

## Learning from history

On January 30, 1948, at a time when northern and eastern India continued to be devastated by the horrors unleashed by the Partition, another appalling event rocked the newly independent and still fragile nation, the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. Detective novelists tell us that hapless people are murdered for mainly three reasons: greed, ambition and lust, not necessarily in that order. But Nathuram Godse of the Hindu Mahasabha assassinated Gandhi because the Mahatma stood for a world view implacably opposed to the hate-filled rhetoric of the religious right. Gandhi was a powerful moral exemplar — therefore, he posed a distinct threat to the dark forces of doom and destruction. He had to be removed physically.

An individual called Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was not murdered, an entire perspective committed to ahimsa, toleration, and respect for other religious traditions was sought to be obliterated. Ironically, his killers failed, because Gandhi continues to live in our hearts, he inhabits our imaginations. We continue to hold right-wing groups responsible for the death of a man who defied an empire as well as obscurantism within India.

Sixty-nine years down the line, Pankaj Phadnis has appealed that the Supreme Court reinvestigate the death of Gandhi, and holds that Gandhi was killed by a fourth bullet fired by someone else. His motive becomes clear the moment we recognise that Mr. Phadnis is a trustee of the organisation Abhinav Bharat, which is a part of the religious right. We also know that the complex of right-wing groups under the umbrella of the power wielded by the Bharatiya Janata Party seek to reduce the art of history writing to a tale told by knaves and fools on a stormy night. They labour in vain, for history does not go away at the wave of a wand, or by a PIL filed in a court of law. The past will sneak in on silent feet, relentlessly intrude into the present, and compel us to recollect murders and murderers most foul.

No country is more conscious of the persistence of the past than Germany. After the Second World War some German scholars spoke of the need to forget. The project was simply not doable, and soon enough intellectuals began to acknowledge the importance of coming to terms with the Holocaust. Theodor Adorno, the noted philosopher of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, spoke of the impossibility of writing poetry after Auschwitz, or philosophising after Auschwitz, or even living after Auschwitz. We cannot, he concluded, break free of the past. All we can do is to come to terms with the past. More importantly, we must learn to critically reflect on our failure to prevent groups which trade in social hatred from dominating the present. The renowned philosopher Jürgen Habermas continues the task of acknowledging the past, and learning from it. A refusal to address the past results in social pathologies.

Remember the past we must, but how do we remember history? How do we remember Gandhi, a man of whom Albert Einstein is said to have remarked that “generations to come, it may be, will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth”? For a long time, scholars did not write biographies of the man, they wrote hagiographies. Today it is acknowledged that he made mistakes, he seriously misunderstood caste discrimination, he went wrong in his debate with B.R. Ambedkar, he could be authoritarian, and he had peculiar ideas on crucial issues. But we also remember that Gandhi would rather suffer himself than impose suffering on others. When he walked the streets, he was regarded as the embodiment of non-violence. In contrast, when cadres of the religious right appear on our streets, they evoke trepidation. Confronted by threats of violence, people shiver, they run for cover. For the religious right nothing has changed since Gandhi was killed because of his world view. Indians continue to be murdered for the same reason — therefore, the murder of a Gauri Lankesh here, of a Narendra Dabholkar there, of a Govind Pansare here, and of an M.M. Kalburgi there.

How on earth does it matter who killed Gandhi? We are not reading a detective novel. Nor are we concentrating on discovering clues that will lead us to the murderer before our beloved detective, for example P.D. James's Adam Dalgliesh, does so. What matters is why Gandhi, and now other dissenters, are killed. Gandhi was killed because he defended an alternative notion of politics based on swaraj, non-violence, pursuit of the truth, and subordination of power to ethics. Putative assassins should recollect that there is a nasty phrase for those who prefer extermination of the opponent to debate, it is called moral cowardice.

What do we learn from two historical narratives, of violence and of non-violence? Violence is based upon the certainty that we know all there is to know, and that is why others who do not conform to our views have to be eliminated. Non-violence is based on the philosophical virtue of doubt. Socrates, who was condemned to drink hemlock by the Athenian jury, knew he did not know. Gandhi, who was assassinated, also knew that no one knows the truth. I, he wrote, have been striving to serve the truth and have the courage to jump from the Himalayas for its sake. But, he added, I know I am still very far from that truth: "As I advance towards it, I perceive my weakness ever more clearly and the knowledge makes me humble."

This does not mean that we stop searching for the truth. But we are seekers, not finders. We would do well to seek together. If persons have the moral capacity to know the truth, but not the entire truth, then no one person or group can claim superiority over others because their truth is the ultimate. We also realise that just as our (partial) truth is dear to us, others' (equally partial) truths are bound to be dear to them. There is simply no point in comparing world views, in grading them, or in pronouncing one conception of the good as superior to the other.

Gandhi himself was what he was, a great moral leader and a giver of remedies for the maladies of the human condition, because he drew inspiration from a variety of sources. His philosophy is indebted to four great spiritual and moral traditions: Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Christianity. Gandhian philosophy is constituted as much by the *Bhagavad Gita* as it is by the Sermon on the Mount. And he drew inspiration as much from Tolstoy and John Ruskin as much as he drew inspiration from Vivekananda and other spiritual leaders in India. Gandhi's truth led inexorably in the direction of toleration.

And it is precisely toleration that we need in today's world where dissent is suppressed through annihilation. This lesson, the religious right, indeed fundamentalists of every hue, need to learn. We do not tolerate others because we alone know the truth, we tolerate because we do not know enough. Confidence that we know the truth leads to violence, doubt that we know enough leads to non-violence. We come to terms with history by learning from it, not by erasing it.

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