



STATUE OF MAHATMA GANDHI

Accra, Ghana
5.64839, -0.1893



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Executive Summary

In June 2016, a statue of Mahatma Gandhi was gifted to the University of Ghana in Accra by the Indian President. Shortly after, staff and students at the University circulated a petition calling for the statue's removal due to Gandhi's racist writings on Africans. In 2018, two years after the #GandhiForComedown movement protested the statue, it was finally removed. This case study explores the dynamics between pragmatic interests such as maintaining favourable diplomatic relations and public sensitivities.

Introduction

Shortly after a statue of Mahatma Gandhi was gifted to the University of Ghana in 2016 by the Indian Government, professors and students began a protest that eventually prompted the University Council to endorse its removal. The debate surrounding the statue is one of the many examples of Gandhi's contested legacy, specifically in Africa. Many people claim that his support of British rule in South Africa, publication of racist justifications for apartheid, and alleged perpetuation of the caste system in India are reasons to question the legacy of India's iconic independence movement leader. The initial push to relocate the Gandhi statue was met with concern over potential damage to Ghana's diplomatic relations with India. However, the movement eventually gained enough support that the statue was removed from its position on University grounds in December 2018. This case study examines the tensions between local sensitivities and national interests, as well as the limits of principal legacies within specific cultural contexts.

Background

Unveiling the Gandhi Statue

In early 2016 Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ghana Ernest Aryeetey received a request from the High Commissioner of India requesting a meeting to discuss the upcoming state visit of the President of India to Ghana and his wish to visit the university campus.¹ At the meeting Aryeetey was informed by the High Commissioner that traditionally on foreign visits it was customary for the president to give a gift to the 'people of any country he visited', and traditionally this has been a statue of Mahatma Gandhi.² Aryeetey inquired whether the 'President was going to carry a statue all the way from New Delhi to Accra' to which he received an affirmative response.

Subsequently, on June 14th 2016 a statue designed and constructed in India was transported to Accra and unveiled at the University of Ghana by the President of India, Pranab Mukherjee, as a symbol of the two countries close relationship.³ The statue was placed in the University of Ghana's Legon campus in the capital city of Accra,⁴ displayed prominently in the college's recreational quadrangle.⁵ The statue features a spectacled Gandhi in a traditional *dhoti*, holding a walking stick in one arm.

The University accepted the statue initially because of the reputation Gandhi had earned during the later years of his life. The University Administration had also been informed that the erection of the Gandhi statue had been approved by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Office of the President of Ghana.⁶ Gifts of statues of Gandhi have also been given by the government of India to

¹ Aryeetey Ernest, "The Background Story to a Statue of Gandhi and the University of Ghana," *Conversation*, May 18, 2020.

² Ibid.

³ Jason Burke, "Racist Gandhi statue banished from Ghana university campus," *Guardian*, October 6, 2016.

⁴ Al Jazeera, "Statue of 'racist' Gandhi Removed from Ghana University Campus," *Al Jazeera*, December 14, 2018.

⁵ BBC News, "Racist' Gandhi Statue Removed from University of Ghana," *BBC News*, December 13, 2018.

⁶ Aryeetey Ernest, "The Background Story to a Statue of Gandhi and the University of Ghana," *Conversation*, May 18, 2020.

Finland⁷, the United States⁸, Malawi⁹ and the UK¹⁰. Some academics have contended that this statue-gifting tactic is a 'staple of [India's] soft-power strategy' and part of Prime Minister Modi's Hindu nationalist tactics, 'reclaiming symbolic ownership of the Mahatma and his legacy in Africa... an attempt at reimagining and re-writing the history of India-Africa relations and re-shaping South-South discourse.'¹¹

The Legacy of Gandhi in Africa

Despite Mahatma Gandhi's iconic statue in his home country and across the globe, he leaves behind a divisive legacy. Claims that he was a racist have had particular salience in the African context, given his experiences during his time in South Africa. Born in 1869 to a Hindu family in Porbandar, Gujarat, India, Mahatma Gandhi left his native country at the age of 18 to study law in England, pursuing his interests in culture, religion, and philosophy. After graduation, he travelled to Mumbai, India to practice law, but was not as successful in the profession as he had hoped. Upon receiving an offer to represent an Indian business firm for one year in South Africa, Gandhi journeyed to the African continent to serve as a legal counsel for an Indian merchant.¹² He spent over two decades in Africa, where he fought for civil rights,¹³ through the *satyagraha*¹⁴ strategy.¹⁵

In 1914, Gandhi returned to India, where he championed non-violent resistance against British colonial rule.¹⁶ Gandhi and his thousands of followers achieved Indian independence through, among other actions, peaceful marches and hunger strikes, which led to Gandhi's imprisonment in several instances. In January 1948, Gandhi was assassinated by a Hindu fanatic who opposed his attempts to bridge the divide between Hindus and Muslims. More than one million people participated in Gandhi's funeral procession, testifying to his immense impact in his home country.¹⁷ Years after his death, Gandhi's legacy has inspired civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela.¹⁸ However, many have also denounced Gandhi's statements made by Gandhi indicating racist and casteist beliefs.

Gandhi's legacy in South Africa is especially controversial. In his early writings during his time as a lawyer in South Africa, he demonstrated an adamant adherence to colonial views on race, often and repeatedly referring to Black Africans as 'savages'¹⁹ or 'kaffirs' an extremely insulting and

⁷ Industrial News Service, "Government of India gifts a statue of Mahatma Gandhi", *Industrial News Service*, no date.

⁸ Ministry of External Affairs, "Government strongly condemns vandalisation of Mahatma Gandhi's statue in Davis, California, USA," *Government of India*, 30 January 2021.

⁹ Rabson Kondowe, "Malawi is the latest African country where a Gandhi statue isn't welcome," *Quartz Africa*, 13 October 2018.

¹⁰ Press Trust of India, "Mahatma Gandhi's statue unveiled in Leicester," *NDTV*, 26 June 2009.

¹¹ Simona Vittorini, "#Gandhi for come down - the Gandhi statue controversy in Ghana. Implications of India's Africa Soft-Power strategy," *ECAS 2019 Africa: Connections and Disruptions*, no date.

¹² South African History Online, "Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi," *South African History Online*, 2020.

¹³ Soutik Biswas, "Was Mahatma Gandhi a Racist?" *BBC News*, September 17, 2015.

¹⁴ Hindi for 'Holding onto Truth', this refers to Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolent resistance.

¹⁵ Gandhi in South Africa.net, "Gandhi in South Africa," *Gandhi in South Africa.net*, 2020.

¹⁶ Gandhi-Mani Bhavan.org "Gandhi Back in India - (1914 - 1948)," *Gandhi-Mani Bhavan.org*, 2019.

¹⁷ History.com, "Mahatma Gandhi," *History.com*, July 30, 2010.

¹⁸ Margaret Bourke White, "In the Footsteps of Gandhi," *National Geographic*, July 1, 2015.

¹⁹ Megha Mohan, "Ghana's Problem with 'racist' Gandhi," *BBC News*, September 22, 2016.

derogatory racial slur.²⁰ Simultaneously, he espoused his beliefs in Indian superiority.²¹ Gandhi made clear his commitment to elevating himself and other Indians to the status of 'whiteness' and keeping their struggle separate from that of other oppressed groups.²²

In an 1893 letter to the Natal parliament, Gandhi remarked that a 'general belief seems to prevail in the Colony that the Indians are a little better, if at all, than savages or the Natives of Africa...with the result that the Indian is being dragged down to the position of a raw Kaffir.'²³ In 1904, he expressed a strong dislike at the 'mixing of Kaffirs with the Indians' in a slum in Johannesburg, arguing instead that the council should 'withdraw Kaffirs' from the place and keep Indians separate due to their closer proximity to whiteness.²⁴ In 1905, he attributed the cause of a plague in Durban to the fact that Africans and Indians were being 'herded together indiscriminately at the hospital' attributing the cause of the plague to Africans.²⁵ Even Gandhi's grandson, Rajmohan Gandhi, admits that at least in his younger years, his grandfather was 'at times ignorant and prejudiced about South Africa's Blacks,' though he ultimately maintains that Gandhi, despite these controversial comments, was still able to aid the Black struggle for civil rights over the course of his lifetime.²⁶

Gandhi has also been criticised for his casteist beliefs. Some question whether Gandhi harboured a 'condescending and patronising attitude towards Dalits,'²⁷ a population of people who belong to the lowest rung of India's caste hierarchy.²⁸ Still, during other parts of his life, Gandhi did take on initiatives to fight against some degree of caste-related and religious discrimination.²⁹ Defenders of Gandhi's legacy claim that his prejudiced comments do not belong to his principal legacy and that his views evolved over time and in his later life were not reflective of his earlier writings as a young lawyer in South Africa.³⁰

History of the Contestation

The Origins of #GhandiForComeDown

The initial installation of the Gandhi statue in June 2016 took place when the University was closed for holidays. Subsequently, most of the protests were limited to social media, where the hashtags, #GandhiMustFall and #GandhiForComeDown³¹ calling for the statue's removal featured

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ BBC News, "Racist' Gandhi Statue Removed from University of Ghana," *BBC News*, December 13, 2018.

²² Soutik Biswas, "Was Mahatma Gandhi a Racist?" *BBC News*, September 17, 2015.

²³ Tekendra Parmar, "Protesters at University of Ghana Want Gandhi Statue Removed," *Time*, September 23, 2016.

²⁴ Soutik Biswas, "Was Mahatma Gandhi a Racist?" *BBC News*, September 17, 2015.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Sue Ginn, "Arundhati Roy - Gandhi & Caste," *MTPR*, October 3, 2014.

²⁸ Venkataraghavan Srinivasan, "How Gandhi's Views on Caste, Race and God Evolved through the Years," *Federal*, October 1, 2019.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Tekendra Parmar, "Protesters at University of Ghana Want Gandhi Statue Removed," *Time*, September 23, 2016.

³¹ Pidgin for Gandhi Must Come Down

prominently soon after its unveiling.³² However, when the new semester began in late August, the already budding controversy over the statue soon intensified.³³ A few weeks after the statue of Gandhi was placed on campus, faculty at the University of Ghana initiated an email chain that questioned the propriety of the monument, as they believed Gandhi to be a controversial figure due to his perception of Black South Africans.³⁴

Professor Adomako Ampofo, the former Director of the Institute of African Studies at the University, inspired by the #RhodesMustFall movement in South Africa³⁵ alongside other faculty members at the University launched an online petition addressed to Members of the University of Ghana Council and its Chairman Professor Yaw A. Twumasi entitled 'Petition for the removal of the Statue of Gandhi.'³⁶ The petition outlined the key rationales behind the call for the statue's removal. First, they referenced Gandhi quotes that were explicitly casteist or racist, such as those advancing Indian superiority while referring to black Africans in derogatory and racist manners.³⁷ Secondly, the petition stressed that the campus lacked any African monuments. Explaining that:

We are of the view that if there should be statues on our campus, then, first and foremost, they should be of African heroes and heroines, who can serve as examples of who we are and what we have achieved as a people. In a context where our youth know so little about our own history, such statues can serve as an opportunity for such learning to occur. Why should we uplift other people's 'heroes' at an African university when we haven't lifted up our own? We consider this to be a slap in the face that undermines our struggles for autonomy, recognition and respect.³⁸

Finally, the petition highlighted that the university community was not consulted in the decision to accept the statue from the Indian government in the first place. It also points to protests against Gandhi in other parts of the world and argues that in order for the University of Ghana to become a world-class university, it must eliminate statues and symbols related to controversial people who upheld beliefs favouring slavery, apartheid, and white supremacy. In fact, the writers of the petition refer to other 'world class' universities who have dealt with contested monuments on their campuses, such as Yale, Harvard Law School, Georgetown University, Rhodes University, and the University of Cape Town.³⁹

Speaking to the press Professor Obadele Kambon, co-author of the petition and research fellow at the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, clarified that the movement's goal was for the short-term the removal of the statue from campus, but in the longer term it aimed to 'show the connectedness of various related movements throughout the world for African/Black dignity' and illustrate that global movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and #ICantBreathe are 'interconnected throughout space and time.'⁴⁰

³² Yomi Kazeem, "Academics want "racist" Gandhi's statue removed from Ghana's oldest university," *Quartz Africa*, September 23, 2016.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Aryeetey Ernest, "The Background Story to a Statue of Gandhi and the University of Ghana," *Conversation*, May 18, 2020.

³⁵ GhanaWeb, "Gandhi statue still standing one year after removal," *GhanaWeb*, September 5 2017.

³⁶ "Gandhi's Statue at the University Of Ghana Must Come Down: Sign the Petition," *Change.org*, September 12, 2016.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Teo Kermeliotis, "Ghana: Call to remove Gandhi statue over racist views," *Al Jazeera*, September 21, 2016.

The university academics were further backed by ACCRA [dot] ALT, an independent cultural network that promotes Ghanaian artists,⁴¹ that shared an open-ed entitled 'The Kind Gift of a Racist Statue' penned by Akosua Abeka on their Facebook page. They were quick to contest the nature of this gift, intimately tied to part of India's growing economic investment in the country. They criticised the University Administration for accepting such a gift, claiming that despite acknowledging the racism issues,⁴² accepting the statue was akin to declaring that 'Ghanaians must accept Gandhi and his idealism if we want to improve our economic situation, ala India'.⁴³ Further, like the original petition, the representation of foreign icons over African ones was further contested, with Abeka concluding:

Our Ghanaian elite have shut their eyes to the reality that is cultural hegemony. They invite our destruction with the elevation of other people's heroes and their emasculating ideologies into our lands. And they insist on remaining in their state of innocence although in the twenty-first century that innocence can hardly be justified. Our ruling class have become the monsters we sought to eradicate. Until Gandhi's statue is removed, the intellect of the Ghanaian, let alone his bravery, together with his history, will forever remain in doubt.⁴⁴

The petition and public outcry over the statue was immense, and the hashtag #GandhiMustFall, #GandhiForComeDown were prominently used by Ghanaians to demonstrate support for the movement, often trending on social media services.⁴⁵ The petition gathered 2300 signatures in quick succession.⁴⁶ The prevailing consensus of protestors, as expressed by Professor Kambon, is that the statue was 'better placed elsewhere' and that the University administration should place statues of 'classical, traditional and modern African heroes', that could 'enhance levels of self-knowledge, self-respect and self-love' for Africa and Africans.⁴⁷

Decision-Making Processes

Despite the intense contestation of the statue on campus, it took several appeals to the Administration before the concerns about the statue were addressed. When the initial contestation arose, given the context of the bilateral relations between the two nations, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs wanted to be assured that the statue would not be torn down by protestors.⁴⁸ Initially, the Ministry, hoping to avoid a diplomatic situation and potential economic consequences, asked Ghanaians to look beyond a few of Gandhi's faults and give credit to his identity as an international leader in nonviolent resistance. The Ministry issued a statement that urged Ghanaians to acknowledge that while 'Mahatma Gandhi may have had his flaws...He

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Aryeetey Ernest, "The Background Story to a Statue of Gandhi and the University of Ghana," *Conversation*, May 18, 2020

⁴³ Akosua Abeka, "The Venal Illusion of Independence: Ghana vs. Gandhi," *Grandmother: The Definitive Record of Africa*, September 28, 2016.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Megha Mohan, "Ghana's Problem with 'racist' Gandhi," *BBC News*, September 22, 2016.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Camila Domonoske, "University Of Ghana Removes Gandhi Statue After Faculty Outcry," *NPR*, December 14, 2018.

inspired movements for civil rights and freedom across the world.⁴⁹ The Ministry also underscored the Government's desire to retain amicable relations with the Indian Government, warning that this controversy could 'create disaffection not only at the level of government relations but also between people not only in our country but all over the world.'⁵⁰

However, for those protesting the statue, the continued presence of Gandhi on campus in light of largely economic and political considerations was untenable. Tensions continued to mount, and due to the lack of a clear response from the Administration and the Government, the statue was vandalised. On October 4, 2016, the spectacles on the bronze statue were removed.⁵¹

The next day amidst increasing social discord around the monument, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement affirming their desire to relocate the statue in order to 'ensure its safety and avoid the controversy.'⁵² This was a precarious balance of competing interests, as the Government did not wish to impair diplomatic and economic relations with India, whereas, for the academic community at the university, there was a strong desire to elevate African Icons within the campus in order to better improve collective self-respect and subscribe to the ideals of the global anti-racism movement that challenges controversial monuments. The fact that the statue was designed and transported from India, as opposed to being created by a local sculptor, further fuelled controversy. Unsurprisingly, in light of this in December 2016, the University Council came to the same agreement as the Ministry's assessment.⁵³

However, there remains some disagreement about who the main decision-making body was in this case. The University claims that the Ministry was the body responsible for the removal of the Gandhi statue. On the other hand, some reports suggest that the Ministry credited the removal of the statue to an 'internal decision' of the University.⁵⁴ This lack of clarity over who could authorise



Figure 1: "The Former Location of the Statue Repurposed into a Plant" Image Courtesy of Prof. Dr. Edward Kissi

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid..

⁵¹Kwasi Gyamfi Asiedu, "Gandhi's Statue Has Finally Been Pulled down in Ghana," *Quartz Africa*. December 15, 2018.

⁵²Jason Burke, "Racist Gandhi statue banished from Ghana university campus," *Guardian*, October 6, 2016.

⁵³Gborbilor Aberqu, "UG Council Supports Decision to Remove Statue of Gandhi," *Change.org*, 3 January 2017.

⁵⁴Camila Domonoske, "University Of Ghana Removes Gandhi Statue After Faculty Outcry," *NPR*, December 14, 2018.

the removal of the statue, considerably delayed the process. In December 2017, one of the petition's co-authors and a professor of African studies at the University of Ghana wrote a letter to the Administration, who then forwarded this to the Ministry, requesting a timeline outlining the process of the statues removal.⁵⁵

On December 12th 2018, the statue was removed.⁵⁶ In its place, a small shrub was planted where the plinth of the statue used to stand (Figure 1). Ela Gandhi, Gandhi's granddaughter and a former MP in South Africa, respected the university's decision but urged students to remember her grandfather's commitment to nonviolence and compassion.⁵⁷ The decision to remove Gandhi's statue at the University of Ghana has worried some that anti-Gandhi sentiments will spread to other African countries and that this will harm ties between India and the continent. A similar situation as Ghana occurred in October 2018. A court in Malawi ordered cessation of work on a Gandhi statue—part of a \$10 million construction project with India—in response to a petition signed by three thousand protesters.⁵⁸

In response to the removal of the statue, reports issued in December 2018 indicated that the Indian Government had cancelled Ghana's participation in the Mahatma Gandhi Scholarship Scheme, which provides scholarships for 2000 Ghanaian students to study in India. However, the secretariat of the Scholarship was quick to clarify that 'students of Ghana cannot continue to enjoy the benefits of the scheme which seeks to honour someone whom they describe as racist.'⁵⁹ As of December 2018, Vice-Chairman of Ghana's Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, Kwaku Ampratwum Sarpong, announced that the Government has plans to reinstall the statue at a new location and ensured that it would be re-inaugurated by a Minister in an official ceremony.⁶⁰ The Ghanaian Government, in a statement, ensured New Delhi that:

India and Ghana have shared a special partnership since the days of decolonisation. Kwame Nkrumah, undisputed leader of Ghana, was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi. There were some voices

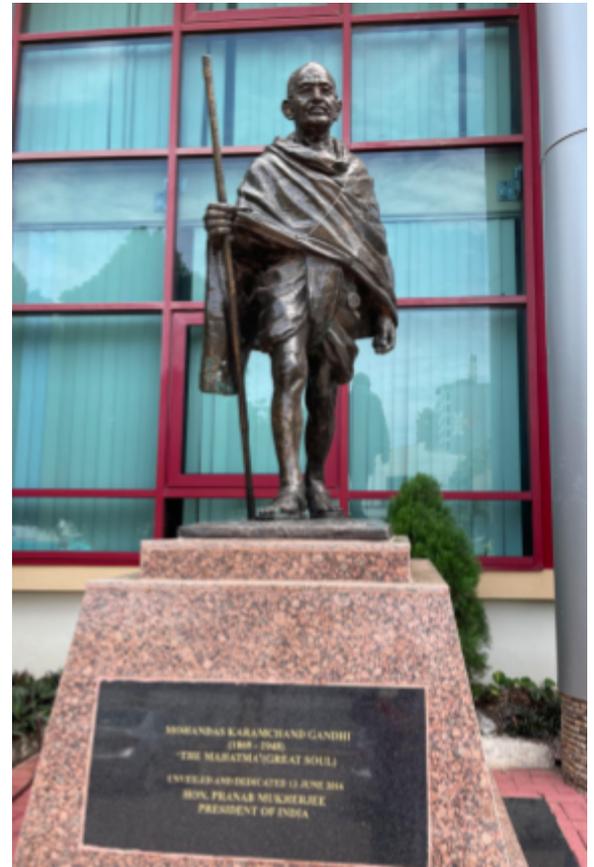


Figure 2: "New Location of the Statue" Image
Courtesy of Prof. Dr. Edward Kissi

⁵⁵ Rama Lakshmi, "Why Ghanaians are removing Gandhi statues," *Print*, December 16, 2018.

⁵⁶ Bukola Adebayo, "Gandhi Statue Pulled down in Ghana after Controversy over 'racist' Writings," *CNN*, December 14, 2018.

⁵⁷ Tekendra Parmar, "Protesters at University of Ghana Want Gandhi Statue Removed," *Time*, September 23, 2016.

⁵⁸ BBC News, "Malawi Court Halts Work on Gandhi Statue after Critics Brand Him Racist," *BBC News*, October 31, 2018.

⁵⁹ Neha Sinha, "Gandhi and the Question of Racism: The Statue Controversy in Ghana," *Vivekananda International Foundation*, January 11, 2019.

⁶⁰ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "Ghana to Reinstall Statue of Mahatma Gandhi at Prominent Location in Accra," *Economic Times*, December 21, 2018

in Ghana based on literature. But the Ghana government felt that the issue cannot be allowed to derail partnership.⁶¹

The statue was ultimately relocated to the Ghana-India Kofi Annan Centre of Excellence in ICT (GI-KACE), located in Accra. GI-KACE is a computer science school co-founded by the Indian Government and serves as a symbol of the two countries bilateral relations. The relocated statue (Figure 2) was unveiled on the 27th of February 2019 at a ceremony attended by Indian High Commissioner to Ghana Birender Singh Yadav and the Ghanaian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Regional Integration Shirley Ayorkor Botchwey.⁶² Speaking at the unveiling ceremony, High Commissioner Yadav stated that:

We are confident that the relocation of the statue to a prestigious location in Ghana will bring an end to what was a misguided campaign about certain writings of Mahatma Gandhi. The contribution of Mahatma Gandhi to India's freedom which subsequently inspired numerous African countries to throw away the yoke colonialism is immeasurable.⁶³

Indicating the divided legacy, Gandhi continues to have abroad. As this case illustrates, some dynamics to consider in the decision-making process include considering pragmatic interests, such as favourable political and economic relations with other countries, versus public sensitivities. In this case, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs became involved because the statue had been given to the University of Ghana by India as a symbol of the relationship between the two countries. When controversy arose around the monument, the Ministry at first appealed to the public to consider Gandhi's principal legacy. When this did not work, it acted to relocate the statue to avoid greater social discord.

Summary and Conclusions

The statue of Mahatma Gandhi at the University of Ghana was removed in December 2018 after the university and Ministry of Foreign Affairs both agreed to relocate the statue in late 2016. This decision was the result of a 'Gandhi Must Fall' movement, which was initiated by university professors in the form of an online petition. Petitioners cited Gandhi's racist attitudes towards Black Africans and his controversial stance on the caste system as reasons to remove the statue from campus. In the end, the petition had over 2000 signatures.

At first, there was some hesitation on the part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to relocate the statue, as it had been bequeathed by India to symbolise good relations between the two countries. However, growing public pressure was able to change this stance. This case study calls attention to the dynamics between pragmatic interests such as maintaining favourable diplomatic

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Nii Larte Lartey, "'Relocation of Gandhi's statue an end to misguided campaign' – Indian High Commissioner," *Citi Newsroom*, February 27, 2019.

⁶³ Ibid.

relations and public sensitivities. Finally, it sheds light on the relationship between specific cultural contexts and the way principal legacies are viewed.

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(Cover Image)

About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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