

From Moment to Eternity: The Rebirth of Gandhi

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ABSTRACT

It is said that Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born in India and reborn in South Africa. Going a step further, Gandhi himself testified that “I was born in India but was made in South Africa”. On the fateful night of June 7, 1893 Gandhi was thrown out of a railway compartment at Pietermaritzburg station, South Africa, despite having a valid first-class ticket on his way to Pretoria. The event did not hit the headlines nor was it reported in newspapers, but it was the catalyst of a revolution in the life of the victim and also the world in general and his motherland in particular. That night witnessed the rebirth of Gandhi, who was later acclaimed as Mahatma Gandhi and the birth of the ideal of *Satyagraha* which inspired the struggle of Indian natives against apartheid in South Africa, India’s national movement against British imperialism and peace movements the world over. The ephemeral became eternal. The present paper examines the defining moment in the life of Gandhi which ignited the spark of an inner psychic revolution in him and transformed him from an unimpressive and diffident barrister into a transformative leader inspiring men and movements the world over. A local event thus became a global beacon light.

The paper intends to explicate the ramifications of the momentous moment within the methodological perspective of the concept of Contingency in politics which postulates

that Politics is based on contingencies of time and space. Contingencies are based on uncertainties which are both foreseeable and unforeseeable, knowable and unknowable. The present paper contends that singular, rare and unanticipated events shape the making and remaking of personality. What appears to be a non-event transcends its status as an event and attains eternity. Providing a counter point to Gregory. A. Huber's view that Political Science should focus on foreseeable contingencies (Huber, 2007), the paper contends that to internalize contingencies, the study of the unexpected and the accidental should be the focal point. Unforeseeable events are rare and unique, but they help to understand how climacteric moments in the life of an individual also become momentous for the world at large. Andreas Schedler highlights a research gap saying that Political Science, seeking to uncover regularities of political life, has paid scarce attention to its contingency with its multiple locations. Its tenets are indeterminacy envisaging possible but unpredictable worlds, conditionality that is causal justifications and uncertainty that is open future. The present paper posits that this research gap is discernible in Gandhian studies as no attempt has been made to treat the micro event at the macro level and delineate its significance in the greater arena. As Ian Shapiro and Sonu Bedi say that the concept of Contingency is a great challenge to Political Science confronting it with the dilemma whether to embrace certainty or uncertainty about political outcomes (Shapiro and Bedi, 2009). The paper concludes that contingencies should not be treated as exogenous and though they are unpredictable, they have the added advantage of demonstrating how in particular cases, events become causes. Unilinear focus on certainty and predictability would preclude the analysis of fascinating events where consequences of the moment become causes of greater moments in future.

The primary objective of the paper is to show how the moment of humiliation proved to be a blessing in disguise for Gandhi and how the waiting room in the station where he shivered throughout the night, attained eternity and immortality. Secondly, it tries to show

how the contingency which was unpredictable and unforeseen, ensured Gandhi a permanent place in the history of the world. Thirdly, the paper emphasizes that singular events involve both objective and subjective factors. Psychic and catalytic moments are not always amenable to objective analysis. Moreover, unforeseen contingency helps to distinguish extraordinary events from ordinary ones. Certainty and predictability are not applicable to events of exceptional importance. The paper thus articulates the counter conviction that Gandhi's emergence as a global leader is best understood within the conceptual framework of Unforeseen Contingency.

Prelude

Gandhi set sail for South Africa in the ship *safri* which left Bombay port on April 19, 1893. Little did Gandhi know that the lawyer who left Bombay would return as a leader. He reached Durban on May 23, 1893 and was received by Seth Abdullah, the elder brother of Abdul karim Zaveri from Porbandar. Gandhi noted that the Europeans standing near them were eyeing Gandhi's European appearance with an air of curiosity. They had never seen such an India before. As they addressed Abdullah as Seth, Gandhi sensed that the address was not unmixed with a note of scorn (Ghosh, 2019). Seth Abdullah then informed him that a complicated case for which, his services were requisitioned, was being heard at Pretoria at Transvaal colony. He could be of help to the British barrister appointed for the case. The next day when he took Gandhi to the Durban court, was asked by a Durban judge to take off his turban which gave him a foretaste of what awaited him in future. Gandhi did not make a row over the matter but did not take it lying down either. He walked out (Ghosh, 2019). Gandhi's defiance of the order of the court magistrate to take off his turban, was reported in the daily *Natal Advertiser* portraying Gandhi as an unwelcome visitor. He did not take this lying down and sent a rejoinder to the editor the very next day where he said that it was

indecent to ask an Indian to take off his turban and barristers in Bombay were never ordered to do so. The letter was published on May 29, 1893 (Ghosh, 2019).

The initial experience came as a shock to Gandhi. He confessed that 'I have made a mistake in coming. My clients have misled me.' It would be difficult to imagine a more lovely spot than Durban or more hospitable people than its citizens. But apparently there was no welcome for an Indian. There were evidences of radical differences of treatment between white and colored people which startled the new arrival and cut him to the quick. In manhood he had known nothing about color prejudice but had been granted access to polite English society. Hitherto he had looked upon a white face as the face of a friend and was taught from childhood to admire British justice and purity of British honor. It is true that now and then some British official had shown himself brusque or overbearing but nothing so far had happened to chill his loyalty. (Doke, 1967, 43). In Durban, Hindu indentured laborers mostly from South India were called Swami and when someone had the temerity to correct their masters saying „I am not your master”, they were abused or slapped. To the whites, every Indian was a coolie and Gandhi was a coolie barrister and his client Seth Abdullah was a coolie merchant (Ghosh, 2019). Meanwhile, Suvan Godfrey, an Indian Christian who taught in the Protestant Mission warned Gandhi that in South Africa, he would not see the attitude of the British as in England. Here they were masters of the colony who treated Indians as servants. However, if Gandhi could adjust himself to the new surroundings, he would be able to earn a good living (Ghosh, 2019). Gandhi himself says that 'I had no idea of the previous history of the India emigrants. I went there only on a purely professional visit (Gandhi, 1928). He then goes on to say that:

„The partner of Dada Abdullah who had engaged me, had given me an account of what things were like in Natal. But what I saw there with my own eyes, absolutely belied his misleading picture. My informant was however not to blame. He was a frank, simple man,

ignorant of the real state of affairs. He had no idea of the hardships to which, Indians were subjected in Natal. Conditions which implied grave insult, had not appeared to him in that light. I observed on the very first day that the Europeans meted out most insulting treatment to Indians” (Gandhi, 1928).

It was racial discrimination which ignited in Gandhi, the first sparks his identity in a foreign land. It has been rightly said that ‘Gandhi met the wall of anti- Indian feeling in Natal and being a man of considerable pride, he fought back. the Gandhi who stepped on Durban docks in May 1893, was a far cry from the figure in abbreviated dhoti that was to become so familiar in the years after world war I. Rather he was immaculate in English suit, winged collar and waist (Huttenback, 1967). Perhaps his anglicized attire made him the object of persecution. Gandhi was blissfully unaware of the deliberate policy of discrimination against Indians. To point out just one instance, the practice of granting land rights upset the symbiotic relation between white supremacy and class privilege and to placate white sentiment, the system of granting land rights to ex indentured Indians was terminated in 1891 (Pachai, 1971). Gandhi surely had no inkling of what was known as Asiatic Menace in South Africa. This was the prelude to his moment of reckoning.

Vicissitude: Face to face with Reality

At this point of time, Seth Abdullah received a telegram from a British Barrister asking for his presence or that of his representative in Pretoria. He accordingly procured a first-class railway ticket for Gandhi in a train which would go from Natal to the city of Charlestown in the frontier of Transvaal and from there a stage coach would take him to Standerton in east Transvaal. After a night’s stay it would take him to Johannesburg and from there another train would take him to Pretoria. When the train reached Pietermaritzburg, the capital of Natal, a white man entered the compartment and on seeing Gandhi, went and complained to the

supervisor who came and asked Gandhi to shift to the van compartment meant for third class passengers. Gandhi refused as he had a first-class ticket. The next thing that happened was the appearance on the spot of a police constable who gripped Gandhi by the hand and dragged him out of the compartment and threw his luggage on the platform. The train whistled away leaving Gandhi desolate and shattered in the platform. He didn't even have his overcoat on in that winter night. It was in his luggage. Slowly Gandhi made his way to the waiting room and a black worker carried his luggage to the custody of the station master (Ghosh, 2019). It seemed to be the end of the world for Gandhi as such a contingency was beyond his imagination. Today with hindsight one can say that Seth Abdullah who was well acquainted with the plight of Indians in South Africa should not have given him a first-class ticket. Gandhi was a stranger in the land but Abdullah was not. The question however remains whether Abdullah was really so naïve as Gandhi imagined. According to a scholar, „Though Seth Abdullah was not an educated man, he had a man-of- the -world cunning and shrewdness. He could judge a man quite easily. He now felt that for him appointing Gandhi would mean keeping a white elephant in service. He would not gain a great deal, and his firm would lose a chunk of money. He felt almost angry with his brother for sending Gandhi here” (Ghosh, 2019). The same author however, partially retracts his view saying that „Talking to Gandhi had made Seth Abdullah recover his rust in the former within just a few days. He could now see that, apart from being a truthful person, this young man was really interested in their case and he would try for its settlement with all the care he could muster. Though an Englishman by appearance, he was really sympathetic to India and Indians in his heart”(Ghosh, 2019, 169). According to Gandhi's own testimony, the next morning when the Indian traders of Pietermaritzburg came to see him, they told him that all of them had the same bitter experiences but did not mind such things being habituated to them. Trade and sensitiveness could ill go together. They had therefore made it a principle to pocket insults as they might

pocket cash. They told Gandhi how difficult it was for Indians to purchase tickets. They could not enter the railway station by the main gate (Gandhi,1928).

It is unthinkable that Abdullah did not know this, but probably he thought that Gandhi would passively acquiesce in his humiliation. Even so, Abdullah found his name in history as the one associated with the famous incident that changed Gandhi's life. The names of the white passenger, the supervisor and the police constable have however been consigned to the dustbin of history. They however deserve gratitude for being unconscious catalysts of great moments and events in future when Gandhi strode on the stage like a colossus and they found their place in the rat hole. Their transient moment of triumphant satisfaction created a momentous moment for Gandhi which immortalized him in history. Thus, even today Gandhi's legacy survives but his assailants have been rejected like garbage.

Solitude of the Fateful Night

In the desolate and dark station waiting room, Gandhi was alone. He was gripped by a fear psychosis. The hallucination of the incident in the train haunted his mind. A white passenger entered the room and wanted to talk to him but Gandhi was too traumatized to talk to anybody. He was now caught in the horns of a dilemma. Should he return to India? Alternatively, should he silently, endure persecution for the one year's contract and then return to his homeland after expiry of the contract? Finally, should he make it his mission of life to fight injustice and wrong? Shivering in the chilling cold of the stilly night, Gandhi grappled with the options open to him. As Gandhi began to interrogate himself, he invoked his inner self and listened to its command. In his own words, ,, I had gone there only for a single case prompted by self- interest and curiosity. During the first year therefore, I was merely the witness and the victim of these wrongs. I then awoke to a sense of my duty. I saw that from the standpoint of self- interest, South Africa was no good to me. Not only did

I not desire but I had a positive aversion to earning money or sojourning in a country where I was insulted. I was in the horns of a dilemma. Two courses were open to me. I might either free myself from the contract with Messrs Dada Abdullah on the ground that circumstances had come to my knowledge which and not been disclosed to me before and run back to India. Or I might bear all hardships and fulfil my engagement” (M.K Gandhi, 1928). As this inner conflict raged within Gandhi’s heart, he was confronted with a crisis of loyalty. He could easily forsake loyalty to his clients who had been responsible for his tribulations, but still there was the greater loyalty to his own greater self. Then in the midst of darkness, came the inspiring illumination. Gandhi took the decision of his life. His mission was to fight injustice and discrimination. In his own words, „late at night I came to the conclusion that to run back to India would be cowardly. I must accomplish what I had undertaken. I must reach Pretoria, without minding insults and even assaults. Pretoria was my goal. The case was being fought out there. I made up my mind to take some steps, if that was possible, side by side with my work. This resolution somewhat pacified and strengthened me. But I did not get any sleep” (Gandhi, 1928). It is important to note that the decision which Gandhi took on that night, was the stepping stone to his mission. For the time being, Pretoria was his destination, come what may. However, the assaults he endured on his way to Pretoria, awakened him to the realization of his greater mission. Pretoria was thus the gateway to the world for Gandhi.

When asked by Dr. John Mott what were the most creative experiences of his life, Gandhi replied „Such experiences are a multitude. But as you put the question to me, I recalled particularly one experience that changed the course of my life”. Then referring to the St Pietersburg incident he said that he had gone to South Africa on a purely mundane and selfish mission, a boy returned from England who wanted to make some money. Now he decided to stay and suffer rather than run away. „My active non- violence began from

that date” (Radhakrishnan, 1977). Explicating the point Hon Jan H. Hofmeyer says that “The Indian had come to South Africa because it was deemed to be the white man’s interest that he should. It seemed to be impossible to exploit the Natal coast belt adequately without indentured labor. So, the Indians came and brought prosperity to Natal. Many remained. Welcome contributors to the Colony’s welfare, and others followed, both free and indentured immigrants. But in due course the Indian, with his lower standard of living, began to threaten the European in some of the occupations which of which, he had previously had a monopoly. This was sufficient to arouse color prejudice- and the Indians came to be regarded in Lord Milner’s phrase, as strangers forcing themselves upon a community reluctant to receive them. It was this prejudice that was brought home to the youthful Gandhi on Maritzburg railway station- as a reaction to it, Satyagraha was born(Radhakrishnan, 1977). The significance of the incident has been very perspicaciously analyzed by John. S. Hoyland according to whom, the youthful episode brings out Gandhi’s life long practice of the belief that suffering can be used creatively for the redemption of others. The incident of ejection from the train, may seem trivial. But the indignity and pain were endured by a shrinking and sensitive boy courageously for the sake of other people. Here was born in practice, not merely in theory, the idealism of Gandhi’s Satyagraha, the idealism which says „Don’t run from a situation of suffering’, plunge into it boldly, not out of bravado or asceticism or self- martyrdom but because if you bear it in the right spirit for the helping of other people, such suffering becomes creative for the righting of wrong” (Radhakrishnan, 1977). Gandhi himself averred „I was born in India but made in South Africa”. It would be no exaggeration to say that he was reborn in South Africa. The station waiting room was a mute witness to the metamorphosis of a diffident Indian barrister into an indomitable crusader, fighter and leader.

Interlude inspires Fortitude

The historic interlude in the waiting room, infused in Gandhi, the central ingredient of Satyagraha, that is fortitude. The next morning, Gandhi sent a long telegram to the General Manager of the railway and also informed Seth Abdullah about his harassment. Many Indian traders met Gandhi in the station and sympathized with him but were powerless to do anything except narrate to Gandhi, their own experience of humiliation (Ghosh, 172). Gandhi now travelled to Charlestown and then Johannesburg from where he took a stage coach to Pretoria. This time he was physically assaulted by the white conductor of the coach for disobeying his order to sit on a dirty rug on the footboard. He was punched but managed to clasp the railings of the coach with both his hands. The co passengers intervened and saved him. The conductor threatened him with dire consequences at Standerton. However, after the destination was reached, he was nowhere to be seen. It proved to Gandhi that most of these white braggarts were cowards at heart (Ghosh, 173). Gandhi was determined to go to Pretoria with a first-class ticket and the station master complied on condition that if he was again evicted by the Guard, he would not hold his company responsible. This time, he had a white man as co passenger and even as the Guard asked him to shift to the third class, this time it was the white man who intervened and said that he had no objection to travelling with Gandhi (Ghosh, 176). Unfortunately, the name of this white person is not known though he deserves a salute. However, the fact that Gandhi insisted on a first-class ticket shows that he was prepared for assaults but was ready to endure them rather than compromise on a question of honor. Satyagraha stood for suffering and this required courage, forbearance and above all inner strength. It has been rightly said by R.F. Alfred Hoernle that 'Gandhi had made for himself, a never to be forgotten place in the history of South Africa before he passed on to devote his gifts of leadership, spiritual and political to the land of the people of his

birth.’(Radhakrishnan, 86).

Reflecting on Gandhi’s legendary status in South Africa, he writes that „In many Indian homes in South Africa, and in all public buildings owned by the Indian community, the picture of the Mahatma occupies a place of honor” (Radhakrishnan, 86). Significantly, at the time of the Pietermaritzburg incident, nobody knew who Gandhi was. South Africa was truly Gandhi’s second land of birth. Gopal Krishna Gandhi in his oration as High Commissioner of India to South Africa on the occasion of posthumous conferment of the Freedom of the City of Pietermaritzburg on Gandhi on April 25, 1997, explicates this beautifully saying that „, Who was the one who was flung out ? Who was it that fell? Again, who was it that rose from his humiliation? Somewhere here, but on two very different feet. When Gandhi was evicted from the train, an Indian visiting South Africa fell, but when Gandhi rose, the Indian and the South African merged in him that instant. He fell doubtless with astonished disbelief. This must have turned the very next instant to fury. But in an alchemy that was uniquely his own, it turned also into something that changed shock and fury into a transformational resolve. Gandhi fell with a railway ticket, no one honored, he rose with a testament none could ignore, he fell a passenger, but rose a patriot, fell barrister, but rose a revolutionary, his legal brief became a political cause, his sense of human decency transformed itself into a passion for human justice. The personal died within him that moment and turned public, mine became thine. In fact, Mohandas Gandhi was not flung here, he was launched as at the moment of birth. All births are traumatic, only we do not remember the one all of us commence our lives with. Porbandar on India’s western coast launched him, doubtless with inchoate shock to physical life. Pietermaritzburg on South Africa’s eastern flank, launched him with transformational shock, to public life” (Gopal Krishna Gandhi, 1997). This impassioned speech is not empty. Flowery rhetoric. It rather testifies to the death of the earlier Gandhi and his resuscitation from the graveyard as a New Gandhi. Of Course, Gandhi

did not die bodily, but disowned and disavowed his earlier life. Unlike ascetics who renounce their earlier life of family attachment, Gandhi renounced his lower self and embraced his higher and truer self. He no doubt became the champion of a political cause but this soon awakened in him, the conviction of a spiritual mission which would send a clarion call to the world at large. South Africa made Gandhi a World Citizen. Gopal Krishna Gandhi acknowledges the fellow passenger, guard and constable as a three some agency of change who imagined themselves to be protectors of the establishment but unwittingly initiated one of the most potent moments for its transformation. To this list, may be added the names of the Magistrate who asked him to take off his turban and also the conductor of the stage coach on the way to Pretoria who assaulted Gandhi brutally. Ironically, their names have been consigned to oblivion while the name of Gandhi was bequeathed to posterity. Obsessed with the satisfaction of victory for the moment, they did not realize that it was defeat in the garb of victory. For Gandhi it was victory in the disguise of defeat.

The question may be asked whether both he and South Africa were necessary to each other. South Africa undoubtedly needed Gandhi in their struggle against racialism but did Gandhi also need a firm foothold for his emergence as the leader of the masses? It was South Africa where the spadework for his future emergence as Mahatma Gandhi was done. Thus, it is pertinent to ask what he would have been without South Africa?

From Certitude to Multitude

Gandhi was never a successful barrister. His reputation as barrister in India, was not encouraging. He was almost pathologically shy and never conspicuous for assertiveness so much necessary for pleading a case. He had failed miserably in arguing his first case in Bombay court in early 1893. After Pietermaritzburg incident however, he showed no signs of timidity.

In the windswept waiting room, he developed certitude of conviction and this was the point when iron entered his soul. Unlike the other Indian merchants who were habituated to enduring humiliation for the sake of making money, Gandhi now vowed to fight racial discrimination with unwavering resolve. It is interesting to note that when he was hailed as Mahatma Gandhi in India and emerged as the undisputed leader of the Indian national movement against British imperialism, Gandhi was imprisoned more than once by the British government, but not even once was he physically assaulted by the police. However, in South Africa he was victim of assault a number of times. Not even once did he retaliate but not for a moment did, he deviate from his resolve. Thus, the event at Pietermaritzburg passed into eternity. Here was an unforeseen and uncertain and unpredictable moment which became a historic event where the cause of the event became the source of a greater event. The apparently small and trivial moment was transformed into a great one with portentous implications and repercussions. The ephemeral became everlasting. It was in South Africa that Gandhi became a leader with a massive groundswell among the persecuted multitude. It has been rightly said that Certitude of his mission banished fear from his heart and he inspired others to conquer fear. Thus, fear- stricken multitudes who were like dumb driven cattle, were now prepared for all adversities with Gandhi galvanizing them with his multitudinous inner strength. The rest is history.

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