

## **Gandhi, Tamils and the Satyagraha in South Africa**

### **E. S. Reddy**

At a farewell meeting of the Tamil community in Johannesburg on July 15, 1914, Gandhi said that the Tamils bore the brunt of the satyagraha struggle and that he felt he came to the meeting to meet his “blood-brothers.” He said in an interview to a Tamil correspondent in Rangoon on 12 March 1915: “I consider that I have more in common with the Tamil community than with any other.”

When the Indians in the Transvaal took the vow to defy the Black Act requiring them to carry passes, the merchants, mainly Muslims from Gujarat, were in the lead. But soon most of them dropped out for various reasons or only went briefly to prison once, and it was the poor Tamil minority in the Transvaal, consisting mainly of hawkers, waiters and grocers who sustained the struggle. Gandhi wrote *in Indian Opinion* on April 16, 1910: “There is hardly a Tamil left in the Transvaal who has not suffered imprisonment in the course of the passive resistance struggle.” Many of them not only suffered in prison but became destitute. But they continued the satyagraha until the provisional agreement of 1911.

When satyagraha was resumed in 1913, with its focus on Natal which had the largest Indian community, and women were invited to join, seventeen Tamil women from the Transvaal volunteered. They went around the mines and railway barracks near Newcastle, with six infants in arms, and encouraged the workers in the coal mines and the railways, mostly Tamils, to suspend work until the obnoxious three pound tax was abolished. That tax, imposed on workers who completed indenture and their wives and children to force them to sign another contract or return to India, had caused enormous suffering. “The appearance of the brave ladies simply acts like a charm and the men obey the advice given them without any great argument being required,” reported *Indian Opinion* on 22 October.

These Tamils were among the twenty-six women satyagrahis in 1913 who spent three months

with hard labour in the notorious Maritzburg prison. The six infants were in prison with them. Mrs. Kasturba Gandhi was one of the women prisoners.

Tamil leaders – above all Thambi Naidoo – organised the strike of the workers not only in mines and railways but also in plantations and municipalities. That was the largest strike in South African history until then.

Of the four martyrs of the satyagraha—Swamy Nagappan Padayachy, A. Narayanswamy, Harbat Singh and Miss Valliamma Munuswamy Mudaliar – three were Tamil youth. The workers who were killed or injured by their employers during the strike were Tamils.

The spirit of Thambi Naidoo and the Tamils can be seen in the letter he sent on 4 October 1909 to Gandhi, then in deputation to London. Passive resistance was at an ebb at the time, as most of the merchants were afraid to defy the law for fear of confiscation of their property. He wrote:

“... I beg to inform you that all Tamil prisoners discharged from the prison during your absence are ready to go back to gaol again & again until the Government will grant us our request

.  
I was in  
Pre  
toria on th  
e 22  
n  
d a  
n  
d 23  
r  
d o  
f last m  
o  
nth in  
o  
rder t  
o

re  
ce  
iv  
e  
the T  
ami  
I pris  
o  
ners  
who  
were  
d  
is  
c  
har  
ged o  
n th  
o  
s  
e d  
at  
es  
a  
n  
d I did re  
c  
eive t  
h  
em  
w  
it  
h a b  
lee  
di  
n  
g hea  
r  
t. I  
c  
ould  
n  
o  
t r  
eco  
gnise m  
o

re than a  
bo  
ut  
15  
men  
out o  
f the  
60  
p  
rison  
er  
s who  
w  
e  
re release  
d

.  
The r  
e  
aso  
n  
for  
t  
hi  
s  
was that they w  
ere  
so  
t  
h  
in an  
d w  
ea  
k,  
s  
ome of  
th  
e  
m n  
o  
th  
ing bu  
t  
ski  
n  
& bon

e,  
but in spite o  
f  
t  
his su  
ffe  
ri  
ng  
t  
h  
a  
t  
t  
hey have  
t  
o und  
erg  
o they were all p  
re  
p  
are  
d  
t  
o go back  
t  
o gaol  
t  
oday..."

[1]

Gandhi often praised the Tamils for their sacrifice. He wrote in *Indian Opinion* (5 June 1909): "No other Indians can equal the performance of the Tamils in this fight."

The heroism of the Tamils, especially the poor workers and hawkers, had great influence on Gandhi. He said at a farewell meeting in Durban on 9 July 1914: "In the van of the satyagraha battle were Indians born here and among them particularly the poor and the simple people rendered great services. The rich were busy getting richer." And he declared at a London reception on 8 August 1914:

"There were 20,000 strikers who left their tools and work because there was something in the air... These men and women are the salt of India; on them will be built the Indian nation that is to be. We are poor mortals before these heroes and heroines."

He said at a public reception in Madras on 21 April 1915:

" It was the Madrassesees who of all the Indians were singled out by the great Divinity that rules over us for this great work. Do you know that in the great city of Johannesburg, it is found among the Madrassesees that any Madrassesee is considered dishonoured if he has not passed through the jails once or twice during this terrible crisis that your countrymen in South Africa went through during these eight long years? You have said that I inspired these great men and women, but I cannot accept that proposition. It was they, the simple-minded folk, who worked away in faith, never expecting the slightest reward, who inspired me, who kept me to the proper level, and who compelled me by their great sacrifice, by their great faith, by their great trust in the great God to do the work that I was able to do."

This statement reflects not only the modesty of Gandhi, but what he learned from his South African experience. For, Gandhi's greatest contribution on his return to India was to transform the elite Indian National Congress into a mass movement for freedom in which simple peasants and workers played a crucial role.

The heroism and sacrifices of some of the Tamil satyagrahis deserve to be noted as they are little known in India and even in South Africa now.

***The Martyrs of the Satyagraha***

Swamy Nagappen Padayachy was sentenced on 21 June 1909, to ten days with hard labour for hawking without licence. He was sent to the Johannesburg prison road-camp and ordered to break stone from early morning in the bitter cold. He contracted double pneumonia and was released from jail on June 30th in a dying condition. He died on 6 July. He was given a public funeral by Indian community the next day. Gandhi wrote in *Satyagraha in South Africa*:

“Winter in the Transvaal is very severe; the cold is so bitter, that one’s hands are almost frozen while working in the morning. Winter therefore was a hard time for the prisoners, some of whom were kept in a road camp where no one could even go and see them. One of these prisoners was a young Satyagrahi eighteen years old of the name of Swami Nagappan, who observed the jail rules and did the task entrusted to him. Early in the morning he was taken to work on the roads where he contracted double pneumonia of which he died after he was released (7 July 1909). Nagappan’s companions say that he thought of the struggle and struggle alone till he breathed his last. He never repented of going to jail and embraced death for his country’s sake as he would embrace a friend.”

The second martyr of the satyagraha was A. Narayanswamy, a hawker in Johannesburg. He served with the British troops in a non-combatant capacity during the Anglo-Boer War and was granted residence in the Transvaal. He went to jail in 1908 and 1909, and was illegally deported to India in 1910. He returned to Durban with 82 other deportees. He was not allowed to land in Durban and had to go from port to port on the deck of the ship. He died on board *Gertrude Woermann* on 16 October 1910, and was buried in Delagoa Bay.

Gandhi called his death “legalised murder” and wrote in a letter to the press on 17 October:[2]

“... When he left this province for India as a deportee, he possessed a healthy constitution, but over six weeks on the decks of different steamers exposed to all sorts of weather evidently proved too severe for his constitution. Mr. Ritch... has stated in a letter to the Cape papers that he found these men (Narayanswamy and fellow-deportees) bootless and hatless and in some cases even without sufficient protection for the body, shivering on the open deck of that steamer. They were refused landing first at Durban, then at Port Elizabeth, then at the Cape, and again at Durban, the last time in defiance of an order of the Supreme Court... The (Immigration) Officer... in indecent haste sent these men to Delagoa Bay with the result that... Narayanswamy is no more.”

Valliamma, and her mother Mangalam, joined the second batch of Transvaal women who went to Natal in October 1913 to explain the inequity of the three pound tax to the workers and persuade them to strike. (Valliamma's father, R. Munuswamy Mudaliar, owner of a fruit and vegetable shop in Johannesburg and a satyagrahi in the Transvaal, was recovering from an operation). They visited different centres and addressed meetings. They were sentenced in December to three months with hard labour, and sent to the Maritzburg prison. Valliamma fell ill soon after her conviction, but refused an offer of early release by the prison authorities. She passed away shortly after release, on 22 February 1914.

Gandhi wrote in *Satyagraha in South Africa*:

“Valliamma R. Munuswami Mudaliar was a young girl of Johannesburg only sixteen years of age. She was confined to bed when I saw her. As she was a tall girl, her emaciated body was a terrible thing to behold.

‘Valliamma, you do not repent of your having gone to jail?’ I asked.

'Repent? I am even now ready to go to jail again if I am arrested,' said Valliamma.

"But what if it results in your death?" I pursued.

'I do not mind it. Who would not love to die for one's motherland?' was the reply.

"Within a few days after this conversation Valliamma was no more with us in the flesh, but she left us the heritage of an immortal name.... And the name of Valliamma will live in the history of South African Satyagraha as long as India lives."

On 15 July 1914, three days before he left South Africa, Gandhi attended the unveiling of the gravestones of Nagappan and Valliamma in the Braamfontein cemetery in Johannesburg.

### ***Some of the Other Satyagrahis***

Govindaswamy Krishnaswamy Thambi Naidoo was born in Mauritius where his parents had migrated. He was active in public affairs since he arrived in Johannesburg around 1893. He was the first Tamilian to start business in that city, and was a leader of the Tamil Benefit Society. He immersed himself in satyagraha when it began in the Transvaal and went fourteen times to prison.

Gandhi wrote to Gopal Krishna Gokhale on 6 December 1909:

“... perhaps the bravest and the staunchest of all (Indians in jail) is the indomitable Thambi Naidoo. I do not know any Indian who knows the spirit of the struggle so well as he does... He has sacrificed himself entirely...”

In the last phase of the satyagraha in 1913, he accompanied the Transvaal women satyagrahis from Johannesburg to Newcastle. He worked ceaselessly night and day among the indentured labourers in the mines. The strike on the mines which spread to plantations, railways, municipalities and other locations is largely due to the efforts of Thambi Naidoo and the women from the Transvaal.

T. Kuppuswamy Naidoo, his eldest son, courted imprisonment several times since he turned sixteen. In 1913, when it was decided to invite women to join the satyagraha, members of the Thambi Naidoo's family were in the first batch which proceeded to Natal to encourage the workers to strike. They included Mrs. N. Pillay, mother-in-law of Thambi Naidoo, the oldest of women satyagrahis; Veerammal, wife of Thambi Naidoo; and Mrs. N.S. (Lachimi) Pillay, wife of Veerammal's brother. They were sentenced to three months with hard labour. N.S. Pillai, brother of Veerammal, was also a satyagrahi and served four terms in prison.

Thambi Naidoo's family is unique in that for five generations its members went to prison in the struggle for freedom.

P. Krishnaswamy Naidoo, born in South Africa, was in the ambulance corps led by Gandhi during Anglo-Boer War. He was one of the most active passive resisters and served several terms in prison from the beginning of the satyagraha. He accompanied Gandhi on the Great March and was arrested with him on 9 November 1913. After release he went to Maritzburg and was arrested on 30 November for inciting workers to strike. He continued organising Indians in Maritzburg and Durban until the provisional settlement of 1914.

He died of pneumonia in 1924. Mahatma Gandhi wrote in an obituary:[3]

“He was one of the truest of Indians and the stoutest of hearts. He suffered the hardships of a prison life many times. His wife followed suit. He was ready for all work. He got ready on an hour`s notice to take charge of a party of deportees who were banished by General Smuts to India.[4] He counted no cost too dear for the sake of his country`s freedom. His death at the present moment, for our countrymen in South Africa, is a tremendous loss”.

□□ Mrs. P.K. Naidoo was one of the eleven Transvaal women who went to Natal in the third phase of the satyagraha in 1913, to persuade Indian workers to suspend work until the three pound tax was abolished. She was arrested on 21 October 1913, and sentenced to three months with hard labour. She again courted imprisonment in the 1946 Indian passive resistance and was elected to the executive of the Transvaal Indian Congress.

V. Amirthalinga Chettiar was born in 1860 in Tranquebar (now Tharangambadi). He traded in Mauritius, Port Elizabeth and Kimberley before moving to Johannesburg in 1893 where he set up business as a general dealer. He was chairman of the Tamil Benefit Society, the main organisation of the Tamil community in the Transvaal, and was highly respected by the community. He served three terms in prison totalling nine months during the satyagraha. He was sentenced to hard labour though suffering from diabetes and other illnesses.

Gandhi wrote *in Indian Opinion* on April 16, 1910:

“ Mr. Chettiar himself has been now arrested for the third time, his son [C. A. Varadan Chettiar] ... for the seventh time. These brave men have reduced themselves to poverty and have sacrificed literally their all for the sake of the national honour and their sacred oath. ... Mr. Chettiar, who was at one time in flourishing circumstances, has now become a pauper. We have seen some of the receipts for the jewellery which had been sold in order to provide for the household....”[5]

“Every hair on his body thrills with the determination to die for the sake of honour, for the sake of the motherland and the pledge, rather than surrender.” [6]

He died on 2 November 1920 in Johannesburg.

Vengadasala Munuswamy Mudaliar, known as Peter Moonlight, was once Chairman of Tamil Benefit Society. He was arrested in May 1910 and deported from the Transvaal to India. He returned to South Africa and managed to get in with difficulty. His wife, Minachi, was in the second batch of Transvaal women who went to Natal in October 1913, “in order to go among the indentured workers in Natal and explain the position to them.” She was sentenced in December to three months with hard labour. Their son Kuppuswamy, a student at Phoenix Settlement, was a member of the party of resisters led by Mrs. Kasturba Gandhi, and was sentenced to three months with hard labour. He was not yet 18.

V. S. Pillay, Chairman of Pretoria Tamil League, suffered two terms of imprisonment totalling nine months with hard labour in 1909. His wife was a member of the second batch of Transvaal women who went to Natal to persuade the workers to strike. She was sentenced to three months with hard labour and served the sentence in Maritzburg jail. Mrs. Pillay was then over 50 years of age.

Joseph Royeppen, born in Natal, worked as a clerk to Gandhi when he first established legal practice in Durban. He was a member of the Indian Volunteer Ambulance Corps led by Gandhi during the Anglo-Boer War. He later went to Britain and obtained B.A., LL.B. of Cambridge University (1906), graduating with distinction. He also passed Bar Final Examination to become a barrister. He was the first Indian barrister born in South Africa.

He returned to Durban in September 1909 and in December went to the Transvaal with Gandhi, Manilal and three others to claim his right as a British subject to enter the Transvaal. At a reception given by the Indian community, he said that after nine years absence from home, he thought he would be able to pass Christmas season among his people. But when the larger duty about the Transvaal struggle faced him, he quickly decided what he should do. "It was a terrible wrench for him to leave his old mother. But she willingly spared him for the sake of the Motherland."

[7]

Royeppen went several times to prison. *Indian Opinion* (5 March 1910) reported that Royeppen did all his work, including the carrying of slop pails, with the utmost cheerfulness, telling his fellow-prisoners that he had not gone to jail to pose as a B.A. but to be a common labourer.

Half a dozen relatives of Royeppen were in jail by October 1910.[8] Samuel Joseph, a nephew who was headmaster of the Seaview School, Durban, served two terms in prison – three months with hard labour and six weeks with hard labour. Solomon Royeppen, another nephew, was among the of resisters from the Phoenix Settlement in 1913, and served three months with hard labour.

N. Venugopal Naidoo was born in Papanasain in Tanjore (now Thanjavur) district in 1873. He migrated to Mauritius with his father in 1880 and was educated at Port Louis. He set up a business there in 1894. He moved to the Transvaal in 1898 and was active in public affairs. He was a member of the Theosophical Society and for some time honorary secretary of the Pretoria branch of the Tamil Benefit Society.

He was sentenced in January 1908 to three months but was released after the Gandhi-Smuts agreement at the end of the month. He was again sentenced in February 1909 to three months with hard labour. Soon after his release, the Indian community elected him as a member of a deputation to India, but the government arrested him on 17 June and he was sentenced to six months with hard labour. After release he settled in the Tolstoy Farm where he looked after cooking and taught Tamil to the children.[9]

### ***Support from Tamil Nadu***

G. A. Natesan of Madras, next only to Gopal Krishna Gandhi, was of greatest support to Gandhi and the Indian struggle in South Africa.

He publicised the struggle in the *Indian Review*, published two pamphlets by Henry S. L. Polak on the disabilities of Indians in South Africa

[10]

and distributed the biography of Gandhi by the Reverend J. J. Doke. He set up an influential committee in Madras – the Indian South African League – to support the Indian struggle in South Africa. He collected substantial amounts of money for the struggle, and was able to obtain contributions even from the Nizam of Hyderabad, the Maharaja of Mysore and the Maharaja of Bikaner.

[11]

Gandhi said in *Satyagraha in South Africa*:

“In those days Shri Natesan perhaps stood alone in India as a student of the grievances of Indians abroad, their valued helper, and a systematic and well-informed exponent of their case.”

Polak wrote in 1933:

“I recall G. A. Natesan’s generous activities on behalf of Mr. Gandhi and his other countrymen in South Africa, and how his heart flamed within him at the knowledge of the hardships and indignities to which they were being subjected by an unsympathetic and hostile Government. He was tireless in his efforts and restless in his energy. His vigorous speeches and writings on behalf of his suffering compatriots compelled attention by their obvious sincerity and accuracy of statement. ...

“Most of all I have to recall the loving service that Natesan gave to the South African Indian and Chinese deportees whom I had been able to rescue at Colombo and divert to Madras. I well remember how he devoted himself to them, day and night, during the whole of their stay in that hospitable City; how he sometimes slept and ate with them, though some of them were possibly untouchables; how he fraternised with them; helped them to restore confidence in themselves and pride in the cause they represented; and then I remember clearly how, when he came to the station to bid farewell on their journey to Bombay, and thence back to South Africa with me, he burst into tears as the train left the station.”[12]

Among those who were particularly helpful in Madras in support of the Indian struggle were V. S. Srinivasa Sastri and C. Rajagopalachari, who became life-long friends of Gandhi.

### ***Gandhi Tries to Learn Tamil***

Since the majority of Indians in South Africa were Tamils, Gandhi wanted to learn Tamil to be able to communicate with them. He began to study Tamil on the boat *S.S. Pongola* on which he sailed from South Africa to Calcutta in the middle of 1896. He wrote in his autobiography:

"The ship's doctor gave me a *Tamil Self-teacher* which I began to study. My experience in Natal had shown me that I should acquire a knowledge of Urdu to get into closer contact with the Mussulmans, and of Tamil to get into closer touch with the Madras Indians...

"With Tamil I made fair progress. There was no help available, but the *Tamil Self-teacher* was a well-written book, and I did not feel in need of much outside help."

He continued study of Tamil during his terms in jail. After the third imprisonment, he wrote in *Indian Opinion* (June 5, 1909):

"No other Indians can equal the performance of the Tamils in this fight. It therefore occurred to me that I should read Tamil with close attention, if for no other reason than to tender sincere thanks to them at least mentally. Accordingly, the last one month was devoted mostly to the study of Tamil. The more I learn it, the better I appreciate the beauties of this language. It is a very fine and sweet language, and from its structure and from what I have read in it, I find that the Tamils have produced, and still produce, a large number of intelligent, thoughtful and wise men. Moreover, since India is going to be one country, some Indians outside Madras should also learn Tamil." [13]

With the knowledge he gained, he was able to teach Tamil to the Tamilian children in the Tolstoy Farm.

He said in a speech at Dakshin Bharat Hindi Prachar Sabha in Madras on 26 March 1937:

“Indeed there was a time when I could speak in Tamil quite as well as I am now speaking Hindi. I had sufficient material when I was in South Africa to assist me in this, because I had to work in the midst of Tamils. but I must confess, to my regret and shame, that I have not kept up touch with it and have forgotten what little I knew of that language.”

### ***Cherished Memories***

When Gandhi established the Satyagraha Ashram at Kochrab in Ahmedabad on May 25, 1915, thirteen of the twenty-five inmates were Tamils. They included five who came from South Africa, four of them sons of Thambi Naidoo who were given to him for the service of India.[14]

Gandhi said on his first visit to Madras in April 1915 that he wished to visit places in the South from where the bulk of Indian settlers went to South Africa in order to meet passive resisters who may have settled there.[15] He was unable to fulfil his wish. But when he passed through villages on his tours in Tamil Nadu, he is reported to have recalled the names of people from the villages whom he knew in South Africa.

He cherished the memory of his association with Tamils in South Africa. He wrote in his autobiography:

“The affection that the Dravidians in South Africa showered on me has remained a cherished memory. Whenever I see a Tamil or Telugu friend, I cannot but recall the faith, perseverance and selfless sacrifice of many of his compatriots in South Africa. And they were mostly illiterate,

the men no less than the women. The fight in South Africa was for such, and it was fought by illiterate soldiers; it was for the poor, and the poor took their full share in it.”

Even in his last prayer meeting on 29 January 1948, a day before his assassination, Gandhi recalled the resourcefulness of the Madrassesees. He said that during the march from Newcastle to Volksrust, when the workers were given only a pound and a half of bread and an ounce of sugar each day, “they surprised me when on our striking camp they would pick out some edible greens or some other thing and cook it singing away in great delight.”

---

[1] From Gandhi archives at Sabarmati, Serial Number 5107

[2] This was published in *Rand Daily Mail*, and *The Transvaal Leader* on 18 October 1910, and in *Indian Opinion*, on 22 October.

[3] Published in *Young India*, 25 September 1924; *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Volume 25, pages 210-11.

[4] About 80 resisters in the Transvaal, including a few Chinese, were deported to India in 1910. After the court declared the deportations illegal, they later returned to South Africa and many of them again went to prison in the satyagraha.

[5] *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG)*, Volume 10, page 220.

[6] *CWMG*, Volume 10, p. 222.

[7] *Indian Opinion*, 1 January 1910

[8] *Ibid.* 29 October 1910

[9] *Indian Opinion*, 3 July 1909 and 18 June 1910

[10] *The Indians in South Africa: Helots within the Empire and how they are Treated and The Tragedy of Empire: The Treatment of British Indians in the Transvaal*

[11] *CWMG*, Volume 10, p. 381n

[12] *Souvenir of the Sashtiabdha-poorthi of the Hon. Mr. G. A. Natesan, Thursday, 24<sup>th</sup> August 1933, Madras*

[13] *CWMG*, Volume 9, page 242.

[14] *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Part V, Chapter IX.

[15] *The Hindu*, 10 April 1915

