

The Assassination of Gandhi and the Manipulation of Historical Memory : An Analysis

By Anil Nauriya

Nearly a month after Mahatma Gandhi's assassination in India on 30 January 1948, Sardar Patel, the then Home Minister, wrote to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru on 27 February 1948 pointing to Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and his group: " It was a fanatical wing of the Hindu Mahasabha directly under Savarkar that [hatched] the conspiracy and saw it through." ⁱ At this time Patel made a distinction between the "fanatical wing of the Hindu Mahasabha directly under Savarkar" , which he held responsible for having hatched the conspiracy to assassinate Gandhi, and the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS), which he suggested was "not involved".

However, a few months later, on 18 July 1948, Patel wrote somewhat differently to his Cabinet colleague, Syama Prasad Mookerjee (1901-1953) a past President of the Hindu Mahasabha: "As regards the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha.... as a result of the activities of these two bodies , particularly the former, an atmosphere was created in the country in which such a ghastly tragedy became possible." ⁱⁱ Even in his February letter to Nehru, Patel had recorded that Gandhi's assassination was "welcomed by those of the RSS and the Mahasabha who were strongly opposed to his way of thinking and to his policy". In a letter dated 11 September 1948 to the RSS leader Golwalkar, Sardar Patel remonstrated with his addressee over the fact that "RSS men expressed joy and distributed sweets after Gandhiji's death." ⁱⁱⁱ

Thus there is enough material implicating the RSS and the Mahasabha, depending upon what level of actions in respect of the assassination are discussed. In some respects one entity is treated as more blameworthy than the other and in other respects the roles get reversed.

This exercise of alternating levels of blame attaching to the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha has continued virtually upto the present day. The interaction between these two streams, now together, now apart, their aspiration for ascendancy and influence in India after independence and their representations of their own and the country's history have been an important aspect of Indian politics

since 1947. On various occasions, the two sectarian streams seemed to draw apart. In late 1951 Syama Prasad Mookerjee, a past president of the Mahasabha formed the RSS-backed Bharatiya Jan Sangh (BJS), ostensibly because the Mahasabha was not willing to open up its membership to all citizens irrespective of religion. In April 1980 the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was founded, having been resuscitated from the erstwhile BJS. The BJP sought to refashion its historical memories by defining itself as being committed to Gandhian Socialism and by making for some time liberal use of the portraits of Jayaprakash Narayan (JP). Narayan, or JP, as he was known, had been in the Indian National Congress, but had broken away in 1948 to form the Socialist Party. [In 1974-75 he provided leadership to an umbrella of political parties which had united against Mrs Indira Gandhi and her government. He had thus come to emblemise the struggle against the Congress regime in the mid-1970s immediately before and during the Emergency imposed by the Indira Gandhi regime during 1975-77]. However, by February 2003, with the BJP's demolition programmes, both religious and political, largely accomplished and its victories at the hustings, their historical memories began brazenly to be recast once more. The BJP, especially the faction led by L.K. Advani, sought to re-incorporate V. D. Savarkar into its political pantheon, by introducing his portrait in the Central Hall of Parliament, papering over his past politics of assassination and undertakings of loyalty given to the British regime. In the current leadership of the Bharatiya Janata Party the two streams represented by the RSS and by Savarkarism appear completely to have converged.

The debates over Gandhi and the assassins need to be seen in the context of this continuing exercise of manipulation of memories to subserve current politics. The manufacturing of historical memory had started soon after the assassination itself. The narrative widely publicized, especially in potentially majoritarian circles, attributed the assassination to the partition of India, thus holding Gandhi responsible for the partition while promoting amnesia both about the origins of Hindu and Muslim separatism and the Colonial role. In addition, the assassin's group accused Gandhi of Muslim "appeasement" and made also a grievance of Gandhi's insistence that Pakistan be given Rs 550 million, its share of certain moneys due from the British as they left India. The facts, of course, tell a more

complicated story. Actually, Sardar Patel had in his letter of 27 February 1948 to Nehru, while holding that the conspiracy leading to Gandhi's murder had been restricted to a small circle of persons, written also that these "men ... have been his enemies for a very considerable time -- the antipathy can be traced right back to the time when Bapu went for his talks with Jinnah... and some... of the conspirators went to Wardha to prevent him [Bapu, that is, Gandhi] from going".^{iv}

Nevertheless, the Hindutva narrative promoted by the assassin's party gained some currency and even a bench of the Bombay High Court in 1969 which waded into the issue while examining an order of forfeiture passed against a compilation of articles written by the assassin's brother, appeared to accept that the assassins were motivated by Gandhi's policy of "appeasement". And that "Gandhiji's life", as the court (seemingly paraphrasing the purport of the articles) said, was "the price which was paid for the decision that the country be partitioned and the subsequent decision to pay the cash-balances to Pakistan in the face of its aggression on Kashmir."^v

Within a few weeks of the Bombay High Court's remarks, a report by a High-powered Commission of Inquiry (the Kapur Commission) which had already been examining the materials on Gandhi's assassination, showed that that the conspiracy to murder Gandhi probably pre-dated the question of payments to Pakistan, or the fast that he announced on January 12, 1948.^{vi} The commission also found that G V Ketkar, a prominent denizen of Pune, had known, as early as in October-November 1947, that the person who ultimately pulled the trigger was planning to assassinate Gandhi.^{vii} The eminent Barrister K L Gauba also contemporaneously showed that the conspiracy to kill Gandhi was already far advanced by the time the Rs 55 crores question came up or when, on 12 January 1948, Gandhi announced his decision to go on fast.^{viii}

To frame the issue in terms of Gandhi and Godse, the man who pulled the trigger on him, diverts attention from an examination both of the matter of V.D. Savarkar's involvement in the assassination and from the larger conspiracy that appears to have existed. Gandhi's secretary Pyarelal has summarised Savarkar's role in the assassination, based on the available evidence.^{ix} Gauba had also concluded that "It is difficult to believe that Savarkar, though acquitted at his trial, had no hand in the murder."^x The Kapur

Commission reached a similar finding at the end of the sixties. It concluded: “All these facts taken together were destructive of any theory other than the conspiracy to murder by Savarkar and his group...”^{xi}

Interestingly, N V Gadgil, a member of Jawaharlal Nehru's Cabinet from Maharashtra, had written in his memoirs: “The judgement showed that no innocent was convicted. On the other hand it is possible that one or two guilty persons escaped conviction.”^{xii} In reference to the RSS too Gadgil wrote that he “did not consider the ban on the RSS unjust in view of the reports we had about the activities of its various centres in the country” though he records that he did not mistrust every RSS member ^{xiii}

Framing the debate as an issue merely between Gandhi and one of his assassins shifts attention away also from the fact that there were other national leaders in addition to Gandhi who had also been earmarked for elimination.^{xiv} According to Pyarelal, these included Jawaharlal Nehru, and (H.S.) Suhrawardy. Gauba refers in this context not only to Nehru but to Maulana Azad, a former Congress President and a Titan of India's freedom movement, as possible targets as well.^{xv}

The precise role of communal-sectarian organisations, and the part played by some lesser known shadowy figures are among the points requiring further scrutiny. Gauba, in his work on Gandhi's assassination and also in his memoirs, suggests that the assassination was a “well-financed operation” and makes some allusions to the role of an “an industrial tycoon” in old Delhi.^{xvi} It is not clear whether the suggestion is that the latter was simply in the know of things or whether there was more to it. *That the conspiracy was well-financed is beyond doubt, with the conspirators travelling to and fro by air more than 70 years ago.* It was apparently a feudal-capitalist-religious sectarian alliance that organised the murder with the added involvement also of some princely states. On one considered view, the murder was accompanied with efforts to overthrow the fledgling Nehru Government itself. VP Menon, who was close to Sardar Patel, had claimed in *The Story of the Integration of the Indian States* (1956) that Alwar and certain other princely states that were suspected of involvement, were exonerated

of this charge.^{xvii} But a slightly different version is given by the eminent journalist, Durga Das. According to the latter, K B Lall, then Special Administrator for Alwar, sent a report to the Union Home Ministry on the goings-on there.^{xviii} According to Durga Das, the materials regarding a plot to topple the government were placed before rulers of 5 princely states: "They were called to judge the role of Alwar and Bharatpur. The evidence collected was placed before them and they readily agreed that the two Princes should be punished by depriving them of their powers. Matsya Union thus came to be formed....". Matsya Union was later merged into what became the state of Rajasthan.

Discussing the issue as merely that between Gandhi and one of his assassins diverts attention also from an examination of Savarkar's ideology and some connected matters. The trigger-pulling assassin was of significance primarily as an instrument and/or expression of a larger conspiracy and of Savarkarite bitterness toward Gandhi's attempts to settle with the League. These attempts were described in Savarkarite discourse as "appeasement". Hindutva narratives consistently seek to evade all responsibility for the partition in spite of Savarkar's support for sectarian nationalism. Savarkarism defined the nation on the basis of religious community. This is reflected in Savarkar's declaration on 15 August 1943: "I have no quarrel with Mr. Jinnah's two-nation theory. We Hindus are a nation by ourselves and it is a historical fact that Hindus and Muslims are two nations"^{xix} Savarkar's exclusion of Christians and Muslims from his definition of nation is acknowledged in contemporaneous Hindu Mahasabha publications.^{xx} Savarkar, as a man of the world, must have known or would be expected to know the demographic composition of Indian provinces. He would therefore have been expected to know the possible consequences of defining India as a Hindu nation and that this could reinforce other separatist tendencies.

A further Savarkarist tenet condones killing to make religious community-related points. The German versus Jew analogy is made in Savarkar's writings when speaking of his notion of the Hindu nation and those outside it. As we have seen, the killer aspect of Savarkarism was noted also by Sardar Patel in his 27 February 1948 letter to Nehru, where he held the fanatical wing of the Hindu Mahasabha under Savarkar responsible for assassinating Gandhi.

Whether a murder may be treated as a crime seems to depend, for Savarkarism, upon the self-perceived religious community interests of the killer.

Savarkar personally gave an assurance to the Police Commissioner of Bombay on February 22, 1948 of non-participation in politics if "released on that condition".^{xxi} Restricting the issue to one between Gandhi and merely the one assassin who pulled the trigger shifts the focus also from the manner in which the Hindu Mahasabha, especially in its post-1937 Savarkar-dominated phase, directly collaborated with and conceptually complemented the League.

For example, the role played by the Hindu Mahasabha from 1928 onwards in complicating settlement of the inter-communal problem is throughout suppressed from the primary assassin's statement at his trial.

Significantly, the Mahasabha appears simultaneously to have allied itself with the League on more than one occasion. While it criticised Gandhi for talking to the League's leader, M.A. Jinnah, in 1944, the Mahasabha supported the League in Sind and Bengal in the 1940s. In a contemporary account Manek J. Gazdar had observed : "It is significant to note that in both these provinces, the League had the support of the Hindu Mahasabha...".^{xxii} .

Yet another perceptive observer noted a similar tendency. On Gandhi's fast in prison in February 1943, the freedom fighter Humayun Kabir, who later served in Jawaharlal Nehru's cabinet, recalled :

"All parties except the League united in presenting a demand for his unconditional release and a solution of the deadlock but the British whose attitude had stiffened as a result of recent successes in North Africa and elsewhere remained obdurate. It was perhaps not without significance that on this as also on many previous occasions there was a strange agreement in the attitude and pronouncements of Messrs Jinnah and Savarkar".^{xxiii}

It is important to emphasise that Savarkar and Jinnah both wanted the same thing, separation on religious grounds, and Gandhi was an obstacle.

There were earlier attempts on Gandhi's life. The assassination of 1948 has also to be examined in the context of these earlier attempts to neutralize or to eliminate Gandhi, which attempts were rooted in Hindu resistance to Gandhi's social reform movements. Pune, which nurtured Gandhi's future assassin, and the Nagpur area were among primary centres of Hindu opposition to Gandhi. Thus there appears to have been yet another aspect to the assassination and this indicates that visualising the assassination merely in the context of the Hindu-Muslim, and later India-Pakistan, relations may not be sufficient. Relevant in this context is the bomb throwing incident in Pune on June 25, 1934 in the course of Gandhi's campaign against untouchability. The *Indian Annual Register* recorded the facts : "A bomb was thrown on what the assailant believed was the car containing Gandhiji on his way to the Municipal Building, Poona to receive an address. Seven persons, including the Chief Officer of the Municipality and two constables who were in the car, were injured. Gandhiji who was following in another car narrowly escaped."^{xxiv}

The Kapur Commission had also recorded some earlier attempts on Gandhi's life. It did not go into the June 1934 incident "because untouchability was a different topic altogether", adding however that "if the culprits then also were the Poona Hindu Mahasabha people that would be quite relevant".^{xxv} The Commission, which examined the background leading to and the material concerning the assassination, devoted considerable space to an alleged July 1944 attempt to kill Gandhi in Panchgani. The attack is not widely known, or rather remembered. This incident, involving an attempt to knife Gandhi, was written about in a Pune paper in October 1966 which asserted that Gandhi's future assassin, that is the man who pulled the trigger, and some 20 Hindu Mahasabha workers had been present also during the 1944 attempt, and were arrested but later let off. The Kapur Commission went into the question on the basis of affidavits of various people but was unable to establish the facts one way or the other. Although it examined some intelligence accounts it does not appear to have called for the local police records from Panchgani. However, the Commission acknowledged as proven that one of the companions of the future assassin and his friends from Pune tried at the time to disrupt a prayer meeting of Gandhi's and that this was duly reported a week later in a Pune paper.

Another incident, which took place in Wardha, is recorded in a Special Police Report of September 8, 1944 that was produced before the Kapur Commission. A man called L G Thatte along with eight others led a party outside Sevagram Ashram and threatened to shoot Gandhi. Thatte was carrying a long and sharp knife and was prosecuted under the Arms Act.

In June 1946 there was an attempt to derail Gandhi's train while he was travelling from Bombay to Pune. The Kapur Commission found the evidence on this to be inconclusive.

In view of the earlier attempts to assassinate Gandhi from 1934 onwards, the question is to what extent Gandhi's challenge to caste led to the accumulation of bitterness against him among a section of Hindu conservatives.

This can perhaps be better contextualised if we pay attention to the Marxist socialist Acharya Narendra Deva's insightful assertion that Gandhi was "in no sense an orthodox Hindu. On the contrary, he breaks almost every rule and practice enjoined by orthodox Hinduism."^{xxvi} The socialist Ram Manohar Lohia, wrote in 1950: "The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi was not so much an episode of the Hindu-Muslim fight as of the war between the liberal and the fanatical in Hinduism. Never had a Hindu delivered greater blows on fanaticism in respect of caste, woman, property or tolerance. All the bitterness was accumulating. Once before an attempt had been made on Gandhiji's life. It was then obviously and openly for the purpose of saving Hinduism in the sense of saving caste. The last and successful attempt was outwardly made for the purpose of saving Hinduism in the sense of protecting it from Muslim engulfment, but no student of Hindu history can be in doubt that it was the greatest and the most heinous gamble that retreating fanaticism risked in its war on liberal Hinduism."^{xxvii}

While Savarkar and his acolytes cashed in on the resentment referred to by Lohia, inasmuch as this built-up resentment provided them with a certain reservoir of social support, their primary problem with Gandhi and the Congress lay in their differing conception of India.

Although its own narratives on the partition of India have provided grist to the Hindutva mill and were offered as an explanation for the assassination of Gandhi, it seeks to erase its own divisive role

from national memory . Gauba underscores the fact that it was the assassin's mentor V D Savarkar who first made the two-nation theory into the ideological basis of a political formation, the Hindu Mahasabha, at least by the late 1930s.^{xxviii} The Muslim League formally adopted the theory after that. Gandhi never. This is only one of the several issues on which the assassin's political statement at the murder trial is silent. There is also sufficient material to indicate a British strategic interest in the partition of India. Clearly, if the assassin was out to enforce accountability for partition, there were multiple directions in which he could have proceeded; and the starting point of his journey, at Savarkar Sadan in Bombay, was no less a pertinent spot for his exertions. Yet in his statement in the murder trial, Gandhi's assassin does not mention the fact that the two-nation idea was propounded by Savarkar in the presidential speech from the Hindu Mahasabha platform in December 1939. In that speech, Savarkar attacked the territorial concept of nation: "This conception has...received a rude shock in Europe itself from which it was imported wholesale to India and the present war has justified my assertion by exploding the myth altogether"...Instead he propounded the alternative conception that "...we Hindus are marked out as an abiding Nation by ourselves".^{xxix}

Jinnah's formal adoption of the two-nation theory came soon after this and is simply the other side of the coin. Savarkar, the assassin's ideological mentor and co-accused, must rank among the ideological forebears of Pakistan. Similarly, having spoken of equal rights for all in Pakistan in August 1947, Jinnah relapsed to speak Savarkar's language in December 1947. At the League Council meeting in Karachi, Jinnah spoke of Pakistan as a "Muslim State" (though not an "ecclesiastical state"). And on March 28, 1948, apparently unmoved even by Gandhi having staked his life for a composite concept of Indian nationhood, Jinnah said: "Pakistan is the embodiment of the unity of the Muslim nation and so it must remain".^{xxx} We have seen that on 15 August 1943 Savarkar declared: "I have no quarrel with Mr. Jinnah's two-nation theory. We Hindus are a nation by ourselves and it is a historical fact that Hindus and Muslims are two-nations".^{xxxi}

The vital difference between Gandhi's approach and the Savarkar line, to which the assassin subscribed, is thus not mentioned in the

court statement made by the assassin. This lay in their entirely different definition of the nation. Gandhi's definition of nation was one of composite Indian nationhood while Savarkar's concept of nation, like Jinnah's, was religion-based. Gandhi's understanding of Indian nationhood is summed up succinctly in a statement he issued a fortnight before his death:

"Delhi is the Metropolis of India. If therefore we really in our hearts do not subscribe to the two-nation theory, in other words, if we do not regard the Hindus and the Muslims as constituting two distinct nations, we shall have to admit that the picture that Delhi presents today is not what we have envisaged always of the capital of India. Delhi is the Eternal City, as the ruins of its forerunners Indraprastha and Hastinapur testify. It is the heart of India. Only a nitwit can regard it as belonging to the Hindus or the Sikhs only. It may sound harsh but it is the literal truth. From Kanya Kumari to Kashmir and from Karachi to Dibrugarh in Assam, all Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Parsis, Christians and Jews who people this vast sub-continent and have adopted it as their dear motherland, have an equal right to it. No one has a right to say that it belongs to the majority community only and that the minority community can only remain there as the underdog. Whoever serves it with the purest devotion must have the first claim. Therefore, anyone who wants to drive out of Delhi all Musalmans as such must be set down as its enemy No. 1, therefore, enemy no. 1 of India. We are rushing towards the catastrophe. It is the bounden duty of every son and daughter of India to take his or her full share in averting it". ^{xxxii}

The purpose of manipulation of historical memory -- of asserting, for instance, that Gandhi was murdered because he allegedly enabled Partition, when his murderers actively courted Partition-- is to control and shape the contemporary narrative. The BJP once claimed, however ahistorically and erroneously, to be a party of Gandhian socialism, with Jayaprakash Narayan briefly touted as its lodestar. It is now openly Savarkarist, with Savarkar's portrait frequently the backdrop of photographs of the BJP's current party president. In fact, by introducing Savarkar's portrait in Parliament's Central Hall in February 2003 the then BJP-led coalition government had also disturbed a 55-year old political understanding that there would be no glorification of the politics of assassination.

There has been an unmistakable convergence of the RSS-controlled BJP and Savarkarism. This had been evident in the past as well.

Mahasabha and RSS members prior to India's independence acted especially to injure the concept of a composite Indian nation. Savarkar belonged to Maharashtra, India's western state. Even within the state of Maharashtra, the pre-independence Congress, including the Socialist tradition, had strongly resisted Savarkarism. The Savarkarite battle with the Indian National Congress was joined soon after Savarkar's faction took control of the Hindu Mahasabha in 1937-38. The May Day march in 1938 was attacked by the Mahasabha in Pune. As the veteran socialist, NG Goray, wrote in the *Congress Socialist* of 14 May 1938 : "Who attacked the May Day procession? Who assaulted men like Senapati Bapat and [Gajanan] Kanitkar? Who tore up the National Flag? The Hindu Mahasabhaites and the Hedgewar Boys^{xxxiii} did all this.... They have been taught to hate the Muslims in general as Public Enemy Number 1, to hate the Congress and its flag which is pro-Muslim, to hate socialists and communists who are anti-Hinduism.... They have their own flag, 'the Bhagwa', the symbol of Maratha Supremacy. And their leader is called 'Rashtra Dhureen', i.e Fuehrer!"^{xxxiv}

Such are the historical memories they would like us to forget.

ⁱ Durga Das (ed.) *Sardar Patel's Correspondence*, Volume 6, p. 56

ⁱⁱ Durga Das(ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 323

ⁱⁱⁱ D R Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh*, 2000, p. 196

^{iv} "Bapu", meaning 'father' was a honorific used for Mahatma Gandhi. M.A. Jinnah was leader of the Muslim League and first Governor General of Pakistan (1947-48).

^v Bombay High Court judgement dated 6 August 1969, AIR 1971 Bom 56

^{vi} The Commission of Inquiry appointed in 1965-66 to Inquire into the Conspiracy to Murder Mahatma Gandhi (the G S Pathak Commission that became the Justice J L Kapur Commission) submitted its report in September 1969, the month following the Bombay High Court judgement referred to above.

^{vii} Kapur Commission Report, Part II, p. 358

^{viii} K L Gauba, *Assassination of Mahatma Gandhi*, 1969, p. 222 and p. 297

^{ix} Pyarelal, *Mahatma Gandhi, (Vol X : The Last Phase : Part II)*, pp 752-756

^x Gauba, *Assassination*, *op. cit.*, p. 296

^{xi} Kapur Commission Report, Part II, p. 303

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- xii N.V. Gadgil, *Government From Inside* (1968), p. 149:
- xiii Ibid.p. 150.
- xiv See Pyarelal, Mahatma Gandhi, (Vol X : The Last Phase : Part II), p. 768
- xv Gauba, *Assassination*, op. cit., p. 297
- xvi Gauba, *Assassination*, op. cit., pp. x to xiii, and Gauba, *Friends and Foes*, 1974, p. 287
- xvii See VP Menon, *The Story of the Integration of the Indian States* (1956)
- xviii Durga Das, *India From Curzon to Nehru & After*, (1969), pp.282-283
- xix *Indian Annual Register*, 1943, Vol. 2, p. 10
- xx A. S. Bhide (ed.) *Veer Savarkar's 'Whirl-wind Propaganda'*, Bombay, 1941
- xxi For text see Gauba, *Assassination*, op. cit., pp 208-9
- xxii Manek J. Gazdar , *The British Case against India*, Allahabad, 1945, p. 75
- xxiii Humayun Kabir, *Muslim Politics, 1906-47 and other Essays*, Calcutta, 1969, p. 51
- xxiv *The Indian Annual Register* (1934, Volume 1, p. 36)
- xxv Kapur Commission Report, Part 1, p. 121
- xxvi *Selected Works of Acharya Narendra Deva*, Vol II, p. 119
- xxvii Ram Manohar Lohia , *Fragments of a World Mind*, pp 118-119
- xxviii Gauba, *Assassination*, op. cit., pp 6-7
- xxix *Indian Annual Register* 1939, Vol. II, p. 317
- xxx Jinnah's Speeches and Statements as Governor General of Pakistan, 1947-48, pp. 211-212.
- xxxi *Indian Annual Register*, 1943, Vol. 2, p.10)
- xxxii M.K. Gandhi, "Letter to Men and Women of Gujarat, 14 Jan 1948, *Selected Letters*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, p. 324.
- xxxiii "Hedgewar Boys" refers to the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS), founded in the 1920s by Dr K B Hedgewar.
- xxxiv *Congress Socialist*, 14 May 1938
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