**Gandhi’s Connections with Booker T. Washington,**

**W.E.B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey**

Mahatma Gandhi’s teachings of nonviolent resistance had a famous and profound impact on the civil rights movement in the United States. That impact was facilitated in part by the journeys of two of Martin Luther King’s future mentors – Howard Thurman and Benjamin Mays, who were both good friends with King’s father – to meet with Gandhi in 1936. However, the black American interest in Gandhi goes all the way back to 1919, when the Indian freedom struggle exploded in the wake of World War I after the British Empire failed to extend greater autonomy to India despite the Indian participation in the war. Gandhi’s interests in the black American freedom struggle date back even further – to the 1890s – when he first studied the abolitionist movement that destroyed slavery. This article traces those earlier connections between Gandhi and black Americans, in the decades before African Americans took the important step of travelling to India to meet with the Mahatma directly.

**Gandhi’s Study of Abolitionism and**

**Booker T. Washington**

In the decade before the Civil War, many of the abolitionists fighting against slavery were also missionaries. Some of these missionaries travelled to India, where they inspired Indians and other South Asians struggling against colonialism to examine the lessons of the fight against slavery in the United States. A few decades after the first South Asians looked to the lessons of abolitionism, a young lawyer named Gandhi engaged in his own study of the abolitionist movement. Gandhi was famously inspired by Henry David Thoreau’s *Civil Disobedience*, which argued that moral people who believed in justice had a duty to break unjust laws, and that in such cases imprisonment should be worn as a badge of honor. Gandhi wrote his first article praising Thoreau in 1907, just months after beginning his first civil disobedience campaign in South Africa. In the words of historian Nico Slate, “Gandhi studied Thoreau’s opposition to slavery in order to combat racial oppression in South Africa.”

Gandhi also engaged in a serious study of Booker T. Washington. Washington was the most influential African American leader during the time that Gandhi spent in South Africa… the same years in which segregationist Jim Crow laws swept the South, enforced by a continuous wave of lynchings. In an environment in which African Americans were being systematically stripped of the rights they had won after the Civil War, Washington warned African Americans that to push “too hard” for their rights would only lead to a fiercer white backlash, and to a further *loss* of rights. Believing that fighting for civil rights would actually be counterproductive, Washington argued that African Americans should invest their energies in developing the types of skilled labor that could allow them to lift themselves out of poverty and invest more in their communities. It would be a slow process, but through self-uplift and self-improvement, he argued that African Americans could convince white Americans that they were, indeed, worthy of equal rights. As a young lawyer fighting for the rights of Indians in South Africa, Gandhi came to believe that Washington’s ideas could be useful there as well. He argued that the Indian community, through patience and hard work, could prove themselves worthy to the English. Gandhi’s ideas, of course, later evolved in a much more revolutionary direction: he wrote his first article on Booker T. Washington in 1903, years before he led his first civil disobedience campaign in which he advocated the breaking of unjust laws.

Booker T. Washington also influenced Gandhi’s perception of blackness. When Gandhi arrived in South Africa as a young lawyer, he carried with him the notion that people of African ancestry had created no great civilization. Indeed, in Gandhi’s early career, he fought for the rights of the Indian community in South Africa partly by arguing that Indians – with their history of building great civilizations – should not be subjected to the same laws as “uncivilized” Africans. Gandhi’s immense respect for the ideas of Booker T. Washington, and of Washington’s personal story of rising from being a slave to a great leader, was an early factor in helping him to gradually transcend these racist views.

Washington also emphasized the dignity of all labor. Physical labor, he said, was the foundation of any community and of society itself. African Americans, he said, should never look down on themselves as lowly laborers, but should value the contributions they made. Their labor deserved both self-respect and respect from society. This notion helped the young Gandhi reevaluate his elitist assumptions regarding caste. Partly under the influence of Washington, Gandhi began to shift the way he used the word “civilized” to describe who was civilized and who was not. He would soon be arguing that what was truly uncivilized was to degrade those who engaged in physical labor… and to refuse to engage in such labor oneself, although happily reaping the fruits of it. As Gandhi began to found his ashrams, which served both as spiritual communities and as training grounds for nonviolent resistance, he mandated that all participants engage in the physical labor that was necessary to run the community.

In other words, abolitionists and African Americans helped Gandhi re-evaluate prejudices that he held around race as well as class, while also contributing to his understanding of nonviolent resistance. These were no small contributions.

**W.E.B. Du Bois and the**

**Global Color Line**

As Gandhi was developing these ideas, on the other side of the planet, a renowned African American scholar was developing a system of thought that would play a major role in drawing African Americans and South Asians together. In 1903 – the same year that Gandhi published his first article on Booker T. Washington – W.E.B. Du Bois published what quickly became one of the most influential pieces of literature in the entire racially oppressed and colonized world: *The Souls of Black Folk.* In that text, Du Bois wrote one of the most well-known lines in all of African American literature when he prophesized that “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.”

By “color line,” Du Bois was referring to lines of racial division, be they physical, legal, or in the minds and emotions of human beings. However, he was not only speaking of the plight of African Americans: for it is only the first half of the sentence that attained fame and became so often quoted. In it’s entirety, the sentence reads: “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line, the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the Islands of the Sea.” For Du Bois, the color line was global. It referred to the ways in which people of European ancestry embraced white supremacy to justify the colonization and racial oppression of people of color throughout the world. The problem of the twentieth century, in other words, was the problem of global domination, based on white supremacy.

For Du Bois, that global problem required a global solution; and a big part of that solution involved colonized and racially oppressed peoples around the world building relationships of solidarity with one another. Du Bois envisioned India playing an important role in such solidarities, and worked to build relationships with Indians and other South Asians during the first decade of the twentieth century. When Du Bois helped found the NAACP in 1909, he ensured that the renowned civil rights organization built ties with India as well.

Du Bois edited the official publication of the NAACP, called *The Crisis.* The subtitle of *The Crisis* was *A Record of the Darker Races*, which emphasized the connectedness of the ‘darker races’ of the world. Over the following decade, Du Bois ensured that *The Crisis* found its way into the hands of Indian freedom fighters, as well as anticolonial freedom fighters around the world. The publication soon became popular across South Asia, and often included articles by South Asians, who embraced the notion of a global ‘color line.’ As the Indian revolutionary Lala Lajpat Rai put it, while lecturing alongside Du Bois during World War I: “The problem of the Hindu and of the negro… are not local, but world problems.” Through his herculean efforts, W.E.B. Du Bois, more than any other figure, ensured that meaningful connections were built between India and black America. Those connections ensured that a foundation for communication was already in place by the time Gandhi burst onto the world stage, in the wake of World War I.

**Gandhi in the African American Press**

The notion of a global solidarity amongst the ‘darker races’ picked up steam in the aftermath of the First World War. Many colonized and racially oppressed people viewed the war as a massive weakening of Europe, and thus as a crucial blow to white global domination. Representatives of the world’s racially oppressed and colonized people – including W.E.B. Du Bois – rushed to Paris in the wake of the war, hoping to influence the peace treaty. At the Paris Peace Conference, President Woodrow Wilson argued that the key to world peace would be the principle of self-determination, the global right to not be dominated, but to rule ones own land. The ‘darker races’ of the world wanted assurances that such a principle would apply to them as well. Would the colonies be granted the ability to determine their own fate? Would racially oppressed people in the United States? When it became clear that the principle of self-determination was meant almost exclusively for those of European ancestry, freedom struggles erupted in many colonies, including India. Mahatma Gandhi – having left South Africa during the war – now rose to global fame as the leader of the Indian freedom struggle. It was in this context that African Americans focused their attention on Gandhi for the first time.

From the start, African Americans watched Gandhi’s actions very closely. They debated whether Gandhi’s strategy of nonviolent resistance could be used in the struggle against white supremacy in the United States. In 1921, a writer for the black newspaper, *The Chicago Defender,* weighed in: “We believe that some empty Jim Crow cars will some day worry our street car magnates in Southern cities when we get around to walking rather than suffer insult and injury to our wives and children.” Such words predicted the Montgomery bus boycott by more than thirty years. In 1922, the executive secretary of the NAACP, James Weldon Johnson, called Gandhi “a prophet and a saint,” and exclaimed that “If non-cooperation brings the English to their knees in India, there is no reason why it should not bring the white man to his knees in the South.”

However, the 1920s was a decade of profound racial violence in the United States. The Ku Klux Klan rose to its greatest prominence, with over two million members in a nation that, at the time, had only one hundred million people. In the context of widespread and brutal violence, it was difficult for most African Americans to imagine nonviolence as an option. The famous African American sociologist Franklin Frazier summed up the perspective of many African Americans when he asked readers of *The Crisis* to imagine that “there should arise a Gandhi to lead Negroes without hate in their hearts to stop tilling the fields of the South under the peonage system; to cease paying taxes to states that keep their children in ignorance; and to ignore the iniquitous disenfranchisement and Jim Crow laws.” Frazier prophesized, “I fear we would witness an unprecedented massacre of defenseless black men and women in the name of law and order.” Frazier made clear to his audience that he did not disagree with Gandhi’s strategies: he simply considered white supremacy in America to be far more brutal than it was under the British in India. African Americans also doubted that the Indian freedom struggle was comparable to their own, given that they were just a small minority in the United States, whereas the Indians were obviously the vast majority in their own homeland.

African Americans in the early 1920s thus paid close attention to Gandhi, despite doubting that nonviolent resistance would function in their own context. They did so because figures like W.E.B. Du Bois – who himself did not endorse Gandhi’s strategies for African Americans – hailed Gandhi as a great spiritual leader, who, through his immense integrity, had been able to unify a profoundly diverse nation. In the 1920s, African Americans studied Gandhi as a model for leadership, seeking to learn lessons about how to unify their own people, who often splintered into many different, competing camps. However, like many people around the world, African Americans often romanticized Gandhi, envisioning that his spiritual purity – more than his political genius – had unified India. They also often overestimated the extent of Indian unity: intense caste prejudices remained, and clashes between Muslims and Hindus persisted. Gandhi called off his first campaign of nonviolence in 1922 after nearly two-dozen police officers were killed in a clash. Even as African Americans viewed Gandhi as a symbol for the possibility of unity, Gandhi himself often felt that the movement he led was very far from achieving that goal.

**Marcus Garvey**

**And Afro-Asian Unity**

Within black America, the Afro-Caribbean community watched Gandhi especially closely. Like African Americans in the South, many Afro-Caribbeans migrated to cities in the American North to take jobs during World War I. As Caribbeans, many of them were themselves subjects of the British Empire, and were deeply critical of that empire and of the wrongs of colonialism. Because of this, they paid close attention to anti-colonial freedom struggles around the world… and especially in India. Many Afro-Caribbeans believed that freedom for India – the “crown jewel” of the British Empire – would be a decisive blow against British colonial rule everywhere, and would facilitate the decolonization of other lands. The thousands of Afro-Caribbeans who migrated to black American neighborhoods during the war played a major role in bringing such anti-colonial critiques into the black American consciousness.

Of the Afro-Caribbeans to champion India’s cause in the United States, none was more prominent than Marcus Garvey. From Jamaica, Garvey had travelled the world as a young man. Noticing that people of African ancestry were oppressed and impoverished wherever he went, Garvey developed the desire to liberate people of African ancestry around the world. He envisioned a united African diaspora working together towards a common goal. Whereas many African Americans emphasized that they were a small minority in the United States, and that this distinguished their own freedom struggle from anti-colonial freedom struggles, Garvey emphasized the massive numbers of the African diaspora. African Americans were not a small minority, he said: they were members of a larger group, 400 million strong. This message was profoundly inspiring to black people across the world, and it helped Garvey’s movement grow into the largest movement for racial justice to take place between the abolition of slavery and the civil rights movement.

However, Garvey had many fierce critics. Many of them argued that the notion of uniting the diverse cultures, languages, and religions of the African diaspora was an impossible, utopian fantasy. In response, Garvey sometimes pointed out that India was a massive and enormously diverse land, full of many languages and cultures and religions… and yet it had attained unity, through the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. India, for Marcus Garvey, became a symbol for the possibility of expansive unity. Garvey argued that this expansive unity had only become possible because the Indians had rallied around a single leader, which had helped to hold the diverse peoples of India together. The African diaspora needed to do the same, Garvey said… and the leader they needed to rally around would be him.

Garvey envisioned a united African people working alongside a united Asian people, and he envisioned the Indian freedom struggle as a step in that larger process. Because of this, Garvey reached out to Indians and other South Asians just as W.E.B. Du Bois had done, inviting them to lecture with him and publish in his journal, *The Negro World.* Garvey sent Gandhi a number of telegrams in the early 1920s, some of which Gandhi published to show Indians that people around the world were supporting them. Inspired after reading Marcus Garvey’s autobiography, Gandhi wrote an article in 1926 titled *Race Arrogance,* in which he denounced “…the injustice that is being daily perpetrated against the Negro in the United States of America in the name of and for the sake of maintaining white superiority.” Over the following years, as Gandhi developed more ties with African Americans who he greatly respected, he would speak up for their cause in ever-stronger terms. He told reporters that slavery had never truly ended in the United States. During World War II, he wrote an article titled “British and American Nazism,” and wrote to Franklin Roosevelt to tell him that his claim to fight for freedom and democracy was preposterous, given that African Americans were denied both.

**Foundations of a Pilgrimage**

During these same years, W.E.B. Du Bois had entered into correspondence with one of Gandhi’s closest friends and disciples, a man named Charles Freer Andrews. Du Bois and Andrews began their correspondence in 1925, and the two men met for the first time in 1929 when Andrews arrived in the United States. While in the U.S., Andrews toured black universities, lecturing on the teachings of Gandhi. He cultivated ties with African American leaders. And when he returned to India, he told Gandhi about the brilliance of those leaders, and ensured that they were personally connected. Andrews hand-delivered letters from W.E.B. Du Bois to Gandhi, and Gandhi immediately wrote back to Du Bois:

Let not the 12 million Negroes be ashamed of the fact that they are the grandchildren of slaves. There is dishonor in being a slave-owner. But let us not think of honour or dishonour in connection with the past. Let us realize that the future is with those who would be pure, truthful, and loving. For as the old wise men have said: truth ever is, untruth never was. Love alone binds and truth and love accrue only to the truly humble.

Shortly after Andrews’ visit, India embraced the goal of total independence from the British Empire, and Gandhi led the entire nation in a massive civil disobedience campaign. African Americans were riveted. With the power of the Ku Klux Klan waning by the late 1920s and with lynchings on the decline, it was easier to imagine the possibility of nonviolent resistance. The black American press was soon publishing hundreds of articles on Gandhi. Calls for a black Gandhi became increasingly common. Thus, the foundations for the black American pilgrimage to India to meet with the Mahatma were laid.

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