

CHAPTER FIVE

HANDING OVER

THE CATALYST OF WAR

The viceroy, Lord Linlithgow's, announcement in September 1939 that India was at war with Germany jolted the Indian people into acknowledging a reality that time had somewhat obscured: India was still an integral part of the British Empire. There had been, to be sure, some devolution of power. But even the reforms introduced under the Government of India Act of 1935, which conceded the substance of self-government at the provincial level, contained significant checks designed to protect and perpetuate a hard core of British control. These included, specifically, statutory provisions binding the Indian government to continue to pay interest to holders of railway stock and the pensions of retired ICS officers, and giving the viceroy and his governors the power to veto legislation repugnant to British interests, and, more generally, a franchise elaborately gerrymandered to favour the election to the federal legislature of princely, business, landlord and communal representatives at the expense of nationalists. While the British no longer deluded themselves that their rule in South Asia would be permanent, and while they no longer talked glibly in Curzonist tones of hanging around for centuries, the terms of the 1935 Act showed that they had no immediate plans to depart, either. Five years in the making, and the longest statute ever enacted by the Westminster parliament, the Act was no stop-gap transitional measure towards full independence. It represented the furthest point the British government and people were prepared to go down the devolutionary path. By what magic, then, did India gain her freedom barely a decade later?

As we have seen, the British position in the subcontinent was underpinned, in the first instance, by a combination of coercive power and administrative efficiency, but by the 1940s these vital props of the Raj were beginning to corrode. Thanks to the policy of Indianisation, by 1939 there were nearly as many Indians in the ICS as Europeans, and by 1947 Indians outnumbered Britishers by 614 to 587. Although the transition in the officer corps of the Indian Army was slower to begin, there, too, significant

strides were made during the 1940s, the Indian element rising from 10 per cent in 1939 to 25 per cent by 1947.

Contrary to earlier British fears, Indianisation did not, in itself, impair the efficiency of the administration. On the other hand, it had the more serious effect for them of diluting the attachment of the Army and the civil bureaucracy to the imperial cause. Following the fall of Singapore in 1942, some 60,000 Indian troops became prisoners of war of the Japanese. Offered their freedom and the chance to help the Japanese 'liberate' India, many changed sides. In 1943 these patriotic defectors were organised into the Indian National Army (INA) by the former Congress nationalist Subhas Chandra Bose, who had fled Bengal in 1941 to join up with the Axis. Although the INA did little actual damage in the field, the fact that thousands of Indian soldiers had seen fit to renounce their oath of allegiance to the King-Emperor raised serious doubts about whether the military could continue to be relied on to enforce imperial authority. These doubts were confirmed when ratings of the Indian Navy based at Bombay and other western Indian ports mutinied in February 1946. Although the situation on the civil side never quite reached this dangerous pitch, there, also, signs of demoralisation began to surface from the early 1940s, particularly during the period of the 'Quit India' disturbances from August 1942 to mid-1943. The governor of Bihar, for instance, expressed alarm at the slack performance of his armed police: 'Their hearts', he reported, 'are not in the job' [38 p. 315].

Efficiency was undermined, though, by the unprecedented strain put on the Indian services by the demands of total war. Unlike the war of 1914-18, the Second World War was not geographically remote from the sub-continent. Shortly after Japan's entry on the Axis side in December 1941, Calcutta, Madras and other ports along the Bay of Bengal came under attack from ships and aircraft of Admiral Nagumo's Indian Ocean taskforce, precipitating a mass exodus of coastal-dwellers to the relative safety of the hinterland. Several months later Burma was overrun, and in 1944 Burmese-based Japanese forces, aided by Bose's Indian National Army, crossed the Assam border and penetrated Assam as far as Imphal. By 1941 India was already a vital conduit for military supplies to the Soviet Union. With the Japanese advance it became a crucial strongpoint and later a springboard for the Allied counter-offensive. These strategic needs demanded that India be organised for total war, and the task of overseeing this process fell basically to the members of the elite services. Even if it had remained at full strength, the ICS would probably have been hard pressed to cope, given that much of the work (for example, civil defence) lay outside its traditional fields of expertise. But during the war competing manpower needs prevented London from injecting new blood into the Service to replace the officers lost to retirement, sickness and secondment to military duties. The ICS men who were left struggled on heroically, but at the expense of their

health and morale. The result, by 1945, as Sir Stafford Cripps admitted during his speech in the parliamentary debate on the bill for the transfer of power, was 'an obvious and inevitable weakening of the machinery of British control' [19 p. 394].

Meanwhile, the forces arrayed against the Raj grew steadily in size, effectiveness and hegemonic power. The nineteenth-century Congress had been purely a middle-class movement; by 1938 the party, by its own accounting, had 4½ million paid-up members. In addition, millions more, who had reservations about joining an outwardly revolutionary organisation, supported Congress sentimentally and with their votes at elections. In the lead-up to the 1936 polls, Nehru alone addressed crowds totalling ten millions. In the election itself, Congress won 74 per cent of the vote in Madras, 63 per cent in Bihar and the Central Provinces, 60 per cent in Orissa and 59 per cent in the United Provinces, an astonishing result by modern democratic standards. After 1936 even the British were forced to concede that Congress had a mandate to rule. Moreover, Congress was not the Raj's only opponent. By the late 1930s the majority of India's industrial workers had been organised into unions, some of them linked to the Congress, others clandestinely to the outlawed Communist Party of India (CPI). For a long time the solidarity of the union movement was undermined by factional bickering, but in 1935, in response to a directive from the Comintern in Moscow, the Marxists agreed to join with their nationalist rivals in a 'united front' against imperialism. Meanwhile, in the countryside, the hardships of the depression, which saw hundreds of thousands of peasants threatened with eviction for non-payment of rents and taxes, sparked an upsurge of rural militancy which swelled the ranks of the *kisan sabha* movement. By 1938, the Bihar Sabha alone boasted 250,000 members.

But it was not only the Left that grew in stature during this period; the Hindu Right also consolidated its position. In 1925, at the urging of Hindu Mahasabha leader Dr B.S. Moonje, Maratha Brahmin K.B. Hedgewar established the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (Association of National Volunteers) (RSS) at Nagpur. The stated mission of the RSS was to defend Hindus and Hindu values. For the first decade of its life the new organisation remained, for the most part, confined to its native Central Provinces, but from the late 1930s it began to spread rapidly across north India. When M.S. Golwalkar, an unabashed admirer of Adolf Hitler, took over the leadership of the RSS in 1940, he assumed dictatorial control over 100,000 cadres trained to a high level of military-style discipline. Meanwhile the Mahasabha itself, which had been languishing, gained a new lease of life in 1937 with the accession of the charismatic V.D. Savarkar, another Maharashtra Brahmin, to the party presidency.

Fortunately for the Raj, the country's burgeoning nationalist organisations – Congress, League, Mahasabha, Socialists, CPI – never managed to

translate their common anti-imperialism into a unitary struggle for freedom, perhaps because they held very different conceptions of what a free India should look like. For instance, the Communists, having long posed as the staunchest of anti-imperialists, turned full circle following the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 and became, for the rest of the war, *de facto* supporters of the government. Nevertheless, by the 1930s even Congress acting alone had the capacity to shake the imperial structure. In the first Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930–31, several hundred thousand Congressmen courted arrest by taking part in illegal demonstrations, picketing, and deliberately breaking the law; some 60,000 went to jail. Another 14,000 *satyagrahis* were imprisoned during the 'Individual' Civil Disobedience Movement of 1940–41. Even these largely non-violent mass actions placed a severe strain on the government's resources. But the Congress did not always stop at peaceful protest. Increasingly, Congress leaders showed a readiness to experiment with more drastic forms of agitation such as withholding taxes, a mood encapsulated in Gandhi's slogan for the Quit India Movement of 1942, 'do or die'. Revolutionaries acting under the Congress banner went further. In 1930 Bengali extremists raided the Chittagong armoury and killed the District Magistrate of Midnapore; in 1932 Abdul Ghaffar Khan's Redshirts briefly seized control of Peshawar and set up a parallel government there; during the 1942 movement, which the government correctly categorised as a full-scale rebellion, Congress cadres murdered ninety-three policemen and blew up 208 police stations, 332 railway stations and 945 post offices. How much of a threat these violent actions posed can be gauged from the severity of the government's reaction to them, which included not merely mass arrests but punitive fines, the razing of whole villages, public floggings, machine-gunning of demonstrators from the air and, in 1942, the deployment of some fifty-seven battalions of regular troops on counter-insurgency duty.

Yet neither of these two great movements achieved their ultimate objective. The Raj outlasted them as it had Non-Cooperation earlier, assisted, particularly in the 1930–34 showdown, by the Congress right wing's continuing reluctance to loose the wrath of the mob against their enemy lest they inadvertently triggered a class war or, worse, a total collapse of law and order. Technically the British remained in control of the subcontinent right down to 1947. Were these struggles, then, in vain?

By no means. The Congress organisation gained enormous respect and prestige through its heroic tilts at the overwhelming power of the Raj. Likewise, the willingness of Congress leaders to suffer arrest and imprisonment (in some cases for years on end) for the national cause, added greatly to their personal aura as politicians. It was the party's (well-deserved) reputation for struggle and sacrifice that, more than anything else, carried it to impressive wins in the 1936 elections and in the post-war polls of 1945.

Moreover, while Congress's agitational movements failed physically to dislodge the British from the subcontinent, they gradually sapped the imperialists' strength and will to rule. Each British 'victory' was won at greater physical, mental and financial cost. Each time, the margin between survival and extinction became narrower. Although there was never a fourth agitational movement as such, the mass demonstrations of 1945-46, in the wake of the abortive trial of the INA leaders, gave the Raj a glimpse of what lay in store if Congress was pushed too far. Accordingly, British policy after 1945 became wholly defensive, driven, in viceroy Lord Wavell's words, by the necessity of staving off a further 'mass movement or revolution which it is in the power of Congress to start and which we are not certain that we can control' [60 p. 428]. Indeed, by 1946 Wavell had begun to plan for an evacuation in the event of his negotiations with the Congress breaking down - an act of realism for which he was unceremoniously sacked by his political masters in London. This end-game of empire showed, too, the finite limits of repression. Each time the British cracked down, they made more enemies. Every son lost to a British bullet or bayonet earned them the permanent hatred of another extended family. But it didn't need something as tragic as a death to convert someone from an onlooker into a Congress cadre. As the case of 'Hazari' shows, a few strokes of a police *lathi* (for the heinous crime of wearing a Gandhi cap!) could achieve the same result [*Doc.* 27].

But it was not just nationalist belligerency and its deleterious impact on the services that forced the British to quit. The decision to transfer power was influenced too by their reluctant acknowledgement that, in Macaulay-esque terms, their task in the subcontinent had been accomplished. Perhaps the first moment of truth in this regard was the comprehensive Congress triumph in the elections of 1936, which finally exploded the myth that the 'real Indians' were indifferent to the call of nationalism. However, the defining watershed in British attitudes took place during the following two and a half years of Congress provincial government. To the surprise and pleasure of the viceroy and his governors, and to the surprise and dismay of many on the Left, the Congress ministers proved reasonably efficient and prudent administrators. What is more, they showed no compunction about using the police in 'defence of life and property', in some occasions incarcerating their own nominal supporters. After 1939 the British could not seriously question the competence of Congress to rule in their stead. At the same time the friendly working relationships which most of the provincial governors managed to build up with their ministers helped break down mutual stereotypes. Working together, the British and the Congress leaders started thinking about each other as individuals, rather than simply as embodiments of 'fanaticism' or 'reaction'. Trust began to replace suspicion and blind hostility. Five years later, at the conclusion of the war,

these mental re-adjustments helped the two sides reach a speedy and largely amicable settlement to the Indian problem on the basis of a grant of dominion status, something Congress had previously ruled out as falling short of true independence.

Wartime exigencies also forced the hand of the rulers. As in 1914–18, the feeding and equipping of the fighting men prevailed over the needs of civilians. By 1940 there was rampaging inflation and a serious shortage of essential commodities, especially food. The well off got by with the aid of the black market, but the rest of the population had to rely on what they were allocated by the authorities. Even when the procurement system functioned well, it sentenced people to dire hardship; by the end of the war the average weekly ration per person was about 1,200 calories, barely enough to sustain life. When, as in Bengal in 1943, it collapsed, the poor starved. The official estimate is that 1.5 million died in this last and greatest of Bengal famines, but nationalist sources put the toll at closer to three million. By any standards it was a disaster, and it did irreparable damage to the credibility of British rule. Meanwhile, and more specifically, the military threat posed by the rapid Japanese advance across Asia, coupled with police intelligence reports that showed that many Indians naively accepted Tokyo's assertion that the forces of the Rising Sun were coming to India solely to liberate it from the British imperial yoke [*Doc. 28*], compelled the British to revise completely their comfortable timetable for the gradual demission of power. On 11 March 1942, three days after the fall of Rangoon, wartime prime minister Churchill announced that he was sending the Lord Privy Seal, Sir Stafford Cripps, to India with an offer designed to break the political deadlock. The gist of the offer was that India would be granted dominion status immediately 'upon the cessation of hostilities'. Although Cripps's mission proved futile (as perhaps Churchill intended it should) – Congress did not think much of an offer which granted no substantial immediate relief and which was conditional on the very uncertain prospect of an Allied victory – it was difficult for the British, thereafter, to rescind it, particularly since Britain's partner and banker, the United States, had made plain its 'in principle' support for early Indian independence [*Doc. 29*]. Repeated references to colonial emancipation and national self-determination in Allied wartime propaganda statements hoisted the British even more securely on this ideological petard. Finally, thanks to the military agreement of 1938, which made the British exchequer responsible for meeting the cost of future Indian Army campaigns beyond the borders of the subcontinent, the United Kingdom ended the Second World War with a debt to India of £1,300 million, an amount equivalent to almost half the country's GNP. After 1945 (as a series of nervous submissions from the Treasury to Cabinet delicately pointed out), Britain's continued solvency hinged to a very large extent on the negotiation of a satisfactory political

settlement with its Indian creditors. That meant, effectively, a settlement with the leaders of the Indian National Congress.

However, the logic of a prompt and friendly handing over of power was not just confined to the sphere of inter-government debt; it applied equally to all areas of the imperial connection with India – to trade, investment, regional defence and diplomacy. Once the British had committed themselves to granting independence to the subcontinent, it was in their long-term economic and political interest to ensure that they departed on good terms with their likely successors. Wavell grasped this as early as 1944 [*Doc. 30*]. So, even earlier, did the leaders of the opposition British Labour Party, who at a private meeting with Jawaharlal Nehru at Stafford Cripps's house in June 1938, undertook to pass a comprehensive independence bill as soon as they came to power. However, hopes of an early Labour election victory were dashed by the intervention of the war, and by the time the party found itself in a position, seven years later, to honour that promise, an additional factor had intruded into the equation: the Muslim factor. When the incoming Labour Ministry led by Clement Attlee sat down in May 1945 to decide on their policy towards India, the main question they had to resolve was not whether power ought to be transferred. They had already agreed that it should be. The question was rather, to whom?

TOWARDS PARTITION

When Mohammad Ali Jinnah took over the leadership of the All-India Muslim League in 1936 he inherited a party all but moribund: fragmented, demoralised and chronically short of funds. But over the next decade the League underwent a remarkable renaissance. It was this somewhat unlikely transformation that, more than anything else, made the establishment of Pakistan possible.

Undoubtedly, an important factor in the League's revival was the astute, visionary and at times ruthless leadership of Jinnah himself, who, in comparison to his Congress opposite numbers, had the further advantage of being virtually a one-man band. Learning from the party's abysmal showing in the 1937 elections, Jinnah set about rebuilding the League by reducing membership fees (to an affordable two annas), opening new branches and recruiting a crop of energetic and talented professionals, many of them graduates of Aligarh, to staff the party organisation. Within two years, these measures had swelled the League's membership at least tenfold, a good proportion of this growth occurring in regions where, hitherto, the League had been weak or non-existent, such as princely Rajputana and central India, and (importantly for future developments) Punjab. In turn, the League's evolution into a mass party made it a more saleable asset,

allowing Jinnah to secure valuable financial backing from wealthy Muslim businessmen such as M.A.H. Ispahani, with whose assistance he acquired the newspaper *Dawn* to serve as a mouthpiece for Muslim opinion.

But the march of events during this decade also favoured the League. As we have seen, Congress provincial rule alienated many Muslims. This made them easy targets for Jinnah's recruiting drive. Secondly, the League benefited in several ways from the outbreak of war in 1939. While Congress took itself into dignified opposition in protest at the viceroy's decision to declare war without consulting Indian opinion, the League, which was ideologically far less anti-Fascist than the Congress, but whose supporters included many families with links to the Indian Army, announced that it would cooperate with the government in prosecuting the fight against the Axis. This pragmatic stance not only allowed the League to continue to function openly and legally during the war years, but also earned the party much imperial goodwill, evidenced in the viceroy's calling Jinnah in for summit talks at the end of 1939 (a gesture which was widely interpreted as giving official recognition to the League's claim to be regarded as the sole voice of Muslim India), in the comforting assurances embedded in the British government's August 1940 policy statement, and even more forthrightly in the Cripps' Offer, that power would not be transferred to any government or group whose authority was unacceptable to substantial elements of Indian society [*Doc. 31*], and in the favoured treatment received by the party in the provincial legislatures, which enabled it, in two cases, to form minority governments. Thirdly, the League profited from the heroic but foolhardy Congress rebellion of August 1942. Within twenty-four hours of the AICC passing the Quit India resolution, most of the party's top and middle-ranking leaders were in prison. The majority would remain there until 1945. Bereft of leadership, the Congress organisation decayed, opening up a power vacuum which the Mahasabha, the CPI and particularly the League hastened to fill.

One measure of the success of Jinnah's reinvigoration of the Muslim League was the party's showing in by-elections for the provincial assemblies. Between 1937 and 1945 it won fifty-five out of the seventy-seven by-elections for Muslim-reserved constituencies. By comparison, the next most successful Muslim party, the Punjab Unionist Party, won only nine, while Congress managed just four. However, the real turning point for the new Muslim League came with the general elections of December 1945 and January 1946. Despite facing a rejuvenated Congress, the League won four-fifths of all the Muslim-reserved seats on offer, enough to take the party into office in Sind and Bengal and within a whisker of provincial power in the Punjab. The result left no one, not least the British, in any doubt about where the locus of power within the Muslim community now lay.

✦ Why did so many more Muslims cast their votes for the League in 1946

than in 1936? For one thing the party this time had a sure-fire vote-winning platform in its scheme for a Muslim homeland. Possibly because Pakistan remained such a very nebulous concept, it struck a chord with Muslims from a variety of social, sectarian and regional backgrounds. Muslim businessmen like Ispahani embraced it in the expectation that it would free them from the economic competition of Marwaris and Parsis. Indebted Punjabi Muslim landed families saw it as offering them a way out of their bondage to Hindu moneylenders. The religious-minded, including many members of the local Muslim clergy and the *pirs* who guarded the tombs of Muslim saints, saw in the scheme an opportunity to create an Islamic state governed by *shar'ia* law, an aspiration that the secularist League leadership hypocritically encouraged by remaining silent whenever it was canvassed. The Pakistan idea even gained a measure of support from Muslims living in the minority provinces, who naively assumed that the establishment of a Muslim state, incorporating within its boundaries millions of potential Hindu hostages, would render them less vulnerable to majoritarian discrimination. For another thing, the League now possessed the resources to run a full-scale campaign. Through its daily national newspaper, *Dawn*, and an informal network of students from Aligarh, the party in 1946 was able to disseminate its message to a far wider audience than had been possible with the limited funds and contacts available ten years earlier. Finally, it would seem from anecdotal evidence that many people voted for the League out of deference to the wishes of the Islamic clergy, many of whom unblushingly used the pulpits of their mosques during the period of the election campaign to pump out pro-Pakistan propaganda. Indeed, if the testimony of one Punjab election agent is to be believed, there was common perception that anyone who did not cast his vote for the League 'would ... become [a] kaffir [heretic]' [76 p. 124].

In most respects, therefore, the League's success in the elections of 1945-46 can be interpreted as a clear Muslim mandate for Pakistan. Yet if this is correct, the outcome was ironic, because the League high command was still far from convinced that even a secular Pakistan, let alone the Islamic utopia envisaged by the clergy, would be in the best interests of Indian Muslims. Moreover, in the following months, the case for sticking with a united India became significantly stronger in the light of the recommendations of the three-member British Cabinet mission charged with the task of drawing up a detailed blueprint for the transfer of power. The Cabinet delegation not only mounted a powerful argument for holding that a sovereign Pakistan would not be economically viable, it also put up an ingenious plan for accommodating Muslim aspirations for a homeland within the framework of a unitary Indian state. Under the Cabinet Mission Scheme, the provinces would be 'free to form groups'. Three potential groups were envisaged, labelled A, B and C in the plan. Groups B and C

were roughly equivalent to the western and eastern zones of the League's Pakistan. The groups would not be sovereign, but they would exercise many of the conventional powers of statehood. Only defence, communications, foreign relations and trade would lie with the centre.

A further consideration that weighed heavily with the League leadership was their awareness that the two-nation theory cut both ways. If history and culture demanded that Muslims and Hindus should live in separate states, partition logically could not follow the arbitrary boundaries of the British Indian provinces, for both Punjab and Bengal contained sizeable Hindu and Sikh minorities. Moreover, it was clear to the League leaders that the British and the Congress would insist on this implacable logic being applied. While they continued to talk publicly of a six-province Pakistan, privately they were resigned, by 1946, to getting, at best, something much less – what Jinnah referred to derisively as 'a shadow and a husk, a maimed, mutilated and moth-eaten Pakistan' [60 pp. 415–16]. If the choice came down to ruling a small, feeble state or sharing power with Congress in a great all-India state, Jinnah for one favoured the latter.

Accordingly, the Council of the Muslim League in June 1946 voted to accept the Cabinet Mission Scheme, implicitly repudiating the sovereign Pakistan option. However, this last chance reprieve for the principle of a united India was destroyed by the thoughtless intervention of a single individual: Jawaharlal Nehru. On 11 June, shortly after taking up the reins of the Congress presidency for a fourth time, Nehru held a press conference at which he offered the casual observation that the grouping provision should be considered a transitional arrangement pending the drafting of a popular constitution. The remark confirmed the League's deep-seated suspicion that Congress's democratic rhetoric masked a totalitarian lust for centralised power [Doc. 32]. At once the party cancelled its acceptance of the Cabinet Mission Scheme and reiterated its demand for Pakistan – a demand which Jinnah indicated would now be pursued in the streets as well as in the legislatures. 'Never have we, in the whole history of the League, done anything except by constitutional methods...', an emotional Quaid-i-Azam thundered. 'But now ... we bid goodbye to constitutional methods' [68 p. 344]. A few weeks later Jinnah made good his threat when he called upon all Muslims to observe 16 August 1946 as 'Direct Action Day'. Particularly in Bengal, where the day was recklessly gazetted as a public service holiday by League premier H.S. Suhrawardy, communal violence erupted almost immediately. Elsewhere the violence was contained by the police, but in Calcutta the city's largely Muslim constabulary, presumably acting on orders, turned a blind eye to the mayhem. Three days later 6,000 Calcutta citizens were dead and at least 20,000 seriously injured – most of them, ironically, Muslims.

Having unleashed a Juggernaut, Jinnah contritely pleaded with his

followers to exercise restraint. But his voice now carried no more authority with the mob than did those of his Congress counterparts – Nehru, Patel and Maulana Azad. In September 1946 the bloodlust spread to Bombay, thence in October to Dacca, the east Bengal district of Noakhali and rural Bihar, and early in the new year to Ahmedabad in Gujarat and Lahore and Rawalpindi in the Punjab. By 1947 north India was in the grip of an undeclared civil war between Muslims and non-Muslims, a war which, over the next eight months, would claim the lives of at least another 900,000 people and turn some twelve millions more into homeless refugees.

It is tempting to say that there were no winners from this holocaust, only losers; but that would not be quite true. Indirectly, the violence advanced the purposes of the League. When the King's cousin, Lord Louis Mountbatten, took up the viceregal reins in March 1947 in succession to Wavell, his official brief was to transfer power on the basis of the Cabinet Mission Scheme, or something close to it. However, a few tense meetings with a stoney-faced Jinnah persuaded him that the League would be satisfied with nothing short of a full division of the country. This left Mountbatten with the seemingly impossible task of persuading the INC to agree to something they had always, in the past, steadfastly resisted, and, true to form, Gandhi met his arguments with the grimly prophetic remark that if the partition went ahead it would probably have to take place over his dead body.

However, the Mahatma's views now carried much less weight in the councils of the Congress than those of his one-time deputies Nehru and Patel, and the latter responded more pragmatically. Shocked by the spreading violence and mindful (as was the viceroy) of the deteriorating efficiency of the security forces, they indicated to him as early as April that they might not oppose the establishment of Pakistan so long as the Hindu and Sikh minorities in Bengal and the Punjab were given the right to opt out, and on condition that the viceroy used his influence with the princes to persuade them to integrate their states in the Indian dominion. (If all or most of the states acceded, India would pick up more territory than it stood to lose to Pakistan.) Patel defended the foreshadowed partition publicly as a form of drastic surgery to 'remove the diseased limb'. (Privately he let it be known that he expected Pakistan to disintegrate within a matter of months.) On 3 June the party leaders went on All-India radio to announce that they had reached agreement with the viceroy for a transfer of power on these terms.

It was not quite a *fait accompli*. Congress insisted that the 3 June agreement be subject to ratification by 'the Indian people'. Yet the procedure employed to solicit the public's opinion made a mockery of this commitment. The crucial decision as to whether the Punjab and Bengal should be partitioned was placed in the hands of the Muslim and Hindu

members of the two provincial legislatures, sitting separately. Given the limited nature of the electorate under the 1935 Act – barely 10 per cent of the population – this hardly amounted to a democratic choice. Moreover, the ‘yes’ case needed the assent only of a simple majority of either group to be carried, and Congress had already instructed its MLAs to vote as a block for partition. But that, perhaps, was not the worst of it. While the parliamentary route was deemed good enough for Punjab and Bengal, when it came to deciding the fate of the NWFP, the government reverted to the mechanism of a direct plebiscite of voters. The reason? The NWFP legislature had a Congress majority. A simple poll of legislators might have achieved the wrong result. As it was, only 50.99 per cent of the province’s registered electors cast their votes in favour of joining Pakistan.

In his statement to parliament on 20 February, Attlee announced that Britain planned to withdraw from India in June 1948. In June Mountbatten was authorised to bring the handover forward by some ten months to 15 August 1947, a tacit acknowledgement that the once all-powerful Raj was fast disintegrating. This left very little time for the government to decide how the country’s administrative assets should be divided up, to physically move Pakistan’s share to its interim capital Karachi, and to demarcate the boundary between the two dominions. Many Indian historians believe that this policy of ‘scuttle’ contributed significantly to the chaos that attended the partition of the Punjab, while many Pakistani historians have questioned whether due process was followed by Sir Cyril Radcliffe’s boundary commission, which for reasons never explained allotted part of the Muslim-majority district of Gurdaspur to India, thereby giving it land access to Kashmir. Contemporaries, however, were more generous. Mountbatten’s last official progress through New Delhi as viceroy on the morning of 15 August was repeatedly halted by the crush of jubilant crowds, while British onlookers that day, some of them sun-dried veterans of brutal encounters with the nationalists, found themselves hugged and garlanded by smiling strangers. ‘We have never been so popular’, one of them remarked wryly.

MOTTLED DAWN

At the beginning of this book I spoke about turning points and how these have been used by historians to shape their narratives. The handover of power on 15 August 1947 was clearly a major turning point in some respects, and has been recognised as such in dozens of standard works. Yet just as continuities overshadowed changes in the Indian scene of 1885, so the India of the 1950s and 1960s continued to be influenced by the patterns and structures laid down during the late colonial period. For one thing, not all the British immediately went home. Mountbatten himself stayed on for a year at Nehru’s behest as a constitutional governor-general, while the

governors of the Punjab, Madras, Bombay and the NWFP, several service chiefs, and eighty-three civilian officers remained in their jobs until at least the end of the decade. As late as the 1970s the tea industry was still largely in British hands. Imperial influence survived, too, in the British-trained Indian members of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) which succeeded to the governing responsibilities of the ICS in 1947. Twenty years on, nineteen out of twenty-three heads of the Indian central secretariat department were headed by former ICS-*wallahs*. The last British-trained IAS officer only retired in 1980. Thirdly, for several years both countries continued to be governed in accordance with the legal norms of the Act of 1935, and many of these were directly imported into the Indian Constitution which passed into law in 1950. Indeed, the two documents have about 250 identical clauses. Last but not least, continuity was preserved in a vast web of inherited administrative forms and guides: training manuals; codes of criminal and civil procedure; the designations of 'district officer', 'chief commissioner', 'high court'; revenue records; railway timetables; maps and gazetteers; law reports. All of these, what is more, were written principally in English – the only language which, to this day, has elite currency throughout the subcontinent.

But it is not only the political forms that have persisted; the successor regimes have also aped the Raj's authoritarian style. In Pakistan and to some extent also in Bangladesh after 1971, this took the form of an imposition of martial rule for extended periods. While India has not so far gone down this track, it came close during Indira Gandhi's Emergency of 1975–77. More insidiously, perhaps, Indian federal governments have regularly made use of the provision in the Constitution (one of those borrowed directly from the 1935 document) that allows the president in certain circumstances to dismiss elected state governments and impose direct rule from the centre. Similarly, perceived threats to the integrity of the state have always been met with exemplary force. One of Sardar Patel's first acts as Home Minister was to ban the CPI, which was inciting the peasants of Andhra to overthrow their landlords. When war with China broke out in 1962, Nehru's Congress government introduced a Defence of India Act identical in name and very similar in content to one he himself had denounced as a young man. In the early 1980s Indira Gandhi sent in troops to root out Sikh separatists holed up in the Golden Temple in Amritsar. And in the 1990s up to half a million troops were deployed against Muslim militants in Kashmir.

Moreover, thanks to Mountbatten's accelerated timetable for the transfer of power, the British in 1947 left behind them numerous unresolved (and in some cases potentially insoluble) problems, of which the most immediate was the refugee problem. Displaced by the whim of Radcliffe's pen, millions of terrified Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs thronged the railway

stations and the bus depots in late August 1947, desperately looking for a passage to safety. Those who could not afford tickets simply shouldered what meagre possessions they could carry and walked. Perhaps three-quarters of a million were butchered en route; and of those who survived, several hundred thousand women and girls were raped or abducted, many never to be reunited with their families [Doc. 33]. Based in a Calcutta slum, Gandhi fought against the tide in the only way he knew how, threatening to fast to death unless communal leaders agreed to halt the killing; but while his presence helped to keep the peace in Calcutta, other cities like Delhi erupted. In August 1947 and for several months afterwards, the Mahatma teetered on the edge of despair.

Partition sowed other deadly seeds too. The Hindu Mahasabha, condemning the settlement of 1947 as a national betrayal, demanded that the Congress Union government stop transferring assets to Pakistan. But while he deeply regretted the injury that had been done to his beloved homeland, Gandhi was adamant that the debt to Pakistan had to be paid, and in March 1948 he announced that he planned to embark on another indefinite fast to ensure that the Indian government fulfilled its legal and moral obligations. The Mahasabha and the RSS denounced this plan as tantamount to treason. In the early evening of 30 March, as he addressed a prayer meeting at Birla House, New Delhi, India's prince of peace was shot and killed by a member of an RSS splinter-group, Nathuram Godse.

However, if the Hindu Right felt cheated by the settlement of 1947, the same could be said for many Muslims. For supporters of the Muslim League, the triumph of Pakistan was marred by the restricted compass of the new state, which excluded many of their co-religionists. While some of the latter were able to make their way to Pakistan as refugees, more than 30 millions chose, or were forced by economic circumstance, to remain in India, their presence a glaring indictment of the two-nation theory. Bengali Muslims, too, had mixed feelings about Pakistan. Many would have preferred to join a separate Bengali state defined by culture rather than religion. These reservations intensified when the Pakistan government announced that Urdu would be the country's sole official language. By 1952 Bengalis were rioting in the streets against Punjabi linguistic 'imperialism'. As for those Muslims who did get to Pakistan, the *muhajirs* as they are called, the promised land proved, in many cases, less than welcoming. By their nature, the *muhajirs* tended to be better educated and more wealthy than the local Sindhis and Punjabis, and they quickly filled most of the important posts in the new government. The locals vented their rage by attacking *muhajir* persons and property. One of the early victims of this vendetta was the country's first prime minister, Liaquat Ali Khan, assassinated in 1951.

Perhaps the major losers in 1947, though, were the Sikhs. As a tightly-knit and well-organised religious group, residing mainly in the Punjab, the

Sikhs believed, with some justification, that they, too, were entitled to a separate homeland. During the war the main Sikh political party, the Akali Dal, formally lodged a claim to this effect [*Doc. 34*]. But for all its moral force, the Dal's homeland claim was fatally flawed by geography. The only possible location for the putative Sikh state, Khalistan, was the central Punjab, a region already claimed by the Muslims for Pakistan. Moreover, the Sikhs living within this region were widely and thinly dispersed; nowhere did they amount to a majority of the population. Accordingly, their claim for statehood was rejected. But the Akali Dal refused to give up its dream, and as the date for the British withdrawal drew near, it clandestinely assembled caches of arms with a view to establishing Khalistan by force. One aspect of this scheme was the ethnic cleansing of the central and eastern Punjab of Muslims, a project whose terrible consequences have already been noted. Nevertheless, for all its calculated brutality, the coup failed, leaving the Sikhs with no alternative but to seek refuge in the security of Indian-controlled east Punjab.

1947, then, was a year of transition rather than one of abrupt discontinuity and closure. But in the way of transitions, every year that has passed since 1947 has seen an imperceptible but steady weakening of the British legacy. One of the first things to go was the residual authority of the Crown. As we have seen, the various parties agreed, for pragmatic reasons, that power should be transferred on the basis of dominion status. However, the British government indicated that it would raise no objections if either dominion chose at a later date to sever its remaining ties with the Crown, and both states lost no time in availing themselves of this invitation. In 1950 India formally transformed itself into a republic. Racked by division, Pakistan moved more slowly, but in 1956 it, too, became a republic.

The colonial economic nexus also dissolved quickly, as the case of India shows. As late as the 1970s the bilateral trade pattern between Britain and India still had a colonial stamp: agricultural commodities inwards, manufactures outwards. But the scale of this trade fell sharply during the 1960s. By 1970 it was worth less than half what it had been twenty years earlier. Moreover, the two countries now traded more extensively with other parts of the world than they did with each other. By the 1980s less than 6 per cent of India's imports came from the United Kingdom, and just 9 per cent of its exports went there.

However, the most important break with the past after 1947 took place in the area of public policy. The British left behind a subcontinent undeveloped and partially modernised. In 1951 male literacy was 24 per cent, female literacy just 8 per cent. Life expectancy was a mere thirty-four years. As late as 1961 there were only ten doctors for every 100,000 people. Their constitutional reforms had laid the foundations for a representative democracy, but had fallen far short of enfranchising the mass of the population.

In the eighteenth century India had led the world in the production of textiles; in 1951 less than 3 per cent of India's labour force was employed in mines or factories, compared to 75 per cent in agriculture. The stark inequalities of the Hindu caste system were as deeply entrenched at the end of British rule as they were at its beginning. These deficiencies reflected the way the British had ruled: in the way of an umpire or manager rather than as a conscious agent of development. The successor governments had a different vision and a greater sense of social responsibility. Quickly India moved to the implementation of full democracy; the 1950 Constitution conferred the right to vote on all adults, literate and non-literate alike. At the first general election of 1951-52 over 100 million people exercised their franchise, easily a world record. The Constitution also committed Indian governments to introduce programmes to ameliorate social disadvantage, and untouchables were marked out for special attention in a schedule to the main document. Meanwhile, land reform legislation was introduced in several states in an attempt to break up the estates of the big *zamindars*; and a Soviet-style Planning Commission was established to ensure that scarce funds were channelled into areas of greatest need, such as primary education and heavy industry. To be sure, outcomes did not always match expectations – particularly in respect of land reform. Nevertheless, India's progress since 1947 has been remarkable. By 1991 literacy was 54 per cent nationally. Today India is once again an economic giant (ranked fourth in the world by size), producing, among other things, sophisticated computer software. By comparison, Pakistan's record has been more uneven, especially on the political front. Yet it, too, has been transformed. Little more than half a century has passed since the transfer of power, yet India and Pakistan are already virtually unrecognisable from the countries that emerged in 1947 from the chrysalis of British colonialism.

However, change has not entirely erased the imprint of South Asia's colonial past. For one thing, a few concrete legacies still remain: the descendants of Anglo-Indian marriages, lost between cultures; cricket; the English language, now studded with Hindustani words; the international imbroglio over Kashmir, which was one of the very few princely states to elude Mountbatten's grasp in 1947. More importantly, the period lives on in countless British, Indian and Pakistani memories: memories nourished by the heroic tales handed down within families, by books and films, and, in the subcontinent, by strongly nationalistic history-teaching in schools. These memories might not be very reliable, but they are vivid and they stir passions: as Queen Elizabeth found when she visited Amritsar in 1997 in the course of a tour to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Indian independence, and was met by a demand that she offer an official apology for the Jallianwallah Bagh massacre of 1919.