

In the middle of 1946, I forget the exact month, Maulana Akram Khan bought the rights of the late Maulana Muhammad Ali's English weekly 'Comrade' and decided to revive it. I was asked to resign from the Islamia College and join the Azad staff and run the weekly. The offer was tempting but I felt on reflection that it would be better to practise free-lance journalism and retain my job at the Islamia College. I was not quite sure where my true vocation lay, but the idea of giving up my academic life completely did not appeal to me. Journalism had its attractions. To a young man of twenty-five, as I then was, the freedom that journalists appeared to possess seemed to contrast with the constraints of service under the Government, but I realised that abandoning the academic career would involve the renunciation of the dreams with which I associated the scholar's life, the detachment I inwardly craved, the ambition which I entertained of exploring uncharted provinces and landscapes as a seeker of knowledge.

While declining to resign from the Islamia College, I agreed to do all I could unofficially to run the Comrade. I remained its editor *de facto* from the day it was revived to the day I left Calcutta in September 1947 for the M.C. College, Sylhet to which I was transferred after the establishment of Pakistan.

The Comrade's policy, it is almost needless to say, was to support the Muslim League in its demand for Pakistan, to explain the Muslim position to the English-speaking world and to encourage forces making for unity and solidarity among the Muslim population of the subcontinent. I used to write the first editorial. The second leader was contributed by Mr Mujibur Rahman Khan whose name appeared on the paper as its editor. His English was shaky but the grammatical and idiomatic deficiencies were to an extent offset by the maturity of his political views. Dr I. H. Zuberi, Principal of the Islamia College, offered to write a column under a pseudonym. He must have been fired by the ambition of emulating the example of Mr Altaf Hussain whose fortnightly column in the Statesman "Through Muslim Eyes by Shahed" served as a sort of tonic to the English-reading intellectuals. Not only did he wield a powerful, vigorous pen, his forthright views, the sincerity of his beliefs, his unflinching faith both in the ideal of Pakistan and in the leadership of the Quaid-e-Azam helped sweep many cobwebs away, strengthened the waverers and doubters, and lent fresh encouragement to the faithful. Shamsheer which was the pen-name adopted by Dr Zuberi proved however utterly disappointing from the literary and the intellectual points of view alike. Dr Zuberi's language was immature; his views lacked the air of conviction which characterised Shahed's writings. We received occasional contributions mainly on cultural topics also from Abu Rushd Matinuddin. A young College student, Mr Shafi Husain, who was a neighbour of mine, wrote a delightful column on science.

We had on the whole a dedicated band of workers who turned the Comrade into a lively weekly reflecting current opinion. But the principal burden of interpreting political events fell on me. This was in addition to my commitments as a leader-writer for the Azad. But I was young enough and energetic enough to be able to cope with this work. Besides the intoxication of the political atmosphere, the intense excitement generated by day-to-day developments was an effective antidote against any kind of boredom and strain. 'Bliss was it in the dawn to be alive and to be young was very heaven'. If this was true of Wordsworth as a young man watching the outbreak of the French Revolution, we reacted to the events of 1946 and 1947 in the same spirit. The possibility of what was widely believed to be a wild dream being realised within our lifetime was

too thrilling to be fully comprehended. We were riding on the crest of a wave. Danger of shipwreck still loomed ahead, but as 1946 moved to a close and as Lord Mountbatten spoke in urgent terms of the determination of the British Government not to stay in India beyond 1948, we appeared to have steered clear of the main shoals.

But had we really done so? I have not so far mentioned the greatest single event of 1946 which, to use a current cliché rendered the polarisation between Hindus and Muslims absolutely final and decisive. This was the chain of communal riots beginning with the great massacre in Calcutta on 16 August 1946, which spread throughout eastern India. 'Riot' is actually a euphemism for what was in fact civil war. The casualties in dead and wounded ran into five figures in most places. Hundreds of homes were burnt and razed to the ground; whole villages wiped out. The barbarities were appalling. Not until the Civil War in East Pakistan in 1971 were they exceeded anywhere in the subcontinent. The terrible explosion of fury which swept the whole region from one end of Bihar to Calcutta left us stunned and numb.

Communal riots have been since the beginning of the 19th century an endemic feature of public life in the subcontinent. The scale and magnitude of the clashes which broke out in 1946 were however altogether different.

The massacre in Calcutta in August 1946 which set off a chain reaction throughout eastern India and was later in 1947 to lead to even more gigantic clashes in the Punjab came as a terrible surprise to us. The Muslim League had fixed 16th August for protest meetings throughout India to mark its disillusionment with the British Government over Lord Wavell's retreat from the promises he had made regarding the formation of his Executive Council. The purpose of these meetings, it said, would be to tell the Muslim public that constitutionalism had failed and that they must be prepared henceforth for Direct Action. The term Direct Action, as understood by all in the context of Indian politics, signified demonstrations, agitations, jail goings, defiance of the Police and civil disobedience. 16th August was not to mark the beginning of any Civil Disobedience movement itself; it was to be a day on which the League would proclaim formally its decision to renounce constitutionalism.

The proposed change in Muslim League policy was viewed by the Hindus with consternation. They feared that Pakistan would now become inevitable, and they were determined to frustrate the new move as best they could. On the Muslim side, the decision to enforce a general strike on August 16th and the attempt to compel Hindu, Sikh and other non-Muslim communities to co-operate was certainly a mistake. This was the work of Calcutta leaders and had nothing to do with Muslim League policy at the Centre.

On the morning of 16th August, I walked to the Maidan there being no trams on that day on account of the strike to attend the public meeting which had been announced. It was not until I crossed Park Street that I saw any sign of trouble. The streets that I passed through were of course deserted, but there was no trace of violence. In Chowringhee, however the situation looked different. Defiant Sikhs were reported to be trying to frustrate the strike by keeping the shops open. I heard that clashes had already occurred in Bowbazar, Harrison Road, Dharamtola, and that men had been killed. How many no one could say. But people looked scared and dismayed. As groups of men from distant areas came in more reports of the same

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Written by Syed Sajjad Husain

sort spread. Attendance at the Maidan meeting was not expected to be good. After a few addresses---most of them perfunctory---we were asked to disperse and defend ourselves as best as we could from attacks by non-Muslims.

I decided to walk back to my residence in Broad Street by way of the Lower Circular Road. I saw a mob breaking a wine-shop open with staves and shovels. Some people ran helter-skelter intent on pillage, so it seemed. I thought it best to hurry back home and not to get caught in this crowd.

Park Circus looked a safe haven. I felt relieved and concluded that the violence I had seen was sporadic and would soon die down.

During the next four days, reports reached us hour by hour of killings, pillage and other forms of violence. No newspapers arrived either on the 17th or on the subsequent three days. On 21st August somebody brought us a single sheet printed on one side: this was what the Statesman had been reduced to. With great difficulty the paper had succeeded in bringing out this sheet, and the news it contained stunned and frightened us into near-paralysis. Over ten thousand people were reported to have been massacred in those four fateful days. This was just an estimate, probably a very conservative one. Of the gruesome, blood-curdling barbarities, the Statesman could only provide hints; authentic reports were impossible to obtain. The whole city of Calcutta appeared to have gone absolutely mad, all feelings to humanity and neighbourliness to have been flung to the winds; the primitive impulses of cruelty and hatred had for four days reigned supreme. Men, women and children, none had been spared. Groups of marauders consisting especially in Hindu areas of educated youths had set houses on fire, beating the inhabitants to death, throwing children into the conflagration.

It was unbelievable, inconceivable, yet true. Fear, hatred, vengeance, political enmity had combined to turn Calcutta's population into beasts temporarily, and we reaped a terrible harvest. Administration completely collapsed. The police not only failed to maintain order; they participated in the killings, Hindus on the Hindu side and Muslims on the Muslim.

At the end of those terrible four days, Calcutta was found to have divided itself into clearly demarcated Hindu and Muslim zones inaccessible to each other. The barbarities went on, on a somewhat reduced scale, for several weeks afterwards. Unwary pedestrians who ventured or strayed into a 'wrong' area seldom succeeded in reaching their journey's end; their corpses would usually be discovered a day or two later in a manhole or a drain.

Of course, the Hindu Press, almost in chorus blamed the Muslim League for what was happening. The fact that there was a Muslim-dominated government in Bengal was seized upon and held up as it irrefutable proof of its guilt.

Hardly had the Calcutta riots stopped when there began a systematic massacre of the Muslims in Bihar. Organised bands of armed Hindus roamed the countryside liquidating the Muslim population, and subjecting them to the most frightful atrocities imaginable. In many places, rather than be forced to watch their families being butchered before them, parents persuaded the children to commit suicide along with themselves.

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Most estimates put the figure of dead at 50,000. Some people believed the real figure to have been higher.

The astonishing thing was that instead of doing anything to stop this pogrom, the Congress kept denouncing the Muslim League for its two-nation theory and its demand for Pakistan and blamed the Muslims for setting the whole process in motion. Mr Gandhi went off to Noakhali where a minor riot had occurred after the Bihar massacres. The cry of distressed humanity in Bihar left him unnerved. Here the victims were all Muslims, and the killers all Hindus. In Noakhali total casualties, even according to reports in the Hindus Press, did not exceed a hundred to two hundred. Mr Gandhi had his own scale of values: a massacre of over fifty thousand was judged by him to be a minor affair as against the incident which had claimed a hundred lives.

This series of riots, as I have said, was really the beginning of the much-dreaded civil war towards which India had been drifting for years. As one reviews these events in retrospect, one is irresistibly struck by a paradox. The greater the symptoms of a countrywide convulsion, the greater grew the intransigence of the Congress, the more obstinate its refusal to agree to any compromise. As India tended to fall apart, the Congress kept insisting that the country was indivisible. Mr Gandhi said that partition would be sinful vivisection, to which he could never reconcile himself.

These statements worried us but little. We knew that they were only last-ditch efforts to prevent the inevitable. But there was cause for serious concern from the point of view of the consequences which Congress obstinacy was likely to produce. If this obstinacy continued, carnage on a larger scale throughout India would become unavoidable. But this did not seem to bother the Congress. We viewed the future--- the coming year or two with hope and apprehension.

It was on this note that the year 1946 ended.