# CHAPTER V

ASIA’S MESSAGE TO THE WEST

L a t e in November 1946 Prime Minister Attlee summoned

Nehru, Defence Minister Baldev Singh, Jinnah and Liaquat

iKhan to 10 Downing Street for an extraordinary conference.

The Constituent Assembly was to meet in New Delhi on

December 9th; Jinnah had repeatedly declared that the Moslem

League would boycott it. The object of the Downing Street

conference was to bring the Moslem League into the Constituent

Assembly. For if the Assembly was a predominantly Congress

affair, with the Moslems outside, how, the argument ran, could

England transfer power to it and leave India?

Originally, the Moslem League had accepted the Cabinet

Mission’s plan of May 16th, 1946, and thereby agreed to go into

the Constituent Assembly. Later, however, it had withdrawn.

The issue on which Jinnah withdrew from the Assembly pro¬

voked hot discussions and fierce hatreds. What was it?

Article 19 of the Cabinet Mission’s plan stipulated that the

Constituent Assembly would first meet in New Delhi for a short,

formal session and then break up into three sections corresponding

to three groups of provinces: Group A comprised the centre, the

heart of India and was overwhelmingly Hindu; Group B included

the North-west Frontier Province, Sind and the Punjab and was

largely Moslem in population; Group C, in the north-east,

consisted of Bengal and Assam.

Each section would draft a constitution for its group of pro¬

vinces. But if a province did not like the constitution it could stay

out of the group.

Thus Hindu Assam would be required to sit in Section C with

Moslem Bengal and participate in the drafting of a constitution

for Group C. But should Assam dislike the final constitution it

could secede from Group C and stand alone, or, possibly, join

Group A. The sections were compulsory, the groups voluntary.

Gandhi objected. He said it was compulsion and a waste of

effort. Suppose Bengal, which would have a big majority in

490

ASIA’S MESSAGE TO THE WEST

Section C, drew up a constitution that tied Assam to Group C.

And why should the North-west Frontier Province, which, though

predominantly Moslem had always been anti-Jinnah, be forced

to sit with the Punjab and Sind?

The sections and groups were introduced into the Cabinet

Mission’s plan in order to satisfy Jinnah; they were a half-way or

perhaps quarter-way house to Pakistan. They divided India into

three federated units. For that very reason Gandhi rejected them.

While Gandhi was in Noakhali, the Congress organizations of

neighbouring Assam sent emissaries to him to ask for guidance.

He told them bluntly to refuse to go into the sections even if the

national Congress leaders told them to go in.

It was to resolve this difficulty that Nehru, Baldev Singh,

Jinnah and Liaquat Ali Khan made their hasty aeroplane trip

to London early in December.

During his stay in London, Jinnah declared publicly that he

expected India to be divided into a Hindu state and a Moslem

state. He shared Mr. Churchill’s apprehensions, he added,

‘regarding the possibility of civil strife and riots in India’. Both

halves of the declarations were programme rather than prophecy.

There had already been enough riots to lead the British to

expect more unless Jinnah got the half-Pajkistan or quarter-

Pakistan implicit in the sections and groups. But although Attlee

succeeded, after great exertion, in bringing the Congress and

League ministers into his Downing Street office, the conference

ended in disagreement.

Attlee thereupon announced on December 6th that if the

Constituent Assembly adopted a constitution without the co¬

operation of the Moslem League ‘His Majesty’s Government

could not, of course, contemplate . . . forcing such a constitution

upon any unwilling parts of the country.’

This meant that one part of India would accept the constitution

and another part might reject it. Again India faced partition.

Soon after Nehru’s return from London he made the long

journey from New Delhi to the village of Srirampur in Noakhali

and, on December 27th, 1946, reported to the Mahatma on the

historic failure to agree in Downing Street.

But Gandhi repeated his advice to Assam and to the Sikhs, to

remain aloof from the constitutional sections and groups. He

49 1 ,

i

THE BIRTH OF TWO NATIONS

regarded them as devices to split India and refused to countenance

anything that contributed to division.

The All India Congress Committee, however, resolved on

January 6th, 1947, by a vote of 99 against 52, to accept the sections.

Gandhi’s influence in Congress was waning.

Gandhi had gone to Noakhali to reinforce the human bond

between Hindus and Moslems before politics and legal enactments

tore it asunder. He dreaded the consequences of the bisection of

India. In New York, on October 16th, 1949, Prime Minister

Nehru stated that he would have fought to the end against the

establishment of Pakistan if he had foreseen the dire results that

flowed from it.

Perhaps Gandhi intuitively anticipated these results. The

division of India caused the violent death of hundreds of thousands

of Indians. It caused fifteen million refugees to wander un¬

happily from their homes into distant uncertainty. It provoked

the war in Kashmir. It brought gigantic economic losses to all

parts of the country. It fed a continuing religious-nationalistic

bitterness with disastrous potentialities.

Even though the Congress leaders were not as perceptive as

Gandhi they knew that no good could come of partition. Why

then did they acquiesce in Attlee’s December 6th statement?

In 1942, Congress President Maulana Azad said to me in

Nehru’s presence that Congress abhorred the idea of the division

of India but could not reject it indefinitely if the Moslems wanted

it. He was opposed, however, he said, to ‘divorce before marriage’.

First they must try to live together in a united independent India

and if it did not work then there would be time enough to separate.

Now Nehru, Patel, Azad and the other Congress members had

had a taste of marriage; they had been sitting in the Government

with Moslem Leaguers who obviously entered the Cabinet to

disrupt it. The experience was a harrowing one. It frayed the

nerves of the Congress leaders. It destroyed their faith in Congress-

League collaboration.

Gandhi still believed in Hindu-Moslem friendship. Nehru and

Patel were reconciled to the constitutional sections knowing that

this might be the beginning of Pakistan but seeing no way out

except civil war. They hoped Jinnah would be happy with the

division into three federated states and forgo Pakistan.

492

ASIA’S MESSAGE TO THE WEST

The next step was a statement by Prime Minister Attlee in the

House of Commons on February 20th, 1947, that England would

leave India ‘by a date not later than June 1948’. Simultaneously,

it became known that Lord (Admiral Louis) Mountbatten, a

great-grandson of Queen Victoria, would succeed Lord Wavell as

Viceroy; he would be the twentieth and last British Viceroy

of India.

To whom would Britain transfer power? On this key question

Attlee, according to Lord Pethick-Lawrence, ‘was less precise’.

His Majesty’s Government, Attlee asserted, would have to

determine whether power should be handed over ‘to some form

of central government’ or in some areas ‘to the existing provincial

governments’ or ‘in some other way as may seem most reasonable

and in the best interests of the Indian people’.

Nehru found this rather vague but he welcomed the whole

statement as ‘wise and courageous’; it removed ‘all misconception

and suspicion’.

The Working Committee, in its session during the first week of

March, officially approved of Attlee’s new utterance and, in view

of the impending ‘swift transfer of power’, invited the Moslem

League to talks. Simultaneously, the Committee took cognizance

of the widespread bloodshed in the populous Punjab. Indeed, it

took such a sombre and serious view of events there that it en¬

visaged ‘a division of the Punjab into two provinces, so that the

predominantly Moslem part may be separated from the pre¬

dominantly non-Moslem part’.

The Punjab situation was ominous. According to a reply given

on May 21st, 1946, in the House of Commons by the Earl of

Listowel, the Secretary of State for India and Burma, 4014 persons

had been killed in disturbances in India between November

18th, 1946, and May 18th, 1947, and of these, 3024 were killed in

fighting between Moslems and Sikhs and Hindus in the Punjab.

Disturbed by events further west, Gandhi left east Bengal for

Bihar. Without a day’s respite, he began a tour of the province.

In village and city, he chastised the Bihari Hindus. They ‘had

forgotten in a fit of insanity that they were human beings’.

One day he listened for hours to reports by Moslems and

Hindus about continued tension. Nobody could assure him ‘that

things had completely settled down to complete normality’. The

493

THE BIRTH OF TWO NATIONS

recital so tired him mentally that he had to take a brief nap before

services.

Another day he apologized for coming to prayers in a car;

the Biharis ‘should know the art of welcoming people in a quiet

and dignified manner instead of the present embarrassing manner’.

Thousands had tried to come near enough to touch him or kiss

his feet.

Wherever he went he preached repentance and restitution. All

kidnapped Moslem women should be returned. Compensation

should be paid for property looted or destroyed.

A telegram arrived from a Hindu warning the Mahatma not

to condemn Hindus for what they had done. Gandhi mentioned

the telegram at his prayer meeting and said, T would forfeit my

claim to being a Hindu if I bolstered the wrongdoing of fellow

Hindus or of any other fellow being.’ He cautioned them against

avenging the killings of Hindus in the Punjab.

He knew that even worshipful Hindus were irritated by his

message of love. Nevertheless, he began collecting money at all

his meetings for the relief of aggrieved Moslems. In Patna, two

thousand rupees were gathered at one assembly and a number of

women contributed their personal jewellery.

Before he spoke in any locality, Gandhi visited the ruined homes

of Moslems or Moslem families who had suffered death or physical

injury. The deeper he penetrated into the Bihar tragedy the

more it obsessed him; he would not leave the province until ‘both

the communities had become friendly with one another and no

longer needed his services’. He insisted that Hindus should call

back the Moslems who had fled and rebuild their huts and re¬

establish them in business. He summoned Hindus guilty of atrocities

to surrender.

The day Gandhi arrived in the town of Masurhi ‘fifty persons’

he reported, ‘who were wanted in connection with the riot cases’

surrendered to the police. He welcomed that, and hoped others

would follow suit. If the criminals lacked the courage to sur¬

render to the authorities they should come to him or to Ghaffar

Khan, ‘the Frontier Gandhi’, or to General Shaw Nawaz of the

Indian National Army, who were accompanying him on the tour,

and confess.

As his car moved across the countryside, groups of Hindus

494

ASIA’S MESSAGE TO THE WEST

signalled him to stop and gave him purses for Moslems. This was

the way to stop violence, not with the aid of the military and the

police.

Hindus were boycotting Moslem stores and firms. He begged

them to abandon such intolerance. He asked them to recant

publicly in order to reassure the Moslems. ‘But he was sorry to

say that not one Hindu got up to give the needed assurance . . .

There was little cause for wonder, therefore, if the Moslems were

afraid to return to their villages.’ He warned them that ‘Indians

might lose the golden apple of independence’. There was re¬

newed agitation among Biharis to avenge the Moslem attacks on

Hindus and Sikhs in the Punjab. ‘If ever you become mad

again,’ he cried out, ‘you must destroy me first.’ It was his fourth

week in Bihar.

On March 22nd, 1947, Lord Mountbatten, handsome in white

naval uniform, arrived in New Delhi with his wife, Edwina, the

Vicereine; their charm and informality and his first political

declaration made a fine impression. Twenty-four hours later,

Jinnah stated publicly that partition was the only solution;

otherwise there would be ‘terrific disasters’.

Within four days of his arrival, Mountbatten invited Gandhi

and Jinnah to the palace. Gandhi was deep in Bihar. Mount¬

batten offered to bring him out by aeroplane. Gandhi said he

preferred a means of locomotion used by the millions. At the

station, before the train left Patna, the Mahatma collected

money for Harijan relief.

Gandhi conferred with Mountbatten for two and a quarter

hours on March 31st.

The next day Gandhi visited the Asian Relations Conference

which had been sitting in New Delhi since March 23rd; delegates

attended from most countries of Asia and from five constituent

republics of the Soviet Union. Asked to speak, he said he would

deliver an address at the closing session the next day, but if there

were any questions now he would try to answer them.

Did he believe in One World and could it succeed under present

conditions?

‘I will not like to live in this world if it is not to be one,’ Gandhi

replied. ‘Certainly I should like to see this dream realized in my

lifetime. I hope that all the representatives who have come here

495

THE BIRTH OF TWO NATIONS

from the Asian countries will strive their level best to have only

one world. 5 If they worked with ‘fixed determination 5 the dream

could come true.

Answering a Chinese delegate’s question about a permanent

Asia Institute, he drifted far from the subject and discussed what

was uppermost in his mind. ‘I am sorry, 5 he said, ‘that I have to

refer to the conditions we see today [in India], We do not know

how to keep peace between ourselves . . . We think we must

resort to the law of the jungle. It is an experience which I would

not like you to carry to your respective countries. 5

He turned to the problem of Asia. ‘All the Asian representatives

have come together, 5 he began. ‘Is it in order to wage a

war against Europe, against America, or against other non-Asia¬

tics? I say most emphatically, “No, 55 this is not India’s mission

. . . It will be a sorry thing if we go away from this conference

without a fixed determination that Asia shall live and live as free

as every Western nation. I just wanted to say that conferences

like the present should meet regularly and if you ask me where,

India is the place. 5

The next day he delivered his promised address before the

conference. He first apologized for speaking English. He ad¬

mitted that he had hoped to collect his thoughts but had no time.

On the way to the meeting he had asked Ghaffar Khan for a

piece of paper and pencil to make some notes. ‘I got a pen instead

of a pencil. I tried to scribble a few words. You will be sorry to

hear that that piece of paper is not by my side though I remember

what I wanted to say. 5

Then he rambled: They were assembled in a city, but cities

were not India. The real truth was in the villages and in the

untouchable homes of the villages. The villages, to be sure, were

dungheaps full of ‘miserable specimens of humanity with lustreless

eyes’. But in them was wisdom.

The East, he proceeded, had submitted to a cultural conquest

by the West. Yet the West had originally received its wisdom from

the East: Zoroaster, Buddha, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, Krishna,

Rama and lesser lights.

He asked the conference to understand the message of Asia. ‘It

is not to be learned through Western spectacles or through the

atomic bomb. If you want to give a message to the West it must

496

ASIA’S MESSAGE TO THE WEST

be the message of love and the message of truth. I do not want

merely to appeal to your head/ he said suddenly. ‘I want to

capture your heart.’

He hoped Asia’s message of love and truth would conquer the

West. ‘This conquest will be loved by the West itself. The West

is today pining for wisdom.’

It was -structurally a poor speech but full of essential wisdom and

of the essence of Gandhi. Most of the delegates had probably not

heard such simple, sincere words for many years.

Between March 31st and April 12th Gandhi conferred with

Mountbatten six times. Jinnah had an equal number of talks

with the hard-working Viceroy.

What did they talk about? ‘Before I would get down to any

actual solution of the problem,’ Mountbatten said in an address

before the Council of the Royal Empire Society in London on

October 6th, 1948, when his task in India was done, ‘I just wanted

to talk to them to get to know them, to get together and gossip.

Thus Gandhi told me about his early life in South Africa, Mr.

Jinnah about his early life in London and I told them a bit about

my early life. Then, when I felt I had some sort of understanding

with the men I was dealing with, I started talking to them about

the problem before us.’

The problem was the fate of 400,000,000 people\* the fate of

India, perhaps the fate of Asia. Mountbatten’s assignment was

to take Britain out of India by June 1948. The schedule required

him to propose a solution by the end of 1947. This would allow

the British Parliament enough time to pass the necessary legisla¬

tion for the liberation of India by June 1948. But on the spot, he

told the Royal Empire Society, he and his advisers agreed that

this would be too slow. Trouble had started, he said, on August

16th, 1946, Jinnah’s Direct Action Day. There followed the

massacres of Hindus in Noakhali and Hindu reprisals in Bihar;

then ‘the Moslems massacred the Sikhs at Rawalpindi [in the

Punjab]’ and a rising took place in the North-west Frontier

Province. ‘I arrived out there,’ Mountbatten stated, ‘to find this

terrible pendulum of massacres swinging wider and wider; if it

was not stopped there was no telling where India might end. . . .

‘Personally,’ Mountbatten continued, ‘I was convinced that

the right solution for them would have been to keep a United

497

THE BIRTH OF TWO NATIONS

India\* under the May 16th, 1946, plan of the British Cabinet

Mission. But the plan presupposed the co-operation and goodwill

of all parties. ‘Mr. Jinnah,’ however, Lord Mountbatten told the

Royal Empire Society, ‘made it abundantly clear from the first

moment that so long as he lived he would never accept a United

India. He demanded partition, he insisted on Pakistan.\* Con¬

gress, on the other hand, favoured an undivided India. But,

Mountbatten stated, the Congress leaders agreed that they would

accept partition in order to avoid a civil war. The Viceroy ‘was

convinced that the Moslem League would have fought\*.

But how was India to be divided? Congress refused to let large

non-Moslem areas go to Pakistan. ‘That automatically meant,’

Mountbatten explained, ‘a partition of the great provinces of the

Punjab and Bengal.’

‘When I told Mr. Jinnah,’ Mountbatten said in his historic

review before the Royal Empire Society, ‘that I had their pro¬

visional agreement to partition he was overjoyed. When I said

that it logically followed that this would involve partition of the

Punjab and Bengal he was horrified. He produced the strongest

arguments why these provinces should not be partitioned. He

said that they had national characteristics and that partition

would be disastrous. I agreed, but I said how much more must I

now feel that the same considerations applied to the partitioning

of the whole of India. He did not like that and started explaining

why India had to be partitioned and so we went round and round

the mulberry bush until finally he realized that either he could

have a United India with an unpartitioned Punjab and Bengal or

a divided India with a partitioned Punjab and Bengal and he

finally accepted the latter solution.’

Gandhi did not approve of any kind of partition in April 1947

and refused until his death to approve of it.

On April 15th, at the request of Mountbatten, Gandhi and

Jinnah issued a joint statement deploring the ‘recent acts of law¬

lessness and violence that have brought the utmost disgrace on

the fair name of India’ and denouncing ‘for all time the use of

force to achieve political ends’. This came at the end of a fort¬

night in which Jinnah had convinced Mountbatten that if he did

not achieve his political ends India would be rent by civil war.

During that fortnight, Gandhi lived in the untouchables’

496

ASIA’S MESSAGE TO THE WEST

quarter on Kingsway, Delhi, and conducted a public prayer

meeting there every evening. The first evening he asked those

present whether they would object to the recitation of some verses

from the Koran. Several objectors raised their hands. They said

he had no authority to intone an Islamic holy book at Hindu

services. Gandhi thereupon broke off the meeting. He put the

same question the second evening. Again there were objectors;

again he refused to pray with the congregation. The same thing

happened the third evening.

The fourth evening nobody objected. The objectors had

withdrawn. If all members of the congregation on the previous

three days had objected, Gandhi explained, he would have read

from the Koran and been prepared ‘to die at their hands with the

name of God on his lips if they wanted to kill him. But he wished

to avoid a clash on the prayer ground between those who wanted

the prayers to be held and those who objected. In the end non¬

violence prevailed’.

He received angry letters, threatening letters, some of them

anonymous. He was a bad Hindu, one said. He was a Moslem

‘fifth columnist’ in Hinduism, another said. A third was addressed

to ‘Mohamed Gandhi’.

‘How can it be a sin to chant God’s name in Arabic?’ he argued.

Hindu-Moslem unity was his life’s goal. ‘If Hindustan meant a

land only for the Hindus and Pakistan only for Moslems, Pakistan

and Hindustan would then be lands flowing with poison.’

On April 13th Gandhi returned to Bihar.

Action for non-violence and against hate was now the only

political work that made sense. Unless Gandhi could prove that

Hindus and Moslems lived in peace, Jinnah was right and Pakistan

inevitable. Mountbatten would not succumb to the most brilliant

debating points; Hindu-Moslem tolerance 'had to be demon¬

strated in life.

A victory for non-violence in Bihar or Bengal or the Punjab

would spell success in the battle for the mind of Mountbatten and

Britain and of those in Congress who had lost faith in a united

India. This was a case where the people would really decide a

major issue — not by their votes but by their behaviour, and Gandhi

still hoped to alter their behaviour. The question was: Is India a

nation or a country inhabited by warring religious communities?

499

11

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THE BIRTH OF TWO NATIONS

One of the world's worst curses is the influence of past centuries.

In India, the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have

survived to plague the twentieth. Religious passions, provincial

loyalties and princely states exercised the same debilitating,

divisive influence they had in Europe before the modern age of

industrialism and nationalism. India, with four hundred million

inhabitants, had only three million industrial workers. The

country lacked cohesion because nobody possessed enough unify¬

ing power or a sufficiently attractive unifying idea to overcome

the centrifugal trends of a backward land. Gandhi, the towering-

symbol of unifying nationalism, was himself a mingling of an

obsolete past, a struggling present and the unborn world of his

high ideals.

Jinnah’s strength was the threat of civil war. The riots were a

preview. The only hope of preserving the unity of India was to

pacify the people and thus prove Jinnah’s threat an empty one.

Gandhi approached this task without flinching and alone.

History was asking whether India was a nation.

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