



STATUE OF MAHATMA GANDHI

Blantyre, Malawi

-15.76667, 35.016781



Image by Pemphero Mphande, courtesy of the owner

Executive Summary

In 2018, the Indian government proposed that a statue of Gandhi be built in Blantyre, Malawi's second-largest city. The statue was part of an investment of ten million USD to construct a convention centre named for Gandhi. However, given Gandhi's controversial writings on race, a 'Gandhi Must Fall' protest group quickly emerged and challenged the decision in court. The organisation claimed that the potential erection of the statue was racist. This case study explores the importance of local consultation in the decision to erect public monuments.

Introduction

The legacy of Mohandas Gandhi in Africa is fraught with complicated histories. Though a hero of the anti-colonial movement in India, Gandhi is termed the 'stretcher-bearer' of colonialist empires in Africa.¹ At the turn of the twentieth century, Gandhi demonstrated loyalty to the British Empire in South Africa. In many ways, he also sought 'integration' for Indian South Africans into White society.² These actions, combined with Gandhi's early comments about Africans that featured racist justifications for colonial rule, have resulted in a complicated legacy. Though he later changed his perspective on imperialism and race, Gandhi's image remains contested in public spaces in Africa, and he does not receive reverence from the African people.³ The proposal to construct a statue of Gandhi in Blantyre, Malawi's second-largest city, was therefore met with intense scrutiny by the public, sparking greater debates about the role Gandhi plays in public memorialisation in Africa.

Background

Gandhi's Role in Africa

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (also known by the honorific Mahatma Gandhi from 1869-1948) first arrived in South Africa in 1893. He received an education in India and the United Kingdom, where he completed his law degree. Because he came to Durban as an Indian, Gandhi was immediately treated as a second-class citizen; he was infamously thrown off a train from Pietermaritzburg to Pretoria for refusing to give away his first-class seat.⁴ Gandhi traveled to South Africa during a period when the systematic disenfranchisement of people of colour, including Indians, had been increasing in intensity. This time established the groundwork for what would later be known as apartheid. Gandhi increasingly positioned himself as a political leader who advocated for the rights of Indian South Africans.⁵

However, with the outbreak of the South African War (also known as the Second Boer War) in 1899, Gandhi advised the Indian South African community to side with the British, under the reasoning that 'since they claimed their rights as British subjects, it was their duty to defend the Empire when it was threatened.'⁶ Much of Gandhi's early beliefs on the Empire were in line with

¹ Ashwin Desai and Goolem Vahed, *The South African Gandhi: Stretcher Bearer for the Empire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016)

² *Ibid.*, 19.

³ NPR, "Gandhi is deeply revered, but his attitudes to race and sex are under scrutiny," *NPR*, October 2, 2019.

⁴ South African History Online, "Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi," *SA History Online*, 2019.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

British imperialists of the time. He believed that the Empire had a 'civilising role to play,' and he wrote in 1895 that Indians were 'proud to be under the British crown.'⁷ His early writings on race cited the works of Cecil Rhodes and Lord Milner. In particular, Gandhi focused on the phrase 'equal rights for civilised men' as a promise to elevate the rights of Indians - a promise that came at the cost of rights for indigenous Africans.⁸ Despite the evident disdain that such imperialists held for people of colour, including Indians, Gandhi's early belief in the 'protection' that could be found in the 'paternal embrace of empire' was resolute.⁹ He wrote of Africans as 'savage' and 'raw' individuals who led lives of 'indolence and nakedness.' In a letter to the Natal parliament in 1893, Gandhi wrote:

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.¹⁰

In 1903, he wrote that 'the white race in South Africa should be the predominating race,' and in 1908, he noted that 'we [Indians] could understand not being classed as whites, but to be placed on the same level as the Natives seemed too much to put up with.'¹¹ Gandhi argued that to treat Indian people like Indigenous Africans was an affront to Western decency and civilisation.¹² On a policy level, Gandhi maintained the need for three entrances and categories in segregated spaces such as trains, one entrance for 'Europeans,' one for 'Asiatics' and one for 'Natives.'¹³

By keeping the struggle of Indian South Africans and other oppressed groups separate, Gandhi committed to elevating himself and other Indians to the status of 'whiteness'.¹⁴ This was ultimately a lost cause; an integral part of British imperial rule contended that races should remain separate and unequal. British administrators snubbed and ignored his campaigns, contributing to a shift in Gandhi's attitude toward the British Empire. Gradually, he transformed from an imperialist 'stretcher bearer' to a key cause of the downfall of the British Raj in what is modern-day India.¹⁵ Nevertheless, many think of Gandhi as 'an astute trespasser over ... carefully cultivated Western landscape' and believe Western memory has elevated him as a 'spiritual leader' partially due to

⁷ Paul Power, "Gandhi in South Africa," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 7, no.3 (2008): 441-455.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ashwin Desai and Goolem Vahed, *The South African Gandhi: Stretcher Bearer for the Empire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016)

¹⁰ Rama Lakshmi, "What did Mahatma Gandhi think of black people?" *Washington Post*, September 3, 2015.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Paul Power, "Gandhi in South Africa," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 7, no.3 (2008): 441-455.

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Socrates Mbamalu, "Resisting the construction of Gandhi's statue in Malawi," *This is Africa*, 8 October 2018.

¹⁵ Ashwin Desai and Goolem Vahed, *The South African Gandhi: Stretcher Bearer for the Empire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016)

his 'civilisational justifications for Western hegemony.'¹⁶

Existing Commemoration in African Public Spaces

Despite Gandhi's early writings and views on African people, many African figures and governments have widely commemorated him. For example, in 1999, South African President Nelson Mandela wrote:

India is Gandhi's country of birth; South Africa his country of adoption. He was both an Indian and South African citizen. Both countries contributed to his intellectual and moral genius, and he shaped liberatory movements in both colonial theatres. Gandhi spent much of his time conducting the struggle of the people of South Africa... he taught that the destiny of the Indian Community was inseparable from that of the oppressed African majority.¹⁷

Contestation over such public commemoration is also prominent across Africa. In 2018, a statue of Gandhi was removed from the University of Ghana in Accra. One student said, 'Having his statue means that we stand for everything he stands for and if he stands for these things [his alleged racism], I don't think we should have his statue on campus.'¹⁸

In South Africa, statues of Gandhi exist in Johannesburg and Pietermaritzburg, and a donation from the Indian government for a statue in Cape Town in 2018 caused substantial controversy. Following a public consultation on the statue, over two-thirds of respondents voiced concerns over Gandhi's comments on African people. The *South African* newspaper stated the statue could 'raise eyebrows in Orania [a white Afrikaner conclave settlement in the Transvaal], let alone Cape Town.'¹⁹ Statues of Gandhi across Africa have been constructed to represent a greater anti-colonial message and to reflect on his role in liberation struggles. However, the construction of such statues, often backed by the Indian government, has drawn increased scrutiny in recent years over what role Gandhi's image has in African public space.

History of the Contestation

Malawian Government Plan

Designers intended the statue to stand at the Queen Elizabeth II Hospital Roundabout on Mahatma Gandhi Avenue. The statue was to be constructed alongside a 'Mahatma Gandhi

¹⁶ Vithal Rajan, "Gandhi: The Colonising Object." *Economic and Political Weekly*, 41 no. 15 (2006): 1425-1427.

¹⁷ Ashwin Desai and Goolem Vahed, *The South African Gandhi: Stretcher Bearer for the Empire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016)

¹⁸ BBC, "Racist Gandhi statue removed from the University of Ghana," *BBC*, December 13, 2018.

¹⁹ Tom Head, "New Gandhi statue in Cape Town sparks a wave of controversy," *South African*, September 25, 2019.

international convention centre.’²⁰ Planning began in 2018. Despite almost immediate backlash, the local government defended Gandhi as a role model for both Africa and India. In a statement, the government said:

It is important to understand that the construction of the Mahatma Gandhi Statue is aimed at recognizing the outstanding role that Mahatma Gandhi played in the struggle against colonialism in Africa and India... all African freedom fighters that fought against colonialism and oppression and thus demanded independence were influenced by what Mahatma Gandhi fought for.²¹

The statement also stressed the financial contribution of the Indian government to the project, as they planned to construct the Gandhi convention centre and a five-star hotel near the site and provided a grant of 10 million USD ‘without preconditions’, a donation of serious consequence to a country with a GDP per capita of \$411, the third-lowest in the world.²²

Therefore, the argument made by Blantyre local government focussed not just on the virtues of a statue to Gandhi himself, but the socio-economic impact of such a large foreign investment in the city and country. Several sources suggested that the statue was a precondition for the construction of other infrastructure around the area, though this was denied by planning authorities.²³ A government statement claimed:

The Government of Malawi supports the ongoing construction of the Mahatma Gandhi Statue and the Mahatma Gandhi Convention Centre... [this] will provide an opportunity for the Government of Malawi to create jobs and generate revenues for the much needed socio-economic development of this country.²⁴

Foreign Ministry official Isaac Munlo claimed that ‘Gandhi is a role model of a human rights campaigner for both Africa and India.’²⁵ Munlo made this assertion less than one week before Indian Vice-President Venkaiah Naidu was scheduled to unveil the statue. He said in Malawi that Gandhi ‘drew sustenance for his fight against discrimination and colonial domination’ in Africa.²⁶

Many also contended that the statue would make little significant impact on Gandhi’s presence in the Malawian public space, as it would sit on a street already named after him. Other officials also noted that there is a sizable Indian population in Blantyre who might feel supported or represented by a statue of an Indian national hero.²⁷ Finally, some have contended that Gandhi’s views on the Empire changed considerably following his experiences in South Africa, contributing

²⁰ Face of Malawi, “Govt. backs construction of Mahatma Gandhi statue in Blantyre,” *Face of Malawi*, October 11, 2018.

²¹ Ibid.

²² World Bank, “GDP Per Capita (US\$ current),” *World Bank*, 2019.

²³ Austin Kakande, “CSOs endorse Gandhi statue erection,” *MBC*, November 24, 2018.

²⁴ Face of Malawi, “Govt. backs construction of Mahatma Gandhi statue in Blantyre,” *Face of Malawi*, October 11, 2018.

²⁵ News24, “Malawi court halt ‘racist’ Gandhi statue,” *News 24*, October 31, 2018.

²⁶ Quint, “Why Some in Malawi believe Mahatma Gandhi was racist,” *The Quint*, November 10, 2018.

²⁷ Malawi 24, ‘Govt fails to vacate injunction against Gandhi statue’, *Malawi 24*, December 21, 2018.

to his peaceful resistance of British rule in India.²⁸

Criticism of the Plans

Gandhi's contentious past writings and opinion towards African peoples meant that the public met news of the statue's proposed construction with passionate debate. In October 2018, opponents submitted a petition to the city council of Blantyre aimed at preventing the City Council from installing the statue. The petition was later transferred to the Change.org platform. It directly cites the Gandhi Must Fall Movement, which emerged from the removal of the Gandhi statue in Accra, Ghana.

The petition on Change.org is titled 'Stop Erecting Racist Mahatma Gandhi's Statue at Ginnery Corner, Blantyre, Malawi.' After citing recent statements made in Ghana about Gandhi's attitudes towards Black Africans, the petition listed several statements attributed to Gandhi, claiming, 'if you erect this statue it will make a mockery out of Malawi's independence movement which fought to extricate classism between black, brown and white races.'²⁹ The court application for the injunction included the statement that 'being [B]lack people ourselves, such remarks [made by Gandhi] have invited a sense of loathing and detestation of Gandhi.'³⁰

Jimmy Kainja, an academic and activist who works at Blantyre's Chancellor College, summarised another attitude widely supported by the original Change.org petition. He commented that many Malawians have done tremendous work, and priority should go to them before an outsider like Gandhi, writing, 'Gandhi may be seen as a hero from a different perspective but not from Africa and the black African perspective.'³¹ Individuals on the Change.org petition also suggested commemorating other individuals such as John Chilembwe, Kanyama Chiume, Aaron Gadama and Bingu wa Mutharika.³²

The petition also offered interesting perspectives, with some signatories commenting: 'I am an Indian. I am ashamed that the father of my country was, in his younger days, a brutal anti-[B]lack lawyer.'³³ Another remarked that 'The people don't know the real face of Gandhi. He wanted to keep separate Black people in separate colonies in South Africa. He also wanted to maintain [the] caste system in India and wanted them to do menial work.'³⁴

²⁸Paul Power, "Gandhi in South Africa," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 7, no.3 (2008): 441-455.

²⁹The Gandhi Must Fall Movement in Malawi, "Stop Erecting Racist Mahatma Gandhi Statue at Ginnery Corner, Blantyre," *Change.org*, 2018.

³⁰BBC, "Malawi Court Halts work on Gandhi statue after critics call him racist," *BBC*, October 31, 2018.

³¹DW, "Gandhi statue sparks controversy in Malawi," *DW*, October 10, 2018.

³²The Gandhi Must Fall Movement in Malawi, "Stop Erecting Racist Mahatma Gandhi Statue at Ginnery Corner, Blantyre," *Change.org*, 2018.

³³ *Ibid*

³⁴ *Ibid*.

Though Gandhi's ideology is evidently a key reason for contestation, a greater issue for many is that the statue seems to be an imposition on Malawi by the Indian government, an example of a richer country imposing their will on Malawi and Malawians in exchange for financial benefit. As one student said, '[A]s a country, we have the power to say no... if we say yes, it will be like we are just receiving anything without thinking of what will be the negative impact.'³⁵ It is therefore as much a matter of national pride and sovereignty as it is about Gandhi himself.

The media made several links between this 'Ghandi Must Fall' campaign, which started in Accra, and the 'Rhodes Must Fall' movement that had taken hold in South Africa and the UK from 2015. Citizens for Progressive Action, a political pressure group, spearheaded the 'Ghandi Must Fall' campaign in Malawi.³⁶

Decision-Making Processes

The key stakeholders, in this case, involved the Malawian government and campaign groups. After the statue's construction was originally confirmed, the 'Gandhi Must Fall' group launched the first petition asking for a Court injunction that would halt work on the statue while further consultations were carried out.³⁷ In addition to this, the government failed to show up to the original hearing, so the injunction was granted without challenge.³⁸

In October 2018 work on the statue was temporarily halted. The judge on the case - Michael Tembo - agreed with the protestors had insufficiently consulted with local people, with many frustrated that local Malawians often didn't know who Gandhi was or what he stood for.³⁹ Following this first success, the movement posted on their Facebook page:

Just yesterday, the constructor cleared the site of the items, meaning that we will not see the work happening soon, or even ever. Some may say [the] government has been defeated, but that is not our understanding. We believe [the] government has listened to the calls against the statue.⁴⁰

In December 2018, the local government applied to have the injunction lifted on the grounds that the statue - already situated on 'Mahatma Gandhi' road - would be no further glorification of Gandhi than already existed in the city. However, Judge Tembo once again agreed with the protestors that the statue would offer further reverence of the man, stating:

'with the statue, you have a bust of the subject of the statue. One would imagine that the statue would be more prominent and attract more attention as it imposes and projects itself onto the space

³⁵DW, "Gandhi statue sparks controversy in Malawi," *DW*, October 10, 2018.

³⁶Pemphero Mphande, "Pemphero, The Youth Political Activist," *Pemphero Mphande*.

³⁷BBC, "Malawi Court Halts work on Gandhi statue after critics call him racist," *BBC*, October 31, 2018.

³⁸Archangel Nzungaya, "Gandhi statue erection: govt fails to challenge injunction," *Malawi 24*, November 13, 2018.

³⁹DW, "Gandhi statue sparks controversy in Malawi," *DW*, October 10, 2018.

⁴⁰Malawi 24, 'Govt fails to vacate injunction against Gandhi statue', *Malawi 24*, December 21, 2018.

it is located.⁴¹

To date, May 2021, construction work on the statue has not been resumed.

Summary and Conclusions

The legacy of Mahatma Gandhi in African public space is heavily disputed. For some, his work as an anti-colonialist and trailblazer for peaceful resistance to foreign occupation in his later years mark him as a hero and role model for anti-colonial movements across the world. For others, his anti-black and anti-African writings and political campaigning in colonial South Africa represent a bigotry that cannot be overlooked when deciding who to commemorate publicly. More broadly, the statue represented the economic contestation of a country that wields considerable power over another through donations and financial aid.⁴²

Despite these transnational debates, however, further efforts by the Indian government to incorporate Gandhi into public spaces have proved successful. For example, in 2020, a statue commemorating Gandhi was unveiled at the Indian High Commission in Lilongwe, Malawi.⁴³

Questions of who the statue is meant *for* and, whom it benefits, were central in this debate. It remains unclear whether the statue was a deal-breaker for the eventual convention centre, as both remain to be built. Local attitudes were clear, however: a statue of Gandhi in Blantyre seemed to mainly represent the interests of Indian donors and the Indian government rather than actual Malawians.

As a result of this opposition, and the strength of Malawi's court system, construction has been paused and seems unlikely to resume in the foreseeable future.

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⁴¹Ibid.

⁴² Little India, "Malawi court halts construction of Gandhi statue," *Little India*, November 2, 2018.

⁴³ Wanga Gwede, "Lilongwe Mahatma Gandhi statue unveiled at Indian High Commission," *Nyasa Times*, October 2, 2020.

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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.

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