

INDIA AND THE ANGLO-BOER WAR

Many books have been written about the soldiers and volunteers from various countries who took part in the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902. But there has been none on the role of India and Indians in South Africa though India contributed more soldiers and ambulance workers than any of the other British colonies and was a major source of supplies for the British army, while the largest number of Boer prisoners of war were held in camps in India.¹ The graves of Indian "auxiliaries" who died in South Africa are not known, and the only memorial to them was erected by the Indian community.

What is best known of the Indian contribution was militarily the least significant, namely, the work of the Natal Indian Ambulance Corps, a unit of a little over a thousand volunteers who served for less than two months, because it was led by M.K. Gandhi who became prominent as the leader of the struggle of the Indians in South Africa against discrimination and later of India for independence.²

The standard histories of the war - such as the official history by Major General Sir Frederick Maurice and Captain M. H. Grant, and *The Times History of the War in South Africa (1899-1902)* - have very little information on the role of India. But extensive files on India's involvement in the war are available in the National Archives of India and the India Office Library in London. Mr. T. G. Ramamurthi, an Indian scholar, has recently referred to these files and produced a monograph which deserves the attention of historians.³

It is not with any pride in Indian participation in this war that I suggest a study of the role of India and the Indians. Gandhi's own sympathies were on the side of the Boers and he expressed great admiration for their leaders and for the heroism of the Boer women. He justified his action in organising the ambulance corps on the grounds that Indians who claimed rights as members of the British Empire had an obligation to contribute to the war effort. At the end of the war, however, Indians suffered greater oppression in the Transvaal than under Boer rule.

I believe that it is essential to be aware the participation and suffering of non-

¹ "India", in this article, refers to the Indian sub-continent which is now divided into three States - India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

² Gandhi wrote about the Corps in *Satyagraha in South Africa* and *My Experiments with Truth (an Autobiography)*, both published in the 1920s. There is further information about the Corps in biographies of Gandhi, especially Pyarelal, *Mahatma Gandhi, Volume II: The Discovery of Satyagraha - on the Threshold* (Bombay: Sevak Prakashan, 1980), Part III, Chapter XII.

³ T.G. Ramamurthi, *The Indian Army and the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902*. A monograph for the General Palit Military Studies Trust, New Delhi and London, 1996. This monograph does not deal with the reception, maintenance and repatriation of the Boer prisoners-of-war in India.

white nations and the non-white people of South Africa in the war - which was not merely a duel between two white armies - in order to derive lessons from it and attain true reconciliation. A study of the role of India is a contribution towards that end.

Arrival of British troops from India

In 1899, when the British government decided to impose its suzerainty over the South African Republic (Transvaal), it had only about ten thousand troops in the Cape and Natal. It decided to augment the force by another ten thousand before delivering an ultimatum to President Paul Kruger, and asked the government of India to provide more than six thousand.

The military authorities in India were very prompt. The troops arrived in Natal between October 3 and 8, 1899, and were moved to the Transvaal border. That triggered the war on October 11 when the Boers attacked the British forces and inflicted severe defeats. By the end of the month they besieged Mafeking, Kimberley and Ladysmith. Britain was obliged to expand its forces many-fold in order to relieve the garrisons and then to deal with the guerilla warfare waged by the Boers.

The British Force in South Africa was eventually reinforced by no less than 448,495 officers and men. Of these, 584 officers and 17,950 men - or a total of 18,534 - came from the British garrisons in India. They numbered more than the contingents sent by the other colonies - Canada, Australia and New Zealand - though far less than the 337,219 troops sent from Britain.⁴

Indian "auxiliaries"

There was a tacit agreement between the two sides that only whites should take part in military operations. Neither side wanted to arm the Africans for fear that they might turn their arms against all whites to fight racist oppression. Non-white people from South Africa and India were employed in non-combat operations though working under fire.

The British Government initially indicated to India that the Force should be composed exclusively of British troops or volunteers in India. But the Indian government sent many Indians - some from Indian Army units - as non-combatant "auxiliaries."

The initial force sent from India - according to a telegram of August 30, 1899, from the Viceroy to the Secretary of State for India, was composed of 5,635 British officers and men, 1,078 "natives" (Indians), 2,334 horses, and 611 mules

⁴ Captain Maurice Grant, *History of the War in South Africa, 1899-1902* (London: Hurst and Blackett Limited, 1910), Volume IV, Appendix 13. This history was written under the direction of His Majesty's Government.

and ponies. A majority of Indians were assigned to field hospitals or used as stretcher-bearers; the remainder were transport drivers, grooms to break in and train horses and private servants.⁵

The force brought with it three complete field hospitals for the British troops from India, and one hospital for the Indians.⁶ The personnel of the hospitals were mostly Indian. They included ward orderlies, water carriers, cooks and sweepers, as well as doctors, including perhaps some from the Indian Medical Service.⁷

By the end of the war, nearly ten thousand Indians were sent to South Africa as "auxiliaries". They included syces or grooms for the horses, water carriers, washermen, smiths, carpenters, cooks, butchers, bakers, sweepers, and servants of officers, as well as doctors, ambulance workers and stretcher bearers. Indians manned field hospitals and two veterinary establishments.⁸

India sent nearly 7,000 horses, as well as ponies and mules. It promptly provided various supplies - helmets, blankets, coats, tents etc., - as needed. Some Indian princes, merchants and others, seeking to show loyalty to the British, offered horses, grooms and money.

More than a thousand Indian auxiliaries were in Ladysmith during the siege. The role of the Indian Ordnance Field Park during that siege was particularly noteworthy.⁹

The Indian auxiliaries worked under fire during many battles. A large number were apparently killed or wounded in action, but no official figures were published.

At the end of the war, the Indian community in South Africa contributed funds to erect a memorial for the troops from India. The inscription on the memorial at Steyn Street, Observatory, Johannesburg, reads:

To the memory of British Officers
Native NCO's and men
Veterinary assistants
Nalbands¹⁰

⁵ India Office Library, London, "Military Collection 380, South African expedition 1899."

The Indian government was reimbursed for its costs in connection with the war by the Imperial Exchequer, except for a grant in aid of £500,000.

⁶ Amery, L.S. (ed.) *The Times History of the War in South Africa, 1899-1902* (London: Sampson Low, Marston and Company, Ltd., 1909), Volume 6, page 513.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pages 513-14

⁸ Pictures of some of the Indian auxiliaries may be found in H. W. Wilson, *After Pretoria: the Guerilla War*, Volume I, pages 255, 277 and 467, and Volume II, pages 282 and 300.

⁹ The unit consisted of 116 Indians and 19 British officers. Ramamurthi, *op. cit.*, Section 3, "Indian Ordnance Field Park at Ladysmith."

¹⁰ water carriers

and
followers of the Indian Army
who died in South Africa
1899-1902

Inscribed on the four sides are the words: "Christian Zoroastrian Hindu Sikh Musalman".

Natal Indian Ambulance Corps

At the beginning of the war, Colonel T. Gallwey, Principal Medical Officer of Natal, organised a paid Natal Volunteer Ambulance Corps, with a strength of over one thousand, to carry the wounded from the battlefield. The Indian community in Natal offered to raise an Indian ambulance corps and pay its expenses. The offer was not accepted until the British faced severe reverses and casualties mounted.

The Natal Indian Ambulance Corps, led by M. K. Gandhi, was composed of 300 "free" Indians and 800 indentured labourers sent by their employers. Its task was to take the wounded brought by the Natal Volunteer Ambulance Corps from the battlefield and carry them to the railhead. It was not expected to work under fire and was given no combat training.

It left for the front on December 14, 1899. It reached the field hospital at Chieveley the next day and was immediately employed in carrying the wounded from the battle of Colenso. It was moved to Estcourt on December 17, and temporarily disbanded two days later.

The Corps was reformed on January 7, 1900, and was again stationed at Estcourt. It was summoned on the eve of the battle of Spion Kop. During the big battle there on January 24, when British suffered heavy casualties, members of the Corps agreed to receive the wounded under fire and carry them from Spion Kop to the base hospital at Frere, more than twenty miles away.

Battle of Spion Kop

The auxiliaries from India, as well as the Indian Ambulance Corps, served during that fateful battle. Vera Stent, who served in the British forces there, described the work of the Indians in the *Illustrated Star* of Johannesburg, July 1911, as follows:

"My first meeting with Mr. M. Gandhi was under strange circumstances. It was on the road from Spion Kop, after the fateful retirement of the British troops in January 1900. The previous afternoon I saw the Indian mule-train moved up the slopes of the Kop carrying water to the distressed soldiers who had lain powerless on the plateau. The mules carried the water in immense bags, one on each side, led by Indians at their heads. The galling rifle-fire, which heralded

their arrival on the top, did not deter the strangely-looking cavalcade which moved slowly forward, and as an Indian fell, another quietly stepped forward to fill the vacant place. Afterwards the grim duty of bearer corps, which Mr. Gandhi organised in Natal, began. It was on such occasions the Indians proved their fortitude, and the one with the greatest fortitude was the subject of this sketch [Mr. Gandhi]. After a night's work, which had shattered men with much bigger frames I came across Gandhi in the early morning sitting by the roadside - eating a regulation Army biscuit. Every man in Buller's force was dull and depressed, and damnation was heartily invoked on everything. But Gandhi was stoical in his bearing, cheerful, and confident in his conversation, and had a kindly eye. He did one good... I saw the man and his small undisciplined corps on many a field during the Natal campaign. When succour was to be rendered they were there."

The Natal Volunteer Ambulance Corps and the Indian Ambulance Corps were disbanded at the end of February 1990 when the British, with large reinforcements, were able to take the offensive and relieve Ladysmith.

Other Indians in South Africa also volunteered. Gandhi in *Satyagraha in South Africa*, refers in particular to Parbhusingh (Prabhu Singh), a hero of Ladysmith:

"The officer in command at Ladysmith [during the siege] assigned various duties to every resident of the place. The most dangerous and most responsible work was assigned to Parbhusingh who was a 'coolie.' On a hill near Ladysmith the Boers had stationed a pom-pom, whose operations destroyed many buildings and even occasioned some loss of life. An interval of a minute or two must pass before a shell which had been fired from the gun reached a distant objective. If the besieged got even such a short notice, they could take cover before the shell dropped in the town and thus save themselves. Parbhusingh was to sit perched up in a tree, all the time that the gun was working, with his eyes fixed on the hill and to ring a bell the moment he observed a flash. On hearing the bell, the residents of Ladysmith instantly took cover and saved themselves from the deadly cannon ball whose approach was thus announced.

"The officer in charge of Ladysmith, in eulogising the invaluable services rendered by Parbhusingh, stated that he worked so zealously that not once had he failed to ring the bell. It need hardly be said that his own life was constantly in peril. The story of his bravery came to be known in Natal and at last reached the ears of Lord Curzon, then Viceroy of India, who sent a Kashmir robe for presentation to Parbhusingh and wrote to the Natal Government, asking them to carry out the presentation ceremony with all possible publicity. This duty was assigned to the Mayor of Durban who held a public meeting in the Town Hall for the purpose."¹¹

¹¹ Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, Chapter XI.

Boer prisoners of war in India

The British took over 25,000 Boer prisoners of war and shipped them to other colonies, while confining civilians, including women and children, in concentration camps in South Africa. The prisoners were sent to India from April 1901 when the facilities in St. Helena, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and Bermuda became inadequate.

At the end of the war in 1902, 9,125 of the Boer prisoners of war, including some foreign volunteers) were in about twenty cantonments all over India. This was the largest number in any colony: there were nearly 6,000 in St. Helena, 5,126 in Ceylon, over 3,000 in Bermuda and 1,733 in South Africa.¹²

Among the prisoners of war in India was Commandant T. F. J. Dreyer, commandant of the Potchefstroom Commando, who served under General Smuts and was captured during the daring raid of 300 miles through British lines in 1901.

One prisoner - J. L. de Villiers - managed to escape from the camp at Trichinopoly. Dressed as an Indian, he went to the French colony of Pondicherry and returned to South Africa via France and the Netherlands.

Another prisoner, Commandant Erasmus, a Johannesburg solicitor, took an interest in Indian history, philosophy and literature. He gave a series of lectures on the subject to the Transvaal Philosophical Society: they were published by Gandhi in *Indian Opinion*.¹³

The Kimberley Public Library has some material in their archives from a Mostert, concerning his experiences as a POW at Ahmednagar.

Pyarelal provides more detailed information regarding Prabhu Singh, and indicates that he waved a flag, rather than ringing a bell, as a warning. See Pyarelal, *op. cit.* Part III, Chapter 12, pages 291-93.

¹² Captain Maurice Harold Grant, *History of the War in South Africa, 1899-1902* (London: Hurst and Blackett Limited, 1910), Volume IV, Appendix 20.

See also "St. Helena Honours Boer War Prisoners" in *History Today*, London, October 1991; *Oorlogsjoernaal van S.J. Burger 1899-1902* (Pretoria: Raad vir Geesteswetenskaplike Navorsing, 1997); and J.N. Brink, *Recollections of a Boer Prisoner-of-war at Ceylon* (Amsterdam and Cape Town: Jac. Dusseau, 1904).

Several photographs of the POWs in India may be found in Johannes Meintjies, *The Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902: A Pictorial History*. Cape Town: C. Struik, 1972. Also H. W. Wilson, *op. cit.*, Volume I, page 454, and Volume II, pages 520, 780, 909 and 993.

¹³ *Indian Opinion*, November 5, 12 and 26, December 3, 10 and 17, 1904; February 4, August 26 and September 3, 1905; April 14 to May 26, 1906. For comment by Gandhi, see *Indian Opinion*, January 28, 1905.

Over 140 Boer prisoners are buried in cemeteries in the Indian subcontinent.¹⁴

New settlers from India

The Indian government gave permission to Indian personnel to settle anywhere in South Africa if they agreed to forfeit return passage. The number of Indians who chose to remain is not known.¹⁵

The Indian settlers before the war came from a few regions of India - the Madras Presidency, Gujarat, Bihar and the eastern part of the United Provinces. The Indian auxiliaries, however, had come from all over the subcontinent and those who settled included Pathans, Sikhs and Bengalis. They were particularly bitter when the British authorities sought reconciliation with the Boers and enforced greater discrimination and humiliation against Indians. A group of Pathans assaulted and nearly killed Gandhi when he reached an interim settlement with General Smuts in 1908 agreeing to voluntary registration by Indians.

The new settlers were easily integrated in the Indian community in South Africa.

¹⁴ Some years ago, I learned that Boer POWs had been held in India and that Jon Hofmeyr had laid wreaths at the gravestone for 18 prisoners who were buried in Ambala. Several scholars I consulted in India had not known that Boer POWs were sent to India, nor did a few South Africans I had asked.

I visited the European cemetery in Ambala Cantonment in 1991 and laid a wreath on the gravestone. An article I wrote in that connection - "Waarom ek by Boere-gevangenes se grafte gekniel het" - was published in *Die Burger* on May 16, 1992.

Information on the graves of the POWs is available in the India Office records. See for instance, R/4/342, File Gen 167/139, Boer prisoner of war graves in India and Pakistan, 1957-1961. Also in the National Monument Council, Johannesburg.

Families of the prisoners were not able to visit the graves for many decades. I hope that the governments of India and South Africa will soon make arrangements to locate and look after the graves, and facilitate visits by families.

¹⁵ Those who settled in the Transvaal were granted permits on presentation of discharge certificates issued by their respective officers.

Indian Opinion (November 30, 1907) reported a petition to the High Commissioner for South Africa by 54 Pathans, 43 Mohamedans from the Punjab and 13 Sikhs.

Gandhi said in an interview that about 150 Pathans had attended a meeting in Johannesburg to protest a Transvaal law requiring Indians to register with thumb prints. *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Volume 91 (Supplementary Volume 1), pages 75-76.