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INSIDE STORY

Gandhi and the ANC

Today is the anniversary of the death of Mahatma Gandhi. His death was mourned in South Africa where he had made contact with the founders of the ANC at the party's early inception, writes ENUGA REDDY

THE birth of the African National Congress a century ago on January 8, 1912, was a landmark in the history of Africa, marking the beginning of the end of centuries of exploitation and humiliation of the continent. It received hardly any attention at the time internationally or from the white establishment in South Africa.

Mahatma Karamchand Gandhi, who was then looking after the families of prisoners and ex-prisoners at the Tolstoy Farm near Johannesburg, during a lull in the passive resistance movement in the Transvaal, hailed the event as representing "the awakening of Africa".

He had become a non-violent revolutionary and a mass leader in 1906 when he realised the futility of mere petitions and deputations to the racist white authorities against oppressive laws and regulations. He decided to defy the imposition of passes and immigration restrictions against the Indian people in the Transvaal and led the passive resistance movement in which about a third of adult Indian males in the Transvaal went to prison.

He had already ceased to limit his attention to the status of the Indian community and his newspaper, *Indian Opinion*, began to denounce the increasing oppression of the African people — "the sons of the soil". At a meeting of the YMCA in Johannesburg on May 18, 1908, he described his vision for the future of South Africa: "If we look into the future, is it not a heritage we have to leave to posterity that all the different races commingle and produce a civilisation that perhaps the world has not yet seen?"

But the leaders of the white minority — the Boers and the Britons — had a different vision. They wished to unite South Africa into a union and turn it into a country of the white people where the great majority of the people would only serve their needs. Gandhi foresaw, as the African leaders did, the consequences of this diabolic plan and described the union as one against the non-white people of the country.

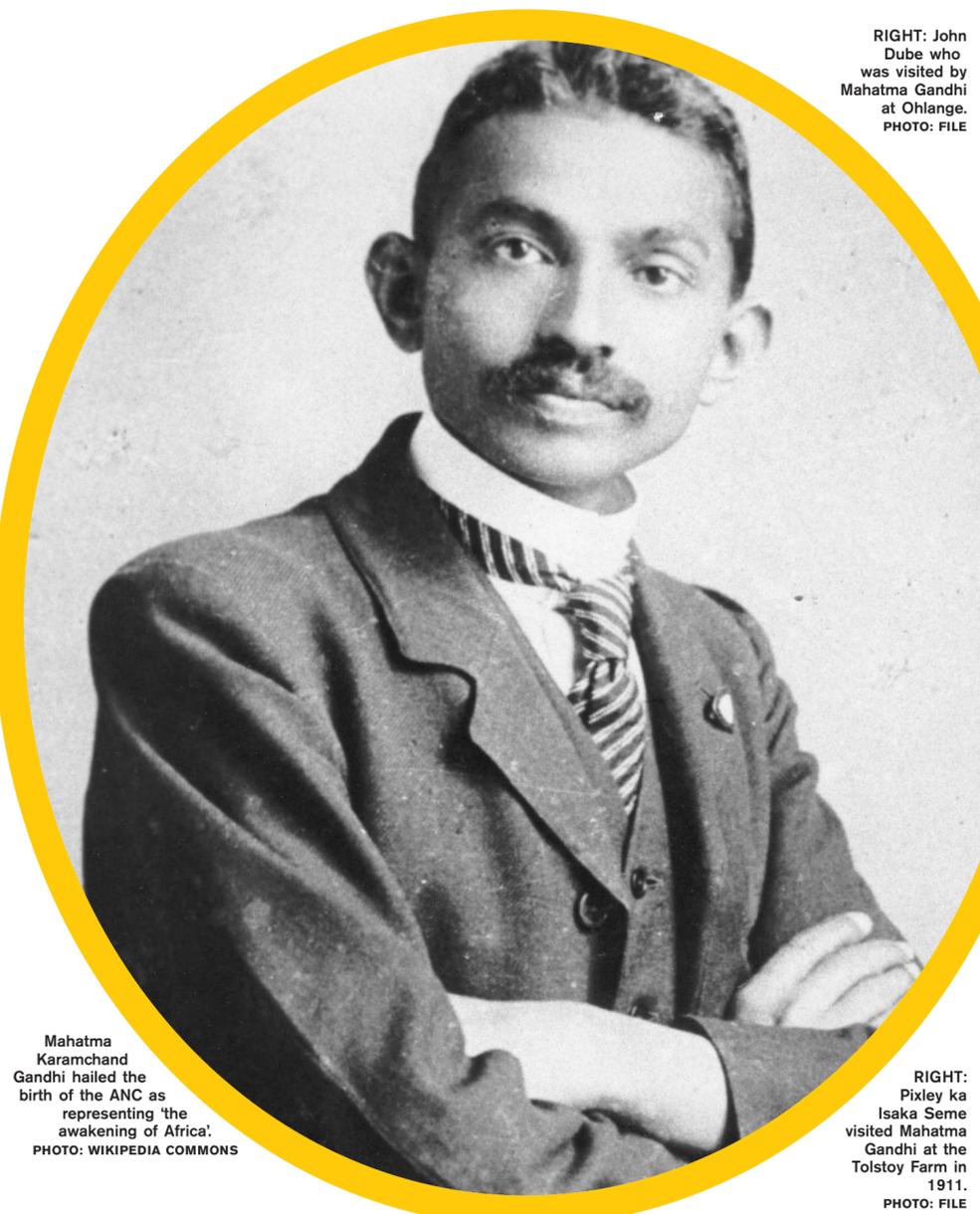
After Britain approved the formation of the Union of South Africa, thereby handing over power to the white minority, ignoring the appeals and betraying the trust of the African and coloured people, four African attorneys in Johannesburg decided to convene a conference of all the African organisations in the country to form a national congress to defend African rights. The initiative for the project was taken by Pixley ka Isaka Seme.

Seme was born in Inanda, near Gandhi's Phoenix settlement, and he must have known of Gandhi who had been an attorney in Johannesburg before he decided to devote his energies to the passive-resistance movement.

It has become known recently, from the memoirs of Pauline Podlashuk, who translated for Gandhi the last letter he had received from Count Tolstoy, that Seme visited Gandhi at the Tolstoy Farm in 1911 and had a long discussion during which Gandhi explained the Indian passive-resistance movement.

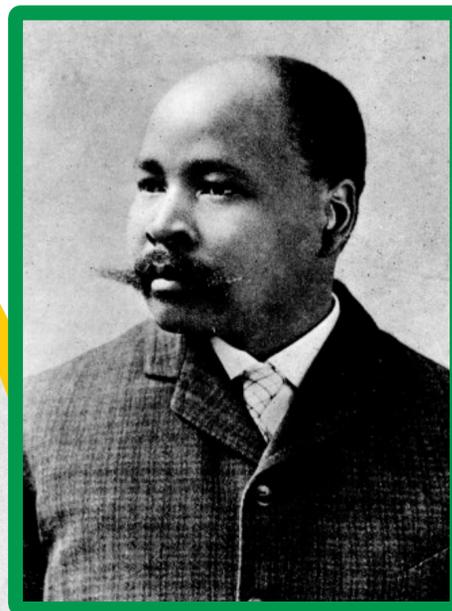
On July 29, 1911, *Indian Opinion* reported an interview with Seme on the progress of plans for the conference, which was held in Bloemfontein from January 8 to January 11, 1912. The conference established the South African Native National Congress (SANNC, later renamed the African National Congress). The Reverend John Langalibalele Dube of Natal, founder of the Ohlange Industrial School, was elected president in his absence. Dube then sent a letter to "Chiefs and Gentlemen of the South African Native National Congress" accepting the honour and published it in his newspaper *Ilanga lase Natal* on February 2, 1912. *Indian Opinion* reproduced an extract from his letter in its February 10, 1912, issue under the title "The Awakening of Africa". It referred to Dube as "our friend and neighbour" and called the letter a manifesto.

The importance attached by Gandhi to this African congress

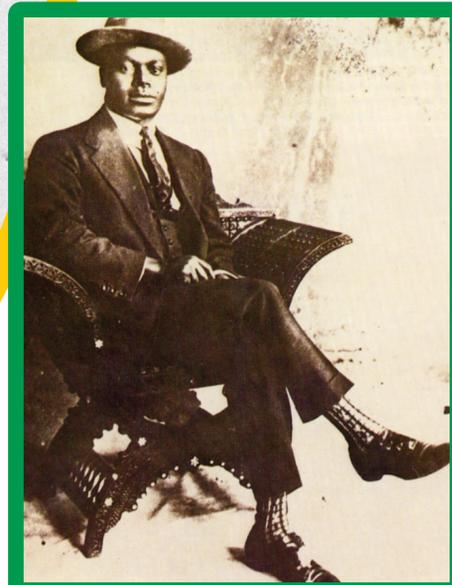


Mahatma Karamchand Gandhi hailed the birth of the ANC as representing 'the awakening of Africa'.
PHOTO: WIKIPEDIA COMMONS

RIGHT: John Dube who was visited by Mahatma Gandhi at Ohlange.
PHOTO: FILE



RIGHT: Pixley ka Isaka Seme visited Mahatma Gandhi at the Tolstoy Farm in 1911.
PHOTO: FILE



WITNESSING
100
YEARS
OF THE ANC

was demonstrated later in the same year. In October, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, a highly respected leader of the Indian national movement and a member of the Viceroy's Legislative Council, visited South Africa at the invitation of Gandhi. The South African government was encouraged by Britain to treat him with due respect. He was provided with a special railway car. Meetings, held in several cities to welcome him, were attended by many white people and addressed by mayors. He was received by the prime minister, Louis Botha. During his short visit to Durban, with a heavy schedule of meetings, Gandhi took him, on November 11, 1912, to Ohlange to meet the Reverend John L. Dube, now the first president of the SANNC. Gokhale received a warm welcome from the staff and students at the Industrial School and spent some time discussing the "native question" with Dube. *Ilanga lase Natal* reported the event on November 15 under the headline "Our Distinguished Visitor".

As Anil Nauriya observed: "The occasion is surcharged with historical significance. Eight decades before the complete independence of South Africa, a past and a future president of the Indian National Congress (Gokhale had been president of the Congress in 1924), were calling on the leader of the African National Congress."

In 1913, when the Natives Land Act was passed by the Union Parliament, Gandhi was vehement in his denunciation. An editorial in *Indian Opinion* declared: "The Natives Land Act of the Union Parliament has created consternation among the natives. Indeed, every other question, not excluding the Indian question, pales into insignificance before the great native question. This land is theirs by birth and this act of confiscation — for such it is — is likely to give rise to serious consequences." 1913 was also the year of passive resistance by African, coloured and Indian people in South Africa.

In June, African and coloured women in the Free State began passive resistance against a new law requiring them to carry passes. They were supported by the SANNC. The authorities were eventually forced to abandon passes for women.

A few weeks later, in September, the Indian community began resistance, especially against an onerous tax imposed on Indian indentured labourers on the completion of their contracts and the non-recognition of Indian marriages. It developed into a general strike involving tens of thousands of workers in the mines, cane fields, and railways. This campaign was also significant for the participation of women and their heroism. Kasturba, wife of Mahatma Gandhi, was in the first batch of resisters. Passive resistance and participation of women in the struggle for freedom thus became a common heritage of South Africa and India.

• Enuga Sreenivasulu Reddy, a national of India, has been an active supporter of the South African freedom movement for more than half a century. As head of the United Nations Centre against apartheid for over two decades, he played a key role in promoting international sanctions against South Africa and organising the world campaign to free Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners.

TELL US YOUR ANC STORY



THE full history of Africa's oldest liberation movement is yet to be written. Many ordinary people played their part in the decades of struggle against apartheid.

If you have a story to tell, no matter how humble, please submit it to the "Witness to history" series which will be running throughout the

centenary year.

Stories must captivate readers and add to the forgotten or previously unknown history of the ANC. Contributions not longer than 1 000 words can be submitted via e-mail or post.

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Welcome democratisation

I REFER to the article headed "The risk of Islamist coups" (*The Witness*, January 23). If we believe in true democracy, equality and human rights, then we need to accept these so-called Islamist parties just as other faith-based political parties are accepted in other parts of the globe.

According to Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch, the West should abandon traditional repressive regimes and begin working with new Islamist politicians on democratic reform. Islamist parties are genuinely popular in much of the Arab world and seen as the antithesis of autocratic rule.

Western countries need to support and encourage democratic change in the interests of lives of dignity for all. If this is shown in the constitutions of these Islamist parties, then the West should welcome them.

ABDULLAH SAEED
Pietermaritzburg

RELATIVE DISTRACTIONS

JUST a thought regarding the removal of roadside crosses erected by the bereaved and presumed to be hazardous to passing motorists. Are they that much more distracting than newspaper billboards, plus advertising posters, plus expired election posters?

This little old woman becomes a positive menace behind the wheel if she misses any detail on the first poster. I speed up to get to the next one. Always the soft targets are singled out.

D. A. CLARK
Scottsville, Pietermaritzburg

Dutch drug policy

UNFORTUNATELY, Werner Ehlers has not followed the logic of my argument in his letter headed "Why stop at drugs" (*The Witness*, January 23). There is no known country where theft and fraud have been reduced by legalising them. However, there are countries where drug use has been reduced by legalising it and implementing programmes to deal with the scourge.

Most policymakers in the Netherlands believe that if a problem has proved to be unsolvable, it is better to try controlling it and reducing harm instead of continuing to enforce laws with mixed results. Their drug policy has four major objectives: prevent recrea-

tional drug use and treat and rehabilitate users, reduce harm to users, diminish public nuisance by drug users and combat the production and trafficking of recreational drugs.

In 2010 research showed that heroin junkies had disappeared from the streets of the Netherlands, and treatment was upgraded from a test trial to standard practice for otherwise untreatable addicts. The number of heroin addicts has dropped by more than 30% since 1983. No doubt South Africa can learn something from the Netherlands as our drug problem continues to worsen.

ANDREW TAYNTON
Shongweni

Appropriate appeals

KHAYA Dlanga's article headed "Madiba's no sellout" (*The Witness*, January 18) is absolutely correct. It seems that over the years since Nelson Mandela was president we have developed a culture of entitlement and making excuses by naming and blaming everyone else — whites, blacks, apartheid and now Mandela. One would hope that after 17 years the government would have persuaded us to do what Dlanga says: "Use this precious right [freedom] to ensure that the darkness of the past never returns." It sometimes seems to be returning.

An appeal to the government to equip and educate our children properly would be more appropriate than blaming others. So too would an appeal to utilise taxpayers' money more productively, especially that which has been used over the years for celebrations, including R400 million for the current centenary affair. As the editorial in the same issue of *The Witness* pointed out, there are great needs in the further education and training (FET) sector. It's our choice.

JEN SCOTT
Creighton

Netting runaway trucks

THE tragic loss of yet another innocent life at Liberty Midlans Mall highlights the ignorance or lack of imagination of the people who design our roads.

Arrester beds are far from the only answer. A standard solution that has been proven countless times in mountainous countries involves the use of steel rope nets, for which there is ample room. Correctly designed they can stop any truck that goes into them, bringing them to a halt in a controlled manner.

They are relatively cheap and quick to erect and extremely effective. They also occupy little space. The difficulty is getting to talk to someone in the roads department who is prepared to listen to other solutions.

ROBIN REYNOLDS
Hilton

MISGUIDED MARKETING

THE Democratic Alliance's patronising stance with an advert to boost its black membership will do its public relations no good.

Coming on the heels of a coup over the selection of Lindiwe Mazibuko to a stellar position, this new recruitment campaign goes against the grain of a party that is, numerically, the only one to have stood tall against a rampant ANC. But now it uses promiscuity as a marketing ploy to swell its numbers.

A. R. MODAK
Johannesburg