

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

124. *The Negro World*, 17 May 1924.

125. *The Negro World*, 17 May 1924.

126. *The Negro World*, 17 May 1924.

127. *The Negro World*, 17 May 1924.

128. *The Negro World*, 17 May 1924.

129. *Young India*, 15 May 1924; *Collected Works*, Vol. 24, 47–48.

stayed, and A.M. Jivanjee of Kenya who had accompanied her to South Africa.¹³⁰ 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'.¹³¹ 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.¹³²

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.¹³³

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'.¹³⁴ 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.¹³⁵ A resolution to this effect would be passed at an Emergency Conference of the SAIC from 21 to 25 April 1924.¹³⁶ 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'.¹³⁷ 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.¹³⁸ 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'.¹³⁹

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.

132. Microfilm of a newspaper cutting, SN 8535; *Collected Works*, Vol. 23, 258–259.

133. *Indian Opinion*, 21 March 1924.

134. *Ibid.* See also South African Indian Congress, first annual report, 1924, excerpted at <http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/library-resources/online/%20books/bhana/part02-A-54.htm>.

135. *Ibid.*

136. Pahad, 'Development of Indian Political Movements in South Africa', n.p.

137. Reproduced at www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/people/gandhi/51-73.htm#N_10_, accessed 30 April 2011.

138. *Natal Mercury*, 19 March 1924.

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.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’.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.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’.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’.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.¹⁴⁵

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.mk gandhi.org/Selected%20Letters/Sarojini/index.htm> accessed at various time during March–April 2011.

141. Reported in *Indian Opinion*, 11 April 1924.

142. *Indian Opinion*, 11 April 1924.

143. *Ibid.*

144. *Indian Opinion*, 2 May 1924.

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

146. *The Hindu*, April 17, 1924, CW 23:442.

147. *Indian Opinion*, 23 May 1924.

148. In *Indian Opinion*, 4 April 1924.

149. *Natal Mercury*, 2 April 1924; reprinted in *Indian Opinion*, 23 May 1924.

150. *Natal Mercury*, 2 April 1924; reprinted in *Indian Opinion*, 23 May 1924.

151. G.A. Natesan, *Speeches and Writings of Sarojini Naidu*, 3rd ed. (Madras: G.A. Natesan & Co., n.d.), 427.

152. *Ibid.*, 432–423.

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.¹⁵³ 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.¹⁵⁴

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.

153. G. Lewis, *Between the Wire and the Wall* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1987), 135–136.

154. *Young India*, 14 January 1926.