Making Peace, Making Riots

Communalism and Communal Violence, Bengal 1940–1947

Anwesha Roy

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The decade of the 1940s was a turbulent one for Bengal. War, famine, riots and partition – Bengal witnessed it all, and the unique experience of each of these created a space for diverse social and political forces to thrive and impact lives of people of the province. The book embarks on a study of the last seven years of colonial rule in Bengal, analysing the interplay of socioeconomic and political factors that shaped community identities into communal ones. The focus is on three major communal riots that the province witnessed – the Dacca Riots (1941), the Great Calcutta Killing (August 1946) and the Noakhali Riots (October 1946).

However, the study does not limit itself to an understanding of communal violence alone; it also studies anti-communal resistance, especially the Gandhian model of peace-keeping to enable a complete understanding of a communal riot. It analyzes the Bengal famine, tracing the nature of breakdown of Bengali society, and their dependence on relief and rehabilitation – which came thickly coated in communal colours and transformed community perceptions into communal identities. These events were closely tied with the politics around the Secondary Education Bill and the transformation of the Muslim League from an arm-chair organization to a more popular party demanding Pakistan, with a distinct socialist colouring and a support base not just among Muslims but also some sections among the Scheduled Castes.

This book moves beyond the binary understanding of communalism as Hindu versus Muslim and looks at the caste politics in the province, and offers a thorough understanding of the 1940s before partition.

Anwesha Roy is Marie Curie Post-Doctoral Research Fellow in Gandhian Politics at the Department of History, King's College London. She completed her PhD from Jawaharlal Nehru University and was a Charles Wallace Scholar to Britain in the year 2014.

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For Ashavari

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Abbreviations

AICC	All India Congress Committee
AIML	All India Muslim League
AIWC	All India Women's Conference
BPCC	Bengal Provincial Congress Committee
CWMG	Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi
DIB	District Intelligence Branch
FIC	Famine Inquiry Commission
GOB	Government of Bengal
IB	Intelligence Branch
MARS	Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti
NAI	National Archives of India
NMML	Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
SB	Special Branch
SC	Scheduled Castes
SDO	Sub-Divisional Officer
WBSA	West Bengal State Archives

Glossary

Abala	helpless woman
Abwab	fines or cesses levied by the landlord upon the peasants.
Ahimsa	non-violence
Akhara	gymnasium/ a place for wrestling
Andolan	a movement/ struggle
Atar	also called itar, is a sweet smelling oil or perfume
Bhadralok	a social class among Bengalis, generally comprising of prosperous, well-educated people.
Bhog	food offerings to Hindu deities
Bhookh Michil	Hunger March
Brahmacharya	celibacy
Bustee	slum
Chadar	cloth
Chheni	Chisel
Dal-bhaat	lentil curry and rice, a staple diet among Bengalis
Darshan	the auspicious act of seeing a holy person or a deity
Ejahar	Complaint
Ghar Wapasi	Homecoming; usually refers to the 're-conversion' to Hinduism, of 'lower' castes, who had earlier been converted to Christianity or Islam.
Ghat	a flight of steps leading down to the river, often a place where Hindu cremation ceremonies take place.
Goalas	Milkmen
Godown	a warehouse
Goonda	a thug or a bully
Gulail	catapult
Hartal	closure of shops and offices as a sign of protest.
Hat	a local, rural market
Janmashtami	Hindu festival celebrating the birth of the God Krishna
Jauhar	Hindu practice of mass self-immolation by women to avoid capture/rape by invaders, usually after defeat in a war

Jumma	Friday Prayer of Muslims
Kalma	the Muslim confession of Faith
Kalwars	artisans working with scrap metals
Kasai	butcher
Khals	small water bodies
Khichuri	also called Khichdi, is a dish made in South Asia by boiling together lentils and rice.
Kripa	grace or mercy
Krishak	farmer
Lathi	a long and strong stick
Lungi	a loose garment wrapped around the waist, extending to the ankles, usually worn by males in South Asia.
Madad-i-maash	Tax free lands given by Mughal Emperors as charity to pious/religious/worthy recipients.
Malechha	or Mlechha, is a derogatory term for one who does not practice Hinduism.
Mochi	shoe-maker
Mofussil	countryside
Mohalla	neighbourhood
Mussalman	Muslim
Namaskar	a form of respectful greeting among Hindus
Namaz	Islamic prayer to be observed five times a day
Patha	male goat
Phen	starchy water that is drained out after the rice has been boiled.
Pir	a Muslim holy man
Prarthana	prayer
Purdah	Veil
Ram-dhun	Singing the name of Ram
Ramzan	the ninth month of the Islamic calendar and observed by Muslims across the world, celebrating the revelation of the Holy Quran to Prophet Mohammad.
Rathajatra	a Hindu festival, signified by the symbolic pulling of the *ratha* or chariot of the God Jagannath.
Sadhana	disciplined practice
Salam	salutation, usually also a form of greeting among Muslims
Sangathan	unity
Sankharis	Conch-shell workers in rural Bengal.
Shiva Ratri	a Hindu festival celebrated annually in honour of the God Shiva
Shuddhi	purification
Teata	Multi-mouthed Lance
Thana	a police station, often refers also to the area that comes under the jurisdiction of a particular police station.

Introduction

Let me begin with a bit of personal history. I grew up in a Bengali family that had seen the horrors of the partition of Bengal. Although I did not live in West Bengal (my father was posted in Bokaro Steel City, Jharkhand), on my frequent trips to Calcutta I was surprised to find how strong the Bengali Hindu identity there was, not just for my family, but also amongst most Bengalis living in the city. Probing deeper, I found that they consciously tried to reinforce this identity through 'customs', 'traditions', attire, food and cultural practices. Discussions about a glorious 'Bengali' past would often go beyond literary geniuses like Rabindranath Tagore and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay; equally important was to remember 'historical' personalities who had 'fought' valiantly for our freedom. Interestingly, amongst many such 'freedom fighters', one name would figure prominently at the top of the list – Shyama Prasad Mookerjee, the well-known leader of the Hindu Mahasabha from Bengal and, later, also the founder of the Jana Sangh. Hailed as a 'saviour' who prevented the Balkanization of Bengal, his politics of the Hindu Mahasabha were considered by the Calcutta Bengalis to be just and even necessary in the face of partition. In contrast, there was also a very conscious attempt to vilify Gandhi as one who had bartered away 'India's' integrity to appease Muslims.

My grandparents had migrated to Calcutta from East Bengal after being compelled, like many others before and after them, to flee their homeland after the partition of Bengal in 1947. The ugly communal riots had stirred their apprehensions about a future in East Bengal. I had heard stories about the Great Calcutta Killing and the Noakhali riots from my grandfather in which he would repeatedly recount how Hindus were butchered in thousands by their Muslim neighbours, and friends turned foes overnight. This perplexed me even more, because Hindus too had killed their Muslim neighbours in thousands. This selective amnesia, which I found not just among those who had witnessed the partition but also amongst the next generation who had only heard stories about it, drove me to seek an understanding of the deeper

currents that ran through the formation of such apparent 'fixed' categories as Hindus and Muslims. I also noticed the almost instinctive exclusion of Muslims from any ideas of the 'Bengali community'. 'Bengali' was always and almost matter-of-factly equated with being Hindu.

A more immediate brush with communalism was the Sikh massacres in 1984 which had affected even a small town like Bokaro Steel City quite badly. My parents had witnessed the riot and my father had narrowly escaped getting hurt. Community ties, with a strong sense of Hindu-Muslim-Sikh divide has since existed in a palpable way in this very small city[1]. My personal experiences of communal violence are located in the Gujarat massacres of 2002. The nature and scale of the violence were incomprehensible and the recurring newspaper images of a badly injured Muslim man with folded hands at a police station haunted me. I questioned the rationale behind such acts of violence, personalized vividly in the exalted faces of Hindu rioters with swords in their hands. In more recent times, the 'saffron wave' in almost the all of north, west and eastern India and parts of southern India in the wake of the Central Assembly polls of 2014 and in its aftermath, has made the reemergence of the Hindu Right in Indian politics a much more palpable reality. The repetitive harping of the Sangh Parivar about 'rebuilding the Ram Temple' in Ayodhya and the use of social media like Facebook and Twitter to reach out to the nation's youth with its programme of Hindu cultural nationalism have also acquired new dimensions since the pre-poll mobilisation drive of 2014. Moreover, the recent insistence of extreme Hindu right-wing groups like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) upon '*Ghar Wapasi*' (homecoming) for people who had apparently 'strayed away' from Hinduism (which invariably focuses on the Dalit converts to Islam and Christianity) is also glaringly reminiscent of the Hindu Mahasabha's *Sangathan* movement in the 1940s, especially in Bengal. In the setting of present day Bengal politics, the retreat of the Left has led to increased opportunities and subsequently attempts of the Hindu right-wing political groups to capture its base. This work is therefore the outcome of a long-standing urge to understand communalism, its growth, sustenance and, also, its limits in a plural society.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

I. Debates around Communalism

C. A. Bayly has argued in favour of a 'pre-history of communalism' in the land wars of eighteenth-century India. He makes a distinction between two

situations. One, where religious buildings and festivals were the chief objects of conflict and rulers played an important part in initiating and resolving disputes. Second, where economic and social conflicts occurred predominantly between groups from different religious affiliations.[2] In the former case, Bayly argues, 'savage destruction and slaughter could take place between groups who continued to venerate the shrines and holy figures of each other's traditions, but fought strenuously for immediate sovereignty of holy places. Sikhs may sometimes have vilified Muslims as 'Turks', but it seems unlikely that any monolithic communal identity existed or was in the process of emerging'.[3] In the second case however, the conflicts between the religious communities which assumed the form of 'land wars' could be expressed in the vocabulary of 'communal antagonism'.

Bayly cites a couple of reasons behind classifying these land wars as 'communal'. Firstly, the nature of the declining Mughal state and administration had ensured that holders of privileged tenures like *madad-i-maash* grants were mostly Muslims, while their local competitors belonged to 'Hindu agricultural castes' like Rajputs, Bhumihars and Jats'.[4] Secondly, these land wars often assumed the form of savage attacks where demolition of mosques, graveyards and Sufi shrines along with houses of the Muslim gentry became the primary objective. He concludes that 'The land wars of the eighteenth century which saw the rise of agrarian Sikh and Hindu peasantry against Muslim rural gentry were apparently no more or less 'communal' than the riots in eastern U.P. in the 1920s or eastern Bengal in the 1930s and 1940s'.[5]

There are some obvious contradictions in Bayly's statements. On the one hand he asserts that no teleology should be established by which the conflicts of this period are stretched out to provide the background for Muslim or Hindu-Sikh contentions in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[6] Yet, he uses an eighteenth-century milieu to trace the genesis of communalism in the colonial period in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By tracing what he calls a 'pre-history of communalism', Bayly seems to suggest an unbroken trajectory from the eighteenth century to the end of the colonial rule. He negates the experience of colonial 'subjects' in structuring their own notions of community through indices introduced by the colonial state like the Census, formalized educational ventures, print culture and institutionalized politics from 1937. The importance of specific political configurations at historical junctures and the importance of the historical juncture itself in providing the scope for the development of communalism and communal politics are also clearly overlooked in his argument.

Bipan Chandra argues precisely in the opposite direction. He argues that it would be incorrect to treat communalism as a 'remnant of the past'.[7] He sees communalism as a byproduct of colonialism. Chandra defines communalism as 'the belief that by virtue of following the same religion, a group of people have common social, political and economic interests'. Situating the rise of communalism in the British colonial impact, he argues that both nationalism and communalism were 'modern phenomena' and the products of social change witnessed during colonial rule.[8]

Chandra says that lack of deep penetration of nationalist ideology has contributed to the prevalence of communal ideology[9]. Communalism was a 'false consciousness' as it presented reality in a distorted form; it was not just a 'partial view of reality' but a 'false view'. Objectively, no real conflict between the interests of Hindus and Muslims existed.[10] This false view, according to Chandra, developed because of the failure of certain sections of the Indian society to 'adequately develop the new national consciousness'. In Chandra's analysis, therefore, what constitutes true consciousness is inevitably nationalism. He argues that the acute shortage of superior jobs carrying high salaries and social status, along with rising prices during the World Wars, filled the middle classes with anxiety about their future and led to a sense of loss of identity as well. This often created an atmosphere of violence and brutality which, triggered by a religious issue, turned into communal riots. Such a sense of destruction of identity, when paired with lack of faith in the national movement, led individuals and groups from the middle classes to seek short term solutions. Here, the use of religion to posit one community against the other or blame one community for the failure of another was facilitating.

On the other hand, Chandra claims, the 'masses' were attracted to communalism by 'having their religious fervour excited', for in their case, communalism involved or projected 'none of their real life demands or interests'. In their case, the fear complex could be fully aroused not by claiming that their interests were in danger, but by insisting that their religion itself was in danger.[11] Here, a certain elitist bias is evident in Chandra's argument. Besides the obvious problems in treating the 'masses' as an amorphous category, he seems to imply that religion solely ordered the world view of the 'masses', whereas the 'middle classes' were concerned more about jobs and educational opportunities. He oversimplifies how the dynamic nature of communal ideology and identity formation could actually negotiate with 'real interests' of the 'masses', like economic and social betterment and mobility.

Chandra's statement that 'communal tension was spasmodic and usually directly involved the lower classes only'[12] is also problematic in that he sees the 'lower classes' as *naturally* susceptible to communal propaganda. He points out that participants in and the victims of a communal riot were 'necessarily the urban poor and lumpen and goonda elements, though in a few cases peasants were also involved. There was seldom any physical participation of middle and upper classes, though they often lent material and moral support to the lumpen and goonda participants'[13]. My dissent with this view is that if we accept that the 'lower classes' can be easily or naturally swayed by propaganda, we inevitably also accept the fact that they do not have the agency for rational thinking of their own. Moreover, the physical absence of middle and upper classes in a communal riot that Chandra emphasizes, was negated by the presence of Bengali Hindu businessmen, 'influential merchants' and students who had been arrested on charges of rioting during the Great Calcutta Killing in August 1946.[14] Although he argues that communalism and communal riots are different, his statement that 'the overwhelming majority of Indians, especially in the rural areas, were unaffected by communal tensions'[15] betrays a subconscious compulsion of looking at the extent of communalization through the prism of riots alone. This is especially true in the context of Bengal in the 1940s, where issues around the Census, education and famine relief resulted in thriving communal tension.

In Chandra's view of communalism, all other social identities are either denied or, when accepted in theory, are either negated in practice or subordinated to the religious identity.[16] Here, Chandra once again oversimplifies the myriad ways in which communalism relates to and negotiates with such identities. Another problem with his line of argument lies in seeing communalism simply as the other of anti-colonial nationalism and seeing 'nationalism' as a monolithic homogenous category. He points out that nationalism acquired its validity because it was 'the **correct** reflection of an objective reality: the developing identity of common interests of the Indian people, in particular against the common enemy, foreign imperialism'.[17] Here Chandra negates the subjective experiences of 'Indian people' in constructing both their own versions of 'interests' and 'common enemy' in the course of their 'developing identity'. He falls into the trap of seeing the 'Indian Nation' as a single, natural given category.

Prabha Dixit, too, offers a similar understanding of communalism and the development of communal organizations. She argues for the singularity of nationalism, positing nationalism and communalism as mutually exclusive

categories, communalism as the opposite of nationalism. She goes on to state, in a very different vein from Chandra, that *Muslim communalism* stood in the way of the development of '*Indian*' nationalism (emphasis mine), thereby treating 'Muslims' and 'Indians' as separate binaries and falling within the communalist trap herself. Her contention is that 'Muslim communalism in India did not arise as a reaction to Hindu communalism, nor was it religiously inspired. It was an independent political movement which developed as an antithesis of Indian nationalism'.[18] She sees Muslim communalism arising as a political doctrine amongst the Muslim elite, as the only plausible and available way to safeguard their class interests, because they had lost out to the Hindus in the race for democratization and modernization. This elite then manipulated the 'ignorant masses' into falling in line with its political doctrine. Once again, we see the negation of agency to the 'masses' by treating them as 'ignorant' and naturally susceptible to the elite's manipulation.

Gyan Pandey offers a completely different take on the relationship between nationalism and communalism. He locates the rise of communalism in the Indian context in the 1920s. 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' political mobilization, he argues, had been seen in the past as necessary in the early stages of building Indian nationalism. But from the 1920s, such politics became the 'chief flogging horse of Indian nationalism'.[19] Thus was born the 'nationalist version' of the concept of communalism. According to Pandey, Indian nationalism was conceptualized only in opposition to the concept of communalism. This view challenges the view of nationalist historians who hold that communalism developed in opposition to Indian nationalism.[20] The language of the 'purely national', unaffected by pulls of caste, class or religion, was put forward by leaders of the Indian National Congress, especially Gandhi; it elevated the concept of the Indian nation to a different plane, one that pushed its foundations beyond the notions of religious communities, castes and class.[21] The idea of an essential 'unity of India' was put forward by the nationalist enterprise, and centuries of Muslim rule before the arrival of the British were also incorporated within this narrative along with 'Hindu' rulers like Ashoka and the Rajputs. Examples of the fifteenth-century mystic poet Kabir and the sixteenth-century Mughal ruler Akbar were celebrated to show the unity, syncretism and synthesis inherent in the 'Indian' cultural fabric.[22] Communalism became everything that nationalism was not. This was the othering of communalism; it was seen as regressive, reactionary and essentially born out of the machinations of the colonial regime.

However, Pandey points out, this nationalist enterprise was fraught with oversimplification. The nationalism being professed by the Congress reconstructed its past to establish in it the unity, uniqueness and pride of the 'nation'[23]. But not all 'nationalisms' reconstructed *their* past in the same way (emphasis mine). Thus, Pandey makes space for the subjective conceptualization and construction of nationalism by different social groups. As he says, 'one person's nationalism was often another's communalism'[24]. Moreover, the historical reconstruction of the past and its 'unity' by the nationalists was premised on great rulers of India – the Mughals, the Rajputs etc. What was completely overlooked in this narrative were common people as 'historical agents, who were struggling to realize their many versions of truth, honour and just life.'[25] Precisely because of this lacuna, nationalism was 'forced into the kind of statist perspective' that colonialism itself was promoting. Colonialist and the nationalist perceptions about communalism also overlapped. Both nationalists and colonialists accepted the 'given-ness' of communalism 'as a more or less tangible phenomenon whose causes can be readily identified, and of its other – rationalism or liberalism, secularism or nationalism, however one chooses to put it'.[26]

Pradip Kumar Datta offers a nuanced understanding of communalism and communal identities. He argues against the singularity of collective identities in any form. He asserts that different identities are not necessarily hard boundaries that can never be transgressed. Even communal collective identities relate in different ways to class, gender and caste affiliations and what needs to be studied carefully are the vulnerabilities of such identities, the ways in which their 'hardness' has to mediate, compromise and suppress in order to produce 'tentative unities' that proclaim themselves to be 'bonded monoliths'.[27] Datta studies identity formation in a more dynamic form, arguing that communalism as an ideological field is fraught with inner tensions, in which it wrestles with the claims of other collectives. Therefore, communalism constantly engages in a process of displacing or actively opposing claims of other collective identities; it has the capability of submerging all vertical social divisions, but in this process it has to compete with rival identities and engage in a multiplicity of relationships with them, in order to neutralize their alternative structures of possibility and absorb them into itself. Moreover, communalism, unlike fascism or other political doctrines, lives in self-denial of its explicit objectives, where it can only imply what its principal characteristics are. It can never name itself directly as communalism. In the communal 'imagery', all symbols and meanings that are created become non-antagonistic and reinforce each other in their orientation towards a common adjective.[28]

II. Debates Around Riots and Collective Violence

Sandria B. Freitag, argues that the tendency of historians of communalism to extrapolate values and meanings from organizations alone leads to an incomplete understanding of the nature and development of communal consciousness. Further, a constant distinction between elite and popular reactions, labelling the latter as 'violent', implies a value judgement that renders popular protest suspect, less than legitimate, or even irrational: the 'insensate violence' of the bazaars and *mohallas*.[29] She lays emphasis on the fact that participants also construct their respective communities for which they act, and in the process create their own 'other'. Riots, in her analysis, occupy an important place because they typify public arena activities and enable the scholar to understand the nature of a particular community to which the participants of the riot conceive themselves as belonging. Riots constitute an essential component in a framework of social interaction that regards violence as one of a range of legitimate options of group action.[30] Riots also measure the extent to which public arenas remained a viable form of negotiation and expression of urban socio-political relationships.[31]

Collective action, according to Freitag, is motivated by the participants' perceptions that they belong to some kind of a whole, whether relational or ideological.[32] She lays emphasis on gatherings in public arenas which create new social ties and emotional bonds, which could then be used as methods of mobilization. This last aspect is particularly important in studying the Noakhali riots and the Great Calcutta Killing, where such gatherings happened in public spaces. In these gatherings, the *maulvis/pirs* and local peasant leaders like Golam Sarwar spoke at length to the local populace. The public spaces and the activities that constituted it, then, become an important component in the mobilization of local Muslims of Calcutta and Noakhali in 1946. Moreover, by looking at the way participants themselves constitute and reconstitute their respective communities and the way they relate to it and act collectively, Freitag provides insights into the nature of a communal riot and reiterates the fact that any identity, whether communal or not, is never fixed.

Patricia Gossman focuses on the rise of communalism amongst Muslims of East Bengal. She correctly argues that they never constituted a monolithic community. What is important to understand is how Bengali Muslim political leaders, especially those of the Muslim League, between 1905 and 1947, could successfully create symbols that cut across religious and class divisions.[33] She focuses on the role played by the local *pirs* and religious leaders, who, in an attempt to forge a greater Muslim identity, were creating a new kind

of community cohesiveness, cutting across the *Ashraf* and *Atrap* differences within the community.

Gossman also studies the role that violence plays in acquiring its own symbolic and ritualized place in political mobilization. This, in turn, creates opportunities for the formation of new identities. Violence during riots facilitates leaders' contest for legitimacy against one another. Violence, she asserts, is an effective tool for political mobilization because it cuts across other divisions and generates solidarity against threatened aggression. Representations of violence become a symbol which helps freeze popular constructions of identity[34] at a certain point. Those who protect their communities during riots become heroes and in this context, the study of the 'criminal elements', e.g. the goondas, becomes important. Arguing that activities of leaders in inciting collective violence do not merely imply that riots are the outcome of elite efforts to manufacture mass support, she suggests the importance to couple the study of riot 'with an analysis that stresses human agency'.[35]

Gyan Pandey, while studying the violence that accompanied partition, asserts that it can be seen in two forms: the first being the 'violence of the state', which is often presumed to be legitimate, organized, carefully controlled, whereas the second form, i.e. the 'violence of the people', is seen as being diametrically the opposite of the first – it is chaotic, uncontrolled, excessive and, likewise, illegitimate. Violent actors are often described as masses, rabble or mob. This precludes the possibility of any sense of rationality and agency that such a group might possess. Looking at violence as a representation of lack of reason and will on the part of those who actively participate in this is essentially a colonialist (or statist) discourse. Riots in this narrative, then, become 'aberrational' or 'extraordinary' cases, seen as 'a temporary madness' or a 'temporary suspension of reason'.

This is the 'othering' of violence, because reason, progress, modernity, rational thought, all belong to the purview of the state. Violent 'masses' are the 'other' who need to be controlled. Riots, therefore, often in colonialist discourse, and later in nationalist discourse as well, became a law and order problem, as was witnessed in the official records during the riots of Bengal in 1946-47. Moreover, the emphasis on the 'criminal elements' such as the goondas during a riot overlooks the important fact that at times, there is tacit support given to them by 'respectable' people. In such instances, they often become heroes and are looked upon as protectors of the community. We shall study this in greater detail when we analyse the Great Calcutta Killing and the Noakhali riots in Bengal in 1946-47.

I return once again to the work of Pradip Kumar Datta. Riots occupy a prominent place in his study as well, although he points out that they are not the terminal points of the process of communalization but one of the interrelated elements in an entire process. He focuses on how, during a riot, the body itself becomes communalized[36]. His work is important for an understanding of the meanings that are attributed to symbols (including symbols placed around the body, like clothing or a beard), that in turn become the chief markers of communal antagonism during a riot. Datta argues that any riot derives its source of power from the dangers posed to the body, and that riots 'take to their [il]logical conclusion . . . the burden of meaning placed by the urban gaze on the communal signifiers of the body.'[37] This argument is a key component in my understanding of communal violence in the riots of 1941 in Dacca and in 1946 in Calcutta and Noakhali, when attacks on the body of the 'other' attained an unprecedented gruesomeness.

Taking a cue from the examples of *go-korbani* (cow-slaughter) that Datta cites[38], and the assertion that during a potential riot situation the power of a communalized discourse is derived from its ability to problematize the relationships within a lived social space, I extend the argument to the case of the Great Calcutta Killing. The mass rally organized by the Muslim League on Direct Action Day turned an abstraction of the achievement or non-achievement of Pakistan into a visible reality. This visibility in a social space becomes very important in the case of a communalized society. Visibility ensures the display of power relations within society or an inversion of existing power relations. The mass meeting of Muslims in a vast open field at the heart of the city was precisely a symbolic assertion of power in a public space. Hindus retaliated by keeping their shops open and preventing the rally from reaching the Ochterlony Monument at the Maidan. A riot scenario then implicitly becomes a power/authority contest over public space. From rights over 'sacred space,' which trigger riots on issues regarding music around mosques, to rights over non-sacred civic space, all are moored eventually in power struggles.

III. Historiography of Communalism and Communal Riots in Bengal

Sumit Sarkar has traced the development of Muslim separatism and the roots of Muslim communalism from the Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903–08. He points to the ruptures under an apparent syncretism that defined the Swadeshi *andolan* in Bengal, arguing that 'social barriers and taboos remained sufficiently formidable for both communities to retain always a sense of separate identity

even at the village level.'[39] He points out that the disparities in the 'middle-class' development amongst the Muslims and Hindus in Bengal regarding education and, consequently, appointment in government jobs constituted a fertile source of communalism. In the early period of the Swadeshi movement, patriotism came to be identified with Hindu revivalism, and the terms 'Hindu' and 'national' became almost synonymous. Muslims came to resent Hindu assumptions of superiority increasingly, and when, under the influence of Syed Ahmad Khan, they gradually began to take to the 'modern' form of English education, far from contributing to secular nationalism, it stimulated in the Muslims a fear of being left behind the Hindus in the race for jobs and political influence.[40] The Wahhabi and the Faraizi movements already had profoundly 'Islamisized' the rural Muslim society. They denounced syncretist trends like the rural Muslims' participation in Hindu rites and festivals. Hindu revivalism too, with its emphasis on the Ganapati Utsava, the anti-cow-slaughter campaign and the Urdu-Nagari controversy 'supplied fresh wind to the sails of the separatist movement being promoted from Aligarh.'[41]

Even when Swadeshi activists used Hindu-Muslim unity as one of their principal themes, there were several problems. On the one hand, communal harmony was notionally celebrated. But on the other, the evocation of traditional Hindu symbols went ahead on an unprecedented scale. Bipin Chandra Pal propounded his theory of 'composite nationalism' wherein the future progress of India was dependent on the advance of particular communities along their own lines. He visualized a 'federal India' in which units were not to be language based nationalities but were based on religious communities.[42] Sarkar remarks that if the 'federal India' of the future was to have religious communities as its constituents, a basic disagreement between them would open the door for a partition of the country on communal lines; 'only one short step thus logically divides Pal's "composite patriotism" from the two-nation theory'.[43] Eventually, the Swadeshi ideals had only a limited appeal for the Bengali Muslims. However, what made communalism dangerous in Bengal was the 'incongruous Muslim combination of aristocratic leadership with anti-landlord demagogy.'[44] The riots of 1906 –07 in Mymensingh, Jessore and other areas of the East Bengal countryside found an increasing response from Muslim lower classes and Sarkar sees an aggravation of the problem in the anti-zamindar and anti-mahajan tone of communal propaganda.[45] The agrarian background in East Bengal districts, where peasants were mostly Muslims while zamindars and mahajans were Hindus, made this a potent possibility. Sarkar argues that from the Muslim point of view, the main lesson

of 1906–07 was that in order to be significantly effective in Bengal, Muslim communalism must have an agrarian base.[46] This lesson was well learnt by the Muslim League, as we shall observe in this book.

Kenneth McPherson traces the rise of Muslim communalism in Bengal to the Khilafat–Non-Cooperation movement from 1918–22. He points out the limitations that the communal rapprochement faced during Khilafat and Non-Cooperation days and also identifies the attitude of the Hindu Bhadralok as a cause for the growth of Muslim communalism. He argues that although Muslim support for the boycott (organized in Calcutta as a part of the Khilafat–Non-Cooperation) was overwhelming, Hindu support was slacked. There was half-hearted support amongst Bengali Hindus for Khilafat and this plagued the rapprochement in Calcutta that had been attained briefly under the leadership of the Ali brothers and Gandhi.[47] The reason behind this was that within Bengal, the Hindu urbanized middle classes and landowners were 'nervously aware' of the economic hegemony they exerted over the Muslim masses. 'They feared to encourage Muslim political activity in case they themselves were threatened . . .'[48] By the end of 1923, communal relations were in ruins and this was manifest in communal riots in Calcutta over issues like *go-korbani* and music before mosques. Communal tensions were further fuelled by the rise of the distinctly anti-Muslim Arya Samaj and the Shuddhi and Sangathan movements from 1923.

C. R. Das' Hindu-Muslim Pact in December 1923 met with lukewarm response and, in some cases, even with outright opposition amongst the Hindus of Calcutta. Public meetings were held to denounce the Pact as one sacrificing the Hindu interests. Even the Congress refused to ratify the pact in the face of strong opposition from Gandhi himself. Such reactions to the Pact, which was clearly conciliatory towards the Muslims, argues McPherson, confirmed the belief of many Muslims in Calcutta that the Congress was dominated by Hindu communalists.[49] The Khilafat movement had politicized Muslims profoundly and created a sense of community solidarity hitherto not so clearly defined. Communal rapprochement during Khilafat and Non-Cooperation had provided the Muslims with much needed allies for their cause in the Congress. But once the Khilafat issue settled itself and the latent tension between the two communities came to the fore, communal antagonism resurfaced. McPherson sums up thus: the uplift and regeneration that the Muslims of Bengal ultimately sought, once the red-herring of the Khilafat had vanished, 'was defined in negative terms of seizing the positions of economic power and influence held by their former allies, the Hindus.'[50]