Gandhi and Oedipus: Rethinking the Mahatma's Murder

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ABSTRACT  Gandhi and Oedipus, at first, seem a rather odd couple. But as this presentation, based on the recent study The Death and Afterlife of Mahatma Gandhi argues, there is a vital link. The connection is uncovered when we meditate deeply on the meaning of the Mahatma’s murder. Many books written on the subject do little more than document and reconstruct the event without interpreting its meaning. Even the mass of data gathered by the Justice Kapoor Commission, while throwing light on the conspiracy to assassinate the “Father of the Nation,” does not attempt to investigate the significance of his death. Paranjape, in confronting precisely this question, contends that the slaying of the Mahatma constitutes one of the twin birth traumas of the nation newly independent—the other being the Partition. There is, moreover, an indissoluble link between the two. Gandhi’s murder, given its singularly abominable enormity, is severely repressed from the nation’s psyche. That is because Nathuram Godse’s coldly premeditated crime is actually a symbolic patricide “unbearable” to the Hindu mind. Even though opinions differ, evidence suggests that there is no Hindu Oedipus. This makes Godse’s act not only “unprecedented” but self-consciously modern and unHindu, even though the killer too quotes the scripture, Gandhi’s favourite Bhagawad Gita, to justify his deed. Does the ageing Mahatma die in vain or does he co-script his own exit from the theatre of history, devising an endgame to worst his opponent and, in the process, salvage the sinking ship of the infant state? This talk will address such questions.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER  Makarand R. Paranjape has been Professor of English at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for over fifteen years. His latest work includes Making India: Colonialism, National Culture, and Indian English Literature (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013 and New Delhi: Amaryllis, 2015) and The Death and Afterlife of Mahatma Gandhi (London and New York: Routledge, 2014 and New Delhi: Random House, 2015). Currently, he is on a short-term Visiting Senior Research Fellowship at Asia Research Institute, NUS.

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TIME  2.00pm to 3.30pm
VENUE  Malay Studies Seminar Room, AS7 #04-13, Kent Ridge Campus, NUS