

INDIANS ABROAD

BULLETIN No. 11

June, 1924

SMUTS-GANDHI AGREEMENT

Printed at the "INDIAN DAILY PRESS" Press and published
by Dr. S. SINGH for the Imperial Indian
Citizenship Association, Bombay.

4124

SOME TRANSVAAL WOMEN

PASSIVE RESISTERS

*Sentenced at Volksrust on the 22nd December 1913 to
Three Months' Imprisonment with Hard Labour.*



Miss Velima Moonsamy, Mrs. Mahabeer, Mrs. Vecrasamy,
Mrs. V. S. Naidoo, Mrs. Moonsamy, Mrs. V. S. Pillay,
Mrs. Moonsamy Moodley.

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INTRODUCTION.

This Bulletin is composed of extracts taken from "Indian Opinion" (published in Durban, Natal), during the year 1914. It was in that year that the settlement, known as the Smuts-Gandhi Settlement, was recalled at the end of June, just a month before the commencement of the great European war. The final steps, which led to the Settlement, were as follows:—Mr. G. K. Gokhale had gone out to South Africa in the year 1912, and had come to a verbal understanding with General Smuts, that the £3 Poll Tax (which caused more Indians back into indenture and was in every way degrading) shall be abolished and that everything should be done to provide just and fair conditions for those domiciled Indians who were remaining in Natal. Mr. Gokhale, on his part, along with Mr. Gandhi, agreed that there should be no opposition to the restriction of immigration into South Africa, so long as the Act did not single out Indians, as a race, for this immigration restriction to the year 1913, the new immigration Bill was brought in and passed without opposition from the side of the Indian Community; but there was no sign whatever of General Smuts either abolishing the £3 Poll Tax, or dealing with other Indian grievances, such as the refusal of Government to recognise the validity of Indian marriages. At last, after repeated efforts to obtain justice, and after the promise made to Mr. Gokhale had been openly denied, Mr. Gandhi launched the passive Resistance struggle, which was immediately taken up by many thousands of Indians, especially in Natal. During the last months of 1913, there were nearly 4,000 Indians in jail, including practically all the leaders and Mr. Gandhi himself. There were also imprisoned many Indian ladies, including Mrs. Gandhi. Then followed certain acts of shooting and violence at Verulan and Mount Edgecombe, in which many Indians were killed and wounded. These acts of violence and bloodshed roused the greatest indignation in India. They also called the world's attention to the Indian struggle in South Africa. Many thousands more, among the Indians, were ready to court imprisonment.

General Smuts was faced at this very time with a syndicalist strike on the mines, on the railways and other services. The peril was one, which threatened the whole South African Union with a revolution. General Smuts saw the coming danger and was eager to settle the Indian struggle, if possible, before the Syndicalist strike began. He released Mr. Gandhi, Mr. Polak, Mr. Kallenbach and other leaders from jail, and tried to get them to agree to a Commission of Enquiry. Mr. Gandhi were perfectly ready to agree to the Commission, on the one condition that the Indian Community should have a voice in the selection of one of the members of the Commission; for during an earlier railway strike this condition had been allowed to the white workers. But this General Smuts refused. It would be a blow to the white man's prestige to allow such things to Indians. Mr. Gandhi and the Indian Community thereupon refused to give evidence before the Commission, to whose personnel they very strongly objected.

At this point, the Passive Resistance struggle was about to begin all over again and it was estimated that at least 20,000 Indian men and women would court arrest. The march into the Transvaal was to begin on January 15. On January 8th General Smuts despatched a telegram to Mr. Gandhi, addressed to Durban, inviting him to come to Pretoria for an in-

terview. Immediately after the arrival of Mr. Gandhi in Pretoria, the syndicalist strike began. Mr. Gandhi, on being asked what his own position was, declared publicly that he would not think of joining the syndicalist strike, even if invited to do so; because the Indian struggle with Government was of quite a different nature and character. The Indians were not to embarrass the Government by using any and every weapon; but only by using the fair and honourable weapon of passive resistance. This declaration was cabled all over the world by Reuter and undoubtedly made a great impression on world public opinion. It also made the steps that led to the Provisional Agreement more easily taken. That agreement was reached on January 21, 1914. Meanwhile the Commission went on sitting. Sir Benjamin Robertson arrived from India to give evidence before it: but all the while the real work of settlement was being done by General Smuts and Mr. Gandhi outside the Commission. The present Government of South Africa, through Mr. Duncan, had now brought forward a new interpretation of the Settlement that was then finally reached at the end of June 1914. They suggest that the vested rights mentioned in it were merely those of individuals and certain township rights in the Transvaal. I have already borne witness in public that, during all the many conversations with General Smuts, leading up to the agreement, in which, I was allowed to take a personal part, there was no doubt whatever that the South African Union Government had agreed to preserve strictly and faithfully all the vested rights of the Indian Community, which were then in existence. It did not merely agree to preserve the personal rights to property of certain individuals, or their rights in certain Transvaal townships, but the vested rights of the whole Indian Community. On that point, there was never left a shadow of a doubt at that time. If there had been the least doubt left, the Passive Resistance Struggle would never have been concluded so soon.

It is of the utmost importance, that the public both in India and in England should have the documents before them in the coming final debate over the 'Class Areas Bill.' These documents show this fact definitely and unmistakably. For this reason, the Imperial Indian Citizenship Association has asked me, through its Honorary Secretary, Mr. Jehangir B. Petit, to collect those documents of 1914 and place them before the public in a readable manner. As I have tried to do this, I have felt the inestimable loss, at such a time, of Mr. W. W. Pearson, who accompanied me to South Africa and took his share in every part of the last phase of the struggle. His death, last September, by a railway accident in Italy, has been a irreparable loss, not only to India itself, but also to Indians in South Africa.

C. F. ANDREWS

JUHU, ANDHERI,

14th May 1924.