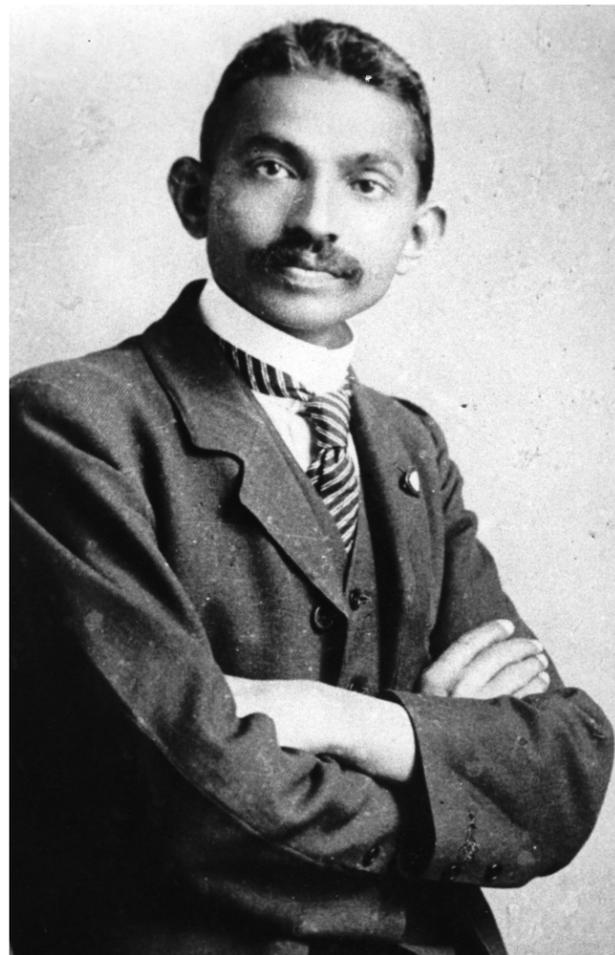


Introduction

Though Mohandas K. Gandhi is generally associated with the history of India, *Satyagraha* focuses on the years he spent in South Africa from 1893 to 1914. The opera unfolds thematically rather than chronologically, depicting the development of Gandhi's philosophy of *satyagraha* ("truth force"), which guided his concept of political struggle through active, loving, non-violent resistance. Each act is dedicated to a "guardian spirit"—a historical figure representing the past, present, and future of *satyagraha* thought. Within each act, each scene has a title specifying its place in Gandhi's biography.



Gandhi in South Africa (1906)

In fond memory of **Tara Colburn**, supertitles are underwritten by **Dunard Fund USA**.

ACT I: Tolstoy

The Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy, a proponent of non-violent protest who corresponded with Gandhi in his later years, is guardian spirit.



Prelude (1893)

Before the opera proper begins, we find Gandhi, recently arrived in South Africa, moments after he has been thrown from the "white people's" compartment of a train because of his darker skin. He picks himself up, gathers his belongings, and prepares for a new life of struggle.

Scene 1: The Kuru Field of Justice

The story opens with a scene depicting the mythic setting of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the Hindu sacred text central to Gandhi's worldview. With his army poised to attack on a field of battle, the valiant Arjuna has second thoughts about the ethics of war. The driver of his chariot is revealed to be an incarnation of the god Krishna, who expounds upon the ethics of war, faith, and moral duty.

Gandhi narrates this story. He is joined in mid-narration by Arjuna himself, then by Krishna, who offers Gandhi a central ethical principle: maintain equanimity with respect to the material aspects of experience, but "brace yourself for the fight."

Scene 2: Tolstoy Farm

The setting moves from the mythic plane to the historical settlement established in 1910 outside Johannesburg by Gandhi and his associate, Hermann Kallenbach. Here Gandhi gathers his followers, known as *satyagrahis*, to enact the principles of their movement in daily life. They build, weave, cook, and live in a spirit of self-reliance. Gandhi stresses the need for both theory and practice—the daily enactment of one's beliefs. His wife Kasturbai, his secretary Miss Schlesen, and a third follower, Mrs. Naidoo, sing of the dignity of honest work, while Kallenbach emphasizes the importance of work free from greed, desire, or concern about failure.

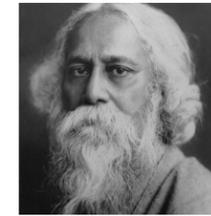
Scene 3: The Vow

Jumping back in time to September 1906, the community of Indians living in South Africa gather under Gandhi's leadership to resist the Black Act, a law requiring that they carry registration papers at all times, subject to fines, prison or deportation. Thousands, gathered at a public meeting, swear a solemn vow that they will refuse to register, even at the risk of death.

Parsi Rustomji, a *satyagrahi*, sings to the assembled crowd about the need to overcome doubt with spiritual wisdom, despite the suffering that may be involved. As people raise their hands to affirm their vows, the chorus stresses the importance of sacrifice in a meaningful life.

ACT II: Tagore

The Indian poet and activist Rabindranath Tagore, whose work in support of popular self-reliance was contemporary with Gandhi's, serves as guardian spirit.



Scene 1: Confrontation and Rescue

Still farther back in time, in 1896, Gandhi has returned to South Africa from a visit home to India. Already well known, he is the target of anti-Indian resentment. A threatening crowd gathers to chase him as he moves from his ship into the port town. The wife of the police superintendent, Mrs. Alexander, comes to support him and escort him to safety. Mrs. Alexander sings verses describing cruel, witless "devilish folk ... maddened by pride and hypocrisy." The chorus responds with a song of pride, pleasure, greed, and murder.

Scene 2: Indian Opinion

Essential to the practice of *satyagraha* was the dissemination of news, information, and ideas. To this end, Gandhi initiated publication of a newspaper called *Indian Opinion*, a forum for dialogue on the progress of South Africa's Indian community. This scene, again set in 1906, the year of the Black Act, depicts the editing and publication of the newspaper. Kallenbach and Miss Schlesen sing verses about the need to work for the welfare of others—the mission of *Indian Opinion*. Gandhi's wife Kasturbai, Mrs. Naidoo, and Parsi Rustomji cite verses explaining that God himself is the model for such labor, needing nothing himself, but working to inspire human labor and so maintain his creation.

Scene 3: Protest

Two years later, the struggle against the Black Act has escalated. The government has proposed that the act will be repealed if Indians register voluntarily. The community has agreed, but the government has gone back on its word, enforcing the act. On August 16, 1908, Gandhi leads a crowd of 3,000 in burning their registration documents in protest. The scene is highlighted by Gandhi's prayer, in which he reflects on Lord Krishna's opposition to hatred, his calls for self-restraint and equanimity, and his love for the righteous.

ACT III: King

Martin Luther King, Jr., the U.S. civil rights leader who took inspiration from Gandhi and the idea of *satyagraha*, is guardian spirit.



New Castle March

The final scene and act takes place in 1913, on the night before the largest demonstration Gandhi led in South Africa: a cross-country march toward Tolstoy Farm, protesting against a new tax on Indian residents. The protest will begin the next morning in the coalmining town of New Castle, where Indian miners will go on strike to join the movement. Five thousand have gathered to begin the trek.

Kasturbai and Mrs. Naidoo pass the vigil singing verses comparing self-restraint and serenity to the virtue of wakefulness during a night when most others are asleep. Then Gandhi reflects on the Lord's eternal return—his many rebirths, each in an era when the world needs him to fight evil and restore righteousness.

Across the stage and across the span of time, Martin Luther King, Jr., silently delivers his "I Have a Dream" speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Reprinted by kind permission of the Metropolitan Opera.

New Sounds

Classically trained, Philip Glass became fascinated with Indian music after collaborating with sitarist Ravi Shankar. "What came to me as a revelation was the use of rhythm in developing an overall structure in music,"

he recalled in his autobiography *Music by Philip Glass*. He developed a new musical language, where melodic ideas emerge seamlessly out of a pattern of repetitive musical structures, weaving in and out of an aural tapestry. Throughout *Satyagraha*, Glass meshes his unique style with a format dating back to the Baroque era: the *chaconne*, in which a repeated harmonic progression provides the foundation for varying melodies heard above it. At the beginning of the opera, for example, a four-bar pattern played by the cellos repeats throughout the 22-minute scene—it's heard in numerous variations, played by different combinations of instruments, but is always recognizable. Over this, the singers are heard in ever-changing melodies and vocal combinations.

