



Between Empire and Identity: Gandhi's Legal and Political Activism in South Africa

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Abstract

The paper discusses Mohandas K. Gandhi's legal and political activism in South Africa, where his experiences there shaped his identity and the development of his philosophy of resistance. Gandhi operated within the British Empire from 1893 to 1914, while at the same time protesting its racial and legal injustices. In his early years, he started as a lawyer who promoted the interests of Indian merchants, but over time, he was able to become a political leader who used organisations like the Natal Indian Congress and the Indian Opinion newspaper to mobilise the Indians. Faced with discriminatory laws and unspoken racism, Gandhi switched to non-violent protest, which was organised, and constitutional petitions were substituted and eventually evolved to Satyagraha. This paper examines the triangularity of empire, race, and identity in the South African experience of Gandhi, by stating that it was these formative years that formed the basis of his ideological approach to his involvement in the anti-colonial struggle in India.

Introduction

The development of the political and intellectual life of Mohandas K. Gandhi is impossible to analyse without considering his revolutionary period in South Africa. Gandhi came into the world in 1893 as a young lawyer with a dearth of political experience in an intricate colonial society built on a set of strict racial lines and segregation laws. Early instances of segregation (the removal by a train at Pietermaritzburg, being refused a place to stay, and being abused by a court of law) were the turning point in his awareness. What had started as a single-year legal assignment slowly turned into a twenty-one-year involvement in the political, social, and moral issues that the Indian community was going through in South Africa (Du Toit, 1996). The activism of Gandhi was centrally developed against the wider context of the British Empire, in which the rule of law and the administrative apparatus were equally restraining and facilitating political action. Gandhi used petitions, legal appeals, and methods based on the constitution initially to attain justice for Indians as loyal imperial subjects. But sure enough, the continued ineffectiveness of these moderate tactics, as well as the more and more forcibly exerted racial oppression, pushed him to new approaches to resistance (Power, 1969). His work in the Natal Indian Congress, the formation of the Indian Opinion newspaper, and his opposition to the Asiatic



Interdisciplinary Journal of Information, Knowledge, and Management

*An Official Publication
of the Informing Science Institute*

SCOPUS INDEXED

Vol. : 20, Issue 2 2025

ISSN: (E) 1555-1237

Registration Act provided a foundation for a unique political ethic that challenged the ethical and moral validity of imperial authority. These were the South African years wherein Gandhi tested and tried the concept of non-violent resistance - now called Satyagraha. The paper discusses how the two roles of Gandhi as the imperial subject and as the leader of a subordinate minority influenced his identity and ideology as they evolved (Dhupelia-Mesthrie, 2009). Through the study of his legal interventions, political mobilization, and philosophical transformations, this study holds that South Africa was the key ingredient in shaping Gandhi's worldview. Knowledge of this stage is vital in the comprehension of the creation of a leader who would in the future become the leader of the Indian nation in the quest to gain independence and influence the masses of the world to fight for justice and civil rights.

To analyse how his legal practice, political activism, and his own experience in a racially stratified colonial society contributed to his developing philosophy of resistance, this paper critically looks at the developing years of Mohandas K. Gandhi, as his philosophy in South Africa. Through the analysis of the era 1893-1914, the research provides an understanding of how the experiences of discrimination and imperialism set Gandhi apart from the constitutional and legalistic approaches to the fresh moral and political paradigm of Satyagraha. The paper presents a case that South Africa was the place where the identity of Gandhi evolved as a lawyer of the Empire into a symbol of non-violent resistance around the globe. This paper, using a historical and sociological perspective, analyses the aspects of leadership that Gandhi played in the Natal Indian Congress, the mobilization of the Indian community, and his strategic application of print media, which is the Indian opinion. It also analyses his talks with colonial leaders, civil disobedience campaigns, and changing ideological commitments. The article argues that the experience that Gandhi had in South Africa not only informed his political ideology but also created the pillars that would guide the independence movement in India. Finally, the study establishes the South African activism of Gandhi as a revolutionary and final step in the history of anti-colonial movements today.

Research Objectives

1. To analyse the colonial legal and administrative structures of Natal and the Transvaal and how they shaped the racial environment Gandhi encountered in South Africa.
2. To examine Gandhi's role as a lawyer and his early legal interventions in defending the rights of the Indian community against discriminatory colonial policies.



3. To investigate the evolution of Gandhi's political activism, including his leadership in institutions such as the Natal Indian Congress and the *Indian Opinion* newspaper.
4. To explore the development of Satyagraha in South Africa and assess how Gandhi transitioned from constitutional methods to organised non-violent resistance.
5. To assess how Gandhi's experience within the British Empire contributed to his identity formation and laid the ideological foundation for his later anti-colonial leadership in India.

South Africa Under the British Empire

The socio-political landscape and the British imperial control of South Africa in 1893, when Gandhi arrived, seriously influenced racial stratifications, and a state apparatus was strengthened and developed to safeguard white supremacy. The British Empire had established dominance in control of the Natal region and, through the South African War (1899-1902), it had increased its control in the Transvaal region, establishing administrative frameworks that favoured the European settlers at the expense of Africans and non-white immigrant populations, such as Indians (Choudhary & Mandot, 2024). The government of Natal, which was dominated by the settlers, introduced discriminatory laws to control the movement and residence, as well as civil rights of the non-Europeans, because they were considered a threat to their economy and society, although the Indians were being treated as British subjects. The Transvaal, originally a Boer republic, subsequently a British colony, imposed even more severe racial limitations against Asians, which were justified by the state on the grounds of preservation of the status of social order and racial purity. The sentiments against Indians escalated when Indians came into the limelight of trade, agriculture, and urban professions; Europeans started to see them as their rivals, and agitation became intensified to an extent where segregationist laws were enacted to deny them their voting rights, restrict their ownership of land, trade licences, and they were restricted to occupy their own residential areas. There were two different groups of Indians within the hostile setting, which were indentured labourers and passenger Indians (Ahmad, 2024). The indentured labourers who were imported to the country (1860-1911) to labour in sugar plantations and railroads, among other industrial purposes, found themselves in agonising working conditions, had low wages, were subjected to coercive measures, and after the duration of indenture, they were in an impossible situation of eking out meaningful lives because of continued racial discrimination. The other group of Indians was passenger Indians who were mainly traders, merchants, and professionals, and were better educated and economically stable, but were also victimized by systematic discrimination, limiting their mobility, economic progress, and political involvement. These groups were both subjected to tremendous



Interdisciplinary Journal of Information, Knowledge, and Management

*An Official Publication
of the Informing Science Institute*

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Vol. : 20, Issue 2 2025

ISSN: (E) 1555-1237

economic, social, and racial pressures including tax, limitations to business activities, lack of accessibility of public services and constant segregation of the school systems, hospitals, transport and residential neighbourhoods, and this was made more serious by the racist colonial thought which saw the Indians as less than equal and culturally incompatible with the white society (Vahed, 2015). The racial politics became entrenched between the 1890s and 1910s; this means that the white political leaders worked harder to secure economic dominance by enforcing more strict rules on the non-white populations. It led to extremely oppressive measures that included the introduction of the Asiatic Registration Act 1907 in the transit of the crossing, which forced all Indians and other Asians to be registered, to carry a pass with a print of their finger, and be summoned to give it on command; otherwise, it resulted in imprisonment, or even a fine, or deportation. These humiliating registration procedures were the major complaint and a direct cause of his first movement of Satyagraha by Gandhi (Singh, 2024). At the same time, pass laws restricted movement within and between provinces, and Indian merchants were also given special treatment, with some being unable to renew business licences as a result, which essentially limited their survival. All these policies taken together had made the white economic hegemony and institutionalised racial segregation in South Africa. It was this atmosphere of oppression in the colonies under British rule that served as the background against which his legal activities and philosophy of politics developed, and led Gandhi to change his approach to constitutional petitioning to organised non-violent resistance.

Gandhi as a Lawyer

In the case of Gandhi, he experienced the starting point of a life of transformation in his career and political awareness as a result of his legal profession and the essence of race disparity in a society dominated by the British, which served as the basis of his awakening in 1893 when he arrived in Natal. Through his initial significant work, the Dada Abdulla case, he got to be acquainted with the Indian merchant community and got to showcase his legal skills by personally negotiating a complicated business case. This initial triumph was, however, marred by the ugly experiences of racism, especially the incident at Pietermaritzburg when he was thrown out of a train with a valid first-class ticket, and one more occurrence at a courthouse where he was commanded to take off his turban (Vahed, 2017). These humiliations left a memorable mark on him, the vulnerable position of the Indian in South Africa, and made him more aware of systemic discrimination. Being passionate about fighting these evils, Gandhi wanted to prove himself as not only a lawyer but also a leader of society. Indian merchants trusted him because they believed he was both honest and transparent in his legal arguments, as well as dedicated to the welfare of the group. His activities soon spread from the field of litigation to that of



Interdisciplinary Journal of Information, Knowledge, and Management

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SCOPUS INDEXED

Vol. : 20, Issue 2 2025

ISSN: (E) 1555-1237

public protest, especially against discriminatory bills brought before the Natal Assembly. Gandhi voiced concerns of his communities through in-depth legal examinations and titles, and he started to write petitions that countered the ethical and legal legitimacy of such bills (Goswami, 2009). His constitutionalism was largely based on appeals to imperial justice: he addressed numerous petitions to the Colonial Office in London and to the British Parliament, claiming that Indians, being British subjects, had the same rights and protections as other imperial citizens. Gandhi tried to highlight the hypocrisy of colonial rule by splitting the Indian struggle into the issue of devotion to the Empire and equal standing before the law, to achieve a moral justification of the political changes. These initial years were the basis of his subsequent development into a political tactician and organised resistance leader.

Political Mobilisation and Institutional Leadership

The formulation of a political organisation, the nucleus of the Indian political mobilisation, which occurred when Gandhi formed the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) in 1894, served as the basis that would take the place of the fragmented efforts of the Indian community to have their voice heard in South African politics. Intended to depict the interests of the merchants and the educated classes, the NIC was aimed at counteracting the discriminatory act, encouraging the citizens to follow civic life, and securing the rights of Indians as British citizens. Gandhi helped to create a form of political activism through the formal membership drives, structured committees, and a systematic organisation of grievances into problems, which fragmented the community. It was an institutional strategy that allowed the Indian people to interact better with the colonial state (Czekalska & Kłosowicz, 2018). The NIC and Gandhi were holding mass meetings, mass campaigns, and community fundraiser activities, which contributed to the growth of political involvement and the creation of awareness among the common Indians. In the long run, such activities created a feeling of unity among people in the diaspora regardless of their regional, lingual, and religious backgrounds. One of the key tools in this mobilisation was the Indian Opinion newspaper, which debuted in 1903 and simultaneously helped in the Indian community to gain political education as well as unite the fragmented Indian population within the South African borders. The weekly magazine spread the news about new laws, reported the cases of racial injustice, and spoke about the ideal of non-violent resistance, which started to be developed by Gandhi at that period (Vahed, 2000). At the same time, Gandhi was involved in high-level maneuvering with colonial governments that used delegations, petitions, and diplomatic talks to promote Indian rights. Despite the usually timid reception and even aggression, Gandhi was constantly pointing towards imperial justice and the much-billed ideals of British justice by stating that racial discrimination went against the constitutional



provisions of the Empire. This diplomatic persuasion, institutional structures, and community mobilisation orchestrated a reputation of Gandhi as being the central face in the Indian political life in South Africa and formed the foundation of the rise of the Satyagraha.

Evolution of Satyagraha in South Africa

The development of Satyagraha in South Africa came as a result of the slow awakening of Gandhi, who realized that constitutional petitions and demands to the imperial government were ineffective in addressing institutionalised racial discrimination. During the late 1890s and early 1900s, significant writings were done on the migrations of petitions, memorials, and legal representations, yet the content of those writings was hardly substantial in any real sense, as they demonstrated the constraints of constitutional agitation within a colonial system that intended to protect the interests of whites. Gandhi grew disillusioned by the futility of traditional approaches, and instead started evaluating a new approach to morality and politics based on non-violent resistance, a change that was to become what he first called passive resistance and later theorised as Gandhi proposed Satyagraha, translated as the force of truth. This ideology assumed the organisational shape during the first big Satyagraha campaign (1907-1914) when people of the Indian community took action against the Transvaal Asiatic Registration Act, which required Indians to register, fingerprint, and use passes in any places to be regarded as law-abiding citizens (Wolpert, 2001). Gandhi had organised peaceful disobedience among the Indians against the Act, and in 1908, a major act of public burning of registration certificates was carried out by the Indians to signify the denial of humiliation by the colonial powers. One notable characteristic of this period was the energetic and brave action of the Indian women, who, despite the inhibiting standards, confronted and went picketing, marching, and to jail, among them Kasturba Gandhi and several unknown female resisters. Their participation expanded the social foundation of the movement and empowered the moral authority of the movement (Power P, 1969). The constant that followed to put Gandhi behind bars during this time was vital in his leadership; the jails made him out to be a real leader; the jails made him into a self-sacrificing, disciplined, and morally brave mass leader. The jail life made his resolve towards non-violence even stronger, and he gained a lot of respect amongst the Indians and sympathetic Europeans. At the conclusion of the South African campaigns, Satyagraha was a full-fledged political ethic, one to be later on at the very heart of the Indian freedom struggle.

Identity, Empire, and Transformation

The years in South Africa were the years of substantial change in the political identity of the man, as Gandhi experienced his complicated relationship with the British Empire, as well as his developing



Interdisciplinary Journal of Information, Knowledge, and Management

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Vol. : 20, Issue 2 2025

ISSN: (E) 1555-1237

moral philosophy. Gandhi was initially an imperial loyalist who believed in the ideals of British justice and constitutional rule. His voluntary service to the British in the Boer War (1899-1902) and the Zulu Rebellion (1906), when he formed the Indian Stretcher-bearer Corps, proved his belief at an early age that allegiance to the Empire would make Indians respected as good imperial subjects (Ali, 2025). However, this patriotism was accompanied by an increasing amount of criticism of colonial racism that undercut his political stance. When laws of discrimination got stronger, Gandhi started to doubt the ethical soundness of being ruled by the British, and this was the first step in his transformation to involvement in moderate petitioning, and a definite resistance of a more aggressive and principled one. This change led to the law of Satyagraha, a form of doctrine that relied on the truth, discipline, and non-violent disobedience, which transformed the moral foundation of political activity. These experiences with institutionalized racism were his ultimate turning point in changing his worldview; on several occasions, Gandhi was humiliated and had to come to terms with the glaring contrast between the ideals of imperialism and the reality in the colonial world (Rajan, 2006). Meanwhile, his spiritual development was fed with different sources, such as the moral lessons of Christianity, the works of Leo Tolstoy about non-violence, and the moral significance of the Hindu and Jain religions, all of which helped him to comprehend moral courage and social responsibility. Such encounters helped Gandhi to shape a political identity based not on loyalty to the imperial but rather on universal moral values. At the conclusion of his South African stay, Gandhi had become not just a lawyer of the Empire to demand justice, but a leader and champion joined to a truth-telling, radical course and method of resistance that would form the ideal of his contribution to the national cause in India.

Impact and Legacy of South African Years

The influence of the years of worldwide political thinking was immense, as it affected not only the Indian community in South Africa but also the rise of Gandhi as a political leader in the world. To the South African Indians, the activism of Gandhi was a definite boost to the level of political consciousness as it changed a disjointed group of traders, professionals, and ex-indentured servants into a more organised and conscious one. Their quest to be civilly recognized was reinforced through his intervention in the legal arena and his what appeared as a public campaign, Satyagraha, provided a new feeling of dignity, oneness, and retaliation to the racial oppression. The South African work of Gandhi also led to some small but significant improvements in legal rights, including better registration procedures, legalization of Indian marriages, and some compromise in the areas of trade and movement, but the framework of racial inequality had not changed significantly (Wolpert, 2001). To Gandhi personally, South Africa was the laboratory of Satyagraha, the laboratory where he could elaborate,



experiment with, and hone the idea of non-violent resistance, moral persuasion, and collective discipline that would become the hallmarks of the future Indian independence movement. His life experiences in terms of being imprisoned, negotiating, and leading communities contributed to making him a changed man; a lawyer employing constitutional means to make him a mass leader who can mobilise the different masses (Vahed, 2000). The philosophical base, which he created, such as truth, non-violence, moral courage, and civil disobedience, became the major foundations of the anti-colonial movement in the world. His South African years, as well, have transnational implications since Gandhi established networks and fomentation between the areas of India, South Africa, and the wider British Empire in general. These connections enabled the transfer of ideas, political plans, and solidarity across colonial boundaries that had some influence on racial equality and civil rights movements even after the departure of Gandhi. In the end, the activism in South Africa prepared not only the struggle for freedom in India but also of the entire world through non-violent actions, so the years spent by Gandhi in South Africa became a key step in the life of politics of the twentieth century.

Conclusion

The period in South Africa forms a stage in the beginning of his political philosophy, moral philosophy, and leadership approach. An overview of his life experience shows that South Africa was the test tube where his conceptions of justice, resistance, and human dignity were tested. The central participants of the discussion show the development of Gandhi as a rather slow, yet fundamental, change towards becoming a leader who expressed a radically different approach to political action, rather than merely a lawyer who wanted to find a solution to a certain issue through the judicial system. The experiences of racism, restrictions of the constitutional agitation, and the feeling of constant humiliation by the Indian population led him towards re-evaluating the previous assumptions about the empire, race relations, and citizenship. It is therefore in South Africa that Gandhi experienced a resounding legal-political change. He shifted imperial devotion to critical activity, ultimately accepting moral defiance of unfair power. His Satyagraha, which is based on truth, non-violence, self-suffering, and courage, did not come about due to any abstract speculations but through experience and collective effort. It is also during this time that the identity of Gandhi mixed with Hindu traditions, Christianity, and Tolstoyan morals, and the realities of the colonial rule of his times, which was racialized. The development of this identity enabled Gandhi not only to emerge as a leader of Indians in other countries but also as a visionary who subsequently would rally millions of people in India. Not only is his own experience significant during the years of his study in South Africa. They created a new political awareness among the South African Indians, solidified connections with the rest of the empire, and offered an example of



Interdisciplinary Journal of Information, Knowledge, and Management

An Official Publication
of the Informing Science Institute

SCOPUS INDEXED

Vol. : 20, Issue 2 2025
ISSN: (E) 1555-1237

anti-colonialism all over the world. Gandhi's experiments in South Africa are very timely even today because race, empire, and non-violent resistance issues continue to be seen as the most effective actions that can be initiated by the minority groups to bring about change in the realm of injustice and racism. In a sense, though, it is South Africa that Gandhi, the thinker, activist, and world icon, started.

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Interdisciplinary Journal of Information, Knowledge, and Management

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of the Informing Science Institute

SCOPUS INDEXED

Vol. : 20, Issue 2 2025

ISSN: (E) 1555-1237

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