REFUGEES AND THE REPUBLIC

> Refugees are [being] sent all over India. They will scatter communal hatred on a wide scale and will churn up enormous ill-will everywhere. Refugees have to be looked after, but we have to take steps to prevent the infection of hatred beyond the necessary minimum which cannot be prevented.
>
> C. RAJAGOPALACHARI, governor of Bengal, 4 September 1947

> May the blood that flowed from Gandhiji's wounds and the tears that flowed from the eyes of the women of India everywhere they learnt of his death serve to lay the curse of 1947, and may the grisly tragedy of that year sleep in history and not colour present passions.
>
> C. RAJAGOPALACHARI, 20 March 1948

I

IN THE INDIAN IMAGINATION Kurukshetra occupies a special place. It was the venue for the bloody battles described in the epic Mahabharata. According to the epic, the fighting took place on an open plain northwest of the ancient city of Indraprastha (now known as Delhi). The plain was called Kurukshetra, a name it retains to this day.

Several thousand years after the Mahabharata was composed, the place of its enactment became the temporary home of the victims of another war.This, too, was fought between closely related kin: India and Pakistan, rather than Pandava and Kaurava. Many of the Hindus and Sikhs fleeing West Punjab were directed by the government of India to a refugee camp in Kurukshetra. A vast city of tents had grown up on the plain, to house waves of migrants, sometimes up to 20,000 a day. The camp was initially planned for 100,000 refugees, but it came to accommodate three times that number. As an American observer wrote, 'the army worked miracles to keep the tents rising ahead of the last refugees'. The new inhabitants of Kurukshetra consumed 100 tons of flour daily, along with large quantities of salt, rice, lentils, sugar and cooking oil – all provided free of charge by the government. Helping the state in their effort was a network of Indian and foreign social workers, the United Council for Relief and Welfare (UCRW).

The refugees had to be housed and fed, but also clothed and entertained. With winter approaching, the 'Government soon recognized that the evenings and nights were hardest to bear'. So the UCRW commandeered a bunch of film projectors from Delhi, and set them up in Kurukshetra. Among the movies shown were Disney specials featuring Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. With large cloth screens allowing for two-way projection, crowds of up to 15,000 could watch a single show. This 'two-hour break from reality', commented asocial worker, 'was a lifesaver. The refugees forgot their shock experiences and misery for two golden hours of laughter. Yes, they who had been bruised and beaten, were homeless and wounded, could laugh. Here was hope.'[1]

Kurukshetra was the largest of the nearly 200 camps set up to house refugees from West Punjab. Some refugees had arrived before the date of transfer of power; among them prescient businessmen

who had sold their properties in advance and migrated with the proceeds. However, the vast majority came after15 August 1947, and with little more than the clothes on their skin. These were the farmers who had 'stayed behind till the last moment, firmly resolved to remain in Pakistan if they could be assured of an honourable living'. But when, in September and October, the violence escalated in the Punjab, they had to abandon that idea. The Hindus and Sikhs who were lucky enough to escape the mobs fled to India by road, rail, sea and on foot.[2]

Camps such as Kurukshetra were but a holding operation. The refugees had to be found permanent homes and productive work. A journalist visiting Kurukshetra in December 1947 described it as a city in itself, with 300,000 people, all 'sitting idle like mad'. 'The one thought that dominates the peasant-refugees of Kurukshetra', he wrote,is '"Give us some land. We will cultivate it". That is what they shouted. These land-hungry peasants told us that they did not very much care where land was given to them provided [it] was cultivable. Their passion for land appeared to be elemental.[3]

As it happened, a massive migration had also taken place the other way, into Pakistan from India. Thus, the first place to resettle the refugees was on land vacated by Muslims in the eastern part of the Punjab. If the transfer of populations had been 'the greatest mass migration' in history, now commenced 'the biggest land resettlement operation in the world'. As against 2.7 million hectares abandoned by Hindus and Sikhs in West Punjab, there were only 1.9 million hectares left behind by Muslims in East Punjab. The shortfall was made more acute by the fact that the areas in the west of the province had richer soils, and were more abundantly irrigated. Indeed, back in the late nineteenth century, hundreds of Sikh villages had migrated *en masse* to the west to cultivate land in the newly created 'canal colonies'. There they had made the desert flourish, but one fine day in 1947 they were told that their garden now lay in Pakistan. So, in a bare two generations, these dispossessed Sikhs found themselves back in their original homes.

To begin with, each family of refugee farmers was given an allotment of four hectares, regardless of its holding in Pakistan. Loans were advanced to buy seed and equipment. While cultivation commenced on these temporary plots, applications were invited for permanent allotments. Each family was asked to submit evidence of how much land it had left behind. Applications were received from 10 March 1948; within a month, more than half a million claims had been filed. These claims were then verified in open assemblies consisting of other migrants from the same village. As each claim was read out by a government official, the assembly approved, amended, or rejected it.

Expectedly, many refugees were at first prone to exaggeration. However, every false claim was punished, sometimes by a reduction in the land allotted, in extreme cases by a brief spell of imprisonment. This acted as a deterrent; still, an officer closely associated with the process estimated that there was an overall inflation of about 25 per cent. To collect, collate, verify and act upon the claims a Rehabilitation Secretariat was set up in Jullundur. At its peak there were about 7,000 officials working here; they came to constitute a kind of refugee city of their own. The bulk of these officials were accommodated in tents, the camp serviced by makeshift lights and latrines and with temporary shrines, temples for Hindus and *gurdwaras* for Sikhs.

Leading the operations was the director general of rehabilitation, Sardar Tarlok Singh of the Indian Civil Service. A graduate of the London School of Economics, Tarlok Singh used his academic training to good effect, making two innovations that proved critical in the successful settlement of the refugees. These were the ideas of the 'standard acre' and the 'graded cut'. A 'standard acre' was defined as that amount of land which could yield ten to eleven *maunds* of rice. (A *maund* is about 40 kilograms.) In the dry, unirrigated districts of the east, four physical acres

comprised one ‘standard’ acre, whereas in the lush canal colonies, a real acre of land more or less equalled its standard counterpart.

The concept of the standard acre innovatively took care of the variations in soil and climate across the province.Theidea of the ‘graded cut’, meanwhile, helped overcome the massive discrepancy between the land left behind by the refugees and the land now available to them – a gap that was close to a million acres. For the first ten acres of any claim, a cut of 25 percent was implemented – thus one got only 7.5 acres instead of ten. For higher claims the cuts were steeper: 30 per cent for 10–30 acres, and on upwards, till those having in excess of 500 acres were ‘taxed at the rate of 95 per cent. The biggest single loser was a lady named Vidyawati, who had inherited (and lost) her husband’s estate of 11,500 acres, spread across thirty-five villages of the Gujranwala and Sialkot districts. In compensation, she was allotted a mere 835 acres in a single village of Karnal.

By November 1949 Tarlok Singh and his men had made 250,000 allotments of land. These refugees were then distributed equitably across the districts of East Punjab. Neighbours and families were resettled together, although the re-creation of entire village communities proved impossible. Refugees were invited to protest against their allotments; close to 100,000 families asked for a review. A third of these objections were acted upon; as a result, 80,000 hectares changed hands once again.

In exchange for their well-watered lands in the west, these refugees were given impoverished holdings in the east. With the implementation of graded cuts, they had less of it as well. But with characteristic ingenuity and enterprise they set to work, digging new wells, building new houses, planting their crops. By 1950 a depopulated countryside was alive once again.[4]

Yet a sense of loss persisted. The economy could be rebuilt,but the cultural wrongs of Partition could never be undone – not in, or by, either side. The Sikhs once more had land to cultivate, but they would never get back much-loved places of worship. These included the *gurdwara* in Lahore where lay buried their great warrior-chieftain, Ranjit Singh, as well as Nankana Sahib, the birthplace of the founder of the faith, Guru Nanak.

In April 1948 the editor of the Calcutta *Statesman* visited Nankana Sahib, where he met the handful of Sikhs permitted by Pakistan to stay on as guardians of the shrine. A few months later the journalist visited the centre of the Ahmadiya sect of Islam, the town of Qadian, which lay in the Indian Punjab. The great tower of the Ahmadiya mosque was visible from miles around, but with in its precincts there now lived only 300 of the faithful. Otherwise, the town had been taken over by 12,000 Hindu and Sikh refugees. In both Qadian and Nankana Sahib there was ‘the conspicuous dearth of daily worshippers, the aching emptiness, the sense of waiting, of hope and . . . of faith fortified by humbling affliction’.[5]

II

The bulk of the migrants from West Punjab were farmers; but there were also many who were artisans, traders and labourers. To accommodate them the government built brand-new townships. One, Farida-bad, lay twenty miles south of the nation’s capital, Delhi. Among the groups active here was the Indian Cooperative Union (ICU), an organization headed by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, a socialist and feminist who had been closely associated with Mahatma Gandhi.

The residents of Faridabad were mostly Hindu refugees from the North-West Frontier Province. A social worker named Sudhir Ghosh encouraged them to construct their own homes. However, the

government wished to build the houses through its Public Works Department (PWD), notorious for its sloth and corruption, widely known both as the 'Public Waste Department' and as 'Plunder Without Danger'. In protest a group of refugees besieged the prime minister's house in Delhi. They were a 'nuisance' to Nehru, who encountered them as he went to work every morning, but at least they made him 'think furiously of the problems' facing the refugees. In atypically Indian compromise, the refugees were allowed to build about 40 per cent of the houses, with the PWD constructing the rest.

In Faridabad, the ICU organized co-operatives and self-help groups, setting up shops and small production units. To power these, and to light up the homes, a diesel plant was erected at short notice. This plant lay in ashed in Calcutta, where it had come as part of German war reparations. No one wanted it in that city, so it was sent to Faridabad instead. Sudhir Ghosh located the German engineer who had built the plant in Hamburg, and persuaded him to come to India. The engineer came, but to his dismay no cranes were available to erect it. So he trained the Faridabad men to operate 15-tonne jack screws, which helped raise the equipment inch-by-inch. In ten months the plant was ready. In April 1951 Nehru himself came to commission it, and as he 'pressed the button, the lights came on and lifted the spirits of all in Faridabad. The township had power in its hands to fashion its industrial future.'[6]

Meanwhile, thousands of refugees had made their homes in Delhi itself. Till 1911 that city had been Muslim in character and culture. In that year, the British shifted their capital there from Calcutta. After 1947 New Delhi became the seat of the government of free India. Urdu-speaking Muslims went away to Pakistan, many unwillingly, while Punjabi-speaking Hindus and Sikhs arrived in their place. They set up house, and shop, wherever they could. In the middle of the city lay Connaught Circus, a majestic shopping arcade designed by R. T. Russell. Had Russell ever seen what became of his creation, he would perhaps have been 'spinning in his grave like a dervish'. In 1948 and 1949, 'stalls and push-carts of every size and shape' had been set up along the pavements. Thus, 'what was once a shaded walk where the stopper could stroll at leisure, inspecting the goods on offer and not meeting an insistent salesman, unless he or she went into a store, has become pandemonium . . . All in all, the exclusive shopping district of New Delhi, which in pre-independence days catered to the elite and wealthy, is now just a glorified bazaar.'[7]

Almost half amillion refugees came to settle in Delhi after Partition. They flooded the city, 'spreading themselves out wherever they could. They thronged in camps, schools, colleges, temples, *gurdwaras*, *dharamshalas*, military barracks, and gardens. They squatted on railway platforms, streets, pavements, and every conceivable space.' In time, these squatters built houses on land allotted to them to the west and south of Lutyens's Delhi.Here rose colonies that to this day are dominated by Punjabis: *nagars* or townships named after Patel, Rajendra (Prasad) and Lajpat (Rai), Hindu Congress leaders they particularly admired.

Like their counterparts settled on the farms of East Punjab, the refugees in Delhi displayed much thrift and drive. In time they came to gain 'a commanding influence in Delhi', dominating its trade and commerce. Indeed, a city that was once a Mughal city, then a British city, had by the 1950s emphatically become a Punjabi city.[8]

III

Like Delhi, the city of Bombay also had its culture and social geography transformed by Partition. By July 1948 there were half a million refugees in the city, these arriving from Sindh, Punjab and the

Frontier. The refugees further intensified what was already the most acute of Bombay's problems: the housing shortage. Almost a million people were now sleeping on the pavements. Slums were growing apace. In crowded tenements, people lived fifteen or twenty to a room.[9]

One journalist claimed that the total losses of Sindh refugees were Rs4,000–5,000 million, since back home they had owned large amounts of land, dominated the public services and controlled business and trade. Whereas the Punjabi refugees now had East Punjab as their own, to fulfil there 'the essentials of an independent corporate existence and the attributes of an autonomous Government', the Sindh is had nothing similar on which to rebuild.[10] Some looked beseechingly or angrily to the state; others took matters into their own hands. Thus, in Bombay, it was 'a sight to see even little Sindhi boys hawking pieces of cloth in the thoroughfares of the city. They have got salesmanship in their blood. That is why the Gujaratis and Maharashtrians have not taken kindly to the Sindhi invader. Even little urchins from the backwoods of Sind are able to make a living by selling trinkets in suburban trains.[11]

There were five refugee camps in Bombay. Their condition left much to be desired. The Kolwada camp had 10,400 people living in barracks. The average space allotted to each family was thirty-six square feet. There were only twelve water taps in the entire camp, no doctors, only one school and no electricity. The place was run in dictatorial fashion by a man named Pratap Singh. In April 1950 a minor riot broke out when some tenants refused to pay rent, protesting their living conditions. Pratap Singh had them served with an eviction order, and when they resisted, called in the police. In the ensuing affray a young man was killed. The journalist reporting the story appropriately called the residents of the camp 'inmates'; as he noted, 'other inmates [were] huge cat-sized ugly rats, bugs, mosquitoes, and snakes'.[12]

The refugees from Sindh spread themselves across the towns and cities of western India. Apart from Bombay, there were substantial communities in Pune and Ahmedabad. A social psychologist visiting them in the autumn of 1950 found the Sindh is deeply dissatisfied. The 'complaints of crowded, filthy quarters, inadequate water, insufficient rations, and above all, insufficient support from the government, are almost universal'. A refugee in Ahmedabad said that 'we are eating stuff which we used to throw away in Pakistan for the birds to eat'. Others complained of ill treatment by the local Gujaratis, and were particularly hostile towards the Muslims. And they fulminated against the Indian state, although they exonerated Nehru himself. 'Our government is useless,' they said. 'All are thieves collected together. Only Pandit [Nehru] is all right; the rest are all worthless and self-serving. The Pandit himself says what he can do; the rest of the machinery does not work.'[13]

IV

The influx of refugees also transformed the landscape of India's third great metropolis, Calcutta. Before Partition, the more prosperous Hindu families of eastern Bengal had begun moving with their assets to the city. After Partition the immigration was chiefly of working-class and farming families. Unlike in the Punjab, where the exodus happened in one big rush, in Bengal it was spread out. However, in the winter of 1949–50 there was a wave of communal riots in East Pakistan which forced many more Hindus across the border. In previous years about 400,000 refugees came into West Bengal; in 1950 the number jumped to 1.7 million.

Where did these people seek refuge? Those who could, stayed with relatives. Others made a home on the city's railway stations, where their beds, boxes and other accessories lay spread out on

the platform. Here 'families lived, slept, mated, defecated and ate on the concrete amidst flies, lice, infants and diarrhoea. Victims of cholera would lie exhausted staring at their vomit, women were kept busy delousing each other, beggars begged.' Still others lived on the street, 'with the stray cattle, like the stray cattle, drinking gutter-water, eating garbage, sleeping on the curb . . .'[14]

So wrote the *Manchester Guardian* correspondent in India. In truth, the refugees were a good deal less passive than this description suggests.

Early in 1948 a 'large number of refugees, disgusted with their miserable existence at Sealdah station, occupied the Lake military barracks, Jodhpur military barracks, the Mysore House and other large unoccupied houses and military barracks at Shahpur, Durgapur, Ballygunge Circular Road and Dharmatala. Almost overnight these deserted houses swarmed with refugee men, women and children. These were deliberate acts of trespass.'[15]

Where some refugees took possession of empty houses, others colonized vacant land along roads and railway lines, as well as freshly cleared shrub jungle and recently drained marshes. The squatters 'would stealthily enter these plots at night, and under cover of darkness rapidly put up makeshift shelters. They would then refuse to leave, while offering in many instances to pay a fair price for the land.'[16]

It was the government of West Bengal that willy-nilly forced the refugees to take the law into their own hands. For one thing, there had been no massive migration in the other direction – as there had been in the Punjab – leaving untended fields and farms for the refugees to be settled in. For another, the government liked to believe – or hope – that this influx was temporary, and that when things settled down the Hindus would return to their homes in the east. Buttressing this belief was the claim that the Bengalis were somehow less 'communal-minded' than the Punjabis. Here, the Muslim spoke the same language and ate the same food as his Hindu neighbour; thus he might more readily continue to live cheek-by-jowl with him.

This latter argument was vigorously rejected by the refugees themselves. For them there was no going back to what they saw as an Islamic state. They found support for their views in the person of the historian Sir Jadunath Sarkar, arguably the most influential Bengali intellectual of his generation. Addressing a mammoth public meeting of refugees, held on 16 August 1948, Sir Jadunath compared the migration of East Bengal Hindus to the flight of French Huguenots in the time of Louis XIV. He urged the people of West Bengal to absorb and integrate the migrants, thus to nourish their culture and economy. With the help of the refugees, said the historian, 'we must make our West Bengal what Palestine under Jewish Rule will be, a light in darkness, an oasis of civilisation in the desert of medieval ignorance and obsolete theocratic bigotry'.[17]

In September 1948 an All-Bengal Refugee Council of Action was formed. Marches and demonstrations were organized demanding that the refugees be given fair compensation and citizenship rights. The leaders of the movement aimed to throw 'regimented bands of refugees in the streets of Calcutta and to maintain a relentless pressure on the Government . . . Processions, demonstrations and meetings, traffic jams, brickbats and teargas shells and *lathis* [bamboo sticks used by the police as weapons]coming down in showers, burning tramcars and buses, and occasional firings – these became the hallmark of the city.'[18]

Displaced from their homes by forces outside their control, refugees everywhere are potential fodder for extremist movements. In Delhi and the Punjab it was the radical Hindu organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, that very early on got a foothold among the migrants. In Bengal the RSS's sister organization, the Hindu Mahasabha, also worked hard at giving a religious colour to the problem. The Bengali Hindus, they said, 'have been made sacrificial goats in the great Yajna of

India's freedom'. In asking them to return to East Pakistan, the government was guilty of 'appeasement' and of abetting 'genocide' While the state asked them to submit, what the refugees needed was a stiff dose of 'the virility of man'. 'One only wishes', wrote one angry Hindu in March 1950, that 'a Shivaji or a Rana Pratap emerged from their ranks'.[19]

This invocation of medieval Hindu warriors who had fought Muslim kings found more takers in Delhi and the Punjab. In Bengal, however, it was the communists who most successfully mobilized the refugees. It was they who organized the processions to government offices, and it was they who orchestrated the forcible occupation of fallow land in Calcutta, land to which the refugees 'had no sanction other than organized strength and dire necessity'. Thus in differentparts of the city grew numerous impromptu settlements, 'clusters of huts with thatch, tile or corrugated-iron roofs, bamboo-mat walls and mud floors, built in the East Bengal style'.[20]

By early 1950 there were about 200,000 refugees in these squatter colonies. In the absence of state support, the refugees 'formed committees of their own, framed rules for the administration of the colonies and organised themselves into a vast united body'.[21] A 'South Calcutta Refugee Rehabilitation Committee' claimed to represent 40,000 families who, in their respective colonies, had constructed a total of 500 miles of road, sunk 700 tube wells and started 45 high schools as well as 100 primary schools – all at their own expense and through their own initiative. The Committee demanded that the government make these colonies 'legal by formally bringing them under the Calcutta Municipality, that it similarly regularize private plots and school buildings, and help develop markets and arrange loans.[22]

Those who spoke for these migrants frequently complained about the preferential treatment given to the Punjabi refugees. A team of Bengali social workers visiting north India found the camps there 'of a superior kind'. The houses were permanent, with running water and adequate sanitation; whereas in West Bengal the refugees had to make do with 'decaying bamboo hutments' where 'lack of privacy and of kitchen space is notorious'. Cash and clothing allowances were also higher in the north. [23]

On the whole, the resettlement process was far less painful in the Punjab. By the early 1950s the refugees in the north had found new homes and new jobs. But in the east the insecurity persisted. So long as the Bengali refugees remained 'unsettled and unemployed, wrote one correspondent in July 1954, 'economic and political discontent will grow; the Communists will succeed in exploiting their grievances'.[24]

V

Unquestionably the main victims of Partition were women: Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim. As the respected Sindhi Congress politician Choitram Gidwani put it, 'in no war have the women suffered so much'. Women were killed, maimed, violated and abandoned. After Independence the brothels of Delhi and Bombay came to be filled with refugee women, who had been thrown out by their families after what someone else had done to them – against their will.[25]

In the summer of 1947, as the violence in the Punjab spread from village to village, Hindus and Sikhs in the east of the province abducted and kept Muslim women. On the other side the compliment – if it may be called that – was returned, with young Hindu and Sikh girls seized by Muslim men. However, after the dust had settled down and the blood dried, the governments of India and Pakistan agreed that these captured women must be returned to their original families.

On the Indian side, the operation to recover abducted women was led by Mridula Sarabhai and Rameshwari Nehru. Both came from aristocratic homes and both had sturdily nationalist credentials. Their work was encouraged and aided by Jawaharlal Nehru, who took a deep personal interest in the process. In a radio broadcast to the refugees, the prime minister spoke especially 'to those women who are the victims of all these hardships'. He assured them that 'they should not feel that we have any hesitation whatsoever in bringing them back or that we have any doubts about their virtue. We want to bring them back with affection because it had not been their fault. They were forcefully abducted and we want to bring them back respectfully and keep them lovingly. They must not doubt that they will come back to their families and be given all possible help.'[26]

The abducted women were tracked down singly, case by case. When a person had been located, the police would enter the village at sunset, after the men had returned from the fields. An 'informer' would lead them to the home of the abductor. The offender would usually deny that the woman in his possession had been seized. After his objections were overcome -sometimes by force – the woman would be taken away, at first to a government camp, and then across the border.[27]

By May 1948 some 12,500 women had been found and restored to their families. Ironically, and tragically, many of the women did not want to be rescued at all. For after their seizure they had made some kind of peace with their new surroundings. Now, as they were being reclaimed, these women were deeply unsure about how their original families would receive them. They had been 'defiled' and, in a further complication, many were pregnant. These women knew that even if they were accepted, their children – born out of a union with the 'enemy' – would never be. Often, the police and their accomplices had to use force to take them away. 'You could not save us then', said the women, 'what right have you to compel us now?'[28]

VI

Compounding the refugee crisis were serious shortages of food. After the end of the war imports of grain were steadily on the rise, increasing from 0.8 million tons (mt) in 1944 to 2.8 mt four years later. On the eve of Independence a politician traveling through the district of East Godavari found men and women surviving on tamarind seeds, palmyra fruits, and the bark of the *jeelugu* tree – these boiled together into gruel, eating which led to bloated stomachs, diarrhoea and sometimes death. The following year the rainsfailed in the western province of Gujarat, leading to acute waterandfodder scarcity. Wells and river beds ran dry, and cattle and goats died ofhunger and disease.[29]

In some places farmers were starving; in other places they were restive. In the uncertainty following the Indian takeover of Hyderabad, the communists moved swiftly to assume control of the Telengana region. They were aided by a pile of .303 rifles and Mark V guns left behind by the retreating Razakars. The communists destroyed the palatial homes of landlords and distributed their land to tillers of the soil. Dividing themselves into several *dalams*,or groups, each responsible for a number of villages, the communists asked peasants not to pay land revenue, and enforced law and order themselves.[30] In districts such as Warangal and Nalgonda, their work at getting rid of feudalism won the Reds much support. A Congress politician visiting the area admitted that 'every housewife silently rendered valuable assistance to the communists. Innocent looking villagers extended active sympathy to [them].'[31]

Their successes in Hyderabad had encouraged the communists to think of a countrywide peasant revolution. Telengana, they hoped, would be the beginning of a Red India. The party unveiled its new

line at a secret conference held in Calcutta in February 1948. The mood was set by a speaker who said that the 'heroic people of Telengana' had shown the way 'to freedom and real democracy'; they were the 'real future of India and Pakistan'. If only the communist cadres could 'create this spirit of revolution among the masses, among the toiling people, we shall find reaction collapsing like ahouse of cards'.[32]

At the Calcutta meeting, the party elected anewgeneral secretary, with P. C. Joshi giving way to B. T. Ranadive. By character, Ranadive was solemn and studious, unlike the playful and likeable Joshi. (Both, notably, were upper caste Hindus – as was typical of communist leaders of the day.)[33]

Joshi was a friend of Nehru who urged 'loyal opposition' to the ruling Congress Party. He argued that after the murder of Gandhi the survival of free India was at stake. He supervised the production of a party pamphlet whose title proclaimed, *We Shall Defend the Nehru Government* (against the forces of Hindu revivalism). Ranadive, however, was a hardliner who believed that India was controlled by a bourgeois government that was beholden to the imperialists. Now, in a complete about-turn, the party described Nehru as alackey of American imperialism. The pamphlet printed by the former general secretary was pulped. Joshi himself was demoted to a status of an ordinary member and a whole series of charges were levelled against him. He was dubbed a reformist who had encouraged the growth of 'anti-revolutionary' tendencies in the party.[34]

The new line of the Communist Party of India held that Nehru's government had joined the Anglo-American alliance in an 'irreconcilable conflict' with the 'democratic camp' led by the Soviet Union. The scattered disillusionment with the Congress was taken by B. T. Ranadive as a sign of a 'mounting revolutionary upsurge'. From his underground hideout he called for a general strike and peasant uprisings across the country. Communist circulars urged their cadres to 'fraternize with the revolutionary labourers in the factories and the students in the streets', and to 'turn your guns and bayonets and fire upon the Congress fascists'. The ultimate aim was to 'destroy the murderous Congress government'[35]

Ranadive and his men took heart from the victory of the communists in China. In September 1949, shortly after Mao Zedong had come to power, Ranadive wrote him a letter of congratulation, saying that 'the toiling masses of India feel jubilant over this great victory. They know it hastens their own liberation. They are inspired by it to fight more determinedly and courageously their battle for ending the present regime [in India] and establishing the rule of People's Democracy.'[36] The Indian communists were also egged on by Russian theoreticians, who believed that 'the political regime established in India is similar in many respects to the anti-popular, reactionary regime which existed in Kuomintang China'.[37] The Soviet embassy in Delhi itself had a large staff, such that (in the words of a senior civil servant) the Indian 'communist movement [was] receiving first-class direction on the spot'.[38]

The communists had declared war on the Indian state. The government responded with all the force at its command. As many as 50,000 party men and sympathizers were arrested and detained. In Hyderabad the police arrested important leaders of communist *dalams*, although Ravi Narayan Reddy, 'the father of the Communist movement in Deccan, [was] still at large'. The military governor, J. N. Chaudhuri, launched a propaganda war against the communists. Telugu pamphlets dropped on the villages announced that the Nizam's private Crown lands would be distributed to the peasantry. Theatrical companies touring the villages presented the government case through drama and pantomime. In one play, Chaudhuri was portrayed as a Hindu deity; the communists, as demons.[39]

The propaganda and the repression had its effect. The membership of the party dropped from 89,000 in 1948 to a mere 20,000 two years later. The government's counter-offensive had exposed

the 'lack of popular empathy it experienced for its unbridled revolutionism'. It appears the party had grossly underestimated the hold of the Congress over the Indian people.[40]

Even as the communists were losing their influence, a band of extremists was gathering strength on the right. This was the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. After the murder of Mahatma Gandhi in January 1948, the RSS was banned by the government. Although not directly involved in the assassination, the organization had been active in the Punjab violence, and had much support among disaffected refugees. Their worldview was akin to Nathuram Godse's, and it was widely rumoured that RSS men had privately celebrated his killing of the Mahatma. Writing to the Punjab government two weeks after Gandhi's death, Nehru said that 'we have had enough suffering already in India because of the activities of the R.S.S. and like groups . . . These people have the blood of Mahatma Gandhi on their hands, and pious disclaimers and disassociation now have no meaning.'[41]

So the RSS was banned, and its cadres arrested. However, after a year the government decided to make the organization legal once more. Its head, M. S. Golwalkar, had now agreed to ask his men to profess loyalty to the Constitution of India and the national flag, and to restrict the Sangh's activities 'to the cultural sphere abjuring violence or secrecy'. The RSS chief promised the home minister, Vallabhbhai Patel, that 'while rendering help to the people in distress, we have laid our emphasis on promoting peace in the country' . Patel himself had mixed feelings about the RSS. While deploring their anti-Muslim rhetoric he admired their dedication and discipline. In lifting the ban on the Sangh, he advised them 'that the only way for them is to reform the Congress from within, if they think the Congress is going on the wrong path'.[42]

After the RSS was made legal, Golwalkar made a 'triumphal' speaking tour across the country, drawing 'mammoth crowds' The Sangh, wrote one observer, 'has emerged from its recent ordeal with a mass support that other parties, not excluding the Congress, might well envy and guard against, while it is yet time, unless they wish to see the country delivered to a Hindu irredentism that will lead it to certain disaster'. The RSS was the Hindu answer to the Muslim League, 'imbued with aggressively communal ideas, and with the determination that there must be no compromise with the ideal of apure and predominant Hindu culture in Bharat-Varsh'[43]

Like the communist B. T. Ranadive, Golwalkar was an upper caste Maharashtrian. Both men were relatively young – in their early forties – and both commanded the loyalty of hundreds of cadres a good deal younger than themselves. The RSS and the communists likewise drew upon the energy and idealism of youth, and upon its fanaticism too. In the early years of Indian independence, these two groups were the most motivated opponents of the ruling Congress Party.

At the helm of the Congress was the Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. In confronting the radicals of left and right, Nehru faced two major handicaps. First, he was a moderate, and the middle ground is generally not conducive to the kind of stirring rhetoric that compels men to act. Second, he and his colleagues were far older than their political rivals. In 1949 Nehru himself was sixty, an age at which a Hindu male is supposed to retire from the workaday world and take *sanyas*.

Nehru saw the RSS as the greater of the two threats. Others in his government, notably Vallabhbhai Patel, disagreed. Intriguingly, M. S. Golwalkar had written to Patel offering help in battling the common enemy – the communists. 'If we utilize the power of your government and the cultural strength of our organization', he wrote, 'we will be able to get rid of the [Red] menace very soon.'[44] This idea of a joint front appealed to Patel; indeed, it may have been one reason he contemplated absorbing the RSS within the Congress.

In the event, members of the RSS were not admitted into the Congress. But Golwalkar remained at large, free to propagate his views to those who chose to hear them. In the first week of November

1949, the RSS chief addressed a crowd of 100,000 in Bombay's Shivaji Park. A reporter in attendance described him as 'a man of medium height with a sunken chest, long uncut and unkempt hair and a flowing beard'. He looked for all the world like a harmless Hindu ascetic, except that 'the black piercing eyes deep in the sockets gave the [RSS] Chief the typical look of a black magician about to pull out a blood-curdling trick'. Before he spoke, Golwalkar was presented with garlands by clubs specializing in body-building and the martial arts. The speech itself 'waxed hot on the virtues of Hindu culture. As the reporter put it: 'He had a cure-all for the ills of the nation: Make Golwalkar the Führer of All India'[45]

A week later Jawaharlal Nehru came to speak in Bombay. The venue was the same as for Golwalkar: Shivaji Park, that oasis of green grass in the heart of the densely packed, middle-class, chiefly Marathi-speaking housing colonies of central Bombay. Nehru used the same microphone as Golwalkar, this supplied by the Motwane Chicago Telephone and Radio Company. But his message was emphatically different, for he spoke of the need to maintain social peace within India as well as peace between warring nations abroad.

Nehru's talk was delivered on his sixtieth birthday, 14 November 1949. He could not have wished for a better present: the abundant affection of his countrymen. The prime minister was due to arrive in Bombay at 4.30 p.m. An hour before his plane landed at Santa Cruz airport, 'people started closing their shops and stopped working so that they might be able to see Pandit Nehru. They jammed the sidewalks and the streets long before the open maroon car carrying Panditji sped by. As he passed by a tumultuous waving and rejoicing was noticed.'

An hour later, after awash and a change, Nehru arrived at Shivaji Park. Here, 'a record crowd [had]stampeded the vast maid an grounds to hear him. More than six lakhs [600,000] assembled that memorable evening. There was one seething mass of humanity; men, women and children who had come . . . to hear him for they still had faith in his leadership and ability to show the way in these hard and trying times ahead of us.'[46]

A hundred thousand people had come to hear Golwalkar espouse the idea of a Hindu theocratic state for India. But in this Maharashtrian stronghold, six times as many came to cheer the prime minister's defence of democracy against absolutism, and secularism against Hindu chauvinism. In this contest between competing ideas of India, Jawaharlal Nehru was winning hands down; for the time being, at any rate.

VII

Like the integration of the princely states, the rehabilitation of refugees was a political problem unprecedented in nature and scope. The migrants into India from Pakistan, wrote one of their number, were 'like the fallen autumn leaves in the wind or bits of stray newspaper flying hither and thither in the blown dust'. For 'those who have come away safe in limb and mind are without any bearings and without any roots'.[47]

The refugees who came into India after Independence numbered close to 8 million. This was greater than the populations of small European countries such as Austria and Norway, and as many as lived in the colossal continent of Australia. These people were resettled with time, cash, effort and, not least, idealism.

There was indeed much heroism and grandeur in the building of a new India. There were also errors and mistakes, loose ends that remained untied. There was pain and suffering in the

extinguishing of the princely order, and there was pain and suffering in the resettlement of the refugees. Yet both tasks were, in the end, accomplished.

Notably, the actors in this complicated and tortuous process were all Indian. This, at least on the British side, was completely unanticipated. A former governor of Bengal had written in 1947 of how

> The end of British political control in India will not mean the departure of the British, as individuals, from India. It will not be possible for many years ahead for India to do without a large number of British individuals in government service. They will remain under contract to the Government of India and to the governments of the Provinces and States in a wide range of administrative, legal, medical, police and professional and technical appointments. It will be many years before India will be able to fill, from amongst her own sons, all the many senior positions under the government that the administration of her 400 million people makes necessary.[48]

In the event, that help was not asked for, nor was it needed. Admittedly, the rulers had left behind a set of functioning institutions: the civil service and the police, the judiciary and the railways, among others. At Independence, the government of India invited British members of the ICS to stay on; with but the odd exception, they all left for home, along with their colleagues in the other services. Thus it came to be that the heroes remembered in these pages were all Indians – whether politicians like Nehru and Patel, bureaucrats like Tarlok Singh and V. P. Menon, or social workers like Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya and Mridula Sarabhai. So too were the countless others who were unnamed then and continue to be unknown now: the officials who took in and acted upon applications for land allotment, the officials who built the housesand ran the hospitals and schools, the officials who sat in courts and secretariats. Also overwhelmingly Indian were the social workers who cajoled, consoled and cared for the refugees.

An American architect who worked in India in the early years of Independence has written with feeling of the calibre and idealism of those around him. ‘The number and kinds of people I’ve seen’, wrote Albert Mayer, ‘their ability, outlook, energy, and devotion; the tingling atmosphere of plans and expectation and uncertainty; and yet the calm and self-possession – what it adds up to is being present at the birth of a nation.’[49]

In the history of nation-building only the Soviet experiment bears comparison with the Indian. There too, a sense of unity had to be forged between many diverse ethnic groups, religions, linguistic communities and social classes. The scale – geographic as well as demographic – was comparably massive. The raw material the state had to work with was equally unpropitious: a people divided by faith and riven by debt and disease.

India after the Second World War was much like the Soviet sssUnion after the First. A nation was being built out of its fragments. In this case, however, the process was unaided by the extermination of class enemies or the creation of gulags.