

A STATEMENT BY MR-GOKHALE  
ON THE INDIAN QUESTION.

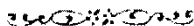
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SUPPLEMENT TO THE BURMAN.

# INDIANS IN SOUTH AFRICA

BEING

A STATEMENT BY THE

Hon. Mr. GOKHALE, C.I.E.



(Reprint from the INDIAN REVIEW.)

RANGOON,

6th December, 1913.

# A STATEMENT BY Mr. GOKHALE

ON

## THE INDIAN QUESTION,

The broad issues involved in this struggle are now fairly well understood in this country, but as I have had special opportunities to acquaint myself not only with the history of the whole question of the actual condition of our people in South Africa, but also with the latest negotiations on the subject that took place in London and at Pretoria, perhaps it will be useful if I make a brief statement of the Indian case on this occasion. Indian emigration to South Africa began in 1859 when the Imperial Government, acting in the interest of the European planters in Natal, persuaded the Government of India to allow Indian labour to be recruited for that Colony under a system of indenture not far removed from slavery. As nearly four-fifths of the present Indian population in South Africa consists of indentured labourers, ex-indentured labourers and their descendants and as the small proportion of free Indian Muslims, petty traders, only followed in the wake of the indentured Indians in the first instance to supply their wants, it is clear that the Imperial authorities are directly responsible for the existence of the Indian problem in South Africa to-day. Not only this; a reference to despatches that passed between the Imperial Government and the Government of India when the bargain to supply indentured labour from India for the benefit of the white planters was struck—a bargain in which the people of this country had no voice—will show that owing to some hesitation of the Government of India in the matter, the Imperial Government held out alluring prospects of how Indians so recruited would fare after their period of indenture was over.

### INTOLERABLE HARDSHIPS.

They would then, it was stated, have opportunity to acquire land in the Colony and settle on it as free men and grow into a contented and prosperous agricultural community living on a far higher plane than the corresponding agricultural class in this country. Contrast the glowing hopes thus held out at that time by the Imperial Government with the miserable, hunted existence which ex-indentured Indians are leading to-day in Natal under the operation of the £3 license! The tax is too dreadful for words, and I think we are entitled to remind the Imperial Government of all this when we now see a disposition on its part to leave our countrymen in South Africa to the tender mercies of the European community there, and to shelter itself behind the plea that the Union of South Africa is a self-governing Dominion, in the

internal affairs of which it is unalterable to have for years one concern of the Colonies was to induce the Indians to remain in the Colony after the completion of their indentures, and though shocking cases of personal ill-treatment during the period of indenture were by no means infrequent, and have come to light from time to time, the attitude of the Colony towards the Indians as a class was for a long time not unfriendly. With the growth of Indian numbers, however, and with increasing competition between the Indian traders and the poorer white traders this attitude of the Colony underwent a complete change, and for the last quarter of a century, speaking roughly, the Indian community of Natal has been subjected to relentless persecution, in the course of which right after right has been taken away from the free population, the one fixed purpose of the Colony being to get rid of all Indians except those actually under indenture by making their life altogether intolerable. Thus the political franchise, to mention only a few things which the Indians at one time enjoyed, has been taken away. Indian traders have been continuously subjected to all manner of harassment and oppression in regard to the issue, renewal and transfer of licenses, and some years ago even legislation was attempted in the Legislative Assembly proposing to extinguish in the course of ten years all the trading licenses held by Indians so that there should be no Indian trader in the whole of Natal after that period. The attempt failed, only because the Imperial Government could not allow such outrageous proposals to become law.

### THE £3 LICENSE TAX.

The £3 license tax is a weapon directed against ex-indentured Indians and their descendants, being a diabolical device to compel them either to quit the Colony after the completion of their indentures or else go back into re-indenture. Under this Law, which came into force in 1901, every ex-indentured Indian or descendant of such Indian, if male above sixteen years or female above thirteen years of age, must pay £3 a year for the mere permission to live in the Colony or else suffer imprisonment, the result of the impost being, as admitted by the highest Natal authorities, to break up their homes, drive the men into paths of crime and the women into lives of shame. The Colony makes no secret of the fact that it wants Indians, but wants them, not as free men, but only as beasts of burden, as the indentured labourers are living in a state of semi-slavery for the benefit of the white planters. A body of Natal planters adopted the following Resolution:—"That this Conference is of opinion that the abolition of the £3 license on the time-expired Indians in Natal would be detrimental to the labour supply of the Province and contrary to the best interests of South Africa." And Sir Thomas Hyslop in moving the Resolution said with brutal frankness:—"The effect of the license is to prevent Indians from settling in the country. It is extended to colonial born Indians now, and if the license were abolished, Indians would have the choice of remaining in the country as free men. We want Indians as indentured labourers but not as free men." I am referring at some

length to the position in Natal, because the present struggle is not confined to Transvaal only, as the last one was, but is general throughout South Africa and out of a total population of about 150,000, more than three-fourths are in Natal, the Cape and the Transvaal having only about 25,000 and 10,000 Indians, and Orangeia only about 100. When the Boer War broke out the Indian community in Natal in spite of the acute persecution which it was then suffering, came forward out of a sense of duty to the Empire to offer its services to the British Government. Owing to disabilities under which Indians have to labour, they could not take their places as fighters. But under Mr. Gandhi's leadership they arranged a corps of stretcher bearers and acquitted themselves in that humble capacity with such zeal and devotion and discipline, that their conduct extorted general admiration and received ample recognition from the authorities. For the time this led to kindlier feelings towards them on the part of the English community in South Africa, but that did not last, and it was not long before the old policy of harassment and persecution was again resumed.

#### THE TRANSVAAL SITUATION.

While things were thus again wearing their old complexion for Indians in Natal, their ill-treatment in the Transvaal after the close of the War became even more acute and soon engrossed all public attention. The main incidents of the struggle that then ensued are, I am sure, still fresh in your memory; and do not call for more than passing reference to-day: how the anti-Indian legislation of President Kruger's Government was alleged as one of the causes for which England went to war with the two South African Republics; how that same legislation instead of being repealed after the overthrow of the Republics was enforced against the Indians even more stringently than before; how on responsible Government being granted to the Transvaal the very first use made by the Transvaal Assembly of its legislative power was to rush fresh anti-Indian legislation of a most offensive character through the two Houses without discussion and without even a single dissentient voice being raised, prohibiting the entry of any more Indians into the Province and requiring those who were already there to register themselves giving finger prints of all ten digits while so registering, and how the Indian community, driven to despair by the failure of all appeals and all attempts at compromise, and by the refusal of the Imperial Government to protect it from indignity and oppression, resolved not to submit to humiliating legislation, preferring to go to jail and suffer in other ways rather than sacrifice their self-respect. The struggle which thus commenced in 1906 lasted for four years, in the course of which untold miseries were unflinchingly endured by our countrymen and countrywomen in the Transvaal. Three thousand five hundred sentences of imprisonment were borne; about 100 persons were deported; many families were broken up, the women and children in some cases being lost trace of; businesses were

ruined and the entire community was practically pauperised. This memorable struggle which, whatever its suffering, brought an accession of self-respect to the community and raised the Indian name throughout South Africa was suspended a short time before the Coronation of His Imperial Majesty George V on a compromise being arranged between General Smuts and Mr Gandhi, a compromise reduced to writing and embodied in correspondence between the two parties. The terms of the compromise were that the offending legislation passed by the Transvaal Assembly was to be repealed; and that in any new legislation that might be undertaken on the subject of immigration there was to be no statutory racial discrimination against Indians as Indians or Asiatics and that the existing rights were to be maintained. As the struggle was confined to the Transvaal, the terms of the compromise could only refer to the Transvaal. But meanwhile the Union of the four Provinces of South Africa had been effected, and it was understood that Mr. Gandhi had insisted on it in a letter to the Minister that if it was sought to give the promised relief to the Indian community not by the new legislation confined to Transvaal only, but by the fresh legislation common to the whole Union, the two conditions agreed to between the two sides about racial bar and existing rights were to extend to such legislation for the whole Union. And this position was further insisted on in the most clear and emphatic language by the Imperial Government itself, who, in a despatch, dated the 3rd October, 1910, (Lord Crewe was then Colonial Secretary) informed the Union Government that no solution of Indian problem would be acceptable to it which either introduce racial bar in any fresh legislation or impaired in any way the existing rights of the Indian community in Cape and Natal, and of course in Transvaal (there being no question about Orangia, as there was practically no Indian community there). An attempt was made in 1911 to draft a Bill to give effect to this compromise, which, however, proved abortive. But at the beginning of last year, a Bill was introduced to carry out the provisional settlement. There were certain serious flaws in the Bill as first drafted. But on Mr. Gandhi drawing the attention of General Smuts to that, the latter agreed to introduce changes fully meeting the objections raised. The Union Government, however, professed to be unable to carry this Bill through the House owing to the opposition of considerable section of its own followers and indifference manifested towards it by the Unionist Party and the Bill was eventually withdrawn. An assurance was, however, given to passive resisters that the settlement would continue in force for another year till the Ministry had time to draft a fresh Bill and get it through Parliament.

#### MR. GOKHALE'S VISIT.

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Matters were in this state when I visited South Africa about this time last year on an invitation from the Indian community there conveyed through Mr. Gandhi. I hope you will pardon this little personal reference, and I assure you it will be very brief. I visited all the important centres in South Africa and addressed several

meetings of both Europeans and Indians that had been arranged for me, and I concluded my tour with a visit to Pretoria, where three Ministers, General Botha, General Smuts and Mr. Fiesher, granted me an interview for the discussion of the whole Indian question in South Africa. The interview lasted for two hours and appeared at the time to be satisfactory. Representations which I had made to the Ministers on behalf of the Indian community in South Africa fell under three heads: first, about the provisional settlement; secondly, about the £3 licence tax, and third, about the existing disabilities of the British Indians in different Provinces in the matter of trading, residence, education, owning of property and so forth. On the first point the Ministers gave me a definite assurance that the provisional settlement would be carried out, subject to one alteration which they felt confident would not be objected to by Mr. Gandhi, as it was not inconsistent with the stand he had taken, namely the substitution of the Canadian test in place of the Australian in the matter of immigration. On the second point I was assured that the Government realised the iniquity of the £3 licence tax, and that from a financial point of view its proceeds were negligible, and that the earliest opportunity would be taken to abolish it. On my asking for the authority to announce this I was told that it was necessary for the Ministers to mention the matter first to Natal members, and I should, therefore, merely announce in general terms that the Ministers had promised their most favourable consideration to my representations in the matter and that I had every confidence that the tax would be repealed in the next Parliament. On the third point, while promising a careful consideration of what I had urged, the Ministers pointed out to me the difficulty of their position and undertook to do what they could to remove hardships by the sympathetic administration of the existing laws and gradual amendment of others without provoking any violent antagonism on the part of any section of the European community.

#### POLITICAL EXIGENCIES.

I am convinced in my own mind that the Ministers at that time were sincerely anxious to carry out the provisional settlement both in letter and in spirit, and even after what has happened I venture to think that if the difficulties created by the secession of General Hertzog from the Ministry had not hampered the Government, they would have carried out the compromise entered into with Mr. Gandhi. General Hertzog's revolt, however, soon changed the whole aspect of things. That extremely clever tactician immediately raised the cry that he was astonished at the concessions which were contemplated by General Botha to the Indian community at the dictation of the Imperial Government thus making an effective appeal to the prejudice of Boers against Indians and of their resentment against anything savouring of the Imperial dictation. General Botha, confronted with the prospect of a split in his own Party, has since then been making desperate efforts to convince the Free Staters and

other Boers that he was as much against Indians as General Hertzog, and that he would not submit to Imperial dictation any more than General Hertzog would. The whole attitude adopted by the Ministry towards the Indian community in the discussions on this year's Immigration Bill, an attitude of superciliousness and contempt, was deliberately designed to please the Free Staters and other extreme Boers, and though at the instance of the Unionist or English Party in the House, whose leaders this time put up a strong fight on our behalf, several important amendments were introduced in the Bill, there is no doubt that faith has not been kept with the Indian community, that the provisional settlement, in accordance with which passive resistance was suspended three years ago, has not been carried out, and the conditions laid down by the Imperial Government in 1910 have been violated. Thus after nearly three years' waiting, Mr. Gandhi and his associates find that the fruit of suffering heroically borne by them for four years have again been snatched from them. In insisting that there should be no racial bar against Indians as such in any future legislation and the existing rights should be respected Mr. Gandhi had two objects in view. If once the principle that there was to be no racial bar tolerated against Indians in any legislation of the Union Parliament was fully recognised and acted upon, there would be no need to fear, as there is to-day, that in any legislative measures that may be taken in hand hereafter by the Union Government such as the contemplated legislation about trade licenses of Municipalities and so forth, an attempt would be made to discriminate against Indians as such, and this is a matter of the utmost importance. And as regards the maintenance of the existing rights, we have been pushed back step by step during the last twenty-five years to such an extent that, unless we make a stand once for all against all further encroachment, we shall be steadily pressed down more and more to the level of the Kaffirs as is really the aim of the bulk of the European community in South Africa.

#### PASSIVE RESISTANCE.

Mr. Gandhi, therefore, has been driven, both by considerations of honour, faith not having been kept with him by the Union Government, and to prevent further assaults on the Indian position, to unfurl again the banner of passive resistance with all the sufferings and sacrifices involved in the struggle. Even after the passing of the Immigration Bill he clung for a while to the hope that both the Union Government in South Africa and the Imperial Government in England would see the necessity of carrying out their respective undertakings towards the Indian community. His negotiations with General Smuts, which are set forth in a series of communications, published in the *Indian Opinion* of the 13th September, show how moderate and reasonable his attitude throughout was, and how anxious he was to prevent a revival of passive resistance if that could be honourably achieved, but the Union Government had closed its ears to all further appeals. I found that out for myself when I had an interview with Mr. Fischer at the



Colonial Office, in London, when she was there on a brief holiday, and thus reason, justice and obligations of honour have all alike failed to bring us any relief. Specific demands which Mr. Gandhi, and other passive resisters have now put forward are six in number:—(1) The racial bar which disfigures the present Bill, in that humiliating and wholly unnecessary declaration which is not required of Europeans but is still required of Indians wanting to enter the Free State, be removed. (2) The right of South Africa born Indians to enter the Cape freely, which has been taken away, be restored. (3) The right of domicile which ex-indentured Indians paying license tax could acquire in Natal after a residence of some years as recognised by the decision of Natal Supreme Court only last December, be restored. (4) £3 license tax to which ex-indentured Indians are subjected, be abolished. (5) All monogamous marriages celebrated in accordance with Hindu or Mahomedan rites, whether inside South Africa or outside South Africa, be recognised as valid. (6) All existing laws affecting Indians be administered in a spirit of sympathy and consideration for the community. Of these demands the first three arise wholly out of the provisional settlement. The fourth is put forward because of the iniquitous character of the impost, the suffering it causes to the poorest and most helpless portion of the population and the promise of early repeal given in the matter last year. The fifth arose out of the wording employed in the new Immigration Act in connection with the recognition of Indian marriages, the wording seeming to imply that monogamous marriages celebrated outside South Africa in accordance with Hindu or Mahomedan rites would be recognised as valid by the Union Government but not if they were similarly celebrated in South Africa itself. The position in this matter since the demand was put forward has been further aggravated by the recent decision of the Supreme Court of Natal that marriages celebrated in accordance with Hindu and Mahomedan rites, though single or monogamous in themselves, could not be recognised in Law as monogamous, because the rites were not confined solely to monogamous marriages. Under this decision no Hindu or Mahomedan wife can be legally recognised as wife in South Africa and no married Hindu or Mahomedan lady can therefore, enter South Africa legally or if she is already there can leave South Africa temporarily and return. This is as recognised by the European organs of public opinion in South Africa themselves, an intolerable position and has infuriated the Indian community in South Africa, both men and women, as nothing else could have infuriated them. The last demand is of a general character, but unless it is granted in essence there is no doubt that the lot of the Indian community in all Provinces of South Africa will grow steadily more and more deplorable. There can be no matter of doubt that the new struggle will be the fiercest that the Indian community in South Africa has so far had to wage. The Government are in no mood to listen to passive resisters, and the bulk of the European community, who are bitterly hostile, will urge the Government to crush the spirit of the Indian community once for all. But Mr. Gandhi has not entered on the struggle without the fullest realisation of the situation, and certainly he has not entered on it in a light-hearted spirit. He knows that

odds this time are tremendously against Indians. The Government will not yield if they can help it. The Imperial Government will be reluctant to exert any further pressure in favour of passive resisters and among the Indians themselves, already exhausted by the last struggle, weakened persons will be found shrinking from the sacrifices involved and advocating submission, but Mr. Gandhi is full of courage and, what is more, he is full of hope. He has planned his campaign carefully and whether he succeeds or fails, he will fight like a hero to the end. The struggle, this time, as I have already pointed out, is not confined to one Province but extends to the whole of South Africa and not only men but women are taking part in it. From what I have seen of Mr. Gandhi's hold over our countrymen in South Africa, I have no doubt in my mind that thousands will be glad to suffer under his banner and his spirit will inspire them all. The last telegram which I had from him two days ago speaks in enthusiastic terms of the bravery and heroism which women who are taking part in the struggle are showing. They are courting arrest. They put up with ill-treatment and even assaults without complaint and they are spreading the movement in all directions with wonderful zeal. The horrors of jail-life in South Africa with Kaffir warders devoid of all notions of humanity for Indian prisoners do not deter them, and they are lifting the whole struggle to a plane which the last struggle even at its highest did not reach. Already two thousand families of indentured and ex-indentured men have joined the struggle. They are suspending work in collieries and on fields, and unless the Government guarantee the repeal of the £3 tax next Session, the industries which depend on Indian labour will soon be paralysed and the Government will have a big job on their hands.

#### SUPPORT FOR THE MOVEMENT.

Mr. Gandhi also wires to say that a growing minority of the English is showing itself increasingly favourable to Indian demands and that the leaders of the Unionist Party, who did so much for us last Session, will, it is expected, take up the Indian case with vigour when Parliament re-assembles, but even if no assistance comes from any quarter, if the bulk of passive resisters retire from the struggle after enduring hardships for some time, and if the prospect is altogether dark, instead of being hopeful, even then one hundred men and forty women are determined to perish in the struggle, if need be, rather than withdraw from it without achieving their object. They think that if everything else failed, this supreme sacrifice on their part is necessary to prevent the Indian community in South Africa from being crushed out of existence altogether. Do not let us be discouraged by a telegram which appeared the other day in papers about some Indians in Durban opposing this passive resistance movement and wanting to submit quietly to the indignities of the new position. When we think of the suffering which will have to be endured and the ruin that may have to be faced, is it any wonder, knowing ourselves as we do, that some Indians in South Africa should shrink from the ordeal? Is it no

a wonder rather that so many men and women, Hindus, Mahomedans and Parsces, well-to-do and poor, should come forward to undergo sacrifice?

#### INDIA'S DUTY.

And now one word about the duty which we owe to these brave brothers and sisters who are struggling and suffering for the honour of India in a distant land. We must first raise funds to support the families of the passive resisters in aid of the struggle generally. It is difficult to frame an estimate when the movement is assuming such proportions, but if I may venture to suggest a figure, I think that for the next four or five months, that is till the Union Parliament meets again, we shall have to send about £2,000 a month on an average. The sum is certainly not large when the extent of this country, the feeling that the question has roused here and the sacrifices which our brethren in South Africa are prepared to make, are taken into consideration, and I not only hope but feel confident that that this amount will be forthcoming. Funds will now be started in different Provinces, but I think it will be desirable that all remittances should be made from one centre in India, and I would respectfully suggest Bombay as the most suitable centre. But though we may raise this money the whole of our duty in the matter will not be discharged by merely raising it.

#### A POLICY OF REPRISALS.

We must hold meetings throughout the country in large towns and in small towns and even in important villages to address our protest to the Imperial Government against the manner in which we are being treated in South Africa. It will not do for the Imperial Government to express their helplessness in the matter. They have made themselves responsible for our welfare. We have no other Government to look to, and they must protect our interests and our self-respect by every means in their power. Finally we must appeal now to the Government of India to take up the question of retaliation against the Union of South Africa. It may be said that there is not much scope for retaliation. That is true to a certain extent, but whatever is possible must be done. The Union Government have notified in a lofty spirit that the Government of India should not interfere in its affairs. After that we should not urge the Government of our country to send any official deputation to South Africa to negotiate a settlement, but the Government must now consider the desirability of declaring that the public services of India will no more be open to Europeans from South Africa. Then there is South African coal, which since last year the Railway Companies have been permitted to use by the Secretary of State. I feel strongly that in view of what South Africa is doing to us, this permission must be withdrawn, for its continuance will be nothing less than an outrage to our sentiment. There are other directions also in which something may be done by way of retaliation, but I will not go into them on this

occasion. If we do all these things, we shall have done whatever is possible to us in the circumstances. And now one word of warning I would like to utter to ourselves before I close. The agitation on this question is bound to stir up racial feelings and, though they will in the first instance be directed to the European community of South Africa, they may not, unless we are very careful, remain confined to that community, and that would be a grave misfortune for any such result may alienate the Government of India and the Secretary of State from us, and we all know that they have done the best they could since this question became acute some years ago to support our cause. I trust therefore, that we shall work in this matter with whole-hearted devotion, coupled with due restraint and a strong sense of responsibility. When we have done that, we shall have done our du'y. The rest we must be content to leave into higher hands than ours.