
Gandhi's Legacy: The Natal Indian Congress 1894-1994

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Introduction

The book details the factors leading to the formation of the Natal Indian Congress (NIC). How the congress has contributed to South Africa's liberation struggle, features prominently in the narrative. The year 1894 was a turning point in the political history of the country. It marked the formation of the Natal Indian Congress. It served as a forum for the protection of Indians' rights as subjects of Britain. Natal was on the verge of becoming a subject of white supremacy. Mahātmā Gandhi observed this trend. He had completed his mission to South Africa and about to return to India when he saw a notice of a bill before the Natal colonial legislature that sought to deprive Indians of their right to vote. He was determined to challenge this move. He approached the leading Indian merchants for support. They met on 22 August 1894 at the residence of Dada Abdulla and formed the NIC. It broadened its vision to accommodate black political activists. They challenged the entire system of racial discrimination.

The road travelled by the NIC was long and difficult. There have been lows and highs marked by moments of acrimony and doubts. The book title *Gandhi's Legacy: The Natal Indian Congress 1894-1994* speaks to the profound influence of Gandhi that repeatedly plays out in the entire narrative. Gandhi fought against racial injustices of the Apartheid system resolutely. The book also provides some background of the arrival of Indians in South Africa.

Two classes of immigrants came from India. The first comprised indentured labourers who came to Natal to work on the sugar plantations. Natal joined the British colonies that were already making use of this labour supply. The first group of Indians arrived in 1860. Other groups continued to arrive until 1911. The indentured Indians worked in the agricultural sector, although some worked in industries. These migrant workers had the option to either renew their contracts or return to India after their contracts expired. Those who chose to serve two five-year contracts received land as a reward until 1891. Many chose to remain in Natal, while others migrated to other parts of South Africa in search of better opportunities. The second class consisted of individuals from western parts of India who paid their own passage fares. "Passenger Indians", as they were called, saw an opportunity to trade in Indian goods. They continued to arrive in the country until the 1870s. The largest numbers of independent immigrants arrived in the 1890s. They did not have capital resources and engaged in various forms of petty trade. When the NIC was established, there were over 42,000 Indians in Natal, almost equal to the number of Whites. The struggle between these two immigrant groups took place in the midst of numerous African populations, including the Zulu people whose powerful kingdom came under siege in the two decades following the British invasion of Zululand in 1879. The Whites in Natal were in the process of subjugating African people. The presence of Asians complicated matters for them. The White settlers recognized the value of indentured labour in Natal's economy. However, they were unhappy that many indentured Indians stayed behind to offer their labour in all sectors or otherwise engage in independent economic activities such as petty trade and market gardening. The "Introduction" is rich in background information. It captures the fundamental aspects of what the book seeks to cover. The reader can tap into the key issues that the author is interrogating.

Chapters

In the second chapter of the book, the author deals with the impact of British colonialism on South Africa. It would be interesting to learn how political activism mitigated colonial subjugation of non-whites in the country. The chapter title 'The Search for Imperial Brotherhood (1894-1914)' provides a clear idea on what the author would cover in the chapter. The years mentioned in the sub-title help the reader locate the narrative within the timelines in history and come to terms with the political climate and mood during the period in question. Gandhi stated categorically that all they wanted in South Africa was not a White man's land, not even a White brotherhood, but an Imperial brotherhood (October

1901). On the contrary, Jan Smuts argued: "... This country is the kaffirs. We Whites are a handful. We do not want Asians to come in" (April 1911). Part of the mission of NIC was to educate White colonialists about the position of Indians in Natal. Some White people perceived it as a secret organisation with sinister motives. It was also the responsibility of NIC to keep India posted on the developments in the country. There was a library for Natal Indians to keep track of socioeconomic and political affairs of India. There was also a desire to maintain Indian heritage. The attempt to open NIC membership to White settlers did not yield fruitful results. Historical records suggest that no white person ever served on the NIC executive committee.

There were issues of segregation and non-representation among Indians. In 1907, a group of Indians represented by V. Lawrence wrote a letter to the *Natal Advertiser* expressing dissatisfaction over the non-representation of colonial Hindus and Christian Indians in the NIC. In 1908, the Natal Indian Patriotic Union came into being as a direct consequence of the NIC's failure to resolve the issue. The NIC was mainly concerned with issues that affected their interests — namely, trade and immigration. There was an overrepresentation of the commercial elite on the NIC's executive committee. This gave the NIC a high profile not only in South Africa, but in England and India as well. However, alternative organisations formed by dissident groups received little attention abroad and did not enjoy much success. The NIC declared interest in the welfare of indentured Indians who had no political organisation of their own. It did little to address their ill-treatment. Eventually it terminated their immigration permits. Meanwhile the White colonialists in Natal began to express fears in the 1890s about the majority of Indian immigrants. The bill to disenfranchise Indians did not succeed, because it made direct reference to Indians that was contrary to the principle of Imperial Equality. In Durban at the time, only 251 Indian people were registered voters. In the capital, Pietermaritzburg, only 31 Indians were registered voters. Indian voters posed a threat to the country's future. The book chapters provide comprehensive accounts of the subject under discussion. The literary style of the book is to point. The language usage enables the reader to capture the essence of the title. The chapter titles provide a brief overview of the key aspects thereof.

Conclusion

The book comes across as a piece of academic writing arrived at through careful and thorough consideration. The author has been able to trace the course of the Natal Indian Congress that features Gandhi's political activism. It portrays the colonial anti-Asiatic

sentiments and the devastating effects of apartheid, right into the surging seas of a new democracy. He also brought a telescope to bear on the officers and crew who charted that course. Undoubtedly, the author's thorough research and solid background reflected in this book, is highly commendable.