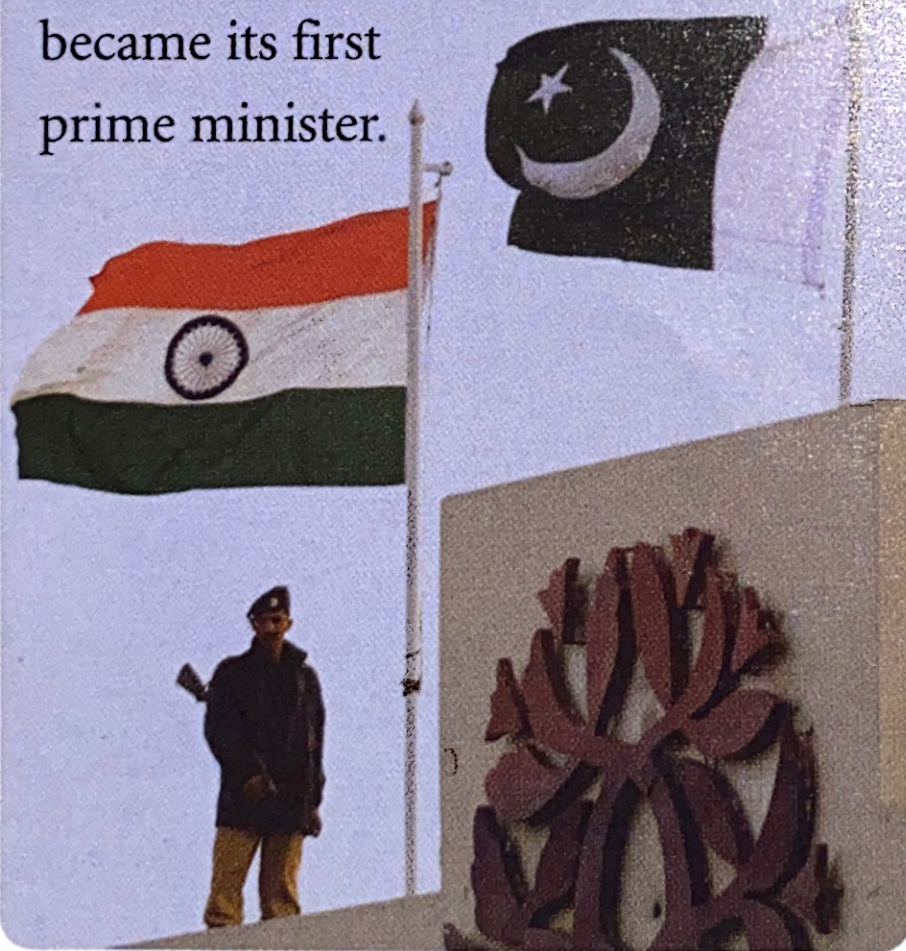


The Poorest of the Poor

The Calcutta that Mother Teresa was going to serve was more needy than ever. Just a year earlier, India had finally won independence from the British Empire, but at a cruel price. The rift between Muslim and Hindu leaders

A Nation Divided

The division of the former British colony of India was known as Partition. Gandhi, who had spent his life working toward a free India and peace among peoples of different religions and ethnic groups, was heartbroken by Partition. He refused to lead a divided India, and his long-term colleague Jawaharlal Nehru became its first prime minister.



had grown so deep that the former colony was split into two different countries: a Hindu India, and a Muslim Pakistan. The island of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) became its own country as well.

For centuries, Hindus and Muslims had lived side by side, so with Partition came one of the largest migrations of refugees in human history. Many Muslims who had been living in India fled with their families to the new nation of Pakistan, which had been carved out in two

sections, to the east and west of India. Meanwhile, many Hindu families who had lived in the areas that were now part of Pakistan fled into India. In all, over 16 million people moved between the two countries, mostly by foot, and there was much bloodshed along the new borders. Former neighbors now saw each other as enemies, and many were killed before they ever reached their new homes.

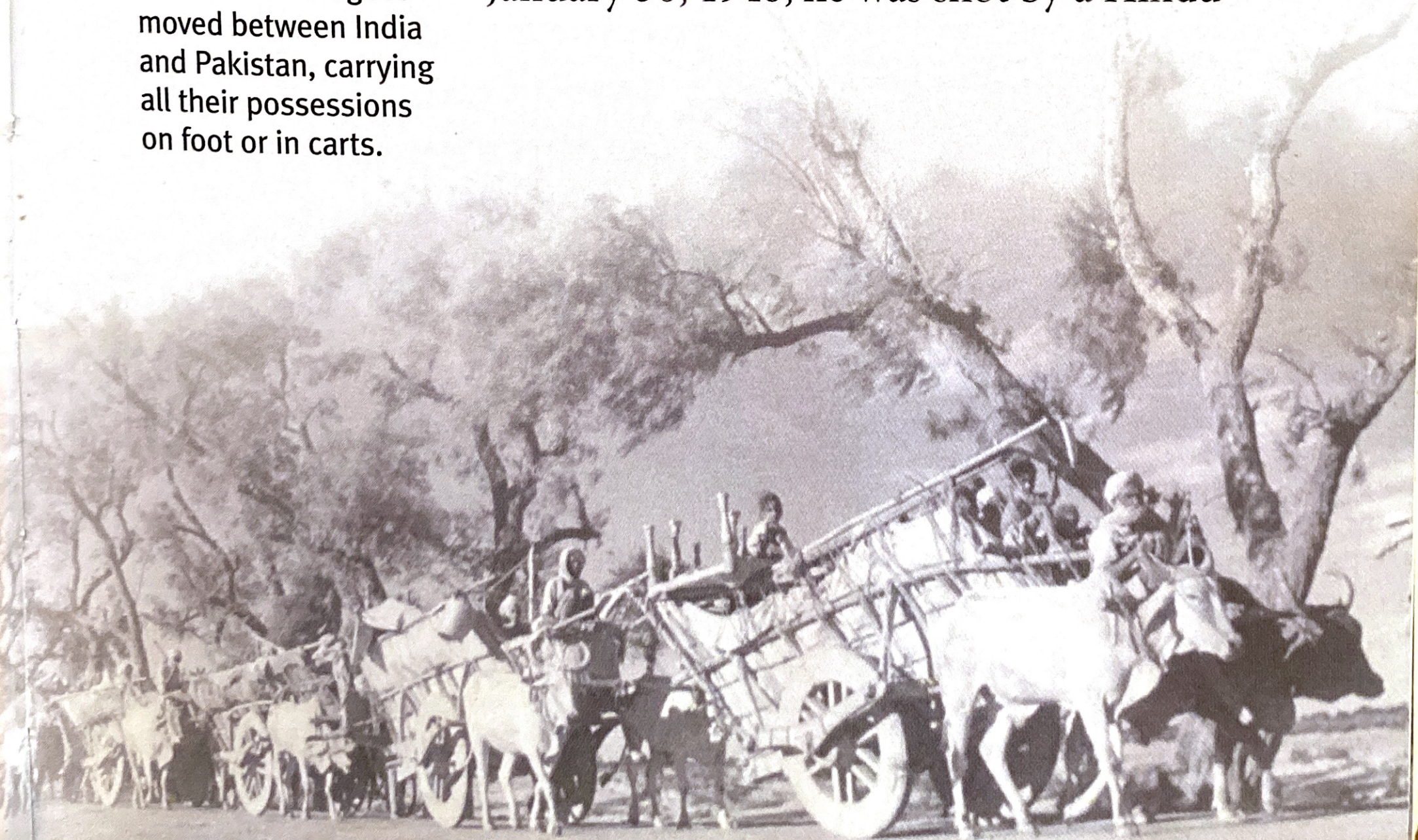
ASSASSIN

An assassin is someone who murders a public figure for political reasons.

Now 78 years old, Gandhi went on a fast to protest the violence between Muslims and Hindus, refusing to eat until there was peace in the streets. "I am prepared to die," he once said, "but there is no cause for which I am prepared to kill." Gandhi was so beloved by the Indian people that the rioting stopped. He agreed to stop fasting, but just two weeks later, on

A stream of refugees moved between India and Pakistan, carrying all their possessions on foot or in carts.

January 30, 1948, he was shot by a Hindu



assassin. All of India mourned Gandhi's death. More than one million people attended his funeral.

Calcutta was the closest major Indian city to East Pakistan, and during Partition, huge numbers of Hindu refugees moved there looking for food, jobs, and places to live. Remember that the population of Calcutta—already a poor and overcrowded city—had recently been swollen by many thousands of famine victims seeking shelter.

Now there were thousands more homeless refugees, most

Calcutta's slums were full of hastily constructed shacks.

without any possessions except for the clothes on their backs. This made Mother



Teresa's mission among the poor even more urgent.

Father Van Exem arranged for Mother Teresa to live

with an order called the Little Sisters of the Poor, who ran a

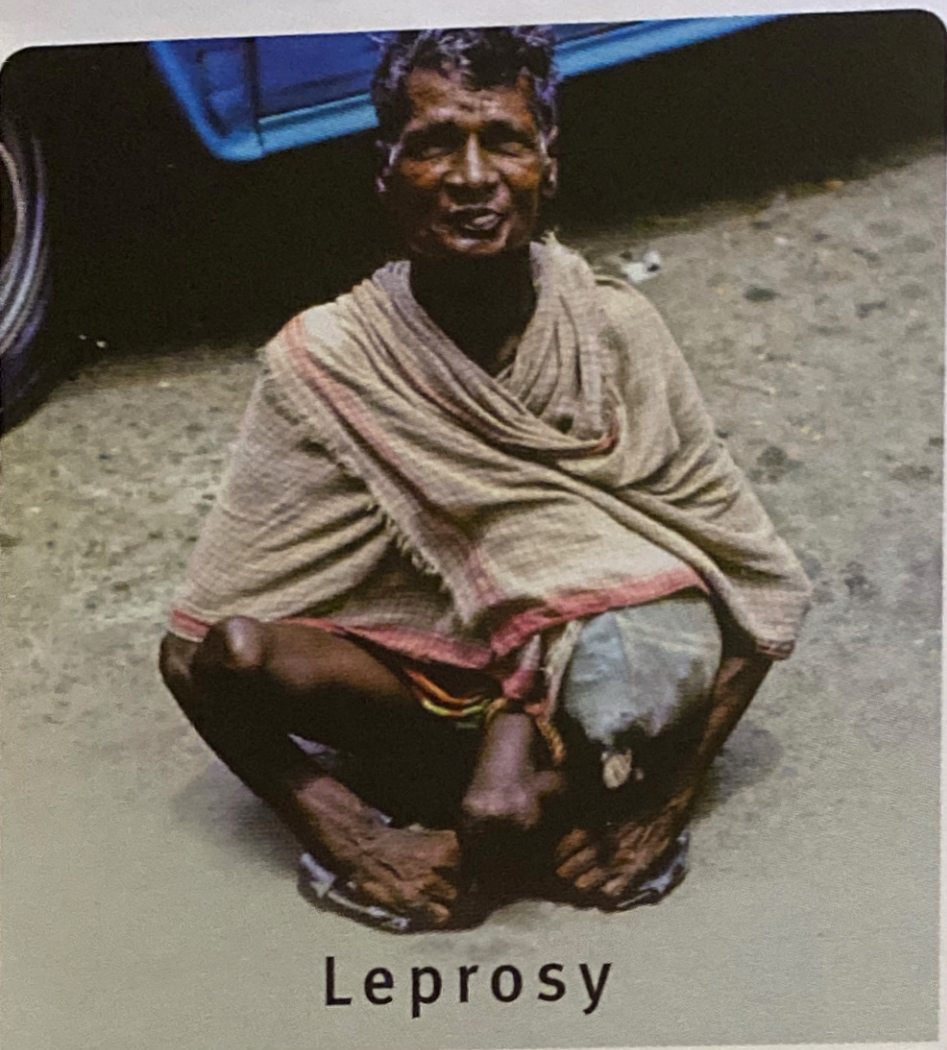
nursing home for the poor and aged called St. Joseph's Home for the Elderly. The Little Sisters lived a simple life of poverty, depending on donations of food and money. They drew inspiration from the words of their founder, Jeanne Jugan: "It is so good to be poor, to have nothing, to depend on God for everything." This would become an important principle of Mother Teresa's new order as well. Its members would own next to nothing, and their care would be up to the grace of God and the charity of their neighbors.

On December 21, 1948, Mother Teresa dressed in her white-and-blue cotton sari and a pair of rough sandals the Patna sisters had given her. She left St. Joseph's Home and went to morning Mass in a neighboring church. Then she boarded a bus that would take her to the infamous slum neighborhood of Moti Jihl, near Loreto Entally.

Calcutta's slums were a jumble of shacks and huts made out of anything people could get their hands on: mud bricks, flattened cardboard boxes, hammered tin cans, sheets of corrugated metal, or plastic. Even though most of these dwellings had dirt floors and makeshift roofs, landlords charged rent to their occupants. Those who couldn't

"It is so good . . . to depend on God for everything."

—Jeanne Jugan, founder of the Little Sisters of the Poor



Leprosy

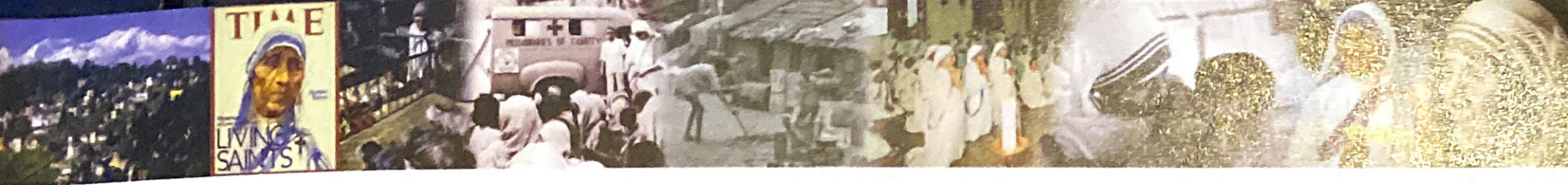
Leprosy creates swelling, discoloration, and numbness in parts of the body. Because it may be spread through contact and was nearly incurable without modern drugs, people with leprosy, called lepers, were often shunned by others and forced to live in remote colonies. The Bible makes many mentions of outcast lepers. In medieval times, lepers would ring a bell as they approached, both as a warning and to ask for charity.

afford to pay slept on the sidewalks and streets, or in public buildings such as railroad stations. Unwanted infants were often abandoned to die on the streets, or left outside clinics and orphanages in the hope that somebody would take them in.

Nearly half the city had no sewer system, and the open drains and gutters smelled foul in the tropical heat. Many families had no place to wash or store food, and some cooked their meals over makeshift fires in the street. Diseases spread quickly in such conditions, especially since

homeless people often died on the street. Their bodies could pass on infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, which is spread by coughing and contact, and leprosy, a disease of the skin and nerves that can cause swelling and deformity.

Moti Jihl had all of these problems and more. There was no school or hospital in the area, and garbage was piled next



to the smelly drains. It's hard to imagine how the recently uncloistered nun must have felt as she first wandered these filthy streets, or how she maintained her determination when she saw firsthand how enormous the problems that facing her new mission were. She had a list of the families that some of her former students and Sodality members had visited with Father Julien Henry, and stopped to see each of them. At every stop, she explained that she would be starting a school for the neighborhood's children.

The next morning, she returned to Moti Jihl, and was delighted to see that 21 children were waiting for her at the place she had chosen for her school: the steps of a railway bridge next to the muddy pond where their families went every day to get water. She found a spot under a tree and picked up a stick, drawing the letters of the Bengali alphabet

Women and children wait in line for food outside Mother Teresa's mission in Calcutta.



CATECHISM

A catechism is a set of religious principles taught in the form of recited questions and answers.

in the mud as the children squatted around her to watch. She had begun her mission, she would say later, “right on the ground.”

More children joined her the next day, and still more the next. She was delighted to see how their faces lit up with smiles when she touched their heads or praised them as they recited the alphabet. Soon, Mother Teresa added lessons in hygiene (sometimes giving baths to the dirtier children), catechism, and sewing.

The tiny European nun who dressed like a poor Indian woman soon became a familiar sight to the residents of Moti Jihl, though many were unsure of what she was doing and why. They were not alone: A Jesuit priest named Michael Gabric would later tell an interviewer, “We thought she was cracked.” Another priest, disturbed by the example she set for young nuns by going her own way, accused her of following the “wiles of the devil.”

As for Mother Teresa herself, her journals from this period (many of which she would later destroy) record her exhaustion and emotional pain at the sights she witnessed every day. Once, she overheard two Hindus saying that her only goal was to convert more people to Christianity. She would later say that the challenges she faced during this time caused her to doubt herself, but she chose to see these doubts as a lesson from God. She was

ALMS

Alms is an old-fashioned word for money or goods that are given as charity.

“We thought she was cracked.”

—Father Michael Gabric

determined to put her faith in God's guidance.

As people learned what Mother Teresa was doing, some stepped forward to help with small donations of money or food. When they didn't, she was forced to beg for alms.

People helped Mother Teresa in other ways, too. The bus driver on her route to St. Joseph's Home gave her a free seat beside him. A former teacher from St. Mary's school came to help her teach in her open-air school beneath the tree. A local priest gave her a donation of 100 rupees, enough to rent two small huts. She even had enough money to buy her students milk for lunch every day and bars of soap as prizes. People in the community gave the school furniture and books.

Mother Teresa gave her first lessons to children from Moti Jihl in a makeshift school under a tree.

