

A citizen of the world in his time and ours

When, following Narendra Modi's claim that "nobody knew about" Gandhi until Richard Attenborough made his 1982 film, I was asked to write on "Gandhi the global citizen", my first wish was to write instead on the alarming ignorance behind the claim. Recognising, however, that many in today's India believe whatever Modi might say, I have put together some chronological Gandhi-related information for them.

In 1893-94, when Gandhi was 23 and in South Africa, he wrote a tiny handbook called *Guide to London*, which was based on his three years (1888-91) as a law student in the empire's capital. Though never published as a book, the *Guide's* text can be found in the first volume of the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. "Who should go to England?" asks Gandhi, and answers: "All who can afford should go to England." Why? Because "in England the student is alone, no wife to tease or flatter him, no parents to indulge, no children to look after, no friends to disturb (him), (and) the invigorating climate is by itself a stimulus to work". The handbook raises and answers a range of questions regarding life in the United Kingdom, including about food, exercise, cooking, cleaning, clothes, haircuts, transport, and the theatre. Gandhi recommends walking, temperance and vegetarian food, but he also provides helpful information for Indian students aiming for England. Interestingly, the young author twice quotes Leo Tolstoy without knowing that he and the Russian novelist would have a significant correspondence before the latter's death in 1910.

In 1906, Gandhi and Winston Churchill met for the first and the last time. Churchill was under-secretary for the colonies, and Gandhi, sent to London by South Africa's Indians, called on Churchill and asked for their rights to be protected. Two years later, Churchill's book, *My African Journey*, was published, in which he expressed fears that "Asiatics" might "teach the African natives evil ways". This was a direct comment on Gandhi's success in mobilising South Africa's Indians to defend their rights.

John Dube (1871-1946), a co-founder of the African National Congress, was Gandhi's neighbour in Phoenix, near Durban, in South Africa's Natal region. Both Gandhi and Dube ran centres in Phoenix, and for a while, a journal started by Dube was printed at Gandhi's "ashram" there, which was also bringing out Gandhi's *Indian Opinion*. One of the students at Dube's centre in Phoenix, Chief Albert Luthuli (1897-1967), later served as president of the African National Congress, from 1952 to 1967. For his struggle for justice in South Africa, Chief Luthuli won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1961, well before the award was bestowed on Martin Luther King Jr and Nelson

Mandela. Everyone knows that Mandela and King acknowledged their struggles' links to Gandhi's *satyagrahas* in South Africa and India, but Luthuli's earlier battles, and their connection to Gandhi, also merit remembrance. In his *Conversations with Myself*, Mandela would write that "Chief (Luthuli) was a passionate disciple of Mahatma Gandhi."

During his South Africa years (1893-1914), Gandhi's *Indian Opinion* kept an eye on the situation of blacks in the US and their experience of slavery. In a 1905 article, Gandhi spoke of Abraham Lincoln as "the greatest and the noblest man of the last century" for his willingness to defy white fellow Americans over slavery. On September 9, 1911, *Indian Opinion* wrote of the African American intellectual, WEB Du Bois: "Dr Du Bois is a great man amongst the world's great men." On their part, African Americans were speaking and writing about Gandhi from 1917, if not earlier, i.e., almost four decades before King burst upon the American scene. For example, in 1921, Marcus Garvey, a major modern figure in the African American story, spoke of Gandhi's success in forging a Hindu-Muslim alliance for India's freedom, adding: "If it is possible for Hindus and Mohammedans to come together in India, it is possible for (African-Americans) to come together everywhere." In

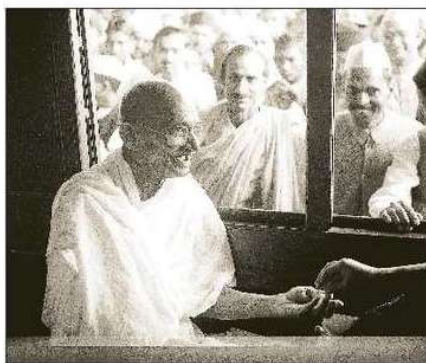


Rajmohan Gandhi

July 1929, the journal *The Crisis*, edited by Du Bois, published on its front page a signed message for African Americans from Gandhi that it had sought, which said: "Let not the 12 million (African Americans) be ashamed of the fact that they are the grandchildren of slaves. There is no dishonour in being slaves. There is dishonour in being slave-owners." In that July 1929 issue, *The Crisis* called Gandhi "the greatest colored man in the world, and perhaps the greatest man in the world." The original article can be seen at <http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums>.

The 1930 Salt March, which triggered all-India eruptions against British rule, drew from Churchill the comment before the House of Commons on March 12, 1931, that the fighters led by Gandhi had "inflicted such humiliation and defiance as has not been known since the British first trod the soil of India". Despite this defiance of British rule, when, in 1931, Gandhi went to London to talk to the imperial government, the British people gave him a cordial welcome. This was true even in Lancashire, where India's boycott of British textiles had added to the woes of the Great Depression of the time. Albert Einstein never met Gandhi although he and Nehru seem to have talked to each other about the Mahatma. Einstein's widely known line that "generations to come" would "scarce believe" that someone like Gandhi was once around was written in 1939, nine years before Gandhi was killed.

Shortly before India's Independence, when many of Asia's leaders gathered in Delhi in April 1947, Gandhi told them: "All the Asian representatives have come together. Is it in order to wage a war against Europe, against America or against non-Asians? I say most emphatically 'No'." Recalling Zoroaster, the Buddha, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, Gandhi called them "Asia's wise men", and added: "I (am) an inheritor of the message of love that these great unconquerable teachers left for us. I want you to go away with the thought that Asia has to conquer the West through love and truth."



African Americans were speaking and writing about Gandhi from 1917

Rajmohan Gandhi's latest book is *Fraternity: Constitutional Norm and Human Need* (2024).

The views expressed are personal