the Government. Jinnah, who was approached by Nehru but refused to co-operate, was bitterly critical of what he described as 'the caste Hindu Fascist Congress and their henchmen' who sought 'to dominate and rule over the Mussalmans and other minority communities of India with the aid of British bayonets'.

This bitterness boded ill at a time when exemplary restraint was necessary to pull the country through a critical period. The 'Direct Action Day', which was celebrated by the Muslim League on August 16th, touched off a chain reaction of violent explosions which in the succeeding twelve months shook the country.
The Muslim League observed August 16, 1946, as the ‘Direct Action Day’. On that day Calcutta witnessed a communal riot, the scale and intensity of which had never been known in living memory. For four days, bands of hooligans armed with sticks, spears, hatchets and even fire-arms, roamed the town, robbing and killing at will. The ‘Great Calcutta Killing’—to use the grim epithet coined by the Statesman—took a toll of more than five thousand lives besides the fifteen thousand or more who were injured.

Bengal was ruled by a Muslim League ministry led by H. S. Suhrawardy. ‘In retrospect,’ wrote the Statesman ‘it is the Muslim League’s conduct before the riots that stands open to inference—not only by its political opponents—that it was divided in mind on whether rioting of some sort would be good or bad.’ Charges were in fact levelled against the Provincial Government that it did not provide against the outbreak which it might well have anticipated, and that Suhrawardy deliberately prevented the police from acting promptly and impartially when the riots broke out.

If, as was suggested at the time, the outbreak was intended to serve as a demonstration of the strength of the Muslim feeling on Pakistan, it proved a double-edged weapon. The non-Muslims of Calcutta reeled under the initial impact, but then, taking advantage of their numerical superiority, hit back savagely. The impression went abroad that, in spite of a Muslim League ministry in Bengal, the Hindus had won in this ‘trial of strength’ in Calcutta. Two months later reprisals followed in the Muslim-majority district of Noakhali in East Bengal where, taking
advantage of poor communications and encouraged by fanatical
priests and ambitious politicians, local hooligans burnt the Hindus' property, looted their crops and desecrated their temples. A shocking innovation was the forcible conversion of Hindus and kidnapping of Hindu women. Thousands of Hindus fled from their homes. In that year of growing lawlessness, East Bengal did for rural India what Calcutta had done for the towns; it showed what inhumanities could be practised in the name of religion and ostensibly for political ends.

Gandhi was in Delhi when the news from East Bengal came through. He was particularly hurt by the crimes against women. He cancelled all his plans and decided to leave for East Bengal. Friends tried to dissuade him. His health was poor; important political developments, on which his advice would be required, were imminent. 'I do not know,' he said, 'what I shall be able to do there. All that I know is that I won't be at peace unless I go.'

At Calcutta he saw the ravages of the August riots and confessed to a 'sinking feeling at the mass madness which can turn man into less than a brute'. He made a courtesy call on the British Governor, met Premier Suhrawardy and his colleagues, and Hindu and Muslim leaders of Bengal. He made it clear that he had not come as a prosecutor or a judge. He was interested not in fastening guilt on any community or individual, but in creating conditions which would enable the two communities to resume their peaceful life. Suhrawardy was at first agreeably helpful: he deputed a minister and two parliamentary secretaries to accompany Gandhi.

The atmosphere in East Bengal was charged with fear, hatred and violence. In a statement, Gandhi declared that he found himself in the midst of exaggeration and falsehood: 'I am unable to discover the truth. There is a terrible mutual distrust. Oldest friendships have snapped. Truth and Ahimsa, by which I swear and which have, to my knowledge, sustained me for sixty years, seem to fail to show the attributes I have ascribed to them. To test them or better to test myself I am going to a village Srirampur . . .
Of the 200 Hindu families of Srirampur village in Noakhali district, only three had remained after the recent disturbances. He dispersed his entourage in the neighbouring villages. Pyarelal, Sushila Nayar, Abha, Kanu Gandhi and Sucheta Kripalani—each of them settled in a village. At Srirampur Gandhi’s only companions were his stenographer Parsuram, his Bengali interpreter Prof. Nirmal Kumar Bose and Manu Gandhi. For the next six weeks a wooden bedstead, covered with a mattress, served as his office by day and his bed by night. His working day extended to sixteen and sometimes twenty hours. He slept little and ate little, made his bed, mended his clothes, cooked his food, attended to his enormous mail, received callers and visited local Muslims. For several years he had been maligned in the League Press, as the ‘enemy number one’ of Indian Muslims. He let the Muslims of Srirampur judge for themselves.

The restoration of confidence between the two communities was, however, a slow and difficult process. Gandhi did not agree to the demand of the Hindus for forming Hindu ‘pockets’ in Muslim areas, and for police and military reinforcements. The only protection, he maintained, which a minority could really count on was that given willingly by neighbours to neighbours. Nor did he accept the specious pleas of Muslim politicians that the accounts of the riots in East Bengal had been fabricated by the Hindu Press to discredit the Muslim League ministry; thousands of people were hardly likely to become homeless and penniless simply to spite the ministers in Calcutta. He lifted the issue of peace from the plane of politics to that of humanity; whatever the political map of the future, he pleaded, it should be common ground among all parties that standards of civilized life should not be thrown overboard.

Gandhi’s presence acted as a soothing balm on the villages of East Bengal; it eased tension, assuaged anger and softened tempers. His success would have been more spectacular were it not for the sustained propaganda against him in the Muslim Press, which continued to suspect a ‘deep political game’ in his mission. Under pressure from local party bosses and perhaps
from the League High Command, Premier Suhrawardy became critical of Gandhi's tour, and joined the outcry that Gandhi should quit Bengal. Gandhi was not dismayed by this perverse opposition; he argued that, if he could not command the confidence of the Muslim League leaders, the responsibility was his own. He was in a mood of self-examination, almost of self-castigation. An entry in his diary dated January 2, 1947, reads: 'Have been awake since 2 a.m. God's grace alone is sustaining me. I can see there is some grave defect in me somewhere which is the cause of all this. All round me is utter darkness. When will God take me out of this darkness into His light?'

The same day he left Srirampur on a village to village tour. At Chandipur village he discarded his sandals and, like the pilgrims of old, walked bare-foot. The village tracks were slippery and sometimes maliciously strewn with brambles and broken glass; the fragile bamboo bridges were tricky to negotiate. He saw gaping walls, gutted roofs, charred ruins and remnants of skeletons in the debris—the handiwork of religious frenzy. A song from Tagore, which he liked to hear, expressed some of his anguish:

Walk Alone.
If they answer not to thy call, walk alone;
If they are afraid and cower mutely facing the wall,
O thou of evil luck,
Open thy mind and speak out alone.
If they turn away and desert you when crossing the wilderness,
O thou of evil luck,
Trample the thorns under thy tread,
And along the blood-lined track travel alone.
If they do not hold up the light when the night is troubled with storm,
O thou of evil luck,
With the thunder-flame of pain ignite thine own heart,
And let it burn alone.

On March 2, 1947, he left for Bihar, where the Hindu peasants had wreaked a terrible vengeance on the Muslim minority for the events in Noakhali. Gandhi had first heard of the Bihar riots when he was on his way to Noakhali in the last week of October 1946. He had made it known that, if peace did not return at once, he would embark on a fast unto death. This warning, coupled with the stern measures adopted by the Bihar Government and a visit by Jawaharlal Nehru, helped in restoring order quickly. The loss of life, however, had been colossal, and problems of relief and rehabilitation were stupendous.

In Bihar Gandhi's refrain was the same as in East Bengal: the majority must repent and make amends; the minority must forgive and make a fresh start. He would not accept any apology for what had happened, and chided those who sought in the misdeeds of the rioters in East Bengal a justification for what had happened in Bihar. Civilized conduct, he argued, was the duty of every individual and every community irrespective of what others did. He collected subscriptions from Hindus for the relief of Muslim sufferers, and encouraged the Bihar Government to prepare an elaborate scheme for the resettlement of Muslims displaced by the riots. Conditions in Bihar began to improve; they would have improved more quickly but for the fact that communal tension in 1946-47 was a reflection of the political situation which continued to oscillate continually and violently.

While Gandhi had 'buried' himself in the villages of East Bengal and Bihar, the political landscape had undergone bewildering changes. As we have already seen, the Cabinet Mission's Plan, prepared with such infinite patience and skill had, soon after its departure, failed to work. The Muslim League withdrew its acceptance of the plan, and launched a 'direct action campaign' to achieve Pakistan. The savage rioting in Calcutta touched off a chain reaction in East Bengal and Bihar. Minor riots went on in most other provinces. Alarmed by this increasing lawlessness, Lord Wavell brought the Muslim
League into the Interim Government, but the formation of this coalition—which for seven years had been talked of as a panacea for India's political ills—fanned political controversy instead of putting it out. The Constituent Assembly was summoned to meet on December 9th, but the Muslim League had declared that its representatives would not participate. The constitutional impasse looked complete when, in the last week of November 1946, in an eleventh hour bid to bring the parties together, the British Government invited the Viceroy, Nehru, Jinnah, Liaquat Ali Khan, and Baldev Singh to London. The discussions proved abortive but the British Government issued a statement on December 6, 1946, to clarify the disputed clauses about the grouping of provinces in the Cabinet Mission Plan. Though this clarification largely met its objections, the Muslim League did not remove its boycott of the Constituent Assembly.

The year 1947 dawned with the darkest possible prospects on the political horizon. India seemed to be sliding into an undeclared, albeit confused, civil war with the battle lines passing through almost every town and village. The Central Government, split from top to bottom, was unable to set an example of cohesion or firmness to the governments in the Provinces. The Viceroy, Lord Wavell, seemed to have been completely outplayed in the face of divergent pressures which he could neither reconcile nor control; he even suggested the desperate expedient of a British evacuation of India province by province. To check the drift to chaos, Premier Attlee came to the conclusion that what was needed was a new policy and a new Viceroy to carry it out. He announced in the House of Commons on February 20, 1947 that the British Government definitely intended to quit India by June 1948, and if by that date the Indian parties did not agree on an All-India constitution, power would be transferred to 'some form of Central Government in British India or in some areas to the existing Provincial Governments or in such other ways as may seem most reasonable and in the best interest of the Indian people'. Simultaneously, it was
announced that Lord Mountbatten would succeed Lord Wavell as Viceroy.

‘Wise and courageous’ was Jawaharlal Nehru’s comment on the statement of February 20th. Jinnah, however, was impressed not so much by the bold sweep and the abounding faith which inspired this historic declaration as by the possibility envisaged in it of transferring power in June 1948 ‘to the existing Provincial Governments’. Apparently, the Muslim League could, by staying out of the Constituent Assembly, frustrate an All-India constitution, and get power for the Provinces in the east and west which it claimed for Pakistan. Of these Provinces, Bengal and Sind had already Muslim League ministries and Baluchistan was centrally administered. There were Congress ministries in Assam and the North-West Frontier Province, and a Congress-Akali Unionist coalition in Punjab; the immediate Muslim League strategy was to dislodge these three ministries and to replace them by Muslim League governments. ‘Direct Action’ campaigns were launched or intensified in these three provinces. The results, particularly in the Punjab, were disastrous. The Hindu and Sikh minorities in the West Punjab went through the same horrors as those suffered by the Hindu minority in East Bengal and the Muslim minority in Bihar. A semblance of order was restored with the help of the military, but tension continued. The first two towns of the Province, Lahore and Amritsar were caught up, however, in a strange guerilla warfare in which shooting, stabbing, and arson went on in the midst of police patrols and curfew orders.

Gandhi was in Bihar when he received the news of the trouble in the Punjab. Since October 1946 he had been wandering from one Province to another in a vain attempt to stem the tide of violence. While his work was unfinished in one Province, there was an outbreak in another. There were some who shrugged their shoulders and said that anarchy was only to be expected with the departure of the British, who alone had prevented Hindus and Muslims from flying at each other’s throats. ‘The fearful massacres,’ said Churchill in September
1947, 'which are occurring in India are no surprise to me. We are, of course, only at the beginning of these horrors and butcheries perpetrated upon one another with the ferocity of cannibals, by the races gifted with capacities for the highest culture, and who had for generations dwelt side by side in general peace under the broad, tolerant and impartial rule of the British Crown and Parliament.'

To Gandhi the violence of 1946-47 was a shocking and even a bewildering phenomenon. All his life he had worked for the day when India would set an example of non-violence to the world. The chasm between what he had cherished in his heart and what he saw was so great that he could not help feeling a deep sense of failure. His first impulse was to blame himself. Was his technique faulty? Had he been unobservant, careless, indifferent, impatient? Had he failed to detect in time that while the people had, on the whole, refrained from overt violence in the struggle against foreign rule, they had continued to harbour ill feeling against the British? Was communal violence only an expression of the violence which had smouldered in the breasts of those who had paid lip service to non-violence?

It was only natural that he should have sought an explanation of this tragedy in terms of his own philosophy and of his part in India’s political struggle. In retrospect, it would appear that he was exaggerating his own responsibility and the failure of non-violence. It would have been too much to expect that even in thirty years one single leader, however great, could have sterilized completely the hate and violence of 400 million people inhabiting a vast continent. It was remarkable enough that in the several Satyagraha campaigns he had led, violence had been reduced to negligible proportions, and India’s millions received a nationalist awakening without that dose of hatred which is usually associated with resurgent nationalisms.

While it is possible that the lawlessness which followed the arrests of the Congress leaders in August 1942 lowered standards of mass behaviour, the real explanation for the
violence of 1946-47 is to be sought in the tensions which the movement for Pakistan aroused both in its protagonists and antagonists. The basic premise of this movement was that Hindus and Muslims had nothing in common in the past, present or future. Large sections of the population were seized with vague hopes or equally vague fears. No one could say with certainty whether India would remain united or be divided into two or more states, whether the Punjab or Bengal would retain their boundaries or be split, whether Indian states would be integrated into an independent India or become autonomous. The Adivasis of Central India and the Nagas of Assam found champions for an independence which they had never claimed before; there was talk of a Dravidistan in the south and a thousand mile corridor to link the two wings of future Pakistan. The 'balkanization of India', once an ominous phrase, had become a real danger. All this excited popular fantasy; the turbulent elements in the society saw in the coming transfer of power a period of vacuum such as had occurred in the eighteenth century during the twilight of the Mogul Empire.

In the face of these perils the Central Government was a house divided against itself, and the Provincial Governments were facing increasing demoralization. The impending termination of their careers had embittered some British officers; moreover, few of them had the will or the ability to cope with the volcanic violence which erupted everywhere. Indian officers, when themselves free from prejudice, were not always able to restrain their subordinates from petty tyranny. The growth of private armies, the Muslim League National Guards, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, and others, showed that popular faith in the instruments of law and order had been shaken.

Gandhi had sensed the explosive possibilities of this situation. 'We are not yet in the midst of a civil war,' he had commented on the Great Calcutta Killing, 'but we are nearing it.' From the end of October, when he had left Delhi for Noakhali, he had made the assuaging of communal fanaticism his primary mission. He knew as well as anybody else that a settlement
between the political parties could help in restoring stability. But he also saw that not only was political settlement not in sight, but violence might influence the nature of the political settlement. He wondered whether the people might be persuaded to agree, if their leaders could not. His tours of Bengal and Bihar succeeded in re-educating the masses, but he was handicapped by the fact that his voice did not carry the weight with the Muslim middle class which it once had done. The Hindus were also restive and critical of what they believed to be his policy of ‘unilateral disarmament’, but he could still sway them.

If Gandhi’s efforts at restoring communal peace had been supplemented by someone who commanded the allegiance of the Muslim middle class, his task would not have been half so difficult. In 1946-47 Jinnah was at the zenith of his influence with the Muslim intelligentsia; he was the Qaid-i-Azam, the Great Leader, whose every nod was obeyed. If Jinnah had toured East Bengal or West Punjab, he might have helped in stopping the rot. Such a suggestion would, however, have been simply laughed away by the Muslim League leader, whose political instinct rebelled against fasts and walking tours.

Lawyer and parliamentarian as he was, it is difficult to believe that Jinnah could have believed in force. But he seemed to have believed in threats of force. We have already seen how, in 1938, he had warned the Congress that the Muslims could disrupt the unity of India, as the Sudeten Germans had broken up Czechoslovakia. After the ‘Great Calcutta Killing’ and the disturbances in Bengal and Bihar, communal violence became the strongest argument in his brief for Pakistan; if India was not divided, he warned, worse things would happen. Though he obliged Wavell and Mountbatten by signing appeals for peace, he did little to restrain his bellicose lieutenants; he himself issued double-edged statements which extenuated the violence they purported to condemn.
Chapter 52

VICTORY OF THE VANQUISHED

The British withdrawal from India had been decided and dated by the February 20th statement. ‘How can we hope,’ Churchill had asked in the House of Commons, ‘that the thousand year gulf which yawns between the Muslim and the Hindu will be bridged in fourteen months?’ To those who knew the facts of the Indian situation, fourteen months seemed not too short but too long a period for a successful withdrawal. From Mr Attlee’s window in Downing Street, the darkest aspect of the Indian horizon was the threat of a civil war. He has recorded in his memoirs that though he did not think that the chances of an orderly change-over were very good he felt there was one man who ‘might pull it off’. The man was Rear-Admiral Lord Mountbatten, who succeeded Lord Wavell in March 1947.

One of the first acts of the new Viceroy was to invite Gandhi for a discussion. The Mahatma interrupted his peace mission in Bihar and travelled by train to New Delhi. He advised Mountbatten to dissolve the Congress-League coalition government and to ask Jinnah to form a cabinet. Evidently, Gandhi’s object was to disarm Jinnah’s suspicion of the Congress and the Hindus with one supreme gesture. To the British Government, however, the suggestion looked far-fetched. The Congress leaders had lately seen enough of their Muslim League colleagues in the Interim Government to want to give them a carte blanche; the time for gestures was past. When Jinnah met Mountbatten he reiterated his demand for the division of India.

The Viceroy’s task was made easier by a reorientation of the Congress attitude to partition. Hitherto the Congress had
insisted that partition should, if at all, follow and not precede political liberation, that (to use a famous expression of Maulana Azad) there could be no divorce before marriage. But a few months of stormy courtship in the Interim Government had cured the Congress leaders of all desire for a closer union. In the spring of 1947 the choice seemed to them to be between anarchy and partition; they resigned themselves to the latter in order to salvage three-fourths of India from the chaos which threatened the whole.

The stage was thus set for the June 3rd Plan, under which power was to be transferred by the British to two successor states on August 15, 1947. The final proposals, which took the Viceroy ten weeks of tireless negotiations and taxed to the full his ingenuity and diplomatic skill, represented the lowest common denominator of agreement between the Congress and the League; though they left the ultimate decision to democratic processes—voting by members of provincial legislatures or by referendum—the partition of India, as also the partition of the Punjab and Bengal, were foregone conclusions.

What Gandhi had feared had come to pass. India was to be divided, but partition was not to be imposed; it had been accepted by Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel and a majority of the members of the Congress Working Committee. Gandhi had no hand in the final negotiations, but his opposition to partition was an open secret. His reasons were the same which he had given several times before: 'We are unable to think coherently whilst the British power is still functioning in India. Its function is not to change the map of India. All it has to do is to withdraw and leave India, carrying out the withdrawal, if possible, in an orderly manner, may be even in chaos, on or before the promised date.' The very violence, which in the opinion of his Congress colleagues and that of the British Government provided a compelling motive for partition, was for him an irresistible argument against it; to accept partition because of the fear of civil war was to acknowledge that 'everything was to be got if mad violence was perpetrated in sufficient measure'.
With such strong views on partition, it might well have been expected that Gandhi would oppose the Mountbatten Plan. The Viceroy had indeed some anxiety on this score, and Alan Campbell Johnson records how Mountbatten faced an interview with the Mahatma with some 'trepidation'. Gandhi had no intention, however, of blocking a settlement which was accepted by leaders of the Congress and the League as well as the British Government. At the meeting of the All-India Congress Committee which debated the Mountbatten Plan, he made no secret of his own misgivings but threw his weight in favour of its acceptance. By this act of self-abnegation he saved a split in the Congress at a crucial moment, without compromising his own independence.

Partition having become a fait accompli, Gandhi's efforts were henceforth directed to mitigating its risks. He welcomed Jinnah's promise of equal rights and privileges to the Hindu minority in Pakistan, and urged the future Indian Union, as 'the major partner', to set an example to its neighbour in treating the minorities not justly but generously.

A becoming pageantry was to mark the transfer of power from Britain to India on August 15, 1947, but Gandhi was in no mood to think of bands and banners. The day for which he had longed and laboured had come, but he felt no elation. Not only was India's freedom being ushered in at the cost of her unity, but large sections of the population were uneasy about their future.

Early in August, after a brief visit to Kashmir, Gandhi passed through West Punjab and saw the havoc which the recent disturbances in that province had wrought; then he left for East Bengal, where the Hindus of Noakhali feared a fresh wave of disturbances after the establishment of Pakistan.

On arrival at Calcutta he found the town in the grip of communal lawlessness which had been its lot for a year. With the exit of the Muslim League ministry and the transfer of the majority of Muslim officials and police to Pakistan, the tables had, however, been turned. It seemed as if the Hindus
of Calcutta were determined to pay off old scores. Suhrawardy, no longer Premier, and therefore somewhat chastened, met Gandhi and urged him to pacify Calcutta before proceeding to Noakhali. Gandhi agreed on condition that Suhrawardy would stay with him under the same roof in Calcutta and also use his influence with Muslim opinion in East Bengal to protect the Hindu minority. The Mahatma’s choice fell upon a Muslim workman’s house in Belighata, a part of the town which was considered unsafe for Muslims. Hardly had he moved into his new quarters, when, on August 13th, a group of young Hindus staged a demonstration against his peace mission. He explained to them how he had been trying to end the fratricidal strife, and how hate and violence would lead them nowhere. His words fell like gentle rain on parched earth, and the young men returned to their homes converted. Calcutta was transformed overnight. Rioting ceased. On August 14th, the eve-of-independence was jointly celebrated by the two communities. Hindus and Muslims collected in the streets, danced and sang together. The incubus which had pressed down upon the heart of the town since August 1946 was suddenly lifted. On the Id day Hindus exchanged greetings and gifts with Muslims. The scenes were reminiscent of the halcyon days of the Khilafat movement in 1920-22. Three to four hundred thousand people attended Gandhi’s prayer meetings, where the flags of India and Pakistan flew together. Gandhi was pleased. ‘We have drunk the poison of hatred,’ he said, ‘and so this nectar of fraternization tastes all the sweeter.’

This cordiality had hardly lasted for a fortnight when the news of the massacres and the migrations from the Punjab caused a fresh flare-up. A Hindu mob raided Gandhi’s residence in Belighata on the night of August 31st; it was angry, abusive, violent; it smashed the windows and forced its way into the house. The Mahatma’s words were drowned in a violent din; a brick flew past him; a lathi blow just missed him. Concurrently Calcutta relapsed into rioting.

This was a serious set-back to Gandhi’s efforts for peace. His
answer was the announcement of a fast from September 1st, to be broken only when peace returned to the town. 'What my word in person could not do,' he said, 'my fast may.' The announcement electrified Calcutta; the Muslims were moved, the Hindus shamed. Not even the hooligans of Calcutta could bear the thought of having his blood on their conscience; truck-loads of contraband arms were voluntarily surrendered by the communal underground. The leaders of all communities pledged themselves to peace and begged Gandhi to break the fast. Gandhi consented, but with the warning that if the pledge was not honoured he would embark on an irrevocable fast.

The Calcutta fast was universally acclaimed as a miracle; in the oft-quoted words of the correspondent of London Times, it did what several divisions of troops could not have done. Henceforth Calcutta and Bengal were to remain calm; the fever of communal strife had subsided.

Immediately, Gandhi felt free to turn to the Punjab. In a sense the flare-up in that Province in the middle of August 1947 was only a continuation of the earlier riots in March 1947; the villages and the towns of the Punjab, seized with fantastic hopes or strange fears, had been dreading and at the same time preparing for a battle of the barricades. The administrative paralysis caused by the reshuffling of cadres on a communal basis, and the infiltration of communalism into the police and military had, by the end of August, led to a situation in which it was impossible for the Hindus to stay in West Punjab and Muslims to stay in East Punjab.

The sum of human misery involved in the movement of five million Hindus and Sikhs from West Punjab to East Punjab, and in the movement of an equal number of Muslims in the opposite direction was appalling. The danger, however, was that as the refugees with their tales of woe arrived at their destinations, violence might spread. This is indeed what happened in Delhi in the first week of September. Gandhi found the capital of India paralysed by one of the worst communal riots in its long history. He felt there was no point in his proceeding
to the Punjab when Delhi was aflame. The Government had taken prompt and energetic action. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had declared that violence would be suppressed sternly; an emergency committee of the Cabinet had been formed and troops had been moved into the town. But Gandhi was not content with a peace imposed by the police and the military; violence had to be purged from the hearts of the people. It was an uphill task. The town had a number of refugee camps, some of which housed Hindus and Sikhs from West Pakistan, while others sheltered Muslims fleeing from Delhi for a passage across the border.

The Hindu and Sikh refugees were in a difficult mood. Many of them, uprooted from their homes, lands and occupations, were going through unfamiliar pangs of poverty; some had been bereaved in the riots and all were bitter. They were anxious to wedge their way into the economy of Delhi; their eyes were riveted on Muslim houses and shops to replace those they had left behind in Pakistan. They could not understand the Mahatma’s advice to ‘forget and forgive’ and to bear no malice in their hearts for those at whose hands they had suffered. They even blamed him for the division of India; his non-violence, they said, had been outclassed by violence. When he suggested that one day they would return to their homes in Pakistan, they smiled incredulously: he had not seen what they had seen; he had not suffered as they had suffered. Little did they know how the tragedy weighed upon him. As he sat down to his frugal meal, he thought of those who were going hungry. At night, when he heard the gentle patter of rain on the roof of Birla House, where he was staying, he lay awake thinking of those who were without adequate shelter. The tales of woe he heard burned themselves into his soul, but he did not falter in his conviction that only non-violence could end this spiral of hate and violence. In his prayer speech every evening, he touched on the communal problem. He stressed the futility of retaliation. He wore himself out in an effort to re-educate the people of Delhi; he heard grievances, suggested solutions,
encouraged or admonished his numerous interviewers, visited refugee camps, remained in touch with local officials. It was an exhausting and sometimes a heart-breaking routine.

Gandhi had a half-serious and a half-humorous way of saying that he aspired to live for 125 years, which, according to the Hindu tradition, was the full span of human life. He was, however, so unhappy at the communal riots which began with the ‘Great Calcutta Killing’ that he repeated time and again that he did not want to ‘be a living witness of the fratricidal strife’. Congratulated on his birthday he asked, ‘Where do congratulations come in? Would condolences be not more appropriate?’ When the Diwali, the festival of lights, came he said he could not celebrate it when the light of love had gone out in the hearts of men. When his English disciple, Mirabehn, invited him to visit her Ashram in the Himalayas in March 1948 he answered, ‘What is the good of counting on a corpse?’

One wonders whether he had a presentiment of an early end, or whether these remarks were no more than occasional glimpses of the torture of mind and spirit which he suffered during this period. ‘Life and death’ he once described as ‘the faces of the same coin’. He spoke of death as an ‘incomparable friend’. There were several occasions when his life had hung by the slenderest thread. He was only twenty-seven when he was nearly lynched in the streets of Durban; eleven years later he was belaboured in Johannesburg by a rugged compatriot; in 1934 a bomb narrowly missed him while he was on his way to the Poona municipal hall. Several of his fasts brought him to the verge of a collapse; in at least two of them his survival seemed a miracle. As a soldier of non-violence, he had probably run more hazards than many a general had done in the battlefield.

On January 13, 1948 he began a fast. ‘My greatest fast,’ he wrote to Mirabehn. It was also to be his last. The fast was not to be broken until Delhi became peaceful. The town was ostensibly quiet; thanks to the stern measures taken by the
Government, the killings had stopped. But the peace for which Gandhi had been working for four and a half months was not 'the peace of the grave', but a peace symbolizing the reunion of hearts. Of the latter there was little sign. Muslims did not dare to move about freely in the town; reports reached the Mahatma that the refugees from West Pakistan were applying subtle methods to oust local Muslims from their shops and houses. The argument that Hindus and Sikhs were equally unsafe throughout the whole of West Pakistan struck him as irrelevant.

The fast had a refreshing impact on Pakistan, where it punctured the subtle web of propaganda which for ten years had represented Gandhi as an enemy of Islam; warm tributes were paid to him in the West Punjab Assembly by Muslim League leaders. In India there was an emotional shake-up. The fast compelled people to think afresh on the problem on the solution of which he had staked his life. There was a sense of urgency; something had to be done quickly to create conditions in which he could end his fast. The Government of India paid out to Pakistan, at his instance, and as a gesture of goodwill, Rs. 55 crores (£44 million) which were due as part of united India's assets but had been withheld on account of the conflict in Kashmir. On January 18, 1948 representatives of various communities and parties in Delhi signed a pledge in Gandhi's presence that they would guarantee peace in Delhi. Before breaking the fast, the Mahatma told them, what he had told the signatories of the peace pledge at Calcutta in September 1947, that if they did not honour the pledge he would fast unto death.

After this fast the tide of communal violence showed definite signs of ebbing. Gandhi felt freer to make his plans for the future. He had promised the refugees from West Pakistan that he would not rest until every family had been rehabilitated in its native town or village. But he felt he could not go to Pakistan without the permission of the Government of that country. Meanwhile, he thought of returning to his Ashram
at Sevagram. For several months almost all his time had been taken up by the communal problem. However acute this problem was, in a wider perspective it was only a red herring across the path of the country’s onward march. The real problems of India, the social and economic uplift of her people had never been absent from his mind. On some of them he had been thinking aloud in his speeches at the evening prayer meetings. He dwelt upon the shortage of food in the country. ‘We have,’ he argued, ‘plenty of fertile lands and large man-power. If we utilize both there would be no necessity of continuing controls.’ As for cloth, he had no doubt that the millions in the villages could spin and weave for their needs in their own cottages during their hours of enforced leisure. He thought of the tasks ahead. Constitution-making would soon be over. He had no thought of entering the Government or active politics in independent India, but he could do his bit to strike out new channels for constructive work. In December 1947 he had convened a conference of the representatives of the various constructive organizations which had been founded under his aegis; each of these organizations had its own chosen sphere, such as removal of untouchability, propagation of basic education, khadi and village industries. He discussed the possibility of unifying all the constructive organizations for the realization of the non-violent order which was their common aim.

Political freedom having become a fact, Gandhi’s mind was switching more and more on to social and economic reform, and to the refurbishing of his non-violent technique.

However, he was destined neither to go to Pakistan nor to pick up the threads of his constructive programme. The first warning came on the evening of January 20th, when a bomb exploded in Birla House a few feet from where he was addressing his prayer meeting. He took no notice of the explosion. Next day he referred to the congratulations which he had received for remaining unruffled after the explosion. He would deserve them, he said, ‘if I fall as a result of such an explosion and yet retain a smile on my face and no malice against the assailant’. He
described the bomb-thrower as a ‘misguided youth’ and advised the police not to ‘molest’ him but to convert him with persuasion and affection. Madan Lal, a refugee from the Punjab who had been arrested, was in fact a member of a gang which had plotted Gandhi’s death. These highly-strung young men saw Hinduism menaced by Islam from without and by Gandhi from within. When Madan Lal missed his aim, a fellow conspirator, Nathuram Godse, a young journalist from Poona, came to Delhi. With a pistol in his pocket he hovered round Birla House, where Gandhi stayed and held his prayer meeting.

Vaguely suspecting a conspiracy, the local authorities had increased their vigilance. Gandhi would not, however, permit the police to search those who came to attend his prayer meetings. ‘If I have to die,’ he told the police officers, ‘I should die at the prayer meeting. You are wrong in believing that you can protect me from harm. God is my protector.’ On the evening of January 30th he left his room in Birla House for the prayer ground. It was only two minutes’ walk, but he was a little late that day, having been detained in a meeting with Sardar Patel. With his forearms on the shoulders of his grandnieces, Ava and Manu—walking-sticks as he called them—he walked briskly. As he approached the prayer ground the congregation of five hundred made a passage for him; many rose, some bowed low in reverence. He said he was sorry for being late, lifted his hands and joined them in a namaskar (salutation). Just at that moment Godse edged forward through the crowd, bent low as if to prostrate himself at the Mahatma’s feet, whipped out his pistol and fired three shots in quick succession. Gandhi fell instantly with the words ‘Hé Rama’ (Oh, God).

It was a strange irony that the apostle of non-violence should have met a violent end. The dark forces of hate seemed to have won; but theirs was a pyrrhic victory. The bullets which passed through Gandhi’s chest reverberated in millions of hearts. The very wickedness of the crime exposed, as if in a flash of lightning, the fatuity and futility of communal fanaticism. The flames which reduced the Mahatama’s body to ashes on the banks of
the Yamuna on the evening of January 31, 1948, proved to be the last flicker of that conflagration which had enveloped the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent since August 1946. Gandhi had fought this fire with all his strength while he lived. His death was to finally quench it.