



## ACT OF 1935 AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR BENGAL

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The Government of India Act, 1935, laid down the process of attaining Dominion Status for India, a promise the British had conceded in 1931. Between the inconclusive Round Table Conferences in the earlier part of 1930s and the passage of the 1935 Act “the most crucial debate about decolonization took place.”<sup>47</sup> The Act provided that the center would get responsible government but only when 2/3 of the Princely States acceded to the federation. In all, the Act was a recognition that the “Raj would end,” but its unraveling would start in the provinces. The best known feature of the Act was the grant of provincial autonomy. For all the devolution of power, when provinces like Bengal, much like the other ten provinces, prepared to enjoy the fruits of the Government of India Act, its politics gradually began to tread uncharted territories. By giving each individual province a chance at self-governance, the British were not agreeing to discuss the eventual transfer of power with each province individually. This meant that the Act, instead of clarifying the path forward to Indian independence, actually complicated it. The Government of India Act 1935 had serious repercussions for national level politics, though at first the Act had nothing much to offer at the national level. In fact, the devolution of power at the provincial level was balanced by strengthening British hold at the center. While “more and more authority was entrusted to Indians” in the provinces, at the center the British Government’s powers were increased and tightened.<sup>48</sup> But because eventual discussions on transfer of power would necessitate parleys with national-level politicians, these leaders became “negotiators at the center.” They had to keep the provinces behind them, and in check.<sup>49</sup> As Anil Seal put it, the provincial leaders could “whip their own dogs, but no one else’s.” So, in the hope of a power settlement with the British that would be acceptable to national leaders and their political parties, the All India National Congress (henceforth Congress) and the All India Muslim League (henceforth Muslim League), got

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<sup>47</sup> W David McIntyre, *British Decolonization 1946-1997, When, Why and How Did the British Empire Fall?* (London Macmillan Press, 1998), 152.

<sup>48</sup> John Gallagher, Gordon Johnson, and Anil Seal, *Locality, Province and Nation : Essays on Indian Politics 1870 to 1940* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 269

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-5



down to increasing their control over their provincial chapters, now vested with increased powers. The Congress, which had been agitating for greater participation in the government, and the Muslim League, which had only recently started having a national presence, gained nothing much from the Act except perhaps symbolically, which admittedly, is not to be slighted. They had to wait their turn for their slices of real administrative power. They both remained all-India parties, whereas their provincial chapters prepared to fight the elections and join the government. In provinces like Bengal, the Raj secured for itself a range of new “collaborators,” who would be the members of the Assembly, the Council, and more importantly, the chief minister and his cabinet ministers. The governors in the provinces were entrusted with the risky business of overseeing how this new handout would work. The British governors remained skeptical. As opposed to national politics, provincial politics in 1937 occupied a privileged place as the first site on which the decolonization project commenced.<sup>50</sup> In Bengal, a province with a Muslim majority, the largest Muslim majority province in British India at that, the Act had an important implication for the provincial level politicians and their parties. They were given powers that challenged the authority of all-India political parties. Congress and Muslim League responded to this new challenge from provincial leaders by passing down ideologies and making aggressive demands that they be adhered to. Joya Chatterji’s work on Hindu politics in Bengal and Ayesha Jalal’s work on Mohammad Ali Jinnah and Muslim League politics offer Discussions on the Act of 1935 and its implications for India abound. Not all historians agree that the Act was intended to start the decolonization process. Gallagher for instance does not see the Act as preparing a stage for Britain’s exit. He sees the Act as “an adjustment in the methods of keeping their Indian connections while retaining intact most of its fundamental advantages.” See Gallagher’s essay “Congress in Decline”. There is consensus on the fact that provinces had new and increased powers. Convincing evidence of the many ways in which ideological tropes were used to keep provincial parties close to the central bodies.<sup>51</sup> The practice and the logic of using an ideology to keep together a community, however disparate, was not new. But all these works have also shown how ideologies are imprecise and utilizing them to sustain mass support for political demands needed techniques, unique to India at the period; and new reasoning. The implementation of the 1935 Act ushered in a period in colonial history where the very strength of ideologies- nationalism, communalism, secularism and separatism - was put to the test in Bengal. The

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 269

<sup>51</sup> Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided. Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League, and the Demand for Pakistan* (Cambridge New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).



decade before independence and partition, therefore, albeit important for tracing the histories that led to these twin cataclysmic events, hold value for understanding other related historical processes as well. The commencement of devolved colonial politics under the Act of 1935, one such process, raises some questions: How did the partnering of power between a British governor and an Indian ministry work out? What was the relationship between ideology and politics, and what change did it undergo with the onset of the war and the occurrence of a tragic famine? Considering Bengal entered a new phase of politics dominated by three Muslim chief ministers in a row, what implications did this have for Muslim separatist ideology or for the achievement of Pakistan? How closely were the fates of political parties associated with the career graphs of politicians? How did Bengal politics weigh in on the much debated question of inevitability of partition of India? To address these questions, I will use as my primary tool of inquiry the political careers of Bengal's three chief ministers in the decade before independence, Fazlul Haq<sup>52</sup> is point of discussion in the last colonial decade in Bengal, within which the tenures of these ministers fit easily. This is a study of Muslim high politics, with focus on the position of the chief minister, his decisions, his limitations, his politics and his failures. While this study certainly has elements of a political biography, it is more. The thrust of the narrative is not just to study these politicians in isolation from each other, one after the other, but to seek out threads of inter-connections among their tenures. These threads are long and they tie in with the larger preoccupations at the national level, prominent among which was Jinnah's urgent need for an ideology which would help him whip unruly provinces into submission. Essentially, their tenures represent an essaying of provincial concerns, dictated by particularities that did not matter at any other level, nation or locality. Together, they tell a story of the understudied high Muslim politics in these crucial years, one that is at variance with existing narratives on this period. The high political space is defined by the chief ministers' arenas of activity, responsibility and political associations. Special attention has been given to the legislative space these ministers worked in. Haq, Nazimuddin and Suhrawardy stand at the center of this political space that I investigate, and a study of British governors, Hindu and even Muslim politicians, significant as they are for the period under study, is only incidental, as is the analysis of political parties and constituencies. The sources I have used to conduct this research include official documents, reports, diaries, letters, political tracts and newspapers, in Bengali as well as English. This thesis is a study of political choices in the face of British

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<sup>52</sup> Gail Minault, *The Khilafat Movement : Religious Symbolism and Political Mobilization* in uses symbols- driven by Islamic ideology- to trace the development of political mobilization. Faisal Devji, *Muslim Zion : Pakistan as a Political Idea* (L: H ondonurst, 2013). Devji, discussing a later event, makes a similar case for political mobilization using the religious parallel of Zionism.



policies, nationalist politics and provincial particularities. Within political choices, I include everything from support of a bill to entering a coalition, every act that had political implications. This thesis argues that the imperative of surviving colonial legislative politics in Bengal left little room for furthering of any ideology. There were many ideologies with significant following in Bengal. There was nationalism, both the secular and the communal brand. Then there was communalism, an ideology that was adopted by believers sometimes for violence and sometimes for activism. Muslim nationalism and Muslim separatism were variants of the communal ideology that the Muslim community was distinct from the non-Muslim communities and the Muslims were a nation. While these ideologies were espoused by Haq, Nazimuddin and Suhrawardy at different points in their tenure, upon closer analysis, it becomes clear that often it was not much more than lip service, the motivation, almost always was pragmatism in politics. Their everyday politics, by which I mean their daily political negotiations, did not allow them to push ahead with any one ideological agenda. Espousing ideology was often means to an end, rather than an end in itself. Their style of politics being so radically different from one another, naturally their responses to political ideologies were different, but over all it was always the pressing concern of staying afloat, of enduring the next political challenge that forced the chief ministers to keep ideology at bay. This was often not a conscious decision but an unintended outcome of their politics and the political space they occupied. For a theoretical and methodological framework for this thesis, I look at Partha Chatterjee's article, "The Second Partition of Bengal." In that article he concludes that Joya Chatterji's central argument in her book *Bengal Divided. Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947*, where she traces the transformation in Hindu *bhadralok* from 'nationalism to communalism,' is "much too simplistic." Chatterjee goes on to explain instead that: "The story of this change must be sought among political strategies adopted for much shorter durations, in institutional arenas that involve only small numbers of people. One cannot tell this story without mentioning specific meetings and negotiations, without citing statements and declarations, indeed without sneaking behind particular people into particular smoke-filled offices. It is precisely because of the relevance of this level of political activity that there will always remain the possibility of telling 'secret histories' and 'untold stories' of events such as the partition."<sup>54</sup> This thesis is not organized around the event of partition or even independence. If anything, this thesis aspires to

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<sup>53</sup>Francis Robinson, *Separatism among Indian Muslims : The Politics of the United Provinces' Muslims, 1860-1923* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

<sup>54</sup> Partha Chatterjee, "The Second Partition of Bengal," in *Partition of India. Why 1947?*, ed. Kaushik Roy (New Delhi; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 152



arrive at these significant moments, encompassing within it an element of surprise. Historical literature on South Asia has taken partition to be one of its central problems, arising out of religious separatism and communalism, ideologies that created a rift between the Hindus and the Muslims. Discussions on why partition happened and the ever fascinating question of its inevitability abound.<sup>55</sup> This thesis does not complement that body of literature. Instead it looks at how Bengal (only Bengal) arrived at August 1947, implying that a nation-centric explanation is both insufficient and faulty. It does so by linking together “political strategies adopted for much shorter durations,” maybe days, maybe months. While this thesis exploits many “secret histories” in the process, it is not altogether dismissive of historical processes that unfold themselves over longer durations. In tracing the politics of “small numbers of people” (just three actually), and linking together “meetings,” “negotiations” and “statements,” this thesis is Namierite in execution. The closeness between this thesis and Lewis Namier’s conclusions that mid-eighteenth century British Parliamentarians cared more for “self interest” is incidental.<sup>56</sup> The final picture that emerges in this work is that of ten years of high politics, but its components are short duration political occurrences. While the last colonial decade in Bengal has generated a lot of intriguing scholarship from historians, activists, anthropologists and literary scholars, there has yet to be a substantial study of Bengali Muslim politics for the period under study Before<sup>57</sup> the time of “history from below,” Delhi was considered the most useful viewpoint from which to study the years leading to 1947. When the need to include provincial experiences became established, Punjab was deemed to be most important for

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<sup>55</sup> Asim Roy, "The High Politics of India's Partition: The Revisionist Perspective," *Modern Asian Studies* 24, no. 2 (1990). See for a historiographical study on the inevitability of partition.

<sup>56</sup> L. B. Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (London; New York: Macmillan; St. Martin's Press, 1957).

<sup>57</sup> Significant works on Bengal focus on Hindus or use them more often as a category of analysis. See J. H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society; Twentieth-Century Bengal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968). John Gallagher, "Congress in Decline: Bengal, 1930 to 1939," *Modern Asian Studies* 7, no. 03 (1973). Sekhar Bandopadhyay, "From Alienation to Integration: Changes in the Politics of Caste in Bengal, 1937-47," *Indian Economic & Social History Review* 31, no. 3 (1994). Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India : The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1997). Bidyut Chakrabarty, *The Partition of Bengal and Assam, 1932-1947* (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2004). Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided. Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal, 1905-1947* (Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).



the prepartition decade. By the time scholars started engaging with Bengal, a region that also underwent partition, the fascination with subaltern studies dictated a certain kind of work narrating people's experiences. Seminal works on Bengal have only looked at Hindus. There has been great hesitation in approaching the Muslim majority. Shila Sen's *Muslim Politics in Bengal, 1937-1947* and Harun or Rashid's *Bengal Muslim League and Muslim Politics, 1906-1947* deal with the period under review but their work is an analysis of the growth of Muslim League in Bengal.