

Statues to History: Mahatma Gandhi on Parliament Square. Using “Non-Violence” to Promote Violence

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Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [History](#)

Statues are not for everyone. They signify flesh made into stone, the sort of transmogrification that frustrates rather than reveals. It suggest the end of an argument by those who erect it – the statue is there, acknowledge and pay due respect, and move on. But statues can trigger more debates, generating more confronting questions.

The Gandhi Statue Memorial Trust raised more than £1 million for the 9ft (2.7m) bronze statue that now shares company with his sparring opposite number, Winston Churchill, on Parliament Square. Such a statue suggests a historical figure free of paradox, the enemy of contradiction. Gandhi becomes the one who resolves the debates for those delving in to the world of conflict.

Non-violence, Satyagraha, disarming your enemy not through the violence of action but the non-violence of resistance, are all statements of ideology that fluctuate in value and position. They are also romantic assertions that feed into the India cult, the cult of the exotic. This is the India of Christian clerics and missionaries, the hagiographers, the white-washers. All constitute a movement towards removing contradiction.

Western clerics have much to answer for. The Unitarian pastor from New York, John H. Holmes, saw in Gandhi a modern incarnation of a Christian idea – “Mahatma Gandhi: The Greatest Man since Jesus Christ”. French writer Romain Rolland similarly saw saintly qualities in the Mahatma, adding a biography on him in French. Such material provided a fusion with Indian deities, with Vishnu providing good incarnating material.

The single Gandhi breaks down on closer inspection. The statue cannot serve to hide the assortment of narratives behind Mahatmomania. For certain Hindu nationalists, Gandhi’s legacy is an uncomfortable one. The sculpture of Gandhi on Parliament Square cannot detract from moves in India seeking to revere Gandhi’s assassin. The Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha has been a group keen on building a temple in the name of Nathuram Godse, whose image had, it argues, been blackened.[1] Gandhi, far from being the “Father of the Nation,” could be deemed its chief saboteur, laying the seeds for partition and sub-continental chaos.

The same goes for those who take issue with Gandhi as the combatant representative against oppression and poverty. Poverty, in a sense, was there to be worshipped. Famously, the Indian poet Sorojini Naidu remarked that it took much money “to keep Bapu in poverty”. This was the cultic reasoning, the philosophy of non-seeing and reflection – the world of khadi.

Such an approach typified the contradictory Gandhi, one seen in his appraisal of the

stratified caste system, something he admitted to having little interest in overhauling, despite idealising the Untouchables as “the children of god”. Spiritual food had little to do with historical inquiry in any genuine sense – the soul resists standard chronicling and corrupt institutions. Religion and caste, he suggested, have no junctures. “Caste,” he explained, “has nothing to do with religion. It is a custom whose origin I do not know, and do not need to know for the satisfaction of my spiritual hunger.” The superior Brahmins, and the merits of “a scavenger are equal, and their due performance carries equal merit before God”. [2] One idealises and worships the oppressed as sacred in order to render them necessary.

Gandhi’s greatest critic, and one with a more direct approach to the cruel rigidities of the caste system, was Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, whose sociological take on caste had no truck with Gandhi and his followers. “Caste in India,” he explained in a paper delivered at Columbia University on May 9, 1916, “means an artificial chopping off of the population into fixed and definite units, each one prevented from fusing into another through the custom of endogamy.” [3]

Gandhi could hardly be said to be a progressive in any conventional sense, having dismissed the British contribution to India as a mere short wonder, framed by trains, infrastructure, and a medical system he scorned. Hindu traditionalism, revamped, revived, resuscitated from the British yoke, mattered above all.

Those seeking to find happy praises in the Gandhi corpus for racial equality would also be disappointed. The genesis of his protest movement in South Africa was hardly designed to help the oppressed *in toto* combat a vicious colour divide. During a spell of incarceration in a South African cell, he noted sharing company with “Kaffir and Chinese prisoners” he deemed “wild, murderous and given to immoral ways” (*Collected Works of Mohandas Gandhi*, IX, 148). Indians always came first.

But some defenders, such as Vinay Lal, find in his works and workings “an open ended conversation”, a problematic designation, to say the least, one suggesting an even greater complexity than is warranted. [4] As ever, there is a continuing project to “rescue” such a figure from his interpreters – a mission that is bound to end up in a tangle, or at the very least, the hands of simplifying sculpture.

Gandhi may well have appreciated the various contradictions on show at the opening presided over by David Cameron, something totally in defiance of the statue ethic. There was that most jarring of contradictions, one where the British prime minister, without tongue-in-cheek, can laud a version of Gandhi without reflecting on his own acts in office. “This statue is a magnificent tribute to one of the towering figures in the history of world politics and by putting Mahatma Gandhi in this famous square we are giving him an eternal home in our country.” [5] Statues always tend to say too little.

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Notes

[1] <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/godse-temple-hindu-group-gandhi-killer-nathuram--ghar-wapsi-akhil-bharat-mahasabha/1/408811.html>

[2] http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/ambedkar/web/appendix_1.html

[3] http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/txt_ambedkar_castes.html

[4] <https://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/southasia/History/Gandhi/GandhLoveToHate.pdf>

[5] <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-31885895>

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