

## 6. THE CALCUTTA RIOT

M. N. ROY

The antagonism between the hindus and the muslims is an old phenomenon in the social life of India. This antagonism, which has its roots in the history of the country, has been fully exploited by British imperialism. It has always provided the basis for imperialist policy of "divide and rule". During the last two decades the religious conflict broke out into bloody riots on several occasions. In each case the hidden hand of the government was to be noticed behind the scene. Provocation acts on the part of the police were the immediate cause of such bloody riots. The latest one in Calcutta has been of an unusually acute nature.

In spite of the fact that hindu-muslim unity was one of the planks of the nationalist program, the bourgeois leaders have totally failed to solve the vexing problem. The reason of this deplorable failure is the inordinate importance given to religion in nationalist agitation. It is also due to the fact that the bourgeois-nationalist leaders only searched for a basis of compromise.

Before the British conquered India in the middle of the eighteenth century, the country had been ruled by

muslim invaders for nearly five hundred years. Although the muslim conquerors settled in India and practically severed all connection with their land of origin, they were always regarded more or less as aliens in the country. Religious antagonism and the consequent persecution was the order of the day in that period. A handful of British invaders were able so easily to conquer India, largely owing to the tacit connivance of the hindu majority of the population. The memory of the three centuries of muslim domination did not die easily among the hindus. The bogey of a new muslim invasion from the northwest was successfully held up by the British rulers to terrify the hindus into subjugation. On the other hand, the muslim minority was held in check by the fear that the disappearance of British protection would place the muslims under the revengeful tyranny of the hindu majority. The British rulers very successfully played upon the mutual fear and suspicion of the two communities. The policy would not have been so disastrously effective had these elements of fear and suspicion not had a traditional basis.

The muslim community constitutes a minority of the population, being in round numbers 70 million as against 200 million hindus. In its earlier stages (until the beginning of the world war) the nationalist movement was almost exclusively a hindu movement. After having overthrown the decayed muslim power with the help and connivance of the oppressed hindu majority, the British conquerors changed their policy. They pretended to be the protector of the muslim minority as against the possible dictatorship of the hindu majority. This pretension was backed up by certain favouritism towards the muslim intelligentsia who received preference over the hindus as regards state employment. This policy of favouritism kept the advanced elements of the muslim community away from the nationalist movement. Consequently, the latter became predominantly hindu and came under the influence of hindu religious ideology. This rendered the situation still worse. It enabled imperialism to play more

upon the fear and suspicion of the muslims. It was pointed out by imperialist writers that program of the nationalist movement was to establish a hindu kingdom in India, and that if that program were realised the muslims would find themselves in a precarious position: they would be subjected to a revengeful tyranny or even driven out of the country like the Moors from Spain. On the other hand, the government refused to pay any heed to the demands of the nationalist movement, on the pretext that it did not represent the view of the entire population. This state of affairs culminated in the organisation of the Indian Muslim League under official inspiration, as a standing challenge to the claims of the National Congress to speak on behalf of the entire nation.

The reactionary nature of hindu nationalism greatly helped the divide-and-rule policy of imperialism. It strengthened the religious preoccupation of the muslims who considered themselves muslims first and Indians last. Whenever necessary the government, with the help of the mullahs (muslim priests), could stir up religious fanaticism among the lowest section of the proletariat and turn their fury against the hindu nationalists. Muslim fanaticism, on its parts, provoked, the corresponding passion among the hindus.

The acuteness of this unfortunate state of affairs was somewhat relieved by the rapid development of native capitalism during the years immediately preceding the world war. Economic interests enabled the bourgeoisie to overcome religious prejudice. Eventually, in 1916, nationalism found a common platform. Hindu and muslim bourgeoisie united in their demand for selfgovernment and fiscal autonomy. Imperialism answered with a very clever move. The very limited franchise (embracing less than two per cent of the population) granted by the reforms act of 1919 was based upon the principle of communal representation. In the beginning the evils of this system were not so clearly felt. They were temporarily drowned by the gigantic mass upheaval of the postwar years. The inclusion of the

redemption of the islamic khilafat in the Indian nationalist program created an apparent unity among the hindus and muslims. But these tactics at the same time encouraged patriotism among the muslims. The failure of the khilafat movement has disturbed the apparent unity; but the results of religious fanaticism are playing havoc.

The religiocommunal problem, dangerous as it is, does not however affect all the social strata; only certain elements of the population are affected by it. A revolutionary outlook on the part of the nationalist leaders would render the solution of the problem much easier. But the nationalists are totally devoid of any understanding of the social basis of this problem. Besides, the leaders themselves are full of religious and communal prejudices which actually frustrate all their frantic attempts at unity. The office-hunting intelligentsia are the spokesmen of communal interests, and the slum proletariat in the cities are the instrument with which the bloody conflicts are precipitated. There has hardly been any case of religious riot in the countryside, in spite of the ignorance and religious prejudice of the peasantry. These class conflicts cut across the artificially fermented religious fanaticism. The landowning class, just as the peasantry, belong to both the religious communities. A muslim landowner exploits his tenant irrespective of religion. So also does the hindu landlord. Only in areas where the landowners and peasants, as classes, belong to different religions, does there exist a certain social basis for religious conflict. This was the case in the moplah rebellion of 1920-21. The peasants were all muslims and the landlords hindus. Consequently, although possessed of a certain religious character, the moplah revolt was an agrarian revolt.

Among the proletariat religious conflict has practically disappeared. For instance, the day after the bloody riots in Calcutta, 7000 workers (hindus and muslims) employed in the jute mills 20 miles away came out on strike as a protest against the ill-treatment of a muslim worker by an English engineer. The police were called in to suppress the strike.

Blood was shed; but the cause on that occasion was just the contrary—it united the struggle of the working class irrespective of religion.

The Calcutta event has its special reasons. It is a part of a plan carefully laid down by the government to break up the Swaraj Party, which, in the province of Bengal, is under certain revolutionary influence. In Bengal the two communities are nearly balanced, the muslims having a small majority. A pact between the hindus and muslims led to the return of a swarajist majority in the last parliamentary election. The next election will take place at the end of the year. The plan of the government is to break up the hindu-muslim pact so that the swarajist majority in the provincial legislative council will be eliminated. The bankruptcy of the swaraj program of parliamentary obstruction has disrupted the nationalist bloc. Now the government is endeavouring to win the muslims to its side by promising the introduction of communal representation in all branches of the public services; in other words, by promising government jobs to the muslim intelligentsia. In order to realise this sinister plan it must be demonstrated that the communities are in a perpetual state of warfare and fly at each others throats at every opportunity. The agitation for the organisation of a muslim party, obviously under official inspiration, strengthened the hands of the reactionary hindu leaders, who are ever ready for an antimuslim campaign. There are a thousand and one pretences on which the slum proletariat in large cities like Calcutta can be incited into a street brawl. A few bottles of alcohol and pieces of silver can always work miracles. That is how the bloody riot of Calcutta, the news of which has been flashed all over the world by Reuter as a proof of Indian's incapacity to govern himself, was engineered.

The growing importance of the proletariat and the rapid development of class-consciousness amongst the poor peasantry render these artificially provoked religious riots of much less gravity than they appear. Nevertheless the

problem of a national minority is there. The bourgeois nationalism, under the ideological influence of the reactionary intelligentsia, has failed to tackle the problem. But approached from the angle of class interests and class struggle this problem becomes comparatively easy.

*International Press Conference*

No 33, 22 April 1926