Gandhi, Dube, and Abdurahman: Collaboration across Boundaries in Colonial South Africa

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Relatively little attention has been paid to the interactions between Indian nonviolent activist Mohandas K. Gandhi (who lived in South Africa from 1893-1914) and Black African and Coloured activists and their initiatives in South Africa, and to the ways his own advocacy and organizing was influenced by Africans before the First World War. We must always proceed cautiously when making an historical argument for the influence of one person or movement on another. We can rarely count on a person to give a full account of who and what shaped them. As historian of India Claude Markovits has explained, many scholars have depended upon Gandhi’s own accounts when covering the history of his time in South Africa. However, Gandhi wrote Satyagraha in South Africa and then his Autobiography years later, without depending on notes and, in the latter case, as an “introspective exercise.” Profesor of African Literature Isabel Hofmeyr reiterates a point Gandhi often made that his influences were English social thinker John Ruskin, Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, and American writer Henry David Thoreau. However, I argue that African and Coloured as well as women peers made a big impression on him; he often credited them with being his role models, influencing his values and his actions. While their influence could very well go beyond the explicit accounts Gandhi gives of their influence on him, for purposes of brevity this article will focus on the (little known or often overlooked) explicit acknowledgment of their mutual influences.

Two outstanding South African leaders were Abdullah Abdurahman and John Langalibalele Dube. Gandhi developed links of solidarity with Abdurahman, the leader of the African Political Organization (APO) based in the Coloured community in South Africa. In his newspaper APO, Abdurahman urged Coloured and Black readers to use Gandhian methods to secure rights, advocated a multi-racial coalition, and concretely lent support to Gandhi’s project. Gandhi’s newspaper Indian Opinion published reports on the injustices suffered by the African and Coloured communities. Decades before the Apartheid government in South Africa enshrined four categories of races into law (native, white, coloured and Asian) in 1948, historians William Beinart and Saul Dubow explain that the British had legally sanctioned segregation, creating the fourth category “Indian” after the practice of importing indentured Indian workers in Natal in the 1860s. While some individuals and groups classified as “Coloured” at this time had ancestors who had come from India, Malaysia, and Indonesia (for example, Cape Muslims), those called “Coloured” were considered as distinct from more recent Indian immigrants to South Africa, since the former were largely Afrikaans speaking, and had more political rights than the latter. Abdullah Abdurahman, for example, was for many years an elected member of Cape Town’s Provincial Council. Despite Abdurahman’s Asian heritage and Muslim faith, reaching out in friendship to him still required Gandhi...
to cross social barriers.

Dube, of Zulu/AmaQadi heritage, was another of Gandhi’s interlocutors. He had studied in the U.S. and was the founder of the 200-acre Ohlanga Native Industrial Institute in Inanda in 1901, modeled on Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute. It was Gandhi’s International Printing Press in Durban that first published Dube’s newspaper, *Ilanga Lase Natal*. When Dube got his own press a few months later, he moved it to his rural location in Ohlanga. Gandhi began his newspaper, *Indian Opinion*, a few months after Dube had started publishing his paper. Its name was influenced by John Tengo Jabavu’s *Invo Zabantsundu (Native Opinion).* Gandhi bought his piece of property next to Dube’s and called it Phoenix Farm. Gandhi then moved his press to this new location in Ohlanga. In these strategic moves, Gandhi’s actions followed the lead of Dube. While this kind of pattern is suggestive of an influence, something remarked on by the historian Maureen Swan, Gandhi does not credit Dube or journalist Jabavu in his autobiographical accounts.

My essay looks at Gandhi’s, Abdurhaman’s, and Dube’s newspapers for insight into the dynamics of support and solidarity across different racially subordinated communities in colonial South Africa. A balanced approach to the topic of interracial connections and collaborations is needed today, when some authors have chosen to emphasize Gandhi’s early racist remarks in their attempts to debunk a myth of the post-racial Mahatma. Exploring Gandhi’s relations with African activists reveals not only social and political ties (with Gandhi visiting Dube and Abdurahman) but also the ways that they publicized each other’s struggles and influenced each other’s ideas.

To find places where Gandhi gives credit to Africans and African Americans, we must turn to *Indian Opinion*. Hofmeyr argues that Gandhi’s “newspaper” was actually a publication through which he challenged his readers, conceiving of “readership as a devoted apprenticeship.” He surveyed both breaking news and classics of philosophy and literature for anything that would help to guide himself and his readers in their daily life and decisions. While some of Gandhi’s written comments and political efforts seem to emphasize the difference between Africans and Indians, and suggest that Indians are of a higher “civilization” than Africans, the historian Nico Slate argues that by 1911 Gandhi had changed his thinking and come to believe that American educator Booker T. Washington’s moral and practical ideal of self-reliant labor was a better and higher way to live than European and high-caste Indian indolence. In practice, Gandhi had already been engaging in manual and semi-skilled labor through his experiments with ashram living and his work in prison. He intended these activities for himself and his followers; he did not suggest that such labor was the proper role for Blacks. The African and African-American practitioners of Washington’s philosophy were literally his role models.

As early as 1906, Gandhi praised a project led by Tengo Jabavu to found a Native College. He admires Africans’ dedication to education and their willingness to suffer to realize their project. He asks his readers, “If the Natives of South Africa, with all their financial disabilities and social disadvantages, are capable of putting forth this local effort, is it not incumbent upon the British Indian community to take the lesson to heart?” In a piece from 1907, *Indian Opinion* says of Dube that “his years of strenuous endeavour on behalf of his people had not been spent in vain.” It goes on to suggest to Indian readers that they emulate John Dube. In 1909, Gandhi says that Indians in South Africa should take up industrial education along the lines of Hampton and Tuskegee in the United States. He discourages Indian youths (even his own sons) from aiming to be lawyers and doctors and emphasizes instead skilled manual labor as building character and imparting self-esteem that will serve them in the movement for political change. In 1912, *Indian Opinion* applauded John Dube on his election as the first President of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) and published excerpts from his acceptance speech.

Historian Ramachandra Guha highlights the similarity of Dube and Gandhi’s political approach. Both embraced a “principled incrementalism” and both used patience and courtesy to diminish racism. Guha notes that Dube had praised Gandhi (in an unsigned editorial attributed to Dube) in his newspaper, *Ilanga Lase Natal*, saying that Gandhi was courageous and that Bantus admire a “plucky contender” who has “a fair claim for justice.” Guha also describes the impact on Dube of witnessing
Indian strikers’ refusal to move despite being beaten by police in 1913. As Guha reports, “Dube was impressed by their courage and endurance, telling a friend that while he had once thought plantation coolies crude and uncivilized, now he had ‘acquired a sense of respect for all the Indians.’” There is no denying that Africans and Indians were sometimes at odds with each other regarding their political goals. But examples like these suggest that Indians and Africans could set aside negative generalizations and develop fresh estimations of each other.

Former professor of African politics and history Heather Hughes points out that Dube had editorialized against Indians as invaders who took jobs and land away from Africans in South Africa. His subsequent revaluation of Gandhi and his Indian followers as worth emulating was quite a transformation. According to Hughes, Gandhi showed concern for the rights of Africans even while he insisted on separation of the Indian and African communities and stated openly that Indians were more advanced than Africans.

Historian Uma Shashikant Mestrie catalogues the many places in Indian Opinion where Gandhi covered stories of racist injustices suffered by Africans or makes celebratory comments when a struggle is decided in their favor. Lawyer, Advocate of the Supreme Court of India and Gandhi scholar Anil Nauriya also covers the relationship between Gandhi and John Dube, as well as earlier connections between Gandhi and African activists and publications. As early as 1906, Gandhi explained that Africans in South Africa were already involved in non-cooperating with racist and unjust colonial rule in South Africa.

E.S. Reddy, former director of the United Nations’ Centre against Apartheid, as well as Anil Nauriya have delved into Gandhi’s journalism and correspondence and the memoirs of those who knew him to show that he was concerned about the sufferings and struggles of black South Africans around land, work conditions, and myriad forms of mistreatment. Indian Opinion championed many African causes, and reprinted news stories from John Dube’s paper, Ilanga lase Natal.

Gandhi admired Abdurahman and his mobilization of the Coloured community. In March 1906, Indian Opinion reported that Abdurahman was coming to Johannesburg and Cape Town to present the “Colored People’s Petition.” According to Gandhi, the Coloured and Indian communities were too different to unite in struggle and follow a common strategy, since the Coloured community could claim that they belonged to the soil of Africa, unlike the Indian immigrants. Gandhi agreed that the rights they enjoyed in the Cape Colony should also be observed in the Orange River Colony and the Transvaal and approved of the strategy of sending Abdurahman to petition the imperial government in London. And while he made some minor criticisms of the conduct of some members of the Coloured community, he concluded that, the Indians “should also attempt something similar to what they are doing.”

As historians Julia Wells and Mohamed Adhikari explain, Abdurahman launched the APO newspaper in 1909, and editorialized in favor of unity among Indians, Coloureds and Africans and adoption of Gandhian methods to challenge racial injustice in South Africa. The APO was popular in Bloemfontein, where fourteen different African and Coloured groups made for a very diverse black community. Gandhi and Abdurahman became better acquainted with each other when both traveled on the same ship to Britain to try to influence the House of Lords to reject a restriction of the Union franchise to white voters.

Soon after their return, Abdurahman filled APO with stories of Gandhi’s imprisonment. In a December 1909 issue of APO, he described Gandhi’s tactics as “the greatest and yet most harmless force anybody can wield with perfect safety and a clear conscience.” He even coordinated an “Indian Passive Resistance Fund.” The same month, Gandhi wrote an article for APO, encouraging members of the Coloured community to engage in nonviolent civil resistance. He asserted the counterintuitive position that “Suffering is the panacea for all evils. . . . Let the illiterate men learn that if they feel a grievance, they are not to break other people’s heads, but their own, in order to have it redressed.” Abdurahman was intrigued by nonviolent resistance, as evidenced by an article in APO in February 1910, in which he noted that the Boston Peace Convention in 1838 had advocated civil disobedience. He commended Gandhi and his followers for their brave witness and for following their consciences, to the point of risking arrest and imprisonment, and insisted that Coloured people should follow their example and do the same.
In the same issue, he elaborated on the unrealized power of colonial subjects: “To my mind the whole native problem could be solved if coloureds, natives and Indians would all take to passive resistance. What could the whites do if the natives understand the meaning of passive resistance? They would be brought to their senses, for they could not do without us. South Africa would collapse in twenty-four hours if we stood together.”

In February 1910 as well, Gandhi wrote about Abdurahman in Indian Opinion. He praised him for refusing to sing “God Save the King” on the day the Prince of Wales visited Cape Town and encouraging others to do likewise as a protest against the partial franchise for Coloured people. Rejecting the charge that this was disloyalty to the Crown, Gandhi insisted, that “Dr. Abdurahman has cleared the atmosphere of cant and humbug and has served Truth, the Crown, his people and himself at the same time.” Gandhi also called attention to a meeting of Coloured activists who had declared that they would engage in passive resistance. A separate article noted that the Coloured community wanted to protest the pass laws and residential segregation and highlighted “a leading churchman,” who “took an oath that he would never take out a pass, and said he would sooner allow himself to be shot than carry a pass.” Here is a clear example from February 1910 of Gandhi and Abdurahman supporting and popularizing each other’s movements.

I want to go further and suggest that Abdurahman exercised a considerable influence on Gandhi’s repertoire of nonviolent protest in two significant ways: the use of strikes and the mobilization of women. Gandhi was reticent to engage in a method that could escalate to violence and rarely mentions strikes between 1908 and 1912. But in September 1913 he finally decided to use strikes to challenge the three pound tax imposed on former indentured workers from India. At almost the same time, Abdurahman spoke and wrote about strikes as a method of resisting injustice. In October and November 1913, Gandhi ended up leading a large strike of Indian miners that was instigated by women whom he had recently recruited into his movement. The development of Gandhi’s attitude to strikes was a long time coming. He knew of their importance in the labor movement, mentioning the labor leader John Burns and the 1889 London dock strike in an “Open Letter” of 1894. A decade later, he recognized the importance of the hartal (general strike) in the protests against the partition of Bengal in an article in Indian Opinion in 1905. He also noticed that general strikes in revolutionary Russia were a way to withdraw cooperation from the despotic tsarist government and he exhorted the Bengalis to copy the Russians. He even exhorted his followers to imitate the “spirit and daring” of white mine workers in South Africa, who went on strike to defend their dignity even though they did not know how they would feed their children. The first time that I see Gandhi exhorting his own followers to resort to a strike occurs in Indian Opinion in July 1908.

For several years afterward, Gandhi hardly mentioned strikes. This changed during another strike of white miners in the gold mines near Johannesburg in July 1913. Gandhi wrote about it in Indian Opinion. The implicit message of the article is that the destruction of life and property was unfortunate and unnecessary.

African women were the vanguard of the movement against the pass laws. A year before the labor unrest of 1913, Abdurahman specifically encouraged African women to use “passive resistance” as a means to overturn the pass laws in the pages of APO in June 1912. We do know that Gandhi was in touch with Abdurahman; they had tea in Abdurahman’s home in Cape Town in October 1912. Gandhi did not call on Indian women to become satyagrahis until March (according to his retrospective account) or May (published account) of 1913, at least nine months after Abdurahman’s appeal, and around the same time that the Coloured and African women of Bloemfontein staged their big protest against the pass laws.

Julia Wells, journalist and politician Frene Ginwala, and political activist and historian Nomboniso Gasa have provided us with a full account of the Bloemfontein protest in May 1913, which resulted in eighty arrests. At least thirty-four of the Bloemfontein women spent several months in prison, receiving sympathetic attention in the press and garnering much support for their movement. Indian Opinion covered developments, even devoting its front page to “Native Women’s Brave Stand” in August. In his address to the annual meeting of the
APO in September, Abdurahman claimed that the pass laws were "a form of modern-day slavery" and should be resisted by "all the blacks in the Union" through a mass strike. If "200,000 Natives on the mines" refused to pick up their tools and farm laborers refused to gather the harvest, "the economic foundation of South Africa would suddenly shake and tremble with such violence that the beautiful white South Africa superstructure which has been built on it would come down with a crash."  

Indian women participated in Gandhi's satyagraha in September 1913. One day before Abdurahman's speech, Gandhi wrote to the authorities that he was about to take the "momentous step" of advising those liable to pay the three pound tax, as well as indentured workers who would have to pay it when their term was finished, to strike until the tax was repealed.  

By late October, Gandhi was cabling the Indian National Congress leader Gopal Krishna Gokhale in India that two thousand people were striking and that the strike's success was due mostly to the women who have been popularizing the struggle. Another thousand men soon proclaimed that they would strike. In an interview in the Rand Daily Mail, Gandhi again insisted that it was the work of the women that was producing such widespread participation in the strike, which reached from the miners to plantations and rail workers.  

The women had engaged in their actions by forming two teams, one of whom spoke Gujarati and the others who were Tamil women from Tamil Nadu in the south of India. When eleven Tamil women were arrested and jailed, the outrage over their imprisonment increased the strikers' ranks and led to a march on 6 November 1913. One of Gandhi's tactical innovations, getting striking miners to march meant they would be arrested, fill the jails, and become the responsibility of the government, which had to feed and shelter them. In Gandhi's view, imprisonment gave strikers an opportunity to suffer for the cause. The strikers' march began with 2,037 men and 137 women, grew to 5,000 within days, and soared to possibly 60,000 participants. While Gandhi did not want to involve African miners in the protest, miners in at least one district took the opportunity to ask for a wage increase and the Natal Coal Owners' Society instructed its members to reject such requests. Nevertheless, Indian Opinion published Abdurahman's address in praise of strikes in December 1913.  

This brief account above shows the extent of direct and acknowledged mutual influence between Gandhi (and his community of activists including the brave Indian women) and Black South African leaders like Dube, Coloured community leader Abdurahman, and the Coloured and Black pass protesting women of Bloemfontein. They knew of each other's movements; they met and talked to each other; they learned from each other's experiments with tactics and strategies of resistance; and supported each other by giving sympathetic publicity to each other's struggles and celebrating each other's victories. Additionally, Gandhi took crucial aspects of Booker T. Washington's educational and lifestyle choices to heart and shaped his spirituality around manual labor.

Notes:
3. For the influence of women on Gandhi's values and nonviolent methods, please see George Paxton, Sonja Schlesin: Gandhi's South African Secretary

4. “Coloured” designated one of the racialized identities of early twentieth-century South Africa.


6. Rajmohan Gandhi, Gandhi: The Man, His People, and the Empire (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 107. John Tengo Jabavu was a South African journalist and political activist, who was editor of the first newspaper in the Xhosa language.


8. Abdullah Abdurahman, Say It Out Loud: The APO Presidential Addresses and Other Major Political Speeches, 1906-1940, of Dr. Abdullah Abdurahman (Western Cape Institute for Historical Research [IHR], University of the Western Cape, 1990), 4; “Mr Gokhale’s Visit,” Ilanga lase Natal, November 15, 1912.


11. “An Inter-State Native College,” IO, 17 March 1906, 156. See also Slate, Colored Cosmopolitanism, 24-25.


15. Guha, Gandhi before India, 267.

16. Ibid., 485.

17. Heather Hughes, First President: A Life of John Dube, Founding President of the ANC (Auckland Park, South Africa: Jacana Media, 2011), 110.

18. Ibid., 108-111.


25. J. N. Uppal, Gandhi: Ordained in South Africa
January 1911 strike of African mine workers who were subsequently imprisoned and forced to return to work under new South African laws.


40. Wells, We Now Demand!, 37.

41. See Gandhi, CWMG 12:348.

42. Gandhi said that he and other Indian men were reluctant to have their wives engage in activity which could land them in a foreign jail. More details in Gandhi, Satyagraha in South Africa, chapter 39, 251-256; “Indian Women and Passive Resisters,” IO 10 May, 1913, 1.


47. Gandhi, CWMG 12:374-376.


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