

GANDHI AND THE FORMATION OF THE AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS OF SOUTH AFRICA

by **E. S. Reddy**

The birth of the African National Congress a century ago, on January 8, 1912, was a landmark in the history of Africa, marking the beginning of the end of centuries of exploitation and humiliation of the continent. It received hardly any attention at the time internationally or from the white establishment in South Africa.

M.K. Gandhi, who was then looking after the families of prisoners and ex-prisoners at the Tolstoy Farm near Johannesburg, during a lull in the passive resistance movement in the Transvaal, hailed the event as representing “the awakening of Africa.”

He had become a non-violent revolutionary and a mass leader in 1906 when he realised the futility of mere petitions and deputations to the racist white authorities against oppressive laws and regulations. He decided to defy the imposition of passes and immigration restrictions against the Indians in the Transvaal and led the passive resistance movement in which about a third of adult Indian males in the Transvaal went to prison.

He had already ceased to limit his attention to the status of the Indian community and his newspaper, *Indian Opinion*, began to denounce the increasing oppression of the African people, “the sons of the soil.” At a meeting of the YMCA in Johannesburg on May 18, 1908, he described his vision for the future of South Africa:

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

But the leaders of the white minority – the Boers and the Britons – had a different vision. They wished to unite South Africa into a Union and turn it into a country of the whites where the great majority of the people would only serve their needs. Gandhi foresaw, as the African leaders did, the consequences of this diabolic plan and described the Union as a union against the non-white people of the country.

After Britain approved the formation of the Union of South Africa, thereby handing over power to the white minority, ignoring the appeals and betraying the trust of the African and Coloured people, four African attorneys in Johannesburg decided to convene a conference of all the African organisations in the country to form a national congress to defend African rights. The initiative for the project was taken by Pixley ka Izaka Seme.

Seme was born in Inanda, near Gandhi's Phoenix Settlement, and he must have known of Gandhi who had been an attorney in Johannesburg before he decided to devote all his energies to the passive resistance movement.

It has become known recently from the memoirs of Pauline Podlashuk, who translated for Gandhi the last letter he had received from Count Tolstoy, that Seme visited Gandhi at the Tolstoy Farm in 1911 and had a long discussion during which Gandhi explained the Indian passive resistance movement.¹

On July 29, 1911, Gandhi's newspaper, *Indian Opinion*, reported an interview with Seme on the progress of plans for the conference, which was held in Bloemfontein from 8 to 11 January 1912. The conference established the South African Native National Congress (later renamed the African National Congress).. The Reverend John Langalibalele Dube of Natal, founder of the Ohlange Industrial School, was elected President in his absence. Dube then sent a letter to "Chiefs and Gentlemen of the South African Native National Congress" accepting the honour and published it in his newspaper *Ilanga lase Natal* on February 2, 1912. *Indian Opinion* reproduced an extract from his letter in its issue of February 10, 1912, under the title "The Awakening of Africa." It referred to Dube as "our friend and neighbor" and called the letter a manifesto.²

The importance attached by Gandhi to this African congress was demonstrated later in the same year. In October, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, a highly respected leader of the Indian national movement and a member of the Viceroy's Legislative Council, visited South Africa at the invitation of Gandhi. The South African Government was encouraged by Britain to treat him

¹ Podlashuk, Pauline. *The Adventure of Life: reminiscences of Pauline Podlashuk*. Edited by Effie Seftel and Judy Nasatyr. Johannesburg: Pan MacMillan, 2010.

Miss Podlashuk and Mr. Seme happened to go on the same train in the morning to visit Gandhi at the Tolstoy Farm. They returned to Johannesburg by the last train.

² The Ohlange Industrial School was near the Phoenix Settlement.

with due respect. He was provided with a special railway car. Meetings held in several cities to welcome him were attended by many whites and addressed by Mayors. He was received by the Prime Minister, Louis Botha. During his short visit to Durban, with a heavy schedule of meetings, Gandhi took him on November 11, 1912, to Ohlange to meet the Reverend John L. Dube, now the first President of the SANNC. Gokhale received a warm welcome from the staff and students at the Industrial School and spent some time discussing the “Native question” with Dube. *Ilanga lase Natal* reported the event on November 15 under the headline “Our Distinguished Visitor.”

As Anil Nauriya observed:

“The occasion is surcharged with historical significance. Eight decades before the complete independence of South Africa, a past and a future President of the Indian National Congress (Gokhale had been President of the Congress in 1905; Gandhi became President in 1924), were calling on the leader of the African National Congress.”³

In 1913, when the Natives Land Act was passed by the Union Parliament, Gandhi was vehement in his denunciation. An editorial in *Indian Opinion* declared:

“The Natives Land Act of the Union Parliament has created consternation among the Natives. Indeed, every other question, not excluding the Indian question, pales into insignificance before the great Native question. This land is theirs by birth and this Act of confiscation – for such it is – is likely to give rise to serious consequences.”⁴

1913 was also the year of passive resistance by African, Coloured and Indian people in South Africa.

In June, African and Coloured women in the Free State began passive resistance against a new law requiring them to carry passes. They were supported by the SANNC. The authorities were eventually forced to abandon passes for women.

A few weeks later, in September, the Indian community began resistance, especially against an onerous tax imposed on Indian indentured labourers on the completion of their contracts and the non-recognition of Indian marriages. It developed into a general strike involving tens of thousands of workers in the mines, cane fields, and railways. This campaign was also significant

³ Anil Nauriya, *The African Element in Gandhi*, (National Gandhi Museum, New Delhi, 2006), pages 44-45.

⁴ *Indian Opinion*, August 30, 1913.

for the participation of women and their heroism. Kasturba, wife of Mahatma Gandhi, was in the first batch of resisters.

Passive resistance and participation of women in the struggle for freedom thus became a common heritage of South Africa and India.