# CHAPTER I

DEATH BEFORE PRAYERS

4.30 p.m., Abha brought in the last meal he was ever to

LJk eat; it consisted of goat’s milk, cooked and raw vegetables,

jl \ oranges and a concoction of ginger, sour lemons and

strained butter with juice of aloe. Sitting on the floor of his room

in the rear of Birla House in New Delhi, Gandhi ate and talked

with Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Deputy Prime Minister of the

new government of independent India. Maniben, Patel’s

daughter and secretary, was also present. The conversation was

important. There had been rumours of differences between

Patel and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. This problem, like

so many others, had been dropped into the Mahatma’s lap.

Abha, alone with Gandhi and the Patels, hesitated to interrupt.

But she knew Gandhi’s attachment to punctuality. Finally,

therefore, she picked up the Mahatma’s nickel-plated watch and

showed it to him. T must tear myself away,’ Gandhi remarked,

and so saying he rose, went to the adjoining bathroom and then

started towards the prayer ground in the large park to the left of

the house. Abha, the young wife of Kanu Gandhi, grandson of

the Mahatma’s cousin, and Manu, the granddaughter of another

cousin, accompanied him; he leaned his forearms on their

shoulders. ‘My walking sticks’, he called them.

During the daily two-minute promenade through the long,

red-sandstone colonnade that led to the prayer ground, Gandhi

relaxed and joked. Now, he mentioned the carrot juice Abha had

given him that morning.

£ So you are serving me cattle fare,’ he said, and laughed.

‘Ba used to call it horse fare,’ Abha replied. Ba was Gandhi’s

deceased wife.

‘Isn’t it grand of me,’ Gandhi bantered, ‘to relish what no one

else wants?’

‘Bapu (father),’ said Abha, ‘your watch must be feeling very

neglected. You would not look at it today,’

‘Why should I, since you are my timekeepers?’ Gandhi retorted.

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‘But you don’t look at the timekeepers,’ Manu noted. Gandhi

laughed again.

By this time he was walking on the grass near the prayer ground.

A congregation of about five hundred had assembled for the

regular evening devotions. T am late by ten minutes,’ Gandhi

mused aloud. T hate being late. I should be here at the stroke

of five.’

He quickly cleared the five low steps up to the level of the prayer

ground. It was only a few yards now to the wooden platform on

which he sat during services. Most of the people rose; many

edged forward; some helped to clear a lane for him; those who

were nearest bowed low to his feet. Gandhi removed his arms

from the shoulders of Abha and Manu and touched his palms

together in the traditional Hindu greeting.

Just then, a man elbowed his way out of the congregation into

the lane. He looked as if he wished to prostrate himself in the

customary obeisance of the devout. But since they were late,

Manu tried to stop him and caught hold of his hand. He pushed

her away so that she fell and, planting himself about two feet in

front of Gandhi, fired three shots from a small automatic pistol.

As the first bullet struck, Gandhi’s foot, which was in motion,

descended to the ground, but he remained standing. The second

bullet struck; blood began to stain Gandhi’s white clothes. His

face turned ashen pale. His hands, which had been in the touch-

palm position, descended slowly and one arm remained moment¬

arily on Abha’s neck.

Gandhi murmured, ‘Hey Rama (Oh, God).’ A third shot rang

out. The limp body settled to the ground. His spectacles dropped

to the earth. The leather sandals slipped from his feet.

Abha and Manu lifted Gandhi’s head, and tender hands raised

him from the ground and carried him into his room in Birla

House. The eyes were half closed and he seemed to show signs of

life. Sardar Patel, who had just left the Mahatma, was back at

Gandhi’s side; he felt the pulse and thought he detected a faint

beat. Someone searched frantically in a medicine chest for

adrenalin but found none.

An alert spectator fetched Dr. D. P. Bhargava. He arrived ten

minutes after the shooting. ‘Nothing on earth could have saved

him,’ Dr. Bhargava reports. ‘He had been dead for ten minutes.’

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The first bullet entered Gandhi’s abdomen three and a half

inches to the right of a line down the middle of the body and two

and a half inches above the navel and came out through the back.

The second penetrated the seventh intercostal space one inch to

the right of the middle line and likewise came out at the back.

The third shot hit one inch above the right nipple and four inches

to the right of the middle line and embedded itself in the lung.

One bullet, Dr. Bhargava says, probably passed through the

heart and another might have cut a big blood vessel. ‘The

intestines,’ he adds, ‘were also injured, as next day I found the

abdomen distended.’

The young men and women who had been Gandhi’s constant

attendants sat near the body and sobbed. Dr. Jivraj Mehta

arrived and confirmed the death. Presently a murmur went

through the group: ‘Jawaharlal.’ Nehru had rushed from his

office. He knelt beside Gandhi, buried his face in the bloody

clothes and cried. Then came Devadas, Gandhi’s youngest son,

and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Minister of Education, followed

by many prominent Indians.

Devadas touched his father’s skin and gently pressed his arm.

The body was still warm. The head still lay in Abha’s lap.

Gandhi’s face wore a peaceful smile. He seemed asleep. ‘We

kept vigil the whole of that night,’ Devadas wrote later. ‘So

serene was the face and so mellow the halo of divine light that

surrounded the body that it seemed almost sacrilegious to

grieve. . . .’

Diplomats paid formal visits; some wept.

Outside, a vast multitude gathered and asked for one last

view of the Mahatma. The body was accordingly placed in an

inclined position on the roof of Birla House and a searchlight

played upon it. Thousands passed in silence, wrung their hands

and wept.

Near midnight the body was lowered into the house. All night

mourners sat in the room and, between sobs, recited from the

Bhagavad Gita and other holy Hindu scriptures.

With the dawn arrived ‘the most unbearably poignant moment

for all of us’, Devadas says. They had to remove the large woollen

shawl and the cotton shoulder wrap which the Mahatma was

wearing for warmth when he was shot. These pure white clothes

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showed clots and blotches of blood. As they unfolded the shawl

the shell of a cartridge dropped out.

Gandhi now lay before them dressed only in the white loincloth

as they and the world had always known him. Most of those

present broke down and cried without control. The sight inspired

the suggestion that the body be embalmed for at least a few days

so that friends, co-workers and relatives who lived at a distance

from New Delhi might see it before it was cremated. But Devadas,

Pyareial Nayyar, Gandhi’s chief secretary, and others objected.

It was against Hindu sentiment, and ‘Bapu would never forgive

us.’ Also, they wished to discourage any move to preserve the

Mahatma’s earthly remains. It was decided to burn the body the

next day.

In the early hours of the morning disciples washed the body

according to ancient Hindu rites and placed a garland of hand-

spun cotton strands and a chain of beads around its neck. Roses

and rose petals were strewn over the blanket that covered all but

the head, arms and chest. T asked for the chest to be left bare,’

Devadas explains. c No soldier ever had a finer chest than Bapu’s.’

A pot of incense burned near the body.

During the morning the body was again placed on the roof for

public view.

Ramdas, third son of Gandhi, arrived by air from Nagpur, in

the Central Provinces of India, at 11 a.m. The funeral had waited

for him. The body was brought down into the house and then

carried out to the terrace. A wreath of cotton yarn encircled

Gandhi’s head; the face looked peaceful yet profoundly sad. The

saffron-white-green flag of independent India was draped over

the bier.

During the night the chassis of a Dodge 15-hundredweight

army weapon-carrier had been replaced by a new superstructure

with a raised floor so that all spectators could see the body in the

open coffin. Two hundred men of the Indian Army, Navy and

Air Force drew the vehicle by four stout ropes. The motor was

not used. Non-commissioned officer Naik Ram Chand sat at the

steering wheel. Nehru, Patel, several other leaders and several

of Gandhi’s young associates rode on the carrier.

The cortege, two miles long, left Birla House on Albuquerque

Road in New Delhi at 11.45 a -m., and, moving forward inch by

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inch through dense masses of humanity, reached the Jumna

River, five and a half miles away, at 4.20 p.m. A million and a

half marched and a further million watched. Branches of New

Delhi’s splendid shade trees bent under the weight of persons who

had climbed upon them to get a better view. The base of the big

white monument of King George V, which stands in the middle

of a broad pond, was covered with hundreds of Indians who had

waded through the water.

Now and then the voices of Hindus, Moslems, Sikhs, Parsis and

Anglo-Indians mingled in loud shouts of c Mahatma Gandhi hi jai

(Long Live Mahatma Gandhi)’. At intervals the multitude

broke into sacred chants. Three Dakota aircraft flew over the

procession, dipped in salute and showered countless rose petals.

Four thousand soldiers, a thousand airmen, a thousand police¬

men and a hundred sailors, in varied and vari-coloured uniforms

and head-dress, marched before and after the bier. Prominent

among them were mounted lancers bearing aloft red and white

pennants — the bodyguard of Governor-General Lord Mount-

batten. Armoured cars, police and soldiers were present to

maintain order. In charge of the death parade was Major-

General Roy Bucher, an Englishman chosen by the Indian

government to be the first commander-in-chief of its army.

By the holy waters of the Jumna, close to a million people had

stood and sat from early morning waiting for the cortege to arrive

at the cremation grounds. The predominant colour was white,

the white of women’s saris and men’s garments, caps and turbans.

Several hundred feet from the river, at Rajghat, stood a fresh

funeral pyre made of stone, brick and earth; it was about two feet

high and eight feet square. Long thin sandalwood logs sprinkled

with incense had been stacked on it. Gandhi’s body was laid on

the pyre with the head to the north and the feet to the south. In

this position Buddha had met his end.

At 4.45 p.m., Ramdas set fire to his father’s funeral pyre. The

logs burst into flame. A groan went up from the vast assemblage.

Women wailed. With elemental force the crowd surged towards

the fire and broke through the military cordon. But in a moment

the people seemed to realize what they were doing and dug in

their bare toes and prevented an accident.

The logs crackled and seethed and the flames united in a single

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fire. Now there was silence . . . Gandhi’s body was being reduced

to cinders and ashes.

The pyre burned for fourteen hours. All the while prayers were

sung; the entire text of the Gita was read. Twenty-seven hours

later, when the last embers had grown cold, priests, officials,

friends and relatives held a special service in the guarded wire

enclosure around the pyre and collected the ashes and the splinters

of bone that had defeated the fire. The ashes were tenderly

scooped into a homespun cotton bag. A bullet was found in the

ashes. The bones were sprinkled with water from the Jumna

and deposited in a copper urn. Ramda placed a garland of

fragrant flowers around the neck of the urn, set it in a wicker

basket filled with rose petals and, pressing it to his breast, carried

it back to Birla House.

Several personal friends of Gandhi asked for and received

pinches of his ashes. One encased a few grains of ash in a gold

signet ring. Family and followers decided against gratifying the

requests for ashes which came from all the six continents. Some

Gandhi ashes were sent to Burma, Tibet, Ceylon and Malaya.

But most of the remains were immersed in the rivers of India

exactly fourteen days after death — as prescribed by Hindu ritual.

Ashes were given to provincial prime ministers or other digni¬

taries. The provincial capitals shared their portions with lesser

urban centres. Everywhere the public display of the ashes drew

huge pilgrimages and so did the final ceremonies of immersion in

the rivers or, as at Bombay, in the sea.

The chief immersion ceremony took place at Allahabad, in the

United Provinces, at the confluence of the sacred Ganges, the

Jumna and the Saraswati. A special train of five third-class

carriages left New Delhi at 4 a.m. on February 1 ith; Gandhi had

always travelled third. The compartment in the middle of the

train containing the urn of ashes and bones was piled almost to

the ceiling with flowers and guarded by Abha, Manu, Pyarelal

Nayyar, Dr. Sushila Nayyar, Prabhavati Narayan and others who

had been Gandhi’s daily companions. The train stopped at

eleven towns en route ; at each, hundreds of thousands bowed

reverently, prayed and laid garlands and wreaths on the carriages.

In Allahabad, on the 12th, the urn was placed under a minia¬

ture wooden palanquin and, mounted on a motor truck, it worked

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its way through a throng of a million and a half people from the

city and the surrounding countryside. Women and men in white

preceded the truck singing hymns. One musician played on an

ancient instrument. The vehicle looked like a portable rose

garden; Mrs. Naidu, Governor of the United Provinces, Azad,

Ramdas and Patel were among those who rode on it. Nehru,

fists clenched, chin touching his chest, walked.

Slowly the truck moved to the river bank where the urn was

transferred to an American military ‘duck’ painted white. Other

‘ducks 5 and craft accompanied it downstream. Tens of thousands

waded far into the water to be nearer Gandhi’s ashes. Cannon on

Allahabad Fort fired a salute as the urn was turned over and its

contents fell into the river. The ashes spread. The little bones

flowed quickly towards the sea.

Gandhi’s assassination caused dismay and pain throughout

India. It was as though the three bullets that entered his body

had pierced the flesh of tens of millions. The nation was baffled,

stunned and hurt by the sudden news that this man of peace, who

loved his enemies and would not have killed an insect, had been

shot dead by his own countryman and co-religionist.

Never in modern history has any man been mourned more

deeply and more widely.

The news was conveyed to the country by Prime Minister

Nehru. He was shaken, shocked and cramped with sorrow. Yet

he went to the radio station shortly after the bullets struck and,

speaking extemporaneously, driving back tears and choking with

emotion, he said:

‘The light has gone out of our lives and there is darkness every¬

where and 1 do not quite know what to tell you and how to say it.

Our beloved leader, Bapu as we call him, the father of our nation,

is no more. Perhaps I am wrong to say that. Nevertheless, we

will not see him again as we have seen him these many years. We

will not run to him for advice and seek solace from him, and that

is a terrible blow not to me only but to millions and millions in

this country. And it is difficult to soften the blow by any advice

that I or anyone else can give you.

‘The light has gone out, I said, and yet I was wrong. For the

light that shone in this country was no ordinary light. The light

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that has illumined this country for these many years will illumine

this country for many more years, and a thousand years later that

light will still be seen in this country, and the world will see it and

it will give solace to innumerable hearts. For that light represented

the living truth, and the eternal man was with us with his eternal

truth reminding us of the right path, drawing us from error,

taking this ancient country to freedom.

‘All this has happened. There is so much more to do. There was

so much more for him to do. We could never think that he was

unnecessary or that he had done his task. But now, particularly,

when we are faced with so many difficulties, his not being with us

is a blow most terrible to bear.

A madman has put an end to his life. . . .’

On January 30th, 1948, the Friday he died, Mahatma Gandhi

was what he had always been: a private citizen without wealth,

property, official title, official post, academic distinction, scientific

achievement, or artistic gift. Yet men with governments and

armies behind them paid homage to the little brown man of

seventy-eight in a loincloth. The Indian authorities received

3441 messages of sympathy, all unsolicited, from foreign countries.

For Gandhi was a moral man, and a civilization not richly en¬

dowed with morality felt still further impoverished when the

assassin’s bullets ended his life. ‘Mahatma Gandhi was the

spokesman for the conscience of all mankind,’ said General

George C. Marshall, United States Secretary of State.

Pope Pius, the Dalai Lama of Tibet, the Archbishop of Canter¬

bury, the Chief Rabbi of London, the King of England, President

Truman, Chiang Kai-shek, the President of France, indeed .the

political heads of all important countries (except Soviet Russia)

and most minor ones publicly expressed their grief at Gandhi’s

passing.

Leon Blum, the French Socialist, put on paper what millions

felt. ‘I never saw Gandhi,’ Blum wrote. ‘I do not know his

language. I never set foot in his country and yet I feel the same

sorrow as if I had lost someone near and dear. The whole world

has been plunged into mourning by the death of this extraordinary

man.’

‘Gandhi had demonstrated,’ Professor Albert Einstein asserted,

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‘that a powerful human following can be assembled not only

through the cunning game of the usual political manoeuvres and

trickeries but through the cogent example of a morally superior

conduct of life. In our time of utter moral decadence he was the

only statesman to stand for a higher human relationship in the

political sphere. 5

The Security Council of the United Nations paused for its

members to pay tribute to the dead man. Philip Noel-Baker, the

British representative, praised Gandhi as ‘the friend of the poorest

and the loneliest and the lost 5 . Gandhi’s ‘greatest achievements’,

he predicted, ‘are still to come 5 . Other members of the Security

Council extolled Gandhi’s spiritual qualities and lauded his

devotion to peace and non-violence. Mr. Andrei Gromyko, of

the Soviet Union, called Gandhi ‘one of the outstanding political

leaders of India 5 whose name ‘will always be linked with the

struggle of the Indian people for their national liberation which

has lasted over such a long period 5 . Soviet Ukraine delegate

Tarasenko also stressed Gandhi’s politics.

The U.N. lowered its flag to half-mast.

Humanity lowered its flag.

The world-wide response to Gandhi’s death was in itself an

important fact; it revealed a widespread mood and need. ‘There

is still some hope for the world which reacted as reverently as it

did to the death of Gandhi, 5 Albert Deutsch declared in the

New York newspaper PM. ‘The shock and sorrow that followed

the New Delhi tragedy shows we still respect sainthood even when

we cannot fully understand it. 5

Gandhi ‘made humility and simple truth more powerful than

empires’, U.S. Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg said. Pearl S.

Buck, novelist, described Gandhi’s assassination as ‘another

crucifixion 5 . Justice Felix Frankfurter called it ‘a cruel blow

against the forces of good in the world 5 .

General Douglas MacArthur, supreme Allied military com¬

mander in Japan, said: ‘In the evolution of civilization, if it is to

survive, all men cannot fail eventually to adopt Gandhi’s belief

that the process of mass application of force to resolve contentious

issues is fundamentally not only wrong but contains within itself

the germs of self-destruction. 5 Lord (Admiral) Mountbatten, last

British Viceroy in India, expressed the hope that Gandhi’s life

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might ‘inspire our troubled world to save itself by following his

noble example’. The spectacle of the general and the admiral

pinning their faith on the little ascetic would certainly seem to

justify the verdict of Sir Hartley Shawcross, British Attorney

General, that Gandhi was ‘the most remarkable man of the

century’.

To the statesmen and politicians who eulogized him Gandhi

was at least a reminder of their own inadequacies.

A California girl of thirteen wrote in a letter: ‘I was really

terribly sad to hear about Gandhi’s death. I never knew I was

that interested in him but I found myself quite unhappy about the

great man’s death.’

In New York, a twelve-year-old girl had gone into the kitchen

for breakfast. The radio was on and it brought the news of the

shooting of Gandhi. There, in the kitchen, the girl, the maid and

the gardener held a prayer meeting and prayed and wept. Just

so, millions in all countries mourned Gandhi’s death as a personal

loss. They did not quite know why; they did not quite know what

he stood for. But he was ‘a good man’ and good men are rare.

‘I know no other man of any time or indeed in recent history’,

wrote Sir Stafford Cripps, ‘who so forcefully and convincingly

demonstrated the power of spirit over material things.’ This is

what the people sensed when they mourned. All around them,

material things had power over spirit. The sudden flash of his

death revealed a vast darkness. No one who survived him had

tried so hard —- and with so much success — to live a life of truth,

kindness, self-effacement, humility, service and non-violence

throughout a long, difficult struggle against mighty adversaries.

He fought passionately and unremittingly against British rule of

his country and against the evil in his own countrymen. But he

kept his hands clean in the midst of battle. He fought without

malice or falsehood or hate.

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