

FREEDOM AND PARRICIDE

The disappearance of the British Raj in India is at present, and must for along time be, simply inconceivable. That it should be replaced by a native Government or Governments is the wildest of wild dreams . . . As soon as the last British soldier sailed from Bombay or Karachi, India would become the battlefield of antagonistic racial and religious forces . . . [and] the peaceful and progressive civilisation, which Great Britain has slowly but surely brought into India, would shrivel up in a night.

J. E. WELLDON, former Bishop of Calcutta, 1915

I have no doubt that if British governments had been prepared to grant in 1900 what they refused in 1900 but granted in 1920; or to grant in 1920 what they refused in 1920 but granted in 1940; or to grant in 1940 what they refused in 1940 but granted in 1947 – then nine-tenths of the misery, hatred, and violence, the imprisonings and terrorism, the murders, flogging, shootings, assassinations, even the racial massacres would have been avoided; the transference of power might well have been accomplished peacefully, even possibly without Partition.

LEONARD WOOLF, 1967

I

FREEDOM CAME TO INDIA on 15 August 1947, but patriotic Indians had celebrated their first ‘Independence Day’ seventeen years before. In the first week of January 1930 the Indian National Congress passed a resolution fixing the last Sunday of the month for countrywide demonstrations in support of *purna swaraj*, or complete independence. This, it was felt, would both stoke nationalist aspirations and force the British seriously to consider giving up power. In an essay in his journal *Young India*, Mahatma Gandhi set out how the day should be observed. ‘It would be good’, said the leader, ‘if the declaration [of independence] is made by whole villages, whole cities even . . . It would be well if all the meetings were held at the identical minute in all the places.’

Gandhi suggested that the time of the meeting be advertised in the traditional way, by drum-beats. The celebrations would begin with the hoisting of the national flag. The rest of the day would be spent 'in doing some constructive work, whether it is spinning, or service of "untouchables", or reunion of Hindus and Mussalmans, or prohibition work, or even all these together, which is not impossible'. Participants would take a pledge affirming that it was 'the inalienable right of the Indian people, as of any other people, to have freedom and to enjoy the fruits of their toil', and that 'if any government deprives a people of these rights and oppresses them, the people have a further right to alter it or abolish it'.¹

The resolution to mark the last Sunday of January 1930 as Independence Day was passed in the city of Lahore, where the Congress was holding its annual session. It was here that Jawaharlal Nehru was chosen President of the Congress, in confirmation of his rapidly rising status within the Indian national movement. Born in 1889, twenty years after Gandhi, Nehru was a product of Harrow and Cambridge who had become a close protégé of the Mahatma. He was intelligent and articulate, knowledgeable about foreign affairs, and with a particular appeal to the young.

In his autobiography Nehru recalled how 'Independence Day came, January 26th, 1930, and it revealed to us, as in a flash, the earnest and enthusiastic mood of the country. There was something vastly impressive about the great gatherings everywhere, peacefully and solemnly taking the pledge of independence without any speeches or exhortation.'² In a press statement that he issued the day after, Nehru 'respectfully congratulate[d] the nation on the success of the solemn and orderly demonstrations'. Towns and villages had 'vied with each other in showing their enthusiastic adherence to independence'. Mammoth gatherings were held in Calcutta and Bombay, but the meetings in smaller towns were well attended too.³

Every year after 1930, Congress-minded Indians celebrated 26 January as Independence Day. However, when the British finally left the subcontinent, they chose to hand over power on 15 August 1947. This date was selected by the Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, as it was the second anniversary of the Japanese surrender to the Allied Forces in the Second World War. He, and the politicians waiting to take office, were unwilling to delay until the date some others would have preferred – 26 January 1948.

So freedom finally came on a day that resonated with imperial pride rather than nationalist sentiment. In New Delhi, capital of the Raj and of free India, the formal events began shortly before midnight. Apparently, astrologers had decreed that 15 August was an inauspicious day. Thus it was decided

to begin the celebrations on the 14th, with a special session of the Constituent Assembly, the body of representative Indians working towards a new constitution.

The function was held in the high-domed hall of the erstwhile Legislative Council of the Raj. The room was brilliantly lit and decorated with flags. Some of these flags had been placed inside picture frames that until the previous week had contained portraits of British viceroys. Proceedings began at 11 p.m. with the singing of the patriotic hymn 'Vande Matram' and a two-minute silence in memory of those 'who had died in the struggle for freedom in India and elsewhere'. The ceremonies ended with the presentation of the national flag on behalf of the women of India.

Between the hymn and the flag presentation came the speeches. There were three main speakers that night. One, Chaudhry Khaliquz-zaman, was chosen to represent the Muslims of India; he duly proclaimed the loyalty of the minority to the newly freed land. A second, the philosopher Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, was chosen for his powers of oratory and his work in reconciling East and West: appropriately, he praised the 'political sagacity and courage' of the British who had elected to leave India while the Dutch stayed on in Indonesia and the French would not leave Indo-China.⁴

The star turn, however, was that of the first prime minister of free India, Jawaharlal Nehru. His speech was rich in emotion and rhetoric, and has been widely quoted since. 'At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom,' said Nehru.⁵ This was 'a moment which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance'.

This was spoken inside the columned Council House. In the streets outside, as an American journalist reported,

bedlam had broken loose. Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs were happily celebrating together . . . It was Times Square on New Year's Eve. More than anyone else, the crowd wanted Nehru. Even before he was due to appear, surging thousands had broken through police lines and flowed right to the doors of the Assembly building. Finally, the heavy doors were closed to prevent a probably souvenir-hunting tide from sweeping through the Chamber. Nehru, whose face reflected his happiness, escaped by a different exit and after a while the rest of us went out.

No event of any importance in India is complete without a goof-up. In this case, it was relatively minor. When, after the midnight session at the Constituent Assembly, Jawaharlal Nehru went to submit his list of cabinet ministers to the governor general, he handed over an empty envelope. However, by the time of the swearing-in ceremony the missing piece of paper was found. Apart from Prime Minister Nehru, it listed thirteen other ministers. These included the nationalist stalwarts Vallabhbhai Patel and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, as well as four Congress politicians of the younger generation.

More notable perhaps were the names of those who were not from the Congress. These included two representatives of the world of commerce and one representative of the Sikhs. Three others were lifelong adversaries of the Congress. These were R. K. Shanmukham Chetty, a Madras businessman who possessed one of the best financial minds in India; B. R. Ambedkar, a brilliant legal scholar and an ‘Untouchable’ by caste; and Shyama Prasad Mookerjee, a leading Bengal politician who belonged (at this time) to the Hindu Mahasabha. All three had collaborated with the rulers while the Congress men served time in British jails. But now Nehru and his colleagues wisely put aside these differences. Gandhi had reminded them that ‘freedom comes to India, not to the Congress’, urging the formation of a Cabinet that included the ablest men regardless of party affiliation.⁶

The first Cabinet of free India was ecumenical in ways other than the political. Its members came from as many as five religious denominations (with a couple of atheists thrown in for good measure), and from all parts of India. There was a woman, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, as well as two Untouchables.

On 15 August the first item on the agenda was the swearing-in of the Governor General, Lord Mountbatten, who until the previous night had been the last viceroy. The day’s programme read:

8.30 a.m.	Swearing in of governor general and ministers at Government House
9.40 a.m.	Procession of ministers to Constituent Assembly
9.50 a.m.	State drive to Constituent Assembly
9.55 a.m.	Royal salute to governor general
10.30 a.m.	Hoisting of national flag at Constituent Assembly

10.35 a.m.	State drive to Government House
6.00 p.m.	Flag ceremony at India Gate
7.00 p.m.	Illuminations
7.45 p.m.	Fireworks display
8.45 p.m.	Official dinner at Government House
10.15 p.m.	Reception at Government House

It appeared that the Indians loved pomp and ceremony as much as the departing rulers. Across Delhi, and in other parts of India, both state and citizen joyously celebrated the coming of Independence. Three hundred flag-hoisting functions were reported from the capital alone. In the country's commercial hub, Bombay, the city's mayor hosted a banquet at the luxurious Taj Mahal hotel. At a temple in the Hindu holy town of Banaras, the national flag was unfurled by, significantly, a Muslim. In the north-eastern hill town of Shillong, the governor presided over a function where the flag was hoisted by four young persons – two Hindu and Muslim boy/girl pairings – for 'symbolically it is appropriate for young India to hoist the flag of the new India that is being born'.

When the first, so to say fantastical, Independence Day was observed on 26 January 1930 the crowds were 'solemn and orderly' (as Nehru observed). But, in 1947, when the real day of Independence came, the feelings on display were rather more elemental. To quote a foreign observer, everywhere, 'in city after city, lusty crowds have burst the bottled-up frustrations of many years in an emotional mass jag. Mob sprees have rolled from mill districts to gold coasts and back again . . . [T]he happy, infectious celebrations blossomed in forgetfulness of the decades of sullen resentment against all that was symbolized by a sahib's sun-topi.'

The happenings in India's most populous city, Calcutta, were characteristic of the mood. For the past few years the city had been in the grip of a cloth shortage, whose signs now miraculously disappeared in a 'rash of flags that has broken out on houses and buildings . . ., on cars and bicycles and in the hands of babes and sucklings'. Meanwhile, in Government House, a new Indian governor was being sworn in. Not best pleased with the sight was the private secretary of the departing British governor. He complained that 'the general motley character of the gathering from the clothing point of view

detracted greatly from its dignity'. There were no dinner jackets and ties on view: only loincloths and white Gandhi caps. With 'the throne room full of unauthorized persons', the ceremony was 'a foretaste of what was to come' after the British had left India. Its nadir was reached when the outgoing governor of Bengal, Sir Frederick Burrows, had a white Gandhi cap placed on his head as he made to leave the room.

II

In Delhi there was 'prolonged applause' when the president of the Constituent Assembly began the meeting by invoking the Father of the Nation – Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Outside, the crowds shouted 'Mahatma Gandhi ki jai'. Yet Gandhi was not present at the festivities in the capital. He was in Calcutta, but did not attend any function or hoist a flag there either. The Gandhi caps were on display at Government House with neither his knowledge nor permission. On the evening of the 14th he was visited by the chief minister of West Bengal, who asked him what form the celebrations should take the next day. 'People are dying of hunger all round,' answered Gandhi. 'Do you wish to hold a celebration in the midst of this devastation?'⁷

Gandhi's mood was bleak indeed. When a porter from the leading nationalist paper, the *Hindustan Times*, requested a message on the occasion of Independence, he replied that 'he had run dry'. The British Broadcasting Corporation asked his secretary to help them record a message from the one man the world thought really represented India. Gandhi told them to talk to Jawaharlal Nehru instead. The BBC were not persuaded: they sent the emissary back, adding, as inducement, the fact that this message would be translated into many languages and broadcast around the globe. Gandhi was unmoved, saying: 'Ask them to forget I know English.'

Gandhi marked 15 August 1947 with a twenty-four-hour fast. The freedom he had struggled so long for had come at an unacceptable price. Independence had also meant Partition. The last twelve months had seen almost continuous rioting between Hindus and Muslims. The violence had begun on 16 August 1946 in Calcutta and spread to the Bengal countryside. From there it moved on to Bihar, then on to the United Provinces and finally to the province of Punjab, where the scale of the violence and the extent of the killing exceeded even the horrors that had preceded it.

The violence of August–September 1946 was, in the first instance, instigated by the Muslim League, the party which fuelled the movement for a separate state of Pakistan. The League was led by Mohammad Ali Jinnah, an austere, aloof man, and yet a brilliant political tactician. Like Nehru and Gandhi, he was a lawyer trained in England. Like them, he had once been a member of the Indian National Congress, but he had left the party because he felt that it was led by and for Hindus. Despite its nationalist protestations, argued Jinnah, the Congress did not really represent the interests of India's largest minority, the Muslims.

By starting a riot in Calcutta in August 1946, Jinnah and the League hoped to polarize the two communities further, and thus force the British to divide India when they finally quit. In this endeavour they richly succeeded. The Hindus retaliated savagely in Bihar, their actions supported by local Congress leaders. The British had already said that they would not transfer power to any government 'whose authority is directly denied by large and powerful elements in the Indian national life'.⁸ The blood shed of 1946–7 seemed to suggest that the Muslims were just such an element, who would not live easily or readily under a Congress government dominated by Hindus. Now 'each communal outbreak was cited as a further endorsement of the two-nation theory, and of the inevitability of the partition of the country'.⁹

Gandhi was not a silent witness to the violence. When the first reports came in from rural Bengal, he set everything else aside and made for the spot. This 77-year-old man walked in difficult terrain through slush and stone, consoling the Hindus who had much the worse of the riots. In a tour of seven weeks he walked 116 miles, mostly barefoot, addressing almost a hundred village meetings. Later he visited Bihar, where the Muslims were the main sufferers. Then he went to Delhi, where refugees from the Punjab had begun to pour in, Hindus and Sikhs who had lost all in the carnage. They were filled with feelings of revenge, which Gandhi sought to contain, for he was fearful that it would lead to retributory violence against those Muslims who had chosen to stay behind in India.

Two weeks before the designated day of Independence the Mahatma left Delhi. He spent four days in Kashmir and then took the train to Calcutta, where, a year after it began, the rioting had not yet died down. On the afternoon of the 13th he set up residence in the Muslim dominated locality of Beliaghata, in 'a ramshackle building open on all sides to the crowds', to see whether 'he could contribute his share in the return of sanity in the premier city of Calcutta'.

Gandhi decided simply to fast and pray on the 15th. By the afternoon news reached him of (to quote a newspaper report) ‘almost unbelievable scenes of fraternity and rejoicing’ in some of the worst affected areas of Calcutta. ‘While Hindus began erecting triumphal arches at the entrance of streets and lanes and decorating them with palm leaves, banners, flags and bunting, Muslim shopkeepers and householders were not slow in decorating their shops and houses with flags of the Indian Dominion’. Hindus and Muslims drove through the streets in open cars and lorries, shouting the nationalist slogan ‘Jai Hind’, to which ‘large, friendly crowds of both communities thronging the streets readily and joyfully responded’.¹⁰

Reports of this spontaneous intermingling seem to have somewhat lifted the Mahatma’s mood. He decided he would make a statement on the day, not to the BBC, but through his own preferred means of communication, the prayer meeting. A large crowd – of 10,000 according to one report, 30,000 according to another – turned up to hear him speak at the Rash Bagan Maidan in Beliaghata. Gandhi said he would like to believe that the fraternization between Hindus and Muslims on display that day ‘was from the heart and not a momentary impulse’. Both communities had drunk from the ‘poison cup of disturbances’; now that they had made up, the ‘nectar of friendliness’ might taste even sweeter. Who knows, perhaps as a consequence Calcutta might even ‘be entirely free from the communal virus for ever’.

That Calcutta was peaceful on 15 August was a relief, and also a surprise. For the city had been on edge in the weeks leading up to Independence. By the terms of the Partition Award, Bengal had been divided, with the eastern wing going to Pakistan and the western section staying in India. Calcutta, the province’s premier city, was naturally a bone of contention. The Boundary Commission chose to allot it to India, sparking fears of violence on the eve of Independence.

Across the subcontinent there was trouble in the capital of the Punjab, Lahore. This, like Calcutta, was a multireligious and multicultural city. Among the most majestic of its many fine buildings was the Badshahi mosque, built by the last of the great Mughal emperors, Aurangzeb. But Lahore had also once been the capital of a Sikh empire, and was more recently a centre of the Hindu reform sect, the Arya Samaj. Now, like all other settlements in the Punjab, its fate lay in the hands of the British, who would divide up the province. The Bengal division was announced before the 15th, but an announcement of the Punjab ‘award’ had been postponed until after that date. Would Lahore and its neighbourhood be allotted to India, or to Pakistan?

The latter seemed more likely, as well as more logical, for the Muslims were the largest community in the city. Indeed, a new governor had already been appointed for the new Pakistani province of West Punjab, and had moved into Government House in Lahore. On the evening of the 15th he threw a party to celebrate his taking office.

As he later recalled, this ‘must have been the worst party ever given by anyone . . . The electric current had failed and there were no fans and no lights. The only light which we had was from the flames of the burning city of Lahore about half a mile away. All around the garden, there was firing going on – not isolated shots, but volleys. Who was firing at who, no one knew and no one bothered to ask.’¹¹

No one bothered to ask. Not in the governor’s party, perhaps. In Belaghata, however, Mahatma Gandhi expressed his concern that this ‘madness still raged in Lahore’. When and how would it end? Perhaps one could hope that ‘the noble example of Calcutta, if it was sincere, would affect the Punjab and the other parts of India’.

III

By November 1946 the all-India total of deaths in rioting was in excess of 5,000. As an army memo mournfully observed: ‘Calcutta was revenged in Noakhali, Noakhali in Bihar, Bihar in Garmukteshwar, Garmukteshwar in ????’¹²

At the end of 1946 one province that had escaped the rioting was the Punjab. In office there were the Unionists, a coalition of Muslim, Hindu and Sikh landlords. They held the peace uncertainly, for ranged against them were the militant Muslim Leaguers on the one side and the no less militant Sikh political party, the Akali Dal, on the other. Starting in January, episodic bouts of violence broke out in the cities of Punjab. These accelerated after the first week of March, when the Unionists were forced out of office. By May the epicentre of violence had shifted decisively from the east of India to the north-west. A statement submitted to the House of Lords said that 4,014 people were killed in riots in India between 18 November 1946 and 18 May 1947. Of these, as many as 3,024 had died in the Punjab alone.¹³

There were some notable similarities between Bengal and Punjab, the two provinces central to the events of 1946–7. Both had Muslim majorities, and thus were claimed for Pakistan. But both also contained many millions of

Hindus. In the event, both provinces were divided, with the Muslim majority districts going over to East or West Pakistan, while the districts in which other religious groups dominated were allotted to India.

But there were some crucial differences between the two provinces as well. Bengal had along history of often bloody conflict between Hindus and Muslims, dating back to (at least) the last decades of the nineteenth century. By contrast, in the Punjab the different communities had lived more or less in peace – there were no significant clashes on religious grounds before 1947. In Bengal large sections of the Hindu middle class actively sought Partition. They were quite happy to shuffle off the Muslim-dominated areas and make their home in or around the provincial capital. For several decades now, Hindu professionals had been making their way to the west, along with landlords who sold their holdings and invested the proceeds in property or businesses in Calcutta. By contrast, the large Hindu community in the Punjab was dominated by merchants and moneylenders, bound by close ties to the agrarian classes. They were unwilling to relocate, and hoped until the end that somehow Partition would be avoided.

The last difference, and the most telling, was the presence in the Punjab of the Sikhs. This third leg of the stool was absent in Bengal, where it was a straight fight between Hindus and Muslims. Like the Muslims, the Sikhs had one book, one formless God, and were a close-knit community of believers. Sociologically, however, the Sikhs were closer to the Hindus. With them they had a *roti-beti rishta* – a relationship of inter-dining and inter-marriage – and with them they had a shared history of persecution at the hands of the Mughals.

Forced to choose, the Sikhs would come down on the side of the Hindus. But they were in no mood to choose at all. For there were substantial communities of Sikh farmers in both parts of the province. At the turn of the century, Sikhs from eastern Punjab had been asked by the British to settle areas in the west, newly served by irrigation. In a matter of a few decades they had built prosperous settlements in these ‘canal colonies’. Why now should they leave them? Their holy city, Amritsar, lay in the east, but Nankana Saheb (the birthplace of the founder of their religion) lay in the west. Why should they not enjoy free access to both places?

Unlike the Hindus of Bengal, the Sikhs of Punjab were slow to comprehend the meaning and reality of Partition. At first they doggedly insisted that they would stay where they were. Then, as the possibility of division became more likely, they claimed a separate state for themselves, to be called

‘Khalistan’. This demand no one took seriously, not the Hindus, not the Muslims, and least of all the British.

The historian Robin Jeffrey has pointed out that, at least until the month of August 1947, the Sikhs were ‘more sinned against than sinning’. They had been ‘abandoned by the British, tolerated by the Congress, taunted by the Muslim League, and, above all, frustrated by the failures of their own political leadership . . .’¹⁴ It was the peculiar (not to say tragic) dilemma of the Sikhs that best explains why, when religious violence finally came to the Punjab, it was so accelerated and concentrated. From March to August, every month was hotter and bloodier than the last. Nature cynically lent its weight to politics and history, for the monsoon was unconscionably late in coming in 1947. And, like the monsoon, the boundary award was delayed as well, which only heightened the uncertainty.

The task of partitioning Bengal and the Punjab was entrusted to a British judge named Sir Cyril Radcliffe. He had no prior knowledge of India (this was deemed an advantage). However, he was given only five weeks to decide upon the lines he would draw in both east and west. It was, to put it mildly, a very difficult job. He had, in the words of W. H. Auden, to partition a land ‘between two people fanatically at odds / with their different diets and incompatible gods’, with ‘the maps at his disposal . . . out of date’, and ‘the Census Returns almost certainly incorrect’.¹⁵

Radcliffe arrived in India in the first week of July. He was assigned four advisers for the Punjab: two Muslims, one Hindu, and one Sikh. But since these fought on every point, he soon dispensed with them. Still, as he wrote to his nephew, he knew that ‘nobody in India will love me for the award about the Punjab and Bengal and there will be roughly 80 million people with a grievance who will begin looking for me. I do not want them to find me . . .’¹⁶

On 1 August a Punjab Boundary Force was setup to control the violence. The force was headed by a major general, T. W. ‘Pete’ Rees, a Welshman from Abergavenny. Under him were four advisers of the rank of brigadier: two Muslims, one Hindu, and one Sikh. In his first report Rees predicted that the boundary award ‘would please no one entirely. It may well detonate the Sikhs’.¹⁷ This was said on 7 August; on the 14th, the commander-in-chief of the British Indian Army, Field Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck, observed that ‘the delay in announcing the award of the Border Commission is having a most disturbing and harmful effect. It is realised of course that the announcement may add fresh fuel to the fire, but lacking the announcement, the wildest rumours are current, and are being spread by mischief makers of whom there is no lack.’¹⁸

The rains still held off, and the temperature was a hundred degrees in the shade. This was especially trying to Muslims, both soldiers and civilians, observing the dawn-to-dusk fast on the occasion of Ramzan, which that year fell between 19 July and 16 August. Rees asked his Muslim driver why the monsoon had failed, and he replied, 'God too is displeased'.

The boundary award was finally announced on 16 August. The award enraged the Muslims, who thought that the Gurdaspur district should have gone to Pakistan instead of India. Angrier still were the Sikhs, whose beloved Nankana Sahib now lay marooned in an Islamic state. On both sides of the border the brutalities escalated. In eastern Punjab bands of armed Sikhs roamed the countryside, seeking out and slaying Muslims wherever they were to be found. Those who could escaped over the border to West Punjab, where they further contributed to the cycle of retribution and revenge. Muslims from Amritsar and around streamed into the (to them) safe haven of Lahore. The 'stories of these Refugees, oriental and biblical in exaggeration, are in deed founded on very brutal fact, and they do not lack handless stumps etc., which they can and doparade before their fellow Muslims in Lahore and further west ...'

According to Pete Rees's own figures, from March to the end of July, the casualties in the Punjab were estimated at 4,500 civilians dead and 2,500 wounded. But in the month of August alone, casualties as reported officially by the troops were estimated at 15,000 killed, and Rees admitted that the actual figure 'may well have been two or three times the number'.)

The Indian prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, was deeply worried about the Punjab troubles and their wider repercussions. In the last fortnight of August he visited the province three times, talking to people on either side of the border and taking aerial sorties. Nehru did not think that there was 'anything to choose between the brutality of one side or the other. Both sides have been incredibly inhuman and bar-barous'.¹⁹ The adjective that Rees himself used for the savagery was 'pre-medieval'. In truth, it was also medieval and modern. For the arms used by the rioters 'varied from primitive axe, spear, and club to the most modern tommy-gun and light machine-gun'.

On 2 September the Punjab Boundary Force was disbanded. It had not been especially effective anyway. It was hampered by the problem of dual authority: by having to report to civilian officers in the absence of martial law. With the exit of the Punjab Boundary Force, responsibility for law and order was now vested in the governments of India and Pakistan. The riots continued, as did the two-way exodus. West Punjab was being cleansed of Hindus and Sikhs, East Punjab being emptied of Muslims. The clinical even-handedness

of the violence was described by the Punjab correspondent of the respected Madras-based weekly *Swatantra*. He wrote of seeing

an empty refugee special steaming into Ferozepur Station late one afternoon. The driver was incoherent with terror, the guard was lying dead in his van, and the stoker was missing. I walked down the platform – all but two bogeys were bespattered with blood inside and out; three dead bodies lay in pools of blood in a third-class carriage. An armed Muslim mob had stopped the train between Lahore and Ferozepur and done this neat job of butchery in broad daylight.

There is another sight I am not likely to easily forget. A five-mile-long caravan of Muslim refugees crawling at a snail's pace into Pakistan over the Sutlej Bridge. Bullock-carts piled high with pitiful chattels, cattle being driven alongside. Women with babies in their arms and wretched little tin trunks on their heads. Twenty thousand men, women and children trekking into the promised land – not because it is the promised land, but because bands of Hindus and Sikhs in Faridkot State and the interior of Ferozepur district had hacked hundreds of Muslims to death and made life impossible for the rest.²⁰

Ten million refugees were on the move, on foot, by bullock-cart, and by train, sometimes travelling under army escort, at other times trusting to fate and their respective gods. Jawaharlal Nehru flew over one refugee convoy which comprised 100,000 people and stretched for ten miles. It was travelling from Jullundur to Lahore, and had to pass through Amritsar, where there were 70,000 refugees from West Punjab 'in an excited state'. Nehru suggested bulldozing a road around the town, so that the two convoys would not meet.²¹

This was without question the greatest mass migration in history. 'Nowhere in known history ha[d] the transfer of so many millions taken place in so few days'. They fled, wrote an eyewitness,

through heat and rain, flood and bitter Punjab cold. The dust of the caravans stretched low across the Indian plains and mingled with the scent of fear and sweat, human waste and putrefying bodies. When the cloud of hate subsided the roll of the dead was called and five hundred thousand names echoed across the dazed land – dead of gunshot wounds, sword, dagger and knife slashes and others of epidemic diseases. While the largest number died of violence, there were tired, gentle souls who

looked across their plundered gardens and then lay down and died. For what good is life when reason stops and men run wild? Why pluck your baby from the spike or draw your lover from the murky well?²²

The trouble in the province was made worse by the noticeably partisan attitude of the governor of West Punjab, Sir Francis Mudie. He was 'inveterate against the Congress'. Mudie thought he 'could govern himself. Thus he thwarts his Cabinet, above all in their attempts to bridge the gulf between West and East Punjab, and therefore between Pakistan and India'. Tragically, no Pakistani politician was willing to take on religious fanaticism. Whatever their private thoughts, they were unwilling to speak out in public. As for Pakistan's new governor general, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, he was headquartered in the coastal city of Karachi (the country's capital), and had 'only visited Lahore in purdah and most carefully guarded'. This timidity was in striking contrast to the brave defence of their minorities by the two pre-eminent Indian politicians. Indeed, as a British observer wrote, 'Nehru's and Gandhi's stock has never been so high with the Muslims of West Punjab'.²³

Meanwhile, trouble had flared up once more in Bengal. There were reports of fresh rioting in Noakhali. In Calcutta itself the peace was broken in Gandhi's own adopted locality of Beliaghata. Here, on 31 August, a Hindu youth was attacked by Muslims. Retaliatory violence followed and spread. By dusk on 1 September more than fifty people lay dead. That night, Gandhi decided he would go on a fast. 'But how can you fast against the *goondas* [hooligans]?' asked a friend. Gandhi's answer, according to an eyewitness, ran as follows: 'I know I shall be able to tackle the Punjab too if I can control Calcutta. But if I falter now, the conflagration may spread and soon. I can see clearly two or three [foreign] Powers will be upon us and thus will end our short-lived dream of independence.' 'But if you die the conflagration will be worse,' replied the friend. 'At least I won't be there to witness it,' said Gandhi. 'I shall have done my bit.'²⁴

Gandhi began his fast on 2 September. By the next day Hindu and Muslim *goondas* were coming to him and laying down their arms. Mixed processions for communal harmony took place in different parts of the city. A deputation of prominent politicians representing the Congress, the Muslim League and the locally influential Hindu Mahasabha assured Gandhi that there would be no further rioting. The Mahatma now broke his fast, which had lasted three days.

The peace held, prompting Lord Mountbatten to remark famously that one unarmed man had been more effective than 50,000 troops in Punjab. But the Mahatma and his admirers might have treasured as much this tribute from the *Statesman*, a British-owned paper in Calcutta that had long opposed him and his politics: 'On the ethics of fasting as a political instrument we have over many years failed to concur with India's most renowned practitioner of it . . . But never in a long career has Mahatma Gandhi, in our eyes, fasted in a simpler, worthier cause than this, nor one calculated for immediate effective appeal to the public conscience.'²⁵

On 7 September, having spent four weeks in Beliaghata, Gandhi left for Delhi. He hoped to proceed further, to the Punjab. However, on his arrival in the capital he was immediately confronted with tales of strife and dispossession. The Muslims of Delhi were frightened. Their homes and places of worship had come under increasing attack. Gandhi was told that no fewer than 137 mosques had been destroyed in recent weeks. Hindu and Sikh refugees had also forcibly occupied Muslim homes. As a Quaker relief worker reported, 'the Muslim population of Delhi of all classes – civil servants, businessmen, artisans, tongawallahs, bearers – had fled to a few natural strongholds' – such as the Purana Qila, the greathigh-walled fort in the middle of the city, and the tomb of the Mughal emperor Humayun. In the Purana Qila alone there were 60,000 refugees, huddled together in tents, 'in the corners of battlements and in the open, together with their camels and tongas and ponies, battered old taxis and luxury limousines'.²⁶

Gandhi now put his Punjab programme on hold. He visited the camps in the capital and outside it. In the plains around Delhi lived a farming community called Meos, Muslims by faith, but who had adopted many of the practices and rituals of their Hindu neighbours. In the madness of the time this syncretism was forgotten. Thousands of Meos were killed or driven out of their homes, whether these lay in Indian territory or in the princely states of Alwar and Bharatpur.²⁷

Through September and October, writes his biographer D. G. Tendulkar, Gandhi 'went round hospitals and refugee camps giving consolation to distressed people'. He 'appealed to the Sikhs, the Hindus and the Muslims to forget the past and not to dwell on their sufferings but to extend the right hand of fellowship to each other, and to determine to live in peace . . .' He 'begged of them all to bring about peace quickly in Delhi, so that he might be able to proceed to both East and West Punjab'. Gandhi said 'he was proceeding to the Punjab in order to make the Mussalmans undo the wrong that they were said to have perpetrated there [against the Hindus and the Sikhs]. But he could not

hope for success, unless he could secure justice for the Mussalmans in Delhi.’²⁸

Gandhi also spoke at a camp of the Rash triya Swayamsevak Sangh. Founded by a Maharashtrian doctor in 1925, the RSS was a cohesive and motivated body of Hindu young men. Gandhi himself was impressed by their discipline and absence of caste feeling, but less so by their antagonism to other religions. He told the RSS members that ‘if the Hindus felt that in India there was no place for any one except the Hindus and if non-Hindus, especially Muslims, wished to live here, they had to live as the slaves of the Hindus, they would kill Hinduism’. Gandhi could see that the RSS was ‘a well-organized, well-disciplined body’. But, he told its members, ‘its strength could be used in the interests of India or against it. He did not know whether there was any truth in the allegations [of inciting communal hatred] made against the Sangha. It was for the Sangha to show by their uniform behaviour that the allegations were baseless.’²⁹

Unlike Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru was not inclined to give the Sangh the benefit of doubt. ‘It seems to me clear’, he told his home minister, Vallabhbhai Patel, ‘that the RSS have a great deal to do with the disturbances not only in Delhi but elsewhere. In Amritsar their activities have been very obvious’. Nehru’s feelings about the RSS stemmed from his deeper worries about the communal situation. He thought that there was ‘a very definite and well-organized attempt of certain Sikh and Hindu fascist elements to overturn the government, or at least to break up its present character. It has been something more than a communal disturbance. Many of these people have been brutal and callous in the extreme. They have functioned as pure terrorists.’³⁰

The worry was the greater because the fanatics were functioning in ‘a favourable atmosphere as far as public opinion was concerned’. In Delhi, especially, the Hindu and Sikh refugees from Pakistan were baying for blood. But the prime minister insisted that India must be a place where the Muslims could live and work freely. An Englishman on the governor general’s staff wrote in his diary of how ‘to see Nehru at close range during this ordeal is an inspiring experience. He vindicates one’s faith in the humanist and the civilised intellect. Almost alone in the turmoil of communalism, with all its variations, from individual intrigue to mass madness, he speaks with the voice of reason and charity.’³¹

At the initiative of Gandhi and Nehru, the Congress now passed a resolution on ‘the rights of minorities’. The party had never accepted the ‘two-nation theory’; forced against its will to accept Partition, it still believed that ‘India is a land of many religions and many races, and must remain so’. Whatever

be the situation in Pakistan, India would be ‘a democratic secular State where all citizens enjoy full rights and are equally entitled to the protection of the State, irrespective of the religion to which they belong’. The Congress wished to ‘assure the minorities in India that it will continue to protect, to the best of its ability, their citizen rights against aggression’.³²

However, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh was actively sceptical of this viewpoint. Its *sarsanghchalak*, or head, was a lean, bearded science graduate named M. S. Golwalkar. Golwalkar was strongly opposed to the idea of a secular state that would not discriminate on the basis of religion. In the India of his conception,

The non-Hindu people of Hindustan must either adopt Hindu culture and language, must learn and respect and hold in reverence the Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but of those of glorification of the Hindu race and culture . . . in a word they must cease to be foreigners, or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment – not even citizens’ rights.³³

On Sunday 7 December 1947 the RSS held a large rally at the Ramlila Grounds in the heart of Delhi. The main speech was by M. S. Golwalkar. As the *Hindustan Times* reported, Golwalkar denied that the RSS aimed at the establishment of a Hindu Raj, but nevertheless insisted: ‘We aim at the solidarity of the Hindu society. With this ideal in view, the Sangh will march forward on its path, and will not be deterred by any authority or personality.’³⁴

The authorities being alluded to were the Congress Party and the government of India; the personalities, Nehru and Gandhi, towards whom there was much hostility among those sections of the refugees sympathetic to the RSS. Gandhi had his meetings disrupted by refugees who objected to readings from the Quran, or who shouted slogans asking why he did not speak of the sufferings of those Hindus and Sikhs still living in Pakistan. In fact, as D. G. Tendulkar writes, Gandhi ‘was equally concerned with the sufferings of the minority community in Pakistan. He would have liked to be able to go to their succour. But with what face could he now go there, when he could not guarantee full redress to the Muslims in Delhi?’

With attacks on Muslims continuing, Gandhi chose to resort to another fast. This began on 13 January, and was addressed to three different constituencies. The first were the people of India. To them he simply pointed out

that if they did not believe in the two-nation theory, they would have to show in their chosen capital, the 'Eternal City' of Delhi, that Hindus and Muslims could live in peace and brotherhood. The second constituency was the government of Pakistan. 'How long', he asked them, 'can I bank upon the patience of the Hindus and the Sikhs, in spite of my fast? Pakistan has to put a stop to this state of affairs' (that is, the driving out of minorities from their territory).

Gandhi's fast was addressed, finally, to the government of India. They had withheld Pakistan's share of the 'sterling balance' which the British owed jointly to the two dominions, a debt incurred on account of Indian contributions during the Second World War. This amounted to Rs550 million, a fair sum. New Delhi would not release the money as it was angry with Pakistan for having recently attempted to seize the state of Kashmir. Gandhi saw this as unnecessarily spiteful, and so he made the ending of his fast conditional on the transfer to Pakistan of the money owed to it.

On the night of 15 January the government of India decided to release the money owed to the government of Pakistan. The next day more than 1,000 refugees signed a declaration saying they would welcome back the displaced Muslims of Delhi and allow them to return to their homes. But Gandhi wanted more authoritative assurances. Meanwhile, his health rapidly declined. His kidney was failing, his weight was dropping and he was plagued by nausea and headache. The doctors issued a warning of their own: 'It is our duty to tell the people to take immediate steps to produce the requisite conditions for ending the fast without delay.'

On 17 January a Central Peace Committee was formed under the leadership of the president of the Constituent Assembly, Rajendra Prasad. Other Congress Party members were among its members, as were representatives of the RSS, the Jamiat-ul-Ulema and Sikh bodies. On the morning of the 18th they took a joint declaration to Gandhi which satisfied him enough to end his fast. The declaration pledged 'that we shall protect the life, property and faith of Muslims and that the incidents which have taken place in Delhi will not happen again'.³⁵

Would the 'miracle of Calcutta' be repeated in Delhi? The leaders of the militant groupings seemed chastened by Gandhi's fast. But their followers remained hostile. On previous visits to Delhi Gandhi had stayed in the sweepers colony; this time, however, he was put up at the home of his millionaire follower G. D. Birla. Even while his fast was on, bands of refugees marched past Birla House, shouting, 'Let Gandhi die'. Then, on 20 January, a Punjabi refugee named Madan Lal threw a bomb at Gandhi in Birla House while he

was leading a prayer meeting. It exploded at some distance from him; luckily no one was hurt.

Gandhi was undaunted by the attempt on his life. He carried on meeting people, angry refugees included. On 26 January he spoke at his prayer meeting of how that day was celebrated in the past as Independence Day. Now freedom had come, but its first few months had been deeply disillusioning. However, he trusted that ‘the worst is over’, that Indians would work collectively for the ‘equality of all classes and creeds, never the domination and superiority of the major community over a minor, however insignificant it may be in numbers or influence’. He also permitted himself the hope ‘that, though geographically and politically India is divided into two, at heart we shall ever be friends and brothers helping and respecting one another and be one for the outside world’.

Gandhi had fought a lifelong battle for a free and united India; and yet, at the end, he could view its division with detachment and equanimity. Others were less forgiving. On the evening of 30 January he was shot dead by a young man at his daily prayer meeting. The assassin, who surrendered afterwards, was a Brahmin from Poona named Nathuram Godse. He was tried and later sentenced to death, but not before he made a remarkable speech justifying his act. Godse claimed that his main provocation was the Mahatma’s ‘constant and consistent pandering to the Muslims’, ‘culminating in his lastpro-Muslim fast [which] at last goaded me to the conclusion that the existence of Gandhi should be brought to an end immediately’.³⁶

IV

Gandhi’s death brought forth an extraordinary outpouring of grief. There were moving tributes from Albert Einstein, who had long held Gandhi to be the greatest figure of the twentieth century, and from George Orwell, who had once thought Gandhi to be a humbug but now saw him as a saint. There was a characteristically flippant reaction from George Bernard Shaw – It shows you how dangerous it is to be good’ – and a characteristically petty one from Mohammad Ali Jinnah, who said that the death of his sold rival was a loss merely to ‘the Hindu community’.

However, the two most relevant public reactions were from Gandhi’s two most distinguished, not to say most powerful, followers, Vallabhbhai Patel and Jawaharlal Nehru. Patel who was now home minister in the government of India, was a fellow Gujarati who had joined Gandhi as far back as 1918. He

was a superb organizer and strategist who had played a major role in making the Congress a national party. In the Indian Cabinet, he was second only to the prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru had come to Gandhi a couple of years later than Patel, and could converse with him in only two of his three languages (Hindi and English). But he had a deep emotional bond with the Mahatma. Like Patel he generally called Gandhi 'Bapu', or 'Father'. But he was, in many ways, the favourite son (dearer by far than the four biological children of the Mahatma), and also his chosen political heir.

Now, in an India caught in the throes of civil strife, both men told the nation that while their master had gone, his message remained. Speaking on All-India Radio immediately after Gandhi's death, Patel appealed to the people not to think of revenge, but 'to carry the message of love and non-violence enunciated by Mahatmaji. It is a shame for us that the greatest man of the world has had to pay with his life for the sins which we have committed. We did not follow him when he was alive; let us at least follow his steps now he is dead.'³⁷ Speaking at Allahabad after immersing Gandhi's ashes in the Ganga, Nehru observed that '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 . . . ?' Indians, said Nehru, had now 'to hold together and fight that terrible poison of communalism that has killed the greatest man of our age'.³⁸

Nehru and Patel both called for unity and forgiveness, but as it happened the two men had recently been involved in a bitter row. In the last fortnight of December Nehru had planned to visit the riot-hit town of Ajmer. At the last minute he called off his trip and sent his personal secretary instead. Patel took serious offence. He felt that since the Home Ministry had sent its own enquiry team to Ajmer, the tour of the prime minister's underling implied a lack of faith. Nehru explained that he had been forced to cancel his own visit because of a death in the family, and had thus sent his secretary – mostly so as not to disappoint those who had expected him to come. But in anycase, as the head of government he had the right to go wherever he wished whenever he wished, or to send someone else to deputize for him. Patel answered that in a cabinet system the prime minister was merely the first among equals; he did not stand above and dominate his fellow ministers.

The exchange grew progressively more contentious, and at one stage both men offered to resign. Then it was agreed that they would put their respective points of view before Gandhi. Before a suitable time could be found the Mahatma began his final fast. The next week Patel was out of Delhi, but the matter lay very much on his mind, and on Nehru's. Indeed, on 30 January Gandhi met Patel just before the fateful prayer meeting and asked that he and

Nehru sort out their differences. He also said he would like to meet both of them the next day.

Three days after Gandhi's assassination Nehru wrote Patel a letter which said that 'with Bapu's death, everything is changed and we have to face a different and more difficult world. The old controversies have ceased to have much significance and it seems to me that the urgent need of the hour is for all of us to function as closely and co-operatively as possible . . .' Patel, in reply, said he 'fully and heartily reciprocate[d] the sentiments you have so feelingly expressed . . . Recent events had made me very unhappy and I had written to Bapu . . . appealing to him to relieve me, but his death changes everything and the crisis that has overtaken us must awaken in us afresh realisation of how much we have achieved together and the need for further joint efforts in our grief-stricken country's interests.'³⁹

Gandhi could not reconcile, in life, Hindu with Muslim, but he did reconcile, through his death, Jawaharlal Nehru with Vallabhbhai Patel. It was a patch-up of rather considerable consequence for the new and very fragile nation.