

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 222

“The Kingdom of Satan”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

“The British government in India constitutes a struggle between the Modern Civilization, which is the kingdom of Satan, and the Ancient Civilization which is the Kingdom of God. The one is the God of War, the other the God of Love.”

Mohandas Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 222. The Kingdom of Satan.

Last time, we traced the history of political developments in India as far as the Great War. To the year 1916, to be specific. That was the year that India was chafing under the wartime Defence of India Act, some fifty thousand Indian soldiers were fighting on the front lines overseas, and the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League crafted a joint position on greater home rule for India.

Having reached this point in the narrative, we then took a step back to examine the life of the most important figure in modern Indian history: Mohandas Gandhi. But we only traced his life story up to the age of 23, by which time this quiet and bookish young man was married, with two sons and a law degree, but was struggling to get a practice going. He had accepted an offer to spend one year in South Africa representing an Indian merchant there. And that's where we left off.

Racism was a fact of life in the British Empire. Gandhi had found during his stay in London that his foreign looks and his musical accent drew merely a polite curiosity from white English people, who treated him far more respectfully than the British in India ever had. But no place in the Empire was more blatantly racist than South Africa, as Gandhi quickly discovered. His ship landed in Durban, the port city on the coast of the Colony of Natal, where most of the Indians in South Africa lived.

South Africa had a significant population of Indian immigrants, as did many other places in the British Empire, from Fiji to Jamaica. Some, like Gandhi, were educated professionals. Some, like the family that had hired him, were prosperous business people. But most were poor indentured laborers who lived packed into decrepit shantytowns. Here we find another under-discussed aspect of India's economic contribution to the British Empire: as a source of low wage labor.

In Natal, Gandhi soon learned that whites in South Africa treated Indians just as badly as they treated native Africans, whether they were impoverished indentured laborers or barristers who had studied the law in London. This education began just a few days after he arrived, when he took the train from Durban to Pretoria, where his case was being tried. Along the way, at a stop in Pietermaritzburg, the capital of Natal, Gandhi was ordered to leave the first-class car where he'd been riding and go back to the van compartment, where they packed the African and Indian laborers. Gandhi pointed out that he had paid for a first-class ticket and was told that didn't matter. When he refused to move, a police constable was called, who forcibly ejected Gandhi and his baggage from the train. It was midnight, and Gandhi spent the rest of the night in the cold, on the darkened train platform.

When he took a stagecoach, he was denied permission to ride inside the coach and had to sit outside, on a seat normally reserved for servants. In Pretoria, he was denied a room at one hotel. Another gave him a room, but wouldn't let him eat in their restaurant. When he complained to his clients about the treatment he was getting in South Africa, they told him that they were being treated the same way. They didn't mind, because they were making good money. They advised Gandhi to adopt the same attitude.

Gandhi did not adopt the same attitude. He wrote a letter of protest to the railway company. He spoke to Indian business groups, calling on them to push back against the way they were being treated. He wrote an editorial for a Natal newspaper in which he questioned whether the treatment of the Indians was just, was fair, was Christian.

Eventually the legal case for which he had been sent to South Africa was resolved and it was time to go home. In May 1894, his clients threw a farewell party for him in Durban. At that very party, someone showed him a newspaper article. The article said that the Natal Legislative Assembly would be taking up a bill that would take away the right to vote from Indians in Natal, the euphemistically named Franchise Adjustment Act. Gandhi approached his soon-to-be-former employers, newspaper in hand, and demanded to know what the Indian business community in Natal was going to do about it.

The Indian business community was trying. They were sending protests to Pietermaritzburg, to Calcutta, and to Westminster, but this was a complicated legal question, involving as it did the relative powers of three different governments within the framework of the British Empire. What they really needed was a smart lawyer.

So Gandhi stayed in South Africa to fight the good fight for the rights of Indians. Queen Victoria's proclamation of 1858 had promised that British subjects in India would be treated equally to other British subjects. In spite of what he had seen during the past year, Gandhi still believed that the British Empire was a force for good in the world. It brought law and civilization. Yes, it had its flaws, but it also had a rich legal and constitutional tradition that provided a means by which those flaws could be mended. That's what he believed, at first. Gandhi posed the question, if the world-spanning British Empire was not going to grant equal status to subjects from the various nations under its rule, if an Indian could not travel to other parts of the Empire freely and be treated with dignity when he arrived, what exactly was the justification for the Empire in the first place?

I feel I would be remiss here if I did not take note that Gandhi's concern for the equal treatment of all of Her Majesty's subjects did not extend to the native Africans of South Africa. His objection had more to do with class than race; he did not oppose South African-style segregation, he just wanted Indians to enjoy the privileges of the "white" side of the color line. In his view, educated, well-dressed, English-speaking British subjects at least, should all be treated the same, regardless of their race or ethnicity. Wasn't that the whole purpose of the Empire's civilizing mission?

But in making his case for fairer treatment for people like himself and his clients, Gandhi did not shy away from disparaging the native Africans, who did not meet his or Britain's criteria for "civilized." To bolster his case, he drew on the anthropology of the period and argued that Indians and Anglo-Saxons shared common enlightened values of liberty and rule by law, inherited from their common ancestors, the Aryans, or Indo-Europeans, a heritage entirely alien to the peoples of Africa. Ironically, Adolf Hitler would use the very same historical argument to justify appropriating the ancient and honorable symbol of the swastika as an emblem of German nationalism 25 years later, as we saw in episode 214.

Gandhi set to work on his project to secure the rights of Indians in Natal. He also developed a law practice, one that actually made money. In 1896, he published the so-called "Green Pamphlet," a short book addressed to the general public in India appealing for their support in the fight for equality for the 50,000 Indians living in Natal. The pamphlet attracted attention in India and excited Indians in Natal, but whites in Natal were offended. When Gandhi returned to Durban in 1897, following a trip to India to collect his family and bring them over to South Africa, he was assaulted and beaten by a white mob as he debarked from the ship. He would likely have sustained more serious injuries were it not for the intervention of a white woman who shielded him from his assailants. This woman turned out to be the wife of a Durban police superintendent.

As for the struggle for equality in Natal, it was not only failing to make progress, it was losing ground. The Franchise Adjustment Bill was enacted in Natal and approved by the British government in London. New laws restricted Indian immigration to those who could speak

English and changed business licensing laws to make it more difficult for Indians to do business in Natal.

The situation was even worse for Indian merchants in the South African Republic, the independent Boer state often referred to as the Transvaal. There Indians were forced to conduct their trade in so-called bazaars outside the towns, in effect segregated marketplaces. These merchants protested to the governments in London and Calcutta, but since the South African Republic was an independent state, the British could only apply diplomatic pressure. Gandhi challenged the bazaars in the courts of the South African Republic, but the courts ruled against his Indian clients.

Then came the Anglo-Boer War, which we covered in episodes 10-12. Gandhi saw the war as an opportunity for the Indians of Natal. At this time, Gandhi still believed the British Empire was largely a force for good in the world. Certainly the injustices inflicted upon Indians in the Boer republics were far more egregious and offensive than the way Indians were treated in Natal, and even with regard to Natal, he still believed that the restrictions on the rights of Indians were not part and parcel of British rule, but an anomaly, a wrinkle in the fabric of British law that would eventually be ironed out. So he supported the British in their war against the Boers, and urged other Indians to do the same. Not only because British rule over the Boer territories would improve the lot of Indians there, but also to make a point. If Indians claimed all the rights of British subjects, they should be prepared to shoulder all the responsibilities of British subjects, and conversely, if Indians proved they were as loyal to the Crown as any Briton, surely British courts and legislators would have to concede that they were entitled to all the rights of Britons.

As I outlined for you back in episode 220, Gandhi had been raised in a religious household and was a believer in the ancient Indian virtue of ahimsa, which is the principle of non-injury, which is what ahimsa literally means. Gandhi's principles made it difficult for him to encourage his fellow Indians in Natal to fight for the British Empire; so did the law that prohibited Indians from owning firearms, which meant there was no Indian in Natal with any kind of experience with modern weapons. But what Indians could do, and what Gandhi organized them to do, was to serve as an ambulance corps for the British Army, carrying away wounded soldiers from the field of combat.

It wasn't full-on military service, but it required grit and courage, and Gandhi was eager to demonstrate to the British that Indians could be brave, something that cut against the stereotypes of the time, and I'll want to get back to that point in a minute. But, as you already know from our episodes on the Anglo-Boer War, Gandhi did indeed organize an Indian ambulance corps and it served the British Army faithfully, particularly during the Battle of Spion Kop, in which British casualties were heavy and the rugged terrain made stretcher-bearers the only practical way to carry the wounded away from the fighting.

Gandhi and the Indian ambulance corps made their point and earned gratitude and honors from the British. But after the war was over, and British Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain was touring South Africa, Gandhi met with him to remind him of how Indians had been treated in the former Boer republics and how Indians had supported the British Army. Now Indians in South Africa were looking for a fairer shake in Britain's newest colonies. Chamberlain responded, "I shall do what I can, but you must try your best to placate the Europeans, if you wish to live in their midst."

This answer must have been profoundly disappointing to Gandhi and the movement for equal rights for Indians. Gandhi tried to take Chamberlain at his word; he moved his law practice to Johannesburg, and was successful there. But the war did not bring an improvement to the lot of most Indians in South Africa; indeed the British government itself was making clear that its own first priority was placating the Europeans, that is, the Boers.

In fact, the end of the war and the dawn of the twentieth century brought not greater rights for Indians, but tighter restrictions. Now the Cape Colony was considering a law to disenfranchise Indians. In 1906, the British went to war once again in Natal, to put down a Zulu uprising, and once again Gandhi organized an ambulance corps that meant to assist wounded on both sides. This war was smaller but uglier than the Boer War, with British troops ready to gun down black Africans on sight, whether or not they were combatants. Even the African stretcher-bearers Gandhi recruited for his ambulance corps were fired on by British soldiers. Gandhi would later say that it was not so much a war as a man-hunt.

[music: Oriental Music of India]

It was during his years in South Africa that Mohandas Gandhi developed the political theory that would soon propel him to prominence. I want to take a break from the narrative to consider some of the influences that went into his thinking. The first one I already mentioned: his religious upbringing, which was devoutly Hindu, and which embraced the principle of ahimsa. Remember also when we reviewed his time in London, when he was under pressure to abandon his vegetarian principles, but chose instead to embrace and defend them.

In this context, you also have to consider the widely held view among British people of this time, who regarded Hindu Indians in particular as a people small and weak, both physically and spiritually. Remember that this was an age that exalted the "manly" attributes of strength and bravery. This was the age of Theodore Roosevelt and Rudyard Kipling, of Billy Sunday and muscular Christianity. While Indians of other religions, especially Muslims and Sikhs, were admired for their martial virtues, Hindus were looked down upon. Their practice of vegetarianism was thought to make them physically weak, while their adherence to ahimsa made them cowardly and easy to control, which was the explanation offered for how first, the Muslim Mughals, and later the British, were able to conquer and dominate them.

Gandhi was sensitive to these accusations of weakness, and responded in a manner similar to his defense of vegetarianism: by challenging the assumption that non-violence represented a lack of courage. To the contrary, he argued, it took courage to practice non-violence. When Gandhi was beaten by white mobs for his advocacy of Indian rights, he did not fight back. He did not even pursue criminal charges against his attackers. And who could question the courage of Gandhi and his ambulance corps through the combat of two wars? Gandhi came to believe that bravery employed in a non-violent way could be just as powerful as bravery employed in the service of violence, and that rejection of violence was a powerful spiritual statement, just as was vegetarianism.

Gandhi was also influenced by the Jain poet and philosopher Shrimad Rajchandra, who had died in 1901. In the last decade before Rajchandra's death, he and Gandhi exchanged correspondence in which Rajchandra encouraged Gandhi in his Hinduism and his commitment to ahimsa. One of the reasons this was so important was that Gandhi was also being influenced by a number of Western thinkers and by Christianity. There was much in Christianity which appealed to Gandhi, particularly the messages of universal love and self-sacrifice, and there were moments in his life when he may have been close to converting. But he never did. The biggest stumbling block for Gandhi was the divinity of Jesus, which for him negated the significance of Jesus' teachings and the example of his life. The influence of Rajchandra kept Gandhi's philosophy firmly rooted in his own Indian culture and traditions and encouraged his belief that only from there could the Indian people draw the strength they would need to resist British rule.

Other Western influences on Gandhi include Henry David Thoreau's essay *Resistance to Civil Government*, often known as *Civil Disobedience*, in which Thoreau argued that individuals should not and must not allow governments and laws to overrule their own private consciences, and that it is the duty of every person to resist government when its actions conflict with conscience. There was the English art critic and philosopher John Ruskin and his 1860 book *Unto This Last*, which was a controversial critique of the prevailing *laissez-faire* political and economic philosophy in the United Kingdom. Ruskin rejected a system in which individuals were forced to compete against one another and argued instead for a society based on mutually supportive relationships. It was not wealth, Ruskin argued, but happiness that a society should strive for.

And then there was Leo Tolstoy, the Russian writer who laid out his interpretation of Christian belief in the books *What I Believe* and *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, that Christianity was a religion of pacifism and nonviolence. In 1908, Tolstoy wrote "A Letter to a Hindu," an essay in which he advocated for peaceful, nonviolent resistance as the method to oppose British rule in India. This led to a brief correspondence between Tolstoy and Gandhi, until Tolstoy died in 1910.

Tolstoy had experimented with building an alternative community based on his religious principles on his farm in Russia. Gandhi became inspired to do the same in South Africa. He

bought a plot of ground, called it Phoenix Farm, and invited family and friends to live there and together to build a community that would live simply and work together for the common good. It was what in the 1960s we called a “commune,” and Gandhi would be part of such a community for the rest of his life.

[music: Oriental Music of India]

Gandhi was part of Phoenix Farm, but he wasn't actually living there. He was still working his lucrative law practice in Johannesburg, the income from which helped support Phoenix Farm as well as support the British Indian Association, the activist organization led by Gandhi that worked for equal rights for Indians in South Africa.

But South Africa's Indians were losing the fight. They were not getting equality; they were losing ground, not unlike African Americans in the United States at this same time. The new Boer-controlled colonial government in what was now the Transvaal Colony enacted a law that required the registration and fingerprinting of all Indians living in the colony. Now, Mohandas Gandhi, as you may have already noticed, is a guy with a general tendency to be flexible and accommodating, but occasionally a moment comes when a line is crossed, he finds the situation intolerable, and he fights back hard. Nonviolently, of course, but hard. This was one such moment.

Gandhi and some in his organization even went to London to try to get the new Liberal government of Henry Campbell-Bannerman to deny British Imperial assent to this new law, and in the course of that visit, he met with the new Liberal undersecretary for colonial affairs, Winston Churchill. This would be Gandhi's and Churchill's one and only fact-to-face meeting, although they would be political antagonists for the next forty years.

The approach of the new Liberal government in Britain was, as the PM put it, “good government is no substitute for self-government.” That is, His Majesty's new Boer subjects must be granted the discretion to make their own laws, even if they made laws that British leaders disapproved of. I can't resist pointing out that the British government never seemed to have considered applying this principle to India.

While Gandhi was in Britain, he took note of the bold campaign of the suffragettes fighting for voting rights for women, and how they kept up the fight even in prison. Gandhi speculated aloud that if British women could fight so fiercely for their rights, surely Indians could do the same.

The disappointment Gandhi felt, upon hearing British politicians like Churchill freely acknowledge that the laws in South Africa were unjust while also refusing to do anything about it appears to have been the last straw. He was done with meetings and pamphlets and petitions, with stirring appeals to the high ideals of British justice. He had come to the conclusion that whatever platitudes the British might utter, the only thing they really believed in was strength. Which brings us back to Gandhi's developing philosophy.

It was at this time in his career that Gandhi first promulgated the resistance strategy he called *satyagraha*. This is a coined term based on two Sanskrit words that together mean something like *truth-firmness* or *truth-steadfastness*. Satyagraha is sometimes described in English as “passive resistance” or “civil disobedience,” but Gandhi himself distinguished it from those concepts. Tactics like passive resistance were weapons the weak wielded against the strong, he argued, and were not necessarily non-violent, as for example, the suffragette protests in Britain were not always non-violent. Satyagraha, by contrast, was firmly committed to non-violence and was a tool used by the strong. We see here Gandhi’s emphasis on strength, as he was influenced by the deference to “manly” virtues that was characteristic of his time, as well as his resistance to the stereotype of the Hindu Indian as weak and submissive. Satyagraha, in Gandhi’s description, holds fast to truth and seeks not to harm one’s opponents, but to bring them to an understanding of that same truth. It seeks not to defeat the enemy, but to convert them. Satyagraha was not merely a political strategy; it was a path to a higher spiritual understanding. It was a philosophy rooted in Indian thought that would take back India’s sovereignty.

Gandhi began his campaign against the registration law in April 1907. The deadline for Indians to register under the new law was July 31. The government later extended the deadline to November 30. When the extended deadline came and went, exactly eleven out of an estimated 13,000 Indians living in the Transvaal had complied with the registration requirement.

Alas for Gandhi, when the government actually began arresting people for failure to comply with the law, resistance began to fail. Gandhi himself was arrested and imprisoned for two months, for the first of many times in his life. Conditions in Transvaal jails were unbearable for people like Gandhi and the Indian merchants who were the cornerstone of his movement. With his support crumbling, Gandhi attempted to negotiate a face-saving compromise with Jan Smuts—yes, him again; he was at this time Colonial Secretary for the Transvaal Cabinet, making him point person for the government in the dispute over Indian registration laws. After a couple of rounds of imprisonment, compromises, breakdowns of the compromises, and imprisonment again, Gandhi and his satyagraha strategy were not looking good.

Gandhi made another trip to London in another attempt to get the British government to intervene. On this trip, he made contact with some of the more extreme young Indians who were pushing for violent resistance against British rule in India. You’ll recall our look at the Bengal partition and how it radicalized the resistance in India, and how some Indian nationalists were resorting to violence and assassination in opposition to British rule. Gandhi was horrified by all this; besides his opposition to violence, he disapproved of those who framed the Indian nationalist cause in essentially European terms of capitalism or socialism, of nationalism and parliamentarism, of tariffs and trade. Gandhi expressed the view that even if British rule were ended, a post-British India that operated on Western principles would amount to no more than British rule without the British.

In 1909, Gandhi published *Hind Swaraj*, or *Indian Self-Rule*, in which he expressed his view of Indian independence. In it, he argued his case that an independent India must necessarily reject Western values, or it would never be truly independent. He made his case for satyagraha as the only path to swaraj, and recommended a strategy of Indians simply withdrawing from Western-style, British-style civilization. Indians should refrain from speaking English or attending British schools. They should not wear Western clothes or purchase Western goods. Indians should grow their own food, weave their own cloth, and have nothing to do with the British. The British only wanted India for the economic benefits they gained from controlling it. If Indians refused to deal with the British, those benefits would disappear, and so would Britain's incentive to control the country.

The British-led government in India banned publication of the book there, on the grounds that it was sedition. In South Africa, the circumstances of Indian immigrants went from bad to worse. In 1910, following the creation of the Union of South Africa, Indian immigration was essentially outlawed. New laws restricted even internal migration of Indians in South Africa from one province to another. The South African Supreme Court issued a ruling that called into question marriages made under religious rites that permitted polygamy—that would be Hinduism and Islam both—even if the particular marriage under consideration was monogamous. Gandhi saw in this a step toward withholding recognition of any Indian marriage.

South Africa was also imposing hefty head taxes on Indian indentured workers, as much as £4 per year. That doesn't sound like much, but it was to an impoverished indentured worker; for someone who was trying to earn their way out of debt bondage, a few pounds per year could make the difference between freedom and a lifetime of servitude.

Gandhi's previous efforts at applying satyagraha had depended on the Indian merchant class in South Africa. In October 1913, Gandhi called for a strike by Indian indentured workers, who were poor and mostly Tamil. In Hindu caste terms, they were Shudras, the lowest caste, or Dalits, those of no caste, the so-called untouchables, as opposed to the merchant class, who were mostly Gujarati and higher caste, like Gandhi himself.

Most of these Indian laborers had never heard of a strike before, but they answered the call, some fifty thousand of them in Natal. They struck, they marched, they protested. They deliberately crossed provincial lines in defiance of the laws that confined Indians to their home province. Thousands were arrested, including Gandhi himself.

The violent response from South African police led to ten dead and many injured by mid-December, and attracted international attention. In India, politicians there called for an inquiry into the treatment of Indians in South Africa. Even British-born leaders of the government in India protested. The Indian Viceroy himself, Lord Hardinge, called the police response in South Africa intolerable. Newspapers in the UK and the US gave the strikers sympathetic coverage.

The strike did significant economic damage in Natal. Produce in the fields went unharvested. Sugar mills were forced to close. Hotels and resorts, which were heavily reliant on Indian labor, had to shut down.

By January, Gandhi was released from prison and was in negotiations with the South African interior minister—guess who—the ubiquitous Jan Smuts. Gandhi and Smuts negotiated a settlement under which Gandhi would call off the strike and the South African government would empanel a commission which would hear the grievances of Indians in South Africa. In March, the commission issued its recommendations, which included repeal of the tax on indentured laborers and legal recognition for marriages performed in Hindu or Muslim ceremonies, and the South African parliament would eventually enact those reforms.

The settlement did not produce any change in the laws requiring Indians to register, or the laws that restricted Indians in South Africa to their home province. Even some of Gandhi's staunchest supporters complained that it only a partial victory. This would not be the last time Gandhi heard that criticism.

Still, it was a victory, and a victory for Gandhi's principles of satyagraha. Past satyagraha campaigns that relied on the merchant elites had failed, because those people lost their nerve once they were arrested. It seemed that satyagraha worked best as a mass movement, one that welcomed people of all classes and all castes. It was a lesson Mohandas Gandhi would take to heart.

Gandhi left South Africa forever in July 1914. His ultimate destination was India, where the Indian nationalist movement did not need to be told to resist British rule, but did need to be taught how to do so nonviolently, or so Gandhi believed.

But first he would travel to Great Britain. His ship arrived there on August 4, 1914. Later that same day, the United Kingdom declared war on Germany.

But that is a story for next time. We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Edward and Lyra for their kind donations, and thank you to Walker for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Lyra and Edward and Walker help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to everyone who has pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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would be the place to go. While you're there, you can leave a comment and let me know what you thought about today's show.

And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we bring the story of India up to 1920 and observe a calculated piece of inhumanity. That's next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. South African law continued to discriminate against Indians, who occupied a legal status inferior to white South Africans but superior to Black South Africans, throughout the twentieth century until the overthrow of the apartheid system in 1994. Since then, immigration from India to South Africa has resumed and South Africa has a vibrant Indian community, still found mostly in what they used to call Natal, and amounting to about 2.5% of the nation's population.

[music: Closing Theme]