

1913 Satyagraha Campaign Resumes



Introduction

A provisional settlement was reached in 1911. But in the letter of 12 September 1913 reproduced below, A.M. Cachalia, chairman of the British Indian Association, explains to the Secretary of the Interior why the campaign was being resumed. The visit by G.I Gokhale in October and November 1912 had failed to secure a negotiated settlement, although Gokhale believed that everything had been settled when he left. In addition, the Searle Judgment in the Cape Supreme Court (March 1913) added another issue: marriages contracted in accordance with Indian religious rites were declared legally invalid. Source: Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, vol. 12, pp. 183-6.

Women and the Satyagraha Campaign

In March of 1913 the Campaign got the impetus it needed to resume. In a judgement of the Supreme Court, Judge Searle refused to recognise Hindu and Muslim marriages. Angered by this, Indian women joined the Campaign for the first time. The participation of women passive resisters was a key element of the Satyagraha Campaign of 1913 - 1914.

One of the most prominent female protesters was Gandhi's wife, Kasturba Gandhi. She declared that she 'would go to prison rather than be declared an unlawful wife'.

Gandhi was delighted with the women's participation in the struggle for justice. He realised that women had responsibilities that men did not have, as they were expected to take care of the home and children. Gandhi felt that married couples should share these responsibilities. He pledged to his wife that he and the other men would take care of the children and all the household chores if the women went to prison as a result of protesting.

On the first day of the new Campaign, Gandhi, together with other men, took over the kitchens. They prepared meals, did the washing and scrubbed the floors. They then accompanied the Satyagrahi women to the Durban railway station, where the women began the first part of their journey by train to the Transvaal.

This was a criminal offence for which they could be jailed for up to six months. The group of 16 Satyagrahis, four women and 12 men, were led by Kasturba. Their aim was to eventually fill the prisons with Satyagrahis.

When Kasturba's group of protesters arrived at Volksrust station in the Transvaal, they were ordered off the train as they did not have permits. They refused to get off, saying that they were prepared to go to jail.

The government knew that, by arresting these women, the Satyagraha Campaign would get a lot of publicity, so for several days they left them alone in Volksrust. But by Sunday 21 September the police had lost their patience and decided to deport them. The police took the group to a bridge on the border between Natal and the Transvaal and pushed the protesters across it. The group promptly marched back into the Transvaal, where, this time, they were arrested.

On 23 September they were tried and sentenced to three months' imprisonment. For six days they were held in Volksrust before being transferred to the Pietermaritzburg prison in Natal.

This act of protest by a relatively small group of Satyagrahis marked the beginning of another huge campaign. A few weeks after the arrest, they were joined by another group of women who had also been sentenced to three months imprisonment for crossing the border. This group of women lived in the Transvaal and crossed into Natal because they wanted to re-cross to the Transvaal side illegally. One of the women imprisoned was 16-year-old Valliama Munuswami Mudliar, who became very ill in prison and died soon after her release.

The arrest and imprisonment of the women angered the Indian community. Indian workers all over Natal decided to go on strike and to join the Satyagrahis.

On 13 October 1913 a new campaign was initiated in Newcastle, Natal, in protest at the £3 Tax imposed on ex-indentured Indians. The aim was to gain the support of the working classes and for Thambi Naidoo, a leader of the Johannesburg-based Tamil Benefit Society, to mobilise the Newcastle merchants. The campaigners gained the support of railway workers and miners, and on 16 October 1913, a strike began. Two weeks later, between 4000 and 5000 miners had downed their tools.

In order to spread the action, Gandhi began leading some of the strikers from Natal over the Transvaal border. The march would take place in eight stages. Preparations for food and sleeping places were made at each of the stopping points. The big march officially began on 6 November 1913 at 6.30 in the morning. Two thousand and thirty-seven men, 127 women and 57 children made up the long and determined line of marchers. During the march Gandhi was arrested and let out on bail three times, but the march continued. Later, P.K. Naidoo and other leaders were also arrested, but still the people marched on.

In Standerton they stopped to rest and to eat. Gandhi was handing out food when a magistrate came and stood quietly at his side until he had finished. He told Gandhi that he had come to arrest him. Gandhi turned to him calmly and said, 'It would seem I have received promotion in rank, as magistrates take the trouble to arrest me instead of mere police officials.' In court, he found that five other marchers had also been arrested. They were kept in prison but Gandhi was released on bail of 50 pounds.

Gandhi joined the march again, but before they reached Balfour he was re-arrested, this time by the chief immigration officer. The workers continued the march. They arrived in Balfour, to find that there were three trains waiting to deport them back to Natal. They were given two choices: either get on the trains or go to prison. They chose prison. In prison Gandhi, met a Satyagrahi called Harbatsingh, who was 75 years old. Gandhi was very moved by his courage.

'You should be at home, old man,' Gandhi said kindly.

'Hah!' said Baba Harbatsingh, 'Sit at home when you, your wife and even your sons are in prison for us! I would rather die in prison than sit at home.'

Harbarsingh died in a Durban jail on 5 January 1914.

The government eventually forced the striking mine-workers back to the mines, which had been closed in by wire fences like concentration camps. A spontaneous strike erupted which changed the campaign radically. There was a violent confrontation and several strikers were killed or injured in clashes with the police. Protests spread and by the end of November 1913, produce markets in Durban and Pietermaritzburg had come to a standstill, sugar mills were closed and hotels, restaurants and homes were without domestic workers. In India, reports of the arrest of Gandhi and the brutality of the police caused an uproar. The British government was forced to come to an agreement with the strikers.

The Satyagrahis continued their campaign. Eventually, in response to pressure from the British government, the Minister of Justice, Jan Smuts, decided to set up a commission to investigate the grievances of Indians in South Africa. The commission's report led to an agreement between Gandhi and Smuts in early 1914. Gandhi agreed that the Satyagraha Campaign would stop and the government agreed to abolish the £3 Tax, recognise Indian marriages, abolish the Black Act and to allow Indians to move freely into the Transvaal.

Indians considered the Ghandi-Smuts agreement of 1914 an important victory, even though it did not mean an end to all the oppressive laws against them. It had been made possible by the bravery of thousands of people who, led by Gandhi, had made many sacrifices to achieve it.

Source: South African History Online, <<https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/1913-satyagraha-campaign-resumes>>.