

Casting the Die

In the early afternoon of 24 March 1946 three members of the British Cabinet, plus their staff, were driven from Delhi's makeshift airport to the monumental residence built for the Viceroy of what was still British India. The traffic was light – it was a Sunday – and along the capital's leafy avenues the cars were outnumbered by carts, some of them high-sided haywains drawn by enormous white oxen, others rubber-tyred flatbeds hauled by wispy-haired water-buffalo whose languid pace allowed for a snatched bite at the herbaceous bounty provided by the municipal groundsmen.

New Delhi, the garden city laid out as the capital of British India only twenty years earlier, dozed in the afternoon heat, unroused by the visiting Cabinet Ministers, untrodden by policemen or postmen – both were on strike – and unbothered by the post-war turmoil beyond India's distant frontiers. It was just eight months since the British Labour Party had taken office in London, and seven since Japan's surrender had brought an end to the Second World War. Half the world was still in uniform. A blitzed and rationed Britain faced the biggest reconstruction crisis in its history. Yet in London Prime Minister Clement Attlee had reconciled himself to dispensing with three of his most senior colleagues for what would turn out to be a hundred-day absence. Their mission was that important.

Of the three Cabinet Ministers, Lord Pethick-Lawrence was there as of right: as Secretary of State for India he headed a branch of the London government whose personnel and budget exceeded those of both the Foreign Office and the Colonial Office. Another of the delegates, Albert Victor Alexander, later Earl Alexander, had responsibility for safeguarding the British Empire's maritime links as First Lord of the Admiralty; and the third, Sir Stafford Cripps, had led an earlier mission to India, was the prime mover in the present one, and was currently

President of the Board of Trade. All were men of high principle. Pethick-Lawrence had once received a custodial sentence for encouraging suffragette defiance; Cripps, a vegetarian and a teetotaler, had once been expelled from the Labour Party as too left-wing; and Alexander, a blacksmith's son, had been known to double as a lay preacher. All sympathised with India's national aspirations and shared its leadership's socialist values. Their integrity, their seniority and their extended leave from Cabinet duties bespoke their government's intent. Britain's Labour Party had already committed itself to 'freedom and self-determination' for the peoples of India; now it must deliver. As per its instructions, the delegation's task was 'to work out in cooperation [with India's political leaders] the means by which Indians can themselves decide the form of their new institutions with the minimum of disturbance and the maximum of speed'. Thus would be consummated what the mission's statement called 'the transfer of responsibility' and what the delegates themselves called 'the transfer of power'.¹

The Cabinet delegates, all of them aged around sixty, reeking of tobacco and unaccustomed to the ease of light linen suiting, were immediately dubbed 'the Magi' by Lord Wavell, the current Viceroy. The Indian press preferred to call them 'the Three Wise Men'. They might have come from the West and arrived by plane, but the treasure they bore was indeed priceless. India was at last being proffered the means of securing full and unconditional independence. After decades of sacrifice and disappointment, of repression and obfuscation, protest and imprisonment, *azadi* ('freedom', 'independence') was within the grasp of the subcontinent's four hundred millions.

In the history books this first post-war initiative in the endgame of British rule is known simply as 'the 1946 Cabinet Mission', an impersonal phrasing that has deterred scrutiny and obscured its importance. Within a year the new Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, would steamroller through a very different handover of power that would relegate the Cabinet Mission and all its doings to the India Office's bulging archive of begrudged concessions and aborted proposals. Yet, for all this, the Mission deserves recognition as one of the twentieth century's milestones. It marked the beginning of the end for the British Empire in India; it was the first such overture to offer independence on a plate – to India or anywhere else. And it was the last to provide any real hope of staving off a division of the South Asian subcontinent.

Only in retrospect was it a failure. Both of the main contenders for

power in India – the Indian National Congress guided by Jawaharlal Nehru and the Muslim League headed by Mohamed Ali Jinnah – would in fact accept a Mission proposal that emphatically rejected any division of the country; the demand for a sovereign state of Pakistan was so hopelessly impractical, declared the proposal, as ‘not to be an acceptable solution’. Even Jinnah, the man who epitomised the demand for a separate Muslim homeland called Pakistan, would not demur over what he called merely these ‘injudicious words’. Fitfully and faintly, a hint of consensus arced across India’s dark horizon of sectarian rivalry. The rainbow would soon fade, but throughout 1946 the country lay within a whisker of attaining full independence as a single sovereign state. Partition, in other words, was no more a foregone conclusion in the run-up to Independence than was the genocidal mayhem of its aftermath.

Rolling up their shirtsleeves of sea-island cotton, the Cabinet Ministers got down to work in the hermetically air-conditioned offices of a wing of the viceregal palace (‘one of the biggest residential buildings in the world’, it is now Rashtrapati Bhawan, the official home of the Republic of India’s President).² For two weeks they listened – to the views of the Viceroy and his Executive Council, to the Governors of British India’s fourteen constituent provinces, the representatives of its several hundred quasi-sovereign princely states and the spokesmen of its main political parties and communal groupings; in all they would interview ‘472 people on 181 separate occasions.’³ Then for four weeks they drafted – first an outline of the likely constitutional options (a large two-tier federal India versus two or more smaller one-tier Indias) – followed, when the Muslim League rejected both, by a statement of their own that proposed a large three-tier federal India. This too was unacceptable; but hoping that common ground would emerge through direct Congress–League contact, the Cabinet Mission invited the interested parties to send representatives to a conference.

By now it was early May. The thermometer on the terrace outside the viceregal palace hovered in the upper thirties centigrade. Tarmac bubbled like porridge, and it was the turn of the railways to be paralysed by strike action. A suggestion that the delegates repair to Simla, 350 kilometres to the north and 2,000 metres higher, promised some welcome relief plus a tantalising glimpse of the Himalayan snowline. It was approved in a rare show of unanimity; elevation was just what the discussions needed. With the railways at a standstill, the Mission flew to Simla’s nearest

airstrip at Ambala before addressing the hairpin bends of the near-perpendicular ascent to the town by car.

But 'the Queen of Hill Stations', as so often, disappointed. The change of scene brought no change of heart. Simla's pine-scented zephyrs neither cooled heads nor cleared the air. The conference lasted over a week and served only to highlight League–Congress differences. Consultation degenerated into altercation. By 13 May the delegates were trailing back empty-handed to the inferno that was Delhi. Pethick-Lawrence was getting tetchy, Cripps, the Mission's intellectual heavyweight, was wilting with diarrhoea which might have been dysentery, and Alexander had discovered an urgent need to visit a British naval base in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon).

Nevertheless, three days later, the Mission came up with its own solution. All its 'proposals' having been shot down by either Congress, the League or both, the Mission had decided to stop inviting comment and instead to table a 'recommendation'. This favoured another three-tier, one-state constitution. Of the three tiers, the first would be comprised of British India's fourteen directly administered provinces. Their recently elected legislatures would then take their provinces into three predetermined regional 'groupings' roughly corresponding to the north-west, the north-east and the remainder of the country, this being the second tier. And the groups would then arrogate to the central government – the topmost tier – certain all-India responsibilities like foreign affairs, defence, communications and some revenue-raising powers. The groups might award to the centre other responsibilities. They might also determine their own constitutions. Although a cumbersome device, the importance of the groups lay in the fact that two of them, those in the north-west and north-east, corresponded to the Muslim-majority regions earmarked by the Muslim League for its putative 'Pakistan'. The League could thus reassure itself that the substance of a Muslim homeland had not been entirely precluded, while the Congress could reassure itself that the principle of an undivided India remained intact.

Overall the structure was essentially a graduated federal pyramid, with the fourteen provinces tapering to the three groups and then the one centre. Residual sovereignty would lie with the provinces and the groups, while the central government was comparatively weak. But provision was also made for an all-India constitution-making body, or Constituent Assembly, to give effect to the whole plan. The Constituent Assembly's members would be selected by the provincial legislatures on a religious

basis: Muslims would choose Muslim members, Sikhs Sikh members, and the great majority would choose 'general members', a term designed to avoid identifying the supporters of the determinedly secular Congress as overwhelmingly Hindus.

All the recommendations contained in this 16 May statement had been pre-agreed with London and anticipated by some of the earlier proposals. It was a longish document, and a particularly taxing one, with more than the odd devil in its considerable detail. In fact the detail was so complicated that it required weeks of clarification by the Mission, then exhaustive debate within the two main parties. Yet, not without grave misgivings and reservations, on 6 June Jinnah and the Muslim League accepted it; and so too, though anxious over the interpretation of some clauses and in the face of disapproval of the confessionally based groups from Mahatma Gandhi himself, did Congress on 25 June.

For the moment Partition was ruled out, as was a sovereign Pakistan; from Afghanistan to Burma an independent India would have the same dimensions as British India. On this happy note the members of the Cabinet Mission began packing their bags. Exhausted, they flew back to London on 29 June.

We ask the Indian people to give this statement calm and careful consideration [Cripps had pleaded at a press conference]. I believe that the happiness of their future depends on what they do now ... But if the plan is not accepted, no one can say how great will be the disturbance, or how acute and long the suffering that will be self-inflicted by the Indian people.⁴

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The disturbance and suffering began within a matter of weeks. For the Cabinet Mission, despite its apparent success on the constitutional front, had inadvertently made things worse. A constitutional framework had been agreed, but an actual constitution would have to wait on the deliberations of the Constituent Assembly. These could take months – as indeed they would (or, as in the eventual case of Pakistan, decades). In the meantime, Congress insisted that an interim government composed of Indian nationals should take over the reins of power. In Nehru's view and in that of Gandhi, a constitution must be the product of an independent nation; freedom, if it meant anything, must include the freedom to formulate one's own institutions; *de facto* independence must therefore

precede the constitution-making process. The League took the opposite view: as Jinnah saw it, an interim government that inherited the paramount powers and patronage of the British Raj would be at liberty to influence the Constituent Assembly's interpretation of the 16 May statement, even overrule it. If there had to be an interim government, therefore, Jinnah demanded a safeguard: half the interim government's members must be Muslims nominated by his Muslim League, so negating any hostile intervention by the other half consisting mainly of Congress 'general members'.

'Now happened one of those unfortunate events which change the course of history,' noted Maulana Azad, a scholarly and emollient Muslim who, unlike Jinnah, rejected the idea of Pakistan and was at the time President of the Congress Party. At a press conference Nehru was asked whether Congress accepted the 16 May plan *in toto*. Off the cuff Nehru replied that Congress would indeed enter the Constituent Assembly, but then added that it would do so 'completely unfettered by agreements and free to meet all situations as they arise'. In effect, concluded Maulana Azad, Nehru was claiming for Congress the right to 'change or modify the Cabinet Mission Plan as it thought best'. This 'astonishing statement' called into question the good faith of one of the main signatories and so undermined the whole agreement. Maulana Azad, as a Congress Muslim from a Muslim minority province that was never likely to be part of any Pakistan, had a vested interest in an undivided India; he was horrified. Jinnah was perhaps less so; in Nehru's casual admission that he did not consider the agreement binding, Jinnah saw his often-aired fears confirmed. If the other signatory reserved the right to change or modify the agreement 'as it thought best', the League wanted nothing to do with it. It therefore withdrew its earlier acceptance.⁵

Meanwhile Congress had decided to withhold support for the proposed interim government. This time it was not Nehru who was responsible but Gandhi; for if Nehru had put his foot in it over the Constituent Assembly, Gandhi put his foot down over the interim government. No longer a Congress office-holder but still very much the party's conscience, the seventy-six-year-old Mahatma balked at that parity between Muslims (comprising roughly 30 per cent of India's population) and non-Muslims (comprising 70 per cent) implied by the proposed make-up of the interim government, and he took particular exception to Jinnah's insistence that only the Muslim League was entitled to nominate Muslim members.

Thus, within days of the Cabinet Mission emplaning for London, the Constituent Assembly was being boycotted by the League while the interim government was being boycotted by the Congress. Of the two representative institutions set up under the Mission's plan to expedite the handover of power, neither was left with more than a single rickety leg to stand on.

Landed with this tottering structure, Wavell, the Viceroy, would do his best. Nehru would revise his position and Jinnah would be credited, wrongly, with second thoughts; a Constituent Assembly would indeed assemble and an interim government would be formed. Though the transactions of neither would induce a spirit of collaboration, well into 1947 all the interested parties remained engaged in a constitution-making process based on the Cabinet Mission's recommendations – including its insistence that the territories comprising British India should continue as a single sovereign state.

It was events rather than debates that poisoned this uncertain process, then rendered it redundant. Back in 1942 Congress had severely embarrassed the British with a mass movement designed to sabotage their war effort and persuade them to 'Quit India' immediately. The movement had been suppressed, but only with great violence and thanks to some draconian wartime regulations. Now, according to the League, in the dog days of 1946, the British were fearful of a new wave of Congress non-cooperation that would be impossible to contain without the troop levels that had pertained in war and must therefore lead to the ignominy of forced eviction. It was this consideration that had led the Cabinet Mission to overlook Nehru's ambivalence about constitution-making and to indulge Gandhi's intransigence over Muslim representation in the interim government. In other words, the Muslim community was being 'betrayed', as Jinnah put it, by a British government reluctant to risk Congress retaliation. A record of mass menace was evidently more persuasive than one of reasoned argument; and taking this lesson to heart, on 29 July Jinnah announced that 'this day we bid goodbye to constitutional methods'.⁶ In the first all-India protest it had ever organised, the Muslim League called on its supporters to stage their own brand of 'direct action'. It also named the day – Friday (the Muslim day of prayer), 16 August.

The League's protest was to be framed as a demand for 'Pakistan', a term that was already understood to mean an independent homeland for the League's Muslim constituency – or what Jinnah called the 'Muslim

nation'. But what this 'Pakistan' would actually mean in respect of territory, population transfers and relations with the rest of India was far from clear. Jinnah preferred it that way: the vaguer the term, the more elastic its scope and the more electric its appeal. Yet despite the 'Pakistan' banners and posters (there was as yet no Pakistan flag or anthem), and despite the vast crowds of demonstrators and the usual scuffles, 'Direct Action Day' on 16 August occasioned no major confrontations in the great north-western centres of Muslim India – Delhi, Lahore, the Punjab – that would witness the worst atrocities of an eventual Partition. Instead it was Calcutta, then India's largest conurbation and business capital, that exploded.

As in Dhaka, where lesser disturbances had been ongoing for weeks, the explosion was triggered by a minor local issue which, magnified in a prism of economic grievances, industrial disputes and confrontational party politics, assumed the black-and-white, them-or-us terms of the city's already endemic Hindu–Muslim animosity. In the gory press reports of 'the Great Calcutta Killing' that ensued, the word 'Pakistan' received scarcely a mention; nor was it prominent among the declared demands and anxieties of the combatants. Partition, and its implications for Calcutta, a city with a Hindu majority but which was the capital of a province (Bengal) with a Muslim majority, was little understood; likewise the niceties of constitution-making and government-formation in far-off Delhi were irrelevant. Rather, the spark that ignited the explosion of violence was an innocuous and apparently commendable resolution of Bengal's provincial assembly. Passed on a show of hands by its incumbent Muslim League ministry, it simply ordained that, to minimise the inevitable friction if non-Muslims worked while Muslims marched, 'Direct Action Day' should be observed by all as a public holiday.

'CALCUTTA IN GRIP OF INSANE LUST FOR FRATRICIDAL BLOOD' ran the 17 August 1946 headline in the *People's Age*, the nation's Communist (and so confessionally neutral) mouthpiece. The riots amounted to 'a communal orgy the like of which had never been seen before'. Indeed, the Muslim League's 'Direct Action Day' on the 16th had 'turned into an open civil war between Hindus and Muslims'.⁷ Thousands were being killed, the streets were strewn with corpses, the hospitals were overflowing with the wounded, fires raged unchecked, and whole districts were being looted. One witness told of corpses being roped together like sporting trophies, another of babies being hurled from balconies, children clubbed to death, and mothers and daughters abused and butchered.

Only the British, usually the butt of Bengali protests, had been left unmolested; and only the police had been minded to observe the declared holiday.

The politicians of both sides had to bear much of the responsibility. Congress members, after walking out of the Bengal Assembly in protest over the holiday resolution, had publicly denounced the League in the most intemperate terms. The League had responded with equally inflammatory sentiments. Both had welcomed the support of known criminal elements whose actions they had subsequently declined to condemn. The League government had at first delayed recalling the police and had then deployed them less than even-handedly; and when the situation was clearly beyond its control, it had failed to call on Bengal's British Governor to send in the army. The Governor, in turn, should have acted sooner, whether asked to or not. As it was, the killing went on unopposed for two days and unquelled for four. Four thousand died, 11,000 survived serious injuries.

In retrospect, 'the Great Calcutta Killing' would come to be seen as the turning point, 'the watershed', in South Asian relations. For decades nationalists of every hue had concentrated their fire on British imperialism; a common enemy cemented a common sense of purpose. Now, with independence as good as won, nationalists turned on nationalists in a 'civil war' between the country's two main communities. It was Gandhi's worst nightmare, Nehru's idea of madness; and it seemed unstoppable. Rightly or wrongly, the outbreak in Calcutta would be construed as the first eruption in a chain reaction of communal atrocities that, spreading erratically, gained in intensity until a year later they climaxed in the mass genocide of Partition.

Calcutta certainly set the pattern of savagery. No one knew who started the killing. Rumour raced ahead of verifiable report. The gangs responsible, whether Hindu or Muslim, invariably claimed to be avenging prior atrocities or acting in self-defence. Street talk of 'massacres' no more captured the full horror than the official designation of the disturbances as 'riots'. Even 'civil war' was something of a misnomer. Some parts of the city were unaffected, with the Communist *People's Age* smugly noting that 'reports from the working-class belt indicate that the hysterical frenzy has not contaminated the workers'. The combatants were divided along purely communal lines, their object being not to expel or detain their opponents but to terrorise, desecrate and exterminate them. Age went unrespected and innocence unacknowledged; just to be of the wrong

community was provocation enough. Votive objects – a domestic deity here, a treasured Quran there – were trashed and fouled. Mosques were defaced, shrines burned. Women, the embodiment of every community's exclusivity, were a particular target. Of those 'lucky' to be still alive, some had been raped or abducted, while the dead had been physically incised with the religious hallmarks of their murderers. Either way, the objective was the appropriation of all that the other community held sacred.

As with the later massacres, the scale and the intensity of the Calcutta killings took both British and Indians by surprise. 'No Indian political leader ... neither the [Bengal] government, the opposition nor the press anticipated the magnitude of the tragedy.' As later too, the national politicians in Delhi seemed more obsessed with the squabble for power than with its consequences for the febrile communities they represented. Like the frailest of firefighters, Gandhi alone would track the flames of violence, touring the stricken areas – Dhaka, then Noakhali (both in eastern Bengal) and then Bihar, all before the end of 1946 – as he fasted, marched and painfully practised the communal harmony that he so tirelessly preached. His colleagues preferred to accuse their political opponents either of starting the troubles or failing to suppress them, both of which only stoked the fires of hatred for the next round of atrocities. No one seemed capable of comprehending the scale and obscenity of the killing. In the midst of forming the interim government, Nehru breezily declared that his arrangements must 'not be upset because a few persons misbehave in Calcutta'; Jinnah similarly refused to believe that any member of the Muslim League 'would have taken part in using any violence'. A joint inquiry might have cleared the air. Neither party would agree to it. Instead both conducted their own inquiries. Each duly found against the other.⁸

Ironically, the effect on the British was wholly counter-productive. 'Direct Action Day', though conceived by Jinnah as a way of demonstrating that the League could bite as well as bark and must therefore be taken seriously, merely impressed the British with the urgency of disengaging. The Viceroy and his advisers were convinced that the situation was getting out of control. An all-India civil war seemed imminent, with the British ill-equipped to prevent it and in danger of being caught in the crossfire. Not for the first time, Wavell wavered over the prospects for a peaceful transfer of power and began drawing up a plan B. The 'B' stood for 'Breakdown' – a breakdown in the constitutional process and a breakdown in law and order. To a military man who had presided over the Allies' wartime retreats in both North Africa and South-East Asia, a carefully

phased withdrawal was the obvious answer, first from the comparatively peaceful south of India to the Gangetic plain, then to the strategic redoubt of the Punjab and the north-west. In this scenario, Jinnah's Pakistan, if it ever materialised, would come piecemeal, later rather than sooner, and by agreement with Westminster regardless of Congress. The Calcutta Killings had neither advanced the League's cause nor made Pakistan inevitable. What they did make inevitable was an early British departure and the near certainty of constitution-making being sacrificed to the exigencies of the moment, while the apprehensions of undivided India's four hundred million citizens were left to fester.

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'Pakistan? What good is that to us? We want oil, cloth, sugar, wheat. And we want justice – that is all.'

Such were the sentiments expressed by a couple of Qureshi Muslims when, in March 1947, they were asked how they felt about a Pakistan that was looming larger with every communal massacre and constitutional impasse. Qureshis claim descent from the Arab invaders who first brought Islam to India in the eighth century; these ones had bicycles and were heading for a building site near the Narmada river in what is now Madhya Pradesh. Famed for speaking their mind, Qureshis might have been expected to welcome the idea of Pakistan. But in this case their response was wholly negative, and it was not untypical. It echoed that of sundry Pathans, Punjabis, Jats, Mewatis and Rajputs – Muslims and Sikhs as well as Hindus – whose opinions had been quietly canvassed over the previous four months by the inquisitive Malcolm Lyall Darling.

An ageing Quixote on a small grey horse, Darling had ridden out of Peshawar one raw November morning in 1946. From a start within sight of the Khyber Pass, he had been ambling east and south ever since. By March 1947 he was nearing the end of his epic ride in what was roughly the centre of India. Dressed in creaky leather boots, tweeds of many pockets and an outsize sola topi to protect his hairless pate, he looked exactly what he was: ex-Eton, ex-Cambridge and ex-ICS (Britain's elite Indian Civil Service). But not for him the face-saving constitutional conundrums of Delhi or the peacekeeping anxieties of Calcutta. Darling was controversial. A gentle critic of many aspects of British policy, he had turned to Nehru when planning his itinerary, and would report to Gandhi on the findings of his trip. During thirty-six years' service his speciality had been setting