'African Gandhi': The South African war and the limits of imperial identity

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Mahatma Gandhi achieved greatness for the struggles that he fought on the political, economic, cultural and moral fronts. His ideas about love, truth, soul force ('brahmacharya') and Satyagraha have universal appeal beyond the Indian setting and mark him as one of the outstanding individuals of the twentieth century. Yet the twenty-one years that Gandhi spent in South Africa were critical in the 'Making of the Mahatma'. The African experience impacted on Gandhi's conception of Indian identity and nationhood, Hinduism,[1] and understanding of colonialism. These years also allowed him to develop his special technique of transforming society. The South African War marked an important crossroads in Gandhi's South African experience. Prior to the war he had relied heavily on the politics of petitioning and placed great emphasis on being part of a British Empire. The war experiences forced Gandhi to reassess this strategy. Feeling betrayed by the British, Gandhi began to seriously question his beliefs and methods, and look for alternative means of redress for Indians. While this transition was not sudden, the war years marked the beginning of Gandhi's transformation. This study of Gandhi's response to the war has relevance beyond his personal transformation. It broaches the wider issues of the position of Western educated elites in the colonial structure and their impact in 'imagining', following Benedict Anderson[2], nationhood and transforming colonial states into nation-states.

Gandhi Arrives in Natal

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born in Porbander, Kathiawar, on the west coast of India in 1869. The youngest of six children, he completed his primary and secondary schooling in Rajcot where his family had moved in 1876. The

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1. See J.T.F. JORDENS, *Gandhi's Religion. A Homespun Shawl*, (St. Martin's Press Inc., New York, 1998).

2. B. ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (Verso, London, 1983)

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opportunity that Gandhi had for a modern-style education must be seen in the context of Colonial states increasing their functions from the middle of the nineteenth century. This created a need for educated individuals for state and corporate bureaucracies.[3] In his famous Minute on education, Lord Macauly, architect of the new education system in India, alluded to this when he pointed out that:

> It is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect.[4]

The expansion of English-language education led to the emergence of a Western-oriented elite comprising of individuals like Gandhi. When asked why he had gone to London in September 1888 to study, Gandhi replied that it was because of ambition and a desire to take in the Motherland.

> 'If I go to England not only shall I become a barrister … but I shall be able to see England, the land of philosophers and poets, the very center of civilization'.[5]

Gandhi was not disappointed by London; on the contrary, he was 'intoxicated' by it and determined, in his words, to undertake

> the all too important task becoming an English gentleman.

He took lessons in dancing, violin, elocution and French.[6] He bought the most elegant clothing and dressed as an English gentleman. This included a high silk hat, patent leather boots and carrying a silver-mounted stick.[7] Being a London-based barrister, Gandhi had hoped to secure a lucrative position when he returned to India in July 1891. These hopes proved futile. He was unable to get any briefs in Rajcot, was struck by shyness in his first court case in Bombay, and failed in his attempt to secure a teaching post. Struggling to earn a living as a barrister, he gladly accepted the offer from *Dada Abdullah and Co*. in 1893 to represent them in Natal.[8]

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3. *Ibid.,* 113
4. H. WOODROW ed., *The Indian Educational Minute of Lord Macaulay*, (Ajanta International, Calcutta, 1865), p. 6.
5. B. KUMARAPPAN (Ed.) The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, I, (Government of India: Publication House, 1958), pp. 53-4.
6. J.T.F. JORDENS, *Gandhi's Religion. A Homespun Shawl*, 9 ; For a full account of Gandhi's London experience see J.D. HUNT, *Gandhi in London*, (Promilla & Co., New Delhi, 1993).
7. J.M. BROWN, *Gandhi. Prisoner of Hope*, (Yale University Press, London, 1989), 23
8. F. MEER (Ed.), *The South African Gandhi. An Abstract of the Speeches and Writings of M. K. Gandhi, 1893-1914*, (Madiba Publishers/Institute For Black Research, Durban, 1996), 32

The Setting: Colonial Natal in the 1890s

Indians arrived in South Africa in two streams. Between 1860 and 1911, 152,641 workers were brought to Natal as indentured immigrants. They were followed by entrepreneurs from Gujarat on the west coast of India who began arriving from the mid-1870s. A third social group comprised of an educated elite that emerged by the 1890s as a result of opportunities provided by mission schools. This small elite included lawyers, teachers, civil servants and accountants.[9] Durban's Indians comprised of an amalgam of ethno-linguistic groups with a high degree of internal differentiation. The main distinction was between higher caste Gujarati-speaking traders from northern India and Telegu and Tamil speaking indentured Indians from south India. In search of economic opportunities, Indians had expanded to other parts of South Africa. By the late 1890s there were at least 15,000 Indians in the Transvaal[10], 700 to 1,000 at the Kimberley diamond fields[11], and around 2,000 in Cape Town.[12] The attitude of the governments of the Boer republics was one of undisguised hostility towards Indians. While the Orange Free State (OFS) barred them totally, in the Transvaal Indians were denied citzenship, compelled to carry a pass, and unable to own fixed property outside locations.[13]

There were approximately 65,000 Indians in Natal in 1899. Traders and ex-indentured independent market gardeners and hawkers who threatened the exploitative relationship of whites with Africans and indentured Indians inflamed white hostility towards Indians. Whites desired the outright coercion of Indian labour and became increasingly hostile as Indians challenged their dominance of local trade. The 1885 Wragg Commission noted that Indian traders were the cause of

> much of the irritating feelings existing in the minds of European Colonists.[14]

After self-government in 1893, whites came to view town planning, public health, trade arrangements and other public issues in terms of racial and ethnic distinctions.[15] The result was the passing of a spate of legislation in 1896 and

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9. M. SWAN, *Gandhi. The South African Experience*, (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1985), p. 185.
10. S. BHANA and J. BRAIN, *Setting Down Roots. Indian Migrants in South Africa, 1860-1911*, (Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 1990), p. 78.
11. *Ibid.,* 99
12. *Ibid.,* 123
13. *Ibid.*: B. PILLAY, *British Indians in the Transvaal: Trade, Race Relations and Imperial Policy in the Republican and Colonial Transvaal* (Longman, London, 1977); B. PACHAI, *The International Aspects of the South African Indian Question, 1860-1971* (Struik, Cape Town, 1971).
14. The Wragg Commission of 1885, in Y.S. MEER (Et. al.), *Documents of Indentured Labour in Natal 1851-1917*, (Institute for Black Research, Durban, 1980), p. 131.
15. M.W. SWANSON, 'The Asiatic Menace: Creating Segregation in Durban, 1870-1900', in *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 16(3), 1983, pp. 401-421, 421.

1897 to force Indians to re-indenture or return to India after completing their indenture and to legally subordinate non-indentured Indians so that whites would feel secure against the "Asiatic Menace".

Merchants dominated Indian politics during this period. Gandhi was drawn into merchant politics because of his legal background and fluency in Gujarati and English. Although he had come on a twelve-month contract he eventually remained in Natal for twenty-one years. In 1894 merchants formed the Natal Indian Congress (NIC), with Gandhi as secretary, to protect their trade, franchise and residence rights. Each of the NIC's six presidents between 1894 and 1913 was a prominent merchant. Since the vast majority of Indians could not afford the £3 annual membership fee, most members were merchants.[16] Until 1899 the strategy of Gandhi and the NIC was primarily one of writing letters to local newspapers and prominent individuals in Natal, India and Britain, circulating pamphlets, engaging in court cases, sending delegations to India and Britain, and sending petitions and memorials to the Natal and Indian governments.[17] The essence of trader politics was the insistence that as British subjects Indians should be treated equally with whites in terms of Queen Victoria's 1858 proclamation.[18]

This demand was in vain. The battery of racist legislation in 1896 and 1897 was a clear indication of the intolerant attitude of whites. The depth of anti-Indian sentiment among ordinary whites is reflected in the demonstration against the landing of the *Naderi* and *Courland* in December 1896. The arrival of the ships, with 600 Indians aboard, including Gandhi, aroused mass hysteria. Working class whites believed that Indian artisans were being brought to take their jobs. The ships were quarantined for 27 days. A meeting of 2,000 working class whites on 30 December 1896 resolved that all passengers should be returned to India. A second meeting on 7 January 1897 called for a special sitting of parliament to return the passengers. There was a third demonstration by over 3,000 whites on 16 January1897 when a signal was received that the ships were coming to port. The crowd dispersed when the government promised to use public funds to induce Indians to repatriate. When passengers began disembarking, Gandhi was recognized. He was kicked and whipped and had fish thrown at him. Cut on his eyes and ears, he was taken to a nearby house,

16. See S. BHANA, *Gandhi's Legacy. The Natal Indian Congress, 1894-1994*, (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1997), Chapter One.

17. M. SWAN, *Gandhi. The South African Experience*, p. 76.

18. This proclamation guaranteed to safeguard the interests of the 'natives' of India in the same manner that white subjects of the British Empire were protected. M. SWAN, *Gandhi. The South African Experience*, p. 84.

which was quickly surrounded by a large white mob. He escaped at night when he was taken to the police station dressed as a police constable.[19]

The Natal government's handling of the Indian refugee problem provides further evidence of the second-class status of Indians. The outbreak of the South African war in October 1899 impacted severely on Indians in northern Natal and Transvaal. In northern Natal republican commandos had laid siege to major towns and Indians north of Colenso were 'scattered in all directions'.[20] Gandhi reported in December 1899 that the

> British Indians, merchants and others, leaving all their belongings, vacated those places with quiet resignation. All this shows intense attachment to the Throne.[21]

On 18 October the *Natal Mercury* reported that 'two trains crowded with Natives and Indians' had arrived from Dundee.[22] Most of the refugees made their way to Durban. Several thousand Indians from the Transvaal joined them. Despite the seriousness of the situation the Natal government was reluctant to remove restrictions on Indian entry into Natal. The Immigration Restriction Act required a deposit of £10 from those who had not been formerly domiciled in Natal and wished to visit temporarily. Gandhi asked the Government in July 1899 to suspend this proviso during the 'period of tension'. The government refused, but was forced to reverse its decision by Alfred Milner, the British High Commissioner. The Natal Government also instructed shipping lines in Delagoa Bay not to carry Indian passengers to Natal. Again, it was forced to change its position as a result of pressure from Milner.[23] A frustrated Gandhi questioned why Natal was making special arrangements to receive white prostitutes and criminals from the Transvaal but

> British [Indian] subjects could not find shelter on British soil.[24]

Declaration of Loyalty

It is in this context of blatant racism that the Indian reaction to the war must be viewed. Shortly after the OFS and Transvaal declared war on Britain in October 1899, around 100 Indians attended a meeting in Durban to decide on a response.

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19. F. MEER (Ed.), *The South African Gandhi. An Abstract of the Speeches and Writings of M. K. Gandhi, 1893-1914*, pp. 207-220.
20. NATAL ARCHIVES REPOSITORY, (hereafter NAR), (Official Publications), Report of the Indian immigration trust board, p. 1.
21. *Times of India*, 9 December 1899, in B. KUMARAPPAN (Ed.) The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, III, p. 119.
22. *Natal Mercury*, 18 October 1899
23. Letter from Gandhi to Select persons, 16 September 1899, B. KUMARAPPAN (Ed.), The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, III, p. 111.
24. *Times of India*, 9 December 1899, B. KUMARAPPAN (Ed.) The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, III, p. 120.

Several opinions were expressed. One view was that since the Boers, like Indians, were 'oppressed' by the British, Indians should not be party to the defeat of a fellow oppressed community. Another opinion was that Indians should remain neutral because the Boers would 'wreak vengeance' upon Indians if they were victorious. Gandhi felt that a man about to join a war could not think along these lines without 'forfeiting his manhood'.[25] Gandhi acknowledged that the Boer cause was a just one. He wrote that

> it must largely be conceded that justice is on the side of the Boers.[26]

Notwithstanding this, Gandhi believed that the views of individuals were immaterial since they owed allegiance to the nation-state:

> Every single subject of a state must not hope to enforce his private opinion in all cases. The authorities may not always be right, but so long as the subjects own allegiance is to a state, it is their clear duty … to accord their support to acts of the state … Our ordinary duty as subjects is not to enter into the merits of the war but to render such assistance as we possibly can.[27]

Gandhi's 'own allegiance' was clearly to the British Empire. He declared that

> though in Natal, yet we are British subjects, in time of danger the enchanting phrase has not after all lost any of its tune.[28]

Gandhi felt that because Indians were

> British subjects, and as such demanded rights, they ought to forget their domestic differences, and render some service.[29]

He pointed out that in every demand and memorial that they had presented to the authorities they had emphasised their British citizenship, giving

> our rulers and the world to believe that we are so proud

of this citizenship. Further, he pointed out, the 'few' rights that Indians enjoyed in Natal and Transvaal were due to the fact that they were British subjects; otherwise they would have been on the same footing as Africans and the Chinese. For Gandhi, the war presented a 'golden opportunity' to prove Indian loyalty and counter the accusation that they had come to South Africa

> for money-grubbing and were merely a dead weight upon the British.

According to Gandhi, whites believed that Indians

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25. M.K. GANDHI, *Satyagraha in South Africa,* (Translated by Valji Govindji Desai (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1928), 73
26. *Ibid.,* p. 72.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
28. Letter from Gandhi to select persons, 16 September 1899. In Gandhi, B. KUMARAPPAN (Ed.), The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, III, p.111.
29. *Times of India*, 9 December 1899, in B. KUMARAPPAN (Ed.), The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, III, p. 120

> were in South Africa only to fatten themselves upon them. The Indian would not render the slightest aid if the country were invaded.[30]

Gandhi believed that if Indians did not offer their services the flames of anti-Indianism would be fanned:

> If we missed this opportunity, which had come to us unsought … we should stand self-condemned and it would be no matter for surprise if then the English treated us worse than before.[31]

For Gandhi,

> it would be unbecoming to our dignity as a nation to look on with folded hands at a time when ruin stared the British in the face simply because they ill-treat us here.[32]

Local Indians had to take cognisance of the broader picture and consider that India was part of the British Empire:

> We have tried to better our condition, continuing the while to remain in the Empire. That has been the policy of all our leaders in India, and ours too. And if we desire to win our freedom and achieve our welfare as members of the British Empire, here is a golden opportunity for us to do so by helping the British in the war by all means at our disposal.[33]

Gandhi did not conceive of an India outside the British Empire. He saw 'Empire' and 'nation' as synonymous. This understanding of an Empire made up of coloniser and colonised was out of sync with developments at the heart of Empire itself where the formation of national identity was already underway. By the late nineteenth century, scientific and racial discourse in England equated nation with fixed territory and cultural identity. As Ruth Lindborg has shown, there was an

> emerging structure of feeling that England possessed an unbroken history of cultural homogeneity and territorial integrity, tradition and boundaries that had to be protected from an alien threat.[34]

As far as Empire was concerned, Victorians had a clear sense of difference from the

> "savages" of their colonies…. Thinking about colonial possessions certainly distinguished between different territories of the nation – its English "heart" and its British imperial outposts – and the different ways individuals or groups could be defined as British subjects.[35]

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30. M.K. GANDHI, *Satyagraha in South Africa,* p. 71.
31. *Ibid.,* p. 72.
32. *Ibid.,* 72
33. *Ibid.,* 72
34. R. LINDBORG, 'The "Asiatic" and the Boundaries of Victorian Englishness', in *Victorian Studies*, (Spring 1994), 381-404: 401
35. *Ibid.,* p. 383.

While Gandhi harboured the notion of an all-inclusive Empire its white members did not share this sentiment. On the contrary, there was a colonial contempt for the colonised.[36]

In Natal, Gandhi's opinion carried the day. Indians resolved to 'unreservedly and unconditionally' offer their services 'without pay'. Gandhi informed the Colonial Secretary that Indians displayed

> extreme eagerness to serve our Sovereign.

For Gandhi the offer proved that Indians were

> ready to do duty for their Sovereign on the battlefield. The offer is meant to be an earnest of the Indian loyalty.[37]

The 33 volunteers, comprising entirely of the educated elite, represented twenty per cent of adult Indian males in Durban with a 'tolerably good English education'. Most of them went on to become important political, sporting and community leaders over the next three decades.[38] While Muslim merchants did not serve on the battlefield, they provided financially for the dependents of volunteers.[39] Officials thanked Gandhi for the offer and informed him that

> should the occasion arise, the Government will be glad to avail itself of these services.[40]

Gandhi was disappointed that

> our services cannot be accepted at present. We however earnestly hope that the authorities will see their way to command them.[41]

Gandhi also collected £62 from Indian merchants for the Durban Women's Patriotic League which, ironically, was collecting money for wounded soldiers and volunteers, many of who were virulently anti-Indian.[42]

Indian Bearer Corps

The unfavourable course of events forced the Government to call on Indian assistance. The Boers invaded Natal with around 25,000 troops in October 1899 and captured Newcastle, Dundee, Colenso and Elaandslaagte in quick

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36. See R. GUHA, 'Dominance Without Hegemony and Its Historiography,' *Subaltern Studies 6* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1989).
37. NAR, Colonial Secretary's Office (hereafter CSO), Vol. 1632, 8047/1899, Gandhi to Colonial Secretary, 19 October 1899
38. NAR, CSO, Vol. 1632, 8047/1899, Gandhi to Colonial Secretary, 19 October 1899
39. *Times of India*, 9 December 1899, B. KUMARAPPAN (Ed.), The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, III, p. 120.
40. NAR, CSO, Vol. 1632, 8047/1899, Principal Under-Secretary to Gandhi, 23 October 1899
41. NAR, CSO, Vol. 1632, 8047/1899, Gandhi to Colonial Secretary, 24 October 1899
42. Gandhi to William Palmer, Secretary, Durban Women's Patriotic League, 17 November 1899, B. KUMARAPPAN (Ed.), The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, III, p.121.

succession. The British retired to Ladysmith where the Boers surrounded them. The immediate focus of the British was to relieve Ladysmith. General Buller, responsible for the British campaign, asked the Natal Government to recruit Indian bearers because of the insufficient number of whites.[43] Percy Clarence was appointed superintendent of this Indian Ambulance Corps. In conjunction with the Protector of Indian Immigrants, Clarence recruited 1100 free and indentured Indians for the Corps.[44] Gandhi was concerned that the government did not call on the services of the volunteers. According to him, they

> encountered formidable difficulties in getting our offer favourably entertained. How could we induce the Government to accept our offer? We had expressed our willingness even to do sweepers' or scavengers' work in hospitals.[45]

Dr Booth, who had been training the volunteers, informed the Government that he found the volunteers

> intelligent about the work, light-handed and quick, and deeply in earnest about the whole matter.[46]

According to Gandhi, even though the men were eager to serve they harboured a nagging fear:

> none of us knew how to march in step. It was no easy task to perform long marches with one's baggage on one's shoulders. Again, the whites would treat us all as 'coolies', insult us and look down on us. How was all this to be borne?[47]

Gandhi became pro-active when he failed to hear from the Government. He went with Dr Booth to Pietermaritzburg in early December where they met the Colonial Secretary, Chief Engineer Barnes and Colonel Johnston, the Senior Medical Officer. When Dr Booth explained the capabilities of the men, Colonel Johnston thought that they would make excellent leaders for the indentured Indians who were being engaged as bearers.[48] For Gandhi

> it would be a great disappointment if after all arrangements government would not accept us.[49]

The Government informed Gandhi a few days after the meeting that their services would be utilised. A Patriotic League Fund was started by Gandhi to

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43. *Times of India*, 14 March, 1900, in B. KUMARAPPAN (Ed.), The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, III, p. 140.
44. NAR, (Public Works Department (hereafter PWD), Vol. 1633, 4964/1900, Barnes, Chief Engineer, to Griffin, Accounting Department, 30 January 1900
45. M.K. GANDHI, *Satyagraha in South Africa,* p. 71.
46. NAR, CSO, Vol. 1632, 9294/99, L Booth to Principal Under-Secretary, 4 December 1899
47. M.K. GANDHI, *Satyagraha in South Africa,* p. 74.
48. NAR, CSO, Vol. 1633, 9588/1899, Gandhi to Colonial Secretary, 15 December 1899
49. Gandhi to Colonial Secretary, 4 December 1899, B. KUMARAPPAN (Ed.), The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, III, p. 127.

equip volunteers and support their families.[50] Merchants contributed to the Fund in addition to supplying 'large quantities' of cigarettes, cigars, pipes and tobacco for the wounded, while Indian women prepared pillowcases and handkerchiefs out of cloth provided by merchants.[51] Prime Minister Harry Escombe invited the volunteers to his home before their departure. Escombe, the Mayor of Durban and other whites praised the volunteers and gave them words of encouragement. On behalf of the volunteers Gandhi thanked Escombe for the gesture and mentioned that Indians would have been able to show their worth as fighters had Ghukas or Sikhs been in Natal. However, he hoped that they would

> discharge their duties well and prove their loyalty.[52]

The Indian Ambulance Corps, as it became known, took part in three attempts to relieve Ladysmith between December 1899 and February 1900. These were the Battles of Colenso (15 December 1899), Spionskop (25 January 1900) and Vaalkrans (5-7 February 1900). All three attempts ended in defeat for the British who suffered heavy casualties. Despite the defeat, British officials complemented Indian bearers for their bravery. As a result of the British reverses, Indians volunteered to work within range of fire, which they were not expected to do. Colonel Gallwey was particularly pleased with their work and wrote that

> this corps performed excellent service, carrying wounded to the hospitals and from hospitals to ambulance trains.[53]

Barnes praised the leaders who

> took the place of, and to us are more useful than white officers.[54]

Gandhi found the experience difficult and tiring, especially because

> the Chievely district is extremely dry, and there is hardly any water to be found within easy distances.[55]

There was continuous work during this period and bearers sometimes carried the wounded in excess of 40 kilometers in a single day.[56]

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50. *Times of India*, 16 June 1900, B. KUMARAPPAN (Ed.), The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, III, p. 141.
51. *Times of India*, 14 March 1900, B. KUMARAPPAN (Ed.), The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, III, p. 140.
52. *Natal Mercury*, 14 December 1899
53. NAR, PWD, Vol. 2/71, 4694/99, Gallwey to Barnes, 22 December 1899
54. NAR, PWD, Vol. 2/71, 5117/1899, Barnes to Gallwey, 23 December 1899
55. *Times of India*, 16 June 1900, in B. KUMARAPPAN (Ed.), The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, III, p. 138-139.
56. *Times of India*, 16 June 1900, in B. KUMARAPPAN (Ed.), The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, III, p. 140.

Gandhi's reaction to the experience is remarkable. The regimented and disciplined army lifestyle resonated with Gandhi. It became an important part of his strategy of resistance, which was marked by an absence of collective consensus in decision making and reliance on a small group of leaders.[57] When the British were retreating from Chieveley to Estcourt at the Battle of Colenso,

> it was wonderful to see how, with clockwork regularity, over 1500 men with heavy artillery and transport broke camp and marched off, leaving behind nothing but empty tins and broken cases.[58]

Gandhi compared war to a

> Trappist Monastery and the holy stillness that pervades.

This seems anomalous since the austere reforms of the Cisterian order carried out by de Rance were based on strict seclusion from the world, silence and liturgical worship for seven hours daily. According to Gandhi,

> strange though it may appear the same impression was created in those vast camps. Although the energy put forth was the greatest – not a minute was passed idly by anybody in those stirring times, - there was perfect order, perfect stillness.[59]

Although Gandhi was opposed to war, he felt that

> if anything can ever partially reconcile me to it, it was the rich experience we gained at the front. It was certainly not the thirst for blood that took thousands of men to the battlefield. Like Arjun[60] they went to the battlefield because it was their duty. And how many proud, rude, savage spirits has it not broken into gentle creatures of God?[61]

Protest, for Gandhi, was as much an ethical and moral experience as it was political.

The Corps and 'Indianness'

Gandhi believed that Indians were fully justified in being loyal to the British, and that this loyalty would result in more equitable treatment during the postwar period. He believed that the contribution of Indians had been 'a complete revelation' to whites. It showed them that Indians were not

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57. P. CHATTERJEE, 'Gandhi and the Critique of Civil Society', in R. GUHA (Ed.), *Subaltern Studies III*, (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1984), pp. 153-195, 186.
58. *Times of India*, 16 June 1900, in B. KUMARAPPAN (Ed.), The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, III, p. 188.
59. *The Englishman*, 28 January 1902 in B. KUMARAPPAN (Ed.), The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, III, p. 223
60. Third of the Pandava princes to whom Lord Krishna expounded the Gita.
61. *The Englishman*, 28 January 1902 in B. KUMARAPPAN (Ed.), The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, III, p. 223

like worms, which settle inside wood and eat it up hollow.[62]

Gandhi felt that white racism would diminish because Indians had proven that they deserved to remain in the country as their equals. In fact, Gandhi even detected a change in white attitudes during the war. He wrote that

> although our Corps, including the indentured labourers, who might be supposed to be rather uncouth, often came into contact with European soldiers and temporary Ambulance Corps, none of us felt that Europeans treated us with contempt or even with discourtesy.

The temporary Corps was composed of whites from Natal who had taken part in anti-Indian protest before the war. However, the

> knowledge that the Indians, forgetful of their wrongs, were out to help them in their hour of need, had melted their hearts.[63]

As a result of this close contact and mutual dependence,

> everyone believed that the Indians' grievances were now sure to be redressed. At the moment the white man's attitude seemed to be distinctly changed. The relations formed with the whites during the war were of the sweetest. We had come in close contact with the Tommies. They were friendly with us. And thankful for being there to serve them.[64]

Such thinking was forlorn, a mere delusion, as the postwar years would prove. However, this shows the genuine faith that Gandhi had in Empire. Reference to indentured Indians as 'uncouth' illustrates the prevailing caste and class attitudes amongst Indians. At this stage, Gandhi was clearly not thinking or writing as an Indian nationalist. His ideas were based on the moral good, a belief that good will be repaid with good.

A very important consequence of the Corps was that it brought Gandhi into sustained contact with indentured Indians. One of the criticisms against Gandhi has been that his constituency comprised of the upper strata on Indian society in Natal only and that he was oblivious to the plight of indentured Indians.[65] During these eight or nine weeks, from mid-December to February, Gandhi was in constant contact with Indians from diverse religious, class, caste, regional and ethnic backgrounds. This broadened his conception of what it meant to be Indian. Referring to the composition of his Corps, Gandhi wrote that there were

> Hindus and Musalmans, Madrasis and upcountry men, all classes and creed were well represented.[66]

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62. M.K. GANDHI, *Satyagraha in South Africa,* p. 71.
63. *Ibid.,* 74
64. S. NARAYAN (Ed.), *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, I*, (Navijan Publishing House, Ahemdabad, 1968), p. 301.
65. This is Swan's hypothesis in her study of Gandhi
66. M.K. GANDHI, *Satyagraha in South Africa,* 76

This helped shape Gandhi's conception of what it meant to be Indian. Had he remained in India, and practiced as a lawyer in Bombay, it is doubtful that he would have come into such close contact with Indians of lower castes. He himself noted that the Corps

> brought me in close touch with suffering Indians, most of them indentured Tamil, Telegu or North Indian men.[67]

They did the same work:

> the work for them was the same as for ourselves and as we were all to live together, they were highly pleased at the prospect, and the management of the entire Corps naturally passed into our hands.[68]

The word 'naturally' points to another important feature of Gandhi's politics, namely, that the masses had to rely on their leaders for guidance, a strategy that he implemented successfully in India.[69]

Gandhi went on to say that as a result of the Corps, the

> Indian community became better organized. I got into closer touch with the indentured Indians. There came a greater awakening amongst them, and the feeling that Hindus, Musalmans, Christians, Tamilians, Gujaratis and Sindhis were all Indians and children of the same Motherland took deep root amongst them.[70]

As a result of his understanding that the plight of Indians was the same, and that those from different areas had to be brought together, a more mature Gandhi returned to India, alert to the plight of the underclasses, and one who abhorred communal differences. Thus, when Gandhi wrote that the

> whole Corps was described as the Indian Corps, and the community received credit for its work,[71]

he was expressing the view that at the micro level a sense of community had been achieved, a collectivity that he made every effort to build nationally when he returned to India. From this experience, and others in South Africa, Gandhi learned to be Indian. This was a significant development because there was nothing 'originary' or 'authentic' about 'Indianness' in this period given the fact

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67. S. NARAYAN (Ed.), *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, I*, p. 301.
68. M.K. GANDHI, *Satyagraha in South Africa,* p. 76.
69. For example, after agitation against the Rowlatt Bill in 1919, Gandhi was asked by the Disorders Inquiry Committee whether the masses should accept the judgement of others equipped with better intellectual faculties. He replied: 'Naturally, but I think that this is human nature… Certainly, he would have to follow somebody. The masses will have to choose their leaders most decidedly.' In P. CHATTERJEE, 'Gandhi and the Critique of Civil Society', in R. GUHA (Ed.), *Subaltern Studies III*, (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1984), p. 184.
70. S. NARAYAN (Ed.), *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, I*, p. 301.
71. M.K. GANDHI, *Satyagraha in South Africa,* p. 76.

that 'India' was not a 'coherent political category'.[72] Gandhi was in a unique situation. He had what van der Veer refers to as a 'vivid migration experience'. He was able to see his society

> from the outside with the eyes of "the other," yet still experience a marginality and strangeness that was enhanced by colonial discrimination'. This led to a 'bold personal transformation

in Gandhi, which had

> paradigmatic significance for the society at large.[73]

Loyalty Un-Rewarded

The blatantly racist attitude of the DTC in failing to assist Indian refugees did not dampen Gandhi's faith in Empire. On the contrary, when the British relieved Ladysmith, Gandhi and the NIC held a public meeting to

> demonstrate their loyalty to the Crown.

The sixty white guests included B.W. Greenacre, Member of the Natal Legislative Assembly, W. Broome, borough magistrate, and J. Nicol, mayor of Durban. Sir John Robinson, first Prime Minister of Natal, was guest speaker. According to Robinson the services of Gandhi and the volunteers

> redounds to the credit and patriotism of all of you.

The NIC congratulated the British generals for their

> brilliant victory in the face of insurmountable difficulties, thus vindicating the might of the British Empire and valour of the British soldier.[74]

For the NIC the distinguished

> representatives of the West assembled on a common platform with the sons of the East to respond to a call of duty owed to a common Sovereign… showed that the proud boast of an Empire in which millions of Her Majesty's subjects lived in harmony and contentment was being realized.

Gandhi added that Indians

> would have failed in their duty to themselves if they had not given expression to their feelings. It was the Indians proudest boast that they were British subjects. If they were not, they would have had a footing in South Africa.[75]

As far as Gandhi was concerned the hive of activity by whites and Indians during the war showed their

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72. A.M. BURTON, *At the Heart of Empire. Indians and the Colonial Encounter in Late Victorian Britain*, (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998), pp. 19-20.
73. P. VAN DER VEER, *Nation and Migration. The Politics of Space in the South Asian Diaspora*, (University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1995), p. 5.
74. *Natal Mercury*, 15 March 1900
75. *Natal Advertiser*, 15 March 1900

> intense attachment to the Throne. There is no mistaking the sign of the wave of Imperial unity.[76]

Whites had to be made to see the error of their ways:

> If only the European Colonists could be induced to see that their attachment would be incomplete unless justice was done to the Indian, they would not fail to respond.[77]

For Gandhi the signs were encouraging. During the first half of 1900 there was a famine in India. A Committee was formed in Durban to raise funds. It included the Governor as patron, the Mayor of Durban was chairman and the Protector of Indian Immigrants was honorary treasurer. An Indian was honorary secretary. The Committee raised around £2000. For Gandhi, such

> a combination would have been impossible a year ago.[78]

There was no basis for Gandhi's optimism. Both the local state and the British remained anti-Indian. Between October 1899 and July 1900, a Durban Relief Committee under the chairmanship of Deputy Mayor J. Ellis Brown spent £50,000 feeding and clothing 12,000 white refugees, while the Durban Town Council provided relief work for unemployed whites. Yet no relief was provided for 4,000 Indian refugees in Durban.[79] The responsibility of taking care of Indian refugees was left to their relatives and Indian merchants. Nicol, mayor of Durban, acknowledged their contribution when he wrote that

> they [Indians] had taken the refugees amongst themselves, and borne the burden of maintenance at their own expense.[80]

Another example of the anti-Indian sentiment is provided by the issue of the 'Queen's Chocolate' that was given as a gift to soldiers. Gandhi wrote to the Colonial Secretary in February 1900 to request this item for leaders of the Ambulance Corp who had 'volunteered without pay' and who would 'prize it as a treasure'.[81] The Colonial Secretary refused because the chocolate was for non-commissioned officers and men only.[82] When Gandhi wrote to the Government in June 1900 for 'discharges' for Indian bearers similar to those given to whites, Clarence refused because he felt that

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76. *Times of India*, 9 December 1899, B. KUMARAPPAN (Ed.), The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, III, p.119
77. *Times of India*, 9 December 1899, B. KUMARAPPAN (Ed.), The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, III, p.119
78. *Times of India*, 16 September 1900, in B. KUMARAPPAN (Ed.), The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, III, p.161
79. DURBAN MUNICIPAL LIBRARY, Mayor's Minute, 1899, 28
80. *Natal Mercury*, 15 March 1900.
81. NAR, CSO, Vol. 1641, 1462/1900, Gandhi to Colonial Secretary, 22 February 1900.
82. NAR, CSO, Vol. 1641, 1462/1900, Colonial Secretary to Gandhi, 9 March 1900.

> political capital will be made of it, and business advantages accrue…. I am sure of one thing: It will be used as a lever.[83]

Volunteers were belatedly given silver medals, even then, around eight of them never received medals.[84]

The attitudes of whites had not changed towards Indians because of their participation in the war. Whites remained as determined as ever to maintain the race and class order. Although the British were in a position to end racist practices in Natal and Transvaal, and enable Indians to enter the OFS, the contrary was the case. British statesmen allowed the English in Natal and the Boers in the Transvaal and OFS to subjugate Indians politically and economically during the post-war period, a process that culminated in their exclusion from the polity when the Union of South Africa came into being in 1910. When he became embroiled in the struggle for redress in the Transvaal during the post-war period Gandhi attained a fuller understanding of Empire and the second-class status of the colonised. It was during this period that Gandhi developed his technique of satyagraha, a form of resistance to injustice that contained psychological liberation because it was intended to end people's fear and make them see the right in their actions.[85]

Conclusion: The Limits of Victorian Britishness

The South African experience profoundly transformed Gandhi. The Gandhi who left South Africa in 1914 was very different to the Gandhi who had arrived in Natal in 1893. The most obvious difference was in his external appearance. He had shed his Western dress for a loincloth. From an ethico-religious point of view, he had renounced sex, began living communally as an ashram dweller and gave up all personal possessions.[86] There were changes in his politics and tactics of resistance as well. Gandhi lost faith in notion of an Empire embracing the coloniser and the colonised. He understood that there were clearly defined limits to Victorian Britishness as long as colonialism endured. E.M. Foster makes this point very lucidly in the closing paragraph of *A Passage to India* when he writes that Fielding and Aziz, coloniser and colonized, could not be friends until the Indians had driven:

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83. NAR, PWD, Vol. 2179, 2458/1900, Clarence to Barnes, 14 July 1900.
84. Nazar to Gandhi, 13 May 1903, in S. BHANA and J. HUNT (EDS,.), *Gandhi's Editor._The Letters of M. H. Nazar, 1902-1903*, (Pomilla & Co., New Delhi, 1989), p. 36.
85. A.J. PAREL, 'The Origins of Hind Swaraj', in J.M. BROWN and M. PRUZESKY (Eds.), *Gandhi and South Africa: Principles and Politics*, (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1996), pp. 35-68, 41.
86. J.T.F. JORDENS, *Gandhi's Religion. A Homespun Shawl*, p. 24.

> Every blasted Englishman in the sea… The horses didn't want it - they swerved apart; the earth didn't want it, sending up rocks through which riders must pass single file; the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House…: they didn't want it, they said in their hundred voices, 'No, not yet,' and the sky said, 'No, not there.'[87]

As a result of unfair treatment by the British, Gandhi moved from petition politics to the politics of passive resistance. Unlike his outlook at the start of the war, when he was loyal to the British Empire, he came to see colonial rule as unjust and understood the limits to Britishness. Reflecting on this period during the 1920s, Gandhi wrote:

> If I had today the faith in the British empire which I then entertained, and if I now cherished the hope, which I did at that time, of achieving our freedom under its aegis, I would advance the same arguments', showing both the deep seated attachment to Empire and the shedding of that attachment.[88]

According to van der Veer colonialism and nationalism were closely intertwined, producing

> reified national cultures both in the colonies and "at home".

European colonial expansion stimulated nationalism and the idea of territorially bounded national communities among colonised peoples.[89] In colonial countries nationalism was premised on opposition to alien rule. As Benedict Anderson has pointed out, in the absence of big merchants, native agrarian magnates, industrial entrepreneurs and a significant professional class, the intelligentsia was central to the rise of nationalism in the colonies.[90] This bilingual educated class had access to the

> models of nationalism, nation-ness, and nation-state produced elsewhere in the course of the nineteenth century.[91]

It allowed, according to Anthony Barnett,

> the intellectuals to say to their fellow-speakers [of the indigenous vernaculars] that "we" can be like "them".[92]

Although the British had intended to produce a class of docile civil servants, their policy of limited liberal assimilation had profound deleterious

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87. Quoted in Nicholas B. DIRKS (Ed.), *Colonialism and Culture*, (Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1992), p. 2.
88. M.K. GANDHI, *Satyagraha in South Africa,* p. 73.
89. P. VAN DER VEER, *Nation and Migration. The Politics of Space in the South Asian Diaspora*, p. 3.
90. B. ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* p. 116.
91. *Ibid.,* p. 116.
92. *Ibid.,* p. 116.

consequences for them. By 'whetting' the appetite of the educated elite for government service without satisfying it, the government

> bred a class of seditious trouble-makers which was inclined to spread discontent and raise the standard of revolt.[93]

Gandhi represented this class of Indian, though his transition to 'seditious trouble-maker' was a long process. Gandhi's education in England exposed him to 'models of nationalism' while the racist treatment that he endured firsthand in South Africa despite proclaiming his loyalty to the British Empire, made him understand that Indians were the 'other' of the British, and could only achieve independence outside of Empire.

Opsomming

'Die Afrika-Gandhi': Die Suid-Afrikaanse oorlog en die perke van imperiale identiteit

Die Suid-Afrikaanse oorlog het Gandhi verplig om 'n politieke satrategie en lojaliteit teenoor die Britse Ryk uit te werk. Gedurende die 1890's was Indiërs uitgelewer aan 'n klomp rassistiese wetgewing in suider-Afrika. Toe die Boererepublieke oorlog teen Brittanje verklaar het, het Gandhi dit gesien as die geleentheid om te bewys dat Indiërs getrou was aan die ryk. Vooraanstaande Indiërs was bereid om hul dienste gratis aan te bied, maar die regering was huiwerig om dit te aanvaar. Benewens vrywilligers, is 1 100 geïndenteerde Indiërs gewerf om in die ambulanskorps diens te doen. Indiërs het aan drie pogings deelgeneem om Ladysmith te ontset. Alhoewel dit op terugslae vir die Britte uitgeloop het, was Gandhi van mening dat dit van waarde was. Die oorlog het Gandhi in nouer verbinding met die geïndenteerde Indiërs gebring; die besef het ontstaan dat hulle 'Indiërs' en ook kinders van dieselfde 'vaderland' was. Die oorlog het ook aan Indiërs die geleentheid gebied om hul lojaliteit aan die blankes te bewys. Gandhi was daarvan oortuig dat dit tot meer regverdige beleidsrigtings aanleiding sou gee. Tog het die blatante rassistiese houding van die Natalase regering, voor en tydens die oorlog, soos ook die Britse beleid wat blankes toegelaat het om Indiërs polities en ekonomies in die ná-oorlogse era te onderwerp, Gandhi diep onder die indruk gebring van die tweedeklas status wat die gekoloniseerde mense gehad het. As reaksie het hy die tegniek van *satyagraha* ontwikkel en terselfdertyd ook vertroue verloor in 'n ryk wat uit kolonialiseerders en gekolonialiseerdes bestaan. Hy het duidelik verstaan daar was grense in Viktoriaanse Britsheid, so lank kolonialisme bestaan. Gandhi het gesien die Indiërs was die 'ander' Britte, en hulle kon net hul onafhanklikheid buite die ryk bewerkstellig.

93. T.V. SATHYAMURTHI, 'Victorians, socialization and imperialism: consequences for post-imperial India', in J.A. MANGAN (Ed.), *Making Imperial Mentalities. Socialisatin and British Imperialism*, (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1990), pp. 110-126, 116.

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