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MAHATMA GANDHI, THE MISSING NOBEL LAUREATE & 5-TIME NOMINEE

Much credit for the research goes to Øyvind Tønnesson and Thomas Weber for this article.

Most people don't know that Gandhiji was nominated for the Nobel five times. This article explains the history, examines the reasons why he never won, writes about the deliberations after his assassination to overturn the principle of awarding the Prize only to the living, and the honors showered by the Committee and many of the winners of the Prize.

Indians have won five Nobel Prizes to date. It should have been six. Yet the most famous Indian, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) never received a Nobel Prize, though he was nominated five times from 1937-1939 and 1947-1948.

Alfred Nobel, in his will dated 27 November 1895, left the bulk of his considerable fortune to the Nobel Foundation. The peace prize was to go to the person "who had worked the most or the best for the fraternity among peoples and the abolition or reduction of permanent armies, as well as the establishment and promotion of peace congresses." The Peace Prize is given by a small Norwegian Nobel Committee in consultation with an appointed advisor.

Mahatma Gandhi was a known figure in Europe due to his struggles in South Africa, even before he returned to India in 1915, due to the twenty years he spent in the apartheid struggle. Gandhiji invented the use of non-violent struggle, a method so successful it was exported around the world and used time and again. The non-violence he preached was a deeply rooted belief. Many Nobel Prize winners have given

homage to Mahatma Gandhi and credited him for teaching them. This august list includes **Albert Einstein, Aung San Suu Kyi, George Marshall, The current Dalai Lama, Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela**

The Christian Century, a US magazine suggested nominating Gandhiji for the Nobel Peace Prize in a 1934 editorial, when he was already well known in the United States for the Salt March of 1930. The editorial read: "Why not award the Nobel peace prize to Gandhi? It would be no personal favor to him and he probably does not want it. The honor would not greatly impress him and he would not know what to do with so much money except give it away. These are all high qualifications for such a prize."

The editorial went on to criticize the 1933 Committee for finding no deserving recipients. It lamented that "of the twenty-five awards, too many went to presidents, ministers and other high officials and too few to working friends of peace or to really radical proponents of peace and disarmament."

The 1937-39 Nominations

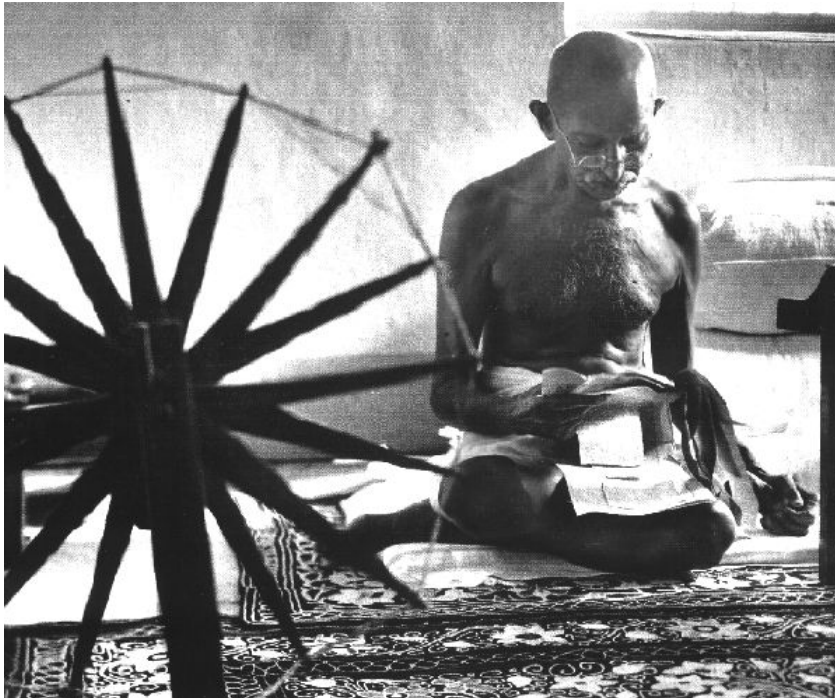
Ole Colbjørnsen, a well known and influential Labour Party MP, nominated Gandhi for the first time in 1937. The Norwegian branch of "Friends of India" wrote the note supporting the candidacy. The Committee's adviser, Professor Jacob Worm-Müller praised Gandhiji, saying he was noble, ascetic, prominent, and much loved man. However he criticized him for not being consistently pacifist in his political actions. He argued that Gandhiji should have known that some of his non-violent campaigns towards the British would degenerate into violence and terror. He also labeled Gandhiji as an "Indian nationalist", criticizing him for helping Indians and not the worse off Blacks in South Africa. At this time no Nobel had been given for a nationalistic freedom struggle.



The Prizes had been awarded for international actions, or actions taken outside ones' own country for the betterment of the masses. Gandhiji's focus on the plight of the Indians in South Africa and India did not fit well. The Prize instead went to Lord Cecil of Chelwood, UK.

support India's participation in the Second World War; and, finally, his efforts to resolve the conflict between Hindu and Moslem communities. In all these matters, Jens said, Gandhiji had consistently followed his own principles of non-violence. Unfortunately, Jens was not explicitly supportive of the Nobel

second strong argument against Gandhiji was his statement made in September 1947, that although he had always opposed warfare, he would support it if it was the only way to secure justice from Pakistan. The Committee took a negative view of this stance, and decided to give the award to the Quakers.



Ole Colbjørnsen renominated Mahatma Gandhi again in 1938 and in 1939, but the arguments made by Prof Worm in 1937 ensured that Gandhiji did not get on the shortlist in either year.

The 1947 Nomination

In 1947, shortly after India's independence, Gandhiji was nominated again, and ended up as one of six names on the Nobel Committee's short list.

The Nobel Committee's adviser Jens Arup Seip was a historian. Jens was full of praise for Gandhiji for his efforts in three different, but mutually related conflicts: the struggle for Independence against the British; the stance taken to

going to Gandhiji. Jens also hinted that the partition of India and the resulting violence had reduced the impact of Gandhiji to some extent.

At the time of the Nobel discussions, there was considerable unrest due to the violence and war between India and Pakistan. When the deliberations began on October 30, 1947, two Committee members spoke in favor of Gandhiji's nomination. However they were not able to convince the three other members. Øyvind Tønnesson speculates that Committee members must have had to consider the political fallout and signals that would be sent if they had awarded the Peace Prize to India's leader in a time of war. A

The 1948 Nomination

Two days before he was assassinated, six nominations were received by the Nobel Committee. The Quakers who pipped Mahatma Gandhi in the previous year, nominated him, and he was included in the final short list of three names. Alas, when Gandhiji died, so did his chances for a Nobel. The award only went to the living.

Till 1948, no one had ever been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize posthumously. But the Nobel Foundation could make this award under certain exceptional circumstances. Unfortunately, the organization chose to focus on some rather irrelevant details regarding the practical consequences of the money distribution if the Prize were awarded posthumously. Although Gandhiji had no will or succession plan, this was a weak excuse; his sons were living, and Navjivan Publishing House publishing Gandhiji's writings could have inherited the award. The Swedish Committees that award all other Nobels were consulted. They did not support a posthumous award, stating that it could only have been made if the laureate died after the Committee's decision had been made.

After much deliberation, the Committee opposed 4-1 to make a posthumous award to Mahatma Gandhi. The announcement was made on November 18, 1948, that

"there was no suitable living candidate" and therefore the prize would remain unawarded that year. This gesture certainly was intended as a show of respect for Mahatma Gandhi.

It is unfortunate that the Committee lacked the courage to create a precedent. What we do know is that this is a decision that the Nobel Foundation regrets to this day, as evidenced quite openly in their actions.

Nobel Organization regrets

The Nobel Foundation website talks about the Mahatma's life and work at great length in an aptly titled write-up, "*The Missing Nobel*". When the Dalai Lama received the Peace Prize in 1989, the chairman of the Nobel Committee said "*It would be natural to compare him with Mahatma Gandhi, one of this century's greatest protagonists of peace, and the Dalai Lama likes to consider himself one of Gandhi's successors. People have occasionally wondered why Gandhi himself was never awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, and the present Nobel Committee can with impunity share this*



surprise, while regarding this year's award of the prize as in part a tribute to the memory of Mahatma Gandhi." The Secretary of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, Geir Lundestad said that no prize could establish a perfect record, indicating their omission of Mahatma Gandhi.

At Chicagopex 2001, the Chicago Philately Association recognized this omission as well. The organization celebrated the 100th anniversary of the Nobel Prize by releasing a number of first day covers. All covers bore the title "*One Nobel prize was not awarded – Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*", and had stamps honoring Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Einstein, Desmond Tutu, Martin Luther King Jr., Aung San Suu Kyi, Desmond Tutu, George Marshall and Nelson Mandela, figures who always supported and honored this man.

Why?

Were the Nobel Committees in the 1930s and 1940s too short sighted? Politically motivated? Did it fly in the face of the imperial designs of Europe, and send wrong signals to the struggling non-Europeans who were trying to overcome European tyranny around the world. Or was it due to Norway's connections to Britain. Little is recorded of those Committee's debates, and no evidence suggests that Britain tried to block the awards.

We can only speculate that Mahatma Gandhi did not fit the stereotype of an international political and humanitarian figure. Neither was he European or American, in a time when the Nobel typically went to Westerners with such

backgrounds. He was a "nationalist" seeking to free Indians from the British in India and South Africa, thus unable to fit into the narrow definitions that made the Nobel Committees comfortable assessing for such awards.

Thankfully in today's times, such nationalistic struggles would surely be rewarded by the Nobel, as is evidenced in their awards to **Martin Luther King Jr., the Dalai Lama and Aung San Suu Kyui**. In fact, some argue that the principles of Alfred Nobel of "*the abolition or reduction of permanent armies, as well as the establishment and promotion of peace congresses*" have not been considered in some awards to controversial supporters of war and violence, including **Menachem Begin, Henry Kissinger, Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin**.



No wonder the Nobel Organization has tried to make amends for its omission of Mahatma Gandhi. They've done less to honor Leo Tolstoy, another historical figure that was never awarded the Nobel, but that's another story.

It is believed that Gandhiji would have been invited to Oslo to receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 1948, had he not died tragically that year. He would certainly have been the brightest light in six instead of our five winners ♦