

JOSEPH ROYEPPEN – A BARRISTER WHO JOINED THE SATYAGRAHA IN SOUTH AFRICA¹

E. S. Reddy

Joseph Devasayagem Royeppen, a barrister and graduate of Cambridge University joined the Satyagraha in the Transvaal in December 1909, soon after his return from study in England. and served four terms in prison with hard labour. His sacrifice reinforced the morale of the resisters when their numbers were dwindling. Several of his relatives also went to prison.

Mr. Royeppen was born in South Africa in 1871. His parents – Devasayagem and Catherine – arrived in Durban from Madras on 30 June 1865 with their three children.² They were devout Christians. They turned their modest home into a church where members of the family and others could pray. They set up the first school for Indians and “Coloured people” in Durban.

Joseph was a good student. He went to primary school with European children, but was refused admission to secondary school so that he had to study at home.

He obtained a certificate in Art. He was a musician. He passed the Natal Civil Service examination by home study and the certificate was presented to him at a reception by the Indian community, organised by Gandhiji at the Natal Indian Congress hall. He was seventh in the list of fifteen candidates who passed the examination, but was not offered an appointment while those below his level were employed by the government.

Gandhiji was impressed by Joseph, a member of the Natal Indian Congress, and took him as a clerk to assist him in the office of the Natal Indian Congress. He lived with Gandhiji in his villa. He served with his older brother, Manikum, under the leadership of Gandhiji, in the Natal Indian Ambulance Corps during the Anglo-Boer War.

After the Ambulance Corps was disbanded in February 1900, he went to England with the help of Gandhiji and all the savings of his family. He studied at Cambridge University where he obtained B.A., LL.B. with distinction. He also passed the Bar Final examination at Lincoln’s Inn becoming the first South Africa-born Indian barrister and graduate of a British university.

While studying in England he helped Gandhiji on his two visits in 1906 and 1909. Along with five other Indian students, he sent a letter on 3 November 1906 to Lord Crewe, Secretary of State for the Colonies, pointing out the inequity of the Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance of the Transvaal which the Indian community in that province vowed to resist.

¹ D. Royeppen, a grandson of Joseph Royeppen, did some research about his grandfather while he was a student at the University of Natal. Some of the information in this article is taken from the report of D. Royeppen. Most of the other information is from *Indian Opinion*.

² Gandhiji wrote in *Satyagraha in South Africa* that Joseph Royeppen was the son of an indentured labourer. Mrs. M. Royeppen, his niece, informed me that his father was not indentured but came to South Africa as an Anglican missionary.

Gandhiji wrote in *Indian Opinion* on 25 September 1909:

“Mr. Joseph, Royeppen, who was called to the Bar a long time ago, was not able to return so far as he was short of money. Even a fund was raised in the Transvaal for him. He is now sailing by the *Tintagel Castle*. He intends to live in poverty and offer his services to the motherland. I wish he remains firm in his idea. If necessary, he assures me categorically, he will even go to gaol in the Transvaal...”

Mr. Royeppen returned to Durban in September 1909 after eight years in England and was given a reception by the Indian community. He did not register as an advocate in Natal as his thoughts were on the struggle in the Transvaal for the honour of India.

On 17 December 1909, he left Durban for Volksrust with Gandhiji and five others to challenge the Transvaal Immigration Restriction Act of 1907 and claim his right as a British citizen to enter the Transvaal.³ This Act was enacted to restrict immigration of Indians. It allowed only the former Indian residents of the Transvaal to enter after passing a strict education test. After entering the Transvaal, the Indian immigrants were required to register under the Asiatic Act which the Indian community was resisting under the leadership of Gandhiji.

Gandhiji and his party were, however, allowed to proceed to Johannesburg without being stopped at the border. At a reception given by the Indian community in Johannesburg to these volunteers, Mr. Royeppen said that after almost nine years absence from home, he thought he would be able to pass Christmas season among his people. But when the larger duty about the Transvaal struggle faced him, he quickly decided what he should do. “It was a terrible wrench for him to leave his old mother. But she willingly spared him for the sake of the Motherland.”⁴

He went hawking fruit in Johannesburg and was arrested in January. Mr. Schururman, the magistrate, expressed regret that he had to pass an order of deportation against an Indian occupying Mr. Royeppen’s status. Mr. Royeppen answered that he was there to suffer for his principle.⁵

He defied the order of deportation, returned to the Transvaal and was sentenced to three months with hard labour. In an appeal “to my countrymen” on the eve of his imprisonment, he said that Indians were engaged in a struggle for the honour and respect of India. He called on his countrymen to stand as firm as a rock until victory was won. He appealed particularly to his

³ In a letter sent to *Natal Mercury* before leaving for the Transvaal and published on 23 December, he said he was going to the Transvaal to test whether he had acquired sufficient status to exercise the rights of British citizenship, especially the right to reside in any part of British dominions, or whether the fact of his race or colour denudes him of any status. *Indian Opinion*, 1 January 1909.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. 29 January 1910

Tamil brothers to stand firm to the end.⁶

P.K. Naidoo, who was in prison with Mr. Royeppen, told *Indian Opinion* (5 March 1910) that he did all his work, including the carrying of slop pails, with the utmost cheerfulness, telling his fellow-prisoners that he had not gone to jail to pose as a B.A. but to be a common labourer. *Indian Opinion* commented: “Of such will the resurrected Indian nation be made.”⁷

After release from prison, he said that, among the many benefits he had derived from his incarceration, he valued nothing as much as the fact of his having become a vegetarian.⁸

He continued to court imprisonment and was sentenced to six weeks with hard labour in May 1910; three months with hard labour in July 1910 and three months with hard labour on 19 January 1911.⁹

Gandhi and Smuts signed a provisional agreement on 20 May 1911 and the satyagraha in the Transvaal was suspended. Mr. Royeppen joined other former prisoners in the Tolstoy Farm.

Half a dozen relatives of Royeppen were in jail by October 1910.¹⁰ Samuel Joseph, a nephew who was headmaster of the Seaview School, Durban, went with Mr. Royeppen to the Transvaal in December 1909 and served two terms in prison – three months with hard labour and six weeks with hard labour. Solomon Royeppen, another nephew, was among the resisters from the Phoenix Settlement in 1913, and served three months with hard labour.

Indian Opinion said on July 9, 1910:

“We congratulate this barrister-passive resister, hawker and labourer upon his unique experiences. His presence in the gaol has been a matter of encouragement and of education to his fellow-prisoners. By his intense desire to share in the fullest measure the hardships of his co-prisoners he has endeared himself to them, and by his unflinching good humour and the philosophic calmness with which he has gone through his experiences he has greatly strengthened his fellow resisters. Mr. Royeppen’s evolution has astonished his friends, and we believe equally the authorities. At first it was considered that he, who has been the pet of his family, has been softly nurtured, and has had a pleasing experience for a number of years of English life, would not be able to stand the rough life of an Indian convict, especially during the trying winter months of the Transvaal. No such fear is now entertained by the community... Mr. Royeppen found himself in

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 5 March 1910

⁸ Ibid., 7 May 1910

⁹ *Indian Opinion*, 18 May 1910, 30 July 1910 and 21 January 1910.

¹⁰ Ibid. 29 October 1910

harness immediately on his discharge. He has gone to Tolstoy Farm and is there working like a common labourer – minding nothing. He takes his hand at wood chopping, water carrying, loading and off loading, laundry work – in fact, every form of what is generally termed menial work. His good humour never fails him in all he does. And he fills his companions with joy by wearing a pleasant smile on his lips even when he is doing the hardest work to which he is not accustomed.”

Mr. Royeppen returned to Durban in 1912 and practised law with Mr. Turner. He was active in public work, especially with the youth, leading deputations to the authorities, drafting petitions and writing letters to the press. He was secretary of the Durban Reception Committee for Professor Gopal Krishna Gokhale on his visit in 1912.

He later moved to the Transvaal and became a member of the Transvaal British Indian Association, founded by Gandhiji in 1903, which was leading the protests against new anti-Indian measures. When the South African Indian Congress was established in May 1923, he was elected to its council as one of the three representatives of the British Indian Association.

He was elected by Madras Presidency as one of the delegates to the Nagpur Congress in 1921 to represent Transvaal Indians, and visited Gandhiji’s Ashram at Sabarmati.¹¹

He passed away in June 1960.

¹¹ Pyarelal, *Mahatma Gandhi, Volume I: The Early Phase*, page 492