

## A City Feeding on Itself: Testimonies and Histories of 'Direct Action' Day

DEBJANI SENGUPTA

In 1946, Gopal Patha, a notorious goon of North Calcutta and leader of a gang, was 33 years old. Everybody called him by the nickname 'Patha' (goat, in Bengali) because he ran a meat shop in College Street. On the morning of 16 August that year, he left for his shop as usual, but when he heard about the trouble in the city he came back to his locality. "Muslim League volunteers were marching with long sticks in their hands. From Boubazar More to Harrison Road you could hear their slogans: '*Lar ke lenge Pakistan* (We'll fight and take Pakistan)!' Then I heard that two *goalas* (milkmen) had been killed in Beliaghata and riots have started in Boubazar..."

Patha organised his gang because, according to him, "it was a very critical time for the country; the country had to be saved. If we become a part of Pakistan, we will be oppressed<sup>a</sup> so I called all my boys and said, this is the time we have to retaliate, and you have to answer brutality with brutality<sup>a</sup>". They armed themselves with knives, swords, cleavers, sticks and rods; Gopal had two American pistols tucked at his waist. He had procured these as well as some grenades from the American soldiers quartered in Calcutta in 1945. "If you paid them Rs 250 or bought them a bottle of whiskey, the soldiers would give you a .45 and 100 cartridges". As soon as the news of rioting spread, Patha's group of vigilantes swelled. They were joined by the Hindustani-speaking, non-Bengali *goalas* from the Janbajar area, each armed with a *lathi* (bamboo staff). "We were fighting those who attacked us<sup>a</sup> We fought and killed them<sup>a</sup> So if we heard one murder has taken place, we committed ten more<sup>a</sup> the ratio should be one to ten, that was the order to my boys".

Like Gopal Patha, the local tough Jugal Chandra Ghosh also had some men at his disposal. He ran an *akhara* (wrestling club) at Beliaghata, and raised money from the neighbouring sawmills, factories and *khatahs* (dairy sheds), distributing it among his "boys". They carried out retaliatory attacks in the Beliaghata area and the Miabagan *basti* (slum settlement). "One murder would fetch ten rupees, and a wounding would bring five". He had links to certain political leaders of the city, and knew the Hindu Mahasabha secretary Bidhubhusan Sarkar as well as Suresh Chandra Bannerjee who later became a prominent leader of the Indian National Trade Union Congress. Ghosh's anger against the Muslim League flared when he saw the dead bodies from the first days of rioting. "I saw four trucks standing, all with dead bodies piled at least three feet high; like molasses in a sack, they were stacked on the trucks, blood and brain oozing out<sup>a</sup> that sight had a tremendous effect on me"<sup>2</sup>.

The picture that emerges from the interviews with these men, active during those riot-torn days of August 1946, also underlines the character of the mob that had gone on a rampage through the bylanes and streets of Calcutta. It often comprised of men working in a city not their own; the *goalas*, the *darwans* (watchmen), the coachmen, the *garoyans* (loaders) from the coal depots, the tailors, boatmen and petty traders who were 'upcountrymen', migrants who laboured in the city for their livelihood. The city, in which the sprawling garden houses of the rich merchants stood cheek by jowl with bustling bazaars and clusters of slums, provided job opportunities and residences to a large labour force drawn from the neighbouring districts and provinces of Bihar, Orissa and the United Provinces. Calcutta, British India's largest metropolis, had started on a downward slump when the colonial administration shifted the capital to Delhi. The number of migrant labourers slowly increased after 1918. By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, only three-tenths of the population was native-born; the working class of the city continued to come from outside. The 1896 Labour Inquiry Commission noted a large number of men migrating from Bihar and North West Provinces to Calcutta for jobs in the jute mills, and recorded that half of Calcutta's mill workers were 'upcountry' people. In 1931, Calcutta residents originally from other states of India constituted 31.70% of the city's population, while those from other districts of West Bengal constituted 30%.<sup>3</sup>

A large percentage of this workforce was employed as unskilled labour in jute and cotton mills, as well as railway workshops, glass and pottery works and leather tanning industries. The migrants were a highly volatile social group. Living in close contact with other immigrant workers, with strong ties of language and religion, they lived in a strange and alien city in extreme squalor and poverty. They had no family near them, and in their daily struggle against poverty and insecurity they depended to a large extent on the *sardar* (foreman) of the mill they worked in, who in many cases was from their village or community, and was of the same faith. The labourers mostly belonged to a category of uprooted peasants and artisans with little commitment to land or livelihood in the villages. In this unknown city they lived alone, in terrible conditions. This group of 'labouring poor' thus came to assume a strong notion of communal identity based on religion, language and

habitat. Although Calcutta was one of the leading industrial centres in the east, local Bengalis had very little share in all the economic activities; "the bulk of the industrial labour force and a small proportion of the small businessmen, artisans, traders, shopkeepers and casual labourers were Hindustani-speaking immigrants from North India"<sup>4</sup>.

"Calcutta developed as a city of lone men, and it was the single upcountrymen, Hindus and Muslims alike, who were most active in the Calcutta riots before 1946 and after"<sup>5</sup>. A significant number of Muslim rioters were *kasais* (butchers) from north and central Calcutta, as well as *khalasis* (dockworkers), masons and hackney carriage drivers. A large segment of Muslim mill-hands who had come to the city to join the Direct Action Day rally, described later in this essay, also took part in the looting and arson. Among the Hindus, contemporary accounts mention the large presence of upcountrymen as rioters. The *goalas*, sweepers and *darwans* took part in the riots, as did the local thugs and petty criminals. One police report blamed the *darwans* of the Clive and Canning Street business offices for most of the "vicious acts".

The rioters, however, were not confined only to the lower social strata. Prominent Muslim League leaders spent a great deal of time in police control rooms directing operations, and the role of H.S. Suhrawardy (who headed the Calcutta Muslim Association and was at that time Chief Minister under the Muslim League government) in obstructing police duties is well documented. S.K. Bhattacharya, a sub-inspector at the Lalbazar police station in 1946, recalls how they were not allowed to take any action for two days under the Muslim League Government; he also named a number of 'bad characters' with political connections who had directed mob frenzy. The notorious criminal Bombaiya, living in the New Market area, had links with the League and participated in riots, as did other goons such as Mina Punjabi of the Cornwallis *basti* and Munna Choudhuri in the Harrison Road area. Police intelligence reports stated that well before the Direct Action Day rally, Muslim League volunteers had acted on directives to mobilise ambulances; special petrol coupons, issued in the name of ministers, were used by League officials. These direct links with institutional politics ensured that the outbreaks of violence were highly organised. Hindu businessmen, prominent merchants, as well as politicians of the Hindu Mahasabha and some sections of the Congress, provided leadership to the mob. A number of INA (Indian National Army) men who had already come to the city to celebrate INA Day on 18 August were involved in rioting.

Even minority sections of the population, such as Anglo-Indians, took part. This is evident from the following eyewitness account of Syed Nazimuddin Hashim, a student at Presidency College in August 1946, who bore testimony to the shocking dimensions of the unrestrained violence in Calcutta, as well as the fatalities of the massacre. "The first victim I saw was a poor Oriya porter<sup>a</sup> he hadn't a clue what was happening<sup>a</sup> he had a basket and had just come into the side street<sup>a</sup> a Muslim wearing a *lungi* broke away from the procession and hit him on the head with an iron rod. The fellow was absolutely startled, the blow broke open his ear<sup>a</sup> All the food shops had closed, New Market had closed after three days of unrestrained rioting and looting, in which the Anglo-Indians took full part;

pickup trucks were used to loot a music and radio shop; departmental shops were looted in Wellington Square and Chowringhee Road, all the liquor shops were looted as well<sup>a</sup> In College Street, where a number of Muslim booksellers plied their trade, their homes being in the nearby Kalabagan *basti*, Hashim saw "dead bodies piled up on both sides, men, women and children and all the books on the road, burnt, gutted"<sup>6</sup>.

It is well documented that from the 1920s onwards, Hindu and Muslim identities had hardened within the framework of institutional politics.<sup>7</sup> In a Public and Judicial Department report covering the first half of 1940, the British government noted the alarming rise of "volunteer corps" or "private armies" of the political parties, an indicator of the increased communitarian tensions. "The militant volunteer corps formed by communal and political organisations subscribing to conflicting objectives and ideologies have grave potentialities for mischief in the event of an organised movement to create communal disorder or to subvert the administration", stated the report.<sup>8</sup> In Bengal, the Muslim League Volunteer Corps increased its number to around 4,154, while the Congress Volunteer Corps also significantly increased its numbers in Bengal and Bombay. With this political army on standby, the Direct Action Day riots in Calcutta also saw, for the first time, a large scale participation of the upper and middle classes of the population. The conjunction of 'elite' and 'popular' communitarianism had never before been manifest to such a vivid extent. The reason why the Calcutta Riot of August 1946 is unique because of the unprecedented scale of violence and the participation of all classes of people, all variously affiliated, in the looting and arson. Certainly, the period 1946-47 was "the penultimate and worst phase of communal violence in pre-independent Bengal. The Great Calcutta Killing of August 1946, followed by the violence in Noakhali seven weeks later, began the spate of Partition riots which plagued the country and helped to prepare for a truncated settlement"<sup>9</sup>.

In the early months of 1946, the Cabinet Mission proposals, which aimed to discuss and finalise plans for the transfer of power from the British Raj to Indian leadership, providing India with independence under dominion status in the Commonwealth of Nations, had come to dominate the national political scene. Differences between the Congress and the Muslim League emerged on the question of whether to join the Interim Government. On 10 July, Jawaharlal Nehru declared in a press conference that although Congress would join the Constituent Assembly, it was free to modify the Cabinet Mission Plan. The Muslim League reacted immediately. In a resolution passed by the National Muslim Parliament held in Bombay on 29 July, it stated its resolve to reject the Cabinet Mission Proposals. "It has become abundantly clear that the Muslims of India would not rest content with anything less than the immediate establishment of an independent and full sovereign state of Pakistan and would resist any attempt to impose any Constitution<sup>a</sup> or setting up of any Interim Government at the centre without the approval and consent of the Muslim League; the Council of the All India Muslim League is convinced that now the time has come for the Muslim Nation to resort to Direct Action to achieve Pakistan<sup>a</sup>"

Consequently, 16 August 1946 was marked as Direct Action Day, when Muslims throughout the country were to observe a *hartal* (strike). In Bengal, with a Muslim League

ministry in power, a special effort would be made to demonstrate the strength of Muslim convictions about Pakistan. On that day, a Friday, *Dawn* came out with a full-page "pledge of sacrifice". The newspaper reiterated (p. 5): "Today Muslims of India dedicate anew their lives and all they possess to the cause of freedom. Today, let every Muslim swear in the name of Allah to resist aggression"; and stated that Direct Action<sup>f</sup> was the only course left to Muslims, because "they offered peace but peace was spurned, they honoured their word but were betrayed, they claimed liberty but are offered thraldom; now might alone can secure their right". Even before the Muslim League National Council could work out the details of the day, the ministry in Bengal declared 16 August a public holiday against wish of the opposition Congress. A mass rally was planned at the foot of the Octelony Monument near Dalhousie Square in Calcutta, where Suhrawardy, Khwaja Nazimuddin and other League leaders were to speak.

That year, Badruddin Umar was 14 years old. His father Abul Hashim was a member of the Muslim League, and went on to become the general secretary of the party in Burdwan in 1947. On Direct Action Day, Umar was present in Calcutta with his father to take part in the rally. "We went to the Maidan by car, but the car could not move ahead because of the crowd<sup>a</sup> I never saw such a huge crowd ever in my life<sup>a</sup>" Another eyewitness describes the procession thus: "Most of the people showed signs of being intoxicated, either with alcohol or with enthusiasm<sup>a</sup> They were shouting wild slogans, 'we'll fight, we'll seize'<sup>a</sup> Slogans about the famous warrior Khalifa Hazrat Ali<sup>a</sup> and they carried huge imaginary portraits of Jinnah in battledress, riding on a white horse, scimitar by the side, and leading the battle of the hordes against the infidels<sup>10</sup>.

The meeting began late, at 4 pm, and by then the crowd had swelled to between 30,000 and 50,000 people. A contemporary account suggests that even before the meeting started, a great deal of agitation was visible among the crowd, who heckled the leaders. "People were shouting all around that riots had broken out in Rajabajar<sup>a</sup> and Muslims are being slaughtered<sup>a</sup>" In his address, Chief Minister Suhrawardy reportedly assured the crowd that the military and police were "restrained". Fuelled by rumour and the Chief Minister's assurance, the processionists, on their way back, began looting Hindu shops. Hamida Khanam, a young lecturer at Lady Brabourne College, recalls the plunder of that day. "In the afternoon<sup>a</sup> around 5.30, I saw a huge crowd coming towards Park Circus<sup>a</sup> I saw men carrying electric fans, brass utensils<sup>a</sup> Then I saw the furniture<sup>a</sup> I realised this was not a simple gathering, there was looting going on<sup>a</sup> just a few moments later I saw people looting a sweetshop on the other side of the road that belonged to a Hindu family. I realised the situation was very grave<sup>11</sup>.

The massacre raged till 19 August. An 18 August telegram to the Viceroy, Lord Wavell, from Sir Fredrick Burrows, the Governor of Bengal, described the Calcutta events in grim detail: "All road traffic, shops, markets and businesses are at a standstill. Electricity and water are unaffected so far. Municipal scavenging of course is paralysed, and in some areas the streets are a shambles with corpses (grossly mutilated) and debris from the looted shops. Hospitals early this morning reported over 170 dead and nearly 1,000 injured, but

numbers of both categories must be many times these figures<sup>12</sup>. Within a few months, an official report claimed 3,700 dead and 11,000 seriously injured in the Calcutta riots.

Immediately following the carnage, relief camps and centres were set up by the government and voluntary organisations, and by 28 August were catering to nearly 200,000 people. A devastated Mahatma Gandhi wrote in an editorial of his newspaper *Harijan* (24 August): "Calcutta has earned a bad repute of late. It has seen too many wild demonstrations during the past few months. If that evil reputation is sustained for sometime longer it will cease to be a city of palaces; it will become a city of the dead". An eyewitness states the horror of those days in very real terms: "In Kalighat tram depot I found some bodies stacked like this, like gunny bags<sup>a</sup> bodies<sup>a</sup> hundreds of bodies, people killed on the roadside; instead of being in the road, they were dragged inside the tram depot and they were stacked like that<sup>a</sup> I can't describe how the bodies were scattered and then stacked, it was terrible<sup>13</sup>.

This account of the dead is corroborated by another chilling account of a necrophiliac city ravaged and destroyed. Phillip Talbot, a journalist present in Calcutta at that time, narrated the experience in a letter to Walter Rogers of the Institute of Current World Affairs:

It would be impossible to describe everything that we saw. A sense of desolation hung over the native bazaars. In street after street rows of shops had been stripped to the walls. Tenements and business buildings were burnt out, and their unconsumed innards strewn over the pavements. Smashed furniture cluttered the roads, along with concrete blocks, brick, glass, iron rods, machine tools ; anything that the mob had been able to tear loose but did not want to carry off. Fountains gushed from broken water remains. Burnt-out automobiles stood across traffic lanes. A pall of smoke hung over many blocks, and buzzards sailed in great, leisurely circles. Most overwhelming, however, were the neglected human casualties: fresh bodies, bodies grotesquely bloated in the tropical heat, slashed bodies, bodies bludgeoned to death, bodies piled on push carts, bodies caught in drains, bodies stacked high in vacant lots, bodies, bodies.<sup>14</sup>

"Watching a city feed on its own flesh is a disturbing experience", Talbot concluded. "In spite of our war heritage of callousness, I know that I was not alone in sensing profound horror this last week as Calcutta, India's largest metropolis and the second city of the Empire, resolutely set at work to cannibalise itself". Talbot's letter is remarkable because of the clarity of his testimonial. He was an outsider and a witness whose detachment and compassion were severely tested as he wrote about the carnage all around him. "In human terms, estimated casualties ran from the Provincial Government's absurdly reductive report of 750 dead to military guesses that 7,000 to 10,000 people might have been killed. Already more than 3,500 bodies have been collected and counted, and no one will ever know how many persons were swept down the Hoogly, caught in the clogged sewers, burned up in the 1,200 fires, or taken away by relatives who disposed of their bodies

privately. A reasonable guess, I think, is that more than 4,000 people died and 11,000 people were injured in what is already being called 'The Great Calcutta Killing' or 'The Week of the Long Knives'<sup>15</sup>.

The orgy of communitarian slaughter, along with the famine of 1944, two years earlier, initiated the decline of the metropolis of Calcutta. The city's vast hinterland, rich in natural and human resources, was unable to cope with the twin disasters, the impact of which is felt even today. From a contemporary perspective,

...The history of Calcutta during the years of the Second World War, and the troubled times that followed the conclusion of the war, was a prolonged nightmare. Blow fell upon blow like the continuous rains of the miserable rainy season in the city. There was hoarding, profiteering and black-marketing on an unprecedented scale. The sequel to this was the devastating Bengal famine of 1944. Thousands poured into the city from the famished countryside<sup>a</sup> Equally indelible was the impression made by the bloody massacres, the stabbings in the back alleys, and the night raids into neighbourhoods that followed Jinnah's call for 'Direct Action' after the war. This was the Great Calcutta Killing of 1946, when the Muslim League Ministry headed by Suhrawardy virtually placed Calcutta in a state of siege. Then followed the Partition of Bengal, the streams of refugees that poured into Calcutta from East Bengal and the far-reaching disruption of the entire economy of the city. After that were to come industrial recession, rocketing prices, food scarcity, staggering unemployment, desperation among youths, renewed terrorism, street warfare between political gangs, collapse of public transport, paralysis of municipal services, the spread of slums, the stupendous increase in the number of pavement dwellers, ubiquitous destitution and beggary, the degradation of humanity to unimaginably low levels.<sup>16</sup>

The personal testimonies presented in this essay point not to a grand narrative of ethnic and social hatred but to the grotesque irruption of these cataclysmic modes within the frame of the everyday and the mundane. These sudden killers were ordinary men and women going about their daily lives; the turbulent spiral of a single event turned them into sadistic assassins, or stunned witnesses to the horrors of genocide. The violence they saw or perpetrated marked them forever. As the poet Shaukat Osman remarked, "<sup>a</sup>We are the prisoners of the past, prisoners of Partition, prisoners of the irrationality which led us to jump into darkness<sup>a</sup> the past is still there<sup>a</sup> it is haunting us like [a] ghost, all over the sub-continent"<sup>17</sup>.

#### **Author's note:**

I came upon the material used in this essay while doing archival research for a project on Partition. I was very moved by the testimonies, and felt I needed to compile them in order to understand one of the generally unanswered questions about Kolkata's past. I had always wondered how my city could have undergone such a

moment of violence that is now either almost forgotten, or vividly remembered as traumatic. I wanted to access the 'little' histories of local witnesses, how they were haunted by the killings even as they continued to go about their daily business in the city. This essay is an attempt to read that convulsion of extraordinary violence through the observations of 'ordinary' people.

## NOTES

Various oral testimonies that appear in this text are excerpts from interviews for a BBC programme on 50 years of India's independence, conducted by Andrew Whitehead and Anuradha Awasthi, who gave the author permission to use this material. The tapes can be accessed at the archives of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. They are referred to here as Partition Tapes, with relevant number.

1. Partition Tapes: 74.
2. Ibid: 72.
3. M. Ghosh et al. *A Study in Urban Growth Dynamics* (1972, Calcutta), p. 103.
4. Rajat Ray. *Urban Roots of Indian Nationalism: Pressure Groups and Conflict of Interests in Calcutta City Politics, 1857-1939* (Vikas Publishing House, 1979, Delhi), p. 3.
5. Suranjan Das. *Communal Riots in Bengal* (Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 22.
6. Partition Tapes: 71.
7. Joya Chatterjee. *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-47* (Cambridge University Press, 1995, Cambridge).
8. L/PJ/8/678. The British Library Archives, London.
9. Suranjan Das, op. cit., p. 6.
10. Partition Tapes: 70.
11. Ibid: 69.
12. L/1/425. The British Library Archives, London.
13. Partition Tapes: 68. Testimony of Kalim Sharifi, medical student and IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association) activist.
14. L/1/425. The British Library Archives, London.
15. Ibid.
16. Rajat Ray, op. cit., pp. 225-26.
17. Partition Tapes: 69.