

LINCOLN LORE

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GANDHI AND LINCOLN

Many years ago a poll was taken among members of the press soliciting a vote on what episode might be considered the most human interest event reported in American newspapers. The almost unanimous result of the balloting revealed that the story of Abraham Lincoln's assassination was accepted as the great feature story of all time. If there could be a poll taken today by the world press with reference to the most human interest story appearing thus far in the nineteenth century the assassination of Mohandas Gandhi would undoubtedly receive such designation. One striking contrast and a series of parallel occurrences associated with the assassination of these two immortal world figures invites a review of certain incidents in the Lincoln tragedy as recalled by the passing of Gandhi.

A Moslem woman apparently unadvised about the identity of Gandhi's assassin cried, "God help us all." The reason for her fear was well put in London, couched in these words, "Thank God it wasn't a Moslem who shot him or all hell would have broken loose." The fact that the murderer, Gadse, was a Hindu like his victim is fortunate indeed, not only for the Moslems but for all India. It is also of great significance that Gadse was a member of the faction which had strenuously opposed the Hindu-Moslem unity. There is hope now that the martyrdom of Gandhi for the cause of Indian unity for which he gave his last years will eventually bring together these factions which for centuries have menaced the peace of India.

With the exception of this extremely important fact that Gandhi's assassin was from his own people, while Lincoln was the victim of a rebel sympathizer, the incidents associated with the death and funeral of the two martyrs have many parallels. Even the early years of Lincoln and Gandhi have much in common; both were lawyers, both directed their efforts towards bettering the condition of the unfortunate peoples of their respective countries, both became recognized leaders of the groups which would preserve unity.

Even in their last days prior to the assassination there was the anticipation that the fondest hopes of each was to be realized. Both felt they were about to look into the "Promised Land" of their dreams. A united nation was then an accomplished fact for Lincoln and the whole people were looking forward, two days hence, to the most glorious Easter the nation had experienced. Gandhi had in three consecutive fasts appealed for a better understanding between the castes of India and was even at the moment of the attack, moving to a place of prayer with a petition on his lips for a united people.

The Second Inaugural Address which Lincoln had delivered a short time previous to his death had contained the words "with malice towards none; with charity for all." Although like Lincoln, Gandhi passed away without

any words of comment he did touch the palm of his hand to his forehead in a gesture of forgiveness.

It is with respect to the immediate reaction to the death and burial of the two martyrs where we find the most striking similarities. Great crowds of people assembled in front of the little house where Lincoln's body had been removed just opposite the place of his assassination and the masses of Indians who milled about the room of Gandhi were so vast that the military, as in the case of Lincoln's removal, had to be summoned to bring about order among the excited and unreconciled people.

Exclamations by the people were of the general tenor in both instances. A youth on a street of Bombay shouted, "This is the end of the world, Gandhi was our only hope." Death also stalked in the streets in 1865 as well as in 1948. It has never been officially recorded how many men lost their lives in America for some expression which belittled the martyred Lincoln. The press dispatches from India state, "In the darkness of Bombay that very night more than seventy persons were stabbed, fatally, in revived communal violence."

Probably the scene to be remembered by most present day Indians was the funeral procession and the final disposition of the ashes. While the simple urn which contained the ashes of Gandhi may not have been displayed in such a spectacular way as the remains of Lincoln and the elaborate furnishings and decorations, yet the central place which it occupied on the catafalque riveted all eyes upon the receptacle that contained the earthly remains of the Hindu martyr.

The Gandhi funeral procession paralleled to a large extent the passage of Lincoln's body from Washington, D. C., to Springfield, Illinois. For 1600 miles Lincoln's funeral train moved toward its destination with frequent stops at the centers of population. Two millions of people are said to have looked on the dead body of Lincoln while other millions gazed on the procession which for twenty days lingered among the people. Never before had so many people viewed a corpse.

The sepulcher in the prairie where Lincoln's body was finally deposited did not offer the dramatic setting which the confluence of the three sacred rivers provided for the final disposition of Gandhi's ashes. The Ganges, the Jumna and the Saraswati received the prepared dust and blended it with their sacred waters. Three millions of people saw the impressive service and few pilgrims will ever visit the sacred spot without visualizing one of the most dramatic funeral spectacles ever witnessed by man.

However we are happy that when we visit Springfield, Illinois, and enter the chambers of the mausoleum we may feel that here there still is preserved the remains of one who was the Gandhi of his day and the martyr of freedom and unity.