

# **Beyond the Mahatma: A Critical Look at Gandhi**

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Installing statues of Mahatma Gandhi abroad is a strategy employed by the Indian government as a form of "soft power," promoting an image of modern India as a land of peace, nonviolence, and a legacy of anti-colonial struggle. However, this contemporary, sanitized portrayal overlooks the more controversial aspects of Gandhi's life and ideology, which have led to significant international and domestic criticism.

Controversies surrounding Gandhi

**Racist views toward Black Africans:** While living in South Africa for 21 years, Gandhi's early writings and statements included derogatory and racist views towards Black Africans. These remarks were made while he was advocating for the rights of the Indian community, and he often contrasted the status of Indians with that of Black Africans.

Examples of Gandhi's racist language in South Africa include:

- Use of the slur "kaffir": Gandhi repeatedly referred to Black South Africans using the highly offensive slur "kaffir".
- "Raw kaffir": In 1903, he wrote that white people sought to degrade Indians "to the level of the raw kaffir," whose life he characterized as one of "indolence and nakedness".
- "Savages" and "half-heathen natives": He described Black Africans as "savages" and "half-heathen natives," portraying them as a primitive and uncivilized people.
- "Troublesome, very dirty and live like animals": In 1903, he also claimed that Black people were "troublesome, very dirty and live like animals".

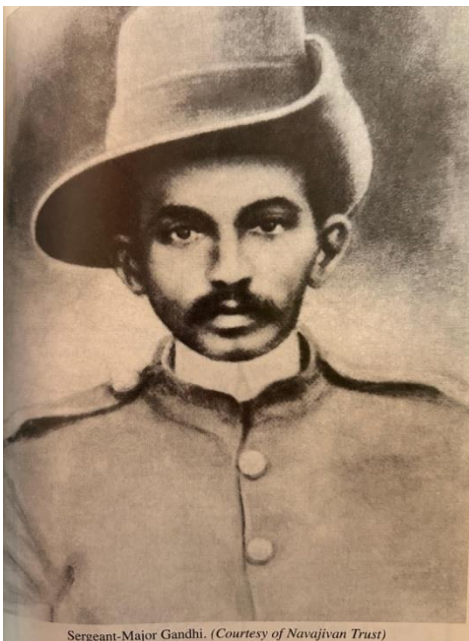
He advocated for the rights of Indians separately from those of Black Africans and used the derogatory term "kaffirs". He was responsible for making two bathrooms into three bathrooms and three separate prison doors—one for whites, one for Blacks, and one for Indians.

This legacy has led to protests and the removal of Gandhi statues in countries like Ghana and Malawi, with activists highlighting his racist past.

**Contradiction with nonviolence:** This action is particularly criticized because he actively aided the colonial power in crushing a movement of resistance by the indigenous population, a group he had previously disparaged with racist language.

Gandhi is known for his advocacy of nonviolence; however, he participated in the Second Boer War (1899–1902). He formed and led the Indian Ambulance Corps, comprising 1,100 Indian volunteers, including himself. The corps' service was recognized by the British, and Gandhi and 37 other Indians received the Queen's South Africa Medal.

As a loyalist to the British Empire during his early years in South Africa, Mahatma Gandhi was involved in the 1906 Zulu Rebellion. Gandhi held the rank of Sergeant Major, a title that reflected his leadership role. Although he did not engage in combat, his participation marked a significant departure from his later philosophy of nonviolence and reflected his complex political stance at the time. This action is particularly criticized because he actively aided the colonial power in crushing a movement of resistance by the indigenous population, a group he had previously disparaged with racist language.



Sergeant-Major Gandhi. (Courtesy of Navajivan Trust)

### **Gandhian Nonviolence (Sergeant Major)**

The quote, as reported by Pyarelal Nayyar, Gandhi's biographer and secretary, suggests that Gandhi said, "We adopted nonviolence out of our helplessness. If we had the atom bomb, we would have used it against the British." This

statement has been widely circulated, particularly on social media and internet forums, but its meaning is highly contested. Critics of Gandhi and his philosophy of nonviolence sometimes cite this quote as evidence that his commitment to nonviolence was not absolute but rather a strategy born of necessity.

**Gandhi manipulated the Dalits into signing the Poona Pact and making them a permanent low class in Indian society for a long time to come:** The signing of the 1932 Poona Pact is a highly contentious event, with Dalit activists and scholars, led by B.R. Ambedkar, often describing Gandhi's fast unto death as a form of manipulation or coercion.

In August 1932, British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald announced the "Communal Award," which allocated separate electorates for various communities, including the "Depressed Classes," a term then used to refer to Dalits.

**Gandhi's opposition:** From his prison cell in Yerwada Jail, Gandhi vehemently opposed the separate electorate for Dalits, viewing it as a British tactic to divide the Hindu community. He believed it would permanently separate Dalits from the larger Hindu society. To protest the Communal Award, Gandhi began a fast unto death in September 1932, stating that he would not break it until the separate electorate was withdrawn.

**Emotional pressure:** The impending death of a revered national leader put immense pressure on Ambedkar. Newspapers across India widely covered Gandhi's fast, with many implicitly framing Ambedkar as responsible for Gandhi's declining health.

Under this immense public and emotional duress, Ambedkar reportedly faced threats of violence against himself and the Dalit community if Gandhi died. His position became increasingly isolated as other Hindu and even some Dalit leaders urged him to compromise.

The pact replaced the separate electorates with joint electorates but significantly increased the number of reserved seats for Dalits in provincial legislatures, from 71 to 148. Ambedkar and his supporters later argued that the Poona Pact fundamentally disadvantaged Dalits and was a consequence of coercion. Loss of genuine representation. Ambedkar argued that under a joint electorate, Dalit candidates would have to rely on the votes of caste Hindus to win.

### **Truth about Gandhi's celibacy**

**Controversial sexual practices:** Later in life, as he became obsessed with testing his celibacy, Gandhi engaged in highly unorthodox practices. The facts

are that after his wife, Kasturba, died in 1944, Gandhi began the habit of sharing his bed with naked young women: his personal doctor, Sushila Nayar, and his grandnieces Abha and Manu, who were then in their late teens and about 60 years younger than him. He would sleep naked with young, sometimes teenage, female followers, to test his self-control. Gandhi began sleeping naked with naked Manu and other young women. He told a woman on one occasion, "Despite my best efforts, the organ remained aroused. It was an altogether strange and shameful experience."

**Gaslighting: Manu's diary entries document her inner turmoil and how Gandhi sometimes laughed at her distress. In one instance, after a sexual assault reportedly took place near where they were walking, Gandhi's laughter made her cry, adding to her emotional trauma.**

**Violation of ahimsa:** Critics argue that using another person for one's own spiritual ends, particularly when that person is vulnerable, is a form of violence and violates the principle of ahimsa (non-harm). The stark contrast between Gandhi's public image as a saintly and disciplined leader and his private sexual "experiments" has led to questioning his true character and motivations.

**Relationship with his family:** Gandhi has been criticized for his treatment of his family, particularly his wife, Kasturbai.

In one instance, he reportedly prevented her from receiving penicillin when she had pneumonia because it was a "foreign" drug. She later died, while Gandhi himself took Western medicine when he fell ill with malaria.

**Joseph Lelyveld's 2011 book, "Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India,"** documents an intimate and intense relationship between a German-Jewish architect, Hermann Kallenbach. The book's descriptions and revelations, drawn from their letters, sparked widespread controversy and sensationalized media reports, leading to the book being banned in some parts of India even before its release.

The relationship developed in South Africa during Gandhi's earlier years. After taking a vow of celibacy in 1906, Gandhi became very close to Kallenbach, a wealthy bodybuilder who became one of his most trusted and intimate friends.

**Intense connection:** Letters exchanged between the two men reveal a deep emotional and physical attachment. In one letter, Gandhi wrote to Kallenbach, "How completely have you taken possession of my body. This is slavery with vengeance". He also mentioned keeping a portrait of Kallenbach opposite his bed. Intimacy and gossip led the men to live together for a time, even leaving Gandhi's wife, Kasturbai, behind.

In a September 1909 letter to Hermann Kallenbach, Gandhi wrote that "cotton wool and Vaseline" were a "constant reminder" of him. The letter, which describes the mantelpiece in his bedroom in a London hotel, is often cited by those highlighting the intimacy of the relationship.

### **Gandhi and untouchability**

In his 2009 book *Jinnah: India, Partition, Independence*, Jaswant Singh recounts the meetings between Mahatma Gandhi and Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Gandhi took water with him and would not drink water from Jinnah's home. He ate his own lunch in his car rather than with Mr. Jinnah.

### **Summary Table**

<b>Controversy</b>	<b>Historical Facts</b>	<b>Scholarly Commentary / Criticism</b>
<b>Racism in South Africa</b>	Offensive and racist remarks; used segregationist rhetoric	Widely criticized; some later contextual reinterpretation, but critique remains
<b>Celibacy experiments</b>	Real documented instances of bed-sharing with young female relatives and aides	Widely condemned as unethical and psychologically harmful; described as indefensible
<b>Poona Pact coercion</b>	Joint electorates with increased seats agreed upon after Gandhi's fasting	Some see it as coercive; Ambedkar's autonomy constricted by moral pressure

### **Opinion of World Leaders about Mahatma Gandhi**

**Neta Ji Subash Chander Bose on Mahatma Gandhi:** The role which a man plays in history depends partly on his physical and mental equipment, and partly on the environment and the needs of the times in which he is born. There is something in Mahatma Gandhi that appeals to the masses of the Indian people. Born in another country, he might have been a complete misfit. What, for instance, would he have done in a country like Russia, Germany, or Italy? His

doctrine of nonviolence would have led him to the **cross** or **to the mental hospital**.

Prime Minister Churchill's opinion about Gandhi

During a 1931 speech, Winston Churchill disparagingly referred to Mahatma Gandhi as a "**sedition Middle Temple lawyer, now posing as a fakir**... striding half-naked up the steps of the viceregal palace."

### **Lord Wavell's view on Mahatma Gandhi**

A "pestilent piece of work": After his release from prison in 1944, Gandhi sent Wavell a letter mixing political demands with spiritual rhetoric. Wavell's diary entry for September 1944 described it as "a pestilent piece of work". He found it difficult to engage with a political document that was not purely secular and administrative. Jinnah had an easy task; he merely had to keep on telling Gandhi he was talking nonsense.

**It is necessary to shine light on uncomfortable truths**—these aspects of Gandhi's life do not fit his public image of unwavering virtue. These criticisms are not fringe—they stem from primary sources and respected historians. They demand that we engage with Gandhi not as myth but as a deeply flawed human. That means reassessing how and whether we memorialize him, and what values we choose to foreground.

**For decades, India has exported the myth of Gandhi as a peace-loving saint, planting his statues across the world to mask the truth. Behind this façade lies a regime driven by an ideology best described as having "Ram Ram on the lips and a dagger in the hand." While preaching peace, it wages war on its own minorities and extends its violence beyond borders. The transnational repression of Sikhs and Kashmiris is undeniable: activists and freedom fighters have been assassinated in Pakistan, England, and Canada, while even in the United States, an assassination attempt against the leader of Sikhs for Justice was uncovered. These acts of terror reveal the hypocrisy behind the state's carefully polished image. It is time to tear down the false idol of Gandhi, to strip away the propaganda that shields oppression, and to resist any further installation of his statues in the free world. Only by exposing this duplicity can truth and justice prevail.**

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