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Obituary as History

By-Hari Nair

Global Gandhi or the modes in which peoples across the world perceived Mahatma Gandhi may be understood through an analysis of hemerographical texts and images.[1] Here, we may glance at a cartoon of Gandhi by the National Award winning Mexican journalist Rafael Freyre (1917-2015) and by analysing the second anonymous editorial published in the Spanish language newspaper *Excelsior* dated 31 January 1948 in Mexico City. *Excelsior* was a worker-owned Co-operative between the 1930s and the 1960s and is now more than a century old newspaper.



Editorial Page of the Spanish language newspaper *Excelsior* of 31 January 1948, Mexico City Asesinato de un Hombre Justo [Assassination of a Just Man] is the second anonymous editorial accompanied by the Cartoon of Gandhi by Rafael Freyre, Courtesy Hemeroteca Nacional, Mexico

[1] Hemerography is the study of periodical publications like newspapers and magazines. It could also refer to any matter related to such publications. The place, where these periodical publications are archived or housed, is called the Hemeroteca.

Freyre's cartoon is captioned 'Gandhi: The Last Trench of Passive Resistance'. The sketch of Gandhi has an angelic appearance comparable to the image on the cover page of *Time* (05 January 1931), an American weekly published in English. This angelic face was in contrast to the image of Gandhi that appeared a few months earlier on the cover of *Time* itself (31 March 1930). In 1930, *Time* portrayed Gandhi as Recpolman – a term invented for describing a man who rolled (R) religion, (ec) economics, and (pol) politics into one. Or a combination of a saint, an anti-machinist, and an astute statesman. The contrast, or the image makeover of Gandhi, was not merely a consequence of changes that may have occurred over ten months at the editorial offices of *Time* magazine.



ON THE LEFT

<https://content.time.com/time/magazine/0,9263,7601300331,00.html>

"Saint Gandhi"

Volume XV Number 13

March 31, 1930

ON THE RIGHT

<https://content.time.com/time/magazine/0,9263,7601310105,00.html>

Man of the Year

Volume XVII Number 1

January 5, 1931

Rather, it was through a slow and settled analysis of Gandhi's work and methods over a decade via the speeches and writings of Christian missionaries such as John Haynes Holmes and Charles Freer Andrews, writers like Romain Rolland, Jabez Sunderland, and Will Durant, activists like Richard Gregg, scholars like W.E.B. Dubois, and indeed by the news reportage of the adventurous and widely travelled journalists Webb Miller, William Shirer, and J.A. Mills. Their writings certainly highlighted many aspects of Gandhi, but their utterances revealed much about their own outlook. Consequently, astute readers often attended more to the background of the writer than to the contents of the written text. But some writers resented this tendency in the readers.

The anonymous newspaper editorial may have been a response of writers who wanted to firewall their text. Anonymity prevented readers from analysing the writers' persona and facilitated the exclusive focus on the written contents. The editorial obituary of Gandhi in the *Excelsior* seemed to have followed that path. And yet the editorial heeded the customary courtesies, due to a deceased person, by ignoring the weaknesses and noting the strengths of the man, his unique contributions and methods, as well as his concerns about the future of his country at the time of his passing. Thus far the obituary was traditional but it stepped away from a clichéd comparison towards the end.

At the end of the obituary, Gandhi was not sanctified like Francis of Assisi but compared to Aristides, the Ancient Pagan Greek leader, who was respected for his indigence. Like Aristides, Gandhi had neglected his own family for the greater common good. The Ancient Greek leader and his Modern Indian counterpart relied on the merits of their own individual effort rather than on inherited wealth or power. Both sought virtue and both disliked appellations such as the just man or the Mahatma. They disdained the appellations bestowed upon them by their supporters as no more than curses. The comparison of Gandhi with a pagan and the overall secular tone of the text were the novelties of this obituary.

Obituaries were meant to remember the deceased, but these often memorialized the dead by giving birth to their afterlife. We have presented below one potential source of Gandhi's afterlife, the editorialized obituary in the *Excelsior*. For analytical purposes, we have transcribed the Spanish obituary and offered its translations in English and Hindi. In the translations, we have sought to facilitate a conversation between the anonymous writer from the print world of the mid-20th century and the insomniac resident reader of the 21st century digital medium. But, in the transcription, we have prioritized textual fidelity.

Transcription of the Second Anonymous Editorial titled 'Asesinato de un Hombre Justo' published in the Spanish language newspaper *Excelsior* dated 31 January 1948 in Mexico City

Asesinato de un Hombre Justo

En la India, agitada por motivos políticos, raciales y religiosos, se acaba de cometer un crimen que ha conmovido a todo el mundo.

La víctima, el célebre Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, casi octogenaria, era el más venerado líder de la India. Si esa gran comunidad de pueblos orientales, dos veces más extensa que la República Mexicana y casi veinte veces más poblada, ha llegado a alcanzar libertad y cesado de ser colonia, lo debe en mucha parte a los esfuerzos rayanos en sacrificio, tenaces, inquebrantables, de ese hombre. Y liberado, pero carcomida, por internas divisiones de raza, de casta, de religión, si pudiera resolver pacíficamente sus conflictos domésticos, sería, sin duda, por la influencia de este hombre, profunda y viva, sobre sus correligionarios y compañeros.

Es cierto que no fue Gandhi el iniciador del movimiento, ni el creador del Partido del Congreso Indú, que domina políticamente el Indostán, una de las fracciones en que la India está dividida. Pero él vino a dar nuevas orientaciones al movimiento. Antes de él, otro líder, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, le había impreso un carácter de franca agresión y violencia. Por el contrario, Gandhi hombre de moral sin tacha y vida ejemplar, convenció a los partidarios del Congreso de que la libertad podría obtenerse, si no de una manera totalmente incruenta, al menos con un mínimo de sangre derramada. Su virtud era tanta, que uno de los preceptos, impuestos a sus partidarios, era “satyagraha”, la insistencia en decir la verdad.

Antes de la organización del Partido del Congreso, los hindúes vivían resignada, pasivamente. Su línea de conducta cívica se expresaba en el versículo: Jalk i Juda, Mulk i Sarkar, Hukm i Sahiban Alishban (el hombre pertenece a Dios, la tierra es del gobierno, el poder pertenece a los poderosos). De esa indiferencia sacó a su pueblo Gandhi, no predicando la rebelión, sino la defensa de los derechos del pueblo mediante una acción en apariencia negativa, pero que tuvo grande efecto: la no resistencia y la no cooperación. Los hindúes no deberían ser los agresores; no se defenderían con las armas; pero se apartarían totalmente de toda colaboración.

Nunca hizo daño a nadie, y sus compatriotas le dieron el sobrenombre de Mahatma, magnánimo, como los atenienses sobrenombraron justo a Arístides.

Cuando se acercó el día de la liberación, Gandhi se preocupó por el porvenir de su patria. Presintió lo que está ocurriendo. En su periódico “Harijan” dijo que, con tantas razas y castas guerreras, la India tendería al militarismo con sus consecuencias. Y pensó que con su sacrificio voluntario, su ayuno, sus oraciones y su ejemplo, los hombres se harían menos feroces y las dos razas que se odian, la musulmana y la india, podrían conciliarse y vivir en paz.

Su último ruego, dicen los cables, fue de piedad para su asesino. Era verdaderamente Mahatma. Ojala que su sacrificio se despierte un halito de paz en esa populosa región de oriente, madre de la filosofía.

English Translation of the Second Anonymous Editorial titled ‘Asesinato de un Hombre Justo’ published in the Spanish language newspaper *Excelsior* dated 31 January 1948 in Mexico City

The Assassination of a Just Man

In India, riven by political, racial and religious divisions, a crime has just been committed, which has shocked the entire world.

The victim was the celebrated Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. He was almost in his eighties and was the most revered leader of India. If that great community of eastern peoples, twice as vast as the Mexican Republic and almost twenty times more densely populated, has

achieved freedom and ceased to be a colony, it owed that in large measure to this man's tenacious and unwavering efforts, which bordered on sacrifice. If India, though free but strife-torn by internal divisions of race, caste, and religion, were to peacefully resolve its domestic conflicts, it would be, without a doubt, due to this man's profound and persisting influence upon his co-religionists and compatriots.

It is true that Gandhi was neither the founder of the [Indian] independence movement nor the creator of the Indian [National] Congress, which is the dominant political party of Hindustan - a fraction [sic] of partitioned [British] India. But he offered new directions to that movement. Prior to Gandhi, another leader, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, had impressed upon the Indians an explicitly violent and aggressive character. On the contrary, Gandhi, who was a man of impeccable morals and who led an exemplary life, convinced the Congress party members that freedom could be obtained with minimum bloodshed, if not by means entirely bloodless. So virtuous was he that his followers adopted his precept of "satyagraha" - an insistence on truthfulness.

Before the formation of the Congress Party, the Indians were resigned to a passive life. Their civic conduct was expressed by the [Urdu-Persian-Arabic] adage: *Khalq e khuda, Mulk i Sarkar, Hukm i Sahibaan i Aalishaan* [Creation belonged to God, the country to the government, and the power to order and command to the Europeans and the Indian majesties]. Gandhi awakened his people from such apathy, not by preaching rebellion, rather by defending the rights of Indians through a method that was apparently negative but which was very effective: non-resistance and non-cooperation. [This meant] that Indians would not be the aggressors, they would not defend themselves with weapons, but they would completely distance themselves from any collaboration [with British rule].

He never harmed anyone and so his compatriots called him Mahatma, Magnanimous [or Great Soul] - like the Athenians addressed Aristides as 'the just man'.

As Independence Day approached, Gandhi was concerned about the future of his country. He anticipated the occurrences. In his newspaper, *Harijan*, he wrote that India would tend towards militarism and its consequences with so many races and martial castes. But he believed that with his voluntary sacrifice, his fasting, his prayers, and his example, the people would become less vindictive and the two races that hated each other, the Muslim and the Hindu, would reconcile and live in peace.

His last wish, according to the news cables, was mercy for his assassin. Truly, a Mahatma. One hopes that his sacrifice breathes a life of peace in that populous region of the Orient - the mother of philosophy.

Hindi Translation of the Second Anonymous Editorial titled 'Asesinato de un Hombre Justo' published in the Spanish language newspaper *Excelsior* dated 31 January 1948 in Mexico City.

एक नेक दिल इंसान की हत्या

राजनीतिक, जातीय और धार्मिक उथल-पुथल से प्रभावित भारत में हाल ही में एक ऐसा अपराध हुआ है जिसने पूरी दुनिया को झकझोर कर रख दिया।

हत्या के शिकार हुए भारत के सबसे सम्मानित नेता लगभग अस्सी वर्ष के प्रसिद्ध मोहनदास करमचंद गांधी। अगर यह पूरे देश के लोगों का समुदाय, जो क्षेत्रफल में मेक्सिको गणराज्य से दोगुना और आबादी में लगभग बीस गुना बड़ा है, स्वतंत्रता प्राप्त कर सका और भारत को उपनिवेश होने से मुक्ति मिल गयी, तो इसका बड़ा श्रेय इस व्यक्ति के बलिदान, दृढ़ता और अडग प्रयासों को जाता है। और अगर स्वतंत्र होकर भी नस्ल, जाति और धर्म के आंतरिक विभाजनों से ग्रस्त भारत अपने घरेलू संघर्षों को शांतिपूर्वक सुलझा सके, तो इसमें भी इस व्यक्ति के अपने अनुयायियों और साथियों पर गहरे और जीवंत प्रभाव का योगदान होगा।

यह सही है कि गांधी ने यह आंदोलन शुरू नहीं किया और न ही वे भारतीय राष्ट्रीय कांग्रेस पार्टी के संस्थापक थे, जो वतमान में भारत में राजनीतिक रूप से हावी है। लेकिन उन्होंने इस आंदोलन को एक नई दिशा दी। उनके पहले एक और नेता, बाल गंगाधर तिलक, ने आंदोलन को आक्रामकता और हिंसा का रूप दिया था। इसके विपरीत, गांधी, जो उच्च नैतिकता और अनुकरणीय जीवन के व्यक्ति थे, ने कांग्रेस के समर्थकों को यह विश्वास दिलाया कि स्वतंत्रता हिंसा के बिना या कम से कम रक्तपात के साथ भी प्राप्त की जा सकती है। उनकी नैतिकता इतनी उच्च थी कि उन्होंने अपने अनुयायियों को सत्याग्रह यानी सत्य पर आग्रह करने का उपदेश दिया।

कांग्रेस पार्टी के गठन से पहले, भारतीय लोग निष्क्रिय जीवन और भगवानभरोसे जीते थे। उनकी नागरिक जीवनशैली इस कहावत में व्यक्त होती थी:

खल्क खुदा का, मुल्क-ए-सरकार, हुक्म-ए-साहबान आलीशान (सृष्टि ईश्वर की है, भूमि सरकार की है, शक्ति यूरोपीय लोगों और कुलीन वर्ग की)।

गांधी ने विद्रोह का उपदेश नहीं दिया, बल्कि नकारात्मक प्रतीत होने वाले लेकिन प्रभावी तरीकों अहिंसा और असहयोग से लोगों को उनके अधिकारों की रक्षा के लिए प्रेरित किया और इस उदासीनता से अपने लोगों को बाहर निकाला। भारतीयों को आक्रामक नहीं बनना था; वे हथियारों से अपनी रक्षा नहीं करेंगे, लेकिन वे हर प्रकार के सहयोग से पूरी तरह अलग हो जाएंगे।

उन्होंने कभी किसी को नुकसान नहीं पहुंचाया, और उनके देशवासियों ने उन्हें महात्मा महान आत्मा का उपनाम दिया, जैसे एथेंसवासियों ने अरस्टाइड्स को धर्मात्मा कहा था।

जब स्वतंत्रता का दिन नज़दीक आया, गांधी अपने देश के भविष्य के लिए चिंतित थे। उन्होंने आने वाली समस्याओं का पूरा भास किया। अपने समाचार पत्र "ह रजन" में उन्होंने लिखा कि इतनी विविध योद्धा नस्लों और जातियों के कारण भारत सैन्यवाद की ओर अग्रसर होगा, जिसके घातक परिणाम होंगे। उन्होंने सोचा कि अपने स्वैच्छिक बलिदान, उपवास, प्राथनाओं और उदाहरण के माध्यम से, वह लोगों को कम हिंसक बना सकते हैं और एक-दूसरे से घृणा करने वाले हिंदू और मुस्लिम समुदायों को सामंजस्य स्थापित करने और शांति से जीने के लिए प्रेरित कर सकते हैं।

उनकी अंतिम प्राथना में, तार संदेशों के अनुसार, उनके हत्यारे के लिए दया थी। वह वास्तव में महात्मा थे। काश, उनका बलिदान दश नशास्त्र की जननी इस घनी आबादी वाले क्षेत्र में शांति की भावना जागृत कर सके।

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