

**COMMUNAL POLITICS AND  
CRIME IN CALCUTTA  
1946-1947**

*Dissertation Submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirement for  
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**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

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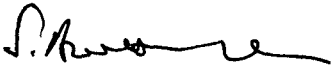
## CERTIFICATE

Certified that the dissertation titled, **COMMUNAL POLITICS AND CRIME IN CALCUTTA 1946-1947**: which is being submitted by **SUGATA NANDI** in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the award of the degree of **MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**. This is his original work and may be placed before the examiners for evaluation. This dissertation has not been submitted for the award of any other degree of this University or any other University.

  
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## INTRODUCTION

The partition of Bengal in 1947 has been the most poignant moment in history of the province in the twentieth century. The two years before partition, 1946 and 1947 witnessed bloodshed and loss of life and property on an unprecedented scale. The communal riots which accompanied the process of partition have been the goriest the subcontinent had witnessed. These riots while raising the darkest passions among the people had revealed the darkest side of politics of the day. The riots showed that politics had forged close links with the underworld. The present study will seek to examine these links by focusing on a brief period of Calcutta's history 1946-47. During these two years city politics was inextricably linked to the Hindu and Muslim communalists'. The reign of terror unleashed by the communal riots necessitated deployment of the 'goondas' or hooligans or criminals by the politicians who engineered these riots.

The activities of the goondas during communal riots were not anything new to the political life of Calcutta. As early as in 1926 it was an accepted fact that "...the goonda is the fuel of these disturbances, his is the hand that commits the worst excesses."<sup>1</sup> In fact the goonda had become a part of life in Calcutta with the growth of industries in and around Calcutta. Drug trafficking, illegal intoxicants peddling, immoral trafficking in women, burglaries and kidnapping

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<sup>1</sup> Bengal Legislative Council Proceedings, Vol. 21, p. 39. Cited in Das, Suranjan - *Communal Riots in Bengal*, p. 243.

were part of the social life of the city. However it was only in the 1940's that goondas became extremely useful elements to the politicians, with the onset of the phase of extreme communalism. The present research seeks to throw light on the role of the goonda elements in communal politics of the city during 1946-1947.

This thesis is divided into three chapters followed by a conclusion.

The first chapter will be on the socio-economic conditions of Calcutta on the eve of August 1946. In that chapter we will try to construct a macropicture which will take into account the socio-economic conditions of the lives of the labouring poor in Calcutta. In the words of eminent Bengali historian, "The history of Calcutta during the years of the Second World War and the troubled times that followed the conclusion after war, was a prolonged nightmare. Blow fell upon blow like continuous rains of the miserable rainy season of the city."<sup>2</sup> The multiple tragedies of stagnating industrial life of the miserable living conditions of the industrial labour force, the effects of the second world war, the starvation deaths during the Bengal Famine of 1944, the ruthless suppression of the uprisings of the Rashid Ali Day, the poverty, the unemployment and the proliferating slum life and the consequent dehumanization will form the subject of the chapter.

The foundation and flourishing growth of industries, and specially the jute industry in the present context, witnesses the

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<sup>2</sup> Ray Rajat K. "*The Urban Roots of Indian Nationalism*" pp.225-226.

formation of a class of wage-earning migrant labourers in the Calcutta industrial area on a minor scale.<sup>3</sup> From 1895 onwards the composition of this labour force allured as the most down-trodden and impoverished mainly from the countryside of Orissa, Bihar and U.P. flocked Calcutta industrial area. By 1921, the migrant formed 7/10<sup>th</sup> of the population of the city. In the city, the migrant workers were squeezed into unhealthy slums and they led a tragic life plagued by poverty, indebtedness, malnutrition, insanitation, ill-health and periodic unemployment. Moreover, the highly competitive job market gave rise to a system of jobbery which in turn reinforced the primordial ties of language, religion and kinship among the workers in an alien atmosphere. This development endowed the migrant workers with a strong sense of communal identity along with a sense of long-standing opposition to other community. Such a communal identity made the migrant workers into volatile class which could be easily goaded to violence during riots.

The Second World War and the stationing of a quarter of the American Army in Calcutta affected Calcutta's citizens. The system of rationing and control of essential commodities during the war years (1942-45) gave rise to a black market in Calcutta. A consequence of the stationing of the army was the increase in prostitution and the growth of a class of pimps. The end of the war witnessed demobilization on a large scale. The demobilized soldiers often finding

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<sup>3</sup> Dasgupta, Ranajit - *'Factory Labour in Eastern India 1855-1946'* IESHR, Vol. XIII, No. 3, 1976.

no avenues of employment and endowed with some mechanical skill in weapon-weilding fell back on crime in search of a livelihood.

The Bengal Famine of 1944 left thousands dying in the streets of Calcutta. The famine left more than 2 million people dead. Thousands died in Calcutta. Those who did not die of hunger died of epidemics which followed close on the heels of the famine. The famine was precipitated by the faulty policies of the government and it left Calcutta dehumanized.

As if these tragedies were not enough for the city, Calcutta witnesses a brutal suppression of the workers' – students' movement in February 1946 during the Rashid Ali Day. The movement set up a glorious example communal harmony among the masses during the heyday of extreme communalism. The repression unleashed by the British police left Calcutta demoralized and as the movement petered out the vacuum left by progressive working class politics was filled by regressive communalist propaganda and criminality.

The above developments are to be seen in the context of the economic decline of 'the second city of the empire' and the consequent social degeneration. It will focus on the increase in the cost of living, overcrowding, unemployment and epidemics in the city. The distress of the citizens due to the lack of the basic amenities of civil life will be the subject of study. It was this morass of poverty that provided the breeding ground of the criminal.

The primary sources for this chapter are the Census volumes for the city of Calcutta for the years 1921, 1931, 1951. These furnish the



necessary data about the growth of the migrants. These census volumes also provide the data about the origins of these migrants in territory, language, religion, caste and occupation. The Census volumes give us sufficient information about the occupation these migrants took up in the city. The *Report of the Royal Commission on Labour* in India of 1929, S.R. Deshpande's *Indian Labour Year Book* of 1946 and D.R. Gadgil's study on labour problems and wages (1940) provide information about the conditions of work and lives of the workers in question. Few at the West Bengal State Archives provide valuable information on problems of labour. Apart from these official sources newspaper reports from the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* add to the information about conditions of living of the labouring populace in 1946. On the war years, several files of the Home Department, Political (internal) section pertaining to the cases of criminal acts committed by American soldiers helps to reconstruct a vivid picture of the sufferings of the citizens. These files are there both in the National Archives in New Delhi and West Bengal State Archives in Calcutta. The interviews with Gopal C. Mukherjee and Gautam Chattopadhyay also proved helpful as personal memories of eye witnessed substantiated the information provided by official documents. On famine of 1944 in Bengal, published sources like the Report of the Famine Enquiry Commission, and books by Bhowani Sen and Freda Bedi have been useful, as well as the Report of the Survey done by Tarak Chandra Das. Some documents in the *Transfer of Power* volumes have also been useful in giving the official point of view. Tarashankar

Bandopadhyay's novel *Jhar O Jharapata* has provided the picturesque detail of the brutal suppression of the uprising.

The second chapter of the thesis has been on the Riot of 1946. This chapter aims to demonstrate that the Riot was not a product of spontaneous reaction of the citizens; it was initially a creation of the politicians with the help of goondas. The chapter enters into a discussion of how the two communities i.e. the Hindus and Muslims prepared for the Direct Action Day. The League leaders and the press retailed hatred against the Hindus among the Muslims through speeches in meetings and pamphlets and newspaper reports. Suhrawardy, the man who captained League in the Riot, inducted hundreds of Muslim goondas in the city for the purpose. He bungled with the police, put thanas under Muslim officers who served as his stooges. He arranged for steady availability of vehicles, fuel and food for his goonda force before the Riot started. The Hindus were not to be caught unaware in the riot. They also made preparations for the day. Resistance groups were formed by local Hindu youths and goondas who amassed a large number of weapons, some manufactured at home, others purchased from American soldiers, for the coming combat. Local clubs and gymnasiums became the focal points of organization and preparation for the Direct Action Day. The study on the preparations for the Riot is of utmost importance as it reveals the nexus between crime and politics.

The study of the preparations is followed by the study of the Riot itself and its tragic consequences followed by a section on how the

Bengal government allowed the riot to happen even when it could have been prevented by timely police and military action. The late deployment of the military and the inaction of the police, masterminded as it was by Suhrawardy, who remained in the control room at the police headquarters of Calcutta allowed the situation to deteriorate and the bloodshed to continue.

Finally this chapter will look at certain criminals and their activities during the Riot. Some of these rioters already belonged to the underworld the others like Gopal Mukherjee were introduced to the underworld during the fateful days of the Riot, later he became a dreaded goonda of the city. His transformation from a law-abiding citizen into a goonda was helped all the way by city politics. People like him were left with no other option but to take crime as a means of livelihood once the riot become the unquestioned kings of the underworld in the post-riot phase.

Among the sources for this chapter, to begin with, are the Evidence Volumes of the Calcutta Disturbances Enquiry Commission. This Commission was headed by Chief Justice Sir Patrick Spens and hence has been referred to by the name of the *Report of the Spens Commission (henceforth R.S.C)* in the thesis. However, it must be remembered that this Enquiry Commission could not come up with a final report as the Commission itself was dissolved on July 20, 1947, as the proceedings were adjourned sine die.<sup>4</sup> The *R.S.C* runs into eleven

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<sup>4</sup> Time Intelligence Report, Cuttings from the Times, Vol. 4, July 18, 1947.

volumes. It has not been opened to researchers in any archive. Fortunately, the copies of it have survived in the library of the History Department of the Calcutta University. The *R.S.C* is compiled in the nature of statements of military commanders and police officers and their re-examination through interrogations by representatives of different political parties in the Commission. The statements of the officials in the *R.S.C* are, quite obviously, definitely non-partisan but on a close scrutiny these statements and the question answers reveal the shocking realities of the riot.

Besides the *R.S.C.*, the Fortnightly Reports for Bengal; during the time of the Riot, a few documents from the Transfer of Power volumes few entries in Wavell: The Viceroy's Journal and Francis Tuke's *'While memory Serves'* completes the list of official sources for the Riot, the *Proceedings of the Bengal Legislative Assembly* in September 1946 also yields valuable information about the Riot. The allegations and counter-allegation during the debates in the Assembly gives information about the villainous acts of the political leaders during the Riot.

Published sources like G.D.Khoslas 'Stern Reckoning', memories of Abdul Haslim, Abdul Mansur Ahmed, Manikuntala Sen provides unofficial commentaries covering several areas of the subject like preparations for the onslaught, the tragedy itself and the consequences of it. Khosla particularly yields several pamphlets released before the Riot by the League, which has been very useful to the thesis.

Newspaper reports from 'The Statesman', 'The Morning News',

'The *Amit Bazar Patrika* and *the Basumati*' has been picked up from the Legislative Assembly Proceedings or from the Bengali monograph, '*Itihasher Dike Phire: Kolkata Danga*' by Sandip Bandopadhyay.

The criminal biographies, used here has been seen at the Crime Records Section, Detective Department, at Police Headquarters in Calcutta. Some has been borrowed from Suranjan Das's monograph named 'The Goondas'.

Oral sources used here are two interviews, one with Gopal Mukherjee at his residence in Calcutta the other with Gautam Chattopadhyay, in his residence in Calcutta. Gopal, who the leader of a Resistance Group during the Riot has provided a lot of information about the Riot and he city politics of the time.

The third chapter of the thesis focuses on the tragic development of Calcutta into a metropolis ruled by the underworld. The evil forces unleashed by the Riot of August 1946 soon came to dominate life in the city. Communalism over shadowed every other issue. Communal clashes and goondasim became the rule of the day. The explosive form of the rioting revealed in August 1946 gave way to minor clashes executed with the coldness of an undertaker by professional criminals. The period beginning with September 1946 and closing with September 1947 is dotted with a series of minor riots. However, communal tension increased in Calcutta during the months of March and April. It subsided somewhat in May, June and registered a fresh start from July. Violence continued till the 14<sup>th</sup> of August and then suddenly there was a respite for the next two weeks. However, riots broke out again in the

end of August and in the beginning of September. Mahatma Gandhi's efforts had helped to quell the disturbances in early August, Calcutta had miraculously returned to peaceful life on the 14<sup>th</sup> of August. But during September goondasim had become brazen enough to thwart Gandhian initiatives. Goondasim in Calcutta had undergone a transformation. Goondas in 1947 started to use sophisticated weaponry like firearms including pistols and Sten guns, crude bombs as well as hand grenades, acid throwing was common, and so was knifings. Huge mobs were replaced by small groups of gangsters who used quicker means of transport like motor cars to disappear from the scene of crime as soon they sprayed bullets into the bodies of their victims. The other unique feature during the dark days of 1947 was the partisan nature of the police forces. Suhrawardy inducted Muslim Punjabi policemen who terrorized the Hindus in Calcutta. Very soon this devilish move of Suhrawardy evoked a reaction from the Hindus who began targeting Muslim policemen as well as innocent, poor Muslim residents in the city as they came to know that a Congress government was being established in Calcutta. The retaliatory mood of the Hindus was so belligerent that even the peace mission of Gandhi could hardly offer the Muslims security of life and property. It was during this time that goondas were began to be deployed by the richer sections of the Hindus of Calcutta to fulfill their aims of profit making.

This chapter has been dependent on the memories of Francis Toker, to the extent that his 'while Memory serves' offers a description

of the violence in the city during 1947. Tucker provides valuable information. His memories are full of details of the violence that occurred during the last days of the Raj. Tucker being the C-in-C of Eastern command of the British Army provides the picture of the tense urban life which depended on the army for security as the police force, being a corrupt and partisan one was unable to cope with the situation.

In addition to '*While Memory Serves*' select official documents found in Volume X and XII of the '*Transfer of Power*' throws light on the tragic developments of 1947. Newspaper reports from *the Times* and *the Hindusthan Standard* offers the day to day details of the gruesome killings and inhuman sufferings. N.K.Bose's '*My Days with Gandhi*' and Manubehn Gandhi's '*The Miracle of Calcutta*' are storehouses of information on the Gandhian peace- initiative and the unrelenting goondaism in Calcutta during August and September 1947.

## CHAPTER I

### SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITION OF CALCUTTA ON THE EVE OF AUGUST 1946

#### SECTION I

“From the time of the Second World War, the value of human life in Bengal, especially in Calcutta, has undergone an abysmal reduction. During the famine of fifty the question of life and death became a child's play for us.<sup>1</sup> Thereafter, when Jinnah sahib's Direct Action started, then we fell in love with death completely. The fact that we people are still alive is simply because we are so at home with death. We have been living along side tigers and snakes from time immemorial, who will dare to put us to death?”

Saradindu <sup>Bandopadhyay</sup> in “Adim Ripu”

The above quote aptly sums up the realities of life in Calcutta during 1946-47. It was during this time that the city witnessed one tragedy after another.

In this chapter, we seek to study the socio-economic conditions which led to the rise of the goonda or the lumpen – subproletariat in Calcutta. The phenomenal poverty of the city was indeed the morass from which the goonda elements rose. But as one intends to study the crime in the context of the developments that took place in Calcutta from 1942 to 1947, it would rather be useful to study certain other

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<sup>1</sup> ‘The famine of fifty’ means the Bengal Famine of 1943.



developments in Calcutta along with general situation of the proletariat. These specific developments include the beginning of the Second World War and the effects of stationing of a quarter of American troops in Calcutta. The Bengal famine of 1944 and its consequent rise in mortality also demands equal attention. Along with the famine what cannot be left out is the rampant corruption in the control or public distribution system of the essential commodities in Calcutta. The last important development in the city in the context of the present chapter was the brutal repression perpetrated by the British on the masses during the Rashid Ali Day. During that time the rowdy elements of the city played an important part along with the general population in their opposition to the British.

The development of large conurbations in modern times never seemed to have been able to escape the development of the urban underworld. This is common to Europe, America and their colonies in Asia and Africa. The growth of the London and Paris underworld has been documented in several historical works. Calcutta being the second city of the British Empire imbibed several characteristics of the first city, London.<sup>2</sup> In the Victorian city London the rise of crime was associated with 'pauperism, filth, overcrowding and slums.'<sup>3</sup> Calcutta which was brought under the Queen in 1858 was the primate city of the

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<sup>2</sup> Das, Suranjan- The Goondas, p.6.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.5.

eastern region of colonial India.<sup>4</sup> Like any other primate city Calcutta was a product of colonialism and served as the headquarter of raw or finished merchandise that brought from the interior areas of the country. Agencies were set up for this purpose in Calcutta and the city served as a trade-mart. From the middle of the nineteenth century, the colonial city also served as the central pool of industrial capital.<sup>5</sup>

Calcutta, the quintessential port city attained the status of the second city of the British Colonial Empire as it was the 'most important of the triad of port cities which were developed as economic and administrative control centres for the vast hinterlands, by the British'.<sup>6</sup>

As the city acted as the central pool of industrial capital it became the receptacle of vast quantity of manpower and the city became the 'flustered host' of an increasing immigrant population. By the beginning of the 20 century 35% of the residents of Calcutta were immigrants.<sup>7</sup> By this time the physical form of Calcutta started bearing the effects of being a colonial industrial town. In 1912 when the Calcutta Improvement Trust was set up under E.P. Richards, it was discovered that the city had become an urban sprawl of 'the squalor, and the grandeur which were interlaced rather than concentrically

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<sup>4</sup> Gupta, Narayani – *Calcutta: Form and Function (1690-1990)* in Grewal, J.S. (ed.) – *Calcutta: Foundation and Development of A Colonial Metropolis* (Shimla, 1991) p.45.

<sup>5</sup> Palit, C.- *Calcutta. The Primate City: A Study in Urbanization* in Sen, S.P. and Ray N.R., (ed.) – *Modern Bengal – A Socio-Economic Survey* (Calcutta, 1973), p.1-2.

<sup>6</sup> Gupta, Samita – *Theory and Practive of Town Planning in Calcutta 1817 to 1912: An Appraisal* Indian Economic and Social History Review, Vol. 30, No. 1, (1993), p.29.

<sup>7</sup> Gupta, Narayani – *Calcutta: Form and Function (1690-1990)*, p.46.

shaded off.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Calcutta had become the 'bastard child of London and Manchester!'<sup>9</sup>

Calcutta acquired two distinct sectors. At the central part of the city where the managing agencies and residential quarters of the Europeans were situated surrounding it, in all the four directions grew the traditional urban sector inhabited only by Indians.<sup>10</sup> In the 'black town' or the traditional urban sector settled the dense population who earned their living by menial labour. As the millionaires did nothing to provide housing to the labourers left the civic infrastructure bereft of any improvement, the workers inhabited the slums that sprouted in the city as against the mansions of the well-to-do Indians and Europeans.<sup>11</sup> The growth of slums or 'bustees' rendered the urban environment chaotic. Richards of the Improvement Trust was at pains to discover that at the Western side of the Circular Road in Calcutta there were as many as twenty two slums covering an area of 2200 acres, some of these slums covered an area of 270 acres alone.<sup>12</sup> These slums sprouted on the swampy soil were a cluster of hutments on muddy ground, these were always overcrowded with open ditches choked with refuse and polluted wells and tanks.<sup>13</sup> It was from these areas of Calcutta that goondas arose.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Nirad C. Chaudhuri, as quoted by Gupta, Narayani - *Calcutta: Form and Function* (1690-1990), p.46.

<sup>10</sup> Gupta, Samita - *Theory and Practice of Town Planning*, p.29.

<sup>11</sup> Gupta, Narayani - *Calcutta: Form and Function*, p.47.

<sup>12</sup> Gupta, Samita - *Theory and Practice of Town Planning*, p.33

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.37.

The 'goonda' of Calcutta was the hooligan and damaged character of the less reputed quarters of the city, who earned his living by committing crimes like burglary, dacoity and who could be hired for inflicting injuries on others.<sup>14</sup>

The menace of goondaism had assumed such fearsome proportions that a goonda Act had to be passed by the Bengal Government in 1926 to help the police to round up these people who posed a threat to the existing socio-political order.<sup>15</sup> Through the Goonda Act they sought to peripheralize these social outcasts whose mere presence spelled danger for the ordinary peace-loving citizens.<sup>16</sup>

Paris also had a similar experience. Louis Chevalier talks about the 'imprint of crime upon the whole urban landscape.'<sup>17</sup> In his words, 'No part of contemporary Paris was unshadowed by crime. At the old gates at the outer boulevards the barriers, where until the railroads were built, highwaymen carried the traditions of the Ancient Regime, as the lower classes drank and danced nearby, forgathered in the shadows with criminals of new type spawned by the recent outward sprawl of the city. And in the central quarters themselves, where the capital's complex and disordered growth had engendered a tangle of lanes, passageways, courts and blind alleys had ranged ~~by~~ by mansion and the slum, areas of light and shade in a landscape.... had

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<sup>14</sup> Edwardes, S.M - *Crime in India* (London, 1924), p.33, 50 and 51.

<sup>15</sup> Das, Suranjan - *The Goondas*, (Calcutta, 1996), p.3.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3 and 5.

<sup>17</sup> Chevalier, Louis - *Labouring Classes and Dangerous Classes*, p.2.

almost everywhere left nooks and corners ideally suited to robbery with violence by day and night – and, indeed in some places day hardly differed from night.”<sup>18</sup>

In India the rise of the urban criminals like the goondas has been seen from the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the effect of the hasty process of modernization which took place as a part of the colonial transformation of the country. The change from an agricultural communal system to a modern urban was upsetting and was accompanied by stress and strains. Several members of the countryside migrated to the urban industrial centres in their futile search for employment where hardpressed by hunger they took to crime as a means of livelihood.<sup>19</sup>

In the cities, slumlife, the lack of recreation facilities and extreme fatigue led to heavy drinking, undesirable forms of amusements, gambling and visits to obscene theatres and brothels.<sup>20</sup> The extreme preponderance of migrant lone male workers due to lack of proper housing in such cities, and in this case Calcutta which till 1950's was the most male city in the world with 515 women to every 1000 men, caused an unprecedented rise in prostitution and a profitable trade of immoral trafficking in women.<sup>21</sup> Very soon cocaine and charas smugglers along with pickpockets, cheats and other petty thieves

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<sup>18</sup> Chevalier, Louis – *Labouring Classes and Dangerous Classes*, p.2.

<sup>19</sup> Mukherjee, Radhakamal – *Foreward* to Haikerwal, B.S. – *Economic and Social Aspects of Crime in India* (London, 1934), p.10.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11.

<sup>21</sup> (i) Gupta, Narayani – *Calcutta: Form and Function*, p.46. (ii) Mukherjee, R. – *Foreward*, p.11.

appeared in the slums.<sup>22</sup> These criminals were the products of the irresponsible industrialization of colonial India which did not elicit 'those agencies of social service and education which... (were) handling problems of moral degradation in the West'.<sup>23</sup> The unhappy lives of the labouring class in Calcutta plagued by problems of economic distress, bad neighbourhood, broken families and alienation of the migrant worker in the callous and indifferent urban environment. These problems forced many to find their way into the underworld.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, such a social map of the city contributed greatly to the rise of a class of 'goondas'. Geographically, the zone which contributes to the rise of the goondas are areas which lay in the black town and were the places where the poor population resided. Areas like the Upper Circular Road, Amherst street, Narkeldanga, Beliaghata, Bowbazar, Rambagan and Muchipara were notorious for the presence of criminals and anti-socials. These were places which provided the socio-economic environment that corrupted those unfortunate few and nurtured their growth into criminals. These were areas where crime could have been a part of daily existence and both the criminal and the victim were 'locked in the same spatial setting characterized by social tension, low self-esteem, fear, and opportunity for misbehaviour.'<sup>25</sup> But this not to label these areas rigidly as the crime zones of the city. But, in general,

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<sup>22</sup> Mukherjee, R. - *Foreward*, p.11.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.11-12.

<sup>24</sup> Das, S. - *The Goondas*, p.5.

<sup>25</sup> Das, Suranjan - *The Goondas*, p.7.

one can say that poverty, slum-life, lack of education, exposure to bad company such as local hoodlums and prostitutes and even tragedies like the break up of family due to some reason or the other contributed greatly to the making of a criminal.

The criminal of the colonial city was, however, (the product of colonialism itself. As has been observed earlier the growth of urban centres was always accompanied by the rise of a class of criminals. Commenting on a similar developments in a different city,<sup>26</sup> Louis Chevalier, writes that crime was not 'an incidental and exceptional consequences of social existence, but one of the largest consequences of the growth of the city; not something abnormal, but one of the most normal aspects of the city's daily life.'<sup>27</sup> In the western world, where capitalism was advancing rapidly, crime was a product of civil law which infringed on the customary rights of the poor without creating an alternative, converting a number of previously legal activities into criminal ones.

The factory labour in India were almost necessarily a group of migrants who had been driven from an agricultural setting into the towns in search of a living. This was because the colonial land settlements had created excess pressure on land, the destruction of the indigenous handicrafts had thrown many people out of occupation. The

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<sup>26</sup> The term 'different city' means Paris.

<sup>27</sup> Chevalier, Louis - *Labouring Classes and Dangerous Classes*, p.5.

following lines from the Final Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India (1931) throws light on this aspect: -

“... It is here that we strike perhaps the most fundamental differences between the Indian factory workers and the corresponding class in the West. The latter is drawn mainly from persons brought up in the towns, and partly from those who have abandoned the country for the towns. The Indian factory operatives are nearly all migrants. But the difference does not end here. In India the migration from the rural areas to the factories... (is)... a temporary transfer, and the recruit to the industry continues to regard as his home the place from which he has come..... agriculture has naturally supplied the bulk of the recently established industrial population.... A large number still have... members of their own family in the village and the latter may secure income from agricultural work. Occasionally members of the same family relieve each other by turns in factory employment.”<sup>28</sup>

The lack of employment opportunities, the various temptations of urban life, the life in the slums and the occasional need for large sums of money for expenditures often lay behind these people's entry into the criminal world. With the passage of time these petty criminals

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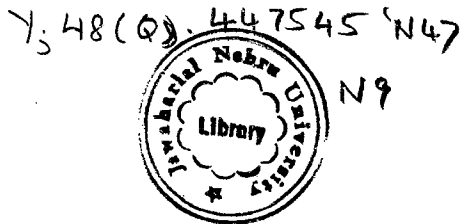
<sup>28</sup> The Final Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India (1931) (henceforth R.C.L.I), p.12-13.R.C.L.I., p.13.



evolved into major ones. They forged links with the high politics of the city and devised strategies to escape from the clutches of law.

Moreover, the labouring poor of Calcutta were of upcountry origin.<sup>29</sup> These people who constituted seven-tenths of Calcutta's population, took to menial works such as those of factory labourers, carters, coolies, cobblers and even domestic servants.<sup>30</sup> They were a perpetually volatile group in the city and were the active participants in the disturbances of the city such as communal riots.<sup>31</sup>

While it would not, however, be very correct to say that all the criminals of Calcutta came from the labouring classes, Engels' observation is pertinent: criminals were "those members of 'surplus population' who- graded by their misery – summon up enough courage to revolt openly against society becomes thieves and murderers. They wage open warfare against the middle classes who have for so long waged secret warfare against them."<sup>32</sup>



## SECTION II

### THE CONDITION OF THE LABOURING CLASS IN CALCUTTA

The last century of British rule saw the growth of a wage-earning labour force though rather small in extent.<sup>33</sup> This labour force was a creation of colonialism. It was an industrial working class engaged in

<sup>29</sup> The term 'upcountry' means Bihar, U.P and M.P.

<sup>30</sup> Das, Suranjan, *Communal Riots in Bengal*, p.21.

<sup>31</sup> Das, Suranjan – *The Goondas*, p.6.

<sup>32</sup> Engels, F – *The Condition of the Working Classes in England in 1844*, as quoted by Das, S. in – *The Goondas*, p.8.

<sup>33</sup> Dasgupta, Ranajit – *Factory Labour in Eastern India, Article in I.E.S.H.R* 79 (henceforth Dasgupta, 1976 )

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enterprises like tea plantations, collieries, repairing concerns (engineering), jute textile manufacture and new modes of transport (railways), and the 'development was accelerated by the entry of Indian capital into the sphere of modern cotton textile production and certain other fields of processing and manufacturing activities (cotton ginning pressing, rice milling, oil milling, sugar production, etc.).'<sup>34</sup>

The consequences of the employment of metropolitan capital was the onset of a social process that of transformation of segments of the population with the common feature of being 'yoked to capital for producing surplus value.'<sup>35</sup> The result of the rise of the industrial proletariat was increased spatial mobility and the development of a geographically vast labour market.<sup>36</sup> This in turn resulted in the expansion and demographic change in the labour force and led to the growth of working class heterogeneous in composition.<sup>37</sup>

So, the demography of the city contributed to proneness to the crime of the city. In the initial days of industry in Bengal i.e. from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the last decade after same century, the mill-owners had to 'send into the highways and byways to obtain workers', because, 'the shortage (of labour) was acute'.<sup>38</sup> Earlier, 'overseers, labours-contractors and others, stimulated thereto by promises of commissions, journeyed to distant villages and brought

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<sup>34</sup> Dasgupta, R. p.278.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p.278.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid..

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p.278-279.

<sup>38</sup> Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India (1931), (henceforth RCLI), p.22.

back recruits to the mills, paying their fares and expenses to the city.<sup>39</sup> However, this situation has changed by the Royal Commission on Labour in India started studying labour situation. By that time i.e. by the late 1920's the labour market had been removed from the village to the factory-gate.<sup>40</sup> As to the question of the social background of the migrants, it can be known from the census of 1911 that the migrant labour population which was seemingly of heterogeneous composition did share a common background. They came from a class of ruined artisans, labourers failing to get adequate employment and subsistence in the rural economy, agriculturists unsettled by the sort of changes taking place in the agricultural economy, unskilled of all trades, turned into paupers.<sup>41</sup> They were the most downtrodden in the countryside, the lowest in the social hierarchy and untouchables like the Chamars, Muchis, Doms, Haris, Bagdis, Kewato and Namashudras.<sup>42</sup> They formed 25.40% of the labour force in the jute mills.<sup>43</sup> Nearly 32% of them were Muslims.<sup>44</sup> So on the whole, from the data obtained from the census of 1911 and 1921, one can come to the conclusion that 'from the angle of occupational groups cultivators with little or no land, members of traditional labouring and service categories and artisans from declining

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<sup>39</sup> R.C.L.I, pp.22-23.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, pp.22-23.

<sup>41</sup> Dasgupta, R. FLEI, p.315.

<sup>42</sup> Census of India, 1911, Vol. V, Bengal, Part I, Report, para -519, as quoted by Dasgupta (FLEI), p.315.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p.315.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p.315.

crafts and from the stand point of social organization low-caste people and untouchables provided the bulk of the total labour force.’<sup>45</sup>

The effects of migration were of immense importance. These important consequences were such vital factors in the life of the labourers that it did not escape the attention of anybody who had any interest in matters pertaining to labour, because migration always remained an important fact of Indian labour. Even as late as in 1946, commenting on labour employment, The Indian Labour Year Book said that the “Industrial labour in India consists mostly of immigrant labourers, the term ‘immigrant’ signifying the worker belongs to a district other than the one in which his place of employment is situated.”<sup>46</sup> While commenting on migration relating to Bengal the same Year Book wrote, ‘In the jute mills in and around Calcutta... the workers are mostly non-Bengalis, belonging to Bihar, U.P and Orissa, and the northern speaking districts of Madras Presidency.’<sup>47</sup>

Jute industry was the most important of all industrial activities in Bengal. Other industries did exist in the forms of the cotton mills, paper mills, and the ordinances factories. But jute industry gave to Calcutta its importance as a centre of economic activities. The majority of the factory labourers in and around Calcutta found employment in the jute industry. The proximity to the source of raw material and the virtual monopoly of Bengal in raw jute production were the two factors

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<sup>45</sup> Dasgupta, R. FLEI, pp.315-316.

<sup>46</sup> Deshpande, S.R. *The Indian Labour Year Book*, 1946. (Labour Bureau, Simla), p.21.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, p.22.

which helped the concentration of jute mills in and around Calcutta.<sup>48</sup> This supremacy of Bengal in the production of jute continued upto the last year of the Raj, for even as late as in 1945-46. Between 1922 and 1931 Bengal's contribution to the total jute production of India was more than 88%.<sup>49</sup> This support from Bengal helped India to contribute 97% to world's total jute production.<sup>50</sup>

The products of the jute mills were mainly meant for overseas market, and this was the reason why almost the entire jute industry was localized in and near the port city Calcutta. As a result "In 1940, 95.5% of the jute looms in Bengal and all the jute factories containing these looms were situated in a small strip of land about 60 miles and 2 miles broad, along both the banks of Hoogly, above and below Calcutta"<sup>51</sup>, and in 'the slums around the jute mills of Calcutta there thus lived thousands of unfortunate human beings whose cheap labour served well the needs of the mill owners but whose capacity for bargaining a better deal out of the latter always low."<sup>52</sup>

With reference to individual provinces of origin of migrant labourers, United Provinces was at the peak in the first decade. Bihar, contributed a large stream of immigrants through out three decades, starting from 1891 and ending in 1921. These two provinces was followed by Orissa.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Chakraborty, Dipesh – *Rethinking Working Class History*. P.8.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p.8.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p.8.

<sup>51</sup> Sharma, Tulsi Ram – *Location of Industries in India*, p.89. as quoted by Chakraborty, D. – *Rethinking Working Class History*, p.8.

<sup>52</sup> Chakraborty, D. – *Rethinking Working Class History*, p11.

<sup>53</sup> Dasgupta, R. FLEI, p.292.

The result of this influx of migrant labourer was that, 'Just over one-third of the population of the city was born in it.'<sup>54</sup> In other words, 'Just less than a quarter, 24.87% of the inhabitants of the city and suburbs were born in the city... 22.5% were born in the 24 Parganas and Howrah districts and more than half further afield. 16.70% were born in other parts of Bengal, 34.99% in other Provinces, and 1.19% outside India.'<sup>55</sup> In Calcutta, Bihar and Orissa supplied 'nearly one in five of the Calcutta population a greater number than comes from the rest of Bengal and outside the city and the two adjoining districts.'<sup>56</sup> Nearly half came from 'South Bihar, the four districts of Gaya, Shahabad, Patna and Monghyr, a quarter from Orissa and most of the remaining quarter from North Bihar.'<sup>57</sup> U.P supplied nearly one in every ten of the Calcutta population.<sup>58</sup> These immigrants were mainly occupied in one or the other form of manual labour. A number of them worked as 'shoemakers, washermen, milkmen and barbers of the town.'<sup>59</sup> Province-wise, the 'Oriyas rely mainly on unskilled labour and domestic service is taken by one in every five who comes from Orissa... Fewer of those born in Bihar than in Orissa, about one in ten, find employment in domestic service, but almost as many in casual labour... they have almost a monopoly of the less important occupation of shoe-making, and with the immigration from United Provinces

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<sup>54</sup> Census of India, 1921, Vol.VI, Part I, p.19.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. p.18.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p.20.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p.20.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p.20.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p.26.

supply most of the carters and darwans... those born in United Provinces ... are able to find regular occupation in mills and factories and fewer are mere casual labourers, more of them are traders and clerks... The figures show them materially more prosperous than those from Orissa and Bihar.’<sup>60</sup> Among those who hailed from districts within Bengal, the men from Dacca mainly found occupation in the docks and shipping, and a few went into the factories.<sup>61</sup> Those coming from Hoogly were mainly employed as clerks and traders.<sup>62</sup> Men from Midnapore earned their living as domestic or as casual or regular labourers, but otherwise this district distinguished ‘itself only by their being as large a proportion as one in eleven of the immigrants from it in the unproductive occupations of beggars and prostitutes.’<sup>63</sup>

Undoubtedly, Calcutta had grown largely on immigrants. One of the peculiarities of the Calcutta population was the high proportion of “on an adult non-family population”.<sup>64</sup> Even as late as 1941 the percentage of married women to the total population of the city was as low as 10.7%,<sup>65</sup> and the percentage of adults (age group 15-60) and that of children in the total population in the same year was 72.7% and 24.5% respectively,<sup>66</sup> whereas ‘in other districts south of the Ganges the proportion of young population is about 35-37% or more of the

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., pp.26-27.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p.27.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, p.27.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p.27.

<sup>64</sup> Census of India, 1951, Vol VI, Part 3, p.XVII.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, p.XVII.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p.XVII.

total population.<sup>67</sup> So this shows that men without families accompanying them were inducted into Calcutta.

Immigration into Calcutta progressed at a slow pace upto 1931. There was depression in the working centres of Calcutta during the years 1921 and 1931. The beginning of the Second World War offered prospects of employment in the city and thereafter immigration proceeded at rapid bounds.<sup>68</sup> The following table shows how immigration and emigration happened in Calcutta from outside as well as from Bengal between 1891-1941:

**Table 1.1 Immigration and Emigration in Calcutta from and outside Bengal.**

	1941	1931	1921	1911	1901	1891
Actual Population	2108891	1140862	1031697	998012	920933	741889
Immigration	690550	378 776	371575	397274	324914	249891
Emigration	26591	22301	46000	34000	3344	5500
Natural Population	1444932	784387	706122	634738	599363	497498
Percentage Variation	+ 84.2	+11.1	+11.2	+5.9	+20.5	-

Source: Census of India 1951, Vol. 6, part 3, p. XVIII.

Other than U.P, Bihar and Orissa, Punjab and Rajputana agency were the other provinces which contributed to the migrant population of Calcutta.<sup>69</sup> In 1931, the number of migrants from Punjab stood at 12,494 and the same from Rajputana was 14,938.<sup>70</sup> The immigrants from Punjab were mainly employed as mechanics and

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p. XVIII.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p. XVIII.

<sup>69</sup> Census of India, 1931, Vol. VI, Part-I, p.13.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, p.13.



motor-drivers, whereas those from Rajputana worked as traders and their employers.<sup>71</sup>

Thus, one finds a situation where the working class population of Calcutta was constituted by migrants from three provinces mainly, U.P, Bihar and Orissa. Their conditions of life in the city went to reinforce their notions of religious linguistic and provincial or local identities which in turn built their communal identities.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, this labouring poor were huddled into the insanitary slums of the city which created conditions which probably account for the proneness of their part in communal riots in large numbers. So the demography of the city contributed to the proneness to crime in the city.

The migrant worker found that he was living in a strange environment where the contrast between his original home and his scenes of work (was) tremendous.<sup>73</sup> So much so that 'the people who have been uprooted ... (found)... themselves in a milieu of strange traditions or no traditions at all,' and the ties which give village life its corporate and organic character are threatened.<sup>74</sup> This strange environment more often than not resulted in ill health and strains due to difficulties in adjustment.<sup>75</sup> The change of climate, the change of diet, the reduction of valuable elements of diet due to reasons of economy, the effect of change from wide fields and fresh air of the village to the cramped and often insanitary streets and lanes of the

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p.13.

<sup>72</sup> Das, S. *Communal Riots in Bengal*, p.23.

<sup>73</sup> R.C.L.I, p.17.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, p.17.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, pp:17-18.

town,<sup>76</sup> all put together take a toll on the health of the migrant worker. In addition there were other dangers to the worker's health existed due to the fact that majority of these workers were single men and the relief which their fatigued bodies sought came in the form of alcohol, gambling and the other insidious temptations where one had the risk of contacting venereal diseases.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, the labour force in any individual establishment was at a state of constant change. This severely affected their efficiency and never gave them an opportunity to adjust themselves to the working conditions of an establishment.<sup>78</sup> The life of the worker in the city was deplorable. Both their working place and their dwellings were insufficiently ventilated and ill-lit places, any description of which will bring out the misery of the migrant workers' lives.

The Royal Commission on Labour, commenting on the working conditions of the factories, said, as far back as in 1929, that, 'More attention should be paid to the general cleanliness of the factor. Where quantities of dust and fluff are produced, it is important that floors and walls should be regularly cleaned. Periodic white washing of interior walls and roofs not only removed collected dust, but helps to improve lighting.'<sup>79</sup> That cleanliness within factories were not treated as a matter of much importance by the factory-owners is proven by the

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid, p. 17.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, p. 17.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, p. 18.

<sup>79</sup> R.C.L.I, p.56.

following lines of the Royal Commission - "We recommend that, where the rules made by the local Government under Section 37 of the Act do not require the cleaning of the factories annually, they should be supplemented in this direction, and that in all the cases the rules should be strictly enforced.'<sup>80</sup> In addition the ill-ventilated factories were characterized by very high indoor temperature and the majority of the factory-owners made no endeavor to mitigate the discomfort which the hot weather brought to their operatives, whereas the 'whitewashing of roofs, the spraying of roofs with water and the provision of electric fans, or even small devices attached to the shaft... (could have been)... made without undue expenses'. The latrine accommodation inside the factories were also not adequate. These latrines were badly constructed and were hardly ever cleaned. Even a body like the Royal Commission were forced to say that, 'every factory should be compelled to maintain separate and sufficient (latrine) accommodation for males and females and a staff adequate to maintain the latrines in a state of cleanliness during the working hours.' Commenting on the absence of the bare minimum comfort available to the workers in his work place the Royal Commission wrote, "We do not, of course suggest that improvements of this character should be regarded solely in the light of their financial results; in many cases the operatives have a right to demand that the present conditions should not continue, even if improvements are not likely to be remunerative.'<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> R.C.L.I, p.56.

<sup>81</sup> R.C.L.I, p.57.

The immigrant workers, in the absence of proper housing provided by the mills were forced to live in the slums. These slums offered the workers, much worse living conditions than these poor migrants had in the villages. In the busiest industrial centres the houses were built close together, cave touching cave, and frequently back to back to make use of all available space.<sup>82</sup> Due to overcrowding and congestion space was so valuable that in place of streets and roads, narrow winding lanes provided the only approach to the houses. Sanitation was generally neglected, scenes like heaps of rotting garbage and pools of sewage were common. The absence of latrines contributed to the pollution of air and soil. Houses meant single rooms built without a plinth, without windows and adequate ventilation and the only opening provided by a doorway often too low to be entered without stooping. As these houses were bereft of any privacy, gunny bags, old kerosene tins were used as screens to secure some privacy. This further restricted the entry of light and air. 'In dwelling such as these, 'wrote the Royal Commission, 'human beings are born, sleep and eat, and die...'<sup>83</sup>

This overcrowding and congestion was due to concentration of industries within a small geographical area, as a result of which large numbers of immigrant labourers sought accommodation in the heart of the industrial and urban centres which were already suffering from a shortage of houses.<sup>84</sup> Due to the intense growth of industries in and

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid, p.271.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, p.271-72.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, p.270.

around Calcutta had made land a scarce and an extraordinary pricey commodity. as a result it was very difficult for the workers to obtain adequate housing accommodation. It was here that the private landlords and mill sardars stepped in to make money. They erected houses and huts in the vicinity of the factories and let these at 'rents so high as to absorb a considerable proportions of the workers' earnings.'<sup>85</sup> Hardly any consideration was given to the amenities of life. Every available foot of land was built upon.<sup>86</sup> Alarmed by the proliferation of slums, the municipalities of Calcutta and Howrah did try to provide the labouring poor with better housing but such efforts hardly made any differences to the prevailing situation. Even in the houses provided by the municipalities the rows of houses were insufficiently spaced out and the size of the rooms were still below recognized health standards. But 'these mill bustees ... (were)... immensely superior to most of the other housing accommodation available and ...(was).. an indication of what still ... (was)... to be done for the rest of the working population.'<sup>87</sup>

In the 1940's the wages did increase, it did not keep pace with the cost of living. For example between 1939 to 1946 wages increased in the textile industry all over India but Bengal lagged.

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p.272.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

**Table 1.2****Average Annual Earnings in the Textile Industry by Provinces:-  
(Wages in Rupees)**

Province	1939	1940	1941	1943	1944	1945	1946
Bombay	373	382	412	823	917	867	835
Madras	173	187	195	345	366	366	431
Bengal	233	268	257	363	387	401	438
U.P	245	297	307	561	556	546	580
C.P	-	196	-	482	506	562	495
Delhi	320	314	-	518	813	779	750

Source: Indian Labour Year Book 1946 (S.R.Deshpande) p.150.

As it can be seen, the average earnings in Bengal had increased by 88% over the years whereas for the whole of British India it had increased by 113% and for places like Bombay and Delhi it had increased by 124% to 134% respectively.<sup>88</sup> In Bengal the textile industry comprised mainly of the jute industry and wage increments during the war period were not really high. Moreover, it was observed from the retail prices of the foodstuffs between the years 1939-1946 that the cost of living was trebled in this period.<sup>89</sup> Thus it can be derived from the figures of the average annual earnings that 'earnings lagged far behind prices in Bengal.'<sup>90</sup>

**Table 1.3****Percentage Distribution of Jute Mill Workers I Bengal According to Basic Wages**

Daily Wages	Percentage
1. Below annas 8	7.2
2. 8 annas and below 12 annas	43.0
3. 12 annas and one rupee	20.7
4. one rupee and below Rs. 1-8-0	26.1
5. Rs. 1-8-0 and above	3

Source: Indian Labour Year Book 1946 (ed.) S.R. Deshpande, p.148)

<sup>88</sup> Indian Labour Year Book, 1946 (henceforth I.L.Y.B '46), p.150.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

The above table shows the large proportion of jute workers in Bengal who were being underpaid.

A consequence of intense poverty and low wages was the presence of large-scale indebtedness among the labouring poor. The Indian Labour Yearbook of 1946 noted that "A very noticeable feature of the economic life of the industrial workers in India, particularly those employed in factories, is that they are generally indebted and live and die in debt. No doubt the comparatively low wage level in the country is partly responsible for the indebtedness of the worker...."<sup>91</sup> and 'From an enquiry made by Prof. Mahalanabis in Bengal in regard to the cost of living of jute mill workers at Jagaddal in 1941, it is seen that nearly 90% of the families are in debt.'<sup>92</sup> Indebtedness, it seems, had been a tragic reality of the lives of the labouring poor even earlier. The Royal Commission on Labour in India wrote, as far back as in 1929, that 'Among the causes responsible for the low standard of living of the worker, indebtedness must be given a high place... the majority of the industrial workers are in debt for the greater part of their working lives. Many indeed are born in debt and evokes admiration and regret to find how commonly a son assumes responsibility for his father's debt, an obligation which rests on religious and social and seldom on legal sanctions. Many come to the industry because they are in debt; some are enabled by the industry to clear themselves and few of them become money-lenders instead of

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid, p. 195.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

money-borrowing. More often the debt remains and fresh obligations are incurred. It is estimated that in most industrial centres, the proportion of families or individuals who are in debt are no less than two-thirds of the whole. We believe that in the majority of cases, the amount of debt exceeds three months wages and is often far in excess of this demand. We are not including in debt, for the purpose of these calculations, the amounts owing for the ordinary purchases of the month, which are generally made on credit.<sup>93</sup> This problem of indebtedness was further aggravated by the high rates of interest that was charged on the principal by the lender. The usual rate of interest was 75% per annum, in the case of the jute mill workers this was 78%, which meant the worker had to part with 20% of his monthly wages on account of interest.<sup>94</sup> Higher rates also prevailed. On small sums, the jute mill workers often had to pay an interest which was as high as 325%.<sup>95</sup> It was very usual for the worker to become defaulter. Moreover, the money-lender preferred to remain creditors and go on receiving the interest, rather than desiring a prompt repayment of the capital.<sup>96</sup> It was a situation where default went to increase the liability, and the borrowed trifling sum, within a few years became a permanent and heavy load of debt.<sup>97</sup> The money-lenders to realize the repayments

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<sup>93</sup> R.C.L.I, p.224.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, p.225.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, p.226.



of his loans often took away the whole of the worker's wages and left him without enough for subsistence.<sup>98</sup>

For the workers' employment in the factories of mills did not mean any economic security. For, all the Indian factories had a very high rate of turnover of workers. On an average every month an Indian factory employed 5% of its labour force as fresh hands. In reality these fresh hands were workers who had previously worked in some other mill or might have worked for the same mill in the same centre, where he was later lucky enough to find re-employment.<sup>99</sup> Moreover, the adoption of short-time working, particularly in the jute industry and the depressed state of the markets, as was the case after 1929, contributes generously to the growth of both under-employment and unemployment.<sup>100</sup> In addition to this, barring the years of the Second World War the supply of labour had far exceeded the demand for it by the beginning of the third decade of this century in India. A massive blow was already dealt by the economic depression starting in 1929.<sup>101</sup> The result of this was that number of people seeking employment in the large cities begun to swell abnormally.<sup>102</sup>

However, any history of the miseries of the workers' lives in Bengal and in any part of the colonial India would not be complete without a proper attention being given to the jobbers. The jobbers were

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. p.26.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. p.31.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

known in different parts of India by different names like the sardar, the mukaddam and the maistry. The jobbers were conspicuous by their ubiquitous presence in the Indian factory system. In the words of the Royal Commission, the jobbers 'usually combines in one person ... a formidable series of functions. He is primarily a chargeman. Promoted from the ranks after a full experience of the factory, he is responsible for the supervision while at work. In a large factory, there may be a hierarchy of jobbers for these purpose, including women overseers in the department staffed by women. He has also on many occasions, to act as assistant mechanism, and to help keeping the machines in running order. So far as the worker is given technical training, the jobber is expected to provide it. He is not merely responsible for the worker once he has obtained work; the worker has generally to approach him to secure a job, and is nearly always dependent on him.'<sup>103</sup>

The system of jobbery, it has been observed by historians, strengthened the religious, linguistic and kinship bonds among the migrant labourers.<sup>104</sup> The sheer dependence on the jobber enforced the 'pre-bourgeois' or 'primordial loyalties' among the workers who had come from a bucolic background. The mere removal of a worker from the countryside to the urban centres were meant the snapping the ties of caste, language, religion or community. In the cities the migrant workers tended to live in a cohesive unit with members of his own community caste and faith. An immigrant worker, as a newcomer, and

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<sup>103</sup> R.C.L.I, p.23.

<sup>104</sup> Das, S. C.R.B, p.21.

also during bad times fell back on this migrant community, and the jobber for temporary finance, housing or may be even for some kind of medical care. This is not to say that this was only mechanism by which primordial ties were reinforced, but this serves as an illustration. These strong primordial loyalties, in turn, prevented the growth of a class identity among the migrant workers in Calcutta and these loyalties were easily manipulated to for communal clashes.<sup>105</sup>

The worker's uninterrupted ties with the countryside can partly accounted for his 'absenteeism'. The migration of the Indian factory operative was not a permanent exodus.<sup>106</sup> The workers who came to seek a living in the industrial centres viewed their migration as a temporary transfer. This migrant worker, who was generally drawn from an agricultural background 'at heart' remained a 'villager' in the words of the Royal Commission. The worker, thus, was a man who took up a definite work at alien place which he did not regard as his own, and cherished the hope of returning to his country as often as possible and of retiring there ultimately.<sup>107</sup> This was natural on the part of the worker, as, the working conditions in the mills and around Calcutta was inhuman, and the worker was driven to take up work there only because of their desperation to earn a living which was not offered by

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<sup>105</sup> Chakrabarty, Dipesh – Rethinking Working Class History, Chapter VI, pp. 186-218.

<sup>106</sup> R.C.L.I, p.12.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, p.12.

the countryside. The migrant workers resented the idea of working in an alien place -<sup>108</sup>

The worker who had come to the city to work as a factory operative retained his links with the countryside. For many of the factory operatives the contact with the village commences from the time of their birth as they were born in the village and they often spent their childhood in the village, this tendency increased with the raising of the minimum age for industrial employment.<sup>109</sup> Very often the worker was married and left his wife in the country and this prompted frequent visits to the countryside.<sup>110</sup> Normally the tendency of the worker was to return to the village as frequently as possible when his income rose. The returns could have been caused by urgency due to illness or family affairs, in such cases the returns to the village was often financed by borrowing.<sup>111</sup> Moreover, it was not always true that the worker returned to the village to give assistance to agricultural operations.

These frequent visits of the country, along with the realities of an immigrant worker's life which has been discussed earlier contributed to the strengthening of the primordial loyalties. These ties of community were manifest during the different disturbances which took place in the city involving labourers, specially communal disturbances. The communitarian ties prevented the growth of any

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<sup>108</sup> R.C.L.I, p.13. and also see Pandey, Gayendra - '*Community Consciousness and Communal Strife in Colonial North India*'.

<sup>109</sup> R.C.L.I, pp.13-14.

<sup>110</sup> R.C.L.I, p.14.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

sense of identity of the workers as a class. Whatever class identity was formed among the workers' was too weak to resist the pulls and pressures of the identities of community.<sup>112</sup> Thus, it was all too common a sight that the labourers sought each other on the basis of communal ties. For example on the occasion of the Durga Puja or the Bakr-Id, communal clashes broke out between the Hindu and Muslim labourers.

The position of the labourers were further weakened vis-à-vis that of their employers by the fact of the lack of trade... unionism among the workers. As late as in 1945 only 18% of the jute mill workers were unionized.<sup>113</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his seminal work, 'Rethinking Working Class History' has related the failure of trade unionism to the bourgeois leadership of labour unions. The leaders of the factory workers, in the case of jute mills, as the historian has shown, almost always came from the western educated Indian bourgeoisie. Chakraborty has gone to show that the relations between the middle-class leaders and the labourers was characterized by certain pre-capitalist relationship between the poor and the rich.<sup>114</sup> The Union leader in turn, in such a situation, tended to become the master rather than the real representative of the labouring poor.<sup>115</sup> What "the jute workers has understood by 'union' nothing more than an office situated

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<sup>112</sup> Chakrabarty, Dipesh – *Rethinking Working Class History*, p.

<sup>113</sup> Despande, S.R. – *Report on an Enquiry into the Conditions of Labour in Jute Mills Industry in India* (Delhi, 1946), pp.6, 34-35, as quoted in Chakrabarty, D. – *Rethinking Working Class History*, p.116.

<sup>114</sup> Chakrabarty, D. – *Rethinking Working Class History*, p.143.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*, p.153.

outside the mill and some union 'babus' whose job is to write occasional petitions and hold gate, bustee or mass meetings."<sup>116</sup>

It will be interesting to note that goondaism was not unknown to the miserable life of the labouring poor. Goondas were often used by mill-owners to quell labour unrest. An important aspect of the sardar's authority was the use of force. If a labourer disobeyed the sardar then he ran the risk of being beaten up by the sardar himself.<sup>117</sup> This aspect of the sardar's authority, which was in other words 'goondaism' itself provoked fear and a sense of awe 'that sometimes bordered on admiration.'<sup>118</sup> Similarly, the labouring poor, also got to know a class of 'goondas' whose activities were very similar to those of the sardars. These goondas co-existed with the labourers in their slums. They were responsible for acts like extortion and terrorizing among the labourers.<sup>119</sup>

Even as late as in 1946, Bengal's labour problem caused alarm in the government circles. None of the problems of labour was given any solution and the growing labour unrest became the cause of intense worries.<sup>120</sup> The working conditions in the factories continued to be inhuman and the offices of the Inspector of Factories needed immediate expansion so that the government could receive adequate information

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid, p.154, as quoted from Gupta, Indrajit - '*Capital and Labour in Jute Industry* (Bombay, 1953).

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, p.109.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.p.110.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, p.111.

<sup>120</sup> Amrita Bazaar Patrika, 16<sup>th</sup> August 1946, Report named '*Growing Labour Unrest*' on page 5.

about working conditions.<sup>121</sup> The wages of the workers fell far short of the increase in the cost of living. The workers who were retrenched in the post-war days were yet to find employment and the Bengal government went on ignoring this problem. In reality the Bengal government did not have any plan to tackle such grave issues.<sup>122</sup> Hundreds of trade unions, legally formed and duly registered under the Trade Union Act were yet to receive registration by the government. As a result of the overall lack of labour policy on the government's part the jute-mill owners of Bengal amassed enormous profits at the cost of the labourers.

### Section III: The Effect of War on the City

'Hark, hark, hark, the Japanese are coming to our villages,  
Come out you young guerillas,  
Come Rahim, come Rahman  
Come Jogesh, come Paran  
Come out Hindus and Muslims all,  
Hold your weapons firm...'<sup>123</sup>

With Japan's entry into the Second World War in 1941, Bengal became the eastern front of the British Empire, which had to be defended by the British at all costs. The urgency of the situation was

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<sup>121</sup> Chakravarty Dipesh – *Condition of Knowledge of Working Class Conditions: Employees, Government and the Jute Workers of Calcutta*. In Guha. R. *Subaltern Studies*, III.

<sup>122</sup> *ABP*, 16 August 1946, p.5.

<sup>123</sup> From Hiren Mukherjee's, "*Bengal Progressive Writers Getting Together for the People*", in *Peoples War*, November, 1942 as quoted in Srimanjari – '*The Second World War and Bengal: A Socio-Political Perspective*', unpublished P.hd Thesis submitted to the Dept. of History, University of Delhi, 1996.

understood even by the hardcore nationalists. On April 12<sup>th</sup>, 1942, Jawaharlal Nehru wrote a letter to Franklin Roosevelt, the President of the U.S.A., saying, ' Though the way of our choice may be closed to us and we are unable to associate ourselves with the activities of the British authorities in India, still we do our utmost not to submit to Japanese or any other power... »<sup>124</sup>

By the end of April, 1942, the Japanese started attacking Bengal. They bombarded Chittagong and there were widespread fears of Japanese air attack on Calcutta. The city of Calcutta being the centre of industrial as well as governmental activity was very important for the British to be forsaken. So the British had to do whatever they could to save the city from destruction. Soon after the month of April the war came even closer to Calcutta as Assam and the eastern border of Bengal became the war-front. When the enemy was so perilously close, British and American troops started to be stationed in India in huge numbers. In Calcutta, a large number of American troopers were stationed apparently for the purpose of defending the city. This signified the beginning of a new tragedy for the citizens. Calcutta suffered from the arrogance and atrocity of the foreign military, and as a result of the stationing of these forces, a new kind of corruption surfaced which involved the rise of a class of blackmarketeers, hoarders, illegal traders in arms and ammunition and a class of pimps

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<sup>124</sup> Nehru, J. to Roosevelt, 12<sup>th</sup> April 1942, in Nehru, J. (ed.) *A Bunch of Old Letters*, p.480. as quoted in Chattopadhyay, G. – *Bengal Electoral Politics and Freedom Struggle, 1862-1947* (New Delhi, 1984), p.179.



who earned money by making arrangements to satisfy the sexual desires of the troopers.<sup>125</sup>

Atrocities committed by some American soldiers individually have been reported in the newspapers. A mere look at the various cases of assaults and affrays tried by the Court Martial involving offences by members of U.S. Forces against Indian civilians will show how the American GI behaved during his tenure in Bengal, and in this case, Calcutta. A few such cases can be mentioned as examples to the point.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of August, 1945 an American soldier of the name Ellis threatened an Indian sub-Inspector at the point of a sub-machine gun in the Alipore Police Station. Ellis was searching for a civilian prisoner and he forcibly disconnected the police telephone communication line at Alipore.<sup>126</sup> Ellis was accompanied by another two American army men, a First Lieutenant Jack H. Gilmore. together they not only threatened the Indian policemen at the police station, they also extorted money and forcibly carried away guns and ammunitions from the constables of the same thana. This Jack Gilmore also had the record of discharging fire arm in and about another police station at Behala in Calcutta on the 30<sup>th</sup> of October during the same year.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Authors interview with Gopal C. Mukherjee, at his residence in Calcutta, in March 1947, and also interview with Gautam Chattopadhyay at his residence in Calcutta, in March 1947.

<sup>126</sup> File No. 7/5/46 of 1946, Government of India, Home Dept., Police Station, NAI.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid,

Attempts at outraging the modesty of women and criminal assaults on civilians and by American soldiers were also not uncommon. On the 30<sup>th</sup> of July, 1945, an American First Officer of the name Elton F. Duncan Jr, tried to rape a nun in Calcutta.<sup>128</sup> Likewise two American soldiers were tried by the court martial in February 1946 for outraging the modesty of a Burmese girl in Calcutta.<sup>129</sup> They were several cases of Indian civilians dying of murderous assault by American soldiers. In 1944 an Anglo-Indian boy died in Calcutta from revolver shots fired by American military personnel.<sup>130</sup> Similarly, in the same year a Mr. Jagadbandhu Sen died of a gun shot fired by an American soldier from a running train.<sup>131</sup> On the night of 4<sup>th</sup> April, 1946 a plains-clothes police constable of the name Nawlakh Singh was stabbed by an American soldier. This soldier was misbehaving with an Anglo-Indian girl in front of the police club-tent at the maidan in Calcutta. As the constable challenged the soldier, he whipped out a knife and stabbed him, following which the constable was admitted to the hospital.<sup>132</sup> This was not, however, an isolated incident. Nawlakh Singh was the sixth constable to be murderously assaulted by an American soldier.<sup>133</sup> After this case the government of Bengal was

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid,

<sup>129</sup> File No. 3R-17, Progs. 542-43, February, 1946, Home Dept., Political Series, Non-Confidential at the W.B.S.A.

<sup>130</sup> File No. 3R-104, Progs. B388-403, August 1944, Home, Political, Non-Confidential, WBSA.

<sup>131</sup> File No. 42C-41, Progs. B271-304, August 1944, Home, Political, Non-Confidential, WBSA.

<sup>132</sup> File No. 3R-56/46, Progs. B802-803, July 1946, Home, Political, Non-Confidential, WBSA.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

alarmed and asked the Commanding Officer of the USA Based Section of the India-Burma Theatre to prevent the US troops from carrying weapons when they were not in duty. In answer the Commanding Officer pleaded his helplessness saying that it was difficult to keep weapons such as knives out of the hands of the troops as this were easily acquired from the side-walk vendors of the streets of Calcutta.<sup>134</sup> However, such violence were not the only forms of barbarism practised by the American military. The drivers of US military vehicles did not hesitate to run down innocent passers-by.<sup>135</sup> The audacity of the US troopers increased to such an extent that they even went to physically assault the Chief Presidency Magistrate of Bengal.<sup>136</sup>

Such cases of violence perpetrated by the American soldiers presents only half the reality to the reader. During 1945-46 it was possible for the black marketeers and the goonda elements to buy a 'Mauser' pistol and a full carton of cartridges from the American military in exchange of as little as two fifty rupees or may be in exchange for a bottle of good liquor.<sup>137</sup> Guns sold by the American troopers came handy to the rioters of August 1946 in Calcutta, later these weapons emboldened several small time criminals to emerge as major goondas during 1946-47. The US troopers also sold tins of petrol and diesels to those criminal elements who then made profits by selling

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Author interviews with Gopal.C.Mukherjee, Prime accused of the Great Calcutta Killing of 16<sup>th</sup> August, 1946, on March, 1999 at Gopal's residence in Calcutta.

the same at high prices to the ordinary civilians, who otherwise found it difficult to get the fuel in those days of control and rationing.<sup>138</sup>

The presence of the American troops, then, naturally caused a severe antagonism among the public in Calcutta. This anger found vent in occasional mob-violence against the American soldiers. During such occurrence the citizens of Calcutta attacked anything that bore the emblem of the US troops. During the disturbances in Calcutta on the occasion of the Rashid Ali Day, an American weapons carrier was burnt in fire by a mob of Calcuttans.<sup>139</sup> Incidentally, this vehicle was being driven by an officer of the Chinese Supply Mission named Lieutenant J.S. Hsing. this Chinese officer was almost burnt alive inside the weapons carrier. This only goes to show the antagonism of the cities masses towards the US army.<sup>140</sup> Another such incident during the disturbances following the Rashid Ali Day (i.e. 14-24<sup>th</sup> February 1946). A truck convoy carrying 3000 homeward bound American soldiers to a ship was attacked and stoned in Calcutta by the city's mob. The stars and stripes of the American flag was painted brightly on these trucks and the crowd made no mistake in attacking the G.I.s. The attack on the G.Is were so serious that some of them had to be taken to the hospital.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Interview with Gopal Mukherjee.

<sup>139</sup> File No. 7/6/46, Home, Political of 1946, NAI.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, July 6, 1946, Report on the Sunday Supplement by Norman Kiell – 'What the G.Is Learnt in India'.

Such mob violence was the outcome of a hostile sentiment towards army personnel and it is also evident that their presence contributed an atmosphere of violence (and supply of weapons) in war time Calcutta. Another evil effect of the war was the demobilized urban or semi-urban tradesmen “who wanted to make use of their skill”, and after the war would ‘crowd to swell the ranks of the unemployed in the cities’, and ‘Disgruntled they may turn to the only other trade they know, fighting and became dangerous dacoits.’<sup>142</sup> From 1946 onwards Calcutta came to know many such armed criminals, who after receiving training in the armed forces during the wreaked havoc in the city on being demoralized.<sup>143</sup>

#### **Section IV: The Effect of Famine on Calcutta**

The Bengal famine of 1943 was precipitated by the interventions made by the government of Bengal in the whole sale rice market in 1942 and 1943.<sup>144</sup> The famine was not caused by a decline in food availability. In fact, during 1943 Bengal produced more rice than she did in 1941, and there was no famine in 1941.<sup>145</sup> The famine was rather caused by faulty and chaotic administration policies adopted by the government of Bengal as well as the government of India. A vigorous speculation and

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<sup>142</sup> Despande, Anirudh – *Hopes and Disillusionment: Recruitment Demobilization and the Emergence of Discontent in the Indian Armed Forces after the Second World War*, Indian Economic and Social History Review, Vol. 33., No.2, April-June, 1996, pp.196-198.

<sup>143</sup> Refer to CRO. No. 19951/47 and CRO. No. R 200044/47 at Crime Records Section, Police HQ, Calcutta for examples.

<sup>144</sup> Greenough, P.R. – ‘Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal’, p.273.

<sup>145</sup> Sen Amartya – ‘Poverty and Famine’, pp.57-58.

panic hoarding, leading to an exceptional shortfall in the market-release of rice, the inept handling of procurement schemes and their final abandonment in March 1943 leading to sudden abolition of price control in the whole sale market, the prohibition of cereal exports from other provinces leading to skyrocketing rice prices, the income inequalities caused by war-time expenditures and the abnormal price rises which began in 1942 all together produced the gigantic crisis of 1943-44.<sup>146</sup> In the words of Amartya Sen, "The famine revealed itself first in the districts away from Calcutta, starting in early 1943.... The experience was quite different in Calcutta. The official policy was based on the firm conviction that 'the maintenance of essential food supplies in the industrial areas of Calcutta must be ranked on a very high priority among their (government) war time obligations'.... Calcutta saw the famine mainly in the form of masses of rural destitute, who trekked from the districts into the city: by July the streets were full.... The relief offered was quite inadequate, unattended dead bodies were found everywhere in the city - 3363 had to be disposed by relief organization in October alone."<sup>147</sup> It is interesting to note that the contemporary intelligentsia did not make any mistake in understanding with whom the responsibility of the tragedy lay. The Statesman wrote:-<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid, pp.75-78.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, pp.55-57.

<sup>148</sup> Cited in Goswami, Omar - *The Bengal Famine of 1943: Re-Examining the Data*, IESHR, Vol. 27, No. 4, 1990, pp.446-447 and also see Bedi, Freda - *Bengal Lamenting*, p.6.

“This sickening catastrophe is man-made...we say with deliberation that the present Bengal famine constitutes the worst and the most reprehensible administrative breakdown in India...”

(The Statesman, 23 September, 1943)

The situation of Bengal during the famine is possibly best captured in a poem written by Subhas Mukherjee, who saw the tragedy unfold in front of his own eyes –

“Villages have sought shelter in cities,  
houses are empty, so the storage bins  
The earth is abundant with ripened harvest...  
the eyes are waiting for her  
From the graveyards on the streets those dying breast can hear  
(the cry)  
That the harvest is awaiting their return.”<sup>149</sup>

By the middle of 1943 throngs of people came to Calcutta in search of a morsel of food. By August 1943 the streets of Calcutta were overcrowded by people begging for food or money. The pavements of the city became the homes of these destitute. The air raid shelters, the sub-urban railway stations, the abandoned Howrah bridge became the place where families of peasants lived in their indescribable distress.<sup>150</sup>

These villagers who had come to Calcutta ate anything that was available to them. Initially, they begged for food or coins in June or July 1943.<sup>151</sup> By August they realised that it was of no use to beg for money and ‘the cry for food became acute, more piteous.’<sup>152</sup> It became

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<sup>149</sup> From ‘*Saugot*’ by Subhas Mukherjee, as quoted by Srimanjari in p.435.

<sup>150</sup> Das, Tarak.C. – *Bengal Famine 1943: As Revealed in a Survey of Destitutes in Calcutta*. (Univ. of Calcutta), 1943, p.3.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid, p.6.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid, p.7.

a common sight in the city that people went on begging for a little rice-water. Even this rice-water was becoming scarce. 'Four or five persons daily wages at the door side of each householder for phan (rice-water) often they fought and scrambled for it. They even stored a little for later consumption.'<sup>153</sup> By the beginning of September the pangs of hunger has to be satisfied by anything in the name of food. Cast off skins of vegetables, rotten fruits, crumbs of food or even refuse of plates dumped in the dust bins came to be accepted as food. In one case the destitutes were seen fighting with each other for crumbs of food for a dust bin in which garbage of the Calcutta Corporation Dispensary was dumped. The hungry people hunted for crumbs of food among the surgical dressings and ashes. 'Even the carcasses of dogs, rats, cats, etc, were welcomed food to these miserable remnants of humanity.'<sup>154</sup>

With the advent of August the situation had become such in Calcutta that the destitutes could no longer be fed on Individual charity. The gruel-kitchens opened by charitable people failed to provide any relief to overwhelming number of destitutes.<sup>155</sup> 'Death by starvation on the streets of Calcutta had become a common thing. The government of the province slowly recognized the gravity of the position and started relief work. By the time the number of destitutes has risen to about hundred thousands in Calcutta itself.'<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.



The relief offered by the government and the private organizations was thoroughly inadequate at any stage.<sup>157</sup> The 'food distributed at many of these centres was neither sufficient in quantity nor adequately nourishing in quality. Sometimes, even it was not fit for human consumption.'<sup>158</sup> The government used bajra (*pennisetum typhoideum*), a coarse grain in the gruel kitchens and relief centres to feed the destitutes. They found the food indigestible and injurious and started having bowel problems after consuming the food distributed at the relief centres.<sup>159</sup>

During 1943-44, starvation along with epidemics of malaria, cholera and dysentery left thousands dead on the streets of the city.<sup>160</sup> The higher rate of mortality sparked off by starvation scaled its peak in December 1943 with the help of this famine induced epidemics.<sup>161</sup> According to official estimates the famine took a death toll of 'about 1.5 million'.<sup>162</sup> But according to Amartya Sen's estimate the famine left at least 3.05 million people dead.<sup>163</sup> But estimates by other scholars have shown that Sen assumed 1.8 to 1.9 million excess deaths of Bengal in 1943-44, taking the average level of death registration to have fallen well below 50% in those two years, whereas if one takes

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid, p.7.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid, p.4.

<sup>161</sup> Sen Amartya - *Poverty and Famine*, pp.55-56.

<sup>162</sup> *Famine Enquiry Commission India* (1945), p.109-10, as quoted by Sen in *Poverty and Famines*, p.52.

<sup>163</sup> Sen Amartya - *Poverty and Famine*, pp.193-216.

into account the pre-famine decline in death rate, a total of 2.1 million rather than 3.05 million seems more appropriate.<sup>164</sup>

What is interesting to observe in any discussion concerning the famine is that there was no dearth of food in Calcutta during this entire period of starvation. Food of all sorts lay in abundance for sale in shops all over the city.<sup>165</sup> Profiteers and black-marketers flourished under the several schemes of procurement at control prices till March 1943. These corrupt people made larger profits when free purchase at market prices were allowed onwards from March. Bijan Bhattacharya's play 'Nabanna' depicted the opulence and wastage by the rich in marriage ceremonies and their utter indifference to mass hunger and poverty.<sup>166</sup>

This famine of 1943 was a gigantic tragedy which was unforeseen in Bengal during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It demoralized the masses and the starvation deaths on the streets of Calcutta desensitized the people. The ordinary people observed the tragedy, struggled to themselves alive and helplessly watched the rampant corruption of the elite circle. It was in this backdrop of such a tragedy that Calcutta was to witness the savagery of the communal riots.

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<sup>164</sup> Maharatna, Arup and Dyson, T. – *Excess Mortality During the Bengal Famine: A Re evaluation*, IESHR, Vol. 28, No.3, p.296 and Maharatna, Arup – *The Demography of the Bengal Famine of 1943-44: A Detailed Study*, Vol.31, No.4, IESHR, 1993, p.171.

<sup>165</sup> Das, Tarak.C. – *Bengal Famine*, p.10.

<sup>166</sup> Srimanjari, p.466.

## Section V

### **The Rashid Ali Day: The Disturbances in Calcutta**

Calcutta witnessed brutal repression of a popular movement during November 1945 when students of the city had organized a massive demonstration demanding the release of three I.N.A officers namely Shah Nawaz, Dhillon and Seghal. In February 1946 a movement of 'greater sweep and intensity' was sparked off in Calcutta when the trial of I.N.A Captain Rashid Ali started in the Red Fort. The Muslim students' League aided by the Students' Federation organized a general strike on 12<sup>th</sup> February 1946 in Calcutta in favour of the demand of release of Captain Rashid Ali.

In Calcutta the strike was completely successful. 'Calcutta, on 12<sup>th</sup> February, presented a grim picture. Public transport was completely paralyzed. Trams, buses and rickshaw workers' had gone on indefinite general strike, responding to the call of their CPI- controlled unions. Taxis and private cars were also off the streets, students' had come out of every schools and colleges in the city and its suburbs. The CPI and BPTUC (Bengal Provincial Trade Union Congress) had given a call for industrial general strike and response was overwhelming from Kankinara in the north to Budge Budge in the south, in the greater Calcutta industrial belt. There were road-blocks everywhere.'<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Chattopadhyay, Gautam – 'The Almost Revolution', Article in 'Essays in Honour of Sushobhon Sarkar' edited by Barun DE (pp.427-449), p.431.

In fact, the movement on the occasion of the Rashid Ali Day begun on the night of the 11<sup>th</sup> of February. Barricades fighting with the British troops went on throughout the 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup>. Throughout this period the brutality of the military knew no limit.<sup>168</sup> The city returned to normalcy on the 16<sup>th</sup> of February but by that time a new chapter had been added to mass struggle against British rule. The characteristic feature of this anti-British upsurge was that it was in the nature of mass uprising.<sup>169</sup> It was sparked off by a militant students' movement and was soon taken up by the poor populace of the city as well as the industrial labourers.<sup>170</sup> This upsurge, 'shook the British rule to its foundation.'<sup>171</sup>

Police and military brutalities on students, youth, activist and other ordinary citizens started on 11<sup>th</sup> February itself when a mammoth rally led by the students was mercilessly beaten up in Central Calcutta.<sup>172</sup> By the next morning the poor people of the city sympathized with the students and workers who went on strike.<sup>173</sup> During the next three days Calcutta became the battle field between the police and the British troops on the one hand and the people of Calcutta. The Congress, League and the Communist flags were tied

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid, p.435.

<sup>169</sup> Chattopadhyay, G. – '*Bengal Students in Revolt Against The Raj 1945-1946*, in Amit Gupta, edited '*Myth and Reality*' (NMMML, 1987), p.152.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid, p.152.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Bandopadhyay, Tarashankar – '*Jhar-o-Jharapata*', Tarashankar Rachanavali, Vol. 8, p.4.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid, p.13.

together. Slogans of 'Death to Imperialism', 'Down with the British Imperialism', and 'Hindus and Muslims Unite' rent the air.<sup>174</sup>

The workers had joined hands with the students. The industrial labourers of the factories in Howrah, Hoogly, Budge-Budge, Barackpore and Kankinara struck work.<sup>175</sup> They squatted on rail-lines at Naihati and Chalegar railway lines were torn up.<sup>176</sup> The police opened fire at Kankinara killing four and injuring fourteen people.<sup>177</sup> Workers' agitation in the dock areas of Calcutta also alarmed the authorities.<sup>178</sup> In south Calcutta, the Sikhs residing in Calcutta joined the fray by combating the attacks of the Gurkha Rifles.<sup>179</sup>

This upsurge was put down by the British with indescribable brutalities. A fourteen year old student processionist, Debabrata was killed by the British military in cold blood.<sup>180</sup> People watching the processions from the balcony's of multi-storied buildings was not spared by the gun-wielding British military.<sup>181</sup> The British was able to finally bring the situation under control after 72 hours of spraying of bullets by the police and military.<sup>182</sup> After the three fateful days, the military operation in Calcutta left 200 dead and 300 injured.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Chattopadhyay, G. - '*Bengal Legislative in India's Struggle for Freedom*', p.201.

<sup>175</sup> Bandopadhyay, T. p.65.

<sup>176</sup> Chattopadhyay, G. - '*Bengal Legislature*', p.201.

<sup>177</sup> Bandopadhyay, T. p.65.

<sup>178</sup> Chattopadhyay, G. - '*Bengal Legislature*', p.201.

<sup>179</sup> Bandopadhyay, T. p.54.

<sup>180</sup> Chattopadhyay, G. - '*Bengal Legislature*', p.202.

<sup>181</sup> Chattopadhyay, G. - '*Almost Revolution*', p.435.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid, p.434.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid, p.435.

'The ferocity and the savagery with which the British army suppressed the Calcutta uprising was unparalleled in India. So also was the complete fearlessness displayed by the masses',<sup>184</sup> writes Gautam Chattopadhyay who was then the Secretary of the Students' Federation's Calcutta branch, and actively participated in the upsurge as a student leader. This upsurge an amazing unity was displayed by the Hindus and the Muslims. The middle class sympathized with the students and workers. During the barricade fighting the lumpen elements of the city came out of the slums and joined hands with the ordinary populace to fight the British army.<sup>185</sup> But this unity, this solidarity against imperialism was soon to disappear and give way to communal riots and bloodbath of August 1946.

## **CONCLUSION:**

### **Calcutta in 1946: A Decaying Metropolis**

Calcutta, the second city of the British Empire, was on a steady course of decline by the 40's of this century. The city was gradually impoverished and this could be seen in the swelling number of poor people living in the increasing number of slums which started dotting the city's map like scars. The decay of Calcutta was linked to the decay of its hinterland. Along with the economic decay came the inevitable

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid, p.434.

<sup>185</sup> Authors interviewed with Gautam Chattopadhyay and Tarashankar Bandpadhyay's description of the participation of slum-dwellers in the Upsurge in his novel *Jhar O Jharapata*.

degeneration in social life which prepared the ground for the rise of the criminals and lumpens.

The secret of Calcutta's decline lay in the agrarian sector. Calcutta carried the weight of four impoverished provinces – U.P, Bihar, Orissa and Bengal itself. From last three provinces other than Bengal, thousands of people, as has been discussed already, came to Calcutta to live the lowly life of a 'mazdoor'. Those who could not find a job for themselves ended on the criminal margin of the urban poor.<sup>186</sup>

Between 1921 and '41 the population increased steadily in eastern India by 1.4% per year but this growth was not coupled with a growth in agriculture. The depression of 1930-38, dealt a heavy blow to the agrarian sector. As prices of raw jute and rice dipped abnormally large number of people from the villages had to leave their hearths and homes and go to the city in search of employment. The final blow was dealt by the famine of 1943 when thousands of people wen to Calcutta from the rural suburbs in search of food. As a result of all this slums proliferated in Calcutta rapidly from 1941 onwards. The Calcutta Corporation watched helplessly, doing little or nothing. The starving people who could not find even slums to live in settled down in water-pipes besides railway lines and on land adjacent to wealthy localities.<sup>187</sup> The year 1942 marked a watershed in the economic life of the province. 1942 was 'exactly at the borderline of two historical

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<sup>186</sup> Goswami Omkar – *Calcutta's Economy: The Fall From Grace*, p.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid*, p.165.

price regimes.’<sup>188</sup> For, ‘Prices had been more or less stationary for decades (the 1941 rice price was comparable to that in 1914), and the price rises (especially of food) that started off in 1942 were to become a part of life from then on. Institutional arrangements including wage system, were slow to adjust to the new reality.’<sup>189</sup> Partially this price rise was fuelled by the inflationary effect of war time expenditure. But this price rise had a pernicious effect on the lives of the ordinary people.

The middle class in Calcutta suffered due to this sudden hike in the standard of living. A report in the *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* revealed the differences faced by the class. This report was the editorial of 8<sup>th</sup> July, 1946, named ‘Middle Class Distress’ said –

“A recent statistical survey of middle-class living in Calcutta by the Indian Statistical Institute reveals an acute state of distress. It has been found that families with a monthly income of below Rs 50 have to spend 89% of their earnings, and those with an income between Rs 51 and Rs 200, no less than 78% on housing and food alone. What is left for clothing, education, medical expenses and recreation is as inadequate as a needle’s eye is for the passage of a camel. The cost of middle class living in Calcutta, it is further revealed stood on March 1 (1946) at 268, taking the 1939 figure at 100. Food prices stood at 282, clothing prices at 259, and fuel prices at 253. As against these costs the average income in the case of salaried workers, has risen by not more than 33%.”

As a result of this abnormal rise in the cost of living, “...these people (i.e. the middle-class) can keep their food costs down at 89% of income... only by keeping the diet to a starvation level... with income

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<sup>188</sup> Sen, Amartya – Poverty and Famines, p.78.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.



rising by one-third only the resultant cut go deep into life's necessities. This long continued state of semi-starvation can only have one ultimate consequences. When children of<sup>190</sup> the middle-class grow up many of them never will – we are likely to have a generation of delicate young people prone to every sort of chronic ailments.”<sup>191</sup>

The gloomy situation reported in the newspaper is testified by contemporary literature. In Tara Shankar Bandopadhyay's novel, one finds the protagonist, a lower middle-class man who supports a family of six, being unable to have a proper square meal as foodstuffs are highly priced. In one situation, one finds him foregoing sugar in his cup of tea as he has to sell his ration of sugar to a local tea shop so as to supplement his income.<sup>192</sup>

The other problem which the middle-class of Calcutta faced was that of housing. Contemporary reports on the subject said, 'The real picture of squalor, poverty and suffering is heart-breaking. There is incredible overcrowding, a city capable of holding 2 million population with difficulty being made to accommodate over 4 millions... (a) large percentage of families enjoyed a floorspace of 25 sq.ft per head. Calcutta has consequently become a favourite haunting ground for such Infectious diseases such as typhoid, enteritis, tuberculosis and malaria. These pass in the dark because the vital statistics of the city do not record their victims.’<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> ABP, 8 July, 1946.

<sup>191</sup> Bandopadhyay, Tarashankar, '*Jhar-o-Jharapata*', p.12.

<sup>192</sup> ABP, 8 July, 1946.

<sup>193</sup> Bandopadhyay, Tarashankar, '*Jhar-o-Jharapata*', p.48.

The proliferation of slums in effect led to the degeneration. The moral degradation set in by the war from 1942 onwards was apparent in Calcutta during 1946. In Tarashankar Bandopadyay's novel '*Jhar-o-Jharapata*' offer substance to this statement. While talking about Calcutta's slum life the author says that he finds no difference between the city of Calcutta at night and thick woods.<sup>194</sup> He writes about a situation wherein the people residing the slums of lower middle-class people fearing that they will finally end up in the slums of the domestic-workers,<sup>195</sup> their sons ending up as criminals and daughters in the slums of the prostitutes.<sup>195</sup>

The youth of the forties grew up witnessed the several tragedies which dotted the history of Bengal during that period. They were the ones who grew up witnessed the starvation deaths during the famine of 1943. They witnessed the stationing of the army in Calcutta and they experienced the danger of a possible Japanese attack on Calcutta. They watched the utter lack of respect which the military had for women. They saw local women working as prostitutes for British, Americans or Indian soldiers, in the name of serving as W.A.C.I. These people suffered from the effects of the black-market. They did not find medicine during ailments of life like food and the basic necessities of life like food and clothing during these years. They have been suffering under the severe oppression of the British rule all the time.<sup>196</sup> It was natural that they were a class whose anger against the ruling class just

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid,

<sup>195</sup> Bandopadhyay, Tarashankar, '*Jhar-o-Jharapata*', p.14.

<sup>196</sup> Das, S. -C.R.B, p.162.

needed a spark to explode. But all these tragic experiences had another effect. The moral degradation, hunger, privation and corruption which they witnessed resulted in a situation where such a tragic developments took place. It was easier for these people to participate in violence. For them boundaries between the morally right and morally wrong activities became flexible to the extent of being non-existent. Very often, they took to criminal activities, initially for sake of survival and later as a full time occupation.

The effect of these developments were immense on the Calcutta citizenry. In the words of Suranjan Das, 'In popular perception these developments reduced the value of human lives. There was a brutalization of consequences on a mass scale as if the people were being prepared for the inhuman episode of August 1946.'<sup>197</sup> It was from this morass of abject poverty, social degradation, corruption and brutalization that the criminal was born.

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid, p. 162.

## CHAPTER II

### CALCUTTA, AUGUST 1946: THE PARTICIPATION OF GOONDAS IN CITY POLITICS

“I feel, in the heart the world there is hatred  
Hatred to the core,  
We make way for grief  
By bringing the evil shadow of suspicion on our affections.

I have killed a man  
His blood is all over me;  
I am the brother to the murdered man  
He knew me as his sibling  
Yet he had the heart to take my life,  
I am sleeping at the bank of  
The river of blood  
Sleeping, after having killed  
The mentally deranged  
Who was like an elder brother to me  
I rest my head on his pigeon chest  
And feel  
That human affection is  
Lying dead somewhere  
Having failed at  
Lighting up the way for human beings.”

Jibanananda Dash in '1946-47', in 'Jibanananda  
Dasher Shreshtho Kobita' [Selected poems of  
Jibanananda Dash], Calcutta, 1968, p.137.

The significance of the 16<sup>th</sup> August 1946 is immense, because after the riot in Calcutta the ties between the two communities were snapped which ultimately led to the partition of the province. But 16<sup>th</sup> August should not be taken as an isolated event. It was the culmination of the communal propaganda of the League and the counter-propaganda of the Hindus. The riot was a fallout of the all-India level deliberations of the Muslim League. In Bengal it revealed the links that the political parties developed with the underworld. The end of the riot did not however,

mean the end of communal violence in Calcutta. From March 1947 onwards Calcutta was again thrown into a communal orgy which continued till September 1947. Rampant goondaism characterized the communal violence in the city.

Of the communal violence of Calcutta during this period and the riots sparked off by spontaneous mob action? Or were they carefully planned? The element of planning and programme would point to the links between politics and the criminal world.

In this chapter we seek to examine the ways in which the goonda elements were mobilized to organize and participate in the riots, and the way in which the youth were criminalized by active leadership of senior politicians who fanned hatred among the masses against the other community.

The riot of August 16, 1946 cannot be studied, as has been already mentioned as a single event. While the decision of the Muslim League of not joining the Interim Government under the Cabinet Mission Scheme and the adoption of the Direct Action Resolution was the reason which lay behind the riot, it would be wrong to assume that the city witnessed a steady development of communal animosity among the masses before the riot. Calcutta witnessed powerful trade-unionism in July 1946 and also in early 1947. But the unity among the working class soon gave way to the most pernicious developments in the city. In this way the riots proved to be a major blow to the Communist Party for the riots represented a set-back to its influence.

For the present purpose, in this chapter some attention will be given to the pre-riot situation in the city and the political development leading to the Direct Action Resolution. This will be followed by a study on how the city was prepared for the riot. In the ~~third~~ section the riot itself will be studied followed by a section on the participants in the riot.

## SECTION I

### PRE-RIOT POLITICS AND TRADE UNIONISM

The Congress emerged victorious in the elections of 1945. In Bengal, as in the rest of India, the Congress contested the election with the slogan of United and independent India.<sup>1</sup> The Muslim League entered the fray with the demand of the division of India and an independent Pakistan. Abdul Hashim, who prepared the election manifesto for the League, declared 'Let Us Go To War.'<sup>2</sup> In the election manifesto the League stated –

“Quaid-e-Azam Mr. Mohammad Ali Jinnah on behalf of the All-India Muslim League declares that the ensuing General Election of the Central and Provincial Legislatures of India will be taken as a plebiscite of the Muslims of India and Pakistan and the Working Committee of Bengal Provincial Muslim League in its

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<sup>1</sup> Azad, Maulana Abul Kalam – India Wins Freedom, p. 3, Section 1.

<sup>2</sup> Sen, Shila – Muslim Politics in Bengal, p.195.

meeting on 1<sup>st</sup> August, 1945 adopted a resolution to this effect.... We are, therefore, in the midst of a war as the General Election is going to be the first pitched battle for Pakistan with the enemies of Muslim India.

The Pakistan formula is very simple and corresponds with the realities of Indian Politics. The basis of Pakistan is real democracy, freedom, equality and justice and is opposed to imperial domination and economic exploitation which is the basis of the favourite, 'Akhand Bharat' of the Congress.

Free India was never one country. Free Indians were never one nation... Liberated India must necessarily be, as God has made it, a sub-continent having complete independence for every nation inhabiting it. However, much weakness the Congress may have for the capitalists of Bombay and however much they may desire by way of doing a good turn to them to open opportunities for exploiting the whole of India under the cover of 'Akhand Bharat', Muslim India to a man will resist all attempts of the Congress to establish dictatorship in India of any coterie, group or organisation.... The General Election is the beginning of our struggle..."<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the Congress and the League fought the elections of 1945 with the mass of electorate being divided along communal lines.<sup>4</sup> The final results of the elections in the province of Bengal were as follows:-

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<sup>3</sup> Sen, Shila – Muslim Politics in Bengal, pp.276-79, as quoted from 'Let us go to war', by A.Hashim, January, 1970, Published by Society for Pakistan Studies, Dacca.

<sup>4</sup> Chattopadhyaya, G. Bengal Legislature, p.204.

**Table 2.1**

The Congress	85 seats
Muslim League	114 seats
Scheduled Caste Independence	2 seats
Krishak Praja Party	3 seats
Hindu Mahasabha	1 seat
Muslim Independents	3 seats
Anglo Indians	4 seats
Indian Christians	2 seats
Europeans	23 seats
Communist Party of India	3 seats

Source: Chattopadhyaya, G. – Bengal Legislature, p.204.

From the results it is apparent that the Muslim League had enjoyed numerical superiority, more so being aided by the operation by the government of India Act of 1935. The League, as it can be observed from the results had by 1946 been successful in wiping out the Krishak Praja Party and defeating almost all the non-Muslim politicians.

The Congress' performance in the Hindu constituencies in the elections of 1945 in Bengal was one of astounding success. The Congress gave the Mahasabha a crushing defeat in the Hindu constituencies. It wrested back the general seats which it had lost in the elections of 1937. But inspite of its success the Congress could not come to power in the Bengal Assembly.

The Muslim League because it did not enjoy absolute majority in



the house had to look for partners in a coalition government. The League enjoyed the goodwill of the Governor of Bengal and was called upon to form a cabinet.<sup>5</sup> Suhrawardy, initially made a show of attempting to come into a coalition with the Congress but such efforts proved abortive.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the League formed the cabinet under the chief ministership of Suhrawardy with the support of the Europeans and Independents.

This new League ministry came into being on 23<sup>rd</sup> April, 1946, and on 16<sup>th</sup> May the plan of a loose Indian Federation with sufficient powers, as drafted by the Cabinet Mission was announced by the British Prime Minister Clement Attlee.<sup>7</sup> Under this plan, the British sought to, 'satisfy the League demand for sufficient autonomy without totally destroying the Congress concept of a United India.'<sup>8</sup> Through the working of this scheme, 'An interim government should be formed at the Centre, under the Viceroy. The provincial assemblies should elect representatives to a Central Constituent Assembly, which should finalize the constitution of an Independent India. The final transfer of power shall take place only then.'<sup>9</sup>

Initially, the Congress resented the grouping of provinces as

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<sup>5</sup> Chattopadhyaya, G. – Bengal Legislature, p.204.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.205.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp.205-06.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.206

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.206.

envisaged by the Cabinet Mission Plan, but soon the party decided to join the Interim Government to be a part of the Constituent Assembly. The League on the other hand had supported in the scheme outlined by the Mission, in the hope that it would ultimately result in the establishment of completely sovereign Pakistan.”<sup>10</sup> But after the Congress’ declaration to join the Constituent Assembly the League changed its mind. It decided to dissociate itself from the Constituent Assembly and chose ‘Direct Action’ as the means to achieve Pakistan. On 27<sup>th</sup> July, Jinnah declared, ‘What we have done today is the most heroic act in our history. Never have we ...done anything except...by constitutionalism.... This day we bid goodbye to constitutional methods. Today we have forged a pistol and are in a position to use it.’<sup>11</sup>

In its resolution passing the decision on ‘Direct Action’, 16<sup>th</sup> August was decided upon as the fateful day. By the same resolution the Cabinet Mission Plan due to ‘the intransigence of the breach of faith with the Muslims by the British, Government on the other.’<sup>12</sup> The moot point was that the League was suspicious of the intentions of the Congress after Jawaharlal Nehru stated that the Congress intended to modify the Cabinet Mission Plan as per requirements.<sup>13</sup> The League

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<sup>10</sup> Statesman, 7 June, 1946. Cited in Chattopadhyaya, G. – Bengal Legislature, p.207.

<sup>11</sup> Mitra, N.N. – Indian Annual Register, Vol.II, 1946, p.178.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p.66.

<sup>13</sup> Das, S. – C.R.B., p.165.

suspected bent upon establishing 'Caste-Hindu Raj'.<sup>14</sup> So the League was convinced that it was the time 'for the Muslim nation to resort to direct action to achieve Pakistan and assert their just rights and to vindicate their honour and to get rid of the present slavery under the British and the contemplated future of Caste Hindu domination.'<sup>15</sup>

Interestingly, it was in July 1946, with the above – developments in the backdrop, that Calcutta witnessed a massive upsurge of workers' movement. On the 29<sup>th</sup> of July 1946 a general strike was called by the employees of the post and telegraph department. This strike received overwhelming support from the Hindu and Muslim masses alike. The *Amrita Bazar Patrika* of 31<sup>st</sup> July described this strike at the largest in the history of Raj. But, tragically enough, this unity of the Hindu and Muslim masses were destroyed by the Direct Action Day. In the words of Manikuntala Sen, a CPI activist, within a matter of 17 or 18 days the carefully nurtured workers' and people's unity came to an end.<sup>16</sup> In this sense the riot proved to be a fatal blow on the efforts of the C.P.I.<sup>17</sup>

However, it would be wrong to presume that the presence of a potential for a secular struggle meant the absence of an undercurrent of communal tensions. For this one has to look not only at Calcutta but also elsewhere in the province of Bengal.

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<sup>14</sup> Mitra, N.N. – I.A.R, Vol.II, 1946, p.66.

<sup>15</sup> Mitra, N.N. – I.A.R, Vol.II, 1946, p.67.

<sup>16</sup> Sen, Manikuntala – 'Shediner Katha' [Memories of Those Days], p.170.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.,

Riots had become rampant in the western part of the province in 1946. The areas immediately around Calcutta had experienced frequent rioting.<sup>18</sup> The following is the statistics of the communal riots in these areas:-

**Table 2.2** Communal Riots in areas near Calcutta, 1946:-

Districts	Police Station	Number of Riots <sup>19</sup>
24 Parganas	Metiabruz	35
	Maheshtala	21
	Barrackpore	1
	Baranagar	9
	DumDum	3
	Naihati	3
	Magrahat	5
Howrah	Howrah	57
	Golabari	45
	Sibpur	35
	Bagnan	12
	Malipanchghora	25
	Bally	4
Burdwan	Purbashtali	6
	Monteswar	1
	Asansol	1
	Raniganj	1
	Kalna	1
Hoogly	Bhadreswar	1
Sealdah R.R		1
Howrah R.R	Howrah	2
	Shaimar	1
	<b>Total</b>	<b>270</b>

Source:- Lambert, Richard, D. - 'Hindu-Muslim Riots'. Unpublished Ph.D Thesis submitted to the Department of Sociology, Graduate School of University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1951, p.167.

The animosity between the two communities was revealed not only by these frequent riots but also by the fact that many such conflicts were fuelled by minor incidents which were completely non-

<sup>18</sup> Lambert, Richard.D in 'Hindu-Muslim Riots,' also refer to Das, S. - *C.R.B. Chapter*

<sup>19</sup> Lambert, Richard, D. - 'Hindu-Muslim Riots', p.168.

political in character.<sup>20</sup> For example on 16<sup>th</sup> May 1946 a riot broke out in Burdwan. It was started by a quarrel over a Muslim vendors' selling sweet-meats to a Hindu without announcing his religion.<sup>21</sup> This resulted in a riot where hundreds of strong armed bands from each communities entered the fight.<sup>22</sup> Commenting on the non-political character of the cause of the riot the District Magistrate of Burdwan said, 'I cannot find any evidence that this trouble has had any connection with the main trend of politics at present, except in the sense that both the communities have been in an excited frame of mind since the election meetings.'<sup>23</sup> So, it is obvious from this incident that the venom spewed by both the Hindu and Muslim politicians during the election campaign of 1945 had evil effects on the public psyche.

A little later, a similar riot broke out in Dacca on 30<sup>th</sup> June 1946.<sup>24</sup> There the reason was a Hindu procession passing by a Mosque. The riot was followed by a series of fracas between the two communities for about a week. The clash finally left two dead and seventeen injured.<sup>25</sup> This riot was, 'a foretaste of the coming communal'

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.168.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Source: Police File No.A787/46, Govt. of Bengal, (Secretariat), 1946. Cited in Lambert, Richard.D - 'Hindu-Muslim Riots', p.168.

<sup>24</sup> Source: Govt. of India, Home, Political (Confidential), File No.5/27/46, Home Poll. (I), NAI; cited in Chatterjee, Pranab K. - '*Struggle and Strife in Urban Bengal, 1937-47*', p.180.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

battle in Calcutta.<sup>26</sup>

Similar communal frenzy reared its head in Calcutta on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1946.<sup>27</sup> On that day communal situation worsened following the defeat of the Mohammedan Sporting Club in a football match. However, in this case, the initial tension did not culminate into a riot.

The provincial government on its part did not take the prevailing communal situation seriously. The League government, moreover, did not think it necessary to send a report to the Central Government on the prevailing situation.<sup>28</sup>

## Section-II

### PREPARING FOR THE DIRECT ACTION DAY

Any study on the participation of lumpen elements in political developments of the riot in Calcutta from 16<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> August 1946, has to necessarily look at the developments which took place in the city in the two rival camps following Jinnah's declaration of the Direct Action. In the same process some people were brought to the gateway of the criminal world which they were to enter within the four days of

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

murder, mayhem, rape, arson and looting. In this sense the four days of the riot were not only the dark days when the hardened lumpens ruled the city, it was during the same time that many were initiated into the world of crime. Some of them were to become dangerous criminals in the period following the riot.

For the convenience of the study, the preparation in the two rival camps are treated separately in this section. First, we look at the Muslim communal forces. Though the League having declared the Direct Action, it tried to manufacture myths to justify it. In spite of Jinnah's declaration of having said goodbye to constitutional methods, the League tried to protect Direct Action in the form of an anti-imperialist movement. Suhrawardy, during the no-confidence motion brought in the Bengal Assembly, asserted that the Direct Action Day was in fact an intended showdown against the British imperialists, which was misconstrued by the Congress as an attack on the Hindus.<sup>29</sup>

At the same time the lesser leaders of the League helped to prepare the ground for the gory riot of August 1946 in a way.<sup>30</sup> Anti-Hindu propaganda were expressed in the form of poems and doggerels which influenced the Muslims masses. One such poem, which was published in the *Azad of Calcutta* on 10 March, 1946, preached Muslim militancy and hatred against the Hindus in the following words: -

'The oppressed remain silent by seeing the hypocrisy

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<sup>29</sup> Source: *Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings*, 1946, Second Session, Vol.LXXI, No.3, pp.153-155 (No Confidence Motion).

<sup>30</sup> Mitra, N.N. -*I.A.R.*, Vol.II, 1946, p.68.

Of the idolatrous Hindus – Oh! Death-like eddy  
O victorious soldiers! March forward  
On our religious pilgrimage to the Caaba under the banner of the  
League,  
We shall spill as much blood as required.

We want Pakistan, a proper division,  
If it cannot be achieved by words, Muslims  
Are not afraid to use swords and spears.

Where are the Muslims youths! We shall attain  
The desire of their hearts by tying down the wild tiger.  
Come quickly, break down Somnath  
If you want freedom, Burn! Burn! Burn!  
The Jatu-Griha (house made of lac), and let all trouble end.’<sup>31</sup>

The League was apprehensive of the potential of class action leading to peoples’ secular unity. That is why one finds that the League organ *‘Morning News’* characterizing the success of the general strike of 29 July as ‘largely due to coercion and threat of hooliganism.’<sup>32</sup> Incidentally the newspaper hailed the news of the declaration of the Direct Action Day as a historic decision.

Soon after the declaration of the Direct Action the Muslim leaders in Calcutta were busy with organizing the Muslim masses into militant bodies. In the words of Shila Sen, ‘the absence of the instruction ‘peaceful observance’ in the Leagues’ leaders’ speeches

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<sup>31</sup> Mitra, N.N. –*I.A.R.*, Vol.II, 1946, p.68.

<sup>32</sup> *Morning News*, 31<sup>st</sup> July.



during the period 1-15 August along with the circulation of a number of inflammatory pamphlets in Calcutta were advance warnings of the riots that were to break out.<sup>33</sup>

A perusal of the '*Morning News*', the League paper in Calcutta gives a clear idea as to how the leaders were preparing the masses for the impending violence.

On 1<sup>st</sup> August Nazimuddin urged the Muslim youth to join the Muslim National Guards. On second August Jinnah denied to reveal the M.L. programme of Direct Action in concrete terms, he state 'I am not going to discuss ethics.' On 4<sup>th</sup> August the editor of *Morning News*. Akram Khan declared that the battle for Pakistan had begun already. On 5<sup>th</sup> August Nazimuddin instructed the Muslim National Guards at a gathering at the Muslim institute at Calcutta to follow the orders of the "Holy Quran and Islam." On 6<sup>th</sup> August a call for a general strike on the 16<sup>th</sup> was given. On the August, the 16<sup>th</sup> was declared to be a holiday. On the 9<sup>th</sup> August, Muhammad Usman, the Mayor of Calcutta and a leader of the League, gave the details of the programme of Direct Action. He urged the Muslims, "to muster strong at the Maidan Meeting and make it a historic rally." He also told that on 16<sup>th</sup> August, every Mosque in Calcutta will have a League representative present. On the 11<sup>th</sup> August the paper published the detailed programme of Direct Action and described it as a jihad, divinely ordained. On the 14<sup>th</sup> August the Muslim National Guards were given the last moment

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<sup>33</sup> Sen, Shila. - '*Muslim Politics in Bengal*', p.212.

instructions. They were asked to assemble at the Muslim Institute in Khaki uniform. On 15<sup>th</sup> August a Muslim railway workers' association called the 'Muslim National Core' was formed and the League leader Noor-ul-Huda declared 'No more slogans. The clarion call has come for action and nothing but action.'<sup>34</sup>

In the meantime a number of pamphlets were issued by the Muslim League all of which urged the Muslims to take to violence. Moreover, the violence was preached in the garb of a religious duty of every Muslim. The Mayor of Calcutta, Mohammad Usman was the man who carefully carried out the job of publishing and distributing these pamphlets.<sup>35</sup>

One of these pamphlets said:-

"Muslims must remember that it was in Ramzan that the Quran was revealed. It was in Ramzan that permission for Jihad was granted by Allah. It was in Ramzan that the battle of Badr, the first open conflict between Islam and Heathenism was fought by 313 Muslims, and again it was in Ramzan that 10,000 under the Holy Prophet conquered Mecca and established the Kingdom of Heaven and the commonwealth of Islam in Arabia. The Muslim League is fortunate that it is starting its action in this holy month."<sup>36</sup>

Another pamphlet urging the Muslims to go on a Jihad said:

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<sup>34</sup> Bandopadhyay, Sandip – *'Itihaser Dikay Phiray: Kolkata Danga'*

<sup>35</sup> Kholsa, G.D. – *"Stern Reckoning"*, p.49.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p.51.

“By the grace of God we are ten crores in India but through bad luck we have come to become slaves of the Hindus and the British. We are starting a Jihad...Pray make us strong in body and mind...make us victorious over the Kafers – enables us to establish, the Kingdom of Islam in India and make proper sacrifice for Jihad – by the grace of God may we build upon India the greatest Islamic Kingdom in the world.”<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, a Bengali pamphlet named ‘Mugur’ (The Mace) appealed:-

“...The day for an open fight which is the greatest desire of the Muslim nation has arrived. Come those who want to rise to heaven. Come who are simple, wanting in peace of mind and who are in distress. Those who are thieves, goondas, those without the strength of character and there who do not say their prayers all come.”<sup>38</sup>

Besides, mobilizing people for violence the pamphlets gave a fairly good idea as to what was going to happen during the 16<sup>th</sup> of August. One of the pamphlets said, “We shall see them who will play with us, for rivers of blood will flow. We shall have the swords in our hands and the noise of the takbir. Tomorrow will be doom’s day.”<sup>39</sup>

In another pamphlet, which had a picture of Mohammad Ali Jinnah armed with a sword a warning was delivered to the enemies of

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<sup>37</sup> Khosla, G.D – *Stern Reckoning*, p.51.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p.53.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p.53.

the League. The threat was expressed in the following words:-

“...O Kafir [i.e. infidel]! Do not be proud and happy. Your doom is not far and the general massacre will come. We shall show our glory with swords in hands and will have a special victory.”<sup>40</sup>

These pamphlets demonstrate how the League leaders were instigating the Muslims to take part in the communal violence of 16<sup>th</sup> August 1946. From these instances one can observe how the Muslims masses were prepared mentally. The inflammatory speeches delivered by the League tried to forewarn Calcutta of the violence that was to break out.<sup>41</sup> These speeches and writings can be construed as evidence against the interpretation of the riot in the Calcutta as spontaneous action of Muslim masses.

The Muslim National Guards, an all-India youth organization of the League, was brought into action during the riot. The Muslim League trained this volunteer body in aggressive methods. The organisation was tightened up as its membership increased daily, for this purpose a National Guards Headquarters was opened in Calcutta.<sup>42</sup> This organization as can be observed from the reports in the Morning News was prepared to play a crucial role in the riot. In Bengal the Muslim National Guards was the militant front of the League and as the vanguard of the Pakistan movement it was to assume a very aggressive

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p.52.

<sup>41</sup> Sen, S – *Muslim Politics*, pp.212-213.

<sup>42</sup> Toker, F- '*While Memory Serves*', p.144

role in the riot.<sup>43</sup>

Beside the call to bravery made to every Muslim, the League went ahead with the preparation where the party brushed shoulders with the underworld. The League was openly urging the Muslims of Calcutta to take to militancy during 16 August, through the exploitation of religious symbols and by raising a fear of an imminent rule of the infidels.

The riot was being planned as has been said, from the beginning of August. Suhrawady as a man at the helm of affairs in Bengal, enjoyed an advantage in this regard. As opposed to his rival within the League, Nazimuddin, who was backed by the landed, rich and powerful Muslims, Suhrawady had links with a section of the Muslim youth and the labouring classes of Calcutta.<sup>44</sup> Suhrawady used his influence among the latter, during this time, to activate the criminal elements among them.<sup>45</sup> As early as August 4, the Muslim League under the leadership of Suhrawady, organized a conference of the executive committee of the Calcutta district, the League representatives in Calcutta and Howrah to chalk out the programme for the 16<sup>th</sup> and from 10<sup>th</sup> August, Muslim goondas from outside the city armed with lathis,

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, pp.190-191.

<sup>44</sup> Sen, S. – *Muslim Politics*, pp.186, 187-191, 194-195. Also see Hashim, Abdul – “*Amar Jibon O Bibhagpurbo Bangladesher Rajniti*”, and Chatterjee, Partha “*Bengal Politics and Muslim Masses: 1920-1947*” [Article in Hasan, Mushirul (ed.) – “*India's Partition*”, p.277.

<sup>45</sup> Author's interviews with Gautam Chattopadhyay in March 1999, Calcutta.

spears and daggers began to appear in the bustee areas.<sup>46</sup> This was stated in the unpublished report of the Spens Commission later. In Mission Row, in Calcutta, a slum was inhabited by both Hindu and Muslim cobblers. These people of different communities had been living there in unity for many years. But suddenly from 10<sup>th</sup> August the Hindu cobblers were seen to abandon their homes to escape to safety. This was because from 10<sup>th</sup> August, they witnessed that the Muslims living there, were being supplied with lathis, daggers and spears.<sup>47</sup> Mr. Kiron Shankar Roy, the Congress M.L.A informed the Calcutta Police, about 'suspicious characters', 'Pathans' and 'goondas' prowling about in Calcutta in those few days before the riot.<sup>48</sup> He warned that the presence of these men was very ominous for peaceful life in Calcutta. Large number of such people were reported into Calcutta. Moreover, 'Hundreds of bad characters who were in detention during the World War had been released by the Suhrawady government, and this force with all its destructive power was available to carry out the behests of the League agitators.'<sup>49</sup> At Howrah, a League M.L.A of the name Sharif Khan, had distributed lathis, and other weapons to the local goondas,

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<sup>46</sup> Source and Testimony of an Anglo-Indian residing on Dharmotalla street, in Amrita Bazar Patrika, 28 August, 1946; And Report of the Commission of Police on the Disturbances, 16-20 August 1946, Government of Bengal. Cited in Lambert, Richard, D - '*Hindu-Muslim Riots*', p.170.

<sup>47</sup> Khosla, G.D - "*Stern Reckoning*", p.53.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

before the riot.<sup>50</sup> Interestingly, this Sharif Khan was formerly convicted for homicide. He was a trusted henchman of Suhrawardy and was given the League ticket during elections as he controlled the goondas of Howrah. Sharif Khan was visited by Mohammad Usman, the Mayor of Calcutta before the riot.<sup>51</sup> In the Muslim bustees of Calcutta, Suranjan Das, notes that weapons like daggers, spears were manufactured out of uprooted railings. The inmates of Muslim hostels were supplied with methylated spirit, kerosene oil and knives during the same time.

A section of the Muslim students were mobilized for violence. Moreover, the creation of the Muslim National Guards and Suhrawardy control over it further strengthened the League. The Muslim students living in several hostels in Calcutta were instructed by the leaders to set fire to trams and military lorries on the 16.<sup>52</sup>

The League was intelligent enough to assume before hand that during the forthcoming bloodshed of 16<sup>th</sup> August the Muslims were to suffer from injuries as would the Hindus. Due to this reason the League organized a body called the 'Pakistan Ambulance Corps', to provide first aid to the Leagues on that day.<sup>53</sup> Mr. Abdul Wahad Chaudhary, a League leader was appointed the D.G.O.C of the Corps. He took charge of a first-aid-centre which was to be opened at Curzon Park, near

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p.49.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. and also Lambert, R.D. - '*Hindu-Muslim Riots*', pp.176-77.

<sup>52</sup> Source: Report of the Commissioner of Police, Calcutta, Cited in Khosla, G.D. - '*Stern Reckoning*', p.56.

<sup>53</sup> Khosla, G.D. - '*Stern Reckoning*', p.53.

maidan where the rally of the League was to be held. In addition, five more first-aid-units were to be kept in reserve and an ambulance bearing a red crescent on white background was to circulate through the city on the 16<sup>th</sup>. Moreover, arrangements were made so that every League procession had its own first aid equipments, two League representatives were to be posted at each of the Medical College Hospitals and also at the Campbell Hospital. Some League representatives were kept ready to go the other hospitals in the city if necessity arose. The information about these patients were to be conveyed to the Calcutta office of the Corps, from where it was to be made obtainable for the public.<sup>54</sup> These elaborate arrangements were not merely out of foresight, 'but...[were] clear proof of the fact that the local League leaders had foreknowledge of what would happen on the Direct Action Day, and had taken steps to provide facilities for the treatment of their injured and wounded.'<sup>55</sup>

To see to it that the riot does not remain localized at some places in the city the League arranged for vehicles for the transportation of the Muslim rioters. The fact that the League did such a thing is exemplified by a photocopy of a blank petrol rationing coupon signed by Suhrawardy and issued to a Muslim lorry owner days before the riot. This photocopied coupon was printed in a Calcutta based paper,

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, pp.53-54.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.



'Nationalist' on 1<sup>st</sup> September, 1946.<sup>56</sup> Suranjan Das, has shown that the Mayor of Calcutta Mr. Usman and the other League politician Mr. Ispahani procured vehicles belonging to the Calcutta Corporation and Muslim businessmen for the rioters. Moreover, Suhrawardy procured the food ration of a month, meant for 10,000 people to feed these League rioters. These lorries, serving the League, being provided beforehand with coupons for obtaining petrol were to be seen travelling all over Calcutta carrying Muslim mobs armed with 'lathis, spears, daggers, knives, unburnt torches, empty soda-water bottles, tins containing kerosene oil and rags soaked in oil ready for being used in setting fire to houses', from 16<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> August.<sup>57</sup>

It would be wrong to assume that Suhrawardy's manipulations ended with mobilizing the Muslim student, youth or with the induction of Muslim goondas in the city and with releasing hundreds of terrorists from the prison in Calcutta day before the riot. He interfered with the activities of the police and tainted the city's police administration with a communal bias.<sup>58</sup> Under the European or Anglo-Indian police sergeants, the lower ranks were increasingly being manned by Muslims. Muslims were disproportionately inducted into the ranks of constables. This could be illustrated by the break up of the recruit for constables.

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<sup>56</sup> Lambert, R.D. - *'Hindu-Muslim Riots'*, p.170.

<sup>57</sup> Khosla, G.D. - *'Stern Reckoning'*, p.55.

<sup>58</sup> Ray.R.I. Annual Report of Police Administration of the Town of Calcutta and its Suburbs for the year 1945 (Government of Benga Press,1)

**Table 2.2 Community- wise break- up of newly inducted constables.**

1. Bengali Muslim	69
2. Up-country Muslim	9
3. Bengali Hindu	33
4. Up-country Hindu	9
5. Scheduled Caste	38
6. Gurkhas	18
7. Punjabi Muslims	1
Total	177

Source:- Lambert R.D. --'Hindu-Muslim Riots', p.178.

Moreover, on the Direct Action Day, 22 police stations out of 24 in Calcutta were in charge of Muslim officials. The rest were under Anglo-Indians.

The consequences of this communal influence in police administration was to be observed in the inaction or half-hearted action taken by the police during the riot. Fazlul Huq's speech in the Assembly during the no-confidence motion and several testimonies before the Spens Commission, later illustrated how the police stayed inactive during the riot or in the way they also participated in the looting during the riot.

So the stage was set up by Suhrawardy to set the city ablaze on 16<sup>th</sup> August 1946. As a result of the hasty activities of the League, the several ward meetings were summarily concluded in the localities of Calcutta, the Muslim mobs were prepared for the riot. The goondas were ready, armed to the teeth after having received protection from

the M.L government. As a defensive action the mobile first-aid units were ready. The police had every idea of what was going to happen and they were to forsake their responsibilities temporarily. The city of Calcutta awaited the unforeseen tragedy that was to unfold from the morning of 16<sup>th</sup> August.

## **PART B**

### **PREPARING FOR THE RIOT: THE HINDUS**

“The ‘even killing’ in Calcutta strengthens the assumption that both the Hindus and the Muslims were equally prepared.”

Shila Sen in ‘Muslim Politics in Bengal.’

While the Muslim League worked hastily to actualize their plan of Direct Action, it would be wrong to presume that the Hindus of Calcutta sat quietly, watching the tragedy unfold. The flurry of activities on the Muslim side before the riot was evenly matched by activities in the Hindu side. The Hindus were also preparing their men to face the ‘Direct Action’ of the Muslims.

In answer to the League’s pamphlets in Urdu, the Hindu Mahasabha started distributing pamphlets which forewarned the Hindus of the Direct Action Day and urged them to take up arms against the Muslims. In a pamphlet titled ‘Sabdhan! 16<sup>th</sup> August’ the Mahasabha appealed that ‘The Hindu will have to give a clear reply to the

highhandedness of the Muslim League.<sup>59</sup>

In another pamphlet the Mahasabha urged the Hindus to do their best to make the proposed strike of the League a failure. The text of the pamphlet said:-

“The Hindus and non-Muslims of Bengal are strongly opposed to the demand for Pakistan. Under the circumstances to join or to assist in the hartal declared by the Muslim League will amount to supporting the Pakistan demand. The Hindus of Bengal can never act in this way. They had the audacity to declare the day as a public holiday. The object is obvious. By this action they mean to compel the Hindu government servants to join the hartal. The Hindus will have to go to give a clear answer to this act of effrontery. The Hindus must make organized efforts to see that no Hindu, or non-Muslim or non-League Muslim is forced to join the hartal. We therefore, request the public to continue on that day their normal work. They must not yield to any coercive measures. Remember that to join the hartal is to support the demand for Pakistan.”<sup>60</sup>

The Bengali newspaper during this time urged the Bengali Hindus to oppose the hartal of Direct Action Day. While the newspaper reports cannot be seen as propaganda of the Hindus in response to the

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<sup>59</sup> Rahid, Harun-cr - 'The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh', Dhaka, 1985, p.260. Cited in Bandopadhyay.S. - 'Kolkata Danga', p.21.

<sup>60</sup> Khosla,G.D. - 'Stern Reckoning', p.55.

League plan of the Direct Action, the reports can easily be described as a reflection of the general mood of the Hindu citizens of Calcutta. A few are quoted as examples:-

‘The victory of League’s Pakistan has to be quashed at its very inception or else Bengalis will have many misfortunes in store....so it is the duty of the minority community (in Bengal) to defeat the efforts of the majority community with all its energy’. (Basumati, 10 August, 1946).

‘But why should the League feel so confident. Do they think that in (an all India) Direct Action 25 crore Hindus will be scared to face 9 crore Muslims?’ (Basumati, 4 August, 1946)

‘The League is making the Hindus their target, though they try to camouflange this message by trickery in language, it can be clearly understood’. (Basumati, 11 August, 1946)

“Possibility of a Hindu-Muslim clash in Calcutta” (Basumati, 14 August, 1946)

(SOURCE:- B.L.A. Proceedings, Second Session, September 1946, No Confidence Motion, Pg-

These reports aroused the anger of the Hindus against the League, and this contributed to the stiffening of Hindu attitude and the consequent Hindu against the League.

The Hindu Mahasabha was one of the most active organization which made arrangements for the Hindu resistance. Their work was made easy by Nazimuddin’s statement, where he said, ‘Our Direct

Action is not against the British, it is against the Hindus.’<sup>61</sup> Such statements created panic among the Hindus and soon the initial fear gave way to aggression.<sup>62</sup>

The Mahasabha has been active in Calcutta in organizing and running local clubs, and akharas (gymnasiums) where the local Hindu youth were given training in muscle-building, gymnastics, wrestling and club-weilding.<sup>63</sup> Many such local clubs were run with active help from the Bharat Sevaram Sangha, a volunteer wing of the Hindu Mahasabha.<sup>64</sup> Alongside the growth of the Mahasabha, copious Hindu organization came up in Calcutta. Ostensibly such organization took up the work of social service but in reality these organizations’ adopted a martial style and urged Hindus to train themselves in the arts of self-defense.<sup>65</sup> Very often, these organizations were able to attract old terrorists who were brought in to train the youth in martial arts and some terrorist tactics. They preached aggressive Hinduism and physiques so that they would take up arms when Hindus were in trouble.<sup>66</sup> The following is the list of organizations in Calcutta in 1945-47.

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<sup>61</sup> Ahmed, Badruddin – ‘Swadhinata Sangramer Nepathya Kahini, p.25. Cited in Bandopadhyay, S. – ‘Kolkata Danga’, pp.21-23.

<sup>62</sup> Ahmed, Abul Mansur – ‘Amar Dekha Rajniti-Panahash Bachhar’, p.253.

<sup>63</sup> Chatterji, Jaya. – ‘Bengal Divided’ (Cambridge, 1995), pp.235,236.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, pp.233-235.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, p.233.

<sup>66</sup> See Patel to R.K.Sidhwa, 27 August, 1946. In Durga Das (ed.) ‘Sardar Patel’s Correspondence’, Vol.III, p.148, cited in J.Chatterji, p.233.

**Table 2.3**

	Name	Strength	Areas of Influence	Financial Position	Threat to Public Order
1	RSS	100	North Calcutta	Moderate	None
2	Jatiya Yuba Sena	200	North Calcutta	Moderate	None
3	Bagh Bazar Tarun Byan Samiti	25-30	Bagh Bazar Area	Not found	Potential
4	Deshbandu Byam Samiti	25-40	Bagh Bazar, Shyam Bazar	Not found	Potential
5	Hindustan Scout Association.	3000	Whole of Calcutta	Sound	None
6	Hindu Shakti Sanga	300-500	Muchipara, Bowbazar	Sound	Potential
7	Arya Bir Dal	16	Park Circus	Sound	None
8	BPHM Volunteer Corps	250	Not known	Not known	None

Source: Compiled from Special Branch memoranda on volunteer organizations, tabled in Government of Bengal, Special Branch, 'PM' Series, Files 829/45 and 822/47 I. Cited in Chatterji, J.- 'Bengal Divided', p.235. The Hindu Sakti Sangha and Hindu Mahasabha Volunteer Corps possibly overlapped with the Bharat Sevashram Sangha.

What is important about these organizations is that such clubs, akharas and social service organizations preached militancy and gave physical training to the bhadralok youth of Calcutta. This youth was then effectively converted into supporters of the communal Hindu ideology which preached hatred against the Muslims.<sup>67</sup> More over the Mahasaba had been encouraging to prepare secretly against any future communal trouble and for this purpose it trained even goondas in staff and dagger play.<sup>68</sup>

The Clubs became the focal point of Hindu mobilization before

<sup>67</sup> Chatterji, J. - 'Bengal Divided'. Pp.235-238.

<sup>68</sup> Toker F. 'While Memory Serves', p.143

the riot. Gopal C. Mukherjee, one of the leaders of the Hindu mobs, remembers that in the days immediately prior to the riot, there was a general idea among the Hindu bhadralok youth that the forthcoming days were to be a period of intense violence. For this purpose, the local Hindu youth was organized to put up resistance. The local akharas became the venue for meetings where the plan of action for the coming days were chalked out. Together with these young men of Central Calcutta started amassing weapons. These weapons included lathis, daggers, swords which were either Kirpans, spears crude bombs and even firearms. The guns were made available after the end of the War. These were either sold by the military or were collected from the ammunitions dumped by the army. These firearms included Mauser pistol, rifles and even stenguns. Enough cartridge was accumulated to use these weapons. Once these Hindu youth entered the fray, these weapons were generously distributed by their leader Gopal.<sup>69</sup>

Interestingly Gopal was active in a Hindu youth organization called the Atmonnati Samiti. This association was founded by Gopal's uncle Anukul Mukherjee, a revolutionary terrorist. The terrorist tactics perfected by the association in Anukul Mukherjee's time came to be of much help to Gopal during the riot. The Samiti provided him with the

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<sup>69</sup> Source: Author's interview with Gopal C. Mukherjee at his residence in Calcutta, in March 1999. His statement is corroborated by Saradindu Bandopadhyay in Adin Ripu. Bandopadhyay makes mention of the sale of firearms by demobilized soldiers to the underworld at the easy availability of firearms in the city.



necessary Hindu ideology and also with training in weilding lethal arms. In his youth Gopal was also an amateur wrestler in the akharas of Central Calcutta, and his fine physique coupled with training in martial arts came handy during 16<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> August.<sup>70</sup>

It was during this time that former INA personnel became very active. Though hailing from a very secular background like the I.N.A. these people did not hesitate to join the communal frenzy.<sup>71</sup> The Hindu Mahasabha was successful in bringing demobbed soldiers and released I.N.A. men under its banner and to put these men into training Hindu youth in martial discipline and tactics.<sup>72</sup> During the riot these ex-I.N.A. men were seen to be involving themselves in rioting. Their associates were accused of having set fire to slums inhabited by Muslims. Jawaharlal Nehru while commenting on such developments, said to the press, 'when such conflicts occur, there is always danger of even persons being swept away by passions and sinking to low levels.'<sup>73</sup>

In view of the above developments the riot of 16<sup>th</sup> August 1946 was anovelty in the history of the province. For the first time the Bengali Hindus, the bhadralok classes took to organizing and even

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Das, Suranjan – C.R.B, p.183.

<sup>72</sup> Source: Memo dated 5<sup>th</sup> February, 1946. Government of Bengal, Special Branch. 'PM' Series. File No.829/45. Cited in Chatterji.J – 'Bengal Divided', p.238.

<sup>73</sup> See – 'Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru', Vol.15, 9ed.), S.Gopal, (Delhi 1982). Cited in Das,S. – C.R.B, p.273. Also see page 184 of the same book.

participating in a riot. Historians have interpreted these developments in various ways. Suranjan Das, a Marxist historian has interpreted this as a moment in history when the world of organized politics forged links with the non-institutionalized domains of politics, a moment when popular communalism mingled freely with the communalism of the elite.<sup>74</sup> For the Cambridge historian Jaya Chatterji this participation was the culmination of the Hindu communalism of the bhadralok community of the city. She discovers a thread of continuity in the development of communal consciousness of the educated Bengali elite and middle class and the occurrence of the riot of 16<sup>th</sup> August.<sup>75</sup>

Hindu mobilization, however, was not limited to the bhadralok section. Local strongmen from the slums as also upcountrymen who earned their living by menial labour were to play a very important part in the riot. 'Bengali Hindu potters, goalas, scavengers, domes, petty shopkeepers. Goldsmith and Kalwars (artisans dealing with scrapmetals)' actively participated in the riot.<sup>76</sup>

Another interesting part in the riot was to be played by a rich section of Hindu non-Bengali populace of the Calcutta. They were the Marwaris. Many Marwari businessmen during this time had purchased arms from American soldiers, which were supplied to the Hindu rioters.

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<sup>74</sup> Das, Suranjan - 'Towards an Understanding of Communal Violence in Twentieth Century Bengal', article in *EPW*, August 27, 1988, pp.1804-1805, and also Das - C.R.B. pp.161-192.

<sup>75</sup> Chatterji, J. - 'Bengal Divide', pp.227-239.

<sup>76</sup> Das, Suranjan - C.R.B. p.183.

Factories owned by Hindus were used to house Hindu rioters to let them manufacture crude bombs for the Hindus to use their mansions as headquarters for operation.<sup>77</sup>

Hindus did not also lag behind their Muslim counterparts in stockpiling weapons for the day. Other than collecting arms from soldiers and manufacturing crude bombs, the poor Hindu workers living in the slums manufactured knives, collected iron rods, brickbats and missiles for the fateful day.<sup>78</sup> In the bhadralok localities, the citizens, who were otherwise peaceful people, stockpile rags rolled in cottonballs (meant to set ablaze and thrown at any attacking mob), clubs and brickbats on the terrace of the houses.<sup>79</sup>

Keeping these preparations of the Hindus of Calcutta in mind, therefore, we can reject any view that seeks to establish that 'Hindus were caught unaware' in the riot of 16<sup>th</sup> August. Like the Muslims the Hindus were also prepared to face the forthcoming calamity.

The struggle for the achievement of Pakistan and the strength for 'Akhand Bharat' was thus about to begin on the 16<sup>th</sup>. Both the sides were ready for assaulting the other. A large section of the city's population was prepared for criminal action. The hordes of 'bad characters' imported into the city waited for the battle to begin. The city newspaper Amrita Bazar Patrika and the Communist organ

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<sup>77</sup> Das, S. -C.R.B, p.180.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Source: Statement given by veteran Bengali Congressmen Bijay Singh Nahar. Cited in Bandopadhyay S. pp.21-22.

'Swadhinata' expressed the worries of the city about the fateful days to come.<sup>80</sup> The fear of a 'widespread riot' had by then struck terror in the hearts of the citizens.<sup>81</sup>

In such a situation the Bengal government declared 16<sup>th</sup> August to be a public holiday.<sup>82</sup> This decision met with widespread protest from the Hindus and some other sections of the city. In a mammoth gathering held under the auspices of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee in Derhapriya Park in South Calcutta on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1946 the government's arbitrary decision of declaring 16<sup>th</sup> August a public holiday was severely condemned and a resolution was passed saying:-

"This meeting of the citizens of Calcutta representing different shades of political opinion records its emphatic protest against the arbitrary highhanded and indiscreet action of the League Government in Bengal in declaring 16<sup>th</sup> August as a public holiday in defiance of public sentiments and in the teeth of popular opinion.'<sup>83</sup>

The above resolution gives clear indication of the terror that the decision of observing Direct Action had struck in the hearts of the citizens. Such protests and resolutions were to prove abortive. By that time violence had become inevitable in Calcutta. The fact that the government was trying to stop all business of the day for a fierce fight

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<sup>80</sup> 'Amrita Bazar Patrika', 16<sup>th</sup> August, 1946. Editorial. And 'Swadhinata', 16<sup>th</sup> August, 1946.

<sup>81</sup> Swadhinata, 16<sup>th</sup> August, 1946. Cited in Bandopadhyay – *Kolkata Danga*.

<sup>82</sup> Morning News 8<sup>th</sup> August, 1946 (in Bandopadhyay)

<sup>83</sup> Amrita Bazar Patrika, 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1946

had become clear to all.

However, similar to this resolution of the B.P.C.C, the Indian Federation of Labour and its constituent units decided not to associate themselves with the observance of Direct Action. The National Organizer of the Federation Rajani Mukherjee sought to desuade the labouring classes from participating in the riot. He warned that 'this (i.e. Direct Action) is likely to split labour into rival communal camps and destroy its solidarity and spell disaster for the trade union movement.'<sup>84</sup> But such appeals were drowned in the overwhelmingly strong communalist propaganda which did not leave the labouring class unaffected.

The city thus resembled a battleground where the rivals were ready and waited for the hour when bloodletting was to begin.

### **SECTION III**

#### **THE RIOT OF AUGUST 1946**

"The events in Calcutta during the fortnight under report, starting on the 16 - Direct Action Day - have compelled the attention of all Bengal to the practical exclusion of every other topic. The possibility of trouble that day has been recognized as mentioned in the last report, but it had never been considered that anything on the scale of the Great Killing; as the disturbances have been appropriately called, was likely. The disturbances which were not anti-government but communal in

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

nature and assumed in fact the character of a civil war.”<sup>85</sup>

The Bengal government described the situation in Calcutta, prevailing from 16<sup>th</sup> August to 20<sup>th</sup> August in the above words. The Governor of Bengal F.J.Burrows in letter to Pethick Lawrence stated, ‘The Scale of rioting was unprecedented. It was a program between two rival armies of the Calcutta underworld.’<sup>86</sup> During those five days Calcutta was virtually at the mercy of the underworld. 2924 ‘persons of goonda type’, confined under the Defence of India Rules during the war were released in Calcutta between July and December 1945 played an active role in the bloodshed.<sup>87</sup>

For the convenience of the present discussion this study of the riot is divided into two parts. The first part will be a brief description of the riot. The second part will be devoted to a scrutiny of goondaism during the riot and administrative connivance which allowed such a thing to happen.

### **The Riot and Its Consequences**

The riot began in Calcutta on 16<sup>th</sup> August as early as 6 A.M in the morning. By that time the police headquarters in Calcutta had started

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<sup>85</sup> Fortnightly Report, File No. 18/8/46, Poll (I). Home, Political. (Report for the latter half of August 1945), NAI.

<sup>86</sup> Burrows to Pelthick-Lawrence, Document No.197. in ‘*The Transfer of Power*’, edited by N.Mansergh, Vol.8, p.302.

<sup>87</sup> Source: (1) *T.O.P*, Vol.8, Document 197, p.302. (2) *Report of the Spens Commission. 1946*, Calcutta, Vol.V, p.66, Examination of Mr. H.N.Sircan, Deputy Commissioner of Police, Detective Dept., Calcutta by Mr. M.N.Ghose. (3) Das, Suranjan *C.R.B*, p.185.

receiving the news of minor scuffles.<sup>88</sup> Troubles began at Manicktola bazar in northern Calcutta when Muslims forced the local Hindu shopkeepers to observe hartal.<sup>89</sup> The first casualties during the riot were two Hindu goallas (milkmen) who were stopped on the streets and were killed in a scuffle by Muslim goondas.<sup>90</sup>

The biggest event of the day was happening at Calcutta maidan. It was the massive rally of the League taking place under the Ochterlony monument. There, the Leaguers were being addressed by Suhrawardy, the Chief Minister, Mohammed Usman the Mayor, Nazimuddin, former C.M of Bengal and League leader, Abdul Hashim the right hand man of Suhrawardy and the head of Muslim League National Guard. The speeches began at 3 P.M in the afternoon.<sup>91</sup> By that time Calcutta had started experiencing widespread rioting. The vast number of Muslims who had assembled at the foot of the monument had come armed to teeth and the police noted that the congregation consisted of a huge number of goondas.<sup>92</sup> The numerical strength of this Muslim crowd has been variously estimated as 30,000, 100,000 and 500,000.<sup>93</sup> Whatever be the correct figure undoubtedly there was a huge crowd at the rally.

The speeches delivered at the meeting by the League leaders were rather provocative. The mob which had already committed enough

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<sup>88</sup> R.S.C., Vol.II, p.68.

<sup>89</sup> R.S.C., Vol.II, p.68.

<sup>90</sup> Interview with Gopal C.Mukerjee.

<sup>91</sup> Lambert, Richard,D. - '*Hindu-Muslim Riots*', p.172.

<sup>92</sup> R.S.C., Vol.II, p.22 and Vol.V, pp.58-60.

<sup>93</sup> Das.S. - '*C.R.B.*', p.171.

violence was thus instigated into participating in further violence. League leaders present in the meeting like Suhrawardy, Gazanfur Ali Khan and Khwaja Nazimuddin reminded the crowd about the real target of the Direct Action. Nazimuddin said in his address, 'Our struggle is against the Congress and the Hindus.' By that time the riot was in full swing in the city and unprecedented barbarism had started taking place.<sup>94</sup>

From the early morning of the 16<sup>th</sup>, there were processions of Muslims armed with lathis, daggers, soda water bottles, clubs and crude bombs.<sup>95</sup> The leader of the mobs were in most of the cases reported to be possessing firearms. The violence of that day was mostly in the nature of mob fights which begun with the Leaguers attempting to force hartal on the Hindus, specially in market areas, also with Hindus attacking the processions of the Muslims. Looting of shops had begun all over the city. It was very common for a mob to loot the shops in the surroundings.

From 17<sup>th</sup> August arson begun in the city in a major way. A day earlier the murders were generally occasioned by scuffles that took place between the two rival groups in the city. From the 17<sup>th</sup> it was usual for the rioters to set fire to the slums which were inhabited by the members of the other community.<sup>96</sup> Despite the curfew imposed on

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<sup>94</sup> Hashim, Abdul - '*Amar Jibon of Bibhagpurbo Bangladesher Rajniti*', p.105.

<sup>95</sup> The minutes of the R.S.C is replete with the description of processions and their weaponry, See Vol.V, pp.125-126; pp.58-60, Vol.IV, pp.217-219.

<sup>96</sup> R.S.C, Vol.IV, p.219, Vol.V, pp.127-128.



the city rioting went on full swing. The rioters ignored the curfew orders and went on committing savagery. Both the police and the military found it difficult to control the situation. Arson did not remain confined to the slums. Shops after being looted were set on fire.<sup>97</sup> On the 18<sup>th</sup> the situation worsened so far that the police were unable to face the fury of the mobs. The mobs on their part did not hesitate to attack the police if they found themselves being obstructed by them.<sup>98</sup> Houses were being looted in front of the police. Pitched battles took place on the streets with the police failing to bring the situation under control.<sup>99</sup> On the 19<sup>th</sup> the consequences of the riot slowly became observable. Much bloodshed had already occurred, leaving many dead and many other fatally injured. But this did not mean that rioting had stopped. While rioting went on the police and the military were able to slowly impose curfew at certain areas.<sup>100</sup> Police pickets were posted at certain areas within the city. However, the police was horribly short of manpower at this stage. The efforts of the police were supplemented by the army. The streets of Calcutta were still so hazardous that the Commissioner of Police had to arm the men serving as traffic police.<sup>101</sup> On the 20<sup>th</sup>, furious rioting was more or less over. However, instances of minor rioting fracas, stabbing and shooting went on. Police and military pickets were posted in the localities in such a way that they

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<sup>97</sup> *R.S.C.*, Vol.VI, pp.182-184.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol.VIII, pp.255-256.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol.II, 72-73. Statement of the Commission of Police of Calcutta.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

separated the areas inhabited by the two communities. A photograph of a similar locality consisting of both Hindu and Muslim residents in north Calcutta shows that makeshift fences were erected so as to separate the Hindu from the Muslim area.<sup>102</sup> From the 21<sup>st</sup>, peace committees were put into action to declare truce and the city was tired and ailing after five days of madness. On that day the relief operations had begun to take place slowly while the streets of the city were still strewn with corpses.<sup>103</sup> On 22<sup>nd</sup> August Calcutta was relatively quiet, however, isolated skirmishes and murders continued months after the riot was over. Moreover, the riot did not remain confined to Calcutta alone. The industrial satellites of the city were affected by the communal frenzy.<sup>104</sup>

Within Calcutta the areas worst affected by the riot were the 'densely populated areas of the metropolis – the sector bounded on the north by Bow Bazar street, on the east of Upper Circular Road, on the north by Vivekananda Road, on the West by the Strand Road or roughly speaking the police stations of Jorasanko, Taltolla, Park Circus, Entally, Amherst Street, Bow Bazar and Manicktola, Bustees were the most vulnerable spots. Thou which won particular notoriety included Kalabagan, Rajabazar, Watgunj, Mehdibagan, Sovabazar, Nikaripara, Manicktola, Zakaria street, Rambagan, Lalbagan and Sovabazar.'<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> See 'Outlook' (A Weekly Magazine). Issue dated, 15 August 1997.

<sup>103</sup> Amrita Bazar Patrika, 21<sup>st</sup> Aug. 1946.

<sup>104</sup> Lambert, Richard, D. – 'Hindu-Muslim Riots', p.173.

<sup>105</sup> Das, Suranjan – C.R.B, pp.171-172.

During the riot the 'general pattern of aggression corresponded to the majority areas of each community.'<sup>106</sup> In south Calcutta, where the Hindus were in a majority, the Muslim lost their lives in a one-sided battle. Hindus fell prey to the Muslim marauders in the Muslim majority areas of East Calcutta. In central Calcutta, the number of rioters on both the sides were evenly matched and pitched battles took place. Organization of local defense characterized the riot onwards from 18<sup>th</sup> August. Watch was kept on the streets of the locality from the rooftops of the houses. As soon as any member of the rival community was in sight the defense organizations sprung into action and they attacked the person being preyed upon as soon as he came within striking distance.<sup>107</sup>

The most common forms of violence during the riot were skirmishes involving a large number of people, gangfights amongst groups of hooligans, loot, arson, attacks on the houses of rich and eminent citizens, and at a later stage cases of individual murders and last but not the least crimes against women and children.

The weapons used in the riot were of many description, ranging from 'sticks, daggers, acid bulbs, soda bottles shaken so that upon breaking they would splinter, home made guns may be igniting a powder charge at a close end of a piece of pipe filled with bolts, grenades, dynamite charges and various guns' as also locally

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<sup>106</sup> Lambert - '*Hindu-Muslim Riots*' p.174.

<sup>107</sup> R.S.C. Vol. IX, pp.82-103, cross Examination of o.c.D.N Mullick by J.P.Mitter and also see Ahmed, Abdul Mansur- *Amar Dekha Rajnitir Pan chash Bachhar*, p.254. and pp.251-252.

manufactured spears, swords, torches and rag dipped in kerosene hurled after being set ablaze.<sup>108</sup>

After 22<sup>nd</sup> August the shocking consequences of the riot lay bare. The intensity of violence could be gauged from the Bengal Governors secret report written on 16<sup>th</sup> august at 6 P.M:-

‘...situation upto 6 P.M is that there has been numerous and widespread communal clashes in Calcutta, accompanied by some looting of shops, arson. Weapons employed appear to have been chiefly brick-bats but in a number of cases shotguns have been used by members of both communities and some cases stabbing has been reported... there has been some police firing on rioters crowds...casualties not yet known...position has been dangerous and I am unable as yet to say that we have passed the worst. Mass meetings of Moslems on Calcutta maidan is now over and there is possibility of increase in cases of stabbing and looting and retaliation by Hindus as processionists return to their homes...Disturbances so far have been markedly communal and not, repeat not, in anti-British...or anti-Government.’<sup>109</sup>

**Table 2.4 The following table shows the casualties after the first day of the riot:-**

Hospital	No. of people admitted	No. of Hindus	No. of Muslims	Others
1. Medical College	435	176	207	52
2. Campell	132	67	65	-
3. Carmichael	16	11	5	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>583</b>	<b>258</b>	<b>277</b>	<b>52</b>

Source: ‘Modern Review’, September 1946, Cited in Sandip Bandopadhyay – ‘Kolkata Danga’, p.30.

After the first day the Amrita Bazar Patrika estimated there were 161 deaths.<sup>110</sup> On the second day, according to the estimates of the Statesman the riot had left 270 dead, more than 1600 injured and 900

<sup>108</sup> Das.S. C.R.B, p.180., R.S.C, Vol.II, p.69.

<sup>109</sup> Mansergh,N. – ‘Transfer of Power’, Vol.VII, Document 154.

<sup>110</sup> A.B.P., 17 Aug.1946.Cited in Bandhopadhyay’s – ‘Kolkata Dang’ p.30.

buildings gutted by fire.<sup>111</sup> The number of deaths rose to 2000 after the third day of riot. In the final analysis the ferocity of the four days left about 4000 dead, and 10,000 injured.<sup>112</sup>

**Table 2.5 The figures of the corpses collected by different agencies were:-**

By Govt. Organizations	1182
By Anjuman Mofidul Islam	761
By Hindu Satkar Samiti	1230
Total	3173

Source: Khosla, G.D. - 'Stern Reckoning', p.65.

According to one government estimate the riot left 4,400 dead, 16,000 wounded and 10,000 homeless.<sup>113</sup> The Calcutta Corporation had to organize a 'Corpse Removal Committee' to remove the dead bodies from the streets of the city. The sweepers had to be given extra pay and heavy ration of country liquor to do the work.<sup>114</sup> But even then disposal of corpses from the different localities remained a very difficult job.<sup>115</sup>

Another problem which the riot created was that of housing for the people who were left homeless. For those thousands of people finding alternative accommodation was very difficult. Moreover, they were not ready to go back to their erstwhile homes as they expected further troubles in those localities.<sup>116</sup> Some of the these destitute were

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<sup>111</sup> Bandopadhyay, p.31, and Mansergh, N. - '*Transfer of Power*', Document 161.

<sup>112</sup> File No. 5/46/46 - Poll(I) NAI, Porter, Home Dept. cited in Das, S, C.R.B., p.171.

<sup>113</sup> File No. 18/8/46 - Poll (I), (N.A.I) Home, Political, para-14.

<sup>114</sup> Lambert - '*Hindu-Muslim Riots*', p.174.

<sup>115</sup> Chatterjee, P.K. - '*Struggle and Strife in Urban Bengal, 1937-1947*', (Calcutta, 1991), p.182.

<sup>116</sup> File No.18/8/46 (Poll) I, Fortnightly Report for the second half of August

housed in the relief camps of the government and non-government agencies. Six Government Relief Camps provided accommodation to 515 people, earlier they had to house about 1700 people. The 305 camps erected by volunteer organizations had to accommodate a total of 189,015 people. Some of them were lucky enough to receive medical aid from the Indian Red Cross workers.<sup>117</sup>

During this time Calcutta suffered from an acute scarcity of food. Looting of ration shops distributing food, clothes and kerosene was common. As a result of which the rationing system broke down in Calcutta.<sup>118</sup> From 20<sup>th</sup> August onwards rationing was reorganized in the city though on a minor scale with 430 out of 1288 government shops in function.<sup>119</sup>

No estimate has been made of the property destroyed by the loot and arson during the riot. But, roughly, of the total property lost during the riot 65% belong to Hindus, 20% belonged to Muslims and 15% were under joint and European ownership.<sup>120</sup> The rich in this group were mostly of the Hindu community. A characteristic feature of the attacks on property during the riot was the selective nature of such attacks which left European properties untouched. 'The ... discriminatory elements in looting by the Muslims exclusively pillaging Hindu shops and vice-versa, leaving untouched the property

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contd...

1946, NAI, para-13.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, para -27.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, para-24.

<sup>119</sup> Chatterjee, P.K - '*Struggle and Strife in Urban Bengal*', p.183.

<sup>120</sup> Khosla, G.D. - '*Stern Reckoning*', p.65.

of government and Europeans.’<sup>121</sup> An eyewitness of the riot has observed that in the Chowringhee area i.e. in the white town, merry making went on freely during the four fateful day. Incidentally during the workers strike of 29<sup>th</sup> July 1946, the same ‘sahibs’ (Europeans) residing in that area had not dared to open a window.<sup>122</sup>

The riot crippled the economic life of the city. Industrial and commercial activities virtually remained suspended. The riot resulted in a heavy exodus of non-Bengali labourers from the city. As many as 150,000 people fled from Calcutta by the end of August. This continued even in the first half of September. As a result, the numbers in the mills were dwindling. Moreover, many Muslim workers were too shaky to rejoin work as they feared assault on them by fellow workers of the Hindu community.<sup>123</sup> Such fears were backed by experience of the days of the riot. ‘Hindu goalas’ (milkman), Hindu Oriya mill-workers and Muslims tram drivers’, were massacred during the riot. Upcountrymen who resided in Calcutta and were engaged some form of menial labour, belonging to both the communities, were the worst sufferers from the riots.<sup>124</sup> Interestingly, they were the ones who had participated in the violence most zealously.

In official version, the riot stopped on 20<sup>th</sup> August 1946 but isolated acts of violence continued long after that. Even till the middle of September assaults and affrays continued. The fresh beginning of

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<sup>121</sup> Das, S. – *C.R.B.*, p.172.

<sup>122</sup> Sen, Manikuntala – ‘*Shediner Kaltha*’, p.170.

<sup>123</sup> Chatterjee, P.K – ‘*Struggle and Strife*’ p.183.

<sup>124</sup> Das, S. – *C.R.B.*, pp.175, 182.

cases of individual attacks specifically in North Calcutta, compelled the return of the military to the city Guards to be posted on trams well into September. Till the middle of that month Calcutta witnessed 40 murders and 140 cases of stabbing, and attacks with weapon like lathis. The government failed in establishing a Central Peace Committee so as to supervise the activities of the different local peace committees in the mohallas. Fresh outbreaks of violence continued to render life, in the city, insecure for the ordinary citizen.<sup>125</sup> The riot had opened a fresh chapter in the history of blood and gore in Calcutta, and rampant and brazen acts of goondaism overshadowed all aspects of the life of the city.

### **Goondaism Under State Patronage**

It is beyond doubts that the riots was the handiwork of goondas. Certain details of incidents of goondaism, will help to reveal the nature of the collusion between goondas and state authority.

A large number of Muslim goondas had swelled the crowd at the rally at the Maidan. These goondas attacked the shopping centres as soon as the meeting ended. Petrol pumps were raided. The bloodiest butchery took place between 8 a.m. and 3 p.m. on the 17 when the fire raging in northern and central parts of the city set the southern part ablaze. Along with looting, arson and murders bustees were being set

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<sup>125</sup> Secret Report on the Political Situation in Bengal for the second half of September 1946. In the 'Fortnightly Report of the Second Half of September, 1946, NAI.



ablaze on the 18. For example a Muslim bustees at Baghbazar was burnt down by nine goondas who was paid by a wealthy Hindu living in the same neighbourhood.<sup>126</sup> Offices of political parties like the Congress in South Calcutta and that of the Communist party was attacked by the goondas. Similar was the fate of offices of newspaper like the Statesman, Hindustan Standard and Ananda Bazar Patrika and Swadhinata.<sup>127</sup>

The 'killed and the wounded' in the riot came mainly from the 'poor innocents', as they were easy prey to goondaism.<sup>128</sup> This is exemplified by the fact that in the Sovobazar market area in northern Calcutta an entire population of rickshaw pullers were massacred by goondas.<sup>129</sup>

Thus the riot was 'unbridled savagery with homicidal maniacs let loose to kill and kill, to maim and burn. The underworld of Calcutta was taking charge of the city.'<sup>130</sup>

Another ugly feature of the riot was the participation of ordinary civilians in the violence. This was vengeful action by the ordinary citizens. Such violence made defenseless innocent and poor people prey. It was nothing but an act of pure communalism. Manikuntala Sen an eyewitness of the riot recounts the events of a murder when a old Muslim egg-hawker was beaten to death by a few medical students in

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<sup>126</sup> Tucker, F. "While Memory Serves", pp.158-165.

<sup>127</sup> Bandopadhyay, S. 'Kolkata Danga', p.28.

<sup>128</sup> Fortnightly Report 'Secret Report on the Political Situation in Bengal for the Second half of August, 1946, 18/8/46 (poll) I, Home, Political (Internal) NAI.

<sup>129</sup> Tucker, F. 'While Memory Serves', p.163.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p.160.

south Calcutta. On another occasion she saw that women belonging to respectable household handing over lathis to Hindu gentlemen on the pavements who went to prepare themselves to stop even any innocent Muslim from entering their locality. On both the occasions Sen laments the tragic loss of human feeling even by peace-loving citizens during the time of riots.<sup>131</sup> It was the demonstration of the worst type of crowd behaviour where the groups arrogated to themselves the right to kill a man.<sup>132</sup>

Similar sights were witnessed by Abul Mansur, who recounts incidents of murders of poor Muslims residing in slums by respected Hindu gentlemen who were the legal profession.<sup>133</sup> Like Hindus, Muslims amicable to other community in normal times participated in the communal orgy during the riots of 1947.<sup>134</sup>

The communal riot, the rampant goondaism which raged the city was made possible by the administrative authorities. The inefficient handling of the situation by the Bengal Governor and the corruption in police administration induced by Suhrawardy both strengthened the hand of the goonda.

The Governor of the province Frederick Burrows was responsible in many ways for the troubles between 16 August-20 August. The situation of Calcutta had worsened so far by 2.30 p.m. on the Direct

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<sup>131</sup> Sen, Manikuntala '*Shediner Katha*', pp.170-173.

<sup>132</sup> Canetti, Elias '*Crowds and Power*' (Victor Gollancz, Great Britain, 1962), p.83.

<sup>133</sup> Ahmed, Abul Mansur '*Aamar Dekha Rajniti Panchas Bachhar*', p.251.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p.252.

Action Day that the Commissioner of Calcutta police conveyed a telephonic message to the Governor saying that the situation 'in the Harrison Road, Wellington Square and Corporation Street was bad..., and troops should be called in.'<sup>135</sup> but the Governor after travelling through the riot-affected areas at 4 p.m. came to the conclusion 'that the situation was improving' and 'the situation did not justify the immediate use of troops.'<sup>136</sup> The military was called in finally in the afternoon of 17 August.<sup>137</sup> So the allegation raised by Leaguers that the Britishers were responsible for the tragedy in Calcutta had a grain of truth in it.<sup>138</sup> The Congress leader Sarat Chandra Bose described Burrows as an incompetent man to be the Governor. The Chairman of the A.I.T.U.C., Mrinal Kanti Basu said, addressing the Governor this 'Province has no use of you'.<sup>139</sup>

Burrows reacted to all this criticism saying that he did not intervene as he did not intend to create a situation where the people might lose faith in their premier i.e. Suhrawardy.<sup>140</sup> The Governor's reaction seems more like a lame excuse and it becomes clear that the British were grossly negligent in their efforts to stem the troubles.

However, the real support to goondaism came from the Government of the Province Suhrawardy was the man who intervened

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<sup>135</sup> Report of the Spens Commission (R.S.C) Vol. II, p.69.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid. p.69.

<sup>137</sup> B.L.A. Proceedings, Second Session, September 1946, Vol. LXXI, No.3, p.92.

<sup>138</sup> Hashim, Abul. '*Amar Jibon O Bibhagpurbo Bangladeshi Rajniti*', (Dacca, 1988), p.105.

<sup>139</sup> Amrita Bazar Patrika, 20 August 1946; Hindustan Standard 20 August. Cited in Bandopadyay, S. '*Kolkata Danga*', p.35.

<sup>140</sup> T.O.P, Vol. VIII, p.297.

with police administration during the days of the riot to allow the Muslim goondas a free hand.

With respect to police administration during the days of the riot 'Suhrawardy's continual presence in the control room along with many friends and his obvious communal bias', is of the utmost importance.<sup>141</sup> 'Suhrawardy's communal bias' shown during the worst moment was a matter of complaint even with the commanders of the battalions of British Indian Army stationed in Calcutta.<sup>142</sup> Suhrawardy stayed in the control room of the police headquarters in Calcutta along with other League leaders like Mohammed Usman and Lal Mia.<sup>143</sup> In the control room Suhrawardy continually argued with the Commissioner to have things his way.<sup>144</sup>

The inactivity of the police force had lethal consequences. It was a situation where 'Police help was sought by people but no help was rendered, when policemen having were available they were helpless in the situation having no order to do anything... and asked the people to protect themselves'.<sup>145</sup> Brigadier Sixsmith of the Eastern Command stated in a press conference on August 23 that 'the police contingent denied help to citizens and every form of cognizable offence like arson, looting assaults and murders took place under the very eyes of the police. It was alleged that 'if the police remained

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<sup>141</sup> Moon, Penderel 'Wavell: The Viceroy's Journal', (London, 193), p.339.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> R.S.C. Vol. II, p.69., Statement of Donald Ross Hardwick, Commissioner.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., p.71, Donald Ross Hardwick.

<sup>145</sup> B.L.A. Proceedings, Second Session, September, 1946, Vol. LXXI, No.3, No Confidence Motion, (19September, 1946) p.92, Speech of D.N. Datta

inactive they must presumably have had definite instructions not to intervene.<sup>146</sup>

A few examples of lawlessness under the eyes of the law-keeper will be useful here. In the early hours of 16 August the police were conspicuously absent from the streets of Calcutta. The normal measure of administration were not taken by the government.<sup>147</sup> Similarly the normal practice of sending foot and mounted police to accompany processions was not observed.<sup>148</sup> As a result of the fiery speech of Suhrawardy in the rally Muslim mob fell on an ammunitions shop nearby and carried away guns and ammunitions in the presence of the police officers.<sup>149</sup> During the night of 18 August Suhrawardy himself got seven Muslim goondas released from the lock-up of the Park Street Police Station. These goondas had been arrested while looting foodstuff in the nearing Mallick Bazar area.<sup>150</sup>

The police inactivity and its effects have been chronicled in the memoires of eyewitnesses of the riot. Manikunatala Sen, an eyewitness writes:-<sup>151</sup>

“...The police have now come into action on the streets. Had they only acted a little earlier, things would not have been taken such an ominous turn. But this had to happen because this is matter of

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p.49, Bimal Comar Ghose.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p.92.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> R.S.C., Vol. II, p.21. Gross Examination of Brigadier General T.L. Binay by B.C.Ghose.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p.73. Statement of Donald Ross Hardwick, Commissioner of Police, Calcutta.

politics ... We are watching with our own eyes that the police is coming from Lalbazar (i.e. police headquarters of Calcutta) to pick up the corpses lying on the streets and not to stop people from rioting.”

## SECTION IV

### THE 'GOONDAS OF AUGUST 1946

The cult of crime and violence perfected in the fateful days of August 1946 had myriad preachers as well as followers. As has been established in this chapter, the city was ruled by criminals during the days of the riot. There were too many others for whom the riot was a turning point in their lives, in the sense that they entered the criminal world during the riot by participating in the riot they took to crime as a means of livelihood. Unfortunately, very few criminal biographies of Muslim goondas have survived.<sup>152</sup> This leaves a lot for the historian. But for the present purpose we have to use the criminal biographies make the riot look like a work of Hindus only, the reader, here will have to keep in mind the vandalisms committed earlier in this chapter.

The most remembered name among the participants of riot is probably that of Gopal Chandra Mukherjee.<sup>153</sup> Gopal was the leader of leaders during the riot of 1946. Gopal a resident of central Calcutta raised a private army of the name 'Bharatiya Jatiyo Bahini' for the

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<sup>152</sup> Das, Suranjan- *The Goondas*, p.4

<sup>153</sup> CRO-HS-K23865 of 1950: Gopal Chandra Mukherjee, at Crime Records Section, Detective Department, Police Headquarters, Calcutta (Henceforth, DD, HQ(P), cal.), cited in Das,S. and Ray J.K *The Goondas*, p.31.

protection of the Hindus in the time of the riot.<sup>154</sup> Gopal formed his 'Bahini' with the assistance of hardened criminals as well as young men from the lower middle class who like Gopal later became criminals. In an interview to the author Gopal has admitted that he had expected major bloodshed in Calcutta after the League's declaration of Direct Action and from that time he went forward, making preparations for the 16<sup>th</sup>. Gopal's 'Bahini' had as many as 400 members at one point of time. His efforts were aided financially by eminent and wealthy Hindu citizens.<sup>155</sup> Gopal was to a great extent successful in his operations. He managed to save the Hindu localities in central Calcutta from the savagery of the Muslim rioters. Gopal's commendable achievements during the riot were soon looked down as heinous act by city people when the riot was over. So Gopal was forced to take up crime as a means of livelihood due to the force of circumstances.

Gopal, hailed from a lower middle class Bengali family. His uncle Anukul Chandra Mukherjee was a revolutionary terrorist who was deported to the gaol in Andamans for his political activities. Gopal owned a butcher shop, retailing goat meat. He had already come into contact with the underworld during the war years. He had been involved in blackmarketing of petrol during those days.<sup>156</sup> He was an important figure in the locality as he acquired fame in gymnastics and amateur wrestling. He was held in awe by the local boys affiliated to

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<sup>154</sup> Das- '*The Goondas*', p.10, as also author's interview with Gopal Mukherjee in March 1999 at his residence in Calcutta.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid, p.10.

<sup>156</sup> Interview with Gopal Mukherjee.

the local clubs. Gopal's family received patronage from the senior Congressman Sarat Chandra Bose.<sup>157</sup> Gopal, however, was not a 'goonda' before the riot.

In the post riot phase, Gopal emerged as a dreaded 'goonda.' Those youngmen who had joined Gopal's resistance group during the riot emerged as his lieutenants in criminal activities. Gopal committed robberies at banks and jewelleries.<sup>158</sup> He received the patronage of none other than Bidhan Chandra Roy the illustrious C.M of West Bengal. Gopal was arrested more than once but was discharged for the want of evidence.<sup>159</sup>

Gopal was assisted in his operations of the resistance group by some young men who already had a criminal past one such man was Basanta Kumar Saha.<sup>160</sup> Unlike Gopal, Basanta came from the labouring class. He had received some school education, worked initially as a waiter in a restaurant and thereafter as a mechanic in an American Air Base at Rishra, near Calcutta from 1944. In the base Basanta started smuggling petrol. Subsequently he was caught red handed and thrown out of the job. He was assisted in smuggling by a driver in the army of the name Ram Kissen Kahar. During the riot of 1946 Basanta formed a defense group with other local hooligans like Ram Kissen Kahar, Kumar Sen, Gour Sarkar, and Shyamapada Dey. These were men whom he had known from earlier in connection with his petrol deals. His

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> CRO-HS-K23865 of 1950. Cited in Das - '*The Goondas*', p.31.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> CRO. No.R 19951/47, S.A No.1741-1950. At D.D., HQ(P), Cal.



resistance group withstood the onslaught of the Muslims of adjacent areas and soon his popularity and prominence attracted the attention of Gopal. Thereafter, Basanta operated in the Resistance Group of Gopal as his lieutenant. 'They secured firearms, learnt their use and as a matter of policy learnt the technic of armed robberies.'<sup>161</sup> Basanta's operations were very methodical and organized, he was very skilful in avoiding arrest. The police while commenting on the 'Bahini' joined by Basanta and led by Gopal says 'since the inception of the Resistance Group in 1946 Calcutta saw a series of heinous bloodshed, murder and robberies not experienced by anybody in this land before.'<sup>162</sup>

Basanta came to possess a number of firearms from the time of the riot, as also cars with false number plates. Later he used them to commit a variety of crimes like bank robberies. He was arrested and convicted for one such robbery.

One of Basanta's associates, who served under Gopal Mukherjee during the riot was Shyamapada Dey. Shyamapada was the son of a grocer who had come to Calcutta from Dacca. He barely received any education and associated with local boys with criminal propensity, while in his teens. He served in the Navy for some time during the war and was demobilized in 1945. While in the navy he received training in firearms. After being demobbed he went back to Calcutta and took to heavy drinking and visiting brothels at Sonagachhi and Rambagan. Soon he came in touch with Basanta and earned his admiration and

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

became his important assistant. He played a prominent role in Gopal's 'Bahini' during the riot. After the riot he continued his activities under Basanta and was arrested under the charge of bank robbery.

Another desperado in Gopal's 'Bahini' was a notorious bully of Calcutta named Bhanu Bose.<sup>163</sup> Born in 1918, he gave up studies at Xth standard and fell into evil company only to emerge as a desperado. Bhanu was already involved in serious crimes like shooting by 1945. He was recruited by Gopal into his 'Bahini' during the riot. After the riot the 'Bahini' lost the financial support it had enjoyed temporarily, and Bhanu along with Gopal took to highly organized crime like armed hold-ups and robberies. His repeated criminal acts earned him the surveillance of the police and temporarily tried to shift his base of operations from Calcutta to Burdwan. However, he was arrested but acquitted due to the lack of evidence. In the words of the police commissioner Bhanu was a 'dangerous criminal.'

A close aide of Bhanu was Buddhadev Chakravarty.<sup>164</sup> Buddhadeb was the son of an advertising agent of newspapers in Calcutta. He studied upto to class X and left school in 1943 and soon came in contact with local bullies and bad characters. Subsequently he went to Nagpur and there he was arrested on a theft case in September 1945. Thereafter he came back to Calcutta and during the riot was active in the 'Bahini'. Soon after the riot on 30<sup>th</sup> August Buddhadeb was caught

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<sup>163</sup> CRO-HS 18888 1946: Bhanu Bose at D.D., HQ (P), Cal. Cited in Das - 'The Goonds', p.24.

<sup>164</sup> CRO No. 19766/47 1947.at D.D., HQ(P), Cal.

red handed while picking pocket in the streets of Calcutta. He was involved in a series of cases of snatching and robbery, specially in the Muchipara area of north Calcutta.

Another member of Gopal's 'Bahini' Lakshmi Narayan Paul,<sup>165</sup> the illiterate son of a spice-trader in Calcutta developed close contacts with local thugs after his father's demise. He acquired expertise in manufacture and use of firearms and explosives. In the years after the riot he used his skills to be branded as a 'Goonda' by Calcutta police.

However, all members of Gopal's Bahini were not people with criminal past. Many were young men of 'bhadralok' background. Many among these men had received a fair amount of education and some had participated in the national movement. The Riot of 1946 was their initiation into a life of crime. Here are two such cases:

One such youngman was Sachindranath Mitra, hailing from a middle class family of Nadia in Bengal. He studied upto class X at Calcutta, participated in the Quit India Movement and suffered imprisonment as a result, for eight months.<sup>166</sup> During the riot he joined Gopal's 'Bahini' and came into contact with hardened criminals like Bhanu Bose and others. After the riot, Sachindranath remained in 'Bahini' and became a robber like the others of the group.

The riot brought drastic changes in lives of certain people like Dinabandhu Datta. Dinabandhu had been educated upto class VIII and was earning his living as mechanic in Howrah. However, during the

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<sup>165</sup> CRO-HS-G 23849: 1950 Lakshminarayan Paul, cited in Das-*'The Goondas'*, p.24.

<sup>166</sup> CRO-HS-D24665-1950: Sachindranath Mitra. Cited in Das- *'The Goondas'*, p.29.

riot he joined the 'Bahini' only to become a dreaded criminal after the riot.<sup>167</sup>

The riot of 1946 did see, for the first time in Calcutta, the participation of Bengali Hindus in communal violence. However, it should not be assumed due to this that there was any less participation from goondas of non-Bengali migrant origin. One such example is Punit Goala, a Bihari coolie sardar in a jute mill who became a menace to the residents of Kadapara jute mill area at Beliaghat in Calcutta.<sup>168</sup> During the riot Punit was an active Hindu rioter. He committed assaults and murders under the garb of organizing local peace committees when the riot had been quelled.<sup>169</sup>

Any historian writing the history on this subject, suffers from a serious handicap due to the lack of evidence on Muslim goondas because their records were removed by the League government. But many documents, like the Report of the Spens Commission on Calcutta Riots (1946) is replete with instances of 'goondaism' by Muslims. Sheikh Habu serves as example to the point. Habu was known as the terror of the Lalbagan area in east Calcutta. Habu kept himself from being declared a 'Goonda' due to his close contacts with corrupt police officers. He was already into illegal dealing of petrol before the riot. He was feared in his locality and he was very infamous due to his

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<sup>167</sup> CRO-HS-R 23193 1950: Dinabandhu Dutta. Cited in Das- '*The Goondas*', p.23.

<sup>168</sup> CRO-HS-M23420- 1950: Punit Goala. Cited in Das- '*The Goondas*', pp.29-30.

<sup>169</sup> R.S.C, Vol.X, pp.109-110.

loutish activities which he was given to after getting drunk. Habu played an active role during the riot of August 1946.<sup>170</sup>

Calcutta, thus, was under the sway of activities of such people during the riot of 1946, some of them were already goondas, others were fresh recruits into the underworld. Their activities came to dominate life in Calcutta from August 1946 onwards. The political and financial support which these 'goondas received during the days of riot facilities their contacts in high places in police and politics, so as to go with impunity after having committed heinous crimes.<sup>171</sup> Their presence was a constant threat to peace in the city. These people represented the criminality and corruption, which proliferated in the breeding ground provided by poverty, social degradation and communalist propaganda. These 'history sheets' in police records quoted above demonstrate how in the city, which was the glittering jewel of the British colonial empire, an increasing number of people fell back on crime to earn a living. The riot in a sense was definitely the turning point in the history of the city. It was during this time that the city's underworld came out in to the open in broad daylight to flout law and administration, to show how the regressive character of the city's politics was becoming a source of danger to the lives of the ordinary citizenry. What followed the riot was another phase which is studied in the next chapter.

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<sup>170</sup> R.S.C, Vol.IX, pp.22-24.

<sup>171</sup> Das, S. *The Goondas*, p.10.

### CHAPTER III

#### COMMUNAL RIOTS AND GOONDAISM IN THE POST AUGUST RIOT PHASE

“The initial volcanic eruption which happened during Direct Action has died down; but the fiery undercurrent flows unceasingly, it comes out in sparks here and there and again hides itself beneath the ashes. The ordinary life in the city does not show any difference. Trams and buses run on the streets as usual, people go on working busily without any interruption. In the borders of the localities inhabited by the different communities very often one hears the noise of troubles, shops are closed down in a flash and soon enough the streets are strewn with two or three bloody corpses. Suhrawardy’s police comes and terrorizes the Hindus in the name of controlling the situation, as a result the number of those dead increases by another two or three persons. The corpses are then picked up by police vans which appear from no-where. After such trouble, an apparent normalcy returns to the city and life goes on as before.”

Saradindu Bandopadhyay in ‘Adim Ripu’<sup>1</sup>.

Communal tension continued in Calcutta from after the riot of August 1946 till September 1947. As has been shown in the earlier chapter, disturbances did not stop after the August 1946 riot. It had continued well into October. The city witnessed some bloodshed during December 1946 when brickbatting, arson and stabbing broke out during the last day of Muharram festival.<sup>2</sup> Fortunately, it was a time when troubles

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<sup>1</sup> Bandopadhyay, Saradindu – Omnibus Vol. 2, Adim Ripu, p.1.

<sup>2</sup> Chatterjee, P.K. – “*Struggle and Strife in Urban Bengal*”, p.190.

were expected and the situation was brought under control by imposing a curfew.<sup>3</sup> But the real shock which was in store for Calcutta, came out into the open during March-April 1947 and thereafter July-September, in the same year. A feature of life in the city during the period in question was the near paralysis of normal life in Calcutta due to the proliferation of crime. During eruptions of communal disturbances the number of criminal acts, quiet obviously, increased, but even otherwise hardly a single day did not feel threatened by the ongoing lawlessness and brazen acts of crime. Back-alley stabbings, night raids and acid and bomb hurling continued through all the months. Unlike the riot of August 1946, these crimes were individual in nature involving skilful planning by the goondas who committed them.

City politics after the riot of August 1946, came to be dominated by communalism. The 'fresh eruption of communal scourge resulted in grave political impasse in Bengal politics.<sup>4</sup> The partisan, communal character of the city's administration, which had come into effect from the time of the August carnage further crippled Calcutta. The induction of Muslim Punjabi policemen into Calcutta had a serious effect in lowering the public morale of the citizens.<sup>5</sup> In such a situation, the citizens went for either taking up the law into their own hands, there was violence against the city's police as well. The preferential treatment given by the administration to certain sections of the society

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<sup>3</sup> Tucker, F. - "*While Memory Serves*", p.203.

<sup>4</sup> Chatterjee, P.K. - "*Struggle and Strife in Urban Bengal*", p.195.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

had a serious consequences. People lost faith in the city's administration and vengefully waited for opportunities to settle scores. Overall, it was a situation where the administration grossly failed at maintaining law and order in the city. Crime proliferated. Criminals became bolder and the ordinary citizenry lived under perpetual fear of goondaism. The history of the city during this time resembles a reign of terror unleashed by the underworld and weak, partisan administration which was offering no relief.

For the convenience of study this chapter is divided into four sections. The first will be a brief discussion of pre-partition politics in Calcutta. The second will be the study of the role of police and the violence of March-April 1947, followed by a third section on the violence which started from July 1947 and how crime had a crippling effect on the life of the city as reflected in literary sources.

## **SECTION I**

### **PART A: THE PROVINCE AND THE CITY**

The most important event in the politics of colonial Bengal in 1947 was the finalization of the plan of partition. The coming of Lord Mountbatten in the place of Wavell signalled the beginning of the phase when transfer of power and partition was being given their final shape. The colonial government declared on 20<sup>th</sup> February 1947, its intention of transferring power to responsible Indians latest by June 1948 and that it should be considered that whether power had to be transferred 'as a whole to some form of Central Government for British



India or in the same areas to the existing Provincial Government for British India or in such other way as may seem most reasonable and in the best interest of the Indian people.’<sup>6</sup> This declaration was a tacit acceptance of the partition of India.

This declaration of 20<sup>th</sup> February 1947 set the ball rolling on the question whether Bengal was to undergo partition or not. In March 1947, the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* started a Gallup poll to ‘make a correct estimate of public opinion’ on the issue of partition. In April, the poll results showed that, ‘partition had gained a virtually unanimous vote of confidence, 98.6% voting yea, with those raising their voice in favour of united Bengal being a tiny minority on the wrong side of a decimal point’.<sup>7</sup> The readers of Gallup poll were Hindus.

The campaign for the partition of the province was led by the Hindus, specially the educated bhadralok section. Their opinion on the issue is expressed in the following words:-

“The hour has now struck...to come down to the realities of the terra firma. It is not patriotism to repeat old slogans to repeat catch words....Our demand for partition today is prompted by the ...ideal and the ...purpose, namely, to prevent the disintegration of the nationalist element and to preserve Bengal’s culture and secure a homeland for the Hindus of Bengal which will constitute a National State as a part of India.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Moon, P. Wavell, *The Viceroy's Journal*, pp.422-23. Cited in Chattopadhyay, G. ‘*Bengal Legislature in Indian's Struggle for Freedom*’, p.214.

<sup>7</sup> Chatterjee, J. *Bengal Divided*, p.241.

<sup>8</sup> Presidential Address by N.C.Chatterjee at the Tarakeshwar session of the Bengal Provincial Hindu Conference, 4<sup>th</sup> April 1947, in Hindu Mahasabha Papers, File No. p107/47. Cited in Chatterji, J. ‘*Bengal Divided*’, p.241.

In a series of petition to the Congress President Acharya Kripalani, the Hindus demanded the partition of Bengal on the ground that they did not anymore enjoy the 'security of life and property' in an undivided Bengal dominated by the Muslims.<sup>9</sup>

The Bengal Muslim League did not, initially favour the idea of partition of the province because, 'Many a Muslim leader sincerely felt that if Pakistan meant the partition of Bengal into two parts, and domination of Bengal Muslims by Muslims from the West, then an independent status of Bengal outside Pakistan was a desirable propositions preferable to Pakistan'.<sup>10</sup> The Bengal League leaders' demand for keeping Bengal united found support for Muslims all over the province. the two leaders who stirred such sentiments were Suhrawardy and Abul Hashim. However, such a demand could not grow into a movement as a section of the League led by Suhrawardy were desirous of keeping Bengal united even at the cost of having to share power in a secular formation with the Hindus. Others, as represented by the Muslim National Guards, were bent upon coercing the Hindus to withdraw their demand of partition, for the sake of the unity of the province.<sup>11</sup>

Suhrawardy's plan of an independent united Bengal was warmly welcomed by Congressman like Sarat Bose. But such a scheme failed to receive support from the all India bigwigs of both the League and the

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<sup>9</sup> AICC Papers, File No. R/8666 of 1947.

<sup>10</sup> Sen, Shila '*Muslim Politics in Bengal*', p.228.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pp.226-242.

Congress. The United Bengal movement of Suhrawardy and Bose revealed the deep schisms in the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, and moreover it was confined to the world of organized politics where issues were tried to be sorted out at the elite level.<sup>12</sup> On popular Hindu side it did not make much impact. So the plan fell through.<sup>13</sup>

Whatever be the deliberations on the fate of the province, when it came to the city of Calcutta the League was in no mood to lose control over it. The industrial importance of Calcutta was the most important factor for the Muslims. The young guards of the League with left leanings under the leadership of Suhrawardy put a semblance of a movement for retaining control over Calcutta, even at the cost of making it a free city.<sup>14</sup> The 'Retain Calcutta' movement found support even from the veteran Muslim politician and ex-Chief Minister of Bengal Fazlul Huq.<sup>15</sup> But this movement fizzled out soon after Suhrawardy was to lose the election to the post of premiership of East Pakistan to Khwaja Nazimuddin, his rival Leaguer, who represented the lobby of Western Indian and rich Muslims in the Bengal League like Ispahani and Adamji. Soon after Nazimuddin's election to leadership on 5<sup>th</sup> August 1947, the tide of the movement turned the other way. In

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<sup>12</sup> Chakravarty Bidyut - *The 1947 United Bengal Movement: A Thesis without Synthesis* (art.) IESHR, Vol. 30, No.4, (Oct-Dec.) 1993.

<sup>13</sup> Chatterji 'Bengal Divided', pp.262-265 and also Sen, Shila 'Muslim Politics in Bengali', p.243.

<sup>14</sup> Ahmed, Abul Mansur- 'Amar Dekha Rajnitir Panchas Bachhar', Dacca, 1970, (Naoroj), p.259.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

the League Daily *Azad* it was written:

'No matter whatever we say Calcutta is a Hindu-majority area. We Mussalmans are, unquestionably, a minority here. We do not want to keep the minority in the city by driving the majority out. This will be undemocratic. Moreover, we are not in favour of retaining Calcutta through violence.'<sup>16</sup>

The Nazimuddin group was ready to give up Calcutta for the monetary compensation, they were to receive in lieu of the city. They tried to placate the young guards by saying that the aforesaid amount will be used to create a 'a New York' out of Dacca.

So, finally, the uproar on retaining Calcutta died down. Abul Mansur Ahmad, an intellectual of the League writes that within three days of Nazimuddin's assumption of leadership the movement for Calcutta lost all force.

## **B. LABOUR MOVEMENT DURING DARK DAYS**

Along with Communalism, a recurring feature of Calcutta politics during the period in question, side by side the city politics was also characterized by the appearance of progressive working class movements. Clan politics and communal politics were two distinct trends occasionally interesting.

Between January and March 1947 the Calcutta industrial area witnessed a number of strikes, spearheaded by the C.P.I. strikes began on the 10<sup>th</sup> January 1947 when the Central Government employees went

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.260.

on a one day strike. This was followed by strike of the tramwaymen from 21<sup>st</sup> January onwards. This movement was led by the Tramway Workers' Union, a trade union led by Communists. Their strike lasted for 86 days and was called off only after intervention by the government of the province. The government promised the tramworkers that a tribunal would be set up to look into their pay structure, at the same time the government pledged that none of the participants in the strike would be victimized.<sup>17</sup>

The other major strike during this time was that of the workers at the Port Commissioners'. It was strike which lasted 87 days. It was during this strike that the dock workers at Kidderpore demonstrated exemplary cohesion. This strike continued despite Jagjivan Ranis appeal to call off, and ended on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1947, when a settlement was made meeting most of the demands of the strikers.<sup>18</sup>

Strikes became endemic in the city affecting 25 industrial municipal and commercial establishments. As early as 1<sup>st</sup> February 1947 a large number of workers, from different corners, came to be influenced by the strike -movement:-

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<sup>17</sup> Chatterjee, P.K. - *'Struggle and Strive in Urban Bengal'*, p.191.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.192.

**Table 3.1**

**Number of Workers involved in the Strike Movement of 1947**

1. Dock Workers	35,000
2. Jute Workers	14,000
3. Cotton Mill Workers	3000
4. Tramway Workers	8000
5. Employees of 12 engineering concerns	5900
Total	65,900

Source: Calcutta Municipal Gazette, Vol.XLV, No.10, 8 February, 1947, p.271.  
Cited in Chatterjee, P.K – Struggle and Strife in Urban Bengal, p.191

The strike movement earned such support from the workers in the Calcutta industrial area that the total number of strikes in February 1947 was greater than the total number of strikes in 1940 and 1941. The following table will help to explain the spread of the movement:-

**Table 3.2 Number of Strikes in Calcutta, 1940-47**

Year	Number of Strike
1940	107
1941	92
1943	214
1944	202
1945	217
1946	393
1947 till Feb.	139

Source: Calcutta Municipal Gazette, Vol.XLV, No.15-17, March 1947, p.387.  
Cited in Chatterjee, P.K. – Struggle and Strife in Urban Bengal, p.191

The reason behind the repeated strikes of the working class in the Calcutta industrial area has to be sought in the economy of the province which was during that time in a pitiable state.<sup>19</sup> During that year the budget estimate for the province showed that Bengal faced a

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<sup>19</sup> Cuttings from the 'Times' (London) by the Times Intelligent Department. Vol.4, 'Times', 18<sup>th</sup> Feb.1947. [(Henceforth Times (cuttings))].

budget deficit of Rs.6 crores, which would have become double in case the government of the province enforced the recommended increase in the pay of the government employees.<sup>20</sup>

Mohammed Ali, the Finance Minister of the province describe the situation as an 'extremely disquieting' one. The province suffered from an annual revenue deficit of Rs.12 crores. The province required, by his estimation Rs.47 crores and 68 lakhs for development projects and Rs.53 crores and 88 lakhs for non-productive projects, and all the centre would give as grant to Bengal was the insufficient sum of Rs.12 crores and 42 lakhs. Moreover, huge sums were proposed to be spent on famine relief, and in providing relief to the riot victims and refugees. The rehousing of slum dwellers was going to cost Rs.35 lakhs.<sup>21</sup> All these heavy expenditures were to be made from the small sum of money that the treasury of Bengal offered.

The economic plight of Bengal was reflected later in Calcutta, in the increasing number of crimes of (non-communal).<sup>22</sup> Unemployment, low wages and dearth of necessities like food and clothing goaded many into the world of crime.

It must, however, be remembered that the working class struggle of 1947, in Calcutta was overshadowed by communalism. Soon, the Hindu-Muslim communal harmony of the working class was to give

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Times (cuttings), June 20, 1947.

way to hatred and violence between the communities.

Bengal was finally divided on June 10<sup>th</sup> 1947 when the Bengal legislature decided to opt for partition.<sup>23</sup> The representatives of the non-Muslim areas of Bengal voted 58 to 21 in favour of partition. In Mountbatten's declaration, it was stated that if the majority within any community decides in favour of partition, then that decision will be given a final shape during the transfer of power.<sup>24</sup> Following this a ministry of representatives of the non-Muslim majority areas was formed on 30<sup>th</sup> June under the Congress leader, Dr. Prafulla Ghosh.<sup>25</sup> But the formation of the additional non-Muslim ministry did not imply the end of disturbance. The Hindus of Calcutta understood the event as a signal to resort to retaliatory rioting against the Muslims residing in the city.<sup>26</sup>

### **BLOODSHED IN SPRINGTIME**

A recrudescence of communal clashes occurred in Calcutta from March 1947. The Congress proposal of partition of Punjab came down as a curse on Calcutta. Moreover, the stories of the horrible riots of Punjab, spread by Sikhs, travelling down to Bihar and Bengal caused fusion. The Hindus feared the repetition of the Punjab 'atrocities, burnings and

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<sup>23</sup> Chattopadhyay, G. '*Bengal Legislature in India's Struggle for Freedom*', p.215.

<sup>24</sup> Amrita Bazar Patrika, June 21, 1947. Cited in Bandopadhyay Sandip - '*Kolkata Danga*', p.81.

<sup>25</sup> Times (cuttings) 30 June, 1947.

<sup>26</sup> Toker, F. '*While Memory Serves*', p.381.



lootings'. The Muslims feared the retaliation of the horrors of Punjab by Hindus of the city.<sup>27</sup> As a result of such fears communal clashes took place in Calcutta in the night of 16<sup>th</sup> March in north Calcutta. Though the situation did not worsen into any major riot by the next morning the air was heavy with rumours and counter rumours and panic was on an increase. Murders went on unhindered in the alleys.<sup>28</sup>

On the night of 16<sup>th</sup> itself curfew had to be imposed in almost half a dozen of police stations in the city.<sup>29</sup> The next day inspite of the curfew, witnessed as many as sixteen incidents of communal clashes. The city was so tense that the senior leader of the opposition, Kiran Shankar Ray, the Congressman, urged the Chief Minister to call the military to keep the situation under control.<sup>30</sup> On 27<sup>th</sup> March the communal riots in the city had taken a toll of 14 lives and left more than a hundred injured. During the end of March the Muslims of Calcutta observed the Pakistan Day. Though that day passed without much trouble but there was some violence on the Harrison Road in Central Calcutta.<sup>31</sup> The Muslim mob at that place constituted of 700 to 800 people and they attacked any Hindu passerby.<sup>32</sup> A Hindu mob had also come to assemble on the Harrison Road but, Gurkha policemen prevented any major combat from taking place. But in the morning

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid, p.228.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> B.L.A. Proceedings, First Session 1947, 17<sup>th</sup> March 1947, Enquiry by the Leader of Opposition regarding the present condition of Calcutta, pp.551-562.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Taker, F. 'While Memory Serves', pp.228-29.

<sup>32</sup> B.L.A. Proceedings, First Session, 1947, 28<sup>th</sup> March 1947. Situation in Calcutta by Dhirendranath Datta. Pp.551-562.

itself 7 to 8 people were killed and 45 among those injured were lucky enough to be taken to the Campbell Hospital.<sup>33</sup> The most important thing which the police had done on that day, in the opinion of a British military commander was that 'they removed the worst offenders' from among the Muslims.<sup>34</sup> This shows that the mob included quite a few Muslim goondas who are described here as the 'worst offenders'.

It would not be wrong to say that Calcutta was subjected to daily rioting, murder and arson onwards from 25<sup>th</sup> March.<sup>35</sup> This riot was majorly supported by the Muslim League. The Muslim National Guards were very active in organizing and participating in these riots.<sup>36</sup> The areas in the city which suffered most due to repeated rioting were east and central Calcutta and the slum dominated areas of Kidderpore, Ikbalpur and Watgunj.<sup>37</sup> Burning down slums, shops, hurling bombs or acid on the buses were slowly becoming the order of the day.<sup>38</sup>

During these days the military regiments brought into action had to open fire to quell the disturbances. On 29<sup>th</sup> March, the Kumaoni Regiment twice opened fire in Ultadanga and in north-east of the city. An acid manufactory was unearthed in the Manicktolla area. On 31<sup>st</sup> March, when several parts of the city were under curfew and there were 'no buses on the streets, drivers and passengers...having been deterred by the attack of the acid throwers', a riot broke out in Manicktolla

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid

<sup>34</sup> Tucker, F. *'While Memory Serves'*, p.229.

<sup>35</sup> Bandopadhyay, S - *'Kolkata Danga'*, p.65.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Modern Review, 1947. Cited in Bandopadhyay S. - *'Kolkata Danga'*, p.65.

deep in the night when the Kumaonis took to firing to bring the situation under control.<sup>39</sup> In the Muslim dominated Narkeldanga area, the 'rowdy Muslim majority', burnt down the huts 'in a worst type of Muslim slum'.<sup>40</sup> Here the Kumaonis took severe measures to stop the violence. But, thereafter, the same Muslims of Narkeldanga complained about the oppression and cruelty of the Kumaonis who were Hindus in faith. The Bengal government went to the point taking the complaint upto the Area Commander of the Army and urged him to take action against the Kumaonis.<sup>41</sup> However, this plea did not evoke any action from the army headquarters. But, this instance stands out as evidence of link between the Muslims 'rowdies', or goondas who had gone on a rampage, and the Suhrawardy government.

In the town of Howrah the police being unable to cope with violence called in the military. The York and Lancaster Regiment were deployed in that area. In Entally in central Calcutta the East Lancaster Regiment was deployed.<sup>42</sup>

The scourge of riot and goondaism continued well into April 1947. The city did not calm down even as late as 28<sup>th</sup> April and the League allowed 'its own party members to roam about...preaching violence and intimidation'<sup>43</sup> On 11<sup>th</sup> April police and troops patrolled on the streets of Calcutta and the government announced the extension

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<sup>39</sup> Tucker, F. *While Memory Serves*, p.229.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> B.L.A. Proceedings, First Session 1947, Adjournment Motion 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1947, Speech of Mr. Bimal Chandra Sinha, pp.22-27.

of sunset to sunrise curfew for another week 'following communal disturbances'.<sup>44</sup> The situation almost went out of control towards the end of April and the beginning of May. Between 24<sup>th</sup> April and 4<sup>th</sup> May, 58 people were killed.<sup>45</sup> On 29<sup>th</sup> April, 40,000 copies of Gandhis and Jinnah's joint appeal for peace were airdropped into the city.<sup>46</sup>

Despite the declaration of a state of emergency and night curfew the rioting of March-April took a heavy toll. Toker, who was complacent enough to say, 'Lawlessness had hardly broken the surface this time', records in a week upto 1<sup>st</sup> April the casualties were:-

**Table 3.3**

**Casualties in Calcutta Communal Skirmishes, March 26-1 April, 1947**

	Killed	Injured
Calcutta	85	607
Howrah	11	95

Source: '*While Memory Serves*', pp.229-230.

In Toker's estimation there were 800 known casualties. He further adds, "How many never came to light one cannot say, but it is fair to assume that 12,000 people were either killed or maimed in those few days. Yet one cannot describe any particular incident. Little crowds, little affairs in little streets; leaving behind them on the ground two or three dead with a few injured staggering away or being

<sup>44</sup> Times (Cuttings), 12th April 1947.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

borne off on one side or the other. In the end casualties climb into thousands.”<sup>47</sup>

An estimation by the Calcutta Municipal authorities of the daily nature of the savagery adds weight to the last line of the above quotation:

**Table 3.4**

**Casualties in Calcutta Communal Incidents, 27 March-15 April 1947**

	Dead	Injured
March		
27	8	46
28	10	100
29	14	104
30	5	66
31	-	50
April		
1	4	55
2	3	37
13	4	15
14	1	7
15	3	13

Source: Calcutta Municipal Gazette, 5-26 April, 1947. Cited in Bandopadhyay – ‘Kolkata Danga’, p.65.

The ordinary citizens suffered miserably during the days of such violence. Within the city a massive transfer of population occurred. Entire communities left one area and sought refuge in other localities where fellow members of their community lived.<sup>48</sup> In the process

<sup>47</sup> Tucker, F. ‘*While Memory Serves*’, p.228.

<sup>48</sup> Chatterjee, P.K. – ‘*Struggle and Strife in Urban Bengal*’, p.195.

40,000 Hindus residing in the Entally and Motijhil areas of Central Calcutta were uprooted from their homes. Similar was the fate of the Hindus living in the Miabagan locality of Belliaghata, and in Ultadanga and Cossipore.<sup>49</sup> These were all residential areas of the working-class population.<sup>50</sup> Here the slums were said to be reduced to a cluster of ghettos of either Hindus or Muslims. The separate zones of the two communities, separately in east and south-east Calcutta were inaccessible to the members of the other community.<sup>51</sup> Sanat Roychowdhury, a Mahasabha Leader, pointed out that in the Park Circus area in south-east Calcutta the Hindu residents were driven out by a pogrom planned and financed by the Leaguers, enacted by the goondas of the party.<sup>52</sup>

To add to woes of the law-abiding citizens a severe crisis in food availability and an epidemic of cholera hit the city in April.

The food crisis was precipitated by the riots. Food became short as ration shops in riot affected areas remained closed. Private shopowners who managed to do some business sought to maximize profits through rising prices of food.<sup>53</sup>

During early April an epidemic of cholera broke out in Calcutta. This again was generated by the riot and the intensity of the epidemic

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<sup>49</sup> B.L.A. Proceedings, First Session 1947, 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1947, Adjournment Motion, p. 153.

<sup>50</sup> Chatterjee, P.K. –“*Struggle and Strife in Urban Bengal*”, p.195.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Times (Cuttings), 2<sup>nd</sup> April, 1947.

was highest at the riot-affected areas. Realizing the threat to life, municipal scavengers refused to expose themselves to risk in those areas. Huge piles of garbage accumulated for weeks. Such unhygienic conditions were ideal for the spread of the disease. By 11<sup>th</sup> April the hospitals in the city received 3000 cases of cholera and as many as 42 patients were admitted to these hospitals on that day itself.<sup>54</sup>

Thus goondaism paralysed the normal life of the city. The representatives in the Legislative Assembly spoke of the 'ugly feature' of violence in the city where organized gangs were at work to keep rioting alive.<sup>55</sup> Tucker, a witness of such a condition of the city, describes it as, 'a chronic situation in which individual goondas took their toll of isolated and unprotected members of the other community.... That position was held till 14 August, with occasional bursts of more murderous activities'.<sup>56</sup>

### **THE ROLE OF THE POLICE**

The Muslim League had a history of manipulating in the police department to help the rioters from the time of the riot in August 1946. In the post-riot period again the Suhrawardy Government interfered in the activities of the city's police. In March 1947, Suhrawardy put 16 out of 25 police stations in the city under the charge of Muslim

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 12<sup>th</sup> April 1947.

<sup>55</sup> B.L.A. First Session 1947, 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1947, Speech by N.Dutta Mazumdar.

<sup>56</sup> Tucker, F. *While Memory Serves*, p.230.

officials.<sup>57</sup>

The League ministry re-enacted its partisan role in Calcutta by bringing in Muslim Punjabi policemen into the city replacing the Gurkhas. Even the Viceroy found this act extremely discreditable. Commenting on this, in his secret report, the Viceroy wrote:-

“The police situation in Bengal is particularly deplorable. In Calcutta there were recently 1200 policemen, mainly Gurkhas, as recruitment from the plains has never been resorted to. When the Inspector General asked for an increase of 50%, Mr. Suhrawardy, the Chief Minister, insisted that they must all be Muslims. To speed up training it was decided that they must be ex-soldiers and they were none suitable in the province, 600 Punjabi Mussalmans were secured from the Punjab. The latter were given preferential treatment by the Muslim government. With the result that they have now come into armed conflict with the Gurkha policemen and I am afraid that the police situation may deteriorate. The Muslim Government of Bengal has just imposed a pre-censorship on news comments criticizing the activities of the police force in Bengal.”<sup>58</sup>

The same report shows that the Governor of Bengal had advised Suhrawardy not to ruin the ‘reliability’ of the police by the induction of these Punjabi Muslim ex-soldiers. But Suhrawardy brushed aside all such words of wisdom and went ahead.

These policemen terrorized the citizenry from April onwards on

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<sup>57</sup> Bandopadhyay. ‘*Kolkata Danga*’, p.65 and Chatterji ‘*Struggle and Strife in Urban Bengal*’, p.195.

<sup>58</sup> T.O.P, Vol.X, p.403, Document No.211, Viceroy's Personal Report No.4., 24<sup>th</sup> April 1947.



12<sup>th</sup> April these policemen did not spare even a pregnant lady from their brutalities.<sup>59</sup> On 14<sup>th</sup> April they allegedly raped a Hindu housewife.<sup>60</sup> A similar fate was shared by the Hindu residents of house number 100 in Harrison Road in Central Calcutta, where the policemen subjected the citizen to indescribable torture.<sup>61</sup> These policemen were allegedly active in forcibly driving out Hindus from their households in the Muslim majority areas of central and east Calcutta.<sup>62</sup> Francis Toker, the military commander of Eastern Command of the Army, criticized such act of terrorizing on the streets of the city. On one occasion, Toker reports, a truckload of these policemen stopped in the street, caught three civilians and demanded money from them. Two of the civilians gave in to this illegal extortion. The third not complying was carried in the truck and was released only after he made the payment of money.<sup>63</sup> So bold and brazen were the attitude of these policemen that on another occasion when they were acting as escorts in the Calcutta court, they dared to face the judge, throughout the proceedings, with their boots on the desk, refusing to put their foot on the ground.<sup>64</sup> On 25<sup>th</sup> April, in Harrison Road these policemen it was reported in the Assembly, allowed a Muslim murderer to run away in broad daylight as they fired on a Hindu crowd who was chasing the assailant after having

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<sup>59</sup> Bandopadhyay '*Kolkata Danga*', p.65.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> B.L.A. Proceedings. First Session 1947, 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1947, Adjournment Motion, pp.136-160.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p.153.

<sup>63</sup> Toker, F. '*While Memory Serves*', p.379.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

witnessed the act of murder.<sup>65</sup> Within a very short time the Muslim Punjabi policemen became synonymous with terror.<sup>66</sup>

The presence of Punjabi Muslim policemen in the province caused a furore in the press and the public and it reverberated in the Legislative Assembly. The Congress representative Bimal Comar Ghose said in the house, 'The innocent and law-abiding citizens of Calcutta today are threatened, are haunted by two nightmares – the knife of the assassins and the brutality and bestiality of some of our guardians of law and order. If a choice were forced upon them between these two gifts of the benign Muslims rule of Bengal, I am not sure if many of them would not have preferred the assassin's knife to the brutality of some of our diabolic protectors...if ....all incidents of atrocities and assaults are investigated then the conclusion becomes irresistible that they are being perpetrated with the sinister motive...to terrorize the members of the ...(Hindu) community in this city. It is also difficult to resist the conclusion that the armed policemen were brought from Punjab...for the work'.<sup>67</sup>

In the Assembly, the Hindu representatives were agitated enough to construe this move as Suhrawardy's scheme to create a Bengal bereft of Hindus.<sup>68</sup> They described the deployment of Punjabi Muslim and

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<sup>65</sup> B.L.A. First Session 1947, 25<sup>th</sup> April 1947. Communal situation in Calcutta, pp.237-241.

<sup>66</sup> Tucker, F. 'While Memory Serves', p.229

<sup>67</sup> B.L.A. First Session 1947, 22<sup>th</sup> April 1947

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p.150.

Pathan policemen as a well-thought out move to repeat the experience of Noakhali on the Hindus of Calcutta so that ultimately Hindus were forced to leave the city and province.<sup>69</sup> These representatives were so enraged that urged the Hindus of Calcutta to prepare themselves for the civil war and be ready to avenge the wrongs inflicted on them, and specially on the Hindu women.<sup>70</sup>

The Suhrawardy Government defended itself on the floor of the house saying that the Hindu press, public and representatives were being shockingly communal on the issue of efficient and stringent administration.<sup>71</sup> Suhrawardy justified his stand by stating that he had inducted these 'trained, fine, gallant' Punjabi Muslims firstly to bring a proper balance among the Hindu and Muslim officers in all departments of the government and secondly, to offer a sense of relief to the desperate state of mind of the Muslim minority, who till early 1947 could not look upto the police force for either support or succour.<sup>72</sup>

Whatever were the lies manufactured by the government about the nature of the Punjabi police force, these policemen invited immense criticism even from the British authorities. As late as 18<sup>th</sup> July 1947, the Governor of Bengal Frederick Burrows feared Muslim excesses in Calcutta on 15<sup>th</sup> August which had the possibility of having the support

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p.153.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p.136.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., pp.145.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., pp.157-158.

of the partisan Muslim Punjabi policemen.<sup>73</sup> This amply explains how much the authorities distrusted these policemen. Even the Viceroy, Mountbatten, realized that the matter relating to the day of transfer of power, in the city of Calcutta, was so urgent that he held a special meeting in Calcutta to discuss the matter on 31<sup>st</sup> July 1947. Very soon the Hindus of the city were to take to the worst forms of violence, that too against the police force. One of the reasons behind that reaction definitely lay in the partisan role of the police-force.<sup>74</sup> Thus state terror prepared the ground for terrorist acts of the subjects.

#### **May-June 1947: Rumbblings of the Storm**

The city was definitely quieter in May and June. After the bloodshed in April Calcutta seemed to be tired of violence in May. But very soon in the month of June it was observed that communal violence had re-established itself as a regular feature of the city's daily life. Between 10<sup>th</sup> June to 19<sup>th</sup> June, 13 persons were killed and 124 were injured in communal assaults, stabbings and bombs throwing.<sup>75</sup>

While a fresh outbreak of communal trouble was due from 22 June life in the city was plagued by the increasing simple non-communal crime. 'Unemployment, industrial unrest, dearth of food and clothing and the general after-the-war lawlessness', prepared the background to this development. An abnormal daily average of 40 cases of such crime was record in the city as against the normal

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<sup>73</sup> T.O.P. VolXII, pp.224-225. Document 161, Secret Letter of Sir F.Burrows to Viscount Mountbatten.

<sup>74</sup> Taker,F. '*While Memory Serves*', p.379.

<sup>75</sup> *Times* (Cuttings), 20 June 1947.

average of less than a quarter of that number. In the five and a half months preceding mid-June such crime contributed 98 murders and 2000 burglaries. Pedestrians were always exposed to the dangers from gangs lurking at the nooks and crannies as also the individual thugs.<sup>76</sup> These petty criminals were so bold that they did not stop harassing the civilians. Thefts of military vehicles from military were also very common.<sup>77</sup>

Communal situation worsened in Calcutta from 22 June, when 4 persons died and as many as 13 'incidents' happened in the city. On the 24 the city experienced bombs throwing and arson at many places. An incident of bomb throwing on a lorry at Belliaghata left 4 dead on 26 June. Troubles broke out in Howrah on 27<sup>th</sup>. Police firing left 6 dead on the 28<sup>th</sup>. On the 29<sup>th</sup> troubles broke out in Chitpur area in North Calcutta resulting in 4 deaths.<sup>78</sup>

Towards the end of June, communal clashes took an anti-police turn in Howrah where four police constables were shot, three of them being Muslims.<sup>79</sup> Hindu-armed mobs attacked a funeral party of 100 Muslims. The Muslims were attacked by men bearing guns and bombs, leaving four dead and nine injured. A 48 hours curfew could hold the wave of communal riots back. The very next day another

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Toker, - *While Memory Serves*, pp.240-241.

<sup>78</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 23-30 June 1947. Cited in Bandopadhyay, Sandip - *Kolkata Danga*, p.82.

<sup>79</sup> Toker, - *While Memory Serves*, p. 379.

Muslim constable was shot dead in the house where he was on picket duty and some Hindus were stabbed. Following that the policemen withdrew their pickets fearing further violence against themselves. The next day, 250 armed policemen refused duty and 100 of them were stopped from taking <sup>revenge of</sup> deaths of their fellow constables. Finally the army was called in to control the situation.<sup>80</sup>

The reason behind the anti-police violence was the acquittal of two Muslim policemen who were charged with the allegations of criminally assaulting a Hindu woman of that area.<sup>81</sup> Finding no legal way to seek justice, as the city administration gave a preferential treatment to the Muslim policemen who acted as keepers of law in that area, the local Hindus took the law into their own hands.

Till 1 July communal situation in the city showed no sign of improvement. Curfew had to be reimposed on the riot-affected areas forcing the life in the city to come to a complete standstill.<sup>82</sup> These clashes were just a pre-cursor of the trouble that the city was waiting onwards from early July.

### SECTION III

#### July 1947: The Hindu Offensive

The second phase of communal riots began in Calcutta during July 1947. On 7 July 1947 Calcutta again witnessed another spell of

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> *Times* (Cuttings), 5 July, 1947.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 2 July 1947.

communal orgy, this time the violence left 50 dead and 200 injured. The city press described the communal clash of 7 July as the gravest since the carnage of August 1946.<sup>83</sup> The root of the trouble lay in the murder of a Muslim police officer-in-charge at a local police station by ~~sten~~ gun wielding goondas on 6 July. To control the situation curfew was declared in the area where the crime was committed.<sup>84</sup> The next day trouble flared up in the afternoon when Muslims took a procession through the streets bearing the body of the Muslim police officer who was shot dead too late in dispersing those in the procession and the situation took an ugly turn when riot was on and the Muslims brought the battered body of one of their comrades in an truck for all to see. Trouble spread over a wide area in the city. The worst affected area being the 'hub' of Calcutta, with, 'mobs at street corners, cars burning and ambulance and fire-engines clattering past at full speed.'<sup>85</sup>

On 8 July, 'Calcutta woke uneasily ....(in the) morning', and there was 'tension in most parts of the city'.<sup>86</sup> Police and troops were deployed in the riot affected and riot-prone parts of the city. Strong and motorized patrols rumbled continuously through the streets incidents took place in the city forcing the police and troops to open fire on two occasions to 'disperse small knots of hooligans'.<sup>87</sup> The communal madness raging through the city forced thousands of clerks

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<sup>83</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 8 July 1946. Cited in Chatterjee, P.K. *Struggle and Strife in Urban Bengal*, p.199.

<sup>84</sup> *Times (Cuttings)*, 7 July 1947.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 8 July 1947.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 9 July 1947.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

and workers to be imprisoned inside their working place and were sent home by armed escorts on hired lorries as the transport services of the city were largely suspended.<sup>88</sup>

Communal killings continued for another day. Deaths caused by the sten gun and brickbatting numbered at 10 on 9 July. The situation worsened so far as to force 'Army patrols and pickets to maintain utmost vigil in the city'.<sup>89</sup> The ordinary citizens refrained from venturing out into the streets. Public and private commutation hardly ran on the streets.

The majority of the sufferers in this riot were from the poorer section. This is evidenced by the fact that, 'The deaths' were, 'almost all confined to humblefolk, whose unclaimed bodies...(were) disposed of by hospital authorities'.<sup>90</sup>

The characteristic feature of this trouble in early July was the fact it signalled the beginning of a phase of offensive by the Hindus. This resurgent mood of the Hindus, expressed in goondaism against the Muslims were to continue well into September 1947.

Middle-class Bengali Hindu opinion sharpened its attack on the Suhrawardy Ministry. They demanded the removal of the League Ministry, as it continued to undermine the law and order machinery in Calcutta. The Amrita Bazar Patrika wrote that the League Ministry 'had no legal or moral justification to continue their civil

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. 10 July 1947.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 10 July 1947 and Bandopadhyay, Sandip 'Kolkata Danga' p.83.



administration over Calcutta and West Bengal'.<sup>91</sup>

The city witnessed fresh outbreak of violence on 19 July, 'Which furnished the biggest single casualty list'.<sup>92</sup> On that day a strike was called in the Bata Shoe Factory in the city. The Muslims workers of the Factory went on rampage after hearing that the workers of the Hindu Union, which had gone on strike were looting Muslim houses. The casualties due to this clash amounted to almost a hundred.<sup>93</sup>

Incidents of sporadic rioting went on an increase in Calcutta in the last week of July. On 30 July such incidents of violence left 14 dead and 70 injured. Acid was thrown at a bus in Jorasanko in North Calcutta. In Bullygunj in South Calcutta travellers were brought down from buses and beaten up on the street. During the same time relatively poorer and working-class locality of the city like Belliaghata, Muchipara, Taltalla and Entally experienced violence by the use of acid, bombs and Stenguns. The residential quarter of the city of the Marwari trading community also experienced similar violence.<sup>94</sup> Following is the list of types of violence and the number of people who suffered from it between 7-31 July:↵

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<sup>91</sup> *Time* (Cuttings), 10 July 1947.

<sup>92</sup> T.O.P Vol. XII, p.65. Viceroy's Personal Report No. 2, 11 July 1947.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 27-31 July, 2,6,8, August, 1947; *The Statesman* - 4 August, 1947. Cited in Bandopadhyay, Sandip - *Kolkata Danga*, pp.82-83.

**Table 3.3**

**Types of Crimes and Number of those Injured in Calcutta: 7-31 July**

Type of Crime	Number of People Injured
1. Knifing and Bomb-attack	163
2. Acid throwing	47
3. Shooting	113
4. Other attacks	123

Source: Amrita Bazar Patrika, July 27-31, August, 2, 6, 8, 1947; The Statesman, August 4, 1947, cited in Bandopadhyay, Sandip - *Kolkata Danga*, pp.82-83.

The crimes of Calcutta during the month of July were dominated mainly by the Hindu goondaism. The Hindus were in a retaliatory mood, whereas the Muslims, in the latter half of the month were under a 'sullen depression of spirits'.<sup>95</sup> The Hindu goondas of this phase were professional criminals who were brought from Bihar and U.P. alongside their communal crimes they did not hesitate to wreak havoc on Hindus as well, for example during looting they did not spare the shops owned by the Hindus.<sup>†</sup> <sup>Sunil</sup>Sen, a participant in the Tebhagha Movement, recalls that during the time the Hindu goondaism was majorly financed by the Marwari traders of Barabazar.<sup>96</sup> So the 'Hindus were on the offensive'

<sup>95</sup> Tucker, F. - *While Memory Serves*, p.381.

<sup>96</sup> Bandopadhyay, Sandip - *Kolkata Danga*, p.83. Also see Sen, Sunil, essay in *Choturango*, March number, 1989.

with 'Hindu and Sikh gangsters...(sweeping) the streets with their automatics'.<sup>97</sup>

During the clashes which took place during July 'The use of firearm by angry mobs and murders individuals ...(became) common occurrence, with home-made Sten-guns and other lethal weapons in the hands of the worst characters of Calcutta'.<sup>98</sup>

### **August 1947: Nightmare and Freedom:**

Apprehensions about another gory month of August had dominated the mind of the British authorities as well as the political leaders at the national and provincial level. Frederick Burrows the Governor of Bengal voiced his fear of 'every, possibility of trouble from Muslim elements in Calcutta to West Bengal. Moreover, further possibilities of trouble lied on the proposed date of transfer of power i.e. 15 August. The chances were of disturbances were there due to the possible 'provocative Hindu celebrations as well as because, August 16 was the anniversary of the Direct Action Day and August 18 was Id. In such a situation, Dr. P.C. Ghosh, urged the stationing of three additional Indian Army battalions of full strength'.<sup>99</sup>

Similar fears were echoed by Jawaharlal Nehru. In a letter to Mountbatten, Nehru also mentioned about the, 'general expectation for the preparation of conflict in Calcutta'. Nehru agreed with Dr.

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<sup>97</sup> Taker, F. - *While Memory Serves*, p.381.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> T.O.P. Vol. XII, Document - 161, pp.224-225. Sir Burrows to Viscount Mountbatten. 18 July 1947.

P.C.Ghosh's proposal of stationing additional troops in the city.<sup>100</sup> A similar publicity was apprehended by Tucker, the C-in-C of Eastern Command and when the Viceroy, Mountbatten visited Calcutta personally on 30 July to assess the situation personally Tucker informed him about the gravity of the situation.<sup>101</sup> The situation was so serious that the authorities cleverly spread the rumours that there was a 'great army on the move to subdue the rowdy city'. This rumour was given a final shape by the city's press. The Statesman wrote of 4 August:-<sup>102</sup>

*"More Troops For Calcutta"*

August 4. - It is authoritatively learnt here that the Central Government has decided to considerably strengthen the military forces in Calcutta.

This decision now taken to meet any emergency between now and the transfer of power on August 15.

The new administrative set up in Bengal was in no way effective to meet the exigencies of the situation. The strange dyarchy 'with Mr. Suhrawardy's Muslim Government still in chair and Dr. P.C. Ghose's Hindu West Bengal Ministry growing up beneath them, as a creeper or as a knobbly sprout from a tree' was grossly ineffective in stemming the troubles.<sup>103</sup> In effect the administration lay in the hands of the Muslim League Ministers with the West Bengal Ministry being just a 'Shadow

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<sup>100</sup> T.O.P. Vol. XII, Document - 194, pp.283-285. Pandit Nehru to Mountbatten. 21 July 1947.

<sup>101</sup> Chatterjee, P.K. *Struggle and Strife in Urban Bengal*.

<sup>102</sup> Tucker, F. - *While Memory Serves*, pp.381-382.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p.378.

Cabinet'.<sup>104</sup> The anti-Hindu activities of the Muslim Punjabi police, who were to be in Calcutta till the second week of August, was a constant source of worry to the politicians as well as the British authorities.<sup>105</sup> A similar source of worry was the Gurkha police force who had become anti-Muslim by that time.<sup>106</sup> Moreover, Dr. P.C.Ghosh, a member of Gandhi's Khadi group could hardly take enough repressive measures to stop the atrocities of the goondas.<sup>107</sup> Altogether, the dual authority in the city led to continuous difficulties and indecision at critical moments.<sup>108</sup>

The situations worsened beyond expectation in Calcutta in August 1947. But this time the initiative came from the Hindu side and not, as was expected, from the Muslim side. 'The latter (Hindus) felt that power of the League Ministry was now broken and the police could, therefore no longer encourage the Muslim goondas...'.<sup>109</sup> Hindu goondaism entered a new phase during August. With the use of automatic rifles, Sten-guns and hand-grenades. Hindu goondas as well as local Hindu youth attacked the local Muslim population.<sup>110</sup> The withdrawal of the Punjabi Muslim policemen emboldened the Hindus and created panic among the Muslims who were now scared of a major Hindu onslaught on them.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> T.O.P., Vol. XII, pp.283-285, Document -194.

<sup>105</sup> T.O.P., Vol. XII, p.284 and pp.224-225.

<sup>106</sup> T.O.P., Vol. XII, p.284.

<sup>107</sup> Tucker, F. - *While Memory Serves*, p.378.

<sup>108</sup> T.O.P. Vol. XII, p.284.

<sup>109</sup> Bose Nirmal K. - *My Days with Gandhi*, (Calcutta, 1953), p.255.

<sup>110</sup> Bandopadhyay, Sandip - *Kolkata Danga*, p. 84 and Bose, N.K. - *My Days with Gandhi*, (Calcutta, 1953), p. 260.

<sup>111</sup> Bandopadhyay, Sandip - *Kolkata Danga*, p. 84.

Troubles were on the city from 1 August when two women died of gunshots by goondas. Major trouble began from 5 and 6 August in Belliaghata.<sup>112</sup> Though Belliaghata was a predominantly Hindu area, the Miabagan slum in that area was the residence of poor Muslims. 'Miabagan had earned the unenviable reputation of harbouring a large number of goondas during the riots'.<sup>113</sup> This slum was attacked by the local Hindu youth who cleared the area of Muslims by the use of locally manufactured hand-grenades and Sten-guns. A similar fate was shared by the Hindus residing in Manicktala, Kankurgachhi and Ultadanga where the Muslim goondas drove out all the Hindus.<sup>114</sup> By 9 August clashes between rival groups had become common in Chitpur, Belliaghata, Manicktolla street, Muchipara, Taltolla street and Beniapukur.<sup>115</sup> The use of firearms by private persons, acid throwing, bomb hurling, stray assaults and arson were on the rise. Travellers in tramcars and suburban trains were receiving fatal injuries due to bomb attacks.<sup>116</sup> Parts of Calcutta inhabited mainly by Muslims, became mainly by Muslims, became inaccessible to the Hindus even if they had houses in those areas. Similar was the case of Hindu localities.<sup>117</sup> The Hindu offensive mood had by then tinged police administration and innocent people died of police firing.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Bose, N.K. - *My Days with Gandhi*, (Calcutta, 1953), p. 260.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Hindustan Standard, 10 August 1947.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Bose, N.K. - *My Days with Gandhi*, (Calcutta, 1953), p. 257.

<sup>118</sup> Morning News, 12 August, 1947. Cited in Bandopadhyay, Sandip - *Kolkata Danga*, pp.8. Also see Bose - *My Days with Gandhi*, p.257.

Mahatma Gandhi went to Calcutta on 9 August 1947. He was on his way to Noakhali but he was asked by the Muslim leaders to 'tarry in Calcutta and pour a pot of water over the raging fire that was burning.'<sup>119</sup> Citing the examples of Hindu retaliation at Muslim-majority slums of Miabagan and Paikpara, the former Mayor of Calcutta Mohammed Usman pleaded Gandhi to save the Muslims of Calcutta.<sup>120</sup> At the request of Suhrawardy and Mohammed Usman Gandhi stayed in Calcutta upto September 1947 in Calcutta. Gandhi's initial efforts at bringing peace back to Calcutta were fruitful. Gandhi stayed at a crumbling house in Belliaghata, locally known as the Hyadari Mansion.<sup>121</sup>

Gandhi was fully aware of the goondaism in Calcutta and he held the government responsible for the acts of the goondas.<sup>122</sup> His hope that 'Calcutta would not present the disgraeful spectacle of hot goondaism when they were entering upon full responsibility', seemed to have been actualized in the streets of Calcutta on the eve of the Independence Day.<sup>123</sup> 'A change of atmosphere seemed to have set in on the evening of the 14 August and everybody continued for many days in a state of friendliness with everybody else.'<sup>124</sup> A great jubilation and fraternization went on all over the city. Nirmal K. Bose who was there with Gandhi in Calcutta during the time writes:-

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<sup>119</sup> Bose, N.K. - *My Days with Gandhi*, p.255.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Kasturi, Bhashyam - *Walking Alone* (New Delhi, 1999), p.105.

<sup>122</sup> Bose, N.K. - *My Days with Gandhi*, p.225.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid. p.256.

<sup>124</sup> Taker, F. - *While Memory Serves*, p. 413.

“For one whole year, ever since the beginning of the Muslim League’s Direct Action on 16 of August 1946. Hindus and Muslims strictly avoided one another’s company. Transference of population had taken place, so that Calcutta had virually become divided into exclusively Hindus and Muslims zones. But news began to pour in now that the Hindus and Muslims were both coming out of the streets, embracing one another and the latter were even inviting their erstwhile enemies to visit their masjids.”<sup>125</sup>

The new Governor of Bengal, C.Rajagopalachari congratulated Gandhi for the ‘miracle which he had wrought’.<sup>126</sup> But Gandhi was sceptical enough of this demonstration of fraternization.

Gandhi’s doubts were to be proved true very soon. The apparent harmony was broken on 31 August 1947 when a large crowd of Hindus assembled at Gandhi’s Belliaghata residence went on a rampage with the avowed purpose of having a score to settle with Suhrawardy. Appeals made by Gandhi, Dr. P.C.Ghosh the Chief Minister of West Bengal and the Commissioner of Police had no effect on the crowd.<sup>127</sup> The bombing of a truck of Muslim refugees from Belliaghata, the next day shocked Gandhi and he undertook a fast to bring sanity back to Calcutta.<sup>128</sup> Gandhi ended his fast on 4 September upon receiving assurances from leaders of both Hindu and Muslim communities to desist from violence. His purpose was apparently served , he left

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<sup>125</sup> Bose, N.K. – *My Days with Gandhi*, p.264.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p.265.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.272-273

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*



Calcutta on 7 September.<sup>129</sup>

Goondaism of July, August and early September 1947 was in certain senses demonstrated as an evolution. Gandhi was very correct in stating that 'goondas were there because we have made them so.'<sup>130</sup> In fact goondas became an important part of city life and in certain cases 'gained respectability' because of the way communalist politics depended on them to give shape to its evil designs. The process was started in August 1946. That was the turning point. When goonda-force was deployed by the League; the ball was set rolling. Soon enough Hindu resistance groups were formed. The illegal trade in firearms, the illegal manufacture of weapons came to be the means of survival in the city. Administration floundered and a completely illegal local security system of the vigilantes replaced the police, which led to a total anarchy in the city. There was terror. Criminals became bolder, more skilful and ruthless. The Calcutta Statesman reported that some people in Calcutta, who tasted blood in riot of 1946, were addicted to the game of bloodshed.<sup>131</sup> If muscle power could be hired for political interests it could be hired for economic profits as well. Things were made easier in a situation where the police was communalized due to the manipulation of police personnel, their ~~posting~~ and fresh induction etc. by Suhrawardy. Use of muscle power were made by the Marwaris

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 278.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 281.

<sup>131</sup> *The Statesman*, 30 October 1946. Cited in Bandopadhyay, Sandip – *Kolkata Danga*, p. 85.

of Calcutta during 1947. Driving out Muslims out of slums with the help of goondas and letting out the shanties to poor Hindus at higher rent by Hindu slum-owners was also common. Such a thing happened in the Miabagan slum of Bellighata, the Nikasipara slum of Shyambazar and the Motijheel slum of Entally. If not on hire, those surviving by muscle-power made a profitable living by the excuse of offering protection and the sheer awesomeness it had acquired after August 1946.<sup>132</sup> So, Hindu economic interest took full advantage of the Hindu retaliatory mood. Thus, the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* was not wrong when it wrote in September that 'what is happening in Calcutta is pure goondaism and it is nothing to do with any communal or political issue.'<sup>133</sup>

The lawlessness, riot, murders, rape and arson which paralyzed the life in the city left an indelible mark on the bhadralok psyche. The law-abiding sections among the bhadralok class recorded its sense of deep shock in contemporary literature. The consequences of this shock found expression in the bhadralok petitions in favour of partition. The reaction of this class is worth recording as it offers a non-official commentary on the past realities of life in the city. For the present purpose we will seek to examine a few stories by Saradindu Bandopadhyay, which are set on the time period to which this study is limited.

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<sup>132</sup> Bandopadhyay, Saradindu - *Adim Ripu*, Omnibas, Vol.2.

<sup>133</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 4 September 1947; Cited in Bandopadhyay, Sandip - *Kolkata Danga*, p.95.

The issue of riot and partition are never taken up by Bandopadhyay as a central theme rather 'the brooding, malignant presence of communal passions in the background, waiting to be fanned to a blaze, underscore his thematic handling of violence and the tremendous feeling of insecurity this generated among the middle-classes in Bengal'.<sup>134</sup>

Three of Saradindu Bandopadhyay's short stories 'Adim Ripu' or 'The Primordial Instinct' (Vol.2. 1961) 'Rakter Daag' or 'The Bloodstain' (Vol.2. 1961) and 'Dui Dik' or 'Both the Facets' (Vol.6. 1964) are set in pre-partition, riot-stricken Calcutta.

'In Adim Ripu' we find awesome presence of a Hindu goonda of the name 'Bantul Sardar'. He is 'the leader of the goondas of a locality, short and stocky in appearance with a spot of vermillion adorning his oily forehead.' His powers and activities had increased considerably from after the time of Direct Action. He collected a levy from the law-abiding residents of the locality in lieu of offering them protection to their lives and property.

As opposed to the Hindu goonda of 'Adim Ripu' we encounter his Muslim counter in the story 'Dui Dik' (Both The Facets). In this story the dread goonda is Noor Mia. Here the plot deals with the transformation of the criminal into a law-abiding citizen after he comes in touch with a Hindu doctor who is shown to have overcome his own

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<sup>134</sup> Mukhopadhyay, Anindita '*Partition Relived in Literature*' (unpublished article), the author is a researcher in Prof. Ashis Nandy's Project on "Violence and Ethnic Conflict in South Asia", Committee for Cultural Choices and Global Futures, New Delhi, 1999, p.2.

moral dilemma to bring Noor Mia back from the doors of death.

In the third story 'Rakter Daag' (The Bloodstain) the author depicts the tragic transformation on a intelligent, educated, college going young man Sitangshu into a cold-blooded murderer. He was transformed into a criminal after the riot of August 1946, in which his father was murdered by Muslim rioters.

In the light of the tragic developments and the condition of Calcutta in 1947 the fact that partition of Bengal received support from the bhadralok class of the city does not come as a surprise. The bhadralok class thus agreed to partition as it was expected to bring security to life and property and as it would put an end to the damage that the repeated riots were doing.

## CONCLUSION

The battle for Partition fought in the streets of Calcutta brought the city underworld out into broad daylight. Calcutta had been a breeding ground for the criminal from the time the city acquired the characteristics of an industrial town. The city had witnessed activities like cocaine-dealing, immoral trafficking in women, burglaries and hooliganism on hire from the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> The Goonda Act passed by the Legislative Assembly in Bengal in 1926 stands out as the effort of the law-abiding bourgeois citizen and the state to control the scourge of goondaism.<sup>2</sup> However, proliferation of crime could not be controlled by mere acts of legislation. The goonda, was emerging as a threat to the security and civil life in Calcutta.

Goondaism had become a part of life for the colonial metropolis by the 1940s. during the '40s, the war, the rationing and the communalist politics created a basis for crime to be on the rise in Calcutta. The lack of long-term development in public order coupled with declining income and fewer opportunities for employment created a favorable environment for crime in Calcutta. The members from the decaying hinterland and of the port city fell upon Calcutta and many of them took to crime finding no

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to Edwards, S.M- '*Crime in India*' (London, 1924) and Haikerwal B.S- '*Economic and Social Aspects of Crime in India*' (London, 1934)

<sup>2</sup>Das, S. -*The Goondas*, p.2.

other means of livelihood.

Criminality joined hands with communalism during 1946 as these two aspects of life developed a symbiotic relationship. The communal riot in August 1946 needed large-scale organization as the Suhrawardy government on the one hand and Hindus communal organizations on the other adopted a strategy of terrorizing the civil population for communal ends. The unleashing of this reign of terror during the Direct Action Day necessitated large bands of goondas armed with weapons ranging from firearms to lathies moving swiftly from one end of the city to the other end on vehicles funded by the league government. The state in those four days deliberately held the hands of law from preventing the criminals from committing the most heinous crimes in broad daylight. The League government's sponsorship of terrorization and crime evoked a reaction from the Hindus of the city who readied small private armies in the different localities manned by goondas and local youth. The riot of August '46 opened a new chapter in the life of Calcutta. The underworld having received support from the state as also the citizens seeking self-protection through communally organized vigilantes groups began to rule the city. The riot of 1946 was the turning point in the lives of many young men of Calcutta who turned into dangerous criminals in those days of bloodshed.

In the years following the Great Calcutta killing the city was virtually left at the mercy of the goondas. Politics became

indistinguishable from communalism. Communalism became indistinguishable from criminality. The large mobs of August 1946 were soon replaced by small bands of cold-blooded gangsters who stabbed people in crowded streets, sprayed bullets in crowded buses, trains or even pavements and hurled acid or bombs on innocent people. The government manipulated in the police force in such a way that its neutrality was questioned and thus it lost its moral authority, the import of Muslim policemen for Punjab also alienated the Hindus. The Hindus did not lag behind and very soon the small resistance groups began targeting the policemen. With the ushering in of the Congress cabinet under Dr.P.C.Ghosh they were emboldened.

The patronage of criminals by politicians made crime a career for the unemployed in Calcutta's underworld. The best efforts of Gandhi could not bring the goondaism of Calcutta to a stop.<sup>3</sup> Political support to crime helped to convert the shady characters of back alleys Calcutta into gang leaders who offered "protection" for money. The links between politics and some of the criminal elements described above, was the outcome of a fatal conjuncture; the social problems of the colonial city in crisis in the 1940's combined with the extreme degree of communalisation of politics in the pre partition days to produce the conflagration of 1946-47.

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<sup>3</sup> Bose, N.K-*My Days with Gandhi* pp.281-82

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