

Natal Indian Congress (NIC)

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ORGANISATIONS1

- [African National Congress \(ANC\)](#)



1946 Resistance Camp. Private Collection, Omar Badsha

The NIC (Natal Indian Congress) was the first of the Indian Congresses to be formed. It was established in 1894 by [Mahatma Gandhi](#) to fight discrimination against Indian traders in Natal. From the 1920s the organization functioned under the umbrella organization, the SAIC (South African Indian Congress). However, in the 1930s-1940s the NIC experienced more radical leadership when [Dr. G.M. Naicker](#) emerged on the scene ([see SAIC history](#)). Dr. Naicker was elected to the organisation's leadership in 1945. Due to more militant protests, by the 1950s and 1960s several of the NIC's leaders were in jail. Although the NIC itself was not banned, this harassment of its leaders and the repressive conditions at that time, led to a halt in its activities. It was only in 1971 that the NIC was revived with a focus on civic work. The organisation was prominent in the establishment of the [United Democratic Front \(UDF\)](#) in the mid-1980s.

The formation of Natal Indian Congress

The Natal Indian Congress (NIC) came into being in 1894 and was formed by Mahatma Gandhi to fight discrimination against Indian traders in Natal. The NIC, was the first of the Indian Congresses followed by the formation of the [Transvaal Indian Congress \(TIC\)](#) and the Cape Indian Congress, the three later went on to form the South African Indian Congress (SAIC) in 1919.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, who was later to play a leading and decisive role in the struggle for independence in India, arrived in South Africa as a fledgling lawyer in May 1893. Having completed his legal assignment, he made preparations to return home. But this was not to be.

At a farewell dinner in his honour in 1894, Gandhi read about the intentions of the Natal Legislative Assembly to disenfranchise the Indians, and immediately suggested to the Indians present that they should resist this attack on their rights. The Indians concurred and prevailed upon him to postpone his departure in order to spearhead the struggle.

On the night of the farewell party he drew up a petition and set up a temporary committee. Within a month, a monster petition bearing 10,000 signatures was presented to Lord Ripon, Colonial Secretary, and the agitation compelled the British Government to disallow the Bill. However, in 1896 the Bill finally became law. To overcome the objections of the Imperial Government, the Act did not mention the Indians but merely disqualified those who were not of European origin and the indigenous population who had not previously enjoyed the vote.

This was the first time that the Indian people had not only participated in, but also organised an agitational campaign. The enthusiasm and determination of the Indians is vividly described by Gandhi:

"Meetings were held every day and more and more persons attended them. The requisite funds were oversubscribed. Many volunteers helped in preparing copies, securing signatures and similar work without say remuneration.... The descendants of the ex-indentured Indians joined the movement with alacrity. They knew English and wrote a fine hand. They did copying and other work ungrudgingly day and night."



Gandhi leads the march from Natal to the Transvaal. 1913. Private Collection, Omar badsha ©

The temporary committee was transformed into the Natal Indian Congress (NIC), which Gandhi helped to found in May 1894. Membership of the Congress was restricted to the trading class since a minimum of £3 annual subscription was a condition of membership. According to Gandhi, in less than a month about three hundred Hindus, Moslems, Parsees and Christians became members. Recruitment drives were held and Indians throughout Natal were contacted. The NIC met at least once a month and they discussed current affairs, accounts and other matters. Congress also had as part of its programs self-improvement. In line with this, the Congress meetings

discussed and debated issues ranging from sanitation to the need for the richer Indians to live in greater opulence and to distinguish between uses of business and residence.

Two of the most important campaigns organized by the NIC in the early years were the Gandhi campaigns of 1908 and 1913. During these campaigns a large section of the Indian community demonstrated its willingness to participate in militant struggles.

Like the TIC, in the 1930s - 1940s the NIC came under the influence of more radical leaders like G.M. Naicker, who believed that the South African Indian Congress could only advance in their struggle if they cooperated with national organisations representing African and Coloured people. Naicker was elected to the NIC leadership in 1945 and he led the NIC in the [1946 Indian Passive Resistance Campaign](#) (see SAIC history) in Durban.

As a result of Naicker's leadership the organization made agreements to work alongside other liberation organizations and most of the NIC's political involvement at the time was done under their national umbrella organization name, the SAIC. In September 1948, Dr. Naicker was elected as President of the SAIC and in 1952 the organization was involved in the Defiance Campaign. The NIC also had members among the [Treason Trial](#) defendants and in MK when it was formed in 1961. Due to these more militant protests, by the 1950s and 1960s several of the NIC's leaders were in jail. Although the NIC itself was not banned, this harassment of its leaders and the repressive conditions at that time, led to a halt in its activities. It was only in 1971 that the NIC was revived with a focus on civic work.

In the 1980s the most striking of the campaigns embarked on by NIC was the Anti-South African Indian Council campaign of 1981 and the Anti-Tricameral Parliament Campaign against the establishment of the House of Delegates in 1984 (see Transvaal). The NIC was also a founding member of the United Democratic Front (UDF), and remained an affiliate until the disbandment of the UDF. After the ANC was unbanned in 1990, the NIC and the TIC, had various meetings with the ANC over the role of the two Indian Congresses. Both organizations were subsequently disbanded and many of their leaders became active in the newly-formed ANC branches and its provincial and national structures.

