

# Dadoo, Gandhi and South African Struggle

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*Some reflections on the 80th birth anniversary of Yusuf Mohamed Dadoo (September 5) and 120th birth anniversary of Gandhiji (October 2).*

**S**PEAKING to a group of South African Indian students in February 1939, Gandhiji said that if the Indian community in South Africa had guts in them, they would launch a *satyagraha*.

"I am hoping that some day from among the youths born in South Africa a person will rise who will stand up for the rights of his countrymen domiciled there, and make the vindication of those rights his life's mission."

He had been distressed for a long time with the situation in South Africa where he had discovered and dedicated his life to *satyagraha*, with a conviction that defiance of evil and willingness to sacrifice would prevail over brute force of the oppressors. Ever since he had left the shores of that country in 1914, more and more humiliating restrictions had been imposed on the Indians — undermining all that had been achieved by the great *satyagraha* of 1906-14 — but there had been no resistance. Leaders of Indian organisations had become docile and selfish, and engaged in petty squabbles and shameful compromises of the dignity and honour of the Indian people.

Gandhiji did not know, when he met the students, that a dedicated leadership was emerging from a new generation of South Africans — one that would recapture the spirit of defiance he had inculcated and take it forward to a new level, one of which India could be proud.

At a mass public meeting called by the Transvaal Indian Congress on March 1, 1939, Yusuf Mohamed Dadoo and his supporters had secured the adoption of a proposal, against the opposition of the leadership, to launch passive resistance if a pending segregation bill was enacted. At a subsequent meeting chaired by E.I. Asvat, a veteran who had been imprisoned 14 times in Gandhiji's *satyagraha* Dadoo was elected leader of the campaign and head of the Council for Action. That marked the dedication of his life to public service.

Dadoo sought the "advice, guidance and inspiration" of Gandhiji who readily endorsed the emerging leadership. Advising a postponement of passive resistance — while he contacted General Smuts and the Indian Government to secure an abandonment of the obnoxious bill — he assured Dadoo that if his efforts failed, the whole of India would back the resisters.

"It has stirred me to find you heading the *satya-*

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*graha* band," he wrote to Dadoo on August 19, 1939, recalling that Dadoo's father had been his client. "You are engaged in a very hard struggle. And if as a result of the present effort a handful of you make it the mission of your life to serve the cause there you will gradually build up a prestige that will stand you in good stead."

The confidence and hope of Gandhiji were not misplaced. Dadoo not only led the Indian people in mass defiance but proceeded to do what Gandhiji could not envisage in his time. He became an architect of the unity of all the oppressed people in the struggle to end racist tyranny, not merely to alleviate grievances.

The African National Congress honoured him in 1955 with the award of the decoration *Isitlawandle Seaparankoe*. Nelson Mandela described him, in evidence during the Treason Trial in 1960, as "one of the most outstanding leaders in our movement, revered throughout the country." The ANC elected him Vice-Chairman of its Revolutionary Committee in 1969. Oliver Tambo said at his funeral in London in September 1983, on behalf of the National executive Committee of the African National Congress:

"...it would be wrong to conceive of Comrade Dadoo only as a leader of the Indian community of our population. He was one of the foremost national leaders of our country, of the stature of Chief Lutuli, Moses Kotane, J.B. Marks, Bram Fischer, Nelson Mandela and others."

## Education of a Revolutionary

Yusuf Dadoo was born on September 5, 1909, in Krugersdorp, the son of a prosperous Indian trader. Even as a child, he experienced racism and was involved in fights with white boys who insulted and attacked him. He learnt about the struggle led by Gandhiji and participated in *hartals* (strikes) in protest against anti-Indian measures such as the Class Areas Bill of 1923.

While a student at Aligarh Muslim College in India from 1925 to 1927 he took great interest in the Indian national movement, rejecting communalism. Proceeding to London in 1929 at the age of 19, he joined the London branch of the Indian National Congress and was arrested in a demonstration for Indian freedom and against the Simon Commission.

While studying medicine in Edinburgh, he took an active part in politics — as a member of the Independent Labour Party and of the League against imperialism which advocated unity of the oppressed people of the world. He joined hunger marches in

Britain, addressed meetings in Hyde Park and worked for the India League. He came under the influence of Pandit Nehru and Marxists who advocated a "united front" against fascism. All the time, he kept close contact with South Africa, trying to encourage resistance against the racist onslaughts.

Returning to South Africa in 1936, he became a popular doctor and his professional work only strengthened his political commitment. He recalled:

"I came across the poverty, the misery, the malnutrition, the sickness of the black people every day.... And that made one's blood boil. What can one do to help these people? Medicine is one thing — you give a few tablets or a mixture — but it doesn't go to the basis of the problem. That has a great deal to do with my thinking and I got into political struggle." (Interview with United Nations Radio in 1979)

He proceeded to rally the Indian people against the compromising leadership of the Transvaal Indian Congress, for militant resistance against anti-Indian measures and for a united front with the African majority against racist-fascist oppression. He was soon able to secure the support of the great majority of the Indian people, including many former colleagues of Gandhiji and their children. He organised the Non-European United Front in Transvaal and became its Secretary-General. And in 1939, the year he contacted Gandhiji, he joined the Communist Party of South Africa.

### Passive Resistance of 1946-48

The postponement of passive resistance in 1939, on the advice of Gandhiji, was utilised by Dadoo to strengthen the organisation of the Indians and to develop unity with the Africans. He spent much time addressing meetings in African locations and was twice sentenced to prison on the charge of inciting Africans against the war.

He became a leader — together with Dr. A.B. Xuma, President of the African National Congress — of the Anti-Pass Council set up in 1943 to campaign against the humiliating restrictions on the movement of Africans. It collected 800,000 signatures to a petition against the pass laws and Dadoo was again arrested for leading a procession to present the petition to the government.

He earned the respect of the Africans by identifying himself with their concerns — a square in Orlando township was named after him — and developed intimate friendship with African leaders like J.B. Marks and Moses Kotane.

The Indian passive resistance movement of 1946-48 — led by Dadoo, a Marxist, and G.M. Naicker, a Gandhian — in which two thousand people went to jail, made South African racism a world issue. It also laid the basis for a national mass movement for freedom in South Africa.

The African National Congress backed the Indian resistance. A number of non-Indian volunteers — Africans, Europeans and coloured people — courted imprisonment in solidarity with the Indian people. International solidarity with the Indian and African people was promoted not only in India, but also in

Britain and the United States through the efforts of V.K. Krishna Menon, Fenner Brockway and Paul Robeson whom Dadoo had known in his student days, with whom Dadoo had come in contact as a student activist.

A few weeks after the launching of the resistance, when African mineworkers went on strike, under the leadership of J.B. Marks, and many were massacred, the Indian community rushed to provide assistance. Dadoo was brought from prison to be tried on the charge of inciting the strike.

Later that year, when the Indian complaint against South Africa was discussed in the United Nations, a multi-racial delegation led by A.B. Xuma visited New York to assist the Indian delegation. And in March 1947, Xuma, Dadoo and Naicker signed the pact of cooperation between the African and Indian Congresses.

### Mantle of Gandhiji

It may seem strange that the mantle of Gandhiji in South Africa had thus fallen on a Marxist. But Gandhiji, who followed and guided the movement, fully supported Dadoo, brushing aside complaints by Manilal Gandhi and others. For him, the objectives of the struggle and the means employed were the essentials, rather than the ideological and other labels of participants. And Dadoo demonstrated integrity, courage and willingness to sacrifice that Gandhiji valued in a public servant.

Speaking of early influences on his thinking, Dadoo said in an interview with the United Nations Radio in 1979:

"I hold Gandhiji in very high respect and affection. He, as a matter of fact, had a great deal in moulding my thinking and subsequently my political activities. I believed in Gandhiji to the extent that there must be resistance, there must be struggle for justice and righteousness. But after Gandhiji went back to India there arose another great revolutionary fighter, Pandit Nehru, whose broad views on politics attracted young people at the time. I believed in the policy of Nehru who also did not believe completely, implicitly, in absolute non-violence.

In his mind, the influence of Pandit Nehru, or one might add Karl Marx, did in no way erase the spirit of defiance he had imbibed from Gandhiji. He became noted for constant refusal to submit to racist intimidation and repression which led to numerous arrests. He risked even his life for the cause. And though he did not believe in non-violence as a creed, he took every care to see that the passive resistance movement was totally non-violent — even when white ruffians began brutally to assault passive resisters, including women.

The interaction of Gandhism and Marxism perhaps enhanced the significance of the Indian *satyagraha* of 1946-48 and made it the rehearsal for mass resistance by all the oppressed people of South Africa.

For Gandhiji who was deeply anguished by the Hindu-Muslim carnage that spread in the Indian sub-continent on the eve of independence as if his

life's work had been in vain, the resistance in South Africa was a solace, demonstrating that *satyagraha* was alive and well in the land of its birth.

### Unity of Indians and Africans

Much has been written about Gandhiji's opposition to a united front of Indians with Africans, but his attitude is often misunderstood and requires explanation.

During his sojourn in South Africa, the Indian community was composed largely of people born in India who were essentially alien settlers, though some Indians had arrived in that country long before the first shipload of indentured labourers were brought in 1860. Many of the Indian traders maintained their contacts and property interests in India.

The struggle led by Gandhiji was for the security of the settlers and to enable them to live with self-respect. It was, for him, even more for the honour of India which was affronted by the racial legislation. It was thus a contribution to the Indian national movement rather than an attempt to change the social order in South Africa.

The victory of the *satyagraha* — when the determination and sacrifices of resisters and the savage repression by the regime aroused opinion in India and persuaded the Imperial Government in London to intervene — was of great historic significance for India and the world. But its effect in countering racism in South Africa was very limited. Gandhiji secured satisfaction of the minimum demands, leaving the rest for the future. Further Indian immigration to South Africa was virtually stopped and Gandhiji assured the authorities that Indians did not seek political rights.

The Indian demands — ending of the poll tax, validation of Hindu and Muslim marriages, and protection of vested rights as regards ownership of property or trading licences had little to do with the legitimate aspirations of the African people for self-determination in their country. There was, moreover, little possibility of a united struggle since the African political movements were then at a nascent stage.

Gandhiji, of course, foresaw the inevitability of confrontation between the Africans and the white rulers. Replying to fears that his passive resistance would place a new weapon in the hands of Africans, he said, soon after the Bambata uprising, as reported by the Reverend Doke.

"Men who see far believe that the problems which are connected with the Natives will be the problems of the future, and that, doubtless, the white man will have a stern struggle to maintain his ascendancy in South Africa. When the moment of collision comes, if, instead of the old ways of massacre, assegai and fire, the Natives adopt the policy of Passive Resistance, it will be a grand change for the Colony...

"If, then, the Natives accept the doctrines which are now so prevalent amongst the Indian community, South Africa need not fear the horrors of a racial uprising. It need not look forward to the necessity of maintaining an army to keep the

Natives in awe. Its future will be much brighter than its past has been." (Joseph J. Doke. *M.K. Gandhi: an Indian Patriot in South Africa*, 1909)

While this early experience conditioned the thinking of Gandhiji, the situation in South Africa had changed by the 1930s when Dadoo came on the political scene. Most of the Indians had been born in South Africa, and saw the rise of the African political consciousness. African-Indian dialogue and cooperation began to develop in the trade unions and among intellectuals. As the regime continued with its plans to force out or segregate the Indians, more and more Indians began to feel that new means of struggle had become necessary. The small Indian community could not by itself stop the racist onslaught nor could it depend on the agents of the colonial government in India. Unity with the Africans, they felt, was the only hope for a secure future.

The issue of Indian-African unity provoked a public debate in India in 1939 when the Non-European United Front was set up in South Africa. Gandhiji strongly opposed a proposal by Ram Manohar Lohia that the Indian National Congress welcome the efforts towards a united struggle.

The reasoning behind Gandhiji's opposition to a united struggle may be found in an interview he had given to the Reverend S.S. Tema somewhat earlier, when asked for his views on the "talk" of a united front of Africans and Indians. He said:

"It will be a mistake. You will be pooling together not strength but weakness. You will best help one another by each standing on his own legs. The two cases are different. The Indians are a microscopic minority. They can never be a menace to the white population. You, on the other hand, are the sons of the soil who are being robbed of your inheritance. You are bound to resist that. Yours is a far bigger issue. It ought not to be mixed up with that of the Indian. This does not preclude the establishment of the friendliest relations between the two races." (*Harijan*, February 18, 1939).

He added that the Indians should never put themselves in opposition to the legitimate aspirations of the Africans, and encouraged the development of an African mass movement.

Gandhiji still thought of Africans as the only rightful owners of South Africa, the Indians as alien settlers and the Europeans as "undoubtedly usurpers, exploiters or conquerors or all of them rolled into one." (*Harijan*, July 1, 1939). He was not persuaded that the new trends of thinking had taken hold among Indians or that the Africans sought a united front. Neither seemed well-organised to be able to combine strength.

When his position at the Congress came under wide criticism in India, he conceded that his view "need not deter the Indians from forming a non-European front if they are sure thereby of winning their freedom." (*Harijan*, July 15, 1939). He was to change his views in the light of further developments in South Africa and the sentiment in India.

Indian nationalist opinion was essentially in favour of identification of Indian settlers abroad with the

indigenous people in the cause of freedom and human dignity. Sarojini Naidu forcefully expressed this view on her visit to South Africa in 1924. Pandit Nehru spoke out for a united front of the oppressed people and advanced sections of the whites, in South Africa and elsewhere, since the Congress against imperialism in 1927.

The urge for unity in struggle grew stronger during the Second World War. This was reflected by Indira Nehru who visited South Africa in April 1941 on the way home from studies in England. Together with a party of fellow students, she issued a statement welcoming "the new awakening of the exploited and oppressed nationalities in South Africa." She added:

"We wholeheartedly support the Non-European United Front in its historic task of mobilising the progressive forces against all manifestations of political and racial tyranny of your existing government.

"At a time when we are fighting our battles in India, this growing movement in your land provides the basis for united action by the enslaved peoples of our two countries." (*The Guardian*, Cape Town, April 10, 1941).

By the end of the War, Gandhiji too began to espouse the unity of the exploited races of the earth. Never again did he oppose a united front in South Africa, but merely kept warning against any abandonment of non-violence. In the message he gave to Dadoo and Naicker on their visit to India, soon after the pact of cooperation between the African and Indian Congresses, he said:

"Political cooperation among all the exploited races in South Africa can only result in mutual goodwill, if it is wisely directed and based on truth and non-violence." (*Harijan*, May 25, 1947).

He constantly stressed the primacy of African interests. He even told the All India Congress Committee on July 7, 1946, on learning of the murder of an Indian near the site of passive resistance, that he would not shed a single tear if all the Indian *satyagrahis* were wiped out, for they would thereby point the way to the Africans and vindicate the honour of India. (*Harijan*, July 21, 1946)

### Defiance Campaign and After

Gandhiji was no more when the National Party came to power in May 1948 and began to erect the structure of apartheid for perpetual white domination and the dispossession of all the black people.

Dadoo and Naicker came out of prison in July calling for a united front against racism — Naicker used the term "united democratic front" — and they immersed themselves in efforts to build a truly firm alliance. This led to the "Campaign of Defiance of United Laws" — organised jointly by the African National Congress and the South African Indian Congress — in which over 8,000 people of all racial origins went to prison: Dadoo was among the first to defy.

The African movement had come of age: it contributed most of the resisters and from their ranks

emerged inspiring national leaders such as Nelson Mandela, the Volunteer-in-Chief, Walter Sisulu and Oliver Tambo.

The non-violent Defiance Campaign was not only a great landmark in the long struggle of the South African people, but had a much wider significance. For it was that campaign in South Africa, and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States which followed, which showed that the concept of *satyagraha* was not for the Indians alone. These campaigns, as much as Gandhiji's *satyagrahas*, were to inspire numerous upsurges of aroused peoples around the world to topple mighty dictators, stop wars and save the human environment.

With the launching of the Defiance Campaign, the perspective was no more of petitions or actions to alleviate grievances, but a long and hard struggle to end racist rule. Victory would be the culmination of a series of ever more difficult battles, each perhaps ending in defeat but ultimately leading to triumph. That required a band of determined men and women willing to dedicate their lives to the cause and make the supreme sacrifice if need be.

The Defiance Campaign, which began as a joint African-Indian effort, transformed the freedom movement into one under African leadership and buried for ever the myth that the Africans were not advanced enough to undertake and lead a well-organised and humane resistance. The mantle of Gandhiji passed from Dadoo and Naicker to Chief Albert Lutuli who was to carry it with honour and dignity.

Dadoo continued to make a crucial contribution for eight years under severe restrictions and three decades in exile — as an elder statesman as well as a militant, under the leadership of the African National Congress. The tremendous contribution he made, under conditions of illegality, will not be known for some years. But he fought on till the end, with unbounded faith, exhorting his colleagues even on his death-bed on September 19, 1983: "You must never give up, you must fight to the end."

### Legacy of Dr. Dadoo

Dadoo began his political life in the small Indian community in South Africa, with a conviction that its destiny was with the African majority and that its future should be built by its willingness to sacrifice in the struggle for a free, democratic South Africa. That conviction was in harmony with the views of Gandhiji who warned in *Young India* on April 5, 1928, that Indians "cannot exist in South Africa for any length of time without the active sympathy and friendship of the Africans."

Dadoo carried forward the tradition of Gandhiji by building an alliance of Indians and Africans as the basis for widest unity of the people against racism.

He became the prototype of the new men and women of the future — as against the caricature of a human being which apartheid sought to mould. Ezekiel Mphahlele, the African writer, said, perhaps half in jest, as early as 1956:

"One might even say Yusuf Dadoo has a Marxist

head, a Hindu heart, Mohammedan nails, and an African blood-system."

Under his leadership, and with the legacy of Gandhiji, the Indian community, consisting of hardly three per cent of the South African population, has been privileged to make a very significant contribution at a crucial stage of the freedom struggle. Let us hope that it will make a worthy contribution in the coming final effort to transform

the country from a prison of the black people to a land that can inspire the world with people of African, Asian and European ancestry living in freedom and harmony.

The epic struggle in the south of Africa can now look forward to its triumph if the world community can be mobilised to exert its collective influence. India cannot fail to make its fullest contribution to that end. □

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