

Gandhi's Natal

The State of the Colony in 1893

At approximately 9 p.m. on the night of 7 June 1893 Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was ejected from a Natal Government Railways train when it made a routine stop at Pietermaritzburg station *en route* into the interior. The circumstances surrounding this event are well-known. Gandhi was then nearly twenty-four years of age and had completed his law studies in London two years previously. He had arrived in Natal from India on 23 May 1893 after being instructed by a firm in Porbander, the place of his birth, to appear in a case which was due to be heard in Pretoria. He was met at Durban by his client, a businessman named Dada Abdulla, who provided him with a (first-class) train ticket from Durban to the terminus at Charlestown on the Transvaal border. At Pietermaritzburg the bed tickets were issued and a white passenger objected to the presence of an Indian travelling overnight in the carriage. When Gandhi steadfastly refused to move to third-class in the van he was forced out of his compartment by the railway guard and local police constable.¹

The remaining hours of darkness spent in a chilly waiting-room at Pietermaritzburg station were the genesis of his resolve to resist racial injustices in southern Africa and elsewhere by non-violent means. This strategy, as it subsequently evolved, was to become synonymous with his name. As Gandhi recalled, nearly forty-six years later, on the eve of his seventieth birthday in 1939:

I was afraid for my very life. I entered the dark waiting-room. There was a white man in the room, I was afraid of him. What was my duty? I asked myself. Should I go back to India, or should I go forward, with God as my helper and face whatever was in store for me? I decided to stay and suffer. My active non-violence began from that date.²

The following morning he made his presence felt in the Colony by venturing down town to the Post Office where he despatched a telegram of protest to Sir David Hunter, General Manager of the Natal Government Railways. After settling his case in Pretoria out of court, Gandhi returned to Natal and soon became involved in its public life. In May 1894, when the Natal Indian Congress was established, he became its first Secretary. In September of that year the application for his admission as an advocate of the Supreme Court of the Colony was successfully moved by Attorney-General Harry Escombe. In one of its darker moments, the Natal Law Society opposed this application. It questioned Gandhi's certificates of character and of admission to the Bombay and English Bar, and even argued that Natal's Rules of Court of 2 January 1893



M. K. Gandhi as a young lawyer in the controversial Bombay High Court head-dress

(*Photograph: Durban Local History Museum*)



The Hon. Sir JOHN ROBINSON, K.C.M.G., M.L.A.
(PREMIER COLONIAL SECRETARY & MINISTER OF EDUCATION)

The first Premier of Natal, 1893

(*Photograph: Natal Society Library*)

had never been intended 'to admit persons as Advocates or Attorneys of the Supreme Court other than those of European extraction'.³

Any lingering doubts about the strength of local racial prejudice must have been firmly removed from Gandhi's mind. Undeterred, he remained in southern Africa until 1914, with brief absences in 1896–7 and 1901–2.⁴ His role in the history of the subcontinent during that period, and the formative influence of that experience on his subsequent career, are the focus of other contributions to this conference. What follows in this paper is a brief examination of the state of the colony which in 1893–94 captured his attention and so aroused his sense of injustice.

The inhabitants of Natal in 1893 may be forgiven for failing to recognise the full historical significance of that year. For several reasons it was indeed acknowledged at the time to mark a momentous milestone in the annals of the Colony, but not for the removal of a young Indian from a 'first-class' railway carriage at Pietermaritzburg station. In May the small white settler community celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of Natal's annexation by the British Crown as a district of the Cape Colony. It was a status that the territory had retained until 1856 when it became a separate colony with its own 'representative government'. In the same month (May of 1893) a 'responsible government' bill was passed by Natal's Legislative Council with a slender majority, and in July it received royal assent.⁵ The last day of August marked the fiftieth anniversary of the arrival in Pietermaritzburg of the first British troops. They had camped on a hill at the western end of the town and on 1 September 1843

had begun to construct Fort Napier, named in honour of Sir George Napier, Governor of the Cape Colony. It was an important event in the history of the colonial capital, for the garrison not only provided a protective military presence but played a significant part in the social and economic life of the city and the surrounding rural districts until its eventual withdrawal in 1914.⁶

The year 1893 was momentous also for the elections held in September for the new Legislative Assembly under Natal's 'responsible government' constitution. This body was voted in by a male and almost entirely white electorate in terms of the Colony's non-racial franchise, whose property qualifications, in the hands of local officials, effectively excluded most persons of colour. Natal's attainment of 'responsible government' status was part of a broader imperial process. Each of the colonies of white settlement in Canada and Australia acquired representative institutions, though their progress from Crown rule to self-government within the British Empire varied in pace in accordance with local circumstances. Closer at hand Natal had among its neighbours the politically-independent Boer republics of the interior, as well as the Cape Colony which had been entrusted with 'representative government' in 1853 and 'responsible government' in 1872.

It was no coincidence that Natal was one of the last British colonies with a white settler population to reach the second of these constitutional milestones. The Imperial Government had to weigh settler demands against the interests of aboriginal populations in several of its overseas possessions, not least in Natal where the colonists constituted such a small minority of the population. Many white Natalians were reluctant to assume responsibility for their own internal security and external defence in view of the Colony's large African population and militarily intimidating Boer and Zulu neighbours. Those among them who favoured 'responsible government' had to overcome several setbacks to that cause, including the mismanaged Langalibalele crisis within the Colony during the mid-1870s and British military defeats on its borders by the Zulu at Isandlwana in 1879 and by the Boers at Majuba in 1881.⁷

The new constitution of 1893 was a source of understandable satisfaction to those in Natal who had campaigned so long for it. Whitehall officials believed that the Colony's voteless majority would be adequately protected by the nominated Legislative Council or 'upper house' provided for in the new constitution, and by the Governor's authority as 'Supreme Chief' of the African population. They were soon disabused of that misconception. The new series of all-white 'responsible government' ministries which held office in Pietermaritzburg from 1893 onwards were comprised of businessmen and farmers who demonstrated little sense of responsibility for the welfare of the vast majority of the population. The first ministry, led from 1893 to 1897 by John Robinson, editor of the *Natal Mercury*, launched a series of discriminatory bills against the Indian community. These were designed to withdraw the franchise from those Indians who qualified for it, to terminate non-indentured Indian immigration to the Colony, and to restrict Indian trading activity.⁸

It was the attempt, in 1894, to abolish Asian enfranchisement that induced Gandhi to stay in Natal and to organise a petition, signed by nearly 9 000 Indians, which may have influenced the Colonial Office in its decision to reject the proposal. Two years later the bill, in modified form, was approved. This limited the franchise in Natal to males of European origin and to non-European males originating from countries which already had elected parliaments. India did not yet fall into this category. Within four years of attaining 'responsible

government' the Natal Parliament had not only deprived Indians of the franchise. It had also imposed a burdensome tax on indentured Indians who declined to re-indenture or return to India, it had initiated a campaign to end the immigration of 'free' Indians, and it had made it more difficult for them to establish businesses by entrusting prejudiced municipal authorities with the power to grant or refuse trading licences.⁹

Gandhi's return to Natal in 1897, after a sojourn in India, attracted far more attention, and more brutal treatment, than his arrival in 1893. Settler animosity towards him was aroused by news of his 'Green pamphlet', based on talks he had given in India on the plight of Indians in South Africa. Whites were also angered by the simultaneous arrival at Durban of several hundred 'free' Indian immigrants for which, as it happened, Gandhi was not responsible. He nevertheless only narrowly escaped an incensed mob of colonists who beat and kicked him after disembarkation. Gandhi subsequently earned grudging admiration for refusing to lay charges against his assailants but his enhanced personal prestige did not deter the Legislature from its programme of discriminatory legislation.¹⁰

Indians were not the only inhabitants of Natal to suffer the effects of these new laws. After 1897, when farmers formed the majority in all cabinets, measures were introduced to induce Africans to work in larger numbers on white-owned farms by discouraging their independent economic enterprises, by denying them access to land, and by making it difficult for them to find employment outside the Colony, notably on the Witwatersrand. The attainment of 'responsible government' in 1893 clearly did not herald a better dispensation for the vast majority of Natal's population. The political advantage exploited by the white settler community to restrain Indian commercial competition and control African labour resources increased even further following the unification of South Africa in 1910 and the consequent removal of any possible imperial intervention.¹¹

Gandhi's experiences in Natal on arrival in 1893 and again in 1897, like the legislation which characterised the 1890s, were symptomatic of the Colony's socio-economic circumstances. By the mid-1890s Natal's population was estimated to be 584 326, of whom 503 208 (86 per cent) were African, 45 707 (8 per cent) were white, and 35 411 (6 per cent) Indian.¹² The vast majority of Africans still lived in the rural districts, where they cultivated approximately 75 per cent of the available arable land, most of it owned by whites. The once prosperous African peasantry, which for a time had produced most of the Colony's food requirements, was rapidly disappearing. The combination of hostile legislation and successive natural disasters, including locust plagues, drought and rinderpest, made it increasingly difficult for Africans to avoid the options of migrancy to the towns and mines or labour tenancy on the large-scale commercial farms which now dominated the agricultural sector. Hardly any Africans had become urbanised, except as 'togt' or day labourers, and in 1904 the estimate of Africans living in urban areas was still as low as 4 per cent.¹³

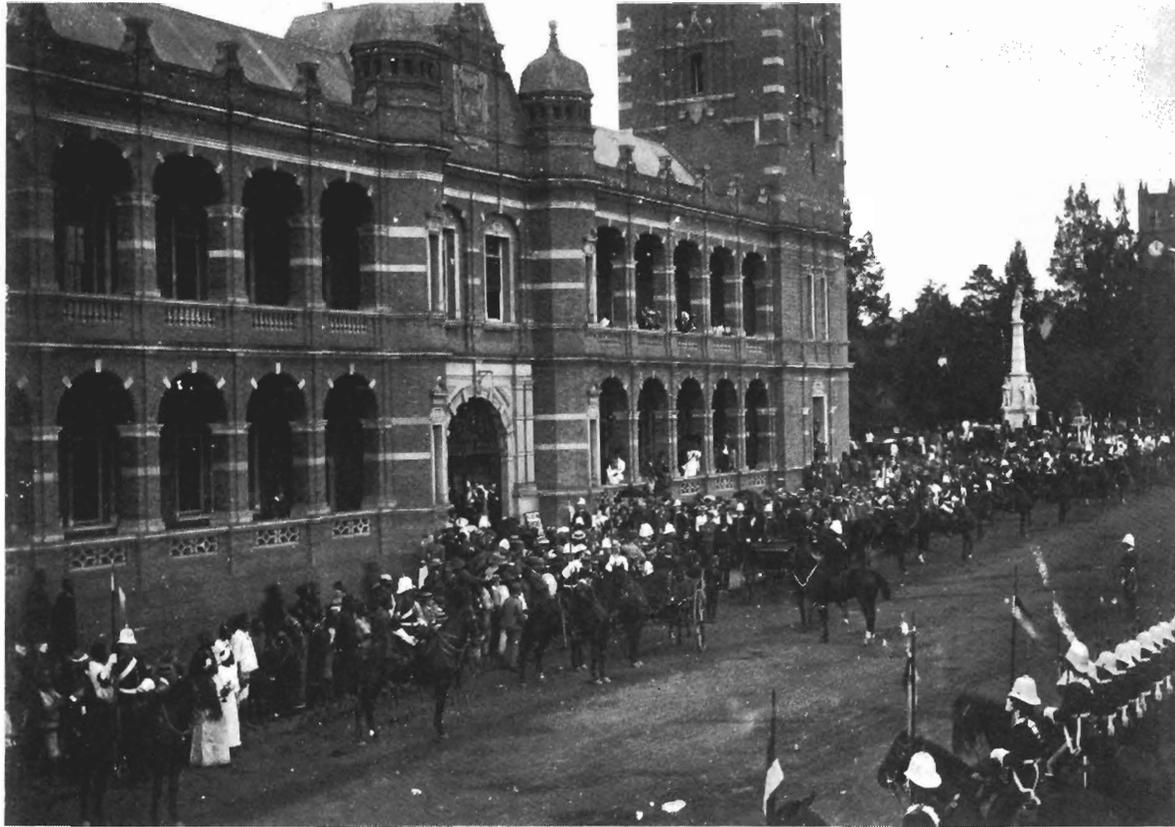
By contrast, approximately 54 per cent of whites were urbanised by the 1890s and a substantial majority of them were engaged in non-agricultural pursuits including mining and small scale manufacturing, public service and the professions, commerce and transport.¹⁴ The transit trade into the interior had always been a significant means of income to the white commercial sector based primarily in Durban, and the money generated by customs duties constituted a major source of public revenue, along with the hut tax and other

financial obligations placed upon the African majority. Following the opening of the Witwatersrand goldfields in the mid-1880s, the 'overberg' transit trade became an even more important source of private and public income. The completion of the railway lines through to the Transvaal and Orange Free State borders in 1891 diminished Natal's waggon-transport business but encouraged local farmers to produce perishable food crops on a much larger scale than ever before, primarily for the expanding Witwatersrand market. Railway earnings became another source of public income, amounting to 51 per cent of Government revenue within a year of the railhead reaching Johannesburg in 1895.¹⁵

The white settler community had been attracted by the commercial opportunities and relative security of the towns from an early stage of the Colony's history. A third of them were already established in Durban and Pietermaritzburg by the early 1850s. They had always been prone as a nervous minority to periodic rumours concerning domestic African uprisings and Zulu military invasions across the Thukela River frontier. By the 1880s, and especially after the British annexation of Zululand in 1887, white Natalians had come to regard Indian immigration and commercial competition as a far greater threat to their well-being. By the mid-1890s there were barely 10 000 fewer Indians than whites living in the Colony, constituting (as previously indicated) 6 per cent compared with 8 per cent of its total population. By 1904 Indians comprised 9.1 per cent of the population compared with the 8.8 per cent made up by whites.¹⁶

It is evident that during the 1880s and 1890s Natal's Indian population was outstripping its white community, not only in numerical terms but also in certain sectors of the colonial economy. Only 22 per cent of Indians were urbanised by the mid-1890s, the majority of those in employment still being engaged in agricultural pursuits as indentured and as 'free' labourers or else as independent smallholders.¹⁷ Nevertheless, as recent research has shown, the Indian community had already made a far greater impact on the colony than the proponents of labour importations could have anticipated when the first shipload of approximately 600 indentured workers arrived on board the *Truro* on 17 November 1860. They undoubtedly helped to alleviate the extended crisis which, for various reasons, the local sugar industry experienced during the latter decades of the nineteenth century, though their arrival did not produce a dramatic and sustained increase in local sugar output, or a significant improvement in the financial circumstances of the sugar farmers. From the beginning, their presence was felt beyond the sugar plantations with which they are popularly associated. Several of the coastal estates on which they were employed were planted with other crops whose suitability as export staples was still being tested. These included cotton, coffee, arrowroot, hill rice and tobacco.¹⁸

Before long, indentured Indian labourers were in demand in the pastoral and wattle industries of the interior districts and, from the 1880s onwards, were applying skills already acquired in India in railway construction and coal-mining. By the 1890s the Natal Government Railways had become the largest single employer of Indians in the Colony and by 1902 Indians constituted 44.5 per cent of the labour force in the local coal industry.¹⁹ Among the indentured Indian immigrants who brought particular skills with them were those specifically selected as 'special servants' to work as chefs, waiters, orderlies, interpreters, clerks, postmen and policemen. Another special category were the ferrymen imported from the east coast of India with their Masulah boats to



'Imperial Splendour': Opening the first Natal Parliament, 19 October 1893, by Sir Walter Hely Hutchinson.

(Natal Society Library)

transport passengers and cargo from vessels lying in Durban's outer anchorage. This was because prior to the early 1900s large steamships were unable to negotiate the notorious sandbar across the harbour mouth.²⁰

Natal's Indian community made its presence felt even more strongly when, after completing their indentures, many workers opted to remain as so-called 'free' Indians instead of re-indenturing, returning to India, or migrating to the diamond and gold fields of the interior. Most of them moved into other spheres of the colonial economy and began to offer various goods and services which had not hitherto been locally available. By the late 1870s they had already established a monopoly over the colony's commercial fishing industry, in addition to that over fruit and vegetable hawking in and around the main urban areas. It was primarily as traders that 'free' Indians found themselves in competition with Africans and whites and so began to experience the resentment of other ethnic groups.²¹ Some indentured labourers engaged in spare-time trading almost immediately on arrival but a significant Indian trading community only really began to emerge with the arrival from the mid-1870s of the so-called 'passenger' Indians.

These new arrivals were endowed with capital, expertise and commercial contacts in India. They set up family businesses which initially catered to the needs of the colony's Indian community but they also identified business opportunities to which white entrepreneurs had been slow to respond. They gradually eclipsed their ex-indentured compatriots, at least in the main urban areas, extended their activities into the Natal interior, and established a monopoly over the indigenous black trade. White consumers readily patronised Indian stores and white wholesalers often employed Indian traders as middlemen, but the small-scale white traders in the towns and countryside felt most directly threatened. It was they who initiated demands for restrictions on Indian commercial activities. During the economic recession of the 1880s white settler attitudes towards Indians, and Indian traders in particular, became increasingly hostile, resulting in the first outbursts of anti-Asiatic sentiment in the Colony, and the appointment of the Wragg Commission of 1885–97. It acknowledged that Indian traders had been beneficial to the local economy but concluded that the majority of white Natalians wanted the Indian community to participate in it as indentured labourers only, or at least to see the status of 'free' Indians diminished.²² It was against this background of mounting anti-Indian sentiment that a young Indian lawyer, smartly attired in European-style dress and wearing a turban, was forced off a train in June 1893 at Pietermaritzburg station when he insisted on remaining overnight in a first-class carriage.

Presumptuously, this paper is entitled 'Gandhi's Natal'. Yet it is evident that while much had been achieved by 1893, after fifty years of British rule, there was a great deal about the prevailing state of the colony to give a compassionate observer like Gandhi cause for concern. Natal was heavily dependent upon the 'overberg' trade, generated primarily by the Witwatersrand gold industry, and upon the labour and taxation of its African majority. The Indian community was active in virtually every sector of the local economy, yet it faced increasing resentment from the small white population. Few Indians had acquired the vote and those who had were soon to be deprived of it as part of a campaign of discriminatory legislation designed to subject Indians and Africans to more effective white-minority control. A more equitable dispensation, for which Gandhi among others campaigned, has taken another century to dawn.

REFERENCES

[Paper delivered at a Conference on the Centenary of Mahatma Gandhi's Transforming Experience in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, (University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg), 7–8 June 1993]

1. M. K. Gandhi, *An autobiography: the story of my experiments with truth* (Ahmedabad, 1948.) pp.92–3; M. Palmer, *The History of the Indians in Natal* (Cape Town, 1957), pp.49–51; J. Brain, 'Natal's Indians, 1860–1910' in A. Duminy and B. Guest (eds), *Natal and Zululand from earliest times to 1910: a new history* (Pietermaritzburg, 1989), p.263.
2. Palmer, *Indians in Natal*, p.51; H. Seedat, 'Gandhi: the Pietermaritzburg experience' in J. Laband and R. Haswell (eds), *Pietermaritzburg 1838–1988 : a new portrait of an African city* (Pietermaritzburg, 1988), p.201.
3. *Natal Witness*, 4 & 5 Sept 1894; Brain, 'Natal's Indians', p.263; H. Seedat, 'Gandhi's admission as an advocate' in Laband and Haswell, *Pietermaritzburg 1838–1988*, p.99.
4. E. H. Brookes and C. de B. Webb, *A history of Natal* (Pietermaritzburg, 1965), p.181.
5. J. Bird, *The Annals of Natal, 1495–1845*, 2 (Pietermaritzburg, 1888; Facsimile reprint, Cape Town, 1965), p.86; G. von W. Eybers, *Select Constitutional Documents Illustrating South African History, 1795–1910* (London, George Routledge, 1918), pp.188–194; *Natal Legislative Council Debates*, 8 May 1893 and 10 May 1893; B. Guest, 'Towards responsible government, 1879–93' in Duminy and Guest (eds), *Natal and Zululand*, p.243.
6. G. Dominy and H. Paterson, 'Fort Napier: The imperial base that shaped the city' in Laband and Haswell (eds), *Pietermaritzburg 1838–1988*, pp.102–109.
7. B. Guest, 'Colonists, confederation and constitutional change' and 'Towards responsible government' in Duminy and Guest (eds), *Natal and Zululand*, pp.146–62 and 233–45.
8. Guest, 'Towards responsible government', pp.243–45 and Brain, 'Natal's Indians', pp.261–2.
9. Gandhi, *Experiments with Truth*, p.116; Palmer, *Indians in Natal*, p.53; Eybers, *Select Constitutional Documents*, p.215; S. Bhana, 'Indian trade and trader in colonial Natal' in B. Guest and J. M. Sellers (eds), *Enterprise and exploitation in a Victorian Colony: aspects of the economic and social history of colonial Natal* (Pietermaritzburg, 1985), pp.235–263.
10. Gandhi, *Experiments with truth*, pp.54–7; Palmer, *Indians in Natal*, pp.59–61; J. T. Henderson (ed), *Speeches of the late Right Honourable Harry Escombe* (Pietermaritzburg, 1903), pp.324–41; *Natal Witness*, 1, 4 to 8 and 11 to 15 Jan 1897.
11. J. Lambert, 'From independence to rebellion : African society in crisis, c.1880–1910' in Duminy and Guest (eds), *Natal and Zululand*, pp.383–4; Bhana, 'Indian trade and trader', pp.252–3.
12. *Statistical Year Book for the Colony of Natal for the year 1904*, p.3.
13. Z. A. Konczacki, *Public finance and economic development of Natal, 1893–1910*. (Durham, N.C., 1967), pp.5, 8; Lambert, 'African society in crisis', pp.373–401.
14. Konczacki, *Public finance and economic development*, p.5.
15. B. Guest, 'The new economy' in Duminy and Guest (eds), *Natal and Zululand*, pp.303–8; H. Heydenrych, 'Railway development in Natal to 1895' in Guest and Sellers, *Enterprise and exploitation*, pp.47–69.
16. Konczacki, *Public finance and economic development*, pp.4–5; D. Welch, *The roots of segregation: native policy in colonial Natal 1845–1910* (Cape Town, 1971), p.229.
17. Konczacki, *Public finance and economic development*, p.5.
18. Ballard and Lenta, 'The complex nature of agriculture in colonial Natal: 1860–1909' and J. Brain, 'Indentured and free Indians in the economy of colonial Natal' in Guest and Sellers, *Enterprise and exploitation*, pp.126–8 and 202–3.
19. Brain, 'Natal's Indians', p.253; Heydenrych, 'Railway development', pp.63–4; R. Edgecombe and B. Guest, 'An introduction to the pre-Union Natal coal industry' in Guest and Sellers, *Enterprise and exploitation*, pp.327–8.
20. Brain, 'Indentured and free Indians', pp.220–226.
21. Brain, 'Natal's Indians', pp.255–7; Brain, 'Indentured and free Indians', pp.210–212, 218–20.
22. Bhana, 'Indian trade and trader', pp.235–263; Brain, 'Natal's Indians', pp.258–61; S. L. Kirk, 'Wragg Commission: a study of economic and social factors' (BA Hons minithesis, University of Natal, Durban, 1980.)

BILL GUEST