GREAT SOUL
MAHATMA GANDHI and HIS STRUGGLE WITH INDIA
JOSEPH LELEYVELD
WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE
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Not yet a mahatma, 1906 (photo credit ifm.1)
Twenty-five years later, 1931 (photo credit ifm.2)
FOR JANNY
I do not know whether you have seen the world as it really is. For myself I can say I perceive the world in its grim reality every moment. (1918)

I deny being a visionary. I do not accept the claim of saintliness. I am of the earth, earthy ... I am prone to as many weaknesses as you are. But I have seen the world. I have lived in the world with my eyes open. (1920)

I am not a quick despairer. (1922)

For men like me, you have to measure them not by the rare moments of greatness in their lives, but by the amount of dust they collect on their feet in the course of life's journey. (1947)

—Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, 1869–1948
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Author’s Note

The Mahatma had been gone for half a century, but there were still Gandhis at the Phoenix Settlement, outside Durban on South Africa’s Indian Ocean coast, when I visited there the first time in 1965. A little boy, identified as a great-grandson, toddled across the room. He was living with his grandmother, widow of Manilal Gandhi, second of Gandhi’s four sons, who’d stayed on in South Africa to edit Indian Opinion, the weekly paper his father had started, and thereby keep alive the settlement and its values. The patriarch had chosen to be father to a whole community, so he turned the farm into a kind of commune where he could gather an extended family of followers, European as well as Indian, nephews and cousins, and, finally, with no special status, his own wife and sons.

I was not a pilgrim, just a reporter looking for a story. By the time of my visit, Gandhi had been dead for nearly eighteen years, Manilal for nine, and Indian Opinion for five. There wasn’t a lot to see besides the simple buildings they’d inhabited. On one of them, the brass nameplate still read “M. K. Gandhi.” The great work of racial separation—what the white authorities called apartheid—had already begun. Small Indian plot holders, who’d once lived and farmed among Zulus, now crowded onto the settlement’s one hundred acres. I wrote about the visit in a mournful vein, noting that Indians and other South Africans no longer believed that Gandhian passive resistance could accomplish anything in their land. “Passive resistance doesn’t stand a chance against this government,” a trustee of the settlement said. “It’s too brutal and persevering.”

If my next assignment as a foreign correspondent hadn’t been India, where I lived for a few years in the late 1960s, that
afternoon might not have stuck in my mind as a reminder of a subject to which I'd need to return. For me the South African Gandhi would always be more than an antecedent, an extended footnote to the fully fledged Mahatma. Having looked at the green hills of Africa from his front porch, I thought, in the simplifying way reporters think, that he was the story.

The maelstroms of India could obscure but never dislodge that intuition. The more I delved into Indian politics, the more I found myself pondering the seeming disconnect between Gandhi’s teachings on social issues and the priorities of the next generation of leaders who reverentially invoked his name. Often, in those days, these were people who’d actually encountered the Mahatma, who’d come into the national struggle fired by his example. So more than a patriotic ritual was involved when they claimed to be his heirs. Yet it was hard to say what remained of him beyond his nimbus.

An occasion for asking such questions occurred with the approach of the one hundredth anniversary of his birth in 1969. Setting out to report on the remnants of Gandhi’s movement, I followed Vinoba Bhave, his last full-time apostle, as he trudged through the most impoverished parts of Bihar, then as now among the poorest of Indian states, trying to persuade landlords to cede some of their holdings to the landless. Vinoba collected deeds to thousands of acres of barren, un-tilled, and untillable land. The Mahatma’s aging protégé seemed stoic, if not tragic, as he saw his doomed mission through to its largely inconsequential end.

“He became his admirers.” That’s Auden on Yeats. Three decades ago V. S. Naipaul used the line to characterize the decline of Gandhi’s influence in his last years, when he was most revered. The combination of piety and disregard—hardly unique to India—lasted as a cultural reflex, surviving the explosion of India’s first nuclear bomb.

Over time and at a distance, my experiences of South Africa and India ran together in my mind. Gandhi was an obvious link. I found myself thinking again about the Phoenix Settlement, to which I returned twice, the second time after it had been burned down in factional black-on-black violence accompanying the death throes of white supremacy, only to be restored with the
blessing of a democratically chosen government eager to canonize Gandhi as a founding father of the new South Africa. I then found myself thinking about Gandhi himself, wondering how South Africa helped to form the man he became, how the man he became in South Africa struggled with the reality of India, how his initiation as a political leader on one side of the Indian Ocean foreshadowed his larger disappointments and occasional sense of failure on the other: whether, that is, there were clues to the end of his journey as leader in its beginning.

I’m hardly the first to raise such questions and won’t be the last. But it seemed to me there was still a story to be uncovered and told, themes that could be traced from the beginning of Gandhi’s political life in one country to its flourishing in another, with all the ambiguity of his legacy in each place. The temptation to retrace my own steps while retracing Gandhi’s finally proved irresistible.

This isn’t intended to be a retelling of the standard Gandhi narrative. I merely touch on or leave out crucial periods and episodes—Gandhi’s childhood in the feudal Kathiawad region of Gujarat, his coming-of-age in nearly three formative years in London, his later interactions with British officials on three continents, the political ins and outs of the movement, the details and context of his seventeen fasts—in order to hew in this essay to specific narrative lines I’ve chosen. These have to do with Gandhi the social reformer, with his evolving sense of his constituency and social vision, a narrative that’s usually subordinated to that of the struggle for independence. The Gandhi I’ve pursued is the one who claimed once to “have been trying all my life to identify myself with the most illiterate and downtrodden.” At the risk of slighting his role as a political tactician, a field marshal of nonviolent resistance, or as a religious thinker and exemplar, I’ve tried to follow him at ground level as he struggled to impose his vision on an often recalcitrant India—especially recalcitrant, he found, when he tried not just its patience but its reverence for him with his harangues on the “crime” and “curse” of untouchability, or the need for the majority Hindus to accommodate the large Muslim minority.
Neither theme, it turns out, can be explained without reference to his long apprenticeship in South Africa, where he eventually defined himself as leader of a mass movement. My aim is to amplify rather than replace the standard narrative of the life Gandhi led on two subcontinents by dwelling on incidents and themes that have often been underplayed. It isn’t to diminish a compelling figure now generally exalted as a spiritual pilgrim and secular saint. It’s to take a fresh look, in an attempt to understand his life as he lived it. I’m more fascinated by the man himself, the long arc of his strenuous life, than by anything that can be distilled as doctrine.

Gandhi offered many overlapping and open-ended definitions of his highest goal, which he sometimes defined as poorna swaraj.* He wasn’t the one who’d introduced swaraj into the political lexicon, a term usually translated as “self-rule” while Gandhi still lived in South Africa. Later it would be expanded to mean “independence.” As used by Gandhi, poorna swaraj put the goal on yet a higher plane. At his most utopian, it was a goal not just for India but for each individual Indian; only then could it be poorna, or complete. It meant a sloughing not only of British rule but of British ways, a rejection of modern industrial society in favor of a bottom-up renewal of India, starting in its villages, 700,000 of them, according to the count he used for the country as it existed before its partition in 1947. Gandhi was thus a revivalist as much as a political figure, in the sense that he wanted to instill values in India’s most recalcitrant, impoverished precincts—values of social justice, self-reliance, and public hygiene—that nurtured together would flower as a material and spiritual renewal on a national scale.

Swaraj, said this man of many causes, was like a banyan tree, having “innumerable trunks each of which is as important to the tree as the original trunk.” He meant it was bigger than the struggle for mere independence.

“He increasingly ceased to be a serious political leader,” a prominent British scholar has commented. Gandhi, who formally resigned from the Indian National Congress as early as 1934 and never rejoined it, might have agreed. If the leader succeeded in driving the colonists out but his revival failed, he’d have to count
himself a failure. Swaraj had to be for all Indians, but in his most challenging formulations he said it would be especially for “the starving toiling millions.”

It meant, he said once, speaking in this vein, “the emancipation of India’s skeletons.” Or again: “Poorna swaraj denotes a state of things in which the dumb begin to speak and the lame begin to walk.”

The Gandhi who held up this particular standard of social justice as an ultimate goal wasn’t always consistent or easy to follow in his discourse, let alone his campaigns. But this is the Gandhi whose words still have a power to resonate in India. And this vision, always with him a work in progress, first shows up in South Africa.

Today most South Africans and Indians profess reverence for the Mahatma, as do many others across the world. But like the restored Phoenix Settlement, our various Gandhis tend to be replicas fenced off from our surroundings and his times. The original, with all his quirkiness, elusiveness, and genius for reinvention, his occasional cruelty and deep humanity, will always be worth pursuing. He never worshipped idols himself and generally seemed indifferent to the clouds of reverence that swirled around him. Always he demanded a response in the form of life changes. Even now, he doesn’t let Indians—or, for that matter, the rest of us—off easy.

* Indian and other foreign terms are italicized on their first appearance and defined in a glossary starting on this page.
PART I
SOUTH AFRICA
Gandhi’s South Africa

(photo credit ip1.1)
PROLOGUE: AN UNWELCOME VISITOR

It was a brief only a briefless lawyer might have accepted. Mohandas Gandhi landed in South Africa as an untested, unknown twenty-three-year-old law clerk brought over from Bombay, where his effort to launch a legal career had been stalled for more than a year. His stay in the country was expected to be temporary, a year at most. Instead, a full twenty-one years elapsed before he made his final departure on July 14, 1914. By then, he was forty-four, a seasoned politician and negotiator, recently leader of a mass movement, author of a doctrine for such struggles, a pithy and prolific political pamphleteer, and more—a self-taught evangelist on matters spiritual, nutritional, even medical. That’s to say, he was well on his way to becoming the Gandhi India would come to revere and, sporadically, follow.

None of that was part of the original job description. His only mission at the outset was to assist in a bitter civil suit between two Muslim trading firms with roots of their own in Porbandar, the small port on the Arabian Sea, in the northwest corner of today’s India, where he was born. All the young lawyer brought to the case were his fluency in English and Gujarati, his first language, and his recent legal training at the Inner Temple in London; his lowly task was to function as an interpreter, culturally as well as linguistically, between the merchant who engaged him and the merchant’s English attorney.
Up to this point there was no evidence of his ever having had a spontaneous political thought. During three years in London—and the nearly two years of trying to find his feet in India that followed—his causes were dietary and religious: vegetarianism and the mystical cult known as Theosophy, which claimed to have absorbed the wisdom of the East, in particular of Hinduism, about which Gandhi, looking for footholds on a foreign shore, had more curiosity than than scriptural knowledge himself. Never a mystic, he found fellowship in London with other seekers on what amounted, metaphorically speaking, to a small weedy fringe, which he took to be common ground between two cultures.

South Africa, by contrast, challenged him from the start to explain what he thought he was doing there in his brown skin. Or, more precisely, in his brown skin, natty frock coat, striped pants, and black turban, flattened in the style of his native Kathiawad region, which he wore into a magistrate’s court in Durban on May 23, 1893, the day after his arrival. The magistrate took the headgear as a sign of disrespect and ordered the unknown lawyer to remove it; instead, Gandhi stalked out of the courtroom. The small confrontation was written up the next day in The Natal Advertiser in a sardonic little article titled “An Unwelcome Visitor.” Gandhi immediately shot off a letter to the newspaper, the first of dozens he’d write to deflect or deflate white sentiments. “Just as it is a mark of respect amongst Europeans to take off their hats,” he wrote, an Indian shows respect by keeping his head covered. “In England, on attending drawing-room meetings and evening parties, Indians always keep the head-dress, and the English ladies and gentlemen seem to appreciate the regard which we show thereby.”

The letter saw print on what was only the fourth day the young nonentity had been in the land. It’s noteworthy because it comes nearly two weeks before a jarring experience of racial insult, on a train heading inland from the coast, that’s generally held to have fired his spirit of resistance. The letter to the Advertiser would seem to demonstrate that Gandhi’s spirit didn’t need igniting; its undertone of teasing, of playful jousting, would turn out to be characteristic. Yet it’s the train incident that’s certified as transformative not only in Richard Attenborough’s film Gandhi or
Philip Glass's opera *Satyagraha* but in Gandhi's own *Autobiography*, written three decades after the event.

If it wasn't character forming, it must have been character arousing (or deepening) to be ejected, as Gandhi was at Pietermaritzburg, from a first-class compartment because a white passenger objected to having to share the space with a "cooie." What's regularly underplayed in the countless renditions of the train incident is the fact that the agitated young lawyer eventually got his way. The next morning he fired off telegrams to the general manager of the railway and his sponsor in Durban. He raised enough of a commotion that he finally was allowed to reboard the same train from the same station the next night under the protection of the stationmaster, occupying a first-class berth.

The rail line didn't run all the way to Johannesburg in those days, so he had to complete the final leg of the trip by stagecoach. Again he fell into a clash that was overtly racial. Gandhi, who'd refrained from making a fuss about being seated outside on the coach box next to the driver, was dragged down at a rest stop by a white crewman who wanted the seat for himself. When he resisted, the crewman called him a "sammy"—a derisive South African epithet for Indians (derived from "swami," it's said)—and started thumping him. In Gandhi's retelling, his protests had the surprising effect of rousing sympathetic white passengers to intervene on his behalf. He manages to keep his seat and, when the coach stops for the night, shoots off a letter to the local supervisor of the stagecoach company, who then makes sure that the young foreigner is seated inside for the final stage of the journey.

All the newcomer's almost instantaneous retorts in letters and telegrams tell us that young Mohan, as he would have been called, brought his instinct for resistance (what the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson called his "eternal negative") with him to South Africa. Its alien environment would prove a perfect place for that instinct to flourish. In what was still largely a frontier society, the will to white domination had yet to produce a settled racial order. (It never would, in fact, though the attempt would be systematically made.) Gandhi would not have to seek conflict; it would find him.
In these bumpy first days in a new land, Mohan Gandhi comes across on first encounters as a wiry, engaging figure, soft-spoken but not at all reticent. His English is on its way to becoming impeccable, and he’s as well dressed in a British manner as most whites he meets. He can stand his ground, but he’s not assertive or restless in the sense of seeming unsettled. Later he would portray himself as having been shy at this stage in his life, but in fact he consistently demonstrates a poise that may have been a matter of heritage: he’s the son and grandson of diwans, occupants of the top civil position in the courts of the tiny princely states that proliferated in the part of Gujarat where he grew up. A diwan was a cross between a chief minister and an estate manager. Gandhi’s father evidently failed to dip into his rajah’s coffers for his own benefit and remained a man of modest means. But he had status, dignity, and assurance to bequeath. These attributes in combination with his brown skin and his credentials as a London-trained barrister are enough to mark the son as unusual in that time and place in South Africa: for some, at least, a sympathetic, arresting figure.

He’s susceptible to moral appeals and ameliorative doctrines but not particularly curious about his new surroundings or the tangle of moral issues that are as much part of the new land as its hardy flora. He has left a wife and two sons behind in India and has yet to import the string of nephews and cousins who’d later follow him to South Africa, so he’s very much on his own. Because he failed to establish himself as a lawyer in Bombay, his temporary commission represents his entire livelihood and that of his family, so he can reasonably be assumed to be on the lookout for ways to jump-start a career. He wants his life to matter, but he’s not sure where or how; in that sense, like most twenty-three-year-olds, he’s vulnerable and unfinished. He’s looking for something—a career, a sanctified way of life, preferably both—on which to fasten. You can’t easily tell from the autobiography he’d dash off in weekly installments more than three decades later, but at this stage he’s more the unsung hero of an East-West bildungsroman than the Mahatma in waiting he portrays who experiences few doubts or deviations after his first weeks in London before he turned twenty. The Gandhi who landed in South
Africa doesn't seem a likely recipient of the spiritual honorific—"Mahatma" means "Great Soul"—that the poet Rabindranath Tagore affixed to his name years later, four years after his return to India. His transformation or self-invention—a process that's as much inward as outward—takes years, but once it's under way, he's never again static or predictable.

Toward the end of his life, when he could no longer command the movement he'd led in India, Gandhi found words in a Tagore song to express his abiding sense of his own singularity: "I believe in walking alone. I came alone in this world, I have walked alone in the valley of the shadow of death, and I shall quit alone, when the time comes." He wouldn't have put it quite so starkly when he landed in South Africa, but he felt himself to be walking alone in a way he could hardly have imagined had he remained in the cocoon of his Indian extended family.

He'd have other racial encounters of varying degrees of nastiness as he settled into a rough-and-ready South Africa where whites wrote the rules: in Johannesburg, the manager of the Grand National Hotel would look him over and only then discover there were no free rooms; in Pretoria, where there was actually a bylaw reserving sidewalks for the exclusive use of whites, a policeman on guard in front of President Paul Kruger's house would threaten to cuff the strolling newcomer into the road for transgressing on the pavement; a white barber there would refuse to cut his hair; in Durban the law society would object to his being registered as an advocate, a status hitherto reserved for whites; he would be denied admission to a worship service at an Anglican church.

It would take a full century for such practices to grind to a halt, for white minority rule finally to reach its inevitable and well-deserved end in South Africa. Now new monuments to Gandhi are scattered about the land, reflecting the heroic role attributed to him in the country's rewritten history. I saw such monuments not only at the Phoenix Settlement but in Durban, Pietermaritzburg, Ladysmith, and Dundee. Nearly always it was the elderly figure Winston Churchill scorned as "a seditious Middle Temple lawyer now posing as a fakir ... striding half-naked" who was portrayed, not the tailored South African lawyer. (Probably that was because most of these statues and busts had been shipped from India,
supplied by its government.) In Johannesburg, however, in a large urban space renamed Gandhi Square—formerly it bore the name of an Afrikaner bureaucrat—the South African Gandhi is shown in mufti, striding in the direction of the site of the now-demolished law court where he appeared both as attorney and as prisoner, his bronze lawyer's robe fluttering over a bronze Western suit. Gandhi Square is just around the corner from his old law office at the corner of Rissik and Anderson streets, where he received visitors under a tinctured image of Jesus Christ. The vegetarian restaurant, steps away, where he first encountered his closest white friends is long gone; hard by the place where it stood, perhaps exactly on the spot, a McDonald's now does a fairly brisk nonvegetarian trade. But it's not entirely far-fetched for the new South Africa to claim Gandhi as its own, even if he failed to foresee it for most of his time in the country. In finding his feet there, he formed the persona he would inhabit in India in the final thirty-three years of his life, when he set an example that colonized peoples across the globe, including South Africans, would find inspiring.

One of the new Gandhi memorials sits on a platform of the handsome old railway station in Pietermaritzburg—Maritzburg for short—close to the spot where the newcomer detrained, under a corrugated iron roof trimmed with what appears to be the original Victorian filigree. The plaque says his ejection from the train “changed the course” of Gandhi's life. “He took up the fight against racial oppression,” it proclaims. “His active non-violence started from that day.”

That's an inspirational paraphrase of Gandhi's Autobiography, but it's squishy as history. Gandhi claims in the Autobiography to have called a meeting on arrival in Pretoria to rally local Indians and inspire them to face up to the racial situation. If he did, little came of it. In that first year, he had yet to assume a mantle of leadership; he was not even seen as a resident, just a junior lawyer imported from Bombay on temporary assignment. His undemanding legal work left him with time on his hands, which he devoted more to religion than to politics; in this new
environment, he became an even more serious and eclectic spiritual seeker than he’d been in London. This was a matter of chance as well as inclination. The attorney he was supposed to assist turned out to be an evangelical Christian with a more intense interest in Gandhi’s soul than in the commercial case on which they were supposed to be working. Gandhi spent much of his time in a prolonged engagement with white evangelicals who found in him a likely convert. He even attended daily prayer meetings, which regularly included prayers that the light would shine for him.

He told his new friends, all whites, that he was spiritually uncommitted but nearly always denied thereafter that he’d ever seriously contemplated conversion. However, according to the scholar who has made the closest study of Gandhi’s involvement with missionaries, it took him two years to resolve the question in his own mind. On one occasion Gandhi acknowledged as much to Millie Polak, the wife of a British lawyer who was part of his inner circle for his last ten years in South Africa. “I did once seriously think of embracing Christianity,” she quoted him as having said. “I was tremendously attracted to Christianity, but eventually I came to the conclusion that there was nothing really in your scriptures that we had not got in ours, and that to be a good Hindu also meant I would be a good Christian.”

Late in 1894 we find this free-floating, ecumenical novice flirting, or so it sometimes seemed, with several religious sects at once, writing to The Natal Mercury on behalf of a movement called the Esoteric Christian Union, a synthesizing school of belief, as he explained it, that sought to reconcile all religions by showing that each represents the same eternal truths. (It’s a theme Gandhi would repeat at prayer meetings in the last years and months of his life, more than a half century later, where the spirit was so all-embracing that “O God, Our Help in Ages Past” had its place among chanted Hindu and Muslim prayers.) In an advertisement for a selection of tracts meant to accompany a letter to the editor he wrote in 1894, he identified himself proudly as an “Agent for the Esoteric Christian Union and the London Vegetarian Society.”
Judging from his autobiographical writings, it seems possible, even likely, that Gandhi spent more time in Pretoria with his evangelical well-wishers than with his Muslim patrons. In any case, these were his two circles, and they didn’t overlap, nor did they represent any kind of microcosm of the country South Africa was fast becoming. By necessity as much as choice, he would remain an outsider. The abrasiveness of some of his early confrontations with whites made it obvious that searching for footholds in this new land could bring him into conflict. To stake a claim for ordinary citizenship was to cross a boundary into politics. Within two months after settling in Pretoria, Gandhi was busy writing letters on political themes to the English-language papers, putting himself forward but, as yet, representing only himself.

On September 5, scarcely three months after he arrived in the country, the Transvaal Advertiser carried the first of these, a longish screed that already has implicit in it political arguments Gandhi would later advance as a spokesman for the community. Here he was responding to the use of the word “Coolie” as an epithet commonly attached to all brown-skinned immigrants from British India. He doesn’t mind it being applied to contract laborers, impoverished Indians transported en masse under contracts of indenture, or servitude, usually to cut sugarcane. Starting in 1860, it was the way most Indians had come to the country, part of a human traffic, a step up from slavery, that also carried Indians by the tens of thousands to Mauritius, Fiji, and the West Indies. The word “Coolie,” after all, appears to have been derived from a peasant group in India’s western regions, the Kolis, with a reputation for lawlessness and enough group cohesion to win recognition as a subcaste. But, Gandhi argues, former indentured laborers who don’t make the return trip home to India at the end of their contracts but stay on to stand on their own feet, as well as Indian traders who had initially paid their own passage, shouldn’t be denigrated that way. “It is clear that Indian is the most proper word for both the classes,” he writes. “No Indian is a Coolie by birth.”

This is not a proposition that would have come easily to him had he remained in India. The alien environment, it’s fair to
speculate, had stirred in him the impulse to stand outside the
community and explain. Implicit in this—the first nationalist
declaration of his life—is a class distinction. He speaks for
Indians here but not for coolies. Between the lines he seems to be
saying that the best that can be said for them is that their status
isn’t necessarily permanent. Nowhere in the letter does he
comment on the harsh terms of their servitude.

He concedes that coolies may sometimes be disorderly, may
even steal. He knows but doesn’t make a point of saying that most
of those he has now agreed to call coolies are of lower-caste
backgrounds. If anything, caste is a subject he avoids. He doesn’t
say that coolies are fundamentally different from other Indians.
They can become good citizens when their contracts end. For
now, however, their poverty and desperation do not conspicuously
engage his sympathies. Temporarily, at least, he doesn’t identify
with them.

The South Africa confronted by young Mohan was counted as
four different states or territories by its white inhabitants and the
Colonial Office in London. (There was also Zululand, which was
under British supervision and had yet to be fully merged into
Natal, the self-governing territory that surrounded it. In the view
of whites, settlers and colonial officials alike, the subcontinent’s
surviving African kingdoms existed only on sufferance, remote
from the main paths of commerce, with nothing approaching
sovereign status.) The states that were deemed to count were those
with white governments. The two coastal territories were British
crown colonies: the Cape, at the very tip of Africa, where whites
first settled in the seventeenth century and where the Atlantic and
Indian oceans meet; and Natal, on the continent’s verdant east
coast. Inland were two landlocked, quasi-independent Boer
(meaning Afrikaner) republics, the Orange Free State and what
was called the South African Republic, a culturally introverted
frontier settlement in the territory known as the Transvaal. That
republic, created as a Zion for an indigenous white population of
trekboers, farmers of mainly Dutch and Huguenot descent who
had fled British rule in its two colonies, had been all but
overwhelmed by a recent influx of mostly British aliens (called Uitlanders in the simplified Dutch dialect that was just beginning to be recognized as a language in its own right, henceforth known as Afrikaans). For it was in the Transvaal, beyond formal British control but temptingly within its reach, that the world’s richest gold-bearing reef had been discovered in 1886, only seven years before the fledgling Indian barrister inauspiciously disembarked at Durban.

The South Africa from which Gandhi sailed all those years later had become something more than a geographic designation for a random collection of colonies, kingdoms, and republics. It was now a single sovereign state, a colony no longer, calling itself the Union of South Africa. And it was firmly under indigenous white control, with the result that a lawyerly spokesman for a nonwhite immigrant community, which was what Gandhi had become, could no longer expect to get anywhere by addressing petitions or leading missions to Whitehall. To this great political transformation he’d been little more than a bystander. But it had the effect of sweeping his best argument for equal Indian rights off the table. Originally, Gandhi had based his case on his own idealistic reading of an 1858 proclamation by Queen Victoria that formally extended British sovereignty over India, promising its inhabitants the same protections and privileges as all her subjects. He called it “the Magna Charta of the Indians,” quoting a passage in which her distant majesty had proclaimed her wish that her Indian subjects, “of whatever race or creed, be freely and impartially admitted to offices in our service.” It was Gandhi’s argument that those rights should attach themselves to “British Indians” who traveled from their homeland to outposts of the empire such as the British-ruled portions of South Africa. That wasn’t quite what the queen’s advisers had in mind, but it was an awkward argument to have to work around. In the new South Africa, which came into existence in 1910, it counted for nothing. To achieve less and less, Gandhi found in the course of two decades, his tactics had to become more and more confrontational.
This transformation and practically everything South African that coincided with his earliest political activities were ultimately traceable to gold and all that the new mines brought in their train—high finance, industrial strife, and the twentieth century’s first major experience of a type of warfare that could be classed as an anticolonial or a counterinsurgency struggle, even though the combatants on both sides were mainly whites. This was the Anglo-Boer War, which seared its brutal course across South Africa’s mostly treeless grasslands and hillsides from 1899 to 1902. It took an army of 450,000 (including thousands, British and Indian, brought across the Indian Ocean under British command from the Raj) to finally subdue the Boer commandos, militia units that never numbered as many as 75,000 at any given time. About 47,000 soldiers perished on the two sides; in addition, nearly 40,000—mainly Afrikaner children and women but also their black farmhands and servants—died of dysentery and infectious diseases like measles in segregated stockades where they’d been massed as the army forcibly cleared the countryside. Coining a functional, antiseptic term for these open-air reservoirs of misery, the British called them concentration camps.

Gandhi briefly played a bit part. The man who would emerge within the next two decades as the modern era’s best-known champion of nonviolence saw action himself in the early stages of the war as a uniformed noncommissioned officer, leading for about six weeks a corps of some eleven hundred noncombatant Indian stretcher bearers. Then thirty and already recognized as a spokesman for Natal’s small but growing Indian community—amounting at that time to scarcely 100,000 but soon to outnumber the colony’s whites—Gandhi went to war to score a parochial point with the colony’s white leaders: that Indians, whatever the color of their skins, saw themselves and should be seen as full citizens of the British Empire, ready to shoulder its obligations and deserving of whatever rights it had to bestow.

Once the British got the upper hand in Natal and the war moved inland, the Indian stretcher bearers disbanded, ending the war for Gandhi. His point had been made, but in no time at all it was brushed aside by the whites he’d hoped to impress. Natal’s racial elite persisted in enacting new laws to restrict property rights for
Indians and banish from the voters' rolls the few hundred who'd managed to have their names inscribed there. The Transvaal could be said to have shown the way. In 1885, claiming sovereignty as the South African Republic, it had passed a law putting basic citizenship rights off limits to Indians; that was eight years before Gandhi landed in its capital, Pretoria.

At first he allowed himself to imagine that the hard-wrung British victory, uniting the two colonies and Boer republics under imperial rule, could only benefit "British Indians." What happened was the opposite of what he imagined. Within eight years, a national government had been formed, led by defeated Boer generals who won at the negotiating table most of their important war aims, accepting something less than full sovereignty in foreign affairs in exchange for a virtual guarantee that whites alone would chart the new Union of South Africa's political and racial future. Some "natives" and other nonwhites protested. Gandhi, still looking to strike a tolerable bargain for Indians, was silent except for a few terse asides in the pages of Indian Opinion, the weekly paper that had been his megaphone since 1903, his instrument for sounding themes, binding the community together. His few comments in its pages on the new structure of government showed he wasn't blind to what was actually happening. Generally speaking, however, it was as if none of this larger South African context and all it portended—the blatant attempt to postpone indefinitely any thought, any possibility, of an eventual settlement with the country's black majority—had the slightest relevance to his cause, had been allowed to impinge on his consciousness. In the many thousands of words he wrote and uttered in South Africa, only a few hundred reflect awareness of an impending racial conflict or concern about its outcome.

Yet if the forty-four-year-old Gandhi who later sailed from Cape Town to Southampton on the eve of a world war seemed deliberately oblivious of the transformation of the country in which he'd passed nearly all his adult life up to that point, there was probably no single individual in it who'd changed more than he had. The novice lawyer had established a flourishing legal practice, first in Durban and then, after a quickly aborted attempt
to move back to India, in Johannesburg. In the process, he'd moved his family from India to South Africa, then back to India, then back to South Africa, then finally to the Phoenix Settlement outside Durban, which he'd established on an ethic of rural self-sufficiency adapted from his reading of Tolstoy and Ruskin. Their teachings, as interpreted by him, were then translated into a litany of vows for an austere, vegetarian, sexually abstemious, prayerful, back-to-the-earth, self-sustaining way of life. Later, all but abandoning his wife and sons at Phoenix, Gandhi stayed on in Johannesburg for a period that stretched to more than six years.

By the time of his departure from South Africa, he'd spent only nine of twenty-one years in the same household with his wife and family. By his own revised standards, he could no longer be expected to put his family ahead of the wider community. Instead of concentrating on Phoenix, he started a second communal settlement called Tolstoy Farm in 1910, on the bare side of a rocky koppie, or hill, southwest of Johannesburg, all the while carrying on his unending campaign to fend off the barrage of anti-Indian laws and regulations that South Africa at every level of government—local, provincial, and national—continued to fire at his people. What inspired these restrictions was an unreasoning but not altogether ungrounded fear of a huge transfer of population, a siphoning of masses, across the Indian Ocean from one subcontinent to the other, under the sponsorship of an empire that could be deemed to have an interest in easing population pressures that made India hard to govern.

Sage, spokesman, pamphleteer, petitioner, agitator, seer, pilgrim, dietitian, nurse, and scold—Gandhi tirelessly inhabited each of these roles until they blended into a recognizable whole. His continuous self-invention ran in parallel with his unofficial position as leader of the community. At first he spoke only for the mainly Muslim business interests that had hired him, the tiny upper crust of a struggling immigrant community; at least one of his patrons, a land and property owner named Dawad Mahomed, employed indentured laborers, presumably on the same exploitative terms as their white masters. Gandhi himself belonged to a Hindu trading subcaste, the Modh Banias, a prosperous group but only one of numerous Bania, or merchant,