

GANDHI—THE LAST PHASE

By R. PALME DUTT

GANDHI died as he had lived—battling in the cause of India and humanity. He died, as Abraham Lincoln died, as Marat, as Jaures, as so many leaders of the battle of human liberation—at the hands of an assassin, the tool of the dark forces. He who at the age of seventy-eight years might well have sought the peace of retirement after half a century of leadership, threw himself into the breach, when others failed or faltered, and gave his life and his blood to save India from the hideous orgy of communal carnage and reaction that had followed on the ill-omened August settlement against whose consequences he had warned.

In death all pay him honour. The Amerys and the Churchills, who persecuted him in life, throw their flower upon his pyre. But the record of his last battle, and the manner of his death, must not be buried in the stiff mausoleum of official obsequies. For that record is political dynamite that may yet from his ashes stir India to renewed life and struggle against the dark forces which are seeking to strangle Indian liberation. The last phase of Gandhi was in truth the crown of his life.

The real Gandhi with difficulty peeps through the official obsequies. His devotees seek to deify him into a saint; when, if any man was “human, all too human”, that man was Gandhi. His detractors can with ease pick out his weaknesses and inconsistencies in a manner which only reveals their own pettiness and inability to understand the greatness that was in him.

Gandhi's greatness of spirit, his honesty, courage and love of humanity shine through and transcend the many inconsistencies and contradictions, even failures of leadership, which were the expression of the social conditions of his era, of the still confused, immature, transitional stage of popular and national awakening that he at once inspired and reflected.

For over a quarter of a century Gandhi incarnated the Indian national movement, in an era when the real content and conscious direction of the movement could only express the striving of the Indian bourgeois revolution, but when the mass upsurge which was the driving force of the movement revealed above all the first stirring from century-old slumber of the masses of the peasantry, still bound by a hundred ties of ancient traditions, religious and social conservatism, naïve and fanciful backward-looking or utopian yearnings couched in language of mythological legend, but groping their way forward to basic social change. No other leader than Gandhi could have bridged the gap, during this transitional period, between the actual bourgeois direction of the national movement and the awakening, but not yet conscious masses. Both for good and for evil

Gandhi achieved this, and led the movement, even appearing to create it. Only to the modern working class, born of factory industry, and to its philosophy, Marxism, Gandhi was a stranger. This role only finally comes to an end in proportion as the masses, with the emergent leadership of the working class, begin to reach clear consciousness of their own interests, and the actual class forces and class relations begin to stand out clear in the Indian scene, without need of mythological concealment.

Gandhi's death, in a manner of speaking, symbolised all the contradictions of his life.

The apostle of the "simple life", he died in the princely mansion of the most ruthless arch-profitteering multi-millionaire of the new Indian ruling monied class.

The apostle of "non-violence", he died a victim of the hideous orgy of murder and gang-ridden violence which was in the main the reflection of long years of imperialist and reactionary intrigue and fomentation of divisions, but was also in part the nemesis of a quarter century's preaching of "non-violence" frustrating the revolutionary energy of the masses.

But he died true to his beliefs, a fighter at his post, a patriot, a martyr in the cause of humanity, and an inspiration to all who come after him.

Gandhi's imperishable achievement in the building of the Indian national movement and in the liberation struggle of humanity needs no record here. He kindled the flame of revolt against imperialist domination. He brought out the national movement from the narrow circles of liberal constitutionalism to the masses. He strove for democratic unity overriding communal divisions. Like his great predecessor, Tolstoy, he inspired burning hatred of the shackles of a false civilisation, even though he had no clear social theory to point the way to a solution.

His weaknesses followed from the transitional stage of the movement he represented. He only awoke slowly to the struggle against imperialism. When he took service in the uniform of imperialism, even though only as a stretcher-bearer, in its war against the Boers, or, even worse, in its war against the Zulus, he was still tied by old conceptions of "loyalty" which appeared again in the first world war. Like his predecessor, Tilak, he sought to combine militant nationalism with Hindu revival, even though he sought to purify Hinduism and strove tirelessly against communal and caste separatism; but this combination of nationalism and Hindu revivalism made the national front vulnerable to imperialist policies of playing on religious divisions, and helped to sow the seeds of the terrible harvest that finally resulted also in his own death at the hands of a Hindu chauvinist. His lack of a clear social theory, and combination of idealisation of the abstract "peasant" with the preaching of the doctrine of "trusteeship" of the landlord and capitalist, inevitably made his social teaching and practical leadership an instrument of the

big propertied interests which in fact moved to capitulation to imperialism. He feared mass violence, and saw in the rising revolt of the workers and poor peasantry only the menace of "red ruin and anarchy", failing to realise until the last how much the real menace of violence and anarchy sprang, not from the left, but from the right, from reaction utilising the weapons of communalism. His theories of "non-violence" thus also in practice served the interests of the propertied classes, and, in the final resort, of imperialism.

So it came about that when the greatest national upsurge swept India after the second world war, in the days of the glorious Indian naval revolt, when Hindu-Moslem unity ruled the streets, Gandhi saw only the menace of "delivering India over to the rabble", and hastened to welcome the Cabinet Mission and advocate a compromise settlement with imperialism.

But when the compromise settlement arrived in the shape of the Mountbatten Award, and was revealed to bring the partition of India, communal conflict and the strengthened domination of right wing reaction in the national movement, Gandhi was the first of the front rank national leaders to sound the alarm. Already in July of last year, when other leaders were singing the dawn of "freedom", Gandhi proclaimed that "Dominion status for India would stink to the nostrils if Britain left India split and at war within herself". In September he sounded the note of warning of the menace of war of India and Pakistan.

As in the wake of the Mountbatten "settlement" the horrors of communal conflict and massacre spread over wide areas of India, Gandhi felt and suffered deeply in his whole being the agony of India. The private record of a friend, to whom Gandhi unbosomed his soul in September, 1947, may now justly be made public to show the depth of the anguish and disillusionment through which Gandhi had to pass in those days when so many superficial politicians of India and Britain were singing their little songs of triumph. Gandhi said, according to this record:

"I do not understand how all these terrible things are happening in our country. For many years the Congress has struggled and grown, and it has grown stronger and stronger, and advanced higher and higher; but now, after we have reached the pinnacle, somehow these horrible things are happening, and the Congress is not able to do anything effective to stop them. What mistakes have we made, for we must have made mistakes? Otherwise how could all these things happen? It seems that while we were building the Congress, at the same time it was decaying; and today it is obvious that it has decayed, because it is not able to fight all the bad things that are going on in India today."

And he went on in words that spoke the agony of his soul:

"Everything looks dark to me, very dark, and I see very little hope. Some people say that after the dark night comes the bright dawn; but I only see the darkness of the night; I do not know when the dawn will come."

But Gandhi did not despair. He fought. He threw his frail body and indomitable will into the forefront of the fight for communal

unity. And in this last heroic fight he began to find his friends, no longer on the right, but on the left. In his great campaigns in Calcutta and in Delhi he worked in close association with the Communists. At the last Gandhi and the revolutionary working class began to find one another in the common fight for democratic unity of the people. The Communists helped, not only to organise the campaign, but to equip him for the fight. They exposed to him the full sinister role of the reactionary communalist organisations, of the R.S.S., which has at last been banned only after Gandhi's death, and of the Hindu Mahasabha. At first Gandhi, as he himself later said publicly, refused to believe it; he had met the leaders of the R.S.S., and they had told him they were only pious Hindus with the most innocent objectives. But the damning dossier of concrete evidence was laid before him. Gandhi was convinced.

With Gandhi to be convinced was to act. He went to the All India Congress Committee in November and opened the offensive. He denounced the R.S.S. He denounced by name the backers of the R.S.S. and of the Hindu Mahasabha in the Congress and in the Government. He declared:

"I met an R.S.S. leader some days ago, and even praised the R.S.S. because of what he said. But soon I came to know that I was deceived. Those who are in the R.S.S. cannot remain in the Congress."

He spoke of Dr. Shyama Prasad Mookerjee, Minister for Industry and Supplies in the Indian Central Government:

"Is Dr. Shyama Prasad here? He is not here. I wish he was here. He is in the Mahasabha. The Mahasabha is an enemy of the Congress. And therefore he can have no place in the Cabinet. Or else he must leave the Mahasabha."

In January Gandhi brought into play his final weapon—his fast. When Gandhi proclaimed his fast on January 12, he declared:

"Death for me would be a glorious deliverance rather than that I should be a helpless witness to the destruction of India."

He proclaimed his fast, not only for communal unity, but against what he described, quoting a friend's letter from Andhra in Madras, as "factionalism in Congress circles, money-making activities by several members of the Legislative Council and Assembly, and the weakness of Ministers", and went on to say: "The corruption described by him is no monopoly of Andhra. Let us beware." Gandhi even named Patel, the right wing dictator of the Congress machine, when he declared that he was no "Yes-man" of Patel, and added:

"If Sardar Patel is the official enemy of the Moslems, Pandit Nehru can ask him to retire."

With this open offensive against the dark forces in India Gandhi sealed his doom. It began to be whispered in high quarters on the right wing: "The old man is going mad; he would be better out of the way." Leaflets of the reactionary communalists openly called for the assassination of Gandhi and Nehru.

Hardly had Gandhi's fast ended than the first attempt on his life was made. Police investigations are understood to have revealed a

widespread plot. Yet it appears that no steps were taken to protect Gandhi's life. Patel, as Minister of the Home Department, was in charge of the police.

On January 30 Gandhi was assassinated.

Patel stood over the dead body of Gandhi; then he broadcast to the people. He declared in his broadcast the cold words:

“How good it would have been if he had passed away during his fast rather than have this thing happen today.”

The trial may reveal some of the background of the plot. There are those who have noted a certain analogy between the assassination of Gandhi in India and the assassination of Aung Sen in Burma a few months earlier. Both were the most prominent national leaders of their people. Aung Sen had also approved a compromise settlement with imperialism, then had shown signs of becoming restive and was in the act of negotiating a united front agreement with the Communists, when he was suddenly removed—by gunmen of right wing extremists.

Gandhi's death has shocked India into awakening. At last the popular demand has compelled the banning of the R.S.S., although the effectiveness of this will depend on the action of the authorities. The offensive against the dark forces goes forward. A serious test of strength between the left and the right, between democracy and reaction, between the fighters for independence and the allies of imperialism, is developing. The need for democratic unity of the left is greater than ever.

The democratic forces of India will carry forward the fight to see that Gandhi's death shall not be in vain, that the fight shall go forward to the victory of true independence and democratic unity for India.

Gandhi, though dead, speaks to India and the world.