

Ireland and India

Kevin Hargaden is the Assistant Director of
the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice.



By Yann (talk) , Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/>

Gandhi during the Salt March, March 1930.

One of the saddest news stories to develop in Ireland this summer was the deep unrest among the Irish-Indian community at the hostility their members have begun to receive. A series of unprovoked attacks on Indian nationals and their children has left one of Ireland's largest and most established new communities unsure of their place in our society.

I sensed how bad things had become even before the headlines and the Minister for Justice's statement of support. In July I spoke with an Irish citizen, born in India, who has lived here for over forty years. He married,

bought a house, ran a business and raised three successful children – a pillar of his community. Yet he told me how, one morning on Pearse Street, a driver cut dangerously across him. When he beeped in alarm, the man leapt from his car, spat in his face and shouted a racial slur. After decades of hospitality, my acquaintance was left wondering if such disdain is more widely shared.

I felt deep shame listening to him. Ireland prides itself on its vast diaspora. We boast that we built Britain's houses, Australia's railways and America's skyscrapers. But our emigrants

often worked in brutal conditions for poor pay and faced hostility and prejudice. Now, when people come to fill the vital vacancies in our economy, they too can be treated with the same suspicion. What a scandal this is! And how important it is that we must stand in public solidarity with our newer neighbours.

But alongside lament and solidarity, it is a good time to remember the more specific story of how Indian and Irish people are entwined. Although separated by many thousands of kilometres, there are great bonds of connection already forged between our tiny nation and that complex sub-continent.

The obvious first point of contact is that we both suffered for centuries under British colonial rule. And this shared experience of trauma is something that the great heroes of both nations were keenly alert to. Gandhi often cited Daniel O'Connell as one of his chief inspirations as he fought, non-violently, for Indian independence.

While Christians in India are vastly outnumbered by Hindus, there are deep religious connections. For centuries, Irish missionaries have spent their lives in India. They have been teachers and nurses and servants in countless other ways. One thinks of the legendary Sr Loreto Houlihan, a Presentation sister who died in 2022, having spent more than 70 years teaching in India. Known as 'Sr India', she was beloved in Chennai for her remarkable presence in the classroom, her warm humour and the traditional soda bread she would cook in Indian ovens. But that long flow of Irish people going south is now reversed. Indian priests, sisters and deacons serve across the Irish Church. Indian doctors and nurses staff

Gandhi often cited Daniel O'Connell as one of his chief inspirations as he fought, non-violently, for Indian independence.

our hospitals. And no one involved in our universities can doubt that the Indian community in our country are doing their part to raise up a new generation of educated leaders.

Even this tradition is longstanding. One of India's presidents, V. V. Giri, studied law in UCD and later declared that 'when I am not an Indian, I am an Irishman.' He counted the revolutionary leader Thomas McDonagh among his teachers, but he also studied under a Jesuit, Thomas Finlay, famous as a social reformer. Giri was renowned through his political career for considering the needs of India's workers. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that this concern was born not just in an Irish university, but from the teaching of an Irish priest.

These connections remind us that India and Ireland have long been partners in different ways. For Christians, there is no stranger; everyone is a neighbour. The Bible teaches that the migrant in our land deserves special protection. Irish people once relied on a welcome extended by other nations. If we can now return that hospitality, it should be a great honour. In remembering the bonds, we already have with our newly arrived neighbours, we can strengthen our foundations for building tighter connections. We can help see love and welcome prevail over fear and hate.