

## VINCENT LAWRENCE – GANDHIJI’S SECRETARY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Vincent Lawrence (1872-1965) was confidential secretary of Gandhiji for six years in the 1890s and stayed in the villa of Gandhiji in Beach Grove at his invitation.<sup>1</sup> He was prominent in public affairs in South Africa until the 1960s . But little is known about him in India since the writings of Gandhiji and books about Gandhiji have referred to him only in connection with two incidents in the life of Gandhiji.<sup>2</sup> Only one letter from Gandhiji to Mr. Lawrence has been available in the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*.

Fortunately Mr. Lawrence left his memoir at a university in South Africa.<sup>3</sup> His granddaughter, Dr. Josephine Naidoo, a retired professor of psychology in Canada, has been working on a biography of Mr. Lawrence. Though the biography is not yet published, the family made some information available on the internet. I have found additional information during my research on Indians in South Africa.

To quote from the memoir:<sup>4</sup>

“I was the sixth in a family of nine children and was born on the 10th September 1872 in Fort St. George, then known as Georgetown because of its proximity to that famous Fort, in Portuguese Church St. very near to the Churches of the Immaculate Conception and St. Francis Xavier where I imbibed the tenets of the Roman Catholic Faith. It was in the City of Madras and the Presidency of that name. My parents were fervent members of that Church by their devotion and piety in following the activities of that Church. So much so they used on important feast days when processions were organised in the streets around the Church, they put up torch lights in earthenware pots in linseed oil and waste cloths from the workshops from the Madras Railways where my father was employed throughout the procession.

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<sup>1</sup> His original name was Vedanayagam. It was changed by missionaries in Durban to Vincent. Joseph Royeppen and Madanjit Vyavaharik were the other clerks of Gandhiji.

<sup>2</sup> He accompanied Gandhiji around 1895 when he rushed home from the office at the suggestion of his cook and found his childhood friend Sheikh Mehtab with a prostitute. Mr. Lawrence was reported to have protected Gandhiji when Mehtab tried to lay his hands on him. The second incident concerns Gandhiji losing his temper with Kasturba and ill-treating her because she resented being forced to carry and empty the chamber pot of Vincent Lawrence.

<sup>3</sup> “Sixty Years Memoir of Vincent Lawrence of 67 Gale Street, Durban, Natal”, document in the UNISA Documentation Centre for African Studies, Pretoria.

<sup>4</sup> I have slightly edited the memoir.

“I was educated in the missionary primary school just opposite my house and was later on shifted to a secondary school near to Royapuram where I completed my secondary education and passed the uncoventened civil service examination... I taught thereafter in a missionary school for four years after passing the teachers’ training course in Madras. I came to Natal on six months leave and entered the service of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, an English Barrister of the Inner Temple as confidential clerk, in other words, as his private secretary for six years and lived with him in Beach Grove...

“During my office hours I translated the first two years' Annual General Reports of the Congress into Tamil and when Mr. Gandhiji went to India in 1896 to espouse the cause of the Indians here he took these translations with him and submitted them to the Madras High Court translators and they complimented the translation and when Mr. Gandhiji returned to Natal he was highly elated and very pleased with me.

“When the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) was founded in 1894 the subscription for membership was fixed at three pounds a year of 5/- per month. Except the merchant class the other members of the Indian community were unable to meet it because of their financial circumstances and agitated against it. I took up their case and formed a Committee and put before the officials of the Committee their complaint and pleaded for an amendment of the subscription clause which was altered to 5/- per year.”

Mr. Lawrence was of particular assistance in connection with the first case of an indentured labourer which Gandhiji took up in 1894. Balasundaram, a domestic worker for a European, was brutally assaulted by his master. He arrived at Gandhiji’s office but was unable to speak. He wrote his complaint in Tamil which Mr. Lawrence translated for Gandhiji. Gandhiji was able to secure the transfer of Balasundaram to work for a European friend.

Mr. Lawrence must have accompanied Mr. Gandhiji when he paid a visit in 1895 to the Marianhill Trappist Monastery where he found the missionaries deep in prayer and labour in the fields and was amazed at their sincerity, piety and devotion. At that time Gandhiji used to visit the missionaries of the South African General Mission in Durban and developed friendship with Walter Spencer Walton. On instructions from Gandhiji, Mr. Lawrence taught Tamil to two young European lady missionaries, Miss Day and Miss Hargreaves, to enable them to labour among the Tamilians.

Mr. Lawrence was active in the Natal Indian Educational Association founded by Gandhiji. He served under the leadership of Gandhiji in the Natal

Indian Volunteers Corps during the Anglo-Boer War in 1899.

He visited India on leave from December 1900 to June 1901. Gandhiji gave him letters of introduction to Indian leaders. During his stay in Madras, he addressed a meeting of leaders in Madras at the Cosmopolitan Club on the political situation in Natal and the plight of Indians.

“I spoke for nearly an hour and they were eminent leaders and were taken up with my exposition of the matters concerning the Indian community in South Africa, and were so thrilled that I was requested by them to give my views in the local papers. I wrote a series of articles in the prominent paper *The Hindu* whose editor and proprietors of their own accord printed them in a pamphlet form... They sent thousands of copies to England and the important cities of India for distribution amongst the prominent people and sent some copies to Mr. Gandhi...”

Soon after return to Durban, he married Miss Josephine Gabriel. At the wedding reception Gandhiji and Parsee Rustomjee spoke in eulogising terms of the bridegroom's career and active work for the Indian community.

After Gandhiji left for India in 1900, Mr. Lawrence continued as an attorney's clerk in the employ of Leon Renard. In 1907 he petitioned the Natal Governor for exemption from discriminatory laws, as an educated and propertied person, but the request was turned down.<sup>5</sup>

Mr. Lawrence was one of the members of the Gokhale Reception Committee when Professor Gopal Krishna Gokhale visited South Africa in 1912. He wrote that he volunteered to join the satyagraha in 1913:

“/... while I was on the train with other passive resisters and Mr. Gandhi, one of my wife's relatives appeared on the platform. He pleaded with Mr. Gandhi that he should not take me along with him because I had a young wife and small children to support, Mr. Gandhi succumbed to this appeal and let me out of the compartment.”

### ***Public activities of Mr. Lawrence***

Mr. Lawrence was associated with numerous organisations and institutions and in many activities in support of the Indian community.

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<sup>5</sup> Surendra Bhana and Bridglal Pachai (editors), *A Documentary of Indian South Africans*, pp. 23-24

He was an executive member of the South African Indian Congress and Senior Vice President of the NIC; and Chairman of the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Trust. He was a member of the National Joint Council established by the African National Congress and the South African Indian Congress in 1949. He was also an executive member of the Indo-European Joint Council in Durban and a delegate to the Non-European Conference convened by Dr. Abdullah Abdurahman at Kimberley in 1927

He was particularly active in educational and social work of the Indian community.

He persuaded the authorities in Natal to establish the first Indian girls' high school in Durban – the Durban Indian Girls High School. He worked with V. S. Srinivasa Sastri, the Indian Agent in South Africa in the late 1920s, in raising funds for Sastri College. He was secretary of the M. K. Gandhi Library and Parsee Rustomjee Hall; member of the Non-European Natal University Council; and member of the M.L. Sultan Educational and Charitable Trust.

He was President of the Indian Social Service Committee set up to educate people about sanitation and cleanliness; one of the founders and a Vice-President of the Indian Child Welfare Society; executive member of the prisoners aid association; and President of the Durban and District Football Association, the Durban and District Cricket Union, and the Natal Football Association.

As a devout catholic, Mr. Lawrence was active in the activities of the Church. In 1895 he started work for the Catholic Indian mission as catechist and Sunday School teacher, and interpreted the sermons into Tamil. He took the initiative in establishing the Catholic Indian Young Men's Society of which he was President for 18 years. He received a medal from Pope John XXIII for his work for the Catholic Church. His wife and children were also prominent in public life.<sup>6</sup>

I must make special mention of two of the bodies with which he was connected – the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Trust and M. L. Sultan Educational and Charitable Trust.

Gandhiji purchased two plots of land in Durban at Prince Edward Road and Umgeni Road and transferred them to the NIC in 1897. But as the NIC constitution did not provide for holding immovable properties, a trust was created with Gandhiji and six others as trustees.

After 1913 when supporters of Gandhiji and the Satyagraha left the NIC, it was in a chaotic state. Acting on an application by Mr. Lawrence and others, the Natal

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, Mrs. Josephine Lawrence was President of the Durban Indian Women's Association and later her daughter Sylvia became President.

Supreme Court appointed a lawyer as receiver of the income from the properties and the monies were deposited in a “Guardians Fund”.

In April 1950, the Supreme Court decided that the NIC, now reunited and led by Dr. G.M. Naicker, was the successor to the original NIC and was entitled to the ownership of the properties and the monies in the Guardians Fund. The NIC then set up the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Trust to manage the properties and Mr. Lawrence was elected Chairman.

A few years after, the apartheid regime declared the area of one of the properties a white area and sold it for a pittance.

Dr. Khurshed Rustomjee is now Chairman of the Trust and the building of a “living memorial” on the site to Gandhiji has begun with financial support from the provincial and city governments, as well the government of India.

The M.L. Sultan Charitable and Educational Trust was set up in 1949 by Mohammad Lappa Sultan who had arrived from Tamil Nadu in 1890 as an indentured labourer. He donated almost all his property to the Trust for technical education of Indians and Africans who had been deprived of opportunities. The Trust set aside 25,000 rand (12,500 pounds sterling) for the building of the M.L. Sultan Technical College and the rest for related projects. The college started full-time classes in 1955.

It had 695 African students in 1956 when the apartheid ordered under the Bantu Education Act that it stop admitting African students.

The College has now been merged with Technicon Natal to form the Durban University of Technology. Mrs. Ela Gandhi, granddaughter of Gandhiji, was Chancellor of the University until recently.

The election of Vincent Lawrence to these two trusts was a tribute to his integrity and reflected the confidence of the Indian community in this associate of Gandhiji.



The Lawrence grave in Durban



Farewell photo when Gandhiji left Durban in 1914. Vincent Lawrence is seated on the extreme right.