

Remarkable People: Mohandas Gandhi, South Africa.

A London-trained lawyer, he came to South Africa in 1893 intending to stay a year to act in a matter concerning two Indian merchants. He could have hardly imagined that he would stay for the better part of 20 years.

Unlike many British educated Indians who returned to throw their energies against Colonial rule, Gandhi was not interested in politics. South Africa was to change him profoundly. The human rights struggle of the Indian immigrants who were imported to Natal as “coolie labour” on the sugar plantations proved to be long and hard. Gandhi emerged as a highly influential lobbyist and leader, developing the “Principle of Satyagraha” – i.e. peaceful but firm resistance, which he later perfected in India.

He had his first taste of racial discrimination shortly after his arrival in South Africa when he was thrown off the train at Pietermaritzburg Station after he was denied admittance to the first-class section and refused to move to a third-class carriage.

During the Second Anglo-Boer War the role of South African Indians was confined to that of stretcher-bearer, a duty that Gandhi himself undertook after the Battle of Spioenkop.

Often controversial and unpopular amongst his rivals in the Natal Indian Congress, Gandhi was nonetheless seen as a champion of the masses when he led a protest march of mainly working-class Indians from Newcastle over the Transvaal border in 1913. This sparked off a strike by Indian workers in the South and the ensuing police brutality and the arrest of Gandhi led to an uproar in India, resulting in Gandhi's release. On his return to India in 1913, he was hailed a “Mahatma” – a great soul. A statue was imported from Bombay and erected as a memorial to his historical association with Ladysmith and its Hindu community. The statue stands in the grounds of the Lord Vishnu temple in Ladysmith, where it was unveiled in 1970. Ladysmith is at the intersection of the N3 with the N11. BCMohandas

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