# CHAPTER X

THE LAST ACT

T h e first day after the fast Gandhi was carried to prayers in

a chair. In his speech, which was only faintly audible, he

reported that an official of the Hindu Mahasabha; which

believed in Hindu supremacy and was the parent of the militant

anti-Moslem R.S.S., had repudiated the Delhi peace pledge.

Gandhi said he was sorry.

The second day he again had to be carried to prayers. In the

course of his usual remarks, he declared he hoped to recuperate

rapidly and then go to Pakistan to pursue the mission of peace.

At question time, a man urged Gandhi to proclaim himself a

reincarnation of God. ‘Sit down and be quiet/ Gandhi replied

with a tired smile.

While Gandhi was speaking, the noise of an explosion was heard.

‘What is it?’ he asked. ‘I don’t know.’ The audience was agitated.

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‘Don’t worry about it/ he said. ‘Listen to me.’

A hand-made bomb had been thrown at the Mahatma from the

nearby garden wall.

The next day Gandhi, having walked to the prayer meeting,

told the worshippers that congratulations had poured in on him

for remaining unruffled during the incident. He said he deserved

no praise; he had thought it was military practice. ‘I would

deserve praise,’ he asserted, ‘only if I fell as a result of such an

explosion and yet retained a smile on my face and no malice

against the doer. No one should look down on the misguided

youth who had thrown the bomb. He probably looks upon me

as an enemy of Hinduism.’

The young man, Gandhi continued, should realize that ‘those

who differ with him are not necessarily evil’. He urged the

supporters of such young people to desist from their activity.

‘This is not the way to save Hinduism. Hinduism can only be

saved by my method.’

Sikhs visited Gandhi and assured him that the would-be assail¬

ant was not a Sikh. ‘What does it matter/ Gandhi asked, ‘whether

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he was a Sikh or a Hindu or a Moslem? I wish all perpetrators

well, 5

An illiterate old woman had grappled with the grenade-

thrower and held him till the police came. Gandhi commended

The unlettered sister on her simple bravery 5 . He told the Inspector

General of Police not to molest the young man. Instead, they

should try to convert him to right thinking and right doing. Nor

should the worshippers be angry with the ‘miscreant 5 . ‘You should

pity him, 5 Gandhi said.

The young man’s name was Madan Lai. He was a refugee

from the Punjab, had found shelter in a mosque in Delhi and been

evicted when the police, under pressure of Gandhi’s wishes,

commenced clearing Moslem places of worship.

‘I had seen with my own eyes horrible things in Pakistan, 5

Madan Lai testified at his trial. ‘I had also been an eye-witness

to the shooting down of Hindus in Punjab towns and in Delhi by

troops from the south. 5

Aroused, Madan Lai had joined a group of men who were

plotting to kill Gandhi. When the grenade failed to reach its

target and Madan Lai was arrested, his fellow conspirator,

Nathuram Vinayak Godse, came to Delhi. Godse, age thirty-five,

was the editor and publisher of a Hindu Mahasabha weekly in

Poona, in Tilak’s Maratha country, and he was a high-degree,

Ghitpawan Brahman.

Subsequently, Godse, Madan Lai and seven others were tried

together. The trial lasted more than six months. Among other

things, Madan Lai said he was angered by the Indian Union’s

payment of 550,000,000 rupees to Pakistan. This exasperated

Godse.

‘I sat brooding intensely on the atrocities perpetrated on

Hinduism and its dark and deadly future if left to face Islam out¬

side and Gandhi inside, 5 Godse testified, ‘and ... I decided all of

a sudden to take the extreme step against Gandhi. 5

The success of Gandhi’s last fast especially infuriated Godse. He

resented the Mahatma’s insistence that refugees be evacuated

from the mosques. He was bitter because no demands were made

on the Moslems.

Godse began hovering around Birla House. He wore a khaki

jacket. In a pocket of the jacket he kept a small pistol.

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Gandhi’s prayer meeting on Sunday, January 25th, 1948, had

an unusually heavy attendance. Gandhi was pleased. He told the

people that they should bring straw mats or thick khadi to sit on

because the ground in winter was cold and damp. It gladdened

his heart, he continued, to be told by Hindu and Moslem friends

that Delhi had experienced £ a reuniofl of hearts’. In view of this

improvement, could not every Hindu and Sikh who came to

prayers bring along ‘at least one Moslem’? To Gandhi this would

be concrete evidence of brotherhood.

But Hindus like Madan Lai and Godse and their ideological

sponsors were incensed by the presence of Moslems at Hindu

services and the reading of selections from the Koran. Moreover,

they seemed to hope that the death of Gandhi might be the first

step towards the violent reunification of India. They wished, by

removing him, to make the Moslems defenceless, little realizing

that his assassination would have the opposite effect by showing

the country how dangerous and undisciplined extreme anti-

Moslems could be.

Despite the relaxation that followed his fast, Gandhi knew the

great difficulties facing the new, inexperienced Government. He

had lost confidence in the ability of Congress. Much, very much,

now depended on the two top government leaders: Prime Minister

Nehru and Deputy Prime Minister Patel. They did not always

see eye to eye. They were temperamental opposites. There had

been friction between them. It worried Gandhi. Indeed, things

had come to such a pass that Gandhi wondered whether Nehru

and Patel could work together in the Government. Forced to

make a choice, the Mahatma might have preferred Nehru. He

appreciated Patel as an old friend and skilled administrator, but

loved Nehru and was sure of his equal friendship for Hindus and

Moslems. Patel had been suspected of political pro-Hinduism.

In the end, Gandhi decided that Nehru and Patel were indis¬

pensable to one another. The Government would be seriously

weakened if it lost either. Gandhi accordingly wrote Nehru a

note in English saying he and Patel ‘must hold together’ for the

good of the country. At 4 p.m. on January 30th, Patel came to

see Gandhi in Birla House to hear the same message.

At 5.05, Gandhi, troubled because he was late, left Patel and,

leaning his arms on Abha and Manu, hurried to the prayer

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ground. Nathuram Godse was in the front row of the congrega¬

tion, his hand in his pocket gripping the small pistol. He had no

personal hatred of Gandhi, Godse said at his trial, at which he was

sentenced to be hanged: ‘Before I fired the shots I actually wished

him well and bowed to him in reverence.’

In response to Godse’s obeisance and the reverential bows of

other members of the congregation, Gandhi touched his palms

together, smiled and blessed them. At that moment, Godse pulled

the trigger. Gandhi fell, and died murmuring, ‘Oh, God.’

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A NOTE TO THE READER

The pages that follow contain notes and comments

on sources. They indicate how this book was written.

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