

# Gandhi on Racism

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## Manifest pedagogy

Gandhi ji is a person of interest to UPSC. The academic circles are always enticed by the views and ideas of Gandhi ji and the controversies surrounding them. UPSC can frame a good prelims or Mains question around the recent controversy in Ghana.

## In news

The removal of the statue of Gandhi in Ghana.

## Placing it in syllabus

Modern Indian history from about the middle of the eighteenth century until the present- significant events, personalities, issues

## Dimensions

- Criticism of Gandhi ji
- Gandhi on racism
- Gandhi on the Varna system
- Gandhi on Women's role in society

## Content

### His views on race relations

Was Mohandas K. Gandhi a racist? This question is being asked afresh in light of the removal of a Gandhi statue in Ghana. The petition that led to the statue being taken down quoted several statements made by Gandhi. Notably, however, they all date from his early years in South Africa. What Gandhi said or

thought about Africa and Africans, race and racism, in his mature adulthood are ignored altogether.

- In his early years, Gandhi was unquestionably a racist. He believed in a hierarchy of civilizations, with Europeans at the top, Indians just below them, and Africans absolutely at the bottom. He spoke of the native inhabitants of Africa in patronizing and even pejorative language. However, by the time he was in his adulthood, Gandhi no longer spoke of Africans as inferior to Indians.
- While in South Africa, Gandhi focused on racial persecution of Indians, but ignored those of Africans. In some cases, his behavior was one of being a willing part of racial stereotyping and African exploitation.
- During a speech in September 1896, Gandhi complained that the whites in the British colony of South Africa were degrading Indian Hindus and Muslims to **“a level of Kaffir”**. Scholars cite it as an example of evidence that Gandhi at that time thought of Indians and black South Africans differently.
- As another example given by Herman, Gandhi, at age 24, prepared a legal brief for the Natal Assembly in 1895, seeking voting rights for Indians. **Gandhi cited race history and European Orientalists’ opinions that “Anglo-Saxons and Indians are sprung from the same Aryan stock or rather the Indo-European peoples”, and argued that Indians should not be grouped with the Africans.**
- The evolution of Gandhi’s views find expression in a fascinating (and neglected) speech delivered by Gandhi at the Johannesburg YMCA in May 1908. He was participating in a debate on the topic: “Are Asiatics and the Coloured races a menace to the Empire?”
- Gandhi may have been the only non-white present; he was certainly the only non-white speaker. Opposing the motion, he pointed out that the labor of Africans and Asians had made the Empire what it was. “Who can think

of the British Empire without India?" he asked, adding: "South Africa would probably be a howling wilderness without the Africans." He went on to insist that it was "the mission of the English race, even when there are subject races, to raise them to equality with themselves, to give them absolutely free institutions and make them absolutely free men".

- **By 1908, Gandhi was clear that Africans as well as Indians needed to be placed on an absolutely equal footing with Europeans.** In another speech made in Germiston the next year, he said that if the Africans took to non-violent resistance against racial discrimination, "there would probably be no native question left to be solved".
- The longer Gandhi lived in Africa, the more he shed the racism of his boyhood and youth. **In 1910 he remarked: "The negroes alone are the original inhabitants of this land... The whites, on the other hand, have occupied the land forcibly and appropriated it to themselves."**
- By now, **Gandhi's newspaper, *Indian Opinion*, was featuring reports on discrimination against Africans by the white regime.** One such report dealt with an annual high school examination in Pretoria. In past years, African students were allowed to sit with their white peers. This time, the Town Hall – where the exams were held – barred them, passing a resolution that no African or any other person of colour would be allowed to enter the building. Gandhi thought this reason enough for non-violent protest.
- Gandhi returned to India in 1914. His views on race continued to evolve in a progressive direction. In his **book *Satyagraha in South Africa***, published in the 1920s, Gandhi offered a spirited defence of African religion. In disputing the claims of European missionaries, Gandhi wrote that Africans had "a perfect grasp of the distinction between truth and falsehood". He thought they practised truthfulness to a far greater extent than

either Europeans or Indians.

- Gandhi's *satyagrahas* of the 1920s and 1930s were widely reported in the African-American press. Reading these reports, a resident of Chicago named Arthur Sewell wrote to Gandhi that the blacks were "keenly and sympathetically" following his movement. Sewell wished that India would be free and end, anticipated "the independence of all the dark peoples of the world".
- Gandhi was in touch with leaders of the African National Congress, and with civil right activists from the United States of America. In 1936 Howard Thurman – a future mentor to Martin Luther King – came to Sevagram to meet Gandhi.
- Ten years later, a delegation of South African Indians called on Gandhi. He told them to reject a segregated approach to politics. They should, he said, "associate with Zulus and Bantus" too. The "slogan today", remarked Gandhi, "is no longer merely 'Asia for the Asiatics' or 'Africa for the Africans,' but the unity of all the exploited races of the earth".
- In the last week of May 1946, Gandhi wrote that "the Indians in South Africa are bearing a heavy burden which they are well able to discharge. Satyagraha, the mightiest weapon in the world, was born and bred there. If they make effective use of it, it will be well with the sacred cause they are handling... The cause is the cause of the honor of India and through her of all the exploited colored races of the earth, whether they are brown, yellow or black. It is worth all the suffering of which they are capable".
- Reading reports of the arrests of protesters in South Africa, Gandhi wrote an article for his newspaper entitled "**White Man's Burden**". The attacks on *satyagrahis* reminded him of the practice of lynching in the American South. The "real 'white man's burden'", he said, "is not insolently to dominate colored or black people under the guise of protection, it is to desist

from the hypocrisy which is eating into them. It is time white men learnt to treat every human being as their equal.”

- These words of Gandhi bear repeating: *It is time white men learnt to treat every human being as their equal*. Strikingly, however, the last quote in the recent petition in Ghana dates to 1906. The last four decades of Gandhi’s life are left out altogether. Was this out of ignorance or malevolence? One does not know. But the historical record is very clear on this subject.
- **While as a young man Gandhi may have been a racist, over time he overcame his racism comprehensively. He befriended, and met on equal terms, men and women of all castes, classes, races, religions, and nationalities.** As a product of British Indian social setting and the education system these kinds of racial views are quite common at that point of time but the greatness of Gandhi lies in outgrowing this racial outlook.
- **He repeatedly argued that the political technique of non-violent resistance, or *satyagraha*, was necessary to overcome exploitation of all kinds suffered by all races.** It was therefore with good reason that the greatest modern leaders of African descent, such as Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela, saw Gandhi as a model and exemplar in their own struggles against racial discrimination

## **His views on Varna system**

According to Gandhiji;

- *Varna* means pre-determination of the choice of man’s profession. The law of *varna* is that a man shall follow the profession of his ancestors for earning his livelihood. *Varna* therefore is in a way the law of heredity.
- *Varna* is not a thing that is superimposed on Hindus, but men who were trustees for their welfare discovered the

law for them. It is a non- competitive social organization.

- It is not a human invention, but an immutable law of nature—the statement of tendency that is ever present and at work like Newton’s law of gravitation. Just as the law of gravitation existed even before it was discovered so did the law of *varna*.
- It was given to the Hindus to discover that law. By their discovery and application of certain laws of nature, the people of the West have easily increased their material possessions.
- Similarly, Hindus by their discovery of this irresistible social tendency have been able to achieve in the spiritual field what no other nation in the world has achieved.
- *Varna* has nothing to do with caste. Down with the monster of caste that masquerades in the guise of *varna*. It is this travesty of *varna* that has degraded Hinduism and India.
- Our failure to follow the law of *varna* is largely responsible both for our economic and spiritual ruin. It is one cause of unemployment and impoverishment, and it is responsible for untouchability and defections from our faith.
- These views of Gandhi ji form the central part of his differences with Ambedkar and Ramaswami Naicker and Narayana Guru.
- But in later stages of his life he moved away from this view and gave Varna the sanction of aptitude rather than birth.

## **His view on the women’s role in society**

- The Mahatma said that women have been suppressed under custom and law for which man was responsible and in the shaping of which she had no hand. Rules of social conduct must be framed by mutual co-operation and

consultation. Women have been taught to regard themselves as slaves of men. Women must realize their full status and play their part as equals of men.

- Gandhiji always advocated a complete reform which he called "*Sarvodaya*" meaning comprehensive progress. He believed that the difference between men and women was only physical and has expressed several times in his writings that in many matters especially those of tolerance, patience, and sacrifice the Indian woman is superior to the male.
- Gandhiji declared that there is no school better than home and there is no teacher better than parents. He said men and women are equal, but not identical. "Intellectually, mentally, and spiritually, woman is equivalent to a male and she can participate in every activity."
- "Womanhood is not restricted to the kitchen", he opined and felt that "Only when the woman is liberated from the slavery of the kitchen, that her true spirit may be discovered".
- He wanted women to outgrow the traditional responsibilities and participate in the affairs of nation. He criticized Indian's passion for male progeny. He said that as long as we don't consider girls as natural as our boys our nation will be in a dark eclipse.
- According to Gandhi, the role of women in the political, economic and social emancipation of the country was of overriding importance. Gandhi had immense faith in the capability of women to carry on a non violent crusade. Under his guidance and leadership, women shouldered critical responsibilities in India's struggle for freedom.
- It can be said without an iota of doubt that Mahatma Gandhi was indeed one of the greatest advocates of women's liberty and all throughout his life toiled relentlessly to improve the status of women in his

country. His faith in their immense capabilities found expression in his decisions to bestow leadership to them in various nationalistic endeavors.

### **Test Yourself : Mould your thoughts**

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## **Prelims question**

1. The South African years of Gandhi ji are known for the evolution of Satyagraha as a method of social mobilization. Which of the following events constitute Gandhian role in South Africa

1. Support and Participation in Boer War.
2. Formation of Natal Indian congress in 1894.
3. Establishment of the Ruskin farm as a social experiment of a commune.
4. He established a newspaper called Indian Opinion.

Choose the correct answer from the codes given below

- a) 1,3 and 4 only
- b) 1,2 and 4 only
- c) 1 and 3 only
- d) All the above.