# CHAPTER IV

PILGRIM’S PROGRESS

C ongress would not participate in the provisional

government because Lord Wavell had, on Jinnah’s insist¬

ence, refused to allow it to nominate a Moslem for- one of

the government posts. True, Wavell had stipulated publicly that

the composition of the interim government would not constitute

a precedent. Congress feared it would, and refused adamantly

to recognize Jinnah’s right to veto a Congress Moslem’s appoint¬

ment to the Cabinet.

Wavell accordingly again asked Congress and the League to

submit lists of its candidates for positions in the Government, but,

in deference to Congress, stressed that no side could bar the

nominees of the other. Jinnah thereupon declined the invitation

to participate in the provisional government. On August 12th,

1946, Wavell commissioned Nehru to form the government.

Nehru went to see Jinnah and offered him a choice of places in

the Government for the Moslem League. Jinnah refused. Nehru

then organized a government consisting of six Congressmen, of

whom five were caste Hindus and one a Harijan, and, in addition,

one Christian, one Sikh, one Parsi and two Moslems who were

not of the Moslem League. Wavell announced that it was open

to the Moslem League to name five of its members to the pro¬

visional government. Jinnah was not interested.

The Moslem League declared August 16th 'Direct Action Day’.

Savage riots lasting four days broke out in Calcutta. 'Official

estimates’, writes Lord Pethick-Lawrence, 'placed the casualties

at some five thousand killed and fifteen thousand wounded, and

unofficial figures were higher still.’

Sir Shafaat Ahmed Khan, a Moslem who had resigned from the

Moslem League to join Nehru’s interim government, was waylaid

in a lonely spot in Simla at dusk on August 24th and stabbed seven

times. ‘Obviously political’, high British authorities said of the

assault.

On September 2nd, Nehru became Prime Minister of India.

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‘Our representatives and leaders have broken into the citadel of

power,’ J. B. Kripalani, the new president of Congress, declared.

Gandhi was living in the untouchables’ quarter in New Delhi

on September 2nd. He woke very early that morning and wrote

a letter to Nehru on the duties of the new Government. This was

a red-letter day in India’s history, he told his evening prayer

meeting and he felt grateful to the British but in no mood for

jubilation. ‘Sooner, rather than later, complete power will be

in your hands,’ he promised the audience, ‘if Pandit Nehru, your

uncrowned king and Prime Minister, and his colleagues, did their

part.’ The Moslems were the brothers of the Hindus even if

they were not in the Government as yet, Gandhi continued, and a

brother does not return anger with anger.

But Jinnah proclaimed September 2nd a day of mourning and

instructed Moslems to display black flags. The next day in

Bombay, Jinnah said: ‘The Russians may have more than a

spectator’s interest in Indian affairs, and they are not very far

from India either.’

Sir Firoz Khan Noon, a big Punjab landowner and a Moslem

League leader, had spoken in the same vein. ‘If our own course is

to fight,’ he asserted, ‘and if in that fight we go down, the only

course for the Moslems is to look to Russia.’

Gandhi did not misread these signs. ‘We are not yet in the

midst of civil war,’ he stated on September 9th, ‘but we are near¬

ing it.’ Shootings and stabbings occurred in Bombay throughout

September. A Moslem black flag was like a red flag to a Hindu.

Trouble spread to the Punjab. Violence shook Bengal and Bihar.

The Moslem League announced that it would abstain from the

national Constituent Assembly.

Alarmed by the disturbed state of the nation, Wavell redoubled

his efforts to win Moslem League adherence to the new Govern¬

ment. Jinnah finally agreed, and appointed four Moslem League

members and one untouchable who was an opponent of Gandhi.

The Moslem League always proclaimed itself a religious body

representing the Moslems of India. Why then should it have

appointed an untouchable, a Hindu? Obviously to anpoy

Congress and the caste Hindus. It was a bad augury for the new

Government. And, in fact, Nawabzada Liaquat Ali Khan,

Finance Member and foremost League spokesman in the Govern-

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ment, announced that he and his colleagues did not recognise the

Government as a coalition and felt no obligation to co-operate

with Nehru and the other Congress ministers. The Government

was a house divided — by religion.

Every day Gandhi preached against the uninterrupted violence

between the two communities. ‘Some people even rejoice,’ he

said, ‘that Hindus are now strong enough to kill in return those

who tried to kill them. I would far father that Hindus died

without retaliation. . . .’

At the same time he remembered his other causes and stressed

the need for more khadi production; he protested against maltreat¬

ment of Harijans: ‘If there is an epidemic they are beaten and

cannot draw water from the wells. They live in hovels.’ He

wanted the Salt Tax completely annulled, but he asked the people

to be patient in this regard; the new ministers were overwhelmed

with unaccustomed tasks.

Most Congress ministers and many of their assistants as well as

provincial officials came to Gandhi’s hut in the Harijan quarter

for frequent visits — sometimes daily — to ask his advice and

approval. Gandhi was ‘super-Prime Minister’.

He wrote on leprosy and the need of collective prayer, on the

regime in Indian jails and discrimination in South Africa, on

lagging food production and the gods in the Hindu pantheon.

Each day he gave instructions for his meals the next day. When¬

ever possible, he made diary entries. ‘It seems to be so very hard’,

he wrote one night, ‘to maintain detachment of mind in the midst

of raging fire.’ And he told a friend ‘Why could I not suffer this

anguish with unruffled calmness of spirit? I am afraid I have not

the detachment required for living to 125 years.’

The raging fire of Hindu-Moslem strife gave him no rest. Yet

his faith in human beings persisted. ‘In Bombay a Hindu gave

shelter to a Moslem friend the other day,’ he wrote on October

15th. ‘This infuriated a Hindu mob who demanded the head of

the Moslem friend. The Hindu would not surrender his friend.

So both went down literally in deadly embrace. This was how it

was described to me authentically. Nor is this the first instance

of chivalry in the midst of frenzy. During the recent blood bath in

Calcutta, stories of Moslems having, at the peril of their lives,

sheltered their Hindu friends and vice versa were recorded. Man-

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kind would die if there were no exhibition any time and anywhere

of the divine in man.’

Gandhi now went in search of the divine in maddened

man.

Widespread Moslem attacks on Hindus had taken place during

October in the distant Noakhali and Tippera rural areas of east

Bengal. These seemed to alarm the Mahatma more than urban

disturbances. Hitherto, inter-religious amity had prevailed in

India’s villages. If now community hatred invaded the country¬

side it might doom the nation to destruction. Gandhi decided to

go to the scene of the trouble. Unless he could stem the violence

life would have no attraction for him. Friends tried to dissuade

him. His health was poor. The Congress members of the Govern¬

ment wanted him near by. ‘All I know is that I won’t be at peace

with myself unless I go there,’ he replied. He wondered whether

he would accomplish anything. But he had to try. He told

people not to come to the station to see him off and get his blessing.

He was in no mood for it.

They came in hordes. The Government gave him a special

train (the British had done likewise) because when he went by the

regular express the crowds that wanted to catch a glimpse of him

delayed the train for hours and disrupted all traffic schedules. At

the big cities where the special stopped, vast multitudes be¬

leaguered the stations and swarmed over the tracks. They

mounted the roof of the station, broke glass, windows and wooden

shutters, and created an ear-splitting din. Several times the

conductor gave the signal for departure but someone pulled the

emergency cord and the train stopped with a jerk. At one station

the railway authorities turned the fire hose on the people but the

water flooded Gandhi’s compartment. He arrived in Calcutta

five hours late, tired from the noise and commotion, and sad.

The day he left New Delhi, thirty-two persons were killed in

another inter-religious riot in Calcutta; military reinforcements

rushed to the scene. Police and troops were kept busy night and

day dispersing bands of hooligans who attacked one another

with kerosene bombs, bricks and soda-water bottles. The day

after his arrival in Calcutta, Gandhi paid a brief courtesy call on

Sir Frederick Burrows, the British governor, and a longer visit

to Mr. H. S. Suhrawardy, the Moslem prime minister of Bengal

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province. The next day, October 31st, he again saw Suhrawardy

and together they drove through deserted streets piled two-feet

high with uncollected garbage and saw many rows of stores and

houses gutted in the most recent as well as in the August disturb¬

ances. He was overcome, Gandhi said, by ‘a sinking feeling at

the mass madness that can turn man into less than a brute’. Yet

he remained an optimist. This could not go on much longer; he

thought the citizens of Calcutta were already beginning to sicken

at their own hideous excesses.

He was going to Noakhali, the rural area where Moslems had

killed Hindus, forcibly converted Hindus to Islam, ravished Hindu

women and burned Hindu homes and temples. ‘It was the cry of

outraged womanhood,’ he told his prayer meeting, ‘that has

peremptorily called me to Noakhali ... I am not going to leave

Bengal until the last embers of the trouble are stamped out. I

may stay on here for a whole year or more. If necessary, I will die

here. But I will not acquiesce in failure. If the only effect of my

presence in the flesh is to make people look up to me in hope and

expectation which I can do nothing to vindicate, it would be far

better that my eyes were closed in death.’

Many members of the congregation wiped tears from their eyes.

But worse woes were in store for the sorrowing Mahatma. In

the neighbouring province of Bihar, with a population of

31,000,000 Hindus and 5,000,000 Moslems, the events in Noakhali

and Tippera had incensed the majority community; October 25th

was declared ‘Noakhali Day’. Speeches by Congressmen and

sensational newspaper headlines whipped the Hindus into

hysteria and thousands paraded the streets and country lanes

shouting ‘Blood for blood’. In the next week, ‘the number of

persons officially verified as killed by rioters’ wrote the Delhi

correspondent of the London Times , was 4580; Gandhi later put

the total at more than ten thousand. They were preponderantly

Moslem.

The news of the Bihar atrocities reached Gandhi in Calcutta

and filled him with grief. He addressed a manifesto to the Biharis:

‘Bihar of my dreams seems to have falsified them . . . The mis¬

deeds of the Bihari Hindus may justify Qaid-e-Azam Jinnah’s

taunt that the Congress is a Hindu organization in spite of its

boast that it has in its ranks a few Sikhs, Moslems, Christians,

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Parsis and others . . . Let not Bihar, which has done so much to

raise the prestige of Congress, be the first to dig its grave.’

As penance, Gandhi announced, he would keep himself ‘on the

lowest diet possible’, and this would become ‘a fast unto death if

the erring Biharis have not turned over a new leaf’.

Expecting vengeance in Bengal for the horrors of Bihar,

Nehru and Patel, and Liaquat Ali Khan and Abdur Rab Nishtar,

two Moslem members of the interim government, hufried by air

from Delhi to Calcutta. Lord Wavell also came. The sacred

Islamic festival of the Id impended when Moslems might rise to

fervour and frenzy. The ministers appealed to the populace to

remain calm. Soldiers patrolled the city and countryside.

Nehru and Patel begged Gandhi not to fast unto death; they,

and the nation, needed him.

From Calcutta, the four ministers flew to Bihar. Infuriated by

what he saw and heard, Prime Minister Nehru threatened to bomb

Bihar from the air if the Hindus did not desist from killings. ‘But

that was the British way,’ Gandhi commented. ‘By suppressing

the riots with the aid of the military they would be suppressing

India’s freedom,’ he said. ‘And yet what was Panditji to do if

Congress had lost control over the people?’

Nehru announced he would remain in Bihar until the province

became calm. On November 5th, Gandhi sent a letter to him

there saying, ‘The news from Bihar has shaken me ... If even

half of what one hears is true, it shows that Bihar has forgotten

humanity . . . My inner voice tells me, “You may not live to be

a witness to this senseless slaughter . . . Does it not mean that your

day is over?” The logic of the argument is driving me irresistibly

towards a fast.’

The Id holiday passed quietly in Calcutta and elsewhere. Re¬

assuring messages reached the Mahatma from Bihar. His duty lay

in Noakhali where frightened Hindus were fleeing before Moslem

violence. Fear is the enemy of freedom and democracy. Non¬

violent bravery is the antidote to violence. He would teach the

Noakhali Hindus to be brave by being brave with them. Equally

important, Gandhi wanted to know whether he could influence

Moslems. If they were not accessible to the spirit of non-violence

and non-retaliation and brotherhood, how could there be a free,

united India?

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‘Supposing someone killed me,’ Gandhi said. ‘You will gain

nothing by killing someone in retaliation. And if you think over

it, who can kill Gandhi except Gandhi himself? No one can destroy

the soul.’

Did he think a Moslem in Noakhali might murder him and was

he afraid that in revenge Hindus would massacre Moslems

throughout India?

The impulse to go to Noakhali was irresistible. He abandoned

the idea of a fast for Bihar.

Gandhi left Calcutta on the morning of November 6th. Noak¬

hali is one of the least accessible areas of India. It lies in the

water-logged delta of the Ganges and Brahmaputra Rivers.

Transport and daily living present gigantic difficulties. Many

villages can be reached only by small boats. Even the bullock

cart, symbol of retarded India, cannot traverse the roads of the

district. Phillips Talbot, correspondent of the Institute of Current

Affairs of New York, spent four days travelling by rail, steamer,

bicycle, hand-poled ferry and on foot from Calcutta to a settle¬

ment where the Mahatma had pitched his camp. The region,

forty miles square, is thick with human beings, 2,500,000 of them;

80 per cent are Moslem. It was rent by civil strife and steeped in

religious bitterness. Some villages had been laid in ruins.

Gandhi deliberately accepted the physical and spiritual chal¬

lenge presented by this remote region. Month after month he

persevered. ‘My present mission’, he wrote from Noakhali on

December 5th, ‘is the most difficult and complicated one of my

life ... I am prepared for any eventuality. “Do or Die” has to

be put to the test here. “Do” here means Hindus and Mussulmans

should learn to live together in peace and amity. Otherwise, I

should die in the attempt.’

Several ministers of the Bengal government and a group of

Gandhi’s secretaries and assistants had accompanied him to

Noakhali. He dispersed his disciples among the villages and

remained alone with Professor Nirmal Bose who was his Bengali

interpreter, Parasuram, his permanent stenographer, and Manu

Gandhi. He said he would prepare his own food and do his own

massage. Friends protested that he needed police protection

against Moslems; Sushila Nayyar, his doctor, should remain

near him, they said. No, she and her brother Pyarelal and

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Sucheta Kripalani and even young Abha, the wife of Kanu

Gandhi and Kanu himself, each of them must settle alone in a

village, often a hostile, isolated village and by their example and

love wean it from the ways of violence. Pyarelal was laid low

with malaria. He sent a note to Gandhi asking whether Sushila

could not come to nurse him. ‘Those who go to the villages have

to go there with a determination to live or die there, 5 Gandhi

replied. ‘If they must fall ill they have to get well there or die

there. Then alone could the going have any meaning. In

practice this means that they must be content with home remedies

or the therapy of nature’s “five elements”. Dr. Sushila has her

own village to look to. Her services are not at present meant for

the members of our party. They are pre-mortgaged to the village

folk of East Bengal. 5 He was subjecting himself to the same cruel,

unyielding discipline.

Gandhi lived in forty-nine villages during his Noakhali pilgrim¬

age. He would rise at four in the morning, walk three or four miles

on bare feet to a village, stay there one or two or three days talking

and praying incessantly with the inhabitants and then trek to the

next village. Arrived in a place, he would go to a peasant’s hut,

preferably a Moslem’s hut, and ask to be taken in with his com¬

panions. If rebuffed he would try the next hut. He subsisted on

local fruits and vegetables and goat’s milk if he could get it. This

was his life from November 7th, 1946, to March 2nd, 1947. He

had just passed his seventy-seventh birthday.

The walking was difficult. Gandhi developed chilblains. But

he rarely put on sandals. The Noakhali troubles arose because he

had failed to cure the people by non-violence. This was therefore

a pilgrimage of penance and in penance the pilgrim wears no

shoes. Sometimes hostile elements strewed broken glass, brambles

and filth in his path. He did not blame them; they had been

misled by their politicians. In many places, walking involved the

crossing of bridges built over low, marshy land. The bridges stood

on bamboo stilts often ten or fifteen feet high and consisted of

four or five bamboo poles about four inches in diameter lashed

together with jute rope or vines. These crude, shaking structures

occasionally had one side-rail for support, often not. Once

Gandhi’s foot slipped and he might have fallen to the muddy

earth far below, but he nimbly regained his balance. To become

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proficient and fearless in such crossings he practised, wherever

he could, on bridges a few inches above the ground.

Mr. Arthur Henderson told the House of Commons on Novem¬

ber 4th, 1946, that the dead in the Noakhali and contiguous Tip-

pera districts had not yet been counted but ‘will’, according to

estimates, ‘be low in the three figures category’. The Bengal

government put the number of casualties at 218; some families,

however, hid their victims out of fear. Over ten thousand houses

were looted in the two districts. In Tippera 9895 persons were

forcibly converted to Islam; in Noakhali inexact data suggested

that the number of converts was greater. Thousands of Hindu

women were abducted and married to Moslems against their will.

Gandhi was deeply depressed by the conversions and abductions.

To convert Hindu women Moslems broke their bangles and

removed the ‘happiness mark’ on their foreheads which showed

they were not widows. Hindu men were compelled to grow

beards, to twist their loincloths the Moslem instead of the Hindu

way, and to recite the Koran. Stone idols were smashed and Hindu

temples desecrated. Worst of all, Hindus were made to slaughter

their cows if they had any or, in any case, to eat meat. It was

felt that the Hindu community would not accept back into its

fold one who had killed a sacred beast or partaken of its flesh.

In the beginning, several of Gandhi’s associates suggested that

he should urge Hindus to abandon the affected areas and settle in

other provinces. He passionately rejected such defeatism. To

exchange populations would be a recognition of the impossibility

of keeping India united. Moreover, it would deny a basic tenet of

Gandhi’s faith: that an affinity exists or can easily be established

between people who are different or think themselves different.

Love and tolerance between the unlike are greater virtues than

between the like.

After he had studied the problem in Noakhali, Gandhi decided

it was necessary to choose one Moslem and one Hindu in each

village who would guarantee the safety of all the inhabitants and

die, if need be, in their protection. With this in view, he inter¬

viewed members of both religious communities. He was once

sitting on the floor of a hut in the midst of a group of Moslems

and discoursing on the beauties of non-violence. Sucheta Kri-

palani passed a note to the Mahatma saying that the man on his

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right had killed a number of Hindus in the recent riots. Gandhi

smiled faintly and went on speaking. Unless you hang the

murderer — and Gandhi did not believe in hanging — you must

try to cure him with goodness. If you imprison him there will be

others. Gandhi knew he was dealing with a social disease; the

liquidation of one or many individuals could not extirpate it.

The criminals who feared retribution would remain on the high¬

way and repeat their crimes. Gandhi therefore forgave them and

told them so, and told the Hindus to forgive them; indeed he told

them that he shared their guilt because he had failed to remove

Hindu-Moslem antagonisms.

The world is full of such antagonisms and the ordinary indivi¬

dual is their victim as well as their agent. ‘But I say unto you,

Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them

that hate you and pray for them which despitefully use you and

persecute you . . . For if ye love them which love you, what reward

have ye?’ Thus Jesus spoke. Thus Gandhi lived.

Generations back, the ancestors of many Noakhali Moslems to

whom Gandhi was appealing had been Hindus and were forcibly

converted to the Koran by the sword. Either they retained part

of the Hindu temper or the Gandhian method has a universal

application. To one village, for instance, Gandhi had sent a

young Moslem disciple, Miss Amtul Salam. She found that

Moslems continued to mistreat their Hindu neighbours. ‘In the

Gandhian tradition’, reports Phillips Talbot, ‘she decided not to

eat until Moslems returned a sacrificial sword which during the

October upheaval had been looted from a Hindu home. Now, a

fast concentrates very heavy social pressure on its objects, as

Indians have long since learned. The sword was never found.

Possibly it had been dropped into a pond. Whatever had hap¬

pened, the nervous Moslem residents were almost ready to agree

to anything when Gandhi arrived in that village on the twenty-

fifth day of Miss SalanTs fast. Her doctor reported that life was

ebbing. After hours of discussion (which . . . Gandhi took as

seriously as the Cabinet Delegation negotiations) Gandhi per¬

suaded the village leaders to sign a pledge that they would never

molest Hindus again.’

The return of the sword would have symbolized amity, Gandhi

explained.

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Gandhi and his associates were working against heavy odds. In

the beginning of his tour, Moslems flocked to his prayer meetings.

But politicians in Calcutta discouraged this practice. And

Mohammedan priests inveighed against it. They made the charge

that the Mahatma was suborning the faithful. Sometimes Gandhi

would interrupt his services to let the Moslems withdraw tem¬

porarily to the fringe of the congregation and turn west to Mecca

and say their prayers. He had an attraction for Moslems which

neither political Moslems nor religious Moslems relished.

Gandhi addressed his meetings in Hindustani. Then an inter¬

preter gave the Bengali translation. Gandhi would sit on the

prayer platform during the translation and make notes of his own

speech which he would then publish: ‘Some Moslems feared that

he had come to suppress them. He could assure them that he

had never suppressed anyone in his life.’

‘I have told our people,’ Gandhi said in an interview, ‘not to

depend on military and police aid. You have to uphold democracy,

and democracy and dependence on the military and police are

incompatible.’ He wanted to restore a sense of popular security

by changing the minds of the people. ‘For me,’ he told a friend,

‘if this thing is pulled through it will be the crowning act of my

life ... I don’t want to return from Bengal in a defeatist way. I

would rather die, if need be, at the hand of an assassin.’

At times, his closest co-workers were afraid of what might hap^

pen to them alone in remote villages. ‘You are not to rush into

danger unnecessarily,’ he instructed them, ‘but unflinchingly

face whatever comes in the natural course.’

January 6th was Gandhi’s day of silence and his prayer

meeting address was read to the congregation while he sat and

listened and nodded assent. They were in the little village of

Chandipur and he told them why he was there: ‘I have only one

object in view and it is a clear one: namely that God should purify

the hearts of Hindus and Moslems and the two communities

should be free from suspicion and fear of one another. Please join

with me in this prayer and say that God is the Lord of us both and

that He may give us success.’

Why did he have to come such a long way to do this? ‘My

answer is that during my tour I wish to assure the villagers to the

best of my capacity that I bear not the least ill-will towards any.

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I can prove this only by living and moving among those who

mistrust me.’

In this village Gandhi received information that Hindus who

had fled during the riots were beginning to return. On the other

hand, attendance at prayer meetings was dwindling. ‘But’,

Gandhi wrote, reporting his own speech, ‘he said that even then

there would be no reason for him to give up his mission in despair.

He would then roam from village to village taking his spinning

wheel. With him it was an act of service to God. 5

On January 17th the newspapers stated that during the last

six days Gandhi had been working twenty hours out of every

twenty-four. He had spent each of those days in a different village

and the people were flocking to his hut for advice, comfort and

confessions.

At Narayanpur village, a Moslem gave him shelter for the night

and food during the day. Gandhi thanked him publicly. Such

hospitality was becoming more frequent.

His Moslem host asked Gandhi why he did not come to an

understanding with Jinnah instead of subjecting himself to such a

strenuous pilgrimage. A leader, he replied, was made by his

followers. The people must make peace among themselves and

‘then their desire for neighbourly peace would be reflected by

their leaders ... If a neighbour was ailing would they run to the

Congress or the League to ask them what should be done?’

Would not literacy help, Gandhi was asked. He held that it

was not enough. The Germans were literate yet they succumbed

to Hitler. ‘It is not literacy or learning that makes a man,’ Gandhi

said, ‘but education for real life. What would it matter if they

knew everything but did not know how to live in brotherliness

with their neighbours? 5

‘If the question is between taking one’s own life or that of the

assailant, which would you advise? 5

‘I have no doubt in my mind 5 , Gandhi declared, ‘that the first

should be the choice. 5

Five thousand persons came to his prayer meeting on January

22nd in the village of Paniala where, several weeks earlier, a large

intercommunity dinner had taken place with Hindus, Moslems

and untouchables sitting shoulder to shoulder. ‘What in your

opinion is the cause of the communal riots? 5 someone asked.

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‘The idiocy of both communities,’ he replied.

The prayer meeting at Muraim on January 24th was the largest

of the pilgrimage. Gandhi attributed it to the successful fast of

Miss Amtul Salam, who was a devout Moslem and a member of

the Mahatma’s ashram.

‘What should a woman do if she is attacked?’ Gandhi was asked

at Palla on January 27th. ‘Should she commit suicide?’

‘Surrender’ he answered, ‘has no room in my plan of life. A

woman should most certainly take her own life rather than sur¬

render.’

Was she to carry poison with her or a knife?

‘It is not for me to prescribe the means,’ Gandhi said. ‘And

behind the approval of suicide in such circumstances is the belief

that one whose mind is prepared for even suicide will have the

requisite courage for such mental resistance and such internal

purity that her assailant will be disarmed.’

Sometimes economic questions were raised at prayer meetings.

Did Gandhi think the landowner’s share in crops should be re¬

duced from one-half to one-third?

Yes, he welcomed the move. ‘The land belongs to the Lord of

us all and therefore to the worker on it. But until that ideal state

of things came about the movement towards the reduction of the

landlord’s portion was in the right direction.’ Many of the land¬

lords were Hindus, and the riots were partly caused by resentment

against high rents.

Dr. Sushila Nayyar was stationed in the village of Changirgaon.

She wanted to go to the hospital in the Sevagram Ashram which

she had set up, but the Moslem patients begged her to stay and

she stayed. She also reported that Moslems were, of their own

accord, returning some of the loot they took in October. ‘A

happy omen,’ Gandhi called it. If the infection spread, the

courts would have less work to do. He aspired to no truce imposed

by the military; he wanted a change of heart.

Four young Moslem men came to Gandhi’s hut for an exchange

of views. Their visit gave him joy; he sought intimate contact

with the people. He told them, incidentally, that the figures on

Moslem killings of Hindus in Noakhali had been exaggerated;

there were not thousands. The Hindus had behaved much worse

in Bihar.

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At Srinagar village on February 5th the volunteers had erected

a platform and canopy. This was a waste of labour and money,

Gandhi chided them. ‘All I need,’ he told the prayer meeting,

‘is a raised seat with something clean and soft to rest my fatless

and muscleless bones.’ Then he laughed and showed his toothless

gums.

He lectured next day’s congregation on cleanliness. He liked

to walk barefoot on the village streets and on the road, but why

did they spit and clear their noses on them? He sometimes had

to wear sandals. No doubt, chronic poverty was responsible for

the prevalence of disease in India, but chronic breach of the laws

of sanitation was no less responsible, he said.

The poorer Moslems attended Gandhi’s meetings in larger

numbers than the rich. Tales reached him that the propertied

and educated Moslems were threatening the poor with economic

sanctions. They displayed anti-Gandhi posters. Returning from

Bishkatali in the Tippera district on February 20th, Gandhi

walked through beautiful bamboo woods and coconut groves.

Hanging from trees he saw placards reading, ‘Remember Bihar,

Leave Tippera Immediately’; ‘Repeatedly you have been warned,

Yet you insist on roaming from house to house. You must leave

for you own good’; ‘Go where you are needed. Your hypocrisy

will not be tolerated. Accept Pakistan.’

Yet crowds at meetings grew in size.

In Raipura, on a Sunday, Gandhi was present at a dinner

given by Hindu merchants to two thousand persons, including

caste Hindus, Moslems, Harijans and Christians. The local

Moslem priest took Gandhi to the village mosque.

Elsewhere a student asked Gandhi whether it was not true that

Christianity and Islam were progressive religions and Hinduism

static or retrogressive. ‘No,’ he replied, ‘I have noticed no

definite progress in any religion. The world would not be the

shambles it has become if the religions of the world were pro¬

gressive.’

‘If there is only one God,’ a questioner said, ‘should there not

be only one religion?’

‘A tree has a million leaves,’ Gandhi replied. ‘There are as

many religions as there are men and women, but they are all

rooted in God.’

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PILGRIM’S PROGRESS

A written query was handed to the Mahatma: ‘Should religious

instruction form part of the school curriculum as approved by the

State? Do you favour separate schools for children belonging to

different denominations for facility of religious instruction?’

Gandhi replied, ‘I do not believe in state religion even though

the whole community has one religion. State interference will

probably always be unwelcome. Religion is purely a personal

matter ... I am also opposed to State aid partly or wholly to

religious bodies.\* For I know that an institution or group which

does not manage to finance its own religious teaching is a stranger

to true religion. This does not mean that State schools would not

give ethical teaching. The fundamental ethics are common to

all religions. 5

Moslem critics warned him not to discuss purdah. How dare a

Hindu tell their women to expose their faces? He nevertheless

discussed it. Segregation of women was a species of violence and

led to other forms of compulsion.

On March 2nd, 1947, Gandhi left Noakhali for Bihar province.

He promised to return some day. He promised to return because

his mission had not been completed. He had not established the

brotherhood of Hindus and Moslems in Noakhali. Relations had

improved perceptibly but insufficiently.

Gandhi’s task in Noakhali consisted in restoring inner calm so

that the refugee Hindus could return and feel safe and so that

Moslems would not attack them again. The malady was deep;

the violent eruptions, however, were infrequent and ephemeral.

Gandhi, therefore, did not despair. He felt that the local com¬

munities, undisturbed by outside political propaganda, could live

in peace.

The call of Noakhali had been insistent. Gandhi might have

sent a message from Delhi or preached a sermon. But he was a

man of action, a Karma yogi. He believed that the difference

between what we do and what we could do would suffice to solve

most of the world’s problems. All his life he endeavoured to

eliminate that difference. He gave his maximum.

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