MINDING THE MINORITIES

The first law of decency is to preserve the liberty of others.

FRIEDRICH SCHILLER

I

ON THE AFTERNOON OF 27 May 1964, as the news of Jawaharlal Nehru's death spread through New Delhi, one of the people it reached was an American graduate student named Granville Austin. Austin was writing a thesis on the making of the Indian Constitution, and thus had a more than ordinary interest in what Nehru stood for. He made his way to Teen Murti House, there to join an already large crowd of Indian mourners. As Austin wrote in his diary the next day, 'all wanted to go in, but they were prepared to wait'. The crowd stood, 'orderly and not noisy', as diplomats and ministers were ushered in by the prime minister's staff. Among the VIPs was Dr Syed Mahmud, a veteran freedom fighter who had been with Nehru at Cambridge and in jail. Like the others, he had to disembark from his car and walk up the steeply sloping lawn that fronted the prime minister's residence. Austin saw a weeping Mahmud given a helping hand by Jagjivan Ram, a senior Congress politician and Cabinet minister of low-caste origin. This was truly 'a scene symbolic of Nehru's India: a Muslim aided by an Untouchable coming to the home of a caste Hindu'.[1]

Between them, Muslims and Untouchables constituted a quarter of the population in free India. Before 1947, two leaders had most seriously challenged the Congress's claims to represent all of India. One was a Muslim, M. A. Jinnah, who argued that the party of Gandhi and Nehru represented only the Hindus. The other was a former Untouchable, B. R. Ambedkar, who added the devastating rider that the Congress did not represent all Hindus, but only the upper castes among them.

These claims were stoutly resisted. Gandhi himself had struggled against untouchability from long before Ambedkar had entered politics. And he had given his life in the cause of Hindu—Muslim harmony. For the Mahatma, *swaraj* (freedom) would have meaning only if it came to all Indians, regardless of caste or creed (or gender).

These were commitments Jawaharlal Nehru shared with Gandhi. In other matters, he might have been a somewhat wayward disciple. With his fellow intellectuals he chose to take India down the road of industrial modernization, rather than nurture a village-centred economy (as Gandhi would have wanted). But when it came to preserving the rights of minorities he stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the Mahatma. His was likewise a nationalism that was both composite as well as egalitarian.

Inspired by Gandhi, and guided by Nehru, the Indian Constitution both abolished untouchability and proclaimed the state neutral in matters of religion. Such was the law; how was the practice? Among all the tests faced by the new state this, perhaps, was the sternest. Since Hindus were both in a numerical majority and in positions of political pre-eminence, the idea of India would stand scrutiny only if they respected the rights and liberties of Indians different from themselves.

II

The idea of Pakistan had as its justification the need for minorities to be free of the fear of Hindu domination. Paradoxically, though, the state of Pakistan was created out of Muslim majority areas where this problem did not exist in the first place.

After 1947 there were large populations of Muslims scattered all over peninsular India – as they had been before that date. Several million Muslims migrated across the borders to East and West Pakistan, but many more than this elected to stay behind in India. The creation of Pakistan had made their position deeply vulnerable. This was the view, ironically, of two men who had played critical roles in the making of Pakistan: the Bengali Muslim Leaguer H. S. Suhrawardy and his United Provinces counterpart Chaudhry Khaliquzzaman. On 10 September 1947 – less than a month after Independence and Partition – Suhrawardy wrote to Khaliquzzaman in horror that 'the Muslims in the Indian Union have been left high and dry'. The antagonism caused by the formation of Pakistan had been heightened by the flight into India of Hindu and Sikh refugees. Suhrawardy now feared that 'there may be a general conflagration which can well destroy the Muslim minority in the Indian Union'. As for Khaliquzzaman, he had reached the melancholy conclusion that 'the partition of India [had] proved positively injurious to the Muslims of India, and on along-term basis for Muslims everywhere'.

To protect their interests and their lives – Suhrawardy drafted 'a declaration of co-operation and mutual assistance between the two Dominions', committing both to protecting their minorities and to not making provocative statements against each other. Suhrawardy got Gandhi to endorse the declaration, but failed to get Jinnah to consent, despite begging him to do so, 'for the sake of the helpless and hapless Muslims of the Indian Union'.[2]

As we have seen, the creation of Pakistan provided a fillip to the forces of Hindu communalism. The RSS and its ilk could now argue that the Muslims were betrayers who had divided the nation. In the view of the extremist Hindu, these Muslims should either go to Pakistan or face the consequences. The RSS grew in strength immediately after Partition, and although the murder of Gandhi in January 1948 stemmed its rise, the organization continued to exercise considerable influence in northern and western India.

Truth be told, there were chauvinists within the ruling Congress itself, men who were not completely convinced of the loyalty of Muslims to the new nation. Some were in positions of high authority. The governor of Bihar warned the owners of the great steel mill in Jamshed-pur that their Muslim employees would leave for Pakistan, but destroy the machinery before going. There were other such rumours floating around the town, but the factory owners stayed steadfast, issuing a notice that they had no intention of dismissing their Muslim employees or of promoting communal disunity among the workforce.[3]

The deep insecurity of the Indian Muslim was foregrounded in a survey conducted by an American psychologist in 1950. His Muslim interviewees – who were from towns in north and west India – were beset by fear and suspicion. 'We are regarded as Pakistani spies', said one. 'It is dangerous to live in a Hindu locality because they may abduct and rape our women', said a second. 'Hindus charge heavy black market prices for goods they sell to Muslims', said a third.[4]

III

Among those who did not wholly trust the Muslims was Vallabhbhai Patel, Home Minister of India. Patel remembered that the majority of Muslims had voted for the League in 1946, even in areas which

would not form part of Pakistan. After the two states were created he remained suspicious of those who had stayed behind. In a speech at Lucknow in early January 1948 he reminded his audience that it was in that town that 'the foundation of the two-nation theory was laid'. For it was the UP intellectuals who had claimed that 'Muslims were a separate nation'. Now, for those who had chosen not to go to Pakistan, it was not enough to give 'mere declarations of loyalty to the Indian Union , they 'must give *practical proof* of their declarations'.[5]

Later that year, the secretary of Patel's Home Ministry wrote to the secretaries of all other departments, drawing their attention

> to one aspect of security which has assumed urgency and importance in the present context of relations with Pakistan. There is growing evidence that a section of Muslims in India is out of sympathy with the Government of India, particularly because of its policy regarding Kashmir and Hyderabad, and is actively sympathetic to Pakistan. Such Government servants are likely to be useful channels of information and would be particularly susceptible to the influence of their relatives.
>
> It is probable that among Muslim employees of Government there are some who belong to these categories. It is obvious that they constitute a dangerous element in the fabric of administration; and it is essential that they should not be entrusted with any confidential or secret work or allowed to hold key posts. For this purpose I would request you to prepare lists of Muslim employees in your Ministry and in the offices under your control, whose loyalty to the Dominion of India is suspected or who are likely to constitute a threat to security. These lists should be carefully prepared and scrutinised by the Heads of Departments or other higher authority, and should be used for the specific purposes of excluding persons from holding key posts or handling confidential or secret work.
>
> I need scarcely add that I am sure you will see that there is no witch hunting; and that only genuine cases are included in the lists. Those who are loyal and whose work is satisfactory should of course be given every cause to feel that their claims are no less than those of men belonging to the majoritycommunity.[6]

This was an extraordinary letter, which sparked, if not a witch-hunt, an energetic attempt to seek out traces of disloyalty among the Muslim employees of the government of India. Consider the case of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), which had numerous Muslim employees, these entrusted with the upkeep of the great buildings of medieval India. When passed this letter by the education secretary, the ASI's director general wrote to his circle heads asking them to furnish lists of Muslim employees, those loyal to the Dominion of India, and those 'likely to constitute a danger to security'. The circle heads then commenced secret investigations among their staff, the results of which were communicated back to headquarters. Half a century later, their reports make for interesting and in some cases chilling reading.

Several heads wrote back saying that they did not personally distrust any of their employees. However, they were pressured to transfer those likely to be in a position of vulnerability. The major of an infantry unit in Bijapur had advised the ASI that the custodian of the Gol Gumbuz was 'not considered reliable'; he, apparently, had relatives in Hyderabad, a state which was refusing to join the Union. The custodian was then transferred to the Kanheri Caves in Bombay.

The most detailed report came from the superintendent of the northern circle, headquartered in Agra, and which had within its purview the Taj Mahal and Fatehpur Sikri. He listed twenty-eight

employees whose relatives had migrated to Pakistan. Of these, he identified five 'as persons whose loyalty to the Dominion of India may not be above suspicion', who 'may constitute a danger to security if they get a favourable opportunity'. One was a booking clerk in Agra Fort, with a brother, son and mother in Hyderabad (Sindh); another a watchman at the Taj Mahal with a wife in Karachi. Another Taj watchman had two sons and a daughter in Karachi. The superintendent listed another seven employees who 'do not seem mischievous by nature, but may prove a useful channel for communicating information under the influence of their relations in Pakistan'.

On 20 October the home secretary sent a follow-up letter, targeting officials who had close relatives in Pakistan. Now that several months had passed since Partition, he said, 'there was no longer any reason [for] Government servants to keep their families in Pakistan. On the contrary, having regard to the strained relations between the two Dominions that would be *prima facie* evidence of disloyalty to the Dominion of India' . Employees with families in Pakistan would have to bring them back within a month. The Home Ministry asked for lists of delinquents; it would then decide, case by case, whether 'the interests of the country' required disciplinary action against them.

Once more, the home secretary's instructions were passed on by the director general of the ASI to all his circle heads. Once more, the most detailed report came from the superintendent of the Agra circle, who did seem to regard this, with some relish, as a sort of witch-hunt. His ire was reserved particularly for the *khadims*, or hereditary watchmen, of the Taj Mahal, eighteen in all, whose posts were created by Emperor Shah Jahan in the seventeenth century, and later confirmed by the British. In the eyes of the superintendent they seemed all to be enemy agents, 'unwilling to tell the whole truth about themselves'. At least six still had families in Pakistan. One *khadim* had overstayed with his relatives across the border; he had been suspended, and ordered to 'hand over both summer and winter liveries and all other Government articles in his possession'. The superintendent wanted to suspend a second khadim, whom he suspected of wanting only to sell his property in Agra before migrating 'to Pakistan surreptitiously'. He had also targeted a third, who 'appears to have made efforts though not energetic enough to bring back the members of his family to India'.

Agra lay in the United Provinces, whose Muslims were very deeply divided indeed. The Muslims of the Punjab had migrated en masse across the border. From Bombay and the south, many intellectuals had voluntarily migrated to Pakistan, but the working-class Muslims had stayed behind. Pakistan was too far and too alien for them to consider making a new life in a new place. However, the UP Mussalman spoke Urdu – the official language of Pakistan – and also lived close enough to be able to jump aboard a train and go there. Many went; many others stayed where they were.

Almost every Muslim family in the UP was divided, and the employees of the ASI were no exception. The superintendent of the Agra circle, however, had no sympathy for employees with kin in what he considered 'enemy' territory. Bring them back, he told his subordinates, or face the consequences. A *khadim* named Shamsuddin had excited his boss's suspicion by selling his house when his entire family was in Pakistan. In a somewhat pathetic petition dated 8 December 1948, Shamsuddin said that he had 'not the least idea of ever going to Pakistan'. There were four reasons why he had disposed of his house: (1) to pay back a debt he owed his relatives; (2) as 'my daughters are to be married, and I have to invest money in this peon's duty of mine'; (3) as the refugee tenants who had been allotted his house were misusing it, and it was best to sell it before its condition further deteriorated; (4) as 'I have to make arrangements for the last ceremonies of my life as my sons have deserted me'.

The superintendent was not convinced, demanding more positive proof of Shamsuddin's loyalty to the Union of India. A note of 13 June 1949 tells us that the *khadim* had travelled to Pakistan, and

brought back with him his two unmarried daughters, and two grandchildren of a deceased daughter 'over whom he could exercise control'.[7]

Were the records of the government of India ever to be thrown open for those years, one might find that such loyalty oaths, extracted under pressure by senior officials, were very nearly ubiquitous. One scholar has recently found a statement issued in 1951 by Muslim pastoralists of Kachchh, the semi-arid part of Gujarat state which bordered the Sindh province of Pakistan. This assured the chief commissioner that 'we are loyal to the Government of India, and if [the] Pakistan government attacks the Indian government, we will sacrifice our lives for the security of India'.[8]

IV

It is not clear whether the prime minister approved of the attempts to ascertain the loyalty of certain select employees of the government of India. But we do know that his view of the Muslim situation was somewhat different from that of his deputy. As he wrote to Patel, he deplored the 'constant cry for retaliation and of vicarious punishment of the Muslims of India, because the Pakistanis punish Hindus. That argument does not appeal to me in the slightest. I am sure that this policy of retaliation and vicarious punishment will ruin India as well as Pakistan.'[9] Where the home minister demanded that the Muslims prove their loyalty, the prime minister placed the onus on the Indian state, which had a constitutional obligation to make all its citizens, but the Muslims especially, feel secure.

Nehru expressed these views both to Patel and in a series of letters he wrote to the chief ministers of various provinces.[10] Three months after Partition he reminded them that

> we have a Muslim minority who are so large in numbers that they cannot, even if they want, go anywhere else. That is a basic fact about which there can be no argument. Whatever the provocation from Pakistan and whatever the indignities and horrors inflicted on non-Muslims there, we have got to deal with this minority in a civilized manner. We must give them security and the rights of citizens in a democratic State. If we fail to do so, we shall have a festering sore which will eventually poison the whole body politic and probably destroy it.

Later in the same letter, he drew attention to 'the paramount importance of preserving the public services from the virus of communal politics'.[11]

This was a subject to which Nehru had necessarily to return. One provocation was quarrels about property, for in some places Muslims were being asked by over-energetic officers to give up their homes in favour of Hindu and Sikh refugees. The prime minister used the occasion of Gandhi's birthday to warn against 'creating an atmosphere of uncertainty and lack of security in the minds of large numbers of our Muslim fellow-countrymen'. For this had 'far-reaching consequences not only in India but also in Kashmir. It affects our reputation abroad. A few houses or shops attached or taken possession of do not make very much difference. But, if wrongly done, they do affect our reputation and thus injure us.'

The prime minister acknowledged that 'Pakistan is pursuing a policy of utter callousness in this matter'. However, he insisted that 'we cannot copy the methods or the ideals of Pakistan. They have declared themselves openly to be an Islamic State believing in the two-nation theory. We reject the theory and call ourselves a secular State giving full protection to all religions. We have to live up to

our ideals and declarations. More especially on this day, Gandhi Jayanti, it is for us to remember what Gandhiji taught us and what he died for.'[12]

Nehru had made communal organizations his principal target during the election campaign of 1951–2. That election was fought and won on the plank of not making India a 'Hindu Pakistan'. However, Nehru continued to be worried about the rights of those Indians whose culture and faith demarcated them from the majority. A particular concern was the very low proportion of Muslims in positions of authority. There were hardly any Muslim officers left in the defence services, and not very many in the secretariat. This, he sensed, was the consequence of a failure in creating a proper 'sense of partnership in every group and individual in the country, a sense of being a full sharer in the benefits and opportunities that are offered'. If India was to be 'a secular, stable and strong state', he told his chief ministers, then 'our first consideration must be to give *absolute fair play* to our minorities, and thus to make them feel *completely at home* in India'.[13]

V

The acknowledged political leader of the Muslims left behind in the Indian Union was Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. Unlike his great rival Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Azad believed that non-Hindus could live with peace and honour in a united India. In Nehru's characteristically eloquent formulation, Maulana Azad was 'a peculiar and very special representative in a high degree of that great composite culture which has gradually grown in India'. He embodied that 'synthesis of various cultures which have come one after another to India, rivers that have flowed in and lost themselves in the ocean of Indian life'.[14]

Azad was deeply damaged by Partition. Seeing it as the failure of his life's mission, he retreated from the world of party politics (though in any case his orientation was always more of the scholar than that of the mass leader). He served as education minister in the Union Cabinet, and in that capacity helped promote new academies for the nurturing of Indian literature, dance, music and art. His age and temperament, however, confined him for the most part to Delhi.

A younger member of the Congress Party seeking amore active political role was Saif Tyabji, scion of a famous nationalist family. Grandson of an early president of the Congress, and himself an engineer educated at Cambridge, Tyabji was well placed to be a modernist bridge between the Congress and the Muslim masses. In 1955 he wrote a series of essays in the influential Urdu newspaper *Inqilab*, these later published in English translation under the title *The Future of Muslims in India*. In the 1952 election Muslims had voted in large numbers for the Congress, a party which, under Nehru's leadership, they felt they could trust more than its rivals.[15] Tyabji, however, felt that the Muslims should do more than vote for India's dominant party – they should join it, and influence its policies.

Saif Tyabji pointed out that the Congress was a democratic institution, with its national council made up of elected representatives sent from the states, these in turn chosen from district and *taluk* committees. All it cost to become a member of the Congress was a subscription fee of four annas (a quarter of a rupee). Spread out across India, the Muslims could enrol in numbers in all the districts, thus to influence the selection of Congress leaders at the higher levels of the organization. Such was Tyabji's political strategy, but he also urged his co-religionists to engage more fully with the cultural life of the country. As a 'patriotic Indian', he wished that the 'new Indian Culture' that was arising 'be as rich and varied and vigorous as possible, and this can only be so if it draws its nourishment

from all possible sources'. Like other kinds of Indians, Muslims had to 'take an active part in its formation'. But 'if the Muslims sit back with folded arms, we can rest assured that the new Indian Culture will have little to do with the achievements in this country between the 11th century and the coming of the British. By this all Indians will suffer, but the responsibility for the loss will lie heavily on those Indians who are Muslims.'

Among Tyabji's other suggestions were that Muslims ask for technical and commercial education, rather than merely study the humanities and join the ranks of the educated unemployed. Even as regards humanistic learning, he deplored the attempts to 'keep our Islamic culture . . . in a state of fossilized purity'. Rather than mourn the decline of their language, Urdu, the Muslims should recognize that Hindi in the Devanagari script was here to stay. Urdu would be made more contemporary by making its literature available in Devanagari, and by suggesting appropriate words and idioms to enrich the new, emerging modern Hindi.[16]

Where the likes of Maulana Azad and Saif Tyabji sought to make Muslims into Congress Party MPs, there were others who argued that the community could better represent itself through its own organizations. In October 1953 a group of intellectuals and professionals met in Aligarh to discuss the founding of a political party to 'protect the minority rights of Muslims, and to enable them to lead an honourable life in this country'. Among their concerns were the low proportion of Muslims in the legislatures, and in the higher civil service.[17] Presiding over the convention was a former mayor of Calcutta, who claimed that, if present trends continued, the future held only 'economic paralysis, cultural death or disintegration and political helotage for Muslims'.[18] Six months later, in a speech at Delhi's Jama Masjid, the secretary of the UP Jamiat attacked the government of India as anti-democratic and pro-Hindu. 'It is high time', he said, 'for Muslims of India to unite and organise themselves under one leadership to face the eventualities in future'.[19]

Meanwhile, in southern India more concrete steps were being taken in this regard. In September 1951 the 'Indian Union Muslim League' (IUML) came into being in Madras, both its name and its charter marking it out from the pre-Partition party some might think it resembled. It sought to 'secure, protect, and maintain' the religious, cultural, economic and other 'legitimate rights and interests of the Muslims and other minorities', but also pledged itself to upholding and defending 'the independence, freedom and honour' of the Indian Union.[20] Several years later, a party was formed in Hyderabad to represent the city's Muslims the Majlis Ittihad-ul-Musilmin. The Majlis put up several candidates in the 1957 elections, but won only a single assembly seat. The IUML was more successful in its own bastion of Kerala, where it won ten seats in the mid-term election of 1960.[21]

VI

Writing in 1957, W. C. Smith observed that in the history of Islam, Indian Muslims were unique in that they were very numerous and yet did not live in a state of their own. Unlike the Muslims of Iran, Iraq, Pakistan or Turkey, they shared their citizenship in the new Indian republic 'with an immense number of other people. They constitute the only sizable body of Muslims in the world of which this is, or ever has been, true.[22]

The Muslims of India were a large minority, as well as a vulnerable one. They were under threat from Hindu communalism, and from the provocation of Pakistan. The leaders of that nation tended to deride Indian secularism, and 'to presume and encourage a disloyalty of Indian Muslims to their state' Muslims were hostage to India—Pakistan relations in general, and to Pakistan's treatment of its own

minorities in particular. Thus 'each new Hindu discontent fleeing from East Pakistan, and each new border incident or exacerbation of canal-water dispute or refugee-property question, has had repercussions on Muslim life within India.'[23]

Another problem, also linked to Partition, was the lack of a credible middle class. At or shortly after Partition, large numbers of Muslim civil servants, lawyers, scholars, doctors and entrepreneurs migrated to the new Islamic state, there to carve out careers unimpeded by Hindu competition. The Muslims who remained were the labouring poor, the peasants, labourers and artisans who were now seriously in want of an enlightened and liberal leadership. As one perceptive British official wrote, it was 'one of the curses of Partition' in Bengal that 'the Muslim officers had all opted for Pakistan', so that 'the Muslim minorities in West Bengal will be without representation in the services or anywhere else where they could look for help or protection'.[24] A partial exception was Kashmir, where under Sheikh Abdullah's regime between 1947 and 1953 Muslims were encouraged to own land, take to the professions and, above all, to educate themselves. Among the more far-sighted reforms were the creation of schools and colleges for girls, with the Women's College in Srinagar justly winning a countrywide reputation for excellence.[25] Elsewhere, Muslims continued to labour in menial jobs while being under-represented in education, in the professions, in the legislatures and in the administration.[26]

On the other side, there was the effort of the Indian political leadership to create a secular state, and to instil a feeling of belonging among the minorities. Nehru was the key figure here, but he was aided by other Congress members who had studied in the school of Gandhi. When street clashes threatened to escalate into a major riot in Ahmedabad in 1956, the chief minister, Morarji Desai, went on an indefinite fast to bring back the peace.[27] Such acts were prompted in part by genuine belief, and in part by diplomatic exigencies – the need to put one's best face outwards while making the case for Kashmir. Attacks on Muslims would make India's claim for the Valley more fragile. [28] Still, it was 'no small matter that the Hindu leaders of the nation, in the name of secularism and humanity, restrained the natural and potentially ferocious impetus of the Hindu majority to wreak vengeance on the Muslim group'.[29]

Immediately after Partition some had feared a conflagration that would destroy the Muslim minority in India. Instead, as Mushirul Hasan has noted, 'the communal temperature in the 1950s remained relatively low. There was a lull after a violent storm, a clear and downward trend in communal incidents.'[30] There was suspicion and tension on the ground, and occasional violent incidents, but no riots of the scale witnessed during the 1920s, 1930s or 1940s. The conflicts of the 1950s were rooted in language, ethnicity, class and caste, rather than in religion.

The lull was broken by the Jabalpur riots of early 1961, in which some fifty Indians, mostly Muslims, lost their lives. But this was a minor affray in comparison with what happened in the winter of 1963/ 4 when the theft of the Prophet's hair from the Hazratbal mosque in Srinagar prompted a series of attacks on Hindus in distant East Pakistan. Thousands of refugees fled into India, their stories leading to a rise in the communal temperature and to retributory violence against Muslims. In and around Calcutta 400 people died in religious rioting, three-quarters of them Muslims. Some of the violence was motivated by speculators seizing the chance to obliterate squatter colonies and redevelop them for sale. There was also serious rioting in the steel towns of Jamshedpur and Rourkela, in which perhaps as many as 1,000 people perished, most of them Muslims.[31]

By this time Partition was almost two decades in the past, yet its residues remained. For, as a Muslim leader in Madras bitterly remarked, the violence of 1963–4 only reinforced the 'fear that anything happening in Pakistan will have its repercussions on Muslims in India, particularly when

exaggerated reports appear in the Indian Press, and people and parties inimical to Muslims are ready to seize the opportunity'.[32]

VII

Like the Muslims, the Untouchables were spread all across India. Like them, they were also poor, stigmatized and often on the receiving end of upper-caste violence. They worked in the villages, in the lowliest professions, as farm servants, agricultural labourers, cobblers and scavengers. By the canons of Hindu orthodoxy their touch would defile the upper castes, and in some regions their very sight too. They were denied access to land and to water sources; even their homes were set apart from the main village.

Under British rule, opportunities had arisen for some Untouchables to escape the tyranny of the village. These gained employment in the army, or worked in factories and urban settlements. Here too they were usually assigned the most menial jobs, as well as the most degrading.

Gandhi had redesignated the Untouchables as 'Harijans', or children of God. The Constitution of India abolished untouchability and listed the erstwhile Untouchable communities in a separate schedule – hence their new, collective name, 'Scheduled Castes'. However, village ethnographies of the 1950s confirmed that the practice of untouchability continued as before. The Scheduled Castes still owned little or no land, and were still subject to social and in some cases sexual abuse. But these ethnographies also revealed that at the bottom things were changing, albeit slowly. In some parts the low castes were refusing to perform tasks that they considered demeaning. No longer would they carry loads for free, or submissively allow upper-caste males to violate their women. More daringly, they were beginning to ask for higher wages and for land to cultivate, sometimes under the aegis of communist activists.[33]

In the cities, lower-caste assertion took amore organized form. Under the encouragement of the Communist Party of India, the municipal sweepers of Delhi who belonged to the Balmiki caste – formed a union of their own. In October 1953 this union presented a charter of eleven demands to the municipal corporation, focusing on better pay and work conditions. The sweepers held processions and public meetings, and marched to the town hall in a show of strength. There were also a series of hunger strikes, and at least one major confrontation with the police. The historian of these protests notes that they were 'not just about wages, but also about dignity and the value of the labour of the Balmikis'.[34]

VIII

The burgeoning genre of Untouchable autobiographies also shows the 1950s to be a time of flux. Caste prejudice and caste discrimination were rampant, but no longer were they accepted so passively. There was an incipient stirring which became manifest in social protest and was aided by the new avenues of social mobility.[35]

The first such avenue was education. After Independence there was a great expansion in school and college education. By law, a certain portion of seats were reserved for the Scheduled Castes. By policy, different state governments endowed scholarships for children from disadvantaged homes.

Where they could they took advantage, spawning an entire generation of first-generation learners. According to one estimate, while the school population doubled in the first decade of Independence, the number of ex-Untouchables in schools swelled eight or tenfold. There were also many more Scheduled Caste students at university than ever before.[36]

A second avenue was government employment. By law, 15 per cent of all jobs in state and state-aided institutions were reserved for the Scheduled Castes. Again, there was a massive expansion after 1947, with new positions available in the Secretariat and in government-run schools, hospitals, factories and infrastructure projects. Although exact figures are hard to obtain, it is likely that several million jobs were created for Scheduled Castes in the state sector in the first two decades after Independence. These were permanent positions, to be retained until retirement, and with pension and health benefits. In theory, such reservation existed at all levels of government; in practice, it was the reserved posts at the lower levels that tended to be filled first and fastest. As late as 1966, while only 1.77 per cent of senior administrative posts were occupied by Indians of low-caste origin, 8.86 per cent of clerical jobs were, and as many as 17.94 per cent of posts of peons and attendants.[37]

There was also reservation in Parliament and state assemblies, where 15 per cent of all seats were filled by Scheduled Caste candidates. Besides, universal franchise meant that they could influence the outcome of elections in the 'unreserved category as well. In many parts, Scheduled Castes were quick to seize the opportunities the vote presented them. As one low-caste politician in Agra observed, his constituents 'may not understand the intricacies of politics', but they did 'understand the power of the vote and want to use it'.[38] And they understood it in all contexts – national, provincial and local. Already in the early 1950s, cases were reported of Scheduled Castes forging alliances to prevent upper-caste landlords from winning elections to village *panchayats* (councils).[39] The vote was quickly perceived as a bargaining tool; for instance, in a UP village, the shoemakers told an upper-caste candidate they would support him if he agreed to shift the yard for the disposal of dead animals from their compound to a site outside the village.[40]

For a fair number of Scheduled Castes, affirmative action did bring genuine benefits. Now, children of farm labourers could (and did) become members of Parliament. Those who joined the government as lowly 'class IV' employees could see their children become members of the elite Indian Administrative Service. But affirmative action also brought with it a new kind of stigma. Intended to end caste discrimination, it fixed the beneficiaries ever more firmly in their own, original caste. There was suspicion and resentment among the upper castes, and sometimes a tendency among the beneficiaries to look down upon, or even forget, their fellows. As one scholar somewhat cynically wrote, reservation had created 'a mass of self-engrossed people who are quickly and easily satisfied with the small gains they can win for themselves'.[41]

A final avenue of mobility was economic development in general. Industrialization and urbanization meant new opportunities away from the village, even if – as in the state sector – the Scheduled Castes came to occupy only the less skilled and less lucrative positions. Living away from home helped expand the mind, as in the case of a farm labourer from UP who became a factory worker in Bombay and learnt to love the city's museums, its collections of Gandhara art especially.[42] And sometimes there were economic gains to be made. Consider the Jatavs of Agra, a caste of cobblers and shoemakers whose world changed with the growth of a market for their products in the Middle East and the Soviet Union. The Jatavs became an 'urban yeomanry', now able to build and buy their own houses. While many continued as self-employed shoemakers, some Jatavs were able to open factories of their own, where the wages paid to their workers were considerably in excess of what they themselves had once hoped to earn. In 1960 a master craftsman took home about Rs250 a

month, a factory worker about Rs100 – even the lesser figure was many times what an unskilled labourer earned. Although the distribution of gains was by no means even, the market had helped enhance their economic as well as social status. The present state of affairs was 'a far cry from the pre-1900 days, when most Jatavs were little more than labourers and city servants'.[43]

IX

As with the Muslims, the Scheduled Castes formed an important 'vote bank' for the Congress. They too tended to trust the party of Mahatma Gandhi more than its rivals. In the 1957 election, for example, the Congress won 64 out of the 76 seats reserved for Scheduled Castes in Parliament, and as many as 361 out of the 469 reserved for them in the legislative assemblies.

When the seats reserved for Scheduled Tribe members were added, nearly one in four MPs came from underprivileged backgrounds. Yet the ministers in Jawaharlal Nehru's Cabinet were overwhelmingly upper caste. This worried him. 'One of my greatest difficulties', he told a senior colleague, 'is to find suitable non-Brahmins.' Nehru asked the colleague to suggest candidates, but then found one himself: a Mrs Chandrasekhar from Madras, an educated Scheduled Caste whom he inducted as deputy minister.[44]

The ranking Scheduled Caste minister in the Union Cabinet was Jagjivan Ram from Bihar. Born into a Chamar (cobbler) home, he became the first such boy from his village to go to high school, and from there to the Banaras Hindu University. On graduation he joined the Gandhian movement, his steady work rewarded after 1947 by a series of Cabinet appointments. Among the Ministries he ran were those of Labour, Communications, Mines, and Railways. Jagjivan Ram had the reputation of being a first-class administrator, although he did not live the kind of squeaky-clean life his Gandhian background perhaps demanded of him.[45]

The most charismatic Scheduled Caste leader, however, remained outside the Congress. This was B. R. Ambedkar, who had joined Nehru's Cabinet as an Independent, leaving the government in 1951 to restart his Scheduled Caste Federation. His party fared disastrously in the 1952 election, although Ambedkar himself was later elected to the Upper House. By now this longtime foe of Hinduism was seeking to find a way of leaving the ancestral fold. He had contemplated converting to Sikhism, then to Islam, then to Christianity. Ambedkar finally settled on Buddhism, a faith of Indian origin that seemed best suited to his own rationalist and egalitarian temperament.

After he left the Cabinet, Ambedkar immersed himself in literature on or about the Buddha. He became a member of the Mahabodhi Society and travelled through the Buddhist countries of south-east Asia. At a public meeting in Bombay in May 1956, Ambedkar announced that he would convert to Buddhism before the end of the year. His mammoth study *The Buddha and his Dhamma* was already in the press. Ambedkar considered holding the conversion ceremony in Bombay – where the publicity would be immense – or in the ancient Buddhist site of Sarnath. In the event he chose Nagpur, a city in the centre of India where he had a large and devoted following. Many joined him in embracing Buddhism, in a colourful and well-attended ceremony that took place on 15 October 1956. Six weeks later Ambedkar died suddenly. He was cremated in Bombay, with an icon of the Buddha placed under his head. A million people participated in the funeral procession.[46]

Shortly before he died Ambedkar had decided to float a new party, the Republican Party of India. This formally came into being in 1957. Its leaders and cadre were, like Ambedkar himself, from the Mahar caste. It was also mostly Mahars who had followed their leader into Buddhism.

Ambedkar was a figure of reverence among the Mahars of the Nagpur area. In his lifetime they celebrated his birthday with gusto, taking out processions holding his photograph aloft. When he came to town to speak, the factory workers would crowd in to hear him; even the 'women went to these parades as to a wedding'. Under his inspiration the Mahars formed troupes that performed plays parodying Hindu ritual and the behaviour of the upper castes. They also sang songs in his honour: 'From the moment that the glance of Bhim [rao Ambedkar] fell upon the poor', began one song, 'From that day our strengthgrew...'.[47]

But it was not merely in Mahar strongholds that Ambedkar was respected. All across northern India he was admired for his scholarship – he had doctoral degrees from Columbia and London universities – and for his political achievements – notably his drafting of the Constitution of India. For members of the Scheduled Castes who had a glimmer of learning themselves, for those who had been to high school or travelled outside their home village, Ambedkar was both exemplar and icon, the man who had breached the upper-caste citadel and encouraged his fellows to do likewise.

Ambedkar's slogan for his followers was: 'Educate, Agitate, Organize'. He setup a People's Education Society that ran schools and at least two good colleges. Scheduled Caste members who went to these or others schools came inevitably to regard Ambedkar as their mentor. Among the Scheduled Caste intelligentsia, books or pamphlets by Ambedkar became required reading, lovingly passed on from hand to hand.[48] Thus the son of a dock worker, sent by government scholarship to the Siddharth College in Bombay, began contributing to magazines and participating in debates – where 'the topic of all these writings and speeches was always Babasaheb [Ambedkar] and his Dalit movement'.[49]

The presence of B. R. Ambedkar underlines a quite profound difference between the Scheduled Castes and the other minority with whom I have here compared them. For the Muslims had no seats reserved for them in the Secretariat or in Parliament. Nor, in independent India, did they have a leader of Ambedkar's stature to inspire and move them – while he was alive or long after he was gone.

X

In March 1949 a group of Scheduled Caste members from the villages around Delhi walked to Mahatma Gandhi's memorial in the city. They had been thrown out of their homes by Jat landowners angered that these previously bonded servants had the cheek to take part in local elections and graze their cattle on the village commons. There, in the very heart of the capital, these outcasts began a hunger strike. By sitting on a memorial to the Father of the Nation, and by using the methods of protest forged by him, they attracted wide attention, including solicitous visits by prominent Gandhians and Cabinet ministers.[50]

Turn next to a case from urban India, to a newly elected Scheduled Caste MP who applied for membership of the Bar Association in his home town, Sitapur. His application was kept pending for four months, after which he was told that he could join but not use the washroom, and be served only by a Muslim servant. The MP brought the matter to the attention of the prime minister, who intervened to have him admitted without any preconditions.[51]

Elsewhere, the Scheduled Castes who asserted themselves were not so fortunate. The sociologist N. D. Kamble collated hundreds of examples of 'atrocities' perpetrated on Scheduled Castes in independent India. Here are a few choice if that is the word – instances taken from

Kamble's research:

> April 1951: A labour camp in Matunga, Bombay. A group of factory workers stages a play on Ambedkar's birthday. Upper-caste young men break up the performance, assault the actors, and damage the stage.
>
> June 1951: A village in Himachal Pradesh.
> A conference of Scheduled Castes is attacked by Rajput landlords. The SCs are beaten up with sticks, their leaders tied up with ropes and confined to a cattle pound.
>
> July 1951: A rural school in the Jalgaon district of Bombay State. A Brahmin teacher abuses Ambedkar for introducing the Hindu Code Bill in Parliament. A SC boy protests, whereupon he is beaten and removed from the school.
>
> June 1952: A village in the Madurai district of Madras State. ASC youth asks for tea in a glass at a local shop. Tradition entitles him only to a disposable coconut shell. When he persists, he is kicked and hit on the head by caste Hindus.
>
> June 1957: A village in the Parbani district of Madhya Bharat. Newly converted Buddhists refuse to flay carcasses of dead cattle. They are boycotted by the Hindu landlords, denied other work, and threatened with physical reprisals.
>
> May 1959: A village in the Ahmednagar district of Bombay State. A Buddhist marriage party is not allowed to enter the hamlet through the village gates. When they persist, caste Hindus attack them with stones and swords.
>
> October 1960: A village in the Aurangabad District of Maharashtra. Caste Hindus enter the Scheduled Caste hamlet and break a statue of the Buddha into tiny pieces.[52]

What these cases and the many more like them – reveal is a system that was in quite profound turmoil. All across India the winds of democratic politics had made the Scheduled Castes more willing to demand their rights. Aided by reservation in schools, offices, factories, and legislatures, inspired by the example of their great leader B. R. Ambedkar and encouraged by the constitutional provisions in favour of social equality, many among them were inclined to abandon the old road of deference in favour of the more rocky path of defiance. This in turn provoked a sometimes nasty reaction from those who persisted in thinking of themselves as social superiors.

XI

In the winter of 1925/6, the writer Aldous Huxley went on along trip through British India. He attended the Kanpur session of the Indian National Congress and heard declamatory speeches asking for freedom. Huxley had some sympathy with these aspirations, yet worried that they represented only the upper-caste Hindu interest. As he wrote in the book of his travels,

> That the lower-caste masses would suffer, at the beginning, in any case, from are turn to Indian autonomy seems almost indubitable. Where the superiority of the upper castes to the lower is a

matter of religious dogma, you can hardly expect the governing few to be particularly careful about the rights of the many. It is even something of a heresy [for them] to have rights.[53]

Two decades later India became independent, and the constitution bestowed rights of equality on all citizens, regardless of caste, creed, age or gender. The lower castes were in fact granted special rights, special access to schools and jobs, in compensation for the discrimination they had suffered down the centuries. But, as a Scheduled Caste member of the Constituent Assembly pointed out, state law was one thing, social practice quite another. For the prejudices of caste had been opposed by reformers down the centuries, from Gautama Buddha to Mahatma Gandhi, yet they had all 'found it very difficult to get rid of this ghost of untouchability'. Laws had been enacted removing strictures against Untouchables, with regard to temple entry for example. 'What is the effect of these laws?' asked the member, before supplying this answer: 'Not an inch of untouchability has been removed by these laws . . . If at all the ghost of untouchability or the stigma of untouchability from India should go the minds of these crores and crores of Hindu folks should be changed and unless their hearts are changed, I do not hope, Sir, that untouchability will be removed. It is now up to the Hindu society not to observe untouchability in any shape or form.'[54]

There was pessimism about the position of Untouchables in free India, and pessimism also about the future of that other large and insecure minority, the Muslims. Travelling through India and Pakistan in 1951, the Aga Khan – the influential leader of the Ismaili sect – found 'a horrible fear' among Muslims on both sides of the border, but in India especially. He wrote to Jawaharlal Nehru of 'the fear amongst Muslims which I myself share to a great extent' – this being that 'five or ten years hence there may be a [Hindu] Mahasabha government who openly make the union of what is now Pakistan – both East and West – with Bharat [India] the main purpose of foreign policy and high politics'. The Muslim leader thought that a Hindu chauvinist party, once in power, would use atomic blasts to divert the rivers flowing through Kashmir into Pakistan, thus bringing that state to its knees. He drew a parallel with the situation in the Arab world, where – so he claimed – Sudan was preparing to stop the flow of the Nile into Egypt. In the Aga Khan's view, Hindu India was to Muslim Pakistan as Christian Sudan was to Muslim Egypt. As he putit, 'I have felt that this atmosphere of doom [which] prevails amongst Muslims on account of this very water question . . . is a replica of the similar fear in Egypt'.[55]

This letter is notable for at least three reasons. First, as an early illustration of the now widespread fear that Muslims were being persecuted worldwide. Second, for its easy equation of the interests of Indian Muslims with the welfare of Pakistan. Finally, and perhaps most tellingly, for its prediction that the Republic of India would become a Hindu state within ten years.

The Aga Khan and Aldous Huxley were both right and wrong in their skepticism – right with regard to the continuing social prejudice, wrong with regard to the intentions of the top political leadership. For the 'governing few' were in fact very careful of the rights of the many. Writing in 1959 – a decade and more after Independence – an Indian editor who was bitterly opposed to Nehru was constrained to recognize his two greatest achievements – the creation of a secular state and the granting of equal rights to Untouchables. Recalling the 'reactionary forces which came into play after partition', the editor remarked that 'had Nehru shown the slightest weakness, these forces would have turned this country into a Hindu state in which the minorities. . . could not have lived with any measure of safety or security . It was also to Nehru's 'everlasting credit that he insisted that Untouchables be granted full rights, such that 'in public life and in all government action, the equality of man would be scrupulously maintained in the secular state of India'.[56]

To be sure, there remained a slippage between public policy and popular practice. The laws promoting secularism and social equality were on the statute books, but most Muslims, and most Scheduled Castes, remained poor and marginalized. The threat of violence was never far away. Still, given the bloody birth of the nation, and the continuing provocation from Pakistan, it was no small matter that the Indian government refused to merge faith with state. And given the resilience of social institutions in general, and the ancient and sanctified history of this one in particular, it was remarkable that the caste system changed as much as it did. The progress made in abolishing untouchability or in assuring equal rights to all citizens was uneven, and – by the standards of understandably impatient reformers – very slow. Yet more progress had probably been made in the first seventeen years of Indian independence than in the previous seventeen hundred.