

Beyond Hindu–Muslim unity: Gandhi, the Parsis and the Prince of Wales Riots of 1921

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Between 17 and 20 November 1921, Bombay was convulsed by the Prince of Wales Riots, which coincided with the arrival of the future King Edward VIII in the city. The riots constituted an extremely important moment in the Non-Cooperation Movement, the political transformation of Bombay and the development of M.K. Gandhi's political thought. Additionally, the riots upturned familiar notions of communalism: angry at repeated violations of a hartal Gandhi declared for the day of the Prince's arrival, Muslim and Hindu supporters of the Non-Cooperation and Khilafat movements joined together to attack supposedly loyalist minorities, especially Parsis. Herein lay the riots' broader significance. During the Non-Cooperation Movement, Gandhi had been keen to recruit the active support of the Parsi community. He was well aware of their financial and political clout and their leadership roles in liberal nationalist circles. Most Parsis, however, expressed strong reservations about Gandhi's tactics, believing that a mass political movement under the banner of 'Hindu–Muslim unity' would be injurious to smaller minority communities. The riots, therefore, confirmed Parsis' worst fears about Gandhi's politics and their majoritarian implications. Gandhi, for his part, worked tirelessly to repair his relationships with the Parsis and reassure them of the Congress' commitments towards minority rights. He reconsidered how smaller communities fit into India's communal dynamics. By December 1921, Gandhi even unfurled a new slogan that was used towards the end of the Non-Cooperation Movement: 'Hindu–Muslim–Sikh–Parsi–Christian–Jew unity'.

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In the summer of 2008, I interviewed two nonagenarian women, both of whom had taken part in the Indian nationalist movement in their own ways. I asked

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whether they remembered a particular incident in Bombay from 1921: the Prince of Wales Riots, where Hindu and Muslim supporters of Mohandas K. Gandhi had attacked Parsis and other supposedly loyalist minorities during the visit of the future King Edward VIII to the city. Although the riots had taken place early in their childhoods, both women instantly registered the topic of my query. Aloo Dastur, a retired University of Mumbai professor whose entire family had been committed, khadi-wearing Gandhians, did not seem to think that the riots had any lasting effect upon Parsi support for Gandhi or the Indian National Congress. ‘Many Parsis were behind Gandhiji’, she asserted. In contrast, Homai Vyrawalla, celebrated as India’s first professional woman photographer, vividly recalled scenes from those portentous days: fellow Parsi schoolgirls staging *garbas* for the Prince, rioters hurling stones at a Parsi-owned liquor shop in Tardeo, Hindus using the marble stops of soda bottles as lethal projectiles, and a Parsi police supervisor smuggling brickbats to his coreligionists on Wadia Street. ‘Hindus had spread propaganda among the masses that Parsis were against Indian independence’, she stated. Although Vyrawalla had captured some of the most iconic images of the nationalist movement, she was deeply critical of Gandhi. ‘I would not call him a Mahatma’, she told me. ‘What authority did Gandhi have to tell men to go to their deaths to achieve independence?’¹

As Dastur’s and Vyrawalla’s accounts indicate, the Prince of Wales Riots were remembered in very different ways. The riots had a deep and immediate impact upon the political landscapes of Bombay and India at large. Over 50 people died on Bombay’s streets between 17 and 20 November 1921; hundreds more were wounded and hospitalised. Political, labour and communal grievances comingled in the violence. Congress and Khilafat volunteers had cast the first stones in response to the open defiance of a *hartal* or strike imposed by Gandhi for 17 November, the day that the Prince of Wales began a four-month tour of India. Millworkers soon joined in the violence, but by the second day, the riots had taken on clearly communal overtones. Parsis were no strangers to communal riots: they had been embroiled in violent episodes with Muslims on the streets of Bombay in 1851 and 1874.² Although intercommunity disturbances had occurred regularly in the city during the previous three decades, the Prince of Wales Riots were the most serious communal conflagration to hit Bombay since the Hindu–Muslim clashes of 1893.³ But the Prince of Wales Riots also upturned familiar narratives

¹ Dastur, who passed away in 2010, noted that her family lived in Bandra, which was unaffected by the riots. Personal interview, 11 September 2008, Mumbai. I interviewed Vyrawalla, then 94, at Harvard University, where she had been invited to speak at an event. This was her first, and final, trip outside of India. She passed away in 2012. Personal interview, 8 May 2008, Cambridge, MA.

² The Parsi–Muslim Riots of 1851 and 1874 were both triggered by articles on Muhammad, authored and published by Parsis, that were deemed offensive to the Muslim community. Palsetia, *The Parsis of India*, pp. 188–89.

³ For more on the 1893 riots, see Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis*, pp. 117–21; and Masselos, ‘The City as Represented in Crowd Action’.

of communalism: here, after all, Hindus and Muslims joined hands to attack other communities. For Gandhi, at the helm of the Non-Cooperation Movement, the riots came as an ill-timed blow. British and Indian critics had already raised questions about Gandhi's ability to control Congress and Khilafat volunteers and ensure their adherence to the creed of non-violence. These voices grew louder as Bombay burned. Consequently, Gandhi launched his first-ever hunger strike for the purpose of ending communal rioting. Although the hunger strike proved successful, the riots left Gandhi crestfallen. When, a little over two months later, Gandhi suspended the Non-Cooperation Movement due to repeated lapses of violence, he invoked the Prince of Wales Riots alongside the holocaust at Chauri Chaura.⁴

In spite of their significance, very little has been written about the riots.⁵ In this essay, I will focus on how the riots were a flashpoint in Gandhi's oftentimes fraught relationship with the Parsi community and, in a related manner, a turning point in Bombay nationalist politics. For this purpose, we must return to the accounts provided by Dastur and Vyarawalla. It is quite apparent that their contrasting views of Gandhi influenced the women's very different recollections of the Prince of Wales Riots.

This points us towards a political rift that existed within the Parsi community in the early twentieth century, one that was representative of broader schisms in the nationalist movement. Nationalist politics in Bombay, as scholars such as Jim Masselos and Prashant Kidambi have demonstrated, underwent a sea change in the years between 1919 and 1921. A new crop of Gandhians elbowed out a more moderate, liberal elite, inaugurating an era of mass politics and confrontationist tactics against the Raj.⁶ Parsis, of course, had played a dominant role in the earlier, liberal phase of Indian nationalism: Dadabhai Naoroji, Pherozeshah Mehta and Dinsha Wacha steered the Indian National Congress through its tempestuous first few decades and, on the whole, championed a constitutionalist strategy vis-à-vis colonial authorities. The community exhibited a mixed response to this brand of liberal nationalism. However, Parsis reacted with overwhelming wariness and trepidation towards Gandhi's innovations in the Congress. Some, like Aloo Dastur and her family, wholeheartedly embraced these innovations. Most Parsis, however, expressed significant reservations about Gandhi's decisions to completely repudiate British rule, abandon constitutionalist methods and usher in an era of mass politics under the banner of Hindu–Muslim unity. They saw these innovations as being

⁴ *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (hereafter referred to as *CWMG*), Vol. 22, p. 378.

⁵ Scholars have made brief mention of the role of industrial workers and have commented on how the riots set the tone of the Prince of Wales's tour of India in 1921–22. See, for example, Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India*, pp. 416, 418; Andrews, *Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 201; and Sapire, 'Ambiguities of Loyalism', p. 46.

⁶ Masselos, 'Some Aspects of Bombay City Politics in 1919'; Kidambi, 'Nationalism and the City in Colonial India'. For detailed examination of a similar political transition in Surat, see Chapter 10 in Haynes, *Rhetoric and Ritual in Colonial India*.

decisively against the community's interests: in Hindu–Muslim unity, particularly, they perceived the threat of majoritarian politics that would leave little room for Parsis and other smaller minorities. Amidst these concerns, the Prince of Wales Riots threatened to bring new fissures to the surface of the Parsi political landscape. The violence, and the specific targeting of an elite minority such as the Parsis, also raised more general questions about Indian nationalism. Had liberal politics in Bombay become completely impotent and irrelevant? Did the Prince of Wales Riots represent a 'point of no return' for moderate political voices?

In the months before the riots, Gandhi expended significant effort to win over Parsis to the Congress and assuage their worries about non-cooperation. After the violence subsided, he threw himself into the task of salvaging his relationship with community members. But why did Gandhi care so much about the Parsis, a numerically insignificant minority whose population barely touched 102,000 at the time of the riots?⁷ First and foremost, Gandhi held Parsis in great esteem, having counted many of them amongst his close allies during his struggles in South Africa. Second, he recognised that Parsis exercised disproportionate political and economic influence in Indian affairs. He was keenly aware that the community was, in many ways, the key to Bombay's liberal political tradition. 'It can be said that it is this community which holds power in India', Gandhi claimed as early as 1909. 'Bombay is the real capital of India, [and] it owes its prosperity mainly to the Parsees.'⁸ Moral and financial support from the community, and Parsi influence over the broader stream of liberal politics in India, could play pivotal roles in the Non-Cooperation Movement.

Finally, Gandhi's outreach to the Parsi community, especially after the Prince of Wales Riots, was reflective of his steadfast commitment to pan-communal inclusivity within the Congress. Gandhi sought to make this abundantly clear to his critics and sceptics. In this sense, the riots and their aftermath become important moments for understanding Gandhi's engagement with smaller religious minorities in India, as well as how he conceptualised minority rights. Existing scholarship on Gandhi and minorities has focused almost entirely on his relations with Indian Muslims, especially the alliance that he brokered between the Non-Cooperation and Khilafat movements under the banner of 'Hindu–Muslim unity'.⁹ Yet, throughout his career, Gandhi made significant efforts to reach out to members of other religious minorities across India, such as Sikhs, Christians and Jews.¹⁰ He fervently encouraged them

⁷ Census figures quoted in Kulke, *The Parsees in India*, p. 35. Today, the Parsi population in India has plummeted to around 61,000, largely due to trends of non-marriage and late marriage.

⁸ *CWMG*, Vol. 9, pp. 194–95.

⁹ See, for example, Minault, *The Khilafat Movement*, especially chapters 2 and 4; Miller, 'Indian Muslim Critiques of Gandhi'; Nanda, *Gandhi*; and Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty*, especially Chapter 5.

¹⁰ Some relatively recent work has touched on Gandhi's relations with the Indian Christian and Sikh communities. See Gorringer, 'Gandhi and the Christian Community'; and Singh, 'The Mahatma and the Sikhs'.

to join the Congress and the broader struggle for swaraj. As peace returned to the streets of Bombay in late November 1927, Gandhi realised that Hindu–Muslim unity was itself a problematic concept, given its potentially majoritarian overtones from the perspective of these smaller communities. Instead, during the waning months of the Non-Cooperation Movement, he adopted a new, albeit slightly unwieldy formula: that of ‘Hindu–Muslim–Sikh–Parsi–Christian–Jew unity’.

Gandhi and the Parsis: A Fraught Relationship

‘A strange relationship binds me to the Parsis’, Gandhi told a crowd in Colombo in November 1927. ‘The affection they have showered on me, a Hindu, wherever I have come in contact with them is something inexplicable and impregnable.’¹¹ Gandhi was well acquainted with the Parsi community during his childhood in Porbandar and Rajkot. In South Africa, his relations with the community extended far beyond mere social interaction. Some of his closest co-workers and political allies were Parsis. Rustomji Gorkhodu, the Durban merchant commonly referred to as ‘Parsi Rustomjee’, was one of Gandhi’s most trusted confidantes, following him to jail countless times and donating generously to causes both in South Africa and India. Sorabji Shapurji Adajania, a small shopkeeper based in the Natal hamlet of Charleston, became one of the first satyagrahis to court arrest and imprisonment. Impressed with his character and dedication, Gandhi arranged a scholarship so that Adajania could study law in London and later take on a position of leadership in the Indian South African struggle. Adajania, unfortunately, died shortly after setting up a legal practice in Johannesburg, robbing Gandhi of a volunteer he had praised as ‘the greatest of the *satyagrahis*’.¹²

Out of the hundred or so Parsis resident in South Africa, Gorkhodu and Adajania were simply the two most prominent satyagrahis from the community. Many others joined the struggle, something that no doubt left a strong impression on Gandhi about Parsi political activism. Additionally, Gandhi received significant support from Parsis further afield. In London, Dadabhai Naoroji, the first Indian elected to the British Parliament, pressed high-ranking British officials on the treatment of South African Indians. After Naoroji lost his seat in Parliament, Gandhi forged a close relationship with Mancherji M. Bhownaggee, a newly elected Conservative MP. Bhownaggee, although trenchantly opposed to most activities of Indian nationalists, proved himself to be a staunch ally of Indians in South Africa and their political ambitions.¹³ Other Parsis, such as Ratan J. Tata, offered critical financial support to the Transvaal Passive Resistance Fund.¹⁴ Pherozechah Mehta,

¹¹ *CWMG*, Vol. 35, p. 291.

¹² Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, p. 324; *CWMG*, Vol. 11, p. 107.

¹³ Gandhi felt so indebted to Bhownaggee that, when Calcutta crowds burned Bhownaggee in effigy for his support of the 1905 Bengal partition, he penned a spirited defence of the MP. *Ibid.*, Vol. 5, p. 92.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. 11, p. 299; Ratan J. Tata to Mohandas K. Gandhi, 18 November 1910, Sabarmati Ashram Archives (hereafter referred to as SAA), Ahmedabad, S.N. 5193.

meanwhile, chaired a Bombay-based committee that further expanded the Fund's corpus. Two other prominent donors, the Bombay millionaire Jehangir Petit and his wife Jaiji Petit, played a leading role in aiding the Transvaal Indian Women's Association.¹⁵

Gandhi was genuinely moved by the support he received from this tiny community. After returning to India in 1915, he was eager to harness further Parsi support, and he initially gained a number of prominent, wealthy allies in his drives to end Indian indentured labour and promote the spinning of khadi cloth. However, by 1919, once he had declared his direct opposition to the British Raj, outlined elements of his constructive programme and embarked upon the Rowlatt Satyagraha, Gandhi began facing a surge of Parsi opposition. Even the liberal, pro-Congress elite in the community, men who had stood by Gandhi during his South African struggle, turned against him. In March 1919, for example, Dinsha Wacha—who had welcomed Gandhi to Bombay during his Indian tours of 1896 and 1901—joined other Congress moderates in opposing Gandhi's use of satyagraha against the Rowlatt Acts.¹⁶ Three months later, Wacha helped coax over a thousand leading citizens of Bombay, including numerous Parsis, to sign a memorandum against civil disobedience.¹⁷ After Gandhi launched the Non-Cooperation Movement at the end of 1920, Parsi opposition reached an almost fever pitch.

What explains this apparent shift in Parsi assessments of Gandhi? We can find answers amid Gandhi's changing politics, the shifting political landscape of Bombay city, and the complexities of Parsi identity in the early twentieth century. The Parsis, a wealthy colonial elite and a numerically insignificant minority, had never reached a consensus about the degree to which they should cooperate with other Indians in nationalist politics—and whether an emerging Indian national identity should take precedence over their communal identity. At the community's vanguard were individuals who strongly identified with the Indian nation and its political aspirations, men such as Pherozeshah Mehta, Naoroji and Wacha. Given the paucity of Parsis in South Africa and their need to close ranks with other Indians against a racist colonial administration, Rustomji Gorkhodu, Sorabji Shapurji Adajania and other Parsi satyagrahis also fell into this category. These nationalist Parsis were nevertheless conscious of their community's vulnerable position as a micro-minority and therefore advocated an explicitly secular, constitutionalist brand of politics. They upheld the banner of liberal nationalism and abhorred the Hindu majoritarianism of Bal Gangadhar Tilak.

Aside from these nationalist voices, many Parsis exhibited what Eckehard Kulke has called a 'mental estrangement from India'.¹⁸ They traced their community's

¹⁵ *CWMG*, Vol. 11, pp. 173–74.

¹⁶ 'Against Passive Resistance: Moderate Members' Manifesto', *Bombay Chronicle*, 3 March 1919, p. 7.

¹⁷ 'Against Non-Cooperation: A Bombay Manifesto', *Bombay Chronicle*, 30 July 1920, p. 8.

¹⁸ Kulke, *The Parsees in India*, p. 140.

commercial success to the advent of British rule and—pointing to social reforms, their steady embrace of the English language, and the Anglophilism of many elites—emphasised their difference from the rest of Indian society. This had two consequences. Parsis began asserting their staunch loyalty to their foreign rulers, casting the Raj as the benign protector of their community’s fundamental interests. This went several steps beyond the notional loyalty offered by liberal nationalists. Additionally, in a curious process of mental gymnastics with their ancient Persian ancestry, Parsis even started to argue that they were themselves foreigners, more Iranian than Indian.

Due to the complexities of Parsi identity, four distinct but overlapping strands of opposition to Gandhi emerged within the community by the time that the Congress endorsed non-cooperation. First, a large cross-section of the community remained aloof from nationalist politics. Their political inclinations ranged from mere indifference about Indian affairs to loud protestations of loyalty towards British rule. Many Parsi-owned newspapers in Bombay expressed this strand of loyalism. ‘You intend getting rid of the British Government by means of non-cooperation’, the *Jame Jamshed* addressed Gandhi. ‘We Parsis, along with other Indians, are of the opinion that we cannot do without the British for some years to come.’¹⁹ Second, liberal nationalists frowned upon Gandhi’s tactics: his repudiation of the moderate, constitutional approaches of the early Congress; his wholesale denunciations of the British administration; and his willingness to employ satyagraha against the Raj. Here, they were no different from other moderate Indian leaders such as Surendranath Banerjea, M.A. Jinnah or V.S. Srinivasa Sastri. Third, a broad spectrum of Parsis—not limited to a politically inclined elite—expressed great apprehension about Gandhi’s reorganisation of the Congress into a mass-based political movement and his willingness to freely mix politics and religion. The prospect of a future India defined by majoritarian politics was, understandably, deeply frightening to a numerically insignificant minority, especially one that currently enjoyed a disproportionately large share of political and commercial influence. In public meetings, Parsis worried that, if Gandhi achieved his version of swaraj, ‘Hindus and Muslims would appoint their own men and Parsis would be nowhere’; that ‘Parsis would certainly be crushed if, following a powerful national awakening, mutual regard does not prevail among the different classes of people’; and that Hindu–Muslim unity ‘between the 23 crores of Hindus and 7 crores of Muslims’ inevitably meant that ‘between them the 80,000 Parsis would suffer’.²⁰

Finally, and very critically, economic considerations fuelled Parsi opposition. Parsis feared that non-cooperation would undermine the very pillars upon which the community’s success and way of life rested. With large numbers of Parsis employed in government offices, commerce and industry that depended on

¹⁹ Quoted in Palsetia, *The Parsis of India*, p. 311.

²⁰ *CWMG*, Vol. 20, pp. 243, 246, 388.

government contracts and support, the legal profession, and the financial sector, the community risked severe economic dislocation from anti-British agitation or a prolonged boycott of the British administration. A correspondent for the *Times of India* thus questioned Gandhi on the very practicability of Parsi involvement in non-cooperation:

Are the Parsis to ask their children to leave Government and aided schools when no provision is made for national schools adapted to meet the special requirements of the Parsis? Are the Parsi lawyers to boycott law courts and starve their families? Are the Parsis to give up their lucrative vocations and devote themselves to spinning yarn for three annas a day? The three annas per day will not suffice to pay their daily bill for soda water, let alone whisky and soda. Or, should the Parsis give up their present dress, which is more European than Asiatic, and go back to the days of their ancestors, who used to put on pyjamas with legs wide enough to carry a dozen fowl? Is it possible, thus, to set back the hand of time? Will Mr. Gandhi be so good as to give a convincing reply to these queries?²¹

Beyond gravely upsetting those Parsis who—as the correspondent alluded—enjoyed their whisky and soda, Gandhi’s call for prohibition of alcohol caused more consternation. In rural Gujarat, Parsi landowners controlled vast groves of toddy-producing palms, while across India, Parsis owned and manned a sizeable number of liquor stores and taverns.²² Prohibition threatened to bankrupt these enterprises and, consequently, impoverish a wide breadth of the community.

As early as 1919, Gandhi acknowledged ‘so much misunderstanding’ between himself and the Parsis and sought to rectify it, authoring a lengthy defence and explanation of satyagraha in *Sanj Vartaman*, a Parsi Gujarati paper.²³ But Gandhi’s outreach to the community truly began in early 1921, as he balanced speaking engagements before Parsi audiences with other components of the Non-Cooperation Movement. Gandhi stressed that he could not afford to estrange and write off a community ‘which was always taking the lead in many questions in this country’, thus making a nod towards Parsi influence within liberal political circles.²⁴ ‘I cannot forget the love which the Parsis have showered on me in India, in England, in South Africa, in Zanzibar and in Aden’, he told community members in Navsari in April 1921. ‘I can appreciate the value of a good turn and that is why it will pain

²¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 251.

²² Parsis had been involved in the liquor trade for centuries, but, in the colonial era, profited handsomely from the abkari regime. For a probing examination of how Parsi wealth in south Gujarat was built off exploitation of the Adivasi communities through the liquor trade, see Chapter 7 in Hardiman, *The Coming of the Devi*.

²³ *CWMG*, Vol. 16, p. 122.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. 20, p. 449.

me if the Parsis remain aloof or even neutral in the great movement that is now going on.’ Gandhi recalled the important roles that Parsis had played in the South African satyagraha. ‘I have love for the Parsis and respect for their abilities’, he stated. ‘I know from experience how intelligent and efficient they are.’²⁵

Invoking these ‘sacred memories’ that he claimed to have with the Parsis, Gandhi dealt frankly with community members’ reservations about non-cooperation.²⁶ He challenged Parsis to look beyond their own political and economic interests and instead evaluate whether British rule had, in fact, been beneficial for the majority of Indians. ‘While some might have benefited [from the British connection]’, the *Bombay Chronicle* reported Gandhi telling an audience of the Parsi Central Association in June 1921, ‘the great masses and the large majority of the people had not benefited in the least, considered from any point of view—whether it was economic or moral or physical point of view. India was never in a worse condition than it was today.’²⁷ Gandhi had been far more blunt in a special letter addressed ‘To The Parsis’ published in March 1921 in *Navajivan*:

You are a very cautious community. You are compact, and you rightly insist on abundant proof of the stability and the morality of any movement before you would take to it. But there is now danger of your becoming over-cautious, and your success in trade may make you oblivious of the wants and aspirations of the multitude of your countrymen.

Gandhi had one particular trade in mind. It would be ‘criminal to wait’ in taking up the cause against liquor, he asserted, and he asked Parsis ‘whether you will forward the cause of temperance in a whole-hearted manner or whether you will supinely and philosophically watch developments’.²⁸ A little over two months later, while speaking to an overwhelmingly Parsi audience of Bombay liquor merchants, Gandhi tightened the screws and even issued a lightly veiled threat. He warned that ‘the example of the Parsi liquor-dealers was very prominently before the country’ and that ‘if the Parsis did not give up this traffic at once, they would injure their community and their country’.²⁹

Alongside prohibition, Gandhi tackled the thorny issue of Parsi identity, acknowledging growing Anglophilism within the community and the persistent fantasy that Parsis were, in reality, ancient Persians cast upon foreign shores. Gandhi recoiled at such talk and behaviour. ‘India is the land of the Parsis as much as it is of the Hindus and Muslims’, he told a community gathering in Ankleshwar. ‘Was Dadabhai Naoroji not an Indian? Was Sir Pherozechah [Mehta] also not an

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol. 19, p. 470.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. 20, p. 239.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. 19, p. 470.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, Vol. 20, pp. 350, 351.

Indian? Parsis should feel as much for the country as the others do.³⁰ During his April 1921 visit to Navsari, where he visited the Naoroji family's ancestral house, Gandhi furthermore reminded Parsis that they 'have a special bond with India. India gave them shelter at a critical time'.³¹

By stressing the Parsis' attachment to India and arguing that their community's fortunes lay with the rest of the nation, Gandhi hoped to diffuse Parsi apprehensions about mass nationalism while reaffirming the Congress' stated commitment to inclusiveness. But Parsis still worried that Gandhi's politics were too majoritarian in nature. On 19 June, Gandhi agreed to sit down with senior Parsi leaders and hear their concerns. Within the imposing premises of the Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy Parsi Benevolent Institution in Bombay, Gandhi listened as, one by one, these leaders expressed unease at how his language of Hindu–Muslim unity threatened to crowd out tiny minorities such as the Parsis. Kersaspji R. Dadachanji, the former diwan of Baroda, maintained that 'smaller communities would suffer' from such a focus. Naoroji Dumasia, a prominent journalist and author, believed that British rule had provided his fellow Parsis with 'protecting shelter'. He held that pan-communal harmony could only be maintained through constitutional reform under the aegis of the British, a position that elicited warm applause from other attendees. In his response, Gandhi argued that Hindu–Muslim unity was not an exclusionary concept. 'When they talked of Hindu–Moslem entente, it did not mean that Parsis were excluded from it', the *Times of India* reported Gandhi's remarks. 'The Hindu–Moslem entente did not mean that big communities should dominate small communities.' Hindus and Muslims, he noted, already lived amicably with Parsis, without Parsis being 'pressed down'. After all, Gandhi concluded, he 'had never known of a Hindu–Parsi riot'.³²

In other speaking engagements, Gandhi began to assure the Parsis, as well as other smaller minorities, that their rights and liberties would be safeguarded under swaraj. Gandhi believed that it was 'impossible for the country to make a move forward without taking all the different communities with it and India could not afford to leave a single community behind'. Furthermore, he declared that the safeguarding of minority rights was a national priority. 'It was the duty of the communities who were in a majority to safeguard the interests of the minorities and look after them, and that was the first principle of swaraj which they had to keep in view', the *Bombay Chronicle* reported Gandhi telling a meeting. For Gandhi, swaraj was not simply political independence; it was attainment of social harmony. 'My conscience tells me that my movement is such that even the smallest community in the country can live without fear', Gandhi assured Parsis in Bulsar (Valsad). 'It will

³⁰ *Ibid.*, Vol. 18, p. 420.

³¹ Gandhi mistakenly stated that Naoroji was born in Navsari and probably believed that the house he visited was Naoroji's birthplace. *Ibid.*, Vol. 20, p. 26.

³² 'Mr. Gandhi and Parsis: An Informal Discussion', *Times of India*, 20 June 1921, p. 10.

not be possible to harass anyone—Parsis, Sikhs, Jews or Christians—and no evil glance can be cast even on a defenceless woman—this is the meaning of *swaraj*.³³

By July 1921, Gandhi believed that his engagement with the Parsis was winning him supporters within the community. Several Parsis had, by this time, emerged as prominent non-cooperators in Bombay and Gujarat: Khurshed F. Nariman, a promising young lawyer; Burjorji F. Bharucha, a tireless promoter of khadi cloth; Perin Captain, a granddaughter of Dadabhai Naoroji who encouraged women to take up khadi spinning; and Mithuben Petit, the niece of Jehangir and Jaiji Petit, who in time would become a leading prohibition activist among Adivasis. These individuals increasingly challenged the old guard of community leaders that had expressed wariness or opposition to Gandhian politics. They played an influential role in wresting political initiative in Bombay away from the liberal elite. ‘Whenever I heard people say that the Parsis had not joined the movement, I have merely smiled’, Gandhi wrote in *Navajivan* in early July. The Parsi Political Association held a public gathering in Bombay to celebrate the birth anniversary of Tilak, hardly a popular figure among the Parsis during his lifetime. A number of Parsi women volunteered to picket liquor stores in Bombay.³⁴ In June, the Parsi industrialist Ardeshir B. Godrej—who had proudly advertised Queen Mary’s use of his safes during her 1911 visit to India—contributed the largest donation, to date, for the Tilak Swaraj Fund, a gesture which prompted the Government of India to retaliate by cancelling further orders for Godrej safes. Godrej stipulated that a portion of the funds should go towards prohibition work.³⁵ Altogether, Gandhi estimated that Parsi monetary contributions towards satyagraha through July totalled ₹400,000, an amount that far exceeded what he originally anticipated from the community. ‘Our Parsi brothers and sisters have started taking a very active part in the national movement’, Gandhi declared at the end of July.³⁶

An ‘Open Manifestation of Racial Hatred’: The Prince of Wales Riots

As Gandhi congratulated Parsis for their increased support for non-cooperation, the Congress geared itself for a show of strength against the Government of India. The Prince of Wales, the future Emperor of India, announced his impending visit to the country; the Viceroy, Lord Reading, consequently organised an elaborate welcoming ceremony for the royal guest in Bombay. Gandhi and the Congress sensed the perfect opportunity in which to air political demands and organise a mass

³³ *CWMG*, Vol. 20, pp. 23, 246, 449.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 302, 452.

³⁵ News of the government order prompted Gandhi to remark, ‘How should the people deal with such a malicious and vindictive Government, if not by resorting to non-co-operation with it?’ *Ibid.*, Vol. 21, p. 272.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol. 20, pp. 303, 451.

protest sure to attract attention both across India and the Empire. On 7 October 1921, the Bombay Provincial Congress Committee resolved to organise a hartal on the day of the Prince's arrival and 'to bring about by all possible means a complete boycott of the visit of His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales'.³⁷ Gandhi summarised the logic behind the strike. 'Our argument is that we should not attend a function in arranging which we have had no voice, even if the expenses are met with our money', he stated. 'If a robber held a feast at our expense, would we attend it?'³⁸ The call for a hartal dramatically symbolised how much had changed in nationalist politics over the past few years. Before World War I, moderate nationalists had been eager participants in royal visits. As Pheroza Shah Mehta had demonstrated in 1905, while the future George V steamed towards India, professions of loyalty to the crown provided perfect cover for launching salvos against British colonial authorities.³⁹ Now, there was no pretence about loyalty, and certainly no engagement with imperial pomp and ceremony.

The Prince was scheduled to sail into Bombay Harbour on 17 November 1921 and take his first steps on Indian soil at Apollo Bunder. On 16 November, the pages of nationalist-leaning newspapers in Bombay were covered with large advertisements put out by the Congress:

CITIZENS OF BOMBAY.

BOYCOTT THE PRINCE'S VISIT.

And observe

COMPLETE HARTAL

TOMORROW

And attend BONFIRE of foreign cloth on the grounds near Elphinstone Mills at 10 a.m.

IN KHADI

MAHATMA GANDHI WILL PRESIDE⁴⁰

That same day, the Congress and affiliated organisations hosted a series of meetings across the city, where speakers such as Sarojini Naidu and Jamnadas Mehta exhorted citizens to turn their backs on the Prince and instead remember the Khilafat and Punjab 'wrongs'. Congress leaders encouraged Indians to stay away from the welcoming ceremonies at Apollo Bunder and, in addition, discouraged caste and community organisations from delivering addresses of welcome to the Prince, which had been solicited by the government. At a special meeting organised by pro-Gandhi Parsis, speakers reemphasised these two points. Perin Captain told her

³⁷ 'Bombay Disturbances: "Responsibility Lies on Non-Cooperators"', *Bombay Chronicle*, 15 December 1921, p. 5.

³⁸ *CWMG*, Vol. 21, p. 373.

³⁹ Kidambi, 'Nationalism and the City in Colonial India', p. 954.

⁴⁰ See, for example, *Bombay Chronicle*, 17 November 1921, p. 10.

coreligionists not to be ‘fools and cowards’ by attending government-sponsored ceremonies. Khurshed F. Nariman brought up the uncomfortable fact that the Bombay Parsi Punchayet was, in spite of the fierce protestations launched by Congress sympathisers in the previous weeks, scheduled to deliver one such address of welcome on behalf of the community. ‘There were Bene-Israels [*sic*] and Christian communities but they had kept aloof’, Nariman thundered from the podium. ‘The only communities that came forward to present addresses were the Parsis and the untouchables. (Laughter).’ After declaring their support for introducing the charkha into all Parsi homes, attendees passed a resolution condemning the Punchayet’s planned address and then dispersed. Burjorji F. Bharucha went home to prepare a speech that he would deliver the next day before Gandhi’s bonfire of foreign cloth. Across Bombay, khadi supporters drummed support for the bonfire and collected silk saris flung out of house windows by sympathetic families, including many in Parsi localities. Summing up the day’s activities, the *Bombay Chronicle* declared it ‘India’s Painful Duty to Boycott the Prince’s Visit’.⁴¹

Early in the morning of 17 November, soldiers and policemen descended on the southern tip of Bombay, lining the streets from Apollo Bunder to Cross Maidan that were to be used for the Prince’s procession. Aside from the troops, however, ‘there was the silence of an English Sunday’ as most Indian storeowners, businessmen and Victoria drivers observed the hartal. One journalist, pondering this ‘gloomy outlook’ in Bombay, recalled King George’s reception a decade beforehand and judged the Prince’s welcome to be ‘not even one-tenth [in comparison] and more artificial than real and spontaneous’.⁴² Yet, as the morning wore on, trams ferried some crowds of well-wishers from the northern reaches of the city to Apollo Bunder. At 8 AM, hartal supporters for the first time that day took the law into their own hands: they forcibly stopped one of these trams on Ripon Road and demanded that its passengers, mainly Parsis, Europeans, and Anglo-Indians, disembark. By 9:30 AM, Congress and Khilafat volunteers had halted several more southbound trams.⁴³ After Gandhi set alight his bonfire of foreign-made cloth at 10:30 AM, matters took a much more violent turn. Striking mill workers stormed out of the Elphinstone Mills compound and burned a few trams and automobiles.⁴⁴ A thicket of police insulated the welcoming ceremony from events developing elsewhere in Bombay. Meanwhile, a large audience of Indians, with a significant Parsi, Anglo-Indian, and Jewish component, greeted the Prince of Wales as he stepped ashore. Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy, fifth baronet, proceeded to read out the Bombay Parsi Punchayet’s welcoming address on behalf of the Parsi community, one of the few

⁴¹ ‘India’s Painful Duty to Boycott the Prince’s Visit’, *Bombay Chronicle*, 17 November 1921, pp. 9–10.

⁴² ‘Bombay’s Reception of Prince: “Silence of a Sunday”’, *Bombay Chronicle*, 18 November 1921, p. 6; ‘Prince’s Reception: Official Welcome’, *Bombay Chronicle*, 18 November 1921, p. 8.

⁴³ ‘Bombay Disturbances: “Responsibility Lies on Non-Cooperators”’, p. 5.

⁴⁴ Paymaster, ed., *Parsi Prakash*, Vol. 6, p. 40.

communal addresses delivered on that day. Parsi schoolgirls helped stage a garba performance for the royal visitor.⁴⁵ There were, consequently, visible signs of Parsi disregard for the Congress boycott.

Once the ceremonies concluded, crowds boarded trams or the handful of motor and horse-drawn vehicles openly defying the hartal. Beyond the reach of soldiers and police, these passengers found a city seething with discontent. Men wearing Gandhi caps or the Khilafat fez jeered and threw stones at vehicles passing by Marine Lines and Charni Road. Throngs of Hindu and Muslim protestors attacked tramcars, assaulting female Parsi passengers and tearing their saris. European and Anglo-Indian women on trams suffered similar fates—nevertheless, Parsis steadily became the prime target for non-cooperators' outrage at the violation of the hartal and boycott. Rioters moved into the predominantly Parsi district of Grant Road and into Anglo-Indian neighbourhoods around the Khada Parsi statue in Byculla, attacking those wearing non-khadi Parsi and European attire. The Parsis' worst possible fears about Gandhian politics, Congress majoritarianism and Hindu–Muslim unity appeared to be manifesting themselves before their very eyes. By nightfall, one European had been murdered and soldiers began redeploying into affected areas.⁴⁶

The disturbances of 17 November had been a relatively one-sided affair perpetrated by aggrieved political volunteers. On 18 and 19 November, however, riots took on a decisively communal colour, with lines clearly drawn between Hindus and Muslims on one side and Parsis and Anglo-Indians on the other. From this point onward, newspaper accounts of the riots sharply diverged. Parsi-owned broadsheets, not surprisingly, depicted Parsis as the innocent victims of Hindu and Muslim *mavalis* (hooligans) bent on destroying their houses and businesses and defiling their places of worship. 'In every area stones fell like rain upon Parsi houses', the *Jame Jamshed* recorded.⁴⁷ Similarly, the staunchly loyalist *Times of India* tended to sympathise with Parsis and Anglo-Indians while excoriating Hindu and Muslim non-cooperators and Khilafatists. At the other end of the political spectrum was the vocally nationalist *Bombay Chronicle*. The *Chronicle* bitterly complained that Parsis were responding with undue force and even blamed the police for 'conniving at, if not actively abetting, some violent sections of the Anglo-Indian and Jewish communities'.⁴⁸

What is clear, however, is that as the riots became explicitly communal in nature, they expanded greatly in size and scope. By mid-day on 18 November, mill workers in Parel struck work and joined the violence. A swelling body of rioters mounted an attack on at least three Zoroastrian fire temples: the Dadysett Atash

⁴⁵ See Khurshed F. Nariman, 'An Appeal to Parsis', *Bombay Chronicle*, 19 November 1921, p. 9. Nariman's letter has a short description of Parsi involvement in the ceremonies welcoming the Prince of Wales.

⁴⁶ 'Bombay Disturbances: "Responsibility Lies on Non-Cooperators"', p. 5.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Paymaster, ed., *Parsi Prakash*, Vol. 6, p. 41.

⁴⁸ 'Disturbances in the City', *Bombay Chronicle*, 19 November 1921, p. 8.

Behram in Fanaswadi; the newly-built Ranji Dar-e-Meher on Grant Road; and the Wadia Atash Behram on Princess Street, one of the most sacred Parsi centres of worship. Parsis responded with vengeance, identifying the rioters of the 17th as Gandhians. By the 20th, a mob of 500 Parsis, armed with bamboo sticks reputedly supplied by a ‘well-known Parsi millionaire’, gathered on Princess Street to defend the Atash Behram, establishing an ‘actual reign of terror’ as they harassed Hindu and Muslim passers-by.⁴⁹ Bands of Parsi and Anglo-Indian youth cried ‘Down with the Gandhi caps’ as they targeted individuals in khadi. Other Parsis brandished firearms⁵⁰ as they patrolled neighbourhoods in motor vehicles. ‘Gandhi caps and khaddar coats on the one hand and European costume on the other continued to be a red rag to the rival mobs and targets for acts of violence’, one newspaper reporter observed.⁵¹ Prominent political leaders suffered as well: a group of Parsis attacked M.R. Jayakar and Jamnadas Mehta as they attempted to disband an unruly mob. Burjorji F. Bharucha, ‘on whom was concentrated the hatred of the educated Parsi hooligans’, was severely assaulted outside of Cama Baug; Parsi rioters then took out their fury on his car.⁵² Indicative of growing anti-Parsi sentiment among Congress supporters, rumours reached as far as Calcutta that a group of Parsis had even assaulted Gandhi.⁵³ The *Times of India* described the ‘open manifestation of racial hatred’ apparent in Bombay.⁵⁴

Some of the first targets of non-cooperators and Khilafatists had been liquor shops. During the riots, Parsi involvement in the liquor business provided aggrieved mobs with one more example of the community’s supposed intransigence with regard to non-cooperation. Peaceful picketing quickly gave way to destruction and desecration of property. In Khetwadi, another heavily Parsi locality, the *Times of India* reported the destruction of all liquor shops, vandalised with ‘charred remains of casks burnt in front of them’, and evacuated residential buildings facing ‘a road strewn with broken glass’. On Grant Road, several Parsi families were trapped in a building while a surging crowd, provoked by the liquor shop on the ground

⁴⁹ ‘Situation Still Uncertain’, *Bombay Chronicle*, 21 November 1921, p. 8.

⁵⁰ Per capita, Parsis were far better armed than members of other communities. In 1921, according to official records, the government recorded 360 licensed Parsi firearm owners as opposed to 425 owners from the catch-all bracket of ‘Hindus’. Parsis seemed to favour revolvers: they purchased more revolvers than members of any other community in 1921. ‘Annual Report of the Police of the City of Bombay for the Year 1921’, pp. 13–14, Maharashtra State Archives (hereafter referred to as MSA), Mumbai, publication no. N 45971. Not surprisingly, the number of new firearms licenses increased the following year. By the end of 1922, the number of licensed Parsi firearm owners actually exceeded that of every other community in Bombay (691 Parsis versus 571 Hindus). ‘Annual Report of the Police of the City of Bombay for the Year 1922’, pp. 19–20, MSA, publication no. N 47455.

⁵¹ ‘Bombay Riots: Week End Activities’, *Times of India*, 21 November 1921, p. 11.

⁵² ‘Another Anxious Day’, *Bombay Chronicle*, 19 November 1921, p. 7; ‘Hooliganism in Bombay’, *Bombay Chronicle*, 22 November 1921, p. 8.

⁵³ ‘Bombay Riots: A Quiet Day’, *Times of India*, 22 November 1921, p. 11.

⁵⁴ ‘Bombay Riots: Friday’s Situation’, *Times of India*, 19 November 1921, p. 10.

floor, threatened to set fire to the structure. Nearby on Foras Road, a group of lathi-wielding Parsis protected another residential building with a ground floor country liquor shop. By the morning of the 20th, however, the Parsi storeowner, Cowasji Battliwala, diffused a worsening situation by bringing all of his casks onto the street and emptying their contents in front of an applauding crowd.⁵⁵

One by one, citizens of Bombay began writing to Gandhi, describing their encounters with the violence. Harilal D. Jasani of Sheikh Memon Street complained of police indifference while Parsis, displaying an intent to kill, assaulted Hindu merchants. From Mazagaon, an anonymous writer recounted the story of Nusserwanji M. Dhondy, a Parsi admirer of Gandhi. Dhondy had rushed to help non-cooperators control riots in Khetwadi on 18 November. ‘While at Foras Road he had some hammering from the mob, and while returning he had some more from the Parsees from his own neighbourhood’—as a Parsi dressed in a khadi cap, he was an enemy to all and a friend to none. Dhondy subsequently died of ‘Acute Mania from effects of the Bombay Riots’. Equally chilling was a missive in Gujarati signed by *Ek dukhi Parsi bai*—‘a despondent Parsi lady’—who refused to divulge her name until she met face-to-face with Gandhi. She narrated how, on the 19th, she and two other women were on their way to Tardeo when passers-by warned them of disturbances in the vicinity. In a state of panic, they accepted an offer from three Muslim men, wearing white topis bearing the Khilafat crescent, who drove up in a motor car and offered to transport them to safety in Gamdevi. This was, tragically, a ruse. The men instead transported the three women to a house near Null Bazaar where they were raped repeatedly.⁵⁶

‘A Foretaste of Swaraj’: Gandhi’s Response

Gandhi, who had congratulated Bombay citizens for maintaining non-violence just hours before hearing the first reports of the riots, was horrified by the carnage unfolding before him. ‘We have had a foretaste of swaraj’, he hurriedly wrote to two volunteers on 17 November. ‘I have been put to shame.’⁵⁷ That afternoon, while rushing towards two wounded policemen lying unconscious outside a damaged liquor shop in Do Tanki, Gandhi was surrounded by a crowd of rioters yelling

⁵⁵ ‘Bombay Riots: Week End Activities’, p. 11.

⁵⁶ Harilal D. Jasani to Gandhi, 20 November 1921, SAA, S.N. 7668; anonymous note, no date, *ibid.*, S.N. 7688; ‘*Ek dukhi Parsi bai*’ to Gandhi, 6 December 1921, *ibid.*, S.N. 7689. The letter by ‘*Ek dukhi Parsi bai*’ most likely provoked Gandhi’s anguished note in *Navajivan* on 18 December 1921:

I have received a letter—an extremely painful one—from a Parsi sister in Bombay. Her complaint is such that I would like to spend a lifetime investigating its root cause, but it is not possible to undertake an inquiry on the basis of her letter alone. If that sister happens to read this, I request her to send me her name and address or to meet me. (*CWMG*, Vol. 22, p. 47)

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. 21, p. 461.

‘Mahatma Gandhi *ki jai*’. ‘That sound usually grates on my ears, but it has grated never so much as it did yesterday when the crowd unmindful of the two sick brethren choked me with the shout at the top of their voices’, he stated in a leaflet distributed around the city on the 18th. At 3:30 AM on 19 November, Gandhi decided, for the first time in his political career, to employ a hunger strike in order to bring communal rioting to an end. ‘The swaraj that I have witnessed during the last two days has stunk in my nostrils,’ he declared in another leaflet where he vowed not to eat or drink anything but water until fighting ceased.⁵⁸

These leaflets were only one component of Gandhi and the Congress’ massive campaign to restore peace: they printed posters, delivered public addresses and employed roving motor vehicles so that Congress volunteers could quickly travel to affected areas and diffuse tensions. From his own statements issued during the riots, it is very clear that Gandhi sought, above all, to salvage his relationship with the Parsis. He did so, in part, by engaging with liberal nationalist critiques of mass politics. Swaraj, he declared, was not possible without inclusivity and tolerance of even the smallest of minority viewpoints. For this reason, Gandhi explicitly condemned the violence inflicted upon Parsi citizens:

I motored with some friends to the area of disturbance and heard the most painful and the most humiliating story of molestation of Parsi sisters. Some few were assaulted, and even had their saris torn from them. No one from among a crowd of over fifteen hundred who had surrounded my car denied the charge as a Parsi with hot rage and quivering lips was with the greatest deliberation relating the story. An elderly Parsi gentleman said, ‘Please save us from this mob rule.’ This news of the rough handling of Parsi sisters pierced me like a dart. I felt that my sisters or daughters had been hurt by a violent mob! Yes, some Parsis had joined the welcome. They had a right to hold their own view free of molestation. There can be no coercion in swaraj.⁵⁹

The Parsis, in Gandhi’s estimation, had faced the worst possible manifestation of majoritarian political will and, therefore, could only be classified as innocent victims. While announcing his hunger strike, Gandhi declared once more how swaraj could not be possible without the absolute protection of smaller minorities. ‘And the Parsis? I have meant every word I have said about them’, he wrote. ‘Hindus and Mussulmans will be unworthy of freedom if they do not defend them and their honour with their lives.’ It was therefore incumbent upon the Hindus and Muslims of Bombay to express their ‘full and free repentance’; otherwise, Gandhi could not ‘face again the appealing eyes of Parsi men and women’.⁶⁰

Gandhi acknowledged that he shared responsibility for the riots, vowing to do ‘the utmost reparation’ for victims. What is striking, however, is that in order to

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 463, 466.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 463.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 466.

express his contrition, he went to the extent of excusing violence committed by Parsis. Previous literature, especially the work of Bhikhu Parekh, has considered how Gandhi's theory of ahimsa could accommodate some forms of violence, and how Gandhi considered defensive violence to be morally superior to offensive variants.⁶¹ During the riots, Gandhi was well aware that not all Parsis were innocent victims. He knew that many of their violent activities had not been entirely defensive in nature. Bombay broadsheets had carried reports of 'Parsee hooliganism' and trigger-happy Parsi rioters wounding innocent women and children, while the *Bombay Chronicle* earnestly beseeched Parsi leaders 'to control the turbulent elements in their community'.⁶² And yet Gandhi, for the most part, excused their behaviour, arguing that the retributive violence of a tiny minority community was justifiable. He expanded the parameters of tolerable violence. 'Certainly the Parsi Mavalis [hooligans] are less to blame', he said on 20 November. Hindus and Muslims, in contrast, could not justifiably carry out retributive violence based on what 'the Parsis in self-defence or by way of reprisals have done to some of us'. It was their responsibility to instead 'ensure the absolute protection of the minorities' in spite of all acts of hostility towards them.⁶³

There was some political logic behind Gandhi's words: he worried that Hindu and Muslim violence was instigating Parsis to retreat further into the protective embrace of the British government, a prospect that he dreaded. Nevertheless, it is difficult to qualify some of Gandhi's later statements, which seem excessively partisan. He spoke of 'the pardonable wrath of the Parsis, the Christians, and the Jews' and stated that 'I can excuse the aggrieved Parsis and Christians' who 'assaulted or shot, not in self-defence but because the victims happened to be Hindus or Mussulmans or non-co-operators'.⁶⁴ It was one thing to defend minority rights and perhaps expand the parameters of tolerable defensive activity; it was quite another thing to dismiss or explain away some unpardonable crimes that Parsis and Anglo-Indians committed upon innocents.⁶⁵

Gandhi's partiality towards Parsi or Anglo-Indian miscreants was not simply an attempt at delicate communal diplomacy amidst the cooling embers of the Prince of Wales Riots. Rather, it signalled a definite shift in how Gandhi conceptualised smaller minorities and their position in Indian society. In his earlier interactions with the Parsis, he had emphasised minority rights and the inclusive nature of the Congress. Perhaps reflecting upon how Parsis had continued to respond with anxiety about Hindu-Muslim unity, Gandhi realised that promises of inclusivity were not enough. Instead, majority communities (here, Gandhi made no distinc-

⁶¹ Parekh, *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform*, p. 150.

⁶² 'Let Us Have Peace', *Bombay Chronicle*, 21 November 1921, p. 6.

⁶³ *CWMG*, Vol. 21, pp. 469, 467.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 477–78.

⁶⁵ Only on 26 November, days after order had been restored in Bombay, did Gandhi acknowledge that Parsis and Christians 'used greater violence than was necessary'. He demanded that the two communities 'feel their share of the guilt' for the riots. *Ibid.*, pp. 485, 486.

tions between Hindus and Muslims) had special and added responsibilities to guarantee the welfare of smaller communities. First, Hindus and Muslims had to be the guarantors of cross-communal peace. ‘It is their primary duty to befriend the minority communities and convince them that they are safe in independent India’, he wrote in *Navajivan*.⁶⁶ Second, it was incumbent upon them to actively work against their own majoritarian tendencies, ensuring that the alliance between Hindus and Muslims did not have adverse repercussions for other components of Indian society. ‘Hindu–Muslim unity has been a menace to the handful of Parsis, Christians, and Jews’, Gandhi tellingly remarked while announcing his hunger strike. A few days later, he clarified the tasks of the majority communities, affirming that they ‘must promote not merely Hindu–Muslim unity but they must now promote unity among all communities’. Referring to Parsis, Christians and Jews, he stated, ‘We must go out of our way to be friendly to them and to serve and help them, above all to protect them from harm from ourselves.’⁶⁷

Consequently, as the mobs started to melt away on Bombay streets, Gandhi began to speak about how smaller minorities such as the Parsis were integral to the idea of Hindu–Muslim unity. Once more invoking the responsibilities of the majority populations, he declared that ‘Hindu–Muslim unity is not worth a day’s purchase if it does not prefer the interests of smaller communities to its own’.⁶⁸ Aside from concerns about the welfare of Parsis or Anglo-Indians, Gandhi understood that smaller minorities would play a crucial role in India’s communal dynamics, either cementing or unravelling relations between Hindus and Muslims. He explained this in a short column titled ‘Rights of Minorities’ published in *Young India* on 1 December. ‘I see in blind prejudice against the Parsis and the Christians a menace to Hindu–Muslim unity itself’, he wrote. If such communal tensions could exist, Gandhi postulated, what would stop Hindus, ‘if they felt the superiority of their brute strength’, from imposing their will upon the ‘Mussulman minority’? Or what would stop Muslims from trying to ‘crush the weak Hindu in spite of his numerical superiority?’ As long as the ‘united strength of Hindus and Mussulmans is used against Parsis and Christians’, then ‘tomorrow the unity will break under the strain of cupidity or false religiosity’, and thus swaraj would be unattainable. Prejudice and bigotry between any two groups, therefore, were a threat to relations between all communities and India’s political ambitions. On the other hand, Hindu–Muslim unity would be strengthened through the active promotion of minority rights, even when certain small minorities objected to policies such as non-cooperation. ‘Let them use their joint strength to protect the minorities’, Gandhi spoke to Hindus and Muslims, ‘and they will learn to protect one another’.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 522.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 466, 481, 482.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 481.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 501, 502.

Gandhi's evolving views on smaller minorities had both long-term and short-term consequences. In the immediate short term, it helped restore peace to Bombay. Late in the day on 20 November 1921, as order returned to most parts of the city, Gandhi drafted a public statement to Bombay residents pledging cross-communal harmony and cooperation. He then circulated the statement among leading Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, Christians and Jews, requesting them to affix their signatures below his own.⁷⁰ Importantly, Gandhi made sure that the roster of community leaders included prominent critics of non-cooperation, including well-known liberal political figures. The following day, after Congress volunteers and community leaders circulated through Bombay and found no further rioting, Gandhi agreed to break his fast. Around 150 prominent non-cooperators, civic leaders, and community representatives met with Gandhi on the morning of 22 November to celebrate the end of the violence and discuss the future of communal relations in the city. Here, Gandhi yielded the floor to the liberal critics present such as Purshottamdas Thakurdas and Homi P. Modi. These individuals, according to the *Bombay Chronicle*, had been 'especially invited' as representatives of moderate leaders, 'with whom Mahatmaji was anxious that amity should be established on as sure a foundation as between the different communities'. By incorporating liberal elites in the process of reconciliation, Gandhi achieved two purposes: he conceded the validity of some of their critiques of non-cooperation, and he acknowledged their claims for continued relevance in Bombay politics.⁷¹

In the long-term, Gandhi drew upon his experiences in Bombay to remould aspects of the Congress organisation and the Non-Cooperation Movement. He introduced new measures to make the Congress more sensitive and responsive to the unique concerns of smaller minorities, especially those of the Parsis. First, in the wake of the riots, he ordered Congress and Khilafat volunteers to stop picketing liquor stores in Bombay. Aside from serving as 'expiation for the burning of Parsee wine shops', this measure helped diminish a major source of non-cooperators' antagonism towards the community.⁷² As an additional means of reparation, Gandhi sat down with Parsi leaders to establish a special committee for awarding monetary compensation to Parsi riot victims. Second, Gandhi made local Congress and Khilafat offices henceforth responsible for responding to any concerns that Parsis may have about their safety. 'Those in charge of the offices', Gandhi assured Parsis, 'will not fail to make arrangements to protect them'. Both the

⁷⁰ Gandhi's co-signatories included Maulana Azad Sobhani, Sarojini Naidu, and Shankerlal Banker. '*Prajane vinanti*' (Public appeal), 20 November 1921, SAA, S.N. 7669.

⁷¹ 'Peace Again', *Bombay Chronicle*, 23 November 1921, p. 7; *CWMG*, Vol. 21, 475–76.

⁷² In the *Young India* edition of 1 December 1921, Gandhi warned that 'picketing should be regarded with the gravest suspicion [...] It is better therefore to suspend picketing at least for the time being or till we have attained much greater self-control and gained greater experience'. On 16 December, Gandhi informed Shankerlal Banker that 'picketing has been stopped'. *CWMG*, Vol. 21, p. 504; *ibid.*, Vol. 95, p. 36.

Bombay Provincial Congress Committee and the December 1921 Congress session in Ahmedabad passed resolutions that strengthened the organisation's commitment to actively protect small minorities in the future. Third, during a meeting of the Congress Working Committee, Gandhi inaugurated a new, more disciplined cadre of non-cooperators, the National Volunteer Corps. Members had to pledge their commitment to 'the consolidation of unity among all the races and communities of India whether Hindu, Mussulman, Sikh, Parsi, Christian or Jew'.⁷³ These measures helped ensure that the concept of Hindu–Muslim unity did not distract volunteers' attentions from the presence of smaller communities.

Finally, through his own speeches and writings, Gandhi wove the language of cross-communal inclusiveness more deeply into the fabric of the Non-Cooperation Movement. He went beyond the simple binary of Hindu–Muslim unity. Thus, in an article published in *Young India* in early December 1921, he implored Congress and Khilafat volunteers to remember that the objective of their non-violent action was not only swaraj but also 'the unity of all the sects and denominations of India'.⁷⁴ This unity, Gandhi remarked, left 'each community free to fight for the preservation of its religion, and all together to fight for India's defence'. Here, we find Gandhi beginning to link the concept of *swadharma*, or self-duty, with the full extent of India's religious diversity. It is therefore not surprising that, in the aftermath of the Prince of Wales Riots, Gandhi threw his support behind a more expansive definition of swaraj offered by an Andhra supporter, Gopal Krishnayya. He quoted Krishnayya in the same *Young India* article: 'Swaraj, therefore, means the preservation of Hindu dharma, Muslim dharma, Christian dharma, Parsi dharma, Sikh dharma, in short *swadharma* of all and a co-ordinated federation of all.'⁷⁵

Krishnayya's formulation probably inspired Gandhi to introduce a new, catch-all slogan a few days later, that of 'Hindu–Muslim–Sikh–Parsi–Christian–Jew unity'. Although somewhat unwieldy, it summed up the direction of thought that Gandhi pursued after the riots. He deployed this slogan numerous times during the remainder of the Non-Cooperation Movement, such as in Bardoli in January 1922, ahead of the planned commencement of mass civil disobedience in this taluka. We find one final reference on 9 March 1922—the day before police officers swooped down on Sabarmati Ashram and transported Gandhi to jail. In a dispatch entitled 'If I am Arrested', Gandhi exhorted all Congress followers to remember the 'four pillars of swaraj', upholding 'Hindu–Muslim–Sikh–Parsi–Christian–Jew unity' alongside non-violence, removal of untouchability and khadi.⁷⁶ But even as Gandhi languished behind bars, other Congress leaders, including a Hindu Mahasabha-

⁷³ *Ibid.*, Vol. 21, p. 566; *ibid.*, Vol. 22, p. 100.

⁷⁴ Emphasis is Gandhi's. *Ibid.*, Vol. 21, pp. 502–03.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 503, 507.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol. 23, p. 59.

affiliated figure such as Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, invoked the slogan.⁷⁷ Thus, the Prince of Wales Riots, as well as Gandhi's broader interactions with the Parsi community, contributed towards a curious dynamic at the end of the Non-Cooperation Movement. As Hindu-Muslim tensions widened in the immediate aftermath of Gandhi's decision to call off non-cooperation, the Congress visibly strengthened its commitment towards upholding the rights and protection of smaller minority communities in India.⁷⁸

Conclusion

Over a period of four days, the Prince of Wales Riots tied together the fates of individuals ranging from anonymous bystanders to a royal heir and a mahatma. For the citizens of Bombay, it was the first of many violent disturbances that rocked the city during the 1920s. At least 58 people lost their lives, including three Europeans, two Parsis, one American and five police officers. Of the 600 establishments within Bombay city licensed to sell alcohol, 135 were damaged and four were completely destroyed.⁷⁹ Claims of compensation for personal injury or damage to property totalled ₹2.5 million by mid-December: Parsis filed 132 of the total of 159 claims, including 14 of the 19 claims exceeding ₹10,000.⁸⁰ For the Bombay government, meanwhile, the riots strained elements of its administrative and judicial machinery to the limits. The government prosecuted over 400 suspects, eventually hanging two convicted rioters, transporting two others for life, and sentencing over a hundred others to rigorous imprisonment. The riots proved to be a trial of endurance for others, as well: the Congress and Khilafat leadership in Bombay, the Bombay city police, and civic leaders who scrambled to keep the visiting Prince occupied while the city burned. We have little idea of how the Prince of Wales reacted to news of the disturbances: he was, for the most part, holed up in the secure fastness that was Government House at the tip of Malabar Hill. Regardless, the riots provided a flavour of what the unlucky Prince was to experience during the remainder of his four-month tour in India. He was welcomed to Allahabad with the lonely silence of a strikingly effective

⁷⁷ 'National Week: Pt. Malaviya's Patriotic Advice to the People', *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 1 April 1922, p. 5.

⁷⁸ Gail Minault suggests that Gandhi's response to the riots even contributed to the widening Hindu-Muslim split. She states that 'Gandhi, without adequate evidence, chastized Muslims for being the major perpetrators of the violence'. While Gandhi did suggest, on 19 November, that Muslims 'played the leading part' during the first two days of the riots, he subsequently refrained from singling out members of this community. *The Khilafat Movement*, pp. 177–78; *CWMG*, Vol. 21, 467.

⁷⁹ These figures were published in an official Government of Bombay Province press note. 'Bombay Disturbances: "Responsibility Lies on Non-Cooperators"', p. 5.

⁸⁰ 'The Last Disturbance: Total Claim Rs. 25 Lacs', *Bombay Chronicle*, 14 December 1921, p. 5.

hartal, ushered into Calcutta on the heels of mass detentions of non-cooperators, and greeted in Peshawar with threats of assassination.⁸¹

While moderate political figures suffered a calamitous diminishment of influence by the end of the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Prince of Wales Riots ultimately did not become the ‘point of no return’ for liberal politics in Bombay. Gandhi’s quick diplomacy at the end of the riots helped reassure moderates that the Congress still recognised them as important political stakeholders. It also gave them a prominent platform upon which to air their views and exhibit a degree of moral leadership. For example, Purshottamdas Thakurdas was incredulous when he was first invited to attend Gandhi’s fast breaking on 22 November: he believed that ‘people of my class’ had ‘fallen out’ and been rendered irrelevant by events that had just transpired on the streets of Bombay. Yet, with Gandhi’s explicit encouragement, Thakurdas addressed the meeting and launched into a scathing critique of mass-based politics and non-cooperation. He called for discipline and excoriated Gandhi for having ‘over-estimated the forebearance [*sic*] of the people and especially of the masses’. A contrite Gandhi assured Thakurdas and other moderates that he was ‘wide awake’ to their points.⁸²

For Gandhi, the Prince of Wales Riots became a watershed moment—and not just because of the ways it enhanced his concern for smaller communities. Although there had been other violent incidents during the Non-Cooperation Movement, such as the killing of three police officers in Malegaon in April 1921 and the ongoing Moplah disturbances on the Malabar coast, Gandhi was left visibly shaken by the nature and magnitude of the riots. ‘Probably no greater shock has ever come in recent years to any national leader, in the midst of an heroic struggle, than that from which Mahatma Gandhi suffered at Bombay in 1921’, Charles F. Andrews argued in 1930, equating the incident with Chauri Chaura two months later.⁸³ It especially worried Gandhi that the riots had taken place in Bombay, perhaps the most vital centre of the Congress, home to the Parsis and numerous other wealthy mercantile communities that supplied him with funds and volunteers. He alluded to this a few days after breaking his fast: ‘It was possible to isolate Malabar. It was also possible to disregard Malegaon. But it is not possible to ignore Bombay.’⁸⁴

Consequently, Gandhi temporarily shelved the Congress’ plans to begin mass civil disobedience—the open defiance of government authority and non-payment of taxes that was to commence in Bardoli by the end of the year. He even contemplated a lull in

⁸¹ As the Prince recalled in his memoirs,

Gandhi’s ominous shadow fell often across my path; and especially in the native sections of the swarming cities the struggle for the loyalties of the masses seemed to me to be a bidding match between the Government of India on the one hand and Gandhi on the other.

Sapire, ‘Ambiguities of Loyalism’, p. 46.

⁸² ‘Bombay Normal: No More Rioting’, *Times of India*, 23 November 1921, p. 10.

⁸³ Andrews’s book was originally published in 1930. *Mahatma Gandhi*, pp. 201, 207.

⁸⁴ *CWMG*, Vol. 21, p. 464.

the Non-Cooperation Movement. Volunteers' indiscipline and the deliberate targeting of small minorities, he argued, meant that they needed to pause and 'put greater stress on non-violence and less on non-co-operation'.⁸⁵ Gandhi's caution, however, did not stop government officials from laying the groundwork for his eventual arrest. A month after the riots, the Governor of Bombay ordered the Special Branch to compile 'all the possible material which might furnish a charge upon which Gandhi could be arrested'. Officers responded by digging up many of Gandhi's statements after the riots, such as those where he acknowledged his own share of responsibility for the four days of mayhem that occurred on Bombay's streets.⁸⁶ The Prince of Wales Riots, therefore, constituted a seminal moment in the endgame of the Non-Cooperation Movement, shaking Gandhi's confidence in his political methods and pushing the government towards repressive action against the Congress leadership.

And what about the Parsis? How did they react to Gandhi's words and actions in the aftermath of the riots? The peculiar dynamics of the riots—the violent manifestation of Hindu–Muslim unity against them—came as a terrible shock to members of the community. As peace returned to the city, the *Times of India* carried letters from several despondent Parsis. The liberal nationalist critique of Gandhi is well apparent in many such letters. J.R. Patell, for example, believed that

this attack on the Parsis was organized and engineered by those who want to bully us to go over to the side of Ghandism [*sic*] and the Khilafat movement, which so far we have seen are equivalent of mob-rule which neither respects minorities nor other religions and to whom even women and children of their opponents are not sacred.

He presented a three-point plan for Parsi self-defence, including the purchase of government weapons by the Bombay Parsi Punchayet.⁸⁷ An Anglo-Indian writer similarly weighed in by suggesting a Mutual Protection Society of Parsis, Anglo-Indians, Jews and Europeans to 'train themselves, get instructors, practice the single stick exercise, [and] provide themselves with arms against any further outrages'.⁸⁸ Others echoed this need for Parsis and other small communities to protect themselves from Hindus and Muslims, but the most devastating observations came in early December 1921 from Dhunjishaw S. Dalal, a self-described 'ardent admirer' of Gandhi who had worked with Burjorji F. Bharucha. He admitted that the riots had made him rethink the role of Parsis in the Non-Cooperation Movement. 'We have no safety, none from our community and none from the Hindus and Mahomedans', he concluded.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 464–65, 492–93, 503.

⁸⁶ 'N.C.O. Movement: Prosecution of M.K. Gandhi under Section 124-A-I.P.C.', MSA, Home Department, Special Branch, series no. 73, file no. 355(35)A, 1921–22.

⁸⁷ 'Protection of Minorities', *Times of India*, 29 November 1921, p. 11.

⁸⁸ 'Self-Protection', *Times of India*, 29 November 1921, p. 11.

⁸⁹ 'A Parsi's Protest', *Times of India*, 3 December 1921, p. 14.

Remarkably, among those Parsis who had not already been openly hostile towards the Congress, Dalal seemed to be in a minority. It is, of course, very difficult to evaluate how the entire community responded to Gandhi's overtures and statements about minority rights, but several signs indicate that his diplomacy was effective. For example, many Parsis denounced a post-riot petition circulating within the community that thanked the government for its protection during the disturbances. Their denunciations signalled a subtle change in sentiment towards British authorities and a dawning acceptance of the Parsis' place within Indian society. The words of M.M. Coyajee, who before the riots had criticised some pro-Congress Parsis, reflected this change. 'To thank Government under these circumstances for having protected us (Parsis) against the onslaughts of neighbouring communities cannot fail to have the baneful influence of an invidious sectarian policy', he noted. 'Mr. Gandhi has in unmistakable terms owned up [Hindus and Muslims'] fault and repented, and has wholly retrieved their honour but that of the Parsis' still remains tarnished.'⁹⁰ Other aggrieved Parsis appreciated Gandhi's contrition and instead focused their ire on pro-British aristocrats in the community. Their overt displays of loyalism, such as the Parsi Punchayet's communal address of welcome to the Prince of Wales, was tantamount to 'persistent and deliberate provocation' of other Indians. 'The real culprits are securely enjoying the comforts and luxuries of the Malabar Hill [*sic*]', Khurshed F. Nariman had written during the early stages of the disturbances, 'while the poor masses and middle classes are left unprotected in the thick of the fight deserted to the violent fury of a fanatic mob'.⁹¹ For such reasons, many Parsis responded positively to Gandhi's assurances to their community—something that helped the healing process. By the time of the Ahmedabad Congress in late December 1921, one Parsi delegate, Rustom K. Sidhwa, mentioned the riots almost as an afterthought. 'It is true that the Bombay disturbances have hurt the feelings of a few Parsis', Sidhwa told other attendees, 'but I desire to assure you that the Parsi Community entirely identifies itself with you in the principles underlying the struggle'.⁹²

Perhaps the greatest sign of Gandhi's success is the fact that most Parsis quickly forgot the riots and moved on with their lives. The riots were not etched into the community's collective consciousness, as the Bombay riots of 1893 had done to the city's Hindus and Muslims, or indeed as earlier riots with Muslims in 1851 and 1874 had done to the Parsis. Homai Vyrawalla admitted as much when I spoke to her in 2008. 'The violence was very quickly forgotten in community memory', she stated.⁹³ Indeed, the year 1921 marked the last time that Parsis were involved en masse in a communal fracas. With the passing of a generation that included the likes of Vyrawalla and Aloo Dastur, the Prince of Wales Riots are all but forgotten

⁹⁰ 'Trust and Love: An Appeal to Parsis', *Bombay Chronicle*, 2 December 1921, p. 5.

⁹¹ 'An Appeal to Parsis', *Bombay Chronicle*, 19 November 1921, p. 9.

⁹² *Report of the 36th Indian National Congress*, p. 47.

⁹³ Vyrawalla, personal interview.

among today's Parsis, who instead choose to remember the community's nationalist stalwarts such as Dadabhai Naoroji, Pherozeshah Mehta or Feroze Gandhi. If anything, the riots had an impact on Parsi identity. Parsis found a position of indifference towards the nationalist movement an increasingly untenable position to hold. They realised that the community was no longer isolated from the political currents sweeping the rest of the nation. In a strange way, therefore, the Prince of Wales Riots helped Mohandas K. Gandhi impress upon Parsis their membership in the Indian polity.

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