

# THE GANDHIS, MANDELAS AND KINGS OF TODAY

Relevant for: Ethics | Topic: Human Values - Lessons from the lives and teachings of great Leaders, Reformers and Administrators

We cannot celebrate Mahatma Gandhi today nor Nelson Mandela nor Martin Luther King Jr. without inviting their immediate and stern reprimand.

All three would say, each a bit differently from the other: ‘If you are gathered to celebrate us, stop right here. If you are gathered to think with us, then listen. Not to us or to those who speak in our names but to your consciences, for that is all we did. We did look back to our heroes and heroines, we did celebrate their anniversaries, but only in order to look more clearly at the world around us and into the future that beckoned. India is a free country today, the colonised world is gone. South Africa’s sharp, bruising chains of apartheid iron have snapped. The U.S., with its Civil Rights Act in place, has made slavery a thing of the disreputable past. It has gone on to elect a distinguished President, Barack Obama, from among people who did not, until very recently, even have the right to ride in a bus on a seat of their choice. But are you — Indians, South Africans, Americans — a happy and contented people?’

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They would ask us this question in anxiety and in pain. We know the answer.

India, South Africa, the U.S., and the whole world are in the grip of the vicious virus that goes by the name of COVID-19 but are in reality in the grip of the gluttony of a civilisation that is disembowelling the earth of its resources and is hunting down the earth’s life forms to gratify its craving for commercial profit. There is a wild animal market in every city and town and, more significant than that, within each of us who are not among the poor, in the shape of a callous disregard of life and the sanctity of due proportion.

The ‘crown’ of the [novel coronavirus](#) microbe is not different either in its human origins nor its inhuman effect from the giant plumes that rose over the embers at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Its victims are like those of the bomb: innocent human beings, invariably poor and marginalised.

Blaming China’s opacity or Nature’s insentient actions shifts our own guilt for the willed depredations of the human species’ powerful segments. Nature is not taking it out on us. It has caught our hegemony destroying what we are meant to respect, to nurture. [Zoonotic pandemics](#) are modern powerhouses’ most diabolic, if unintended, creation, after our fabrications of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and the propensity of nation states to practise custodial torture. Albert Lutuli’s and Mandela’s South Africa has signed and ratified without any objections or reservations the United Nations Convention Against Torture. Abraham Lincoln’s and Martin Luther King Jr.’s U.S. has done so with reservations. Rabindranath Tagore’s and Gandhi’s India has signed but has not ratified the Convention Against Torture. What would those two men have had to say about this? Is something about torture more valuable to a state than its outright abolition?

Also read | [Mandela and the Mahatma](#)

George Floyd’s dying words, “I can’t breathe”, rival Martin Luther King Jr.’s living words, “I have a dream”. That Floyd’s words were uttered when the world was breathing through masks, inhaling with fear, expiring in despair has given us a chilling picture of the human origins of the crisis that we have brought upon ourselves.

Gandhi was thrown out of a train on the night of June 7 in 1893, in Pietermaritzburg. That train journey changed the course of colonial history. Trains have captured India's headlines today — only very differently. Not by someone being thrown out of one of them but by millions bundling themselves into them. They are all migrant workers, exactly as Gandhi himself was in South Africa, except that he was a lawyer with a solid income and in a different country. These migrant workers were locked out of livelihoods and of ways of travel in their own country but in a far distant part of it when a lockdown was imposed to contain the spread of the virus. While for the upper class of society lockdown meant staying home, watching films, baking, eating, doing stationary exercises and staying one metre away from one another, for these millions it meant the sudden disappearance of wages or work, of every security and, ironically, because they were now obliged to stay cooped up in their tiny dwellings, it also meant overcrowding, inhaling others' exhalations for hours together. So they moved on foot, no matter how far they had to go, just to get back home. And for the reason that they were breaking the lockdown rules, they were pushed back. Until it dawned on those who mattered that these fellow human beings had to get home to stay home. And trains were deployed. Too few for too many, they saw the opposite of social distancing. I believe the Railways when they say that as many as 80 migrant workers who died on these trains died not due to infection or starvation. I want to believe that, for I trust the Railways and the government to speak the truth. But even the Railways do not say these persons did not die.

We are thinking of heroes today. May I speak of a little heroine? The indefatigable documenter of rural livelihoods in India, P. Sainath, and his colleagues Pushpa Usendi-Rokade, Purusottam Thakur and Kamlesh Painkra tell us: [Jamlo Madkam](#) was a 12-year-old from the tribal Muria community of Chhattisgarh who went with others of her village to Telangana to work on chilli farms. When the lockdown was announced she was told her work had stopped and she might as well leave. So, with others the little one walked. Over three days and 140 kilometres she walked and when she was just 60 kilometres from her village and could walk no more, collapsed and died. The virus did not kill her. She was thrown out of no train. But she was thrown out of opportunity, pushed out of life. No government, no politician, no employer but the whole lot of India's consumerist population, we, did that.

Also read | [After death, Jamlo Makdam helped others get freedom from lock down captivity](#)

Will post-COVID-19, the world return to the profligate misuse of its natural inheritance? Will it learn any lessons from the deaths of thousands? If the way in which the upper classes are hailing relaxations of the lockdown is any indication, the old story seems set to be back. After all only those dying and meant to die, die.

And yet we must not on this day let hope down. Rajmohan Gandhi has reminded us of [Li Wenliang](#), the Wuhan doctor who first sounded the world about the virus that he had found in patients and then himself succumbed to. Li had been pilloried for having started a rumour and disrupted social order. He is now receiving honours. "I think there should be more than one voice in a healthy society," Li said before dying.

There are Lis among Indian, African and American doctors, nurses, lab assistants, police and guards and there are many who are speaking up not only against racism but against what Sainath has described as classism, a new form of callous elitism. Protesters in the U.S. and in England and Australia and elsewhere saying 'I can't breathe' are not doing so in Gandhi's or Mandela's or King's name. But they are doing exactly what Gandhi, Mandela and King were doing. They are, in fact, Gandhi, Mandela and King. Together with Li and Floyd and Jamlo they are saying we are with them. We are them.

*Gopalkrishna Gandhi is a former administrator, diplomat and governor*

*This is the edited text of a speech made online by him on June 7 for a commemoration of June 7, 1893 when Mohandas K. Gandhi was expelled from the train at Pietermaritzburg station. Two others who spoke with the writer were Ndileka Mandela, head of the Thembekile Mandela Foundation, and Clayborne Carson, History Professor and Director of the Martin Luther King Jr. Institute, Stanford University. David Gengan, Chairman of the Pietermaritzburg Gandhi Memorial Committee, which hosted the programme, moderated it.*

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