

## Was Mahatma Gandhi a Racist?

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### Abstract

*The world has witnessed the menace of racialism in many nations in the form of Nazism in Germany, eugenics in Japan, racial segregation in the United States of America, anti-Chinese legislative initiatives in Indonesia and apartheid in South Africa in nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Problem of racial differentiation and segregation affected various regions of the world in the beginning of twenty-first century. On December 2018, after complaints from students about Indian freedom fighter Mahatma Gandhi being a racist against Black Africans, Ghana's most prestigious University has removed a statue of the leader. This incident forced research scholars to ask this question afresh 'Was Mahatma Gandhi a racist? This research paper is a modest attempt to explore Mahatma Gandhi's approach towards Black Africans. This paper also tries to explore Gandhi's view on race and racism.*

The evolution of Gandhi's views on race finds expression in a fascinating speech delivered by Gandhi at the Johannesburg YMCA in May 1908. He was participating in a debate on the topic: "Are Asiatics and the Coloured races a menace to the Empire?" Gandhi may have been the only non-white present; he was certainly the only non-white speaker. Opposing the motion, he pointed out that the labour of Africans and Asians had made the Empire what it was. "Who can think of the British Empire without India?" he asked, adding: "South Africa would probably be a howling wilderness without the Africans." He went on to insist that it was "the mission of the English race, even when there are subject races, to raise them to equality with themselves, to give them absolutely free institutions and make them absolutely free men".<sup>1</sup> So by 1908, Gandhi was clear that Africans as well as Indians needed to be placed on an absolutely equal footing with Europeans. In another speech made in Germiston the next year, he said that if the Africans took to non-violent resistance against racial discrimination, "there would probably be no native question left to be solved". In 1910 he remarked: "The negroes alone are the original inhabitants of this land... The whites, on the other hand, have occupied the land forcibly and appropriated it to themselves."

Mahatma Gandhi not only understood the problem of racial discrimination and intolerance for racial heterogeneity in the world, but also challenged the atrocities based on racial segregation during his stay in South Africa. Hence, he wanted to eliminate racialism, segregation and discrimination to make the society free and equal for every human being, irrespective of their color, creed or race. In South Africa, Blacks had to face the abnormal and unsocial behaviour by the white people. Gandhi himself witnessed such social exploitation and atrocities during his stay in South Africa. Describing the white man's burden theory as imperialistic, he opined that "the real white man's burden" is not impertinently to dominate colored or black people under the guise of protection<sup>2</sup> and ensuring development or emancipation. He further added that "There is no mystery about whiteness

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of the skin. It has repeatedly been proved that, given equal opportunity, a man, be he of any colour or country, is fully equal to any other.”<sup>3</sup> Gandhi was of firm belief that do unto others as you would that they should do unto you. He emphasized over the need to oppose discriminative policy of the white government, he highlighted the great role of coloured people in the development of human beings and slammed as “do they forget that the greatest of the teachers of mankind were all Asiatics and did not possess a white face? These, if they descended on earth and went to South Africa, will all have to live in the segregated areas and be classed as Asiatics and coloured people unfit by law to be the equals of whites.”<sup>4</sup>

While opposing the discriminative policy of the white government of South Africa, Gandhi warned that the South Africa's white man's burden policy “holds the seeds of a world war.”<sup>5</sup> He questioned the supremacy of breed, race and civilization claimed by the white people as “worth the name, which requires for its existence the very doubtful prop of racial legislation and lynch law.”<sup>6</sup> Gandhi vehemently condemned the white government as it requires “the erection of legal barriers in order to protect itself against Asiatics and Africans.”<sup>7</sup> Gandhi considered man equal, irrespective of their color or race. In his views, “Life is one indivisible whole.”<sup>8</sup> His views drew no distinction between different races as he always believed in the idea that “man is a man.”<sup>9</sup> Gandhi led the *satyagraha* of Indians against the atrocities and discrimination by the white government from 1893 to 1914 and became a source of strength for the black people throughout the world. Following his method of *satyagraha* or “passive resistance” (method as once described by Gandhi himself), many African nations got independence. Following his precepts, Martin Luther King successfully campaigned against the racial discrimination in the United States of America and ultimately Americans got rid of the social evil of racial inequality. After opening a new gate for racial unity in South Africa Gandhi returned back to his land in 1915 and faced a different kind of challenge in the form of caste and religious discrimination.

Gandhi's views on race continued to evolve in a progressive direction. In his book *Satyagraha in South Africa*, published in the 1920s, Gandhi offered a spirited defence of African religion. In disputing the claims of European missionaries, Gandhi wrote that Africans had “a perfect grasp of the distinction between truth and falsehood”. He thought they practised truthfulness to a far greater extent than either Europeans or Indians.

Gandhi's *satyagrahas* of the 1920s and 1930s were widely reported in the African-American press. Reading these reports, a resident of Chicago named Arthur Sewell wrote to Gandhi that the blacks were “keenly and sympathetically” following his movement. Sewell said his people deeply “sympathized and suffered” with India and Indians, “for here, in America, they [the white racists] not only rob us of our possessions and hurdle us into the prisons unjustly, but they mob, lynch and burn us up with fire...” The struggle against British colonialism in India, thought Sewell, anticipated “the independence of all the dark peoples of the world”. “May God Bless you,” this African-American told Gandhi, “and enable you to carry on the great battle for righteous adjustment until you win a glorious victory for the common cause of the lowly; that is the prayer of fourteen millions of Negroes of America.”<sup>10</sup>

His entire political career in India after his return from South Africa concentrated on the cultural/ religious rights of minorities and Untouchables. In South Africa Gandhi realized that the Hindu- Muslim Unity was essential for any movement for rights in India. He cited that South African Indians is an example of communal unity for India. Gandhi identified “four pillars on which the structure of *Swaraj* would ever rest” in India: the unbreakable alliance between Hindus and Muslims,

wiping out untouchability, accepting non-violence and promotion of spinning of khadi. He focused on transformation of India into a nation composed of different cultural/religious communities, primarily Hindus and Muslims, respecting each other. Gandhi devoted himself to bringing about the two races (Hindu and the Muslims) into harmonious coloration without advocating or desiring an impossible fusion between the two peoples, he tried to unite them in friendship.<sup>11</sup>

Bikhu Parekh, a Gandhian scholar, not considered Gandhi as a racist. In his writings, he has mentioned him as an 'example of intercultural experimentation'. By developing a common sense of belonging, and through reconciliation of political unity and cultural diversity, a multicultural society can be built together. For integration at the cultural and political levels, he recommended the dialogic path with slightly different emphases. At the cultural level, he recommended strengthening of the civil society within its cross-cutting relationship, accepting multiple identities within the overarching national identity and achieving a dialogical consensus through constant conversation. At the political level, he suggested the attainment of a consensual set of constitutional, legal and civic values, which he labelled 'operative public values'. This would require a shared life across communities while as well as extending the individual autonomy by leaving personal life to each member.

Gandhi evolved his political praxis around dialogue. He would never allow critical events, deeply disturbing communal relations (for example, the assassination of Swami Shraddananda by a fanatic Muslim or the Kohat riots) to close the door to talk. On Swami Shraddananda's tragic death, he warned the Hindus that they must not "ascribe the crime of an individual to a whole community" and 'Harbor the spirit of relations.'<sup>12</sup> He knew that lack of trust was the biggest problem for the dialogic process to operate and did everything to generate and nurture mutual trust. Being a pragmatic idealist, he did not rule out the possibility of a felt wrong done by either community. But he said, the conception of Hindu-Muslim unity did not presuppose a total absence for all time, of wrong done by any of communities. On the contrary, it assumed that our loyalty to the unity would survive shocks that in every such case we should not blame the whole body of the followers but seek relief against individual by way of arbitration and not by reprisal.

That is to say, the community and its individual members were not co-extensive. Whether doing right or wrong, the individual member of a community has the right to go his/her own way. Yet how a community would manage its internal affairs and shall regulate the conduct of its members is largely a matter for the community to decide, not for the majority community to intervene and settle. Gandhi advised individual untouchables to change their way to make themselves more acceptable to the caste Hindus. Gandhi also claimed himself to be one of untouchables. However, with regard to Muslims, Gandhi's stance was altogether different. He claimed to know the Hindu mind because the "Hindu mind is myself ... every fiber of my being is Hindu", but he could not claim the same for the Muslims. For working among the Muslims, he needed Muslim friends, such as Ali brothers. Regarding the personal conduct of the individual Muslims, he always suggested them to abjure violence and urged them to apply their individual reasoning to judge what in fact was true religion." But at the same time, he opined that, it was not wrong if the majority community expect the minority community to deliberate and voluntarily accept communal harmony as a condition for peacefully living together. Hence, Gandhi advocated the cause of cow protection but never imposed it on the Muslims and advised them to accept voluntary on ground of mutual love. He remarked: "The majority must be patient: the surest way of defeating our (cow protection) is to rush Mussalmans. I do not know that Mussalman honour has ever been found wanting for it to react upon the Mussalman masses. The Hindus must therefore be patient".<sup>13</sup>

Gandhi believed in the role of the leaders in promoting inter-communal understanding. He firmly believed that if good leaders were strongly committed to communal harmony, their efforts must permeate the masses. He said, "As members of a family, we shall sometime fight, but we shall have leaders who will compose our difference and keep us under check." Leaders were supposed to act as agent of their respective communities and speak for their communities. The intercultural dialogue demands the presence of leaders, because the whole communities cannot enter into dialogue with other communities. But Gandhi realized within a few years that there could be real difficulties on the ground. Leaders representing a community might not speak different language as every community is internally heterogeneous and polyvocal. Leaders might deceive, followers might defect, and these leaders might also become prisoners of their own followers. In such a situation, dialogue might be prolonged and fruitless; promises made might turn out to be useless, forcing one to appeal to the reasonableness of the masses over the supposed charisma of the leaders. Therefore Gandhi had to relocate his hopes: "Fortunately, Hindu-Muslim unity does not depend upon religious or political leaders. It rests upon the enlightened selfishness of the masses of both the communities. They cannot mislead everyone for all the times. But did not take him long to find out that there was no easily available multiculturalist tune to which the masses could dance and be enlightened".<sup>14</sup>

Gandhi's approach to racial equality originated from his own ethical concerns. He had fought the doctrine of superiority in South Africa and was also against the *brahmanas in India* who claimed themselves as the superior caste by reason of their birth. He stated: "I consider that it is unmanly for any person to claim superiority over a fellow-being." However, Gandhi supported some aspects of the *varna-ashrama* system of India which he termed as the *idealistic varnasharam*. He further explained: "Whilst I have said that all men and women are born equal, I do not wish therefore to suggest that qualities are not inherited; but on the contrary, I believe that just as everyone inherits a particular form so does he inherit the particular characteristics and qualities of his progenitors, and to make this admission is to conserve one's energy. [...] It is this doctrine of *Varnashrama Dharma*, which I have always accepted".

Gandhi realized that an idealistic *varna* system would help human beings to strike a balance between one's energy and one's material ambitions and to have the liberty to pursue one's spiritual evolution. He regarded, caste a *hereditary traditional* aspect of one's life. He understood the distortion of the original meaning of caste system as the wrong assumption of associating different degrees of dignity according to the differences of castes. Gandhi discouraged the use of the term *caste* since he associated it with the wrong way of practising *varna ashrama dharma*. Rather he saw a *constructive* meaning in *varna* system for our society. This certainly created problem for the so called leaders of national movement. It is pertinent to mention that Gandhi was criticized by Ambedkar, who championed the greatest cause of outcastes and *untouchables*.

Gandhi accepted with open heart that the *Bhagavad-Gita* was the source of his understanding of *varnas*. Unlike *Manusmriti* in the *Gita* one gets the principle of *varna*. Though the *Gita*, speaks of a relationship among *varna*, *guna* and *karma*, yet, according to Gandhi, all those aspects are associated with one's birth. Superiority in the hierarchy of *varnas* refers to the capacity for superior service, but certainly not superior status. Gandhi considered people of all *varnas* as equal, and he adopted an inclusive approach to inter-caste endeavours. He supported *varna dharma* where the duty of each *varna* by birth was emphasized. It is important to mention that each *dharma* is equal by being a *dharma*. Gandhi supported dignity of labour and treated all professions as equal in dignity. This led him to accept the basic idea of the *varna* system. However, he was always opposed to

discrimination against the “*Untouchables*” whom he called “*Harijans*.” Gandhi's effort to resolve the problem of the *Harijans* by combining them into the Hindu *varna* system invited more severe criticism, than most things he did. It is important to mention that Gandhi himself was considered as an outcaste on account of his education and experiences in London. He confessed, “I never had an occasion to be troubled by the caste; nay, I have experienced nothing but affection and generosity from the general body of the section that still regards me as ex-communicated.”<sup>15</sup> If *casteism* was one of the deeply rooted aspects of India, the second aspect definitely is communalism. Gandhi found it as one of the serious problems in uniting the people of India. Communalism generally refers to “strong allegiance to one's own ethnic group rather than to society as a whole.” In the Indian subcontinent, it has taken on a very bigger meaning, namely the one that pertains to religion. India being a multi-religious society (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Islam, Parsies, Judaism and Christianity), communalism involves an attitude centered on communal/ethnic groups defined by religious affinities. This engagement was not *spiritual* one but a *political one*. Gandhi understood that Muslims in Indian had been vexed, since Gandhi's efforts to unify them as part of India gave him the greatest trouble for the longest time and ultimately ended up with a negative result as evidenced by the partition of Pakistan from India Gandhi stated that his engagement with communal groups in 1891, he associated with Abdullah Shekh who had large Muslim followers in South Africa. Gandhi's ashram incorporated Muslims and he engaged in genuine dialogues with Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who was the most important leader of Muslims in those days. Gandhi admitted that his South African experiences had made him realize that the issue of Hindu/Muslim unity would put *ahimsa* (non-violence) to its logical test in his non-violent movement for freedom in India. He advocated, harmonizing the Muslim minority with the Hindu majority. Nevertheless, the task of complete unity of the different communal groups in Indian society still remains as an unfinished agenda. Gandhian Ashrams were glaring examples of inter-racial respect and recognition where people of different religions, castes, races and communal affinities lived together, dined together, and prayed together. These common prayers were not based primarily on acts of worship, but rather on an evangelical model of the coming together of multi-faith individuals to unite themselves for political action by way of *satyagraha*.<sup>16</sup>

### Conclusion

Gandhi's political pedagogy was to show humanity that it is possible to bring people together across the differences of race, caste and creed. Such concepts like *swaraj*, *swadeshi* and *satyagraha* can never be attained if the society is not founded on self-respect and respect for all different communities, language groups, regions, and religions. The greatness of a civilization and its people can be traced from their multicultural co-existence. John Stuart Mill also emphasized this 'ability to contain diversity' as a sign of a civilized community.<sup>17</sup> Gandhi was against any sort of provincialism that impeded the national unity. He was a firm believer in the ability of human beings to co-exist and live in harmony. Though, Gandhi was challenged and in many respects by the ethno-racial, linguistic, religious, regional, and economic diversity, yet he supported the promotion of diversity. He advocated pluralism with utmost tolerance and respect for fundamental human rights. Speaking on the occasion of the centenary of “*Satyagraha*” Desmond Tutu confirmed Gandhian live of thinking, asking, “When will we ever learn that the most effective way of dealing with differences, with conflict, with disagreement is not through force, not by annihilating the others? But it is through forgiveness, through negotiation, through compromise, through trying to see the point of view of the other, recognizing and respecting the essential, irreducible human spirit which is common to us all.”<sup>18</sup>

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