



Dan Flavin (United States, 1933–1996), untitled [to the young woman and men murdered in Kent State and Jackson State Universities and to their fellow students who are yet to be killed], 1970. Fluorescent tubes and metal fixtures, 16 feet × 24 inches (4.9 m × 61 cm). Stephen Flavin, New York, Courtesy of David Zwirner, New York/London

VINAY LAL

On the Art of Dying: Death and the Specter of Gandhi

Such was the end, Echecrates, of our friend: concerning whom I may truly say, that of all men of his time whom I have known, he was the wisest and justest and best.

—Plato, *Phaedo*

I: THE TIMEPIECE AND THE LAST WALK

On the evening of January 30, 1948, around ten minutes past five o'clock, Gandhi emerged from the interior of Birla House, where he had been immersed in a meeting with his close associate Sardar Patel, and began to walk towards the garden for his customary evening prayer. A crowd was gathered as usual to catch a glimpse of the old man and seek his audience; among those awaiting his presence were the American journalist Vincent Sheean and BBC's Delhi correspondent, Bob Stimson. But something was amiss: though scarcely a Protestant, Gandhi could well have been mistaken for one, considering that he swore both by punctuality and by the maxim that "cleanliness is next to Godliness," and yet this evening the prayer meeting had not commenced at 5 pm. Gandhi had failed to keep time, prompting Stimson to remark to Sheean, "Well, this is strange. Gandhi's late. He's practically never late."¹ Gandhi's life was governed by the watch to an unusual degree, but he was no prisoner of time; remarkably, though he adhered to a meticulous, even punishing, schedule for much of his life, Gandhi was generous in giving his time to others, whatsoever their station in life. Hundreds of people who were close to him have written that even as he was preoccupied by weighty matters, among them the struggle for the achievement of Indian independence, the oppressive burdens placed upon Dalits, or the tenor of Hindu-Muslim

¹ Vincent Sheean, *Lead, Kindly Light: Gandhi and the Way to Peace* (New York: Random House, 1949), 202.

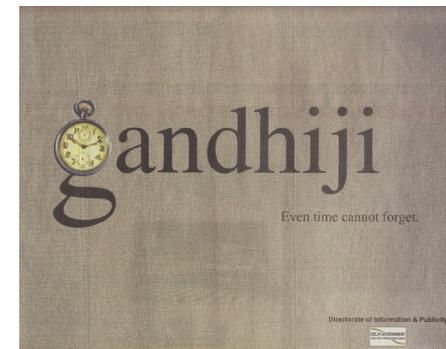
relations, he never neglected to inquire into the well-being of those around him, looking into the minutest details of everyday matters, and furnishing solace and comfort to all those who came to him with their sorrows. Punctual to a fault, Gandhi yet adhered to the most capacious conception of time—the time spent in service to others was time well spent.

If the slightest slackening of the disciplined life was calculated to agitate Gandhi, we should not be surprised that he was in a somewhat disturbed frame of mind as he commenced his last walk. His grand-niece, Manu, who tended to his daily needs, later recalled that he scolded her and Abha, his other caregiver and “walking stick,” for having failed to enforce the time. “I do not like,” Manu recalled Gandhi telling her, “being late for the prayer meeting. Today’s delay is due to your negligence . . . Even a minute’s delay for the prayer causes me great discomfort.”² Yet she had not had the heart to pull him away from Patel: though bereft of any official responsibilities, since Gandhi held no post in the newly minted nation, he had taken upon himself the onerous responsibility of healing the much-talked about rift between Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and the Home Minister Sardar Patel and thus holding the nation together as it lay engulfed by communal killings, arson, and the social disorder in the wake of mass displacement of people following the Partition of India into two new nation-states. So, coming out of Birla House, Gandhi quickened his pace; at around twelve minutes past five, Stimson finally saw him walking across the grass and remarked to Sheean, “There he is.”

Approaching the elevated platform from where he conducted the prayer meeting, Gandhi had taken his hands off the shoulders of Abha and Manu in a gesture of greetings to his well-wishers. Nathuram Godse, a middle-aged high-caste Hindu from Pune, elbowed his way into Gandhi’s path, brushing aside Manu who sought to stop him as they were already late for the prayer, and with a revolver fired three shots at Gandhi in rapid succession and at point-blank range. Some say that as Gandhi slumped forward, the words “Hey Ram, Hey Ram” escaped his lips; others argue that he merely gasped, or that he only uttered a faint “ah” as breath left his body. The assassin’s brother, also implicated in the conspiracy (as it was termed by the government of India) to murder Gandhi, would claim in an interview given in 2000 that “the government knew that he [Gandhi] was an enemy of the Hindus, but they wanted to show that he was a staunch Hindu. So the first act they did was to put ‘Hey Ram’ into Gandhi’s dead mouth.”³ As for the assassin, it is somewhat more reliably reported that before pumping bullets into the “Father of the Nation,” he folded his hands in the traditional Indian greeting of *namaskar*: misguided though he

2 Manubehn Gandhi, *The End of an Epoch*, trans. Gopalkrishna Gandhi (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1962), 41.

3 Gopal Godse, “Events and Accused,” introduction to Nathuram Godse, *May It Please Your Honor* (Delhi: Surya Prakashan, 1987), 11. See also interview with Gopal Godse, “His Principle of Peace Was Bogus,” *Time* (Asia Edition), February 14, 2000; and Gopal Godse, *Gandhiji’s Murder and After*, trans. S.T. Godbole (Delhi: Surya Prakashan, 1989), 64.



thought Gandhi may have been, his assassin nonetheless recognized him as a devoted servant of the nation who strangely deserved both respect and a sentence of death.

As Gandhi collapsed to the ground, his timepiece, always tucked into this loincloth, broke: it had served its master well and had now lost its *raison d'être*. Months before, a nation had been vivisected; now a man was severed from his watch, a country from its guiding light. Time itself stood still, and a silence descended upon the country. Some sixty years later, on the anniversary of his death, the Delhi Government’s Directorate of Information and Publicity rendered homage to Gandhi with a newspaper advertisement bearing his name, an image of a timepiece, and a caption which says, “Even time cannot forget.”

II: THE ART OF DYING

Gandhi appears to have been preparing for death almost from the moment that he entered into public life in South Africa. He had arrived in Natal in May 1893, and soon thereafter, in circumstances that have been discussed, disputed, and dissected in thousands of books and articles, found a niche for himself in South Africa as an advocate of the rights of Indians, founding what Nelson Mandela would much later describe as “the first anti-colonial political organization in the country, if not in the world.”⁴ Gandhi’s reputation as an agitator who aimed to take on South Africa’s white establishment would precede him as he returned to Durban from Bombay in 1897, and he barely survived the beating of a lynch mob that had gathered at the port to receive him.⁵ A decade later, Gandhi would again be tested: in pursuance of his agreement with General Jan Smuts, who agreed to repeal the Transvaal Asiatic Registration Act if the majority of Indians agreed to voluntary registration, which entailed the taking of fingerprints,⁶ Gandhi was perceived by some of his fellow Indians as a traitor. A Pathan client, Mir Alam, thereby took an oath, “I swear with Allah as my witness that I will kill the man who takes the lead in applying for registration.” One conception of the truth met another; both Gandhi and Mir Alam would be true to their words. As Gandhi led a group of Indians to the registration office, Mir Alam and his friends pounced upon him and some of his companions; Gandhi was dealt a severe blow to the head and kicked in his ribs. “I at once fainted with the words *He Rama* (O God!) on my lips,” wrote Gandhi years later, “[and] lay prostrate on the ground and had no notion of what followed.”⁷ The assault might well have continued but for the fact that European passers-by were attracted by the commotion, and Mir Alam and his companions fled—only to be picked up by the police.

4 This is a reference to the Natal Indian Congress, established by Gandhi in 1894—see Mandela’s, “Gandhi the Prisoner: A Comparison,” in *Mahatma Gandhi: 125 Years*, ed. B.R. Nanda (New Delhi: Indian Council for Cultural Relations, 1995), 8. The Indian National Congress was founded in 1885, but whether it was “anti-colonial” at its inception is a different question.

5 M.K. Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, trans. Valji Govindji Desai (1928; 2nd rev. ed., Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1950), 48–60.

6 Though fingerprinting is now fairly ubiquitous, a sign of how far the state everywhere in the world has appropriated powers of surveillance and disciplinary regimentation, only a few decades ago it was still largely criminals who were asked to give fingerprints.

7 Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, 145–55.

It is perfectly apposite that the practitioner of *satyagraha* should be prepared to confront death at any moment: as Gandhi was to write, “Just as one must learn the art of killing in the training of killing for violence, so one must learn the art of dying in the training for nonviolence.”⁸ In an intensely probing and brilliantly hermeneutic piece on Gandhi’s assassination, the cultural critic and political psychologist Ashis Nandy argues that the assassin was motivated not merely by rage at Gandhi’s alleged pampering of the Muslims and his alleged betrayal of the Hindu community. Godse was disturbed rather more by Gandhi’s concerted attempts “to change the definition of centre and periphery in Indian society,” and equally by Gandhi’s “negation of the concepts of masculinity and femininity implicit in some Indian traditions and in the colonial situation.”⁹ It is telling that, at his trial for the murder of Gandhi, Nathuram Godse complained bitterly about how the *bania* (merchant-class) Gandhi had shipwrecked Indian politics with his quaint and enfeebling idea of nonviolence. Gandhi understood well the homology between colonial dominance and masculinity, and he sought to bring to the body politic a conception of politics that valorized the feminine, the non-Brahminical, and the mythos of Indian civilization. Nathuram Godse thus divined what many others did not, namely that Gandhi represented a threat to the idea of India as a masculine, modern nation-state, indeed to the very idea of “normal politics”. Godse himself hailed from Maharashtra, “a region where Brahmanic dominance was particularly strong”;¹⁰ and the Chitpavan Brahmin community of which he was a member had seen the gradual erosion of its power, first under colonial rule and then with the ascendancy of the likes of Gandhi, who belonged to a merchant caste and had little affinity for the worldview associated with the traditional Brahmin elites. Not surprisingly, three previous attempts to assassinate Gandhi—in 1934, and twice in 1944, one in which Godse was implicated—all involved Maharashtrian Brahmins.

However, there was more to the “art of dying” than a series of providential escapes from the jaws of death. Gandhi had often expressed the desire to live to 125 years—and some suspected that the old man, considering the rigorous discipline to which he subjected himself in every respect, could well have lived that long. As the prospect of independence became brighter, the communal killings intensified, and his associates showed an unseemly preoccupation with the quest for power, Gandhi cut an increasingly lonely figure. At the prayer discourse on what would turn out to be last birthday, October 2, 1947, Gandhi noted that “there was a time when I wanted to live for 125 years, but I do not desire to live to be a hundred, or even ninety, I have lived for 78–79 years and that is enough for me.”¹¹ Some months earlier, on May 22, he had told Manu that while he had “no longer the desire to live for 125 years,” he also did not wish to “die of lingering

8 *Gandhi on Non-Violence: Selected Texts from Mohandas K. Gandhi’s Non-Violence in Peace and War*, ed. Thomas Merton (New York: New Directions, 1965), 68.

9 Ashis Nandy, “Final Encounter: The Politics of the Assassination of Gandhi,” in *At the Edge of Psychology: Essays in Politics and Culture* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980), 70–98, quotes on 71.

10 *Ibid.*, 77.

11 Cited by Sudhir Chandra in *Speaking of Gandhi’s Death*, ed. Tridip Suhrud and Peter Ronald deSouza (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2010), 44.

12 Manubehn Gandhi, *Last Glimpses of Bapu* (Delhi: Shiva Lal Agarwala, 1962), 234, 297–98.

13 See Narayan Desai, *My Life is My Message*, trans. Tridip Suhrud, 4 vols. (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2009), vol. 4, *Svarpan (1940–48)*, 476–79.

14 Robert Payne, *The Life and Death of Mahatma Gandhi* (1969; reprint, New York: Smithmark Publishers, 1995), 647.

illness”—such a death would obligate Manu to signal to the world that he “was not a man of God but an imposter and a fraud. If you fail in that duty I shall feel unhappy wherever I am. But if I die taking God’s name with my last breath, it will be a sign that I was what I strove for and claimed to be.”

Nathuram Godse was among the men who were determined that Gandhi should die at their hands. On January 20, 1948, he and a handful of others had engineered a bomb explosion at Birla House with the hope of killing Gandhi, but the attempt was a resounding failure; two days later, Gandhi took Manu aside and told her, “I wish I might face the assassin’s bullets while lying on your lap and repeating the name of Rama with a smile on my face. But whether the world says it or not—for the world has a double face—I tell you that you should regard me as your true mother.” Gandhi would even suggest to Manu, the night before his murder, that the manner of his death would reveal to the world whether he was a real Mahatma or not: in words reminiscent of his earlier admonition to her, she was to shout from the rooftops to the whole world that he was a “false or hypocritical Mahatma” if he were to die of a “lingering disease, or even from a pimple.” Yet if an explosion took place, as it had last week, “or if someone shot at me,” Gandhi continued, “and I received his bullet in my bare chest without a sigh and with Rama’s name on my lips, only then should you say that I was a true Mahatma.”¹²

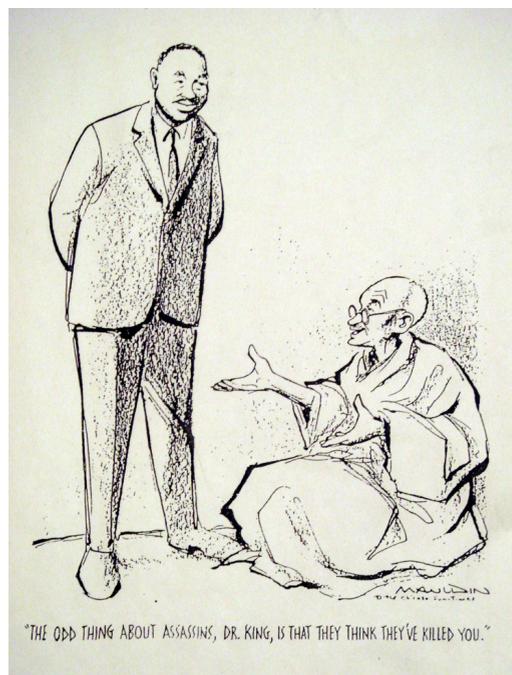
Does the “art of dying” mean only, then, that we should be able to choose the timing and manner of our death? On the morning of his assassination, Gandhi gave Pyarelal, his secretary, the draft constitution for the Congress Party that he had completed the previous night; he then called for Manu, who replied that she was busy with something and would join him shortly. Thereupon Gandhi replied: “Who knows, what is going to happen before night fall or even whether I shall be alive?” He also penned a letter of condolence to a colleague who had lost his daughter: “What can I write to you? What comfort can I give you? Death is a true friend. It is only our ignorance that makes us to grieve.”¹³

III: THE SPECTER OF GANDHI

Robert Payne was among Gandhi’s first biographers to describe his murder as a “permissive assassination.”¹⁴ India had emerged as a new nation-state from two centuries of colonial rule, and India’s elites, among them some who were Gandhi’s associates, were keen that the country should take its place in the world as a strong nation-state resolutely committed to modernization, industrialization, and the kind of central planning that characterized the policies of the Soviet

Union. Yet Gandhi had initiated a far-reaching critique of industrial civilization and the very precepts of modernity in his tract of 1909, *Hind Swaraj*, and his critics worried that his pervasive influence would be detrimental to the development of India as an economic and political power. Gandhi was, though this could scarcely be admitted, a nuisance, even a hindrance; and when Godse pulled the trigger, there were certainly others who thought that the man had died not a moment too soon. The government had cast the murder as a “conspiracy” among Nathuram, his brother Gopal, the ideologue Vinayak Savarkar, and a few other men; but it was the bureaucrats and elites who, viewing Gandhi as expendable, had secretly conspired to let him die.

Gandhi has, however, had to be killed repeatedly. It may well be that is likewise the fate of others whom a nation seeks to exorcise. A cartoonist for the *Chicago Sun-Times* in the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. appears to have understood this well: a seated Gandhi looks up to the slain civil rights leader and remarks, “The odd thing about assassins, Dr. King, is that they think they’ve killed you.” A modern nation-state has many ways to excise the memory of those who are most despised, resented, or feared. It is a criminal offence in Germany, for instance, to perpetuate the memory of Hitler, or take up his cause in any fashion. The case of Gandhi is, of course, far more complicated: as I have argued elsewhere, every constituency in India—Dalits, modernizers, feminists, Marxists, Hindu nationalists,



Bill Mauldin cartoon published in the *Chicago Sun-Times* the day after Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, April 5, 1968

15 Vinay Lal, “The Gandhi Everyone Loves to Hate,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, no. 40 (October 4–10, 2008): 55–64.

self-proclaimed revolutionaries, and various worshippers at the altars of violence, science, and development—“loves to hate” him,¹⁵ but he is also revered by many. Gandhi is none other than the “Father of the Nation,” and whatever politicians think of him on the sly, the proper obsequies must be paid: his statues are garlanded, his birthday is uniquely observed as a mandatory national holiday, and a requisite number of seminars proclaiming his “relevance” are held every year with gusto. For decades after his death, the commercial Hindi film captured the Janus-faced sentiment with which Gandhi is received with simple elegance: in the police station or the bureaucrat’s office, underneath the required framed picture of Gandhi, the functionary of the state invariably pockets a bribe. Gandhi’s fellow Gujaratis, in and out of India, have banished him from their worldview; rather shamefully, the guardians of his own Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad, from where Gandhi set out on the Salt March, shut close its doors in the face of the Muslim refugees seeking protection from the hoodlums baying for their blood in the killings of 2002. Yet it is the same Gujaratis who, mindful of the fact that no figure in India’s modern history commands the kind of cultural capital that Gandhi does, unfailingly attempt to avail themselves of the goodwill generated by their kinsman’s name, especially internationally.

Yet, however much India’s elites and middle classes have attempted to relegate Gandhi to the margins, engaging in campaigns of slander, obfuscation, and trivialization, Gandhi continues to surface in the most unexpected ways. He is the (sometimes hidden) face of most of India’s most significant ecological movements, from the Chipko agitation to the Narmada Bachao Andolan, just as he is the face of intellectual dissent, little insurrections, and social upheaval. Every so often someone comes along purporting to unmask the “real” Gandhi, the Gandhi that “no one knows,” the Gandhi who was patriarchal, bourgeois, casteist, a sexual puritan, contemptuous of Africans, an enemy of progress and development, even a “friend of Hitler.” (Gandhi authored two short very short letters to Hitler, neither of which the war-time British censors permitted to reach the intended recipient, urging him to renounce violence.) Yet Gandhi refuses to disappear: we have heard of the Gandhian moment in Iran’s Green Revolution, the Gandhi who appears on Israel’s Separation Wall, and of the “little Gandhi” thrown up by every revolution over the last few decades. Few Indian artists of any caliber have not entered into an engagement with his life and work; the very iconography of Gandhi—the shining bald head, the pair of round spectacles, the timepiece, the walking stick, the sandals, the Mickey Mouse ears, the pet goat—is now part of the national imaginary. He is everywhere, in every act of nonviolence and, more significantly, every act of violence—a spectral presence to remind us of the supreme importance of the ethical life.