

Speaking of Gandhi's Death

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Tridip Suhrud and Peter Ronald de Souza (Eds.) (2010). Speaking Of Gandhi's Death. New Delhi & Shimla: Co-published by Orient Blackswan and Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Price: Rs. 350, Pages 147, ISBN: 9788125040385.

In the evening hours of January 30 1948, Gandhi was leading for an outdoor prayer meeting for peace. When he arrived people cleared a path for him, without warning, a young man rushed from the crowd pulling out a pistol and fired three shots. As he stopped the bullets in their path of hate, he uttered the name of Rama. Within minutes he was dead. Incidentally, his watch stopped at the exact moment of the assassination. 'The light has gone out of our lives and there is darkness everywhere,' so announced Jawaharlal Nehru.

One comes across a host of books that deal with the life and thought of M.K. Gandhi but it is rare and refreshing to find a book that tries to capture the meaning and message of Gandhi's death. Speaking of Gandhi's Death is such an unusual work.

In March of 1948, a group of Gandhi's associates like Nehru, Vinobha Bhave, Kripalani, Moulana Azad and Jayaprakash Narayan met at Sevagram to reflect and deliberate on Gandhi's assassination. Almost like a sequel to that meeting, sixty years later, on 30 January 2008, Indian Institute of Advanced Study gathered a group of scholars, thinkers and writers at Sabarmati Ashram to once again reflect on Gandhi's death. Speaking of Gandhi's Death is an outcome of that introspection. The book tries to relive Gandhi's death, literally and metaphorically. It seeks responses to two themes: what was the significance of Gandhi's assassination and what did his absence mean to the contemporary times. Since the collection includes voices of both the converted and unpersuaded, it brings forth contrasting positions on the topics. It offers not only new interpretations but also explores the deep crevasses of the mind of one of the greatest men.

Decoding the philosophical, political, historical and civilizational meanings of the event, the book raises questions like what is to speak of Gandhi's death. How do we understand the meaning of his assassination? How did the new nation comprehend the nature of his

absence? In what way his death can be seen as a continuation of his life and in what way it is a break? Did his death burden us forever or did it allow the nation and the state to explore new directions?

There are poignant descriptions about the moment of Gandhi's death in the book. When the news of death was announced a hushed silence spread across the nation, across villages and towns. It was a silence of loss, of guilt, of despair, of deep metaphysical uncertainty.

Talking about the meaning of Gandhi's death, Ashis Nandy says Gandhi is a *mrityunjaya*-triumphant over death-he used his death to gain a victory (not an *amar-immortal* as in Indian epics) which he could not have won in life. Gandhi continues to live as a socio-political force (p.3). In that sense Godse was an accomplice, a collaborator. Both of them projected two ideas of India and the choice is given to all of us. Gandhi and Godse are a potentiality in each of us. Rukmini Bhaya-Nayar thinks the death rendered the country mute and pushed his conscious thought and influence into the subconscious of the nation (p.20). Tridip Suhrud says it was *iccha mrityu*, a death that he had desired and willed (p.133). His striving was to meet death with the name of Rama on his lips. He had expressed his desire to give one final proof of his striving to see God face to face. He wanted a demonstration of his faith with such finality as he sought to heal himself and the country which was in the grip of an unprecedented orgy of violence. A final demonstration of *ahimsa*, of total submission to Rama, he hoped, would cure the country of the disease.

Looking at Gandhi's assassination, D.L. Sheth feels that his death was a disjuncture that extinguished a possibility that was alive. If Gandhi was a revolution, then what happened after revolution could be seen as a kind of counter-revolution, a capture of power by the English-educated, upper-caste, urban elite taking that

thing. He would have recreated a mass movement which might have India on a different course (p.56).

In their observation, Sudhir Chandra and Vidyut Joshi feel that Gandhi's assassination and death are intertwined. He was dead long before his assassination (p.44-45). For at least a few years before his assassination, the congress and its leadership particularly Nehru had turned away from Gandhi. He was alone and lonely with a 'cry in the wilderness'. So, speaking of the death of the physical body would be something different from understanding the real assassination.

As it can be seen, the concept of death acquires different resonance across the authors. It is not detailing the semantics of death but to deliberate how is meaning located in and through a system of absences and disappearances. Next, the anthology engages the issue of what Gandhi's absence means or what his presence would have meant.

Delineating some of the direct consequences of assassination, Partha Chatterjee says, assassination in some ways actually put a stop, for the time-being, to further communal conflicts. Hindu right wing variety of politics actually came under a cloud for a while. (p.70) Given the fact that there was a time Gandhi desired to live for 125 years, Chatterjee uses counter-factual approach and extrapolates the areas in which Gandhi's historical counter-factual presence would have made a difference and the areas which Gandhi would have played a critical and even oppositional role even to the Indian state.

According to Sujata Patel, Gandhi's presence can be felt as someone who brought in a 'mode of reflectivity' - the way to think about oneself, to reflect and reflectively reflect on the present as it bridges the past and the future (p.100). Contrary to the perception that Gandhian Constitution is an alternative to the Indian Constitution, Thomas Pantham says that Gandhi continues to be present through his mass 'demos' to the parliamentary liberal secular democratic Republic (p.108). It was he who brought in the mass movement and played a father's role in pre-constitutionalization and the social construction of the nation. G.N. Devy believes Gandhi is a myth. India never allows myths to die anytime (p.103). Sadanand Menon says after his consecration as 'Bapu', Gandhi lived that life (p.111).

The true nature of Gandhi's absence lies in the lack of quest for self-purification. Whenever darkness enveloped him and he groped for light, Gandhi waited upon inner voice and sought its unfailing guidance. When we refer to the absence of Gandhi, we refer to the void that is created by our inability and unwillingness to hear our own inner voice, says Tridip Suvrud quoting Vinobha Bhave(p.122).

The reflections portray nuanced understanding regarding the presence, absence and memory of Gandhi. All the scholars agree that Gandhi remains frozen in the historical context and time and there is a compelling need to re-interpret Gandhi and re-radicalize him in our context on a daily basis. This points to the need to forget him as an icon so that we can remember him and look at him on that borderline between the death of a man and the birth of a new nation.

Though the work is primarily aimed at ferreting out the meaning of assassination and absence of Gandhi, it often slips into the discussion of the relevance or irrelevance of Gandhi and his philosophy. It may be because of the nature of themes chosen for deliberations, as observed by Peter Ronald deSouza, one of the editors, in his prologue. While bringing together the reflections, in all their hesitation and tentativeness, many speakers liberally employed counter-factual arguments while estimating the outcome of some important historical events. Of course, one can level the standard critique against counter-factual method as based on speculation, in this case also.

The deliberations subtly border on the moral and metaphysical realm which runs like an interconnecting undercurrent throughout the chapters. The book provides fascinating insights into the hitherto unknown episodes of national history, sociology and polity while it consistently throws up normative issues to ponder. A lucid intervention in the form of prologue and afterword by the editors provide enormous depth and heart to the work.

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