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Fighting Religious Hatreds

> ... there are two principles embodied in a democratic system: rule by majority is one; but respect for certain individual and collective rights and freedoms is the other and more fundamental one. Should the two principles collide, it is the second that must at all costs be defended. Thus to resist the encroachment of basic rights by a duly elected government is not to deny democracy but to uphold it.[1]
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> I do not believe in the doctrine of the greatest good of the greatest number. It means in its nakedness that in order to achieve the supposed good of 51 per cent, the interests of 49 per cent may be, or rather should be, sacrificed.[2]

Gandhi believed that all people had a right to practise any religion they chose to identify with, and that forms of worship should not be dictated by the state. Although himself a Hindu, he carried on a sympathetic dialogue with those of other faiths, arguing that each represented a different path towards Truth. His views were in part a product of his upbringing in Saurashtra, a region in which there was no obvious history of communal

antagonism and in which the local rulers had for centuries pursued a policy of religious tolerance. His father, Karamchand Gandhi, was a follower of the Vallabhacharya Vaishnava sect, which was strong among the mercantile and Baniya élites. He was, it is said, always fascinated by the beliefs of those of other faiths and he used to enjoy discussing them in an open-minded way with Muslims, Parsis, and people of other sects who visited their home from day to day.

His mother, Putaliba, was a follower of the syncretic Pranami sect, which was founded in the early eighteenth century by Prannath, who preached that the Puranas, the Koran and the Bible represented merely alternative paths to the One God. No images were allowed in his temples, merely scriptures of different religions. Putaliba was from a relatively humble Baniya family—considered to be much lower in status to that of her husband—and in following the Pranami sect, her family adhered to the popular syncretism of the people rather than the more orthodox Vaishnavism of her husband's family. It is claimed that Gandhi imbibed much of her attitude in his religious belief as well as practice.[3]

Although there is truth in this so far as Gandhi's own upbringing was concerned, being raised in a high-caste family in Saurashtra was no guarantee of such tolerance. Swami Dayanand Saraswati had also been brought up in a wealthy and prominent family of the small state of Morvi, not so far from Rajkot, where Gandhi spent most of his child-hood.[4] His Arya Samaj became the foremost vehicle in early-twentieth- century India for an assault on the religious loyalties of non-Hindus, with its strident orchestration of a so-called 'purification' of Muslims and Christians to bring them 'back' to Hinduism. Gandhi viewed such activities with distaste, and criticised Dayanand for his narrow-mindedness and intolerance in this respect.[5]

Gandhi's religious tolerance was reinforced by secularist doctrines that had emerged in Europe in the years after the religious wars of the post-

Reformation period. The latter was formulated most clearly by John Locke, who argued that the state should not seek to adjudicate within the sphere of private belief—this was a matter for the subjective conscience of the individual.[6] Gandhi's commitment to this principle comes out very clearly in two statements made at a time when the division of India along supposedly 'religious' lines was looming before him. In September 1946 he reassured a Christian missionary who had asked him whether religion would be separate from the state after Indian independence: 'If I were a dictator, religion and state would be separate. I swear by my religion. I will die for it. But it is my personal affair. The State has nothing to do with it. The State would look after your secular welfare, health, communications, foreign relations, currency and so on, but not your or my religion. That is everybody's personal concern!'[7] Five months later he condemned the suggestion that the state should concern itself in religious education:

> I do not believe that the State can concern itself or cope with religious education. I believe that religious education must be the sole concern of religious associations. Do not mix up religion and ethics. I believe that fundamental ethics is common to all religions. Teaching of fundamental ethics is undoubtedly a function of the State. By religion I have not in mind fundamental ethics but what goes by the name of denominationism. We have suffered enough from State-aided religion and State Church. A society or group, which depends partly or wholly on State aid for the existence of its religion, does not deserve or, better still, does not have any religion worth the name.[8]

Gandhi, Muslims, and Hindu Nationalists

One of the most important issues which was debated and fought over in Gandhi's time was the question whether or not Indian nationalism was compromised by the presence of large numbers of Muslims in India. There were many Hindu nationalists who believed that Muslims could not be

genuine Indian patriots as their religious 'home' lay outside the subcontinent.[9] Many Muslims, on the other hand, saw that the Indian National Congress was dominated by high-caste Hindus, and felt that the 'India' which they projected was one ruled by high-caste, and particularly Brahmanical, values. The British argued that India could never be a viable nation-state as Hindus and Muslims could never live in peace because of their inborn enmity. There was nothing peculiarly Indian, or 'Third World', about such debates as such—defining what constitutes the nation has been and continues to be a controversial matter in all parts of the world. In England, for example, 'Englishness' was often associated with Protestantism, particularly Anglicanism, while non-Protestants, particularly Catholics who supposedly owed their allegiance to the Roman pope, were seen to be inadequate as Englishmen and suspect in their patriotism.[10]

Gandhi took a secular line on this question, stating in *Hind Swaraj* that: 'India cannot cease to be one nation because people belonging to different religions live in it. ... If the Hindus believe that India should be peopled only by Hindus, they are living in dreamland. The Mahomedans also live in dreamland if they believe that there should be only Muslims in India.'[11] They were fellow countrymen who had to live in unity.

Gandhi saw the divide as an aberration, being a poisonous consequence of colonial rule. In the past, he argued, peoples of the two religions had flourished under rulers of both faiths, but 'with the English advent quarrels re-commenced'. He sought to counter these artificial divisions by insisting that: 'Religions are different roads converging to the same point.' There was a lot in the Koran which Hindus could endorse, just as there was much in the Bhagavat Gita which Muslims could agree with. It was important that Hindus gained the trust of Muslims by backing their sectional demands.[12] Because of this, Gandhi supported the establishment of separate electorates for Muslims in 1909—as it was a 'Muslim demand'.

In 1919, Gandhi extended his support to another supposedly sectional demand of the Muslims, that of the Khilafat. In the short term this brought great political gains for him, for with the support of the Khilafatists he was able to win the crucial vote for non-cooperation at the Calcutta Congress session of August 1920. The Khilafat cause was however a dubious one. Its proponents did not speak for the majority of Muslims in India, who were in general followers of the Sufi, Barelvi and Shia systems of worship. These traditions were known for their tolerance. Likewise, the Khilafatists opposed the secularist Muslims of the Muslim League, led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who had engineered the Lucknow Pact with the Congress in 1916.

The Khilafatists represented mainly the group which has been defined as the Muslim 'salariat'—that is, Muslims with an Anglo-Vernacular education who sought jobs in government service and the modern professions, often with limited success.[13] They were readers of the popular Urdu newspapers that had emerged in the past twenty or so years, and which at that time had —to boost their circulation—taken up the issue of the supposed threat to the Khalifa of Turkey as a result of British hostility during the First World War. Populist mullahs and maulanas took up the issue in similar vein. After the war ended, the British in fact went back to supporting the Turkish Khalifa against internal enemies, notably the republican nationalists associated with Mustafa Kemal. The fact that the Khalifa collapsed in 1924 had nothing to do with the British—it represented, rather, a triumph for the forces of change in Turkey against a vicious autocracy. Logically, Muslim nationalists in India should have supported Mustafa Kemal and his republicans, who were fighting against a British-supported tyrant. But, as Hamza Alavi has demonstrated, the whole Khilafatist position was riven by contradiction.[14]

In 1919, so keen was Gandhi to maintain a dialogue with the Muslims that he allowed himself to be persuaded by the rhetoric of Khilafat leaders such as Mahomed and Shaukat Ali, Abul Kalam Azad, Abdul Bari and Hasrat Mohani. In their speeches they claimed that the institution of the

Khalifa as the political head of all Muslims was set out in the holy scriptures of Islam. In fact, this assertion was false—there was no such sanction for this idea. Indeed, the claim of the Ottoman Sultans to be the Khalifa went back hardly more than one hundred years.[15] Like many others at that time, Gandhi was taken in by this concoction, backed up as it was by seemingly scholarly quotations in Arabic.[16] As a result, he endorsed the Khilafat position through a misplaced trust— believing that this was a heartfelt plea of the 'Indian Muslim', when in fact it was a highly contentious and sectional demand put forward by populist maulanas.

The politics that Gandhi was now endorsing was not defined by the subjective individual conscience, but that of an alleged collective that was defined in religious terms. He thus both politicised religion and communalised the proto-democracy that was being forged in India at that time. By supporting the Muslim clergy, Gandhi also endorsed the position of a group that was often reactionary and divisive. The lasting legacy of this was, in Alavi's words, 'the legitimisation of the Muslim clergy at the centre of the modern political arena, armed with a political organization in the form of the *Jamiat-e-Ulama-e-Hind* (and its successors after the Partition) which the clergy have used to intervene actively in both the political and ideological spheres. Never before in Indian Muslim history was the clergy ever accorded such a place in political life.'[17] At the same time, Gandhi alienated some Muslim secularists who would have been better allies in the long term, notably Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Jinnah's championship of a secularist and cosmopolitan politics for the Muslim League provided a counter to the grandiose claims of the Khilafatists to represent the Muslims of India. They sought to vilify him in whatever way they could; at the Calcutta Congress of September 1920, Shaukat Ali even assaulted Jinnah physically—he had to be wrenched away by the other delegates.[18] Jinnah and Gandhi fell out decisively in October 1920 when Gandhi demanded that the Home Rule League support the Non-Cooperation movement. Jinnah, who was president of the Bombay branch of the League and a leading figure in

the organisation since its establishment in 1915, argued that the body had been set up to fight for home rule for India by legal means, and that a two-thirds majority was required to change the League's constitution in this respect. Gandhi, who chaired this meeting, ignored him and pushed through a majority vote in his own favour. Jinnah was furious, and resigned his membership.[19] Some of Gandhi's strongest Muslim supporters were very worried by this turn of events. Abbas Tyabji, for example, warned Gandhi that the Ali brothers were effective as rabble-rousers, but that he would never want to have them in positions of responsibility or authority over him.[20] In this, he implied that people like Jinnah were more deserving of their trust.

At the same time, Gandhi was courting Hindu nationalist organisations, in particular the Arya Samaj and the Hindu Mahasabha. Gandhi admired the educational work of the Arya Samaj, with its gurukuls. Even while in South Africa he had been in touch with Mahatma Munshiram, who had founded the Kangri Gurukul at Hardwar in 1902. Munshiram, who became later known as Swami Shraddhananda, had collected funds for Gandhi's work in South Africa. Immediately after his return to India in 1915, Gandhi had visited this institution and praised it highly.[21] In 1916, Gandhi attended an Arya Samaj conference in Surat and performed the opening ceremony of its new temple there. In his speech he said that although he was not an Arya Samajist, he had 'especial respect for the Samaj', and that he had come under the influence of its founder Dayanand Saraswati.[22]

The Hindu Mahasabha was founded at Hardwar in April 1915. Gandhi attended the inaugural meeting and spoke in favour of the body.[23] Its main support came from high-caste Hindu businessmen and professionals in Uttar Pradesh, most of whom were also active in Congress politics. Madan Mohan Malaviya, the founder of the Banaras Hindu University and President of Congress in 1909 and 1918, was the most influential figure within it. Gandhi was in close contact with Malaviya from 1915 onwards. In

1919 he praised him as 'a great leader of India' and 'the patriarch of Hinduism'.[24]

Although Gandhi was seeking a base for himself within these Hindu organisations, he did not give unqualified support to their agendas. In 1916 he told some Arya Samajists that they could do better work if they reformed themselves in some important respects. In particular, he disliked the way that the organisation's spokesmen were 'only too ready to enter into violent controversy to gain their end'.[25] He also felt that the education provided by the gurukuls failed to inculcate a spirit of self-sufficiency, and he recommended that they provide training in agriculture, handicrafts and sanitation.[26]

Gandhi claimed at this time to be a highly orthodox Hindu of the Sanatanist persuasion.[27] He took up the issue of cow protection, calling it the central fact of Hinduism that symbolised the Hindu's reverence for all of God's creation.[28] When he was criticised by Goswami Shri Gokalnathji Maharaj, a leader of the Vallabhacharya Vaishnavites, for his rejection of the institution of untouchability, Gandhi argued that he was as orthodox as any. 'Do not conclude that I am a polluted person, a reformer. A rigidly orthodox Hindu, I believe that the Hindu Shastras have no place for untouchability of the type practised now.'[29] On a visit to a Swaminarayan temple in 1921, he exclaimed: 'At this holy place, I declare, if you want to protect your "*Hindu dharma*', non-cooperation is [the] first as well as the last lesson you must learn up.'[30]

With appeals such as these, Gandhi managed to rally a significant number of Hindu nationalists behind him in the period up until 1922. Mahatma Munshiram, who had taken *sannyas* as Swami Shraddhananda in 1917, threw his support behind Gandhi in 1919. Previously he had distrusted the motives of politicians, but he felt that Gandhi's politics were different, being enthused with the spirit of religion.[31] For a time, he became a leading proponent of Hindu–Muslim unity, and was even invited to preach at the

Jama Masjid in Delhi.[32] M.M. Malaviya threw his full support behind the Non-Cooperation Movement, and during those years the Hindu Mahasabha was in astate of hibernation.[33] Gandhi sought to win such people to a more tolerant and inclusive nationalism, insisting, for example, that cow protection should not be made a pretext for any antagonism against Muslims—their support for this cause should be won through love.[34]

As with the Khilafat, Gandhi was playing with fire. Although this strategy forged an unprecedented alliance—symbolised most strikingly by the saffron-clad Shraddhananda preaching from the pulpit of the Jama Masjid—it also brought a new credibility to the Hindu nationalists. Shraddhananda's popularity was much enhanced through his participation in Gandhi's movement. Malaviya had been previously an old-style élite Congressman without widespread support among the masses.

The implosion came after Gandhi called off civil disobedience and was arrested and jailed in early 1922. Already, the revolt by Muslim tenants in Malabar in 1921, which had been accompanied by attacks on Hindu landlords and cases of forcible conversion, had caused uneasy stirrings among the Hindu nationalists. They resented the way in which the Khilafat leaders had refused to condemn these attacks.[35] Swami Shraddhananda took it as a sign of Muslim bad faith: 'it appears that the Muslims only want to make India and the Hindus a mere means of strengthening their own cause. For them Islam comes first and Mother India second. Should not the Hindus work at their own *sangathan* [consolidation]?'[36] In 1922 he turned on the offensive, demanding that the Congress provide funds for a campaign of reconversion of Muslims to Hinduism, known as *shuddhi,* or 'purification'. When this request was turned down, he renounced his affiliation with the Congress and forged new links with the Hindu Mahasabha. An All-India Shuddhi Sabha was formed at Agra in February 1923.[37]

In the same year, V.D. Savarkar published *Who is a Hindu?*, which defined a Hindu as those who regarded Bharatvarsha as their holy land and

fatherland. This formula allowed a wide variety of religions within India, such as Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Jainism, Sikhism to be included within the 'Hindu' umbrella, but not religions such as Islam or Christianity, which were considered 'alien', and by extension, unpatriotic. The Hindu Mahasabha endorsed this definition at its session of August 1923. It also called for a campaign of shuddhi and the organisation of Hindu self-defence squads.[38]

Muslim leaders countered all this with their own *tabligh* (propaganda) and *tanzim* (organisation). There followed what has been described as 'a spate of Hindu-Muslim riots from 1923 onwards'.[39] One British observer calculated that eleven serious communal riots occurred in 1923, eighteen in 1924, sixteen in 1925, thirty-five in 1926 and thirty-one in 1927. The worst of these was in Calcutta in 1926 when 67 died and nearly 400 were injured.[40] The most notable victim of this violence was Swami Shraddhananda, who was assassinated in Delhi by a Muslim in December 1926.

One town in which there were disturbances in 1923 was Nagpur in the Maharashtrian part of the Central Provinces. Members of the local Hindu Sabha had taken out a procession in which they flaunted weapons and played loud music before the mosques of the town. The Muslims had fought back and many people were injured. The Muslims, who were mostly poor weavers, were forced to agree to allow music to be played in front of their mosques, and there were further armed processions with music in the following years.[41] In 1925, K.B. Hegdewar decided to put these activities on a firmer footing by establishing the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Hegdewar was a Maharashtrian Brahman of Nagpur who had condemned Gandhi's alliance with the Khilafatists, arguing that it was impossible to ally with 'foreign snakes'.[42] The RSS ran daily sessions for boys and young men—known as *shakhas*—which involved physical training and the propagation of right-wing Hindu beliefs. There was training in the use of sticks, swords, javelins and daggers—weapons associated with street fighting. In 1927, the RSS played a leading and aggressive role in another riot in Nagpur in which

twenty-two people died. From 1928, the body extended their activities to Uttar Pradesh. M.M. Malaviya supported them fully, providing an office for the organisation at the Banaras Hindu University.[43]

Gandhi was sickened by what he saw as an eruption of hatred that was destroying the achievements of previous years. After his release from prison in February 1924 he received many abusive letters from Hindus who accused him of opening the floodgates by uniting the Muslims of India behind the Khilafat cause. They argued that the 'awakened' Muslims had reverted to their true nature by launching 'a kind of jehad' against the Hindus.[44] Muslims wrote to him complaining of the shuddhi and sangathan activities of the Hindus.[45] Many Hindus saw non-violence and satyagraha as discredited forces, claiming that contrary to Gandhi's reading, the Bhagavad Gita enjoined violence in defence of one's faith. Gandhi refused, however, to believe that all was lost—this was a sad regression, but not a defeat. The fighting between Hindus and Muslims was a squalid diversion from the much more important struggle for freedom from British rule, and this battle would not be won through violence. Non-violence would be vindicated in the end because it was the only true way forward.[46]

Gandhi warned the Hindus that if they deployed violence in this way, they were likely to come off as losers. This was because: 'My own experience but confirms that the Mussalman as a rule is a bully, and the Hindu as a rule is a coward. I have noticed this in railway trains, on public roads, and in the quarrels which I have had the privilege of settling.'[47] The answer to this was not, however, gymnastic training and physical exercises which had an aggressive intent. Muslims would play the same game, and the violence would merely escalate. What was needed was training in non-violent resistance and a willingness to arbitrate in communal quarrels. This required far more courage. 'The remedy against cowardice is not physical culture but the braving of dangers.'[48]

Gandhi said that he had also been warned that people like M.M. Malaviya, Lala Lajpat Rai and Swami Shraddhananda had had a hand in stirring up this hatred against Muslims. He refused to accept this. He had worked closely with Malaviya since 1915, and knew that hatred was alien to his being. 'He and I are temperamentally different, but love each other like brothers.' Lajpat Rai had assured him personally that he put unity before division as he believed so strongly in swaraj.[49] Gandhi was less generous towards Swami Shraddhananda. Although he admired his bravery and his educational work, his speeches were 'often irritating' and had the unjustifiable ambition of bringing all Muslims into the Aryan fold. Gandhi went on to criticise the Arya Samaj. He had read Dayanand Saraswati's *Satyarth Prakash*—'the Arya Samaj Bible'—for the first time when he was in jail. In his opinion, Saraswati had severely misrepresented all religions, including Hinduism. 'He has tried to make narrow one of the most tolerant and liberal of the faiths on the face of the earth.'[50]

Gandhi then launched an attack on the shuddhi campaign. He argued that proselytism was alien to the spirit of Hinduism, and he accused the Arya Samaj of imitating Christian missionaries. Like the missionary, 'The Arya Samaj preacher is never so happy as when he is reviling other religions.'[51] This all did far more harm than good. 'My Hindu instinct tells me that all religions are more or less true. All proceed from the same God, but all are imperfect because they have come to us through imperfect human instrumentality. The real shuddhi movement should consist in each one trying to arrive at perfection in his or her own faith.'[52] He also condemned the Muslim campaign of tabligh as being alien to the spirit of Islam. He had read some pamphlets from the Punjab, and found them full of hatred and vile abuse.

He went on to examine some of the so-called 'causes' of the animosity, such as cow-slaughter by Muslims and playing music before mosques by Hindus. Gandhi said that although he believed strongly in protecting cows,

this worthy principle could never be served by attacking Muslims; indeed, such aggression was likely to make Muslims kill even more cows. The Hindu demand was full of hypocrisy, as Hindus routinely maltreated their cattle, and when they became old they sold them to Muslim butchers well knowing what their fate would be. It was only by befriending Muslims that they could be persuaded to refrain from cow-slaughter. As for music, Hindus should consult with their Muslim neighbours and come to mutually agreeable arrangements in the matter. In many cases, however, music was being played with the sole intention of irritating Muslims, and this was wholly unacceptable.[53] Gandhi concluded:

> For me the only question for immediate solution before the country is the Hindu–Mussalman question. I agree with Mr. Jinnah that Hindu-Muslim unity means swaraj. I see no way of achieving anything in this afflicted country without a lasting heart unity between Hindus and Mussalmans of India. I believe in the immediate possibility of achieving it, because it is so natural, so necessary for both, and because I believe in human nature.[54]

In September of that year, Gandhi sought to bring about such a change of heart by fasting for twenty-one days in the house of a Muslim friend. The rioting, however, continued. By 1927 he was forced to admit: 'I am out of tune with the present temper of both the communities. From their own standpoint they are perhaps entitled to say that my method has failed.'[55]

Some commentators have argued that Gandhi's attempt to forge communal harmony was doomed because he was so obviously a Hindu. His massive popularity with the majority was gained through his religious appeal, but in the process he alienated the religious minorities. W. Norman Brown claims, for example, that: 'He could not in his time have become the political leader of the majority group in India, fortified by mass support, without being religious, he could not be religious without being a Hindu. He could not be a Hindu without being suspect to the Muslim community.'[56]

This latter argument is wrong empirically, for even after the communal clashes of the 1923–7 period, many Muslims continued to follow Gandhi with fervour. Most notable in this respect was Abdul Ghaffar Khan and his Khudai Khidmatgars or 'Servants of God'. They were from the Pathan or Pukhtun community of the North West Frontier Province, which had been the first in the subcontinent to convert to Islam in the eighth century when the Prophet Muhammad was still living.[57] They were known, stereotypically, for their supposed propensity for violence, and thus seem the most unlikely of satyagrahis. Yet, they became model Gandhians in this respect. The movement of the Khudai Khidmatgars began in the 1920s as a revolt by tenants and small peasants of the community against the big landlords and reactionary mullahs who, supported by the British, ruled this society The mullahs, who received stipends from the colonial state, taught the people that one had to suffer in this world to gain paradise; they also opposed popular education, stating that if the poor were educated they would go to hell. Abdul Ghaffar Khan took the mullahs head on, showing that they were the spokesmen for the rich landlords.[58] Because he was known to have a strong grasp of the scriptures and had a reputation for asceticism and holiness, the vilification of him by the mullahs as a kafir, or unbeliever, found few takers. He was in fact known in the area as a faqir, which means both a religious ascetic and a beggar, and in the North West Frontier region was often used by the élites in a contemptuous manner to refer to peasants without land. By making poverty a virtue, he gave a new and positive meaning to the term as it was applied to the landless poor.

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Initially, Khan had approached the Muslim League, hoping to affiliate his movement with it. The leaders of this party did not however believe that their interests would be best served by confronting the colonial state and they showed no interest in an alliance with the Khudai Khidmatgars. Khan then approached Gandhi and the Congress and was welcomed with open arms.[60] All Khudai Khidmatgars had to take an oath in the name of God

and with one hand on the Koran that they would observe strict non-violence.[61] Khan was very impressed by the way that women had become active in the Gandhian Congress, and encouraged Pukhtun women to play a vigorous role in protests. He knew that the mullahs would damn him for this, but decided that it was a risk worth taking.[62] The British tried to crush the movement in a brutal manner, with beatings, whipping, torture and confiscation of land.[63] The people stood firm with admirable discipline and nonviolence. The Khudai Khidmatgars saw themselves as being first and foremost good Muslims, and only secondarily as followers of Gandhi.[64] Through their example, they proved that Gandhian methods of resistance could, when the conditions were right, triumph over narrow religious divides.

This gives the lie to arguments of the sort advanced by W. Norman Brown that the divide between Hindus and Muslims in India was such that it was impossible for a saintly leader of one faith to have any appeal to those of the other. The appeal of many Indian saints has, historically, often cut across religious lines. In many cases it has been hard to categorise particular bhakti sants, faqirs and Sufi pirs as unambiguously 'Hindu' or 'Muslim'. Gandhi's identity in this respect was partially forged and partially projected on him by the people out of a *bricolage* of popular religious belief, of the sants, faqirs, pirs, and even the morality of Christ.[65] In the process, he was able to cut across narrow religious divides and built a rapport with people of various faiths. Many Muslims in India revered him as they would a pir or faqir.

This was seen in the matter of his dress. Some have argued that he alienated Muslims by adopting the garb of a 'Hindu' renouncer. He was aware of this particular criticism, and sought to answer it in 1931 by stating that he had taken the decision to wear only a short *langoti* because he had been told by some poor people in 1921 that they could not afford to dress in a long dhoti and kurta made of khadi. In his opinion, the langoti was a mark of an Indian civilisation which 'spells simplicity', and was not to be seen as

having any particular religious connotation.[66] In fact, many faqirs and Sufi pirs—who are classed generally as Muslims—adopted such a garb also. Ironically, Winston Churchill—who otherwise projected Gandhi as a narrowly Hindu politician—acknowledged this fact without meaning to when he accused him of 'posing as a fakir of a type well-known in the East.'[67]

Gandhi was very careful to avoid sectarianism in his daily practice. For example, in his ashram rules he set out the vows that all inmates were required to take, and although each could have been supported by a quotation from the Shastras, he refused to do this on the ground that 'the principles implicit in the vows are not a monopoly of Hinduism but are common to all faiths.'[68] At his daily prayer meetings hymns from different religious traditions were sung as a matter of routine. He also refused to allow the nationalist workers at his ashram to dress in saffron, insisting that they wear white khadi. The reason he gave for this was that he did not want these 'servants of the people' to be confused with Hindu sannyasis.[69]

Despite this there were, as we have seen, certain problems with the way in which Gandhi handled the issue of the communal divide. In addition to his questionable espousal of the Khilafat issue, he tended to tolerate the communalists who were present in the ranks of the Congress. Thus, although he criticised the Arya Samaj for stirring up animosity, he absolved from blame other Hindu nationalists such as Malaviya and Lajpat Rai. For all their claims to love Muslims, their actual politics were hardly conducive to harmonious communal relations. Muslims who had a less sanguine attitude towards their activities were given one more reason to distrust the motives of the Congress as a whole.

Another problem was that Gandhi gave credibility to stereotypes about each community when he talked about 'bullying' Muslims and 'cowardly' Hindus. In this, he was attributing an essential character to each religious group in a way that depersonalised individuals and made each into a

supposedly natural representative of the one or the other. The individual thus became a bearer of the supposed characteristics of a group that was divided from others by its very being. Too much ground was being conceded to the characteristic argument of the communalist that a people's traits were rooted in their religion.

Gandhi was however not insensitive to the problem of label-sticking, knowing from his own experience the offence it could give. For example, many Punjabi Sikhs had told him that they did not consider themselves to be Hindu, yet when he described them as 'non-Hindu' in *Young India* in 1924, he was swamped by letters of protest from Sikhs. Similarly with Jains and Arya Samajists—some demanded to be considered Hindu, others repudiated the classification strongly. He stated that he personally felt that these particular faiths were a part of a broad Hindu culture, but he was more concerned not to offend them than to press his own views on the matter.[70]

This latter statement might appear to concede ground to the position that only those who belonged to such a broad Hindu culture could be genuine patriots. His position on this was however very firm—patriotism could not be defined in religious terms. Muslims in India were as much Indians as Muslims in Turkey were Turks: 'Islamic culture is not the same in Arabia, Turkey, Egypt and India but is itself influenced by the conditions of the respective countries. Indian culture is therefore Indian. It is neither Hindu, Islamic nor any other, wholly. It is a fusion of all ...'[71] Gandhi increasingly began to see that the problem of Muslim alienation from the Congress was caused as much by the intolerance of many Hindus as by Islamic fundamentalism. He condemned the 'Hindu patronizing attitude' which was causing disgust to many Congress Muslims, stating in July 1946 that: 'Hindu separatism has played a part in creating the rift between Congress and the League.'[72] When told at the same time that Jinnah was accusing him of wanting only Hindu rule he launched an angry attack on both Jinnah and Hindu nationalism: 'He is utterly wrong. That is absurd. I am a Moslem, a

Hindu, a Buddhist, a Christian, a Jew, a Parsi. He does not know me when he says I want Hindu rule. He is not speaking the truth.'[73]

The 'National Duty' of the Hindu Patriot

During the 1920s, Gandhi still sought to win the more chauvinistic Hindu nationalists over to his way of thought. For example, in 1925 he was involved in the establishment of an All-India Cow Protection Sabha which he hoped would pursue this issue in a less confrontational way.[74] By the early 1930s it was apparent that these initiatives were not working—he continued to be the target of venomous hostility from hardline Hindus. Ashis Nandy has argued that Gandhi antagonised the Hindu nationalists not so much by what he said, as by the fact that he took his message to the people. Many were Brahmans who could tolerate intellectual dissent, but not low-caste assertion. Even more galling, Gandhi criticised the westernisation of many Brahmans and projected himself as the 'real' Hindu.[75] In Maharashtra, in particular, Gandhi's popularity with the non-Brahman masses infuriated many members of the Brahman élite, most notably those clustered around the Hindu Mahasabha, RSS and even more extreme groups, such as Nathuram Godse's Hindu Rashtra Dal. Godse was Gandhi's eventual killer.[76]

Nandy's analysis is only partial, for the more extreme Hindu nationalists were also strongly antagonistic to Gandhi's non-violence. They saw this as going against the national interest of the Hindu people, who needed to arm themselves to fight against 'foreign' enemies, such as the British and the Muslims. They considered Gandhi and his doctrine of ahimsa to be the single greatest obstacle to building a strong and militaristic Indian nation, and felt that it would be a boon if he could be removed from the scene, by violence if necessary. V.D. Savarkar set out the intellectual justification for this mindset in a book that he published after Gandhi's death called *Six Glorious Epochs of Indian History.* There is no evidence that Savarkar himself

actually plotted the assassination of Gandhi at any time, but it is known that the actual assassins were his devoted disciples, and they may well have been encouraged in their task by notions that he had put in their head through his particular interpretation of Indian history.[77] In this book, Savarkar is noticeably silent on the subject of Gandhi's murder, for it was hardly a matter he could seek to justify in a direct way at that time. Instead, he used a historical analogy to make his point. He argued that the emperor Ashoka was a ruler of great moral power, but that his endorsement of Buddhism and non-violence had seriously weakened the Indian national polity. Ashoka, he stated, had carried out 'an excessive propaganda in favour of certain Buddhist principles like Ahimsa *and the rest* which have caused so much harm to the Indian political outlook, her political independence, and her empire ...' He condemned such preaching and practice as 'anti-national'.[78] Because of this, India was soon invaded by a foreign power, 'the aggressive Greeks'.[79] Resistance came at last only after a Brahman warrior called Pushyamitra—a staunch devotee of Shiva and follower of the Vedic religion—assassinated the last of the Maurya emperors. Savarkar argued that: 'Pushyamitra had simply done the unavoidable national duty of killing Ashoka's descendant, Brihadrath Maurya, who had proved himself thoroughly incompetent to defend the independence of the Indian empire.'[80] The assassin became emperor and drove the Greeks—whom Savarkar describes as the 'Yavans'— from India, after which he performed the great horse sacrifice.[81]

The message in all this was clear—staunch patriots had a 'national duty' to eliminate influential apostles of non-violence through assassination. Nathuram Godse—an ardent follower of Savarkar—clearly held such a belief, deeming that it was his patriotic duty to kill Gandhi. The successful assassination of 30 January 1948 was not the first time that Godse had sought to do this. It is likely that he and his associates made an attempt to kill Gandhi with a bomb as early as 1934. In July 1944, Godse had gone to Panchgani, where Gandhi was recuperating from a bout of malaria, with the

intention of stabbing him with a dagger. He was overpowered before he could get in his presence. Gandhi, when told of what had happened, asked Godse to spend eight days with him so that they could discuss their differences. Godse rejected the invitation. Gandhi, magnanimously, said that he was free to go.[82]

The contrast between the approaches of Gandhi and Godse was striking. Gandhi clearly put his faith in dialogue and forgiveness. Godse's motives for rejecting Gandhi's offer at Panchgani were less apparent. He was isolated, in a state of mental turmoil and no doubt keen to escape as soon as the opportunity was presented to him. The balance of power in any debate between the Mahatma surrounded by his acolytes and the bitter, disarmed young man would hardly have been an even-sided one. But also, he must have known that any such dialogue was likely to weaken his resolve.

Two months later, in September 1944, Godse and a colleague called Thatte led a group of men to Gandhi's ashram at Sevagram to protest against his forthcoming talks with Jinnah. They were apprehended at the gates by Gandhi's followers and Godse was found to be carrying a dagger. When questioned, either he or Thatte (the report is unclear as to who) stated that Gandhi would be killed and that one of them would become a 'martyr'. He was asked why he did not leave such things to his leader, V.D. Savarkar. In reply, he boasted: 'If Savarkar talks with Gandhi it will be an honour for Gandhi. The time will not come for Savarkar to talk to Gandhi. Gandhi will be dealt with by our lowly Orderly.' He and the others were then allowed to go on their way.[83] Once again, the idea of dialogue was rejected—it was below the dignity of their Great Leader, Veer Savarkar, to stoop to debate. Gandhi deserved only to be silenced, once and for all. Godse's whole approach, like that of the Hindu and Islamic right in general, was strongly monologic. He hated Gandhi not for any one particular and contingent line of action—such as his attempt to protect Muslim lives in 1947–8—but because he represented a living refutation of the monologic mindset which formed the very core of his, Godse's, being.

Gandhi and Christianity

In nineteenth-century India, Christianity was associated strongly with British colonialism. Missionaries tended to be firm supporters of colonial rule, seeing their work as being a part of the colonial enterprise. In some cases they even acted as propagandists for violent imperial expansionism.[84] When describing their work, they frequently deployed the terminology of military aggression: 'recruiting agencies', 'marching orders', 'the far-flung battle line' and so on.[85] They believed that it was their task to 'civilise' heathens, weaning them from idolatry and inculcating Western values and 'Christian' cultural practices. Even the Anglican clergyman C.E Andrews, who later became a close colleague of Gandhi, had been inspired by tales of imperial glory as a boy, and later, as a young priest, had run a club for boys in a working-class area of England that was named after the great imperial hero General Gordon. He used to tell the boys stories that glamorised imperialism. Only later did he become a strong critic of British rule in India.[86]

Although Gandhi was brought up in an atmosphere of religious tolerance, he developed an early antipathy to Christianity, which he experienced as a colonial subject. When still a schoolboy in Rajkot, he had paused to hear a missionary who was preaching in the street and was disgusted by the way he poured abuse on Hindus and their gods. He was also sickened by stories he heard that converts were made to eat beef, drink liquor and wear Western dress. This created in him an initial dislike for the Christian religion.[87]

This changed to a certain degree during his period in London when he was studying law He was given a Bible to read by a Christian, and although he failed to be impressed by the Old Testament with its vengeful God, he was very taken by the New Testament. He was particularly struck by the Sermon on the Mount, which he believed to be equal in moral authority to the *Bhagavad Gita*.[88] He was struck also by the way that Jesus Christ stood up for his principles, in particular when he drove the moneychangers from

the temple. This made him more open to Christians and Christianity, and during his years in South Africa he came into contact with Christians whom he respected, including C.F. Andrews. Later, he even claimed that he had derived his idea of nonviolence from the Sermon on the Mount, and that Christianity justified satyagraha: 'Jesus's whole preaching and practice point unmistakably to non-co-operation, which necessarily includes non-payment of taxes.'[89] He drew freely on the New Testament and used Christian hymns and Biblical texts in religious services at his ashrams. He also sought to emulate the Christian missionaries in their educational and welfare work, and favourably compared their dedicated work for the poor with the activities of sadhus and pandits.[90]

Gandhi was however careful to distinguish Christianity as a system of morality from Christianity as an arm of British imperialism. As he stated in 1929:

> Unfortunately, Christianity in India has been inextricably mixed up for the last one hundred and fifty years with the British rule. It appears to us as synonymous with materialistic civilization and imperialist exploitation by the stronger white races of the weaker races of the world. Its contribution to India has been therefore largely of a negative character.
>
> It has done some good in spite of its professors. It has shocked us into setting our own house in order. Christian missionary literature has drawn pointed attention to some of our abuses and set us athinking.[91]

Gandhi did not, however, seek to attack the British by condemning Christianity, for example by claiming it to be an inferior religion to Hinduism. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay adopted such a stance, as have Hindu nationalists subsequently. This merely reversed the approach of Christian chauvinists, replacing one form of intolerance with another. Gandhi, by contrast, saw Christianity as a religion containing great moral truths, and he argued that modern Western civilisation had turned its back

on these values.[92] Such an approach made it impossible to take an aggressive position against the 'Other' on the basis of their religion, whether it was Christianity or Islam.

After Gandhi began his work in India after 1915, a small number of Christian missionaries became his admirers, and in the process they often developed a new and more critical attitude towards the colonial state. The American missionary Frederick Fisher, for example, returned to India in 1917 after a seven-year absence, to find the name 'Gandhi' on everyone's lips. He did not know who Gandhi was, but decided to go and meet him. He immediately fell under his spell: 'The power of his personality, the fire in his great brown eyes, his innate dignity, draw you, irresistibly. You forget yourself; you forget Gandhi as a man. His deep voice carries to you his message only. It is because he has sunk himself so deeply in his ideal, that he has lost all self-consciousness; and therefore is greater than his puny body.'[93] For Christians such as Fisher, Gandhi appeared to exemplify all that a good Christian should be. Two years later he wrote a book called *India's Silent Revolution,* which praised Gandhi and the new spirit of nationalist awakening in India.[94]

Some missionaries began to try to adapt their practice more to Indian culture. Notable in this respect was J.C. Winslow, who founded the Christa Seva Sangh, which drew inspiration from the ashram ideals of Hindus as well as from Gandhi. The missionaries wore khadi, ate vegetarian food, lived in austere simplicity, composed bhajans and kirtans, and worked with the lowest castes. The young Verrier Elwin joined this organisation in 1927, and was soon working closely with Gandhi within the nationalist movement. In time, he even abandoned his desire to proselytise.[95] In 1931 Gandhi held Elwin up as an example of how Christian missionaries should operate in India, and he encouraged the establishment of 'Christian Ashrams'.[96]

Such missionaries were however in a minority. Those who did show sympathy for Gandhi and the nationalist movement soon found themselves

under police surveillance. The C.I.D., for example, suspected Fisher—bizarrely—of being a 'Bolshevik agent' working under the cover of the priesthood.[97] He managed to avoid being expelled from India by appealing to the viceroy. Some other American missionaries with similar political opinions were however deported. In one such case, the local magistrate commented that it was the duty of everyone involved in educational, medical or other public work in India to voice his or her disapproval of the nationalist movement. Missionaries who did not follow this precept were in some cases beaten up by the police and even jailed.[98] It was not therefore surprising that missionaries who might otherwise have been sympathetic chose to keep their thoughts to themselves.

Despite his admiration for many individual Christian missionaries, Gandhi felt that missionaries in general had no right to convert people to a faith other than the one they had been brought up with. 'I disbelieve in the conversion of one person by another. My effort should never be to undermine another's faith but to make him a better follower of his own faith. This implies belief in the truth of all religions and therefore respect for them.'[99] What he rejected in other words was the missionary practice of strident proselytisation with a view towards conversion, an idea he found repulsive for any religion, including Hinduism.[100] He believed that people should strive to work through their destiny within the religious tradition in which they were raised. He wanted people to be better people as Muslims, Hindus or Christians. Thus, when his ardent follower Madeline Slade was attracted to the idea of becoming a Hindu, he advised her strongly to remain a Christian, which she did.[101]

In 1936–7 there was a strong and often acrimonious debate between Gandhi and some leading missionaries who were working in India. Some who had been involved in movements of mass conversion of low-caste and Dalit peoples to Christianity argued that the process fulfilled a deeply felt need for many of the most oppressed, and that the prime initiative had come

from the latter rather than from themselves. They held that in responding to this need, they were more in tune with lower-class sentiments than Gandhi, despite his claims to be the true champion of such people. In reply Gandhi said that the missionaries were exaggerating their popular strength. Bishop J.W Pickett, for example, was claiming that four and a half million members of the 'depressed classes' had become Christians through these mass movements. Gandhi disputed these figures, arguing that he had not seen any evidence of such whole-scale conversion during his tours of India. He also doubted whether the converts had really escaped from the taint of untouchability through conversion and had been accepted by their high-caste neighbours, as asserted by Pickett. Gandhi argued that the real 'miracle' lay not in such claims, but in the fact that over two thousand temples in Travancore State had been opened recently to Harijans as a result of self-reform on the part of caste Hindus.[102]

Gandhi was also in dispute with the Anglican Bishop of Dornakal in eastern Hyderabad State—the Indian Christian V.S. Azariah—who had claimed in a Church Missionary society pamphlet that about 40,000 people of that area were asking to be baptised and about a million in all were 'moving Christward'. Gandhi stated that he had travelled in the area often and had never heard of such numbers seeking to be baptised.[103] Azariah, who was an admirer of Gandhi, invited him to come and see for himself, but Gandhi did not take up the offer.[104] Azariah argued that if people expressed a genuine desire to become Christians, then it was his duty as a clergyman to baptise them. In this, he was following the command of Jesus Christ.[105] He also asserted that for him Christianity was the only true religion, and that he personally could not accept that other faiths could be adequate to his needs. He argued that all seekers after truth should be free to choose their own religion: 'Each religion stands for certain truths. When a man genuinely seeks after truth, he will come to a point where Truth must win his obedience. This obedience must mean abandoning one religious system and uniting with another. If a man fears this result, he will either effect a

compromise with the Truth as he sees it, or yield to an unreality, professing to see in his old religion the new truth he has found in the new religion.' He called for sympathy from Gandhi for their efforts to help the poor and oppressed. 'Hating conversion, and hating the Christian propaganda are not becoming of a true lover of India's poor.'[106]

This was written in January 1937. In the following month he and J.W Pickett went to meet Gandhi at Segaon to discuss these issues. The meeting was a failure. Not only was there no significant meeting of minds, but a subsequent report about the content of the meeting in the mission press poisoned the atmosphere yet further. An American missionary called Donald A. McGavran who had met Pickett afterwards put together what he claimed to be a statement made by Gandhi to the two bishops: 'You Christians must stop preaching to and making disciples amongst the Depressed Classes. If you do not, we shall make you. We shall appeal to the educated Indian Christians: we shall appeal to your home constituency; and if those fail we shall prohibit by law any change of religion, and will back up the law by the force of the State.'[107] Gandhi denied that he had ever said any such thing, and demanded an apology. Azariah backed Gandhi in this, saying that it was a 'cruel fabrication'.[108] McGavran backed down, admitting that it was not a direct quotation, and he offered an apology. In private, however, he argued that it was an expression of what he claimed were Gandhi's true feelings in the matter.[109] Many missionaries in fact believed that Gandhi was opposing their work because he was at heart a Hindu chauvinist. They were unable to grasp that his real commitment was not to a narrow form of Hinduism, but to religious plurality and a commitment to truths that cut across sectarian divides.

In recent years, Hindu chauvinists have deployed Gandhi's principled opposition to all forms of conversion to justify their attacks on Christian missionaries. Like McGavran, they have sought to twist Gandhi's arguments and attribute to him statements that they like to think he should have made,

rather than anything he said as such. For example, Ravindra Agarwal claimed in a book of 1999 titled *Hindu Manch* that Gandhi had stated on 22 March 1931 that if Christian missionaries continued to proselytise by means of education and health provision he would ask them to leave India.[110] No such statement can in fact be found in the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* for that date. As Sumit Sarkar has pointed out, the only statement made by Gandhi on this subject around that time was on 23 April 1931, when he told reporters that this particular comment had been attributed to him in one newspaper report, and that it represented a travesty of his views. His real view was that Christian missionaries were welcome in India so long as they concentrated on humanitarian work. Their reward should lie in the knowledge that they had relieved suffering, not in conversion. If they tried to exploit such activities so as to proselytise, then he would prefer that they withdraw. Such an activity was not uplifting, and it gave rise to suspicions. He went on to say that he was not against conversion as such, but only a form of conversion that was like a form of business. He recalled with distaste reading a report by a missionary who had set out how much it cost per head to convert, and who then presented his budget for 'the next harvest'. He closed his message by stating that what he desired above all else was that followers of the great religions of the world should coexist in peace and tolerance and stop trying to win converts from each other.[111] This call for tolerance was hardly one that Hindu chauvinists would wish to endorse.

Partition and Gandhi's 'Finest Hour'[112]

For Gandhi, the idea of Pakistan—which became the official objective of the Muslim League from 1940 onwards—represented the most deathly closure of all, as it meant tearing Indians apart and foreclosing the dialogue of centuries. In September 1946 he stated:

> But what a tragic change we see today. I wish the day may come again when Hindus and Muslims will do nothing without mutual

> consultation. I am day and night tormented by the question what I can do to hasten the coming of that day. I appeal to the League not to regard any Indian as its enemy. ... Hindus and Muslims are born of the same soil. They have the same blood, eat the same food, drink the same water and speak the same language.[113]

Two weeks later he stated:

> But I am firmly convinced that the Pakistan demand as put forward by the Muslim League is un-Islamic and I have not hesitated to call it sinful. Islam stands for the unity and brotherhood of mankind, not for disrupting the oneness of the human family. Therefore, those who want to divide India into possible warring groups are enemies alike of Islam and India. They may cut me to pieces but they cannot make me subscribe to something which I consider to be wrong.[114]

He realised that his was, as he put it, 'a voice in the wilderness'. Despite this he launched what was to become his last and greatest battle—that of the fight against communal violence and hatred at a time when it was spreading like a forest fire. His method was to strive at all costs to keep open a dialogue with and between Hindus and Muslims, even in the face of communal rioting. He saw this as his greatest test. In early August 1946, just before the start of the violence which was to tear Bengal apart, Gandhi stated: 'I have never had the chance to test my non-violence in the face of communal riots. ... the chance will still come to me.'[115] Unlike in the 1920s, however, Gandhi did not try to carry out this work through intermediaries such as the Khilafatists. He no longer had any faith in such people. He now went himself to the areas of communal strife and sought to bring about peace through a courageous personal intervention.

In October 1946, Muslims in East Bengal turned on the Hindu minority. In the ensuing violence several hundred were killed.[116] Gandhi went to the area in November and over the next four months toured the villages on foot, unprotected and with a minimal number of companions. Despite the

hostility of many Muslims, he insisted on talking to them and managed to obtain many promises that they would guarantee the safety of the Hindus. He met Hindus and tried to persuade them to remain in the villages. He told both groups that if they wanted peace, they would have to forget the desire for vengeance and build a spirit of mutual trust and confidence.[117] Following this, in March 1947 he went to Bihar, after the Muslim minority was attacked. He toured devastated villages and held prayer meetings. In East Bengal in particular he managed to calm the atmosphere to a remarkable degree.[118]

Once the Congress high command had agreed to partition in June 1947, Gandhi accepted it, with distress, as 'an accomplished fact.'[119] He decided to return to East Bengal to ensure that there was no more violence there. If he had carried out this plan, he would have found himself in Pakistan after the partition of 15 August. However, while on the way there was an outbreak of violence in Calcutta, and he decided to halt there. On 11 August he went to stay in a deserted Muslim house in Beliaghata, one of the worst affected areas of the city. The Muslim chief minister of Bengal, H.S. Suhrawardy, agreed to stay with him there. Suhrawardy was generally considered to be a highly devious and untrustworthy politician, and he was loathed by Hindus throughout the city as the chief instigator of the riots of August 1946. Yet, Gandhi won Suhrawardy over through a strong moral appeal, and together they worked to overcome the distrust and quell the violence. Suhrawardy was so moved by Gandhi's trust in him that he even confessed to his culpability in the rioting of the previous year.[120]

Soon after they arrived at the house in Beliaghata, some Hindus broke into the house and smashed doors and windows and accused Gandhi of pandering to the Muslims. He asked how anyone could accuse him of being an enemy of Hindus. The crowd dispersed. On the day of independence and partition, there was fraternisation between Hindus and Muslims in the city. This continued until 31 August, when a crowd of aggressive Hindus again

invaded the house in Beliaghata, claiming that a Muslim had knifed a Hindu. Gandhi, who narrowly escaped being wounded, had to be rescued by the police. Next day, the violence resumed with a vengeance.

Many people in Calcutta laid the blame for the violence on so-called 'goonda elements', who had been instigated by unscrupulous Hindu and Muslim leaders. However, as Gandhi had stated in 1940, the society as a whole provided the climate in which the goondas operated: 'Goondas do not drop from the sky, nor do they spring from the earth like evil spirits. They are a product of social disorganisation, and society is therefore responsible for their existence.'[121] Gandhi decided to fast to bring pressure to bear on the gangs who were responsible for the attacks.

The climate of remorse brought about in Calcutta by Gandhi's fast soon saw several of these goondas coming to Gandhi to beg for forgiveness and promise to stop the violence if he called off the fast. On the evening of 4 September a deputation of leaders from the Muslim League, Hindu Mahasabha, Sikh community and other bodies came to plead with him to end his fast. Gandhi demanded that they promise to lay down their lives to prevent further communal violence. If they broke the promise, he would begin an irrevocable fast until death. They agreed, and he called off the fast. There was no more communal violence in Calcutta during that period.[122] Gandhi's success in preventing any widespread rioting in the city, and indeed in Bengal in general at that time, is considered by many to be his most remarkable achievement.

Gandhi then went to Delhi, arriving on 9 September. From around 3 September, there had been a wave of attacks on Muslim houses and shops throughout the city, with large numbers being killed as a form of 'revenge' for the carnage in the Punjab. The police were noticeably partisan, failing in most cases to provide any protection. A high proportion of the Muslim population of the city fled to places where there was safety in numbers, camping in the Purana Qila, Humayun's Tomb, and elsewhere. The

authorities initially treated these places as mere transit camps on the route to Pakistan, and made little effort to provide food, water or sanitation, arguing that this was the responsibility of the Pakistan government. The logic was clear: *all* Muslims were to be henceforth considered as 'Pakistanis'. It was in this atmosphere of hatred and suspicion that Gandhi arrived in the city. Many Muslims believed that having performed one 'miracle' in Calcutta, he would do the same in Delhi. Shahid Ahmad Dehlavi, who had taken shelter in the Purana Qila, compared his coming 'to the arrival of the rains after a particularly long and harsh summer.'[123] On 13 September, Gandhi visited the camp there. 60,000 Muslims were crowded within the walls of the old fort, with only a few tents to protect them from the rain and mud. There was one tap, and no latrines or bathrooms. Gandhi's arrival in their midst represented a gesture of compassion that sent out a message that the Muslims were Indian nationals who should be protected by the Indian state. The Delhi authorities were shamed into treating it as their problem, and set about organising rations, sanitary facilities and better security. South Indian troops, who were supposedly more 'neutral' than north Indian soldiers, were deployed to guard the camps. Daily meetings were held to review the situation and neighbourhood meetings were organised and peace committees established.

After this the large-scale attacks on Muslims ceased, though there were still stabbings and Muslim houses and shops continued to be raided and appropriated by Hindus and Sikhs. According to Gyanendra Pandey, Gandhi's presence appears to have given the secular nationalists 'the moral strength they needed to renew the fight for the composite and tolerant India that so many had dreamt of; perhaps his very presence stunned the government and an army of stupefied Congress workers into action.'[124] Pandey goes on to record that: 'In November, again with Gandhi's active intervention and not without some expression of dissent, the All India Congress Committee reiterated its commitment to building a non-sectarian, democratic India in which there would be place for people of all faiths.'[125]

He argues that it was Gandhi above all who insisted that Muslims should be declared unequivocally to be entitled to full rights of citizenship in the new nation state. In the month after 15 August this outcome had been by no means certain, given the intolerance and blood lust of many of those in positions of authority in India.

The recurring day-to-day violence against Muslims was now less dramatic but still a cause of anguish for Gandhi, for it revealed a profound hatred in the hearts of large numbers of Sikhs and Hindus. On 13 January 1948 he launched an indefinite fast, declaring that 'It will end when and if I am satisfied that there is a reunion of hearts of all communities brought about without any outside pressure, but from an awakened sense of duty.'[126] He also stated that 'Death for me would be a glorious deliverance rather than that I should be a helpless witness of the destruction of India, Hinduism, Sikhism and Islam.'[127] However: 'If I am to live I shall ask every Hindu and every Sikh not to touch a single Muslim.'[128] He would only be satisfied when he could be assured that every Muslim would feel safe walking freely in the streets of Delhi.[129] He also called on Muslims to openly declare themselves for the Indian nation state. He knew that many had in the past supported the Muslim League and Pakistan, but if they were to remain in India as respected citizens they had to show that they had changed their attitude in this respect. He thus called for a change of heart from Muslims too. Only on such a basis could trust between Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims be built.[130]

In the words of Abul Kalam Azad: 'The moment it was known that he had started his fast, not only the city but the whole of India was deeply stirred. In Delhi the effect was electric. Groups which had till recently openly opposed Gandhiji came forward and said that they would be prepared to do anything in order to save Gandhiji's precious life.'[131] Nehru and many others fasted with Gandhi, including Hindu and Sikh refugees from Pakistan. On the fifth day of the fast 100,000 government employees signed a pledge to work for peace. The police signed their own pledge. Representatives of the RSS and

Hindu Mahasabha came and promised to maintain peace. M.S. Randhawa, the deputy commissioner of Delhi who had not been active in protecting Muslims, took a group of Hindu and Sikh leaders to repair the shrine of the Sufi saint Khwaja Qutubuddin Bakhtiar Chisti near Mehrauli, which had been desecrated in September. Heartened by this response, Gandhi gave up his fast on 18 January.[132]

On 27 January Gandhi was invited by Muslims to speak to them at one of their shrines in Delhi. Three days later he was shot and killed by Godse. He was considering the idea of establishing a Shanti Sena (Peace Army) that would work actively to prevent rioting through quick intervention. A conference of leading Gandhians had been convened for February 1948, but Gandhi was assassinated before it could be held, and it was called off.

What had been gained? The verdict of the historian Sumit Sarkar is harsh: 'Intensely moving and heroic, the Gandhian way in 1946–7 was no more than an isolated personal effort with a local and often rather short-lived impact.'[133] Dal ton argues against this that Gandhi's final heroic struggle that culminated in his martyrdom had a cathartic effect, revealing the depths to which hatred had dragged the Indian people.[134] Hatred was replaced by grief—voiced in the massive funeral procession in Delhi. Along with it developed a mood of collective guilt, and the hatred was spent. In this respect, Gandhi's death in itself went a long way in achieving what he had been striving for in those final months of his life. Gyanendra Pandey states that the assassination jolted the authorities into taking a far less tolerant line towards communalists. There was a clampdown on extremist groups. The RSS, for example, was banned and many of its leaders were arrested. The Maharajas of Alwar, Bharatpur and other states who had aided and abetted, and even organised, attacks on Muslims, were brought sharply into line. There was also much fuller reporting of violence against Muslims in India; hitherto this had been suppressed in the newspapers. Pandey continues: 'Thus Gandhi achieved through his death even more than he had achieved through his fast. His success at this juncture conveys an unusual

message about the meaning of politics and the possibility of a new kind of political community. It is an improbable story of how a certain kind of bodily sacrifice in the public sphere—and a refusal by one outstanding leader to give his consent to the particular conception of the political community that was emerging—changed the nature of sociality at the local level.'[135] No longer were demands heard to make Delhi or India an exclusively Hindu and Sikh territory, and no longer was a 'Muslim' seen as being synonymous with a 'refugee' or 'alien'.[136]

Many Muslims felt personally bereaved. According to Ebadat Barelvi: 'The fire of sectarian strife that had raged for months, or rather years, died down as if such strife had never occurred... Overnight, such calm was established, such a peace that one could not have dreamed of even a few days earlier.'[137] At last, the Muslims of Delhi felt secure and able to return to their earlier way of life. As Qazi Jalil Abbasi of Delhi later stated with tears in his eyes: 'Gandhiji made it possible for Muslims to continue to live in India.'[138] Some even sent messages to those who had fled to Pakistan that it was now safe for them to return.

The fact that the communal divide continued, and has been one of the most intractable problems in postcolonial India, does not mean that Gandhi's intervention had failed or that his approach was unsound. In fact, his proved to be the most practical and effective strategy of all. The problem has been otherwise: that in the last two decades of the twentieth century—a time when communal violence once more moved centre-stage in India—there was nobody of a similar calibre who was prepared to lay down her or his life to prevent attacks by the majority community on the minority.

It might be argued that we cannot pin our hopes on exceptional individuals whose like emerges only rarely in history. Perhaps, however, we should feel heartened by the fact that the Gandhi of 1946–8 did exist, and was able to achieve so much. This fact alone means that what he preached

was not impractical or Utopian, and does provide a way through what might appear to be an impasse of division and hatred.

Gandhian Anti-Communal Work Since Independence

Among leading post-independence Gandhians, it was probably Jayprakash Narayan (JP) who took anti-communal work most seriously. When Hindus launched a pogrom in his home region of Bihar in October 1946—killing thousands of Muslims in 'retaliation' for the attacks on Hindus in East Bengal—JP launched an outspoken attack on the Congress government of the state for conniving with the Hindus and deliberately failing to protect Muslims. The events of 1946 and 1947 sickened JP; he became a strong believer in ahimsa as a result.[139]In the following years he worked hard to reconcile Hindus and Muslims in Bihar. Although he received a lot of abuse for this, the hatred abated. In March 1950, when a million refugees fled from East to West Bengal he took a strong stand against those who demanded that all Muslims be driven out of India in revenge. He insisted that Muslims should enjoy full rights of citizenship in India and that the state should adopt a strictly secular policy.[140]

In 1957 Vinoba Bhave established a Shanti Sena to combat communal violence, thus taking up the idea that Gandhi had put forward a few days before his death. Most of those who enrolled as Shanti Sainiks were Gandhian workers already. The secretary of the body from 1962 to 1978 was Narayan Desai, son of Gandhi's secretary, Mahadev Desai. Under his vigorous leadership, the membership increased to about 6,000 in the mid-1960s. When rioting was reported in a particular place, Sainiks went there and tried to meet with leaders of the communities involved in the violence. In the words of Narayan Desai: 'We present ourselves not as saviours but as people eager to assist them in their difficulty. We gather information from them and try to understand their minds. And we try to find the forces of peace on both sides. Often there are people who favour peace but do not

know how to work for it.'[141] They encouraged the community leaders to set up peace committees with representatives of both rival groups. They also spoke with local political leaders and police officers, requesting them to use methods that would not inflame the situation any further.

As rioting was almost always stoked—often deliberately—by rumours of supposed atrocities, one important task was for the Sainiks to enquire into the substance of a story and then walk around the disturbed neighbourhoods seeking to counter it. They would talk to people, write messages on community notice boards and make announcements through megaphones. As they were often the only people able to pass freely from one part of a city to another, they were able to counter rumours in an authoritative way in this respect. They also stationed themselves at known tension-spots, hoping by their presence—in their distinctive Sainik uniform of white khadi and saffron scarves—to calm the situation. Female and male Sainiks took part in this work.

One drawback to this approach was that the Sainiks often had to travel some distance to the town or city in which rioting was going on. Many of the Gandhian activists worked in rural areas, which made it hard to act promptly enough. Often, they arrived after the worst of the rioting was over. There were however some notable successes. Narayan Desai told of an occasion when there was violence in Bhivandi, near Bombay:

> ... when we met with the Hindus, they said, 'Why talk to *us* about peace? Why don't you try to go to the Muslim part of the city? The minute you go there, you'll be killed!'
>
> So we said, 'All right, we'll go lodge there.' Then we went and lived with the Muslims.
>
> The Hindus of the city were amazed. They never could have imagined that a mostly Hindu group, including five Hindu women, could stay with the Muslims overnight and be alive the next morning. But we were

safe. Not only were *we* safe, but the Muslims thought *they* were safe, because they had Hindu Shanti Sainiks protecting them.[142]

In Calcutta in 1964 they organised a silent procession of three thousand people through the riot-torn streets. The tension was defused and the shopkeepers opened their shops, feeling that they would be secure with the Shanti Sainiks in the area. In Orissa some Christians burnt down the houses of their Muslim neighbours. The local Shanti Sainiks persuaded the Christians to donate funds for the rebuilding of these houses. Some of the actual arsonists even donated money.

JP took an active part in this work in 1963–4, when tensions with Pakistan led to many Hindus being expelled from East Pakistan. This set off a wave of retaliatory attacks on Muslims in eastern India. Muslim houses were attacked, the men and children killed and the women raped. JP visited the riot-torn areas and directed the activities of the Shanti Sainiks. In some cases they took huge personal risks in personally persuading angry crowds to disperse. Many Muslims fled their homes, seeking refuge in camps. JP visited some of these places to try to reassure the Muslims.[143]

Although the Shanti Sainiks were invariably Hindu, and they dressed in a manner that would today be associated with the Hindu right, this does not seem to have compromised their work. As always, the non-violent method depended on the skill and moral courage of its practitioners. In the Bhivandi case, the Sainiks under Narayan Desai managed to turn their Hindu identity to their advantage by showing that the Hindus need not fear Muslims and that Hindus would protect the Muslims. In such situations, it was vital to dispel the fear that each community had of the other. In Desai's words: 'Fear and courage are equally contagious. So Shanti Sainiks often go to areas that are supposed to be dangerous to show that there is nothing to fear.'[144]

JP believed that the root cause of communal friction in India was the continuing hostility between India and Pakistan, and he worked hard to try to bring about reconciliation between the two nations. He was highly critical

of Nehru's handling of the Kashmir issue, which involved his reneging on his commitment to hold a plebiscite and then suppressing protest and jailing Sheikh Abdulla in 1953.JP continued to demand Sheikh Abdulla's release over the following two decades, succeeding eventually in 1968. In 1964, JP set up a sixteen-member Indo-Pakistan Conciliation Group in India, and worked to establish a similar body in Pakistan. He argued that there should be a constitutional link between India and Pakistan. He attacked Congress and other politicians for their often narrow-minded, chauvinistic nationalism, with its communal underpinnings. He was as a result subjected to abuse from the Hindu right, with the RSS-inspired Jana Sangh organising a demonstration against him in Delhi in September 1964 just as he was setting out to visit Pakistan on a mission of peace. The mission did not succeed; less than a year later war broke out between India and Pakistan.[145]

After JP died in 1979, no leading Gandhian came forward to replace him in this respect. The Shanti Sena had been split badly in 1975 when Vinoba Bhave supported the Emergency, with one section going with Bhave, the other with JP. Narayan Desai stepped down as secretary in 1978 and the body soon declined into inactivity. Tragically, this was at a time when the Hindu right was beginning to consolidate its power through a deployment of a populist anti-Muslim demagogy. When things came to a head with the vandalistic destruction of the Babri Masjid in December 1992, there were few Gandhians prepared to risk their necks against the saffron fanatics and their criminal hangers-on as they attacked, raped, killed and looted defenceless Muslim citizens in towns and cities throughout India. One notable exception was Baba Amte, who rushed to Surat, where there had been some of the most despicable acts of violence against Muslims, and worked to restore communal peace. When the attacks began again in Bombay in January 1993, he went there and confronted the Shiv Sena workers. In one case he had to plead with them to allow fire engines to reach houses that were on fire.[146]

As the Hindu right strengthened its hold over Indian politics, some tendencies within it sought to appropriate Gandhi's legacy. Their argument was that Gandhi was a 'great Hindu' who had raised the prestige of Hinduism as a world religion. In a lavish and costly Bharat Mata temple at Hardwar, constructed in the early 1980s by a leading ideologue of the Hindu right, Swami Satyamitranand Giri, Gandhi found a place in the 'Shrine of Heroes' alongside M.M. Malaviya and V.D. Savarkar. Nehru was conspicuous by his absence in this pantheon of freedom fighters, as he was seen to be a socialist and secularist, which according to the dogmas of the Hindu right makes him a dubious patriot. Gandhi was included as a symbol of Hindu spirituality and ahimsa.[147] In a school textbook on '*Hindu Dharma'* prepared by the cultural wing of the RSS, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Gandhi was cited as a great 'Hindu thinker' who fought racism and propounded ahimsa.[148] Gandhi was thus sought to be assimilated to the Hindu right project of a 'world renaissance of Hinduism'.[149]

This line is however rejected by hardline Hindu nationalists, for it is not possible for those who celebrate violence and aggression to assimilate a figure who stood above all for non-violence. We see this very clearly in the writings of Franijois Gautier, a Frenchman resident in India for thirty years who has become a spokesman for the Hindu right. He describes Gandhi as a 'great soul, an extraordinary human being, a man with a tremendous appeal to the people. But, unfortunately, he was a misfit in India.'[150] Why was this so? Because he was, Gautier argues, at heart a European and a Christian. His non-violence was inspired more by Jesus Christ than by Hindu dharma, which insists that violence is often a matter of religious duty. Gandhi brought great harm to India by his pandering to Muslims and Untouchables. His love of Untouchables was based on a Christian notion of equality, and he failed to appreciate that caste is divinely sanctioned. In acting as he did 'he sowed the seeds of future disorders and of a caste war in India, of which we see the effects only today.'[151] As for Muslims, 'nobody more than Gandhi contributed to the partition of India, by his obsession to always give in to the

Muslims, by his obstinate refusal to see that the Muslims always started rioting, Hindus only retaliated; by his indulgence of Jinnah ...'[152]

Gautier goes on to cite his own hero, Sri Aurobindo, who criticised Gandhi for making 'a fetish of Hindu-Muslim unity':

> It is no use ignoring facts; some day the Hindus may have to fight the Muslims and they must prepare for it. Hindu–Muslim unity should not mean the subjection of the Hindus. Every time the mildness of the Hindus has given way. The best solution would be to allow the Hindus to organise themselves and the Hindu–Muslim unity would take care of itself, it would automatically solve the problem. Otherwise we are lulled into a false sense of satisfaction that we have solved a difficult problem, when in fact we have only shelved it.[153]

The 'automatic solution of this passage appears to be that of instilling such fear in Muslims that they will be forced to flee India.

Another hardline ideologue of the Hindu right is the VHP president, Ashok Singhal, who likewise refuses to countenance the idea that Muslims can be genuine Indians. In a speech in Calcutta in 1998 he accused Gandhi of trying to destroy the identity of India through his insistence that all 'invaders' had a right to be considered Indians, stating that 'India must choose between the theories of Mahatma Gandhi and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh.'[154] From the perspective of the exclusionary and authoritarian politics of this tendency, Gandhi's politics of plurality, incorporation and dialogism continues to be an anathema. It is indeed hard for the Hindu right to incorporate him into their agenda, for his whole life and being represents a standing indictment of their brand of politics.