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A Partition of Contingency? Public Discourse in Bengal, 1946-47

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Abstract

The historiography on the Partition of Bengal has tended to see it as a culmination of long term trends Hindu and Muslim communalism within the province. This essay offers a counter narrative to the ‘inevitability’ of the Partition by focusing on Bengali public discourse in the months leading up to the Partition. The possibility of a division generated a large-scale debate amongst the educated in Bengal and they articulated their views by sending numerous letters to leading newspapers, district political and civic organizations and sometimes published pamphlets for local consumption. A critical examination of this public debate for and against Partition reveals the countdown to August 1947 as a period of multiple possibilities. Understanding the genesis provides the starting point and the necessary corrective to evaluate India’s path to post –colonial nationhood.

Introduction

On 23 April 1947, the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, a widely read English language nationalist newspaper published from Calcutta, featured the results of a Gallup poll on the issue of partitioning Bengal. In reply to the *Patrika*'s question "Do you want a separate homeland for Bengal Hindus?" an overwhelming 98.3% Bengalis voted in favor, and 0.6% voted against the division of the province.¹ The newspaper reported that of the 99.6% Hindus and 0.4% Muslims who had replied to the poll, most had voted in favor of a division. The *Patrika* claimed the results of the opinion poll were evidence of the Bengali people's verdict favoring the partitioning of the province.²

Why did most of the respondents of the poll favor the partitioning of the province and what were the different calculations behind those who argued for and against the partition? More importantly, what did Partition mean to its advocates and its critics and how did these multiple meanings frame their expectations towards the future of Bengal and India? This article examines the answers to these critical questions and challenges the established narratives of Partition that see the event as a culmination of Hindu and Muslim communal politics. Rather, this article offers a counter narrative which highlights political contingency, where the countdown to August 1947 figures as a moment of multiple possibilities. It argues that far from being characteristic of a consensus within

¹ *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (henceforth, *ABP*), 23 April 1947, 1, 5. The newspaper published its intentions of conducting a Gallup Poll to ascertain "as far as possible, public opinion on the question of proposed partition of Bengal for the creation of a separate homeland for Bengal Hindus" on March 23 1947. The polls closed on 15 April 1947, and the results were published on 23 April. To maintain the credibility of the poll, the paper also published comments in support from Surendra Mohan Ghosh, the president of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, and the reputed Calcutta based chartered accountant company of Messrs. Gupta and Mitra.

² Scholars have argued that that this particular poll was a indicative of the communalization of the Bengali bhadralok public opinion and was part of wider organized campaign towards the partitioning of the province. See Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 240-41.

Bengali public opinion on the eve of Partition, the poll was only one of many opinions that framed a range of conceptions about the future of the Indian, Pakistani and Bengali nations.

This essay focuses on the public debates surrounding the Partition issue, in the months between February 20 1947 when the British government announced its intentions to transfer power to India³ till June 20 when the Bengal Legislative Assembly voted in favor of partitioning Bengal and in favor of the western half joining the Indian Union. The announcement's intentionality belied the uncertainty it generated in people's minds about its implementation. These four months were marked by complete political confusion as elite politics entered into a mercurial decision making process regarding the conditions and the nature of such a withdrawal.⁴ A cartoon in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* published in May 1947, graphically captured the doubts and confusion in people's minds.⁵ Titled, "Who is Right?" it showed four key public and political figures, H. S. Suhrawardy, Shyamaprasad Mookerjee, the leader of the Hindu Mahasabha, M. A. Jinnah, and M. K. Gandhi each with a placard with their supposed propositions. Thus Suhrawardy holds "United Bengal in Divided India," Mookerjee "Divided Bengal in United India," Jinnah "Divided Bengal in Divided India," and Gandhi holds up a sign

³ On Feb 20, 1947, Clement Attlee declared the intention of the British government to withdraw from India by June 1948.

⁴ Fueled by the publication of the *Transfer of Power* Papers, historical scholarship on the endgames of empire and the Partition began to emerge from the 1970s. For varied empirical analyses on the causes of Partition, see Anita Inder Singh, *The Origins of Partition of India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987); David Page, *Prelude to Partition, Indian Muslims and the Imperial System of Control* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press 1982); Robin Moore, *Escape from Empire: The Attlee Government and the Indian Problem* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983); Ajit Bhattacharjea, *Countdown to Partition, The Final Days* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 1997).

⁵ See Appendix I.

with “United Bengal in United India.”⁶ The cartoon clearly indicated the high level disagreements about India and Bengal’s political future. The leaders were depicted as picketing in front of an invisible higher power which suggested a certain powerlessness. More importantly, it suggested to its readers the possibility that they could have the power to decide which of these leaders had the ‘right’ interests for Bengalis and India. In reality, such decisions were to be taken behind closed-door negotiations far away from Bengal.

The Congress Working Committee announced on March 8, 1947 that in the event that India was partitioned, such a partition would entail a division of Bengal and Punjab. This announcement, in the backdrop of the riots of 1946, implicitly signaled to the residents of these provinces that Partition might be imminent if not inevitable.

Uncertainties about the political future of Bengal became the central feature of public debates as Bengalis began to write in their opinion for and against the Partition to leading newspapers and send petitions to their local political and civic organizations. Newspapers, journals, pamphlets offered the discursive and representational space which constituted a ‘common space’⁷ a public sphere where these Bengalis hoped to discuss and disseminate their ideas on the Partition and hoped to build a larger consensus. However, public opinion on the Partition operated within a partially realized public sphere, where the case for and against Partition was often formed in political and civic groups or individually and then presented within the common space accessible to the readers of the

⁶ *ABP*, 6 May 1947, 5.

⁷ Here I follow Charles Taylor’s formulation of the public sphere as a ‘common space,’ where members of society interact through a variety of media and where anyone may enter with views on the common good, issues that potentially concern everybody. Charles Taylor, “Liberal Politics and the Public Sphere,” in his *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 259.

print medium. The poll in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* is a case in point. Neither the issue of Partition nor the question put forward in the poll had its origins in the public. The newspaper framed the question that affected and limited the ways in which the public could answer it. Further, the poll results accrued from individuals who arrived at a particular conclusion without any public debate. However, it was after the poll results were published that we see evidence of a full-fledged emergence of divergent public opinion, which deliberated and discussed the issue of Partition through publicly accessible print mediums.

The newspapers and journals helped to provide what Charles Taylor calls ‘meta-topical’ spaces, where people separated by space and unknown to each other expressed shared aims, in this case the political future of Bengal.⁸ Letters, opinion pieces, editorials and regular cartoons in leading newspapers and journals in Bengal such as the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, *Hindustan Standard* and the *Ananda Bazar Patrika* and the *Modern Review*⁹ constituted and contributed to such a ‘meta-topical’ space but were also indicative of a specific colonial public sphere which was intrinsically fragmented and polyvalent.¹⁰ These newspapers, published mainly in English¹¹ were widely circulated.

⁸ Ibid., 263.

⁹ Another leading newspaper, the British owned *The Statesman*, received fewer comments from its readers on the issue of Partition, most probably due to its perceived connections with the colonial state.

¹⁰ Neeladri Bhattacharya points out the limitations of the applicability of Jurgen Habermas’s formulations of the modern public sphere in the case of colonial India and has outlined a distinctive set of characteristics for the colonial public sphere in India. Neeladri Bhattacharya, “Notes Towards a Conception of the Colonial Public,” in Rajeev Bhargava and Helmut Reifeld ed. *Civil Society, Public Sphere and Citizenship: Dialogues and Perceptions* (New Delhi: Sage, 2005), 130-56. Also see, Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989)

¹¹ Writing on the state of the Indian Press in 1952, A D Mani provided a number of reasons why English continued to be language of choice for leading English newspapers. Among them were the speed of typesetting in English, dependence of foreign advertisements that were often in English and the reliance on

Moreover, they were associated with and were representative of mainly moderate 'nationalist' viewpoints. The authors who wrote in these newspapers were mainly urban, English-educated and situated in both Eastern and Western Bengal. Some of them had ties to political organizations such as the All India Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha and some of them had been prominent political figures as assemblymen and bureaucrats in the colonial state.¹² A large number of these writers were also intellectuals, businessmen, and landlords within little ties with the political machinery. Their arguments for and against Partition imbricated community interests with appeals towards public good and *national* good. Even as they aimed to build a larger consensus for their respective positions, their arguments reiterated their differences and in hindsight, failed to persuade. However, as Neeladri Bhattacharya as urged, such failures characterize the modern public sphere just as much as the hegemonic politics of consensus building.¹³ A critical analysis of the public debates in Bengal thus reveals a remarkable range of contestations between territorial nationalism and the imagined community that defined the Indian nation and itself primarily by its non-inclusion within the prospective Pakistan.

This essay is divided into three sections that examine the Bengali public discourse in the wake of momentous political decision made in Delhi. The first two sections showcase the difference within petitions that would, at least superficially, seem to have the same objective, i.e. the partition of Bengal. While some petitions were couched within rhetoric for a 'Hindu' nation, others were framed within a 'need' for 'nationalist'

telegraphic communication which used the Roman alphabet. A. D. Mani, "The Indian Press Today," in *The Far Eastern Survey*, Vol. 21, No. 11 (July 2, 1952) p. 109-113.

¹² Taylor identifies the modern public sphere as characteristically independent of any exercise of political and state power. In this sense, the Bengali public sphere and public opinion within it was not essentially extra-political. Charles Taylor, "The Public Sphere," 265.

¹³ Neeladri Bhattacharya, "Notes Towards a Conception of the Colonial Public," 155.

India. Such a 'need' was often framed within secondary prerequisites of economic stability, territorial jurisdiction and organic unity with the soon-to-be new nation state of India. The last section examines the demand of those who voiced their opinion against any kind of partition but were divided on whether united Bengal should join the prospective India, Pakistan or become a nation state itself.

Several scholars have attempted to identify the political and cultural processes that led to the Partition. In the case of Bengal, Suranjan Das's monograph on communal riots in Bengal and Joya Chatterji's work on Hindu communalism argue a case for Partition within the paradigm of a communal-national binary. Das provides a uni-linear trajectory between Muslim 'communalism', which in his view, resulted in the riots of 1946 and ultimately the Partition. Joya Chatterji attributes a central role to elite Bengali Hindus in spearheading the campaign that led to the fateful division of the province in 1947. She argues that the public demands for partition and a separate "homeland for Bengali Hindus" on eve of partition reflected the end result of a decisive shift "from nationalism to communalism" that had marked Bengal politics and identity from the 1930s.¹⁴ Having identified the main actors in the promotion of Hindu communalism, she then makes the problematic leap to make the case for all Bengali Hindus who in her view were not "passive bystanders."¹⁵ Both Das and Chatterji's work fall within the trap of

¹⁴ Chatterji traces the proliferation of communalism in Bengal thus, "Nationalism was directed against imperialism and gave top priority to anti-British action. The communalism of the *bhadralok* was directed against their fellow Bengalis. History for the one was the struggle against British liberation from the despotism of Muslims. Its key political objective was to prevent this 'despotism' from returning when the British left India, and to deny that Muslims could be Bengalis, and by extension Indians." Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition*, 268.

¹⁵ In an attempt to provide agency to the colonized, Chatterji argues, "Bengalis were not passive bystanders in the partition of their province; nor were they victims of circumstances entirely out of their control, forced reluctantly to accept the division of their 'motherland'. On the contrary, a large number of

teleology as they seek to explain final dénouement in August 1947 as a result of communal fratricide. More importantly, such analyses erase alternative possibilities in the political and public realm that existed at this time.

That provincial politics in Bengal after the Communal Award of 1932 shifted towards mass mobilization along communal lines cannot be denied. Scholars have drawn attention to the unique political and demographic landscape of Bengal in the 1930s that ensured an easy conflation between ‘class’ and ‘community’ within mass mobilization efforts of Hindu and Muslim leaders.¹⁶ The politics of representation also incorporated issues of peasant rights and freedom from Hindu landlord domination and the cultural flowering of Muslims who could and did re-invent the struggle of their identity within and outside the national movement.¹⁷ However, a critical distinction needs to be made between communitarian struggles of non-elite social groups in which religion played an important organization role and the communal mobilizations within provincial politics informed by colonial constructions of politically representative religious groups.¹⁸ In the context of Bengali nationalism, Sugata Bose has noted that religion and religious symbols had always informed the cultural identities of both Hindu and Muslim nationalists and had played a crucial role in garnering support of the masses and elite alike against

Hindus of Bengal, backed up by the provincial branches of the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha, campaigned intensively in 1947 for the partition of Bengal inside an Indian Union.” Ibid. 227.

¹⁶ Taj ul Hashmi, *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia, The Communalization of Class Politics in East Bengal 1920-1947* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992).

¹⁷ Partha Chatterjee, “Agrarian Relations and Communalism in Bengal, 1926-35”, in Ranajit Guha ed. *Subaltern Studies Vol. 1*. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982).

¹⁸ Sugata Bose, *The New Cambridge History of India, Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 142.

colonial rule.¹⁹ Further, as Partha Chatterjee rightly argues, Muslim politics in Bengal remained circumscribed as they failed to draw the support of the Hindu minority in Bengal.²⁰

Given these significant characteristics of Bengal politics, the arguments for the centrality of communalism that led to Partition are difficult to accept. Clearly, even within the immediate context of the Partition debates one finds public opinion far from being framed along rigidly communal lines. Partition's 'inevitability' is belied by the existence of multiple discourses on the issue of the division. Further, even after June 20th, when the Bengal legislative assembly sealed the deal by voting in favor of Partition, it is difficult to identify an overtly communal tone within the public demands which now concentrated in translating their demands for territory along cultural, economic and linguistic lines.

In contrast to Joya Chatterji's argument for the participation of the Bengali *bhadralok* in deciding the fate of their province, Partha Chatterjee has correctly pointed out that the Bengal assemblymen, whose election had been determined on the basis of limited representation, took the final decision. Chatterjee further describes stances taken by political leaders and organizations within Bengal as contingent and strategic and that "positions were being taken on the assumption that Pakistan was in the offing, that there was nothing left to be done to change that eventuality and that all that remained was to

¹⁹ Sugata Bose, "Between Monolith and Fragment: A Note on Historiography of Nationalism in Bengal" in Sekhar Bandyopadhyaya, ed., *Bengal: Rethinking History, Essays in Historiography* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001), 288.

²⁰ This was due to the continuation of League politics in Bengal as politics of the minority even while they were a majority within the province. Partha Chatterjee, "The Second Partition of Bengal," in his *The Present History of West Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 36.

strike the best bargain for each sectional interest,”²¹ for Bengalis belonging to different religions and castes. In terms of the Bengali public opinion, one senses similar factors influencing the stands printed in the leading newspapers and self-published pamphlets. I would like to suggest that the debates for and against Partition were neither small scale nor do they reflect an acknowledgement of political powerlessness to influence the course of events. Although the pleas and demands on the Partition issue were addressed to an external authority, as Chatterjee suggests, the continuation of these pleas till the very end imply that these Bengalis believed themselves as crucial cogs in generating public consensus and thereby hopefully influence high-level decisions. The authors of these letters, articles and pamphlets were Partition’s bit players, who, in reality were powerless to control their political destiny, but remained confident of their ability to influence the outcome of their political futures. They were representative of a specific Bengali civil society, albeit a limited one.

The Need for ‘Nationalist’ India

Between February and June 1947, representations from political units such as the Municipal and Union Boards, civil groups like District Bar Associations and Zamindars Associations, and local clubs flooded the offices of the Hindu Mahasabha and the AICC voicing their demands for Partition.²² A front-page cartoon in the *Hindustan Standard* depicted the Viceroy being overwhelmed by nearly 10, 000 telegrams demanding the

²¹ Ibid., 38.

²² File: G-54/1947, Part I, AICC Papers, NMML, New Delhi.

Partition of Bengal.²³ In fact, one Purna Chandra Chandra, a Calcutta resident, wrote to the editor of the leading Bengali daily, *Ananda Bazar Patrika* suggesting that its readers send at least ten telegrams per day to the Viceroy to inform him of their support for the Partition.²⁴ Most of these petitions asked for the formation of a separate province of West Bengal that would remain within the Indian Union. The demand for partitioning the province spread to the districts and *mofussil* towns as Calcutta based newspapers continuously printed local resolutions. While some framed their petition within demands to safeguard “the lives, properties, honor and culture of the Hindus and other minorities,”²⁵ other resolutions argued that their demand for partition was in keeping with the nationalist core of Bengal and India.²⁶

The aim of creating a ‘homeland’ for the Bengali Hindus was by no means the only reason for the advocacy of the partition of the province. Neither does one see the primacy of specifically ‘communal’ overtones within the articulation of those who were in support of the division. In fact, several readers of the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* wrote in their protest against the limitations of the poll question. D. N Mukherjee, a member of the Bengal legislative assembly pointed out “the term of reference given by you does not cover all the grounds for such a partition. Many of us think that Partition is needed not so

²³ *The Hindustan Standard* (henceforth *HS*), 17 May 1947, 1. See Appendix II.

²⁴ *Ananda Bazar Patrika* (henceforth *ANBP*), 26 April 1947, 9.

²⁵ Resolution passed by Hindu citizens of Rajshahi. Most newspapers like *HS* and *ABP* published such resolutions, which ranged from district political organizations to neighborhood meetings of non-Muslim residents of the area. *HS*, May 23, 1947, 7.

²⁶ For instance, Muktagachi, a municipality in Mymensingh in eastern Bengal, passed a resolution by municipal commissioners who belonged to both communities. It noted, “in consideration of the present situation of the country and the move taken by the nationalist Bengal, the Partition of Bengal has been essentially necessary in order to frame a constitution or free and nationalist India.” File: G-54/1947, Part I AICC Papers, April-May 1947, NMML, New Delhi.

much for providing a homeland for the Hindus as for remaining united to the Indian Union.”²⁷ According to Mukherjee, the present debate about dividing the province was really a non-issue as such a division would ensure that India remained united and provide the opportunity to those ‘nationalist’ citizens to remain within its territorial borders. The theme of ‘unity’ was echoed by another reader of the *Patrika*, Sakti Ranjan Bose of Calcutta who argued, “our ambition is not to create a separate homeland for Hindus but to increase the territories under the Indian Union. Why we want a separate state in the West is not because the majority is Hindu but because the majority population would like to form itself in a state which is connected to the center.”²⁸ For these members of the Bengali bhadralok, Partition was explained in terms of a *historical necessity*, which would ensure a continued association with the national imagination.

Hemanta K Sarkar, the General Secretary of the provincial committee of the Azad Hind Fauj²⁹, identified the aims and objects of the movement for a Hindu homeland as not communal. Rather, it was in accordance with the ideal of Hindu Muslim unity in order to achieve complete independence of India. “We propose to fall in line with the rest of nationalist India to achieve that object by separating west Bengal as a province where the nationalist forces from all over Bengal may rally and strive instead of being throttled by a reactionary communal government in present Bengal conspiring to wipe out our very existence. Our aim is to create one more province in addition to the already

²⁷ *ABP*, March 28, 1947, 4.

²⁸ *ABP*, March 30, 1947, 8.

²⁹ The Azad Hind Fauj or the Indian National Army was formed in 1942 under the leadership of Subhas Chandra Bose. The main aim was a military overthrow of the British Government.

numerous provinces of India the oneness of which remains as before.”³⁰ Interestingly, Sarkar’s statement went against the anti-Partition stance of the organization.

Veteran Congress leaders such as Nalini Ranjan Sarkar and Kiran Sankar Roy, both originally hailing from eastern Bengal but had made their political career in Calcutta, publicly voiced their reasons for supporting the movement. In a series of public lectures and essays in major newspapers, Nalini Ranjan Sarkar, a veteran of the 1905 anti-Partition movement, assured those Hindus who would surely become part of Pakistan in the event of the division that, “In a divided Bengal those Hindus who might be left in East Bengal should have this satisfaction that West Bengal as a separate province would be there as a safe home for Hindu culture and economic interests.”³¹ Using the metaphor that the Bengali Hindus were “living in a house on fire,” Sarkar dissociated the call for Partition as a consequence of the Cabinet Mission Plan and stressed that the demand was due to intrinsic problems within the Bengal body politic. “The Hindus have been forced into this position by extreme circumstances” whose roots lay in the ‘communal administration’ of the Bengal Muslim League. He then described in detail the “separatist tendencies” not only in the field of political representation but also in fields such as education and trade and industry. He emphasized that,

If the present policy of the League in Bengal had undergone a real change and in accordance with that change a constitution was evolved which made it possible for all sections of people to be imbued with the idea of a common citizenship overriding communal distinctions and thereby ruling out any communal

³⁰ *ABP*, 19 January 1947, 4.

³¹ Nalini Ranjan Sarkar, “Partition Demand not outcome of Cabinet Mission Plan,” *ABP*, 15 March 1947, 4.

domination, then indeed I believe the Hindus of Bengal would not think it necessary to press for a divided Bengal.³²

Thus the demand for Partition, from Sarkar's point of view had little to do with "saving one's religion" but was a necessary step towards achieving the "nationalist" goals of Bengal. Similarly, Kiran Sankar Roy, in a forty-page memorandum to the British Prime Minister and Secretary of State, drafted by Bengal Congress party, charged the League administration of corruption, discrimination against Hindus and the cause for the general retrogression in the province.³³ In addition it held the League singularly responsible for "spreading the virus of communalism" in Bengal's politics and culture. Although Kiran Sankar was a partial advocate of the United Bengal Movement promoted by Sarat Bose, Abul Hashim and Suhrawardy, he, like other members of Bengal Congress, ultimately argued in terms of the political necessity for Partition to ensure the survival of the Indian nation.

Those who had hitherto been against the partitioning of the province in April 1947 began to see it as a necessary evil and to similarly justify it in terms of historical necessity. Using several biological metaphors of "canker" for Pakistan that needed to be removed for the general health of the Indian body politic, Partition now became the solution to the contemporary communal problems. For Niharendu Dutta Mazumdar, a Congress member of the Bengal Legislative Assembly, the issue at stake was not religion but "how to save Indian nationalism in Bengal against the dark forces of politico

³² Ibid.

³³ "Maladministration of League Government in Bengal: Letter and Memorandum from Kiran Sankar Roy, Bengal Congress Assembly Party Leader," dated 25 April 1947. File: L/P&J/7/12231 7749, April May 1947, OIOC.

communal reaction.” He urged the people not to split over the issue of Partition, but to form “patriotic Councils of Action” comprising both Hindus and Muslims to combat “League tyranny.”³⁴ The *Ananda Bazar Patrika* in an editorial in early April echoed similar sentiments. It outlined three key questions that faced the Bengalis in 1947. First, in order to remain within the Indian Union, the Bengalis had to choose between the whole or a portion of the province. Second, if the whole of Bengal remained within India then they would have to decide on the issue of separate electorates. Third, given the recent history of Muslim League governance in Bengal, the editorial noted that it would be unlikely that separate electorates would be abolished. The editorial concluded that the only resolution to these three issues was the division of the province.³⁵

Some went on to argue that Partition would again be annulled once the Bengali Muslims realized that they could not survive alone. Krishnaprasanna Sinha, in a provocatively titled letter, “Kill Pakistan,” wrote that,

If Bengal is divided it would be impossible for the Muslim League to carry on with only Eastern Bengal as a separate Muslim state...if only Calcutta is taken out it would be impossible for the Muslim state to function. It need hardly be emphasized that Calcutta is definitely a Hindu city, not merely by the standard of its Hindu population but also by the standard of lands and houses, which are mostly owned by the Hindus. West Bengal with Calcutta will be more self-supporting than merely east Bengal can ever hope to be. If Muslim League is confronted with the two alternatives viz. to join the All India Union in the right spirit or form East Bengal as a separate Muslim state the Muslim League would

³⁴ *HS*, 4 March 1947, 3.

³⁵ *ANBP*, April 7 1947, 4.

prefer the former. The Bengalee Hindus must however make it quite clear that either the whole of Bengal joins the all India union or they separate.³⁶

Although the claim for Calcutta led Sinha to identify it as a 'Hindu city' notwithstanding the sizeable Muslim and Christian population, a similar claim was not laid out for Dacca whose population was, by Sinha's standards, predominantly Hindu. Thus the religious identity of Calcutta camouflaged the economic motives in Sinha's demand for the inclusion of the city in West Bengal.

Similarly, Kalipada Mukherjee, Secretary of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, at a conference in Jessore in May 1947 publicly declared, that the Congress demand for Partition did not intend to abandon "Hindus and other national forces in East Bengal but it is believed and in no distant future it would be able by their strenuous efforts, to bring about the situation under which East Bengal should be forced to join the Indian Republic."³⁷ Although this conjecture did not agree with the official policy of the Bengal Congress, like Mukherjee, others believed that this Partition would also be annulled, as had the 1905 Partition.

For some groups Partition was a "necessary step" in the path of India's progress towards freedom. Bhabadev Bhattacharjee, a professor of political philosophy at Ripon College in Calcutta, used the metaphor of a joint family system to explain to his readers their current political reality. "If the joint family system has broken up as a result of impact of selfish ideas, how much is the danger of a country beset with warring creeds. Brothers have maintained better relations by living separately in many cases than most of

³⁶ *ABP*, 4 March 1947, 4.

³⁷ *ABP*, 20 May 1947, 4.

those who outwardly profess brotherhood and are compelled to eulogize on united life even though in their heart of hearts they have realized the hollowness of the actual situation. To fight the movement for Pakistan in the most practical way is to cry for partitioning of Bengal. A Muslim Bengal without Hindu Bengal is a hopeless idea.”³⁸

Another writer, similarly argued that the

Moral partition of Bengal is already complete and notwithstanding the tender sentiments for an undivided Bengal. Constitutional partition is inevitable unless the Muslims in this province unequivocally repudiate the communal electorates and communal politics and unseat their present leadership which works against the emergence of a strong independent and progressive union of India to take her rightful place in the community of other great nations of the world.³⁹

For those who still remained uncertain about their views on partitioning the province and found the current demand in contradiction to the earlier movement to annul the Partition in 1905, arguments about the continuation and preservation of nationalist ideals had more appeal than religion. Major General A. C. Chatterjee thus urged the nationalists to “attach themselves firmly with the rest of nationalist India.” This goal could only be possible with the creation of a new province which did not subscribe to the Pakistan ideal and thus ensured that it be part of nationalist India. Chatterjee argued that the nationalist goals that had led to wide ranging protests against the first Partition of Bengal in 1905 had not changed in 1947. In his view, the creation of a new province was

³⁸ *HS*, 25 March 1947, 4.

³⁹ *HS*, 29 March 1947, 4.

being urged along similar lines and intended to “preserve the solidarity and integrity of the people who were nationalistic in outlook and who consider their language tradition and civilization as one, facts denied by the Muslim Leaguers.”⁴⁰

At a conference in Jalpaiguri in northern Bengal, attended by 500 delegates from that region, Pandit Lakshmi Kanta Maitra, a member of the Legislative Assembly, noted that there were three courses open to Bengali nationalists,

First was an abject surrender to the Muslim League. Hindus could not think of it.

The second course was the violent method or a bloody civil war. Nationalist Hindus did not want to adopt this barbarous cruel path which was destructive of civilization. The third course was the creation of a new province, a homeland for the nationalists which would be linked with the Indian union and would remain within that union.⁴¹

Maitra then contended that the imminent freedom of India from colonial rule was due to the sacrifice of Bengali Hindus who had now been forced to ask for a division because of “the irresistible logic of events and communal misrule that had sought to curtail the rights and privileges of the Hindus since its very inception.” By collapsing nationalist goals with religious identity, Maitra and others hoped to convince those who continued to doubt their political representative’s demands for Partition.

The Dacca District Congress Committee passed a resolution on 15 May 1947 that stated,

⁴⁰ *HS*, 3 April 1947, 3.

⁴¹ *HS*, 18 May 1947, 5.

The members of the Executive Committee have belief in the united India and the united Bengal as a unit of the Indian union. In case the division of India becomes inevitable on account of the unreasonable demand of the Muslim League as a natural corollary they claim that a separate unit with those districts of Bengal willing to join the Indian union is to be formed.⁴²

Along with the justifications for the cause of 'nationalist India', Partition in this petition echoed the widespread belief that it was the Muslim League which had generated the 'unreasonable' demand for separation. Thus it behooved those in opposition to Pakistan to demand inclusion within India even if it meant that very separation.

The tension between 'Hindu' and 'Nationalist' India continued to be a moot issue as the Partition debate engaged with the critical question of space and territory. How much territory was sufficient for the proposed West Bengal province? On what basis should the territorial coordinates be decided? Without anything of a guideline except the understanding that any division or 'demand for inclusion' would involve areas that were unlikely to be part of the proposed Pakistan, some petitioners continued to demand a region which would circumscribe a Hindu communal demography. But there were many others who couched their appeals within what they hoped would be key to the sustenance of the new Indian nation, citizenship, loyalty and economic stability.

In the event of a division, it was clear that the western districts of Bengal would join the Indian union. Consequently the status of the eastern districts became central to the extension of a potential border. More importantly, the status and citizenship rights of Hindus who resided in this region dominated the debate on Partition. Thus several groups

⁴² File: G-54/1947, Part I AICC Papers, April-May 1947, NMML, New Delhi.

and petitioners unsure whether their locality would be part of India or Pakistan, evoked their contribution and sacrifices for the Indian freedom struggle, which they argued, should guarantee their inclusion in the free Indian state. For example, the Student's Library of Howrah framed their support for the division in the following terms, "Although it believes in the existence of a united Bengal within united India, in order to protect the civil liberty of the people, the honour of women, the culture and tradition of Bengal and to form a separate and nationalist Bengal under the Indian Union, comprising of the parts of Dinajpur and Malda districts, and such other parts as are willing to come under the Indian Union and a regional ministry for the area should be set up immediately."⁴³

Similarly, writing to the *Hindustan Standard*, one Satish Chandra Roy urged Hindus in eastern Bengal were and would remain loyal to united India and that they "should be given rights of citizenship in the newly created province of Bengal and the union of India as well. They shall be eligible to services, trade education etc. in the province of Bengal and also in the union government."⁴⁴ Roy contended that if the Hindus of East Bengal were recognized as Indian citizens, then "Pakistan will be compelled to give them their due share in the administration of East Bengal" and "even though they reside outside the union and be entitled to the full protection of the union government."⁴⁵ Roy's suggestions thus advocated the cause for trans-national citizenship for the minority Hindus in eastern Bengal. Like many of his compatriots Roy also

⁴³ File: G-30/1947-48, AICC Papers, NMML, New Delhi.

⁴⁴ *HS*, 17 April 1947, 4.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

assumed that the Muslim residents of this region were eager for citizenship within Pakistan.

Roy was not alone in voicing his concern about the fate of the Hindus whose homes were most likely to be part of Pakistan. A deputation from Noakhali, one of the eastern most districts of Bengal, wrote to Shyamaprasad Mookerjee pointing out “If Bengal is partitioned no doubt the Hindus of west Bengal will be saved, but what will be the position of the east Bengal Hindus under the Pakistan government? The Hindus of East Bengal paid as much for the present political improved state of affairs as for the independence of India. They sacrificed much and above all the lives of their boys and girls to fight out the Britishers (sic) from India.”⁴⁶ The petitioners thus invoked ‘nationalist sacrifice’ to the cause of freedom from colonial rule as a sure guarantee of Indian citizenship.

Narendranath Biswas of Magura, a scheduled caste, had an ingenious solution to the problems affecting his community. He urged that the community, instead of living in different districts of Bengal, move their residence to the district of Jessore, and back their demand for inclusion within India with numerical strength.⁴⁷ As one of the five districts whose future would be decided by the Boundary Commission, Jessore’s position was critical in Biswas’ demand for relocation. He wanted to ensure that when the time came for the decision, the district would have a numerical majority of non-Muslims to justify its inclusion within India.

⁴⁶ Letter to Shyamaprasad Mookerjee, dated 7 May 1947 in File: 32, *SP Mookerjee Papers*, NMML, New Delhi.

⁴⁷ *HS*, 15 May 1947, 4.

In the scramble for territory, the city of Calcutta, seat of Bengali urban culture for both Muslims and Hindus, became the most sought after because of its logistical, industrial and business infrastructure. A detailed petition to Lord Listowel, from S. M. Usam, ex-Mayor of Calcutta, Mr. Abdus Sabur Khan and Mr. Mahisuddin Ahmed, the President of the Bengal Jute Grower's Association, couched their demands for Calcutta in economic terms. The petition began by indicating "East Bengal is the homeland of Jute and Calcutta is the byproduct of the marriage of Bengal jute with Hoogly River and it is for this reason Calcutta is rightly called the city of jute and port of jute." Jute, the petitioners reminded, was produced solely by East Bengal Muslim peasants and Scheduled classes. Such an organic connection between Calcutta and its eastern hinterlands would be severed in the case of Partition and if Calcutta was awarded to West Bengal.⁴⁸ Thus the petitioners, as representatives of not only the Muslim farmers but also the port and industrial workers in Bengal, urged the British authorities to re-think and re-work their decision to partition Bengal. On the other side of the coin, D. N Banerjee, a professor at Dacca University, noted, that Calcutta, by virtue of its population which was predominantly Hindu, should be part of West Bengal.⁴⁹

The Cause for a 'Hindu Nation'

The acceptance of the Punjab Partition by the All India Congress at the national level clearly indicated for the people in Bengal that Partition of their province was not

⁴⁸ Letter to Lord Listowel from S M Usam, Ex Mayor of Calcutta and President Indian National Maritime Union, Mr. Abdus Sabur Khan, MLA, and Mr. Mahisuddin Ahmed, President and Vice President, Bengal Jute Growers Association, Calcutta, in protest against any scheme of partitioning of Bengal, dated 22nd May 1947 (approx.) in File: L/P&J/7/12068 6076, Jan 1947-Jan 1948, Political Department, OIOC, London.

⁴⁹ *HS*, 7 May 1947, 4.

only plausible but also imminent. The Hindu Mahasabha, which had initially advocated the idea of an “*Akhand Hindustan*” (Unbroken India), changed its stance and focused on retaining as much territory as possible for a “Hindu India.” In February 1947, it appointed a Working Committee to report on “the feasibility and desirability of having a separate province for securing a homeland for Bengal Hindus.”⁵⁰ At a conference at Tarakeshwar, Mahasabha workers passed a resolution to begin a campaign to “retain East Bengal Province...within the Indian Union.”⁵¹

In the following months, as the Hindu Mahasabha deployed their cadres to promote their cause the Bengal Congress also jumped onto the bandwagon for Partition, albeit for different reasons. The Congress political leadership couched the demand as one *necessary* to remain within ‘nationalist’ India. In over four hundred petitions addressed to the district and provincial Congress leaders, Bengalis mainly from western parts of the province urged for inclusion.⁵² Ironically, Partition politics made strange bedfellows out of the Hindu Mahasabha and the Congress. The demand for inclusion within India among those proclaiming their nationalist credentials found common cause among those who had begun to promote the demand for a Hindu homeland. Two things immediately stand out in these petitions. First, these petitions provide a clear evidence that the political campaigns for Partition was well organized and second, they concentrated mainly in the

⁵⁰ *Hindu Outlook* (New Delhi), 11 February 1947, in File: 102, *S P Mukherjee Papers*, II-IV Installment, NMML, New Delhi.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² File: G-54/1947, Part I; CL-14 (A)/ 1946; CL-14 (B)/1946-47, All India Congress Committee (henceforth AICC) Papers, Nehru Memorial and Museum Library (henceforth NMML), New Delhi.

western parts of the province which had more Hindu majority districts and were most likely to remain in India in the event of a Partition.⁵³

It would be accurate to point out that some sections of the Bengali Hindu *bhadralok* adopted the discourse of religious nationalism in their advocacy for the Partition. The amalgam of religion with politics was the leitmotif in a number of letters sent to leading newspapers. From mid January 1947, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, began to carry letters from its readers titled 'Homeland for Bengal Hindus.' One such letter under this caption noted, "Bengali Hindus must face the grim reality before them. If they do so, then they will see how the good deeds done by patriotic Bengalis in an earlier day are gradually being nullified by the Muslim-dominated administration of the province... The Bengali Hindus must have a home where they will be able to preserve their culture and adjust its administration to their needs."⁵⁴ Written under the pseudonym, 'Fairplay', the author then went on to outline the different economic and social opportunities that had been lost to the Bengali Hindus since the Communal Award.

Another writer, B C Sen of Calcutta, did not mince words when he warned the readers of the *Patrika*, "The Bengalee Hindus are now faced with a new danger-the danger of total extinction and being reduced to the position of Jews."⁵⁵ Although Sen agreed that "Hindus and Muslims belong to the same racial stock, language and culture

⁵³ Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, 248.

⁵⁴ *ABP*, 17 January 1947, 4. The same letter was again published under the same caption on January 20, 1947. However, this time the author used the pseudonym 'A Bengali Hindu.'

⁵⁵ *ABP*, 21 January 1947, 4. The comparison of Bengali Hindus to Jews is a recurring motif both in the public debates leading up to the Partition and in reference to the post-Partition refugee migration. For example, in their letter explaining their support for the division, some employees of the Tata Nayamudi Iron Factory alluded to the fact that if the demand for a separate West Bengal was not met then, "definitely in the future the Bengali residents (of western Bengal) will have to give up their language and culture in their own motherland and like the Jews will have to take their family and be ousted to Bihar and Orissa relief camps." *ANBP*, 4 April 1947, 4.

and their economic interests are identical,” the present political situation had placed the Muslims in a position of unchecked ‘absolute authoritarianism.’ Thus the Partition “ is a move to self-defense particularly necessitated by the fact that neither the Congress nor any other national political organization has been able to carry the Muslim masses with them.” In a booklet published in early 1947, Bhupendra C. Lahiri articulated the immediate need to have a “Hindu nation” in Bengal. After pointing out that in the current state of affairs, the Hindus’ efforts to enter and influence the politics, education and the workforce had been stymied by communal reservations, Lahiri argues that the Partition of Bengal into Hindu majority and Muslim majority provinces was not only possible in terms of geographical division but was the only way to ensure that the Hindus of eastern Bengal could be saved. In Lahiri’s view rather than undertaking a messy population exchange, “If the Hindus of eastern Bengal are ensured the support of the 3 crores Hindus of independent Bengal, the former would be much strengthened as a race than they are currently...The only way to save the Bengali Hindus is to ensure the preservation of the glory of Hindus in Western Bengal.”⁵⁶

The correlation between religion, culture and territory was not new. However, several other strands of argument were interwoven in the case for Partition. The extinction of the Bengali Hindu “race” was a recurring motif evoked by some writers.⁵⁷ One Charu Chandra Sinha from Howrah, in western Bengal, argued that the Bengalis had been “politically, socially, and economically maimed.” While he echoed the arguments about maladministration of the League Ministry in the political and social field, he also

⁵⁶ Bhupendra Chandra Lahiri, *Bange Hindu Rashtra Chai (The Need for a Hindu Nation in Bengal)* (Calcutta: No Publisher, 1947), 119.

⁵⁷ See Letters to the Editor, *ANBP*, April 9 1947, 2; *HS*, May 27, 1947, 5; *ABP*, 21 January 1947, 4.

pointed out that existing scarcity of food in Bengal specifically targeted the Bengali Hindu race. He claimed that “ There is no vitaminous [sic] food sustaining the life of the masses with the result that they are deteriorating in health day by day proving the truth of the theory that the Bengalis are going to be an extinct race.”⁵⁸ The only way to save the situation was the creation of a separate homeland for the Hindus in Bengal.

The politics of representation in the late 1930s and the decade of the 40s in which Bengali Muslims made substantial gains confirmed fears of political curtailment for some sections of the Bengali Hindu Bhadrak. It was only a short leap to translate such fears into rhetoric of cultural and religious strangulation. Hindu organizations began to mobilize lower caste groups such as the Namasudras in Bengal within the large Hindu fold.⁵⁹ By late 1946, many Bengalis, both Hindus and Muslims, were convinced that Pakistan whatever its constitutional structure and spatial coordinates was inevitable. To top it all, the riots of 1946 had convinced many of ‘League maladministration’⁶⁰ and that the political future of the Bengali Hindus were at jeopardy under the current Muslim League government.

A number of writers thus echoed the theme of ‘political impotency.’ D. N. Bannerjee, a professor at the Dacca University, wrote to another popular English daily, the *Hindustan Standard*, arguing that Partition was the “only solution.” He pointed out that,

⁵⁸ *HS*, 20 June 1947, 4.

⁵⁹ Sekhar Bandyopadhyaya, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal 1872-1947* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997).

⁶⁰ “Maladministration of League Government in Bengal: Letter and Memorandum from Kiran Sankar Roy, Bengal Congress Assembly Party Leader,” dated 25 April 1947. File: L/P&J/7/12231 7749, April May 1947, OIOC.

The whole future of the entire Hindu community of Bengal is in serious peril today, that this community which has suffered so tremendously during the last sixty years for building up Indian nationalism and for the freedom of India is in the imminent danger in view of the impending constitutional changes of being reduced to absolute political impotence and even abject slavery; that there is a great probability of an admittedly medieval theocratic state being established in Bengal with all its consequences; and that because of their questionable slight inferiority of number the lot of the Hindus in Bengal may soon become, unless timely action is taken that of mere hewers of wood and drawers of water for a people who are by their own admission inferior to them in so many respects.⁶¹

The theme of ‘culture in danger’ was seamlessly co-opted within a remarkable notion of Hindu cultural superiority in Bannerjee’s statement. Such proclamations turned the Muslim League’s claim of “freedom from Hindu economic and cultural domination” on its head by arguing that the Bengali Hindus, by virtue of being minorities within Bengal, needed political freedom from being ruled by a “brute’ majority. Such a brand of communal ideology invoked the ghosts of ‘Muslim tyranny’ and ‘medieval theocracy’ in Bengali life, which itself was projected as essentially Hindu. On the one hand, such arguments portrayed the Bengali Hindus as victims and minorities while on the other hand they highlighted the reputation of the Hindu Bengalis as economic, social and cultural leaders who needed the partitioning of the province for their continued prominence.

⁶¹ *HS*, 1 May 1947, 4.

Against Partition

Although Bengali Muslims generally supported the demand for Pakistan, within the political leadership of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League and the Krishak Praja Party, a socialist peasant party, there was no consensus on the meaning and program of the virtual Pakistan. The historiography on Muslim politics has conclusively shown that in Bengal, the Pakistan idea had moved away from its central focus on religion as the basis of unity and had metamorphosed into a more socio- democratic ideal resulting in a myriad of “Pakistans.”⁶² The multiple promises of Pakistan, from being a peasant utopia to a nation based on socio democratic principles and a nation free from Hindu domination, found favor not only with the illiterate, poor and less informed Muslim peasantry in rural areas, but also within groups of highly literate and politically aware urban Muslims principally based in Dacca and Calcutta.

Some Bengali Muslims questioned the rights of the All India Muslim League and its Bengal branch to represent Muslims of the region.⁶³ Several letters to the *Hindustan Standard* stressed the common cultural and linguistic background of the Bengali Hindus and Muslims. The current divide, according to these writers was due to colonial machinations. In May 1947, a Bengali Muslim that outlined meaning of Pakistan thus,

By keeping silent over the details of economic and political structure of the contemplated Pakistan our leaders have allowed the Mahomedan mass to believe that it will be a land of milk and honey. But Pakistan as it is already in the

⁶² For an elaboration of this issue see, Taj-ul- Hashmi, *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia, The Communalization of Class Politics in East Bengal 1920-1947* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992); Semanti Ghosh, *Nationalism and the Problem of ‘Difference*, (Unpublished Dissertation: Tufts University, 2000).

⁶³ See letters to the editor in *HS*, 11 September 1946, 4; 17 September 1946, 4; 5 December 1946, 4; 17 December 1946, 4.

offing, does not seem to be a cheering prospect to us, the Bengal Mahomedans. Firstly, Mahomedans of different provinces are infiltrating into Bengal. These immigrants thinking themselves of a noble descent cherish a most contemptuous attitude towards the Bengali Mahomedans most of whom are illiterate peasants and as it is low born converts. These immigrants have a smattering of English and are out to dominate the Bengali Mahomedans both politically and intellectually. They will form the Mahomedan middle class in Bengal by monopolizing all the government jobs. An examination of the Muslim League high command and the coterie of Muslim members of the interim government points to the future domination of Moslem India by non- Bengalis. Secondly, Pakistan means, it is clear, the greatest advantage of the Muslim capitalists and business magnates. None of them are Bengalis. Hence Bengali Mahomedans will have very little to hope from them.⁶⁴

The writer, who identified himself only as a “Bengali Mahomedan,” questioned the hegemonic ambitions of the Pakistan demand to represent all Muslims of the subcontinent. He further questioned the ability of the Muslims, who were culturally and linguistically different than the Bengali Muslims, to represent or respond to regional concerns. The idea of Pakistan for this particular writer thus did not hold out the promise of a socialist revolution whereby the Bengali Muslim peasantry could also be free of the “capitalists and business magnates.” In some ways, his concerns seem prophetic in the light of the trajectory East Bengal followed after 1947.

⁶⁴ *HS*, 17 May 1947, 4.

Opinion among the scheduled caste leadership within Bengal was also divided. Although Jogendra Nath Mandal, the leader of the Scheduled Caste Federation which was politically aligned with the Muslim League, voiced his support against the Partition of Bengal, other leaders such as Radhanath Das, a member of the Constituent Assembly, and Birat Mandal, the leader the All India Depressed Class Association argued that the League could not guarantee safety for the scheduled castes in eastern Bengal and the interests of the group would be best served within a divided Bengal.⁶⁵ In a press conference at Delhi, Mandal pointed out that the Partition of Bengal would not solve the current problems and would in fact reduce the Hindus of East Bengal to an insignificant minority. Further, he pointed out that in the event of an exchange of population, the Scheduled castes of eastern Bengal, comprising mainly the poorer sections of the Hindu community, would not have the means to make the move across the borders.⁶⁶ Mandal had some support from scheduled caste groups such as the North Bengal Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samity which passed a resolution against the Partition on April 27, 1947 at Rangpur in northern Bengal.

However, scheduled caste leaders such as Radhanath Das, whom Jogendra Mandal had defeated in the 1940 Calcutta Corporation elections, argued that “If we ask our Namasudra brothers in Noakhali to come to West Bengal and the government of West and North Bengal will provide them with shelter and other economic requirements, then I am prepared to swear that Jogen babu [Jogendra Mandal] will not able to keep a single one of his caste brothers in Noakhali.” Further, he argued that it would be easy for

⁶⁵ Jagadishchandra Mandal, *Banga Bhanga* (Calcutta: Mahapran Publishing Society 1977), 39-42.

⁶⁶ *The Statesman*, 17 May 1947, 5.

the scheduled castes to move precisely because “ in terms of their homes, they only have small huts, which they would not have much compunction or problem in leaving” and moving to western Bengal.⁶⁷

In response to Das, Dwarikanath Barori, who sided with Mandal, argued, “it’s a novel discovery [on Das’s part] that the scheduled castes’ attachment to their home would be less because they lived in huts,”⁶⁸ and added that in reality a majority of that community owned substantial property. Clearly, the main issue within this particular Partition debate was whether the new province in the west would be able to guarantee economic opportunities for the scheduled castes.⁶⁹

Not all Hindus in Bengal subscribed to the view that there was a need to create a new province.⁷⁰ The fault lines of the debate against the Partition of the province are captured clearly in the writings of Naresh Chandra Gupta. In “An appeal to Sons and Daughters of Bengal,” Gupta urged the Bengalis not to be swept away by propaganda in favor of the partitioning the province. He pointed out that “Hindus of Bengal have suffered terribly of late though Muslims too could not but suffer to a larger extent.” However, Gupta asserted that partitioning the province along communal lines was not a remedy at all.⁷¹ Rather, “the continuance of a united Bengal freed from the canker of

⁶⁷Jagadishchandra Mandal, *Banga Bhang*, 43.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 45.

⁶⁹ When the issue of Partition was put to vote in the Bengal Assembly, only five of the thirty scheduled caste members voted against the Partition. Chatterjee interprets this vote as an example of the limitations of the Muslim League’s hegemonic gestures towards the scheduled castes. Partha Chatterjee, “The Second Partition of Bengal,” 40.

⁷⁰ See Braja Sundar Roy’s letter to the editor of *Ananda Bazar Patrika* where he urged the Bengali Hindu and Muslim nationalist leaders to join hand in order to combat the all India ‘communal threat.’ *ANBP*, March 31 1947, 8.

⁷¹ *HS*, 23 April 1947, 4.

communal electorates and a communal ministry, continuing as a member of the Indian union” was a better option and urged his fellow Bengalis to “strive and toil and fight for that rather than to seek a partition of the province which but forty years ago people considered to be an intolerable calamity?” The persistent struggle by the Bengalis had “unsettled the settled fact” earlier. For Gupta, like Gandhi, an advocate of a united Bengal within the Indian Union, Partition was the very anti-thesis of nationalist ideals.

The ongoing proposal for a ‘homeland for Bengali Hindus’ was in Gupta’s view fallacious as “Bengal Hindus are not like Jews, wanderers in foreign lands, they have their homes in land which is their own and which generations of ancestors have made their own...the promise of this homeland which seeks to pluck them out of the land to which they are rooted in tradition and sentiment of centuries.”⁷² Gupta correctly identified the problem of demanding a homeland for Bengali Hindus that would, if successful, mean the uprooting of those who did not live within its territorial boundaries.

Even at this late date, dissenters remained against the idea of any division of the province. The Forward Bloc organized a congregation against the proposed division that was reportedly attended by more than ten thousand people.⁷³ Another group comprising of members of different political colors and led by Sarat Bose and Abul Hashim promoted the idea of a United Bengal, which would not be constitutionally part of India or Pakistan but have an independent identity. In a letter to Sardar Patel, Sarat Bose specified, “It is not a fact that Bengali Hindus unanimously demand Partition. As far as East Bengal is concerned, there is not the slightest doubt that the majority of Hindus were

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ *ANBP*, April 14 1947, 7.

opposed to partition...the demand for Partition is more or less confined to the middle classes...Future generations will, I am afraid condemn us for conceding the division of India and supporting the partition of Bengal and Punjab”⁷⁴ This plan did not find much support within the political ranks of the Bengal Congress or the Muslim League. The Bengali public already inundated by Mahasabha propaganda was wary of the possibilities that Bengal as an independent entity might in the future join Pakistan.

A number of letters anthropomorphized India as a “motherland” and urged the readers to be patriotic sons in preventing the vivisection of their mother.⁷⁵ While one writer questioned, “ Is there none in Bengal to challenge this spurious census⁷⁶ on which the Muslim League’s citadel of Pakistan is being built? It was the patriotic sons of Bengal who nullified the 1905 partition; is there none to follow them to nullify the infernal Pakistan,”⁷⁷ another urged, “No true Indian should entertain such absurd unreasonable and foolish ideas and all must cooperate to keep India united.”⁷⁸ Jnanjan Pal, in a critical analysis of the future of a divided Bengal, identified several problems. He specified that,

By making our demand for a partition of the province on the basis of denominational religious communities we are likely to cloud the real issue. India cannot be communally divided, nor Bengal nor any other part of it. That will smother our progress; we will be going back to a perverted type of religious

⁷⁴ Letter dated 27 May 1947, in Durga Das ed. *Sardar Patel’s Correspondence, 1945-50*, Vo. IV (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1972), 45-6.

⁷⁵ *HS*, 11 June 1947, 4.

⁷⁶ The Census of 1941 was at the center of controversy during this period as it was the key document determining the areas based on religious demography.

⁷⁷ *HS*, 25 March 1947, 4.

⁷⁸ *HS*, 11 June 1947, 4.

medievalism, absolutely unacceptable in the modern world.... A homeland for Bengali Hindus is therefore ideologically separated from the Indian union.⁷⁹

As a solution to the communal issue, Pal urged a separation between religion and politics and an effort to achieve a complete secularization of political life. Such a process would be amply aided by implementing a common electorate on the basis of universal adult suffrage. The only way to solve Bengal's problems was also to keep "ties with the other parts of India and with the Center or the Union firmly secured not for communal moves, but for essential political and economic advantages." Pal was not an advocate of the United Bengal Plan. In his view, "Bengal's sovereignty so called that is dissociated from the Indian Union, is thus fraught with immense mischief for India as also for Bengal." However, if the political majority did not agree to the principles of democracy and common electorate, Partition would be forced upon all Bengalis. Pal, however, hoped that the "Partition would be temporary in nature and would last till the communal madness had blown over."⁸⁰

A group of Hindu residents of Barisal opposed the Partition proposal on the grounds that such a division would "disrupt the ancient unity and solidarity of Bengalee Hindus."⁸¹ Several leaders within the Bengal Congress such as Akhil Chandra Datta, Leela Roy and Kamini Kumar Datta, publicly declared that it would be "improper, suicidal for them to lend support Pakistan" and that "partition amounted to the acceptance of the basic principle of Pakistan namely the territorial division or re-adjustment on the

⁷⁹ *HS*, 19 May 1947, 7.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *HS*, 4 March 1947, 3.

basis of community or religion.”⁸² In April 1947, Sarat Bose along with Kamini Kumar Datta formed the All Bengal Anti-Pakistan and Anti-Partition Committee. At a conference, the members of this committee passed a resolution noting, “The proposed partition on a religious basis would be in direct conflict with the principles of nationalism. That it would be a concession to the demand of Pakistan and that it would put Hindus in eastern and northern Bengal districts in a desperate position.”⁸³ In addition, the members decided to mobilize public opinion against Pakistan and Partition. However, such a plan found few takers at this late date.

Conclusion

One of the paradigmatic problems that have haunted the historiography of the Partition is the communal-national binary that seeks to explain religious communalism as the causal force, which at the expense of secular nationalism marked the inevitable path towards Partition. Historians of both the so-called Nationalist and the Cambridge schools become an odd couple in sharing this binary. Although the former undercuts their own emphasis on anti-colonial nature of different communities by isolating the Muslim League as a ‘communal’ organization, the Cambridge historians fail to take cognizance of the quintessential nature of Indian nationalism that evolved specifically as an anti-colonial struggle. For both Hindus and Muslims, anti-colonial nationalism had always been informed by their religious and cultural identities, which did not necessarily mean

⁸² *HS*, 26 March 1947, 4. In several public meetings where anti partition resolutions were passed, Leela Roy repeatedly demanded “Our demand is that not a single Bengalee whether a Hindu or a Muslim must leave his homeland- whether he be in the eastern or the western part of Bengal. *HS*, 16 April 1947, 7.

⁸³ *ABP*, 26 April 1947, 4.

an antagonistic communal relationship.⁸⁴ Further, as Ayesha Jalal has pointed out, the historiography has had a curious propensity to conflate communal bigotry of a few with the ‘communalism’ of many.⁸⁵

The historiography has also suffered from the need to explain the central question ‘Why did Partition happen?’ Although scholars agree that the answer is complex, there still has been a propensity to explain the Partition as inevitable, a foregone conclusion, at least after the riots of 1946. However as this article has shown, Bengali public opinion remained divided and marked with confusion when it came to the subject of the political future of the province. Neither the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha, nor the Muslim League could claim complete support in their demands for Partition and Pakistan.

The debate on whether Bengal should be partitioned was laid to rest when the Congress and the Muslim League leaders publicly accepted and endorsed Governor Louis Mountbatten’s Plan of June 3, 1947 which clearly outlined the possibility of a Partition.⁸⁶ The certainty of Partition significantly changed the tenor of public discourse. Although the ground rules for Partition had been laid down in Delhi and London, the Bengali public wrote in their views hoping to influence their leaders into deciding in favor of

⁸⁴ One just has to look at the successful use of religious symbols during the Non-Cooperation Khilafat movement to understand this point. In the case of Bengal, Barbara Southard has noted the use of Sakta symbols in early Swadeshi nationalism while Sacred and the Secular has noted the success of Islamic motifs in garnering support for anti-colonial nationalism.

⁸⁵ Ayesha Jalal, “Exploding Communalism: The Politics of Identity in South Asia,” in Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal Eds. *Nationalism, Democracy, and Development: State and Politics in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997) 76-103.

⁸⁶ According to this Plan, the Muslim majority provinces of Bengal, Punjab, Sind, the NWFP and Baluchistan would chose either the existing constitutional assembly to frame their future constitution within a united Indian Union or a new and separate constituent assembly.

certain territorial coordinates.⁸⁷ Inclusion within India both in terms of territory and citizenship became the moot issue of the day. The Bengal Legislative Assembly met on June 20, 1947 and voted to join the Indian Union. In a separate ballot they voted to partition Bengal into East and West Bengal. On both issues, the voting was divided along communal lines although the representatives had no way of knowing whether their respective areas would finally be in east or west Bengal. The representatives of the Hindu majority districts voted to join the Indian Union and to partition Bengal to that effect while the representatives of the Muslim majority districts voted for a separate union and against the Partition of Bengal.⁸⁸

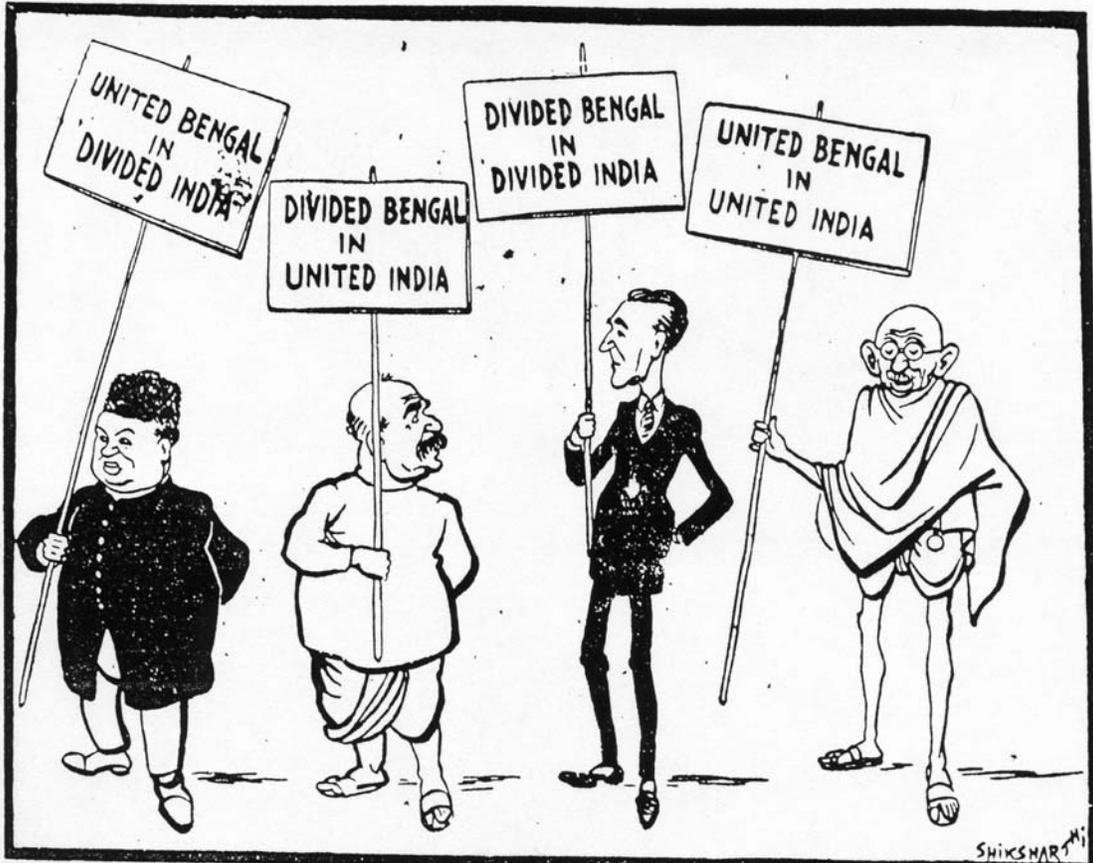
Although the different trajectories within the public debate for and against Partition run tangential to the constitutional negotiations at the top political level, their significance lies in delineating alternative political futures. Understanding the genesis provides the starting point and the necessary corrective to evaluate India's path to post-colonial nationhood.

Appendix. I.

⁸⁷ For details on the different schemes and plans for Partition that the Muslim League, Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha presented to the Boundary Commission, see Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India 1947-1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 19-60.

⁸⁸ The provisional West Bengal Legislative Assembly voted by 58 votes to 21 that the province should be partitioned and that West Bengal should join the existing Constituent Assembly.

WHO IS RIGHT ?



HS, May 17, 1947, 5.

Telegraphic Campaign For Partition



The Viceroy is reported to have been overwhelmed by nearly 10,000 telegrams demanding partition of Bengal.

HS, 17 May 1947, 1.