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## **TAGORE AND SOUTH AFRICA<sup>1</sup>**

The historic role of Gandhiji in leading the heroic resistance of the small Indian community in South Africa against the racist Anglo-Boer alliance has overshadowed the significant contribution of many others in South Africa and India who helped ensure the triumph of the satyagraha though Gandhiji himself had been generous in acknowledging their assistance. Among those who deserve recognition is Poet Rabindranath Tagore.

He hailed the satyagraha in South Africa as "the steep ascent of manhood, not through the bloody path of violence but that of dignified patience and heroic self-renunciation". He encouraged the Reverend C.F. Andrews to go to South Africa in January 1914 to assist the Indian community and Gandhiji in a mission that proved crucial in securing the Smuts-Gandhi settlement. When Gandhiji left South Africa and sent a number of children from the Phoenix settlement to India, he provided them hospitality and education in Santiniketan.

It was Rabindranath who named Gandhiji - who had been known in South Africa as Gandhibhai - a Mahatma.

He kept up an interest in South Africa as discrimination against Indians continued, and the Reverend Andrews had to visit the community again and again to assist them in their trials. There was one powerful message that he sent through Andrews - and later confirmed in a public statement - which was in advance of Gandhiji and remains relevant until today. As Reverend Andrews wrote in *Modern Review* in March 1928:

"The Poet, Rabindranath Tagore, gave me a definite message to the Indians in South Africa. He stated that if the Indian community could not win the respect and affection of the Africans (who had the true right to be in South Africa, as the children of the soil) then they had no place there. They were imperialist intruders."

I think of this when I read the thoughtless and mischievous statements of some recent Indian visitors to South Africa who seek to destroy the strong bonds which had been built between Indians and Africans in the joint struggle against apartheid and the record of India - under leadership of Gandhiji, Tagore, Sarojini Naidu and Nehru - in encouraging that alliance. Their approach may even prove criminal by endangering the future of Indian South Africans.

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In his first statement after leaving South Africa - at a London reception in his honour on August 8, 1914 - Gandhiji said in recognising those who helped the struggle:

"But I must mention one more: Mr. Andrews. You have no notion of what he did; how he worked in selfless zeal, preaching love for India through his Master - the poet-saint at Bolpur whom I have come to know through Mr. Andrews - Rabindranath Tagore."

The Indians in South Africa at the time were mostly labourers and the community was mostly illiterate. The Europeans tended to look down upon them, unaware of the cultural heritage of India; and to call all Indians "coolies".

But the announcement of the Nobel Prize to Tagore in the midst of the struggle made many of the Europeans curious. Reverend Andrews found enthusiastic audiences for his exposition of the life and thought of the Poet.

The climax was a meeting in Cape Town City Hall addressed by him. The Mayor of the City, John Parker, presided. The overflow audience included the Governor-General Lord Gladstone and his wife, the Archbishop of Cape Town, many members of Parliament and other dignitaries. John Merriman, a former Prime Minister of the Cape, gave a vote of thanks.

Lord Gladstone, who had been equivocal on the Indian struggle, to say the least, then rose to second the vote of thanks. He said the lecture was one to make people think and to realise in a fuller degree what India was, and what our duties were to a people who were members of the British Empire.

He recalled that he had made a special study of Indian history at Oxford and had visited India. He wished that more South Africans would go there and rise to a higher appreciation of what the Indians were. They would then think less of India which sends its coolies to the South African coast and realise that there was in the person of Tagore an intense expression of imaginative national life. In fact, India had developed, perhaps, far above the line attained by any other part of the British Empire in its civilisation.

He believed that the lecturer would do much to solve the trouble which had arisen between India and South Africa, and thanked Reverend Andrews for his effort to bring about a better understanding.

The lecture was printed in full by the *Cape Times* with an editorial. Gandhiji had the lecture printed as a souvenir and sent complimentary copies to many influential Europeans.