

*The Story of My Experiments with Truth: A Study of  
Cultural Perspective on MK Gandhi's Migration to South Africa*

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the diasporic identity of MK Gandhi and explores the cultural perspective on his migration to South Africa in 1893. Gandhi became a significant Indian voice in late nineteenth century and he played a crucial role in confronting the harsh reality of racial discrimination against Indian community living in South Africa. His experiences as a migrant serve as a tool to analyse the nature of racial discrimination, racial hierarchies and diasporic identity. The historical information in the paper is drawn from MK Gandhi's autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, and Ramachandra Guha's *Gandhi Before India*. MK Gandhi went through the similar kind of ordeals which ordinary Indians immigrants faced, he was also subjected to discrimination and prejudice due to his brown colour and Indian heritage. An examination of Gandhi's encounter with the Africans, white colonizers, colonial authorities and white South Africans will shed a light on how culture and diasporic social setting served as a ground for his decision to stay there and fight for the rights of Indian communities in Africa. The Natal Indian Congress formed in 1894 provided him the platform to articulate and represent the Indian communities in South Africa. He used writing and speeches to raise awareness among the Indian communities so that they could voice their concerns and grievances. The study will also evaluate and analyse his social interaction with the migrant population and indentured labours. The study will bring forth the impact that the migration and immigration can have on an individual's life. His migration to South Africa was supposed to be a short term but it lasted for 21 years. This paper aims to analyse how Gandhi's cultural exchanges in the new country played a significant role in shaping the course of his entire life. As much as the experiences of new country altered him as a person, the new country is also indebted to his contribution in making the social fabric of South Africa more accommodative.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, migration, Indian voice, apartheid, indentured labours etc.

Gandhi made notable contribution to the Indian diaspora in South Africa. His role as an activist has gained much attention from the historians but his experiences as a migrant is not much talked about. The present paper will explore his journey as a migrant in a new nation and his complex relationship with migrants and the colonial powers. In most of the biographies of Gandhi, the phase of his life that he spent in South Africa has been skipped over hastily. This phase has been treated as a "prelude" (Guha 18) to his later life which is considered to be more significant. Earlier part of his life has been ignored by most of the biographers and chroniclers who were mainly interested in magnifying his part as an activist. Gandhi arrived in South Africa in 1893 as a young Indian lawyer to represent Abdullah Sheth, a merchant, in a legal case. When he was approached with the case, he saw "a tempting opportunity of seeing a new country, and of having new experience." (qtd. in Guha 75) in his autobiography, Gandhi writes, "In April 1893, I set forth full of zest to try my luck in South Africa" (103). He left his wife and family and sailed from Bombay to Durban on 24th April. He further says, "When starting for South Africa I did not feel the wrench of separation which I had experienced when leaving for England . . . I had gained some knowledge of the world and of travel

abroad...” (102). In words of Nalini Natrajan, “Transethnicity is what Gandhi notes when he lands in the bustling Durban harbour” (71). He recounts his first encounter with the people in the region as follows, “I went to the Post Office and was delighted to see the Indian clerks there and had a talk with them. I also saw the Africans, and tried to acquaint myself with their ways of life which interested me very much.”(Gandhi 103). He witnesses interaction between the merchant class and labour class. The Indian migrants had already settled over there. Soon, he became aware of the pervasive racism and prejudice that characterized South African Society at that time.

The first Indians who sailed for Natal thirty three years before Gandhi were a group of indentured labours. They were brought into work on sugar plantations. However, he soon realized that the Indian community faced extensive discrimination, prejudice and segregation and humiliation from the white colonial rulers in the region. “I observed that the Indians were not held in much respect. I could not fail to notice a sort of snobbishness about the manner in which those who knew Abdullah Sheth behaved towards him, and it stung me.” (Gandhi 105). He himself was called a “coolie barrister” (Gandhi 107). Coolie was a common denotation for all the Indians. The colour prejudice was so rampant that even the hotels did not accept Indians as guests and Gandhi also found it difficult to find lodgings. He found that Indians faced various discriminations such as all except Europeans had to carry a pass when out in the street at night, traders were not permitted to sell goods on Sunday- the day their main clients, the indentured labours were off work— and not allowed to open shops in the city centre; lavatories were marked “natives and Asiatics” (qtd. In Guha 115) at the railway stations. They did not issue first and second class tickets to the Indians. With these incidents, eventually he learnt about the hardships faced by the Indian immigrants. “I thus made an intimate study of the hard conditions of the Indian settlers, not only by reading and hearing about it but by personal experience.” (Gandhi 126) These conditions impelled Gandhi to take up the struggle for the rights and dignity of Indian settlers who formed a significant part of the working class. Due to the deficit of labours in South Africa, the Natal government sought to import labour from India in late 1850s. “the coolies who came to Natal were indentured for five years. They could reindenture for a further five years and then claim a return voyage home or stay on in Natal as “(nominally) free”. Some returned home, others chose to stay on, to work as household servants, farmers etc. When MK Gandhi first arrived in South Africa in 1893, he had no intention of staying there for more than a few months. His original purpose for going to South Africa was to represent a client in a legal dispute, but he soon became involved in the struggle against laws that discriminated against Indians and other non-whites. Gandhi had won the case and he prepared to go to India. Abdullah’s guests at his party wanted Gandhi to fight the legislation for them. A bill was introduced before the Natal Assembly that would prohibit Indians from enrolling as voters. He ponders:

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? It would be cowardice to run back to India without fulfilling my obligation. The hardship to which I was subjected was superficial—only the symptom of 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. (Gandhi 110)

And then it was decided that as long as Gandhi stayed in Durban, the merchant would pay him an annual retainer.

Despite winning the case he came for in South Africa, Gandhi realized that the fight against discrimination and racism was far from over, and that he could make a difference by staying and continuing to fight for

the rights of Indians and other minorities in South Africa. He also became deeply involved in the Indian community in South Africa, seeing it as his duty to defend and support his fellow Indians in their quest for justice and equality.

Gandhi's stay in South Africa is significant from another perspective also as it helped him to develop his philosophy of Satyagraha, which became a defining feature of his life and activism. Gandhi's philosophy of Satyagraha, or nonviolent resistance, was a powerful tool that empowered diasporic and other marginalized communities to fight for their rights and resist oppression without resorting to violence. Through his work and teachings, Gandhi became a symbol of resistance against colonialism and oppression, not just in India but across the world. He had immense pride in his cultural identity and he strongly opposed to the restrictions on immigrants on practising their own faith and speaking their own language. Migrants usually face discrimination and sometimes mistreated due to their choice of dressing and eating habits. If their clothing style is perceived different from the majority culture, they are forced to give up their cultural identity. Indians faced predicament in South Africa as migration of groups, communities, willingly, unwillingly gave rise to many difficulties.

In one incident, a white magistrate insisted that Gandhi should remove his turban in the court, which Gandhi clearly refused as it was a symbol of his Indian heritage and cultural identity. He could empathize with the fellow Indians and quickly became involved in the struggle for the rights of Indian immigrants who were facing discrimination and mistreatment at the hands of colonizing authorities and white Africans. He worked tirelessly to raise the awareness of the struggles and challenges faced by the Indian immigrants and he inspired many people to join the fights for their rights and dignity. He refused to remove his turban in court, as he believed it to be a symbol of his commitment to his cultural and religious identity and powerful statement against discrimination and oppression. This is an important cultural aspect of his migration to South Africa where he clearly refuses to give up his cultural identity. He retained his identity as an Indian throughout his stay in South Africa. In initial days he faces a dilemma regarding the issue of wearing the turban. In his words:

The question of wearing the turban had a great importance in this state of things. Being obliged to take off one's Indian turban would be pocketing an insult. So I thought I had better bid goodbye to the Indian turban and begin wearing an English hat, which would save me from the insult and the unpleasant controversy. (Gandhi 107)

Later he retains turban which gains lot of traction from the press and he is also tagged as an 'unwelcome visitor' and he also gains a lot of fame due to the incident.

Gandhi's cultural background as an Indian Hindu played a significant role in his approach to the struggle for the rights of Indians in South Africa. He says:

I found myself completely absorbed in the service of community, the reason behind it was my desire for self-realization. I had made the religion of service my own, as I felt that God could be realized only through service. And service for me was the service of India, because it came to me without my seeking, because I had an aptitude for it. (Gandhi 150)

He believed that nonviolence and civil disobedience could be used as a powerful tool to fight against oppression and injustice. This philosophy was rooted in his understanding of Hinduism, which advocates nonviolence, compassion and social justice. Gandhi's cultural background also influenced his approach to personal spirituality, which was central to his life and work. Furthermore, Gandhi's promotion of Indian culture, arts and traditions, especially through his advocacy of *Khadi* and *Charkha*, helped spread awareness

about the richness and diversity of Indian culture, making a significant impact on the Indian diaspora globally.

As a member of the Indian diaspora himself, Gandhi had an intimate understanding of the challenges and struggles that diasporic communities face, including discrimination, displacement, and a sense of disconnection from their homeland. His experiences in South Africa, where he fought against discrimination faced by the Indian community, helped shape his vision for a just and peaceful world. Along with Gandhi, his wife Kasturba was also subjected to racial discrimination. Her first exposure to South Africa was not a pleasant one. When they reach South Africa, her husband is attacked by the mob. This incident had a profound effect on her and after this she could not trust the whites in South Africa. She mostly confined herself to her home in Durban and she didn't have Indian friends either. Another problem she faced as a migrant was the language problem. She used to speak the language of the bazaar in Rajkot. In India, she also had friends and relatives and missed having friends in Durban.

Gandhi's cultural background presented various challenges during his stay in South Africa. He had to navigate the cultural differences between the Indian and South African communities and develop a strategy that could effectively address the concerns of the Indian community. Gandhi realized that cultural and social differences were significant obstacles to achieving unity and solidarity among the Indian community, which was necessary for the success of their struggle. During his stay, he was worried about his children's education. He expresses his concern and says:

I could have sent them to the schools for European children, but only as a matter of favour and exception. No other Indian children were allowed to attend them. For these there were schools established by Christian missions, but I was not prepared to send my children there, as I did not like the education imparted in those schools. (Gandhi 184)

He got children admitted in India for better education as he believed, “there isn't so much moral to be drawn from the works of the English poets as from our old story-poems.” (qtd. in Guha 160)

Gandhi's stay in South Africa was also an opportunity for him to learn about the culture and traditions of the Zulu people, who he admired for their spirit of resistance and resilience. He recognized the importance of cultural diversity and the need for mutual respect and understanding among different communities. He explores his identity as an Indian and as a member of the Indian diaspora, as well as his attempts to understand the culture and traditions of the Zulu people. He also reflects on his spiritual and philosophical journey, which was influenced by his cultural heritage and the experiences of his life in South Africa.

Gandhi's autobiography can be read as a diasporic literature as it highlights the challenges faced by individuals who migrate from their homeland and the struggle to find a sense of identity and belonging in a new culture. It also reflects the importance of cultural heritage and the need to understand and appreciate other cultures. In his autobiography, Gandhi reflects on his experiences as a member of the Indian diaspora in South Africa and his struggle to find a sense of belonging. It provides a sneak peek into the inner lives of Indian migrants. It reflects his experiences as a member of the Indian diaspora in South Africa and his struggle to find a place in the world where he could belong. It also highlights the challenges faced by individuals who migrate from their homeland and the importance of cultural heritage and understanding other cultures. Diasporic literature reflects the experiences of people who have migrated from their homeland to other parts of the world, often due to economic or political reasons. Gandhi's own migration was due to economic reasons. In his words, “I had gone to South Africa for travel, for finding an escape from Kathiawad intrigues and for gaining my own livelihood” (Gandhi 150). His autobiography also

explores themes such as displacement, identity and cultural conflict. His autobiography reflects his struggles with these themes throughout his life.

Gandhi's experiences in South Africa, where he faced discrimination and mistreatment because of his race, were a turning point in his life. He became aware of the extent of the oppression faced by Indians in South Africa.

When Gandhi arrived in South Africa in 1893, there were 50,000 Indians, most of whom had come in as indentured labours to work in the mines and sugar plantations. According to Guha. "...the Indians should really be considered to be among apartheid's first victims. And in so far as it was Gandhi who led the first protests against the racial laws, he should really be more seriously recognized as being among apartheid's first opponents" (22). It can be argued that he laid the groundwork for later struggles against apartheid. He further says, "Gandhi's South African Campaigns were an early example of 'diasporic nationalism'..." (22) Gandhi had a significant interaction with Indian indentured laborers during his time in South Africa. During his years spent there, he became deeply involved in advocating the rights of the Indian community, including the indentured laborers who had been brought to South Africa to work on sugarcane plantations and mines. Gandhi's efforts on behalf of the Indian indentured labours in South Africa included organizing protests and strikes, negotiating with plantation owners and government officials, and creating awareness about their plight among the Indian community in South Africa and back home in India. His efforts were instrumental in creating better working and living conditions for Indian indentured labours, and many of the rights and protections that they enjoy today are due in large part to Gandhi's efforts. Gandhi saw the conditions that the indentured laborers were working and living in, and he was appalled by the treatment they received from the white plantation owners. He became a fierce advocate for their rights and worked tirelessly to improve their living and working conditions. He believed that Indians, regardless of their social or economic status, deserved equal rights and dignity, and he saw clear parallels between their struggles and those of the Indian community as a whole.

Gandhi's interaction with Indian indentured laborers was an important part of his work in South Africa. His advocacy for their rights and improvement of their living and working conditions became an important part of his broader efforts to promote social justice and equality for the Indian community as a whole. He took up the case of one Balasundaram and helped to release him from his employer. This reached the ears of all indentured labours and they came to regard Gandhi as their friend. He writes, "A regular stream of indentured labours began to pour into my office, and I got the best opportunity of learning their joys and sorrows." (Gandhi 147)

Gandhi's struggle in South Africa was essentially a migrant's struggle as he identified himself as an immigrant who was fighting for the rights of his fellow migrants. He saw that the Indian community in South Africa was subjected to harsh working conditions, racial segregation, and discriminatory laws such as the Poll Tax Act, which required Indians to pay a tax to vote, and the infamous Black Act, which gave the police power to arrest any person of colour without a warrant. Gandhi realized that the Indian community needed legal representation and assistance, and he established the Natal Indian Congress in 1894 to fight for their rights.

The Natal Indian Congress became the forum for the Indian community to voice their grievances, and Gandhi took up the challenge of leading the organization. He mobilized the community and organized various campaigns, including boycotts, strikes, legal challenges, and civil disobedience, to protest against the discriminatory laws and policies of the colonial government. Gandhi's most notable campaign was the Satyagraha campaign, which used nonviolent resistance to challenge the colonial authorities and their

discriminatory policies. In his article, Suraj Milind Yengde asserts, “Indian activism in South Africa, and Africa in general, is premised on, and inspired by Gandhi’s ideals- apart from a few socialist believers” (65).

Through his struggle, Gandhi secured various concessions for the Indian community, including repealing the poll tax, recognizing Indian marriages and providing the right to vote. However, Gandhi's struggle in South Africa was not without challenges as he faced arrest, imprisonment, and backlash from the white community, who did not want to give up their power and privileges. He felt that his experience in South Africa had equipped him with the necessary skills and knowledge to fight for social justice in India. It can be argued that “Gandhi was fundamentally shaped by his South African experience.”

Gandhi is often regarded as the voice of the Indian diaspora due to his role in leading India's freedom struggle and his work as a global ambassador of Indian culture, values, and traditions. Gandhi's work and philosophy were rooted in his understanding of the Indian diaspora, which helped shape his views on the importance of cultural identity, nonviolence, and self-rule. Gandhi's role as the voice of the Indian diaspora was shaped by his experiences as a member of the diaspora and his work as a global ambassador of Indian culture and values. His teachings and philosophy continue to inspire diasporic communities around the world to fight against oppression and stand up for their rights, while also promoting a deeper understanding and appreciation of Indian culture and traditions.

Gandhi's struggle in South Africa was a migrant's struggle, which recognized the plight of the Indian community in the region. He fought for their rights and dignity through nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience, securing various concessions from the colonial government. Over time, Gandhi's activism and leadership in South Africa made him a well-known and respected figure in South Africa. This news quickly spread in India also and this eventually led to his return to India in 1915, where he would become a leading figure in India's independence movement

Gandhi’s twenty one years spent in South Africa, as recorded in his autobiography and biographies, traces the complex relationship of Indian migrants with the natives. During his stay, he created a sense of unity and solidarity among the Indian communities and built alliances with other marginalized communities residing there, such as the Africans and other coloured communities. Political, religious, social contexts also find expression in his autobiography. And at the same time, his cultural perspective played a crucial role in shaping his approach to the struggle for the rights of Indians in South Africa. It helped him to understand and appreciate the cultural differences between different communities. Gandhi's stay in South Africa was an opportunity for him to learn about different cultures and traditions and the importance of diversity and respect for other cultures. He raised awareness about injustices faced not only by the Indian communities, but he also articulated a vision for a more just and equitable society. He influenced the country on various different levels and left a lasting impression on them.

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