



Two high profile Goan political figures who have passed on in the last couple of months were only showered with eulogies, even from their die-hard critics. But why must one only highlight the good?

I wrote the following Facebook post after the death of ex-Chief Minister Manohar Parrikar: "One should not speak ill of the dead, many people say. But I don't agree. If one thinks a man is a fascist, not considering other people's views, arrogant and not a team person, one cannot, in my opinion, suddenly imagine the same man to be a "tall leader" when he dies."

The post evoked mixed reactions. Some felt that I was calling a spade a spade. Others felt that hypocrisy was at play with those showering praises for a person they despised when they were living, and still others felt that I should have adhered to the idea of what was described as 'Christian love', ensuring that I respect the dead, no matter what the truth.

Let us dissect some of the arguments in support of or against the maxim that one should speak nothing but good:

*The Dead cannot defend themselves:*

Indeed they cannot. And it would not be fair to allege something against the dead on matters that they were never confronted with when living. But what if the dead had the opportunity to defend themselves when living? I think enough people have said, when Parrikar was alive, for instance, that he was 'Hitler-like', did not create second-rung leadership. Enough people have called out his remark about India being a Hindu nation and Goan Catholics being culturally Hindus, just as enough people have called out Francis D'Souza's remark about he himself being a Christian Hindu.

*But the good cannot be proffered for the dead to accept either:*

Indeed, as much as the dead cannot defend themselves against accusations, they cannot also approve the good that is being spoken about them, which was not spoken when they were living. So also they cannot affirm the hypocrisy of those who only had negative words for them during their lifetime and now give him epithets like, for instance, 'tall leader' (many periodicals) or 'one of Goa's favourite sons' (Rahul Gandhi).

*We do not agree with this perspective about the dead person:*

This is not an argument against the maxim, because what these people are actually saying is

that it is OK to talk ill about the dead, but your view of this particular person is wrong, or even you cannot speak so about this person. So what they are actually saying is that, for instance, it is okay to say anything you like about Vishnu Wagh (who also died recently), but you cannot say anything critical about Parrikar

I googled for literature on this subject and found, to my relief, that I am not the only one indulging in a critical questioning of the maxim "*De mortuis nil nisi bene*" (speak no ill/evil of the dead). Sample this thought from Sigmund Freud's *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death* (1915), "We suspend criticism of him, overlooking whatever wrongs he may have done, and issue the command, *De mortuis nil nisi bene*: we act as if we were justified in singing his praises at the funeral oration, and inscribe only what is to his advantage on the tombstone. This consideration for the dead, which he really no longer needs, is more important to us than the truth, and, to most of us, certainly, it is more important than consideration for the living".

Freud's observation could not be more pertinent today - the irrelevance of these eulogies for the dead, but the casualty of truth which has consequences for the living. The truth, in fact, as Richard Wilkinson aptly writes in a 2008 essay for the History Review, "involves the removal of smokescreens of evasion, or clouds of incense heaped on their altars by uncritical admirers". Therefore it is so critical to watch out for the smokescreens, so that history will not be guilty of creating bad role models.

It seems to me that the metaphors for the dead Goan politicians have been deployed for instrumentalising the dead and their death. The metaphors in fact point to socially sanctioned casteism and classism, almost implying that greatness follows those who land places. How else would one explain the awe with which Manohar Parrikar was described as an IIT graduate in metallurgy, without looking at how he did or did not deploy his education for the larger cause?

Maintaining the silence over negative qualities of a politician can become the springboard for the reproduction of similar traits in politicians to come. Particularly more so when the talk from the party candidate, in the ensuing Panjim elections, is that "each Panjim BJP *karyakarta* will be a Manoharbai" - a Manoharbai whose connect with the voters, of course, will be exploited by future BJP politicians, with his traits, lock, stock and barrel.

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Speak No Evil of the Dead?