



Gandhi falling ... and rising

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, statues of Gandhi have been attacked by a variety of radically incommensurable movements. Subaltern social movements struggling to dismantle the legacies of colonialism, slavery and apartheid have attacked Gandhi on the grounds of his alleged racism, casteism, misogyny and because he functions as a cipher for the imperialism of the contemporary Indian state and the racism of Indian society. Yet little about the case against Gandhi is new. This article explores why these arguments are being voiced now by identifying three discursive vehicles that have given them salience – decolonisation in the African academy, US-originated Afropessimism and a resurgent global Dalit movement. The article juxtaposes this global picture with the range of contradictory attitudes expressed towards Gandhi in India, where a state dominated by the neoliberal Hindu Right promotes Gandhi abroad at the same time as it sidelines him at home. Simultaneously, Gandhi is attacked by its domestic electoral base while remaining a talisman for its opponents as a symbol of an elusive communal harmony and environmentalism. In revealing how Gandhi is toppled by radically incommensurable social movements and how attitudes towards Gandhi do not map neatly onto power, the article complicates ongoing debates about decolonisation, memorialisation and heritage.

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In recent years, monuments and statues of figures associated with slavery, colonialism and apartheid have become targets of protest by movements struggling against the legacies of these historical processes. Among the most well-known instances of this phenomenon are the 2015 Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) protests calling for the removal of statues of the late Victorian settler colonist Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town and the University of Oxford, the movement against Confederate statues in the United States and the global wave of statue protests led by Black Lives Matter (BLM) activists following the murder of George Floyd by a white policeman in May 2020.¹ Such protests have elicited white supremacist backlashes in 'defence' of statues attacked by antiracist protesters such as those of Confederate general Robert E. Lee in

Charlottesville, Virginia, and Winston Churchill in London.² They have also provoked attacks on statues of antiracist figures. In an editorial published during the BLM protests in 2020, the editors of the *Journal of Historical Geography* describe the tearing down in Rochester, New York, of a statue of the Black antislavery campaigner Frederick Douglass as an instance of how 'the cultural landscape inscribes the negations of black history, heritage and space and belies a fuller, inclusive memorialisation of all citizens and all humanity.'³ Yet between the polarities of antiracists attacking statues of white supremacists and apologists for the latter attacking statues of antiracists, a third category of mobilisations in which antiracists (amongst others) have challenged the memorialisation of figures once associated with decolonisation has drawn

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¹ K. Gillespie and L.-A. Naidoo, #MustFall: The South African Student Movement and the Politics of Time, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 118, 1 (2019) 190–194; R. Chan-tiluke, B. Kwoba and A. Nkopo (Eds), *Rhodes Must Fall: The Struggle to Decolonise the Racist Heart of Empire*, London, 2018; Lara Choksey, Colston falling, *Journal of Historical Geography* 74 (2021) 77–83.

² See *The New York Times* archive on the white supremacist 'Unite the Right' Rally held in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017 and its long afterlife: <https://www.nytimes.com/news-event/charlottesville-rally>, last accessed 12 May 2023; D Sabbagh, Campaigners fear far-right 'defence' of statues such as Churchill's, *Guardian*, 10 June 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/10/far-right-protesters-plan-defence-of-statues-such-as-churchills>, last accessed 12 May 2023.

³ D. Tolia-Kelly, D. C. Cabral, S. Legg, M. Lane and N. Thomas, Historical geographies of the 21st century: Challenging our praxis, *Journal of Historical Geography* 69 (2020) 1–4.



Fig. 1. Gandhi statue being removed from the University of Ghana, 2018; image courtesy Q̄bádélé Kambon.

less attention.⁴ Exemplary of this phenomenon are the global protests against Gandhi statues.

Born in 1869 in Porbandar, Gujarat, Mohandas Gandhi would become the leading figure in the Indian nationalist movement against British rule. After training as a lawyer in England, he moved to South Africa in 1893 to represent an Indian merchant in a lawsuit. This was the start of a twenty-one-year stint in the country, during which he rose to become leader of the Indian community and honed the tactic of satyagraha ('soul force') as a weapon of nonviolent resistance, for which he would become a global icon. Returning to India in 1915, he assumed leadership of the struggle for independence, transforming an Indian National Congress dominated by elite reformists into the mass movement that drove the British out of the subcontinent through campaigns of non-cooperation and civil disobedience. Gandhi's claim to represent all Indians was fiercely contested in his lifetime, notably by Muhammad Ali Jinnah's Muslim League which championed the creation of Pakistan as a homeland for Muslims and by B. R. Ambedkar as leader of the Dalit community. More recently, his views on race and his relations with Black people, particularly during his South Africa years, have come under greater scrutiny generating critical revisionist histories that have in turn provoked protests against his hagiographical memorialisation. It is these protests that are the primary subject of this article.

It is difficult to definitively date the advent of this phenomenon. The first reported instance in recent times seems to have been a protest against the installation of a statue of Gandhi in Johannesburg in 2003. Welcomed by African National Congress (ANC) leaders including Nelson Mandela, the statue was criticised by others for overlooking Gandhi's racism towards Black South Africans.⁵ Just

over a decade later in the midst of the RMF protests that erupted in Cape Town in 2015, the Gandhi statue again became a target of protest with the hashtag #GhandiMustFall (sic) circulating on social media.⁶ The connection between Rhodes and Gandhi was more than incidental: here were two settlers in turn-of-the-century South Africa, the protesters seemed to say, with deeply prejudiced attitudes towards the 'natives'. When in 2016 the then Indian President Pranab Mukherji unveiled a statue of Gandhi at the University of Ghana, protesters again demanded that 'Gandhi Must Fall' and persuaded authorities to remove the statue two years later (see Fig. 1).⁷

Gandhi's evident unpopularity in Africa has not inhibited the Government of India from continuing to memorialise him on the continent, even as the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) maintains an ambivalent attitude towards him in India as I shall demonstrate. In 2018, it proposed the installation of a bust of Gandhi in Blantyre, Malawi, to mark the construction of a Mahatma Gandhi Convention Centre in the city funded by a grant of £7.8 million. A protest campaign pre-empted the installation of the bust by going to court.⁸ Three years later, the High Court of Malawi ruled that the bust could not be installed on public land on account of planning irregularities. The court also took note of Gandhi's views, finding them to be 'clearly racist' and ruling that 'the erection of the Statue of a person who viewed Black people like the claimants [in the case] as sub human' would breach their right to dignity.⁹ Even before the

⁴ For an exception see D. Kikon and H. Bapuji, Understanding Modern Attacks on Gandhi, *Pursuit*, 17 December 2021, <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/understanding-modern-attacks-on-gandhi>, last accessed 26 November 2022.

⁵ R. Carroll, Gandhi branded racist as Johannesburg honours freedom fighter, *Guardian*, 17 October 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/oct/17/southafrica.india>, last accessed 26 November 2022.

⁶ BBC News, Mahatma Gandhi statue vandalised in Johannesburg, 13 April 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-32287972>, last accessed 26 November 2022.

⁷ BBC News, 'Racist' Gandhi statue removed from University of Ghana, 13 December 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-46552614>, last accessed 26 November 2022.

⁸ BBC News, Malawi court halts work on Gandhi statue after critics brand him racist, 31 October 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-46051184>, last accessed 26 November 2022; see also K.J. Lipenga, Tales of Political monuments in Malawi: Re-storying National History, *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies* 5 (2019) 109–127.

⁹ *S v Blantyre City Council*, [2021] MWHC 34, paras. 132, 136.

judgment was delivered, Indian authorities discreetly unveiled the bust at the Indian High Commission in Lilongwe.¹⁰

As with RMF, the call for Gandhi to fall spread from Africa to Europe and North America. In 2019, the University of Manchester Students' Union petitioned Manchester City Council to reconsider its decision to allow the installation of a 9-foot statue of Gandhi outside the city's cathedral on his 150th birth anniversary.¹¹ In 2020, while BLM activists attacked statues of white supremacists in protest against Floyd's murder, Gandhi statues became targets in several Western capitals including Ottawa, Amsterdam, and Washington, D.C.¹² Thereafter, news reports record attacks on Gandhi statues every few months including multiple incidents at the statue outside the Indian embassy in Washington, D.C., and at another in Davis, California.¹³ Unidentified persons attempted to slice the head off a Gandhi statue the day after it was unveiled in Melbourne in November 2021.¹⁴ In February 2022, a Gandhi statue in Union Square, Manhattan, that has been the target of a petition launched by 'NYU students' was reported to have been 'vandalised'.¹⁵ Inspired by the Ghanaian campaign, US BLM activist Cheryl Renee Moses has led several anti-Gandhi initiatives, pre-empting the erection of a Gandhi statue in Lilburn, Georgia, and demanding the removal of Gandhi statues from the King Centre in Atlanta and the Coahoma County courthouse in Clarksdale, Mississippi.¹⁶

A survey of the protests against Gandhi reveals four recurring arguments. Gandhi is accused, first, of being racist towards Black South Africans; second, of being an apologist for Hinduism's caste system and thwarting Dalit political aspirations for autonomous self-assertion; third, of being sexually predatory or, at the very least, questionably eccentric in testing his vows of celibacy by sleeping naked with some of his closest women associates. A fourth category of grievances focuses less on Gandhi, treating him as a metonym for India and Indians and as a screen onto which anti-Indian sentiments are projected.

Two things are striking about the contemporary anti-Gandhi discourse. First, little about it is new. Gandhi made no secret of his views, writing copiously on an enormous range of subjects including such intimate matters as his diet, bowel movements and celibacy. Moreover, so much has been written about Gandhi that to

say anything genuinely new about him is difficult. If Gandhi is falling today, it is not because we have discovered something previously unknown but because we are re-evaluating things we have long known. What interests me in this article are the shifts in the politics of memory in the contemporary conjuncture that have prompted this re-evaluation. Second, the geographical spread of these protests across Africa, Europe, North America and Australia (and, in quite a distinct way, India) suggests that the discourses fuelling this re-evaluation are global. This globality does not mean that the kinds of arguments that are levelled against Gandhi or the discursive vehicles through which they acquire salience are the same everywhere or are commensurable with one another.

I suggest that three subaltern discourses have contributed to contemporary antagonism against Gandhi – decolonisation in and of the African academy, a US discourse of Afropessimism and a resurgent Dalit movement in India and its diaspora. Importantly, the geographical provenance of these discourses in no way circumscribes their reach. Discourses of decolonisation originating in the African academy have travelled to the US, Europe and elsewhere; the influence of Afropessimism, which is often critiqued as US-centric, is palpable in the South African decolonisation movement; and the global activism of contemporary Dalit movements has given caste as a category of hierarchy an unprecedented visibility and intelligibility. My claim is not that these discourses have intersected to topple Gandhi: in some cases, their foundational premises are too incommensurable for them to work with one another. Nor is Gandhi the most urgent antagonist for these movements, each of which is more preoccupied with the violence of the carceral state, racial and caste capitalism, and knowledge production in the academy. Instead, each independently supplies frames through which the case against Gandhi is sharpened, challenging his hegemony as a global icon of nonviolent struggle. My reading of contemporary anti-Gandhi protest is complicated by a recognition that it unfolds at a time when Gandhi's legacy is differently challenged in India by the Hindu Right, the ideological forerunners of which provided the inspiration for his assassination in 1948. In this regard, I ask what it means for arguments against Gandhi to emanate from both those at the helm of the Indian state and their most fervent opponents.

The racist Gandhi: South African fallism and US Afropessimism

All the recent protests against Gandhi accuse him of racism towards Black people during his time in South Africa.¹⁷ The allegation is often substantiated with reference to a recent biography of Gandhi by South African academics Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed.¹⁸ They take issue with the hagiographical treatment of Gandhi by Indian historians and especially with Ramachandra Guha's claim that Indians in South Africa were among apartheid's first victims — as a result of the racist immigration restrictions to which they were subject — and that Gandhi was one of its first

¹⁰ M.E. Taylor, A Gandhi bust has just been quietly unveiled in Malawi despite protests, *Face2Face Africa*, 2 October 2020, <https://face2faceafrica.com/article/a-gandhi-bust-has-just-been-quietly-unveiled-in-malawi-despite-protests>, last accessed 26 November 2022.

¹¹ BBC News, Manchester Mahatma Gandhi statue unveiled, 25 November 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-manchester-50550085>, last accessed 26 November 2022.

¹² K. Molina, Petition calls for removal of Gandhi statue from Carleton campus, CBC News, 16 June 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/carleton-petition-removal-gandhi-statue-1.5612763>, last accessed 26 November 2022; Press Trust of India, Mahatma Gandhi's Statue In Amsterdam Vandalised by Unknown People: Report, *NDTV*, 18 June 2020, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/mahatma-gandhis-statue-in-amsterdam-vandalised-by-unknown-people-report-2248550>, last accessed 26 November 2022; Press Trust of India, Life-Sized Mahatma Gandhi Statue Vandalised In New York, *NDTV*, 5 February 2022, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/life-sized-mahatma-gandhi-statue-vandalised-in-new-york-2751155>, last accessed 26 November 2022.

¹³ C. Hampton, Gandhi statue toppled, defaced and removed, *Davis Enterprise*, 28 January 2021, <https://www.davisenterprise.com/news/local/gandhi-statue-toppled-defaced-and-removed/>, last accessed 26 November 2022.

¹⁴ R.A. Luthra, A Gandhi statue for Melbourne (UPDATED), *IndianLink News*, 13 November 2021, <https://www.indianlink.com.au/india-in-australia/melbournes-gandhi-statue/>, last accessed 26 November 2022.

¹⁵ Press Trust of India, Life-Sized Mahatma Gandhi Statue.

¹⁶ F. Ingram, Coahoma County Gandhi Statue Protest Heads to Courts, *The Clarksdale Press Register*, 4 April 2022, <https://www.pressregister.com/coahoma-county-gandhi-statue-protest-heads-courts#sthash.oDefEC61.OJuNSKFY.dpbs>, last accessed 26 November 2022.

¹⁷ This analysis is drawn from a survey of online petitions initiated by activists at the University of Ghana (<https://www.change.org/p/the-members-of-the-university-of-ghana-council-gandhi-s-statue-at-the-university-of-ghana-must-come-down>), University of Manchester (<https://www.change.org/p/manchester-city-council-petition-against-erecting-racist-gandhi-statue-in-manchester>), New York University (<https://www.change.org/p/new-york-city-council-remove-the-gandhi-statue-in-union-square-park-nyc>), the Gandhi Must Fall Movement in Malawi (<https://www.change.org/p/the-mayor-of-blantyre-stop-erecting-mahatma-gandhi-s-statue-at-ginnery-corner-blantyre>), as well as news articles covering these and other protests.

¹⁸ A. Desai and G. Vahed, *The South African Gandhi: Stretcher-Bearer of Empire*, Stanford, 2016.

opponents.¹⁹ They argue that far from attacking the oppressive racial order of the settler colony, Gandhi sought Indian advancement within its terms. Immersed in the racial discourses of his time, particularly extant articulations of 'Aryanism',²⁰ Gandhi frequently emphasised Indians' proximity to whites and superiority vis-à-vis Africans. In an open letter to the Natal Parliament in 1893, in which he casually uses racial slurs to refer to Africans, he says:

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 ... The Indians were, and are, in no way inferior to their Anglo-Saxon brethren, if I may venture to use the word, in the various departments of life — industrial, intellectual, political, etc.²¹

Desai and Vahed demonstrate how during key episodes in his South African career, Gandhi sought equal citizenship for Indians by demonstrating loyalty to the British Empire. When his remarkable offer of Indian military assistance to the British in the South African War (1899–1902) was rejected, he provided humanitarian aid by raising an Ambulance Corps to evacuate wounded soldiers from the frontline. He rendered similar service during the Zulu Bhambatha Rebellion (1906).²² In both conflicts, they argue, Gandhi attempted to ingratiate himself with the British authorities while remaining oblivious to the dispossession and suffering of Africans resulting from the brutal labour regimes, taxes and movement restrictions imposed on them. Guha acknowledges Gandhi's troubling views on race, but insists that they evolved to the point where he ceased referring to Africans with the racial slurs in common use at the time fifteen years into his South African life. Making much of Gandhi's ability to organise Indians across lines of caste, class and religion and of his close relationships with white dissidents of all stripes (many of whom were Jewish), he skims lightly over the implications of his admitted inability to identify any substantive dealings that Gandhi had with Black South Africans. For their part, Desai and Vahed are sceptical of the pan-Indianness that Gandhi is said to have forged in the South African Indian diaspora, pointing out that for much of his time there, he advocated on behalf of upper-caste Indians in the professional and merchant classes, belatedly taking up issues relevant to indentured labour in the mines and sugar plantations in the 1913 strike against racist immigration restrictions.

Desai and Vahed cite the 'intense debate on the politics of remembering and forgetting' that RMF spawned and the renewed interest in rewriting South Africa's colonial and liberation histories that it provoked as the inspiration for their revisionist take on Gandhi.²³ As South African public intellectuals, their targets are not

only Gandhi's many hagiographers but also South African political elites such as Mandela and Thabo Mbeki who invoke Gandhi as an icon of nonracialism in their own attempt to realise a post-apartheid 'rainbow nation'.²⁴ It was these ideals of nonracialism and egalitarian multiculturalism that rang hollow for RMF protesters, many of whom hailed from the first 'born free' generations of a putatively post-apartheid South Africa that remained deeply stratified by race.²⁵ The influence of RMF on attacks against Gandhi is directly visible in the name 'Gandhi Must Fall', which activists at the University of Ghana gave to their protest against the installation of a Gandhi statue on the university's Legon campus in 2016. Accordingly, it is useful to attend briefly to the genealogy of RMF as a means of understanding one of the key discursive currents that fuels the contemporary animus against Gandhi.

Beginning in March 2015 with a demand for the removal of a statue of Rhodes from the University of Cape Town, RMF launched a powerful critique of the endurance of colonial and apartheid legacies in the South African academy.²⁶ For the protesters, this was evident in the persistence of colonial iconography in the built environment of the university, the continuing Eurocentrism of the curriculum and the underrepresentation of Black students and staff at historically white universities. Rhodes's links with the University of Oxford as an alumnus and as benefactor of the Rhodes Scholarships meant that it was only a matter of time before RMF in South Africa inspired a solidarity movement in the UK.²⁷ Seven months later when South African universities announced a fee increase of over 10%, a movement calling itself Fees Must Fall demanded a rollback of the fee hike and an end to privatisation and outsourcing in university employment practices. Drawing on Black Consciousness, Black feminism and Pan-Africanism and on a repertoire of protest honed during the anti-apartheid struggle, the movement spilled out of universities and onto the streets, where it shook the hegemony of the ruling ANC.²⁸ In challenging not only the remnants of white supremacy but also an ANC elite that had failed to dismantle it, RMF sought to continue the unfinished work of decolonisation by transcending older, demonstrably inadequate modes of waging decolonisation. In this, there is a clear ideological resonance with protests against Gandhian decolonisation.

Some of the North American protests against Gandhi statues have featured the accusation that he was 'anti-Black'.²⁹ As Annie Olaloku-Teriba has pointed out, the cry of anti-Blackness has been a signal contribution of the US discourse of Afropessimism, which argues that the violence suffered by Black people in the US is unique and incomparable to the struggles of other people of colour.³⁰ Afropessimists see slavery as constitutive of Blackness. In the words of Frank B. Wilderson III, a key exponent of Afropessimist

¹⁹ R. Guha, *Gandhi Before India*, London, 2014.

²⁰ I.R. Birkvad, The Ambivalence of Aryanism: A Genealogical Reading of India-Europe Connection, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 49 (2020) 58–79.

²¹ Cited from Desai and Vahed, *The South African Gandhi*, 44. The term 'kaffir', derived from the Arabic for 'unbeliever', came to be used in Afrikaans to refer to Black people and is now considered offensive hate speech.

²² For an account of this episode as part of a larger reading of Gandhi's politics as 'nonviolent martiality', see M. Misra, Sergeant-Major Gandhi: Indian Nationalism and Nonviolent 'Martiality', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 73 (2014) 689–709; for an account of Gandhi's ostensibly nonviolent politics as seeking not to avoid violence but to elicit and transform it through the force of suffering, see F. Devji, *The Impossible Indian: Gandhi and the Temptation of Violence*, London, 2012.

²³ Desai and Vahed, *The South African Gandhi*, 27; See also S. Legg, Reviewing geographies of memory/forgetting, *Environment and Planning A* 39 (2007) 456–466.

²⁴ Desai and Vahed, *The South African Gandhi*, 23–28.

²⁵ R. Chikane, *Breaking a Rainbow, Building a Nation: The Politics behind #MustFall Movements*, Johannesburg, 2018; S. Mpofu-Walsh, *The New Apartheid*, Johannesburg, 2021.

²⁶ Gillespie and Naidoo, #MustFall, 190–194.

²⁷ Chantiluke, Kwoba and Nkopo (Eds), *Rhodes Must Fall*.

²⁸ F. B. Nyamnjoh, #RhodesMustFall: Nibbling at Resilient Colonialism in South Africa, Bamenda, 2016. T. Gamedze, Destruction styles: Black aesthetics of rupture and capture, *Radical Philosophy* 2 (2020) 55–65.

²⁹ See for example NYU Students, Remove the Gandhi Statue in Union Square Park, NYC, <https://www.change.org/p/new-york-city-council-remove-the-gandhi-statue-in-union-square-park-nyc>, last accessed 13 May 2023; Hampton, Gandhi statue toppled; J. Aribido, Remove the Gandhi Statue from Carleton Campus, <https://www.change.org/p/carleton-university-remove-the-gandhi-statue-from-carleton-campus>, last accessed 13 May 2023.

³⁰ A. Olaloku-Teriba, Afro-Pessimism and the (Un)Logic of Anti-Blackness, *Historical Materialism* 26 (2018) 96–122.

thought, 'Africans went into the ships and came out as Blacks.'³¹ Drawing on Orlando Patterson's notion of slavery as 'social death' — a condition entailing the 'permanent, violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonoured persons' — Wilderson argues that 'modernity marks the emergence of a new ontology because it is an era in which an entire race appears, people who, a priori ... stand as socially dead in relation to the rest of the world.'³² This ontological understanding of Blackness makes Afropessimists pessimistic about theories of liberation that analogise or subsume Black suffering with that of other oppressed peoples. Wilderson is at pains to distinguish slavery from other forms of exploitation on the basis of class, indigeneity, etc. As he puts it, 'the antagonist of the Black is the Human being.'³³ One upshot of these claims is that whereas Blackness once functioned as a political coalitional sign under which differently racialised groups united in their opposition to white supremacy, Afropessimists are more likely to conceive of the primary racial antagonism as Black/'non-Black'.³⁴ Sceptical of the possibility of solidarity amongst people of colour, Wilderson frequently positions non-Black people of colour (NBPOCs in the argot of contemporary social media) as 'junior partners' to Whiteness in racist and imperialist projects.

This is not the place for an extended discussion of Afropessimism or the numerous critiques that have taken it to task for its putative US-centrism, its disinterest in African history and politics, and its flattened conception of Blackness that is inattentive to intraracial hierarchy and intersectionality.³⁵ Yet the contemporary currency of Afropessimism, particularly in antiracist organising in the US, is relevant to understanding why Gandhi is increasingly framed as 'anti-Black'. Indeed given his complicity in imperial British racial ordering, his early appeals to imperial brotherhood and offers of Indian partnership with Britain, Gandhi is a prime exhibit for Wilderson's claim that NBPOCs have tended to play the role of 'junior partners' to White western imperialism.

The casteist Gandhi: Global Dalits and the 'Blacks of Asia'

Some recent African protests against Gandhi's memorialisation cite his apologetics on caste and his patronising attitude towards Dalits as an additional ground for their opposition.³⁶ Gandhi's views on caste were most candidly expressed in his arguments with Ambedkar in 1936. Arguing that caste was legitimated by Hindu religious scripture, Ambedkar's advice to those seeking to abolish caste was uncompromising: 'You must not only discard the Shastras, you must deny their authority ... You must have courage to tell

the Hindus, that what is wrong with them is their religion — the religion which has produced in them this notion of the sacredness of Caste.'³⁷ Gandhi responded that Hinduism had to be judged 'not by its worst specimens but by the best it might have produced', citing a tradition of Hindu reformers whom he admired. Acknowledging the degradation of Hinduism by the practice of caste discrimination but quibbling with Ambedkar's reliance on 'texts of doubtful authority', he conjured up an idealised vision of the caste system.

The law of Varna teaches us that we have each one of us to earn bread by following the ancestral calling. It defines not our rights but our duties. It necessarily has reference to callings that are conducive to the welfare of humanity and to no other. It also follows that there is no calling too low and none too high. All are good, lawful, and absolutely equal in status. The calling of a Brahmin — spiritual teacher — and a scavenger are equal, and their due performance carries equal merit before God and at one time seems to have carried identical reward before man. Both were entitled to their livelihood and no more. Indeed one traces even now in villages the faint lines of this healthy operation of the law.³⁸

Ambedkar retorted that the Hindu preachers whom Gandhi revered 'did not preach that all men were equal. They preached that all men were equal in the eyes of God — a very different and a very innocuous proposition which nobody can find difficult to preach or dangerous to believe in.'³⁹

The debate between the two men followed on the heels of their famous clash over political representation of Dalits. Ambedkar wanted to safeguard Dalit political representation through a system of separate electorates, following the example of Indian Muslims who had in 1909 secured the right to have Muslim voters choose Muslim representatives. Conscious of the power of numbers in the embryonic forms of representative politics that the British colonial government conceded, and dogged in his insistence that caste was a matter for internal Hindu reform, Gandhi was determined to ensure that Dalits were regarded as Hindus. When in 1932 the British government accepted Ambedkar's demand for separate electorates, Gandhi undertook a hunger fast and forced Ambedkar to back down. The compromise Poona Pact put in place a single Hindu electorate with seats reserved for representatives of 'depressed classes' (the official term for those considered untouchable by caste Hindus) who would, however, be elected by the entirety of the electorate.⁴⁰ The event is seared in Dalit memory as the moment in which Gandhi thwarted Dalit political aspirations for autonomous self-representation.

Gandhi's views on caste have been well known in India from the time they were articulated. So we must ask how and why they have acquired global salience in the contemporary moment. A full answer to this question would demand a more comprehensive account than I can offer here of the decades of tireless global advocacy against caste discrimination performed by Dalit activists and intellectuals.⁴¹ Such an account might start with Ambedkar's

³¹ F.B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, Durham, 2010, 38.

³² Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 17–18.

³³ F.B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism*, New York, 2020, 241.

³⁴ On the rise and fall of political Blackness in diasporic South Asian organising in the US and UK, see M. Bharadwaj, Queering Diasporic Desi Solidarity: South Asian Activism in US and UK Multiracial Social Movements, *Journal of Asian American Studies* 25 (2022) 95–123.

³⁵ See for example Olaloku-Teriba, Afro-Pessimism and the (Un)Logic of Anti-Blackness; gamEdze and gamedZe, Anxiety, Afropessimism, and the University Shutdown, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 118, 1 (2019) 215–225; K.O. Okoth, The Flatness of Blackness: Afro-Pessimism and the Erasure of Anti-Colonial Thought, *Salvage*, 16 January 2020, <https://salvage.zone/the-flatness-of-blackness-afro-pessimism-and-the-erasure-of-anti-colonial-thought/>, last accessed 26 November 2022; J. McCarthy, On Afropessimism, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 20 July 2020, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/on-afropessimism/>, last accessed 26 November 2022.

³⁶ Gborbilor Aberqu, Gandhi's Statue at the University of Ghana Must Come Down, 12 September 2016, <https://www.change.org/p/the-members-of-the-university-of-ghana-council-gandhi-s-statue-at-the-university-of-ghana-must-come-down>, last accessed 26 November 2022; Felix Ntehe, UG: Pull down Gandhi's [sic] statue, he was a racist, 4 July 2016, <https://www.rawgist.com/ug-pull-ghandis-statue-racist/>, last accessed 26 November 2022; Carroll, Gandhi branded racist.

³⁷ B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste: An Undelivered Speech*, Mulk Raj Anand (Ed), New Delhi, 1990, 84.

³⁸ M.K. Gandhi, Dr. Ambedkar's Indictment: parts (I) and (II), *Harijan* 11 July & 18 July (1936), reprinted as A Vindication of Caste, in: Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, 108–109.

³⁹ Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, 115.

⁴⁰ A. Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*, Berkeley, 2009, 118–160.

⁴¹ For an excellent overview see S. Yengde, The Harvest of Casteism, *The Caravan*, 3 July 2020, <https://caravanmagazine.in/essay/race-caste-and-what-it-will-take-to-make-dalit-lives-matter>, last accessed 26 November 2022.

international travels and correspondence and pay attention to the transnational solidarity between the Dalit Panthers (formed in 1972) and the Black Panthers.⁴² It would recognise the efforts of Dalit activists to use international alliances and institutions — over the strenuous objections of the Government of India — to inscribe caste as a prohibited category of discrimination in international law, and to analogous domestic efforts in states with sizeable Indian diasporas such as the US and UK.⁴³ It would attend to popular culture, especially the wave of memoirs and auto-theory by Dalit writers, including in the diaspora, many of whom bring their personal experience into conversation with Black struggle to make the harsh realities of Dalit humiliation and oppression intelligible to a global reading public.⁴⁴ The proliferation of Dalit media including social media means that stories about Dalit achievement and suffering reach global audiences in real time and greater volume, no longer reliant on the fickle attention of a caste-ridden Indian legacy media. A key vehicle for broader conversations about caste has been student activism on university campuses in India and abroad, radicalised amongst other things by the spate of suicides by Dalit students (of whom Rohith Vemula might currently be the most well-known) driven to take their lives by the caste oppressiveness of their institutional environments.⁴⁵

Finally, the global intelligibility of caste has been enabled by theoretical interventions exploring its complex relationship with race. While caste and race have been variously related through the modalities of analogy, entanglement, syncretism and more, the result of such efforts has been a de-provincialisation of caste as a category that is no longer confined to South Asia.⁴⁶ At stake here is not only the claim that caste travels with South Asian migrants, but the more ambitious suggestion that caste is relevant to the analysis of hierarchies outside South Asia and its diasporas. Surveying discrimination in Africa and the Americas, Suraj Yengde makes a compelling case for the utility of caste as a global category to describe a 'layered mechanism of immovable social hierarchy and absolute control that aims to dehumanize certain forms of labour through both structural and economical positions, as well as through the cultural practices of endogamy and ritual'.⁴⁷

Writing in 2014, just before the eruption of Gandhi Must Fall (GMF), Sankaran Krishna lamented the fact that untouchability did not elicit the same opprobrium on the world stage as segregation,

apartheid, genocide and slavery. He surmised that this was the result of a mystification of caste as uniquely Indian or Hindu and of the idealisation of Gandhi as an icon of peaceful political change and of India as a moral leader of the non-aligned world's struggle against racism and colonialism.⁴⁸ Clearly much has changed in the time that has elapsed since these observations. The developments that I have sketched above in the realms of politics, law, social theory and popular culture have given caste, Dalitness and Ambedkar an unprecedented global visibility from which there will be no turning back. And they have concomitantly cast Gandhi in a new and less flattering light.

Speaking to *The Caravan* in 2019, Q̄bádélé Kambon, an academic at the University of Ghana and leading architect of the 2016 GMF campaign said 'if you want to give us a statue, give us a statue of Ambedkar. That is whose writings we can relate to as Black people.' In the interview, Kambon racialises Dalits as Black in contrast to caste Hindus ('the Brahmins tend to be the whitest ones').⁴⁹ He arrives at this position via the work of scholars such as Runoko Rashidi and V. T. Rajshekar, who argue that Africans and Indian Dalits and Adivasis had common ancestors — a claim that they try to substantiate with archaeological and anthropological evidence. In her account of the history of entanglements between West Africa and India, Shobana Shankar provides a glimpse of the antecedents of such discourses by pointing to Senegalese poet and first president Léopold Senghor's racialization of Dravidians in South India as the 'Blacks of Asia'. Articulated in the early 1970s — a time when the racial boundaries of Blackness and Indianness were hardening in Africa as a result of the entrenchment of apartheid in South Africa and Idi Amin's expulsion of Asians from Uganda, among other developments — Shankar describes Senghor as 'the first prominent African ... to bring India into Africa's racial humanism that undergirded Pan-Africanism and Afrocentrism'.⁵⁰ Senghor's promotion of Afro-Dravidian studies was itself heir to a tradition of speculative thinking on connections between South India and Africa including linguistic analysis that purported to reveal Dravidian elements in the languages of West Africa, archaeological discoveries and the 'fabulous geography' of 19th century European occultists who believed that a lost land bridge called Lemuria connected India and Africa. While Marxists invested in Afro-Asia solidarity have balked at the racial ontologisation underpinning some of these claims, Shankar invites us to see how these imaginative geographies express a yearning for connection between struggles against white supremacy and caste Hindu dominance.⁵¹

In an interview with me, Kambon repeatedly framed the global racial order in Black versus non-Black terms, which led me to ask him if he identified as an Afropessimist. Born and educated in the US with advanced degrees from the US and Ghana, it was a discourse that he was familiar with. Kambon nonetheless refused the term, arguing that his politics was grounded in what he called the original conception of Pan-Africanism, which he described as championing the interests of all Black people regardless of location. He contrasted this with what he called 'All Africanism' — a philosophy that he associated with the ANC amongst other political formations, which claimed to work for all people located in Africa

⁴² N. Slate, *The Dalit Panthers: Race, Caste, and Black Power in India*, in: N. Slate (Ed), *Black Power Beyond Borders: The Global Dimensions of the Black Power Movement*, New York, 2012, 127–143.

⁴³ L. Cabrera, Dalit cosmopolitans: Institutionally developmental global citizenship in struggles against caste discrimination, *Review of International Studies* 43 (2016) 280–301; D. Mosse, Outside Caste? The Enclosure of Caste and Claims to Castelessness in India and the United Kingdom, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 62 (2020) 13–24; M. Dhanda, Anti-castism and misplaced nativism: Mapping caste as an aspect of race, *Radical Philosophy* 192 (2015) 33–43.

⁴⁴ S. Gidla, *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India*, New York, 2017; S. Yengde, *Caste Matters*, Gurgaon, 2019; Y. Dutt, *Coming Out as Dalit: a memoir*, New Delhi, 2019.

⁴⁵ The Wire Staff, My Birth is My Fatal Accident: Rohith Vemula's Searing Letter is an Indictment of Social Prejudices, *The Wire*, 17 January 2019, <https://thewire.in/caste/rohith-vemula-letter-a-powerful-indictment-of-social-prejudices>, last accessed 28 June 2023.

⁴⁶ For an analogical treatment of race and caste, see N. Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India*, Cambridge, 2017; on entanglement see S. Dilawri, On the worldmaking of vernacular capitalists: tracing entanglements between race, caste, and capital, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* (forthcoming); for the suggestion that colonial governmentalities produces syncretised accounts of race and caste, see J.F. Cháirez-Garza, M.D. Gergan, M. Ranganathan and P. Vasudevan, Introduction to the special issue: Rethinking difference in India through racialization, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 45, 2 (2022) 196; see also I. Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, New York, 2020.

⁴⁷ S. Yengde, Global Castes, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 45 (2022) 343.

⁴⁸ S. Krishna, A Postcolonial Racial/Spatial Order: Gandhi, Ambedkar, and the construction of the international, in: A. Anievas, N. Manjanda and R. Shilliam (Eds), *Race and Racism in International Relations*, London, 2014, 153–154.

⁴⁹ Sagar, Give us a statue of Ambedkar, not Gandhi: Ghana university professor Q̄bádélé Kambon, *The Caravan*, 13 January 2019, <https://caravanmagazine.in/caste/gandhi-must-fall-interview>, last accessed 26 November 2022.

⁵⁰ S. Shankar, *An Uneasy Embrace: Africa, India and the Spectre of Race*, London, 2021, 88.

⁵¹ V. Prashad, 'Afro-Dalits of the Earth, Unite!', *African Studies Review* 43 (2000) 192; Shankar, *An Uneasy Embrace*, 97.

regardless of whether they were Black, often — he said — to the detriment of Black people.⁵² Even as he tethered his politics to a global Blackness antagonistic to ‘non-Black’ people, in embracing Dalit and Adivasi communities, his notion of Blackness hung somewhere between the expansiveness of a vanishing political Blackness and the racial exclusiveness of Afropessimism. By rewriting the scope of global Blackness, Kambon's position implicitly shared Afropessimism's suspicion that the old solidarities of political Blackness had masked the racisms that NBPOCs perpetrate vis-à-vis Black people, while distancing himself from its tendency to give up on the possibility of global solidarity altogether. Moreover, when Dalits and Adivasis but not caste Hindus are embraced within the scope of a rescripted global Blackness, ‘Indian’ ceases to be a coherent racial category, fractured as it is by the Black/non-Black axis of differentiation.

The predatory Gandhi: politics of the bedroom

A third charge in some of the recent anti-Gandhi protests centres on allegations of ‘questionable sexual practices and misogynistic views’ and ‘predatory behaviour’.⁵³ While not substantiated in as much depth as the racism charge tends to be, it is not difficult to guess that the references here are to Gandhi's infamous ‘experiments’ with celibacy. Towards the end of his life, he took to sleeping naked with younger women — his grandnieces Abha and Manu and his physician Sushila Nayar. For Gandhi, this was a test of his vow of ‘brahmacharya’, translated imperfectly as celibacy but entailing a more all-encompassing control of the senses in the quest for truth. The exposure to, and resistance of, temptation was a method of cultivating spiritual discipline that gave the nonviolent resistor strength. In a thoughtful exploration of this practice, Vinay Lal notes that the women themselves described Gandhi's relationship with them as maternal and ‘may have ceased to think of [him] as a man’ — one indication of this being the title of Manu's memoir of Gandhi, *Bapu — My Mother*.⁵⁴ Indeed there has never been any suggestion — till the recent crop of petitions — that the encounters were remotely sexual, with even those of Gandhi's associates who were disturbed by the practice arguing not that he had been guilty of impropriety but that he would set a bad example to others who might lack his purity and discipline. This may be why Gandhi's practice of brahmacharya has not attracted as much attention as his devotion to satya (truth) and ahimsa (nonviolence), with admirers embarrassedly brushing aside the experiments with celibacy as unnatural and adversaries finding little ammunition in them beyond evidence of inexplicable eccentricity. Writing in 2000, Lal observes that ‘one might have expected that Gandhi's detractors, of whom there are many, would have pounced upon the Mahatma for harbouring sexual fantasies in the ripe years of his life while proclaiming himself to be celibate, for compromising the lives of very young women, and for exploiting the vastly iniquitous power relationship that obtained between him and the young women.’ Lal does not endorse these charges and indeed his complex philosophical investigation of brahmacharya leads him in quite different directions. But his observation raises questions about

what drives the recent interest in this aspect of Gandhi's worldview.

One driver of this interest may be the increasing problematisation of consent in feminist debates.⁵⁵ We might ask what scope for refusal the apparently consenting women involved in these experiments meaningfully had, constrained as they might have been by Gandhi's power over them and by his overwhelming public status as ‘Father of the Nation’. How can we be sure that we are not looking at an instance of what we might today call grooming? Perhaps it has taken the global force of #metoo, thanks to which the corporeal intimacies of powerful men are increasingly under scrutiny, to cast a revisionist spotlight on Gandhi's libidinal life in the popular imaginary.

Gandhi as cipher for India(n): superpower statutory diplomacy and nationalist capital making

Some grievances in the anti-Gandhi protests have less to do with Gandhi than with perceptions of contemporary India and Indians. For example, Sikh supporters of an independent state of Khalistan have used the Gandhi statue outside the Indian embassy in Washington, D.C., as a screen on which to project their opposition to the Indian state's putative imperialism on the occasion of Republic Day.⁵⁶ Ghanaian protesters also regarded the Gandhi statue that they objected to as representing more than simply his views, seeing it as a reminder of the imperialism of the Indian state and the racism of its society. Having outlined their case against Gandhi, they insisted that ‘it is better to stand up for our dignity than to kowtow to the wishes of a burgeoning Eurasian superpower’.⁵⁷ The anti-India feeling in this case was partly provoked by news of racist hate crimes against Africans in Indian cities. Weeks before the Gandhi statue was unveiled in Accra, a Congolese man named Masonda Ketada Olivier had been murdered in New Delhi.⁵⁸ Reports of racism and harassment encountered by Africans in urban India at the hands of police, landlords, neighbours, shopkeepers and others had become routine by this point.⁵⁹ The anger on this occasion prompted African Heads of Mission to threaten to boycott the Africa Day celebrations organised by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations in New Delhi.⁶⁰ Even so, GMF activists in Accra were outraged that the Ghanaian Ministry of Foreign Affairs seemed keener to protect the inanimate object that had been gifted by the Government of India than to protest the treatment of Africans in India.⁶¹ Analogously, one observer of the anti-Gandhi

⁵² See for example A. Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, London, 2021.

⁵³ M.A. Shah, Khalistan flag installed on Gandhi statue in anti-India protest, *The News*, 28 January 2022, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/928778-khalistan-flag-installed-on-gandhi-statue-in-anti-india-protest>, last accessed 26 November 2022.

⁵⁴ Aberqu, Gandhi's Statue at the University of Ghana.

⁵⁵ Express News Service, Minutes before birthday, man from Congo beaten to death in Vasant Kunj, *Indian Express*, 22 May 2016, <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/minutes-before-birthday-man-from-congo-beaten-to-death-in-vasant-kunj-delhi-2813079/>, last accessed 26 November 2022.

⁵⁶ IANS, African students often victims of racism, stereotyping, *Deccan Herald*, 12 March 2013, <https://www.deccanherald.com/content/318250/african-students-often-victims-racism.html>, last accessed 26 November 2022; P. Ghosh, Murder of Nigerian in Goa Uncovers Ugly Racist Attitudes of Indians Against Black Africans, *International Business Times*, 11 June 2013, <https://www.ibtimes.com/murder-nigerian-go-uncovers-ugly-racist-attitudes-indians-against-black-africans-1458578>, last accessed 26 November 2022; Congolese nationals arrested in Punjab, a ‘real hell for black Africans’, *The Observers*, 19 June 2013, <https://observers.france24.com/en/20130619-congolese-nationals-arrested-punjab-africans>, last accessed 26 November 2022; R. Mackey, Beating of African Students by Mob in India Prompts Soul-Searching on Race, *New York Times*, 1 October 2014.

⁵⁷ S. Vittorini, Africa Day, 20 June 2016, <https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/ssai-notes/2016/06/20/africa-day-by-simona-vittorini/>, last accessed 26 November 2022.

⁵⁸ Author interview with Kambon.

⁵² Author interview with O. Kambon, Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Accra, 5 August 2019.

⁵³ L. Sears, Petition Against Erecting Racist Gandhi Statue in Manchester, 18 July 2019, <https://www.change.org/p/manchester-city-council-petition-against-erecting-racist-gandhi-statue-in-manchester>, last accessed 28 June 2023; Aribido, Remove the Gandhi Statue from Carleton Campus; NYU Students, Remove the Gandhi Statue in Union Square Park; Hampton, ‘Gandhi statue toppled’.

⁵⁴ V. Lal, Nakedness, Nonviolence, and Brahmacharya: Gandhi's Experiments in Celibate Sexuality, *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9 (2000) 128.

protests in Malawi noted that they were underpinned by a resentment of the insularity of the local Indian community which, in its aloofness from black Malawians and its alleged tendency to send its money abroad, was seen as being racist and insufficiently committed to the country.⁶² In such moments, Gandhi becomes a metonym for Indian imperialism and racial capitalism.

Crucially, the equivalence between Gandhi and India does not simply reside in the minds of the protesters but is engendered by those responsible for the installation of the statues. At the University of Ghana, the Government of India's gift of the statue — which accompanied high profile investments in infrastructure such as funding for a new parliamentary chamber and the renovation of the presidential residence — was seen as aiming to counter the influence of China, symbolised by the establishment of a Confucius Institute in 2013.⁶³ In 2014, the British government announced the erection of a statue of Gandhi in Westminster Square, London, at the same time as ministers were traveling to India to persuade it — ironically — to buy arms from Britain.⁶⁴ Here the installation of Gandhi statues is a projection of rising Indian power and a recognition of that rise, even if Gandhi himself might not have endorsed the nation's drive towards great power status or the ideological project of those who currently hold the reins of state.

That Gandhi has become an abstracted symbol of the Indian state — one that is proliferated and protected by it as a measure of its own expanding reach — is visible in official Indian reactions to criticism of him. In December 2021, shortly after the attack on the Gandhi statue in Melbourne, Dolly Kikon and Hari Bapuji published an article much like this one, discussing Gandhi's racism and casteism in an attempt to explain why statues of him had increasingly become targets of protest.⁶⁵ It subsequently emerged that the Australia India Institute (AII), of which the authors were fellows, had declined to publish the article on its website as a result of which it was published elsewhere.⁶⁶ This revelation was made in a letter written by thirteen of the then forty fellows of the Institute, who resigned in protest at the manner in which the Indian High Commission in Australia had pressured the AII into withdrawing support for the hosting of events and the publication of opinions that were critical of the Indian state and its elites. The letter bemoaned the Institute's increasing patronage of propagandistic events that celebrated the current Indian government and the majoritarian culture that it promoted and its discouragement of 'secular, liberal or critical viewpoints'.⁶⁷ In its response to the letter, the University of Melbourne — which hosts the AII — claimed that restrictions imposed on academics were not restraints on free speech but legitimate exercises in editorial judgment. The university reiterated its commitment to strengthening ties with India.⁶⁸ It is telling that these exchanges coincided with the signing of an Australia-India Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement, whereby India removed tariffs on more than 85% of Australian

goods while Australia reciprocated with tariff removals on 96% of Indian goods entering the country.⁶⁹

What is especially intriguing and ironic about the Indian government's sensitivity to criticisms of Gandhi is that it is expressed at the same time as this government and its supporters routinely denigrate Gandhi and Gandhian values at home. It should go without saying that the BJP's electoral mobilisation of Islamophobia to construct its formidable Hindu base on the strength of which it has held power at the national level since 2014 flies in the face of Gandhi's appeals for, and sacrifice on behalf of, Hindu-Muslim amity and communal harmony.⁷⁰ Given this article's interest in statues as embodiments of public memory, it is instructive to turn to sculptural manifestations of the marginalisation of Gandhi in the Indian built environment at both regional and national scales.

We might turn, first, to Gandhi's native Gujarat, where the BJP has been in power continuously since 1995. Writing about the reconstruction of Kachchh in northwestern Gujarat after the devastating earthquake of 2001, Edward Simpson describes the aggressive promotion of the figure of Shyamji Krishnavarma.⁷¹ A critic of Gandhian non-violence and advocate of political assassination and armed struggle in the service of Indian independence, Krishnavarma spent much of his political life in London. There he established the Indian Home Rule Society in 1905 as well as India House, a hostel for politically-minded Indian students. Among those who passed through it was the young Vinayak Damodar Savarkar — the ideological architect of Hindutva who inspired Gandhi's assassin Nathuram Godse and was himself tried for conspiracy following the assassination but eventually acquitted. Fearing arrest by the British government on account of his political views, Krishnavarma moved to Paris and then Geneva, where he died in 1930. In 2003, his ashes were brought to the house in which he was born in the coastal town of Mandvi in Kachchh. Krishnavarma features prominently in the rebuilding of Kachchh, with the reconstructed airport and a new university being named after him. He is also memorialised through biographies, statues and a park, the centrepiece of which is a replica in Kachchh of the Victorian mansion in London that provided the premises for India House.

In the same year that Krishnavarma was brought 'home' to Gujarat, a portrait of Savarkar was unveiled in the Indian Parliament. While not displacing the veneration of Gandhi within the premises of the legislature, this symbolic move introduced a discordant note in what Shirin M. Rai describes as the 'palimpsestic' depiction of Indian history in Parliament.⁷² Beginning in this way during the BJP's first stint in office at the national level while at the helm of a coalition government, the symbolic marginalisation of Gandhi has intensified during its unimpeded grip on power from 2014, becoming particularly evident in the Central Vista Project which has been a major priority for the second Modi administration from 2019 onwards.

The project comprises a number of elements including the construction of a new Parliament, Secretariat, residences and offices, the conversion of some buildings into museums and the demolition of others, and a revamping of the central axis that connects the famous India Gate to Rashtrapati Bhavan, the former

⁶² Lipenga, *Tales of Political monuments in Malawi*, 118.

⁶³ Author interview with N.-L. Kuditchar, Department of Political Science, University of Ghana, Accra, August 2019.

⁶⁴ P. Gopal, Does Gandhi really belong in Parliament Square?, *Guardian*, 11 July 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jul/11/gandhi-parliament-square-india>, last accessed 26 November 2022.

⁶⁵ Kikon and Bapuji, *Understanding Modern Attacks on Gandhi*.

⁶⁶ The Wire Staff, Citing Indian High Commission Interference, 13 Academics Resign From Australia India Institute, *The Wire*, 7 April 2022, <https://thewire.in/world/citing-indian-high-commission-interference-13-academics-resign-from-australia-india-institute>, last accessed 15 May 2023.

⁶⁷ NRI Affairs News Desk, 13 fellows of Australia India Institute resign over 'serious concerns about the vision and governance', *NRI Affairs*, 31 March 2022, <https://www.nriaffairs.com/13-fellows-of-australia-india-institute-resign-over-serious-concerns-about-the-vision-and-governance/>, last accessed 15 May 2023.

⁶⁸ The Wire Staff, Citing Indian High Commission Interference.

⁶⁹ Reuters, India, Australia Ink Landmark Trade Deal, Major Import Duties to be Scrapped, *The Wire*, 2 April 2022, <https://thewire.in/world/india-australia-ink-landmark-trade-deal-major-import-duties-to-be-scrapped>, last accessed 15 May 2023.

⁷⁰ A.P. Chatterji, T.B. Hansen and C. Jaffrelot (Eds), *Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism is Changing India*, Oxford, 2019.

⁷¹ E. Simpson, *The Political Biography of an Earthquake: Aftermath and Amnesia in Gujarat, India*, London, 2014, 76–83.

⁷² S.M. Rai, Political Aesthetics of the Nation: Murals and Statues in the Indian Parliament, *Interventions* 16 (2014) 911.

Viceroy's House that is now the residence of the President.⁷³ A small but significant element of this project — not least because it stands at the epicentre of the axis in the hexagonal garden in which India Gate is located — has been the installation of a 28-foot black granite statue of Subhas Chandra Bose. A giant in the pantheon of freedom fighters, Bose famously broke with Gandhi and Nehru on the question of non-violence and pursued an ill-fated wartime alliance with Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan in an attempt to eject the British from India. The statue of Bose was installed under a stone canopy on a plinth that once bore a statue of King George V. As Kelly D. Alley explains, the removal of the statue of the British monarch in 1968 was followed by several decades of wrangling over whether and how a statue of Gandhi might take his place.⁷⁴ Politicians' demands for the installation of such a statue were consistently opposed by artists, architects and urban planners. One expert committee constituted by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi objected that it would be inappropriate to place a leader who opposed colonial rule within structures built by and representing the British Raj; they were also squeamish about the prospect of Gandhi presiding over the displays of military might staged annually on the central axis on Republic Day.⁷⁵ While there is a certain lack of nuance in these simplistic readings of Gandhi as a symbol of nonviolence, that the current regime has found in Bose a figure who is symbolically more congruent with the spatial forms and performances of imperialism and militarism is telling.

What should we make of the fact that even as the Indian state sidelines Gandhi at home, it obsessively presents statues of Gandhi abroad as diplomatic gifts signifying friendship as well as the reach of Indian power and capital?⁷⁶ This apparent contradiction sends different messages to different audiences. For domestic audiences, particularly the BJP's core Hindutva constituency, it confirms the eclipse of the putatively pacifist and emasculated Hinduism with which the Hindu Right associates Gandhi and the ascent of a muscular political Hinduism that puts minorities firmly in their place. For international audiences, particularly those anxious or uncertain about India's rise, Gandhi as stereotypical signifier for truth and nonviolence remains useful as a means of providing assurance that rising Indian power will be used for noble purposes. The fact that such signals are not always interpreted by their audiences in the intended ways may alter the state's practice of gifting Gandhi statues in its attempt to consolidate diplomatic relationships. Yet for now, the state's official hallowing of Gandhi proceeds alongside a hollowing out of his substantive moral and political project, rendering him a mere cipher for whatever the Indian state wishes to project at any given time.

Deaths and afterlives of Gandhi

If the ruling party sidelines Gandhi at home, its electoral constituency engages in a more vicious and neurotic toppling of him on a regular basis. Every year on January 30, the anniversary of Gandhi's assassination, Hindutva twitter is awash with celebration of his assassin Godse. Tweets thank him for allegedly saving India from becoming a Muslim country, for preventing the loss of Kashmir to Pakistan, and other national fates that the tweeters fantasise might have resulted had Gandhi lived beyond 1948. Slogans such as 'Nathuram Godse zindabad!' ('victory to Nathuram

Godse') typically trend on the day. A 2022 tweet on the anniversary showed a man lowering his shorts to reveal a photoshopped head of Godse in place of the man's penis, as if to suggest that Godse had — through his murderous action — virilised a nation that Gandhi had emasculated. The Hindu Right's antipathy to Gandhi on account of his pleas for Hindu-Muslim friendship and his commitment to nonviolence has nothing in common with the Dalit argument against Gandhi or indeed with African and other anti-racist grievances against him. Indeed the mutual antipathy of Hindus and Dalits on caste lines offers as compelling an illustration as any that the enemy's enemy is not necessarily a friend.

Paradoxically, the annual re-enactment of Gandhi's assassination on social media does more than anything else to keep him alive. As long as Hindu Right activists bash Gandhi, he remains a talisman for their opponents despite the growing awareness of his racism and casteism. One of those opponents is Harsh Mander, a former civil servant who became a social activist in 2002, the year of the infamous anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat early in Modi's first term as Chief Minister of the state. Mander is today best known for his Karwan-e-Mohabbat (Caravan of Love), a grassroots campaign whose members travel across the country to support families who have lost loved ones to hate crimes such as the lynchings motivated by religious and caste supremacism that have marred Modi's rule.⁷⁷ He cites as his inspiration Gandhi in the last months of his life, which Mander describes as his 'finest hour'.⁷⁸ This is not the Gandhi who parleyed with the British while purporting to represent all of India, but a lonelier, frailer Gandhi, walking from house to house with a small band of supporters in a desperate attempt to stem the horrific communal violence that was engulfing Noakhali, Calcutta and elsewhere, far from the celebrations of Independence in August 1947 and largely ignored by the leading politicians of the day.

A second example of Gandhi veneration by opponents of the neoliberal Hindu Right is provided by activists of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save Narmada Movement), a grassroots movement of Adivasis, farmers, environmentalists and human rights advocates that waged a long and ultimately unsuccessful campaign to prevent construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam across the Narmada river and its displacement of upwards of a quarter of a million people.⁷⁹ For several decades, NBA activists have drawn on a Gandhian repertoire of protest comprising tactics such as satyagraha and hunger strikes to staunch what they see as the relentless march of destructive neoliberal development, and have championed pro-poor Gandhian visions of rural self-reliance and sustainability. In 2018, they installed a bust of Gandhi in the village of Chikhaldia in central India to mark the spot of a major struggle the previous year, when they had fasted in protest against their impending displacement and been imprisoned for over two weeks.⁸⁰ When the sluice gates of the completed dam were shut in 2019 and the reservoir filled to capacity for the first time flooding Chikhaldia and other areas, they returned in a boat, lifted the Gandhi bust out of the water and reinstalled it on top of a metal

⁷⁷ <https://karwanemohabbat.in/about/>.

⁷⁸ H. Mander, Fraternity: The Missing Link of India's Democracy, *The India Forum*, 13 February 2019, <https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/fraternity-missing-link-india-s-democracy>, last accessed 16 May 2023.

⁷⁹ For accounts of the movement see A. Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley*, New Delhi, 1995; A.G. Nilsen, *Dispossession and Resistance in India: The river and the rage*, Abingdon, 2010.

⁸⁰ M. Patkar, Historic Chikhaldia, temples, mosques submerged, activists 'rescue' Gandhi idol, *Sabrang*, 16 September 2019, <https://sabrangindia.in/article/historic-chikhaldia-temples-mosques-submerged-activists-rescue-gandhi-idol>, last accessed 16 May 2023.

⁷³ <https://centralvista.gov.in/>.

⁷⁴ K.D. Alley, Gandhiji on the Central Vista: A Postcolonial Reconfiguring, *Modern Asian Studies* 31(1997) 967–994.

⁷⁵ Alley, Gandhiji on the Central Vista, 978.

⁷⁶ On the Indian state's diplomatic practice of gifting Gandhi statues, see Sruthi Muraleedharan, Statues of Dis 'order': exploring affinities across caste and race, paper presented at Millennium conference, October 2021.



Fig. 2. Gandhi bust being reinstalled in Chikhalda, 2019; image courtesy Rehmat.

pillar dropped into the bed of the reservoir (see Fig. 2).⁸¹ Now that the waters of the Narmada have covered Chikhalda, only the bust of Gandhi visible above the water level marks the spot where a bustling community once lived.

What should we make of the fact that Gandhi is being toppled all over the world by a variety of social forces whose worldviews are radically incommensurable with one another? Indeed where the Hindu Right is concerned, its religious, racial and caste supremacism renders it so out of kilter with the other social movements discussed here as to make it ethically imperative for us to distinguish it from them. Yet even bracketing the Hindu Right as the odd one out in this discussion, what should we make of the fact that subaltern social movements evince radically different attitudes towards Gandhi in the contemporary moment, with some taking him down for his racism, casteism and misogyny and forging new imaginative geographies of solidarity in the process, even as others continue to venerate him as an icon of communal harmony and environmentalism?

Perhaps this fractious state of affairs confirms — if it still needed confirming — the impossibility of the humanist fiction of coherent personhood, which continues to haunt discussions of political thought that attempt to grapple with the complex legacies of historical figures. Figurative statues as media of representation exacerbate these difficulties. Their embodiment of the singular figure lures viewers into relating to them in Schmittian mode — as friend or enemy, as someone to be for or against. And whereas we routinely relate to flesh and blood humans with ambivalence,

something about the performativity of the statue — its occupation of public space, its elevation on a pedestal, its claim to authority and immortality — demands a more categorical response: revere or revile, retain or remove. Such responses can seem especially moot when the statue has become a cipher, an empty signifier whose meaning derives less from the historical personage that it purports to embody than from the relations of production and exchange responsible for its erection. As this article has shown, the multiplicity of scales at which the meaning of Gandhi is being contested and renegotiated — continental, national, provincial — and the complex and unexpected ways in which they collide, only intensifies the difficulties with developing singular responses to his legacy. Indeed the historical and geographical specificity and incommensurability of the discourses that give different aspects of his legacy renewed salience seem to throw into relief the limits of the statue form in representing any legacy.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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⁸¹ R. Sutar, Gandhi of Chikhalda, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dOOrRa-t-LU>, last accessed 16 May 2023.