

# INDEPENDENCE and PARTITION

THE EROSION OF COLONIAL POWER IN INDIA



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S U C H E T A   M A H A J A N

SAGE SERIES IN MODERN INDIAN HISTORY

# **Independence and Partition**



# Independence and Partition

## The Erosion of Colonial Power in India

SUCHETA MAHAJAN

**Sage Series in Modern Indian History-I**

SERIES EDITORS

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*To*

*Maiji*

*How many of you realise what it has meant to India to have the presence of Mahatma Gandhi these months? We all know of his magnificent services to India and to freedom during the past half century and more. But no service could have been greater than what he has performed during the past four months when in a dissolving world he has been a rock of purpose and a lighthouse of truth, and his firm low voice has risen above the clamours of the multitude pointing out the path of rightful endeavour.*

Address by Jawaharlal Nehru to the Allahabad  
University jubilee convocation, 13 December 1947

*And like the baseless fabric of this vision  
The cloud capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,  
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a rack behind: We are such stuff  
As dreams are made of, and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep....*

Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act IV, Scene i

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## Series Editors' Preface

The Sage Series in Modern Indian History is intended to bring together the growing volume of historical studies that share a very broad common historiographic focus.

In the 50 years since independence from colonial rule, research and writing on modern Indian history has given rise to intense debates resulting in the emergence of different schools of thought. Prominent among them are the Cambridge School and the Subaltern School. Some of us at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, along with many colleagues in other parts of the country, have tried to promote teaching and research along somewhat different lines. We have endeavoured to steer clear of colonial stereotypes, nationalist romanticization, sectarian radicalism and a rigid and dogmatic approach. We have also discouraged the "flavour of the month" approach which tries to ape whatever is currently fashionable.

Of course, a good historian is fully aware of contemporary trends in historical writing and of historical work being done elsewhere, and draws heavily on the comparative approach, i.e., the historical study of other societies, states and nations, and on other disciplines, especially economics, political science, sociology and social anthropology. A historian tries to understand the past and make it relevant to the present and the future. History thus also caters to the changing needs of society and social development. A historian is a creature of his or her times, yet a good historian tries to use every tool available to the historian's craft to avoid a conscious bias to get as near the truth as possible.

The approach we have tried to evolve looks sympathetically, though critically, at the Indian national liberation struggle and other popular

movements such as those of labour, peasants, lower castes, tribal peoples and women. It also looks at colonialism as a structure and a system, and analyzes changes in economy, society and culture in the colonial context as also in the context of independent India. It focuses on communalism and casteism as major features of modern Indian development. The volumes in the series will tend to reflect this approach as also its changing and developing features. At the broadest plane our approach is committed to the Enlightenment values of rationalism, humanism, democracy and secularism.

The series will consist of well-researched volumes with a wider scope which deal with a significant historiographical aspect even while devoting meticulous attention to detail. They will have a firm empirical grounding based on an exhaustive and rigorous examination of primary sources (including those available in archives in different parts of India and often abroad); collections of private and institutional papers; newspapers and journals (including those in Indian languages); oral testimony; pamphlet literature; and contemporary literary works. The books in this series, while sharing a broad historiographic approach, will invariably have considerable differences in analytical frameworks.

The many problems that hinder academic pursuit in developing societies—e.g., relatively poor library facilities, forcing scholars to run from library to library and city to city and yet not being able to find many of the necessary books; inadequate institutional support within universities; a paucity of research-funding organizations; a relatively underdeveloped publishing industry, and so on—have plagued historical research and writing as well. All this has made it difficult to initiate and sustain efforts at publishing a series along the lines of the Cambridge History series or the history series of some of the best US and European universities.

But the need is there because, in the absence of such an effort, a vast amount of work on Indian history being done in Delhi and other university centres in India as also in British, US, Russian, Japanese, Australian and European universities which shares a common historiographic approach remains scattered and has no “voice”. Also, many fine works published by small Indian publishers never reach the libraries and bookshops in India or abroad.

We are acutely aware that one swallow does not make a summer. This series will only mark the beginning of a new attempt at presenting the efforts of scholars to evolve autonomous (but not indigenist) intellectual approaches in modern Indian history.

**Bipan Chandra  
Mridula Mukherjee  
Aditya Mukherjee**

# Acknowledgements

I have accumulated innumerable debts over the years this book was in the making. I was fortunate to have been a student of the Centre for Historical Studies (CHS), Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, which could boast of some of the finest minds of contemporary India, as teachers and even as students. The faculty read like a who's who of Indian history: Sarvepalli Gopal, Bipan Chandra, Romila Thapar, Satish Chandra, to name only a few. The Centre spearheaded a self-confident, independent and self-consciously anti-colonial tradition of historical writing on India which broke the veritable stranglehold of Oxbridge. The students of CHS looked down from its lofty abode on the fifth floor of the School of Social Sciences upon disciplines like politics, economics and sociology, which inhabited the lower floors, in keeping with their less exalted status.

Professor S. Gopal has firmly steered this ship to shore. He read everything I subjected him to, including virus-ridden, faint, dot-matrix computer printouts, often delivered to the bemused receptionist at the India International Centre well after midnight, with instructions to give them to Professor Gopal when he checked out next morning to catch the 6 a.m. flight to Madras. He resisted all the ploys of an errant student, often absent for long spells and always prone to substitute informed discussion for laborious writing. Half-baked ideas, window-dressed in purple prose, would get short shrift. It has been a privilege to have Professor Gopal as my supervisor.

Professor Bipan Chandra has been a rock of purpose in moments of intellectual doubt and personal despair. His has been the profoundest influence in the shaping of my ideas over the last two decades. One course with him changed the direction of my interest from

economic history, which, as a student of economics, I had gone to JNU to pursue, to political history of the mid-twentieth century, and that too of the most contentious sort, the final phase of the conflict between colonialism, nationalism and communalism. Bipan's lectures would typically start at 3 p.m. and it was only when the lights were switched on that I realized that I had been listening to him lecture for over three hours! The years I spent, as the junior-most member of his team, interviewing activists in the national, peasant and workers movements (for the ICSSR/JNU project on the history of the national movement, on which *India's Struggle for Independence* was largely based), were an exhilarating foray into the heady days of the freedom movement. After eating, drinking, sleeping oral history for three years virtually non-stop, I became such a compulsive interviewer that not only did my motto change to, "the older the better", but my opening gambit became, "when did you first hear of Gandhiji?" Our perambulating circus, with six core members, numerous associates and some spouses, and ex-JNU students from the region who loyally responded to Bipan's call for interpreters, set up camp everywhere—in seedy hotels in one horse-hick towns like Kasargod, in filaria-endemic Ramchandrapuram, in the MLA hostel in Anna Salai and in a penthouse in Pali Hill.

The national movement "high" persisted in Delhi, courtesy friends who were co-travellers on the Indian National Movement trail. All of us, Gyanesh Kudaisya, Visalakshi Menon, Antony Thomas, Salil Misra, Vinita Damodaran, Medha Malik and Neerja Singh, seemed to live for a while in the 1930s and 1940s. Our days were measured out in three-hour "filmshows"; shorthand for the sessions at the microfilm reader, punctuated with long breaks for *vada* and tea at Kutty's.

Professor Ravinder Kumar's invitation to a seminar on the Struggle for Freedom in India, 1945–47 at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in 1984 was extremely encouraging at a relatively early stage in my research. Professor Partha Sarathi Gupta has always been generous with references.

I wish to thank the director, librarians and archival staff of the Nehru Memorial Library, New Delhi, the National Archives of India, New Delhi, the Bihar State Archives, Patna, the Maharashtra State

Archives, Bombay, the Tamil Nadu State Archives, Madras, the Secretariat Record Room, Trivandrum, the India Office Library, London, the Cambridge South Asia Archive, the archives at the Nuffield College, Oxford and the Churchill College Archive, Cambridge. Tarababu at Patna and David Blake at the India Office Library, London were particularly helpful. Thanks are also due to Mr Bharat Bhushan, Executive Editor at *The Hindustan Times* for having given permission to reproduce cartoons by Shankar and Ahmed which had appeared in the newspaper during 1945–47.

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For hospitality, information, guidance, stories and leads, I wish to thank R.S. Sharma in Patna, Atluri Murali in Nidobrulu, Gopalan Kutty in Kozhikode, Amrita Das in Lucknow, Vinita Damodaran and Richard Grove in Falmer and Cambridge, Anna Brown, Madhu and Ajay Sharma in London and Alex Tickell and Rachel in Oxford. Anubha Banerjee looked at the manuscript with her sternest editorial eye. Vikram Menon brought cheer, wit, good sense (and, when all else failed, double whiskies at the Gymkhana) to bear on the almost daily crises (be it over the title, the cover or a contested turn of phrase) that dotted the last year. Jyotirmaya Sharma doubled up as personal physician, private editorial consultant, troubleshooter and slave driver. Laxmi typed at the oddest of hours and places. Sukrita and Jayant generously offered their home and computer and Sanjay his office. I am grateful to Tejeshwar Singh, Omita Goyal and Jaya Chowdhury at Sage Publications for their cooperation and patience with a fussy author.

The thesis was always a 'family business'. My father, Vidya Dhar Mahajan, tried to help a slow and plodding researcher by offering me his steno-typist, with instructions to dictate my thesis, as he did

his court appeals! He would have been proud to see my argument in print, though he would have dismissed it as idealistic and unrealistic, given his own predilections for the RSS in the strife-torn days of 1947 in Lahore. I regret that I took so long to write the book that he did not live to see it. My mother has always been a source of great strength and inspiration. The memory of her silent, dogged pursuit of a career of teaching and academic administration despite the odds of three children and opposition from her husband kept me going during the days I was juggling research, teaching and parenthood. Mridula and Aditya were unsparing with their encouragement, time and support. They put their own work aside to assume the varied roles of friends, editors, advisors or cheerleaders, depending on the need of the hour. Ajay's demand was for less academic history, written straight from the heart. Bodh, of course, would think it presumptuous if I were to thank him for all he did and more, but he may accept responsibility for providing perennial distractions from research. I hope my children, Varun and Srikant, will someday share the concerns which inform this book—as of now they're thrilled as the completion of this book has given them unlimited access to the computer to play Aladdin.





# Introduction

## I

There is an almost alarming contemporaneity to the history of the turbulent 1940s. The issues at stake in 1947 were very much of the present and future. Whither Indian polity, what was the basis of Indian nationhood these were the questions which divided the secular and communal forces. The concluding episodes of the saga of independence and partition come across as the opening acts of the post-independence sequel, when viewed from the 1990s. A whole new way of seeing the 1940s opens; flashback rather than hindsight. Gandhi's assassination comes across as the first major skirmish in the struggle between the votaries of a Hindu polity on the one hand and a secular polity on the other—Babri Masjid, 1992, and the BJP/VHP/Shiv Sena resurgence, 1995, being further episodes. The assassination acquires sinister overtones as the tiger growls in Maharashtra and Gandhi is vilified and Godse hailed as the saviour in Gandhi's very own Gujarat. The politics of the assassination was this contest on the terrain of nationhood—the contestations have not abated over the years, they are fiercer.

This continuing struggle between secular and communal forces informs this work on the independence and partition of India with a contemporary relevance. Is there something for us today in how the national leadership dealt with communal forces? For one, we can derive inspiration from the indomitable courage with which the secular forces took on the communal challenge in a volatile situation. Second, the existence of a wide range of approaches towards communal forces, ranging from outright condemnation and suppression,

to co-existence and even accommodation at times, make our struggle for independence a rich indigenous resource which can be drawn on in our present troubled times. The Bihar riots of 1946 offer an interesting example of diverse approaches—if there was Jawaharlal Nehru who ordered firing on Hindu rioters and threatened to bomb them from the air, there was Gandhi who used moral chastisement of the Hindus in such a way that they felt repentant for their deeds. This diversity is important as recent times have often witnessed communal forces benefiting from a backlash of sympathy when radical groups derisively refer to them as ‘the saffron brigade’ or ‘fascist goons’.

At one level, this work is an inquiry into the struggle of secular nationalism against communalism—a matter of immense political gravity today. My argument about the 1940s is an intervention, on the side of secularism, in the contest between secular and communal forces today. India is still a nation in the making and the way in which the secular forces scotched the communal challenge in the difficult, first year of the establishment of the independent state has enormous relevance for our present day engagement with the communal offensive. This is all the more necessary today, as, in a post-modernist intellectual world, it is increasingly fashionable to be non-ideological and apolitical. Many of the ideals, values, principles, cherished and upheld by the Indian people, especially nationalism, secularism and pluralism, have been sought to be divested of their intrinsic worth.

Amazingly, more than a half-century after the departure of the colonial masters, denigrating nationalism continues to be fashionable. Generously funded scholarships ensure that ideas emanating from Oxbridge, Chicago or even lowly Canberra rule the roost. The form of the diatribe has altered every few years. The Cambridge school has come a long way from its direct, frontal assault on nationalism in the 1960s, when the politics of the early nationalist arenas was described derogatorily as a “cockfight”. When this did not wash, assault was mounted from another battery, positioned in the province and locality. All-India history was given up as it allegedly dealt only in generalities. The emphasis on provincial and local arenas indirectly suggested the bankruptcy of all-India politics and national concerns.

Subaltern studies, whose deep complicity with imperialist scholarship is fairly well accepted, condemned nationalism for its alienation

from the real issues of subaltern resistance, culture and gender. The case was that the history of partition (significantly, not independence) was reduced to a “subordinate” and “inconsequential” “motif in the larger drama of India’s struggle for freedom”.<sup>1</sup> All existing histories of this period (including those by the orthodox left) were dismissed as statist, elitist and unworthy of the authentic, felt “experience” of partition. The subaltern school’s contribution to the lexicon of abuse reserved for the national movement is “statist”, “elitist” and “modernizing”, just as the favourite terms of abuse of the orthodox left were “bourgeois” and “compromizing” and that of the Oxbridge establishment were “totalitarian” and “majoritarian”. Gyanendra Pandey disparaged the historian’s craft as having “never been particularly comfortable with such matters”; “the horror of partition, the anguish and sorrow, pain and brutality of the ‘riots’ of 1946–47 has been left almost entirely to creative writers and film makers.” Curiously for a historian, what were offered (as the new grand narrative?) were the stories (not histories) of the victims, especially those rejected by society—lunatics, abducted women, and so on.

Both bourgeois and working class histories were criticized for privileging nation and class over community, just as leftist orthodoxy had earlier berated the national movement for taking the emphasis away from the substantive issue of class. The technique, similar to the earlier shift from nation to province, is to attack the focus on the history of the nation as taking away from emphasis on equally important markers of identity, such as community. Sectarian strife and communal violence, Pandey complained, were ignored or underplayed in the history of partition. The political implications of this foregrounding of community are there for all of us to live with. India in the 1990s has been marked by growing intolerance, often legitimized as defence of “rights” of communities.

A curious feature of the latest attack on nationalism is that it has come from scholars flaunting diverse ideological persuasions but sharing a Cambridge-subaltern pedigree. Ayesha Jalal, who has else-

<sup>1</sup> Gyanendra Pandey, “The Prose of Otherness”, *Subaltern Studies, Essays in Honour of Ranajit Guha*, Vol. 8, New Delhi, 1994, pp. 188–221.

where described subaltern history as rubbish,<sup>2</sup> condemns secular historiography for privileging nation over community and marginalizing the problem of cultural difference by denigrating it as communalism. The binary mode of perceiving secular nationalism and religious communalism is believed to be responsible for this.<sup>3</sup>

Another tactic employed is to shift the focus away from the role of the two important players, the colonial government and the Muslim League, to an analysis of the role of Hindu communalism. Ayesha Jalal asserts that it is a “historiographical error” to see the “1947 partition as [the] ultimate goal of Muslim politics”. “The Congress leadership, keen on grasping the centralised apparatus of the colonial state, was prepared neither to share power with the Muslim League at the all-India level nor accommodate Muslim majoritarian provincialism within a loose federal or confederal structure. It was ready instead to wield the partitioner’s axe—in concert one might add with the Hindu Mahasabha—to exclude both the League and the Muslim majority areas from the horizons of the secular Indian nation-state.”<sup>4</sup> Sugata Bose, in a complementary piece, similarly shifts responsibility on to the Congress: “At the end of the day the nationalist leadership in both India and Ireland, quite as much as their departing colonial masters, failed to negotiate a satisfactory solution to the problem of religious difference.” Bose would have it that this “political failure” was because “the Indian nation was permeated by a Hindu ethos”.<sup>5</sup>

No distinction is made between Hindu communalism as an institutionalized and organized force and as an ideological current which also permeated otherwise secular parties like the Congress. This While

<sup>2</sup> Ayesha Jalal, “Secularists, Subalterns and the Stigma of ‘Communalism’: Partition Historiography Revisited”, *Modern Asian Studies* (henceforth *MAS*), Vol. 30.3, 1996, pp. 681–89.

<sup>3</sup> Ayesha Jalal, “Exploding Communalism: The Politics of Muslim Identity in South Asia”, in Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, eds, *Nationalism, Democracy and Development: State and Politics in India*, Delhi, 1997, p. 90.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 93, 95.

<sup>5</sup> Sugata Bose, “Nation, Reason and Religion: India’s Independence in International Perspective”, *Economic and Political Weekly* (henceforth *EPW*), Vol. 33.31, 1 August 1998, pp. 2090–97.

categorization of the Congress as a Hindu communal party at par with the Hindu Mahasabha is non-ideological and ahistorical—it ignores the struggle waged by the Congress against communalism in both its Hindu and Muslim variants.

Ayesha Jalal presents Hindu communalism as the original sinner in her analysis of the role of Punjab in the partition of India.<sup>6</sup> She traces the genealogy of the demand for the partition of the Punjab to Lajpat Rai's scheme of 1924. While underplaying the Lahore resolution as demanding national status, not state sovereignty (an ingenious distinction, indeed), she deems "the Sikhs' reaction to 'Pakistan'", "nudged on by the provincial Hindu Mahasabha", to be of "crucial significance in tracing the historical backdrop to the partition of the Punjab". Region is also privileged over all-India—all-India is equated with imposition and the regions with genuine aspirations. For instance, "the imposition of an all-India solution on Punjab" is singled out as the factor that convulsed the Punjab in violence. The implication is that left to them, the different communities would have worked out some amicable solution.

Joya Chatterji's thesis extends Jalal's contention, that the Congress wanted partition, to the move for the partition of Bengal: "Partition is generally believed to have been a consequence of the separatist politics of Muslim minorities, but in the case of Bengal, Hindus evolved a parallel separatism of their own. The Congress High Command is widely (but wrongly) believed to have acquiesced only reluctantly to Partition...the Bengal Congress campaigned successfully for the vivisection of its province on communal lines."<sup>7</sup> Her argument is that there was no difference between the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha: "The distinctions between the Congress and the Mahasabha had been rubbed away during the forties, both in membership and in policy... If, in the early forties, the Mahasabha tail had tended to wag the Congress dog, the roles were now reversed.

<sup>6</sup> Ayesha Jalal, "Nation, Reason and Religion: Punjab's Role in the Partition of India", *EPW*, Vol. 33.32, 8 August 1998, pp. 2183–190.

<sup>7</sup> Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided—Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932–1947*, Cambridge, 1996, p. 266.

While the two organisations worked closely together in the cause of partition, the Congress unquestionably took the lead in orchestrating the campaign.” Chatterji does not consider it necessary to furnish any evidence for this assessment or take into account facts which contradict it, for example, the rout of the Hindu Mahasabha at the hands of the Congress in the elections of 1945–46 in Bengal. In fact, with obtuse logic, Chatterji claims that the success of the Congress and the defeat of the Mahasabha demonstrates that the Congress had become communal, that it was now the choice of the committed “Hindu” voter.

The legitimacy of nationalism is also eroded by the currently popular usage, “Hindu nationalism”, for both communal groupings and secular parties. It is used both for parties which specifically represent “Hindu” interests, like the Hindu Mahasabha, the RSS and the BJP, and a mainstream national political party like the Congress, whose ideology is secular but whose supporters are largely Hindus because of the preponderance of Hindus in the overall population. This schema would have Gandhi espouse a moderate, pluralist version of “Hindu nationalism” while Savarkar would represent a radical variant of the same. The political implications of the use of the term Hindu nationalism are negative. The gathering of secularists and communalists under the same umbrella of Hindu nationalism permits Hindu communalists to indulge in a game of selective appropriation of nationalists; for example, Patel is claimed to be “one of us” by the Hindu communalists. It is conveniently forgotten that Patel’s dismissal of the suggestion that India be a Hindu state was as forthright as Nehru’s: “I do not think it will be possible to consider Hindustan as a Hindu State with Hinduism as the state religion. We must not forget that there are other minorities whose protection is our primary responsibility. The State must exist for all irrespective of caste or creed.”<sup>8</sup>

The casualty, of course, is the crucial ideological difference between secular nationalism and communalism. In what is an obvious travesty

<sup>8</sup> To B.M. Birla, 10 June 1947, Durga Das, ed., *Sardar Patel’s Correspondence, 1945–50* (henceforth *SPC*), Vol. 4, Ahmedabad, 1971–74.

of reality, communalism and nationalism, which were historically opposed, are equated. The consequence is that communalism is legitimized and Indian nationalism is misrepresented—its powerful secular orientation is ignored. For countless of our countrymen, secularism, in the sense of anti-communalism (as it was perceived during the Indian national movement), was a deeply held faith, an integral facet of nationalism, a value to be upheld even in the face of grave provocation, as in the difficult days of August 1947. The creation of a secular polity was firmly upheld amidst the cacophony of demands for a Hindu *rashtra* and the Congress party refused to forego its right to nominate a Muslim for the Interim Government. Gandhi pertinently pointed out, when faced with the demand to forsake the nationalist Muslims in the interest of a settlement with the Muslim League, that “one can waive a right, one cannot waive a duty”. In this context the almost summary dismissal of secularism by T.N. Madan—“it is not a rooted, full-blooded and well-thought out weltanschauung...it is only a stratagem”<sup>9</sup>—or the rejection of secularism by Partha Chatterjee<sup>10</sup> as an inadequate ground from which Hindu communalism can be fought—seem surprising, to say the least.

Curiously, the attack on secularism has come not only from communalists but also from indigenists purporting to support India's pluralist tradition. Styling themselves as “anti-secularists”, and claiming that Gandhi was one of them, they contend that secularism was inappropriate for India<sup>11</sup> because it was part of the modernist baggage imbibed by the national movement from the post Enlightenment West. The problem has partly arisen because studies of secularism in India have wrongly adopted the classic Western definition of secularism as separation of religion and politics, rather than basing their analysis on the historical practice of secularism in India during the national movement and after. This is partly because what we called

<sup>9</sup> T.N. Madan, “Whither Indian Secularism”, *MAS*, Vol. 27.3, 1993, pp. 667–97.

<sup>10</sup> Partha Chatterjee, “Secularism and Toleration”, *EPW*, Vol. 29.28, 9 July 1994, pp. 1768–777.

<sup>11</sup> Ashis Nandy, “The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance”, in Veena Das, ed., *Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia*, Delhi, 1990, pp. 69–93.



ideas in the “good old days” have now been rarefied into constructs and artifices, which, not being located in a specific historical context, can be deconstructed and reconstructed ingenuously to become the opposite of what they were to begin with. If ideas were studied in a historical perspective rather than as abstract formulations, it would be evident that secularism emerged from a specific, historical context, that of the Indian national movement. Was secularism not an imperative that emerged from the broad multi-religious base of the movement? Whatever may be the roots of secularism in the West, in India they go back to the Indian people’s struggle for independence.

## II

The period between the end of the Second World War and the attainment of independence by India was the climactic stage in which the logic of the anti-imperialist movement and colonial rule clearly revealed itself. The British decision to withdraw from India has wrongly been seen as the additive product of pressures from different directions, the task of the historian being to evaluate their relative weight fairly. The more enterprising historian might even find yet another factor. This is but natural, for, if you look continuously at a fragment, it will loom as large as the whole of which it is a part. For too long, historians have gone about, armed with flashlights, directing them at a dark corner or two, in the belief that many bright corners will eventually create a well-lit room. I hope to open a couple of large windows, to let some limpid, even light into the room.

An extremely rich pool of first-hand information is available in the autobiographical and biographical accounts of the leaders of the Indian National Army (INA),<sup>12</sup> the Royal Indian Navy (RIN) revolt,<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Shah Nawaz Khan, *My Memories of INA and its Netaji*, New Delhi, 1946; A.C. Chatterjee, *India’s Struggle for Freedom*, Calcutta, 1947; and S.A. Ayer, *Story of the INA*, Delhi, 1972.

<sup>13</sup> B.C. Dutt, *Mutiny of the Innocents*, Bombay, 1971; and Subrata Banerjee, *The RIN Strike*, New Delhi, 1981.

the peasant movements<sup>14</sup> and the workers' struggles,<sup>15</sup> as well as of the Congress and League leaders<sup>16</sup> and the British officials.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, the common problem plaguing these participants' accounts is that they assign a historically decisive character to their own role, which is often not borne out by their actual contributions.

Lord Mountbatten is famous for claiming to have determined the course of Indian history almost single-handedly, which is a flagrant distortion of what actually happened.<sup>18</sup> Maulana Azad is constantly at pains to show how his stance alone was the correct one at any given moment, how Nehru's understanding was wrong and how he was insulted and neglected by Sardar Patel.<sup>19</sup> The leaders often exaggerate the importance of the specific actions they participated in—a tendency that is shared by the historians of these movements. Gautam Chattopadhyay, for instance, feels that the Rashid Ali Day demonstration in Calcutta (which he actively organized) marked the most revolutionary moment, "the almost revolution".<sup>20</sup> Subrata Banerjee, who was in the RIN, claims that "the RIN revolt shook the mighty British empire to its foundation",<sup>21</sup> while B.C. Dutt, an actual

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Sunil Sen, *Agrarian Struggle in Bengal, 1946–47*, New Delhi, 1972, for the Tebhaga movement; and P. Sundarayya, *Telengana People's Struggle and its Lessons*, Calcutta, 1972; C. Rajeswara Rao, *The Historic Telengana Struggle—Some Useful Lessons from its Rich Experience*, New Delhi, 1972; Raj Bahadur Gour et al., *Glorious Telengana Armed Struggle*, New Delhi, 1973, for the Telengana struggle. For the Varlis, see S.V. Parulekar, *Revolt of the Varlis*, Bombay, 1947.

<sup>15</sup> On the coir-workers' struggle in Kerala, see K.C. George, *Immortal Punnappra Vayalar*, New Delhi, 1975.

<sup>16</sup> Maulana Azad, *India Wins Freedom: An Autobiographical Narrative*, Calcutta, 1959; Rajendra Prasad, *Autobiography*, Bombay, 1957; and C. Khaliquzzaman, *Pathway to Pakistan*, Lahore, 1961.

<sup>17</sup> Penderel Moon, ed., *Wavell: The Viceroy's Journal* (henceforth *Wavell's Journal*), New Delhi, 1977; and Sir F. Tuker, *While Memory Serves*, London, 1950, are invaluable for this period. Also see Lord Ismay, *Memoirs*, London, 1960.

<sup>18</sup> Mountbatten's exaggerated statements in his interviews to Lapierre and Collins, who based two whole books on them, are well known.

<sup>19</sup> Azad, *India Wins Freedom*.

<sup>20</sup> Gautam Chattopadhyay, "The Almost Revolution; A Case Study of India in February, 1946", in *Essays in Honour of Prof. S.C. Sarkar*, New Delhi, 1976.

<sup>21</sup> Banerjee, *RIN Strike*, p. vii.

participant, goes further to say that it was probably “the greatest single factor in hastening our independence”.<sup>22</sup> This claim is hotly contested by the INA historians and Bose’s biographers. Hugh Toye, for example, argues that it was the INA, “which in its thunderous disintegration, hastened the end of British rule in India”.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Dilip K. Roy contends that had it not been for Netaji and the INA, “our freedom would have been delayed by a decade at the very least”.<sup>24</sup>

In their search for the source that led to the British withdrawal, the historians of the imperialist tradition have arrived at some common conclusions. They argue that British imperial interests in India were declining, that India no longer fulfilled its role in the maintenance of imperial interests in the fields of either defence or commerce or finance and that, in fact, over the years it had become a liability for the British.<sup>25</sup> It is argued, for instance, that during the Second World War, Britain footed the bill for India’s defence requirements.<sup>26</sup> However, this view that imperial interests in India were on the wane or that India was becoming a burden to Britain, has been

<sup>22</sup> Dutt, *Mutiny of Innocents*, p. 266.

<sup>23</sup> Hugh Toye, *The Springing Tiger: Subhas Chandra Bose*, Bombay, 1974, p. 191.

<sup>24</sup> Dilip K. Roy, *Netaji: The Man*, Bombay, 1966, p. 197.

<sup>25</sup> John Gallagher, *The Decline, Revival and Fall of the British Empire*, edited by Anil Seal, Cambridge, 1982; John Gallagher and Anil Seal, “Britain and India between the Wars”, *MAS*, Vol. 15.3, 1981, pp. 387–414; I.M. Drummond, *British Economic Policy and the Empire, 1919–1939*, London, 1972; Clive Dewey, “The End of Imperialism of Free Trade: The Eclipse of the Lancashire Lobby and the Concession of Fiscal Autonomy to India”, in Clive Dewey and A.G. Hopkins, eds, *Imperial Impact: Studies in the Economic History of Africa and India*, London, 1978. A slightly different position is taken by B.R. Tomlinson, “India and the British Empire, 1935–47”, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* (henceforth *IESHR*), Vol. 13.3, 1975, pp. 331–52. Tomlinson is critical of the “fancy footwork” school, which sees decolonization only as a technique by which formal empire became informal in the interests of maximizing advantages to Britain. He concedes that there was an Indian angle to the end of Empire, apart from changes in the metropolitan and world economies, but the Indian factor was not nationalist pressure, but discontent with the ever-increasing financial burdens imposed by the colonial government on its subjects. B.R. Tomlinson, “Contraction of England: National Decline and Loss of Empire”, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* (henceforth *JICH*), Vol. 11.1, 1982, pp. 58–72.

<sup>26</sup> Gallagher and Seal, “Britain and India between the Wars”, p. 144.

seriously questioned.<sup>27</sup> It has been argued that, on the contrary, towards the end of British rule and especially during the war, British imperial control was intensified considerably and the economic exploitation of India increased manifold.<sup>28</sup>

An important weakness of imperialist historiography is that it ignores the major political activity going on in India, focusing, in typical Eurocentric tradition, on the developments at home. David Potter, for instance, believes that “an explanation for the end of colonialism is unlikely to be found within the boundaries of the subject country” and that historians “have so far been unable to account satisfactorily for political events like the end of colonialism because, quite simply, they have not been looking in the right place”.<sup>29</sup> His search for the “right place” leads him to a treasure-key to the understanding of the end of colonialism—manpower shortage.

As we shall see, the drying up of British recruitment to the Indian Civil Service (ICS) was not the crucial factor even in the decline of the ICS, let alone the reason for the end of the British rule. This many-sided process of decline of imperialist hegemony can be said to have reached a peak by early 1946. The decision to send the Cabinet Mission to India, taken in late January 1946, represented the awareness among British policy makers that the end was near and the granting of self-government a matter of time. Pethick-Lawrence’s statement of 1 January 1946 reflected this new tone.

<sup>27</sup> Basudev Chatterji, “Business and Politics in the 1930s: Lancashire and the Making of the Indo-British Trade Agreement, 1939”, *MAS*, Vol. 15.3, 1981, pp. 527–29; and Ousep Matthen, “Monetary Aspects of the Inter-War Economy of India”, unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1980.

<sup>28</sup> Aditya Mukherjee, “The Indian Capitalist Class: Aspects of its Economic, Political and Ideological Development in the Colonial Period, 1930–47”, in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya and Romila Thapar, eds, *Situating Indian History*, New Delhi, 1986, pp. 239–82.

<sup>29</sup> David Potter, “Manpower Shortage and the End of Colonialism: The Case of the Indian Civil Service”, *MAS*, Vol. 7.1, 1973, pp. 47–73. Simon Epstein is the only British historian who accepts the role of nationalist pressure in the erosion of authority. See Simon Epstein, “District Officers in Decline: Erosion of Authority in the Bombay Countryside, 1919–47”, *MAS*, Vol. 16.3, 1982, pp. 493–518.

Even those historians in the imperialist tradition who are devoted exclusively to the study of Indian politics, for instance, R.J. Moore,<sup>30</sup> are of the view that “British policies which shaped India’s political development were related to metropolitan changes”. Nationalist political activity acted merely as a response to the supposed British policy of devolution of power, the only alleged problem in this process being the Hindu–Muslim divide. There is no recognition either of the fact that the national movement reflected the fundamental contradiction of the Indian people with imperialism or of its vital impact on the British decision to concede independence.

A number of books and biographies, which broadly fall within the nationalist historiographical stream,<sup>31</sup> do recognize nationalism as the central cause of the British withdrawal from India. In their coverage of this period, however, they get submerged in the spurt of constitutional negotiations between 1945 and 1947 and the stances taken up by the British, the Congress and other political groups, paying little attention to popular activity, such as the INA agitation and the RIN revolt.

The histories and commentaries coming from the left tradition<sup>32</sup> are a valuable corrective to both the imperialist and the nationalist writings on the period, in that they shift the focus away from constitutional developments and political negotiations towards popular

<sup>30</sup> R.J. Moore, “Recent Historical Writing on the Modern British Empire and Commonwealth: Later Imperial India”, *JICH*, Vol. 4.1, 1975, pp. 55–76. See his *Crisis of Indian Unity, 1917–1940*, New Delhi, 1974; and *Escape from Empire: The Attlee Government and the Indian Problem*, Oxford, 1983.

<sup>31</sup> Tarachand, *History of the Freedom Movement in India*, Vol. 4, New Delhi, 1972; Ram Gopal, *How India Struggled for Freedom*, Bombay, 1967; and many others.

<sup>32</sup> There are three types of writings under this category, the “official” Communist Party of India (CPI) histories and reviews, the writings of the Communist leaders and the works of some historians of the left; M. Farooqui, *India’s Freedom Struggle and the Communist Party of India*, New Delhi, 1974; Mohit Sen, *Revolution in India: Path and Problems*, New Delhi, 1977; R.P. Dutt, *India Today*, Bombay, 1949; V.V. Balabushevich and A.M. Dyakov, *Contemporary History of India*, New Delhi, 1964; Sumit Sarkar, “Popular Movements and National Leadership, 1945–47”, *EPW*, Vol. 17.14–17.15, April 1982, pp. 677–89; Ajit Roy, “Sociopolitical Background of Mountbatten Award”, *The Marxist Review*, Vol. 16.5–16.7, 1982: 171–91.

mass activity.<sup>33</sup> However, the political activity that is considered worthy of their attention and assumed to be the propelling force behind the political decisions and stances of the nationalist leadership and the British government, is that in which the Communists played an important role, or that which involved the economic struggles of workers and peasants, or that which stepped outside the Congress limits of non-violence, such as the three outbreaks, two in Calcutta in November 1945 and February 1946 (connected with the INA issue) and the one in Bombay and a few other towns in February 1946 (concerning the RIN strike).

Their argument runs as follows: The Congress, frightened by the radical potentialities held out by these mass struggles and violent outbreaks, moved towards a path of negotiation and compromise with imperialism, even at the cost of sacrificing the unity of the country.<sup>34</sup> The British, too, preferred to compromise and bargain with the Congress rather than face the alternative of having to surrender power to a radical combination of political forces.<sup>35</sup> The interests of both the British and the Congress coalesced in the final transfer of power, which was carried out through the “bourgeois” path of bargain and compromise, rather than through the parallel “revolutionary” path of mass struggle and seizure of power.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Some of the post-war upsurges are discussed in detail only in works of the left. These struggles are linked up to portray a heroic saga of popular militancy.

<sup>34</sup> “Fear of popular ‘excesses’ made Congress leaders cling to the path of negotiation and compromise, and eventually even accept partition as a necessary price”, Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India, 1885–1945*, New Delhi, 1983, p. 414. The national leadership “proved to be more afraid of a revolutionary victory...than a negotiated compromise with imperialism which they know was fraught with the danger of partition of India”, Chattopadhyay, “Almost Revolution”, p. 428.

<sup>35</sup> “Imperialists obviously could not rule in the old way. So the shrewd imperialists decided to make a strategic retreat by transferring power to the national leadership”, G. Adhikari, *Communist Party and India’s Path to National Regeneration and Socialism*, New Delhi, 1964.

<sup>36</sup> “Under the leadership of Gandhi, the Indian National Congress followed this ‘nonviolent’ road to compromise to secure a transfer of power from the British rule and stave off the possibility of the subcontinent following the other militant path of revolutionary class and mass struggles”, A.R. Desai, “Introduction”, in A.R. Desai, ed., *Peasant Struggles in India*, Bombay, 1979, p. xx.

A common feature of almost all the approaches described above is the virtual ignoring of the groundswell of popular nationalist activity in this period. We feel that the historian, in his or her search for the immediate causes of the post-war political developments, has also to turn to this mostly peaceful, grassroots-level political activity (as witnessed, for example, in the agitation around the INA issue and in the election campaign of 1945–46), which was extremely widespread, both in terms of spatial spread and in the range of the social classes involved. Violent outbreaks in a few urban centres and the primarily economic struggles of the workers and the peasants in some areas are unlikely to provide a major part, and certainly not the whole, of the answer.

There is hardly any discussion, in any substantive work on this period, of the overall assessment by the Congress of its own and the British positions in 1945, which was the basis of its willingness to go in for negotiations. There is also no analysis of the concrete way in which the national movement had succeeded in undermining imperialist hegemony and shaking the pillars of the colonial structure.

In our view, centre stage was taken by the long-term process of retreat of the imperial regime in the face of the challenging stance of the nationalist forces. This conflict had come to a head by the end of World War II in the form of the impending breakdown of the administrative machine. The arena in which this struggle for counter-hegemony was waged by nationalist forces was, of course, the minds of the Indian people. The hardening perception of the nationalist forces and the changing perception of the loyalists indicate the steady success of the national movement. Specific indications were the tremendous upsurge over the INA trials and the RIN revolt and the fury of the election campaign. One graph is that of the swelling crowds, the wide reach of the nationalist sentiment, the deep intensity and fervour witnessed. The other graph plots the demoralization of the British ICS officials, the shifting loyalties of the Indians in the services and the stirrings within the armed forces.

Though the erosion of authority was a slow process, realization of the irrevocable point it had reached is normally pinpointed to a moment after 1942. As examples, I have identified below four moments that embody varied historiographical views:

- (i) 1942, specifically the collapse of British authority in the rural Indian countryside, is believed to have brought home, to the British, the realization that their days were numbered.<sup>37</sup>
- (ii) Most conventional historiography has seen Labour's victory in the July 1945 election as decisive for Indian independence, given Labour's commitment to it. We are often reminded that Churchill would never have presided over the liquidation of the Empire. In contrast, Partha Sarathi Gupta,<sup>38</sup> Anita Inder Singh<sup>39</sup> and B.R. Tomlinson<sup>40</sup> have suggested that Labour's vision of Britain's world influence, based on her leadership of the new Commonwealth of self-governing dominions and independent ex-colonies, could compete with the plans of many Conservatives in grandeur and illusion.
- (iii) The third moment is the RIN revolt, which is, till today (despite scholars presenting evidence to the contrary),<sup>41</sup> linked to the decision to send the Cabinet Mission to India.<sup>42</sup>
- (iv) The 20 February 1947 statement, which announced the final date, June 1948, is cited as decisive because of the fixing of a time limit for withdrawal.<sup>43</sup>

There are obvious problems in looking for a turning point in imperial consciousness. There were phases of realization and moments of clarity

<sup>37</sup> Chandan Mitra, "Contours of Popular Protest: The Quit India Movement of 1942", paper presented at the seminar on "A History of the Indian National Congress, 1885-1947", Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (henceforth NMML), New Delhi, 22-24 July 1985.

<sup>38</sup> Partha Sarathi Gupta, "Imperial Strategy and the Transfer of Power, 1939-51", in A.K. Gupta, ed., *Myth and Reality: Struggle for Freedom in India, 1945-47*, New Delhi, 1987, pp. 1-53.

<sup>39</sup> Anita Inder Singh, *The Origins of the Partition of India, 1936-1947*, New Delhi, 1987.

<sup>40</sup> B.R. Tomlinson, "Indo-British Relations in the Post Colonial Era: The Sterling Balances Negotiations, 1947-49", *JICH*, Vol. 13.3, May 1985, pp. 142-62.

<sup>41</sup> Partha Sarathi Gupta, *Imperialism and the British Labour Movement, 1914-64*, London, 1975, p. 292.

<sup>42</sup> Dutt, *India Today*, and Balabushevich and Dyakov, *Contemporary History of India*.

<sup>43</sup> Anita Inder Singh, "Decolonisation in India: The Statement of 20 February 1947", *International Historical Review* (henceforth *IHR*), Vol. 6.2, 1984, pp. 191-209.



in colonial perception which stand out. But it is perhaps wrong to argue, as is often done, that the decisive moment was 1942 or that it was the elections in Britain in July 1945 or the Royal Indian Navy revolt in February 1946 or even the statement of policy of 20 February 1947.

Why do we begin with 1944 and not 1942? It is not because, in our view, the end of the war and not 1942 was the turning point on the road to freedom. The 1942 movement was (depending on which angle one looked at it from, i.e., Indian or British) the pinnacle or the nadir of their fortunes. On the face of it, this seems an exaggerated claim. The newspapers and official dispatches report that the all-India movement was scotched in a fortnight. Even the eastern U.P. and Bihar belt was subdued in a few weeks. The militant students of Bombay lowered their flags by the end of September. Satara and Midnapore kept the torch blazing but the flame flickered to such an extent that Gandhi's one-man challenge from within jail, his 21-day fast in early 1943, cast a wider beam. In fact, the "failure" of the 1942 movement and the "success" of British policy can be easily argued if we confine ourselves to the "facts". But sometimes perceptions of reality are more illuminating than reality itself.

The British could be sanguine about 1942 and justifiably so. Rebellion had been crushed, politics was dormant and the war effort was on. Yet we find talk of the "most serious outbreak since 1857" and that too by the doughty Viceroy, Linlithgow. "What happened in 1942" and "what could have happened" were different and the prudent British planned on the basis of the second, not the first. Planning of policy for the post-war future began in late 1944 when the end of the war seemed in sight. The new Viceroy, Wavell, wished to achieve a political settlement before post-war problems set in.

### III

Another area of focus is the form that independence took—partition. When and how did it seem clear to the powers-that-be that partition was the form they wanted independence to take? Mountbatten has claimed that it was the only possible form but there is little reason

for accepting his claim. Anita Inder Singh and Partha Sarathi Gupta have demonstrated that the British themselves preferred a united India for the maintenance of their post-imperial, strategic defence interests in South Asia. Why, then, did His Majesty's Government (HMG) not intervene determinedly in favour of unity? Or even refuse to be associated with partition and leave it to Indians to decide? Was it because of the irreconcilable differences between the Hindus and Muslims, as the British claimed, or was it their refusal to break with their own past or endanger their future interests in South Asia?

When did the British decide to "divide and quit"? Was the 3 June Plan, with its features of dual dominionhood and early transfer of power, a Mountbatten–Nehru "deal", as R.J. Moore has claimed?<sup>44</sup> The problem with such a view is that it shifts the responsibility, for what was a British award, on to the Congress. If the Congress called the shots in the last rubber of the endgame, as Moore claims, why was partition instead of unity the end result?

A few years ago, Ayesha Jalal, a Pakistani scholar, absolved not only Jinnah, but by implication, the British, of responsibility for partition.<sup>45</sup> She claimed that, contrary to conventional wisdom, it was the Congress which wanted partition, while Jinnah was against it. Jinnah demanded Pakistan only as a bargaining lever to secure his real objective of getting a dignified position at the centre. However, the totalitarian Congress, with its eyes on a strong centre, let go of the provinces of Punjab and Bengal, over which it had, at best, a tentative hold.

Anita Inder Singh set the record straight on this question: "That Jinnah envisaged a sovereign Pakistan was clear from his assertion at Lahore, that 'the problem in India is not of an inter-communal character but manifestly of an international one and must be treated as such'."<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> R.J. Moore, *Endgames of Empire: Studies of Britain's Indian Problem*, Delhi, 1988.

<sup>45</sup> Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan*, Cambridge, 1985.

<sup>46</sup> She dismisses the argument, made by Maulana Azad in his autobiography, *India Wins Freedom* (and before him by Reginald Coupland), and popularly accepted, that partition could have been avoided if Congress had formed a coalition with the

Most existing works on the Congress and the communal problem in the 1940s miss out two important aspects. First, the Congress comes across as a monolith; the diversity of reactions and approaches within its ranks is missed. If some individual Congressmen showed "Hindu" leanings, Congress ministries took stern action against Hindu rioters, and national leaders, including Patel, firmly ruled out reducing the Congress to a Hindu body or India to a Hindu state, as demanded by Hindu communalists.

Second, they equate communalism with Muslim communalism, ignoring the constraints posed by Hindu communalism. We have discussed at length the growth of Hindu communalism and the pressure it exerted on the Congress. The Congress stand on partition was not the simple picture generally drawn in the literature on partition, of steady retreat before the juggernaut of Muslim communalism; Hindu communalism blocked the path at the other end. The options before it, e.g., of a mass campaign against the demand for Pakistan, were also foreclosed by the spread of communal sentiment among the Hindus, including some partymen. League leaders were quick to point out that the rioting by Hindu mobs in Bihar and U.P. was no less inhuman than the much-condemned action of the League-abetted Muslims of Bengal. When the Congress supported the demand for the partition of Punjab and Bengal, on the ground that it represented genuine minority fears, it laid itself open to the criticism that it was following in the footsteps of the Mahasabha, which had already raised the demand, but for different reasons. The Congress could be described as treading a narrow path along a steep edge, with one eye on the overhanging boulder above, the other on the dizzy fall below.

This brings us to the question of how the Congress came to accept partition. That the League should assertively demand it and get its Shylockian pound of flesh or that the British should concede it, being unable to get out of the web of their own making, seems explicable. But why the Congress, wedded to a belief in one Indian nation,

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League in U.P. in 1937: "Jinnah's opposition to the negotiations between Provincial Leaguers and the Congress showed that the failure could not have been the reason behind his call for a sovereign Muslim state in March 1940. Singh, *Origins of Partition*, p. 24.

accepted the division of the country, is a question that has provoked many answers. Nehru and Patel's acceptance of partition has been popularly interpreted as stemming from their lust for quick and easy power, which made them betray the people. Gandhi's counsels are believed to have been ignored and it is argued that he felt betrayed by his disciples and even wished to end his life but heroically fought communal frenzy single-handedly—"a one man boundary force", as Mountbatten called him.<sup>47</sup>

In this period, Gandhi did have a different, more individualized approach than that of the Congress but not counterposed to it, as is often claimed. Why did his Herculean efforts fail to prevent partition? Why did he, in the end, urge Congressmen to accept partition, after having said he would fight it with his life? These questions are critical to why partition became a reality.

#### IV

In the narrative that follows, a thematic presentation has been preferred to a chronological one. Part I takes the story up to July 1945. Chapter 1 discusses nationalist activity and the government's response in the last year of the war. It is a transitional phase between the harsh repression of the 1942 movement and the normal peace-time political activity expected to be resumed after the war. Chapter 2 documents the evolution of the Wavell Offer, its hesitant acceptance by His Majesty's Government and the Simla Conference and its breakdown in the face of Jinnah's intransigence.

The next set of chapters, Chapters 3, 4 and 5, make up Part II—Imperialism and Nationalism. Chapter 3 discusses the anti-imperialist strategy of the Indian national movement in general and in 1945 in particular, based on the assessment by the Congress of its own strength vis-à-vis the British. Nationalist activity in the first six months after the war is described, with special focus on the movement for the

<sup>47</sup> Sandhya Chaudhuri, *Gandhi and the Partition of India*, New Delhi, 1984; Sarkar, *Modern India*; and Bimal Prasad, *Gandhi, Nehru and J.P.: Studies in Leadership*, Delhi, 1984.

release of the INA prisoners. Chapter 4 picks up another strand of political activity, generally described as “popular movements” in the left writings. We discuss their nature and significance, the relationship of these movements with the national movement and their influence over Congress strategy. Chapter 5 begins with the nature of British rule and goes on to unfold the contradictions within colonial policy towards the anti-imperialist movement. The role of the nationalist forces in this developing crisis of the colonial state is traced through the last decade of British rule. The chapter ends with the long-term and immediate factors behind the sending of the Cabinet Mission, including discussion of the impact of the popular upsurges, especially the RIN revolt.

Part III—Imperialism, Nationalism and Communalism—covers the period from early 1946 to August 1947, from the viewpoint of British policy. Chapter 6 deals with the experiment in unity from the spring to the autumn of 1946, influenced by future strategic considerations and present political compulsions. Chapter 7 traces the evolution of the statement of 20 February 1947, fixing a time limit for withdrawal, from Wavell’s unsuccessful championing of it from mid-1946, to its inclusion in the directive given to Mountbatten, the last Viceroy. Chapter 8 focuses on the decision to “divide and quit”, its timing, motivations and consequences.

Nationalism and Communalism is the theme of Part IV, comprising Chapters 9, 10 and 11, which together deal with minority and majority communalisms in their different faces. Chapter 9 traces the step-by-step retreat of the Congress before the advancing tide of Muslim communalism from 1940 to 1947. The landmarks sighted are the elections of 1946, the “direct action” unleashed by the League from August 1946 onwards, the conflict-ridden Interim Government and the League’s subversion of the Constituent Assembly. Chapter 10 discusses the different reactions of the Congress to Hindu communalism, depending on whether it was majority assertion, as in the Bihar riots, or the minority fears of the Hindus of Punjab and Bengal behind the demand to partition the two provinces. Chapter 11 assesses the “success” and “failure” of Hindu communal forces in subverting the secularism of the Congress party, the Congress ministries and the newborn Indian state.

The final section looks at partition from the viewpoint of the Congress and Gandhi, Part III having presented the British side and Part IV the Muslim and Hindu communal angle. Chapter 12 discusses the various reasons, rationalizations, hopes and weaknesses that went into the acceptance of partition by the Congress. Chapter 13 discusses why Gandhi came to accept the partition of India, after having tried unsuccessfully to avert it.



## *Background*





## Nationalist Activity and Government Response at the End of the War

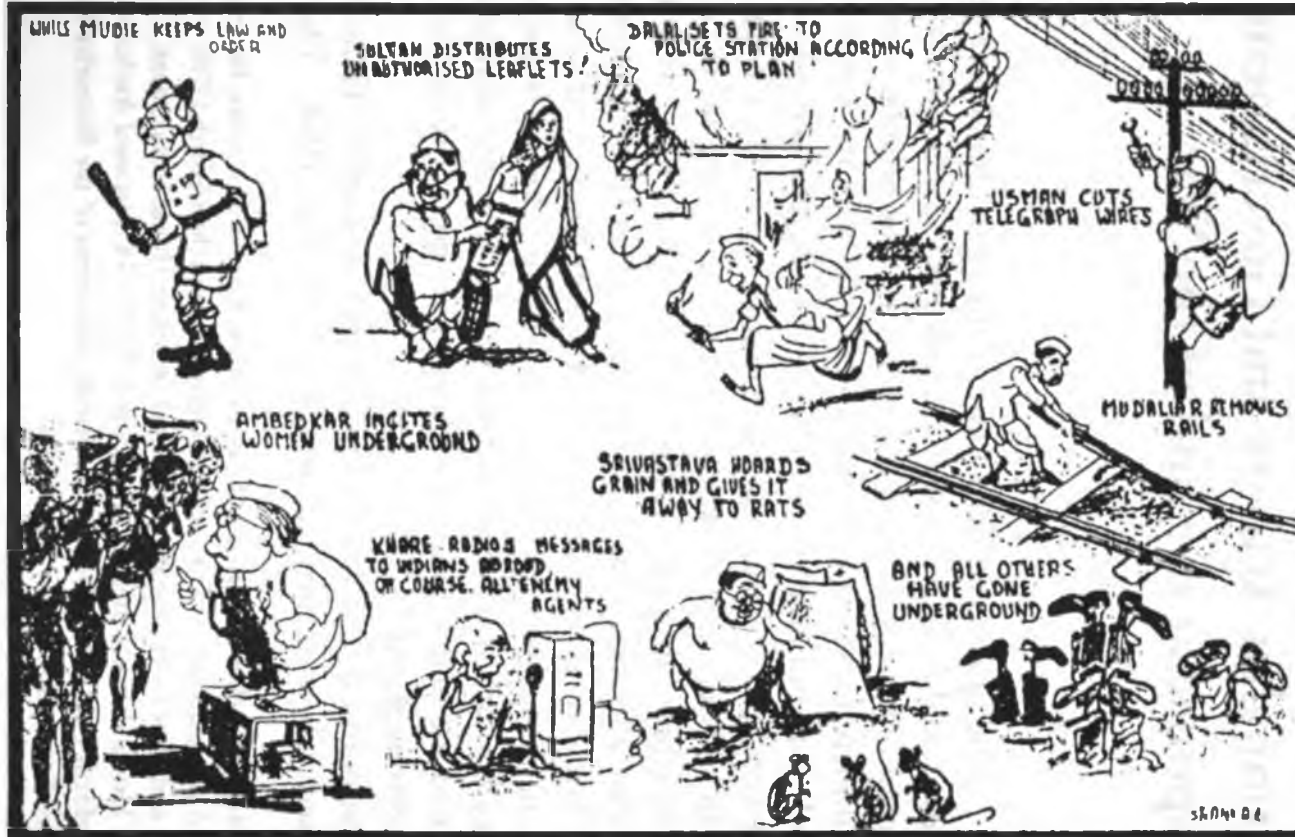
The unrelieved desolation of the post-Quit India political scenario could well have inspired complacency in officialdom. Unprecedented repression had broken the back of the popular movement. The underground movement that had held aloft the torch of Quit India had all but petered out. The only "Congress" activities in early 1944 were the relief and legal aid committees set up by Congressmen to help convicted fellow-workers and their families and the committees mushrooming all over the country to raise Rs 75 lakh for the Kasturba Memorial Fund, to be presented to Gandhi on his 75th birthday.<sup>1</sup> The government gathered details about funds and members, suspicions were aired that all this was but a cloak of humanitarian service beneath which rehabilitation of the Congress and supply of funds to the underground movement were going on, but no action was contemplated.

The political field was seen to be barren enough for Gandhi to be released, albeit on medical grounds, on 6 May 1944.<sup>2</sup> The initial

<sup>1</sup> See Note on Relief and Legal Aid Committees, Appendix to notes; Note by Beveridge, Asstt. Director (S), Director, Intelligence Bureau (henceforth DIB), 15 January 1944; and Note by Tottenham, Additional Secretary, Home Department, 15 January 1944, Home Political (henceforth Home Poll) 4/1/44, National Archives of India (henceforth NAI), New Delhi. The British assessment of the Kasturba Memorial Fund is discussed in Home Poll 4/3/44.

<sup>2</sup> Home Department telegram to all provinces, 5 May 1944, Home Poll 33/19/44.

# CONGRESS RESPONSIBILITY



"There is a danger that certain persons who may not share Mr Gandhi's views may use this ( constructive ) programme as a cloak for their subversive activities." - Sir Francis Mudie

Source: *The Hindustan Times*, 17 March 1945

expectation that Gandhi would breathe fresh life into the defunct underground movement was belied. Gandhi advised the underground activists to surrender.<sup>3</sup> From July 1944, he busied himself with constructive work, which soon became the main activity of Congressmen. With the ban on the Congress continuing, constructive work had a useful political role to play. Its contribution was primarily by way of organization, as a substitute channel of political expression and as an endeavour at social change. Constructive work became a nationalist political platform on which anti-imperialist issues were taken up. The government's policies were often the butt of attack. The ban on mass drill and public meetings, the Savings Drive and the Levy Scheme of the government were opposed. Refusal to contribute to the war fund and boycott of foreign goods were to follow.

The serious attention paid by the government to this new political development is indicated by the fact that detailed reports sent in from the provinces on the steady growth of constructive work were conveyed to Whitehall. Associations like the All India Spinners Association, the All India Village Industries Association and the Kasturba Gandhi Memorial Fund were seen as "really the old Congress Committees under new names".<sup>4</sup> Constructive work was considered to be a "cover", a "camouflage", a "cloak", for the real motive of the regaining of Congress influence and revival of organization.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See letters exchanged between Gandhi and Aruna Asaf Ali, 9 June and 1 August 1944, *Jawaharlal Nehru Papers* (henceforth *J.N. Papers*), NMML, New Delhi. Gandhi's attitude led the government to postpone its planned action against the All India Satyagraha Council, the right wing of the underground, Note by Beveridge, Assistant Director (S), DIB, 16 August 1944, Home Poll 4/4/44.

<sup>4</sup> Wavell to Amery, 25 February 1945, N. Mansergh, E.W.R. Lumby and E.P. Moon, eds, *Constitutional Relations between Great Britain and India: Transfer of Power, 1942-47* (henceforth *TP*), London, 1970-83, Vol. 5, p. 615; Twynam (Governor, CP and Berar) to Wavell, Extract, 23 November 1944, *ibid.*, p. 219; Associated Press of India (henceforth API) Report of 11 December 1944 from Nagpur commented on the formation of the biggest body of social workers in the world. The Samiti would comprise of members of Talimi Sangha, Charkha Sangh, Village Industries Association and Goseva Sangh.

<sup>5</sup> Twynam warned Wavell that "no reliance can be placed on the camouflage of rural uplift" which was "in accordance with Gandhi's usual duplicity", 7 January 1945, *TP*, Vol. 5, pp. 378 and 379. "In actual fact the present leaders of Congress

All these developments were geared towards the future—creating an effective organization that could be readily harnessed to a mass movement, as soon as a call for “conflict with the authorities” was given.<sup>6</sup> The criticism of government policies, as well as the covert revival of the organization posed a threat to the war effort. Officials continued to expect use of this organization in conflict, despite Gandhi’s public censure of the underground movement and his reported opinion that the present situation did not warrant a fight with the government. But more crucial to officialdom was the portent for the post-war future. It was expected that with the end of the war, and the coming of an atmosphere of political freedom, the released detenus would “find explosive material ready to their hands”, both by way of simmering discontent and a functional organization.<sup>7</sup>

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reorganisation in the Punjab are incapable of anything constructive”, Punjab Fortnightly Report (henceforth FR) for the second half of May 1945, Home Poll 18/5/45. “Congress supporters are endeavouring on a fairly wide scale, as elsewhere in India, to rebuild the strength of their party”, Glancy (Punjab Governor) to Wavell, Extract, 24 January 1945, *TP*, Vol. 5, p. 616.

Nearly all districts have reported an intensification in varying degree of Congress activities under the cloak of Gandhi’s ‘constructive programme’ and it is becoming increasingly evident that the objective of Congress workers is to build up the shattered Congress organisation without giving Government an opportunity of declaring the Congress Workers Assembly an unlawful association (Punjab FR for the second half of March 1945, Home Poll 18/3/45).

<sup>6</sup> “I have no doubt that they [reorganization measures] aim at again placing Congress in a position which will enable it to threaten Government”, Twynam to Wavell, Extract, 23 November 1944, *TP*, Vol. 5, p. 220. Wavell confirmed: “the ultimate object was to prepare the ground for further conflict with the authorities”, Wavell to Amery, 25 February 1945, *ibid.*, p. 615. “Despite Mr. Gandhi’s assertion that the constructive programme is primarily intended to improve the social and economic conditions of the masses, the average Congress worker regards it as a scheme to extend and increase Congress influence in preparation for the next round in the struggle.” Bombay FR for the second half of February 1945, Home Poll 18/2/45.

<sup>7</sup> Note by Jenkins on informal discussion of political situation on last day of Governors’ Conference, 31 August 1944, *ibid.*, p. 2; and Wavell to Amery, 20 September 1944, *TP*, Vol. 5, p. 38.

If the Congress, despite the constraints on it, functioned under cover of the constructive programme, the Indian people, despite the constraints on the premier nationalist party, expressed their nationalist feelings by participating in large numbers in the Independence Day and National Week celebrations and the Chimur-Ashti reprieve agitation. Independence Day celebrations, traditionally held by the Congress on 26 January, were quiet and peaceful, in keeping with the non-provocative stand advised by Gandhi. The usual features of flag-hoisting, reading of the Independence Day pledge, sale of miniature Congress flags and closure of commercial institutions were present.<sup>8</sup> The pattern of National Week celebrations was similar. Public meetings were held, the Congress flag was hoisted and resolutions demanding the release of Congress leaders and establishment of the national government were passed. The emphasis on khadi and spinning was a special feature of National Week. Charkha competitions and *dangals* were organized and spinning demonstrations and training arranged. Exhibitions of khadi goods were on view in Bombay, Poona and Nagpur, and in Punjab, khadi was sold. More permanent activities such as the setting up of charkha training centres were also reported. On the whole, the activities were low key.<sup>9</sup>

The death sentences awarded to the prisoners in the Chimur and Ashti cases aroused the sympathy of the nation.<sup>10</sup> Popular interest

<sup>8</sup> Gandhi advised celebrations of a private nature, which focused on constructive work rather than on large congregations, *The Hindustan Times* (henceforth *HT*), 25 January 1945. Also see C.P. and Berar FR for the second half of February 1945, Home Poll 18/2/45.

<sup>9</sup> Meetings were reported from Matunga (Bombay), Hubli, Lucknow, Hathras, Gurgaon, Madras, Punjab, Sindh, Delhi and Ajmer. The Punjab revolutionaries, Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdeo were honoured in Thana, Mahad (Kolaba), Jalgaon (East Khandesh). See *HT*, 8, 10, 20 April 1945; Punjab, Madras, Sind, Delhi, Ajmer FRs for the first half of April 1945 and Bombay FR for the second half of April 1945, Home Poll 18/4/45. See *HT*, 12, 13 and 20 April 1945; and Punjab FR for the first half of April 1945, Home Poll 18/4/45. Madras, Bombay, U.P., Punjab and C.P. and Berar FRs for the first half of April 1945 and U.P., Punjab and C.P. and Berar FRs for the second half of April 1945, *ibid.*, all report the lack of enthusiasm.

<sup>10</sup> Chimur and Ashti were two towns in the Chanda and Wardha districts of the Central Provinces, respectively, where people protesting at the arrest of Congress

was awakened in January and reached a crescendo in April. Public meetings were held in Poona, Delhi, Madras, Amritsar, towns in Bengal and Punjab, Bombay, Burhanpur, Gonda and Akola districts in the Central Provinces and Berar, Peshawar, Cuttack districts and Burdwan at which resolutions were passed appealing for, or demanding, the commutation of the death sentences.<sup>11</sup> In August 1945, the new Secretary of State, Lord Pethick-Lawrence urged commutation of the death sentences on grounds of the long delay since they were passed, the unpremeditated nature of the murders and, more significantly, as a gesture from the newly sworn-in Labour government. Wavell feared that such a step would adversely affect the morale of the armed forces, the civil services and the loyalists, but agreed that "in view of long delay" since the sentences were passed, it was best to recommend commutation as a humanitarian measure.<sup>12</sup>

As we have seen, the constructive programme and the spontaneous expression of nationalist sentiment skirted the ban on the Congress. Similarly, with the blocking of the main channel of nationalist protest, the Congress, subsidiary vents opened up in the form of the political activity of the Communist Party of India (henceforth CPI), as well as that of the kisan bodies, labour organizations, students' unions and women's conferences. This had two important aspects. One was

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leaders on 9 August 1942 had violently retaliated to police firing. Four British officials were killed in Chimur and five in Ashti, where six processionists were also killed. Police stations and government buildings were damaged. Severe military repression followed, with widespread arrests, imposition of collective fines and even rape of women being common. Of the numbers arrested, many were convicted and nine Chimur prisoners and six Ashti prisoners were sentenced to death. See Govind Sahay, *42 Rebellion*, Delhi, 1947, pp. 369 and 373; and Editor's note, *TP*, Vol. 5, p. 713.

<sup>11</sup> FRs from Punjab, Bombay, C.P. and Berar, NWFP and Orissa for the first half of April 1945, Home Poll 18/4/45. Delhi Stock and Share Brokers Association, Silk Merchants Chamber, Benares, Kaiserganj Merchant Association and Kanpur Iron and Hardware Merchants Association appealed. Forty-seven business associations of Karachi wired their concern to the Viceroy and businessmen of Rawalpindi joined in. See *HT*, 4, 5 and 12 April 1945.

<sup>12</sup> Pethick-Lawrence to Wavell, 10 August 1945, Wavell to Pethick-Lawrence, 11 August 1945; and Pethick-Lawrence to Wavell, 15 August 1945, *TP*, Vol. 6, pp. 43, 46, 44 and 68.

the sheer heightened level of politicization. This was evident from the large number of kisan conferences, student meetings and labour conferences reported from all over the country. The organization of these groups also advanced—increased membership, opening of branches, holding of training classes and study circles, setting up of committees, etc. The Communists actively participated in workers' strikes, convened conferences of workers and kisans and carried on relentless propaganda.<sup>13</sup>

The second aspect was the political stance adopted by these organizations, not centred on specific group interests. Their demands were in the same refrain—release of Congress leaders and workers and establishment of a national government. Kisan conferences at which these demands were specifically raised were few,<sup>14</sup> but considering that of a total of 23 conferences and meetings reported from January to May, six were under Congress auspices<sup>15</sup> and nine organized by Communists (who were taking a nationalist stand)<sup>16</sup>, the support must have been more widespread. The same may be said of labour organizations, to only four of which these demands are ascribed.<sup>17</sup> Nineteen

<sup>13</sup> There were as many as 23 kisan conferences spread over the country from January to May. Nine major student conferences were reported from Bombay, Guntur, Punjab, Burdwan, Jabalpur, Mymensingh, etc. Seven labour conferences and meetings were held in Madras, Ahmedabad, Nagpur, Sholapur, Assam and Ajmer. See FRs from various provinces for the months January to May, Home Poll 18/1/45 to 18/5/45.

<sup>14</sup> Anand Taluka Kisan Conference at Kambhaipura on 3 December 1944; meetings of the Krishak Party were held at Faridpur and Bogra, see Bombay FR for the first half of January 1945, Home Poll 18/1/45; and Bengal FR for the first half of March 1945, Home Poll 18/3/45.

<sup>15</sup> Belgaum, Surat, Patna, Bombay, Thana and Burdwan districts, see Bombay FR for the second half of February 1945, Home Poll 18/2/45; Bombay FR for the second half of April 1945, Home Poll 18/4/45; Bihar FR for the first half of May 1945 and Bombay and Bengal FRs for the second half of May 1945, Home Poll 18/5/45.

<sup>16</sup> Thana, Kistna, East Khandesh, Kanara, Ratnagiri and Nagpur districts.

<sup>17</sup> All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) Session, Madras; Textile Labour Union meeting, Ajmer; Bengal Cement Company's Labour Union meeting at Chhatak and Gujarat Trade Union Congress (TUC), Ahmedabad; Madras FR for the second half of January 1945, Home Poll 18/1/45; Ajmer FR for the second half of March



students' conferences and unions also threw their weight behind these demands in Poona, Bombay, Bareilly and Lahore.<sup>18</sup>

The Communists voiced these nationalist demands at the Independence Day celebrations they organized, at their propaganda meetings, at May Day public meetings in Madras, Bombay and Calcutta and at conferences of the kisan and labour organizations that they controlled.<sup>19</sup> The National Liberal Federation of India, too, supported these demands.<sup>20</sup> The annual session of the FICCI, the All Frontier Political Conference, the Indian Scientists Mission on its return from abroad, a women's conference and a literary conference in Dhulia and a Sikh Dewan at Tarn Taran, all made these demands.<sup>21</sup>

The CPI's pro-Congress stance led the government to reconsider its policy towards the party. The possible effects of a ban were considered. It was feared that action would drive activity underground and endow the party with the romantic aura it sorely needed. On the whole, it was considered advisable to keep the party legal and continue the policy of neutrality. Besides, the government even hoped that the CPI could be encouraged to function as a constitutional opposition to the "capitalist clique" dominating the Congress!<sup>22</sup>

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1945, Home Poll 18/3/45; Assam FR for the first half of May; and Bombay FR for the second half of May 1945, Home Poll 18/5/45.

<sup>18</sup> Bombay FR for the first half of January 1945, Home Poll 18/1/45; and Punjab FR for the first half of February 1945, Home Poll 18/2/45.

<sup>19</sup> Ahmedabad, Sholapur, Surat, East Khandesh, Rudrapore, Bombay and Bengal FRs for the February 1945, Home Poll 18/2/45; Punjab and Orissa FRs for the first half of February 1945, *ibid.*, Madras, Bombay and Bengal FRs for the first half of May 1945, Home Poll 18/5/45.

<sup>20</sup> "News from India", 26 March 1945, Home Poll 97/45.

<sup>21</sup> The 18th annual session of the FICCI, 3–4 March 1945, Home Poll 87/45; *HT*, 22 and 23 April 1945; API report of 22 February 1945, Home Poll 97/45; 18th Session of Maharashtra Provincial Women's Conference on 22 December 1944 and 28th Session of Maharashtra Literary Conference on 24 and 25 December 1944, Bombay FR for the first half of January 1945, Home Poll 18/1/45; *HT*, 23 January 1945.

<sup>22</sup> This was the substance of Tottenham's circular to provincial governments, 21 August 1944, Extract from Home Poll 7/5/44. Also see Home Poll 7/2/44, 7/1/45 & KW and 7/6/44. See Sanjoy Bhattacharya, "The Colonial State and the Communist Party of India, 1942–5, A Reappraisal", *South Asia Research* (henceforth *SAR*), Vol. 15.1, 1995.

Nationalist activity in this phase thus took the form of a demonstration of the popular support behind nationalist issues and the demand for independence. It was an assertion of nationalist strength, not an assault on British authority. The impressive show of solidarity in the absence of mobilization and despite the ban on the Congress indicates the maturing of the nationalist sentiment nurtured over the years by the Congress. The constraints imposed by an administration preoccupied with war, among which the ban on the Congress was notable, confined organized activity to the realm of constructive work. However, the nationalist movement, suppressed by these restrictions, took the form of a spontaneous effusion of sentiment during Independence Day and National Week celebrations and over the Chimur-Ashti cases. The common nationalist denominator of section and class activity also kept the flag flying.

Nationalist activity adapted to the limited space provided to it by the British; similarly, British policy, to a large measure, evolved in direct response to the nature of this activity. The non-provocative tone and the absence of any concrete challenge to law and order meant little handling was necessitated on the whole. Policy remained limited to surveillance despite the steady accretion of nationalist strength being a source of official anxiety. The fact that the organizational build-up was intended for use in the future ensured that British sights, too, were set on the future. Official attention was, therefore, focused on the tasks of assessing prospects and planning for contingencies related to the post-war situation. Designing the contours of the political field within which a settlement could be attempted was the first, critical step.

## Planning of the Political Offer, the Simla Conference and its Breakdown

The suggestion for a political move, mooted at the Governors' Conference in August 1944, clearly stemmed from the government's anticipation of the post-war situation. The authorities were confident that "India was quiet and could be kept so till the end of the war".<sup>1</sup> The future presented a bleak picture to the Government of India. The scenario was dotted with challenges on both the political and economic fronts. The end of the war would entail large-scale demobilization of men from the armed forces, factory workers and clerks,<sup>2</sup> but no relief from the economic difficulty faced.<sup>3</sup> The end of the war would also mean that the constraints on political activity would have to be removed. All political detenus, including radical Congressmen, would be released and would begin to foment trouble.<sup>4</sup> Besides, with the lid off, the accumulated discontent of the people through the war years would surface. The necessary constituents of a mass

<sup>1</sup> Wavell before War Cabinet India Committee (henceforth WCI Comme), 26 March 1945, *TP*, Vol. 5, p. 733. Also, Wavell to Amery, 20 September 1944, *ibid.*, p. 37. See chapter on Simla Conference in J.H. Voigt, *India in the Second World War*, New Delhi, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> Wavell to Amery, 20 September 1944, *TP*, Vol. 5, p. 37.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* Also, Wavell to Amery, 15 March 1945, *ibid.*, p. 696.

<sup>4</sup> Wavell to Churchill, enclosed in Wavell to Amery, 24 October 1944, *ibid.*, p. 126.

# HE HAS SWALLOWED IT



The Simla Conference has ended

Source: *The Hindustan Times*, 15 July 1945

movement would be available—an anti-government leadership, a revived organizational base and a dissatisfied, war-weary populace. The situation was further worsened by the fact that this resurgent nationalism would have to be contained by a doddering administration. The Indian Civil Service, “the steel frame of the Raj”, was heavily strained<sup>5</sup> and considered to be a virtually “moribund” force.<sup>6</sup> The Government of India constantly warned that its ability to meet a challenge was declining rapidly and that a point would come soon when they would have the responsibility for managing the situation, but no power to effectively exercise it.<sup>7</sup>

It was as a technique to defuse this likely explosive situation that the government evolved the plan for a political initiative from August 1944 onwards.<sup>8</sup> The Congress and the League were sought to be drawn into constitutional politics before the end of the war.<sup>9</sup> This channelling away of political energies from subversion into constitutional areas was the primary purpose of the intended move.<sup>10</sup> Two additional benefits were also seen as likely to accrue from this move. Working together in a government, it was hoped, would pave the way for the otherwise elusive agreement of the Congress and the League on the issue of the future Constitution of India.<sup>11</sup> Further, a successful settlement of the Indian question was expected to strengthen the future security of the Empire, ensure British prestige in the east, and even lead to India remaining within the Commonwealth. Wavell warned Churchill: “The future of India is the problem on which the British Commonwealth and the British reputation will stand or fall in the post-war period...with a lost and hostile India, we are likely to be reduced in the East to the position of commercial bag-men.”<sup>12</sup> Public opinion the world over would be placated and the initiative retained.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Wavell to Amery, 20 September 1944, *ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> Wavell before WCI Comme, 26 March 1945, *ibid.*, p. 733.

<sup>7</sup> Wavell to Churchill, enclosed in Wavell to Amery, 24 October 1944, *ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>8</sup> Wavell to Amery, 20 September 1944, *ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>9</sup> Wavell before WCI Comme, 26 March 1945, *ibid.*, p. 733.

<sup>10</sup> Wavell to Amery, 20 September 1944, *ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>11</sup> Wavell to Churchill, enclosed in Wavell to Amery, 24 October 1944, *ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>12</sup> Wavell before WCI Comme, 26 March 1945, *ibid.*, p. 733.

<sup>13</sup> Wavell before Cabinet, 31 May 1945, *ibid.*, p. 1073.

The timing of the political initiative was considered crucial. Initially, Wavell wanted its promulgation to coincide with the end of the war in Europe, thereby not allowing the released leaders any time to arouse nationalist protest.<sup>14</sup> Soon he urged great immediacy as he felt that a stable, transitional government, functioning for some period before the end of the war would entrench the moderates more firmly within the constitutional structure. The political offer Wavell proposed was in the nature of a practical interim development, aimed at constituting a more representative government. The Viceroy's Executive Council was to comprise representatives of major political parties and groups, including the Congress and League, and coalitions were to be formed in the provinces—this would continue till elections were held and a Constituent Assembly was formed.<sup>15</sup> "A change in spirit" was seen as necessary and some innocuous measures were even suggested towards that end.<sup>16</sup> However, no constitutional change was intended, nor was there to be any limitation of the Viceroy's powers vis-à-vis his Council. Neither was an alteration to be made in the relationship between the Parliament, the Secretary of State and the Viceroy. Any real development such as progressive Indianization of the Indian armed forces, the transfer of External Affairs and Defence to Indian hands, the appointment of a United Kingdom High Commissioner in India, the release of detenus, was dismissed as being uncalled for and conceding too much at the outset.<sup>17</sup> The sole interest was in getting a coalition government working—without involving

<sup>14</sup> Wavell to Amery, 20 September 1944, *ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>15</sup> Wavell to Amery, 20 September 1944; Wavell to Amery, 20 December 1944; Wavell to Amery, 11 February 1945; Wavell before WCI Comme, 26 March 1945; Wavell before WCI Comme, 27 March 1945; Wavell to Amery, 26 October 1944, *ibid.*, pp. 37, 314, 540, 733, 760 and 139.

<sup>16</sup> These measures were—(a) Declare HMG's intention to give India self-government soon; (b) Declaration that HMG does not intend to repudiate her debt to India; (c) Transfer of ships to India against sterling balances; (d) Promise of modern ships for the Indian navy at the end of the war; (e) Enhancement of status of Indian High Commissioner; (f) Raising of status of Indian representative in the United States; (g) Transfer of responsibility for Indian affairs to Dominions Office. See Wavell to Amery, 26 October 1944, *ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>17</sup> Wavell before WCI Comme, 5 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 832; "I am fairly sure that Indians do not really expect the portfolio of External Affairs or particularly desire it

legislation, or a Parliamentary Debate, or even declaration of Dominion Status—in short with a minimum of fuss and change.

## I

The Home Government accepted the Government of India's sketch of the post-war future—mounting challenges and dwindling capacity to meet them. However, they did not share the hope of the Government of India that the political move would have the simultaneous benefits of securing communal agreement through day-to-day participation in a government and ensuring British prestige. The Home Government felt that reports from India did not indicate a deteriorating situation compelling early action.<sup>18</sup> Amery's primary objection to Wavell's plan was that handing over control to representatives of political parties during the war could be dangerous, especially as important operations in the east were expected in 1945 and perhaps even in 1946.<sup>19</sup> His Majesty's Government rejected Wavell's notion of an informal offer involving consultations with Indians.<sup>20</sup> On the

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at the moment. It would certainly be much better for me to be allowed to keep it as a possible bargaining counter during the Conference". WCI Comme Paper by Wavell, 17 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 896. Also see Wavell before WCI Comme 18 April 1945, *ibid.*, pp. 898–99, 901.

<sup>18</sup> The Viceroy's proposals "brought Gandhi before the public again, and raised his stock at a time when he had failed politically", points of discussion, WCI Comme meeting, 6 December 1944, *ibid.*, p. 276. Wavell himself, in his appreciation of Gandhi's movement noted that the "country is very quiet" and "there is at present no serious threat to law and order", Wavell to Amery, 25 February 1945, *ibid.*, p. 616. "I cannot see the least sign in any of the reports that have been circulated that the internal situation in India is deteriorating in any way, or that the delay that there has been has made any difference, and that is a further relevant fact", Attlee to Amery, 13 March 1945, *ibid.*, p. 686. Grigg saw no reason why "something must be done" at a time when "India had never been so quiet or Congress prestige so low" since the early 1930s, Grigg before WCI Comme, 18 April 1945, *ibid.*, pp. 396–97. Grigg repeated his view that India was "fairly quiescent", Grigg before WCI Comme, 23 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 932.

<sup>19</sup> Amery to Wavell, 10 October, *ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>20</sup> Anderson before WCI Comme, 29 March 1945, *ibid.*, p. 780.

one hand, it was expected to disturb the whole administration of India,<sup>21</sup> frighten the loyalists and the Princes and have a bad effect on the Punjab.<sup>22</sup> Negotiations, it was feared, would "raise the stock of Congress",<sup>23</sup> and put it "back on the map", while also giving a handle to various other political elements to raise a "babel of conflicting demands".<sup>24</sup> More generally, there was the dual danger of informal talks carrying the British further than they wished,<sup>25</sup> and of the undefined parameters of the Viceroy's position leading unwittingly to a cessation of control over areas of decision-making.<sup>26</sup>

The form of the offer envisaged by the Home Government was a clear and precisely outlined statement, formally laying down the change entailed.<sup>27</sup> His Majesty's Government was to directly declare

<sup>21</sup> Grigg before WCI Comme, 18 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 904.

<sup>22</sup> Grigg before WCI Comme, 25 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 962.

<sup>23</sup> Grigg before WCI Comme, 25 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 962.

<sup>24</sup> Grigg before WCI Comme, 23 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 938.

<sup>25</sup> Attlee before WCI Comme, 3 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 815. Wavell's plan "is not in the nature of an arbitral offer, but a starting point for negotiations which might end up anywhere". Grigg before WCI Comme, 23 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 933.

<sup>26</sup> "There was the danger in the Viceroy's scheme that without any Parliamentary approval or any formal Act we should find ourselves slipping into a position in which the Viceroy would be bound by convention to carry out the views of Ministers", Attlee before WCI Comme, 5 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 842. "He [Wavell] would soon find himself pushed into a position in which he was practically a constitutional monarch", Attlee before WCI Comme, 10 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 851. "With no clear line defined the tendency would be to take refuge in general statements, and the Viceroy would find himself slipping gradually into the position of a Dominion Governor General and gradually yielding to pressure in order to avoid a breakdown", Attlee before WCI Comme, 18 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 904. "May not the effect of the new step be prejudicially to affect the Viceroy's position and to lead to his authority and powers being whittled away without a full realisation of what is happening until it is too late to check the process?" final WCI Comme Paper on the Constitutional Position in India, 27 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 981.

<sup>27</sup> There was unanimity on this question. Anderson "attached the greatest importance to doing whatever it might be decided to do in the most clear and open way", with an "explicit statement" to that effect, Anderson before WCI Comme, 3 and 5 April 1945, *ibid.*, pp. 817, 833. Simon felt it "important that we should clearly show what we were doing", Simon before WCI Comme, 5 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 840. Cripps stressed that "whatever was done should be done in a very formal way, and that there should be a very carefully worded statement in the House of Commons



its decisions,<sup>28</sup> stressing that they were firm and non-negotiable.<sup>29</sup> In contrast to Wavell's approach, all the changes were intended to be openly proclaimed and formalized.<sup>30</sup> Limitation of the Viceroy's powers in practice, especially restricted use of his veto, was seen as clearly entailed by the new proposals.<sup>31</sup> However, rather than maintain silence on this point as preferred by Wavell,<sup>32</sup> the India Committee wanted to publicly proclaim this change.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the feature of political parties nominating their representatives to the Viceroy's

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here", Cripps before WCI Comme, 10 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 857. Grigg was in favour of making an "offer as near as possible cleanly [clearly?] defined", Grigg before WCI Comme, 18 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 904. The final WCI Comme Report on the Constitutional Position in India reflected this preference for clear proposals—"whereas the Viceroy's plan set no precise boundaries to the area of negotiations, the proposed statement would define these boundaries strictly", WCI Comme Paper, 27 April 1945, *ibid.*, pp. 982–83.

<sup>28</sup> Cripps stressed that His Majesty's Government must itself make a declaration that it had come to a decision on the Indian question, Cripps before WCI Comme, 29 March 1945, *ibid.*, p. 776.

<sup>29</sup> Amery urged acceptance of the WCI Comme draft plan on grounds that "there was no question of negotiation and the statement represented a firm offer" and the Cabinet agreed with this interpretation, Cabinet meeting, 30 May 1945, *ibid.*, p. 1066.

<sup>30</sup> The Final WCI Comme Paper on the Constitutional Position in India stated: "It is made public for all to recognise its nature and to appreciate the importance of the changes involved." 27 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 983.

<sup>31</sup> Attlee and Grigg likened the Viceroy's new position to that of a constitutional monarch or a Dominion Governor-General, WCI Comme meetings, 26 March and 10 April, *ibid.*, pp. 733, 849 respectively.

<sup>32</sup> Wavell "could not see any reason for formally giving anything away by statute, as proposed by the Committee", Wavell before WCI Comme, 5 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 837; "If it is announced that the powers of the Governor General are to be in any way limited, there is bound to be pressure for them not to be exercised at all", so it would be better if the "announcement should contain nothing about the Viceroy's powers except section 27 of the Draft Statement", WCI Comme Paper by Wavell, 17 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 896; WCI Comme Paper by Wavell, 21 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 921; "an announcement that it was proposed to limit the Viceroy's powers would make his negotiations very difficult", Wavell before War Cabinet, 23 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 936.

<sup>33</sup> Amery conceded that a public definition of the Viceroy's limited powers would weaken his position, but still felt that Parliament should be informed of the likeli-

Executive Council was seen to involve a basic constitutional change.<sup>34</sup> Parliamentary approval was felt to be crucial prior to making a general declaration of intent.<sup>35</sup> An altered Instrument of Instructions for the Viceroy<sup>36</sup> and formal statements were prepared to be legislated upon by Parliament.<sup>37</sup> Whereas the India Committee felt that the new set of proposals and their attendant measures warranted a radical change in constitutional practice,<sup>38</sup> Wavell felt they involved no constitutional

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hood of the Viceroy's position changing with a representative Executive Council, WCI Comme Paper by Amery, 20 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 915. Anderson held the opposite view—he felt that openly recognizing a representative Executive Council would curtail the Viceroy's position and entail a constitutional change that would strengthen the Viceroy's position, Anderson before WCI Comme, 23 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 932. He argued that a paragraph on the precise limitation of the Viceroy's functions must be included in the statement, else the situation would deteriorate rapidly, Anderson before WCI Comme, 25 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 962. The final WCI Comme Paper on the Constitutional Position in India recommended an avowal of increased authority to the representative Executive Council and limited powers to the Viceroy, 27 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 979.

<sup>34</sup> Attlee before WCI Comme, 27 March 1945, *ibid.*, p. 760.

<sup>35</sup> "...without formal Act or Parliamentary approval, things would move much faster than he imagined in the direction of which he was now apprehensive", Attlee before WCI Comme, 5 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 836; Attlee before WCI Comme, 18 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 897.

<sup>36</sup> WCI Comme Paper by Amery, 2 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 805.

<sup>37</sup> Draft by Cripps of Viceroy's declaration; draft memorandum by Amery of HMG's declaration; draft by Cripps of statement by WCI Comme to Parliament; final draft made by Cripps accepted by WCI Comme and sent to the Prime Minister; WCI Comme Papers, 31 March, 2, 11 and 25 April 1945, *ibid.*, pp. 796, 803, 866, 952 respectively.

<sup>38</sup> Anderson declared that the WCI Comme's stand "did not purport to be an approach involving no constitutional change", Anderson before WCI Comme, 5 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 833. Cripps outlined that the new manner of constituting the Executive Council had "behind it a very great constitutional innovation", Draft by Cripps of statement by India Committee to Parliament, 11 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 868. "Lord Wavell seemed to have no conception of the constitutional implication of his plan", Attlee before WCI Comme, 10 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 851. Amery felt that "...what was involved was an important development of what had already taken place, and which did involve constitutional implications", while Anderson noted that "the feeling of the Committee was that the method proposed by the Viceroy would in fact represent a constitutional change", Amery and Anderson before WCI Comme, 18 April 1945, *ibid.*, pp. 899, 900 respectively.

change.<sup>39</sup> Further, while Wavell chose to proceed quietly, bypassing all debate and discussion on grounds that it would lead to alarm,<sup>40</sup> the India Committee was anxious to emphasize the significance of the scheme<sup>41</sup> and even portray it as an attempt to promulgate that part of the 1935 Act pertaining to the Centre, which never got off the ground.<sup>42</sup>

His Majesty's Government consistently rejected Wavell's persistent demands for a brief to negotiate with Indian leaders and for permission to come home for talks.<sup>43</sup> In March 1945, Wavell declared his intention to visit England immediately, and he was allowed to proceed home, albeit grudgingly. The preliminary debate revealed a basic difference of approach.<sup>44</sup> A segment of opinion even argued for sending the Viceroy back to India.<sup>45</sup> Others felt that though the Viceroy's visit may have been premature, he could not be asked to return empty-handed. A political move, but one significantly different from Wavell's original scheme, was proposed.<sup>46</sup>

The India Committee laid the onus for the decision on the Cabinet, but clarified that, should the Cabinet endorse the need for a move,

<sup>39</sup> "As regards conventions, or changes in the Constitution; his object and policy was to avoid any such change", Wavell before WCI Comme, 27 March 1945, *ibid.*, p. 761; "...what was involved was not a constitutional change, but merely a development", Wavell before WCI Comme, 18 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 901.

<sup>40</sup> Wavell before WCI Comme, 5 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 832.

<sup>41</sup> Anderson before WCI Comme, 18 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 897; "it is the essence of the proposed statement that it is made public for all to recognise its nature and appreciate the importance of the changes involved", Final WCI Comme Paper on the Constitutional Position in India, 27 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 983.

<sup>42</sup> Cripps repeatedly linked the offer to the 1935 Act, Cripps before WCI Comme; Draft by Cripps of Viceroy's declaration; Draft by Cripps of Statement by WCI Comme to Parliament; WCI Comme Papers, 29 and 31 March and 11 April 1945, *ibid.*, pp. 776, 797, 866 respectively.

<sup>43</sup> See Minute by Churchill to Amery, 1 January 1945, *ibid.*, p. 347; Amery to Wavell, 5 January 1945, *ibid.*, p. 347; Amery to Wavell, 5 January 1945, *ibid.*, p. 365; Amery to Wavell, 11 January 1945, *ibid.*, p. 392.

<sup>44</sup> The debate took place at the WCI Comme meetings of 26, 27 and 29 March, 3, 5, 10, 18, 23 and 25 April 1945, *ibid.*, pp. 733, 760, 776, 832, 849, 897, 932, 962 respectively.

<sup>45</sup> Simon, Grigg and Butler were its spokesmen.

<sup>46</sup> Anderson, Attlee and Cripps were its proponents.

Anderson's scheme, and not Wavell's, should be accepted<sup>47</sup> With elections looming on the horizon, Amery urged Churchill to clinch the Indian issue before the coalition broke up. This, he argued, would "put an end to any attempt by the Socialist Party to make capital against us over India—Attlee and Cripps would have to bless it in the House".<sup>48</sup> Churchill, however, felt unable to advocate a move unless it was "sound on its merits".<sup>49</sup> It was only when Wavell demonstrated the extremely limited nature of the move, which conceded virtually nothing,<sup>50</sup> that Churchill became favourably inclined towards it. He laid down three conditions—no legislation to remove the official element from the Council, no public reference to Indianization of the Indian army and no negotiation on the terms of the offer.<sup>51</sup> The plan was approved by Parliament and, in early June 1945, Wavell left for India with the brief to make a political move he had pressed for and been denied for almost a year. The scheme authorized by the Cabinet was neither Wavell's original proposal, nor the India Committee's plan in its entirety, but a curious mixture of both. It was limited enough for a Conservative like Churchill. It was defined and firm enough too. If it failed, as Churchill was assured it would, the positive benefits of having made a move would accrue without any ground being lost. Even if it were accepted, little harm, besides involvement of Indians in the administration, would be done. The risk of the Viceroy making concessions in order to achieve a settlement had been removed by declaring the offer to be closed to negotiations.

The India Committee scheme was barely recognizable, its political content depleted by the vetoing of some of the concrete political concessions they had included to make the offer generous enough to be acceptable to Indian parties and to be helpful with public opinion, even if rejected. The important clause of Indianization of the armed forces was removed and the feature of unilateral release of political prisoners simultaneously with the announcement of the offer was

<sup>47</sup> Final WCI Comme Paper on the Constitutional Position in India, 27 April 1945, *ibid.*, p. 979.

<sup>48</sup> Amery to Churchill, 23 May 1945, *ibid.*, p.1057.

<sup>49</sup> Churchill before Cabinet, 30 May 1945, *ibid.*, pp. 1069, 1073 respectively.

<sup>50</sup> Wavell before Cabinet, 31 May 1945, *ibid.*, p. 1073.

<sup>51</sup> Cabinet Conclusions, 31 May 1945, *ibid.*, p. 1083.

modified to negotiated release after acceptance of the offer. Only the symbolic concessions of the appointment of a United Kingdom High Commissioner in India and the entrusting of the External Affairs portfolio to an Indian Executive Councillor were retained. The political approach of the India Committee's plan weathered the Churchillian storm better. The explicit reference to limitation of the powers of the Viceroy and of Parliament was deleted. The stress on the need for parliamentary sanction was, however, upheld and the move was linked, as desired by the India Committee, to the last constitutional development, the Cripps Offer. The most crucial part of the entire India Committee's approach was its emphasis on a clearly defined declaration of a firm official decision not open to any negotiation. This was specifically affirmed by Churchill and included in the offer.

If the approach of the India Committee's plan survived while its content did not, the basic core of Wavell's scheme remained intact, but not his method. The final scheme, known as the Wavell Plan, announced the convening of a conference to get together a politically representative Executive Council, which was in any case Wavell's original proposal. Two vital aspects of his political approach, his avoidance of both formalization of the scheme and its sanction by Parliament were clearly absent from the final plan. Now he was given a specific mandate by the Home Government to promulgate an official decision, ratified by Parliament. There was no scope for negotiation and no latitude for ensuring the smooth functioning of the Council, and no credit was given to Wavell. The Wavell Plan was not the undefined brief, the free hand, to resolve the Indian crisis that Wavell had demanded from September 1944 onwards. The limited political content of Wavell's plan was yoked to the firm political approach of the India Committee's scheme.

## II

The next hurdle, the Parliamentary Debate, was skirted successfully and the scheme was "blessed on all sides". Statements of policy announcing a new political move and proposing a conference at Simla were made simultaneously by the Secretary of State for India and the

Viceroy on 14 June 1945.<sup>52</sup> Acceptance of invitations issued to leaders of various political groups came in, except from the two main parties, the Congress and the League.<sup>53</sup> Their attitude was assessed by Wavell as “preliminary manoeuvring” and “showing off”, which was “typical” and “expected”, but it made him confess to Amery that he was “not too optimistic”.<sup>54</sup> After discussions with Azad, Gandhi and Jinnah on 24 June,<sup>55</sup> the Simla Conference met on the stipulated date, 25 June 1945.

Only two days later, Wavell warned Amery that “we have arrived at the critical point of the conference”. “The main stumbling block” was not the attitude of the Congress, which was reported to be “conciliatory and reasonable”, but Jinnah’s stand. On the eve of the Conference itself Jinnah had indicated his position by claiming the right of the League to nominate all Muslims.<sup>56</sup> Wavell’s efforts to secure agreement continued, with his asking the parties to submit lists of names from which the Viceroy would make the selection. Yet, his optimism about the future of his plan was heavily discounted and he confessed to the prospect of failure. He also faced up to the contingency of pressure to form an Executive Council with the Congress and others if Jinnah refused to cooperate, though he made it clear that he did not expect such a Council to be viable.<sup>57</sup> The Home Government agreed with the Viceroy’s view that Jinnah’s claim was unacceptable but still considered it important that a breakdown be

<sup>52</sup> Statement of the Policy of HMG made by the Secretary of State for India; and Broadcast Speech by Field Marshall Viscount Wavell at New Delhi, 14 June 1945, *ibid.*, pp. 1118 and 1122 respectively.

<sup>53</sup> Telegrams exchanged between the Viceroy and Gandhi and the Viceroy and Jinnah were repeated by Wavell to Amery, 16 June 1945, *ibid.*, pp. 1129, 1131 respectively. Gandhi pointed out that he had no official position in the Congress any longer, but offered to be present before and during the Conference if the Viceroy desired him to do so, Gandhi to Wavell, 16 June 1945, *ibid.*, p. 1132. Jinnah pressed for postponement on grounds of difficulty of getting his Working Committee together, Jinnah to Wavell, 16 June 1945, *ibid.*, p. 1132.

<sup>54</sup> Wavell to Amery, 17 June, 1945, *ibid.*, p. 1136.

<sup>55</sup> Wavell to Amery, 25 June, 1945, *ibid.*, p. 1151.

<sup>56</sup> Wavell to Amery, 25, 27 and 28 June 1945; *ibid.*, pp. 1153–54, 1166 and 1170 respectively.

<sup>57</sup> Wavell to provincial Governors, 30 June 1945, *ibid.*, p. 1175.

avoided as they were “afraid of the whole onus of failure being thrown on Muslims” and the League being “held up as the one obstacle to progress”.<sup>58</sup>

Any faint hopes receded when Jinnah finally refused to submit his list.<sup>59</sup> Wavell’s compromise of himself selecting a non-League but non-Congress Muslim, and getting Jinnah to accept that, also failed.<sup>60</sup> Jinnah declined to discuss any names unless the Viceroy accepted the League’s exclusive right to nominate all Muslims.<sup>61</sup> He also insisted on the fulfillment of his demand for “a special safeguard that no decision objected to by Muslims should be taken in Council except by clear two third majority”.<sup>62</sup> Wavell ultimately rejected both Jinnah’s claims.<sup>63</sup> This amounted to the breakdown of the Conference, for Wavell considered that a government with only Congress and non-League Muslims “would not (repeat not) work”.<sup>64</sup> Declaring that the “responsibility for the failure is mine”, Wavell convened a final meeting of the Conference on 14 July 1945, and formally announced the breakdown.<sup>65</sup>

### III

A study of the Simla Conference is a revelation of the “communal” roots of British policy—roots which penetrated the terms of the offer, the actual proceedings of the Conference, its breakdown and even the subsequent post mortem. A communal conception of politics

<sup>58</sup> Cabinet Conclusions, 10 July 1945, Amery to Wavell, 10 and 11 July 1945, *ibid.*, p. 1221, 1224 and 1228.

<sup>59</sup> Jinnah to Wavell, 9 July 1945, *ibid.*, p. 1213.

<sup>60</sup> Wavell to Amery, 10 July 1945, *ibid.*, pp. 1214–15.

<sup>61</sup> Cabinet Conclusions, 10 July, 1945, *ibid.*, p. 1221.

<sup>62</sup> Wavell to Amery, 11 July 1945, *ibid.*, p. 1225.

<sup>63</sup> “I told Jinnah I could not accept these conditions.... The Conference has therefore failed”, Wavell to provincial Governors, 11 July 1945, *ibid.*, pp. 1227–78. “I told Jinnah I could not agree, and it was then clear that the conference had failed.” Note on the Simla Conference sent for Amery’s use, enclosed in Wavell to Amery, 15 July 1945, *ibid.*, p. 1262.

<sup>64</sup> Wavell to provincial Governors, 30 June 1945, *ibid.*, p. 1175.

<sup>65</sup> Text of Wavell’s Statement to Conference conveyed to Amery, 13 July 1945, *ibid.*, p. 1239.

underlay the offer itself. "Caste Hindus" and Muslims were put on par, as were the Congress and the League, by being recognized as the main representative parties of the two communities. Even the government's denial of the legitimacy of Jinnah's claim to be the sole spokesman of the Muslims did not constitute, as would seem at first sight, a digression beyond the communal parameters of British policy. For the ground for rejection was not the necessity of including a Congress-nominated Muslim but the need to reward the loyalism of the Punjab Muslims. Wavell's counter-proposal of four nominations from the League and one selection from the Unionists was a balance between the claims of the communalists and those of the loyalists, the other bulwarks of British rule. The "4 plus 1" formula was "virtual refusal to regard the Congress as a non-Hindu, secular organisation, and acceptance of Jinnah's contention that it was as much a communal party as the League".<sup>66</sup>

The handling of the breakdown of the Conference showed clearly the political alignment of the British with communal forces. Despite declaring consistently that Jinnah's demands were unreasonable, Wavell chose to abandon his own proposal and declare the Conference a failure, rather than consign the League to political oblivion. He ignored the willingness of the Congress to form a government immediately and allow the League to come in later. By allowing Jinnah to wreck the British initiative, the government revealed that it was "Jinnah's wishes that mattered above all else".<sup>67</sup> Once again, officialdom extended its patronage to communalism. It is significant that it was not only in public that Jinnah and the League were sought to be absolved of responsibility for the breakdown. In private confidential correspondence as well, the failure of the talks was assessed in terms that shifted attention away from the League and cited the failure as a further proof of the continuing validity of the "communal" British view that the issue of political progress in India was a result of the Hindu-Muslim divide. The first premise was the classic British notion that political progress in India was stalled because of the disagreement of the two communities—"the difficulty does not lie as between India

<sup>66</sup> S. Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography*, Vol. 1, New Delhi, 1976, p. 304.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*



and His Majesty's Government, but within India itself".<sup>68</sup> The second communal premise seen to be justified by the breakdown was the genuine basis of this communal disagreement in the "real fear on the part of the Muslims...of Congress domination, which they regard as equivalent to a Hindu Raj",<sup>69</sup> it was not merely the intransigence or obduracy of a particular individual. In Wavell's later assessments of the conference and its breakdown, Jinnah's assertive obduracy was clearly displaced in its primacy as the "real reason" by the "deeper cause" of the "real distrust of the Muslims".<sup>70</sup> The earlier characterization of the attitude of the Congress as "conciliatory and reasonable"<sup>71</sup> was notably absent.

The making of a gesture was the crucial part; its result made little difference. Even those who were strongly against making a move conceded the value of a move. The comparison drawn with the Cripps Offer, which had effectively silenced the clamour for a political initiative in India despite being a failure, appealed to the India Committee.<sup>72</sup> The death-knell of the past year's effort having sounded, planning for the future began. Wavell reported the breakdown of the talks to his provincial Governors and invited them to New Delhi for discussions on future strategy. Policies on specific issues such as the future of the central government, the release of detenus, the timing of central and provincial elections and the revival of ministries in provinces under governor's rule, were to be formulated too.<sup>73</sup> He considered the Government of India to be "weakened as an administrative machine" with "the performance of the departments getting worse". His Executive Council had seven members who had not supported his proposals and he had "little confidence in his Indian

<sup>68</sup> Amery to Wavell, 12 July 1945, *TP*, Vol. 5, pp. 1236–37.

<sup>69</sup> Wavell to King George VI, 19 July 1945, *ibid.*, p. 1279.

<sup>70</sup> Text of Wavell's Statement to the Conference conveyed to Amery, 13 July 1945, *ibid.*, p. 1239; and Wavell to Amery, 14 July 1945, *ibid.*, p. 1248.

<sup>71</sup> Wavell to Amery, 27 June 1945, *ibid.*, p. 1167.

<sup>72</sup> Amery assured Wavell: "Whether it now comes to fruition or not, we shall stand justified as having made a really honest attempt to help India forward to the fullest extent possible so long as there is no agreement upon the ultimate constitution", Wavell to Amery, 18 June 1945, *ibid.*, p. 1141.

<sup>73</sup> Wavell to provincial Governors, 11 July 1945, *ibid.*, p. 1227.

colleagues, individually or collectively". He approved of elections as a "political diversion", but the likelihood of their becoming a "trial of strength and causing 'intense communal bitterness' was disquieting".<sup>74</sup>

Maintaining the status quo while assessing the situation, past and future, and then beginning all over again the arduous process of arriving at a consensus of policy—this was the timetable for the future. British officialdom had made its move and then allowed itself to be checkmated. No new move was contemplated in the near future.

<sup>74</sup> Wavell to Amery, 22 July 1945, *ibid.*, pp. 1287–88.



## II

### *Imperialism and Nationalism*



## Congress Strategy and Popular Nationalist Activity

The overall strategy of the Congress was based on an understanding of the nature of the colonial state: "The semi-hegemonic nature of the colonial state in India led the Congress to adopt a strategy of creating a counter-hegemony through a multifaceted struggle".<sup>1</sup> The hegemonic nature of the struggle was also the chief reason for the insistence on non-violence, for it was through mass propaganda and agitation and the use of non-violent but illegal or non-constitutional methods of mass struggle that the hegemonic foundations of British rule were corroded.

The political strategy of the Congress has been characterized as one of "struggle—truce—struggle",<sup>2</sup> in the sense that it was "one of a long drawn-out hegemonic struggle", of phases of mass struggle interspersed with phases of constitutional struggle—and not one of an all-out insurrectionary seizure of power—i.e., it was a "war of position", rather than a "war of manoeuvre".<sup>3</sup> This strategy of non-violent mass movement, combined with constitutional struggle—the working

<sup>1</sup> Aditya Mukherjee, "The Indian Capitalist Class" See Bipan Chandra, *Indian National Movement: Long Term Dynamics*, New Delhi, 1988, for a comprehensive analysis of Congress strategy.

<sup>2</sup> Chandra, *Long Term Dynamics*, p. 129.

<sup>3</sup> Mridula Mukherjee, "Peasant Movements and National Movement", paper presented at Indo-GDR Seminar on "Nationalism and National Movements", Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, March 1988.

# WHO SAYS WE'RE NERVOUS ?



of constitutional concessions, negotiations and settlements—was adopted by the Congress, not “because it was allegedly a class party of the bourgeoisie, but because it saw it as the most effective strategy of struggle in the given context”.<sup>4</sup>

Within this framework, the necessity for exploring constitutional paths of struggle, before embarking on a mass movement, was prime. Gandhi clarified this in his unique language:<sup>5</sup>

The first and last work of a *satyagrahi* is ever to seek an opportunity for an honourable approach.... If the leaders have active *ahinsa* in them, they must cultivate a belief in the perfect possibility and necessity of such approach.... Our aim must remain what it is, but we must be prepared to negotiate for less than the whole, so long as it is unmistakably of the same kind and has in it inherent possibility of expansion.

This strategy was reiterated in 1945 in a resolution of the All India Congress Committee on Congress policy:<sup>6</sup>

The method of negotiation and conciliation which is the keynote of peaceful policy can never be abandoned by the Congress, no matter how grave may be the provocation, any more than can that of non-cooperation, complete or modified. Hence the guiding maxim of the Congress must remain negotiations and settlement when possible and non-cooperation and direct action when necessary.

In 1945, Congress policy was shaped in accordance with the leaders' assessment of the situation in Britain and of the stage reached by the anti-imperialist movement: “The war has shaken up Asia and

<sup>4</sup> Mukherjee, “Indian Capitalist Class”, p. 275.

<sup>5</sup> *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (henceforth *MGCW*), Vol. 69, New Delhi, 1977, p. 323.

<sup>6</sup> AICC resolution on Congress Policy, adopted on 22 September 1945, Indian National Congress, *March 1940 to September 1946: Being the Resolutions Passed by the Congress, the AICC and the Working Committee*, published by the General Secretary, AICC, New Delhi, 1946.



Europe.... Great Britain already occupies a secondary position and is destined to play a subsidiary role. Britain is fighting a losing battle and the sources of her old imperial strength are drying up.”<sup>7</sup> The 1942 movement and its repression had ushered in a new phase of the national movement: “...the past three years have affected our people very deeply, and, I think, changed them considerably. Intense passion has been aroused and iron has entered the soul of large numbers of the people.”<sup>8</sup> The isolation of the government on various policies was noted in an *Amrita Bazar Patrika* editorial:<sup>9</sup>

Never perhaps in the annals of Indo-British relationship has the government been so completely isolated on such questions as the trial of the INA, the use of Indian troops in Indonesia, the surreptitious execution of Indians in Malaya and Singapore, the reimposition of an autocratic rule in Burma and the grave allegations of torture, made in the public press, in the Delhi Red Fort and the Lahore Fort. These events have stirred public feeling to its very depths....

The national leadership did not miss the import of the change effected by Labour. The anxiety of the Labour government to “settle the constitutional question without further ado” marked a clear contrast with Churchill’s subversive and delaying tactics in the last two initiatives, the Cripps Mission and the Simla Conference.<sup>10</sup> The Viceroy was immediately called to London and following discussions with him, a policy statement was framed and announced on 19 September 1945. It announced the holding of elections and the formation of a Consti-

<sup>7</sup> File No. G-20/1942-45, *All India Congress Committee Papers* (henceforth *AICC Papers*), NMML, New Delhi.

<sup>8</sup> Nehru to Vijayalakshmi Pandit, 26 July 1945, S. Gopal, ed., *Jawaharlal Nehru: Selected Works* (henceforth *JNSW*), Vol. 14, New Delhi, 1981, p. 61. See also his speech in Bombay, 22 September 1945, *Bombay Chronicle*, 23 September 1945.

<sup>9</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 15 November 1945, NMML.

<sup>10</sup> “The Cabinet are very much in earnest about the Indian problem and are, I think, determined to solve it if they can”, Wavell to provincial Governors, 21 September 1945, *TP*, Vol. 6, pp. 286–88.

tuent Assembly. This was an advance from mere “talks towards setting it up”.<sup>11</sup> In November, the Cabinet India and Burma Committee accepted Cripps’ endorsement of all of Amrit Kaur’s suggestions on viceregal talks with Gandhi, invitations to Nehru and Jinnah for talks in London and sending out of a Parliamentary Delegation. Again, the Viceroy rejected the first two suggestions.<sup>12</sup> The Secretary of State’s statement of 1 January 1946, clearly reiterated the Labour government’s earlier promise of self-government in the immediate future.<sup>13</sup> In specific policies, the Labour government, especially Secretary of State Pethick-Lawrence, took the initiative in pressurizing the Viceroy, with some success, to restore civil liberties,<sup>14</sup> release detenus under a scheme of periodic reviews,<sup>15</sup> remove bans on all political parties, including the Congress Socialist Party and the Forward Bloc,<sup>16</sup> repeal war-time special ordinances<sup>17</sup> and commute the death sentences passed on the Chimur-Ashti accused.<sup>18</sup>

Reflecting the new mood, Nehru predicted that “Britain would leave India within two to five years”, Katju warned that “freedom is coming...sooner than we expected” and Pant looked forward to India being “completely free very soon”.<sup>19</sup> The Congress’ understanding of the stage reached by the national movement was based on an evaluation of the strength of the nationalist forces. The “Quit India” call had evoked a stupendous response even in the face of extreme repres-

<sup>11</sup> Viceroy’s letter to provincial Governors, 21 September 1945, *ibid.*, p. 230.

<sup>12</sup> Cabinet India and Burma Committee meeting, 19 November 1945, and Viceroy to Secretary of State, 23 November 1945, *ibid.*, pp. 501 *ff.* and 524.

<sup>13</sup> Lord Pethick-Lawrence’s New Year Message to India, *Indian Information*, Issued fortnightly by the Principal Information Officer, Government of India, 15 January 1946, Vol. 18.176, p. 59.

<sup>14</sup> The Secretary of State took up the question on 21 September and 11 October with the Viceroy, *TP*, Vol. 6, pp. 264–69, 289 and 334–35.

<sup>15</sup> Secretary of State to Viceroy, 20 October, 31 October and 2 November 1945, *ibid.*, pp. 412, 427 and 431.

<sup>16</sup> Secretary of State to Viceroy, 23 August, and 11 October 1945, *ibid.*, pp. 143 and 334.

<sup>17</sup> See Secretary of State to Viceroy, 21 September, 19 October and 20 December 1945, *ibid.*, pp. 289, 364 and 667.

<sup>18</sup> Pethick-Lawrence to Wavell, 10 August 1945, *ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>19</sup> U.P. FR for the first half of October 1945, Home Poll 18/10/45, NAI, New Delhi; and *HT*, 7 and 22 October 1945.

sion and, though the people were bitter, there was a grim resolution in the popular mood.<sup>20</sup> The enthusiastic populace that turned out to welcome the leaders,<sup>21</sup> the mammoth crowds at meetings and demonstrations (whether they be election meetings or those demanding leniency for the Chimur-Ashti accused and the Indian National Army prisoners),<sup>22</sup> the spread of the movement for the release of INA men to relatively politically inactive areas, such as Ajmer, Assam, Sind, Orissa and Coorg<sup>23</sup> and to people beyond the Congress following—loyalists, zamindars, sections of the services and the army—all these phenomena indicated the advance of the national movement over the earlier periods.

The Congress' awareness of the nearness of the end of British rule and the advanced position of the nationalist forces led to the belief that the victory stage of the "struggle–truce–struggle" spiral was approaching. With the great likelihood of a settlement in the near future, the party contested the elections in order to form ministries and to elect representatives who would participate in the negotiations to decide the form of the Constituent Assembly. Though the general approach was clear, there were certain disturbing features of British policy that raised doubts as to the manner of a final settlement. While the Simla Conference marked a break with the repression-generated stalemate of the war years, its failure indicated that British policy remained within the old groove of first supporting the Muslim League's intransigence and then pointing to the communal divisions as the barrier to constitutional progress.<sup>24</sup> Despite indications of a more responsive approach, it remained to be seen whether the Labour government's stand on colonial self-government broke away from the imperialist paradigm in general, and on the question of using communal forces in particular. On the whole, British policy in the second half of 1945 did not yet adequately reflect even the policy makers' own realization of the change the British position had undergone.

<sup>20</sup> Amin Chand to the General Secretary, AICC, 3 April 1946, File P-16/1942-6, *AICC Papers*.

<sup>21</sup> See footnotes 28 and 29.

<sup>22</sup> See Home Poll 18/8/45 to 18/11/45.

<sup>23</sup> We have discussed this with reference to the INA agitation later in this chapter.

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of the Simla Conference and its aftermath, see Chapter 2.

Therefore, the Congress felt it necessary to prepare for a mass movement, which they would launch if the promised negotiations after the elections did not concede independence. Anti-government discontent was channelled to this end and the election platform was used to criticize the official actions and policies, such as the 1942 excesses, the INA trials and the use of Indian troops in Indonesia, as well as to “revive and reorganise the Party”.<sup>25</sup> We find Congress leaders asking people to prepare for the next struggle,<sup>26</sup> much to the consternation of officialdom.

Willingness to enter into a negotiated settlement and preparedness for a future mass movement marked the policy of the Congress, which was determined to keep both the options of compromise and struggle open. Premature outbreaks of struggle were clearly inconsistent with the general Congress strategy of exploring constitutional possibilities before launching direct action. Gandhi expressed this clearly in his comments on the RIN mutiny and the Cabinet Mission: “The rulers have declared their intention to ‘quit’ in favour of Indian rule. Let the action not be delayed for a moment because of the exhibition of distressful unrest which has been lying hidden in the breast”. He wrote to Aruna Asaf Ali: “Is the official deputation coming to deceive a great nation? What would be lost by waiting?”<sup>27</sup>

Outbursts of militancy would also go against the understanding of the Congress in 1945–46 that the weight of probability was in the

<sup>25</sup> Viceroy to Secretary of State, 6 November 1945, *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 452.

<sup>26</sup> Nehru, in a speech at Bombay, said that we must “prepare ourselves for the last battle of freedom”, *HT*, 12 November 1945. Patel also spoke in the same vein. Viceroy to Secretary of State, 6 November 1945, *TP*, Vol. 6, pp. 450–54. At a public meeting in Nagpur on 3 January 1946, Pandit Ravi Shankar Shukla said:

We can no longer rely on the words of the British and will not be taken unawares. We will continue to build up the organisational strength of the Congress. If the British are sincere in what they say and want us to believe, let them settle and come to an understanding with our foremost leader, Mahatma Gandhi. We will, however, continue to ask the people to prepare themselves for the struggle for freedom and keep ready when the call comes from the Congress. (File 1, No. 16, *J.M.G. Bell Papers* [henceforth *Bell Papers*], Cambridge South Asian Archive, UK.)

<sup>27</sup> *HT*, 24 February 1946 and *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 28 February 1946.

direction of a substantial final settlement. By precipitating a direct confrontation with the authorities, such outbreaks would prejudice the chances of a settlement by giving the British an excuse to scuttle talks, if they so wished. The other danger was that if the Congress encouraged outbreaks of this nature and launched a mass movement prematurely, it would be opting out of the constitutional arena, even before knowing what possibility it held and leaving the unoccupied territory to the communal and reactionary forces, with which the government could conveniently settle. Within this overall perspective and strategy, the predominant form that the national movement assumed was one of demonstration of nationalist solidarity. This sustained popular sentiment and built up preparedness and yet did not involve an outright assault on the British.

We shall first look more closely at the specific character of popular political activity in the period under study and, in a later chapter, examine its relationship with and impact on the Congress and the British policies. As already discussed in the previous chapter, the political scenario after the "Quit India" movement was considerably calm. The primary activity of Congressmen was constructive work, which helped to revive the Congress organization. Other forms of political activity were celebration of Independence Day and National Week; the campaign for release of Chimur-Ashti detenus and voicing of nationalist demands at kisan and labour conferences, including those controlled by the Communists.

Coming to the immediate post-war period, a glance at the graph of nationalist activity reveals a new trend. The middle of the year 1945 represented a transition, with the political atmosphere becoming more relaxed. Two of the major lines of war-time nationalist activity, constructive work and the nationalist stand taken by various social and political groups, faded out. The constructive programme died out but its organization was retained and served as the Congress election machinery. June 1945 marked a transition in nationalist activity from spontaneous political expression at a low key during the war period, to open, direct, anti-British political activity of a high level of intensity. The INA agitation and the RIN revolt eclipsed at this point all other forms of political functioning, including the observance of the Martyrs Day or the Liberty Week.

One reason for this unprecedented popular excitement was that the political energies of the people were surfacing after having been suppressed for three years. Besides, political constraints were also removed. The beginning of this process was the release of the leaders in June 1945. The Simla Conference, despite its failure, the Labour party's coming to power, the subsequent declaration of elections and the prospect of popular ministries, signalled the turning tide. These timely British moves also coincided with renewed nationalist initiatives. The campaign for the release and pardon of the INA prisoners evoked widespread support for the "misguided patriots". The agitation, spearheaded by the Congress, to bring to book those officials guilty of excesses in the 1942 movement, released the general public from the grip of fear of officialdom. The RIN had a similar, though more dramatic, "freeing" impact.

The first expression of the post-war political euphoria actually began before the end of the war in the eastern theatre, with the convening of the Simla Conference. Wavell's broadcast on 14 June 1945 about the new political offer included an announcement that the Congress Working Committee members were being released to enable them to participate in the forthcoming conference. Hearing this news, large crowds thronged the jails where the Congress leaders were interned after they had been sent from Ahmednagar Fort to the respective provinces.<sup>28</sup> Personal felicitations apart, the news itself was the occasion for celebration in many areas.<sup>29</sup>

An enthusiastic welcome was accorded to the Congress leaders on their arrival in Bombay for the Congress Working Committee meeting on 21 and 22 June 1945. Large, excited crowds at the railway stations cheered those travelling to Bombay through the Central Provinces.<sup>30</sup> Ten thousand people invaded Victoria Terminus, despite inclement

<sup>28</sup> U.P. FR for the second half of June 1945, Home Poll 18/6/45; Azad, *India Wins Freedom*, p. 100; and Prasad, *Autobiography*, p. 565.

<sup>29</sup> Several demonstrations and processions were held all over the Presidency. Madras FR for the second half of June 1945, Home Poll 18/6/45. News of release was received with jubilation all over the Bombay province. Bombay FR for second half of June 1945, *ibid.*, See also *HT*, 22 and 24 June 1945.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 23 June 1945; C.P. and Berar FR for the second half of June 1945, Home Poll 18/6/45.

weather.<sup>31</sup> Municipal schools were closed on 21 June to mark the visit of the Congress president to the city after three years.<sup>32</sup> Half-a-million people lined the streets in the monsoon rain to welcome Nehru when he reached Bombay on 20 June.<sup>33</sup> The scenes of reception soon shifted to Simla and the places en route. The main political activity in Delhi at this time was the arranging of receptions for various leaders passing through the city.<sup>34</sup> Immense crowds cheered Gandhi and Azad as they passed through Ambala on their way to Kalka.<sup>35</sup> At Simla, when the train carrying Gandhi arrived, the crowds became uncontrollable and tried to enter his compartment.<sup>36</sup> People took up positions on hillsides and treetops to get a glimpse of Nehru on his arrival in Simla.<sup>37</sup>

This popular enthusiasm did not subside even a month later, though the failure of the Simla Conference had belied the people's expectations of immediate political progress. Nehru was struck by the "enormous enthusiasm" of the people in Lahore.<sup>38</sup> The electioneering for the central assembly in November 1945 and for the provincial assemblies in early 1946 was a revelation to the leaders in terms of the popular mood. In 1945–46, as during the 1936–37 elections, Nehru was the star campaigner, touring virtually the entire country. He confessed that he "had not previously seen such crowds, such frenzied excitement".<sup>39</sup> In Nehru's view, the popular mood and the large gatherings showed not only the popularity of the leaders, but also the increased strength of the Congress.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Bombay FR for the second half of June 1945, *ibid.*, 18/6/45.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Delhi FR for the second half of June 1945, *ibid.*, 18/6/45.

<sup>35</sup> Virtually the entire town came out in Ambala and Kalka to greet Gandhi, *HT*, 25 June 1945. The crowd surrounded Azad's car in such a way that it was impossible to move, Azad, *India Wins Freedom*, p. 105.

<sup>36</sup> *HT*, 25 June 1945.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 2 July 1945.

<sup>38</sup> Nehru to Vijayalakshmi Pandit, 26 July 1945, *JNSW*, Vol. 14, p. 60.

<sup>39</sup> Nehru's press interview at Karachi, 9 January 1946, *ibid.*, p. 614; Jawaharlal Nehru, *Discovery of India*, New Delhi, 1981, p. 693.

<sup>40</sup> Nehru's speech at Bombay, 24 September 1945, *JNSW*, Vol. 14, p. 292.

Another mode of expression of nationalist sentiment was the observance of anniversaries of the birth and death of national leaders and landmarks in the national movement. The 25th death anniversary of Tilak on 1 August 1945 was observed as Tilak Day. Meetings, processions, *prabhat pheris* (morning rounds) and flag hoisting took place in almost all the Bombay districts, in several places in U.P., especially Meerut, Hapur and Kanpur, in Punjab, in most districts of the Central Provinces and Berar, in most district towns in Sind, and in Ajmer and Beawar.<sup>41</sup> Martyrs Day was observed on 9 August 1945, the third anniversary of the arrests of Congress activists in 1942, by holding meetings, hoisting the flag, taking out processions, abstaining from classes and observing hartals.<sup>42</sup> Martyrs Day was the first day of the Liberty Week, which extended from 9 to 15 August 1945, during which the Political Prisoners Day, the Civil Liberties Day, the Students' Demand Day, the Charkha Demonstration Day, the National Unity Day and the Anti-untouchability Day were observed.<sup>43</sup>

The third form of expression of popular enthusiasm was the response evoked by the Congress during the electioneering for the central and provincial assemblies. The wide sweep of the election campaign was evident from the large number of election meetings held and the turnout of crowds—over 50,000 at normal meetings and a lakh and above at major meetings addressed by big leaders. The Congress made a clean sweep of the general seats in the provincial elections, won 923 out of an overall total of 1,585 seats (general and special seats) and obtained a large majority of the labour seats, 23 out of 38, but it lost badly to the Muslim League in the Muslim seats.<sup>44</sup> The two major issues taken up in the election campaign were the repression of 1942 and the trials of the INA prisoners.

<sup>41</sup> *HT*, 1 and 2 August 1945; and Bombay, U.P., Punjab, C.P. and Berar, Sind and Ajmer FRs for the first half of August 1945, Home Poll 18/8/45.

<sup>42</sup> *HT*, 10, 11, 13–16 August 1945; Bombay, C.P. and Berar, Assam and Ajmer FRs for the first half of August 1945, Home Poll 18/8/45. See Government of Madras, Under Secretary's Safe File, 89/45, 27-8-1945, Tamil Nadu State Archives, Madras.

<sup>43</sup> *HT*, 6 and 20 August 1945, Bombay, Madras, U.P., Bengal, and Punjab FRs for the first half and U.P. FR for the second half of August 1945, Home Poll 18/8/45.

<sup>44</sup> See *ibid.*, 18/11/45 to 18/2/46; N.N. Mitra, *The Indian Annual Register*, An Annual Digest of Public Affairs in India, January to June 1946, Vol. 1, Calcutta, 1946; and File 26/1946, *AICC Papers*.



The focus in the election campaign was on two aspects, the glorification of the martyrs of 1942 and the condemnation of official excesses. Gandhi had, as early as 1943, justified the violence of the 1942 movement as being provoked by the “leonine violence” of the Raj, in his long reply to the government charge sheet, “Congress Responsibility for the Disturbances”.<sup>45</sup> In 1945, the Congress leaders lauded the brave resistance put up by a leaderless people, martyrs’ memorials were erected and relief funds for the 1942 sufferers and their families were revived. Official action was severely condemned both in the press and at election meetings. Stories of repression were recounted, officials responsible were condemned, very often by name, and threats of inquiries and punishment were held out.

However, the issue that caught the popular imagination was the fate of the members of Subhas Chandra Bose’s Indian National Army, who were captured by the British in the eastern theatre of war. An announcement by the government, limiting trials of the INA personnel to those guilty of brutality or active complicity, was due to be made by the end of August 1945. However, before this statement could be issued, Nehru raised the demand for leniency at a Srinagar meeting on 16 August 1945<sup>46</sup>—making the proposed statement seem a response to his call rather than an act of generosity on the part of the government.<sup>47</sup>

Hailing them as patriots, albeit misguided, Nehru called for their judicious treatment by the authorities, in view of the British promise that “big changes” were “impending” in India.<sup>48</sup> Other Congress leaders soon took up the issue and the AICC, at its first post-war session

<sup>45</sup> See Sucheta Mahajan, “British Policy Towards Gandhi’s Fast, 1943”, unpublished seminar paper, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 1981.

<sup>46</sup> Nehru’s address to a gathering of Sikhs, Srinagar, 16 August 1945, *JNSW*, Vol. 14, p. 66.

<sup>47</sup> “Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru are taking a keen interest in this matter.... We believe that the statement will be found to be more generous than the public expects.... But if it is delayed until the agitation has had time to gather way, our statement of policy will be largely discounted and we shall in fact be forced on to the defensive.” Governor-General (War Department) to Secretary of State, 21 August 1945, *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 111.

<sup>48</sup> Nehru’s speech at Srinagar, 19 August 1945, *JNSW*, Vol. 14, p. 332.

held in Bombay from 21 to 23 September 1945, adopted a strongly worded resolution declaring its support for the cause.<sup>49</sup> The defence of the INA prisoners was taken up by the Congress—Nehru, Asaf Ali, Bhulabhai Desai and K.N. Katju appeared in court at the historic Red Fort trials. The Congress organized the INA Relief and Enquiry Committee, which provided small sums of money and food to the men on their release and attempted, though with marginal success, to secure employment for these men.<sup>50</sup> The Congress authorized the Central INA Fund Committee, the Mayor's Fund in Bombay, the AICC, the provincial Congress committee offices and Sarat Bose to collect funds.<sup>51</sup> The INA question was the main issue highlighted from the Congress platform in meetings held all over the country—in fact, very often, it was difficult to distinguish between the INA and the election meetings. In view of Nehru's early championing of the INA cause, and the varied involvement of the Congress in it later, the charge that the Congress jumped on to the INA bandwagon, and merely used the issue as an election stunt,<sup>52</sup> does not appear to have any validity.

The reason for focusing on the INA agitation is that it was a landmark on many counts. First, the high pitch or intensity, at which the campaign for the release of INA prisoners was conducted, was unprecedented. This was evident from the press coverage and other publicity it got, from the threats of revenge that were publicly made and also from the large number of big meetings held.<sup>53</sup> Initially, the appeals in the press were for clemency to "misguided" men, but, by November 1945, when the first Red Fort trials were held, there were

<sup>49</sup> Resolution on the INA, AICC session, 23 September 1945, Indian National Congress, *March 1940 to September 1946: Being the Resolutions Passed by the Congress, the AICC and the Working Committee*, p. 47.

<sup>50</sup> Punjab and Sind FRs for the first half of November 1945, Home Poll 18/11/45; Orissa FR for the first half of December 1945, *ibid.*, 18/12/45; Punjab FR for the second half of December 1945, *ibid.*, 18/12/45.

<sup>51</sup> Nehru's statement to the press, 16 November 1945, Allahabad, *JNSW*, Vol. 14, pp. 352–53.

<sup>52</sup> K.K. Ghosh, *The Indian National Army: Second Front of the Indian Independence Movement*, Meerut, 1969, p. 210; Sumit Sarkar, "Popular Movements", p. 679 also talks of the "sabre rattling" by the Congress.

<sup>53</sup> These were the important features of the campaign, which we shall now take up separately.

daily editorials hailing the INA men as the most heroic patriots and criticizing the government stand.<sup>54</sup> Priority coverage was given to the INA trials and to the INA campaign, eclipsing international news.<sup>55</sup> Pamphlets, the most popular one being "Patriots Not Traitors", were widely circulated.<sup>56</sup> "Jai Hind" and "Quit India" were scrawled on the walls of buildings in Ajmer.<sup>57</sup> Posters threatening reprisals and death to "20 English dogs" for every INA man sentenced were pasted all over Delhi.<sup>58</sup> A speaker at a meeting in Rajahmundry warned that for every INA man executed, 100 white men would lose their lives,<sup>59</sup> while in Banares it was declared at a public gathering that "if INA men were not saved, revenge would be taken on European children".<sup>60</sup>

An indication of the popular interest in the issue can be measured from the fact that 160 political meetings were held in the Central Provinces and Berar alone in the first fortnight of October 1945, at which the INA issue was discussed.<sup>61</sup> The INA Day and Week celebrations all over the country were characterized by strikes, large collections of funds, widespread closure of markets and huge processions. The INA Day was generally observed on 12 November in Agra, Banares, Kanpur, Lucknow, Firozabad and Allahabad in U.P., Amritsar and Lahore in Punjab and in Bombay, Madras, Patna, Beawar and Quetta.<sup>62</sup> The INA Week celebrations from 5th to 11th November

<sup>54</sup> *The Searchlight* editorial of 27 August 1945 spoke of the INA as a "clear cause for large-hearted clemency". The editorial of 13 October 1945 in *The Leader* declared "that the INA men fought for their country's freedom and their countrymen will continue to look upon them as national heroes...."

<sup>55</sup> U.P. and Punjab FRs for the first half of November 1945 and Bengal FR for the second half of November 1945, Home Poll 18/11/45.

<sup>56</sup> Delhi FR for second half of October 1945, *ibid.*, 18/10/45.

<sup>57</sup> Ajmer FR for the second half of December 1945, *ibid.*, 18/12/45.

<sup>58</sup> Delhi FR for the first half of November 1945, *ibid.*, 18/11/45 and U.P. FR for the first half of December 1945, *ibid.*, 18/12/45.

<sup>59</sup> Madras FR for the first half of November 1945, *ibid.*, 18/11/45.

<sup>60</sup> Hallett, Governor, U.P., to Wavell, 19 November 1945, *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 507.

<sup>61</sup> Note on the INA Situation by Director, Intelligence Bureau, enclosed in Government of India, Home Department to Secretary, Political Department, India Office, 20 November 1945, *ibid.*, p. 512. See Government of Madras, Under Secretary's Safe File 3-A/6-2-1946 for Congress meetings at which INA was the main issue.

<sup>62</sup> *HT*, 14 and 15 November 1945; U.P., Bengal and Ajmer FRs for the first half of November 1945, Home Poll 18/11/45.

were notable in Bombay city, U.P. and Orissa.<sup>63</sup> While nearly 50,000 people would turn out for the larger meetings in various areas, the largest meeting was the one held in Deshapriya Park, Calcutta, which was organized by the INA Relief Committee. It was addressed by Sarat Bose, Nehru and Patel and was attended by two to three lakh people—Nehru put the figure at 5–7 lakh.<sup>64</sup>

The second significant feature of the INA campaign was its wide geographical reach and the participation of diverse social groups and political parties. This had two aspects. One was the generally extensive nature of the agitation; the other was the spread of pro-INA sentiment to social groups hitherto outside the nationalist pale, a fact that had serious implications for the authorities. The unprecedented, wide-spread, popular interest generated by the INA issue was conceded by the Director of the Intelligence Bureau: "There has seldom been a matter which has attracted so much Indian public interest, and, it is safe to say, sympathy".<sup>65</sup> Nehru confirmed the same: "Never before in Indian history had such unified sentiments and feelings been manifested by various divergent sections of the Indian population as it has been done with regard to the question of the Azad Hind Fauj".<sup>66</sup> Delhi, Bombay, Madras, Punjab, U.P. and Bengal were the main centres of the agitation and large meetings were held in various towns and cities. What is even more noteworthy was the spread of the agitation to places as distant as Coorg,<sup>67</sup> Baluchistan<sup>68</sup> and Assam<sup>69</sup>. "Anxious inquiries" and "profuse sympathies" were forthcoming from the "remotest villages" from all men, "irrespective of caste, colour and creed".<sup>70</sup> The social and political reach of the movement was very extensive, ranging from municipal committees to army men and from political parties, such as the Congress and Muslim League, to the Akalis' and the Justice Party.

<sup>63</sup> Bombay, U.P. and Orissa FRs for the first half of November 1945, *ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Bengal FR for the first half of December 1945, *ibid.*, 18/12/45.

<sup>65</sup> See footnote 61.

<sup>66</sup> Nehru's speech at Patna, 24 December 1945, *JNSW*, Vol. 14, p. 280.

<sup>67</sup> Coorg FR for the first half of November 1945, Home Poll 18/11/45.

<sup>68</sup> Baluchistan FR for the first half of November 1945, *ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Assam FR for the second half of November 1945, *ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Nehru's speech at Patna, 24 December 1945, *JNSW*, Vol. 14, pp. 279–80. Also, Note on the INA Situation by Director, Intelligence Bureau, 20 November 1945, *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 512.

Participation was of many kinds: some contributed funds, others attended or organized meetings, shopkeepers downed shutters and political parties and organizations raised the demand for the release of the prisoners. Municipal committees, Indians abroad and *gurdwara* committees subscribed liberally to the INA funds, leading Nehru to comment that money “flows in unasked from all quarters”.<sup>71</sup> The Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, Amritsar, donated Rs 7,000 and set aside another Rs 10,000 for INA relief.<sup>72</sup> Official institutions contributed their mite, too, much to the chagrin of the authorities. A District Board in Madras, the Poona City Municipality and the Kanpur City Fund contributed Rs 1,000 each. More newsworthy contributions were those by film stars in Bombay and Calcutta, by the Cambridge Majlis and the *tongawallas* of Amraoti.<sup>73</sup>

Students, whose role in the entire campaign was outstanding, held meetings and rallies and boycotted classes. Reports of their involvement came in from all over the country, from Salem in the south to Rawalpindi up north, from Calcutta and Cuttack in the east to Bombay and Poona in the west.<sup>74</sup> Commercial institutions, shops and markets stopped business on the day of the first trial, 5 November 1945 and during INA Day and Week in various towns in U.P. and Punjab, Bombay, Madras, Patna and Quetta.<sup>75</sup> Demands for the release were raised at kisan conferences in Dhamangaon and Sholapur on 16 November and at the tenth session of the All India Women’s Conference in Hyderabad on 29 December 1945.<sup>76</sup> Tucker wrote, “even English intellectuals, birds of a year or two’s sojourn in India, were

<sup>71</sup> Nehru’s statement to the press, 16 November 1945, Allahabad, *JNSW*, Vol. 14, pp. 352–53.

<sup>72</sup> Punjab FR for the second half of October 1945, Home Poll 18/10/45.

<sup>73</sup> *HT*, 21, 22, 29 November 1945; Bombay FR for the second half of November 1945; Home Poll 18/11/45; and C.P. and Berar FR for the second half of December 1945, *ibid.*, 18/12/45.

<sup>74</sup> *HT*, 27, 30 and 31 October and 4, 6 and 9 November 1945; Madras, Bihar, Orissa and Ajmer FRs for the first half of November and Madras, Bombay, Ajmer and C.P. and Berar FRs for the second half of November 1945, *ibid.*, 18/11/45.

<sup>75</sup> *HT*, 2, 3 and 6 November, 1945.

<sup>76</sup> Bombay FR for the first half of December 1945, Home Poll 18/12/45 and Mitra, *Indian Annual Register*, July–December 1945, p. 36.

taking a keen interest in the rights and wrongs, and the degrees of wrong, of the INA men".<sup>77</sup> There were some unusual forms of participation. In some areas in Punjab, Diwali was not celebrated in sympathy with the plight of the INA detenus.<sup>78</sup> Besides, the INA cause was propagated on social and religious occasions in the Central Provinces and Berar,<sup>79</sup> while Calcutta *gurdwaras* reportedly became a "centre for political activity on behalf of the INA".<sup>80</sup>

As important as the widespread social participation was the united stand put up by political parties with distinct ideologies and manifold differences. The Muslim League,<sup>81</sup> the Communist Party of India,<sup>82</sup> the Unionist Party,<sup>83</sup> the Akalis,<sup>84</sup> the Justice Party,<sup>85</sup> the Ahrars in Rawalpindi,<sup>86</sup> the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh,<sup>87</sup> the Hindu Mahasabha and Sikh League,<sup>88</sup> extended their support to the INA cause, in varying degrees. The Muslim League became active late in the day when Abdul Rashid was tried for brutality. Wavell explained their attitude thus: "The argument apparently is that the leniency shown in the first INA trial was entirely due to the Congress pressure and that the Muslim League must show in the case of Abdul Rashid [Rashid Ali] that they are equally good at agitation".<sup>89</sup>

The Communists were, in the beginning, notably half-hearted in their espousal of the INA cause, as the early *People's War* editorials

<sup>77</sup> Tucker, *While Memory Serves*, p. 54.

<sup>78</sup> Punjab FR for the first half of November 1945, Home Poll 18/11/45.

<sup>79</sup> C.P. and Berar FRs for the second halves of November and December 1945, *ibid.*, 18/11/45/ and 18/12/45.

<sup>80</sup> Tucker, *While Memory Serves*, p. 77.

<sup>81</sup> U.P. and Punjab FRs for the first half of November 1945, Home Poll 18/8/45.

<sup>82</sup> Madras and Punjab FRs for the first half of December 1945 and Bombay FR for the second half of December 1945, *ibid.*, 18/12/45.

<sup>83</sup> *HT*, 27 October 1945.

<sup>84</sup> Punjab FR for the second half of November 1945, Home Poll 18/11/45.

<sup>85</sup> Madras FR the second half of November 1945, *ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *HT*, 6 November 1945.

<sup>87</sup> U.P. FR for the second half of November 1945, Home Poll 18/11/45.

<sup>88</sup> Note on the INA Situation, Director, Intelligence Bureau, enclosed with Government of India, Home Department, to Secretary, Political Department, India Office, 20 November 1945, *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 512.

<sup>89</sup> Wavell to Pethick-Lawrence, 27 November 1946, *ibid.*, p. 969.

indicate.<sup>90</sup> By late November, however, Communist students were leading INA processions in Calcutta and clashing with the police. Among the political parties, the leadership and active involvement in the INA campaign was predominantly that of the Congress. Wavell noted that “all parties have taken the same line though Congress are more vociferous than the others”.<sup>91</sup>

The notable feature of the INA agitation was the effect it had on the traditional bulwarks of the Raj. Government employees, loyalists and even the armed forces were submerged in the tide of pro-INA sentiment. Many officials saw this to be a most disquieting trend. The governor of the North West Frontier Province warned, “every day that passes now brings over more and more well-disposed Indians to the anti-British camp”. The director of the Intelligence Bureau observed that “sympathy for the INA is not the monopoly of those who are ordinarily against Government” and that it was “usually the case that INA men belonged to families which had traditions of loyalty”.<sup>92</sup> This was clear in Punjab, to which province 48.07 per cent of the INA men released till February 1946 belonged. Here the return of the released men to their villages and the general uncertainty regarding the future of countless others, stimulated interest in the INA issue among groups and in areas “which had hitherto remained politically unaffected”. Local interest was further fuelled by virtue of many of the INA officers belonging to “influential families” in the region.<sup>93</sup> P.K. Sehgal, one of the three tried in the first Red Fort trial, was the son of Diwan Achhru Ram, an ex-judge of the Punjab High Court.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>90</sup> The editorial of 28 October 1945 in *People's War* warned against the glorification of INA men: “In defending victims of British terror, can we ourselves afford to preach ideas and glorify elements whom we were pledged to resist as reactionary pro-fascists?”

<sup>91</sup> Wavell to Pethick-Lawrence, 27 November 1945, *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 552.

<sup>92</sup> Cunningham to Wavell, 27 November 1945, *ibid.*, p. 546; and Note on INA Situation, Director, Intelligence Bureau, enclosed with Government of India, Home Department, to Secretary Political Department, India Office, 20 November, 1945, *ibid.*, p. 514.

<sup>93</sup> Prem Chowdhury, “The Congress Triumph in South-East Punjab: Elections of 1946”, *Studies in History* (henceforth *SIH*), Vol. 2.2, 1980, pp. 91 and 95. Also, interview with Niranjan Singh Gill, Amritsar, 2 and 3 April 1985.

<sup>94</sup> Interviews with P.K. and Laxmi Sehgal, Kanpur, 23 September 1986.

Those ex-judges and “gentlemen with titles”, who defended men accused of “war-time treason”, did not glorify the action of the INA men. Rather, they appealed to the government to abandon the trials in the interest of good relations between India and Britain.<sup>95</sup> Liberals like P.N. Saprú shared this attitude.<sup>96</sup> Generally, the government officials sympathized privately, if at all, but instances were reported of railway officials in the Central Provinces and Berar collecting funds.<sup>97</sup>

However, it was the support to the cause from within the armed forces that was more alarming for the government. The response of men from the armed forces to the INA issue was unexpectedly sympathetic, belying the official perception that loyal soldiers were very hostile to the INA “traitors”. Army men directly showed their support in some cases, by attending meetings and sending contributions. But more significantly, it was the weight of their opinion behind the demand for leniency that acted as the decisive factor in the government’s decision to modify its policy. Sikh sepoy s greeted Govind Ballabh Pant at Sahjanwa station and flew Congress flags on their lorries. The Royal Indian Air Force (RIAF) men in Kohat attended Shah Nawaz’s meetings and army men in U.P. and Punjab attended INA meetings, often in uniform.<sup>98</sup> The RIAF men in Calcutta, Kohat, Allahabad, Bamrauli and Kanpur contributed money for the INA defence, as did other service personnel in U.P.<sup>99</sup>

Apart from these instances of overt support, a “growing feeling of sympathy for the INA” pervaded the Indian army.<sup>100</sup> The Commander-in-Chief’s evaluation of sympathy for the INA among the armed

<sup>95</sup> Kunwar Dalip Singh, an ex-judge, commented: “Severity shown to any of these misguided men, will, I believe leave a legacy of hatred in the hearts of a great many Indians”, quoted in “Patriots-Not Traitors”, enclosed in Home Poll 33/27/45.

<sup>96</sup> Statement of P.N. Saprú and H. N. Kunzru, Allahabad, *ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> C.P. and Berar FR for the first half of December 1945, *ibid.*, 18/12/45.

<sup>98</sup> U.P. FR for the first half of November 1945, *ibid.*, 18/11/45; NWFP FR for the first half of February 1946, *ibid.*, 18/2/46; U.P. FR for the first half of March 1946, *ibid.*, 18/3/46; and Glancy to Wavell, extract, 16 January 1946, *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 807.

<sup>99</sup> U.P. FR for the first half of November 1945, Home Poll 18/11/45; NWFP FR for the first half of February 1946, *ibid.*, 18/2/46; and Hallett to Wavell, 19 November 1945, *TP*, Vol. p. 506.

<sup>100</sup> Auchinleck to Wavell, 26 November 1945, cited in J. Connell, *Auchinleck*, London, 1949, p. 806. The U.P. FR for the second half of December 1945 noted



forces is extremely revealing.<sup>101</sup> It stated that 100 per cent of the Indian Commissioned Officers were sympathetic, that the King's Commissioned Indian Officers were very divided, that 100 per cent of the Royal Indian Air Force were "100 per cent INA" and Indian Other Ranks were, on the whole, apathetic, but sympathetic. The implications of this sympathy were important, as the army top brass realized. The Commander-in-Chief, who had earlier argued for stern punishment on the grounds that the "general feeling throughout the Army would be that they [the INA prisoners] must be tried as traitors also",<sup>102</sup> modified his view by late November, when he reported to Whitehall that "general opinion in the army is in favour of leniency".<sup>103</sup> The "great majority" of the army was believed to be "pleased" at the "leniency" shown by the authorities in commuting the sentences of the first three INA men accused of cashiering and forfeiture of pay.<sup>104</sup> The British authorities were naturally alarmed at this development. Though Lt. General Taker's statement, that the "INA affair was...threatening to tumble down the whole edifice of the Indian Army",<sup>105</sup> was clearly alarmist, there is no doubt that "harm had been done to the morale and discipline of the army", as Wavell told Azad.<sup>106</sup>

The unprecedented intensity and the widespread nature of the movement apart, another striking feature of the INA issue was its political significance. Interestingly, the question of the right or wrong of the INA men's action was hardly debated. What was in question was the right of Britain to decide a matter concerning Indians. As

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the sympathy for the INA cause among certain sections of military personnel, Home Poll 18/12/45.

<sup>101</sup> Appreciation of Political Situation, 20 February 1946, cited in Chowdhury, "The Congress Triumph in South-East Punjab", p. 92.

<sup>102</sup> "Appreciation of the situation in respect of the so-called Indian National Army" by Auchinleck, 31 October 1945 enclosed in Wavell to Pethick-Lawrence, 2 November 1945, *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 436.

<sup>103</sup> Auchinleck to Wavell, 24 November 1945, *ibid.*, p. 538.

<sup>104</sup> Secret and Personnel letter from the Commander-in-Chief to all Army Commanders, 12 February 1946, enclosed in Auchinleck to Wavell, 13 February 1946, *ibid.*, p. 939.

<sup>105</sup> Taker, *While Memory Serves*, p. 43.

<sup>106</sup> Wavell's interview with Azad and Asaf Ali, 10 March 1946, *Wavell's Journal*, p. 222.

Nehru often stressed, if the British were sincere in their declaration that the Indo-British relationship was to be transformed, they should demonstrate their good faith by leaving it to Indians to decide the matter. Even the appeals by liberal sections were made in the interests of good relations between India and Britain in the future. It was almost as if a challenge was being put forward—we will not defend INA men's actions, we concede they were misguided, but we insist that they be let free, or else we will disbelieve your intentions to leave India. The British realized this political significance of the INA issue and the governor of the North West Frontier Province, advocating that the trials be disbanded, warned that day by day the issue was becoming "more and more purely Indian versus British".<sup>107</sup>

<sup>107</sup> Cunningham, Governor, NWFP, to Wavell, 27 November 1945, *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 188.

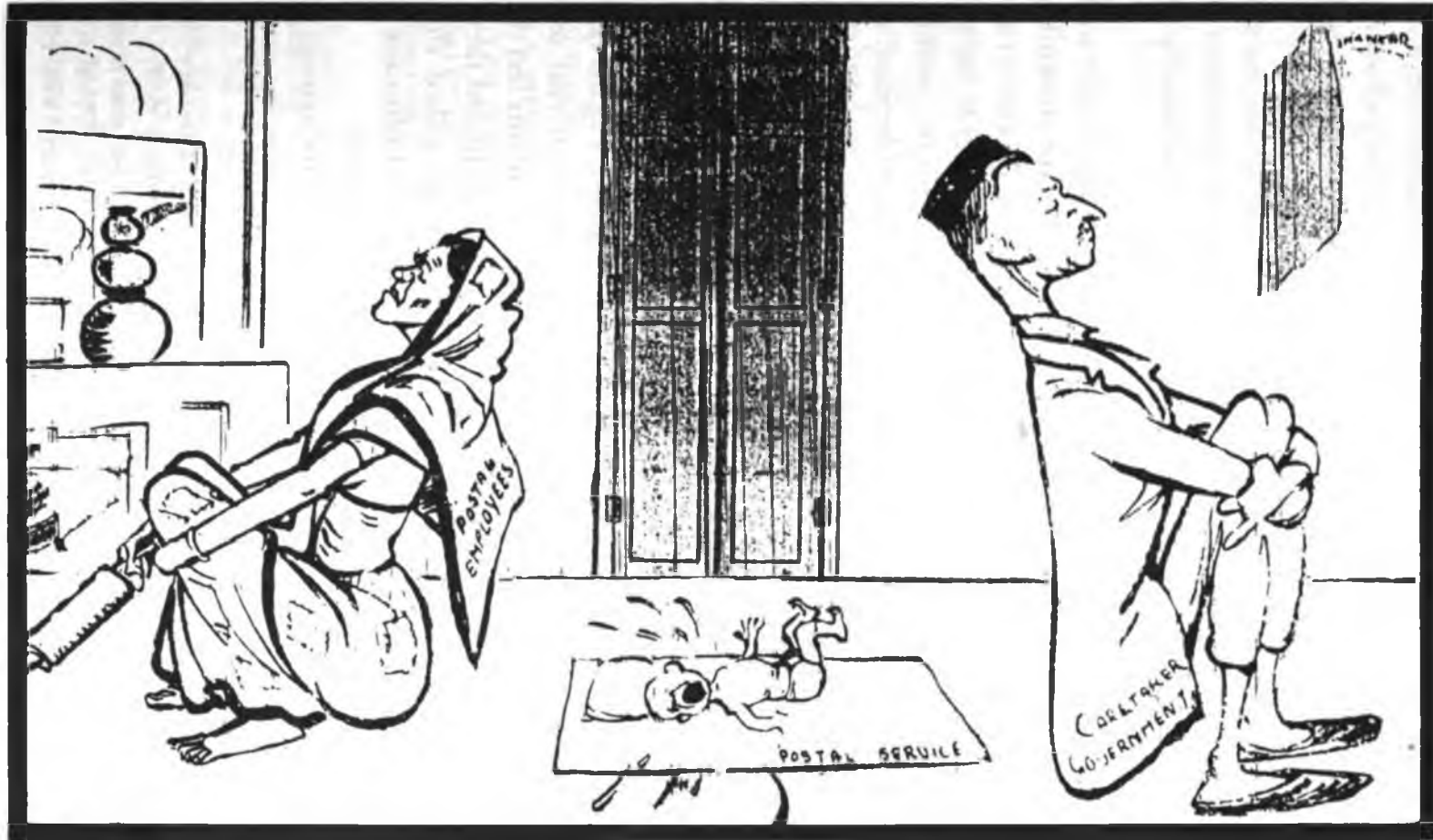
## “Popular Movements”: Myth and Reality

In this chapter, our focus shall be on the three upsurges around the INA trials and the RIN revolt and the workers', peasants', and tribals' movements. What was their nature, significance and impact? These are some of the questions we shall try and answer. Since some historians, especially those on the left, see only these upsurges as constituting popular activity and make certain contentions about their effect on the Congress stance and British policy, it will be worthwhile to treat them as a distinct analytical category. The argument about their impact on British policy flows into the next chapter, which focuses on colonial state and policy.

### Popular Upsurges in the Winter of 1945–46

In this section we shall analyze three agitations—the demonstration in Calcutta from 21 to 23 November 1945 over the INA issue, the Rashid Ali Day students' demonstration in Calcutta from 11 to 13 February 1946 and the Royal Indian Navy strike which began on 18 February 1946 in Bombay and spread to Karachi, Madras, Visakhapatnam, etc. We discuss them separately from the popular nationalist activity taken up earlier, for their common characteristic was a direct, violent confrontation with the authorities, in sharp contrast to the general trend of peaceful nationalist activity in this period. Rather than giving a blow-by-blow account of each one of these three

# BETWEEN TWO STRIKERS



Source: *The Hindustan Times*, 12 July 1946

upsurges, we shall deal with them together under some broad heads—the pattern of the agitation, its features and its inherent limitations. We shall also try to compare and contrast these upsurges with the trend of general politicization as delineated in the preceding chapter.

The broad pattern of these agitations followed three phases. First, a sectional protest posing a challenge to authority was met by official repression. This was followed by the involvement of various sections of the public in the city, who were indignant at the severity of the repression unleashed. The third stage saw solidarity actions by people in other parts of the country.

The first stage, i.e., the protest action of a section, was the students' clash with the police in the Calcutta demonstrations of November and February (over the issue of the release of the INA prisoners) and the ratings' revolt and their subsequent refusal to surrender to the government. On 21 November 1945, a procession of students, mainly from the Forward Bloc, but also joined by the Student Federation and the Islamia College students, shouting slogans like "Jai Hind" and "Marshal Bose Zindabad", was prevented by the police from passing through Dalhousie Square, the seat of authority in Calcutta. When the students refused to disperse, they were lathi-charged by the police. The students retaliated by hurling stones and brickbats. This in turn invited firing by the police, resulting in the death of two and injury to 52.<sup>1</sup> On 11 February 1946, the students had once again taken up the INA prisoners' issue, more specifically, the seven-year sentence passed on Abdul Rashid.<sup>2</sup> The Muslim League students led the procession; the Congress and the Communist students joined them. The arrest of some students on Dharamtolla Street provoked the main body of students to defy Section 144 imposed in the Dalhousie Square area; they were lathi-charged and many were arrested.<sup>3</sup>

The first stage in the RIN revolt was marked by the ratings' strikes in Bombay and Karachi and the sympathetic strikes by ratings in

<sup>1</sup> *HT*, 22 November 1945; and Pethick-Lawrence to Wavell, 2 January 1946, *TP*, Vol. 6, pp. 552 and 724. Also see Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India*, p. 682.

<sup>2</sup> Wavell wrote to Pethick-Lawrence that Abdul Rashid "had one man hung up and beaten in his presence until he lost consciousness", 13 February 1946, *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 969.

<sup>3</sup> *HT*, 12 February 1946; Bengal FR for the first half of February 1946, Home Poll 18/2/46.

Madras, Vishakhapatnam, Calcutta, Delhi, the Andamans and Bahrein and by some RIAF and Indian Army units. On 18 February, 1,100 naval ratings on the HMIS Talwar went on strike in protest against racial discrimination, abuse and the unpalatable food served to them. The release of a fellow rating, arrested for writing "Quit India" on the walls of the Talwar, was also demanded.<sup>4</sup> By 19 February, the number of striking ratings was 7,000 and ratings on shore, in the Castle and Fort Barracks, joined the ship's ratings, many of whom went around Bombay city in lorries flying the Congress flag, threatening Englishmen and policemen, breaking shop windows and shouting slogans.<sup>5</sup> Pitched battles between the ratings and the troops took place at Castle Barracks on 24 February.<sup>6</sup> The ratings at Karachi struck when the news of the Bombay strike reached on the 19th. The HMIS Hindustan, another ship and three shore establishments were involved. There was a gruesome end to the episode when troops encircled the ships. The ratings fired the ships' guns but they were clearly out-matched and six ratings were killed and the others arrested.<sup>7</sup>

The other ratings' strikes were token, sympathetic strikes. About 85 ratings struck work in Madras on 21 February and 600 in Visakhapatnam. There was a seven-day strike in Calcutta, where surrender was forced by a prolonged military siege. Some 80 ratings struck work in Delhi and there were strikes in Cochin, Jamnagar, the Andamans, Bahrein and Aden. Altogether, 78 ships and 20 shore establishments, involving 20,000 ratings, were affected.<sup>8</sup> However, the naval strike did not spark off a revolt in the armed forces, and contrary to popular opinion, Indian police and troops were successfully used by the authorities to suppress the revolt. Nevertheless, sepoy at Jabalpur observed a sympathetic strike, and the Colaba cantonment

<sup>4</sup> *HT*, 19 and 20 February 1946; Banerjee, *RIN Strike*, p. 9; and Dutt, *Misery of Innocents*, p. 111.

<sup>5</sup> *HT*, 20 February 1946; Colville, Governor, Bombay to Wavell, Extract, 27 February 1946, *TP*, Vol. 6, pp. 1079–80; Bombay FR for the second half of February 1946, Home Poll 18/2/46.

<sup>6</sup> *HT*, 21 and 22 February 1946.

<sup>7</sup> *HT*, 22 and 23 February 1946; Banerjee, *RIN Strike*, p. 83.

<sup>8</sup> *HT*, 22, 24 and 27 February 1946; Madras and Delhi FRs for the second half of February 1946, Home Poll 18/2/46; Banerjee, *RIN Strike*, pp. 92–94, 95 and 97; and Chattopadhyay, "The Almost Revolution", p. 441.

showed some “restlessness”.<sup>9</sup> The RIAF men, discontented with their own lot, were more enthusiastic in their support and the Marine Drive, Andheri, Sion, Poona, Calcutta, Jessore and Ambala units observed sympathetic strikes.<sup>10</sup>

In the second stage, the public in Calcutta and in the centres of the revolt became involved in the conflict and rendered the confrontation with the government more broad-based. There were two significant features of this phase—the violence and high pitch of the anti-British sentiment expressed and the ability of popular action to bring the cities to a temporary standstill. Protest meetings and rallies were held, barricades set up, Europeans assaulted, strikes observed by students and workers and hartals organized. In the November demonstration, the public protested in Calcutta on 22 and 23 November 1945 and a mammoth meeting was held at Wellington Square.<sup>11</sup> In February 1946, traffic was stopped and shops were closed within an hour of the arrests. People in Bombay initially gave food to the ratings, later they joined the ratings in attacking government buildings and European shops and even prevented troops from arresting the ratings.<sup>12</sup> In Karachi and Madras, too, there were large meetings, hartals, strikes and attacks on government institutions and the police.<sup>13</sup> In November, the “strong anti-British feeling”<sup>14</sup> manifested itself in the attacks on the army and police personnel, police and military vehicles and Indians wearing European dress.

In February 1946, the public action in Calcutta was characterized by a greater intensity. Government institutions and European officials were special targets. Police stations, post offices, shops and even a YMCA centre was attacked and burnt down. Besides, the erection of

<sup>9</sup> B.C. Dutt, *Mutiny of Innocents*, p. 154.

<sup>10</sup> *HT*, 22, 24 and 27 February 1946; Banerjee, *RIN Strike*, p. 115 and 119; Dutt, *Mutiny of Innocents*, p. 154; and Punjab FR for the second half of February 1946, Home Poll 18/2/46.

<sup>11</sup> Bengal FR for the second half of November 1945, Home Poll 18/11/45.

<sup>12</sup> Banerjee, *RIN Strike*, p. 128.

<sup>13</sup> *HT*, 23, 25, 26 and 27 February 1946 and the Madras FR for the first half of March 1946. Home Poll 18/3/46; Mudie, Governor, Sind, to Wavell, 27 February 1946, *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 1071 and Banerjee, *RIN Strike*, p. 131.

<sup>14</sup> Wavell to Pethick-Lawrence, 27 November 1945, *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 553.

barricades was widespread and street battles with the police were common.<sup>15</sup> This pattern was repeated in Bombay, where military lorries, trams, buses, railway stations, banks, grain shops, as well as British soldiers, were targets of popular fury.<sup>16</sup> Official figures of destruction of property in Bombay were 30 shops, 10 post offices, 10 police chowkis, 64 food grain shops and 1,200 street lamps.<sup>17</sup>

Anti-British violence apart, a noteworthy feature of popular action was the complete paralysis of the cities. The transport system, business and industry, the educational institutions and the administration were brought to a halt for a few days. In November 1945, the Governor of Bengal spoke of the virtual "paralysing" of the "life of the community".<sup>18</sup> The entire transport system was affected; private cars were stopped by students, military and official vehicles by barricades, railways by crowds squatting on the lines, and trams by the decision of the CPI-controlled union. Other sectors affected by strikes and hartals were the Calcutta Corporation, the schools and colleges and most of the markets.<sup>19</sup>

In February 1946, the same pattern was more or less repeated. This time, however, the burning of military lorries, cars and trams was fairly common and the Tollygunge Tram Depot was set on fire.<sup>20</sup> During the RIN revolt in Bombay, transport services were at a standstill on 22 and 23 February, roadblocks were common and two trains were burnt down.<sup>21</sup> In response to the Communists' call, 3 lakh workers struck work and thousands paraded through the city.<sup>22</sup> Banks and shops were generally closed.<sup>23</sup> Karachi was stilled on 23 February

<sup>15</sup> *HT*, 13 February 1946; Bengal FR for the first half of February 1946, Home Poll 18/2/46 and Gautam Chattopadhyay, "The Almost Revolution", p. 427.

<sup>16</sup> *HT*, 22 February 1946; Bombay FR for the second half of February 1946, Home Poll 18/2/46; and Colville to Wavell, 27 February 1946, *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 1079.

<sup>17</sup> Colville to Wavell, 2 January 1946, *ibid.*, p. 1079.

<sup>18</sup> Casey to Wavell, 2 January 1946, *ibid.*, p. 724.

<sup>19</sup> *HT*, 23 and 26 November 1945; Bengal FR for the second half of November 1945, Home Poll 18/11/45; Wavell to Pethick-Lawrence, 27 November 1945; and Casey to Wavell, 2 January 1946, *TP*, Vol. 6, pp. 552 and 724.

<sup>20</sup> *HT*, 11 and 13 February 1946 and Chattopadhyay, "The Almost Revolution", p. 427.

<sup>21</sup> *HT*, 24 February 1946.

<sup>22</sup> Banerjee, *RIN Strike*, p. 128.

<sup>23</sup> Colville to Wavell, 27 February 1946, *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 1079.



by a widespread hartal and students' strike and both British and American army vehicles were attacked.<sup>24</sup> Hotels, restaurants and shops were closed in Madras on 25 February. There were strikes by students and workers, stopping of public transport and stoning of official vehicles.<sup>25</sup>

The third phase of these three upsurges saw actions of solidarity by people in other parts of the country—strikes by students, hartals, demonstrations and meetings to express sympathy with the students and ratings and to condemn official repression. In November 1945, students were in the forefront, organizing demonstrations to protest against repression of their Calcutta brethren and boycotting classes and even convocations in Agra and Patna.<sup>26</sup> There were protest rallies and hartals by the public in big cities and in some small towns and various political parties condemned the firing.<sup>27</sup> Wavell's effigy was burnt in Allahabad.<sup>28</sup> In February 1946, people in other parts of the country had protested against the sentence passed on Rashid Ali, even before the Calcutta students' demonstration of 11 February, by holding meetings and observing hartals.<sup>29</sup> This pattern was renewed when the news of the police action in Calcutta reached various places and processions, meetings and hartals were common.<sup>30</sup> A large public meeting was held at Jallianwala Bagh, the scene of an earlier infamous episode of repression.<sup>31</sup> Students' strikes were fairly widespread and

<sup>24</sup> *HT*, 23 February 1946; Sind FR for the second half of February 1946, Home Poll 18/2/46; and Banerjee, *RIN Strike*, p. 131.

<sup>25</sup> Madras FR for the second half of February 1946, Home Poll 18/2/46; Madras FR for the first half of March 1946, Home Poll 18/3/46; *HT*, 26 and 27 February 1946.

<sup>26</sup> *HT*, 24, 25, 26 and 30 November 1945; Assam, Orissa, Sind and UP FRs for the second half of November 1945, Home Poll 18/11/45; and Note by WPN Jenkins, Deputy Director(C), Intelligence Bureau, Home Department, 23 November 1945, Home Poll 21/6/45.

<sup>27</sup> *HT*, 24 and 27 November 1945; Assam and Delhi FRs for the second half of November 1945, Home Poll 18/11/45.

<sup>28</sup> *HT*, 24 November 1945 and Mitra, *Indian Annual Register*, An Annual Digest of Public Affairs in India, Calcutta, July–December 1945, p. 30.

<sup>29</sup> *HT*, 12 and 17 February 1946; Bombay, UP, Assam, NWFP, Baluchistan, Delhi and Madras FRs for the first half of February 1946, Home Poll 18/2/46.

<sup>30</sup> *HT*, 20 February 1946; Orissa FR for the first half and Bengal, Assam, Orissa, Delhi and Ajmer FRs for the second half of February 1946, Home Poll 18/2/46; and Chattopadhyay, "The Almost Revolution", p. 427.

<sup>31</sup> *HT*, 19 February 1946.

Muslim students participated in these in considerable numbers, especially in Punjab.<sup>32</sup> On the issue of the RIN revolt, strikes and hartals were reported in some Madras districts. The general discontent over food rationing fuelled discontent and there were attacks on grain shops, which were met by police firing, in which four persons were killed.<sup>33</sup> Trichinopoly and Madurai witnessed a one-day general strike and hartal<sup>34</sup> and Ahmedabad and Kanpur reported workers' strikes.<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, Calcutta, the city of "the almost revolution" only a week earlier, was relatively quiet during the RIN revolt, despite a seven-day ratings' strike there—it observed only a one-day general strike involving one lakh workers.<sup>36</sup>

What was the significance of these events? There is no doubt that these upsurges were significant in as much as they gave expression to militancy in the popular mind. Action, however reckless, was fearless and the crowds, which faced police firing by temporarily retreating, only to return to their posts, won the Bengal Governor's grudging admiration. The RIN revolt remains a legend to this day. When it took place, it had a dramatic impact on popular consciousness. A revolt in the armed forces, even if soon suppressed, had a great liberating effect on the minds of people. The RIN revolt was seen as an event which marked the end of British rule almost as finally as Independence Day, 1947.

While this is true, it is also true that the three agitations were localized and confined to the big cities of Calcutta, Bombay, Karachi and Madras, as far as their actual occurrence goes. The confrontation with the police, the defiance of authority, the paralysis of administration, which were the main features, thus remained restricted to these cities. Even the sympathetic strikes and hartals were less widespread than was the general INA agitation. Besides, as they precipitated a violent conflict with the authorities, they could involve

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 17 and 18 February 1946; Madras, Punjab and Orissa FRs for the second half of February 1946, Home Poll 18/2/46.

<sup>33</sup> Madras FR for the second half of February 1946, *ibid.*; *HT*, 26 and 27 February 1946.

<sup>34</sup> Banerjee, *RIN Strike*, pp. 131, 133 and 134.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *HT*, 24 February 1946 and Bengal FR for the second half of February 1946, Home Poll 18/2/46.

only the students and the more militant sections of society. The loyalists and the liberals obviously had no place in such a scenario. Though the firing was condemned by all, the ability of the crowds to hold a city to ransom also may have been disturbing to many, especially the propertied classes.

Further, these upsurges were short-lived for obvious reasons. One reason was the violent and extreme form they took. Popular fury, having vented itself, usually subsides after a while. There was no programme of action for sustaining the agitation and keeping the issues alive among broad sections of society. These upsurges took place in the cities. This urban concentration made it easy for the authorities to deploy troops and effectively suppress the upsurge.<sup>37</sup>

An important fact, which was demonstrated by these outbursts, was that the government retained its repressive machine intact, and was determined to use it harshly and effectively in case of violence. Police controlled the situation in Calcutta in November 1945. In February 1946, troops were called in on the second day, patrolling was extensive and one army officer and 38 civilians were killed.<sup>38</sup> In the RIN revolt in Bombay, troops were called in on the 19th, when firing by police could not restrain the ratings. A Maratha battalion rounded up ratings from the streets, while troops besieged the ships and forced surrender.<sup>39</sup> That the government was bent upon repression was clear from British Prime Minister, Attlee's announcement in the House of Commons that Royal Navy ships were proceeding to Bombay.<sup>40</sup> It was confirmed by Admiral Godfrey's stern ultimatum to the ratings, the troops' encirclement of ships and the bombers flying over them. Peace was restored by the 25th, following heavy casualties among the civilians—228 dead and 1,046 injured.<sup>41</sup> In Karachi, eight ratings were killed

<sup>37</sup> In the 1942 movement, Satara, a district with difficult terrain and thereby affording cover to the underground workers, stood out against the authorities for two to three years.

<sup>38</sup> Bengal FR for the first half of February 1946, Home Poll 18/2/46; *HT* put it as 53 dead and 500 injured, *HT*, 17 February 1946.

<sup>39</sup> Colville to Wavell, 27 February 1946, *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 1079.

<sup>40</sup> *HT*, 22 February 1946.

<sup>41</sup> Colville to Wavell, 27 February 1946, *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 1079. The Bombay FR for the second half of February 1946 listed 236 dead and 1,156 injured, including 25 officers and 75 policemen, Home Poll 18/2/46.

when troops forced ships to surrender.<sup>42</sup> Police firing in the city left eight dead and 18 injured—all civilians.<sup>43</sup> In Madras district, four died and many were injured.<sup>44</sup>

Reality and how people perceive that reality often prove to be different, and this was true of these dramatic moments in 1945–46. Contemporary perceptions and later radical scholarship has infused these historical events with more than a symbolic significance.<sup>45</sup> These events are imbued with an unrealized potential and a realized impact that is quite out of touch with reality. A larger-than-life picture is drawn of their militancy, reach and effectiveness. India is seen to be on the brink of a revolution. The argument goes that the communal unity witnessed during these events could, if built upon, have offered a way out of the communal deadlock.

The communal unity witnessed was more at the level of organizations, rather than unity of the people. Moreover, the organizations came together only for a specific agitation that lasted a few days, as was the case in Calcutta on the issue of Rashid Ali's trial. Calcutta, the scene of "the almost revolution" in February 1946,<sup>46</sup> became the battleground of communal frenzy only six months later, on 16 August 1946. The communal unity evident in the RIN revolt was limited, despite the Congress, League and Red flags being jointly hoisted on the ships' masts. Muslim ratings went to the League to seek advice on future action, while the rest went to the Congress and Socialists; Jinnah's advice to surrender was addressed to Muslim ratings alone, who duly heeded it. The view that communal unity forged in the struggles of 1945–46 could, if taken further, have averted partition, seems to be based on wishful thinking rather than concrete historical possibility. The "unity at the barricades" did not show this promise.

<sup>42</sup> HT, 22 and 23 February 1946; Banerjee, *RIN Strike*, p. 90.

<sup>43</sup> Mudie, Governor of Sind, to Wavell, 27 February 1946, TP, Vol. 6, p. 1071.

<sup>44</sup> Madras FR for the second half of February and the first half of March 1946, Home Poll 18/2/46 and 18/3/46.

<sup>45</sup> Dutt, *India Today*, pp. 536–42; Sarkar, *Modern India*; and Chattopadhyay, "The Almost Revolution".

<sup>46</sup> This was the assessment of Gautam Chattopadhyay, a Student activist in Calcutta. See Chattopadhyay, "The Almost Revolution".

Popular perceptions differ from reality when it comes to the response these upsurges, especially the RIN revolt, evoked from the colonial authorities. It is believed that “the RIN revolt shook the mighty British Empire to its foundations”.<sup>47</sup> In fact, these upsurges demonstrated that, despite considerable erosion of the morale of the bureaucracy and the steadfastness of the armed forces by this time, the British wherewithal to repress was intact. The soldier-Viceroy, Wavell, gave a clean chit to the army a few days after the naval strikes: “On the whole, the Indian army has been most commendably steady”.<sup>48</sup> Those who believed that the British would succumb to popular pressure, if only it was exerted forcefully, were proved wrong. It was one thing for the British government to question its own stand on holding INA trials when faced with opposition from the army and the people; it was quite another matter when they faced challenges to their authority. Challenges to law and order and peace, the British were clear, had to be repressed.

The corollary to the above argument is the attribution of the sending of the Cabinet Mission to the impact of the RIN revolt. R. P. Dutt had yoked the two together many years ago: “On February 18, the Bombay Naval strike began. On February 19, Attlee, in the House of Commons, announced the decision to dispatch the Cabinet Mission”.<sup>49</sup> This is obviously untenable. The decision to send out the Mission was taken by the British Cabinet on 22 January 1946 and even its announcement on 19 February 1946 had been slated a week earlier.<sup>50</sup> Others have explained the willingness of the British to make

<sup>47</sup> Banerjee, *RIN Strike*, p. vii.

<sup>48</sup> Viceroy to Secretary of State, 27 February 1946, *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 1076. General Mayne reported to Whitehall that “as regards the Army the morale of Indian troops during the RIN mutiny in Bombay and the subsequent civil disturbances in that city was high. Men carried out their duties efficiently and impartially”, Mayne to Monteth, Under Secretary of State, 13 March 1946. The overall assessment in the War Department’s report to the Secretary of State stated under the head, Reliability of Services: “Army: No reports of any refusal or reluctance to do duty”—the only exception was a platoon of the RIASC which refused duty, tried to join the ratings and was disarmed. See War Staff Department, L/WS/1/1040, File WS 17057, accession no. 4356.

<sup>49</sup> Dutt, *India Today*, p. 542.

<sup>50</sup> Cabinet Conclusions, 22 January 1946, *TP*, Vol. 6, pp. 830–34. Partha Sarathi Gupta had pointed this out many years ago in *Imperialism and the British Labour Movement*, p. 292.

substantial political concessions at this point of time to the combined impact of the popular, militant struggles.<sup>51</sup> However, as we shall see in a subsequent chapter, the British decision to transfer power was not merely and mainly a response to the immediate situation prevailing in the winter of 1945–46, but a result of the realization that their legitimacy to rule had been irrevocably eroded over the years.

The notion that these violent upsurges posed a threat to the Congress, either in terms of its position at the head of the nationalist forces being challenged by other more radical parties, or in terms of its strategy of struggle being replaced by an alternative, more "revolutionary" strategy, are even less sustainable. These agitations are believed to have been led by the Communists, the Socialists or Forward Blocists, or all of them together. The Congress role is seen as one of defusing the revolutionary situation,<sup>52</sup> prompted by the fear that they would lose their position of leadership or by the concern that disciplined armed forces were vital in the free India that the party would rule soon. The Congress is seen to be immersed in negotiations and ministry-making and hankering for power.

In our view the three upsurges were an extension of the earlier nationalist activity with which the Congress was integrally associated. The Congress was not only in the forefront of the widespread activity, its leaders and the rank and file, in fact, inspired even the three major outbreaks under discussion. An inquiry by the Home Department into the causes of the "disturbances" came to the conclusion that the outbreaks were the outcome of the "inflammatory atmosphere created by the intemperate speeches of the Congress leaders in the last three months".<sup>53</sup> The Viceroy had no doubt that the primary cause of the RIN "mutiny" was the "speeches of Congress leaders since September

<sup>51</sup> See Sarkar, *Modern India* and Balabushevich and Dyakov, *Contemporary History of India*, p. 417.

<sup>52</sup> Apart from the toning down of Congress speeches, Sumit Sarkar specifically mentions Gandhi's talks with Casey, the Governor of Bengal.

<sup>53</sup> Government of India, Home Poll 5/8/46. A.P. Hume, ICS, described the outbreaks, which were "the most serious outbreaks in India since 1857", as the "natural, obvious and predictable result of allowing what is clearly wrong, by any standards of morality, to continue unchecked and be praised as though it were right. Mutiny involving the use of guns and arms must now not be called 'mutiny' but a strike",

last".<sup>54</sup> In fact, the Punjab CID authorities warned the Director of the Intelligence Bureau of the "considerable danger", while dealing with the Communists, "of putting the cart before the horse and of failing to recognise Congress as the main enemy".<sup>55</sup> Further, the Communist Party of India did not at any stage even seek to challenge the position of the Congress in the nationalist firmament. Rather, it looked up to the Congress as the leader, along with the League, of the anti-imperialist forces and raised the slogan of Congress–League–Communist unity.<sup>56</sup>

These three major upsurges were distinguishable from the activity preceding them because the form of articulation of protest was different. They took the form of a violent, flagrant challenge to authority. The earlier activity was a peaceful demonstration of nationalist solidarity. One was an explosion, the other a groundswell. The Congress did not give the call for these upsurges; in fact no political organization did. People rallied in sympathy with the students and the ratings as well as voiced their anger at the repression that was let loose. Individual Congressmen participated actively, as did individual Communists and others. Student sympathizers of the Congress, the Congress Socialist Party (CSP), the Forward Bloc and the Communist Party of India jointly organized the 21 November 1945 demonstration in Calcutta. The Congress lauded the spirit of the people and condemned the repression by the government. It did not officially support these struggles as it felt their tactics and timing were wrong. The Congress leaders quickly realized the British determination to repress. They had seen the forced surrender at Karachi and knew that many ratings on the streets had been rounded up, and that too, by Indian troops and so they advised the ratings' leaders to end their strike.<sup>57</sup> Congress leaders were not the only ones who felt the need to restore

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Hume, to his parents, 26 February 1946, Hume Collection, Mss Eur D 724/13, NAI accession no. 2041, New Delhi.

<sup>54</sup> Viceroy to Prime Minister, 24 February 1946, *TP*, Vol. 6., p. 1055.

<sup>55</sup> Home Poll 7/1/46.

<sup>56</sup> *People's War*, 14 October and 18 November 1945.

<sup>57</sup> The Bombay Governor's Secretary wrote to the Secretary of State that the Governor was maintaining close contact with the service chiefs and "has interviewed Congress and League leaders who deplore the disturbances, disown responsibility and say they

peace. Communists joined hands with the Congress in advising the people of Calcutta in November 1945 and February 1946 to return to their homes. Communist and Congress peace vans did the rounds of Karachi during the RIN revolt.<sup>58</sup>

Again, these outbursts were not integrated into any alternate strategy of insurrectionary struggle or seizure of power evolved by a leadership or party other than the Congress, seeking to lead the anti-imperialist struggle along a different path. It would be revealing to look at the stance adopted by the "revolutionary party" (as opposed to the "compromising" Congress) in this period. The CPI was contesting elections, for the first time as a legal party, and sought to translate the steady accretion to their strength into electoral victories. The party actively contested 108 seats, expected to win 25, but finally won only eight, seven of which were in the labour constituencies.<sup>59</sup> It was only the August 1946 resolution of the Communist Party, which officially sanctioned, though still ambiguously, its local leaders to actively develop "revolutionary" situations towards a final struggle.<sup>60</sup> Though local communists participated in these upsurges, as did

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are doing their best to induce return to normalcy", 22 February 1946, 227/C, War Staff Department records, L/WS/1/1040, File WS 17057, NAI accession no. 4356. Patel wrote to Nehru on 22 February 1946: "The overpowering forces of both naval and military personnel gathered here is so strong that they [the rebels] can be exterminated altogether and they have been also threatened with such a contingency." *J.N. Correspondence*, NMML, New Delhi, Part I, Vol. 81.

<sup>58</sup> Banerjee, *RIN Strike*, p. 131; Home Poll 21/16/45 and *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 724.

<sup>59</sup> As A.R. Desai puts it, the "Communist party during the war and the post-war period had no clear policy of an alternative strategy for securing independence", *Peasant Struggles*, p. 426. See "The New Situation and our Tasks", Central Committee of CPI resolution, December 1945, Archives of Contemporary History, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

<sup>60</sup> Gene D. Overstreet and Marshall Windmiller, *Communism in India*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1959, p. 242. "The CPI national office did not support these revolts for its leadership was divided and its official policy was now of cooperation with the Congress in the transition to independence. Rural Communist leaders were, however, active in the revolts." Kathleen Gough, "Peasant Resistance and Revolt in South India", in Desai, *Peasant Struggles*. "For the Final Assault"—Tasks of the Indian People in the Present Phase of the Indian Revolution", Central Committee of CPI, August 1946, Archives of Contemporary History, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.



individual Congressmen and Congress Socialist Party leaders, such as Aruna Asaf Ali, the CPI officially denied any share in the RIN revolt before the enquiry commission.<sup>61</sup> This was much the same as the Congress denial of any share in the February outbursts over the Rashid Ali Day, which has been presented as proof of Congress moderation.<sup>62</sup> Interestingly, the attempts by the Congress to keep peace and their denial of official involvement in the outbursts are seen as classic proofs of their “moderation” or of “bourgeois” fear, while the Communists doing the same is perhaps sought to be justified on grounds of strategy or tactics.

### Workers', Peasants' and Tribals' Movements

Our spotlight now shifts to another distinct group of movements, notably the strike wave, the Warlis revolt, the Tebhaga movement, the Telengana struggle, the Punnapra-Vayalar upsurge and the Punjab kisan *morchas*.<sup>63</sup> These movements form the basis of the left argument that the potential for anti-imperialist “unity in struggle” existed even in 1946–47, but the Congress preferred the path of a negotiated transfer of power, even though the country had to pay the price of partition. We shall take a look at the broad features and contours of these movements to see whether, in fact, they held out this revolutionary promise.

Though their time span varied, the climactic point in at least three of these struggles was reached in late 1946, after the process of transfer of power was under way. They were not a continuation of the militant, anti-imperialist wave of 1945–46. They were not overtly anti-

<sup>61</sup> *Towards a People's Navy*, Bombay, n.d., p. 18, cited in *ibid*.

<sup>62</sup> The Congress denial of any share in the Rashid Ali Day outbursts is one of the six instances that Sumit Sarkar cites as evidence of Congress moderation, “Popular Movements”, pp. 679 and 682.

<sup>63</sup> For an overview of these movements see Sarkar, “Popular Movements”, Farooqui, *India's Freedom Struggle*, Sen, *Revolution in India*; Dutt, *India Today*; Balabushevich and Dyakov, *Contemporary Theory of India*, Roy, “Socio-Political Background of Mount-batten Award”; Adhikari, *Communist Party*; Desai, *Peasant Struggles*.

imperialist, in that they did not seek to challenge the legitimacy or the might of the Raj. Unlike February 1946, when the workers took to the streets on political issues, the strikes and peasant movements of 1946 were primarily over economic issues, such as wages, working conditions and economic grievances. The fight was often against local capitalists, landlords and Princes, not the Raj itself. It is true that in a situation of rapid political developments and a national mood of excitement at impending freedom, no action could remain purely economic. Sometimes, the very anticipation of freedom could give workers and peasants the confidence to demand better conditions.<sup>64</sup> Yet a distinction between conscious, direct, political action and economic struggle with a political dimension continues to be relevant.

Another unifying thread was Communist initiative.<sup>65</sup> Some of the issues of the 1946 struggles were of long standing, but had not been taken up by the Communists earlier because of the *People's War* line, during which struggle was at a discount. For example, the injustice of the *adhiar* (or share cropper) getting only a half-share of the produce had been recognized by the Kisan Sabha in 1940 and the Flood Commission had recommended two-thirds share the same year. The Kisan Sabha took up the issue after the war. Similarly, despite severe economic privations suffered by industrial workers, because of inflation and food scarcity during the war, Communist labour leaders exhorted the workers to increase production and refrain from strikes, even during the initial, stormy weeks of the 1942 movement. Other reasons for fewer strikes were greater war-time employment, Defence of India Rules and sympathetic handling by the government—a legacy of the Congress ministries. Support for the war effort brought the Communist Party its first spell of legality. While the party did lose many a cadre because of its unpopular *People's War* line, the ability to organize and recruit openly, raise funds and build kisan and trade union bases, strengthened the organization of the party. Drives against

<sup>64</sup> Ranajit Dasgupta stresses this constantly in his study of Jalpaiguri during 1945–47, both for the Tebhaga movement and the Duars labour struggle. Ranajit Dasgupta, "Peasants, Workers and Freedom Struggle, Jalpaiguri, 1945–47" in Gupta, ed., *Myth and Reality*.

<sup>65</sup> See Home Poll 7/1/43 and 7/1/45 for extensive accounts of communist activities in the "legal" phase.

hoarding and black-marketing, famine relief work in Bengal and attention to people's needs, all done in the best spirit and tradition of Gandhian constructive work, widened the influence of the party and rooted it in the people.

Godavari Parulekar and Kisan Sabha activists acquainted themselves with the problems of the tribals of Maharashtra from 1944 onwards; Punjab kisan leaders nurtured their peasant bases; peasant cadres in Bengal took up famine relief work; Telengana communists came to dominate the Andhra Mahasabha, proving, like their Travancore comrades, that they were the most uncompromising fighters against feudal oppression. The All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) expanded its influence to achieve a strength of 700,000 members by 1945. Thus, by 1946, simmering discontent was fast reaching boiling point, aided by a lid kept firmly pressed down. The strengthened Communist Party provided the conduit. Local cadres were emboldened by the Central Committee resolution of August 1946, which spoke of partial struggles of workers and peasants coalescing into a revolutionary alternative. They were somewhat confused as the resolution retained the old line of Congress–League–Communist unity. How would these struggles coalesce? What precisely did a revolutionary alternative mean? No strategy of seizure of power was formulated, except for some general statements about popular struggles showing the way out of compromise and partition.

It is impossible to paint the detailed picture of all or some of the struggles here. The basic issues taken up in these struggles, though specific and varied, were illegal or patently exploitative and unjust exactions and practices and low wages. Those interested in the fuller picture may see Godavari Parulekar's moving account of her life when it interwove with that of the Warlis,<sup>66</sup> Sunil Sen's honest and in-depth study of the Tebhaga movement,<sup>67</sup> supplemented by Ranajit Dasgupta's work on Jalpaiguri,<sup>68</sup> K.C. George's saga of Punnapra-

<sup>66</sup> See Godavari Parulekar, *Adivasis Revolt-The Story of Warli Peasants in Struggle*, Calcutta, 1975.

<sup>67</sup> Sen, *Agrarian Struggle in Bengal*. For the failure of the Tebhaga movement see Hamza Alavi, "Peasants and Revolution", in Desai, *Peasant Struggles*.

<sup>68</sup> Dasgupta, "Peasants, Workers and Freedom Struggle".

<sup>69</sup> George, *Immortal Punnapra Vayalar*.

Vayalar<sup>69</sup> and P. Sundarayya and Raj Bahadur Gaur's accounts of the Telengana struggle.<sup>70</sup> The strike wave of 1946–47 has not found a participant-historian, as the other movements have—however, details about participation, intensity, etc., can be got from Sukomal Sen's general study of the Indian working class<sup>71</sup> or from V.B. Karnik's account of strikes in India.<sup>72</sup>

The Warlis, caught in the landlord–moneylender–official nexus, first opposed the practice of forced labour (*vethi* or *vethbigar*) and the institution of debt slavery (or marriage slaves), by which a married couple ended up working gratis for their whole lives to repay a debt of Rs 100 or 200 incurred for marriage expenses.<sup>73</sup> The Warli woman was often sexually exploited by the landlord and contractor—the separate name given to an adivasi–landlord offspring, *watlas*, indicated how pervasive this exploitation must have been. Implicit faith in their leaders and in the magic of the Red Flag and incredulous amazement at their invincible strength, when united, created a form of struggle that was disarmingly simple, yet singularly effective. Ten thousand Warlis marched together and freed marriage slaves by asking them to leave their masters' houses or asking the landlord to send them out. Sometimes, the landlords meekly asked their slaves to leave. Similarly, *vethi* and extortion of non-existent rent arrears was resisted by individual refusal, backed by the strength of Warli unity. The Kisan Sabha was more in evidence in the struggle to get fairer wages for grass cutting and felling of trees. The wages for grass cutting were a couple of annas in cash or toddy for 500 lbs. The Kisan Sabha demanded two and a half rupees. The wage was four annas per day for felling trees while the Kisan Sabha demand was one and a quarter rupees. These wage disputes, which also involved the government, led to conflict, repression and finally to success.

<sup>69</sup> Sundarayya, *Telengana People's Struggle*; and Gour et al., *Glorious Telengana Armed Struggle*.

<sup>71</sup> Sukomal Sen, *Working Class of India: History of Emergence and Movement, 1930–1970*, Calcutta, 1977.

<sup>72</sup> V.B. Karnik, *Strikes in India*, Bombay, 1967. Also see Files L-D/1946-47 and 26/1946, *AICC Papers*.

<sup>73</sup> See Parulekar, *Adivasis Revolt*, and Interview with Godavari Parulekar, Bombay, 1985. Also see S.V. Parulekar, "Warlis" in Desai, *Peasant Struggles*.

The *adhiars* or *bargadars* in Bengal demanded two-thirds of the produce where they supplied the plough, cattle, manure and seeds, as against the half-share they got, which was clearly unjust. Initially, they stacked the paddy in their own houses after the harvest and asked the *jotedar* (medium-sized landowner) to collect his one-third share. The Bargadars Bill introduced by the Suhrawardy ministry in January 1947 gave impetus to the *tebhaga* movement, as the demand was no longer illegal. *Bargadars* began to remove paddy from the *jotedars' khamars* (storeroom) and often came into conflict with the police as *jotedars* levied charges of dacoity.

All criteria—number of stoppages, number of workers involved and the amount of man-days lost—indisputably establish the remarkable intensity of the strike wave in 1946.<sup>74</sup> Workers were badly bit by inflation and retrenchment. Five to seven million Indians were re-trenched from industry, administration and the army. The main issue was wages, followed by hours of work, bonus and food rations. This demand for wages arose because of the sharp decline in the living standards of workers. Though earnings went up to an index figure of 208 in 1946, real earnings fell to 73.2 as the price index had shot up to 285 (taking 1939 as 100). Industry apart, strikes took place in the Post and Telegraphs Department, in the South Indian Railway and North Western Railway (a complete strike in the railways was

<sup>74</sup> A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1939				100.00	100	100.0
1940				105.03	97	108.6
1941	359	291,054	3,330,503	111.00	107	103.7
1942	694	772,653	5,779,965	129.10	145	89.0
1943	716	525,088	2,342,287	179.60	268	67.0
1944	658	550,015	3,447,306	202.10	269	75.1
1945	820	747,530	4,054,499	210.50	269	74.9
1946	1,629	1,961	12,717,762	208.00	285	73.2

A- Year

B- Number of Stoppages

C- No. of Workers Involved

D- Amount of Mandays Lost

E- Index of Earnings

F- All India Consumer Price Index

G- Index of Real Earnings

Source: Karnik, *Strikes in India*, p. 308.

prevented by negotiations), in police units in Delhi and Bihar and in ordinance depots. The issue was working conditions, including better wages. The Post and Telegraph strike began on 11 July 1946 over wages and working conditions and was settled on 3 August, after Patel intervened.

Punjab kisans waged no-rent struggles in Patiala, Una, Kangra, Pathankot and Ferozepur.<sup>75</sup> There were tenant struggles for non-payment of illegal levies in Nili-Bar. Peasant proprietors protested against the remodelling of *moghas* (canal outlets) as they reduced water supply, while water rates remained the same. The Harsa Chhina Mogha Morcha was formed, led by the Communists and also comprising Congressmen and Akalis.

In Travancore, the fish workers, coir factory workers, toddy tappers and agricultural workers, unionized by the Communist Party, rallied behind its call to "sink the American model constitution in the Arabian Sea".<sup>76</sup> The reference was to the constitution being promulgated under the initiative of the Dewan, Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyer. One of the provisions, the irremovable executive to be nominated by the Maharaja, negated the concession of a Legislative Assembly elected by adult franchise. Economic aspects were interwoven, as there was *jenmi* (landlord) domination and oppression in the area. Besides, the Communists had led a successful strike for higher wages in August 1946 and had the workers solidly behind them.<sup>77</sup>

The areas these movements engulfed and the large number of strikes that took place indicate their extent and reach. The Warlis comprised 50 per cent of the adivasis of Umbergaon, Dahanu, Palghar and Jawahar taluks of Thana district. Tebhaga was centred in the North Bengal districts, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Jalpaiguri, with pockets of Mymensingh, Midnapur, 24 Parganas, Jessore and Khulna. Affected Hajong tribals of North Mymensingh and tea garden and railway labour in the *duars* joined in. There were many strikes in 1945 and

<sup>75</sup> See Master Hari Singh, *Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle*, New Delhi, 1984.

<sup>76</sup> Robin Jeffrey, "India's Working Class Revolt: Punnapra Vayalar and the Communist 'Conspiracy' of 1946", *IESHR*, Vol. 18.2, 1980, pp. 97-122.

<sup>77</sup> George, *Immortal Punnapra Vayalar*. Also see Government of Travancore, Confidential Department, 774/46/CS, Bundle 4/ and 731/46, Bundle 40, Cellar Library, Secretariat, Trivandrum.

1947, but 1946 marked the high point of the strike wave. As compared to 820 strikes, 747,530 men and 5,054,459 man-days in 1945, 1,629 strikes, involving 1,961,948 men and a loss of 12,717,762 man-days were reported. The Travancore revolt, better known by the names of the two principal centres, Punnapra and Vayalar, also included Kattoor, Olathala, Mararikulam and Menassery in its spread, all being part of Shertallay and Ambalapuzha talukas of Travancore.

The fearlessness displayed by the Warlis, the Bengal kisans and the Travancore workers in confrontations with the police, army or landlords' *lathials* (armed retainers) as the case may be, was a reflection, not only of their own anger and enthusiasm, but of their total faith in the party, Kisan Sabha or union and in their leaders. The Warlis came to love Godavari Parulekar over the long days and nights she spent with them, listening to their woes, urging them to resist oppression, eating their sparse food and sleeping in their huts. Knowing the Warlis love for the *bai* (as Godavari came to be called), the landlords spread the canard that the *bai* was in danger and wanted the Red Flag people to save her. Warlis in their thousands, only stopping to pick up an axe or a bow and arrow, rushed to the town. Landlords had duly informed the police that armed Warlis were marching in large numbers and the police soon appeared, asked the Warlis to disperse, fired upon them when they refused to do so and killed five Warlis. This did not deter the Warlis and they sat at the place where Kisan Sabha meetings were held until someone went to Kalyan and returned with the news that the *bai* was safe in her house, but too ill to travel. Then the Warlis quietly went home, but with the news went deep resentment at the deception practised by the landlords. It was a tough test of their faith but they passed it, bravely and tragically.

In Punnapra, 1,000 workers armed with areca nut *lathis* marched on to a police camp with 20 armed policemen to seize rifles. Caught by surprise, the Inspector, Velayadhan Nair, was collectively speared to death and eight policemen were killed. But some policemen were able to rush in and arm themselves and after that countless workers died and the rest had to retreat, with some rifles in tow. Martial law was imposed the next day, 25 October, but the camps where people had lived together to prevent repression by the *goondas* were not disbanded. On 27 October, 400 army men surrounded the Vayalar

camp and the 200 volunteers there marched out with *lathis* to face bullets of which 150 died.<sup>78</sup>

Travancore Communists, backed by the August Resolution, threw the agricultural workers of Shertally and Alleppey into direct struggle with the Travancore ruling order, which the workers waged fearlessly and in which many fell martyrs, but which was simply smashed by the Dewan. Impatient with the state Congress, which wanted to give the new constitution a trial, confident that the workers would follow them because they had recently secured better wages for them through a strike, the Travancore Communists rushed into a political confrontation which soon developed into an armed struggle—or rather an unarmed struggle—for *areca nut lathis* are not arms. The march on Punnapra police camp left many dead and yielded nine rifles, that were dumped in a river, as those who had them did not know what to do with them. The decision not to disband the camps after imposition of martial law, on the ground that people could face repression better united than alone, ignored the fact that unarmed men herded in one place were an invitation to large-scale butchery, as Vayalar showed.

Did these movements light a path, which could have brought freedom "from below" instead of the freedom "from above" that we got? It does not seem so. The movements were often primarily economic in motivation, or against feudal and class oppression, i.e., they were not directly anti-imperialist. In fact they may be seen as the first wave of post-independence class struggles, rather than the final assault on colonialism. With the conflict with imperialism resolved in principle, groups and classes moved on to resolve the class and social questions, which had often taken a backseat during the days of the anti-imperialist struggle.

## Popular Movements and Nationalist Strategy

The contention of some left historians that "fear of popular excesses made Congress leaders cling to the path of negotiation and compro-

<sup>78</sup> See George, *Immortal Punnapra Vayalar*, especially pp. 89–90.



mise and eventually even accept Partition as a necessary price”, has little validity.<sup>79</sup> Negotiations were an integral part of Congress strategy; a possibility that had to be exhausted before a mass movement was launched. As late as 22 September 1945, this had been reiterated in a resolution on Congress policy passed by the AICC,<sup>80</sup> referred to in Chapter 3.

As regards the question of Congress “moderation”, the views of its chief adversary, the British, are revealing. The British clearly saw that the basic Congress intentions remained the same and that no real change of policy was involved in the Congress inclination towards more moderate speech. The present policy of the Congress was to “avoid conflict at any rate until after the elections, while taking full advantage of the license they are being allowed during the elections, to increase their influence and prestige, to stir up racial hatred against the British”.<sup>81</sup> There was “no real change of heart” on the part of the Congress, only the tactics had been changed till the elections.

One specific instance of “moderation” cited by Sumit Sarkar was Gandhi’s “friendly talks” with Casey, the Governor of Bengal. Far from being interpreted as a gesture, or even an indication of “moderation”, the talks were seen by Casey himself as Gandhi’s way of finding out how far the Congress could go with safety.<sup>82</sup> Running “true to form, he [Gandhi] has not changed his distrust and dislike of the British as a whole, and he never will”.<sup>83</sup> The “détente” was seen to be merely temporary, no shift was believed to have occurred and the danger of a mass movement after the elections or the predicament in the shape of the Congress provincial ministries remained as real as before. The Viceroy saw clearly that the “temporary détente” had come about because the November disturbances “made Congress

<sup>79</sup> Sarkar, *Modern India*, p. 414. Also see Chattopadhyay, “The Almost Revolution”, p. 428, and Desai, “Introduction”, p. xx.

<sup>80</sup> Indian National Congress, *March 1940 to September 1946: Resolutions passed by the Congress, the AICC and the Working Committee*.

<sup>81</sup> Viceroy to Secretary of State, 27 December 1945 and Viceroy to King George VI, 31 December 1945, *TP*, Vol. 6, pp. 688 and 713.

<sup>82</sup> Sarkar, *Modern India*, p. 682; Bengal Governor to Viceroy, 4 December 1945, *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 598.

<sup>83</sup> Viceroy to Secretary of State, 5 December 1945, *ibid.*, p. 604.

leaders realise that the violent language that was being used for electioneering purposes might cause premature demonstrations and riots and harm the Congress cause".<sup>84</sup> According to the Viceroy, the danger of a mass movement was "more obvious than ever" and the government must be on guard.<sup>85</sup> Nehru also warned that if the Cabinet Mission failed, a "political earthquake of devastating intensity would sweep the entire country".<sup>86</sup>

In 1946, this strategy of exploring the option of negotiation, before launching a movement, was seen to be crucial. The British were likely to leave India within two to five years, according to Nehru. The Secretary of State's New Year statement on 1 January 1946 and the British Prime Minister's announcement of the Cabinet Mission on 19 February 1946 spoke of Indian independence coming soon. However, pressure had to be kept up on the British to reach a settlement and to this end, preparedness for a movement (built steadily through 1945 by refurbishing the organization, electioneering and spearheading of the INA agitation) was sought to be maintained. But the card of negotiation was to be played first, that of the mass movement to be held in reserve.

It was not the fear of the left or the popular outbreaks, which led the Congress to negotiate for the transfer of power. The negotiations prior to independence, to our mind, are to be seen differently. They reflected not only the pressure of immediate Congress activity, but decades of their spearheading the anti-imperialist struggle, which had seriously eroded the British capacity for continuing their rule. Having already undermined the basis of British rule, the Congress was willing to go in for negotiations for the actual handing over of the state machinery.

In a similar situation, no leadership with sound political sense would have done otherwise. History is replete with examples of similar negotiated settlements prior to independence—in Mozambique, in Guinea-Bissau, in Vietnam, to name just a few. Even the Chinese

<sup>84</sup> Viceroy to Secretary of State, 5 December 1945 and 27 February 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 603 and 1076.

<sup>85</sup> Viceroy to Secretary of State, 5 December 1945, *ibid.*, p. 602.

<sup>86</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 5 March 1946.

Communist Party under Mao carried on negotiations with Chiang Kai-Shek under U.S. mediation for a whole year from 1945 to 1946. It seems that the Rubicon of negotiations is a river that is often crossed in the final stages of an anti-imperialist movement's march to independence.

Gandhi, in three statements that he published in the *Harijan* on 3 March 1946, indicated the perils of the path that had been taken recently by the people:<sup>87</sup>

It is a matter of great relief that the ratings have listened to Sardar Patel's advice to surrender. They have not surrendered their honour. So far as I can see, in resorting to mutiny they were ill advised. If it was for grievance, fancied or real, they should have waited for the guidance and intervention of political leaders of their choice. If they mutinied for the freedom of India, they were doubly wrong. They could not do so without a call from a prepared revolutionary party. They were thoughtless and ignorant, if they believed that by their might they would deliver India from foreign domination.... Lokmanya Tilak has taught us that Home Rule or Swaraj is our birthright. That Swaraj is not to be obtained by what is going on now in Bombay, Calcutta and Karachi....

They who incited the mutineers did not know what they were doing. The latter were bound to submit ultimately... Aruna would "rather unite Hindus and Muslims at the barricade than on the constitutional front". Even in terms of violence, this is a misleading proposition. If the union at the barricade is honest, there must be union also at the constitutional front. Fighters do not always live at the barricade. They are too wise to commit suicide. The barricade life has always to be followed by the constitutional. That front is not taboo forever.

<sup>87</sup> *MGCW*, Vol. 83, pp. 171, 173, 183–84. According to Y. Keshav Menon, who was part of a delegation of striking ratings who went to see Gandhi, Gandhi said: "There are very few areas of discipline left in this country, Kesu, and I do not want anyone to go about destroying those areas." Transcript of tape recording, S 12, Cambridge South Asia Archive, Cambridge.

Gandhi went on to outline the path that should be followed by the nation:

Emphatically it betrays want of foresight to disbelieve British declarations and precipitate a quarrel in anticipation. Is the official deputation coming to deceive a great nation? It is neither manly nor womanly to think so. What would be lost by waiting? Let the official deputation prove for the last time that British declarations are unreliable. The nation will gain by trusting. The deceiver loses when there is correct response from the deceived....

The rulers have declared their intention to "quit" in favour of Indian rule.... But the nation too has to play the game. If it does, the barricade must be left aside, at least for the time being.

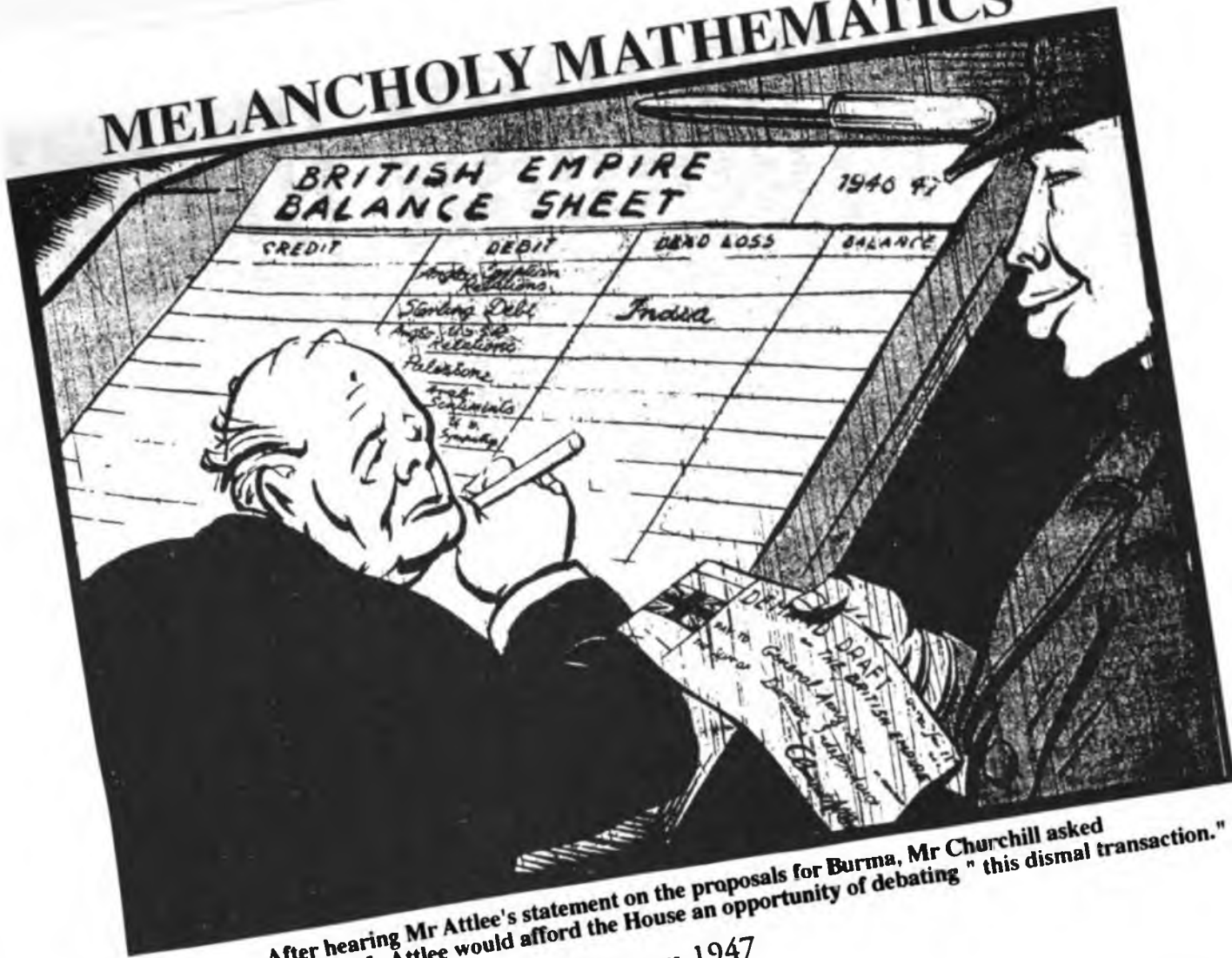
## Imperial Hegemony and Colonial Policy

The success of the nationalist forces in the struggle for hegemony over Indian society was fairly evident by the end of the war. The British rulers had won the war against Hitler but lost the one in India. The space occupied by the national movement was far larger than that over which the Raj cast its shadow. Hitherto unpoliticized areas and apolitical groups had fallen in line with the rest of the country in the agitation over the INA trials. Men in the armed forces and bureaucracy openly attended meetings, contributed money, voted for the Congress and let it be known that they were doing so. The militancy of the politicized sections was evident in the heroic actions of 1942 and in the fearlessness with which students and others expressed their solidarity with INA and RIN men. The success of the national movement could be plotted on this graph of the spread of nationalist sentiment.

A corresponding graph could also be drawn of the demoralization of the British officials and the changing loyalties of Indian officials and loyalists, which would tell the same story of nationalist success, but differently. In this tale, nationalism would not come across as a force whose overwhelming presence left no place for the British. Rather, it would show the concrete way in which the national movement eroded imperial hegemony, gnawed at the pillars of the colonial structure and reduced British political strategy to a mess of contradictions.

That the British wielded brute force to maintain their rule and to crush opposition is well known. Very often, the state did not actually

# MELANCHOLY MATHEMATICS



After hearing Mr Attlee's statement on the proposals for Burma, Mr Churchill asked if in the near future Mr Attlee would afford the House an opportunity of debating "this dismal transaction."

Source: *The Hindustan Times*, 30 January 1947

repress; the very fact that it had the capacity to do so was enough to contain revolt. Hence, the British considered the maintenance of a large, disciplined, efficient and loyal army to be a prime necessity, for the armed forces remained, in the ultimate analysis, the final guarantor of British interests. But generally, for the continued existence of their rule and for the perpetuation of imperialist domination, they relied on a variety of ideological instruments. It is in this sense that the "British colonial state in India was, in however limited a way, a hegemonic or semi-hegemonic state in the Gramscian sense". Its "semi-hegemonic foundations" were "buttressed by the ideology of pax Britannica, law and order, the British official as the mai-bap of the people, as well as by the institutions of the ideological, legal, judicial and administrative systems...the ideological state apparatuses...which acted as the active purveyors of these colonial ideologies".<sup>1</sup>

The impression of the unshakable foundations of British rule, the aura of stolidity and general prestige of the Raj contributed towards the maintenance of imperial hegemony. The prestige of the Raj was very largely embodied in its much vaunted 'steel frame', the Indian Civil Service (ICS), and, more specifically, in the district officer, who represented authority in the countryside: "At the centre of the 'benevolent despotism' that British rule in the subcontinent adopted stood the steel frame of the Indian Civil Service...and in particular the figure of the district officer himself, the physical 'embodiment of Government' across the Indian countryside...."<sup>2</sup> The prestige of the Raj, by showing the futility of attempts to overthrow it, had all along played as crucial a role in the maintenance of British rule as the armed might behind it.

A state structure of this kind, based on "semi-hegemonic foundations", called for certain specific policies in the political sphere. A reliable social base for the state had to be secured on the one hand;

<sup>1</sup> Mridula Mukherjee, "Communists and Peasants in Punjab: A Focus on the Muzara Movement in Patiala, 1937-53", in Bipan Chandra, ed., *The Indian Left: Critical Appraisals*, New Delhi, 1983, pp. 421 and 425. See Chandra, *Long Term Dynamics*, pp. 18-22 and 46-53.

<sup>2</sup> Simon Epstein, "District Officers in Decline", p. 493.

on the other, strategies had to be devised to limit the social reach and effective clout of the anti-imperialist forces. Active cooperation of "native allies" in running the country was gained by a variety of techniques, ranging from the handing out of jobs, favours and positions of some authority to concessions to the "legitimate" political demands of the loyalist and liberal sections.

As regards the snowballing anti-British discontent, it was sought to be neutralized by confining it within the constitutional arenas created by the political reforms. Constitutional concessions were regularly made, though under pressure, to the demands raised by the anti-imperialist forces. Divisive tactics, perfected in the communal sphere, were used to disrupt the broad unity of the national movement. A split was sought to be created between the left and the right wings, either by co-opting the moderate wing of the Congress through sustained constitutionalism, or by allowing extremism to go unrestrained, in the belief that the moderates would take fright and effect a break. This was the hope during the period of the provincial ministries<sup>3</sup> and behind the government's decision not to arrest Nehru in 1936–37, despite his clearly seditious speeches.<sup>4</sup>

This was in peacetime, but when the Congress declared all-out war on officialdom, as in 1920–22, 1930–32, and 1942, a different approach was called for. Nevertheless, even on such occasions, repression was never immediate and pervasive but selective and after due deliberation. On the whole, even mass movements were sought to be dealt with constitutionally. A naked show of force was always sought to be avoided, for not only would it sow deep seeds of bitterness, it would alienate the liberal sections in society, some even within the

<sup>3</sup> Linlithgow wrote to the Secretary of State: "It would, indeed, be convenient if the various sections in the Congress ranks were to part company and sort themselves out before action became necessary against the real revolutionaries." 5 March 1937, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss/ Eur F.125/4, NMML, New Delhi. Linlithgow wrote to Haig, the U.P. Governor, that "the only ultimate refuge lies in a split in the Congress, with the right joining moderate opinion outside in defence of the rights of property", 23 October 1938, *Haig Papers*, Roll 1, NMML, New Delhi.

<sup>4</sup> This has been discussed at length in Sucheta Mahajan, "British Policy towards Left Nationalism: Nehru's Challenge, 1934–37", unpublished paper, 1979, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.



administration and push them into the nationalist camp. Repression, when wielded, was no doubt very brutal and widespread, but on the whole, the British preferred to find solutions to political developments and even political crises, within the ambit of constitutionalism. Thus the keynote of British policy was constitutionalism in general and as far as possible, and repression only when necessary and preferably against extremists alone.<sup>5</sup>

At the end of the war, the British evaluated their position in the context of the post-1942 situation. It was clear to them that the hegemonic foundations of their rule were fast crumbling. Even erstwhile loyalists were deserting and the ICS was reaching a breaking point. The army, despite the rumblings of discontent and increase in pro-nationalist sympathies, was, however, considered quite safe at the time. The general consent of the people to British rule had diminished and the open, military repression of the 1942 movement had contributed greatly to this. Even liberal opinion in the country had shifted, slowly but steadily, away from the British and towards the nationalist forces. In 1942, Sapru, who had been on the Viceroy's Council during the non-cooperation movement in the early 1920s, bemoaned the depths to which British policy had sunk in the hands of officials like Amery and Linlithgow. He, Jayakar and others had pressed for the release of Gandhi when he fasted in 1943 and later supported the demands for the release of national leaders and the formation of a national government:

The present Viceroy...is totally devoid of imagination.... If this is my feeling about Linlithgow my feeling about Amery is that no Secretary of State since 1858 has done half the mischief which Amery has done.... I have come to the conclusion that there is no chance for Indo-British relations being straightened out, unless there is change in the personnel at Delhi or Whitehall.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> For the British response, see Chandra, *Long Term Dynamics*, pp. 46–53; and R. Hunt and J. Harrison, *The District Officer in India 1930–1947*, London, 1980.

<sup>6</sup> Sapru to Cook, 14 August 1942, T.B. Sapru, *Welding the Nation*, ed., K.N. Raina, Bombay, 1974, Appendix D.

The loyalists were in a dilemma. They could no longer sustain faith in the inherent "justice" of British rule or in the invincibility of the British. The repression of 1942, the obstinacy of the government in not releasing Gandhi in February 1943 and then its stubborn insistence on holding the INA trials, offended the loyalists. Besides, their belief in the innate strength of the British had been assailed by the conciliation of the mid-1930s. In 1945, this faith was further eroded when the government followed a policy of wooing their erstwhile opponents, when it retreated under the storm of public pressure on the question of severely punishing the INA soldiers and when the violence of the Congress speeches rent the air and officials stood helplessly by.<sup>7</sup> In late 1945, Wavell noted that non-official loyalists were doubtful of the willingness and capacity of the British to protect them. Wavell told the Secretary of State that they were running risks to keep the possibility of negotiations open but there were "many experienced officials in this country who think that our policy is so weak as to lead inevitably to loss of control".<sup>8</sup>

Since the government relied on the active support of the loyalist and the liberal sections to rule the administration and work the reforms, the diminishing number of loyalists, especially ones of credibility and calibre, posed a serious problem. Wavell and Linlithgow often bemoaned the low calibre and standing of the Indian members of the Executive Council. As early as 1940, the then Viceroy felt that only a Congress-League Council would effectively command authority. Further, the Indian members of the Executive Council could not be relied upon, as was evident from the resignation of three members of the Viceroy's Executive Council on the question of the British refusal to release Gandhi during his 21-day fast in February 1943.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See Simon Epstein, *The Earthly Soil—Bombay Peasants and the Indian National Movement, 1919–47*, Delhi, 1988; and Hunt and Harrison, *District Officer in India*, p. 193.

<sup>8</sup> 27 February 1946, *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 1076. A.P. Hume, ICS, stationed at Benares, wrote to his parents: "Now any little loocher in a khaddi cap can, in the name of freedom and democracy, get up and spew out lies and venom against us and our traditions." 3 February 1946, *Hume Collection*, Mss Eur D. 724/12 Part I.

<sup>9</sup> Linlithgow to Hallett, U.P. Governor, 10 June 1940 and Viceroy to Secretary of State, 8 October 1940, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss/Eur F. 125/103 and 125/14.

The Civil Service was deemed to be at breaking point by the end of 1943. The problem of declining recruitment, which had plagued the ICS ever since the end of the First World War, had reached alarming proportions by the Second World War. By 1939, its British and Indian members had achieved parity. Overall recruitment was first cut in order to maintain this balance and then stopped in 1943. By August 1945, the number of British officials was down to 522 and Indian officials up to 524. Besides, the men coming in were no longer Oxbridge graduates from upper-class families, many of whose fathers and uncles were “old India hands” and who believed in the destiny of the British nation to govern the “child people” of India. They were increasingly grammar school and polytechnic boys for whom serving the Raj was a career, not a mission.

At the end of the war the “urgent need of recruits” was sought to be met by seconding officers from the army. This War Service Recruitment Scheme invited sharp criticism from Indians, on grounds of recruitment being made by the Secretary of State and the “backdoor entry” of Europeans. The authorities recognized that recruitment by the Secretary of State was politically inadvisable and that it was “better to have Indian officers who will stay on” than British officers who would leave.<sup>10</sup>

By 1945, the ICS was a run-down machine, not only because of its depleted numbers but also because the officers were heavily strained by the war and by long absences from home. The Viceroy informed the Secretary of State that the services “badly need a rest from the strain which they have undergone during the war years”. The Governor of U.P. confirmed that district officers were “both over-taxed

<sup>10</sup> The information in this paragraph and the one above is based on the Home Member's Papers—Civil Appointments in India and Burma, 1 June 1945, especially Home Department, Note 1, Recruitment to ICS in 1946 and subsequent years by Mudie, Home Member, 31 August 1945, *Mudie Collection*, F164/40, NAI accession no. 4234, New Delhi. Also see Potter, “Manpower Shortage”, p. 67; Moore, *Escape from Empire*, p. 22, Hunt and Harrison, *District Officer in India*, p. xxxi and David Potter, *India's Political Administrators, 1919–83*, Oxford, 1986, pp. 86, 100–101 and 126. See F.G. Rowland's report on central requirements of the ICS, dated 30 June 1945—the figure estimated was 1,551, *Mudie Collection*, F 164/11.

and overworked".<sup>11</sup> Even after the war, the passages situation was so bad, with the troops getting priority, that civilians and their families could not go home on leave. In early October 1945, the Viceroy pointed out that scarcity of sea passages had a bad effect on the morale of British civil servants who wish to proceed home on leave. But four months later, there was little difference in the situation and he warned that, if special provision was not made, this would have a "serious effect on the morale of the services at a time when it is essential for us to keep it at its highest".<sup>12</sup>

However, the main factor in the debilitation of the ICS was not manpower shortage (presented by Potter as an "autonomous" factor delinked from Indian political developments) but the slow, invidious decline of its prestige and authority. Here the erosion of authority had been taking place over the years, when the rising nationalist forces had been sought to be contained by a policy of conciliation mixed with repression. But the strategy of the national movement, of a multi-faceted struggle combining non-violent mass movements with working of constitutional reforms, proved to be more than a match for them. When non-violent movements were met with repression, the naked force behind the government stood exposed, offending the sensibility of the government's supporters; whereas if the government did not clamp down on "sedition", or effected a truce (as in 1931 when the Gandhi-Irwin Pact was signed) or conceded provincial autonomy under the Government of India Act, 1935, it was seen to be too weak to wield control and its authority and prestige were undermined.<sup>13</sup>

The services had always cried out for a clear-cut policy, one way or the other, but the pursuit of political ends had held sway and the

<sup>11</sup> Viceroy to Secretary of State, 29 January 1946 and U.P. Governor to Viceroy, 19 February 1946, *TP*, Vol. 6, pp. 870 and 1018 respectively. See Hume's letters to his parents, 30 February, 22 March and 17 September 1944, for the difficulty he faced in getting home leave despite having been in India since 1938, *Hume Collection*, Mss Eur D. 724/13. NAI accession no. 2041.

<sup>12</sup> Viceroy to Secretary of State, 1 October 1945 and 29 January 1946, *TP*, Vol. 6, pp. 308 and 870 respectively.

<sup>13</sup> See Chandra, *Long Term Dynamics*, pp. 46–53. Also see Bipan Chandra, Mridula Mukherjee, Aditya Mukherjee, K.N. Panikkar, Sucheta Mahajan, *India's Struggle for Independence*, New Delhi, 1988, Chapters 38 and 39.

result was deterioration of the administrative machine. The contradictions of a policy intertwining conciliation with repression are obvious. Action could be decisive only if policy was clearly defined. A two-pronged policy could not but create problems, especially when the same set of bureaucrats had to implement both policies.<sup>14</sup> This dilemma arose in the mid-1930s, when the officials, who had organized the repression of the Congress-led civil disobedience movement and kept the leaders in detention, were faced with the prospect of serving under these very men in the provincial ministries to be set up in 1937. This prospect soon became a reality in eight provinces.<sup>15</sup>

Constitutionalism wrecked the services' morale as or more effectively as the mass movement before it, as the experience of the ministries of 1937–39 showed, though this is not often realized.<sup>16</sup> From the elections onwards, condemnation of police officials began and later on policemen and intelligence officials were even hounded out of the political meetings they came to cover.<sup>17</sup> In some parts of the country, the Congress organization became a locus of authority parallel

<sup>14</sup> "To defend and to dissolve are opposite purposes and imply opposite moods. That was the dilemma upon which the British members of the ICS were impaled throughout their career and on which they agonised." J. Enoch Powell, "Servants of India", review of P. Moon's *The British Conquest and Dominion of India*, IOR Mss Eur C. 601, London.

<sup>15</sup> Hallett, Governor of U.P., wrote to Mudie: "As we learnt in 1937, it is indirect and insidious attacks that are more troublesome than direct attack." 25 June 1945, *Mudie Collection*, F 164/10, NAI accession no. 4231. Epstein refers to the "long shadow cast by the threatening approach of a specifically Congress ministry in Bombay, apparent in fact from 1935 onwards", "District Officers in Decline", p. 506. "The constitutional experiment would also tax the administrative structure of the provinces greatly. The officials who had hitherto taken punitive action against Congressmen, would now have to take orders from them." Visalakshi Menon, "National Movement, Congress Ministries and Imperial Policy: A Case Study of the UP, 1937–39", M.Phil. dissertation submitted to the Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1981. I am indebted to Visalakshi Menon for references from the *Haig Papers* and *Linlithgow Papers*.

<sup>16</sup> Epstein argues that by the close of the 1930s the "trend of events [was]... undermining the morale of the services at breakneck speed", "District Officers in Decline", pp. 509–10. Also see Interview with Y.B. Chavan, New Delhi, 2 May 1984.

<sup>17</sup> See Menon, "National Movement", p. 190 and Haig to Linlithgow, 6 January 1937, *Haig Papers*.

to the official administration, with left-wing Congressmen directing that rent be paid to them, deciding agrarian disputes and setting up Congress panchayats.<sup>18</sup> People could not fail to notice that the British Chief Secretary in Madras took to wearing khadi or that the Revenue Secretary in Bombay, on tour with the Revenue Minister, Morarji Desai, would scurry across the railway platform from his first-class compartment to the latter's third-class carriage, so that the Honorable Minister may not be kept waiting.<sup>19</sup> Among Indian officials, disloyalty was not evident but where loyalty to the "Raj" was paraded earlier, "it was the done thing to parade one's patriotism and, if possible, a third cousin twice removed who had been to jail in the civil disobedience movement".<sup>20</sup>

With Congress having assumed office once, the likelihood of its return to power in the future weighed as a consideration with officials. The Bombay Governor felt that the "feeling that Congress would return to power some day...cannot fail to be in the mind of all Indian officials".<sup>21</sup> Hallett explained Pant's condemnation of services as directed to "discredit the present regime or to remind officers that the Congress may again become their masters. That is one of the difficulties I foresee in the future..."<sup>22</sup> From the time ministries resigned in September 1939, negotiations were afoot to bring the Congress back to office. This continued till the rejection of the August Offer in 1940 and later, when the Cripps offer was made, the prospect

<sup>18</sup> "One of the most dangerous activities of left-wing Congressmen" was seen to be the attempt to "set up the Congress organisation as a parallel administration", Quarterly Report for the period ending 31 March 1937, *Linlithgow Papers*, F.125/42, pp. 15-16. Kemp, ICS, wrote from Saran, Bihar: "The Congress ministry were great interferers in the day-to-day administration of the districts...", Hunt and Harrison, *District Officer in India*, p. 196.

<sup>19</sup> Innumerable nationalists recounted similar instances of the officials' desire to please their Congress "bosses". See Interviews, ICSSR Project, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 1984-87.

<sup>20</sup> R.P. Noronha, *A Tale Told by an Idiot*, New Delhi, 1976, p. 3 and C.S. Venkatachar, "ICS: The Last Phase", in *Indo-British Review*, Vol. 7.3 and 7.4, 1974.

<sup>21</sup> Governor of Bombay to Viceroy, 14 January 1939, cited by Epstein, "District Officers in Decline", p. 508.

<sup>22</sup> Hallett to Linlithgow, 15 March 1940, *Linlithgow Papers*, F125/103.

of provincial ministries loomed again. This dual policy of carrot and stick complicated the dilemma of the officials.

The outbreak of the war in 1939 and the resignation of Congress ministries arrested this trend of declining morale. Initiative and authority were restored to officialdom.<sup>23</sup> However, a strong policy and return to official rule provided only a temporary respite. Many officials hesitated to take action against the organizers during the individual civil disobedience movement. The Governor of U.P. explained this hesitation:

During the Congress regime officers were brought in contact with Congress workers and possibly became friendly with them; it is only natural that they would be reluctant to take action against their former friends. But apart from this, there is the fear of what their position will be if Congress returns to power.<sup>24</sup>

The Quit India movement, with its features of attacks on and killings of police and district officers and burning of police stations, created a difficult situation for district officials. In some areas, action taken was weak, perhaps because officials were wary of antagonizing Congressmen or secretly sympathized with them.<sup>25</sup> In other cases,

<sup>23</sup> The Home Political files and Linlithgow's correspondence in March–April 1940 are full of discussions on the need to crush the Congress, Home Poll 3/2/40; 3/11/40; 3/13/40; and Linlithgow to Zetland, 5 and 25 March 1940, *Linlithgow Papers*, F125/9.

<sup>24</sup> For government hesitation to act in 1941, see U.P. FR for first half of April 1941, Home Poll 18/4/41.

<sup>25</sup> Max Harcourt argues that handling of the Quit India movement was ineffective because officials feared "adverse consequences for their careers if they antagonised Congress excessively", "Kisan Populism and Revolution in Rural India: The 1942 Disturbances in Bihar and East United Provinces", in D.A. Low, ed., *Congress and the Raj, Facets of the Indian Struggle, 1917–1947*, London, 1977, pp. 342–43.

Martin, ICS, Bihar, wrote about the "riots" of August 1942:

The landlords who formed the richest and most influential grouping in the province were united only in a recognition that to survive and prosper they would have in the long run to make their peace with the Congress Party; and much the same feelings influenced the members of the provincial services, parti-

repression was exceptionally harsh, perhaps as a last ditch measure. As the Governor of U.P. admitted later, such actions were taken in 1942, "which, dragged out in the cold light of 1946, nobody could defend".<sup>26</sup> This unwarranted repression had to be covered by a Vice-regal pledge that no inquiries would be allowed into executive action.<sup>27</sup>

By mid-1944 it was clear that constitutionalism had returned, though the war, Defence of India Rules and detentions continued. Gandhi's release, albeit on grounds of ill health, was a pointer, given a government which had made arrangements for his funeral in February 1943. Assemblies of Congressmen were convened, though Congress was under a ban, and a machinery was created, through constructive work, which would be the basis for Congress reorganization in mid-1945. All sections of political opinion, from their manifold political platforms, voiced the two demands—release of leaders and formation of a national government. District officials stood idly by, watching these developments, as they did the later ones—the release of the leaders, the announcement of elections and the increasing likelihood of Congress ministries in many provinces.

It was a vastly depleted, war-weary, 1942-battered bureaucracy that was expected to implement the peace-time constitutionalism now on the cards. At any time the ambivalence of a policy of repression followed by constitutionalism posed a difficult problem for the administration. In 1945, there were more concrete entanglements between repression and conciliation because the Congressmen released from jail were determined to pull the 1942 skeletons out of the cupboard. The victims of repression, those who lost their lives, were hailed as

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cularly the magistracy and the police, who formed the great part of the administration (Hunt and Harrison, *District Officer in India*, p. 202).

Penderel Moon, ICS, had to resign because of his "indiscreet criticisms" of the government in a letter to Amrit Kaur while she was in detention, Note on P. Moon by David Blake, IOR Mss Eur C 601, India Office Library, London.

Among others, Achyut Parwardhan, Lata Povaiah, Vasantdada Patil and A. Achuthan gave instances of officials' sympathy. Interviews at Bangalore, 7 December 1984, Bombay, 21 May 1985, Bombay, 14 June 85 and Kasargod, Kerala, 13 May 1984.

<sup>26</sup> U.P. Governor to Viceroy, 19 February 1946, *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 101.

<sup>27</sup> Linlithgow to Amery, 2 and 9 September 1942, *TP*, Vol. 2, pp. 879 and 928.



“martyrs”, while the officers responsible for repression were, often by name, severely condemned for their gross misdeeds. While such speeches and the government’s inability to check them had a devastating effect on services’ morale, what was more alarming for the officials was the rising crescendo of demands for inquiries into official action.<sup>28</sup>

The forthcoming elections were likely to bring Congress ministries back to power, significantly in provinces where repression had been most arbitrarily brutal, and the services feared that inquiries would be instituted, Linlithgow’s pledge notwithstanding. The question of inquiries was seen as “the most difficult issue” that the formation of provincial ministries would bring to a head, which could only be resolved by a “gentlemen’s agreement” with the Congress.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Epstein, “District Officers in Decline”, p. 511.

<sup>29</sup> Reports of Governors of Bombay, Madras, Sind and C.P. to the Viceroy and Viceroy’s report to the Secretary of State, *TP*, Vol. 6, pp. 429, 318, 437, 468, 562 and 602. FRs of C.P. and Berar, Madras, Assam, Delhi, Orissa and Bombay for July to October 1945, Home Poll 18/7/45, 18/8/45, 18/9/45 and 18/10/45, report the officers’ alarm at inquiries. The Viceroy’s opinion was that “this is probably the most difficult issue that will arise between Governors and their Congress Ministries”, to Secretary of State, 27 February 1946, *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 1077. The end of the war and the return to government by elected ministries in all the provinces was trying enough, as Ray, ICS, Bihar, records for Bihar:

They toured the districts continually with a large following, not for administrative purposes, but mainly for political reasons. Seldom was any warning given in advance: a telephone call at any early hour would inform one that an Hon’able Minister had arrived at the Circuit House which meant postponing one’s work, joining the queue of petitioners and dancing attendance upon him for the rest of the day. With one or two notable exceptions they had little idea of the complexities of administration. “I hear there is a lot of black-marketing in the district—look to it at once and let me know next week” was a fairly typical verbal instruction I once received. Nor were personal courtesies always very marked. After a tiring day with the Prime Minister I recall being dismissed with a wave of the hand late at night on the railway station with a curt: “You can go now.” However objectionable all this did not really matter, but what did matter was the tendency of Ministers to manipulate affairs with their Congress henchmen on the spot. Endless intrigue, interference and misunderstanding was the result. This meant that the District Officer was often isolated and bypassed and had no idea of important orders passed or decisions taken until long after, often

Having outlined the impact of the national movement on the British position over the years, let us assess the impact of popular nationalist activity and "popular movements" on British policy in the six months after the end of the war. As stressed earlier, British policy was in the main based on long-term considerations, the assessment of the past and the anticipation of the future course of events. It was hardly ever related to immediate, individual events; rather, it tended to override short-term pressures in its determination to reach the desired goal. For example, in 1945, the Home Department explained its liberal policy towards "sedition" in the election period as risks that were necessary in order to secure the wider interests of getting provincial ministries into office.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the government's reaction to unanticipated challenges to peace was normally one of repression, of handling them as law and order problems. This is clear from the severe handling of all the upsurges, the prompt use of troops, indiscriminate firing, stern ultimatums to the naval ratings, calling in of

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by rumour. Transfers of subordinate officials without warning or consultation become commonplace. Nevertheless any failings or shortcomings were attributed to "sabotage by British officials", the words of a friendly Congressman to me (Hunt and Harrison, *District Officer in India*, p. 235).

A.P. Hume, ICS, complained of daily interference from the government at Lucknow and the intrigues of local Congressmen to get officials transferred. Frampton, the Chief Secretary, U.P., was reported to have described the Congress tactics thus: "...their method is to try and by-pass officials and official machinery from the Governor downwards, and carry on a sort of Panchayat Raj behind the scenes." Hume, along with like-minded officials, pressurized the authorities to lift the ban on premature retirement imposed till 30 October 1947. See letters to parents, 24 March, 11 May and 18 August 1946, *Hume Collection*, Mss Eur D 724/13, NAI accession no. 2041.

For compensation of services, protection against reprisals, reaction to political events, air evacuation, etc., see accession nos 3826-32; specially file nos 180, 181, 182, 183, 185, 187 and 287; R/3/1 series, P.S. to Viceroy's Office Papers, I.O.L.R., Microfilm in NAI.

For the appointment of British officials by the Government of India after independence, see IOR O/1/410, India Office Library, London.

<sup>30</sup> Home Secretary to provincial governments, 5 December 1945, Home Poll 33/1/46.

Royal Navy ships and the forcing of surrender by siege of the ships and firing by troops.

Even in 1945, the wherewithal for repression was intact, as shown again by the successful use of Indian troops against RIN ratings and the failure of the RIN strike to become the signal for a general revolt in the armed forces. The government's determination to force the ratings to surrender is clear from the Viceroy's reiteration that only an unconditional surrender was acceptable, that Admiral Lockhart had ample forces, and that, if the ships opened fire, "they will be sunk". In Karachi, surrender was forced by firing at the ships in which eight RIN ratings were killed. In Bombay, naval officials warned the ratings that only unconditional surrender was acceptable and eight ships of the naval squadron were en route to Bombay. The Viceroy also testified to the continuing reliability of the forces of repression.<sup>31</sup>

Within the framework of long-term considerations, the immediate situation and political developments in the present acted as pressures, modifying and even partially changing specific policies. The widespread strength behind the Congress, the spread of sympathy for the INA to sections hitherto outside the pale of the nationalist movement, the liberals, loyalists, services and the army, the debilitating effects on services' morale of Congress glorification of the 1942 movement and threats of bringing guilty officials to book, were all watched with increasing anxiety by officialdom. They led to changes in British policy too; for instance, the slow retreat on the INA issue to trying only those directly responsible for brutality and finally to commuting sentences on the first trials. The position taken on the issue of inquiries into 1942 action also shifted from the firm pledge to disallow inquiries given by Linlithgow, to Wavell's general assurances to the services and to the seeking of a "gentleman's agreement" with the Congress to avoid inquiries. Finally, though this falls outside this period, Wavell promised Nehru to look into the matter himself and ask the guilty officials to retire.

<sup>31</sup> See Home Poll 5/14/46; Viceroy to Secretary to State, 22 February 1946; Viceroy to PM, 24 February 1946; Viceroy to Secretary of State, 27 February 1946; and Viceroy to King George VI, 22 March 1946, *TP*, Vol. 6, pp. 1048, 1055, 1076 and 1234.

However, though the immediate political situation did affect British policies, as we have shown above, the contention of the left historians that the upsurges they focus on led to concrete changes in specific policies—the abandonment of the INA trials, withdrawal of Indian troops from Indonesia, the sending of the Parliamentary Delegation—and to a major shift in British policy—the sending of the Cabinet Mission—is clearly untenable. These developments were the result of considerations and pressures other than those alleged.

First, the policy changes on the INA question were, as we have seen, gradual and based on considerations other than the violent outburst of November 1945. The widespread support behind the demand for the INA prisoners' release, as demonstrated in the widespread, popular, though peaceful activity associated with the whole INA campaign all over the country (including the support by liberal and even loyalist factions), was an important factor. The Commander-in-Chief was of the view that any executions "might result in unrest on a scale more serious than in 1921 & 1942".<sup>32</sup> Some Home Department officials had expressed doubts about the wisdom of holding public trials, especially in the Red Fort, while policy was being framed. The Governor of C.P. referred to the "mistake" made by the government in trying the INA men at Delhi.<sup>33</sup>

The government had unrealistically expected that public opinion would turn against the INA men when their cowardice in joining the INA as an escape from being persecuted by the Japanese was publicized and when the brutalities committed on loyal Prisoners of (POWs) was known to all. The Secretary of State felt that if punishment were given only to those guilty of brutality, it would "take the wind out of Congress criticism". The Viceroy went further to say that "when the courts-martial begin other people may be shocked, too".<sup>34</sup> The government had failed to adequately publicize the government's position before political parties took up the issue.<sup>35</sup> All these

<sup>32</sup> Commander-in-Chief to Viceroy, 24 November 1945, *ibid.*, p. 530.

<sup>33</sup> Letter to Viceroy, 26 November 1945, *ibid.*, p. 542.

<sup>34</sup> Secretary of State to Viceroy, 5 October and Viceroy to Secretary of State, 9 October 1945, *ibid.*, pp. 315 and 321.

<sup>35</sup> Viceroy to Secretary of State, 5 November 1945, U.P. Governor to Viceroy, 19 November 1945 and note on Indian National Army (henceforth INA) sent by DIB, 20 November 1945, *ibid.*, pp. 442, 507 and 515 respectively.

doubts had been voiced from the very beginning from within officialdom and were now recognized as valid by the decision-making authorities. The Home Member outlined all the blunders and omissions in the government's policy towards the INA men.<sup>36</sup>

Most important perhaps, given the fact that it was essentially an army question, despite its political implications, was the consideration that opinion within the army, especially among the rank and file and Indian officers, was generally in favour of leniency. The earlier expectations and opinion that strict punishment was necessary not only to maintain the morale of the army but would in fact be welcomed by the army, had been proved wrong. On 2 November 1945, the Commander-in-Chief argued that the majority opinion in the Indian army wanted INA men to be punished but on 24 November 1945 he recommended limiting the trials to "brutality cases" alone, on the ground that the general opinion in the army favoured leniency.<sup>37</sup> In fact, His Majesty's Government ultimately endorsed the changed policy of leniency on the ground that it was in the interests of the integrity and discipline of the army.<sup>38</sup>

The use of Indian troops in Indonesia had, in fact, been severely criticized by the Viceroy himself, who had demanded that they be withdrawn. The Secretary of State had pleaded inability to do so, given the paucity of other troops but had promised their withdrawal as soon as possible and conveyed the Viceroy's strong reaction to the relevant military authorities. So their withdrawal had little to do with immediate pressure at that time.<sup>39</sup>

The decision to send a Parliamentary Delegation had originated in early 1945 when it had been vetoed on grounds of non-availability of air passages. It had been revived by the new Secretary of State, mainly as a means to acquaint backbencher opinion with the difficult

<sup>36</sup> Note in Home Department, 20 February 1946, Home Poll 21/13/45, Part II.

<sup>37</sup> *TP*, Vol. 6, pp. 435 and 532.

<sup>38</sup> Secretary of State's memorandum, 20 October 1945; Governor-General (War Department) to Secretary of State, 30 November 1945; and Secretary of State to Viceroy, 7 December 1945, *ibid.*, pp. 371, 572 and 618.

<sup>39</sup> Secretary of State to Viceroy, 19 October 1945, *ibid.*, p. 366.

realities of the Indian problem, but delayed on account of some technical difficulties about sponsorship. Another motive was to counter Krishna Menon's influence in London circles. It had been suggested to Cripps by Amrit Kaur and accepted formally by the Cabinet India and Burma Committee on 19 November and approved by the Viceroy. Only the announcement was after the November demonstrations.<sup>40</sup>

The main shift in British policy traced to the impact of the three upsurges, especially the RIN revolt, is the sending of the Cabinet Mission. It is believed that a single mutiny, that of the Royal Indian Navy ratings in February 1946, led to the dispatch of the Cabinet Mission.<sup>41</sup> As pointed out in the last chapter, the link with the RIN revolt or even the February demonstration is clearly untenable—the official Cabinet decision on the Cabinet Mission was taken on 22 January 1946 and even the announcement made on 19 February had been slated a week earlier.<sup>42</sup> The idea of a Cabinet rank delegation had been mooted earlier—Major Short's suggestion of a Milner-type kindergarten going out to India.<sup>43</sup> Then there was a proposal by the Prime Minister to give the Viceroy a political advisor, Tom Johnston, a Scottish trade union leader, being recommended for the job.<sup>44</sup> The Secretary of State, mindful of Wavell's objections to such an advisor having direct touch with Whitehall, tactfully suggested that only a Cabinet rank person should be sent,<sup>45</sup> and finally, on the consideration that only a Cabinet team could actually take far-reaching decisions without referring back to London constantly, a three-member Cabinet

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Dutt, *India Today*, p. 542 and Balabushevich and Dyakov, *Contemporary History of India*, p. 417. Also see S. Banerjee, *RIN Strike*, p. 136 and Farooqi, *India's Freedom Struggle*, p. 44 for similar views.

<sup>42</sup> The Cabinet decided on 22 January 1946, to send the Mission in March and to announce it in February 1946, *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 831.

<sup>43</sup> Major Short's note, enclosed with Cripps to Viceroy, 3 December 1945. Shiva Rao suggested that a Cabinet team should go out to India after the elections as early as 20 August 1945, *ibid.*, pp. 592 and 100–105 respectively.

<sup>44</sup> Moore, *Escape from Empire*, p. 44.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

Mission was decided upon.<sup>46</sup> Thus the need to send a full-fledged Cabinet Mission was largely because of Wavell's limited capabilities as a political negotiator and perhaps the divergence of his views from Whitehall's stance.

It must also be noted that the importance of the Cabinet Mission lay in the concrete demonstration of the willingness of His Majesty's Government to negotiate a settlement, especially since the ministers had full powers to decide and planned a long stay in India. The Mission did not mark a break in British policy, for the decision to initiate post-election discussions with Indian leaders in order to decide the form of the constitution-making body had been made and announced in the 19 September 1945 statement. The Cabinet Mission was the implementation of that promise.

Let alone leading to any major shifts in overall British policy, these three upsurges did not even occasion any change in the policy towards agitations. Interestingly, the provincial authorities responsible for maintaining law and order, who were clamoring for censorship, continuation of war-time ordinances and even preventive arrests in the face of Congress election speeches and threats of a future mass movement, did not suggest any significant measures to handle similar outbreaks in the future, though specifically asked to do so by the Home Department.<sup>47</sup> Most provinces reported that existing arrangements were adequate, one suggested changes such as re-equipping and strengthening the police force and another rounding up waifs and strays!<sup>48</sup>

On the basis of these views from the provinces, the Home Department concluded that no change in the existing policy of restraint towards agitations or violent speeches during the election period was warranted and expressed the hope that the coming negotiations would clarify the situation. It was argued that if talks succeeded, conflict

<sup>46</sup> Cabinet India and Burma Committee Meeting, 14 January 1946, *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 786.

<sup>47</sup> The Deputy Secretary, Home Department noted on 4 April 1946 that "no particular measures have been suggested for avoiding such trouble in future", Home Poll 5/8/46.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

would be averted and if they failed, then policy would be "as usual", presumably, firm handling of agitation. The Home Department concluded that the policy of restraint, followed since December, should be continued, since that "policy was necessitated by the political negotiations". When negotiations were completed, "there will either be no further hostility to the government or it will have to be dealt with in the usual way".<sup>49</sup>

This same Home Department evaluation of the "disturbances" brought out an important point. The conclusions reached were that the "disturbances" had no organization behind them and were the result of the inflammatory atmosphere created by Congress speeches over the past few months. The Viceroy informed the Prime Minister on 24 February 1946 that the primary cause of the RIN agitation was the "speeches of Congress leaders since September last". According to the Home Department, "the real cause" behind the disturbances from November 1945 to February 1946 was "the general atmosphere induced by the inflammatory speeches and writings of Congress leaders".<sup>50</sup> It also concluded that the Communist Party had not organized them, but local Communists only "exploited" them when the "riffraff" became involved in them. The Central Intelligence Officer, Calcutta, reported on 28 November 1945 that

on the night of the 22 there was a definite move on the part of both the CPI and the Congress to take active steps to stop further disorders and on the 23 it was decided to send leaders into the affected areas to address mobs to this effect.<sup>51</sup>

It was felt that action against the CPI would have little meaning as long as the major parties like the Congress continued unchecked: "The Punjab Government also point out that Congress is the real danger and action against minor parties so long as Congress is left free to pursue its plans would be misconceived".<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 1055 and Home Poll 5/8/46.

<sup>51</sup> Home Poll 21/16/45.

<sup>52</sup> Deputy Secretary in Home Department, 1 April 1946, Home Poll 5/8/46.



Sarkar's study of post-war politics had concluded that "CPI had displaced the Congress as Enemy No. 1 already by the end of 1945".<sup>53</sup> The government officials, however, held quite a different view. The Viceroy told the Secretary of State that "Neither the Communist Party nor M.N. Roy's Social Democrats have any influence". The Punjab C.I.D. authorities warned the Director, Intelligence Bureau, of the "considerable danger of putting the cart before the horse and of failing to recognise Congress as the main enemy".<sup>54</sup>

It may be suggested that the extent to which the immediate situation in late 1945 and early 1946 forced its way into the arena of imperial policy making, into which generally wider, long-term considerations were allowed access, it was the threat of another Congress-led movement in the given situation of increasing hegemony of the anti-imperialist forces and the corresponding erosion of British hegemony that kept the British government tied to its promises and finally forced it to implement them. What took place was neither a voluntary withdrawal on the part of the British, as the imperialist historians would have it, nor were the British pushed out by the popular outbursts, as some left historians argue—the reality clearly lay elsewhere, as we shall see.

Along with the appearance of fissures in the structure of the Raj, the limitations of British policy in handling the anti-imperialist movement became apparent by the end of the war. Co-option of the constitutionalist right wing or its break with the left wing had proved a futile hope with the resignation of Congress ministries in 1939.<sup>55</sup> Further, in 1942, except for Rajagopalachari, it was the right-wing leaders, Patel, Prasad and Kripalani, who were solidly behind Gandhi's call for the Quit India movement.<sup>56</sup> As far as the violence of Congress speeches in late 1945 was concerned, Patel's utterances were no less extreme and "seditious" than Nehru's; rather, he was considered to be more determinedly anti-British and hostile than Nehru.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Sarkar, "Popular Movements", p. 685.

<sup>54</sup> 27 December 1945, *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 687 and Home Poll 7/1/46.

<sup>55</sup> Menon, "National Movement", pp. 205–206 and 199.

<sup>56</sup> Wickenden report on the Quit India Movement, P.N. Chopra, ed., *Quit India Movement: British Secret Documents*, New Delhi, 1986, pp. 196, 200 and 203.

<sup>57</sup> The Governor, Bombay, reported to the Viceroy on 2 November 1945 that Patel was "breathing forth threatenings and slaughters". The Viceroy warned the Secretary

The impact of the nationalist movement on the bureaucracy was not only indirect through weakening morale under pressure from mass movements and ministries, the permeation of nationalist sentiment among the Indian element of the services, especially the subordinate services and even the police, directly affected their loyalty and reliability.<sup>58</sup> Even earlier in 1937–39, the tendency of Indian officials to look up to the Congress was apparent, but, by 1945, the Indian services were assertively nationalist,<sup>59</sup> though the British preferred to see their feelings as merely the tendency of the natives to worship the rising and not the setting sun.<sup>60</sup>

By 1945, nationalist feeling had reached the army, which was otherwise, too, in a state of flux. Politicized elements had entered the army, especially the technical services, under the new recruitment policy, which was liberalized because the carefully selected men of the “martial races” did not suffice. The soldiers who fought in Europe and South East Asia and liberated countries from fascist control, returned home with new ideas. When the issue of the INA prisoners came up, the army authorities discovered that army opinion was not clamoring for punishment, as initially expected, but predominantly in favour

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of State on 6 November 1945 that Nehru’s and Patel’s speeches “can only be intended to provoke or pave the way for mass disorder”, *TP*, Vol. 6, pp. 429, 385 and 450–54.

<sup>58</sup> For details, see Viceroy to Secretary of State, 6 November; Governor, C.P., to Viceroy, 26 November; Governor, Assam, to Viceroy, 11 December; and especially Viceroy to Secretary of State, 27 December 1945, *ibid.*, pp. 453, 543, 576, 632 and 687.

<sup>59</sup> The Orissa FR for the first half of November mentioned that chowkidari presidents were identifying openly with the Congress and also raising funds for it. The U.P. FR for the second half of October 1945, reported that railway officials in east U.P. “decorated their stations in honour of Nehru and Pant and in one instance...detained a goods train for three hours to enable Nehru to make a speech and then travel by it”. The C.P. Governor reported to the Viceroy that “most of our clerical staff voted for the Congress at the elections and presumably allowed this to be known”. Home Poll 18/11 and 18/10/45; *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 632 and Azad, *India Wins Freedom*, p. 127, respectively.

<sup>60</sup> Viceroy to Secretary of State, 16 November 1945, *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 213; and Home Poll 18/11/45 and 18/12/45. See also H.V. Hodson, *The Great Divide: Britain, India, Pakistan*, London, 1969, p. 185.

of leniency. As pointed out earlier, the Commander-in-Chief's opinion had changed by February 1946, when he stated that "any Indian officer worth his salt is a nationalist".<sup>61</sup>

A serious evaluation was made of the integrity of the armed forces in the event of widespread revolt. While the Commander-in-Chief would not assure continued reliability through the coming years, it is worth noting that even as late as November 1945, after the high pitch reached by the INA campaign, he accepted the basic reliability of the Indian army for the present.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, though he had earlier asked for larger deployment of British troops in India, he quite readily agreed not to have them sent (categorically saying that the Indian situation did not call for it as he intended them only as a reserve), when the British Chiefs of Staff pointed out that they had no spare troops at call and they would divert them from other countries only if the Indian army needed them urgently.<sup>63</sup> The Commander-in-Chief's fears were mainly of the future, the coming months, when loyalty was likely to be further impaired, especially if a widespread mass movement began.<sup>64</sup>

In 1945, it was from a position of eroded hegemony that the British contemplated the present and the future. The present posed incal-

<sup>61</sup> Commander-in-Chief to Viceroy, 24 November 1945, *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 533. Contrast this with the Secretary of State's memorandum of 20 October in which he argued that leniency will be a "great offence" to the Indian army, especially the loyal prisoners of war, *ibid.*, p. 371. Also see Mary Wainwright, "Keeping the Peace in India, 1946-47", in C.H. Philips and M.D. Wainwright, eds, *The Partition of India: Policies and Perspectives, 1935-1947*, London, 1970.

<sup>62</sup> Commander-in-Chief's appreciation of the internal situation, 24 November 1945, *TP*, Vol. 6, pp. 577-84. As late as 22 March 1946, after the INA trials, and even after the RIN revolt, Wavell informed King George VI that the "great mass of the Indian Army is still sound", *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 1234.

<sup>63</sup> Chiefs of Staff in Britain to Commander-in-Chief, 11 December 1945, Commander-in-Chief to Chiefs of Staff, 22 December 1945; and Chiefs of Staff in Britain to Defence Committee, 22 February 1946, *TP*, Vol. 6, pp. 638-39, 675 and 1042.

<sup>64</sup> On 24 November 1945, the Commander-in-Chief, while stressing that the army was reliable at present, felt that political influences would steadily impair its morale over the months till spring 1946, when the Congress might launch a mass movement. Commander-in-Chief's appreciation of the internal situation, 24 November 1945, *ibid.*, pp. 577-84.

culable problems, the chief among them being the means by which to secure a representative national government and the need to contain the snowballing anti-British feeling before it reached ungovernable proportions.<sup>65</sup> The possibility of an immediate explosion of this discontent was unlikely. The real danger was perceived to be in the not too distant future, sometime around the spring of 1946, when, having won the elections and formed provincial ministries, the Congress, from a position of accreted strength, would "organise a mass movement on the 1942 lines but on a much larger scale".<sup>66</sup> By then, the bureaucracy and the army, it was feared, would be in a worse state, with communal divisions having further rent the fabric and provincial ministries likely to be aiding the movement, rather than the administration.<sup>67</sup>

It was increasingly clear to the British that the old basis of British rule would not continue for long, and a new structure would have to be devised, if rule was to continue. Later, in mid-1946, many officials, including the Viceroy, were to argue that in the face of such an eventuality the whole nature of British rule could be transformed to one of strong, autocratic authority, replenished by new officials, which could then maintain British rule for 15–20 years.<sup>68</sup> Even then, their argument was turned down,<sup>69</sup> but in early 1946 this option was not even proposed.<sup>70</sup>

In late 1945, when the British saw the imminence of collapse, they sought to avert it by offering constitutional concessions. They

<sup>65</sup> This was realized and stressed by Wavell as early as the end of 1944. See Wavell to Churchill, 24 October 1944, *Wavell's Journal*, pp. 98–99.

<sup>66</sup> Viceroy to Secretary of State, 6 November 1945; Commander-in-Chief's appreciation of the internal situation, 24 November 1945; Governor, Orissa to Viceroy, 6 November 1945; and Azad's letter to the Viceroy, 7 November 1945, *TP*, Vol. 6, pp. 450–54, 577, 396, 447 and 455.

<sup>67</sup> Viceroy to Secretary of State, 27 December 1945 and 29 October 1945, Commander-in-Chief's appreciation of internal situation sent to the Cabinet, 14 November 1945, C.P. Governor to Viceroy, 10 January 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 687, 420, 577, 482 and 756, and Epstein, "District Officers in Decline", p. 518.

<sup>68</sup> Viceroy to Secretary of State, 24 July 1946, *TP*, Vol. 8, p. 115.

<sup>69</sup> Secretary of State to Viceroy, 26 July 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 123–24.

<sup>70</sup> Wavell foresaw the difficulties that total repression would involve. See Viceroy to Secretary of State, 6 November 1945, *TP*, Vol. 6, 452.

could not take the risk of the concessions being rejected, for, if that happened, a mass movement would follow which they might not be able to contain. With the need being to avoid a contingency of negotiations breaking down, the concessions had to be of substance, which largely met the demand of the Congress. And so, faced with the Congress demand of Quit India and with the large majority of people affirming it, the Cabinet Mission came to India in 1946 to negotiate the setting up of a national government and set into motion the machinery for transfer of power. It was not an empty gesture like the Cripps Mission in 1942; they intended to stay till they succeeded in securing some agreement. The reality was that they could not afford failure, for failure would lead to a humiliating surrender before a mass movement or would necessitate a basic change in the character of British rule from semi-hegemonic to repressive and autocratic. The first was obviously to be avoided at all costs; the second was also not likely to appeal either to the Labour government that was in power, or to British and American public opinion, which was still conditioned by the pro-democratic and anti-Fascist euphoria of the war years.

### III

## *Imperialism, Nationalism and Communalism*



## “Unite and Quit”

The Cabinet Mission’s declaration, that they would set up a machinery to transfer power to Indian hands, clarified that the conflict between imperialism and nationalism had been resolved in principle. This question now receded from the spotlight and centre stage was taken over by the differing conceptions of the post-imperial order held by the British, the Congress and the Muslim League. The Congress obviously wanted unity and the League division;<sup>1</sup> what did the British want?

Their past practice of nurturing the League and looking upon the Muslims as their friends suggested that the British would opt for division. Hindsight also supports the likelihood that the British would have seen Pakistan as their natural future ally. Pakistan continued for years to be the most reliable outpost of the Western bloc in South Asia. But the old digits worked no longer. New alignments suggested themselves. Maintenance of rule demanded one stance, withdrawal and post-imperial interests suggested a different posture. The earlier strategy of encouraging communal forces to deny the legitimacy of nationalist forces did not suffice.

<sup>1</sup> For a critique of Ayesha Jalal’s well known but erroneous contention that Congress wanted partition while Jinnah was against it, see Chapters 9 and 10 (section on partition of Punjab and Bengal), Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman*, p. 262.



# MISSION'S SYMPHONY



Official circles in London were clear by early 1946 that any solution must be one "based on maintaining the unity of India".<sup>2</sup> The Governors of the important provinces of British India did not think that Pakistan would work. Bengal was the exception. The Governor of U.P., where Muslims were a significant minority, warned that Pakistan "would be a retrograde step of the first order".<sup>3</sup> The Governors of Punjab and Sind, two important constituents of Jinnah's Pakistan, were opposed to Pakistan.

One wonders, though, how many of them would have supported the Assam Governor's call to "throw all our weight on the side of unity".<sup>4</sup> After all, the other members of the Cabinet Mission did not accept the Viceroy's and Secretary of State's argument for taking a bold stand against Pakistan.<sup>5</sup> They chose to offer provincial autonomy within a unitary framework in an attempt to reconcile division and unity.<sup>6</sup> It is interesting that the Viceroy, who confessed to having little sympathy for the Congress, was also of the view that the British "must try to leave India united".<sup>7</sup> There was also perhaps a latent guardian syndrome at work: "We had given India political unity and we wished to preserve our handiwork".<sup>8</sup>

By early 1946, Whitehall and New Delhi agreed that strategic interests in the Indian subcontinent after independence were better served by a united India friendly with Britain and an active partner in Commonwealth defence. A divided India, besides being a blot on British prestige, would weaken Commonwealth defence. Pakistan could not play any of the three roles expected of it: a counter to India, a link with the West and a buffer to Russian advance. Britain would have to defend Pakistan as it lacked depth in defence, besides being economically unviable. Britain lacked the forces necessary for this and her military weakness would be exposed to the world. The Commander-in-Chief was categorical that the only option was

<sup>2</sup> Under Secretary of State to Secretary of State, 1 March 1946, Vol. 6, p. 1094.

<sup>3</sup> U.P. Governor's note, undated, *ibid.*, Vol. 7, p. 70.

<sup>4</sup> Assam Governor's note, 3 April 1946, *ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>5</sup> 25 April 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 330-34.

<sup>6</sup> First revise of draft statement, n.d., *ibid.*, p. 371.

<sup>7</sup> Viceroy's letter to King George VI, 8 July 1946, *ibid.*, p. 1092.

<sup>8</sup> Philip Mason, *The Men Who Ruled India*, London, 1985, p. 387.

“keeping in being a united India which will be a willing member of the Commonwealth ready to share in its defence to the limit of her resources”.<sup>9</sup> The Cabinet Mission and the Viceroy were attracted by the possibility of Pakistan offering to be in the Commonwealth and wanted it to be given military help against India, if need be.<sup>10</sup> But by mid-April the Cabinet Mission advised the Prime Minister that Pakistan would be weak, defence of the subcontinent would be ineffective and the possibility of a common approach to foreign policy was minimal.

Hence alternative A, unitary India with a loose federation, was preferred to alternative B, divided India.<sup>11</sup> Attlee agreed that many disadvantages plagued alternative B, including the division of the army. These “grave dangers” could be partially offset if “all acknowledged a central directing authority” for defence. But alternative A remained better than B, which was “better than no agreement at all”. B was to be opted for “if it seems to be the only chance of an agreed settlement”.<sup>12</sup>

The Commander-in-Chief saw Pakistan in the Commonwealth as a liability as Britain would have to pump in troops to defend it against India. Similarly, on the advice of the British Chiefs of Staff, the Cabinet ruled out the Viceroy’s suggestion of retreat to the “Pakistan provinces” in the event of breakdown of negotiations and outbreak of anti-British hostilities.<sup>13</sup> The two grounds were that strategic interests would suffer and result in civil war. Defence interests were best served by India remaining a single unit. The Chiefs of Staff

<sup>9</sup> Memo dated 11 May 1946, *TP*, Vol. 12, pp. 800–806.

<sup>10</sup> 27 March 1946, *ibid.*, Vol. 7, pp. 13–14.

<sup>11</sup> Cabinet Mission and Viceroy to Prime Minister, 11 April 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 220–221.

<sup>12</sup> Attlee to Cabinet Mission and Viceroy, 13 April 1946, *ibid.*, p. 260.

<sup>13</sup> The Memorandum by the Under Secretary of State stated that the Plan would have all the disadvantages attached to the Muslim League’s original project of Pakistan with the added embarrassment for His Majesty’s Government that they would be inextricably involved in responsibility for maintaining the two widely separated Muslim blocks of territory: “We should neither be getting out of India nor retaining the means of maintaining an effective administration of it.” 12 June 1946, *ibid.*, p. 902.

chose to meet the challenge and send in British troops from the Middle East, Greece, Italy and Germany, if need be. This would prejudice the British position in Greece and Palestine, where the situation was poised at a delicate stage. But "if we did not follow such a policy we would undoubtedly lose considerable prestige in the Far East and in Europe".<sup>14</sup> Appealing to the United Nations or abandoning India without a solution were both out of the question as they amounted to an admission of powerlessness. As it happened, the need did not arise, as the anti-British movement which was feared did not materialize.

If future strategic interests would be better served by a united India, solution of the present political impasse required a settlement with the Congress. Labour's imperial vision was informed by the realization that erstwhile allies no longer sufficed.<sup>15</sup> A shift of stance from the days of the Simla Conference, which Jinnah was allowed to wreck, was indicated in the memorandum prepared by the Secretary of State for the Cabinet Mission. It held that bypassing the Congress was "less justifiable on merits than the opposite case".<sup>16</sup> Attlee's oft-quoted statement, that a minority would not be allowed to place a veto on the progress of the majority, confirmed the position.<sup>17</sup>

The basis of the new stance of wooing the Congress into a settlement was the understanding that a Congress movement would be more difficult to suppress than a League one. An appreciation by the Home Member to this effect, was not communicated by the Viceroy to the Cabinet Delegation.<sup>18</sup> Wavell explained to the Prime Minister that Congress cooperation would provide a better approximation to the Cabinet Mission Plan than similar cooperation by the League.<sup>19</sup> In practice, settlement with the Congress could only be achieved in the short term, i.e., by securing its participation in the Interim Government. This was because, professions of unity apart, the British were not willing to throw their weight behind unity. Since they could not

<sup>14</sup> Cabinet Defence Committee (CDC) meeting, 14 June 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 926–29.

<sup>15</sup> Gupta, "Imperial Strategy and Transfer of Power", p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> 21 February 1946, *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 1026.

<sup>17</sup> 15 March 1946, House of Commons, *Parliamentary Debates*, Hansard.

<sup>18</sup> 5 April 1946, *TP*, Vol. 7, pp. 149–51.

<sup>19</sup> 26 May 1946, *ibid.*, p. 705. Also see Wavell's "Appreciation of the Political Situation, May 1946", 30 May 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 731–37.

meet the basic demand of the Congress, they were willing to make concessions on virtually every other contentious issue in order to reach an agreement. An example was their willingness to set up a government with the Congress alone.

The Cabinet Mission came around to the view that their best bet was a Congress government with independent Muslims: "We are influenced in this by our opinion that on a long term view it will be more important to us to have good relations with the Hindus than with the Muslims."<sup>20</sup>

The Viceroy, with his usual scepticism, noted in his diary that a Congress government would merely buy time till an all round agreement was reached.<sup>21</sup> Cripps was keenest on going ahead with the Congress alone, Pethick-Lawrence was doubtful and Alexander was with the Viceroy in opposing it.<sup>22</sup>

## Divide and Quit?

His Majesty's Government had opted for united India but not ruled out Pakistan. Pakistan, with a joint Indo-Pakistan Defence Council, was accepted as the second best choice. In some quarters there was an over-willingness to opt first for what was deemed to be the second choice—Pakistan. Partha Sarathi Gupta is of the view that Wavell and the Commander-in-Chief's Secretariat were, from the beginning, willing to opt first for Pakistan, while the Commander-in-Chief and the army top brass wanted India and her armed forces as a single unit. By 1947 they, too, preferred the alternative of Pakistan, with joint defence, on the assumption (which proved to be wrong) that Pakistan would be a part of the Muslim bloc of states stretching from West Asia.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Draft undated telegram, *ibid.*, p. 746.

<sup>21</sup> 2 June 1946, *Wavell's Journal*, p. 284. The Viceroy preferred to go in for a caretaker government rather than be outmanoeuvred by the Congress into setting up a Congress government. Viceroy's note, referred to by Rankin to Turnbull, 25 June 1946, *TP*, Vol. 7, p. 1038.

<sup>22</sup> Croft to Monteath, 22 June 1946, *ibid.*, p. 1070.

<sup>23</sup> Gupta, "Imperial Strategy", pp. 27–30.

The Cabinet Mission preferred unity primarily because it served British strategic interests better, according to Partha Sarathi Gupta and Anita Inder Singh.<sup>24</sup> R.J. Moore suggests a different sequence, wherein the Mission tried to get agreement on unity only when it became clear that Indian parties would not agree upon the limits of Pakistan. The desirability of unity for strategic interests was only a secondary reason.<sup>25</sup>

Initially, as we pointed out, the Cabinet Mission and the Viceroy were attracted by the possibility of Pakistan being in the Commonwealth and contemplated supporting it militarily against India, if need be. But a broad consensus on united India emerged. There were significant exceptions. An India Office memorandum in late April 1946 accepted that impartiality was futile and the government must take sides. There was no point in supporting the Hindus "for the sake of Indian unity, which, in the absence of communal agreement is bound to break up as soon as our authority is withdrawn".<sup>26</sup> The best bet was a limited Pakistan because the Muslims were past allies and likely to be future friends as Commonwealth members. The British could remain in Pakistan till their economic and military help was needed.

In mid-1946 the Viceroy advanced the suggestion that in the event of failure to reach an agreement, retreat to the provinces that would constitute Pakistan should be preferred to the options of repression or complete withdrawal.<sup>27</sup> The premise was that the Muslims would welcome the British presence as being in mutual interest. The Viceroy was among those who believed that the British must continue to support the Muslims, who had been their best friends over the years.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10, and Singh, *Origins of Partition*, pp. 151–52.

<sup>25</sup> R.J. Moore, "Towards Partition and Independence in India", in *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* (henceforth *JCCP*), Vol. 20.2, July 1982, pp. 189–99.

<sup>26</sup> Croft and Turnbull, 25 April 1946, *TP*, Vol. 7, p. 336. Griffiths, too, argued that unity was created by the British and could be sustained only if they stayed on another 50–100 years. To Secretary of State, 3 September 1946, *TP*, Vol. 8, pp. 402–403.

<sup>27</sup> Viceroy to Cabinet Mission, 15, 22 and 30 May 1946, *TP*, Vol. 7, pp. 502–504, 657 and 931 respectively.

He confessed to distrust of the Congress, especially because of 1942, and to “much sympathy for Jinnah, who is straighter, more positive and more sincere than most of the Congress leaders”.<sup>28</sup> He was highly critical of the Secretary of State for “his usual sloppy benevolence to this malevolent old politician”,<sup>29</sup> which, he was sure, would have no positive effect.<sup>30</sup> “So far all the gifts of the Magi—the frankincense of goodwill, the myrrh of honeyed words, the gold of promises—have produced little. Indian politicians are not babes even if they do wear something like swaddling clothes.” Time and again he spoke of the dangers of “appeasement” of the Congress, raised the cry of being out-manoeuvred and tried, but without success, to get HMG to clarify how much they were willing to concede to woo the Congress.<sup>31</sup> He portrayed the Congress as a totalitarian party which intended to throw out the British and suppress the Muslims and Princes.<sup>32</sup> He was firm in his opinion that “we must if necessary accept the challenge” and refuse to “handover the Muslims”.<sup>33</sup>

Those who preferred to rely on the League pointed out its eagerness for a settlement in contrast to the Congress’ pretence at the same.<sup>34</sup> Jinnah’s intransigence before the Mission dismayed the Viceroy, who assumed the role of Jinnah’s advisor, warning him that his stance would draw the British closer to the Congress.<sup>35</sup> Churchill’s paternalistic reproach to Jinnah was in the same sympathetic vein.<sup>36</sup>

I was, however, surprised to read all the insulting things that were said about Britain at the Moslem Congress in Bombay, and how

<sup>28</sup> To King George VI, 8 July 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 1091–92.

<sup>29</sup> The reference was to Gandhi. See *Wavell’s Journal*, 3 April 1946, p. 326.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 April 1946, p. 249.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 9 April 1946, p. 240; Viceroy to Cabinet Mission, 2 and 3 June 1946, *TP*, Vol. 7, pp. 771 to 776 and 786; and Rankin’s minute on Viceroy’s note, 25 June 1946, *ibid.*, p. 1038.

<sup>32</sup> Viceroy to Cabinet Mission, 20 May 1946, *ibid.*, p. 637.

<sup>33</sup> Viceroy to Secretary of State, 24 July 1946, *TP*, Vol. 8, p. 115.

<sup>34</sup> Woodrow Wyatt’s note for the Cabinet Mission, 28 March 1946, *ibid.*, Vol. 7, pp. 22–24.

<sup>35</sup> Cabinet Mission and Viceroy’s meeting with Jinnah, 9 May 1946, *ibid.*, p. 480.

<sup>36</sup> 3 August 1946, *Churchill Papers*, quoted by Martin Gilbert, *Winston Churchill: Never Despair, 1945–65*, London, 1985, p. 248.

the Muslims were described as "undergoing British slavery". All this is quite untrue and *very ungrateful*. It also seems to be an act of great unwisdom on the part of the Muslims. The tendencies here to support the Congress are very strong in the Government party and you are driving away your friends [emphasis added].

The Viceroy, who had steadfastly opposed the formation of a Congress government sans League support, was not averse to going ahead with the League alone. The Secretary of State and Cripps, on the other hand, were clear that a caretaker government was better than a League one.<sup>37</sup> Jinnah argued for a League government on the ground that his party had accepted both the 16 May and 16 June statements.<sup>38</sup> However, even the champions of the League conceded that the Congress had declared its acceptance in a less ambiguous way than the League.<sup>39</sup> The dominant thinking in official circles, as we have seen, was that the Congress could create more trouble than the League. Hence it was vital to reach a settlement with it. But the Viceroy and other officials sympathetic to the League, who did not wish the League to be bypassed, warned their colleagues of the capacity of the League to create trouble.

## How to Be pro-Congress Without Being Anti-League

The Cabinet Mission Plan divided the provinces into three sections. Section A comprised Madras, Bombay, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Central Provinces and Orissa; Section B consisted of Punjab, Sind and NWFP and Section C comprised Bengal and Assam. Each section would meet separately to decide on the constitution for the group. The common centre would look after defence, foreign affairs and communications. A province could come out of a group after the first general elections. After 10 years, a province could ask for a reconsideration of the group

<sup>37</sup> Secretary of State to Prime Minister and Under Secretary of State, 26 June 1946, *TP*, Vol. 7, p. 1064.

<sup>38</sup> To Cabinet Mission and Viceroy, 25 June 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 1044–48.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1044.



or union constitution. The Congress was in favour of provinces having the option not to join a group in the first place, rather than waiting till the first elections to leave the group. Assam and NWFP, both Congress ruled provinces, wished to opt out of Sections B and C, which were dominated by Muslim majority states. The League wanted provinces to have the right to question the union constitution at the very outset, rather than wait for 10 years. The Mission Plan was ambivalent about whether grouping was compulsory or optional. It quibbled that sections were compulsory but grouping was optional. The attempt was to somehow keep the Congress and the League satisfied that their interpretation was upheld. In the Cabinet Mission scheme, the grouping provision was an alternative to the sovereign Pakistan demanded by Jinnah.<sup>40</sup> Groups were intended to satisfy the League and the Muslim majority provinces' desire for autonomy. The right of provinces to opt out of a group was included to accommodate the peculiar situation of the Congress-ruled provinces, NWFP and Assam, which had little in common with the other League-dominated provinces in their group. But as the grouping scheme could be grounded if provinces did not join groups in the first place, the option of the provinces to leave a group was to be exercised after the constitution was drawn up. The Mission clearly stated this in its meeting with the Viceroy on 4 May 1946.<sup>41</sup>

However, the Congress wanted the option not to join the group to be exercisable by a province at the very outset. The League insisted that provinces join their groups now and exercise their option to leave or stay after the new constitution was devised. Provincial option was interpreted by the Congress as an option not to join a group while the League limited it to an option to come out of a group at a later stage. The two stands were clearly opposed, with the Congress *for* immediate provincial option and *against* compulsory grouping.

Throwing consistency to the winds, the Mission incorporated both interpretations in their policy statements in a bid to achieve a compromise between the Congress and League positions.<sup>42</sup> The Mission's

<sup>40</sup> See R.J. Moore, *Escape from Empire*, for details of the constitutional negotiations.

<sup>41</sup> *TP*, Vol. 7, p. 414.

<sup>42</sup> Secretary of State to Jinnah, 9 May 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 469–71.

letter of 8 May 1946 to the Prime Minister began with the “Congress formulation” that a province “may remain independent of any group”, followed by the opposite interpretation that a province may come out of a group.<sup>43</sup> The Cabinet Mission chose to be ambiguous about whether grouping was compulsory or optional in the hope of somehow reconciling the irreconcilable. The discussions between the Viceroy, officials and political leaders make it evident that the ambiguity was intentional. The Prime Minister pointed out that the provincial option clause was obscure,<sup>44</sup> perhaps not realizing that it was intended to be so. The Viceroy knew better and explicitly charged the Mission with being “intentionally vague” in order to accommodate the Congress position.<sup>45</sup> Abell, who saw through the plan, warned that “if it is intended by its vague wording to get both parties into the Executive Council on two different interpretations of the statement it will only lead to trouble later”.<sup>46</sup>

As expected, the Mission’s quibbling could not yoke the League and Congress together. Jinnah charged the Mission with accepting the Congress position on grouping.<sup>47</sup> The Secretary of State’s reply that the Mission’s stand was a compromise between the Congress and League position could not satisfy him.<sup>48</sup> The Mission continued its equivocation. At the Simla Conference held on 9 May 1946, it was asserted that “no province should be compelled to remain in a group against its will”.<sup>49</sup> But an assurance to the contrary was given to the League that provincial option would be exercised only after the constitution was framed.<sup>50</sup> Cripps even tried to push the decision on grouping on to the new legislatures to be elected by adult franchise after independence.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 455.

<sup>44</sup> To Cabinet Mission, 8 May 1946, *ibid.*, p. 457.

<sup>45</sup> To Secretary of State, 2 June 1946, *ibid.*, p. 776.

<sup>46</sup> Note by Abell, 1 June 1946, *ibid.*, p. 757.

<sup>47</sup> Jinnah to Secretary of State, 8 May 1946, *ibid.*, p. 464.

<sup>48</sup> Secretary of State to Jinnah, 9 May 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 46–71.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 489.

<sup>50</sup> 16 May 1946, *ibid.*, p. 577.

<sup>51</sup> Press statement, 16 May 1946, *ibid.*, p. 597.

Soon after the Mission's 16 May statement, Gandhi sought to pin the Mission down by offering the bait of acceptance by the Congress. He wished to know if the Congress could honourably oppose grouping while welcoming the plan.<sup>52</sup> This was similar to the League's acceptance of the plan in as much as it implied Pakistan. Afraid of further concessions, the Viceroy insisted that the Mission stick rigidly to the stand already taken.<sup>53</sup> The Congress President was told that grouping was essential to the scheme but that changes of procedure were possible by agreement between the two parties.<sup>54</sup>

The clarification by the Mission that the procedure laid down in the Plan could be changed by agreement did not have the desired effect of inducing compromise. It reduced the Plan document from a final award to a working paper. It gave an invitation to the Congress and the League to go ahead with their opposed interpretations of the Plan. Nehru threatened that "the Congress were going to work for a strong centre and to break the Group system and they would succeed".<sup>55</sup> In contrast, the League accepted the Plan "in as much as the basis and foundation of Pakistan are inherent in the Mission Plan by virtue of the compulsory grouping of the six Muslim provinces".<sup>56</sup>

In mid-June the Congress President was assured that grouping was not compulsory, groups need not be formed and if they were, provinces could opt out.<sup>57</sup> The Viceroy was doubly indignant—he hated being party to wooing the Congress and would rather have Jinnah form the government. He charged the Mission with bad faith: "(either) there has been a reversal of policy which has not been agreed to or that the assurance given to Mr Gandhi is not an honest one".<sup>58</sup> He complained that he had clarified that grouping was vital to the scheme but "was asked by the Secretary of State not to press the

<sup>52</sup> 19 May 1946, *ibid.*, p. 623.

<sup>53</sup> Mission's meeting with Viceroy, 19 May 1946, *ibid.*, p. 629.

<sup>54</sup> Secretary of State to Azad, 22 May 1946, *ibid.*, p. 659.

<sup>55</sup> Cabinet Mission and Viceroy's meeting with Azad and Nehru, 10 June 1946, *ibid.*, p. 855.

<sup>56</sup> 6 June 1946 resolution, forwarded to Viceroy, *ibid.*, p. 836.

<sup>57</sup> To Azad, 15 June 1946, *ibid.*, p. 947.

<sup>58</sup> Viceroy's Note for Cabinet Mission, 25 June 1946, *ibid.*, p. 1039.

point". He was not satisfied by the Secretary of State's explanation that they had not wished to insist on grouping with Gandhi, as that would have exacerbated him.<sup>59</sup> He retorted that rejection by the Congress would have been preferable to its dishonest acceptance, which negated the fundamentals of the Plan—grouping.<sup>60</sup>

Interestingly, the Viceroy's ire was not provoked by the League's acceptance of the Plan, which was as conditional as that of the Congress. If the Congress accepted the Plan sans grouping, the League accepted the Plan to the extent that compulsory grouping laid the basis for Pakistan. This was perhaps a greater distortion of the intentions of its framers who had intended the Plan to be an alternative to Pakistan, not an intermediate stage in its establishment.

A pure Congress government was once again on the agenda after the Muslim League withdrew its acceptance of the Cabinet Mission Plan on 29 July 1946. It had greater official backing, ranging from members of the Viceroy's Executive Council to India Office officials.<sup>61</sup> Even the Viceroy stressed that "the most urgent need is for a central government with popular support".<sup>62</sup> Yet, given the Viceroy's earlier opposition, the Secretary of State reiterated HMG's position: "We feel sure that you will bear in mind when you see Nehru and in any further talks with him or other Congress leaders the paramount necessity of securing that the Interim Government does now take office".<sup>63</sup> There was vast relief in London when a Congress government was sworn in.<sup>64</sup>

From the time the Mission came out to India the Viceroy warned against being pushed by the threat of a movement into giving in to what he regarded as the extreme demands of the Congress.<sup>65</sup> He demanded that HMG clarify the policy to be followed in the event of

<sup>59</sup> Cabinet Mission's meeting with Viceroy, 25 June 1946, *ibid.*, p. 1042.

<sup>60</sup> Viceroy's Note for Cabinet Mission, 25 June 1946, *ibid.*, p. 1039; and *Wavell's Journal*, 26 June 1946, p. 306.

<sup>61</sup> Viceroy's Executive Council's meeting of 4 August 1946 and Monteath's note, 30–31 August 1946, *TP*, Vol. 8, pp. 184–85 and 358 respectively.

<sup>62</sup> To Secretary of State, 31 July 1946, *ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>63</sup> To the Viceroy, 30 August 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 352–53.

<sup>64</sup> Secretary of State to Viceroy, 28 August 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 334 and 336.

<sup>65</sup> *Wavell's Journal*, 30 March 1946, p. 232.

the Congress actually carrying out its threat of a movement. His Majesty's Government refused to contemplate the possibility. In their view the forces of moderation within the Congress desired a settlement and a movement was unlikely. They were hopeful that "the powerful element in Congress which would not want chaos any more than we do...would throw their weight against the more irresponsible elements".<sup>66</sup>

The Viceroy did not deny that the threat of an anti-British movement had receded after the Cabinet Mission had secured confidence in British intentions to quit. However, he anticipated a crisis brewing out of the growing communal tension.<sup>67</sup> This only confirmed the Secretary of State's position that there could be no blanket policy—it would depend on which quarter the threat arose from.

If a break threatened over a specific issue, HMG was willing to make concessions in order to reach a compromise. If the threat emanated from the left wing, the government would be prepared to meet the challenge and repress the movement.<sup>68</sup> Even the Viceroy, who was sceptical of the Congress' desire for a settlement, conceded that Patel and the right wing wanted to accept office and would deal firmly with their left wing after assuming responsibility.<sup>69</sup> In any case, the government could do little but await party action against "extremists", such as Jayaprakash Narayan, as they were wary of precipitating a conflict with the Congress over any issue.<sup>70</sup>

No issue was deemed beyond compromise. When the Viceroy raised the doubt that the Congress government may reverse HMG's foreign policy, particularly towards Indonesia, Tibet, Afghanistan and the Gulf, the Secretary of State urged him to go to the utmost limit to meet the Congress point of view. Alternative arrangements could

<sup>66</sup> Cabinet conclusions, 5 June 1946, *TP*, Vol. 7, p. 831.

<sup>67</sup> Viceroy's note, 29 June 1946, and Viceroy to King George VI, 8 July 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 1085 and 1091.

<sup>68</sup> Secretary of State to Viceroy, 16 July 1946, and Secretary of State to Prime Minister, 15 July 1946, enclosed in Turnbull to Croft, 16 July, 1946, *ibid.*, Vol. 8, pp. 70 and 64.

<sup>69</sup> Viceroy to Secretary of State, 5 August 1946 and 31 July 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 190–91 and 154.

<sup>70</sup> Governor's Conference, 8 August 1946, *ibid.*, p. 209.

be made by HMG to secure their foreign policy goals and the Congress demand for withdrawal of troops from Indonesia could be met with delaying tactics.<sup>71</sup> The issue of official "excesses" in 1942 could be settled with the Congress.<sup>72</sup> However, the Government must insist on continued employment of Gurkhas in the British Army.<sup>73</sup> His Majesty's Government pointed to the moderation beneath the challenging public stances of the Congress:<sup>74</sup>

It is the consistent practice of the Indian parties to take up a bargaining position well in advance of what they expect to get and we feel that it would be fatal to deal with Nehru's letter on the assumption that it is a final challenge under threat of a direct breach with Congress.

A breach was unlikely, but should such a contingency arise, the Viceroy should inform HMG in time, so that they could avert it by making further concessions. The Secretary of State was willing to accommodate the Congress position on grouping by modifying the Cabinet Mission's stand<sup>75</sup> but Alexander opposed this as being certain to incur Jinnah's displeasure, without ensuring Congress cooperation.<sup>76</sup> The Secretary of State suggested more autonomy for the provinces vis-à-vis the sections to help the Congress out with NWFP and Assam. The Viceroy preferred to break with the Congress rather than go ahead with it alone. The Secretary of State conceded that the latter may lead to communal riots and that the Congress might be unrestrained once they saw HMG giving in. If nothing worked, Nehru and Jinnah could be invited to London for talks. Failing agreement,

<sup>71</sup> 28 May 1946, Croft to Monteath, 31 May 1946, *ibid.*, Vol. 7, pp. 719–20 and 742 respectively. Also see Cabinet Paper by Bevin and Secretary of State, 30 August 1946; and Cabinet Conclusions, 4 September 1946, *ibid.*, Vol. 8, pp. 359–65 and 412–14.

<sup>72</sup> Wavell to Governors, 30 July 1946, *ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>73</sup> See Cabinet Paper by Bevin and Pethick-Lawrence, 30 August 1946, *ibid.*, p. 363.

<sup>74</sup> Pethick-Lawrence to Wavell, 26 July 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 123–24.

<sup>75</sup> Pethick-Lawrence to Wavell, 30 August 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 352–53.

<sup>76</sup> Alexander to Pethick-Lawrence, 31 August 1946, *ibid.*, p. 366.

the Congress provinces could go ahead with their constitution-making body.<sup>77</sup> It was obvious that HMG simply refused to countenance a break with the Congress.

<sup>77</sup> Secretary of State to Prime Minister, 13 September 1946, *ibid.*, p. 514.

## “Decide on a Date and Quit”

The Cripps Offer of 1942 had held out the promise of self-government after the war. Pethick-Lawrence referred to the imminent end of empire in his New Year Day address of 1946. His statement foreshadowed Attlee’s announcement on 19 February 1946 that a ministerial level Cabinet Mission would go out to India to assist Indians to devise a constitutional machinery for transfer of power. The idea of fixing a time limit of one year for British withdrawal, mooted by Cripps, did not find favour with the other members of the Mission.<sup>1</sup>

The Cabinet Mission also dismissed out of hand the “breakdown plan” devised by the Viceroy’s office to meet the contingency of a breakdown of the Congress–League negotiations. The plan contemplated province-wise withdrawal from the hostile Congress areas to the future Pakistan provinces.<sup>2</sup> The Cabinet Mission condemned it as “only a deferred scuttle plan” which “does not of itself solve any problems”.<sup>3</sup> The Cabinet was critical of both ideas of a time limit and phased withdrawal.<sup>4</sup> A specific date for departure, it was feared,

<sup>1</sup> 15 May 1946, *TP*, Vol. 7, p. 263. P.J. Griffith, representative of British business in India, tried in vain to convince the Cabinet Mission that a time limit would impart reality into their deliberations and chances of a settlement would increase, *ibid.*, p. 242.

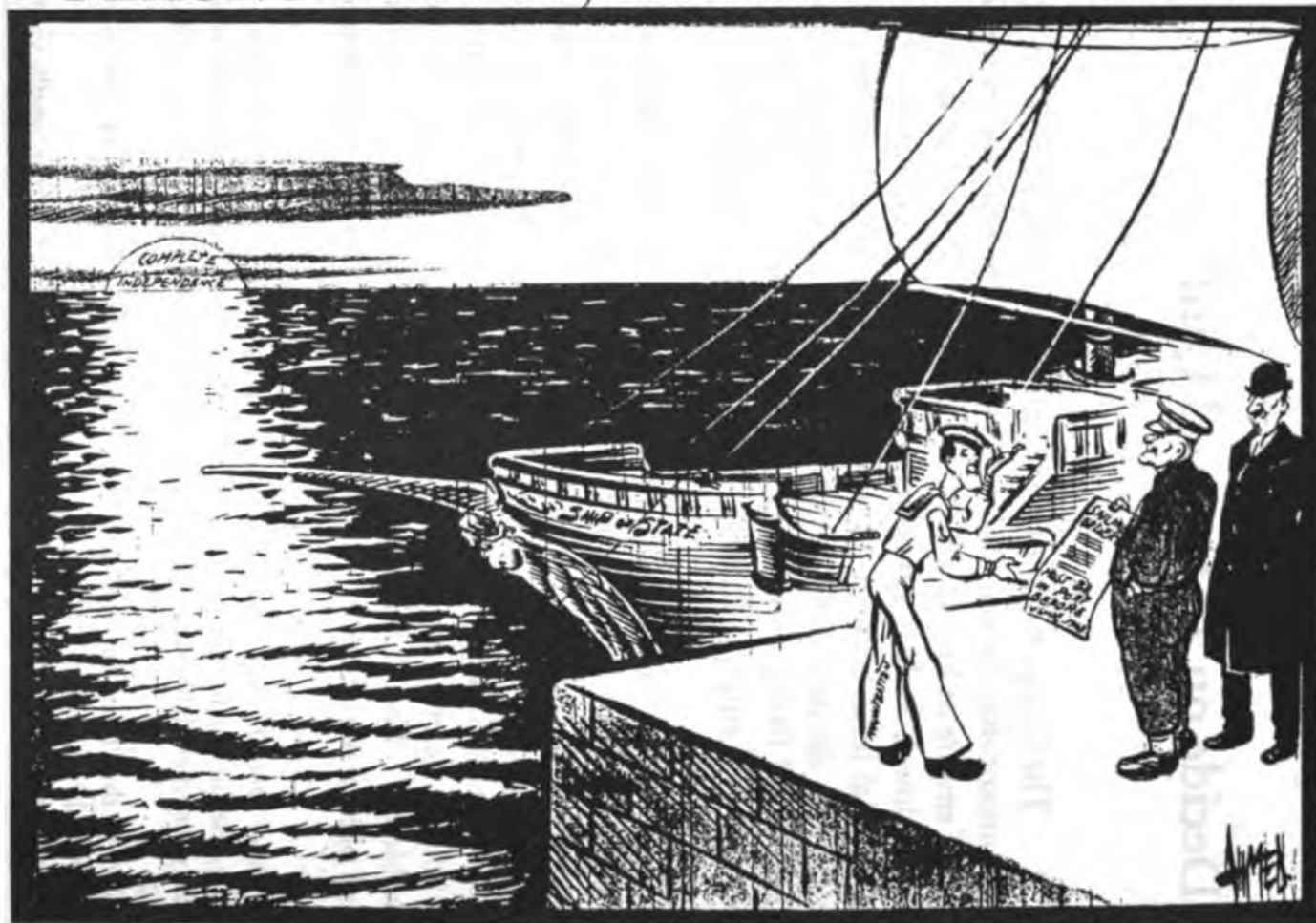
<sup>2</sup> Note by the Private Secretary to the Viceroy, 7 April 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 160–62.

<sup>3</sup> 16 May 1946, *ibid.*, p. 568.

<sup>4</sup> See Cabinet Conclusions, 5 June 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 812–19. Partha Sarathi Gupta and Moore both point out that the plan was deemed to be against British strategic



" I LAUNCHED HER, CHUM. YOU SAIL HER !"



would give an impression of weakness, which would be damaging to Britain's international position. Withdrawal to Muslim majority provinces was ruled out as being tantamount to Pakistan. Attlee reassured the Cabinet Mission that moderation would triumph in Indian politics and the crisis feared might not come soon.<sup>5</sup> In early September 1946, a "breakdown plan" was fleshed out, the contingency anticipated this time being breakdown of order, rather than breakdown of agreement.<sup>6</sup> It was once again rejected by the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State, Cabinet Mission members and India Office hands, on the grounds of parliamentary difficulties and the likelihood that it would lead to a scramble for power. The Secretary of State advised the Prime Minister against a Cabinet discussion, as a settlement was imperative for defence reasons.<sup>7</sup>

Wavell had spoken of a specific date, 31 March 1948, beyond which the government would be powerless to wield the responsibility vested in it. The date was not for quitting, it was for planning withdrawal; it was for one's own reference, not for announcement. The main rationale for winding up the Raj was the assessment that the government was unlikely to be able to wield authority after the spring of 1948. Rather than wait for that to happen, some unwanted baggage could be jettisoned from the sinking ship. With the Congress provinces offloaded, authority could be effectively wielded in the limited area.

Wavell kept up the pressure on Whitehall despite repeated rebuffs, answering criticism and reiterating the need for a policy on "how and when we are to leave India".<sup>8</sup> The pressure on him did not let up either. The deadlock between the League and the Congress over the

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defence interests and her international position, Gupta, "Imperial Strategy", p. 20; and Moore, *Escape from Empire*, p. 187.

<sup>5</sup> 6 June 1946, *TP*, Vol. 7, pp. 830–31.

<sup>6</sup> Viceroy to Secretary of State, 8 September 1946, *ibid.*, Vol. 8, p. 454.

<sup>7</sup> Secretary of State to Prime Minister, 20 September 1946, Discussion by Prime Minister, Mission members, India Office officials, 23 September 1946 and Secretary of State to Viceroy, 28 September 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 550, 570, 596 and 620 respectively.

<sup>8</sup> The Viceroy to Secretary of State, 23 and 30 October 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 501 and 531.

Constituent Assembly persisted. Jinnah insisted that the Constituent Assembly be postponed sine die till grouping was clarified. Nehru was unwilling to brook further delay in convening the Assembly or in the League's meeting the condition for participation in the Interim Government, viz., acceptance of the Cabinet Mission Plan.<sup>9</sup> The communal situation had deteriorated to virtual civil war by November 1946. The need for a policy at this critical juncture was evident.<sup>10</sup>

Attlee agreed that reassertion of British authority was impractical. In an undated note, Attlee spelt out five incontrovertible arguments against a long stay:<sup>11</sup>

In the event of a breakdown of the administration or a general alignment of the political parties against us are we prepared to go back on our policy and seek to reestablish British rule as agst. the political parties and maintain it for 18 years? The answer must clearly be no because

- (a) In view of our commitments all over the world we have not the military force to hold India agst. a widespread guerilla movement or to reconquer India.
- (b) If we had, pub. opinion in our Party would not stand for it.
- (c) It is doubtful if we could keep the Indian troops loyal. It is doubtful if our own troops would be prepared to act.
- (d) We should have world opinion agst. us and be placed in an impossible position at UNO.
- (e) We have not now the administrative machine to carry out such a policy either British or Indian.

<sup>9</sup> Viceroy's interviews with Jinnah and Nehru, 17 and 19 November 1946, *ibid.*, Vol. 9, pp. 92 and 110 respectively.

<sup>10</sup> Survey from July to October 1946 enclosed in Secretary of State's Memorandum for the India and Burma Committee, 11 November 1946, Viceroy to Secretary of State, 20 November 1946 and 27 November 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 45, 118 and 197 respectively.

<sup>11</sup> c. 13 November 1946, *ibid.*, p. 68.

The interim solution proposed by the Cabinet was to invite the leaders to London for a conference.<sup>12</sup> On his visit to London, Wavell submitted a note to the Cabinet suggesting a time-bound withdrawal.<sup>13</sup> He impressed upon His Majesty's Government that they must "accept that the Mission Plan is dead...we have only a very limited period and a very limited power to substitute fresh arrangements". He outlined three alternatives: repression, surrender to the Congress and a fresh settlement—only to rule them out. The only option remained the breakdown plan, to be implemented in the event of a political impasse. The plan would enable the government to take a firm line with the Congress, which was necessary, in his view, if a settlement was to be achieved.

Cripps initially supported the idea as he felt that power could be transferred by a fixed date only to the government that derived legitimacy from the Constituent Assembly.<sup>14</sup> The task of persuading the Muslim League to participate in the Assembly would be left to this government, should the deadlock persist, despite the Federal Court's ruling. But he withdrew his support when he realized that neither New Delhi nor London had any intention of handing over power to the Congress alone. The other Ministers, led by Attlee (whom Wavell had only two weeks earlier praised as likely to make "a notable Prime Minister"),<sup>15</sup> attacked Wavell's plan as complicated and irresponsible. They pleaded difficulty in handing over power at the Centre and control of the Indian Army in the absence of a settlement, as well as carrying legislation through Parliament.<sup>16</sup> His Majesty's Government had obviously had second thoughts, and one of them was that India needed a new Viceroy.

Wavell understood HMG's refusal to contemplate handing over India by a specific date as embedded in the imperialist vision of the ministers. In his view A.V. Alexander was "imperialistic in his outlook

<sup>12</sup> Cabinet conclusions, 25 November 1946 and Secretary of State to Viceroy, 25 November 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 166 and 170 respectively.

<sup>13</sup> *Wavell's Journal*, pp. 386–95.

<sup>14</sup> 5 December 1946, *TP*, Vol. 9, p. 275.

<sup>15</sup> *Wavell's Journal*, p. 394.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 397.

and hates the whole idea of handing over India”, while Bevin “like everyone else hates the idea of our leaving India, but like everyone else has no alternative to suggest”.<sup>17</sup> Bevin voiced his reservations in his New Year Day 1947 note to Attlee: “I am against fixing a date.”<sup>18</sup> However, not all Ministers were “imperialist”. Some wondered whether a ‘quit India’ notice should not be more flexible, given all that had to be done. Others saw the point of a specific day, especially to demonstrate sincerity about leaving, but preferred another date. None doubted the “facts”, i.e., decline of authority, the objection was to the form of presentation. His Majesty’s Government had little patience with what was in their view an imperial Viceroy masquerading as a

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 397 and 399. Lascelles, private secretary to King George VI, wrote in his diary after meeting Bevin: “he wld like to be considered a statesman with large imperial ideas”, 20 August 1943 entry, *Bevin Papers*, Churchill College, Cambridge. Bevin objected to Amery representing him “as a Christopher Columbus who had suddenly discovered the question of empire”. He sent him an extract from the proceedings of the Trade Union Congress in 1930 to confirm that his advocacy of the Empire dates back to then. Bevin to Amery, 6 October 1947, *Bevin Papers*. George Carlin “advocated an economic unification of the Commonwealth as one of the best long range routes out of our difficulties, where Little Englandism is not enough”, to Bevin, 4 September 1947, *Bevin Papers*.

<sup>18</sup> *TP*, Vol. 9, p. 420. Hugh Tinker has argued that Bevin’s pressure on Attlee was decisive: “He was only goaded into a decision to announce a date for withdrawal by a blunt challenge from Ernest Bevin calling for a firm declaration that Britain would not knuckle under.” Attlee did not question Bevin’s perspective of the post-war world in which Britain would continue to play an imperial role in Palestine, Greece and Egypt and head the new Commonwealth, domestic financial constraints and changed international position notwithstanding. He merely pointed out that Bevin had no alternative to suggest. Tinker’s contention that Bevin’s stand provoked Attlee to fix a date seems one-sided. His Majesty’s Government had decided on announcing their departure by 17 December 1946. More one-sided is Bullock’s assertion that the June 1948 date was part of a general cutting of imperial commitments, including in Burma, Palestine and Greece, in the wake of the economic disaster fuelled by the coal crisis in Britain in February 1946. This can at best explain how other concerns swamped Bevin’s opposition to his colleagues’ views on India. Wavell’s comment that HMG’s concern was “not about India, but about coal, electricity and Palestine” was apt for Bevin. See Alan Bullock, *Ernest Bevin, Foreign Secretary, 1945–51*, London, 1983, Vol. 3, p. 361; Hugh Tinker, “The Contraction of Empire in Asia, 1945–48: The Military Dimension”, in *JICH*, Vol. 16, 1988; *Wavell’s Journal*, p. 421.

Birmingham housewife prudently planning for a rainy day. Their stance was that one must be seen as having the initiative, even if one does not have it. Self-interest was to be disguised as magnanimity and transfer of power presented as the outcome of self-determination. Wavell's style—concede defeat in order to retreat at your own pace—was the inverse of HMG's method, i.e., assert success even during withdrawal under pressure from the opponent.

His Majesty's Government assumed cooperation would be forthcoming from Indians, whereas Wavell assumed opposition and even rebellion. In HMG's hands, withdrawal was transformed from a military-style step-by-step retreat to a political exercise to be conducted with great delicacy. Appearances were absolutely primary in HMG's consciousness. As early as 25 November 1946, the Secretary of State explained to Wavell that HMG did not wish to give up hope of achieving agreement between Indian parties, and certainly not publicly. They were even more unwilling to admit in Parliament that the British position would become untenable at the end of 18 months: "To do so would indeed be the most complete condemnation of our own policy and an admission of our own futility."<sup>19</sup> The minutes of the Cabinet meeting of 31 December 1946 were explicit:<sup>20</sup>

The general feeling of the Cabinet was that withdrawal from India need not appear to be forced upon us by our weakness or to be the first step in the dissolution of the Empire. On the contrary, this action must be shown to be the logical conclusion, which we welcomed, of a policy followed by successive Governments for many years.

Within two days the Cabinet Office prepared a memorandum listing the history of progressive reforms and marking the stages in self-government, with the new statement heralding the final stage.<sup>21</sup> Attlee's

<sup>19</sup> *TP*, Vol. 9, pp.170–73.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* Lockhart, Acting Governor, NWFP, wrote to Caroe, his predecessor: "What a tragedy it all is; yet perhaps things will work out all right in the end and History say we did what was right—and great", 3 August 1947, *Caroe Collection*, Mss Eur F. 203/1&2, NAI accession no. 4780, New Delhi.

<sup>21</sup> 2 June 1947, *ibid.*, pp. 441–43.

biographer, Kenneth Harris, records that Attlee's reasoning against the breakdown plan ran along the lines that the British could not leave India to chaos as that would condemn them in the eyes of people all over the world.<sup>22</sup>

His Majesty's Government dismissed out of hand both the Viceroy and his plan as beleaguered by the pessimistic and ponderous vision typical of a soldier. But they retained the idea of a time limit. Attlee packed the time limit as putty into the mould of a new initiative to be launched by the last Viceroy as the final act of bestowing self-government on the "child people" of India. In its new wrapping the withdrawal date was transformed from a weapon of manoeuvre to a grand gift.

A Cabinet India and Burma Committee memorandum of 21 December 1946 referred to the British leaving India not later than 31 March 1948. This was modified in the 4 January draft to mid-1948. The reference to winding up the Raj was dropped and stages in self-government listed instead. The next day, Wavell's plan of province-wise withdrawal by stages was replaced by the notion of a gradual but simultaneous withdrawal all over the country, till finally a skeletal administration remained. On 6 January, the Viceroy's plan was officially consigned to the shelf, as a reserve, but no alternative emergency plan was worked out, though India Office officials pointed out its need. When the Viceroy sent a plan, working out the stages of an HMG-style withdrawal from the entire country spread over a year, with separate dates for services, troops, etc., it was stowed away. Unfortunately, Mountbatten drew up no timetable till the 3 June Plan was introduced. By then it was too late to have an orderly transfer of power. The consequences of the 72-day Quit India notice, sans plan, Mountbatten style, announced on 3 June 1947, are still with us.

Wavell was dismayed at this tearing away of the fixed date from its original habitat, the plan of phased withdrawal and its being placed in the hostile terrain of a new initiative. He protested strongly that the statement, except for the mid-1948 date, was a "complete indefinite": "Nothing happens, nine-tenths of it is simply claptrap of

<sup>22</sup> Kenneth Harris, *Attlee*, London, 1982, p. 372.

the usual kind."<sup>23</sup> But knowing his voice carried little weight in Whitehall, he added that it was backed by the weighty opinion of the Governors of Punjab, Bengal and U.P. and the Commander-in-Chief.<sup>24</sup> The Governor of Bengal felt a fixed date would lead to chaos unless the League was in the government and the Constituent Assembly. The Governor of Punjab thought that the "statement will be regarded as the prelude to the final communal show-down, with everyone out to seize as much power as they can, if necessary by force". The Governor of U.P. gave the statement only a 20 per cent chance of inducing realism if coalition governments came up all over the country. The Commander-in-Chief wanted three years for the reorganization and nationalization of the army; any earlier date would mean chaos.

Even two days before the announcement, Wavell suggested that the new Viceroy should, at a later date, announce that June 1948 was the date fixed for withdrawal<sup>25</sup>—but even his desperate attempts to buy time floundered.

The differences between the Viceroy and HMG came to a head by 17 December 1946.<sup>26</sup> His Majesty's Government believed that announcement of departure would alone suffice to stall the downward decline of authority the Viceroy feared. But the latter disagreed and Mountbatten's name was proposed as Viceroy to the King that very day. Artlee approached Mountbatten while Wavell was still in London. Mountbatten was, however, hesitant to leave his newly resumed naval career and asked for terms he thought HMG would not accept—

<sup>23</sup> 10 February 1947, *TP*, Vol. 9, p. 659.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 725, 728, 746 and 734 respectively.

<sup>25</sup> 18 February 1947, *ibid.*, p. 745 and *Wavell's Journal*, p. 421.

<sup>26</sup> According to R.J. Moore, the differences over the date between Wavell and HMG were rooted in sharply varied approaches to the Indian problem. Wavell feared Congress Raj would become a *fait accompli* through the continuance of drift and lead to renegeing of pledges to the minorities. But HMG was willing to transfer power to the Congress as long as it was peaceful and their long-term interests were safeguarded. Moore's position, which is in obvious sympathy with the Viceroy's, is contestable. Partha Sarathi Gupta rightly points out that the problem was that HMG refused to make a choice of an option, such that in the elusive pursuit of multiple options finally none were left.



declaration by HMG that he was the last Viceroy and an invitation from Indian leaders to come out as Viceroy.<sup>27</sup> Attlee decided to clinch the Mountbatten deal before the year was out and had him brought back by special plane from a Christmas holiday in Europe. Attlee wrote to Wavell sometime after 8 January 1947, asking him home. The idea was to force his resignation, or so felt Wavell: "cold, ungracious and indefinite, the letter of a small man."<sup>28</sup> The King's approval, asked for on the 17th, came on 29 January and a letter, not mentioning Mountbatten, was sent off to Wavell, informing him that his war-time appointment as Viceroy was drawing to a close.

Attlee referred to the wide divergence of views on policy between HMG and the Viceroy as necessitating a new man for the job. Wavell himself felt he was too small a man for the job and was depressed and strained. But he spoke with dignity of the flaying of the prestige of the great office of Viceroy by his sacking, which was at the very least unceremonious and not very courteously done.<sup>29</sup> Wavell tartly corrected Attlee that the difference lay in "my wanting a definite policy and HMG refusing to give one". Even at the end of March 1947, the Viceroy's staff had little idea of the new policy, or so Wavell thought, and he continued to advise the Cabinet at his last meeting with them to make detailed arrangements for partition.<sup>30</sup>

But who's afraid of a dismissed Viceroy? Attlee drafted a telegram to Wavell<sup>31</sup> wherein he accused the latter of disowning paternity of the time limit. Attlee argued that as the ministers opposed to it had

<sup>27</sup> Mountbatten to Attlee, 20 December 1946, *TP*, Vol. 9, p. 396.

<sup>28</sup> *Wavell's Journal*, p. 410.

<sup>29</sup> Even the date of announcement was only shifted to the afternoon of the 20th after his asking that he be saved some embarrassment at his daughter Felicity's wedding that morning. Gossip has it that many of the 800 guests knew that his head was to roll and some even kept back the expensive gifts they now saw no point in giving to an old, retired soldier's daughter, *TP*, Vol. 9, pp. 577 and 582.

<sup>30</sup> *Wavell's Journal*, pp. 403, 417, 432 and 434.

<sup>31</sup> 17/18 February 1947, *TP*, Vol. 9, p. 747. Attlee had informed Wavell on 21 December 1946 that his view had been accepted, by which he meant the need for a statement and a time limit. The Cabinet India and Burma Committee agreed that the 6 December 1946 statement had not got the League into the Constituent Assembly and a further statement was needed, 11 and 20 December 1946 meetings, *ibid.*, pp. 332 and 391.

acquiesced in the face of Wavell's insistence and his better knowledge as the man on the spot, Wavell could hardly reject as illegitimate the very child he had fathered. The telegram was imbued with the same exasperation and misrepresentation (deliberate perhaps) that flavoured most of Attlee's reactions to Wavell. Needless to say, it was most unfair of Attlee to insist that Wavell must sink or sail with the boat he set afloat in another stream. Attlee described the "central point" of Wavell's plan as a fixed date, which again was wrong. The fixed date idea, yoked to a carriage choked with pretenders to the throne, was totally different from Wavell's conception of it as the faithful horse carrying the weary rider home from the outposts of empire.

Attlee constantly distorted Wavell's position, especially when presenting it to others. First, he saw the breakdown plan as a military retreat, which it was not. Second, it was seen as an admission of failure, whereas it sought to arrest futility and despair by wresting the initiative with a declaration that departure would be at a pace and in a manner decided by the imperial masters; they would not flee in fear of the time bomb ticking away, its fuse lit by the communal flare-up. Third, Attlee questioned Wavell's assumption of a hostile reaction from the Indian people during withdrawal.<sup>32</sup> Wavell had in fact assumed the continuance of Congress ministries even in the areas under British control, as well as regional cooperation between provinces, whether independent or not. Fourth, when explaining HMG's policy, Attlee did not inform the Prime Ministers of the Dominions that Wavell envisaged province-wise withdrawal.<sup>33</sup> This gave a vagueness to Wavell's proposals that was not there. Fifth, Attlee painted a fairly lurid picture of a defeatist Viceroy both in his telegram of 17/18 February 1947 to Wavell and in the Cabinet meeting of 18 February.<sup>34</sup>

To whom then does one assign parentage of the time limit? Wavell had put forward 31 March 1948 as the date by which the Raj should be wound up. By 17 December 1946 Attlee had accepted the general idea of a time bound departure—the day Mountbatten's name was

<sup>32</sup> 8 January 1947, *ibid.*, p. 490.

<sup>33</sup> 13 February 1947, *ibid.*, p. 701.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 747 and 750 respectively.

suggested as Viceroy to the King. A draft memorandum of the Cabinet India and Burma Committee incorporated the specific date, 31 March 1948, which was later modified to mid-1948.<sup>35</sup>

Mountbatten insisted that a date was crucial in his letter to the Prime Minister on 3 January 1947 (and not 11 February as Anita Inder Singh would have it).<sup>36</sup> Attlee, who was agreeable to the general idea, preferred mid-1948 to a specific day. "Mid-1948" was duly incorporated in the draft policy statement of 4 January 1947.<sup>37</sup> Mountbatten pared down mid-1948 to June 1948,<sup>38</sup> (and not second half of 1948 to June 1948 instead of December 1948, as Campbell Johnson would have it),<sup>39</sup> arguing that Indian leaders would be given the 1 June date, whereas he would actually have till the end of the month, if he needed. Cabinet agreement came on 13 February<sup>40</sup> and the 20 February statement assigned 30 June 1948 as the last day of the Raj. The parentage of the fixed date was clearly mixed, Mountbatten's tall claims notwithstanding.<sup>41</sup>

Dissenting voices in the Cabinet were many, and to different aspects of the draft statement, to the specificity of the time limit, to the timing of its announcement and to the suggestion of transfer of power to other than a central authority. However, be it Bevin with his dreams of world influence, Cripps with his faith in the Congress, or Smuts, implacably imperial, they acquiesced in the face of Attlee and Co.'s poser: Do you have an alternative?

Attlee's preference for "mid-1948", rather than Wavell's 31 March or Mountbatten's June 1948, suggested that he recognized the need

<sup>35</sup> 21 December 1946, *TP*, Vol. 9, p. 397.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 451 and PM to Mountbatten, 9 January 1947, *ibid.*, p. 491.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 454.

<sup>38</sup> To Cripps, 26 January 1947, *ibid.*, p. 553.

<sup>39</sup> Campbell Johnson, *Mission with Mountbatten*, London, 1972, p. 16.

<sup>40</sup> *TP*, Vol. 9, p. 688.

<sup>41</sup> Mountbatten later claimed that though Attlee took credit for it, the time limit idea was his. If he had not insisted, the British might still be out there in India! See Dominique Lapierre and Larry Collins, *Mountbatten and the Partition of India*, pp. 15–16 and 37. For Anita Inder Singh the weightier reason for the government's accepting the fixed date was the weak administration in India. Mountbatten's insistence acted as the immediate pressure. Singh, *Origins of Partition*, pp. 212–13.

for a somewhat flexible timetable but accepted a specific date on the ground that it would convince Indians that there was no going back. There were two considerations in opposing too specific a date, the first being that it might mean handing over to chaos, if no responsible government existed. This was the fear of Viscount Addison, Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, echoed by others and assuaged by adding the words, "to responsible Indian hands". Addison argued for a two-year time limit, instead of a date, which would give the government some space for manoeuvre. His suggestion was not taken up, perhaps because the dramatic impact of a date was deemed greater.<sup>42</sup>

The second consideration was that handing over power would involve tortuous negotiations and a protracted process of Indianization, not to speak of the wrangles should division be decided upon. The voices were strongest from within the Government of India, with virtually each official pointing to the impossibility of winding up his department in the given time. The Commander-in-Chief wanted three years, without division, while the Punjab Governor needed four years for his province to be divided peacefully.<sup>43</sup>

The debate in the House of Commons was a stormy one.<sup>44</sup> Attlee made the policy announcement in the Commons but it fell to Cripps to make the keynote speech. His Majesty's Government had decided on a double-edged strategy, the carrot of friendship and unity for the dreamers and visionaries and the stick of impending powerlessness for the realists. Neither worked. The latter was the incontrovertible argument—that India could not be held any longer. This was the natural outcome of stopping recruitment, a decision taken early in the war with the concurrence of the Conservatives. An apparent choice was offered, that of continuing British rule for a couple of decades more, if men, money and troops could be poured in and force used to compel consent. It was so obviously a non-option, for all knew that the necessary willpower, manpower and money did not exist. It had a curious impact—an alternative that only proved that there was no alternative. It also served as a whipping boy, who was occasionally

<sup>42</sup> Cabinet conclusions, 18 February 1947, *TP*, Vol. 9, pp. 748–52.

<sup>43</sup> *Wavell's Journal*, p. 410.

<sup>44</sup> House of Commons debate, 6 March 1947, *ibid*.

pushed into the opposition fold by the government, branded as Conservative and then beaten for having not so honourable designs on India. Conservatives patiently pointed out that they supported self-government but questioned both the assessment on which the decision to leave in a hurry was based and the manner of conceding independence.<sup>45</sup>

The irony was that an appearance-conscious HMG had to admit in Parliament to loss of initiative and authority, after opposing Wavell's plan on the ground that it would be an admission of failure. This was the only unanswerable argument for winding up the Raj and by a particular day at that. In fact, HMG used three arguments—the time limit was needed to convince Indians of our sincerity about leaving India; the time limit will shock Indians into agreement; the time limit is the date beyond which we cannot stay on. The first one was weak with overuse, as Scarborough pointed out. Every policy initiative in the past two years, be it the sending of the Cabinet Mission or the setting up of the Interim Government had all been argued for on this ground. The second prop collapsed with the first blow. Logic was not on HMG's side, for disunity seemed a likelier prospect given a time limit. Despite HMG's assertion that it would bring agreement, the statement that power would be transferred to responsible government(s) and not to whoever is at the centre, would invite disunity.

Only their majority carried Labour through the Commons. Cripps took up the argument of decline in authority and put it to good use in his 5 March 1947 speech in the Commons.<sup>46</sup> Lord Hailey, with his long experience of India, clarified that the situation was one of "running down" rather than breakdown of administration and this could be reversed, given time to train new recruits. Anderson, in the

<sup>45</sup> "Why hand over to Congress" was the question asked by Thomas Moore, Churchill and Walter Smiles. Walter Smiles felt the "present political leaders would vanish like Kerensky", while Churchill likened Congressmen to "men of straw".

<sup>46</sup> Stafford Cripps' position was most ironic. He had strongly opposed the idea of a time limit in the Cabinet when he realized it went against the emergence of a united India. But it fell to him to take the lead in the Commons debate on which, paradoxically, Godfrey Nicolson commented: "If ever there was a speech which was a direct invitation to the Muslim League to stick their toes in and hold out for Pakistan, that was one".

Commons, suggested seconding officials from the home services and army and police for a while. Both these arguments questioned first the limiting of options to two—reinforce or wind up—and then to one, quit, because the first was impractical and inadvisable. Hailey's second point was more significant, though taken less note of. He declared that the services aspect was not decisive at all, it was being made out to be so, because the government did not want to face up to the facts. The facts were that the League had refused to come into the Constituent Assembly and the Congress threatened revolution. Both those were threats which had to be met, not surrendered before. As far as the Congress went, it had initiated revolution in 1942 but the British had met the challenge then and should do the same now. Templewood questioned the argument that a fixed date and a breakdown plan would infuse spirit into the services. He feared that the services would react adversely to an announcement that "the steel frame" would be scrap metal after 15 months. Their already strained loyalty would be under greater stress if the Secretary of State withdrew support.

The specificity of the time limit was flayed in Parliament and modifications offered. John Anderson, an old India hand, retained the idea of a date, but as one till which agreement on a unitary succession could be awaited. If that did not happen, Britain would transfer power at a pace she deemed fit. Anderson's suggestion of delinking the date from withdrawal and linking it with agreement alone, letting the former take its own time, put an onus on agreement, whereas the statement, by waiting on agreement, encouraged disagreement. Viscount Cranbourne asked: "Why did they fix so early a date so as to make success almost impossible?"

The opposition was at two levels—one, questioning the likelihood of unity and positing divisiveness in its place and the other pointing to the danger of handing over to chaos. Speaker after speaker advanced the first argument, Templewood and Hailey in the Lords and Churchill, Anderson, Raikes, Nicolson and Brigadier Low in the Commons. The hope that the parties would be shocked into agreement was believed to be a fond hope; rather, an onus was placed on secession, with divisive forces encouraged to dig their toes in and wait for the appointed hour to see their dreams realized. Templewood

warned of creating ten British Indias, as separatist elements would become “more isolationist than ever”: “Can the government have had it in mind that the statement of a definite date would lead to the separation of the various parts of India? On the face of it looks almost as if they had.” Churchill laid the same charge: “The Government by their 14 months time limit have put an end to all prospect of Indian unity.... A time limit is imposed, a king of guillotine!”

Those who warned of chaos were afraid of greater fragmentation. Addison had expressed the doubt in the Cabinet whether a responsible government(s) would exist by June 1948. R.A. Butler in the Commons had echoed Addison’s very words while Nicolson added: “In June 1948, chaos will be set up by Act of Parliament.” In the Lords, Newall, Middleton and Cranbourne had raised the spectre of anarchy—“I am afraid that we have only seen the beginning of bloodshed of a sort that would make the operations of Shivaji and his Maharatta hordes look like something of a picnic”. Churchill was devastatingly acerbic, as usual, when he likened HMG’s policy to a Gandhian Quit India notice of the 1942 “Do or Die” type—“leave India to God or, in modern parlance, to anarchy”: “There, as far as I can see, is a statement indistinguishable from the policy His Majesty’s Government are determined to pursue.”

The Congress demand that the League join the Constituent Assembly or leave the Interim Government, became an additional, though important factor, in making a policy statement. As the Muslim League persisted with its stand of not participating in the Constituent Assembly, the Congress demanded that in that case the League should withdraw from the Interim Government, as the two were integral parts of the Mission Plan.<sup>47</sup> Neither the Viceroy nor HMG could deny the logical validity of the Congress demand.<sup>48</sup> HMG could only advise the Viceroy to play for time and appeal to the Congress not to insist on their point in the interests of the country.<sup>49</sup> The rider

<sup>47</sup> Nehru and others to Viceroy, 5 February 1947, *TP*, Vol. 9, p. 622.

<sup>48</sup> Jalal, however, does and interprets it as the unwillingness of Congress to share power with the League in a weak centre, Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman*, p. 245.

<sup>49</sup> Secretary of State to Viceroy, 5 February 1947 and Memo by Secretary of State, 6 February 1947, *TP*, Vol. 9, pp. 634 and 622.

was—how was the appeal to be justified? Those planning policy tried to shape the 20 February statement into a double-edged tool which would meet the Viceroy's demand for a policy and the Congress demand for the ouster of the League by turning their sights towards the prospect of freedom by a predetermined date. If it did neither, it would at least gain time for HMG.

This idea of the announcement of a fixed date for withdrawal seems to have developed between 6 and 14 February, for on the latter date the Secretary of State wrote to the Viceroy that "he should ask Nehru to await our answer in our proposed statement".<sup>50</sup> The argument given by Attlee for the urgency of the statement was that the Congress was pressing for a statement on the League's position, and as a separate statement could not be framed in a hurry, the present one must suffice.<sup>51</sup> In Parliament, Cripps and Pethick-Lawrence presented the statement as a response both to decline in authority and the quit notice served by the Congress on the League.

The basic flaw in the 20 February statement was its ambiguity on the issue of a successor authority. Despite conceding the possibility of more than one successor state and refusing to define "responsible government" as the one emanating from the Constituent Assembly, HMG denied that they accepted Pakistan and continued to harp on Indian unity. As in the case of the Cabinet Mission Plan, there was a deliberate obscurity to allow for counterposed perceptions of the proponents of unity and division in India and Britain.<sup>52</sup> Once again two contradictory conceptions had been yoked together—a time limit to set the Congress sights on imminent independence and talk of transferring power to responsible government(s) to keep the bait of Pakistan dangling before the League.

The League's reading of the statement was that provincial governments would inherit power if there was no agreement at the Centre

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 712.

<sup>51</sup> Cabinet India and Burma Committee and Cabinet meetings, 17 and 18 February 1947, *ibid.*, p. 748. For text of 20 February statement see *ibid.*, pp. 773–75.

<sup>52</sup> According to Hailey, Congress was confident that they could handle the Muslims while the League was confident it could get Pakistan. Also see Moore, *Escape from Empire*, p. 222.



and duly made a bid for power in the Punjab. The Punjab Governor had cautioned that the statement amounted to an “invitation to warring parties to make real war upon one another”.<sup>53</sup> The Congress leaders welcomed the statement as proof of British sincerity to quit. Nehru promptly extended the hand of cooperation to Liaquat: “The British are fading out of the picture and the burden of decision must rest on all of us here. It seems desirable that we should face this situation squarely and not speak to each other from a distance.”<sup>54</sup> The distance remained but the crisis in the Interim Government was temporarily defused.

Gandhi felt that the statement could be oriented in a direction favourable to the Congress, despite its holding out the possibility of Pakistan. Those parts wishing to be independent of the British, i.e., the Congress provinces, were free to do so, just as those who wanted Pakistan might get it. Much depended on the Constituent Assembly and the Interim Government and on the Congress provinces, who, “if wise, will get what they want”.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>53</sup> 16 February 1947, *TP*, Vol. 9, p. 728. Anita Inder Singh has termed the statement a “conspicuous failure”, as it virtually declared the Assembly dead, besides making the “Unionist ministry politically irrelevant”: “The fixing of a terminal date for the Raj in the 20 February statement, far from leading to an agreement between the League and the Congress proved the signal for an attempt to carve out Pakistan by direct action by the League”, *Origins of Partition*, p. 214. In Moore’s view, “the 20 February statement exacerbated communal disorder in Northern India”. The fall of the Punjab ministry was followed by League assertion in NWFP and immigration of Bengali Muslims into Assam. *Escape from Empire*, p. 239. In Jalal’s view, “London had placed a time bomb under an already tottering administrative structure and had now lit the fuse”. The consequences for Jinnah were adverse. The date was a blow to him, as he needed time to get the Congress to concede his demands. But there was an identity of interests between British and the Congress on quick independence. Both were afraid that delay in transferring power would mean losing control, for the former over the country, for the latter over the party and country. Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman*, p. 243–44.

<sup>54</sup> 9 March 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, p. 69. According to Moore, Congress saw the statement as a go-ahead signal for constitution making, with units unwilling to be in the Union given the option to secede from it, but only after the Union was functional. *Escape from Empire*, p. 222.

<sup>55</sup> To Nehru, 24 February 1947, *MGCW*, Vol. 87, p. 12.

## “Divide and Quit”

The failure of the 20 February 1947 statement to force the two parties to come together confronted Mountbatten on his arrival. Mountbatten had a clear-cut directive to explore the options of unity and division till October 1947, after which he was to advise HMG on the form transfer of power should take. He was also directed to try and keep India in the Commonwealth.

### Commonwealth Solution to Post-imperial Interests

The need for a defence alliance and orderly transfer of power to a friendly united India was stressed by HMG from the time when transfer of power assumed urgency on the official agenda. This was in early 1946, before the Cabinet Mission idea took final shape. The Cabinet laid down a veritable condition that the solution to the Indian problem must satisfy economic and defence interests.<sup>1</sup> Attlee had wanted the Mission to indicate that HMG would welcome India in the Commonwealth but would respect her wishes if she chose not to join and have a defence treaty instead.<sup>2</sup> The Mission ruled out raising the question directly: “We are all of the opinion that there is a fair chance of securing what we want provided we do not force the issue

<sup>1</sup> 14 January 1946, *TP*, Vol. 6, pp. 788–89.

<sup>2</sup> Attlee to Cabinet Mission, 14 May 1946, *ibid.*, Vol. 7, pp.555–57.

# DRASTIC REMEDY



and the approach to us is allowed to come about in an entirely voluntary and spontaneous way."<sup>3</sup> The Cabinet reluctantly agreed to the Mission's argument that the "less we appear to insist upon it the more likely it is to happen".<sup>4</sup>

An appreciation of the strategic value of India to the British Commonwealth of Nations prepared by the Chiefs of Staff (India) Committee in the Commander-in-Chief's Secretariat was sent by the Viceroy to the Secretary of State in mid-July 1946. India's geographical location and her industrial capacity and manpower placed her in an advantageous position where she could meet many strategic requirements. India would serve as an essential link in air communication; she had an army of a quarter million besides an almost inexhaustible supply of manpower; and her economic prospects were extremely good.<sup>5</sup> Auchinleck's paper met the same fate as his earlier memorandum dated 11 May 1946, waived away by General Mayne as "sound but academic".<sup>6</sup> It remained with the Chiefs of Staff Committee of the Cabinet.<sup>7</sup> Ismay was directed to write a minute for the Prime Minister to the effect that, as a sovereign India was unlikely to sign a defence treaty, "from the military point of view it was as nearly vital as anything could be to ensure that India remained within the Commonwealth".<sup>8</sup>

By October 1946 an anti-Commonwealth undertow (in Moore's words)<sup>9</sup> developed in Whitehall, with some officials of the India Office joining the Foreign, Colonial and Dominions Offices in preferring a treaty to Commonwealth membership. However, the army top leadership prevailed. The last Viceroy's directive, dated 11 February 1947, expressed the hope that India would be in the Commonwealth.<sup>10</sup> Ismay, now Mountbatten's chief aide, stressed at a meeting of repre-

<sup>3</sup> 15 May 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 557-59.

<sup>4</sup> Cabinet Mission to PM, 15 May 1946 and Cabinet Conclusions, 16 May 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 565 and 572-73.

<sup>5</sup> 13 July 1946, *ibid.*, Vol. 8, pp. 49-57.

<sup>6</sup> See Appendix to *ibid.*, Vol. 12.

<sup>7</sup> Croft and Montearth's note, 12-13 August, *ibid.*, pp. 223-24.

<sup>8</sup> 30 August 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 348-50. See Tinker, "The Contraction of Empire".

<sup>9</sup> Moore, *Escape from Empire*, pp. 223-30.

<sup>10</sup> *TP*, Vol. 9, p. 365.

sentatives of the Dominions, Foreign, Colonial, Burma and India Offices, that “every effort should be made to keep India in the Commonwealth and that the main objective in the next 18 months should be to get friendly relations with India in the subsequent period. When the Indians found themselves independent, they might well want to stay in the Commonwealth”.<sup>11</sup> The Cabinet Committee authorized the Viceroy to encourage moves by Indian leaders to this effect.

## Congress and Commonwealth Membership

The very idea of Commonwealth membership was an anathema to the Congress because of India’s colonial past. The Cabinet Mission had recognized this as “a red rag to a bull” and advised that the issue not be raised.<sup>12</sup> A year later, Mountbatten’s impression was more hopeful: “I feel that they are beginning to see that they cannot go out of the Commonwealth but they cannot afford to say that they will stay in; they are groping for a formula.”<sup>13</sup> The External Affairs Secretary, too, felt that Nehru’s dilemma was how to reconcile India’s interest in remaining in the Commonwealth with the party’s public stand on “complete independence”.<sup>14</sup> In his talk with Baldev Singh in April 1947, Nehru agreed that “India must go out of the British Commonwealth” (as “Britain is incapable of defending India in the future and the main result of being in the Commonwealth would be to drag us into the Commonwealth’s foreign politics and animosities”) but agreed that membership on the basis of independence could be negotiated.<sup>15</sup>

Congress, however, hesitated to take the initiative, for fear of criticism by its followers, just as did HMG, for fear of being dubbed imperialist. A way out could be HMG’s acceptance of the Congress demand for immediate dominion status. The motivation of the Congress was that only an immediate assumption of power and

<sup>11</sup> 11 March 1947, *ibid.*, p. 522.

<sup>12</sup> Cabinet Mission to PM, 15 May 1946, *ibid.*, Vol. 7, p. 565.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Nehru, 24 March 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 10, pp. 11–13.

<sup>14</sup> Weightman’s report of his interview with Nehru, 18 April 1947, *ibid.*, p. 320.

<sup>15</sup> Viceroy’s staff meetings, 18 and 19 April 1947, *ibid.*, pp. 313–14 and 328–30.

responsibility could stall the civil war. Mountbatten hoped to use this demand to keep India within the Commonwealth, even if temporarily.

Another opportunity used by Mountbatten was Congress anxiety that British troops be available to the newly independent Indian state. Rajagopalachari, Baldev Singh and V.K. Krishna Menon asked Mountbatten (interestingly, within the space of two days) if British troops would stay on. Throwing honesty to the winds, Mountbatten took the line that no British officer would be interested in becoming "an adventurer in the Indian Services"; however, if India joined the Commonwealth, officers could serve India while retaining the King's Commission. Justifying it as tactics, Mountbatten went on to make the completely false statement (to C. Trivedi) that HMG was likely to refuse India's request for membership, as an underdeveloped country could only be a liability: "India had everything to gain by remaining in and we had nothing whatever to lose by her going out". He also played on Indian fears that they might be at a disadvantage vis-à-vis Pakistan if the latter received British military help under Commonwealth auspices. Then Mountbatten very generously offered to help India out with HMG, describing himself as one of those rare "sentimental fools", like the King, who wished India to be in the Commonwealth. However, Congress was to make the first move by postponing, for five years, the implementation of the Constituent Assembly resolution, declaring India an independent sovereign republic.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Mountbatten's interview with Baldev Singh, 16 April 1947; Mountbatten to Rajaji, 11 April 1947; Mountbatten to C. Trivedi, 15 April 1947; and Mountbatten's interview with V.K.K. Menon, *ibid.*, Vol. 10, pp. 284-86, 194-96, 260-61 and 310-13 respectively. Interestingly, Churchill had taken the same line (in a draft reply to Jinnah's letter of 22 August 1946) that Britain would lose little if India scorned the Commonwealth, but India would lapse into civil war, cited in Gilbert, *Churchill*, p. 276. Mountbatten's diplomacy is discussed in W.H. Morris-Jones, "The Transfer of Power, 1947, A View from the Sidelines", *MAS*, 16.1, 1982, pp. 1-32; R.J. Moore, "Mountbatten, India and the Commonwealth", *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* (henceforth *JCCP*), Vol. 19.1, 1981, pp. 5-43; and Hugh Tinker, "Jawaharlal Nehru at Simla, May 1947", in *MAS*, Vol. 4.4, 1970, pp. 349-58.

## Commonwealth as “Informal Empire”?

How realistic was HMG’s conception of the Commonwealth (with India at its centre) restoring to Britain her lost imperial power?<sup>17</sup> Tomlinson has dismissed it as the “war time fantasies of the Commonwealth acting as a strategic ‘third force’ in world affairs”—in any case, according to him, India was not important in this plan. Partha Sarathi Gupta considers the British aim of recovering world power an “illusion”, given her economic position, weakened by the U.S. loan and the domestic crisis of 1946–47. Bullock, Bevin’s biographer, points out that Labour’s plan of transforming the Empire into a Commonwealth was dashed by the economic crisis of February 1947 but Britain chose to nurse the illusion of a continuing imperial role on the strength of India and Pakistan staying in the Commonwealth.<sup>18</sup> His Majesty’s Government certainly failed to meet Halifax’s hope—“the real seal of achievement will be of course if you can hold them in the Commonwealth on terms as nearly analogous to those of Dominions as circumstances permit”.<sup>19</sup> Commonwealth defence plans failed to take off, primarily because of post-partition hostilities and India’s

<sup>17</sup> Churchill said in April 1945: “We could hold our own only by our superior state craft and experience and above all, by the unity of the Commonwealth.” “There is perhaps no other country in the world potentially more important to us, except the United States, than India with its vast population, immense trading possibilities and key position in Asia”, Lord Privy Seal’s memo, 3 November 1947, cited in Anita Inder Singh, “Keeping India in the Commonwealth: British Political and Military Aims, 1947–49”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 20.3, 1985: 469–81. The nursing of the illusion of world power was pathetic—when an American speaker dismissed Britain as “down and out” at a meeting in Bombay in November 1947, the Deputy High Commissioner of the United Kingdom noted with satisfaction that the remark was rebutted by Sir Homi Mody and that the audience echoed the sentiments. T. Shone, Office of the High Commissioner for the UK, New Delhi, dispatch no. 132, 26 November 1947, to Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, London, Pol. (S) 936/1947, IOR L/P&J/12/297.

<sup>18</sup> Tomlinson, “Indo-British Relations in the Post Colonial Era” Balances Negotiations, *JICH*, Vol. 13.3, 1984–85, pp. 142–62; Gupta, “Imperial Strategy”, and Bullock, *Bevin*, p. 114.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in R.F. Holland, “The Imperial Factor in British Strategies from Attlee to Macmillan, 1945–63”, *JICH*, Vol. 12.2, 1984, pp. 168–69.

non-alignment. By 1951 HMG had given up hope in the Commonwealth solution to post-imperial interests. A military alliance with Pakistan and the senior partnership of the U.S. were quietly accepted.<sup>20</sup> In the final analysis, what did Britain gain by India's Commonwealth membership?

It suited Britain ideally in 1947 to have India and Pakistan remain in the Commonwealth, albeit for their own reasons. On it rested the whole edifice of the "graceful withdrawal from India", by which Britain laid so much store. That ex-colonies, just becoming free, throwing off the colonial yoke, should wish to retain ties with the mother country by being in the Commonwealth, showed up Britain in a beautifully benign light. India's and Pakistan's decision to stay set a precedent, which was followed by colonies that became independent later. More material benefits accrued. British civilians could continue to serve in India without any break in service. Most left but a few served on till the late 1960s. This was no small advantage, considering the initial absence of any commensurate opening for them at home. British commercial interests too got a further lease of life. They were spared nationalization and externment and only underwent slow Indianization and gradual phasing out. The process of extracting India from the Empire was potentially as complicated a job as separating Pakistan from India. The Commonwealth membership gave the necessary breathing space, provided the transitional institutional arrangement within whose rather flexible limits knotty issues, such as the continued employment, payment and compensation of the services and armed forces and the sterling balances repayment could be sorted out. Had India's separation from Britain been rushed by a countdown calendar, Mountbatten style, to full severance, the consequences for Britain and India could have been disastrous.

The 1935 Act, which, as Jayprakash Narayan put it, went begging for shelter in the streets of Patna in 1937, provided the constitutional continuity till India's new constitution was framed. Dominion Status, its function over, was buried once the new sovereign republic was

<sup>20</sup> Singh, "Keeping India in the Commonwealth", and Anita Inder Singh, "Post Imperial British Attitudes to India, The Military Aspect, 1947-51", *The Round Table*, 296, October 1985, pp. 360-75; and Gupta, "Imperial Strategy".



inaugurated on 26 January 1950. Commonwealth membership was delinked from dominion status and a new category of non-dominion members evolved. But with it the Commonwealth ceased to be an *avatar* of Empire in any sense. The unity of interests, which bound the white, English-speaking dominions, did not extend to the “brown and black” colonies. The pursuit of common political, military and economic ends was the rationale for the Commonwealth. India changed it all. The Commonwealth was reduced from a comprehensive association of nations to a sort of club. When the Commonwealth basked in the glory of Nehru’s world stature in the mid-1950s, he, rather than the British Prime Minister, could be said to be its real head. Was the new Commonwealth that emerged serviceable to British ends? A loose confederation, swamped by “brown” and “black” ex-colonies, was it more a third world forum in its composition than an offshoot of the white man’s Empire? India pursued a distinct, though broadly defined, non-aligned policy. Commonwealth membership did not draw India any further into the Western imperialist bloc.

## Divide and Quit?

Mountbatten soon discovered that he had little real choice: “at this early stage I can see little common ground on which to build any agreed solution for the future of India”.<sup>21</sup> The broad contours of the scenario that was to emerge were discernible even before he came out. Mountbatten found out within a month of his arrival that more flogging would not push the Cabinet Mission Plan forward, it was a dead horse. Jinnah was obdurate that the Muslims would settle for nothing less than a sovereign state. Mountbatten found himself unable to move Jinnah from this stand: “He gave the impression that he was not listening. He was impossible to argue with.... He was, whatever was said, intent on his Pakistan.” Afraid that Jinnah may carry out his threat of civil disobedience, Mountbatten surrendered initiative:

<sup>21</sup> Michael Brecher, “India’s decision to Remain in the Commonwealth”, *JCCP*, Vol. 12.1, March 1974, pp. 62–90.

"I am very much afraid that partition may prove to be the only possible alternative."<sup>22</sup>

The triumph of political compulsions over strategic interests meant victory for divisive forces over forces for unity. The setting of a time limit by the 20 February statement amounted to a withdrawal of the condition (laid down by HMG since 1943) that transfer of power must be such that strategic requirements are protected. Henceforth strategy was to be adapted to the form transfer of power would take, unity or division, i.e., strategic cloth was cut to political size.<sup>23</sup>

Other eminent commentators on this subject have not accepted this view that partition meant the victory of politics and failure of strategy. Partha Sarathi Gupta is of the opinion that by early 1947 strategic perceptions had changed such that army top brass preferred Pakistan (with joint defence with India), in the belief that Pakistan would help them out with West Asia. But this assessment proved to be mistaken.<sup>24</sup> Moore disagrees with the view that strategic interests underlay the Cabinet Mission's preference for unity. Since the Cabinet Mission's days the preference was for agreement on the limits of Pakistan but since that was not forthcoming, loose unity was experimented with. But both alternatives, unity and partition, remained in the picture till Mountbatten's arrival. He accepted within a month that Pakistan in some form was unavoidable.<sup>25</sup>

Patel was dismayed.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> See Mountbatten's interviews with Jinnah, 8, 9 and 10 April 1947, and Viceroy's 19th and 20th staff meetings, 11 and 22 April 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, pp. 158–60, 163–64, 186–88, 190 and 359.

<sup>23</sup> Singh, *Origins of Partition*, p. 233. Draft Chiefs of Staff memo conceded that defence would suffer if only Pakistan remained an ally, but Pakistan's location was better strategically: "The majority of our strategic requirements could be met, though with considerably greater difficulty, by an agreement with Pakistan alone." The Brief for Negotiations based on this draft COS memo (enclosed in Secretary of State to PM, *TP*, Vol. 12, pp. 314–21) discussed how both countries can together provide the bases and men unified India would have.

<sup>24</sup> Gupta, "Imperial Strategy", p. 41.

<sup>25</sup> Moore, "Towards Partition and the Independence of India", p. 191.

<sup>26</sup> Patel to Sudhir Ghosh, 29 June 1947, *Sudhir Ghosh Papers*, NMML, New Delhi.

I still hope that in coming to their conclusions HMG would give some thought to economic and strategic requirements and not dispose of the case entirely on the political aspect. If their declaration encourages fissiparous tendencies and increases the difficulties of Congress and other political organisations that are whole heartedly for a united India, I am afraid Britain would be quitting India under a permanent estrangement of feelings between the two countries.

The army top brass also feared the primacy of politics. They pressurized India Office, which, in turn, urged the Viceroy to take the initiative for talks regarding future defence arrangements: "It is of the greatest importance to ensure that in the struggle to resolve the political difficulties of the future of India, the question of some form of military agreement runs no risk of being allowed to go by default."<sup>27</sup> It was deemed important that negotiations on defence and political matters go hand in hand, else all concessions would have been made prior to the defence talks and there would be no bargaining counter left.<sup>28</sup>

However, New Delhi ruled out talks before the tricky issue of partition was out of the way. Ismay had clarified that military arrangements in India must attend upon the political situation, not determine it.<sup>29</sup> He gradually prevailed upon the Chiefs of Staff and then the Prime Minister that talks were totally inappropriate at present and that they should await the building up of goodwill with the future leaders.<sup>30</sup> It seems the army authorities reluctantly accepted Ismay's stand that defence talks would have to await independence. It was agreed that general talks could be held with leaders about the need for "defence arrangements of mutual advantage" to India and the Commonwealth. As independence and partition would weaken the dominions militarily, the emphasis must be on the benefits accruing to India and Pakistan from remaining within the Commonwealth.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Secretary of State to Viceroy, 3 July 1947, *TP*, Vol. 11, pp. 871–72.

<sup>28</sup> Meeting of Chiefs of Staff Committee, 9 July 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 12, pp. 43–49.

<sup>29</sup> Ismay at the meeting of ministers, 18 March 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 9, p. 984.

<sup>30</sup> Ismay to Mountbatten, 9 July 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 12, p. 61.

<sup>31</sup> Ismay to the Viceroy, 16 July 1947, *ibid.*, pp. 200–201.

A "brief for negotiations", based on a Chiefs of Staff memorandum, was sent for the Prime Minister's approval. The main points were that a Commonwealth was crucial for world peace and British help was vital for Indian security. Concealing self-interest beneath magnanimity, the brief went on to say: "The U.K. is prepared to aid India and Pakistan to enable these countries to play their part in the maintenance of their own tranquillity and stability and the strength of the Commonwealth, on which in the last resort their continued peace and independence must depend."<sup>32</sup>

### Award or "Agreed Solution"?

The government was at pains to assert that they had no view to impose; all they sought to do was provide a listening ear to both sides if that could enable them to agree to a compromise solution. They were constantly running away from making a policy declaration, be it in May 1946 or early 1947 or June 1947, but each time finally did exactly that. The Cabinet Mission Plan, the 20 February 1947 statement and the 3 June 1947 Plan were awards; no amount of prevarication could change their character.

After all, the 3 June Plan was the Mountbatten Award, putting across his views that an early date for transferring power was necessary and that power would be transferred to two dominions, India and Pakistan, with the setting up of the latter involving partition of Punjab and Bengal. Independent Bengal was ruled out. The NWFP referendum was restricted to two options, joining India or Pakistan, an independent state for the Sikhs was ruled out, and the native states' dream of independence was quietly buried. Despite their assertions to the contrary, the British did make an award, did choose one policy option against another, and did implement their policies.

Contrary to their projected self-image of disinterested observers, the British had interests in India and in particular options and in certain developments at that. To argue their neutrality would be to

<sup>32</sup> Secretary of State to PM, 24 July 1947, *ibid.*, pp. 314–21.

fall for the bait laid by the Mountbatten Papers and most official pronouncements and writings. Their two concerns were to extricate themselves from empire as bloodlessly and painlessly as possible and with a residue of goodwill and to continue to derive benefit from India's and Pakistan's economies and strategic position for Commonwealth defence. They had preferences for a united India, from the defence angle, but, if that was not possible, then they favoured as much unity as possible. Most of their policies had crucial implications, e.g., the decision to compensate the Secretary of State's services, withdraw the British army, prepone the date of withdrawal to 15 August 1947 and announce the boundary awards after 15 August 1947.

A situation of responsibility without power was the common justification advanced for the government's not intervening in favour of unity. But when it came to defining their stand in the face of anti-British hostilities, the government had no doubt that it would not abandon India without a settlement, even if it meant getting military reinforcements. The plea of powerlessness was not given. There was no such clarity on the communal front. When the British opted for united India, they did not rule out other options. Options were ranged on a scale of preferences, making it easy for the second choice to become the first, should the wind blow that way. The British did not take the stand that unity would be compelled by force if agreement on it was not achieved. Rather, from the outset, they took the position that if unity did not work, division was to be made the basis for agreement. Attlee agreed with the Chief Minister and Viceroy that unity was better than Pakistan, which was "better than no agreement at all".<sup>33</sup> Absence of agreement posed a "grave danger of violence, chaos and even civil war".<sup>34</sup>

India Office officials were severely critical of the government's preferring a balancing act to making hard choices. They warned that

<sup>33</sup> 13 April 1946, *ibid.*, Vol. 7, p. 260.

<sup>34</sup> Cabinet Mission and Viceroy to Prime Minister, 12–13 May 1946, *ibid.*, p. 536–37. Also see Cabinet Mission and Viceroy to Prime Minister, 11 April and 3 June 1946; Prime Minister to Cabinet Mission and Viceroy, 13 April 1946; Croft to Montearth, 15 April 46; and Secretary of State to Prime Minister, 26 May 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 221, 794, 274 and 705 respectively.

softness may still not effect agreement and it was necessary to have an alternative, which could be believed in, and implemented.<sup>35</sup>

Any plan of this sort must either involve the compulsion by us of one party or be of limited application. Since there can be little practical object to be served in propounding a solution without ranging ourselves behind it, we must give more than moral support to one thesis or the other, in whatever form we consider either of them to be just and viable, as well as expedient.

For HMG expediency was obviously more important. The Cabinet Mission members said as much: "The question was not whether the demand for Pakistan was just and legitimate, but what could be done about the very strong feelings of those who were making this demand."<sup>36</sup> Similar exhortation to make a choice came from a very different quarter. Gandhi urged Wavell: "Dare to do the right. You must make your choice of one horse or the other. So far as I can see you will never succeed in riding two at the same time."<sup>37</sup> Gandhi's words were prophetic: "You will have to choose between the two—the Muslim League and the Congress, both your creations."<sup>38</sup>

Parroting of unity while effecting division was tactically useful in masking failure. Unity had not been realized and neither had the much vaunted "agreed solution". The attempt now was to dress up the award as an agreed solution, as well as present division as the maximum unity realizable (i.e., it was better than balkanization). There were two other considerations involved. It was important that responsibility for division should not devolve on the British: "It was of the utmost importance that in the eyes of the world it should be Indian opinion rather than a British decision which made the choice as to the future."<sup>39</sup> Moreover the appearance of impartiality had to

<sup>35</sup> Croft to Turnbull, 25 April 1946, *ibid.*, p. 336.

<sup>36</sup> Cripps and Alexander's meeting with Hindu Mahasabha leaders, 15 April 1946, *ibid.*, p. 270.

<sup>37</sup> Gandhi to Wavell, 13 June 1946, *MGCW*, Vol. 84, p. 328.

<sup>38</sup> Gandhi to Cripps, 13 June 1946, *ibid.*, p. 330.

<sup>39</sup> Viceroy's address to Governors' Conference, 15 April 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, p. 250. He put across the same idea at a meeting on 10 April: "Indian people should take

be maintained. Mountbatten began his address to the Governors' Conference in mid-April 1947 by "reiterating his honest assurance that he maintained complete impartiality towards both the Muslim League and Congress".<sup>40</sup> The Viceroy advised the Commander-in-Chief to let a committee of Indians look into the reorganization of the army on communal lines, "because, if we should decide on Pakistan, we would at least give the semblance of fair play".<sup>41</sup> However, the public relations exercise did not always work. The Viceroy's staff admitted that "there is a big volume of opinion all over the world that ways and means should have been found to keep India united and grave doubts have been expressed about the necessity of partition".<sup>42</sup>

Both Congress and League leaders saw through the charade. Liaquat Ali Khan advised Jenkins to take a decision and enforce it and not "evade their responsibility". Gandhi described the attempt to "please all parties [as]...a fruitless and thankless task".<sup>43</sup> But the British per-

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the onus of making a decision. The British could not then be blamed after the event", *ibid.*, pp. 176–79. Also see BBC interview with Mountbatten, *Oral History Transcripts* (henceforth *OHT*), 656, NMML, New Delhi.

<sup>40</sup> 16 April 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, p. 296. The obsession with appearing impartial was sometimes carried to somewhat ridiculous lengths, as, for instance, when the Secretary of State for India was advised by officials at the India Office that it would be unwise to send a message because it would be widely reported in India and might very well give offence to Mr. Jinnah. This was in reference to an invitation by Swaraj House, London, to attend Gandhi's birthday celebrations. The Secretary of State stated that he was "reluctant to make any move which might be interpreted as signifying special sympathy with the Congress side", Metropolitan Police Office letter (Special Branch), New Scotland Yard, 10 October 1946, Pol. (S) 1417/1946, IOR L/P&J/12/658.

<sup>41</sup> 14 April 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, pp. 223–26.

<sup>42</sup> Viceroy's Conference paper, 5 July 1947, taken to London by Ismay, *ibid.*, Vol. 11, p. 918. The Irish nationalists pointed out to a visiting Congressman from India that the partition of India was on lines similar to that of Ireland and that Pakistan had been created so that British rule could be perpetuated. New Scotland Yard Report No. 22, new 3 series, 30 July 1947, Pol. (S) 695/47; Indian Political Intelligence (IPI) report on Activities in Swaraj House, 1945–47, IOR L/P&J/12/658, India Office Library, London.

<sup>43</sup> Jenkins to Viceroy, 31 May 1974, *TP*, Vol. 11, p. 24 and Gandhi to Mountbatten, 10/11 June 1947, *ibid.*, p. 262.

sisted with their balancing tricks as it kept up pressure on both parties. They "let the threat of Pakistan hang over the heads of Congress so that they would be obliged to give the British the military facilities they wanted".<sup>44</sup> In the short term, too, the League was a useful counterpoise to Congress. The Viceroy retained his special powers whereas a pure Congress regime would have reduced him to a figurehead. However, these short-term needs ended up negating long-term ends which perhaps would have been better served by unity.

The British could keep India united only if they gave up their role as mediators trying to effect a solution Indians had agreed upon. Unity needed positive intervention in its favour, including putting down communal elements with a firm hand. This they chose not to do. Attlee wrote later: "We would have preferred a united India. We couldn't get it, though we tried hard."<sup>45</sup> They, in fact, took the easy way out. A serious attempt at retaining unity would have involved identifying with the forces that wanted a unified India and countering those who opposed it. Rather than doing that, they preferred to woo both sides into friendly collaboration with Britain on strategic and defence issues. The British preference for a united Indian subcontinent that would be a strong ally in Commonwealth defence was modified to two dominions, both of which would be Britain's allies and together serve the purpose that was expected of a united India. The poser now was, how was friendship of both India and Pakistan to be secured?

## Division with Maximum Unity

Mountbatten's formula was to divide India but retain maximum unity. The country would be partitioned but so would Punjab and Bengal, so that the limited Pakistan that emerged would meet both the Congress and League positions to some extent. The League position on Pakistan was conceded to the extent that it would be created but the Congress position on unity would be taken into account to make

<sup>44</sup> Singh, *Origins of Partition*, p. 245.

<sup>45</sup> Francis Williams, *A Prime Minister Remembers: The War and Post War Memoirs of the Rt. hon. Earl Attlee*, London, 1961, pp. 211-12.



Pakistan as small as possible. Since Congress was asked to concede its main point, i.e., a unified India, all its other points would be met. Whether it was ruling out independence for the princes or unity for Bengal or Hyderabad's joining up with Pakistan instead of India, Mountbatten firmly supported Congress on these issues. He got His Majesty's Government to agree with the argument that Congress goodwill was vital if India was to remain in the Commonwealth.

The Cabinet Mission Plan had been devised as a packing case of unity large enough to hold division. The 3 June Plan was constructed as a scheme of division to hold the maximum unity possible. In fact, once division of the country was decided upon, further diminution of unity was severely frowned upon, the premise being that both the Congress and League standpoints had to be accommodated. Since the main demand of the Congress, unity, was not accepted, Congress was to be satisfied on sundry minor counts. It seems that having delivered the knockout blow itself, the government was anxious to protect unity from subsequent harm by others.

At the conference held in mid-April 1947, the Governors agreed to Mountbatten's suggestion to restrict the choices before the provinces to joining India or Pakistan. The option of independence was ruled out as it may lead to balkanization, despite Ismay's warning that HMG would disapprove of any scheme that did not give free choice to provinces.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, princely states were denied the option of independence and at times even pressurized by Mountbatten to join one or the other union. When HMG hesitated, Mountbatten argued that India would be convinced that "we had no intention to leave it balkanised" if we brought the states into the Union.<sup>47</sup> Nehru and Patel's goodwill would be gained for "it is known that these leaders have never been reconciled to the plan of partition and they were naturally more anxious that the process of disintegration should not go further". This would help Mountbatten achieve his objective of an "integrated India, which will be friendly with Britain".<sup>48</sup> It would be folly to estrange the Indian Dominion, which was of great importance in the Indian Ocean area, for the sake of the states.

<sup>46</sup> Governors' Conference, 16 April 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, pp. 269–79.

<sup>47</sup> Viceroy to Secretary of State, 8 August 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 12, p. 589.

<sup>48</sup> Viceroy to Secretary of State, 4 August 1947, *ibid.*, pp. 529–30.

Mountbatten used his friendship with some of the leading Princes (e.g., Bhopal and Dholpur), flaunted his royal connection to impress the smaller Princes and tried bullying tactics with others. He projected himself as a friend of the Princes and advised them to submit to Congress Raj, while he was around to get them a better deal. This was good, pragmatic advice for the Princes because they really had no option (as Hyderabad was to realize soon) but to be part of India or Pakistan. The British had promised the Princes that paramountcy would lapse with their rule and would not be transferred to successor authorities and they betrayed the Princes on this count, as the Princes and their supporters were quick to bewail. The British did not transfer paramountcy but short of that they did all that was possible to make the new countries, India and Pakistan, paramount powers in the sub-continent. For one, Dominion Status was refused to the states, which meant not recognizing their independent status. The Commonwealth, after all, was an international forum and being refused recognition by it dampened their hopes of being recognized by the United Nations. Moreover, separate trade relations were discouraged, despite advice to the contrary by British commercial interests and some policy makers. Travancore, for example, was willing to supply thorium to Britain, but the Government of India persuaded His Majesty's Government to look away.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>49</sup> On the question of the independence of the princely states the Congress stand was unambiguous—the future Government of India would be the paramount power and all states would owe allegiance to it. Mountbatten, who was anxious to please the Congress, once HMG had accepted the Muslim League's demand for Pakistan, agreed with the Congress. He used both persuasion (e.g., it was in the princely states' long-term interests to accede) and threats (a socialist Indian government would give them a raw deal later) to get around most of the Princes. Although HMG advised Mountbatten to maintain an appearance of neutrality, and not put any pressure on the states, the last Viceroy refused to oblige. Later HMG agreed that Mountbatten was right.

For the Congress stand, see AICC resolution, 15 June 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 11, p. 399; V.P. Menon to Patrick, 8 July 1947, Interview between Mountbatten and Gandhi, 9 July 1947; V.P. Menon to Symon, 26 July 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 12, pp. 1, 50 and 363.

For HMG's stand, see Cabinet India and Burma Committee Paper, 31 May 1947; HMG's Statement on India, 3 June 1947; *ibid.*, Vol. 11, pp. 15 and 89; Listowel to Mountbatten, 1 and 9 August 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 12, pp. 459 and 628.

The administration had run down further by the time Mountbatten came out to India and Congress cooperation to run the country was vital. There was a corresponding need to accommodate its demands, more so as its primary demand for unity had not been met. Mountbatten confessed to Jenkins that "Nehru's goodwill is essential to me in this critical period".<sup>50</sup> Mountbatten was obviously satisfied with the Congress response to his overtures: "Congress is falling over at this moment to make friendly gestures to the British".<sup>51</sup> The left wing was critical of the leaders for "pandering far too much to the British".<sup>52</sup> His Majesty's Government was urged to accept financial responsibility for compensation of the services so as not to annoy Patel.<sup>53</sup> Mountbatten persuaded HMG to give up its intention of retaining the Andaman and Nicobar islands in the empire as it would shatter the delicately nurtured belief of the Congress in the good faith of the

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For Mountbatten's stand, see Viceroy's meeting with members of States' Negotiating Committee, 3 June 1947; Minutes of Viceroy's 17th and 18th Misc. meetings, 7 and 13 June, 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 11, pp. 80, 184 and 320; Mountbatten to Listowel, 12 July 1947, Viceroy's personal report No. 14, 25 July 1947; Press Communique of Mountbatten's address to conference of rulers and representatives of Indian States, 25 July 1947; Mountbatten to Attlee, 25 July 1947; Mountbatten to Bhopal, 31 July 1947; Viceroy's personal report No. 15, 1 August 1947; Mountbatten to Listowel, 4 and 8 August 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 12, pp. 126, 338, 347, 353, 436-43, 443-56, 579 and 584.

Mountbatten firmly scotched Travancore's plans for independence by pointing out that accession would be beneficial to the state and even threatened the Maharaja with a Congress agitation if he did not accede to the Indian Union. For details see C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar's Statement, undated, c. 16 July 1947; Cripps to Aiyar, 17 July 1947; V.P. Menon to Abell, 20 July 1947; Interview between Symon and Aiyar, 21 July 1947; Mountbatten to Travancore, 22 July 1947; Viceroy's Personal Report, No. 14, 25 July 1947; Travancore to Mountbatten, 30 July 1947; Resident for Madras States to Abell, 30 July 1947; *ibid.*, pp. 202, 216, 274-76, 281, 298, 337, 414 and 421 respectively.

For Hyderabad's refusal (encouraged by Jinnah) to accede to India, see Monckton to Ismay, 9 June 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 11, p. 214; and Monckton to Mountbatten, 28 July 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 12, p. 377.

<sup>50</sup> Mountbatten to Jenkins, 19 June 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 11, p. 508.

<sup>51</sup> Viceroy's personal report no. 11, 4 July 1947, *ibid.*, p. 894.

<sup>52</sup> Viceroy's personal report no. 13, 18 July 1947, *ibid.*, p. 231.

<sup>53</sup> Mountbatten to Listowel, 2 August 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 12, p. 489.

British.<sup>54</sup> India was recognized as the existing international entity while Pakistan had to seek recognition as a new state by international bodies.<sup>55</sup>

Mountbatten did not share Wavell's instinctive sympathy for Jinnah and the League. Hence he did not try to justify the League's intransigence or Jinnah's unbending stance: "I regard Jinnah as a psychopathic case; in fact until I had met him I would not have thought it possible that a man with such a complete lack of administrative knowledge or sense of responsibility could achieve or hold so powerful a position."<sup>56</sup> The Viceroy and the Governors condemned the League's incitement to violence. The Punjab Muslim League came in for sharp criticism for its complacency in the face of breakdown of order following upon its dislodging of the Khizr ministry.<sup>57</sup> The attitude of the NWFP

<sup>54</sup> Cabinet India and Burma Committee Paper, 12 June 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 11, p. 313. Nehru pre-empted HMG by claiming the islands for the Indian Union: "These also will naturally go with the Union of India." Note on the draft announcement of the 3 June Plan, dated 16 May 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 10, p. 857. Ten days later the Secretary of State put forward the interests of the Chiefs of Staff in retaining them with HMG. Cabinet India and Burma Committee Paper, 26 May 1947, *ibid.*, p. 995. Mountbatten was unable to convince the Cabinet India and Burma Committee that Congress interest in the islands and their being administered by Chief Commissioner of British India was enough basis for their retention in India, 28 May 1947 meeting, attended by Mountbatten, Auchinleck and Ismay, besides the regular committee members, *ibid.*, p. 1017. Mountbatten categorically rejected HMG's claim that the islands were colonies. He warned that such a stand would lead to a "flare-up" and the issue was merely negotiable, Viceroy's personal report No. 9, 12 June 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 11, p. 306. When the islands were included in the Indian Union in the Draft India Independence Bill, the Muslim League objected. Mountbatten and HMG rejected their demand that the islands would provide refueling facilities on the Karachi-Chittagong route. See Muslim League's comments on Draft Bill; Cabinet India and Burma Committee Meeting, 3 July 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 11, pp. 859, 832, 938-39 and 868 respectively. Also see Gupta, "Imperial Strategy", p. 20.

<sup>55</sup> Cabinet India and Burma Committee Paper, 13 June 1947, and meeting on 17 June 1947, *TP*, Vol. 11, pp. 345-48 and 481 respectively.

<sup>56</sup> Viceroy's personal report no. 3, 17 April 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 10, pp. 296-303. Sir T. Shone described Jinnah as "quite unbending in his insistence on Pakistan which indeed, savoured of the psychopathic", 16 April 1947, *ibid.*, pp. 279-80. Also see Viceroy's staff meeting's report, 11 April 1947, *ibid.*, pp. 190-92.

<sup>57</sup> Note by Jenkins, 16 April 1947, *ibid.*, pp. 281-84.

unit of the League was a shade worse: "I fear that the League may have totalitarian ideas and intend to victimise their opponents".<sup>58</sup>

Mountbatten adopted a tough stand with Jinnah with the intention of forcing him to adopt a more reasonable stand. He got Jinnah to agree to the partition of Punjab and Bengal, not only by using Jinnah's arguments for "two nations" but also by making it clear that a limited Pakistan was all he would get. He suggested that Jinnah could be threatened with a notional partition favourable to the Sikhs and with a referendum in NWFP to be conducted by the Congress ministry.<sup>59</sup> Mountbatten was able to call Jinnah's bluff when he threatened to refuse to convene the Pakistan Constituent Assembly and delay the passing of the Independence Bill, if his position on the reconstitution of the Interim Government was not met. Mountbatten astutely reasoned that Jinnah would not implement either threat as they went against his self-interest.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, he persuaded the Cabinet to refuse to countenance Pakistan's claim to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.<sup>61</sup> What really frustrated Mountbatten was Jinnah's insistence on becoming Governor-General, which dashed Mountbatten's hopes of coordinating joint defence, besides being a blow to his vanity. Four hours of argument left Jinnah unmoved and Mountbatten could do little but diagnose Jinnah's problem as "megalomania in its worst form".<sup>62</sup> Jinnah's plea to Mountbatten to ignore these "apparent

<sup>58</sup> NWFP Governor to Mountbatten, 9 July 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 12, p. 54.

<sup>59</sup> See Chapter 10, section on partition of Punjab and Bengal.

<sup>60</sup> Mountbatten to Listowel, 30 June 1947, *TP*, Vol. 11, p. 806.

<sup>61</sup> Cabinet India and Burma Committee, 3 July 1947 meeting, *ibid.*, p. 868.

<sup>62</sup> Mountbatten to Attlee, 3 July 1947 and Viceroy's personal report No. 11, 4 July 1947, *ibid.*, pp. 863 and 898.

Morris-Jones has argued that joint coordination was doomed to fail once Jinnah rejected a common Governor-General. In his view, modest consultative bodies, focusing on technical and economic matters, would have worked better than reliance on a common Governor-General, "The Transfer of Power, 1947: A View from the Sidelines", *MAS*, Vol. 16.1, 1982, pp. 1–32. See Moore, *Escape from Empire*, p. 318 for Attlee's view that the massacres could have been avoided had Mountbatten been common Governor-General. Jalal, of course, interprets Jinnah's action sympathetically, as his need for strong authority over the provinces. Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman*, p. 292.

rebuffs" and judge his friendship "by deeds, not words", went unheeded.<sup>63</sup>

Ayesha Jalal charges Mountbatten with acting completely in the interests of the Congress after the latter made the offer to remain in the Commonwealth, which was too attractive to refuse. In her florid prose, Pakistan was given a tent in the back and beyond, and the Congress the key to the house.<sup>64</sup> Interestingly, in Jalal's version, Congress emerges as the main villain and Mountbatten its handmaiden. Partition is not a British award, but a Congress directive carried out by Mountbatten.<sup>65</sup> The imperialist premise beneath her Congress baiting is obvious. R.J. Moore has talked of a "Mountbatten–Nehru deal" at Simla in May 1947. His assertion that "Congress called the cards in the last rubber of the endgame" serves to shift responsibility for the controversial decisions of these months on to Congress shoulders.<sup>66</sup>

The burden of the Pakistani case against Mountbatten<sup>67</sup> essentially rests on his apparent pro-Congress stance and certain actions taken which were favourable to India. It is alleged that his bias against the League was directed against its leader, Jinnah, whose commitment to the cause of establishing Pakistan he denounced as "psychopathic" and "maniacal". Unlike Congress leaders who were out to woo Mountbatten and be wooed by him, Jinnah did not succumb to his charm and demanded to be treated as an equal. Mountbatten's ego, it is claimed, was further bruised by Jinnah's insistence on becoming

<sup>63</sup> Jinnah to Mountbatten, 12 July 1947 and Ismay's meeting with Jinnah, 24 July 1947, *IP*, Vol. 12, pp. 121–24 and 322–25.

<sup>64</sup> Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman*, pp. 270–71.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 280.

<sup>66</sup> Moore, *Endgames of Empire*, p. 7.

<sup>67</sup> See Chaudhury Muhammad Ali, *The Emergence of Pakistan*, Lahore, 1973 and G.W. Choudhury, *Pakistan's Relations with India, 1945–66*, Lahore, 1968 for two well-known charge sheets. For a restatement of the allegations (which drew Mountbatten's response) see the debate serialized in the *Dawn*, 14 to 18 March 1979 and published as Syed Hashim Raza, ed., *Mountbatten and the Partition of India*, New Delhi, 1989. Even the editorial in the *Dawn* on Mountbatten's death spoke of his disservice to Pakistan.

Governor-General of Pakistan.<sup>68</sup> Personal glory apart, Mountbatten's Commonwealth diplomacy hinged on his being common Governor-General of both dominions. Mountbatten was so exasperated at Jinnah's frustrating his objective of achieving unity and his ambition to be joint Governor-General, that he threatened Jinnah that his action would cost him dearly. The coming weeks showed that the threat was not an empty one.

Mountbatten, it is alleged, went on to adopt a consistently strident anti-Pakistan and pro-India stance on various contentious issues, such as the boundary question, accession of princely states and keeping the peace in strife-torn Punjab. The charges are that the Punjab Boundary Commission Award was modified to favour India,<sup>69</sup> Ferozepur and Zira tehsils went to India, which were of strategic value to Pakistan, besides the irrigation headworks situated there and the inclusion of Gurdaspur in India gave her a road link to Kashmir and made viable the latter's accession to India. Mountbatten had already paved the way for this by a visit to Srinagar, in June 1947, at Nehru's behest, to persuade the Maharaja to bring his state into the Indian Union. According to the Pakistani historians, a large part of the responsibility for the communal disturbances in Punjab devolves on Mountbatten. It is alleged that he delayed the announcement of the Boundary Commission's awards and did not heed advice to crack down on the militant Sikh groups behind the trouble.

<sup>68</sup> Mountbatten admitted that Jinnah had scored "an undoubted victory from a psychological point of view in having an Indian Governor-General for Pakistan", 24 July 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, pp. 322-25.

<sup>69</sup> Justice M.C. Mahajan, a member of the Punjab Boundary Commission, was of the view that there was no reason to believe that Mountbatten could influence Radcliffe. Radcliffe gave the award as the Hindu and Muslim members of the Commission could not reach agreement. Radcliffe's award gave only Shakargarh tehsil of Gurdaspur district to Pakistan, ensuring that India too had a road to Jammu and Kashmir. The notional partition of 15 August 1947 had placed the entire Gurdaspur district in Pakistan, M.C. Mahajan, *Looking Back*, Bombay, 1963.

## 15 August 1947: Too Late or Too Early?

The rationale for the early date for transfer of power, 15 August 1947, was securing Congress agreement to dominion status.<sup>70</sup> The additional benefit was that the British could escape responsibility for the rapidly deteriorating communal situation. As it is, some officials were more than happy to pack their bags and leave the Indians to stew in their own juice. As Patel said to the Viceroy, the situation was one where "you won't govern yourself, and you won't let us govern".<sup>71</sup> Mountbatten was to defend his advancing the date to 15 August 1947 on the grounds that things would have blown up under their feet had they not got out when they did.<sup>72</sup> Ismay felt that August 1947 was too late, rather than too early.<sup>73</sup>

From the British point of view, a hasty retreat was perhaps the most suitable action. That does not make it the inevitable option, as Mountbatten and Ismay would have us believe. Despite the steady erosion of governmental authority, the situation of responsibility without power was still a prospect rather than a reality. In the short

<sup>70</sup> The speed with which power was transferred has been criticised by historians and commentators of different persuasions. Jalal described it as an "ignominious scuttle"; British officials were critical, as was K.B. Sayeed. See Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman*, p. 193; Hunt and Harrison, *District Officer in India*, pp. 242–43; K.B. Sayeed, *Pakistan: The Formative Phase 1857–1948*, London, 1968, p. 169.

Some writers, however, rather than defending Mountbatten directly, shift the responsibility on to the Congress. Moore explained that Mountbatten preponed the date of departure because he could not meet the Congress demand that Muslim League members be dismissed from the government: "the speed of the transfer of power to Dominion governments, for which Mountbatten has been blamed, was in fact dictated by Congress." See R.J. Moore, "The Mountbatten Viceroyalty", *JCCP*, Vol. 22.2, 1984, pp. 204–15.

Y. Krishnan has termed the early date a "bargain" for the Congress, which induced it to join the Commonwealth. "Mountbatten and the Partition of India", *History*, Vol. 68.222, 1983, pp. 22–38.

<sup>71</sup> Viceroy's interview with Patel, 24 April 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, p. 398.

<sup>72</sup> Mountbatten defended his decision even two decades after he left India—"If I had the whole of my time over again, one thing I would not change would be the way I handled the speed of the transfer", Interview with B.R. Nanda, *OHT*, 351, NMML.

<sup>73</sup> Ronald Wingate, *Lord Ismay: A Biography*, London, 1970, p. 167.



term, the British could assert their authority, but did not care to, as Kripalani pertinently pointed out to Mountbatten.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, the situation, rather than warranting withdrawal of authority, cried out for someone to wield it.

If abdication of responsibility was callous, the speed with which it was done made it worse. But 15 August 1947? It was one of Mountbatten's "flashes", revealed by him at a press conference and followed up with a 72-day tear-off calendar to introduce urgency. Mountbatten's action became a time-bomb ticking away when tortuous processes, such as the integration of the states, the division of the country (not just notionally, geographically, but down to the last typewriter ribbon) and the winding up of the massive superstructure of the Raj, were set into motion.

The British, it must be said, did not want to sever ties in one sharp stroke, but were immobilized by their total preoccupation with how best they would come out of the crisis. There was also lack of concern with what Indians would do with themselves. The sentiment was, let them find the joys of freedom in the wasteland of partition. But even from Britain's point of view, the advantages of this approach could be questioned. British officials' unconcern for the Indians' fate lost her much of the goodwill her "generous" declaration of withdrawal from India had created. If Indians chose to echo the well-orchestrated voices of Mountbatten and Co. in "Oh what a lovely farewell", it was because they found it difficult to say, after getting complete independence, that it came in a way which gave it a hollow ring.

The 72-day timetable, 3 June to 15 August 1947, for both transfer of power and division of the country, was to prove disastrous. Senior officials in India, like the Punjab Governor, and the Commander-in-Chief, felt that peaceful division would take a few years at the very least.<sup>75</sup> As it happened, the Partition Council had to divide assets (down to typewriters and printing presses) in a few weeks. There were no transitional institutional structures within which the knotty problems spilling over from division could be tackled. Mountbatten had hoped to be common Governor-General of India and Pakistan

<sup>74</sup> Interview with Mountbatten, 17 April 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, p. 309.

<sup>75</sup> See ante p. 171, fn. 43.

and provide the necessary link but this was not to be, as Jinnah wanted the position himself. Hence, even the joint defence machinery set up failed to last beyond December 1947, by which time Kashmir had already become the scene of a military conflict rather than a political settlement.

## Partition Massacres

The Punjab massacres that accompanied partition were the final indictment of Mountbatten. His loyal aide, Ismay, wrote to his wife on 16 September 1947: “Our mission was so very nearly a success; it is sad that it has ended up such a grim and total failure”.<sup>76</sup> The early date, 15 August 1947, and the delay in announcing the Boundary Commission Awards, both Mountbatten’s decisions, compounded the tragedy that took place.<sup>77</sup> A senior army official, Brigadier Bristow, posted in Punjab in 1947, was of the view that the Punjab tragedy would not have occurred had partition been deferred for a year or so.<sup>78</sup> Lockhart, Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army from 15 August to 31 December 1947, endorsed this view: “Had officials in every grade in the civil services, and all the personnel of the armed services, been in position in their respective new countries before Independence Day, it seems there would have been a better chance of preventing widespread disorder.”<sup>79</sup>

The Boundary Commission Awards were ready by 9 August 1947 but Mountbatten decided to make them public after Independence Day, so that the responsibility would not fall on the British.<sup>80</sup> A map

<sup>76</sup> Wingate, *Lord Ismay*, p. 167.

<sup>77</sup> Messervy’s opinion has been cited in Shahid Hamid, *Disastrous Twilight: A Personal Record of the Partition of India*, London, 1986. Also see Robin Jeffrey, “The Punjab Boundary Force and the Problem of Order, August 1947”, *MAS*, 8.4, 1974, pp. 491–520.

<sup>78</sup> Brigadier R.C.B. Bristow, *Memories of the British Raj—A Soldier in India*, London, 1974.

<sup>79</sup> Lockhart wrote the Foreword to Brishow, *Memories of the British Raj*.

<sup>80</sup> Mountbatten’s position has been accepted uncritically by H.V. Hodson, “The Role of Lord Mountbatten”, in C.H. Philips and M.D. Wainwright, eds, *Partition*

purporting to delineate the proposed boundaries accompanied the communication of the Private Secretary to the Viceroy to the Private Secretary to the Governor, Punjab, on 8 August 1947. This map was to be the basis of the Pakistan case that the Award was modified by Mountbatten in favour of India. At the Viceroy's staff meeting of 9 August 1947, Ismay recommended delay in publication of the awards to after 15 August 1947 so that responsibility for the fallout did not evolve on the British. Mountbatten and his team also did not wish to risk any setback to the delicately wrought good relations with Indian leaders before the transfer of power had taken place with goodwill and fanfare on 15 August 1947.

Independence Day in Punjab and Bengal saw strange scenes. Flags of both India and Pakistan were flown in villages between Lahore and Amritsar, as people of both communities believed they were on the right side of the border. The morrow after freedom was to find them foreigners in their own homes, exiled by executive fiat.

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*of India, Policies and Perspectives*, London, 1970. For the Pakistan charge sheet, see footnote 67.

## IV

### *Nationalism and Communalism*



## Congress and the Muslim League's Demand for Pakistan

### The Initial Years

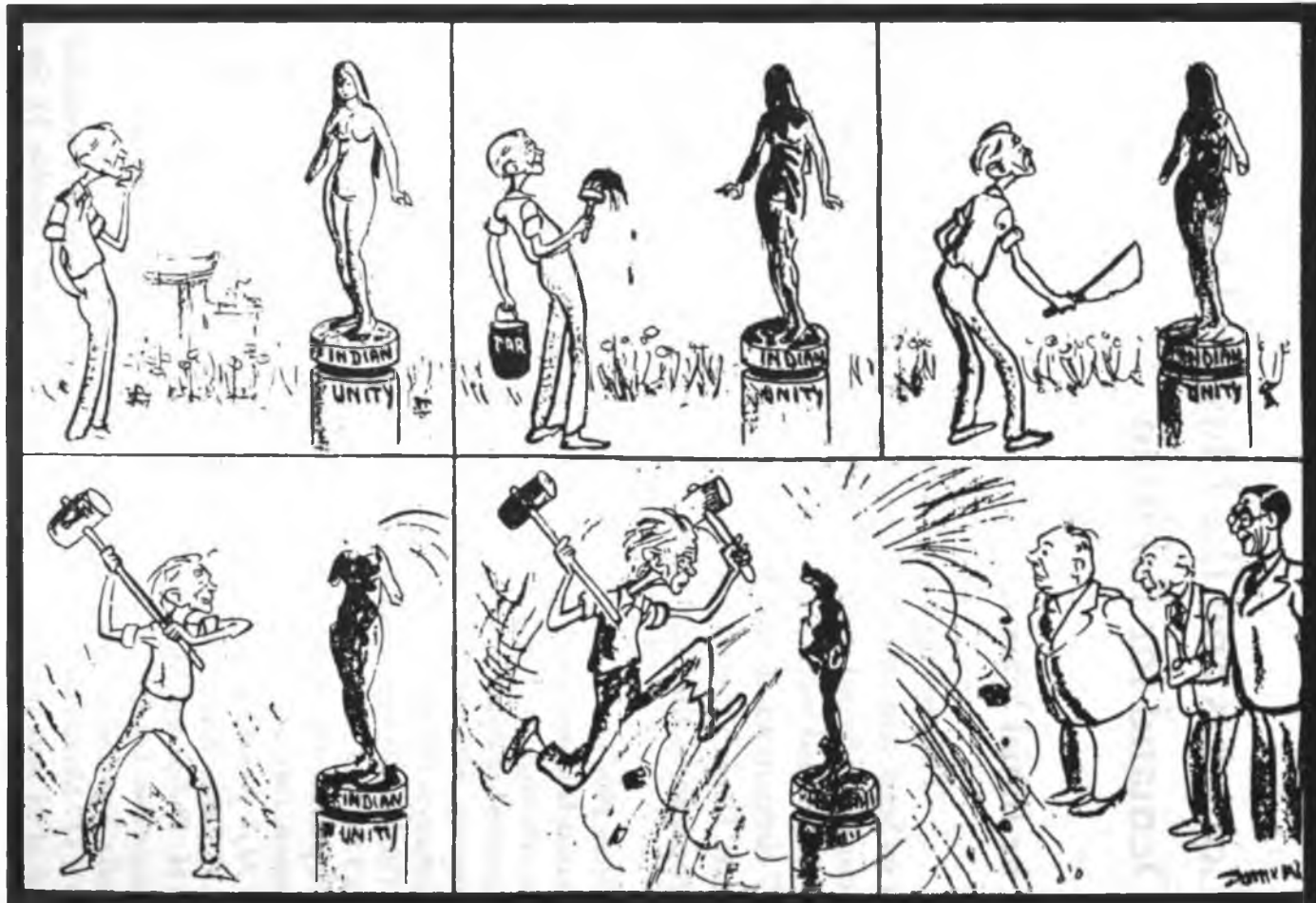
The raising of the demand for Pakistan by the Muslim League at its Session in Lahore 1940 was largely an outcome of the unenviable position it found itself in at that stage. Although founded as early as 1906,<sup>1</sup> it had been largely defunct since 1920.<sup>2</sup> Its record in the 1936–37 elections was dismal. If the Congress did not do too well with Muslim seats (largely because Congress Muslims could not meet League propaganda), the League fared even worse in Muslim majority provinces.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> From 1906 to the early 1930s the League had represented the interests of the big Muslim landowners and its role was mainly restricted to petitioning the government for concessions to Muslims. "Since its very birth in 1906, the Muslim League's activities had always been confined to indoor political shows. Therefore, mass public meetings were unknown to the Muslim League organisation", Khaliqzaman, *Pathway to Pakistan*, p. 137.

<sup>2</sup> The League's total membership in 1927 was 1,330, its annual expenditure was Rs 3,000 in 1931–33 and the quorum for meetings of its council was only 10 out of a possible 310, since most Leaguers far from Delhi hardly ever attended. Also see Sayeed, *Pakistan: The Formative Phase*, pp. 176–77; Z.H. Zaidi, ed., *Introduction to M.A. Jinnah—Isphani Correspondence 1936–48*, Karachi, 1976, pp. 10–14; Z.H. Zaidi, "Aspects of the Development of Muslim League Policy, 1937–47", in C.H. Philips and M.D. Wainwright eds, *The Partition of India: Policies and Perspectives*, London, 1970, p. 246; and Bipan Chandra, *Communalism in Modern India*, New Delhi, 1984.

<sup>3</sup> Of 117 Muslim seats in Bengal the League won 38, in Punjab it contested only 7 out of 84 seats and won only 2 and in Sind 3 out of a possible 33, See Singh, *Origins of Partition*, p. 13.

# MARCH OF TIME



Source: *The Hindustan Times*, 4 April 1946

The Congress attitude to both the League and the Hindu Mahasabha, prior to the 1937 elections, had been largely dismissive. Congressmen could simultaneously be League or Mahasabha members since it was assumed (rather naively) that all political groups were fighting for Indian independence. It was only in December 1938 that the Congress Working Committee characterized the League and Mahasabha as communal organizations.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, though it reacted sharply to the demand for Pakistan, the Congress took no concrete steps to counter it.<sup>5</sup>

Congress stood sanguine in its strength and ignored the Viceroy's sharpening of the Jinnah card for use against it. Jinnah correctly calculated that the British would not reject the demand for Pakistan since such an idea would help them repudiate the Congress demand for independence. In March 1940 Linlithgow suggested a "wait and watch" policy; on 9 April the War Cabinet declared that the Lahore resolution had "complicated" the situation; and on 18 April 1940 Zetland stated that an agreement between the two communities was essential for a united India.<sup>6</sup> All these statements clearly implied that the British would henceforth keep the option of partition open, as being politically convenient, and quite naturally give the League greater say in all further constitutional discussions.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, so concerned was Linlithgow with the strength of the League remaining intact that when Sikander Hayat Khan proposed to resign from the Muslim League Working Committee in 1941,

<sup>4</sup> "Communalism—The Extreme Phase", in Chandra et al., *India's Struggle for Independence*.

<sup>5</sup> Rajagopalachari called it a "mischievous concept"; Nehru dismissed it as a "mad scheme"; and Gandhi protested that partition means a "patent untruth". Anita Inder Singh, after citing their views, goes on to argue that these "sharp reactions", along with tacit support by the British, "gave more substance to the demand for Pakistan than perhaps it deserved", Singh, *Origins of Partition*, pp. 58–59.

<sup>6</sup> Antony Thomas, "Lord Linlithgow and the League: British Policy towards the Muslim League, 1937–42" unpublished seminar paper, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

<sup>7</sup> The "August Offer", which the Congress peremptorily turned down, was also rejected by the League on the grounds that it had not been offered equal partnership at the Centre. However, the League was quite happy with the stipulation that minorities would be consulted in all future constitutional discussions. See, Moore, *Escape from Empire*, p. 9.



following Jinnah's continued demand for Pakistan, the former asked the Governor of Punjab to persuade Sikander discreetly not to resign.<sup>8</sup>

The Congress firmly turned down the Cripps Offer made in March 1942 because it provided a clever backdoor entry into Pakistan through provincial self-determination.<sup>9</sup> Cripps' visit to India and what he offered made clear the British position that it saw the Congress and the Muslim League as the main parties involved in the transfer of power. The League's demand for Pakistan had been recognized in principle and the idea of partition had been incorporated in the Cripps Offer—"Pakistan [had] advanced one step further."<sup>10</sup> The League's appeal to all the Muslims to keep aloof from the 1942 movement further sharpened the Hindu-Muslim divide. In addition, the Viceroy advised the Governors to set up non-Congress ministries in NWFP, Sind, Assam and Bengal as a counterpoise to the Congress. The League promptly obliged, enhancing its own status and giving a fillip to the idea of Pakistan yet again.

In July 1944, Gandhi conceded the right of self-determination to the Muslim majority provinces, partly due to C. Rajagopalachari's persuasion.<sup>11</sup> He was anxious to reach an agreement with Jinnah and

<sup>8</sup> For Linlithgow it was important that the League remain "a solid political entity", capable of speaking on behalf of Muslim opinion. Jinnah was "the one man" who had united the Muslims and wielded effective control over them. Linlithgow to Amery, 15 May 1941, *Linlithgow Correspondence*, Vol. 10, cited in Singh, *Origins of Partition*, p. 66.

<sup>9</sup> According to the draft declaration which Cripps brought, the elected members of the Lower Houses would elect a constitution-making body by proportional representation. This constitution would be accepted by the British, but any province unwilling to accept the new constitution had the right to secede and frame its own constitution. Draft Declaration, *TP*, Vol. 1, pp. 314-315. R.J. Moore states that the Cripps Offer "did recognise Pakistan in principle by allowing provinces to opt out of the Union and become separate dominions". The Congress Working Committee resolution of 2 April 1942 deplored the provision of "local option" but made it clear that it would not contemplate "compelling the people of any territorial unit to remain in an Indian Union against their declared and established will", Moore, *Escape From Empire*, p. 54-56. Also see R.J. Moore, *Churchill, Cripps and India, 1939-1945*, Oxford, 1979, pp. 83 and 145.

<sup>10</sup> U.P. FR for the first half of April 1942, Home Poll 18/4/42.

<sup>11</sup> Rajaji's formula envisaged a plebiscite in contiguous Muslim-majority districts in North-West and East India to decide on separation from India. This would be after

had long discussions with him, which are known as the Gandhi–Jinnah talks. After his release from prison in May 1944, Gandhi offered a formula to Jinnah, under which, after the war ended, a plebiscite of the adult population in demarcated, contiguous, majority districts in North-West and East India would be taken and if a majority voted for a separate sovereign state, it would be conceded. Accepting the principle of Pakistan, embodied in C. Rajagopalachari's belief that it would instil confidence in the Muslims who would then cease demanding Pakistan, Gandhi perceived the division (as outlined in his formula) "as between members of the same family and therefore reserving for partnership things of common interest".<sup>12</sup> Gandhi's offer alarmed the Sikhs, the Mahasabha and the Unionists, while the Muslim Leaguers were jubilant at the acceptance of the principle of Pakistan.

However, the talks failed since Jinnah was obdurate and refused to have anything short of full sovereignty at the outset.<sup>13</sup> He moved centre stage by occupying the dominating position of one who spurns what is offered him and recovered much of the prestige he had lost in the Punjab.<sup>14</sup> He also emerged from the talks with the status of the spokesman of Muslims and recognized as such by no less a figure than Gandhi.<sup>15</sup> Gandhi's talks with Jinnah had proved to be a futile exertion from Gandhi's point of view. The Congress leadership was willing to cooperate in the setting up of a national executive when the Simla Conference was held in June–July 1945. They even accepted

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the war and would follow League participation in an interim government and support to independence. Rajagopalachari believed that an understanding with Jinnah was necessary before the establishment of a National Government at the centre. He was confident that Jinnah could be defeated within his own organization, but British support to him made this difficult. See Singh, *Origins of Partition*, pp. 109–10.

<sup>12</sup> Gandhi to Sapru, 26 February 1945.

<sup>13</sup> Jinnah contended that only Muslims would decide whether an area was to separate from India, and that all six provinces and not districts alone would make up Pakistan. Sovereign Pakistan would only have treaty relations with India and Pakistan must precede independence, not follow it. Moore, *Escape from Empire*, p. 56.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Singh, *Origins of Partition*, p. 112.

<sup>15</sup> Jayakar was right when he told Gandhi that "the Muslim League leader has gained more from you than he has lost to you", M.R. Jayakar to Gandhi, 29 September 1944, *Jayakar Papers*, Correspondence, File 826, NAI.

Hindu–Muslim parity in allotment of seats. The Viceroy, Wavell, felt unable to either accept Jinnah’s claim to nominate all Muslims or go ahead without the Muslim League. He chose to declare the Conference a failure. Jinnah’s ability to veto political progress was successfully demonstrated.<sup>16</sup>

## The Battle of the Ballot, 1946

On 19 September 1945 it was announced that elections to the central assembly and provincial legislative assemblies would be held in the winter of 1945–46. They proved to be a contest between the League and the Congress, with other parties more or less out of the reckoning. One official report noted that “the other non-Congress and non-Muslim League parties had little organisation and no effective machinery”.<sup>17</sup>

The Muslim constituencies were to be the battle ground. The League was determined to consolidate the advance it had made in the Gandhi–Jinnah talks and the Simla Conference and translate it into votes. Attlee’s statement of 11 September 1945, once again renewing the Cripps Offer (with its local option clause), made victory in the battle of the ballot crucial for the League. A majority in the legislatures and mass support in the Muslim majority provinces would decide the fate of Pakistan. The elections would test the League’s claim to represent the Muslims of India. The election campaign of the Muslim League in Punjab illustrated well the party’s assets and weaknesses.<sup>18</sup> Its weaknesses were its poor organization and its social base which was limited to the landlords. The Viceroy had noted:<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> See Chapter 2 of this book for the Simla Conference and its breakdown.

<sup>17</sup> *Report on elections in Bihar, March 1946* by R.B. Nandlal Sinha, Electoral Officer, Bihar, 1946, NMML, New Delhi.

<sup>18</sup> The Punjab elections of 1946 have been extensively documented. See Ian Talbot, “The 1946 Punjab Elections”, *MAS*, Vol. 14.1, 1980, pp. 66–69; David Gilmartin, “Religious Leadership and the Pakistan Movement in the Punjab”, *MAS*, Vol. 13.3, 1979, pp. 485–517; Chowdhry, “The Congress Triumph in South-East Punjab”, pp. 92–105; Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman*, pp. 138–51; and Singh, *Origins of Partition*, pp. 128–36.

<sup>19</sup> To Secretary of State, 12 August 1945, *TP*, Vol. 6, p. 59.

The League organisation is poor—the leaders are mostly men of social standing and do not trouble themselves much with mass contacts, and local committees and the election results might be better from Jinnah's point of view if he had time to raise money and create an efficient organisation.

But the pace picked up once the League directed its propaganda at the peasant rather than the landlord, perhaps with some communist assistance. By the end of 1945 the League organization had reached the villagers and was better than that of the Unionists.<sup>20</sup>

The League encouraged the prelates to give *fatwas* in its favour. Some propagandists threatened the voters that if they did not back the League, they would cease to be Muslims and their marriages would be invalid. If this did not frighten them, then they were told they would face "excommunication including a refusal to allow their dead to be buried in Muslim graveyards" and be debarred from "joining in mass Muslim prayers". Mohammed Yunus (then a young Congressman from the NWFP and a relative of Abdul Ghaffar Khan) later recollected that *khooni mushairas* were held by the Leaguers in the election campaign of 1946, at which bricks from mosques, allegedly desecrated by Hindus, and copies of the *Koran*, allegedly burnt by Hindus, were provocatively flaunted. Muslims were urged to choose between the *Koran* and the *Gita*, which as a British politician observed, virtually amounted to a religious diktat, for which Muslim would spurn the *Koran* and settle for the *Gita*? The spectre of Islam in danger carried the League past the winning post.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Jalal's insistence that the League organization was non-existent rings hollow in the immediate pre-election period. Any organizational loophole that may have survived was plugged by the popular cry of "Islam in danger". The religious leaders, the *ulema*, the *pirs* and *sajjad nashins*, were mobilized to declare in favour of the League and to good effect too.

<sup>21</sup> Banning Richardson, defeated Labour candidate, then in India, to Attlee, 25 March 1946, cited by Moore, *Escape from Empire*, p. 76. All kinds of religious pressure was exercised. Burial grounds were refused to non-Leaguers, according to a report cited by M.N. Das, *Partition and Independence of India: Inside Story of the Mountbatten Days*, New Delhi, 1982, p. 153. Also see Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman*, p. 147; and Mohammad Yunus, *OHT*, p. 392.

The organization of the League and its religious appeal to the voter were the two crucial factors in the success of the League in Punjab.<sup>22</sup> Jalal, however, suggests a different list of factors. She sees the electoral success of the League as a gift of the British and the Congress: "Jinnah's success at the polls in 1946 owed a great deal to the reluctance of the British to tell the voters what Pakistan entailed; it owed almost as much to Congress, which failed to rally its potential Muslim allies in provinces outside the League's sway." Far from accepting that the religious appeal of the League was crucial for its success, Jalal argues that the networks of patronage of the local Muslim leaders led to the success of the League at the hustings.<sup>23</sup>

No one denies that the choices of the *pirs* mattered; but this was part and parcel of local patronage systems, with *pir* and landlord working hand in glove, rather than the profane and the religious in some improbable conflict in the plains of the Punjab.... But a vote for the League in 1945–46 was mainly a calculated exercise in expediency; the politicians of the Punjab who became Leaguers in 1946 could, Jinnah realised, as easily desert their new allegiance as they had espoused it if they detected different straws in the wind.

The Congress leaders were unhappy about this propaganda and its possible effects. Nehru wrote: "An unknown factor, however, creeps in when God and the Koran are used for election purposes."<sup>24</sup> But there was never any intention of stooping to conquer. On the contrary, the problem was that the cutting-edge of the Congress election campaign was anti-British and not anti-League. The Congress slogans were "Release the misguided patriots" of the INA and "punish the guilty" officers involved in suppressing the 1942 movement. In fact the election propaganda by the Congress hardly gave the impression that the Pakistan issue was the main bone of contention or that elections were an arena for communal politics.

<sup>22</sup> Singh, *Origins of Partition*, p. 135.

<sup>23</sup> Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman*, pp. 135, 147 and 150.

<sup>24</sup> Nehru to V.K. Krishna Menon, c. 1 November 1945, *JNSW*, Vol. 14, p. 97.

Congress leaders were openly dismissive of the League's claim of a large mass base. Nehru's views, apt in 1937, sounded akin to wishful thinking in 1946.<sup>25</sup>

The Muslim League is the organisation of nawabs and taluqdars.... It raises the Pakistan slogan mainly to sidetrack the problems of poverty and starvation and to safeguard feudalism and capitalism for the benefit of a handful of persons.

Nehru explained that the Congress stand was not a denial of Muslim sentiment: "The Congress was willing to recognise the genuine fears and aspirations of the Muslims." But it did not accept the League's interpretation of them. When voiced by the League, the Congress gave no hearing to the Pakistan demand: "The cry of Pakistan is a slogan of imaginary fears."<sup>26</sup> But the Congress promised to listen should it become the choral voice of the Muslims: "The Congress has stated that if the Muslims wish to have Pakistan it will not deny it to them."<sup>27</sup>

The League took up the challenge of proving at the hustings that Pakistan was indeed the collective chant of Muslims and the League their authorized spokesman. The League won all the Muslim seats in the Central Legislative Assembly elections, winning 89 per cent of the Muslim vote.<sup>28</sup> The decisive contest was yet to come when the provinces went to the polls. The complacency of Congress leaders suffered a setback at the very beginning of the campaign. It became evident at the stage of nominations that Congress Muslims were too few and among them those likely to win even less. Nehru's confidence at the end of November 1945—"we are going to put up candidates for every seat and I think we shall do well"—proved premature.<sup>29</sup>

Adjustments had to be sought with non-Congress nationalist Muslims and that often proved to be beset with problems. They tended

<sup>25</sup> Speech at Jhansi, 2 March 1946, *ibid.*, Vol. 15, p. 23.

<sup>26</sup> Nehru's speech at Lucknow, 4 October 1945, *ibid.*, Vol. 14, p. 211.

<sup>27</sup> Nehru's speech at Titagarh, 10 March 1946, *ibid.*, Vol. 15, p. 35.

<sup>28</sup> Nehru lamely explained to Cripps that Congressmen had been in jail and had not time to establish contact with the people. 27 January 1946, *ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

to demand a first choice of seats, were particular about maintaining their distinct identity, asked for specific assurances, especially regarding religious rights, and had large requirements of money and men, as in the case of Bihar, which we shall discuss presently. There was also the possibility of some of them joining the Muslim League at any point, after nomination, or even after winning. Shamsuddin Ahmed of the Krishak Praja Party in Bengal and Secretary of the Muslim Board, assured Patel of help in the elections, but joined the Muslim League soon after.<sup>30</sup> The Congress supported the Ahrar Party in Punjab but many of their candidates joined the League, leading Patel to lament the “wasting of good money for nothing”.<sup>31</sup>

Patel wrote to Maulana Azad on 2 January 1946, before the election campaign had really got under way: “In my opinion, the proper course all over India would have been to contest the elections on Congress tickets.”<sup>32</sup> It seems Maulana Azad was inclined to favour a joint front of nationalist Muslim organizations, while Nehru agreed with Patel that “the direct Congress appeal goes furthest”.<sup>33</sup> Nationalist Muslim Boards were set up and seat adjustments made between Congress, Jamiat-ul-Ulema, Ahrars, Momins, etc.

## Bihar Elections, 1946

The various problems that beset the bid made by the Congress for Muslim seats can best be demonstrated by taking a closer look at Bihar, where Rajendra Prasad supervised the campaign and left a documentary record.

The start was inauspicious. Two seats out of three in the central assembly elections went uncontested because of lack of coordination between nationalist Muslim organizations and the third was won by the League.<sup>34</sup> There was a fair degree of hope about winning seats in

<sup>30</sup> Patel to Maulana Azad, 21 December 1945, *SPC*, Vol. 2, p. 47.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Patel to Azad, 2 January 1946, *ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>33</sup> Nehru to Patel, 26 November 1945, *ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 77.

<sup>34</sup> Rajendra Prasad to Patel, undated, *Rajendra Prasad Papers* (henceforth *R.P. Papers*), F. no. 7-5/45-6, NAI.

the provincial elections if extensive propaganda was done. That meant money and Rajendra Prasad warned Patel much in advance that the Muslim seats would involve a large amount of expenditure. The nationalist Muslim bodies had scarce resources and the Momins, who expected to win 20 to 25 of the total 40 seats in Bihar, were a poor community.<sup>35</sup>

The expenditure on Muslim seats, Rs 2,63,575, amounted to three-fourths of the total amount spent.<sup>36</sup> The President of Chandi Thana District Congress Committee, Abu Nasr Abdul Baes, had suggested to Rajendra Prasad that Rs 10,000 be allocated for every Muslim seat and all the seats be contested by the Congress.<sup>37</sup> That would have been a better investment (even if no seats were won) from the ideological point of view, as the Congress message would have reached the Muslim masses.

Many of the nationalist Muslim organizations, as Abu Nasr pointed out, were obsessively concerned with religious questions.<sup>38</sup> This was apparent from the nature of promises they sought to extract from the Congress about Muslim religious rights. These included employment quotas, the appointment of a Muslim teacher in primary schools, special qazi courts, etc. The President of the Muslim Parliamentary Board, Qazi Ahmad Hussain Saheb, recommended that the Congress make these promises, arguing that "without the support of these religious bodies we cannot be successful in the elections".<sup>39</sup> Rajendra Prasad disagreed with the idea, arguing that liberty to pursue religious education should be ensured and no more.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Rajendra Prasad to Patel, 7 November 1945, *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Momins	-	Rs 1,17,000
Ulemas Congress	-	Rs 34,405
Muslims Congress	-	Rs 1,12,370
(General)	-	Rs 91,473 (including Rs 11,750 spent by candidates)
<hr/>		
Total	-	Rs 3,55,248

*Ibid.*, Col. 4, 3-N/45-6/47

<sup>37</sup> Undated letter, *ibid.*, 9-R/45-6.

<sup>38</sup> Undated letter to Rajendra Prasad, *ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Qazi Ahmad Hussain Saheb, Phulwari Sharif, to Rajendra Prasad, 22 November 1945, *ibid.*, 5-RP/PSF(I)/1945.

<sup>40</sup> Rajendra Prasad to Maulana Azad, 19 December 1945, *ibid.*



The point is that the nationalist Muslims in Bihar operated on religious terrain. They could hardly be expected to take on the League and its clever use of religion frontally. Touring by *ulemas*, *maulanas* and *maulvis* was considered an essential part of the campaign.<sup>41</sup> The limitations of such propagandists are obvious. Far from questioning it, they reinforced the nexus between religion and politics. The campaign had other weaknesses. Some nationalist Muslims were unable to stand up to the hostility of the League. Shah Ozair Momini, the candidate from Islampur, Purnea, was "afraid of being assaulted by the Leaguers and, therefore, he tried to avoid appearing before the public". This, in the local District Congress Committee Secretary's view, was why he lost the election.<sup>42</sup> Nationalist Muslims in Bihar, as elsewhere in the country, had no answer to another weapon in the League's armoury—the batches of students from Aligarh Muslim University who fanned out to the provinces carrying the message of Pakistan.<sup>43</sup> When they toured Laheriasarai, a local Muslim sent Rajendra Prasad an urgent demand for money to be used to counteract their propaganda.<sup>44</sup> Yunus, a nationalist Muslim of Patna, seems to have been closer to the mark when, among other things, he had suggested at the outset of the campaign that 2,000 boys tour the province for "creating a patriotic atmosphere".<sup>45</sup>

Another problem related to the coordination of the efforts of various organizations. A Nationalist Muslim Board was formed but a joint manifesto was problematical. Congressmen were sometimes overruled when other bodies insisted they had better chances of winning a seat. Patel felt it was wrong for Congress Muslims (or for that matter Congress Sikhs) to come under a Muslim election board, let alone sign a pledge. If this was done, "we shall be liquidating the Congress altogether".<sup>46</sup>

<sup>41</sup> According to Jalal, nationalist Muslims in Sind were assisted by a dozen *mullahs* imported from Baluchistan, *The Sole Spokesman*, p. 166.

<sup>42</sup> Report on Bihar elections, probably written by Rajendra Prasad, *R.P. Papers*, 9-R/45-6, Col. I.

<sup>43</sup> See Mushirul Hasan, "Nationalist and Separatist Trends in Aligarh, 1915-47" in Gupta, ed., *Myth and Reality*.

<sup>44</sup> S. Haq to Rajendra Prasad, 19 February 1946, *R.P. Papers*, 9-R/45-6, Col. I.

<sup>45</sup> Yunus to Rajendra Prasad, 10 December 1945, *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Patel to Rajendra Prasad, 10 November 1945, *ibid.*, 7-S/45-6.

As we have said earlier, optimism about winning Muslim seats was rather unreal. Nehru, as usual, was hopeful:<sup>47</sup>

I want to repeat that the recent election work has been a revelation to Congress workers so far as the Muslim areas are concerned. It is astonishing how good the response has been. How we have neglected these areas. We must contest every seat.

As late as 2 March 1946, Rajendra Prasad evaluated that the Congress and its allies in Bihar would win 15 to 20 Muslim seats out of 40.<sup>48</sup> This was similar to the U.P. leader G.B. Pant's expectation that "more than half the seats will be secured by the Congress in the rural constituencies, which number 41".<sup>49</sup> But on 8 March 1946, Rajendra Prasad confessed that "the Congress cannot expect to get more than four seats. We are not sure about these four." The Momins expected to win 10, the Jamiat one or two. On the whole, Rajendra Prasad expected victory in 10–12 seats only.<sup>50</sup> By the end of January 1946, Nehru, too, had conceded to Cripps that the majority of seats will go to the Muslim League.<sup>51</sup>

How was the retreat from optimism explained? Rajendra Prasad's conclusion was that it would have been better to have fought all seats on the Congress ticket.<sup>52</sup> He obviously attributed the dashing of hopes to the confused, uncoordinated, joint campaign with nationalist Muslims. Pakistan could not be opposed from the very terrain of religion

<sup>47</sup> Nehru to Patel, 26 November 1945, *SPC*, Vol. 2, p. 77. K.M. Munshi later claimed that he did not share the optimism of Nehru and others who "believed that the masses of Muslims were with them—with the Congress—and that once they went to the polls, the Muslim masses would vote with the Congress. I was sure no such thing would happen and no such thing happened", *OHT*, No. 15, NMML.

<sup>48</sup> Rajendra Prasad to Patel, *R.P. Papers*, 7-5/45-6.

<sup>49</sup> Patel to Rajendra Prasad, 6 March 1946, *ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Rajendra Prasad to Patel, 8 March 1946, *R.P. Papers*, 7-5/45-6.

<sup>51</sup> Nehru to Cripps, 27 January 1946, *JNSW*, Vol. 14, p. 141. In early November 1945 Nehru had informed V.K. Krishna Menon that Congress prospects were good and U.P. alone would return 25 Nationalist Muslims, c. 1 November 1947, *ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>52</sup> Rajendra Prasad to Patel, 8 March 1946, *R.P. Papers*, 7-5/45-6.

that it stood on. There was need for a detailed, point-by-point explanation of how Pakistan was not in the interest of Indian Muslims and was in fact inimical to the Muslims of Muslim minority provinces like U.P. and Bihar. Another view was that Congress efforts were too late. The alienation of the party from the Muslim masses could not be overcome by words and that too at election time. Yunus had written to Rajendra Prasad, as early as 10 December 1945, predicting that all 40 seats would be won by the League and pointing to this fatal weakness in the Congress position:<sup>53</sup>

The Muslim masses felt that the Congress was trying to woo them just on the eve of elections and that created a sense of opposition.... Nobody is to be blamed except the Congress for it talks and writes about Muslim mass contact but does nothing.

Bihar mirrored what was happening in the rest of the country. Brave words failed to mask the unpleasant likelihood that Muslim voters would line up behind the League. Bhim Sen Sachar, Congress leader of the Punjab, had admitted to Patel on 2 January 1946 that "the Congress may hardly get two Muslim seats". Yet Patel wrote to B.S. Gilani a month later: "Let us hope Punjab will finish the League."<sup>54</sup> The League emerged as the single largest party in Punjab. Patel deplored that "it is not good for the province or for the country. It means that all our efforts and resources there have been wasted and all hopes given were false and the calculations and expectations wrong."<sup>55</sup> The all-India figures were no more heartening. The League won 428 of the 492 Muslim seats while the Congress won 930 of the 968 general seats.

Amazingly, the Congress leaders continued to understand their failure in the old terms. They continued to believe and argue that all that was needed to be done was to establish contact with the Muslim masses. Once the Congress appeal reached them, they would rally

<sup>53</sup> Yunus to Rajendra Prasad, 10 December 1945, *ibid.*, 9-R/45-6, Col. 1.

<sup>54</sup> 3 February 1946, G.M. Nandurkar, ed., *Sardar's Letters, Mostly Unknown* (henceforth *SLMU*), Vol. 1, Ahmedabad 1977, p. 48.

<sup>55</sup> Patel to Bhim Sen Sachar, 20 February 1946, *SPC*, Vol. 2, p. 305.

behind the Congress. Muslim mass contact was brought out from the cupboard where it had been stashed away a decade ago and dusted and readied for use. Jayaprakash Narayan wrote the *Note on the Communal Question* sometime in 1946, which listed tasks ranging from economic betterment of Muslims to their representation on Congress committees—all desirable, most necessary, but none designed to grapple with the monster communalism had become.<sup>56</sup> Congress had not kept pace with the changing times. If Congress understanding was then outdated by years, there was at least a lag of six months in the acceptance by the Congress that the League's success with the Muslim seats had strengthened its claim to speak for most Indian Muslims. Nehru's concession of this right was uncharacteristically cautious.<sup>57</sup>

We are willing, as a result of the elections, to accept the Muslim League as the authoritative representative organisation of an overwhelming majority of the Muslims of India and that as such and in accordance with democratic principles they have today the unquestionable right to represent the Muslims of India, provided that for identical reasons the League recognises the Congress as the authoritative organisation representing all non-Muslims and such Muslims as have thrown in their lot with the Congress.

Jinnah's success at the hustings had wrung this concession.

### **Brief Glimmer of Unity—Summer of 1946**

Though a vote for the League was declared to be a vote for Pakistan, electoral victory for the League did not make Pakistan a reality. Pakistan could be created only if the British were willing.

<sup>56</sup> Other suggestions were: debarring from elective posts in the party of those who observe communal distinctions; setting up of service centres or *Quami Khidmat Markaz* with a library and a medical clinic; ensuring of a share for Muslims in licences, contracts, jobs; support to nationalist Muslims, etc. *AICC Papers*, G-36/1946.

<sup>57</sup> Nehru to Jinnah, 6 October 1946, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 1, p. 173.

However, public statements of policy indicated a change in British attitude towards the League. Wavell had conceded veto power to the League when he declared the Simla Conference a failure in July 1945. Attlee, in contrast, declared in the House of Commons on 15 March 1946 that a minority would not be allowed to place a veto on the advance of the majority.<sup>58</sup> Since this speech was made on the eve of the departure of the Cabinet Mission to India, it was taken to be an expression of the Mission's likely stand.<sup>59</sup>

The Mission found that most British officials were against Pakistan even when they were very sympathetic to the Muslim League. Glancy, the Governor of Punjab, was totally opposed to Pakistan.<sup>60</sup> Burrows, the Governor of Bengal, favoured a loose federation.<sup>61</sup> Wylie, Governor of U.P., argued that support to Pakistan would be "a retrograde step of the first order".<sup>62</sup> Mudie, Governor of Sind, reported that the Sind Muslims did not want a separate state but favoured an association that would rule out the possibility of Hindu domination.<sup>63</sup> Clow, Governor of Assam, advocated that we must "throw all our weight on the side of unity".<sup>64</sup> The Chiefs of Staff in Britain were of the opinion that a loose, all-India federation was far better than partition.<sup>65</sup> Attlee conveyed their opinion to the Mission.

The Mission, after long deliberation, came out with a statement on 16 May which studiously avoided any reference to Pakistan by name and constructed a three-tiered federal structure which would

<sup>58</sup> *Parliamentary Debates* (Hansard), House of Commons, Official Report, Vol. 420, No. 103, India (Cabinet Mission), Debate on Motion for Adjournment, 15 March 1946, Column 1424, available as published volume in NMML.

<sup>59</sup> For a further discussion on the Cabinet Mission to India, see Chapter 6 in this book; Singh, *Origins of Partition*, pp. 142–78, and Moore, *Escape from Empire*, Chapter 2.

<sup>60</sup> Record of meeting between Viceroy, Cabinet Delegation and Provincial Governors, 29 March 1946, *TP*, Vol. 7, p. 41.

<sup>61</sup> Note by Sir F. Burrows, undated, c. 1 April 1946, *ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>62</sup> Note by Sir F. Wylie, undated, c. 1 April 1946, *ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>63</sup> Record of meeting between Viceroy, Cabinet Delegation and provincial Governors, 28 March 1946, *ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>64</sup> Note by Sir A. Clow, 3 April 1946, *ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>65</sup> 13 April 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 260–61.

ensure the autonomy of Muslim majority provinces.<sup>66</sup> A sovereign Pakistan was ruled out.

The Mission's stand against a sovereign Pakistan evolved from two separate considerations. The first was the preference for a united India in the post-imperial world order envisaged by British statesmen and strategists.<sup>67</sup> The second was the evaluation that the Congress posed a greater danger than the League and hence it was more imperative to get its cooperation. The Home Member, Government of India, had noted on 5 April 1946 that in the event of a break with the League, even if they fought, "they would be beaten", as the Congress would aid the Central Government; but "on the whole, I doubt whether a Congress rebellion could be suppressed".<sup>68</sup> The question of what next, if rebellion was somehow suppressed, remained. Getting the Congress into the government was deemed vital.

The Congress leadership was naturally pleased at the British attitude, particularly the Cabinet Mission's pronouncement against Pakistan. They believed that Pakistan could come only by British design or at least acquiescence and since the British were no longer in favour of it, it meant the burial of the idea of Pakistan. Patel, in particular, was of this view. K.M. Munshi had telegraphed to Patel on 17 May 1946:<sup>69</sup> "Heartiest congratulations. Thank God Pakistan is out of picture". Patel replied:<sup>70</sup>

Thank God we have successfully avoided a catastrophe which threatened our country. Since many years, for the first time, an authoritative pronouncement in clear terms has been made against the policy of Pakistan in any shape or form. The continuous threat of obstruction to progress and the power of veto from obstructionist elements have been once for all removed.

<sup>66</sup> For text of statement, see *ibid.*, pp. 582–91.

<sup>67</sup> See Chapter 6 in this book.

<sup>68</sup> This note, two versions of which were prepared, one for the Viceroy and the other for the Cabinet Delegation, was subsequently, on the Viceroy's orders, not circulated to the Delegation members, *TP*, Vol. 7, pp. 149–51.

<sup>69</sup> *SLMU*, Vol. 1, pp. 195–96.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

This was obviously premature and not only from hindsight. The grouping provisions in the Cabinet Mission Plan and the interpretation given to them (in private with Jinnah) by the Mission members kept the possibility of some sort of Pakistan alive.<sup>71</sup>

The Congress was complacent that “we will hear no more of that mischievous cry of Pakistan”<sup>72</sup> because it believed that only the British had the power to create or destroy Pakistan. Congress leaders did not think that Jinnah could achieve his ideal by any means other than British complicity. When Jinnah suggested that he might not be willing to accept passively whatever the British government decided about Pakistan, most people did not take this threat seriously. Jinnah was seen to be so completely a creation of the British that defiance on his part of his benefactors seemed improbable. Nehru argued with Cripps in late January 1945:<sup>73</sup>

[Jinnah] threatens bloodshed and rioting if anything is done without his consent. I do not think there is much in Jinnah’s threat. The Muslim League leadership is far too reactionary (they are mostly landlords) and opposed to social change to dare to indulge in any form of direct action. They are incapable of it, having spent their lives in soft jobs.

During the Simla Conference in July 1945, Sapru’s view was that the Viceroy should go ahead without Jinnah, “for whatever Jinnah and the Muslim League may do they cannot resort to civil disobedience”.<sup>74</sup> Nehru said the same thing publicly in 1946: “I would like to see a revolution in India called by Mr. Jinnah. It is one thing to call for a revolution and another to carry out a revolution”.<sup>75</sup>

If Nehru was mocking, Patel was contemptuously dismissive. Jayakar noted Patel’s reactions in his diary after the talk he, along

<sup>71</sup> See Chapter 6 in this book.

<sup>72</sup> 2 June 1946, *SPC*, Vol. 3, p. 104.

<sup>73</sup> Nehru to Cripps, 27 January 1945, *JNSW*, Vol. 14, p. 142.

<sup>74</sup> To Jagdish Prasad, 5 July 1945, *Tej Bahadur Sapru Papers* (henceforth *Sapru Papers*), NMML, S-I, Roll 4, p. 338.

<sup>75</sup> Press Conference at Singapore, 20 March 1946, *ibid.*, Vol. 15, p. 49.

with Jagdish Prasad and Gopalaswami Ayyangar, had with Patel about Jinnah.<sup>76</sup>

He had met Cripps informally and also Pethick-Lawrence and had made it clear that if driven to it the Congress could create more trouble than Jinnah's 100 mullahs could and that if left to control the situation, Congress Government was quite willing and capable of managing and controlling the situation which Jinnah would create.

All three, Sapru, Nehru and Patel, would have had to change their minds when Jinnah successfully fired his first salvo at Calcutta.

## The Pistol is Forged

From vague threats of bloodshed and rioting, referred to by Nehru in his letter to Cripps, Jinnah had moved on to formalize his plan of Direct Action.<sup>77</sup> The convention of Muslim League legislators held at Delhi from 7–9 April 1946 was an indication of the shape of things to come.<sup>78</sup> It modified the Lahore, 1940, resolution's definition of Pakistan as two independent states in the north-west and east of India. It was clarified that Pakistan would be a single sovereign nation with western and eastern halves. The subjects committee resolution made it clear that imposition of unity would be resisted by Muslims "by all possible means for their survival and national existence".<sup>79</sup>

<sup>76</sup> *Jayakar Papers*, NAI, 7 April 1946, File No. 866, S. No. 35.

<sup>77</sup> For an account of these events from the Pakistani point of view the following works are invaluable: Syed Sharifuddin Pirzada's *Evolution of Pakistan*, New Delhi, 1987; Jamil-ud-din Ahmad (compiler), *Quaid-i-Azam as seen by his Contemporaries*, Lahore, 1966; Dr Shafique Ali Khan's two works, *Iqbal's concept of a Separate North-West Muslim State* (a critique of his Allahabad address of 1930), Karachi, 1987, and *Two Nation Theory: As a Concept, Strategy and Ideology*, Karachi, 1973.

<sup>78</sup> See Syed Sharifuddin Pirzada, ed., *Foundation of Pakistan: All India Muslim League Documents*, Vol. 2, 1924–47, Karachi, 1970, pp. 509–20, for a report of the convention, including the speeches quoted below.

<sup>79</sup> See Khan, *Two Nation Theory*, p. 60.



Jinnah's inaugural speech set the tone:

If, unfortunately, the British are stampeded by the threat of bloodshed, which is more a bluff than a reality, this time Muslim India is not going to remain passive or neutral. It is going to play its part and face all dangers. Nehru is greatly mistaken that there might be trouble, as he says, but not very much. He is still living in the atmosphere of "Anand Bhawan".

Suhrawardy dramatically declared that "every Muslim of Bengal is ready and prepared to lay down his life". Khaliqzaman agreed and added: "We are awaiting the order." Khan Abdul Qaiyum Khan, till recently in the NWFP Congress, warned that if unity was imposed, "Muslims will have no other alternative but to take the sword and rebel against it". Firoz Khan Noon, who had served on the Viceroy's Executive Council and was considered a "moderate" in politics, thundered: "If Britain sells our freedom to join the trade of Akhand Hindustan, if the British force on us an Akhand Government, the destruction and havoc which Muslims will cause, will put to shame the deeds of Halaku Khan, and the responsibility for this will be Britain's."

The Cabinet Mission's Statement had possibilities of Pakistan contained in its compulsory grouping clause, though overtly it declared against Pakistan. Jinnah was not satisfied with the ambivalence and feared that the Congress interpretation of grouping may be favoured. He appealed to Attlee to "avoid compelling the Muslims to shed their blood", else they would have to "forge sanctions to meet the situation".<sup>80</sup> On 29 July 1946 the Council of the All India Muslim League withdrew its acceptance of the 16 May statement, using Nehru's 10 July statement as a pretext.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>80</sup> 6 July 1946, *TP*, Vol. 8, p. 107. The All India National League (American Branch) appealed to the British Parliament to allow "honourable existence" to the Muslims who shed their blood for Britain during the last war. A copy submitted to President Truman's office is in File 5(i), Selections from Harry S. Truman Library, Manuscript Section, NMML.

<sup>81</sup> See Pirzada, *Foundation of Pakistan*, p. 558 for text of resolution and Jinnah's speech. The call for renouncing titles and honours had a favourable response. This

The new policy was declared.

The Council of the All India Muslim League is convinced that now the time has come for the Muslim nation to resort to Direct Action to achieve Pakistan to assert their just rights, to vindicate their honour and to get rid of the present British slavery and the contemplated future caste-Hindu domination.”

The Working Committee was directed to concretize the programme and “organise the Muslims for the coming struggle to be launched as and when necessary”. The Muslim League was no longer willing to give in to the British in whose shade it had grown. Jinnah asserted:

Today we have said goodbye to constitutions and constitutional methods. Throughout the painful negotiations, the two parties with whom we bargained held a pistol at us; one with power and machine guns behind it, and the other with non-cooperation and the threat to launch mass civil disobedience. This situation must be met. We also have a pistol.

It is surprising that Ayesha Jalal characterizes the Muslim League's intransigence and threat of Direct Action as a bargaining counter “merely to induce H.M.G. to give a definite assurance on the grouping scheme, an assurance which might enable him to bring the League into the Constituent Assembly and certainly into the Interim Government”. According to her, saying goodbye to constitutions and constitutional methods, merely reflected the Council's mood and is to be seen as an “au revoir”, not an “adieu” to the negotiating table. The

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surprised Congressmen who had criticized Leaguers as being wedded to their neighborhoods. In fact, the Congress condition that titles could not be assumed by any member was seen to be a stumbling block to the entry of nationalist Muslims into the Congress. R.K. Sidhwa, Secretary, Sind P.C.C, had argued that the condition be removed to facilitate entry of Muslims into Congress. This example indicates how wide off the mark Congress leaders were in understanding the Muslims. R.K. Sidhwa to Azad, 1 August 1945, *R.P. Papers*, NAI, 5-R.P./P.S.F.(I)/1945. For Nehru's 10 July 1946 statement, see Chapter 13 of this book.

threat of Direct Action was “played as a metaphor, not proposed as a fact”.<sup>82</sup>

## Calcutta, 16 August 1946—The Salvo is Fired

The first shots were fired in Calcutta.<sup>83</sup> The issue of Pakistan now moved to the streets for settlement, the inadequacy of the conference table having been proved.<sup>84</sup> On 16 August 1946, declared as Direct Action Day, Calcutta witnessed widespread communal violence. With the Muslim League government merely looking on, if not actively abetting the rioting, the death toll rose to over 5,000. The initiative was taken by the Muslims (Jinnah’s denials notwithstanding),<sup>85</sup> Hindu communal groups retaliated and, it is believed, inflicted more casualties than they suffered.

The Congress leaders were taken aback by the dreadful turn of events. There were hardly any public references to the incident. Gandhi’s reaction reflected the general mood:<sup>86</sup> “I am not able to say what I want to say. Words fail me. Over such an outrageous happening in India it is better to remain silent. Very often silence is the most effective communication because silence is filled with truth.”

The bewilderment was because the “black and inexcusable crimes”<sup>87</sup> that had taken place were not communal riots, but a qualitatively new phenomenon. Gandhi saw that the situation had gone beyond rioting: “We are not yet in the midst of civil war. But we are nearing

<sup>82</sup> Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman*, pp. 212–13.

<sup>83</sup> See Singh, *Origins of Partition*, pp. 182–87, for an account of the Calcutta riots.

<sup>84</sup> Moore, *Escape from Empire*, p. 162.

<sup>85</sup> Jinnah said in a press statement at Bombay on 10 September 1946 that the fact that disturbances took place on days declared as protest days by the League proves that the League did not take the initiative: “We were exercising our right of peaceful protest, and we did not start these disorders. There was an organised, premeditated move to mar the effectiveness of the protest and to discourage the Muslim League.” A.M. Zaidi, ed., *Evolution of Muslim Political Thought in India, Vol. 6, Freedom at Last*, New Delhi, 1979, p. 465.

<sup>86</sup> Prayer meeting, New Delhi, 28 August 1946, *MGCW*, Vol. 85, p. 22.

<sup>87</sup> Patel to Sarat Bose, 24 August 1946, *SPC*, Vol. 3, p. 177.

it. At present we are playing at it.”<sup>88</sup> Nehru saw fascist parallels in the state of the victims and the nexus between the government and terror:<sup>89</sup>

The provincial Government under Suhrawardy displays all the elements of gangsterism. It behaves essentially like the Hitler Government in Germany during its early years.... The Government functions in a shamelessly partial manner.... People who come from Bengal remind me forcibly of the refugees from the Hitler terror.

Understanding the phenomenon did not mean being able to contend with it. A certain helplessness was evident: “In its [Calcutta’s] suffering we have not been able to do anything.”<sup>90</sup> All that was done was the raising of a demand for central intervention and another one for a fair and impartial enquiry.<sup>91</sup> Even the demand for resignation of the Suhrawardy Ministry was not pressed, though there was no doubt that “in no civilised country such a Government should have a day’s existence”.<sup>92</sup>

However, when the demonstration of the League’s fire-power in Calcutta sent Wavell “scurrying back to the policy of appeasement of League”,<sup>93</sup> the Congress leaders firmly resisted his moves. Wavell met Gandhi and Nehru on his return from Calcutta on 27 August 1946 and explained: “While I recognised the difficulty in reopening negotiations with the Muslim League, I felt sure that the country expected it as a result of what had happened in Calcutta”.<sup>94</sup>

Nehru was emphatic that the consequences of agreeing to the Viceroy’s view would be disastrous: “To change our declared policy, which is generally acknowledged to be fair, because of intimidation is surely not the way to peace but is an encouragement of further

<sup>88</sup> *Harijan*, 15 September 1946, *MGCW*, Vol. 3, p. 177.

<sup>89</sup> Nehru to Krishna Menon, 5 October 1946, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 1, p. 169.

<sup>90</sup> Patel to Sarat Bose, 24 August 1946, *SPC*, Vol. 3, p. 177.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*; and Nehru to Wavell, 8 September 1946, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 1, p. 156.

<sup>92</sup> Patel to Sarat Bose, 24 August 1946, *SPC*, Vol. 3, p. 177.

<sup>93</sup> Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography*, Vol. 1, p. 340.

<sup>94</sup> *TP*, Vol. 8, pp. 312–13.

intimidation and violence.”<sup>95</sup> This clarified the stand he had taken earlier: “We are not going to shake hands with murder or allow it to determine the country’s policy”.<sup>96</sup> Gandhi echoed Nehru’s words.<sup>97</sup>

Nor can the Congress be expected to bend itself and adopt what it considers a wrong course because of the brutal exhibition recently witnessed in Bengal. Such submission would itself lead to an encouragement and repetition of such tragedies. The vindictive spirit on either side would go deeper, biding for an opportunity to exhibit itself more fiercely and more disgracefully when occasion occurs.

He cabled to Sudhir Ghosh after his interview with Wavell: “Gandhi says Viceroy unnerved Bengal tragedy. Please tell friends he should be assisted by abler and legal mind. Otherwise repetition of tragedy a certainty.”<sup>98</sup> To his own countrymen, he urged restraint and pointed out that responsibility for preventing the spread of violence lay on everybody’s shoulders, including the Muslim League’s.<sup>99</sup>

Nehru set the example for non-partisan action by appealing to people to collect funds for the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee’s Relief and Rehabilitation Committee, which would aid all communities.<sup>100</sup> The Congress leaders’ reaction to the Calcutta killings was an exercise in moderation and restraint. They avoided the temptation of making political capital by whipping up public sentiment against the League. They warned the government and the people of the pitfalls of appeasement and vindictiveness. They pointed to the writing on the wall and drew the attention of people to the fact that

<sup>95</sup> Nehru to Wavell, 28 August 1946, *JNSW*, Vol. 15, p. 318.

<sup>96</sup> Nehru to Wavell, 22 August 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 307–308.

<sup>97</sup> Gandhi to Wavell, 28 August 1946, *MGCW*, Vol. 85, p. 215. Wavell could hardly understand that Gandhi considered surrender to violence to be worse than violence: “Gandhi thumped the table and said, ‘If India wants her blood bath she shall have it’”, 27 August 1946, *Wavell’s Journal*, p. 341.

<sup>98</sup> Gandhi to S. Ghosh, *MGCW*, Vol. 85, p. 215.

<sup>99</sup> *Harijan*, 25 August 1946.

<sup>100</sup> 27 September 1946, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 1, p. 49.

Calcutta marked the entry of terrorist violence as a variable into the political arena and that this heralded civil war.

Gandhi pointed to a dimension which others had missed, i.e., how violence extended the life span of British rule: "What senseless violence does is to prolong the lease of the life of British or foreign rule. But if we need the use of the British gun and bayonet, the British will not go..."<sup>101</sup>

The reaction of Jinnah and other Leaguers was in striking contrast. Jinnah refused to comment on what the League meant by Direct Action: "I am not going to discuss ethics." Liaqat Ali Khan described it as "action against law".<sup>102</sup> This calculated lack of clarity meant that local Leaguers could interpret Direct Action as they wanted. Suhrawardy's abetment of the Calcutta killings needs no elaboration. Direct Action Day passed off peacefully in other provinces, including Sind, which was governed by a League ministry.<sup>103</sup> Jinnah did condemn the violence in Calcutta and stated that the Bengal Provincial League would take action against Leaguers found guilty of disobeying instructions (which ones, is anybody's guess); but he made no attempts to denounce Leaguers who continued to incite violence.

Ghulam Ali Khan, Minister for Law and Order in Sind, declared that anyone opposed to Pakistan "shall be destroyed and exterminated". Mamdot voiced the Muslim League's determination to "use all methods worthy of an aroused nation.... Now we are determined to stake our all in the *Jihad* to achieve freedom for Islam in India". Even as the situation was brought under control in Calcutta, Jinnah warned that the inauguration of the Interim Government would result in "unprecedented and disastrous consequences".<sup>104</sup>

Ayesha Jalal once again absolves Jinnah of all responsibility for the Calcutta violence, just as Jinnah absolved his party. According to her, Jinnah, being a "man of orderly constitutional advance", "did

<sup>101</sup> *Harijan*, 25 August 1946.

<sup>102</sup> *Morning News*, 2 August 1946, cited by Singh, *Origins of Partition*, p. 181.

<sup>103</sup> See Singh, *Origins of Partition*, pp. 182-87 and the FRs for August 1946 from the provinces, especially from Punjab, Bihar, C.P. and Berar, Delhi, Madras, Bengal, U.P., Assam, Orissa and Sind, which contain extensive information about the build up to 16 August and the fall out, Home Poll 18/8/46.

<sup>104</sup> All quotations in this paragraph are from Singh, *Origins of Partition*, pp. 187-88.

not expect, and certainly did not want, anything like this to happen.... Jinnah had his own priorities savaged tooth and claw by an unthinking mob, fired by blood, fear and greed". Jalal further argues that the League's organization and resources were so poor that it had to call in 10 *mullahs* and 10 *pirs* to make something of Direct Action Day. The violence was sparked off not by any League statements but by the Muslim clergy and quite naturally, once the movement had begun, Jinnah could not direct or control it.<sup>105</sup>

## Responsibility without Power—Congress Interim Government and Noakhali

On 2 September 1946, the Interim Government, comprising Congress representatives alone, was sworn in, with Nehru heading the team. Its inauguration was greeted with ominous threats by the League. Jinnah saw the division of India as the only alternative, and declared that India was on the brink of civil war. The Punjab Provincial League asked all able-bodied Muslims to enlist in the National Guards. Ghazanfar Ali stated that Muslims should prepare for Direct Action and wait for the "final signal for a tremendous struggle for the establishment of Free Pakistan". The League's Committee of Action defined Direct Action as *jihad* against the *kafirs* in India.<sup>106</sup>

Wavell had to admit failure, if only temporarily, in his efforts to secure a place in the sun for the League. He had also failed to intimidate the Congress leaders into giving in to the blackmail of the Calcutta violence. Wavell was not only afraid of the League's ability to unleash communal strife, he had a deep sympathy for the League standpoint, which survived Jinnah's intransigence. He had confessed to holding a brief for Jinnah:<sup>107</sup>

I put in a great deal of hard work and had some acrimonious discussion at times trying to get the best possible deal for the League;

<sup>105</sup> Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman*, pp. 216–17.

<sup>106</sup> See Singh, *Origins of Partition*, p. 190.

<sup>107</sup> Wavell to Burrows, Bengal Governor, 19 July 1946, *TP*, Vol. 8, p. 87.

and it was very largely Jinnah's own fault that we did not succeed in getting an Interim Government on what would have been very good terms for the League. So I feel a little sore myself at the line Jinnah and the League have since taken.

He even justified the League's espousal of direct action as being the outcome of Congress provocation:<sup>108</sup> "It is very unfortunate that the Muslim League has felt compelled to pass the resolutions which it has; and I think Nehru's intemperate speeches have done almost more than anything to drive them to this position".

He wished to stall the formation of a purely Congress government. He tried hard to convince Attlee and Pethick-Lawrence that the Congress had not really accepted the Mission Plan and hence should not be invited to form the government. Instead, they instructed Wavell to avoid a break with the Congress at all costs and, to that end, not to press the grouping issue till the Constituent Assembly met and the Interim Government was formed: "We feel therefore that it is quite vital not to allow any difference with Congress to come to a head before the Constituent Assembly meets at the end of August."<sup>109</sup> Wavell formed a solely Congress Interim Government but did not give up his efforts to get the best possible deal for the League. He continued to negotiate with Jinnah on terms of entry into the government and sought to effect this entry as soon as he could.

Having got Congress into the government and complacent that its potential of revolutionary danger was neutralized, Attlee and his colleagues were now willing to let Wavell bring in the League if he could. They justified their stand on the grounds that without the League in the government, "civil war would have been inevitable". If Calcutta planted the seed of fear, at Noakhali the harvest was reaped. By 25 October 1946, within 15 days of the Noakhali riots, League members joined the government.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>108</sup> Wavell to Caroe, NWFP Governor, 29 July 1946, *ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>109</sup> Pethick-Lawrence to Wavell, 26 July 1946, *ibid.*, p. 124; Moore, *Escape from Empire*, p. 166 and Chapter 6 in this book.

<sup>110</sup> Pethick-Lawrence to Cripps, 8 November 1946, *TP*, Vol. 9, p. 14; and Moore, *Escape from Empire*, p. 174.



The need to assume the responsibility of governing the country had been a strong consideration with the Congress when forming the Interim Government. Even before the riots in Calcutta, Rajagopalachari had warned Patel:<sup>111</sup>

Now that Jinnah and the League are certain to create trouble it has become our unavoidable and bounden duty to accept the challenge. We cannot refuse any offer about the Interim Government now without opening ourselves to the charge that we funk accepting responsibility under difficult conditions.

There were already indications of the tendency, which was to gather momentum later, of British officials being fairly indifferent about keeping the peace when only Indians were involved. Calcutta had shown that it was unlikely that the British would accept the challenge offered by Jinnah.

Communal trouble began in Noakhali in East Bengal on 10 October 1946 and spread to the villages of Noakhali district, Sandwip island and south-west Tippera district.<sup>112</sup> Killings, conversions by force, abductions and loot were common. The Hindus, who were only 18 per cent of the population but owned 75 per cent of the land, were the victims. Communications being limited to waterways, suppressing the trouble, provision of relief and even gathering of information about the extent of trouble was difficult. News filtered out slowly and, as it was confirmed from many sources, the horror of what had happened seeped in. Nehru reacted strongly:<sup>113</sup> “What has happened in other parts of India and more so in East Bengal has been so ghastly that it is even sufficient to wake up the dead. I am not dead, I am very much alive.”

As in Calcutta, the tragedy was compounded by the fact that it was not sought to be prevented or even alleviated:<sup>114</sup> “It is evident

<sup>111</sup> 1 August 1946, *SPC*, Vol. 3, p. 249.

<sup>112</sup> For a fuller account see Singh, *Origins of Partition*, pp. 195–97. Partha Chatterjee has discussed communalization in the context of the agrarian structure in “Bengal Politics and the Muslim Masses, 1920–47”, Vol. 20.1, 1982: 25–41.

<sup>113</sup> Interview to the press, 2 November 1946, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 1, p. 54.

<sup>114</sup> Nehru to Wavell, 15 October 1946, *ibid.*, p. 51.

that the Bengal Government is completely incapable of controlling the situation. Indeed, many people think that they have no desire to control it." The British Governor, complained Patel, was in Darjeeling instead of in Noakhali and "did nothing to prevent the mischief if he has wished to avoid it [sic]".<sup>115</sup>

Both Nehru and Patel pressurized the Viceroy to intervene in Bengal, dismiss the Ministry and rule from Delhi, but to no avail. Patel urged that special officers be sent and the centre take over the responsibility for law and order in the troubled districts, if not in Bengal.<sup>116</sup> He asked Cripps to intervene and complained that "provincial autonomy serves as a screen to prevent Government action".<sup>117</sup> He only got advice to be patient with some good wishes thrown in.<sup>118</sup> Cripps showed the letter to Pethick-Lawrence who accused Patel of misinterpreting Section 93 and asserted that there was no provocation for changing an established constitutional provision. He readily shook off the responsibility for keeping the peace between Indians by arguing that civil war could be avoided only by mutual accommodation.

The Secretary of State affirmed his faith in the Governor,<sup>119</sup> who in turn absolved his Chief Minister and even the Muslim League of complicity.<sup>120</sup> Yet, according to Wavell, the Governor "thoroughly mistrusted him" [Suhrawardy] whereas Wavell's own reaction was: "Suhrawardy, looking as much a gangster as ever...."<sup>121</sup> The government admitted inaction at the district level. The Inspector General of Police told the Viceroy that the police had "misjudged the situation".<sup>122</sup> General Bucher, who was in charge of Eastern Command, felt that the people had no faith in the police and the troops

<sup>115</sup> Patel to Cripps, 19 October 1946, *SPC*, Vol. 3, pp. 181–82.

<sup>116</sup> Home Department note for Wavell, 25 October 1946, reprinted in *ibid.*, p. 304.

<sup>117</sup> Patel to Cripps, 19 October 1946, *ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>118</sup> 24 October 1946, Cripps to Patel, *ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>119</sup> Pethick-Lawrence to Cripps, 28 October 1946, *TP*, Vol. 8, p. 830.

<sup>120</sup> Bengal Governor to Secretary of State, 17 October 1946, *ibid.*, p. 745.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 9, pp. 15–16.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

had arrived late on the scene.<sup>123</sup> Major General Ranking and Brigadier Thapar, stationed in Chandpur, one of the worst affected areas, told the Viceroy that the police were “communally biased”.<sup>124</sup> More than a month after the trouble broke out, order had not returned and police parties were attacked.<sup>125</sup> The League Ministry pressurized the police to withdraw criminal cases, including murder, rioting and even rape.<sup>126</sup> Nearly two months later the governor admitted that the administration had little energy to deal with communal strife.<sup>127</sup>

On the whole, the authorities were complacent when action was demanded of them. They were inclined to underplay the happenings and constantly referred to the exaggerated accounts and figures given by the Hindus and accepted by the Congress. The Secretary of State went so far as to say that the “Hindus, as is their custom, grossly exaggerated what happened.”<sup>128</sup>

The troubles in East Bengal painfully revealed to the Congress leaders that the stark reality of their position in the Interim Government was one of responsibility, without the power to exercise it. Patel wrote to Wavell: “It would indeed be a strange paradox if we who have undertaken responsibility of the Government of India should be powerless to do anything to terminate the reign of terror which prevails in East Bengal”.<sup>129</sup> He was right—it was a paradox and one that allowed for no easy resolution. Nehru sounded grimly resolute:<sup>130</sup>

What is the good of our forming the Interim Government if all that we can do is to watch helplessly and do nothing else when thousands of people are being butchered and subjected to infinitely worse treatment.

I am greatly perturbed. I feel that we must face this issue somehow or else we retire from the public scene.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>125</sup> 18 November 1946, *ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>126</sup> M.O. Carter, “Trouble in 1946”, *M.O. Carter Papers*, Centre for South Asian Studies, Cambridge, pp. 10–11, cited in Singh, *Origins of Partition*, p. 196.

<sup>127</sup> Governor of Bengal to Secretary of State, 3 December 1946, *ibid.*, p. 250.

<sup>128</sup> Secretary of State to Viceroy, 15 December 1946, *ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>129</sup> 25 October 1946, *SPC*, Vol. 3, p. 303.

<sup>130</sup> Nehru to Wavell, 15 October 1946, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 1, p. 51.

This was precisely the League's intention. Ghazanfar Ali Khan, soon to become a League member of the Interim Government, explained to the students of Islamia College at Lahore:<sup>131</sup>

The disturbances which have occurred in many parts of the country after the installation of the purely Congress Government at the Centre have established the fact beyond doubt that the ten crores of Indian Muslims will not submit to any Government which does not include their true representatives.

The Noakhali events demonstrated that, despite being in the government, the Congress leaders were able to do little except protest in public and feel acutely their helplessness in private. It was left to the Congress organization and to individuals like Gandhi to bear the cross.

### **Groping Towards Light—Gandhi in Noakhali**

Gandhi's first action was to send Kripalani, the Congress President, to Noakhali to ascertain the facts. Along with his wife, Sucheta, Kripalani managed to reach the affected area after one abortive attempt and despite being dissuaded by Suhrawardy. The scenes they witnessed, horrified them and the helplessness of the people was so acute that Sucheta stayed on at Noakhali and was there for seven months.<sup>132</sup> Gandhi reached Noakhali on 6 November, after she had been there for three weeks.

While he was still in Calcutta, the riots broke out in Bihar but, after some hesitation, he decided that "though Bihar calls me, I must not interrupt my programme for Noakhali". Rather, he would undertake "some measure of penance" for the Bihar happenings by reducing his intake of food.<sup>133</sup> Noakhali compelled his attention.

<sup>131</sup> 19 October 1946, Zaidi, *Freedom at Last*, p. 470.

<sup>132</sup> Sucheta Kripalani, *An Unfinished Autobiography*, Ahmedabad, 1978, pp. 43–53.

<sup>133</sup> Open letter in *Harijan*, 10 November 1946, *MGCW*, Vol. 86, pp. 81–82.

If Calcutta had left Gandhi distressed, Noakhali convinced him that his message of non-violence had only been accepted superficially by the mass of people. He felt his technique of *ahimsa* needed to be refurbished, for, while it worked adequately with the British, "*ahimsa* does not seem to answer in the matter of Hindu-Muslim relations". Typically, he saw this as his own limitation: "The reason for the present darkness lies within me".<sup>134</sup> It was, as he himself said, the "most difficult part of my mission in life".<sup>135</sup>

His stay in Noakhali had two dimensions. One was that of healing the rift that had taken place, restoring confidence to the Hindus by his presence and inducing a change of heart among the Muslims. This was a formidable task in itself. But more than that, Gandhi hoped Noakhali would be the seed-bed and even the nursery in which the plant of communal amity would be tended and watched while growing, so that it could later be transplanted all over the country.

Gandhi stayed in Noakhali from 6 November 1946 to 2 March 1947 when he left for Bihar, intending to return within a fortnight, but getting caught subsequently in the avalanche of political developments in Delhi. Initially, in Noakhali, he tried to reach out to both Hindus and Muslims through prayer meetings and visits to households. He preached his message of non-violence of the brave which demanded greater fortitude because there was no room for retaliation even under provocation, the last resort being suicide, if need be, rather than murder. Hindus must return to their homes and die there if it came to that, rather than run away and form ghettos elsewhere: "If they lived in clusters, it would really mean accepting the Muslim League's mischievous two-nation theory."<sup>136</sup> Muslims must repent for their acts by ensuring that such occurrences were never repeated. The demand was made for replacing certain Muslim officers with Hindu ones. Gandhi pointed out that this was a communal demand and the right thing would be to demand impartial officials, whatever their religion may be.<sup>137</sup> Gandhi rightly saw that communalization

<sup>134</sup> Interview to press, 2 December 1946, *ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>135</sup> Gandhi to Agatha Harrison, 5 December 1946, *ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>136</sup> N.K. Bose, *My Days with Gandhi*, Calcutta, 1953, p. 96.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

of the people in insidious ways like this was as great a danger as riots, however devastating they may be. He was also anxious to discover the political intentions behind the riots so that he could then combat them.

His programme varied considerably to serve better his multiple motives and aims. Initially, he visited various towns and villages to get a first-hand impression of the situation and met scores of individuals, Hindus and Muslims. By 20 November 1946 he settled down in Srirampur, a village, with a typist, Parasuram, and an interpreter, N.K. Bose, for 43 days. He cut himself away from friends, old companions and comforts, stopped writing for the *Harijan* and turned his reflections inward. As N.K. Bose understood it, Gandhi was "bent upon putting up with as much inconvenience as possible, if thereby he could somehow gain access into the hearts of the Muslim peasantry of Noakhali".<sup>138</sup> In Gandhi the social and personal were never separate and his search for the means to rid society of the communal canker was accompanied by a rigorous search for the flaw within himself.<sup>139</sup> Gandhi himself emphasized another aspect. He hoped to raise one seedling properly in order to understand how the plant survives. Later, Gandhi undertook a *padayatra*, camping in a different village every night, hoping to reach many more people this way. Sucheta Kripalani adds that the *padayatra* was to expiate for the violence committed by Muslims.<sup>140</sup>

Noakhali was the cynosure of all eyes while Gandhi was there. Would Gandhi's unique, personalized experiment be a success? Would Gandhi's unsteady tread through the darkness lead eventually to the glimmer of light? Thousands hoped along with him that he would

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>139</sup> Gandhi located the roots of violence in his imperfect *brahmacharya* and resolved to make his body the vehicle of the incarnate cosmic spirit. But his experiments failed to give him the spiritual power to end violence and control the drift of political events. Bhikhu Parekh is of the view that this was perhaps inevitable, for there is no such thing as spiritual power over one's countrymen; Gandhi, as was his wont, exaggerated his own responsibility for other men's actions. See Bhikhu Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform: An Analysis of Gandhi's Political Discourse*, New Delhi, 1989, pp. 195–96.

<sup>140</sup> Kripalani, *An Unfinished Autobiography*, p. 52.

find a way. Yet as time went by, while people continued to laud the valour and idealism of the attempt and appreciate its imperceptible but basic impact, there was pessimism about Gandhi's original intention that Noakhali would show the way out.

Even Gandhi's immediate two-pronged campaign to restore Hindus to their homes (and to a feeling of security) and to win the hearts of Muslims and plant the seed of repentance therein, had achieved only partial success. Sucheta Kripalani felt that Gandhi's expectation that people would "cast off fear" and return to their homes was unrealistic: "Gandhi did not realise that this was too much to expect from the Hindus who had suffered so much and so grievously."<sup>141</sup>

N.K. Bose noted that refugees did return in small numbers because of Gandhi's presence but it was necessarily a slow and long process.<sup>142</sup> Gandhi admitted defeat on this count to Suhrawardy: "In spite of all my efforts exodus continues and very few persons have returned to their villages."<sup>143</sup>

An official report on the situation in Noakhali, written seven months later, noted that Hindus were so intimidated that they were afraid to report or corroborate instances of harassment and quietly put up with insults, boycott, robbery and worse: "Under the surface, however, there is definitely tension and among Hindus a sense of insecurity. Hindus have not yet recovered their morale. They are apprehensive and suspicious."<sup>144</sup>

Gandhi's effort to effect a change of heart among the Muslims was equally futile. Their hostility was fairly apparent towards the latter part of his stay. The path he traversed between villages on his *padayatra* was regularly dirtied with night soil and strewn with glass. Gandhi's response was to decide to go bare-foot.<sup>145</sup> Then Muslims avoided coming to his prayer meetings and boycotted them.<sup>146</sup> Gandhi himself

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> Bose, *My Days with Gandhi*, p. 56.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>144</sup> Confidential official report of Commissioner, Chittagong Division to Assistant Secretary, Home (Poll) Department Calcutta, 13 May 1947, reprinted as an appendix to *ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> Kripalani, *An Unfinished Autobiography*, p. 52.

<sup>146</sup> Bose, *My Days with Gandhi*, pp. 140 and 152.

explained that "he was now looked upon as the Enemy No. One, rather than a friend by the majority of the Muslim community in India".<sup>147</sup> The Chief Minister and the Muslim League had been critical from the very beginning of his decision to stay in Noakhali and charged him with the desire to make political capital out of an unfortunate happening. They accused him of caring only for Hindus, else why did he make Noakhali his headquarters and not Bihar?

Others picked up the refrain and Gandhi was confronted with placards, letters, statements, all demanding that he go to Bihar. He refused to succumb to the pressure, which was, on his own admission, considerable and resolutely asserted that he felt no need to prove his secular bona fides.<sup>148</sup> However, he did give in to Suhrawardy over the batch of INA volunteers headed by Col. N.S. Gill that had reached Noakhali for relief work. He asked them to go to Bihar and work for the relief of Muslims there. As for himself, he stuck to his ground and went to Bihar only when Syed Mahmud, an old colleague and Minister in the government, appealed to him to come.<sup>149</sup>

Yet, being the honest man he was, he saw the wall that had come up between him and the Muslims and was unhappy that they were not willing to meet him half-way. When Hindu friends asked him why he did not go on a fast against Muslims over the Bengal events (as he had over Bihar) he confessed that "he could not do so today. If the Mussalmans realised that he was their friend, he would be entitled to fast against them too".<sup>150</sup> The admission that Muslims did not regard him as their friend must have been painful for Gandhi.

If Hindus continued to be insecure and Muslims to be hostile, close colleagues were critical of his decision to bury himself in Noakhali when his presence was necessary in Delhi to guide the Congress through those politically stormy months. Birla was openly critical of his master's mission in Noakhali:

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>148</sup> He told Patel, "I alone know what pressure is being put upon me to go to Bihar", 14 January and 6 February 1947, *MGCW*, Vol. 86, pp. 352 and 437 respectively.

<sup>149</sup> To Patel, 3 March 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 87, p. 37.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 86, p. 127.



I have now begun to take [a] rather unhopeful view of the peace mission. The world is what it is—while Bapu may perform his own *tapascharya*. Whether it could have immediate result is extremely doubtful.... Hindu-Muslim unity can come, if it can come at all, in the Constituent Assembly.<sup>151</sup>

Patel wondered “what is the result of all these Herculean efforts of Bapu”.<sup>152</sup> He wrote to Thakkar Bapa in Noakhali: “You are in the midst of *asuras* and I do not know whether God will have mercy on you and the people over there to allow you to escape from that dreadful hole.”<sup>153</sup>

Nehru was characteristically petulant:<sup>154</sup>

I am quite sure your visit to and tour in Noakhali district has great significance and importance. It is not for me to suggest to you to go against your own inclination. But I have an overwhelming feeling that vital decisions are being made and will be made in Delhi, affecting the whole of our future as well as of course the present, and your presence at such a moment is necessary. We are drifting everywhere and sometimes I doubt if we are drifting in the right direction. We live in a state of perpetual crisis and have no real grip of the situation.... If you had been easier of access our difficulties would have been less.

In a different context he is reported to have told Mountbatten that “Mr. Gandhi was going around with ointment trying to heal one sore spot after another on the body of India, instead of diagnosing the cause of this eruption of sores and participating in the treatment

<sup>151</sup> G.D. Birla to Pyarelal, 18 January 1947, in G.D. Birla, *Bapu: A Unique Association*, Vol. 4, Bombay, 1977, p. 433. Pyarelal’s enthusiasm had dampened after two months in “this luckless place” where the “waters of stagnation show not the least sign of stirring”.

<sup>152</sup> To Pyarelal, 16 December 1946, *SLMV*, Vol. 1, p. 223.

<sup>153</sup> 17 December 1946, *ibid.*, p. 225.

<sup>154</sup> Nehru to Gandhi, 10 February 1947 and 30 January 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 1, pp. 110–11 and 36.

of the body as a whole".<sup>155</sup> One is tempted to agree with Nehru that Gandhi should have been at the helm of the ship, steering a course through treacherous shoals.

This impression seems to gain ground when one realizes that however isolated Noakhali was geographically, it was not insulated from the ragings of the communal storm that only intensified in its wake. The historical forces at work were too strongly counter posed to Gandhi's careful ministrations to have any thawing effect. As the Governor of Bengal said, "it would take a dozen Gandhis to make the Muslim leopard and Hindu kid lie down together again in that part of the world."<sup>156</sup> In any case, the process of bringing together communities that have been torn asunder is a slow and uphill one. In a situation in which the fabric being darned is pulled apart at the other end, the tragic futility of the endeavour is even more stark.

When trouble again broken out in Noakhali in early April 1947, Gandhi conceded to Suhrawardy that "probably my presence would have made no difference to the situation."<sup>157</sup> Yet in July 1947 he said at a prayer meeting: "There is fire raging inside me. The fire will not rage after I go to Noakhali.... I am restless here. I was not so in Noakhali. I walked long distances every day, visited even new villages and met an immense number of people both Hindus and Muslims."<sup>158</sup>

Somewhere Gandhi had decided that the path to unity lay through Noakhali and Bihar and not through Delhi. Gandhi explained his stand at a prayer meeting:<sup>159</sup>

Many people retort, "What could I achieve in Noakhali." If there is a settlement concerning the whole of India, there will automatically be a settlement concerning Noakhali. But I proceed the other way. I had learnt when still a child the formula, "As in the microcosm so in the macrocosm."

<sup>155</sup> Mountbatten's note of interview with Nehru, 1 April 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, pp. 70-72.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 9, p. 301.

<sup>157</sup> 18 April 1947, Bose, *My Days with Gandhi*, pp. 210-11.

<sup>158</sup> Prayer meeting, New Delhi, 11 July 1947, *MGCW*, Vol. 88, p. 318.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

The tragedy was that both Gandhi's narrow, meandering path and Nehru's mainstream reached dead ends. Both paths were right or both were wrong. Neither could avert the tragedy of partition.

## Interim Government as a Front of Direct Action

Direct Action in Bengal had revealed the powerlessness of the Interim Government to the Congress leaders. When the Interim Government became one of the veritable centres of the direct action campaign, the position became more intolerable. The League members of the government made it clear at the outset that they had no intention of forsaking direct action and confining their actions to the constitutional domain. When the Viceroy and others argued that the coming of the League into the government would mean the burial of the ghost of civil war and the revival of the possibility of constitutional progress, they were only masking their real intention, which was to weaken the Congress. Wavell brought the League into the Interim Government without their fulfilling an elementary pre-condition—acceptance of the Cabinet Mission Plan.<sup>160</sup>

Ghazanfar Ali Khan, one of the five League nominees to the government, had not minced his words: "We are going into the Interim Government to get a foothold to fight for our cherished goal of Pakistan. The Interim Government is one of the fronts of the direct action campaign."<sup>161</sup>

Patel protested to the Viceroy the next day, demanded the speech be withdrawn and hinted at resignation.<sup>162</sup>

Raja Ghazanfar Ali Khan's speech (copy herewith) is disconcerting and bodes ill for the future. It should be noted that the speech was made before impressionable students on the 19th instant, i.e., after his name was sent by Mr. Jinnah as a member of the Interim Government on behalf of the Muslim League. Should he not withdraw the speech before he takes the oath of office?

<sup>160</sup> See Chapter 6 in this book.

<sup>161</sup> 20 October 1946, *SPC*, Vol. 3, p. 301–302.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

If wrangles over partition and fomenting of trouble are to take the place of the immediate work of the administration, it would be a question for the Congress to revise its attitude about shouldering the burden it has taken over in response to your invitation.

Patel's protest obviously had no impact on the Viceroy because, almost two months later, Nehru had to draw the British government's attention to a similar speech made by M.A.H. Ispahani at a debate on Indian affairs at the New York Herald Forum. Ispahani had said that "The League's participation (in the Interim Government) means that the struggle for Pakistan will now be carried on within as well as outside the Government."<sup>163</sup> By early February 1947 an emboldened Ghazanfar Ali Khan could publicly declare that "Mohammed Bin Kassim and Mahmud of Ghazni invaded India with armies composed of only a few thousands and yet were able to overpower lakhs of Hindus; God willing, a few lakhs of Muslims will yet overwhelm crores of Hindus."<sup>164</sup>

By now it was not a question of objectionable speeches alone. The Punjab League unit had declared civil disobedience against the Unionist–Akali–Congress coalition ministry headed by Khizr Hayat Khan and members of the Interim Government, particularly Liaquat Ali Khan and Ghazanfar Ali Khan, associated themselves with it openly. Khizr Hayat's ban on the RSS and the Muslim League National Guards led to widespread protests from the Leaguers. Jinnah warned the Viceroy of grave consequences throughout the country. Even after the ban was withdrawn, demonstrations, meetings and *hartals* continued.<sup>165</sup> Nehru drew the Viceroy's attention to "the way certain Members of Interim Government actively participated in the Punjab agitation and encouraged the attempts to upset the coalition Government there. This is patently opposed not only to constitutional procedure but seemed to us wholly lacking in propriety."<sup>166</sup>

<sup>163</sup> Nehru referred to this speech at a conference at the India Office on 4 December 1946, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 1, p. 129.

<sup>164</sup> Free Press Journal report of 7 February 1947, enclosed in Patel to Wavell, 14 February 1947, *SPC*, Vol. 4, p. 6.

<sup>165</sup> See Singh, *Origins of Partition*, pp. 209–11.

<sup>166</sup> 9 March 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, p. 293.

He was more forthright with Asaf Ali: "At present they are carrying on an aggressive direct action campaign in Punjab and the Frontier Province. It is fantastic for Members of the Central Government to be leaders of revolt in provinces."<sup>167</sup>

Patel no longer offered to resign, rather he asserted that the League members should do so: "Of course, if they wish to continue in their course, the only honourable course for them is to resign."<sup>168</sup> The Viceroy merely conveyed, or said he had conveyed, the Congress leader's protests to the relevant League members.

Encouraged by their success in dislodging the Punjab ministry, the League intensified its agitation against the Congress ministry in the North West Frontier Province. Sardar Abdur Rab Nishtar, a League member of the Interim Government hailing from NWFP, asserted at Abbottabad: "The root cause of all the trouble in the Frontier Province is the unnatural Congress Government foisted upon 95 per cent Muslim population. The present Government has become intolerable. This yoke has to be cast away and it must be cast away."<sup>169</sup>

Patel demanded that League members observe "constitutional propriety" or resign office. Mountbatten did take up the issue, but to little avail.<sup>170</sup>

When Jinnah agreed to put his name along with Gandhi's to a joint appeal to Hindus and Muslims to eschew violence and preserve peace (made on 15 April 1947), there seemed some ground for hope. But if the appeal was to be effective, it had to be combined with forsaking of direct action. As Patel said:<sup>171</sup>

My innermost conviction (is) that unless and until the Muslim League is compelled to withdraw its "Direct Action" resolution and this step is followed up by active efforts to keep its followers

<sup>167</sup> 24 February 1947, *ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>168</sup> Patel to Wavell, 26 January 1947, *SPC*, Vol. 4, p. 5. Patel had explained to Gandhi on 7 January 1947 why he was "opposed to Jawaharlal's hurling idle threats of resigning from the Interim Government. They damage the prestige of the Congress and have a demoralising effect on the Services." *MGCW*, Vol. 86, p. 288.

<sup>169</sup> Enclosure to Patel to Mountbatten, 1 May 1947, *SPC*, Vol. 4, p. 146.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>171</sup> Patel to Mountbatten, 20 April 1947, *ibid.*, p. 23.

in check and under control, the necessary psychological atmosphere in which the appeal could strike a responsive chord would be completely lacking and the appeal itself would not serve much useful purpose.

Gandhi, too, hinted that Jinnah was not sincere about the appeal when he rhetorically asked the question: "Why do Muslims kill when asked not to? Jinnah has signed a statement asking for peace. He is the head of a great organisation. His writ runs."<sup>172</sup>

The League did not retract direct action till the end.

Ayesha Jalal perceives the Muslim League's position in relation to the Interim Government rather differently. She argues that obviously Jinnah did not want the central administration to be run only by the Congress but the problem was that he did not want to give the impression of succumbing to Congress pressure. It was, as she quotes Wavell, merely a question of "their *amour propre*...in some ways [being] satisfied" and the League would have easily come in. She further argues that Jinnah's desperation was revealed by his joining the Interim Government without getting anything he had demanded—neither a monopoly of Muslim representation nor the right to veto on issues concerning Muslims.<sup>173</sup>

## Non-Cooperation from Within the Government

The problem was not only what the League members were doing outside the government. Their confrontationist attitude inside the government—what Nehru called their "attempt sometimes to noncooperate from within"—was an equal poser.<sup>174</sup> Nehru feared this when the League nominees announced, apart from Liaquat Ali Khan, were second-raters. "That choice itself indicates a desire to have conflict rather than to work in cooperation. The Muslim

<sup>172</sup> Prayer meeting, 1 May 1947, *MGCW*, Vol. 87, p. 394.

<sup>173</sup> See Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman*, pp. 224–25.

<sup>174</sup> Nehru to V.K. Krishna Menon, 13 October 1946, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 1, p. 521.

League...(has) not taken the trouble to send their most suitable men."<sup>175</sup>

It was soon evident that the League members did not subscribe to the "Cabinet" approach and intended to function as a separate bloc. Since the Viceroy was the official head of the government, the Congress members had devised the strategy of informal meetings prior to official ones to arrive at a consensus and reduce the Viceroy to a figurehead. The League members refused to attend these meetings and the Viceroy happily resumed his role of arbiter. Appointments of foreign representatives made by Nehru were objected to on little ground. Liaqat Ali Khan's budget is alleged to have upset the capitalist supporters of the Congress.<sup>176</sup>

The effect of this attitude was twofold. For one, it was to the advantage of British officials who had not taken happily to being sidelined. The Viceroy and his advisers made no secret of their sympathies and functioned, as Nehru put it, "more and more openly as if they were allied with the Muslim League".<sup>177</sup> The Congress leaders may have been able to contend with the League's unwillingness to cooperate but intransigence, backed by official support or sympathy, proved too formidable.

Second, it brought home to the Congress leaders the impossibility of jointly running the administration of the country with the League. Patel said as much at the Liberty Week celebrations just before partition: "My experience in office during the past year showed that it was impossible to do anything constructive with the Muslim League. The League representatives during their continuance in office did nothing but create deadlocks and their attitude was entirely an obstructionist one."<sup>178</sup>

Increasingly there was a feeling that it was better to wield control fully over most of the country than to have responsibility, without

<sup>175</sup> Nehru to Wavell, 15 October 1946, *ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>176</sup> See R. Chattopadhyay, "Liaqat Ali Khan's Budget of 1947-8: The Tryst with Destiny", *Social Scientist*, 16.6 & 16.7, June-July 1988: 77-89.

<sup>177</sup> Nehru to Krishna Menon, 17 November 1946, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 1, p. 541.

<sup>178</sup> 11 August 1947, Delhi, G.M. Nandurkar ed., *Sardar Patel: In Tune with the Millions*, Vol. I, Ahmedabad, 1975, p. 4.

the corresponding power, for the entire country. This implied a tacit acceptance of the notion of partition. Nehru, in a speech made two months after partition, suggested that the Interim Government's experience was the crucial variable in their decision to accept partition.<sup>179</sup>

There seems to us to be some element of post-facto rationalization at work here. The Congress decision to accept partition was much too convoluted a process to allow for any specific, determining factor to be represented. Yet, if we understand this process as the closing, one by one, of a series of options, till only one—partition—remained, the experience of running the Interim Government with the League was the shutting of one door.

## Political Progress Blocked

However, the most lethal weapon in the League's armoury was neither the pistol of direct action nor the dextrous blade of non-cooperation. It was the League's ability to withhold political progress and render all constitutional solutions futile. By the simple expedient of insisting that its interpretation of the Cabinet Mission Plan be accepted, it eventually nullified the entire Plan. It refused to accept the long-term provisions of the Plan but was willing to work the short-term aspect, i.e., the formation of an interim coalition government. This was a contradiction that should have been resolved before the League members were allowed to join the Interim Government but the Viceroy chose to ignore it and brought them in, despite the Congress leaders' demand that the League clarify their stand.

<sup>179</sup> Speech at Lucknow, 19 October 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 4, p. 171. H.M. Patel feels that despite the wrangling a certain equilibrium had been achieved which allowed for smooth day-to-day functioning. In his view the crucial and irreconcilable difference was one of social and developmental vision: "The Muslim League members of the old Cabinet created a deadlock at every step and made it impossible to run the country on smooth lines. The Congress eventually decided to allow the secession of the parts of India which wanted to do so and try to administer the rest of the country in accordance with its ideals. This was the only solution of the daily conflicts in the Cabinet which held up all plans for the reconstruction of the country." He was Joint Secretary and functioned as Secretary to the Cabinet, *OHT*, NMML and Interview, Anand, 1985, ICSSR Project, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.



Nehru had written to Jinnah when negotiations were going on: "I am hoping that if your Committee finally decides upon the League joining the National Cabinet, they will also decide simultaneously to join the Constituent Assembly, or recommend to your Council to this effect."<sup>180</sup> Patel saw that the League's refusal to accept the long-term aspects of the Plan indicated that it was bent on affecting partition. He expressed his fear to the Viceroy that the League intended to use their being in the Interim Government "for driving in the very partition wedge which the long term arrangement has withdrawn once for all".<sup>181</sup>

But Nehru's hopes and Patel's warnings had no impact. The Viceroy was determined to bring the League into the government. Nehru had predicted that "having not agreed to come in by the front door, they want to creep in by the back door".<sup>182</sup> This is exactly what happened.

A corollary of the League's rejection of the long-term plan was its refusal to join the Constituent Assembly.<sup>183</sup> The Congress had elected its members to the Assembly and left the Muslim seats vacant. The task of framing a constitution could not be gone ahead with fully when many representatives, especially from Bengal, Punjab and Sind, were not present. Besides, Congress leaders pressed the League to rescind its boycott of the Assembly but with no effect. The British government, who were partly responsible for the situation as they refused to clarify their ambivalence on grouping, chose to prevaricate and invited the leaders to London for talks.

Patel was visibly angered by this device of talks resorted to by the British government. He saw the London talks as yet another attempt to pressurize the Congress to concede to the Muslim League. In his view the League had realized to some extent that "violence is a game

<sup>180</sup> 6 December 1946, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 1, p. 174; and Nehru to Wavell, 23 October 1946, *ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>181</sup> 20 October 1946, *SPC*, Vol. 3, p. 302.

<sup>182</sup> Nehru to V.K. Krishna Menon, 13 October 1946, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 1, p. 521.

<sup>183</sup> Jinnah dismissed the convening of the Constituent Assembly as appeasement of the Congress and barred his partymen from participating in it. 21 November 1946 statement, New Delhi, cited in Zaidi, *Freedom at Last*, p. 510.

at which both parties can play and the mild Hindu also, when driven to exasperation, can retaliate as brutally as a fanatic Muslim",<sup>184</sup> but the British government nullified this realization by convening talks. Jinnah could now "convince the Muslims once again that he has been able to get more concessions by creating trouble and violence".<sup>185</sup> Patel felt that it was "a misfortune that the British Government are unable to take a firm stand and call off the bluff."<sup>186</sup> The prospects seemed grim to him. He feared that the Sikhs would go out of the Constituent Assembly, that the Congress would have to give it up too and the situation would revert to one of the minority holding the veto.<sup>187</sup> Neither he nor Nehru were in favour of the Congress participating in the talks but Nehru finally went in response to the British Prime Minister's personal appeal to come.<sup>188</sup>

The talks were not fruitful and His Majesty's Government's Statement of 6 December 1946 took an interpretation of grouping that was clearly favourable to the League.<sup>189</sup> But, even as the Congress considered HMG's statement (and subsequently accepted it), the Labour government clearly saw the reason for Jinnah's refusal to enter the Constituent Assembly in the reluctance of Congress to guarantee the procedure of the Assembly.<sup>190</sup> The Congress decided to accept that, too, after some debate, but that brought the League no closer to the Assembly.

The proverbial last straw was the resolution passed by the League's Working Committee at Karachi on 31 January 1947, calling not only for a boycott of the Constituent Assembly but demanding the dissolution of the entire Cabinet Mission Plan.<sup>191</sup> The Congress

<sup>184</sup> Patel to Cripps, 15 December 1946, *SPC*, Vol. 3, p. 314.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>186</sup> Patel to Amrit Kaur, 28 November 1946, *ibid.*, p. 290.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> Patel to Cripps, 15 December 1946, *ibid.*, p. 313-14.

<sup>189</sup> Patel had written to Gandhi: "Jawaharlal has returned from England. I did not go. Better it would have been, if he too would have declined to go. But he did not accept my advice. In a way he has returned as a defeated man." 9 December 1946, Nandurkar, *SLMU*, Vol. 1, p. 221.

<sup>190</sup> Singh, *Origins of Partition*, p. 207.

<sup>191</sup> Zaidi, *Freedom at Last*.

members of the Interim Government wrote a joint letter to the Viceroy: "We are clearly of [the] opinion that as a consequence of the Muslim League decision it is no longer possible for members of the Muslim League to continue in the Interim Government."<sup>192</sup> In private, Rajendra Prasad was sceptical of their demand being met: "They have thus disqualified themselves for the second time for being in the Interim Government, but they were brought in when they had that disqualification and they are still there."<sup>193</sup> He was right. The government had no intention of asking the League to quit the government. Yet they had to do something about the Congress stand. The policy statement of 20 February 1947, announcing a new Viceroy and a fixed date for transfer of power to one or more successor authorities, had been designed to arrest the process of decline of official authority but was now made to serve the purpose of an answer to the immediate constitutional crisis. The Prime Minister expressed the hope that attention would now be directed towards shaping the future.<sup>194</sup>

The Congress response left nothing to be desired from the British point of view. Nehru argued that generosity was the need of the hour.<sup>195</sup> "In view of this recent development and Mountbatten coming here soon, it seems undesirable to press that issue immediately. From every point of view it is worth while to make one more effort to get the Muslim League into the Constituent Assembly."

The old notion that Congress–League differences could easily be resolved once the third party, the British, were out of the picture, seems to have resurfaced in Nehru's appeal to Liaquat Ali Khan:<sup>196</sup>

It is obvious now that the time has come for a practical appreciation of events and speedy decision. The British are fading out of the picture and the burden of the decision must rest on all of us here. It is no longer good enough for any of us to criticise the other from a distance.... You and I might meet to discuss matters.

<sup>192</sup> 5 February 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, p. 34.

<sup>193</sup> To Sachidanand Sinha, 8 February 1947, *R.P. Papers*, 5-D/46-7.

<sup>194</sup> For text of Attlee's statement, see *TP*, Vol. 9, p. 773–75. See Chapter 7 in this volume.

<sup>195</sup> Nehru to Krishna Menon, 5 February, 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, p. 46.

<sup>196</sup> 9 March 1947, *ibid.*, p. 69.

This was not to be. Wrangling was destined to continue till the bitter end, as was the unhappy coalition. When Pakistan appeared firmly on the horizon, Nehru demanded that the Congress be given a "free hand for the rest of India".<sup>197</sup> The Interim Government should be treated as a dominion government in practice, with the Viceroy safeguarding the interests of the minorities and the areas in which they had a majority. The situation in the country cried out for firm handling. This was not possible with the League members of the government causing obstruction on every issue. As Patel told Mountbatten, "the introduction of the Muslim League members against the advice of the Congress, had so weakened the Centre that India was rapidly disintegrating into a lawless State".<sup>198</sup> Mountbatten dismissed the demand as the Congress desire to "crush the League during these coming two or three months".<sup>199</sup> The Congress acquiesced in order to prevent a break. The League continued to be in the Interim Government till 19 July 1947 when two provisional governments for India and Pakistan were formed.

Gandhi was not directly involved either in the Interim Government or in the controversy over the League's stand of boycotting the Assembly but participating in the Interim Government. He, as was his wont, went to the heart of the problem and located the basic flaw in both the situations. He had never entertained any illusions that a Congress-League coalition could work. In fact, as early as June 1946, he had prophesied to the Viceroy and the Secretary of State what indeed did happen later:<sup>200</sup>

Despair he must, if he expects to bring into being a coalition government between two incompatibles.... Dare to do the right. You must make your choice of one horse or the other. So far as I can see you will never succeed in riding two at the same time. Choose the names submitted either by the Congress or the League.

<sup>197</sup> Nehru to Krishna Menon, 17 May 1947, *ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>198</sup> Viceroy's interview with Patel and Nehru, 17 May 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, p. 870-71.

<sup>199</sup> Nehru to Krishna Menon, 17 May 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, p. 167.

<sup>200</sup> 12 and 13 June 1946, *MGCW*, Vol. 84, pp. 324 and 328.

For God's sake do not make an incompatible mixture and in trying to do so, produce a fearful explosion.

Gandhi did not share the Congress leaders' consternation at the boycott of the Constituent Assembly by the League.<sup>201</sup> For one, he felt something was wrong with a Constituent Assembly meeting under British auspices. It should not meet, even if this was seen as a surrender to the League. The basic point was that it was wrong to look to the British to ensure that the Assembly met and that the League joined it. The Congress should wait till it had the status and strength to convene a Constituent Assembly and invite the League to join, after which it should go ahead with constitution-making with whoever joined. But a constitution should be drawn up only for those parts which were represented in the Assembly and not for the whole of India.

Gandhi's stress was on independence and self-reliance in thought and action. One acted according to one's conviction, one did not look to what others could or should do. Considering the futility of Congress pressure on the League or on the British authorities, it seems the Congress leaders would have done well to have taken Gandhi's advice. But they did not and the drift towards conflict went unabated.

## Conciliation Reaches a Dead End

Direct action by the League had exposed the powerlessness of the Congress members of the Interim Government. The encouragement of direct action by League members of the Interim Government and their confrontationist posture within the government had brought home to the Congress leaders the impossibility of jointly running the country with the League. A third realization, and one as despairing as the other two, was that Jinnah and the League could not be conciliated. No amount of unilateral concessions were enough as long as they fell short of the requirement—Pakistan.

<sup>201</sup> His views are taken from two notes he wrote on the Constituent Assembly, 3 and 17 December, 1946, *ibid.*, Vol. 86, pp. 184–85 and 235.

The policy of contending with communalism by meeting it half-way may have had some validity when the issues at stake—representation, safeguards, reservation—had an element of genuine grievance which could be corrected. Assertive communalism stridently marching towards nationhood was hardly likely to be satisfied by concessions on provincial autonomy, parity in government or even constitutional procedures like grouping. The Congress leadership ultimately came to realize that it was not that the negotiation card had been played out, there was no way they could have won the game with it.

Nehru's assessment of Jinnah's method of functioning was quite accurate.<sup>202</sup> "During the past few years it has been our repeated experience that Mr. Jinnah does not commit himself to anything and does not like coming to a settlement. He accepts what he gets and goes on asking for more."

Jinnah put his stance to good use on another front too—to maintain his position as the undisputed leader of the Muslims. "Jinnah's creed...[was] always to avoid taking any positive action which might split his followers: to refuse to hold meetings or to answer questions, never to make a progressive statement because it might lead to internal Muslim dissension".<sup>203</sup>

How did one deal with Jinnah? How could one counter his method? Nehru could make little sense of Jinnah: "We are up against something which is neither political nor economic nor reasonable nor logical."<sup>204</sup>

<sup>202</sup> To Eric Mieville, 25 May 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, p. 178. Sapru's comment on Jinnah was more dramatic. "He is like Oliver Twist. The more you give him the more he wants." Sapru's friend, K. Iswara Dutt, continued the Dickensian analogy: "If Dickens' Micawber always waited for something to turn up, Mr. Jinnah—to quote one of Mr. Philip Guedella's famous epigrams in another context—is always waiting, like a kind of inverted Micawber, for something to turn down." Sapru to Jagdish Prasad, 5 July 1945 and K. Iswara Dutt to Sapru, 15 May 1946, *Sapru Papers*, Roll 1, p. 338 and Roll 4, D-117 respectively.

<sup>203</sup> Mountbatten's record of interview with Nehru on 24 March 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, pp. 11–13.

<sup>204</sup> Nehru to Akbar Hydari, 24 May 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series Vol. 2, p. 173. P. Subbarayan has quoted Nehru on the subject of Jinnah to Sapru as early as 21 September 1942: "What Jawaharlal said is quite true. He said Jinnah is an impossible person, and he is like the horizon, and the nearer you get to him the further he moves." *Sapru Papers*, S-1, Roll 6, S-419.

Gandhi, perhaps because he was less obsessed by reason or logic, could understand Jinnah's problem as a psychological one and suggest it be dealt with at that level. His talks with Jinnah in 1944 had shown him that Jinnah was more than a maniac.<sup>205</sup> "A maniac leaves off his mania and becomes reasonable at times. Jinnah is an evil genius. He believes he is a prophet.... He really looks upon himself as the saviour of Islam."

It seems Gandhi tried to analyze the roots of Jinnah's attitude and concluded that it could not be countered by reason; it could only be disarmed. "One supreme gesture", as Gandhi's biographer B.R. Nanda puts it, should be made.<sup>206</sup> Jinnah should be given the power and responsibility for running the country—he should be made Prime Minister.

The Congress leaders dismissed such a prospect out of hand both the times Gandhi suggested it, in mid-1946 and mid-1947. One must concede that it was hardly a feasible option from the standpoint of practical politics. It implied forsaking responsibility and handing it over to the League which did not forsake either direct action or Pakistan. The risk was considerable. What if Jinnah became intoxicated by power instead of being chastened by responsibility? Suppose he used the leverage of power to carve out his Pakistan in the contours of his liking? Would not the large majority of people condemn the act of vesting Jinnah with the supreme office as one of betrayal and abandonment?

The Congress response had the wisdom of reason on its side. Since the option was never tried out, one cannot assert that it would not have worked. Yet Jinnah's response to Mountbatten's casual comment that he would have liked to see Jinnah as Prime Minister suggests that Gandhi may have been close to the mark. Mountbatten noted that Jinnah said nothing but was obviously very tickled by the idea.<sup>207</sup> On the other hand, Jinnah's personality, combined with a lack of responsibility for the fate of the country, could have resulted in an explosive mixture.

<sup>205</sup> To Louis Fischer, 17 July 1946, *MGCW*, Vol. 85, p. 514.

<sup>206</sup> B.R. Nanda, *Mahatma Gandhi: A Biography*, New Delhi, 1968, p. 503.

<sup>207</sup> 9 April 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, pp. 103–104.

Far from endowing the highest office on Jinnah, Nehru was now convinced that there could be no further unilateral concessions to Jinnah: "We have made it abundantly clear to the Viceroy that we are not going to have a one-sided agreement about anything which commits us and does not commit Jinnah in any way".<sup>208</sup> However, deciding upon this did not bring a settlement any nearer. Nehru came to believe that however desirable a settlement was, it may be impossible to achieve.<sup>209</sup>

We have arrived at a stage when it is quite impossible to carry on in the way we have done so far. There must be a settlement, and if there is no settlement there must be some other way of ending this crisis...: Fortunately we have arrived at a stage when we must put an end to this sorry business some way or other.

The "other way" was the division of the country. Though not explicitly stated, it was accepted in a public statement he had made a month earlier:<sup>210</sup> "I want that those who stand as an obstacle in our way should go their own way. I wish that at least 80 or 90 per cent of India should move forward according to the map of India which I have in my mind."

The irony was manifest. The Congress policy of making concessions to the League was intended to prevent the formation of Pakistan. It failed to do that. Pakistan was conceded finally, though a truncated version of it. In fact, it came to be seen as the concession to end all concessions. From the hope that appeasement would prevent partition, partition came to be seen as an end to appeasement.<sup>211</sup> The inversion was complete.

<sup>208</sup> To Baldev Singh, 25 May 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, p. 174.

<sup>209</sup> Nehru to Akbar Hydari, 24 May 1947, *ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>210</sup> Jallianwala Bagh Day meeting, New Delhi, 13 April 1947, *ibid.*, p. 89. See Chapter 12 in this book.

<sup>211</sup> Patel expressed this view to N.V. Gadgil: "The question of appeasement of the Muslim League does not now arise. We have given what they wanted and we must now begin with a clean slate on our side.... We must have a strong Central Government and a strong Central Army to deal with all eventualities. We must do away with weightage and communal electorates." 23 June 1947, Nandurkar, *SLMU*, Vol. 2, p. 230.



## Two Faces of Hindu Communalism: Majority Reaction, Minority Fears

Conciliation of communalism was not only futile; it had more disastrous consequences when the communalism in question was akin to fascism. If Jinnah's domain had been the negotiating table, appeasement would have been unfortunate. As his arena of battle extended to the streets, appeasement meant encouragement of fascist methods. Each bout of direct action that went unchecked set the stage for the next round. Soon direct action was not the prerogative of the League alone. Hindu communalism not only grew at an alarming rate; it showed no hesitation in adopting the tactics of intimidation, coercion and terror that had hitherto been confined to the League. As Nehru put it in April 1947:<sup>1</sup>

The violence and brutality that we have seen in India during the last eight months are the resultants of the deliberate policy of the Muslim League called "Direct Action". That violence has bred violence in others also. Essentially the tactics of the Muslim League have been remarkably similar to those of the Nazis in their early days with their Brown Shirts and Black Shirts. In so far as belief grows that these tactics succeed, the method is pursued with greater vigour. In the Punjab they succeeded in bringing about the fall of

<sup>1</sup> Nehru to Mountbatten, 17 April 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, p. 94.



" The Flowers that bloom in the spring, Tra-la, have nothing to do with the case. " - The Lord High Executioner in Gilbert and Sullivan's, the "Mikado."

Source: *The Hindustan Times*, 3 May 1947

the Ministry and immediately after horrible consequences followed.... It seems to me essential that it should be demonstrated beyond doubt that these methods cannot be allowed to succeed. A policy of appeasement results in encouragement and in inflaming people who are opposed to these methods and suffer from them. As soon as they think the Government is partial, they despair and take the law into their own hands.

Nehru was writing from experience and his understanding of why communal riots had erupted in Bihar with such ferocity in late October 1946. Anger had certainly been brewing since August 1946 when communal riots had ravaged Calcutta and many Biharis had lost their lives. Feelings of revenge and hatred spread fast among the Hindus of Bihar. The feeling grew that Hindus would have to come to their own aid; as Nehru had warned, they decided to "take the law into their hands".<sup>2</sup>

### Majority Reaction—Bihar Riots

Trouble broke out on 25 October 1946 in Chapra in Saran district and spread to the rural areas. Mobs of Hindu peasants in Patna, Gaya and Monghyr districts followed suit and entire villages of Muslims were wiped out. Estimates of the number of dead varied widely. The Viceroy was inclined to accept the Bengal League leader Nazimuddin's figure of 10 to 20,000 killed but settled for 5 to 10,000, while the DIG, CID, Bihar, put the total at 2,870,<sup>3</sup> Nehru at 4,300–4,700<sup>4</sup> and the Bihar government at 5,246, including 213 Hindus.<sup>5</sup> The trouble was not unexpected. A secret circular had gone out from the Chief Secretary to District Magistrates and Super-

<sup>2</sup> Nehru's Note on Bihar riots, 6 November 1946, *ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 72.

<sup>3</sup> Viceroy to Secretary of State, 22 November 1946, *TP*, Vol. 9, pp. 130–40, and Report by DIG, CID, 16 December 1946, *R.P. Papers*, 6-B/46, Part I, Sen. 76.

<sup>4</sup> Nehru to Suhrawardy, 1 January 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 1, p. 105.

<sup>5</sup> L.P. Singh, "The Bihar Government's Case" 2 February 1947, *R.P. Papers*, 6-B/46, Part I, S. No. 1.

intendents of Police on 21 August 1946 warning against the possibility of communal outbreaks fuelled by tales of atrocities carried by refugees from Bengal and advising use of full powers to contain them, if they did occur.<sup>6</sup> The Governor of Bihar informed the Viceroy on 26 October 1946 that the communities were hostile and ended with the comment, "We shall be lucky indeed if we get through the next few months without serious riots and bloodshed".<sup>7</sup> Trouble had already broken out though the news had not yet reached him. Initially, the mobs went about their business relatively unchecked. The suddenness of the upheaval, its widespread character, the absence of some Ministers and the Governor from the capital and the indifference of some of the British officials, all contributed to this.<sup>8</sup> However, once the government swung into action, it went all out to suppress the trouble and the situation was under control in two weeks.

Nehru set the tone in the clearest manner possible. He was in Calcutta, along with League members of the Interim Government, issuing appeals for sanity and peace in East Bengal, when the news from Bihar broke. He rushed to Bihar and resolved to remain there till peace returned. Shades of Gandhi were evident in his action and speech:<sup>9</sup>

I must not leave Bihar till we see light... As for myself I will never allow any repetition of communal massacre anywhere on this earth. I have suspended all my engagements and I will go from village to village in Bihar to prevent communal riots...

In case any man seeks to kill his compatriot, he will have to murder Jawaharlal first and then by trampling over his corpse, he would be able to satisfy his lust for blood.

<sup>6</sup> No. 1917 C Secret, Government of Bihar, Political Department (Special Section), Bihar State Archives, Patna, S. No. 2.

<sup>7</sup> *TP*, Vol. 8, pp. 813–14.

<sup>8</sup> Note on Bihar riots by Nehru, 5 November 1946, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 1, p. 74.

<sup>9</sup> Nehru to Patel, 5 November 1946 and speech at Taregna, 5 November 1946, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 1, pp. 68 and 63.

He minced no words when condemning the action of Hindu mobs. The crowds that gathered to hear him at Patna were told: "You should realise that you have by your conduct reached the stage of animality when nothing but the primal instinct of preserving one's life works to the exclusion of the rest. No, but you are even worse than animals as animals at least do not attack in a herd."<sup>10</sup> Privately, in a letter to a friend, he confessed that he had been taken aback by the way the simple peasants had behaved. "Something incredible has happened here or something that I would have refused to believe in, a few days ago. Hindu peasant mobs have behaved in a manner that is the extreme of brutality and inhumanity... To think that the simple, unsophisticated, rather likeable Bihar peasant can go completely mad en masse upsets all my sense of values."<sup>11</sup> In public he displayed none of his sense of dismay and distress. Wherever he went he made it amply clear that the requisite force would be used to quell the trouble: "I warn you that police will come and shoot you if you do not stop the murder, arson and loot that has been going on.... Machine guns, bombs and all the force of the Government will be put in motion to stop bloodshed."<sup>12</sup>

The Secretary of State for India reacted spontaneously to the report of Nehru's threats of bombing: "I confess I was astonished."<sup>13</sup> Nehru was privately as surprised at his own reaction. When firing by the army on an advancing mob was believed to have killed 400 people, Nehru "felt that the balance had been very slightly righted.... Normally such a thing would have horrified me. But would you believe it? I was greatly relieved to hear it! So we change with changing circumstances as layers of fresh experience and feeling cover up the past accumulation".<sup>14</sup> British and Muslim opinion, though surprised by the vehemence of Nehru's reaction, approved of it.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> 6 November 1946, *ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>11</sup> To Padmaja Naidu, 5 November 1946, *ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>12</sup> Speeches at Biharsharif and Fatwa, 4 November 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 55 and 57.

<sup>13</sup> To the Viceroy, 8 November 1946, *TP*, Vol. 9, p. 34.

<sup>14</sup> To Padmaja Naidu, 5 November 1946, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 1, p. 65.

<sup>15</sup> The Viceroy conceded that Nehru's efforts in Bihar had helped to control the situation. Sultan Ahmed, Adviser to the Chancellor, Chamber of Princes, would undoubtedly have approved of Nehru's action. He urged Rajendra Prasad to get the

Many Hindus felt he had been unduly harsh in his condemnation and he faced cries of "go back" and "Jawaharlal Murdabad" in Patna.<sup>16</sup> H.B. Chandra, a Bihar Congressman, was distressed that calumny was heaped on Bihari peasants "not only by the League Muslims and the alien-minded services or the British interests but even by its chosen representatives who profess to act in the name of democracy as the people's tribune". He felt that the uneducated kisans had misunderstood the Congress condemnation of the Noakhali riots as a signal to fight but as soon as they realized their mistake, they "wound up their fight". Hence, it was unfair to call them Hindus or anti-national.<sup>17</sup> G.D. Birla seems to have written to Patel about Hindus being agitated with Nehru's stand and other telegrams and letters on the same lines were received by Patel. Patel strongly defended Nehru from "Hindu" criticism. He wrote to G.D. Birla.<sup>18</sup>

I am aware that the Hindu public all over, and especially in Bihar, have been greatly agitated and annoyed at some of the speeches of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in Bihar. Our people are taking a narrow view of things. The atmosphere today is such that people lose balance early. I think that in spite of all little acts of indiscretion, he has done immense service to the cause of nationalism and the Congress by his strenuous efforts in restoring order in Bihar.

Yet, Patel felt that given the League tendency to exaggerate what had happened and attack the Congress Ministry, there were negative aspects to the stand of severely condemning Hindus.<sup>19</sup>

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Hindus to "to go round and chastise the Hindus in as strong a language as they are capable of for having behaved or allowed people to behave as they did", Viceroy to Secretary of State, 22 November 1946, *TP*, Vol. 9, pp. 139-40; and Sultan Ahmed to Rajendra Prasad, 24 December 1946, *R.P. Papers*, F. No. 6-B/46 (Pt. I), S. No. 78. See Sapru to Rushbrook Williams, 28 November 1946, *Sapru Papers*, S-I, Roll 6, W-18.

<sup>16</sup> Nehru's third note on the Bihar riots, 8 November 1946, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 1, p. 85.

<sup>17</sup> H.B. Chandra to Rajendra Prasad, undated, *R.P. Papers*, F. No. 6-B/46-Part I, S. No. 83.

<sup>18</sup> Patel to G.D. Birla, 15 December 1946, *SLMU*, Vol. 1, p. 222.

<sup>19</sup> Patel to Rajendra Prasad, 11 November 1946, *SPC*, Vol. 3, p. 171.

While we are justified in condemning the brutalities perpetrated by those who were concerned in these atrocities, we would be committing a grave mistake if we expose the people of Bihar and their Ministry to the violent and vulgar attacks of the League. None of them open their mouth against what was happening, and is still happening in Bengal. We must guard against being stampeded into indiscreet actions through sheer panic.

Pragmatism, loyalty to a colleague and to the party and impatience with unnecessary demonstrations of good intentions, went into the making of Patel's stand. He appreciated Nehru's role for the impact it had but feared that it conceded too much to the League's position.

Patel felt the Congress Ministry had to be supported, especially against League criticism and central interference. He had demanded central intervention in East Bengal but opposed it vehemently in Bihar. When the Viceroy sent his Deputy Private Secretary, Scott, to Bihar, to report on the situation, Patel protested and asked why Scott was not sent to East Bengal.<sup>20</sup> When Scott wrote a report that was heavily critical of the Ministry, Patel urged the Chief Minister of Bihar, Sri Krishna Sinha, to "protest strongly against anything that interferes with your provincial autonomy".<sup>21</sup> This could be interpreted as double standards. But one must not forget that the Viceroy and his staff were pro-League. While the Viceroy took great pains to cut down to size the exaggerated estimates of those killed in Noakhali, he was inclined to accept Nazimuddin's figures of 10 to 20,000 dead in Bihar and termed the Bihar and U.P. killings as "far beyond anything that I think has yet happened in India since British rule began".<sup>22</sup>

Patel disapproved of having any truck with the League, even in relief and rehabilitation work. He told the Chief Minister to keep a watch on the activities of the volunteers and retain control of relief work in his own hands.<sup>23</sup> In his view, "If there is any trouble it is with regard to the relief and rehabilitation of the Muslim sufferers due to

<sup>20</sup> Patel to Viceroy, 22 November 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 175–76.

<sup>21</sup> 26 November 1946, *ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>22</sup> Viceroy to Secretary of State, 22 November 1946, *TP*, Vol. 9, pp. 138–40.

<sup>23</sup> 26 November 1946, *SPC*, Vol. 3, p. 174.

the obstructionist attitude of the Muslim League which has practically taken charge of the relief operations.”<sup>24</sup> Nehru, too, agreed that “the Bihar League was more interested in making political capital than in helping the evacuees”.<sup>25</sup> The League leaders demanded that all relief be routed through them and that they and their volunteers be given facilities to supervise camps. The government recognized the League as the principal relief agency, allowed its volunteers to run government camps<sup>26</sup> and have access to government supplies, sanctioned them the largest quantity of petrol, 3,553 gallons,<sup>27</sup> loaned doctors and medicines to private camps run by the League<sup>28</sup> and allowed the League to overrule camp sites, etc.

In Bengal, Hindu volunteers were discouraged, Niranjan Singh Gill and his batch of INA volunteers were sent off to Bihar to prove their bonafides first by serving Muslims and even Gandhi was not spared pressure to leave Noakhali. The refugee camps in East Bengal were overcrowded, with bad sanitation and poor supplies of fuel, clothing, food and little medical aid. Sucheta Kripalani, who tried to organize relief work in Noakhali, went on to say: “from what I saw in East Bengal it was a welcome relief to see the way in which the Bihar Government was giving all-out help to the refugees”.<sup>29</sup> Despite his own poor record, the Chief Minister of Bengal, Suhrawardy, alleged obstruction by the Bihar government in the League’s relief efforts.<sup>30</sup>

The contrast between the responses of the Congress and League leaders to Bihar and Noakhali respectively was summed up by Sapru.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Patel to N.S. Gill, 26 January 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 4, p. 224.

<sup>25</sup> Nehru pointed out to Suhrawardy that “When I was there I found the Muslim League coming in the way of the Government’s efforts to help the refugees and evacuees”, 29 December 1946, *JNSW*, 2nd series, Vol. 1, p. 99.

<sup>26</sup> Nehru to Suhrawardy, 11 January 1947, *ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>27</sup> Notes (by Bihar government) on allegations by Suhrawardy, *R.P. Papers*, 6-B/46, Part I, S. No. 80.

<sup>28</sup> IG of Civil Hospitals, Bihar to Minister, Medical Dept., 1 January 1947, *ibid.*, Part II, S. No. 5.

<sup>29</sup> A.P. report, undated, *ibid.*, S. No. 77.

<sup>30</sup> Suhrawardy to Gandhi, 15 December 1946, *ibid.*, Part I, S. No. 80.

<sup>31</sup> To Rushbrook Williams, 28 November 1946, *Sapru Papers*, S-1, Roll 6, W-18.



The Congress and the Hindus generally have condemned the misconduct of the Biharis and no one more emphatically than Jawaharlal and the Congress Ministers in Bihar have been able to bring the whole situation under control. In Noakhali and East Bengal the trouble is still raging. Jinnah has not had a word of sympathy for those who suffered in East Bengal and Noakhali and this has entered like iron in the souls of the Hindus.

In Bihar, the Ministry and Congress workers both actively suppressed the trouble and organized relief on a large scale and yet the League was able to discredit the Congress because Congressmen and the Ministry had not approached the Muslims directly.<sup>32</sup> The League extracted the utmost political mileage from the riots and turned it to communal ends. The exodus of refugees into Bengal was influenced, if not organized, by the League.<sup>33</sup> Free land and houses were promised in Bengal and people left their homes even in districts like Shahabad, which were unaffected by the riots. About 60,000 refugees left Bihar between the third week of November and the end of December 1946.<sup>34</sup> Patel had suggested even earlier, when the League volunteers were dissuading people from returning to their villages, that District Magistrates should have powers to disallow their entry.<sup>35</sup> But the League went unchecked.

Patel was impatient of criticism of the Congress Ministry's relief initiative or any suggestion that something more could be done. Patel had arranged funds for N.S. Gill and a batch of 100 INA men for their programme of relief work in Noakhali.<sup>36</sup> He disapproved of Gandhi's agreeing to send Gill and his party to Bihar to serve the Muslims and establish their credentials. "I do not know what work your volunteers can do in Bihar. There is no trouble there...it is, in my opinion, a waste of energy and money to send any of your

<sup>32</sup> Giridher Singh's note on riots, *R.P. Papers*, 6-B/46, Part I, S. No. 85.

<sup>33</sup> Nehru to Suhrawardy, 1 January 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 1, p. 104.

<sup>34</sup> Note (by Bihar government) on allegations by Suhrawardy, *R.P. Papers*, 6-B/46, Part I, S. No. 80.

<sup>35</sup> Patel to Private Secretary to Viceroy, 25 November 1946, *SPC*, Vol. 3, p. 172.

<sup>36</sup> Patel to Gill, 19 November 1946, *ibid.*, pp. 188-89.

people.”<sup>37</sup> He told Gandhi that the Bihar government was spending Rs 50 lakh per month on relief. Referring to the Muslims’ hesitation to return to their villages, he wrote somewhat insensitively: “They get twice or thrice the quota of ration than what they were having at home. What needs they then return home?”<sup>38</sup>

Did Bihar mark the communalization of the Congress on Hindu lines? Many, and not only Leaguers, would accept this view. The Viceroy was emphatically of the opinion that the lower strata of the Congress were responsible for the killings in U.P. and Bihar: “And they were undoubtedly organised, and organised very thoroughly, by supporters of Congress.”<sup>39</sup> H.B. Chandra, a Congressman from Bihar, complained to Rajendra Prasad that ruthless suppression of the Hindu peasant mobs was grossly unfair as they were only translating into practice the warnings of the Congress leaders after Noakhali.<sup>40</sup> Nehru’s view was that some Congressmen with inclinations towards the Hindu Mahasabha were said to be involved but others have done “excellent work in the face of grave difficulty”.<sup>41</sup> Giridher Singh, in a note on the riots, mentioned Mokamah and Sultanganj as places where Congressmen prevented the outbreak of trouble.<sup>42</sup> A CID report listed many more instances of Hindus, particularly the Congress workers, who persuaded mobs to retreat at great personal risk.<sup>43</sup> As regards the Congress Ministry, the Bihar Governor, Hugh Dow’s opinion was: “On the whole, my Ministry must be given the credit of having acted vigorously when the actual troubles started, and the military officers will, I think, agree that they have not been in any way impeded by the Ministry in getting the situation under control in the shortest possible time.”<sup>44</sup>

Bihar showed to the Congress the dangerous face of Hindu communalism, particularly when it erupted in the form of widespread

<sup>37</sup> Patel to N.S. Gill, 26 January and 10 February 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 4, pp. 224 and 227, respectively.

<sup>38</sup> 9 December 1946, Nandurkar ed., *SLMU*, Vol. 1, p. 221.

<sup>39</sup> Viceroy to Secretary of State, 22 November 1946, *TP*, Vol. 9, pp. 139–40.

<sup>40</sup> To Rajendra Prasad, undated, *R.P. Papers*, 6-B/46, Part I, S. No. 83.

<sup>41</sup> Nehru to Patel, 5 November 1946, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 1, p. 64.

<sup>42</sup> *R.P. Papers*, 6-B/46, Part I, S. No. 85.

<sup>43</sup> Report by DIG, CID, 16 December 1946, *ibid.*, S. No. 76.

<sup>44</sup> Bihar Governor to Viceroy, 22/23 November 1946, *TP*, Vol. 9, p. 149.

riots. The Congress, in turn, demonstrated that when confronted with such a deadly menace, it had no hesitation in using all the weapons at its command to scotch it.

Gandhi's way, as always, was different from others. His distress at the news of the Bihar riots was considerable. Champaran in Bihar had seen his first experiment in satyagraha in India. His mind harked back to those days. He ended a letter to Nehru with: "Is this the Bihar of Brij Kishore Prasad?"<sup>45</sup> He was in Calcutta en route to Noakhali when a dilemma faced him. Should he go to Bihar, instead of to Noakhali, as the Muslims clamoured he should. He decided to adhere to his original plan: "Though Bihar calls me, I must not interrupt my programme for Noakhali."<sup>46</sup> However, Bihar compelled some action. Gandhi resolved to go on a fast. He wrote to Nehru:<sup>47</sup>

The events in Bihar have distressed me. I can clearly see my duty.... And the cry came from within, "Why should you be a witness to this slaughter? If your word, which is as clear as daylight, is not heeded, your work is over. Why do you not die?" Such reasoning has forced me to resort to fasting. I want to issue a statement that if in Bihar and other provinces slaughter is not stopped, I must end my life by fasting.

He wrote to his followers in the Ashram that they must not fast with him.<sup>48</sup> Gandhi was in favour of an inquiry into the riots and pressed from Noakhali for its institution. The argument, which Patel endorsed, that this would mean playing into the League's hands, did not worry him. His concern was with the truth, however advantageous it was for the League or damaging for the Congress. In his view, not appointing an inquiry committee would strengthen the League's hands, rather than if it were set up. "I am strongly of opinion that if no commission is appointed, the League's report will be accepted as

<sup>45</sup> 5 November 1946, *MGCW*, Vol. 86, p. 79.

<sup>46</sup> "To Bihar", 6 November 1946, *ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>47</sup> 5 November 1946, *ibid.*, Vol. 86, p. 78.

<sup>48</sup> To Kishore Mashruwala, with instructions that it be read to other Ashramites, *ibid.*, p. 73.

true.”<sup>49</sup> Moreover, Nehru’s comments led him to step up his pressure on the Bihar government. Nehru had written that the Bihar Ministry did not favour an open inquiry.<sup>50</sup> His additional remarks were hardly reassuring: “The Government is far too passive about it all. They work slowly... There is a sense of fear and apprehension among the Muslim population...very little regret or remorse among the Hindus.”<sup>51</sup> Pressure on Gandhi from the supporters of the League in Bengal to go to Bihar had not abated. But Gandhi did not succumb; he chose to wait and watch. He asked Syed Mahmud and Niranjan Singh Gill to check out the League report and make inquiries about the general state of affairs.<sup>52</sup>

His vigil should have been over on 13 February 1947 when the Bihar government announced their decision to appoint an inquiry commission. But a long letter from Syed Mahmud, written on 16–17 February 1947, seems to have convinced him that he must go to Bihar.<sup>53</sup> Syed Mahmud wrote that four months after the trouble, *shubah* and *khauf*, suspicion and fear, persisted, and removing them was the main challenge. Mere relief was not enough and even that was not entrusted to his charge, despite Maulana Azad’s advice to the Chief Minister to do so. There were other disquieting comments. Mahmud felt that those who called for avenging Noakhali, be they Congressmen or others, were responsible for the riots. Allowing the processions calling for revenge for Noakhali to go unchecked was seen as an *ailan-e-jang*, a cry for battle. Mahmud’s last sobering comment was that Pakistan, from a political ideal, had become a place for refuge. Mahmud wanted Gandhi to come to Bihar, to help the Hindus repent and the Muslims regain confidence. Gandhi left Noakhali for Bihar on 2 March 1947.

If Gandhi differed from other Congressmen over the appointment of an inquiry commission, his understanding of why the riots took

<sup>49</sup> Gandhi to Patel, 4 January 1947, *MGCW*, Vol. 86, p. 352.

<sup>50</sup> 30 January 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 1, p. 111.

<sup>51</sup> Nehru to Gandhi, 19 and 30 January 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 3 and 4, pp. 496 and 111, respectively.

<sup>52</sup> 31 December 1946 and 8 February 1947, *MGCW*, Vol. 86, pp. 293 and 448 respectively.

<sup>53</sup> *R.P. Papers*, 24C/46-7, S. No. 58.

place differed from that of Nehru. Nehru had written to Patel soon after reaching Bihar in early November 1946: "Indeed one can only explain all this by saying that a madness had seized the people".<sup>54</sup> He saw what happened as a "mass uprising" and an isolated event. Gandhi saw it as a trend: "But Bihar has been having a lesson in organised violence since 1942 and before. Our weakness for the goondas rose to the highest in 1942."<sup>55</sup> He made the connection more explicit at a prayer meeting in Patna on 12 March 1947. Gandhiji added that, in his opinion, the departure from the straight path of non-violence they had made at times in 1942 was very probably responsible for the aberration to which he referred. He instanced also the spirit of general lawlessness which had seized them in as much as they dared to travel without tickets, pulled chains unlawfully or in senseless vindictiveness, burnt zamindars' crops or belongings.<sup>56</sup> Another point of difference of opinion with Nehru was over suppression of riots. Gandhi felt that to be the foreign way of handling such occurrences. In his view, it was best to give up the reins of government.<sup>57</sup> This had hardly any support.

His arrival in Bihar brought to the fore other areas of difference with local Congressmen, especially the Ministers.<sup>58</sup> Gandhi planned to tour the affected villages on foot but Mridula Sarabhai dissuaded him from doing so, much to the approval of the Ministers. Gandhi wanted the government to buy Muslim houses in cases where the Muslims wanted to move from them. The Ministers opposed this on the ground that it would lead to concentration of Muslims in pockets. Gandhi was of the view that Syed Mahmud should be in charge of relief, but the Ministers again did not agree. Moreover, the Ministers felt that Gandhi's hearing of complaints against Congressmen and the Ministry had weakened their position.

<sup>54</sup> 5 November 1946, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 1, p. 63.

<sup>55</sup> Discussion with Sarat Bose and others on 24 November 1946, *MGCW*, Vol. 86, p. 158.

<sup>56</sup> Report of his address, *ibid.*, Vol. 87, p. 75.

<sup>57</sup> Speech at prayer meeting, 5 November 1946, Calcutta, *ibid.*, Vol. 86, p. 80.

<sup>58</sup> K.B. Sahay's note on his talk with Patel, 1 April 1947, discusses these differences. See *R.P. Papers*, 24-C/46-7, Col. I, S. No. 87.

The question of the inquiry commission remained unresolved even after Gandhi had left Bihar for Delhi. The Chief Minister had repeated the old argument, that the League would make political capital out of an inquiry, to Gandhi, when he was in Patna. Gandhi had been unmoved. His unhappiness that an inquiry commission had not been set up, despite being announced, was to remain with him in subsequent months.<sup>59</sup> After independence, the Bihar government quietly decided to withdraw their decision to have an inquiry on the ground that it would only rake up memories. There had been one silver lining in the cloud: "Of course, there is one thing and it is that the Hindus regard me as their servant and they trust me. That was how the Hindus in Bihar were pacified. And how much are those people expiating even now!"<sup>60</sup>

## Hindus as a Minority—Demand for Partition of Punjab and Bengal

One reaction to the communal violence sponsored by the League was counter-violence by Hindus. Bihar had seen a trial of that option. But minorities in Muslim majority provinces could not easily exercise it. They looked to the government at the centre to intervene and protect them. When this did not happen they raised their voice, first hesitantly and then stridently, for the division of their provinces into Hindu and Muslim majority zones.

In Bengal, Hindus had lost faith in the League Ministry headed by Suhrawardy. Many believed in his complicity in the Calcutta riots of August 1946, others felt unable to trust him after his insensitivity to Hindu sufferings in Noakhali.<sup>61</sup> By March–April 1947, public

<sup>59</sup> Rajendra Prasad conveyed Gandhi's dissatisfaction to the Bihar Chief Minister twice, on 25 March and 19 June 1947, *ibid.*, S. No. 84 and 10.

<sup>60</sup> Gandhi to Suhrawardy, 12 May 1947, *MGCW*, Vol. 87, p. 458.

<sup>61</sup> Suhrawardy deluded himself when he argued that "Hindus were more content to live under a Muslim Raj than the Muslims under a Hindu Raj"; meeting between the Cabinet Delegation, the Viceroy and H.S. Suhrawardy, 9 April 1946, IOR L/P&J/10/32, *Cabinet Mission Papers—Moslem View upto April 1946*, India Office

opinion had hardened behind the demand for a separate province of West Bengal that would be part of India.<sup>62</sup> The Congress leaders were flooded with memoranda (often signed by hundreds of villagers or with their thumb impressions), declaring their unwillingness to live under League rule.<sup>63</sup> The signatories included the Bangladeshiya Kayasth Sabha, the Assam Bengal Indian Tea Planters Association, Calcutta Motor Dealers Association, the Bar Associations of Barisal, Khulna and Kushtia, Municipal Commissioners and even the priest of Kalighat Kali Temple. Bengalis outside Bengal, in Kanpur, Nagpur and Banaras supported the demand. Eminent intellectuals such as Jadunath Sarkar, Meghnad Saha, Suniti Kumar Chatterji, Kalidas Nag, and R.C. Majumdar, among others, came out publicly on the

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Library, London. His subsequent actions were hardly likely to inspire trust. He insisted that all new policemen recruited be Muslims, and eventually 600 Punjabi Muslims were taken, who came to be looked upon as Suhrawardy's private army. They went around saying that they had been enrolled for a specified purpose, which would be revealed later. See Mountbatten's interview with Tyson, Secretary to Governor of Bengal, 15 April 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, p. 268. The Calcutta killings convinced the Hindus that they could not live under a Muslim League government even in a free, federated India. See Leonard Gordon, "Divided Bengal: Problems of Nationalism and Identity in the 1947 Partition", *JCCP*, Vol. 16.1, March 1978: 136–68. "But the extreme communalism of the Muslim ministry under Mr. Suhrawardy [sic], the Chief Minister, over the last two years, finally convinced the Bengali Hindus that they could not expect a square deal under a government which had a slight Muslim majority, and the partition of the Province has been accepted as the lesser of the two evils." File 3, no. 2, *Bell Papers*. Cambridge South Asian Archive.

<sup>62</sup> The apprehension about perpetual domination was not a new one. It went back to the Hindu minorities gradually losing out in successive constitutional proposals and developments from the Nehru Report to the Communal Award. The Lucknow Pact of 1916 had provided weightage to the Hindu minority in Bengal but the Nehru Report ruled out reservation for any group in Bengal. The Communal Award went a step further and actually provided reservations for the Muslim majority in Bengal, thereby leaving only 31 per cent of seats for 44 per cent Hindus. Joya Chatterji has presented the partition of Bengal as the considered choice of the Bengali *bhadralok* who saw it as a stratagem to regain their influence. The problem with this thesis is in the primacy it accords to this choice, underplaying the role of Muslim communalism in effecting the partition. Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*.

<sup>63</sup> *R.P. Papers*, 6-1/45-6-7. See *AICC Papers*, Bengal Partition Files, CL-8, CL-14C, CL-14D, and CL-21.

side of the partition of Bengal.<sup>64</sup> Seven members of the Indian Legislative Assembly and four members of the Council of State from Bengal posed the choice as “whether to live in freedom or in slavery” and opted for a separate autonomous province in West and North Bengal within the Indian Union.<sup>65</sup> Pressure on the Congress to come forward and espouse this demand for the partition of Bengal was at a high pitch.

Events in Punjab in late February and early March 1947 clinched the Congress decision to come out in favour of the division of the Punjab. The League’s civil disobedience movement had brought about the downfall of Khizr Hayat Khan’s coalition ministry and an “orgy of murder and violence” had been let loose there. The Congress Working Committee met on 8 March 1947 and demanded the partition of the Punjab, should India be partitioned. Nehru explained the resolution to Wavell the following day: “Recent events in the Punjab have demonstrated, if such demonstration was necessary, that it is not possible to coerce the non-Muslim minority in the province, just as it is not possible to coerce the others”.<sup>66</sup> The following weeks saw riots in the Rawalpindi area and hardened the resolve of the non-Muslim minority to seek a separate province. By the end of March the Governor of the Punjab confirmed that Sikhs wanted the partition of the Punjab.<sup>67</sup> On 2 April 1947, members of the Indian Central Legislature from the Punjab sent a representation to Nehru arguing that partition was the only solution available.<sup>68</sup> Baldev Singh, Minister

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-1/45-6-7, S. No. 91, undated. Intelligence authorities in London reported that 200 students, led by Dr N. Gangulee of Swaraj House, protested at Charing Cross against the “inability of the Bengal Government to maintain law and order in the Province” and alleged that the riots in Noakhali were “instigated by agents provocateurs paid by British imperialists”, Indian Political Intelligence records, Pol. (S) 1551/1946, New Scotland Yard report, No. 4, 6 November 1946, IOR L/P&J/12/658, British Library, London.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-B/47, S. No. 32.

<sup>66</sup> 9 March 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, p. 67.

<sup>67</sup> Jenkins to Mountbatten, 24 March 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, p. 15. B. Shiva Rao, a well-known journalist, concurred: “The Punjab riots have so far influenced Hindu and Sikh opinion as to make a truncated Pakistan next year a possibility.” To Sapru, 14 March 1947, *Sapru Papers*, S-2, roll 4, R-160.

<sup>68</sup> *TP*, Vol. 10, p. 88.



for Defence in the Interim Government, took the same stand in a letter written to the Viceroy on 27 April 1947: "The Hindus and Sikhs have finally and unalterably come to the conclusion that the only solution is an immediate division of the Punjab."<sup>69</sup>

The partition of Bengal, implied in the Congress Working Committee resolution of 8 March 1947, was specifically demanded by the Bengal Congress on 9 April 1947. The Executive Committee of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee urged the setting up of two regional Ministries and demanded that, in the event of power being transferred to the present League government, those areas wishing to remain in India be brought together in a separate province.<sup>70</sup>

The Congress leaders realized that however undesirable the partition of the two provinces, there was no alternative to it. They had proved to be powerless to check the League, stop violence and provide security to the minorities of Punjab and Bengal. Nehru explained to H.N. Brailsford, a British journalist, that division of the provinces "seems to have become inevitable after recent happenings".<sup>71</sup> In his address to the All India States People's Conference session at Gwalior, he defended the Congress decision to demand partition of the provinces: "It did so because there was no way out of the situation. The question here again was not one of desirability but of facing realities."<sup>72</sup>

There was a tactical angle, too, to the Congress demand for division of the provinces. Nehru noted that His Majesty's Government's statement of 20 February 1947 allowed the provinces of Punjab and Bengal the choice of staying out of the Constituent Assembly, if they so wished. Nehru logically extended this choice to parts of these provinces and concluded that West Bengal and East Punjab were represented in the Constituent Assembly and hence would be part of India. He explained this likely scenario to Gandhi.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 467.

<sup>70</sup> Bengal Governor to Viceroy, 11 April 1947, *ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>71</sup> 15 April 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, p. 91.

<sup>72</sup> 18 April 1947, *ibid.*, p. 270.

<sup>73</sup> 24 February 1947, *ibid.*, p. 53. This was obviously an argument whose logic appealed widely. It was repeated in the resolution passed by the Bengal National Chamber of Commerce, Calcutta, at a meeting of representatives of different commercial organizations, on 29 April 1947, "in case however any area chooses to stay

This may result in the Indian Union being first established for the whole of India except Bengal, the Punjab and Sind. Of course, the Union Constitution will apply to or rather be open to all; but these provinces may not choose to adhere to it. If so the second question that arises is that those parts of Bengal and Punjab which are fully represented in the Constituent Assembly (Western Bengal and Southern Punjab) should be parts of the Union. That means a partition of Punjab and Bengal.

Division of the provinces would mean a fairly limited Pakistan in effect. The Congress leadership believed that "the truncated Pakistan that remains will hardly be worth having".<sup>74</sup> With the end worthless, Jinnah may give up his pursuit. He may be willing to settle for less than Pakistan. Nehru argued, uncharacteristically, that the time had come to drive a hard bargain: "I feel convinced, and so did most the members of the Working Committee that we must press for this immediate division so that reality might be brought into the picture. Indeed this is the only answer to Pakistan as demanded by Jinnah."<sup>75</sup>

Mountbatten, who wanted unity of the country for his own reasons, vested hope in the demand for the partition of the two provinces: "The great problem was to reveal the limits of Pakistan so that the Muslim League could revert to an unified India with honour."<sup>76</sup> The partition demand, by "torpedoing Pakistan would be of advantage in

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out it cannot force parts within the area which desire to remain inside the Union to go outside the Union against their will". Copies were sent to the British Prime Minister, Secretary of State for India, and the Viceroy, among others, *R.P. Papers*, 19-P/47, Col. II, Part II, S. No. 32.

<sup>74</sup> Nehru to Krishna Menon, 23 February 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, p. 45. He expressed the same sentiment to Asaf Ali and Gandhi the next day, *ibid.*, pp. 51 and 53. The Bihar Governor was of the view that support for partition of the provinces was tactical rather than genuine: "Those who give hesitant support to idea of partition do so rather in the belief that it will show the complete unworkability of Pakistan than because they are prepared to contemplate the division of India into two independent states." To Viceroy, 25 March 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, p. 18.

<sup>75</sup> To Gandhi, 25 March 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, pp. 77-78.

<sup>76</sup> Minutes of First Day of First Governors' Conference, 15 April 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, p. 251.

that it would lead the way back to a more common sense solution".<sup>77</sup> However, these efforts, just as similar attempts earlier, to bring Jinnah around to the path of unity, proved futile.<sup>78</sup> Far from being intimidated, Jinnah held out the counter-threat that if the Congress demanded partition of Punjab and Bengal, the League would demand that other provinces be divided too. He advised that the "British Government should not countenance it...as to embark on this line will lead to the breaking up of the various provinces and create a far more dangerous situation in the future than at present."<sup>79</sup> Jinnah contemptuously dismissed out of hand the Congress proposal to partition Punjab and Bengal. He told Mountbatten emphatically: "This was a bluff on the part of Congress to try and frighten him off Pakistan. He was not to be frightened off so easily, and he would be sorry if I were taken in by the Congress bluff."<sup>80</sup> Mountbatten tried hard to convince Jinnah that he was not taken in by a bluff but believed that autonomy, under the Cabinet Mission Plan, was better for Jinnah and the Muslims than a small Pakistan, which would be plagued by difficulties from the outset.<sup>81</sup> But Jinnah stood firm, perhaps because he was convinced that the small state would be viable.<sup>82</sup> Mountbatten admitted: "He had brought all possible arguments to bear on Mr. Jinnah but it seemed that appeals to his reason did not prevail. He

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>78</sup> A section among the Sikhs had floated the Azad Punjab scheme in 1943–44. This sought the creation of a province in which no community would have an absolute majority, with somewhat similar objectives. The Hindu Mahasabha leader, B.S. Moonje was approached by Sardar Rachpal Singh, IG Police, Alwar for support to a proposal to demand the division of the Punjab along the river Ravi in order to checkmate Jinnah's demand for Pakistan. Diary noting, 17 September 1946, *Moonje Papers*, NMML, Roll 4.

<sup>79</sup> Undated statement, *R.P. Papers*, 17-P/46-7, Col. I, S. No. 3.

<sup>80</sup> 8 April 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, pp. 158–60.

<sup>81</sup> Mountbatten's interviews with Jinnah, 9 and 10 April 1947, *ibid.*, pp. 163–64 and 186–88.

<sup>82</sup> The League Planning Committee's Secretary had, on 31 May 1946, argued that if non-Muslim areas were excluded from Pakistan, the state that would be formed would be a better bet than autonomy under the Mission Plan. Cited by R.J. Moore, *Escape from Empire*, p. 122.

was, whatever was said, intent on his Pakistan.”<sup>83</sup> Unreasonable as it may sound, his fellow Muslims too “were apparently prepared to give up the full Pakistan with a small Centre which they would have had in Sections B and C of the Cabinet Mission’s plan and opt instead for a truncated Pakistan with full initial independence”.<sup>84</sup>

When Jinnah proved to be inflexible, hope vested in him was transferred to his Muslim followers in Punjab and Bengal. It was believed that if the partition of the two provinces was announced, the Muslims would revolt against the League and leave it in order to preserve the unity of the province. Patel and Azad outlined this possibility to the Viceroy in separate interviews on the same day, 12 April 1947.<sup>85</sup> Nehru asked Jenkins, the Punjab Governor, if, in his opinion, there would be a split in the ranks of the League, should it be known that Pakistan necessarily entailed the partition of the Punjab. Jenkins considered it possible but did not know how deep it would go.<sup>86</sup> But this hope too went unrealized. The League remained behind Jinnah.

It was now the League’s turn to play a tactical game. As the Congress laid more emphasis on the necessity of partitioning the provinces, the Muslim League waxed eloquent about the inviolable unity of the Bengali and Punjabi peoples and their cultures. Mountbatten confessed that he was taken aback by Jinnah’s stand: “He appealed to me not to destroy the unity of Bengal and the Punjab, which had national characteristics in common, common history, common ways of life; and where the Hindus have stronger feelings as Bengalis or Punjabis than they have as members of the Congress.”<sup>87</sup> But he quickly rallied and shot back: “I said I was impressed by his arguments; and was therefore beginning to revise my ideas about any partition anywhere in India; since any argument that he produced for not agreeing to partition within the Punjab and Bengal applied with even greater force to India as a whole.”<sup>88</sup> Though this “drove the old gentleman quite mad”, he refused to concede even an inch of ground.

<sup>83</sup> Viceroy’s nineteenth staff meeting, 11 April 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, p. 190.

<sup>84</sup> Viceroy’s twentieth staff meeting, 22 April 1947, *ibid.*, p. 359.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 214 and 216.

<sup>86</sup> Viceroy’s thirteenth miscellaneous meeting, 11 May 1947, *ibid.*, p. 760.

<sup>87</sup> Mountbatten’s interview with Jinnah, 8 April 1947, *ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

The unmistakable irony in the situation, with the Congress championing division and the League unity, invited comment then and later.<sup>89</sup> Nehru pointed out to Asaf Ali: "It is a curious reversal of the previous position. Suhrawardy goes about proclaiming that Bengal is one Nation. So also Shaukat Hayat Khan and Feroz Khan Noon declare that the Punjabis are one and cannot be separated. The two-nation theory evidently does not work in Bengal and the Punjab."<sup>90</sup> Even those like Rajendra Prasad who realized there was no alternative could not help commenting on the strangeness of it all: "It is an irony of time that the very people who fought against the partition of Bengal and got it reversed should now demand that it should be divided and that demand should be conceded just as the demand for the reversal of partition had to be conceded."<sup>91</sup> This reversal of position, which left a lingering sense of uneasiness among nationalist-minded Bengalis and Congressmen, delighted the British officials. The Bengal Governor's comment, "Curzon must be chuckling in his grave",<sup>92</sup> summed it up well.

This seeming contradiction in the Congress position was further sharpened when some Leaguers in Bengal came up with the concrete proposal that Bengal should be an independent state, affiliated to the Commonwealth, but not to Pakistan or India. As an idea it was not a new one. United independent Bengal had been the unspoken assumption of the League's propaganda during the years it made rapid strides in Bengal. Association with the Muslim majority areas in North-West India was never clearly spelled out. It was as late as April 1946 that the League at the national level called for the creation of

<sup>89</sup> By an intellectual sleight of hand, Ayesha Jalal has merged the partition of provinces and partition of the country into one and argued that the Congress wanted partition, while the League opposed it. She quotes Nehru's statement to Mountbatten, "Mr. Jinnah was much opposed to partition" but forgets to mention that the partition of Punjab was being discussed, not that of the country, Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman*. For further consideration of Jalal's thesis, see Chapter 13 in this book.

<sup>90</sup> 14 May 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, p. 150.

<sup>91</sup> To Satish Chandra Mukherji, 5 June 1947, *R.P. Papers*, F. No. 6-1/45-6-7, S. No. 52.

<sup>92</sup> To the Viceroy, 7 March 1947, cited by Das, *Partition and Independence of India*, p. 119.

the state of Pakistan. Earlier references, including the one in the Pakistan resolution of Lahore 1940, were to Muslim majority zones.<sup>93</sup> The Bengal Leaguers did not see the implications of this for their province till much later. It was only when the demand for the partition of Bengal began to crystallize that the Bengal Leaguers explored options of maintaining the unity of the province. It was evident that the Hindu minority would be unwilling to countenance living in Pakistan. So the proposal of an independent state was conceived. As a scheme, as distinct from an idea, its inception can be dated to January 1947 when Sarat Bose and Abul Hashim held discussions. But it was only when Suhrawardy took it up that events began to unfold rapidly.<sup>94</sup>

Suhrawardy had little difficulty in getting the support of Burrows, the Bengal Governor. The latter feared that the partition of Bengal would unleash communal warfare and bring into being the province of East Pakistan, which would be nothing more than a rural slum. Burrows soon had a partner in the Viceroy, who had his reasons for welcoming the move. Mountbatten had failed to push the partition of provinces down Jinnah's throat and was on the lookout for something that would satisfy the Congress, while not alienating the League. The Governor of Sind, Mudie, had said that Pakistan consisting of Sind and the western half of Punjab would be a "perfectly feasible economic proposition".<sup>95</sup> Tyson, Secretary to the Bengal Governor, was of the view that Suhrawardy "would choose Hindustan rather than accept partition".<sup>96</sup> These two statements were linked together by Mountbatten to suggest a possible scheme. He allowed himself to be hopeful: "Such a solution might make everybody happy. Mr. Jinnah would have a viable Pakistan with the choice of not taking over NWFP, which could be regarded as a liability; and the Congress would have the rest of India."<sup>97</sup> The Congress leadership did not believe, as

<sup>93</sup> See Pirzada, ed., *Foundation of Pakistan*.

<sup>94</sup> This summary has been primarily derived from Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal 1937-47*, New Delhi, 1976. Also see Gordon, "Divided Bengal".

<sup>95</sup> Mountbatten's interview with Mudie, 15 April 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, p. 259.

<sup>96</sup> Mountbatten's interview with Tyson, 15 April 1947, *ibid.*, p. 264.

<sup>97</sup> Minutes of Second Day of First Governors' Conference, 15 April 1947, *ibid.*, p. 270.

Mountbatten did, that "Suhrawardy...will throw in his lot with the Congress".<sup>98</sup> Kiran Sankar Roy was the only major Congress leader whom Mountbatten was able to convert to the idea of united Bengal;<sup>99</sup> Sarat Bose was already converted. The others were suspicious that independent Bengal was merely a cover-up for Pakistan. Jinnah's support to the move exacerbated such doubts. He had told the Viceroy: "I should be delighted. What is the use of Bengal without Calcutta; they had much better remain united and independent, I am sure that they would remain on friendly terms with us."<sup>100</sup>

Nehru made his opposition to the move evident to the Viceroy fairly early. He explained that the Bengal Hindus were against independent Bengal because they feared "a way would be found to associate it with Pakistan later".<sup>101</sup> In his view, "there was not likely to be more than one per cent of non-Muslims who would agree to independence".<sup>102</sup> His statement in a press interview was taken to be the official Congress pronouncement: "The independence of Bengal really means in present circumstances the dominance of the Muslim League in Bengal. It means practically the whole of Bengal going into the Pakistan area, although those interested may not say so."<sup>103</sup> Patel was even more forthright: "Talk of the idea of a sovereign republic of independent Bengal is a trap to induce the unwary and unwise to enter into the parlour of the Muslim League. Bengal has got to be partitioned, if the non-Muslim population is to survive."<sup>104</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Mountbatten's interview with Mudie, 15 April 1947, *ibid.*, p. 260.

<sup>99</sup> K.S. Roy, who had earlier opposed the independent Bengal move, supported unity when told by the Viceroy that Suhrawardy would introduce joint electorates and form a coalition ministry. See Viceroy's interview with K.S. Roy, 3 May 1947, *ibid.*, p. 585.

<sup>100</sup> Interview, 26 April 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, p. 450.

<sup>101</sup> B.N. Banerjee, President, Indian Association, Calcutta, warned Rajendra Prasad that the League was trying to secure Pakistan in Bengal "by an indirect and tortuous method", 13 May 1947, *R.P. Papers*, 1-B/47, S. No. 4. S.P. Mookerjee, the Hindu Mahasabha leader, told Mountbatten: "Sovereign undivided Bengal will be a virtual Pakistan." 2 May 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, p. 557.

<sup>102</sup> Viceroy's fourteenth miscellaneous meeting, *ibid.*, p. 764.

<sup>103</sup> Interview to Norman Cliff of the News Chronicle, 25 May 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, p. 179.

<sup>104</sup> To Binoy Kumar Roy, 23 May 1947, *SPC*, Vol. 4, p. 43.

The vehemence of Nehru's and Patel's reactions was a reflection of the stridency with which most Bengali Hindus opposed the sovereign Bengal scheme and demanded the partition of their province. The demand for partition, in fact, acquired a sense of desperation and urgency when faced with the possibility of a sovereign united Bengal, which was interpreted as perpetual Muslim domination. Nalini Ranjan Sarkar's speech at the Bengal National Chamber of Commerce meeting on 25 April 1947, while moving the resolution on partition of Bengal, explained their stand:<sup>105</sup>

We demand partition from a spirit altogether different from that from which the League wants Pakistan. We have always been staunch believers in the unity and integrity of Bengal and we consider it a tragedy to have to press for division or partition of the province, but we have been reduced to this as a pis-aller-for want of anything better; it comes not of our choice, but out of the impossible situation in which we find ourselves placed due to the demand of the Muslim League for creating a sovereign Pakistan state in Bengal outside the Indian union.

He dismissed Suhrawardy's sentiments out of hand: "Such sentiments and solicitude for Hindu culture and unity hardly sound real after all that has happened during recent years in Bengal." He pointed to the lack of feasibility of independent Bengal and to the likelihood that "she would be doomed to a pastoral economy hardly able to maintain herself". Lady Abala Bose, the widow of the eminent scientist Jagdish Chandra Bose, wrote to Rajendra Prasad, in a similar vein:<sup>106</sup>

It breaks our heart to think of dividing our beloved Bengal but there seems to be no other alternative. This is certain that we cannot live under the League Government. It pains the Congress minded

<sup>105</sup> Speech at Bengal National Chamber of Commerce meeting, 29 April 1947, *ibid.*, F. No. 19, p. 47, Col. 1, Part 2, S. No. 32.

<sup>106</sup> 17 May 1947, *ibid.*, F. No. 6-1/45-6-7, S. No. 40. M.N. Saha ended his letter to Rajendra Prasad with the same appeal: "I hope the members of the Interim Government will support the partition move, and thus save Bengal Hindus and the city of Calcutta from Utter ruin which now faced them." *Ibid.*, S. No. 33.



masses in Bengal that Shyama Prasad Mookerjee is giving us the right lead and not the Bengal Congress some of whom have even joined S. J. Sarat Bose, a renegade from Congress.... All our thoughts are turned to our leaders in Delhi for we have no reliance on our Bengali leaders.

Rajendra Prasad's personal assurance of full support was indicative of the Congress position too:<sup>107</sup>

You may rest assured that so far as we are concerned, we shall do our best to secure partition of the areas from Muslim areas.... My own feeling is quite definite and so far as other colleagues in the Government are concerned, their view is also equally definite. I had gauged the feeling in Bengal and everyday I am getting confirmation that I had done it rightly. I gather that S. J. Sarat Chandra Bose is practically isolated and has no support for his viewpoint in Bengal.

Rajendra Prasad was not overstating the case. The truth was that most Hindus of Bengal did not like Sarat Bose and K.S. Roy's support to the scheme. A couple of them wrote to Patel demanding that he save Bengal from the clutches of these traitors.<sup>108</sup> Patel countered that they should ensure that popular feeling makes itself felt, for then the "leaders dare not defy the popular voice".<sup>109</sup> On his part, he would see that the official Congress stand was enforced. Confident that K.S. Roy would fall in line, he sent off a strongly worded letter to him: "It is incumbent on all Congressmen to set aside personal predilections and to stand united on the official policy of the Congress. Individual expression of views should fit into that policy, and there should not be any discordant note. As a disciplined Congressmen, I am sure you will appreciate this advice."<sup>110</sup>

<sup>107</sup> To M.N. Saha and Lady Abala Bose, 5 and 22 May 1947, *ibid.*, S. Nos 34 and 45 respectively.

<sup>108</sup> Binoy Kumar Roy to Patel, 16 May 1947 and Surendranath Sen to Patel, 28 May 1947, *SPC*, Vol. 4, pp. 42 and 51 respectively.

<sup>109</sup> To Bimal Chandra Sinha, 10 June 1947, *ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>110</sup> Patel to K.S. Roy, 21 May 1947, *ibid.*, pp. 46-47.

Patel's tone with Sarat Bose was appealing, rather than admonitory, perhaps because there was a history of differences: "Vital matters which will leave their mark on generations to come have to be settled, and in such settlement it behoves all of us to contribute our best to the combined strength of the Congress".<sup>111</sup> K.S. Roy rushed to Delhi to discuss the issue with Nehru and Patel. Sarat Bose stuck firmly to his stand and minced no words in criticizing the Congress acceptance of the partition demand: "It is not a fact that Bengali Hindus unanimously demand partition. As regards West Bengal the agitation has gained ground because the Congress came to the aid of the Hindu Mahasabha and also because communal passions had been roused among Hindus on account of the happenings since August last."<sup>112</sup> He invoked the spectre of the wrath of posterity. "Future generations will, I am afraid, condemn us for conceding division of India and supporting partition of Bengal and Punjab."

Patel was unmoved but Sarat Bose was not disappointed in Gandhi. From the very outset, Gandhi had not liked the Congress proposal to divide the provinces of Punjab and Bengal, should the country be partitioned. He was away in Bihar, unaware of what had prompted the Congress Working Committee to take such a step. Local Leaguers raised uncomfortable questions about partitioning of the two provinces. "I was asked by a Muslim Leaguer of note...if it was applicable to the Muslim majority provinces, why it should not be so to a Congress majority province like Bihar."<sup>113</sup> Gandhi called for explanations from Patel and Nehru but was not convinced by any of their arguments. It made little difference to Gandhi whether the proposal flowed from the 20 February statement or was the only answer to Jinnah or had become inevitable given the extent and intensity of communal violence. No partition scheme could capture his allegiance and he let this be known publicly:<sup>114</sup>

<sup>111</sup> Patel to Sarat Bose, 22 May 1947, *ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>112</sup> Sarat Bose to Patel, 27 May 1947, *ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

<sup>113</sup> Gandhi to Nehru, 20 March 1947, *MGCW*, Vol. 87, pp. 124-25.

<sup>114</sup> Prayer meeting, 7 May 1947, *ibid.*, p. 432. He wrote to the Viceroy the next day, "I feel sure that partition of the Punjab and Bengal is wrong in every case and a needless irritant for the League", *ibid.*, p. 435. At another place he wrote: "If Pakistan is wrong, partition of Bengal and Punjab will not make it right. Two wrongs will not make one right." *Harijan*, 1 June 1947.

Jinnah Saheb wants Pakistan. Congressmen have also decided in favour of acceding to the demand for Pakistan. But they insist that the Hindu and Sikh (majority) areas of the Punjab and Bengal cannot be included in Pakistan. Only the Muslim (majority) areas can be separated from India. But I for one cannot agree to Pakistan on any account. I cannot tolerate any proposal for vivisectioning the country.

His basic animus to any partition scheme inclined him to favour the independent Bengal scheme. He saw a ray of hope in the joint sponsorship of the proposal by Suhrawardy and Sarat Bose. Ultimately, he thought unity of Bengal might even become the basis for unity of India as the two-nation theory on which the demand for Pakistan rested would be undermined: "An admission that Bengali Hindus and Bengali Mussalmans were one would really be a severe blow against the two-nation theory of the League."<sup>115</sup>

There was one problem, however. The Bengali Hindus (and the Punjabi Hindus and Sikhs) were vocal in their unwillingness to live under Muslim domination. Gandhi saw that they could not be compelled to do so. They must have the right to exercise their choice. Accordingly, in a note for the Congress Working Committee, he conceded that East Punjab and West Bengal, along with Assam and NWFP, could abstain from joining Pakistan.<sup>116</sup> This implied the partition of the two provinces and was not very different from Nehru's option to these areas to remain in the Indian Union; Gandhi said they could remain out of Pakistan. Gandhi hoped Hindus would not exercise this option: "The best way to stop the agitation for the partition of Bengal is to persuade the Hindus through reasoning and assure them right now that they would not be forced one way or the other. If Suhrawardy acts in this manner, the whole of Bengal would

<sup>115</sup> To Shyama Prasad Mookerjee, 13 May 1947, *MGCW*, Vol. 87, p. 465. Gandhi was not the only one who noticed this aspect. Shiva Rao commented that Suhrawardy's statements are "extremely embarrassing to Jinnah because they go directly counter to the two-nation theory", to Sapru, 15 May 1947, *Sapru Papers*, S-2, Roll 4, R-168.

<sup>116</sup> 10 April 1947, *MGCW*, Vol. 87, p. 246.

become an independent province.”<sup>117</sup> Suhrawardy pertinently pointed out that Hindus distrusted him and disbelieved his word.<sup>118</sup> Gandhi had even earlier offered to accompany Suhrawardy on a campaign for unity of Bengal by appealing to Hindus to forget the past.<sup>119</sup> Now he offered to “act as your honorary private Secretary and live under your roof till Hindus and Muslims begin to live as (the) brothers that they are”.<sup>120</sup> Suhrawardy’s reaction reportedly was: “What a mad offer! I have to think ten times before I can fathom its implications.”<sup>121</sup> When Gandhi was told this, he wrote a letter to Suhrawardy renewing his offer.<sup>122</sup> Nothing came of it. It was only in mid-August 1947, when partition of Bengal was a fact, that Suhrawardy—chastened by loss of his prime ministership and hard pressed to protect the lives of Muslims in Calcutta, where a Congress government now ruled—shared the same roof with Gandhi in strife-torn Beliaghata.

If Suhrawardy was perplexed by Gandhi’s offer, most Bengali Hindus were stridently critical of his stand. The *Amrita Bazar Patrika* editorially commented: “But we may tell him that nationalist Bengal is today definitely and emphatically in favour of a partition of Bengal.”<sup>123</sup> Others pointed to the unsavoury aspects of the scheme. K.C. Neogy, member of the Central Assembly, warned Patel that fabulous sums were being spent to purchase votes for unity.<sup>124</sup> P.B. Mukherji, President, Indian Merchants Association, reported a conversation he had overheard about bribing legislators and pressed Patel to arrange the voting in Delhi.<sup>125</sup> There was intimidation too. N. Dutt Mozumdar,

<sup>117</sup> Prayer meeting, 9 April 1947, *ibid.*, p. 245.

<sup>118</sup> Interview to H.S. Suhrawardy, 12 May 1947, *ibid.*, p. 459.

<sup>119</sup> Prayer meeting 10 May 1947, *ibid.*, p. 446.

<sup>120</sup> 12/13 May 1947, *ibid.*, p. 460.

<sup>121</sup> Bose, *My Days with Gandhi*, p. 233.

<sup>122</sup> 13 May 1947, *R.P. Papers*, 1-B/47, S. No. 4.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-P/47, Col. 1, Part II, S. No. 32.

<sup>124</sup> 11 June 1947, *SPC*, Vol. 4, p. 57.

<sup>125</sup> Mukherji overheard a Muslim family at the hospital saying: “Twenty lakhs per member means five crores; we are prepared to spend this amount and see whether we can buy them over or not’. We should remember that ordinary people do not possess the honesty, integrity and the unbreakable determination of a Gandhi, a Rajendra Prasad or a Jawaharlal. Twenty lakhs might be a sum which might bring off betrayal right in our camp.” 9 June 1947, *R.P. Papers*, 6-1/45-6-7, S. No. 53.

member of the Congress party in the Bengal Assembly, was warned by "S.S. Headquarters" to "immediately stop propaganda in support of 'Bengal partition'", else the "very existence of you will be at stake". The letter continued:<sup>126</sup>

Bengal must be an independent sovereign and united state wherein there will be no distinction of class, creed and religion. But this independent state must be called "Azad Pakistan" and the Muslims by virtue of their numerical strength will be the dominant power. Remember, Muslim Bengal is no more idle and busy after job-hunting. Youths of Muslim Bengal are now prepared to sacrifice their last drop of blood to attain and afterwards defend what they love to call "Pakistan".

The impure means tainted the end. Gandhi sadly withdrew his support to the campaign for unity.<sup>127</sup>

I have come to know that money is being squandered to stall the partition of Bengal. Nothing enduring can be achieved with the help of money. Votes purchased with money have no force. I can never be party to such an act. I can never support an act of goondaism, even if committed by my own kith and kin. Hence I would like to tell Sarat Babu that even though he and I would like to stop the partition of Bengal we should forget about it for the time being. It cannot be achieved by impure means.

His letter to Sarat Bose showed that Nehru's and Patel's misgivings influenced Gandhi's views.<sup>128</sup>

Both of them are dead against the proposal and they are of (the) opinion that it is merely a trick for dividing Hindus and the Scheduled Caste leaders. With them it is not merely a suspicion but

<sup>126</sup> The letter was signed "Sardar, Azad Pakistan" and dated 30 April 1947. Enclosure to N. Dutt Mozumdar to Patel, 8 May 1947, *SPC*, Vol. 4, pp. 36–37.

<sup>127</sup> Prayer meeting, 8 June 1947, *MGCW*, Vol. 88, p. 110.

<sup>128</sup> 8 June 1947, *ibid.*, p. 103.

almost conviction. They feel also that money is being lavishly expended in order to secure the Scheduled Caste votes. If such is the case, you should give up the struggle at present. For the unity purchased by corrupt practices would be worse than a frank partition, it being a recognition of the established division of hearts and the unfortunate experiences of the Hindus.

Two preconditions were laid down, should Sarat Bose choose to continue his efforts. There should be no corruption and the Bengal League should put its support to the scheme in writing.<sup>129</sup> The first was difficult to ensure, while the second had been ruled out by developments that had taken place in the meanwhile. The Bengal Provincial Muslim League had referred the dispute between Akram Khan's parliamentary group and Suhrawardy's camp on this question to Jinnah on 28 May 1947. His verdict was against independent Bengal.<sup>130</sup> On 9 June 1947, a day after Gandhi wrote to Sarat Bose, the All India Muslim League Council accepted the 3 June Plan, which sought to transfer power to two dominions only. Partition of Bengal was regretfully accepted as part of the Plan.<sup>131</sup>

Ultimately it was Mountbatten's retreat from the concept of unity for Bengal that sealed its fate. His withdrawal of support was more decisive than Gandhi's and Jinnah's as he was in a position to introduce the proposal into or delete it from the constitutional plans being devised. His original plan, tentatively outlined on 10 April 1947, had envisaged the partition of Punjab and Bengal and the setting up of two dominions, India and Pakistan.<sup>132</sup> This was the plan tacitly

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal, 1937-1947*, New Delhi, 1976, pp. 242-43.

<sup>131</sup> The resolution ran, "The Council of the All India Muslim League is of the opinion that the only solution of India's problem is to divide India into two—Pakistan and Hindustan. On that basis, the Council has given the most earnest attention and consideration to HMG's statement. The Council is of the opinion that although it cannot agree to the partition of Bengal and the Punjab, or give its consent to such partition, it has to consider HMG's Plan for the transfer of power as a whole." Members voting for numbered 400 and eight voted against it. Zaidi, *Evolution of Muslim Political Thought*, p. 238.

<sup>132</sup> Viceroy's twelfth staff meeting, 10 April 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, p. 177.

approved by Nehru when shown to him by Mieville, the Viceroy's Private Secretary, on 30 April 1947.<sup>133</sup> In the meanwhile, as we have seen, Mountbatten had come around to believing that united independent Bengal could be the key to the all-India deadlock. On 1 May 1947 he modified the plan by introducing the provision that provinces would first vote for independence and only a week later for partition.<sup>134</sup> The expectation was that this would strengthen the prospects of unity. The reality was that it created the possibility of several successor states, instead of two dominions.

Nehru reacted extremely adversely to the proposals in their modified form when he saw them on 10 May 1947 and declared that he would have nothing to do with them.<sup>135</sup> He felt the British government had imparted an "ominous meaning" to the original proposals to which he and Mountbatten had mutually agreed: "The whole approach was completely different from what ours had been and the picture of India that emerged frightened me."<sup>136</sup> He alleged that what he had been shown was a rough draft of one-and-a-half pages, though Mieville insisted that the full draft had been shown to him.<sup>137</sup> The initial note dashed off to the Viceroy<sup>138</sup> was followed by a long note on the proposals that spelt out the fears of balkanization.<sup>139</sup> In an official meeting with the Viceroy the next day Nehru explained how the agreed formula had undergone a complete inversion.<sup>140</sup>

<sup>133</sup> Mieville to Mountbatten, 30 April 1947, *ibid.*, pp. 488–90.

<sup>134</sup> Viceroy's personal report No. 5, 1 May 1947, *ibid.*, p. 539.

<sup>135</sup> In his own words, "but with all the goodwill in the world I reacted to them very strongly. Indeed they produced a devastating effect upon me". Nehru to Mountbatten, 11 May 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, p. 134.

<sup>136</sup> Nehru to Mountbatten, 11 May 1947, *ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>137</sup> Viceroy's fourteenth miscellaneous meeting, 11 May 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, pp. 762–63.

<sup>138</sup> Nehru to Mountbatten, 11 May 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, pp. 130–31.

<sup>139</sup> Nehru spoke of "disruptive tendencies everywhere and chaos and weakness", "certain civil conflict", "violence and disorder". He felt the plan is "likely to create many 'Ulsters' in India". A note on the draft proposals, 11 May 1947, *ibid.*, pp. 131–37.

<sup>140</sup> Viceroy's fourteenth miscellaneous meeting, 11 May 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, p. 763.

The conception was not so much of a Union of India but of a large number of successor states to which theoretically power would be transferred, and which would then join one group or another...it would encourage people to realise that India was being balkanised. The procedure appeared to be first separation, then a request to join up again. The previous process had been the opposite—first a request for unity and then the option to secede.

Anxious not to alienate Nehru (and perhaps not very keen to confess that his, and not HMG's, had been the distorting hand), Mountbatten immediately informed Ismay, his Chief of Staff, who was in London, that he had "omitted choice to provinces for standing out independently".<sup>141</sup> Mountbatten did not want to risk Nehru's hostility over any issue as that might upset the delicately balanced equation he had struck with him which was vital for the success of both Mountbatten's Commonwealth diplomacy and his plans for a peaceful transfer of power. Nehru's cooperation was believed to be important in a more immediate sense too. Mountbatten believed that "if he fell foul of Congress it would be impossible to continue to run the country".<sup>142</sup> That should have been the end of the united Bengal story, but it was not. Mountbatten hesitated to call off the efforts of Suhrawardy and the Bengal Governor for unity. Rather, he indicated that he would favourably consider any joint representation for unity signed by Bengal MLAs.<sup>143</sup> It took Nehru's forthright statement to a foreign journalist that the Congress would agree to united Bengal only if it remained in India,<sup>144</sup> to wring a clear-cut stand from Mountbatten. He admitted that "the prospects of saving the unity of Bengal ...had been gravely prejudiced" by Nehru's statement.<sup>145</sup> The Cabinet

<sup>141</sup> 13 May 1947, *ibid.*, p. 807.

<sup>142</sup> This was the argument he gave to reject the Bengal Governor's proposal that Calcutta be made a free city. Viceroy's ninth miscellaneous meeting, 1 May 1947, *ibid.*, p. 511.

<sup>143</sup> Mountbatten to Burrows, 16 and 18 May 1947, *ibid.*, pp. 849 and 889 respectively.

<sup>144</sup> Interview to Norman Cliff of the News Chronicle, 25 May 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, p. 179.

<sup>145</sup> Cabinet India and Burma Committee meeting, 28 May 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, p. 1014.



India Committee agreed with him that independent Bengal, as a separate dominion, was no longer likely.<sup>146</sup> Yet Mountbatten had two texts for broadcast drafted, one of which referred to united Bengal, on the ground that a coalition government may be formed which demanded that option.<sup>147</sup> This broadcast was, of course, not used.

Mountbatten wrote to the Bengal Governor on 1 June 1947 that given the Congress opposition to it, the scheme for unity had to be forsaken.<sup>148</sup> It was now the Bengal Governor's turn to refuse to give up the plan. He argued that a coalition government was a necessity and was even prepared to dismiss his Ministry should this not have its approval.<sup>149</sup> But with the possibility of unity now being ruled out, both Suhrawardy and K.S. Roy were disinclined to try short-term experiments.<sup>150</sup> On 20 June 1947 the majority of West Bengal legislators voted for partition of Bengal, 58 for and 21 against. This clinched the issue in favour of partition as the 3 June Plan had laid down that Bengal and Punjab would be partitioned if the majority of members of either group in the Assembly were in favour of it.<sup>151</sup>

## Congress Support to Partition of the Provinces—Wider Implications

What did the Congress achieve from its support of the demand for the partition of the provinces of Punjab and Bengal? The hope that it would be an "answer to Pakistan" had been widely belied. To add insult to injury, the Congress had been charged with surrendering before Hindu communalism. Early in the day, the Bengal Governor had commented: "The attitude of the Hindu Mahasabha has surprised nobody, but the Muslims have been quick to criticise the manner in which the local Congress leaders have subordinated nationalism to

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1018.

<sup>147</sup> Viceroy's conference paper, 31 May 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 11, p. 1.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>149</sup> To Mountbatten, 2 June 1947, *ibid.*, pp. 64–65.

<sup>150</sup> Burrows to Mountbatten, 17 June 1947, *ibid.*, p. 470.

<sup>151</sup> Viceroy's interview with Jinnah, 23 June 1947, *ibid.*, p. 581.

communalism.”<sup>152</sup> More stringent strictures had been passed closer home by Sarat Bose, who alleged that the “agitation has gained ground because the Congress came to the aid of the Hindu Mahasabha...”.<sup>153</sup> This risk of being dubbed communal had been there from the start, after the Hindu Mahasabha Conference held at Tarakeshwar in early April 1947 had attracted a “large and enthusiastic audience”.<sup>154</sup> Shyama Prasad Mookerjee was authorized to constitute a council of action to set up a separate homeland for Bengal Hindus and the Constituent Assembly was asked to set up a Boundary Commission.<sup>155</sup> Purity could only be maintained by keeping a safe distance from the agitation. But the pressure of public opinion proved to be too strong. The Hindus, including secular intellectuals, believed they had no future under a League-dominated government, namely, a communal government. The Congress had itself charged the League government with callousness and even complicity in the riots of Calcutta and Noakhali. How then could it deny the genuineness of the insecurity felt by the minority in Bengal? Having proved powerless to change the state of affairs despite being in the Interim Government, they had no alternative to offer to those who argued that partition was the only solution.

So the Congress did what they had done when faced with the demand for Pakistan. They had dismissed the League’s raising of the demand for Pakistan as communal but recognized the grievances and aspiration of the Muslims as genuine, to allay which they conceded

<sup>152</sup> To the Viceroy, 11 April 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 10, p. 203.

<sup>153</sup> To Patel, 27 May 1947, *SPC*, Vol. 4, pp. 45–46.

<sup>154</sup> Bengal Governor to Viceroy, 11 April 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, p. 203.

<sup>155</sup> B.S. Moonje’s diary entry for 26 March 1946 reads: “He [Mookerjee] is strongly in favour of partition of Bengal. I told him though I am not in favour of it I will publicly not show my opposition but who will bring about the partition?” *Moonje Papers*, Roll 4, NMML. It is significant that S.P. Mookerjee was for partition of the two provinces even prior to the August 1946 riots, which are generally regarded as the turning point in communal polarization in Bengal. In fact, Nehru too had foreseen and predicted this in 1945, even before Mookerjee: “If Pakistan is given, then parts of the Punjab and Bengal, where the Hindu population is in a majority, will join Hindustan and both the Punjab and Bengal will have to be divided.” Speech at Lahore, 26 August 1945, *JNSW*, Vol. 14, p. 165.

the right of self-determination of their future to the Muslims. Similarly, partition of the provinces appeared to be a communal demand in that it accepted that two communities could not live together, but in fact the situation was very different. The Congress was offering the Muslims a secular government, a secular constitution and a secular society in independent India. A united Punjab and Bengal would mean Hindus living in a communal society and under a communal regime.

There was another and far graver divide between the intention and the consequence of the Congress stand on the partition of the provinces. When the partition of Bengal and the Punjab was finally effected, it was virtually seen as a victory for the Congress. After all, the Congress demand for their partition was accepted and the League's upholding of their unity rejected. One almost forgets that the demand was originally conceived as a conditional one, contingent on the creation of Pakistan, i.e., if Pakistan is created on a communal basis, then Bengal and Punjab should be partitioned. Almost imperceptibly, the conditional demand assumed an autonomous character: whether Pakistan comes or not, there must be an administrative partition of the provinces. This was not surprising. The ground on which the demand of partition was accepted was the insecurity of the minorities about their future under Muslim communal domination in Pakistan. Patel's statement reflected this aspect: "Bengal has got to be partitioned if the non-Muslim population is to survive."<sup>156</sup> Similarly, Nehru wrote to the Viceroy: "Even before and apart from such partition recent events have made an administrative division of both Bengal and Punjab an obvious and urgent necessity."<sup>157</sup>

As we know, Mountbatten and His Majesty's Government had laid the greatest stress on an agreed solution to the constitutional tangle but agreement was most elusive. The Congress and the League stands were diametrically opposed; the former stood for unity of the country, the latter for division. The attempt made in the Cabinet Mission Plan to convince both parties that they were getting what they wanted had inevitably been exposed once clarifications were

<sup>156</sup> Patel to Binoy Kumar Roy, 23 May 1947, *SPC*, Vol. 4, p. 43.

<sup>157</sup> 1 May 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, p. 518.

sought and given. With the Congress becoming an active proponent of partition of the two provinces, the demand became identified as the “Congress demand”. This was used to good effect by Mountbatten, who identified provincial partition as the Congress demand, Pakistan as the League demand and yoked the two together in his 3 June Plan. The impression of mutual concessions was upheld. The Congress would concede the League’s demand for partition of the country and the League in turn would accept partition of the provinces. However, partition of the provinces was not really the “Congress demand”—the real Congress demand was unity—in taking it up the Congress was only pointing to the logic of the League demand.

Gandhi had pointed to the dangers of the path.<sup>158</sup>

The only alternative to Pakistan is undivided India. There is no *via media*. Once you accept the principle of partition in respect of any province, you get into a sea of difficulties. By holding fast to the ideal of undivided India, you steer clear of all difficulties.

But what was to be done if the division of India was accepted, as even Gandhi had done?

<sup>158</sup> Talk with Aruna Asaf Ali and Ashok Mehta, 6 May 1947, *MGCW*, Vol. 87, p. 421.

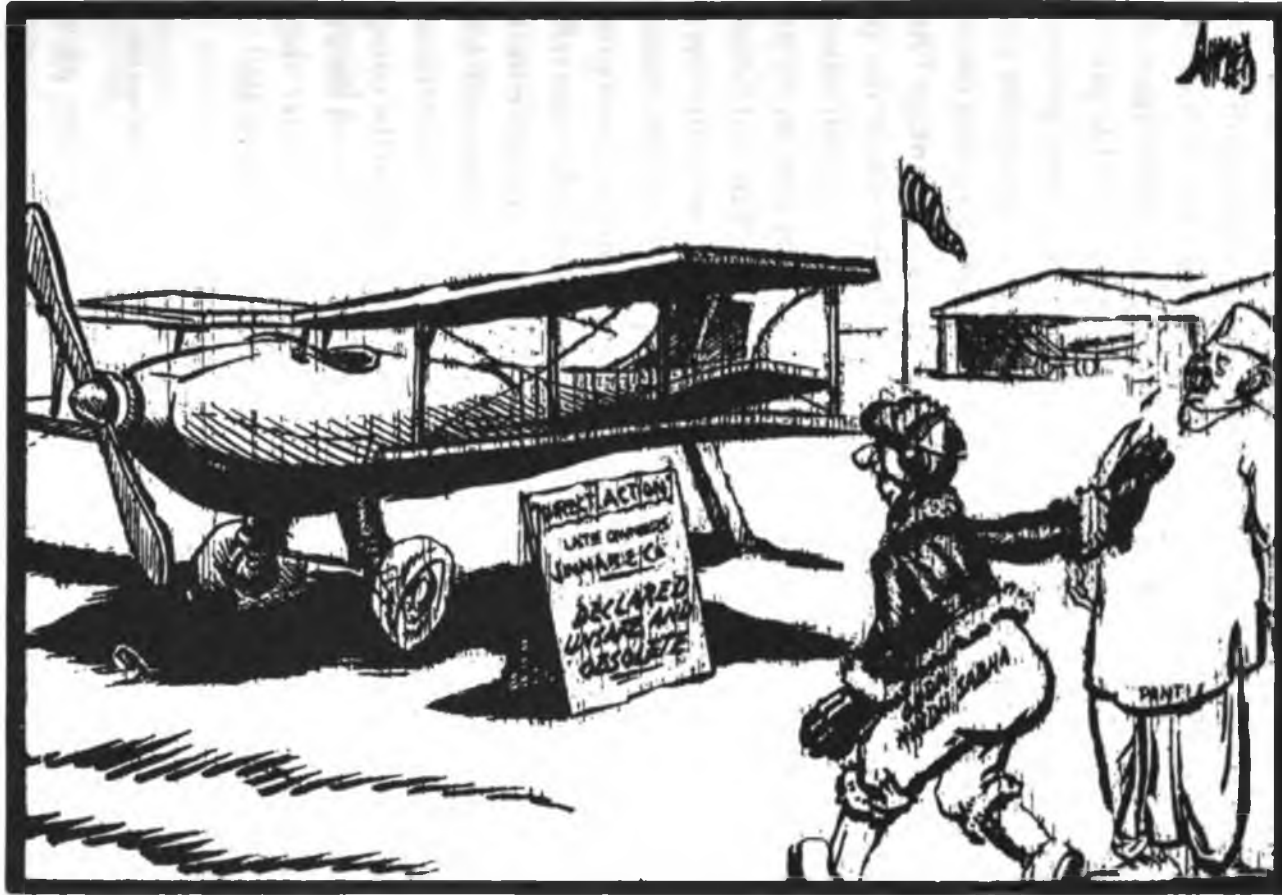
## Hindu Communal Pressure on the Congress

The rampaging Hindu mobs of Bihar and the anxious Hindu and Sikh minorities of Punjab and Bengal—these were the two faces of Hindu communalism, majority assertion and minority fears, that confronted the Congress. As we have seen, Hindu mobs could be suppressed with force and Hindu minority fears assuaged by ensuring—through partition of the two provinces—that they too would have a place in the sun. The Congress found it far more difficult to contend with pressures, both invidious and explicit, exercised by Hindu communal opinion in myriad ways. The attempt was to somehow, by friendly overtures if possible, or by a show of force if need be, impart a pro-Hindu orientation to the Congress and a Hindu tinge to its secularism.

At one end of the spectrum was the attempt to transform the Congress into a communal organization. This pressure was exercised at different levels of the Congress. The Congress party was exhorted to give up placating the Muslims and to function as a Hindu body; Congress provincial governments were urged to give up their impartiality (which was seen as a guise for their pro-Muslim stance) and, after the creation of Pakistan, the Congress, as the ruling party, was pressurized to declare the Indian state a Hindu *rashtra*.

This was but one trend among Hindu communal opinion—working on the Congress through the tactics of subtle pressure, friendly advice, offers of cooperation and threats disguised as appeals. The

# " STAND BACK, THERE ! "



The Oudh Hindu Sabha has decided, in spite of everything, to launch Direct Action from August 1.

Source: *The Hindustan Times*, 1 August 1947

other stance was aggressively militant—the Congress had to be exposed as being incapable of dealing with the Muslim challenge or even protecting Hindu lives and property and Hindu organizations were to be built up as the real defenders of the Hindus. The choice between the two stances placed the Hindu communal forces in a real dilemma. The success story of the Muslim League, which firmly asserted its claim to be the sole spokesman of Indian Muslims and got the British and the Congress to more or less recognize this, prompted the Hindu Mahasabha leaders to make an all-out bid to be the sole representative of the Hindu body. The General Secretary of the organization claimed, at the Simla Conference in June 1945, that the Mahasabha represented the Hindus.<sup>1</sup> The elections cruelly exposed such claims as baseless and the Mahasabha had to eat humble pie.

Opportunity arose again in late 1946, when stern government action against Hindu rioters in Bihar and U.P. turned the popular mood against the Congress. Mahasabha organizers felt that they could exploit the unpopularity of the Congress to their advantage.<sup>2</sup> As riots spread, Hindu communalists could easily point out to the people that the Congress would not come to their aid and that they must arm themselves and train in self-defence and retaliation by joining volunteer armies such as the RSS or the Hindu National Guards.

Hindu communal forces really came into their own after the creation of Pakistan. The communalized atmosphere in the country in the aftermath of the holocaust that attended on partition provided fertile soil for their growth. Their newfound confidence was reflected in the strident tone of their utterances and the provocative militancy of their actions. Quick strides were made from virulent anti-Muslim propaganda to active participation in riots, to calls to overthrow the government and hang the national leaders and finally to the conspiracy to assassinate Gandhi. This proved to be the last straw and the curtain was finally rung down on them but tragically only after they had claimed their greatest prize, the life of the tallest man of all.

<sup>1</sup> Draft Resolution for Working Committee, *All India Hindu Mahasabha Papers* (henceforth *AIHMP*), File No. C-65/1945 NMML, New Delhi.

<sup>2</sup> Report to Working Committee, 8, 9 and 10 February 1947, *ibid.*, File No. C-138/1946-47.

However, the above stance of arraying themselves in opposition to the Congress was adopted by Hindu communal forces primarily after independence and after the strategy of persuading the Congress to offload its Muslim baggage and function as a Hindu body did not seem to work. In the crucial years, 1945–47, the basic strategy of Hindu communal organizations remained one of trying to bend the Congress to accommodate their position.

Why was accommodation rather than opposition the first choice of the Hindu communal forces? Essentially, this stemmed from a realistic assessment of their own weakness relative to the immense strength of the Congress, which continued to command the allegiance of the large majority of the Hindus, whatever might be their dissatisfaction with it. If the Congress could be persuaded to make substantial concessions to Hindu communal demands, it would represent a more substantial advance for Hindu communalism than what it might achieve via the slow uphill path of building bases among the Hindus.

Moreover, the Hindu communal leaders sensed that this was no longer a remote possibility. The Congress was steadily being forced to retreat before the determined advance of Muslim communalism and what better opportunity could there be for pressing for the adoption of a new approach than the failure of the old ways? The expectation was that many Congressmen, who had been communalized by the riots, would come out openly in support of a change of the Congress strategy. The political situation seemed to offer a possibility never known before of effecting an ideological shift of the Congress. The challenge before the Hindu communal forces was—could they make the possible real?

## **Should the Congress Ally with Hindu Bodies?**

The first overture of the Hindu Mahasabha to the Congress came in the winter of 1945 in the form of S.P. Mookerjee's suggestion to Rajendra Prasad that the parties should come to an electoral understanding. The Hindu Mahasabha, it was argued, could then represent Hindu interests in the Assembly, something the Congress, being a national body, could not openly do. Rajendra Prasad conveyed this



offer to his colleagues, pointing out that the money and workers conserved by avoiding a contest with the Mahasabha in the general constituencies could be used to fight the Muslim League more effectively. His own predilections were cautiously stated: "I would like without detriment to the Congress position to have some understanding with him if possible."<sup>3</sup>

Patel firmly ruled out an alliance on two grounds. First, the politics of the Mahasabha was dubious;<sup>4</sup> second, the party was unlikely to win any seats.<sup>5</sup> Maulana Azad, who was then the Congress President, agreed with Patel.<sup>6</sup> Nehru not only rejected the offer, but analyzed at length why "it would be wrong policy and harmful for us to enter into pacts and arrangements with the Hindu Mahasabha". The secular credentials of the Congress, already under attack by the League, would be further questioned: "[They will] again emphasise, as they have done in the past, that the Congress is the Hindu Mahasabha in a different guise.... This will take away from the straight and semi-revolutionary appeal of the Congress functioning without compromises with other groups."<sup>7</sup> Nehru's fears that any dealings with the Mahasabha would create anxiety among Muslim supporters of the Congress soon came true in Punjab where the Congress leaders persuaded the Mahasabha leader, Gokul Chand Narang, to step down in favour of a Congress candidate. The National Workers' Conference protested strongly against the Congress having any truck with Hindu communalists and was unmoved by the consideration that the Congress stood to gain a seat in the bargain.<sup>8</sup> When S.P. Mookerjee pressed the matter again in December 1945 he could hardly have expected the summary dismissal he got from Patel: "The Hindu Mahasabha

<sup>3</sup> 5 November 1945, *R.P. Papers*, File No. 7-S/45-6, NAI. A short while earlier Surya Narain Prasad of the Hindu Mahasabha, Bhagalpur had argued for a pact on the same ground, 7 October 1945, *ibid.*, File No. 9-R/45-6, Col. I.

<sup>4</sup> Patel to Nehru, 12 October 1945, *SPC*, Vol. 2, p. 121.

<sup>5</sup> Patel to Prasad, 8 October 1945, *ibid.*, p. 11

<sup>6</sup> Azad to Patel, 21 October 1945, *ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> The letter was written after a discussion with the U.P. Premier, G.B. Pant, and purports to represent Pant's views as well, Nehru to Rajendra Prasad, *R.P. Papers*, File No. 7-S/45-6, S. No. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Patel to Dr Gopichand Bhargava, 5 November 1945, *SPC*, Vol. 2, p. 141.

should be dissolved and its members should join the Congress.”<sup>9</sup> Mookerjee, obviously, had no intention of accepting such friendly advice. A year after his first overture, he wrote to Jayakar: “The Congress in its own interest should encourage the Hindu Sabha, which alone can properly deal with the reactionary League.”<sup>10</sup>

## Was the Congress Essentially a Hindu Body?

When it became clear that the Congress was not willing to ally with Hindu organizations, Hindu communal elements adopted the tactic of persuading the Congress to function as a *de facto* Hindu body. The Open Letter of the Hindu Relief Committee, Meerut, to the U.P. Government, entitled, “Why this anti-Hindu Policy?” was stridently critical in its tone:<sup>11</sup>

Your policy of unfairly appeasing the Muslims is misconceived. This will never make the Muslim League friendly to India’s aspiration and will only strengthen its venom.... You may personally be Godly but we are men and we want justice and we believe in Shylock being paid in his own coins.... The vast majority of the Hindus of this province are nationalist and Congressites and wish Congress all success. The Congress has been kept alive only by their blood and it would be a sorrowful day if on account of biased communal politics like those of your government we may have to decry as partial and unjust the very institution which is so dear to our hearts.

The letter written by Banwari Lal Gupta, “just a Hindu”, to the President of the Hindu Mahasabha was in a similar vein: “We should tell Muslims firmly that if you want to live as human beings in India, you may do so, else you must pack your bags and lathis on your camels and take off for Arabia.” The letter went on to appeal to the Congress not to “sacrifice the interests of Hindus for the wrongful

<sup>9</sup> 20 December 1945, *SLMU*, Vol. 1, p. 31.

<sup>10</sup> 16 October 1946, *Jayakar Papers*, File No. 833, S. No. 67.

<sup>11</sup> *R.P. Papers*, File No. 3-N/45-6-7, Col. V, S. No. 79.

happiness of the Muslim minority". The Congress was after all "the symbol of the sacrifice and devotion of the Hindus" and it should be reminded of this fact.<sup>12</sup>

Nationalist Muslims came in for sharp attack because it was felt that their presence in the Congress was the stumbling block to the Congress accepting that it was a Hindu body. The tactic was to question their loyalty to the national cause, imply that their sympathies were really with the League and point out that, in any case, they were too few to be of importance. A provocative pamphlet titled *Existing Dangers and our Duties*, published by *Kalyan*, a weekly from Gorakhpur, alleged: "It is a fact that the nationalist Muslims are Muslims first and nationalist afterwards, which is clear even from the speeches of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad."<sup>13</sup> Even Shantilal Shah, a Congressman from Bombay, was of the view that Azad was "a little soft on the League".<sup>14</sup> Why then, it was argued, should the Congress continue to "sacrifice the Hindus for these handful of so called nationalist Muslims"?<sup>15</sup>

The argument that the Congress should accept its essentially Hindu character was not a new one. The British had always maintained that, though the Congress had pretensions to be a national body, it was merely a body of the Hindus. The Muslim League had never ceased to demand that the Congress recognize that it was a Hindu party and that the League was the sole spokesman of the Muslims. Jinnah had been totally unwilling to accept Nehru's offer that the Congress would recognize the League as the predominant voice of Indian Muslims if the League in turn conceded that the Congress represented "such Muslims as have thrown in their lot with the Congress". Muslim and Hindu communalists seemed to be in agreement on one issue—that the Congress should forsake the nationalist Muslims.

The issue became contentious at the Simla Conference in July 1945 when Jinnah insisted that no other party could nominate a Muslim as its representative in the Executive Council. The government held

<sup>12</sup> 20 March 1947, *AIHMP*, File No. C-138/1946-47. The original is in Hindi.

<sup>13</sup> 14 September 1946, *ibid.*, File M-14/1946.

<sup>14</sup> OHT, 384, NMML.

<sup>15</sup> Man Mohan to G.B. Pant, 23 June 1947, *P.D. Tandon Papers*, Part II, File 231, June 1947, NAI, New Delhi.

no brief for the Congress but could not let down its allies, the Unionists of Punjab, and the Viceroy chose the easier path of declaring the breakdown of the conference instead of calling Jinnah's bluff. The controversy arose again in mid-1946 during the negotiations for the formation of the Interim Government. The pragmatic argument was that, in the interests of a settlement, the Congress should give up its insistence on nominating a Muslim, which, given the small number of nationalist Muslims involved, amounted merely to stubborn adherence to a principle. However, those who could see the import of even a symbolic defiance of the League's totalitarianism threw their full weight behind up-holding the Congress' right to represent and nominate Muslims.

In fact Gandhi rightly clarified that what was involved was a duty, not a right: "One may waive a right, one cannot waive a duty".<sup>16</sup> He recognized that the Congress President, Maulana Azad, might find it awkward to insist on a nationalist Muslim being included in the Congress list of nominees and suggested to Patel that someone else be authorized to conduct negotiations with the Cabinet Mission.<sup>17</sup> He went so far as to warn the Congress Working Committee that he would wash his hands of the whole affair should they agree not to have a nationalist Muslim in their quota.<sup>18</sup> The reason for Gandhi's strong stand was his conviction that if the Congress gave way on this issue, from being the foremost national body it would be reduced to a mere communal organization, a Hindu body. Nehru, too, recognized that the issue had important implications for the nature of the Congress: "The Congress could not agree to this standpoint because if it agreed it would at once become a communal organisation."<sup>19</sup> What appeared to be a small concession for the Congress to make for immediate pragmatic gains would amount to "an admission [which] belies all its past history".<sup>20</sup> The fear was that "the Congress will lose its prestige if it ceases to have a national character".<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> To Wavell, 26 September 1946, *MGCW*, Vol. 85, p. 383.

<sup>17</sup> To Patel, 21 June 1946, *ibid.*, p. 353.

<sup>18</sup> 19 June 1946, *ibid.*, Vol. 84, p. 347.

<sup>19</sup> Speech at Shillong, 17 December 1945, *JNSW*, Vol. 14.

<sup>20</sup> Gandhi to Norman Cliff, 29 June 1946, *MGCW*, Vol. 84, p. 388.

<sup>21</sup> Gandhi's speech at Congress Working Committee meeting, 18 June 1946, *ibid.*, p. 345.

In the strife-torn days of 1946–47, this clinging to one rock, while bigger boulders were swept away, might have seemed quite futile to many. The Congress could not have done otherwise. Should it have abandoned the secular Muslims who had stood by it despite great pressure? Could it have forsaken its past history as a national organization to become a mere Hindu body? Or given up its future vision of a secular India? The price demanded was clearly too high.

### Should Unity be Compelled by Force?

A bigger poser than the question of the nationalist Muslims proved to be the option of maintaining unity by force. The intractability of the League, the refusal of the British government to take a clear stand on Pakistan and the communalization of the ordinary person as communal violence engulfed province after province, narrowed down the options before the Congress, till only two were left. The first was that Congress should concede that it had failed to achieve unity and accept the partition of the country. The other way was to declare that the Congress would never agree to the formation of Pakistan and would fight those who wanted it every inch of the way.

Hindu communal opinion, both within and outside the Congress, was of the view that Pakistan must be opposed with all the force that could be mustered. Purshottamdas Tandon, Congress Speaker of the U.P. Legislative Assembly, appealed to the “Congress and the manhood of the country” to “even at this stage prevent this betrayal”.<sup>22</sup> Ram Ratan Gupta, a Congressman from Kanpur, called upon members of the Constituent Assembly to oppose this needless gift to Jinnah as it was “a sheer repudiation and negation of our avowed principles and a gross betrayal of the pledge we have given to the electorate on whose strength is based the edifice of our organisation”.<sup>23</sup> M.R. Jayakar, the

<sup>22</sup> Typed note, 4 June 1947, *ibid.*, Group 13, S.No. 361. A correspondent of Tandon’s commented: “Pakistan is the ‘Munich’ of India and the Congress.” R.N. Dhar to Tandon, 19 July 1947, *P.D. Tandon Papers*, Part II, File No. 231.

<sup>23</sup> 19 July 1947, *ibid.*, Part II, File No. 231.

Bombay Liberal leader with Mahasabha sympathies, bemoaned to his close associate, Sapru:<sup>24</sup>

We have no Benjamin Franklin who could tell the Muslims "we will not allow you to secede and, if you wish to fight, we shall meet you on your own ground". From the very beginning the process of appeasement went on and a year ago the appeasement took the form of concessions surrendered at the sight of violence. This will go on until Congress makes up its mind to stand firm and meet violence on its own ground.

Who did Jayakar expect would assume the mantle of Franklin? A year earlier it had seemed that Patel might fit the bill. Jayakar had gone along with Jagdish Prasad and Gopaldaswami Ayyangar to meet Patel in order to impress upon him their "fears that Congress might yield further concessions to Jinnah". The entry for 7 April 1946 in his diary suggests that he had returned from his visit reassured.<sup>25</sup> Jayakar's lament in May 1947, "we have no Benjamin Franklin", suggests that by then he had lost hope in Patel too.

What about other Congress leaders? Were they inclined to "meet violence on its own ground"? Gandhi's objection was fundamental, as it was to the very use of force for any end. On two occasions, when the League refused to come into the Constituent Assembly and when he visited Noakhali, where Muslim communalists had spread terror in the countryside, Gandhi made it clear that, whatever the provocation may be, his way could never be that of force or compulsion, even if the alternative was Pakistan.<sup>26</sup> Nehru's approach was pragmatic rather than principled: "We could have checked them by resorting to the sword and the lathi but would that solve the problem?"<sup>27</sup> In fact, violence could intensify the problem: "The use of violence at this

<sup>24</sup> 21 May 1947, *Sapru Papers*, S-I, Roll 3, J-100.

<sup>25</sup> *Jayakar Papers*, File no. 866, S. No. 35.

<sup>26</sup> *MGCW*, Vols. 88 and 86, pp. 73 and 106.

<sup>27</sup> Speech at AICC Meeting, 15 June 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 3, p. 112.

time to maintain Indian unity will have disastrous results. Civil war will check the progress of India for a long time to come."<sup>28</sup>

It seems that the posing and then the ruling out of this option made it easier for the Congress leaders to accept partition. If the choice was between partition and communal civil war, the former was certainly to be preferred. In their meetings with Mountbatten in early April 1947, Kripalani, Rajagopalachari and Rajendra Prasad presented their acceptance of Pakistan as the better of the two alternatives. Kripalani, who was then the Congress President, even introduced a magnanimous note: "Rather than have a battle we shall let them have their Pakistan."<sup>29</sup> Rajagopalachari admitted, "the ideal of a united India could not be imposed by force",<sup>30</sup> while Rajendra Prasad echoed Nehru's fears of a civil war.<sup>31</sup> Elsewhere Rajendra Prasad maintained that the Congress could not have done otherwise: "We must be prepared either to prevent it [partition] by force or to consent to it.... The Congress from the very beginning has held that it cannot contemplate coercing any part of India."<sup>32</sup>

The problem with maintaining unity by force was not only that it went against the democratic grain of the Congress. The Congress was constrained by the lack of state power at the national level despite Congress members in the Interim Government, and its powerlessness to control developments in the crucial provinces of Punjab and Bengal. The instruments at the command of the Congress to impose unity were not the armed forces of the state, which were controlled by the British, but the cadres of the party. The option of unity by force then really meant matching League hooligans with Congress *goondas*, and raising volunteer bodies which could counter the Muslim National Guards—in short, the turning of the Congress into a Hindu communal organization, and a fascist one at that. If the Congress chose to concede partition rather than attempt to prevent it by force, it is a choice that can hardly be faulted.

<sup>28</sup> Speech at Liberty Week meeting, 9 August 1947, *ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>29</sup> 17 April 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, pp. 308–9.

<sup>30</sup> 11 April 1947, *ibid.*, pp. 194–96.

<sup>31</sup> 10 April 1947, *ibid.*, pp. 179–80.

<sup>32</sup> To Radhakrishnan, 6 May 1947, *R.P. Papers*, File No. 19-P/47, Col. I.

## “Why are Congress Ministries Anti-Hindu?”

If the refusal of the Congress party to function as a Hindu body irked the communal Hindus and organizations, the actions of the Congress ministries caused no less distress. The Congress governments, particularly in Bihar and U.P., came in for sharp criticism. The Hapur Hindus were unhappy with the punitive measures taken by the government after the December 1946 riots. They alleged that the Hindus had been singled out for punishment and the Muslims allowed to go scotfree—that the collective fine of Rs 0.2 million was imposed only on the Hindus; that large numbers of the Hindus were detained without trial and Hindu houses alone were searched for illegal fire arms; that the government had ears only for Muslim grievances, for instance, Rafi Ahmed Kidwai visited the town but went away without meeting any prominent Hindus, including Congressmen. The government, they alleged, was actually following a blatantly pro-Muslim policy.<sup>33</sup>

The complaint of the Hindu Mahasabha was that it was being singled out for repression by the Congress ministries. The report of the organization for the period January to May 1947<sup>34</sup> made particular mention of the Bihar, U.P. and Bombay ministries. In Bihar, it was alleged, permission was refused for conferences and the Provincial Hindu Conference could not hold its session. Speakers were banned from touring and some of them were arrested; for instance, the Raja of Ramgarh. In U.P., the President of the Hindu Sabha, Bareilly, and an ordinary worker in Kanpur were arrested, though they were only doing relief work. Congress MLAs came to the aid of the ministry in Badaun by trying to derail the Divisional Conference organized by the Mahasabha but the District Magistrate was able to thwart their designs. The Bombay government demanded securities from the *Kesari* and the *Maharatta*. The report concluded that the motive behind the “various penal measures” taken by the Congress ministries was to “thwart the growing popularity of the Hindu Mahasabha movement”.

<sup>33</sup> Open Letter to U.P. Govt.—“Why this anti-Hindu Policy?”—from Hindu Relief Committee, Meerut, *ibid.*, p. 20, File No. 3-N/45-6-7, Col. 5, S.No. 79.

<sup>34</sup> *AIHMP*, File No. C-138/1946-47.



A personal representation was made by Babu Nawal Kishore Prasad to Rajendra Prasad against the discriminatory attitude of the Bihar ministry towards the Hindus in general and the Mahasabha in particular.<sup>35</sup> It was alleged that all the 1,000 detenus who languished behind bars without a trial were Hindu and that "Hindu Sabhaites cannot get permission to hold any meeting or to take out even religious processions and thus all their activities have been curbed throughout the province". Sri Krishna Sinha's reply was comprehensive, countering each charge at length.<sup>36</sup> First, the figures of detenus were grossly exaggerated, the total figure at that time being 327. Second, over 20 per cent of them were Muslims and in one district alone, Monghyr, 25 Muslims were detained for possession of unauthorized firearms. Third, the government had progressively relaxed the strict prohibition on meetings, beginning from November 1946, only a month after the riots. However, whenever there was an apprehension that communal tension might be aggravated, prohibitory orders were re-imposed for short periods. As for the Mahasabha charge that only Hindu organizations had been restrained, this was clearly false:

It is entirely incorrect to say that discrimination has been made against the Hindu Sabha in the matter of granting permissions for meetings and processions. Meetings and assemblies of a religious nature have been allowed in most cases in which permission has been sought and during the last District Board elections the Hindu Sabha was given the same freedom for holding election meetings etc. as were given to other political parties.

The Hindu communal case against Congress ministries was that not only were their actions anti-Hindu, but that they also continued the pro-Muslim policies of the British regime. A major grievance was that Muslim officers continued to occupy important posts and over-

<sup>35</sup> Rajendra Prasad conveyed the complaints to the Bihar Premier, Sri Krishna Sinha, in a letter dated 11 August 1947, *R.P. Papers*, File No. 24-C/46-7, Col. I, S. No. 143. Subsequent quotations are from this letter.

<sup>36</sup> To Rajendra Prasad, 3 September 1947, *ibid.* 24-C/46-7, Col. I, S. No. 155.

representation of Muslims in the services was not corrected. Hindu communal leaders and organizations, at their national conventions, raised the demand for making the proportion of different communities in the services commensurate with their strength in the population. The Working Committee of the All India Hindu Mahasabha passed a resolution to this effect, at its annual meeting from 8 to 10 February 1947.<sup>37</sup> The well-known Hindu communal leader, Moonje, had warned that if the Congress did not reorganize the army it would be helpless in the exercise of its sovereignty.<sup>38</sup>

The U.P. ministry faced complaints from the Hindus of Hapur in Meerut district (where riots had broken out in December 1946):<sup>39</sup>

Your administrative machinery is rotten and communal. Your police in U.P. is 70% Muslim and your Deputy Collectors are also about 50% Muslim. The Muslim goonda element finds a positive encouragement from his co-religionists in authority, who make no secret of their communal leanings. It is this fact which made U.P., where Muslims are only 14%, a stronghold of the Muslim League.... In any case there can be no justification for 86% of the Hindus of your province being left at the mercy of Muslim police and executive. It is high time for you to take stock of your administrative machinery and to eliminate the unwilling and undesirable portion of it.

The U.P. Premier, G.B. Pant's reply is not on record, but the government did not concede these demands. In fact Pant's letter to Patel months later clearly indicated that he was still inclined to tread cautiously on what he felt was tricky ground.<sup>40</sup>

The Bihar ministry also faced the twin demands that over-representation of Muslims in the services should be corrected and

<sup>37</sup> *AIHMP*, C-138/1946-7.

<sup>38</sup> Address to All India Hindu Mahajati Sammelan, Kurukshetra, 19 August 1946, *ibid.*, C-105/1946.

<sup>39</sup> Report on Hapur riots by Meerut Hindu Relief Committee and Hindu Sabha, 21 December 1946, *R.P. Papers*, 3-N/45-6-7.

<sup>40</sup> 22 May 1947, *SLMU*, Vol. 1, p. 22.

Muslim officials should be removed from key posts because "Hindus have lost confidence that they will get Government support and Government aid if any trouble arises".<sup>41</sup> The Bihar Premier resolutely refused to concede any ground. He pointed out that over-representation was not as serious a problem as in neighbouring U.P. For instance, only 20 per cent of the constabulary were Muslim and even this percentage would soon be reduced as no Muslim was being recruited in the special police force of 2,000 men currently being constituted. The government was having the whole issue examined and was firmly of the opinion that the matter should not be rushed: "We thought we might wait till the general question of the rights and privileges in the Indian Union had been examined." He reacted more adversely to the other demand that Muslim officials be removed as the Hindus had no faith in them. He did not see any basis in the grievance that Muslims held far too many key posts, when only one District Magistrate out of 16, and that too in distant Palamau, was a Muslim. There were of course "several Muslim officers" who were Superintendents of Police and Sub-Divisional Officers: "I fail to understand what is wrong in this. Am I to get rid of Muslim officers of superior rank? If not am I to keep them out of posts to which, by their length and record of service, they are entitled?"<sup>42</sup>

Sri Krishna Sinha's reaction to an anonymous Urdu petition received by Gandhi and forwarded to him by Rajendra Prasad<sup>43</sup> contrasts sharply with his reaction to Nawal Kishore Prasad's complaints. The petitioner complained that Muslim houses were subject to searches for illegal arms, women were dishonoured, mosques and *dargahs* desecrated and harassed and Muslims were migrating to Pakistan in large numbers. Sri Krishna Sinha pointed out that "some of the allegations are maliciously false", particularly the ones about dishonour

<sup>41</sup> Bapu Nawal Kishore Prasad's complaints, conveyed by Rajendra Prasad to Sri Krishna Sinha, 11 August 1947, *R.P. Papers*, File No. 24-C/46-7, Col. I, S. No. 143.

<sup>42</sup> Sri Krishna Sinha's reply to Rajendra Prasad, 3 September 1947, *ibid.*, 24-C/46-7, Col. I, S. No. 155.

<sup>43</sup> Rajendra Prasad to Sri Krishna Sinha, 28 October 1947 and Sri Krishna Sinha's reply, 12 December 1947, *R.P. Papers*, 24-C/46-7, Col. I, S. No. 197.

to mosques, holy books and Muslim women. Migration was the result of Muslim League propaganda and "Government are, in no way, responsible for this". After denying the allegations, he went on to show that his government in fact took special care to ensure full protection of the religious freedom of the Muslims. Elaborate arrangements were made for Moharram processions but in some places "Muslims abstained from taking out processions with a view to discredit the Indian Union Government in the eyes of the outside world". Despite the appeal made by prominent Muslims of Bihar that in deference to Hindu sentiment there should be no cow sacrifice, the Bihar administration instructed District Magistrates "that the full vigour of law should be applied in upholding the customary rights of cow sacrifice even using force where necessary".

If the choice was between respecting Hindu sentiments and upholding Muslim "customary rights", the Bihar premier had no hesitation in settling for the latter. He could not have been more explicit about his choice than in his reply to Rajendra Prasad about Nawal Kishore Prasad's complaints:<sup>44</sup>

Nawal Babu, and those of his persuasion would...like me to ignore completely the feelings and even the reasonable expectations of the Muslims who form about 13% of the population of the province and to meet all demands whether reasonable, or unreasonable, of every section of the majority community. I am afraid if this is the price I have to pay for satisfying Nawal Babu and other people like him, I would rather let them remain aggrieved.

## Should India be a Hindu State?

The announcement, on 3 June 1947, that two dominions, India and Pakistan, would be established after independence, was perceived to be a victory for the Muslim League. After all, its stand that Muslims must have their own homeland, as they were a separate nation, had

<sup>44</sup> Sri Krishna Sinha to Rajendra Prasad, 3 September 1947, *ibid.*, Col. I, S. No. 155.

been upheld. Hindu communal organizations and individuals immediately raised the banner of Hindu Raj, a Hindu state that would safeguard the interests of the Hindus through the difficult times ahead. This was but an extension of the old argument that only a Hindu party could protect Hindu interests as the Congress inevitably sacrificed Hindu interests at the altar of national unity—from Hindu party to Hindu state was a short step.

The All India Committee of the Hindu Mahasabha met on 7 and 8 June 1947 and resolved: "The Committee considers it its duty to warn the Hindus and unless they are more careful and vigilant in future and take immediate and effective steps to build up a real and powerful Hindu state, not only will their interests under the new proposed arrangements be unsafe but they may lose even what is left to them of India."<sup>45</sup> A correspondent of Patel wrote, "It is no doubt a very good thing for the Hindus and we will now be free from the communal canker.... The partitioned area, of course, would be a Muslim state. Is it not time that we should consider Hindustan as a Hindu State with Hinduism as the State religion?"<sup>46</sup> Patel emphatically ruled out such a possibility: "I do not think it will be possible to consider Hindustan as a Hindu State with Hinduism as the state religion. We must not forget that there are other minorities whose protection is our primary responsibility. The State must exist for all irrespective of caste or creed."<sup>47</sup>

The months after independence saw the slogan of a Hindu Raj being raised with impunity at Hindu communal platforms. Nehru missed no opportunity to counter the demand with all possible arguments. His initial attitude was dismissive: "It may be a demand of some people.... I do not understand what it means."<sup>48</sup> Was the term Hindu Raj a descriptive or prescriptive one, he demanded to know. Was India to be a Hindu state in the sense that most of its citizens were Hindu? Or was the intention that it should be a Hindu State in

<sup>45</sup> *AIHMP*, File No.C-162/1947.

<sup>46</sup> B.M. Birla to Patel, 5 June 1947, *SPC*, Vol. 4, p. 56.

<sup>47</sup> Patel to B.M. Birla, 10 June 1947, *ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>48</sup> Press Conference at Delhi on 12 October 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 4, p. 152.

the sense of being exclusively for the Hindus? Nehru's own intention was simply to show, by his deliberate incomprehension, that the concept was ill-defined and hence of little substance. A similar tactic was to demonstrate that it was an unnecessary demand. Did Hindu culture need a Hindu state for it to survive? He had "no doubt that Hindu culture will have its influence in India".<sup>49</sup> He clarified his own stand on the issue: "My opposition to the idea of a Hindu raj does not mean any hostility towards Hindu culture. India being predominantly a country of the Hindus, Hindu culture will naturally overshadow all other cultural shades in the country. But I am strongly opposed to the medieval idea of establishing a theocratic state in India."<sup>50</sup> Further: "This demand for a Hindu raj tends to show to the outside world that India is a narrow minded country with strong leanings towards fascism.... If we follow this path of sheer communalism then nobody will respect us in this world."<sup>51</sup> Nehru pointed to the totalitarian notion of politics behind the demand: "The ideas and methods of fascist organisation are now gaining popularity among the Hindus also and the demand for the establishment of a Hindu state is its clear manifestation."<sup>52</sup> He pointed to the dangerous core at the heart of the demand: "This business of the Hindu state is just the two nation theory exemplified."<sup>53</sup> Elsewhere he explained: "To demand a Hindu state is wrong. It is a negation of the principle for which we have fought."<sup>54</sup>

Thus, the acceptance of Pakistan by the Congress, howsoever unfortunate, did not amount to acceptance of the two-nation theory on which the demand for Pakistan was based.<sup>55</sup> The Congress had

<sup>49</sup> Speech at Delhi, 6 November 1947, *ibid.*, p. 320.

<sup>50</sup> Address to Congress workers and students in Delhi, 3 October 1947, *ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>51</sup> Public meeting in Delhi, 6 October 1947, and speech at Kanpur, 16 December 1947, *ibid.*, pp. 124 and 219 respectively.

<sup>52</sup> Public meeting at Delhi, 6 October 1947, *ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>54</sup> Speech at Delhi, 6 November 1947, *ibid.*, p. 320.

<sup>55</sup> Karyanand Sharma, the CPI Kisan leader from Bihar, recognized this distinction. At a speech at Narkatiaganj, Shikarpura, Champaran, in early November 1947, he spoke out against the demand for a Hindu state: "By raising the slogan of Hindu

but accepted defeat in the battle against communalism; it had not sacrificed the secular principles it had upheld. If the Congress had succumbed to the pressure to establish a Hindu state, that would have been the real victory of communal forces, an even bigger prize than the creation of Pakistan.

### The Other Face of Hindu Communalism— Self-reliance and Assertion

One strand within Hindu communal opinion had all along upheld that it was futile for the Hindus to look to the Congress for protection of their lives, property or political interests. This strand gathered strength, as it increasingly became clear that the attempt to give the Congress a Hindu communal orientation was not proving to be a success. The Congress governments had taken the stand that the well-being of the Muslim minority was a higher priority. Who, then, the Hindu communalists asked, would protect the Hindus? The answer was self-help. The Hindus must arm themselves for self-defence and for combating the terror unleashed by the Muslim National Guards, the volunteer army of the Muslim League. Hindu communal bodies such as the Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS would provide the leadership.

Three days after the League demonstrated its firepower in Calcutta, the Mahasabha Leader, B.S. Moonje, observed that to counter Jinnah “we will have to organise violence on a scientific basis”.<sup>56</sup> Meetings were held by the Hindu Mahasabha in Delhi in mid-October 1946 to find out practical ways and means by which the Hindus could prevent the Muslim League from winning the battle for Pakistan.<sup>57</sup> By February 1947, the volunteer army set up by the Hindu Maha-

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Raj the people will support the two nation theory of Mr. Jinnah which was still unaccepted by Gandhi and Nehru.” Government of Bihar, Political Department (Special), File no. 113(V) of 1947, Confidential, Bihar State Archives, Patna.

<sup>56</sup> Speech at All India Hindu Mahajati Sammelan, 19 August 1946, *AIHMP*, C-105/46.

<sup>57</sup> Dated 14-9-46, *ibid.*, M-14/1946.

sabha, the Hindu National Guards, had come to wield some influence. The Working Committee of the Hindu Mahasabha, which met from 8 to 10 February 1947, noted that new branches of the Hindu National Guards had been formed in U.P., Delhi and Maharashtra and rapid strides made in Bengal and Bihar, where the communal riots the previous year had left behind a legacy of communal bitterness which communal bodies could exploit to their advantage.<sup>58</sup>

The situation in the Punjab was grave after the Muslim League's civil disobedience campaign brought down Khizr Hayat Khan's coalition ministry. The Mahasabha leader, Gokul Chand Narang, pressed the Congress to step in even at this late stage and discharge its duty towards the Hindus. He wrote to Patel about the situation created by the Muslim National Guards and how it could be met:<sup>59</sup>

There is no reason why the Congress should not organise a similar band of civic guards for the maintenance of peace. If the Congress had acted upon the suggestions which I made to Mahatma Gandhi eight years ago and also to the then Premiers of the first Congress Governments the Congress would have had an army of two millions at its command even if without firearms.

Patel ignored the advice, denied the charge that Congress had not discharged its duty towards the Hindus and offered that members of the Interim Government were willing to resign if it "would be of help to the Hindu community".<sup>60</sup>

The announcement on 3 June 1947, that two states, India and Pakistan, would come into being when the colonial power withdrew, introduced a sense of urgency. The All-India Committee of the Hindu Mahasabha met on 7 and 8 June 1947 and warned the Hindus and Sikhs that they must promptly arm themselves and form militias if they wished to survive the hour of crisis.<sup>61</sup> This view found resonance across the political spectrum. Purshottamdas Tandon saw the decision

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* C-138/1947.

<sup>59</sup> 19 March 1947, *SPC*, Vol. 5, p. 283.

<sup>60</sup> 25 March 1947, *ibid.*, p. 285.

<sup>61</sup> *AJHMP*, C-162/1947.



of the Congress to accept partition as a betrayal and urged the youth to come forward and prevent it from becoming a reality.<sup>62</sup> Tandon pointed out that the country's leaders had not awakened to the danger posed by Pakistan and warned that if action was not taken in time, the scenes of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries would be repeated. He recalled the Puranas and Durga's rising from the collective genius of the Gods to slay the demon Mahishasur and prophesied that the time had come when good men would be born to fight demons. At a more practical level, he took the initiative in forming a volunteer body—the Hind Rakshak Dal.<sup>63</sup> Tandon described the Dal as a scheme for self-defence, but its declared objective was the overthrow of the Pakistan and Indian governments.

With independence and the creation of Pakistan, Hindu communalism came of age. Gone was the restraint of masking criticism of the Congress as friendly advice and demands as appeals. There was a new assertion in its stance. The Hindu Mahasabha declared 15 August 1947 a day of mourning and embarked on a campaign of vilification of Muslims and slander of national leaders. This won them many supporters, especially among the Hindus who had been uprooted from their homes or lost their kith and kin in communal riots and who were easily convinced that the Muslims and the Congress government, which protected them, were the cause of all their troubles and must be removed. The soil was exceedingly fertile for communal ideas to strike root and the Indian state seemed vulnerable, it was but a "new-born babe".<sup>64</sup>

Swarms of refugees had settled in Delhi, bringing with them tales of loot and killings and a communally volatile situation soon developed. Riots broke out in the city in September 1947, forcing Muslims to flee to temporary camps for refuge or undertake the long trek to Pakistan in pursuit of a permanent haven. This was precisely the

<sup>62</sup> Note written on 22 July 1947, *P.D. Tandon Papers*, Group XI, S. No. 907. A correspondent suggested to Tandon that "Hindu wealth", including jewellery and the coffers of temples be used to buy arms for Hindus, K.S. Pai to Tandon, *ibid.*, Part II, File 231, June 1947.

<sup>63</sup> FR for second half of July 1947, Home Poll 18/7/1947.

<sup>64</sup> Speech of Kanpur, 16 December 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 4, p. 219.

intention of those who had fomented the trouble. Even mosques were not spared from pillage. Some mosques in Delhi were converted into temples, with Arya Samaj or Hindu Mahasabha flags defiantly proclaiming their new faith.<sup>65</sup> Nehru was of the opinion that the government should take on the responsibility of rebuilding the mosques destroyed by rioters in Delhi.<sup>66</sup> The riots were not spontaneous upheavals, but the work of well-organized bands, Sikh and Hindu. While the Hindu gangs took care of the loot and destruction, Sikh “terrorists” (Nehru’s phrase), trained and harboured by the Maharaja of Patiala and other Sikh rulers, carried out the brutal killings.<sup>67</sup> The RSS was not only behind the trouble, many of its members actively participated in the riots.<sup>68</sup> In subsequent months, too, the RSS continued its activities on this front and by January 1948 a “mass of information” was available to the government about its “close association with riots and disorder”.<sup>69</sup> Riots were not the work of organized gangs alone, they were also the outcome of the pernicious propaganda carried on by communal organizations against Muslims and the government.<sup>70</sup> The press and the public platform were the two main forums. The press took the lead, particularly in slander of the Congress leaders. The *Hindu Outlook*, published from Delhi, often carried allegations of misuse of power by the Congress leaders. Nehru, who initially felt such petty, low-level criticism was best ignored, later advised action against the newspaper and it was banned in November 1947.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Nehru to Patel, 22 October 1947, *ibid.*, p. 174. In the princely state of Alwar, the Premier, N.B. Khare, a known Hindu communalist, offered the inducement that whosoever destroyed a mosque first would be granted the land it stood on, Nehru to Patel, 3 December 1947, *ibid.*, p. 533.

<sup>66</sup> Nehru to Patel, 22 October 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 4, p. 174.

<sup>67</sup> Nehru to Patel, 30 September 1947, *ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>68</sup> Nehru to S.P. Mookerjee, 28 January 1948, *ibid.*, Vol. 5, p. 31.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> The Bihar Chief Minister had warned Rajendra Prasad about this: “I have little doubt that if this kind of propaganda is allowed to go on, there would be serious communal trouble in the province, as communal relations are still far from normal.” 3 September 1947, *R.P. Papers*, 24-C/1946-7, Col. I, S. No. 155.

<sup>71</sup> Nehru to Patel, 27 October 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 4, p. 517.

Responsible leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha did not lag behind in adopting a defiant posture vis-à-vis the government. The organization refused to accept the national flag, an important symbol of the sovereignty of the Indian state, as the real flag of India and upheld that only the *bhagwa jhanda*, the saffron-coloured flag of their organization, was worthy of this position. The President of the All India Hindu Mahasabha, Bhopatkar, declared at a public meeting that even S.P. Mookerjee, who was a Minister in Nehru's Cabinet but abided by the Mahasabha's discipline, flew the *bhagwa jhanda* at his official residence in New Delhi.<sup>72</sup> Mookerjee explained to Nehru that the statement was only a half-truth, and though Mookerjee flew the *bhagwa jhanda* sometimes, it was always along with the national flag, which was hoisted permanently.<sup>73</sup> It was evident that the Mahasabha President's concern was not with the truth but with the creation of an impression in the people's minds that the Mahasabha could defy the government with impunity under its very nose and get away with it. If the government could be shown to be powerless, people would start looking to the Mahasabha. The battle being waged was a hegemonic one, for allegiance of the large mass of the people.

At other times, as in the case of Kashmir, Hindu communalism demonstrated that it had the capacity to subvert government policy and destroy the credibility it had assiduously built up. At a time when the government of India was trying to assure Kashmiri Muslims that their interests would be better protected in India than in Pakistan, the Hindu Mahasabha vociferously opposed the promised plebiscite and the appointment of the popular National Conference leader, Sheikh Abdullah, as head of the administration. To make matters worse, truckloads of RSS volunteers, numbering about 500, were dispatched from Punjab to Jammu, with the objective of carrying out propaganda against the Muslims. In addition, the actions of the Maharaja's government could hardly have reassured his Muslim subjects. For instance, a special Recruiting Officer, who was believed to be in touch with RSS elements, was sent to enlist Sikhs and Dogras

<sup>72</sup> Nehru complained to S.P. Mookerjee about this speech, 28 September 1947, *ibid.*, p. 506.

<sup>73</sup> S.P. Mookerjee to Nehru, 30 September 1947, *ibid.*, p. 507.

from Gurdaspur and Kangra. Such actions and propaganda acutely dismayed Nehru as they gave a handle to Pakistan, which it wielded dexterously against India, both at home and in forums abroad. He expressed his fear to Patel that if the anti-Muslim drive did not end, "the whole Kashmir position will crack up".<sup>74</sup>

The virulence of the speeches of Hindu Mahasabha leaders increased progressively over the months.<sup>75</sup> A prominent Hindu Mahasabha leader demanded publicly that Nehru, Patel and Azad should be hanged and "Gandhi *murdabad*" was a common slogan at their demonstrations and meetings. In November 1947 the CPI leader from Bihar, Karyanand Sharma, had warned that the demand for a Hindu Raj "was very bad and behind it there was a conspiracy to murder Gandhiji and Panditji".<sup>76</sup> The national leaders had all along been charged with betraying the interest of Hindu India. The issue of the payment of Rs 550 million to Pakistan provided the Hindu communalists with the final "proof" that the Government of India was incapable of standing up to Pakistan. Financial compensation for Pakistan's share of immovable assets in Indian territory constituted Rs 550 million but the Indian government withheld payment because India and Pakistan were involved in hostilities over Kashmir and paying the money at this stage would have amounted to financing Pakistan in its war against India. Pakistan, of course, promptly raised the cry that the Indian government was renegeing on its commitments and Gandhi decided to go on fast on 13 January 1948, to protest against the Indian government's stand. The government had little option but to pay the stipulated sum.<sup>77</sup> Hindu communalists could hardly have wished for a better opportunity to pillory the national leadership as anti-national.

<sup>74</sup> Nehru to Patel, 30 October 1947, *ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>75</sup> To Sanjeevi, 27 January 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 5, p. 29. He wrote to the Bihar Chief Minister the same day: "It seems to me that Hindu Sabha speeches are getting more and more intolerable and objectionable and something has to be done to meet this menace." *ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>76</sup> Speech at All India Hindu Mahajati Sammelan, 19 August 1946, *AIHMP*, C-105/46.

<sup>77</sup> See appendix to *MGCW*, Vol. 90, pp. 500-506 for the Government of India's stand before and after the fast.

Gandhi was made the target of attack. There were noisy demonstrations outside Birla House in New Delhi where chants of “Gandhi *murdabad*” were raised. On 20 January 1948 there was an abortive attempt to murder Gandhi. Some inquiries were made, intelligence officials went to Maharashtra to unravel the conspiracy, but failed to uncover anything. On 30 January 1948 the assassin made no mistake. Gandhi was shot dead at point-blank range.

This was the second grievous blow dealt by communalism to the newly emergent nation within a short span of six months. In August 1947 the country had been divided. Hindu communalism had taken heart from this success achieved by Muslim communalism and claimed the life of Gandhi. Four months after Gandhi’s murder, in a public speech, Nehru pointed out that communalism was the unifying link between partition and Gandhi’s assassination: “Communalism resulted not only in the division of the country, which inflicted a deep wound in the heart of the people which will take a long time to heal if it ever heals but also the assassination of the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi.”<sup>78</sup> Gandhi’s death was a tragedy for the entire nation, but was perhaps more unbearable for those of his colleagues who were in the government. They suffered from extreme remorse at not having taken preventive action: “Perhaps we have been too lenient in dealing with these various elements in the country. We have suffered for that.”<sup>79</sup>

Why had the government failed to take timely action? Inaction had not stemmed from a lack of awareness or a paralysis of will. It was the result of an unresolved dilemma. The highest authorities, including the Prime Minister, realised the gravity of the challenge and had no doubt that strong action was necessary but years of espousing the cause of civil liberties had made them wary of undertaking repressive action against those who opposed them politically.<sup>80</sup> It was a case of present imperatives conflicting with past traditions and a choice had to be made between the two. The government chose instead to reconcile the two and the result was a vast gap between its assessment of what had to be done and the actual action it undertook.

<sup>78</sup> Coimbatore, 3 June 1948, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 6, p. 25.

<sup>79</sup> Nehru to his Chief Ministers, 5 February 1948, *ibid.*, Vol. 5, p. 312.

<sup>80</sup> Nehru to S.P. Mookerjee, 28 January 1948, *ibid.*, p. 31.

Nowhere is this contrast starker than in the case of Nehru. His correspondence and speeches from September 1947 to January 1948 revealed that he entertained no illusions about the real nature, as well as the motives, of the RSS and Hindu Mahasabha. The RSS, in his view, was not only “an injurious and dangerous organisation” but “fascist in the strictly technical sense of the word”.<sup>81</sup> He was more explicit in the letter he wrote to the Chief Ministers on 7 December 1947, which was wholly devoted to the threat posed by these tendencies: “The RSS is an organisation which is in the nature of a private army and which is definitely proceeding on the strictest Nazi lines.”<sup>82</sup> S. Radhakrishnan came in for criticism at Nehru’s hands for publicly praising the discipline of the RSS workers: “I was sorry to read some time back that you had encouraged the R.S.S. This organisation is one of the most mischievous in India at present.”<sup>83</sup>

Nehru realized that Hindu communalists posed a threat not only to law and order or the security of the Muslims but to the very secular nature of the Indian state. Muslim communalism had earlier tried to get the Congress to compromise on its secularism but had only wrung from the Congress an acceptance of the partition of the country, not of the two-nation theory. After partition Hindu communalists took up the battle where their Muslim counterparts left off and tried to subvert the building of a secular, free India. To those, like Nehru, who could read the writing on the wall, the riots in Delhi in September 1947 were a revelation of the designs of Hindu communal forces. Nehru impressed upon Patel that the riots were not mere riots, they were part of a wider nettle, which had to be grasped:<sup>84</sup>

As far as I can make out, we have had to face a very definite and well-organised attempt of certain Sikh and Hindu fascist elements

<sup>81</sup> To Kanwar Dalip Singh, 21 November 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 4, p. 330.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 461.

<sup>83</sup> 22 January 1948, *ibid.*, Vol. 5, p. 23.

<sup>84</sup> 30 September 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 4, p. 114. Ismay, Mountbatten’s chief aide, noted in his report of his conversation with Nehru on 3 October 1947, that Nehru had analyzed the character of the present trouble as the handiwork of Hindu communal elements, *ibid.*, p. 244. “I cannot now help believing that there is a real conspiracy to support the present campaigns of violence in both the Punjab and Delhi Province.” Lockhart to Mountbatten, 22 September 1947, IOR R/3/1/87, NAI.

to overturn the Government, or at least to break up its present character. It has been something much more than a communal disturbance. Many of these people have been brutal and callous in the extreme. They have functioned as pure terrorists. They could only do so, of course, with success in a favourable atmosphere so far as public opinion was concerned. They had that atmosphere. These gangs have not been broken up yet although something has been done to them, and they are still capable of great mischief.

The same day, 30 September 1947, he spoke to Sir Terence Shone, British High Commissioner in India, about the public campaign he and his associates were carrying on to induce amity among the different communities. However, though this “was having a real effect”, it “would not influence the ‘core’ which must somehow be eradicated”.<sup>85</sup> He returned to the theme again and again and each time with stronger words. His fortnightly letter to Chief Ministers, written on 22 November 1947, warned: “The danger to us is not so much external as internal. Reactionary forces and communal organisations are trying to disrupt the structure of free India.”<sup>86</sup> A fortnight later, he stressed upon his Chief Ministers the urgency of action against the RSS, which was not only getting more assertive, but worse, attracting Congressmen too: “I have ventured therefore to draw your attention to this for we will ignore it at our peril. I have little doubt that if these tendencies are allowed to spread and increase in India, they would do enormous injury to India. No doubt India would survive. But she would be grievously wounded and would take a long time to recover.”<sup>87</sup>

By January 1948 he had evidently exhausted his capacity for restraint. He wrote to Patel: “In view of the attitude of the Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS it has become increasingly difficult to be

<sup>85</sup> *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 4, p. 240. Ismay reported to the Chiefs of Staff that Delhi was in chaos in September but the Government of India reacted with determination. COS (47) 125th meeting, 8 October 1947, L/WS/1/1137, File WS 17132/1, NAI accession no. 5153.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 456.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 461.

neutral towards them.”<sup>88</sup> Two days before Gandhi’s death, when Mahasabha leaders were openly calling for “death to Gandhi” and other national leaders and “continually inciting to violence”, Nehru complained to S.P. Mookerjee about the provocative speeches and actions of Hindu Mahasabha members, “I fear that the limit is being reached if it has not already been crossed”, but merely asked Mookerjee how he intended to deal with the situation, which was embarrassing for both of them.<sup>89</sup> The next day, in a speech he made at Attari on the Indo-Pakistan border, he lashed out at the group of communal Sikhs who had insulted the national flag in Amritsar on Independence Day, 26 January: “I challenge communal organisations to come out in the open if they dare test their strength to fight with the Congress Government.”<sup>90</sup>

Nehru’s brave words must have been reassuring to Muslims and may even have shown Congressmen the light when they were in danger of going astray. The tragedy was that they remained mere words and failed to become the basis for action that would have dealt a grievous blow to the forces whose danger Nehru so well understood and communicated to others. Riots were, of course, suppressed with a stern hand but Nehru did not initiate any action to stem the root of the evil, the spread of communal venom.

## Aftermath of Gandhi’s Murder

Gandhi’s death changed everything. Gone were the days of sending polite missives to S.P. Mookerjee, and suggesting that he clarify his position vis-à-vis the Mahasabha. Four days after Gandhi’s murder, Nehru firmly told Mookerjee that he must not only dissociate from the Mahasabha but raise his voice against that organization, as it was clearly associated in people’s minds with Gandhi’s assassination.<sup>91</sup> His 1 February 1948 letter to the Punjab Chief Minister shows that

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 5, p. 21.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>91</sup> 4 February 1948, *ibid.*, p. 46.



he was in no mood for magnanimity: "These people have the blood of Mahatma Gandhi on their hands and pious disclaimers and dissociation now have no meaning."<sup>92</sup> He publicly pointed to who "these people" were: "Recently a cry for Hindu Rashtra was raised by some organisations. It was one of the votaries of this demand for Hindu Rashtra who killed the greatest living Hindu."<sup>93</sup> Chief Ministers were instructed to see that there was no letting up of efforts till the communal monster had been vanquished.<sup>94</sup> He urged them to locate all areas where the communal forces had spread their tentacles, especially the bureaucracy: "We shall have to purge these and purify our administration and services".<sup>95</sup>

On 4 February 1948, 25,000 members and sympathisers of the Hindu Mahasabha, including its General Secretary, Ashutosh Lahiri, were rounded up all over the country. The Hindu Mahasabha called a meeting of its Working Committee and preferred to dissolve itself rather than be liquidated. The known bases of the organizations in the princely states were dismantled. Alwar and Bharatpur had gained notoriety as a happy hunting ground for Hindu communalists. The Maharaja and Prime Minister of Alwar were not allowed to enter the state's territory and Bharatpur was entrusted to an administrator.<sup>96</sup>

However, governmental action could not substitute for popular will and Nehru realized that communalism could be exterminated only if the people as a whole awoke to the danger and resolved to meet it. This was why, though he was acutely conscious of his personal responsibility for the tragedy, he constantly stressed the collective guilt of the nation. It was from there, and not from his own isolated remorse, that he hoped to distill the determination and unity needed for the coming battle: "We are all responsible for this unprecedented tragedy. Our heads hang in shame that we could not protect him and save his life, though we always cried Gandhiji ki jai."<sup>97</sup> Standing on

<sup>92</sup> 11 February 1948, *ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>93</sup> Speech at New Delhi, 2 February 1948, *ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>94</sup> 5 February 1948, *ibid.*, pp. 312 and 313.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 52 and 53, notes 2 and 3.

<sup>97</sup> Speech at Jullundur, 24 February 1948, *ibid.*, p. 63.

the bank of the river at the Triveni Sangam in Allahabad, after Gandhi's ashes had been immersed in the waters, he reminded his countrymen of their duty: "We have had our lesson at a terrible cost. Is there anyone amongst us now who will not pledge himself after Gandhi's death to fulfil his mission—a mission for which the greatest man of our country, the greatest man in the world has laid down his life?"<sup>98</sup> This mission was national unity: "We have to hold together and fight that terrible poison of communalism that has killed the greatest man of our age."<sup>99</sup>

The masses were horrified by Gandhi's assassination and shied away from supporting Hindu communal forces now that their designs had been exposed. By 1949 the government was confident that they could handle the RSS without the help of a ban and it was withdrawn, on the condition that the body would not engage in political activities. While government resolve had played no small part in rendering the communal forces impotent, what had hardened their resolve was Gandhi's assassination. In his death, as in his life, Gandhi had initiated new and positive tendencies.

## **Congress and Hindu Communal Pressures: An Overall Assessment**

If one were to draw up a balance sheet of the record of the Congress on the front of Hindu communalism, a very differential picture would emerge, depending on which level of the Congress one examined—the Congressman as an individual, the Congress as a party, the Congress in power in the provinces and the Congress as the ruling party of the Indian state. The distribution of weaknesses and strengths was very uneven and whereas the Indian state, the provincial governments and the party resolutely stood their ground, there were failings at the individual level. As we have seen, the Congress party had rejected an alliance with the Mahasabha and refused to abandon nationalist Muslims or compel unity by force; Congress provincial ministries had

<sup>98</sup> 12 February 1948, *ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>99</sup> Nehru to his Chief Ministers, 5 February 1948, *ibid.*, p. 312.

taken stern action against Hindu rioters, opposed the witchhunt of Muslim officials and refused to discriminate between their Hindu and Muslim subjects; and the Indian state, steered by the Prime Minister, Nehru, had thwarted all attempts to orient it in a Hindu direction.

The weakest links in the chain were, however, the many Congressmen who proved unable to stand up to the test imposed by the heightened communal tension and developed sympathy for the Hindu communal standpoint. Among the leaders, Nehru was most watchful of this tendency, as he clearly perceived its danger. As early as 14 July 1945, Nehru admitted to the Viceroy, Wavell, that "some of the Congress Hindus were anti-Muslim".<sup>100</sup> A year later, he proposed that the AICC office set up a minorities department, one of whose urgent tasks would be to "suggest ways of preventing the growth of communal and sectarian feeling among Congressmen".<sup>101</sup>

This tendency was aggravated after independence. Partition and the holocaust that attended it communalized politics further. Hindu communal forces not only grew in strength but began to make steady inroads into nationalist bastions. B.G. Kher, the Chief Minister of Bombay, commented on this trend to Patel on 26 May 1948: "Hindu-Muslim relations last year made the Hindu preaching more popular and many Congressmen also got affected by the communal virus."<sup>102</sup> The AICC session in November 1947 revealed sharp differences among Congressmen over the question of what attitude was to be adopted towards Hindu communal elements. The final resolutions adopted were a reiteration of the secular position of the Congress: "They make clear that we cannot compromise our ideals because communal organisations are shouting a great deal."<sup>103</sup> The debate had showed up ambiguity among Congressmen and this itself was disturbing to Nehru. He lamented to his Chief Ministers: "Even many Congressmen have given way to this mental turmoil and con-

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 14, p. 46.

<sup>101</sup> 6 August 1946, *ibid.*, Vol. 15, p. 488.

<sup>102</sup> *SPC*, Vol. 6, p. 78.

<sup>103</sup> Nehru to his Chief Ministers, 22 November 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 4, p. 453.

fusion.”<sup>104</sup> The ambiguity, said Nehru, arose from a shared affinity with the outlook of bodies such as the RSS and Hindu Mahasabha: “Unfortunately a number of Congressmen without thinking are attracted to this development of Fascist and Nazi modes of thought and practice.”<sup>105</sup> This undoubtedly made the task of suppressing the Hindu communal forces difficult, but also made it more urgent. The enemy was within, it was not a distant threat, and Nehru warned his Chief Ministers that if we ignore it, we do so “at our peril”.<sup>106</sup>

The issue of relief to victims of riots brought out differences among Congress leaders, with Purshottamdas Tandon ranged on one side, Nehru on the other and Patel somewhere between the two. Our discussion of the Bihar riots has shown that Patel had been somewhat insensitive to the plight of Muslims and impatient with suggestions, even when they came from Gandhi, that the Bihar government should intensify their relief efforts. Purshottamdas Tandon saw no reason why the Congress government should continue to protect Muslims and give them succour when League ministries were pursuing anti-Hindu policies and abetting riots. The U.P. and Bihar government particularly came in for criticism at his hands.<sup>107</sup> In contrast, Nehru questioned Bhim Sen Sachar, the Punjab Congress leader, as to why the relief fund in the Punjab was earmarked for the Hindus and Sikhs only: “This news has rather upset me and Gandhiji is also put out by it. . . . Our declared object must be to give relief wherever it is needed, regardless of com-munity, religion or creed”.<sup>108</sup>

Lack of sympathy for Muslim victims of riots did not take long to develop into distrust of Muslims in general and Muslim civil and military officials in particular. Ram Ratan Gupta, a well-known Con-

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> Nehru to Chief Ministers, 7 December 1947, *ibid.*, p. 461.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> Note, 22 July 1947, *P.D. Tandon Papers*, Group XI, S. No. 907. As we have seen, Tandon’s position was often difficult to distinguish from the extreme Hindu communal standpoint. He opposed the Congress acceptance of partition and called upon the manhood of the country to prevent this betrayal. One of the stated aims of the Hind Rakshak Dal he established was the overthrow of the Indian and Pakistani governments.

<sup>108</sup> 14 April 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, p. 304.

gressman from Kanpur, warned the members of the Constituent Assembly that Indian Muslims would be spies for Pakistan and Muslim native states its agents.<sup>109</sup> Many Hindus in U.P. and Bihar had raised the cry that Muslim officials were League agents and the Hindus had lost confidence in them. They demanded that those in sensitive posts be removed and the numbers of the rest be made commensurate with their strength in the population. The U.P. and Bihar Premiers had refused to concede any ground and the latter in particular had spoken out about his duty to his Muslim subjects in words that would have done Gandhi proud.<sup>110</sup> The trend became disquieting when Congressmen, and well-known leaders at that, came to share the general distrust of Muslims. P.C. Ghosh, the Congress leader from Bengal, wrote to the Congress President, Kripalani, to arrange for troops to stand by in Calcutta during the tense pre-partition days: "I want only Hindu soldiers. I cannot depend on the loyalty of the Muslim soldiers."<sup>111</sup> Rajendra Prasad, after a meeting with Hindu residents of Karol Bagh in Delhi, asked Patel to transfer Muslim officers from the area: "Hindus are naturally apprehensive that they may not get protection from them when the trouble starts."<sup>112</sup>

Patel scoffed at Hindu fears and reminded Prasad that "the attacks have been almost all one-sided and the aggressors have been Hindus or Sikhs".<sup>113</sup> However, his own assessment of the reliability of Muslim officials was similar to the prevalent Hindu one. When Govind Malaviya had suggested that now that Pakistan was to be a reality, Muslim officials should be told to "move on to their own area", Patel had countered that only those who were pro-Pakistan would be asked to leave, but had confessed his own reservations about their loyalty: "I have noticed in my experience during the last 10 months that the Muslim personnel of the services are thoroughly disloyal to Government, and it was impossible to run any administration efficiently or

<sup>109</sup> 7 June 1947, copy in *P.D. Tandon Papers*, Part II, No. 231, June 1947.

<sup>110</sup> See the section on provincial ministries earlier in this chapter.

<sup>111</sup> Enclosure to Kripalani to Rajendra Prasad, 13 July 1947, *R.P. Papers*, File 16-P/45-6-7, S. No. 83.

<sup>112</sup> 5 September 1947, *SPC*, Vol. 4, p. 338.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 339.

even tolerably fairly.”<sup>114</sup> He informed Rajendra Prasad that he was in favour of encouraging the exchange of Muslim officials with Hindu officials from Pakistan and that the government had already taken up the question of over-representation: “We have been able to restore the balance in the representation of various communities in the upper ranks of the police force. As regards the lower ranks, the position is difficult, but I am trying to have the Muslim element rendered as innocuous as possible.”<sup>115</sup>

One must concede that the problem was a ticklish one. For one, there was an element of truth in the Hindu propaganda that Muslims were over-represented. The British government had assiduously ensured this as part of their strategy of keeping Muslims away from the Congress. Should not this communal policy be reversed? The problem was that righting an old wrong could well create a new wrong in a situation where Indian Muslims were already under tremendous pressure. Second, once Muslim communalism achieved success in establishing a territorial base in Pakistan, the implications of communal bias among Hindu and Muslim officials were naturally different. Muslim officials who were communal could well be pro-Pakistan whereas communal Hindu officials could only be pro-Indian. At a pragmatic level, an Indian administrator would find himself having to distinguish between the two in specific situations. Moreover, in the highly communalised atmosphere of 1946–47, with the Muslim League having communalized virtually the entire Muslim middle class, did not the demand for shifting Muslim officials involved in law and order also have some basis? Yet the contrast between Patel’s instinctive sympathy for the Hindu officials and his basic distrust of the Muslim officials was extremely disturbing. He was visibly impatient when Nehru brought cases of communal bias of Hindu officials to his notice.<sup>116</sup>

<sup>114</sup> 7 July 1947, *ibid.*, p. 413.

<sup>115</sup> 5 September 1947, *ibid.*, p. 339.

<sup>116</sup> To Nehru, 12 October 1947, *ibid.* p. 303. The attitude and action of the District Commissioner of Delhi, M.S. Randhawa, came in for sharp criticism from Nehru. He complained to Patel that the Delhi police were slow to take action during the September troubles and that the special police officers appointed included men

However much we might like officials to behave like Gods, we have to take note of the fact that they are human beings and it is likely that in the case of a few officials here and there, their inward sympathies get the better of their discretion and they indulge in objectionable behaviour.... I am asked first to suspend them and then to collect evidence. It is obvious that such an action would, apart from being unfair and unjust, completely throw the administration out of gear.

Nehru was compelled to concede the point somewhat: "One can understand the natural feelings of officers coming from the Punjab and I am not prepared to blame them too much."<sup>117</sup> However, in a letter written three days later to the Chief Ministers, Nehru again pointed to lapses in the East Punjab, especially in the police. He stressed "the paramount importance of preserving the public services from the communal virus" and warned, "unless we are vigilant, the disease may spread".<sup>118</sup> Nehru's attitude to the communal problem was that of a restless campaigner who was unwilling to let go of any opportunity to press his cause. At every opportunity he himself entered the fray, rushing where trouble broke out and admonishing those who were behind it. Back in Wardha for the first time since Gandhi's death, he spoke of his own inclinations: "At times I feel like divesting myself of office and meeting this challenge in the open."<sup>119</sup>

Patel saw his task as ensuring the smooth running of the government and its machinery and came to resent Nehru's constant references to lapses of the administration as well as his peace initiatives. Nehru's actions were interpreted as criticism of his functioning as Home Minister and undue interference in his domain. Considerable tension ensued, Gandhi's mediation was sought and both men offered to

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who had RSS sympathies and might even have organized the riots. A conversation with Randhawa confirmed Nehru's reservations: "from his talk it would appear that his sympathies lay in a certain direction and this perhaps prevented strong action." Nehru to Patel, 30 September 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 4, pp. 112-13.

<sup>117</sup> To Patel 12 October 1947, *ibid.*, p. 509.

<sup>118</sup> 15 October 1947, *ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>119</sup> 13 March 1948, *ibid.*, Vol. 5, p. 75.

resign.<sup>120</sup> It was only the shock of Gandhi's death that brought them together. Nehru promptly wrote to Patel that now they must strive jointly to fulfil Gandhi's mission and Patel responded to Nehru's reaching out and pledged complete loyalty.

Though their personal differences were buried, their political judgements continued to tread different paths. The conclusions they drew from the same event, Gandhi's assassination, were totally opposite. Nehru's letter of 26 February 1948 was in the same vein as his letter of 30 September 1947 written after the Delhi riots: "More and more I have come to the conclusion that Bapu's murder was not an isolated business but a part of a much wider campaign organised chiefly by the R.S.S...there appears to be a certain lack of real effort in tracing the larger conspiracy."<sup>121</sup> Patel was as sceptical as ever: "I have come to the conclusion that the conspiracy of Bapu's assassination was not so wide as is generally assumed, but was restricted to a handful of men."<sup>122</sup> He expressed the same opinion to S.P. Mookerjee three months later: "I quite agree with you that the Hindu Mahasabha, as an organisation, was not concerned with the conspiracy that led to Gandhi's murder."<sup>123</sup> This was either sheer naivete or hairsplitting. The Hindu Mahasabha obviously did not officially hatch the plot, but could it escape responsibility when its prominent leaders had publicly called for the hanging of national leaders and, as Patel himself pointed out to S.P. Mookerjee,<sup>124</sup> the conspirators of Gandhi's murder visited the General Secretary, Ashutosh Lahiri's house?

<sup>120</sup> See *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 4, pp. 538–39, Vol. 5, pp. 473–75 for Nehru's version of the conflict; and *SPC*, Vol. 6, pp. 9–10, 12–13, 21–26.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 5, p. 67. It seems likely that Gandhi would have agreed with Jawaharlal. When an abortive attempt was made on his life on 20 January 1948 and a co-worker at Birla House suggested to Gandhi that the bomb blast may have been accidental, Gandhi retorted: "The fool! Don't you see, there is a terrible and widespread conspiracy behind it?" Pyarelal, *Mahatma Gandhi—The Last Phase*, Vol. II, Ahmedabad, 1958, p. 750.

<sup>122</sup> He made a point of correcting Nehru on his facts—the Mahasabha and not RSS men were involved and Delhi was not a centre of the Mahasabha, 27 February 1948, *SPC*, Vol. 5, p. 56.

<sup>123</sup> 6 May 1948, *ibid.*, Vol. 6, p. 66.

<sup>124</sup> 8 February 1948, *ibid.*, p. 37.



However, though Patel absolved the Mahasabha of responsibility for Gandhi's assassination, he was not in favour of a general amnesty. A week after Gandhi's death, S.P. Mookerjee asked for an inquiry into Lahiri's arrest and pressed for prominent Mahasabha leaders to be released for the forthcoming Working Committee meeting at which the party intended to give up communal politics, but Patel refused to oblige.<sup>125</sup> Three months later, Mookerjee complained that the continued detention of large numbers of Mahasabhaites was unjustified, as the Hindu Mahasabha had nothing to do with Gandhi's murder. Patel, as we have seen, conceded the last point but refused to hasten releases and criticized the Mahasabha for celebrating Gandhi's death and continuing to preach militant communalism.<sup>126</sup>

It is obvious that Patel's position was a complex one, which permitted of no easy characterization. There were times when he betrayed a communal bias in his outlook. But when it came to Hindu pressure on the Congress he was with the rest of the Congress leaders in refusing to compromise on the secular nature of the institution. He had ruled out an alliance with the Mahasabha and come out strongly against a Hindu state. He cannot be dubbed communal and yet his secularism lacked the rock-like quality that distinguished Gandhi and Nehru's actions. It could be said that Patel's secularism was tilted in a pro-Hindu direction.

But if Patel's secularism was pro-Hindu, this was counterbalanced by the pro-Muslim tilt of Nehru's secularism. The two men were both a foil and balance to each other. If Patel reflected the thinking of the average Congressmen who found it difficult to be secular in the heavily communalized atmosphere, Nehru lectured them about what was wrong with their thinking, and, by admonitions and personal example, tried to herd those who had gone astray back to the right path. Similarly, if there was a Purshottamdas Tandon in the Congress, there was also a Shri Krishna Sinha whose brave words about the duty of the Congress by the Muslims had the unmistakable

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36 and 37.

<sup>126</sup> 6 May 1948, *ibid.*, p. 66.

Nehruvian stamp.<sup>127</sup> This diversity of opinion within it was the source of the strength of the Congress and gave it the capacity to withstand the manifold pressures it had to face in those troubled times.

<sup>127</sup> Shri Krishna Sinha dismissed Hindu communal leaders and their demands: "I am afraid if this is the price I have to pay for satisfying Nawal Babu and other people like him I would rather let them remain aggrieved." The "price" was ignoring the "feelings and even the reasonable expectations of the Muslims". Nehru addressed his Chief Ministers: "Muslims have got to live in India.... Whatever the provocation from Pakistan and whatever the indignities and horrors inflicted on non-Muslims there, we have got to deal with this minority in a civilised manner." S.K. Sinha to Rajendra Prasad, *R.P. Papers*, 24-C/46-7, Col. I, S. No. 155 and Nehru to Chief Ministers, 15 October 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 4, p. 442.



## *Denouement*



## Congress Accepts Partition

The Congress will for unity gradually waned. Nehru had confidently asserted in early 1946 that Pakistan could not exist in the age of the atom bomb. A year later he appealed to his countrymen to accept the partition of the country in the best spirit possible. Patel had “laughed out” the prospect of the League’s direct action and visualized united India around the corner in mid-1946. In April 1947 he spoke of there being “no alternative but to divide”, of there being “no way out”. By early April, partition was deemed to be better than civil war or imposition of unity. Kripalani, Rajagopalachari, Prasad and Patel met Mountbatten and told him so.<sup>1</sup> By 1 May 1947, the Working Committee accepted partition, not as the League demand, but as the “principle of partition based on self-determination as applied to definitely ascertained areas”. The Congress seems to have reconciled itself to the partition of the country by mid- to end-April.<sup>2</sup>

The Congress denial of the legitimacy of the League’s claim weakened in the face of the League’s incessant demand for Pakistan, backed by mass action. The League used to good effect against the Congress the strategy that the Congress had applied to undermine colonial authority. The conviction that India must be free backed by mass

<sup>1</sup> *TP*, Vol. 10, pp. 308–9, 194–96, 179–80, 213–15 respectively.

<sup>2</sup> In Anita Inder Singh’s view, Congress had despaired of united India by February 1947, *Origins of Partition*, p. 226. Gopal clarifies that by March 1947, Congress had reconciled to the partition of Punjab and Bengal. Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography*, Vol. 1, p. 343. This was in the event that the country would be partitioned.

# SEPARATION, NOT LIQUIDATION !



" The June 3 Plan means the end of India as a nation." - Mr B.Bhopatkar, President, A.- I. Hindu Mahasabha.

Source: *The Hindustan Times*, 1 August 1947

pressure had broken the springs of the empire. Akin to the process of decline in the morale of the ICS officers was the one that took place in the morale of the Congress leadership.

The Congress used diverse arguments for accepting partition. First of all there were the arguments given by the leaders, that partition reflected popular will and it was the only “way to be free”. Then there were the hopes expressed by them, that it would not be a final settlement but a temporary measure and that it would end communal violence. They believed they were avoiding the worse alternatives of balkanization and civil war. They finally conceded that there was no other option—those explored had reached a dead end. This left the alternatives of anti-communal struggle by the party and use of force. It was too late for the former and the party did not have state power, so the two proved to be non-options. In the ultimate analysis, the basic flaw was their inability to comprehend the real nature of the communal forces they were up against.

## Partition as the “Popular” Will

The Congress leadership was at pains to stress that they had accepted partition because that was the people’s choice. Gandhi was most forthright:<sup>3</sup>

The demand has been granted because you asked for it. The Congress never asked for it.... But the Congress can feel the pulse of the people. It realised that the Khalsa as also the Hindu desires it.... They have taken this course because they realised that it was not possible to get around the Muslim League in any other way.... We do not wish to force anyone. We tried hard. We tried to reason with them but they refused to come into the Constituent Assembly.

Nehru similarly alluded to pressures from both quarters in his explanation of the “various reasons that had forced the Congress to accept the division of India”. The first pertained to Bengali and Punjabi

<sup>3</sup> Gandhi’s address to the prayer meeting, 11 June 47, *MGCW*, Vol. 88, pp. 73–75.



Hindu pressure to divide the two provinces.<sup>4</sup> The second referred to the unwillingness of Muslims to be part of India: "The Congress has to face the fact that certain sections of the people do not want to remain with the rest of India."<sup>5</sup> Since 1942, Nehru's stand, and that of the Congress,<sup>6</sup> had been that while they opposed the League's demand for Pakistan, "if the Muslims wish to have Pakistan, it will not deny it to them".<sup>7</sup>

Nehru repeated it more firmly in May 1947 when he interpreted it as Gandhi's view.<sup>8</sup> Gandhi held the opinion that any arrangement for the division of India or the provinces should not take place through British agency. If the people of the areas concerned desired a division, there would be nothing to stop them. In the Congress Working Committee (CWC) meeting of 1 June 1947, Patel and Nehru said that their stand flowed out of the resolutions passed by the AICC itself since 1942, viz., that no part of India could be coerced into accepting a constitution against its will.<sup>9</sup> Again, when the AICC finally accepted partition on 15 June 1947, it justified its decision by referring to the same clause in the CWC resolution on the Cripps plan, drafted by Nehru and accepted by Gandhi and the Congress.<sup>10</sup>

The Congress had always maintained that it would accept Pakistan if that were the popular demand of the Muslims. It said this with the confidence of years of moulding popular opinion in the anti-imperialist struggle wherein Congress anticipated popular will and was one step ahead of it, and hence led the people into movements

<sup>4</sup> See Chapter 10, section on partition of Punjab and Bengal.

<sup>5</sup> Nehru's speech at Liberty Week meeting, 9 August 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 3, p. 134.

<sup>6</sup> This contradiction existed even in Gandhi, who, on the one hand, challenged anyone to create Pakistan over his dead body and, on the other, conceded that no one can prevent partition if the Muslims wanted it. See Chapter 9 on Muslim League and the demand for Pakistan for details.

<sup>7</sup> 10 March 1946, *JNSW*, Vol. 15, p. 34.

<sup>8</sup> Interview to Norman Cliff, 25 May 1947, *ibid.*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, p. 180.

<sup>9</sup> *AICC Papers*, G-30, 1946-48, cited in Singh, *Origins of Partition*, p. 230. Singh wrongly refers to an AICC meeting on 1 and 2 June 1947.

<sup>10</sup> A.M. Zaidi, ed., *The Encyclopaedia of the Indian National Congress*, Vol. 6, New Delhi, 1981, pp. 110-14.

and out of them. On the communal front it not only reflected popular will, it was led by popular opinion. This was tantamount to surrendering all initiative to the people by letting them believe that their writ alone would run. In practice, there were qualifications to this stand. For one, popular opinion was very much influenced by the stands taken by the Congress; it was not only that the Congress reflected popular opinion. Sarat Bose had made this clarification earlier in the context of the controversy over the partition of Bengal. He had argued that the Congress should not take cover behind public opinion but take a firm stand against the partition of Bengal. That would strengthen the hands of all those who were for a united Bengal and erode the Hindu Mahasabha's newfound strength, which, in his view, was largely the making of the Congress.<sup>11</sup>

There was another qualification to the notion of the popular will. Since it was not quantifiable or easily demonstrable, it was open to diverse interpretation and conflicting uses. The controversy surrounding the partition of Bengal again revealed this problem, with Nehru and Patel arguing for partition and Sarat Bose opposing it and upholding unity, both sides on the ground that people wanted it.<sup>12</sup> Naturally, then, with both sides claiming popular support, it was unlikely that public opinion could be interpreted as an impartial tribunal. Nehru suggested this two-way process between popular opinion and the acceptance of partition in his broadcast over AIR on 3 June 1947. He accepted that the "future of India can only be decided by the people" but stressed that "decisions cannot await the normal course of events. So while we must necessarily abide by what the people finally

<sup>11</sup> "The Congress stand regarding partition has been taken advantage of by the sections mentioned above to inflame communal passions further.... As regards West Bengal, the agitation for partition has gained ground because the Congress came to the aid of the Hindu Mahasabha and also because communal passions have been roused among the Hindus on account of the happenings since August last". To Patel, 27 May 1947, *SPC*, Vol. 4, pp. 45-46.

<sup>12</sup> Sarat Bose told Patel that having been in close touch with public opinion both in West and East Bengal: "I can say that it is not a fact that Bengali Hindus unanimously demand partition." Contrast this with Shyama Prasad Mookerjee's dismissal of Sarat Bose: "He has no support whatsoever from the Hindus and he does not address one single public meeting." 27 and 11 May 1947, *ibid.*, pp. 45 and 40 respectively.

decide, we have to come to certain decisions ourselves, and to recommend them to the people for acceptance.”<sup>13</sup> This, of course, begged the question: was partition recommended by the people or dictated by popular opinion?

## Partition as a Final Settlement

One of the beliefs nurtured by the Congress leaders was that the 3 June Plan would effect a settlement. Its terms were unfortunate, i.e., division of the country, but its finality seemed to offset this. The letter sent by the Congress President to the Viceroy on 2 June 1947, drafted by Nehru, made it explicit that the Congress accepted the proposals “in order to achieve a final settlement”.<sup>14</sup> Nehru’s letter to Mountbatten, written 20 days later, emphasized this aspect of popular acceptance: “Whether people like the decisions or not they accept them and have a general feeling that a settlement has been arrived at.”<sup>15</sup> Patel echoed the sentiment: “I also feel happy that the announcement of 3 June at least settles things one way or the other. There is no further uncertainty”.<sup>16</sup> As Nehru pointed out, settlement involved the League: “This is dependent on the acceptance of the proposals by the Muslim League and a clear understanding that no further claims will be put forward.”<sup>17</sup>

It was soon clear that the League would, as usual, dodge acceptance. Jenkins, the Punjab Governor, had cautioned an already pessimistic Nehru that Liaqat Ali Khan had said that His Majesty’s Government (HMG) would have to enforce partition, the League would not accept

<sup>13</sup> 3 June 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 3, p. 99.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91. Jalal, as usual, completely inverts reality and argues that the Congress insisted that partition be final and absolute because it wanted to exercise full power. She blames the Congress for wanting a divorce, not a limited separation, Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman*, p. 280.

<sup>15</sup> 22 June 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 3, p. 181.

<sup>16</sup> Patel to B.M. Birla, 10 June 1947, *SPC*, Vol. 4, p. 56.

<sup>17</sup> Congress president to Viceroy, 2 June 1947, drafted by Nehru, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 3, p. 91.

it.<sup>18</sup> Jinnah's broadcast on All India Radio (AIR) "accepting" the proposal was in contrast to Nehru's eloquent appeal.<sup>19</sup> Jinnah made a fairly blatant communal speech, which brought forth the now ritualistic protest from Patel<sup>20</sup> and the equally ritualistic Viceregal response. The League's Council did accept the 3 June Plan, but Patel maintained that the League's "resolution is contradictory and there is studied evasion of straightforward acceptance...the Pakistan of the statement of June would merely be a springboard for action against Hindustan, and...there is no possibility of a settlement on this basis."<sup>21</sup>

What emerged was the League's half-hearted acquiescence. There was little of the cooperation and willingness to agree that the Congress expected of the League, now that its demand for Pakistan was met: "We agreed to accept the Plan in the hope that the Muslim League, having got what it wanted, will cease its hymn of communal hate and cooperate in the reconstruction of society and economic structure of the two states."<sup>22</sup> Gandhi expressed a similar hope but added a qualification: "I would ask you to rely upon the plighted word of Muslim leaders. They have got their Pakistan. They have no quarrel with anyone in India—at least they should have none."<sup>23</sup>

The Congress leaders drew their expectations from their experience with their opponents, the British regime, over the last few years. Once the British announced that they were quitting India, the Congress leaders changed their confrontationist posture vis-à-vis the Raj. Their main demand had been met and they were willing to forsake the minor ones in the belief that the severing of the colonial connection should be as painless as possible and future relations cordial. They went more than half way to meet the British point of view on controversial issues such as the future of the INA prisoners and the punishment of officials guilty of excesses in 1942. It seems the Congress expected the League to do the same—respond to the Congress

<sup>18</sup> Jenkins' record of interview with Nehru, 30 May 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 311.

<sup>19</sup> See *SPC*, Vol. 4, pp. 121–24, for both speeches.

<sup>20</sup> 3 June 1947, *ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>21</sup> Patel to Mountbatten, 10 June 1947, *ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>22</sup> Kripalani's speech at the AICC session, 14 June 1947, *AICC Papers*, G-71, 46/7.

<sup>23</sup> Speech at Gurdwara Panja Sahib, 5 August 1947, *MGCW*, Vol. 89, p. 5.

acceptance of partition with a gesture of cooperation that would make the separation easy and bloodless. But this was not to be.

Nehru had said in another context: "Mutual consent involves a settlement, imposition involves carrying on the dispute."<sup>24</sup> This doomed the 3 June plan to discord, for though the two parties agreed to the imposition, it remained an award imposed by the British, and not a settlement between the Congress and the League. Girija Shankar Bajpai summed up neatly: "The so-called settlement which is to be made public tonight will, I fear, leave many things unsettled."<sup>25</sup>

### Unity through Partition?

One of the reactions to partition was to see it as a temporary measure. Most people were unable to accept that Pakistan was forever. They continued to believe that a united India would be forged and that the two countries would be reunited. Congress leaders were no exception; they too "nursed the hope that one day Pakistan will come back to us".<sup>26</sup> Hope in an eventual united India reconciled them to the present reality of division.

The possibility of reunion after partition had seemed a pipe dream to Nehru in 1945. In 1947 he extended possibility into likelihood and argued that unity would not only follow partition, it would flow from it.<sup>27</sup> This would happen because no coercion was involved. Nehru propounded this view in his AIR broadcast on 3 June 1947

<sup>24</sup> Interview to Norman Cliff, *News Chronicle* correspondent, 25 May 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, p. 180.

<sup>25</sup> Girija Shankar Bajpai to Sapru, 3 June 1947, *Sapru Papers*, S-1, roll 1, B-39.

<sup>26</sup> Patel to Bozman, 11 July 1947, *SPC*, Vol. 4, p. 469. Rajendra Prasad expressed the same sentiment in a letter to S. Radhakrishnan, "We do not yet know what is going to happen but we are not without hope that after sometime reunion may become possible". 6 May 1947, *R.P Papers*, 19-P/47, Col. I, Part II, serial no. 1.

<sup>27</sup> There was obviously a meeting of the minds of Nehru and Patel: "In spite of my previous strong opposition to partition I agreed to it because I was convinced that in order to keep India united it must be divided now." Patel's speech at Liberty Week celebrations, 11 August 1947, Nandurkar, *In Tune with the Millions*, Vol. 1, p. 4.

appealing to people to accept the Plan: "The united India that we laboured for was not one of compulsion and coercion, but free and willing association of a free people. It may be that in this way we shall reach that united India sooner than otherwise and that she will have a stronger and more secure foundation."<sup>28</sup> Partition thus signified the present desire of some parts of the country to lead a separate existence. Once passions subsided, common interest would draw those parts and the rest of India together and united India would result.<sup>29</sup>

However, when Nehru found that the expression of the hope that India and Pakistan would be one was misinterpreted by Pakistan to imply India's designs on Pakistan, he gave up talking of united India<sup>30</sup> and spoke instead of united action of the two countries, though he flinched from using the words, India and Pakistan.<sup>31</sup>

On my part I feel that after the present passions have cooled down and a sense of freedom has come to all of us, we shall be able to consider our mutual relations in a better atmosphere and context. Then I think it will be inevitable for close relations to grow up between India and the parts that secede from India.

Others were to echo Nehru's hopes, including Rajendra Prasad and Subbarayan.<sup>32</sup> But it was not Subbarayan, but another of Sapru's

<sup>28</sup> *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 3, p. 99. Such an unconventional slogan, "unity through partition", surprisingly found a taker in Mudie, the pro-League Governor of Sind. He argued at the Governors' Conference on 15 April 1947, that once Pakistan was agreed to on paper both parties would be talking of unity. *TP*, Vol. 10, pp. 242-45.

<sup>29</sup> Nehru to Sultan Sjahrir, 17 June 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 3, p. 197.

<sup>30</sup> 5 January 1948, *ibid.*, 2nd Series, Vol. 5, p. 177.

<sup>31</sup> Nehru to Sultan Sjahrir, 17 June 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 157. Jinnah did not share these hopes for "closer relations". On 17 April 1947 he had told the Viceroy: "you must carry out a surgical operation; cut India and its Army firmly in half and give me the half that belongs to the Muslim League." Viceroy's personal report, *TP*, Vol. 10, pp. 298-301.

<sup>32</sup> Rajendra Prasad wrote to Sinha, "I am feeling [sic] that Pakistan will soon discover the utility of a union with India and will reconsider its position, and when that happens, we shall be happy, but whether that comes about or not, we have to go ahead with the present plan." 5 June 1947, *R.P. Papers*, 6-1/45-6-7, s.no. 51. Subbarayan wrote to Sapru: "However I am hoping that once the division has been

correspondents, Girija Shankar Bajpai, who proved prophetic: "Two Indias will in reality be foes not friends for a long time to come."<sup>33</sup>

Nehru's interpretation made the inevitable seem desirable. Gandhi strove to make the desirable real. He saw that the first step was to ensure that the partition decision remained reversible: "The Viceroy has already stated in his speech and he has also assured me that when we approach him united this decision would be revoked."<sup>34</sup> When Gandhi saw that few came forward to oppose partition vocally, he exhorted people to not accept partition in their hearts. That would be a way of opposing partition and it would limit the decision to being a mere geographical divide: "We may take it that the physical division of the country is now certain. Since the Congress has accepted the plan, we must now look for another way. That way I have been showing. Just as land or other property can be partitioned so also can men's hearts. If therefore our hearts are true we can behave as if they had not been partitioned."<sup>35</sup> His faith in the indivisible unity of the country found eloquent expression: "How long can a thing over which the two are not agreed last? Geographically we have been divided. But so long as hearts too not have been divided, we must not weep, for all will be well so long as our hearts remain whole. The country may well be divided today into Pakistan and Hindustan. In the end we have to become one."<sup>36</sup> If Gandhi was eloquent, Nehru was poetic:

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made and the constitutions get working it may be possible for the two parts at least to act in unison by means of agreements for purposes of defence and foreign relations." 27 June 1947, *Sapru Papers*, S-2, roll 5, S-613.

<sup>33</sup> Girija Shankar Bajpai to Sapru, 3 June 1947, *Sapru Papers*, S-1, B-39. The Governor of U.P., Wylie, concurred: "The moment India is partitioned all sorts of vested interests in the two separate states will arise and you cannot ever bring them together again." Quoted by Horace Alexander, OHT, No. 12, NMML.

<sup>34</sup> Gandhi's prayer meeting speech, 4 June 1947, *MGCW*, Vol. 88, p. 75. Mountbatten had in fact wanted ratification of partition after a year so that Indians could see what it "implied and involved" and if possible, evolve a different outlook. But Ismay ruled out an "escape clause" as wrong and avoiding finality. This was at the Viceroy's 18th staff meeting on 21 April 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, pp. 347-49.

<sup>35</sup> Gandhi to Munnalal Shah, 11 June 1947, *MGCW*, Vol. 88, p. 130.

<sup>36</sup> Prayer meeting speech, 12 June 1947, *ibid.*, pp. 138-39. Nehru, Patel and Kripalani, all three spoke in Gandhi's language. In Patel's words, "What nature and God had intended to be one can on no account be split in two for all times." *HT*,

“But of one thing I am convinced that ultimately there will be a strong and united India. We have often to go through the valley of the shadow before we reach the sunlit mountain tops.”<sup>37</sup>

Equally necessary in Gandhi's view was that the partition decision not be reinforced by other actions that would tend to cement it. That was why he opposed the partition of the army,<sup>38</sup> migrations across the border, and most of all, the India Independence Bill, because it “created” two “nations”, India and Pakistan, to whom Britain would transfer power. He wrote to Patel: “The news today is the limit. Look at the Reuter cable. The Bill provides for two nations. What then is the point of the big talks going on here...if there has been no tacit acceptance on our part you people can prevent this crime.”<sup>39</sup> Gandhi realized that the British actions one by one made the partition decision more difficult to reverse. Each step was another nail in the coffin of united India and there were many such steps. Arthur Moore assured Gandhi that Patel and others felt that the Pakistan area had to be taken back. Gandhi was forthright in his denial: “There you are greatly mistaken. Personally I feel Pakistan has come to stay. They realise it.”<sup>40</sup>

## Partition as an End to Violence?

Another hope vested in the 3 June Plan was that it would end communal violence and put a stop to murder and arson. The Congress leaders acutely felt their powerlessness in stemming the tide. They

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12 August 1947. Kripalani echoed him: “Sooner or later the basic unity will assert itself and those who are anxious to break away now will be equally anxious to return to the common lap”, *ibid.*, 20 June 1947.

<sup>37</sup> Nehru to Brigadier Cariappa, 29 April 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, p. 377. Also see Reception by Sikh Seva Dal, 28 November 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 4, pp. 189–90.

<sup>38</sup> “The partition was indeed an error... The partition of army, however, is a terrible a mistake we are making”. 15 July 1947, *MGCW*, Vol. 88, p. 341. Also see *ibid.*, p. 335.

<sup>39</sup> 23 June 1947, *ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>40</sup> Interview to Arthur Moore, 10 July 1947, *ibid.*, p. 311. Subbarayan conveyed Gandhi's pessimism to Sapru: “He felt, to use this own words, ‘that the Hindus



came around to the view that as only partition would satisfy League ambitions, it must be accepted in the interests of a final settlement. Once the political impasse was broken, communal tension would ease.<sup>41</sup> It was the same belief that violence would cease with the partition, which lay behind Nehru's statement that Hindus and Sikhs would be safe in Pakistan.<sup>42</sup> Patel explained why they would be safe: "It is possible the Pakistan Government may find the presence of Hindus and Sikhs indispensable...and now that the Muslims have secured a homeland for which they have agitated in season, and out of season, they may find that it is in their interest to ensure protection and justice to the minorities."<sup>43</sup> He explained that "we may also be able to afford some protection on the basis of reciprocity in regard to treatment of minorities".<sup>44</sup> Patel felt that Pakistan would take a sympathetic stance towards minorities for fear that the Indian government would be harsh on Muslims if they ill-treated the Hindus and Sikhs.<sup>45</sup> Nehru was optimistic that "the sobering and calming effect" of the

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were being wound up' (and he instanced Pandit Shukla's speech), and it is going to be hard for the two communities to be reconciled in the future", 27 June 1947, *Sapru Papers*, S-2, Roll 5, S-6 13.

<sup>41</sup> Nehru argued that partition is better than murder of innocent citizens while Rajendra Prasad explained to S. Sinha: "Considering all that was happening and viewing the future we felt that there was no escape from division unless we were determined to have a long period not only of uncertainty and instability but of strife, conflict and even bloodshed spread over large tracts of the country. We hope however that we shall be able to carry on the great constructive work of nation building in an atmosphere of peace, if not goodwill." 5 June 1947, *R.P. Papers*, 6-1/45-6-7, S. No. 51. Kripalani's speech to the AICC, on 14 June 1947, first referred to partition as the only way to get freedom from Britain; "Secondly, the plan seemed to open a way out of this tangle, chaos and frustration resulting from the deteriorating communal situation in the Punjab, Bengal, Bihar and the Frontier Province. The provincial governments were unable to cope with the riots." *AICC Papers*, G-71/46-7.

<sup>42</sup> Nehru to AICC delegates, 15 June 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 3, p. 112.

<sup>43</sup> Patel to Shiromani Committee Jain Biradiri, Rawalpindi, 22 June 1947, *SPC*, Vol. 5, p. 287.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Patel to Parmanand Trehan, 16 June 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 5, p. 289.

announcement of 3 June would continue.<sup>46</sup> Patel was somewhat more cautious: "Whether these disturbances will continue after partition is difficult to prophesy and still remains to be seen."<sup>47</sup> Sachidananda Sinha apprehended very serious troubles: "The chances are that before long we shall be thrown back into the conditions which prevailed in India in the early eighteenth century after the death of Aurangzeb in 1707."<sup>48</sup> In April 1947, the Punjab Governor, Jenkins, had warned the authorities that he anticipated worsening of the communal situation after the announcement of the partition.<sup>49</sup> The Viceroy told Jenkins in May that "no more troops were available for the Punjab as the British expected disorder in other parts of India following an official announcement in June".<sup>50</sup>

Sadly, events proved not Nehru, but Jenkins, Mountbatten and Sinha right. Partition was effected, but violence continued, in fact it intensified. By August 1947, "Punjab had become worse than all the hells we ever heard of", commented Rajagopalachari.<sup>51</sup> What happened was far from what the leaders expected. In fact, the situation was pointing the other way, towards the persecution of minorities in Punjab. Gandhi spoke out, "so that what I say may reach the ears of the Muslims": "the Muslims are on the rampage. They say that now that they have Pakistan, they will make slaves of everyone else.... If after Pakistan has come into being the conflict is further sharpened then it will only mean that we have been made fools of."<sup>52</sup> Migration was so extensive that transfers of population, though opposed earlier,

<sup>46</sup> Nehru to Mountbatten, 22 June 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 3, p. 181.

<sup>47</sup> Patel to Secretary, Shiromani Committee Jain Biradari, Rawalpindi, 22 June 1947, *SPC*, Vol. 5, p. 287.

<sup>48</sup> S. Sinha to Rajendra Prasad, 9 July 1947, *R.P. Papers*, 5-D/96-7.

<sup>49</sup> Jenkins warned Ismay on 14 April 1947 that the announcement of partition would be "followed by an immediate blow up. There was therefore a military problem of considerable magnitude." *TP*, Vol. 10, pp. 231-34. Jenkins wrote to Mountbatten on 4 August 1947, "Nor can all the King's horses and all the King's men prevent—though they may be able to punish—conflict between communities interlocked in villages over wide areas of the country." *ibid.*, Vol. 12, p. 516.

<sup>50</sup> Cited in Singh, *Origins of Partition*, p. 224.

<sup>51</sup> Rajaji to Rajendra Prasad, 30 August 1947, *R.P. Papers*, 23-C/46-7.

<sup>52</sup> Prayer meeting address, 14 June 1947, *MGCW*, Vol. 88, p. 152.

were subsequently arranged by the two governments. Nehru, who had declared that he was “opposed to the principle of population transfers”<sup>53</sup> and Patel, who had proudly said that he could “never be guilty of such a [sic] cowardly advice” as asking Hindus to migrate,<sup>54</sup> were at the helm of the government that effected these transfers. From Patel’s hope that “minorities may not have anything to fear” to Rajendra Prasad’s brutally truthful admission was a long way: “It seem [ed] West Punjab and the Frontier Province will have no Hindu or Sikh and similarly East Punjab will have no Muslim.”<sup>55</sup> Nehru explained his change of stand at a press conference on 12 October 1947. In Sheikhpura he came across

old friends and colleagues of mine. They came up and charged me with having deluded them. They were referring to a broadcast I had made ten days previously from All India Radio in which I had appealed to the people not to migrate but to stay on. They told me they had followed my advice and this was the consequence: their families were all dead and they were the sole representatives left. After that it became impossible for us to talk in terms of asking them to stay on in spite of those consequences and face greater dangers.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, though the Congress accepted partition as a last measure, when all else failed to stop the violence, this tactic was as incapable of containing violence as the earlier ones. The irony was cruel: “The partition of India was agreed to by the Congress leaders in the hope of averting [as Nehru himself declared in his radio talk on 3 June] a civil war between Hindus and Muslims, but a civil war did result, perhaps in

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Mountbatten, 10 June 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 3, p. 212. Gandhi asked the Sind Hindus to stay on rather than run away. Gandhi even said to Gidwani on 30 January 1948: “if there can be war for Kashmir, there can also be war for the rights of Sindhi Hindus in Pakistan”. K.R. Malkani, *The Sindh Story*, New Delhi, 1984, pp. 100–11, 126.

<sup>54</sup> Patel to R.K. Sidhwa, MLA, Sind, 23 May 1947, *SPC*, Vol. 5, p. 317.

<sup>55</sup> Rajendra Prasad to S. Sinha, 23 September 1947, *R.P. Papers*, 5-D/46-7.

<sup>56</sup> *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 3, p. 147.

acuter form.”<sup>57</sup> If they had anticipated that partition would unleash greater furies of violence, rather than stemming the existing tide, perhaps the Congress leaders may not have accepted partition.<sup>58</sup> According to Nanda, “somehow their dread of civil war was greater than Gandhi’s, who believed that after the British departure a few days of blood letting were likely to bring the parties back to sanity”.<sup>59</sup>

Gandhi was willing to risk anarchy, which Congress was not:

They thought it was better to partition the country so that both the parts could live happily and peacefully rather than let the whole

<sup>57</sup> S. Sinha’s comment must have seemed painfully true to Rajendra Prasad. 16 September 1947, *R.P. Papers*, 5-D/46-7. “But when we agreed to partition, we never bargained for all that has happened, we never bargained for the systematic and planned squeezing out of Hindus and Sikhs from Pakistan.” Patel’s speech at Hyderabad, 7 October 1950, Nandurkar, *In Tune with the Millions*, Vol. 2, p. 166. “Even though the Congress agreed to a division of the country in the hope, which had thus far proved vain, that thereby internal conflicts might cease, it has never accepted the theory that there are two or more nations in India,” AICC resolution, 15 November 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 4, p. 180. In Abdul Majid Khan’s view the Congress got scared after the March riots and made the “tactical blunder” of preponing the date of withdrawal from June 1948 to 15 August 1947. If they had not done so, “the riots would have come to an end after 2 or 3 months”. Of course, there would have been mass killing among the three communities, but the country could remain united, OHT, 348, NMML. H.K. Mahtab argued that it would have been better to have fought it out as happened in Nigeria: “Some party would have been defeated and then some compromise would have been arrived at, but unfortunately what happened in India was that partition was done by agreement. There was no fighting. Both sides agreed to part.” OHT, 306, NMML.

<sup>58</sup> “Our calculations were evidently wrong as events have proved. Yet oddly enough on the 15th August and after there was such tremendous popular rejoicing all over the country that we felt that we had done rightly. But the poison was there and it came out and spread with amazing rapidity.” Nehru to Sheikh Abdullah, 10 October 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 4, p. 269. S. Gopal adds: “as Nehru acknowledged, had the leaders of the Congress anticipated this, they might well have preferred to keep India united and distraught”, *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography*, Vol. 2, p. 14.

<sup>59</sup> Nanda, *Mahatma Gandhi: A Biography*, p. 489. Gandhi believed that communal violence under British aegis was pernicious—once the British left, the people and the country would go through the fire, nonetheless, but it would be purifying. For further elaboration, see *MGCW*, Vols 86, 87 and 88, pp. 83, 152 and 416 and 14 respectively.

country go to pieces. About this I did hold a different view. My view was that no one could take an inch of land by resorting to violence and murder. Let the whole country be reduced to ashes.<sup>60</sup>

He told the British repeatedly that they should leave India, to anarchy, if need be: "He (the Englishman) was self-deceived in that he believed that he could not leave India to possible anarchy if such was to be India's lot. He was quite content to leave India a cockpit between two organised armies."<sup>61</sup> In a question-and-answer session with D. Campbell, Reuter's correspondent in Delhi, he said: "It would be a good thing if the British were to go today. Thirteen months mean mischief to India. The British will have to take the risk of leaving India to chaos or anarchy. This is so because their rule has been imposed on the people. And when you remove that rule there might be no rule in the initial state."<sup>62</sup> Even Gandhi's willingness to risk anarchy rings truer in retrospect than the Congress leaders' obsession with peace.

## Partition and Strong Centre vs. Unity and Weak Centre

There was a silver lining to the cloud. The limitations of sections, grouping, and most of all a weak centre, imposed by the Cabinet Mission Plan, could be bypassed. Nehru had seen this to be an advantage earlier too, when commenting on the implications of the 20 February 1947 statement.<sup>63</sup> He had appreciated that the Constituent Assembly could be "much freer to do what it likes for the part of India it represents".<sup>64</sup> With time his conviction and his tone became more emphatic: "I want that those who stand as an obstacle in our way should go their way. I wish that at least 80 or 90 percent of India

<sup>60</sup> Talk with visitors from Punjab, 17 July 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 88, p. 356.

<sup>61</sup> *Harijan*, 20 July 1947.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 May 1947. "He [Mountbatten] could have allowed the carnage to go on, if it had to go on, and said that he would not bow before the sword". Prayer meeting address, 14 June 1947, *MGCW*, Vol. 88, p. 153.

<sup>63</sup> Nehru to Asaf Ali, 24 February 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, p. 51.

<sup>64</sup> Nehru to Krishna Menon, 23 February 1947, *ibid.*, p. 45.

should move forward according to the map of India which I have in my mind...if unity is not possible, we shall have to concentrate our efforts in some parts of the country where we can develop things in an ideal form.”<sup>65</sup> The “map of India”, added Radhakrishnan, should have two salient contours—a democratic socialist state and a strong centre.<sup>66</sup> Patel stressed the latter:<sup>67</sup>

We are now free to develop about 80 percent of our country in our own way. If we can consolidate our forces, have a strong Central Government and a strong army, we can, during the course of five years, make considerable progress. If we can only make substantial progress in the development schemes that are pending, it would give great hope to the country.

Besides, baggage could be off-loaded easier: “We must do away with weightage and communal electorates.”<sup>68</sup>

## Partition, not Balkanization

The 3 June Plan, envisaging transfer of power to two dominions, was preceded by the 10 May 1947 “bombshell” at Simla. Mountbatten claims that the draft proposals, which he showed Nehru on a

<sup>65</sup> Speech at Jallianwala Day meeting, 13 April 1947, *ibid.*, pp. 89–90. With a common centre, the League would constantly be threatening to leave the government. Viceroy’s 6th miscellaneous meeting, 22 April 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, pp. 363–64. Brecher is of the view that a larger India would have had disintegrating pulls, “India’s Decision”, p. 77.

<sup>66</sup> “If predominantly Muslim zones are getting out both in the N. and in the N.E., there is no reason why we should not have a strong socialist state”. S. Radhakrishnan to Rajendra Prasad, 29 April 1947, *R.P. Papers*, 1-B/47, S. No. 2.

<sup>67</sup> Patel to Neogy, 18 June 1947, *SPC*, Vol. 5, p. 72. Neogy had written, “Though every patriotic Indian must grieve over the partition of India, the scheme, as now announced, is the best that could be devised in the present circumstances. From one point of view Hindustan will have some chance of planning for future development, now that the obstructive elements in the Central Government will have to leave”. Neogy to Patel, 7 June 1947, *ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>68</sup> Patel to N.V. Gadgil, 23 June 1947, *SLMU*, Vol. 2, p. 230.

“hunch”,<sup>69</sup> produced a dismayed reaction from Nehru: “the picture of India that emerged frightened me...a picture of fragmentation and conflict and disorder, and, unhappily also, of a worsening of relations between India and Britain.”<sup>70</sup> Nehru feared the proposals would “invite balkanisation...provoke certain conflict and...create many ‘Ulsters’ in India”. The crucial problem, in Nehru’s view, was that “the proposals start with the rejection of an Indian Union as successor to power and invite the claims of large numbers of successor states who are permitted to unite if they wish in two or more states”. The previous process had begun with a request for unity and then given an option to secede—now separation would be followed by a request to join up again.<sup>71</sup>

Mountbatten quickly clarified in his draft to HMG that only two successor states were permissible. This was what Mountbatten had initially argued at the Governors’ Conference in mid-April 1947—that provinces be given a choice to join either the Indian or the Pakistan Constituent Assembly.<sup>72</sup> There would then be no possibility of

<sup>69</sup> Viceroy to Lord Ismay (via India Office), 11 May 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, p. 776.

<sup>70</sup> Nehru to Mountbatten, 11 May 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, pp. 131–33. He complained that Mieville had showed him a rough draft of one-and-a-half pages but the latter insisted he had been shown the full draft. Actually Mountbatten had modified them later, but Nehru believed that HMG had imparted “an ominous meaning” to the proposals. He dashed off a letter of protest immediately to Mountbatten and followed it up with a long discursive note on the proposals. Various interpretations have been offered of the “incident at Simla”, notably by Tinker, Morris Jones, Gopal and Moore. See Moore, *Escape from Empire*, pp. 272–80 for a summary.

<sup>71</sup> Viceroy’s meeting with his staff, attended by Nehru, 11 May 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, p. 142.

<sup>72</sup> Mountbatten’s insistence with HMG that the proposals be modified to meet Nehru’s objections has helped historians to erroneously argue that partition was being conceded in deference to Nehru’s wishes—that partition was the Congress demand. For instance, Jalal argues that Mountbatten gave in to Congress on this point because if he fell foul of Congress it would be impossible to continue to run the country. Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman*, p. 262. Actually it was no volte-face for Mountbatten, made under pressure from Nehru, but a return to a position he shared with Nehru and had been persuaded to abandon by HMG and the Ismay–Corfield lobby. Sumit Sarkar seems to have accepted the impression Mountbatten sought to give, in taking Mountbatten’s revision of HMG’s proposals (in response

their becoming independent and the balkanization of India coming about. Most Governors agreed, though they wished to give the provinces the option to contract out later. But Ismay stressed that HMG would not agree unless provinces were given a free choice and Corfield supported him, pointing out that free choice was being given to the states. Ismay's opinion seems to have been accepted and Nehru was dismayed by the wide freedom that the draft proposals vested with the provinces and states.

The earlier formulation was already aimed at placating the Princes, many of whom were demanding the right to stand apart from any union, India or Pakistan. It has been argued that the threat of balkanization was unreal in practice<sup>73</sup> and there could have been little difference between the draft proposals and the final 3 June Plan as far as the future of the Princes goes (provinces were another matter), for realpolitik would have ensured their integration with one union or another, administratively or otherwise. Was the danger of balkanization then apparent or real? It is likely that it was real, though one cannot prove a hypothetical theorem. Be as that may, there appeared to Nehru to be a vast difference in black and white between the 3 June Plan and the earlier proposals. The former was a vast improvement on the latter. That must have aided Nehru's acceptance of the final plan, for, after the possibility of balkanization, partition must have seemed its relatively harmless cousin.

## Repression a Non-option

Finally, two crucial lacunae in the Congress armoury lost it the battle. The first was the absence of state power and the capacity to use state

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to Nehru's objections) as "proof" of the pressure Congress could but chose not to wield over the British authorities, Sarkar, *Modern India*. In our view the real proof of Congress strength would lie in its ability to get reversed a decision whose revoking would go against British interests and against the inclinations of the Viceroy.

<sup>73</sup> In Jalal's view the "apparent" threat to balkanize India was bandied to induce Congress to offer to be in the Commonwealth. The Congress bait to Mountbatten was their offer of Commonwealth membership and Mountbatten's reciprocal gift



force that went along with it. The powerlessness of the Congress, despite its leaders being in a position of authority, was acute. Provincial autonomy constrained the Interim Government's power. As we have seen, the League's non-cooperation within and without the Interim Government amounted to inaction being forced on the Congress. The Interim Government's powers in the sphere of law and order were more or less limited to protesting to the Viceroy, backed by threats to resign or demands that the League resign, as the case may be.<sup>74</sup> The British, of course, were not powerless; they could "keep law and order if they wanted to".<sup>75</sup> Mountbatten was duly pressed to assert his powers to stop the bloodshed and end the trend of the

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was the transfer of power to the Union. Mountbatten duly modified Plan Balkan to suit Congress requirements, denying independence to the provinces, *The Sole Spokesman*, p. 249. In sharp contrast to Jalal is Moore's view of the likely alternative scenario (had the Simla agreement on dual dominionhood not come through): "a rash of unstable regimes", police actions, and foreign intervention perhaps (as in Afghanistan in 1979).

The Simla deal averted the fragmentation of British India, drawing the limits of unity by restricting the options of Muslim majority areas to membership of India or Pakistan...probably the main attraction of the deal to Congress was that it promised to banish the spectre of princely Ulsters. It is likely that the primary significance of the deal will come to be seen as its preparation for the integration of the 562 princely states within the two dominions and that the Mountbatten viceroyalty will be assessed mainly in terms of his contribution to that process.... Mountbatten, Nehru, Patel & V.P. Menon had found the solution to the problem of British India's fragmentation in the dual dominion deal.... A negotiated settlement consonant with political realities emerged, maximising unity without the deployment of force, *Endgames of Empire*, pp. 180 and 200.

In Bimal Prasad's view, the Mountbatten Plan should really be called the Mountbatten-Nehru Plan as "it nipped a serious mischief in the bud" by preventing many partitions: "This was no mean achievement." *Gandhi, Nehru and J.P.*, p. 120. B.R. Nanda is of the view that the independence of the Princes would have been worse than partition. "Nehru and the Partition of India", in Phillips and Wainwright ed., op. cit. See H. Brasted and C. Bridge, "15 August 1947: Labour's Parting Gift to India" in J. Masselos, ed., *India: Creating a Modern Nation*, New Delhi, 1990, for the argument that limited fragmentation was Labour's achievement.

<sup>74</sup> See Chapter 9.

<sup>75</sup> Viceroy's interview with Kripalani, 17 April 47, *TP*, Vol. 10, pp. 308-9.

weakening of the centre that Wavell had introduced.<sup>76</sup> Nehru asked the Governor of Punjab to use troops as they inspired more confidence than the police.<sup>77</sup>

Gandhi's outlook was different. He pointed out that looking to the British was wrong, a sign of weakness, and asking for military help doubly so.<sup>78</sup> This had been his view in mid-1946, when he had warned that senseless violence, by warranting the use of bayonets, would prolong British rule.<sup>79</sup> Bloodshed and the rash of riots did not shake Gandhi's conviction that the British should leave India forthwith, they only strengthened it.

If state force alone could ultimately subdue fascist communalism, why did the British not use it? Why did communal fires blaze and British officers stand idly by? Nehru's view was that British officials were incapable of and disinterested in containing the communal virus.<sup>80</sup> The main reason for their indifference and even callousness was that they no longer had any stake in India. Their future was not

<sup>76</sup> Viceroy's interview with Patel, 12 April 1947, *ibid.*, pp. 213–15.

<sup>77</sup> Nehru to Jenkins, Interview, 30 May 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, p. 309. Jenkins ruled it out. He saw the problem as lack of information and wrong tactics. So Nehru appealed to Mountbatten, adding a personal appeal to save Lahore: "My mother came from Lahore and part of my childhood was spent there." He wanted Mountbatten to declare martial law and give orders to the troops to be ruthless in suppressing trouble. Mountbatten simply agreed that "something must be done". Nehru to Mountbatten, 22 June 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 3 p. 139.

<sup>78</sup> Gandhi's statement to the director of an influential British daily, New Delhi, *Harijan*, 10 November 1946. Also see his reply to Shankarrao Deo, *Harijan*, 15 September 1946.

<sup>79</sup> "What senseless violence does is to prolong the lease of life of British or foreign rule. I believe that the authors of the State paper issued by the Cabinet Mission desire peaceful transfer of power to representative Indian hands. But if we need the use of the British gun and bayonet, the British will not go or, if they do, some other foreign power will take their place." *Harijan*, 25 August 1946.

<sup>80</sup> Nehru to Agatha Harrison, 22 May 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, p. 337. The Hazara riots brought forth Patel strongly: "The British civilians would do nothing to quench the burning fires. Indeed they have allowed it to spread on and some of them have even added fuel to it." Patel to Gandhi, 17 January 1947, *SLMU*, Vol. 1, p. 196. See Viceroy's interview with Kripalani, 17 April 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, pp. 308–9.

linked with India any more.<sup>81</sup> Nehru saw this clearly. "They feel that they have to go anyhow pretty soon, so why should they bother?"<sup>82</sup> If their future made them callous, their past made them vengeful. Having been pushed into the corner by the Congress movements, as recently as 1942, they were not unhappy to see Congressmen in a tight spot.<sup>83</sup> Patel pointed out that the Gurgaon D.C., who had been against Quit India, gloated over events.<sup>84</sup> Nehru added that "there is often also a secret satisfaction that India is going to pieces".<sup>85</sup>

The Congress leaders were not totally fair to the British officials and to reality. Some officials who shared the dream of Indian unity excelled themselves in suppressing communal trouble as it threatened to nullify what they saw as their long and arduous mission in India. The senior officials indignantly denied Nehru's charge that there was most trouble where there were British officials in charge.<sup>86</sup> One could

<sup>81</sup> According to Jayaprakash Narayan, Indians were told by British officials to go to their future rulers. 21 March 1947 statement cited in Singh, *Origins of Partition*, p. 219. Mountbatten reported to his Governors that a member of the Interim Government had told him that a British official, when informed on the phone, that houses in an outlying district were on fire, replied, "We are leaving any how—what do we care?" Governors' conference, 15 April 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, pp. 242–45.

<sup>82</sup> See fn. 80. A British official said to a journalist, "Quite apart from the Civil Service, the British soldier...is not yet ready to swelter for ever in India to stop Indians from killing each other." *The Sunday Times* report by Joselyn Hennessy, c. May 1947, File 1, No. 16, *Bell Papers*.

<sup>83</sup> The Sind Governor, Mudie, made the counter accusation that Congressmen were angry with him and accused him of being partisan to the League, because he was Chief Secretary, U.P., during the 1942 movement, and had rounded up Congress leaders. Nehru's interview with Mudie, 15 April 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, pp. 259–80.

<sup>84</sup> Patel as Home Member could not get the D.M. of Gurgaon transferred, see Nandurkar, *In Tune with the Millions*, Vol. 2, p. 124.

<sup>85</sup> Nehru to Agatha Harrison, 22 May 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, p. 337. Also see Sudhir Ghosh to Patel, 26 August 1947, *Sudhir Ghosh Papers*, NMML, New Delhi.

<sup>86</sup> Nehru's speech at AICC, 15 June 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 3, p. 110. Moon is reported to have walked up to an armed sepoy who was looting and given him a hard kick up the bottom. IOR Mss Eur C 601. Jenkins disagreed with the allegation that officials did not do their duty: "The senior officials employed in Rawalpindi and Attock are all British, and I am satisfied that the official outlook is quite impartial." Jenkins to Amrit Kaur, 24 April 1947. *Rajkumari Amrit Kaur Papers*,

concur with Anita Inder Singh's view that British officials were no worse than others were, they were a mixed lot.<sup>87</sup>

There was another dimension, that of the gradual collapse of the structure of the civilian regime, which the Congress leaders were unwilling to concede.<sup>88</sup> That, along with wilfulness, made the British officials incapable of wielding authority.<sup>89</sup> Nehru commented to Agatha Harrison: "The British civil servants neither want to deal with the present situation effectively nor are they capable of it."<sup>90</sup>

Two processes linked up here, not unseen by Nehru. The decline of authority, which made continuance of British rule impossible, also made the communal violence difficult to suppress. The consensual answer to the first dilemma was independence, to the second, partition. Mountbatten's answer was a "quick decision"; failure to make which "would be tantamount to failure to take the responsibility of civil war off the Viceroy's shoulders. The only alternative he could recommend, it should be made clear, was immediate evacuation".<sup>91</sup> Gandhi's answer was that the British should leave India, to anarchy if need be, but they should leave immediately. The Congress took ingredients from both Mountbatten and Gandhi in equal measure

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File No. 3, NMML, New Delhi. Gandhi put the onus on the services: "They have to see to it that the suspicion that they are behind the riots is not true." Prayer Meeting, 10 April 1947, *MGCW*, Vol. 87, p. 252.

<sup>87</sup> Singh, *Origins of Partition*, p. 219.

<sup>88</sup> Kripalani was not willing to concede Mountbatten's argument that British Governors could not overrule their Ministers in the changed conditions. He held to the view that the prestige of the British Governor was still so high that any man worth his salt could make his government keep law and order, Mountbatten's interview with Kripalani, 17 April 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, p. 309. The Governor of NWFP was also of the view that the "situation... is being held by what remains of the prestige of the Government of the days that are gone". Caroe to the Viceroy, 23 November 1946, *Caroe Collection*, Mss Eur F 203/1&2, NAI, New Delhi, accession no. 4780.

<sup>89</sup> See Jenkins to Viceroy, 25 June 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, p. 676. Also see Jenkins to the Viceroy, 11 June 1947, D.O. 680, Jenkins-Mamdor Correspondence, IOR R/3/1/77, NAI accession no. 4121.

<sup>90</sup> 22 May 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, p. 337.

<sup>91</sup> Mountbatten was blatantly manipulative as usual. He sent Ismay to London with a draft statement backed by the above threat. Viceroy's staff meeting, 14 April 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, p. 223.

to concoct their answer—the British should leave immediately but to agreement, not anarchy.<sup>92</sup> The mixture was explosive.

The likely sources of civil war had been identified as “unity by force” and “dangers of drift”. They were blocked by the two stratagems of accepting partition and effecting of early transfer of power. Lack of agreement was the danger, agreement the solution. The tragic paradox was that civil war came on despite agreement on partition—rather, the agreement set off another round of civil war. This was not anticipated. Sadly, accords often have a way of paving the way for discord.

If British officials had “ceased to care”, some Indian officials cared only for their community. As the communal conflict in national politics grew, it seeped into the bureaucracy, the police and the army.<sup>93</sup> Often communal sentiment remained at the stage of sympathy and bias existed, but was not blatantly expressed. At certain times it took the form of complicity, active or passive, in riots. This was alleged in Bihar but appears fairly unfounded, the events suggesting inaction rather than communal action. In later months, as riots spread, and more importantly, migrations began, the sympathies of officials were often blatant. Nehru tended to be more critical of biased Hindu officers; Patel was sympathetic to them but firmly distrustful of Muslim officials. Nehru found that Randhawa, the Delhi Chief Commissioner, otherwise a good officer, had a bias of a certain kind. He was not harsh enough on the RSS, Nehru felt, but Patel absolved him completely. Patel may have been unanswerable when he argued that

<sup>92</sup> “I am sure than ever of the rightness of what Bapu said last year that the first thing to be done is an immediate transfer of power to some Indian authority.” Nehru to Agatha Harrison, 22 May 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, p. 337. (Gandhi had actually said hand over to anarchy if need be—Author’s Note)

<sup>93</sup> “The feelings between the communities are much the same as though a civil war was going on. An official, if he tries to be impartial is merely suspected on both sides, so he tends to take shelter with one side or the other, according to his community”. Note by Abell, 26 March 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, pp. 26–27. In the Commander-in-Chief’s opinion, the overall situation had deteriorated rapidly over the last three months. Interview with Mountbatten, 14 April 1947, *ibid.*, pp.223–26. For communalism in the army, see *ibid.*, pp. 60 and 1033. Also see Hunt and Harrison, *District Officer in India*, p. 243.

officials were after all human beings and liable to have sympathies like other people. Nehru merely said he understood their feelings.<sup>94</sup>

But understanding did not suggest a solution. How did one meet communal violence with a partially communalized police and even army? Or rebuild a hate-free atmosphere with the aid of a communalized administration? It seemed as impossible a task in some way as launching a mass movement to achieve unity with communalized cadres and people.

### **Another Non-option: Anti-communal Struggle by the Congress Party**

An important constraint on the Congress leaders' range of choices was the state of the party. For one, many Congressmen were communally inclined, while others had become communalized in the context of the riots. The riots had brought forth the latent communal biases of Congressmen, Hindus and Muslims, activists and ministers.<sup>95</sup> There were in any case few nationalist Muslims, many of whom went over to the League after the elections. The earlier problem of who would reach out to the Muslim masses continued.

How did the communalized cadres pose a limitation? In the sense that they could hardly be the propagators of staunch secularism when their own was tainted. They were, to be fair, not communal either, if that means being active purveyors of communal ideology. They mirrored the frailties and strengths of the rest of the society. It was unlikely that they would respond to a "Do or Die" call to prevent others from being killed even at the price of their lives. Gandhi knew that, and was wise enough not to give a call, which would go unanswered.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>94</sup> For details and references see Chapter 11.

<sup>95</sup> See Chapter 10, section on Bihar riots, for this and similar instances and discussion of communalism within the Congress.

<sup>96</sup> Gandhi's reasons for his inability to launch a mass movement included not only the problem of communalized partymen but also that of a communalized people. We discuss the latter aspect at length in Chapter 13, section on why Gandhi says no to a mass movement.

Communalism was not the only malady plaguing the party. It was disorganized and undisciplined. After the battering of the war years, the task of welding it, planned in 1945, had been interrupted by other pressing concerns—fighting elections, forming ministries, running the Interim Government, and not least of all, participating in the negotiations and the Constituent Assembly.<sup>97</sup> Party reorganization took a back seat, despite awareness among the leaders, including Nehru, that it needed to be done.<sup>98</sup> Gandhi was upset by Congressmen scrambling for seats in the provincial legislatures and the Constituent Assembly, as, in his view, these forums were only one possible arena of political work and not the most important one.<sup>99</sup> Nehru assumed the presidency of the Congress with the objective of reviving the party, but gave up the office to head the Interim Government. In subsequent months he spoke often of losing touch with the party, and even the people, because of the cares of office, but did little to correct the situation.

## No Options Left

Hopes, beliefs, rationalization, justification apart, the truth of the matter was that the Congress accepted partition because there was little else it could do. “But the Congress has to agree to it because

<sup>97</sup> Since mid-1945, the Congress leaders had realized the necessity of revitalizing the party but “involvement in the negotiations took its toll of organisational work and in August 1946, Nehru reiterated that the Congress had lost its vitality. Nehru hoped that the Interim Government would open an opportunity to carry out Congress programmes, but this was not to be” Singh, *Origins of Partition*, pp. 230–31.

<sup>98</sup> Nehru’s notes for AICC, 6 August 1946, *AICC Papers*, 69 (part 2), 1946. Also see files G-39 (KW-1) 1946, p-1, part 3, 1946-8, G-6 (KW-1) 1947, 27/1947 and 6/1947, *AICC Papers*, NMML.

<sup>99</sup> D.G. Tendulkar, *The Mahatma*, Vol. 7, Delhi, 1960–63, p. 186. If Prasad’s correspondent from Calcutta is to be believed, what was worse was that some of the scramblers were bribable. He feared that Bengal MLAs could be bought over by the League to support independent Bengal. See *R.P. Papers*, 6-1/45-6-7. See Chapter 10, section on partition of Bengal for details and references.

there is no other alternative."<sup>100</sup> This was Nehru's public admission to AICC members after two months of denying partition, calling it secession, believing it would pave the way for reunion, laying responsibility at the door of the people, etc. Patel had made a private confession earlier: "Frankly speaking, we all hate it, but at the same time see no way out of it."<sup>101</sup> Amrit Kaur explained the Congress stand to Sudhir Ghosh in London. "The Congress had seemingly no option left."<sup>102</sup> In a conversation with Mountbatten in mid-April 1947, Rajendra Prasad had indicated that the Congress leadership would accept partition if there was no other alternative.<sup>103</sup>

There was no option before the Congress in the sense that the ones it had explored had reached a dead end, and the reasons that ruled out the other options earlier still held good. Nehru had posed these two options as negotiations or a fight<sup>104</sup> and pointed out that discussion was the way they had chosen, not coercion. The limits of discussion were soon reached—Jinnah's favourite expression being "No" and his favourite action stalling. A fight could be of two kinds; a fight against the British, whose fallout would be unity or a fight against the League and Muslims. Both varieties of struggle were pondered upon, but rejected as options for different reasons.<sup>105</sup>

The two options the Congress did not debate, but which were the only ones that could, as a two-pronged strategy, contain communalism, were the use of state force and ideological struggle against communalism. In 1947 both were foreclosed.

<sup>100</sup> Nehru's speech to AICC, 9 August 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 3, p. 134.

<sup>101</sup> Patel to Bozman, 11 July 1947, *SPC*, Vol. 4, p. 469.

<sup>102</sup> Amrit Kaur to Sudhir Ghosh, 9 July 1947, *Sudhir Ghosh Papers*, p. 1.

<sup>103</sup> Kripalani said the same. See interviews with Prasad and Kripalani, 10 and 17 April 47, *TP*, Vol. 10, pp. 179–80 and 308–9 respectively.

<sup>104</sup> "I would like to draw your attention to the Muslim League's demand for Pakistan. There are only two ways to resolve this—either through mutual discussions and negotiations or through a fight!" Jallianwala Bagh Day meeting, 13 April 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 2, pp. 88–89.

<sup>105</sup> See Chapter 13, section on Gandhi and mass movement and Chapter 11.



## Why Gandhi Accepted the Decision to Partition India

Among the various reasons at work behind the decision of the Congress to accept the partition of India, there was only one that Gandhi recognized as the operative one. At his prayer meeting of 4 June 1947, he explained that the Congress accepted partition because the people wanted it: "The demand has been granted because you asked for it. The Congress never asked for it...but the Congress can feel the pulse of the people. It realised that the Khalsa as also the Hindus desired it."<sup>1</sup> After all, "as representatives of the country they cannot go against public opinion. They derive their power from the people."<sup>2</sup> His rejoinder to N.K. Bose's suggestion that he was protecting Congress leaders by supporting the Working Committee on partition is particularly illuminating: "Don't you realise that, as a result of one year of communal riots, the people of India have all become communal. They can see nothing beyond the communal question. They are tired and frightened. The Congress has only represented this feeling of the whole nation. How can I then oppose it?"<sup>3</sup>

He himself raised the question which many were asking, and not so silently—Why do I not oppose partition as I had said I would? His reply to his critics echoed his reply to the critics of the Congress:

<sup>1</sup> *MGCW*, Vol. 88, p. 75.

<sup>2</sup> Prayer meeting, 9 June 1947, *ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>3</sup> N.K. Bose, "My Experiences as a Gandhian-II", in M.P. Sinha, *Contemporary Relevance of Gandhism*, Bombay, 1970, p. 52.

# OUT OF THE WILDERNESS



Source: *The Hindustan Times*, Independence Number, 15 August 1947

“When I said that the country should not be divided I was confident that I had the support of the masses. But when the popular view is contrary to mine, should I force my own view on the people?” He was willing to take up the challenge: “And today I can say with confidence that if all the non-Muslims were with me, I would not let India be divided. But I must admit that today the general opinion is not with me and so I must step aside and stay back.”<sup>4</sup>

His despair, “if all the non-Muslims were with me”, was the same as the constraint on the Congress—the Hindus’ and Sikhs’ desire for partition. It was not that Gandhi (or the Congress) was responsive only or more to the Hindus. If he pointed particularly to the non-Muslims’ desertion as the root of his helplessness,<sup>5</sup> it was because he had by now accepted that the Muslims had drifted away from him, which had initially caused him great anguish in Noakhali.<sup>6</sup> Gandhi still continued to believe that the Hindus might come around: “I say nothing of the Muslims. They think I am their enemy but the Hindus and Sikhs do not consider me their enemy... If I can thus make myself heard by even the Hindus alone, you will see that India holds her head high in the world.”<sup>7</sup> But not only were many Hindus not with him in opposing communalism or even partition, they would not even heed his call to end the orgy of violence. Gandhi could only despair, “if only I could convince the Hindus of this...”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Prayer meeting, 9 June 1947, *MGCW*, Vol. 88, p. 118.

<sup>5</sup> Nanda’s assessment is correct that Gandhi’s main handicap in opposing the communal forces was that his voice did not carry weight with the Muslims, especially the intelligentsia. But specifically in mid-1947 his handicap was also that his voice did not reach the ears of the Hindus either. B.R. Nanda, *Gandhi and his Critics*, New Delhi, 1985, p. 113.

<sup>6</sup> Gandhi had explained earlier that as the Muslims did not consider him their friend, he could not fast in protest against the Bengal riots, as he could against the action of the Bihar Hindus. See *MGCW*, Vol. 86, pp. 127 and 274.

<sup>7</sup> Prayer meeting, 16 June 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 88, p. 163.

<sup>8</sup> Prayer meeting, 5 June 1947, *ibid.*, p. 77. A group of visitors from Punjab told Gandhi that the country was behind him. Gandhi countered, “that is what you think? I tell you that I can show you the miracle today if Hindus maintain peace and show courage. But with what force can I tell the League not to indulge in atrocities.” 17 July 1947, *ibid.*, p. 356.

Gandhi's attitude baffled most people. Here was a mass leader who would not "force his own view on the people" and a "dictator" of the Congress who was unwilling to use his position to impose his will on the party.<sup>9</sup> Referring to the Congress Working Committee's acceptance of the partition plan, Gandhi put into words the question that was in the minds of people: "One may ask why I allowed such a thing to happen. But should I then insist that the Congress should do everything only after consulting me? I am not so mad."<sup>10</sup>

Public opinion, both within and outside the party, may not have been with him, but what about the motley crowd (socialists, visitors from Punjab, communal bodies) that urged him to give the lead? Gandhi was categorical that they were not the answer: "There is nothing in common between me and those who want me to oppose Pakistan except that we are both opposed to the division of the country. There is a fundamental difference between their opposition and mine. How can love and enmity go together?"<sup>11</sup>

Through the summer of 1947, Gandhi expressed his anguish at his alienation from the people:<sup>12</sup>

No one listens to me any more. I am a small man. True, there was a time when mine was a big voice. Then everyone obeyed what I said, now neither the Congress nor the Hindus nor the Muslims listen to me. Where is the Congress today? It is disintegrating. I am crying in the wilderness.

<sup>9</sup> Satish Chandra Dasgupta's account of Gandhi's stand in the AICC meeting of 14 June 1947 emphasizes Gandhi's strong commitment to democracy. Gandhi felt that his opposing the Working Committee's decision would be autocratic, and preferred to leave it to the Congress and go his own way if need be. Hence he put the choice before the AICC who, it became clear, only wanted to censure the Working Committee, not throw them out as Gandhi had reminded them they could. Significantly, argues Dasgupta, they did not ask Gandhi to give the lead in opposing partition. This raised the disturbing question: "did the country as represented by the Congress want it?" *OHT*, No. 255, NMML.

<sup>10</sup> Prayer meeting, 5 June 1947, *MGCW*, Vol. 88, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> See section on Mass Movement. Prayer meeting, 9 June 1947, *ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>12</sup> Prayer meeting, 1 April 1947, *ibid.* Vol. 87, p. 187.

But his *cri-de-coeur* was to no avail. His talk with a co-worker two months later was in the same vein:<sup>13</sup>

*Gandhi:* Who listens to me today?

*Answer:* Leaders may not but the people are behind you.

*Gandhi:* Even they are not. I am being told to retire to the Hima-layas. Everybody is eager to garland my photos and statues. Nobody really wants to follow my advice.

In early June 1947 he distilled the essence of his realization in a single sentence: "If I rebel against the Congress, it will mean that I am re-belling against the whole country."<sup>14</sup>

## Why Gandhi Said No to a Mass Movement

The demands made on Gandhi were such that they were impossible to meet. "Why don't you stop partition? Why do you countenance violence when you call yourself an apostle of non-violence?" The question now asked was: "Why don't you start a mass movement?" Letters demanded it; participants of his prayer meetings echoed it; a close associate interpreted it as Gandhi's wish, socialists offered support and a correspondent one lakh volunteers.

Conceptions of the "movement" were varied. One notion was of an anti-British mass struggle,<sup>15</sup> whose fall-out would be Hindu-Muslim unity.<sup>16</sup> Others saw a movement specifically as a Gandhian

<sup>13</sup> 29 May 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. 88, p. 33.

<sup>14</sup> Prayer meeting, 5 June 1947, *ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>15</sup> Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay contends that the only alternative to the partition was a mass movement because the British were willing to quit only on the basis of partition. Gandhi's leadership was crucial, for the socialists could not have launched a movement on their own, with Gandhi neutral and Congress against it. *OHT*, 388, NMML. Sarkar writes: "The only real alternative lay along the path of united militant mass struggle against imperialism and its Indian allies, the only thing which, as we have repeatedly seen, the British really dreaded." *Modern India*, p. 438.

<sup>16</sup> The Congress had also assumed over the years that communal unity would be a fall-out of the anti-imperialist struggle but this had proved to be unfounded. How

answer to partition, bypassing the Congress if need be.<sup>17</sup> But all shared an irrational belief in the healing power of mass movements—Gangajal-like, they would purify the human heart of the communal feelings and communal violence embedded in it and bring unity to a divided people. Gandhi's understanding was different: a movement may or may not quell violence but the existing violence quelled any possibility of a movement. Gandhi had indicated this in his talks with Louis Fischer in the summer of 1946, significantly before communal violence had become widespread. He explained that in 1942 he had sailed out on uncharted seas: "I did not know the people then. I know now what I can do and what I cannot."<sup>18</sup> Fischer asked specifically if he would not launch civil disobedience even if the Constituent Assembly failed and Gandhi replied: "not unless the Socialists and Communists are subdued by that time." Fischer countered that that was unlikely and Gandhi said emphatically: "I cannot think of civil disobedience when there is so much violence in the air."<sup>19</sup>

A year later and this time in the context of communal violence, Gandhi offered a similar explanation to his associate, N.K. Bose, as to why he supported the Congress stand on partition. The situation was surcharged with communalism and not at all favourable for a struggle.<sup>20</sup> Gandhi was speaking on the basis of his own experience,

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would a movement bring unity now in a more communalized situation? The votaries of a movement did not even raise this question.

<sup>17</sup> This Gandhi was not willing to do for various reasons. For why he did not oppose partition or rebel against the Congress, see the next section. Here we only take up why he specifically ruled out a mass movement.

<sup>18</sup> Louis Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, New York, 1983, p. 435.

<sup>19</sup> But when Fischer, in another talk, suggested to Gandhi that "you are strongly constitutionalist now because you fear violence", Gandhi's comment was that we should work the Constituent Assembly and see. He may not have agreed with the way Fischer put it ('fear of violence'—SM) and it seems he preferred a conditional statement about his "militancy" to a categorical ruling out—"not unless the socialists and communists are subdued". Fischer's conclusion is far more certain than Gandhi's own position: "Gandhi was less militant than ever before in his career.... Widespread violence had knocked from his hand the special weapon he had forged: civil disobedience.... Gandhi had entered on the road of anguish that led to his death". *Ibid.*, pp. 441 and 437 respectively.

<sup>20</sup> Bose, "My Experiences as a Gandhian-II", p. 52. Bimal Prasad echoes Fischer's conclusion: "The most powerful sanction behind his leadership had been the recourse

when he had stumbled repeatedly on communal sentiment even during the lonely furrow he had chosen to plough in Noakhali.<sup>21</sup> If communal sentiment could negate his individual mission of peace, how could he even envisage a movement?<sup>22</sup>

There were two other dimensions to the communal situation, apart from violence, which posed constraints, though Gandhi does not allude to them. Sapru, who in this period played the role of an elder statesman, drew attention to them. Congress resigning from office would have meant the Muslim League being in full control. A British–League combine would then handle a civil disobedience movement against the British. After Suhrawardy's acting on the behest of his lumpen camp followers in August 1946 and the British looking on

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to a mass struggle. But this sanction, he felt, could not be forged in the situation existing in 1947. There was so much communal frenzy in the air that a mass struggle at that time might have meant only more of communal killing." *Gandhi, Nehru and J.P.*, p. 74. It is worth noting that the All India Forward Bloc faced the same constraint—"a suggestion that a movement against the Government should be launched to remedy this was rejected, owing to the communal situation." See report of the Working Committee meeting, November 1946, I.B. note dated 20 February 1947, Indian Political Intelligence records, IOR L/P&J/12/648, London.

<sup>21</sup> N.K. Bose and Gandhi's biographer, B.R. Nanda, concur that despite Gandhi's staking his all, his efforts in Noakhali and Calcutta (August–September 1947) had only a short-lived success. Calcutta witnessed the miracle of peace on Independence Day, but 31 August 1947 saw a Hindu mob attack Gandhi's house and bricks and *lathi* blows just missed him. Bose, *My Days with Gandhi*, pp. 255 and 275 and Nanda, *Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 506.

<sup>22</sup> Gandhi, Bose and Fischer notwithstanding, Sarkar continues to maintain that "despite the obvious disruption caused by the riots, this possibility [mass struggle against imperialism—S.M.] was by no means entirely blocked even in the winter of 1946–47". The evidence offered is the Vietnam Day celebrations and the tram strike in Calcutta, both of which saw Hindu–Muslim unity. Sarkar goes on to reveal "the real fear" of the Congress, i.e., the left: "the only real alternative for the Congress was to plunge into another mass confrontation, difficult in the context of communal riots and very dangerous socially in view of what appeared to be the growing left menace". The choice of words for the two threats, "difficult" for communal riots and "very dangerous" for the left, indicates Sarkar's bias. *Modern India*, pp. 438–39.

Divergence on the question of India's future (united or divided) and unity in economic struggles and on broad anti-imperial issues; that the two could coexist is the contradictory, complex reality of 1946–47.

and pleading helplessness, the Congress could hardly walk into the League's parlour. Sapru censured the critics of the Congress who wanted it to resign office, start civil disobedience "and leave it to be dealt with by the Muslim League!". He cautioned that "it is a practical question which ought to be answered in a practical manner".<sup>23</sup>

Communal sentiment was a consideration with Gandhi in not opposing partition, in a different way, too. The problem before him was that many of those who wanted Gandhi to oppose partition were impelled by communal sentiments and to support them or have them support him, would have been a political blunder.<sup>24</sup>

The trouble was that Gandhi was the accepted practitioner par excellence of the art of successful mass movement, so no one believed him when he expressed his inability to perform the operation with infected instruments. Even a close associate like Shriman Narayan Aggarwal could write (in the *Harijan* of 1 June 1947) that a mass struggle was the answer and imply that Gandhi was in favour of it:<sup>25</sup>

if we could compel the Britishers to quit India, we can also tell them plainly but firmly: "No, India shall not be divided". And if Pakistan is forced on us, even then the nation must resist it with all the strength at its command by starting a countrywide mass rebellion....

<sup>23</sup> Sapru to Sir Sita Ram, 22 July 1947, *Sita Ram Papers*, NAI, New Delhi.

<sup>24</sup> For Gandhi's realization that there was little in common between him and other opponents of partition, see footnote 11 of this chapter.

<sup>25</sup> Aggarwal missed the point that one cannot both heed Gandhi's advice and start a mass rebellion that Gandhi had been ruling out since a year. Kripalani saw that the two tasks, anti-imperialism and anti-communalism were different, and that Gandhi had succeeded in the first but not so far in the second. In his concluding speech to the momentous AICC Session of 14 June 1947, Kripalani said: "Why then am I not with him? It is because I feel he has yet found no way of tackling the problem on the mass basis. When he taught us non-violent non-cooperation, he showed us a definite method, which we had at least mechanically followed, but today he himself is in the dark". He subdues Noakhali, then Bihar, but Punjab explodes. "There are no definite steps as in non-violent non-cooperation, that lead to the desired goal." D.G. Tendulkar, *The Mahatma*, Delhi, 1960-63, Vol. 8, p. 22. Gandhi, as was his wont, disputed the implication of a masterly strategist at work: "It was by the grace of God that we adopted certain methods and the circumstances too so changed that the British are now talking of leaving." *MGCW*, Vol. 87, p. 252.



There was a tendency to see the mass movements he led as conjured by him from nothing, with the magic wand of his charisma, perhaps. Even the possibility that Gandhi's magic could be found wanting was hard to concede. Few realized that deciding the moment when to commence *satyagraha* was based on a careful reading of the popular strength and persistent checking of the pulse of the people.

The need was pressing but the spring yielded no water, the source had dried up. The spirit of the people, the latent strength he had been able to draw out to the fore, was lacking. What could even a mass leader do when the masses had succumbed to the plague? He would not succumb, he would not be led, but neither could he lead: "You say that if I give you the lead you will follow me? Have you ever thought against whom and to whom I can give the lead".<sup>26</sup> Disciples he could forsake—had not many drifted away over the years, some quietly, others while heaping calumny on him? He could defy the leaders' counsels, as he had in 1942 when he saw clearly that the leaders were wrong and he was right in sensing that the country was ripe for a struggle.<sup>27</sup> But people? They were the clay from which he fashioned his pots. When they were not in tune with him, what was he to do?

N.K. Bose naively suggested: "Why don't you create a situation by your efforts as you had done earlier?" Gandhi's answer encapsulated in a handful of words the essence of the relationship between a leader and his people.<sup>28</sup>

I have never created a situation in my life. I have one qualification which many of you do not possess. I can almost instinctively feel

<sup>26</sup> To visitors from Punjab, 17 July 1947, *MGCW*, Vol. 88, p. 356.

<sup>27</sup> But in 1947, unlike in 1942, there was no conviction in Gandhi that the country was ready for a movement. As K.M. Munshi put it, Gandhi had no answer to the question: "Was the country prepared to take up the fight again in the foreseeable future? Jawaharlal and Vallabhbhai were convinced that it was not possible for the people to stage a movement then and that they should seize the opportunity to take power and utilise it for the development of freedom". *OHT*, 15, NMML. So in 1947 the question of forsaking his disciples did not really arise, for most agreed, though for different reasons, that a movement was not on the agenda.

<sup>28</sup> Bose, "My Experiences as a Gandhian-II", p. 53.

what is stirring in the heart of the masses. And when I feel that the forces of good are dimly stirring within, I seize upon them and build up a programme. And they respond. People say that I had created a situation, but I had done nothing except giving a shape to what was already there. Today I see no sign of such a healthy feeling. And therefore I shall have to wait until the time comes.

## Why did Gandhi not Rebel Against the Congress?

There was but one way out of the paradox that the people and the party he wanted behind him were not with him and those who could have been with him in opposing partition were not otherwise in tune with him: "The best course, and the only course, for all of us is to extend as much cooperation to the National Government as we can.... We are all one body."<sup>29</sup> Gandhi asked the socialists to close ranks with the Congress for "he did not want a divided front when this decision of partition was being taken."<sup>30</sup>

He set the example himself. In his prayer meetings (by now his favourite forum for sharing his heart-searching with others) he explained why he chose to remain with the Congress. An angry man had sent him a telegram demanding to know why he did not fast against the acceptance of partition by the Congress? Had he not declared a few days ago that Pakistan would not be yielded under coercion? Gandhi put the question to his prayer meeting audience on 5 June 1947:<sup>31</sup>

Why do I not rebel against the Congress? Why am I so slavishly toeing their line? How can I remain a servant of the Congress? Why do I not undertake a fast and give up my life? ...

<sup>29</sup> To Prabhavati Narayan and others, 30 June 1947, *MGCW*, Vol. 88, p. 247.

<sup>30</sup> The socialists had offered to resign from the Congress and go along with him. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, *OHT*, 338, NMML. Though one might disagree with the term "self-abnegation", Nanda rightly stresses Gandhi's contribution to Congress unity: "By this act of self abnegation he saved a split in the Congress at a crucial moment without compromising his own independence", Nanda, *Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 505.

<sup>31</sup> *MGCW*, Vol. 88, pp. 82–84.

How can I go on a fast because somebody wants me to do so? I believe I have to undergo one more fast in my life.... But I will not do it at anyone's bidding. I will do it when God commands....

And what is there left in India that can gladden my heart? But I am still here because the Congress has now grown into a great institution and I cannot go on a fast in protest against it. But I feel as if I was thrown into a fire pit and my heart is burning. God alone knows why I continue to live in spite of this....

Whatever I am, I am after all a servant of the Congress. If the Congress is seized with madness, should I also go mad? Should I die in order to prove that I alone was right?

Gandhi was not in search of martyrdom but of a path. He was not looking for a gesture of protest, which would vindicate his own position,<sup>32</sup> let alone an all-out struggle against a body of whose bonafides he was still convinced. A few days earlier, a correspondent had offered one lakh volunteers for a struggle against the division of India on a communal basis or fragmentation into Indian states.<sup>33</sup> Gandhi firmly declined:<sup>34</sup>

Probably no one is more distressed than I am over the impending division of India. But I have no desire to launch a struggle against what promises to be an accomplished fact. I have considered such a division to be wrong and therefore I would never be party to it. But, when the Congress accepts such a division, however reluctantly, I would not carry on any agitation against that institution.

<sup>32</sup> A fast would have become a mere gesture of protest in the existing situation, not acted as a weapon of *satyagraha*. The pragmatist in Gandhi said: "But one thing had definitely come to pass. Hindustan and Pakistan have come into being and their separate Constituent Assemblies have been formed. Should I now die to nullify them? I am not going to die that way", *ibid*.

<sup>33</sup> Though the identity of the correspondent is not specified, only a communal body could perhaps offer one lakh volunteers in 1947.

<sup>34</sup> Prayer meeting, 2 June 1947, *MGCW*, Vol. 88, p. 63.

Such a step is not inconceivable under all circumstances. The Congress association with the proposed division is no circumstance warranting a struggle against it of the kind you have in mind.

What situation, then, would warrant revolt against the Congress? Gandhi clarified: "I shall do such a thing only when I find the Congress has gone over to the capitalists. But so far I think the Congress is working for the poor."<sup>35</sup> In the prayer meeting of 7 June 1947, he further elaborated these ideas, that the Congress was a "great organisation" which continued to do good work and that the Congress decision was a reluctant acceptance and not a deliberate mistake:<sup>36</sup>

But one should not suddenly oppose the Congress to which we have been loyal all this time and which has earned reputation in the world and has also done so much work... But we shall do this [fight the Congress] when we find that the Congress is deliberately erring. In my view, it has not committed a deliberate blunder at present: The division is now a *fait accompli*.

The AICC session on 14 June 1947 saw Gandhi take a challenging stance that was far from his earlier appeals for loyalty. He began by reminding the members of their powers—they could remove the Working Committee and assume leadership if they believed the leaders were in the wrong: "But I do not find that strength in us today. If you had it I would also be with you and if I felt strong enough myself I would, alone, take up the flag of revolt. But today I do not see the conditions for doing so."<sup>37</sup> He did not wish to replace the leaders, let alone take over: "I criticise them, of course, but afterwards what? Shall I become a Nehru or Sardar or a Rajendra Prasad? Even if you should put me in their place I do not know what I should be able to do. But I have not come here to plead for them. Who will listen to my pleading?"<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Prayer meeting, 5 June 1947, *ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

Gandhi had his share of differences with his colleagues and also the habit of airing, not concealing these. He told his prayer meeting audience on 14 July 1947: "It is true that there are differences between me and my closest colleagues. I do not approve of certain things that they have done or are doing."<sup>39</sup> As early as July 1946 he had pointed to the gradual rot in the Congress, the tendency of Congressmen to cling to positions of profit and power<sup>40</sup> and would have noted, if not warned the people, of such a trend in his closest associates, had it existed. Had Nehru, Patel or Prasad sought office or assumed responsibility? "Your real king is Jawaharlal" were his words in the prayer meeting of 1 June 1947,<sup>41</sup> the very day he had admitted to his "walking stick", his grandniece Manu, that he was completely alone, for even Nehru and Patel did not agree with his reading of the situation.<sup>42</sup> He spoke equally warmly of Nehru to Manu, of his love which "has made me a captive" and his integrity: "He can renounce things as easily as a snake its slough."<sup>43</sup>

Gandhi's conception of his colleagues' burdens was obviously at variance with that of some of his contemporaries and recent commentators. Individual variations apart, there seems to be a consensus among commentators on this period on Gandhi's loss of influence over the Congress. Gopal writes: "To Gandhi the unity of India was still important, but he had by now departed into the shadows. His role in the Congress was similar to that of a head of an Oxbridge college who is greatly revered but has little influence on the governing body."<sup>44</sup> Socialists like Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay<sup>45</sup> and right wingers

<sup>39</sup> Gandhi went on to locate "the root of these differences" as non-violence being a creed with him, but a policy with the Congress, *ibid.*, p. 336.

<sup>40</sup> Tendulkar, *Mahatma*, Vol. 7, p. 186.

<sup>41</sup> *MGCW*, Vol. 88, p. 53.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>43</sup> 14 June 1947, *ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>44</sup> *Nehru*, p. 343. Sumit Sarkar writes: "Gandhi had increasingly taken a back seat in the tortuous negotiations going on since 1945." *Modern India*, p. 437. Bimal Prasad concludes that in 1946–47 Gandhi's leadership "suffered a clear decline and almost collapsed. Gandhi was no longer the chief factor in decision making inside the Congress, which he had dominated since 1919–20." *Gandhi, Nehru and J.P.*, pp. 62–64.

<sup>45</sup> *OHT*, 338, NMML.

like N.B. Khare,<sup>46</sup> as well as writers, Marxist and Gandhian,<sup>47</sup> have traced Gandhi's helplessness to his disciples' alleged lust for power.

K.M. Munshi and B.R. Nanda differ from the above view and rightly see the anxiety of Congress leaders to retain power in broader political, rather than personal, terms. In Munshi's view, Nehru and Patel wished to assume office in the national interest and they were wise to "seize the opportunity to take power and utilise it for the development of freedom".<sup>48</sup> B.R. Nanda points out that Gandhi advised Congressmen not to accept any arrangement in a hurry: "at the worst Congressmen were to be prepared to go once again into the wilderness. This advice did not appeal to Congress leaders, who (like the British) tended to judge the situation in terms of political necessity, and feared a drift to a civil war through vacillation and delay."<sup>49</sup>

The conventional picture of Gandhi's relationship with the Congress needs to be questioned on many other counts (apart from the leaders' lust for power). Was Gandhi's loss of influence and isolation forced or did he voluntarily retreat from mainstream politics? Was his departure into the shadows final or did he retain his place in the sun? Was the cause of his retreat general disillusionment with the Congress or his conviction in an individual path? Were the differences of opinion on specific issues significant enough to constitute an unbridgeable chasm or did they amount to a serious divide, with space left open for agreement on other issues? Was this divide limited to the leaders or did it extend to the people? Did this alienation incline him to die much before his self-declared wish to live for 125 years?

Disillusionment and forced isolation appear untenable notions, but there was a divide, which often seemed unbridgeable and naturally

<sup>46</sup> *OHT*, 310, NMML.

<sup>47</sup> E.M.S. Namboodiripad, *The Mahatma and the Ism*, Calcutta, 1981, pp. 110–11 and Prasad, *Gandhi, Nehru and J.P.*, p. 64. For Sarkar, the question of power is not one of personal greed, but the party's fear of losing out to left forces if it does not obtain quick power. But there was a bargain nonetheless and a high-level one at that, though Gandhi was above it: "To one man, however, the idea of power in the major part of the country at the cost of a partition on religious lines still seemed unimaginably shocking and unacceptable." Sarkar, *Modern India*, p. 437.

<sup>48</sup> *OHT*, 15, NMML.

<sup>49</sup> Nanda, *Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 489.

enough this was agonising for Gandhi.<sup>50</sup> When he did not see eye to eye with his colleagues on important issues, he felt distressed and expressed his alienation to them and to others: "Today I find myself all alone. Even the Sardar and Jawaharlal think that my reading of the situation is wrong and peace is sure to return if partition is agreed upon."<sup>51</sup> Asaf Ali, who met him on 14 July 1947, was told: "So far as I can see, I am a back number."<sup>52</sup>

However, his unhappiness was not because his colleagues ignored him but because he could not carry them with him. When he confided to Manu that he was all alone, he went on to clarify that "they all come and consult me, seek my advice".<sup>53</sup> Besides, the real tragedy, as Gandhi realized all along (but not his critics), was that his alienation from his colleagues reflected his alienation from the people. Leaders reflected popular opinion not only in their acceptance of the partition, but in their more pragmatic approach to political questions and in their imperfect practice of non-violence.

The notion that Gandhi was pushed to the periphery of the Congress in his last years is contestable. Ever since the 1920s, when he had retired to the villages to carry on his constructive work, Gandhi had chosen, on occasion, to step away from the spotlight, only to assume leadership, in fact, dictatorship of the party, when he felt the country was ready once again to follow him. Since 1934 he had ceased to be a *four-anna* member of the Congress. But be it his ashram in Sevagram, his train compartment, the temple in Bhangi Colony, the

<sup>50</sup> After discussing Gandhi's differences with the Congress in the mid-20s and mid-30s, E.M.S. Namboodiripad comes to the mid-40s:

Particularly this was true in the last days of his life when his idealism came into conflict with the "iron practicalism" of the "steel minded" Sardar Patel, with the modernism of the radical intellectual, Pandit Nehru, and several others who had been his colleagues and lieutenants for several years. It was this growing gulf between him and his colleagues that made his life tragic in the post-independence months, even before that life came to a tragic end.

*The Mahatma and the Ism*, p. 118.

<sup>51</sup> To Manu Gandhi, 1 June 1947, *MGCW*, Vol. 88, p. 50.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 338.

<sup>53</sup> Nanda, *Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 489.

Muslim worker's house in Beliaghata or the hut in Noakhali, the place where Gandhi lived became the centre where people flocked for *darshan*, where Congress leaders ran to for advice.

Gandhi's relationship with the Congress in the post-war years was similarly one of relative autonomy. He was in and out of the various decision-making forums engaged in tireless confabulations and endless bargaining, the government-sponsored conferences, the Congress Working Committee, individual sessions with the Viceroy and visiting Cabinet Ministers and persevering with Jinnah after all others had given him up. Gandhi's statement to the press (on the occasion of the release of the Congress leaders and the convening of the Simla Conference) expressed his position vis-à-vis the Congress concisely: "I have no locus standi as the recognised representative of the Congress...for several years, I have acted unofficially as an adviser to the Congress whenever required."<sup>54</sup> He insisted that the Congress President should represent the party in the Conference but made himself available at Simla for consultation. He attended the Working Committee meetings in September 1945, at which the decision to contest elections was formalized and the contours of nationalist strategy emerged. He was duly consulted by the Cabinet Mission (Cripps visited him in the Harijan colony at unearthly hours and once even fetched him a glass of water, much to the disapproval of Wavell).<sup>55</sup> He attended the Working Committee meetings in April to discuss the Mission plan and went to Simla on 1 May along with the other members. He was at the AICC meeting in early July 1946 during which Nehru made his much misinterpreted statement: "We are not bound by anything except that we have decided to go into the Constituent Assembly." Nehru was but echoing Gandhi's comment in the *Harijan* editorial of 26 May 1946, that the Constituent Assembly would decide its own procedure and the Mission Plan was not binding.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, when Gandhi opted out, he did so at his own time and for his own reasons. He told the Working Committee on 24 June 1946

<sup>54</sup> 15 June 1947, *MGCW*, Vol. 80, p. 331.

<sup>55</sup> *Wavell's Journal*, p. 236.

<sup>56</sup> 7 July 1946, *JNSW*, Vol. 15, p. 236; *MGCW*, Vol. 84, p. 170.



that they should take a decision according to their own lights; he could not light their path when he was himself in the dark.<sup>57</sup> Tendulkar recounts an instance when, on 9 October 1946, Gandhi approved a document on Congress–League parleys, which he later realized he should not have. Doubts entered his mind about “creeping senility” and he pondered that “then he had no business to be in public life”.<sup>58</sup> Helpless in the wake of the spreading prairie fire of communal riots (or was it in part his doubts about losing his touch?), he left for Noakhali, where he burrowed underground till early March 1947, when he moved on to Bihar.

However, the impression that Gandhi was, like his abode Noakhali, cut off from the rest of the country, such that when Nehru visited Noakhali, he virtually appealed to Nehru to consult “an old tried servant of the nation”, is one sided.<sup>59</sup> “Gandhi’s emissary”, Sudhir Ghosh, carried letters from Nehru and Patel to Noakhali. Gandhi read them and commented: “So they want me to go back to Delhi, do they?” Ghosh nodded. Gandhi thought for some time and then answered: “No, my place is here, I will stay here.”<sup>60</sup> In early March 1947, the Congress President, Kripalani, wired to Gandhi that he should attend the Working Committee meeting in Delhi but Gandhi did not wish to delay his long overdue visit to Bihar.<sup>61</sup> The decision to demand the partition of the provinces was taken at this meeting. However, Kripalani’s invitation is ignored and only Gandhi’s version is presented in the commentaries on this period—that he learnt about the decision from the press and other reports and asked the Congress leaders to explain their stand.<sup>62</sup>

The end of March 1947 saw Gandhi’s return to Delhi, where he met Mountbatten, and once again advanced his earlier suggestion that Jinnah be made Prime Minister. The selection of the Cabinet would be left to him—the members could all be Muslims, if he wished. The conditions were that Jinnah must promise that his government

<sup>57</sup> Tendulkar, *Mahatma*, Vol. 7, p. 163.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 272.

<sup>59</sup> Prasad, *Gandhi, Nehru and J.P.*, p. 65.

<sup>60</sup> Sudhir Ghosh, *Gandhi’s Emissary*, London, 1967, p. 193.

<sup>61</sup> Tendulkar, *Mahatma*, Vol. 7, p. 407.

<sup>62</sup> Prasad, *Gandhi, Nehru and J.P.*, p. 65.

would strive to maintain peace in the country, the Muslim National Guards would be disbanded and Jinnah would be free to press for Pakistan, but not through force of arms, which he would abjure for all time to come for this end.<sup>63</sup> Mountbatten thought the plan was potentially feasible, but both his staff and the Congress Working Committee were perhaps even more unenthusiastic than they had been in 1946, when Gandhi had first made the suggestion. As Nanda puts it, Gandhi's idea was to disarm Jinnah with "one supreme gesture", but the Congress leaders' view was that the "time for gestures was past".<sup>64</sup> On 11 April 1947, Gandhi asked Mountbatten to "omit me from consideration" and deal henceforth with the Working Committee, who would be "complete advisors".<sup>65</sup>

Much ado was made, then in the press and later in historical writing, about Gandhi falling out with the Congress (on this issue of making Jinnah Prime Minister), withdrawing from the negotiations and returning to Bihar.<sup>66</sup> Gandhi publicly contradicted news reports: "What the newspaper says, despite my explanation, is sheer nonsense. I am going no doubt, but there is no quarrel between us. Our relations are no less cordial."<sup>67</sup> He explained to Patel that there was not "the slightest suggestion of a complaint" in his action: "I am thinking of my duty in terms of the country's good. It is quite possible that what you can see while administering the affairs of millions may not be realised by me. If I were in the place of you all, I would perhaps say and do exactly what you are saying and doing."<sup>68</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Gandhi's outline plan to Mountbatten, 1 April 1947, *TP*, Vol. 10, p. 69. On 8 April 1947 he told Malcolm Darling: "let the whole of India be handed to the League", *MGCW*, Vol. 87, p. 233.

<sup>64</sup> Nanda, *Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 503.

<sup>65</sup> *MGCW*, Vol. 87, p. 254.

<sup>66</sup> Sumit Sarkar points to it as an exceptional case of intervention by Gandhi (after having taken a back seat), *Modern India*, p. 437. This is but a representative view; the notion that partition could have been averted had Congress agreed to let Jinnah be the Prime Minister is part of popular mythology.

<sup>67</sup> Prayer meeting, 12 April 1947, *MGCW*, Vol. 87, p. 265.

<sup>68</sup> 13 April 1947, *ibid.*, p. 271. One is not arguing for accepting all that Gandhi says at face value. He did feel insulted and withdrew from the negotiations, but again what was involved was a difference of approach to politics, not to the loaves and fishes of office.

In any case, one wonders why so much should be made of differences on a proposal which was hardly likely to succeed, for any of the following reasons—for one, though Jinnah's vanity may have been tickled, he was most unwilling to open the issue of Pakistan or the means to that end to discussion. Moreover, though Gandhi may have been right in tracing the roots of the Pakistan demand to the subterranean depths of the psyche of its "sole spokesman", one must not overdo the tendency to reduce history to biography. By 1946–47 the forces behind Pakistan were larger than the overweening ambition of an individual.<sup>69</sup> Even a Qaid-e-Azam could not have turned the clock back to 1940. The cry for Pakistan had become the choral voice of most Muslims; even the *muezzin* could not withdraw it. Jinnah, the League and its followers apart, would the rest of the people have accepted Jinnah as Prime Minister? In a political context in which Bengali and Punjabi Hindus preferred partition of their provinces to League rule,<sup>70</sup> this was hardly likely. Such an action would have been decried not merely as appeasement, but as abandonment of the people by the Congress. Besides, would a League government in total command have allowed the Congress to function and if not, was not installing Jinnah in supreme office tantamount to political hara-kiri?<sup>71</sup>

Gandhi was back to attend the Congress Working Committee meeting on 1 May 1947, and once again on 25 May, at Nehru's bidding.<sup>72</sup> Even in the 2 June 1947 meeting of the Working Committee, Gandhi's attitude, despite his disapproval, was not to wash his hands of the whole affair.<sup>73</sup> He advised that clarifications be obtained, both regarding the League's acceptance and the membership of the Commonwealth—could one part of the country be in it if the other was not? The momentous session of the AICC on 14 June 1947 saw him playing a vital role, challenging the opposition to throw out the Working Committee or accept their decision and join ranks to make the best of the situation.<sup>74</sup> In the turbulent months after

<sup>69</sup> See Chapter 9 on Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan.

<sup>70</sup> See Chapter 10, section on partition of provinces.

<sup>71</sup> See section on mass movement in this chapter.

<sup>72</sup> Tendulkar, *Mahatma*, Vol. 7, pp. 454 and 474.

<sup>73</sup> *MGCW*, Vol. 88, p. 61.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154. See section on why Gandhi did not rebel against the Congress.

independence, he continued to guide the Congress leaders, be it in their steering the ship of state through the treacherous shoals of resurgent Hindu communalism, supporting the sending of troops to Kashmir or dealing with the sundry problems of rehabilitation of the refugees.<sup>75</sup> Nehru's words, though spoken before Gandhi's death, are a worthy epitaph: "How many of you realise what it has meant to India to have the presence of Mahatma Gandhi these months?...in a dissolving world he has been like a rock of purpose and a lighthouse of truth."<sup>76</sup>

## Why Did Gandhi No Longer Wish to Live for 125 Years

It is true, as both Gandhi's associates and commentators have pointed out,<sup>77</sup> that Gandhi often spoke of no longer wishing to live for 125 years, of his agony over partition and of his loneliness.<sup>78</sup> Even before the partition plan was accepted, he told Rajaji on 25 May 1947: "You know I have given up the hope of living for 125 years. But I have no wish to live if India is to be submerged in a deluge of violence, as is now threatened."<sup>79</sup> In the summer of 1947, this was a common enough refrain: "I have given up counting on my being alive very much longer.... I hope and trust that God will take me away."<sup>80</sup> In

<sup>75</sup> See chapter on Hindu communal pressures on the Congress, section on post-independence events. Also see Gopal, *Nehru*, Vol. 2, pp. 17–20.

<sup>76</sup> Address to the jubilee convocation, Allahabad University, 13 December 1947, *JNSW*, 2nd Series, Vol. 4, p. 206.

<sup>77</sup> Namboodiripad says that "he had lost all his self-confidence, lost even his joy of life and will to live", *The Mahatma and the Ism*, p. 111. Bimal Prasad quotes Pyarelal in support of a similar view, *Gandhi, Nehru and J.P.*, p. 65.

<sup>78</sup> Tendulkar points out that Gandhi's confidence in his ability to live for 125 years was shaken in October 1946. He read a paragraph regarding Congress–League parleys and thought it was all right when it was not. This being the first time this had happened in his life, he feared "creeping senility" and thought of retreating from public life. *Mahatma*, Vol. 7, pp. 272–73.

<sup>79</sup> *MGCW*, Vol. 88, p. 4.

<sup>80</sup> To Sushila Gandhi, 2 July 1947 and to a deputation from Quetta, 8 July 1947, *ibid.*, pp. 257 and 299.

the early hours of 1 June 1947 he told Manu: "I shall perhaps not be alive to witness it, but should the evil I apprehend overtake India and her independence be imperiled, let posterity know what agony this old man went through thinking of it. Let not the coming generations curse Gandhi for being a party to India's vivisection."<sup>81</sup> But this was only half the truth, as Gandhi, in those very days, equally strongly expressed his desire to live on: "It was and still is my aspiration to live up to 125 years. But I have lost my place among the people."<sup>82</sup> He ruled out the possibility of a fast, arguing: "I am not going to die that way."<sup>83</sup>

The truth was the whole. His despair drove him to a point where he no longer wished to live but his desire to carry on with the unfinished tasks close to his heart gave him a reason not to die. Among the reasons he advanced for not undertaking a fast was: "I have a very big job to do...industrialisation of my conception has to be carried out in the villages with the *charkha* plying in every home and cloth being produced in every village."<sup>84</sup>

Constructive work apart, the fact was that Gandhi had immense resilience and abounding faith.<sup>85</sup> When the Chinese ambassador, Dr Lo Chia Luen, asked him, "How do you think things will shape themselves?", Gandhi replied:<sup>86</sup>

I am an irrepressible optimist. We have not lived and toiled all these years that we should become barbarians as we appear to be becoming, looking at all the senseless bloodshed in Bengal, Bihar, and the Punjab.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>82</sup> 6 July 1947, *ibid.*, p. 284.

<sup>83</sup> Prayer meeting, 5 June 1947, *ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>84</sup> See footnote 81 above. On 10 June 1947 he told Rajendra Prasad that if he were free, he wished to tour the country to start a movement to throw the youth into constructive work. *Ibid.*, p. 123. According to Nanda, towards the end of his life Gandhi's mind was more inclined towards social and economic reform and refurbishing his technique of non-violence. *Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 511.

<sup>85</sup> Fischer recognized that though Gandhi expressed a loss of will to live, "yet he could not be a pessimist for long", *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 470.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

But I feel that it is just an indication that, as we are throwing off the foreign yoke, all the dirt and froth is coming to the surface. When the Ganges is in flood, the water is turbid, the dirt comes to the surface. When the flood subsides, you see the clear, blue water which soothes the eye. That is what I hope for and live for. I do not wish to see Indian humanity becoming barbarian.

The conventional picture of Gandhi, sketched in stark shades of black and white, fails to convey this aspect of Gandhi's personality; his resilience, his pragmatism, his faith in the future and his determination to make his vision a living reality.

# Conclusion

## I

The story of the post-war period, in fact, began almost a year before the war ended. Nationalist activity gradually picked up momentum after Gandhi's release in May 1944, rendering the ban on the Congress ineffective. The Government of India planned a political offer designed to secure the participation of the two main political parties in the Viceroy's Executive Council. The intention was to achieve a settlement before the end of the war and hence preclude a return to stormy politics. The Simla Conference, however, shipwrecked on the shoals of the government's own hesitation to withdraw the veto on political progress it had given to the Muslim League.

The major development was the impending collapse of the edifice of colonial rule as the pillars holding it aloft cracked. Ravage had been wrought from two quarters—the rot within and the challenge from without. The anti-imperialist movements had incessantly hammered away, leaving an incisive mark. The mass movements of 1920–22, 1930–32 and 1942 are cases in point. With hitherto unpoliticized regions and social groups flowing into the mainstream, the bed widened, whittling down the banks. The authorities set to work after each flood, building firmer banks damming the river, but to little avail. Officials suffered a loss of will to rule. The golden age of the Indian Civil Service, of belief in the mission of the Empire was long over. Second-rate men from grammar schools, with little of the grand vision of their Victorian ancestors, or belief in the destiny of the British race to govern the “child people” of India, joined the heaven-born service. Increasingly, even such men were difficult to find.

The Indians recruited were mostly loyal to the hilt, even at moments of extreme trial, but the conflict within them sharpened over time, especially as they often had to cruelly repress fellow Indians who were impossibly non-violent. Besides, the pull of nationalism reached them too. With the nationalist forces on the ascendant and even assuming partial power during the provincial ministries in 1937–39, many loyal Indian officials too, started looking towards them with a less hostile attitude. The process was one of contradictions of colonial policy becoming increasingly manifest. The repression–conciliation dualism of political policy could not but create problems when the same set of officials had to implement both poles of policy. As long as Congressmen were branded agitators and seditious, officials dealt with them firmly. But when these Congressmen became ministers and legislators and ran the administration, the bureaucracy had to work under them. Subsequently, when Congressmen were again perceived as threats to the state (during the Individual Satyagraha of 1940–41 and the Quit India movement of 1942), the action of many officials lacked conviction. There was the additional anxiety that if policy changed after the War and Congress resumed positions of authority, the officials who repressed the movement would be brought to book. There were few instances of refusal to act, but often the action did not flow from conviction of purpose. This, in the long run, was a serious question for those in authority.

The post-war period accentuated these problems. A divide arose among officials as to how to deal with the INA prisoners—exemplary punishment of “traitors” vs. leniency to “misguided” men. The case for the defensive position was strengthened by the realization of the top army brass that, far from clamouring for punishment (as was believed), the bulk of the Indian Army wanted compassion to be shown to the “deserters”. This was an indication that nationalism had permeated the armed forces at various levels, just as it had enveloped Indian officials, loyalists and groups hitherto outside the nationalist pale. The naval revolt in February 1946, though it was easily crushed and remained confined to a section of the Navy, was a portent for the future. Anger at racial discrimination and poor service conditions and ill-defined but strong patriotic feelings, produced an explosive situation.



The structure remained intact and one can argue for a strong state existing to the end. But to those farsighted officials and policy makers who understood the dynamics of power and authority, these incidents conveyed as much as a full-scale revolt would to others more brashly confident—that the storm brewing this time was to be confronted, not frontally, but by strategic retreat. The sending of the Cabinet Mission expressed this realization.

Congress strategy at any given point of time was to first exhaust the option of negotiation and compromise before embarking on non-violent mass struggles. This dual strategy had served admirably in reducing British policy to a mess of contradictions. In 1945, the Congress leaders participated in the negotiations to evolve machinery for the transfer of power. They saw little reason to unleash another round of struggle given the likelihood of Britain leaving India soon. The Congress leaders, unlike left historians, knew that the content of freedom would not change if it emanated “from above” or “from below”, a negotiated settlement rather than a “final assault” on imperialism. But the Congress kept up preparedness for a movement, to be launched if the British declaration to quit proved to be insincere. In fact, the threat of another Congress-led movement in the context of eroded authority acted as an underlying pressure on the British to implement their promise to quit.

There were two processes which hastened the end—nationalism and communalism. Ironically, communalism, devised to delay the end, hastened it in the last stage. There were really two stories enmeshed in the story of 1945–47. One was the story of nationalism vs. imperialism, which formally ended on 15 August 1947. However the element of suspense in it was virtually over by early 1946, with the sending of the Cabinet Mission. At this stage the second story shifted to the centre of the stage. Communal sentiment, zealously whipped up by the League, exploded into communal riots, dashing the hopes of a free, united India. Those on the fence slipped into the gutter while there were stains on the spotless secularism of many. Yet others clung to their secularism tenaciously, but could at best aim an occasional blow at the communal forces. Their hands were not free to take on the menace frontally.

The elections of 1946 marked the cleavage between the two stories of nationalism and communalism. The Congress sweep of the general

seats strengthened its position at the head of the nationalist firmament. But equally emphatic was the victory of the Muslim League in the Muslim seats, a flagrant challenge to the Congress' claim to be the voice of all the Indian people. There was a new dimension too. The Muslim League was increasingly inclined to speak in a voice that rang out distinct from the Congress and the British. It was no longer content to provide the orchestrated cacophony desired by the British when the monotone of the nationalist forces seemed dangerously hypnotic. The League's call was "Pakistan", a Muslim nation that had gained freedom from Britain and from "Hindu" India.

How did the "parent" react to the "child" asserting his right to speak in his own voice? A charge of "ingratitude" was the natural response. Wavell spoke of Jinnah as the Frankenstein monster they had helped to create; Mountbatten of his being a psychopathic case. There was a sharp sense of betrayal as well as a feeling that the "foster-child", whom they had cruelly treated, was kinder in this, their last hour. But the League and Jinnah, however intransigent, could not be bypassed. They had a mass base, as was evident both from their electoral victories and the response they would get to their call for Direct Action.

In the changed situation, the British would have preferred the Indian people to speak with one voice. Having decided to leave, unity suited them better than division. United India was the dream of Gandhi and Indians but Attlee and the British Commander-in-Chiefs dreamt of it too, albeit as the basis of Britain's world influence. Why then did they divide and quit?

The British could have accepted the claim of the Congress to be the main representative of Indian opinion, on the plea that, amidst the welter of sounds, theirs seemed the clearest as also the loudest. But paradoxically, the very success of their past policy of propping up the League, in order to combat the Congress, contributed to their final failure to leave behind a united India. Moreover, Jinnah was still useful as a counterpoise to the Congress and the League's presence in the Interim Government restored to the Viceroy his role as a mediator. In Anita Inder Singh's words, "short term tactics worked against the achievement of their own long-term aims".<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Singh, *Origins of Partition*, p. 250.

Unity was only a preference for the British, not a conviction for which they were willing to sacrifice anything, let alone their lives. They sat back and let civil war unfold, as it did not affect them directly. They would not have been so sanguine had they been the targets of the violence. The option of division was always a real one, should there be no agreement on unity. It was not the same kind of option as the one of staying on in India by repression, which, by being ruled out, only confirmed that there was only one option, which was to quit.

The decision to partition India was not only the consequence of past actions and present needs, it was influenced by future prospects. The British could not be sure that Congress would allow undivided India to play the role in Commonwealth defence envisaged for her by Britain and naturally did not want to close the option of Pakistan being a future ally. Indian hostility (because of the British supporting or accepting Pakistan) could be allayed by pleading inability to intervene in favour of unity because of the irreconcilable differences between the Congress and the League. In any case the latter was a sin of omission, not commission and His Majesty's Government (HMG) plumped for the easier option, inaction or passive acceptance, rather than active intervention. Thus the partition decision is to be seen both as the first act of the drama of Commonwealth diplomacy and the closing scene of "Divide and Rule". It was part of Britain's future in India, as well as her past.

Finally, British preference for unity does not imply that partition was the "failure" of British strategy, as Partha Sarathi Gupta and Anita Inder Singh have implied. Strategic cloth was cut according to political measurements and post-imperial interests in South Asia were approximated to by India lending prestige to the Commonwealth and Pakistan becoming an outpost of the Western bloc. The argument that the British did not get what they wanted, that partition was not in their interest, cannot absolve them of responsibility for the decision to partition India.

It is only natural that an event like partition would encourage thought on when and how it could have been averted. The abortive talks in U.P. in 1937 to set up a coalition ministry are a much-quoted example, primarily because they predated the rapid growth of the

Muslim League after 1937. The resignation of Congress ministries in 1939 and the subsequent movements of 1940–41 and 1942 are seen as a tactical blunder. The government's alliance with the League matured during over the war years and the League got an opportunity to spread its influence, unchallenged by Congress, which was banned after 1942. Another tactical mistake, which is believed to have cost the country dearly, was Nehru's statement, on 7 July 1946, that the Constituent Assembly would decide its own procedure. The Muslim League reacted on 29 July 1946 by withdrawing its acceptance of the Cabinet Mission plan. Nehru's colleagues too were critical, Patel calling it an act of emotional insanity and Maulana Azad holding Nehru responsible for subverting the last chance of averting partition.

Another popular conception is that partition could have been avoided if Jinnah had been made Prime Minister, as suggested by Gandhi but turned down by other Congress leaders. This would have satisfied his overweening ambition, which fuelled his "maniacal" obsession with the creation of a new state. A possible last "if" is Gandhi's call for a mass movement, which would have united Hindus and Muslims in struggle, as in the past. As we have seen, this "if only" school is largely myth, with little reality. As usual Congress is criticized for the wrong reasons, i.e., for making tactical blunders, when the fatal flaw was located in its strategy, not tactics alone.

Where did the Congress responsibility for partition lie? The notion of a "sellout" by an ageing, power-hungry, "bourgeois" leadership has little basis, as we have seen, nor does its corollary that Gandhi was "betrayed" by his disciples. Interestingly, writers of different persuasions have criticized Congress policy on both the fronts of imperialism and communalism. While the liberals would have the Congress remain permanently constitutionalist and compromising, the radicals would have liked it to wage permanent revolution. Following Coupland, Gowher Rizvi has argued that by forsaking office and going in for a mass agitation during the war years, the Congress left the field open for the Muslim League.<sup>2</sup> The Congress comes across as intransi-

<sup>2</sup> Gowher Rizvi, "Transfer of Power in India: A Restatement of an Alternative Approach", *Journal of Contemporary History*, 2, January 1984, pp. 127–44.

gent and totalitarian in the works of Moore and Jalal, and hence primarily responsible for partition. Its alleged role in the breakdown of the 1937 coalition talks in U.P. and its refusal to accept Hindu-Muslim parity in 1946 are much publicized examples of the uncompromising stand.

In contrast, the left would have the Congress undertake a "final assault" on imperialism in the belief that unity would be the magical fallout. Even Anita Inder Singh argues that "the greatest tactical mistake" made by the Congress was acceptance of office in 1946.<sup>3</sup> The party became an easy target for communal propaganda that a Hindu Raj had been ushered in.

In our view the strategy followed by the Congress to combat imperialism had been largely successful in its objective, i.e., securing independence. There was little need to alter this strategy in the last phase. The Congress had achieved success in only the second of its twofold task of structuring a nation from the vast diversity lying in religion, caste and region and securing independence for this nation-in-the-making. Independence and partition were but the reflection of the success and failure of the strategy of the national movement.

The need was to integrate a strategy to combat communalism with the strategy of anti-imperialism. This would have brought complete success, freedom and unity. But the Congress devoted little attention to this task in the belief that the communal question could wait or would get resolved in the course of the anti-imperialist struggle. But nationalism and communalism were intertwined and the British and League would not allow this disentanglement. There was little intellectual recognition or effort to understand communalism in order to combat it, as was done in the case of colonialism by generations of nationalists. Nehru's generation tried to come to terms with the phenomenon but failed to appreciate its varied nature in the different stages. The well-tried method of concession did not work once minority communalism had entered the extreme, mass, fascist phase—it was akin to building sand dykes at high tide.

It is often forgotten that Nehru, Patel and Gandhi in 1947 were only accepting the logic of the long-term failure of the Congress to

<sup>3</sup> Singh, *Origins of Partition*, p. 251.

draw in the Muslim masses into the national movement and stem the surging waves of Muslim communalism, which, especially since 1937, had been beating with increasing fury. This failure was revealed with stark clarity by the 1946 elections in which the League won 90 per cent Muslim seats. Though the war against Jinnah was lost by early 1946, defeat was conceded only after the final battle was mercilessly waged in the streets of Calcutta and Rawalpindi and the village lanes of Noakhali and Bihar. By April 1947 the Congress leaders felt that only an immediate transfer of power could forestall the spread of direct action and communal disturbances.

The virtual collapse of the Interim Government also made Pakistan appear to be an unavoidable reality—Patel argued in the 14 June 1947 AICC meeting that they had to face up to the fact that Pakistan was functioning in Punjab, Bengal and in the Interim Government. Nehru was dismayed at the turning of the Interim Government into an arena of struggle. Ministers wrangled, met separately to reach decisions and Liaquat Ali Khan as Finance Member hamstrung the functioning of other ministries. In the face of the Interim Government's powerlessness to check Governors from abetting the League, and the Bengal provincial ministry's inaction and even complicity in riots, Nehru wondered whether there was any point in continuing in the Interim Government while people were being butchered. Immediate transfer of power would at least mean having the control it was now expected to wield, but was powerless to exercise.

There was an additional consideration in accepting the immediate transfer of power to two dominions. The prospect of balkanization was ruled out as the provinces and princes were not given the option to be independent—the latter were, in fact, much to their chagrin, cajoled and coerced into joining one or the other dominion. This was no mean achievement. Princely states standing out would have meant a graver blow to Indian unity than Pakistan was.

The acceptance of partition in 1947 was thus only the final act of a process of step-by-step concession to the League's intransigent championing of a sovereign Muslim state. Autonomy of Muslim majority provinces was accepted in 1942 at the time of the Cripps Mission. Gandhi went a step further and accepted the right of self-determination of Muslim majority provinces in his talks with Jinnah in 1944.

In June 1946, Congress conceded the possibility of Muslim majority provinces (which formed Groups B and C of the Cabinet Mission Plan) setting up a separate Constituent Assembly, but opposed compulsory grouping and upheld the right of NWFP and Assam not to join their groups if they so wished. But by the end of the year, Nehru said he would accept the ruling of the Federal Court on whether grouping was compulsory or optional. The Congress accepted without demur the clarification by the Cabinet in December 1946 that grouping was compulsory. The Congress officially referred to partition in early March 1947 when a resolution was passed in the Congress Working Committee that Punjab (and by implication Bengal) must be partitioned if the country was divided. The final act of surrender to the League's demands was in June 1947 when the Congress ended up accepting partition under the 3 June Plan.

The brave words of the leaders contrasted starkly with the tragic retreat of the Congress. While loudly asserting the sovereignty of the Constituent Assembly, the Congress quietly accepted compulsory grouping and abandoned NWFP to Pakistan. Similarly, the Congress leaders finally accepted partition most of all because they could not stop communal riots, but their words were all about not surrendering to the blackmail of violence. Nehru asserted on 22 August 1946 that "we are not going to shake hands with murder or allow it to determine the country's policy".

What was involved here was a refusal to accept the reality that the logic of the failure in their past could not be reversed by their words or action in the present. This was hardly surprising at the time, for hardly anybody had either anticipated the quick pace of the unfolding tragedy, or was prepared to accept it as irrevocable. It is a fact that the morrow after freedom rendered millions of people on both sides of the border aliens in their own homes.

It is only appropriate that our story ends with Gandhi's acceptance of the decision to partition India, which finally sealed any other option. Gandhi found himself helpless in the face of the communalization of the people. There was no question of giving a call for a movement when there was so much violence in the air. He sadly accepted that the path of *ahimsa*, however imperfectly practised, had brought independence but failed miserably to bring about Hindu-

Muslim unity. The man who had challenged those who would divide the country to kill him first, publicly supported the decision of the AICC to accept partition.

A focus on Gandhi's actions and writings has been a thread running throughout this work. But more than that, Gandhi's understanding of the motivations and implications of what was happening has served as a touchstone. He was, after all the embodiment of the national movement and its undisputed leader because his understanding of the Indian people, and especially his opponents, was unparalleled.

## II

There is an unfortunate tendency to see 1947 primarily as an hour of sorrow or describe it, after the poet, as a "blemished dawn". We are reminded in learned articles every morning that India turning fifty is an occasion for mourning, for remembrance, not celebration. This is only part of the truth. If partition was the most traumatic event of the century, then independence was surely the most significant turning point.

Most writings see no need to explain why freedom came—it was as if it had to happen. The imperialists claimed that independence was the culmination of their policy of preparing India for self-government, whereas nationalists claimed that independence vindicated their moral stand that alien rule was unnatural and must go. Both were self-evident truths, which did not require any explanation, narration or analysis. Partition, however, was something which should not have happened and hence required explanation. Explanations varied according to the ideological predilections of the analysts. Partition was explained away as the final act of the divide-and-rule drama or the inevitable outcome of the age-old Hindu–Muslim rift or as the betrayal by the compromising, bourgeois nationalist leadership.

Such explanations fail to apprehend the complex, contradictory reality of 15 August 1947. They do not recognize independence and partition as parts of an integral whole, as twin, contingent phenomena. In our view, the paradox of independence–partition reflects another paradox, that the national movement was both a success and a failure.



The task of the national movement was two-fold—structuring classes, communities and regions into a nation and securing independence from colonial rule for this emerging nation. While the national movement succeeded in building up a national consciousness sufficient to wrest freedom, the process of making the nation remained incomplete and the Congress, the party of the national movement, failed to keep the country united. A complex, contradictory reality is symbolized by 15 August 1947. A hard-earned, prized independence was won but a bloody, tragic partition rent asunder the fabric of the emerging free nation. Freedom came, but with it partition.

The appointed day, 15 August 1947, found Gandhi in Calcutta and Nehru in New Delhi. As always, between the two of them they mirrored the contradictory feelings of their countrymen. Gandhi's silent prayers throughout the day for an end to the carnage were reflective of the goings on in the dark, the murders, rapes and abductions. Others were at their posts in Wah, Noakhali, Masaurhi, Jehanabad or wherever men were killing other men for no other reason than that they believed in another God. Jawaharlal Nehru pointed to the new dawn, the birth of a free India. "At the stroke of the midnight hour when the world sleeps, India shall awake to light and freedom." His evocative words, "Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny", reminded the people that their angry bewilderment was not the only truth. There was a greater truth—that of a glorious struggle, in which many martyrs fell and countless others made sacrifices, in the faith that one day India would be free. That day had come.

There must have been moments when the task of building a secular polity on partition-ravaged soil seemed almost impossible—the miracle was that the house was built and still survives. Immense fortitude, great personal courage and determination to rise above despair were the hallmark not only of Gandhi and Nehru but also of the ordinary Congress worker at the village and *taluka* level. Nehru often jumped into the fray and dared rioters to kill him before harming any Muslim. Shah Nawaz of the INA became the saviour of Masaurhi, Bihar. Gandhi fasted to quell the violence in Calcutta and Delhi. Sushila Nayyar became an angel of mercy for homeless refugees in the Wah camp in the NWFP. Congress workers in Dehradun stood vigil on housetops to protect Muslim *mohallas* from attack. Their actions

helped stop the tide of communal violence from spreading eastwards to the villages of U.P. and Bihar, where, feared Nehru and Pant, it could become an uncontrollable prairie fire. The unsung Congress workers of Jehanabad spread Gandhi's message of peace. Were it not for them and Congressmen in other districts who countered communal venom, worse horrors might have been in store for Bihar in 1947. This was a time when Hindu and Muslim communalists were spewing hatred. Graphically illustrated booklets about atrocities on Hindu women in Rawalpindi, Kasur and Noakhali were thrown in "coolie trains" passing through the province while the vernacular press in Urdu gave the call for a generalized Muslim uprising against the Hindu Raj in the event of Pakistan invading India.

We often forget that the acceptance of Pakistan by the Congress, however unfortunate, did not amount to an acceptance of the two-nation theory on which the demand for Pakistan was based. The Congress had regretfully accepted partition as unavoidable, while keeping hope alive—"We often have to go through the valley of the shadow before we reach the sunlit mountain tops," wrote Nehru to Cariappa. It had neither accepted defeat in the battle against communalism nor sacrificed the secular principles it had upheld. The communist kisan leader, Karyanand Sharma, warned in a speech in Narkatiaganj, Champaran, Bihar, in early November 1947, that "by raising the slogan of Hindu Raj the people will support the two-nation theory of Mr Jinnah which was still unaccepted by Gandhi and Nehru." Nehru realized that communalism not only posed a threat to law and order but to the very secular nature of the Indian state. Muslim communalism had earlier tried to get the Congress to compromise on its secularism but had only wrung from the Congress an acceptance of partition, not of the two-nation theory. Hindu communalists had taken up the battle where their Muslim counterparts left off and tried to subvert the building of a secular India. If the Congress had succumbed to the pressure to establish a Hindu state, that would have been the complete victory of communal forces, an even bigger prize than the creation of Pakistan.

## Appendix

**Summary of Replies to telegram No. 2080, New Delhi, 27 February 1946  
from HOMEIN to all provinces**

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**Province:** Is there evidence of organised promotion or exploitation of the disturbances and if so, by which classes?

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**Bombay:** The cause of the disturbances is the repeated praise of violence and rebellion in Congress speeches particularly the glorification of the INA and mutinous activity in general. Disturbances in Bombay were organized by the Congress Socialist Party and exploited by the Communists. The chief active elements were hooligans.

**Sind:** There is no direct evidence yet of organized promotion or exploitation of the disturbances. The general impression is that the Communists were behind the scenes and Congress were sympathizing with them.

**Madras:** There is no evidence of organized promotion of the disturbances but the Communists exploited them. Leaders, both Congress and Communist, created the atmosphere leading to the disturbances and the mobs were incited by the example of the disturbances in Bombay and Calcutta.

**Bengal:** The cause of the trouble was the strong anti-government feeling created by propaganda in praise of the INA and the Congress rebellion of 1942. Trouble was started on one occasion by the Congress and on another by the Muslim League; but on both occasions it was deliberately exploited by the Communists and a few terrorist groups.

**Punjab:** The disturbances are the logical result of a policy of drift and appeasement combined with the freedom given to the press and public speakers to malign the British government and the failure to take strong action against

strikes and show that mutiny does not pay. The decision to proceed with the INA trials in the teeth of public opinion has also been attributed to the trouble. In all disturbances in Punjab a large part has been played by students.

**Bihar:** The cause of the trouble is the virulent tone of the anti-government campaign in the press and in public speeches as well as the activities of students. The Communists are also suspected to be taking a part with the aid of Russian money.

**C.P.:** There has been some organized attempt to tamper with the loyalty of the armed forces but definite information as to whether the strike at Jubbulpore was instigated from outside is not yet available. Forward Bloc leaders are active in support of the mutineers and Congress are making capital out of the food situation.

**Orissa:** There is no evidence of attempts by political parties to organize and promote labour unrest in the railways or Post & Telegraph Department; but Congress and Communists may try to use the discontent for political purposes. Both are using the food situation as a motive for attacking the government.

**N.W.F.P.:** No comments.

**U.P.:** No comments.

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**Province:** What steps are recommended to check such action and prevent organized incitement?

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**Bombay:** Rounding up of principal agitators and control of undesirable publicity. This action has so far been avoided in view of the elections and the desirability of giving a fair chance to all parties.

**Sind:** Communist leaders will be arrested under section 151, Cr. P.C., and their meetings will be regulated.

**Madras:**

1. Strengthening the police armed reserve.
2. Providing police with better transport.
3. Dealing with waifs and strays under the Madras Children's Act of 1920.

4. Consulting the Press Advisory Committee on the possibility of inducing newspapers to give balanced accounts of disturbances.

**Bengal:** It is not desirable to use the Criminal Law Amendment Act for banning the organization as this would lead to agitation in which all parties would join and would thus defeat its own ends. It is better to rely on the ordinary law. Action is being taken against inflammatory matter circulated in certain newspapers and leaflets. Action is being taken to expand and re-equip the police.

**Punjab:** Nothing can be done as regards the students short of closing down their colleges. As regards action against parties, the Congress is the main enemy and so long as it is allowed to proceed without interference, it would be a mistake to ban minor organizations such as the CSP or the Communist Party. Until the Cabinet Mission has ended nothing more can be done than to strengthen the morale and improve the conditions of service in the police and increase the number of British troops in the country.

**Bihar:** Action should be taken against inflammatory press matter and speeches and police arrangements should be adequate in places where trouble is apprehended.

**C.P.:** It may be necessary to take action against Forward Bloc and Communist leaders e.g., Ruikar.

**Orissa:** Future developments may justify the use of the preventive sections of the Defence of India Rules.

**N.W.F.P.:** No comments.

**U.P.:** No comments.

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