

## Review

Paranjape, Makarand R. *The Death and Afterlife of Mahatma Gandhi*  
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Makarand Paranjape's book is divided into Part I and Part II, consisting of 15 chapters and 10 chapters respectively. Although not a slim volume, the book is not very long, consisting of about 215 pages. One of the key features of this book is its propensity for short chapters, suggesting greater coverage of his subject.

Paranjape's book deals with the death and, more specifically, the afterlife of Mahatma Gandhi, the effect his life and death have had, and not hesitating to take a personal trajectory with regard to them. As he states: "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 so crucial to understand it?" (pp.4)

From the very beginning it is evident that the author has read vastly on his subject, given the number of sources he is quoting from for various aspects of Gandhi's life. One would

think that Paranjape would follow in the footsteps of psychologist Erik Erikson who he says actually prompted him to undertake a study of Gandhi as his story "must be retold in terms of a new age" (pp.3) but he avoids that. The author launches into an attack on the Congress party, the dominant national parties in India after Independence, providing grounds also for the criticism through a full two pages of the book. Gandhi suggested disbanding the Congress after 1947 but it held on doggedly to power for three decades, many of India's ills traced to it. The book has an interesting premise and the beginning is dramatic, where he is leading up to the arguments as to who killed Gandhi. The language is lucid, and the arguments easy to follow though they are deeply thought out.

In the second chapter titled 'The Event' the author uses the present tense to perhaps make the assassination more dramatic and more poignant as well. This chapter too follows in the

style of the first – precise and to the point, with logical build-up of ideas. In ‘The memorialization’ personal reminiscences dot the chapter as Paranjape and his students visit the various places connected to Gandhi, or rather the memorials connected to him- “on our way back in the minibus a most interesting discussion ensues over what we have seen that day at Raj Ghat, Gandhi darshan, Gandhi museum, Gandhi peace foundation, and finally at Gandhi smriti.”(pp 30). The first one and half pages provide the reader with the history of the various memorials and is not just a litany of names but connect up with Gandhi interestingly.

An interesting aspect of this book is the author’s proclivity to use a number of quotations from thinkers, philosophers and critics to bolster his arguments. Paranjape slowly builds up to his main argument of Oedipus complex and critiques Ashish Nandy’s assessment of Gandhi’s murder as one undertaken by upper caste Hindus because Gandhi was dislodging their seat of power and Paranjape presents his own counter arguments in a succinct, precise manner. But this thesis is not as detached as it would seem as another personal note intervenes trying to right a wrong as the author himself belongs to the same caste denomination as the murder-accused Nathuram Godse. Paranjape states, “an entire community cannot, quite obviously, be attacked for the act of one individual.” (pp 36) Paranjape also criticizes noted Indian psychoanalyst Ashish Nandy’s conjecture on Gandhi’s implications for right-wing masculinity: “Gandhi’s constant emphasis on pacifism and self-control...posed a threat to the warrior cultures of India...by constantly stressing the feminine, nurturing, nonviolent aspects of men’s personality, he challenged the Kshatriya’s identity built on fear

of woman and of the cosmic feminine principles in nature.” (Pp 36).

The inclusion of the chapter ‘The unbearability of patricide’ adds colour to Paranjape’s narrative and makes it lively since otherwise, a sententious account of the mahatma’s murder may have become monotonous and boring. In the next chapter however Paranjape uses more quotations from Freud to prove his hypothesis but it makes for dense reading, while the next chapter displays the range of Paranjape’s scholarship and his considerable ability to carry forward the narrative but the erudition is perhaps overdone. He begins with in Western literature, particularly Greek and then moves to Hinduism but one wonders where it all leads to? What does the author hope to achieve through this chapter?

In the chapter titled ‘The guilt’ Paranjape writes about three pages of the various kinds of guilt as noted by Karl Jaspers, he gets to the point but again digresses. In a previous chapter Paranjape accuses Sarojini Naidu of using what he terms as “Biblical allusion and phraseology” (pp 59) but he himself is guilty of using so much of Western literature to discuss Gandhi. He also lumps Gandhi’s murder with the Holocaust which to my mind is not only farfetched but not substantiated adequately. The Holocaust and World War II affected millions of lives and hence Gandhi’s death, whatever its tragedy, cannot be compared to that.

Too many quotations dot the book which is perhaps one of the weaknesses of this otherwise thoughtful effort. But it is when Paranjape deals with the two films based on Gandhi’s life and philosophy – Attenborough’s *Gandhi* and Rajkumar Hirani’s *Lage Raho Munnabhai* - that he truly comes into his own. The Hindi film

*Lage Raho Munnabhai* is analysed in great detail, and perhaps Paranjape finds the film to be having greater interest than Attenborough's *Gandhi* and also perhaps finds it more relevant in today's world. 'Gandhism vs Gandhigiri is a rather longish chapter but nothing short of delightful to read. This chapter stands out; it comes imbued with a personal touch and displays the author's partiality towards the medium of cinema, despite a smaller display of erudition. The thrust in this chapter as in all chapters is to return to message the father of the nation held out to Indians.

There is a clear division between the two parts of the book. In the first half he establishes the methodology by which he will analyse Gandhi's death and afterlife and in the second half he chronicles the details of the last 133 days of Gandhi's life. There are typographical errors abounding, for instance the author uses the word 'bangal' instead of 'bangla'. There is also a chapter titled 'Partitioning women' and one wonders at first as to why the author would be adding a chapter titled in this way but then on a detailed reading it becomes obvious that Partition did have a great impact on women since they were made victims by both communities of Hindus and Muslims in a bid to outdo each other in terms of seeking retribution.

The book is subtle in parts and strident in others, loudly proclaiming Gandhi's philosophy or thoughts. Paranjape has a lot to say about

Gandhi and Hinduism but his optimism at Gandhi's message seems at times quite stretched, as for instance when he writes, "whatever might have happened in Pakistan, India remained the plural society that Gandhi insisted upon." (pp 172) but to invoke only cinema's portrayals, there are films like *Pinjar*, *Garam Hawa* and *Zubeidaa* that brings up this very issue and deal with it in great depth to say that there more problems than he admits; and again, "it would seem that the truce brokered by Gandhi between the two communities has still endured." But India has had an uneasy peace since the Partition and one must recall the 1992 riots and Bombay blasts that shattered this uneasy peace, and communalism once again reared its ugly head.

In spite of the many flaws what is commendable about this book is that not only does Paranjape present an interesting premise but also provides a succinct history of the subject. The book is a critical intervention in Gandhian studies but at the same time it does not add so much to the field, considering its vastness into account and how Gandhism as a subject has been belabored for political reasons. Perhaps the subject of Gandhi needs a fresh look, since much of what anyone says on the subject seems only to echo cliché. Till that happens, however, Paranjape's book remains a highly engaging and worthwhile read.