

STUDY OF MUSLIM LEAGUE POLITICS IN BENGAL

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Study of Muslim League politics in Bengal is not a sufficient indication of the politics of Haq, Nazimuddin and Suhrawardy, just because they were Muslims and associated with the Muslim League. The need to understand the latter is important because these ministers were holding the highest^{32 33 34} government offices in Bengal and by means of their clout and their political associations, their politics had the potential to direct Bengal towards a certain course. In conducting their politics some ideologies were abandoned, some new ones embraced, and to some, only lip-service was paid. This dissertation therefore is the first exploration of the parting of rhetoric and action in the tumultuous pre-Independence/partition decade in Bengal. A study of Muslim politicians in Bengal cannot ignore the relationship of these politicians with Muslim League, Bengal League and Jinnah, as well as the larger question of Muslim nationalism and Muslim separatism. Insights gained from a focus on Haq, Nazimuddin and Suhrawardy helped in looking outward and upward at the structures of this organization, its ideology, its propagandists and its ardent devotees. Muslim nationalism, as a movement that was bigger than Jinnah's bargains for political rights of Muslims and the Muslim League's rising strength in the 1940s has a complicated relationship with the "minor histories" of the provinces. The fact that the idea of Muslim nationalism was "abstract" and labor had to be exerted to make it appear more concrete is not just a retrospective realization.³⁵ Muslim League leaders grappled with the inherent challenges in first, linking Muslim nationalism to Muslim separatism, finally landing on their demand for Pakistan; and second, in a systematic repression of clan and caste loyalties, ethnic and regional identities and province-based languages like Bangla. The project had to be conducted at the national level. Faisal Devji's contention that "Muslim nationalism cannot simply be seen as sum of its provincial parts" can be admitted. True, "such minor histories...could not exist without a countrywide one...while the reverse is manifestly not true," what about the trajectory of that history once it had been embraced in the provinces?³⁶ While taking note of Devji's caveat that regional histories can be localized further, this dissertation nevertheless, with its regional focus, will contribute to new understandings on Muslim

³² V. P. Menon, *The Transfer of Power in India* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957).

³³ See David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). Anita Inder Singh, *The Origins of the Partition of India, 1936-1947* (Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). Mushirul Hasan, *India's Partition: Process, Strategy, and Mobilization* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993). Ian Talbot, Khizr Tiwana, the Punjab Unionist Party and the Partition of India (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1996). Ian Talbot and Gurharpal Singh, eds., *Region and Partition: Bengal, Punjab and the Partition of the Subcontinent* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

³⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Remembered Villages: Representation of Hindu-Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of the Partition," *Economic and political weekly* 31, no. 32 (1996). Bashabi Fraser and Sheila Sengupta, *Bengal Partition Stories: An Unclosed Chapter* (London; New York: Anthem Press, 2006). Gargi Chakravarty, *Coming out of Partition: Refugee Women of Bengal* (New Delhi: Bluejay Books, 2005).

³⁵ 15 Faisal Devji, *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea* (London: Hurst, 2013), Introduction. Devji makes an excellent case for how Pakistan was imagined in an "alien geography, without a necessary reference to shared blood and rootedness in the soil." Choudhry Khaliqzaman, *Pathway to Pakistan* ([Lahore]: Longmans, Pakistan Branch, 1961), 188-97. Of particular interest is the chapter, "Search for Formula and Ideology" where Khaliqzaman debates on what Muslim League ideology should be.

³⁶ Faisal Devji, *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea* (London: Hurst, 2013),

nationalism and how its very nature was forged by how Muslim nationalism was defined in the provinces. These provincial histories accentuated the tensions in the implementation of the project of Muslim nationalism. In Bengal, Muslim nationalism, depending on which political group one looks at, was at one time directed towards achievement of Pakistan, at another time, Purba Bangla and yet one more time United Bengal.³⁷ Not just definitions of Pakistan but even belonging to the Muslim League was debated in Bengal. Haq and Suhrawardy's politics are especially important to follow in this regard. The history of Muslim separatism too had a contested path in Bengal. Needless to mention that if Pakistan was the outcome of Muslim separatism, and Bengal, in very real terms, had to face that consequence through its own vivisection, how can a national telling of that nationalism/separatism alone suffice to narrate this very regional experience?³⁸ Furthermore, while there was nothing teleological about it, we should not forget the disillusionment with the Pakistan project that overtook East Pakistan within two decades and culminated in the emergence of Bangladesh. A case for provincial history has been made in the past for the period under review, especially for Punjab.³⁹ As a provincial study, this thesis offers an interesting relationship with national history. In the late 1930s national-level events had less impact on Bengal's provincial politics, and when they did, they were few and far between. In the 1940s and closer to 1947, the intensity of this impact increased, and the events became more frequent. The study of Haq's first five years in office will show how he operated without having to calculate power dynamics at the center, and their implications for his rule. But from his second term onward, and during Nazimuddin and Suhrawardy's terms, the impact of national level politics was always a big concern for the chief ministers. The irruption of national history into the provincial political landscape of Bengal is carefully delineated in this thesis, be it the Quit India, the Cripps Mission or the Cabinet Mission. Through these and other national level events, this thesis will show the slow but determined devouring of provincial histories, so much so that many of the trends in provincial history lead to abrupt endings in August 1947, and repercussions of events at the center impact and shape provincial politics. In the existing historiography the logic for the partition of Bengal, and the independence of its western part in 1947 has been ascribed to the vociferous demands of the Bengali Hindus according to Chatterji. Their demands alone however did not bring about partition of Bengal, because the powerful last Viceroy of British India, Mountbatten was until late May 1947 invested in keeping Bengal united. This is where a study of Suhrawardy's politics aids our understanding of this historical outcome. During the period preceding partition, Suhrawardy made drastic attempts to ward off the forces of national politics in Bengal. His movement for United Bengal failed and partition happened. So while for a decade provincial and national history are seen as running parallel to each other, they suddenly collapse into

³⁷ Neilesh Bose, *Recasting the Region : Language, Culture, and Islam in Colonial Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 187-236. Faisal Devji, *Muslim Zion : Pakistan as a Political Idea* (London: Hurst, 2013), 6. Bose's chapter, "Ideas of Pakistan and the End of Empire" and Devji's assertion of how Pakistan was "imagined so variously" discuss the various possibilities and outcomes that Muslim nationalism could have had while espousing for Pakistan.

³⁸ David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam : Punjab and the Making of Pakistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). Gilmartin does something similar. He is also looking at how the idea of Pakistan, once it was announced in Punjab, became popular, was internalized and reworked to suit the local political arena.

³⁹ Ian Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj, 1849-1947* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1988). Talbot's thesis that the fall of the inter-communal Unionist Party in Punjab allowed for the Muslim League to step in and transfer the communal mood prevalent in the province to a demand for Pakistan, underscored clearly how provincial narratives often made clear national events like partition of India.

one in the event of partition, and the logic for this event is then best traced at the level of national history. My work will contribute to making sense of this puzzle by looking not at the Muslim League's politics, because at provincial and national level, organizationally they stood for the same goals, but at Suhrawardy's politics as representative of a unique provincial stand.⁴⁰ Suhrawardy's politics, and his alone, offer a sense of how national and provincial histories work with each other, resist each other, and finally the province gives in to the nation. Explaining the causes for the failure of Suhrawardy's United Bengal Plan is not critical for gaining an understanding of the relationship between provincial and national history.⁴¹ It is necessary to understand the context of Suhrawardy's politics as he came up with this proposal. Considering that Haq, Nazimuddin and Suhrawardy worked the system through provincial autonomy and interacted closely with Governors, and even Viceroy, over the span of a decade, an analysis of their politics is bound to offer an intimate window into the imperial mind. By the mid-1930s the British, no longer an irresistible power, were certainly willing to share power as evidenced by constitutional enactments like the Act of 1935. This however did not mean that the future course of imperial action was well chalked out or that every British official in the line of command from London, to Delhi to Calcutta spoke in one voice. While the question of decolonization was not formally discussed as an official policy- definitely not in the correspondences between Bengal's many Governors and British Viceroy like Linlithgow and Wavell- the historiography on decolonization has looked at this period for clues that led to the final British withdrawal from India. In these histories, the central focus has been the machinations that took place in the center. These decolonization theories are essentially nation-centric. This work⁴² ⁴³ will suggest that it is worthwhile to de-center the decolonization debate (in India, as anywhere else) and look for provincial narratives of decolonization. Based on "event history analyses," this work will focus on the sidelines, upon the contours of a decolonization narrative that runs counter to existing theories.⁴⁴ One of the theories of decolonization looks at the pressure that came from Britain itself, the pressure of domestic politics. A P Thornton's famous explanation that the aristocracy lost its grip on the working class; the liberated mass electorate did not care for empire and democracy acquired popularity makes a convincing case.⁴⁵ These factors however did not always go well with governors on the spot like John Anderson and John Herbert, who remained concerned about being able to rein in provincial autonomy if the situation demanded. Their concerns were less about an ideological position on the empire and if its disintegration should be willingly pursued or not, but a very practical concern

⁴⁰ Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided. Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁴¹ Bidyut Chakrabarty, "The 1947 United Bengal Movement : A Thesis without a Synthesis," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 30, no. 4 (1993).

⁴² Anita Inder Singh, *The Origins of the Partition of India, 1936-1947* (Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). A standard argument for British decolonization in India is a weakened British position. Singh is one of the many scholars to state it. While other possible explanations to decolonization have been provided, this has not been refuted

⁴³ David Strang, "Global Patterns of Decolonization, 1500-1987," *International Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (1991). Strang clarifies how he sees decolonization in regions as "single events." The process is driven by streamlining many provincial level experiences into one national experience. This work does not mean to stake out singularity of provincial experiences to debate the event of independence. Clearly Bengal was not like Portuguese Goa which became part of India in 1961. But the experience of decolonization complicates the nation's decolonization experience.

⁴⁴ "From Dependency to Sovereignty: An Event History Analysis of Decolonization 1870-1987," *American Sociological Review* 55, no. 6 (1990).

⁴⁵ A P Thornton, *The Imperial Idea and Its Enemies: A Study in British Power* (London: Macmillan, 1985).

regarding governance. This work will test the application of three theories of decolonization: domestic political consideration in London, the ‘metropole,’⁴⁶ the Second World War and the growth of nationalism, and how it confronted Britain with its “own liberal precepts.”⁴⁷ First, domestic opinion may have been all for decolonization and the grant of provincial autonomy was its logical corollary, but the implicit British expectation from the new indigenous provincial ministries was that they would not jeopardize British interests. Anderson and all governors who followed him were expected to watch over those interests, with the help of the European Group in the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council. British interests in colonial Bengal were widespread. Jute mill owners were British and so labor strikes could not be tolerated. The army was important, and so no budget cuts could tamper with it. Trade in Bengal was crucial to the colonial economy, and no disruption to it could be entertained, especially when it came in the form of communal clashes. Clearly a variety of considerations dictated the British response to provincial politics, depending on what was at stake. Sometimes the British stayed neutral, sometimes, they just sat back and watched, but more often than not they intervened. The decade 1937-1947 in Bengal was defined by its coalition politics and this thesis will show how, despite promises to the contrary, British governors meddled with provincial politics frequently, often shaping the kinds of coalition parties Bengal witnessed. Second, when the war started, the defense budget naturally reflected a rise in the cost of retaining the Empire. Herbert noted that in Bengal the annual cost of the war was three crore rupees, an amount that could not possibly be raised. These and other reality checks from other corners of the far flung empire forced the British to practically conclude that they would not throw away the colonies but “they were no longer to be held at all costs.”⁴⁸ The war was not only expensive it also upset networks of trade. Empire was a network of economic relationships and Britain’s capacity for defending the empire from ‘internal subversion and external attack’ depended on the wealth generated from the colonies.⁴⁹ Additionally, the establishment of the principle of international accountability contributed significantly to the decolonization process.⁵⁰ America’s entry into the war led to a series of discussions on decolonization. America was adamant, a position strengthened by its economic power, that Britain grant independence to its colonies. This was anathema to the likes of Churchill. 14 In Bengal however, war triggered reverse decolonization moves. One prime example of this initiative was the imposition of two Section 93s in Bengal. A Section 93 refers to the Government of India Act, part III and chapter VI, Section 93, describing the power structure of a province in the event of “Failure of Constitutional Machinery.” For this section to be put into force the Governor alone had to be “satisfied that the situation has arisen.” The Governor could then issue a proclamation, by which he would not only “assume to himself” all administrative powers in the province, but also suspend “in whole or in part the operation of any provisions of the Act.”⁵¹ This proclamation was not to be issued without the concurrence of the Governor-General,

⁴⁶ John Darwin, *The End of the British Empire, the Historical Debate* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991). p11.

⁴⁷ A G Hopkins, "Rethinking Decolonization," *Past and Present*, no. 200 (August 2008). p243-44

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p244

⁴⁹ John Darwin, *The End of the British Empire, the Historical Debate* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991). p40

⁵⁰ William Roger Louis, *Imperialism at Bay: The United States and the Decolonization of the British Empire, 1941-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

⁵¹ http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1935/2/pdfs/ukpga_19350002_en.pdf

but as we shall see in the coming chapters, Governors did not care for that check much.⁵² Not just Section 93, but also the Communal Award of 1932, which formed the basic framework for elections under the 1935 Act is also regarded by scholars as an attempt to hold on to the Indian Empire, rather than give it up.⁵³ The Award, which carried the prime minister, Ramsay Macdonald's name, fixed representation of religious communities in provincial electorates. The Hindus, who by the 1931 census were 44% of the population in Bengal were given 32 % of the seats in the legislature. The Muslims, who were 54 % got 48.7% of the seats. While Muslims were also underrepresented, the Hindu setback was historic. In a house of 250, Hindus were to have only 80 seats, and because this included depressed classes, caste Hindus actually had only 70 seats. The period of provincial autonomy in Bengal therefore cannot be simply seen as a period when gradual devolution of power took place. The British persistence in safeguarding the Communal Award, more vehemently during the war, had little to do with maintaining stability or status quo during war time; it had to do with putting brakes on further decolonization. Third, nationalism occupies a crucial role in theories of decolonization because of the moral angle that it brings to the debate. It strengthens the case against the very immorality that imperialism represented. In less than a century it brought about the ruination of the British Empire in India. As Anthony Hopkins argues, nationalist sentiments in the colonies drew on the "same principles" of racial equality and selfdetermination that were bringing discrimination in the dominions to an end.⁵⁴ John Darwin shows how local politicians used the rhetoric of nation and nationalisms to forward their demands about participation in the government as representatives of a nation.⁵⁵ For all this talk on nationalism, Bengal, as we shall see, evinced no signs of fervent nationalism. There were clashes and violence but they were not significant and for the most part, they were communal, not anti-British. The last two chief ministers, Nazimuddin and Suhrawardy, served their role as collaborators to the Raj. Roger Louis' argument that the inversion of collaboration into non-cooperation determined the process of decolonization was true at the national level.⁵⁶ But in Bengal the British did not face any such hostility, definitely not from the men in power, and yet British power came to an end there too. Somewhere in Bengal's experience of decolonization there appears a forced imposition of national experience of this monumental process that changed the history of the modern world. It may be worthwhile, for a different project, to follow the provincial line of reasoning and seek a different telling of decolonization, one that is more centered on the province. A continuous subtext in this work will show the various instances in which decolonization theories fall short in explaining what happened in Bengal in the years before Britain's final withdrawal. While not the focus of this thesis, the discussion on decolonization, as a subsidiary interpretive endeavor will contribute to decolonization studies. This thesis has four chapters. The first two chapters deal with Fazlul Haq's two ministerial tenures. The

⁵² Arthur Berriedale Keith, *A Constitutional History of India, 1600-1935* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1969), 356

⁵³ Bidyut Chakrabarty, "The Communal Award of 1932 and Its Implications in Bengal," *Modern Asian Studies* 23, no. 3 (1989). Chakrabarty, at the very outset makes it clear that historians like Gallagher and Seal saw the Award from the British point of view and saw in its grant the magnanimity of the British in extending the electorate and introducing Indians to the "sophisticated world of parliamentary politics." Chakrabarty's article shows that the Award while appearing to be "a calculated generous gesture was very much a political expedient."

⁵⁴ A G Hopkins, "Rethinking Decolonization," *Past and Present*, no. 200 (August 2008), p243-44.

⁵⁵ John Darwin, *The End of the British Empire, the Historical Debate* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p86.

⁵⁶ William Roger Louis, *Imperialism : The Robinson and Gallagher Controversy* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1976), 37.

third and the fourth chapters look at Nazimuddin and Suhrawardy's years in office. The first chapter follows Haq's rise to power as chief minister of Bengal in 1937. Defining Haq's politics as "contingent" the chapter traces the minutiae of his years in office from January 1937 when he won a resounding victory, to December 1941 when he resigned from his own ministry, thus causing it to collapse and then forming a new ministry. Most of the decisions Haq took during his first tenure were aimed at making his immediate position strong, but not necessarily his future position. All his maneuvers were subject to chance, and he took many chances during the first five years in office. Some of these chance political steps can be attributed to his personality, but his circumstances were also partly responsible for pushing him towards a certain direction. The second chapter carries the same theme of contingent politics ahead, only to focus on how it started to backfire. His second tenure lasted a little over a year, December 1941 to March 1943. During this very short span, as compared to his previous tenure, Haq was confronted with many political decisions he took in the past. But in his second tenure too, Haq's politics took turns that were unanticipated, thus offering credibility to the larger framework of Haq's politics as being "contingent." The third chapter finds Nazimuddin (April 1943 to March 1945), in charge of a war ministry, responsible for delivering relief during one of Bengal's worst famines. These two events, plus the pressure from British governor Herbert and the set rules handed down from Jinnah, created a restrictive political space for Nazimuddin. Nazimuddin's politics were geared towards renegotiating the boundaries of this space and operating within what was unviable politics at best. The fourth and last chapter, on Suhrawardy's politics (April 1946 to June 1947) sees him transition from politics of exclusion in 1945 to politics of inclusion in 1947. I use the terms exclusion and inclusion to qualify not just the goal of Suhrawardy's politics but also his method of doing politics. When practicing exclusion, Suhrawardy not only alienated the Hindus, some of whom were members of his cabinet, but his goal was achievement of Pakistan, defined and popularized in Bengal as a haven for Bengali Muslims. In 1947 however, he had not only started negotiations with Hindus, which by itself showed his inclusive tendency in politics, Suhrawardy was battling for the achievement of United Bengal, a state for all Bengalis, Hindus and Muslims. United Bengal was nothing if not a negation of Pakistan, though Suhrawardy never put it that way. With regard to the employment of ideologies in the service of politics, the chapters will show in greater detail how dogged pursuit of an ideology was not a priority, but also not possible. It is not that Haq, Nazimuddin and Suhrawardy had no ideas or ideals. They were new to a position of historic significance. They had constituencies to serve, including the British, in order to stay in power. Surviving a political tenure needed astute pragmatism. They had to constantly worry about a belligerent Hindu opposition, mostly of caste Hindus. It was in addressing recurring practical concerns that ideology was kept at bay. Their position as provincial leaders dealing with historical events like the war, famine, Quit India movement and Cabinet Mission Plan, imbued their politics with an urgency that others failed to appreciate. "In the pages that follow, I narrate the political lives of Bengal's three pre-independence chief ministers, now forgotten, to shed new light on a decade overshadowed by partition and independence history."