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# The Death and Afterlife of Mahatma Gandhi

Makarand R. Paranjape



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# The Death and Afterlife of Mahatma Gandhi

Who is responsible for the Mahatma's death? Just one single, but determined, fanatic, the whole ideology of Hindu nationalism, the ruling Congress-led government which failed to protect him, or a vast majority of Indians and their descendants who consider Gandhi irrelevant? Such questions mean that Gandhi, even after his tragic and brutal death, continues to haunt India – perhaps more effectively in his afterlife than when he was alive.

*The Death and Afterlife of Mahatma Gandhi* is a groundbreaking and profound analysis of the assassination of the 'father of the nation' and its after-effects. Paranjape argues that such a catastrophic event during the very birth pangs of a new nation placed a huge burden of Oedipal guilt on Indians, and that this is the reason for the massive repression of the murder in India's political psyche. The enduring influence of Gandhi is analysed, including his spectral presence in Indian cinema. The book culminates in Paranjape's reading of Gandhi's last six months in Delhi, where, from the very edge of the grave, he wrought what was perhaps his greatest miracle, the saving of Delhi and thus of India itself from internecine bloodshed.

This evocative and moving meditation into the meaning of the Mahatma's death will be relevant to scholars of Indian political and cultural history, as well as those with an interest Gandhi and contemporary India.

**Makarand R. Paranjape** is Professor of English at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Among his latest monographs is *Making India: Colonialism, National Culture, and the Afterlife of Indian English Authority* (2012) and *Altered Destinations: Self, Society, and Nation in India* (2010). His previous work on Gandhi includes *Decolonization and Development: Hind Svaraj Revisited* (1993).

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**The Death and Afterlife of Mahatma Gandhi**

*Makarand R. Paranjape*

# **The Death and Afterlife of Mahatma Gandhi**

**Makarand R. Paranjape**

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**For Ursula:**

**“And we may find, when all the rest has failed, hid in ourselves  
the key of perfect change.”**

**-Sri Aurobindo**

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In the Winter Semester of 2010 I taught an M.A. course on Gandhi at the Centre for English Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. It was in this course that I understood the overwhelming question that no official history of Gandhi or India was willing to acknowledge, namely, what the murder of the Mahatma really meant to Indians, especially Hindus. I believe that no understanding of contemporary India or Hinduism can be complete without addressing this question of the killing of Gandhi. No attempt to exalt, fetishize, or memorialize Gandhi can ever deny or cover up the great disturbance and unresolved shock that this event produced. Instead of trying to forget or deny or displace this distress, we need to come to terms with it and realize its truly transformative potential. Only then can the twin birth traumas of the sub-continent – the Partition and Gandhi's assassination – be healed. My gratitude for the students of that class must be therefore be recorded; it is they who made this project not just possible, but inevitable. Prayag Ray, who was not in JNU at that time, stepped in after the manuscript was written to copy-edit and proof-read it. His inputs are greatly valued. I am also thankful, once again, to my colleagues and staff at the Centre for English Studies, JNU, for their continued support. I live and work on the campus of this university, in the capital of India. What JNU means to me is so much more than my livelihood; it is my very life.

28 March 2014

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**Part I**

**Birth traumas of the nation**

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# 1 Who killed Gandhi?

A book on the persistence of Mahatma Gandhi may well begin with trying to make sense of his death. His death, or rather assassination, marks the point of transition between his life and *afterlife*. Ultimately, it is with the latter that I shall be more concerned here. After all, a Mahatma, or great spirit, may actually be defined as someone whose afterlife is greater than his life. But to break out into that vastness, the actual event of transition is crucial. In this context, that event is Gandhi's death, which is the subject of this book. I use the word 'event' in an Eriksonian way, as a key occurrence that helps us unlock a larger story. In his influential and inspired study, *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence*, Erik Erikson shows us the need to retell Gandhi's story from alternative perspectives: 'a presence such as Gandhi's, in order to remain alive or indeed to become alive for mankind beyond India, must be retold in terms of a new age' (1969: 64). That is why a study of the murder of the Mahatma, which was nothing less than a catastrophe for a nation newly independent, marks a convenient, almost statutory point of departure. Just as his life was far from the ordinary, the Mahatma's death too was stunning.

While Erikson himself warns against the danger of 'traumatology' in its all-too-predictable application to the life of a great man, it might still be useful to examine the trauma of Gandhi's murder on the life of an infant nation. The purpose of such an exercise would be

to discern not only origins but traumatic ones at that – trauma meaning an experience characterized by impressions so sudden, or so powerful, or strange that they cannot be assimilated at the time and, therefore, persist from stage to stage as a foreign body seeking outlet or absorption and imposing on all development a certain irritation causing stereotypy and repetitiveness.

(Erikson 1969: 98)

Without succumbing entirely to the dangers of either 'originology' or 'traumatology', the meaning and aftershocks of the slaying of the 'Father of the Nation'<sup>1</sup> may still be fruitfully examined, especially because, as I shall show later, a satisfactory understanding of Gandhi's death still eludes us.

#### 4 *Birth traumas of the nation*

When it comes to his life rather than his death, Gandhi's is one of the most well-documented of any that we know, with his *Collected Works* extending into nearly a hundred large volumes, not to mention the scores of biographical and historical books written on him besides. What is, perhaps, not equally well known is that his assassination, too, has been more closely examined than that of almost any other great man's.<sup>2</sup> Apart from the dozens of accounts and interpretations that are available, it was studied and documented by the Commission of Inquiry appointed by the Government of India and headed by the Justice Jeevan Lal Kapur Commission, whose six-volume report was published in 1970.

On the one hand, the Kapur Commission Report, invaluable as it is, attempts only to examine the killing of Gandhi, notably whether there was a larger conspiracy behind it than the one hatched by the motley, almost gormless bunch that carried out the deed and was convicted for it. I am more interested, on the other hand, in the fuller ramifications of his death rather than the mere details and circumstances of his murder. What did Gandhi die for? What, moreover, is the significance of his death? Why is it still so crucial to understand it? The answers to such questions are critical if we wish to form an appropriate estimate not only of his life, but of the life history of the nation that he was instrumental in bringing into being. In trying to address these questions, we must, of course, also engage with the one that most commentators have asked, namely, 'Who killed Gandhi? Who was responsible for his murder?' But the larger concern, with the *meaning* of Gandhi's death, with its psycho-political implications for India and its people, is more demanding of our attention than merely the criminal conspiracy to assassinate him.

As a matter of fact, to all appearances, the question 'Who killed Gandhi?' is easily answered: Gandhi was killed by Nathuram Godse, a misguided Hindu activist, as the 'official histories' of the event would put it. However, were matters as simple as that? That there was a criminal conspiracy in which a larger number of people were involved was fairly obvious even at that time. Several other conspirators, in addition to the main accused, were therefore charged and tried. But as Justice Kapur unearthed in his re-examination of the evidence and by recalling the available witnesses, the conspiracy to kill Gandhi was much wider than previously suspected. Robert Payne in *The Life and Death of Mahatma Gandhi* observes, 'The attentive reader of the voluminous trial reports soon finds himself haunted by the certainty that many others who never stood trial were involved in the conspiracy' (1969: 646). Moreover, the persistence of the ideology that resulted in the Mahatma's murder, its conspicuous presence in our midst especially on the World Wide Web, and its championing by a section of one of India's leading political parties, to say the least, enlarges the circle of responsibility. Clearly Gandhi was not killed by a single individual. The individual was perhaps just an agent of history, but behind his murderous act were larger historical, political, and ideological forces.

Such a line of thinking, nevertheless, would appear to restrict the agency in Gandhi's assassination to a particular political group if not to one individual; but is the imposition of such a limit admissible? We know for instance that the

Government was quite well aware of the conspiracy to kill Gandhi; in fact the killers had botched up a bomb-attempt on Gandhi's life at the same venue, Birla House, just ten days earlier, on 20 January 1948. Of the team of assassins, Madanlal Pahwa, the latest recruit and weakest link, actually an angry and restive refugee from the just-created Pakistan, was caught by the police. He not only led the investigators to the Marina Hotel in Connaught Circus where Godse had stayed, but warned them that he would be back, with the ominous prediction, '*Phir ayega*' – he will come again. Between Pahwa's capture and the actual murder committed by the very same group a few days later is the story of an incompetent and messed-up police investigation, with gaps in communication, delays, misunderstandings, and erroneous conclusions, not to mention the stand-off between the Delhi and the Bombay police.

The story of this tragic bungling that cost the country its Mahatma has been documented in great detail by the Kapur Commission report and retold with the narrative verve of a thriller by Manohar Malgonkar. Surely, then, the Union Government led by Gandhi's chosen heir Jawaharlal Nehru, with Vallabhbhai Patel, so devoted to Gandhi as the Home Minister, not to speak of the Congress Government in Maharashtra, whose Deputy Premier, Morarji Desai, another of Gandhi's disciples and later to be India's Prime Minister, was directly involved in the investigation, are also responsible for being unable to prevent the Mahatma's murder.

Indeed, Government had been aware for some time of the threat to Gandhi's life. Several refugees from Pakistan, who had lost home and hearth, whose loved ones had been raped, kidnapped and murdered, had been enraged, shouting anti-Gandhi slogans, such as '*Mahatma Gandhi murdabad*' ('death to Mahatma Gandhi'), or if it is not taken literally, 'down with Mahatma Gandhi') outside his prayer meetings. One of these slogans, as reported by Manohar Malgonkar was, '*Gandhi ko marne do, hum ko makan do*' ('As to Gandhi, let him die; as to us, give us homes') (1978; 2008: 143); another one was '*Marta hai to marne do! Khoon ka badla khoon se!*' ('If he so wishes let him die, what we want is blood for blood') (ibid.: 155). With a section of the public so angry and with credible intelligence of a threat to the Mahatma's life, why had the Home Ministry failed to prevent the second and, this time, successful attempt on his life within the space of ten days? Despite Madanlal's arrest, despite Dr Jain's warning to the Bombay Government, despite the failed assassination attempt on 20 January 1948 at Birla House itself, the police did very little to beef up Gandhi's security, let alone to foil the plot.<sup>3</sup> According to Robert Payne, the total extent of the police *bandobast* (arrangement) at Birla House was only on assistant sub-inspector, two head constables, and sixteen foot constables (1969: 572); clearly insufficient to keep at bay the throngs of slogan-shouting refugees outside or to watch over the milling crowds inside. Gandhi, whether he or Government knew it or not, was a sitting duck – or, if we were to be more metaphorically generous to his exalted status, *paramahansa*.<sup>4</sup>

I am not suggesting that Patel or Desai were deliberately negligent in allowing Gandhi to die, but surely they are liable to bear some responsibility for the event. Worse, the complicity of the entire Congress Party in the Mahatma's

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neglect cannot be denied. After all, Gandhi's last will and testament, written the night before his assassination, actually called for the dissolution of Congress as a political organization:

Though split into two, India having attained political independence through means devised by the Indian National Congress, the Congress in its present shape and form, i.e., as a propaganda vehicle and parliamentary machine, has outlived its use... For these and other similar reasons, the A.I.C.C. resolves to disband the existing Congress organization and flower into a Lok Sevak Sangh.

(Gandhi 1999, Vol. 98: 333)

So intent was he on finishing this new 'constitution' – though it was more a dissolution – of the Congress that he told Pyarelal the previous day, 'My head is reeling. And yet I must finish this', and to Abha, his young assistant, he remarked, 'I am afraid I shall have to keep late hours' (ibid.: 334). This 'constitution' was published as his 'Last Will and Testament' in the *Harijan* of 15 February 1948, a fortnight after his death. In it, instead of enjoying the spoils of office, Congress workers were enjoined by Gandhi to fan out into the countryside and become a vast volunteer corps which would, in effect, serve as a comprehensive peoples' self-help network, almost an alternative government. Surely Gandhi's attempt to snatch away the rewards of power and pelf from Congressmen, just when they had started relishing such benefits, would have dismayed if not angered most Congressmen. That this was his considered opinion is evident from earlier remarks in this vein. For instance in a fragment of a letter written from Birla House on 14 November 1947, he said:

My suggestion is that, in so far as the Congress was intended solely to achieve swaraj and that purpose has been gained – personally I do not think that what we have gained is swaraj but at least it is so in name – this organization should be wound up and we should put to use all the energies of the country.

(Gandhi 1999, Vol. 97: 310)

In addition, Gandhi's demand for the repatriation of 55 crore rupees which was Pakistan's share of the exchequer would have nettled the Congress government as it incensed his right wing opponents; some of the former would have liked to use it as a handle to rein in Pakistan's aggression in Kashmir, while most of the latter considered it the last nail in Gandhi's coffin, proving beyond a doubt his continuing partiality to the newly created Muslim state. Gandhi, old and feeble though he may have been, was surely a thorn in the side of the Congress establishment. As early as 1946, the Congress Working Committee had at his own insistence chosen to bypass him, if necessary, in the most vital of decisions pertaining to Partition and the future of India. After 15 August 1947 his irrelevance would have been all the more obvious to the Congress rank and file. That is why

I would hazard to argue that though Godse pulled the trigger and a larger group of Hindu nationalists cheered his act, many more people, including a sizeable section of the Congress party, cannot be totally absolved of their liability in the crime. They may not have wanted Gandhi dead, they would certainly not have tried to murder him, but by marginalizing and bypassing Gandhi they had all but 'killed' him symbolically. Gandhi himself said to an unnamed correspondent on 18 December 1947, one-and-a-half months before he was assassinated:

I know that today I irritate everyone. How can I believe that I alone am right and all others are wrong? What irks me is that people deceive me. They should tell me frankly that I have become old, that I am no longer of any use and that I should not be in their way. If they thus openly repudiate me I shall not be pained in the least.

(Gandhi 1999, Vol. 98: 72)

But had Gandhi really lost the plot or was he the only one still thinking clearly in these terrible times? In the same letter he says to his correspondent, 'seeing all this, people like you should take pity on an old man like me and pray to God to take me away', (ibid.) a wish he repeated very often in his last days. The violence and carnage around him was so intolerable to him that he would rather die than watch helplessly; or, if he remained alive, God should give him the strength to make a difference, something he tried to do until his dying day.

Whatever the case may be, his death, if not often wished for and actually invited upon himself, was certainly preventable. Payne observes wryly,

So Gandhi died, and there was no comfort in the knowledge that his death could have been prevented. In the eyes of too many officials, he was an old man who had outlived his usefulness: he had become expendable. By negligence, by indifference, by deliberate desire on the part of many faceless people, the assassination had been accomplished. It was a new kind of murder – the permissive assassination, and there may be many more in the future.

(1969: 647)

Tushar Gandhi, the Mahatma's grandson, who wrote a very long book on this subject, is even blunter:

The Congress government and at least some of the members of the Cabinet were fed up of the interventions of the meddling old man. To them, a martyred Mahatma would be easier to live with... The way the investigation was carried out, and the lackadaisical approach of the police in trying to protect Gandhi's life, leads one to believe that the investigation was meant to hide more than it was meant to reveal. The measures taken by the police between 20th and 30th January 1948 were more to ensure the smooth progress of the murderers, than to try to prevent his murder.

(T. Gandhi 2007: xvii–xviii)

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That Gandhi was inconvenient is obvious: he had not only urged the disbanding of the Congress in his 'last will and testament', but he had opposed the Partition, threatened to walk across the border into Pakistan, asked for the Viceregal Palace to be turned into a hospital, and, of course, been conspicuous by his absence at the midnight hour when India kept its 'tryst with destiny', with Jawaharlal Nehru sworn in as the first Prime Minister.

By a similar method we can widen the circle of responsibility of Gandhi's death to a much larger section of Indian people, including those whose rights he fought for, such as the dalits, the Muslims, the women of India, and ultimately even the Hindus whose leader he was according to Muslim separatists – thus amounting to millions and millions of Indians – all of whom turned their backs on him over a period of time. To that extent were not all of these groups responsible to varying degrees for his real and metaphorical assassination? Arguably this is the line of argument that a popular commercial movie such as *Hey Ram* ends up taking. The protagonist, unlike Nathuram Godse, is actually one of us, the so-called normal middle-class Hindu, who comes precariously close to murderous rage and violence before being pulled back into a safer, wholesome, 'secularist' position. *Hey Ram* seems to suggest that there is a Gandhi-killer lurking in the deeper folds of the psyche of the average Hindu. Or, according to the more sophisticated analysis of political psychologist Ashis Nandy, the 'real' killers of Gandhi were

the anxiety-ridden, insecure, traditional elite concentrated in the urbanized, educated, partly Westernized, tertiary sector whose meaning of life Gandhian politics was taking away. Gandhi often talked about the heartlessness of the Indian literati. He paid with his life for that awareness.

(Nandy 1990: 87)

Who really killed Gandhi? Are we not, all of us, in one way or another, responsible for his death? Jawaharlal Nehru, Gandhi's chosen heir and successor admitted as much when he said, in speech at Jalandhar on 24 February 1948, 'We are all responsible for this unprecedented tragedy' (Nehru and Gopal 1988: 63) and 'It is a disgrace that [the] people of India could not save Mahatma Gandhi' (ibid.: 65).

## Notes

1 Incidentally, such a title was used by Gandhi himself for Dadabhai Naoroji; see *Hind Swaraj* 20. The Reader asks the Editor, 'What has he whom you consider to be the Father of the Nation done for it?' The Editor replies,

I must tell you, with all gentleness, that it must be a matter of shame for us that you should speak about that great man in terms of disrespect. Just look at his work. He has dedicated his life to the service of India. We have learned what we know from him. It was the respected Dadabhai who taught us that the English had sucked our life-blood. What does it matter that, today, his trust is still in the English nation? Is Dadabhai less to be honoured because, in the exuberance of

youth, we are prepared to go a step further? Are we, on that account, wiser than he? It is a mark of wisdom not to kick away the very step from which we have risen higher . . . Such is the case with the Grand Old Man of India. We must admit that he is the author of nationalism.

(Gandhi 1999, Vol. 10: 248–249)

- 2 The growing interest in Gandhi's death is evident in recent works such as *Speaking of Gandhi's Death* in which a group of scholars, carefully selected from the left-liberal spectrum, congregated at Sabarmati Ashram to reflect on Mahatma's demise.
- 3 Dr Jagdish Chandra Jain, an Indologist and Jain scholar, warned the then Home Minister of Bombay, Morarji Desai, of the plan to murder Gandhi. Dr Jain had learned this from Madanlal Pahwa, a refugee from the newly formed Pakistan and one of the conspirators. Government, however, did not follow up effectively on Dr Jain's warnings. After the murder, Dr Jain became one of the key witnesses in the trial, appearing on behalf of the prosecution. See *I Could Not Save Bapu* (1949) for a fuller account.
- 4 Or 'the supreme swan', an appellation for self-realized souls.