

PM traces the Mahatma's historic steps

None | By Chaitanya Kalbag, Durban

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The Prime Minister boarded a 124-year-old train with wooden carriages, pulled by an ancient steam locomotive, for the short, 10-kilometre journey from Pentrich to Pietermaritzburg Station. He sat in the first-class coach. Not far were a clutch of Pietermaritzburg's Indian worthies and leaders of the Gandhi Memorial Committee. All of them were enjoying a privilege Mohandas Gandhi did not.

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rain chuffed along on a disused narrow-gauge track, it was not easy, in today's South Africa, to picture the young Barrister-at-Law who ran headlong into his first brush with racial prejudice.

The Prime Minister told reporters on the noisy platform, his low, soft voice drowned by the hissing locomotive, that he was glad to be in the "blessed land of South Africa, to breathe something of the air which transformed Mahatma Gandhi and in many ways laid the spiritual foundation of India's freedom struggle... so it is for me an act of pilgrimage."

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Pietermaritzburg, home to 150,000 Indians, is indelibly linked to Gandhi's name. But satyagraha's birth was long in coming after Gandhi landed in Durban in May 1893, a young 24-year-old lawyer, eager to make his mark with the migrant Indian sugar plantation labourers who had helped fuel a boom in the South African colonies in the 1860s. Barely a week after he landed, Gandhi bought an upper-class ticket and climbed into a first-class



launched his first civil disobedience movement against the Asiatic Registration Act in the Transvaal on 11 September 1906, but the decision to stay on and fight the injustice of colour was taken on the platform at Pietermaritzburg, as the young lawyer sat shaken and humiliated with his belongings strewn around him.

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For Gandhi, who rated cowardice a worse sin than violence, the choice became clear on that cold night. He debated going back to India, but, as he wrote in his autobiography, "It would be cowardice to run back to India without fulfilling my obligation. The hardship to which I was subjected was superficial — only a symptom of the deep disease of colour prejudice. I should, if possible, root out the disease and suffer hardships in the process. So I decided to take the next available train to Pretoria."

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The prime minister noted that the idea of satyagraha eventually led Gandhi back to his own country and to lead the struggle for independence from Britain. "I am awed and humbled to be at the very spot at which began the transformation of an ordinary young lawyer into an extraordinary legend who influenced the destiny of my country," Manmohan Singh wrote in the visitors' book at the Pietermaritzburg City Hall.

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Later, the prime minister laid a wreath at a Gandhi statue on Church Street in Pietermaritzburg. For the Indian community in the capital of Kwazulu-Natal province, it was a moment to savour. Bunny Bhoola, whose great-grandfather was shipped from Surat in 1852 to work on the sugar plantations in hinterland of the busy port, said the past decade had been good for her travel business. "Everything is opening up, and the world is coming to South Africa," she said happily, pausing to click a picture of Manmohan Singh.

On Sunday, the prime minister will visit the Resistance Monument on Umbilo road in Durban, which marks the site where Indians launched a passive resistance movement against apartheid in 1946, and visit a memorial to Dr John Langalibalele Dube, the founding father of the African National Congress. Manmohan Singh will also visit Phoenix Settlement, where he and President Thabo Mbeki will tour the complex Gandhi set up in 1904.

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On Sunday evening the two leaders will meet again at the Kingsmead Stadium, where they will address a public gathering. The Indian delegation will then fly to Johannesburg for a busy day of bilaterals on Gandhiji's birth anniversary on October 2. The prime minister is scheduled to meet Nelson Mandela on Monday.



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