

'India gave us Mohandas,' said Ela Gandhi, one of his granddaughters, a South African Indian who lives in Durban. 'We gave India the Mahatma (Great Soul). Indeed, if he hadn't had his South African experience, I doubt whether he would ever have become a Mahatma. It was here that he found his destiny.'

Gandhi arrived in Durban in a frock coat and spoiling for a fight. He had heard from Abdullah Sheth, the South African Indian who was head of the company he had come to represent, and from Indians on the ship how their countrymen were treated in South Africa. They were routinely known as coolies or Samys (after the Swamy with which so many South Indian surnames end). They were demonized as 'black vermin'. The Indian indentured labourers who worked on Natal's sugar estates were little better than slaves.

Gandhi, however, had no intention of being either a coolie or a Samy. He was a barrister of the Inner Temple, and he was not going to have any of it. The Ollivant incident was humiliation enough, however justified the Resident's reaction might have been. Gandhi still bridled mentally when he remembered the hand of the Resident's peon on his shoulder.

There was in him a touchiness and a preparedness for conflict from the very moment of his arrival in South Africa. The Ollivant episode had made him ultra-sensitive to anything that could be construed as a racist insult. He had heard how the whites behaved in South Africa and his clash with Ollivant had made him all the more determined not to take such behaviour lying down. Although he knew he had gone to see the Resident on an unworthy errand, he still nursed a sense of bitter resentment about the way he had been thrown out. Anyone in South Africa who, he felt, treated him equally shabbily was going to get it in the neck.

After he had heard how degradingly the Indians were being dealt with there, what is more, he would not—he told himself—be taking issue with the whites merely to assuage his own (albeit irrational) sense of grievance, but on behalf of all his fellow-countrymen. Not for nothing was he the descendant of diwans, the

paternalist protectors of their people. He had a growing sense that he wanted to take on not just one Ollivant but a whole army of Ollivants. From the beginning, there was more than a little of the fighting cock about him.

A few days after his arrival, Gandhi sat in the Durban court alongside Abdullah's white attorney. He was wearing a black turban. The judge could scarcely believe his eyes, and asked him to remove it. For an Indian lawyer, that would have been a further humiliation. In the Bombay High Court, Indian lawyers usually wore turbans. Gandhi refused and left the court.

That, however, was only round one. Required to travel to Pretoria to meet Tyebe Sheth, the cousin against whom Abdullah was bringing his case, Gandhi bought first-class tickets for the journey. He paid a hefty £3 2s 6d for a rail ticket as far as Charleston and a further £4 10s for the stagecoach to Johannesburg. In doing so, he knew perfectly well that he was asking for trouble. Indians were expected to travel third-class or not at all.

He could easily have played safe, concentrated on the case and gone third-class—but he did not want to do that, because he was proud of being a London-trained barrister. He was perfectly aware that it was an act of provocation, but he was in the mood to be provocative.

Even so, when Gandhi boarded the train in Durban, he had no idea either how explosive the reaction would be—or how momentous his journey was to prove, no less momentous in its way than Lenin's journey by closed train to the Finland station in St. Petersburg. The railway station in Durban is now no more, but the building which still stands has a plaque commemorating the fact that it was here that Gandhi boarded the train.

Gandhi, however, was not on it for long. At Pietermaritzburg, a white passenger who entered Gandhi's carriage complained that it was being sullied by a Samy and when Gandhi refused to move into third class, a policeman was called while the train waited and Gandhi and his luggage were pitched out onto the platform.