

LEADER MANIKUM ROYEPPEEN

From the late 1870's, Gujerati traders began arriving in Natal from India on their own initiative. Because they effectively created competition for long-established traders in the *dorps* of Natal, the Oranje Vrij Staat and Transvaal, the matter of the continued enfranchisement of the Natal Indian became a highly politicised issue and in some communities focal rallying cry. An anti-Indian campaign gathered sufficient momentum in Natal to result in the development of a legislative programme designed at restricting the economic and political power of the Indian community and of which disfranchisement was the main thrust.

In 1893, an attorney-at-law, Mohandas K. Gandhi arrived in Natal on a brief legal assignment. He decided to remain on learning that disfranchisement of Indians was intended. Together with influential others from within the Indian community, he founded the *Natal Indian Congress* and became editor of *Indian Opinion*, writing prodigiously - as is born out by the 98 volumes of memoirs that encapsulate his life and work. He conceived of a new technique of political resistance based on the methods of *satyagraha* ("soul force") and derived from the teachings of the pacifist Jain sect of Hinduism; a technique of resisting an objectionable law, if need be by enduring suffering, but without resorting to violence or ceasing to respect those who governed the people or enforced the law.

During his sojourn in South Africa, and as an outward manifestation of *satyagraha*, two field units were raised and commanded by Mohandas K (Mahatma) Gandhi from amongst his fellow countrymen then resident in Natal; one in 1899 (Indian Ambulance Corps: Second Anglo-Boer War) and the other in 1906 (Indian Stretcher-bearers Corps: Natal Rebellion).

In a sense, their formation, functioning and later disbanding are illustrative of the many tragedies, of the many lost opportunities, offered South Africa to acknowledge a wealth in its racial plurality and avoid a further century of economic and political aberration, social conflict and heart-break in tens of thousands of all colours and creeds.

The original formation, the Indian Ambulance Corps, served with distinction at Colenso, Spion Kop and Vaalkrantz; and had a strength of 34 leaders and 1100 men ¹.

The following is a list of names of Indian volunteers who, in October 1899, offered their services to the Natal government and the Imperial authorities: M.K. Gandhi, H.L. Paul, A.H. Peters, R.K. Khan, P. Dhanjisha, P.C. Cooper, J.W. Godfrey, R. Baghwan, P. Peter, N.P. Dhunde, V. Lawrence, L. Gabriel, G.D. Harry, R. Govindoo, S. Shadrack, Ramtahal, J.D. Home, M.H. Nazar, P K. Naidoo, K. Singh, S.N. Richards, M.S. Lutchman Panday, J. Royeppen, J. Christopher, C. Stevens, J.L. Roberts, H.J. Jappie, J.S. Done, B. Gabriel, **M ROYEPPEEN**, F. Lazarus, R. Moodley.

¹ Sources vary as to the exact numbers of Indian [participants. 1100 appears to be correct, constituted of 300 "free" and formerly indentured Indians and 800 indentured workers from the sugar estates, sent by their employers to join Buller's "body-snatchers"

Being civilians and unpaid volunteers, their members were not considered eligible to receive medals (nor, incidentally, the Queen's Chocolate²). The Rev. Dr Lancelot Parker Booth, the Medical Officer to the corps, lobbied the Secretary of State for War, Sir John Broderick, for decorations on behalf of the leaders. Field-Marshal Lord Garnet Wolseley agreed to the proposition as he felt that, were the matter brought to Queen Victoria's attention, she would have insisted that medals be awarded.

The motivation written to the Colonial Secretary by Lancelot P Booth M.D. Medical Officer to the Corps is dated 8th October 1900. It states the following [W032/8550.136241]:

THE NATAL VOLUNTEER INDIAN AMBULANCE BEARERS

These men are educated, English-speaking, Indians residing in Natal who volunteered for active service in any capacity and underwent training in Ambulance work, and when some 700 to 800 Indian coolies, ignorant of English, were engaged as Ambulance "bearers" these Volunteers were appointed Leaders.

The Leaders stipulated that they should be unpaid, as their one desire was to prove in some humble way their loyalty to the Empress of India.

These men saw active service in the operations at the Tugela, at Colenso and Spion Kop. Their special usefulness was in helping to remove the severely wounded to Rail-end by stretcher when the troops fell back, carrying as far as 25 miles in one day.

The War Medal would be highly prized by them.

Their names are as follows:-

1. Mohandas K. Gandhi Bar-at-Law, Inner Temple
2. Rahim K. Khan " Lincoln's Inn
3. M.H. Nazar Gentleman
4. David Vinden Government Clerk & Interpreter
5. M. V. Madanjit Printer
6. W. Johathan Schoolmaster
7. D. Narainen Farmer
8. K. K. Mavji Clerk
9. A. S. Abhechand Storekeeper
10. P. K. Naidoo Clerk
11. M. Jackson Clerk
12. D. VasANJI Bookkeeper
13. Emanuel Petar Clerk
14. C. P. Ravashankar Storekeeper
15. Bryan Gabriel Photographer
16. R. Dhanji Schoolteacher *
17. J Ajodhya
18. W. M. Manekhal Clerk
19. J. S. Kinehand Clerk

8th October 1900

signed Lancelot P. Booth, M.D.
Medical Officer to the corps

* in other documents he is called Prof. Dhanji

Only 34 members of the Indian Ambulance Corps received a Queen's South Africa medal. Leader S N Richards received the silver Queen's South Africa medal with bars Tugela Heights and Relief of Ladysmith. The remainder, including Leader Manikum Royeppen, received a Queen's South Africa medal no bar.

² Collected Works of Gandhi Vol. 2. No.120: 339 LETTER TO COLONIAL SECRETARY dated 22 February 1900



That of Leader Manikum Royeppen (ex *Kenneth G Gibbon Collection*) is inscribed thus:

LEADER M. ROYEPPEN NATAL VOL: IND: AMB: C.



Leader Manikum Royeppen ³

INDIAN AMBULANCE CORPS ⁴

Gandhi, though acknowledging that "justice was undoubtedly on the side of the Boers", believed that it would best serve the future political interests of the Indian community in South Africa were they to actively demonstrate a loyalty to the British Empire. Being unable to become combatants, he proposed that Indian volunteers serve as stretcher-bearers together with the Natal Volunteer Ambulance Corps organised by Colonel T. Gallwey, Principal Medical Officer of Natal. The offer was initially declined ⁵. However, General Buller, later recognising a need for assistance, intervened and had this decision reversed.

³ The Genealogy of Manikum Royeppen will be found under "Genealogy" elsewhere in this site

⁴ INDIAN AMBULANCE CORPS is the name which is used in the South African Archive Repositories and much of Gandhi's personal correspondence. NATAL VOLUNTEER INDIAN AMBULANCE CORPS is the name cited on the Queen's South Africa medals, in various pieces of official War Office correspondence (ex. *Kenneth G Gibbon Collection*) and by ES Reddy; INDIAN BEARER CORPS is the name cited by Major G Tylden

⁵ 19 October 1899, in a letter addressed to the Colonial Secretary, Pietermaritzburg, Gandhi offers the services of Indian Volunteers ready to do duty for their Sovereign on the battlefield. The offer is meant to be an earnest [indication] of the Indian loyalty.

Meanwhile, in response to a complaint from a certain William Palmer, Treasurer to the Durban Women's Patriots League, a local organisation which supplied medical comforts to the wounded soldiers and volunteers, and in order to demonstrate solidarity with their cause, Gandhi organized a collection from the Indian community.

Early December 1899 saw Gandhi applying pressure by maintaining contact with the Colonial Office and approaching Bishop Baynes of Natal in order to ensure that the Rev. Dr. Booth, whom he considered indispensable for the Indian Ambulance Corps, was seconded to the group. On 11 December, Gandhi telegraphed Pragjee Bhimbhai Bellair to have him alert the volunteers to stand prepared; and he and Rev. Dr. Booth met with the Colonial Secretary the following day to further arrangements.



Indian Bearers, Natal. No date.
Jeffrey Collection, J 3342, Cape Archives

The Corps was sent forward by train on 14 December 1899, reaching the Field Hospital at Chieveley the next day. The task of the Indian Bearer Corps was defined as having to take the wounded brought by the Natal Volunteer Ambulance Corps from the battlefield and carry them to the railhead, as it transpires an extremely onerous job. They had been given no combat training as there was no expectation of their serving

In response 23 October 1899, the Principal Under Secretary informed Gandhi that "the Government is deeply impressed with the offer of Her Majesty's loyal Indian, subjects in Durban who have offered their service's ... and should the occasion arise; the Government will be glad to avail itself of those services. Will you be good enough to convey to the Indians in question an expression of the Government's appreciation of their loyal offer."

under fire. However, they were immediately employed in assisting the wounded at the battle of Colenso. On 17 December 1899, the Corps moved to Estcourt and peculiarly was temporarily disbanded two days later.



Indian Bearer Corps : Dr Lancelot Parker Booth (middle row fourth from left), Mohandas K (Mahatma) Gandhi (middle row fifth from left), M Royeppen (middle row seventh from left)(Ref.5)

Reformed on 7 January 1900, the Corps was again stationed at Estcourt. On 24 January 1900, at the battle of Spion Kop, the Corps agreed to serve under fire and carried the wounded from the field to the base hospital at Frere, more than twenty miles away. "When succour was to be rendered they were there" ⁶ .

The Natal Volunteer Ambulance Corps and the Indian Ambulance Corps were disbanded at the end of February 1900.

In April, 1900 Gandhi addressed a personal letter of thanks to each of the Leaders in the Indian Ambulance Corps saying "as a memento for the assistance you gave me in serving the motherland at a critical juncture, I offer you the gift of my services, which please accept I promise to take up without fee any legal work that I can do in Durban for you or for your friends to the extent of £5 during the course of a year from today". And to a number of the stretcher-bearers he wrote "I

⁶ Vera Stent, who served in the British forces there, described the work of the Indians in the Illustrated Star of Johannesburg, July 1911. Quoted in *India and the Anglo-Boer War*. Reddy, ES. 1999. Gandhi Foundation

promised to make a small present myself to the stretcher-bearers within my charge in the event of their doing their work creditably". Though there is no record known detailing the nature of this gift, it is thought to have been of a similar nature to that offered the Leaders.

In the years that followed the Second Anglo-Boer War, Gandhi periodically returned to the subject of the Indian Ambulance Corps as being illustrative of the principles that were adopted by Indians in South Africa to further their political struggle, and these were "to stick to the truth at all costs and conquer hate by love. This was the ideal to be realized" ⁷.

References

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2. Anglo-Boer War 1899-1901. Indian ambulance (stretcher bearers carrying someone). Jeffreys Collection. Photograph Ref. J3342
3. Collected Works of Gandhi. Vols.2 and 6
<http://www.gandhiserve.org/cwmg/> (*vide infra*)
4. India and the Anglo-Boer War. Reddy, ES. 1999. Gandhi Foundation
<http://www.gandhiserve.org/cwmg/cwmg.html>
5. The South African War : The Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902. Ed. Warwick, P. Publ. Longmans, 1980
6. The Boer War. Pakenham, T. Publ. Jonathan Ball, 1979
7. South Africa: A Modern History. Davenport, TRH. Publ. Macmillan (South Africa), 1977
8. South African Archives Repository, Pietermaritzburg: various archival documents are available in this repository and can be found under the key words Booth, Gandhi, Indian Volunteers, Indian Ambulance Corps, Royeppen
9. Prof J C de Villiers, Newlands: Personal communication
10. Brian Johnson Barker, Cape Town: Personal communication
11. The Curator, Ladysmith Siege Museum: Personal communication

From the Collected Works of Gandhi. Vols. 2 & 6, the following references were used whilst researching this article

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⁷ [Report of an address in Calcutta: The Englishman, 28 January 1902]

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THE ROYEPPEN GENEALOGY

The name Royeppen is thought to be of Tamil origin
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0 Father Royapen [sic] m. Catherine

- 1 Manikum Royeppen bc. 1864 India d. St Aidan's Hospital, Durban 23 September 1939 NAB MSCE 29932/1939 m. Lydia Kate Royappen [sic] née NARAINEN b. Mount Moriah, Natal ca. 1888 d. King Edward Hospital 3 November 1962 (do. Barnabas and Munniamah NARAINEN) NAB MSCE 3141/1963
- 1.1 Percy Goodwin Royeppen
 1.2 Mabel Christiana Royeppen
 1.3 Mary Edith HARRIS
 1.4 Edward Joseph Royeppen
 1.5 Eugene Christian Royeppen
 1.6 Gladstar Vedhamanickum Royeppen b. Durban d. 1970 m. Gladys Thelma
 1.7 John Nelson Rajah Royeppen b. 7 February 1924
 1.8 Bernard Devadasen Royappen [sic] b. 2 September 1927
 1.9 Mercia Biakum Royeppen b. 15 July 1929
 1.10 Stella Samathanam Royeppen b. 17 July 1932
 1.11 Edgar Jeevaruthnam Royeppen b. 30 September 1934

2 Joseph Royeppen b. India d. 1960 m. Mary Anne NAIDOO b. Grahamstown d. 1967

The Death Notice of Manikum Royeppen MSCE 29932/1939 states that he was Indian Immigrant No. 4991 living at 90 Syringa Road, Clairwood, Durban. He was a barman. He died in St. Aidan's Hospital, Durban. At the time of her death, Lydia Kate Royappen lived at Overport, Durban
