

Violence, Reconciliation and the Idea of Responsibility: Gandhi in 1946-47

Rakesh Batabyal

[Dr. Rakesh Batabyal, Fellow, National Institute of Punjab Studies, New Delhi, India]

Responsibility, this building block of all moral behaviour, arises out of the proximity of the other. Proximity means responsibility and responsibility is proximity. The alternative to proximity is social distance. The moral attribute of social distance is lack of moral relationship, or heterophobia. Responsibility is silenced once proximity is eroded; it may eventually be replaced with resentment once the fellow human subject is transformed into another. The process of social transformation is one of social separation. It was such a separation which made it possible for thousands to kill, and millions to watch the murder without protesting.[1]

The modern world has witnessed a gradual atomization of human society. This, many have argued, has led to a modern malaise, alienation or separation, resulting in the loss of human communication. This loss then becomes significant in times of crises or societal rupture, i.e., during violence, or an ideological take over of society at a given time. In such situations, how one rehabilitates responsibility to integrate society, or mend social ruptures, can be a matter of deep significance. One modern attribute has been the complete social surrender to ideologies of one variety or the other. The societal rupture that some of these ideologies effect are also, in some sense, a result of the failure of human beings at that historical juncture to share the idea of human well being and be responsible for its sustenance.

It is in this context, of a critique of those ideologies that contribute to the social rupture and impede human well being, that one can go beyond common sense meanings and explore the idea of responsibility deeper. During the pre partition communal violence in Bengal, Gandhiji tried to invoke this idea of responsibility in his mission for reconciliation in the villages of Noakhali and Tippera districts. He tried to engage a hostile population, and create a situation in which they were to be made responsible for their own actions as well as those of their neighbours. In this mission, however, there was no effort to be conciliatory towards the ideological bases of the social rupture. In the present paper, I shall try and locate the ideas of reconciliation and responsibility in the context of the violence that characterised what is generally termed the Noakhali riot, on the eve of India's Independence.

India was in the throes of killings and more killings. The talks of independence and partition in 1946-47 had worked people up in the subcontinent. While there were tremendous expectations of the impending freedom all round, the idea of having a free Pakistan along with this freedom too had triggered human emotions and political sensitivity.[2] It was around such a time that in its eastern provinces of Bengal and Bihar it was carnage that began to take turns. On 16 April Calcutta was initiated into the killings with 5, 000 and more killed in a span of four days. Seven weeks later the easternmost districts of Bengal bordering Burma, Noakhali and Tippera, burst into another form of violence when it was not only, that the people were targeted, but their

religion too. Hindus were not only forced to get converted into Islam but hundreds of Hindu women were forced into marriages with the Muslims in the locality. It was first of its kind in the history of the sub continent and therefore shocked the whole country. The neighbouring province of Bihar tried to observe what was declared as the Noakhali day and then organized the killings of the Muslims in central Bihar which prompted Nehru the prime Minister of the provisional government to issue warnings that he would bomb Bihar if they did not stop. It was in such a situation that Gandhi embarked on his mission. He saw that the violence that he had seen in Calcutta, Noakhali and Bihar needs to be attacked as his entire philosophy of non violence seemed to be challenged by some unseen quarters. This made him come to Noakhali and try out his method of conflict resolution. I shall try and present a narrative of the effort and in the end would make only one suggestion, i.e. Gandhian way of conflict resolution in such violence is a powerful antidote to the helplessness of different political formations such as the political parties.

Gandhi, it seems, had already seen in the Calcutta riots of August 1946 the potential for greater, escalated violence probably on the scale of a civil war. 'We are not yet in the midst of a civil war', he said, 'but we are nearing it. At present we are playing at it.'^[3] It was, however, the news of violence in Noakhali and Tippera that prompted him to come to Bengal. In the meantime violence erupted in Bihar in an unprecedented manner and a very large number of Muslim population was either killed or rendered homeless. 'Why and why only Noakhali whereas rioting had been taking place in Ahmedabad, Bombay or for that matter in the neighboring Bihar', was the question repeatedly asked of him. 'Why do you want to go to Noakhali? You did not go to Bombay, Ahmedabad or Chapra, where things have happened that are infinitely worse than Noakhali. Would not your going there only add to the existing tension?' Was it because in these places it was the Muslims who had been the sufferers that he did not go there, and would go to Noakhali, because, sufferers there were Hindus.'^[4] This question was important, as the answer to it not only suggested the significance that Gandhi attached to the Noakhali riot, but also provokes us to probe deeper into the ramifications of Gandhi's visit to the riot affected areas. Gandhi's answer to this question was that 'he would certainly have gone to any of the places mentioned (not Bihar) by the friend if anything approaching what had happened at Noakhali had happened there and if he had felt that he could do nothing without being on the spot'.^[5] Thus, it seems, he attached greater significance to the happenings in Noakhali despite the fact that the number of people killed either in Calcutta or Bihar far outnumbered those killed in Noakhali.

The Noakhali riot was qualitatively different from the earlier communal riots including the Calcutta killings of August 1946, which immediately preceded it. It may be that Gandhi could sense that the difference lay in the transformation of a communal discourse, as a politics based on religion, to one in which violence was sanctified by religion. Gandhi, it seems, became aware of this very acutely. It was evident from the pattern of violence that a total rupture of an essentially peasant society had occurred and that communal ideology could entrench itself in that social milieu and could legitimize itself as a source of valid and just political action. It was not difficult for Gandhi, being an astute reader of the peasant psyche as he was, to understand the impact of such a rupture. Noakhali, therefore, became important not just because it demonstrated an intensity of violence, but also the power of an ideology, i.e., Communalism.

By this time the idea of Pakistan had been concretised in the popular mind. At the end of the elections of 1945-46, it was quite clear that the League had achieved some sort of a mandate of being the representative agency fighting for Pakistan. The Muslim League wanted people's support in its endeavour to realize Pakistan. Neither the Muslim League nor its leader Jinnah had ever espoused a critique of colonialism, so that the movement for achieving Pakistan could be galvanised by critiquing the Colonial power. Instead it was the Congress, which the League argued was the representative of the Hindu population that was attacked. By the forties, it was not just the Hindu Congress but also the general Hindu population that was depicted as opposing the creation of Pakistan.

Gandhi, it seems, was practical enough to see the writing on the wall. In September 1944 itself, he sensed the increased hold of Jinnah on the Muslim masses, and therefore, while writing to Jinnah he acknowledged the latter's hold over them. His meeting with Jinnah was basically an acceptance of this realisation. Aware of the significance of 'symbols', he wanted to attack the idea of 'two nations' and thereby, attack the ideological basis of Pakistan, by attacking communa-lism. He was prepared to accept any kind of partition as long as it was not based on this theory. He wrote to Jinnah that he could already see the dangers of its operation. He wrote:

Dear QaidiAzam,

For the moment I have shunted the Rajaji formula and, with your assistance, am applying my mind very seriously to the famous Lahore resolution of the Muslim League.... As I write this letter and imagine the working of the resolution in practice, I see nothing but ruin for the whole of India.[6]

The Noakhali riot presented for Gandhi the first field demonstration of the ruin that he had already envisaged in 1944. In Noakhali, it came in a form most intense and most frightening. And it is here that one finds a very serious effort at conflict resolution tried at a societal level. 'In any war', he said, 'brutalities were bound to take place; war is a brutal thing'.[7] Once this was accepted by Gandhi, he started looking beyond the violence and the violations taking place there. He also went beyond the question of Pakistan as he made it clear that he was not there to fight even Pakistan. He told his audience at Dattapara, 'Whether you believe it or not, I want to assure you that I am a servant of both the Hindus and the Mussalmans. I have not come here to fight Pakistan. If India is destined to be partitioned, I cannot prevent it. But I wish to tell you that Pakistan cannot be established by force.'[8] He was, as suggested by a close aide in Noakhali, not very concerned about the casualties or the extent of material damage. Instead he concentrated on 'discovering the political intentions working behind the move and the way of combating them successfully'.[9]

While it was 'the cry of outraged womanhood' which brought him to Bengal,[10] he was equally aghast at the religious intolerance shown by the local populace. He took it upon himself to combat the operation of the 'two nation theory', while also delegitimising violence of its apparent religious sanctions. Therefore, Noakhali was made the battlefield on which he sought to uphold his political as well as personal credo.

This attitude of combating the war brought out a novel form of experience in its train significantly entitled Gandhi's Noakhali experiment. In this experiment, Gandhi's principles were at stake. 'My own doctrine', Gandhi said to N. C. Chatterjee, 'was failing. I don't want to die a failure'.^[11] But what was his doctrine that was failing? Throughout his sojourn he would mention about this failing doctrine but one does not come across any specific instance where he is explicit about his doctrine. It raises a very serious question. The Noakhali riot, as everyone knew by that time, was between the Hindus and Muslims. And by this time so many riots between the Hindu and Muslim communities had already taken place that there was nothing novel about a communal riot as such. Then, why was it that only in the case of Noakhali, Gandhi would talk about the failing of his doctrine. It seems to me that it was phenomena like forced conversions and the way that religion was made to legitimise violence, which shook Gandhi's previous understanding of communalism.

It may be due to this shaken understanding that he was groping for a way out. One might ask whether he possessed any coherent strategy when he landed in Noakhali? Gandhi, notwithstanding his determination to go to Noakhali, it appears, was quite apprehensive of his plan of action in Noakhali from the very beginning. Even en route, he did not know what he was going to do there. He invoked God as the only one who knew what he could do.^[12] The only thing he was certain of was that his presence in Noakhali was necessary.^[13] He grappled in the darkness and told N. K. Bose, his secretary during those days, that he might have to stay on there for several years.^[14]

While he was fighting this uncertainty vis-à-vis the Noakhali situation, there erupted in the neighbouring province of Bihar ghastly communal riots. Hindu crowds began slaughtering Muslims in order to avenge the rumored massacre of people of their community by the latter in Noakhali. However, this made Gandhi's mission in Noakhali very delicate. The number of casualties in the Bihar riots was much more than those in the latter. Though there were conflicting reports about the casualties, the Bihar Government had given the figure of 5,246, which is suggestive of the intensity of the violence that swept across the area.^[15] Therefore, the Muslim League Ministry in Bengal, which from the very beginning had been trying to minimize its own responsibility in the Noakhali riots, now found some justification for asking Gandhi to shift his attention to Bihar instead of Noakhali. The details of the Bihar riot were exaggerated and made the center of projection. The Bihar riots were presented as another stage of the anti Muslim campaign led by the Congress Ministers, which, according to the Muslim League, wanted to annihilate the Muslims and their culture and religion.

The Star of India, a prominent Muslim League daily of Calcutta, dedicated its issue of 11th November 1946, 'to the dead of Bihar'. 'It is only now', it wrote, 'that the full staggering enormity of their terrible ordeal has begun to escape through the conspiracy of silence that surrounded the orgy in a thick veil.'^[16] As regards the number of people killed, it began with the initial statistics of 13,000.^[17] Fazlul Huq came out with a figure of one lakh in Azad, which was quoted in the Star of India on 13th November 1946. After being criticised for exaggeration, Fazlul Huq brought the figure down to 30,000.^[18] The irresponsible behaviour of the Press, which became manifest during the Noakhali riot, reached its climax during the Bihar riots, which forced the Viceroy to ask the Ministers of the Interim Government to control the Press.^[19] Thus,

communal discourse whether Hindu or Muslim, justified, and thereby, validated itself and the other.

The Muslim League Government did not like Gandhi's visit to Noakhali as it felt that world attention would get focused on the active collaboration of the League workers with the rioters. It, therefore, exerted pressure through propaganda and personal insinuation against Gandhi. Even a person of Fazlul Huq's stature urged his audience to make it impossible for Gandhi to remain in Bengal.[20] People holding responsible positions attacked Gandhi and asked him to leave Noakhali, and attend to the Bihar situation. Hamiduddin Chaudhury, a Parliamentary Secretary of the Muslim League Ministry, who had visited Noakhali with Gandhi and initially condemned the atrocities there, issued a statement to the Press that Gandhi was in Noakhali 'only to focus attention of the world on the happenings there and to magnify the issue'.[21] The full statement read:

Mr. Gandhi does not intend to go to Bihar.... will it be wrong if one feels that Mr. Gandhi is in Noakhali only to focus attention of the world on the happenings there and to magnify the same for keeping the Bihar happenings in the background?

Does Mr. Gandhi want to complete his organisation through the number of volunteers he has got from outside?... Mr. Gandhi may conveniently ask all the outside volunteers both male and female to quit while advising the refugees to return to their homes.... Mr. Gandhi is holding prayer meetings everyday in the evening and after the prayer he sometimes delivers lectures.... the Hindus will realise that the mischievous propaganda of their so called friends has been the cause of (bringing upon them) more misery and discomfort, they will begin to think rightly. Free from outside propaganda, they will begin to repose confidence in their Muslim neighbours with whom they have been living peacefully for centuries.[22]

Synchronizing with statements of this sort was the behaviour of the local Muslim League workers. They began to harass Gandhi, as well as the relief workers, so that they would perforce leave the place. Members of the Feni subdivision of the Muslim League sent Gandhi a post card, containing a copy of the resolution passed by that body, which read:

It is appreciated that Mr. Gandhi's presence in Bihar is much more useful than at Noakhali where the situation is normal. He is therefore requested to leave for Bihar.[23]

Gandhi remained undeterred by these attacks. His reply to the Feni subdivision Muslim League request was direct and curt. He wrote that he was unable to follow their advice as it was based on ignorance of the facts. 'In the first place, I know that the situation is not normal here and that so far as I can contribute to the Bihar problem, I have to inform you that such influence as I have on Bihar can be and is being efficiently exercised from Srirampur.'[24] It is not that he was not aware of the magnitude of the Bihar riots. Gandhi could see the logic of communalism and the relationship between the Noakhali and Bihar riots. He perceived that Noakhali was the disease, while Bihar was just an outgrowth or casualty of the former. Gandhi's reply to the statement of Hamiduddin Choudhury bears out this understanding. He wrote:

It will not serve the cause of peace if I went to Bihar and found the Bihar Muslims League's report to be largely imaginary and the Bihar Govt.'s conduct substantially honourable, humane and just. I am not anxious to give them a certificate of good conduct as I am to give you, much though you may not want it. My spare diet and contemplated fast, you know well, were against the Bihar misdoings. I could not take such a step in the matter of Noakhali misdoings. It pains me to think that you a seasoned lawyer should not see the obvious.[25]

With the society showing heightened polarization and intolerance and when there were attempts to portray Gandhi as a Hindu and the greatest enemy of the Muslims, this seems to be a sound judgment. He was aware of his ability to influence the Ministers and people of Bihar even from a distance. His presence in Noakhali, on the other hand, was a deterrent for any further retaliatory action anywhere else. At another level, he neither had a hold on the Ministers in Bengal, nor did he have any strong influence, as he had witnessed, on the Muslim populace of Noakhali, many of whom had even condemned him as an arch enemy of Islam.[26]

Gandhi, on his part, faced all these charges with the simple statement that he was as much a friend of the Muslims as he was of the Hindus. However, this was increasingly disbelieved by the villagers, and towards the end of his sojourn they not only boycotted his prayer meetings,[27] but also dirtied the roads which he used everyday from village to village.[28] He accepted this as the misdemeanours of those who had failed to understand him and his work. But he, Bose says, resolved not to 'surrender his own love for men even if they were erring'.[29]

Though outwardly unfazed, the situation in Noakhali, the Bihar riots and its reaction, the strong and entrenched opposition from the Muslim League quarters in Bengal, and his own search for a way out, created some intense moments of selfdoubt, and consequently, Gandhi was not at peace with his inner self. This forced him to put his 'will' to the test. He not only reduced his food intake and retained but two of his aides, he also experimented with his personal purity. Though it created a stir even among his close aides, this shows the desperation with which Gandhi was fighting the last battle of his life a battle against communal ideology.

II

Gandhi was in Noakhali from 6th November 1946 to the end of February 1947. Beginning his tour with the villages of Gopdirbag, he reached Srirampur on 20th November 1946, where he decided to spend the next one and half months.[30] His visits to these villages on the one hand stirred the entire area with new life, and on the other strengthened his own determination to contest communal politics, with Noakhali as his battleground.[31] In combating communal ideology and the forces that represented it, he sought to heal the societal rupture that had sustained the communal breach. The battle was a difficult one, because the communalisation of the population was complete. This made him more determined to fight it with all his strength.

After a long sojourn in Srirampur, which had soon become the nerve centre of his mission in Noakhali, Gandhi embarked on his journey into the interior of Noakhali and Tippera from 2 January 1947. He repeatedly expressed his desire to be left alone on this journey, and in fact, desired that the military protection provided to him be withdrawn. He felt it prevented him from showing the people that his concern was genuine, and that they could approach him without any

fear. He wrote to Suhrawardy on 8th January 1947, all my attempts at bringing about real friendship between the two communities must fail so long as I go about fully protected by armed police or military.... The fright of the military keeps them from coming to me and asking all sorts of questions for the resolution of their doubts....[32]

He wanted the Muslim population to give vent to their anger openly, which would clear avenues for dialogue, rather than continue with the present scenario of sullenness. He wanted both the communities to be brave but, as he wrote, 'Unfortunately both lack this very necessary human quality'.[33]

In almost all the villages he visited and the congregational prayer meetings he addressed, he admonished the Hindus for being cowards and exhorted them to be fearless. He was aware of the fear that prevailed, and of the fact that the Hindus were really in great danger, without adequate protection. The total social rupture that was demonstrated by the brutality of the communal attacks was soon compounded by the Muslim League workers instituting false cases against Hindu villages,[34] at times with the active connivance of the local authorities.[35] Even the army found it difficult to tackle the situation.

Therefore, talk of fearlessness in such an atmosphere of all-pervasive tyranny of fear was seen by many as unwise. Leaders of political parties, especially the Mahasabha leaders, demanded military protection for the Hindus of Noakhali.[36] Contesting this line of argument, Gandhi refuted the claims that he was not practical in advocating military protection for the Hindus. 'I am an idealist',[37] he said to the Hindu Mahasabha delegation, 'but I claim to be a practical idealist'.[38] And as a 'practical idealist', he must have realised that any talk of army protection would make the Muslim villagers more belligerent against the Hindus, as well as hamper the return of a normal social existence in these villages. In the same vein, he contested the idea of the 'segregation of Hindu population in protected pockets'.[39] For him, this 'would be interpreted as preparation of war'[40] by the Muslim League. 'For myself', he declared, 'the path is different.' He wanted one worker in each village 'to steal the heart of the inhabitants'.[41] It did not matter, he added, if there was only one or many Hindus in a village. His prescription was that they should stick to their posts and even face death if necessary with courage and willingness. If they live in clusters it would only mean accepting Muslim League's mischievous two nation theory.[42]

Here, the idea that the villagers, irrespective of their religious affiliation, should take responsibility for each other was a very fundamental one for Gandhi. It was this idea of responsibility that he attempted to use as an antidote against the atmosphere of violence, created with the help of the idea of Pakistan through which people were trying to legitimise their acts of *irresponsibility*. It is on this level that a face-to-face community could be validated against an abstraction, which was proving to be negative and anti emancipatory.[43] Therefore, the path he chose was different.

The talk of migration was in the air but in his opinion if it had to take place, 'it must be complete'.[44] After all this was what Pakistan meant. He did not want to be 'a willing party to Pakistan'.[45] *Pakistan was a political agenda and not a social solution, just as migration was not the solution to the problem.*

‘No police or military would protect those who are cowards’.[46] Gandhi emphasised the need for Hindus to be courageous and shun their inferiority complex. From the beginning he asked them to be fearless. On 12 November at Dattapara he said that he ‘had seen the terror-stricken faces of the sufferers. They had been forcibly converted once and they were afraid the same thing would be repeated. He wanted them to shed that fear.’[47] In fact, he tried to attack the tyrannical hegemony of fear that the communal violence had created in the minds of the people. It was here that he reflected on his idea of an imminent civil war that communalism posed at this stage, and with which the League was trying to get Pakistan. Therefore, Gandhi in his talk with Nalini Mitra and Rasomoy Sur of Noakhali, at Srirampur, concluded that ‘the present problem was not the question of Noakhali alone; it was a problem for the whole of Bengal and the whole of India’.[48] This was why Gandhi was so perturbed about Noakhali. In fact, his determination to go back to Noakhali even after the Partition, reflects his idea of attacking communal ideology and the ‘two nation theory’ from here. Thus, unlike his ‘search for light’, as far as his actions were concerned, he was determined that Noakhali was going to be his testing ground. In Dattapara he said, The question of East Bengal is not one of Bengal alone. The battle for India is today being decided in East Bengal. Today Mussalmans are being taught by some that Hindu religion is an abomination and therefore forcible conversion of Hindus to Islam is a merit.[49]

Noakhali in his mind was like Champaran or Bardoli the ‘model site’ for launching his movement. His speech at Nabagram reflected what was going on his mind. He said, ‘Noakhali offered an almost ideal situation for testing whether ahimsa could effectively be used by a small number of people against an almost sullen if not hostile majority all round.’[50] He was conscious that ‘the problem here was also complicated by the fact of the existence of a popular Government controlling the destinies of the people’.[51] About the contrasting psyche of the two communities in Noakhali, he stated that he had been ‘moving amidst a sullen population on the one hand and a frightened one on the other’.[52] A conciliation, he resolved, was to be achieved through the one’s openness and the other’s fearlessness. Gandhi’s presence and his attempts at meeting people in ‘their home’, were themselves a symbolic attack on the prevailing atmosphere marked by fear.

Gandhi was very upset by the targeting of violence against women, who were the worst victims. The male population in most of the villages had to run for their lives and the women lived in great fear and danger. Gandhi asked them to be courageous without sounding patronising – he shared their grief. Manubehan Gandhi, his grand daughter, who was there with him wrote:

Many of them had been forcibly converted to Islam. As the husbands and sons of some of them had been murdered, they were plunged in grief. With sobs and tears they poured out their stricken hearts to Bapuji. ‘The only difference between you and me,’ he consoled them, ‘is that you cry and I don’t. But my heart sorrows for you. Your grief is my grief; that’s why I have come here. There is no remedy for our pain except faith in God. Is the one, most efficacious panacea dead? If one imbibes this truth, there will be no cause for such outbursts of grief.’[53]

Later, Gandhi in a sad tone told Manubehan, ‘the meeting with those sisters is still vivid, who knows how many more tragic sights like this I am fated to see’.[54]

Speaking at Jagatpur on 10th January 1947, he advised his audience 'about courage and the need of never surrendering one's honour even on pain of death'.^[55] Gandhi's presence, his prayer meetings, which encouraged women to come out confidently in the open after a long time, and his constant evocation of courage, fearlessness, honour and death, had a significant impact. Women began to come out and share their tales of woe with him. In Bansa, they put before him their dilemma, 'what is a woman to do when attacked by miscreants run away or resist with violence'.^[56] Gandhi shared their concern and advised them to come out of the trap of violence. He said, my answer to this question is very simple. For me there can be no preparation for violence. All preparation must be for nonviolence if courage of the highest type is to be developed. Violence can only be tolerated as being preferable always to cowardice.... For a nonviolent person there is no emergency but quiet dignified preparation for death.^[57]

He asked them to be like Sita and Savitri who by their deeds refuted the fact that women were 'weak'. While speaking at Bhatialpur he noted, 'It was often said that women were naturally weak- they were *abalas*'. His advice to women was that they should not believe such things.^[58] They could be, he opined, as hard as men.^[59]

While advising Hindu women to become courageous and fearless, he at the same time asked them to help the neighbouring Muslim women shed their ignorance and illiteracy, as also in other aspects where they lagged behind the former.^[60] As Gandhi's journey progressed, a sense of confidence built up in the Noakhali villages. Women started coming out more often and they even displayed the courage that Gandhi was exhorting them to live with. Bose wrote that after one prayer meeting a girl came up to tell her story without the slightest fear, and on being asked whether she would be able to go back and stay once more in the midst of scenes she could never forget, the girl answered in the affirmative.^[61]

Bose recorded that she answered in this manner because now she knew that she could save herself by dying.^[62] This forced Bose to think about the transformation Gandhi had caused. Though equivocal in his judgement, he could not negate the influence of Gandhi's speeches on that girl.^[63]

When told that the Muslims were willing to receive the refugees back in their villages, provided they withdrew the criminal cases arising out of the disturbances, Gandhi provided the guilty with two alternatives: They could admit the crimes and justify their conduct on the ground that whatever they had done was under advice, solely for the establishment of Pakistan without any personal motive and face the consequences. Or, they should report and submit to penalty of law by way of expiation.^[64]

But he negated any compromise such as dropping the cases. Hence, personal responsibility was to be accepted, as also the root of those acts which had forced people to create such a situation.

He rejected the idea of the Hindu Mahasabha that the entire Hindu population should be segregated in pockets. N. C. Chatterjee, the President of the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha, personally came to Gandhi to argue on these lines. Gandhi's counter argument contained his idea of responsibility. For him, the former was an unworkable proposition. He said

to N. C. Chatterjee: Put yourself in Mr. Suhrawardy's shoes; do you think he would favour it, or even the Muslim residents of Noakhali? For it would be interpreted as a preparation for war.[65]

He could see that by putting forth that demand, they would practically be conceding the logic of the Muslim League's demand of Pakistan. He opined, and quite forcefully, that if migration had to take place, it must be systematic and complete, and it was not therefore to be thought of so long as there was any hope of cooperation. And so long as there was any hope, efforts were to be made for a permanent solution to the communal problem. It is here that he could see the Hindu Mahasabha and the Muslim League actions as complementary to each other. Gandhi, on the other hand, insisted that for a permanent solution responsibility as well as proximity were absolutely necessary. While talking to Nalini Mitra and Rasamay Sur at Srirampur on 22 November his advice to the victims was not to leave their homes and go elsewhere.[66] In conversation with Nalini Mitra and Rasomoy Sur at Srirampur, he said, the Bengalese were always in the forefront of civilised life in bravery and sacrifice and it was really shocking to find that people would run away in fear giving up their hearths and homes.[67]

He said that he 'wanted to see every Hindu family settle down in its own village and face the situation fearlessly and with courage'.[68]

While he asked them to seek protection through their inner strength, he also tried through the Peace Committees to create bridges between the communities. This would enable the communities to come into physical proximity with one another, which again would bring moral responsibility into the social life of the population.[69]

The enactment of this idea of the sense of responsibility lay in his idea of Peace Committees of the local population. Initially, the idea to have Peace Committees was mooted by the Bengal Muslim League Government while Gandhi was in Srirampur. The plan was to have equal number of Hindu and Muslim members in these Peace Committees, with a government official as Chairman. Gandhi was favourably disposed to the idea because it fulfilled his idea of *responsibility*. This is why he asked the Hindu members to give it a chance to succeed when the latter insisted on first bringing the miscreants to book. Gandhi advised them not to summarily reject the proposal by placing any conditions. Thus, the Hindus had to trust and honour the work of these Committees. The functions of the Peace Committees were defined as:

- (a) Undertaking intensive propaganda work to restore confidence;
- (b) Helping in constructing shelters for the returning refugees, and in processing and distributing relief, e.g., food, clothing etc.;
- (c) Drawing up lists of disturbers of peace, who should be rounded up. These lists would be checked with the First Information Reports already lodged with the police, and arrests would be made on verification. If an innocent person was found to have been arrested, the Peace Committee would recommend to the Magistrate his release on bail, or unconditionally as the case might be;
- (d) Preparing a list of houses destroyed or damaged during the disturbances.

Similarly Gandhi asked the people to trust representatives of the Government. In Srirampur, he said: "Here were elected Muslims who were running the government of the Province, who gave

them their word of honour. They would not be silent witnesses to the repetition of shameful deeds. His advice to the Hindus was to believe their word and give them a trial. This did not mean there would not be a single bad Mussalman left in East Bengal. There were good and bad men amongst all communities. Dis-honourable conduct would break any ministry or organisation in the end.”[70]

When the Government’s efforts proved wanting, Gandhi even went to the extent of advocating that ‘one brave man’ in a village could achieve the desired peace, if he was ready to lay down his life when the occasion arose rather than shun responsibility. He was of the firm conviction that a single man could change the entire complexion of societal thought by his acts. He was glad to meet the Maulvi at Muraim who ‘helped in sustaining his theory that one individual can transform the entire society’. There was no riot in Muraim where, according to Pyarelal, the Maulvi was like an oasis amidst the desert; he saw to it that the Hindus did not even panic and made himself responsible for their well being.[71]

The notion of responsibility therefore was a crucial link in his idea of reconciliation. The third ingredient in Gandhi’s battle in Noakhali Tippera was an attack on communal ideology from a high moral and ethical plane. First, he emphasised the right of every individual to profess or follow any religion as long as it did not negatively affect the others’ religious creeds. He was appalled to witness the religious intolerance shown during the riot and which continued during his visits. In the village of Masimpur, which he visited on 7th January 1947, the Muslim audience left the place once he began his prayer meeting. At which Gandhi remarked: ‘I am sorry because some of my friends had not been able to bear any name of God except Khuda but I am glad because they have had the courage of expressing their dissent openly and plainly.’[72] This small incident provides an inkling of the mentality that prevailed during the fateful October disturbances in the district.

He then appealed to the ‘Muslim brethren’ to assure him ‘of that freedom which is true to the noblest tradition of Islam. Even from the Muslim League platforms, it has been repeatedly said that in Pakistan there will be full tolerance of the practice of their faiths by the minorities and that they will enjoy freedom of worship equally with the majority.’[73] There was no sense of appeasement. His stout defence of his Ram dhun and the prayer meetings testified to his fight for religious freedom. Here again, it will not be out of place to suggest that prayer for him broke all religious and communal boundaries and, in addition, it even gave voice to the protesting soul. The prayer meetings of Gandhi brought people out into the open for the first time after 10th October 1946, and thereby, broke the tyranny of fear.

In a place where all symbols of a particular religion had been made the target of attack, the Gandhian defense came as an attack on that particular undercurrent of communal ideology, which legitimised religious intolerance.

Another aspect of this was that by bringing up ethical-moral questions, Gandhi was trying to delegitimise the forces of communal ideology, which, in fact, claimed religious sanction for their agenda of violence. In retrospect this seems quite significant, because clerics of religion, and religion itself, had become the main prop and legitimising factor in the Noakhali riot. Apart from the physical manifestation of it, Gandhi perceived the prevailing psyche from a discussion with

Maulvi Khalilur Rahman of Devipur, when he visited there on 17th February 1947. The Maulvi was reportedly responsible for the conversion of a large number of Hindus during the disturbances.[74]

On being asked about the truth of the matter, the Maulvi said that ‘the conversion should not be taken seriously, it was a dodge adopted to save the life of the Hindus’.[75] Gandhi was aghast at this casual attitude that the religious preceptor displayed towards religion. Bose noted, ‘(he) asked him if it was any good saving one’s life (*jan*) by sacrificing one’s faith (*iman*)? It would have been much better if, as a religious preceptor, he had taught the Hindus to lay down their lives for their faith, rather than give it up through fear.’[76] The divine stuck to his position that such false conversions for saving one’s life had the sanction of religion. This angered Gandhi considerably and he lamented that if ‘ever he met God, he would ask Him why a man with such views had ever been made a religious preceptor’.[77]

This and other encounters made him realise that the acts of communal violence and attacks on religion during the riot had the strong sanction of the clerics and religious teachers. The large scale conversions were a living testimony of that. Therefore, he tried to invoke Islam itself, to counter the ideology seeking to premise itself on Islam. Requesting the Muslims to join the Peace Committees, he said: “It was only in order to serve the cause of Islam that the Muslims are being called to join the committees. The most important task is to restore the confidence among the Hindus that they would be able to pursue their religious practice in freedom.”[78]

In another place when he was describing his meeting with the Hindu women ‘who put on vermilion mark indoors but wipe it off when they stir out in public’, Gandhi invoked the name of the Prophet and Islam: I will ask my Mussalman friends to treat this as their sacred duty. The Prophet once advised Mussalmans to consider the Jewish places of worship to be as pure as their own, and offer it the same protection. It is the duty of the Mussalmans of today to assure the same freedom to their Hindu neighbours.[79]

He himself referred to Jinnah so that the local Muslim Leaguers did not commit misdeeds by using the latter’s name. He said, QaidiAzam Jinnah has said that every Muslim must show by his conduct that not a single non Muslim need be afraid of him, the latter would be guaranteed safety and protection. For, thus alone can the Mussalmans command honour and respect.[80]

He knew quite well that Jinnah held sway over the masses. So, his was a very practical realisation that he could not fight this battle by attacking Jinnah but rather by taking his name. His constant references to the Quran were also supportive of his argument that ‘if people had known the true meaning of their scriptures, happenings like those of Noakhali could never have taken place’.[81] In a talk with the villagers of Fatehpur, he appealed to their reason by saying: It is the easiest thing to harass the Hindus here, as you Muslims are in the majority. But is it just as honourable? Show me, please, if such a mean action is suggested anywhere in your Koran. I am a student of the Koran... So in all humility I appeal to you to dissuade your people from committing such crimes, so that your own future may be bright.[82]

One can discern from this narrative that while by advocating fearlessness, invoking a sense of responsibility and discoursing at a ethical moral plane, Gandhi was at the same time prioritizing

the ideological fight against the ideology that had created the circumstances in which violence of this kind took place. He, it seems, understood, from the very beginning, that the hegemony of communal ideology was partially a reflection of the socioeconomic structure of that society. And this was quite significant because his own earlier understanding of communalism was not as focused as it was beginning to look like now.[83] This makes his efforts at reconciliation a matter of not only historical importance but of significant contemporary relevance. It is here that the question of communal violence becomes quite crucial. Quite often historians and social scientists equate communal riots with communalism. They are however not the same thing—neither analytically nor in their nature. Violence in the form of the communal riot itself is not the cause of communalism; rather it is the product. Violence can certainly be a reflective index of the communalisation of society but there can be communalization without any violence. Therefore, escalated violence and its aggressive insensitivity indicate the intensity and depth of ideological penetration that has taken place. A discourse on violence without taking cognisance of the ideological apparatus is to naively ignore the entire process that went into making that violence. Discussing the role of ideology in shaping the Nazi violence in Germany, Lucy Davidovicz says: ‘In slighting the relationship between Nazi ideas and the bloody events that proceeded from them, the historian reduces his own capacity to explain Nazi Germany’s past.’[84] Communalism, given its ideological apparatuses, legitimises, sanctions and creates occasions for violence. And it is here that one needs to see that the reconciliation efforts should not merely attempt at stopping violence but try and critique the ideology that produces such violence.

References

Primary Sources

Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. lxxxvi

Bose, Nirmal Kumar, *My Days with Gandhi*, Orient Longman, Delhi, 1974

Newspaper

Star of India, English, 1946

Amrita Bazar Patrika, 1946

Secondary Sources

Bauman, Zygmunt *Modernity and the Holocaust*, London, 1989

Bose, Nirmal Kumar, *My Days With Gandhi*, Orient Longman

Bondurant, Joan, *Conquest of Non Violence*

Chakravarty, Gargi, *Gandhi and Communalism*, Delhi, 1988

Chatterjee, Joya, *Bengal Divide: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-47*, Cambridge, 1994

Das, Suranjan, *Communal Riot in Bengal, 1906-1947*, Delhi, 1992

Davidowicz, Lucy S., *The Holocaust and the Historian*, Cambridge, 1984 University Press, Cambridge, 1994

Gandhi, Rajmohan, *Good Boatman*, Viking, 1995

Gupta, A.K. ed., *Myth and Reality: The Struggle for Freedom in India, 1945-47*, Delhi, 1987

Jalal, Ayesha, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Partition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985

Mahajan, Sucheta, *Independence and Partition The Erosion of Colonial Power in India*, Delhi, 2000

Moon Penderal, Wavell, *The Viceroy's Journal*, Delhi, 1973
 Singh, Anita Inder, *The Origins of the Partition*, Delhi, 1989
 Pyarelal, Mahatma Gandhi, *The Last Phase, Book One, I*, Ahmedabad, 1958
 Tucker, F, *While Memory Serves*
 Or-Rashid, Harun, *Foreshadowing Bangladesh: Bengal Muslim League and Muslim Politics*, University Press Dacca, 1987

Endnotes

1. Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, London, 1989, p. 184
2. One can get a glimpse of the time through some of the historical narratives which also captures the complexities of the time and its politics. See A.K.Gupta, ed. *Myth and Reality: The Struggle for Freedom in India, 1945-47*, Delhi, 1987; Anita Inder Singh, *The Origins of the Partition Delhi, 1989*; Sucheta Mahajan, *Independence and Partition The Erosion of Colonial Power in India*, Delhi, 2000; Joya Chatterjee, *Bengal Divide: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-47*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994; Harun Or-Rashid, *Foreshadowing Bangladesh: Bengal Muslim League and Muslim Politics*, University Press Dacca, 1987
3. *Harijan*, 15 Sept. 1946, p. 312
4. Talk with a Muslim Friend, Sodpur, Calcutta, Nov.1, 1946, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (hereafter CWMG)*, Vol. LXXXVI, p. 65
5. *Ibid*
6. Gandhi to M. A. Jinnah, 15 Sept. 1944, N. N. Mitra, (ed.), *Indian Annual Register, 1944, Vol. II*, pp. 14014.
7. Bose, *My Days with Gandhi*, Orient Longman, 1974, p. 43
8. Speech at Dattapara, *CWMG*, Vol. LXXXVI, p.106
9. Bose, *My Days*, p. 43
10. *Harijan*, 10 Nov. 1946, p. 396. 'It was the cry of outraged womanhood that had peremptorily called him to Noakhali', *CWMG*, Vol. LXXXVI, p.65
11. Gandhi with Mahasabha leaders, 5 Dec. 1946, *CWMG*, Vol. LXXXVI, p. 200. See also N. K. Bose, *My Days*, p. 85
12. Bose, *ibid.*, p. 40
13. *Ibid.*, p. 62. His numerous letters written during this time indicate this uncertainty. See *CWMG*, Vol. LXXXVI, pp. 47-63
14. Bose, *My Days*, p. 85. See also *CWMG*, Vol. LXXXVI, p. 200
15. L.P.Singh, 'The Bihar Government's Case' 2 February 1947, *R.P. Papers, 6-B/46, Part I, s.No.1*, as cited in Sucheta Mahajan, *Independence and Partition The Erosion of Colonial Power in India*, Delhi, 2000, p.258 f.n.5
- 16 *Star of India*, Cal., 14 Nov. 1946, p. 1
17. See *Ibid.*, 6 Nov. 1946
18. See *Ibid.*, 14 Nov 1946, p.1
19. See Wavell to Pethick-Lawrence, 13 November 1946, N. Mansergh, (ed.), *TOP*, Vol. IX, pp. 5657
20. *Modern Review*, MarchOct. 1947, p. 174, as quoted in Suranjan Das, *Communal Riot in Bengal, 1906-1947*, Delhi, 1992, p. 202

21. Azad, Cal., 14 Dec. 1946, p. 1
22. Ibid
23. Gandhi to Feni M. L., 25 Dec. 1946, *CWMG*, Vol. LXXXVI, p. 265, f.n. 4
24. Ibid., pp. 265-266. See also N. K. Bose, *My Days*, p. 106
25. Bose, *My Days*, p. 109
26. Gandhi at Srirampur, 27 Dec. 1946, *CWMG*, Vol. LXXXVI, p. 280
27. Bose, *My Days*, p. 132
28. Ibid
29. Ibid
30. He visited 48 villages during his stay in Noakhali. He covered those Noakhali Tippera villages most affected by the riot, including Karpara and Devipur.
31. *CWMG*, Vol. LXXXVI, pp. 62;65;70
32. Letter to Suhrawardy, 8 Jan. 1947, *CWMG*, Vol. LXXXVI, p. 330. In fact in some villages when he reached, people had fled with the news of the arrival of police and Military.
33. Ibid.
34. F. Tucker, *While Memory Serves*, pp. 609-612. Pyarelal, Mahatma Gandhi, *The Last Phase, Book One, I*, Ahmedabad, 1958, p. 15. The colonial attitude can be contrasted here: He (Burrows) was relieved that G. (Gandhi) had left Bengal, it had taken 20 of his best police to protect him; and he was sarcastic over an American correspondent's article headed 'Gandhi walks alone'! (Penderal Moon, *Wavell: The Viceroy's Journal*, Delhi, 1973, p. 428.)
35. Ibid.
36. Gandhi's discussion with Mahasabha leaders, 5 December 1946, *CWMG*, Vol. LXXXVI, p. 199.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.
43. This validation, however, is not on the plea of pragmatism but on the argued and reasoned understanding of the emancipatory potential of any discourse, particularly when we are trying to understand two ideas like Nationalism and Communalism.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. Prayer Meeting, *Dattapara*, 12 Nov. 1946, *CWMG*, Vol. LXXXVI, p. 113
48. *Srirampur*, 22 Nov. 1946, *ibid.*, p. 145
49. *Dattapara*, 12 Nov. 1946, *ibid.*, p. 115
50. Gandhi's interview at Nabagram, 1 Feb. 1947, *CWMG*, Vol. LXXXVI, p. 416
51. Ibid
52. *Ibid.*, p. 417
53. Manu Behan Gandhi, *Lonely Pilgrim*, p. 81
54. Ibid
55. Bose, *My Days*, p. 126
56. Palla, 27 Jan. 1947, *CWMG*, Vol. LXXXVI, p. 397
57. *Ibid.*, pp. 397-98

58. Bhatialpur, 14 Jan. 1947, *CWMG*, Vol. LXXXVI, p. 353
59. Ibid
60. Ibid
61. Bose, *My Days*, p. 146
62. Ibid
63. Ibid., p. 147
64. Pyarelal, *Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 416
65. Bose, *My Days*, p. 84. He countered similar arguments from the Muslim quarter during his visit to the Bihar riot affected areas
66. Srirampur, 22 Nov. 1946, *CWMG*, Vol. LXXXVI, p. 145
67. Ibid
68. Ibid
70. Bose, *My Days*, p. 58
71. Pyarelal, *Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 399
72. Prayer meeting at Masimpur, 7 Jan. 1947, *CWMG*, Vol. LXXXVI, p. 323
73. Ibid., pp. 323-324
74. Bose, *My Days*, p. 130
75. Ibid
76. Ibid
77. Ibid
78. Ibid, p. 64
79. Ibid., pp. 64-65
80. Ibid., p. 65
81. Ibid., p. 57
82. Gandhi's talk at Fatehpur, 8 Jan. 1947, *CWMG*, Vol. LXXXVI, p. 328
83. Gargi Chakravarty, *Gandhi and Communalism*, Delhi, 1988
84. Lucy S. Davidowicz, *The Holocaust and the Historian*, Cambridge, 1984, p. 31