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THE MAHATMA

(One Act Play)

M. V. Rama Sarma

CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY

The Mahatma	Nathuram
Three Youths	Manohar
Lalitha	Shankar
Mukherji	Hari Lal
Paul Sundaram	Ahmed Ali
Sarala	Gopal
Sarkar	

Scene-I

(January 20, 1948. Evening 4.30, The Scene takes place in Delhi. The disciples of the Mahatma are assembled in the open space near Birla's house. Men and women have come in large numbers to have darshan of Gandhiji and to listen to him.

In one corner four young men get busy. Nathuram Godse is one of them. They are engaged in a serious talk. They are full of religious fervour. Their looks indicate firm resolution. Like the four knights murdering Thomas Becket under a misguided idea of ridding the king and his kingdom of an unruly archbishop, these four young men have a crusading spirit for saving India from Gandhiji's influence. They represent and reflect the views of a section of the people who have resented Gandhiji's conciliatory methods to bring about unity between the Hindus and the Moslems. They talk mostly in whispers.)

First Youth : Brother, Hinduism is in danger. The Hindus in Pakistan have no peace, no security. Their lives are at stake.

Nathuram : Yes, it is true. But our leaders do not realise this. They are blind to facts.

Second Youth : Not exactly so. They know what is happening, but they believe or at least pretend to believe in a Hindu-Moslem unity.

Nathuram : (Contemptuously) Unity ! It's impossible. The East and the West may come together one day but not the Hindus and the Moslems.

First Youth : Yes, I agree. Our differences are irreconcilable. India is for the Hindus, and we should try to revive our culture and traditions.

Nathuram : But as long as this old man lives it is not possible to achieve our goal. What about the recent fast ? Whom has it benefited—the Hindus or the Moslems ?

Third Youth : The Moslems, of course.

Nathuram : When the old man makes an appeal, the Hindus follow, the Moslems do not. So we are the losers and the sufferers.

First Youth : We can't tolerate this state of affairs. We must establish a Hindu Raj.

Nathuram : But we must first get rid of this old man. He is a stumbling block in the way of our progress. We will mix with the audience and wait for an opportunity to shoot him. You go ahead and talk to him.

First Youth : Yes, I will.

(The four young men disperse distributing themselves among the assembled gathering. A passage is made to allow Gandhiji to go to the platform wherefrom he generally speaks. The Mahatma nears the platform and addresses the congregation.)

The Mahatma : Brothers and sisters, we must try to forget our differences of caste, creed and religion. We must live like members of a large family.

First Youth : (Coming to the front) How is it possible? When a man hates me how can I love him? When a man gives me a blow how can I tolerate that?

The Mahatma : (Smiling) Yes, you can. If you repay your foe in the same coin, you are not giving him an opportunity to repent of his mistake. Man becomes ennobled only through penitence and through an awareness of his wrong doing. Goodness lies in doing good against evil.

First Youth : (With emotion) Ridiculous !

The Mahatma : We should show kindness to all, to foes as well as friends. If your friends betray you it only shows their weakness. If your foes ill-treat you they will repent ultimately. We should love our enemies and pray even for those who persecute us.

First Youth : But why should I suffer? When I have the strength and courage to attack you why should I be a coward ?

The Mahatma : Courage and heroism do not lie in brutally assaulting and murdering people. On the other hand heroism lies in tolerance and magnanimity. One who can forgive his foes is indeed a hero. In fact truth and non-violence are as old as the hills.

(Applause from the audience)

First Youth : I know all this, but it is cowardice to allow your foe to kill you when you can as well resist him by force.

The Mahatma : Violence should not be met by violence. Violence is nothing but brute force. Any victory won through bloodshed, we all know, is only transitory. But by non-violent methods you appeal to the hearts of the people so that a tangible effect is left on them.

First Youth : But how can you resist an aggressor by purely non-violent methods ?

The Mahatma : By appealing to his heart, by showing him that he has within him human instincts, not merely brute force.

First Youth : Supposing he is stubborn, and he has no heart.

The Mahatma : Every human being has sympathy for his fellow beings. But sometimes, motivated by greed, ambition and fanaticism, one may kill one's own brethren. Even he will realise his folly one day or other.

First Youth : What do you think of the partition of India?

The Mahatma : I was never in favour of divided India. But now that the division is made, the Hindus and the Moslems should live together amicably.

First Youth : That is simply a dream.

The Mahatma : But we must prove our friendship and sincerity even towards our foes. Mind you, the Moslems are not our foes. So all the more reason why we should be friendly with them. Love begets love.

(Applause from the audience)

First Youth : I don't think it is possible. As human beings we have our own loves and hates. We can't help it.

The Mahatma : But you must realise that India belongs to all, to the Hindus, the Moslems, the Sikhs, the Christians and various other sects who have made India their home. This is greater India.

First Youth : (Vehemently) India is only for the Hindus.

The Mahatma : That shows only your weaknees. If the younger brother is rude to you, in what way are you better if you also behave in the same way? I tell you, and I repeat it, the Hindus and the Moslems should get to know each other properly. There will come a day when the Hindus and the Moslems will forget all their differences and sit for a glorious banquet as brothers and friends. That is my dream of a greater India, of a golden age when men and women will be motivated by principles of equity and justice.

(The whole congregation is moved by the Mahatma's words. They are thrilled, and in unison they say 'Mahatma Ki jai.' As though mocking this sentimental ovation for Gandhiji a few yards away a time bomb bursts with frightening fury. A column of smoke rises. There is confusion all over the place. Gandhiji asks the congregation to be calm. The prayer meeting continues. One of the four young men responsible for the explosion of the bomb is caught by the police. The other three move fast and run away.)

The audience is full of grateful prayers for the miraculous escape of Gandhiji. But the Mahatma is serene and unperturbed.)

The Mahatma : (Smiling) Do not hate or condemn the men who has thrown the bomb. We have no right to punish a person whom we consider wicked. If my people do not want me to live I am prepared to die. I am not afraid of death. I surrender myself to the will of God, I have no will of my own. I am in the hands

of God. I have faced many a storm with faith in God. He knows full well when to call me back for I will not outlive my usefulness to the nation. But my request to all of you, Hindus, Sikhs, and Moslems is that we live as friends and brothers. We may live separately but we are the leaves of the same tree.

(A silent prayer is offered by the assembly and initially they all feel numbed and later get exhilarated by the sudden turn of events—from an attempted murder to a providential escape. The Mahatma gets ready to leave the place. His admirers and disciples flock to him.)

Manohar : The miraculous escape of Gandhiji this evening only shows that God wants him to do some more good work in this world.

Lalitha : His survival after the fast is itself a manifestation of the divine Providence that Gandhiji is meant for a greater and nobler end.

The Mahatma : (Listening to them and slowly commenting)
Yes, I think I should take my philosophy of non-violence to other countries.

Lalitha : Yes, Bapuji, you should go to Pakistan,

The Mahatma : Even though I am still not physically fit I would like to walk across the country and go on a pilgrimage, on a mission of peace and love to bind the two countries, India and Pakistan, together.

Manohar : That will be wonderful. God's work has yet to be done by you, or else He wouldn't have saved you from the fast or from the bomb explosion today.

The Mahatma : (Half tempted) I also think like that I shall visit Pakistan on 2nd February. Lalitha, you go ahead and make arrangements for my visit to Pakistan.

(The Mahatma's face is full of animated glow. He pauses for a minute and then he adds cautiously.)

The Mahatma : God may have other designs for me. God's ways are mysterious and inscrutable.

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Scene II

(January 30, 1948. Evening 4.30. Gandhiji has not yet come for the prayer meeting. Men and women of all ages are congregated there. They are waiting for the Mahatma. They visualise the vast panorama of the Freedom Movement with all its dynamic spirit. Like the Chorus in a Greek play they come in groups and talk of the great deeds of the Mahatma.)

Shankar : (Leading the first group) we are indebted to the Mahatma for his tremendous sacrifice. He is the Father of the Nation, the liberator, the light of India. He is a mighty craftsman, an artist, an undisputed leader of three movements—boycott of British goods, Salt Satyagraha and Quit India. Besides he has done a lot of constructive work by way of village uplift and amelioration of the masses, especially the Harijans. To him we owe everything. Long live Gandhiji !

Mukherji : (Leading the second group) The Mahatma is a saint among the politicians. He brings ethics to politics and everything he does full of the spirit of forgiveness. He is loved by all. His philosophy of non-violence and Ahimsa is his gospel to the strife-torn world. We have in him the Buddha and the Christ. Long live Gandhiji !

Harilal : (Leader of the third group) The Mahatma is the Karma Yogi doing Nishkama karma, disinterested work. His humanism, his abundant love for the Harijans, for the oppressed and the depressed, make him the world's first socialist. One who has accepted life with detachment and surrendered oneself to the will of God is a Jnani, a Mahatma. That is what Gandhiji is. Long live the Mahatma !

Paul sundaram : Gandhiji is the world's most Christ-like person. The sermon on the Mount is practised by him most scrupulously much to the amazement of Christians professing Christian faith. Perhaps Christ has come back to the world to preach his message of love. The Hindu saint is the Christ figure in our age.

Ahmed ali : The Moslem cause is espoused by the Mahatma. He is always fair to them. He is a living example of tolerance. We have heard of great prophets and saints before, but to practise what one preaches, especially in an age of unbelief and scepticism, is something unique about the Mahatma. In him we find the essence of all religions, the best in all faiths.

Sarala : (Leading the women) Mahatma, the emancipator of women, long live the Mahatma. He has given to Indian women the pride of place in the Freedom Movement. He has liberated the women from the rigid customs and shackles of society. But who knows what is in store for him. The Hindu-Moslem riots have torn the country to pieces. Fanatics on both sides do not like his plea for unity. Only ten days ago God has saved him. But the threat is still there. No doubt the Mahatma has fulfilled his mission. He has brought Independence to India. It is for us to deserve it and to be worthy of his great sacrifice.

(From another corner some lone voices come questioning the validity of these statements.)

Gopal : How can you say that Gandhiji has done much for India ? All that he has done is mostly negative. The Hindu dharma is completely ruined by him. We have lost faith in everything that has been sacred to us.

Shankar : That's not true. On the other hand Gandhiji is responsible for establishing an integrated India. The three movements he has led have been accepted all over the country. If the first movement of 1920, the boycott of British goods, has stirred the intellectuals and the upper classes, the Salt Satyagraha movement of 1930-31 is of the masses.

Mukherji : The third movement, Quit India of 1942 was a potential threat to the British. Even though it has not come up to the expectations of Gandhiji, for it has taken a violent turn, it has served its purpose in telling the British in unequivocal terms that the time has come for them to pack up and go.

Gopal : All that may be true, but . . .

Mukherji : Not may be true, but it is true,

Gopal : All right, you have your own way. But what is the use of creating an India that is devoid of Hindu dharma,? An India that has no moral fibre is no India, according to me.

Sarkar : That's true. The whole trouble with us is that we worship everything blindly. So we idolize Gandhiji.

Hari Lal : Nothing wrong in worshipping Gandhiji for he is a saint, one who has renounced the worldly pleasures,

Sarkar : (Laughing) Don't make me laugh. Gandhi is in the

thick of worldly entanglements. Even his much boosted Brahmacharya is of the worldly type.

Mukherji : Yes, worldly entanglements, not for any gain for himself, but for the country. Gandhiji has effaced himself. He has no personal ambition. He belongs to the country, he is with the masses. As regards his experiments in Brahmacharya it is not uncommon among Hindu saints to expose themselves to such fiery tests for achieving perfection. Gandhiji, being a lover of truth, hides nothing from the public. So we know all about him even though we may not know much about the other saints. His personal life is one of renunciation. He identifies himself with the poor man and gladly chooses to live with the Harijans in their homes.

Sarkar : (Sarcastically) But he has capitalists also to support him.

Mukherji : That's a different thing. He loves all, the rich and the poor. But he needs nothing for himself. That is why even while attending the conference in London he has been averse to pomp and show. Gandhiji has conquered his ego, his five senses. His fasts are monumental examples of his supreme will power. Or else how could this 'man of straw', as his opponents used to call him, survive and baffle the medical experts in every fast that he undertook?

Sarkar : That is past history. Now he cannot do all those so called miracles. His time is up.

Shankar : It does not matter, for martyrs do not die like ordinary persons. They die for others. If Gandhiji has to pay for all our cussedness and spite, he will gladly do so. Even if some criticise him he is unruffled, for a mountain remains a mountain even though the waves

come and dash against it. When he is congratulated by almost all the leading persons in the world for his miraculous escape a few days ago, he says that there is nothing wonderful about it. On the other hand, if someone shoots him and he dies uttering the name of Rama, he says he will consider that to be a great and heroic deed.

Sarala : Yes, Gandhiji seems to be aware of some such end for himself. He has a prophetic vision and it looks as though he is anticipating his death. With him, now-a-days, readiness is all for what does it matter to a saint like him if millions adore and a few indulge in vilification of him? He is one with the great saints, with this difference that he is still with us, fighting for the cause of truth and working for the good of the country.

Gopal : Whatever you may say, we are not convinced about Gandhiji's contribution to India. Political freedom does not mean freedom of the soul. The soul lies embittered while the body perhaps may flourish in time to come. That's all we see, and can see. We don't have a bloated vision because our eyesight is normal.

Sarala : Don't be sarcastic. If you don't have a bloated vision you have a blurred vision, which is equally bad if not worse.

Shankr : We only pray that India may have the wise counsel of Gandhiji for some more years.

GoPal : Perhaps a dream, or a wishful thinking. But reality is totally different, for he will be more a hindrance than help to the country.

Mukherji : May God bless him. May Gandhiji serve the country for years and years.

(The assembled see the Mahatma coming, his hands resting on the shoulders of his 'walking sticks', his nieces. The air is rent with shouts of 'Gandhiji ki jai.' Gandhiji is a little late that evening and he is annoyed with his nieces for not keeping time. He tells them that they are his watches and he does not like going late for a meeting.

Gandhiji reaches the prayer ground, keeps his palms together and greets the crowd. Nathuram, a young man in his thirties, dressed in khaki dress, rushes forward furiously. He pushes one of the nieces away from the Mahatma and makes obeisance to Gandhiji saying, 'Namaste Gandhiji.' He takes his pistol from his pocket and passes it between his palms. Then he pulls the trigger three times and shoots Gandhiji in the chest. Gandhiji with his hands still clasped in greeting moves to the platform and sinks to the ground uttering the name of God.)

The Mahatma : (In a feeble tone) He Ram! O God!

(A few minutes later a voice is heard on the air)

The Voice : The sun has set. The light that has illumined the whole world, has gone. History repeats itself. Christs are born and reborn only to be murdered by their own people who fail to understand the significance of their philosophies. Gandhiji is born ahead of his times. The tenets of his creed may sound utopian, not because there is anything wrong with them, but because it is difficult for men with limited vision and bigoted views to transcend their limitations. Gandhiji's teaching will be understood only when mankind has had its fill of violence and slaughter.

From time to time God sends His saints and prophets for alleviating the misery and suffering of the humanity. In a world of darkness, chaos and strife these chosen few shine as luminaries and offer benediction to the lost and erring humanity. Once their mission is over they relinquish their mortal coil and become one with God. Gandhiji is one of these great saints whose mission has been only to liberate India from slavery. These saints and martyrs may be physically extinct, but their spirit endures.

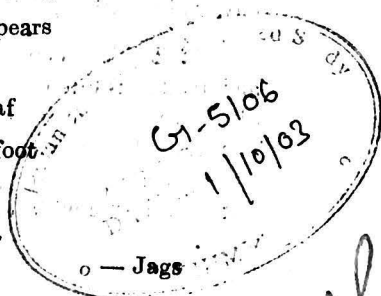
Gandhiji's teachings, his philosophy of nonviolence and truth, his love of humanity, his ethical idealism—all have an imperishable significance to mankind. The second crucifixion in the history of the world also takes place on a Friday, a curious coincidence indeed! Gandhiji is one with the saints and martyrs of the world.

CURTAIN



AN EYEWASH

An ant crawls
stealthily, among the
faded blades of grass.
I wait and watch.
The ant disappears
under a leaf.
I crush the leaf
with my left foot
and grind it
with my right.



DESERT OF NOTHINGNESS

Well, there's nothing
really to say
except that
I'm enveloped in a
desert of nothingness.
And over here
leave aside an oasis
there's not even
a mirage of it.

- Jags

Some Opinions Contd...

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