# CHAPTER VII

GANDHI HOES HIS GARDEN

T h e British had left India. Politically literate, they had read

the handwriting on the Indian wall: ‘Your day is done. 5

The handwriting was Gandhi’s.

By the will of Indians, Lord Mountbatten remained as

Governor-General of the Indian Union. It had been agreed that

Mountbatten would also be Governor-General of Pakistan and

thus a symbol of unity. But Jinnah substituted himself.

Pakistan bisected India. Pakistan itself was bisected. It

counted 38,000,000 inhabitants in north-west India and 45,000,000

in north-east India. Between the two parts lay nearly 800 miles

of the Indian Union.

In Moslem Pakistan there were many million Hindus and Sikhs.

Of the 330,000,000 residents of the Indian Union, some 42,000,000

were Moslems.

Five hundred and fifty of the 565 native states quietly acceded

to the Indian Union. Three joined Pakistan. Most of the mahara¬

jas and nawabs became overpaid pensioned puppets. Elephants

went begging.

The frontier that divided India in two divided families in two;

it separated factories from raw materials, crops from markets.

The army was divided; the treasury was to be divided. The

non-Moslems of Pakistan were worried about their future. The

Moslems of the Indian Union were anxious. In each of the new

Dominions, fighting broke out between ruling majority and

frightened minority.

One India could have lived in peace. Vivisection sundered

vital arteries; out of them flowed human blood and the poison

of religious hate.

Calcutta and the western part of Bengal province remained in

the Indian Union. Eastern Bengal went to Pakistan. Twenty-

three per cent of the population of Calcutta was Moslem. The

Hindus and Moslems fought.

How does a religious riot commence? On April 17th, 1938,

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three Hindus and a Moslem were sitting on their haunches in the

Northbrook Gardens in Bombay and playing cards. They had

been drinking. They quarrelled over the game. ‘Rumours of a

Hindu-Moslem disturbance 5 , reads an official report, ‘spread in

the city resulting in panic which was taken advantage of by

hooligans and stray assaults, stabbing and stone-throwing

commenced . . . Orders were issued prohibiting the carrying of

lethal weapons and prescribing the routes for Hindu and Moslem

funeral processions. Troops were also asked to stand by ... A

clash that threatened to assume serious proportions was soon

brought under control. Sporadic assaults, however, continued for

a few days and altogether there were fourteen deaths and injuries

to ninety-eight persons. 5 The police arrested 2488 persons.

That was in the quiet, normal, pre-Pakistan days of 1938.

With tension at its peak in 1947, especially in a city like Calcutta

where the inhabitants are squeezed together herring-barrel

fashion in filthy slums, a little Moslem girl pulling a Hindu girl’s

hair or a Hindu boy calling a Moslem boy names might precipitate

a mortal riot. Passion and poverty converted men into tinder.

On this inflammable material, Gandhi undertook to sprinkle

the sweet waters of peace.

Gandhi had arrived in Calcutta on August 9th, 1947. For an

entire year, ever since Jinnah’s Direct Action Day on August

16th, 1946, Calcutta had been torn by bloody strife. Gandhi and

H. S. Suhrawardy, the former prime minister of Bengal, walked

arm in arm through streets tense with religious frenzy. Suhra¬

wardy drove a car with Gandhi as his passenger through riotous

areas. Violence seemed to melt away wherever they passed.

Thousands of Moslems and Hindus embraced one another

shouting ‘Long Live Mahatma Gandhi 5 , ‘Long Live Hindu-

Moslem unity 5 . Huge crowds fraternized at Gandhi’s daily

prayer meetings. After August 14th no disturbances were reported

in Calcutta. Gandhi had calmed the storm. The press paid

tributes to the magician in loincloth.

On the night of August 31st Gandhi had gone to bed in the

Moslem house. At about 10 o’clock he heard angry noises. He

lay still. Suhrawardy and several female disciples of the Mahatma

could be heard attempting to pacify some intruders. Then glass

crashed; window panes had been broken with stones and fists. A

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number of young men entered the house and commenced kicking

in doors. Gandhi got out of bed and opened the door of his room.

He was face to face with enraged rioters. He touched his palms

together in greeting. A brick was thrown at him. It hit a Moslem

friend standing by his side. One of the rioters swung a lathi stick

which narrowly missed Gandhi’s head. The Mahatma shook his

head sorrowfully. The police arrived; the police chief appealed

to Gandhi to retire to his room. Then the officers hustled the

intruders out of the house. Outside, tear gas was used to disperse

an unruly mob of Moslems infuriated by the presence of a band-

aged Moslem who, they alleged, had been stabbed by Hindus.

Gandhi decided to fast.

In a statement to the press on September ist, he said, ‘To put

in an appearance before a yelling crowd does not always work. It

certainly did not last night. What my word in person cannot do,

my fast may. It may touch the hearts of all the warring factions

in the Punjab if it does in Calcutta. I therefore begin fasting

from 8.15 tonight to end only if and when sanity returns to

Calcutta.’

It was a fast unto death. Unless sanity returned, the Mahatma

would die.

September 2nd, groups and delegations commenced streaming

to Gandhi’s residence. They would do anything to save his life,

they said. That was the wrong approach, he explained. His

fasts were ‘intended to stir the conscience and remove mental

sluggishness’. Saving his life must be incidental to a change of

heart.

Leaders of all communities and many organizations called on

the Mahatma. He received them all and talked with them. He

would not desist from the fast until communal harmony had been

restored. Prominent Moslems and an official of the Pakistan

Seamen’s Union visited Gandhi and assured him they would work

to keep the peace. More Moslems came. The fast impressed

them; it was for their safety and for the rehabilitation of their

destroyed homes.

On September 4th, municipal officials reported to Gandhi that

the city had been absolutely quiet for twenty-four hours. They

also told him that as proof of their wish for communal peace 500

policemen of North Calcutta, including the British police officers,

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had commenced a twenty-four-hour sympathy fast while remain¬

ing on duty. The leaders of hooligan bands, burly ruffians, came

and sat at Gandhi’s bedside and wept and promised to refrain

from their usual depredations. Hindu, Moslem and Christian

representatives, workers, merchants and shopkeepers gave a

pledge in Gandhi’s presence that there would be no more trouble

in Calcutta. He believed them, he said, but this time he wanted

a written promise. And before they signed the promise they must

know this: if the promise was broken he would commence e an

irrevocable fast’ which nothing on earth could stop until he died.

The city leaders withdrew to deliberate. It was a serious moment

and they were conscious of the responsibility. They nevertheless

drafted and signed the pledge. At 9.15 p.m. on September 4th,

Gandhi drank a glass of sweet lime juice which Suhrawardy

handed him. He had fasted seventy-three hours.

From that day, through the many months when the Punjab

and other provinces shook with religious massacres, Calcutta and

both parts of Bengal remained riot-free. Bengal remained true to

its plighted word.

On September 7th, Gandhi left Calcutta for New Delhi en

route to the Punjab. Another part of the garden needed hoeing.

At the station Gandhi was met by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel,

Rajkumari Amrit Kaur and others. Gloom covered their faces.

Riots were raging through Delhi. Sikh and Hindu refugees from

the fires of the Punjab were flooding the city. They had occupied

the untouchables’ colony where the Mahatma used to stay. He

would have to live in the ‘palatial Birla House’, as Gandhi

called it.

Gandhi’s room in Birla House was on the ground floor, about a

foot above the earth. It was approximately 25 feet by 16 feet in

area and some io feet high. A bathroom adjoined it. When

Gandhi arrived he had all the furniture removed. Visitors sat on

the floor and he slept on the terrace outside the room. An

electric heater and electric lamp were available for use. The

room was where the prayer meetings were held on the right side

of the house and furthest from the area of the Birla grounds.

To go to prayers Gandhi would step down to the earth through a

high window and then walk under a long row of red sandstone

pergolas covered with luxurious vines.

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On arriving at the house Gandhi learned that no fresh fruit or

vegetables were available; vital services had been disrupted by

the riots in Delhi which, he said, resembled a C city of the dead’.

With passion and without restraint, Gandhi now\* gave himself

to the task of bringing Delhi to its senses — it and the Punjab.

Nothing else mattered. In former years, he had permitted doctors

to measure his blood pressure. Now he said, ‘Leave me alone. I

must work and do not want to know about my blood pressure.’

His circulatory system, the physicians said, had not deteriorated

in ten years, nor did he have more wrinkles on his face or body.

A cataract discovered in 1939 by an eye specialist had not pro¬

gressed. His ears had become very sensitive to loud noises. He

slept five to six hours every night and half an hour to an hour

during the day; he always slept soundly and rarely talked in his

sleep. On one occasion, he made arm motions during his sleep

and when he woke, Dr. Nayyar asked him what had happened

and he said he had dreamt he was scaling a wall. He was always

fresh and keen in the morning.

Despite acute distress over the political situation, Gandhi

continued to take excellent care of his body. He enjoyed lying

for ten to twenty minutes in a very hot bath at a temperature of

100 or 101 Fahrenheit. Sometimes it made him giddy. If a

shower-bath was available he finished with a cold one.

In these months of hard travel and tremendous mental pressure,

he ate less. His formula was: Under-eat when overworked. There

was much work to be done.

The very first day in Birla House Gandhi visited Dr. Zakir

Hussain at Okla, a village fourteen miles outside New Delhi.

Zakir Hussain, a stately scholar with a noble head and charac¬

ter, presided over the Jamia Millia Islamia, a Moslem religious

academy at Okla. Gandhi had collected money for the school. He

had also appointed Dr. Zakir Hussain chairman of the national

society for basic education; he did it at a conference where every¬

body except Hussain had accepted Gandhi’s ideas on training

for children.

The Okla academy, a collection of small, new, clean-looking

buildings, lies in a region redolent with Moslem tradition and

rich in ruins of ancient Mogul forts and mosques. But in August

1947 it found itself engulfed in a sea of angry Hindus and Sikhs

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to whom everything Moslem, whether man or building, was

hateful. At night the teachers and students of the academy stood

guard, expecting an assault. All lights were out. In a circle

around them they could see Moslem villages in flames and Moslem

homes burning like torches. Near by is the Jumna River. Night

after night they could hear Moslems jumping into the river to

escape their pursuers. But the pursuers would jump in after them

and then there was a scuffle and splash and the victim would be

held down till he drowned or gave one last anguished scream as

the knife cut his throat. Nearer and nearer the ring of attackers

came. One dark night a taxicab arrived at the Jamia Millia

grounds; out of it stepped Jawaharlal Nehru. He had driven

alone through the belt of madmen that circled Delhi in order to

stay with Dr. Tiussain and his students and protect them if harm

came.

The moment Gandhi heard of the danger that threatened the

Moslem academy he went out in a car and spent an hour with

Zakir Hussain and talked with the teachers and the boys. His

presence hallowed the academy; after that it was safe.

The same day Gandhi visited several refugee camps; he was

urged to go with an armed guard; the Hindus and Sikhs might

attack him as pro-Moslem and the Moslems might attack him as

a Hindu and anybody crazed by deaths or abductions in the

family might attack him without reason. He went without escort.

Throwing caution and health considerations to the wind,

Gandhi now developed inordinate energy, criss-crossing the city

many times each day to tour riotous areas, visit refugee camps in

and outside the city and speak several times a day to thousands of

embittered, uprooted specimens of humanity. T think of the poor

refugee in Delhi, in both East Punjab [Indian Union] and West

Punjab [Pakistan] today while it is raining,’ he told his prayer

meeting on September 20th. ‘I have heard that a convoy of

Hindus and Sikhs fifty-seven miles long is pouring into the Indian

Union from West Punjab,’ he said. ‘It makes my brain reel to

think how this can be. Such a happening is unparalleled in the

history of the world and it makes me, as it should make you, hang

my head in shame.’

Gandhi was not exaggerating; the fifty-seven-mile long convoy

was one of several in the Great Migration in which at least

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15,000,000 people trekked hundreds of miles not to new homes and

opportunities but to homelessness, sometimes to death and

disease. Out of the part of the Punjab assigned to Pakistan,

moving in the general direction of New Delhi, came millions of

Hindus and Sikhs fleeing the knives and clubs of Moslems. Out

of the Indian Union, moving towards Pakistan, came millions of

Moslems fearing the daggers and lathis of Hindus and Sikhs.

Police protection had become a thing of the past. Police and

even military were animated by the same passions as the aggressors

and often helped them to loot and kill.

A few tired policemen and groups of young volunteers were all

that distinguished the ‘convoys’ from disorganized flights of

panicked people. They fled in their bullock carts or, if they had

never owned a cart or it was taken from them, they fled on foot,

whole families, adults carrying children, carrying the sick in

baskets, carrying the aged on their shoulders. Frequently the

sick were abandoned and left to die on the dusty road. Cholera,

smallpox and other diseases scourged the migrant hordes. For

days and weeks the convoys crawled forward leaving corpses

behind to mark their route. Vultures hovered over the line of

march waiting for weary wanderers to drop to the ground. Few

families had salvaged enough food to support health. If they did

it was stolen or fought for; the losers starved, the victors existed a

little longer. Sometimes hostile convoys, advancing in opposite

directions, camped during the night in the vicinity of one another

and continued their senseless vendetta.

The Nehru government set up camps outside Delhi to catch the

migrants before they entered the city and care for them. But end¬

less thousands escaped the cordons. They took what they could

seize in the town. They slept in doorways and courtyards, on

pavements, in gutters, on streets. They lay on the asphalt,

exhausted. Unheeding drivers might run over them.

The Delhi home of a Moslem gone to Pakistan was considered

legitimate booty; the refugees occupied it. Moslem stores were

looted. Where Moslems resisted, riots occurred. Reduced to

primitive living, the displaced persons yielded to primitive passions.

In this city of the dead and the mad, Mahatma Gandhi tried to

spread the gospel of love and peace. Moslems must remain even

if they were molested, he said; ‘the Hindus and Sikhs who molested

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them discredited their religion and did irreparable harm to India’.

He urged holders of unlicensed arms to surrender them to him;

‘driblets have been coming to me voluntarily’.

T must be pardoned for putting first blame on the Hindus and

Sikhs,’ he told a prayer audience consisting chiefly of Hindus and

Sikhs. ‘I will not rest till every Moslem in the Indian Union who

wishes to be a loyal citizen of the Union is back in his home living

in peace and security and until the Hindus and Sikhs have returned

to their homes.’ But the Hindus and Sikhs were afraid to return

to Pakistan, nor did they wish to relinquish the homes of Moslems,

who had fled to Pakistan and whom Gandhi was inviting to

return.

Gandhi had planted himself, alone, athwart a raging torrent.

He went to a meeting of about five hundred members of the

Rashtriya Sevak Sangha or R.S.S., a highly disciplined organiza¬

tion of young militant Hindus. They were fiercely anti-Moslem,

and many of them were fiercely opposed to him because he tried

to protect Moslems. But he told them that they would kill Hin¬

duism by their intolerance. If Pakistan was maltreating Hindus

that was no justification for their maltreating Moslems. ‘There is

no gain in returning evil for evil.’ He was indeed a friend of the

Moslems, but also a friend of the Sikhs and Hindus. ‘Both sides

appear to have gone crazy. The result can be nothing but destruc¬

tion and misery’ for both sides. The R.S.S., Gandhi said, was

‘a well-organized, well-disciplined body. Its strength could be

used in the interests of India or against it’. Allegations had been

made against the R.S.S., Gandhi declared; it had been accused

of fomenting riots and planning assassinations. ‘It is for you to

show by your uniform behaviour that the allegations are baseless.’

After his speech, Gandhi invited questions. One question and

answer was recorded.

‘Does Hinduism permit killing an evil-doer?’

‘One evil-doer cannot punish another,’ Gandhi replied. ‘To

punish is the function of the Government, not of the public.’

October 2nd, 1947, was the Mahatma’s seventy-eighth birthday.

Lady Mountbatten and foreign diplomats came to congratulate

him; sheaves of telegrams were delivered from abroad and all

parts of India. Many Moslems sent greetings. The rich sent

money. Refugees sent flowers. ‘Where do congratulations come

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in?’ Gandhi asked. ‘Would it not be more appropriate to send

condolences? There is nothing but anguish in my heart. Time

was whatever I said the masses followed. Today, mine is a lone

voice ... I have lost all desire to live long, let alone 125 years . . .

I cannot live while hatred and killing mar the atmosphere ... I

therefore plead with you to give up the present madness.’

He did not feel depressed; he felt helpless. ‘I invoke the aid of

the all-embracing Power to take me away from this “vale of

tears” rather than make me a helpless witness of the butchery by

man become savage ... If He wants me He will keep me on earth

yet awhile.’

He visited refugee camps that were filthy. Refugees who were

not untouchables refused to clean. He chastised that weakness in

Hindus. Cold weather was approaching. He appealed for

blankets, quilts and cotton sheets for the homeless.

The Punjab is the granary of India. The turmoil in it had

stamped the harvest into the dust and the Indian Union was

feeling greater hunger than usual. Gandhi nevertheless opposed

rationing because it entailed centralization, red tape, speculation

and corruption.

Each evening he announced how many blankets he had received.

Blankets were better than quilts because quilts got wet with dew.

But quilts, he said, could be covered with old newspapers at night.

Gandhi hoped to leave for the Punjab. But Delhi was not at

peace. A Moslem shopkeeper, thinking that things had settled

down, opened the shutters of his shop. The same instant, a bullet

killed him.

One evening Gandhi went to the Delhi Central Jail and con¬

ducted a prayer service for three thousand prisoners. ‘I am a

seasoned ex-prisoner myself,’ he told them with a laugh.

‘What should jails be like in free India?’ he asked. ‘All criminals

should be treated as patients and the jails should be hospitals

admitting this kind of patients for treatment and cure.’ He closed

by expressing the wish that Hindu, Moslem and Sikh prisoners

live together in fraternity.

The news from Calcutta was good. Why, he asked his prayer

meeting at Birla House, could Delhi not follow the peaceful

example of Calcutta?

Each evening Gandhi asked his prayer congregation whether

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anybody objected to the reading of some verses from the Koran.

Usually there were two or three objectors. Then he askfed whether

the other worshipers would harbour any ill feeling for the objec¬

tors. They said they would not. Would the objectors remain

quiet during the Koran readings? They would. He read the

verses. This was a lesson in tolerance and discipline. He did not

expect all to agree. He expected all to remain non-violent despite

disagreements.

With the refugees came harrowing tales of savagery. A man

swung an infant by its foot and bashed its head against a wall.

Two men took a child by the feet and tore its body in two down

the middle. A Moslem mob laid siege to a village; after long

resistance, the Hindu and Sikh men came out and surrendered;

the women had huddled inside the stockade which enclosed the

village well. The Moslems were coming to fetch them; a woman

jumped into the well; another woman jumped after her; in the

next four minutes, seventy-three women had drowned themselves

on top of one another in the well.

These memories bred new atrocities. Assume that some

Moslems had killed Hindus because they were Hindus and that

most Moslems condoned those killings. To hate, suspect and wish

to hurt all Moslems because they were Moslems made the Hindus

as immoral as the Moslems. (The argument could also be applied

to Hindu killings of Moslems.) Moreover, if Hindus sought to

justify their actions by proving that the Moslems had commenced

the atrocities it merely meant that the Hindus had allowed them¬

selves to become as evil as the Moslems whom they abominated

because of that evil; they had been conquered by the spirit of

their tormentors.

Fearing retaliation, Moslems in the Indian Union decided to

escape to Pakistan. Fearing reprisals, the Hindus and Sikhs in

Pakistan were trekking to the Indian Union. A vast region was

churning with hate, murder and migrating millions. In the

midst of the upheaval stood the little man in the loincloth. A

reprisal for a reprisal, a death for a death, he was saying, means

death for India.

Lady Mountbatten visited a refugee camp; she brought Gandhi

a message; the refugees wanted to see him. Similar messages

arrived from other camps, Hindu camps and Moslem camps. He

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went as often as he could. Two hundred thousand displaced

persons were packed into Kurukshetra Gamp in east Punjab and

more were pouring in each day from west Punjab. Gandhi had a

session of the Congress Working Committee to attend so he

addressed the camp by radio on November 12th, 1947: ‘I can

serve you best by drawing attention to your shortcomings. That

has been my life’s motto, for therein lies true friendship and my

service is not only to you or to India; it extends to the world, for I

know no barriers of race or creed. If you can get rid of your

failings, you will benefit not only yourself but the whole of

India.

‘It hurts me to know that so many of you are without shelter.

This is a real hardship particularly in the cold weather . . .You

must help in the maintenance of discipline ... You must take the

sanitation of the place in your hands. I ask you . . . everyone of

you, men, women and children to keep Kurukshetra clean . . .

share your rations, be content with what you get... You must

live for others and not only for yourselves. Idleness is demoraliz¬

ing.’ He urged them to spin.

Sporadic violence in Delhi continued. In the early disturbances

137 mosques had been damaged; some had been converted into

Hindu temples with idols. Gandhi considered ‘such desecration

a blot on Hinduism and Sikhism’. He went to a Sikh celebration

attended by 100,000 bearded Sikhs and their families. He

condemned their violence against Moslems. Sikhs, he said, had

been drinking and rioting. ‘Keep your hearts clean and you will

find that all other communities will follow you.’

Gandhi also criticized the Indian government. ‘Our statesmen’,

he wrote in a letter to Madame Edmond Privat, ‘have for over

two generations declaimed against the heavy expenditures on

armaments under the British regime, but now that freedom from

political'serfdom has come, our military expenditure has increased

and still threatens to increase and of this we are proud. There is

not a voice raised against it in our legislative chambers.’ He called

it ‘mad imitation of the tinsel of the West’. But he still hoped that

India would ‘survive this death dance’ and ‘occupy the moral

height that should belong to her after the training, however

imperfect, in non-violence for an unbroken period of thirty-two

years since 1915’.

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‘When it is relevant,’ Gandhi wrote, ‘truth has to be uttered,

however unpleasant it may be . . . Misdeeds of the Hindus in the

Indian Union have to be proclaimed by the Hindus from the house¬

top if those of the Moslems in Pakistan are to be arrested or

stopped.’ As a Hindu he was sternest with Hindus.

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