

William Winstanley Pearson: The Natal Experience

by Anil Nauriya

THE year 2014 marks 100 years since the arrival in Natal of two Englishmen, Charles Freer Andrews (1871-1940) and William (“Willie”) Winstanley Pearson (1881-1923), from India to assist in the concluding stages of the Gandhiled Indian struggle in South Africa. Andrews is the better known of the two and there are biographies on him.¹ Pearson was a decade younger than Andrews and also pre-deceased him by nearly two decades. Andrews’ published corpus is vast. His work involved him in discussions with, among others, high imperial functionaries in South Africa, India and England. There are few such high imperial interactions in Pearson’s life which otherwise had a focus similar to Andrews’. Not surprisingly, Pearson is much lesser known although on his death the *Manchester Guardian*

described him as “the best loved Englishman in India”.² This article is primarily on Willie Pearson and his connection, a century ago, with Natal.

Willie Pearson’s father, Dr Samuel Pearson, was a well-known Congregationalist Minister in England, while his mother, Mrs Bertha Pearson, belonged to a famous Quaker family of London. Willie had studied at Cambridge and Oxford, majoring in the natural sciences and producing a thesis on the teleological aspects of evolution. Having joined the London Missionary Society (LMS), he had come out to India in 1907, inter alia, to teach botany at an LMS Institution in Calcutta. By 1909 he had also prepared an edition of Mazzini’s *Duties of Man*. Accompanied with a preface and biographical introduction by Pearson, this was published from Calcutta. For



Gandhi (centre) with C.F. Andrews (left) and W.W. Pearson (right), 1914 (photograph courtesy of the Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, Dell)

various reasons, including ill-health, Pearson returned to England in 1911. But he was soon back in India with teaching assignments in Delhi and would later find his way also to the Indian poet-laureate Rabindranath Tagore's educational institution, Shantiniketan at Bolpur, near Calcutta.

To Natal and Back

The trip to South Africa materialised rather unexpectedly for Willie Pearson towards the end of 1913. By the time C.F. Andrews and Pearson reached Durban by ship, on 2 January 1914, M.K. Gandhi (1869-1948) and many other passive resisters had been released from prison.³ Andrews was sent by the Indian statesman Gopal Krishna

Gokhale (1866-1915) who had become anxious with Gandhi having been arrested and this having been followed by the harassment and unexpected arrest on 25 November 1913 of an English associate of Gandhi, Albert West (b. c1880), who was then Acting Editor of the Indian leader's journal, *Indian Opinion*.⁴ West was charged with "harbouring indentured people".⁵ Gandhi, who had been arrested earlier in November, would recall:

Mr West was in charge of the English section of *Indian Opinion* and of the cable correspondence with Gokhale. At a time like the present, when the situation assumed a new aspect every moment, correspondence by post was out of the question. Cablegrams had to be dispatched, no shorter in length than letters, and the delicate



Rev. C.F. Andrews and W.W. Pearson (photograph courtesy of Indian Opinion, 1914)

responsibility regarding them was shouldered by Mr West.⁶

That was the reason why

[a]s soon as the news of the arrest of West was cabled to Gokhale, he initiated the policy of sending out able men from India No sooner, therefore, did he hear of West's arrest, than he inquired of Andrews by wire if he was ready to proceed to South Africa at once His beloved friend Pearson also got ready to go the same moment, and the two friends left India for South Africa by the first available steamer.⁷

According to Gandhi's journal, before leaving for South Africa, Pearson had already been "the spokesman for the European community at the great Delhi demonstration, addressed recently by the Hon. Mr Gokhale,

against the ill-treatment of Indians in South Africa".⁸ Not surprisingly, therefore, it was actually Susil Kumar Rudra, the eminent Indian Christian Principal of St Stephen's College in Delhi, who suggested that Pearson accompany Andrews on the tour; the two then visited the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore to secure his blessings before setting out for South Africa.⁹ A farewell meeting was held for the two and Tagore wrote: "Along with Mr Gandhi and others, you are fighting for our cause."¹⁰ The Nobel Prize for Tagore had also come in late 1913, making the poet's work, and *Gitanjali* in particular, widely known. Andrews and Pearson sailed from Calcutta via Madras.

Although in his multifarious pursuits Pearson seldom suffered from a lack



*Pearson and Rabindranath at Santinikatan
(photograph courtesy of Modern Review, 1923)*

of self-belief, he tended, especially in periods of solitude or on long voyages, to indulge an exaggerated sense of his own vulnerabilities. From the ship he wrote to Tagore: "The very thought that I go to South Africa as a messenger ... will strengthen me and help me to herd the broken threads of my life's purposes in that service of love."¹¹ In spite of this self-deprecating tendency, Pearson's cheery temperament ensured that his company was sought after, especially on long journeys during which he would tend to liven things up, at least for others.¹²

During the sea voyage, there was also indirect criticism of functionaries of the church: Pearson wrote, "Our time with the Bishop of Madras was very helpful. He is taking such a firm, uncompromising stand on the South African question He seems to me very unlike most Bishops!"¹³

On their arrival in Durban, Andrews and Pearson explained their plans.¹⁴ Pearson referred to the Quaker background of his family and to their belief in spiritual force which he shared.¹⁵ Andrews expected to stay for at least six weeks, Pearson for a month. During this period they would, among other things, "endeavour to see the conditions under which Indians work on the estates, coal mines and factories" and they would also be taken to the districts where Indians worked "independently as gardeners and small farmers, as artisans and traders".¹⁶ Visits to the Cape Colony and the Transvaal were also scheduled. On 18 January Pearson attended a reception given by G.M. Moodaley of Umgeni where he could meet farmers of the district.¹⁷ Pearson then visited the farmers of Sea Cow Lake before returning to Gandhi's Phoenix Settlement.¹⁸ On 25 January there was

a mass meeting of 3 000 Indians on the Indian Football Ground in Durban at which Andrews, Pearson, Albert West, H. Kallenbach (1871-1945), and H.S.L. Polak (1882-1959) were present along with Gandhi. The terms of the agreement reached with Jan Smuts in the negotiations at Pretoria, to which Andrews had also contributed, were explained. Before explaining the terms of the agreement, Gandhi referred to the letter that Andrews had received from England preparing him for the death of his mother.¹⁹ Andrews would leave for England later in February.

Pearson spent the bulk of his time in South Africa studying the labour conditions in the sugarcane plantations in Natal.²⁰ He was at the Phoenix Settlement itself for no more than two or three weeks. He studied the working of Magistrates' Courts and of the Office of the Protector of Indian Immigrants. In the period that Pearson spent at Phoenix, writes one inmate of the settlement, Pearson "became one with the children".²¹ Prabhudas Gandhi, who was at Phoenix at the time, writes:

While Mr Andrews spent his time discussing political problems with Gandhiji, Mr Pearson studied the life of the people. He walked for most of the day around Phoenix and saw how Indian indentured labourers lived. He also visited Africans' homes and found out what their problems were.²²

At the end of January 1914, Pearson gave evidence before the Inquiry Commission that had been set up in South Africa to go into Indian grievances which had culminated in the famous 1913 agitation and strike led by Gandhi and his colleagues such as Thambi Naidoo (1875-1933).²³ In his evidence before the Commission, Pearson sought



*Pencil sketch of W.W. Pearson by
Abanindranath Tagore
(photograph courtesy of Visva-
Bharati Quarterly, May 1939)*

the removal of the £3 tax which, he told the panel, was levied unfairly and lacked justification.²⁴

Pearson visited the coal-mining area around Newcastle in February.²⁵ At Newcastle, which had been the nerve-centre of the miners' strike, the local Passive Resistance Committee organised a reception in honour of Andrews and Pearson. The former had proceeded directly to Cape Town on account of his indisposition. In the event, Pearson attended the reception along with Kallenbach.²⁶ The report of this occasion is important especially because it highlights the involvement of Newcastle's St Oswald's School in the struggle. The school appeared to have provided the passive resisters with a support system and some meetings had in fact been held in the school premises. On the occasion of the reception for Pearson, too, *Indian Opinion* reported: "Some 150 of the residents assembled at the station to meet the guests and there were also gathered here the

children of St. Oswald's School under their headmaster, Mr Ephraim."²⁷ The headmaster, Abdial Massieka Ephraim, had actively supported the struggle and the school's hall had been the venue of a meeting of Newcastle Indians on 13 October 1913.²⁸

At the place of the reception, where Pearson and Kallenbach were escorted, were present, among many others, Messrs Vawda, Joshie, Ballaram, and Dwarkasingh, Mrs S. Ephraim and Mrs D. Lazarus.²⁹ Dossen Lazarus presided. The women had been active. Lazarus's sister-in-law, Miss Thomas, and his wife, Mrs D.M. Lazarus, whose home in Newcastle at 37 Murchison Street had become the virtual headquarters of the struggle in the area, had been greatly praised by Gandhi for their contribution.³⁰

Pearson's report on his visit to South Africa deals substantially with the question of indentured labour in Natal. It is a sophisticated work containing insights that are all the more remarkable for the fact that Pearson spent no more than two months in the country.³¹ In his report Pearson drew attention to several defects of the indenture system, the law and the administrative machinery. A couple of these may be mentioned here. Of the Office of "Protector of Indian Immigrants", Pearson remarked: "He seems to interpret the principles of British justice in a way that assumes all Indians to be guilty until they are proved to be innocent, and all the employers of Indians innocent until they are proved to be guilty."³² If the indentured labourer

has complaints against the employer and manages to pass the barrier of the interpreters, and thus reach the Protector himself, he has this initial prejudice to overcome, and then, if he manages to convince his official

guardian that there is justification for his complaint, he is ordered to go back to his employer pending inquiry and, if he refuses, he is handed over to the police for being absent without leave from his employer. This means that he is brought before the Magistrate, who is bound by law either heavily to fine the culprit or to send the unfortunate man to gaol for seven days with or without hard labour for a first offence, fourteen days with hard labour for a second offence, and up to thirty days with hard labour for any subsequent offence.³³

Under the curious provisions of the law (Section 101 of the Law No 25 of 1891), absence would be punishable even if the complaint was justified and successful:

When all or a large number of the Indian immigrants employed upon any estate or property shall absent themselves from their employment without leave for the purpose or on the pretence of making any complaint against their employer, such Indians or any number of them shall be liable to be brought before any court and, on conviction, to be punished by fine not exceeding £2 Sterling or by imprisonment for any period not exceeding two months, with or without hard labour, whether such complaint shall or shall not be adjudged to be groundless or frivolous and *notwithstanding that such complaint may be successful*.³⁴ [Italics Pearson's]

For the condition of indentured labour, Pearson placed the primary blame on the Colonial Government of India.³⁵ He appealed for mutual understanding between the communities. Having attended, along with other passive resisters, the funeral of Hurbat Singh, an Indian worker who had died in jail, Pearson recorded his impressions:

A short time after my arrival in Durban, I was walking behind the hearse of an old Indian labourer who died in gaol as a passive resister, at the age of 70. As we passed through the streets of Durban during luncheon hour, I was struck with the way in which hundreds of Europeans showed their respect for the dead body by removing their hats as the hearse passed. It seemed to me strange that this old man who, as a labourer, had for 40 years served this country, had to wait for death to claim his body before he could win the respect of the Christian public.³⁶

While in South Africa, Pearson made known his support for the promotion of racial equality and the fostering of social and political protest in that country. Phoenix was situated in the midst of a Zulu area. On one occasion Raojibhai M. Patel, who was also at Phoenix, accompanied Willie Pearson to meet the African educationist and leader John Langalibalele Dube (1871-1946), whose Ohlange Institute in Inanda was situated close to the Phoenix settlement. In January 1912 Dube had been chosen as the first President of the African National Congress (then known as the South African Native National Congress). Gandhi was well acquainted with Dube.³⁷ He had referred appreciatively to Dube as early as in 1905.³⁸ In November 1912 Gandhi had taken Gopal Krishna Gokhale, then on a tour of South Africa, to Dube's institution where the visiting leader was given a rousing reception.³⁹ The significance of Dube in African history may be gauged by the fact that when democracy and freedom were restored to South Africa in the 1990s, Nelson Mandela chose to cast his vote in Ohlange, Inanda, expressly recalling the memory and legacy of John Dube.

One may obtain a sense of Willie Pearson's extraordinary character and commitment to racial equality from the fact that on his visit to John Dube, he asked whether the Africans were ready to emulate the kind of passive resistance struggles launched by Indians. John Dube's reply to Willie Pearson, as recorded by Raojibhai Patel, indicated admiration for the Indian struggle under Gandhi's leadership and the endurance shown by even the unlettered among the Indians; he was doubtful, however, whether the struggle could be emulated by Africans without bringing forth severe retaliation from the ruling dispensation.⁴⁰

Pearson left for India on 27 February.⁴¹ On his return journey, he spent 10 days in Mozambique. He has provided us with a rare account of Indians living in Mozambique at the time.⁴² Keenly observant, he makes tell-tale comparisons between the treatment of Indians in South Africa and the treatment they receive in Portuguese-administered Mozambique. As a Britisher, he found it "humiliating" that "the treatment which British Indians receive at the hands of the Portuguese is so much better than that which they receive in British Colonies".⁴³ He was pleasantly surprised to find a Portuguese boy strike up a conversation with Pearson's Indian friends when they were travelling together on the railway, an experience which "was such a complete contrast to the behaviour of most European boys in South Africa towards Indians".⁴⁴ The Portuguese, Pearson went on to record in the article, "seem to mix freely even with the natives of the country, especially in the interior". He analysed the reason for the contrast between South Africa

and Mozambique as regards the Indians and concluded that "[t]here is amongst the Portuguese very little insularity or colour prejudice".⁴⁵ Pearson did notice, however, that the "Goanese element being largely Roman Catholic and consisting of Portuguese subjects helps to form a connecting link between British Indians and Portuguese." Along with his growing association with Indian nationalist tendencies, Pearson's experiences in South Africa and Mozambique had enabled him to cross many lines and several borders.

Pearson's later life

Soon after returning to India, Pearson joined the staff at Tagore's Shantiniketan not very far from Calcutta. His later life was not uneventful.⁴⁶ In 1915 he accompanied C.F. Andrews on a trip to Fiji to study the indentured labour problem there. Apart from teaching at Shantiniketan, Pearson accompanied Tagore on his trips to Japan and the United States. Later, in 1917, he wrote *For India*, a little book published from Japan in which he advocated Indian independence. The book was proscribed by the British Colonial regime in 1917. Pearson was arrested in April 1918 in China while he was on a visit there and sent back to England. He was placed under restrictions in England. Though he was allowed to return to India in 1921, he remained under police surveillance. Later he again returned home to England apparently to recoup his health. While on a visit to Italy in 1923 Willie Pearson fell out of a fast-moving train on 18 September and died a week later on 25 September. He was cremated in Pistoia where his ashes are still interred.

ENDNOTES

- 1 See, for example, Benarsidas Chaturvedi and Marjorie Sykes, *Charles Freer Andrews*, [first published, 1949], Indian Reprint, New Delhi, Publications Division, Government of India, 1982 and Hugh Tinker, *The Ordeal of Love: C F Andrews and India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- 2 "A Great Englishman", *Manchester Guardian*, 30 November 1923.
- 3 Gandhi recalled in 1924: "It was when almost all the leaders were arrested that Mr Gokhale ... sent Mr Andrews and Mr Pearson. Whilst their help was invaluable, it was not necessary to keep the sacrificial fire going. They were useful for conducting negotiations". "Interview to *The Hindu*", 15 April 1924, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Ahmedabad, Navajivan Trust, 1958-1994, [CW], Vol 23, p. 441 .
- 4 See Pranati Mukhopadhyay, "Africa and C.F. Andrews" in Somendranath Bose (ed.), Deenabandhu Andrews Centenary Volume, 1972, Calcutta, Deenabandhu Andrews Centenary Committee, 1972, pp. 152-171 at pp. 154-5.
- 5 *Indian Opinion*, 26 November 1913.
- 6 M.K. Gandhi (Valji Govindji Desai, Tr.), *Satyagraha in South Africa*, Ahmedabad, Navajivan Publishing House, (first published, 1928), second edition, 1950, p. 290.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 291.
- 8 *Indian Opinion*, 7 January 1914.
- 9 Probbhat Kumar Mukherji (Sisir Kumar Ghosh, Tr.), *Life of Tagore*, New Delhi, Indian Book Company, 1975, p.118.
- 10 *Idem*.
- 11 Pearson to Rabindranath Tagore, 14 December 1913, Pearson Papers, Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.
- 12 Among attributes that Pearson valued highly are those expressed in R.L. Stevenson's prayer which he cites in a letter to Tagore: "Give us courage, gaiety and a quiet mind"; he would, he writes, like to begin each day with it: Pearson to Rabindranath Tagore, 6 May 1913, Pearson Papers, Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.
- 13 Pearson to Rabindranath Tagore, 14 December 1913, Pearson Papers, Rabindra Bhavan, Shantiniketan.
- 14 There is a vivid description of their arrival in Andrews' letter of 6 January 1914 to Rabindranath Tagore and the reaction that followed in the Natal Press when Andrews, in an Indian gesture of respect, had touched Gandhi's feet. See C.F. Andrews, *Andrews' Papers: Bunch of Letters to Rabindranath Tagore and M.K. Gandhi*, Deenabandhu Andrews Centenary Committee, (n.d.), pp. 8-10.
- 15 *Indian Opinion*, 7 January 1914. In a letter to Rabindranath Tagore on 2 March 1914, Andrews wrote: "It interested me much also to hear Willie say in one of his speeches, that he could understand the Indian situation in S. Africa because his family had been quakers That was significant!". See C.F. Andrews, *Andrews' Papers: Bunch of Letters to Rabindranath Tagore and M.K. Gandhi*, Deenabandhu Andrews Centenary Committee, op. cit., p. 25 .
- 16 *Indian Opinion*, 7 January 1914.
- 17 *Indian Opinion*, 28 January 1914.
- 18 *Idem*.
- 19 "Durban Supports Mr Gandhi", *Indian Opinion*, 28 January 1914. Andrews' mother had in fact died earlier in January soon after his arrival in Durban from India.
- 20 Benarsidas Chaturvedi and Marjorie Sykes, *Charles Freer Andrews*, op. cit., p. 106.
- 21 Prabhudas Gandhi, *My Childhood With Gandhi*, Ahmedabad, Navajivan Publishing House, 1957, p. 178.
- 22 *Idem*.
- 23 These events and Gandhi's role in them have been written about by Pearson in "A Character Study of M.K. Gandhi" an essay included in W.W. Pearson, *The Dawn of a New Age and other Essays*, Madras, S.Ganesan, 1922, pp. 55-73. For Thambi Naidoo see also E.S. Reddy, *Thambi Naidoo and his family*, New Delhi, National Gandhi Museum and Library, 2014 .
- 24 *Indian Opinion*, 4 February 1914.
- 25 *Indian Opinion*, 4 & 18 February 1914.
- 26 "Mr Pearson at Newcastle", *Indian Opinion*, 18 February 1914.
- 27 *Idem*.
- 28 Yusuf H. Seedat, *Gandhi in Newcastle*, Part Two and Three, mimeograph, September 1980, p. 9 and p. 15. The mimeograph is available at the Fort Amiel Museum, Newcastle, KwaZulu-Natal.
- 29 "Mr Pearson at Newcastle", *Indian Opinion*, 18 February 1914.
- 30 M.K. Gandhi, "The Last Satyagraha Campaign: My Experience", *Indian Opinion*, Golden Number, 1914; CW, Vol 12, p. 512.
- 31 W.W. Pearson, "Report on my visit to South Africa", *Modern Review*, Vol XV, No 6, June 1914, pp. 629-42.

- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 632.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 633.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 636.
- 35 “Mr Pearson’s Impressions”, *Indian Opinion*, 4 March 1914.
- 36 *Idem.*
- 37 See my article, “Gandhi and Some Contemporary African leaders from KwaZulu-Natal”, *Natalia*, No 42, December 2012, pp. 45-64.
- 38 *Indian Opinion*, 2 September 1905, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, [CW], Vol 5, p. 55.
- 39 *Ilanga Lase Natal*, 15 November 1912.
- 40 E.S. Reddy, *Gandhiji’s Vision of a Free South Africa*, New Delhi, Sanchar Publishing House, 1995, pp. 23-6. Raojibhai M. Patel was an inmate of the Phoenix settlement who accompanied Pearson to his meeting with Dube. Patel wrote his account of this meeting in Gujarati in a work published in India in 1939 under the title *Gandhijini Sadhana*.
- 41 *Indian Opinion*, 4 March 1914.
- 42 W.W. Pearson, “British Indians in Portuguese East Africa”, *Modern Review*, July 1914, pp. 45-46. See also report of Pearson’s letter from Beira, Mozambique to Rustomjee in South Africa, *Indian Opinion*, 22 April 1914.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- 44 *Idem.*
- 45 Interestingly, another keen observer recorded a similar lack of racial feeling in mainland France of the 1920s: See K.M. Panikkar, *An Autobiography*, Madras, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 61. Panikkar wrote: “Only in Paris do we find a complete absence of colour bar. Everyone knows that the British look down on coloured people. The reverse was true of Paris.” Both the Portuguese attitudes noticed by Pearson and the French noticed by Panikkar would, however, come under strain in subsequent decades.
- 46 See Anil Nauriya, *English Anti-Imperialism and the Varied Lights of Willie Pearson*, NMML Occasional Paper: History and Society Series, New Delhi, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, 2014.