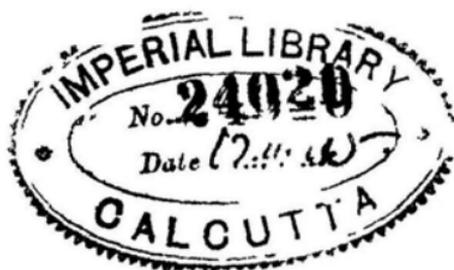


Satyagraha
or
The Service of Capitalism.



SAUMYENDRANATH TAGORE.

Jhitya Prachar Sabha, Ahmedabad



SATYAGRAHA

OR

THE SERVICE OF CAPITALISM ?

From 1893 till 1914 Mahatma Gandhi remained in South Africa and it is here that he rose to fame. Here he worked out his philosophy of life which goes under the name of "Gandhism." "Satyagraha in South Africa" exhaustively deals with the history of the passive Resistance Movement there and also with other activities of Mahatma Gandhi during his 21 year's stay. This book and his Autobiography may, therefore, be used as references for a survey of Mahatma Gandhi's career in South Africa.

Within a fortnight of his arrival in Durban in May in 1893 he had many bitter experiences. He found it impossible to secure accommodation in hotels; he was thrashed and pushed out of a train by a police constable. Of his first year's stay in South Africa there is nothing more to narrate than the series of insults and humiliations he was subjected to. His first thought was to leave South Africa immediately and to return to India,

but later on, after much consideration, he came to the conclusion that this would be cowardly on his part and that he must accomplish the work he had taken in hand. With this resolve, he proceeded to Pretoria but on the way was once more subjected to rough handling.

In Pretoria Mahatma Gandhi was chiefly engaged in looking after the interests of the firm he was representing. In 1894, on the expiry of his contract, he was preparing to leave for India. A farewell party was given in his honour by the firm he had served. At this party someone put a copy of the "Natal Mercury" in his hands. Reading it, he found that the Natal Government was about to introduce a bill to disfranchise the Indian residents there. Mahatma Gandhi read the article out to all those present and called upon them to oppose this bill. They urged Mahatma Gandhi to stay on a month or so longer. This he consented to do and drew up a petition which was sent to the Legislative Assembly. A Committee was formed, meetings were held, funds were collected and a memorial signed by four hundred persons was forwarded to the Assembly. All this however rema-

ined unheeded and the iniquitous bill was duly passed.

Again Mahatma Gandhi wanted to leave for India. But the Indians, finding his presence advisable, persuaded him to stay on. As a result of his efforts, a permanent organisation, the Natal Indian congress, was formed in 1894. In 1896 he returned to India for six months. He went about the country, making rousing speeches to enlighten the India public on the condition of their fellow-country men in South Africa. At the end of six months he received a cable from the Indians in Natal asking him to return at once and so he betook himself immediately to South Africa. The European residents, informed by Reuter of Mahatma Gandhi's activities, awaited his arrival and lynched him.

In 1899 the Boer war broke out. The Indian community in South Africa was divided in its opinion as to what attitude the Indians in South Africa should take. Some argued: "The British oppress us equally with the boers. If we are subjected to hardships in the Transvaal, we are not very much better off in Natal or Cape Colony. The difference, if any, is only on of degree. Again we are

more or less a community of slaves; knowing as we do that a small nation like the Boers is fighting for its very existence, why should we be instrumental in their destruction? Finally, from a practical point of view no one will take it upon himself to predict a defeat of the Boers. And if they win, they will never fail to wreak vengeance upon us."*

Against them Mahatma Gandhi the apostle of non-violence, advanced the following arguments: "Our existence in South Africa is only in our capacity as British subjects... we have been proud of our British citizenship or have given our rulers and the world to believe that we are so proud...It would be unbecoming to our dignity as a nation to look on with folded hands at a time when ruin stared the British in the face as well as ourselves, simply because they illtreat us here ...It is true that we are helots in the Empire, but, so far, we have tried to better our condition, continuing the while to remain in the Empire. That has been the Policy of all our leaders in India and ours too. And

*Satyagraha in South Africa, Chap, IX, "The Boer War." Page 113-114 Published in 1928 by S. Ganesan Madras.

if we desire to win our freedom and achieve our welfare as members of the British Empire, here is a golden opportunity for us to do so by helping the British in the war by all the means at our disposal. It must largely be conceded that Justice is on the side of the Boers. But every single subject of a state must not hope to enforce his private opinion in all cases...Our ordinary duty as subjects, there fore is not to enter into the merits of the war, but when war has actually broken out, to render such assistance as we possibly can."* Here we see that the Mahatma prompted either by his love for the British Empire and pride in being a British subject or by his opportunism, prepared to fight on the side of the British though he admits that justice was on the side of the Boers.

The Indians in South Africa, most of whom were petty merchants and clerks hailing from Gujarat, convinced by his arguments or bludgeoned by his personality, agreed to render loyal support to the Government, excepting, of course, the coolies, those "dumb paupers," who had no say in the matter. Mahatma Gandhi wrote letter after

letter to the Government offering his loyal services and those of the other Indians. These offers were refused several times but eventually sanction was given to the formation of an Indian Ambulance Corps. "All this was a revelation to the English Press.....An English man wrote in a leading newspaper a poem eulogistic of the Indians with the following lines as refrain: "We are sons of the empire after all,"* writes Mahatma Gandhi, with pride. For helping the Empire in its hour of need war medals were conferred on the thirty-seven leaders of the Indians among whom Mahatma Gandhi was the most prominent.

By the year 1900 the British defeated the Boers. General Kronje had surrendered and only guerilla warfare was going on. Mahatma Gandhi thought that his work was over. He had helped the British in South Africa and now that the war had practically come to an end, he could very well return to India. His friends agreed to let him go only on the condition that he would return to South Africa if his presence should become necessary. This was settled and towards the close of 1901 he returned home. He had

* Satyagraha in South Africa, Chap. IX, page 419.

hardly been in India one year when he received a cable from his colleagues in South Africa, urging him to return immediately.

After having helped the British Government against the Boers, what conditions did Mahatma Gandhi find on his return? At the conclusion of the war the British had occupied those territories which had previously belonged to the boers, but where were the expected concessions, the true reward of loyalty? They were non-existent. The old laws which the Boers had directed against the Indians were also enforced under British rule. In particular the Law No. 3 of 1885, forbidding Indians to buy land. Two deputations waited upon Mr. Chamberlain, who happened to be in Natal, but both were fruitless.

The Government introduced a rigorous system of registration, directed solely against the future immigration of Indians. This was the State of affairs when the Zulu rebellion broke out in Natal. And Mahatma Gandhi? "Now, as in the Boer war, many European residents of Natal joined the army as volunteers. As I, too, was considered a resident

of Natal, I thought I must do my bit in the war" he writes.*

The Government naturally accepted the offer of Mahatma Gandhi's services and but for him the wounded Zulus would have fared terribly! In his book "Satyagraha in South Africa" Mahatma Gandhi writes cleverly giving the impression that he took part in the war only for the purpose of taking care of the wounded Zulus. In reality, he was inspired by the same motive as that which actuated him at the time of the Boer war. Mahatma Gandhi, always optimistic, wanted, as he still wants, to convince his Imperialist masters of his loyalty and thus to gain a few concessions from them for his people. And what was the reward of this service to the cause of imperialism? Mahatma Gandhi and his Friends added to their collection of medals and an ordinance was introduced to consummate the ruin of the Indian traders in Transval. He writes: "I know that indentured Indians in Natal are subject to a drastic system of passes, but these poor fellows can hardly be classed as free men. However, even the laws to which they are

* Satyagraha in South Africa. Chap. II. page 153.

subject are mild in comparison to the ordinance outlined above and the penalties they impose are a mere fleabite when compared with the penalties laid down in the ordinance. A trader, with assets running into lakhs, could be deported and thus faced with utter ruin in virtue of the ordinance."* Here in the clearest terms Mahatma Gandhi states the reason of his opposing the ordinance. The indentured Indians, the coolies, were hardly the people to bother about, "they could hardly be classed as free men," so why bother about them! Mahatma Gandhi was perturbed because the traders "with assets running into lakhs could be deported and thus faced with utter ruin in virtue of the ordinance." The much advertised Satyagraha movement which Mahatma Gandhi started in South Africa was his answer to the ordinance. The Satyagraha movement was started and carried on solely with the purpose of safeguarding the interests of the traders. The indentured labourers were, of course, drawn into the struggle. Without their help sufficient pressure could not have been brought to bear on the mine-owners and the

*Ibid. Chap. III, page 158.

mine-owners' Government. So those "poor fellows who could hardly be classed as free men" generously gave their help to prevent the ruin of the traders.

On the 11th of September, 1906 a meeting was held which was presided over by Mr. Abdul Gani, the partner and manager of the Johannesburg branch of the well-known firm of Maman Kasam Kamruddin. At this meeting a resolution was passed to oppose the ordinance. The local Government was approached with memorials, deputations waited upon the minister, and a deputation led by Mahatma Gandhi was sent to England. Mahatma Gandhi met all those officials and officials, whom he considered important for his mission, and then after six weeks' stay in England, returned to South Africa. But all these memorials and petitions achieved nothing. Lord Elgin, who refused to give the ordinance the force of a law on the ground that racial discrimination was a departure from the basic principles of the British Empire, assured Sir Richard Solomon, the Transvaal representative in England, that after the lapse of a few months, when the Transvaal would have its own responsible government

and cease to be a Crown Colony, the ordinance could be introduced into their legislature in which case the royal assent would not be refused. This friendly understanding seemed to satisfy everyone except the Indian victims. In due time responsible government was established in Transvaal and the Asiatic Registration Act, a copy of the original ordinance, was passed on 21st of March, 1907. The act was declared law from 1st of July, 1907 and Indians were required to register before 31st of July. The usual course of petitions was followed without the slightest result and at last the Passive Resistance Association was formed. Many Indians joined the Association and the Indian Community contributed generously to the funds of the organisation.

The offices for registration were opened in July, but, due to picketing by the volunteers of the Passive Resistance Association, not more than 500 Indians (out of a population of ten thousand) registered themselves. The Asiatic Department of the Government, finding that despite persuasion only 20 per cent. of the Indians were prepared to obey the new law, law, began wholesale arrests.

These law-breakers, among whom was Mahatma Gandhi, were sentenced to two months' simple imprisonment. In the course of a few weeks, they were joined by their fellow passive resisters to the number of 150. Meanwhile one Mr, Cartwright, editor of the Johannesburg Daily, The Transvall leader, came to see Mahatma Gandhi in prison to submit to him terms of a proposed settlement, the already approved by general Smuts by the terms of this settlement Indians were required to register voluntarily. The Government undertook to repeal the act if the majority of the Indians would undergo voluntary registration. Mahatma Gandhi, having clothed the agreement in different language without altering the conditions, accepted it and was set free along with the other prisoners. Immediately after his release he went straight to Johannesburg and pleaded the other Indians to accept the Government's terms. There were a few who opposed, saying that the Act should first be repealed and than the Indians would register themselves voluntarily. Mahatma Gandhi, however, managed to win the majority of the community to his side and to get them to agree to

the settlement. He was the first to register himself by giving his finger-prints on the paper. Here, again, is ample proof of Mahatma Gandhi's unbounded faith in the British Imperialists.

Again disappointment ! It had not been General Smuts' intention to repeal the Act. It was maintained. The voluntary registration was accepted as valid and any later Indian immigrants to the country were still subject to the registration Act. His next step was to address a letter to General Smuts, but the "great" General was silent. At last, smarting under this treatment, the passive resisters forwarded an ultimatum to the Government intimating that if the Act was not forthwith repealed those Indians who had voluntarily registered themselves would burn their certificates and suffer all the consequences, whatever they might be. As a gesture of defiance more than two thousand certificates were burnt. The Government, after a time, took recourse to arresting the Indians wholesale. Mahatma Gandhi was again among the prisoners. The struggle became more acute. Imprisonment as a weapon did not appear to be effective enough.

So the Government tried deportment. This entailed tremendous hardships on the batches of Indians deported, as they were forced to leave their lands and businesses in South Africa. In the midst of these proceedings Mahatma Gandhi was released and undertook another of his abortive deputations to England.

Mahatma Gandhi's political Guru Gokhale, the well-known moderate leader, visited South Africa in 1912. He had, like his disciple, infinite faith in the British Imperialists. In an interview with General Smuts, the latter promised him that the Act would be repealed and that the obnoxious £3 poll tax would be abolished. He returned to India satisfied with his achievements. The promises of the Imperialist masters were, alas, as piecrusts; neither the Act was repealed nor was the poll tax abolished. On the country, through a strange decision of the Cape Town Supreme Court all marriages celebrated according to rites other than Christian, were placed outside the pale of legal marriage. This reduced married Indian women to the position of concubines and deprived their children of all rights to their father's property. The women, now alive to the struggle

that was going on and fierce in defence of their homes, joined the movement. They began their campaign by entering Transvaal without permits but the Government left them unharmed. No deportations for them. Realising the power of the hitherto unused weapon, they proceeded to Newcastle, the great coal-mining centre in Natal, and urged the Indian labourers to help them by going on strike. As a result of this propaganda a strike broke out. The mine-owners' Government could ill afford to look at these developments with indifference. They became uneasy and arrested these women and sentenced them to short terms of imprisonment. In the meantime the strikers began to flock into the city. The mine-owners began to harass the workers in various ways. All these labourers lived in company houses. Suddenly their supply of light and water was cut off and evictions frequently took place. Mahatma Gandhi advised the workers not to wait to be thrown out but to leave their quarters immediately. Following this advice some five thousand labourers, men and women left their homes and lived under the open sky. Then Mahatma Gandhi decided to march into

Transvaal at the head of these 5,000 labourers, and get them arrested for having illegally left Natal without the necessary permit.

Up to this point Mahatma Gandhi had not thought even of making the £3 poll tax a plan of his political programme. The struggle, so far, had been only the voice of the Indian merchants protesting against the Act. Mahatma Gandhi writes: "The struggle also was limited to a repeal of the Act in question.....In the early stages the Indians were every now and then asking for other grievances beside the Black Act to be covered by struggle. I patiently explained to them that such extension would be a violation of the truth, which could not be so much as thought of in a movement professing to abide by truth and truth alone".* But Mahatma Gandhi's truth was proved to be nothing if not elastic. In time he got to realise that, to serve the cause of the Indian merchants in South Africa, it was necessary, nay it was imperative to put a real, a firmer pressure on the British Government by drawing the indentured Indian workers into the movement. Without them all efforts would have proved

* Satyagraha in South Africa, Chap. XXXVIII
 " Breach of Promise. " page 412.

null and void. So Mahatma Gandhi tried another experiment and brought forth from his laboratory a freshly-distilled "truth" which allowed the £3 poll tax to be made a plank of the movement. The Union Government had promised Gokhale to repeal it and then had gone back on their word. As a result of his new discovery Mahatma Gandhi holds forth "that the breach of promise made to such a representative of India as Gokhale, could not be taken lying down." * Satisfying himself and his followers with such a sentimental reason for broadening his truth out to cover the labourers, Mahatma Gandhi started to attract the workers to the movement.

To continue our narrative. Transvaal was 36 miles from Newcastle and Mahatma Gandhi decided to march these 36 miles on foot with these 5,000 people. The march began causing untold suffering to the workers. Mahatma Gandhi once more tried to make a compromise with General Smuts but only got insulted. He was several times arrested and released during the course of the march

* Satyagraha in South Africa, Chap. XXXVIII, "Breach of Promise," page 415.

and eventually he was sentenced to two years imprisonment on two different charges. The workers were then transported by special trains to Natal and were straight away sent to prison. Such a procedure, however, was detrimental to the working of the mines. So the Government turned the mine compounds into jail areas where the workers were compelled to stay caged in by wire netting. In this way the workers were forced back to their work. Many of them refused to work but some little persuasion by the European staffs of the mines armed with whips soon remedied this defect.

But the strike was not limited to the Natal area alone. Thousands of workers from different parts of the country downed tools. This was not Mahatma Gandhi's wish. He writes: "When I went to jail, I had warned my co-workers against allowing any more labourers to go on strike," but in spite of this the strike became general.

The Government adopted barbarous methods of repression against it. The workers were forced to work in the mines and were fired upon whenever they refused to work. But in face of all this oppression the workers continued their struggle.

At this time a strike broke out among the European employees of the Union Railways. The Government was surrounded by difficulties on every hand the enormous losses inflicted on the mine-owners, troubles among their own railwaymen and so were forced to adopt different tactics. General Smuts appointed a Commission to report on the entire Indian question. Mahatma Gandhi was released from prison after he had served his term for only six weeks. It was suggested to him to start his march into Transvaal again. Here is Mahatma Gandhi's answer to the request in his own words: "But I declared that the Indians could not thus assist the railway strikers, as they were not out to harass the Government, their struggle being entirely different and differently conceived. Even if we undertook the march, we would begin it at some other time when the railway trouble had ended. This decision of ours created a deep impression, and was cabled to England by Reuter.....Lord Ampthill cabled his congratulations from England One of the secretaries of General Smuts jocularly said: I do not like your people. But what am I to do? You help us in our days

of need. How can we lay hands upon you?"*

This secretary of General Smuts has put the Mahatma Gandhi policy in a nutshell. Mahatma Gandhi had served the British imperialists again and again. He served them in the Boer war; he served them in the Zulu rebellion and later on in the Great War he served them once more. Was there any reason why the Mahatma should support the railway employees on strike particularly when "The European workmen not only demanded higher wages, but aimed at seizing the reigns of government into their hands?"^x Thus once more Reuter, Lord Amthill and the European capitalists nodded approval to the Mahatma's laudable action.

But still the railway strike did help the Indian movement. Faced with this grave rapidly spreading danger, the Union Government thought it better not to let the Indian workers' strike grow in the same direction and they agreed to the proposal of the appointed Commission and the Act was repealed and the £3 poll tax was abolished. In accor-

* "Satyagraha in South Africa, Chap. XIVII, "Beginning of the End", page 491.

^x "Satyagraha in South Africa, Chap. XIVIII; "The Provisional Settlement."



dance with the terms of the Indian Relief Bill passed by the Union Parliament, Mahatma Gandhi immediately stopped the struggle. But the question is, did it really bring an amelioration in the condition of the thousands of indentured Indian workers in South Africa? Did it fundamentally and essentially change the condition of the Indians in South Africa? It did not. On the contrary, as time went on, the conditions of the Indians in South Africa began to worsen. The Passive Resistance Movement brought only some insignificant changes in the conditions of Indians in South Africa. Did it achieve anything worthy of making people get so enthusiastic over it as the Gandhists often do? Mahatma Gandhi's own words are quite to the point. He says: "When one considers the painful contrast between the happy ending of the Satyagraha struggle and the present condition of Indians in South Africa, one feels for a moment as if all this suffering had gone for nothing, or is inclined to question the efficacy of Satyagraha as a solvent of the problem of mankind." And the Mahatma has said the truth.

* Ibid. Conclusion, page 509.

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