# CHAPTER VI

TRAGIC VICTORY\*

I T was very hot in Bihar in April, and Gandhi could not stand

the strain of extensive travel among the villages. But he

would have to go if the Hindus did not repent and bring back

the Moslems who had fled in fear. He received a letter suggesting

that he should retire to the forest as Krishna had done; the country

had lost faith in non-violence, the correspondent stated, and the

Bhagavad Gita , moreover, did not teach non-violence. He reported

this to his prayer meeting in Patna.

He heard of renewed rioting in Noakhali.

Yet several developments encouraged him. At Gandhi’s

request General Shah Nawaz, a Moslem and hero of the Indian

National Army, had remained in Bihar. Shah Nawaz now said

that Moslems were returning to their villages and that Hindus

and Sikhs were helping them. A Sikh had been invited to a

mosque.

This information made Gandhi feel that c if the Hindus were

true Hindus and befriended the Moslems the present all-envelop¬

ing fire would be extinguished 5 . Bihar was a big province. Its

example would inspire others. Peace in Bihar would ‘dissolve 5

the trouble in Calcutta and elsewhere. His mother, ‘an illiterate

village woman 5 , Gandhi said, had taught him that the atom

reflected the universe; if he took care of his immediate surround¬

ings the universe would take care of itself.

Nehru telegraphed Gandhi to come back to Delhi. The Con¬

gress Working Committee was convening on May ist for a great

historic decision. Gandhi made the five-hundred-mile trip by

hot train.

Mountbatten had been extremely active, visiting provinces,

talking to leaders, steeping himself in the problem of India’s

future. As his thoughts crystallized he saw no escape from

Pakistan.

Mountbatten accordingly put the question to the Congress

party: Would they accept the partition of India? Nehru had

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already told a United Provinces Political Conference on April

21 st that ‘The Moslem League can have Pakistan if they wish to

have it, but on condition that they do not take away other parts

of India which do not wish to join Pakistan.’

Would the Working Committee take the same stand?

Gandhi was opposed to it. Patel wavered; he would have put

Jinnah’s threats to the test of force. He would have used the cen¬

tral government to suppress Moslem violence. But in the end he

too acquiesced. T agreed to partition as a last resort when we

reached a stage when we would have lost all,’ he revealed two

and a half years later. Rather than risk a civil war or the loss of

independence, Congress was reconciled to Pakistan.

Pakistan was the high price they paid for freedom.

Gandhi made no secret of his chagrin. ‘The Congress’, he told

his prayer meeting in the untouchables’ colony in Delhi on May

7th, ‘has accepted Pakistan and demanded the division of the

Punjab and Bengal. I am opposed to any division of India now

as I always have been. But what can I do? The only thing I can

do is to dissociate myself from such a scheme. Nobody can force

me to accept it except God.’

Gandhi went to see Mountbatten. His advice to the British

was to leave with their troops and ‘take the risk of leaving India

to chaos or anarchy’. If the British left India, Gandhi explained,

there might be chaos for a while; ‘We would still go through the

fire no doubt but that fire would purify us.’

Mountbatten’s mind was too precise and military to build the

future on a chance. Yet not only do most individuals do exactly

that; in a war, nations often gamble with their lives. Every battle

is a ‘calculated risk’ in which the calculation is quite theoretical.

To Gandhi, the division of India was an absolute evil, as evil as

Britain’s submission to Hitler would have been in 1940, and rather

than resign himself to it he would have accepted all the possible

material losses.

This, however, was only the abstract aspect of Gandhi’s

suggestion. In concrete form, its simplicity concealed its astute¬

ness. The British could not abandon India without a govern¬

ment. Gandhi’s advice to England to leave India to chaos meant

give India to Congress. If England refused, Gandhi wanted

Congress to leave the Government. The burden of maintaining

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peace in the country would then have rested solely on the British,

who sought no such responsibility.

The choice that Gandhi put to the British therefore was: Let

Congress rule India or rule it yourself in these troubled times.

Gandhi saw that no Pakistan was possible unless the British

created it, and the British would not create Pakistan until Congress

accepted it; they could not split India and antagonize the majority

in order to placate Jinnah and the minority. Therefore Congress

should not accept it.

Nobody listened to Gandhi. c Our leaders were tired and short¬

sighted,’ writes an intimate collaborator of Gandhi. The Congress

leaders were afraid to delay independence. Gandhi would have

delayed it in the hope of ultimately winning freedom for a united

country instead of independence for two hostile Indias.

In the summer of 1948, I asked Nehru, Patel and others in

India why Gandhi had not attempted to prevent Congress from

accepting Pakistan; if nothing less had availed he might have

coerced them by fasting.

It was not Gandhi’s way, their composite reply ran, to compel

agreement even on the most crucial issue. That is true, but the

complete answer goes deeper. Congress acquiesced in Pakistan

and stayed in the Government. The only alternative would have

been to reject Pakistan, leave the Government and stake every¬

thing on a restoration of the people’s sanity and peaceful inclina¬

tions. But Gandhi saw that the leaders had no faith in this

alternative. He might have induced them to vote for his view in

committee; he could not have infused them with faith in it except

by proving that Hindus and Moslems could live together amicably.

The burden of proof was on Gandhi. And time was running out

fast.

Gandhi hurried across the continent to Calcutta. To get Pakis¬

tan, Bengal would have to be partitioned between Pakistan and

Hindustan. If he could impress the Bengal Moslems with the

painful results of such vivisection and if he could check the rising

Hindu sentiment for the division of Bengal, he might prevent

Pakistan.

‘When everything goes wrong at the top,’ Gandhi asked in

Calcutta, ‘can the goodness of the people at the bottom assert

itself against the mischievous influence?’ This was his hope.

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Bengal has one culture, one language, he argued. Let it stay

united. They had reunited Bengal after Lord Curzon partitioned

it; could they not rebuff Jinnah before he partitioned it?

After six days in Calcutta, Gandhi went to Bihar. Despite the

torrid heat, he travelled to the villages. His refrain was the same:

‘If the Hindus showed the spirit of brotherliness, it would be good

for Bihar, for India and for the world.’

On May 25th, in response to a summons from Nehru, Gandhi

again returned to New Delhi. Mountbatten, his mind made up,

had flown to London. Rumour had it that India would be

partitioned, that the plan would be announced soon. But why,

Gandhi wondered. The Cabinet Mission had rejected partition

and Pakistan on May 16th, 1946. What had happened since

then to alter the situation? The riots? Were they yielding to

hooliganism? T must cling to the hope,’ Gandhi said, That

Britain will not depart a hair’s breadth from the spirit and letter

of the Cabinet Mission’s statement of May 16th of last year. . . .’

‘He is burning the candle at both ends,’ Dr. Sushila Nayyar

reported. He was still striving to reverse the tide towards partition.

If the effort killed him what did it matter? ‘In the India that is

shaping today there is no place for me,’ he said; his voice shook

with emotion. ‘I have given up the hope of living 125 years. I

may last a year or two. That is a different matter. But I have no

wish to live if India is to be submerged in a deluge of violence as

it is threatening to do.’

Yet he could not be a pessimist for long. Nehru brought Dr.

Lo Chia-luen, the Chinese Ambassador, to Gandhi’s untouchable

hut. ‘How do you think things will shape themselves?’ Dr. Lo

asked.

‘I am an irrepressible optimist,’ Gandhi said. ‘We have not

lived and toiled all these years that we should become barbarians

as we appear to be becoming, looking at all the senseless bloodshed

in Bengal, Bihar and the Punjab. But I feel that it is just an indica¬

tion that, as we are throwing off the foreign yoke, all the dirt and

froth is coming to the surface. When the Ganges is in flood, the

water is turbid; the dirt comes to the surface. When the flood

subsides, you see the clear, blue water which soothes the eye.

That is what I hope for and live for. I do not wish to see Indian

humanity becoming barbarian.’

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Mountbatten, meantime, had been working in London on a

plan to divide India.

The Mountbatten plan provided for the division not only of

India but of Bengal, the Punjab and Assam if their people wished.

In the case of Bengal and the Punjab, the recently elected pro¬

vincial legislatures would decide. If Bengal voted to partition

itself, then the Moslem-majority district of Sylhet in Assam would

determine by popular referendum whether to join the Moslem

part of Bengal.

‘Nor is there anything in this plan’, the text read, ‘to preclude

negotiations between communities for a united India. 5

The scheme was thus permissive and involved no legal com¬

pulsion by Britain. Bengal and the Punjab might vote to remain

united, in which case there would be no partition and no Pakistan.

But even if Pakistan came into being, it and the other India

could subsequently unite.

Before leaving England, Mountbatten saw Churchill who

promised to support the plan in the House of Commons. •

On June 2nd, 1947, Herbert L. Matthews, telegraphing to the

New fork Times on the eve of the announcement of the plan, said,

‘Mr. Gandhi is a very real worry, since if he decides to go on a

“fast unto death 55 it would well wreck the whole plan. 5

The next day, Prime Minister Attlee announced the plan in the

House of Commons and Mountbatten revealed it on the New

Delhi radio. In his broadcast, the last Viceroy said frankly, ‘I am,

of course, just as much opposed to the partition of provinces as I

am to the partition of India herself. 5 The plan, he knew, was

imperfect, especially because of its effect on the five million

fighting Sikhs of the Punjab. Any conceivable line through that

province would leave some Sikhs in Pakistan against their

wishes.

Nehru, Patel and the Working Committee had approved the

plan; their approval became official when the All-India Congress

Committee, sitting in New Delhi, on June 15th voted 153 for the

plan, 29 against, with some abstentions.

After the resolution had been adopted, Professor J. B. Kripalani,

the president of Congress, delivered a brief speech which explained

why Congress had abandoned Gandhi.

The Hindu and Moslem ‘communities’, Kripalani said, ‘have

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vied with each other in the worst orgies of violence ... I have

seen a well where women with their children, 107 in all, threw

themselves to save their honour. In another place, a place of

worship, fifty young women were killed by their menfolk for the

same reason . . . These ghastly experiences have no doubt affected

my approach to the question. Some members have accused us

that we have taken this decision out of fear. I must admit the

truth of this charge, but not in the sense in which it is made. The

fear is not for the lives lost or of the widows’ wail or the orphans’

cry or of the many houses burned. The fear is that if we go on like

this, retaliating and heaping indignities on each other, we shall

progressively reduce ourselves to a state of cannibalism and worse.

In every fresh communal fight the most brutal and degraded acts

of the previous fight become the norm.’ This is the cruel truth of

all violence.

T have been with Gandhiji for the last thirty years,’ Kripalani

continued. T joined him in Champaran. I have never swayed

in my loyalty to him. It is not a personal but a political loyalty.

Even when I have differed with him I have considered his political

instinct to be more correct than my elaborately reasoned attitudes.

Today also I feel that he with his supreme fearlessness is correct

and my stand defective.

‘Why then am I not with him? It is because I feel that he has as

yet found no way of tackling the problem on a mass basis.’ The

nation was not responding to Gandhi’s plea for peace and

brotherhood.

Gandhi knew this. ‘If only non-Moslem India were with me,’

he declared, ‘I could show the way to undo the proposed partition

. . . Many have invited me to head the opposition. But there is

nothing in common between them and me except the opposition

. . . Can love and hate combine?’

Ninety-five per cent of Gandhi’s mail was abusive and hateful.

The Hindu letters asked why he was partial to Moslems and the

Moslem letters demanded that he stop obstructing the creation of

Pakistan.

A Marathi couple from the Tilak country came up to Delhi,

camped near the untouchables’ quarter and announced to Gandhi

that they had begun a fast which would last until Pakistan was

abandoned. He addressed them at two successive prayer meetings.

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Are you fasting against Pakistan, he asked, because you hate

Moslems or love Moslems? If you hate Moslems you may not

fast. If you love Moslems, you should go and teach other Hindus

to love them. The young couple abandoned the fast.

The Hindus did not love Moslems enough and the Moslems did

not love Hindus enough. India would therefore be divided

between them.

Gandhi considered partition ‘a spiritual tragedy’. He noted

preparations for bloody strife. He saw the possibility of a ‘military

dictatorship’ and then ‘goodbye to freedom’. ‘I do not agree with

what my closest friends have done or are doing,’ he said.

Thirty-two years of work, Gandhi stated, have come to ‘an

inglorious end’. On August 15th, 1947, India would become

independent. But the victory was a cold, political arrangement:

Indians would sit where Englishmen had sat; a tricolour would

wave in place of the Union Jack. That was the hollow husk of

freedom. It was victory with tragedy, victory that found the

army defeating its own general.

‘I cannot participate in the celebrations of August 15th,’

Gandhi announced.

Independence brought sadness to the architect of independence.

The Father of his Country was disappointed with his country. ‘I

deceived myself into the belief that people were wedded to non¬

violence . . .’ he said. Indians had betrayed non-violence which

was more important to him than Indian independence.

Mountbatten told the Royal Empire Society on October 6th,

1948, that in India Gandhi ‘was not compared with some great

statesman like Roosevelt or Churchill. They classified him simply

in their minds with Mohammed and with Christ’. Millions adored

the Mahatma, multitudes tried to kiss his feet or the dust of his

footsteps. They paid him homage and rejected his teachings.

They held his person holy and desecrated his personality. They

glorified the shell and trampled the essence. They believed in

him but not in his principles.

Independence Day, August 15th, found Gandhi in Calcutta

fighting riots. He fasted all day and prayed. He issued no

message to the nation. Invited to the capital to participate in the

formal inauguration of the nation’s life, he refused to attend.

‘There is disturbance within,’ he wrote to Rajkumari Amrit Kaur

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the next day. In the midst of festivities, he was sad. ‘Is there

something wrong with me, 5 he asked, ‘or are tilings really going

wrong? 5

Freedom had come to India and Gandhi was perplexed and

perturbed; his Gita detachment was impaired. T am far away

from the condition of equipoise, 5 he declared.

But faith never left him, nor did he contemplate retiring to a

cave or a wood. ‘No cause that is intrinsically just can ever be

described as forlorn, 5 he asserted.

‘You must not lose faith in humanity, 5 he wrote Amrit Kaur on

August 29th. ‘Humanity is an ocean. If a few drops of the ocean

are dirty, the ocean does not become dirty. 5

He had kept his faith in man. He had kept his faith in God.

He had kept therefore his faith in himself. ‘I am a born fighter

who does not know failure, 5 he assured a prayer-meeting audience.

Partition was a fact, but ‘it is always possible by correct conduct

to lessen an evil and eventually even to bring good out of evil 5 ,

Gandhi said.

He still hoped his faith would move people, but how? ‘I am

groping today, 5 he declared. He was full of ‘searching questions 5

about himself. ‘Have I led the country astray? 5

A lesser man might have sulked or grown bitter or plotted the

discomfiture of those who thwarted him. Gandhi turned the

searchlight inward; perhaps it was his fault.

‘I can echo your prayer that I may realize peace and find my¬

self, 5 he wrote in a letter to Kurshed Naoroji. ‘It is a difficult task

but I am after it. 5

‘O Lord, 5 he exclaimed, ‘Lead us from darkness into light. 5

He was approaching his seventy-eighth birthday. The world he

had built lay partly in ruins all around him. He must begin

building anew. Congress was too much a political party; it must

become an instrument for the constructive uplift of the people.

He wrote two articles in Harijan on the virtues of non-violent, non¬

revolutionary, God-loving, equalitarian Socialism. He was seek¬

ing new directions. He was old in body and young in spirit, old

in experience and young in faith. Future plans lifted past troubles

from his back.

He had gone to Calcutta and been taken into a Moslem house

in an area where the stones were slippery with fresh blood and the

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air acrid with the smoke of burning homes. The Moslem family

to whom the house belonged were friendly to him. Tor the

moment I am no enemy,’ he wrote Amrit Kaur. He rejoiced

more in the smallest triumph of brotherhood than in the political

independence of a country.

The bereaved came to him in the lowly house and he wiped

their tears. He found solace in the balm he gave others. He had

discovered his new task. It was his old task: to assuage pain, to

spread love, to make all men brothers.

St. Francis of Assisi, hoeing his garden, was asked what he

would do if he were suddenly to learn that he was to die at sunset

that day.

He said: T would finish hoeing my garden.’

Gandhi continued to hoe the garden in which he had worked

all his days. Sinners had thrown stones and filth into the garden.

He continued to hoe.

Pertinacity was Gandhi’s antidote to frustration and tragedy.

Action gave him inner peace.

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