GANDHIJI'S VISION OF A FREE SOUTH AFRICA

A collection of articles

by

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"If we look into the future [of South Africa], is it not a heritage we have to leave to posterity, that all the different races commingle and produce a civilisation that perhaps the world has not yet seen?"

- M.K. Gandhi, in a speech in Johannesburg in 1908

[NOTE: The following is a revision of a book published in 1995 by Sanchar Publishing House, New Delhi, in 1995. It includes an additional article entitled: "Mahatma Gandhi - South Africa's Gift to India".]
DEDICATED

TO

NELSON MANDELA AND HIS COLLEAGUES

IN THE STRUGGLE FOR A NEW SOUTH AFRICA WHERE,

IN THE WORDS OF GANDHIJI,

"ALL THE DIFFERENT RACES COMMINGLE AND PRODUCE A

CIVILISATION THAT THE WORLD HAS NOT YET SEEN"
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With the establishment of a non-racial democratic government in South Africa, under the leadership of Nelson Mandela, in a remarkable spirit of reconciliation, the vision of Gandhiji, during the satyagraha he led in that country, remains an abiding source of strength and inspiration to the South African people. He had said in 1908:

"If we look into the future, is it not a heritage we have to leave to posterity, that all the different races commingle and produce a civilisation that perhaps the world has not yet seen?"

Interest in Gandhiji, his method of struggle, and his vision for the future of humanity has been rekindled of late across the globe, not least in South Africa. As Nelson Mandela said in September 1992: "Gandhiji was a South African and his memory deserves to be cherished now and in post-apartheid South Africa. We must never lose sight of the fact that the Gandhian philosophy may be a key to human survival in the twenty-first century."

It is most appropriate at this time to recall the role of Gandhiji in the movement for emancipation of South Africa and in clear perspective that provided him for directing the Indian freedom struggle. The publication of this book is intended to meet that timely requirement.

The author, an international civil servant with the United Nations (1949-85), has rendered valuable service towards globalising the problem of South Africa through his writings, initiatives and actions. While a student in the United States he met a delegation of the South African freedom movement in 1946 and since then he has unswervingly helped the struggle of the South African freedom fighters to secure genuine independence from apartheid rule. His contribution to that cause as the Principal Secretary of the Special Committee against Apartheid as well as the Director of the Centre against Apartheid in later years was indeed "formidable", as was noted by the late Olof Palme, the Prime Minister of Sweden. On retirement from the UN, he continued to promote the international campaign against apartheid as a member of the Council of Trustees of the International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa, and in other capacities.

While championing the cause of South African freedom he was inexorably drawn towards analysing the phenomenal part that Gandhiji played as one of the prime motive forces behind the struggle to obliterate the tyrannical system founded in racism. The collection of articles comprising this publication is a vivid testimony of his scholarship and comprehension of both the Gandhian approach and the essence of the movement for freedom in South Africa. He effectively brings out the symbiotic relationship between the two while also pointing to the "South African roots of the ideas of Gandhiji" (to explore which he has called for further indepth study).

Mr. Reddy's words are of special significance in the current context. While recounting Gandhiji's observation in 1946 - "that he would not shed a single tear if all the Indian satyagrahis were wiped out (in South Africa), for they would thereby point the way to the Africans and vindicate the honour of India" - he projects the "true Gandhiji" and not the caricature drawn in some supposedly scholarly studies. Gandhiji repeatedly emphasised until the end of his life that he was an Indian and a South African. He
does not belong to Indian South Africans alone but to all South Africans. He then asserts without any trace of ambiguity: "The spirit of Gandhiji lives not only in the hearts of Indians struggling against racism and for a non-violent democratic society, but in those of Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Reverend Beyers Naude and many, many others."

His article on Gandhiji's influence on Dr Yusuf Dadoo focuses attention on how Dr Dadoo, an outstanding South African freedom fighter of Indian origin, carried forward the Gandhi legacy "by building an alliance of Indians and Africans as the basis for widest unity of the people against racism".

Of particular value is the illuminating article on Gandhiji's association with the remarkable European women - pacifists, feminists and socialists - who helped him in South Africa. Gandhiji's unpublished letters also throw light on this association. It is necessary here to underscore what Mr. Reddy has written in conclusion: "those who assumed that he must be a reactionary if he wore peasant's clothes or professed religion; and those who called him an agent of Gujarati capitalists because he did not advocate class struggle and tried to unite the Indian community in the struggle for its dignity and honour - could not understand Gandhiji nor the admiration he evoked among the greatest men and women of this century. I hope that the new information which is becoming available will persuade scholars in India and South Africa to reconsider their assumptions and understand the real Gandhi."

This book, we are confident, would prove invaluable both for scholars engaged in Gandhian studies and for those concerned with promoting friendship and cooperation between India and the new South Africa.

SUMIT CHAKRAVARTTY
Editor, Mainstream
New Delhi
August 15, 1994
INTRODUCTION

I have put together a collection of articles and papers as my modest contribution to Indian-South African relations and to the observance of the 125th birthday of Gandhiji.

It was in South Africa where he had gone in search of gainful employment - first as an employee of a merchant and later as an advocate in Durban and attorney in Johannesburg - that Gandhiji found his vocation because of his spirit of service and the influence of emergent Indian nationalism.

The precarious position of the small Indian community, the experience of rabid racism against Indians, and the repeated betrayals of promises by the authorities in South Africa and Britain did not lead him to despondency or to a lack of faith in humanity. He discovered satyagraha and became convinced that it was invincible. His philosophy was tested in South Africa in an unequal contest between the determined racist authorities and the small Indian community divided by class, language and religion. The seven-year satyagraha climaxed in the heroism of tens of thousands of working people - coupled with the sacrifices of many professionals and youth, as well as some prosperous merchants - and forced the government to negotiate an honourable settlement.

This experience transformed M.K. Gandhi, the “Indian patriot in South Africa”, into a leader whose efforts to spiritualise politics inspired many struggles around the globe for freedom, justice and a sane society.

I became particularly interested in Gandhiji during the many years I spent, as Director of the United Nations Centre against Apartheid, in promoting international action against racism in South Africa. These articles are a result of my search for an understanding of the evolution of the freedom struggle in the country and its continuing relevance. They were written over several years - before and after mass defiance forced the regime to negotiate with the liberation movement - and will need to be understood in that context.

I am most grateful to a number of friends for their encouragement, advice and assistance in my research - notably the editors of Mainstream (New Delhi) and The Leader (Durban) where most of the articles appeared; to Haridev Sharma, Deputy Director of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi; to the Southern Africa Research Program at Yale University and its Director, Prof. Leonard Thompson; to the Librarians at the Yale University, the University of Witwatersrand and the University of Cape Town - Moore Crossey, Anne Cunningham and Leonie Twentyman Jones - to the University of Durban-Westville and its Documentation Centre; and, above all, to the numerous friends I cherish from the South African liberation movement.

E.S. Reddy
New York
July 12, 1994

THIS GANDHI HAD LITTLE RELATION TO THE M.K. GANDHI, THE 23-YEAR-OLD BARRISTER IN A SUIT, WHO HAD SAILLED FROM BOMBAY IN APRIL 1893 BY FIRST CLASS IN THE HOPE OF FINDING OPPORTUNITY IN A NEW LAND.

IN LATER YEARS, GANDHIJI SAID THAT HE WAS BORN IN INDIA BUT "MADE" IN SOUTH AFRICA; "IT WAS AFTER I WENT TO SOUTH AFRICA THAT I BECAME WHAT I AM NOW".

HE TOLD THE KANPUR CONGRESS IN 1925 THAT "INDIANS OF SOUTH AFRICA CLAIM THAT THEY HAVE GIVEN ME TO YOU. I ACCEPT THAT CLAIM. IT IS PERFECTLY TRUE THAT WHATEVER SERVICE I HAVE BEEN ABLE TO RENDER... TO INDIA, COMES FROM SOUTH AFRICA."

TO UNDERSTAND THE EVOLUTION AND TRANSFORMATION OF GANDHIJI IN SOUTH AFRICA, IT IS NECESSARY TO NOTE, AS HE HIMSELF STRESSED ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS, THAT HE WAS NOT A BORN SAINT AND HAD NOT HAD AN EXTRAORDINARY CHILDHOOD OR YOUTH.

HE SAID IN A SPEECH IN 1925:

"I NEVER HAD A BRILLIANT CAREER. I WAS ALL MY LIFE A PLODDER. WHEN I WENT TO ENGLAND... I COULDN'T PUT TOGETHER TWO SENTENCES CORRECTLY. ON THE STEAMER I WAS A DRONE... I FINISHED MY THREE YEARS IN ENGLAND AS A DRONE."

AND FURTHER IN A SPEECH IN 1937:

"AT SCHOOL THE TEACHERS DID NOT CONSIDER ME A VERY BRIGHT BOY. THEY KNEW THAT I WAS A GOOD BOY, BUT NOT A BRIGHT BOY. I NEVER KNEW FIRST CLASS AND SECOND CLASS. I BARELY PASSED. I WAS A DULL BOY. I COULD NOT EVEN SPEAK PROPERLY. EVEN WHEN I WENT TO SOUTH AFRICA I WENT ONLY AS A CLERK."

HIS PRIMARY CONCERN AS A STUDENT IN LONDON AND ON HIS RETURN TO INDIA WAS TO MAKE MONEY. HE WAS UNSUCCESSFUL AS A BARRISTER AND COULD ONLY EARN SOME 300 RUPEES A MONTH AS A WRITER OF PETITIONS AND MEMORIALS, A PROFESSION IN WHICH HE WAS TO EXCEL LATER. FRUSTRATED, HE ACCEPTED AN OFFER OF EMPLOYMENT FROM A FRIEND OF HIS BROTHER IN DURBAN. HE WAS TO GET FIRST CLASS FARE, BUT ONLY £105 AND LOCAL EXPENSES FOR THE YEAR. HE WAS IN FACT PUT UP AS A BOARDER IN PRETORIA.

HE SHOWED LITTLE INTEREST IN POLITICS AND HAD NO ORGANISATIONAL EXPERIENCE EXCEPT FOR HIS WORK WITH THE VEGETARIAN SOCIETY IN LONDON. HIS MAIN ASSETS WERE HIS HONESTY, SPIRIT OF SACRIFICE AND INNATE LOVE OF HIS COUNTRY.
The Gandhi who returned from South Africa was an inspiring leader - fearless, selfless and with a vision - who had led a small community in a long and difficult, yet victorious, struggle against a stubborn racist government. He had developed a philosophy of life and of non-violent defiance of injustice which were to influence millions of people around the world. He had also formed definite views on reform of the Indian society and means to secure Swaraj.

In considering the influences which moulded Gandhiji in South Africa, we are handicapped by the serious gaps in knowledge about his life in that country. He said in 1939 that he had intimate relations with many Africans and had the privilege often advising them.\(^{(7)}\)

He was a close friend of Olive Schreiner, a prominent writer and a very progressive South African\(^{(8)}\) and he was in contact with many other South Africans of all backgrounds. But no information is available on his discussions with them. The evolution of his thinking has often been described - relying mainly on his book, *My Experiments with Truth* - as the result of his “ethical experiments” and of his study of religions and some Western writers. I would suggest that a major influence on him was the Indian national movement in the early years of this century.

The incident soon after his arrival in South Africa, when he was thrown out of a train in Pietermaritzburg in bitter cold, has often been cited as a landmark in his transformation. He himself said in an interview with Dr. John Mott:

"I was afraid for my very life... What was my duty, I asked myself. Should I go back to India, or should I go forward, with God as my helper, and face whatever was in store for me? I decided to stay and suffer. My active non-violence began from that date. And God put me through the test during that very journey. I was severely assaulted by the coachman for my moving from the seat he had given me."\(^{(9)}\)

Gandhiji was, I believe, particularly shocked as he was a well-dressed barrister who had only recently returned from Britain where he would have been treated with respect. The conductor and the constable who evicted him were British and would have been considered of lower class. The fact that he was humiliated in a foreign country, especially a British colony, outraged him and aroused his patriotism.

While this incident was a turning point in his life, it did not have a significant effect on his activities for many years. Returning to India was not a serious option for him at the time. His only public activity in the following year was to encourage meetings of Indians in Pretoria to consider their grievances and to draft petitions to the authorities. One of the first petitions was to secure assurance from railway authorities that first and second class tickets would be issued to "properly dressed" Indians.

After his initial contract expired, he agreed to stay on in Durban and undertake public service. It was decided in his discussions with the local Indian merchants that he would be provided retainers of at least £300 a year so that he could set up an independent household and live in a style usual for barristers. He was firm that he would not charge for public work.

He enrolled as a barrister and his practice developed. He rented a house at Beach Grove and entertained Europeans and Indians. His service to the Natal Indian
Congress, essentially an organisation of the Indian merchants, was mainly in drafting petitions to authorities and letters to the newspapers. He gave legal services to the poor Indians and indentured labourers at no charge and did volunteer work as a compounder in a hospital. He devoted much time to the welfare and improvement of the Indian community. He organised debates and other programmes for young Indians - most of them Natal-born and educated - and even led sporting activities. He gained respect as a public-spirited barrister but had not become a fighter for justice. He lived comfortably and apparently sent money to his family.

Returning in 1902 after a brief stay in India, he decided to settle in Johannesburg and enrolled as an attorney. He sought no retainers, but had a successful practice, earning as much as £5,000 a year, though devoting much of his time to public service. He spent part of his income to finance *Indian Opinion* and the Phoenix Settlement.¹⁰

The establishment of the Phoenix Settlement in 1904 was a new phase in his experiments, especially as regards simple living. This was followed in 1906 by two crucial decisions in his life - the vow of *brahmacharya* and a letter to his brother that he had no interest in worldly possessions. These decisions were also a preparation for a new level of public service, and were followed by the abandonment of legal practice in 1908, when his friend, Mr. Hermann Kallenbach, undertook to look after his simple needs.

It was in 1906 that Gandhiji decided to defy a humiliating law and soon became a leader in struggle rather than an adviser to the community. I believe Gandhiji was greatly influenced by the rise of national movement in India in taking this step.

He had visited India for five months in 1896 and met a number of public leaders to secure their support to redress the grievances of Indians in South Africa. But it was his second visit for a year in 1901-2 which had a profound effect on him. He attended the Congress session in Calcutta and spent more than a month with G.K. Gokhale whom he admired greatly for his efforts to "spiritualise" politics and to organise a corps of "servants of India" for whom politics would be a wholetime occupation.

Returning to South Africa, he began to follow the national movement in India. He called for united opposition by Hindus and Muslims against the partition of Bengal, and supported the *swadeshi* movement. Soon after, he abandoned "petition politics" as useless, unless there was some sanction behind the petitions, and decided to defy the Transvaal Asiatic Ordinance. One of the most dramatic events of the *satyagraha* was the burning of the passes, similar to the burning of British cloth in the *swadeshi* movement. Throughout the *satyagraha*, Gandhiji emphasised that it was not so much for the rights of the Indians in South Africa as for the honour of the "motherland". Many young people who were not particularly affected by the discriminatory laws repeatedly went to prison for that cause. Significantly, the first biography of Gandhiji, by the Rev. J.J. Doke, was entitled "An Indian Patriot in South Africa".¹¹

During this time, Gandhiji began to express his views on the situation in India and they reflected his own experience with the Indian community in South Africa which included people of many religions and castes who spoke many languages and were mostly illiterate.