

Chapter 3: The 130th Anniversary of the Eviction of M.K. Gandhi from a Train at Pietermaritzburg Railway Station on 7th June 1893

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Abstract

This presentation provides a few brief historical perspectives on the significance of the event. From Gandhi's biography, it is evident that it played a key role in his subsequent conceptualisation of *satyagraha*, related to truth-force, and related terms he coined and used in his campaigns throughout his life. These played formative roles in his mobilisation of the people for nonviolent resistance and action both in South Africa (1893 – 1914) and in India (1914 – 1947). Many in the world have claimed to be impacted by the life and teachings of Gandhi, not least such eminent persons as the late Albert Einstein and Nelson Mandela, and Martin Luther King Jr., himself stating his drawing inspiration from Gandhi's life, writings and legacy.

Keywords: Experiments with truth, *ahimsa*, *Satyagraha*, *sarvodaya*, nation building

The 7th of June 1893 will go down in history as the night that changed the world. It was here at 21:00 that night that the young Indian lawyer M.K. Gandhi was evicted from a first class compartment. Gandhi said of that incident, that his active non-violence started from that date.

On 25 April 1997, on the post-humous conferment of the freedom of the city of Pietermaritzburg, on Mohandas K. Gandhi, Gopalkrishna Gandhi, a grandson and former High Commissioner of India to South Africa, said the following with regard to that incident.

Who was the man that was flung out; who was it that fell? Again, who was it that rose from his humiliation, somewhere here, on two very different feet? The question may be answered thus: When Gandhi was evicted from the train, an Indian visiting South Africa fell; but when Gandhi rose an Indian South African rose. The Indian and the South African merged in him the instant he fell, doubtless with astonished disbelief. This must have turned the very next instant to fury. But, in an alchemy that was uniquely his own, it turned also into totally different, something creative, something redemptive, something that changed shock into transformational resolve. Gandhi fell with a railway ticket no one honoured, he rose with a testament none could ignore; he fell a passenger but rose a patriot; fell a barrister but rose a revolutionary; his legal brief became a political cause; his sense of human decency transformed itself into a passion for human justice. The personal died within him that moment and turned public. Mine became thine. In fact, Mohandas Gandhi was not flung here, he was launched.

So, in the words of Gopalkrishna Gandhi, Mohandas Gandhi was not flung here, he was launched.

In telling this story of the incident on this railway station platform on 7th June 1893, we have to cover Gandhi's journey from Gujarat where he grew up, to London where he studied as a lawyer, to Natal and the Transvaal where he spent 21 years of his life, and then back to Gujarat. Going back to his formative years will help us to know who this Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was when he was evicted here on this platform from a first class train compartment. More importantly what was the immediate impact of this humiliation on the young Gandhi, and how did it influence his life and the various philosophies that he came to develop and espouse?

About the incident itself Gandhi said in his book *My Experiments with Truth*, ([1927] 1948: 140ff; 134ff in the online version) that 8 days after his arrival in Durban, Abdulla Sheth (Dada Abdulla) booked him a first class berth on the train to Pretoria. Actually the train only went as far as Charlestown then, and one had to travel by coach the rest of the way. He said that he saved 5 shillings by not paying for the bedding. When the train arrived at this station at about 9 o' clock that cold winters night a railway worker came into the compartment and asked whether he needed bedding. This man was followed by a passenger, who when he entered the compartment looked Gandhi up and down, looking disturbed. He left and returned with two officials, and he was

instructed to go to the van compartment. Gandhi refused saying that he was allowed to travel from Durban on a first class ticket, and he refused to get out voluntarily. A police constable was then summoned and Gandhi was pushed out of the train with his luggage following and the train left without him. He then went into the waiting room with his hand luggage, not knowing where his main luggage was. He said it was bitterly cold that night, and he sat shivering in the waiting room, too scared to ask for his luggage so that he could get his overcoat. A passenger joined him in the waiting room at about midnight, but he did not talk to him – he said he was not in the mood to talk.

While he sat here in the waiting room he said he began to think of his duty – should he fight for his rights or go back to India, or go on to Pretoria without minding the insult. He decided that to return to India without fulfilling his obligation would be cowardice. He realised later that morning that the insult he felt was superficial, and a symptom of deep colour prejudice, and he decided he would stay and try to root out the problem.

The following morning he sent a telegram to the General Manager of the Railways expressing his protest at the treatment he had received in Pietermaritzburg. He also sent a telegram to Abdulla Seth who immediately contacted the General Manager who justified the conduct of the railway officials, but also instructed the Station Manager to ensure Gandhi's safe passage to his destination. Abdulla Seth contacted some friends and Indian businessmen in Maritzburg who met with Gandhi and told him of some of the hardships they experienced through the colour bar. He was told that Indians travelling 1st or 2nd class had to expect trouble from railway officials and white passengers. He departed on the evening train, this time purchasing a bedding ticket that he refused in Durban.

But his ordeal was not over. On reaching Charlestown at the Natal-Transvaal border he had to transfer to a stagecoach – the line ended here. On seeing his ticket for the coach, and realising he was a stranger, he was told that his ticket was cancelled. After some negotiation he was allowed to sit in the seat of the coach leader in the coach box outside the coach. Gandhi said that he knew it was another insult, but decided it would make no difference to protest the injustice, which would have resulted in the coach going off without him, and he would have lost another day. So he sat beside the coachman until the coach reached Pardekop in the Transvaal at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. The leader wanted his seat back because he wanted to smoke, and he spread a dirty sackcloth on the floorboard and ordered Gandhi to sit on it. This insult was too much to bear, and although fearful, Gandhi protested and refused to be seated

there. Gandhi said the giant of a man boxed him around the ears and tried to drag him down, but he hung on to the railings until the intervention of the passengers who insisted that Gandhi be seated inside the coach. The coach stayed overnight in Standerton, and Gandhi wrote a letter to the Coach Company protesting his treatment and requesting a trouble free journey to Johannesburg, which he was granted, travelling in a bigger coach.

He was met by Abdul Gani Sheth who, on listening to the events of Gandhi's journey, warned him of what to expect in the Transvaal, including the fact that he would have to travel 3rd Class to Pretoria the next day. Gandhi refused saying that he would rather take a cab to Pretoria. They then decided to send a note to the Station Master indicating that he always travelled 1st class and that he needed to get to Pretoria urgently, and as there was no time to await his reply, he would collect it in person at the station the next day. Gandhi went to the station in his frock coat and necktie, and placed a sovereign for his ticket on the counter. Confirming that it was Gandhi who sent the note, the Manager issued him a first class ticket absolving himself of any responsibility for anybody asking him to move to 3rd class. True to his word, at Germiston the guard on examining the tickets insisted that Gandhi move to 3rd class ignoring the 1st class ticket. A fellow passenger took the guard to task insisting that he remain seeing that he had the required ticket. The guard responded 'If you want to travel with a coolie, what do I care'? Gandhi reached Pretoria at 8 pm.

And so began Gandhi's first two weeks in South Africa. Gandhi said in his autobiography that this incident started his 'active non-violence', and planted the seed for the formation of *satyagraha*, which stands for 'truth force'. Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence was greatly influenced by the Qur'an, Tolstoy's book *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, and the Sermon on the Mount found in the book of Matthew in the Bible, when Jesus said,

... Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth; blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy; blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God; blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; Ye have heard that it hath been said an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, but I say unto you that whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also; Ye have heard it said thou shalt love thy neighbour and hate thine enemy, but I say unto you love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you and pray for them that which despitefully use you and persecute you.

Gandhi indicated that there were many differences between passive resistance and *satyagraha*, even to the extent that passive resistance had a scope for the use of arms, and often was a preparation for the use of arms, and the harassing of the other party. He said *satyagraha* and brute force can never go together, and there is no possibility of injuring an opponent. The opponent is rather conquered by suffering in one's own person. Gandhi said real suffering bravely borne melts even a heart of stone, such is the potency of suffering, and therein lies the key to *satyagraha*.

Gandhi gave *satyagraha* to the world as a powerful technique of mass civil disobedience where the rulers were shamed by voluntary suffering, with resisters seeking beatings and imprisonment by breaking laws in a non-violent, yet utterly determined manner.

Satyagraha was to be the weapon that was to bring freedom to India from Colonial rule. And in South Africa *satyagraha* was used to pressure the government to scrap the need for registration, and to scrap the £3 tax imposed on free indentured labourers who chose to stay in the country, and to recognize marriages conducted under Indian religious rites.

Gandhi's 21 years in South Africa (1893 – 1914), shaped his philosophy, especially as it relates to peace and non-violence, which, given what is happening around the world today, is so relevant to achieving a peaceful society, where human life is respected. Nelson Mandela once said that India gave us Mohandas Gandhi, and we gave them the Mahatma (Chaudhuri 2013).

The 7th June 1893 is where it all started, at this very railway station in Pietermaritzburg.

So, who was this young man that was flung out of here on this platform? Gandhi's biographer described him as 'the child of an ancient and noble race' (Doke [1909] 1967:43). His father, grandfather and uncle were Prime Ministers of their respective courts. His childhood and youth were spent in India where he was familiar with the splendour of an eastern palace'.

Gandhi was born in Porbander, in the State of Gujarat in North West India, on 2 October 1869. Porbander was a fishing port in those days. He was born into the Bania class, the middle class below the Kshatriyas and Brahmins. His father worked for the government, a Prime Minister of the Court. His mother, a Jain, exposed the young Mohandas to the idea of non-violence as the road to spiritual and social equality. The family later moved to Rajkot where his father was State Prime Minister.

Gandhi was educated in an English medium high school, and was said to be a rebellious teenager. He studied law in England in 1888, after his mother

reluctantly gave him permission to go. He was called to the Bar in 1891, and returned to India that same year, and opened his first practice in Bombay, which was not very successful. He then moved his practice to Rajkot where his brother worked for a legal firm.

It was here that His brother was contacted by a Memin firm in Porbander, who had a case in South Africa representing Dada Abdulla and Co. He met Abdulla Sheth Karim Jhaveri, a partner in the firm, who explained the nature of the case.

The offer was for a year, all expenses paid, including first class passage on the ship, and \$105, to advise the firm's counsel. There was no berth available in first class, and he was offered a place on deck which he refused – he actually spoke to the chief officer who offered him an extra berth in his cabin.

And so, he departed India in April 1893 at the age of 24, to in his words 'try his luck in SA'. The case lasted a year, and at its conclusion he returned to Durban to prepare for his departure to India. At his farewell, the issue of the Indian franchise came up, and he was persuaded to stay for another month to make representations to stop the bill.

He was to stay another two years during which time he proposed the establishing of the Natal Indian Congress, on 22 May 1894, which was then established on 22 August 1894. It was the first black political formation in SA. He left for India in 1896 to bring his wife and sons to South Africa. They stayed for nearly two decades. It was during this time that he experimented with truth, and developed the core tenets of his philosophy in all aspects of life. This was in between his work as a lawyer and activist/ passive resister in Natal and the Transvaal taking up the various protest actions against discriminatory laws and regulations.

He left SA on 18 July 1914 soon after the Indian Relief Bill was passed in parliament scrapping the £3 tax, the Black Act, Transvaal Immigration Act, and recognizing Hindu, Muslim and Parsi marriages. His work in SA was done. On his departure, when the then Jan C. Smuts said, 'The saint has left our shores, I hope forever', he had no idea of the legacy that Gandhi would leave, and the impact that his ideals would have on the liberation of our country (see Radhakrishnan 1939).

Former President Nelson Mandela said in his speech here in 1997, and I quote:

He showed us that it was necessary to brave imprisonment if truth and justice were to triumph over evil. The values of tolerance, mutual

respect and unity for which he stood and acted, had a profound influence on our liberation movement, and on my own thinking. They inspire us today in our efforts of reconciliation and nation building.

The world has come to know Gandhi as the thin older man in a homespun *dhoti* and shawl leading the independence struggle in India. He came to us as a shy, young barrister wearing the frock coat and patent leather shoes of his profession. Ramachandra Guha (2013) said he was an unlikely candidate for the compelling episode of self-definition from which he emerged a confident public figure and an accomplished political organiser by the time he left in 1914. It was here that he came to acquire, and practise, his four major callings – those of freedom fighter, social reformer, religious pluralist and prophet. Almost eight decades after his death his life and legacy are still discussed, and acted upon in countries that barely knew him, and he continues to loom large in the land of his birth. His ideas are praised as well as attacked, dismissed by some as dangerous or irrelevant, yet celebrated by others as key to resolving religious tensions, tensions between low and high castes, and tensions between humans and the environment. Einstein (240) said this of him: ‘Generations to come, it may well be, will scarce believe that such a man as this one ever in flesh and blood walked upon this Earth’.

In conclusion, it is appropriate to quote a portion of the poem written by Fathima Meer on the occasion of the freedom of city of Pietermaritzburg given posthumously to Gandhi in 1997:

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, You passed through our city once 104 years ago today. You were thrown out of your train compartment, here on our station in Pietermaritzburg, For asserting your rights as an Indian, a black man, as a universal colonised man. You turned the insult and the pain into *satyagraha*, *ahimsa*, into *sarvodya*, the abode of peace, love, and equity among all members of the human race. We know now the passion that inspired you, the passion that stirred within you to liberate; To battle tirelessly against racism and casteism, inequality, injustice, untruth, ignorance and violence. We invoke your spirit. Abide with us eternally so that we may be bathed in your truth. Accept these our words, our atonement and apology (Pietermaritzburg Gandhi Foundation).

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