

Gandhi in South Africa

The infamous train incident at PMBurg

(In this Centenary Series, especially written for The Leader, Ismail Meer deals with M.K. Gandhi's train and coach travel from Durban to Pretoria, which took place one hundred years ago).

THE Attenborough film *Gandhi* has been criticised by some historian as being very inaccurate on the South African part, which forms a very small portion of the great film.

It is hence vital that we go back to Gandhiji's Autobiography and quote his own words as to what happened and on which Pietermaritzburg will focus attention next week.

Gandhiji says: "On the seventh or eighth day of my arrival I left Durban. A first class seat was booked for me. It was usual there to pay five shillings extra, if one needed a bedding.

Abdulla Seth insisted that I should book one bedding but, out of obstinacy and pride and with a view of saving five shillings, I declined.

Unstinting

"Abdulla Seth warned me, 'Look now,' said he, 'this is different country from India. Thank God we have enough and to spare. Please do not stint yourself in anything you may need.' I thanked him and asked him not to be anxious."

But obviously this young man, who observed his 24th birthday in Pretoria on October 2, 1893, was himself full of anxiety in the strange country where already his turban had created a judicial controversy widely publicised in the press, which had dubbed him an "unwelcome visitor."

Gandhiji continues: "The train reached Pietermaritzburg, the capital of Natal at about 9 p.m. Bedding used to be provided at this station."

"A railway servant came and asked me if I wanted one. 'No,' said I, 'I have one with me.'"

"He saw that I was a 'coloured' man. This disturbed him. Out he went and came again with one or two officials."

"They all kept quiet, when another official came to me and said, 'Come along you must go to the van compartment.'"

Confrontation

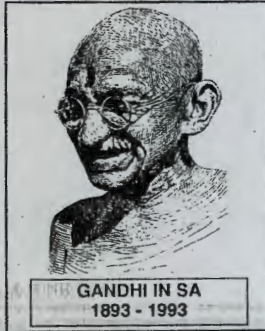
"But I have a first class ticket," said I.

"That doesn't matter," rejoined the other. "I tell you, you must go into the van compartment."

"I tell you, I was permitted to travel in this compartment at Durban, and I insist on going on it."

"No you won't," said the official. "You must leave this compartment, or else I shall have to call a police constable to push you out."

"Yes you may. I refuse to go out voluntarily."



"The constable came. He took me by the hand and pushed me out. My luggage was also taken out. I refused to go to the other compartment and the train steamed away."

"I went and sat in the waiting room, keeping my hand-bag with me, and leaving the other luggage where it was. The railway authorities had taken charge of it."

Before we came back to the Pietermaritzburg station, let us not overlook that the Pietermaritzburg incident took place on June 6. The very same station building that existed in 1893, still stands there unaltered as noted by India's top film producer Sham Benegal who is to make a film on Gandhi's 21 years in South Africa.

In 1893 indentured Indians were being employed on the Natal Railways and one asks whether the "servant: that came to enquire about bedding was White, Coloured or African. In later years Coloureds were employed as "bedding boys" who were all grown up men.

We may also conjecture with an amount of certainty that the third class "van compartment" was at the back of the train and not in 1893 marked "non-Europeans."

In the British Colony of Natal, one hundred years ago there was no train segregation but the Blacks - Africans, Coloureds and Indians - were expected to travel third class only.

Conversely, no White person was allowed to travel third class.

It may be safely assumed that if M.K. Gandhi had been a White person and had been with a third class ticket been found in the "van compartment" he would have been asked to move into the first or second class compartment and perhaps excused from paying the extra fare.

Kipling's Brits adage of the "twain never meeting" was in full force in the Railways of Natal, long before the birth of segregation and apartheid in the Colony, unlike the Republic of the Transvaal where anti-Indian legislation had been enacted in 1885 - the Group Areas Act of the 19th Century.

Was Gandhi identified as a "coloured" man because of his colour only? Or was it his colour and his turban, the Bangali Pughree?

History does not record this. Perhaps it was the turban only, since the turban had already created a problem for him in the Durban Magistrates' Court.

But let us now return to the young Gandhi, thrown out of the train and shivering in the June cold of Pietermaritzburg.

M.K. Gandhi continues his own story: "It was winter and winter in the higher regions of South Africa is severely cold. Maritzburg being at a high altitude, the cold was extremely bitter."

"My overcoat was in my luggage but I did not dare to ask for it lest I should be insulted again, so I sat and shivered."

"There was no light in the room. A passenger came in about midnight and possibly wanted to talk to me. But I was in no mood to talk."

"I began to think of my duty. Should I fight for my rights or go back to India or should I go on to Pretoria, without minding the insults, and return to India after finishing the case?"

Superficial

"It would be cowardice to run back to India without fulfilling my obligation."

"The hardship to which I was subjected was superficial - only a symptom of the deep disease of colour prejudice. I should try, if possible, to root out the disease and suffer hardships in the process."

"Redress for wrongs I should seek only to the extent that would be necessary for the removal of the colour prejudice."

"So I decided to take the next available train to Pretoria."

Indeed this was major turning point in the life of the young barrister destined to become the Mahatma, one of the greatest advocates of peace and non-violence produced in the Twentieth Century.

(Next week we will deal with the journey from Pietermaritzburg to Pretoria, via Charlestown, Pardekop, Standerton and Johannesburg).

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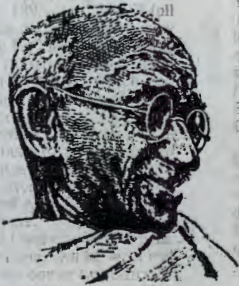
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Gandhi in South Africa

Gandhi's ashes also brought to SA

CT Bhoola recalls trip from India with urn

PART of Mahatma Gandhi's ashes were scattered in the sea off Durban's Umgeni River in 1948.

Prominent community figure, the late Sorabjee Rustomjee and businessman Mr C.T. Bhoola who were in India at the time of Gandhi's funeral brought some of the ashes back to South Africa.

They were accorded the honour by the then Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru who felt that it was appropriate to scatter some of the ashes here because of Gandhi's work in South Africa over a period of 21 years.

According to Mr Bhoola, who spoke to *The Leader* this week, the ashes were carried on board the SS Taira by him and Mr Rustomjee from Bombay to Durban.

However, they made a number of stops at East African ports where members of the local communities paid homage to the slain leader.

"When we reached Mombassa, the local community held a prayer meeting.

"The next day I took the ashes by overnight train to Nairobi. The urn carrying the ashes was placed at the window and at every station stop through the night people came to pay their respects.

"In Nairobi prayer meetings also took place and the mayor of the city sent a wreath and a message from him and the Governor of Kenya", said Mr Bhoola.

After the Nairobi trip, Mr Bhoola flew back to Mombassa with the ashes where he re-boarded the SS Taira.

"All along the coast, people paid homage to the Mahatma.

"In Beira a delegation from the then Southern and Northern Rhodesias requested a portion of the ashes.

"We communicated the request to New Delhi and received their permission.

"The delegation was given the ashes which was scattered in Lake Nyasa, Lake Malawi and also at the Victoria Falls."

The ashes eventually arrived in Durban where a number of prayer meetings were held, including one at the Phoenix Settlement, the home of Gandhi for many years.

The ashes were finally scattered in the sea at the mouth of the Umgeni River.



ABOVE: Mr Rustomjee, seen disembarking at Mombasa carrying the ashes of the Mahatma, while Mr Bhoola stands at the foot of the gangplank.



RIGHT: Mr Sorabjee Rustomjee (left) and Mr Chagan C.T. Bhoola, seen carrying the glass-encased urn containing the ashes of Mahatma Gandhi on board the S.S. Taira. They are surrounded by a group of passengers who travelled on the same vessel.

'A man without a pledge or a code of conduct is like a ship without a rudder' - GANDHI

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