Gandhi's Last Fast

Vinay Lal

AT HIS PRAYER meeting on the evening of 12 January 1948, Gandhi announced that he would commence, at noon on the following day, a fast of an indefinite duration. Unknown to him, this was to be his last fast unto death, for death, that great equalizer of all inequities, snatched him away less than three weeks later. Gandhi survived his fast but he could not escape the three bullets that his assassin, Nathuram Godse, pumped into his frail and yet muscular body on that fateful Friday which fell on 30 January 1948. Gandhi outlined this last fast, as he had all his previous fasts, but he could not outlive its implications. At the very moment when the announcement of his impending fast was being flashed over the world, Godse and his chief collaborator, Narayan Apte, who heard the news as it came put over their office teleprinter, made up their minds to kill him.1

India was then, in the last days of the Mahatma's life, a cauldron of seething fury, hatred, and communal carnage. Partition, to the creation of which the leaders of the Congress party had agreed when Jinnah could not be dissuaded from relinquishing his claim for a Muslim-majority State, carried with it the promise of an abatement of the communal fighting which began in earnest when the Muslim League, acting under Jinnah's instructions, announced Direct Action Day to demonstrate Muslim support for the creation of Pakistan. On 16 August 1946, the day fixed by the Muslim League for the observance of Direct Action, Calcutta became, in the words of the Statesman, a "bloody shambles." The British military officer stationed in that area observed that "it was unbridled savagery which homicidal maniacs let loose to kill and to maim and burn. The underworld of Calcutta was taking charge of the citizen."2 Hindus retaliated with swiftness. At Noakhali in Eastern Bengal (now in Bangladesh), in Bihar, indeed in large parts of the vast areas through which the Ganges flows, Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs found themselves enmeshed in what appeared to be a fight to the finish. Gandhi walked from village to village, entrusting the negotiations over India's future largely to his colleagues. On that momentous day when independence dawned and when the sky was rent with the sound of rejoicing, Gandhi was nowhere to be seen in
Dhaka. While the country was celebrating its deliverance from the yoke of foreign rule, the residence he had taken in Dhaka, a suburb of Calcutta, Gandhi was observing a twenty-four-hour fast, praying for the freedom of his countrymen from the more terrible yoke of anger and hatred.

Far from eliminating communal fighting, partition had the effect of entrenching the communal feeling that had in the past year appeared to rise like a lumbering giant. For Sir Cyril Radcliffe, chairman of the commission appointed to draw a boundary between India and Pakistan, the division of Bengal and Punjab was merely a thankless task but, for the residents of these areas, it represented a nightmarish reality. Hindus and Sikhs fled across the border into India and Muslims crossed into Pakistan; a mass exodus of some ten million people, uprooted from their traditional homes, many fleeing in panic, and others clamouring for revenge. Gandhi had arrived in 8 August to "contribute share in the return of sanity in the premier city of India." Independence produced a full in the notting; on 15 August it was reported that Hindus and Muslims were fracturing in the streets of Calcutta, and on 20 August Gandhi's prayer meeting at Kharagpur was attended by over 4,000,000 people representing various classes, communities, and shades of opinion. It pleased Gandhi so immensely that at prayer meeting the flags of Pakistan and the Indian Union were flown together.

Meanwhile Gandhi was receiving letters urging him, now that Calcutta appeared to be free from communal disturbances, to go to Punjab. Gandhi had all along been eager to return to Noakhali, but on the evening of 31 August, a demonstration against his peace mission induced him to prolong his stay in Calcutta. As he told his secretary Pyarelal: "My resolve to go to Noakhali has collapsed after this evening's happenings. I cannot go to Noakhali or, for that matter, anywhere, when Calcutta is in flames. Today's incident to me is a sign and a warning from God." News of rioting continued to pour in, and Gandhi pondered over the nature of his duty, it came to him that he was called upon to immediately commence fasting. The press statement announcing the fast reaffirmed Gandhi's faith that fasting, which had "inherently proved infallible" for him, alone could accomplish what his words could not—"touch the hearts of all the warring elements," in Calcutta and even in Punjab. The termination of the fast was conditional upon the return of sanity to Calcutta. In subsequent statements to delegations, comprised of members of the different faiths, which called upon him during his fast, Gandhi described in fuller detail the condition that would have to be met before he agreed to break the fast. He would need the assurance that, whatever may be the conditions prevailing in the rest of Bengal and the country, there would never be recrudescence of communal madness in Calcutta. Gandhi asked that the Muslims "come and tell him that they now felt safe and secure." Then only he would believe that the fast need not be prolonged. If he were hoodwinked into abandoning his fast by the promises of people who had not had a sincere change of heart but were merely desirous of preserving his life, he would have to undertake an unconditional, irrevocable fast unto death. A "temporary lull" followed by a "worse conflagration" would suggest to him that false pledges had been given "merely to keep him" alive. Gandhi advised the depression that came to see him on the third day of the fast that if the safety of the Muslims could not be guaranteed, its members should desist from attempting to make him give up the fast. He said: "But mind, you, my blood will be upon your head if you say one thing and mean another: rather than thoughtlessly hurry, let me prolong my fast a little longer. It will not hurt me. When a man fasts, it is not the gallons of water he drinks that sustains him, but God."

On 4 September the deputation came to see Gandhi armed with the news that Calcutta was quiet (not a single incident of violence had been reported from any part of the city). Finally, when the fast was in its twenty-third hour, Gandhi broke it—but not until representatives of the Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims had signed a declaration in which they pledged that they would sacrifice their lives rather than permit a recrudescence of the communal fighting. Gandhi was inclined to leave for Punjab at once, but delayed his departure by a few days upon being asked to stay longer to ensure the consolidation of the peace that he had wrought. These few days in Gandhi's life have often been described as among the greatest moments of his political career. C. Rajgopalachari's assessment of Gandhi's action was in this vein in which he said: "Gandhiji has achieved many things but there has been nothing, not even independence, which is so truly wonderful as his victory over evil in Calcutta. He has been the successful one-man Boundary Force in Bengal, when forces numbering 50,000 have failed elsewhere."

Thus there is a considerable pre-history which in fact extends much further back to 1924, when Gandhi fasted for 21 days on behalf of Hindu-Muslim friendship, to Gandhi's last fast for communal harmony in January 1948. Gandhi arrived in Delhi on 9 September 1947 and, as soon as he was apprised of the riots that had shaken the capital, he decided to 'irritating postpone his trip to Punjab. D.G. Tendulkar, in his exhaustive biography of Gandhi, has given a minute account of how the Mahatma spent the last months of his life. He was writing regularly on a host of problems in his weekly journal, Harijan. Congressmen came to him for advice; and though the reins of power were in other hands, Birla House—where Gandhi was lodged—continued to remain a seat of activity at the highest level of State policy. Unhappily he conducted the evening prayer meetings in the

July-September 1989
Delhi in Indian experience and history—its centrality, now as the capital, in the past as the city which gave refuge to the Pandavas, the forces of good. Now it was serving as the home to hundreds of thousands of refugees; and it there, in Delhi, peace could not be maintained, justice not enforced, would it appear to the world that in India communalism was being fought with courage and moral conviction? Gandhi realized fully well that so long as the Muslims in Delhi were unable to gain full redress, Pakistan would exploit the situation as evidence of the discrimination of minorities in a Hindu-majority State and of hostility towards itself at the more international level.

And so it was in Delhi that Gandhi began his last fast as noon on 13 January. Following his usual practice, he described the events that had rendered his action necessary, the conditions that would have to be met before he could contemplate its termination, and the uselessness of both dissuading him from taking the proposed step and capitulating, without a sincere change of heart, to his demands. The condition he stipulated for its termination, as may well be expected, was "a reunion of hearts of all communities without any outside pressure, but from an awakened sense of duty." He told the members of the deputation that came to see him that they were "to turn the searchlight inward" and, if they could not find a "responsive echo in their hearts" to what he stood for, they were to continue to oppose him. They knew "he was not a man to shirk [from] another fast," should he later discover that they had deceived him with false intentions, or that he had deceived himself through his impatience into breaking the fast prematurely.

"With God as my supreme and sole counsellor, I felt that I must take the decision without any other adviser," Gandhi said. The announcement was startling in its suddenness, recorded the Governor-General's press secretary in his journal, and had a resounding impact on everyone. Neither Nehru nor Patel had been consulted prior to the evening prayer on 12 January about the impending fast. When Mountbatten was informed the same evening, he at first tried to reason with Gandhi, but realized almost immediately that Gandhi's decision represented a brave move to bring about a new spirit of reconciliation. Thirteen important positions in the Indian government, had no inking of the step that Gandhi was about to take, is one measure of how far the dictates of Gandhi's conscience superseded, as in the days before independence, his expectations of officialdom. Gandhi was by no means averse to using legal, democratic means, when they were available, to rectify social wrongs or redress grievances, but he had little faith in the ability of government and its functionaries to effect permanent change and bring people to a state of heightened awareness about their duties and rights as social beings. That Gandhi's last fast should have

July-September 1989
taken place in Delhi, with the legally constituted government in the hands of largely those who had struggled by his side during the nationalist movement, and understood—however minimally—his world viewpoint: that the fast should, moreover, have as its objectives not only the attainment of communal harmony, but—as shall presently be discussed—the conversion of a government which had, despite the idealism with which the freedom struggle had been conceived and waged, succumbed to the compulsions of realpolitik—-all this is extraordinary, a telling commentary on Gandhi's novel conception of political behaviour and estimation of his own prowess and ability to imprint his presence on the body politic.

Gandhi's fasts were never merely acts of defiance undertaken in indifference to considerations of whether they were likely to have an impact on specific individuals or groups. Each fast was directed against someone and, as was habitual with him, he would specify, either in the announcement preceding the fast or in subsequent replies to queries from reporters and friends, whom the fast was intended to influence. To a Sikh friend he gave the rather characteristic response: "My fast is against no one party or group exclusively, and yet it excludes nobody. It is addressed to the conscience of all, even the majority community in the other dominion."8 But when accused by some people of undertaking the fast for the sake of Muslims, Gandhi confessed that they were right.9 Yet, on another occasion, he described his fast as an act undertaken on behalf of all minorities:

My fast, as I have stated in plain language, is undoubtedly on behalf of the Muslim minority in the Indian Union and, therefore, it is necessarily against the Hindus and Sikhs of the Union and the Muslims of Pakistan. It is also on behalf of the minorities in Pakistan, as in the case of the Muslim minority in the Union. . . . The fast is a process of self-purification for all.10

The fast was not exclusive, in so far as it sought to stir the conscience of the entire nation, and encouraged men of goodwill to emerge from their lethargy and prove their mettle in action. In the Gandhian view, if "evil" at times appears to dominate, it is because goodness is satisfied with being merely good, whereas evil is forever striving to find new prey. But, what is equally a tenet of Gandhian thinking, good can only break out of the shell of inertia if change is sought at a level where the issues and actors can be clearly identified. To those who were not without intellectual equipment, Gandhi would have given one, usually the more expansive, explanation; to others, less literate, precluded by the dint of circumstances from being preoccupied with thoughts of anything other than sheer sustenance, he would have given a simpler, less demanding but not contradictory, explanation. Gandhi had not privileged his immediate family, so that he could genuinely embrace the entire country as his very own, and as a father would attend to the varying needs of his own children, so Gandhi engaged in public discourse with an eye to the needs and circumstances of his audience. In him several levels of explanation and performance coexisted harmoniously.

It has also been argued that the last fast was directed against the Government of India. Some people have even named Vallabhbhai Patel, the Deputy Prime Minister and the boss of the Congress machine, as the man whom it was specifically intended to influence. When partition became an accomplished fact, the resources and financial holdings of undivided India were apportioned between the two countries. Pakistan's share of the assets amounted to fifty-five crores of rupees, then equivalent to about $200,000,000 of the gold reserve, but this amount was held back by the Government of India when Pakistan's troops forcibly entered Kashmir. Gandhi was unhappy over the stance adopted by the Indian government. His view was that while India should not break such armed intervention into its territory, there was no moral justification in withholding from Pakistan assets to which it was legally entitled. He saw in the position of the Indian government an abdication of its moral duty and the rejection, barely six months after independence, of the ideals which came to be associated with the freedom struggle under his leadership. It could with some justice be claimed that the struggle in India had been waged not primarily through the use of force, but with a dedication to truth. Was India now going to readily surrender the prerogative it had earned of showing the world how morality ought to impinge upon politics?

It is thus not at all implausible that Gandhi had all this squarely in his mind and that he hoped to bring the government round to his point of view. This hypothesis is reinforced by the information gleaned from the account of Campbell-Johnson, Mountbatten's Press Secretary, who recorded in his diary that the evening before the fast, Gandhi went out of his way to ask [Mountbatten] for a frank opinion about India's refusal to pay to Pakistan the fifty-five crores from the cash balances. Gandhi presumably wanted to ascertain whether he could rely upon the support of at least Mountbatten, for whom Nehru had great respect, and whose advice was repeatedly solicited by the Indian leaders. Mountbatten reassured him that he considered the step taken by the government as "unstatesmanlike and unwise," whereupon Gandhi said that he proposed to take the matter up with Nehru and Patel.11 But the interpretation put upon these events by Manchur Malgonkar is not entirely unwarranted: he argues that when Nehru and Patel came to see Gandhi to talk him out of his fast, he imposed another condition: "India must pay Rs 55 crores to Pakistan or see Gandhi die, and never mind if the country was at war with Pakistan."12 Perhaps Malgonkar is predisposed towards this view as it strengthens his thesis that the fast had the effect of making the conspirators who were already
planning his assassination more determined to carry out their resolve. Among the conspirators was Madanlal Pahwa, a young refugee from Punjab and, as Munir ul Haque and others have noted, the last generation more ill-will towards Gandhi among the refugees who in fact marched for a few nights by Gandhi's residence, shouting the slogans: "Marte ham to marne do" and "khoon ka badla khoon se leenge" till he wants to die, let him die! We shall avenge blood with blood.\(^{23}\) It is also true that when Patel sent word to Gandhi informing him of his willingness to do anything that he might wish, the Mahatma argued that priority be given to reconsidering the government's decision to withhold Pakistan's share of the assets.\(^{24}\)

On the strength of this evidence and other announcements by Gandhi, it has been argued that the fast was really directed against Patel. Alan Campbell-Johnson, who was spending those days with the Maharaja of Bikaner, reports that K.M. Panikar, then the Maharaja's secretary and an astute public observer, was emphatically of this view.\(^{25}\) After Gandhi arrived in Delhi, differences began to surface, according to the popular account, between the master and his former disciple. Not only was Patel diverging significantly from Gandhi's teachings, but it was commonly believed that he did not harbour friendly sentiments towards the Muslims and that he had been instrumental in determining the cabinet policy to deny Pakistan its share of the assets of undivided India. Gandhi is then reported to have said: "Yallahh bhai! I always thought you and I were one. I begin to see that we are two."\(^{26}\) The fast, then, aimed to bring Patel to heel, and strengthen the hands of Nehru, whose views collided sharply with Patel's. Those who allow Patel more credit would say that Gandhi, unable to choose between the two, wished to heal through his fast this rift that threatened to rent asunder the very nation.\(^{27}\)

Gandhi, for his part, admitted in public that Sardar Patel was known to have subscribed to the feeling that Muslims could not be trusted but added that most Hindus also "held this view".\(^{28}\) Then why reprieve Patel alone? He wanted his Muslim League friends to give through their conduct the lie to the view with which Patel and other Hindus were identified. He also reminded the public that Patel enjoyed the confidence of Nehru and that if he were indeed "an enemy of the Muslims, Panditji could ask him to retire."\(^{29}\) Gandhi Ahmed that Patel was, if no longer his "yes-man", still an "esteemed friend." On 15 January, newspapermen conveyed to Gandhi a message, in which they sought a response, that an impression had been created "that the fast is more intended to bring about a change of heart in Sardar Patel and thereby amounts to a condemnation of the policy of the Home Ministry." Gandhi in his reply firmly rejected this view: "The suggested interpretation never crossed my mind. If I had known that my statement could bear any such interpretation, I should certainly have dispelled the doubt in anticipation." The public, and particularly Patel's critics, were rather too zealous in praising Nehru to the hilt, but it must not be forgotten that Patel and Nehru could not with such ease be isolated from each other. Nor should anyone doubt that Patel, whom he affectionately dubbed as his "yes-man," was "too masterful," too much his own man, to merely remain forever under his tutelage. And then Gandhi confessed candidly that when "power descended on the Sardar, he saw that he could no longer successfully apply the method of nonviolence which he used to wield with signal success. I have made the discovery that what I and the people with me had termed nonviolence was not the genuine article, but a weak copy known as passive resistance."\(^{30}\) Patel was not to be accused of betraying or degrading the trust which the public had placed in him. He had departed from the ideals of nonviolence, but it had been the Mahatma's own error of judgment that had led him to believe that these ideals were now entrenched in public and social life. Would anybody still "dare," after Gandhi had placed before them all this information, to call his fast "a condemnation of the policy of the Home Ministry"?\(^{31}\)

Whatever may have been the intentions with which Gandhi embarked upon his fast, less than twenty-four hours after its commencement Nehru called a meeting of his cabinet on the lawns of Birla House "to consider afresh the issue of Pakistan's share of the cash balances." On the night of 15 January, the government announced a reversal of its earlier policy. The agreement with Pakistan would now be implemented immediately "to remove the cause of suspicion and friction" between the two nations. The communiqué further stated that this decision was the government's contribution to the best of their ability, to the nonviolent and noble efforts made by Gandhi in accordance with the glorious traditions of this great country, for peace and goodwill.\(^{32}\)

Gandhi was immensely pleased. In his written message read before those who gathered at his prayer meeting, which he could not attend on account of his greatly weakened health, Gandhi commended the Cabinet in glowing terms for having acted with deliberation and yet with promptness to alter, what was no easy matter, a "deliberate settled policy" conceived at the highest level. The Cabinet deserved "the warmest thanks from the whole country" for acting with such responsibility and integrity. No government could take such a weighty step "merely because it is likely to win the hasty applause of an unthinking public." What then justified this change of policy? "It was my fast," stated Gandhi, with rather surprising, if not uncharacteristic modesty, or at least with undisguised faith in his ability to influence men and institutions. The fast, Gandhi claimed, had "changed the whole outlook": the government's gesture of unshaken goodwill would put relations between Pakistan and India on a friendly footing, and impel Pakistan to also act honourably. Gandhi then defended his fast.
Gandhi's Last Fast

violence and attempts to fracture its unity? India's 'honour' had to be
'saved,' and it was immaterial how long he had to fast to bring people
to a realization of how ruinous was the course of mindless killing upon
which they were set.

Gandhi's medical advisers were of the opinion that now, by the
evening of 16 January, the fast could be fatal, though what was even
more feared was the risk of permanent impairment of several vital
organs. But as Gandhi stated quite pungently, the fast was not
undertaken "after consultation with medical men, be they however
able," and the public should know that neither could it terminate on
their advice, though if the country still had any use for him, the
people would hurry up "to close their ranks."27 Yet, hurry though they
might, Gandhi persistently refused to break his fast. He was then
asked if a specific test would satisfy him that Delhi had returned to
sanity—at indeed it had. "Just then," to follow Tendulkar's succinct
narration of the events, "a telegram from Karachi came." The Muslim
refugees who had been driven out of Delhi inquired whether they could
return to Delhi and re-occupy their homes. "That is the test," Gandhi
remarked as soon as he read the telegram.28 The indefatigable
Parela, Gandhi's principal personal secretary, immediately set out
with the telegram for the city and by night he had secured signed
declarations from 1,000 Hindu and Sikh refugees to the effect that they
would welcome the return of Muslims to the homes from which they
had been forcibly ejected, even though they themselves would now
have to return to the refugee camps in the height of Delhi's winter.

On 17 January, Gandhi spoke at the prayer meeting from his bed and
again urged the representatives of the various communities and groups
in the city not to mistake him at that "sacred juncture" of his life with
a view to making him terminate the fast. He was never happier than
when he was fasting, for the spirit; and this fast, in particular, had
brought him 'higher happiness' than he had ever experienced.29 That
same evening, subsequent to the release by Gandhi's doctors of a
medical bulletin which placed his life in great danger, Maulana Azad,
the foremost Indian Muslim of his day, addressed a large peace rally in
Delhi, where he informed the gathering that Gandhi had mentioned
seven concrete conditions to which the representatives of all the parties
would have to signatories before the fast could end. Perhaps
in the urgency of the moment, no one considered asking Gandhi whether
he was justified in imposing new conditions, given that the laws of
satyagraha disallowance taking such a step when the original
objective was clearly within reach. Had such an objection been raised,
pot would have come his response: the seven conditions were not added
as an afterthought, or because their fulfillment seemed assured, but
they were necessarily contained within the overarching condition that
communal strife must cease and that a true union of Muslim, Hindu, and
Sikh hearts be effected. The seven conditions guaranteed to the

July-September 1969
Muslims, inter alia, freedom of movement, the return of their mosques, the right to carry on their business as before," and the unhindered celebration of their annual festival at the Khwaja Qutab-ud-Din Mazan. Did not communal harmony entail these guarantees which should, to begin with, never have been necessary? The signatories also pledged themselves to "live in Delhi like brothers and in perfect amity... protect the life, property, and faith of Muslims," and prevent the recurrence again of such events as had taken place. Thus, on 18 January, at forty-five minutes past noon, ended the last fast of Mahatma Gandhi.

Gandhi had himself described his last fast as "my greatest fast" to his devoted English disciple, Mirabein. C. Rajagopalachari, never to hitch himself blindly to another man's bandwagon, declared that though on similar occasions in the past he had wrangled with Gandhi, he would not do so this time as now the Mahatma was the only sane man. Speaking at a Sikh gurdwara on the fourth day of the fast, Rajagopalachari eulogized Gandhi in these spirited words: "Gandhiji has become insolent because he has taken upon himself all the debts of our people. Today, he has gone to a great banker, namely God, in order to repay the money." Telegrams, characterized only by the dullest uniformity of their message of congratulation, poured in and the Mahatma expressed anew his long-cherished desire to live "to full span of life" which, according to "learned opinion," is 125 years, though some say 133 years. Thousands of refugees had been fasting alongside Gandhi, and even Nehru, unknown to Gandhi, had begun a sympathetic fast on 17 January. Vincent Sheean had been told by his informants in the capital that "talk of war with Pakistan had been quite common" but after the fast such talk had "vanished utterly." And in the capital, though in the capital alone, no untoward happenings were reported.

Viewed from the standpoint of less conventional criteria, and less through the eyes of the protagonist and his supporters and more through the lens of history, other conclusions begin to emerge. It cannot be gainsaid that Gandhi, bemoaned by the violent communal strife to which he was a witness, undertook his fast mainly in the interest of promoting communal harmony, ensuring the safety of Muslims, eradicating the baneful legacy that violence leaves behind, demonstrating the power that comes with satyagraha and an unwavering dedication to truth, and--in the more general sense--reducing the violence that appeared to be endemic to Indian society. In this respect, there was nothing unusual about this fast. On similar occasions in the past also, he had taken the same step, with this difference: whereas in 1922 and 1924 particularly gruesome acts of violence prompted his fasts, both Calcutta and Delhi were relatively quiet, and had gone through their worst phases of communal violence, when Gandhi commenced fasting. In fact, reporters in Delhi asked him why he had undertaken the fast when at that time there were no disturbances in Delhi, and Gandhi's response was that it would have been foolish of him to wait until all the Muslims had been thrown out of Delhi "by subtle undemonstrative means," which to him was akin to "killing by inches." It can, then, perhaps, be argued that in the absence of communal violence, the fast would not have been undertaken. But the presence of violence, or the threat of it, was only a necessary, though not sufficient, reason for Gandhi to have imposed upon himself at this advanced age this intolerable penance.

Vincent Sheean, who was present in Delhi during the second half of January 1948, seemed to think that Gandhi had ended his fast rather prematurely. In his biography of Gandhi, Last Kindly Light, Sheean writes that among the press correspondents speculation was rife as to why Gandhi had chosen to end his fast at the particular moment, and the inclination was to find something "calculating in the whole business." Sheean says that the true explanation suddenly struck him: "Gandhi ended his last fast [when he did] because the sun did not shine that day." The sun did shine every previous day of the fast and Gandhi would lie on a cot in the garden of Birla House and bask in the warmth of the sun's rays. Besides, some of Gandhi's earliest memories of his mother, Sheean recalls from Gandhi's autobiography, were associated with the sun. Sheean concludes that "the darkness of the morning, the [seven-point] pledge to peace and the memory of his mother all combined together to make up the utterance which he called the "inner voice," that which guided him through all the last thirty or forty years of his life, and said imperiously, "fast no more." Although Sheean suggests no other motives that moved Gandhi to fast, his account may be read to support the view that it was not only the attainment of communal harmony that was desired. For, the fast was terminated not so much on the ground that this harmony seemed assured but for other reasons. Another point that deserves consideration is that though representatives of the Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh, both communal organizations known for their animosity to the Muslims, were signatories to the pledge, the Mahasabha's secretary published a statement immediately after the conclusion of the fast dissociating the Mahasabha from the "suicidal policy" implied by the Mahatma's actions and the conditions contained in the pledge. The fast, he charged, had only succeeded in weakening the position of the Hindus.

I have earlier hinted that the fast was aimed simultaneously at ameliorating the lot of Muslims in India and prodding the Indian government into reconsideration of its policies with respect to Pakistan. Gandhi was inquiring whether the Government of India, now a free agent, would permit, as he surely desired, the intrusion and

July-September 1989
acceptance of moral values in the shaping and conduct of its foreign policy. This argument can, moreover, be reconciled with Gandhi's own emphatic rejection of the suggestion that the fast was in any way against Patel or a condemnation of the Home Ministry. Patel's communism, alleged or real, and the Indian government's pragmatic decision to withhold Pakistan's share of the assets of united India lest the money be used to further wage war in Kashmir were, from the standpoint of Gandhi, only symptomatic of the early abandonment by the entire Indian government and its functionaries of that moral probity which Gandhi had hoped would suffice political behaviour in post-Independence India. In the last major document to which Gandhi's name is attested, he recommended the dissolution of the Congress and suggested that party members should constitute themselves into a Lok Sevak Sangh and disperse throughout the country to do social work in India's villages. Political freedom had been attained; but what of the other freedoms, social, economic, and moral, which were more intangible, and harder to attain precisely because the "antagonists," who prevented their realization, were harder to identify. Whatever the difficulties the country had encountered in attaining independence, constructive work demanded greater perseverance, tolerance, and dedication, the demolition of cherished beliefs, ingrained habits of thinking, and routine behaviour. Radical politics would have to be rooted in radical praxis. Independence could be demanded from Britain, the alien element on Indian soil. But social justice and economic parity were to be attained only by making the demands on one's ownself and then on one's owncountrymen. A man could not demand of others the redressal of grievances or the enforcement of certain privileges which he was not willing to grant to others. And the same principle applied in foreign relations with other nations. Let India show that the wrongful incursion of Pakistan's troops into its territory would not be ignored. But this violation of its sovereignty would not induce it to ignore its own obligation of delivering to Pakistan its rightful share of the wealth of undivided India. But such magnanimity, and so it would be by the standards of everyday politics, where one wrong is matched by two, could not ordinarily be expected of a country in which a substantial minority feared the loss of its life and property. And democracy, Gandhi had said, is to be judged by how it treats its minorities. If the Muslims in India had legitimate grievances which were not being redressed, could it be expected that India's relations with other countries would be conducted honourably? Aggrieved though he was over the denial of elementary human rights to Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan, Gandhi considered it morally binding on the Hindus and Sikhs of India to treat the Muslims as their own brethren. Gandhi demanded that we should acquaint ourselves like soldiers on the battlefield and then only we can acquire the moral authority to demand of others that they accept the principle of equity. Thus, in the circumstances of the fast, these considerations came together.

Speaking before the United Nations Security Council at Lake Success, where India's complaint against Pakistan over the invasion of Kashmir was being heard, Sir Mohammad Zafarullah Khan, the Foreign Minister of Pakistan, said that "a new and tremendous wave of feeling and desire for friendship between India and Pakistan is sweeping the sub-continent in response to the fast." A skeptic may justly respond that such pronouncements from official lips are in the nature of embellishments, superfluous but pleasing to the senses. Numerous Pakistanis testified that after partition, and no doubt even more after the last fast and its martyrdom, Gandhi's standing among the Muslims of Pakistan increased tremendously, so much so that he ceased to be their "bête noire." Gandhi himself appeared to think that his fast had generated much sympathy among the Muslims of Pakistan and that he had received several telegrams, "not one of dissonance." If in the Union of India the night of despair and darkness were dispelled, it could not be otherwise in Pakistan. He saw in Pakistan signs in that direction and Mountbatten likewise hoped that the fast would be "the great gesture for Pakistan to act in the same way." But Manmohan Malhotra says quite categorically that the fast "affected Pakistan not at all. If anything, there had been a renewed frenzy of communal massacres of which the papers carried 'properly watered down reports.' Indeed, the situation continued to remain intolerable for Hindus and, though forty million Muslims remained in India, Pakistan was soon depopulated of the greater part of its Hindu population. B.R. Nanda, whose biography of Gandhi enjoys the reputation of fairness and impartiality, appears to have given in this respect an overly optimistic assessment of the fast which, he says, "had a refreshing impact on Pakistan, where it punctured the subtle web of propaganda which for ten years had represented Gandhi as an enemy of Islam." Among the public in Pakistan the fast may indeed have generated feelings of goodwill towards the people of India and it may be argued that it is at this level, not so much in changing official thinking, that Gandhi would have desired to be successful. One indication of how much his name and contribution to the achievement of independence continued to be maligned is that in the History of the Freedom Movement sponsored by the Pakistan Historical Society in Karachi, he was cast as the archvillain who obstinately persisted in opposing the rights of Pakistanis to their emergence as a sovereign people. Writing, for example, about the failure of the Jinnah-Gandhi talks in September 1948, it attributed the failure mainly to 'Gandhi's total disregard of the two-nation idea which was the fundamental basis of the Muslims' demand embodied in the Lahore resolution and his rejection of the Muslims' right of self-determination.'
IF the last fast be viewed strictly in terms of its immediate objective, namely the attainment of communal harmony, it was well be termed a "success." It would be disingenuous to argue that this, however, was only ostensibly Gandhi's objective. But it cannot be doubted that in the last few weeks, perurbed as he was by the thought that his life had been a reounding failure and robbed of his will to live 125 years at the sight of the destruction of all the ideas he had cherished, he must have been thinking of the larger principles that were now at stake. Each civil disobedience movement, each satyagraha campaign, each fast, whatever the circumstances, however insistent the demand for independence, was first an attempt to hone the public conscience and its guardians to an acceptance of the place of moral values in political and social life. No sooner had Gandhi arrived in India after a long span of over twenty years in South Africa than he had begun to speak of the necessity of realizing in practice the "spiritualizing" of the political life and the political institutions of the country. Politics, he told the students gathered before him at the Y.M.C.A. on an April afternoon in 1915, "cannot be divorced from religion" and significantly, among the truths which he felt he had recovered for humanity during his ceaseless experimentation in life, and which finds its way into the last paragraphs of his autobiography, is that "those who say that religion had nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means." 53 It would be ephemeral to say only that Gandhi refused to be drawn into the compartmentalization of life that was so characteristic of his time. In a society more given to religion, and the placation of deities for the amelioration of worldly distress, Gandhi emphasized the centrality of politics. 54 Saints stood condemned for having abandoned politics—and what is politics but the realization that in the welfare of all is one's own good? Politicians, even those few deserving of the sobriquet of "statesmen," had erred in the opposite direction of shunning morality for a more worldly political existence. The marriage of politics and morality, so that one would cease to even think of them as different, was the only marriage to which Gandhi was sworn.

Dharmasheha kurushthre ("on the field of Dharma, on the field of the Kuru")—so begins the Bhagavad Gita, which forms a part of the Mahabharata. On the field of Kurushthre, the Pandavas and Kauravas fought that battle of which the fires are still burning, the embers still alive. Both fought mastery in the political realm. But whereas the Kauravas, driven by greed and the craving for power, villainously resorted to treachery and deceit, the Pandavas, at least in the person of Yudhishtithra, came to vindicate truth and arm political power with the strength of virtue. Many centuries later, the battle was reenacted; and it was not so much a battle of the indigens against the allies on the time-worn plains of India, as between realpolitik and Gandhi's politics. As Gandhi stated in an interview in February 1924: "I have plunged into politics simply in search of truth."

July-September 1929

GANDHI'S LAST FAST

... I want to show how to epitomize the Mahabharata. This refrain runs through Gandhi's writings. "My devotion to Truth," he wrote in his autobiography, "has drawn me into the field of politics." Politics was not perhaps the choicest of professions but a man who aspired after truth could not keep out of any field of life. It was not to advance his own interest, or merely to retrieve his kingdom, but to uphold dharma, which is all-embracing and inescapable, that Yudhisthithra fought the Kauravas. Likewise, so Gandhi claimed, he took part in politics, which "enriched us today like the coals of a snake from which one cannot get out, no matter how much one tries," without letting the politician in him dominate any decision of his. 59

The bond between politics and religion, understood not as faith or religious practice but as ethical precepts, that Gandhi was attempting to establish was subversive of the political culture of those Hindus who, with the advent of independence, and even before it, were coming into power. For this kind of experimentation, Gandhi's assassin, Nathuram Godse, had utter disdain, and indeed during his trial he denounced Gandhi for having undertaken "experiments... at the expense of the Hindus." 60 Godse mocked Gandhi's politics in no uncertain terms for being "supported by old superstitions beliefs such as the power of the soul, the inner voice, the fast, the prayer and the purity of mind." 61 and though he expressed satisfaction that the Nehru government was showing greater realism in the shaping of its policy vis-a-vis Pakistan, he feared that Gandhi's influence on the thinking of India's leaders was such that he would have to be eliminated if the development of India were to occur on sounder lines. "I felt that the Indian politics in the absence of Gandhi would surely be practical, able to retaliate, and would be powerful with the armed forces... People may even call me and dub me as devoid of any sense or foolish but the nation would be free to follow the course founded on reason which I consider to be necessary for sound nation-building." 62 That Gandhi had to stake his very life during the last fast is one measure of how far he had failed, at least in his own estimation, in the battle against realpolitik. But the fact that he was killed in less than two weeks after the termination of the fast is another measure of how far he had succeeded, particularly in the last days of his life, in the same battle.

Notes and References

3. Moreh had advanced the rather disingenuous, if not ludicrous, argument that as all the parties were equally dissatisfied with the Radcliffe Award, the best solution was to have an impartial arbitrator. 

July-September 1929
Gandhi's Last Fast

likely to give edge to a Government crisis. For, he had clearly reached very strongly against this move, and seems to be prepared to face a head-on collision with Patel about it.”

"Noteu and Patel have undoubtably been drifting apart... Gandhi may well hope by a supreme effort to heal the breach between the two great men in the Indian government, realising that he alone has the status to do it, and that if he fails, not only the Congress Party but the entire regime would be placed in deadly peril."

29. Ibid., pp. 251-52.
30. Ibid., p. 250.
31. Ibid., pp. 258-59.

35. Harjeev, 23rd January 1948.
38. Ibid., p. 262.
42. Before commencing his fast in Calcutta, Gandhi prepared a statement which he showed to C. Rajagopalachari, the new Governor of West Bengal. Rajaji, as he was popularly known, tried to talk Gandhi out of his fast, and upon finding that he was having no success, poured upon a part of the statement where Gandhi seems to have left himself open to attack. So insistent was Gandhi that he invariably also stated what amenities, if any, he would permit himself during the fast. Now Gandhi had said that he would allow four lemon juices to be added to his water, presumably to avoid nausea, but Rajaji objected that this might not be necessary, if he had put himself entirely in God's hands. Gandhi conceded this; he had allowed it out of weakness and that as a salutary he should not have allowed himself the liberty of hoping that the fast was to be relieved, other than by the "timely fulfillment of the condition." Nirmal K. Bose, who was then serving as Gandhi's secretary and interpreter, recalled same year that Gandhi then took a penknife and shaved the portion referring to the four lemon juices in Bose's words, "now this was the man whom we saw, not merely great, but immensely great." See D.G. Tendulkar, Mahatma, Vol. 8, p. 262, and D. Watson and H. Tennyson, Tearing of Gandhi, p. 115.
44. Vincent Sheean, Lead Kindly Light, p. 170.

July-September 1989

Gandhi's Last Fast

likely to give edge to a Government crisis. For, he had clearly reached very strongly against this move, and seems to be prepared to face a head-on collision with Patel about it.”

"Noteu and Patel have undoubtably been drifting apart... Gandhi may well hope by a supreme effort to heal the breach between the two great men in the Indian government, realising that he alone has the status to do it, and that if he fails, not only the Congress Party but the entire regime would be placed in deadly peril."

29. Ibid., pp. 251-52.
30. Ibid., p. 250.
31. Ibid., pp. 258-59.

35. Harjeev, 23rd January 1948.
38. Ibid., p. 262.
42. Before commencing his fast in Calcutta, Gandhi prepared a statement which he showed to C. Rajagopalachari, the new Governor of West Bengal. Rajaji, as he was popularly known, tried to talk Gandhi out of his fast, and upon finding that he was having no success, poured upon a part of the statement where Gandhi seems to have left himself open to attack. So insistent was Gandhi that he invariably also stated what amenities, if any, he would permit himself during the fast. Now Gandhi had said that he would allow four lemon juices to be added to his water, presumably to avoid nausea, but Rajaji objected that this might not be necessary, if he had put himself entirely in God's hands. Gandhi conceded this; he had allowed it out of weakness and that as a salutary he should not have allowed himself the liberty of hoping that the fast was to be relieved, other than by the "timely fulfillment of the condition." Nirmal K. Bose, who was then serving as Gandhi's secretary and interpreter, recalled same year that Gandhi then took a penknife and shaved the portion referring to the four lemon juices in Bose's words, "now this was the man whom we saw, not merely great, but immensely great." See D.G. Tendulkar, Mahatma, Vol. 8, p. 262, and D. Watson and H. Tennyson, Tearing of Gandhi, p. 115.
44. Vincent Sheean, Lead Kindly Light, p. 170.

July-September 1989
At the height of the civil disobedience movement of 1920-22, it was reported that at Chauri Chaura, on 5 February 1922, a procession, incensed by the harassment of some of its members by the local police, entered twenty-two constables, who had run out of ammunition, into the police-station, which was then set on fire. All the constables were burnt to death, as they emerged from the station, hacked to pieces. On receiving this news, Gandhi at once issued orders for suspension of the civil disobedience movement throughout the country, much to the chagrin of even his most devoted followers in the Congress party, who failed to see why any incident in a remote Indian village justified the suspension of a movement that was believed to have brought the country very close to the doors of freedom. Although the incident at Chauri Chaura cannot be described as a communal disturbance, it is one piece with the Hindu-Muslim riots of 1924 and 1946-48, so far as they all represented a reagan to that atrocity which delighted in gratuitous massacre of violence and which, Gandhi must have suspected, lurked deep in the Indians' psyche. In the event, Gandhi imposed on himself a five days' fast to atone for the callous misdeeds of his countrymen (see D.G. Tendulkar, Mahatma: Life of Mahatma Karamchand Gandhi, Vol. 2, pp 22-27). Similarly, in 1930, it was the riots at Kohat which prompted Gandhi to undertake a fast for twenty-one days. He had been greatly disturbed for some time over Hindu-Muslim riots; and then, when 36 people were killed at Kohat, and the entire Hindu population evacuated the town, the light came to him: "I was writhing in deep pain. News of Kohat set the smouldering mass afame. I passed two nights of remorse. I knew the remedy," Quoted in Harold E. Fry, "Why Gandhi Fast," The Christian Century (February 1940), pp 320-321.

Vincent Sheean, Lead Kindly Light, pp 174-75. The author's account is to be treated with some skepticism that one ordinarily reserves for authors. Sheean happened to be in Lahore when Gandhi was assassinated; and he further writes that in the very instant that his mind registered this shock, he began to appear on his mind. He describes this as a psychosomatic phenomenon — no great novelty — but not to be dismissed lightly either (pp. 223-45).


See, for example, Wason and Tomiyama, Talking of Gandhi, p. 17.


B.R. Nanda, Mahatma Gandhi, p. 262.


The phrase is Asha Nandy's. See his "Final Encounter: The Politics of the Assassination of Gandhi," in his At the Edge of Psychology (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 72. This essay is inspiring with perceptive insights and has helped me to reevaluate some of my arguments.