

**“Our plucky sisters resist” Indian Women and the Passive
Resistance Campaign of 1913**

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Introduction

During the first half of the 20th century, Indian women, were at the forefront of protest politics: the 1913 and 1946 passive resistance strikes, and the Defiance campaign of 1952 are examples of women’s courageous and bold participation. Yet, we know very little about their activities. During the 1913 passive resistance campaign, over 20,000 Indians, both indentured and non-indentured laborers, men and women participated. Women of different castes, linguistic and religious groups bravely courted arrest and endured imprisonment, in a cause they believed was worthy of challenging the state. Women in particular, played a pivotal role in mobilizing the support of indentured workers on the Natal Collieries and Railways. Yet, in the vast corpus of literature on Gandhi and the 1913 strike, there has been no sincere attempt made to analyze and document the experiences and political participation of these women. We know very little about their lives, beliefs or the social background of the participants. This gender blindness can be attributed partly to the fascination and pre-occupation of scholars and historians on the charismatic personality and leadership qualities of Gandhi, which has led to the masses who participated in the struggle, in most instances, to be eliminated from analysis, and have tended in the process to provide a very skewed picture of the movement itself.¹ With the exception of M.Swan, J.Beall and M.D.North-Coombes, their work has placed the movement in its socio-economic political context thereby illuminating the sterling role-played by indentured workers.²

This article examines the role of Indian women in the 1913 passive resistance campaign and traces the nature and motives of their participation and their subsequent imprisonment. Several

¹ Historiographical trends have been reviewed by S.Bhana and U.Dhupelia, ‘Passive Resistance Among Indian South Africans: A Historiographical Survey’, *South African Historical Journal*, no. 16, November 1984, pp.118-130; R.Huttenback, *Gandhi in South Africa* (Cornell University Press, 1971); L.Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* (London, 1951); C.Clement, *Gandhi – The Power of Pacifism* (Harry N.Abrams, Inc., Publishers, New York, 1996).

² M.Swan, ‘The 1913 Natal Indian Strike’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol.10, no.2 (April 1984), pp.239-258; *Gandhi – The South African Experience* (Ravan Press, 1985); J.D.Beall and M.D.North-Coombes, ‘The 1913 Disturbances in Natal: The Social and Economic Background to “Passive Resistance”’, *Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, vi, 1983, pp.48-77.

questions are raised in this study? What made illiterate, poor and apolitical women engage in strike action? What generated this kind of commitment and resistance?

The participation of Indian women in the campaign of 1913 was not an isolated incident. The years 1912-1914 were a period of economic and political turmoil in South Africa. Many different groups of people challenged the policies of the newly created white-controlled Union of South Africa. In 1913, Black women in the Orange Free State participated in the anti-pass campaign. Their actions together with the passive resistance movement were part of a nationwide climate of dissatisfaction.³

Position of Indians in Natal and the Transvaal 1860-1910

The origins of the passive resistance movement are to be sought in agitation by Indians against certain discriminatory measures imposed by the South African Republic, the Natal and later the Union governments. A brief summary of these grievances is pivotal for a broader understanding of the campaign. Between 1860 and 1911 a total of 152 184 indentured immigrants (62% men, 25% women and 13% children) arrived in Natal to labor on the coastal plantations.⁴ The immigrants had to serve a five-year contract. On the expiry of their contracts, they were classified as free laborers and many engaged in market gardening, hawking and petty-trade. Indentured laborers were followed by 'passenger' Indians who came to seek economic opportunities in the wake of a large Indian labor force in Natal.⁵ They were predominantly Gujarati speaking Hindus and Muslims who migrated from the west coast of India. Unencumbered by contractual obligations they gradually settled throughout Natal and Transvaal and to some extent monopolized the retail trade. The presence of this group of Indians gave rise to periodic waves of anti-Indianism in colonial and post-colonial Natal and the Transvaal. Subsequently, these provinces passed a series of discriminatory legislation to curb their economic and political freedom.

In Natal, 1895, the government imposed a £3 annual tax on all ex-indentured laborers over the age of sixteen, who chose to reside in the colony. It was introduced as a means to regiment sustainable labor and prevent Indians from competing economically with whites. In 1896, Indians were deprived of the parliamentary franchise, and in 1897, the Immigration Restriction Bill, imposed an educational test on immigrants wishing to enter the country. In the same year, the

³ J.Wells, *We have Done With Pleading – The Women's 1913 anti-pass campaign* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1991), p.3; *Indian Opinion*, 20 September 1913.

⁴ U.Dhupelia-Mesthrie, *From Cane Fields to Freedom – A Chronicle of Indian South African Life* (Kwela Books, Cape Town, 2000), p.10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, They were referred to as 'passenger' Indians because they paid their own fare to Natal.

General Dealer's Licenses Act conferred arbitrary powers on licensing officers in the issuing of retail licenses.⁶ In the Transvaal, Law 3 of 1885 prohibited Indians from owning fixed property or trading, but in designated locations. In 1906 The Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance, made it compulsory for all Indians to take out a certificate of registration. The failure of the Transvaal government to repeal this legislation led to the first passive resistance campaign between 1906-1908. Hundreds of Indians participated and courted arrest. In 1910, the four colonies, Natal, Orange Free State, Transvaal and the Cape Colony joined to form the Union of South Africa. Many of the discriminatory measures still remained in force, while others were amended by new Union legislation.

Status of Indian Women

Indians were 'the only part of the population of Natal which came by special and urgent invitation'. The invitation was not extended to Indian women. However, the government of India ensured that women constituted at least 25% of the total immigrant population. Indentured women were engaged in various spheres of the colonial economy: the sugar and tea estates, coalmines and worked as domestic servants on small farms, particularly in the Natal Midlands. They were also subject to greater degree of exploitation than men. Their accommodation was appalling. They lived in overcrowded rooms with poor ventilation. They were also poorly remunerated; often rations withheld, and were subjected to sexual assaults from their employers. The effect of the £3 tax was especially hard on women.⁷ Women, like men had no say in the terms of their contract, and were denied legal protection and the right to organize. According to Beall, their powerlessness stemmed largely from the system of labor regimentation and control, which applied to the indenture labor force as a whole. Familial resistance to anything that sought to challenge women's domestic role in life prevented Indian girls from being allowed to acquire an education when this became a possibility for male immigrant children in the early twentieth century. Given this scenario, one would ask the question as to whether women, did in fact resist their lot? There is insufficient archival information to suggest that there was overt or demonstrably collective form, but rather, more often, found in expression in individual acts of desertion and arson. For many, to resist meant risking physical assault, deprivation of wages, the withholding of rations or dismissal.⁸

⁶ K.Hiralal, *The Natal Indian Trader – A Struggle for Survival 1875-1910* (unpublished MA thesis, University of Durban Westville, 1992).

⁷ Report of the Protector of Indian Immigrants – 1877-1888; Report of the Coolie Commission, 1872; Indian Immigrants Commission, 1885-1887; Report of the Indian Immigration Commission 1910, p.640; Meer *Documents of Indentured Labour Natal 1851-1917*; J.Beall, *Women under indentured labour in colonial Natal 1860-1911* in C.Walker, *Women and Gender in Southern Africa* (Cape Town, 1989), pp.147-167.

⁸ Beall, *Women under indentured labour in colonial Natal, 1860-1911*, pp.156-157.

'Passenger' Indian women, on the other hand, arrived under different circumstances. They were not subjected to the labor regimentation controls as indentured women and did not come as isolated individuals but were met by family on arrival. Their assimilation in colonial society was made easier by a close-knit community organization. Their numbers increased at the turn of the century. They had little or no education and led very secluded and sheltered lives. Gujarati speaking Hindus women would occasionally assist her husband in the store as well as attend to household chores and rearing children. Muslim women, on the other hand observed the strict purdah.⁹

Nevertheless, women, both indentured and 'passenger' was among the most subjected group in Indian society. Both Hindu and Muslim religions sanctioned submission and passivity among women. Clearly defined roles were identified for men and women. Women engaging in any form of activity outside the home were shunned and condemned. Yet, surprisingly, hundreds of women participated in the 1913 campaign. It was a radical departure from accepted norms of behavior. In 1913, because women were acting in defense of their religion and domestic role, their actions were condoned and even encouraged. It was an extreme response to an extreme provocation.¹⁰

The Marriage Issue

Prior to 1913, women were relatively obscure from political activity. During the 1906-8 passive resistance campaign, non-participation by women was due to lack of encouragement rather than fear. According to Gandhi:

"Some brave women had already offered to participate, and when Satyagraha's went to jail for hawking without a license, their wives had expressed a desire to follow suit. But we did not think it proper to send women to jail in a foreign land. There seemed to be no adequate reason for sending them into the firing line and I for my part could not summon courage enough to take them to the front. Another argument was, that it would be derogatory to our manhood if we sacrificed our women in resisting a law, which was directed only against men. But an event now happened which involved a special affront to women, and which therefore left no doubt in

⁹ J.Beall, 'The Political Economy of Women in Colonial Natal', unpublished MA dissertation, University of Natal, 1982, pp. K. Hiralal, 'The Role of Class, Gender and Kin in Indian Family Businesses in Natal 1890-1950', Paper presented at the Western Association of Women Historians, Asiolmar, Pacific Grove, May 1997.

¹⁰ C. Walker, *Women and Resistance in South Africa* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1982), p.106.

our minds as to the propriety of sacrificing them."¹¹

Women's participation must be analyzed on the issue of non-recognition of Indian marriages and the £3 tax. The latter affected women of indentured origin, and in its application weighed heavily upon them. Gandhi's inclusion of the tax, a legitimate grievance, gave indentured and ex-indentured women the opportunity to participate. In fact, majority of the physically active women in the movement were drawn from this group. Questions regarding the validity of Indian marriages came to the fore in the courts over the admission of polygamous marriages in the Union. Judge Malcolm Searll in the Cape Division of the Supreme Court on the 14 March 1913, in the case of *Bai Miriam* stated that for the purposes of immigration no marriage could be regarded as monogamous, and therefore legal, if it was celebrated according to the rites of any religion recognizing polygamy. The facts of the Searll judgment were as follows: Hassan Essop an Indian of 'passenger' origin, lived in Port Elizabeth since 1902. He obtained a permit to visit India and contracted a marriage with Bai Miriam. In 1912, he re-visited India and returned with his wife. However, the immigration authorities did not allow Bai Miriam to land, as the marriage was conducted under Muslim rites, recognizing polygamy. The Searll judgment had broad implication. It nullified in South Africa all marriages celebrated according to Muslim and Hindu rites. Furthermore, it implied that an Indian marriage would be considered invalid, even if she were the only wife of a domicile Indian. Polygamy was recognized by both Hindu and Muslim faiths but in reality only practiced by members of the Muslim trading class. In South Africa only one per cent of the total Indian population practiced polygamy.

Prior to 1910, Indian marriages in Natal and the Cape Colony were registered with the Protector of Indian Immigrants or Resident Magistrates. Only monogamous marriages were recognized. The Indian Immigration Act of 1891 forbade polygamous marriages. Customary marriages were not recognized, unless registered with the authorities. The validity of Indian marriages created many problems for Indians of 'passenger' origin. The authorities in South Africa recognized their customary marriage, but only one wife was allowed to enter. However, there were cases in Natal where concessions were made to long-standing traders in the admission of plural wives. Between 1908 and 1913 this practice gradually fell away. The Immigrants Regulation Act of 1913, made provision for the admission of one wife and the minor children of a domicile Indian even though she was married within rites of a religion which recognized polygamy.¹² However the combination of cases and legislation created a situation after 1910, where the validity of all non-Christian marriages was questioned unless performed in a registry office. There are numerous cases cited in the *Natal Law Reports*, *Indian Opinion* and *African Chronicle*, on the status of Indian wives of domiciled Indians.

¹¹ *Indian Opinion*, 22 March 1913, 5 April 1913.

¹² Indian Inquiry Commission, 1914, pp.19-19; Immigration Restriction Department (IRD), Minute Paper, vol. 10, 574/1902, vol. 63, 746/1906, vol. 84, 792/1910.

For example, the case of *Bai Rasul and Fatima vs. Rex*, the courts had stated that only one wife of a polygamous marriage would be permitted to enter the Union.¹³ In June 1912, in the case of *Sukina vs. Rex* Judge Jordan declared all polygamous marriages illegal. In the case of *Bhogwan, Bhika and Munchi*, the chief magistrate refused to recognize the Hindu marriage.¹⁴ The situation was confusing, to say the least.

Thus, for Indian women of Muslim and Hindu origin, the Searll judgment was an affront to their religion. It denigrated their religion and their customary practices. It also challenged the legal status of Indian women within a marriage, the legitimacy of children borne of that union and the right of ownership and inheritance. For Indian women, marriage was an important aspect of their religious faith, and they viewed the judgment as an insult to their womanhood. Thus passive resistance was conducted for the honor and sanctity of Indian womanhood and became an important emotive political issue, and subsequently involved all women in the movement.¹⁵

Reaction to the Searll Judgment

The reaction to the judgment was most vociferous from the Indian trading community. The British Indian Association, held a meeting in Johannesburg. It comprised largely of Gujarati-speaking Muslims. They condemned the judgment and called upon the Union government to remove the “derogatory” measure. For the trading class, the effect of the Searll judgment was two-fold: it struck a blow to their religious and national self-respect. Resolutions were tabled at the meeting, the most important of which, called upon the community to embark on passive resistance as a form of protest. It stated: “unless relief is granted it will become the duty of the community, for the protection of its womanhood and its honor, to adopt passive resistance.”¹⁶ Protests and objections also came from women’s organizations. The Transvaal Women’s Association, an organization consisting of forty women, professing the Hindu, Muslim and Christian faiths, sent a telegram, to the Minister of Interior, General J. Smuts, condemning the judgment, and called for the removal of the Searll ruling, failing, they would embark on passive resistance. The telegram read as follows:

“Committee Transvaal Indian Women’s Association has carefully considered the position, in the light of the Searll judgment, of Indian women resident in South Africa.and has come to the conclusion that the honor of

¹³ *Indian Opinion*, 21 September 1912; F.Ginwala, *Class, Consciousness and Control*, (unpublished PhD thesis, Oxford University, 1972), pp.196-198.

¹⁴ *African Chronicle*, 16 August 1913.

¹⁵ Beall, *Women under indentured labour in colonial Natal, 1860-1911*, p.149.

¹⁶ *Indian Opinion*, 22 March 1913, 5 April 1913.

Indian womanhood is affected by the judgment Committee therefore respectfully trusts that the Government will be pleased to amend the Law so as to recognize the validity of Indian marriages which have been duly consecrated according to the religious customs of the parties and are recognized as legal in India. I am also to inform the Government that the earnestness of the members of the Association is such that, if the Government cannot see its way to comply with the request, they would offer passive resistance and in common with the male members of the community suffer, imprisonment rather than suffer the indignity to which in their opinion the Searll Judgment subjects them”¹⁷

The members of the Association were not in any way politicized. The women were neither educated nor had participated in any political struggle prior to 1913. In fact, the Association enlisted the help of Sonja Schlesin, a European, sympathetic to the Indian cause and an ardent admirer of Gandhi. Schlesin, was appointed honorary secretary and was largely responsible for the drafting of letters, memorandums and petitions.¹⁸ The resolutions of the Transvaal Women’s Association marked a new development in the passive resistance movement. The prospect of women engaging in strike action now became a reality. The marriage issue thus became a serious grievance not only for Indian men but women too. The Editor of *Indian Opinion*, 10 May 1913, were full of praise and admiration for their brave stand on the marriage issue and stated:

“We congratulate our plucky sisters, who have dared to fight the Government rather than submit to the insult offered by the Searll Judgment. They will cover themselves and land of their birth, as, indeed, of their adoption, with glory, if they remain true to their resolve to the end.”¹⁹

Gandhi and Women Satyagrahis (Women resisters)

The *Satyagraha* philosophy (Indian term) was based on the principle of non-violence, commitment and self-sacrifice. *Satay* means truth, *agraha* means love and firmness. Thus it was a force borne out of truth and love and non-violence. According to Gandhi, the three essential qualities of a *Satyagrahi* were a capacity for love, non-violence and self-sacrifice. A *satyagrahi* once convinced of the righteousness of his action, will attempt to convert his opponents by love

¹⁷ Ibid. The members were mainly wives of Indians who had participated in the passive resistance campaign of 1906-8. Ibid.

¹⁸ *Indian Opinion*, 10 May 1913

¹⁹ *Indian Opinion*, 24 May 1913.

and self-sacrifice. The qualities of love have traditionally been associated with women. A woman Gandhi believed, would make an effective *satyagrahi*:

“To call woman the weaker sex is libel; it is man’s injustice to women. If by strength is meant brute strength, then, indeed, is woman less brute than man. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man’s superior. Has she not greater intuition, is she not more self-sacrificing, has she not greater powers of endurance, has she not greater courage? Without her man could not be. If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with woman...who can make a more effective appeal to the heart than woman?²⁰

Pyarelal Sushila Nayar, a close friend of Gandhi, is of the opinion that Gandhi had really learnt the secret of *Satyagraha* from his wife, Kasturba. According to Gandhi, women make better *satyagrahis* than men because women globally suffer oppression, but do not resort to arms, instead, seek alternate forms of resistance. They in the process have developed a weapon out of their own self-suffering to resist oppression. Thus the spirit of sacrifice is natural and spontaneous for women and hence the technique of *Satyagraha* has evolved.²¹

Gandhi decided to approach the women living at Tolstoy Farm in Johannesburg and the Phoenix settlement in Durban. The women at Tolstoy were young, uneducated, were of indentured origin, and spoke mainly Tamil. They were all keen to participate and were aware of the hardship that one had to endure. In many ways the women at Tolstoy were much better prepared as *Satyagrahis* than perhaps the women at the Phoenix settlement. At Tolstoy women were taught to live communally, forsaking material comfort and luxuries: they lived a very prudent life, did their own domestic chores, followed a strict vegetarian diet, prepared meals, stitched their own garments and practiced religious tolerance. Women here became self-reliant and independent. According to Gandhi, Tolstoy Farm, proved to be “the center of spiritual purification and penance for the final campaign.” The women residing at the Phoenix settlement were mainly friends and relatives of Gandhi. They differed in age, were uneducated, predominately Gujarati speaking Hindus and Muslims, and mainly wives of Indian traders. Gandhi was doubtful of their ability to participate in the movement and whether they would be able to withstand the harsh conditions of prison life:

²⁰ M.K.Gandhi, *Woman’s Role in and Society* (Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1959), pp.8-9.

²¹ P.S.Nayar, *In Gandhiji’s Mirror* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1991), p.71.

“They had not the training or experience of the Transvaal sisters. Moreover, most of them were related to me, and might think of going to jail only on account of my influence with them.”²²

Many of them led very secluded and sheltered lives. On arrival in Natal, they were met by my family and friends. In addition, they belonged to a close-knit community, which staunchly protected their religion and culture. This communal structure provided a support system for many ‘passenger’ Indian women and made their entry and adaptability to a new and strange environment easier. Indentured women on the other hand, arrived in a strange land with no familiar faces to receive them. As indentured laborers they endured a harsh life, as already mentioned. Their experiences provided them with a strong foundation to endure prison life.

Passive Resistance

Gandhi had very definite ideas as to when and how women should participate in the struggle. He ordered a group of women from Tolstoy Farm to cross the Natal border in defiance of the immigration law, which prohibited Indians from moving between provinces. Their instructions were that if they failed to court arrest, they should then proceed to the coal mining areas of Northern Natal and incite the indentured laborers to strike. The women were ideally suited for this task. Majority of the laborers on the mines were of South Indian origin and spoke predominantly Tamil, the same linguistic group as the women. If the laborers engaged in strike activities, the government would be forced to arrest the women and this would serve as a motive for others to strike.²³

The Transvaal women were among the first group of women resisters. They engaged in several illegal activities: hawking without permits, trespassing, disturbing the peace and non-compliance of the immigration laws. Eleven women, in their early 20s and 30s, six with babies in their arms, set off to Viljoen’s Drift, in the Orange Free State, in defiance of the immigration law, which prohibited Indians from residing or entering the Orange Free State. They were mainly wives and relatives of veteran passive resisters. The names of the eleven resisters were: Mrs Thumbi Naidoo, Mrs N.Pillay, Mrs. K.Murugasa Pillay, Mrs A.Perumal Naidoo, Mrs. P.K.Naidoo, Mrs. K.Chinnaswami Pillay, Mrs. N.S.Pillay, Mrs. R.A.Mudalingam, Mrs. Bhavani Dayal, Miss Minachi Pillay and Miss Baikum Murugasa Pillay.²⁴ Hermann Kallenbach, a German, sympathetic to the

²² M.Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa* (Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1954), p.279.

²³ Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, pp.277-281.

²⁴ Ibid., The six babies who accompanied their mothers, as they were not completely weaned. Mrs T.Pillay was the wife of veteran passive resister Thambi Naidoo. He constituted the first batch of prisoners. He was born in Mauritius, and his parents eventually settled in Natal. He was

Indian struggle, and a personal friend of Gandhi, accompanied them. Having reached Vilgoen's Drift, the local authorities failed to arrest them. Frustrated, the women entered Vereeniging, a small town near Johannesburg. Here, they resorted to hawking fruit and vegetables, without a permit. Local Indian merchants assisted them with subsistence, accommodation, clothing and transport. Despite their activities, the women failed to get arrested. They later decide to proceed to Natal by train. En route to Charlestown they were detained by the local authorities at Volksrust for a few hours. No arrests were made and the women were released and thereafter proceeded to Newcastle, their main destination.²⁵

Newcastle was one of the major urban centers in the northern coal-mining district. Here, the women accompanied several veteran passive resisters, among them Thambi Naidoo, C.K.Naidoo, A.D. Pillay and Albert Christopher. They visited several mines in the areas to mobilize support for the movement. They chatted to the wives of Indian laborers to canvass support. They raised the issue of the £3 tax and its hardships on the Indian community and the non-recognition of Indian marriages. Mass meetings were held at Fairleigh Colliery, which was attended by indentured workers and their families. The Transvaal women were given the opportunity to address the meetings. Among them who spoke were Mrs. T.Pillay, Mrs. Moorgen, Mrs. T.Naidoo and Mrs.P.K.Naidoo. Each of them spoke of their commitment to the cause, and the reasons for embarking on passive resistance. They made eloquent appeals to the laborers and their families to cease work until the government made a sincere attempt to address Indian grievances.²⁶ In fact women traveled throughout the coal mining district encouraging laborers to cease work and even discouraging those who opted to return to the mines. By the 23 October 1913, nine mines were affected: Newcastle, Ballengeich, Fairleigh, Durban Navigation, Hatting Spruit, Ramsey, St. George's, Glencoe and Cambrian, Over 2000 Indian laborers, both men and women went on strike.²⁷ *Indian Opinion*, commented on the activities of these women:

"The appearance of the brave ladies simply acts like a charm and the men obey the advice given to them without any great argument being required."²⁸

The women also incited the workers on the Natal Railways to join the movement. The eleven women together with eight male passive resisters conducted mass meetings on the railway

an ordinary trader, with no education. He was bilingual, both in Tamil and Hindi. Source: Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p.147. With the exception of Mrs Bhavani Dayal, who was Gujarati speaking Hindu, the rest of the women were all of South Indian origin and Tamil speaking. Source: Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p.278.

²⁵ *Indian Opinion*, 15 October 1913.

²⁶ *Indian Opinion*, 22 October 1913.

²⁷ *Souvenir of the Passive Resistance Movement in South Africa, 1906-1914* (Africana Book Collectors, Pietermaritzburg, 1990).

²⁸ *Indian Opinion*, 22 October 1913, 29 October 1913.

barracks. They belloved all women and men to cease work. They were keen to court arrest under Section 1 of the Ordinance of 1850 for inciting people and obstructing and forcibly preventing peaceful servants from performing duty.²⁹ After six weeks of intense mobilization, the women were eventually arrested and transferred to the Pietermaritzburg prison. The role of these women on the coalmines and railways was truly remarkable and their eventual arrest provided an added incentive for indentured workers throughout Natal to engage in strike action.

A second group of resisters from the Phoenix settlement comprising of sixteen individuals, twelve men and four women, of 'passenger' origin, set off to cross the Transvaal border. They were mainly family and friends of Gandhi. The names of the four women were: Mrs. Kasturbai Gandhi (wife of Gandhi), Mrs. Jayakunvar Manilal, Mrs. Kashi Chhaganlal Gandhi and Mrs. Santok Maganlal Gandhi. Their task was to court arrest by crossing the Transvaal border at Volksrust. The group were eventually arrested at Volksrust and charged under Section 4 of the Immigration Restriction Act as prohibited immigrants on the 18 September 1913.³⁰

The activities of these women and their subsequent imprisonment, spurred individual acts of bravery. In Durban, Bai Fatima Mehtab, was one of the first Muslim women to court arrest. She left Durban for Volksrust, accompanied by her mother, Hanifabhai and her seven-year-old son. Mother and daughter were eventually arrested and imprisoned at Pietermaritzburg.³¹ At Germiston Central Station in the Transvaal, women courted arrest by hawking without permits. Their names were: Mrs. Somar, Mrs. Mandar, Mrs. Bandu, Mrs. Behari, Mrs. Doowat, and Mrs. Maharajah. They were eventually arrested and charged with illegal trading on railway premises.³²

Crossing the Transvaal Border

During the last phase of the movement, women played an important role. The indentured workers having struck work, together with their families marched to Volksrust under the leadership of veteran passive resisters. *Indian Opinion* cites several references of women accompanying their spouses on this journey. However, many who could not undertake the physical journey opted to travel by train to Volksrust and court arrest. On the 6 November 1913, 2,037 men, 127 women and 57 children crossed the Natal border. They were all arrested and imprisoned in Natal. The men and women who undertook the long march did so under inclement weather and food rations which comprised of small amounts of rice, sugar and bread. Many women on reaching Palm ford,

²⁹ *Indian Opinion*, 25 October 1913.

³⁰ *Indian Opinion*, 20 September 1913, 15 October 1913, 1 October 1913; Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, pp.283-285.

³¹ *Indian Opinion*, 15 October 1913, 14 January 1914; Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, p.297.

³² *Indian Opinion*, 15 October 1913.

a small village eight miles from Volksrust, were visibly exhausted. Gandhi in *Satyagraha in South Africa* recall some their hardships:

“Some of the women were thoroughly exhausted by the march. They had dared to carry their children in their arms, but it was impossible for them to proceed further.”³³

Women who were unable to complete the journey were housed with local Indian residents and were sent home at the end of the march.

Women in Prison

Women resisters were incarcerated at Durban and Pietermaritzburg. The maximum sentence was three months with hard labor. The Transvaal women were given the choice of paying £5 fine or face imprisonment. All chose the latter. Women were not given preferential treatment. The quality of food served was poor, they were subjected to police harassment and some were incarcerated with ordinary criminals. Valliamah Moodaliar, eldest daughter of Mr. and Mrs. R. Moonsamy Moodaliar of Johannesburg died on the 22nd of February 1914 after a prolonged illness in prison. She was only seventeen years old at the time of her death. From the various sources consulted there is no information available on the nature of her illness. She joined the passive resistance movement on the 29 of October 1913 and proceeded to Newcastle with a group of women to mobilize support of local Indians in Natal and then proceeded to court arrest at Volksrust. She later rendered assistance at Pietermaritzburg, Ladysmith, Dan Hauser, Charlestown and Dundee. She eventually re-crossed the Transvaal border and was convicted with her mother and others at Volksrust to three months' imprisonment with hard labor. Valliamah family was no stranger to the passive resistance cause. Her father was a veteran of the first movement and was imprisoned for his activities.³⁴ Her death elicited widespread sympathy from the local Indian community. Several women's groups, for example the Tamil Benefit Society of Johannesburg, the Indian Women's Association, the British Indian Association, the Hindu Community, the Patidar Society, the Germiston Indian Association and the Hindu Women's Sabha praised Valiamah for her courageous spirit and patriotism in the struggle. A tombstone stone was erected in her memory.³⁵

³³ *Indian Opinion*, 5 November 1913; Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p.302

³⁴ *Indian Opinion*, 2 August 1913, 9 August 1913, 25 February 1914, 11 March 1914, 29 July 1914; Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, pp.283-284.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

The women, upon their release from prison were given a tumultuous welcome from the local Indian community and a few white supporters. The pioneer group of Transvaal women was released in Durban at the end of January 1914. Officials of the Transvaal Women's Association, the Natal Indian Association, the Christian Indian Women's Association and the Zoroastrian Anjuman Association warmly received them. The three male and female infant passive resisters, which shared their mothers' imprisonment, were: Seshumma Naidoo, Rajuma Pillay, Angela Pillay Sababady Pillay, Rambdat B. Dayal and Vello Naidoo. The oldest was under two years and the youngest just five months old.³⁶

International and Local Support

The activities of Indian passive resisters drew support and sympathy, from locals and foreigners alike. Amongst them was Mrs. Millie Polak, wife of renowned journalist H.L. Polak, who founded the Transvaal Indian Women's Association. She provided both moral and financial support during the movement.³⁷ Annie Besant, an Englishwoman, was also an ardent and eloquent advocate of fair and equitable treatment of Indians in South Africa. News of the strike and women's arrest aroused widespread resentment in India. Sympathetic meetings and protests were held by various women's organizations in Western India, mainly in the cities such as Bombay and Ahmadabad. As early as 1912, protest meetings were held condemning the discriminatory treatment of Indians in South Africa. Women representing the various religious denominations met in Bombay, and praised the fearless courage of the women who braved various hardships to defend and protect not only their womanhood, but also the womanhood of all Indian women:

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All honor to these brave woman for their self-sacrifice and suffering spirit! Who would have believed that Indian women were capable of such heroic conduct, standing shoulder to shoulder with their husbands, fathers and brothers! Really and truly our hearts bleed for them and go out to them in their hour of harm, pain and suffering. They have the courage to leave behind them their families and their children, unprotected, unprovoked and starving."³⁸

Nevertheless, by January 1914, Gandhi met Smuts to deliberate on the Indian question. The Indian Relief Bill of 1914 followed this. The provisions of the Bill was as follows: the £3 tax was cancelled, Indian marriages were legalized and one wife, and the minor children, of an Indian

³⁶ *Indian Opinion*, 25 February 1914.

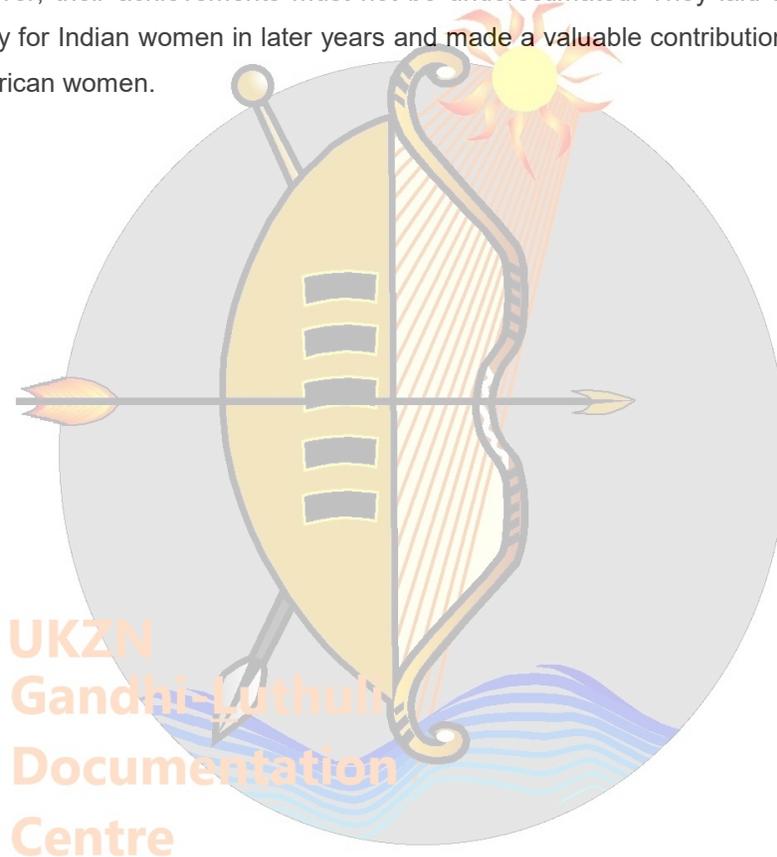
³⁷ Souvenir of the Passive Resistance Movement in South Africa 1906-1914; Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, pp. 174-183.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 7 January 1914.

marriage - even if it was polygamous - were given the right to join their husbands residing in South Africa.³⁹

Conclusion

In conclusion, women's participation in the passive resistance campaign of 1913 was a sterling effort, given the prevailing conservative social norms governing Indian society. Women responded spontaneously to defend their honor. But, in the aftermath of the campaign the women failed to sustain the political momentum of 1913 and the vast majority returned to the domestic sphere. However, their achievements must not be underestimated. They laid the precedent for political activity for Indian women in later years and made a valuable contribution to the struggles of all South African women.



³⁹Swan, *The South African Experience*, p.256.