The Phoenix Settlement

From Ulwazi

## Contents

- 1 Communal Settlement
- 2 Phoenix Settlement Trust
- 3 Indian Opinion
- 4 Private School
- 5 Gandhi’s legacy continued
- 6 The settlement restored
- 7 Gandhi honoured
- 8 Sources

### Communal Settlement

The Phoenix Settlement, established by Mahatma Gandhi in 1904, is situated on the north-western edge of Inanda, some 20 kilometres north of Durban. Sita Gandhi writes “my grandfather’s farm … was fifteen miles away from the city, and in those days around us were plantations of sugar cane fields. Over 100 acres of land was called Phoenix Settlement. It was the most beautiful piece of land, untouched by the then racial laws.”

The Settlement, devoted to Gandhi’s principles of Satyagraha (*passive resistance*) has played an important spiritual and political role throughout its long history, promoting justice, peace and equality. Gandhi established the settlement as a communal experimental farm with the view of giving each family two acres of land which they could develop. He believed that communities like Phoenix which advocated communal living would form a sound basis for the struggle against social injustice. His granddaughter Ela Gandhi points out that Gandhi used the Settlement “to train political activists called satyagrahis as well as house their families, while they were engaged in the campaigns against unjust laws”. Her sister Sita describes the Phoenix Settlement as a lively, bustling community, a veritable *kutum*. Market gardens were established, their diary supplied milk to all the homesteads on the settlement as well as the neighbourhood, and they produced their own butter and ghee for domestic use. Everybody on the settlement had to participate in communal activities, such as the daily prayers and singing of hymns which Gandhi himself had instituted.

### Phoenix Settlement Trust

In 1913 Gandhi created the Phoenix Settlement Trust. After he left, his second son Manilal, who returned to South Africa in 1917 to assist in running the settlement, became the resident trustee of the Trust. Together Manilal and his...
wife Sushila supervised the running of the household after the pattern Gandhi and Kasturba had set, upholding his father's ideal to abolish class distinctions. His daughter Sita remembers how her father would invite local African children on a Sunday and how they would all go together for picnics to the nearby Inanda Falls in the uMngeni River. In 1946 he volunteered to enter the Passive Resistance Movement and the Defiance of Unjust Laws in 1952.

**Indian Opinion**

In 1903 Gandhi founded a newspaper, *Indian Opinion*, targeting mainly the Indian community. Initially the newspaper was published in four languages - Tamil, Hindi, Gudjerati and English - but later on the Tamil and Hindi editions ceased. Later renamed *Opinion*, the paper was printed at the Phoenix Settlement since 1904 on the printing press now on display in the museum at the Settlement. Until 1944 the printing press, built of wood and iron, was at the foot of the hill. The *Opinion* was published until August 1961.

Gandhi had hoped to use the newspaper to create social awareness to inequality, racism and other human rights issues. Since 1955 the newspaper introduced African viewpoints in its columns and with the adoption of the Freedom Charter in 1955 under the aegis of the Congress Alliance vigorous debates took place between the protagonists of non-racialism and others. Chief Albert Luthuli was a regular participant in these debates, through the *Opinion*.

In 1920 Gandhi's second son Manilal become editor of the Indian Opinion. After his death in 1956 his wife Sushila Gandhi took over the position of resident trustee and editor of the paper.

After the paper was discontinued in 1961, the Mahatma Gandhi Clinic was established in the press building; a crèche was later added in the Press Building alongside the clinic.

The *Opinion* was re-launched in October 2000 by the Deputy President of South Africa Mr. Jacob Zuma.

**Private School**

In 1952 a private school of local children was established at the Settlement. Within months this private school became so big that a 12 classroom school had to be built. Unfortunately the SA government stipulated that only children of Indian origin could attend. The school was totally destroyed in 1985.

**Gandhi's legacy continued**

In 1967 the Gandhi Work Camps projects was launched at the Phoenix Settlement to expose South Africans from diverse cultural backgrounds to work together, towards unity, and non-racialism. Several South Africans who are today political leaders in government, business persons, professionals, church leaders and leaders of NGO’s passed through these work-camps. These work camps were forced to close in 1975 due to government intimidation, killings, imprisonment, banning and banishment of its leaders.
In January 1971 the Committee for clemency, the forerunner of the Release Mandela Campaign, was launched at Phoenix. This was the first call and campaign for the release of all political prisoners, return of exiles and the unbanning of South Africans and of political parties.

In June 1971 the Ad Hoc Committee for the revival of the Natal Indian Congress was established at Phoenix. In October 1971 the Natal Indian Congress was officially resuscitated at Phoenix amid heavy police pressure and intimidation.

In 1972 the National Union of students was denied permission by the University to house delegates on its campus. Phoenix came to its rescue and housed hundreds of these delegates in defiance of laws and practices that demanded segregation on the basis of race. The SA Students Organization under the leadership of Steve Biko and Barney Pityana also accessed Phoenix Settlement for their conferences, workshops and seminars.

In September 1983, the First National executive Meeting of the United Democratic Front was held at Phoenix. Phoenix Settlement was a member of the UDF which united organizations against “apartheid”.

The settlement restored

After the 1985 Inanda Riots, the Settlement was badly damaged and taken over by about 8 000 informal settlers. Since then, the Phoenix Settlement Trust has faithfully restored the buildings and gardens to their original state and established an interpretation centre and museum. Sushila Gandhi (the wife of Manilal and mother of Sita and Ela) sees the “institution as a memorial to Gandhi,” and writes that it “will always be a place of pilgrimage, for those who seek inspiration to better their lives and gain a little from the great men who have passed on.” The Settlement and the immediate surrounding area is presently collectively known as Bhambayi (Bombay).

Gandhi honoured

In 1963 the Phoenix Settlement established the Gandhi Centenary Committee and this had several branches throughout the country. The Gandhi Museum and Library was built and the Gandhi Clinic was moved into new premises to mark the centenary celebrations. Despite the stringent government racist laws Phoenix continued to attract thousands of people from across racial lines. In 1969 the annual Gandhi Memorial Lecture was also launched at the Settlement.

In 1993 Phoenix Settlement Trust established the “Gandhi 100” to mark Gandhi’s arrival in SA. Twenty two sets of Gandhi’s collected works, sponsored by the Government of India, were donated to universities in South Africa. Local authorities, NGO’s, universities, cultural organizations, students, and the business sector were organized to celebrate Gandhi’s arrival.

Sources


Categories: Indian Community | Places | Indian South Africans | Durban Heritage Sites