

# Other Scenes

John Wilcock

NEW DELHI—Twenty-one years after his murder this month Mahatma Gandhi is still India's number one news-maker. There is hardly an issue of any of India's scores of English-language magazines that doesn't carry some word of him—a book review, a reminiscence, an inspirational quotation on its editorial page. And hardly a day goes by without some politician or would-be politician invoking his memory or reaffirming his beliefs—all duly reported in the daily newspapers. Currently, the following running stories pop up with dependable frequency:

1. Reports of a long-lasting Gandhi Murder Enquiry Commission which seeks to pin the responsibility for his assassination on Morarji Desai, now India's deputy prime minister but the minister ostensibly responsible for Gandhi's safety in 1948. (Desai, an elderly economist, is a relatively unpopular conservative member of the ruling Congress party and the investigation is generally believed to have been inspired by his political rivals);

2. Arguments over the fate of Birla House, an independently-owned property in whose grounds Gandhi was shot on January 30, 1948. Many nationalist Hindus want to turn Birla House into a national monument and one legislator even threatened to "fast unto death" (a weapon used to exert moral pressure by Gandhi himself on many occasions) unless this happened. He was dissuaded after 100 fellow-MP's agreed to support his stand but the Birlas, a family of rich industrialists, are reluctant to hand over the property except as an official residence for India's prime ministers. Critics of this plan ask why the family should get permanent publicity out of the building. (It could always be renamed, of course);

3. Maoist slogans appearing recently on walls in Delhi accusing Gandhi of being "a tool of the imperialist British," a charge patently absurd considering Gandhi's lifelong fight for Indian independence—a battle he could be said to have won by 1947 when the last British soldier left India after an occupation lasting for almost two centuries;

4. Debates in the Lohk Sabha (India's national parliament) over funds to complete the memorial Dandi path, a 241-mile stretch in the western state of Guajrat over which Gandhi and his followers marched in the spring of 1930 to dramatize India's resistance to the tax on salt enforced by British authorities. The march began with 80 people at Gandhi's ashram at Ahmendabad and ended three and a half weeks later at Dandi beach where almost 100,000 sympathizers gathered to watch Gandhi pick up a pinch of salt from the shore—thereby breaking the law. Within a month the protest had spread all over India. The fledgling Congress party had organized public sales of salt and 60,000 people were jailed for this simple, symbolic defiance by the British who thus stupidly underwrote their own demise. "Salt," wrote Gandhi's biographer Vincent Sheean, "was the commonest of necessities and it had been monopolized by the foreign government. Salt was something every peasant could understand. Salt was god's gift and the wicked foreign government had stolen it from the people."

5. The year 1969 is the centenary of the Mahatma's birth—the honorific title was conferred on him by India's Nobel-prize-winning poet Tagore and means, roughly "Great Soul"—and from all over India come countless plans to recall Gandhi's life and celebrate the anniversary.

Ironically it is just about now that the true influence of Gandhi is beginning to wane. Twenty-one years is just long enough for a whole generation to have grown up who know his name but have forgotten or never appreciated his ideals. And although his philosophy permeates Indian life in so many ways (because it was a distillation of

philosophies that have always existed therein) his name can be, and is, invoked by people who represent his absolute antithesis.

The Congress party which he once headed and for so long inspired suffers from a surfeit of corrupting power (22 uninterrupted years in office) and at its recent national convention was so divided that discussion was limited to one subject: the continuation and extension of prohibition.

This, it's true, was a Gandhian belief, but given the world's present situation—and especially India's current problems—it's probably the lowest of priorities and the one most out of touch with the way things are going. (Every supposedly "dry" state in India issues liquor permits to foreign tourists plus a growing number of Indian wire-pullers, and to supplement these outlets are thousands of illicit stills which, in Bombay at least, have already created the same corrupt alliance between police and bootleggers that Americans know so well).

Gandhi himself officially withdrew from politics in the 1930s and this may have been the smartest move he ever made because it became virtually impossible for any politician to get anything done subsequently unless the Mahatma approved it. His fasts were a kind of moral blackmail to achieve the absolute compliance that words alone can never win. Millions of people all over the world followed every minute of his day, inquiring constantly about his health. It may have been possible to call his bluff and let him fast unto death but nobody dared try it.

He had already ousted the British (or done as much as anybody to bring about their ousting) and united the country over numerous issues including his fight for the acceptance of "untouchables" (which he renamed Harijans or children of god) and was in the middle of his biggest fight—to stop the interfaith massacres between Hindus and Muslims—when a fellow-Hindu shot him. The murderer's *raison d'être* was that only Gandhi was preventing the certain war which would forever drive out the hated Muslims. Gandhi's murder, ironically, united them as they had never been united before (or since).

In his lifetime, and outside of any recognizable political structure, the little man achieved miracles. He had been heard to say, "Those who say religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means." And for awhile it looked as though even after his religious-political fight to change society would continue. His successor was Jawarhl Nehru, one of this country's most articulate and humane statesmen, who led the Congress party and his country with the principles of his late friend until his own death in 1963.

A brief interlude with the universally-admired Shastri in charge (he died of a heart attack after one year in office) and then Nehru's daughter, Indhira Gandhi, took over as prime minister. Although a cut above the calibre of most national leaders, her rule is suffering from the inevitable loss of popularity that any government endures after two decades in power. There is wrangling among the younger legislators who have waited their turn for leadership; discontent among state governments who feel that Delhi is too remote to understand their problems (the only place where the Congress party has been ousted by one party rather than an opposition coalition is Madras where the DMK won power solely on local issues); and a fierce fight brewing in four states whose opposition legislatures were disbanded by Delhi (being placed under the so-called "president's rule") on the grounds that they were squabbling too much to rule effectively.

The time is ripe, in short, for another Gandhi at whose call, Tagore once wrote, "India blossomed forth to new greatness just as once before in earlier times when Buddha proclaimed the truth of fellow-feeling and compassion among all living creatures."

Buddhists believe that a true reincarnation of Buddha descends to earth every five thousand years. Can we have another Gandhi in the same century?

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