



In 1900 Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was a dapper young lawyer, just beginning those "experiments with truth" that led to his becoming the revered Mahatma of hundreds of millions of Indians.

The Making of a Mahatma

—Gandhi's South African Years

by Robert A. Huttenback

The troubles Asians are encountering in East Africa today were foreshadowed by those experienced by Indians in South Africa at the turn of the century. The Uganda Indians are (or perhaps "were" is more accurate) essentially leaderless, whereas those in South Africa were fortunate enough to fall under the spell of one of the modern era's most charismatic leaders—a man who sought to alter the existing order not through appeals to man's darker side but rather to his better nature.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi is properly remembered as the father of India's independence, uniquely achieved through the practice of nonviolence. It is too frequently forgotten, however, that the *satyagraha*, or militant nonviolence, was forged as a political technique not in India but during the 21 years Gandhi lived in South Africa—years which saw the development of philosophical precepts that were to guide him throughout the rest of his life.

Gandhi was born on October 2, 1869, in the tiny princely state of Porbander on the west coast of India. The Gandhi family was of the Vaisya caste, and the future Mahatma's father, Ota, rose to the dignity of *dewan*, or prime minister, of the principality. The young Gandhi gave no signs of greatness in his youth. He was an undistinguished student, and when his family sent him to England in 1888 to study law, it could not have been with much confidence in his abilities. Gandhi returned to India after two and a half years in London with the uncertain intent of practicing law. From the first he was ineffectual. In one of the few cases in which he became involved, he was virtually struck dumb while cross-examining a witness. Finally, frustration forced him to accept a year's contract in South Africa in connection with a £40,000 civil suit.

The case involved litigation between Indians, and there were in fact some 43,000 Indians as opposed to 40,000

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whites in the colony of Natal when Gandhi landed in Durban in 1893. Indians had first started arriving in Natal in 1860. They came as indentured laborers to work in the sugar fields of the colony. It had been fully expected by the white colonists that the Indians would return to their native land at the end of the five-year period of indenture. This, however, they failed to do; and when they were joined—starting in the 1880's—by free Indians who entered the retail business to the detriment of white merchants, anti-Indian feeling in Natal became intense.

There was more to Gandhi than his early years had promised, and when he encountered the wall of anti-Indian sentiment in Natal, he fought back. On his first day in court he wore a *pugri* (turban) and was ordered to remove it by the judge. He refused to do so and left the chamber in protest. But worse was to come. He bought a first-class train ticket to Pretoria, only to be forced out of his compartment by a constable who wanted him to sit in the baggage car. Rather than accede, Gandhi spent the night in the unlit, ice-cold station at Pietermaritzburg. The next day, at Charlestown, he boarded a stage for Standerton and was first given a seat next to the driver. He was, however, soon ordered to move to the footboard; but again he would not comply and was roughly handled as a consequence of not submitting to an "insult [which] was more than I could bear." Gandhi was in South Africa for purely professional reasons and could easily have returned to India. But these indignities forced him to consider his position more deeply.

In Natal, the real Gandhi began to emerge; as it turned out, he was not just another canny Gujerati lawyer bearing the credentials of a British legal education. He was deeply introspective—a moralist and ideologue who all his life wrestled with conscience and the spirit, Truth and Right. These preoccupations spawned a complex mentality which allowed Gandhi to think little of personal discomfort, to eschew the shackles of ego and ambition, and, concomitantly, rarely to harbor resentment or rancor against others.

Not that Gandhi developed his personal philosophy and code of ethics easily, or ever saw the process as

complete; truth to him was never monolithic or simple, and he spent his life in what he called "experiments with truth." His metaphysical probings led him often from one extreme to another. Upon encountering Gandhi in Piccadilly Circus, Sachchidanand Sinha, a fellow Indian, described the 21-year-old fledgling barrister:

He was wearing a high silk hat burnished bright, a Gladstonian collar, stiff and starched, a rather flashy tie displaying almost all the colours of the rainbow under which there was a fine striped silk shirt. He wore as his outer clothing a morning coat, a double-breasted vest, and dark striped trousers to match and not only leather boots but spats over them. He carried leather gloves and a silver-mounted stick.

What a far cry from the more familiar figure, garbed only in the abbreviated *dhoti* of the poorest Indian cultivator.

As in dress, likewise in food, philosophy, and religion; a short period of meat eating gave way to devout vegetarianism and the realization that control of the palate and carnal appetites in general led to the sublimation of materialism and the physical self and the attainment of real freedom. Gandhi's dietary experiments, which were at first dictated by imperatives of health and economy, later became part of his religious and spiritual evolution. It is not hard to see the connection of vegetarianism to the Hindu concept of *ahimsa* (literally nonhurting, non-violence) which became the basis of so much of Gandhi's thinking.

Gandhi arrived in South Africa just at a time when he was most needed by his Indian confreres not only in Natal but in Cape Colony and the Afrikaner republics of the interior. In Natal, where the vast majority of the Indian population resided, the government determined that if the Indians were to remain in their midst they should at least do so only as hewers of wood and drawers of water. The Colonial Legislature consequently passed three highly discriminatory acts.

Natal's main objective was to inhibit the ease of entry into the colony enjoyed by free Indians. Initially the legislative assembly wanted to pass an act specifically

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excluding all but indentured Indians from the colony, but the Colonial Office would not permit it. As a result, Act 14 of 1897, "to place certain restrictions on Immigration," was technically nonracial. Qualifications for entry into Natal were based on property (£25) and knowledge of a European language.

The Immigration Restriction Act of 1897 was administered in such a manner that most Europeans were judged eligible to enter Natal while virtually all Indians were not. As the prime minister of Natal told the legislature, "It never occurred to me for a single minute that [the act] should ever be applied to English immigrants."

The removal of all Indians from the colonial voters' rolls was considered a matter of no less urgency than immigration restriction. In the first instance, a bill making all Indians ineligible to vote in Natal parliamentary elections was passed by the legislative assembly, but the Colonial Office, as guardian of the imperial philosophy of the equality of all British subjects regardless of race, informed the government of Natal that "to assent to this measure would be to put an affront upon the people of India as no British government could be a party to."

In a second version of the franchise act, the colonists were able to disenfranchise for the future all Indians, regardless of qualifications, who were not at that time on the voters' rolls. The colonial legislators merely stipulated that those "who (not being of European origin) are Natives or descendants in the male line of Natives of countries which have not hitherto possessed elective institutions," unless exempted by the governor in council, could not vote in parliamentary elections. Again, once the specific racial terminology was removed from the franchise law and despite the clarity of its objective, the Colonial Office's opposition essentially evaporated.

Objectionable as were the immigration restriction and franchise acts, by far the most insidious piece of legislation passed by the Colony was the Natal Act of 1897, which made all applicants for trading licenses or renewals of trading licenses subject to municipal licensing officers to be appointed by the corporations. The act stipulated that all books were to be kept in English and that com-

mercial premises should be maintained in a sanitary condition. The licensing officer was to determine whether these conditions were being met or not. Appeals were to be allowed to a board made up of municipal officials (those very merchants who were determined to drive the Indians out of business) but not to the courts of the land.

The position of the British government must be viewed with some sympathy. On the one hand, if the Empire stood for equality, any attack on a particular group of the Queen's subjects by other members of the British family struck at the very roots of the imperial policy of equality. On the other hand, it must have been difficult for Englishmen of the 19th century, not the most tolerant of ages, to feel in their hearts that Africans and Indians were really the equals of white men. Embarrassed and frustrated, the government compromised. It insisted that the letter of any particular law be nondiscriminatory but cared little about the spirit.

All of this must have been immensely discouraging to Gandhi. He fought against anti-Indian legislation, and although he riveted world attention on the situation in Natal, he inevitably failed. Yet, Gandhi was a passionate believer in the British Empire. He felt that much of the antipathy that the white colonists of South Africa felt toward the Indians was based on misunderstanding and on doubts about the Indians' commitment to the Empire. Consequently, when the Anglo-Boer War broke out in 1899, Gandhi organized a corps of stretcher bearers to serve with the British troops in the field.

But Gandhi was disappointed in his conviction that loyal Indian service would change settler attitudes. In fact, the situation, as far as Indians were concerned, deteriorated even more rapidly after the British victory in the Anglo-Boer War than before. In the Transvaal, which became the main arena of the future Mahatma's postwar activities, Gandhi fought the situation as well as he could; but it is worthy of note that he did not lead his followers into the streets but rather conducted his battle through the established courts. Not only was Gandhi's method singularly law abiding, but his goal was not one of total victory. He fought for triumphs of principle rather than sweeping reform. For example, he demanded the *right* of Indians to enter the Transvaal. But he would have deemed honor vindicated if administrative practice had restricted the actual immigration to no more than six.

It is significant in this context that the birth of *satyagraha* is again associated with a conflict over principle rather than more pragmatic realities. In 1906 the Trans-

vaal government sought to implement an ordinance which would have required the registration of Indians and the issuance of residence permits to them. As Indians alone were singled out for such treatment and as they had submitted to special registration already twice before, Gandhi was prepared, this time, to lead his followers to the metaphoric barricades.

The Transvaal Indians deluged the governor and the secretary of state with telegrams and other protests, and on September 11 they held a mass meeting at which for the first time the use of *satyagraha* as a political weapon was proposed. Gandhi moved the relevant resolution:

In the event of the Legislative Council, the local Government and the Imperial Authorities rejecting the humble prayer of the British Indian community of the Transvaal in connection with the Draft Asiatic Ordinance, this mass meeting of British Indians here assembled solemnly and regretfully resolves that, rather than submit to the galling, tyrannous and Un-British requirements laid down in the above Draft Ordinance, every British Indian in the Transvaal shall submit himself to imprisonment and shall continue to do so until it shall please His Most Gracious Majesty the King Emperor to grant relief.

When another speaker passionately declared that in the name of God he would never submit to the law, it appeared to Gandhi that the scales had been taken from his eyes, and he wondered how he had not before seen that the pledge to initiate *satyagraha* must be taken in the form of a solemn oath.

Clearly *satyagraha* could not be undertaken lightly. The situation to be fought had to be massively and manifestly wrong, a determination which could only be made after the soul had been leeches of all hate, passion, and prejudice through the practice of nonviolence of the mind. Insight, when combined with the spirit of love, could light the path to the Truth. Once the Truth had been discovered, the *satyagrahi* could boldly assert his opposition to the wrong and refuse to cooperate with those attempting to implement it. The *satyagrahi* might indulge in public acts of dissent and disobedience but he could never act violently, for to do so would cloud his insight and set him on a path as misguided as that of his adversary. If physically assaulted, the *satyagrahi* might never defend himself. He had willingly to go to prison and even to his death. He would win his adversary to his side through love, patience, purity, and humility—would convert him through the eloquence of his suffering.

Gandhi warned his listeners of all the possible consequences they faced if they pledged themselves.

We might have to go to gaol, where we might be insulted. We might have to go hungry and suffer extreme heat or cold. Hard labour might be imposed on us. We might be flogged by rude warders. We might be fined heavily and our property might be attached and held up to auction. . . . Opulent today, we might be reduced to abject poverty tomorrow. We might be deported. Suffering from starvation and similar hardships in gaol, some of us might fall ill and die. In short, therefore, it is not at all impossible that we might have to endure every hardship that we can imagine, and wisdom lies in pledging ourselves on the understanding that we shall have to suffer all that is worst.

Gandhi emphasized that “going to gaol is a unique step, a sacred step, and only by doing so can the Indian community maintain its honour.” Optimistically, he concluded: “I can boldly declare, and with certainty, that as long as there is even a handful of men true to their pledge, there can be only one end to the struggle, and that is victory.” With a roar of enthusiasm the Transvaal Indians rose to take the pledge as *satyagrahis*, and a new political technique was born.

On August 16, 1907, the Indians formally commenced their struggle. At a meeting held outside the Hamidia Mosque in Johannesburg, some 3,000 Indians from all over the Transvaal gathered to hear their leaders. The *Transvaal Leader* described what happened at the close of the session:

A large three-legged pot was filled with the registration certificates, about 1,000 in all, and about 500 trading licenses. Paraffin was then poured in, and the certificates set on fire amid a scene of wildest enthusiasm. The crowd hurrahed and shouted themselves hoarse; hats were thrown in the air, and whistles blown. One Indian . . . walked onto the platform and setting alight his certificate held it aloft. The Chinese then mounted the platform and put their certificates in with the others. For a considerable time it was impossible for any leaders on the platform to make themselves heard.

The battle was now fully joined, and during its eight years duration, other issues merged with the registration question. Immigration continued to be a burning issue, as did the annual £3 tax Natal levied on all former indentured Indian laborers and legal attacks levied on the vested interests of the Indian community. As more and more Indians refused their cooperation to the government, they were tried, convicted, and sent to prison. In keeping with the principles of *satyagraha* they did not try to evade punishment but rather demanded the maximum penalty. Gandhi himself was arrested on October 7, 1908, for refusing to produce his registration certificate and was

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In 1914 Gandhi—with his wife, Kasturba—for the first time adopted Indian dress. This was his way of identifying with the indentured laborers of Natal who were fighting against the annual £3 tax on them.

sentenced to two months at hard labor.

The creation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 did little to alter the context of the Indian question in South Africa. It did, however, concentrate the struggle as it had existed in four separate colonies into a single arena.

With so many of the Indians incarcerated and out of work, Gandhi needed the support of sympathetic Europeans. One of these, Hermann Kallenbach, a German-Jewish architect, purchased a 1,100-acre farm 21 miles from Johannesburg and offered it to Gandhi, rent free, for the use of the *satyagrahis*. Gandhi named the estate the "Tolstoy Farm" in honor of Alexei Tolstoy, whose philosophy he greatly admired. There, Gandhi, always the experimentalist, was able to pursue his theories on health, education, and the virtuous life. He even tried to work out the implications of *ahimsa* (nonviolence) as they applied to snakes.

Gandhi's tendency toward puritan ethics, food fadism, and metaphysical experimentation of course extended beyond Tolstoy Farm. His family of three children and his wife, Kasturba, were constant victims. As history has shown many times before and since, great men tend to make difficult husbands and fathers.

The final phase of Gandhi's sojourn in South Africa

was ushered in by an intensification of the *satyagraha* campaign prompted by a court decision invalidating virtually all Indian marriages and the passage of a Union immigration act which totally excluded Indians from South Africa. Gandhi traveled to Natal and brought the Indians in the collieries and sugar fields out on strike. Next he led a column of over 2,000 *satyagrahis* on an illegal march from Natal to the Transvaal. Again Gandhi and hundreds of his followers filled the South African jails. It was the kind of dissent with which a government drawn on British lines did not know how to deal.

Pressed by the Indian community, the government of India, and liberals throughout the British Empire, the Union government capitulated. Indian marriages were recognized as legal. The measure empowering Natal to collect an annual £3 tax on all formerly indentured Indians was repealed. The administration of the immigration act was relaxed slightly, and the registration issue was finally settled to the Indians' satisfaction.

Gandhi now felt he could at last return to India. One wonders what he would have been like without the South African experience. He had landed in Natal as the junior counsel for a commercial firm, earning a salary of £105 per annum. Within a few short years he was receiving £5,000 a year in legal fees, all of which he was to contribute to a cause in which he deeply believed. Operating in a sphere where he really had no rivals, Gandhi was able to rid himself of the uncertainty which had caused him to fail as a lawyer in Bombay, and to emerge not only as a skilled attorney, respected throughout Natal, the Transvaal, and later the Union, but as a political leader of great maturity, flexibility, and imagination. On the other hand, it is much too easy to confuse what Gandhi accomplished as a human being—his stature as the prophet of a devastating new philosophy of dissent—with what his presence in South Africa meant in changing imperial policy and attitudes and the actual fabric of Indian life. He had returned to the Indians their honor but little else. And in spite of everything, Gandhi still remained enamored of the British constitution and the principles he thought stood in back of it.

As he sailed away from South Africa in July 1914, Gandhi knew not what great task lay ahead of him in India. Wistfully he wrote from shipboard: "I have been so often prevented from reaching India that it seems hardly real that I am sitting in a ship bound for India. And having reached that what shall I do with myself? However, 'Lead Kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom. Lead Thou me on.' That thought is my solace." □