GREAT SOUL

Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India

JOSEPH LELYVELD

ALFRED A. KNOPF NEW YORK 2011

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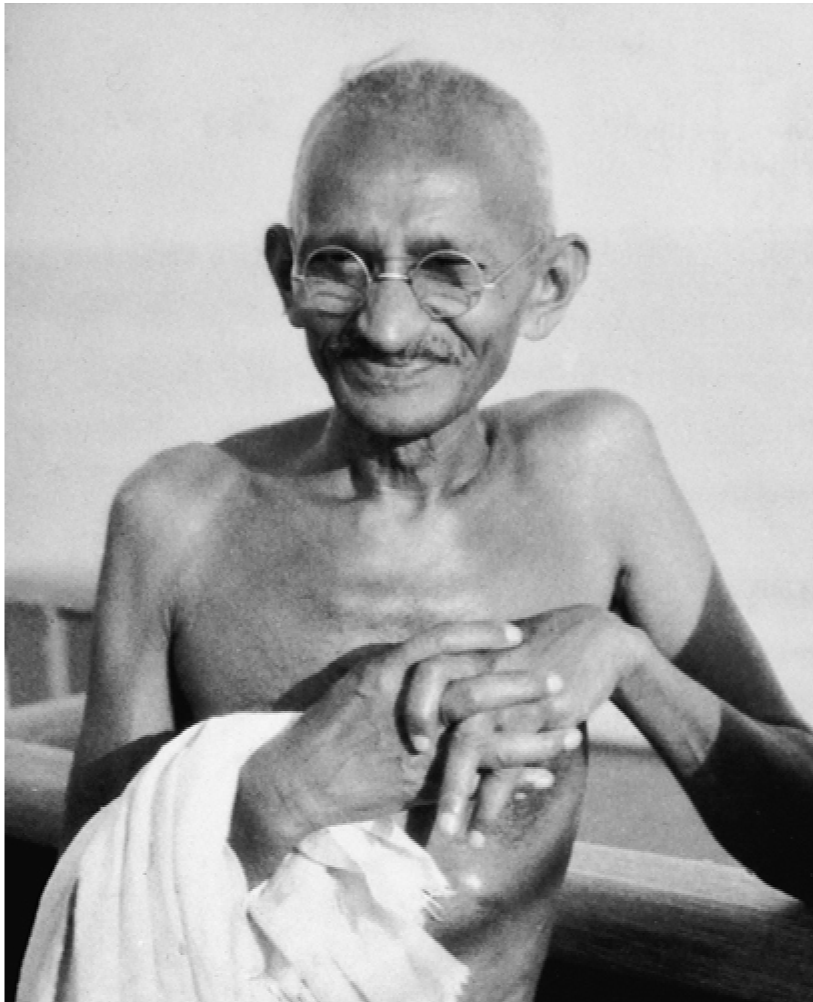
Not yet a mahatma, 1906 (photo credit ifm.1)



Twenty-five years later, 1931 (photo credit ifm.2)

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FOR JANNY

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I do not know whether you have seen the world as it really is. For myself I can say I perceive the world in its grim reality every moment. (1918)

I deny being a visionary. I do not accept the claim of saintliness. I am of the earth, earthy … I am prone to as many weaknesses as you are. But I have seen the world. I have lived in the world with my eyes open. (1920)

I am not a quick despairer. (1922)

For men like me, you have to measure them not by the rare moments of greatness in their lives, but by the amount of dust they collect on their feet in the course of life's journey. (1947)

—MOHANDAS KARAMCHAND GANDHI, 1869–1948

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE MAHATMA had been gone for half a century, but there were still Gandhis at the Phoenix Settlement, outside Durban on South Africa's Indian Ocean coast, when I visited there the first time in 1965. A little boy, identified as a great-grandson, toddled across the room. He was living with his grandmother, widow of Manilal Gandhi, second of Gandhi's four sons, who'd stayed on in South Africa to edit *Indian Opinion*, the weekly paper his father had started, and thereby keep alive the settlement and its values. The patriarch had chosen to be father to a whole community, so he turned the farm into a kind of commune where he could gather an extended family of followers, European as well as Indian, nephews and cousins, and, finally, with no special status, his own wife and sons.

I was not a pilgrim, just a reporter looking for a story. By the time of my visit, Gandhi had been dead for nearly eighteen years, Manilal for nine, and *Indian Opinion* for five. There wasn't a lot to see besides the simple buildings they'd inhabited. On one of them, the brass nameplate still read "M. K. Gandhi." The great work of racial separation—what the white authorities called apartheid—had already begun. Small Indian plot holders, who'd once lived and farmed among Zulus, now crowded onto the settlement's one hundred acres. I wrote about the visit in a mournful vein, noting that Indians and other South Africans no longer believed that Gandhian passive resistance could accomplish anything in their land. "Passive resistance doesn't stand a chance against this government," a trustee of the settlement said. "It's too brutal and persevering."

If my next assignment as a foreign correspondent hadn't been India, where I lived for a few years in the late 1960s, that afternoon

might not have stuck in my mind as a reminder of a subject to which I'd need to return. For me the South African Gandhi would always be more than an antecedent, an extended footnote to the fully fledged Mahatma. Having looked at the green hills of Africa from his front porch, I thought, in the simplifying way reporters think, that he was the story.

The maelstroms of India could obscure but never dislodge that intuition. The more I delved into Indian politics, the more I found myself pondering the seeming disconnect between Gandhi's teachings on social issues and the priorities of the next generation of leaders who reverentially invoked his name. Often, in those days, these were people who'd actually encountered the Mahatma, who'd come into the national struggle fired by his example. So more than a patriotic ritual was involved when they claimed to be his heirs. Yet it was hard to say what remained of him beyond his nimbus.

An occasion for asking such questions occurred with the approach of the one hundredth anniversary of his birth in 1969. Setting out to report on the remnants of Gandhi's movement, I followed Vinoba Bhave, his last full-time apostle, as he trudged through the most impoverished parts of Bihar, then as now among the poorest of Indian states, trying to persuade landlords to cede some of their holdings to the landless. Vinoba collected deeds to thousands of acres of barren, untilled, and untillable land. The Mahatma's aging protégé seemed stoic, if not tragic, as he saw his doomed mission through to its largely inconsequential end.

"He became his admirers." That's Auden on Yeats. Three decades ago V. S. Naipaul used the line to characterize the decline of Gandhi's influence in his last years, when he was most revered. The combination of piety and disregard—hardly unique to India—lasted as a cultural reflex, surviving the explosion of India's first nuclear bomb.

Over time and at a distance, my experiences of South Africa and India ran together in my mind. Gandhi was an obvious link. I found myself thinking again about the Phoenix Settlement, to which I returned twice, the second time after it had been burned down in factional black-on-black violence accompanying the death throes of

white supremacy, only to be restored with the blessing of a democratically chosen government eager to canonize Gandhi as a founding father of the new South Africa. I then found myself thinking about Gandhi himself, wondering how South Africa helped to form the man he became, how the man he became in South Africa struggled with the reality of India, how his initiation as a political leader on one side of the Indian Ocean foreshadowed his larger disappointments and occasional sense of failure on the other: whether, that is, there were clues to the end of his journey as leader in its beginning.

I'm hardly the first to raise such questions and won't be the last. But it seemed to me there was still a story to be uncovered and told, themes that could be traced from the beginning of Gandhi's political life in one country to its flourishing in another, with all the ambiguity of his legacy in each place. The temptation to retrace my own steps while retracing Gandhi's finally proved irresistible.

This isn't intended to be a retelling of the standard Gandhi narrative. I merely touch on or leave out crucial periods and episodes—Gandhi's childhood in the feudal Kathiawad region of Gujarat, his coming-of-age in nearly three formative years in London, his later interactions with British officials on three continents, the political ins and outs of the movement, the details and context of his seventeen fasts—in order to hew in this essay to specific narrative lines I've chosen. These have to do with Gandhi the social reformer, with his evolving sense of his constituency and social vision, a narrative that's usually subordinated to that of the struggle for independence. The Gandhi I've pursued is the one who claimed once to "have been trying all my life to identify myself with the most illiterate and downtrodden." At the risk of slighting his role as a political tactician, a field marshal of nonviolent resistance, or as a religious thinker and exemplar, I've tried to follow him at ground level as he struggled to impose his vision on an often recalcitrant India—especially recalcitrant, he found, when he tried not just its patience but its reverence for him with his harangues on the "crime" and "curse" of untouchability, or the need for the majority Hindus to accommodate the large Muslim minority.

Neither theme, it turns out, can be explained without reference to his long apprenticeship in South Africa, where he eventually defined himself as leader of a mass movement. My aim is to amplify rather than replace the standard narrative of the life Gandhi led on two subcontinents by dwelling on incidents and themes that have often been underplayed. It isn't to diminish a compelling figure now generally exalted as a spiritual pilgrim and secular saint. It's to take a fresh look, in an attempt to understand his life as he lived it. I'm more fascinated by the man himself, the long arc of his strenuous life, than by anything that can be distilled as doctrine.

Gandhi offered many overlapping and open-ended definitions of his highest goal, which he sometimes defined as *poorna swaraj*.* He wasn't the one who'd introduced *swaraj* into the political lexicon, a term usually translated as "self-rule" while Gandhi still lived in South Africa. Later it would be expanded to mean "independence." As used by Gandhi, poorna swaraj put the goal on yet a higher plane. At his most utopian, it was a goal not just for India but for each individual Indian; only then could it be *poorna*, or complete. It meant a sloughing not only of British rule but of British ways, a rejection of modern industrial society in favor of a bottom-up renewal of India, starting in its villages, 700,000 of them, according to the count he used for the country as it existed before its partition in 1947. Gandhi was thus a revivalist as much as a political figure, in the sense that he wanted to instill values in India's most recalcitrant, impoverished precincts—values of social justice, self-reliance, and public hygiene—that nurtured together would flower as a material and spiritual renewal on a national scale.

Swaraj, said this man of many causes, was like a banyan tree, having "innumerable trunks each of which is as important to the tree as the original trunk." He meant it was bigger than the struggle for mere independence.

"He increasingly ceased to be a serious political leader," a prominent British scholar has commented. Gandhi, who formally resigned from the Indian National Congress as early as 1934 and never rejoined it, might have agreed. If the leader succeeded in driving the colonists out but his revival failed, he'd have to count

himself a failure. Swaraj had to be for all Indians, but in his most challenging formulations he said it would be especially for “the starving toiling millions.”

It meant, he said once, speaking in this vein, “the emancipation of India’s skeletons.” Or again: “Poorna swaraj denotes a state of things in which the dumb begin to speak and the lame begin to walk.”

The Gandhi who held up this particular standard of social justice as an ultimate goal wasn’t always consistent or easy to follow in his discourse, let alone his campaigns. But this is the Gandhi whose words still have a power to resonate in India. And this vision, always with him a work in progress, first shows up in South Africa.

Today most South Africans and Indians profess reverence for the Mahatma, as do many others across the world. But like the restored Phoenix Settlement, our various Gandhis tend to be replicas fenced off from our surroundings and his times. The original, with all his quirkiness, elusiveness, and genius for reinvention, his occasional cruelty and deep humanity, will always be worth pursuing. He never worshipped idols himself and generally seemed indifferent to the clouds of reverence that swirled around him. Always he demanded a response in the form of life changes. Even now, he doesn’t let Indians—or, for that matter, the rest of us—off easy.

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* Indian and other foreign terms are italicized on their first appearance and defined in a glossary starting on this page.

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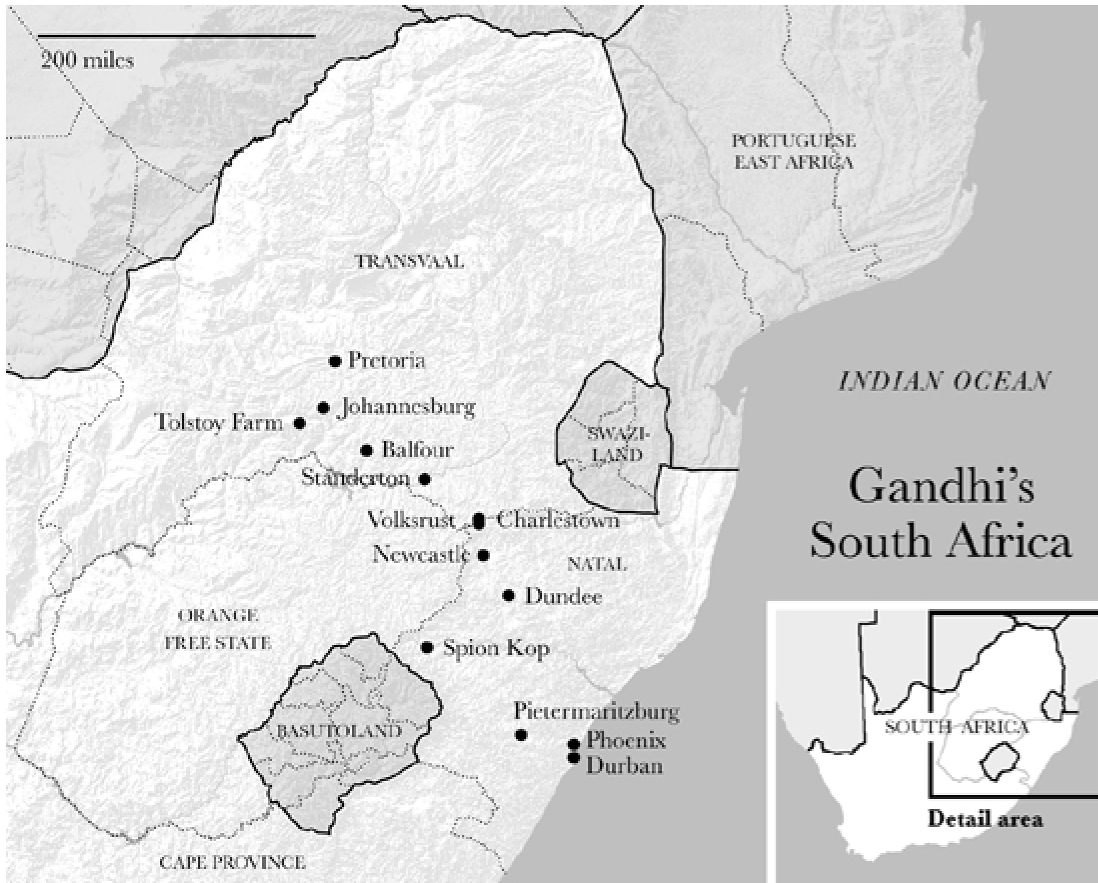
PART I

SOUTH AFRICA



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PROLOGUE: AN UNWELCOME VISITOR

IT WAS A BRIEF only a briefless lawyer might have accepted. Mohandas Gandhi landed in South Africa as an untested, unknown twenty-three-year-old law clerk brought over from Bombay, where his effort to launch a legal career had been stalled for more than a year. His stay in the country was expected to be temporary, a year at most. Instead, a full twenty-one years elapsed before he made his final departure on July 14, 1914. By then, he was forty-four, a seasoned politician and negotiator, recently leader of a mass movement, author of a doctrine for such struggles, a pithy and prolific political pamphleteer, and more—a self-taught evangelist on matters spiritual, nutritional, even medical. That's to say, he was well on his way to becoming the Gandhi India would come to revere and, sporadically, follow.

None of that was part of the original job description. His only mission at the outset was to assist in a bitter civil suit between two Muslim trading firms with roots of their own in Porbandar, the small port on the Arabian Sea, in the northwest corner of today's India, where he was born. All the young lawyer brought to the case were his fluency in English and Gujarati, his first language, and his recent legal training at the Inner Temple in London; his lowly task was to function as an interpreter, culturally as well as linguistically, between the merchant who engaged him and the merchant's English attorney.

Up to this point there was no evidence of his ever having had a spontaneous political thought. During three years in London—and the nearly two years of trying to find his feet in India that followed—his causes were dietary and religious: vegetarianism and the

mystical cult known as Theosophy, which claimed to have absorbed the wisdom of the East, in particular of Hinduism, about which Gandhi, looking for footholds on a foreign shore, had more curiosity then than scriptural knowledge himself. Never a mystic, he found fellowship in London with other seekers on what amounted, metaphorically speaking, to a small weedy fringe, which he took to be common ground between two cultures.

South Africa, by contrast, challenged him from the start to explain what he thought he was doing there in his brown skin. Or, more precisely, in his brown skin, natty frock coat, striped pants, and black turban, flattened in the style of his native Kathiawad region, which he wore into a magistrate's court in Durban on May 23, 1893, the day after his arrival. The magistrate took the headgear as a sign of disrespect and ordered the unknown lawyer to remove it; instead, Gandhi stalked out of the courtroom. The small confrontation was written up the next day in *The Natal Advertiser* in a sardonic little article titled "An Unwelcome Visitor." Gandhi immediately shot off a letter to the newspaper, the first of dozens he'd write to deflect or deflate white sentiments. "Just as it is a mark of respect amongst Europeans to take off their hats," he wrote, an Indian shows respect by keeping his head covered. "In England, on attending drawing-room meetings and evening parties, Indians always keep the head-dress, and the English ladies and gentlemen seem to appreciate the regard which we show thereby."

The letter saw print on what was only the fourth day the young nonentity had been in the land. It's noteworthy because it comes nearly two weeks *before* a jarring experience of racial insult, on a train heading inland from the coast, that's generally held to have fired his spirit of resistance. The letter to the *Advertiser* would seem to demonstrate that Gandhi's spirit didn't need igniting; its undertone of teasing, of playful jousting, would turn out to be characteristic. Yet it's the train incident that's certified as transformative not only in Richard Attenborough's film *Gandhi* or Philip Glass's opera *Satyagraha* but in Gandhi's own *Autobiography*, written three decades after the event.

If it wasn't character forming, it must have been character arousing (or deepening) to be ejected, as Gandhi was at Pietermaritzburg, from a first-class compartment because a white passenger objected to having to share the space with a "coolie." What's regularly underplayed in the countless renditions of the train incident is the fact that the agitated young lawyer eventually got his way. The next morning he fired off telegrams to the general manager of the railway and his sponsor in Durban. He raised enough of a commotion that he finally was allowed to reboard the same train from the same station the next night under the protection of the stationmaster, occupying a first-class berth.

The rail line didn't run all the way to Johannesburg in those days, so he had to complete the final leg of the trip by stagecoach. Again he fell into a clash that was overtly racial. Gandhi, who'd refrained from making a fuss about being seated outside on the coach box next to the driver, was dragged down at a rest stop by a white crewman who wanted the seat for himself. When he resisted, the crewman called him a "sammy"—a derisive South African epithet for Indians (derived from "swami," it's said)—and started thumping him. In Gandhi's retelling, his protests had the surprising effect of rousing sympathetic white passengers to intervene on his behalf. He manages to keep his seat and, when the coach stops for the night, shoots off a letter to the local supervisor of the stagecoach company, who then makes sure that the young foreigner is seated inside for the final stage of the journey.

All the newcomer's almost instantaneous retorts in letters and telegrams tell us that young Mohan, as he would have been called, brought his instinct for resistance (what the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson called his "eternal negative") with him to South Africa. Its alien environment would prove a perfect place for that instinct to flourish. In what was still largely a frontier society, the will to white domination had yet to produce a settled racial order. (It never would, in fact, though the attempt would be systematically made.) Gandhi would not have to seek conflict; it would find him.

In these bumpy first days in a new land, Mohan Gandhi comes across on first encounters as a wiry, engaging figure, soft-spoken but

not at all reticent. His English is on its way to becoming impeccable, and he's as well dressed in a British manner as most whites he meets. He can stand his ground, but he's not assertive or restless in the sense of seeming unsettled. Later he would portray himself as having been shy at this stage in his life, but in fact he consistently demonstrates a poise that may have been a matter of heritage: he's the son and grandson of *diwans*, occupants of the top civil position in the courts of the tiny princely states that proliferated in the part of Gujarat where he grew up. A diwan was a cross between a chief minister and an estate manager. Gandhi's father evidently failed to dip into his rajah's coffers for his own benefit and remained a man of modest means. But he had status, dignity, and assurance to bequeath. These attributes in combination with his brown skin and his credentials as a London-trained barrister are enough to mark the son as unusual in that time and place in South Africa: for some, at least, a sympathetic, arresting figure.

He's susceptible to moral appeals and ameliorative doctrines but not particularly curious about his new surroundings or the tangle of moral issues that are as much part of the new land as its hardy flora. He has left a wife and two sons behind in India and has yet to import the string of nephews and cousins who'd later follow him to South Africa, so he's very much on his own. Because he failed to establish himself as a lawyer in Bombay, his temporary commission represents his entire livelihood and that of his family, so he can reasonably be assumed to be on the lookout for ways to jump-start a career. He wants his life to matter, but he's not sure where or how; in that sense, like most twenty-three-year-olds, he's vulnerable and unfinished. He's looking for something—a career, a sanctified way of life, preferably both—on which to fasten. You can't easily tell from the autobiography he'd dash off in weekly installments more than three decades later, but at this stage he's more the unsung hero of an East-West bildungsroman than the Mahatma in waiting he portrays who experiences few doubts or deviations after his first weeks in London before he turned twenty. The Gandhi who landed in South Africa doesn't seem a likely recipient of the spiritual honorific—"Mahatma" means "Great Soul"—that the poet

Rabindranath Tagore affixed to his name years later, four years after his return to India. His transformation or self-invention—a process that's as much inward as outward—takes years, but once it's under way, he's never again static or predictable.

Toward the end of his life, when he could no longer command the movement he'd led in India, Gandhi found words in a Tagore song to express his abiding sense of his own singularity: "I believe in walking alone. I came alone in this world, I have walked alone in the valley of the shadow of death, and I shall quit alone, when the time comes." He wouldn't have put it quite so starkly when he landed in South Africa, but he felt himself to be walking alone in a way he could hardly have imagined had he remained in the cocoon of his Indian extended family.

He'd have other racial encounters of varying degrees of nastiness as he settled into a rough-and-ready South Africa where whites wrote the rules: in Johannesburg, the manager of the Grand National Hotel would look him over and only then discover there were no free rooms; in Pretoria, where there was actually a bylaw reserving sidewalks for the exclusive use of whites, a policeman on guard in front of President Paul Kruger's house would threaten to cuff the strolling newcomer into the road for transgressing on the pavement; a white barber there would refuse to cut his hair; in Durban the law society would object to his being registered as an advocate, a status hitherto reserved for whites; he would be denied admission to a worship service at an Anglican church.

It would take a full century for such practices to grind to a halt, for white minority rule finally to reach its inevitable and well-deserved end in South Africa. Now new monuments to Gandhi are scattered about the land, reflecting the heroic role attributed to him in the country's rewritten history. I saw such monuments not only at the Phoenix Settlement but in Durban, Pietermaritzburg, Ladysmith, and Dundee. Nearly always it was the elderly figure Winston Churchill scorned as "a seditious Middle Temple lawyer now posing as a fakir … striding half-naked" who was portrayed, not the tailored South African lawyer. (Probably that was because most of these statues and busts had been shipped from India, supplied by its

government.) In Johannesburg, however, in a large urban space renamed Gandhi Square—formerly it bore the name of an Afrikaner bureaucrat—the South African Gandhi is shown in mufti, striding in the direction of the site of the now-demolished law court where he appeared both as attorney and as prisoner, his bronze lawyer's robe fluttering over a bronze Western suit. Gandhi Square is just around the corner from his old law office at the corner of Rissik and Anderson streets, where he received visitors under a tinctured image of Jesus Christ. The vegetarian restaurant, steps away, where he first encountered his closest white friends is long gone; hard by the place where it stood, perhaps exactly on the spot, a McDonald's now does a fairly brisk nonvegetarian trade. But it's not entirely far-fetched for the new South Africa to claim Gandhi as its own, even if he failed to foresee it for most of his time in the country. In finding his feet there, he formed the persona he would inhabit in India in the final thirty-three years of his life, when he set an example that colonized peoples across the globe, including South Africans, would find inspiring.

One of the new Gandhi memorials sits on a platform of the handsome old railway station in Pietermaritzburg—Maritzburg for short—close to the spot where the newcomer detrained, under a corrugated iron roof trimmed with what appears to be the original Victorian filigree. The plaque says his ejection from the train "changed the course" of Gandhi's life. "He took up the fight against racial oppression," it proclaims. "His active non-violence started from that day."

That's an inspirational paraphrase of Gandhi's *Autobiography*, but it's squishy as history. Gandhi claims in the *Autobiography* to have called a meeting on arrival in Pretoria to rally local Indians and inspire them to face up to the racial situation. If he did, little came of it. In that first year, he had yet to assume a mantle of leadership; he was not even seen as a resident, just a junior lawyer imported from Bombay on temporary assignment. His undemanding legal work left him with time on his hands, which he devoted more to

religion than to politics; in this new environment, he became an even more serious and eclectic spiritual seeker than he'd been in London. This was a matter of chance as well as inclination. The attorney he was supposed to assist turned out to be an evangelical Christian with a more intense interest in Gandhi's soul than in the commercial case on which they were supposed to be working. Gandhi spent much of his time in a prolonged engagement with white evangelicals who found in him a likely convert. He even attended daily prayer meetings, which regularly included prayers that the light would shine for him.

He told his new friends, all whites, that he was spiritually uncommitted but nearly always denied thereafter that he'd ever seriously contemplated conversion. However, according to the scholar who has made the closest study of Gandhi's involvement with missionaries, it took him two years to resolve the question in his own mind. On one occasion Gandhi acknowledged as much to Millie Polak, the wife of a British lawyer who was part of his inner circle for his last ten years in South Africa. "I did once seriously think of embracing Christianity," she quoted him as having said. "I was tremendously attracted to Christianity, but eventually I came to the conclusion that there was nothing really in your scriptures that we had not got in ours, and that to be a good Hindu also meant I would be a good Christian."

Late in 1894 we find this free-floating, ecumenical novice flirting, or so it sometimes seemed, with several religious sects at once, writing to *The Natal Mercury* on behalf of a movement called the Esoteric Christian Union, a synthesizing school of belief, as he explained it, that sought to reconcile all religions by showing that each represents the same eternal truths. (It's a theme Gandhi would repeat at prayer meetings in the last years and months of his life, more than a half century later, where the spirit was so all-embracing that "O God, Our Help in Ages Past" had its place among chanted Hindu and Muslim prayers.) In an advertisement for a selection of tracts meant to accompany a letter to the editor he wrote in 1894, he identified himself proudly as an "Agent for the Esoteric Christian Union and the London Vegetarian Society."

Judging from his autobiographical writings, it seems possible, even likely, that Gandhi spent more time in Pretoria with his evangelical well-wishers than with his Muslim patrons. In any case, these were his two circles, and they didn't overlap, nor did they represent any kind of microcosm of the country South Africa was fast becoming. By necessity as much as choice, he would remain an outsider. The abrasiveness of some of his early confrontations with whites made it obvious that searching for footholds in this new land could bring him into conflict. To stake a claim for ordinary citizenship was to cross a boundary into politics. Within two months after settling in Pretoria, Gandhi was busy writing letters on political themes to the English-language papers, putting himself forward but, as yet, representing only himself.

On September 5, scarcely three months after he arrived in the country, the *Transvaal Advertiser* carried the first of these, a longish screed that already has implicit in it political arguments Gandhi would later advance as a spokesman for the community. Here he was responding to the use of the word "coolie" as an epithet commonly attached to all brown-skinned immigrants from British India. He doesn't mind it being applied to contract laborers, impoverished Indians transported en masse under contracts of indenture, or servitude, usually to cut sugarcane. Starting in 1860, it was the way most Indians had come to the country, part of a human traffic, a step up from slavery, that also carried Indians by the tens of thousands to Mauritius, Fiji, and the West Indies. The word "coolie," after all, appears to have been derived from a peasant group in India's western regions, the Kolis, with a reputation for lawlessness and enough group cohesion to win recognition as a subcaste. But, Gandhi argues, former indentured laborers who don't make the return trip home to India at the end of their contracts but stay on to stand on their own feet, as well as Indian traders who had initially paid their own passage, shouldn't be denigrated that way. "It is clear that Indian is the most proper word for both the classes," he writes. "No Indian is a coolie by birth."

This is not a proposition that would have come easily to him had he remained in India. The alien environment, it's fair to speculate,

had stirred in him the impulse to stand outside the community and explain. Implicit in this—the first nationalist declaration of his life—is a class distinction. He speaks for Indians here but not for coolies. Between the lines he seems to be saying that the best that can be said for them is that their status isn't necessarily permanent. Nowhere in the letter does he comment on the harsh terms of their servitude.

He concedes that coolies may sometimes be disorderly, may even steal. He knows but doesn't make a point of saying that most of those he has now agreed to call coolies are of lower-caste backgrounds. If anything, caste is a subject he avoids. He doesn't say that coolies are fundamentally different from other Indians. They can become good citizens when their contracts end. For now, however, their poverty and desperation do not conspicuously engage his sympathies. Temporarily, at least, he doesn't identify with them.

The South Africa confronted by young Mohan was counted as four different states or territories by its white inhabitants and the Colonial Office in London. (There was also Zululand, which was under British supervision and had yet to be fully merged into Natal, the self-governing territory that surrounded it. In the view of whites, settlers and colonial officials alike, the subcontinent's surviving African kingdoms existed only on sufferance, remote from the main paths of commerce, with nothing approaching sovereign status.) The states that were deemed to count were those with white governments. The two coastal territories were British crown colonies: the Cape, at the very tip of Africa, where whites first settled in the seventeenth century and where the Atlantic and Indian oceans meet; and Natal, on the continent's verdant east coast. Inland were two landlocked, quasi-independent Boer (meaning Afrikaner) republics, the Orange Free State and what was called the South African Republic, a culturally introverted frontier settlement in the territory known as the Transvaal. That republic, created as a Zion for an indigenous white population of *trekboers*, farmers of mainly

Dutch and Huguenot descent who had fled British rule in its two colonies, had been all but overwhelmed by a recent influx of mostly British aliens (called Uitlanders in the simplified Dutch dialect that was just beginning to be recognized as a language in its own right, henceforth known as Afrikaans). For it was in the Transvaal, beyond formal British control but temptingly within its reach, that the world's richest gold-bearing reef had been discovered in 1886, only seven years before the fledgling Indian barrister inauspiciously disembarked at Durban.

The South Africa from which Gandhi sailed all those years later had become something more than a geographic designation for a random collection of colonies, kingdoms, and republics. It was now a single sovereign state, a colony no longer, calling itself the Union of South Africa. And it was firmly under indigenous white control, with the result that a lawyerly spokesman for a nonwhite immigrant community, which was what Gandhi had become, could no longer expect to get anywhere by addressing petitions or leading missions to Whitehall. To this great political transformation he'd been little more than a bystander. But it had the effect of sweeping his best argument for equal Indian rights off the table. Originally, Gandhi had based his case on his own idealistic reading of an 1858 proclamation by Queen Victoria that formally extended British sovereignty over India, promising its inhabitants the same protections and privileges as all her subjects. He called it "the Magna Charta of the Indians," quoting a passage in which her distant majesty had proclaimed her wish that her Indian subjects, "of whatever race or creed, be freely and impartially admitted to offices in our service." It was Gandhi's argument that those rights should attach themselves to "British Indians" who traveled from their homeland to outposts of the empire such as the British-ruled portions of South Africa. That wasn't quite what the queen's advisers had in mind, but it was an awkward argument to have to work around. In the new South Africa, which came into existence in 1910, it counted for nothing. To achieve less and less, Gandhi found

in the course of two decades, his tactics had to become more and more confrontational.

This transformation and practically everything South African that coincided with his earliest political activities were ultimately traceable to gold and all that the new mines brought in their train—high finance, industrial strife, and the twentieth century's first major experience of a type of warfare that could be classed as an anticolonial or a counterinsurgency struggle, even though the combatants on both sides were mainly whites. This was the Anglo-Boer War, which seared its brutal course across South Africa's mostly treeless grasslands and hillsides from 1899 to 1902. It took an army of 450,000 (including thousands, British and Indian, brought across the Indian Ocean under British command from the Raj) to finally subdue the Boer commandos, militia units that never numbered as many as 75,000 at any given time. About 47,000 soldiers perished on the two sides; in addition, nearly 40,000—mainly Afrikaner children and women but also their black farmhands and servants—died of dysentery and infectious diseases like measles in segregated stockades where they'd been massed as the army forcibly cleared the countryside. Coining a functional, antiseptic term for these open-air reservoirs of misery, the British called them concentration camps.

Gandhi briefly played a bit part. The man who would emerge within the next two decades as the modern era's best-known champion of nonviolence saw action himself in the early stages of the war as a uniformed noncommissioned officer, leading for about six weeks a corps of some eleven hundred noncombatant Indian stretcher bearers. Then thirty and already recognized as a spokesman for Natal's small but growing Indian community—amounting at that time to scarcely 100,000 but soon to outnumber the colony's whites—Gandhi went to war to score a parochial point with the colony's white leaders: that Indians, whatever the color of their skins, saw themselves and should be seen as full citizens of the British Empire, ready to shoulder its obligations and deserving of whatever rights it had to bestow.

Once the British got the upper hand in Natal and the war moved inland, the Indian stretcher bearers disbanded, ending the war for Gandhi. His point had been made, but in no time at all it was brushed aside by the whites he'd hoped to impress. Natal's racial elite persisted in enacting new laws to restrict property rights for Indians and banish from the voters' rolls the few hundred who'd managed to have their names inscribed there. The Transvaal could be said to have shown the way. In 1885, claiming sovereignty as the South African Republic, it had passed a law putting basic citizenship rights off limits to Indians; that was eight years before Gandhi landed in its capital, Pretoria.

At first he allowed himself to imagine that the hard-wrung British victory, uniting the two colonies and Boer republics under imperial rule, could only benefit "British Indians." What happened was the opposite of what he imagined. Within eight years, a national government had been formed, led by defeated Boer generals who won at the negotiating table most of their important war aims, accepting something less than full sovereignty in foreign affairs in exchange for a virtual guarantee that whites alone would chart the new Union of South Africa's political and racial future. Some "natives" and other nonwhites protested. Gandhi, still looking to strike a tolerable bargain for Indians, was silent except for a few terse asides in the pages of *Indian Opinion*, the weekly paper that had been his megaphone since 1903, his instrument for sounding themes, binding the community together. His few comments in its pages on the new structure of government showed he wasn't blind to what was actually happening. Generally speaking, however, it was as if none of this larger South African context and all it portended—the blatant attempt to postpone indefinitely any thought, any possibility, of an eventual settlement with the country's black majority—had the slightest relevance to his cause, had been allowed to impinge on his consciousness. In the many thousands of words he wrote and uttered in South Africa, only a few hundred reflect awareness of an impending racial conflict or concern about its outcome.

Yet if the forty-four-year-old Gandhi who later sailed from Cape Town to Southampton on the eve of a world war seemed deliberately oblivious of the transformation of the country in which he'd passed nearly all his adult life up to that point, there was probably no single individual in it who'd changed more than he had. The novice lawyer had established a flourishing legal practice, first in Durban and then, after a quickly aborted attempt to move back to India, in Johannesburg. In the process, he'd moved his family from India to South Africa, then back to India, then back to South Africa, then finally to the Phoenix Settlement outside Durban, which he'd established on an ethic of rural self-sufficiency adapted from his reading of Tolstoy and Ruskin. Their teachings, as interpreted by him, were then translated into a litany of vows for an austere, vegetarian, sexually abstemious, prayerful, back-to-the-earth, self-sustaining way of life. Later, all but abandoning his wife and sons at Phoenix, Gandhi stayed on in Johannesburg for a period that stretched to more than six years.

By the time of his departure from South Africa, he'd spent only nine of twenty-one years in the same household with his wife and family. By his own revised standards, he could no longer be expected to put his family ahead of the wider community. Instead of concentrating on Phoenix, he started a second communal settlement called Tolstoy Farm in 1910, on the bare side of a rocky *koppie*, or hill, southwest of Johannesburg, all the while carrying on his unending campaign to fend off the barrage of anti-Indian laws and regulations that South Africa at every level of government—local, provincial, and national—continued to fire at his people. What inspired these restrictions was an unreasoning but not altogether ungrounded fear of a huge transfer of population, a siphoning of masses, across the Indian Ocean from one subcontinent to the other, under the sponsorship of an empire that could be deemed to have an interest in easing population pressures that made India hard to govern.

Sage, spokesman, pamphleteer, petitioner, agitator, seer, pilgrim, dietitian, nurse, and scold—Gandhi tirelessly inhabited each of these roles until they blended into a recognizable whole. His continuous

self-invention ran in parallel with his unofficial position as leader of the community. At first he spoke only for the mainly Muslim business interests that had hired him, the tiny upper crust of a struggling immigrant community; at least one of his patrons, a land and property owner named Dawad Mahomed, employed indentured laborers, presumably on the same exploitative terms as their white masters. Gandhi himself belonged to a Hindu trading subcaste, the Modh Banias, a prosperous group but only one of numerous Bania, or merchant, subcastes that have been counted in India. The Modh Banias still discouraged and sometimes forbade—as he himself had discovered when he first traveled to London—journeys across the *kala pani*, or black water, to foreign shores where members of the caste could fall into the snares of dietary and sexual temptation. That's why there were still few fellow Banias on this side of the Indian Ocean. It also helps explain the early predominance of Muslims among the Gujarati merchants who ventured to South Africa. So it was that the first political speeches of Gandhi's life were given in South African mosques, a fact of huge and obvious relevance to his unwavering refusal, later in India, to countenance communal differences. One of the high points of Gandhi's South African epic occurred outside the Hamidia Mosque in Fordsburg, a neighborhood at the edge of downtown Johannesburg where Indians settled. There, on August 16, 1908, more than three thousand Indians gathered to hear him speak and burn their permits to reside in the Transvaal in a big cauldron, a nonviolent protest against the latest racial law restricting further Indian immigration. (Half a century later, in the apartheid era, black nationalists launched a similar form of resistance, setting fire to their passes—internal passports they were required to carry. Historians have searched the documentary record for evidence that the Gandhian example inspired them. So far, the record has been silent.) Today in the new South Africa, in a Fordsburg once proclaimed "white" under apartheid, the refurbished mosque gleams in a setting of overall dinginess and decay. Outside, an iron sculpture in the form of a cauldron sitting on a tripod commemorates Gandhi's protest.

Such symbols resonate not only with later South African struggles but also with Gandhi's campaigns in India. When Johannesburg Muslims wanted to send humble greetings to a new Ottoman emperor in what was still Constantinople, they relied on their Hindu mouthpiece to compose the letter and convey it through the proper diplomatic channels in London. Later, in the aftermath of a world war in which the Ottoman Empire had allied itself with the losing side, Gandhi rallied Indian Muslims to the national cause by proclaiming the preservation of the emperor's role as caliph and protector of the Muslim holy places to be one of the most pressing aims of the Indian national struggle. On one level, this was a sensitive reading of the emotional tides sweeping through the Muslim community; on another, a breathtaking piece of political opportunism. Either way, it would never have occurred to a Hindu politician who lacked Gandhi's experience of trying to bind together a small and diverse overseas community of Indians that was inclined to pull apart.

If the Johannesburg Gandhi could speak comfortably for Muslims, he could speak for all Indians, he concluded. "We are not and ought not to be Tamils or Calcutta men, Mahomedans or Hindus, Brahmans or Banias but simply and solely British Indians," he lectured his people, seeking from the start to overcome their evident divisions. In India, he observed in 1906, the colonial masters exploited Hindu-Muslim, regional, and language differences. "Here in South Africa," he said, "these groups are small in number. We are all confronted with the same disabilities. We are moreover free from certain restrictions from which our people suffer in India. We can therefore easily essay an experiment in achieving unity." Several years later, he would claim prematurely that the holy grail of unity had been won: "The Hindu-Mahomedan problem has been solved in South Africa. We realize that the one cannot do without the other."

In other words, what Indians in South Africa had accomplished could now be presented as a successful demonstration project, as a model for India. For an upstart situated obscurely on another continent, far beyond the farthest border of British India, it was an audacious, even grandiose claim. At first, it made no discernible

impression outside the actual halls in which it was voiced; later, it would be one of his major themes when he succeeded in making himself dominant in the national movement in India. For a brief time then, Muslim support would make the difference between victory for Gandhi and a position in the second tier of leaders; it would guarantee his ascendance in India.

But that was probably still beyond Gandhi's own imagining. Events would soon show that the ideal of unity wasn't so easily clinched in South Africa, either. Hindu and Muslim revivalists arrived from India with messages that tended to polarize the two communities and undercut Gandhi's insistence on unity. By sheer force of personality, he managed to smooth over rifts in his final months in the country—a temporary fix that allowed him to claim with pardonable exaggeration, as he would for years to come, that his South African unity demonstration was an achievement for India to copy. It was also, of course, his own offshore tryout, his great rehearsal.

Gandhi's really big idea—initially it was termed "passive resistance"—came in 1906 with a call for defiance of a new piece of anti-Indian legislation in the Transvaal called the Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance. Gandhi lambasted it as the "Black Act." It required Indians—only Indians—to register in the Transvaal, where their numbers were still relatively minuscule, under ten thousand: to apply, in other words, for rights of residence they thought they already possessed as "British Indians," British law having been imposed on the territory as a consequence of the recently concluded war. Under this discriminatory act, registration would involve fingerprinting—all ten fingers—of every man, woman, and child over the age of eight. Thereafter certificates had to be available for checking by the police, who were authorized to go into any residence for that purpose. "I saw nothing in it except hatred of Indians," Gandhi later wrote. Calling on the community to resist, he said the law was "designed to strike at the very root of our existence in South Africa." And, of course, that was exactly the case.

The resistance he had in mind was refusing to register under the law. He said as much at a packed meeting in the Empire Theater in Johannesburg on September 11, 1906 (an earlier 9/11, with a significance quite the contrary of the one we know). The all-male crowd probably numbered fewer than the figure of three thousand that has been sanctified by careless repetition; the Empire—which burned down that same night, hours after the Indians had dispersed—couldn't have held that many. Gandhi spoke in Gujarati and Hindi; translators repeated what he said in Tamil and Telugu for the sake of the South Indian contingent. The next speaker was a Muslim trader named Hadji Habib, who hailed, like Gandhi, from Porbandar. He said he would take an oath before God never to submit to the new law.

Burning registration certificates at the mosque (photo credit i1.1)

The lawyer in Gandhi was "at once startled and put on my guard," he would say, by this nonnegotiable position, which on its face didn't seem all that different from the one he had just taken himself. The spiritual seeker that he also was couldn't think of such a vow as mere politics. The whole subject of vows, their weight and worth, was at the front of his consciousness. During the previous

month, Gandhi himself had taken a vow of *brahmacharya*, meaning that this father of four sons pledged to be celibate for the rest of his days (as he had presumably been, after all, during all the years of separation from his wife in London and South Africa). He'd discussed his vow with some of his associates at Phoenix but not yet publicly. He'd simply announced it to his wife, Kasturba, assuming it called for no sacrifice on her part. In his mind, he was dedicating himself to a life of meditation and poverty like an Indian *sannyasi*, or holy man, who has renounced all worldly ties, only Gandhi gives the concept an unorthodox twist; he will remain in the world to be of service to his people. "To give one's life in service to one's fellow human beings," he'd later say, "is as good a thing as living in a cave." Now, in his view, Hadji Habib had suddenly gone beyond him, putting the vow to defy the registration act on the same plane. So it wasn't a matter of tactics or even conscience; it had become a sacred duty.

Speaking for a second time that evening in the Empire, Gandhi warned that they might go to jail, face hard labor, "be flogged by rude warders," lose all their property, get deported. "Opulent today," he said, "we might be reduced to abject poverty tomorrow." He himself would keep the pledge, he promised, "even if everyone else flinched leaving me alone to face the music." For each of them, he said, it would be a "pledge even unto death, no matter what others do." Here Gandhi hits a note of fervor that to the ear of a secular Westerner sounds religious, almost born-again. Unsympathetic British officials would later portray him as a fanatic in dispatches to Whitehall; one of his leading academic biographers comes close to endorsing that view. But Gandhi was not speaking that night to an audience of secular Westerners. It's also unlikely that Hadji Habib or the overwhelming majority of his audience had any inkling of his distinctly Hindu vow of brahmacharya. The idea of civil disobedience was original with neither man. It had lately been tried by suffragettes in London. The idea that it might call for chastity was Gandhi's alone.

In his own mind, his two vows were now bound together, almost inextricable. Gandhi held to a traditional Hindu idea that a man is

weakened by any loss of semen—a view aspiring boxers and their trainers are sometimes said to share—and so for him his vows, from the outset, were all about discipline, about strength. "A man who deliberately and intelligently takes a pledge and then breaks it," he said that night in the Empire Theater, "forfeits his manhood." Such a man, he went on, "becomes a man of straw." Years later, upon learning that his son Harilal's wife was pregnant again, Gandhi chided him for giving in to "this weakening passion." If he learned to overcome it, the father promised, "you will have new strength." Later still, when he'd become the established leader of the Indian national movement, he'd write that sex leads to a "criminal waste of the vital fluid" and "an equally criminal waste of precious energy" that ought to be transmuted into "the highest form of energy for the benefit of society."

After a while, he sought an Indian term to replace "passive resistance." He didn't like the adjective "passive," which seemed to connote weakness. *Indian Opinion* held a contest. A nephew suggested *sadagraha*, meaning "firmness in the cause." Gandhi, by then accustomed to having the last word, changed it to *satyagraha*, normally translated as "truth force" or sometimes, more literally, as "firmness in truth," or "clinging to truth." To stand for truth was to stand for justice, and to do so nonviolently, offering a form of resistance that would eventually move even the oppressor to see that his position depended on the opposite, on untruth and force. Thereafter the movement had a name, a tactic, and a doctrine. These too he would bring home.

Gandhi kept changing, experiencing a new epiphany every two years or so—Phoenix (1904), brahmacharya (1906), satyagraha (1908), Tolstoy Farm (1910)—each representing a milestone on the path he was blazing for himself. South Africa had become a laboratory for what he'd later call, in the subtitle of his *Autobiography*, "My Experiments with Truth," an opaque phrase that suggests to me that the subject being tested was himself, the pursuer of "truth." The family man gives up family; the lawyer gives up the

practice of law. Gandhi would eventually take on garb similar to that of a wandering Hindu holy man, a *sadhu* off on his own lonely pilgrimage, but he would always be the opposite of a dropout. In his own mind, his simple handwoven loincloth was a signal not of sanctity but of his feeling for the plight of India's poor. "I did not suggest," he would later write, "that I could identify myself with the poor by merely wearing one garment. But I do say that even that little thing is something." Of course he was aware, politician that he was, that it could be read in more than one way. His idea of a life of service also meant staying in the world and having a cause, usually several at a time.

The householder takes to the land and settles on a farm. "Our ambition," one of his colleagues explains, "is to live the life of the poorest people." He was a political man, but he was surprisingly free in Africa, as he would not have been in India, to go his own way. Family and communal ties, less binding in the new environment, had to be reinvented anyway; he had room to "experiment." And, of course, there were no offices to seek. Whites had them all.

It's not easy to pinpoint the moment in South Africa when the ambitious, transplanted barrister becomes recognizable as the Gandhi who would be called Mahatma. But it had happened by 1908, fifteen years after his arrival in the land. Still called *bhai*, or brother, he sat that year for a series of interviews by his first biographer, a white Baptist preacher in Johannesburg named Joseph Doke who, not incidentally, still harbored the ambition of converting his subject. It doesn't demean Doke's well-written tract to call it hagiography, for that's distinctly its genre. Its main character is defined by saintly qualities. "Our Indian friend lives on a higher plane than most men do," Doke writes. Other Indians "wonder at him, grow angry at his strange unselfishness." It also doesn't demean Doke to note that Gandhi himself took over the marketing of the book. He bought up the entire first edition in London in order, he said with false modesty, to save Doke from "a fiasco" but actually to have volumes to distribute to members of Parliament and ship to India; later he arranged for publication of an

Indian edition by his friend G. A. Natesan, a Madras editor; and every week for years to come he ran house ads in *Indian Opinion* inviting mail orders. In Gandhi's hands, Doke's book becomes a campaign biography for a campaign as yet unlaunched.

He's still wearing a necktie and a Western suit in the group portrait for which a garlanded Gandhi and Kasturba posed on the docks in Cape Town on their last day in the country, but if you look closely, there's what may be a tiny foreshadowing in his shaved head and the handcrafted sandals on his feet of a sartorial makeover he'd already experimented with on several occasions and that he'd display on his arrival in Bombay six months later and then adapt over the following six years until he had reduced his garb to the utter, literally bare simplicity of the homespun loincloth and shawl. In the Bombay arrival pictures, suit and tie have been banished for good; he wears a turban, the loose-fitting tunic called a *kurta* on top of what appears to be a lungi, or wraparound skirt. The lungi would soon be replaced by a *dhoti*, a wide enveloping loincloth, which in later years, in its most abbreviated form, would sometimes be all he wore. He wanted, he would teasingly say in rejoinder to Churchill's gibe, to be "as naked as possible."

Viewed as if in a digitally manipulated tracking shot over time, Gandhi the South African lawyer who goes through these changes seamlessly morphs into the future Indian Mahatma. In this long view, an extraordinary, heroic story unfolds: Within the brief span of five and a half years after landing in his vast home country, though still largely unknown to the broad population that hasn't yet had a taste of modern politics, he takes over the Indian National Congress—up to then a usually sedate debating club embodying the aspirations of a small Anglicized elite, mostly lawyers—and turns it into the century's first anticolonial mass movement, raising a clamor in favor of a relatively unfamiliar idea, that of an independent India. Against all the obstacles of illiteracy and an absolute dearth of modern communications reaching down to the 700,000 villages where most Indians lived in the period before partition, he wins broad acceptance, at least for a time, as the authentic exemplar of national renewal and unity.

That outcome, of course, was not foreordained. If the earlier frames are frozen and the South African Gandhi is viewed up close, as he might easily have been seen a year or two before the end of his African sojourn, it's not a mahatma who comes into focus; it's a former lawyer, political spokesman, and utopian seeker. In this view, Gandhi shows up as a singularly impressive character. But in the political realm, he's nothing more than a local leader with a weakening hold on a small immigrant community, facing an array of adherents, critics, and rivals. In such a perspective, if we had to guess, it would seem likeliest that his trajectory would end in a smallish settlement or ashram, a transplanted Phoenix, lost somewhere in the vastness of India; there he'd be surrounded by family and followers engaged with him on a quest as much religious as political. In other words, instead of ending up on pedestals in India as Father of the Nation, the leading figure in a mistily viewed national epic and subject for legions of biographers, scholars, and thinkers who have made him perhaps the most written-about person of the last hundred years, the South African Gandhi could have become another Indian guru whose scattered devotees might have remembered him for a generation or two at best. In South Africa itself he might even have been remembered as a failure rather than held up for reverence, as he is there today, in the fading glow of the advent of democratic, supposedly nonracial government, as one of the founding fathers of the new South Africa.

In fact, the South African Gandhi was explicitly written off as a failure a little more than a year before he left the country by the irascible editor of a weekly newspaper in Durban that competed—sometimes respectfully, sometimes spitefully—with Gandhi's *Indian Opinion* for Indian readers. *African Chronicle* was aimed mainly at readers of Tamil origin, among whom Gandhi found most of his staunchest supporters. "Mr. Gandhi's ephemeral fame and popularity in India and elsewhere rest on no glorious achievement for his countrymen, but on a series of failures, which has resulted in causing endless misery, loss of wealth, and deprivation of existing rights," fumed P. S. Aiyar in a series of scattershot attacks. His leadership over twenty years had "resulted in no tangible good to

anyone." He and his associates had made themselves "an object of ridicule and hatred among all sections of the community in South Africa."

There was some basis for Aiyar's tirade. Gandhi's support had been dwindling for some time; the nonviolent army of Indians willing to step forward yet again and volunteer for the "self-suffering" that came with service as willing *satyagrahis*—offering themselves as fodder, that is, for his campaigns of civil disobedience against unjust racial laws, by courting arrest, going to jail, thereby losing jobs, seeing businesses fail—had visibly shrunk to the point that it hardly exceeded his own family and a band of loyal Tamil supporters in Johannesburg, members of what was called the Tamil Benefit Society. The campaigns had pushed the government into compromises, but these fell many leagues short of the aspirations of the more emboldened Indians for rights of full citizenship; and the authorities had repeatedly stalled and reneged on the meager promises they'd made.

For all that, 1913 was to prove a turning point. Gandhi's experience over two decades in Africa is replete with turning points in his inner life, but this is the one in his public life, in the political sphere, that best explains his subsequent readiness and ability to reach for national leadership in India. He might have faded into semi-oblivion if he'd returned to India in 1912. His final ten months in South Africa, though, transformed his sense of what was possible for him and those he led.

It was only then that he allowed himself to engage directly with the "coolies" he'd described twenty years earlier in his first letter to a newspaper in Pretoria. These were the most oppressed Indians working on sugar plantations, in the coal mines, and on the railroad under renewable five-year contracts of indenture that gave them rights and privileges only slightly less flimsy than those of chattel. A colonial officer with the title "Protector of Immigrants" had a statutory duty to make sure that these "semi-slaves," as Gandhi termed them, were not overworked or underfed in violation of the letter of their labor contracts. But the records show that the putative protector more commonly served as an enforcer on behalf of

plantation owners and other contract holders. Under the indenture system, it was a crime for a laborer to leave his place of employment without authorization: not only could he lose his job; he could be clapped in jail and even flogged. Yet, for a spell of only several weeks in November 1913, in a collective spasm of resentment and hope, what had been unthinkable happened: thousands of these indentured Indians walked off the mines, plantations, and railroad to follow Gandhi in the greatest and last of his campaigns of nonviolent resistance in South Africa.

For their leader it was a sudden and radical change in tactics, a calculated risk: in part a result of events accelerating out of his control, transforming and renewing his own sense of his constituency, his sense of who it was he actually represented, for whom it was he actually spoke. If Gandhi had gone home at the start of that year as he'd originally hoped, it's questionable whether he would ever have been able to conceive of, let alone effect, such a mass mobilization. Instead, he returned to India in 1915 with an experience no other Indian leader had yet known.

He hadn't seen it coming. In June 1913 he outlined his expectations for this final struggle in a letter to Gopal Krishna Gokhale, the statesmanlike and moderate Indian leader whom he'd taken as a mentor years before and to whom he was now hoping to apprentice himself on his return. Gokhale had just visited South Africa, where he'd been hailed by whites as well as Indians as a tribune of the empire. "So far as I can judge at present 100 men and 30 women will start the struggle," Gandhi wrote. "As time goes on, we may have more." (Reminiscing, many years later, he would remark that the number with whom he actually started was only 16.) As late as October 1913, *Indian Opinion* flatly declared: "The indentured Indians will not be invited to join the general struggle."

Then, just two days after the date on that issue, Gandhi showed up in the coal-mining town of Newcastle in northern Natal to address indentured laborers who'd already started to leave the mines. He had shaved his head, and for the first time at a political

event in South Africa the former lawyer dressed in Indian garb, showing his allegiance to the laborers by donning their attire.

"It was a bold, dangerous and momentous step," *Indian Opinion* commented a week later. "Such concerted action had not been tried before with men who are more or less ignorant. But with passive resistance nothing is too dangerous or too bold so long as it involves suffering by themselves and so long as in their methods they do not use physical force." This sounds like a passage Gandhi himself may have dictated in the full flush of the movement. The condescending reference to the ignorance of the strikers is a consistent Gandhian note. Later, back in India, he would regularly speak of the "dumb millions" in summoning the national movement to work for the poorest of the poor, or, on an occasion when he contemplated with some irony the scope of his influence, of "the numberless men and women who have childlike faith in my wisdom." On this South African test run for satyagraha as a form of mass mobilization, the hint of concern that the dumb and childlike could lapse into violence foreshadows the Gandhi who would write, after his first call for a national movement of noncooperation with British rule in India ended in a spasm of arson and killing, "I know that the only thing that the Government dreads is the huge majority I seem to command. They little know that I dread it more than they."

Of course, in South Africa, he didn't command a majority. Here the huge majority was black. In his fixation on winning for Indians what he deemed to be their rights as citizens of the British Empire, he never posed the question about how or when that majority could be mobilized. Considering what a leap of faith it was for him to call out even Indian indentured laborers in Natal in 1913, it's clear that mass mobilization would remain for him a dangerous political weapon, tempting but risky. He would try it on a national scale in India on only a roughly decennial basis—in 1921, 1930, and 1942—as if he and the country required years to recuperate in each case. Yet this time in South Africa—because he desperately needed reinforcements on the front line of nonviolent resistance at a moment when his support among his people had dwindled, because his most devoted followers whom he'd trained for disciplined

resistance wanted him to seize the opportunity—the Mahatma-to-be found the political steel, the will, to grasp the weapon. He was fighting for his people but also for his own political survival. The prospect of returning to India as the retiring head of an exhausted and defeated movement had little appeal; it may even have been a goad to action. Not to have seized the moment would have been to acknowledge the possibility that he might fade from the scene. "The poor have no fears," he later wrote wonderingly, looking back on the wildfire of strikes that spread across Natal after he and his comrades lit the fuse. It was an important discovery.

What had he known of the indentured laborers? Maureen Swan, author of a pioneering study that filled in and thereby demythologized the received narrative of Gandhi's time in South Africa, notes significantly that he'd never previously tried to organize the indentured, that he'd waited until 1913 before addressing the grievances of "the Natal underclasses." The received narrative, of course, was Gandhi's own, based on the reminiscences he later set down in India; there they were serialized on a weekly basis, in the newspaper published from his ashram, as parables or lessons in satyagraha, until eventually they could be collected as autobiography. The scholar Swan speaks and works in the language of class. Her social analysis doesn't touch on the categories by which Indians who came to South Africa were accustomed to viewing themselves. I mean those of region and caste or—to be a little more specific without plunging into a maze of overlapping but not synonymous social categories—*jati* and subcaste, the groupings by which poor Indians would commonly identify themselves. That her "underclasses" were heavily lower caste was not relevant to her argument. But it may have some relevance to the way Gandhi saw them, for he'd come, by his own peculiar route, early in his time in South Africa, to a position of moral outrage on the injustice of caste discrimination by Indians, against so-called untouchables especially.

Gandhi's ideas of social equality kept evolving during his time in South Africa and later, after he confronted the turbulent Indian

scene. He'd struggled for the legal equality of Indians and whites. This had led him, inevitably, to the issue of equality between Indian and Indian. He crossed the caste boundary before he crossed the class boundary, but all these categories would eventually blur and come to be overlaid on one another in his mind so that years later, in 1927, it would seem natural to him to refer back to his South Africa struggle when campaigning in India against untouchability: "I believe implicitly that all men are born equal … I have fought this doctrine of superiority in South Africa inch by inch, and it is because of that inherent belief that I delight in calling myself a scavenger, a spinner, a weaver, a farmer and a laborer." Here he echoes his half-jesting suggestion to his biographer Doke, twenty years earlier in Johannesburg, that the first study of his life could be titled "A Scavenger." On another occasion, he'd say that "uplift of Harijans"—a term meaning "children of God" he tried to popularize for untouchables—first struck him as an idea and a mission in South Africa. "The idea did occur to me in South Africa and in the South African setting," he told his faithful secretary Mahadev Desai. If he was referring to his political life—to actions he took in the world and not simply to values he'd come to hold inwardly—there's little in all Gandhi's South African experience besides the 1913 campaign that could stand as a basis for the assertion.

Talk of scavengers and other untouchables is not the vocabulary of class struggle used by a revolutionary like Mao Zedong. But it's radical in its own terms—its own Indian terms—and makes the link between the struggles he later waged in India against untouchability and the strikes of indentured laborers he found himself leading, despite obvious misgivings, in 1913 in the coal-mining district of northern Natal.

Long before he thought of deploying the indentured in his struggle, Gandhi was alive to their oppression. When he made it a cause, he didn't make explicit the connection, the overlap, between the indentured and the untouchables. Still, he had to be aware of it. It was a subject generally to be avoided, but all Indians in South Africa knew it was lurking in their new world. They had mostly come to South Africa as indentured laborers, or were descended

from indentured laborers. And most indentured laborers were low caste; the proportion of those deemed to be untouchable seems certain to have been significantly higher in South Africa than in India, where it was estimated, at the time, to be about 12 percent nationally, as high as 20 percent in some regions. One of the appeals for the indenture system made by recruiters who canvassed for volunteers in South India and on the Gangetic plain had been that it could lighten the load carried by oppressed laborers held to be outcastes. Crossing an ocean, even on a contract of indenture, made it easier to change one's name, religion, or occupation: in effect, to pass. Even if these remained unchanged, caste could be expected to recede as a touchstone and social imperative in the new country. Yet it was there. Because Gandhi himself was liberated on caste issues, he could finally conceive of leading indentured laborers, just as it came easily for him to conceive of Hindus and Muslims, Tamils and Gujaratis, as one people in the setting of an immigrant community where they were all thrown together as they seldom were in India.

At this point in South Africa, the political Gandhi and the religious Gandhi merge, not for the first or last time. At the end of his life, just before India's independence and in its aftermath, a heartsick Mahatma would verge on seeing himself as a failure. He saw Hindus and Muslims caught up in a paroxysm of mutual slaughter, what we later learned to call "ethnic cleansing." Untouchables were still untouchable in the villages, where they mostly dwelled; the commitment to liberate them as part of the achievement of freedom, which he'd tried to instill among Hindus, seemed to have become a matter for lip service, whatever new laws proclaimed. No individual, no matter how inspiring or saintly, could have accomplished the wholesale renewal of India in only two generations, the time that had passed since Gandhi had started to conceive it as his mission while still in South Africa. It was there, Gandhi later wrote in his summing-up, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, that he'd "realized my vocation in life."

Those who depend on what he called “truth force” were “strangers to disappointment and defeat,” he claimed in that book’s last line. Yet here he was, at the end of his days, expressing chronic disappointment and, sometimes, a sense of defeat. He’d had more to do with India’s independence than any other individual—in declaring the goal and making it seem attainable, in convincing the nation that it was a nation—but he was not among those who celebrated that day. Instead, he fasted. The celebrations were, he said, “a sorry affair.”

In our own time, the word “tragedy” inevitably gets tagged to any disastrous event. A highway pileup or a killer tornado that claims lives, a shooting binge in a post office or an act of terrorism—all will promptly be labeled “tragic” on the evening news as if tragedy were simply a synonym for calamity or baleful fate. Naipaul once wrote that Indians lack a tragic sense; he didn’t specifically mention Gandhi in that connection, but probably, if asked, he would have. Yet in the deeper meaning of the word—connecting it to character and inescapable mortality rather than chance—there’s a tragic element in Gandhi’s life, not because he was assassinated, nor because his noblest qualities inflamed the hatred in his killer’s heart. The tragic element is that he was ultimately forced, like Lear, to see the limits of his ambition to remake his world. In that sense, the play was already being written when he boarded the steamship in Cape Town in 1914.

“The saint has left our shores, I sincerely hope forever,” wrote his leading South African antagonist and occasional negotiating foil, Jan Christian Smuts, then the defense minister. An “unwelcome visitor” at the beginning of his long sojourn, a “saint” at the end but obviously still unwelcome, it wasn’t easy to say what Gandhi had accomplished beyond his remarkable self-creation and the example he’d set. A top British official worried that he might have shown South Africa’s blacks “that they have an instrument in their hands—this is, combination and passive resistance—of which they had not previously thought.” It would be years before that hypothesis would be seriously tested.

But for Gandhi himself, South Africa had been more than an overture. Between his arrival and his departure, he'd acquired some ideas to which he was committed, others that he'd only begun to try out. Satyagraha as a means of active struggle to achieve a national goal belonged to the first category; satyagraha involving the poorest of the poor fit the second. These were what he carried in his otherwise meager baggage when, finally, he came out of Africa.

Another conceivable variation on this theme—struggle not only involving the poorest but specifically for their benefit—never quite materialized in South Africa. It would prove even harder to conceive of in the circumstances of the India to which he returned.

To understand how Gandhi's time in South Africa set him on his brilliantly original, ultimately problematic course, we need to delve deeper into some of the episodes that made up this long tryout, to see how his experiences there shaped his convictions, how those convictions shaped a sense of mission and of himself that was close to fully formed by the time he headed home for good.

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2

NO-TOUCHISM

"… *the least Indian of Indian leaders.*"

V. S. Naipaul's words were intentionally surprising, even startling. What a way to describe the iconic figure in a loincloth whom the Cambridge-educated Nehru called "the quintessence of the conscious and subconscious will" of village India. How could Gandhi be at once "the least Indian" and "the quintessence" of the country's deepest impulses? I was newly arrived in India toward the end of 1966 when I came upon Naipaul's line. For me it was the most memorable in his scorching, sometimes hilarious first book on India, *An Area of Darkness*, published in 1964. It spoke to Gandhi's time in South Africa, to the question of how it had shaped him.

I'd landed as a correspondent in New Delhi, coming from South Africa via London myself, just as Gandhi had in 1915, which may suggest why I was susceptible to the flattering argument that outsiders saw the country more clearly than its most sophisticated inhabitants. In the first generation after independence, it was insolent if not heretical for any Indian, especially one born in Trinidad and resident in London, to argue that India's father figure, its beloved Bapu, as he was called in his ashrams and beyond, had come into his own overseas—in Africa, of all places—and had been forever changed by the traumatic but unavoidable experience of having to look on his motherland through what had become foreign eyes. In other words, the way Naipaul himself saw India. The writer was blunt. He didn't waste words; that was an essential part of his genius. Basically, he was saying that Gandhi was appalled by the country he'd later get credit for liberating. It was the social

oppression of India and its filth—the sight of people blithely squatting in public places to move their bowels and then, just as blithely, leaving their turds behind for human scavengers to remove—that accounted for the Mahatma-to-be's reforming zeal. "He looked at India as no Indian was able to," the young Naipaul wrote; "his vision was direct, and this directness was, and is, revolutionary."

Naipaul found supporting evidence in the *Autobiography*, a book he would continue to mine every decade or so for new insights into "the many-sided Gandhi." In this earliest excavation, he concentrated on a visit by Gandhi to Calcutta on a return home in 1901 that he'd originally intended to make permanent. Gandhi doesn't know it yet, but he still has a dozen years ahead of him in South Africa. Within a year, he'll allow himself to be summoned back from India. This is the pre-satyagraha Gandhi, still only thirty-two, the writer of lawyerly petitions to remote officials, not yet a leader of mass protests. Gandhi is in Calcutta—now called Kolkata—to attend his very first annual meeting of the Indian National Congress, a movement he'd one day transform and dominate but that, at this stage, hardly knows his name.

Naipaul doesn't waste words on context, but a little helps. Calcutta, at the start of the last century, is "the packed and pestilential town" Kipling described, but it's also in those days still the seat of the viceroy, capital of the Raj, "second city" of the empire, and capital as well of an undivided Bengal (a Muslim-majority area by a thin margin, taking in the entire Ganges delta including all the present Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal). Not just that, it has been an important seedbed of Hindu reform movements and is now on the verge of a period of ferment that might be called prerevolutionary. In these respects, it's India's St. Petersburg. A political newcomer, Gandhi has been granted a scant five minutes to speak about the situation Indians confront in far-off South Africa. In nobody's eyes but his own is the arrival of this lawyer, lately from Durban, a big deal. He's as central to the proceedings as a delegate from Guam or Samoa at an American political convention.

But look what happens. Naipaul brilliantly swoops in on three paragraphs in the *Autobiography*. They need no magnification. Twenty-five years later, when Gandhi wrote about this first encounter with the Congress, he still sounded astonished, really aghast. “I was face to face with untouchability,” he said, describing the precautions high-caste Hindus from South India felt they had to take in Calcutta in order to dine without being polluted by the sight of others. “A special kitchen had to be made for them … walled in by wicker-work … a kitchen, dining room, washroom, all in one—a close safe with no outlet … If, I said to myself, there was such untouchability between the delegates of the Congress, one could well imagine the extent to which it existed amongst their constituents.”

And then there was the problem of shit, which was not unconnected, since sweepers, scavengers, Bhangis, call them what you will, were deemed to be the lowest, most untouchable of all outcastes. Here’s Gandhi again:

> There were only a few latrines, and the recollection of their stink still oppresses me. I pointed it out to the volunteers. They said pointblank, “That is not our work, it is the scavenger’s work.” I asked for a broom. The man stared at me in wonder. I procured one and cleaned the latrine … Some of the delegates did not scruple to use the verandahs outside their rooms for calls of nature at night … No one was ready to undertake the cleaning, and I found no one to share the honour with me of doing it.

If the Congress had stayed in session, Gandhi concludes tartly, conditions would have been “quite favourable for the outbreak of an epidemic.” A quarter of a century lies between the Calcutta meeting and his rendering of this memory. Conditions have improved but not enough. “Even today,” he says, in his insistent, hectoring way, “thoughtless delegates are not wanting who disfigure the Congress camp … wherever they want.” (Forty years later, when I attended my first session of the All India Congress Committee, the party—in power then for a generation—had discovered the Indian equivalent of the Porta-Potty.)

Naipaul considers Gandhi's fierce feelings about sanitation and caste an obvious by-product of his time in South Africa. He doesn't go further into their genesis. Gandhi tells another story, but it's incomplete; it doesn't begin to explain his readiness to do the scavenger's job in the Calcutta latrine, his eventual readiness to make this one of his signature causes. He says he has been opposed to untouchability since the age of twelve, when his mother chided him for brushing shoulders with a young Bhangi named Uka and insisted he undergo "purification." Even as a boy, he says in his various renditions of this incident, he could find no logic in his mother's demand, though, he adds, he "naturally obeyed."

The memory isn't unique to Gandhi or his era. Indians living today, when the practice of untouchability has been forbidden by law for more than sixty years and now is more or less disowned by most educated Indians, can recall similar lessons in distancing from their childhoods. This is true among Indians even in South Africa, where the existence of untouchability was seldom acknowledged and never became an issue of open debate. On a recent visit to Durban, I heard a story like Gandhi's from an elderly lawyer friend who recalled his mother refusing to serve tea to one of his schoolboy pals whom she identified as a Pariah. (Yes, that outcaste South Indian group gave us the English word.) But Gandhi's experience as a boy doesn't explain his behavior in Calcutta. At the age of twelve, he didn't think of helping Uka empty the Gandhi family's latrine, and his readiness to shrug off untouchability didn't instantly mature into a passion to see it abolished. The path he followed to the Calcutta meeting has twists and turns and leads ultimately through South Africa. But it starts in India, where untouchability was coming into disrepute among enlightened Hindus well before Gandhi made himself heard on the subject. Coming into disrepute, that is, among a smallish sector of an Anglicized elite that had been educated to one degree or another in English. At the same time, according to persuasive recent scholarship, the actual practice of untouchability was becoming more rigid and oppressive in the villages where the elite seldom ventured. This happened as upwardly mobile subcastes sought to

secure their own status and privileges by drawing a firm line between themselves and dependent groups they conveniently branded as "unclean" but systematically exploited. Just as racial segregation became more rigid and formally codified in the Jim Crow era in the American South and the apartheid years in South Africa, the barriers of untouchability were, in general, not lowered but raised even higher in colonial India, according to this line of interpretation.

What outsiders and many Indians think they know and understand about the caste system and the phenomenon of untouchability owes much to colonial taxonomy: the unstinting efforts of British classifiers—district officials called commissioners, census takers, and scholars—to catalog its multiplicity of subgroupings and pin them down the way Linnaeus defined the order of plants. Outlining the system, they tended to freeze it, imagining they had finally uncovered some ancient structure undergirding and explaining the constant flux, jostling, and blur of contending Indian social groups and sects. But the fixed system they thought they had delineated could not be pinned down; shot through with all the inconsistencies, ambiguities, and clashing aspirations of the actual India, not to mention its undeniable oppressiveness, it kept shifting and moving. Not all very poor Indians were regarded as untouchable, but nearly all those who came to be classed as untouchable were wretchedly poor. Shudras, peasants in the lowest caste order, could be looked down upon, exploited, and shunned on social occasions without being considered polluting by their betters. Some untouchable groups practiced untouchability toward other untouchable groups. If one group could be considered more polluting than another, untouchability could be a matter of degree. Still, to be born an untouchable was almost surely to receive a life sentence to an existence beyond the pale, though the location of what the scholar Susan Bayly calls the "pollution barrier"—the boundary between "clean" Hindu groups and those deemed to be "unclean" or polluting—might shift from place to place or time to time. In some regions, South India in particular, contact with even the shadow of

an untouchable could be regarded as polluting. In few regions, however, were supposedly untouchable women secure from sexual exploitation by supposedly “clean” higher-caste men.

Some outcaste groups managed, over a stretch of generations, to promote themselves out of untouchability by ceasing to practice trades that were regarded as polluting such as picking up night soil or handling dead carcasses or working in leather. Others found they could distance themselves from their lowly origins by converting to Christianity and Islam. (Among Christians, in a shadowy carryover belying missionary promises, not to mention the Sermon on the Mount, some Indian Christians continued to treat others as untouchable.) Practices varied from region to region, as did the authority of high-caste Brahmans, the priestly types who rationalized the system and were, usually, its chief beneficiaries. The British and the missionaries who followed in their train taught members of the broad spectrum of various overlapping sects, devoted to various gods, that they belonged to a great encompassing collective called Hinduism. Simultaneously and more important, Indians were making the discovery for themselves. (Ancient Persians described “Hindus” more than two millennia before the British arrived; and recent scholarship suggests that the coinage “Hinduism” was first accomplished by an Indian, early in the nineteenth century.) Similarly, members of specific groups that were targets of untouchability—Chamars, Mahars, Malas, Raegars, Dusadhs, Bhangis, Doms, Dheds, and many more—learned they were all members of a larger group called untouchables. In short order, some began to draw the conclusion that they could make common cause for their own advancement.

Before Gandhi made his final return from South Africa to India, Brahmans were running schools in Maharashtra for the education of untouchables. They didn’t necessarily, however, make a practice of eating with those they were uplifting. A movement called the Arya Samaj, concerned about the number of untouchables converting to Christianity and—given the then-theoretical possibility that votes might one day be counted in India—even more concerned about the number converting to Islam, instituted a ritual of *shuddi*, or

purification, for untouchables who could be lured into "the Hindu fold" (as Gandhi would later describe it). Here again the equality they offered was strictly limited; followers of the movement were not even consistent on the question of whether the "purified," or reconverted untouchables, should be allowed to draw their water from wells used by higher castes. Perhaps it would be just as well if they were given their own separate but equal wells. It was enough not to consider the practitioners of polluting trades polluted. Higher-caste reformers saw no need for them to undertake such dirty, distasteful tasks themselves.

In later years, Gandhi displays at least a passing familiarity with this reformist history without ever acknowledging it influenced his own thinking. The theme of a memoir subtitled "The Story of My Experiments with Truth"—in the literary sense, its conceit—is that he had always been an independent operator, fearlessly making his own discoveries based almost entirely on his own experience. In the political realm, he never really portrays himself as a follower, even when he writes about his close ties to Gokhale, the Indian leader who cleared a path for his return to India, seeing Gandhi as a potential heir, and whom he acknowledged as a political guru. In the religious realm, he also acknowledged one guru, a philosophizing Jain poet (and diamond merchant) in Bombay named Shrimad Rajchandra, from whom he sought guidance when feeling pressed by Christian missionaries in his Pretoria days. But Rajchandra, who died early, in 1901, was no social reformer. Gandhi posed a series of questions to this sage. Included in his response was advice on what's called *varnashrama dharma*, the rules of proper caste conduct. Gandhi was then warned not to eat with members of different castes and, in particular, to shun Muslims as dining companions.

Much as he admired, even revered, Rajchandra, these strictures against out-of-caste dining gave him no pause. It took years for members of Gandhi's own household who remained orthodox to become accustomed to nonsectarian dining. "My mother and aunt would purify brass utensils used by Muslim friends of Gandhiji by putting them in the fire," recalled a young cousin who grew up on

the Phoenix Settlement. “It was also a problem for my father to eat with Muslims.” Later, back in India, Gandhi sometimes argued that the reluctance of Hindus to eat with Muslims was just another offshoot of the untouchability he deplored. “Why should Hindus have any difficulty in mixing with Mussalmans and Christians?” he asked in 1934. “Untouchability creates a bar not only between Hindu and Hindu but between man and man.”

The question of how he came upon his independent views still needs some untangling. In Gandhi’s own telling, after being warned against physical contact with the untouchable Uka at age twelve, he was not confronted with caste as a significant question until he resolved to go to London to study law. Then the *mahajans*, or elders, of the Modh Banias—the merchant subcaste to which all Hindu Gandhis belong—summoned him to a formal hearing in Bombay, now Mumbai, where he was spoken to severely and warned that he’d face what amounted to excommunication if he insisted on crossing the “black water,” thereby subjecting himself to all the temptations of flesh (principally, meat, wine, and women) that can be assumed to beckon in foreign parts. If he went, he was told, he’d be the first member of the subcaste to defy this ban. Then only nineteen, he stood up to the elders, telling them they could do their worst.

We can surmise that the mahajans were already fairly toothless, for Gandhi’s orthodox mother and elder brother Laxmidas supported him: in part, because he solemnly took three vows in front of a Jain priest to live abroad as a Bania would at home, in part because his legal training was seen as a key to the extended family’s financial security. What we cannot do is conclude that this younger Gandhi was already in open rebellion against the caste system. In asserting his independence, he stopped well short of renouncing the caste that had just effectively declared him untouchable, warning its members that dining or close contact with him would be polluting. Three years later, when he returned from London, a docile Gandhi traveled with Laxmidas to Nasik, a sacred place in Maharashtra, to submit to a “purification” ritual that involved immersion in the Godavari River under the supervision of a priest who then issued

certificates, which Gandhi preserved, saying he had performed his ablutions. The Bania in Gandhi, who always kept a frugal eye on accounts and expenditures, made a point of complaining to his first biographer, Doke, nearly two decades later, that the priest had charged fifty rupees.

And that wasn't the end of his purification. The Gandhi family then had to give a banquet for caste members in the Gujarati town of Rajkot, where he spent much of his childhood and where his wife and son had been stashed all the time he was abroad. The dinner itself included a ritual of submission. The prodigal son was expected to strip to the waist and serve all the guests personally. Gandhi—whose torso would be naked above the waist throughout the latter part of his life—submitted. Most members of his jati were mollified, but some, including his wife's family, never again ran the risk of allowing themselves to be seen eating in the presence of one so wayward, even after he became the recognized leader of the country. Gandhi went out of his way not to embarrass the holdouts, some of whom signaled that they were ready to ignore the ban in the privacy of their homes. He preferred to shame them. "I would not so much as drink water at their houses," he tells us, lauding himself for his own "non-resistance," which won him the affection and political support of those Banias who still regarded him as excommunicated.

Or so he claims. The line between humility and sanctimoniousness can be a fine one, and Gandhi occasionally crossed it. On display here is his tendency to turn his life into a series of parables, as he dashed off his memoir in the 1920s and, as he grew older, in his everyday discourse. The fact is he'd defied the caste elders and then, even after he'd gone through the purification ceremony, ostentatiously refused to evade the ancient prohibition in collusion with anyone who worried it might still be valid. His handling of the matter might be seen as passive-aggressive: in the arena of family, a precursor of satyagraha. It's Gandhi's way of seizing higher ground. All that came later. On his return from London, he had strong practical reasons for getting back on good terms with his caste. His standing with the Modh Banias was bound to have a bearing on his

prospects as a lawyer, for it was among them that he would expect to find most of his clients.

The purification ceremony in Nasik and the banquet in Rajkot show that he was far from being a rebel against the strictures of caste in the interim between his return from London and his departure for South Africa. Whatever his private views, the newly minted barrister's stand on caste and its place in Indian society was still basically conformist. The experience of becoming untouchable in his own relatively privileged subcaste had given Gandhi no particular insight into the life of the downtrodden. At most, it insinuated the notion that caste might not be an impermeable barrier. It was just a step, then, on the way to Calcutta in 1901. Naipaul is almost certainly right: that encounter might never have occurred the way it did had he not gone to South Africa. If we look closely at Gandhi's early experience there, several critical moments of consciousness-raising appear to converge in a period of roughly half a year, starting in the latter part of 1894 as he was setting up a law practice in Durban.

Could his engagement with Christian missionaries in that period have had something to do with the sprouting of a social conscience? It's clear enough that British and American missionaries helped insinuate a notion of social equality into Indian thought. The thin edge of their wedge, it was always implicit and sometimes explicit in their general critique of a social order they considered wicked and in their more specific attack on the authority of Brahmans. The priestly caste was portrayed in Christian tracts as self-serving and corrupt. ("Wherever you see men, they have two hands, two feet, two eyes, two ears, one nose and one mouth, whatever their kind or country," a letter in a missionary newspaper noted nearly three decades before Gandhi was born. "Then God could not have had it in mind to create many castes among men. And the system of caste, that is only practised in India, is caused by the Brahmans to maintain their superiority.") However, it's less clear that discussions of caste and social equality came up in discussions between Gandhi and the missionaries who competed for his soul in Pretoria and Durban. Everything about the newcomer's first experiences in the

emerging racial order suggests that such matters should have and may have arisen. But these evangelicals had salvation, not social reform, on their minds. From all that we actually know of their conversations with Gandhi, they were consistently otherworldly.

Enter Tolstoy, from the steppes. At some point in 1894, apparently in his last weeks in Pretoria, Gandhi received a packet in the mail from one of his well-wishers in Britain. This was Edward Maitland, leader of the tiny Esoteric Christianity spin-off from the Theosophist movement. Inside was the newly published Constance Garnett translation of *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, the great novelist's late-life confession of a passionate Christian creed, founded on the individual conscience and a doctrine of radical nonviolence. Ten years later, Gandhi would come upon Ruskin and a few years after that on Thoreau. Subsequently, he would correspond with Tolstoy himself. But if there is a single seminal experience in his intellectual development, it starts with his unwrapping that package in Pretoria. The author of *War and Peace*, a book the young lawyer would have found less compelling, excoriates the high culture of the educated classes, which profess to believe in the brotherhood of man, condemning in the course of his argument all the institutions of church and state in czarist Russia. What they have in common, he rages, is bedrock hypocrisy, never more so than when they're declaiming on the subject of brotherhood:

> We are all brothers, but I live on a salary paid me for prosecuting, judging, and condemning the thief or the prostitute whose existence the whole tenor of my life brings about … We are all brothers, but I live on the salary I gain by collecting taxes from needy laborers to be spent on the luxuries of the rich and idle. We are all brothers, but I take a stipend for preaching a false Christian religion, which I do not myself believe in, and which only serves to hinder men from understanding true Christianity.

And this: "We are all brothers—and yet every morning a brother or a sister must empty the bedroom slops for me."

Here we begin to get a clear view of how the social conscience that Gandhi would bring to Calcutta in 1901 was formed. It was not just living in South Africa that inspired it. It was musing about India while living in South Africa and reading Tolstoy there as he would continue to do in the coming years. By the time he got to the Calcutta meeting, Gandhi had read Tolstoy's subsequent jeremiad, *What Is to Be Done?* Here Tolstoy, continuing in his full-throated prophetic vein, tells the educated classes how they can save themselves—through an uncompromising rejection of materialism, a life of simple living, and physical labor to provide for their own necessities. ("Body labor" and "bread labor," he calls it, language Gandhi eventually appropriates for his own use.) In this context, Tolstoy, now determined to shed the privileges of a Russian aristocrat, returns to the question of human feces. The laws of God will be fulfilled, he writes, "when men of our circle, and after them all the great majority of working-people, will no longer consider it shameful to clean latrines, but will consider it shameful to fill them up in order that other men, *our brethren*, may carry their contents away."

The deep impression Tolstoy etched on Gandhi's soul was sufficiently conspicuous for one of his Indian critics to seize on it, years later, as proof of his essential foreignness. This was Sri Aurobindo, a brilliant Bengali revolutionary who advocated terrorism under the name Aurobindo Ghose, then lived out his long life as an ashram mystic and guru in the tiny French enclave of Pondicherry in South India. "Gandhi," Aurobindo said in 1926, "is a European—truly a Russian Christian in an Indian body." Gandhi, by then all but undisputed leader of the nationalist movement in India, might plausibly have retorted that Aurobindo was a Russian anarchist in an Indian body, but the Bengali's remark either passed him by or was beneath his notice.

The younger Gandhi, the South African lawyer and petitioner, immediately saw the contradiction between Tolstoy's prophetic teachings and the values prevailing among Indians of his station. Evidence that he has been more than shaken soon begins to accumulate. In May 1894, he travels to Durban, presumably to close

out his year in South Africa and board a ship for home. Gandhi's account of what happened then has been accepted by most biographers: how at a farewell party his eye happened to fall on a brief newspaper item on the progress of a bill to disenfranchise Natal's Indians, how he called it to the attention of the community and was then prevailed upon to stay and lead a fight against the legislation. But an Indian scholar and Gandhi enthusiast, T. K. Mahadevan, noting that the bill had by then been progressing in stages through the colonial legislature for more than half a year, devoted a whole book to exposing Gandhi's "fictionalizing" and "mendacity" in his recounting of this episode in the *Autobiography*. With all the vehemence of a trial lawyer addressing a jury, the scholar concluded that the young barrister was mainly looking out for himself. Rather than return to an uncertain future in India, according to Mahadevan, he wanted to establish a legal practice in Durban.

It's more generous and probably more accurate to allow for the possibility of mixed motives, of altruism and ambition each playing its part in the cancellation of his voyage home. In any case, by August 1894 he has thrown himself into a life of what would now be called public service, drafting petitions and, early on, a constitution for the Natal Indian Congress, a newly formed association of better-off Indians, mostly traders and merchants and, in the Durban of that time, mostly Muslim. And here for the first time, at the very outset of his career in politics, he notices and mentions poor Indians. With Tolstoy hovering at his shoulder, or so we can reasonably surmise, Gandhi lists among the seven "objects" of the new Congress two for which it's hard to find any other inspiration in his reading or experience: "To inquire into the conditions of Indentured Indians and to take proper steps to alleviate their sufferings … [and] to help the poor and helpless in every reasonable way." He may have done little for or with the indentured until late in his stay in South Africa, but clearly they were on his mind and conscience from his earliest days in politics.

In 1895, with founders of the Natal Indian Congress, mostly Muslim merchants (photo credit i2.1)

Such “objects” remained words, floating for years into a realm of high-flown aspiration, stopping far short of a program. Gandhi doesn’t immediately travel to the sugar plantations and mines to make an on-the-spot inquiry. Years later, back in India, he would attribute his hesitation to his own social anxieties. “I lived in South Africa for 20 years,” he said then, “but never once thought of going to see the diamond mines there, partly because I was afraid lest as an ‘untouchable’ I should be refused admission and insulted.” By then, his equation of British racism and Indian casteism—the notion that all Indians were untouchable in British eyes—had become the rhetorical cutting edge of his argument as a social reformer. It worked for him as a nationalist, too.

But that was not where he started. Initially, his goal was social equality within the empire for his benefactors and clients, the higher-class Indian merchants. Indentured Indians thus weren’t invited to join the Natal Indian Congress. Its annual membership fee of three pounds was far beyond their means. Their sufferings remained unalleviated, but several months later Gandhi had his first notable encounter with an indentured laborer; it’s a case of reality

crashing in. A Tamil gardener named Balasundaram, indentured to a well-known Durban white, turns up in Gandhi's recently opened law office, where one of the clerks, also a Tamil, interprets his story. The man is weeping, bleeding from the mouth; two of his teeth have been broken. His master has beaten him, he says. Gandhi sends him to a doctor, then takes him to a magistrate.

That's the version of the encounter he gives in the *Autobiography*, what deserves to be belittled as its movie treatment. None of his biographers seem to notice how far this account, written after the passage of three decades, strays from one he wrote just two years after the event. In the earlier one, the laborer has already gone on his own to the official known as the protector of immigrants, who conveys him to a magistrate, who, in turn, arranges for him to be hospitalized for "a few days." Only then does he land on Gandhi's doorstep. His wounds have been treated, he is no longer bleeding, but his mouth is so sore he can't speak. Surprisingly, he's able to write down his request in Tamil. He wants the lawyer to have his indenture canceled. Gandhi asks whether he'd be willing to have it transferred to someone other than his employer if cancellation can't be arranged. It takes half a year, but finally Gandhi arranges for Balasundaram to be indentured to a Wesleyan minister of his acquaintance, whose services Gandhi has been attending most Sundays.

Balasundaram is hardly a typical indentured laborer. Instead of toiling on a sugar plantation or mine, where laborers in large numbers are confined to compounds, the gardener lives in the city, where he knows his way around well enough to be able to get to the protector and Durban's one Indian lawyer on his own. That he's at least semiliterate suggests that he may not be an untouchable. Gandhi, later claiming more credit than he seems to have deserved, describes the case as a turning point. "It reached the ears of every indentured laborer, and I came to be regarded as their friend," he says in the *Autobiography*. "A regular stream of indentured labourers began to pour into my office." He says he got to know their "joys and sorrows." These broad claims have been widely accepted. ("He emerged virtually as a one-man legal aid society for these poor

Indians," a respected Indian scholar, Nagindas Sanghavi, wrote.) Evidence from this period to support them, however, is less than slight. Gandhi himself doesn't go on to mention any subsequent cases involving indentured laborers; if there were records of such cases, they've long since disappeared. Apart from sketchy reports of two weekend forays late in 1895 to pass the hat for the Natal Indian Congress, there's nothing to indicate he went out of his way to meet the indentured in his Durban years.

On October 26, 1895, he's said to have visited shanties near the Point Road where Indian dockworkers and fishermen lived, collecting only five pounds. (Point Road, the thoroughfare he first traveled on landing in Durban, has lately, in the new South Africa, been renamed Mahatma Gandhi Road, a well-meant tribute that has discomfited local Indians, given its reputation for prostitution.) The next weekend he ventured north with some Congress members to the sugar country, but, barred from speaking to laborers at the Tongaat estate, he concentrated on local Indian traders. A British estate owner was asked by a magistrate in Durban to report on Gandhi's activities. The planter was no clairvoyant. This is what he wrote: "He will cause some trouble I have no doubt, but he is not the man to lead a big movement. He has a weak face."

Gandhi's real attitude to the indentured in this period is made plain by the arguments he advanced on the first of his losing causes in South Africa: that of protecting the voting rights of literate, propertied Indians. Such Indians, he wrote in December that year, "have no wish to see ignorant Indians who cannot possibly be expected to understand the value of a vote being placed on the Voters' List."

If the thought of following Tolstoy's teaching on his brief foray to the sugar country on Natal's north coast so much as crossed his mind, it hadn't yet carried him to the conclusion that he needed to do physical labor with his own hands. Nor, it seems, did he try again to penetrate the plantations, having failed the first time. So for anyone looking for the origins of his passion on untouchability—so evident by the time he reaches Calcutta in 1901—the Balasundaram case sheds little light. The most that can be said is

that it might have helped set the stage for his next revelation, which came not from actual encounters with poor Indians but from finding himself on the short end of an argument with whites. At virtually the same time, probably no more than a few weeks after the gardener's arrival in his office, Gandhi the lawyer and petitioner was pulled up short by an editorial in a Johannesburg paper called *The Critic*.

The editorial chews over Gandhi's first venture in political pamphleteering, an open letter to the members of the colonial legislature in Natal, published at the end of 1894. In it, Gandhi took on "the Indian question as a whole," asking why Indians were so despised and hated in the country. "If that hatred is simply based upon his color," the twenty-five-year-old neophyte wrote, "then, of course, he has no hope. The sooner he leaves the Colony the better. No matter what he does, he will never have the white skin." But if the hatred was a result of misunderstanding, then maybe his letter would spread some appreciation of the richness of Indian culture and the thrifty hard work that made Indian citizens so useful. The case was different, Gandhi conceded, with indentured laborers, imported by the thousands on starvation wages, held under bondage, and lacking anything that can be described as "moral education." In finely honed understatement, so understated it probably passed over the heads of most white readers, Gandhi writes: "I confess my inability to prove that they are more than human." He's saying: Sure, they're unsanitary and degraded, but what can you expect, given the conditions in which you confine them? Maybe the image of Balasundaram, the only indentured laborer he'd met up to that point, flitted through his mind.

The Critic seizes on that argument and turns it around. It was the caste system and not the laws of Natal that condemned Indian laborers to be "a servile race," it said. "The class of Hindoos which swarms in Natal and elsewhere is necessarily of the lowest caste and, under the circumstances, do what they will, they can never raise themselves into positions which command respect, even of their fellows." Gandhi, the newspaper said, should "begin his work at home."

It's Gandhi's authorized biographer and longtime secretary, Pyarelal, who brings this passage to our attention. That may mean he has come upon a clipping Gandhi—a great hoarder and indexer of clippings all through his career—had saved from his South Africa days. Or, since Pyarelal was at Gandhi's side for nearly thirty years, from boyhood on, it may also mean that he has discussed the editorial with the man he called his "Master." Pyarelal is given to flowery hyperbole. But writing of the editorial in *The Critic*, he seems sure of his ground as he describes an epiphany:

> The barbed shaft penetrated to the core of Gandhiji's heart. The truth burst upon his heart with the force of revelation that so long as India allowed a section of her people to be treated as pariahs, so long must her sons be prepared to be treated as pariahs abroad.

The shaft flung by an English editorial writer in Johannesburg would become a fixture in Gandhi's own arsenal of arguments. ("Has not a just Nemesis overtaken us for the crime of untouchability?" he would ask in 1931. "Have we not reaped as we have sown? … We have segregated the 'pariah' and we are in turn segregated in the British colonies … There is no charge that the 'pariah' cannot fling in our faces and which we do not fling in the faces of Englishmen.")

Gandhi would testify that the point made by the editorial writer in Johannesburg was one he regularly had to confront. "During my campaigns in South Africa, the whites used to ask me what right we had to demand better treatment from them when we were guilty of ill-treating the untouchables among us." Whether the point was made routinely or just once, it left a permanent impression.

Ultimately, he did "begin his work at home," if under "his work" we include his Tolstoyan preoccupation with sanitation and the cleaning of latrines. He returned to India in 1896 with the aim of gathering his family and bringing it back to Durban. Soon after he arrived in Rajkot, there was an outbreak of plague in Bombay. Put on a sanitation committee in Rajkot, he made the inspection of

latrines his special task. In the homes of the wealthy—and even in a Hindu temple—they were “dark and stinking and reeking with filth and worms.” He then went into the untouchables’ quarter: “the first visit in my life to such a locality,” he acknowledged. Only one member of the committee was ready to go along. It turned out the untouchables had no latrines. “Latrines are for you big people,” they told him, or so Gandhi recalled. They relieved themselves in the open, but, to his surprise, they kept the hovels where they lived cleaner than the more substantial homes of their social betters. Henceforth for Gandhi, sanitation and hygiene were at or near the top of his reform agenda.

The first overt sign that he has started to connect his passion for latrine cleaning with his convictions about untouchability crops up back in Durban, a year or so later. By his own account, Gandhi turns vicious in an argument with his long-suffering wife, Kasturba, over the emptying of a chamber pot. Here for the first time we find the categorical imperative of “body labor,” derived from Tolstoy, brought into action against the very Indian practice of untouchability, which Gandhi has now learned to abhor on grounds that it undercuts the case he has been making for Indian equality in South Africa. The chamber pot in question had been used by Vincent Lawrence, one of Gandhi’s law clerks, whom he describes as “a Christian, born of *Panchama* parents.” A Panchama is an untouchable. Lawrence had been recently staying as a houseguest in the lawyer’s two-story villa on Beach Grove, steps from Durban Bay. A submissive Hindu wife, in her husband’s portrayal, the illiterate Kasturba, normally called just Ba, had reluctantly learned to share with him the unspeakable duty of cleaning chamber pots. “But to clean those used by one who had been a Panchama seemed to her to be the limit,” says Gandhi. She carries the clerk’s pot but does so under vehement protest, weeping and upbraiding her husband, who responds by demanding sternly that she do her duty without complaining.

“I will not stand this nonsense in my house,” he shouts, according to his own account.

“Keep your house to yourself and let me go,” she replies.

The future Mahatma is now in a fury. "I caught her by the hand, dragged the helpless woman to the gate … and proceeded to open it with the intention of pushing her out." She then sues for peace, and he admits to remorse. Thirty years later he either doesn't remember or chooses not to say who finally emptied the chamber pot.

Here we have a clear prelude to the Calcutta scene on which Naipaul fastened. It shows that Gandhi didn't have to travel back to India to be confronted by the persistence of untouchability. He could bully his own wife on that score but must have known he had yet to convert her. As late as 1938, he erupts in a similar fury upon learning that Ba has entered a temple in Puri that still bars untouchables. His pique becomes an occasion for a fast, and he loses five pounds. What's somewhat unreadable, still, after the first incident in Durban, is the question of his own attitude to the very poor, the Panchamas and other low-caste Indians oppressed by the practice he abhors. His Christian law clerk is too easy an example. He is educated, an upstanding citizen in a starched collar. What about the indentured laborers on the sugar plantations with whom he doesn't mix, for whom he sometimes apologizes, those who fit a white man's stereotype of a "servile race"? Does he care about them in only an abstract, self-regarding sort of way, because he objects to the impression they leave of Indians? Or does he actually care about them?

A few lines in the *Autobiography* suggest that a positive answer came during the Durban years. Gandhi, who developed what he describes as a "passion" for nursing while caring for a dying brother-in-law in Rajkot, started putting in an hour or two most mornings as a volunteer in a small charitable hospital. This brought him, he says, into "close touch with suffering Indians, most of them indentured Tamil, Telugu or North India men." But that's all he says. It's a remark made in passing. We don't know how long this volunteer nursing went on, only that he counted it as good preparation for the Boer War, when the stretcher bearers he led sometimes nursed wounded British troops. These "body snatchers," as they were called by the troops, were themselves mostly indentured laborers. It was the war, rather than the volunteer nursing, that actually gave him

his most conspicuous engagement with the poorest Indians before the final satyagraha campaign in his last year in South Africa.

Of the eleven hundred stretcher bearers nominally under his command, more than eight hundred were indentured, recruits from the sugar plantations on a stipend of one pound a week (double what most of them normally earned). The indentured, Gandhi makes clear, remained "under the charge of English overseers." Technically, they were volunteers, but they'd actually been drafted as a result of an official government request to their employers passed along by the so-called protector of immigrants. Rounded up on the plantations where they were indentured, these "semi-slaves," as Gandhi called them, were then marched off under the command of their usual overseers. It would be an overstatement, but not altogether inaccurate, to describe Gandhi as a convenient front man in this transaction. In a revealing passage, he later acknowledged he had nothing to do with recruiting most of the stretcher bearers: "The Indians were not entitled to the credit for the inclusion of the indentured laborers in the Corps, which should rightly have gone to the planters. But there is no doubt that the free Indians, that is to say the Indian community, deserved credit for the excellent management of the Corps."

Here again he's plainly saying that "free Indians" are members of the community; Indian indentured laborers are not. So while he has told us in the pages of the *Autobiography* that he was now recognized as "a friend," a man who knew their "joys and sorrows," his claim to have "got into closer touch" with the indentured with whom he served on the fringes of Boer War battlefields rings a little hollow. He speaks of no individuals, no incidents, just "a greater awakening amongst them," a realization that "Hindus, Musalmans, Christians, Tamilians, Gujaratis and Sindhis were all Indians and children of the same motherland." The awakening is "amongst *them*." We can almost picture his captive audience nodding while he speaks, even though many of them—the Tamils in particular—have no common language with him. But, as a matter of fact, we're not sure he delivered such speeches at the time. More likely, these words are directed to a different audience, in a different place, at a

later time: convinced Gandhians in India who follow from week to week the installments of his memoirs in his newspaper. Long after the events he relates, Gandhi the Indian politician shapes and reshapes the experience of Gandhi the South African lawyer in order to advance his nationalist agenda and values at home.

Part of that reshaping involves his memory of valor in the face of danger. The original understanding was that the Indians would not be exposed to battlefield fire and risks. But when the British found themselves falling back from a severe reversal, according to Gandhi, their commander paused to reopen the question with the Indians in the most tactful and sensitive way. "General Buller had no intention of forcing us to work under fire if we were not prepared to take such risk," he wrote, "but if we undertook it voluntarily, it would be greatly appreciated. We were only too willing to enter the danger zone." In later years, Gandhi habitually used martial metaphors to summon the valor of his volunteers for nonviolent resistance. Perhaps that's what he's doing in this passage. But the impression he leaves is exaggerated. He never met General Redvers Buller; it's less than clear that the general knew his name. What he's talking about are orders and dispatches issued in the commanding officer's name. And his stretcher bearers never really operated on battlefields. They were at their greatest peril when, briefly, they were asked to carry their burdens over a pontoon bridge and pathways known to be in range of Boer artillery. But the guns remained silent, and no Indians were wounded or killed, even though the early Natal battles to which they were dispatched—Colenso in mid-December 1899 and Spion Kop a month later—quickly became charnel houses for the British, with the total of killed, wounded, and captured amounting to 1,127 in the first case and 1,733 in the second. The fact that not a single member of the ambulance corps fell to a Boer marksman or shell makes clear that their arduous, certainly stressful labors in the "danger zone" couldn't have been all that dangerous.

In describing these events, Gandhi cultivates the manly, modest voice of a leader who doesn't want to boast. On a rereading, there comes to seem a touch of the mock-heroic in that voice as well; his small ambiguities seem more calculated than careless. Yet

biographers make the most of them. Here's Louis Fischer, one of the earliest and still one of the most readable, on the stretcher bearers: "For days they worked under the fire of enemy guns." Pyarelal, the apostle turned biographer, describes Gandhi's role in carrying General Edward Woodgate, the mortally wounded commander at Spion Kop, to the base hospital. "The agony of the General was excruciating during the march and the bearers had to hurry through the heat and dust." Two months were to pass before Woodgate finally died from his wounds. It's possible he was conscious as the stretcher or, more likely, curtained palanquin in which he was evacuated bumped along across the Tugela River valley for a little more than four miles to the base hospital at Spearman's Camp, where General Buller had established his headquarters. Physical details of the evacuation are sparse in Gandhi's account. Whether he accompanied the wounded commander for the whole distance is never entirely clear.

Spion Kop was a strategic hilltop that Woodgate had led his troops to capture in the middle of the night, only to discover in the morning that he'd neglected to secure the highest ground. Their trenches were half-dug when the Boers opened fire. Recklessly standing outside the trenches, Woodgate was shot through the head as soon as the morning mist lifted. He had to be pulled into a trench filled with dead and dying Lancashire fusiliers, then evacuated to "the first dressing station" by a squad of his troops, next hauled down the hillside to a "field hospital" by British stretcher bearers before his body could be handed over to the Indians. The contemporaneous "*Times" History of the War in South Africa* has a detailed narrative of these events, even naming one Lieutenant Stansfield as head of the squad that got Woodgate's body down the hill. The narrative doesn't mention the Indians, nor did a young British correspondent who climbed the hill late in the day after "the long, dragging hours of hell fire" had wound down.

"Streams of wounded met us and obstructed the path," Winston Churchill wrote in his dispatch to the *The Morning Post*. "Corpses lay here and there. Many of the wounds were of a horrible nature." At the base of the hill, "a village of ambulance wagons grew up."

Gandhi and Churchill were seldom again on the same side. They wouldn't actually meet until a brief official encounter in London in 1906, which proved to be their only one. It's intriguing to think they may have crossed paths at Spion Kop. What's especially striking is the complete absence from Gandhi's accounts of the picture Churchill described. Either he saw very little of it, or, somehow, the impression it left soon faded.

Thirty educated Indians from Durban had been designated as "leaders" and given uniforms (paid for by the Muslim traders, none of whom volunteered). Leaders also got tents. The recruits from the ranks of the indentured had to sleep on open ground, often without blankets, at least in the early weeks. Gandhi was leader of the "leaders." It's never entirely clear that the leaders actually carried stretchers. In his several accounts Gandhi leaves the point vague. It's at least as likely that they supervised the work, marching along and setting the pace (though Gandhi's first biographer, Doke, came away from his interviews with the impression that his subject actually hauled stretchers). When it was all over, Gandhi wrote a beseeching letter to the colonial secretary noting that a gift of "the Queen's Chocolate"—held out as more than a gift, a royal beneficence—had just been distributed to British troops in Natal. He asked that the chocolate go as well to the uniformed leaders of the ambulance corps who had served their brief tours without compensation. He made no request on behalf of the much larger number of indentured laborers whom he had not personally recruited. In the event, no Indians got "the Queen's Chocolate." The exchange makes a pathetic coda. The official replied stiffly. The chocolate was intended only for enlisted men and noncommissioned officers, he said; only for whites, he might just as well have said, for that's how Gandhi, scrounging for some small recognition of common citizenship, no matter how symbolic, would have read it. Eight Indians, including Gandhi, got medals. None of the other stretcher bearers got any recognition except a letter from Gandhi himself accompanied by a modest unspecified gift.

Vincent Lawrence, the outcaste clerk whose chamber pot had disgusted Kasturba Gandhi, was among the "leaders" sleeping in

tents, which shows that for Gandhi the great social divide had become a matter of class, not caste. The idea of crossing that divide is presented only retrospectively. At the time he finds it remarkable that the stretcher bearers got along well with British soldiers they encountered, considering that the indentured laborers were "rather uncouth."

The fastidiousness is Gandhi's. He'd not always be this fussy. Much later, in India, after he'd crossed the social divide, Gandhi adopted an untouchable girl as his daughter. She was named Lakshmi. Years after his death, when the writer Ved Mehta sought her out, Lakshmi described Gandhi's obsession with the system of sanitation he established in his ashram: how his followers were trained to pass stool and urine into separate whitewashed buckets in a whitewashed latrine, then cover the stool with earth, eventually emptying the stool buckets in a distant trench, covering what was disposed there with cut grass, and then using the urine to rinse the bucket out. "Bapu had found a use even for urine," Lakshmi said. Ved Mehta doesn't indicate whether this was said with pride, irony, or some measure of each. Maybe she was simply matter-of-fact, in which case she sets an example for anyone trying to understand his thinking on such matters now.

The ashram and the refinements of its sanitation system were still to come when Gandhi reached Calcutta in 1901. But the impulse to experience India as the mass of rural Indians did, more or less the way Tolstoy sought to experience the Russia his former serfs inhabited, was now breaking through. Perhaps the spectacle of South Indian Brahmans shielding themselves from pollution behind wicker walls was what triggered it. The boundaries of caste were obviously more firmly drawn in India, even in the precincts of the Indian National Congress, than they had been in South Africa. There, among the indentured at least, intercaste relationships, sometimes sanctified as marriages, were not uncommon, an adaptation to a shortage of females resulting from the decision of colonial officials to import only two women for every three men. A laborer on a particular estate could hardly be sure of finding a mate from his specific subcaste and region there. He might not even care

about these categories anymore. In a contemporary send-up of the recruiting agents for the distant plantations who operated in the most depressed parts of India, the promise that caste restrictions could be loosened or abandoned in the new land is part of the pitch of a "sweet-tongued talker." In this lightly satiric version, the agent promises high wages, light workloads, and no priests "to call on you to conform to the customs of caste traditions." The laborer will be able to eat, drink, or lie down "with any lass you may love and no one demurs or disputes your rights."

In fact, an 1885 judicial commission looking into conditions on the sugar plantations in Natal found "high-caste men married to low-caste women, Mahommedans to Hindus, men from Northern India to Tamil women from the South." Later, when the contracts of indenture ran out, upwardly mobile ex-indentured Indians who'd elected to stay in South Africa and make a life there soon started to reerect the barriers that had been taken down. In 1909, fifteen years after Gandhi had first come forward as a spokesman for the Indians of Natal, twenty-nine Hindus sent a petition to the protector of immigrants, demanding the immediate dismissal of two Pariahs who'd been appointed as constables in their community. "These two Indians are sent out to execute writs," the petitioners complained, "and at other times to search our houses … What we wish to point out is that if a pariah touches our things or makes an arrest we [are] polluted. They also put on airs."

Today, five or six generations later, marriages between persons of South and North Indian extraction, not to mention Hindus and Muslims, are still likely to provoke family tensions in South Africa. Marital Web sites tend to be less pointed about caste requirements, however, than they still are in India, but there are sometimes veiled allusions. In marital ads in India today, there are occasional explicit references to Dalits, the preferred name for the former untouchables in recent decades. In South Africa today, such up-front, unashamed allusions to untouchability seem to be beyond the scope of marital ads aimed at the Indian minority. Untouchability is never mentioned. Except for a rare academic study, it may not have been acknowledged in print since a single mention a long lifetime ago in

The Star of Johannesburg. The headline on a small article on June 18, 1933, nearly two decades after Gandhi left South Africa, said: UNTOUCHABILITY IN JOHANNESBURG REMOVED. The elders of the Hindu temple in a neighborhood called Melrose, the article said, had decided to admit untouchables to worship there, in response to a fast against the practice that the Mahatma had ended in India three weeks earlier. Without acknowledging it in so many words, the article thus confirmed that there had long been Indians deemed to be untouchable by other Indians in South Africa and that they'd been barred from the temple throughout Gandhi's time there.

Gandhi must have known this. But since it was not in the open, untouchability never had to be named as a particular target of his reforming zeal, much as he'd come to abhor it. Even if he had the impulse to launch a campaign among South African Indians against it, how could he have done so without reinforcing anti-Indian sentiments among whites or splitting his small community? Calcutta at the end of 1901 was a different story. At the Congress session untouchability was blatantly in the open as an unquestioned social practice. Not only did Gandhi see it with a foreign eye; he reacted.

When the Congress ended, he stayed on in Calcutta for a month, lodging for most of that time with his political guru, Gokhale, and calling on prominent figures, including Swami Vivekananda, a Hindu reformer known to his followers as "the Seraphic Master." An overnight sensation at the World's Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in conjunction with the World's Fair in 1893 when he was just thirty, Vivekananda had been hailed as a prodigy, even prophet, in some religious circles in the West. But when the colonial lawyer came to call, he was on his deathbed at the age of thirty-nine and not receiving visitors. There's no way of knowing whether Gandhi wanted to talk about religion or India. For both men, these were never unrelated subjects. Vivekananda's central theme was the liberation of the soul through a hierarchy of yogic disciplines and states of consciousness, starting with some Gandhi would later profess: nonviolence, chastity, and voluntary poverty. He also spoke scathingly about the involuntary poverty to which Indians by the

millions were subjected, saying it was futile to preach religion to the Indian masses "without first trying to remove their poverty and their sufferings." When Gandhi mentioned Vivekananda in speeches later, it was almost always to haul out a favorite quotation about the evil of untouchability. The swami could be down-to-earth as well as mystical. He condemned India's "morbid no-touchism." And, in the phrase Gandhi regularly used, he played on the official designation of India's lowest and poorest as "depressed classes." What they really should be called, Vivekananda said before Gandhi came on the scene, was "the suppressed classes." Their suppression depresses all Indians, Gandhi would always add.

On leaving Calcutta at the end of January 1902, Gandhi resolved to travel alone across India by train on a third-class ticket in order to experience firsthand the crowding, squalor, and filth that were the lot of the poorest travelers. With a rhetorical flourish but no direct reference to anything his Master said then or later, Pyarelal wrote that Gandhi wanted to bring himself "into intimate touch with a wide cross-section of the Indian humanity with whom it was his ambition to merge himself." He bought a blanket, a rough wool coat, a small canvas bag, and a water jug for his expedition.

His resolve to travel third-class from Calcutta may not have become as celebrated as his resistance to being expelled from a first-class compartment on the other side of the Indian Ocean nearly nine years earlier. But it's not far-fetched to see it as a turning point that's equally laden with portents. If he hadn't crossed the social divide in his own mind and heart before, he did so now. It wasn't a political gesture, something done to attract attention, for no one was paying him any except Gokhale, who, after reacting incredulously to the unheard-of notion of an upper-caste lawyer in third class, finally was touched by Gandhi's earnestness, so touched he accompanied his protégé to the station, bringing him some food for the journey and saying, "I should not have come if you had gone first-class but now I had to." That, at least, was the way Gandhi remembered his send-off. Gokhale's admiration for his would-be apprentice, who was only three years younger, grew into a kind of reverence. "A purer, a nobler, a braver and more exalted spirit," he would tell a crowd of

Punjabis in 1909, while Gandhi was still in South Africa, “has never moved on the earth.”

After that trip across India in early 1902, Gandhi made it a rule—it might even be called a fetish—always to travel third-class in India (even when, as sometimes happened in later years, the railway laid on entire cars and even trains for the exclusive use of his entourage, inspiring the poet Sarojini Naidu’s loving jibe: “You will never know how much it costs us to keep that saint, that wonderful old man, in poverty”). On this first outing, he found the noise unbearable, the habits of the passengers disgusting, their language foul. Chewing betel and tobacco, they “converted the whole carriage into a spittoon,” he said. Getting into “intimate touch” with Indian humanity proved to be a nasty experience, but, Pyarelal wrote, “in retrospect, Gandhi even enjoyed it.” Presumably he means that Gandhi got a kick out of the thought that he was doing something completely original for an aspiring Indian politician. In South Africa, he noted, third-class accommodations, used mainly by blacks, were more comfortable with cushioned rather than hard wooden seats and railway officials not as completely indifferent to overcrowding as they were in India. But in South Africa he had mostly traveled first-class until then. Merging with indentured Indians there wasn’t yet part of his program, and they weren’t often on trains; merging with blacks never occurred to him.

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3

AMONG ZULUS

FROM HIS FIRST MONTHS in South Africa, the young Mohandas Gandhi was acutely sensitive to the casual racism that dripped and oozed from the epithet “coolie.” Never could he get over the shock of seeing the word used as a synonym for “Indian” in official documents or courtroom proceedings; making that translation in reverse—defining himself on behalf of the whole community as an Indian rather than as a Hindu, Gujarati, or Bania—was his first nationalist impulse. Years later he could be freshly affronted by the memory of having been called a “coolie lawyer.” Yet it took him more than fifteen years to learn that the word “kaffir” had similar connotations for the people he occasionally recognized as the original owners of the land, the “natives,” as he otherwise called them, or Africans, or blacks.

Gandhi is likely to have heard the term in India. Originally derived from the Arabic word for infidel, it was sometimes used by Muslims there to describe Hindus. Its range of meanings in the speech of white South Africans would have been new to him. In Afrikaans and English, whites used “kaffir” in a variety of compounds and contexts. The Kaffir Wars of the early nineteenth century were fought by white settlers against black tribes who inhabited territory known as Kaffirland or Kaffraria. Kaffir corn was the grain used in their mealie porridge and beer. Anything with the word attached to it was normally deemed to be inferior, backward, or uncivilized. In its most polite usage, as a noun, it signified a primitive being. When it came with a sneer, it amounted to “nigger.” *Kafferboetie* was an abusive term in Afrikaans for anyone

who liked or sympathized with blacks; a fair translation was “nigger lover.” It was something Gandhi was never called.

Here he is in early 1908, reporting on his first experience of prison as an inmate:

> We were then marched off to a prison intended for Kaffirs … We could understand not being classed with the whites, but to be placed on the same level as the Natives seemed too much to put up with. It is indubitably right that Indians should have separate cells. Kaffirs are as a rule uncivilized—the convicts even more so. They are troublesome, very dirty and live almost like animals.

Indians sentenced to hard labor were routinely placed in the same cells with blacks, an experience Gandhi would have himself the next time he went to prison, later that same year.

Much happened in the eight months between these two prison experiences. Initially, he’d urged Indians to refuse to register in the Transvaal as the “Black Act” required; then he’d quixotically struck a deal with Smuts under which, as he understood it, Indians would register “voluntarily” and then, in recognition of their easy compliance, the law requiring them to do so would be repealed. As Gandhi saw it, the removal from the statute books of a racial law defining Indians as second-class citizens had to be welcomed even if little or nothing changed in their actual lives. Similarly, he would later demand changes in a law called the Asiatic Act (enacted in 1907 by the all-white new provincial legislature, as soon as self-rule was restored to the former South African Republic) that barred Indian immigrants to the Transvaal with no history of previous residence there. Gandhi wanted six, just six, highly educated Indians to be admitted annually as permanent residents, even if they had no ties to the territory. By Gandhi’s puzzling, legalistic standard, the admission of half a dozen Indians a year would cancel any suggestion that they were innately unequal and unworthy of citizenship. It could also be interpreted as a sly tactical maneuver designed to establish or, rather, insinuate a precedent or right, which is precisely why the new white government resisted the demand. “The spirit of fanaticism which actuates a portion of the

Indian community" made it inadvisable, Prime Minister Louis Botha explained to a British official, suggesting it would be an invitation to further Gandhian resistance. What the prime minister really meant was that even six Indians a year—one every two months—would be enough to inflame whites, for whom, of course, there had never been numerical quotas or educational standards. It would violate one of their regularly proclaimed demands: that a lid be placed absolutely on the number of Indians. "Resolved," a group calling itself the White League had formally declared as early as 1903, "that all Asiatics should be prevented from coming into the Transvaal." In Botha's view, that was reasonable, not "fanatical."

The registration issue came first; and for the first but not last time, Gandhi's instinct for compromise, for sticking to a principle even if it meant gaining little in practice, confused and upset followers, to the point that he was waylaid and severely beaten on the day he himself went to register by burly Pathans, Muslims from the frontier area of what's now Pakistan who'd been brought over during the war to serve in various noncombatant roles. The Pathans were quick to conclude that Gandhi's supposed deal was a betrayal. The distinction between being fingerprinted voluntarily and being fingerprinted under duress was not apparent to them. Reacting in horror to the assault on their leader, who was now beginning to be recognized as a spiritual pilgrim as well as a lawyer and spokesman, the broader Indian community finally heeded his appeal and registered. But, in a further twist, the "Black Act" wasn't repealed as he'd assured them it would be. A nonplussed Gandhi said he'd been double-crossed. As his grandson and biographer Rajmohan Gandhi observes, he then "for the first time permitted himself the use of racial language," saying Indians would never again "submit to insult from insolent whites." Satyagraha resumed with the aroused mass meeting at the Hamidia Mosque in Johannesburg, where, following Gandhi's example, Transvaal Indians flung their certificates into the iron cauldron, where they were promptly doused with paraffin, set aflame, and incinerated.

So Gandhi had no certificate to present when, in October, he led dozens of similarly undocumented Indians from Natal into the

Transvaal border town of Volksrust, where, refusing to be fingerprinted, he was arrested and sentenced to two months of hard labor. Brought to Johannesburg under guard and wearing the garb of ordinary black convicts (“marked all over with the broad arrow,” in Doke’s contemporaneous description), the well-known lawyer was paraded through the streets from Park Station to the Fort, Johannesburg’s earliest prison, where he was tossed into an overcrowded holding cell in the segregated “native jail,” full of black and other nonwhite criminals. This too is commemorated: the skeleton of the old Park Station, all elegant fretwork and filigree open to the elements under a pitched metal roof, sits today as a monument on a bluff above the rail yards in downtown Johannesburg; the communal holding cell at the Fort has been converted into a permanent Gandhi exhibition where his reedy voice, recorded in an old BBC interview, can be heard complaining a dozen or so times an hour about being belittled as “a coolie lawyer.” The prison, where Nelson Mandela and many other political prisoners were subsequently jailed, has been converted into a museum preserving the memory of past oppression and struggle. Hard by its thick ramparts stand the open, airy chambers of South Africa’s new Constitutional Court, pledged to uphold a legal order guaranteeing equal rights for all South Africa’s peoples: an imaginative juxtaposition intended as an act of architectural restitution and rebalancing, meant to enshrine, not just symbolize, a living ideal.

All that—the dedication of the new court building, the renaming of the prison precincts as Constitution Hill—came ninety-six years after Gandhi’s first imprisonment there in 1908. His experience, recounted to Doke and subsequently written up in *Indian Opinion*, more than confirmed his earlier fears. The future Mahatma was mocked and taunted by a black inmate, then by a Chinese one, who finally turned away, going to “a Native lying in bed,” where “the two exchanged obscene jokes, uncovering one another’s genitals.” Gandhi, who tells us that both men were murderers, admits to having felt uneasy and finding it hard to fall asleep for a while; the Baptist preacher Doke, with whom he spoke the next day, is

instantly horror-struck. “This refined Indian gentleman was obliged to keep himself awake all night, to resist possible assaults upon himself, such as he saw perpetrated around him,” Doke writes. “That night can never be forgotten.” The man who didn’t have the experience is more vivid in this instance than the one who did, probably, we may surmise, because of the immediacy, the sense of looming violation, with which the badly shaken prisoner related it to him as compared to the cool indifference Gandhi attempted to affect two months later, when he got around to writing about that evening himself.

On that second day in the holding cell at the Fort, as Gandhi was starting to use a prison latrine, so he later wrote, “a strong, heavily built, fearful-looking Native” demanded that Gandhi step aside so he could go first. “I said I would leave very soon. Instantly he lifted me up in his arms and threw me out.” He was not injured, Gandhi tells us, “but one or two Indian prisoners who saw what happened started weeping,” out of shame over their inability to defend their leader. “They felt helpless and miserable,” he says. Here again Gandhi doesn’t say how he felt. It was the fourth assault on his person in South Africa, the first by a black. Yet he writes about it only once, doesn’t dwell on it even then. He’s not shocked, he leads us to infer, not even surprised.

Writing after the passage of two months, he draws a conclusion that’s not about jail life. It’s about ordinary relations between Indians and the black majority. “We may entertain no aversion to Natives,” he says, “but we cannot ignore the fact that there is no common ground between them and us in the daily affairs of life.” This time he doesn’t say “kaffirs.” But the sentiment isn’t conspicuously different from what a refined Brahman in that era—or, for that matter, most Banias—might have voiced about untouchables. Is that, as some Indian scholars suggested to me, really how Gandhi saw Africans, as people who should be deemed untouchable? In strict interpretation of caste, any non-Hindu or foreigner, white or black, is an outcaste by definition, unsuitable as a dining companion, or for partnering of a more intimate kind. Then and later, other South African Hindus found it natural to apply the

strictures of untouchability to black servants, not allowing them to have contact with their food or dishes or persons. Gandhi himself had for years eaten with non-Indian vegetarians, all whites. At this stage in his life, he was actually living with a non-Indian, a Jewish architect of Lithuanian background by way of East Prussia named Hermann Kallenbach. So when we think it through, the question becomes this: whether, on account of race, he put hard-living, uneducated, meat-eating Africans in a separate category of humans from that of hard-living, uneducated, meat-eating Indian "coolies," or the third-class passengers whose behavior appalled him on Indian trains; in other words, whether for him, race was a defining characteristic or, finally, as incidental as caste.

It's in this context that we must view Gandhi's early reflections on jail life from the same year. I've not highlighted them because they're especially shocking or revealing of his feelings about race. There are passages sprinkled among Gandhi's writings of earlier years in South Africa that sound—in, as well as out of, context—even more condescending to Africans, sound, frankly, racist. As early as 1894, in an open letter to the Natal legislature, he complained that "the Indian is being dragged down to the position of the raw Kaffir." Two years later he was still going on about "the raw Kaffir, whose occupation is hunting and whose sole ambition is to collect a number of cattle to buy a wife, and then pass his life in indolence and nakedness." (The very proper young lawyer Gandhi then was plainly had no premonition of the day he'd teasingly vow to be "as naked as possible" himself.) In 1904, during an outbreak of plague in Johannesburg, he asks the official medical officer why the so-called Indian location—the area where the city's Indians were mostly required to live—had been "chosen for dumping down all the Kaffirs of the town." Hammering his point further, he declares what's only obvious: "About the mixing of the Kaffirs with the Indians, I must confess I feel most strongly." And there's Gandhi the eager racial theorist who had written a couple of months earlier: "If there is one thing the Indian cherishes more than any other, it is purity of type." And a couple of months before that: "We believe as much in the purity of races as we think they [the whites] do."

All that can be said by way of extenuation about such passages is that they were addressed to whites. If we want to give him any benefit of the doubt, we might say that the eager-to-please advocate was maybe playing to his audience, seeking to advance his argument that so-called British Indians could safely be acknowledged as cultural and political equals of whites, worthy citizens bound to them by their common imperial ties—that equality of sorts for Indians would not, in the near or far future, undermine the dominance of whites. But he was up against the color bar. For many whites, color was all that mattered; in this view, Indians had to be classed first and foremost as "non-white" if white dominance was to be maintained as the basic premise of social order. To concede that there could be "British Indians"—Indians who met standards that could be acknowledged as "civilized"—was a step away from admitting the unthinkable, the possibility of "British" or "civilized" Africans. It was an attitude that had riled Gandhi practically from the time he set foot in the country. In his fifth month in South Africa he clipped and saved a snatch of racist verse from a humor column in a Transvaal newspaper:

> Oh, say have you seen
> On our market so clean
> Where the greens are exposed to the view,
> A thing black and lean,
> And a long way from clean,
> Which they call the accursed Hindoo.

Insisting that Indians were British was one way of resisting the easy classification that blackness suggested to colonial minds, and not just colonial minds but Indian minds as well, as Gandhi himself, having returned to India, acknowledged years later in these reflections on race:

> A fair complexion and a pointed nose represent our ideal of beauty. If we discard this superstition for a moment, we feel that the Creator did not spare Himself in

> fashioning the Zulu to perfection … It is a law of nature that the skin of races living near the equator should be black. And if we believe there must be beauty in everything fashioned by nature … we in India would be free from the improper sense of shame and dislike which we feel for our own complexion if it is anything but fair.

Back now to those 1908 reflections on race and the mixing of races that jail inspired in Gandhi's own mind: it's not their content but the timing that makes them stand out, for they happen to frame the single most farsighted and enlightened thing Gandhi would say on the subject during his many years in Africa. In May 1908—scarcely four months after his first imprisonment ended, a little more than four months before his second began—the recently sprung barrister was asked to argue the negative side in a formal debate before the YMCA in Johannesburg. The issue was tailor-made: "Are Asiatic and Colored races a menace to the Empire?"

"In a well-ordered society," Gandhi begins, "industrious and intelligent men can never be a menace." Immediately he makes it plain that he's speaking of Africans as well as Indians (and the mixed-race people known in South Africa as Coloreds). "We can hardly think of South Africa without the African races … South Africa would probably be a howling wilderness without the Africans," he says. The ugly racial stereotype of the "raw Kaffir" has been discarded. Africans are described as being among "the world's learners." Nothing special has to be done for them, "able-bodied and intelligent" as they are. But "they are entitled to justice" and what he calls "a fair field." He makes the same claim for indentured Indians, brought to the country as "semi-slaves." It's not a question of political rights, he carefully insists. It's a question of being able to own land, live and trade where they want, move freely from province to province, without regard to color, so they are no longer barred from having "their being on God's earth in South Africa with any degree of freedom, self-respect and manliness." Implicitly, for the first time, indentured Indians and Africans coming into the colonial labor market are put on the same plane.

So far what's new here is that the debater has bracketed Africans with Indians. Otherwise it's his standard trope, his appeal for equality of opportunity for his people. But as he starts to wrap up, he takes a further step. He has always said it's not a question of political rights, but now he breaks out of that straitjacket. On this one occasion, he allows himself to talk about "free institutions" and "self-government" and the duty of the British to lift "subject races" to "equality with themselves." Surprisingly, in this imperial context, he finds a vision of something like "the rainbow nation" the multiracial South Africa of today aspires, or at least claims, to be:

> 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 civilization that perhaps the world has not yet seen? There are differences and misunderstandings, but I do believe, in the words of the sacred hymn, "We shall know each other better when the mists have rolled away."

How do we reconcile these two contrasting Gandhis, each circa 1908 in South Africa—this debater and visionary with the narrow racial pleader who, earlier and afterward that same year, spoke in such a different vein? Can one be seen as more real or enduring than the other? Put another way, can what he says to a white audience be taken as more genuine than what he says to Indians? The answer is so far from being obvious that the only possible conclusion seems to be that Gandhi's views on race—on blacks in particular—were now contradictory and unsettled. Considering what they had been, this has to be seen as an advance.

If Gandhi was in flux, so was the country. An all-white national convention was about to set a constitutional course. Standing apart with their list of grievances against the Transvaal, Indians were in no position to influence the debate. In fact, there was no national Indian organization. Gandhi himself was all that connected the Transvaal British Indian Association to the Natal Indian Congress. Less and less did they seem like different faces of a single movement. (It wasn't till 1923, nine years after Gandhi left South Africa, that a national Indian organization finally came into being,

calling itself the South African Indian Congress; by then, the organizations he led were dormant.)

Even the courageous band of Transvaal protesters courting arrest—his “self-suffering” satyagrahis—were sometimes less united than he might have wished. This became evident, he later acknowledged, in the tight quarters of a jail. “Indians of all communities and castes lived together in the jail, which gave us an opportunity to observe how backward we are in the matter of self-government.” Some Hindus refused to eat food prepared by Muslims or fellow prisoners of lower caste. One satyagrahi objected to sleeping near another from the scavenger subcaste; he was afraid his own caste would punish him, perhaps even brand him as outcaste if it learned of his propinquity to an untouchable. Speaking about caste in a specifically South African context for the first time, Gandhi denounced “these hypocritical distinctions of high and low” and the “caste tyranny” that lay behind them. So both forms of government—“self-government” (meaning how Indians treated Indians) and national government for South Africa (meaning whites ruling everyone else)—were on his mind when he spoke to the YMCA in Johannesburg between his first two jail experiences. At its heart, each held for him the issue of equality. In that sense, he now saw the issue through different ends of one telescope. On this occasion at least, in taking the long view, Gandhi managed to include Africans in his vision of “a civilization that perhaps the world has not yet seen.”

But outside prison walls, who were the Africans in his life? What, after fifteen years in the country, did he actually know of them? The historical record has remarkably little to say on that score. There is a photograph taken in early 1910 of a dapper, neatly groomed Gandhi, in shirtsleeves and tie, sleeves rolled up, casually sitting on a hillside, where a big tent has been pitched, with a few of the pioneers who would form the nucleus of his nascent utopian community. Standing off to the side, very much apart, are two black men. Possibly these are “Native Isaac” and “Native Jacob,” whose monthly wages of one pound each are detailed in the diary of Gandhi’s friend and fellow settler Hermann Kallenbach, the

architect who purchased the land for what became known as Tolstoy Farm and later functioned as its treasurer. Gandhi would propose, in a set of rules drafted for this new commune and boot camp for nonviolent resisters, that it employ no servants. "It is understood that the ideal is not to employ native labor and not to use machinery," he'd written. But Isaac and Jacob remained on Kallenbach's books until the end of its brief life of two and a half years. Gandhi himself later came close to portraying these low-paid farmhands as noble savages in a paean to the life of physical labor in the fields of Tolstoy Farm: "I regard the Kaffirs, with whom I constantly work these days, as superior to us. What they do in their ignorance we have to do knowingly." (Rajmohan Gandhi, his grandson, suggests this may have been his last use of the epithet "kaffir.")

On the building site of Kallenbach's new home (photo credit i3.1)

Other Africans from the neighborhood may have visited Tolstoy Farm—as Zulus living near the Phoenix Settlement visited there—

but no such visitors, nor the seemingly indispensable Isaac and Jacob, were invited into the mixed group of Indians and whites that made up the company of Gandhian recruits. Their leader couldn't have passed many days in his two decades in Africa without seeing ordinary Africans, legions of them. But the question of how much contact he had with them, like the question posed earlier of how much actual contact he had with indentured Indians toiling on the plantations and in the mines, finds no ready answer. It can only be inferred from what he wrote. He had a fair amount to say about indentured Indians—about their miserable circumstances, about caste—before he finally became involved with them. Few and far between were his reflections on Africans. Calling him ethnocentric doesn't cover the case. He had plenty to say to—and about—whites.

In the several thousand pages Gandhi wrote in South Africa, or later about South Africa, the names of only three Africans are mentioned. Of the three, he acknowledges having met only one. And when it comes to that one African, what documentary evidence there is covers only two meetings with Gandhi—seven years apart—leaving to our imaginations the question of whether they ever met again.

His name was John Langalibalele Dube. A Zulu aristocrat descended from Zulu chiefs, he'd been raised at the American Zulu Mission station in Inanda, where his father, James Dube, had become one of the first converts and, eventually, a pastor as well as a prosperous farmer, so prosperous that he had thirty gold sovereigns to invest in sending his son off in the company of an American missionary to Oberlin College in Ohio. John Dube thus took a cultural leap as long as the one Gandhi managed when he crossed the black water to be trained as a lawyer in London. Later Dube returned to America to be ordained in Brooklyn as a Congregational minister and raise funds for an industrial school modeled on Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute. Dube called Washington, to whom he made a pilgrimage in 1897, "my patron saint … my guiding star."

In 1900 he founded an organization called the Natal Native Congress, in hopes of giving a voice to Zulus on issues of land, labor, and rights where the traditional chiefs seemed unprepared to engage white authorities. The new group's name strongly suggested that it found its model in Gandhi's own Natal Indian Congress. Twelve years later, John Dube became the first president—president-general he was called—of the South African Native National Congress, which later simplified its nomenclature, calling itself the African National Congress, the name under which it finally took power in 1994 after the country's first experience of nonracial universal suffrage. In homage to John Dube's standing as a founding father, Nelson Mandela made a point of casting his own first vote in Inanda at Dube's school, the Ohlange Institute. The place has since been known as First Vote.

So if Gandhi was to know only one African of his own generation, John Dube, just two years his junior, was probably the one to know. That is exactly what Gandhi himself concluded after hearing Dube speak in 1905 at the home of a white planter and civic leader named Marshall Campbell. "This Mr. Dubey [*sic*] is a Negro of whom one should know," he wrote in *Indian Opinion*. The article had an unfortunate headline: THE KAFFIRS OF NATAL. And Gandhi called Dube the leader of "educated Kaffirs," which demonstrates that for him the word applied to all blacks, including Congregational ministers and headmasters, not merely unlettered tribal Africans. Still, his summary of the speaker's remarks—more than likely the first speech he'd ever heard by an educated African and quite possibly the last—was respectful and sympathetic:

> They worked hard and without them the whites could not carry on for a moment. They made loyal subjects, and Natal was the land of their birth. For them there was no country other than South Africa; and to deprive them of their rights over lands, etc., was like banishing them from their home.

What's striking here is that Gandhi had to travel the several miles to the Campbell residence in Mount Edgecombe to meet Dube. The two men were near neighbors; the Ohlange Institute in Inanda was

(and is) less than a mile from the Phoenix Settlement, its buildings visible to this day from the veranda of Gandhi's cottage. A brisk walker like Gandhi could have crossed the narrow valley that separated them in less than half an hour.

Only one such visit surfaces in the written record. Just as disappointing is the absolute lack of any correspondence, even a brief note, indicating they kept in touch or were used to addressing one another with familiarity. Gandhi was absent from Phoenix much more than he was present there in the eight years following its founding; and when he was there, often for a matter only of days, his routine was to focus on the settlers, going door-to-door to visit families, holding prayer meetings, gathering the children around him. And there was always *Indian Opinion* with its weekly demand for more copy from its proprietor and guiding light. Even so, it's surprising how little turns up linking him to his Zulu neighbor. We know that Gopal Krishna Gokhale, the Indian leader who toured South Africa in Gandhi's company in 1912, was taken to Dube's school during a stay of less than forty-eight hours at Phoenix. But only in Dube's Zulu-language newspaper, *Ilanga lase Natal* (Sun of Natal) do we find evidence that Gandhi accompanied him. We know also that *Ilanga* was printed for a brief time on the hand-operated press at the Phoenix Settlement; that the Ohlange Institute came into being just three years before Gandhi's Phoenix; and that *Indian Opinion* was just months older than *Ilanga*. But tantalizing as these parallels are, they continue to run on in parallel without yielding any firm evidence of a crossing of paths by Gandhi and John Dube beyond their somewhat formal encounters at the white plantation owner's spacious residence and years later, on the occasion of the Gokhale visit.

There's another Gandhi who later became a regular visitor at the Ohlange Institute, stopping by now and then on his daily walks. That Gandhi also got to know Isaiah Shembe, called by his followers the Prophet. In 1911 the Prophet founded the Nazareth Church—the largest movement among Zulu Christians, with more than two million adherents today—at Ekuphakameni, which lies between Inanda and Phoenix. (The Nazareth Church was called independent,

meaning it was unaffiliated to any white denomination.) Shembe had a bigger impact on South Africa, it can be argued, than the founder of the Phoenix Settlement ever had. The other Gandhi, the one who took the trouble to cultivate the acquaintance of these two significant African leaders, was Manilal, the mainstay of Phoenix after his father returned to India. When John Dube died in 1946 at seventy-five, the headline on his obituary in *Indian Opinion* read A GREAT ZULU DEAD. "To us at the Phoenix Settlement from the days of Mahatma Gandhi," the obituary said, "he has been a kindly neighbor."

Sparse as this record is, the names Gandhi, Dube, and Shembe are hallowed today as a kind of Inanda troika, if not trinity, by the publicists and popular historians responsible for weaving a teachable heritage for the new South Africa out of the disparate movements that struggled into existence under oppressive white rule. The fact that three leaders of such consequence emerged in rural Natal in the same decade, within an area of less than two square miles, is too resonant with possibilities to be overlooked. It has to be more than a coincidence. And so we find the man who became the new South Africa's third president elected by universal franchise, Jacob Zuma, celebrating "the solidarity between the Indians and Africans" that came into being in Inanda. "What is also remarkable about the history of the Indo-African community in this area is the link that existed between three great men: Gandhi, John Langalibalele Dube and the prophet Isaiah Shembe of the Nazareth Church." A tourist brochure urges visitors to follow the "Inanda Heritage Route" from Gandhi's settlement to the Dube school and finally to Shembe's church. ("Inanda where there is more history per square centimeter than anywhere in South Africa!" the brochure gushes, making no allusion to the sad, sometimes alarming state of what might otherwise be seen as a hard-pressed rural slum, except for the telltale caution that it not be visited without "a guide who knows the area well.")

On my last visit to Inanda, banners stamped with Dube's face were streaming from lampposts on the Kwa Mashu Highway, which

cuts through the district, alternating with lampposts bearing Gandhi banners. Such sanctification of their imagined alliance rests on little more than the political convenience of the moment and a wispy oral tradition. Lulu Dube, the last surviving child of the Zulu patriarch, grew up with the notion that her father kept in touch with Gandhi. "In fact, they were friends, they were neighbors and their mission was one," she said in a chat on the veranda of Dube's house, which was declared a national monument at the time of the first democratic election, then left to rot (to the point that eighty-year-old Lulu, fearful of a roof collapse, had moved into a trailer nearby). Born sixteen years after Gandhi left the country, she's at best a link in a chain, not a witness. Ela Gandhi, keeper of her grandfather's flame in Durban as head of the Gandhi Trust, inherited a similar impression. She was raised at Phoenix but decades after her grandfather departed. She was only eight when he was killed. A member of the African National Congress, she's aware that, politically and historically, this is treacherous ground, so she chooses her words with care. "They were each concerned with dignity, particularly the dignity of their own people," she said of the two men on the banners.

What the real history, as opposed to heritage mythmaking, seems to disclose is a deliberate distancing of each other by Gandhi and John Dube, a recognition, on rare occasions, that they might have common interests but a determination to pursue them separately. If there could ever have been a possibility of their making common cause, it may well have been stalled for a generation by Gandhi's calculated reaction to a spasm of Zulu resistance in 1906—the year after they met—that was instantly characterized as a "rebellion" and brutally suppressed by Natal's white settlers and colonial authorities.

The immediate provocation for the rising was a new head tax on "natives," called a poll tax, and the severe penalties imposed on those who failed to pay up promptly. The broader provocation was a sense among Zulus—those still bound by tradition and those

adapting to imported ways and faiths—that they were losing what was left of their land and autonomy. Numbers as much as race always had to be factored into these South African conflicts. Altogether the Zulus of Natal outnumbered the whites by about ten to one in that era (outnumbered the whites and Indians combined by about five to one). Gandhi's instant reflex, as at the time of the Anglo-Boer War seven years earlier, had been to side with English-speaking whites who identified themselves with British authority in their struggle with Afrikaans-speaking whites who resisted it. Here again he offered to raise a corps of stretcher bearers—another gesture of Indian fealty to the empire, which in his view was the ultimate guarantor of Indian rights, however circumscribed they proved in practice. It was a line of reasoning few Zulus were likely to appreciate.

The story isn't a simple one. Gandhi and Dube, each in his own way, were men of divided loyalties at the time of what came to be known as the Bhambatha Rebellion. Martial law was declared by trigger-happy colonial whites confronting Zulus armed mainly with assegais, or spears, before anything like a rebellion got under way. The spark was a face-off in early February between a group of protesting Zulu artisans from a small independent church and a police detachment sent to arrest its leaders. One of the policemen pulled a revolver, spears were thrown, and before the smoke cleared, two of the officers had been killed. The protesters were then rounded up and twelve of them sentenced to death. The British cabinet tried at first to have the executions postponed, but the condemned men were lined up at the edge of freshly dug graves and shot on April 2. A few days later, a chief named Bhambatha, who was being sought for refusal to pay the tax, took to the deepest, thorniest bush in the hills of Zululand with some 150 warriors. A thousand troops were sent in hot pursuit, homesteads were raked with machine-gun fire, shelled, and then burned. More warriors took to the hills. Against this background, under the leadership of the man who would one day be called a mahatma, the Indian community offered its support to the governing whites in the fight against the so-called rebels. The least temperate of his many

justifications for this stand is worth quoting at length, for it's revealing on several levels:

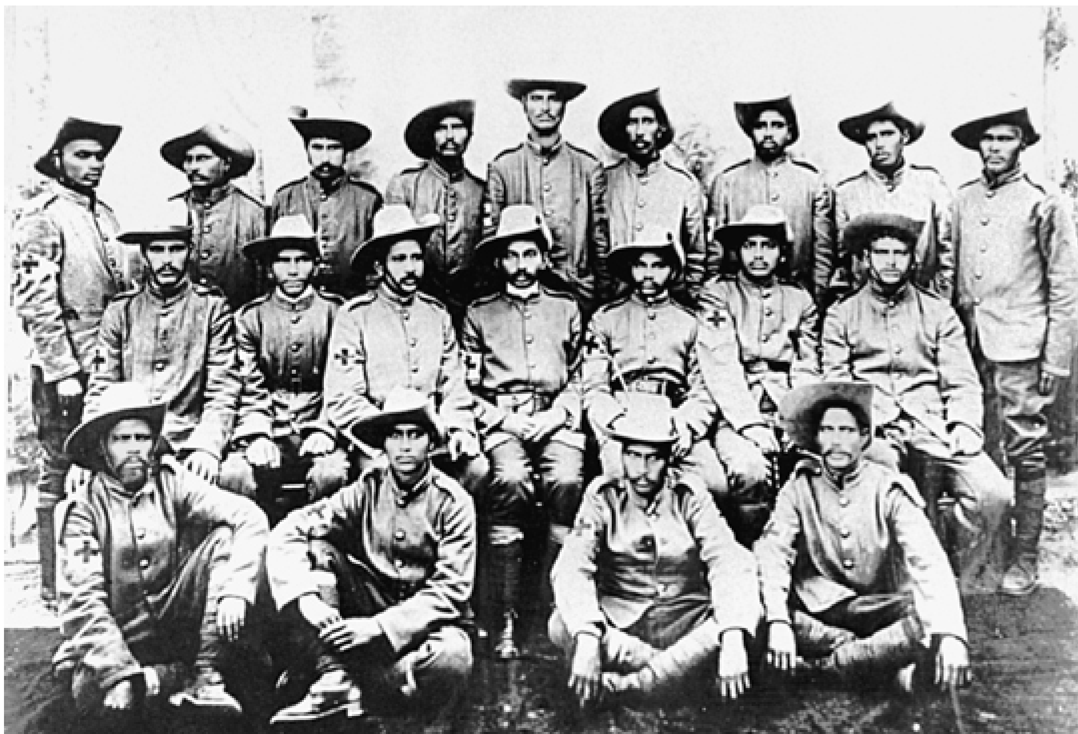
> For the Indian community, going to the battlefield should be an easy matter; for, whether Muslim or Hindu, we are men with profound faith in God … We are not overcome by fear when hundreds of thousands die of famine or plague in our country. What is more, when we are told our duty, we continue to be indifferent, keep our houses dirty, lie hugging our hoarded wealth. Thus, we live a wretched life, acquiescing in a long, tormented process ending in death. Why then should we fear the death that may overtake us on the battlefield? We have much to learn from what the whites are doing in Natal. There is hardly any family from which someone has not gone to fight the Kaffir rebels.

Obviously, what we have here is a rant. Gandhi's irony is out of control; his inclination to scold undermines his desire to persuade. He has lost the thread of his argument about duty and citizenship. What comes across is revulsion, barely contained anger over the cultural inertia of his own community, its resistance to the social code he hopes to inculcate. If it offers nothing else, he seems to feel, the battlefield promises discipline.

The war posed a different set of conflicts for John Dube, the Congregational minister seeking to arm young Zulus not with spears but with the Protestant work ethic and basic skills that could win them a foothold in a trading economy. The rebels were, on the other hand, his people, and in the final stages of the conflict it was the chiefdom from which he descended that was attacked. The Christian in Dube, not to mention the pragmatist, could not endorse the rising, but the mercilessness of the repression shook his faith in the chances for racial peace. Cautiously, in the columns of his newspaper, he questioned the heavy-handedness of the whites. Soon he was summoned to appear before the governor and warned that the martial law regulations applied to him and his paper. Somewhat chastened, he later wrote that the grievances of the rebels were real but "at a time like this we should all refrain from discussing them."

What was said to be the severed head of Chief Bhambatha had been displayed and the rebellion all but crushed by June 22, when

Gandhi finally left Durban for the struggle for which he'd been beating the drums in the columns of *Indian Opinion* for two months. This time the community had managed to restrain its enthusiasm for what he proposed as a patriotic duty and opportunity. Gandhi had the rank of sergeant major but a much smaller band of stretcher bearers under his nominal command than he'd had at the start of the Anglo-Boer War: nineteen as opposed to eleven hundred in the earlier conflict; of the nineteen, thirteen were former indentured laborers; this time just four of twenty, counting Gandhi himself, could be classed as "educated." In the next few weeks, in the sporadic final clashes of the conflict, the colonial troops were told to take no prisoners. What Gandhi and his men got to witness were the consequences of the mopping up, the worst part of the repression. At this stage of the conflict, there were few white wounded. Mostly the Indians ended up treating Zulu prisoners with terrible suppurating lacerations, not warriors with bullet wounds, but villagers who'd been flogged beyond submission.



Sergeant Major Gandhi with stretcher bearers, 1906 (photo credit i3.2)

Gandhi later wrote that the suffering Zulus, many of whom had been untreated for days, were grateful for the ministrations of the Indians, and maybe that was so. White medics wouldn't touch them. But back at Phoenix, roughly forty miles from these scenes, Gandhi's relatives and followers were seized by the fear that the Zulus in their neighborhood would rise against them in retaliation for the choice he'd made. He'd deposited Kasturba and two of his four sons there before leaving for the so-called front. "I do not remember other things but that atmosphere of fear is very vivid in my mind," Prabhudas Gandhi, a cousin who was a youngster at the time, would later write. "Today when I read about the Zulu people's rebellion, the anxious face of Kasturba comes before my eyes." No reprisals materialized, but signs of Zulu resentment over Gandhi's decision to side with the whites were not lacking. Africans would not forget, said an article reprinted in another Zulu newspaper, *Izwi Labantu*, "that Indians had volunteered to serve with the English savages in Natal who massacred thousands of Zulus in order to steal their land." That article was by an American. *Izwi* offered no comment of its own. But it did say: "The countrymen of Gandhi … are extremely self-centered, selfish and alien in feeling and outlook." In London, an exile Indian publication called *The Indian Sociologist*, which tacitly supported terrorist violence in the struggle for Indian freedom, found Gandhi's readiness to join up with the whites at the time of the Zulu uprising "disgusting."

As the Zulu paper implied, Gandhi's own outlook may have initially been alien and, in that sense, self-centered. But he was profoundly moved by the evidence of white brutality and Zulu suffering that he witnessed. Here again is Joseph Doke, his Baptist hagiographer: "Mr. Gandhi speaks with great reserve of this experience. What he saw he will never divulge … It was almost intolerable for him to be so closely in touch with this expedition. At times, he doubted whether his position was right." The biographer seems to hint unwittingly at taboos of untouchability that Sergeant Major Gandhi's small band had to overcome. "It was no trifle," he writes, for these Indians "to become voluntary nurses to men not yet emerged from the most degraded state." Eventually, Gandhi did

divulge what he saw—in his *Autobiography*, composed two decades after the event, and in conversations in his last years with his inner circle. "My heart was with the Zulus," he then said. As late as 1943, during his final imprisonment, Sushila Nayar tells us, he was still recounting "the atrocities committed on the Zulus."

"What has Hitler done worse than that?" he asked Nayar, a physician who was attending his dying wife and himself. Gandhi, who'd tried writing to Hitler on the eve of world war in an attempt to soften his heart, never quite realized, or at least acknowledged, that the führer represented a destructive force beyond anything he'd experienced.

By his own account, the horror over what he'd seen in Natal and the soul-searching over his unpopular decision to side with the whites produced the major turning point of his life spiritually. Gandhi drew a straight line from his battlefield reflections to his vow of perfect celibacy—necessary, he felt, to clear the way for a life of service and voluntary poverty—and from that vow to the one he offered at the Empire Theater in Johannesburg on September 11, 1906. All this happened in little more than two months: marching off to support the whites, swearing off sex for the rest of his life, and following up that life-transforming promise to himself with his vow of nonviolent resistance to the Transvaal "Black Act," which then became his first exercise of the strategy later called satyagraha. Gandhi's testimony of cause and effect is irrefutable as far as it goes, but, as Erik Erikson noted, it doesn't carry us to anything approaching a full understanding. "These themes, were they to be clarified," the psychoanalyst wrote, "might more directly connect the two decisions of avoiding both sexual intercourse and killing. For it would seem that the experience of witnessing the outrages perpetrated on black bodies by white he-men aroused in Gandhi both a deeper identification with the maltreated, and a stronger aversion against all male sadism—including such sexual sadism as he had probably felt from childhood on to be part of all exploitation of women by men."

What was not aroused in Gandhi in the immediate aftermath of the Bhambatha Rebellion—not, at least, as far as we can discern—

was a deepened curiosity about black Africans or sympathy for them that reached further than pity. Two years later, when he started writing about his first experience of jail, they were still “kaffirs,” too uncivilized and dirty to be incarcerated with Indians, let alone to be seen as potential allies. In part, this may have been because of a change in context: leaving Natal and returning to his base in Johannesburg, having left his family behind at Phoenix, Gandhi also left behind whatever opportunities he might still have had to build bridges and, ultimately, deepen contacts with a Zulu leader like John Dube who spoke for a small Christianized, landowning black elite, sometimes called in the language of urban Zulus the *amarespectables*.

In part, it was also due to Gandhi’s continued reluctance to let go of the idea that his so-called British Indians were naturally the allies of whites, just another kind of settler. If indentured Indian “coolies” were still seen, in his view, as too ill-bred, unlettered, and backward to be citizens, then what could he do about “kaffirs” except put them out of mind? Gandhi kept his distance and apparently found it easy to do so. A tacit alliance between blacks and Indians was the opposite of what he’d all along been seeking. If he thought about it at all, he would have known that such an alliance could only deepen white racial hysteria. He must have understood, too, that it would not have been an easy sell in his own community. Much later he knit together a rationalization out of such disparate reflections. Asked long after he returned to India by a visiting delegation of black Americans whether he’d ever made common cause with blacks during his time in South Africa, Gandhi replied, implying he had to resist the impulse: “No, I purposely did not invite them. It would have endangered their cause.” A few years later, a quarter of a century after he returned home, he told a black South African, “Yours is a far bigger issue.”

This Gandhi, the full-blown Mahatma of 1939, is doing some retrospective tidying up. In 1907, the Gandhi who actually resided in South Africa, the barrister and community leader, sent a letter to Sir Henry McCallum, the colonial governor who had imposed martial law on the restive Zulus the previous year. The letter is

written a year after Gandhi's vows. The doctrine of nonviolent resistance has now been proclaimed, but "the many-sided Gandhi," as Naipaul called him, is arguing that the time had come to give Indians an opportunity for service in the colonial militia, a force whose most obvious function—as he had to know, given his experience the previous year—was to keep Zulu power in check.

"I venture to trust," the special pleader pleads, "that as the work done by the Corps had proved satisfactory, the Indian community will be found some scope in the Natal Militia. If such a thing is done, I think it will be mutually advantageous and it will bind the Indians, who are already a part of the body politic in Natal, closer to the Colony."

Gandhi knew in his heart that he'd taken the wrong side at the time of the rebellion, but he was still ready to claim a dividend from the white authorities for services rendered, just as he'd sought "the Queen's Chocolate" as a reward for his service with the "body snatchers" on a couple of the early battlefields of the Anglo-Boer War.

The strain on the Reverend John Dube, who imbibed a strategy of accommodation from his exemplar Booker T. Washington, was even more severe. In the aftermath of the rebellion, the Oberlin graduate and Congregational minister positioned himself as a defender and supporter of the Zulu king, Dinuzulu, who had been put on trial for high treason. He had spoken of the need to raise "the native people out of the slough of ignorance, idleness, poverty and superstition." In later years, at a ceremony honoring white missionaries, he sounded almost fawning in his expression of a gratitude that had to be genuine, for he was a missionary himself. "Who was it," he asked his white audience, "who taught us the benefits and decency of wearing clothes? Who was it who taught us that every disease is not caused by witchcraft … that a message can be transmitted by writing on a piece of paper?" But now in the aftermath of the 1906 conflict, he showed that he was prepared to exempt some tribal traditions from such broadsides. Dube remained close to the Zulu royal house and thus immersed in ethnic politics for the rest of his life. He also spoke for a broader nationalism as the first leader of the

movement that became the African National Congress. But the straddle between these two kinds of politics—urban–based mass politics and aristocratic tribal politics—became increasingly difficult. In 1917, the first Congress president was eased out. The accommodationist in him had expressed a willingness to accept the principle of racial separation that the white government was pushing in exchange for an expansion of the so-called native reserves. To secure a bigger Zululand, he was prepared to bow reluctantly to a law that reserved most of Natal for whites. This was too much for younger Africans rising in the movement.

The law was the Natives Land Act, passed in 1913 by the white parliament, just three years after white hegemony had been formally built into the new Union of South Africa. A huge, blatant land grab, the law made it illegal for blacks to own land in 92 percent of the entire country. Dube was eloquent in denouncing it. So, strikingly, was Gandhi, in what was really his first serious engagement with any measure weighing on Africans. “Every other question, not excluding the Indian question, pales into insignificance before the great Native question,” he now wrote in *Indian Opinion*. “This land is theirs by birth and this Act of confiscation—for such it is—is likely to give rise to serious consequences unless the Government take care.” The date was August 30, 1913. Gandhi was already in his last year in the country when he wrote those words. Not only that, he was already laying the strategy for his last, most radical campaign there, his first on behalf of indentured laborers. Suddenly, it seems, he is less parochial, able for the moment, at least on paper, to take something approaching a national view.

It’s tempting to try to imagine what the two neighbors, each a religiously inclined political leader—a Congregationalist Zulu and a neo-Christian Hindu—might have had to say to each other had they met to exchange views at this time. It’s not impossible that there was such an encounter, but, more likely, each was aware at a distance of what the other was saying and doing. *Indian Opinion* reprinted a portion of an appeal John Dube addressed to the British public. “You must know that every one of us was born in this land, and we have no other,” he said. “You must know that for untold

generations this land was solely ours—long before your father had put a foot on our shores.” That could have moved Gandhi.

For his part, John Dube professed to have been struck by the example of nonviolent resistance that Gandhi’s followers were about to furnish. Decades later a memoir appeared in the Gujarati language describing an encounter between Dube and a British cleric in which the African described an instance of nonviolent resistance that he said he’d witnessed himself at Phoenix in late 1913:

> About five hundred Indians were sitting together in a group. They had come there after going on a strike in their factory. They were surrounded from all sides by white managers, their staff and white police … Whiplashes began to descend on the backs of the Indians sitting there, in quick rapidity, without stop. The whites beat them with lathis and said, “Get up, do your work. Will you do your duty or not?” But nobody rose. They sat, quite motionless … When whips and lathis failed, gun butts came to be used.

The Gujarati was translated into Hindi, the Hindi back into English. It would be a miracle if those were Dube’s exact words, but some such conversation may have occurred. Dube may even have expressed admiration for the fortitude of the Indians who followed Gandhi, though probably not in the words attributed to him in this Gujarati reminiscence, which has the Zulu expressing wonder over their “divine power” and “Himalayan firmness.” Or all this may be little more than rosy self-congratulation on the part of an Indian witness with a hazy memory. What Dube is known to have said is less admiring. While Zulus fought among themselves, he observed in 1912, “people like Indians have come into our land and lorded it over us, as though we who belong to the country were mere nonentities.” Heather Hughes, a Dube biographer, writes of “his pronounced anti-Indianism.” She quotes a Dube article headlined “The Indian Invasion” that ran in *Ilanga:* “We know from sad experience how beneath our very eyes, our children’s bread is taken by these Asiatics.”

Perhaps it is just as well that, as far as we can tell, the two neighbors never had that searching conversation. Even if there was

a moment after the new white regime imposed the Natives Land Act when they appear to have been more or less aligned, they were moving in different directions. For more than six years after the 1906 Zulu rising, Gandhi had devoted most of his time and energy to the Transvaal. At the start of 1913, he abruptly shifted back to Natal. Within months, he was laying plans for a new satyagraha campaign, with the repeal of a three-pound head tax ex-indentured Indians were required to pay annually if they wanted to stay on in the country as one of its main demands.

Dube, meanwhile, was consumed by the land issue, by the dispossession of his people. Later a Zulu newspaper would portray the Reverend John Dube sitting in his Chevrolet, a mere onlooker, as the police marched a group of black Communist organizers to jail in Durban. If Gandhi had stayed on in South Africa, he might have been similarly sidelined. As leaders of the African National Congress made their first tentative international contacts, they came into touch with Jawaharlal Nehru and other leaders of the Indian independence movement that had grown up in Gandhi's shadow. In 1927, Nehru and Josiah Gumede, then ANC president, twice crossed paths—at an anti-imperialism conference in Brussels and in Moscow at the tenth-anniversary celebration of the Bolshevik Revolution. Nehru and his circle were quick to take the view, from afar, that Indians in South Africa should stand together with blacks there. Gandhi himself held out. "However much one may sympathize with the Bantus," he wrote as late as 1939, "Indians cannot make common cause with them." Two years later, in 1941, an antithetical political message was personally delivered in Durban by the young Indira Nehru—later to be known by her married name, Gandhi—who stopped off in South Africa on her way home from Oxford, having been forced by the outbreak of war to take the Cape route. "Indians and Africans must act together," she said. "Common oppression must be met with the united and organized power of all the exploited people." That night, according to one reminiscence, Gandhi's son Manilal endorsed "a united front of all non-Europeans" for the first time in his life.

Manilal's father by this time was more than a quarter of a century removed from South Africa. Perhaps, reflecting back over all the years and miles he'd traveled since his jail experiences there in the aftermath of the Bhambatha Rebellion, he sensed there were grounds for conflict between Indians and Africans in Natal. A year after Gandhi's death, in January 1949, communal rioting, sometimes characterized as a Zulu "pogrom" against Indians, engulfed Durban. The violence had been sparked by a scuffle with a young Zulu in an Indian shop. By the time it burned out, 142 persons had been listed as killed—the majority, as a result of police fire, African migrant laborers—and more than 1,700 injured. The violence exposed the long-standing African resentment of the relatively privileged status of Indians in the racial hierarchy, of Indian shopkeepers in particular. A hangover of fear and mutual suspicion lingered for years.

Yet three years later Indian and African activists in South Africa finally succeeded in coming together politically to make common cause against apartheid, a program for comprehensive racial separation and white dominance that neither Dube nor Gandhi lived to see. In 1952, the African National Congress and the South African Indian Congress agreed on what was called the Defiance Campaign Against Unjust Laws.

The nonviolent campaign could be seen as self-consciously Gandhian in tactics and strategy. But few African leaders were ready to embrace him as their patron saint. From the other side of the Indian Ocean, shortly before his assassination, the Mahatma had finally given his highly qualified support to the idea of Indians throwing in their lot with Africans. "The inclusion of all the races while logically correct," he said, "is fraught with grave danger if the struggle is not kept at the highest level." Between the lines, he seems to be expressing his doubts that blacks would hew to nonviolent principles. For his part, the young Nelson Mandela had to overcome his own doubts about an alliance with Indians. "Many of our grassroots African supporters saw Indians as exploiters of

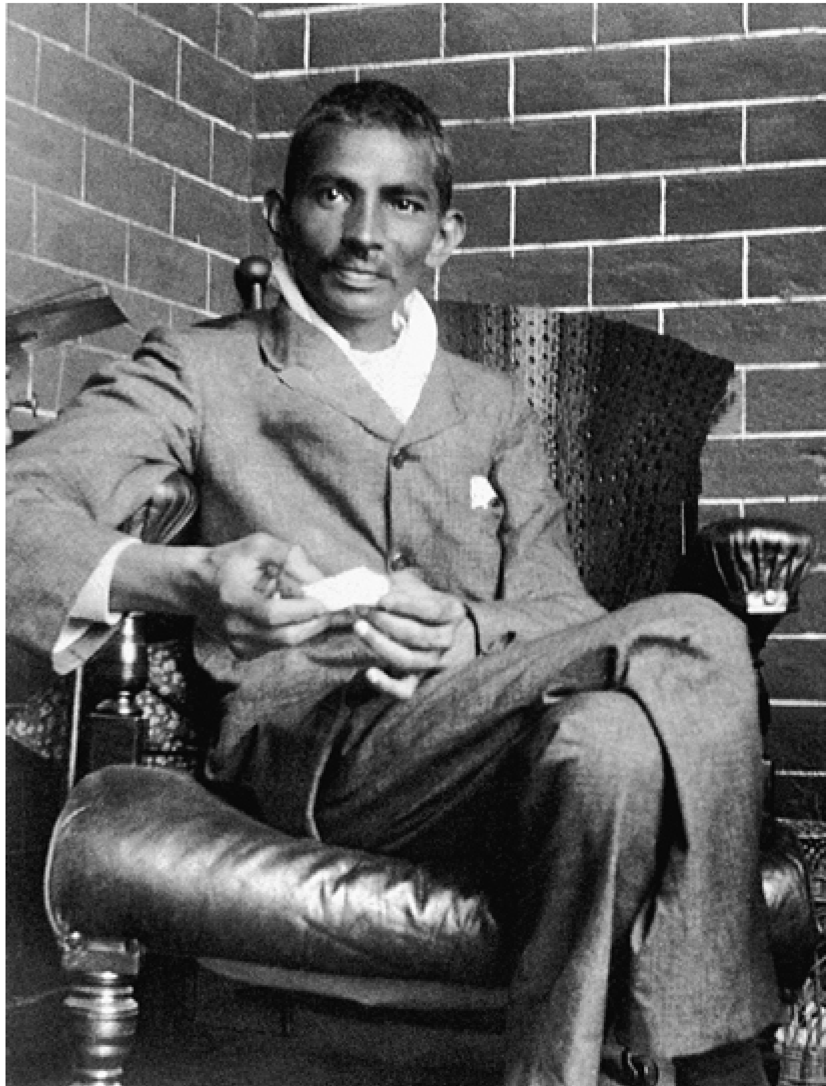
black labor in their role as shopkeepers and merchants," he later said.

Manilal Gandhi, the faithful second son, briefly lent his name to the Defiance Campaign, but he was mostly out of step. Following his father's example, he endured fasts of increasing duration against apartheid; in his case, however, their impact was not great. Repeatedly, he courted arrest by going to the white section of the library or post office in Durban, but the police had instructions to merely take down his name. Finally, at the end of the year, in the company of other whites and Indians, he managed to get arrested by entering a black "location" in the Transvaal town of Germiston. He was then sentenced to fifty days in jail for the crimes of "meeting with Africans" and "incitement to break laws." But Manilal had no organized following of his own and remained an independent operator, standing "outside the organized struggle," his granddaughter and biographer, Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie, acknowledges. The movement had become more radical than Manilal, who was suspicious of the influence of Communists, would ever be. And its commitment to nonviolence was merely tactical. At one meeting, as Manilal, seeking to be "worthy of Bapu and serve as he served," sermonized at length on the ethical discipline of satyagraha, the young Nelson Mandela rattled his teacup to signal his impatience.

The first Gandhi in South Africa never had to face the kind of retaliation the Afrikaner nationalist regime now rolled out in the form of repressive new security laws, allowing arbitrary arrest, preventive detention at the hands of an emboldened security police, and bannings, not only of organizations, but of individuals (making it illegal for their words to appear in print or for them to meet more than one person at a time); eventually, as the struggle intensified, the white regime would resort to torture, "disappearances," bombings, and assassination. The colonial regime in India had been repressive, regularly jailing Gandhi and his followers, but it had never imagined it could remove them permanently from the scene, that it could purge India of the Indian national movement. The Afrikaner regime had exactly that ambition when it came to the

sponsors of the Defiance Campaign. Long before the movement was driven underground, younger leaders like Mandela and Oliver Tambo reappraised their tactical embrace of the Gandhian code of nonviolence.

But satyagraha did get its trial in a national cause, the cause of nonracial justice. For a brief time, it was no longer parochially Indian in its appeal. And a much older, more mellow Mandela himself would later claim, once he'd emerged from his long imprisonment and stepped into the role of father of the nation, that the model for the mass action campaigns he'd witnessed in his youth had been the nonviolent campaign the original Gandhi led in 1913. "The principle was not so important that the strategy should be used even when it was self-defeating," Mandela said then, explaining how he'd deployed his own interpretation of Gandhi against Gandhi's son. "I called for nonviolent protest for as long as it was effective." As an interpreter of Gandhian doctrines, Mandela was decidedly less rigorous about means and ends than their originator. Still, no one was better qualified to certify that Gandhi was indeed a founding father in the country he adopted temporarily, as well as in his own.



Doke’s Gandhi, 1908 (photo credit i3.3)

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4

UPPER HOUSE

THE REVEREND DOKE, the first of Gandhi's many hagiographers, took a snapshot of the pensive barrister as he recuperated in 1908 from his beating at the hands of the Pathans. His subject bears little resemblance to the Gandhi the world would come to know. Lean and slouching in casual Western clothes, he gazes past the lens with an expression that's inward and contemplative, not kindly or twinkling in the manner of the loincloth-clad public man who'd evoke a mass following in India within little more than a decade. Yet he'd already laid out essential components of his thought and leadership strategy. Ecumenical and open-minded in his approach to religion and relations between sects of all description, loyal by his own lights to the British Empire and to values embedded in the British legal system, yet aggressive in his resistance to unjust colonial laws that system not infrequently upheld, the Johannesburg Gandhi now claimed the right to follow his conscience—what he would variously identify as his "inner voice" or, simply, "truth"—in every sphere of life. Yet he was still Gandhiji or Gandhibhai—the suffixes indicating respect for an elder or leader and fraternal feeling for a relative or friend—and not yet canonized as a mahatma, still engaged in self-creation, finding his way to a grounded sense of himself and his mission. In his own mind, we may infer, self and mission both felt incomplete as he closed in on his late thirties.

Celibacy as a spiritual discipline was now a preoccupation of his daily life but not, as yet, a theme of his public discourse; his interviews with his Baptist Boswell never, or so it appears from Doke's book, got around to the delicate subject of brahmacharya. Probably the politician in him understood that this was the least

appealing side of his evolving doctrine. He'd experienced sexual passion but could never condone it or, having made his choice, simply drop the subject. "Marriage is not only not a necessity but positively a hindrance to public and humanitarian work," he'd later write. Those, like himself and Kasturba, who'd fallen into the coils of matrimony could save themselves by living together chastely as brother and sister. "No man or woman living the physical or animal life can possibly understand the spiritual or ethical." Gandhi doted on children but regarded childbirth as prima facie evidence of a moral lapse. With distressing regularity, he'd nag his daughters-in-law and others close to him to mend their ways and not do it again.

His vegetarianism was still in his early Johannesburg years a matter of moral preference, hygiene, and heritage, but apart from eschewing meat and grinding his own grain, he hadn't yet placed severe strictures on his diet, hadn't yet arrived at the conviction that the curbing of one appetite was dependent on the curbing of another, that sexual abstinence and diet were closely linked. He still drank milk, still enjoyed spicy food in convivial settings. Such indulgences would soon be brought to an abrupt end. The vegetarian would try for a time to become a fruitarian, having concluded that milk, other dairy products, and most spices have aphrodisiac qualities; he'd also give up salt, cooked food, and seconds, eventually measuring his intake in ounces and thoroughly chewing each spare mouthful of carefully blended and pounded mush—lemons, honey, and almonds were usually part of the mix along with grains and leaves—in order to derive as much nourishment from as little food as possible. Mastication would thus become one of his many lesser disciplines and causes.

"Meagerness," he'd later write, was the ethical standard by which diet should be measured, according to "God's economy" and Gandhi's own reading of a Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad Gita. That standard enjoined a perpetual "partial fast," which would require "a grim fight against the inherited and acquired habit of eating for pleasure." Grim was the word for it. A full meal, Gandhi would write, was "a crime against God and man … because the full-mealers deprive their neighbors of their portion." There you have