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## G. K. GOKHALE AND MAHATMA GANDHI, A UNIQUE RELATIONSHIP

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### Abstract

It is perhaps the biggest mystery of modern Indian history as to how the two famous personalities of the Indian national movement—Gokhale and Gandhi with diverse family background, upbringing, training and in temperament were in close association for long. It was so in their outer life, in politics, and in modes of approach to public questions and ideology. With regard to the respective merits of petitioning versus protest, modern civilization versus (traditional), allopathic versus naturopathic medicine—yet after his personal visit to South Africa in 1912, Gokhale returned with a very elevated view of his protégé's personality and achievements. He defended Gandhi against his critics at home and abroad. Gandhi's public words of praise for Gokhale were often answered by Gokhale's public words of praise for Gandhi. Gandhi may not have influenced Gokhale's ideas or politics but he was reckoned by Gokhale as a person who had some definite spiritual influence upon himself. Gandhi was three years younger to Gokhale but he always thought of Gokale as his master and political 'guru'. This paper is an attempt to understand the beautiful close association with two giants of the Indian National Movement.

**Keywords:** First Meeting, Closeness at Calcutta, Mutual admiration in South Africa, Servants of India Society succession, memorable and understanding relationship.

It goes without saying that the relationship between Gopal Krishna Gokhale and Mahatma Gandhi is unique in the history of Modern India. They both first met in October 1896, again for a month at Calcutta during the session of the Indian National Congress in 1901 and after, during which time their association was cemented. Even after his return to South Africa in early 1902, Gandhi continued to maintain contact with Gokhale and impressed upon Gokhale to visit South Africa to study the Indian situation first hand. When in 1909 Gandhi wrote his seminal work the Hind Swaraj, Gokhale began to seriously doubt his ideologies and principles. Although he did not make

any public criticism of the book, Gokhale believed that Gandhhi's views will change once he returns to India. In 1912 when he visited South Africa, Gokhale looked upon Gandhi with awe and veneration. Thereafter he anxiously awaited the remarkable leader to return to India and join the Servants of India Society. But Gandhi could not even become an ordinary member of the Society. Despite all this Gandhi continued to consider Gokhale as his mentor and 'political guru'. This article studies the reason behind this.

In 1893 when Gandhi had returned from England after obtaining a degree in Law, a business firm from Porbunder offered to send him to South Africa for a

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year as their lawyer. He seized the opportunity to see a new country and have new experiences. He said: 'I wanted somehow to leave India'. His mission was simply to win a lawsuit, earn some money and perhaps, at long last start his career. No sooner he landed at Durban, Natal in May 1893 than he experienced the worst form of racial discrimination in a train to Pretoria. Many years later Gandhi told the story of the night in the Maritzburg station. Since the first shipload of indentured Indian labourers destined for the sugar and coffee plantations, of Natal reached Durban in 1860, the tide of Indian emigration to South Africa steadily climbed and there were many Indians settled in the four colonies and states of the South African Union. The vast majority of Indians lived in Natal, though there were many in the Cape Colony as well. Most of them were indentured labourers who had opted to settle in South Africa. In 1896 when the Crown Colony of Natal passed legislation imposing a special annual tax of three pounds on every formerly indentured Indian male over sixteen, and every female over thirteen, it created much distress. They were signs of the coming conflict between him and the Government of South Africa. Gandhi became the leader of Indian community in Natal and had successfully established the Natal Indian Congress. He had proved himself an effective leader and an excellent organizer. The lawsuit settled, Gandhi prepared to sail for India in June 1896 to fetch his family. He was then twenty-six years old. He had been commissioned by the Natal Indian Congress as their official representative for India to win the support of Indian leaders and the Indian National Congress for the Indian cause in South Africa.

In 1896 Gandhi returned to Calcutta from where he boarded a train towards to his home state to join his family in Rajkot whom he had not seen for more than three years since 1893. He was preoccupied with printing a pamphlet for an Indian audience on the grievances of their countrymen in South Africa. He printed about ten thousand copies of his pamphlet called *The Grievances of the British Indians in South Africa: an Appeal to the Indian Public*. It was called 'Green' Pamphlet because of its green cover. He wanted the Indian people to understand the problems of Indian settlers in South Africa and provide them with support. About ten thousand copies of the pamphlet were distributed. He set up contact with newspapers and posted them to newspaper editors across the country

with the hope of getting some response and wished to conduct public meetings in India. The Times of India called it 'Mr. Gandhi's able and striking pamphlet' and provided some examples of the ill-treatment to which the Indians were subjected in South Africa.

Gandhi arrived in Bombay and met national leaders such as M.G. Ranade, Badruddin Tyabji, Pheroze Shah Mehta and addressed a number of influential meetings in Bombay. On 26 September 1896 at a meeting organized under the auspices of the Bombay Presidency Association in the Framji Cowasji Institute in Bombay under the chairmanship of Sir Pheroze Shah Mehta, Gandhi explained how he was speaking on behalf of the one lakh people of Indian origin then residing in South Africa. He said that the interest of 100,000 Indians were closely bound up with the interest of the 300 millions of India. The question of grievances of the Indians in South Africa affects the future well-being and the future immigration of Indians of India. Gandhi, then briefly explained the various problems from which the Indians had been suffering. He concluded with the words:

We have a right to appeal to you for protection. We place our position before you, and the responsibility will rest to a very great extent on your shoulders, if the yoke of oppression is not removed from our necks. Being under it we can only cry out in anguish. It is for you, our elder and freer brethren, to remove it. I am sure we shall not have cried out in vain.

From Bombay, Gandhi went to Poona, the cultural capital of the western presidency. It was here that he met G.K. Gokhale, the rising star of Indian politics and the chief spokesman of the Moderates. He also met B.G. Tilak, the leader of the Extremists. Both the leaders promised to help Gandhi but advised Gandhi to meet R.G. Bhandarkar, a respected Sanskrit scholar and a social reformer, to preside over the public meeting as there was group politics in the city. A meeting was conducted at Poona organized by the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha in the Joshi Hall. Bhandarkar presided. Gandhi, mostly read from the pamphlets, with comments whenever they were required. A resolution moved by B.G. Tilak was passed, sympathizing with the Indians in South Africa and authorizing a Committee, composed of R.G. Bhandarkar, Tilak, Gokhale, and some others to submit a memorial to the Government of India on the disabilities imposed upon the Indians. No report of

Gandhi's speech made at Poona is available except from a brief reference to his speech (16 November 1896) in a confidential report prepared in Poona for the Home Department of the Government of India. The lecture consisted mostly from the extracts from a pamphlet which he had prepared in India. He asked the audience to do their very best to bring about the amelioration of the conditions of the Indian people of South Africa.

Gandhi arrived in Madras on 14 October 1896 where he stayed for two weeks. It was from Madras that Gandhi wrote his first letter to Gokhale dated 18 October 1896. Addressing him as Professor Gokhale, a habit he cultivated, Gandhi wrote:

We very badly need a Committee of active, prominent workers in India for our cause. The question affects not only South African Indians but also Indians in all parts of the world outside India. I have no doubt that you have read the telegrams about the Australian colonies legislating to restrict the influx of Indian immigrants to that part of the world. It is quite possible that legislation may receive the Royal sanction. I submit that our great men should without delay take up this question. Otherwise within a short time there will be an end to Indian enterprise outside India. In my humble opinion, that telegram may be made the subject of a question in the Imperial Council at Calcutta as well as in the House of Commons. In fact, some inquiry as to the intention of the Indian Government should be made immediately. Seeing that you took very warm interest in our conversation, I thought I would venture to write the above.

News of the work which Gandhi had done in India had reached South Africa. The pamphlet became the innocent cause of violent repercussions in Durban due to the explosive twist given to it by Reuter's subsequent reporting. Reuter sent garbled versions of his addresses to South Africa, that Indians were treated like wild beasts. The Colonials were angry and the feeling against Gandhi reached its height. They were determined not to allow the Asiatics to land. When Gandhi arrived at Natal in January 1897 he was almost lynched by a section of the European mob in Durban. Fortunately, he was saved by an alert Police superintendent. Sympathisers of Gandhi and his Indian agitation could take some consolation from the fact that a few Englishman such as the Durban solicitor F.A. Laughton, and the wife of the chief superintendent of Police, R.C. Alexander, all

along stood by Gandhi. Commenting on the lynching incident which occurred three and a half year after the train incident at Pietermaritzburg Railway Station, the most 'creative' experience in his life; 'the germ of social protest was born in Gandhi.' Louis Fischer wrote in inimitable style:

Should he return to India? This episode reflected a much larger situation. Should he address himself to it or merely seek redress of his personal grievance, finish the case, and go home to India? He had encountered the dread disease of colour prejudice. To flee, leaving his countrymen in their predicament, would be cowardice. The frail lawyer began to see himself in the role of a David assailing the Goliath of racial discrimination.

In the train Gandhi was attacked by one or two individuals, at Durban it was a violent mob that assaulted Gandhi.

This incident angered Gokhale so much that he wrote a strongly-worded article in India, a journal of the British Committee of the Indian National Congress established in London in 1889. The article entitled 'The Indians of South Africa,' unfolded a tale 'which no right-minded Englishman ought to read without a feeling of deep shame and indignation'. Gandhi, along with his fellow countrymen, continued the Indian agitation and appealed to many well-placed public men in England for justice. He regularly wrote to Dadabhai Naoroji and Sir William Wedderburn, the Chairman of the British Committee regarding Indian suffering and requested help. He also consulted Gokhale often through mail.

In late 1901, Gandhi attended a Congress session at Calcutta and briefly explained how badly the Indians were treated in South Africa. 'It was not to be expected that the [Subject] Committee would spare the evening for me. Just at that moment he [Gokhale] cried out, "Gandhi has a resolution on South Africa which we will have to consider". With the help of Gokhale, Gandhi got a resolution passed condemning the treatment of Indians in South Africa by the white minority. Early in 1902 Gandhi had the opportunity to stay with Gokhale for a month. During this period he delivered two lectures at the Albert Hall—one on the 19th January 1902 and the other on the 27th January 1902. The first lecture was presided over by Norendra Nath Sen, the editor of the Indian Mirror. While seconding the vote of thanks Gokhale recalled his first

meeting with Gandhi in 1896 at Poona and how much he had been impressed by 'his ability, earnestness and tact and also by his manner at once so gentle and firm'. Since then he had followed his career with 'the deepest interest and admiration and having studied every utterance of his and every movement in which he had any share, and he would say without any hesitation that Mr. Gandhi was 'made of the stuff of which heroes are made'. In fact, Gokhale, praised him so lavishly that Gandhi was embarrassed.

Events in South Africa compelled Gandhi to return to South Africa soon and he kept in touch with Gokhale all through his years in South Africa. At the Lahore session of the national Congress held in 1909 Gokhale paid Gandhi perhaps the biggest tribute from a Congress platform. He said:

Fellow-delegates, after the immortal part which Gandhi has played in South Africa, it will not be possible for any Indian... to mention his name without deep emotion and pride and I can tell you that a purer, a nobler, a braver and a more exalted spirit has never moved on this earth. Mr. Gandhi is a man among men, a hero among heroes, a patriot amongst patriots.

Recalling his first meeting with Gokhale Gandhi wrote 'his manners immediately won my heart.' He began to look after Gokhale as his 'Guru' and for arousing Indians to the consciousness of the plight of their fellow countrymen in South Africa. Speaking about his very first meeting with Gokhale years later to a public reception that was held in Madras in his honour when he returned to India in 1915, Gandhi recalled 'It was in 1896 that I found in Mr. Gokhale my Rajya Guru, and it was here that I found that deep abiding sense of religion which has carried me through all trials'. Again on 4 February 1916 in Gujarat, Gandhi said:

In 1896, I discussed [with leaders] in India the question of indentured labour in Natal. At that time, I knew the Indian leaders only by name. This was the first occasion when I had contact with the leaders at Calcutta, Bombay, Poona and Madras. The late Gokhale was then known as a follower of Ranade. He had already at this time dedicated his life to Fergusson College. I was a mere youth, with no experience. The bond which developed between us on the occasion of our very first meeting in Poona never came to exist between any other leader and me. Sure enough all that I heard about Mahatma Gokhale was confirmed by my

own experience; but especially the effect which the soft expression on the Lotus-like face had on me has still not vanished from my mind. I instantly recognized as dharma-incarnate. I had an audience with Shri Ranade, too, at that time, but I could get no glimpse to his heart. I could only see him as Gokhale's mentor. Whether it was that he was much senior to me in age and experience, or that there were some other reasons, whatever the reason, I could not understand Shri Ranade as well as I could Gokhale.

Gandhi further said: 'After this contact with him in 1896 Gokhale's political life became my ideal. That very time he took possession of my heart as my guru in matters political'. Indeed, he said, his 'features took me by storm.' Unveiling a portrait of Gokhale in Bangalore soon after his death in February 1915, Gandhi said: I have declared myself his [Gokhale's] disciple in the political field and I have him as my Rajya Guru; and this I claim on behalf of the Indian people. It was in 1896 that I made this declaration, and I do not regret having made the choice'.

Recalling his togetherness with Gokhale in 1896 and in 1901-02, Gandhi wrote much later in his paper *Young India* on 13 July 1921:

It was different with Gokhale. I cannot say why, I met him at his quarters on the college ground. It was like meeting an old friend, or better still a mother after a long separation. His gentle face put me at ease in a moment. His minute enquires about myself and my doings in South Africa at once enshrined him in my heart. And as I parted from him, I said to myself, 'you are my man'. And from that moment Gokhale never lost sight of me. In 1901 on my second return from South Africa, we came closer still. He simply 'took me in hand' and began to fashion me. He was concerned about how I spoke, dressed, walked and ate. My mother was not more solicitous about me than Gokhale. There was, so far I am aware, no reserve between us. It was really a case of love at first sight, and it stood the severest strain in 1913. He seemed to me all I wanted as a political worker—pure as crystal, gentle as a lamb, brave as a lion, and chivalrous to a fault.

Gandhi was devoted to Gokhale since his very first meeting with him at Poona in October 1896. He recalled: 'This relationship of ours was formed in the year 1896. I had no idea of its nature then; nor had he... Still it was Gokhale who bound me to himself. Our

new relationship did not take place immediately. But in 1902, when I attended the Calcutta Congress, I became fully aware of being in the position of a disciple...I saw that Gokhale had not only not forgotten me but had actually taken me under his charge'.

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