Chapter XI

HINDU COMMUNAL PRESSURE ON THE CONGRESS

The rampaging Hindu mobs of Bihar and the anxious Hindu and Sikh minorities of Punjab and Bengal—these were the two faces of Hindu communalism, majority assertion and minority fears, that confronted the Congress. As we have seen, Hindu mobs could be suppressed with force and Hindu minority fears assuaged by ensuring, through partition of the two provinces, that they too would have a place in the sun. The Congress found it far more difficult to contend with pressures, both invidious and explicit, exercised by Hindu communal opinion in myriad ways. The attempt was to somehow, by friendly overtures if possible; or by a show of force if need be, impart a pro-Hindu orientation to the Congress and a Hindu tinge to its secularism.

At one end of the spectrum was the attempt to transform the Congress into a communal organisation, i.e., change the fundamental character of the party. This pressure was exercised at different levels of the Congress. The Congress party was exhorted to give up placating the Muslims and to function as a Hindu body; Congress provincial governments were urged to give up their impartiality (which was seen as a guise for their pro-Muslim stance); and after the creation of Pakistan, the Congress, as the ruling party, was pressurised to declare the Indian state a Hindu Rashtra.
This was but one trend among Hindu communal opinion-working on the Congress through the tactics of subtle pressure, friendly advice, offers of cooperation and threats disguised as appeals. The other stance was aggressively militant—Congress had to be exposed as being incapable of dealing with the Muslim challenge or even protecting Hindu lives and property and Hindu organisations were to be built up as the real defenders of the Hindus. The choice between the two stances placed the Hindu communal forces in a real dilemma. The success story of the Muslim League, which firmly asserted its claim to be the sole spokesman of Indian Muslims and got the British and the Congress to more or less recognise this, prompted the Hindu Mahasabha leaders to make an all-out bid to be the Hindu body. The General Secretary of the organisation claimed as early as the Simla Conference in June-July 1945 that the Mahasabha was the representative of the Hindus. The elections cruelly exposed such claims as baseless and the Mahasabha had to eat humble pie.

Opportunity arose again in late 1946 when stern governmental action against Hindu rioters in Bihar and U.P. turned the popular mood against Congress. Mahasabha organisers felt they could exploit Congress' unpopularity to their advantage.

1. Draft Resolution for Working Committee, All India Hindu Mahasabha Papers (AIHMP), File No. C-65/1945, NMML.
As riots spread, Hindu communalists could easily point out to the people that Congress would not come to their aid and that they must arm themselves and train in self-defence and retaliation by joining volunteer armies such as the R.S.S. or the Hindu National Guards.

But Hindu communal forces really came into their own after the creation of Pakistan. The communalised atmosphere in the country in the aftermath of the holocaust that attended on partition provided fertile soil for their growth. Their newfound confidence was reflected in the strident tone of their utterances and the provocative militancy of their actions. Quick strides were made from virulent anti-Muslim propaganda to active participation in riots, thence on to calls to overthrow the government and hang the national leaders and finally to the conspiracy to assassinate Gandhi. This proved to be the last straw and the curtain was finally rung down on them, but tragically only after they had claimed their greatest prize, the life of the tallest man of all.

However, the above stance of arraigning themselves in opposition to the Congress was adopted by Hindu communal forces primarily after independence and after the strategy of persuading the Congress to offload its Muslim baggage and function as a Hindu body did not seem to work. In the crucial years, 1945-47, the basic strategy of Hindu communal organisations remained one
of trying to bend the Congress to accommodate their position.

Why was accommodation rather than opposition the first choice of the Hindu communal forces? Essentially this stemmed from a realistic assessment of their own weakness relative to the immense strength of the Congress, which continued to command the allegiance of the large majority of Hindus, whatever might be their dissatisfaction with it. If the Congress could be got to make substantial concessions to the Hindu communal demands, it would represent a more substantial advance for Hindu communalism than what it might achieve via the slow uphill path of building bases among Hindus.

Moreover, the Hindu communal leaders sensed that this was no longer a remote possibility. The Congress was steadily being forced to retreat before the determined advance of Muslim communalism and what better opportunity could there be for pressing for the adoption of a new approach than the failure of the old ways? The expectation was that many Congressmen, who had been communalised by the riots, would come out openly in support of a change of Congress strategy. The political situation seemed to offer a possibility never known before of effecting an ideological shift of the Congress. The challenge before the Hindu communal forces was—could they make the possible real?
Should the Congress ally with Hindu bodies?

The first overture of the Hindu Mahasabha to the Congress came in the winter of 1945 in the form of S.P. Mookerji's suggestion to Rajendra Prasad that the parties should come to an electoral understanding. The Hindu Mahasabha, it was argued, could then represent Hindu interests in the Assembly, something the Congress, being a national body, could not openly do. Rajendra Prasad conveyed this offer to his colleagues, pointing out that the money and workers conserved by avoiding a contest with the Mahasabha in the general constituencies could be used to fight the Muslim League more effectively. His own predilections were cautiously stated: "I would like without detriment to the Congress position to have some understanding with him if possible".

Patel firmly ruled out an alliance on two grounds. Firstly, the politics of the Mahasabha was dubious; secondly, the party was unlikely to win any seats. Maulana Azad, who was then Congress President, agreed with Patel. Nehru not only

3. 5 November 1945, R.P. Papers, File No. 7-S/45-6, NAI. A short while earlier Surya Narain Prasad of the Hindu Mahasabha, Bhagalpur had argued for a pact on the same ground. 7 October 1945, ibid., File No. 9-R/45-1, Col. I.


5. Patel to Prasad, 8 October 1945, ibid., p. 11.

6. Azad to Patel, 21 October 1945, ibid., p. 25.
rejected the offer, but analysed at length why "it would be wrong policy and harmful for us to enter into pacts and arrangements with the Hindu Mahasabha." He conceded that a pact would enable the Congress to direct all its efforts to winning Muslims seats: "And yet there is another and, as we think, more important consideration even from the point of Muslim seats". The secular credentials of the Congress, already under attack by the League, would be further questioned: "(They will) again emphasise, as they have done in the past, that the Congress is the Hindu Mahasabha in a different guise". Muslim seats could be won only if the right atmosphere was created before the elections and issues raised to a level above that of communalism. A pact with the Mahasabha would prevent this from emerging: "This will take away from the straight and semi-revolutionary appeal of the Congress functioning without compromises with other groups".

Nehru's fears that any dealings with the Mahasabha would create anxiety among Muslim supporters of the Congress soon came true in Punjab where the Congress leaders persuaded the Mahasabha leader, Gokul Chand Narang, to step down in favour of a Congress candidate. The National Workers' Conference protested strongly against the Congress having any truck with Hindu communalists and

7. The letter was written after a discussion with the U.P. Premier, G.B. Pant and purports to represent Pant's views as well. Nehru to Rajendra Prasad, R.P. Papers, File No.7-S/45-6, S.No.11.
was unmoved by the consideration that the Congress stood to gain a seat in the bargain.

When S.P. Mookerjee pressed the matter again in December 1945 he could hardly have expected the summary dismissal he got from Patel: “The Hindu Mahasabha should be dissolved and its members should join the Congress”.

Mookerjee, obviously, had no intention of accepting such friendly advice. In fact with time he was more convinced than ever of the correctness of his original assessment that the Congress and the Mahasabha must work together if they had to defeat the League, which had now added the lethal weapon of direct action to its armoury. An year after his first overture, he wrote to Jayakar: “The Congress in its own interest should encourage the Hindu Sabha which alone can properly deal with the reactionary League”.

Was the Congress essentially a Hindu body?

When it became clear that the Congress was not willing to ally with Hindu organisations, Hindu communal elements now


10. 16 October 1946, Jayakar Papers, File No. 833, S.No.67.
adopted the tactic of persuading the Congress to function as a de facto Hindu body. The argument went that it was the most natural position for the Congress to adopt—most of its followers were Hindus and it was the duty of the Congress to safeguard their interests. Moreover, over the years the Hindus had made immense sacrifices for the national cause, in fact it could be said that the Congress "has been kept alive only by their blood". The Muslims had made far less sacrifices, the number of Congress supporters among Muslims had generally been few and now only a handful of Muslims remained with the Congress. Surely then it was a misconceived policy to alienate its faithful Hindu supporters and woo the elusive Muslims?

Perhaps the most assertive statement of this position was the open letter of the Hindu Relief Committee, Meerut, to the U.P. Government, entitled, 'Why this anti-Hindu Policy?' The specific anti-Hindu and pro-Muslim actions objected to were the imposition of a collective fine of Rs. 2 lakhs on Hindus only (though many of them were victims in the December riots), detention of Hindus without trial, refusal to remove Muslim officers who were known to be pro-League or reduce the overrepresentation of Muslims in the administration. The Congress was warned that far from gaining something, it would have to pay dearly for such policies. The Muslims would not be won over and the Hindus who had stood by the Congress would be compelled to
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forsake it:

Your policy of unfairly appeasing the Muslims is misconceived. This will never make the Muslim League friendly to India's aspiration and will only strengthen its venom... You may personally be Godly but we are men and we want justice and we believe in Shylock being paid in his own coins.... The vast majority of the Hindus of this province are nationalist and Congressites and wish Congress all success. The Congress has been kept alive only by their blood and it would be a sorrowful day if on account of biased communal politics like those of your government we may have to decry as partial and unjust the very institution which is so dear to our hearts.

In similar vein was the letter written by Banwari Lal Gupta, 'just a Hindu', to the President of the Hindu Mahasabha. He too began with advocating taking a tough line with the Muslims:

"We should tell Muslims firmly that if you want to live as human beings in India, you may do so, else you must pack your bags and lathis on your camels and take off for Arabia". The letter went on to suggest that an appeal should be made to the Congress not to forsake the Hindu cause: "We do not want to compel it to abandon its path but it should not sacrifice the interests of Hindus for the wrongful happiness of the Muslim minority". The Congress was after all "the symbol of the sacrifice and devotion of the Hindus" and it should be reminded of this fact.

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11. R.P. Papers, File No. 3-N/45-6-7, Col. 5, S.No. 79.

Nationalist Muslims came in for special attack because it was felt that their presence in the Congress was the stumbling block to the Congress accepting that it was a Hindu body. The tactic was to question their loyalty to the national cause, imply that their sympathies were really with the League and point out that in any case they were too few to be of importance. A provocative pamphlet titled 'Existing Dangers and our Duties', published by the Kalyan Weekly, Gorakhpur, which began by relating tales of brutality on Hindu victims in the Calcutta riots in horrific detail, went on to castigate the Congress for pandering to Muslims: "It is a fact that the nationalist Muslims are Muslims first and nationalist afterwards, which is clear even from the speeches of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad." Even Shantilal Shah, a Congress man of Bombay, was of the view that Azad was "a little soft on the League." Why then should the Congress continue to "sacrifice the Hindus for these handful of so-called nationalist Muslims"?

The argument that the Congress should accept its essentially Hindu character was not a new one. The British had always maintained that though the Congress had pretensions to be a

14. Oral History Transcript, NMML.
national body, it was merely a body of Hindus. The Muslim League had never ceased to demand that the Congress recognise that it was a Hindu party and that the League was the sole spokesman of the Muslims. Jinnah had been totally unwilling to accept Nehru's offer that the Congress would recognise the League as the predominant voice of Indian Muslims if the League in turn conceded that the Congress represented "such Muslims as have thrown in their lot with the Congress". (See chapter VIII on the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan, section on elections.) The bone of contention, it was evident, was the nationalist Muslims. Muslim and Hindu communalists seemed to be in agreement on one issue— that the Congress should forsake the nationalist Muslims.

The issue became contentious as early as July 1945 when Jinnah insisted at the Simla Conference that no other party could nominate a Muslim as its representative in the Executive Council. The Government held no brief for the Congress but could not let down its allies, the Unionists of Punjab and the Viceroy chose the easier path of declaring the breakdown of the conference instead of calling Jinnah's bluff, as he should have done. (See chapter II on the Simla Conference.) The controversy arose again in mid 1946 during the negotiations for the formation of the Interim Government, the short-term aspect of the Cabinet Mission Plan. The pragmatic position was that in the interests of a settlement the Congress should give up its stand, which after
all, given the small number of nationalist Muslims involved, amounted merely to stubborn adherence to a principle. But those who could see the import of even a symbolic defiance of the League's totalitarianism threw their full weight behind upholding the Congress' right to represent and nominate Muslims.

In fact Gandhi rightly clarified that what was involved was a duty, not a right: "One may waive a right, one cannot waive a duty." He recognised that the Congress President, Maulana Azad, might find it awkward to insist on a nationalist Muslim being included in the Congress list of nominees and suggested to Patel that someone else be authorised to conduct negotiations with the Cabinet Mission. He went so far as to warn the Congress Working Committee that he would wash his hands of the whole affair should they agree not to have a nationalist Muslim in their quota. The reason for Gandhi's strong stand was his conviction that if the Congress gave way on this issue, from being the foremost national body, it would be reduced to a mere communal organisation, a Hindu body. Nehru too recognised that the issue had important implications for the nature of the Congress. He had publicly taken a stand identical to Gandhi's six months earlier: "The Congress could not agree to this

18. 19 June 1946, ibid., vol.84, p.347.
standpoint because if it agreed it would at once become a communal organisation."

Such an eventuality had to be prevented for in one stroke it would nullify all the Congress stood for—both its past achievement and its current standing. What appeared to be a small concession for the Congress to make for immediate pragmatic gains, would amount to "an admission (which) belies all its past history," besides costing the Congress dearly in terms of its stature: "The Congress will lose its prestige if it ceases to have a national character".

What had the Congress demonstrated by resolutely upholding this principle, even at the cost of tactical disadvantage? In the strife torn days of 1946-47, this clinging to one rock while bigger boulders were swept away might have seemed quite futile to many. But the Congress could not have done otherwise. Should it have abandoned the secular Muslims who had stood by it despite great pressure? Could it have forsaken its past history as a national organisation to become a mere Hindu body? Or given up its future vision of a secular India? The price demanded was clearly too high and the Congress rightly refused to pay it.

Should unity be compelled by force?

A bigger poser than the question of the nationalist Muslims, with possibly more far reaching implications, proved to be the option of maintaining unity by force. The intractability of the League, the refusal of the British Government to take a clear stand on Pakistan and the communalisation of the ordinary man as communal violence engulfed province after province, narrowed down Congress options till only two were left. The first was that Congress should concede that it had failed to achieve unity and recognise that there was no way out of the situation but to accept the partition of the country. The other way was to declare that the Congress would never agree to the formation of Pakistan and would fight those who wanted it every inch of the way. (See chapters 12 and 13 for other options considered by Congress and Gandhi).

Hindu communal opinion, both within and outside the Congress, was of the view that Pakistan must be opposed by all, including Congressmen, with all the force that could be mustered. Ram Ratan Gupta, a Congressman from Kanpur, called upon members of the Constituent Assembly to oppose this needless gift to Jinnah as it was "a sheer repudiation and negation of our avowed principles and a gross betrayal of the pledge we have given to the electorate on whose strength is based the edifice of our
organisation."

Purushottamdas Tandon, Congress Speaker of the U.P. Legislative Assembly, appealed to "Congress and the manhood of the country" to "even at this stage prevent this betrayal".

M.R. Jayakar, the Bombay Liberal with Mahasabha sympathies, bemoaned to his close associate, Sapru:

We have no Benjamin Franklin who could tell the Muslims 'we will not allow you to secede and, if you wish to fight, we shall meet you on your own ground'. From the very beginning the process of appeasement went on and a year ago the appeasement took the form of concessions surrendered at the sight of violence. This will go on until Congress makes up its mind to stand firm and meet violence on its own ground.

Who did Jayakar expect would assume the mantle of Franklin? A year earlier it had seemed that Patel might fit the bill. Jayakar had gone along with Jagdish Prasad and Gopalaswami Ayyangar to meet Patel in order to impress upon him their "fears that Congress might yield further concessions to Jinnah". The entry for 7 April 1946 in his diary suggests that he had returned from his visit reassured:

24. 21 May 1947, Sapru Papers, S-I, Roll 3, J-100.
25. Jayakar Papers, File no.866, S.No.35.
Then Jagadish expressed fears that Congress might yield further concessions to Jinnah. That brought him out very forcibly. He was frank and positively down right, which pleased me immensely.... He had met Cripps informally and also Pethick-Lawrence and had made it clear that if driven to it the Congress could create more trouble than Jinnah's 100 mullahs and that if left to control the situation, Congress government was quite willing and capable of managing and controlling the situation which Jinnah would create.

Jayakar's lament in May 1947, "we have no Benjamin Franklin", suggests that by then he had lost hope in Patel too.

What about other Congress leaders? Were they inclined to "meet violence on its own ground"? Gandhi's objection was fundamental, as it was to the very use of force for any end. On two occasions, when the League refused to come into the Constituent Assembly and when he visited Noakhali, where Muslim communalists had spread terror in the countryside, Gandhi made it clear that, whatever the provocation may be, his way could never be that of force or compulsion, even if the alternative was Pakistan. Nehru's approach was pragmatic rather than principled: "We could have checked them by resorting to the sword and the lathi but would that solve the problem?"


In fact, violence could intensify the problem:

The use of violence at this time to maintain Indian unity will have disastrous results. Civil war will check the progress of India for a long time to come.

It seems that the posing and then the ruling out of this option made it easier for the Congress leaders to accept partition. If the choice was between partition and civil war, the former was certainly to be preferred. In their meetings with Mountbatten in early April 1947, Kripalani, Rajagopalachari and Rajendra Prasad presented their acceptance of Pakistan as the better of the two alternatives. Kripalani, who was then Congress President, even introduced a magnanimous note: "Rather than have a battle we shall let them have their Pakistan." Rajagopalachari frankly admitted that "the ideal of a united India could not be imposed by force", while Rajendra Prasad echoed Nehru's fears of a civil war. Elsewhere Rajendra Prasad maintained that the Congress could not have done otherwise. Coercion had never been part of its tradition and by taking this stand, the Congress was only being faithful to its past:

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31. 10 April 1947, ibid., pp.179-80.
The position with regard to the partition of India is this. We must be prepared either to prevent it by force or to consent to it... The Congress from the very beginning has held that it cannot contemplate coercing any part of India.

The problem with maintaining unity by force was not only that it went against the democratic grain of the Congress. The Congress was constrained by the lack of state power at the national level, despite Congress members in the Interim Government, and its powerlessness to control developments in the crucial provinces of Punjab and Bengal. The instruments at the command of the Congress to impose unity were not the armed forces of the state, which were controlled by the British, but the cadres of the party. The option of unity by force then really meant matching League hooligans with Congress goondas, and raising volunteer bodies which could counter the Muslim National Guards—in short, the turning of the Congress into a Hindu communal organisation, and a fascist one at that. If the Congress chose to concede partition rather than attempt to prevent it by force, it is a choice that can hardly be faulted.

'Why are Congress Ministries Anti-Hindu?'

If the refusal of the Congress party to function as a Hindu body irked communal Hindus and organisations, the actions of the Congress ministries caused no less distress. The Bihar and U.P Congress governments particularly came in for sharp criticism.
The Hapur Hindus were unhappy with the punitive measures taken by the government after the December 1946 riots. They alleged that Hindus had been singled out for punishment and Muslims allowed to go scot-free. The collective fine of Rs.2 lakhs was imposed only on Hindus, large numbers of Hindus were detained without trial and Hindu houses alone were searched for illegal fire arms. The Government had ears only for Muslim grievances - Rafi Ahmed Kidwai visited the town but went away without meeting any prominent Hindus, including Congressmen. In the name of impartiality, the Government was actually following a blatantly pro-Muslim policy:

Your government seems to be guided by the idea that Muslims being in a minority have to be pleased at all cost and the success of your Government will be gauged by the number of certificates that your ministry receives from the Muslim League.

The complaint of the Hindu Mahasabha was that it was being singled out for repression by Congress ministries. The report of the organisation for the period January to May 1947 made particular mention of the Bihar, U.P. and Bombay ministries. In Bihar, permission was refused for conferences and the Provincial Hindu Conference could not hold its session. Speakers were

33. Open Letter to U.P.Govt.- 'Why this anti-Hindu Policy?' from Hindu Relief Committee, Meerut, ibid., p.20, File No.3-N/45-6-7, col.5, S.No.79.

banned from touring and some of them were arrested, for instance, the Raja of Ramgarh. In U.P., the President of the Hindu Mahasabha, Bareilly and an ordinary worker in Kanpur were arrested, though they were only doing relief work. Congress MLAs came to the aid of the ministry in Badaun by trying to derail the Divisional Conference organised by the Mahasabha but the District Magistrate was able to thwart their designs. The Bombay Government demanded securities from the Kesari and Maharatta and anxious not to be left behind, the Delhi authorities banned a R.S.S. rally. The report concluded that the motive behind the "various penal measures" taken by the Congress ministries was to "thwart the growing popularity of the Hindu Mahasabha movement":

Everywhere, wherever the Congress Ministry has been in power, free expression of public opinion either through press or through platform have been suppressed and the Hindu Mahasabha has received special attention in every Congress province.

A personal representation was made by Babu Nawal Kishore Prasad to Rajendra Prasad against the discriminatory attitude of the Bihar ministry towards Hindus in general and the Mahasabha in particular. It was alleged that all the 1000 detenus, who languished behind bars without a trial, were Hindus as the Public Safety Act "is being used against the Hindus and not against any

other" and "even people from whose houses arms and ammunition including fire-arms have been recovered have not been detained if they happened to be non-Hindus". Further, "Hindu Sabhaites cannot get permission to hold any meeting or to take out even religious processions and thus all their activities have been curbed throughout the province."

Rajendra Prasad summed up his overall impression of the Hindu case.

On the whole the picture given has been one in which the Hindus are at a great disadvantage on account of the action or inaction of the Government and under these provocations they are thinking of starting Satyagraha.

His own concern was with the civil liberties aspect of the issue rather than the threat of satyagraha. He pressed the Bihar premier to review all cases of detention without trial and repeal special laws as soon as possible.

We are passing through a very critical time and we cannot be too cautious or too vigilant in our dealings with the public at large and it would be a most dangerous thing if the notion goes abroad that our Government is taking recourse to measures which we have condemned all our lives.

Sri Krishna Sinha's reply was comprehensive, countering each charge at length. Firstly, the figures of detenus were grossly

exaggerated, the total figure at present being 327. Secondly, over 20% of them were Muslims and in one district alone, Monghyr, 25 Muslims were detained for possession of unauthorised firearms. Thirdly, the government had progressively relaxed the strict prohibition on meetings, beginning from November 1946, only a month after the riots. However, whenever there was an apprehension that communal tension might be aggravated, prohibitory orders were reimposed for short periods. Some of the developments which had created such an apprehension were communal disorder in West Punjab in March-April 1947, Mountbatten’s announcement of the 3rd June Plan, the awards made by the Boundary Commission and the upheaval that followed in the wake of independence and partition. Recently the orders had been withdrawn everywhere, except in Purnea and Santal Parganas which bordered Bengal, where the situation was still tense. He reassured Rajendra Prasad that the effort has been to function with normal laws as far as possible. As for the Mahasabha charge that only Hindu organisations had been restrained, this was clearly false:

It is entirely incorrect to say that discrimination has been made against the Hindu Sabha in the matter of granting permissions for meetings and processions. Meetings and assemblies of a religious nature have been allowed in most cases in which permission has been sought and during the last District Board elections the Hindu Sabha was given the same freedom for holding election meetings etc. as were given to other political parties.
The Hindu communal case against Congress ministries was that not only were their actions anti-Hindu, but that they also continued with the pro-Muslim policies of the British regime. A major grievance was that Muslim officers continued to occupy important posts and overrepresentation of Muslims in the services was not corrected. Hindu communal leaders and organisations at their national conventions had raised the demand for making the proportion of different communities in the services commensurate with their strength in the population. The Working Committee of the All India Hindu Mahasabha had passed a resolution to the effect at its annual meeting from 8th to 10th February 1947. The well known Hindu communal leader, Moonje, had given the demand an interesting twist by presenting it as advice to the Congress. He had warned that if Congress did not reorganise the army it would be helpless in the exercise of its sovereignty. The new dimensions were that Congress governments were directly under pressure to concede these demands, not only from all India organisations but also from local citizens, and that the demand to reduce the number of Muslim officials was now being justified on the ground that most of them were communally biased.

37. AIHMP, C-138/1946-7.
38. Address to All India Hindu Mahajati Sammelan, Kurukshetra, 19 August 1946, ibid., C-105/1946.
The U.P. ministry faced complaints from the Hindus of Hapur in Meerut district (where riots had broken out in December 1946), about the preponderance of Muslim officials, despite the fact that they were known to be "invariably communal in outlook". It was alleged that the police station officer and the tehsildar, who were both 'pro-Muslim to the core of the Muslim League brand', abetted the local Muslims. The former even managed to get his transfer delayed by a week so as to be at his post when the riots took place. This was not an isolated example:

Your administrative machinery is rotten and communal. Your police in U.P. is 70% Muslim and your Deputy Collectors are also about 50% Muslim. The Muslim goonda element finds a positive encouragement from his coreligionists in authority who make no secret of their communal leanings. It is this fact which made U.P., where Muslims are only 14%, a stronghold of the Muslim League...In any case there can be no justification for 86% of the Hindus of your province being left at the mercy of Muslim police and executive. It is high time for you to take stock of your administrative machinery and to eliminate the unwilling and undesirable portion of it.

The Government's claim to impartiality came in for sharp attack:

You are not in office as representatives of Gods but of us human beings. Government jobs are not personal gifts to be frittered away at the sweet will of any one and especially those jobs in whose hands remains the life and honour of our people, we demand an equitable distribution thereof.


41. Ibid.
The U.P. Premier, G.B. Pant's reply is not on record, but the Government did not concede these demands. In fact Pant's letter to Patel months later clearly indicated that he was still inclined to tread cautiously on what he felt was tricky ground:

The present structure and composition of the services is the outcome of the policy that has been followed for several decades. Certain sections are over-represented with the result that inevitably others have been denied a ratable share. How to make necessary changes without impairing the allegiance of the existing force, to the extent it exists today, is the main problem.

Bihar did not lag behind U.P. in this respect. The Bihar ministry also faced the twin demands that over-representation of Muslims in the services be corrected and Muslim officials be removed from key posts because "Hindus have lost confidence that they will get Government support and Government aid if any trouble arises." The Bihar Premier resolutely refused to concede any ground. He pointed out that overrepresentation was not as serious a problem as in neighbouring U.P. For


44. Sri Krishna Sinha's reply to Rajendra Prasad, 3 September 1947, ibid., S.No.155.
instance, only 20% of the constabulary was Muslim, and even this percentage would soon be reduced as no Muslim was being recruited in the special police force of 2,000 men currently being constituted. The government was having the whole issue examined but was firmly of the opinion that the matter should not be rushed: "We thought we might wait till the general question of the rights and privileges in the Indian Union had been examined".

He reacted more adversely to the other demand that Muslim officials be removed as Hindus had no faith in them. He failed to see the basis of the grievance that Muslims held far too many key posts, when only one District Magistrate out of 16, and that too in distant Palamau, was a Muslim. There were of course "several Muslim officers" who were Superintendents of Police and Sub-Divisional Officers:

I fail to understand what is wrong in this. Am I to get rid of Muslim officers of superior rank? If not am I to keep them out of posts to which, by their length and record of service, they are entitled?

The basic problem with the administration, in his view, was not the communal bias of Muslim officials, as alleged by Hindu communalists, but "lack of experienced officers and loss of standards during the period 1942 to 1945 when the object was to get certain things done, and little regard was paid to the means adopted." Muslim officials were merely being made the scapegoat for the ills plaguing the administration and this tendency had to
be decried.

The record of the Bihar ministry in the recent past suggested that its present refusal to be part of a witchhunt of Muslim officials did not stem from a tendency towards inaction. After all it had not hesitated to take action against officials, both Hindu and Muslim, suspected of exhibiting communal sympathies during the riots in October 1946. Soon after the riots, L.P. Singh, I.C.S., Joint Secretary to the Political Department, Special Section, was appointed as special officer to coordinate the investigations and follow-up actions of various departments. The Inspector-General of Police, the intelligence authorities and the heads of the divisions affected by the riots were asked to send in names of officials who had acted in a communally biased manner during or after the riots and report disciplinary action, if any, taken against them. The names of four magistrates were sent in by the Deputy Inspector General, Criminal Investigation Department, along with the information that one of them, S.H. Rizvi, was discharged from service as he was still under probation and the other three, Mahendra Prasad Singh, Raghumani Patnaik and P.K. Mitra were transferred. District heads reported that enquiries were proceeding into the

45. All details about governmental action have been obtained from File 250/1947, Confidential, Government of Bihar, Political Department (Special), Bihar State Archives, Patna.
conduct of four more magistrates, one of whom was a Muslim. Police authorities reported that departmental action, including transfer and suspension, has been taken against 20 police officers.

L.P. Singh was not satisfied that the list was complete or that action taken was adequate. He wanted enquiries into the actions of at least one more civil officer and 9 more police officials. He pertinently pointed out that a distinction needed to be made between officers who had acquired a "reputation of communal bias" and those who were "really communal." Transfer would suffice in the first case, but "if actual communal bias is established", more suitable punishment was necessary. The Chief Secretary agreed that "transfer was only a first step, much delayed though it was" and urged that all further enquiries and action be completed within the next two or three months.

Hindu allegations of discrimination may have been exaggerated but there is little doubt that the Bihar Premier did discriminate between Hindu and Muslim allegations of discrimination. The first he treated with dismissiveness, the second with attentiveness and reassurance. His reaction to an anonymous Urdu petition received by Gandhi and forwarded to him

46. Subsequent decisions are unfortunately not recorded.
by Rajendra Prasad contrasts sharply with his reaction to Nawal Kishore Prasad's complaints. The petitioner complained that Muslim houses were subject to searches for illegal arms, women were dishonoured, mosques and dargahs desecrated and harassed Muslims were migrating to Pakistan in large numbers. Gandhi was requested to provide protection to Muslims. Sri Krishna Sinha pointed out that "some of the allegations are maliciously false," particularly the ones about dishonour to mosques, holy books and Muslim women. Migration was the result of Muslim League propaganda and "Government are, in no way, responsible for this".

After denying the allegations, he went on to show that his government in fact took special care to ensure full protection of the religious freedom of Muslims. Elaborate arrangements were made for Moharram processions but in some places "Muslims abstained from taking out processions with a view to discredit the Indian Union Government in the eyes of the outside world". Despite the appeal made by prominent Muslims of Bihar that in difference to Hindu sentiment there should be no cow sacrifice, the Bihar administration instructed District Magistrates "that the full vigour of law should be applied in upholding the

customary rights of cow sacrifice even using force where necessary."

While "every precaution was taken against giving any offence or wounding the susceptibilities of the Muslims" there was no such sensitivity to Hindu susceptibilities, as the stand over cow sacrifice shows. If the choice was between respecting Hindu sentiments and upholding Muslim "customary rights", the Bihar premier had no hesitation in settling for the latter. He could not have been more explicit about his choice than in his reply to Rajendra Prasad about Nawal Kishore Prasad's complaints:

Nawal Babu, and those of his persuasion would... like me to ignore completely the feelings and even the reasonable expectations of the Muslims who form about 13% of the population of the province and to meet all demands whether reasonable, or unreasonable, of every section of the majority community. I am afraid if this is the price I have to pay for satisfying Nawal Babu and other people like him, I would rather let them remain aggrieved.

The contrast with the last lines of his reply to Muslim allegations could not have been more marked:

Would you kindly assure Gandhiji on our behalf that Bihar Government is doing every thing possible to maintain law and order, ensuring the life and property as well as giving full protection to the rights of the minorities?

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Should India be a Hindu State?

The announcement on 3rd June 1947 that two dominions, India and Pakistan, would be established after independence was perceived to be a victory for the Muslim League. After all, its stand, that Muslims must have their own homeland as they were a separate nation, had been upheld. Hindu communal organisations and individuals immediately raised the banner of Hindu Raj, a Hindu state that would safeguard the interests of Hindus through the difficult times ahead. This was but an extension of the old argument that only a Hindu party could protect Hindu interests, as the Congress inevitably sacrificed Hindu interests at the altar of national unity - from Hindu party to Hindu state was a short step.

The All India Committee of the Hindu Mahasabha met on the 7th and 8th of June 1947 and resolved:

The Committee considers it its duty to warn the Hindus and unless they are more careful and vigilant in future and take immediate and effective steps to build up a real and powerful Hindu state, not only will their interests under the new proposed arrangements be unsafe but they may lose even what is left to them of India.

A correspondent of Patel even argued that the tragedy of partition was a blessing in disguise as it permitted the new state greater latitude in shaping its contours:

51. B.M.Birla to Patel, 5 June 1947, SPC, vol.4, p.56.
It is no doubt a very good thing for the Hindus and we will now be free from the communal canker... The partitioned area, of course, would be a Muslim state. Is it not time that we should consider Hindustan as a Hindu State with Hinduism as the State religion?

Patel emphatically ruled out such a possibility:

I do not think it will be possible to consider Hindustan as a Hindu State with Hinduism as the state religion. We must not forget that there are other minorities whose protection is our primary responsibility. The State must exist for all irrespective of caste or creed.

The months after independence saw the slogan of a Hindu Raj being raised with impunity at Hindu communal platforms. Nehru missed no opportunity to counter the demand with all possible arguments. His initial attitude was dismissive: "It may be a demand of some people.... I do not understand what it means".

Was the term Hindu Raj a descriptive or prescriptive one, he demanded to know. Was India a Hindu state in the sense that most of its citizens were Hindus? Or was the intention that it should be a Hindu State in the sense of being exclusively for Hindus? Nehru's own intention was simply to show, by his deliberate incomprehension, that the concept was ill-defined and hence of little substance.

52. Patel to B.M.Birla, 10 June 1947, ibid., p.56.

A similar tactic was to demonstrate that it was an unnecessary demand. Did a majority community need safeguards? Or did Hindu culture need a Hindu state for it to survive? He had "no doubt that Hindu culture will have its influence in India". He clarified his own stand on the issue:

My opposition to the idea of a Hindu raj does not mean any hostility towards Hindu culture. India being predominantly a country of the Hindus, Hindu culture will naturally overshadow all other cultural shades in the country. But I am strongly opposed to the medieval idea of establishing a theocratic state in India.

Another argument he employed to criticise the demand was that it would tarnish India's image abroad. The notion of basing nation states on religion was an outmoded concept everywhere and by persisting with it India would only reveal that it had not yet emerged from the medieval ages:

This demand for a Hindu raj tends to show to the outside world that India is a narrow minded country with strong leanings towards fascism... If we follow this path of sheer communalism then nobody will respect us in this world.

These stands were tactical, intended to wean people away from support to the demand. It was not as if Nehru did not grasp

54. Speech at Delhi, 6 Nov.1947, ibid., p.320.

55. Address to Congress workers and students in Delhi, 3 October 1947, ibid., p.118.

56. Public meeting in Delhi, 6 October 1947, and speech at Kanpur, 16 December 1947, ibid., pp.124 and 219 resp.
the real nature or the full implications of the demand. He pointed to the totalitarian notion of politics behind the demand:

The ideas and methods of fascist organisation are now gaining popularity among the Hindus also and the demand for the establishment of a Hindu state is its clear manifestation.

At the press conference in Delhi on 12 October 1947, a correspondent took at face value his rhetorical statement that he did not understand what the demand for a Hindu state means, and began to explain that it was simply a natural reaction to the establishment of a theocratic state in Pakistan. This provoked Nehru, who not only retorted sharply that by calling it natural one was justifying such a reaction, but went on to point to the dangerous core at the heart of the demand: "This business of the Hindu state is just the two nation theory exemplified." Elsewhere he explained:

To demand a Hindu state is wrong. It is a negation of the principle for which we have fought.

Herein lay the main danger of the demand. The Congress acceptance of Pakistan, however unfortunate, did not amount to

57. Public meeting at Delhi, 6 October 1947, ibid., p.124.
58. Ibid., p.152.
59. Speech at Delhi, 6 Nov. 1947, ibid., p.320.
acceptance of the two nation theory on which the demand for Pakistan was based. The Congress had but accepted defeat in the battle against communalism, it had not sacrificed the secular principles it had upheld. If the Congress had succumbed to the pressure to establish a Hindu state, that would have been the real victory of communal forces, an even bigger prize than the creation of Pakistan.

The Other Face of Hindu Communalism—Self-Reliance and Assertion

One strand within Hindu communal opinion had all along upheld that it was futile for Hindus to look to the Congress for protection of their lives, property or political interests. This strand gathered strength as it increasingly became clear that the attempt to give the Congress a pro-Hindu orientation was not proving to be a success. The Congress governments had clearly taken the stand that the well-being of the Muslim minority was a higher priority and British officialdom was indifferent to the loss of Indian lives. Who then would protect Hindus? The only answer was self-help. Hindus must arm themselves for self-

60. Karyanand Sharma, the CPI kisan leader from Bihar, recognised this distinction. At a speech at Narkatiaganj, Shikarpura, Champaran, in early November 1947, he spoke out against the demand for a Hindu state—"By raising the slogan of Hindu Raj the people will support the two nation theory of Mr. Jinnah which was still unacceptable by Gandhi and Nehru". Government of Bihar, Political Department (Special), File no. 113(V) of 1947, Confidential, Bihar State Archives, Patna.
defence and for combating the terror unleashed by the Muslim National Guards, the volunteer army of the Muslim League. Hindu communal bodies such as the Hindu Mahasabha and R.S.S. would provide the leadership.

Three days after the League demonstrated its firepower in Calcutta, the Mahasabha Leader, B.S. Moonje, observed that to counter Jinnah "we will have to organise violence on a scientific basis". In September 1946, a provocative pamphlet, "Existing Dangers and our Duties", was brought out by a Gorakhpur weekly, Kalyan, which went on to advise Hindus not only to form rakshak dala in each village, but regularly recite the Ramayana, offer sacrifices and observe all religious rituals. Meetings were held by the Hindu Mahasabha in Delhi in mid October 1946 to find out practical ways and means by which the Hindus could prevent the Muslim League from winning the battle for Pakistan. It was noted with approval that N.D. Apte of Poona had suggested a "few practical methods of retaliation".

But the organised terror created by the Muslim National Guards could hardly be countered with a "few practical methods".

61. Speech at All India Hindu Mahajati Sammelan, 19 August 1946, AIHMP, C-105/46.
63. Ibid.
to meet that it was necessary for Hindus to organise on similar lines. By February 1947, the volunteer army set up by the Hindu Mahasabha, the Hindu National Guards, had come to wield some influence. The Working Committee of the Hindu Mahasabha, which met from 8th to 10th February 1947, noted that new branches of the Hindu National Guards had been formed in U.P., Delhi and Maharashtra and rapid strides made in Bengal and Bihar, where the communal riots the previous year had left behind a legacy of communal bitterness which communal bodies could exploit to their advantage.

The situation in the Punjab was much graver than other provinces where the Muslim League's civil disobedience campaign, as implemented by the Muslim National Guards, brought down Khizr Hayat Khan's coalition ministry. The Mahasabha leader, Gokul Chand Narang, pressed the Congress to step in even at this late stage and discharge its duty towards Hindus. He wrote to Patel about the situation created by the Muslim National Guards and how it could be met:

64. Ibid., C-138/1947.

There is no reason why the Congress should not organise a similar band of civic guards for the maintenance of peace. If the Congress had acted upon the suggestions which I made to Mahatma Gandhi eight years ago and also to the then Premiers of the first Congress Governments the Congress would have had an army of two millions at its command even if without firearms.

Patel ignored the advice, denied the charge that Congress had not discharged its duty towards Hindus and offered that members of the Interim Government were willing to resign if it "would be of help to the Hindu community."

The announcement on 3rd June 1947 that two states, India and Pakistan, would come into being when the colonial power withdrew, introduced a sense of urgency. The All-India Committee of the Hindu Mahasabha met on 7th and 8th June 1947 and warned Hindus and Sikhs that they must promptly arm themselves and form militias if they wished to survive the hour of crisis. This view found resonance across the political spectrum. Purshottamdas Tandon saw the decision of Congress to accept partition as a betrayal and urged the youth to come forward and prevent it from becoming a reality. Tandon pointed out that the country's

67. AIHMP, C-162/1947.
68. Note written on 22 July 1947, P.D.Tandon Papers, Group XI, s.no.907. A correspondent suggested to Tandon that "Hindu Wealth", including jewellery and the coffers of temples be used to buy arms for Hindus. K.S.Pai to Tandon, ibid., Part II, File 231, June 1947.
leaders had not awakened to the danger posed by Pakistan and warned that if action was not taken in time, the scenes of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries would be repeated. He recalled the Puranas and Durga’s rising from the collective genius of the Gods to slay the demon, Mahishasur and prophesied that the time had come when good men would be born to fight demons. At a more practical level, he took the initiative in forming a volunteer body. The first branch of the Hind Rakshak Dal, which he founded, was inaugurated on 23 July 1947. Tandon described the Dal as a scheme for self-defence, but its declared objective was the overthrow of the Pakistan and Indian governments.

With independence and the creation of Pakistan, Hindu communalism came of age. Gone was the restraint of masking criticism of the Congress as friendly advice and demands as appeals. An assertive tone was adopted immediately after independence. The Hindu Mahasabha declared 15 August 1947 a day of mourning and embarked on a campaign of vilification of Muslims and slander of national leaders. This won them many supporters, especially among Hindus who had been uprooted from their homes or lost their kith and kin in communal riots, and

were easily convinced that the Muslims and the Congress Government which protected them, were the cause of all their troubles and must be removed. The soil was exceedingly fertile for communal ideas to strike root and the Indian state seemed vulnerable, in Nehru's words, it was but a "new-born babe".

The conjuncture of circumstances was favourable for the growth of Hindu communal forces and they capitalised on every opportunity that came their way.

The capital city, Delhi, was a centre for their operations. Swarms of refugees had settled in Delhi, bringing with them tales of loot and killings, and a communally volatile situation soon developed. Riots broke out in the city in September 1947, forcing Muslims to flee to temporary camps for refuge or undertake the long trek to Pakistan in pursuit of a permanent haven. This was precisely the intention of those who had fomented the trouble. Even mosques were not spared from pillage. Some mosques in Delhi were converted into temples, with Arya Samaj or Hindu Mahasabha flags defiantly proclaiming their new faith. The riots were not spontaneous upheavals, but the work of well organised bands, Sikh


71. Nehru to Patel, 22 Oct. 1947, ibid., p.174. In the princely state of Alwar, the Premier, N.B.Khare, a known Hindu communalist, offered the inducement that whosoever destroyed a mosque first would be granted the land it stood on. Nehru to Patel, 3 Dec. 1947, ibid., p.533.
and Hindu. While the Hindu gangs took care of the loot and destruction, Sikh "terrorists" (Nehru's phrase), trained and harboured by the Maharaja of Patiala and other Sikh rulers, carried out the brutal killings.

The R.S.S. was not only behind the trouble, many of its members actively participated in the riots. In subsequent months, too, the R.S.S. continued their activities on this front and by January 1948, a "mass of information" was available to the Government about its "close association with riots and disorder". Riots were not the work of organised gangs alone, they were also the outcome of the pernicious propaganda carried on by communal organisations against Muslims and the Government. The press and the public platform were the two main forums. The press took the lead, particularly in slander of Congress leaders. The Hindu Outlook, published from Delhi, often carried allegations of misuse of power by Congress leaders. Nehru, who initially felt such petty, low-level criticism was best ignored, later advised action against the newspaper and it

74. Ibid.
75. The Bihar Chief Minister had warned Rajendra Prasad about this - "I have little doubt that if this kind of propaganda is allowed to go on, there would be serious communal trouble in the province, as communal relations are still far from normal". 3 Sept. 1947, R.P.Papers, 24-C/1946-7, col.1, S.No.155.
was banned in November 1947.

Responsible leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha did not lag behind in adopting a defiant posture vis-a-vis the Government. The organisation refused to accept the national flag, an important symbol of sovereignty of the Indian state, as the real flag of India and upheld that only the bhagwa jhanda, the saffron coloured flag of their organisation, was worthy of this position. The President of the All India Hindu Mahasabha, Bhopatkar, declared at a public meeting that even S.P.Mookerjee, who was a Minister in Nehru's Cabinet, but abided by the Mahasabha's discipline, flew the bhagwa jhanda at his official residence in New Delhi. Mookerjee explained to Nehru that the statement was only a half-truth, and though Mookerjee flew the bhagwa jhanda sometimes, it was always along with the national flag, which was hoisted permanently.

It was evident that the Mahasabha President's concern was not with the truth, but with the creation of an impression in the people's minds that the Mahasabha could defy the Government with impunity under its very nose and get away with it. If the Government could be shown to be powerless and the Mahasabha a


77. Nehru complained to S.P.Mookerjee about this speech, 28 September 1947, ibid., p.506.

78. S.P.Mookerjee to Nehru, 30 Sept. 1947, ibid., p.507
powerful force, people would start looking to the Mahasabha. The battle being waged was a hegemonic one, for allegiance of the large mass of the people.

At other times, as in the case of Kashmir, Hindu communalism demonstrated that it had the capacity to subvert Government policy and destroy the credibility it had assiduously built up. At a time when the Government of India was trying to assure Kashmiri Muslims that their interests would be better protected in India than in Pakistan, the Hindu Mahasabha vociferously opposed the promised plebiscite and the appointment of the popular National Conference leader, Sheikh Abdullah, as head of the administration. To make matters worse, truckloads of R.S.S volunteers, numbering about 500, were despatched from Punjab to Jammu, with the objective of carrying out propaganda against the Muslims. In addition, the actions of the Maharaja's Government could hardly have reassured his Muslim subjects. For instance, a special Recruiting Officer, who was believed to be in touch with R.S.S. elements, was sent to enlist Sikhs and Dogras from Gurdaspur and Kangra. Nehru was acutely dismayed by such actions and propaganda as they gave a handle to Pakistan, which it wielded dexterously against India, both at home and in forums abroad. He expressed his fear to Patel that if the anti-Muslim drive did not end, "the whole Kashmir position will crack up."

The virulence of the speeches of Hindu Mahasabha leaders increased progressively over the months. By January 1948 even a usually tolerant Nehru remarked that the speeches were "extraordinary in their virulence" and violated all civility in public life: "I fear that the limit is being reached if it has not already been crossed".

A prominent Hindu Mahasabha leader had recently demanded publicly that Nehru, Patel and Azad should be hanged and Gandhi Murdabad had become a common slogan at their demonstrations and meetings. In November 1947 the C.P.I. leader from Bihar, Karyanand Sharma, had warned that the demand for a Hindu Raj "was very bad and behind it there was a conspiracy to murder Gandhiji and Panditji". The national leaders had all along been charged with betraying the interest of Hindu India. The issue of the payment of Rs.55 crores to Pakistan provided the Hindu communalists with the final "proof" that the Government of India was incapable of standing up to Pakistan. Rs. 55 crores constituted financial compensation for Pakistan's share of immovable assets in Indian territory but the Indian Government

80. To Sanjeevi, 27 January 1947, ibid., Vol.5, p.29. He wrote to the Bihar Chief Minister the same day -"It seems to me that Hindu Sabha speeches are getting more and more intolerable and objectionable and something has to be done to meet this menace." ibid., pp.29-30.


82. See footnote 60.
withheld payment because India and Pakistan were involved in hostilities over Kashmir and paying the money at this stage would have amounted to financing Pakistan in its war against India. Pakistan, of course, promptly raised the cry that the Indian Government was reneging on its commitments and Gandhi decided to go on fast on 13 January 1948, to protest against the Indian Government's stand. The Government had little option but to pay the stipulated sum. Hindu communists could hardly have wished for a better opportunity to pillory the national leadership as anti-national.

Gandhi was made the target of attack. There were noisy demonstrations outside Birla House in New Delhi where chants of Gandhi Murdabad were raised. On 20 January 1948 there was an abortive attempt to murder Gandhi. Some enquiries were made, intelligence officials went to Maharashtra to unravel the conspiracy, but failed to uncover anything. On 30 January 1948 the assassin made no mistake. Gandhi was shot dead at point blank range.

This was the second grievous blow dealt by communalism to the newly emergent nation within a short span of six months. In

August 1947 the unity of the country had been sacrificed at the altar of Muslim communalism. Hindu communalism had taken heart from this success achieved by Muslim communalism and claimed the life of Gandhi. Four months after Gandhi's murder, in a public speech, Nehru pointed out that communalism was the unifying link between partition and Gandhi's assassination.

Communalism resulted not only in the division of the country, which inflicted a deep wound in the heart of the people which will take a long time to heal if it ever heals but also the assassination of the Father of the Nation-Mahatma Gandhi.

Gandhi's death was a tragedy for the entire nation, but was perhaps more unbearable for those of his colleagues who were in the government. They shared a sense of loss with their countrymen but in addition suffered from extreme remorse at not having taken preventive action. There was the nagging doubt whether government's inaction against Hindu communalists might have bolstered their confidence till they believed they could get away with anything: "Perhaps we have been too lenient in dealing with these various elements in the country. We have suffered for that".

Why had the Government failed to take timely action?

84. Coimbatore, 3 June 1948, JNSW, 2nd series, vol.6, p.25.
Inaction had not stemmed from a lack of awareness or a paralysis of will. It was the result of an unresolved dilemma. The highest authorities, including the Prime Minister, realised the gravity of the challenge and had no doubt that strong action was necessary. But years of espousing the cause of civil liberties had made them wary of undertaking repressive action against those who opposed them politically. It was a case of present imperatives conflicting with past traditions and a choice had to be made between the two. The Government chose instead to reconcile the two and the result was a vast gap between its assessment of what had to be done and the actual action it undertook.

Nowhere is this contrast more stark than in the case of Nehru. His correspondence and speeches from September 1947 to January 1948 revealed that he entertained no illusions about the real nature, as well as the motives, of the R.S.S. and Hindu Mahasabha. The R.S.S. in his view, was not only "an injurious and dangerous organisation" but "fascist in the strictly technical sense of the word". He was more explicit in the letter he wrote to the Chief Ministers on 7 December, 1947, which was wholly devoted to the threat posed by these tendencies: "The R.S.S. is an organisation which is in the nature of a private

army and which is definitely proceeding on the strictest Nazi line." S. Radhakrishnan came in for criticism at Nehru's hands for publicly praising the discipline of R.S.S. workers:

I was sorry to read some time back that you had encouraged the R.S.S. This organisation is one of the most mischievous in India at present.

Nehru realised that Hindu communalists posed a threat not only to law and order or the security of the Muslims but to the very secular nature of the Indian state. Muslim communalism had earlier tried to get the Congress to compromise on its secularism but had only wrung from the Congress an acceptance of partition, not of the two nation theory. Now Hindu communalists had taken up the battle where their Muslim counterparts left off and were trying to subvert the building of a secular, free India.

To those, like Nehru, who could read the writing on the wall, the riots in Delhi in September 1947 were a revelation of the designs of Hindu communal forces. Nehru impressed upon Patel that the riots were not mere riots, they were part of a wider

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88. Ibid., p.461
89. 22 Jan.1948, ibid., vol.5,p.23.
90. 30 September, 1947, ibid., Vol.4, p.114. Ismay, Mountbatten's chief aide, noted in his report of his conversation with Nehru on 3 October 1947, that Nehru had analysed the character of the present trouble as the handiwork of Hindu communal elements. ibid., p.244.
As far as I can make out, we have had to face a very definite and well-organised attempt of certain Sikh and Hindu fascist elements to overturn the Government, or at least to break up its present character. It has been something much more than a communal disturbance. Many of these people have been brutal and callous in the extreme. They have functioned as pure terrorists. They could only do so, of course, with success in a favourable atmosphere so far as public opinion was concerned. They had that atmosphere. These gangs have not been broken up yet although something has been done to them, and they are still capable of great mischief.

The same day, 30 September 1947, he spoke to Sir Terence Shone, British High Commissioner in India, about the public campaign he and his associates were carrying on to induce amity among the different communities. However, though this "was having a real effect", it "would not influence the 'core' which must somehow be eradicated". He returned to the theme again and again and every time with stronger words. His fortnightly letter to chief ministers, written on 22 November 1947, warned:

The danger to us is not so much external as internal. Reactionary forces and communal organisations are trying to disrupt the structure of free India.

A fortnight later, on 7 December 1947, he stressed upon his chief ministers the urgency of action against the R.S.S., which was not

91. Ibid., p.240.
92. Ibid., p.456.
only getting more assertive, but worse, attracting Congressmen too:

I have ventured therefore to draw your attention to this for we will ignore it at our peril. I have little doubt that if these tendencies are allowed to spread and increase in India, they would do enormous injury to India. No doubt India would survive. But she would be grievously wounded and would take a long time to recover.

By January 1948 he had evidently exhausted his capacity for restraint. He wrote to Patel: "In view of the attitude of the Hindu Mahasabha and the R.S.S. it has become increasingly difficult to be neutral towards them". On 28 January 1948 he complained to S.P. Mookerjee about the provocative speeches and actions of Hindu Mahasabha members: "I fear that the limit is being reached if it has not already been crossed". The next day, in a speech he made at Attari on the Indo-Pakistan border, he lashed out at the group of communal Sikhs who had insulted the national flag in Amritsar on Independence Day, 26 January: "I challenge communal organisations to come out in the open if they dare test their strength to fight with the Congress Government".

93. Ibid., p.461.
94. Ibid., Vol.5, p.21.
95. Ibid., p.31.
96. Ibid., p.32.
Nehru's brave words must have been reassuring to Muslims and may even have shown Congressmen the light when they were in danger of going astray. The tragedy was that they remained mere words and failed to become the basis for action that would have dealt a grievous blow to the forces whose danger Nehru so well understood and communicated to others. Riots were of course suppressed with a stern hand but Nehru did not initiate any action to stem the root of the evil, the spread of communal venom.

Action, when undertaken, was extremely limited and specific. The Hindu Outlook was banned when it became to provocative, as we have seen. Nehru was of the opinion that the Government should take on the responsibility of rebuilding the 97 mosques destroyed by rioters in Delhi. But when Mahasabha speeches became provocative, Nehru merely drew S.P. Mookerjee's attention to them, instead of advising action against the speakers. On 28 September 1947 he referred to the statement made by Bhopatkar, the President of the Hindu Mahasabha, that Mookerjee flew the bhagva jhanda and not the national flag at his house. Four months later, and two days before Gandhi's death, when Mahasabha leaders were openly calling for 'death to Gandhi' and other national leaders and "continually inciting to -

98. 28 September 1947, ibid., p.506.
violence”, Nehru merely asked Mookerjee how he intended to deal with the situation, which was embarrassing for both of them.

Aftermath of Gandhi’s Murder

Gandhi’s death changed everything. Gone were the days of sending polite missives to S.P. Mookerjee, and suggesting that he clarify his position vis-a-vis the Mahasabha. Four days after Gandhi’s murder, Nehru firmly told Mookerjee that he must not only dissociate from the Mahasabha but raise his voice against that organisation, as it was clearly associated in people’s minds with Gandhi’s assassination. His 1 February 1948 letter to the Punjab Chief Minister shows that he was in no mood for magnanimity: “These people have the blood of Mahatma Gandhi on their hands and pious disclaimers and dissociation now have no meaning”. He publicly pointed to who “these people” were:

Recently a cry for Hindu Rashtra was raised by some organisations. It was one of the votaries of this demand for Hindu Rashtra who killed the greatest living Hindu.

99. 28 January 1948, ibid., vol.5. p.31.
100. 4 February 1948, ibid., p.46.
101. 11 February 1948, ibid., p.53.
102. Speech at New Delhi, 2 Feb. 1948, ibid., p.44.
Chief Ministers were instructed to see that there was no letting up of efforts till the communal monster had been vanquished:

It is time that we gripped the problem fully and dealt with it adequately. There can be no half measures.

He shared with them his own painful realisation that there were moments in the battle to combat terror when the government had to shelve awhile its usual duties, such as protection of civil liberties. He urged them to locate all areas where the communal forces had spread their tentacles, including the bureaucracy: "We shall have to purge these and purify our administration and services".

The ban on the R.S.S. came on 4 February 1948. 25,000 members and sympathisers of the Hindu Mahasabha, including its General Secretary, Ashutosh Lahiri, were rounded up all over the country. The Hindu Mahasabha called a meeting of its Working Committee and preferred to dissolve itself rather than be liquidated. The known bases of the organisations in the princely states were dismantled. Alwar and Bharatpur had gained notoriety as happy hunting ground for Hindu communalists. The Maharaja and Prime Minister of Alwar were not allowed to enter

103. 5 February 1948, *ibid.*, pp. 312 & 313.
the state's territory and Bharatpur was entrusted to an administrator.

But governmental action could never substitute for popular will and Nehru realised that communism could be exterminated only if the people as a whole awoke to the danger and resolved to meet it. This was why, though he was acutely conscious of his personal responsibility for the tragedy, he constantly stressed the collective guilt of the nation. It was from there, and not from his own isolated remorse, that he hoped to distill the determination and unity needed for the coming battle:

We are all responsible for this unprecedented tragedy. Our heads hang in shame that we could not protect him and save his life, though we always cried Gandhiji ki jai.

Standing on the bank at the Triveni Sangam in Allahabad, after Gandhi's ashes had been immersed in the waters, he reminded his countrymen of their duty;

We have had our lesson at a terrible cost. Is there anyone amongst us now who will not pledge himself after Gandhi's death to fulfil his mission—a mission for which the greatest man of our country, the greatest man in the world has laid down his life.

105. Ibid., pp.52 and 53, notes 2 and 3.
106. Speech at Jullundur, 24 February 1948; ibid., p.63.
107. 12 February 1948, ibid., p.55.
This mission was national unity: "We have to hold together and fight that terrible poison of communalism that has killed the greatest man of our age".

A month after Gandhi's assassination, Nehru was hopeful that we had turned the corner:

We are not wholly out of the wood yet.... But by and large I think we may say we have successfully weathered the storm.

Remarkable changes in our political structure have taken place in the six months that have gone. The Hindu Mahasabha as a political organisation has liquidated itself. The R.S.S. has been banned.

These events have, of course, been precipitated by the assassination of Gandhiji, but they indicate a wholly healthy development in our political life.

By May 1948 anxiety had returned. Nehru despatched a letter to his chief ministers on 2nd May, advising them to be vigilant, as extreme Hindu communalists were becoming "vocal and demonstrative again". The same day Patel received a similar note.

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108. Nehru to his Chief Ministers, 5 February 1948, ibid., p.312.
110. Ibid., vol.6, p.257.
111. Ibid., p.50.
I am rather worried at the number of reports that I have received from various quarters about the recrudescence of the R.S.S. in various forms and the growth of communal propaganda on their part. Unless this is dealt with at its very inception it may grow to dangerous proportions.

But the threat was now a qualitatively different one. The state had shown its will to survive and demonstrated that it clearly intended to stay secular. The mass of the people had been horrified by Gandhi's assassination and shied away from supporting Hindu communal forces now that their designs had been exposed. By 1949 the Government was confident that they could handle the R.S.S. without the help of a ban and it was withdrawn, on the condition that the body would not engage in political activities. While Government resolve had played no small part in rendering the communal forces impotent, what had hardened their resolve was Gandhi's assassination. In his death, as in his life, Gandhi had initiated new and positive tendencies.

Congress and Hindu Communal Pressures—An Overall Assessment

If one were to draw up a balance sheet of the record of the Congress on the front of Hindu communalism, a very differential picture would emerge, depending on which level of the Congress one examined— the Congressman as an individual, the Congress as a party, the Congress in power in the provinces and the Congress as the ruling party of the Indian state. The distribution of weaknesses and strengths was very uneven and whereas the Indian
state, the provincial government and the party resolutely stood
t heir ground, there were failings at the individual level. As we
have seen, the Congress party had rejected an alliance with the
Mahasabha and refused to abandon nationalist Muslims or compel
unity by force; Congress provincial ministries had taken stern
action against Hindu rioters, opposed the witchhunt of Muslim
officials and refused to discriminate between their Hindu and
Muslim subjects; and the Indian state, steered by the Prime
Minister, Nehru, had thwarted all attempts to orient it in a
Hindu direction.

The weakest link in the chain were the many Congressmen
who proved unable to stand up to the test imposed by the
heightened communal tension and developed a sympathy for the
Hindu communal standpoint. It was not the first time in its
history that the Congress had to contend with the problem of
the overtly Hindu leanings of Congressmen, including its
prominent leaders. The Madan Mohan Malaviyas and K.M. Munshis
had posed ticklish problems in their day. In the post war
period the Congress was having to fight communalism of both hues
with its back to the wall and the existence of ambiguity within
its ranks was far more of a threat.

Among the leaders, Nehru was most watchful of this tendency
as he perceived its danger clearly. As early as 14 July 1945,
Nehru admitted to the Viceroy, Lord Wavell that 'some of the
Congress Hindus were anti-Muslim." A year later, he proposed that the A.I.C.C. office set up a minorities department, one of whose urgent tasks would be to "suggest ways of preventing the growth of communal and sectarian feeling among Congressmen."

As we have seen in our discussion of the Bihar riots, Nehru pointed both to the involvement of some local Congressmen in the troubles as well as the commendable efforts of others in preventing riots and helping Muslims.

The tendency was aggravated after independence. Partition and the holocaust that attended it communalised politics further. Hindu communal forces not only grew in strength, but began to make steady inroads into nationalist bastions. B.G. Kher, the Chief Minister of Bombay, commented on this trend to Patel on 26 May 1948: "Hindu-Muslim relations last year made the Hindu preaching more popular and many Congressmen also got affected by the communal virus".

The A.I.C.C. session in November 1947 revealed sharp differences among Congressmen over the question of what attitude was to be adopted towards Hindu communal elements. The final

112. Ibid., Vol.14, p.46.
113. 6 August 1946, ibid., vol.15, p.488.
114. SPC, vol.6, p.78.
resolutions adopted were a reiteration of the secular position of the Congress: "They make clear that we cannot compromise our ideals because communal organisations are shouting a great deal". But the debate had showed up ambiguity among Congressmen and this itself was disturbing to Nehru. He lamented to his Chief Ministers: "Even many Congressmen have given way to this mental turmoil and confusion".

The ambiguity arose from a shared affinity with the outlook of bodies such as the R.S.S. and Hindu Mahasabha, which was essentially fascist in nature. "Unfortunately a number of Congressmen without thinking are attracted to this development of Fascist and Nazi modes of thought and practice". This undoubtedly made the task of suppressing the Hindu communal forces difficult, but also made it more urgent. The enemy was within, it was not a distant threat, and Nehru warned his chief ministers that if we ignore it, we do so "at our peril".

The real test for Congressmen had come in mid-1946 with the success of the League's strategy of fomenting communal violence. The latent biases of many an ordinary, nameless worker, and even

116. Ibid.
118. Ibid.
some leaders, were revealed. Acceptance of communal stereotypes was disquietingly evident in the report filed by B.B. Sen, the head of the District Congress Committee, Noakhali, to the office of the A.I.C.C.:

The Muslims are temperamentally violent and aggressive.... The Hindu masses are always docile and have become accustomed to suffer indignities, insults and humiliations in their every-day life, since a pretty long time.

One could argue that these stereotypes, while exaggerated as inherent qualities of the two communities, may have reflected the varying degree of communalisation of Hindus and Muslims. Sen was writing from Noakhali, where the Muslims had recently been the aggressors, and such confusion could perhaps be excused. But there can be little justification for Patel making a comment which implicitly accepts the stereotypes: "I wonder why should there be any riots where the Muslim population is insignificant".

The cowardly Hindu was of course not an ideal. Patel agreed with Jayakar and Moonje that Hindus must shed their docility, was pleased when they did and disappointed when they did not. Jayakar bemoaned to Chemburkar:

119. AICC Papers, File No.G-53/1946, NMML.
121. 14 August 1945, Jayakar Papers, file 832.
But as present constituted, the Hindu community presents no hope of such concerted action... who knows perhaps with more provocation, the inert Hindu mass may think of taking action?

Moonje approved heartily of Sikh and Hindu aggression against Muslims in Punjab and Hindu preparedness in Bombay. Patel's reaction to the news that Hindus in Baroda had not retaliated despite provocation, was not one of relief, as one would expect, but regret: "If the facts are true, it makes us hang our heads in shame".

The issue of relief to victims of riots brought out differences among Congress leaders, with Purshottamdas Tandon ranged on one side, Nehru on the other and Patel somewhere in between. Our discussion of the Bihar riots had shown that Patel had been insensitive to the plight of Muslims and impatient with suggestions, even when they came from Gandhi, that the Bihar government intensify their relief efforts. Purshottamdas Tandon saw no reason why the Congress government should continue to protect Muslims and give them succour when League ministries were pursuing anti-Hindu policies and abetting riots. The U.P. and Bihar Government particularly came in for criticism


at his hands. Where was the need for the U.P. Government to provide protection to Muslims in Garhmukteshwar or for the Bihar Government to spend Rs.70 lakhs in relief for Muslims? Nehru posed precisely the opposite question to Bhim Sen Sachar, the Punjab Congress leader. Why was the relief fund in Punjab earmarked for Hindus and Sikhs only? This news has rather upset me and Gandhiji is also put out by it... Our declared object must be to give relief wherever it is needed, regardless of community, religion or creed.

Lack of sympathy for Muslim victims of riots did not take long to develop into distrust of Muslims in general and Muslim civil and military officials in particular. Ram Ratan Gupta, a well known Congressman from Kanpur, warned the members of the Constituent Assembly that Indian Muslims would be spies for Pakistan and Muslim native states its agents. As discussed earlier in the chapter, Hindus in U.P. and Bihar had raised the

124. Note, 22 July 1947, P.D. Tandon Papers, Group XI, S.No.907. As we have seen, Tandon's position was often difficult to distinguish from the extreme Hindu communal standpoint. He opposed the Congress acceptance of partition and called upon the manhood of the country to prevent this betrayal. One of the stated aims of the Hind Rakshak Dal he established was the overthrow of the Indian and Pakistan Governments.


cry that Muslims officials were League agents and Hindus had lost confidence in them. They demanded that those in sensitive posts be removed and the numbers of the rest be made commensurate with their strength in the population. The U.P. and Bihar premiers had refused to concede any ground and the latter in particular had spoken out about his duty to his Muslim subjects in words that would have done Gandhi proud.

The trend became disquieting when Congressmen, and well known leaders at that, came to share the general distrust of Muslims. P.C. Ghosh, the Congress leader from Bengal, wrote to the Congress President, Kripalani, to arrange for troops to stand by in Calcutta during the tense pre-partition days:

I want only Hindu soldiers. I cannot depend on the loyalty of the Muslim soldiers.

Rajendra Prasad, after a meeting with Hindu residents of Karol Bagh in Delhi, asked Patel to transfer Muslim officers from the area: "Hindus are naturally apprehensive that they may not get protection from them when the trouble starts".

127. See the section on provincial ministries earlier in this chapter.


Patel scoffed at Hindu fears and reminded Prasad that "the attacks have been almost all one-sided and the aggressors have 130 been Hindus or Sikhs". However, his own assessment of the reliability of Muslim officials was similar to the prevalent Hindu one. When Govind Malaviya had suggested that now that Pakistan was to be a reality, Muslim officials should be told to "move on to their own area", Patel had countered that only those who were pro-Pakistan would be asked to leave, but had confessed his own reservations about their loyalty:

I have noticed in my experience during the last 10 months that the Muslim personnel of the services are thoroughly disloyal to Government, and it was impossible to run any administration efficiently or even tolerably fairly.

He informed Rajendra Prasad that he was in favour of encouraging the exchange of Muslim officials with Hindu officials from Pakistan and that the Government had already taken up the 132 question of overrepresentation:

We have been able to restore the balance in the representation of various communities in the upper ranks of the police force. As regards the lower ranks, the position is difficult, but I am trying to have the Muslim element rendered as innocuous as possible.

130. 5 September 1947, ibid., p.339.
131. 7 July 1947, ibid., p.413.
One must concede that the problem was a ticklish one. For one, there was an element of truth in the Hindu propaganda that Muslims were overrepresented. The British Government had assiduously ensured this—particularly in provinces like the U.P. where the Congress base went deep—as part of their strategy of keeping Muslims away from the Congress. Should not this communal policy be reversed? The problem was that righting an old wrong could well create a new wrong in a situation where Indian Muslims were already under tremendous pressure. Secondly, once Muslim communalism achieved success in establishing a territorial base in Pakistan, the implications of communal bias among Hindu and Muslim officials were naturally different. Muslim officials who were communal could well be pro-Pakistan whereas communal Hindu officials could only be pro-Indian. At a pragmatic level, an Indian administrator would find himself having to distinguish between the two in specific situations and perhaps that was what Patel was doing.

And yet the contrast between his instinctive sympathy for the Hindu official’s position and his basic distrust of the Muslim official cannot fail to be extremely disturbing. He was visibly impatient when Nehru frequently brought cases of
However much we might like officials to behave like Gods, we have to take note of the fact that they are human beings and it is likely that in the case of a few officials here and there, their inward sympathies get the better of their discretion and they indulge in objectionable behaviour.... I am asked first to suspend them and then to collect evidence. It is obvious that such an action would, apart from being unfair and unjust, completely throw the administration out of gear.

Nehru was compelled to concede the point somewhat: "One can understand the natural feelings of officers coming from the Punjab and I am not prepared to blame them too much". But in a letter written three days later to the chief ministers, Nehru again pointed to lapses in the East Punjab, especially in the police. He stressed "the paramount importance of preserving the public services from the communal virus" and warned that "unless we are vigilant, the disease may spread."

133. To Nehru, 12 October 1947, ibid., p 303. The attitude and action of the District Commissioner of Delhi, M.S. Randhawa, came in for sharp criticism by Nehru. He complained to Patel that the Delhi police were slow to take action during the September troubles and that the special Police Officers appointed included men who had R.S.S. sympathies and might even have organised the riots. A conversation with Randhawa confirmed Nehru's reservations- "from his talk it would appear that his sympathies lay in a certain direction and this perhaps prevented strong action". Nehru to Patel, 30 September 1947, JNSW, 2nd series, Vol. 4, pp. 112-13.


135. 15 Oct.1947, ibid., p.44.
In the above case Nehru chose not to press his point with Patel. But conflict was inevitable as the approach of the two leaders was too divergent to allow for an understanding of each other's position. Nehru was deeply suspicious of the motive of Hindu communal elements but Patel was sceptical of Nehru's suspicions. His own inclination was to be less harsh, perhaps because he understood communal sentiment as individual weakness, natural enough in the troubled times, whereas Nehru was sure, as in the case of the Delhi riots, that there was an invisible hand behind the scenes, orchestrating a conspiracy to overthrow the government.

Whether it was Randhawa's attitude or the appointment of special police officers in Delhi or communal trouble in the dargah town of Ajmer, Nehru's attitude to the communal problem was that of a restless campaigner who was unwilling to let go of any opportunity to press his cause. As Prime Minister he was responsible for coordinating countless policies and the communal problem was but one of his concerns. Yet at every opportunity he himself entered the fray, rushing where trouble broke out.

136. Patel was obviously referring to Nehru in his Lucknow speech on 6 January 1948—"In Congress there are some in power who feel that by virtue of authority they will be able to crush the R.S.S. You cannot crush an organisation by using the rod. After all R.S.S. men are not thieves or dacoits. They are patriots who love their country. Only their trend of thought is misdirected." Pyarelal, Mahatma Gandhi, The Last Phase, Vol.2, p.693.
admonishing those who were behind it, compelling them to open their eyes to the dangers of their own actions. Back in Wardha after many years and the first time since Gandhi's death, after warning that the murder was but the "first show of a challenge thrown out", he spoke of his own inclinations: "At times I feel like divesting myself of office and meeting this challenge in the open".

Patel saw his task as ensuring the smooth running of the Government and its machinery and came to resent Nehru's constant references to lapses of the administration as well as his peace initiatives. Nehru's actions were interpreted as criticism of his functioning as Home Minister and undue interference in his domain. Considerable tension ensued, Gandhi's mediation was sought, and both men offered to resign. But it was only the shock of Gandhi's death that brought them together. Nehru promptly wrote to Patel that now they must strive jointly to fulfil Gandhi's mission and Patel responded to Nehru's reaching out and pledged complete loyalty.

Though their personal differences were buried, their political judgements continued to tread different paths. The conclusions they drew from the same event, Gandhi's

137. 13 March 1948, ibid., vol.5. p.75.

assassination, were totally opposite. Nehru's letter of 26 February 1948 was in the same vein as his letter of 30 September 1947 written after the Delhi riots:

More and more I have come to the conclusion that Bapu's murder was not an isolated business but a part of a much wider campaign organised chiefly by the R.S.S. ... there appears to be a certain lack of real effort in tracing the larger conspiracy.

Patel was as sceptical as ever: "I have come to the conclusion that the conspiracy of Bapu's assassination was not so wide as is generally assumed, but was restricted to a handful of men". He expressed the same opinion to S.P. Mookerjee three months later: "I quite agree with you that the Hindu Mahasabha, as an organisation, was not concerned with the conspiracy that led to Gandhi's murder".

This was either sheer naivete or hair-splitting. The Hindu Mahasabha obviously did not officially hatch the plot, but could it escape responsibility when its prominent leaders had publicly called for the hanging of national leaders and, as Patel himself

139. Ibid., vol.5, p.67. It seems likely that Gandhi would have agreed with Jawaharlal. When an abortive attempt was made on his life on 20 January 1948 and a co-worker at Birla House suggested to Gandhi that the bomb blast may have been accidental, Gandhi retorted—"The fool! Don't you see, there is a terrible and widespread conspiracy behind it?" Pyarelal, Mahatma Gandhi – The Last Phase, Vol. II, p. 750.

140. He made a point of correcting Nehru on his facts—the Mahasabha and not R.S.S. men were involved and Delhi was not a centre of the Mahasabha. 27 February 1948, SPC, Vol.5, p.56.

141. 6 May 1948, ibid., vol.6, p.66.
pointed out to S.P. Mookerjee, the conspirators of Gandhi's murder visited the General Secretary, Ashutosh Lahiri's house?

However, though Patel absolved the Mahasabha of responsibility for Gandhi's assassination, he was not in favour of a general amnesty. A week after Gandhi's death, S.P. Mookerjee asked for an enquiry into Lahiri's arrest and pressed for prominent Mahasabha leaders to be released for the forthcoming Working Committee meeting at which the party intended to give up communal politics, but Patel refused to oblige. Three months later Mookerjee complained that the continued detention of large numbers of Mahasabhaites was unjustified as the Hindu Mahasabha had nothing to do with Gandhi's murder. Patel, as we have seen, conceded the last point but refused to hasten releases and criticised the Mahasabha for celebrating Gandhi's death and continuing to preach militant communalism.

It is obvious that Patel's position was a complex one, which permitted of no easy characterisation. As we have just discussed, there were times when he betrayed a communal bias in his outlook. But when it came to Hindu pressures on the Congress he was with the rest of the Congress leaders in refusing to

142. 8 February 1948, *ibid.*, p.37.
143. 8 February 1948, *ibid.*, pp.36 and 37.
144. 6 May 1948, *ibid.*, p.66.
compromise the secular nature of the institution. He had ruled out an alliance with the Mahasabha and come out strongly against a Hindu state. He cannot be dubbed communal and yet his secularism lacked the rock-like quality that distinguished Gandhi's and Nehru's actions. It could be said that Patel's secularism was tilted in a pro-Hindu direction.

But if Patel's secularism was pro-Hindu, this was counterbalanced by the pro-Muslim tilt of Nehru's secularism. The two men were both a foil and balance to each other. If Patel reflected the thinking of the average Congressmen who found it difficult to be secular in the heavily communalised atmosphere, Nehru lectured them about what was wrong with their thinking, and, by admonitions and personal example, tried to herd those who had gone astray back to the right path. Similarly, if there was a Purshottamdas Tandon in the Congress, there was also a Shrikrishna Sinha whose brave words about the duty of the Congress by the Muslims had the unmistakeable Nehruvian stamp. This diversity of opinion within it was the source

145. Shrikrishna Sinha dismissed Hindu communal leaders and their demands—"I am afraid if this is the price I have to pay for satisfying Nawal Babu and other people like him I would rather let them remain aggrieved". The "price" was ignoring the "feelings and even the reasonable expectations of the Muslims". Nehru addressed his chief ministers—"Muslims have got to live in India... Whatever the provocation from Pakistan and whatever the indignities and horrors inflicted on non-Muslims there, we have got to deal with this minority in a civilised manner". S.K. Sinha to Rajendra Prasad, R.P. Papers, 24-C/46-7, col.I, S.No.155 and Nehru to chief ministers, 15 Oct.1947, JNSU, IInd series, Vol.4, p.442.
of the strength of the Congress and gave it the capacity to withstand the manifold pressures it had to face in those troubled times.