

We, the Living!

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In Delhi along the Yamuna River a stretch of 371 hectares, that is, approximately 927 acres, has come under cremation ground, samadhi, etc., of people perceived as the leaders of the nation. These include Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri, Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi and now IK Gujral. All these seemed to merit cremation at new sites, reserved individually for each, instead of at Nigambodh Ghat, also on the Yamuna River but meant for ordinary mortals whom Yamaraj has taken away from the world. Over 900 acres of land, therefore, now stands assigned to people who are no longer living and who do not have any use for the land. A samadhi for Mahatma Gandhi one can understand because he was truly unique as not only the person who launched our movement for independence but also as one who united this nation as has never been done before. The whole of India is his, whether or not we commemorate his memory through brick and mortar, by assignment of land or by any other means that this nation chooses. No one else, not even Jawaharlal Nehru, comes anywhere near the stature of Mahatma Gandhi. The irony, of course, is that this ascetic, this man who genuinely lived and died for India and who had no desire for anything material, is still honoured not by our practicing what he has taught us but rather by creating monuments in his memory. He who did not own a square inch of land when he was alive now virtually finds **himself** the owner of a huge chunk of land in Delhi.

Morarji Desai, Rajendra Prasad, Vallabhbhai Patel and Gulzarilal Nanda fortunately decided to die otherwise than in Delhi and it is to the credit of these leaders, their followers and the cities in which they cast aside their mortal coil that they have not transferred land to them in death which they did not aspire for in life. Of course we have a contrast in Tamil Nadu where first the Annadorai Memorial swallowed up a substantial portion of the Marina Beach in Madras, to be followed by the M.G. Ramachandran Memorial and no doubt with advance reservation for the present leaders in that State. The only parallel one can think of is the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt who, when they died, were buried in what are virtual underground cities in which the dead symbolically still live. These cities of the dead, these necropolises, are covered by pyramids, themselves built by slave labour, many of whom died in building monuments to the dead. Of course no one honoured them with a pyramid. Are we in modern India trying to emulate the ancient Egyptians in assigning large areas of land to the dead, not because they may come alive but because we cannot think of any other, more sensible method of perpetuating their memory?

In India we have two methods of disposing of the dead. The vast majority of the population being Hindu, cremation is the preferred method. Normally the funeral pyre is used, though besides the pyre we also see the emergence of electric crematoria which provide an advanced, scientific and technological method of quickly reducing the body to ashes, with minimum pollution. Whether it is the funeral pyre or the electric crematorium, cremation does not call for much space and the same platform on which the pyre is lit can be re-used after the remains are removed. In terms of use of land there is nothing more economic than cremation. The second method is burial, because both Christians and Muslims bury their dead. I suppose this is because the followers of both religions believe in the Day of Judgement for which purpose the body is resurrected, which would not be possible if it had been cremated and reduced to ash. Even here there is an anomaly because whilst the Christian invocation at burial

is “ashes to ashes and dust to dust”, meaning that the body will go back to its constituent elements, in Islam the invocation is “Supurd-e-khak”. This means that you are consigned to the earth, to the dust from which you have been created. If you are reduced to dust, or to ash by burial do you have a better chance of resurrection than if you are reduced to ashes through cremation? If the Almighty can reconstitute a person’s body from dust, why not from the ashes of cremation? In Islam a burial ground as such has no sanctity and, for example, in Saudi Arabia it is considered legitimate after a certain period, say twenty years, to recycle the burial ground. Christians, however, consider a cemetery to be hallowed ground, which means that burial is final and the land cannot be recycled. Christian cemeteries are well maintained but they are by no means a necropolis of the Pharaonic variety.

Hindus seem to revel in perpetuating the memory of departed powerful politicians by monuments which are no less than the samadhis of saints. This seems to be a complete waste of time and money because it takes a Prince Siddhartha to live on as the Buddha, or the Enlightened One. No monument can enhance his glory, nor lack of monument retract from it. Our politicians are like the thousands of princes and kings whose memory is obliterated by time. None of them will be a Siddhartha and, therefore, the necropolis built for them on the Yamuna River front will not delay by a moment the day of forgetting. What we need, therefore, is to celebrate not the memory but the forgetting of the person in question because that is the reality of the “*kaal chakra*”.

We do not stop at building a city of the dead at the spot of cremation. We go much further and we reserve the houses once occupied by these celebrities as monuments to be preserved, but not used by those who are living and are entitled to a house of this category. The house at Tees January Marg, known as Birla House, is where the Mahatma was assassinated. He never wanted a monument to himself but we have converted Birla House into a monument in memory of the Mahatma’s martyrdom. I have already said that Mahatma Gandhi is unique and, therefore, a monument to him does not really call for any comment. Teen Murti House, once the residence of the British Commander-in-Chief of India, the second most powerful person in British India, was rightly taken over as the residence of the Prime Minister, the most powerful man in India, by Jawaharlal Nehru. After his death his successor did not occupy the house, in sharp contrast with the practice in Britain where 10, Downing Street is the official residence of the Prime Minister. The incumbent Prime Minister vacates the house prior to the new Prime Minister being sworn in so that his successor comes straight from Buckingham Palace to 10, Downing Street and begins his tenancy. Teen Murti House became the Nehru Memorial, a library and a major centre for academic studies and, therefore, one can perhaps overlook its no longer being the official residence of the Prime Minister. But look at what has followed. Indira Gandhi was shot at the boundary between 1, Safdarjang Road and 1, Akbar Road and both houses have now been pulled out of the official pool and have become a monument to the memory of Indira Gandhi. This has happened to the house on Janpath occupied by Lal Bahadur Shastri as Prime Minister. Babu Jagjivan Ram’s official residence is also reserved in his memory. 7, Race Course Road is the Prime Minister’s residence and I am amazed that on the death of Rajiv Gandhi at Sriperumbudur that whole complex of houses has not been converted into his memorial. Perhaps this is because he was not in power when he died, nor was the Congress Party. All these houses have been built with exchequer funds, duly voted upon as part of a grant of the Central Public Works Department. When the grants are discussed government has to give justification for every item included in the budget and I am absolutely certain that when these bungalows were built in British days the construction must have been justified as

being necessary for housing senior officers and Members of the Council, the British equivalents of our ministers. Therefore, when these bungalows are converted to monuments the purpose for which they were erected is defeated, which means that in a way the approval of Parliament for their construction is bypassed and perverted. This is a clear misuse of public funds and the legitimacy of their conversion becomes highly suspect and open to objection.

Why do we indulge in such futile exercises? If the answer were to be in only one word, it would be “sycophancy”. Because those close to the departed person or related to him are in power or are likely to come to power, flatterers and sycophants hasten to gain favour by commemorating the memory of the departed in such a way that the heirs and successors feel pleased and, in this state of being pleased, they might throw a crumb or two to the flatterers. The Sanatan Dharma in its purest form is not idolatrous or polytheistic and there is belief in one God, by whatever name He is known. The ultimate goal of every human being of the Sanatan faith is to achieve a state in which one can be absorbed permanently into the God-head or Brahmatma. However, because the Sanatan Dharam gives the freedom of choice to select one’s own path to salvation, this has manifested itself in sects in which the Lord is worshipped in many forms, including devis and devtas, who are symbolised by idols. In the course of practice the basic tenet of there being only one God is forgotten, the symbolism of different forms of God is lost sight of and ritual becomes all important and, therefore, the artificial discipline imposed by ritual ultimately replaces the divinity of God by the artificial sanctity of idols. When the idol achieves an identity of its own we become idol worshippers and, therefore, slaves of empty ritual, which overtakes that which is sacred. This calamity seems to have overtaken us as a people. The true worth of our leaders is forgotten, invoking their name has become a ritual, being sycophantic to them has become worship and the balance that should exist in society is disturbed. If ritual becomes more important than religion, then we shall certainly believe that the idol of Ganesh drinks milk and, therefore, we insist on feeding milk to an idol. Our cupidity is fed by unscrupulous priests who convince us that the idol is actually drinking the milk. That piece of stone then become more important than Ganesh himself. That is precisely what is happening to us as a people when we build cities of the dead for departed leaders, a few of whom have been nation builders but the rest of whom have only been powerful politicians, a few being good in government and the rest being no better than Pindaris. Regardless of this we still build monuments, reserve huge stretches of land for their remains and convert houses for the living into mausoleums for the dead. I find this absolutely sickening.

Let us come to the living. About forty percent of the population of every city in India consists of the very poor who have come in search of a job and who cannot find shelter for themselves. These are the squatters or encroachers who, on the failure of administrators and planners to accommodate them, have used their native intelligence to build some sort of shelter on unoccupied pieces of land. In Bombay and Calcutta they have converted whole pavements into shanty towns and the self built homes of the poor have gifted to Bombay what it touts to be the largest slum in Asia at Dharavi. Anything between thirty to forty percent of every major town is either squatter colonies or unauthorised colonies. These people are looked upon as criminals because they have encroached on government land, dirty as they live in slums which have no services, intriguers because they try every tactic under the sun to retain the foothold that they have established in the city and potential crooks because every theft in the city is attributed to slum dwellers. The authorities, the middle class, the affluent all look upon squatters as people who have no right to shelter and for whose eviction the bulldozer was created.

These squatters are the very people who provide the city almost its entire unskilled work force, its construction workers, maintenance personnel who keep the buildings and services in good repair, most of its craftsmen, almost all the domestic servants and without whom the city would simply not function. These are living people who keep the city functioning and yet they are denied the very thing that we lavish on the dead, that is, a right to living space and shelter. This is a completely skewed approach to city planning and development. The dead who have no need become masters of acres of land and the living, who need it most, do not have access even to that much piece of land on which we can put the point of a needle. The Constitution mandates justice and equality, equal protection of laws and a social order which promotes welfare. Under Article 39 the State is directed to secure that the ownership and control of the material resources of the community are so distributed as best to sub-serve the common good. It also mandates that operation of the economic system must not result in the concentration of wealth and means of production to the common detriment. A system which concentrates land and housing in the dead to the detriment of the living can hardly promote welfare. The very act of setting aside in perpetuity large parcels of land for memorials for a few people hits both at the principle of equality and promotion of welfare.

The reservation of 927 acres of land along the Yamuna River front, including Rajghat, is an affront to the Constitution and directly aimed at the common man. Shivaji Park at Dadar in Bombay is meant for the citizens of Dadar, Matunga and perhaps a part of Mahim. This is a place for recreation, for future Sachin Tendulkars to fine hone their cricket skills, for the elderly to walk morning and evening and for the citizens of the area to give their lungs a chance to breathe in this open space. Not an inch of it is meant for memorials. If the Shiv Sena is so concerned about Maharashtrians and Bombay, it should come forward and remove whatever has been erected there in the name of Bal Thackeray and gift the park back to the citizens of Bombay, free of all encumbrances. But then we should remember that our priority is monuments to the dead and not land for the citizens. It has been argued that the Yamuna River front has been saved by reserving 927 acres as a monument to the dead, but it is not a monument to all the dead. It is a monument to certain leaders only and though it is claimed that the Yamuna River front has been beautified thereby, the fact remains that this is not a public park open to every citizen of Delhi. It is very much a closed and regulated monument to the dead, a new necropolis with restricted access. The lawns of the Central Vista along Rajpath are meant for the living because people congregate there in the evening and during holidays. Rajghat and its surroundings is not a place for normal public access and, therefore, it can only be defined as a necropolis. Therefore, the title of this paper, 'We, the Living!' Do we not have some rights? I am not for a minute suggesting that we build housing along the Yamuna River front but just to give you an idea of the scale of this stretch of land, we could have accommodated approximately 50,000 houses on this much land and accommodated a population of about two and a half people. In the scales justice we have half a dozen leaders who have now deceased, occupying this much of land, on the other side would be two and a half lakh people, none of whom is given legal access to even one inch of land. In whose favour is the balance tilted? That is our real tragedy!!
