

Gandhi's legacy: Beyond Black or White

[Rajeev Kadambi](#) | Updated on May 13, 2021



Upright: Gandhi instilled courage in people to act irrespective of their social station - ISTOCK.COM

The present arena of hatred against Gandhi is undermining a rich and complex history of anti-racial and anti-imperial struggles

*** A High Court in Malawi, East Africa, recently stalled the construction of a statue of MK Gandhi on the ground that his statements proved he was racist and prejudiced against Black Africans**

*** Non-violent resistance was an active social force to transform the other through suffering and not retaliating — transformation involved both the victim and oppressor**

*** Neither King nor Mandela wholly adopted the spiritual practices of Gandhi. But this precisely points to the creativity of the moment**

A High Court in Malawi, East Africa, recently stalled the construction of a statue of MK Gandhi on the ground that his statements proved he was racist and prejudiced against Black Africans. Objections to Gandhi's views on race have been the flavour of the season, with the rise of such incidents in different parts of the world in recent times — especially during the “Black Lives Matter” movement. A major work that provides grist for the mill is *The South African Gandhi: Stretcher-Bearer of Empire* by Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed. This is a racy aggregation that plucks Gandhi's words out of context.

It is relevant here to refer to Nelson Mandela's statement that Gandhi's objection to Indians being classified with Africans in prison was a reaction not to the local people but to criminals in jail. While he did not deny Gandhi's early statements, he described the position as an ambivalence in his attitude. Gandhi himself once remarked that he purposely did not invite South Africans in his struggle on behalf of Indians against Whites in South Africa, as he felt it would have “endangered their cause”. This could be because he saw peculiarities in the Indian social and political situation in South Africa vis-à-vis the African community.

The issue is not about arranging what Gandhi said and when, but to understand him in practical terms, as someone who lived and acted well. At any rate, if he was a racist as is claimed, how is it that he exerted such an enormous influence on Black leaders and movements for racial justice across the world?

Power of non-violent social change

Early Black activists such as Jamaican Marcus Garvey and clergyman and educator, George Hancock, and Christian missionaries were inspired by Gandhi and his ideas of soul force used against colonial rule. The renowned American sociologist and civil rights activist, WEB Du Bois, admired Gandhi for “loving his enemies”. Gandhi replied to his request in 1929 for a message to Black Americans with: “There is no dishonour in being slaves. There is dishonour in being slave-owners.” After Gandhi’s death in 1948, Du Bois referred to him as the “Prince of Peace”.

The first Black delegation to visit Gandhi in India was led by educator and activist Howard Thurman and others from Howard University, US, in February 1936. They tried to understand the intricacies of non-violence and its relevance for racial segregation in America. After giving an extensive reply, Gandhi famously prophesied: “It may be through the negroes that the unadulterated message of non-violence will be delivered to the world.”

Several International and American organisations such as the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the March on Washington Movement, Congress of Racial Equality and Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee emerged to challenge segregation through non-violence. Black leaders A Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, James Farmer, John Lewis, James Lawson, Andrew Young, Julian Bond and Jesse Jackson were all committed to Gandhi’s ideals of mass non-violent resistance.

Reading Gandhi as a young Black graduate student in Boston University, American civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr was fascinated by his thoughts. Reflecting on this later, he observed: “Christ furnished the spirit and motivation, while Gandhi furnished the method”. In his autobiography, a chapter appropriately entitled “Pilgrimage to Non-violence”, he states that Gandhi lived the love of Jesus and took it from mere interaction among individuals to a large social scale. Gandhi’s salt march was his favourite example. He invoked Gandhi in his speeches and sermons, referring to him as embodying the spirit of love and healing. What he developed from

Gandhi was the gospel of mass non-violent disobedience — an action that was neither a cult of revolutionary violence nor complacent.

He observed: “Love for Gandhi was a potent instrument for social and collective transformation. It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and non-violence that I discovered the method of social reform that I had been seeking for so many months.” As is well known, he first deployed this in the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955-56 and continued to dialogue with Gandhi’s ideals until his own assassination. When he finally made his momentous journey to “the land of Gandhi”, he famously intoned: “To other countries I may go as a tourist, but to India I come as a pilgrim.”

Gandhi’s influence extended to the African continent. His first experience with civil disobedience during 1906-07 in South Africa hugely influenced the formation of the African National Congress and later their freedom struggle in the apartheid era. Albert Mvumbi Luthuli, the first Black African to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1960, acknowledged Gandhi's influence on his philosophy of non-violence. Mandela’s observation that the Indian struggle was rooted in the African also throws light on the itinerant nature of struggles against injustice. Reflecting on his own time in prison, he saw that there was a shared bond between him and Gandhi. South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu followed the tradition of Gandhi’s emphasis on non-violent civil disobedience. He deployed non-violent non-cooperation techniques such as prayers, sermons, fasting, marches and boycott against apartheid. Later, Tutu was chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established by Mandela in 1995 and tasked with granting amnesty to those who violated human rights by giving an opportunity to the victims to extend conditional amnesty based on the wrongdoer’s acknowledgement of the past. In his later accounts on reconciliation through forgiveness, Tutu extended this notion to an unconditional forgiveness.

Philosophy in Action

Gandhi's ideas of truth, ahimsa, and satyagraha were rooted in the interconnection of all beings. He showed that self-respect could, simply even if dauntingly, be realised though spiritually transforming oneself. He instilled courage in people to act irrespective of one's social station. The oppressed classes began to realise that domination rested on cooperation with their oppressors and non-cooperating with injustice was a duty. But this form of refusal was neither gamesmanship nor a passive retreat; non-violent resistance was an active social force to transform the other through suffering and not retaliating — transformation involved both the victim and oppressor.

Neither King nor Mandela wholly adopted the spiritual practices of Gandhi. But this precisely points to the creativity of the moment. They abstracted their philosophy from Gandhi: Meaning, courage and ways to confront an opponent who accorded them a sub-human existence. Gandhi was an iconic cultural figure practising self-realisation in a modern world that impeded the ability to reflect on oneself. He made the West look critically at itself and understand its own Christian moorings. The present arena of hatred against Gandhi is undermining a rich and complex history of anti-racial and anti-imperial struggles. The Black Gandhi provided a spiritual and moral imagination to the struggles, helping people overcome a mighty and unjust structure entirely through the immeasurable force of non-violent resistance.

Rajeev Kadambi teaches political philosophy and ethics at O P Jindal Global University