

## **The Boer War and Role of the Indians**

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### **Abstract**

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 of the role of India and Indians in South Africa. Though India contributed more soldiers and ambulance workers than any of other British colonies and was a major source of supplies for the British army, while the largest number of Boer prisoners of War was held in camps in India. The graves of Indian “auxiliaries” who died in South African 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. In the Boer war, 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 organizing the ambulance Corps on the ground that Indians who claimed rights as members of the British Empire had an obligation to contribute the war effort. At the end of the Boer war, however, Indians suffered greater oppression in the Transval then under Boer Rule. It is essential to be aware of the participation and suffering of non-white nations and the non-white people of South Africa in the war which was not merely a dual between two white armies – in order to derive lesson from it and attain true reconciliation. A study of the role of India is a contribution towards that end.

### **Introduction:**

The Boer War which was waged in South Africa from 1899 to 1902, between Dutch settlers and the British, Gandhi’s personal sympathy was with the Boers. Yet he volunteered to serve with the British. Every single subject of a state, he explained must not hope to enforce his opinion in all cases. The authorities may not always be right, but as long as the subjects were allegiance to a stage, it is their clear duty generally to accommodate themselves and to accord their support, to the acts of the state.<sup>1</sup>

### **Causes of the War:**

- The Discovery of Gold on the Witwatersrand :

After the first Anglo – Boer war the British Government did not give up its ambition of unifying South Africa under Imperial British Rule. The two Boer Republics of the Orange Free State and the South African Republic or Transval still maintained their desire for independence. The Boer republics are a stumbling block for the British Empire.

The Gold mine was discovered on the Witwatersrand; in Transval in 1886. By 1890 thousands of white and black South Africans were employed on the mines by 1890. South Africa became the single biggest gold producer in the world and this meant great growth for the independent Boer governments. The Transval now became more prominent in international finance because of the importance of gold as an international monetary system. Britain was the centre of industry and trade in the world at the time and needed a steady supply of gold to maintain this position.

Neighbouring independent states like the Orange Free State and British colonies like Natal could also gain from the riches and investment brought to the country. The cape colony wasn't the leading economic state in the country anymore and a Boer Republic took its place.

Even though the Transval goldmines were the richest in the world they were also the most difficult to mine because the root lay so deep under the ground. The gold had to be mined by shafts as opposed to open mines, like diamonds. Large companies were created with local and international investment and individual miners were soon squeezed out.

Prospectors streamed to South Africa from all over the world and especially from Europe. The Transvalers saw the foreigners as a threat to their independence. In order to maintain its

control of gold mining, the Transval Government restricted this voting right. Only those foreigners who had been in the country for 14 years or more could vote. Because it didn't bother the Uitlander, who had come to South Africa to make their fortunes. But it created strain between the Transval and British Government.

- Tension Between Political Leaders:

There were various political leaders with opposing views in different parts of South Africa during the 1890s. Paul Kruger was President of the Transval or South African Republic and Cecil John Rhodes became the premier of the Cape colony in 1890. Rhodes was from Britain and had made his fortune in South Africa by mining diamonds. He was also a supporter of the British imperial plan to unite South Africa under British rule. Kruger was a supporter of Boer independence and the two leaders were in direct conflict with each other.

Rhodes believed that if the SAR was left to grow financially it would eventually grow in size and topple Britain from its position of power of the British Colonies. Rhoees and Britain were determined to stop the SAR's expansion<sup>ii</sup>.

- Role of Gandhi and the Indian in the War:

The Britishers believed that the Indians went to South Africa only for money grubbing and were merely a

dead weight upon the British. Like worms which settle inside wood and eat up hollow, the Indians were in South Africa only to fatten themselves upon them. The Indians wouldn't render the slightest aid if the country was invaded or if their homes were raided<sup>iii</sup>

The Indian felt that this was a golden opportunity for them to prove that the charge was baseless. It would be unbecoming to their dignity as a nation to work on with folded hands at a time when ruin started the British in the face as well as themselves simply because of their ill-treat. Such criminal inaction could only aggravate the difficulties. If they missed the opportunities which had come to them unsought of proving the falsity of a charge which they believed to be false, they should stand self-condemned. Because their existence in South Africa is only in their capacity as British subject<sup>iv</sup>.

In what say they can offer help to the Britishers was a question now. None of them had ever wielded a weapon of war. Even the work performed by non-combatants in war required training and none of them even know how to march in step.<sup>v</sup> So they decided to serve the wounded. The leaders among them received formal training in nursing the wounded and the sick, obtained medical certificates of physical fitness and sent a formal letter to the government. The government thanked them in reply but rejected the offer for the first time but

later on sanction was given for the formation of an Indian Ambulance Corps.<sup>vi</sup>

About 300 free Indians and 800 indentured Indians were permitted to serve in the Boer War as an Ambulance Corps. Thirty seven Indians were listed as leaders<sup>vii</sup>. The corps members were African born and Indian born Hindus, Muslims, and Christians<sup>viii</sup>. The Well off and the poor, South Indians and North Indians were represented in the corps and among the leaders. Here Gandhi was with the rank of a sergeant major.<sup>ix</sup>

There was a European Ambulance Corps as well as the Indian and both worked side by side in the same place. In the town where the armies were operating there were no made roads between the battle field and the base hospital and it was impossible to carry the wounded by means of ordinary transport. The base hospital was situated near a railway station and at a distance of between seven and twenty five miles from the battle field.

They had to carry the wounded seven or eight or sometimes twenty five miles. The march could commence at eight in the morning, medicines must be administered on the way, had to reach the hospital at 5. That was a very hard work indeed. So the officers gave up their idea of not taking the corps within the firing line. But none of the member of the Corps received a bullet wound or other injury.<sup>x</sup>

Gandhi and several comrades received the war medal<sup>xi</sup> and the Ambulance Corps was disbanded<sup>xii</sup>

It had cost the state nearly 1 million pound to suppress the rebellion. Thirty one combatants on the Government side lost their lives, as against nearly 4000 Africans in a war carried out with machine guns against spears and shields<sup>xiii</sup>.

All this was a complete revelation to the English newspapers. No one expected that the Indians would take any part in the war. An English man wrote in a leading newspaper a poem eulogistic of the Indians with the following line as a refrain "We are sons of the empire after all".<sup>xiv</sup>

#### **References:**

1. Louis Fischer, The Life of Mahatma Gandhi, P. 74
2. South Africa History Online, 21<sup>st</sup> March, 2011.
3. M.K. Gandhi, Satyagrah in South Africa, p.66.
4. M.K. Gandhi, *ibid.* p.67
5. M.K. Gandhi, *ibid.* p.69
6. M.K. Gandhi, *ibid.* p.69-70
7. Raj Mohan Gandhi, Mohandas – A true story of a man, His people and an Empire, p.95
8. Louis Fisher, *Offcit.* P.75
9. Rajmohan Gandhi, *Offcit.*
10. M.K. Gandhi, *Offcit.* p.72-73
11. Louis Fischer, *Offcit.* p.76
12. Ramchandra Guha, Gandhi Before India, p.192
13. Edward Raux – Time longer than Rope : The Blackman's struggle for freedom in South Africa, pp-96-104
14. M.K. Gandhi, *Offcit.* p.70
15. M.K. Gandhi, *Offcit.* p.75

The most important phase of the war was over in 1900. Ladysmith, Kimberley and Maifeking had been relieved. General Cronje had surrendered at Paardeburg. Parts of British colonies occupied by Boers, had been wrested from their hands and Lord Kitchener had conquered the Transval and the Orange Free State<sup>xv</sup>

#### **Conclusion:**

The contribution of the Indians in South Africa to the war was comparatively insignificant. They suffered hardly any loss of life. Yet even a sincere desire to be of help is bound to impress the other party and is doubly appreciated when it is quite unexpected. Such fine feeling for the Indians lasted during the continuance of the war.

- <sup>i</sup> Louis Fischer, P-74  
<sup>ii</sup> Net, South African History Online on 21<sup>st</sup> Mar, 2011  
<sup>iii</sup> Satyagrah in South Africa, P. 66  
<sup>iv</sup> Satyagrah in South Africa, P. 67  
<sup>v</sup> p.69  
<sup>vi</sup> p.69-70  
<sup>vii</sup> Rajmohan Gandhi, p.95  
<sup>viii</sup> Luis Fischer, p. 75  
<sup>ix</sup> Rajmohan Gandhi p. 45  
<sup>x</sup> Gandhi – Satyagraha in South Africa, p. 72-73  
<sup>xi</sup> Louis Fischer, p. 76  
<sup>xii</sup> Ramchandra Guha, p. 192  
<sup>xiii</sup> Edward Raux – Time longer than rope...  
<sup>xiv</sup> Satyagrah in South Africa, p. 70.  
<sup>xv</sup> Satyagrah in South Africa p. 75

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