

India, a Nation of the Living or a Necropolis?

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I.K. Gujral died a few days ago. As a former Prime Minister he was given a state funeral and the cremation was done on one of the sthals which has come up along the Yamuna River on the Ring Road. A country which believes in caste and class hierarchies to the extent that India does would naturally not permit a former Prime Minister to be cremated at Nigambodh Ghat, which is also located on the Yamuna River but is meant for ordinary mortals whom Yamaraj has taken away from the world.

It all started with Mahatma Gandhi. The man was an ascetic, with almost no personal wants and certainly with no personal property of his own. Yet by his cremation at Raj Ghat and the creation of the Gandhi Memorial there a huge chunk of land stands transferred in death to a person who did not have even a square inch when he was alive. Anyway Gandhi was unique, which means there is no one who is his parallel or is equal and, therefore, the whole of India is his by right. Unfortunately, he is not the only person who has died since then. Jawaharlal Nehru died, as all mortals must do and another huge chunk of land at Raj Ghat was put aside as his memorial. This was followed by Shanti Sthal for Lal Bahadur Shastri and Shakti Sthal for Indira Gandhi, and now by the area where first Lal Bahadur Shastri and then IK Gujral after quitting the mortal coil became one with the elements. Fortunately Morarji Desai, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Gulzarilal Nanda and other such lesser beings were content to be cremated elsewhere than in Delhi and, therefore, we have been spared the question of donating hundreds of acres of land in Delhi in their memory. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, whose contribution to the independence of India and its unity and integrity is not less than that of Jawaharlal Nehru, owns no piece of land in life or in death in Delhi and certainly in Ahmedabad where he died and was cremated a whole chunk of land along the Sabarmati River is not dedicated to his memory. Simple in life, firm in government, simple in death one has only to gaze around an united India to see the true monument to this great son of India

In India huge numbers of people are poor. They somehow eke out a living in the villages and by and large land ownership or land occupation is fairly stable in rural India. When the poor move to the cities they have no place for shelter and, therefore, they create squatter colonies, largely on government land. Being incontinent enough to live rather than die they have no entitlement to shelter, are considered encroachers and the more affluent of them who may have acquired land legally but contrary to the land use prescribed in the city master plan are considered to be part of unauthorised colonies. Because the squatter has no rights he is vulnerable to action by the authorities and from time to time municipal bulldozers appear on the scene and raze the hutments of the poor to the ground. Because the owners of property in unauthorised colonies are slightly more affluent they bribe their way to regularisation, but even they are not considered citizens worthy of government's notice. This has led to a very anomalous situation.

Look at the paradox. The living, who need shelter, are denied official access to it. The dead, who do not need shelter, at least on earth, have huge bungalows reserved for them and made into memorials. The house at Tees January Marg, known as Birla House, is a monument to Mahatma Gandhi because he was assassinated there. The Mahatma did not want a memorial

but we have created it for him. Teen Murti House, the residence of Jawaharlal Nehru, is a monument but at least there is the saving grace of it being a centre for academic discussion, studies and research. But the bungalows occupied by people like Babu Jagjivan Ram, Indira Gandhi and Lal Bahadur Shastri have all become monuments, some of them still on the tourist map, but just barely. However, the *dhobi*, the cook, the *mali* and other domestic help who lived in the servant quarters of these bungalows have all been thrown out. Has the stature of our dead leaders been enhanced by these houses being turned into monument? These are government buildings, constructed at public cost and specifically meant for housing a government functionary so long as he is in service or on that particular post. It does not become his private property and, therefore, once he or she is not there on account of retirement, losing at the polls or death, the property cannot become his or her's in perpetuity. It must revert to government for further allotment because its cyclical and continuous use is built into the order which sanctioned its construction. Every time we make a public building into a monument we waste public funds.

In India we have two methods of disposing of the dead. The vast majority of the population being Hindu cremation is the preferred method. For this one does not require much land space and because cremation reduces the body to ashes, which are then collected and suitably consigned to some sacred stretch of water, the land is reused for cremation for ever and a day.

The second method is burial. In Islam a burial has no sanctity and in fact the belief in Saudi Arabia is that after a certain period of use, say twenty years, the land can be recycled. Then we have the Christian burial in which the cemetery is considered hallowed ground, but it is no way a necropolis because whereas the dead are remembered through headstones, Christians do not follow the Pharaonic practice of using the tombs of dead rulers virtually as underground cities of the dead. Why, then, have we singled out powerful politicians in India for being perpetuated in public memory through what is no less than a Samadhi? In any case why waste time and money because for every Prince Siddharth who lives on as the Buddha there are thousands and thousands of princes and kings whose memory is obliterated by time. That will be the fate of all those who inherit Delhi's new city of the dead, except for Mahatma Gandhi, who will live on as the Enlightened One so long as mankind exists. That is a real monument though, like the Vedas, it is an ephemeral though eternal Word, rather than mere brick and cement, which perishes with time.

Delhi is studded with cities which ceased to exist as the abode of the living Tughlaqabad, Ferozeshah Kotla and Quila Rai Pithora are three examples of such cities, now forcibly reclaimed by the living, but only in parts and against the staunch opposition of the so-called conservationists. The Yamuna River front goes one better. It has been dedicated to the dead without ever being used by the living. In my book that makes it a necropolis.
