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# GANDHI'S PERCEPTION OF RACIALISM IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

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**Abstract**

Gandhi became well-known throughout the world as a key player in India's anti-British movement. He was the forerunner of a nonviolent protest movement in world history. Naturally, there isn't a long history of successful nonviolent movements being successfully followed and carried out before Gandhi. Gandhi's viewpoint on international politics, however, is one facet of his life that has received relatively little attention. Gandhi brought up the world wars in his talks on global politics. In addition, he offered well-considered views on a variety of topics, including the shortcomings of organizations that work to promote peace, colonialism, and aggressive nationalism. He identified a number of global ideologies, particularly when investigating the reasons behind the First and Second World Wars. He blamed these ideologies for a large number of international conflicts. Among these ideologies was racialism. This essay will discuss Gandhi's perspective on racialism. It will also examine what the nature of racialism was during Gandhi's contemporaneous period, and how racialism led human civilization into crisis.

**Keywords:** *Gandhi, Racialism, Nazism, Apartheid, Arab crisis*

## Introduction

Gandhiji's contribution to the Indian independence movement against the British is a well known fact. However, there is very little discussion regarding Gandhiji's perspective on international relations and international politics. When examining Gandhiji's view on international politics, it becomes evident that he expressed thoughtful opinions on issues such as World War I, World War II, arms race, and aggressive nationalism. In his analysis of international politics, two themes were prominent – firstly, an enquiry into the causes of war, and the other was the concept of peace. In fact, in exploring the causes of war in international politics, he identified multiple reasons. Since the core principle of Gandhian philosophy is nonviolence, he attributed violence as the main inspiration behind all forms of war. Gandhi, taking into consideration his own experience of witnessing war, observed that various ideologies such as imperialism, aggressive nationalism, fascism, and racism were in some way responsible for conflicts among states at the international level. This article will attempt to discuss, from Gandhiji's perspective, nature and influence of racism on the international stage, and its impact on interstate relations in his time.

## Racialism: A Conceptual Understanding

Racialism can be understood as a belief that race is a fundamental determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race. It promotes systemic oppression of a racial group to the social, economic, and political advantage of another. In the Cambridge Dictionary racialism refers to policies, behaviours, rules, etc. that result in a continued unfair advantage to some people and unfair or harmful treatment of others based on race. It is a belief that some races are better than others, or the unfair treatment of someone because of his or her race. Collins Dictionary defines racism as the belief that people of some races are inferior to others, and the behaviour which is the result of this belief. Racism also refers to the aspects of a society which prevent people of some racial groups from having the same privileges and opportunities as people from other races. Sociologists generally view "race" as a social construct. While concepts of race and racism stem from observable biological traits, interpretations are heavily shaped by cultural beliefs. Racism, as an ideology, operates at both individual and institutional levels. Ibram X. Kendi defines racism as a combination of racist policies and ideas that creates and sustains racial inequality. He defines a racist as anyone supporting racist policies through action or inaction, or expressing racist ideas. Racial inequity, therefore, exists when different racial groups lack equal footing, a consequence of racist policies or ideas. (Kendi, 2020) At its root, racism is an ideology of racial domination, where the perceived biological or cultural superiority of certain racial groups justifies or dictates the inferior treatment and social standing of others. (Berghe 857: 2001) Gandhi not only identified the root cause of racialism but also mentioned the institutionalized form of racialism which is a recent addition to the field of social studies.

### Racialism in South Africa & America

To Gandhi, racialism was as perilous as imperialism because it relied heavily on the forces of exploitation based on violence. In fact, Gandhi thought, imperialism, fascism and racialism were intertwined together in one way or another. Imperialism gave rise to racialism and vice-versa. Experiences have shown Africa and America had faced latent or manifest violence and killing of millions of people continued for a long period of time as a result of racialism. Gandhi fought in South Africa his struggle for the right of the citizenship for the indentured Indians settled there against the laws of racial discrimination under which the Indians suffered till 1907. (Roychoudhury 251 :1970) In all those cases violent activities predominated. President Kruger used to say that "…the White Christians were the chosen of God and Indians were inferior beings created to serve the Whites. A fundamental clause in the Transvaal constitution was that there should be no equality between the Whites and coloured races including Asiatics. There too the Indians were consigned to ghettos described as locations. The other disabilities were almost of the same type as those of the Jews in Germany." (Gandhi 162: 1948) Gandhi, however, distinguished South African Indian problem from that of Negroes and racially mixed Africans who had grievances against the governing White minority in South Africa. Gandhi's experience with European racialism in South Africa did much to set his future course as an active opponent of Western customs and government and as a leading proponent of Indian nationalism. Symptomatic of his thoughts, his paper Indian opinion contended that the bias of Whites drew its strength from colour prejudice and it condemned deliberate social segregation as an un-Christian practice for the Western people. (Power 92: 1961)

Gradually Gandhi became more and more aggressive about racial issues. Although he continued to take an interest in South African Indian situation, Gandhi began to take interest in American racialism too. Though he did not visit America at that time he learned about racial problem in the United States from the correspondents. To Gandhi, America was the house of inter-racial conflicts on a vast scale. Gandhi observed that although American Negroes had accepted Christianity and Western civilization discrimination continued against them. In his opinion Christian association served no useful purpose for American Negroes. (Gandhi 167: 1948)

### Racialism in Germany: The rise of Nazism

Gandhi also responded to a different form of racism present in Germany at that time. It is widely understood how Hitler and his associates managed to promote the idea that Germans were a superior race, justified in either eliminating inferior races or subjugating them as their servants. According to the Nazis, Jews, whether in their homeland or abroad, were considered a subhuman species. This mindset led to the merciless exploitation of others and their own disadvantaged classes. Numerous workers, Christians, and liberals who had opposed such abuses endured hardships or lost their lives in concentration camps at Germany. (Gandhi 61-62: 1948) However, the German persecution of the Jews appears unmatched in historical context. The dictators of the past were never as insane as Hitler appears to be. And he is approaching it with passionate fervor. He is advocating for a new faith centered on exclusive and aggressive nationalism, whereby any act of inhumanity is considered a virtuous act deserving of reward in this life and the next. However, Gandhi contended that even the feeble nations of Europe couldn't hinder the Nazi persecution of Jews through violent means. In reality, any armed action by them would exacerbate the suffering of the Jews. (Power 97: 1961) He cautioned, "In fact, even if Britain, France, and America were to declare war on Germany, they would gain no true happiness, no true power." (Gandhi 160: 1948) The assessed brutality of Hitler might ultimately lead to a widespread slaughter of the Jews as a response to the proclamation of such aggression.

The entire philosophy of Nazism rested on the idea of individual sacrifice for the nation or State. Gandhi denounced this ideology as harmful influences in global affairs. Gandhi thus said, "Germany is showing to the world how efficiently violence can be worked when it is not hampered by any hypocrisy or weakness masquerading as humanitarianism. It is also showing how hideous, terrible and terrifying it looks in its nakedness." (Gandhi 161: 1948) Gandhi always discarded the war as an unmitigated evil. He considered that war could not produce a constructive outcome and it could not lead to any solution of the crisis of the humanity. On contrary it aggravated the crisis plaguing the world. However, in order to stop the menace of Hitlarism once Gandhi agreed to waging war against Germany. On another occasion Gandhi accused the other powerful nations in the world who were supporting the military offensive of the Germany and together formed a power bloc. In his views the nations sought to establish justice and promoting democracy could not afford to be part of Hitler's heinous act of persecuting Jews. Gandhi believed that democracy and justice was antithesis of dictatorial rule and merciless oppression. One of the Dutch friends of Gandhi wrote to him about the nature of Nazi atrocities. He intimated Gandhi that the damage done by Hitler was unprecedented. Even he comparing the use of violence by rest of the European nation called the aggression of Hitler as matchless. Thus, Hitler vitiated the European politics. (Roychoudhury 253 :1970) In Germany the children were given lessons to use violence. They were trained to become cunning and they learned to use treachery. So, Nazism inculcated in the young Minds immoral values.

The great mass of young people has lost its heart and is degraded to the level of a machine. Gandhi thought the dictatorial leadership; wanton killing of masses did not gain much for Hitler. The citizens of the Germany also suffered the consequences of ruthlessness of Hitler. He felt that the future generations of the German race had to pay the price of the misdeed of their ruler. Moreover, Germany under the leadership of Hitler witnessed destruction, bloodshed and aggression. They had seen the power of violence and army. The people of Germany might consider Hitler as a great warrior and a good organizer because he elevated the nation to the level of a great power in world politics by showing its military prowess. (Gandhi 320: 1948) Moreover the military strength it had acquired eradicated the threat from Germany from being vulnerable to the attacks of other nations. But Gandhi conceived that Hitler, by doing so, degraded the whole humanity and snatched the moral values of the German race. The

ideology of Nazism had glorified war. They intended to use large scale violence and sought to suppress the spirit of humanity throughout the world. Gandhi believed that Hitler has brutalized not only Germans but a large part of humanity. (Gandhi 321: 1948)

## Racialism in the Middle East

After World War I (1914-1918), the borders of several nations were altered due to various treaties, which subsequently led to racial tensions in the Middle East stemming from these political changes. This situation attracted considerable criticism of British policies. Historically, both Jews and Poles have endured persecution for centuries, losing their land and property and being forced to seek refuge in other countries. The key distinction was that Polish persecution was largely confined to Poland, while Jews faced discrimination in every nation, experiencing racial violence primarily from Christians. Consequently, Gandhi expressed his support for the Jews, stating, "My sympathies are entirely with the Jews. I have known them intimately in South Africa. Some of them became lifelong companions. Through these friends, I came to learn much about their long-standing persecution. They have been the untouchables of Christianity." (Gandhi 163: 1948)

Regarding Jewish nationalism in Palestine, Gandhi believed that the Jews were making a mistake. He remarked, "And now a word to the Jews in Palestine. I have no doubt that they are going about it the wrong way. The Palestine of the Biblical conception is not a geographical tract. It is in their hearts. But if they must look to the Palestine of geography as their national home, it is wrong to enter it under the shadow of the British gun. A religious act cannot be performed with the aid of a bayonet or a bomb. They can settle in Palestine only with the goodwill of the Arabs." (Kataria 32:1990) He argued that if their religious beliefs inspired their desire for a national home, they should renounce the use of force and strive to win the Arabs' support. He warned that if the Jews resorted to violence, it would perpetuate animosity between the two groups. Furthermore, he cautioned that once a militarily strong nation intervened in Palestine's internal matters, it could lead to future interference in domestic issues. (Kataria 35:1990)

Gandhi also asserted that the primary basis for a nation claiming land as its homeland should be natural habitation. Therefore, he argued that Palestine rightfully belonged to the Arabs, just as England belonged to the English and France to the French. According to him, Palestine is Arab territory in the same way that England is English territory or France is French territory. Imposing Jews on Arabs is unacceptable and cruel. The current state of affairs in Palestine cannot be excused by any moral code. The mandates are illegitimate beyond the conclusion of the most recent conflict. In order to partially or completely restore Palestine as the Jewish homeland, it would undoubtedly be a crime against humanity to subjugate the proud Arabs. (Roy Chaudhury 258:1970) However, Gandhi observed that in Palestine, Arabs had been forced to compromise with Jews to share their land. In fact, the distribution of land between the two groups was determined by a mandate resulting from war. In his view, any settlement following the mandate would likely be a source of ongoing conflict between the two races.

## Conclusion

Gandhiji clearly understood that the racial discrimination is fundamentally rooted in ideas of violence. He was sufficiently aware of the differences among the various forms of racial discrimination around the world. In South Africa, he conducted satyagraha against the British racial system. He commented in Harijan magazine, "Unseen it ['South Africa's white man's policy'] hold the seeds of a world war." (Gandhi 52:1946). He also blamed the aggressive chauvinist attitude behind the Jews holocaust in Germany. Moreover, he also identified how the vicious circle of aggressive nationalism, chauvinism and the totalitarian ideology. In fact, Gandhiji tried to draw attention to the tendency of this racialism to demean other groups of people and how they were being deprived of various rights, even at times risking their lives. In order to remove the menace of racialism Gandhi urged to the UNO, "If the UNO fails to deal justly with the South African Indian dispute, the UNO will lose its prestige. I have no doubt that the UNO can prosper only if it is just." (Gandhi 385:1947,) In fact, in the epicenter of Gandhian vision there was individual-self. He strongly believed in human perfectibility. And he also believed that an individual might elevate him/herself to the level of a greater self if he/she remained committed to the path of satya. However, to him, the term satya was not a lofty philosophical ideal, but a tool to be employed in real life. In his mind, satya referred to the essence of existence of human life. However, it cannot be denied that Gandhi, in his early age, was also influenced by racist ideas that were prevalent in his time. This phase of Gandhi's life has recently caught popular attention and became a matter of intense debate. Some scholars has pointed out that in the initial phase of his stay at South Africa Gandhi appeared to be a racialist. A University situated at Accra, Ghana, taking into account Gandhi's attitude to racial question, has decided to remove the Gandhi's statue from its premise as in he had been found to mention phrases like denoting south African black people as 'Kaafirs' and an 'inferior' to Indians. Despite the fact, in the later phase, his attitude towards racialism had evolved to that extent that the he had been revered as one of the greatest inspiration in the fight against apartheid in USA, spearheaded by Martin Luther King.

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