



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Indians in South Africa wage Satyagraha for their rights, 1906-1914

August

1906

to: January

1914

Country: South Africa

Location City/State/Province: *British colony of Natal, and Boer Republic of Transvaal*

Goals:

Resist unjust Acts against Indian South Africans; repeal the Black Act (Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance) and Transvaal Immigration Restriction Act, allow Hindu and Muslim marriages, repeal the £3 annual tax that was part of the Immigration Law Amendment Bill of 1895

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 013. Deputations
- 016. Picketing
- 023. Destruction of own property
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 135. Popular nonobedience › noncooperation with 'Black Act'
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 023. Destruction of own property › burning registration certificates
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 135. Popular nonobedience › noncooperation with 'Black Act'
- 139. Noncooperation with conscription and deportation
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws
- 175. Overloading of facilities
- 195. Seeking imprisonment

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 135. Popular nonobedience › noncooperation with 'Black Act'
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws
- 174. Establishing new social patterns
- 179. Alternative social institutions
- 192. Alternative economic institutions

Methods in 4th segment:

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 135. Popular nonobedience › noncooperation with 'Black Act'
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws
- 179. Alternative social institutions
- 192. Alternative economic institutions

Methods in 5th segment:

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 090. Revenue refusal
- 135. Popular nonobedience › noncooperation with 'Black Act'
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws
- 175. Overloading of facilities
- 179. Alternative social institutions
- 192. Alternative economic institutions
- 195. Seeking imprisonment

Methods in 6th segment:

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 038. Marches
- 090. Revenue refusal
- 106. Industry strike
- 116. Generalised strike
- 119. Economic shutdown
- 135. Popular nonobedience › noncooperation with 'Black Act'
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws
- 179. Alternative social institutions
- 192. Alternative economic institutions

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Human Rights

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Indian South African Satyagrahis
- Professionals
- indentured and ex-indentured servants
- traders

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Mohandas K. Gandhi, Kasturba Gandhi, and a satyagrahi named Sorabji

Partners:

Chinese South African community, including Mr. Leung Quinn; workers and miners in Newcastle, Durban, and Pietermaritzburg

External allies:

Architect Hermann Kallenbach; Gokhale, an Indian political figure and friend of Gandhi; Lord Harding, a British official in India; Millie Graham Polak

Involvement of social elites:

Prominent Indian leaders: Abdul Gani, the Chairman of the Transvaal British Indian Association, Yusuf Ismail Mian (The Chairman of the Transvaal Indian Association, later called the Transvaal Indian Congress), and Ahmad Muhammad Cachalia, a wealthy merchant supported the Satyagraha politically and financially

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Chinese South African community
- Indian satyagrahis
- Mohandas K. Gandhi
- prominent Indian leaders

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Hermann Kallenbach

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *about 15 months*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Colonial administrations in South Africa; General J. C. Smuts

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Violent skirmishes broke out when miners were being forced back to mines

Repressive Violence:

Mass imprisonment, deportation, and sentencing to hard labor. After the strikes, miners were forced back into the mines, which had been militarized. Many were sentenced to hard labor. Some spontaneous strikes occurred, leading to some violent confrontations; several strikers were killed or injured in clashes with the security forces.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The Satyagraha in South Africa went through several phases over its 8 years of struggle, changing in character at times in terms of the makeup of the campaigners and the organizing structure employed. At the end of the campaign, the £3 Tax was repealed, Indian marriages were recognized, the Black Act was abolished, and the Immigration Restriction Act was lightened. Further Indian grievances were worked out through letter correspondences between Gandhi and General Smuts. The agreement was deemed an important victory by the satyagrahis, even though it by no means ended all oppressive laws and cultural norms toward Indians and other people of color in South Africa. Although the satyagrahis' stated goals were reached, a more detailed analysis of how lives of Indian South Africans changed after 1914 would be beneficial. Many sources center the South Africa Satyagraha story of Gandhi. Although his leadership was formative and significant, it would be great to look at sources that speak to the experiences of the average satyagrahi during the struggle. It would also be interesting to examine the legacy of Satyagraha (principles/philosophy) and Tolstoy Farm after Gandhi departed for India.

Although the campaign grew substantially amid deportations and immigration restrictions, it did experience times of stagnation. However, it was a long campaign that developed in several 'phases' with Gandhi leaving the country at times.

Before the start of the 20th century, there were about 62,000 Indians living in South Africa, including the British colonies of Natal and the Cape, and the Boer republics of Transvaal and the Orange Free State (OFS). Most Indians were indentured laborers or newly freed laborers.

In the 1890s, legislation passed that restricted Indian's freedoms amidst growing anti-Indian sentiment. The Immigration Law Amendment Bill of 1895 stated Indians had to return to India at the end of their five-year indenture period, or they would have to be re-indentured for two more years. Anyone who refused would be charged an annual tax of £3. Additionally, the Franchise Amendment Bill of 1894 limited Indians political representation.

Mohandas K. Gandhi, now a London-trained lawyer, arrived in South Africa in 1893 to settle a legal dispute between two Indian business partners. He soon became involved in Indian politics, helping organize the Natal Indian Congress and the British Indian Association, and starting the Indian Opinion publication in 1903 to promote Indian's rights.

In August 1906, the Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance was signed into law in the Transvaal. It was a humiliating and discriminating law forcing Indians in the Transvaal to register with the 'registrar of Asiatics,' submit to physical examinations,

provide fingerprints, and carry a registration certificate at all times. Otherwise, Indians and other 'Asiatics,' as they were called, could be fined, imprisoned, or deported. It became known as the 'Black Act'.

Immediately, the ordinance was translated and published in the Indian Opinion along with articles denouncing it. Within days, mass meetings were organized. Thousands attended and pledged not to cooperate with the Black Act. Leaders in the Chinese community were contacted, including Mr. Leung Quinn, as they too were affected by the Act. It was the beginning of an eight-year-long resistance campaign. Prominent leaders pledged their support including Abdul Gani, the Chairman of the Transvaal British Indian Association, Yusuf Ismail Mian (The Chairman of the Transvaal Indian Association, later called the Transvaal Indian Congress), and Ahmad Muhammad Cachalia, a wealthy merchant.

A delegation of Indians sailed to London to meet with Secretary of State Lord Elgin, who then publicly renounced the Black Act, but privately only advocated for superficial revisions to the Act.

When the certificate offices opened on July 1, 1907, resisters picketed outside the office and dissuaded passing Indians from registering. They gathered support for the noncooperation in temples, mosques, and churches. Initially known as the 'Passive Resistance Campaign,' Gandhi coined the term 'Satyagraha,' literally 'truth-force,' as an alternative name. Satyagraha developed as a paradigm for waging nonviolent struggle, advocating 'active resistance to oppression,' and would profoundly influence the Indian struggle for independence in later decades.

At the closing of registration, only 511 out of the 13,000 Indians in the region had registered. Some who had registered faced shaming by the resisters, with some tearing up their certificates afterward. In response, hundreds of campaigners, known as satyagrahis, were imprisoned. Some were even deported, including South African born Indians; however, noncooperation with the Act continued throughout.

In January 1908, Gandhi was arrested. The jails were filling rapidly with satyagrahis refusing to register. Later that month, General J. C. Smuts was forced to negotiate. With Gandhi and other campaign leaders in prison, General Smuts presented an ultimatum: if Indians would register voluntarily, the Black Act would be repealed and prisoners released. Gandhi agreed on behalf of the campaign.

After word of the deal spread, some campaigners felt betrayed. Mid-February, Gandhi was attacked and injured by a group of angered satyagrahis on his way to the registration office. Gandhi reiterated his trust in General Smuts and registered himself. Soon after, Smuts introduced a bill validating the voluntary registrations, but did not keep his word about the Black Act. Gandhi gave Smuts until August 16, 1908, to fulfill his promise and repeal the Act.

Gandhi's leadership was accepted for the next phase in the struggle. A last ultimatum was sent to General Smuts: repeal the Black Act or registration certificates will be burnt. On August 16, hundreds of satyagrahis gathered outside the Hamida Mosque. A telegram arrived from Smuts, saying the government could not follow through with the repeal. Gandhi addressed the crowd; then all burned about 2,000 registration certificates in a giant fire. Those who had attacked Gandhi apologized and threw their certificates in the fire. A renewed Satyagraha had begun.

Back in 1907, yet another Act had been passed. The Transvaal Immigration Restriction Act placed restrictions on Indians entering the Transvaal from other provinces, affecting Indians all over the country. Most Indians lived in the province of Natal, but wanted access to the more prosperous province of Transvaal. Some petitioning and legislative actions were taken by the British Indian Association, but it wasn't until later that the satyagrahis included the Act in their campaign.

The action started with a satyagrahi named Sorabji, who informed the government he would break the law in protest. He entered the Transvaal without a permit and was arrested. Refusing to leave the Transvaal even after the court appearance, he was sentenced to prison and hard labor in July 1908. Inspired by Sorabji, groups of satyagrahis repeated his action. As momentum grew, many were arrested and ordered to leave the Transvaal, but they did not cooperate and many were deported. An Indian delegation was sent to Britain to seek the support of the British government, but little progress was made. Satyagrahis continued their campaign on the ground until the jails were overflowing.

With imprisonment not seeming to deter resisters, deportations increased, inciting some fear within the satyagrahi ranks. However, deportations were fought in court, often successfully, and the campaign continued.

By 1909, reports indicate that Gandhi may have lost some support, at least significant financial and political support from the merchant class. Some satyagrahis were still bitter about the deal brokered with Smuts. Others were simply feeling the stress of the campaign, where many breadwinners were in jail for prolonged periods of time. The campaign showed signs of losing momentum; although, at the same time Smuts' regime was coming under scrutiny in Britain for the way it was handling the 'Indian problem'.

In 1910 with the support of architect, Hermann Kallenbach, Gandhi founded a farming community he called Tolstoy Farm. Satyagrahis and their families were welcomed to live under principles of simplicity and discipline as part of the Satyagraha struggle. Work was distributed evenly, including sincere attempts at increased gender equality. A school on the farm taught many subjects and cultivated a spirit of friendship among the children. It was here that Gandhi shed his English lawyer-suit in exchange for 'working man's trousers and shirts'.

From Tolstoy Farm, the satyagrahis practiced other small forms of civil disobedience, including selling fruits and vegetables without licenses to do so, and continuing to cross the border from Natal into the Transvaal without permits. In 1912, Gokhale, an Indian political figure and friend of Gandhi's visited the Farm, the first time an Indian leader had visited South Africa. Gokhale toured South Africa for several months, giving speeches to crowds of Indians and Europeans, listening to satyagrahis stories, and even meeting with General Smuts himself. Before departing, Gokhale suggested to Gandhi that the Satyagraha should oppose the £3 annual tax that was part of the Immigration Law Amendment Bill of 1895 in addition to the Black Act and Immigration Restriction Act as part of their campaign. The tax was very burdensome for servants and their families.

In March 1913, the satyagrahi's campaign was motivated again by government action. The Supreme Court announced it would refuse to recognize Hindu and Muslim marriages. The Indian community was outraged. At this point of the struggle, women would increasingly join the campaign in larger numbers.

As part of measures to increase gender equality, on the first day of the renewed campaign, Gandhi and other satyagrahi men took over the kitchen duties, preparing meals, cleaning dishes, and washing the floors. They then accompanied the satyagrahi women to the Durban train station. They were on their way to the Transvaal to cross the border in protest. Gandhi's wife, Kasturba, led a group of satyagrahi women into the Transvaal, still a criminal offense. Their goal was to overload the prisons. Officials were hesitant to arrest them, afraid to give the campaigners publicity. Soon after, mass crossings were organized. Officials were forced to make arrests, which inspired even more crossings. The arrest and imprisonment of the women angered the Indian community.

Some satyagrahis made their way to Newcastle, Natal, sometime in October 1913, where they proposed that the coalminers there to strike on behalf of repealing the £3 annual tax. Workers enthusiastically joined the struggle, and soon large numbers of miners (up to 5,000) and railway workers were on strike.

With such large numbers entering the struggle, Gandhi proposed a 36-mile march from Newcastle to Charlestown, and the plan was carried forward. Over 2,000 men and 127 women began the march toward Charlestown. After reaching Charlestown, they decided to continue to the Tolstoy Farm. They set out on November 6, 1913, crossing the Transvaal border soon after. Gandhi was arrested, but was released on bail and returned to the march. Within four days of the march, Gandhi was imprisoned three times, finally sentenced to nine months imprisonment with hard labor. Later, P.K. Naidoo and other leaders were arrested, but the march continued. On the morning of November 10, marchers were arrested, put on trains and transported to Newcastle as prisoners. Miners were forced back into the mines, which had become more militarized. Many were sentenced to hard labor. Some spontaneous strikes occurred, leading to some violent confrontations; several strikers were killed or injured in clashes with the security forces.

News of the crackdown spread, inspiring more protest. In India reports of Gandhi's arrest and of police brutality caused an

uproar. Lord Harding, a British official in India, made a public speech condemning the treatment of Indians in South Africa. Workers in South Africa took action. By the end of November produce markets in Durban and Pietermaritzburg had come to a standstill. Sugar mills closed, and hotels, restaurants, and homes were without domestic workers. Satyagrahis worked with strikers to look after their needs. The world was watching.

Gandhi, Mr. Kallenbach, and Millie Graham Polak (European allies in the campaign) were released from jail, having spent only 6 weeks time there. In response to pressure from the British Government, General Smuts and Gandhi reached an agreement to have a commission appointed to examine the grievances of the Indians. The demands put forward by the Indians were:

1. Repeal of the 3 pound tax
2. Legalization of the marriages celebrated according to the rite of Hinduism, Islam, etc.
3. The entry of educated Indians
4. Alteration in the assurance as regards the Orange Free State
5. Assurance that the existing laws especially affecting Indians will be administered justly.

In early 1914, an agreement was reached. The commission ruled in favor of the Indians' demands. The £3 Tax was repealed, Indian marriages were recognized, the Black Act was abolished, and the Immigration Restriction Act was lightened. In exchange, Gandhi agreed that the Satyagraha would stop. Further Indian grievances were worked out through letter correspondences between Gandhi and General Smuts. The agreement was deemed an important victory by the satyagrahis, even though it by no means ended all oppressive laws and cultural norms toward Indians and other people of color in South Africa.

After the struggle was concluded, Gandhi left South Africa, having spent 21 years there, to return to India where he would continue to campaign for Indian independence. His time in South Africa was foundational in his development of Satyagraha, or "truth force," which would later help lead India to its independence.

Research Notes

Influences:

After the struggle was concluded, Gandhi left South Africa, having spent 21 years there, to return to India where he would continue to campaign for Indian. His time in South Africa was foundational in his development of Satyagraha or "truth force," which would later help lead India to its independence. (2)

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