

Was Mahatma Gandhi Racist?

by Saurabh Jha



When I was a child, my parents tried writing my future. They told me that I would become a doctor, have an arranged marriage, and worship Mahatma Gandhi. This was common for first generation Indian migrants to Britain, land-locked in a time capsule of bucolic nostalgia.

The first test of my destiny was when I was nine. My parents made me watch Richard Attenborough's "Gandhi," starring Ben Kingsley. They asked what I thought of the film. I had seen Star Wars the week before, so my standards were exacting. Worried that I would give the plot away, I hesitatingly replied, "Gandhi got shot", thereby reducing India's freedom struggle to point blank range.

As a growing lad, coming to terms with my own ethnicity in the land of the former colonialists, I became besotted by Bhagat Singh, the combative freedom fighter who was hung for assassinating a British police officer who had beaten to death Singh's hero and another freedom fighter, Lala Lajpat Rai. In

a fit of adolescent rebelliousness, I sometimes pushed the envelope too far.

"Gandhi should have been more supportive of Bhagat Singh," I said defiantly.

"Gandhiji, call him Gandhi Jee," my father scolded me.

"Ji" is a Hindi word for respect. We call our father's friends "uncle-ji." But I didn't feel Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, a man who wasn't my father's friend, owned my respect just because he was "Bapu", the Father of India.

"Saints should be judged guilty until they are proved innocent," reflected [George Orwell](#) about Gandhi. As a youth, Gandhi was no saint. He [confessed](#) to refusing to abandon his carnal duties with his wife when his father was literally dying. He also confessed to lying, stealing, and smoking – which is tame for most young men, but a tad scandalous for a "Mahatma," which means "a great soul."

In [The South African Gandhi](#), two fastidious historians, Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed, have uncovered even more evidence that Gandhi was far from a great soul. History is written by those who can be bothered to write it. Desai and Vahed have gone to great troubles to show that Gandhi, who spent several years in South Africa as a young lawyer, was plagued by the same foibles as others in his time. They reveal that Gandhi didn't think highly of black Africans. He called them "Kaffirs", a derogatory term, was indifferent to their plight, and wanted them segregated from Indians. He despised their beer, too.

At first, it seems odd that the man who fasted so that Hindu-Muslim riots would end, could be so – and there is no charitable way to say this – racist. However, this would be a superficial interpretation of the scholarship of Desai and Vahed. Their work explains what Nietzsche described as a powerful human emotion – [ressentiment](#) – a potent shame that is nurtured in vanity.

Gandhi, as a young man, admired and supported the British. During the Second Boer War, he organized volunteers for the Indian Ambulance Corps. Indeed, he was on the same side as Winston Churchill, who was captured by the Boers, and who would go on to call Gandhi a "seditious middle temple lawyer." That Gandhi, then, identified more with the British than black Africans is a sentiment not uncommon in upper caste Hindus, even today. Gandhi's reckoning, what may have induced the resentment, came when he was thrown off a first-class cabin in a train despite paying for a first-class ticket. Because of the segregation laws in South Africa, only whites could sit in first class. For an educated upper-caste Hindu, who rightly thought that he was not inferior to whites, this was a slap on the cheek, and Gandhi refused to turn the other cheek.



It may not have been the suffering of the blacks and Indians in South Africa which transformed Mohandas to Mahatma, but his personal sleight. Revolutions are often personal. Revolutionaries are bounded by their own vanity and Gandhi expressed his vanity in unconventional ways. His insistence on

drinking goat milk, his sartorial thrift, which made Churchill call him a “half-naked fakir,” and his boundless embrace of a contrived poverty that made one observer comment that it cost a lot keeping Gandhi poor, were surrogates of narcissism which could only come from a man who believed that he, and he alone, spoke for India. This did not go unnoticed by Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the debonair leader of the Muslim league, and founder of Pakistan, who saw through Gandhi’s conceit, and refused to join the flock.

Gandhi took his pet ideology, *ahimsa* (non-violence), very personally. After the massacre in Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar, when a British general shot peaceful Indian protesters to teach Indians a lesson, Gandhi started the Non-cooperation movement, in which, Indians stopped buying British goods. The movement was successful, and peaceful, except for an isolated episode which became known as the “Chauri Chaura” incident. Two years into the movement, protesters in Gorakhpur, a town in Uttar Pradesh, burnt a police station in retaliation for the police opening fire on them. Gandhi, feeling responsible for the Chauri Chaura violence because he started the Non-cooperation movement, did what he did best – he fasted. And then – depending on your perspective – out of vanity, or petulance, or principle, he called off the Non-cooperation movement.

It is debatable if the British would have left India in the 1920s if Indians continued boycotting their goods. But Gandhi’s reason for calling off the movement is instructive. He felt that Indians were not ready to be liberated because they were too violent. Even violence in retaliation to violence, in Gandhi’s eyes, made Indians unfit for independence. The irony is both deep and tragic. The death toll in Chauri Chaura – less than thirty people died – would pale into insignificance compared to the million killed in the partition. Gandhi, like Churchill, felt that Indians, because of their actions, could be demonstrably unfit for freedom.

With astounding paternalism, Gandhi felt that he was the arbiter of their suitability for freedom. If Churchill didn't think highly of Indians unconditionally, Gandhi thought highly of them only conditionally.

So blinded was Gandhi by his ideology of non-violence that it made him woefully non-judgmental. During the Second World War (WW2), Gandhi [advised](#) the Jews that if they'd only turn the other cheek they'd melt Hitler's heart. It was not Hitler's conscience that Gandhi grotesquely overestimated, but his own self-importance. Gandhi, in an [ingratiating](#) letter to Hitler, which began with "Dear friend," reassured the Führer, "We have no doubt about your bravery or devotion to your fatherland, nor do we believe that you are the monster described by your opponents."

Sounding like Sherlock Holmes speaking to Dr. Watson, Gandhi described his methods to Hitler. "We have found in non-violence a force which, if organized, can without doubt match itself against a combination of all the most violent forces in the world. In non-violent technique, as I have said, there is no such thing as defeat. It is all 'do or die' without killing or hurting."

Finally, Gandhi offered Hitler his prescription, "You will lose nothing by referring all the matters of dispute between you and Great Britain to an international tribunal of your joint choice." Gandhi's priceless advice to Hitler wreaked of a naiveté that can only come from conceit. It is one thing winning freedom through non-violence. It is another matter asking that France and Poland be under the German banner through non-violence. What was Gandhi thinking?

For the British, Gandhi, though pesky, was a godsend as an activist who eagerly went to jail and eagerly fasted, but left their affairs untouched. Even as Gandhi was deep in the Quit India movement during WW2, Indian soldiers were fighting for the allies. More Indians have died fighting for Churchill's

“finest hour” than in India’s wars with China and Pakistan.

The British arguably preferred Gandhi as the face of India’s freedom struggle over more intemperate sorts, such as Subhash Chandra Bose, a firebrand Bengali, who decided, perhaps foolishly, that Indians needed to physically fight for their independence. Bose, once a devotee of Gandhi, broke off from Gandhi’s principle of *ahimsa*, and waged a forlorn war against the Allied forces in the East.

Gandhi left two legacies for India – fasting and *ahimsa*. Fasting has caught on as a weapon of activism. Recently, an Indian social activist, Anna Hazare threatened to fast indefinitely if an anti-corruption bill was not passed. Hazare broke his fast after 290 hours. A former army man with a Gandhi complex, Hazare once saw it fit to publicly flog several young men he had never met before for consuming alcohol. Starving was easier than *ahimsa*.

The narrative that India achieved her freedom because of Gandhi’s non-violence, non-cooperation, and by turning the other cheek, reducing the British to irreparable guilt, is simplistic and untrue. It ignores the underbelly of violence in India’s freedom struggle, such as the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, the martyrdom of the more impetuous revolutionaries such as Bhagat Singh, and the bloodbath of the partition. It also ignores economics, and India may very well have achieved her freedom, technically, by non-violence.

Why the British really left India will always be controversial. Churchill, the wartime prime minister, had no immediate plans for exit. Many Indians are indebted to the Labour Party, as it was Clement Attlee’s government, immediately after the war, that pulled out of India. Their debt to Attlee is misplaced. Britain was in financial tatters after WW2 and managing the colonies became untenable, which showed by the haste with which the British deserted India – like rats deserting a ship in partial construction. Their

speedy exit had consequences. Law and order quickly degenerated because police outposts in cities such as Lahore and Amritsar, which had the bloodiest sectarian violence, were woefully unattended.

The Mahatma was an odd character who set moral standards for others that he failed. He slept naked with women to practice self-control for his celibacy. His celibacy was self-imposed, as it is doubtful that he consulted his wife, Kasturba, who he fatally forbade from taking penicillin for pneumonia because he felt that antibiotics were unnatural. Later, he had no problems taking quinine for malaria.

Even Gandhi's assassin, Nathuram Godse, a Hindu fundamentalist, was an odd man. Godse was angry with Gandhi because he believed that Gandhi had double standards during the partition and felt he admonished, selectively, the Hindus for the violence. The final straw for Godse was when Gandhi fasted so that India give Pakistan the money that was set aside for her, which had been withheld by the Indian government because Pakistan had attacked Kashmir. The Indian government has allowed Godse's [memoirs](#) to be published. Godse had exchanged letters with one of Gandhi's sons, Ramdas, explaining his actions. The Epistolary, started by Ramdas, is intense but Ramdas remained unconvinced by Godse's reasons for killing his dad. The two men finally agreed to disagree. True to his father's legacy, Ramdas asked that Godse not be hung but his request was declined.

Recently, I heard a few Americans admonishing the Founding Fathers for being "slave-owning white males." I felt that their disdain towards the founders was unfair. Some of their practices were, undoubtedly, barbaric by today's standards, but in many ways the founders were ahead of their times. I then understood why I was ambivalent towards Gandhi. Once I accepted that the Mahatma was no Mahatma, I realized that Gandhi was a great man.

Gandhi should not be judged with foresight. He was an imperfect, though not a uniquely flawed, man who united a divided “almost nation.” India, as it exists today, only existed during a few epochs. The British, known for divide and rule, curiously united India. Indians can debate endlessly if the British Raj was a net good for the country, but what can’t be debated is that before the British landed, India was a rag tag of small states – there was no India. Without the British, India might have become another Europe. It is history’s accident that India became a united European super state without a formal referendum.

The greatest misjudgment of Gandhi isn’t that he was a saint, but in failing to recognize that he was a consummate politician – a shrewd self-promoter, a Machiavellian to the core and, not unlike Charles De Gaulle, a nationalist, albeit a more expedient nationalist. Gandhi was no Dalai Lama, but the Dalai is in exile, and Gandhi died in an independent India. It is not Gandhi’s godliness that Indians should worship. It is his pragmatism that they should admire.

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