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Race, Empire, and Citizenship: Sarojini Naidu’s 1924 Visit to South Africa

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Abstract

This paper focuses on Sarojini Naidu’s noteworthy 1924 visit to South Africa. She was the first high profile Indian to visit after the departure of Mohandas K. Gandhi in 1914. Her visit also highlighted that Indian political figures’ visits to colonies often perpetuated a reliance on India for political redress. Naidu stood out because, even though she came as Gandhi’s emissary, she went well beyond him in calling for a broad-based black alliance against white minority rule. She also emphasised that Indians in South Africa were national citizens and owed their allegiance to their adopted home. By emphasising the ‘South Africanness’ of Indians, she put paid to Gandhi’s idea of imperial citizenship transcending the nation-state. Moreover, she was highly critical of Empire. The question is whether Naidu’s visit should be understood within a particular historical trajectory or as the individual actions of an exceptional woman, feminist, and leader. This paper argues that she reflected changes in attitudes towards race in the colonies as well as feelings in India, including Gandhi’s, of disillusionment with Empire. Rather than seeing Naidu’s position as that of an outstanding individual, it should be contextualised within a specific historical conjuncture.

Key words: Sarojini Naidu; Mohandas K. Gandhi; identity; India; colony; swaraj

By the turn of the twentieth century there were over 100,000 Indians in South Africa. The overwhelming majority had come as indentured workers who were part of the international circulation of labour from India following the end of slavery in the 1830s, while a small number of free migrants (‘passengers’\(^1\)) followed in their wake. Around two-thirds of the 152,184 Indians who arrived in Natal as indentured labourers did not return to India, while many of those who returned ‘home’ made their way back to Natal, some as passenger migrants and others by re-indenturing.\(^2\) Non-indentured passenger migration was circular

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1. In the historiography the term ‘passenger’ has generally come to be associated with traders. However, as used here, the term merely refers to those Indians who came outside of any official arrangements between the governments of India and South Africa.

as most migrants maintained some form of interaction with their ancestral homes through remittances, return visits, marriage, and even investment in home villages in the form of schools, temples, and mosques. Levitt and Schiller have termed this religious, economic, social, and political linking of migrants and non-migrants across national borders ‘transnationalism’. But as Bhana and Vahed point out, even while migrants ‘were strongly tied to their ancestral land, they also engaged in making a new home for themselves and adapted in various ways as South Africa became their home’. They were to discover, however, that in the emerging racial order in South Africa, they would not be accepted as citizens.

South African society was constituted through colonisation and migration, and race became a basis for citizen rights and obligations. It determined legal and political rights, access to education and the labour market, health and welfare provision, and land ownership. These race-based exclusionary policies rejected Indians as citizens even though they constituted less than 3% of the population. For Indians, one of the key considerations was whether they should make their political struggle part of the broader black struggle for citizenship rights or rely on India to intervene on their behalf. For a long time, they saw South Africa as part of the British Empire, and sought to use the framework of imperial citizenship, as well as nationalist politics in India, to help them in their cause in South Africa. This kept their struggles separate from black organisations in South Africa until the 1940s.

With the exception of Gandhi’s South African period (1893–1914) little has been written about the circulation of political figures who ensured that the Asian subcontinent remained a point of political reference for many South African Indians. This paper focuses on one such visit, that of Sarojini Naidu, whose stormy 1924 visit is important for several reasons. She was the first high profile Indian to visit South Africa following the departure of Gandhi in 1914. Her visit underscored the fact that Indian political figures’ visits to colonies with sizeable diasporic populations perpetuated a reliance on India for political redress. But Naidu stood apart from those who came before her and those who would follow in that although she came as Gandhi’s emissary, she went well beyond him in calling for a broad-based black alliance against white minority rule. She also emphasised that Indians in South Africa were citizens of the country and owed their allegiance to their adopted home rather than India. And she was highly critical of Empire.

The question that Naidu’s visit raises is whether it should be studied as a problem of a historical conjuncture or as the individual actions of an outstanding woman, feminist, and


7. In the peculiar South African context, where the obsession with race remains as strong as ever, the population is divided into black African, white, Coloured, and Asian (Indian). When ‘black’ is used politically, it refers cumulatively to Indians, Africans and Coloureds.
leader. Naidu, an avowed feminist, also had an important influence on key black South African women leaders. That aspect of her visit, and a biographic analysis of Sarojini Naidu, has been analysed elsewhere and is not covered here. This paper is framed in the context of race, imperial citizenship, and transformations in the political stance of Indians in South Africa vis-a-vis the black majority.

Gandhi and ‘imperial citizenship’

Just over 150,000 indentured Indians arrived in Natal between 1860 and 1911. They were followed by passenger migrants from the 1870s. Most of the indentured chose to remain in Natal after serving their contracts. The story of indenture and its struggles was to be linked to the arrival in 1893 of English qualified lawyer Mohandas K. Gandhi at the behest of an Indian merchant who was involved in a private litigation. Gandhi’s arrival marked a period in which British settler hostility was aroused by non-indentured Indians, especially the urban and propertied classes, who were seen to upset ideologies of a ‘natural’ hierarchy of labour exploitation by white planters of Africans and indentured Indians. Natal was granted self-government in 1893 with a constitution that had few safeguards for Africans and Indians. Several laws were passed from 1896 to restrict Indian immigration, franchise and trading rights. This was not done on the basis of race but on grounds of public health, vagrancy, and sanitation. Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain told that 1897 Imperial Conference,

[what I venture to think you [the colonies] have to deal with is the character of the immigration. It is not because a man is of a different colour to ourselves that he is necessarily an undesirable immigrant, but it is because he is dirty, or immoral, or he is a pauper, or he has some other objection.

Citizenship increasingly came to be based on ‘respectability’, which coincided with race, rather than property ownership.

9. The term ‘passenger Indian’ has led to the stereotype of the wealthy Gujarati trader which, like all stereotypes, fails to capture the complex and diverse composition of this migrant stream from South Asia. According to Dhupelia-Mesthrie, the term ‘requires redefinition. Its simplified definition leads to a divisive understanding of migration from the Indian subcontinent and contributes to the stereotype of the rich Gujarati. The term needs to embrace workers and in terms of regional origins to include not just those from west India and certainly not just Gujarat but also those from other parts of India... [Many] Passenger Indians secured work in menial positions and some remained in these for more than just an initial phase’, (63–64) See U. Dhupelia-Mesthrie, ‘The Passenger Indian as Worker: Indian Immigrants in Cape Town in the Early Twentieth Century’, African Studies, 68, 1 (2009), 111–134.
And yet, despite these race-based exclusions, Gandhi organised a bearer-corps to serve in the South African War of 1899–1902. He was hopeful that participation in the war would ‘bind closer still the different parts of the mighty empire of which we are so proud’. According to Gandhi, ‘what we want in South Africa was not a White man’s country; not a White brotherhood, but an Imperial brotherhood’ in which ‘British subjects of all nationalities will be allowed . . . to remain in harmony and peace’. Indian nationalist teleology, like most nationalist teleologies, has tended to expunge those moments of the past that do not fit within the grand narrative of nation that has become dominant in the post-colonial period. One such moment was the rise of a moderate nationalism in late colonial India. Gandhi, until he was at least 50 years old, believed in imperial citizenship, rather than Indian nationalism, as the way for Indians to acquire political rights within the framework of a British Empire, an Empire that he often described as benevolent. Gandhi was of the opinion that the status of Indians as British subjects and India’s position within the British Empire gave Indians leverage in South Africa. His aspiration to a form of imperial citizenship was shared by many of India’s Western educated elite. Indians elsewhere in the Empire also sought to transform their position as ‘subjects’ on the basis of race and class to ‘citizens’ on the basis of their imperial connections. Surendranath Banerjea, who founded the first avowed nationalist organisation in British India, the Calcutta-based Indian National Association in 1876, wrote in 1893:

We are not Englishmen or men of English race or extraction, but we are British subjects, the citizens of a great and free empire; we live under the protecting shadows of one of the noblest constitutions the world has ever seen. The rights of the Englishmen are ours, their privileges are ours, their constitution is ours. But we are excluded from them.  

A memorandum from the Canadian-based Hindu Friends Society to the British government in 1911 asked:

Does imperialism mean Canada for the Empire, Australia for the Empire, Indian for the Empire, or can there be two definitions for subjects for one and the same Empire? If there is but one recognized definition under the flag over which the sun is supposed to never set, then it is for us to see that no injustice shall minimize the rights or privileges of that citizenship, whether the holder is black or white.

Claims by Indian migrants for formal equality challenged the different definitions of ‘subjects’ within the same Empire. Such demands were ignored by the colonial power. Race-based exclusion in white settler colonies was in part shaped by global developments such as the fear of the ‘yellow peril’, especially the rise of Japan, which fostered concerns

13. Natal Archives Repository (NA), Colonial Secretary’s Office (CSO), vol. 1632, 9294/1899, Gandhi to Colonial Secretary, 19 October 1899.
16. In Banerjea, Becoming Imperial Citizens, 1.
17. Ibid.
about anti-colonial activity within the Empire, and the movement of Indian labour to the colonies and the potential consequences of that process.\textsuperscript{18} As Radhika Mohanram has argued persuasively, ‘whiteness’ and ‘Britishness’ became cognate during this period,\textsuperscript{19} with the result was that exclusionary immigration legislation was adopted to create an imperial citizenship based on homogeneous (white settler) societies\textsuperscript{20} such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and, later, Kenya.

Gandhi was the public face of the Indian demand for citizenship in South Africa. He set the trend in articulating a politics that linked South African Indian struggles to the British Empire and Indian nationalist politics. He formed the trader-dominated Natal Indian Congress (NIC) on 22 August 1894, which was modelled on the Indian National Congress (INC), and he regularly sought out the help of prominent Indian figures. He visited India in 1896 and published the Green Pamphlet which outlined anti-Indian discrimination in South Africa. Thus when anti-Indian legislation was being debated in Natal, the Calcutta-based British Indian Association issued a statement that reflected the class basis of the NIC:

\begin{quote}
The Indians protest against their disenfranchisement, not because they are ambitious of acquiring political power […] or because they want to increase the Indian vote, but simply because, being educated and intelligent men, possessing both wealth and stake in the country, they keenly feel the ignominy of disenfranchisement.\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

Indians did not have the vote in India, and they were protesting against ‘their disenfranchisement as citizens, understood along universal lines of a liberal citizenship’.\textsuperscript{22} Gandhi appeared before the INC at regular intervals; he volunteered to serve in an Indian Ambulance Bearer Corps during the South African War (1899–1902) and the Bambatha uprising of 1906; he sent many appeals to Indian members of Parliament, such as Dadabhai Naoroji and Mancherjee Bhownaggree, and he went to London in 1906 and 1909 to put the case of South African Indians before Whitehall.\textsuperscript{23} Although the British government did not interfere in the internal affairs of its South African colonies, Gandhi continued to appeal to the metropole on the basis of liberal universalism, the idea ‘that subjects of the Crown were guaranteed rights, irrespective of racial or ethnic distinctions’.\textsuperscript{24} Gandhi wrote in ‘My Experiments with Truth’ that he considered racial prejudice in South Africa an aberration:

\begin{quote}
The colour prejudice that I saw in South Africa was, I thought, quite contrary to British traditions, and I believed that it was only temporary and local. I therefore vied with Englishmen in loyalty to
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{18} Gorman, ‘Wider and Wider Still?’, para. 6.
\textsuperscript{19} Radhika Mohanram’s \textit{Imperial White: Race, Diaspora, and the British Empire} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
\textsuperscript{20} Gorman, ‘Wider and Wider Still?, para. 6.
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Ibid.}, 149.
\textsuperscript{24} Banerjee, \textit{Becoming Imperial Citizens}, 83.
the throne. With careful perseverance I learnt the tune of the “national anthem” and joined in singing whenever it was sung. Whenever there was an occasion for the expression of loyalty without fuss or ostentation, I readily took part in it.  

Before he resorted to mass deployment, Gandhi invited Indian statesman and prominent leader of the INC and member of the Viceroy’s Executive Council, Gopal K. Gokhale, to help resolve some of the issues facing Indians. Gandhi described Gokhale as his mentor. Gokhale was leader of the moderate faction of Congress, a faction whose views were represented in the English language Times of India, whereas the thrust of vernacular papers like Bande Mataram was revolutionary and faced British censure. English language newspapers had English editors and generally supported Empire. Gandhi used these papers to publicise the status of Indians in South Africa.

In a speech in 1910, ‘Three Questions of Vital Importance’, Gokhale argued that British rule was necessary for the evolution of India, and of his desire for equal ‘rights’ to be given to Indians under the British Crown, which was similar to what Gandhi was demanding for Indians in South Africa. Gokhale said that he had supported a Bill imposing restrictions on press freedom in India because he believed that ‘something deeper and even more fundamental than the liberty of the Press was at stake’. That something was ‘the unquestioned continuance of British rule, with which all our hopes of a peaceful evolution are bound up’. Gokhale added that British rule had to be accompanied by equality and that ‘no single question of our time has evoked more bitter feelings throughout India … than the continued ill treatment of Indians in South Africa’. Gokhale simultaneously argued for Indian rights in South Africa while supporting plans to curb a growing Nationalist press in India that advocated independence from the British.

Joseph Doke’s 1909 book, MK Gandhi: An Indian Patriot in South Africa, portrays Gandhi as a patriot of the Gokhale ilk, a kind that the British wanted to foster, and contained a foreword by Lord Ampthill, who was Governor of Madras from 1904 to 1906 and Viceroy of India in 1906. In the book Gandhi described the severance of relations between Britain and India as ‘a calamity’.

If we are treated as . . . free men, whether in India or elsewhere, the connection between the British people and the people of India can not only be mutually beneficial, but is calculated to be of

26. Gokhale (1866–1915) was one of the founding leaders of the Indian Independence Movement against the British. He was a senior leader of the Indian National Congress. While promoting independence Gokhale believed strongly in the avoidance of violence and reform within existing government institutions.
enormous advantage to the world religiously, and, therefore, socially and politically. In my opinion, each nation is the complement of each other.\textsuperscript{29}

Gandhi failed in his efforts to lobby the authorities in South Africa, India, and Britain through petitions and between 1906 and 1910 was involved in a passive resistance campaign in the Transvaal against a law requiring Indians there to register. By the end of 1909 only Gandhi and a few loyal supporters were engaged in the ‘movement’ and between 1909 and 1913 resistance constituted mainly of negotiations between Gandhi and the government.\textsuperscript{30} By the time that Gokhale arrived on a three-week tour in October 1912, two years after the Union of South Africa had defined citizenship on the basis of race, Indians had a host of grievances, foremost among which was a £3 poll tax on ex-indentured Indians.\textsuperscript{31}

Gokhale’s visit galvanised Indians. According to one report, ‘some hundreds of Indians were gathered on the quay’ and a Reception Committee headed by Gandhi boarded the vessel to formally welcome him.\textsuperscript{32} Gokhale told the gathering that he would ‘endeavour to state with due restraint and with such regard as may be expected from me in my position in India and with due regard to the interests of the Empire of which we are all members’.\textsuperscript{33} The tactful Gokhale was feted by the government. According to Chada:

On the advice of the wily Smuts, the Union government made Gokhale a state guest, and showered him with flattery and adulation with a view to dulling the edge of his resentment. From the time of his arrival in Cape Town, a private state railroad car was placed at his disposal, and for the whole of the month-long tour red carpets and illuminations greeted him at every stop. Decorations by Indians at the principal railroad stations added to the glitter.\textsuperscript{34}

Gokhale drew large crowds as he mobilised Indians countrywide. He discussed the tax with the Union government and left with the impression that it would be repealed. When Smuts denying giving such an undertaking, Gandhi considered it ethically proper to pursue its repeal and he and his supporters initiated a strike by Indian workers at the coal mines in Northern Natal on 16 October 1913. Soon the strike spread to the coastal sugar estates, railways workers and municipal workers. The violence associated with the strike, coupled with pressure from the British government in India, led to the Smuts-Gandhi Agreement of 1914 which abolished the tax but maintained other restrictions.\textsuperscript{35} At his farewell banquet in

\textsuperscript{30} See Swan, \textit{Gandhi}, 197.
\textsuperscript{31} This included the prohibition on inter-provincial migration, restrictions on the entry of wives, loss of domicile after a three year absence from the Colony, the three pound tax on free Indians which forced large numbers of Indians to re-indenture, and so on.
\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Cape Argus}, 22 October 1912.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Cape Times}, 23 October 1912.
\textsuperscript{34} Y. Chada, \textit{Rediscovering Gandhi} (London: Century 1997), 175.
\textsuperscript{35} See Desai and Vahed, \textit{Inside Indian Indenture}, chs 19 and 20, 371–419 for a discussion of the strike and the settlement. The Agreement facilitated the entry of wives and children of Indians domiciled in South Africa; and made provision for the granting of free passages to India to all Indians who gave up their right to domicile in South Africa. However, Indians were still banned from entering the Orange Free State, only Indians born in South Africa before August 1913 were allowed to enter the Cape, and restrictions against Indian immigration remained.
1914, Gandhi said that passive resistance alone would not have succeeded, and that the help of Lord Hardinge and the Imperial Government was instrumental in achieving the settlement. The British had sent numerous cables to General Botha to take cognizance of the Imperial standpoint.\textsuperscript{36}

Gandhi’s two-decades-long stay in South Africa cannot be flattened into a single narrative without accounting for the evolution in his thoughts and action. The indentured and their status as ‘imperial citizens’ did not figure in his agenda except for the last phase of passive resistance. This was not purely self-interest but due in part to his reading Leo Tolstoï and embracing the dignity of manual labour.\textsuperscript{37} During his South African stay, Gandhi used the Raj to apply political pressure and continued to tie South African Indian politics to India into the 1920s.

Gandhi stated in his autobiography that even though the world was on the eve of war in 1914 he visited England en route to India because Gokhale has asked to see him.\textsuperscript{38} Gokhale’s health was fast deteriorating and he probably wanted to symbolically pass on the ideological torch to his heir apparent. In was in London on 8 August 1914 at a reception given in his honour that Gandhi first met Sarojini Naidu.\textsuperscript{39} Naidu was born in 1879, educated in Hyderabad and Madras in India, and Cambridge in the UK. She first came to prominence at the Bombay session of the INC in 1904, where she was inspired by well-known nationalist leaders such as Pherozeshah Mehta, CY Chintamani, Gokhale, and Ramabai Ranade, a pioneer of the women’s movement in India.\textsuperscript{40} Gokhale had already alerted her to Gandhi as ‘the coming man of Indian politics’.\textsuperscript{41} Gandhi and Naidu would be in the forefront of many political campaigns over the next few decades. Gandhi wrote in \textit{Young India} in 1920 that no praise of Naidu was ‘overdone . . . She has wonderful charm of manner and is tireless in her duties . . . God alone knows from where she gets the strength’.\textsuperscript{42}

British imperial leaders, it seems, had marked Gandhi as moderate enough to take over leadership of the INC. As soon as Gandhi reached Bombay, Gokhale informed him that Governor Lord Willingdon wanted to meet with him. When they met, the Governor told Gandhi ‘to come and see me whenever you propose to take any steps concerning Government’. Gandhi promised to do so because

\begin{quote}
it is my rule, as a satyagrahi, to understand the viewpoint of the party I propose to deal with, and to try to agree with him as far as may be possible. I strictly observed the rule in South Africa and I mean to do the same here.\end{quote}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{36} Golden Number, \textit{Indian Opinion}, 1914, CWOMG vol. 12, 473–478.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Banerjee, \textit{Becoming Imperial Citizens}, ch. 2.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Gandhi, ‘The Stories of My Experiments with Truth’, Part IV, Ch. XXXVII.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Gandhi, \textit{Collected Works}, 12, 523.
\item \textsuperscript{41} E.S. Reddy and M. Sarabhai, ed. and comp., \textit{The Mahatma and the Poetess. Being a Selection of Letters Exchanged between Gandhiji and Sarojini Naidu} (Bangalore: Sarvadoya International Trust, 1998), 11.
\item \textsuperscript{42} Cited in T.A. Baig, \textit{Sarojini Naidu: Portrait of a Patriot} (Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India, 1974), 75.
\end{itemize}
Lord Willingdon assured Gandhi that the British government will ‘not willfully do anything wrong’.

Gandhi replied that faith in the British Empire sustained him.

Many were critical of Gandhi’s faith in Empire. One such figure was Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950), who was associated with the original Swadesh movement and was part of the hardline faction of the INC. He wrote:

> We gain nothing by preaching an unconditional loyalty to the Government... or doing anything which even in appearance strengthens the disposition towards an abject and unmanly tone in politics. Gandhi’s loyalism is not a pattern for India which is not South Africa, and even Gandhi’s loyalism is corrected by passive resistance ... What Gandhi has been attempting in South Africa is to secure for Indians the position of kindly treated serfs – as a stepping-stone to something better ... Our position is different and our aim is different, not to secure a few privileges, but to create a nation of men fit for independence and able to secure and keep it.

By the time that Gandhi returned to India, the hardline faction of the INC had been defeated and talk of independence would only surface again in 1919. The massacre of Jallianwallah Bagh (Amritsar) and British dismantling of the Islamic Caliphate were decisive in changing Gandhi’s attitude to Empire. Gandhi initiated a satyagraha campaign to protest against the Rowlatt Act of 1919 and the Jalian Wallah Bagh massacres. British Prime Minister Lloyd George had promised in January 1918 that the Turkish Caliphate would not be dismantled in the aftermath of World War I, a promise that encouraged many Indian Muslims to enlist on the Allied side. Dismantling of the Caliphate was seen as a ‘betrayal and a sacrilege’. To garner Muslim support Gandhi supported the Khilafat Movement which was launched in September 1919 to save the Ottoman Empire from dismemberment by European powers. Gandhi linked the issue of Indian self-government with the Khilafat demands and became a member of the Central Khilafat Committee. He attended a meeting of India’s Muslim leaders in Delhi in November 1919 where delegates adopted a policy of non-cooperation with British rule. The December 1920 Plenary Session of the INC supported a resolution on swaraj (self-government), with Gandhi making it clear that that India would only stay in the Empire if it ‘agrees to do justice and grant us our rights’. There were two strands in Indian politics, one leaning towards


44. Gandhi, ‘The Stories of My Experiments with Truth’, Part V, Ch. II.


46. On 13 April 1919, thousands of Punjabis gathered in Amritsar’s Jallian wala Bagh public garden, the day of the Sikh Festival ‘Baisakhi fair’, to protest against British rule. General Reginald Dyer, without warning, fired into the crowd, killing 379 people and injuring over 1,526 people.


Empire and the other towards Gandhi. 51 British brutality caused Gandhi to lose faith in the Empire that he had fought for on several occasions. He conceded that millions of Indians came to the conclusion that ‘British domination of India has been on the whole a curse’. According to Gandhi the INC came to the conclusion

that guns should not be feared … The cornerstone of the policy of 1920 was organized national non-violence. The British … could not do otherwise than bow to the inevitable and either retire from the scene, or remain on our terms, that is, as friends to co-operate with us, not as rulers to impose their will upon us. 52

The Gandhian faction of Indian politics identified themselves by wearing a khadi (homespun cotton cloth).

Developments in India had their parallels in South Africa where society was racialised with increasing vigour in the post-World War I period.

**The South African situation**

The First World War broke out shortly after Gandhi’s departure. A mass meeting of Indians in Durban ‘declared its loyalty to the King-Emperor, and its readiness to serve the Crown and to co-operate with the government in defence of the country’. 53 This was in keeping with Gandhi’s approach of Indians’ remaining loyal British subjects when the Empire was threatened. Indian political elites also raised money for the Mayor’s War Fund and around seven hundred Indian volunteers served in East Africa as part of a bearer corps. Instead of redress, the political, economic, and social screws were tightened after the war as anti-Indianism gained momentum. 54

The South African League, which had been formed in 1919 to rally against the ‘Asiatic Menace’, declared that Indians constituted a ‘serious moral, economic and political menace’ and should be repatriated ‘as speedily as possible’ because they caused unemployment and lower living standards among whites. Those who remained should be segregated in reserves and banned from employment in ‘positions of responsibility’. 55 The League’s hostility forced the government to appoint the Asiatic Inquiry Commission of 1920, which found that the ‘Asiatic menace’ was a myth but urged voluntary segregation and firmer immigration laws to appease white settlers. 56 The Durban City Council (DCC) took the cue and began restricting Indian trade and voting rights. From 1922, the DCC was empowered to stop the sale of municipal land to Indians. When a councillor suggested that Indians were in need of land, Councillor H. Kemp responded that there was plenty in India. 57

52. Harijan 4 September 1937, CWOMG vol. LXVI, 104.
55. Letter from Leo Macgregor, Hon. Sec. of the South African League, Durban and Coast Branch, to the Town Clerk, 12 November 1920. NA, 3/DBN, 4/12/1150, 16/327.
57. *Indian Opinion*, 12 September 1924.
As racism began to rear its ugly head, Indians met in Cape Town in January 1919 to form a national organisation. This failed to materialise but a second South African Indian conference was held in August 1919 to discuss the Asiatic Commission. Delegates emphasised the binding link with India and compared their problems with those in India. Failure to act, one delegate said, would be tantamount to letting down the ‘Indian nation’. Another delegate reminded the gathering that

our countrymen... the cream of Indian society, have suffered every indignity rather than submit...
We as Indians here have sympathised with them because blood is thicker than water. The destinies of India and ourselves are one, and we cannot afford to dissociate ourselves from our Motherland.

Measures were taken by Indians in South Africa to strengthen links with their Indian counterparts. In 1919 Swami Bawani Dayal represented South African Indians at the annual meeting of the INC at Amritsar. In 1922 he got the INC to agree that South Africa could send 10 delegates to its annual meetings. The NIC formed a national body in May 1921 to coordinate protest.

Intensification of racial discrimination in South Africa must be viewed in a wider international context. The African-American intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois described South African prime minister Smuts in 1925 as ‘the world’s greatest protagonist of the white race... He expressed bluntly, and yet not without finesse, what a powerful host of white folk believe but do not plainly say in Melbourne, New Orleans, San Francisco, Hong Kong, Berlin and London’. Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points of 1917, the idealistic basis of the League of Nations, created universal optimism that imperialism and racial oppression would soon end. But when the creation of a League of Nations was mooted at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, the Japanese delegation argued for the inclusion of an equality clause to end international racial discrimination. The Americans baulked at this demand because they feared that it would open the door for a repeal of anti-Asian legislation in California. Delegations of the British Dominions from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa ensured the racial equality clause was excluded from the League’s charter.

This was a blow to Black peoples across the globe. Versailles demonstrated, Du Bois remarked, that ‘the “new religion” of whiteness showed no signs of losing its sway’. Black South African doctor, the Edinburgh educated S.M. Molema, wrote in his book The Bantu (1921) that Blacks came to see Western liberalism as

58. The Dharma Vir, 24 January 1919.
59. The Dharma Vir, 22 August 1919.
60. P.N. Agrawal, Bawani Dayal Sanyasi: A Public Worker of South Africa (Etwa, Uttar Pradesh, India: Indian Colonial Association, 1939), 44.
64. Ibid., 308.
hollow promises and egregious tricks ... Its hollowness must have surprised the outside thinking world when after four years of hard struggle side by side ... and victory, the Western world went to Versailles with professions of ... ‘Making the World Free for Democracy’ ... and made a blott ... by making a fine distinction between the East and the West.65

It was during this period that Gandhi’s old adversary General Jan Christian Smuts emerged as an international statesman of note. Smuts was a key figure in drafting a pamphlet, *The League of Nations* which became a bestseller. Wilson’s delegation was so impressed with it that they even mooted for him to become the next British ambassador to the United States.66 Having Australian prime minister William Hughes and the White Australia Policy as the ‘fall guy’ allowed Smuts to ‘play the suave international statesman, all the while certain that the proposal for racial equality – a principle he had opposed throughout his political career – would be defeated’.67 Hughes did not attend the Imperial Conference in London in 1921 where New Zealand, Australia, and Canada were prepared to grant the franchise to Indians but Smuts ‘alone stood out against the policy of granting equal rights to Indian immigrant communities across the Empire’.68 This was not lost on black leaders. In one of her first speeches in South Africa, Sarojini Naidu remarked that at the Imperial conference

> the great and clever General Smuts ... showing the iron hand, tried to persuade the other Dominion Premiers to a like course of action. But the other Premiers, though possessing far less statesmanlike qualities, had refused to comply. They showed more common humanity.69

Smuts was emphatic that the South African political arrangement was not based on ‘a system of equality. The whole basis of our political system rests on inequality and recognising the fundamental differences which exist in the structure of our population’. Shortly before the Imperial Conference of 1923, Smuts made it clear that the binary politics of whiteness drew ‘a clearly marked line you can follow ... There is the coloured line which is in existence today. Right or wrong ...’.70 After meeting with Smuts during her South African tour, Naidu described him as ‘the Strong Man of the Empire’ and wrote to Gandhi on 15 May 1924 that he was

> designed by nature to be among the world’s greatest, but he has dwarfed himself to be a small man in robe of authority in South Africa; it is the tragedy of a man who does not or cannot rise to the full height of his pre-destined spiritual stature.71

68. *Ibid*.
Australia, New Zealand, and Canada hosted V.S. Srinivasa Sastri during his 1923 tour to promote the equality clause but South Africa declined to do so. Instead, Minister of Interior Sir Patrick Duncan introduced the Class Areas Bill in 1923 proposing the compulsory residential and trading segregation of Indians throughout South Africa. Anti-Indianism had its parallel elsewhere in Africa. In Kenya, for example, pressure from white settlers, whose demands were supported by the government of South Africa, led to the creation of a settler dominated legislative council in 1919 which immediately set about restricting Indian immigration and segregating the Highlands for white settlement. Indians in India and Kenya cried foul that this violated the promise of equality in the empire, but to no avail. Race came to determine the status of the commonwealth citizen in Africa. Sarojini Naidu would say during her South African tour that ‘in the Empire colour is still the test of humanity and might is still the standard of right’. The British government’s Devonshire White Paper of July 1923 affirmed white control of the Kenya legislative council. This was a victory for white settlers throughout Africa.

In Tanganyika, around this same time, the government passed legislation to stifle Indian traders by imposing a 4% tax imposed on profits and prohibiting the writing of books of account in Gujarati. Led by the Manilal Desai and the East Africa Indian National Congress (EAINC), all Indian businesses organized a hartal and closed for six weeks in protest until some of their demands were met.

Sarojini Naidu in Africa

This mounting racial pressure brought Sarojini Naidu to Kenya to preside over the 5th Session of the EAINC in Mombasa from 19-21 January 1924. She was travelling on Gandhi’s directive, and had left behind in India a son who was dying, because she regarded the mission as ‘too important’. In her presidential address, Naidu called the White Paper a ‘black document’ and offered the moral support of India but also made it clear that ‘India must help herself first. The future [in East Africa] lies with the Africans’. Naidu’s speech was so direct against white settlers that it is said that they ‘abused and insulted her at every opportunity’. Naidu described anti-Indian feelings among white settlers sarcastically in a letter to Gandhi on 13 February 1924:

I wish I could transport you into the heart of one of the marvellous Highland forest retreats of Kenya – but I was forgetting – in spite of being the Greatest Man in the world you are a miserable Indian and may not have a sanctuary in the Highlands!

73. Ibid., 72–76.
74. Durban, 10 March 1924. In Indian Opinion, 21 March 1924.
77. Ibid., 61.
78. Ibid., 61.
From Kenya, Naidu proceeded to Lourence Marques (Maputo). The *Lourenco Marques Guardian* described her as ‘a cultured, gifted and able woman’. When the newspaper’s reporter warned that in Smuts she would meet a powerful antagonist, she replied that ‘undoubtedly General Smuts is a strong man, but he will be confronted by a woman who is not afraid because she has the support of a united India behind her’. A confidential memorandum from British official H.E. Dickie to the Foreign Office reported that on arrival in Lourenco Marques on 25 February, Naidu was met on the quay by a large concourse of Indians ‘headed by men bearing a large portrait of Mr. Gandhi encircled with garlands’. She delivered a lecture at the Verieta Theatre where she declared that she would ‘do everything in her power to defeat the (Class Areas) legislation … This lady is a woman of considerable ability. The Verieta Theatre, which is a large building, was filled to overflowing’.81

All this time, anti-Indian agitation in South Africa had been mounting. The outcome of the Asiatic Commission was the Class Areas Bill. The draft of the Class Areas Bill was even more restrictive than the 1885 law which had prevented Asians from living in certain areas in the then South African Republic (Transvaal). The new law was intended to force Indians to both trade and live in locations. Speaking in 1899 as a member of the British government, Lord Lansdowne said that the 1885 law was one of the justifications for the South African War. When Natal tried to introduce a similar law in 1908 the Imperial government prohibited it on the grounds that the policy of the British was to prohibit further Asiatic immigration while ‘securing fair and proper treatment for Asians already in the country’.82 The British, in 1924, could not interfere in what was a South African ‘domestic matter’. Indians, both in India and South Africa, were irate that at the 1923 Imperial Conference, while his government was busy drafting the Bill, Smuts stated publicly that Indians enjoyed all rights in South Africa ‘barring the rights to voting, that any white citizens have’.83 Many whites told the Asiatic Commission that the aim of the Bill was to make it impossible for Asians to survive economically so that they would repatriate.84

When the bill was mooted Gandhi issued a statement that Smuts had promised him that no future anti-Indian legislation would be enacted. Gandhi added that his ‘compromise’ with Smuts was reached with the full knowledge and approval of the Indian and Imperial governments and that the proposed Bill would violate their Agreement.85 With the Bill due to be debated in Parliament, P.K. Naidoo, secretary of the Transvaal British Indian Association, who had worked closely with Gandhi during the latter’s South African sojourn, wrote to the INC to send Naidu to South Africa to assist Indians in getting the Bill vetoed.86

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81. National Archives Repository (SAB), Governor General (GG) 912, 15/1193; 15/1198; 15/1201, 28 February 1924.
83. Ibid.
84. The bill was discussed in *The Star* (Johannesburg), 15 March 1924.
Imperial or South African citizenship?

Naidu travelled from Lourenco Marques to Johannesburg by train. Two days after her arrival she told a reporter that she had been ‘pressed by the Indian Congress, India’s unofficial parliament, to come to South Africa and she had to obey’. \(^{87}\) Like Gokhale before her, Naidu drew large audiences but unlike Gokhale, she did not couch her views in diplomatic niceties. She told a reporter for *The Star* shortly after her arrival in Johannesburg that the struggle in South Africa ‘is only one incident in the whole struggle which is taking place’, \(^{88}\) and told a public meeting that the ‘oppressed [black] people of the world are linked together in the brotherhood of suffering and martyrdom’. \(^{89}\) At the Wanderers Hall in Johannesburg on 28 February 1924, Naidu criticised the British who believed they were the ‘masters’ and Indians the ‘menials’. The attitude of the British was, ‘we conquer, we rule, we trample down, we make graveyards where there were gardens, we rule with the iron heel, we flash the sword and daze the eyes of those who would look us in the face’. She warned that if the British think that they have ‘fettered and manacled and trampled’ Indians, ‘this is your illusion. In the end the land goes back from the conquered to the true inheritors’. \(^{90}\)

From Johannesburg, Naidu travelled to Pretoria where she castigated the selfishness of English settlers who had emigrated to South Africa

> because those dear little islands were not big enough. My brothers came though India was big enough, to give food and raiment, as miners and sappers for the white settlers, and now it is said: ‘Go now, thou pig, to thy pigsty’. \(^{91}\)

She called on Indians to ‘fight the unjust position. Don’t accept a position of inferiority.’ In what was construed as a veiled threat by some observers, she hoped that it would not be ‘necessary to remind the people of the lessons of passive resistance’. \(^{92}\) Naidu wanted ‘justice, not concessions. I scorn concessions. I want no favour’. \(^{93}\) She called on the white minority to ‘live on equal terms with Indians [since] the land belongs to neither. It is the land of the black man, of the African. My Indian brothers and the white settlers live here on sufferance’. \(^{94}\) India would leave the Empire ‘if it is necessary for our self-respect and in vindication of the honour of the Indian people’. \(^{95}\) She warned in Pietermaritzburg (7 March) that India was ‘angry’ because

> she could have had her freedom in those days when English widows were weeping for their warriors. But no, we sent our soldiers to die with yours. Their blood mingles in the grave. Now India has something to say, and I have come to say it. In the Empire, if possible or outside the Empire if

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90. *Cape Argus*, 1 March 1924.
91. *Cape Argus*, 1 March 1924.
92. *Ibid*.
93. *Ibid*.
94. *Ibid*.
95. *Ibid*. 

necessary. South Africa shall decide the issue for the Empire. We go out for our self-respect and in vindication of the honour of the Indian people. 96

The Cape Times described Naidu’s remarks as ‘outrageous’ as she gave ‘free rein to her very considerable gifts of oratory . . . If she has come to agitate, she will go back to India having done her countrymen in the Union the greatest possible disservice’. 97 The Mayor of Johannesburg took her remarks as a personal affront and declined an invitation to attend a reception in her honour and declined the Reception Committee’s request to use the Town Hall to host her. In Pretoria too organisers were denied use of the City Hall and had to use the skating rink for Naidu’s public appearance. 98 Even Naidu’s harshest critics conceded, though, that she was a compelling orator. According to the Pretoria News:

As a speaker in the English medium, Mrs Naidu is not only fluent and practiced but eloquent, polished and poetic. It is not hyperbole to say that as a public speaker she has few equals and fewer superiors. Her speech was full of telling allusions and contrasts . . . no effect from language, period, inflection, appeal to logic, reference to history, or the sounding of the human note was missed. 99

The Natal Advertiser described Naidu as ‘gifted beyond the endowment of a great many gifted Europeans’. Her achievements were seen as

a notable triumph for feminism; and her race and colour should not blind women the world over to the spectacle of one of their own sex exerting a power over the public mind far greater than that shown by the vast majority of men engaged in public affairs today. 100

From Johannesburg, Naidu travelled to Durban which she reached on 9 March, having addressed several meetings along the way. Naidu’s speech at the Pietermaritzburg City Hall on 7 March was a raucous event before a capacity crowd, including a large number of whites. The Times of Natal reported that when Naidu took the stage, there was ‘ironical applause from the part of the house occupied by the Europeans’, but it failed to drown out her ‘clear voice’. When Naidu died in March 1949, an obituary in the Indian Opinion recalled that her visit

was met with open hostility by the Europeans. But the more hostility the more she enjoyed . . . The Gallery was filled with European hooligans who had especially come to break up the meeting. When Mrs. Naidu rose to speak pandemonium was let loose. But [her] voice rose above the din and she needed only a few words of reproach when every hooligan quietly slipped away. 101

Around 4000 people welcomed Naidu at the railway station in Durban on 9 March. She was accompanied by 200 supporters who followed her throughout the country.

96. Natal Mercury, 10 March 1924.
97. Editorial, Cape Times, 29 February 1924.
98. The Friend, 29 February 1924.
100. Cited in Indian Opinion 21 March 1924.
According to the *Natal Mercury*, the engine of the train was ‘decorated with foliage, while on the platform there was a guard of honour wearing pink turbans, and representatives of the Indian National Volunteer Guard’. Dressed ‘in flowing blue robes and gold embroidered slippers, carrying a bouquet of carnations and wearing a necklace of the same flowers’, Naidu was taken to Albert Park where she addressed a mass meeting.\(^{102}\) That evening she spoke to the Indian Women’s Association, and implored women to become involved in political issues as their ‘very existence is threatened by this Class Areas Bill’.\(^{103}\)

Naidu drew large crowds to all her meetings in Durban. *Indian Opinion* (21 March 1924) reported that over a five-day period she spoke to a crowd of 10,000 in Albert Park; when she toured Isipingo and Clairwood on 10 March, ‘the rain was pouring down but Indians assembled at these places in their thousands’; 4,000 people, including Deputy Mayor Francois, were present when she visited the Indian Market; she also toured Stanger and Darnall. Naidu was scheduled to be in South Africa for 18 days before proceeding to Turkey and Mesopotamia (Iraq) but delayed her departure to the end of May to lobby against the Bill. During this period she visited many parts of South Africa – Cape Town, Grahamstown, Port Elizabeth, East London, Kimberley, Newcastle, Ladysmith, Estcourt – as well as Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe).

At the City Hall in Durban on 10 March, Naidu was garlanded by Mayoress Mrs W. Gilbert and Deputy-Mayor Francois. Being feted by white dignitaries, she reminded the audience, did not change her status:

> When I am garlanded and given presents during my mission I realise that my people are indivisible whether born in India or being the children and grandchildren of the indentured labourers … Therefore I must be full of sorrow and of shame because I, too, being of my people, soul of their soul, blood of their blood, bone of their bone, am a helot and slave standing before you, though you garland me …\(^{104}\)

Most Indians admired Naidu’s outspokenness. NIC president Amod Bhayat described her as

> essentially a peace maker, but her way of supporting truth is by vigorous and emphatic declamation of all that is untrue and unreal. With her, expediency is no substitute for justice … Our sister is at times held up as the “agitator” but we know her better.\(^{105}\)

Naidu insisted that the government was reneging on its promise of citizenship to Indians. Reflecting the transformation in the thinking of Indian elites, and in Gandhi’s thinking as well, the pursuit of Imperial Citizenship had been abandoned. Natal had requested ‘cheap, honest, and good labour’, she pointed out. The ‘highest virtue in the eyes of their employers was not their simplicity or loyalty, but their cheapness’ and it was for this reason

\(^{102}\) *Natal Mercury*, 10 March 1924.

\(^{103}\) Naidu’s speech was summarised in the local press. The *Natal Mercury* reported that she had asked the women what they would be prepared to do ‘to be free; to get freedom; to get equal political status, and the respect of all other communities for the Indian community’ (*Natal Mercury*, 10 March 1924).

\(^{104}\) *Indian Opinion*, 21 March 1924.

\(^{105}\) City Hall, 10 March 1924. Cited in *Indian Opinion* 21 March 1924.
that settlers considered it ‘very desirable that these people who could live on the smell of an oil rag should be induced to stay in this country’. Naidu reiterated at the City Hall in Durban on 10 March that indentured Indians had been brought to Natal with promises, with pledges, and with hopes to come and serve the white man in this country [and] after a certain period live as a free man in this land with a gift of land and freedom to live like the citizens of the country.

So, she asked, ‘what was the reason to turn the Indian out of his own country?’ She was categorical that after ‘two or three generations we are citizens of South Africa. It is our land, our country ... as much as the land of our friend, the Native, also of the Englishman and the Dutchman.’

Naidu described the Bill as ‘a measure of self-defence. It is largely an economic question. It is a competition for bread ... race arrogance and race ignorance’. Descendants of the indentured were part of the fabric of South African society. ‘They even speak what English they know with a colonial accent’, she said. But since ‘the economic situation has grown more severe, you call them “coolies”’. She respected the right of whites not to be forced to live ‘on the smell of an oil rag’, adding sarcastically that whites could not live ‘on the smell of roast beef; they must eat it’. It was not the fault of Indians that whites ‘measured standards of civilisation by the things which made them dependent on asparagus, forks and knives and spoons?’

We cannot do without tables and chairs and spoons, but this man uses his fingers; he lives on banana leaves and therefore he is a menace to us. These people do not wear shoes and stockings in their homes and they have no chairs and furniture; they are a menace to us...

Indentured labourers had no home ‘excepting here. Their only hope is here, their only breathing space lies here and not across the seas’. She advised Indians not to return to India as their grandparents had been ‘lured to Natal by all sorts of tales’. Indians had as much ‘right to live in this country as General Smuts and General Hertzog’. She had told Smuts to his face that he should leave his ‘little prejudices in the rag-bag’. Addressing a packed Durban City Hall on 9 March 1924 Naidu reiterated the message that Smuts had promised Gandhi that the South African government would ‘treat the Indians fairly and with justice and any vested right shall not be challenged or threatened’. Instead, Gandhi’s departure was followed by ‘legislation after legislation in Natal under the pressure of Natal voters...’

107. *Indian Opinion*, 21 March 1924.
112. *Indian Opinion*, 21 March 1924.
114. *Indian Opinion*, 21 March 1924.
Naidu’s message to Indians was that they were South African citizens and should forge strong links with the black majority. ‘Do not turn your eyes to India. You are nearer to the black man who looks to you more trustingly ... You are citizens of an Africa which can never be only white’.115 Her message was that Indians should be ‘true to Africa. You are citizens of South Africa ... make a splendid contribution to the culture and the character-building and the glory of that country that has given you bread’.116 She implored Indians to spend their income in South Africa in order to ‘build the country in which they live. They must learn to build up a colonial tradition’.117 This did not mean that India would turn its back on them:

says India, if one hair of your head is touched, I, your mother will remember that citizens of South Africa though you may be, you are still my children, and I will come to your rescue.118

Naidu told a meeting of Indian women in Durban that they ‘owe a duty to South Africa. Your husbands’ earn their livelihoods here, and your fathers are buried here. You cannot remain a debtor and prosper’.119 She urged women to get involved in the political struggle to help establish ‘once and for all time our rights in this country that belongs neither to the white man nor to the brown man but to the black man, who has never been treated rightly?’” She called on Indian women to examine their attitude towards Africans for ‘if you have not been giving justice you cannot expect to receive justice’.120 At another meeting she warned Indians to treat their fellow South Africans with respect: ‘If I say I am Indian as well as a citizen of South Africa then I must say, “I love every other community in this country as much as I love myself”’.121

Non-European unity

Naidu pursued the question of joint black struggle in Cape Town (18 March) when she told the large mainly African and Coloured audience at the City Hall that their presence ‘assured me ... that in the struggle of justice you are with me’.122 Reflecting the outcome of the Imperial Conference of the previous year, and Smuts’ views on the race question, she added that ‘the oppressed [black] people of the world are linked together in the brotherhood of suffering and martyrdom’.123 Naidu was hosted by the Universal Negro Improvement Association at the National Theatre in Cape Town on 30 March. The Association, a creation of Marcus Garvey, gave her

115. Ibid.
117. Interview with the Johannesburg Star. Cited in Indian Opinion, 21 March 1924.
118. Indian Opinion, 21 March 1924.
119. Cited in Indian Opinion, 21 March 1924.
120. Durban, 9 March 1924. Natal Mercury, 10 March 1924.
121. Albert Park, 9 March, Indian Opinion, 21 March 1924.
122. Cited in Indian Opinion, 28 March 1924.
a hearty welcome . . . knowing that whatever measure of success may be achieved through your indefatigable efforts will not only redound to the amelioration of the sufferings of the Indian community, but will also improve the status of the black population of the subcontinent. 124

According to one newspaper report, ‘long before 3 o’clock, the time fixed to commence, large crowds besieged the closed doors’. 125 She was escorted to the stage by the Association’s president W.O. Jackson ‘amidst thundering cheering and clapping of hands. Mrs Sarojini gave a very forceful and masterful exposition’. Naidu said that it was not her intention to attend to Indian grievances only:

From the time I set foot on the shores of Africa and saw the conditions of the natives I felt I owed a duty not to my people alone but to the native people of Africa. Everywhere I have been I have addressed large gatherings of natives. In East Africa the natives were so enthused over the message I gave them that they called me “Mama Afrika”! and everywhere I would go they would shout “Mama, come and speak to us”. 126

Naidu called on black people not to be ‘ashamed of your black skin.’ Black was emblematic of ebony, ‘that wood preferred over all other wood’. 127 She reminded the audience that an African from Ethiopia had been chosen by the Prophet Muhammad to call Muslims to prayer. Jesus, she said, was Asian, not European. Africans had a proud history and should not try to emulate Europeans. If black people took pride in their colour, and did not ‘try to reach the outskirts of the white man, your black skin will one day be your Magna Carta in the republic of liberty’. 128

Naidu wrote to Gandhi on 15 May 1924 that she had given off her best despite ‘a prejudiced press and ignorant legislators’. She was of the opinion that ‘African races and even the difficult “Coloured” people have been moved to enthusiasm and indignation, and a sense of kinship and community of suffering and destiny’. Whites, she wrote, resented her expression that South Africa was ‘a University of oppression’. ‘Yet’, she went on, ‘it is a “University of oppression” to discipline and perfect the spirit of the non-European people’. 129

The Class Areas Bill

Naidu’s primary purpose in coming to South Africa was to intervene in the debates around the Class Areas Bill. She was in Cape Town for this very purpose. She left Durban in her special train on 15 March accompanied by the likes of NIC secretary Albert Christopher, tour organiser P.K. Naidoo of the Transvaal British Indian Association, V.S.C. Pather, secretary of the SAIC at whose Beatrice Street home in Durban Naidu had

125. The Negro World, 17 May 1924.
126. The Negro World, 17 May 1924.
128. The Negro World, 17 May 1924.
stayed, and A.M. Jivanjee of Kenya who had accompanied her to South Africa. Jivanjee’s presence underscores the diasporic links among Indians. On 16 March Naidu met with Patrick Duncan, the Minister of the Interior, in Cape Town and insisted that the Bill would be a breach of the Agreement and would be akin to ‘committing the murder of the spirit of the Indian people’. She told Reuters’ that Smuts’ pledges to Gandhi and Gokhale were not being respected. India, she added, ‘would not allow herself to be humiliated by the Dominions subjecting her children to the differential treatment based on racial consideration’. Gandhi’s cable to Sarojini Naidu on 16 March 1924 described the Bill as a poor recompense for the local Indians’ exemplary self-restraint throughout the campaign against them . . . Remind the Union government of the compact of 1914. Acceptance of the Class Areas Bill is tantamount to political and civil suicide.

Naidu stated that unwritten pledges should be sacred with ‘honourable men’ and asked to address the Cabinet. Duncan denied that the Bill violated alleged promises made by Smuts.

Naidu was present in parliament for the first reading of the Bill on 17 March. Indian Opinion reported that her presence ‘synchronized with the descent of the Class Areas Bill to seventh place on the Order whereas on Friday it stood first for Monday’. On 18 March Naidu addressed the South African parliament. She attributed the ‘present difficulties’ to ‘misconception and a needless fear of the unknown’, and mooted a round-table conference to resolve these differences. A resolution to this effect would be passed at an Emergency Conference of the SAIC from 21 to 25 April 1924. P.R. Pather, general secretary of the SAIC, cabled Gandhi on 23 March to express his organisation’s confidence in Naidu who ‘has made deep impression and won many hearts. Mrs. Naidu deferred leaving South Africa owing great demand on her in interest of the cause’. When Naidu spoke at the Cape Town City Hall on the evening of 18 March, prominent local leaders such as liberal Advocate Morris Alexander, who was a city councillor at the time, five MPs, the mayor, and Dr Abdullah Abdurahman of the APO. In what was described as ‘an eloquent speech’ she said that she did not want a ‘settlement, but justice . . . The brotherhood of those who suffered was immutable’.  

130. Cape Times, 17 March 1924. Jivanjee (1856–1936), a prominent merchant in Kenya and founding member of the East African Indian National Congress and the newspaper East African Standard, stayed in Natal until the end of March. Many private and public functions were held in his honour by local merchants and the NIC gave him an official farewell (Indian Opinion, 4 April 1924).
131. Indian Opinion, 21 March 1924.
133. Indian Opinion, 21 March 1924.
135. Ibid.
136. Ibid.
137. Ibid.
139. Ibid.
Naidu attended the second reading of the Bill on 1 April with Dr Abdurrahman and other black politicians and her presence, according to Indian Opinion, seemed to have made a difference.\textsuperscript{140} When the Bill was eventually debated on 2 April Duncan said that its aim was to ‘remove the evil which comes from racial and social competition’. Duncan ignored the fact that most Indians were born in South Africa and warned that his government would not be ‘deterred by any threats of resistance in South Africa, or of political action outside South Africa’.\textsuperscript{141} In the ensuing debate, Colonel Cresswell of the Labour Party and member for Stamford Hill, Durban, felt that the Bill did not go far enough. He called on the government to ‘deal with the root causes rather than eyewash the problem. The maxim of big business was to get labour as cheaply as possible irrespective of how it lived, and this was destroying “white” civilisation’. Cresswell demanded ‘class legislation in the extreme’ because the Bill would afford protection to white traders but not the white population as a whole.\textsuperscript{142}

Sir Abe Bailey described Duncan’s speech as so ‘apologetic’ that he expected him to be garlanded by the Indian community. Whites were adamant that the ‘Asiatic should go’ and he would fight the ‘Asiatic menace’ to the death. He felt that government policy placed a razor in Indian hands to cut white throats and the only solution was compulsory repatriation. He described the visit of the ‘missionary’, Sarojini Naidu, as ‘dangerous to a degree and it would take years to overcome the effect of the doctrines which had been preached during the last few weeks’.\textsuperscript{143} All this became academic as the Bill was put on hold when Smuts’ South African Party (SAP) lost the Wakkerstroom by-election in April 1924. Its majority in the House of Assembly was reduced to eight and Smuts announced a general election for June 1924. His government was easily unseated.

The SAIC held its fourth session in Durban from 21 to 25 April 1924 under the presidency of Sarojini Naidu. Amongst the resolutions passed was that anti-Indian hostility was against ‘all the accepted principles of British fairplay’.\textsuperscript{144} The congress protested Smuts’ declaration at the Conference of the Premiers that he could not accept the principle of equal rights of British citizenship ‘in the teeth of and opposition to the unanimous acceptance of that principle by all other Dominions…’. The conference resolved to ask the INC to open an overseas department ‘for the benefit of Indians abroad’ and that Naidu be asked to do whatever is possible to establish a Ministry for Overseas Indians. The delegates adopted Naidu’s suggestion of a round table conference between the Indian and South African governments and representative of the SAIC to resolve the Indian question.\textsuperscript{145}

\textsuperscript{140} Indian Opinion, 4 April 1924; 11 April 1924. Mrinalini Sarabhai (Editor) and ES Reddy (Compiler), The Mahatma and The Poetess: A selection of letters exchanged between Gandhiji and Sarojini Naidu (Mumbai: Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, 1998), http://www.mkgandhi.org/Selected%20Letters/Sarojini/index.htm accessed at various time during March–April 2011.

\textsuperscript{141} Reported in Indian Opinion, 11 April 1924.

\textsuperscript{142} Indian Opinion, 11 April 1924.

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{144} Indian Opinion, 2 May 1924.

\textsuperscript{145} Published in Indian Opinion, 2 May 1924.
Conclusion

Sarojini Naidu made a huge impression on both white and black South Africans during her South African visit. While she was in South Africa, Gandhi told a reporter for *The Hindu* (17 April 1924) that he was

> convinced that her presence in South Africa has done much good to our countrymen there. She has undoubtedly given them courage and hope . . . It was not to be expected that she would produce any permanent effect upon the European opinion. That can only be produced by the exemplary conduct of the resident Indians and their capacity for united action.146

Wishing her ‘God Speed’ on her departure on 25 May 1924, an editorial in the *Indian Opinion* stated that in Naidu South African Indians saw ‘the shadow of our Motherland. When we see her we feel that Old Motherland has not forgotten her children who have left their own home and gone astray’.147 Gandhi wrote in *Young India* on 17 July 1924 that Naidu ‘has been veritable angel of peace in East Africa and South Africa’.

For many whites, on the other hand, Naidu’s presence was an unnecessary intrusion. An editorial in the *Natal Mercury* suggested that ‘wealthy Indians from India who, out of spite against the British Raj, are financing from India the agitation against the Class Areas Bill’.148 Some whites also felt that Naidu’s visit had made Indians ‘rebellious’. The *Natal Advertiser* insisted that it had led to ‘a resurgence of aggressiveness in the Asiatic temper and studied provocativeness in the attitude of many of these people towards the European community around them’. The newspaper cited the example of a jeweller who, when stopped by a policeman for driving recklessly, ‘used obscene language and threatened to shoot the officer’.149 In another incident an Indian driver kicked a constable who tried to arrest him. The drivers were fined three and four pounds respectively. These low fines, according to the editor,

> will further allow Indians to resist and treat with contempt if not violence white officers of the borough . . . Many an Asiatic today would consider the gesture of defiance cheap – remarkably cheap – at the price. There is not too much white prestige left that we can jeopardise the remainder. How the prestige of white authorities in troubled times like this is going to be maintained in face of this judicial attitude towards law-breaking by wealthy non-Europeans it is impossible to say.150

In her farewell speech at the Durban Town Hall on 22 May 1924, Sarojini Naidu reiterated that she had felt at home in Africa, a land ‘so full of possibilities, so impregnated with prophecies, so teeming with the manifold destinies of manifold people’,151 and emphasised the connection between ‘Mother India’ and ‘Mother Africa’: ‘My body goes back to India but that part of me that belongs to you remains with you your inalienable gift and possession’.152

147. *Indian Opinion*, 23 May 1924.
Inspired by Naidu’s visit, Dr Abdullah Abdurahman of the African People’s Organisation (APO) formed a consultative committee consisting of representatives from the Cape Indian Council, the APO, and the Industrial and Commercial Union (ICU) to achieve closer cooperation. When C.F. Andrews visited South Africa in 1926, he wrote to Gandhi that Naidu’s visit has done one thing for which I bless her every day. She has finally cemented the Native cause with that of the Indian as one cause. She made an immediate impression both on the Native and on the Coloured people … The very publicity which attended her immensely attracted them and added to her popularity; but it was her genuine feeling of love for them that made them look to her almost as to a queen. She also left a healthy spirit behind among the Indian leaders themselves. They are not likely now to separate their case from that of the Natives at all.

Naidu’s views on black unity must be seen in the context of international developments. This included Smuts’ pronouncements at the 1923 Imperial Conference that there was a clear colour line that could not be crossed; the Devonshire White Paper in Kenya; increasing racial discrimination against Indians in Tanganyika; and exclusion of Indians from citizenship in British Dominion policies. The idea of imperial citizenship had run its course. Andrews’ verdict was premature for it would only be in the late 1930s that non-racial political alliances began to take shape with the formation of the Non-European Unity Front. However, his sentiments point to the optimism that Naidu’s visit had generated and the ways in which politicians broadened their outlook, albeit ephemerally.

Sarojini Naidu’s visit to South Africa stands out for several reasons. Unlike other Indian dignitaries who visited South Africa before and after, she spoke her mind freely even though this upset white South Africans. By emphasising the South Africanness of Indians, she put paid to the idea of imperial citizenship. Gandhi’s definition of imperial citizenship went beyond the ambit of a particular nation-state. While it broadened the horizons of what citizenship can entail, and may resonate with many in the contemporary period who consider themselves to be ‘global’ citizens, the global racial order put paid to that idea. It also seems that she took a considerably broader view of political alliances than Gandhi in calling for unity between Indian, African and Coloured people, in imploring Indians to embrace South African citizenship, and in urging them to identify with Africa. The question that arises is why Naidu was so outspoken. Was it just her nature or was it to ‘test the waters’ as to how far the imperial will was willing to go to defend white South Africa? The answer, it would seem, is that she was reflecting the changing feelings in India where Gandhi too had become disillusioned with Empire and was increasingly speaking of swaraj. Rather than seeing Naidu’s position as the viewpoint of an outstanding individual, it should be contextualised within a specific historical conjuncture.

154. Young India, 14 January 1926.