

# ISAS Working Paper

No. 63 – Date: 10 June 2009

469A Bukit Timah Road  
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770  
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239  
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447  
Email: [isassecc@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isassecc@nus.edu.sg)  
Website: [www.isas.nus.edu.sg](http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg)



## The Roots of Bangladeshi National Identity: Their Impact on State Behaviour

Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

The growth of the consciousness of the Bengali Muslims as a distinct social and political entity that found fruition in their carving out for themselves a separate and sovereign state in 1971 was the product of a historical evolution over a period of two centuries. Their past experience is important in as much as it continues to condition their external behaviour pattern even in contemporary times.

### The Colonial Period

Two factors assisted the process that led to the partition of British India in 1947 into the sovereign dominions of India and Pakistan. One was the British policies during the colonial period, starting perhaps with Governor-General Lord Cornwallis' Permanent Settlement scheme in 1793. The other was a series of social and political developments within the two major communities of pre-partition Bengal – the Hindus and the Muslims.<sup>2</sup>

### British Colonial Policies

As a result of the Permanent Settlement scheme, the government's revenue demands were fixed in perpetuity with the incumbent landholders. This policy had several important effects on the two major communities in Bengal.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury is a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore. He was the (Foreign Secretary) Foreign Minister of Bangladesh from 2007 to 2009. He can be reached at [isasiac@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isasiac@nus.edu.sg).

<sup>2</sup> The population of the eastern region, known as *Vanga*, was predominantly of Buddhist and Mongoloid extraction. It was here that Islam gained most of the converts largely through the efforts of various Sufi orders. The population of western Bengal, known as *Gauda*, was of mixed Aryan stock and was predominantly Hindu. (Ishtiaq Ahmed, *State, Nation and Ethnicity in Contemporary South Asia*, Pinter, London and New York, 1996, p. 223). Conversions to Islam in parts of Bengal were facilitated by 'a rigid system of caste discipline' (E. A. Gait, *Census of India, 1909*, Vol. 6, Part 1, Report, p. 165). Eventually, a majority of the population of the whole of Bengal became Muslims. (See Premen Addy and Ibne Azad, 'Politics and Society in Bengal', in Robin Blackburn (ed.) *Explosion in a Subcontinent*, Penguin, 1975, pp. 80-82.

First, as the fixed quantum of revenues were high and the collection by the British was far more efficient than from the peasants by the landlords, many of whom were Muslims – remnants of the period of rule by Muslim *Nawabs* – these landlords or *Zamindars* fell into arrears and were compelled to alienate their properties. This the *Zamindars* did to mainly two Hindu groups, one the city-based class of rising businessmen,<sup>3</sup> and the other, those employed in tax collection establishments of the larger *Zamindaris* (estates) or the British East India Company.<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, as it was the revenue to the government that was fixed in perpetuity and not the rent from the peasants to the *Zamindars*, the new class of *Zamindars* endeavoured to extract as much as possible from the peasants, who were mostly Muslims. This was not conducive to inter-communal harmony for it tended to get enmeshed with class conflict as the sense of deprivation of the Muslim peasants, including the *Jotedars* or richer peasants, sharpened.<sup>5</sup>

Thirdly, the *nouveau riche* commercial-class *Zamindars* preferred to be ‘absentee landlords’, further adversely affecting the *Ryots* or peasants.<sup>6</sup> Sub-infeudation also resulted from the fact that the British sealed off the apex of the feudal hierarchy with their corps of civil servants, permitting only undergrowth.<sup>7</sup>

A second policy that affected the Muslims was the shift from the use of the Persian language in government offices to the English language and Bengali. This led to a loss of influence in the administration in Bengal on the part of mainly the high-born *Ashraf* class.<sup>8</sup> This tradition-bound aristocracy displayed no eagerness, at least at this stage, to learn English.<sup>9</sup> Nor did they receive much encouragement to do so, either from the authorities or the Bengali upper caste-Hindus, as evidenced in the fact that when the Hindu College was established, its charter limited admission to only the members of that community.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Addy and Azad in Blackburn (ed) op. cit., pp. 87-88.

<sup>4</sup> See Rajat and Ratna Ray, ‘The Dynamics of Continuity in Rural Bengal under the British Imperialism: A Study of Quasi-stable Equilibrium in Underdeveloped Societies in a Changing World’, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. X (1973), p. 106.

<sup>5</sup> Rajat and Ratna Ray state that “the social peculiarity of East Bengal which fed the growing political conflict in the province was that the *Zamindars* and *Talukdars* (bigger landlords) in the area were mostly high caste Hindus while the large *Jotedars* under them were invariably Muslims of peasant stock.” Rajat and Ratna Ray, ‘Zamindars and Jotedars: A Study of Rural Politics in Bengal’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 1975, p. 101.

<sup>6</sup> N. K. Sinha, *Economic History of Bengal*, (Calcutta, 1962), Ch V.11 passim.

<sup>7</sup> Dietmar Rothermund, *The Phases of Indian nationalism and other Essays*, (Bombay: Nachiketa Publications Ltd., pp. 177-178. Rothermund argues that while the European bourgeoisie overthrew feudalism in their own countries, they did not perform the same service as colonial rulers in Asia. For instance, in India, while reserving capitalist mode of production for themselves, they sought to keep the rest of the country at the level of pre-capitalist production, which required the maintenance of ‘the stunted and ossified remnants of feudalism, capped by a salaried and efficient bureaucracy’, p. 177.

<sup>8</sup> Initially, the *Ashraf* Muslims who claimed descent from the Turco-Afghans spoke Persian or Urdu, and the *Atraf*, or functional groups, spoke Bengali. The latter were, of course, numerically superior and eventually, by early twentieth century, Bengali became the mother tongue of most Bengal Muslims. However, in the course of the nineteenth century, a special patois came into vogue especially in eastern Bengal, known as *Mussalmani Bangla*. Amalendu De, *Roots of Separatism in Nineteenth Century Bengal*, Calcutta: Ratna Prakashan, 1974, p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> A. R. Mullick, *British Policy and the Muslims in Bengal, 1775-1856*, Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1961, p. 200.

<sup>10</sup> M. Mujeeb, *The Indian Muslims*, London: John Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1966, p. 521. In fact, even lower caste Hindus were also excluded from this privately-funded institution. Eventually, in the middle of the nineteenth century, British authorities intervened and the College, later known as the Presidency College, was thrown open to all castes and communities. R. C. Majumdar, *Glimpses of Bengal in the Nineteenth Century*, Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyaya, 1960, p. 48.

The Census of 1871 reports:

Hindus, with exceptions of course, are the principal *Zamindars*, *Talukdars* (owners of large sub-feudatory estates), public officers, men of learning, moneylenders, traders, shopkeepers, and [are] engaging in most active pursuits of life and coming directly and frequently under notice of the rulers of the country; while the Muslims with exceptions also, form a very large majority of the cultivators of the ground and day labourers; and others engaged in the humblest form of mechanical skills and of buying and selling.<sup>11</sup>

This social decline engendered disaffection among different Muslim classes whose interests appeared to blend for a while with and found expression in three peasant uprisings – the *Faraizi* Movement (1810-1831), the ‘Indigo’ riots (1859-1860) and the Pabna Rent Revolt (1873) as well as in the communal violence in Calcutta in the 1890s. The *Faraizi* Movement was the Bengali version of the Pan-Islamic Wahabi movement that sought to revive the pristine glories of Islam. Initially, the content was religious but eventually the bias became socio-economic. It aimed at the two-fold objective of ‘protecting’ the largely Muslim peasantry from ‘the Hindu *Zamindars*’ and of ‘securing social justice for the masses of the Muslims’.<sup>12</sup> The ‘Indigo’ riots resulted from the coercion of the indigo planters to produce the crop at a loss.<sup>13</sup> The Pabna Rent Revolt was a protest by the largely Muslim peasantry in that district of eastern Bengal directed against absentee landlordism.<sup>14</sup> The communal violence in Calcutta or ‘the Calcutta Riots’ in the 1890s resulted from the rise of ‘community consciousness’ among jute labourers of Calcutta, especially after the influx of Urdu-speaking labour migrants from northern India into Bengal.<sup>15</sup> The Hindus participated in those movements where the thrust was clearly against the British, but quite understandably, they tended to remain uninvolved when the Islamic features were emphasised.<sup>16</sup>

Two traits became evident at this stage. First, the growing formation of a loose alliance between the *Ashraf*, the old aristocracy, and the *Atraf*, the more indigent segments of the Muslim community, poised against the British state authority and the burgeoning Hindu middle class, the *Bhadralok*.<sup>17</sup> The second was the power of religion as a means of rousing Muslims of all classes.

---

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Abdul Majeed Khan, ‘Research about Muslim Aristocracy in East Pakistan’, in Pierre Bessaignet (ed.) *Social Research in East Pakistan*, Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1961, p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> Muin-ud-din Ahmed Khan, *Social Organization of the Faraidis*, *Pakistan Historical Society Journal*, Vol. 12, 1964, p. 195.

<sup>13</sup> Chittabrata Palit, *Tensions in Bengal Rural Society: Landlords, Planters, and Colonial Rule 1830-1860*, Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 1975, pp. 140-151.

<sup>14</sup> There were, however, some Hindus among the leaders of the revolt. See, Kalyan Kumar Sengupta, ‘The Agrarian League of Pabna, 1873’, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 7, No. 2, June 1970, pp. 253-270. Later, the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1948 attempted to remove some of the grievances. Initially, the British tended to favour the landlords and their legislations facilitated rent extraction. The tenancy protection that gradually emerged, and which aimed to forestall peasant agitation, flowed from the Rent Recovery Acts. Dietmar Rothermund, *Government, Landlord, and Peasant in India: Agrarian Relations under British Rule*, Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMHH, 1978, p. 89.

<sup>15</sup> See Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘Communal Riots and Labour: Bengal’s jute Mill Hands in the 1890s’, *Past and Present*, 1981.

<sup>16</sup> Addy and Azad, Blackburn, op. cit., p. 104.

<sup>17</sup> Contemporary historians and sociologists have assigned the description of a ‘Weberian status group’ to the powerful *Bhadralok* who, unrelated to the processes of production, were not seen as strictly constituting a class. According to J. H. Broomfield, they were ‘distinguishable by many aspects of their behaviour, their deportment, their speech and their dress, their style of housing, their eating habits their occupations, and their associations and quite as frequently by their cultural values and their sense of propriety’. *Elite Conflict*

The simmering discontent among the Muslims that had begun to foster the development of a separatist consciousness was yet unarticulated in any major way except for the occasional local ‘uprisings’. However, yet another policy decision of the colonial powers brought this ‘community consciousness’ a step closer to ‘nationalism’. This was the partition of Bengal in 1905 that gave a ‘territorial’ content to these sentiments. By then, the British had become somewhat wary of the growing clout of the *Bhadralok*. Also, Muslim aspirations were beginning to find some resonance among the British, particularly in the Viceroy, Lord Curzon. The animosities between the Muslims and the British, generated by the ‘Sepoy Mutiny’ of 1857, now seemed behind them.

The partition of Bengal in 1905 (Partition Mark I) ostensibly had a two-fold objective – ‘the reinvigoration of Assam and the relief of Bengal’.<sup>18</sup> Eastern Bengal was hived off and joined to Assam, thereby creating a separate province. It was hoped that the reduction of the size of Bengal would render it more governable. Also, enhancing Assam’s access to the port of Chittagong in East Bengal would invigorate the rather neglected Assam province which, together with its now larger size and population, would make it attractive for covenanted civil servants.<sup>19</sup>

In making his decision, Curzon was certainly motivated by a desire to curb the rising influence of the Calcutta *Bhadralok*. A senior British official, H. H. Risley, recorded that:

Bengal united is power. Bengal divided will pull in different ways. That is what the Congress leaders feel; their apprehensions are perfectly correct and they form one of the great merits of the scheme...one of our main objects is to split up and thereby weaken a solid body of opponents to our rule.<sup>20</sup>

Apart from dividing up Bengal, another way of minimising the *Bhadralok* power was to encourage the Muslims by giving them a province where they would be dominant. In fact, Curzon himself urged Nawab Salimullah of Dacca, a Muslim leader, that:

By means of their numerical strength and superior culture, the Mussalmans would have the preponderant voice in the Province that would be created and that would invest the Mussalmans of East Bengal with a unity they had not enjoyed since the days of the old Mussalman Kings.<sup>21</sup>

---

*in a Plural Society*, University of California Press, 1968, pp. 5-6. John McGwire saw them as a composite group of the middle and the rentier class of Calcutta who continued to retain strong residual ties with their own pre-capitalist past. He noted the absence of any industrial bourgeoisie among them as the paradox of the colonial situation where the latter was to be found in Britain only. Development and Underdevelopment: Calcutta and the *Bhadralok*, 1857-1885, Australian National University Conference Paper, December, 1979, p. 11. However, S. N. Mukherjee has argued that to describe the *Bhadralok* as a mere ‘status group’ or even as a ‘category’ would be to ignore the economic changes and social mobility in nineteenth century Bengal. Mukherjee would even go further and call the *Bhadralok* a ‘class’. S. N. Mukherjee, ‘Class, Caste, and Politics in Calcutta, 1815-1818’, in Edmund Leach and S.N. Mukherjee (eds.) *Elites in South Asia*, Cambridge University Press, 1970, p. 51. Incidentally, the *Bhadralok* have been seen as both ‘collaborators’ and ‘critics’ of the British Raj.

<sup>18</sup> Minute by Curzon, June 1903, para 49, cited in John R. Mc Farlane, ‘The Decision to partition Bengal in 1905’, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, July 1965, p. 223.

<sup>19</sup> Mc Lane, op. cit., pp. 222-223.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Amal Tripathi, *The Extremist Challenge: India between 1890 and 1910*, Bombay: Great Longman’s, 1967, p. 157.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Abul Hayat, *Musulmans of Bengal*, Calcutta: Zahed Ali, 1966, p. 18.

A period of good relations between the British Raj and the Muslim leaders in Bengal began. The All-India Muslim League was established in Dacca (now Dhaka) with the stipulation of loyalty to the government.<sup>22</sup> The anti-British stirrings of the nineteenth century among the Muslims were now, to a large extent, calmed.<sup>23</sup>

The partition of Bengal provoked convulsive and, at times, violent outbursts from the *Bhadralok*. This drew adverse reaction from the Muslim community. The resultant polarisation had the effect of politicising and galvanising Muslim opinion. Added impetus towards communalism was provided by journals such as *Lal Ishtihar*, literally 'Red Pamphlet', and *Krishak Bandhu*, meaning 'Friend of the Peasants'.<sup>24</sup> This polarisation was so complete that even when the partition was revoked in 1911, the deep shock of the Bengali Muslims found expression, not in any anti-British fury, but in antipathy directed more towards the Hindu community in Bengal.

This suited the Bengali Muslim leadership, conservative and feudal, in background. Salimullah and his ilk had clearly seen the advantage of remaining on the right side of the authorities. The strategy was to secure as much advantage as possible by portraying the Bengali Muslims as the aggrieved party without resorting to any lawlessness. As a sop, the British authorities agreed to establish a university in Dacca.<sup>25</sup> Secondly, the decision to shift the capital from Calcutta to New Delhi was a blow to the *Bhadralok* power, which was not unpalatable to Bengal's Muslim leaders. Thirdly, the Indian Councils Act of 1909 recognised Bengal's political maturity and signalled the commencement of a series of reforms that could gradually lead to the devolution of power in Bengal as well as increased legislative politics. The Muslims, being the overall majority, stood to gain from this. For all these reasons, it was the Hindu community rather than the British which began to be viewed as the major source of threat in Bengal. Indeed, this feeling was so strong that the Bengali Muslim leadership reacted adversely to the Lucknow Pact of 1916 between the Congress and the Muslim League, which reflected an understanding between India's two major communities at an all-India level.

The Lucknow Pact, based on the principle that the minority communities ought to have weightage in representation, granted major concessions to the Hindus in the Muslim-majority province of Bengal. There the Muslims, with 52.6 percent of the population, were to have only 40 percent of the seats.<sup>26</sup> This was, of course, due to the fact that the Muslims were provided advantages in the provinces where they were minorities. Clearly this went against the interest of the Bengali Muslims. Salimullah was now dead and leadership had passed on to conservatives such as Nawab Nawabaly Chowdhury who argued that the Muslim League

---

<sup>22</sup> See Abdul Hamid, *Muslim Separatism in India: A Brief Survey, 1858-1947*, Lahore: Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 78.

<sup>23</sup> This period of improved relations between the British and the Muslim community also saw a more intense development of the process of what D. A. Low has called the 'neo-darbari' politics which involved, on the part of the British, a multiplicity of initiatives to associate non-official Indian notables with the workings of the higher levels of the Raj so as to extend the linkages through which the Indian society could be controlled. D. A. Low (ed.), *Congress and the Raj*, London: Arnold-Heinemann, 1977, p. 5.

<sup>24</sup> *Lal Ishtihar*, for instance, urged the Muslims that, despite being the majority community, they have been cheated and that they should rise up against it. Cited in Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908*, Delhi: Peoples' Publishing House, 1973, p. 209. *Krishak Bandhu* also made similar exhortations. Sarkar, op. cit., p. 214.

<sup>25</sup> Abdul Hakim, 'University of Dacca', *The Journal of the Pakistan Historical and Social Review*, Vol. 16, January 1968, Part 1, p. 50.

<sup>26</sup> Broomfield, op. cit., p.114.

could not, and did not, represent the interests of the Bengali Muslims.<sup>27</sup> This position stiffened with the Hindu-Muslim communal riots in Bihar in 1917, and more significantly, in Calcutta the following year.<sup>28</sup> It was beginning to be perceived that the interests of the Bengali Muslims did not necessarily coincide with and, at times, were even distinct from those of their coreligionists in other parts of the subcontinent, a perception with considerable ramifications for subsequent political developments for the region.

This partly explains the rather lukewarm response of Bengali Muslims to the call for the “Khilafat Movement” as a mark of protest against the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire. Such all-India Muslim causes still generated some support among the Urdu-speaking Muslim Calcuttans such as Mowlana Abul Kalam Azad but were, by and large, peripheral to those representing the more indigenous Bengali-speaking Muslims.

Finally, British policies, with regard to the gradual devolution of power and the extension of legislative politics in Bengal, were leading inexorably to the solution of the major problem that confronted the Bengali Muslims, which was the translation of their demographic majority into political power, the same challenge they would confront later in Pakistan. The reforms that came into operation in 1921 introduced a system of ‘dyarchy’ in the provinces, viz a division of powers between the Executive Councillors responsible to the Governor administering ‘reserved’ subjects and the ministers answerable to the legislature controlling ‘transferred’ subjects. Besides the principle of transferring responsibility for certain functions while reserving control over others, the idea was also to establish substantial provincial autonomy.<sup>29</sup>

This autonomy worked to somewhat insulate Bengal from the rest of India, with communal politics there developing dynamics of their own. Muslim politicians entered into an alliance with the *Swarajists* or seekers of self-rule on the eve of the 1923 elections.<sup>30</sup> However, when the government was formed, two of the three ministers turned out to be Muslims. So when the *Swarajists* assumed the role of opposition and attacked the cabinet, it was interpreted as threatening a Muslim-majority ministry by a Hindu-majority *Swaraj* Party.<sup>31</sup> Ultimately, the government was defeated and the Governor suspended the constitution until after the 1927 elections. The prospects of Hindu-Muslim unity received a severe jolt and Muslim politicians closed ranks for the elections, in which only one out of 39 Muslims elected to the Bengal council was a *Swarajist*.<sup>32</sup> This short-lived *Swarajist*-Muslim alliance showed how brittle such understandings were when confronted by communalist sentiments.

It was now clear that, as the scope of legislative politics broadened, Muslim domination of such politics was inevitable.<sup>33</sup> This shift of power resulted once again in the expression of the

---

<sup>27</sup> *Octennial Report of the Central National Mohammedan Association 1917-1924*, Calcutta, 1925, pp. 35-37

<sup>28</sup> See J. H. Broomfield, ‘The Forgotten Majority’: The Bengal Muslims and September 1918’, in D. A. Low (ed.), *Soundings in Modern South Asian History*, London: The Camelot Press Ltd., 1968, pp. 196-220.

<sup>29</sup> L. F. Rushbrook Williams, *India in the Years 1917-1918: A Report prepared for presentation to the Parliament in accordance with the 26<sup>th</sup> Section of the Government of India Act*, Calcutta; 1919, pp. 192-193.

<sup>30</sup> This section of the Congress, led by C. R. Das, aimed at achieving *Swaraj* or self-rule through participation in electoral bodies.

<sup>31</sup> See Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society*, op. cit., p. 253.

<sup>32</sup> *A Short History of Hind Pakistan* (Prepared by Pakistan History Board, Pakistan Historical Society, Publication No. 3, 1963), p. 396.

<sup>33</sup> Initially, the Muslims felt that their interest lay in the continuation of ‘consultative politics’ rather than in the extension of legislative politics, and that any system of open elections would be dominated by the powerful *Bhadralok*. It was only a gradual realisation on their part that “they had many technical advantages in the

*Bhadralok* discontent through terrorism, as was the case during the partition of Bengal (1905). In April 1930, they raided the Chittagong armoury.<sup>34</sup> The disturbances assumed communal proportions when a Muslim police inspector was killed by a Hindu boy in August 1931, which led to rioting in the bazaars.<sup>35</sup> Chittagong's district magistrate imposed a curfew on 'Hindu *Bhadralok* youths' who had organised themselves into a terrorist organisation named the 'Indian Republican Army'.<sup>36</sup> At the level of constitutional politics, the *Bhadralok* demanded a second chamber so as "to form a backwater against sudden storms, sudden tidal waves" of extended franchise.<sup>37</sup> In other words, the *Bhadralok* asked for an institutional check against the power of a Lower House increasingly dominated by lower caste Hindus and Muslims. Muslim leaders such as A. K. Fazlul Huq vigorously opposed this, and when put to the vote, the motion was lost by 46 to 44.<sup>38</sup>

The Government of India Act 1935 enlarged the electorate and further enfranchised the lower caste Hindus and Muslims. It was obvious that the Muslims would be the dominant force in legislative politics and their energies would now be directed towards ameliorating the problems and grievances of the tenants and peasantry. The policy of 'separate electorates' gave, in a House of 250, 117 seats to the Muslims, 78 to the Hindus and 30 to the 'Scheduled Castes' (Lower Castes). The Muslims thus received a 'built-in' bias to power.<sup>39</sup> Also, it is noteworthy that separate electorates further engendered separatist tendencies in both communities.

An opportunity for improved communal relations was lost immediately after the 1937 elections. Huq, who had floated the Krishak Praja Party (KPP), having fought the Muslim League led by Khwaja Nazimuddin, turned to the Congress to form a coalition.<sup>40</sup>

The Congress turned him down, and with it, the opportunity for an understanding with the 'most secular segment of the Muslim leadership' as well as 'progressive Hindu elements'.<sup>41</sup>

---

new system, and that the sheer size of their community gave them great agitational and electoral strength, which only awaited the perfection of those techniques for its realisation". Broomfield in D. A. Low (ed.) *Soundings in South Asia*, op. cit., p. 220.

<sup>34</sup> *India in 1931-1932*, A statement prepared for presentation to Parliament in accordance with the requirement of the 26<sup>th</sup> Section of the Government of India Act, Calcutta: Government of India Central Publication Branch, 1933, p. 32.

<sup>35</sup> *Terrorism in India 1917-1936*. Compiled in the Intelligence Bureau, Home Department, Government of India, New Delhi: Deep Publications, Reprinted in 1974, p. 32.

<sup>36</sup> *Indian Recorder*, October-December 1932, p. 32.

<sup>37</sup> The *Bhadralok* leader, S. M. Bose, called for such a House 'representing an aristocracy of intellect, men of education and experience in the service of the state, men representing the great social and industrial interests in the country, men of sufficient strength to avoid the evils which might possibly flow from the unabridged powers of an autocratic lower chamber'. Bose's fears of the 'rule of majority is obvious. Interestingly, he only speaks of 'men', though by now the feminine counterpart of the '*Bhadralok*', that is, the '*Bhadramahila*' or 'gentlewomen' were coming to the fore already. For a study of this phenomenon, see G. Murshid, 'Reluctant Debutante: Response of Bengali Women to Modernization, 1849-1905, Rajshahi: Shahitya Samsad, Rajshahi University, 1983.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, p. 815.

<sup>39</sup> Shapan Adnan, 'Fazlul Huq and Bengal Muslim Leadership 1937-1943', *Bangladesh Historical Studies*, Vol. 1, Dacca: Journal of Bangladesh Itihash Samiti, 1976, pp. 4-5.

<sup>40</sup> Though the League had 43 seats, and the Congress 52, Fazlul Huq, with 36 KPP seats, was best placed to lead a coalition either in alliance with one of the above or with support from the 108 Independents and some others (statistics of results from Humaira Momen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal: A Study of the KPP and the Elections of 1937*, Dacca, 1972, p. 77.

<sup>41</sup> Shila Sen, Some Aspects of Muslim Politics in Bengal 1937-1946, *Bangladesh Historical Studies*, op. cit., p. 30.

Huq thereafter sought the Muslim League's support for a coalition, a move that had significant long-term impact on Bengal's future politics. First, Huq's alliance with the Muslim League once again led to a closing of ranks of the Bengali Muslims of both the progressive and conservative nature. Secondly, the Muslim League, as a result of its association with the various reforms that followed, gained a radical flavour that it never really possessed, and this aided its image as of a friend of the impoverished Muslim tenants. Thirdly, as the Congress was unresponsive to Huq, the latter turned to the more extremist Hindu groups for alliance when he fell out with the Muslim League, thus exposing himself, a progressive and secular Muslim leader, to criticism from a majority of Bengali Muslims.

The Muslim victory in Bengal led the Urdu poet-philosopher, Sir Muhammed Iqbal, to ask of M. A. Jinnah, later to be the founder of Pakistan, as to why the Muslims of north-west India and Bengal should not be entitled to self-government just as other nations.<sup>42</sup> Huq, who himself joined the Muslim League in October 1937, was used by Jinnah in March 1940 to move the famous Lahore Resolution which demanded:

That the areas in which the Muslims are numerically in a majority as in the North Western and Eastern Zones in India should be grouped to constitute *independent* states in which the *constituent units* shall be *autonomous* and *sovereign*.<sup>43</sup> [Italics by author]

Two points emerge from this – first, that the partition should be on communal lines; and, secondly that the new units should be 'autonomous' and 'sovereign' rather than a part of a single national entity. It may, therefore, be well argued that the solution in the subcontinent in 1971 was more in conformity with the original Lahore Resolution than the partition of 1947. In other words, what eventually happened in 1971, that is, the emergence of Bangladesh, could, therefore, be viewed as the second and final phase of the realisation of the original Lahore Resolution.

When Jinnah wanted Huq to resign from the Defence Council, the two leaders fell out.<sup>44</sup> Huq was the receiving threat perceptions from his co-religionists in north-western India. Prominent Muslim Leaguers such as Hussein Shaheed Suhrawardy and Nazimuddin quit the ministry. Huq was somewhat cornered. He began to talk of Hindu-Muslim unity. In June 1942, he said in Calcutta:

Hindus and Muslims must realise ... that they have got to live together, sink or swim together, and if need be, lay down their lives together for the good of their common motherkind.<sup>45</sup>

Deserted by the Leaguers and rebuffed by the Congress, Huq turned to his Hindu-extremist arch-rival, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, for an alliance. Once again, to counter the threat

---

<sup>42</sup> Iqbal asked, 'Why should not the Muslims of North-West India and Bengal be considered as nations entitled to self-government just as other nations?' Kamruddin Ahmad, *A Social History of Bengal*, Dacca, 1970, Edition 3, p. 31. Iqbal's use of the plural 'nations' indicates that in his mind Bengal was a potential sovereign Muslim entity.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Sharifuddin Pirzada (ed), *Foundations of Pakistan 1923-1947*, Karachi: National Publishing House, 1970, p. 341.

<sup>44</sup> See M. A. H. Ispahani, *Quaide Azam Jinnah As I Knew Him*, Karachi: Forward Publications Trust, 1966, pp. 48-49.

<sup>45</sup> *Hindustan Standard*, Calcutta, 21 June 1942, cited in Shyamoli Ghosh: 'Fazlul Huq and Muslim Politics in Prepartition Bengal', *International Studies*, Vol. 13, New Delhi, 1974, p. 457.



perceptions from his north-western co-religionists and their allies in Bengal, the indigenous Muslim Bengalis forged an alliance with a section of the Hindu *Bhadralok*, a tactic or phenomenon that was to repeat years later during the ‘Bangladesh Liberation War’ in 1971.

Mukherjee left the ministry in protest against the government’s failure to heed his advice on food procurement prior to the 1943 ‘Bengal Famine’. Huq, unsupported by all major political elements, was edged out of office by the Governor, Sir John Herbert.

In May 1943, the Muslim League, with Nazimuddin as Premier, was in full command and Bengal came into line with the All-India Muslim League. In the elections of 1946, the Muslim League, basing its campaign on the All-India Muslim League demand for ‘Pakistan’, won all the six Muslim seats from Bengal in the Central Assembly, and 113 out of 121 territorial Muslim seats in the Provincial Assembly. Shila Sen has argued:

The election results also proved that in Bengal, the Pakistan movement was mass based and democratic. They reflected the aspirations of Bengali Muslims for a Muslim majority state in northern India.<sup>46</sup>

However, Suhrawardy, who succeeded Nazimuddin as Premier in April 1946, had a vision of Bengal as an independent sovereign unit. He was supported in this project by a number of Bengali Muslim politicians such as Abul Hashim and Fazlur Rahman. Even a document was drawn up – a blueprint – for a ‘Socialist Republic in Bengal’, which implied that they had more than a ‘dominion’ status in mind for the proposed unit.<sup>47</sup> However, opposition came from the *Bhadralok* who, fearing a perennial domination by the Muslims of a United Bengal, preferred ‘partition’ along the lines of the ‘Radcliffe Award’.<sup>48</sup> On June 1947, the Council of the All-India Muslim League in New Delhi accepted a partition of Bengal as a compromise solution. East Bengal was to be separated once again from West Bengal (Partition Mark II), this time to join some provinces of northwest India to constitute Pakistan.<sup>49</sup>

### Development within the Two Communities

The communal separatism in Bengal engendered over the decades by colonial policies periodically received simultaneous impetus from certain developments within both the Hindu and Muslim communities during the colonial period. The first was a series of ‘revivalist’ movements in the latter half of the nineteenth century within each community. The whole of India was undergoing a spell of Hindu revivalism that found expression in the establishment of such institutions as the *Arya Samaj* in Bombay (now Mumbai) in 1875. The *Samajists*

---

<sup>46</sup> *Muslim Politics in Bengal, 1937-1947*, New Delhi: Impex India, 1976, pp. 197-198.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with M. Masood, Director, Pakistan Institute of International Affairs, Karachi, 10 May 1978. Masood was a Private Secretary to Suhrawardy during that period.

<sup>48</sup> Shyama Prasad Mukherjee wrote to the Central Congress leader, Sardar Patel, ‘We demand the creation of two provinces out of the boundaries of Bengal, Pakistan or no Pakistan’. Shila Sen. *Muslim Politics in Bengal*, op. cit., p. 227.

<sup>49</sup> It seems for a while the fate of the *Bhadralok* stronghold, Calcutta, was in doubt. A government circular in February 1946 read, ‘The question whether Calcutta should be included in Eastern Bengal raises some very serious issues. If Calcutta is not so included, Eastern Bengal would obviously be a very poor thing, and Pakistan as a whole will be heavily unbalanced as between agriculture on the one hand, and industry, commerce and finance on the other’. Note by Pethick-Laurence, India Office, 13 February 1946, in Nicholas Mansergh (ed), *Constitutional Relations Between Pakistan and India: The Transfer of Power 1942-47*, Vol. VI, London, 1976, p. 953.

carried out *Shuddhi* (purification) and *Shanghatan* (union) programmes that naturally clashed with the proselytising work of the Muslim revivalists.<sup>50</sup> The conflict in Bengal would have been sharper had it not been for the fact that ‘the need of a re-examination, re-explanation and re-interpretation of the traditional religion of the people by their contact with modern European thought and culture, and the conflict between Hinduism and the evangelical Christian missions had been met by the *Brahma Samaj*’,<sup>51</sup> a reformist movement started by Raja Rammohan Roy.

The Muslims had revivalist movements of their own. The *Faraizi* movement had a religious component as evidenced by the *Dini* (religious) branch in their organisation, as opposed to the *Siyasi* (political) branch.<sup>52</sup> Eventually, this orthodoxy gave way to a more liberal trend initiated in northern India by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan.<sup>53</sup> In Bengal, contemporary flag bearers advocating similar lines were Nawab Abdul Latif and Sir Syed Amir Ali.<sup>54</sup> While the orthodox revivalists sought to restore Islam’s ‘lost glories’, the modernists just cited emphasised the material aspect of the competition with the Hindus. Both, however, had the same effect of acting as a catalyst to instill into the Muslim mind a sense of distinctiveness from the Hindu community.

A second development would be the rise of the *Bhadralok*, the category from whom the Muslims were, by and large, excluded. The attitude of this group towards the Muslims has been summed up by the writer Nirad C. Choudhury who, recalling his boyhood days, wrote:

In the first place, we felt a retrospective hostility toward the Muslim for his one-time domination of us, the Hindus; secondly, on the plane of thought we were utterly indifferent to the Muslims as an element in contemporary society; thirdly, we had friendliness for the Muslims of our own economic and social status with whom we came into contact; our fourth feeling was mixed, concern and contempt for the Muslim peasant whom we saw in the same light as we saw our low-caste Hindu tenants, as in other words, our livestock.<sup>55</sup>

A third development would be the migration of Muslims from other Indian provinces to Bengal in the latter half of the nineteenth century. They represented an extension of non-indigenous Muslim ethos into Bengal, throwing into relief certain inter-communal differences that had eroded in Bengal over centuries but were very much alive in the rest of India. One evidence of this was the sudden emergence of ‘cow sacrifice’ as a factor of dispute among the factory hands in Calcutta.<sup>56</sup>

A fourth factor was the *Bengal Renaissance* and certain directions that it assumed.<sup>57</sup> It was largely expressed through literature, the luminaries being Henry Derozio, Isvar Chandra

---

<sup>50</sup> K. P. Karunakaran, *Religion and Political Awakening in India*, Calcutta: Minakshi Prakashan, 1965, p. 99.

<sup>51</sup> Bipen Chandra Pal, *Memories of My Life and Times*, Calcutta: Yugantri Prashak Ltd., 1951, Vol. 2, p. 71.

<sup>52</sup> Muin-ud-din Ahmed, op. cit., p. 195.

<sup>53</sup> See his passionate appeal to the Indian Muslims in ‘In support of Western education, art and science’, Appendix F in Karunakaran, op. cit.

<sup>54</sup> S. M. Ikram, *Modern Muslim India and the Birth of Pakistan*, Lahore: Sh. Mohammed Ashraf Second Edition, 1970, pp. 90-99.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Sumit Sarkar, ‘Hindu Muslim Relations in Swadeshi Bengal, 1903-1908’, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 9, 1972, pp. 167-168.

<sup>56</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, op. cit., p. 9.

<sup>57</sup> Susobhan Sarkar has compared Bengal’s role in the awakening of India to that of Italy in the European Renaissance. *Bengal Renaissance and Other Essays*, New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1970, p. 3. The

Vidyasagar, Dinabandhu Mitra, Bankim Chatterjee, Debendranath and Rabindranath Tagore. *Shahitya Shadhak Charitmala*, a list of 102 literary figures of the nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal, includes only one Muslim, Meer Mosharraf Hussain.<sup>58</sup> In the absence of Muslim participation, many of these literary works were open to criticism by the Muslims. An example was Bankim Chandra's *Anand Math*, a pseudo-historical novel published in 1882, depicting the struggle of Hindu 'patriots' against Muslim 'intruders'. In the words of a later writer, such authors 'instilled in the minds of the Muslims, suspicion and fear that subsequent events did not eradicate'.<sup>59</sup> The symbols and heroes of the *Renaissance* literature were largely alien to the Muslim tradition.<sup>60</sup> Muslims of the day were extremely sensitive to the treatment they received in contemporary literature and endeavoured to retaliate in kind in their own, though minimal, literary activities.<sup>61</sup>

These were the various economic, social and political factors that were at the roots of the evolution of the consciousness of the Bengali Muslims as being distinct from the other major community in Bengal, the Hindus. The identity of interest that appeared to exist with their co-religionists outside Bengal in India led to an alliance, the experiment of Pakistan that flowed from the 'partition' (for Bengal, Mark II) of the subcontinent in 1947 which in reality was a 'trifurcation of British India, masquerading as a bifurcation'.<sup>62</sup>

### The Pakistan Experiment

After the 'partition' of 1947, the central problem of the East Bengalis remained constant. This was once again the translation of their demographic majority into political power, now within the framework of Pakistan. From the very outset, this proved to be a difficult task. First, there was the overriding personality of Pakistan's Karachi-based Governor-General, Mohamed Ali Jinnah.<sup>63</sup> Secondly, since the central constituent assembly comprised entirely of Muslim Leaguers, all local aspirations were subordinated to the 'central theme of Pakistan'. Also, many of East Bengal's representatives to the central legislature were not 'sons of the soil, but Muslim migrants from northern India'.<sup>64</sup> Thirdly, in a 'society heavily reliant on its

---

author believes it would be more correct to compare it to the English Renaissance, which, like Bengal's, was literary in flavour rather than the Italian counterpart, which was more focused on the fine arts and whose literary expression was only classical.

<sup>58</sup> Sumit Sarkar, op. cit., p. 166.

<sup>59</sup> T. W. Clark, 'The Role of Bankim Chandra on the Development of Nationalism' in C. H. Philips (ed), *Historians of India, Pakistan, Ceylon*, London: Oxford University Press, 1962, pp. 439-440.

<sup>60</sup> There was, for instance, adoration of heroes identified with the glories of Hindu history such as the Mahratta Chief Shivaji, who opposed the orthodox Muslim Emperor Aurangzeb. B. C. Pal wrote of Shivaji, '[He was] the symbol of a grand idea, the memory of a noble sentiment, the mouthpiece of a grand movement. The idea was the idea of a Hindu *Rashtra* (state) which would unite under one political bond the whole Hindu people united already by communities of tradition and scriptures'. Quoted in Nimai Sadhan Bose, *The Indian Awakening and Bengal*, Calcutta, 1969, p. 245.

<sup>61</sup> Ghulam Murshid, 'Coexistence in a Plural society under Colonial Rule: Hindu-Muslim Relations in Bengal 1757-1913', *The Journal of Bangladesh Studies*, Vol.1, Institute of Bangladesh Studies, University of Rajshahi, 1976, p. 137.

<sup>62</sup> Peter Lyon 'Bangladesh Fashioning a Foreign policy', *South Asian Review*, (April 1972), p. 231.

<sup>63</sup> A contemporary observer, Alan Campbell-Johnson, described Jinnah thus, 'If Jinnah's personality is cold and remote, it also has a magnetic quality. The sense of leadership is almost overpowering. He makes only the most superficial attempts to disguise himself as a constitutional Governor-General...Here indeed is Pakistan's King-Emperor, Archbishop of Canterbury, Speaker and Prime Minister concentrated into one formidable *Quaid-e-Azam* (Father of the Nation)' *Mission with Mountbatten*, London: Robert Hale Ltd., Reprinted 1953, p. 156.

<sup>64</sup> Sisir Gupta, 'From Pakistan to Yahya Khan' in Pran Chopra (ed), *The Challenge of Bangladesh*, New York: Humanities Press, Reprinted 1973, p. 21.

permanent bureaucracy'<sup>65</sup> (and as was to be the case later, on its military), the East Bengalis were disadvantaged by their minimal representation in the upper reaches of the civil service' (and the military).<sup>66</sup> Finally, the focal point of political power, the capital, was located in West Pakistan, first in Karachi and later in Rawalpindi, Islamabad, both over a thousand miles away from East Bengal. It was not surprising, therefore, that the honeymoon period was brief.

The attempt to impose Urdu as the state language acted as a catalyst for East Bengali protest, in very much the same way as the 'partition' of Bengal in 1905 had done in *Swadeshi* Bengal, particularly among the *Bhadralok*. As the 'Language Movement', which demanded the recognition of 'Bangla' as the state language, starting from among the students, was brewing, a new party, the Awami League, was born under the aegis of Mowlana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani.<sup>67</sup> The movement assumed significant proportions after the police opened fire on student demonstrators on 21 February 1952, creating martyrs (*Ekushey*, literally 'twenty-first' February has been observed as 'language martyrs day' ever since). It now appeared that the 'Bengali' component of the East Bengali Muslims was under perceived threat.

Anti-Muslim League sentiments were now running high. Meanwhile the 'Zamindari Abolition Act' of 1951 eliminated the feudal class in East Bengal. These developments encouraged Fazlul Huq to revive his old KPP under the new name, 'Krishak *Sramik* Party' (Peasants Workers Party), which combined with the Awami League and others, formed the *Jukto Front* (United Front) that dislodged the Muslim League from the government in the 1954 provincial elections in East Bengal. The rejection of the Muslim League in East Bengal initiated a period of conflictual relations between the provincial and central governments. Once again, East Bengali Muslims were pitted against their north-western co-religionists.

The provincial government, now representing the more indigenous urges of the East Bengalis, became suspect in the eyes of the centre. Huq's coalition was short-lived, soon to be dismissed by the centre, ostensibly for his 'treasonable' views.<sup>68</sup> Not long afterwards, the United Front disintegrated and eventually the Awami League, which had left the Front in 1955, emerged as the party in power in East Bengal (East Pakistan since 1955). At the centre, after a period of instability, the Awami Leaguer, Suhrawardy, held the prime ministership for a period of 13 months in 1956-57.<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup> Gunnar Myrdal, *Asian Drama: An Enquiry into the Poverty of Nations*, Three Volumes, Vol. 2, New York: Pantheon, 1968, p. 318. Also for an analysis of the 'rising power of the bureaucracy' in Pakistan, see Hamid Yusuf *Pakistan: A Study of Political Developments 1947-97*, Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1999, pp. 36-37.

<sup>66</sup> In 1959, out of 690 senior civil servants, only 51 were East Pakistanis. See Ramkrishna Mukherjee, 'The Social Background of Bangladesh' in Kathleen Gough and Hari Sharma (eds), *Imperialism and Revolution in South Asia*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973, p. 419.

<sup>67</sup> M. Rashiduzzaman, 'The Awami League in the Political Development of Pakistan', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 10, No. 7, August 1970, p. 576. With the Muslim League in power, the Awami League was, therefore, the first major opposition party in East Bengal.

<sup>68</sup> After a closed door meeting with the Prime Minister in Karachi, Huq was said to have issued a statement that East Bengalis desired to be independent. *New York Times* 23 May 1954. Also, Huq was accused of making 'anti-Pakistani' remarks on a stopover in Calcutta during his travel.

<sup>69</sup> Around this time, Mowlana Bhashani left the Awami League in protest against the pro-western foreign policy and formed his own left-wing National Awami Party. M. Rashiduzzaman, 'The National Awami Party of Pakistan: Leftist politics in Crisis', *Pacific Affairs*, Vol XLIII, No. 3, Fall 1970, p. 395. Suhrawardy had justified his foreign policy on the grounds that sentiments aside 'zero plus zero equals zero', meaning that Muslim states were insufficient to 'offset Indian power'. Wayne Wilcox, Leo E. Rose, David Boyd

The Awami League, with its avowed policy of obtaining 'autonomy' for the regional units, was now caught between the horns of a dilemma by being in power in the centre as well.<sup>70</sup> It thus lay itself bare to the National Awami Party's criticism that it had failed to give 'autonomy' to the provinces.<sup>71</sup> Provincial autonomy became the major demand of both these parties who, henceforth, vied with each other with regard to its extent.

The imposition of martial law in October 1958 and the assumption of power by General Ayub Khan had significant impact in eroding the prospects of such autonomy. If legislative politics were allowed to run their course, it was likely that the Bengalis would have been able to achieve power in the polity as Bengali Muslims had done in pre-partition Bengal. It was in the representative institutions, now dissolved in Pakistan, where the Bengalis with their majority, could wield some clout. Now, in its place, the civil-military bureaucracy clearly emerged as the dominant ruling elite. The East Pakistanis, with their limited representation in this group, were clearly disadvantaged.<sup>72</sup>

To Samuel Huntington, Ayub had come close to filling the role of "a Solon, or Lycurgus or Great Legislator on the Platonic and Rousseauan model".<sup>73</sup> Though it is indeed true that major reforms were initiated by the regime during the martial law period, there was an unequal progress in different regions, creating an "imbalance which inevitably intensified Bengali alienation",<sup>74</sup> Ayub, in pursuance of a stated goal to take politics directly to the people, introduced a system of 'Basic Democracy', "the cornerstone" of his policy "which also proved to be its tombstone".<sup>75</sup> By this time, there was a rising middle class in the cities, particularly in Dacca and Chittagong, the new East Pakistani *Bhadralok*, now Muslims, unlike their earlier Calcutta counterparts, in many ways a product of the partition. The involvement of the rural masses by superseding them, as Ayub appeared to be doing, did not appeal to them. In fact, eventually, it was they who led the anti-Ayub movement in East Pakistan. By limiting franchise to the 'Basic Democrats', who were his creation, Ayub ensured his victory in the 1962 elections.

Throughout his term, Ayub had been in favour of reducing 'provincialism' to the 'minimum',<sup>76</sup> inevitably headed for a collision with the East Pakistanis. Though the 1965 war with India appeared to paper over these differences, in effect, it exacerbated them. The rising political star of East Pakistan, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (who as *Bangabandhu* or 'Friend of Bengal' was later to inspire the Bangladesh Liberation Movement in 1971), Suhrawardy's successor as Awami League leader after his death in 1963, was bitterly critical of the reliance on China for East Pakistan's defence and argued for self-sufficiency of his province in this respect.<sup>77</sup> Secondly, the closure of trade with India, especially West Bengal, was perceived to

---

(eds), *Asia and the International System*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Winthrop Publishers, 1972, pp. 100-1001.

<sup>70</sup> Shamoli Ghosh, *The Awami League in East Pakistan's Political Development*, New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru University, Unpublished M.Phil thesis, p. 16.

<sup>71</sup> *Pakistan Observer*, Dacca, 24 July 1957.

<sup>72</sup> In 1956, in the Pakistan Army, among 26 Major and Lieutenant Generals, there was not a single East Pakistani. *Dawn*, Karachi, 9 January 1956.

<sup>73</sup> Quoted in Laurence Ziring, *The Ayub Khan Era Politics in Pakistan 1958-59*, Syracuse University Press, 1971, pp. 1-2.

<sup>74</sup> Rounaq Jahan, *Pakistan: Failure in National Integration*, New York Columbia University Press, 1972, p. 6.

<sup>75</sup> Mushtaq Ahmed, *Politics without Social Change*, Karachi: Space Publishers, 1971, p. 48.

<sup>76</sup> Mohammed Ahmed, *My Chief*, Lahore: Longman's Green & Co., 1960, p. 89. Ayub's negative predilections for East Pakistanis come through clearly in his personal diaries, published in 2007 long after his death.

<sup>77</sup> D. N. Bannerjee, *East Pakistan: A Case study in Muslim Politics*, Calcutta: Vikas Publications, 1969, p. 152.

have been detrimental to East Pakistan's interests, for the province was seen to have been rendered into a closed market for West Pakistani products.<sup>78</sup> Thirdly, West Pakistan's sharp reaction to the 'Tashkent Declaration' of January 1966 that formally ended the Indo-Pakistan hostilities through Soviet mediation was not shared by the Bengalis who felt they had more to lose from the continuation of the belligerency.<sup>79</sup>

The feeling that the East Pakistanis had a set of interests distinct from that of West Pakistan, intensified and culminated in Mujibur's 'Six-Point Programme' announced in Lahore in February 1966.<sup>80</sup> The central government reacted by charging Mujibur with sedition, in what was known as the 'Agartala Conspiracy Case', and jailed him. This led to violent protests in East Pakistan. The protesters were able to secure Mujibur's release. The events catapulted Mujibur into the position of East Pakistan's foremost and undisputed leader.

A combined movement against Ayub in both wings of Pakistan resulted in his resignation in 1969 and the assumption of his mantle by the commander-in-chief of the army, General Yahya Khan. Yahya promised elections on a 'one-man one-vote' and adult franchise basis to an assembly that was to frame a new constitution for Pakistan. However, he foreclosed the proposed assembly's options by issuing a Legal Framework Order (LFO) that was to guide the constitution-making. This purported to ensure: a) Islamic ideology; b) territorial integrity; c) independence of the judiciary; d) the federal principle; and e) full opportunity of participation in government of all regions. Also, the new constitution would have to be authenticated by the President (that is, Yahya himself).<sup>81</sup> Clearly, now that the passage of power to the demographically superior Bengalis was almost certain, steps were being taken to preserve and protect West Pakistani interests by the entrenched interests in the centre. Mujibur's Awami League found the LFO 'restrictive', but nevertheless decided to participate in the forthcoming elections announced for 1970.<sup>82</sup>

In the elections, the Awami League won 167 out of 168 East Pakistani seats in the national assembly. In West Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) secured 85 seats, by far the largest number in that wing. Neither party won any seats in the other wing. By the logic of parliamentary politics, Mujibur was ready to become prime minister. However, this was not to be. The demographic and political majority once again could not be translated into political power. William Barnds points out that the elections demonstrated that Pakistan was 'two separate polities' – on the one hand, there was Awami League in East Pakistan with its advocacy of normalising relations with India, provincial autonomy and

---

<sup>78</sup> Most manufacturing industries were located in West Pakistan, while East Pakistan was largely agricultural. More on this later in the paper.

<sup>79</sup> *Holiday*, Dacca, 6 February 1966. Also *The Economist*, London, 21 May 1966.

<sup>80</sup> Briefly, the salient features of the 'Six Points' were demands for 1) a Federal Constitution and Parliamentary form of government with the supremacy of Legislature directly elected by universal adult franchise; 2) only two subjects, Defence and Foreign Affairs, to be dealt with by the centre and the residuary subjects by the provinces; 3) either two separate but freely convertible currencies for the two wings, or one currency to be maintained with effective constitutional provisions to check flight of capital from East to West Pakistan, in which case Separate Banking Reserves to be created and separate fiscal and monetary policies to be adopted for East Pakistan; 4) powers of taxation and revenue collection to vest in the federating units; 5) two separate accounts of foreign exchange earnings of the two wings, with the earnings of each wing under its control with the requirements of the centre being met either equally or in a ratio to be fixed; and 6) a militia or a para-military force for East Pakistan. See *Bangladesh Contemporary Events and Documents*, Dhaka: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, u. d., pp.16-28.

<sup>81</sup> Rashiduzzaman, *Awami League in the Political Development of Pakistan*, op. cit., p. 586.

<sup>82</sup> *Bangladesh: Contemporary Events and Documents*, op. cit., p. 56.

moderate socialism; and on the other hand, there was the PPP in the west with its manifesto of extreme socialisation, a harsh anti-Indian policy, and a stronger central government.<sup>83</sup>

Mujibur and Bhutto fell out on the 'Six-Point' issue, and taking advantage of this, Yahya postponed *sine die*, the scheduled national assembly session on 1 March 1970, thereby also indefinitely delaying Mujibur's assumption of office as prime minister and power. This triggered off a mass movement in East Pakistan where Mujibur was in virtual control of almost all segments of public life. A well known Bengali economist, Rehman Sobhan, wrote:

Yahya's decision on 1 March to save Bhutto's crumbling position in the West by postponing the assembly session *sine die* brought to the surface the fear that had been dormant in Bengal since the successful completion of the elections that the generals never really wanted to transfer power.<sup>84</sup>

Yahya initiated tripartite negotiations with Mujibur and Bhutto on 15 March 1971 which ended with the military crackdown and the arrest of Mujibur on the night following 25 March 1971.<sup>85</sup> The war for a sovereign Bangladesh began and a declaration of independence was made in Chittagong by Major Ziaur Rahman (later to be the President of Bangladesh in 1977, and founder of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party [BNP]). Sovereignty was achieved with Indian assistance in December that year, and the identity of Bangladesh was established as a distinct international entity.

Thus, within the structure of Pakistan, while political developments as analysed above fanned the nationalist sentiments of the Bengalis, a deep sense of economic deprivation provided added fuel. There were, first, complaints about the comparative minimal share of central government expenditure for East Pakistan. Despite comprising 56 percent of the population of Pakistan, the East's share of central development expenditure over the First Five-Year Plan period (1951-1955) was only 20 percent. There was an upward trend in the plans to follow but even during the Third-Plan Period (1965-1970) it did not exceed 36 percent with private investments being less than 25 percent.<sup>86</sup>

Secondly, only a small percentage of the total quantum of foreign aid was disbursed in East Pakistan. For instance, the bulk of the US\$3 billion received from the United States was spent in the western wing.<sup>87</sup>

Thirdly, East Pakistan economists pointed to a massive transfer of resources from the eastern to the western wing since the partition in 1947. One group suggested a figure of 31,120 million Rupees.<sup>88</sup> A. R. Khan, a prominent Bangladeshi economist, has argued that the rural

---

<sup>83</sup> William J. Barnds, 'Pakistan's Disintegration', *World Today*, Vol. 27, 1971, p. 321.

<sup>84</sup> Rehman Sobhan, 'Negotiations for Bangladesh: A Participant's View', *South Asian Review*, Vol. 4, No. 4, July 1971, p. 319.

<sup>85</sup> For details of the negotiations, see *Ibid*, pp. 315-326. Also, for a different view, see G. W. Choudhury, *The Last Days of United Pakistan*, London: C. Hurst & Co., 1974, pp. 161-179.

<sup>86</sup> *Report of the Advisory Panels for the Fourth Five Year Plan 1970-1975*, Islamabad Planning Commission, Government of Pakistan, Vol. 1, July 1970, p. 6.

<sup>87</sup> See M. A. Sattar, *United States Aid and Pakistan's Economic Development*, Unpublished PhD dissertation, Tufts University, 1969.

<sup>88</sup> *Report of the Advisory Panels for the Fourth Five Year Plan*, *op. cit.*, p. 75. This panel was chaired by an East Pakistani economist, Professor Nurul Islam Faaland, and Parkinson however contends that this figure almost nearly represents the upper limit but nevertheless agrees that the transfer was considerable. They suggest a figure between Rs15,000 million and Rs 30,000 million, which in terms of US dollars, range from

population of East Pakistan was 'subjected to high rate of primitive capital accumulation which was transferred to finance growth of West Pakistan capitalism and industrialisation.'<sup>89</sup>

Fourthly, there was discontent regarding what was perceived to be internal colonialism<sup>90</sup> perpetrated in East Pakistan by the western wing. This was seen to assume three principal forms – a) utilising East Pakistan's cash crops, mainly jute but also tea as the major foreign exchange earner and awarding that province only 25-30 percent of the total imports; b) penetration of West Pakistan-based industry into East Pakistan to exploit its raw materials and cheap labour; and c) use of East Pakistan as 'a market for the mother country's manufactures'.<sup>91</sup> These perceptions were not limited to the intelligentsia and the economists. It was also shared by other members of the newly-emerging East Bengali *Bhadralok*, including senior government officials.<sup>92</sup>

Partha Chatterjee has argued that "when there is a perceptible uneven development within the political boundaries of a nation state" and "the lines of division between the developed and backward regions are perceived along the lines of division of the ethno-cultural communities of nationality", the result is "the growth of separatist national movements".<sup>93</sup> Michael Hechter has concluded that ethnic solidarity will be bred in groups relegated to inferior cultural and economic positions.<sup>94</sup> That has been the case with the growth of the consciousness of the distinctive identity of the Bengali Muslims through the colonial period of the British Raj as well as through the Pakistan experiment, springing from a "sense of alienation...aggravated and strengthened by the awareness of economic differences but with the root in political and cultural discontinuities".<sup>95</sup> As this era drew to a close, the Bengali middle classes, the emerging new *Bhadralok*, were "ready and willing to accept the newly fashioned...materially more tolerant social philosophy of a modern secular, territorial

---

US\$1.5 billion to US\$3 billion. Just Faaland and J. R. Parkinson, *Bangladesh: A Test Case for Development* (Dacca: The University press Ltd., 1976), pp. 7-8. The figures, though not the substance, was also contested by another panel, chaired by a West Pakistani economist, Dr Pervez Hassan.

<sup>89</sup> Azizur Rahman Khan, *The Economy of Bangladesh*, London: MacMillan, 1972, p. 29.

<sup>90</sup> This term connotes a process of domination and exploitation of one ethnic group by another within the same country. See, Zillur Rahman Khan, 'Leadership, Parties, and Politics in Bangladesh', *Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. XXIX (1976), p. 102.

<sup>91</sup> Feroz Ahmed, 'The Structural Matrix of the Struggle in Bangladesh', in Gough and Sharma (eds), *Imperialism and Revolution in South Asia*, Karachi: Monthly Review Press, 1973, p. 423.

<sup>92</sup> The current Finance Minister of the Awami League-led Government in Bangladesh, and then senior Civil Servant, M. A. Muhith, had observed, "Through a system of tight control of trade a colonial relationship was established between the two regions. The policy of industrialization followed in West Pakistan demanded heavy import of capital goods, spares and industrial raw materials, foreign aid and export earnings of the country were utilized to meet these demands. The products of these industries were marketed in Bangladesh under heavy protective cover. The export earnings of Bangladesh and its large market were harnessed for the development of West Pakistan's industries. Even in the import of consumer goods, West Pakistan was given preferential treatment. By depressing consumption in Bangladesh and raising unduly excessive revenues from these, the claims of Bangladesh were neutralized". A. M. A. Muhith, *Bangladesh: The Emergence of a Nation*, Dacca: Bangladesh Books International Ltd., 1978, p. 90.

<sup>93</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *Stability and Change in the Indian Political System*, Calcutta: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, unpublished, p. 8. The eventual dismemberment of Yugoslavia in Europe in the 1990s is a good example.

<sup>94</sup> Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536-1966*, London Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975, *passim*.

<sup>95</sup> W. H. Morris-Jones, 'Pakistan Post-Mortem and the Roots of Bangladesh', *The Political Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 2, 1972, p. 192.



nationalism bred on, language and culture”,<sup>96</sup> though these values also faced challenges as the future unfolded.

## Conclusion

Thus, the “justification for Bangladesh’s political independence from Pakistan and (earlier) India...was to be found in the identity of the nation-state as both Bengali and Muslim”.<sup>97</sup> There was, thus, this “duality of heritage”<sup>98</sup> that, among other things, contributed to shaping the external behaviour of Bangladesh. Historically then, what is now the Bangladesh nation evolved through its having to deal with the West Bengali Hindu community, now a part of India, and their fellow Muslims in the rest of South Asia, most of the latter eventually assuming the form of Pakistan. It had taken three ‘partitions’ to reach this point – ‘Partition Mark I’ in 1905 when East Bengal was hived off from Bengal and connected to Assam; ‘Partition Mark II’ in 1947 when East Bengal was once again separated from West Bengal, this time to create Pakistan; and finally ‘Partition Mark III’ when East Bengal or East Pakistan was bifurcated from West Pakistan, leading to the birth of a sovereign and independent state, Bangladesh.

After experience had indicated a distinct set of interests for Bengali Muslims, their basic strategy in countering threat perceptions from one community was to seek an alliance with the other. The perceived threats were seen to be to one or the other of their attributes – to their *Bengaliness* or to their *Muslimness*. These two streams of their nationhood found political expression in the two political parties that currently dominate the national scene – the Awami League, led by the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, assassinated in 1975, Sheikh Hasina, which emphasises the former ethos, and the BNP, led by Begum Khaleda Zia, the widow of President Ziaur Rahman, assassinated in 1981.

Despite the fact that the relationship between the two ladies, who have alternated in leading the government remains volatile to say the least, the ideological divide is perhaps more in nuances than in substance. It is difficult to place the contemporary Bangladeshi “in rigidly separate boxes, linked with religion or community”.<sup>99</sup> Thanks to a Socratic or an argumentative intellectual tradition that often delights in challenging received wisdom, developed through decades of having to protect its flanks, the average Bangladeshi tends to be moderate and tolerant, though extremist fringes are not non-existent. The political presence of far-right non-secular elements such as the *Jamaat-e-Islami* was reduced to minimal in the elections of December 2007 when it managed to secure only two seats in the Parliament.

Importantly, Bangladesh is now a ‘sated’ or ‘satisfied’ nation, secure in the knowledge that neither of its two attributes of *Muslimness* or *Bengaliness* is being seriously threatened by external actors or elements, given the country’s sovereign status. It is, therefore, well poised to play a constructive role as a bridge-builder in regional politics as it did when it initiated the

---

<sup>96</sup> Mizanur Rahman, *Emergence of a New Nation in a Multi-Polar World: Bangladesh*, Durham, North Carolina: University Press of America, 1978, p. 132.

<sup>97</sup> Naureen Chowdhury Fink, *On the Borderlines: Politics, Religion and Violence in Bangladesh*, New York: International Peace Academy, 2009, forthcoming, p. 1.

<sup>98</sup> Ali Riaz, “God Willing”: The Politics and Ideology of Islamism in Bangladesh, Project Muse, Chicago: *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, 23: 1 & 2, 2003, p. 2.

<sup>99</sup> For an interesting study of multi-dimensional identities, see a report by a Committee chaired by Amartya Sen, *Civil Paths to Peace: Report of the Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding*, London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 2007.

concept of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation in the late 1970s.<sup>100</sup> This has been the major impact of its historical experience on Bangladesh's state behaviour. Not surprisingly, it has an extremely vibrant civil society which has given birth to concepts such as 'micro-credit' and 'non-formal education' for women that are being widely replicated in many parts of the world. Indeed, there was great national jubilation when, in 2006, Professor Mohammed Yunus and his 'Grameen Bank' received the Nobel Peace Prize, for somehow they were also seen to be representing 'essential Bangladesh values' associated with social advancement and poverty alleviation. It is also well recognised that 'female empowerment is a reality in Bangladesh'.<sup>101</sup> These features of Bangladesh, that have helped it secure a modicum of societal stability, are its assets. However, the challenges to this nation of 150 million people with a per capita income of US\$690,<sup>102</sup> in terms of poverty and underdevelopment, are also legion. The manner in which these are tackled by its leadership and people will determine and define Bangladesh's role in rising Asia.

oooOOOooo

---

<sup>100</sup> For an insight into Bangladesh's behaviour pattern in South Asia, see Iftekhar A. Chowdhury, 'Strategy of a Small Power in A Sub-System: Bangladesh's External Relations, *Australian Outlook*, April 1980, Vol. 34., No.1, pp. 85-98.

<sup>101</sup> Farooq Sobhan, 'Bangladesh: The Present Situation and Future Outlook,' in Tan Tai Yong (ed), *Socio-Political and Economic Challenges in South Asia*, Singapore: SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd, 2009, p. 97. Women in Bangladesh are the main beneficiaries of micro-credit and 'non-formal education' schemes. Also Bangladesh is a major producer of ready-made garments, and this industry and other NGOs (non-government organisations) employ more than 14 million women.

<sup>102</sup> *The Daily Star*, 11 May 2009.