Chapter Five
The Noakhali riot, and its countrywide repercussion, soon vitiated the communal situation in the country. At this juncture, Gandhi decided to come to Bengal and visit the riot affected areas of Noakhali and Tippera. Gandhi’s presence introduced a new dynamic into the entire discourse on the question of communal ideology/riots. This dynamic was transported to the realm of politics, especially that which contained a steady undertone of violence as manifested by the communal riots. His presence provides the backdrop to the study of the situation that prevailed in Bengal during those fateful days and how this situation reshaped men and their minds. "Men create violence, but violence recreates them." This chapter attempts to locate this process of reshaping of the social fabric in the geographic context of Bengal, within the larger thematic context of communalism and its violent manifestation - the communal riots.

Gandhi had already seen in the Calcutta riots the potential for greater, escalated violence - probably on the scale of a civil war. "We are not yet in the midst of a civil war", he

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1 The riot had a massive spill over effect. For reports on the repercussion of the Noakhali riot see Chapter IV, f.n.s. 4-7.


3 The Noakhali riot demonstrated the confusion and helplessness of all organised forces in the face of such an intense and violent manifestation of communal ideology. The Muslim League, on the one hand, tried to distance itself from the violence, but constantly supported and gave legitimacy to the perpetrators of communal violence in the area. Thus, Gandhi’s intervention was the only unorganised human intervention - there was a constant interaction and dialogue between organised politics and individual efforts.

said, "but we are nearing it. At present we are playing at it." In fact, it appears that Gandhi took a close personal interest in the affairs of Bengal, especially the violence there. It was the news of violence in Noakhali and Tippera that prompted him to come to Bengal. "Why and why only Noakhali whereas rioting had been taking place in Ahmedabad, Bombay or for that matter in the neighboring Bihar", was the question repeatedly asked of him. This question was important as it not only suggests the significance that Gandhi attached to the Noakhali riot but also provokes us to probe deeper into the ramifications of Gandhi's visit to the riot affected areas.

As we have outlined, Noakhali riot was qualitatively different from the earlier communal riots including the Calcutta killings of August 1946 which immediately preceded it. The difference lay in its transformation of a communal discourse, as a politics based on religion, to one in which violence was sanctified by religion. Gandhi had

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5 Harajan, 15 Sept. 1946, p. 312.

6 After the violence that followed the Rashid Ali Day demonstrations on 11-12 February 1946, Gandhi had asked the Secretary of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee (BPCC) to send him a report on the incidents. The Secretary's letter dated 16 February 1946, said:

Revered Mahatmaji,

I beg to confirm the telegram to you on 15.2.1946 in reply to your query regarding Calcutta Disturbances. The Telegram was as follows: REACTION AGAINST POLICE FIRING AND PEACEFUL PROCESSIONIST EXCITED.... CITY UNDER MILITARY CONTROL. (sic)


7 Gandhi's answer to this question was that "he would certainly have gone to any of the places mentioned (not Bihar) by the friend if anything approaching what had happened at Noakhali had happened there and if he had felt that he could do nothing without being on the spot". Gandhi to 'Friend', 1 Nov. 1946, Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (hereafter CWMG), Vol. LXXXVI, p. 65.

8 As we have seen in Chapter III, the violence in Noakhali was the product and manifestation of a complete communalisation of the society. The constitutive elements of the riot, viz., conversion, forcible marriage and the kind of legitimacy and sanction that these acts gained, made it qualitatively different from the Calcutta riot of August.
realized this more than any one else. It was evident from the pattern of violence that there had occurred a total rupture of an essentially peasant society, and the entrenchment of communal ideology in that social milieu. Gandhi, an astute reader of the peasant psyche, appeared to perceive the effects such a rupture could engender. Noakhali, therefore, became important not just because it demonstrated an intensity of violence, but also the power of ideology, i.e., Communalism. Gandhi, in fact, was practical enough to see the writing on the wall. In September 1944 itself, he sensed the increased hold of Jinnah on the Muslim masses, and therefore, while writing to Jinnah he acknowledged the latter's hold over them. His meeting with Jinnah was basically an acceptance of this fact. Aware of the significance of 'symbols', he wanted to attack the idea of 'two nations' and thereby, attack the ideological basis of Pakistan, i.e., communalism. He was prepared to accept any kind of Partition as long as it was not based on this theory. He wrote to Jinnah that he could already see its operation. Noakhali presented for Gandhi the first field demonstration of this theory in its intense and most frightening form. Gandhi's visit to Noakhali, therefore, had a combating element to it as he tried to counter the ideological underpinnings of the riot. "In any war", he said, "brutalities were bound to take place; war is a brutal thing". Once this was accepted by Gandhi, he started

9 For a detailed discussion see chapter I and II of this thesis.

10 He wrote:

Dear Qaid-i-Azam,
...
For the moment I have shunted the Rajaji formula and, with your assistance, am applying my mind very seriously to the famous Lahore resolution of the Muslim League.... As I write this letter and imagine the working of the resolution in practice, I see nothing but ruin for the whole of India....


11 Bose, N. K., op. cit., p. 43.
looking beyond the violence and the violations taking place there. He was, as suggested by a close aide in Noakhali, not very concerned about the casualties or the extent of material damage. Instead he concentrated on "discovering the political intentions working behind the move and the way of combating them successfully".  

The spread and the intensity of the violations convinced him that the war was to be a long drawn one and that he would have a personal stake in it. While it was "the cry of outraged womanhood" which brought him to Bengal, he was equally aghast at the religious intolerance shown by the local populace. This further convinced him that his place was in Noakhali. He took it upon himself to combat the operation of the "two nation-theory" while also delegitimising violence of its apparent religious sanctions. Therefore, Noakhali was made the battlefield on which he sought to uphold his political as well as personal credo.

This attitude of combating the war brought out a novel form of experience in its train - significantly entitled Gandhi's Noakhali experiment. In this experiment, Gandhi's principles were at stake. "My own doctrine", Gandhi said to N. C. Chatterjee, "was failing. I don't want to die a failure".

Did he possess any coherent strategy when he landed in Noakhali? From the very beginning, he was quite apprehensive of his plan of action in Noakhali. Even enroute, he did not know what he was going to do there. He invoked God as the only one who knew

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13 *Harijan*, 10 Nov. 1946, p. 396.

what he could do.\textsuperscript{15} The only thing he was certain of was that his presence in Noakhali was necessary.\textsuperscript{16} He grappled in the darkness and told N. K. Bose, his secretary during those days, that he might have to stay on there for several years.\textsuperscript{17}

While he was fighting this uncertainty vis-à-vis the Noakhali situation, there erupted in Bihar ghastly communal riots. Hindu crowds began slaughtering Muslims in order to avenge the rumored massacre of people of their community by the latter in Noakhali.\textsuperscript{18}

Gandhi's position became very delicate as the Bihar riot boomeranged on his peace-mission in Noakhali. The number of casualties in the Bihar riots was much more than those in the latter. Therefore, the Muslim League Ministry in Bengal, which from the very beginning had been trying to minimize its own responsibility in the entire episode, now asked him to shift his attention to Bihar. The details of the Bihar riot were exaggerated and made the center of projection.\textsuperscript{19} Thus, communal discourse whether Hindu or Muslim, justified, and thereby, validated itself and the other.

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{15} Bose, \textit{ibid.}, p. 40. \\
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 62. His numerous letters written during this time indicate this uncertainty. See \textit{CWMG}, Vol. LXXXVI, pp. 47-63. \\
\textsuperscript{17} Bose, N. K., \textit{op. cit.}, p. 85. See also \textit{CWMG}, Vol. LXXXVI, p. 200. \\
\textsuperscript{18} The communal situation in Bihar had become quite tense after the "direct action" resolution of the Muslim League at the end of July 1946. There was violence in Muzaffarpur on 27 September. On October 25, meetings were held throughout the Province to observe Noakhali Day. This was the beginning of the Bihar riot. The Governor's report stated: ...

On October 25th meetings were held all over the Province to commiserate with Hindu victims of Noakhali and it was meetings in Chapra (Saran District) and in Patna which started the present widespread riots in South Bihar. ...

\textsuperscript{19} The Bihar riots were presented as another stage of the anti-Muslim campaign led by the Congress Ministers which, according to the Muslims League, wanted to annihilate the Muslims and their culture and religion.
\end{flushleft}
The Muslim League Government did not like Gandhi's visit to Noakhali as it felt that world attention would get focused on the active collaboration of the League workers with the rioters. It, therefore, exerted pressure through propaganda and personal insinuation against Gandhi.\textsuperscript{20} Even people holding responsible positions attacked Gandhi and asked him to leave Noakhali, and attend to the Bihar situation. Hamiduddin Chaudhury, a Parliamentary Secretary of the Muslim League Ministry, who had visited Noakhali with Gandhi and initially condemned the atrocities there, issued a statement to the Press that Gandhi was in Noakhali "only to focus attention of the world on the happenings there and to magnify the issue".\textsuperscript{21}

\textit{The Star of India}, a prominent Muslim League daily of Calcutta, dedicated its issue of 11 November "to the dead of Bihar". "It is only now that the full staggering enormity of their terrible ordeal has begun to escape through the conspiracy of silence that sounded the orgy in a thick veil." \textit{Star of India}, Cal., 14 Nov. 1946, p. 1.

As regards the number of people killed, it began with the initial statistics of 13,000. See \textit{Star of India}, Cal., 6 Nov. 1946; Fazlul Huq quoted a figure of one lakh in \textit{Azad}, cited in \textit{Star of India}, Cal., 13 Nov. 1946. After being criticised for exaggeration Huq brought it down to 30,000. See \textit{Ibid.}

The irresponsible behaviour of the Press, which became manifest during the Noakhali riot reached its climax during the Bihar riots which forced the Viceroy to ask the Ministers of the Interim Government to control the Press. See Wavell to Pethick-Lawrence, 13 November 1946, Mansergh, N., (ed.), \textit{op. cit.}, Vol. IX, pp. 56-57.


\textsuperscript{21} The full Statement read:

Mr. Gandhi does not intend to go to Bihar,... will it be wrong if one feels that Mr. Gandhi is in Noakhali only to focus attention of the world on the happenings there and to magnify the same for keeping the Bihar happenings in the background?

Does Mr. Gandhi want to complete his organisation through the number of volunteers he has got from outside?... Mr. Gandhi may conveniently ask all the outside volunteers both male and female to quit while advising the refugees to return to their homes.... Mr. Gandhi is holding prayer meetings everyday in the evening and after the prayer he sometimes delivers lectures.... the Hindus will realise that the mischievous propaganda of their so called friends has been the cause of (bringing upon them) more misery and discomfort, they will begin to think rightly. Free from outside propaganda, they will begin to repose confidence in their Muslim neighbours with whom they have been living peacefully for centuries.

Synchronizing with statements of this sort was the behaviour of the local Muslim League workers. They began to harass Gandhi as well as the relief workers in order that they perforce left the place. Members of the Feni sub-division of the Muslim League sent Gandhi a post card containing a copy of the resolution passed by that body which read:

It is appreciated that Mr. Gandhi's presence in Bihar is much more useful than at Noakhali where the situation is normal. He is therefore requested to leave for Bihar.  

Gandhi remained undeterred by these attacks. His reply to the Feni sub-division Muslim League request was direct and curt. He wrote that he was unable to follow their advice as it was based on ignorance of the facts. "In the first place, I know that the situation is not normal here and that so far as I can contribute to the Bihar problem, I have to inform you that such influence as I have on Bihar can be and is being efficiently exercised from Srirampur." It is not that he was not aware of the magnitude of the Bihar riots. Gandhi with his keen understanding of communal logic, perceived the dynamic involved in the relationship between the Noakhali and Bihar riots. He perceived that Noakhali was the disease, while Bihar was just an outgrowth or casualty of the former.

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24 Gandhi's reply to the statement of Hamiduddin Choudhury bears out this understanding. He wrote:

It will not serve the cause of peace if I went to Bihar and found the Bihar Muslims League's report to be largely imaginary and the Bihar Govt.'s conduct substantially honourable, humane and just. I am not anxious to give them a certificate of good conduct as I am to give you, much though you may not want it. My spare diet and contemplated fast, you know well, were against the Bihar misdoings. I could not take such a step in the matter of Noakhali misdoings. It pains me to think that you a seasoned lawyer should not see the obvious.

The sound judgement displayed by Gandhi at this juncture was apparent. He was aware of his ability to influence the Ministers and people of Bihar even from a distance. His presence in Noakhali, on the other hand, was a deterrent for any further retaliatory action anywhere else. At another level, he neither had a hold on the Ministers in Bengal nor did he have any strong influence, as he had witnessed, on the Muslim populace of Noakhali, many of whom had even condemned him as an arch enemy of Islam.\(^{25}\)

Gandhi, on his part, faced all these charges with the simple statement that he was as much a friend of the Muslims as he was of the Hindus. However, this was increasingly disbelieved by the villagers, and towards the end of his sojourn they not only boycotted his prayer meetings\(^{26}\), but also dirtied the roads which he used everyday from village to village.\(^{27}\) He accepted this as the misdemeanours of those who had failed to understand him and his work. But he, Bose says, resolved not to "surrender his own love for men even if they were erring".\(^{28}\)

Though outwardly unfazed, the situation in Noakhali, the Bihar riots and its reaction, the strong and entrenched opposition from the Muslim League quarters in Bengal and his own search for a way out, created some intense moments of self-doubt, and consequently, Gandhi was not at peace with his inner self. This forced him to put his 'will' to the test. He not only reduced his food intake and retained but two of his aides, he also experimented with his personal purity. Though it created a stir even among his


\(^{26}\) Bose, N. K., *op. cit*, p. 132.

\(^{27}\) *Ibid.*

\(^{28}\) *Ibid.*
close aides, this shows the desperation with which Gandhi was fighting the last battle of
his life - a battle against communal ideology.

A psycho-analytical study reveals that a period of desperation like this had the
total potential to disturb the “integration of his (Gandhi’s) sexuality and spirituality”.29 This
was because “for Gandhi, celibacy was not only the sine qua non for moksha, but also the
mainspring of his political activities” (sic).30

On the other hand, Bhikhu Parikh tries to understand this traumatic episode
through an analysis of Gandhi’s political discourse. For Gandhi, says Parikh, personal
purity and political success hung together. Parikh suggests that personal purity generated
the energy and power he desperately needed to succeed in his momentous political
struggle. On the basis of this argument he tries to explain Gandhi’s Noakhali experiment.
He maintains that,

the more intense his political problems became, the greater was the moral struggle in his
personal life. It was hardly surprising that his finest political experiment of successfully
controlling violence in Noakhali should have been conducted alongside his heroic sexual
experiment.31

Kakar and Parikh both agree on one central point, i.e., the integration of the
spiritual and the sexual (Parikh calls it the moral) in Gandhi’s political life. In the context
of Noakhali, however, his experiment needs to be analysed in a much more dynamic

29 Kakar, Sudhir, Intimate Relations Exploring Indian Sexuality, Penguin Books, New Delhi,
1990, p. 102.

30 Ibid., p. 96. Kakar further argues that “it is from the repudiation, the ashes of sexual desire,
that the weapon of nonviolence which he used so effectively in his political struggle against the
racial oppression of the South African white rulers and later against the British empire, was
phoenix-like born”. Ibid.

31 Parikh, Bhikhu, Colonialism, Tradition and Reform: An Analysis of Gandhi’s Political
manner; to shift emphasis from reading Gandhi - the person, to the political context in which he was situated in the winter of 1946.32

A post-1942 reading of events shows a strangely quiet Gandhi. That fire of the Quit India movement appeared to be missing. However, he continued his fight against the ideological basis of Pakistan, i.e., the 'two nation' theory. His endorsement of the CR formula and subsequent meetings with Jinnah demonstrated his determination to achieve his ends. The increasing hold of Jinnah over the Muslim masses, Gandhi himself acknowledged,33 made him aware of the 'shrinking space' to combat communalism / Pakistan. His acceptance of the envisaged partition in the CR formula was the the limit to which he was prepared to compromise with Jinnah.34 With this compromising stroke, however, he lost his advantage to fight 'Pakistan'. By 1946, he had no political weapons left to arm himself against the Muslim League and the rapid communalisation of the society, which in a sense culminated in the Noakhali riot. The religious sanction behind the Noakhali riot disturbed him most because it robbed him of one of his most significant

Erikson, one of the pioneers of psychohistory, tried to study Gandhi of 1918 "in his middle ages, just before he became Mahatma", through primarily the latter's autobiography, and interviews with the participants of the textile mill strike in Ahmedabad. See Erikson, Erik H. Gandhi's Truth, On the Origins of Militant Non-Violence, W. W. Norton & Co., New York, 1969. The Noakhali experience provided an excellent opportunity to study Gandhi in his 'old age', in the sense of Erikson's 'life cycle theory', according to which there is a distinctive characteristic or 'goal' in each stage of life, for eg., youth is marked by an identity crisis. However, given the problems that psychoanalytical studies suffer from, any such study will be more of a biographical exercise than a serious discussion on why, say, the population of Noakhali reacted the way they did in the winter of 1946. This shows that, despite attacks by the literary theorists and the external critics of history, historical discourse is most appropriate to understand social realities, and to a great extent social psychology, too.

Dear Qaid-i-Azam,

... I know that you have acquired a unique hold on the Muslim masses. I want you to use your influence for their total welfare....


See Chapter I for a detailed discussion on the CR Formula.
political weapons - a politics based on ethics and morality. He, therefore, had no plans nor any weapons, and helplessly asked "Kya Karoon, Kya Karoon?" (What should I do, What should I do?).

At this historical conjuncture, a rupture between his personal life and political struggle seemed imminent. The situational adversity, his feeling of loneliness and the intensity of communal hatred, together forced Gandhi to engage in an intense battle with his own self. This explains to some extent his moments of agony. At this point, he tested himself to garner moral strength, and equip himself to dispel the darkness around.

Gandhi was in Noakhali from 6 November 1946 to the end of February 1947. In May 1947 he visited Calcutta when the question of united and sovereign Bengal vis-à-vis the partition of the province was agitating the minds of the leaders and people of the province. His last visit to the province was in August 1947. The news of the Punjab killings had already poisoned the air in Calcutta, and there were all the indications of the city erupting again in a communal conflagration. It was on the verge of this situation that he undertook the now famous 'fast' to intervene in the continuing civil strife.

He was supposed to leave for Noakhali on 1 November but the departure was postponed to 6 November. Beginning his tour with the villages of Gopdirbag, he reached Srirampur on 20 November where he decided to spend the next one and half months.

37 He visited 48 villages during his stay in Noakhali. He covered those Noakhali-Tippera villages most affected by the riot, including Karpara and Devipur.
His visits to these villages on the one hand stirred the entire area with new life, and on the other strengthened his own determination to contest communal politics with Noakhali as his battle-ground. In combating communal ideology and the forces that represented it, he sought to heal the societal rupture which had sustained the communal breach. The battle was a difficult one because the communalisation of the population was complete. This made him more determined to fight it with all his strength.

After a long sojourn in Srirampur, which had soon become the nerve centre of his mission in Noakhali, Gandhi embarked on his journey into the interior of Noakhali and Tippera from January 1947. He repeatedly expressed his desire to be left alone on this journey, and in fact, desired that the military protection provided to him be withdrawn. He felt it prevented him from showing the people that his concern was genuine and that they could approach him without any fear. He wrote to Suhrawardy on 8 January,

All my attempts at bringing about real friendship between the two communities must fail so long as I go about fully protected by armed police or military... The fright of the military keeps them from coming to me and asking all sorts of questions for the resolution of their doubts...

In almost all the villages he visited and the congregational prayer meetings he addressed, he admonished the Hindus for being cowards and exhorted them to be fearless. He was aware of the fear that prevailed, and of the fact that the Hindus were really in great danger, without adequate protection. The total social rupture that was demonstrated by the brutality of the communal attacks was soon compounded by the

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39 Letter to Suhrawardy, 8 Jan. 1947, CWMG, Vol. LXXXVI, p. 330. He wanted the Muslim population to give vent to their anger openly which would clear avenues for dialogue rather than the present scenario of sullenness. He wanted both the communities to be brave but as he wrote, "Unfortunately both lack this very necessary human quality". Ibid.
Muslim League workers instituting false cases against Hindu villages, at times with the active connivance of the local authorities. Even the army found it difficult to tackle the situation.

Therefore, talk of fearlessness in such an atmosphere of all-pervasive tyranny of fear was seen by many as unwise. Leaders of political parties, especially the Mahasabha leaders, demanded military protection for the Hindus of Noakhali. Contesting this line of argument, Gandhi refuted the claims that he was not practical in advocating military protection for the Hindus. "I am an idealist," he said to the Hindu Mahasabha delegation, "but I claim to be a practical idealist". And as a 'practical idealist', he realised that any talk of army protection would make the Muslim villagers more belligerent against the Hindus, as well as hamper the return of a normal social existence in these villages. In the same vein, he contested the idea of the "segregation of Hindu population in protected pockets". For him, this 'would be interpreted as preparation of war' by the Muslim League. Therefore, the path he chose was different.

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40 Tu ker, F., *op. cit.*, pp. 609-612. Pyarelal, *Mahatma Gandhi, The Last Phase*, Book One, I, Navajivan Trust, Ahmedabad, 19??, p. 15. The colonial attitude can be contrasted here: He (Burrows) was relieved that G. (Gandhi) had left Bengal, it had taken 20 of his best police to protect him; and he was sarcastic over an american correspondent's article headed ‘Gandhi walks alone’!


41 Ibid.


43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.
The talk of migration was in the air but in his opinion if it had to take place, "it must be complete". After all this was what Pakistan meant. He did not want to be "a willing party to Pakistan". Pakistan was a political agenda and not a social solution, just as migration was not the solution to the problem.

"No police or military would protect those", he said, "who are cowards". He emphasised the need for Hindus to be courageous and shun their inferiority complex. From the beginning he asked them to be fearless. In Dattapara, "He had seen the terror-stricken faces of the sufferers. They had been forcibly converted once and they were afraid the same thing would be repeated. He wanted them to shed that fear." In fact, he tried to attack the tyrannical hegemony of fear that the communal violence had created in the minds of the people. It was here that he reflected on his idea of an imminent civil war that communalism posed at this stage, and with which the League was trying to get Pakistan. Therefore, Gandhi in his talk with Nalini Mitra and Rasomoy Sur of Noakhali, at Srirampur concluded that "the present problem was not the question of Noakhali alone; it was a problem for the whole of Bengal and the whole of India". This was why Gandhi was so perturbed about Noakhali. In fact, his determination to go back to Noakhali even after the Partition reflects his idea of attacking communal ideology and the 'two nation theory' from Noakhali. Thus, unlike his 'search for light' as regards his

47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
51 Srirampur, 22 Nov. 1946, ibid., p. 145.
actions, he was determined that Noakhali was going to be his testing ground. In Dattapara he said,

The question of East Bengal is not one of Bengal alone. The battle for India is today being decided in East Bengal. Today Mussulmans are being taught by some that Hindu religion is an abomination and therefore forcible conversion of Hindus to Islam is a merit.  

Noakhali in his mind was like Champaran or Bardoli - the 'model site' for launching his movement. Therefore, his speech at Nabagram reflected what was going on in his mind. He said, "Noakhali offered an almost ideal situation for testing whether ahimsa could effectively be used by a small number of people against an almost sullen if not hostile majority all round."

He was conscious that "the problem here was also complicated by the fact of the existence of a popular Government controlling the destines of the people". About the contrasting psyche of the two communities in Noakhali, he stated that he had been "moving amidst a sullen population on the one hand and a frightened one on the other". A conciliation, he resolved was to be through the one's openness and the other's fearlessness. Gandhi's presence and his attempts at meeting people in 'their home' were themselves a symbolic attack on the prevailing atmosphere marked by fear.

Gandhi was very upset by targeting of violence against women who were the worst victims. The male population in most of the villages had to run for their lives and

52 Dattapara, 12 Nov. 1946, Ibid., p. 115.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid., p. 417.
the women lived in great fear and danger. Gandhi asked them to be courageous, though not on a patronising note - he shared their grief. Manubehan Gandhi, his grand daughter, who was there with him wrote:

... many of them had been forcibly converted to Islam. As the husbands and sons of some of them had been murdered, they were plunged in grief. With sobs and tears they poured out their stricken hearts to Bapuji. "The only difference between you and me," he consoled them, "is that you cry and I don't. But my heart sorrows for you. Your grief is my grief; that's why I have come here. There is no remedy for our pain except faith in God. Is the one, most efficacious panacea dead. If one imbibe this truth, there will be no cause for such outbursts of grief." 56

Later, Gandhi in a sad tone told Manubehan, "the meeting with those sisters is still vivid, who knows how many more tragic sights like this I am fated to see". 57

Speaking at Jagatpur on 10 January, he advised his audience "about courage and the need of never surrendering one's honour even on pain of death". 58 Gandhi's presence, his prayer meetings which encouraged women to come out openly after a long time - and with confidence, and his constant evocation of courage, fearlessness, honour and death, had a significant impact. Women began to come out and share their tales of woe with him. In Bansa, they put before him their dilemma, "what is a woman to do when attacked by miscreants - run away or resist with violence". 59 Gandhi shared their concern and advised them to come out of the trap of violence. He said,

My answer to this question is very simple. For me there can be no preparation for violence. All preparation must be for non-violence if courage of the highest type is to be developed. Violence can only be tolerated as being preferable always to cowardice....

56 Gandhi, Manu Behan, op. cit., p. 81.
57 Ibid.
58 Bose, N. K., op. cit., p. 126.
For a non-violent person there is no emergency but quiet dignified preparation for death.\footnote{Ibid.}

He asked them to be like Sita and Savitri who by their deeds refuted the fact that women were ‘weak’. While speaking at Bhatialpur he noted, “It was often said that women were naturally weak - they were abalas”. His advice to women was that they should not believe such things.\footnote{Bhatialpur, 14 Jan. 1947, \textit{CWMG}, Vol. LXXXVI, p. 353.} They could be, he opined, as hard as men.\footnote{Ibid.}

While advising Hindu women to become courageous and fearless, he at the same time asked them to help the neighbouring Muslim women shed their ignorance and illiteracy, and also in other aspects where they lagged behind the former.\footnote{Ibid.}

As Gandhi’s journey progressed, a sense of confidence built up in the Noakhali villages. Women started coming out more often and they even displayed the courage that Gandhi was exhorting them to live with. Bose wrote that after one prayer meeting a girl came up to tell her story without the slightest fear, and on being asked whether she would be able to go back and stay once more in the midst of scenes she could never forget, the girl answered in the affirmative.\footnote{Bose, N. K., \textit{op. cit.}, p. 146.}

Bose recorded that she answered in this manner because now she knew that she could save herself by dying.\footnote{Ibid.} This forced Bose to think about the transformation Gandhi
had caused. Though equivocal in his judgement, he could not negate the influence of Gandhi's speeches on that girl.\(^{66}\)

When told that the Muslims were willing to receive the refugees back in their villages provided they withdrew the criminal cases arising out of the disturbances, Gandhi provided the guilty with two alternatives:

They could admit the crimes and justify their conduct on the ground that whatever they had done was under advice, solely for the establishment of Pakistan without any personal motive and face the consequences. Or, they should report and submit to penalty of law by way of expiation.\(^{67}\)

But he negated any compromise such as dropping the cases. Hence, personal responsibility was to be accepted, as also the root of those acts which forced people to create such a situation.

He rejected the idea of the Hindu Mahasabha that the entire Hindu population should be segregated in pockets. N. C. Chatterjee, the President of the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha, personally came to Gandhi to argue on these lines. Gandhi's counter argument contained his idea of responsibility. For him the former was an unworkable proposition. He said to N. C. Chatterjee:

Put yourself in Mr. Suhrawardy's shoes; do you think he would favour it, or even the Muslim residents of Noakhali? For it would be interpreted as a preparation for war.\(^{68}\)

... by putting forth that demand they would practically be conceding the logic of the Muslim League's demand of Pakistan for what was Pakistan but a glorified pocket. If migration had to take place, it must be systematic and complete.... It was not therefore to be thought of so long as there was any hope of co-operation.\(^{69}\)

\(^{66}\) Ibid., p. 147.

\(^{67}\) Pyarelal, op. cit., p. 416.

\(^{68}\) Bose, N. K., op. cit., p. 84. He countered similar arguments from the Muslim quarter during his visit to the Bihar riot affected areas.

\(^{69}\) Pyarelal, op. cit., p.
Gandhi, therefore, insisted that for a permanent solution responsibility as well as proximity were absolutely necessary. He advised people not to leave their homes and go elsewhere.\(^{70}\) In conversation with Nalini Mitra and Rasomoy Sur at Srirampur, he said,

The Bengalees were always in the forefront of civilised life in bravery and sacrifice and it was really shocking to find that people would run away in fear giving up their hearths and homes. He wanted to see every Hindu family settle down in its own village and face the situation fearlessly and with courage.\(^{71}\)

While he asked them to seek protection through their inner strength, he also tried through the Peace Committees to create bridges between the communities. This would enable the communities to come into physical proximity with one another, which again would bring moral responsibility into life.\(^{72}\)

The enactment of this idea of the sense of responsibility lay in his idea of Peace Committees. Initially the idea of Peace Committees was mooted by the Bengal Muslim League Government while Gandhi was in Srirampur. The plan was to have equal number of Hindu and Muslim members in these Peace Committees with a government official as Chairman. Gandhi was favourably disposed to the idea because it fulfilled his idea of responsibility. This is why he asked the Hindu members to give it a chance to succeed


\(^{71}\) \textit{Ibid.}

\(^{72}\) Writing on the role of social and moral responsibility, and the relationship between the two, Zygmunt Bauman in his study on the Holocaust makes this observation:

Responsibility, this building block of all moral behaviour arises out of the proximity of the other. Proximity means responsibility and responsibility is proximity .... The alternative to proximity is social distance. The moral attribute of social distance is lack of moral relationship, or heterophobia. Responsibility is silenced once proximity is eroded; it may eventually be replaced with resentment once the fellow human subject is transformed into another. The process of social transformation is one of social separation. It was such a separation which made it possible for thousands to kill, and millions to watch the murder without protesting ....

when the latter insisted on first bringing the m. reants to book. Gandhi advised them not to summarily reject the proposal by placing any conditions. Thus, the Hindus had to trust and honour the work of these Committees. The functions of the Peace Committees were defined as:

(a) to do intensive propaganda work to restore confidence;

(b) to help in constructing shelters for the returning refugees, and in processing and distributing relief, e.g., food, clothing etc.;

(c) to draw up lists of disturbers of peace, who should be rounded up. These lists would be checked up with the first information report already lodged with the police, and arrests to be made on verification. If an innocent person was found to have been arrested, the Peace Committee would recommend to the Magistrate his release on bail or unconditionally as the case might be;

(d) to prepare a list of houses destroyed or damaged during the disturbances.

Similarly Gandhi asked the people to trust representatives of the Government. In Srirampur, he said:

_Here were elected Muslims who were running the government of the Province, who gave them their word of honour. They would not be silent witnesses to the repetition of shameful deeds. His advice to the Hindus was to believe their word and give them a trial. This did not mean there would not be a single bad Mussulman left in East Bengal. There were good and bad men amongst all communities. Dishonourable conduct would break any ministry or organisation in the end._

Bose, N. K., _op. cit._, p. 58.
Gandhi in Noakhali 319

was of the firm conviction that a single man could change the entire complexion of societal thought by his acts. He was glad to meet the Maulvi at Muraim who "helped in sustaining his theory that one individual can transform the entire society". There was no riot in Muraim where, according to Pyarelal, the Maulvi was like an oasis amidst the desert; he saw to it that the Hindus did not even panic and made himself responsible for their well being. 74

The third ingredient of Gandhi's battle in Noakhali-Tippera was an attack an communal ideology from a high moral and ethical plane. First, he emphasised the right of every individual to profess or follow any religion as long as it did not negatively affect the others' religious creeds. He was appalled to witness the religious intolerance shown during the riot and which continued during his visits. In the village of Masimpur, which he visited on 7 January 1947, the Muslim audience left the place once he began his prayer meeting. At which Gandhi remarked: "I am sorry because some of my friends had not been able to bear any name of God except Khuda but I am glad because they have had the courage of expressing their dissent openly and plainly." 75 This small incident provides an inkling of the mentality which prevailed during the fateful October disturbances in the district.

He then appealed to the 'Muslim brethren' to assure him "of that freedom which is true to the noblest tradition of Islam. Even from the Muslim League platforms, it has been repeatedly said that in Pakistan there will be full tolerance of the practice of their faiths by the minorities and that they will enjoy freedom of worship equally with the

74 Pyarelal, op. cit., p. 399.

majority. 76 There was no sense of appeasement. His stout defence of his Ramdhun and the prayer meetings testified to his fight for religious freedom. Here again, it will not be out of place to suggest that his prayer for him broke all religious and communal boundaries and in addition it even gave voice to the protesting soul. The prayer meetings of Gandhi brought people out into the open for the first time after 10 October 1946, and thereby, broke the tyranny of fear.

In a place where all symbols of a particular religion had been made the target of attack, the Gandhian defense came as an attack on that particular undercurrent of communal ideology which legitimised religious intolerance.

Another aspect of this was that by bringing up ethical-moral questions, Gandhi was trying to delegitimise the forces of communal ideology which in fact claimed religious sanction for their agenda of violence. In retrospect, it seems quite significant because clerics of religion, and religion itself, had become the main prop and legitimising factor in the Noakhali riot. Apart from the physical manifestation of it, Gandhi perceived the prevailing psyche from a discussion with Maulvi Khalilur Rahman of Devipur, when he visited it on 17 February, 1947. The Maulvi was reportedly responsible for the conversion of a large number of Hindus during the disturbances. 77

On being asked about the truth of the matter, the Maulvi said that "the conversion should not be taken seriously, it was a dodge adopted to save the life of the Hindus." 78 Gandhi was aghast at this casual attitude that the religious preceptor

76 Ibid., pp. 323-324.
77 Bose, N. K., op. cit., p. 130.
78 Ibid.
displayed towards religion. Bose noted, "(he) asked him if it was any good saving one's life (iman) by sacrificing one's faith (iman)? It would have been much better if, as a religious preceptor, he had taught the Hindus to lay down their lives for their faith, rather than give it up through fear." The divine stuck to his position that such false conversions for saving one's life had the sanction of religion. This angered Gandhi considerably and he lamented that if "ever he met God, he would ask Him why a man with such views had ever been made a religious preceptor".

This and other encounters made him realise that the acts of communal violence and attacks on religion during the riot had the strong sanction of the clerics and religious teachers. The large scale conversions were a living testimony of that. Therefore, he tried to invoke Islam itself to counter the ideology which sought to premise itself on Islam. Requesting the Muslims to join the Peace Committees, he said:

It was only in order to serve the cause of Islam that the Muslims are being called to join the committees. The most important task is to restore the confidence among the Hindus that they would be able to pursue their religious practice in freedom.

In another place when he was describing his meeting with the Hindu women "who put on vermilion mark indoors but wipe it off when they stir out in public", Gandhi invoked the name of the Prophet and Islam:

I will ask my Mussulman friends to treat this as their sacred duty. The Prophet once advised Mussulmans to consider the Jewish places of worship to be as pure as their own, and offer it the same protection. It is the duty of the Mussulmans of today to assure the same freedom to their Hindu neighbours.
He himself referred to Jinnah so that the local Muslim Leaguers did not commit misdeeds by using the latter’s name. He said,

Qaid-i-Azam Jinnah has said that every Muslim must show by his conduct that not a single non-Muslim need be afraid of him, the latter would be guaranteed safety and protection. For, thus alone can the Mussulmans command honour and respect.

He knew quite well that Jinnah had a sway over the masses. So, his was a very practical realisation that he could not fight the battle by attacking Jinnah but rather by taking his name. His constant references to the Quran were also supportive of his argument that "if people had known the true meaning of their scriptures, happenings like those of Noakhali could never have taken place".

In a talk with the villagers of Fatehpur, he appealed to their reason by saying:

It is the easiest thing to harass the Hindus here, as you Muslims are in the majority. But is it just as honourable? Show me, please, if such a mean action is suggested anywhere in your Koran. I am a student of the Koran.... So in all humility I appeal to you to dissuade your people from committing such crimes, so that your own future may be bright.

The major part of Gandhi's experiment in Noakhali was to attack communal ideology with three ingredients, viz., advocacy of fearlessness, invoking the sense of responsibility and taking the discourse to an ethical-moral plane. He struck at the core of the crisis by posing a counterpoint to the prevalent mental blocks. He understood that the hegemony of communal ideology was partially a reflection of the socio-economic structure of that society. He endeavoured to understand the problem in its totality and this made him realise that his task would be a long one. However, he remained faithful to

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83 Ibid., p. 65.
84 Ibid., p. 57.
his prioritizing of the ideological fight as he recognised its necessity at this particular historical juncture.

III

A study of Gandhi's presence in Bengal during those fateful days brings another personality within our ambit - Hussain Saheed Suhrawardy. Suhrawardy was at the forefront of the entire phenomenon of communalism during this period.

Gandhi had realised that the attendance of both Hindus and Muslims was dwindling and one day he might be left without anyone to listen to him at all. But he was confident that there was "no reason for him to give up his mission in despair."\(^8\) He was prepared to roam from village to village taking his spinning wheel with him. It would be an act of service to God.

... A worker who travelled from village to village teaching people how to clean their ponds effectively and teaching them other arts and crafts so as to enrich the life of the villages, should be able to make the villagers long for his company rather than shun him.\(^7\)

He was, therefore, prepared to live there and fight his battle, preparing himself and Noakhali for a major offensive. He was not just trying to test his non-violence but test it vis-à-vis the "poisonous spread of communalism". In a letter to Patel from the village Datta he wrote: "The poison [of communalism] is public knowledge. Non-violence has to make its way through it. That is the only way in which it can be put

\(^8\) CWMG, Vol. LXXXVI, pp. 318-319.

\(^7\) Ibid.
to the test." He never attacked 'Pakistan' but the communalism which constituted the ideological basis of the demand. After all, Gandhi had accepted that he was not averse to a partition of sort if it was not based on the theory of two nations.

I proceed on the assumption that India is not to be regarded as two or more nations but as one family.... I can... recommend to the Congress and the country the acceptance of the claim for separation contained in the Muslim League resolution of Lahore of 1940.... and that it had to be mutually agreed and not a gift of the British.

He was trying to call the bluff on the threat of violence. Speaking at Karpara on 12 January, he said that it was wrong to think that "Pakistan could be achieved through civil war".

The Bihar riot, however, interrupted his plan and he had to leave Noakhali in March 1947 but Noakhali remained a recurrent theme on his tour of Bihar. Afterwards, he wanted to go back to Bengal and particularly to Noakhali. On the eve of independence, he finally arrived at Calcutta from where he proceeded to Noakhali. Here he found himself amidst the danger of an impending communal riot. Gandhi reached Calcutta on 9 August 1947 from Srinagar. On the same day a deputation led by S. M. Unman, ex-Mayor of Calcutta, waited upon him and requested him to postpone his Noakhali journey as the Muslims of Calcutta needed his presence more than anybody

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90 Ibid.
else. Mr. Usman pleaded with him by saying: "We Muslims have as much claim upon you as the Hindus. For you yourself have said you are as much of Muslims as of Hindus".  

For Gandhi, the violence in Calcutta did not constitute the core of the problem as he was concerned with the situation in Noakhali about which he was kept informed by his workers who were engaged in relief work there. He, in turn, kept Suhrawardy informed, and demanded that he attend to these matters. He wired Suhrawardy saying, "... I continue (to) receive doleful wires about increasing lawlessness Noakhali (stop) I suggest prompt attention... and prompt action...".  

Therefore, when requested to stay in Calcutta, he asked for an assurance that the situation in Noakhali would not deteriorate. "If anything happens here", he said, "I now have a right to go on a fast for Noakhali and you will have to be a witness during the fast". He was reassured that the Leaguers in Noakhali would be informed but that he would not be allowed to fast. It was at this time that Suhrawardy encountered Gandhi again. He met Gandhi on 11 August and had a long talk with him. Gandhi told Suhrawardy that he would remain in Calcutta if the latter was prepared to live with him under the same roof:

This is my second offer to you. We shall have to work as long as every Hindu and Mussulman in Calcutta does not safely return to the place where he was before. We shall continue in our effort till our last breath.  

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93 Gandhi's telegram to Suhrawardy, 7 April 1947, *ibid.*, Vol. LXXXVII, p. 221.
Suhrawardy was prepared but Gandhi did not want him to commit immediately and advised him to consult his family as the decision had serious implications - "the old Suhrawardy would have to die".

Why did Gandhi choose Suhrawardy? After all, he was the person who was held primarily responsible for the 'Calcutta killings' and the rapid deterioration of communal relations in the province. Gandhi had met Suhrawardy for the first time at a conference in Faridpur in 1918. The strong attraction that Suhrawardy had felt towards Gandhi in 1918 had made him ask the latter to address him as son. Reminding Suhrawardy of their old acquaintance, Gandhi wrote:

I remind you of our pleasant meeting in Faridpur when Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das was still in his physical case. If I remember rightly, you were the only one sitting in front of me spinning assiduously, though you were unable to pull an even or fine thread. And then, if I remember rightly, when I applied to you some distant adjective of affection, you corrected me by saying that you felt as son to me (sic). I would like to think still that you are the same Shaheed and to feel proud that my son has become Chief Minister of Bengal.

Their relationship waned over the years during which Suhrawardy emerged as the most powerful leader of the Muslim League in Bengal. But, this coming together in the month of August 1947 appears to have revived the old attraction. It was the realisation

96 Manu Behan writes:
Shri Suhrawardy came at 10 p.m. He was with Bapu for nearly an hour and a half. Bapuji said, "We shall both work together you should join me if you are sincere (sic). Then I do not have to go to Noakhali. This is a path of renunciation so, you should consult your family before you decide."

97 "... for the implication of what I mean", Gandhi said, "is that the old Suhrawardy will have to die and accept the garb of a mendicant (fakir)". Gandhi to Suhrawardy. 11 Aug. 1947, *CWMG*, Vol. LXXXIX, p. 28.

of Gandhi's potential and the question of safety of Muslims in Calcutta which brought Suhrawardy close to Gandhi and he soon became Gandhi's "messenger of peace".

During his Noakhali stay, Gandhi repeatedly impressed upon Suhrawardy the need to own up responsibility for the state of affairs, and to improve the situation in Noakhali rather than add fire to the already tense communal situation. He even volunteered his own service. He wrote to Suhrawardy,

I wish you had Bengal on the brain rather than Bihar. Assume the truth of all that has been said in the Bihar provincial Muslim League's reports.... You do not want to satisfy yourself by thanking God for Bengal being as bad as Bihar.... I frankly confess to you that these reports do not carry conviction to me. If even 50 per cent of the stories are true, life would become a burden for me.... You should know that though here, I was able to affect events in Bihar by my proposal, if things did not mend, to undertake complete fast.

Though I have not come out publicly, and I hope I shall never have to do so, things in this part of Bengal are not at all rosy. Fear still dominates the refugees. Refugees ought not to be threatened with stoppage of rations. There are several other humane ways of inducing them to return to their homes. If you really want them to do so, you ought to supply them with proper food, warm clothing and decent habitation.... If you cannot do so, because of want of funds or sufficient workers, it would be quite proper and honourable to make that announcement and let philanthropists do the needful. There are workers enough in the country who would respond to the call. You, single-handed, will not be able to cope with the work... you will find in me a ready, willing, and, I hope, efficient helper.(italics mine)\(^99\)

Suhrawardy had defended his government quite forcefully by constantly harping on the fact that Noakhali was just a law and order problem and that the situation would soon be brought under control (which, as we have seen, was not the case).\(^100\) It was Gandhi who advised the people to trust the government and honour Suhrawardy's words. While resolute in his fight against the 'the two-nation theory' in the fields and villages of Noakhali, Gandhi had in mind Suhrawardy's potential as the leader of the


Muslim masses. By virtue of this, he could have challenged Gandhi's politics with the help of his mass base in Bengal. Gandhi's insistence of remaining in Noakhali even when the Bihar riot had boomeranged on his mission, indicates his strong resolution. The opportunity, however, was lost due to several reasons, primarily owing to his entanglement in the logic of communal politics. Even as late as June, when the partition of Bengal had become a near possibility he wrote to Suhrawardy saying that this could still be undone. He wrote,

Instead of being angry you should be thankful to me that I have dispelled all suspicion, if there was no ground for any.... Do you not realise that the unity of Bengal is as dear to me as it is to you? The partition agreed to by the Congress and the Muslim League, however reluctantly it may be, can still be undone by you if you would, as I suggested to you when we met, stoop to conquer the Hindus.\(^{101}\)

Meanwhile, in order to counter the influence of the Nazimuddin-Ispahani combine who owed their political existence more to Jinnah's appeal than to their base in Bengal, Suhrawardy had tried to radicalise his stance. This radicalisation, as we have seen, was rather a combination of radical rhetoric and communal politics than what Hashim tried to project, i.e., radicalisation on communistic lines. Therefore, by 1946 Suhrawardy not only outshone the Nazimuddin-Ispahani combine in provincial politics but also came out as the most enthusiastic exponent of Pakistan. It was not a coincidence that he turned out to be the most "enthusiastic Direct Actor". What he failed to understand was the fact that Jinnah could deliver extremely radical and communal rhetoric and ask people to go for direct action without taking any responsibility for such actions. Suhrawardy, on the other hand, was the Premier of the province where any such

action which escalated communal oppositions would alienate him from one section of the population. And by 1947, he had successfully managed to alienate almost the whole of the Hindu population. This was quite strange given his ambition of having a greater Bengal. He confessed to Gandhi that "... no Hindu would listen to him today, he found it hard to prove the utter sincerity of his proposal".\(^{102}\)

It was upon this confession that Gandhi offered to act as his secretary "live under the same roof with him and see to it that the Hindus at least gave him a patient hearing. Was he prepared to accept the offer?"\(^{103}\)

Suhrawardy was perplexed at what he thought of as a 'mad offer'.\(^{104}\) However, he accepted the invitation when offered a second time by Gandhi on the eve of the Partition and Independence. However, the time and context had changed drastically. But it did not mean Gandhi's offer was less consequential, rather it went on to provide the ingredient of a sound counter-communal stratagem at a high, *symbolic level*.

Once Suhrawardy had accepted to live under the same roof as Gandhi, a place was selected, of much symbolic value. On the afternoon of 13 August, Gandhiji arrived at Beliaghata. He was accompanied by S. M. Usman, the ex-Mayor and Secretary of the Calcutta District Muslim League, Mr. A. P. Chaudhury, Political Secretary to the Chief Minister, Manu Gandhi and Abha Gandhi.\(^{105}\) By the time the entourage which also included Nirmal Kumar Bose reached the Hydari Mansion - the house where they stayed


\(^{103}\) *Ibid.*

\(^{104}\) *Ibid.*

in Beliaghata - a number of demonstrators had gathered there to protest against the fact that Gandhiji had come to stay here, instead of going on to Ultadanga and Kankurgachi where Hindus were being killed by Muslims. People also shouted at Suhrawardy, and accused him of complicity in the communal riots. Gandhi "felt glad that the demonstrators had not merely the courage to oppose him openly, but also to charge Mr. Suhrawardy to his face with all that they had to say against him. Such courage was good; it was indeed a contrast to what he had witnessed in the district of Noakhali hitherto". 106

Despite such pronouncements, Gandhi was quite conscious of the fact that he was taking a big risk by staying with Suhrawardy. In a letter to Vallabhbhai Patel he commented,

I am stuck here and now I am going to take a big risk. Suhrawardy and I are going to stay together in a turbulent area from today. Let us see what happens. Keep a watch. 107

But then the rationale was that no Hindu in Bengal trusted Suhrawardy, and it was trust which was most important to the restoration of communal harmony. In another letter to Satish Chandra Dasgupta written from Beliaghata on 13th, he wrote, "Shaheed Saheb will be with me. Let me see what happens. I have taken many risks, perhaps this is the greatest of all. Who knows what will happen? We have to live as God wills and be content". 108

107 Gandhi to Patel, 13 August 1947, CWMG, Vol. LXXXIX, p. 35.
This had its desired effect. On the eve of Independence, i.e., 14 August, a strange fever of fraternisation gripped the Calcuttans and the same Hindus and Muslims who had strictly avoided each other’s company ever since the Direct Action Day riot, overflowed on the streets with fraternising scenes. This, an eye witness who travelled with Gandhi said, reminded him of Eric Maria Ramarque’s "All Quiet on the Western Front, when on Christmas Eve, the common French and German soldiers came out of their trenches and forgot, even if it were for a brief moment, that they were to regard each other as enemies".\textsuperscript{109}

Gandhiji himself wrote in a piece in the \textit{Harijan} entitled ‘Miracle or Accident’, that the "joy of fraternization (sic) is leaping up from hour to hour".\textsuperscript{110}

However, Gandhi was not very jubilant on this show of goodwill. "I am not lifted off my feet by these demonstrations of joy",\textsuperscript{111} was his response to the events. Why? Because, he said, he "could not be satisfied until Hindus and Muslim felt safe in one another’s company and returned to their own homes to live as before. Without that change of heart, there was likelihood of future deterioration in spite of the present enthusiasm".\textsuperscript{112} His anticipation proved correct because very soon Calcutta saw the recrudescence of communal violence. This finally forced Gandhi to sit on a fast for the "return of sanity among the people of Calcutta”. This was again a symbolic act because

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\textsuperscript{109} Bose, N. K., \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 228-9.


\textsuperscript{111} Bose, N. K., \textit{op. cit.}, p. 230.

\textsuperscript{112} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 229.
\end{flushright}
he thought his duty was to "go to every citizen of Calcutta and argue with him until he was convinced that any attack upon the Muslim community, as such, was wrong. But as that was physically not possible, he had decided upon the other alternative of a fast. Then people's hearts might be touched...."\textsuperscript{113}

His fast was broken only when the leaders of different communities and parties took upon themselves the responsibility of preventing any communal attacks from taking place. On 6th September 1947, addressing an immensely large crowd at Calcutta, Gandhi said that he broke the fast on the "strength of the pressure of friends drawn from all communities in Calcutta and outside, he threw the burden on them of preservation of peace at the cost of their lives.... What all wanted was not peace imposed by the Government forces but by themselves".\textsuperscript{114}

The fast lasted for three days and it was broken only when necessary assurances were made by important citizens that they were prepared to lay down their lives if necessary for the restoration of peace in Calcutta.

While all this was happening, one person though, shorn of his powers, was gradually coming to terms with the new realities. It was Saheed Suhrawardy. He was beside him during Gandhi's fast when Gandhi insisted that Suhrawardy should give his word that there had been no attack on the Muslims. Suhrawardy quite unlike his salvo of

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., pp. 236-237. In his statement released to the Press, he said:

From the very first day of peace, that is August 14th last, I have been saying that the peace might only be a temporary lull. There was no miracle. Will the foreboding prove true and will Calcutta again lapse into the law of the jungle? Let us hope not. let us pray to the Almighty that He will touch our hearts and ward off the recurrence of insanity.

Quoted in \textit{ibid.}, p. 239.

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., p. 246.
some months ago,\textsuperscript{115} later admired Gandhi for his role in the Calcutta riot of 1947.\textsuperscript{116} He narrated in his memoirs his experience during the August days with Gandhi.

There were mixed gatherings of men and women, Hindus and Muslims, who attended in hundreds of thousands, in complete friendship and mutual understanding. The atmosphere was completely metamorphosed; instead of bitterness and hatred and murder and rapine, communal harmony was established, although not without some attacks on my person in the beginning, which fortunately for me, failed to find their target.\textsuperscript{117}

Thus, it was evident that Gandhi's peace efforts at Calcutta brought him closer to Suhrawardy who had accepted Gandhi's invitation and worked for communal harmony.

The question of why Suhrawardy suddenly joined Gandhi and the communal harmony mission remains, when he knew fully well that it would cost him very dearly as far as his political future in Pakistan was concerned. Was it because, as Suhrawardy's biographer says, "Calcutta Muslims were in the middle of another nightmare and they asked Suhrawardy to stay with them. Suhrawardy could not refuse them during the most perilous period after they had stood solidly by him in all his movements for over a quarter of a century"?\textsuperscript{118} Or was it because, as the Governor of Bengal, Burrows, told Wavell, "... Suhrawardy was a very frightened man".\textsuperscript{119}

\textsuperscript{115} Suhrawardy met Gandhi on 11 May 1947, at Sodpur where during the course of conversation he retorted to Gandhi's words that he was responsible for every life lost in Bengal by saying that "it is you who are responsible for it, for you have denied justice to the Mussulmans". Bose, N. K., \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 198-199.


\textsuperscript{117} \textit{Ibid.}


\textsuperscript{119} Moon, Penderal, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 428. Mountbatten's aide, Allan Campbell Johnson, also expressed a similar view. He wrote, "Suhrawardy is frightened of Partition and is ready to play with the
There is some truth in this but it may be said that what made Suhrawardy accept Gandhi's invitation was the fact that since he had been the Chief Minister of the Province till 13 August, he was well aware of the explosive situation that existed in Calcutta. A sense of moral responsibility must have disturbed him; and as Gandhi's letters constantly reminded him of his past role, Suhrawardy might have really become conscious of the fact that he bore some responsibility for the communalisation and its outcome in the Bengalee society especially if the Hindus (for whom August 16, 1946 was still a living testimony of the League's and Suhrawardy's irresponsibility) made reprisals.

Suhrawardy's own rationale was that he wanted to protect the Muslims of India from communal onslaught after the partition. He writes in his memoirs,

that if the Muslims of Calcutta and environs were massacred or driven away there would be repercussions in East Bengal and that the Hindus there would be similarly treated. There were about four times as many Hindus in East Bengal as Muslims in West Bengal... The result could be that the Muslims of Bihar, Assam and the United Provinces certainly and elsewhere probably would be slaughtered or driven out to make room for the refugees. There would be a terrible holocaust all over the country.120

Thus, he took it upon himself to induce Gandhi to work for communal harmony in Calcutta.121

A close perusal however brings out some more facts of the entire episode. The failure of his greater, united and sovereign Bengal scheme and his recent hobnobbing with the Hindu leaders had made him a persona non grata in the ranks of Bengal Muslim League leadership which paid allegiance to the All India Muslim League leadership. In

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addition, the Partition and the subsequent loss of Calcutta meant that he had lost his political base, too.

His problems were compounded when the central leadership of the All India Muslim League, while keeping him busy in the Partition negotiations, elected Khwaja Nazimuddin as the leader of the Muslim League Parliamentary Party despite Jinnah’s assurance that there would be no election for the Parliamentary leadership of East Bengal. But Liaqat Ali Khan, who, according to Suhrwardy’s biographer, disliked Suhrwardy and was jealous of him, suddenly announced an election, not in the Punjab but in Bengal only, throwing in his support behind Khwaja Nazimuddin.

This is however not to suggest that Suhrwardy was forced to work with Gandhi only because he was left with no political base. This substantiates my earlier contention that the internal fissures in the Bengal Provincial Muslim League were a force which resulted in radicalising the communal overtones of the party. This had culminated in the Great Calcutta carnage of 1946. With the assumption of leadership, the Nazimuddin Government became thoroughly communal in East Bengal while, on the other hand, situational realities or some other forces pushed Suhrwardy into acting, helping Gandhi extinguish the flames of the communal riots. The change was, however, not sudden. Suhrwardy, despite his communal rhetoric, had always aspired to become

123 Talukdar, *op. cit.*, p. 32.
124 Jinnah offered him the job of Roving Ambassador of Pakistan.
the leader of the Province and here his communal stance and broader political ambitions clashed.

However, the Partition snatched away his political leadership and mass base, and he was even barred from entering East Bengal. These were factors which led him to become Gandhi's Ambassador of Peace rather than Jinnah's Roving Ambassador - "personal representative to acquaint the Governments all over the world with the *raison d'être* of Pakistan". 125

The pressure of the local representatives of the All India Muslim League was a significant factor throughout the years in pushing the Muslim leadership of the Province to an extreme communal position. This was proved once again when the Nazimuddin Government adopted an extreme communal stance and even prevented Suhrawardy from entering East Pakistan (East Bengal).

125 Talukdar, M. H. R., *op. cit.*, p. 32.