GANDHI DURING PARTITION: A CASE STUDY IN THE NATURE OF SATYAGRAHA

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An appreciation of Gandhi’s achievement at any given point in time requires, first, a close examination of that point in time. His peculiar genius becomes evident not in terms of an abstract political philosophy, but rather within the historical context of a series of challenges and responses. The main concern of this paper is with one segment of this series. The challenge is seen here in the chronic communal violence and lawlessness that prevailed in Calcutta during the year preceding partition; that is the ‘Great Calcutta Killing’ and its aftermath. The response occurs with Gandhi’s satyagraha in the city, beginning at the time of independence and culminating in his Calcutta fast of early September 1947. The paper is thus divided into two sections: the first to reconstruct the atmosphere of India’s largest city in its year of unprecedented turmoil, and to convey the extent to which the processes of orderly government had been undermined by forces of anarchy. The second section analyses Gandhi’s Calcutta satyagraha. It examines his response to the crisis there, and the manner in which the city responded to him. It concludes with an analysis of the main dynamics of Gandhi’s approach.

One purpose of this reconstruction and analysis is to suggest a subject of study fruitful for students of political sociology and political theory. The concern of the former would be with the social and psychological dynamics of the conflict area under analysis, while the latter might assess the significance of the subject in terms of the theoretical problem of conflict resolution. A notable point at which these two disciplines may meet is with an examination of Gandhi’s style. The aspect of style, which will be developed in this paper at some length, is suggested by W. H. Morris-Jones when he writes of the ‘languages’ or ‘idioms’ of contemporary Indian politics; that is, India’s ‘modern’, ‘traditional’, and ‘saintly’ styles of political behaviour. Although Morris-Jones is concerned with ‘behaviour and accounts of behaviour’, his insights are broadly applicable to Indian political and social thought as well: especially to an analysis of the myths, symbols, imagery, attitudes and beliefs that dynamized Gandhi’s technique of satyagraha.

THE GREAT CALCUTTA KILLING: ITS BACKGROUND AND AFTERMATH

‘The problem of communal strife which is vexing the whole of India can be studied in an intensified and concentrated manner in this focal
city.’ – Sir Frederick Burrows, governor of Bengal, in a broadcast to the

‘Calcutta, once the most lively if never the most comfortable city of India,
is becoming almost unbearable to its inhabitants. Under the blight of communalism, it is from dusk onwards a city of the dead. Even by day, life is at a low ebb. . . . Shadowed by past calamity, not daring to turn their eyes from the morbid present to a future without hope, its citizens drag out meaningless lives, thankful only from day to day that these are still safe from the goonda and the housebreaker. They ask themselves if such terrible conditions are to be permanent and find no answer. If Calcutta passes two ‘quiet’ days in succession, hope revives – to fall again as the third day brings news of fresh outrages.’

This is The Statesman, Calcutta’s leading newspaper, writing in May 1947, no longer with indignation but in despair. In such an atmosphere of quiet agony all of Calcutta had acquiesced by mid-1947. Only six months before, The Statesman, long proud of its independent critical stance and crusading spirit, was alive with attacks on the government of Bengal and exhortations to the citizenry. But these had been gradually replaced by the standard front-page entry: ‘A Government Press Note reports that the number of casualties as a result of yesterday’s communal disturbances in Calcutta were . . .’ ‘The Terror’, as it was commonly called, lasted a full year, from August 1946 until independence. Three factors determined its character and fostered its growth: communalism, goondaism, and political extremism. Not until these three coalesced was the nature of Calcutta’s atmosphere radically transformed; together they wrought (in the words of The Statesman after the worst of the Great Calcutta Killing had passed) ‘the transference of this dread social phenomenon [of communal violence] into another dimension’. Communalism and goondaism had long existed in Calcutta, as throughout India, the latter always ready for the circumstances that would allow exploitation of the former. However, not until political extremism had gained its head was the new dimension added. Political extremism of a kind had of course appeared in India early in the twentieth century, first among Bengali terrorists then later in Gandhi’s non-co-operation campaigns. But a decisive change in the political climate came with the events of 1946: the national elections, the Great Calcutta Killing, and its aftermath. Independence combined with the prospect of either a Congress or League raj now seemed imminent and the ensuing struggle for power soon consumed the political leadership. In this particular context, there came to flourish a peculiarly virulent form of political extremism with an awesome irresistibility. This was the crucial catalyst. With its entry, Calcutta was plunged into bitter irrationality and intense party rivalry, and events took on the familiar overtones described in that classic text on political extremism, the civil war in Corcyra.

1 The Statesman (Calcutta), May 20, 1947, p. 4.
2 Ibid. August 21, 1946, p. 4.
3 ‘Civil war broke out in city after city, and in places where the violence occurred late the knowledge of what had happened previously in other places caused still new extravagances of fanatical zeal, expressed by an elaboration in the methods of seizing power and by unheard-of atrocities in revenge. To fit in with the change of events, words, too, had to
February set the pattern of disturbances for the new year. Early in the year, increased communal tension was noted by Tuker, then G.O.C. in C., eastern command. Large-scale rioting, though, was not anticipated. On Monday, February 11th, students demonstrated as they had in November, in protest against the I.N.A. trials. The protest, however, was significantly different in this instance: an ex-Muslim officer of the I.N.A. had been court-martialled, and given seven years R.I. The demonstrators were therefore mostly Muslim, protesting against the severity of the punishment; Hindu officers, they added, had recently escaped with much lighter sentences. All Muslim shops in Calcutta were closed, and 2,000 Muslims, carrying League flags, demonstrated. Once again, the demonstrations quickly deteriorated into 'mob violence', with more casualties and over a longer period than the November riots. 'It is an awful warning,' The Statesman commented, 'to more than established authority.' Leaders of the Congress and the Muslim League significantly interpreted this warning in different ways. Congressmen like Maulana Azad, Sarat Chandra Bose, and Surendra Mohan Ghosh vied with one another in issuing blanket condemnations of the riots. For them it showed only that 'the goonda and irresponsible elements of this city have gained the upper hand'. H. S. Suhrawardy, however, then a prominent League in Bengal and soon to become its chief minister, had taken an active part in the initial demonstrations, and enthused over them. Although he criticized the violence, for him the riot 'was a warning that, once the Muslim public was aroused, it would need all the forces of Government to restrain it. . . . The reason for our success is the sincerity of purpose behind all this agitation'. Suhrawardy's reaction forebode ill for the next of Calcutta's communal riots, when the responsibility was to fall on him, as chief minister, for maintaining law and order.

For Sir Francis Tuker, the February riots had a special significance: they 'set a match to the fuse which detonated the charges with such fearful violence months later not only in Calcutta and Eastern Bengal, but far afield in Bihar and into the United Provinces at Garhmukteswar and finally into the Punjab'. With hindsight, it is easy to plot such a chain of events. Even without hindsight, though, the ominous aspects of the riots were clear to perceptive observers like R. G. Casey who noted their significance shortly

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2 The Statesman, February 13–15, 1946. The rioting lasted four days; 42 killed and 380 injured.
3 Ibid. February 15, 1946, p. 4.
5 It may be noted that the largest riots of February occurred not in Calcutta, but in Bombay (The Times of India, February 22–24, 1946). Indeed, during the months of late 1945 and early 1946, Bombay's incidence of large-scale rioting became the highest in India. Significantly, these riots were non-communal in nature, and therefore the situation in Bombay did not deteriorate on the Calcutta model. These riots did, however, drive home to the Government the realization of the terrifying scale that could be reached. Thus, when Gandhi commented on them he struck precisely the note of anxiety that was in the air, and the press throughout India commented on his words: 'A combination between Hindus and Muslims and others for the purpose of violent action [as had happened in Bombay] is unholy and will lead and probably is a preparation for mutual violence—sad for India and the world.' (Times of India, February 25, 1946, p. 7).
6 Tuker, op. cit. p. 108.
after his expiration of office, as governor of Bengal, in February. Casey’s successor, Sir Frederick Burrows, arrived in the wake of the February riots to assume an ‘onerous appointment’, (in Tuker’s view) ‘that we would none of us have touched with the proverbial bargepole, and [we] admired the sense of public duty that brought him from gentle England to turbulent Bengal’. For a time, it seemed that Burrows had imposed some of this gentleness on the turbulence around him. India, particularly Bombay and Ahmedabad, experienced rioting, but Calcutta was relatively calm.

A national political crisis now emerged, though, which was to affect Calcutta directly. At the end of July, the council of the All-India Muslim League met in Bombay and revoked their earlier acceptance of the cabinet mission plan. ‘The time has now come,’ the council resolved, ‘for the Muslim nation to resort to direct action to achieve Pakistan . . . The Council calls upon the Muslim nation to stand to a man behind their sole representative, the All-India Muslim League, and be ready for every sacrifice.’1 Sacrifices were indeed to be made. August 16th was subsequently fixed by the council for the observance of ‘Direct Action Day’ throughout India. Muslims were urged to stage a hartal on that day, to hold public meetings and other demonstrations. Another ‘Day’ was thus designated for political demonstrations; but this day India was not soon to forget.

While the League was making decisions in Bombay that would, in less than three weeks’ time, transform Calcutta, Bengal was preoccupied with quite another matter. On the same day (July 29th) that the direct action resolution had been passed, a one-day general strike of transport, industrial and government employees ‘completely paralysed’ Calcutta. The general strike coincided with the postal strike (of 16,000 employees) that had been in progress throughout Bengal since July 21st. This was in turn followed by still another strike, of the Imperial Bank employees, which further belaboured the city. The strike of last November had coincided with the riots; now larger strikes preceded far greater rioting. This is not surprising, since the effect of each of these strikes was to quieten the forces of unrest and disorder in the city.

Once the postal strike was resolved, on August 7th, Calcutta could turn again to the national scene, which the Congress now dominated. By August 14th, Nehru had accepted the viceroy’s invitation to form an interim government, and had written to Jinnah asking for his co-operation. The latter replied that ‘the situation remains as it was and we are where we were’; and, after meeting with Nehru in Bombay on August 15th, Jinnah told the press, ‘There will be no more meetings between me and Pandit Nehru.’ The stage was thus set for August 16th: Jinnah adamantly pledged to direct action, Nehru engrossed in the formation of his interim government, with the viceroy hoping for a reconciliation. And Gandhi, in Sevagram, was pondering, ‘I have never had the chance to test my non-violence in the face of communal riots . . . the chance will still come to me . . . ’

Gandhi’s remark might be thought prophetic; and in a general sense it undoubtedly was, for no one was more aware than Gandhi of the troubles ahead. The remark was not a prophesy, though, of what would happen in Calcutta on direct action day. No Indian political leader foresaw that event. Indeed, most of them do not appear to have had the slightest inkling of the scale on which the Calcutta riots would occur. The Indian press was a shade more foresighted. Among the major English-language papers, mild warnings of the consequences of direct action appeared in The Times of India and The Statesman; and The Leader singled out Calcutta, on the day before the tragedy as the most likely trouble spot, although this comment, as noted below, hardly foresaw the scale or intensity of the rioting. One insight into the peculiar context of the political situation in Calcutta occurred in The Times of India on August 7th. After observing that the Congress had tended to dismiss the very real dangers of direct action, the writer wondered whether the League ministries, in Bengal and Sind, would resign, since the direct action would be directed against them. If they did not resign, ‘quite an interesting situation will have been created by Leaguers breaking the law in Sind and Bengal, where the League may be in charge of the maintenance of law.’ The remark did anticipate the dilemma which the League ministry in Bengal faced.

Suhrawardy attempted (like the League minister in Sind) to overcome this dilemma by declaring August 16th a public holiday. This, the chief minister declared, would ‘minimize chances of conflict’, and was preferable to ‘stopping business by means of stone-throwing, intimidation, and dragging people out of buses and cars and burning the vehicles’. The Congress opposition immediately pounced on this remark as a confession of the government's inability to maintain order, or much worse (from the Congress point of view) the use of government to further narrow party ends. It is likely that the chief minister thought that the government could walk the tightrope by having peaceful demonstrations on behalf of the League which would not degenerate into uncontrollable rioting. This was a major blunder. What is certain, however, is that neither the government nor the opposition nor the press anticipated the magnitude of the tragedy. While the Congress did attack Suhrawardy, and The Leader reinforced this censure on the day before the riots, both concentrated their criticism on the chief minister’s unwarranted use of government power to achieve party aims. Neither focused its criticism on what was later to form the crux of the indictment. Suhrawardy’s failure to take adequate preventive measures. This was simply because neither the opposition nor the press had guessed what ‘adequate’ might involve. The statement issued by the government of Bengal on the riots, six months after their occurrence, cannot be gainsaid: ‘What was not foreseen and what took everybody by surprise including the participants was the intensity of the hatred let loose and the savagery with which both sides killed.’ The chief minister, the governor, and the police should have taken stronger precautions at the beginning and then acted with more dispatch as the disturbances gained ground. Suhrawardy in particular was appallingly negligent, perhaps in the

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2 Tuker, op. cit., p. 114.
4 Ibid., July 31-August 2, 1946.
5 Ibid. August 13-16, 1946.
6 Gandhi, quoted in The Times of India, August 5, 1946, p. 5.
early stage of the killing even deliberately provocative. Yet, it is hardly realistic to place all the blame on the government, or on any single party to the conflict. Seen in this light, two points may initially be made on the killing: first, it was precisely the total unexpectedness of the calamity that produced its aftermath of shock, terror, and vengeance. Second, the search for scapegoats which followed only obscured (given the political atmosphere of the time) the real lessons that might have been grasped at once. In this connection, one of the most salutary and refreshing features of Gandhi's approach was his insistence that everyone was in some measure responsible for the continuing violence, and therefore every citizen had it in his power to exercise some degree of control over it. Unfortunately, another year passed, after the killing, before Calcutta came to appreciate this basic truth.

It could be argued that the real tragedy of the Great Calcutta Killing came not with the massacre itself, but rather with the character of the response to it, especially among India's politicians. Consumed with the political demands of forming an interim government, and oblivious to what might have happened in Calcutta, Pandit Nehru, when asked by the press (on early reports of the riots) whether Calcutta's disturbances would affect his plans, replied, 'Our programme will certainly not be upset because a few persons misbehave in Calcutta.' Once the scale of this 'misbehaviour' struck the Congress, though, no time was lost in placing the responsibility 'for all that has happened' on the League ministry. Simultaneously, Jinnah was saying, 'I cannot believe that any Muslim League would have taken part in using any violence.' Thus, the dog-fight was on. 'There is no indication that the Calcutta riots have induced a calmer frame of mind,' wrote The Times of London correspondent; rather, 'recriminatory and, indeed, vitriolic' comments prevail among all circles in India. Liaquat Ali Khan, then general secretary of the League, attributed the killing solely to the Hindu elements whose actions plunged Calcutta into these orgies of violence and slaughter. Liaqat agreed that a 'bitterness' now 'sweeps India as never before, and the inevitable bloodshed... will continue to be caused'; but, for him, the exclusive cause was the 'communal arrogance and the spirit of violence fostered by the Congress'. The Congress contemplates another 'Hindu raj' but 'a hundred million Muslims will resist it.' The Statesman, since the killing, had pressed the 'leader of the Muslim League' for an 'apology'. From Mr Jinnah came word that the main 'responsibility' for Calcutta must rest with 'the Viceroy, Mr Gandhi, and the Congress'; for 'it was an organized plot to discredit the Muslim League on the part of the Hindus.' The Statesman did not press further.

In this atmosphere, the question of which side started the riots on that morning of August 16th could hardly be judged impartially by the parties involved. However, this did not deter the Congress and the League from pursuing their respective 'investigations' into the matter. The Congress working committee discovered that first blood was drawn by Muslims carrying 'big bamboo sticks, swords, spears, daggers and axes which they brandished' before unarmed Hindus. The working committee of the Bengal Muslim League, however, found that 'peaceful Muslim processions almost everywhere had to face a barrage of brickbats, stones, and missiles.' The Modern Review (Calcutta) replied with 'photographic evidence' of the Muslim aggressors on that morning, and concluded that the riots started when 'their Fuehrer had declared a Jihad, and thousands of gangsters had been import to reinforce them.' On this hysterial exchange, the most acute comment came from Arthur Moore: 'For any given man-made catastrophe, all participating parties bear some responsibility. In party politics the procedure considered correct and honourable is for each component to blame the others and entirely exonerate himself... We have produced a situation in which civil war is an obvious possibility... I have a deep sense of terrible disasters impending.'

As early as April 1946, Gandhi had criticized 'loose talk of civil war', but by late August such talk was widely accepted. In the press commentary on the killing, no term was more often applied than 'civil war'. 'What befell India's largest city last week', summed up The Statesman, 'was no mere communal riot... It was three days of concentrated, unprecedented Indian civil war.' Ten days after the killing, The Times of London correspondent reported: 'To put it bluntly, far too many thinking Indians are resigned to the prospect of civil war in the near future... Was Calcutta the first battle of a civil war, and is this country threatened with massacres carried out with ruthless fanaticism by the baser elements of the communities?' Such were the doubts and fears emanating from Calcutta, and Arthur Moore's 'deep sense of terrible disasters impending' was widely shared. For Gandhi, the killing was an 'ocular demonstration' of the fruits of direct action; for many other Indians, it was an oculat demonstration of the reality of the abyss beyond. 'One principal lesson of the tragedy', editorialized The Times immediately after the killing, 'lies in its illustration of the perilously narrow margin which today divides order from anarchy in India.' After August 16th, anarchy and civil war of the worst form were no longer abstractions in India: they had become spectres which overshadowed all else by the end of the year. It is above all in this sense – in terms of a 'psychosis of fear' – that the Great Calcutta Killing marks the watershed of events in a study of partition. 'Would that the violence of Calcutta were sterilized', exclaimed

1 The Great Killing began on the morning of August 16, 1946 and lasted until August 20th. Approximately 4,000 were killed and 11,000 injured. The most graphic account occurs in Tuker's While Memory Serves.
3 Maulana Azad quoted in The Statesman, August 20, 1946, p. 1. The indictment was repeated by Sarat Chandra Bose, leader of the opposition in the central assembly of Bengal.
5 The Times of London, August 26, 1946, p. 5.
8 The Statesman, September 1, 1946, p. 1.
9 Ibid. September 7, 1946, p. 5.
11 Arthur Moore, in a letter to the editor from Delhi, dated August 22, 1946. The Statesman, August 27, 1946, p. 4.
13 The Times of London, August 26, 1946, p. 5.
14 Ibid. August 20, 1946, p. 5.
Gandhi, when he heard of the killing, ‘and did not become a signal for its spread all over’. But this was not to be. The grim chain reaction immediately began in which India was soon convulsed: Dacca, Noakhali, Bihar, and the Punjab.

‘By the end of 1946 India was drifting rapidly to chaos. The real power had passed from British hands; senior officials, anxious about their future, were conscious that they were caretakers under notice and were disheartened; Ministers, paralyzed by the communal situation, seemed unable to come to grips with the problems of administration; and the unparallel communal riots in Calcutta, together with serious disorder in many parts of India, made it clear that nobody was in effective control.’

Of this situation, Calcutta was an inextricable part, acting from within India upon it, and in turn reacting to the anxiety and disorder from without. The agony that Calcutta experienced in the year after the Great Killing is indescribable. Communal fear and hatred pervaded the city. Many sought to escape, either fleeing from the city or withdrawing from armed communal camps within it. The first major riot of the year occurred in late March. A series of stray incidents quickly escalated into large-scale mob violence and troops were called in to restore order. After March, rioting became chronic, persisting, in Governor Burrows words, in ‘a stream...now ebbing, now flowing, but never completely ceasing for more than a few days.’ The government had clearly lost control, for despite the fact that Suhrawardy now took maximum precautions, ‘so far has the position now deteriorated that the public has come to realize that its only protection is, in the last resort, India’s armed force.’

The once effective Calcutta police had itself become undermined and demoralized by communalism, and the Hindu majority regarded the League ministry with intense suspicion. ‘We have come to a stage’, Suhrawardy admitted, ‘when nobody, not even the Government, can guarantee that there will not be arson, stabbing or looting.’ At the national level, Mountbatten had induced Gandhi and Jinnah to sign, on April 15th, a joint appeal for peace, deploiring the recent acts of ‘lawlessness and violence.’ All communities were urged ‘to refrain from violence in any form.’ This appeal had little effect on India, and certainly no influence on Calcutta. Gandhi sensed this, and on a visit to the city in early May, threatened a ‘fast unto death’.

On the prospect of Gandhi fasting, The Statesman commented:

1 Gandhi, quoted in The Statesman, August 27, 1946, p. 5.
3 The riots lasted from March 26th to April 1st, 73 were killed and 481 injured. See The Statesman.
5 For example, on ‘Pakistan Day’, March 23, 1947, Suhrawardy banned all processions, demonstrations and public meetings in Bengal, and enforced this ban stringently with troops.
7 The Statesman, April 10, 1947, p. 4.
8 See Tucker on this point, op. cit. pp. 234, 412.

It is with regret that many will learn that Mr. Gandhi has again spoken of a fast, more than once hinted at, to reinforce the joint appeal... We think, however, that all those who are close to him should do their best to dissuade him... The contemplated fast could not be expected to influence Muslims generally, whether aggressors or (as both communities tend to believe of themselves when involved) acting on the defensive. In such circumstances, if Mr. Gandhi started a fast, he would presumably continue to the end. As Hindus saw his life ebbing away, their own bitterness would greatly increase and the outcome would be in every way disastrous.

‘Like many others, we have never been able fully to understand these Gandhian fasts. The appeal they make is primarily to the emotions, to the heart. But also, perhaps, they are intended to appeal to the head. If one man greatly admired is so strongly convinced of the rightness of the cause he advocates that he is prepared to sacrifice his life for it, then, his opponents may come to think there must be more to be said for it than they concede; and so they start to consider their own position afresh — although, we think, under compulsion. But with communal disputes it is different. That they are primarily emotional is true; but once feelings are aroused to fever-pitch, there is no more possibility of subduing them by appeal to some other nobler emotion than of curing a rabid dog of his madness by talking gently. As for the intellectual factor, that is wholly absent. It should be plain, we think, that fasts, by whoever undertaken, can have little effect in such conditions. We trust that Mr. Gandhi will see that his duty is not to use this last weapon...’

THE CALCUTTA SATYAGRAHA: EXPLANATION AND ANALYSIS

‘Is the Satyagraha of my conception a weapon of the weak or really that of the strong? I must either realize the latter or lay down my life in the attempt to attain it. That is my quest.’ — Gandhi, December 1946.

Gandhi arrived in Calcutta on August 9th. The previous month had seen the city's worst communal riots of the year. The most notable feature of these disturbances was the flash panic that had instantly consumed the population. ‘Lurking in the back of most minds is the possibility of a sudden conflagration on last August’s scale. Monday’s events started panic which may not be quickly allayed.’ Many urged the enactment of martial law. No longer, moreover, could Suhrawardy serve as scapegoat: on July 3rd, a West Bengal cabinet had been formed of which Dr P. C. Ghosh of the Congress became chief minister. Now he, with Suhrawardy (who remained de jure chief minister of Bengal until August 14th), bore responsibility for communal violence. When, therefore, it became obvious that the Congress, like the League, was unable to curb the riots, the open attacks by the press and others on the League ministry were superseded by more sweeping indictments of the very process of democratic government itself. This breakdown in civil
authority meant in fact an almost total reliance on the military. In early August, the announcement came that ‘the military forces in Calcutta will soon be strengthened considerably’. This increase of troops was immediately enforced by the governor’s application of the ‘Disturbed Areas Ordinance’ to the whole of Bengal. The ordinance gave utmost powers to magistrates and the police in their enforcement of a prohibition on public assemblies or the carrying of weapons. The civil government, therefore, had gone about as far as it could go, short of acquiescence to martial law. Yet, even a week before independence, severe communal rioting again broke out, when, on the day before Gandhi arrived in Calcutta, a crowd of over three hundred had stopped a train, selected twelve of its passengers, and wantonly slaughtered them in full public view. This incident, which ignited many others, is a prime example of the impotence of government when the citizenry, in fear and vengeance, turn to support forces of anarchy.

Gandhi had announced that he would spend independence day in Noakhali, but after a day spent in Calcutta, ‘listening to the woes of the city’, his departure for Noakhali was postponed. At his prayer meeting, on the evening of August 10th, Gandhi told a vast crowd that his ‘head hung in shame at this recital of man’s barbarism’ in Calcutta. This was madness, and his aim was to effect a return to sanity. He refused to write off Calcutta’s riots as simply a manifestation of goondaism. All citizens of Calcutta were responsible for the widespread violence, all must ‘turn the searchlight inwards’ and see that ‘wide open goondaism was a reflection of the subtle goondaism they were harbouuring within’. He had decided to delay his departure, and work here for peace, because (as he pointedly said) ‘the argument of his Muslim friends had gone home’. Then he promised that he would make an extensive tour of the riot areas, and this brought huge crowds the next day, ‘Hindus and Muslims, including women, who told him their grievances’. Two weeks before, The Statesman had commented, ‘The need now is not so much of political reassurance as of psycho-therapy, could that be practised on a mass scale.’ The therapist had arrived, and his genius was such that he, above all Indian leaders, knew intuitively how it could be practised on a mass scale.

On August 11th, Suhrawardy returned to Calcutta from Karachi, and went immediately to see Gandhi at his Sodepur ashram. He implored Gandhi to stay in Calcutta, at least until after independence. Suhrawardy had made a similar plea three months earlier, when Gandhi had last visited the city. Gandhi’s reply at that time was that he would remain if Suhrawardy would enlist him as ‘his private secretary’; they could then work together as a team against communalism. The chief minister had dismissed the suggestion as ‘madness’. Now, however, Gandhi had an even more extraordinary proposal. He suggested to Suhrawardy that they both move into a deserted Muslim bustee, in one of the worst-affected localities of the city, and live there together, for whatever period was required, until peace was restored to Calcutta. ‘It would be best’, Gandhi thought, ‘to live unprotected by the police or the military.’ In brotherly fashion they would approach the people, reason with them, and foster a return to sanity. Suhrawardy considered the proposal, and after twenty-four hours gave his unqualified acceptance. ‘In view of the fact’, he told the press, ‘that an insensate orgy of violence has started and the feeling of revenge, instead of subsiding, is increasing, I have decided to accept Mr. Gandhi’s offer.’ The year since the killing had humbled Suhrawardy. The irrepressible Calcutta riots had blackened his ministry; and the League itself had partly withdrawn its favour, as suggested by his defeat by Nazimuddin, the week before, in the election for party leader of East Bengal. Gandhi, however, was not concerned with Suhrawardy’s political status in the League, but rather with what the chief minister meant to the Muslims and Hindus of Calcutta. When Gandhi wrote to Patel of his Calcutta ‘experiment’, the Sardar, with characteristic humour replied, ‘So you have got detained in Calcutta and that too in a quarter which is a veritable shambles and a notorious den of gangsters and hooligans. And in what choice company too!’ For Gandhi’s purpose, Suhrawardy was indeed ‘choice company’. No individual could have better disarmed Muslim suspicion and also attracted the hostilities of the Hindus, drawing them into the ‘experiment’ where they could be neutralized non-violently.

Hostile Hindu elements were present in full force when Gandhi and Suhrawardy arrived at the deserted ‘Hyderi Mansion’ in Bellaghat, the afternoon of August 13th. The original crowd of two hundred swelled in size, and eventually broke into the house, hurling stones, smashing doors and windows. Gandhi confronted them. Why had he now ‘come to the rescue of the Muslims’ when it was the Hindus who had suffered? How could he, a Hindu, associate himself with the man who was responsible for the slaughter of countless Hindus a year ago? Gandhi replied with the simple argument that he had used, as a reformer, all his public life: ‘How can I, who am a Hindu by birth, a Hindu by creed and a Hindu of Hindus in my way of living be an “enemy” of Hindus?’ This reasoning had the desired effect and the crowd eventually dispersed. For almost three weeks after this initial outburst, Calcutta not only remained calm, but on independence day became the scene of unprecedented communal fraternization. All India was astounded at the sudden transformation.

How far Gandhi’s experiment and personal example influenced the independence day metamorphosis in Calcutta is impossible to determine precisely. At the least, Gandhi was ‘a lightning conductor for unpleasant verbal storms’, whose experiment offered ‘an object lesson in the neighbourliness which is the only true answer to communal fury’. At most, he was, in the words of the new governor of West Bengal, Rajagopalachari, ‘the magician’ who performed the ‘Calcutta miracle’. Perhaps the truth lies

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1 The Statesman, August 5, 1947, p. 1. This followed Lord Mountbatten’s visit to Calcutta at the end of July during which he expressed his ‘grave concern at the troubled conditions in the city’. It will be recalled, moreover, that in this seminar, Lord Spens remarked that he had himself urged the central government to increase military forces in Calcutta at this time.
somewhere between these two points. Gandhi’s experiment in Belliaghatta did provide, on the eve of independence, ‘a place of pilgrimage for thousands of Calcutta’s citizens. Both Hindus and Muslims came in a constant stream [on August 14th]... and placed their grievances before Mr. Gandhi and sought his advice.’ 1 The experiment, therefore, acted as a remarkable catharsis at the critical moment of independence, and its effect continued in the days immediately after. Throughout August, unprecedented crowds gathered at Gandhi’s evening prayer meetings, and rejoiced together in an astounding upsurge of communal harmony. Gandhi did not, it should be noted, suppress or eliminate the atmosphere of extreme tension present in the city since the killing; indeed, he watched as it burst into a form of social hysteria. What Gandhi did was to act, at this point, as one of several forces 2 which served to release desirable social energies, and thereby precipitate an explosion of communal goodwill rather than of violence. When, however, the city’s tensions and anxieties once again sought violent expression, Gandhi abandoned his milder cathartic techniques and applied instead an extreme form of social control. For the fast was the ultimate weapon of satyagraha, employed only when all other means had failed. As it was then used by Gandhi in Calcutta, the fast marked the final and climactic stage of his satyagraha, an intense method of conflict-resolution through non-violent action. In this sense, the fast may be seen as an ‘escalation’ of non-violent conflict, the culmination of a process in which power is increasingly applied to achieve selected ends.

THE FAST: SEPTEMBER 1–4, 1947

As the end of August approached, Calcutta’s political leaders and its press enthused over ‘the miracle of communal harmony in India’s largest city.’ 3 The announcement of the boundary award had not caused further disturbances, and the Id festivities had been marked by more scenes of ‘unforgettable communal friendliness.’ 4 Glowing tributes to Gandhi flowed in from the highest political sources, including Lord Mountbatten 5 and the Muslim League. Gandhi’s 6 prayer meetings held on the Calcutta maidan (especially the one held for the celebration of Id) seemed to demonstrate the complete success of his ‘experiment’. Congress leaders urged him to leave for the Punjab and plans for his departure on September 2nd were accordingly made. Nehru had referred to the Punjab riots, which were now being reported daily in Calcutta, as constituting a ‘grave crisis’, and General Rees warned in Lahore that ‘the spirit of retaliation is abroad in the land’. 1 On September 1st, the Calcutta press described the Punjab as being in the throes of ‘primitive blind vengeance’ and torn by a ‘veritable civil war’. 2 Hideous tales of mutual violence wrecked by Sikhs and Muslims there proliferated throughout Bengal. Reports of restiveness, especially among the Sikhs of Calcutta, now appeared. As the old fears once more emerged in the city, it seemed to many inevitable that, despite the recent ‘miracle’, the urge to retaliate would again prevail.

The fact that the recrudescence of violence in Calcutta actually began at Gandhi’s Belliaghatta bustee, indicates the extent to which his experiment had become the magnet for communal tensions. Late in the evening of Sunday, August 31st, a crowd converged on Hydari mansion, carrying an injured Hindu, allegedly knifed by a Muslim. They demanded that Gandhi call for retaliation. Not only did his attempts to quiet them fail, but he was almost seriously wounded when the crowd attacked his party. The police soon restored order, but Gandhi’s detailed statement of the incident to the press indicates the extent to which he himself was severely shaken by it. The disturbance here triggered an outburst of violence the next day throughout the city; by evening fifty people had been killed and over three hundred injured in uncontrollable rioting. Troops immediately came in, but since the demands of the United Provinces and Punjab had drastically reduced the military resources available to Bengal, the situation, in Tuker’s view, was far more critical than it had been in July or August. Major General Ranking, area commander, ‘acted at once with all the troops at his disposal, calling in Gurkhas’ as well; yet even this, the military realized, was inadequate, and Ranking ‘pressed the government to impose martial law’. 3

Gandhi toured the affected areas, and then wrote to Sardar Patel, ‘What was regarded as the “Calcutta Miracle” has proved to be a nine days’ wonder. I am pondering what my duty is in the circumstances.’ 4 When Rajagopalachari came to visit him on the evening of September 1st, Gandhi had already made his decision. He proposed a fast. ‘Can one fast against the goondas?’ Rajaji asked. ‘I want to touch the hearts of those who are behind the goondas,’ Gandhi replied. ‘The hearts of the goondas may or may not be touched. It would be enough for my purpose if they realize that society at large has no sympathy with their aims or methods and that the peace-loving element is determined to assert itself or perish in the attempt.’ Rajaji urged him to ‘wait and watch a little’, but Gandhi was adamant. The fast has to be now or never. It will be too late afterwards. The minority community cannot be left in a perilous condition. My fast has to be preventive.

1 Nehru and Rees reported in The Statesman, August 29, 1947, pp. 1, 5-6.
2 The Statesman, September 1, 1947, p. 5.
3 Tuker, op. cit. p. 426.
if it is to be of any good. I know I shall be able to tackle the Punjab if I can control Calcutta. But if I falter now, the conflagration may spread.'

The weapon which has hitherto proved infallible for me is fasting,' Gandhi announced in his public statement that evening. 'To put in an appearance before a yelling crowd does not always work. It certainly did not last night. What my word in person cannot do, my fast may. It may touch the hearts of all the warring elements in the Punjab if it does in Calcutta. I, therefore, begin fasting from 8:15 tonight to end only if and when sanity returns to Calcutta.' The focus throughout the country was at once on Gandhi. The Times of India commented, 'More than his life -- the peace of India -- is at stake.' Indian political leaders responded with alarm and exhortation. On the first day of the fast, however, it was clear that the city's communal antagonists, inflamed by goondaisam, had not yet felt the impact of Gandhi's move. Looting and rioting persisted as the casualties mounted.

But on September 3rd, the second day of the fast, quiet came to Calcutta. Gandhi cautiously observed that 'the leaves of the tree have begun to look.' The positive effects of his action on the city were plain: a deputation from the Calcutta bar association came to pledge their assistance; and they were followed by a large mixed procession of Hindus and Muslims, who promised to reconcile their differences; then, peace demonstrations of students, political workers and government officials of both communities, paraded through the city to Hydari mansion. Gandhi told them all to 'go out together to patrol the troubled areas and relieve the police of its arduous duties'. Meanwhile, the police force itself, European and Indian, had commenced a twenty-four hour fast in sympathy while remaining on duty. This show of civic sympathy was precisely what Gandhi wanted; of less interest to him were the public broadcasts with which provincial and national Congress leaders bombarded the city.

By September 4th, the third and last day of the fast, the mass therapy had progressed still further. Scores of members of Hindu 'resistance groups', formed since direct action day, surrendered to Gandhi a small arsenal of weapons, and admitted to him their complicity in the communal violence. They were followed by a large gang of goondas who offered to 'submit to whatever penalty you may impose, only that you should now end your fast'. To both groups, Gandhi replied, 'My penalty for you is that you should go immediately among the Muslims and assure them full protection. The minute I am convinced that real change of heart has taken place, I will give up the fast.' 'The function of my fast,' Gandhi explained, 'is not to paralyze us or render us inactive,' but 'to release our energies...'. Release them he did: not only was Calcutta without a single incident on this day, it was mobbed with processions to Hydari mansion clamouring for an end to the fast.

Earlier The Statesman had argued (in the May editorial quoted at length above) against a fast under these circumstances. The leader admitted that

'we have never been able fully to understand these Gandhian fasts', and then proceeded to demonstrate this lack of understanding. It began with all the wrong assumptions: 'the contemplated fast could not be expected to influence Muslims generally', and since 'Hindu bitterness would greatly increase the outcome would be in every way disastrous'. Then it went on to point out that the appeal of the fast is 'primarily to the emotions, to the heart', although it is also 'intended to appeal to the head'. It is conceivable, the leader admitted, that in some instances this appeal might work. 'But with communal disputes it is different...once feelings are aroused to feverpitch, there is no more possibility of subduing them by appeal to some other nobler emotion than of curing a rabid dog of his madness by talking gently.' As for the intellectual factor, that is wholly absent.' This argument is worth repeating, not only for its suggestion of an almost fatalistic acceptance of the 'mad dog' forces of communalism, even among the most intelligent observers, but also because it reflects its confident scepticism of the efficacy of an essentially non-rational effort. At the crux of this effort was the will of one extraordinary individual, a will which he directed at the 'rabid dogs' of Calcutta, not merely by talking gently, but through the potent force of non-violent action; and this summoned a power so considerable that it persuaded even The Statesman to reconsider its position:

'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, expressing our views frankly. But never in a long career has Mahatma Gandhi, in our eyes, fasted in a simpler, worthier cause than this, nor one more calculated for immediate effective appeal to the public conscience. We cordially wish him unqualified success...'.

Now, all Calcutta was wishing him 'unqualified success'. But for Gandhi, the right time to break the fast had still not come. At 6 p.m. on September 4th, what he regarded as a decisive breakthrough occurred. Gandhi was visited by another delegation: they included N. C. Chatterjee and Debendranath Mukherjee, the president and secretary, respectively, of the Bengal Mahasabha; R. K. Jaidka, a prominent Hindu Punjabi businessman; Sardar N. Singh Talib, the Sikh editor of the influential Sikh daily, Desh Darpan; Dr G. Jilani of the Muslim League; Dr A. R. Choudhury and M. Rahaman of the Pakistan Seamen's Union, and the ever-present Suhrawardy. As Suhrawardy escorted them in to Gandhi, the delegation joined Rajagopalachari, Acharya Kripalani, and P. C. Ghosh, who were already at his bedside. Gandhi, of course, appreciated that among these men were represented the most powerful interests in the city, and, after

1 Pyarelal, op. cit. p. 407.
3 The Times of India, September 3, 1947, p. 4.
4 Pyarelal, op. cit. p. 412.
5 Ibid. p. 421.
6 Ibid. p. 420.
listening to their pleas for ending the fast, he demanded of them two promises: first, that communal violence would not recur in Calcutta; second, that if it did recur, they would ‘not live to report failure’, but would lay down their lives to maintain order. If these pledges were given and broken then he vowed that he would begin an irrevocable fast until death. The delegation withdrew to another room, conferred, and emerged with a joint agreement: ‘We, the representatives of the people of Calcutta, now that peace and quiet have been restored in Calcutta once again, we shall never allow communal strife in the city and shall strive unto death to prevent it.’ 1 Gandhi immediately broke the fast; it had lasted seventy-three hours. On September 7th, he left for Delhi. Communal violence, during this critical period surrounding partition, did not return to Calcutta.

‘Gandhiji has achieved many things,’ said Rajagopalachari afterwards, ‘but in my considered opinion, there has been nothing, not even independence, which is so truly wonderful as his victory over evil in Calcutta.’ 2 Perhaps even more representative of the city’s sentiments was the acting mayor’s comment on Gandhi’s departure that ‘Calcutta has been spared the horrors of a strife which easily might have been as bad or worse than former disturbances.’ 3 This was the judgment of the moment, not only by Congressmen, but by the press and political leaders of both communities. But it was not only the judgment of the moment; it has been confirmed by sober reflection as well, nowhere expressed better than by E. W. R. Lumby in his account of the fast:

‘His triumph was complete, and the peace that he brought was destined to endure. A League newspaper, acknowledging the debt Calcutta Muslims owed him, said, “he was ready to die so that they might live peacefully”. He had in fact worked a miracle, perhaps the greatest of modern times.’ 4

**ANALYSIS**

‘In this, the last year of his life, Gandhi’s influence was transcendent. By the people of India he was treated with the awe given to the great prophets and religious teachers of the past. Indeed he was already numbered with them. It was his preaching of the doctrine of non-violence more than any other single factor that stood between India and bloodshed on a frightful scale.’ 5

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1 Quoted in Pyarelal, *op. cit.* p. 423.

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The aim of this analysis is to examine, ‘in this, the last year of his life’, the nature and scope of Gandhi’s influence; or, more specifically, some of the main sources and dynamics of his power, and the manner in which he used this power, within the context of the Calcutta satyagraha. The scope of Gandhi’s influence at this time may best be described as ‘popular’, rather than as political in the strict sense. Nicholas Mansergh observes of Gandhi that ‘As his inclinations seemed to lead him to withdraw more and more from the narrow political issues of the hour and to devote his efforts to the noble work of pacification, so his reputation grew. . . .’ 6 While it is true that Gandhi’s popular influence increased at this time, his withdrawal from politics was accompanied by a sharp decrease in influence within the higher political circles, where the decisions on partition were being made. His decline, moreover, had begun at least as early as September 1944, with his failure to reach a compromise in his talks with Jinnah. Deeply aware of this decline, and profoundly discouraged with the political trend of events, he wrote in October 1946, ‘I know that mine is today a voice in the wilderness.’ 7 As the ‘vivisection of India’ became imminent, his own sense of impotence increased: this, while, as Nicholas Mansergh rightly asserts, Gandhi’s influence ‘more than any other single factor stood between India and bloodshed on a frightful scale’. This apparent paradox itself illuminates, among other things, the peculiar nature of Gandhi’s power, and the extent to which it was, particularly in this last phase, trans-political in character. This is evident especially in the Calcutta satyagraha. In this instance, at least three main dynamics of Gandhi’s power emerge: his past experience with the communal problem, the style which he developed in dealing with it, and his theory of fasting, which he increasingly applied to its resolution. The last of these is especially noteworthy, since it exemplifies both his stylistic achievement as well as elements of his social thought, that is, his ideas on society and on means of social control.

‘My South African experiences had convinced me’, Gandhi recollected in his *Autobiography* in 1927, ‘that it would be on the question of Hindu-Muslim unity that my Ahimsa would be put to its severest test, and that the question presented the widest field for my experiments in Ahimsa. The conviction is still there.’ 8 This conviction had, throughout Gandhi’s life, much to sustain it. In September 1924, for example, communal violence reached a high peak and Gandhi decided to fast, his first major fast on behalf of communal unity. ‘The recent events’, he announced from the home of a Muslim friend in Delhi, ‘have proved unbearable for me. My helplessness is still more unbearable. My religion teaches me that whenever there is distress which one cannot remove, one must fast and pray. . . . I am therefore imposing upon myself a fast of twenty-one days commencing from today.’ 9

Like the Calcutta fast, undertaken twenty-three years later for the same purpose, this one was begun in a Muslim home and Muslim friends cared for him; these elements of his style, then, had already taken shape. The 1942
fast, however, represents only one high point in his consistent concern for communal harmony. Whatever mistakes Gandhi may have made in his later dealings with the League, no Indian leader gave greater attention, over a longer period, to the fundamental problems of Hindu–Muslim relations. For three decades, during his career in the Congress, he emphasized Hindu–Muslim unity as among 'the three pillars of Swaraj'; and, at the end of this long career, when communal violence suddenly gained its head, Gandhi acted intuitively to meet the emergency. He turned first to Bengal. After the Great Calcutta Killing, he realized that an alternate form of 'direct action' was necessary; and, when the first report of the Noakhalı atrocities reached him in October 1946, he knew that this action demanded, above all, his physical presence in the disturbed areas. With this decision to wage satyagraha against large-scale communal rioting, that series of developments in method began which culminated a year later in the Calcutta 'experiment'.

While, therefore, the Congress working committee were passing resolutions in Delhi, finding 'it hard to express adequately their feelings of horror and pain at the present happenings in East Bengal', Gandhi was heading for the Noakhalı villages. Had it not been for the precedent of the Calcutta killing, the early reports of casualties in Noakhalı would have seemed incredible (5,000 killed and 50,000 injured). Gandhi arrived there, after a brief stop-over in Calcutta, in early November. The next four months were spent in a relentless effort to restore confidence among the Hindu minority. He moved slowly through the area toward his destination of Srirampur, a remote village where he spent six weeks organizing the satyagraha. Then came his renowned 'a village a day pilgrimage': a walking tour of seven weeks in which he covered 116 miles and 47 villages. During this time, Gandhi was receiving reports of the Hindu retaliation in Bihar. This eventually prompted his departure from Bengal, arriving at Patna in early March. Here it was the Muslim minority that he sought out and consoled, while the Hindus now bore the brunt of his censure. The technique, however, was substantially the same in Bengal and Bihar: a tour of the devastated villages, visiting the afflicted homes and families; then the inevitable prayer meeting, with its ingenious admixture of the traditional and the contemporary; and finally the delegation of responsibility to one individual or group in the village that order might be preserved. Occasionally, as at Srirampur, Gandhi would remain for a prolonged period in one of the most remote and ravaged of the villages, until his persuasiveness and sheer courage stabilized the area. Fundamentally, this was the programme of action that directed the Calcutta satyagraha.

While Gandhi was touring the villages of Bihar, Nehru was preoccupied with running his inter-Asian relations conference in Delhi. Gandhi had been persuaded to attend, so he left Bihar at the end of March to address the closing session. During the summer in Delhi, recurrent reports of disturbances in Bengal and Bihar unnerved Gandhi, and the summer was subsequently broken with visits to Calcutta and Patna. Then, at the end of July, he travelled throughout Kashmir, leaving there in early August for Calcutta en route to Noakhalı. Gandhi came to Calcutta, then, as a revered leader who had courageously fought communalism, first, on behalf of the Hindus in Noakhalı and then in defence of the Muslims in Bihar. His reputation had indeed grown, and for good reason; among India's leaders he was unique in having gone to the villages and struggled there in the interests of both communities. Moreover, as both Hindus and Muslims turned increasingly to him with trust, Gandhi's own confidence in his mission increased. Only days before the Calcutta killing, he had said, 'I have never had the chance to test my non-violence in the face of communal riots'. Now, this had been tested. The results were successful; not as dramatic, perhaps, as the Calcutta fast, but the work in Noakhalı and Bihar did give him the opportunity to sharpen his methods, which soon were to find their proving ground in Calcutta.

Gandhi's style, abundantly manifest in his ingenious use of traditional Indian language, images, and symbols, goes further than any other single factor to explain the source and dynamics of his power. This style had been cultivated since his early South African experience. The attention given to it is most evident in his use of words, like satyagraha, swaraj, sarvodaya, ahimsa and harijan. These were terms which Gandhi either coined or re-interpreted. Language, though, represents only one element of his style: other components, often less obvious, contributed equally to the way in which he communicated with the Indian people. In his last phase, his style had, after a lifetime of public contact, become largely instinctive; and for this reason, his power over the Indian people reached its zenith.

Gandhi's 'experiment' at Hydari mansion marks the most imaginative of his stylistic achievements in this period. The richness of symbolism here shows everywhere the touch of the master. For at Hydari mansion appeared the microcosm on which the whole should be patterned: Gandhi, the 'Hindu of Hindus', moving into a house owned by a Muslim widow, cared for throughout by a volunteer squad of Muslim friends and admirers, and receiving daily an endless stream of Muslim devotees into his 'confessional' (men and women, the latter, he always proudly said, never observing purdah in his presence). Then there was his companion, Suhrwardy, the last Muslim for whom any Calcutta Hindu would have felt 'brotherly love'. Yet, here was Gandhi, saying often and unrepentantly of this notoriously untrustworthy Muslim politician, 'I trust him, he is my friend.' All this Gandhi could do because he was Gandhi. But there were reasons why this man came to be seen as the Mahatma; and his sense of style, now fully developed, was not the least of these reasons.

Another example of Gandhi's style appears with his use of a device tested in Noakhalı and Bihar and further developed in Calcutta: the prayer meeting. In this last phase, almost all Gandhi's major moves and decisions, often of political import, were first announced, not at press conferences, party conventions, or political assemblies, but in prayer meetings. These meetings had two parts: the first consisting of a reading from religious texts followed

1 Suhrwardy, moreover, not only behaved like Gandhi's trusted comrade during the experiment, but, to the astonishment of his Hindu antagonists, he admitted what he had heretofore denied vehemently: that he should bear the largest responsibility for the Calcutta Killing.
by hymns and prayers; the second, that of Gandhi’s personal ‘post-prayer message’, which he said should ‘be regarded and listened to as an integral part of the prayer’. The first part served to set an example of tolerance: verses from the Koran and the Bible were read aloud with those from Hindu texts – unless, that is, a member of the audience objected. In that case, Gandhi would omit the prayers, and, with consummate skill, take as his text for the ‘post-prayer message’ the very example of intolerance that the objector had shown. The manoeuvre often resulted in the audience itself castigating the objector, and insisting that the prayers be read after all. At the huge gatherings in Calcutta, the emphasis in Gandhi’s post-prayer message was often on the need for social discipline; and Gandhi used the meeting itself as a testing ground for the maintenance of discipline, censuring the crowd’s restlessness or praising their orderliness. After the meetings, Hindus and Muslims could mingle together in an atmosphere of trust; and although the attendance in Calcutta generally numbered in the hundreds of thousands, no incident of communal violence occurred at Gandhi’s prayer meetings. Rather, they provided the opportunity for a needed release of anxiety, and display of friendship.

The prayer meeting and its associated psychological effects, date far back into the history of organized religion. Gandhi’s genius, in this as in other instances, was to adapt a traditional concept and experience to his own use, in this case for the resolution of communal conflict. The most brilliant example of this adaptation appears in his theory and practice of fasting, which is both illustrative of his stylistic achievement, and suggestive of some of the main assumptions underlying his conception of satyagraha. ‘Satyagraha’, he wrote, ‘has been designed as an effective substitute for violence,’ that is, to wage non-violent conflict in a way that will resolve a conflict situation. The fast became, in Gandhi’s hands, the most potent of all ways: ‘an integral part of the satyagraha armoury, . . . the greatest and most effective weapon in its armoury.4 Gandhi repeatedly use the term ‘weapon’ when describing the technique: ‘a fiery weapon’, ‘an infallible weapon’. The term is employed to convey the idea of waging non-violent conflict. The course of this conflict should be carefully plotted by the satyagrahi, and the fast should come only as ‘a last resort when all other avenues of redress have been explored and have failed’.6

Beyond this consideration, two special conditions should be attached to the fast: first, it must be used in a constructive sense, to reform an individual, to gain his repentance for a wrong committed, to awaken his conscience and induce a re-examination of his position. Its general aim, therefore, is ‘to evoke the best in [the wrong doer]. Self-suffering is an appeal to his better nature, as retaliation is to his baser. Fasting under proper circumstances is such an appeal par excellence’.1 The second condition attached by Gandhi to the fast reveals his understanding of its dynamics. He says that a satyagrahi should always fast against a ‘lover’; that is, one who shares, however unconsciously, an underlying sympathy and respect for his aim. This condition is significant for at least two reasons. On the one hand, it indicates Gandhi’s awareness of the fast’s inherent limitation. He conceives that ‘You cannot fast against a tyrant.’2 On the other hand, with this condition may be seen Gandhi’s insight into the real source of the fast’s power: in his case the overwhelming sympathy of the Indian people, manifest in the fact that Gandhi’s fasts worked best when waged against his own countrymen, Hindus and Muslims.

All these requirements and conditions that Gandhi attached to fasting in satyagraha were fulfilled in the Calcutta fast except the last, and this was only partially met. The Calcutta goondas were not tyrants, but even Gandhi did not assume that they were sympathetic to his cause. Rajagopalachari’s first objection (noted above) when Gandhi proposed the Calcutta fast came with the question ‘Can one fast against the goondas?’ Gandhi replied that the goondas ‘could be overcome by a determined effort by society at large to keep the peace. It is this emphasis upon social responsibility that lies at the heart of Gandhi’s conception of satyagraha: since society, he reasoned, is responsible for the existence of goondism in the first instance, then it both bears the moral responsibility for curing this disease of the body politic as well as the power to do so. Neglect of this responsibility is tantamount to moral cowardice.

‘Goondas do not drop from the sky, nor do they spring from the earth like evil spirits. They are the product of social disorganization, and society is therefore responsible for their existence. In other words, they should be looked upon as a symptom of corruption in our body politic.’3

This was Gandhi in 1940; when in 1946, he was confronted with the Bihar riots, he again unequivocally placed the responsibility where it belonged: ‘I deplore the habit of procuring a moral alibi for ourselves by blaming it all on the goondas. We always put the blame on the goondas. But it is we who are responsible for their creation as well as encouragement.’4 Gandhi argued these simple truths because he was intensely involved in the problems posed by communal violence and desperately sought their resolution through satyagraha. For those more removed from the heat of the struggle, it was easier to sidestep the implications of Gandhi’s arguments. After Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan had visited Gandhi during the Calcutta fast, he commented to the press: ‘I have told Mahatmaji not to confuse between goonda activities and communal violence. What had happened in Calcutta during the last few days was absolutely the work of goondas and nothing else.’5 From Gandhi

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1 Gandhi, Delhi Diary (1948), p. 302.
2 The technique of the prayer meeting, developed in Calcutta, was perfected by Gandhi in Delhi (September 1947–January 1948). For his use of the ‘objector’ in the audience see, for example, Delhi Diary, pp. 27, 29–32, 38, 45–8.
3 Gandhi, Harijan, September 9, 1933, p. 4.
5 Harijan, October 13, 1940, and Harijan, April 21, 1946, p. 93.
6 Harijan, April 21, 1946.
came a reasoned restatement of earlier views which again steadfastly refused to dodge the crucial question of social responsibility, and the subsequent issue of the right method of social control:

‘The conflagration has been caused not by the goondas but by those who have become goondas. It is we who make goondas. Without our sympathy and passive support, the goondas would have no legs to stand upon. . . . During one year of past anarchy, it is understandable how these elements in society have gained respectability. But the war between Pakistanis and those for Undivided India has ended. It is time for peace-loving citizens to assert themselves and isolate goondaism. Non-violent non-co-operation is a universal remedy. Good is self-existent, evil is not. It is like a parasite living on and around good. It will die of itself when the support that good gives is withdrawn. The heart of the anti-social elements may or may not be changed; it will be enough if they are made to feel that the better elements of society are asserting themselves in the interests of peace and in the interests of normality.’

Gandhi’s hopes for communal harmony rested, in the last analysis, not with government or law enforcement agencies, but with the ‘better elements of society’ willing to assert themselves ‘in the interests of peace and normality’. The Calcutta fast, he stressed, was ‘meant to activize the better, peace-loving and wise elements in society’, for only these could forge lasting bonds of communal friendship. In the days immediately after the Calcutta fast, and before his departure for Delhi, Gandhi met with numerous civic groups in an attempt to consolidate, through them, the salutary results of the satyagraha. Private citizens, businessmen, students, volunteer groups, and other social agencies were formed into ‘Peace Brigades’ and assigned to patrol affected areas of the city. These civic forces alone, Gandhi believed, could strengthen the fabric of their society, after a year of incessant violence had left it in shreds. If there was a ‘miracle’ in Calcutta, then it occurred when one man’s thirty-day satyagraha restored to over two million people the will and sense of responsibility needed to mend their strife-torn city.