

A Tale of Two Murders : Yitzhak Rabin and Mahatma Gandhi

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When Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was murdered in protest against his peace efforts, many parallels were offered by commentators, most frequently with the Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat, but also with Indian Prime Ministers Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi. However, if we look for parallels in India, the closest parallel is not with these Government leaders. Indira and Rajiv were killed not for any peace efforts but for their military actions: against the Khalistani separatists and against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, respectively. Unlike Rabin and Sadat, they were not killed by radical members of their own community, but by Sikh bodyguards and by a female Christian Tamil suicide bomber, respectively.

Mahatma Gandhi, by contrast, was killed for the very same reason as Yitzhak Rabin: he had conceded "land for peace". When the Great Calcutta Killing of 1946 made clear that the forces bent on creating a separate state of Pakistan would stop at nothing to achieve their goal, Mahatma Gandhi and most Congress leaders were intimidated into accepting that the Partition of India was the lesser evil, the only alternative being bloodshed of (what we now would call) the Yugoslav type, but on a much larger scale. So, they conceded that against which they had been fighting and scheming for the past decade: the division of India into a theocratic Pakistan and a pluralistic remainder-India.

The murderer's motives

Like Rabin, Mahatma Gandhi was murdered by a diehard belonging to his own community. Like Rabin for the Jewish state, Gandhi had rendered sterling services to Hindu society, which commanded his first and foremost loyalty. Rabin's murderer had been a great admirer of Rabin in his earlier phase, viz. as the general who conquered much of what are now called the "occupied territories". Gandhi's murderer, Nathuram Godse, had been a follower of Gandhi in many respects, e.g. he was very active in organizing inter-caste activities involving the Untouchables. But he had come to decide that in 1947-48, like Rabin in recent years, the Mahatma had betrayed everything he had stood for. Indeed, Gandhi had declared that Pakistan would only be created "over my dead body", but when the hour came, the champion of fasts unto death did not try this pressure tactic to force Mohammed Ali Jinnah, leader of the Pakistan movement, to abandon his demand for Partition. Millions of people, mostly Hindus and Sikhs in West Panjab and East Bengal, felt confident that Partition would not take place because the Mahatma gave them that assurance; and they felt betrayed when he threw them to the wolves.

Nathuram Godse worked in the relief operations for Hindu-Sikh refugees from Pakistan, many of whom had been raped or maimed or had lost relatives, and he held Gandhi responsible for their plight on two counts. Firstly, Gandhi could have prevented Partition, or at least staked his life in an attempt to do so; this he failed to do, probably because he knew that Jinnah would not give in. This failure also cast a shadow over the earlier occasions when he had staked his life to pressure people into doing his bidding: it now seemed that he had only used this tactic with people who could be counted upon to give

in, so that there had never been any real risk of having to fast unto actual death.

Secondly, even after conceding Partition, a lot of bloodshed could have been averted by means of an orderly exchange of population, as advocated by the lucid and realistic Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, free India's first Law Minister: all Muslims to Pakistan, all non-Muslims to India. At the time, neutral British troops were still around to oversee such an orderly migration, and the psychological climate was ready for this lesser-evil solution. Instead, Gandhi and his appointee as Congress leader, Jawaharlal Nehru, refused to countenance this bloodless solution out of attachment to the multiculturalist ideal. The result was that a spontaneous partial exchange of population took place anyway, but under much worse circumstances: nearly a million people were killed. For an apostle of non-violence, this was indeed a disappointing *fin-de-carrière*.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can only conclude that this second criticism is entirely justified. In India, the Hindu-Muslim riots which were a regular feature of pre-Independence India have resumed (though they have abated somewhat after the 1992 Ayodhya demolition and the subsequent riot wave). In Pakistan, the situation is much worse: the non-Muslim minorities are being terrorized and squeezed out, and in 1971, the Pakistani army killed perhaps as many as two million Hindus in East Bengal, the biggest genocide after World War 2. In total, more than three million people (only counting the mortal victims, not the far more numerous refugees) would have been saved if the Indian leaders in 1947 had had the wisdom to settle for the lesser evil of an exchange of population.

By contrast, the first criticism, the one uppermost in Godse's mind, is less justified. It is unfair to blame the Mahatma for the Partition, considering that most other Congress leaders had endorsed the very policies which had led to the Partition, along with the Mahatma or even before his rise to power (e.g. the 1916 Lucknow Pact signed by Bal Gangadhar Tilak, which conceded the principle of communal electorates). The Mahatma's failure was in fact the failure of Hindu society as a whole. But in the charged post-Partition atmosphere, he was made to bear most of the responsibility, and forgotten were the sterling services he had rendered to his people.

The final straw after which Godse "could not tolerate this man to live any longer", was Gandhi's "fast unto death" to force the Indian Government to pay 550 million Rupees to Pakistan, and to force the Hindu and Sikh refugees in Delhi to vacate the abandoned mosques and Muslim homes where they had found shelter (this was mid-winter 1947-48, temperature close to freezing). The money was Pakistan's fair share of British India's treasury, but it was nonetheless a strange and unique event to see one country pay such a sum of money to a country which had just invaded it: Pakistani troops were occupying a large part of Kashmir (which had by then legally acceded to India), where they exterminated the entire non-Muslim population. This moral statement, that certain fairness standards are to be maintained even in wartime, was too much for Godse and a few companions. On 30 January 1948, he shot the Mahatma at the beginning of his evening prayer-meeting in Birla House, Delhi.

Reaction of the public

Both Rabin's and Gandhi's murderers represented an informal group or "conspiracy", which in both cases included the murderer's brother. Nathuram's brother, Gopal Godse, is still alive and, like Rabin's murderer, is still unrepentant: every year on the anniversary

of the day when Nathuram was hanged (15 November 1949), he and other Nathuram fans gather at the family house in Pune to commemorate "Nathuram Godse's martyrdom".

After the murder, Nathuram also enjoyed a certain popularity among the refugees, particularly the women, who had borne the brunt of the Partition atrocities. But on the whole, the population was angry with him, just like most Israelis are with Rabin's murderer and his supporters. There is, however, an important difference between the two murders in the reaction of the masses.

In Israel, no revenge has been wrought upon the Jewish fundamentalists by Rabin supporters: Jews kept their cool and refused to compound this one inter-Jewish murder with a wave of revenge murders. In India, by contrast, the murder of the Mahatma was followed by a wave of violence against the Hindu Mahasabha, the party to which Godse belonged, even though the judicial enquiry later revealed that the party as such had not been involved in the conspiracy. Worse, numerous people were molested and some of them killed by Gandhi supporters for no other crime than belonging to the same (Chitpavan Brahmin) caste as Godse, a wave of violence comparable to the 1984 anti-Sikh violence in Delhi by Congress activists after Indira's murder.

Political consequences

It is too early to compare the long-term political fall-out of the two murders. My hunch is that after the dust has settled, Rabin's murder will have only a limited effect on Israeli policy: Israeli policy-makers including Rabin have always been led by sober calculations of national interest, sometimes justifying war and sometimes encouraging the "peace process". The anger of public opinion against Jewish fundamentalists will not fundamentally alter this approach, most of all because public opinion itself is not tempted to go to the opposite extreme, viz. to abandon all concerns for national security in favour of a purely moralistic and pacifistic stand. In India, by contrast, policy is to a large extent dictated by the contrived hysteria generated by the chattering classes in their sloganeering sessions (e.g. the "anti-imperialism" and "peace" slogans of the 1950s providing the music to Nehru's foolish foreign policy, which sacrificed Tibet and invited a Chinese invasion), and the masses are easily swayed from one extreme to another. This way, a single murder changed India's political landscape completely.

First of all, it prevented the rise to prominence of the Hindu Mahasabha and other pro-Hindu forces (including the National Volunteer Association or RSS, which was not involved in the murder but got banned nonetheless). After Congress had betrayed its own 1946 election promise of not allowing the Partition of the Motherland, the stage was set for a breakthrough of the Hindu parties; after the murder, they were marginalized and their breakthrough got postponed until 1989. Even the millions of refugees from Pakistan did not join them in sizable numbers (e.g. in West Bengal they became the backbone of the Communist Party, even though the latter had supported the Partition).

Secondly, and ironically, the murder revived the Mahatma's own fortunes. It is insufficiently realized today that just after the Partition, Gandhi was discredited and demoralized. He regained some credibility after his last "fast unto death" managed to make Hindu and Sikh refugees vacate Muslim property in Delhi, a feat which cooled communal tempers. But this could not remove the blot of the unprevented Partition from his name. It was his martyrdom which assured his place of honour in history.

The most important political effect of the Mahatma's murder for people who genuinely stand by the Gandhian ideals, was that it immensely strengthened the power position of Jawaharlal Nehru. Prime Minister Nehru and his westernized and Soviet-oriented clique killed Gandhiji a second time, viz. by thoroughly negating every single element in his vision of what free India should be like. They were implacable enemies of everything which Mahatma Gandhi had held dear: Hinduism of course, and religion in general, but also village autonomy, economic decentralization, simplicity of lifestyle, emphasis on personal morals rather than on socio-political structures, character-building rather than materialist consumerism, and grass-roots solutions for India's specific problems.

Gandhi's major claim to fame was that he, almost alone among the freedom leaders in the entire colonized world, had sought and developed policies and strategies rooted in native culture rather than borrowed from Western models (nationalism, socialism etc.); of this nativist orientation, nothing was retained in Nehru's politics. Thus, the Indian Constitution which was approved two years after Gandhi's death, was essentially an adaptation of the 1935 colonial Government of India Act; its format and philosophy contains almost no trace of specifically Indian cultural achievements and values. In this respect, the Hindu activists who opposed Gandhi's acceptance of Pakistan were much closer to him (and still are, cfr. the Gandhian writings of the late Ram Swarup and of Dattopant Thengadi), but the effect of the murder was that the only movement which might have implemented many of Gandhiji's projects was politically marginalized for decades.

This way, Gandhiji's death brought the death of Gandhism as a political factor in India. It strengthened the position of people who used his name but were objectively the worst enemies of everything he had stood for.