



CHAPTER – III

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SOUTH AFRICAN EXPERIENCE AND UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL PROBLEMS

In May 1893, Gandhi proceeded to Natal in South Africa as the Lawyer of a firm of Porbandar Muslims and was deeply shocked by the political and social disabilities imposed by law and usage, upon the Indian residents in South Africa.¹

When Gandhi worked in South Africa, it was a place where the 'whites' treated the 'blacks' and the Indians as though they were inferior human beings. They called all Indians 'Sammy' (from the word Swami) or 'Coolie', and looked down upon them.² Gandhi, dressed in a frock coat and turban, landed at Durban in the province of Natal, where his employer, Dada Abdullah was waiting for him. Then Gandhi worked hard at his first case. As he entered the court with Dada Abdullah, the judge, a white man, glared at him. "Mr. Gandhi" he roared, "This is not an Indian court. You must come suitably dressed. Take off that turban at once."³ Gandhi was surprised, but he knew that he would certainly not obey such an unfair order. He said politely, "Sir, my turban will stay on my head. I will not take it off."⁴ And then he walked out of the court. This attracted the attention of Europeans and Indians, who wrote angry replies for and against Gandhi's action.

Gandhiji's Experience in South Africa

Gandhiji's Experience in South Africa helped him in his social work towards the India. While travelling in a coach, Gandhiji was beaten by the conductor of the coach, because the Indians were not allowed to sit on the seats of such coaches.⁵ The passengers took pity on him and came to his rescue. This incident taught Gandhiji the technique of Satyagraha or passive resistance.⁶ Another incident about Gandhiji was that, as Gandhiji was travelling to Pretoria for a lawsuit. He got into the first class compartment for the comfortable journey, suddenly a displeasing man who was an European jumped on the platform and called for the railway official. He shouted, "Get the coolie out of the first class compartment. He can travel in the Van-car."⁷ Gandhiji having his brown skin suffered all the insult and pain, without resisting Gandhiji faced this terrible diseases of colour prejudice which attacks a persons dignity yet Gandhiji did not give up rather decided not to run away but to stay back and fight the diseases.

In South Africa he was a victim of the colour bar and of racial discrimination. In January 1897 Gandhi was beaten by African whites. It was with extreme difficulty that he escaped death from the crowd which sang, "Hang old Gandhi on the sour apple tree."⁸ In February 1908, because he agreed to voluntary registration, a Pathan accused him of bribery and threatened to kill him. On the next day he was beaten with a heavy stick by one, Mir Alam.⁹ Though the blow was severe and Gandhi fainted, it proved to be a test of his nobility: from his sick bed he wired to the Attorney

General that Mir Alam and others should be pardoned.¹⁰ His participation in the Boer War and Zulu Rebellion as a volunteer to help the sick and wounded brought him into direct contact with many problems of human life, apart from the personal sufferings which he had to encounter. The Zulu Rebellion especially was a new experience for him and gave him much food for thought. It was this Rebellion which brought home the horrors of war more than did the Boer War.¹¹ The prison life which he had to undergo many times provided him with further opportunities to share the sufferings of humanity. The 'Satyagraha Movement', which he led in South Africa¹², brought much suffering in its initial stages. The insults which he had to endure, the severe restrictions he had to place on himself, the attempt to reform himself and the penances imposed on himself, such as fasting, were all suffering which he undertook of his own free will. He fasted, both to reform himself and to reform society. It was then that the germ of social protest was born in Gandhiji. This incident was a turning point in his life and he decided to fight in South Africa against social injustice.

Apartheid Policy

He invited Indians to many meetings where they discussed the injustice brown-skinned people had to face, and how they could fight it. In South Africa, Indian could not own property, and they had to pay an extra tax every year.¹³ They were not allowed to be on the streets after nine O'clock at night unless they had a pass. If anyone dared to go out, he was kicked and beaten. The Indians were too afraid to stand up to the whites.

But Gandhi made them write letters to newspapers and protest. The whites resented their settlement there and the Government also encouraged the whites with its suppressive attitudes against the Indians. The Government created a phobia among the white population against the Indian emigrants and subjected them to heavy taxation, police atrocities, looting and destroying of shops etc.¹⁴

Gandhiji, though a staunch Hindu,¹⁵ was always revered and respected both by the Europeans and the Americans.¹⁶ He also had in his mind respect and reverence for them. In fact there were many European and African friends of Gandhiji. But, when he was acquainted with the situations there a sense of vile affront developed in his mind. In Dutch Transversal, he was severely beaten, thrown out of trains and hotels forbidden for the blacks, and insulted several times. He had gone there on contract for a year, otherwise he would have soon returned to India.¹⁷ He was always counting the days for his safe return to his homeland. But when the time came for his departure from Africa, he learnt that the Government would pass a legislation through which Indians would be deprived of using their franchise. The Indians were leading a fettered and chaotic life. They were disorganized and scattered. They had no one to lead and guide. Realizing their difficulties, Gandhiji thought that it would not be proper for him to leave South Africa and consequently he took up the task of leading and liberating his countrymen there.¹⁸ He could have earned a lot if he had come back. He abandoned all his connections in order to serve the Indians there.

In 1896, Gandhiji returned to India to get his family.¹⁹ During his stay there, he went about the country, telling people about the problems Indians faced in South Africa. He wrote a pamphlet, describing the grievances faced by Indians, a pamphlet that almost cost him his life when he returned to South Africa. A news agency had written a wrong report about it saying that 'it declares that Indians in Natal are robbed and attacked and treated like beasts.' Of course, Gandhi had not written such fiery words. He had written a calm, thoughtful article.²⁰

When Gandhi's ship from India reached Durban on January 1897²¹ the South African whites were waiting at the dock waiting to attack. Kasturba and the boys were quickly whisked away to the home of Mr. Rustomji, a lawyer and a friend of Gandhi, but Gandhi had to follow on foot. As soon as he began walking, two small boys shouted, "There he is, There is Gandhi."²² Suddenly, the crowd urged towards Gandhi, screaming angry words and throwing stones, bricks and eggs. A stone hit his head and he fainted. Somehow he managed to get up and move. But the whites hit his face and body mercilessly with sticks. There seemed to be no way to get him out of the reach of the enraged people. Suddenly, through the frenzied roar of the crowd, Gandhi could hear a high pitched voice shouting, "Keep away, Move back, Stop this nonsense."²³ He looked up and, in a blur, saw a small, white lady beating back the mob with her umbrella. She was shouting, "To beat him, you will have to come at me first", And she flung herself between Gandhi and the crowds. Luckily, they withdrew and the lady was

able to take Gandhi to safety. She was Mrs. Alexander, the wife of the Police Superintendent. Later, when Gandhi and his family were in Rustomji's house, a mob surrounded the place shouting, "Set it on fire". Then the police came in from the back door and said, "Mr. Gandhi, wear this police uniform and come with us". So in the dead of night, Gandhi had to escape to the police station even though he was wounded badly. News of this attack troubled the ministers in England and when they found out that Gandhi's pamphlet had been misquoted, they forced the whites in Durban to say that they were sorry.²⁴ And Gandhi, instead of hating them and taking action against the people guilty of attacking him so violently, forgave them. The law taking away the votes from Indians was also withdrawn, Gandhi was the winner. For the twenty years that Gandhi was in South Africa, he kept up the fight against injustice. He adopted the practice of ahimsa or non-violence to all living things, and Satyagraha, the force of truth and love.²⁵

Colour Prejudice

This is the original work of Gandhiji expressed by the Dr. Barnard from the script "Delhi Diary" saying that he evidently doubts about the entry of Gandhiji into the social work whether it is a great day", Gandhiji treats the Natal Indian Congress with the gratuitous advice that the Indian of South Africa should emigrate to India and become "missionaries of the gospel they have been taught in South Africa, namely, to live in peace and order and not to fight in communal riots". Gandhiji has fear that this message is typical about the average of white mans mind in the South Africa Dominion.

Hence the series of disabilities on our country men for the crime of being Asiatics and having a coloured pigmen. Gandhiji appeals to the best western mind of South Africa revise this anti-Asiatic and anti-colour prejudice. They have an overwhelming African population in their midst. They are worse treated in some respect than the Asiatics. Gandhiji urged the European settlers to read the signs of the times, either this prejudice is wrong from every point of view or the British people and their fellow members of the great common wealth have made an unpardonable mistake in admitting Asiatic countries as members.²⁶

Satyagraha in South Africa

Gandhiji then referred to another kind of Satyagraha launched by the Indian community in South Africa.²⁷ Indians in South Africa were not permitted free entry into the various provinces. In defence of their honour as men and women the satyagrahies had marched to Volkurst and then motored to Johannesburg where they held a meeting. This was a courageous step and if the people as a whole became satyagrahies in the right spirit, victory was sure to crown their efforts. In the question of the March the Government had shown a degree of tolerance and not effected any arrests. But the progress of the movement it was feared that arrests would follow.

So long however as the movement was conducted peacefully, there was no reason for the Government to resort to persecution. Why should

whites consider it infra dig to talk matters over with non whites? Gandhiji suggested that the authorities should contact the Satyagraha leaders and satisfy their reasonable demands.²⁸ The struggle between Gandhiji and the Indians on the one hand, and the Whites and the Government on the other. The spiritual forces were pitted against the brute forces. In spite of virulent opposition, Gandhiji organized the Indian Congress at Natal and formed an association for educating the Indians. He also started publishing a paper 'Indian Opinion' in three Indian languages and in English in 1904.²⁹ In 1901, he founded an agricultural farm at Phoenix near Durban on the line of Tolstoy farm. He asked his countrymen to settle there. Gradually the colony became thick. Indians settled in different parts of the cities were advised to settle there. They paralyzed the city life by withdrawing themselves from cities. Industrial life became very uneasy. Gandhiji fought the battle with his pure means of non-violence before which even the mighty Rome became powerless. Gandhiji applied this method in South Africa. He resisted non-violently against any oppression and exhorted the Indians to take part in public activities. He also started a hospital in Johannesburg in 1904, when plague broke out. The Government of Natal also tendered him thanks for his public work there. Romain Rolland put it thus, "Gandhi organized and served at the head of a corps of brancardiers and the Government of Natal tendered him public thanks."³⁰ But the proffered action of the Government was of no avail. Once Gandhiji was mercilessly and brutally assaulted by the mob and had to undergo rigorous imprisonment.

On suspicion, he was also beaten by his own compatriots in 1907. Romain Rolland writes, "Gandhi, therefore, suffered from the violence of the oppressed as well as of the oppressors".³¹ But Gandhiji never lost his patience. He never spoke ill of anyone. On the contrary, he grew stronger. His lofty ideal could not be renounced. His slogan was "Hind Swaraj". And he published a book *Hind Swaraj* in 1908,³² preaching the gospel of heroic love. The most critical period of Gandhiji's life in South Africa can be said to be from 1907 to 1914. In 1906, the South African Government passed a new Asiatic law for which even the broad-minded and intelligent Englishmen showed resentment. But the Government had passed this Law in great haste. Gandhiji organized and launched non-violent resistance against the Government on a large-scale. In 1906, a huge gathering of Indian emigrants solemnly took oath for passive resistance.³³ The Asians were arrested in large numbers and were lodged in jails. As the accommodation in jails was not sufficient, the prisoners were thrown into mine-pits. Gandhiji was also arrested thrice and was kept in prison. These atrocities of the South African Government created a bad public opinion among the Asians and the people settled there. They, in turn, demonstrated, condemned and went on strike. The entire Indian community was stirred, and Viceroy Lord Hardinge finally lodged a complaint against the African Government. Mahatma Gandhi thus finally triumphed over the brute force through his unique method of passive resistance. The method of non-violence gave a crushing defeat to the violent method and proved

to be the weapon of the brave. He realised the real force behind the method of non-violence in South Africa. In the end, in 1914, the Natal Government allowed the Indians to settle there. Tax was also exempted. It was South Africa where Gandhiji for the first time used his method of non-violence, and after twenty years of relentless war against the Whites he finally won. It is mainly due to this that he adopted this method as the method of self-realization. South Africa, for Gandhiji, was like a laboratory where he evolved the new weapon of non-violent resistance. He experimented upon it with the minutest care and found it useful and one that could never be denounced.³⁴

His passive resistance and Satyagraha movement in South Africa in spite of all the initial difficulties finally met with considerable success. His non-violent fight for the indentured laboured and the appraised and against racial discrimination won Lion universal appliance. In his later life he often used to narrate his successful experiments in South Africa, if he wanted to establish his point of view against his opponents in political matters. His struggle in South Africa, unarmed against armed people, made him a confirmed believer in non-violence and universal love.³⁵

After all his efforts, there was victory for Gandhi. The tax on Indians, and the unjust laws on working conditions and marriage were withdrawn. They were also given the right to vote. He decided to leave South Africa, once his task was completed. It was 1913, and India, a country enslaved by the British, beckoned to him. It was at this time that he cast off Western

clothes and began wearing the dhoti. He also stopped wearing shoes. He was no longer the Westernised lawyer.³⁶

In South Africa Gandhiji gave a non-violent fight for the Indians against the violent Government. Though it was a political fight its base was social that is the discriminatory practices against the blacks. Here for the first time Gandhiji realized a social problem. In his struggle in South Africa he was successful but at the same time a social base for his political leadership was also created.³⁷

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