

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JCB-17: Gandhi's Spirit
in South Africa

November 24, 1962
1239 Arcadia Street
Pretoria, Transvaal
Republic of South Africa

Mr. Richard Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte:

About twenty miles north of Durban at Phoenix is located the South African home of Mahatma Gandhi. It was from this base that he developed and put into practise his non-violent theory for social change.

At the turn of the century a number of Indian families joined him at Phoenix in an experience of communal living somewhat similar to Brooks' Farm. There, in austere surroundings, he set up a printing press and in 1903 began publishing Indian Opinion, the first Indian newspaper in South Africa. There he worked to broaden the base and the perspective of the Indian Congress, which he had founded in 1893, to serve the entire Indian community. And there, out of his spiritual life, he fashioned a political approach that made an impact on South Africa, achieved independence for India and fired the imagination of the underprivileged the world over.

To him non-violence was not just an expedient means of civil disobedience but a method consistent with the way he tried to live. He believed that social reform was dependent on the

method used to bring it about; good came not through evil, democratic rights not by un-democratic means nor peace from violence.



"Sarvodaya" (Welfare for All), Gandhi's home and study at the Phoenix Settlement.

Although his first Passive Resistance Campaign in 1907 did not succeed in lessening the Transvaal's restrictive immigration laws, it did prepare the way for a successful campaign in 1913. Then, with Gandhi leading a march of thousands of Indians illegally across the border from Natal into the Transvaal, and with widespread strikes by Indian labourers in Natal, the Government was obliged to give ground. It modified some of the legislation which the Indians had felt was unjust and convinced Gandhi that it had a change of heart. He left South Africa in 1914 with the feeling that much of his mission in South Africa had been fulfilled.

However, following World War I, with increased European demands that the Indian "threat" be contained, the Government forgot its change of heart and new anti-Indian legislation was passed. This time there was no one with the leadership qualities of a Gandhi to pull together the divisive forces within the Indian community to make an effective protest.

Without Gandhi, it's all downhill

Without Gandhi the spiritual dedication of the Settlement seemed to decline and gradually families left to go their own ways. Phoenix has remained as a working farm and a memorial to Gandhi's name but its character has changed. After his father left, Manilal Gandhi carried on Indian Opinion until he died seven years ago. Since then it has not too successfully passed through the hands of several editors. The difficulty of meeting the broader needs of a multi-racial commitment caused its circulation to drop until now the presses are idle and a single sheet keeps the name alive.

OPINION

NEW SERIES No 1—Vol. 1. 25th July, 1962.

Price 3 C.

PHOENIX SETTLEMENT TRUST

(Founded by Mahatma Gandhi)

PHONE 30 Mount Edge Combe

Eleven years ago Mrs. Manilal Sushila Gandhi started a school at the settlement with four pupils. It quickly blossomed into 100 and now has 8 grades and 13 classes. The desire of Indians and Africans for education has always been larger than the number of schools can fulfill and she thought her school could provide some help to relieve the shortage. But the Government's separate development policy ruled out the mixed classes for which she had hoped. For a while she tried classes for Zulus in the morning and Indians in the afternoon, but this also was prohibited. Now the Provincial Government runs the school exclusively for Indians. It hires the



Mrs. Gandhi, Mr. Ramgobin and my wife look over the future prospects of the Phoenix Settlement.

her to stay. The Ramgobins moved to the Settlement with the hope that they could pump some new life into it.

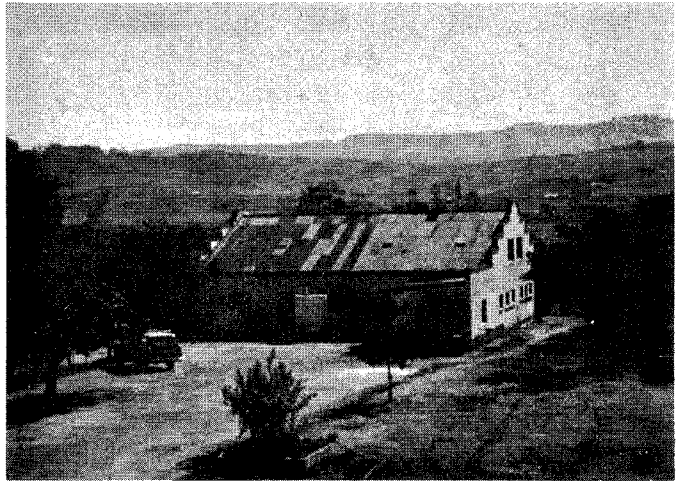
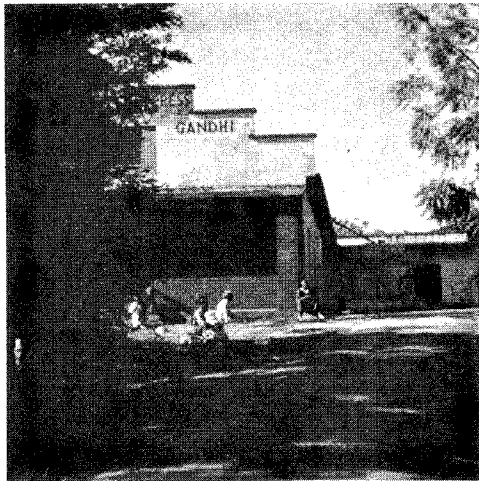
They first took stock of the Settlement's resources. There are 90 acres of land, 40 of which are planted in sugar cane and another 20 in vegetables. There are a few small buildings scattered throughout the estate, now housing tenant farmers who look after the crops. The main buildings are located on a hill in the center of the estate. From here Kwa Mashu, the gigantic housing project for Zulus who work in Durban, can be seen nearby. Behind the excellent school building, a bit higher on the hill, is Gandhi's house and study, still filled with the books that belonged to him and his son, as well as some of his pictures. On the top of the hill is a large rambling house where Mrs. Gandhi and the Ramgobins live. On this same level, about 500 feet away, is the large building which housed the now-inactive press and the former newspaper offices.

With these physical resources, they looked to the area around them to see what service could be offered. They decided that there was a great need for a medical clinic. While there is a clinic for Zulus living in Kwa Mashu, there are many people, Indian and Zulu living within 15 miles of the Settlement who have never seen a doctor. Their poverty affects their health; they do not have financial means for proper medical attention. Some travel over 20 miles to one of the two non-European hospitals in Durban, but bus fare and a minimum clinic fee costs them \$1.00 out of monthly earnings not likely to be more than \$14.00.

teachers, controls the curriculum and rents the building from Mrs. Gandhi and the Settlement.

While there are still pilgrims who visit the Gandhi home, Mrs. Gandhi became discouraged because the Settlement was not carrying out any vital function that would do honor to her father-in-law's name. She had taken care of the estate without much help since her husband's death. Her son had gone to India to study and was unable to return because his wife, whom he married there, was prohibited from entering this country. Mrs. Gandhi was tired and determined to close down the Settlement and join her son.

However, her enthusiastic daughter and son-in-law, Ela and Mewa Ramgobin, with the help of her other daughter, Sita Dhupelia, persuaded



Zulu patients waiting for the clinic to open on a Sunday afternoon, and the newspaper building which may become a nursing home.

Using part of the newspaper building, a clinic of sorts has been set up. It is stocked with drugs donated by various Durban firms and served by four Indian doctors who donate a few hours each week. The Ramgobins administer it. There is no charge unless the patient can afford a half-crown (35¢) and that is used to purchase additional drugs. There is no colour bar; everyone is taken care of. Patients are now about evenly divided between Indian and Zulu.

While the clinic goes against Gandhi's belief in nature healing, the Ramgobins believe that it is about the only service which could be provided without regard to race which would not directly conflict with the Government's race policies. They hope there will be no interference as plans are underway to transform the newspaper building into a maternity nursing home and, if this is successful, eventually into a small hospital. Their need for a resident nurse or doctor who could administer the clinic and the nursing home as well as for an ambulance to carry 'emergency' patients to the city's hospitals have been answered to some extent by the Unitarian-Universalist World Service Committee.

Things begin to look up

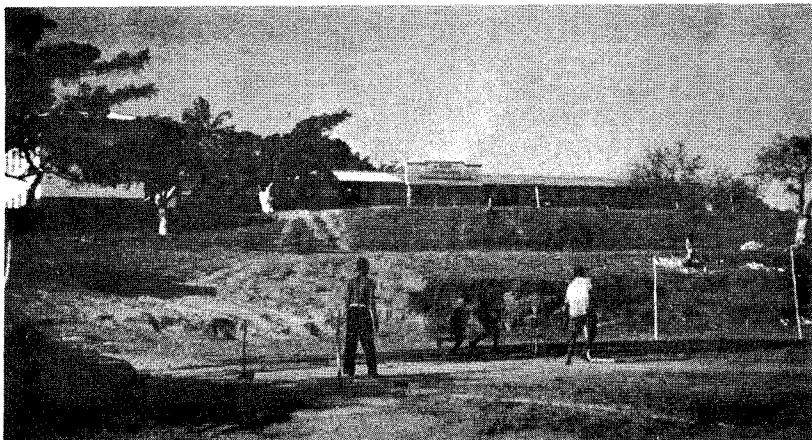
Already, with the incentive this project has engendered, a new Board of Trustees has been appointed to further expand the usefulness of the Settlement. Previously the Board was composed almost exclusively of Indians. Mrs. Gandhi wanted the Board to represent all races and she chose those men whom she believed had tried to live close to the Gandhi ideal. The new members include: Bishop Alpheus Zulu, the only African Anglican Bishop in South Africa; Nobel Peace Prize winner, ex-Chief Albert Luthuli; A.J. Lazuras,

Principal of the most influential Indian High School, Satri College; Peter Brown, National Chairman of the Liberal Party; I.C. Meer and J.N. Singh, both attorneys and prominent members of the Indian Congress who were imprisoned and acquitted in South Africa's famous treason trials; E.G. Rooks, prominent leader of Natal's Coloured community, and Alan Paton who serves as Chairman.

They plan to turn Gandhi's house (where morning prayers are conducted daily by the family) into a shrine. Gandhi's personal pictures will be enlarged and framed and, along with his library, mementoes and other Gandhiana, moved to a museum to be built at the foot of the hill in a small grove. The land surrounding this will be made into a recreational area which will be open to all, particularly non-Europeans who do not have many facilities of this kind. Copies of Indian Opinion, which have not been adequately cared for, will be micro-filmed as soon as money is available and will also be available in the new museum. 1969, the centenary of Gandhi's birth, is their deadline for this project.

In the meantime they plan to make more use of the present facilities. While the educational program of the school is out of their hands, the building and playing field are available after school hours and they hope to develop health education classes and a youth recreation program. Both are badly needed. In addition, there is the dream that someday summer conferences on non-violence as a way of life can be held there on the pattern of Tagore's school in India. They also hope that someday in the future the newspaper will regain its former standing and persuasively spell out the Gandhi ideal.

While there is serious doubt that some of these possibilities can ever be augmented there is no question in the minds of the Board members that there is a great need for such an institution. The



element of trust that was so much a part of Gandhi's philosophy is virtually gone. Young people are suspicious of others; they demand proof of good intentions before

Zulu boys on the playing field in front of the school building at the Settlement.

they will have faith in anyone, particularly one of another race. Influential members of the Indian Congress have criticized Gandhi for trusting Government leaders too much and not demanding more from them when he held the upper hand. He was unwise, they believe, in thinking that the Government would do anything for them if they had no power to retaliate.

Non-violence - an adequate means?

More and more Indians, as most politically minded Africans, look upon non-violence as only a means to an end; to be employed when useful, abandoned when it fails. Nothing more. They argue that Gandhi's passive resistance campaign in 1913 succeeded (the only one that ever did in South Africa) because it was able to cripple the economy by a withdrawal of labour. Restrictions today against mass demonstrations and strikes would make it impossible for enough non-European workers to equal the earlier effort.

If people were thoroughly dedicated to the idea of protesting their grievances without violence, and without any regard to what might happen to them as a result, a passive resistance campaign could still be successful no matter what the restrictions. This would call for considerable sacrifice. But, as a prominent Indian educator told me, "We don't have the kind of leaders that can lead us to this and, more important, we Indians are not conditioned for it. We have grown up in a culture where violence is stressed and preferred to non-violence. When you are separated from another man and do not know him it is easy to distrust his motives and to lash out at him violently. Violence is more immediate, it suits the impatience of the young. And it is much easier to train a person to use explosives than to become a disciple of passive resistance."

A prevalent attitude is that "we must show the South African Government and the world, especially the Western powers, Britain and the United States, that we mean business; that we will go to any lengths to get our just rights. We will use violence but only against property. We will still be non-violent to people."

This is the kind of thinking the political, educational and religious leaders on the Phoenix Board are trying to stay. They feel that once violence is unleashed it will be difficult to control; it will encourage others to be more radical and lead to continuing waves of reprisals between Government and anti-Government forces.

These preachers of non-violence are caught between the Government and violent extremists. They must choose between sticking with non-violence and losing much of their influence (which has already happened) or abandon their position in order to have some moderating

influence on what direction violence might take.

Whatever way they choose, the Settlement faces a number of major obstacles, not even considering the financial one.

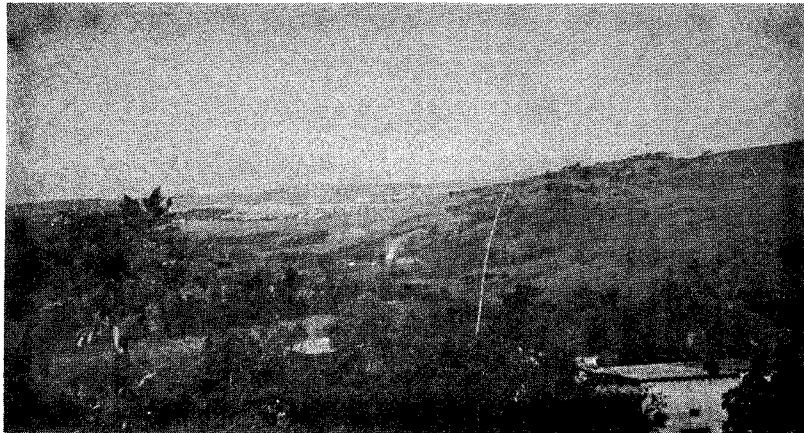
With three strikes against them...

It is located in an area between a municipal African location (Kwa Mashu) and land which belongs to the Zululand Territorial Authority. The South African Government would like to have the two African areas united. Sometime in the future the Settlement may have to move and such a move might very well mean its end.

The Board is studded with men the Government considers subversive. Already one is restricted to a small area in Natal and can't attend Board meetings (Luthuli), two are on the Government's official Communist List (Meer and Singh), and another has had his passport taken away, is constantly harrassed by the police and expects house arrest shortly (Paton). Many others are known for anti-Government sentiments. Therefore the character of its members, perhaps because of the similarity of their thinking to that of Gandhi, may well cause its disbanding by the Government.

And this is especially true in the light of a statement lately by Senator de Klerk who announced a Cabinet decision that all professional groups and businesses must definitely separate themselves on racial lines. Legislation is to be introduced in Parliament at the next session to ensure its enforcement if groups refuse to segregate voluntarily.

All in all it doesn't seem likely that the reactivation of the Settlement will ever be more than a dream.

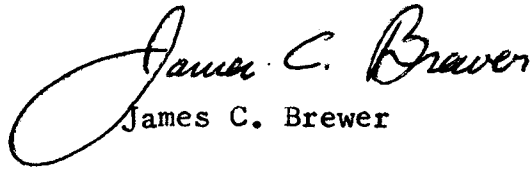


Phoenix stands as
and ideal because
of what it has
been and because
of what it might

Looking out over
the estate to Kwa
Mashu's Zulu
housing in the
distance.

be. But the place which gave birth to the philosophy of non-violence in the modern world may well see the death of its spirit. For violence is on the ascendency here.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "James C. Brewer". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a large initial 'J' and a long, sweeping underline that extends under the rest of the name.

James C. Brewer