
UNIT 23 TOWARDS FREEDOM-I*

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23.1 INTRODUCTION

This Unit traces the main political and constitutional developments following upon the termination of hostilities in 1945 to the end of 1946. Some of these milestones are the Simla Conference, the elections of 1945-46, the formation of popular provincial ministries, the ministerial level Cabinet Mission, the Interim Government, Direct Action by the Muslim League and Gandhiji in Noakhali and Bihar.

23.2 SIMLA CONFERENCE, 1945

The Viceroy, Lord Wavell, had been laying the ground for a political settlement which would be in place before the War ended. The end of the War was expected to bring with it a host of intractable problems, including pent up economic discontent and a standoff between the two principal parties, Congress and the Muslim League. He was of the view that a successful settlement of the Indian question would strengthen the future security of the Empire, ensure British prestige in the East, and even lead to India remaining within the Commonwealth. The specific steps of the settlement were to secure representation of the Congress and Muslim League on the Executive Council, to put in place elected coalition ministries in the provinces and elect representatives to the Constituent Assembly.

Soon after being released from prison in June 1945, important Congress leaders headed towards Simla, the summer capital of the Raj, to participate in the Conference convened by the Viceroy. Gandhiji took the line that he did not hold any official position in the Congress and that Maulana Azad, the Congress President, would be the Congress representative. However, he, Gandhi, would be present in Simla to advise the Viceroy during the Conference, should he so desire. The Simla Conference was held at the Viceregal Lodge, the summer residence of the Viceroy, in June-July 1945. The Muslim League was represented, among others, by its pre-eminent leader, Mahomed Ali Jinnah.

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The crucial point at issue at the Simla Conference was Jinnah's contention that the Muslim League was the sole spokesman for Muslims. Congress insisted on its right to represent Muslims, including nationalist Muslims, a venerable one being Maulana Azad, the President of the Congress. The British also found it difficult to ignore the claims of the Unionist Party of the Punjab, which represented Muslim landlords of West Punjab and Hindu smallholders of South East Punjab, and had contributed handsomely to the War effort in men and money. To underscore their point of not being a mere Hindu party, Congress included in its list of members for the Executive Council, representatives from non-Hindu communities. Jinnah insisted on his position as sole spokesman of Muslims being upheld and the Viceroy chose to ditch the Unionist allies of the British in favour of Jinnah and the League, whom they had helped during the War to make quick strides. Failure of the offer did not really put out the government: what was important was that the offer was shown to have been made.

The Simla Conference demonstrated, if a public avowal was still needed, given the government's overt espousal of the League during the War years, which the government considered its ally in the scenario that was to unfold in the post war period. However, the challenge posed by the Congress, indeed by the nationalist forces, continued to be formidable and the situation the government found itself in increasingly precarious with the rapidly eroding pillars of the state.

23.3 ELECTIONS OF 1945-6

The hopes for some political advance, dashed by the failure of the Simla Conference, once again revived with the coming to power of the Labour Party in Britain. An important initiative taken by the Labour Government was the declaration that elections to the central and provincial assemblies would be held in the winter of 1945 and spring of 1946.

The main parties in the contest were the Congress and the Muslim League. The elections were particularly important for the League in its quest for Pakistan. If it could gain a majority in the Muslim majority provinces, which could comprise the future Pakistan, this would strengthen its case for Pakistan. Its main weakness was organisational, but it was balanced by the active role played by the religious leaders, the *ulema*, *pirs* and *sajjada nashins*, especially in the Punjab. Some religious leaders gave *fatwas* in favour of the League while others portrayed the vote for Pakistan as a vote for the Koran. Another factor, which contributed to the success of the League in the elections in Punjab, was the local patronage network in which the landlords and *pirs* worked together.

The election campaign of the Congress, in contrast, was anti-British in its thrust. Congress slogans were "Release the misguided patriots" of the INA and "punish the guilty" officials who committed excesses in 1942. It was not anti-League in its tenor despite the elections being fought by the League on the issue of Pakistan. Given the primacy of the issue of Pakistan, it is surprising that the Congress leaders dismissed Pakistan as a slogan of imaginary fears. However, the Congress leaders increasingly conceded that if Muslims spoke out in favour of Pakistan, "it will not deny it to them".

For the League, the elections were extremely important, as they would give legitimacy to its claim to be the sole spokesman for the Muslims, who were, in

turn, decisively for Pakistan. The results in the Muslim seats did vindicate the stand of the League to represent Muslims, winning as they did all Muslim seats at the centre and gathering most of the Muslim vote. The same story appeared to be repeated in the provinces.

When it came to Muslim seats, Congress found it difficult to find Muslim candidates in the provincial elections. Many of those who contested appeared unlikely to win. This was a change from the optimism of Jawaharlal Nehru in November 1945 when he declared that Congress would put up candidates for every seat and that they would do well. In some provinces, Congress supported nationalist Muslim candidates, who often wanted the upper hand in the partnership, had big demands for funds and workers, and whose perspective was at times different from that of the Congress. While Congress preferred the straightforward Congress appeal in reaching out to the Muslim voter, nationalist Muslim organisations stressed cultural and religious rights. The worst blow was when those who promised an alliance with the Congress joined the Muslim League after being nominated or even after winning. This was the case with some candidates in Bengal and with the Ahrar Party in Punjab.

Congress leaders were divided on the issue of how to best contest Muslim seats. Maulana Azad felt there was an advantage in going along with nationalist Muslim organisations. Jawaharlal Nehru went along with Vallabhbhai Patel who felt the Congress should go it alone. In practice, the Congress joined Nationalist Muslim Boards and worked out sharing of seats with Ahrars, Jamiat-ul-Ulema and Momins, etc.

The case of Bihar showed that campaigning for Muslim seats involved large funds, amounting to three fourths of the total sum spent on the election campaign. As nationalist Muslim organisations generally took up the issue of religious rights of Muslims, they could hardly question the manner in which the Muslim League brought religion into politics. They could only pit *ulemas* inclined to their point of view against the *ulemas* and *pirs* fielded by the League. Nationalist Muslim propagandists ended up being no match for the sharper propaganda of the Leaguers. Early optimism on the part of the Congress leaders about winning many Muslim seats was replaced soon by the expectation that the League was likely to do well in the Muslim seats.

Some Congress leaders rued that they had not sharply targeted Pakistan as unworkable and injurious to the Indian Muslims. The Congress attempt to win over Muslims was ill timed, as Muslim voters saw the party as only interested in their votes, not in addressing their concerns. In Punjab, Congress leader Bhim Sen Sachar had predicted only two Muslim seats for the Congress. The election results returned the League as the single largest party in the Punjab.

Even after this disastrous showing in the Muslim seats, the Congress did not experience any profound realisation. It continued to interpret the political attitude of the Muslims in the old grooves. Congress leaders spoke of the need to improve the economic conditions of Muslims and ensure their representation in the Congress. It was as late as 6 October 1946, many months after the election results were known, that Jawaharlal Nehru accepted that the Muslim League was the authoritative representative organisation of an overwhelming majority of the Muslims of India. Here, too, a caveat was introduced, which the League was

unlikely to accept. This was that the League in turn should recognise the Congress as the authoritative representative organisation of the non-Muslims and such Muslims as have thrown in their lot with the Congress. The last clause negated the claim of the League to be the sole spokesman of the Muslims.

23.4 ELECTION RESULTS

In the elections to the central assembly in December 1945, out of 102 seats, Congress won 57, League 30, Independents 5, Akalis 2 and Europeans 8. In the elections to the provincial assemblies, Congress won 923 of 1585 seats, 23 of 38 labour seats but was defeated by the Muslim League in the Muslim seats. In NWFP, the League contested all 33 Muslim seats and won 15 of them. 19 Muslim seats were won by the Congress and 58.75 per cent of the Muslim vote went to the non-League parties. In Punjab, the League gained 73 seats, with its share of the Muslim vote being 65.10 per cent. The League gained 83.6 per cent of the Muslim vote in Bengal. It won 76 per cent of the total Muslim vote in India. This was a sharp rise from the 4.8 per cent vote in its tally in 1937. Elections of 1946 were a watershed. The results made it clear that the Congress represented the large masses of the country. It was equally clear, however, that the Muslim League spoke for most Muslims.

The Congress was to go on to form **governments in the provinces** of Madras, Bombay, United Provinces, Bihar, Orissa, Central Provinces and Berar and NWFP. The League formed ministries in Bengal and Sind. In Punjab, after the elections of 1946, some negotiations between Muslim League and Akalis were carried out with a possible coalition in mind. This had been unsuccessful and Akalis joined with Unionists and Congress to form a coalition ministry.

23.5 BRITISH DECISION TO WIND UP THEIR RULE

As we saw in the last Unit, the hegemony of the national movement over the Indian people was substantial by the time the war was over. Correspondingly, the influence of the colonial state was on the wane. The ideological instruments on which the state had relied to buttress its rule no longer served the purpose. The pillars of the colonial state, the army and bureaucracy, had been eroded. Diminishing numbers of British recruits had become a problem, which reached a head during wartime. By 1945 Indian recruits outnumbered British ones. Dealing with nationalist protest and long years of service without leave during the War had undermined the morale of the British officials. This erosion of colonial hegemony was apparent not only to colonial officials but also to the mass of people.

Bipan Chandra has described the strategy adopted by the Congress against the colonial state as struggle-truce-struggle. Colonial officials found this combination of phases of struggle alternating with phases of non-struggle extremely impossible to deal with. Policy moved between the two opposite poles of repression and conciliation. When non-violent movements were met with repression, the power behind the government stood exposed. Conversely, the government was seen to be too weak when it went in for a truce or appeared helpless in the face of open challenges. When the ship was seen as sinking, sections loyal to the government

deserted. Many who had stood by the government over the years no longer believed in its capacity to govern with prudence. They were shocked by the brutal repression of the 1942 movement and the callous attitude of the government to Gandhi's condition during his 21-day fast in detention in 1943. This led the services to wonder whether to take action against nationalist forces or not. Part of the difficulty was that the same set of officials had to carry out the opposite policies of repression and conciliation, often against the same political activist.

By the end of 1945 the government had reached a situation of responsibility without power. The prospect of a revolt by the Congress a few months down the line was considered formidable as Congress governments, by then likely to be in power in the provinces, would be on the side of the revolt. Here again it is significant to note that the assessment of the Viceroy was that "We could still probably suppress such a revolt" but "have nothing to put in its place and should be driven to an almost entirely official rule, for which the necessary numbers of efficient officials do not exist."

In late 1946, the British Prime Minister, Attlee, rejected the option of changing the nature of British rule to coercion and staying on in India, citing the following grounds: inadequate administrative machinery to implement a policy of rule by coercion; armed forces pledged elsewhere in line with international commitments; adverse opinion in the Labour Party; questionable loyalty of the Indian troops and the unwillingness of British troops to serve; adverse world opinion and an uncomfortable position in UNO. As colonial rule could not survive on the old basis for long, a graceful withdrawal from India became the overarching aim of policy makers. Of course, the details of the post-imperial relationship had to be negotiated and modalities of transfer of power worked out.

But we have gone too far ahead and need to retrace our steps to New Year Day 1946. It was in keeping with his government's understanding of imminent departure that the Secretary of State in his New Year's Day speech on 1 January 1946 made it clear that Britain would be leaving in the near future. On 19 February 1946 Prime Minister Attlee announced in Parliament that a three-member Cabinet Mission would go out to India to set up the constitutional machinery for transfer of power. The decision to send a mission was taken on 22 January 1946. The announcement about a statement to be made in Parliament on 19 February was made a week earlier. A time limit to British rule was proposed but not accepted by His Majesty's Government as was the plan for the British to withdraw in phases to the provinces which would make up Pakistan. The apprehension of the Viceroy was that the government might not be in a position to wield power after March 1948. Hence a time limit was proposed as a way of giving time to reorganise and manage with limited powers.

From the side of the Congress, too, negotiations were generally tried out before going in for a confrontation. When independence seemed to be on the cards, Congressmen were willing to wait to see the substance of the offers being made. As Gandhiji said, a great nation has declared its intention to quit, what would be lost by waiting? Congress kept up preparedness for a mass movement, however, in the eventuality that agreement was elusive.

23.6 UNITE AND QUIT

By early 1946 the British had moved to the position that when they left India it was better to leave it united. The old stance of propping up communal forces was given up once it was decided that British rule was no longer to be continued. Post imperial strategic interests, which envisaged India as a partner in Commonwealth defence, implied reworking of their relationship with Congress. Moreover, Pakistan was not seen as workable by the governors of the crucial provinces, Punjab, U.P., Sind and Assam. Hence a policy change was warranted by both long term and short term considerations. Whereas a pro-Muslim League stance had been adopted at the Simla Conference in 1945, Attlee stated in the House of Commons on 15 March 1946 that a minority would not be allowed to veto the progress of the majority.

However, the Viceroy and some of his officials continued to believe that Jinnah would deliver better than the Congress. The Secretary of State on the other hand believed that Congress could create more trouble than the League. So did the Home Member of the Government of India, whose assessment was that a challenge from the League could be met, whereas a Congress rebellion would be difficult to suppress. So unity was preferred, both from the point of view of getting out of the political impasse and from the long run strategic perspective. One must not forget, however, that there were voices in the government who spoke out for Pakistan being a natural ally. This included the powerful voice of the Viceroy, who trusted Jinnah more than the Congress, which he dubbed as totalitarian.

The **Cabinet Mission Plan** was spelt out in two statements dated May 16th and June 16th, 1946. Whereas the latter statement hinted at the partition of the subcontinent and was rejected out of hand by the Congress, it found great favour with the Muslim League. Both parties accepted the 16th May statement in a manner of speaking, albeit with varying interpretations.

The Mission Plan envisaged three sections: A: comprising Madras, Bombay, United Provinces, Bihar, Central Provinces and Berar and Orissa, B: consisting of Punjab, Sind and NWFP, and C: made up of Bengal and Assam. The centre would look after foreign affairs, defence and communications. Constitutions would be framed at the group and union level. Provinces could leave the group after the first general elections. A province or a group could ask for reconsideration of the group or union constitutions after ten years.

The difference of opinion between the League and the Congress was primarily over whether grouping was optional or compulsory. The Congress said it was assured by members of the Mission that provinces need not join if they did not wish to. It recommended this interpretation to Assam and NWFP, which did not want to be part of the League dominant Sections B and C. It challenged grouping and worked towards a strong centre, rather than a weak one. Patel discerned a shift from the earlier policy of the government of giving the League a veto and saw the Plan as a clear authoritative pronouncement against Pakistan. On the other hand, the League wanted to be able to question the constitution at the very start, rather than wait for ten years. The League accepted the Mission Plan to the extent Pakistan was implied in the compulsory grouping clause.

Clearly there was some doublespeak involved here on the part of the Mission. It said that sections were compulsory but grouping was optional. Members of the Mission, influenced by their personal predilections, gave contrary assurances to both parties, Congress and the League, in an attempt to bring them together despite their seemingly irreconcilable standpoints. The Viceroy thought he was trying to tease out the ambivalences but could not do so as he was partial to the League.

Nehru declared on 7 July 1946 that Congress reserved the right to give shape to the Constituent Assembly as it wished. This invited the League's charge of insincerity on the part of the Congress in working the plan. The League withdrew its acceptance of the plan on 29 July 1946 on the ground that Nehru's statement made Congress intentions not to play the game evident.

As British initiative and authority declined, a popular government appeared to be on the cards. Both the Viceroy and the Secretary of State agreed on the need for one, with the difference that the Viceroy did not want only a Congress government. He had feared this would happen given that the Congress held out the threat of launching a movement to pressurise the government to accept its demands. Admittedly, the possibility of this threat being put into practice had receded after the Cabinet Mission begun its deliberations. The British government feared a Congress government could adversely influence foreign policy in Indonesia, take up uncomfortable issues like that of the official excesses in 1942, retention of Gurkhas in the British Army etc. What is worth noting is that the government in London did not want a break with Congress and hence was willing to go far to accommodate the positions of the Congress on many of these issues.

23.7 INTERIM GOVERNMENT

So a pure Congress Interim Government was formed on 2 September 1946. Jawaharlal Nehru was sworn in as Vice-President of the Executive Council. This marked an important milestone in achieving independence and the inauguration was marked by festivities. The League, however, declared civil war and warned that Pakistan could no longer be prevented. No Muslim League members joined at this point, making the government inherently unstable, especially as the Viceroy was convinced that their presence was vital. He even put the blame for Direct Action on the Congress and the stances it took. He lost no opportunity to bring them in even though the League had withdrawn its acceptance of the Cabinet Mission Plan. In this he was supported by Attlee and his ministers who felt the danger from the Congress was now over. This was on 25 October 1946, within fifteen days of communal trouble breaking out in Noakhali. The League's capacity to foment communal violence had brought them into the government. The British were afraid that civil war would result if the League continued on the path of direct action.

The hope of the government was, of course, that the principal parties would adopt a stance of moderation once they became involved in running the administration. This did not ensue. The League did not forsake direct action. It did not send its best men to the Interim Government, except Liaquat Ali Khan, indicating its attitude that the real task lay outside. Ghazanfar Ali Khan, one of the five League ministers in the government, publicly declared that the Interim Government was merely another front of direct action for the League. This

prompted protest by Vallabhbhai Patel who demanded the speech be withdrawn before Khan took the oath of office. This had no effect on the Viceroy and Khan went on to invoke Mohammed bin Kassim and Mahmud of Ghazni and threaten that a few lakhs of Muslims will overwhelm crores of Hindus. A month later, another League minister declared at the New York Herald Forum that the struggle for Pakistan will now be carried on within as well as outside the government. Speeches were followed up by action in the Punjab, where League members of the Interim Government took part in the civil disobedience movement against the coalition ministry headed by Khizr Hayat Khan, the leader of the Unionists. Again Nehru protested to the Viceroy about this improper behaviour but to no avail. Elsewhere, to a colleague, he described “members of the Central Government being leaders of revolt in the provinces” as “fantastic”.

Non-cooperation was the policy adopted by the League in its functioning in the Interim Government. Attempts by the Congress to lessen the powers of the Viceroy by meeting informally before the Council meeting were stymied by the League. Decisions by the Congress ministers, especially regarding appointments, were questioned as partial. Liaqat Ali Khan’s budget was designed to upset the capitalist class, some of whom were supporters of the Congress. In later years Congress leaders were to describe the complete non-cooperation by the League in the running of the Interim Government as the factor that convinced them that there was little alternative to accepting the division of the country.

Gandhi’s stand was different. He had told the British government from the beginning that there cannot be a coalition government between two incompatibles. They had to choose one of them. About the Constituent Assembly, he believed Congress should go ahead and form a Constituent Assembly when they had the strength to do so and frame a constitution for the areas it represented. An assembly under British auspices was a non-starter.

What Congress finally found impossible to accept was the League’s refusal to join the Constituent Assembly. This amounted to rejection of the long-term aspect of the Cabinet Mission Plan. Elections to the Assembly had been held and the Congress had sent its representatives, while keeping the door open for the League. This was despite His Majesty’s Government clarification on the grouping clause (in the 6th December 1946 statement) upholding the League’s interpretation and the Congress accepting this. The League later demanded dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, indeed, scrapping of the entire Cabinet Mission plan, at the Karachi session of its Working Committee on 31 January 1947. But such was British propping up of the League that it continued to be in the Interim Government till 19 July 1947.

23.8 PAKISTAN DEMAND AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

The demand for Pakistan, raised in Lahore in March 1940, acquired stridency by the summer of 1946. At the convention of Muslim League legislators at Delhi from 7 to 9 April 1946 it was clarified that Pakistan would be one nation though geographically spread across two regions. Unity of India was to be opposed by the sword if need be. Interestingly, Firoz Khan Noon threatened that if British impose unity, Muslims will be forced to wreak devastation worse than the deeds of Halaku Khan did. Jinnah made an appeal to Prime Minister, Attlee, to “avoid

compelling the Muslims to shed their blood” (6 July 1946). The League went one step further and withdrew its acceptance of the 16 May 1946 statement. Direct Action was declared to achieve Pakistan and to end domination by the British in the present and Caste Hindus in the future. Jinnah declared, “Today we have said goodbye to constitutions and constitutional methods.” And he ended with “We also have a pistol”.

The Council of the Muslim League had removed doubts, if there were any, about the sovereignty and integrity of the contemplated nation. (In later years, some scholars were to argue that Jinnah did not contemplate Pakistan as one nation or a sovereign one, it was only a bargaining counter.) The two parts in the north-west and east would comprise one nation, Pakistan, which would be a sovereign nation. Around this time Jinnah gave up constitutional methods and adopted the technique of Direct Action to reach his goal. This was based on his understanding of the clout of the Congress over the British and that the British government generally listened to troublemakers. It is worth noting that neither the British nor the Congress took Jinnah’s threat of bloodshed and rioting very seriously. Nehru misjudged the League’s ability to take to Direct Action, in his belief that reactionary landlords opposed to social change could hardly be expected to make revolution. Nehru challenged Jinnah to go in for civil disobedience, mockingly concluding: “I would like to see a revolution in India called by Mr. Jinnah. It is one thing to call for a revolution and another to carry out a revolution.” This was underlined by Jayakar who reported Patel’s conversation with some members of the Cabinet Mission in which he said that “the Congress could create more trouble than Jinnah’s 100 mullahs”.

16 August 1946 was declared as Direct Action Day. Trouble first broke out in Calcutta where a Muslim League government, headed by H. S. Suhrawardy, abetted the rioters. The slogans in Calcutta were *Larke lenge Pakistan*, *Lekar rahenge Pakistan*. Early Muslim initiative was met by Hindu retaliation and in the end 5000 people were killed. While Gandhi saw the Calcutta violence as bordering on civil war, Vallabhbai Patel spoke of the “black and inexcusable crimes” which went beyond riots. Jawaharlal Nehru compared the League’s government in Bengal with that of Hitler. Patel added that such a government would not exist for a day in a civilized country. Latter day scholars like Ayesha Jalal shifted responsibility for the violence in Calcutta on to the *mullahs* and *pirs* who were brought in to make Direct Action effective.

The effect of the happenings in Calcutta on the Viceroy was predictably to buttress his view that the Muslim League must immediately be brought into the Interim Government. Nehru in turn characterised this as “shaking hands with murder” and said they would have nothing to do with it. Far from revoking Direct Action after the tragedy in Calcutta, some League leaders went on to speak of “Jihad to achieve freedom for Islam in India”. Jinnah himself warned that the impending installation of a Congress Interim Government would result in unprecedented and disastrous consequences.

The communal trouble in Noakhali and Tippera in East Bengal began on 10 October 1946. Apart from killings, which had been witnessed in Calcutta, abduction of women and forced marriages and conversion by force were distinctive features. The topography of the region made communication difficult and assisted the troublemakers while making the task of the officials out to contain

the violence difficult. In any case, the government showed little interest in controlling the situation. The Governor mistrusted the Premier, Suhrawardy and top civilian and army officials admitted to inaction and communal bias. The Secretary of State contributed to condoning the government by charging the Hindus with exaggerating what had happened.

This was a cruel reality for the Congress leaders in the Interim Government to accept; that they were powerless to stop the reign of terror that prevailed in East Bengal. Nehru was so upset by this situation of responsibility without power that he contemplated retirement. It was precisely this sense of helplessness and the situation of an impasse that the League intended to create. Fortunately for the Congress, there was Gandhiji.

Gandhiji went to Noakhali on 6 November 1946, after having sent the Congress President, Kripalani and his wife Sucheta, ahead to report on the situation. Gandhi's way was different from his colleagues in the Interim Government. His first priority was to bring the Hindus and Muslims together, inspire confidence among Hindus and get the Muslims to repent for their deeds. At a wider level, he wanted his experiment with building non-violent communal unity to be such that it could be made to work across the country. His understanding was that *ahimsa*, which had worked well against the British, had not worked satisfactorily in Hindu-Muslim relations and needed to be refurbished. Predictably, he saw this as his personal failure and vowed to subject himself to purification to root out the imperfection.

During his stay in Noakhali he held prayer meetings and visited Hindus and Muslims in their homes. He exhorted Hindus to return home. For him, living in clusters with other Hindus was a worse fate than death as it implied accepting the two-nation theory. Similarly he opposed the demand that Hindu officials be posted in Hindu dominated areas, pointing out this was showed a communal mentality. Both these stances have enormous importance for us today when dealing with communal violence today in India. After the initial period of surveying the area and assessing the problem, Gandhiji settled in a village and gave up all conveniences, including the company of his associates. The intention was to remove the flaw in society by searching for the imperfection in himself. This flowed from his belief, "as in the microcosm, so in the macrocosm". While his efforts to get Muslims to repent and Hindus to return to their homes and practise their faith met with some response, Noakhali was so strife torn and polarised that even Gandhiji had to accept that his mission was only a partial success. Hostility from Muslims continued, Hindus could not pick up confidence to return to their homes and colleagues in the Congress party were keen to have him back in Delhi and guide the negotiations at a crucial period in the country's history. The Governor of Bengal said somewhat dramatically, "It would take a dozen Gandhis to make the Muslim leopard and Hindu kid lie down together again in that part of the world."

Noakhali was followed soon by communal trouble in Bihar, especially Patna, Gaya and Monghyr districts. Here Hindus attacked Muslims and around 5000 lost their lives. The Viceroy accepted the League figure of 10 to 20,000 dead and described the Bihar riots as the worst ever during British rule, surely an exaggeration. The League encouraged Muslims to migrate to Bengal in large numbers. Nehru led from the front in suppressing the rioters, even threatening

use of machine guns and bombs. In some instances, those Hindus who defended the actions of the Bihar peasants as righting the wrongs of Calcutta and Noakhali, interpreted Gandhi's actions as anti-Hindu.

Gandhiji could only go to Bihar on 2 March 1947, though he had been disturbed by what had happened since the day he heard about it when *en route* to Noakhali in November 1946. He was in favour of an enquiry into what happened even though some of his colleagues opposed it as it may discredit the Congress ministry at the helm. In Bihar, he saw his task as getting the Hindu peasants to repent for their deeds and create an environment conducive for Muslim victims to return to their homes. Never one to hesitate to harness the positive aspects of faith, he referred to the doings as *paap* (sin) and sought to invoke *pashchaataap* (repentance) for them.

However horrific the violence in Calcutta, Noakhali and Bihar, it paled in comparison with the happenings in Punjab, beginning with Rawalpindi and engulfing the province thereafter. Tragically, the country was now thrown into the vortex of civil war, a qualitatively new phase and type of violence. This will be taken up in the next Unit.

23.9 SUMMARY

Various factors – exhaustion in the War, unavailability of suitable British persons to serve in army and administration in India, and the growing protests in India against the colonial rule convinced the British government that it would not be possible to hold India for long. However, they wanted to retain connections with India by keeping it within the Commonwealth. Initially, they wanted to keep India unified. The Congress also sincerely wanted a unified country. But the violence unleashed by the Muslim League in its demand for Pakistan made it difficult for the Congress to force the unity solution. A series of communal riots in Bengal and Bihar and growing communalisation made the situation in 1946 extremely volatile.

23.10 EXERCISES

- 1) Write a short note on the Simla Conference.
- 2) What were the results of elections in 1945-46? What did they prove?
- 3) Discuss the political situation in the country in the wake of the 'Direct Action' call given by Jinnah and the Muslim League.