



# The Great Calcutta Killings of 1946: Its Historical Significance

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## Abstract:

The pre-partition India witnessed many communal riots of small scale. But the riots that frightened and shakened the city of Calcutta in August 1946, the enormity of which was never witnessed by the Indian people before. The manner in which the hooligans organised themselves for the greater brutality to other community remains astonishing and intriguing. The role of the Bengal Chief Minister and the British officials in the phase of violence asks for the explanation. The loss of life and property was irreparable. The Calcutta Killings, in its part, once again showed the ugly fact that its very difficult for the Hindus and Muslims to co-exist in the same place. The event precipitated the process of the partition of India by many months.

**Keywords:** Calcutta Killings, communalism, H.S. Suhrawardy, Cabinet Mission Plan, partition of India

Before the partition, India, being a country where Hindu and Muslim communities were always on the loggers head, barring few stray and brief period of time, the communal riots were always on the cards. But the scale and massacre witnessed during the The Great Calcutta Killing was never seen by the people of India. The Calcutta riots of August 1946 is recorded in the memory of the people of Bengal as an extremely violent episode and generally referred to as the Great Calcutta Killings. On 16 August, observing the call of the Direct Action day given by the Muslim League Working Committee in its resolution of 29 July 1946, a large number of people took recourse to violence in articulating what they thought was the legitimate political action. The violence that lasted from 16-19 August sparked off a chain of communal violence that led to the partition of the country within a year.

The All India Muslim League and the Indian National Congress were the two largest political parties having their own support base. They were the main actors in the Constituent Assembly of India during the decade of 1940. The Muslim League gained unprecedented popularity and support from the Muslim people of India after the passage of Lahore Resolution, commonly known as Pakistan Resolution in its Lahore session in 1940. According to the Resolution, the Muslim League had demanded that the Muslim-majority

areas of India in the northwest and the east, should be constituted as 'independent states'. The 1946 Cabinet Mission to India, sent for planning the transfer of power from the British Raj to the Indian leadership proposed a three-tier structure: a centre, groups of provinces and provinces. The 'groups of provinces' were meant to accommodate the Muslim League demand. Both the parties accepted the Cabinet Mission's plan in principle. The Cabinet Mission Plan was a milestone in the history of the struggle for independent India. The acceptance of the Plan by both the Congress and the Muslim League was a glorious event. In the words of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad "It (The Cabinet Mission Plan) meant that the difficult question of Indian freedom had been settled by negotiation and agreement and not by methods of violence and conflict. It also seemed that the communal difficulties had been finally left behind. Throughout the country there was a sense of jubilation and all the people were united in their demand for freedom." There was an atmosphere of joy and celebration. However, the Muslim League suspected that Congress is plotting something different in the guise of the Plan.

Muhammad Ali Jinnah declared 16 August as 'Direct Action Day' and called for Muslims all over the country to suspend all business. This was to put pressure on the British government to relent to the Muslim League's demand of dividing the country on the basis of religion, thereby allowing the creation of a Muslim dominated state of Pakistan. The state of Bengal was one of those very few pockets in the country where Muslims were in a majority. However, they were precariously positioned against a political hinterland inhabited by the Hindu dominated National Congress, the Communist Party of India and the Hindu Mahasabha. Additionally, as the freedom struggle against the colonial masters waged on, notions of nationalism became more intricately entwined with religion. Being an Indian started being equated with being a Hindu. However, the idea was to only assert the Indian identity against the European coloniser.

The communal riots that started on the day of Direct Action are one of the most brutal incidents of violence in the history of India, leaving behind several thousands dead. There are two sides of this story. When Jinnah called for a nationwide day of suspension of all business, he perhaps did not expect a riot could reach such an extremity. The other side of the historical spectrum disagrees. The riots were a result of the panic Muslims experienced at the prospect of being a minority in a Hindu dominated country. In that case, it might have been a deliberate, well thought plan of executing the killings. It is hard to conclude that the violence, of this magnitude and of communal nature, was entirely unplanned. The riots did eventually serve to increase a feeling of alienation among Muslims, therefore strengthening their desire for a separate nation. The violence made both communities realise the extent of harm they were capable of causing each other when being 'forced' to live together. Therefore, the partition of the two communities became inevitable.

The severity and the extent of the violence witnessed during the Calcutta Killings demands an explanation of the ideological ambience in which such acts of violence and violations were carried out. The stories of such brutality support the contention that there was a brutalization of consciousness which began with the famine. "there was a brutalization of consciousness on a mass scale, as if the people were being prepared for

the inhuman episode of August 1946.”<sup>1</sup> However, viewing events from another angle it seemed a very systematic insanity. The Muslims killed the Hindus and the Hindus killed the Muslims. Therefore, even in the brutalization of consciousness, there was a pattern, a line of demarcation. And here one can see that the crucial element defining this line was the identification of the other community as a single monolithic whole defined by its religion. The significant question here relates to the process that makes this demarcated line available, and then prepares individuals and groups to position themselves along that line. So, behind the insanity worked a very sane idea. And therefore, one can argue for the primacy of the study of these sane ideas before embarking upon looking at the demonstrated insanity.<sup>2</sup> “Direct Action had earned its historic importance not because Pakistan was achieved on that day but because on its corpses was laid the edifice of Bengal partition”<sup>3</sup>

The Direct Action day started with the procession of the Muslim League members around the town. Disturbances started soon when the League volunteers forced Hindu shopkeepers in North Calcutta to close their shops and Hindus retaliated by obstructing the passage of League’s processions. The League’s rally at Ochterloney Monument on that day was considered as the largest ever Muslim assembly. Prior to the Direct Action day, the Chief Minister of Bengal, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, in his address to the members assured them that the military and police had been ‘restrained’. This was interpreted by the gathering as an open invitation to commit violence on its rival community. The areas that were mostly affected by the violence were the densely populated sectors of the city bounded by Bowbazar Street on the south, Upper Circular Road on the east, Vivekananda Road on the north and Strand Road on the west.

After the Calcutta riots, the Hindu leaders and press wholesale accused H. S. Suhrawardy of giving the Calcutta Muslims their ‘marching orders.’<sup>4</sup> His continued presence in the police control room during the riots aroused in many quarters doubts as to his impartiality. The army was not summoned when the situation was worsening with each passing hour giving hooligans more time to destroy the property and free hand to killings. Curfew orders were not strictly enforced on the first few nights. The conduct of the Bengal Government and the European officials was ‘culpable’ in so far a timely intervention might have averted the scale of violence. On the other hand, the Muslim leaders claimed that Chief Minister Suhrawardy worked day and night risking his life to stop the carnage.<sup>5</sup> In any event, Suhrawardy’s role will never be known since there is no authentic and impartial account of it.

The Calcutta and Noakhali riots played a significant role in precipitating the partition of India in general and Bengal in particular. These riots severely disrupted the communal harmony of the two communities. Apart from the loss of lives, the Calcutta and Noakhali communal riots created an environment of suspicion and hatred between the two communities. It created the panic in the minds of Hindus in Muslim majority

<sup>1</sup> Suranjan Das, Communal riots in Bengal, p. 162

<sup>2</sup> Rakesh Batabyal, Communalism in Bengal, p.238

<sup>3</sup> Shila Sen, Muslim Politics, p. 217

<sup>4</sup> Kiran Shankar Roy’s speech in the Bengal Assembly

<sup>5</sup> Abul Hashim’s speech in the Bengal Assembly

areas and Muslims in Hindu majority areas. The horror of the riots simply stunned both the communities and for them, parting ways with other was the only way to start a new life. The sense of horror that these riots created among the minds of Hindus and Muslims of Bengal was far worse than the lives lost during these riots. This greatly changed the mindset of the people of Bengal. Both these riots are therefore, an indication as well as confirmation of the breakdown of communal harmony that Bengal witnessed during the final phase of her struggle against the British. The British divide and rule strategy had succeeded not only due to the peculiar structural characteristics of Bengal, but also to an equally peculiar unfolding of socio-economic processes in which those responsible for her political destiny had significant roles.<sup>6</sup> Apart from the blatant communal justification from both sides for the partition, it was also defended by more sophisticated arguments underlining the probable strength of democratic secular values in areas likely to constitute India. In February, 1947, the Hindu Mahasabha openly came forward with its partition demand. The Congress leadership also understood the gravity of the problem and endorsed the idea of partition as the only solution under the circumstances. Few intellectuals, both from Hindu and Muslim communities, still advocated for the idea of United Bengal. But it was evident from the beginning; the proposal had a few takers. Most of the Bengali Hindus were strongly convinced by the idea of Shyama Prasad Mookherjee and they demanded immediate partition of Bengal on communal ground.

Communalism at the popular level provided a new turn to India's institutional politics. the Muslim League warned that civil wars on the Calcutta scale would occur in other parts of the country unless its proposal for the Partition of India was accepted and the Congress suffered a setback and its leadership accepted the partition of the country along religious lines as the 'last resort'. One may wonder whether the Great Calcutta killing could have been averted had there been a congress-League coalition in the province that H.S. Suhrawardy had tried to secure immediately after the 1946 elections. There is no doubt that the evasiveness of the Cabinet Mission and the Viceroy's decision to install a Congress Interim government at the centre bypassing the Muslim League had contributed a great deal to arouse ever mounting emotion among the members of the two communities, blended with hopes in case of one and fears in case of the other. However, this may be regarded as only the immediate cause for the trouble. The scar of the violence and brutality during the Calcutta Killings will always haunt the mind and hearts of the people of Calcutta and both the communities who were affected by it.

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<sup>6</sup> Bidyut Chakrabarty, pp. 115-116

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