

## Rhodes Will Not Fall Alone

ABHIJIT SARKAR

---

Vol. 51, Issue No. 2, 09 Jan, 2016

Abhijit Sarkar ([abhijit.sarkar@sant.ox.ac.uk](mailto:abhijit.sarkar@sant.ox.ac.uk)) is a doctoral researcher in Modern Indian History at the University of Oxford, United Kingdom.

A campaign to remove the statue of Cecil Rhodes in Oxford University has gained currency among a section of students and intellectuals. However this method does not address his legacy of racism and colonialism and merely sanitises our uncomfortable past.

The ongoing “Rhodes must fall” movement at Oxford University demanding the destruction or removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes, the British coloniser of Africa, raises several important questions. This movement is instructive on how not to use (or misuse) history when engaging with the present.

### Not Celebrating Racism

In the first place the movement is counterproductive. Not many in Oxford were even aware of the existence of the Rhodes’ statue, let alone celebrating Rhodes or the racism and colonialism that he practised. Undoubtedly the movement has brought Rhodes, who was otherwise sinking into oblivion, back to life. This long dead man does not deserve all the attention that the enthusiastic protestors are showering on him now. Allowing him to sink into oblivion was a better way of fighting him and his blatant racism.

It seems that the current movement in Oxford is inspired by the removal of Rhodes’ statue in Cape Town in South Africa in April 2015. Ostensibly the current movement wants to “decolonise” Oxford and education in general by erasing symbols that “celebrate” colonialism and racism. However, equating the survival of a statue from the past to the celebration of colonialism and racism at present is nothing but populist oversimplification, and a highly political act of using history to tickle sentiments in the present.

The superficiality of this movement becomes clear if we care to consider a few examples—the pyramids of Giza and the Taj Mahal of Agra were made using slave labour extensively. Today, when we travel long distances and spend loads of money to see these, and then take photographs in front of them, do we celebrate slavery? No one would suggest that. Installing a new statue of Rhodes in the 21st century could be interpreted as a celebration of racism and colonialism. But the existing statue was installed almost a century ago, when, historically speaking, this world was a different place, whether we like this fact

or not. Destroying a statue a century later does not sanitise that uncomfortable past.

Contrary to the understanding of the protestors in Oxford, the statue of Rhodes does not celebrate racism and colonialism, it actually acts as a reminder of our ugly racist past, a reminder that reappearance of such an ugly past must be avoided at all costs. The remains of the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz in Poland is a great example of this kind of reminder. When millions of tourists attend guided tours of the camp at Auschwitz, they do not celebrate our horrific history, instead they become more aware of the horrors of history that must be avoided in our present and future.

## **Dangerous Method**

However, one needs to appreciate the intention behind the movement, that is, to fight racism and colonialism. Nor is it possible to deny that Rhodes was a racist individual. It is not the aim, but the method that is highly problematic and dangerous. The modus operandi of sanitising the past by physical destruction or removal of historical objects is dangerous. The protestors are insisting on being blind to the dangerous possibility of gross appropriation of this method. The method of “Rhodes must fall” can easily be appropriated for purposes quite opposite to that of the present movement. Consider a dangerous, but quite strong, possibility—following the logic of “Rhodes must fall,” the Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) may well demand further destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya built in the 16th century. For the “Rhodes must fall” activists the Rhodes’ statue is a symbol of racism and colonialism, for the RSS the Babri Masjid is a symbol of what they claim to be centuries of Islamic oppression of the Hindus. To the protestors in Oxford, Rhodes’ statue is a vulgar celebration of racism and colonialism; to the RSS the Babri mosque is a vulgar celebration of Muslim oppression of Hindus. The method, that is physical destruction of historical objects, is the same in both cases. The aim is seemingly different—in Oxford it is to fight racism and colonialism, in India it is to fight alleged “Islamic oppression.”

On a closer look, the difference lies only in the specificity of the aim, but the core of the aim is rather similar—to erase oppressive or allegedly “oppressive” past, to make the past comforting to our contemporary eyes as well as minds. This aim has already been realised through the method of physical destruction of past objects, resulting in horrific destructions drawing global condemnation—the RSS partially demolished the Babri Masjid in December 1992 causing Hindu-Muslim riots in many parts of India. The Talibans in Afghanistan tried to erase the so called “heretic” past by destroying ancient Buddha statues in Bamiyan in 2001, the Islamic State in Syria similarly destroyed art objects in Palmyra earlier in 2015.

Thus, supporting “Rhodes’ must fall” would mean giving up our moral and logical argument against such dreadful acts by the RSS, the Talibans, and the Islamic State, an argument which many would very much like to retain. And, retaining such argumentative weapon against the RSS and other organisations anywhere in the world requires an outright

# Economic & Political WEEKLY

---

ISSN (Online) - 2349-8846

dismissal of the method of physical destruction or removal of past objects. And, we must be uniform in dismissing such method. We cannot selectively dismiss that method, as selectivity would only allow subjective distortions to slip in.

The path to Rhodes' removal is a dangerous one, and some paths are better not to be treaded on. If we make the statue of Rhodes fall, it will bring down many others with it.