



A STUDY OF THE ROLE OF MAHATMA GANDHI IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT :

Mahatma Gandhi's tenure in South Africa from 1893 to 1914 was a formative period that significantly influenced his philosophy and methods of nonviolent resistance. During this time, Gandhi evolved from a struggling barrister to a determined leader of the Indian community, which faced widespread racial discrimination and injustice. His experiences in South Africa led to the development of his concepts of Satyagraha (truth force) and ahimsa (nonviolence), which became central to his later actions in India's freedom struggle. This paper examines Gandhi's role in South Africa, highlighting his efforts to combat oppressive policies against Indians, such as discriminatory legislation and the infamous "Black Act".

Keywords: Gandhi: Social Justice, Political Approach and Peaceful Protest

Introduction :

Mahatma Gandhi's 21-year stay in South Africa from 1893 to 1914 was a crucial period that deeply influenced his development as a leader and proponent of nonviolent resistance. This time not only shaped his personal philosophy but also laid the groundwork for his future role in India's freedom struggle. This paper explores Gandhi's transformative visit to South Africa, focusing on his efforts to combat racial discrimination, his development of the principles of satyagraha and nonviolence, and the long-term impact of his activism.

Through organized civil disobedience, legal challenges, and mass movements, Gandhi laid the groundwork for his future strategies of nonviolent resistance. The paper also explores how Gandhi's South African experience shaped his political and moral outlook, establishing him as a global icon of peaceful protest and social justice. Would Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi have become Mahatma if he had not gone to South Africa? This is a question that even Gandhiji himself would hardly be able to answer. Before coming to India, he opposed apartheid and racial discrimination in South Africa. While living there, he struggled to get justice not only for Indians but also for people of other deprived sections. One such struggle was The Great March, which emerged as the biggest victory for Mahatma Gandhi abroad.

In March 1913, the Supreme Court of Cape ruled that all such marriages are illegal which are not done according to Christian customs. This means that the marriages of most Indians became illegal. When the marriage itself is illegal, how can the children born from it remain legitimate?

The effect of the Supreme Court's decision would be that Indian children would be disinherited from the inheritance of their ancestors, then there was anger among the citizens. On the other hand, the Natal government started filing cases against Indians who could not pay the annual tax of 3 pounds.

Then Mahatma Gandhi started Satyagraha in Natal and Transvaal. On 6 November 1913, The Great March was taken out against the repressive law. More than 2,000 people marched to Natal under Gandhiji's leadership. Gandhiji was arrested. When he was released on bail, he again joined the march. Then he was arrested again.

This sequence was broken and Gandhiji won. The government agreed to the compromise. Talks were held between Gandhiji and General John Smiths, as the representative of the South African government. The Indian Relief Bill was passed and Indian citizens got freedom from the black law.

Gandhi's Satyagraha in South Africa

Looking at Gandhi's selfless work and his established advocacy there, it seemed as if he had settled in Natal itself. In mid-1896, he came to India with the intention of taking his entire family with him to Natal. His objective during this journey was to gather as much support as possible in the country for the Indians of South Africa and to create public opinion.

While staying in Rajkot, he wrote a book on the problems of the Indian diaspora and got it printed and sent its copies to the major newspapers of the country. At the same time, the plague epidemic that had spread in Rajkot had taken a terrible form. Gandhi started serving as a volunteer. He went to the Dalit settlements there and helped the affected in every possible way.

During his visit, he met the prominent leaders of the country. The personalities of leaders like Badruddin Tayyab, Sir Firozshah Mehta, Surendranath Banerjee, Lokmanya Jilak, Gokhale etc. had a deep impact on him. He put forth the problems of the expatriate Indians in front of everyone. Gandhiji's speech program was held in Bombay under the chairmanship of Sir Firozshah Mehta. After this, Gandhiji had to address a public meeting in Calcutta.

But before doing so, he received an important telegram from the Indians of South Africa. After this, he left for Durban with his wife and children in November 1896.

The true report of whatever Gandhiji did and said in India did not reach Natal. It was presented there in an exaggerated and distorted manner. This infuriated the white residents there. When Gandhiji reached Natal by a ship named 'Crueland', the white residents there behaved indecently with him. Rotten eggs and pebbles were thrown at him. The mob kicked and punched him. If the wife of the Superintendent of Police had not intervened, he would have died the same day. On the other hand, the Colonial Minister of London sent a telegram to the Natal government to take action against those who attacked Gandhiji. Gandhiji refused to reveal the identity of the accused and requested not to take any action against them. Gandhiji said, "They have been misled, when they will know the truth, they will regret their actions. I forgive them." It seemed as if these words were not of Gandhiji but of some Mahatma beating inside him.

After his second visit to South Africa, a wonderful change came in Gandhiji. Earlier he used to live like an English barrister. But now he started giving place to frugality in his life. He reduced his expenses and his needs. Gandhiji learned the 'art of living'. He started doing the work of ironing clothes, stitching clothes etc. himself. He used to cut his hair himself. He also used to do the cleaning himself. Apart from this, he also took out time to serve the people. He used to give two hours every day to a charitable hospital, where he worked as a compounder. He used to teach his two sons as well as his nephew. In the year 1911, Gokhale ji came to South Africa on a visit. The Boer generals promised Gandhi ji and Gokhale to end the discriminatory practices towards Indians. But the system of personal tax was not stopped. Gandhi ji got ready for the struggle. The women who were not active in the movement till now, stood up on Gandhi ji's call. The torch of sacrifice was lit in them. Now Satyagraha was emerging in a new form. Gandhiji decided that a group of women would break the law and go from Transvaal to Natal. That too without paying taxes. Women participated enthusiastically in this struggle. His wife Kasturba also joined it. The women who were trying to break this law were arrested. Strikes took place at many places under the guidance of Gandhiji. Adopting the path of non-violence, Gandhiji started his Satyagraha. Despite the beatings of the police and hunger and thirst, the Satyagrahis remained steadfast on their path. Gandhiji's Satyagraha proved to be an infallible weapon. Finally a compromise was reached and the Indian Relief Bill was passed. It was provided in the law that Indians cannot go from one province to another without permission, but Indians born here can go and live in the Cape Colony. Apart from this, marriages conducted according to the Indian system were declared valid. Personal tax on indentured labourers was removed and the outstanding amount was cancelled. Now Gandhiji's work in South Africa was completed. On 18 July 1914, at Gokhale's invitation, he sailed for England with his wife. Before leaving, he presented a pair of his slippers made in prison to Smuts. General Smuts wore it for twenty-five years. He later wrote, "Since then I have worn these slippers in many summers, though I realize that I can in no way equal so great a man."

Early years in South Africa

Gandhi arrived in South Africa as a young barrister to assist in a legal dispute. His early experiences of racial discrimination, such as being thrown out of a first-class train compartment despite having a valid ticket, were important in awakening his social consciousness. These events were instrumental in making Gandhi realize the widespread racial injustice faced by the Indian community in South Africa.

Development of Satyagraha

The term Satyagraha, meaning "truth force" or "soul force", was coined by Gandhi during his time in South Africa. This principle emerged from his belief in the power of nonviolent resistance as a means of confronting and rectifying injustice. Gandhi's philosophy was deeply rooted in the concepts of ahimsa (nonviolence) and satya (truth), which he believed to be interconnected and essential to achieving social and political change.

First Campaign: Asiatic Registration Act

One of Gandhi's earliest and most notable campaigns in South Africa was against the Asiatic Registration Act of 1906, also known as the "Black Act". This law required all Asians to register with the authorities and carry identity cards at all times. Gandhi organized mass protests against this discriminatory law, which initiated the first satyagraha campaign. Inspired by Gandhi's call for nonviolent resistance, thousands of Indians burned their registration certificates and faced imprisonment.

Natal Indian Congress

In 1894, Gandhi founded the Natal Indian Congress to unite the Indian community in South Africa and fight against discriminatory laws and practices. The Natal Indian Congress became a powerful platform for organizing protests, petitions, and legal challenges against the injustices faced by Indians. Under Gandhi's leadership, the Natal Indian Congress played a key role in advocating for the rights of the Indian community and raising awareness of their plight.

Gandhi's Personal Transformation

During his time in South Africa, Gandhi underwent significant personal and ideological changes. He adopted a simple lifestyle, adopted vegetarianism, and practiced self-discipline. His experiences in South Africa also gave him a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of all forms of oppression and the importance of fighting injustice through non-violent means.

Impact on the Indian community

Gandhi's activism in South Africa had a profound impact on the Indian community. He succeeded in unifying diverse groups of Indians, including Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, under the common objective of fighting racial discrimination. His efforts drew international attention to the plight of Indians in South Africa and laid the foundation for future civil rights movements.

Legacy and Global Influence

Gandhi's principles of satyagraha and nonviolence, developed and tested in South Africa, became the cornerstone of his leadership in India's freedom struggle. His success in South Africa demonstrated the effectiveness of nonviolent resistance, which inspired civil rights movements around the world. Leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela drew inspiration from Gandhi's methods in their struggles against injustice and oppression.

Conclusion :

Mahatma Gandhi's role in South Africa was crucial in shaping his philosophy of nonviolent resistance and his approach to social and political activism. His experiences in South Africa not only transformed him personally, but also had a lasting impact on the Indian community and the global civil rights movement. Gandhi's legacy in South Africa is a testament to the power of nonviolent resistance in the face of injustice and continues to inspire movements for social justice around the world.

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