

Assassination of Mahatma Gandhi: A 75th Anniversary Review

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To commemorate the 75th death anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), I revisit the pre-and post-assassination events of his assassination in the newly independent India.

Methods: Available information on the January 30th 1948 assassination in New Delhi was gathered from period news reports, Gandhi biographies and related reference sources as well as the books published by justice Khosla who heard the assassination trial appeal and Gopal Godse, a sibling of the assassin and one of the co-conspirators.

Results: Weapon of choice by the assassin to commit his deed was a Beretta automatic pistol. At a point blank range, Gandhi was attacked three times; one bullet struck Gandhi in the chest and two in the abdomen on the right side. General consensus was Gandhi was killed 'almost instantaneously' because he never spoke after he was shot. Autopsy on Gandhi's body was not performed to identify the path of three bullets which caused mortal damage; and remains were cremated within 24 hours of his death. As such, data on which internal organs were irreparably damaged by the bullets is lost to history. It may also be postulated that the five day fast by Gandhi which was terminated 12 days prior to assassination might have weakened his natural body defences.

Conclusion: It is inferred that Gandhi's assassin Nathuram Godse may fit the zealots type in the assassin typology pattern of James Clarke (1981), in preference to three other types, namely psychotics, nihilists and neurotics.

KEY WORDS

assassination, assassin typology, pistol, India, zealots type

INTRODUCTION

The life and achievements of Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) as a freedom fighter and social reformer had attracted study and research from various angles¹⁻⁴⁾, including his dietetics and passion for nature cure⁵⁾, psychological trait⁶⁾, charisma⁷⁾ and sexuality issues⁸⁻¹⁰⁾ for a century. But, his instant death by assassination¹¹⁻¹⁶⁾ remains obliterated; and only a minimal number of studies^{17,18)} cover the assassination specifically, and even these do not offer forensic details.

As such, to commemorate Gandhi's 75th death anniversary, I focus here on the pre-assassination events in January 1948 and infer that Gandhi's assassin Nathuram Godse may fit the zealots type in the assassin typology pattern of Clarke¹⁹⁾.

METHOD

Available information on the January 30th 1948 assassination in New Delhi was gathered from period news report²⁰⁻²²⁾, Gandhi biographies¹⁻⁴⁾ and related reference sources²³⁻²⁵⁾ as well as the books published by judge Khosla²⁶⁾ who heard the assassination trial appeal and Gopal Godse²⁷⁾ a sibling of the assassin and one of the co-conspirators.

RESULTS

Pre-assassination events in which Gandhi took part and how his conspirators planned their attack on Gandhi are summarized in Table 1. The assassin was a 37 year old Hindu Brahmin named Nathuram Vinayak Godse (Fig. 1), elder brother of Gopal Godse. His weapon of choice was a Beretta automatic pistol (Fig. 2).

Trumbull's on the spot report for the *New York Times*, was as follows: "...A youngish Indian stepped from the crowd — which had opened to form a pathway for Mr Gandhi's walk to the pergola — and fired the fatal shots from a European-made pistol. One bullet struck Mr. Gandhi in the chest and two in the abdomen on the right side. He seemed to lean forward and then crumbled to the ground..."¹⁸⁾

The anonymous reporter for the *Time* magazine offered additional details on Gandhi's final minutes as follows:

"A stocky young man in grey slacks, a blue pullover and khaki bush jacket stepped forward and knelt at Gandhi's feet. He was Nathu Ram Vinayak Godse, editor of the extremist newspaper, *Hindu Rashtra*, which had denounced Gandhi as an appeaser of Moslems. 'You are late today for the prayer' said the murderer. 'Yes, I am' said Gandhi.

Godse suddenly pulled out a tiny Beretta automatic pistol. He fired three times. One bullet ripped into Gandhi's chest, two into his belly. With hands folded, as if welcoming the blow, in the gesture that is both Hindu greeting and the Christian attitude of prayer, Gandhi fell backward. He murmured, '*Ai Ram, Ai Ram*' (O Ram, O Ram), in invocation to the gentle hero of the Hindu pantheon, Gandhi's favorite."¹⁹⁾

Table 1: Pre-Assassination Calendar of Events in Jan 1948*

Date	Event
Jan 12	As per negotiation, India had to pay a sum of 550 million (55 crores) rupees to Pakistan. But the newly independent Indian government was reluctant to pay this sum, for fear that Pakistan may use this sum to purchase arms for use against India in Kashmir. The Home Minister Sardar Patel had made a statement. Gandhi strongly opposed this decision. His view was, this was a breach of faith in the negotiation made. Thus he declared his intention to fast for an indefinite period, on the pretext of improving communal relations in the capital.
Jan 13	Gandhi's fast started. Decision to 'hit' Gandhi was taken by the conspirators, for his 'unreasonable demand on forcing' the Indian government to pay the large sum of money to Pakistan.
Jan 14	fast continued. According to Green ¹⁷⁾ , Gandhi body weight decreased to 109 pounds (49.4 kg). 'His kidneys were also failing to eliminate the water he drank.' Gopal Godse (assassin Nathuram Godse's younger brother, employed as a store keeping in an army depot, near Poona) had submitted a request for 7 days leave, beginning from Jan 15 th . This was refused for a procedural reason.
Jan 15	fast continued. Gandhi delivered post prayer speech on mike from his room.
Jan 16	fast continued. Gopal Godse applied again for a week of leave, from Jan 17 th and this request was granted. On request from his brother (assassin Nathuram), Gopal had brought a revolver which he had with him.
Jan 17	fast continued. Gandhi's health condition was causing anxiety. Conspirators acted quickly. Nathuram Godse and Narayan Apte had travelled to Delhi and stayed till 20 th , at a Hotel, after registering themselves under false names. Vishnu Karkare and Madanlal Pahwa also went to Delhi, and stayed at another Hotel, under assumed names.
Jan 18	Indian government 'surrendered' to Gandhi's demand; on receiving assurance from all communities, Gandhi broke fast by having juice. Gopal Godse reached Delhi, in the evening. They had assembled 2 revolvers, gun-cotton slabs and several hand grenades. Digambar Badge (who later turned to be a prosecution witness) was the guy who had provided the 2 nd revolver and supplied gun cotton slabs and hand grenades.
Jan 19	Seven conspirators charged with assassination (namely Nathuram Godse, Apte, Karkare, Pahwa, Shankar Kistaiyya, Gopal Godse, and Digambar Badge) had arrived in Delhi, by the evening. Kistayya, an illiterate from Andhra Pradesh, worked as a trusted servant in Badge's house.
Jan 20	In the morning, Apte, Karkare, Kistaiyya and Badge paid a reconnaissance visit to Birla House. A bomb exploded in the compound, when Gandhi was holding prayer. This was his first public appearance after 12 th , when he began his fast. The plan of the conspirators was as follows: During the prayer meeting, (1) Badge was to shoot Gandhi from behind and follow up by throwing a hand grenade. (2) Kistaiyya was to duplicate the act from the front by shooting and throwing a hand grenade. (3) Pahwa was to explode a gun-cotton slab, near the back gate of the house, to distract attention of the crowd gathered. Pahwa was a Punjabi Hindu refugee from newly formed Pakistan, who had witnessed the murders of his father and aunt by a Muslim mob, before he left Pakistan. The plan of conspirators went awry, when Badge's courage failed him. Only, Pahwa accomplished task, and was caught and handed to the police.
Jan 26	Gandhi had a 30 min. talk with judge Gopal Das Khosla (who subsequently served as one of the three High Court judges, in the Gandhi assassination trials appeal in 1949). Pahwa's arrest made the other conspirators to quickly complete the task they had in plan, because they feared that Pahwa may 'spill the beans' when subjected to interrogation and they could be taken into custody.
Jan 27	Nathuram Godse and Apte left for Gwalior by train at 10:38 pm and stayed with Dr. Parchure. The objective was to purchase a pistol that can fire accurately. This objective was fulfilled.
Jan 29	Nathuram Godse and Apte returned to Delhi in the morning. Karkare also had arrived in Delhi. As a diversion, Karkare and Apte went to see a movie at night. But, Nathuram Godse wished to rest, and spent time reading a book.
Jan 30	Nathuram Godse, Apte and Karkare went to a thick forest and Godse checked that pistol was in working condition by firing a few rounds. Godse was satisfied. Around 4:30 pm, Gandhi was visited by Sardar Patel and both discussed the rift between Nehru and Patel intensely, to the extent that Gandhi was held late for his scheduled prayer meeting at 5:00. At 4:30 pm, Godse left first to Birla House. Apte and Karkare followed him a few minutes later. Gandhi was assassinated around quarter past five (17:15 hr, Indian standard time), while on his way to evening prayer ground at Birla House, by Nathuram Vinayak Godse. Gandhi collapsed.

*Sources: Kapoor²³⁾, Dalal²⁴⁾ and Khosla²⁷⁾



Figure 1: Assassin Nathuram Godse

DISCUSSION

General consensus was Gandhi was killed 'almost instantaneously'¹⁴⁾ because he never spoke after he was shot.¹⁹⁾ Autopsy on Gandhi's body (Fig. 3) was not performed to identify the path of three bullets which caused mortal damage; and remains were cremated within 24 hours of his death. As such, data on which internal organs were irreparably damaged by the bullets is lost to history. It may also be postulated that the five day fast by Gandhi which was terminated 12 days prior to assassination might have weakened his natural body defences.

The accused in the Gandhi assassination trial^{23,26-27)} were,

1. Nathuram Godse, aged about 37 yr.
2. Narain Apte, aged about 34 yr.
3. Vishnu Karkare, aged about 38 yr.
4. Madanlal Pahwa, aged about 20 yr.
5. Shankar Kistayya, aged about 20 yr.
6. Gopal Godse, aged about 27 yr.

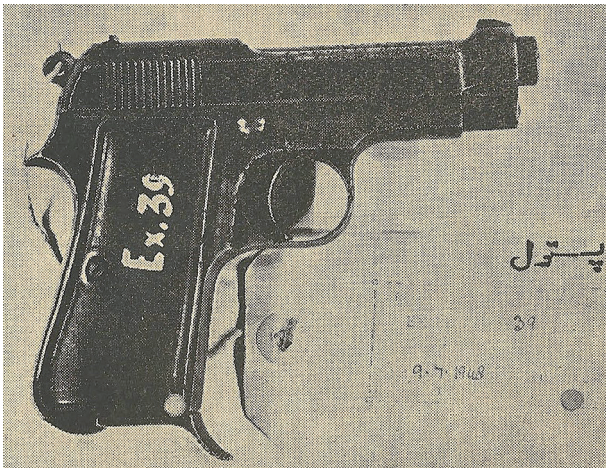


Figure 2: European model Pistol used by assassin Godse



Figure 3: Gandhi in 'death-bed'.

Table 2: Clarke's¹⁹ four fold typology of Assassins

Characteristics	psychotics	nihilists	neurotics	zealots
Emotional distortion	severe	severe	moderate	mild
Cognitive distortion	severe	absent	absent	absent
Hallucination	present	absent	absent	absent
Delusion	present	absent	absent	absent
Reality contact	distorted	clear	clear	clear
Social relations	isolated	isolated	disturbed	varied
Primary motive	irrational	personal/ Provocation	personal/ compensatory	political

7. V.D. Savarkar, aged about 66 yr.

8. D.S. Parchure, aged about 47 yr.

Interestingly, the 8th accused Parchure (1902-1985) was a medical doctor with an MBBS degree, who later studied Ayurvedic medicine, to specialize in pediatrics.²⁸ He was first ordered to be detained and kept as a detenu at Gwalior from Feb 3, 1948, and was placed under arrest for the offence of conspiracy etc. on Feb 17, 1948²³. Dr Parchure was identified as the provider of pistol, that was used by Nathuram Godse in the assassination. Subsequently, he was acquitted on appeal to the High Court. The pistol acquired by Dr. Parchure has an interesting transfer story on its own. Chaturvedi²⁸ cites in a foot-note that 'the gun was manufactured in Italy in 1934 and was in the possession of an officer in Mussolini's army. An officer in the 4th Gwalior State Infantry, fighting in Abyssinia (currently, Ethiopia) acquired the gun when his Italian counterpart had surrendered.'

Clarke¹⁹ had presented a four-fold typology of assassins, based on 7 characteristics namely emotional distortion, cognitive distortion, hallucination, delusion, reality contact, social relations and primary motive. (Table 2) The four types identified by Clarke are psychotics, nihilists, neurotics and zealots. Among these, Gandhi's assassin Nathuram Godse fits the zealots category optimally especially because the primary motive for assassination was political.

During the murder trial held in a special tribunal under Judge Atmacharan Agrawal, Nathuram Godse presented his defence for his act by reading a 30,000 word statement, as recorded by the *New York Times* reporter Trumbull:

"Standing before a microphone and reading the English statement in a heavily accented, metallic voice, Godse said he considered Mr Gandhi responsible for the creation of Pakistan and for the sufferings of Hindus in the upheavals attending India's partition. 'It is a fact that in the presence of a crowd numbering 300 to 400 people I did fire shots at Gandhi in open daylight.' Godse said. Throughout his statement he used the respectful suffix 'ji' in referring to Mr Gandhi. He expressed admiration for some of Mr Gandhi's work.

The background of the assassination was 'wholly and exclusively political' Godse said. He tried to absolve his fellow defendants of complicity in his act, which he said he had conceived and carried out alone..."²²

The trial judgement was delivered judge Atmacharan Agarwal on February 10, 1949. Among the eight accused individuals, only Savarkar (7th accused) was acquitted. Nathuram Godse (1st accused) and Narayan Apte (2nd accused) were sentenced to death. Appeal hearings that began on May 2, 1949, heard by three judges of High Court, did confirm the death sentence delivered by Judge Atmacharan Agarwal.

According to the memoirs of Justice Khosla²⁶, one of the three judges who heard the appeal of the assassination trial, the final hour of assassin Nathuram Godse and his co-conspirator Narayan Apte, before their execution on November 15, 1949 were as follows:

"The two condemned prisoners were led out of their cells with their hands pinioned behind them. Godse walked in front. His step occasionally faltered. His demeanour and general appearance evidenced a state of nervousness and fear. He tried to fight against it and keep up a bold exterior by shouting every few seconds the slogan 'Akhand Bharat' (undivided India). But his voice had a slight croak in it and the vigour with which he had argued his case at the trial and in the High Court seemed to have been all but expanded. The desperate cry was taken up by Apte who shouted 'Amar rahe' (May stay forever). His loud and firm tone made an uncanny contrast to Godse's at times, almost feeble utterance...

A single gallows had been prepared for the execution of both. Two ropes, each with a noose, hung from a high crossbar in parallel lines. Godse and Apte were made to stand side by side, the black cloth bags were drawn over their heads and tied at the necks. After adjusting the nooses, the executioner stepped off the platform and pulled the lever. Apte died almost at once and his still body swung in a slow oscillating movement; but Godse though unconscious and unfeeling, continued to wriggle and display signs of life in the shivering of his legs and the convulsing of his body for quite fifteen minutes. The dead bodies were cremated inside the gaol..."

However, the information on the final moments of assassin Nathuram Godse as recorded by Gopal Godse²⁷ (6th accused), who had received a life sentence in 1949, was at variance from that of Justice Khosla. He had stated, "Nathuram's death was instantaneous. Narayan's knees once tried to reach his chin. He shook in that unconscious state for a couple of minutes and then life was completely extinct. The Assistant superintendent Shri Ram Nath Sharma performed the last rites before the bodies were cremated. The articles carried by the two in their hands were passed on to the writer (i.e. Gopal Godse)." Gopal Godse, after serving 16 years of prison sentence, was released in 1964, few months after the death of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister. He died on Nov 26, 2005.

CONCLUSION

It is inferred that Gandhi's assassin Nathuram Godse may fit the zealots type in the assassin typology pattern of James Clarke (1981), in preference to three other types, namely psychotics, nihilists and neurotics.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS AND FUNDING

None declared.

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