



# IN DEPTH Film review: Gandhi

Anti-racist religious education



RE TODAY AND NATRE WORKING WITH THE FREE CHURCHES GROUP  
AND METHODIST SCHOOLS





# Gandhi

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## Introduction

Over the years I have developed (and, in collaboration with new and younger colleagues, updated) my use of films to engage young minds and encourage them to analyse issues aided by an audio-visual immersion into 'someone else's shoes'. It is vital, however, to plot a journey carefully when using of films in the classroom as a tool so that meaningful dialogue is opened and developed. When using clips from the film Gandhi, students are offered opportunities to identify and reflect upon personal, social, religious, moral, economic and political issues in the context of challenging social injustice. At points in the Year 9 RPE (Religion, Philosophy and Ethics) course students review areas studied in history and English lessons in Year 8. Our lessons promote discussions about the origins of a binary mindset that identifies people into 'us/them' and 'superior/inferior', and how these attitudes have become actions leading to injustice and oppression. Students have learned the definitions and examples of stereotype, prejudice and discrimination. Using 'Gandhi' offers students an insight into experiencing injustice and the use of non-violent direct action, ahimsa and satyagraha [along with links to Martin Luther King's discussions about agape and non-violence studied earlier in this topic) to challenge injustice. My teaching teams have discussed whether certain figures do not bear up well to contemporary scrutiny (and therefore should be removed from the curriculum). I believe it is both possible and important for students to learn about Gandhi's work and legacy whilst ensuring that his flaws are not ignored.

There are 'layers' to investigate for the film 'Gandhi' to be used effectively to support RS lessons. Before starting the film, a mix of images, information and skilful questioning is vital to ensure students see this film as a stimulus for enquiry and understanding:

- students find out about Gandhi in the UK, training in law and called to the Bar in 1891 (bringing in links to careers). This opens the door to discuss the British Empire (which will be developed in subsequent lessons)
- I remind students that in 1899, travelling across continents involved ships and long train journeys... and what the trains were like (along with the coveted position of travelling First Class)
- I inform students that I will be using subtitles... bringing into the classroom a discussion of Afrikaans (bringing in further discussions about accents, culture and colonisation)
- I introduce motives and controversies concerning the casting of Ben Kingsley as Gandhi (which leads to a discussion about variable skin tones across continents, and social responsibility in casting/representations of diverse communities in films)

There are distinct sections of Gandhi that I 'carve out' from the 3+ hour epic. Watching the whole of the film would certainly take them on a very important journey through key events and issues involving Britain's role as an empire (and in subsequent lessons, as a Commonwealth) – however with many topics in RS jostling for priority, a concise edit is



needed. To support students' analysis of what they are watching, I have created a video and quotation sheet – at key parts of the film students add notes and reflections.

### Key elements & lesson ideas

The key elements of the film that I use include these four sections/lessons:

1. Gandhi's arrival to South Africa on the train (and being thrown off for refusing to move from a first class seat for which he had purchased a ticket). In this first lesson, after the introduction and discussion of the above bullet points, this clip helps them to see such deep prejudices in action. As students watch the film, I pause at intervals... identifying why the porter, passenger and guard are shocked by Gandhi travelling in First Class; reminding them that the language used in this film is not acceptable; exploring why he refused to move; and how he must have felt when standing isolated on the platform after being thrown off the train. I usually set a homework task on 'Being Prejudged' (poem, lyrics or prose) ... encouraging students to explore an example, feelings and possible solutions to experiencing prejudice and discrimination (some students take on the 'voice' of Gandhi, others experienced of fat-shaming, hair/skin colour, or disability).
2. Gandhi meeting with a group to discuss his experience (where discussions of 'members of the Empire' and 'children of God' [students are reminded of learning about imago dei/Genesis from a previous lesson] are followed by declarations of intentions to challenge injustices). Students learn about the system of identification passes in South Africa – when they watch the burning of the passes scene, I encourage them to look at the police officer's expression as he sees Gandhi still lifting a further pass to burn. Students sometimes laugh and often wince. We discuss passes as an official document, the role of authorities to maintain law and order and responsibilities for methods used by those in authority. They are shocked by the blatant use of violence. I keep the scene rolling so that they see Gandhi's children greet him upon his return from hospital (with interesting discussions about the two boys bowing at their father's feet as a cultural sign of respect!). The references to articles in the UK press remind students of the role of the media to research, witness, inform and question. Students watch Gandhi walking with Rev Andrews in theological dialogue and being faced with a racist group of young men, reflecting upon agape as well as questioning divine intervention in the affairs of humans. (At this point, students are informed that we will be learning more about apartheid in our next topic... we will move on to Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, the TRC, and the film *Invictus* in later lessons).
3. Before introducing students to Gandhi's NVDA in India, students see a pink-tinged world map of lands the British Empire dominated, are introduced to the 'Raj', learn definitions of ahimsa and satyagraha, and explore the importance of salt in maintaining a healthy neural network. Students see Gandhi transformed – gone are the Western suits... we discuss the making of one's own cloth and clothes, and Gandhi now as an older man. The clip starts with Gandhi by the waterside, discussing with Webb Miller his experience of studying the Bhagavad Gita and the Bible at school as a continuous encounter with God (an interesting exploration of pluralism for students to consider), and preparing for the next step in challenging injustice.



Students watch the Salt March, the original Pathe report of Gandhi and others making salt illegally on the coast, the Viceroy's response, the violent arrests of protestors... and the intentions of the action at Dharasana Salt Works (on the anniversary of the massacre at Amritsar). The film's British characters oozing disdain for Gandhi and fellow protestors helps students to understand how constructions of privilege and power encourage a binary mindset.

4. In preparing to watch the final clip, the protests at the Dharasana Salt Works, I remind students of the concept of satyagraha and ahimsa. They are reminded that Gandhi has been arrested. They are introduced to the guards, who are not white British but Indians employed to protect the Salt Works. They are reminded of the role of the press as witnesses (here is Webb Miller's report of this event). As students watch row upon row of protestors walk up to the guards, they are reminded of how difficult it must have been to face the weapons and still have the courage to proceed... exemplifying 'soul force'. The (adapted and reconstructed) words of Webb Miller in the closing scene of this clip is useful: 'it went on and on into the night... whatever moral ascendancy the Empire had was lost today... India is free...'

### Considerations & conclusions

It is vital that using films like Gandhi are supported by 'reality checks'. It took over a decade for India to gain independence (useful for students to see events in the global context of WW2); partition led to substantial issues for families and communities. Additionally, I am aware that British students want to feel proud of their heritage... this film may be the first time a student has encountered 'empire' with examples of its poisons. In a following lesson, students learn about the aims of the Commonwealth (encouraging international cooperation and to advance economics, social development, and human rights) – these are then compared and contrasted with what they had learned about the Empire (from the film 'Gandhi' and their own research). Looking at preparations for the Commonwealth Games (Birmingham 2022) helps to bring learning into the present day.

In light of reappraisals of historic figures, once venerated and now seen as flawed, it is true that Gandhi as a man reflected a different century and culture. Arguments and counter-arguments about his attitudes towards the Black African communities continue to be discussed, raising questions of whether statues of this man should be erected (or removed). Perhaps what is unique about the RS classroom is that it is a place to study the beliefs, experiences, mindsets and practices of people who do not consistently reflect contemporary standards we aspire to uphold. Rather than glorifying this historical figure and ignoring his failings as a man, using the film 'Gandhi' enables a dialogue to continue to take place about what are the aspirations and expectations this next and future generations should be seeking to create and celebrate.