

Gandhi's Formative and Transitional Years in South Africa

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Abstract

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi spent twenty-one years in South Africa in which he was heavily involved in petitioning the government for equal rights for the Indians in the region. Throughout these years he established a newspaper, fought many political battles, willfully served time in jail and developed his non-violent ideology. The years between 1906 and 1908 were the most crucial of his transitional and formative years in South Africa. This paper examines how his experiences in the political arena of South Africa, readings on religion, readings by famous authors and his experiments with civil disobedience all were influences on his developing ideology.

Introduction

Gandhi spent twenty-one years in South Africa. During this time he went from a young lawyer who embraced British Imperialism, to a political activist who denounced any association between India and Great Britain. His struggles and failures in the political arena of South Africa shaped and molded his philosophy and caused him to reject British civilization and modernity. The years Gandhi spent in South Africa proved to have indispensable factors in creating Gandhi's ideology.

Early Life

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born 2 October, 1869 in Porbander, India. He was born into one of the most respected families in the city-state of Porbander. His parent's devoutly practiced the Hindu religion and expected the same of their son. They also practiced

vegetarianism and preached of equality, morality, and tolerance of others, all of which influenced him into his adult years.¹

Gandhi's father, Karamchand was a very ideological man and sought to teach his son about his ideals concerning morality and honor, especially in regards to British Imperialism. Through his father, Gandhi was able to learn how important it was for a man to operate under a code of conduct that treats all humans as equals. Later in life, Gandhi stated that as a boy he was taught to value a religious scripture based on its ethical teachings, not on what miracles were performed. He had been taught to take a practical approach to life and religion, rather than simply having blind faith.² Also, he learned to behave responsibly and to have a high degree of self-efficacy, which later became evident during his years in South Africa. Karamchand was very hard on his young son and expected a lot from him, which is probably why Gandhi was very sensitive to any negative marks toward his integrity.³ He later recalled that "The least little blemish drew tears to my eyes."⁴ A high degree of integrity and self-efficacy, which Gandhi possessed as a boy, stayed with him throughout his adult years.

Education

While Karamchand denounced British Imperialism and medicine because it employed the practice of cutting up dead bodies (in fact he died in 1885 from an ulcerated boil on his neck

Hay, Stephen. "Between Two Worlds: Gandhi's First Impression of British Culture." *Modern Asian Studies*. 3 (1969): 305

² Gandhi, M.K. *Harijan*. 18 April, 1936

³ Hay, Stephen. "Between Two Worlds: Gandhi's First Impression of British Culture." 317

⁴ Gandhi, M.K *An Autobiography*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 26

which surgery probably could have healed but he refused to be operated on), he also realized that in order to be successful and attain higher education within the system, one must be willing to conform to some aspects of the culture. Karamchand did not know how to speak any English, however, he did encourage his son to become fluent in the language. To help him to learn the English language, Gandhi was sent to an English style school in India where he became intrigued with British civilization and began to dream of traveling to London.⁵ Gandhi later stated that he had a hard time learning English because it is not spoken that same way it is written. This probably affected his performance in the English-style school.⁶

Gandhi became interested in going to law school, however law schools in India were very difficult to get accepted to and Gandhi had merely average grades.⁷ In fact, Gandhi said that he was lucky to pass examinations in high school and that he never aspired to have any type of academic distinctions.⁸ Since law school in India was out of the question, his father encouraged him to travel to London to attend law school there. While attending English-style school in India, Gandhi had heard that England was the “center of civilization” and he later wrote that the reason he wished to travel to London to study was to attain a higher status in society and to see first what civilization (as it was termed) was really like. Gandhi had to convince his mother and

⁵ Hay, Stephen. “Between Two Worlds: Gandhi’s First Impression of British Culture.” 311

⁶ Gandhi, M.K. *Harijan*. 9 July, 1938.

⁷ Huttenback, Robert A. “Some Fruits of Victorian Imperialism: Gandhi and the Indian Question in Natal, 1893-99.” *Victorian Studies*. 11 (1969): 153

⁸ Gandhi, M.K. *Harijan*. 9 July, 1938.

other family members to allow him to study abroad. Once he had convinced them, his older brother made arrangements for his departure.⁹

Practicing Law in India

After passing his bar exams in London, he sailed back to India on 12 June 1891.¹⁰ When he arrived in India he was shocked to hear that his mother had died while he was in England. He had not received any word about his mother's death while he was in England because his brother decided it was best that he not have to endure the loss of his mother while he was away from home.¹¹ It is possible that depression from the loss of his mother negatively affected his ability to conduct business in law. He then attempted starting a couple businesses practicing law which he was marginally unsuccessful in so doing. One might have thought that given he had been educated in London and was fluent in English, he would not have had a hard time creating a successful business, especially when considering that in all of British ruled India, English was the only language spoke in the courts.

However, Gandhi said he felt unprepared to practice law in India. He claimed that he never had learned anything of applied law and that he was even more deficient when it came to Indian law.¹² However, this isn't very surprising considering how ethno-centric the British Empire was in the late 19th Century.

⁹ Hay, Stephen. "Between Two Worlds: Gandhi's First Impression of British Culture." 311

¹⁰ Gandhi, M.K. *An Autobiography*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 105

¹¹ *Ibid*, 112

¹² *Ibid* 106

Gandhi later recalled his first experience in a court room representing a person. He was so nervous and unprepared that when it was his time to conduct a cross examination of the plaintiff he couldn't think of any question to ask. Conforming to his high degree of integrity, he felt so embarrassed that he later refunded his clients money in full.¹³

After his embarrassment in the courtroom, Gandhi set up his own office in Rajkot where he drafted legal papers. A friend of Gandhi's older brother also drafted legal papers in Rajkot and sent some of his poorer clients to Gandhi to have him draft their papers. He found moderate success in doing this, however he wasn't making a large sum of money.¹⁴

Contract in South Africa

While running his own office and drafting legal papers, Gandhi's older brother had learned that Indian merchants in South Africa had a large case in court and were looking for an Indian lawyer willing to move to the region. Gandhi then signed a year-long contract to serve as a barrister for local Indian merchants who were deficient in English.¹⁵ When he arrived in Durban, South Africa in May of 1893 he wore an English suit, which was a stark contrast to his dress years later, after he denounced British Imperialism and modernity.¹⁶

Initially, Gandhi intended to stay in South Africa for only one year, however soon after his arrival he became appalled by the inequalities endured by Indians due to legal restrictions

¹³ Ibid 120

¹⁴ Ibid 125

¹⁵ Ibid 128

¹⁶ Huttenback, Robert A. "Some Fruits of Victorian Imperialism: Gandhi and the Indian Question in Natal, 1893-99." 153

placed on them.¹⁷ They were in effect second class citizens and the government was constantly passing laws restricting them and stripping Indians of their rights. Most of the Indians in South Africa had come there as indentured servants to work in mines and served as laborers on plantations. The colonists were largely unable to make laborers out of the Natives in South Africa so they had turned to India to relieve the labor shortage. Between 1860 and 1911, 152,184 Indian immigrants came to Natal, nearly all of which came as indentured servants.¹⁸

Conditions in South Africa

Indentured Indians typically signed five year terms of service. Two thirds of the immigrants were male and ninety-percent of the Indians were Hindu. Most immigrants were low in the caste system and had been agricultural workers before travelling to South Africa. Under most contracts of servitude, the Indians were required to stay in South Africa as “free Indians,” for five years. After five years of residing in South Africa as free Indians (after the initial five years under contract of servitude), the Indians were then given free passage back to India. The reason the Indians were forced to stay in South Africa after their servitude was up, was probably because of the labor shortage in South Africa, coupled with the inability to recruit indentured Indians in later years. Ideally, the colonists wanted the free Indians to perform the same arduous

¹⁷ Dobbins, Sharon Kay. “The Principles of Equity and the Sermon on the Mount as Influence in Gandhi’s Truth Force.” *Journal of Law and Religion*. 6 (1988): 139

¹⁸ Vahed, Goolam. “Constructions of Community and Identity Among Indians in Colonial Natal, 1860-1910: The Role of the Muharram Festival.” *The Journal of African History*. 43 (2002): 78-79

jobs in the mines and plantations as they had during the servitude. However, most free Indians became small merchants peddling goods to other Indians, or became small market gardeners.¹⁹

Shortly after arriving in South Africa in May of 1893 Gandhi was told to give up his seat in a first class compartment on a train. After refusing to exit the compartment he was physically thrown out. This first-hand experience with unfair and restrictive practices in South Africa prompted action from Gandhi.²⁰ Understanding that most Indians in South Africa were not educated nor attuned to politics, Gandhi extended his stay in South Africa and took it upon himself to enter the political arena in South Africa in order to address the inequalities being dealt to Indians.

One of the first public political battles which Gandhi became involved in was in the opposition to the Franchise Amendment Bill, which was enacted in April of 1894. This bill sought to disallow franchise rights such as voting and citizen rights to all Asians in Natal, South Africa. Gandhi wrote many letters to government officials attacking the bill and demanding that it be nullified. However, Gandhi was unsuccessful in preventing and repealing the bill, but he did start to make a name for himself and he set a precedent of social activism.²¹

Travel Back to India

¹⁹ Vahed, Goolam. "Contractions of Community and Identity Among Indians in Colonial Natal, 1860-1910: The Role of the Muharram Festival." 78-79

²⁰ Stone, J.H. "M.K. Gandhi: Some Experiments with Truth." *Journal of Southern African Studies*. 16 (1990): 723

²¹ Power, Paul F. "Gandhi in South Africa." *The Journal of Modern African Studies*. 7 (1969): 448

After three years of struggling in the political arena of South Africa, Gandhi traveled back to India in 1896. He spent five months there telling the government and people in India of the oppressive laws Indians were being subjected to. While he was in India he even wrote a pamphlet that was entitled, *Grievances of the British Indians in South Africa*, which was so successful and popular that it went through two printings.

The important reason why Gandhi traveled back to India was to inform the Indian governments about the racial inequalities in South Africa. Gandhi understood that while much of India was under British Imperial Rule, the local Indian governments had the power to halt all indentured servitude to India. In effect, the Indian governments had much lobbying power to compel the governments in South Africa to change the nature of their oppressive laws. If South Africa was cut off from Indian indentured laborers, the country's economy could fall into a depression from the lack of labor so vitally needed to work its mines and plantations. While the Indian governments did little to pressure the governments in South Africa, Gandhi's trip to India in 1896 was successful in informing all levels of society in India of the racial injustices in South Africa.²²

After five months in India in 1896, Gandhi sailed for South Africa aboard the *Courland*. When the ship arrived in South Africa, it was ordered to quarantine all passengers aboard. The justification for the quarantine was that there had been a mild form of the black plague in India; however, the *Courland* did not sail out of any of the infected areas. Nevertheless, the ship was ordered to be quarantined for twenty-three days. Once the twenty-three days was up, the

²² Huttenback, Robert A. "Some Fruits of Victorian Imperialism: Gandhi and the Indian Question in Natal, 1893-99." *Victorian Studies*. 11 (1969): 157-158

quarantine was extended and the passengers were order to burn all bedding aboard, which they were instructed to do repeatedly.

It became obvious that the government in South Africa was using the quarantine to prevent Gandhi from landing. News of his trip to India had spread like wildfire throughout South Africa. Rumors had passed about his actions during his five months in India, and misinformation was transmitted through newspapers in Natal and Transvaal about what he had published in his pamphlet *Grievances of the British Indians in South Africa*. Town meetings were held in which people vowed to “tar and feather” Gandhi and to throw him overboard.²³

The quarantine ended on 13 January, 1897 after 27 days aboard the ship while afloat off the coast. A mob gathered at the port and hurled threats at Gandhi. Gandhi was advised to stay aboard the ship and travel under disguise and by night. Not wanting people to think he was a coward Gandhi walked by himself off the ship and traveled down Mainstreet of Durban. Gandhi later recalled that young kids had spotted him as he got off the Courland and began shouting “Gandhi, Gandhi.” They began to throw stones and rotten eggs at him.²⁴ The mob even whipped him, cutting him open around the neck and ears. The Police Chief’s wife gratefully stepped in between the mob and Gandhi and protected him with her umbrella and guided him toward the safety of the police station.

The police chief asked Gandhi if he wished to press charges against the mob. Gandhi declined stating that, he willfully and at his own risk walked himself down Main Street even

²³ Huttenback, Robert A. “Some Fruits of Victorian Imperialism: Gandhi and the Indian Question in Natal, 1893-99.” 160

²⁴ Gandhi, M.K. *“All Men are Brothers.”* ed. Krishna Kripalani New York: Columbia University Press, 1958. 19

though he had been warned not to. He also said that it was his fault for not informing the police force of his embarkation and route. For these reasons Gandhi, conforming to his upbringing of morality and self-efficacy, did not blame the mob which attacked him, but himself in the ordeal.²⁵

Continued Political Involvement

In 1897, the Natal Legislative Assembly passed the Immigration Restriction Act. This bill was supposedly conformed to the official British Imperial philosophy of equality; however it was obvious through the stipulations included in the bill that it was definitely not free of racism. The bill sought to prevent free Indians from immigrating to Natal. A prerequisite to gain permission to immigrate to the region was that the immigrant must be fluent in the English language and a property requirement was set that was well above what any Indian laborer could ever hope to meet. The reason the bill was passed was because the Natal Government and the British colonists in Natal didn't want free Indians being merchants and competing with the European merchants. Even newspapers such as the *Mercury* and the *Witness* both published articles supporting the Immigration Restriction Act. The articles usually appealed to white's fear of being swamped by low class Indians.²⁶

²⁵ Huttenback, Robert A. "Some Fruits of Victorian Imperialism: Gandhi and the Indian Question in Natal, 1893-99." 164

²⁶ Huttenback, Robert A. "Some Fruits of Victorian Imperialism: Gandhi and the Indian Question in Natal, 1893-99." 165, 174.

Natal Act No. 18 of 1897 required all vendors and merchants' books to be kept in English. It also allowed for municipalities to appoint their own merchant licensing agent. Merchant store and goods must be deemed "sanitary," in which interpretation of sanitary was left to the licensing agent's discretion. While it was contended that this bill was not racial, it was obvious that it was given the stipulation that fluency in the English language was required. Also, agents were instructed to refuse licenses to Indian merchants. The reason this bill, like the Immigration Restriction Act, was enacted stemmed from the fear that Indian merchants were able to undersell European vendors because of their frugal lifestyle.²⁷

Establishing a Newspaper

Gandhi realized that it was difficult to organize resistance to oppressive labor laws and practices because the Indian population was spread thought vast distances. In fact, in 1904 there were more than 1,300 employers of indentured Indians in Natal alone.²⁸ In order to address this problem, Gandhi helped to found a weekly newspaper called the *Indian Opinion* in June of 1903. Through the medium of the newspaper, Gandhi could transmit local happenings in politics to the rural population of Indians. Gandhi wrote an article in this newspaper nearly every issue until his departure from South Africa in 1914. The *Indian Opinion* was also aimed at pointing out to Europeans that they had a responsibility towards Asians who were part of the British Empire. Gandhi also wrote about passive resistance, civil disobedience, Satyagraha and his various other

²⁷ Huttenback, Robert A. "Some Fruits of Victorian Imperialism: Gandhi and the Indian Question in Natal, 1893-99." 172, 177

²⁸ Vahed, Goolam. "Contructions of Community and Identity Among Indians in Colonial Natal, 1860-1910: The Role of the Muharram Festival." 79

developing ideologies in the newspaper.²⁹ The *Indian Opinion* was very successful and Gandhi stated that within the first month of starting the *Indian Opinion*, he had concluded that a newspaper's main function should be to serve the people. He also realized how powerful a newspaper can be and noted that the author should be sure to not use the newspaper for his or her own advantage because it holds many destructive powers.³⁰

Even though Gandhi had an extensive formal education, which was a sharp contrast to the average Indian in South Africa in the late 19th Century and early 20th Century, he was careful to write his points simply and clearly for the readers of the *Indian Opinion*. For example, in his 16 August, 1907 article in the *Indian Opinion*, he simply stated, in numerical order, what the current law was. On the opposite side of the page, numbered accordingly, he stated what changes would be made if the new legislation were to pass. It is obvious that Gandhi realized that the average Indian had not been formally educated and were probably doing well if they could read. This also shows that Gandhi truly cared about the plight of the average Indian in South Africa, and was not just concerned with gaining notoriety and attention as a distinguished and well articulated lawyer.³¹

Involvement in British-Boer War

²⁹ Power, Paul F. "Gandhi in South Africa." *The Journal of Modern African Studies*. 444

³⁰ Gandhi, M.K. *An Autobiography*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1948. 349

³¹ _____. *Indian Opinion*. August 16, 1907

Even though Gandhi put so much effort in resisting oppressive and unfair British Colonial laws, at the turn of the Century he still placed much faith and loyalty in the British Imperial system. In 1899, the British-Boer War broke out and Gandhi stated that he personally sided with the Boers. However, he felt his personal opinions should not have an effect on his actions. Since he demanded equal rights from the British Empire as white British citizens had, it was his duty to be loyal and serve the British Empire.³² Gandhi organized and served on an ambulance corps that served as stretcher teams which evacuated and cared for British casualties. Gandhi mentioned that prior to the British-Boer war, he had volunteered in a small hospital and it had given him experience that helped him during his time caring for British casualties.³³ Gandhi believed that Indian stretcher teams would show the British of their loyalty, and also increase their ability to negotiate with the British to end racially oppressive laws. During the war in order to convince the Indians to assist the British, they said that the Indians in the Transvaal would be much better off with the British controlling the Transvaal than they would if the Boers controlled it. However at the end of the war, most of the promises made to the Indians by the British never materialized.³⁴ Gathering casualties during the war probably significantly influenced to adopt the ideology and policy of non-violence.

The Black Act

³² Ibid, 264

³³ Ibid, 249, 250

³⁴ Power, Paul F. "Gandhi in South Africa." *The Journal of Modern African Studies.* 443,45

On 31 July, 1907, the Asiatic Registration Act (commonly called the Black Act) passed in the Transvaal and was enacted in November of that year. The Act required all Indians to register with the Registrar of Asiatics and obtain a certificate. Failure to do so would subject the offender to a fine, imprisonment or to be deported.³⁵ The government would then be able to monitor Asian residents by registering, finger printing them and requiring them to possess passes at all times. Gandhi announced that he would set precedence and be the first person to fail to register and subject himself to imprisonment. He also instructed other Indians to refuse to register and to willfully accept imprisonment. He wrote extensively about the “Black Act” in the *Indian Opinion* and sought to persuade Indians to unite together.³⁶ In fact, Gandhi encouraged Indians not to take out permits required by the Transvaal Act. He pointed out that if they did he anticipated the situation for Indians to only get worse. He figured that if the Indians were to give into the government’s demands, eventually no licenses would be given to any Indian merchants. He also suspected that Indians would be given no land rights and would only be allowed to live and trade in certain locations. Through this example, one can see how Gandhi’s ideology was transforming from a desire to be reasonable and willing to negotiate with government, to one that is very hesitant to appease or to even negotiate with government.³⁷

Gandhi’s efforts were successful and only 500 of the 9,500 Indians registered under the Asiatic Registration Act. Gandhi was arrested 10 January, 1908 in a mass arrest for failing to register.³⁸ After learning through a telegram that other Indians got three months hard labor for

³⁵ Dobbins, Sharon Kay. “The Principles of Equity and the Sermon on the Mount as Influence in Gandhi’s Truth Force.” 139

³⁶ Power, Paul F. “Gandhi in South Africa.” *The Journal of Modern African Studies*. 450

³⁷ Gandhi, M.K. *Indian Opinion*. 18 May, 1907

³⁸ ³⁸ Hendrick, George. “The Influence of Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” on Gandhi’s Satyagraha.” 465, 467, 469

their non-compliance, he felt compelled to ask for the maximum penalty from the judge.³⁹ He did plead guilty and asked for the maximum sentence, but was sentenced to two months simple imprisonment instead of three months hard labor. While Gandhi was in jail, Transvaal authorities negotiated with him regarding registration. Gandhi agreed to register and encouraged other Indians to do so as well, and in return, once all Indians were registered the Act would be repealed.⁴⁰ Gandhi even wrote in the *Indian Opinion* instructing all Indians to register. To make registration easier for Indians and the government as well, Gandhi outlined the procedure in the *Indian Opinion*. He explained who could simply sign their name and who would be required to give digit impressions for the government's identification records. He also explained what ages of children were required to register and under which circumstances. This shows that even when negotiating with a government which he opposed, when he made a promise (to instruct Indians to register) he would keep that promise and by all means encourage Indians to register. However, once all the Indians had voluntarily registered, the Act was never repealed.⁴¹

Negotiations broke down between the Indians and the Transvaal Government in May of 1908. Gandhi and hundreds of other Indians decided to burn their registration cards in a mass protest 16 August, 1908. Several large cauldrons were set afire up in public and Indians threw their registration cards in. For his participation in burning the registration certificates he was sentenced to prison 10 October, 1908.⁴²

³⁹ _____. *Indian Opinion*. 3 March, 1908

⁴⁰ Hendrick, George. "The Influence of Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" on Gandhi's Satyagraha." 465, 467, 469

⁴¹ Gandhi, M.K. *Indian Opinion*. 2 February, 1908

⁴² Hendrick, George. "The Influence of Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" on Gandhi's Satyagraha." 553, 469

Experiences in Jail

After people had requested Gandhi to write about his experiences in jail, Gandhi wrote in the *Indian Opinion* about the lifestyle and routine he experienced in jail. He discussed the jail rules in great length and with more detail than one might expect if he were merely writing for the enjoyment of others. He even wrote about socializing with his fellow inmates.⁴³ While he didn't try to indicate to his Indian audience that a stay in South African jail was luxurious, he didn't speak of great suffering either. He wrote of his experiences with a high degree of calmness and stated it in a "matter of fact" manner. It seemed that he didn't find jail repulsive, it seemed like he simply accepted it as he due punishment.⁴⁴

Based on how Gandhi wrote at length about the rules and routine in jail, I believe that Gandhi did not write about his experiences in the *Indian Opinion* just because someone requested him to do so. I think Gandhi felt a duty to inform other Indians about what they might have to endure if they chose to participate in his acts of civil disobedience. Since Gandhi always preached about willfully accepting a prison term for ones actions, I think Gandhi wanted his "followers" to be fully aware of what conditions inside a jail were like. He didn't want to mislead anyone into thinking that jail was like a vacation, which is probably why he spoke of his experience in such a matter of fact way.

⁴³ Gandhi, M.K. *Indian Opinion*. 14 March, 1908

⁴⁴ _____. *Indian Opinion*. 3 March, 1908

Another explanation for him revealing his experiences in jail is that if he hadn't, it could have possibly undermined his base for support. If he had failed to tell his followers what jail was like, or if he portrayed jail in his writings as a five-star hotel, his followers might have been shocked and horrified by the conditions and lifestyle in the jail. If they were shocked and horrified by their experience, not only would they be unwilling to participate in civil disobedience again and risk another imprisonment, they would also be inclined to warn others not to participate as well. Gandhi would then lose support and his credibility if he did inform his followers about the hardships they might endure if they were to be imprisoned.

Final Efforts in South Africa

By 1910, the Transvaal government had passed legislation designed to keep Indians from emigrated to the region. It also prevented Indians from merely visiting the region temporarily. To protest this, Gandhi used civil disobedience in South Africa one last time in November of 1913. He and 2,000 Indians walked from Natal to the Transvaal, an illegal action, to the illegalization of interprovincial travel.⁴⁵ Gandhi later recalled that he had informed the Transvaal government that they had intended to cross from Natal into Transvaal in willful violation of the Transvaal immigration law. He took pride in that there was no violence as a result from the protest. In fact it failed to provoke any response from the government. This was an excellent example of a civil disobedience act going exactly as Gandhi had planned. How else could 2,000

⁴⁵ Power, Paul F. "Gandhi in South Africa." *The Journal of Modern African Studies*. 454

Indians march in unison across a border, which the British so adamantly sought to protect, and not provoke any response?⁴⁶

Before Gandhi left South Africa in 1914, he was able to repeal the per capita head tax on Indians of three pounds. He also was able to get the government to recognize non Christian marriages including the right to marry more than one woman. They also allowed Indians to serve as marriage officers. Also, some racist language was removed from laws and educated Indians were allowed to immigrate to South Africa.⁴⁷ However, Gandhi failed to significantly change colonial and imperial legislation, he merely embarrassed the governments. However, we can be fairly certain that the plight of Indians in South Africa from 1893 to 1914 would have been much worse without Gandhi's actions and involvement as much anti-Indian legislation was passed in South Africa in the years after his departure.⁴⁸

Henry David Thoreau's Influence on Gandhi

For all his original and novel brilliance, Gandhi was certainly influenced heavily by other well known writers and philosophers. Gandhi stated that he was an avid reader of Henry David Thoreau and was especially moved by his work *Civil Disobedience*. Many of Gandhi's actions and statements are astonishingly similar to Thoreau's rhetoric within *Civil Disobedience*. In *Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau encouraged people to resist unjust laws immediately rather than to wait for the majority of affected people to deem the law unjust and eventually petition to amend

⁴⁶ Gandhi, M.K. *Young India*. 10 November, 1921

⁴⁷ Du Toit, Brian M. "The Mahatma Gandhi and South Africa." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 652

⁴⁸ Power, Paul F. "Gandhi in South Africa." *The Journal of Modern African Studies*. 454

it. He also claimed that it didn't matter how small the act of civil disobedience was, if it was done well its memory would last forever.⁴⁹ This notion could have convinced Gandhi that even token resistance to an unjust government can be significant and meaningful in accomplishing one's overall goal.

Throughout *Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau extensively outlined his ideology and rationalized why he opposed the United States government. He also explained his "civil disobedience" against the government, and sought to legitimize his disobedient actions of not paying his taxes. However, he also noted that the U.S. Constitution had many faults, but in general terms it was admirable. He cited that the Constitution sought to uphold equality and morality. Also, he felt that the court system was worth respecting. It may seem strange to some that in a short book dedicated almost entirely to opposing government that an author would be willing to point out a few good things about the government as well. Gandhi could have been influenced by Thoreau's effort to point out that not all aspects of government is bad as Gandhi was always careful not to preach anarchism. He was always willing to accept the punishment for infractions which he committed, which again shows that Gandhi still respected some aspects of government.⁵⁰

Thoreau also pointed out that newspapers always seemed to be interested in government reform. He stated that newspapers were always the first to discuss government reform, before any single individual would even dare mention it. This is probably because a newspaper doesn't have a single individual identity, and no single person could be blamed for inciting

⁴⁹ Thoreau, Henry D. *Civil Disobedience*. Raleigh, 1849. 6,7

⁵⁰ Thoreau, Henry D. *Civil Disobedience*. Raleigh, 1849. 13

insubordination. Given that Gandhi became so involved in with the newspaper in South Africa, *Indian Opinion*, it is very possible that Gandhi felt encouraged by Thoreau's statements in regard to their ability to spread notions of government reform.⁵¹

Also in *Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau explained that he thought it was ideal for a farmer to remain merely a subsistence farmer and to minimize his affairs away from the farm that were necessary for his well being. This would in turn minimize the farmer's reliance on the government and would free him to practice disobedience against the government if they were to impose unjust laws upon the farmer. This notion could have also steered Gandhi's ideology to reject modernity. Both Gandhi's and Thoreau's rhetoric included the idealization of localism and warned against moving towards a global economy. Given that Gandhi cited Thoreau's work as being very influential on him, it is highly unlikely that the similarities between Gandhi and Thoreau were merely coincidental.⁵² While Gandhi agreed with much of the ideals concerning subsistence farming outlined by Thoreau, years later Gandhi offered diverged and seemingly contradictory opinion. He warned against becoming too independent and self sufficient. He argued that if a man became too independent he would become arrogant and be an annoyance to the world. Accordingly, a man should be willing to rely on his neighbor much like he would rely on his family.⁵³

⁵¹ Thoreau, Henry D. *Civil Disobedience*. Raleigh, 1849. 7

⁵² Thoreau, Henry D. *Civil Disobedience*. Raleigh, 1849. 9

⁵³ Gandhi, M.K. *Young India*. 21 March, 1929

Further Writers and Religions' Influence on Gandhi

John Ruskin was also cited by Gandhi as an influence to his ideology. He especially liked Ruksin's statement that in order for the welfare of all to be obtained, people must conform to moral law.⁵⁴ Interestingly, Gandhi did much of his reading while in jail. In fact, in 1908 while serving his first prison sentence he read Tolstoy, Ruskin, Socrates and Bacon. Gandhi said he actually enjoyed prison where "the body is restrained, but the not the soul"⁵⁵ and he was especially influenced by Thoreau's ideals concerning serving time in jail "for the sake of his principles and suffering humanity."⁵⁶

Gandhi cited Leo Tolstoy as a major influence on his ideology. He claimed that Tolstoy's writing gave him a basis of reasoning for non-violence. Tolstoy's *Unto This Last*, Gandhi claimed, had transformed him from a British Indian lawyer to an Indian who rejected anything to do with British government and culture. In fact, Tolstoy and Gandhi even wrote letters back and forth to each other while Gandhi was in South Africa. In the letters Tolstoy encouraged Gandhi and claimed that his efforts were giving hope to oppressed people.⁵⁷

Gandhi did not only study popular writers, he was also very interested in world religions. Even though he was a Hindu, he was not narrow thinking when it came to religions. He studied also Christianity, Islam, and Jainism. As a boy and into his young adult years he resented the Christian religion because he felt that Christian missionaries denounced and attacked Hinduism.

⁵⁴ Appadoral, A. "Gandhi's Contribution to Social Theory." *The Review of Politics* 314

⁵⁵ Hendrick, George. "The Influence of Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" on Gandhi's Satyagraha." 469

⁵⁶ Hendrick, George. "The Influence of Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" on Gandhi's Satyagraha." 464

⁵⁷ Gandhi, M.K. Vol. VI "To American Friends." 3 August, 1942

He also disliked it because it's intolerance towards other religions.⁵⁸ He claimed that all religions teach morality and are based on ethical principles. He felt that professing all religions was better than adhering to a single religion. He thought that this would tend to make a person conform to the laws of morality, rather than simply following a certain religion in order to be "saved." He also claimed that many people memorize and preach sermons, but do not abide by them.⁵⁹ As Gandhi aged he found more and more appreciation for the teachings of various religions and was especially interested in the Christian religion's *Sermon on the Mount*. Gandhi thought that Jesus was particularly good at defining spiritual ideals. He interpreted his message as saying that people should be humble and reflect upon the nature of their own character often and also should be willing to suffer.⁶⁰

An Abrupt Transition

When analyzing Gandhi's years spent in South Africa, a certain transition can be seen around the time period between 1906 and 1909. At this point, Gandhi had spent more than a decade in South Africa. During this time Gandhi went from being a prominent lawyer to being a radical political leader. By 1909, Gandhi felt that European modernity and civilization, such as railways, machines and poor habits were the true form of slavery placed on the Indians by the British.⁶¹ Instead of taking a slow, gradual change from embracing the concept of British

⁵⁸ Hay, Stephen. "Between Two Worlds: Gandhi's First Impression of British Culture." 308

⁵⁹ Gandhi, M.K. *Indian Opinion*. 5 January, 1907

⁶⁰ Dobbins, Sharon Kay. "The Principles of Equity and the Sermon on the Mount as Influence in Gandhi's Truth Force." 134

⁶¹ Hendrick, George. "The Influence of Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" on Gandhi's Satyagraha." 470

Imperialism to denouncing it, there was a sudden change during these 3 years, as Gandhi moved away from a “British- Indian” lifestyle and thought.⁶² In later years Gandhi even pointed this sudden transition out. He claimed that until 1906 he simply used reasoning to get the British to repeal oppressive legislation. However, when this failed, he felt forced to choose between violence or adopting a different method of opposing government.⁶³

Gandhi’s Famous Work: *Hind Swaraj*

A book by Gandhi that exemplifies the sudden transition in ideology that he experiences is *Hind Swaraj*. Written in 1908 on a return voyage from England to South Africa, the book gives Gandhi’s response to British Imperialism, European civilization and European wealth stratification. He also outlines his ideology of passive resistance or civil disobedience. Some scholars consider it to be one of his greatest works.

Gandhi stated that he was against allowing the British government to rule over Indians any longer. He claimed that the British government kept Indians in a state of slavery by imposing large taxes on them. He also believed that the British-style government was inefficient. He stated that government officials are supposed to follow the will of the public; however they become intoxicated by their power and become more concerned with serving those

⁶² Power, Paul F. “Gandhi in South Africa.” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 447

⁶³Gandhi, M.K. *Young India*, 4 November, 1931

who have the wealth to bribe them. By analyzing this work by Gandhi, one can see that by 1908 he was already rejecting the British government, rather than trying to show his loyalty like he had attempted through his participation in the British-Boer War, less than ten years earlier.⁶⁴

In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi also addressed his views towards British civilization, mechanization and technology. He pointed out that mechanization and technology creates a system where an oligarchy forms in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. No doubt Gandhi was well aware of the wealth stratification in England. He also noted that works risk their lives in dangerous factories so the owner of the factory can become wealthier.⁶⁵

Gandhi also discusses his disregard toward the railroad system. He pointed out that since the railroad was put in; India had suffered from increased bouts of disease and epidemics. His interpretation of this was that before the railroad was put in, which connected hundreds of miles of countryside, villages had a “natural segregation,” which served as a buffer zone that prevented diseases travelling vast distances and infecting thousands. He also believed that the railroad increased the likelihood of famine. The railroad enabled small, peasant farms to export grain and other farm produce across vast distances to foreign markets. This transformed the subsistence peasant farmer into a market capitalist. Farmers were able to transport their goods to distant markets for a higher price, when his neighbors were starving as the result of a famine.⁶⁶

Gandhi also felt that British medical system was to be detested as well. He pointed out that doctors cured ailments of people that were from their own negligence. In this sense the doctor took care of a person’s body so they didn’t have to. Gandhi used the example of a person

⁶⁴ Gandhi, M.K. *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1908. 25, 27, 28

⁶⁵ _____. *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*.30

⁶⁶ _____. *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*.35

who overeats, gets indigestion. That person then goes to the doctor to get a pill to cure his indigestion. However, the person only overeats again because he didn't suffer the consequence from his action, which he deserved. Doctor's medicine caused people to lose self-control. In this way, poor health and even death, according to Gandhi, sets an example to people to take care of their body.⁶⁷

British cities, according to Gandhi, were less desirable than a small village. Gandhi pointed out that cities were full of vice, such as thieves and prostitution. Also, large cities tended to have stronger, less responsive government, whereas a small village retained a higher degree of autonomy than a large city.⁶⁸

While Gandhi rejected just about everything to do with British Colonialism and modernity, he was also careful to make a distinction between disallowing British influence and hating the British themselves. He claimed that the British were not inherently evil. In fact, he said that Indians should take pity on the British, for they are merely infected with the disease of modernity. According to his ideology, a man with opposing views should not be viewed as an enemy. Viewing the British as enemies would only make Hind Swaraj, or "Home Rule" more difficult to attain.⁶⁹

Gandhi's Development of Satyagraha

⁶⁷ _____. *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*. 43

⁶⁸ _____. *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*.45

⁶⁹ _____. *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*.48

In 1906, he began to employ the use of mass rule-breaking to protest British Imperial laws. He then saw first-hand that non-violent, non cooperation can induce a change of heart in the wrongdoer, without creating feelings of winning or losing. It prevents an “us vs. them” mentality. Gandhi then set out to educate the masses so they could realize the power they have to effectively organize to reject oppressive government.⁷⁰

During his twenty-one years in South Africa, Gandhi developed what he called “Satyagraha” or Truth Force which he coined during his resistance to the “Black Act.” He claimed that Satyagraha was the moral equivalent to war in which he combined politics and morality. Gandhi claimed that he built his theory of Satyagraha upon the “inherent goodness of human nature.”⁷¹

Satyagraha was strictly non-violent; however Gandhi chose to align his ideology of Satyagraha so that it resembled military warfare. He even called it militant non-violence. Gandhi referred to himself as the Satyagrahi General and felt that if the leaders of Satyagraha were discipline and well trained, then the “soldiers” in their command would obey them and so too would be disciplined. He did claim that there was another stark difference between Satyagraha and militant warfare and it was that in Satyagraha warfare there is enough room allowed for a soldier to reason for himself, unlike in military warfare. However, in Satyagraha and the military, the responsibility of the soldier is the same; both must be disciplined to the cause and must obey their superiors.⁷² He claimed that a person must train to ready to kill when

⁷⁰ Pantham, Thomas. “Thinking with Mahatma Gandhi: Beyond Liberal Democracy.” 174

⁷¹ Appadoral, A. “Gandhi’s Contribution to Social Theory.” *The Review of Politics*. 313

⁷² Dalton, Dennis. “Gandhi: Ideology and Authority.” *Modern Asian Studies* 381,391

learning how to perform violent opposition, while a person must train to be ready to die when learning non-violent opposition.⁷³

Wording Perplexities in Gandhi's Stayagraha

With Gandhi so adamantly denouncing any type of action that involved violence, it is interesting that he would be inclined to use military jargon in his Satyagraha. To understand why he did this it is best to look at his disgust with the actions of groups of disgruntled people, which he termed, "mobocracy." He felt that people in mobs go mad and do not think clearly. He even stated "Personally, I do not mind Governmental fury as I mind mob fury." While Gandhi denounced much of the British Imperial system and its government, he was not a pure anarchist; he still recognized the need for a central government. In fact he warned against converting existing government into "mobocracy." Years after his experience in South Africa he quoted, "If I can have nothing to do with the organized violence of the government, I can have less to do with the unorganized violence of the people. I would prefer to be crushed between the two."⁷⁴

Even though Gandhi discredited military force because of its inherent violence, he still liked military ideology because of its force and its central authority. Gandhi stated, "...in satyagraha unity is imperative. Every Indian must, therefore, don armor in order to join battle."⁷⁵ He associated the military with value such as courage, discipline, self sacrifice and obedience.

⁷³ Gandhi, M.K. *Harijan*. 1 September, 1940

⁷⁴ Gandhi, M.K. *Young India*. 24 November, 1921

⁷⁵ _____. *Indian Opinion*. 13 June, 1908

The reason he used military jargon in his ideology surrounding Satyagraha was because he felt a strong need for orderliness.

Conclusion

While in South Africa, Gandhi was influenced by the British-Boer War, several famous writers, and his inability to negotiate with the government. This caused him to reject British Imperialism and modernity and served as a basis for his political activism in India after 1914. Gandhi's time South Africa proved to be transitional and formative years for him in which the period between 1906 and 1908 was most crucial.

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