

HUSSAIN SHAHEED SUHRAWARDY AND THE VIOLENCE AT CALCUTTA, 1946: HIS SISTER'S TESTIMONY

[Suhrawardy was Bengal's Chief Minister at the time that the Muslim League called for direct action against the continuation of British rule in India.]

He was accused of planning and organizing the [Calcutta] riots with the view of forcing the British to yield to the Muslim League demands[;] he was accused of neglect in putting down the disturbances once they started[;] and he was accused of not providing adequate and sufficient attention for the Hindu areas.

The Calcutta riots of August 1946 were not caused by Shaheed. No one person or organization can be held responsible for them[.] [I]t was the result of the mounting tension of years. The atmosphere of August 1946 was so charged with hatred that it was inevitable that it would explode into violence. What added to the tension was that the Viceroy who had not gone ahead with the formation of the interim government when the Muslim League had accepted the Cabinet Mission Plan, now did so, and to add insult to injury it included Muslims whom the League did not accept as its representatives. All this added fuel to an already smouldering fire and a flare-up was inevitable ...

... The riot in all its frenzy lasted three days, though its aftermath continued for weeks. In fact, life and property ceased to be safe in Calcutta from then onwards.

The Hindus had an initial advantage of several hours for the Muslim men were away from their homes and so the slaughter of the women and children took place without any hindrance. That the Muslims retaliated I do not deny, for I do not belong to that school of thought which thinks that its own nation is incapable of cruelty and brutality. Unfortunately, history has too many proofs to the contrary. Once animal passions of hatred and cruelty are aroused there is nothing to choose between nations and peoples. All I want to say is that the riot was not diabolically planned by [my brother] Shaheed Bhai.

... He had spent day and night round the clock doing whatever was humanly possible to stop the carnage. He had moved to the Lal Bazaar

and Police Headquarters to be able to get information and direct operations better. He had a map of Calcutta spread before him on which he followed the course of the riots in the ill-fated city. As the phone calls came in, he rushed to where it [i.e. help] was needed. Shaheed went to the worst afflicted areas himself and tried to get the crowd under control by sheer force of personality. I believe he engaged in hand-to-hand fights more than once, pulling bloodstained swords from the hands of half-crazed individuals. Even his worst enemies have given him credit for complete fearlessness. This quality somehow had a salutary effect in calming a violent crowd ... That Shaheed worked like a tiger to quell the riots is well known. There are enough people still alive, both Hindus and Muslims, who can bear testimony to it, but for one of the greatest proofs was to look on his face during those days. It was a look of anguish and suffering. No man who looked as stricken as Shaheed did could have deliberately planned the riots. No one who knew Shaheed could believe it, for he was a most compassionate man and violence was abhorrent to him. Each time, the turning point in his career came after violence. In 1926 he left the Congress after the first Calcutta riots, and twenty years afterwards, in 1946, the carnage of the second Calcutta riots led him to seek Gandhi's help in preventing a repetition of it and this eventually cost him his future in the state which he helped create [i.e. East Pakistan, later Bangladesh].

[Accuses Congress of a systematic propaganda campaign against her brother through its control of the press.] ...These charges reverberated throughout the length and breadth of India. Though there had been riots before the Calcutta riots and there were riots later, which were as terrible - [such] as that of Garmukteshwar and as devastating, [such] as the Bihar riots, which were virtually genocide - they are not remembered. But the Calcutta riots are stamped on the minds of people as the Great Calcutta Killings. Such is the power of propaganda.

Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah, *Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy: a Biography* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1991), 54-57. Quoted by Habibul Haque Khondker, 'Partition of Bengal or Creation of a "Nation"?', *The Partition Motif in Contemporary Conflicts*, ed. Smita Tewari Jessal and Eyal Ben-Ari (New Delhi: Sage, 2007), 253-255. For a contrasting (circumstantial) interpretation, without evidence adduced: Pranab Kumar Chatterjee, *Struggle and Strife in Urban Bengal, 1933-47. A study of Calcutta-Based Urban Politics in Bengal* (Calcutta: Das Gupta, 1991), 184: 'It was on record that when Calcutta was burning, the Chief Minister was fiddling in the control roof of the police headquarters. Suhrawardy became the target of attack for his

partisan role. The law and order machinery for combating acts of violence lost its grip in the situation with Suhrawardy's unnecessary interference. It was even reported that the police commissioner felt so much exasperated that he tendered his resignation.'