* **Remembering Gandhi in Modi’s India**
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Nothing is so prized in politics as a short public memory. As India and the world mark the 150th birth anniversary of Gandhi, and world leaders ply us with the usual platitudes about the greatness of the Mahatma and his teachings, it’s extraordinary how anachronistic the man deified as the ‘Father of the nation’ has become in today’s India.

And those who have spent all their lives fighting and mocking his ideals and teachings see no irony in lining up to offer rich tributes to the great man and portraying themselves as his sincere followers.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been considerate enough to pen an opinion article for the ‘New York Times’ on the occasion. Irony of ironies, the same issue of the Times had on its front page a stunning image of distraught Kashmiri women, endlessly waiting for their loved ones – many of them young children – who were taken away by security forces.

As Nicholas Dawes of Human Rights Watch tweeted, “it takes some chutzpah to write a paean to (Gandhi’s) non-violent resistance when you’ve locked up and locked down so many elected Kashmiri leaders and ordinary citizens!”

The greatest irony of these perfunctory ceremonies is how the Mahatma has been successfully appropriated by the very forces that detested his worldview, collaborated with the British and eventually killed him.

Even as it continues to worship and defend Nathuram Godse and build shrines to him, the Hindu Right has successfully usurped Gandhi’s name and legacy. To top it all, it has the gall to pass off its crimes against Indian democracy and people as something noble and inspired by Gandhi’s philosophy.

The same dark forces that Gandhi fought tooth and nail, especially in his twilight years, until he fell to a Hindutva soldier’s bullets have captured the reins of the country for whose independence he dedicated his life and spent long years in prison.

If Gandhi were alive today, he would have been horrified at the state of the nation he led to freedom. Those who endlessly courted the colonial masters and sat out the freedom struggle have not just captured the reins of power, they are also doing everything to undo the historic achievements of the country as a vibrant democracy over the past seven decades.

Having carefully infiltrated and captured all national institutions and arms and levers of power over the years, the Right is out to dismantle the very republic and the idea of India as envisioned by India’s founding fathers and authors of its liberal, inclusive constitution.

Historian Manu S Pillai raises an interesting possibility in his new book, ‘The Courtesan, The Mahatma and the Italian Brahmin’, wondering how Gandhi would have reacted to today’s India and tragedies like the destruction of Babri Masjid, Kashmir and NRC if he had lived long enough. “He would have died of a shattered heart, in a country he no longer recognised”, the author answers his own question.

“If he had lived beyond 1948 he would probably have been disappointed with the nation he helped mould and bring together. This state may well have placed him under house arrest, as the British had before them. He may never have intended it, but he has become a mirror that shows the true form of people who stand before it. For all his weaknesses, Gandhi is a reminder of the moral imperative of truth in an age of untruth”, says Pillai.

Indeed, if the Mahatma had lived up to the impossibly ripe age of 125 or 150, he would have found it impossible to recognise the country he bequeathed to a new generation of leaders. He would have found himself hopelessly out of place in the ‘new India’ of Narendra Modi. Trump was hardly exaggerating. Modi is indeed the new ‘father of the nation,’ – and more – for the saffron faithful.

More important, how would Gandhi have responded to the challenges and threats facing India today? A life-long champion of Hindu-Muslim unity, how would he have responded to the challenge of Hindutva fascism and the open war it has declared on Muslims on every front?

What would Gandhi have done to help the hundreds of thousands of helpless, dispossessed Muslims of Assam who have been declared ‘illegal aliens’ overnight after living for generations in the country?

What would he have done to protect innocent Muslims who are being beaten to death and dragged like animals in the streets of the ‘new India’ in the name of the cow and other sacred absurdities?

How would Gandhi have dealt with the BJP’s brazen power grab in Kashmir and months-long siege of its eight million people? He would have launched a ‘satyagraha’ until the Kashmiris were set free, HS Doreswamy, a 101-year-old freedom fighter, told ‘The Hindu’ newspaper.

Himself an ardent believer in Hinduism, Gandhi believed that the Hindu-supremacist RSS militated against the ideals and values of a pluralist, secular democracy.

On November 15, 1947, three months after Partition, when Delhi and other major cities in north India were rocked by anti-Muslim violence, Gandhi implored Congress workers to “be true to the basic character of the Congress and make Hindus and Muslims one, for which ideal the Congress has worked for more than sixty years”.

Urging his followers to do all they could to make Muslims feel safe in India, he warned: “Violent rowdyism will not save either Hinduism or Sikhism.” He then added: “I hear many things about the RSS. I have heard it said that the Sangh is at the root of all this mischief. Let us not forget that public opinion is a far more potent force than a thousand swords. Hinduism cannot be saved by orgies of murder. You have to preserve this freedom. You can do so if you are humane and brave and ever-vigilant, or else a day will come when you will rue the folly which made this lovely prize slip from your hands.”

The next day, speaking at his prayer meeting, Gandhi noted that while religious polarisation was being furthered by the Muslim League, “there is also the Hindu Mahasabha assisted by members of the RSS who wish that all the Muslims should be driven away from the Indian Union”.

Then he travelled to Calcutta to help end the orgy of Hindu-Muslim violence in the East, ignoring the warnings of Nehru and Patel about threats to his life. The Mahatma didn’t die in Calcutta and managed to put out the blaze with his message of love. However, he eventually paid with his life for championing peace and religious harmony.

Those who plotted his assassination and have never apologised for it are no more the fringe that they were during Gandhi’s time. They are at the heart and centre of power in India, truly ruling the length and breadth of the country and transforming it into the Hindu Rashtra of their dreams. RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat declared it as much on the 150th anniversary of the Mahatma. The timing couldn’t have been better.

When Gandhi was gunned down in Delhi, on the way to a multi-faith prayer meet, he had been preparing to visit Pakistan to rescue the tattered Hindu-Muslim relations on the one hand and the India-Pakistan equation, on the other. Today, when relations between India and Pakistan as well as between the Subcontinent’s Hindus and Muslims are at their worst, Gandhi and his humane touch is sorely missed. But then I must be out of my mind to dream of Gandhi, in times of Modi.

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