

## **Vandalising Gandhi's Statues: Is there really Something Wrong with Gandhi?**

**Imran Sardar\***

*After the United Kingdom, South Africa, and the United States, Gandhi's statue was vandalised in Australia just a day after it was unveiled by Prime Minister Scott Morrison on 12 November 2021.*

The first incident took place in June 2014, after a month of Narendra Modi's assumption of office as the Prime Minister of India. The statue was situated on Belgrave Road, Leicester, UK. It was sprayed with the slogans that read: 'Never forget 84' and 'We want justice #84'.<sup>1</sup> The second incident happened in South Africa in April 2015. A man threw white paint on Gandhi's statue installed at Gandhi Square in Johannesburg. The protesters were holding placards that read 'racist Gandhi must fall'.<sup>2</sup> The third incident took place again in the UK. Gandhi's statue was sprayed as 'racist' during Black Lives Matter protests at Parliament Square in London. Other statues along with Gandhi's statue were also defiled.<sup>3</sup> The fourth incident took place in California in January 2021. The 6 feet high and 294 kg bronze statue situated in Central Park in Davis, Northern California, suffered similar mistreatment at the hands of unknown miscreants. The offenders sawed off the ankles and half of the statue's face.<sup>4</sup> The fifth and the most recent incident took place in Melbourne city on 13 November 2021. The vandalized life-size statue was installed outside the Australian Indian Community Centre in Rowville. Unknown miscreants tried to saw off its head by sawing around its neck.<sup>5</sup> These incidents, of course, are shocking not only for the Indian diaspora but also for the Indians living in India.

Looking at the series of vandalising incidents happening around the world, one might be curious to know what is really wrong with Gandhi. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi is a well-known figure in the history of the freedom struggle of India. He is known as an architect of the non-violent discipline. He is also famous as the most generous person in the world. He was a peace lover who inspired millions. His philosophy is taught in many universities around the world. He is respected as 'Bapu' (father) at home. On the flip side, the incidences of vandalism present a completely different narrative about Gandhi's personality that 'Gandhi was a racist'. Those who sprayed Gandhi's statue as 'racist' argued that Gandhi considered the Africans inferior to the Indians. Although he fought for equality, in reality he believed in Indians' supremacy over the Blacks of Africa. And there is historical evidence for such a bold claim. Gandhi's actions and writings in South Africa are widely quoted in support of that argument. Gandhi's words against the Blacks of South Africa are summed up in a book titled *The South African Gandhi: Stretcher-Bearer of Empire* published in 2015. In this book, authors Ashwin Desai and Goolem Vahed challenged Gandhi's saintly character and argued how he disrespected the African race by calling

---

\* Syed Imran Sardar is Research Analyst at the Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad.

them 'savages' and *Kaffirs* in his fight for the glory of the Indians in South Africa. In an open letter to Natal Parliament in 1893, Gandhi said:

I venture to point out that both the English and the Indians spring from a common stock, called the Indo-Aryan [...] A general belief seems to prevail in the Colony that the Indians are little better, if at all, than savages or the Natives of Africa. Even the children are taught to believe in that manner, with the result that the Indian is being dragged down to the position of a raw Kaffir.<sup>6</sup>

The book basically portrayed Gandhi as a British 'stooge' and 'spy'. The authors, Desai and Vahed, challenge Gandhi's generosity to the extent that it makes one question whether Gandhi was really a hero or a racist. Arundhati Roy, a renowned Indian author, commented on the book:

This is a wonderful demonstration of meticulously researched, evocative, clear-eyed, and fearless history writing...the South African Gandhi is a big book. It is a serious challenge to the way we have been taught to think about Gandhi.<sup>7</sup>

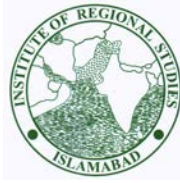
Gandhi's writings during his stay in South Africa had a deep imprint on the minds of South African people. Before that, a book written by Joseph Lelyveld titled *Great Soul* published in 2011 sparked criticism in India. The book contained some controversial remarks about Gandhi as a racist but in a subtle manner. Nevertheless, it would be unfair to call Gandhi a racist without considering his 'freedom struggle' at home.

Gandhi was young when he lived in South Africa and one can imagine how enthusiastic, energetic, and sentimental one can be in that age, especially a student of law who is learning how to fight for his

rights. The same was the case with Gandhi. His thoughts were unclear on how to go about fighting for the Indians. On his return to the subcontinent, his thoughts and actions began progressing towards a decisive start for its struggle for the rights of Indians. With the passage of time, his discontent with the Raj started growing. He eventually decided to stand up against unjust treatment of the Indians at the hands of the British through a nonviolent struggle. Owing to his devotion and kindness, he rose to become the most revered person in the subcontinent and came to be called the Mahatma and the 'father of the nation'. His generosity towards Muslims, however, was not acceptable to the hardline Hindus, and that perhaps became the principal cause of his assassination.

Gandhi was seeking independence from the British Raj while working with all the other religious communities. Besides, he also fought for the justice and fair treatment of Harijans<sup>8</sup> within Hindu society. He strived for their social integration into the Hindu society. He categorically told Dr Ambedkar (a jurist and activist from the discriminated against class the Harijans) that if they were united, "I will raze to the ground, the fort of Sanatanists (Hindus) with dynamite."<sup>9</sup> The Harijans were strictly not allowed to visit the Hindu temples and Gandhi was preparing the untouchables to rebel against the Sanatanists. But the hardline Sanatanists were not in a mood to extend the rights to the lower casts. One can imagine how Gandhi was not only conscious of the grievances of other castes but also very active in supporting them.

Now we look at the incidence of vandalizing where protesters sprayed Gandhi's statue with 'Justice for 84' and 'Never Forget 84'. The incident happened



in London during Sikhs' march in the wake of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the storming of the Golden Temple. The protesters were actually demanding justice for tragic events that happened in 1984 when the Golden Temple, a Sikh holy site in Amritsar was assaulted and thousands of Sikhs were killed amid riots in the aftermath the assassination of Indra Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India. In Operation Blue Star, a battalion of 3,000 troops armed with mortars and machine guns escorted by armored vehicles took part. As a matter of fact, there is no direct link between Gandhi and that particular incident that happened in 1984. Spraying 'Justice for 84' on Gandhi's statues does not vindicate by any means Sikhs' hatred against Gandhi, but India's failure to provide justice for the 1984 massacre and prevent similar killings afterward. Those who try to build the narrative that Gandhi was anti-Sikh, do not have much to offer in the defence.

Nevertheless, one of the reasons could be that Indira Gandhi who ordered the Indian army to attack the Golden Temple, was a central figure of the Indian National Congress that was long headed by Mahatma Gandhi. Secondly, her father, Jawaharlal Nehru was a close ally of Mahatma Gandhi. These facts alone, however, are not sufficient to support the argument that the anger was directed against Gandhi. This is also evident from the history of Sikhs in India as Gandhi has never been the target of Sikhs in any case. For that reason, it cannot be said for sure that Sikhs were behind those particular incidents of vandalisation of Gandhi's statue. The message written on the base of Gandhi's statue was loud and clear, though.

After careful deliberation on both cases, it cannot be said that there is not really something wrong with Gandhi,

particularly concerning racism. Gandhi's words and actions in South Africa cannot be denied or rejected as fabricated. But his life in India, its struggle for independence from the Raj, and his generous attitude towards all is a counter-narrative in itself that needs to be understood and promoted. One of the strongest defences of Gandhi could be Nelson Mandela's words for him. In a speech that Mandela delivered during his visit to New Delhi he referred to Gandhi as a 'hero of both India and South Africa.' He also said:

"Gandhi must be forgiven for those prejudices and judged in the context of the time and circumstances since we are looking here at the young Gandhi, still to become Mahatma when he was without any human prejudice save that in favor of truth and justice."<sup>10</sup>

Many have criticised Gandhi's writings and actions in South Africa in the past but incidents of extreme hatred against Gandhi had never been the case before 2014. Thus, the onus is on the state now to avert future incidents of vandalisation. For that particular national cause, Modi needs to work with all the political parties, including the Indian National Congress, media, and people from academia to project Gandhi's counter-narrative against the racist accusation. It is interesting to note that when Modi was the Chief Minister of Gujarat, he not only condemned the book *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle* (2012) in strong words but also moved a resolution in the State Assembly for banning this book for printing and distribution in India, which was unanimously passed. But this time around when he is heading the country, neither has any resolution been tabled to ban *The South African Gandhi: Stretcher-Bearer of Empire* (2015) nor against the

recurrence of vandalism of Gandhi statues across the globe. In sum, restoring Gandhi's image as an icon of non-violence and a champion of equality is possible but requires a lot of intellectual as well as

diplomatic efforts. But preventing Gandhi from being the target of those fighting for justice will require an overhaul of India's attitude towards religious minorities that is increasingly intimidating.

### Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> 'Arrest after Leicester Mahatma Gandhi Statue Vandalized', *BBC*, 11 June 2014, online <Arrests after Leicester Mahatma Gandhi statue vandalised - BBC News>, accessed on 30 November 2021.
- <sup>2</sup> 'Mahatma Gandhi Statue vandalized in Johannesburg', *BBC*, 13 April 2015, online, <Mahatma Gandhi statue vandalised in Johannesburg - BBC News>, accessed on 30 November 2021.
- <sup>3</sup> 'Black Lives Matter Protests: Gandhi Statues in UK among targets of ire', *Hindustan Times*, 11 June 2020, online < Black Lives Matter protests: Gandhi statues in UK among targets of ire | World News - Hindustan Times>, accessed on 30 November 2021.
- <sup>4</sup> Mahatma Gandhi Statue Vandalized in California, US, *Business Today*, 30 January 2021, online < Mahatma Gandhi statue vandalised in California, US-BusinessToday >, accessed on 30 November 2021
- <sup>5</sup> 'Australia: Police Investigate attempt to behead Mahatma Gandhi's Statue', *DW*, 14 November 2021, online < Australia: Police investigate attempt to behead Mahatma Gandhi statue | News | DW | 14.11.2021 >, accessed on 30 November 2021.
- <sup>6</sup> Rama Lakhshmi, "What did Mahatma Gandhi Think of Black People?," *Washington Post*, 23 September 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/09/03/what-did-mahatma-gandhi-think-of-black-people/>.
- <sup>7</sup> Arundhati Roy's Reviews on *The South African Gandhi: Stretcher and Bearer of Empire*, <https://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=26014>.
- <sup>8</sup> The Untouchables.
- <sup>9</sup> Madhu Limaye, *Mahatma Gandhi and the Jawaharlal Nehru, A Historic Partnership 1916-1945*, Vol.II, (Delhi: B.R Publishing Corporation, 1989), 44.
- <sup>10</sup> Quoted by Dr.Vusi Shongwe in "SA Unrest: Situating Racism between Blacks and Indians in perspective", *South Africa Press*, 3 August 2021, <https://www.iol.co.za/news/opinion/sa-unrest-situating-racism-between-blacks-and-indians-in-perspective-d64bb88e-6cfb-4e2b-99a4-470bdd53fc20>.