# CHAPTER VII

A MOB SCENE

N atal, in 1896, had 400,000 Negro inhabitants, 50,000

whites, and 51,000 Indians. The Cape of Good Hope

Colony had 900,000 Negroes, 400,000 Europeans and 10,000

Indians; the Transvaal Republic, 650,000 Negroes, 120,000

whites and about 5000 Indians. Similar proportions obtained in

other areas. In 1914, the five million Negroes easily outnumbered

a million and a quarter whites.

Indians or no Indians, the whites were a permanent minority

in South Africa. But the Indians were thrifty, able and ambitious,

and they worked hard. Given normal opportunities, they became

rivals of the whites in business, agriculture, law and the other

professions.

Is that why the Indians were persecuted?

The Dutch, who first settled South Africa in the sixteenth cen¬

tury, brought their slaves from Malaya, Java and other Pacific

islands; they concentrated in Transvaal and the Orange Free

State. The British arrived much later. In Natal, they found they

could grow sugar cane, tea and coffee. But the Negroes were

reluctant to work for them. Arrangements were accordingly

made for the shipment of indentured labourers from India. ‘The

Indian had come to South Africa 5 , wrote Chancellor Jan H.

Hofmeyer of the Witwaterstrand University in Johannesburg,

‘because it was deemed to be in the white man’s interest that he

should. It seemed to be impossible to exploit the Natal coastal

belt without indentured labour. So the Indians came — and

brought prosperity to Natal. 5

The first Indian contract workers landed in Natal on November

16th, i860. That was the genesis of the Gandhi saga in South

Africa.

The indentured Indians were term serfs. They came from India

voluntarily or, frequently, involuntarily and not knowing where

they were going; many were untouchables snatched from semi¬

starvation. The system tied them for five years to private farms.

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They were given free board and lodging for themselves and their

families and ten shillings a month in the first year and an addi¬

tional shilling a month each year after. At the end of five years

the contractor paid their passage back to India. He did likewise

if they remained an additional five years as free labourers.

In numerous cases, the indentured labourers chose to become

permanent residents.

When Gandhi had been in South Africa just over twelve months

— on August 18th, 1894 — these conditions were altered. At the

end of the first five-year period, the indentured labourer was

obliged to return to India or agree to be a serf in South Africa for

ever. But if he wished to stay as a free working man, he had to

pay an annual tax of three pounds for himself and for each of his

dependants. Three pounds was the equivalent of six months 5 pay

of an indentured labourer.

This aroused a storm at the centre of which stood Gandhi.

Indentured Indian immigration drew after it thousands of free

Indians who came as hawkers, tradesmen, artisans and mem¬

bers of the professions, like Gandhi. They numbered perhaps fifty

thousand in 1900. The pedlars carried their wares on their backs

hundreds of miles into Zulu villages where no white man would

try to do business. Gradually, many of them acquired riches and

property. Indians even owned steamship lines.

In 1894, 250 free Indians in Natal, being subjects of Her British

Majesty, Queen Victoria, and having met the wealth qualification,

enjoyed the right to vote. But that year the Natal legislature passed

a law explicitly disfranchising Asiatics.

This was the second serious Indian complaint.

Throughout Natal, an Indian had to carry a pass to be in the

streets after 9 p.m. Persons without passes were arrested. The

Orange Free State, a Boer republic, forbade Indians to own

property, to trade, or to farm. In the Crown Colony of Zululand,

Indians were not allowed to own or buy land. The same pro¬

scription applied in the Transvaal where, moreover, Indians had

to pay a three-pound fee for the right to reside; but residence was

restricted to slums. In the Cape Colony, some municipalities

prohibited Indians from walking on footpaths. Elsewhere,

Indians avoided footpaths and pavements because they might be

kicked off, Gandhi himself was once so kicked. Indians in South

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Africa were legally barred from buying South African gold. They

were described in statute books as ‘semi-barbarous Asiatics’.

In three years in South Africa, Gandhi had become a prosperous

lawyer and the outstanding Indian political figure. He was

widely known as the champion of indentured labourers. He

addressed conferences, drafted memorials to government ministers,

wrote letters to newspapers, circulated petitions (one was signed

by ten thousand Indians), and made many friends among whites,

Indians and Negroes. He learned a few Zulu words and found the

language ‘very sweet’. He also achieved some knowledge of

Tamil, a Dravidian tongue spoken by natives of Madras and other

south-Indian provinces. When work permitted he read books,

chiefly on religion. He published two pamphlets: An Appeal to

Every Briton in South Africa and The Indian Franchise , an Appeal.

‘Appeal’ was the key to Gandhi’s politics. He appealed to the

common sense and morality of his adversary. ‘It has always been

a mystery to me’, he says in his autobiography, ‘how men can feel

themselves honoured by the humiliation of their fellow-beings.’

This was the essence of Gandhi’s appeal.

Gandhi’s struggle in South Africa did not aim to achieve equal

treatment for the Indians there. He recognized that the whites

thought they needed protection against a coloured majority

consisting of Indians and Negroes. He also knew, as he wrote in a

letter to the Times of India of June 2nd, 1918, that ‘prejudices

cannot be removed by legislation . . . They will yield only to

patient toil and education’.

Nor were the Indians protesting against segregation. ‘They

feel the ostracism but they silently bear it’, Gandhi wrote.

This too was a long-range problem.

Gandhi’s immediate quarrel with the white governments of

Natal, Transvaal, the Orange Free State and Cape Colony was

‘for feeding the prejudice by legalizing it’. At least the laws must

be just; often they are not. ‘I refuse to believe in the infallibility

of legislators,’ he said. ‘I believe that they are not always guided

by generous or even just sentiments in their dealings with un¬

represented classes.’ They may react to non-existent perils; they

may serve the interests of white merchants irked by Indian

competitors.

Gandhi wished to establish one principle: that Indians were

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citizens of the British Empire and therefore entitled to equality

under its laws. He did not expect fair administration of the laws;

the whites would always be favoured. But once the principle of

legal equality was fixed he would be content to let life work out its

own complicated pattern, trusting honest citizens to brighten the

design. If, however, the Indians supinely acknowledged their

inferiority they would lose dignity and deteriorate. So would the

whites who imposed the inferiority.

Gandhi aimed to save the dignity of Indians and whites.

Thus far in South Africa, Gandhi had displayed unflagging

energy, an inexhaustible capacity for indignation, an eagerness

to serve the community, honesty which inspired trust, and a talent

for easy personal relations with the lowly and the prominent.

Zeal and a cause dissolved his timidity and loosened his tongue.

Though there was only slight visible evidence, as yet, of the great

Gandhi of history, he had proved himself an effective leader and

an excellent organizer. His Indian co-workers felt acutely, and he

could not fail to see, that without him the struggle for Indian

rights would collapse or at least lag.

Gandhi accordingly took six months’ leave and went to India

to fetch his family.

Arrived in the homeland in the middle of 1896, the twenty-

seven-year-old man with a mission developed a furious activity.

In Rajkot Gandhi spent a month in the bosom of his family writing

a pamphlet on Indian grievances in South Africa. Bound in

green and consequently known as ‘The Green Pamphlet’, it was

printed in ten thousand copies and sent to newspapers and

prominent Indians. Many publications reviewed it. To mail the

rest of the edition Gandhi, always eager to keep down expenses,

mobilized the children of the neighbourhood who wrote the

addresses, licked the wrappers and pasted the stamps when there

was no school. He rewarded them with used stamps and his

blessing. The children were delighted. Two of them grew up to

be Gandhi’s close disciples.

At this juncture, the bubonic plague appeared in Bombay and

Rajkot was in panic. Gandhi volunteered his services to the State

and joined the official committee in charge of preventive measures.

He stressed the need of supervising toilets and accepted that task

himself. ‘The poor people’, he remarks in his memoirs, ‘had no

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objection to their latrines being inspected and, what is more,

they carried out the improvements suggested to them. But when

we went to the houses of the upper ten, some of them even refused

us admission. It was our common experience that the latrines

of the rich were more unclean. 5 Next, Gandhi urged that the

committee investigate the untouchables’ quarter. Only one

committee member would go with him. It was Gandhi’s first

visit to the slums. He had never known how outcasts lived. He

discovered that they did not have latrines or any enclosed facilities.

But their houses were clean.

From Rajkot Gandhi went to Bombay to arrange a public

meeting on South Africa. He introduced himself to the leading

citizens and enlisted their support. Meanwhile he nursed his

sister’s husband, who was ill, and later moved the dying patient

into his own room. Gandhi always boasted of an ‘aptitude for

nursing which gradually developed into a passion’.

The Bombay meeting was a tremendous success because of the

sponsors and the topic. Gandhi had a written speech but could

not make himself heard in the big hall. Somebody on the plat¬

form read it for him.

At Poona, inland from Bombay, Gandhi interviewed two of the

great men of India: Gopal Krishna Gokhale, President of the

Servants of India Society, and Lokamanya Tilak, a giant intellect

and towering political leader. Tilak, Gandhi said later, was like

the ocean and you could not readily launch yourself on it; Gokhale

was like the Ganges in whose refreshing, holy waters one longed to

bathe. He fell in love with Gokhale but did not take him as his

guru. Gandhi described a guru in Young India of October 6th,

1921, as a rare combination of ‘perfect purity and perfect learn¬

ing’. Gokhale, as Gandhi saw him, failed to meet those require¬

ments. He did, however, become Gandhi’s political guru, his

ideal in politics.

‘They treat us as beasts,’ Gandhi cried out at a mass meeting in

Madras on October 26th, 1896. ‘The policy is to class us with the

Kaffir whenever possible,’ he said. South Africa depressed the

living standards of Indians and locked them up in insanitary

districts; then the whites condemned the dirty Indian habits.

‘Submission’ to these ‘insults and indignities’, Gandhi told the

meeting, ‘means degradation’. He urged resistance. He urged,

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too, that if no amelioration took place emigration from India to

South Africa be suspended.

At the Bombay, Poona and Madras meetings, Gandhi quoted

from the ‘Green Pamphlet 5 and asked the audience to buy it on

the way out. In Madras, the proud author, noting the brochure’s

success, brought out a second ten thousand edition which, at first,

‘sold like hot cakes’; but he had overestimated the market and was

left with a remainder.

Gandhi hoped to repeat the performance in Calcutta and

talked with newspaper editors and eminent citizens. But a cable

recalled him to Natal, South Africa, to cope with an emergency.

He therefore rushed back to Bombay where, with his wife, two

sons and the widowed sister’s only son, he boarded the S.S. Courland ,

a ship belonging to his client, Dada Abdulla Sheth, who gave the

whole family a free trip. The S.S. JVaderi sailed for Natal at the

same time. The two ships carried about eight hundred passengers.

Gandhi’s efforts to arouse Indian public opinion on the South

African issue had been reported, with exaggeration, in the South

African press. Now he was arriving with eight hundred free

Indians. This provoked fierce resentment among the whites:

Gandhi, they charged, intended to flood Natal and the Transvaal

with unwanted, unindentured coloured people. Gandhi was of

course innocent of recruiting or encouraging the travellers.

At first the ships were kept in quarantine, ostensibly because of

the plague in Bombay. But after the five-day quarantine period,

nobody was permitted to come ashore. In Durban, meetings of

whites demanded that the ships and their passengers, including

Gandhi, be returned to India. Dada Abdulla received offers of

reimbursement of losses if he sent the steamers back. The offers

were accompanied by veiled threats. He stood firm.

On January 13th, 1897, at the end of twenty-three days’ rocking-

outside the harbour (following a three-week voyage from Bombay)

the Courland and Naderi were permitted to dock. But Mr. Harry

Escombe, Attorney-General of the Natal government, who had

openly participated in the anti-Gandhi agitation, sent a message

to Gandhi to land at dusk to avoid trouble. Mr. F. A. Laughton,

an Englishman and legal counsellor of Dada Abdulla, advised

against this procedure. Nor did Gandhi wish to enter the city by

stealth. Mrs. Gandhi, who was pregnant, and the two boys accord-

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ingly disembarked in normal fashion and were driven to the home

of an Indian named Rustomji, while, by agreement, Gandhi and

Laughton followed on foot. The clamouring crowds had dis¬

persed; but two small boys recognized Gandhi and shouted his

name. Several whites appeared. Fearing a fight, Laughton

hailed a Negro-drawn rickshaw. Gandhi had never used one and

was reluctant to do so now. The rickshaw boy, in any case, from

fright ran away. As Gandhi and Laughton proceeded, the

crowd swelled and became violent. They isolated Gandhi from

Laughton and threw stones, bricks and eggs at him. Then they

came closer, seized his turban and beat and kicked him. Gandhi

fainted from pain but caught hold of the iron railings of a house.

White men continued to smack his face and strike his body. At

this juncture, Mrs. Alexander, the wife of the Police Superintend¬

ent, who knew Gandhi, happened to pass and she intervened and

placed herself between the maddened mob and the miserable

Gandhi.

An Indian boy summoned the police. Gandhi refused asylum

in the police station but accepted a police escort to Rustomji’s

house. He was bruised all over and received immediate medical

attention.

The city now knew Gandhi’s whereabouts. White gangs

surrounded Rustomji’s home and demanded that Gandhi be

delivered to them. ‘We’ll burn him,’ they yelled. Superintendent

Alexander was on the scene and tried, vainly, to calm or disperse

the howling mob. To humour them, Alexander led the singing of

And we’ll hang old Gandhi

On the sour apple tree,

but he sensed that the temper of the mob was rising and that

the house with all its inmates might be set on fire. Night had

set in. Alexander secretly sent a message to Gandhi to escape in

disguise. The Superintendent put two detectives at Gandhi’s

disposal. Gandhi donned an Indian policeman’s uniform and a

headgear that looked like a helmet while the two white detectives

painted their skins dark and dressed themselves as Indians.

The three then left by the rear of the house and, threading their

way through side streets, reached the police station.

When Alexander knew that Gandhi was safe, he informed the

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crowd of the fact. This new situation required diplomatic hand¬

ling and fortunately the police chief proved equal to it.

Gandhi remained in the safety of the police station for

three days.

News of the assault on Gandhi disturbed London. Joseph

Chamberlain, British Secretary of State for Colonies, cabled the

Natal authorities to prosecute the attackers. Gandhi knew several

of his assailants but refused to prosecute. He said it was not their

fault; the blame rested on the community leaders and on the

Natal government. ‘This is a religious question with me, 5 Gandhi

told Attorney-General Escombe, and he would exercise ‘self-

restraint 5 .

‘Gandhi ought to have hated every white face to the end of his

life, 5 wrote Professor Edward Thompson of Oxford. But Gandhi

forgave the whites in Durban who assembled to lynch him and

he forgave those who mauled and beat him. His soul kept no

record of past sins against his body. Instead of prosecuting the

guilty he pursued the more creative task of lightening his country¬

men’s lot.

Gandhi had been called back to South Africa to seize a happy

opportunity. Under pressure exerted from London by the

Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, and from the British

government in India, the Natal legislature was debating a law

to annul racial discrimination and replace it by an educational

test. This had been Gandhi’s goal. The Natal Act, passed in

1897, met his demand of equal electoral rights for British subjects,

Indians included; the attempt to disfranchise the few hundred

Indians was abandoned. Gandhi felt some satisfaction. Tempers

cooled and tensions relaxed.

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