Gandhi in South Africa

Gandhi and Indian cause

Aveling, the daughter of Karl Marx, with Edward Carpenter, the socialist whom Gandhiji admired, and many other intellectuals.

She vehemently opposed the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 and was virtually interned by the British authorities.

I do not know when Gandhiji first met Olive Schreiner - it may have been in 1907 when she moved to De Aar - but he was proud of the friendship.

Indian Opinion, in an editorial note on January 2, 1909, probably written by Gandhiji, had highly commended her for a letter she wrote on the race problem, commenting that she was of "greater permanent value to the world than a continent of Napoleons."

Gandhiji said in his speech on South Africa at the Kanpur Congress in 1925:

"I claim the privilege of having been a close friend of that great poetess and philanthropist and that most self-effacing woman - Olive Schreiner.

"She was a friend of the Indians equally with the Natives of South Africa. She knew no distinctions between white and black races.

"She loved the Indian, the Zulu and the Bantu as her own children...Such precious men and women have also been born and bred in South Africa."

In 1909, when Gandhiji was leaving on a deputation to Britain, she went to the ship in Cape Town with her sister and, in defiance of the racist authorities, shook hands with Gandhiji and expressed sympathy for the Indian cause.

Gandhiji was thrilled.

He wrote: "She performed this ceremony most heartily in the presence of a huge crowd and both the sisters were quite for a few minutes with us.

South Africa's prominent writer, Olive Schreiner, who described Gandhi as "the greatest spirit that has ever come to South Africa."

"Fancy the author of *Dreams* paying a tribute to passive resistance." (*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Volume 9, page 287).

She was instrumental in persuading her brother, W.P. Schreiner, a prominent Liberal parliamentarian, to support the Indian cause.

The admiration of Gandhiji to Olive Schreiner was reciprocated.

She told Mrs Sarojini Naidu in London in 1914: "Tell your young Indians that Mr Gandhi is the greatest spirit that has ever come to South Africa; he is the Mazzini of the Movement." (*Indian Opinion*, September 30, 1914).

Elizabeth M. (Betty) Molteno (1852-1927)

BETTY Molteno came from a very prominent family. Her father, Sir John, was the first Prime Minister of the Cape Colony, and her brother was the first Speaker of the South African Parliament.

Tired of riches and leisure, she took to teaching and became principal of a girls' school in Port Elizabeth.

She was forced to leave her job because of her opposition to the Anglo-Boer War.

She supported Emily Hobhouse and developed a close friendship with her.

She was not happy at the developments after the War and went to England. She met Gandhiji in London in 1909.

Returning to South Africa in 1912 she visited the Phoenix Settlement: "Your sweet Phoenix is a poem - a dream of loveliness" she wrote to Gandhiji.

She bought a cottage at Ohlange, a mile or two from Phoenix, and was there during the crucial phase of the Satyagraha, lending invaluable moral support which no European of her standing could conceive of.

Visiting the Phoenix Settlement on November 1913, when Gandhiji was in prison, she saw Soorzai, an invalid Indian worker, brought there by his family and colleagues after he was brutally flogged by his estate manager on suspicion of leading a strike.

Soorzai was subsequently jailed and died in prison on December 10.

Miss Molteno went to see the body in the hospital, joined the funeral procession organised by the Natal Indian Association in Durban, and later testified at the inquest.

She spoke at an Indian meeting in Durban on January 4 to welcome the Reverend C.F. Andrews - Gandhiji was among the other speakers - and called on Indians to identify with Africa: "Only as you learn to call Africa your Motherland can you become worthy children of her sacred soil."

Indian Opinion (January 7, 1914) quoted her speech as follows: "...After the Boer War I saw that Boer and Briton would have to unite, but would they try to do it at the cost of their dark brothers?

"Broken-hearted I went to England. For eight long years I remained away from Africa - in body - never in soul and spirit.

"And England and Europe have sent me back with this message to white South Africa: 'Open your hearts - your souls - to your brethren of colour.' We are in the 20th century. Rise to the heights of this glorious century.

"Try to comprehend the words of DuBois - that grand and sympathetic soul; 'The 20th century will be the century of colour'. And I say it is also the Century of the woman. She, too, is divine and supreme. She, too, must play her God-appointed part - and in this 20th century her part will be a great one."

On January 12, 1914, she spoke at a meeting to welcome Mrs Sheikh Mehtab and Hanifa Bibi, the two Muslim women passive resisters, on their release from prison.

On January 20, she spoke at another meeting to welcome a group of women passive resisters from the Transvaal, and expressed the hope that in the future multi-racial South Africa, women would take a prominent part.

Alice M. Greene (died 1920)

Alice Greene, friend and companion of Miss Molteno, came from another distinguished family.

One of her uncles was head of the Admiralty in Britain. Her brother, principal of a public school in Britain, was father of Graham Greene, the famous novelist.

She was vice-principal of the school in Port Elizabeth of which Betsy Molteno was principal. She too opposed the Boer war and was an advocate of women's rights.

Ruth Alexander

Ruth Alexander deserves mention in this group though she arrived in South Africa after the Anglo-Boer War and was not involved in the anti-war campaign.

Daughter of an American Jewish scholar, Ruth married Morris Alexander in 1907 at the age of 19 and went to South Africa. Advocate Alexander - a relative of Herman Kallenbach, associate of Gandhiji - was a Jewish leader and liberal parliamentarian who had been helpful to the Indians. Ruth soon became an admirer, disciple and friend of Olive Schreiner.

Gandhiji first met her in Cape Town in February 1914. He and Kasturba stayed at the Alexander home on their last night in South Africa in July 1914.

Mrs H.S.L. Polak, who was sympathetic to the Indian cause, and was to write a book, "Gandhi - the Man", seen with Gandhi and Kallenbach during the Great Strike in 1913.

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WHAT GANDHI SAYS

"Someone has said that Europeans in South Africa dread the advent of Islan - Islam, that civilized Spain; Islam, that took the torch of light to Morocco an preached to the world the Gospel of Brotherhood. The Europeans of Soutl Africa dread the advent of Islam, as they claim equality with the white races They may well dread it. If brotherhood is a sin, if it is equality of the coloure races that they dread, then their dread is well-founded."

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