LEGISLATIVE RESPONSES TO SOCIO-ECONOMIC ISSUES

At a crucial moment in the history of Bengal when the socio-economic environment had been undergoing stresses and strains in the last phase of the imperial rules, the Legislature had to continually respond to environmental issues as the custodian of public interest. In 1937, under the new Constitution the Bengal Legislative Assembly sat in two sessions in the Assembly House in Calcutta. The first session met on the 7th of April, 1937 to elect the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker. Eric Studd, Leader of the European Group was in the Chair. Almost all the members including five women members were present. It was reported that the galleries were packed to capacity by visitors including a large number of Hindu and Muslim women. It was noticeable that there was no police guard at the main gate of the chamber.

Adjournment Motions on Jute And Cotton Strikes

Before the commencement of the actual working of the House, the following motion tabled by Congress Labour member, Sibnath Banerjee, was moved by Congress member, Nalinakshya Sanyal - 'The House do adjourn to discuss a definite matter of urgent public importance, namely, the situation created by the interference of the local executive authority in connection with the Jute Mill Strike in the vicinity of Calcutta'. As the requisite number stood up in support of leave being granted, the Chairman announced that the motion would be taken up as soon as the Speaker

1 Indian Annual Register, 1937, vol. 1, p. 150.
and the Deputy Speaker were elected. Only one Muslim member opposed the motion. Another motion of a similar nature in connection with the Cotton Mill Strike at Kusthia was moved but it was not pressed in view of the fact that two adjournment motions could not be discussed at the same sitting.

Election of Speaker And Deputy Speaker

Then the question of the election of the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker came. At first there were five candidates to contest for Speakership and they were P. Banerjee, Khan Bahadur Hashem Ali Khan, Azizul Huq, Kumar Shib Sekhareswar Roy and Tamizuddin Khan. The former two withdrew from the contest. Of the remaining three, Azizul Huq obtained 116 votes, Shib Sekhareswar Roy 83 and Tamizuddin Khan 42. Azizul Huq was supported by the Coalition Party and the European Group. By process of elimination Tamizuddin Khan went out and votes were polled again. Then Azizul Huq obtained 159 votes and Shib Sekhareswar Roy got 81 votes. The defeated candidate S.S. Roy, former President of the Bengal Legislative Council and also a former Minister for Local Self Government, was supported by the Congress. Thus Azizul Huq was elected Speaker of the Assembly. In this election of the Speaker, the Congress committed the 'Second Himalayan blunder' - its refusal to form coalition with the Krishak Proja Party was considered as first blunder. In the election of the Speaker, if the Congress supported Tamizuddin Khan, the Krishak Proja Party candidate (led by Shamsuddin Ahmed), then by simple calculation Tamizuddin could get 125 votes against 116 for Azizul Huq. There would have been a possibility of a
first blow to the Coalition Party and to the Europeans.\(^3\)

For the post of the Deputy Speaker there were four contestants. The election for the Deputy Speaker also started on the same day and was finalised on the next day. Ashraf Ali Khan Chowdhury won the election. The session was a short-lived one, of two days only.

After the election of the Speaker the Chief Minister, Fazlul Huq felicitated the new Speaker on behalf of the Ministerial party and said that in all countries (where there are Parliamentary governments) legislatures rightly assigned the place of honour to the Speaker. He hoped that in the discharge of his duties, the Speaker would receive co-operation from all the parties in the House.\(^4\) On the other hand, the Opposition Leader in the House and also the leader of the Congress Party, Sarat Chandra Bose said that the Congress Party in the House was out to combat the Constitution. They intended to carry on their work with that objective and in that work he did not expect the Speaker's support. But he hoped that the Speaker would give assistance by giving rulings in a manner which would be consistent with justice and fair play.\(^5\) Other representative members like Shamsuddin Ahmed on behalf of the Proja Party, Eric Studd from European Group, Niharendu Dutta Mazumdar from Bengal Parliamentary Peasant and Labour Party, and Tamisuddin Ahmed congratulated the Speaker. On behalf of the Ulema Group Moulana Sanaullah also congratulated the Speaker whom he regarded as the nominee of the Jamat-ul-Ulema and recommended by Hazrat Abu Bakr.\(^6\)

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On April 8, 1937 the House took the previous day's adjournment motion on jute strike which had already drawn the attention of the British Parliament. The Under Secretary of State for India had been asked by the member Sorensen whether he was aware that 75,000 jute workers were on strike in India and that it might lead to a general strike in the jute industry. He also wanted to know whether trade union leaders had been arrested or externed from the strike area and whether he would state the wages of jute workers and the nature of the demand of the strikers. The Under Secretary of State for India, Butler replied that he understood that between 55,000 and 60,000 workers were involved in the strike, which was then limited to certain mills, south of Calcutta. The strikers were almost entirely unorganised, but a trade union was reported to have been formed in the Budge Budge area where the strike began. Two persons described as labour leaders from Calcutta were arrested on March 5, for alleged intimidation of workers who refused to strike and since that date, an order had been issued prohibiting the Secretary of the newly formed union and certain others described as labour leaders from entering the area under the control of Budge Budge Police Station. The scale of wages was on an average Rs. 20/- per mensem, but it was not uniform and varied considerably for different classes of workers. The strike began with the dismissal of workers for short returns. The strikers' demands included reinstatement of dismissed workers, restoration of a wage cut made in 1932, no victimisation and recognition of the union of Budge Budge. The strikes, however, were intensified because the elections at the beginning of the year gave

the agitators an admirable opportunity to extend their influence and organise support. According to the Government of India records, the extravagant promises made by candidates of all parties in search of votes prepared the workers to believe the assurances that employers would be afraid to refuse demands however wild, or could be easily forced to concede them. The result was a series of strikes for which the ostensible reason was the redress of grievances more or less trivial or the demand for concessions obviously impossible, but which the organisers designed to serve different ends. It was widely believed that funds for the support of the strike in the jute mills came from speculators in the Calcutta jute market whose object was to raise the price of hessians. And it soon became clear that 'professional politicians' were deliberately attempting through incessant underground propaganda and the organised intimidation of contended workers, to infuse Indian industry with communism. Contrary to this, Nalinakshya Sanyal in the Bengal Legislative Assembly narrated the pitiable condition of the workers in the Jute Mill areas and referred to the promulgation of 144 Cr. P.C. surrounding the places of strikes. He also said that there was executive influence of the Government in the said areas. Other Congress and Labour members, Santosh Kumar Basu, Sibnath Banerjee and Niharendu Dutta Mazumdar spoke in support of the motion as mentioned before. Here it may be pointed out that the labour leaders had to depend on agitational impact. A.R. Siddiqui, also supported the motion and appealed to the Opposition to give the Cabinet time to study the situation and come to a decision. He also requested the Cabinet to take the

9 Interview with Sibnath Banerjee (24.8.82) and Niharendu Datta Mazumdar (5.7.85) by the author.
matter into their hands instead of leaving it in the hands of the executive.

Replies were given calmly by the Labour and Commerce Minister, H.S. Suhrawardy. He said that the Government was moving in the matter and would soon come out with its policy for bringing closer contact between the employers and the employees. Khwaja Nazimuddin, the Home Minister, characterised the strikes in India as politically motivated, which in all other countries were legitimate means for the labour to get their grievances redressed. Regarding the promulgation of the order under Section 144 Cr. P.C. on April 1, he said that the Government had received information that there was going to be a militant hartal on that day as declared by the Congress Socialist Party, which aimed at stopping ordinary business and public utility services and he thought that the Government was justified in taking action to prevent such a situation.\(^{10}\) The Home Minister particularly mentioned the case of Howrah where no restraint was imposed in advance and riot or attack on people or looting of shops and throwing of brickbats at the mill gates at Fort Gloster took place. He quoted a part of a published notice - 'People are begged to observe the strike. If any "sala" does not do so, then he will be hit on the head with a lathi. The Chief Minister, however, tried to soothe the strikers and promised to call a conference of leaders of the strikers at which he along with the Labour Minister would discuss the matter from various points of view in order to arrive at a settlement'.\(^{11}\)

\(^{10}\) B.L.A.P., vol. L, pp. 47-49.

\(^{11}\) Ibid, p. 51 ("sala" - slang Bengali word for brother-in-law, i.e., wife's brother).
The Ministers were criticised for their statements. It was said that the statement of the Labour Minister contained nothing but words and the criticism went somewhat on communal line, like this: 'It is known that 75,000 Muslim labourers have also joined the strike. What are Mr. Suhrawardy and Mr. Huq doing for them?'

After one day the Ananda Bazar Patrika also criticised the Government's policy on strike. Their Anglo-Indian counterpart from another viewpoint stated that those responsible for the jute strike in Calcutta had not been able to establish their bona fides. Their motive had been so clearly political that their 'hot denial' would not convince anybody. Their had been more reasons behind the strike. One object certainly was to discredit the Bengal Ministry. Another was to strengthen the hold of the new Labour MLAs on their electorates. The strike was carefully timed so as 'to synchronise with provincial autonomy'. That was as clear as noonday sun and there was not an iota of exaggeration in Fazlul Huq's complaint. Matters were not improved by asserting that the demands were economic. The manner and setting in which they appeared would antagonise all impartial men.

In the beginning of the year 1937 there was an 'epidemic of strikes' especially in jute mills at Fort Gloster, Ganges and Howrah Mills, Budge Budge Mills and at the Mills of Uluberia areas on the opposite banks of the Hooghly, etc. One or the other of the following names, Suresh Banerjee, Sibnath Banerjee, Miharendu Dutta Mazumdar, A.M.A. Zaman— all MLAs, and Soumendranath Tagore was associated with practically every meeting protest, strike or other activity of labour. It is significant that these names also recurred in

connection with the meetings organised to further the Congress-Communist Campaign among the cultivators. The Ministry, however, decided for the first time to change radically the traditional approach of the Government of complete neutrality towards industrial disputes, by endeavouring to investigate the source of trouble and to bring the opposing parties to agreement. The Ministry established a Labour Department. In July 1938 the Labour Commissioner and the Assistant Labour Commissioner were appointed Conciliation Officers under the Indian Trades Disputes Act, 1929. They also undertook an intensive study of the Trade Union Movement with a view to the definite recognition of such organisations as would be genuine and not mere cloaks for the propaganda of revolutionary ideas. The Government were promoting and encouraging the formation of trade unions run for the benefit of the labourers on sound and reasonable lines and were not only granting those trade unions their own recognition but also securing for them the recognition of the employers. In 1938 (from April to December) and 1939 the Labour Commissioner and the Assistant Labour Commissioner dealt with 153 major and 322 minor disputes.

The Workmen's Protection Act, 1934, was in operation in Calcutta, in the districts of 24-Parganas, Hooghly, Howrah, Amansol Sub-division of Burdwan district and certain parts of Chittagong. That continued to offer protection to the workmen against oppression of professional money lenders. But that was not enough. To amend the Bengal Workman's Protection Act 1934, a Bill was introduced in the Legislature in 1939. The main purpose of the new

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16 Ibid, p. 17.
17 Two Years of Provincial Autonomy, Govt. of Bengal, 1939, p. 86.
Bill was to prevent effectively the besetting of places (where the workmen received their wages) by the professional money-lenders who used to recover their dues as a first charge. Moreover it wanted to bring in workmen employed by a local authority or a public utility service and also the Seamen within the protection afforded by the law. It was passed into law on April 25, 1940. In addition, new social and labour legislations in the form of (1) the Payment of Wages Act, (2) the Employment of Children Act, (3) the Bengal Maternity Benefit Act and (4) the Factories (Amendment) Act, 1940 created additional work and responsibilities on the Factories and the Government.

On March 13, 1940, the Minister for Industries, Tamizuddin Ahmed stated in the Assembly that the question of surveying the industrial position in Bengal, its problems and difficulties and the possibilities of future industrial expansion had been referred to the Bengal Industrial Survey Committee. That was also known as Mafthal Committee as Sir John Mafthal was its Chairman. The Committee so far submitted two schemes, one on the marketing of cottage industry products and the other on the development of electricity in relation to industries in Bengal. The steps had been taken by the Government to assess those proposals. The Scheme formulated by the Industrial Survey Committee was particularly important for the recuperation of cottage industry products where marketing and financing were serious problems. The Minister expected that out of schemes suggested by the Committee, the Government should be able to devise some such methods and measures as would be of substantial assistance to the industries of the Province.
While speaking on the Budget next year, the Minister said, 'coming to the industrial schemes included in this budget, I would first of all refer to the marketing of cottage industry products in Bengal at an estimated expenditure of Rs. 2,26,000/-. For one single scheme this is no doubt a high estimate but even so, I would submit that this is just the beginning of a really big scheme which we have in view. The scheme is based mainly on the recommendations of the Bengal Industrial Survey Committee and on its success would depend its further expansion'.

Immediately after assuming power the Government had to face jute strikes. In the face of the scathing criticism from the Opposition in the Assembly the Ministers took firm decisions, and through the intervention of the Chief Minister along with the Labour Minister, strikes were withdrawn. Afterwards, the Government formulated its labour policy and gave trade union facilities to the labourers under its protection.

Wind Of Change

The autumn session of 1938 started on the 29th of July and coincided with a demonstration denouncing the Ministry, which was organised by the Provincial Congress Committee and the Trade Union Congress. The opening day was rather quiet, there being no opportunity for a trial of strength. But the Opposition whips were in a rather jubilant mood as things were moving according to their plans. Outwardly, there was considerable reshuffling in the sitting arrangements. Some members who used to sit on the right side of the Speaker in the Coalition benches crossed to the other side.
and took their own seats among the Opposition members. Notable among them were Nausher Ali and the followers of Tamizuddin Khan. Obviously what was happening on the surface, had deeper roots within. On the one hand, there were differences of opinion between the Chief Minister and the Health Minister Nausher Ali which followed a lengthy correspondence between the two.\(^\text{19}\) This ultimately led to announcing the resignation of the whole Ministry. Fazlul Huq dropped Nausher Ali from the Cabinet and formed another Ministry within one hour. On the other, some Proja MLAs under the leadership of Tamizuddin Khan dissociated themselves from the Coalition Party and formed the Independent Proja Party. There was also news that the Congress was trying to form a Coalition with the Proja party.\(^\text{20}\) Others who moved to the left of the Speaker were the members of the Independent Scheduled Caste Group, who under the leadership of Hem Chandra Naskar dissociated themselves from the Coalition Group.

An innovation in the Assembly House was introduced in marking off portions of different blocks by red tapes. It was said that this was only a tentative arrangement and when respective strength of different parties and groups would be known more definitely separate blocks would be assigned to different groups doing away with the necessity for such thin barrier as red tape.

At first two adjournment motions were moved in the House.

One was moved by Surendra Nath Biswas on behalf of the Congress Party to discuss the alleged omission of the Government to devise ways and means to enable the jute growers to obtain an economic price for jute. The other adjournment motion was moved on behalf

\(^\text{19}\) Hindusthan Standard, June 24, 1938.

of the Krishak Pronto Party by Jalaluddin Hashemy to discuss the alleged indifference and apathy of the Government in the matter of affording relief to the people affected by recent floods in Bengal. Both the motions were disallowed by the Speaker. The Government opposed them on the ground that the House would have an opportunity of discussing those matters in the course of a few days while considering the Supplementary Budget Estimates amounting to Rs. 49 lakhs.

Of the sum of 49 lakhs, one lakh of rupees was required for the remaining part of the current year to create a separate Publicity Department to be placed in charge of the Director of Public Information with three Assistant Directors. The first Director of the Department was Altaf Hossain. He organised it with full-fledged powers and established its real importance. He was no doubt unparalleled in founding the tradition of Publicity Policy in Bengal to which his successors could add very little. Though a Bengali, he himself was anti-Bengali and had contemptuous attitude to the rising trend of the Bengali Muslim politics. He fully advocated the League-influenced opinion. He was also engaged in political activities. It was all very secret but it could be guessed from outside. Though Publicity was the Department of Fazlul Huq, Altaf Hussain had no high respect for him.21

**Trial Of Strength**

The most striking incident in the Bengal Assembly during the year was the no-confidence motions against all the ten individual members of the Cabinet. It was the first occasion since the introduction of Provincial Autonomy in Bengal that the 'no-
confidence' motions had been brought. The Opposition groups stood en bloc for all the motions, as many as 110 members rising for the motion. On August 8, the House met in an atmosphere of wild excitement in and outside the House. The public galleries were overcrowded and there was a very large attendance. The members were present almost in their full strength.

The Independent Scheduled Caste member, Dhananjoy Roy moved that the House had no-confidence in the Maharaja Sris Chandra Nandy of Cossimbazar, Minister for Communications. Only the mover and the Minister spoke and the motion was defeated by 130 to 111 votes. An analysis of the voting on the first no-confidence motion showed that of the 111 members who voted in support of the motion, 53 belonged to the Congress Party (in full strength), 18 to the Krishak Proja Party, 15 to the Independent Scheduled Caste Party, 14 to the Independent Proja Party, five to the Nationalist Party, two Indian Christians, two members of the Independent Labour Party, one Anglo-Indian and one representative of the garden labour. The 130 members who voted against the motion, included 82 members of the Coalition Party, 23 Europeans, nine Scheduled Caste members, the ten Ministers, four members of the Nationalist Party and two Anglo-Indians. Maulvi Abdul Hakim of the Krishak Proja Party, Kasem Ali Mirza and Mohammed Ibrahim of the Independent Proja Party remained neutral.

The Labour MLA, Aftab Ali moved the second motion against H.S. Suhrawardy. His main point was that during the sixteen months Suhrawardy had been the Labour Minister, he had created a spirit of unrest and discontent amongst the Labour force and he had also

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created divisions in their ranks by starting rival organisations. Santosh Kumar Basu, a Congress member supported the motion and severely criticised the general policy of the Cabinet as a whole. He asked the Cabinet to ponder how long they would continue to be in office with the support of the European Group in the House and he also asked the latter in the House to ponder whether they would perpetually take upon themselves the onus of deciding which form of Government there should be in Bengal. He further charged the Ministry with favouritism and nepotism of the worst type.

George Campbell, the Leader of the European Group in the House explained their attitude towards the present Ministry and specially in respect of the 'no-confidence' motions against it. He claimed that his party had a definite stake in the country, and had a definite interest in its welfare. If they did not take their fullest part in the debate in the House, they would be shirking their duty. 'We have no more than any other Party in this House', declared Campbell, 'any special association with Government and are only here to see that there is good government in this province. Here we have a Coalition Ministry that has been 17 months in office, consisting at the moment of 5 Moslems and

23 It may be mentioned that while announcing the achievements of the Government, it had been stated that, 'In order that the Labour population should be able to organise itself on sound lines taking its stand on just and reasonable demands pursue its disputes with the employers to a successful conclusion, and in order also that the labourers may have a correct notion of their relationship with the employers and their proper place in the economic wealth production Government are promoting and encouraging the formation of trade unions run for the benefit of the labourers on sound and reasonable lines and are granting these trade unions not only their own recognition but also securing for them the recognition of the employers'.

Two Years of Provincial Autonomy, Govt. of Bengal 1939, p. 86.
5 Hindus. And I venture to say that to the best of the ability it is trying to carry on the Government of this Province'.

To the credit side of the Ministry, Campbell said that they had done well in handling finance and the administration of law and order. But he expressed regret that they had perhaps failed to stop the demonstration which took place that very day. He praised the restraint displayed by the Congress in deciding not to stage a counter-demonstration on that day. George ventured the opinion that his party might find it difficult to trust a new Ministry with the likely inclusion of members who had withdrawn their allegiance from the party under whose wings they had entered the Assembly. He disliked defection. He firmly concluded that as it had been the declared policy of the European Party to support the Ministry so long as it acted on constitutional lines, they could not possibly act inconsistently by not supporting the Coalition Government at the critical juncture.

The debate on 'no-confidence' against Suhrawardy continued till August 10. Supporting this motion Shyamaprasad Mookerjee commented in a general way on the policy and programme of the Government and tried to establish the points on want of confidence on the Ministry and on law and order. Sarat Chandra Bose remarked that the criticism of the works of the Ministry during the past 16 months could be summed up in three words 'want of policy'. In the matter of communal interest, the activities of the Government could be summed up in three words also - 'Raising communal passion'. He also talked about the programme in case the 'no-confidence'

25 Ibid, p. 36.
against the present Ministry was successful and the Opposition came to power.

Suhrawardy, replying to the charges against them, remarked that the programme which had been read out by Sarat Chandra Bose before the House, was exactly the same as the one the existing Ministry was seeking to carry out excepting in minor details. He claimed that the labour policy of their Ministry was the most successful in India. He had introduced a comprehensive scheme for the improvement of the lot of the labour population and reiterated that the Ministry in all its activities, was trying 'to deal out even-handed justice to all and to give the under-dog the rights and privileges that he had been denied so long'.

Winding up the debates, the Premier challenged the criticism and the charges of nepotism of the Opposition and said, 'My short reply to the charges that have been made by Mr. Abdul Hakeem and supported this afternoon by Mr. Upendra Nath Burman is this : the whole catalogue is a catalogue of atrocious lies from the beginning to the end. I say solemnly with all the responsibility that has devolved upon me as Chief Minister that I have not, during my term of office as Chief Minister or Education Minister, given any appointment to any near or distant relation of mine, in any posts anywhere in any Department of Government Service'. He appealed to make an enquiry into the allegations. If it was found that there was the slightest suspicion of nepotism against him he would tender his resignation and would ask the European Group to withhold its support from the Ministry. Continuing he said that not only had his Ministry a programme which could be compared

favourably with the programme of Ministries in other Provinces, but the Ministry had also tried its level best to implement that programme. Then he explained the working of the programme item by item and showed that they had appointed a Land Revenue Commission and both the Houses had passed the Bengal Tenancy (Amendment) Bill. In this connection he pointed out that in other provinces their counterpart had not been able to make any progress in respect of any tenancy legislation of the character of the Bengal Tenancy Bill and that the Bill which had been sponsored by the Bengal Ministry conferred very substantial rights to the tenants. He detailed the achievements of the Ministry in respect of solving the problem of rural indebtedness, marketing of jute, primary education and the release of detenues.

The 'no-confidence' motion against the Labour Minister was rejected by the House without a division. The House similarly rejected the next one moved by P.R. Thakur, a Scheduled Caste member against Mukunda Behari Mallick. The seven other motions of 'no-confidence' against the other Ministers were not moved and the House was adjourned till August 15. On that day the Opposition for the second time measured their strength against the Government when the amendment of Abdul Hakim, an Independent Proja member seeking to reduce the supplementary demands for one lakh of rupees to one rupee in regard to Publicity Department was rejected by the House by 123 votes to 103. The entire European bloc save one voted with the Government. W.C. Wordsworth remained neutral.

Some Critical Issues

In the remaining days of the session the Ministry faced more criticism. On August 16, the Scheduled Caste members of the Opposition attacked the Government for its lack of a definite policy and sufficient provision for the development of the backward classes. This was raised when the Chief Minister moved a supplementary grant of Rs. 5,35,000 under Education-General. In his speech he maintained that he was greatly solicitous for the welfare of the backward communities and denied the charges levelled against the government. The entire supplementary budget demands were passed without any division.

The temper on both sides of the House still continued to be frayed. This was clear when there was a sudden flare-up on August 18 during interpellations. The root cause laid in the question asked by Nalinakshya Sanyal about certain appointments which, he alleged, were made over the head of the public service commission. The normal business of the House, namely, consideration of the Bengal Maternity Benefit Bill receded to the background and the whole interest centred on the unexpected development. This time the Opposition Deputy Leader, T.C. Goswami figured prominently. The Charges of 'liars' and 'thieves' were hurled across the floor of the House and the Speaker had to call several members of the treasury bench as well as of the Opposition benches to order in a very stern voice. Confusion prevailed for a while, several members rising from their seats at a time and the voice of the Speaker appeared to have been drowned in the chaos that prevailed. Finally both Fazlul Huq and Tulsi Goswami withdrew their
unparliamentary expressions. The echo did not die out in the next day's sitting.

During this time three non-official resolutions got prominence, one such was on the compulsory free retirement of Government officials sponsored by Opposition Scheduled Caste members Jogendra Nath Mandal. He stated, 'This Assembly is of the opinion that with a view to curtailing the cost of administration and minimising the unemployment problem to a certain degree, the compulsory retirement of all Government officials in the Provincial and Subordinate Services be effected on the completion of 25 years service'. But the Finance Minister urging the mover to withdraw the resolution argued that the policy advocated in it was a short-sighted one and he maintained that if the Government adopted this policy it would in the long run, lead to increased expenditure.

Half a dozen members including three members of the Ministerialist Party, spoke in support of the resolution which though opposed by a few, was carried without any division. The next resolution moved by Abdul Majid was on the immediate introduction of free and compulsory primary education in Bengal. This has been discussed along with Education.

The third non-official resolution moved by Mian Abdul Hafiz of the Coalition Party and amended by Abdul Majid of the same Party sought to fix the percentage of appointments in various branches of the public services and civil posts (temporary and permanent) as follows: Muslims 60, Scheduled Castes 20, and the rest 20. Another amendment moved by Ramizuddin Ahmed seeking to fix the percentage of 70 for Muslims, 15 for the Scheduled Castes and 15 for the

30 B.L.A.P., vol. LIII, No. 4, p. 89.
The rest was rejected by 115 to 31 votes. The Congress, the Independent Scheduled Caste Party, the unattached members and two Europeans remained neutral, while the Ministers, a majority of the Europeans and some non-Congress Hindu members voted against the amendment. A sharp rebuke to the Ministerialists was administered on behalf of the Europeans by Curtis Miller who seemed to be disillusioned by the exhibition of communal tendencies by the rank and file of the supporters of the Cabinet.

According to Abul Mansur Ahmed, the Ministry faced criticism boldly and there was a feeling that though the public opinion would not regard it as an ideal one, there was no possibility of the formation of any better government than this. Such was the general Muslim public opinion at that time. A section of the Hindus also had faith in Huq Ministry. This had been reflected by a famous comment of Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy. When in a discussion with Acharya Roy, Abul Mansur Ahmed sternly criticised Fazlul Huq and his Government and justified the impending no-confidence motion, Acharya Roy who had great faith in Fazlul Huq reacted. He tried to impress upon A. Mansur Ahmed by saying that Fazlul Huq was 'a symbol of Hindu-Muslim unity' in Bengal. So he must not be removed.

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32 Abul Mansur, op. cit., p. 175.
33 Ibid., pp. 177-78.
P.C. Roy’s touching comment about Fazlul Huq to Abul Mansur Ahmed was like this:

What you have said are the questions of politics. I am not talking about politics. I am saying about the future of the Bengali nation. Above political truth there is one great truth. That is the existence of Bengali nation. The future of the Bengali nation depends on the Hindu-Muslim unity. Fazlul Huq is the symbol of that unity. I do not understand the Indian nationalism of the Congressmen. I understand Bengali nationalism. Only Fazlul Huq can establish this nationalism. Fazlul Huq is a real Bengali from head to tail and at the same time
In the meantime floods affected some parts of the Province. Throughout September 1938 the Ministers were largely occupied in visiting those flood-affected places and the Governor and the Chief Minister issued appeals for funds for flood relief purposes. It was said that 15 out of the 26 districts of the Province had suffered flood damage. The Government took prompt action which comprised of agricultural loans totalling Rs. 30 lakhs, gratuitous relief amounting to Rs. 3 lakhs and Rs. 1 lakh for test relief works. However, these measures did not satisfy certain section of the Opposition and at the end of October, rumours were again current regarding a reconstitution of the Ministry.

This time, the speculation was that the Cabinet would be reconstituted with the inclusion of the Krishak Proja Party of Shamsuddin Ahmed and Tamizuddin Khan. The demands were: reduction of ministerial salaries, reduction of rents, introduction of free compulsory primary education without further taxation of the raiyats, fixation of a minimum price of jute, release of political prisoners by a specified date, and reservation for Muslims of 60 per cent of all Government appointments. On the basis of these demands the correspondence between Fazlul Huq and Humayun Kabir MLC, Convenor of the 'Opposition Negotiation Committee' was published in the Press on November 4. In the second half of the

he is a real Muslim from head to tail. I have never seen such an amalgamation between pure Bengalism and pure Muhammedanism. I am not saying this because Fazlul Huq is my student. I am saying this because it is a truth. The future of Bengali nationalism is the harmony of pure Bengalism and pure Islamism, Fazlul Huq is the replica of that harmony. Please, you do not break that symbol. You please do not disregard Fazlul Huq. Listen Mansur, I am telling you, if the Bengalis do not give proper respect to Fazlul Huq, then they will have to suffer for it. (Free translation by the author from Bengali).
month the negotiations resulted in the reconstitution of the Cabinet with the addition of Tamizuddin Khan and Shamsuddin Ahmed.

The Ministry had overcome the censure of the Opposition and in the trial of strength the Opposition lost in all the no-confidence motions against individual members. The Ministry of Fazlul Huq so far, gained strength in the House and popularity among the people.

Appointment Of Land Revenue Commission

Immediately after assuming office the Ministry according to its promise, had been contemplating to give effect to the first item of the programme. It promised to set up a Commission to make recommendations to reform the existing land revenue system in Bengal based on the Permanent Settlement. But for sometime the Ministry could not take any step. The various groups of the Opposition in the Assembly were pressing this point hard in the House as well as through newspapers. The Congress, the Krishak Proja Party, which broke off from the Nikhil Banga Krishak Party and the Independent Proja Party were vocal on this issue. So the Government decided to appoint a Land Revenue Commission. It was appointed by Government Resolution No. 22716-L.R. of the 5th November 1938. 34

34 The following were the personnel of the Commission:—

Sir Francis Floud (Chairman), Sir Bijoy Mahtab, Mr. M.O. Carter (Member Secretary), Khan Bahadur Saiyed Maizamuddin Hosain M.L.C., Khan Bahadur Maulvi Hashim Ali Khan M.L.A., Mr. S.M. Masih, Bar-at-Law, Khan Bahadur, M.A. Momin, Sir Manmuth Nath Mookerjee, Dr. Radha Kumud Mookerjee, Mr. Brajendra Kishore Ray Chowdhury, Sir F.A. Sachse.

Mr. Masih did not join the Commission and Sir M.N. Mookerjee resigned in January 1939.
There was uproar in the House on April 7 over the appointment of a European Chairman of the Commission. It was also criticised by the Press. Rezaul Karim expressed the general view in his comment and regretted that throughout India they (the Government) could not find a single Indian worthy of holding the post of the President of Land Revenue Commission, and hence they appointed a European in the teeth of opposition from the people.\footnote{35 Hindusthan Standard, September 11, 1938, a special article.}

The Commission, however, assembled on the 19th of November 1938 and its first meeting was attended by the Revenue Minister, Bijoy Prasad Sinha Roy. After extensive tour in Bengal and the Provinces of Madras, the Punjab and the United Provinces the Commission submitted its report on the 27th of July 1940.

The majority of the members of the Commission held that the Permanent Settlement and the Zamindari System it had confirmed, were out of touch with the modern conditions and recommended that all interest in land rent should be taken over by the Government with payment of compensation and that a ryotwari system should be introduced so as to convert the cultivators into Government tenants.\footnote{36 Report, Paragraph 80 to 88, p. 96.} The general opinion was that any drastic change of the position should be postponed till after the war. Towards the end of 1940 the Government appointed an officer, C.W. Gurner to examine the recommendations of the Commission, to summarise its conclusions and to suggest means which could be adopted to implement the recommendations. The report of Gurner along with the recommendations of the Commission were placed for discussion on the table of the Assembly on July 28, 1941. The Congress Party was conspicuously absent. Bijoy Prasad Sinha Roy, initiating the discussion on the report of the Commission, delivered a long speech detailing the...
recommendations of the Commission and also the report of the special officer. He did not give any indication as to the intentions of the Government with regard to the subject. For this he was attacked by Jalaluddin Hashemy of the Krishak Proja Party.

The main recommendations of the Commission, however, could be divided under four heads, namely, (1) State acquisition of all Zamindaries and rent receiving interest above the lowest grade of cash paying undor-raiyats, (2) imposition of agricultural income tax, (3) tenancy reforms and (4) measure for improving the economic conditions of the cultivators. In the course of discussion, Niharendu Dutta Mazumdar congratulated the European member, Chippendale, who characterised the Zamindar as the useful scapegoat and as the buffer between the State and the people, who bear the brunt of the burden of the people's wrath on his shoulder. The Zamindars had been made scapegoat behind which the Government wanted to hide their misdeeds. Niharendu Dutta Mazumdar also stated in the House that the pressure on land increased and the Government made the entire middle classes of Bengal depend on land rent or some share of it. The result was that industry and commerce had not grown in this province. Crusades against 'non-Bengalees' coming to Bengal and monopolising her industry, trade and commerce had been heard. He further said, 'This state of affairs was a direct product of the land revenue system. Those who might have otherwise gone forward in industrial enterprise, who might have devoted their initiative and energy for the creation of other means of living - the corresponding classes of which have been enterprising traders and merchants in Ahmedabad and other parts of India - remained as intermediary raiyats between

Government and landlords. It is the cumulative effect of that process which nurtured the developing crisis of the social and economic life of Bengal .... It is the direct outcome of Government's policy. By that policy they created an army of unemployed, they shut out avenues of employment for the vast majority of our people between the Government and the landlords'.39 Maharaja Uday Chand Mahtab was not satisfied with the proposed system of compensation and he was against agricultural income-tax.

Abdul Latif Biswas supported the recommendations. On behalf of the Scheduled Castes, Rasik Lal Biswas also supported the recommendations of the Commission. The Opposition Leader Sarat Chandra Bose in his lengthy speech criticised the delay in the appointment of the Commission and also delay in making its final recommendations. He also referred to the resolution of the Lucknow Congress. According to him the delay was unnecessary. At the end of the discussion there were some altercations. In spite of long discussions, no action was taken. The plain thing was that the recommendations of the Land Revenue Commissions were not implemented. But its report became the basis for future land reforms.

Detenu: Question

The unconditional release of detenus was a plank in the platform of many candidates to the legislature during the general election. Bengal had a 'record of conspiracy and outrage' and political agitation here was deeply imbued with the ideas of revolutionary violence. Because of this the Government of Bengal was not as ready as those of the Congress Provinces to repeal the

'repressive legislation of old regime'. 'A much more awkward inheritance for the new Government than the "repressive" laws of the previous regime were the "victims", as the Congress put it, of those laws'. So the release of 'those victims' or political prisoners and detenus was one of the programme of the League-Proja Government in addition to the repeal of repressive laws. It was also included in the programme with the provision that 'this must be consistent with public safety'. The release of political prisoners was posed by the Congress in Bengal as an important issue. Indeed this was the issue on which the talk on Congress-Proja Coalition which took place at the House of J.C. Gupta failed. While the Proja Party wanted to place Tenancy Reforms and Money Lenders questions as priorities on the programme and the release of detenus afterwards, the Congress insisted on placing the release of political prisoners prior to the Tenancy Reforms and the like. Both the parties insisting on their order of priorities tried to show the relative importance of the respective issues. Ultimately the midnight drama ended in fiasco. In this connection it may be recalled that the Congress High Command was against any coalition as a matter of policy.

Whatever might be the reason for the failure of League-Congress entente talk, the problem of the release of political prisoners was very much there and the League-Proja Coalition Party had to face it. The Nationalist Press was a staunch critique of the Government in this respect. When Fazlul Huq took office, no less than 2,304 persons were being detained without trial, under

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the Bengal Criminal Law Amendment Act or other Regulations. Those prisoners were presumed to be members of secret 'terrorist societies'. Of these 1,152 were in jails or detention camps and the rest confined to their homes or villages. 41

The release of Subhas Chandra Bose in March was generally welcomed. This naturally led to the demand that the release of others should follow. The next three months were preoccupied with other important matters as the jute mills strike, the coronation and the controversy in Congress circles over 'office acceptance'. So it could not come to the forefront again until July, when the second session of the Legislature was about to begin.

In his address to the joint session of the Legislature the Governor, Sir John Anderson, along with some matters of Constitutional interest, referred to the question of detenus and stressed on the Ministers' and the Governor's responsibility in that matter. The character and criminality of the numerous detenus and convicts were widely varying. Some were connected with 'terrorist' movement, some were connected with murder or attempt to murder and there was charge of dacoity or gang robbery against some other persons. So, on the one hand, there were those who had committed to violence and on the other there were persons connected with violence. But in the eyes of the Congress in general, there was no distinction between the two. The only connotation they understood, was the 'repression' of the Government against the detenus.

In the July session of the Assembly in 1937 the Government had to face stringent criticism from the Congress Opposition bench. Actually the detenus in general provided the Congress with a very

41 Coupland, op. cit., p. 31.
convenient stick to beat the Ministry and an agitation in the press and on the platform naturally prefaced fireworks in the Assembly. In his statement to the press Subhas Bose's 'malicious attack' on Bengal Premier showed mainly two types of reaction to political affairs - one of those outside power and other of those in power. Subhas Bose said, 'The chameleon changes its colour and the Hon'ble Mr. Fazlul Huq his words. It is, therefore, not surprising that Mr. Huq has sent to the press a statement with a view to whitewashing what he said very recently at Barisal regarding the release of political prisoners and detenus. At Barisal he spoke of weighty reasons which have made it impossible for the Government generally to release detenus without causing disturbance of public peace and serious breach of law and order. Before his audience there, he confessed that in the past he had made irresponsible and uniformed criticism of the Government. And as a measure of penance, he declared himself a convert to the Government view that the wholesale release of political prisoners and detenus would jeopardise public peace and safety. As a non-official, he had seen only one side of the shield but as the Chief Minister in the present Cabinet he has had opportunities of seeing the other side which in his opinion was far more important than the side that was open to the gaze of the public'.

In July 1937, 225 out of 250 'terrorist' convicts confined in the Andaman Jails started a hunger strike to enforce a demand for the immediate release of all political prisoners in general. Sympathetic hunger strike ensued in a Bengal jail. In Bengal there was violent and widespread excitement and agitation. Ministers were bitterly assailed as the foes of India's freedom.

42 Star of India, July 3, 1937.
It was interesting that the local Congress leaders made the expected gesture of asking the Andaman hunger strikers to break it, at the same time encouraged the youth of the province in making demonstrations at which demands for their immediate repatriation and unconditional release were advanced. A detenus day and two Andamans days were observed, on the second of which on August 16, a clash with police on the Strand Road, not far from the Assembly building took place. This provided the local Congress leaders with the occasion for another gesture. It was their appeals that eventually secured the peaceful dispersal of the crowd. When two days later, debate took place in the Assembly on this issue the Congress made full capital of it. The Congress raised adjournment motion on it. That motion was defeated but the Government stated their policy in the Assembly. In the same month the Home Minister Khwaja Nazimuddin expounded that the Government's policy was not wholesale or immediate but gradual release - a process which could be 'accelerated in proportion to the cooperation and support given to the Government by the public in rallying opinion against terrorist methods and in preventing a recrudescence of terrorism and other violent subversive movements. In view of this statement the Legislature significantly amended a Congress resolution to the effect that all detenus should be at once release unconditionally 'in so far as such orders may be consistent with public safety'. This in effect merely repeated the announcement made when the Coalition was originally formed.

Later in the session the Government convened a Conference of party-leaders to discuss the repatriation of the 'terrorist convicts' in Port Blair. The Home Minister, then agreed that

this would be done. But its progress must depend upon the rate at which accommodation could be provided in provincial jails. As a result of these assurances and the successive defeats of the Congress Party in the Legislature the agitation 'rapidly' subsided. It was reported that the number of detenus in jails and camps which was 1,048 at the end of March was reduced to 245 at the end of December and 136 convicts had been brought back from Andamans. In January 1938 there was a hunger strike in Dacca Central Jail. Gandhiji who visited Bengal in November 1937 (when he met the Governor) and again in March 1938 on the question of guarantee on behalf of the prisoners, maintained that it would be a sufficient guarantee if a victim declared that he had abjured the principle of violence. He was engaged in interviewing convicts but broken health compelled him to go back to Wardha. Subhas Chandra Bose who had 'revolutionary sympathy' for all the victims to be freed, promised the Ministers the backing of his party if they would agree to immediate and unconditional release of all the remaining convicts and this promise was endorsed by the Provincial Congress Committee which appealed for funds and for 10,000 volunteers to open a campaign of direct action.

But the agitation continued. There was second hunger strike at Dacca Central Jail in an attempt to enforce the Government's acceptance of their thirty five demands. On September 25, 1938 the Government released a statement about their policy. The Home Minister said that they intended (1) to release at once all 'terrorist' convicts suffering from grave or lasting illness, (2) to release as soon as possible those who had not been convicted of murder or serious violence and had not more than 18 months of

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45 Coupland, op. cit., p. 33.
their sentences still to run, and (3) as regards the main ideas to set up an advisory committee of nine, including six members of the Legislature, and presided over by a High Court Judge, which would consider each case on its merits and recommend what action the Government should take. The Advisory Committee was constituted in November and in the following January it began to review the cases of the remaining prisoners. During the year 1938, and without reference to the Advisory Committee sanction had been accorded to the premature release of 108 terrorist convicts. The Government's action did not, however, satisfy the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee which resolved to resume agitation for the release of 'politicals'. The much-heralded campaign for this purpose was launched by Subhas Chandra Bose on November 12, in a speech delivered to a Calcutta audience of 3,000 persons. A Political Prisoners Release Committee was appointed and the 20th November was celebrated as 'All Bengal Political Prisoners Day'.

The reactions of the ex-detenus to their release were somewhat difficult to assess. It was reported that some went back to their old activities and some degraded to hooliganism. It was also reported that in May 1937 at Khulna an ex-detenu got up in a district students' conference and warned his listeners against the will of political agitators and Congress workers who had brought ruin to many students. Some other instances were likewise cited. Little more could be deducted from all this than that the released detenus were exposed to a variety of influences to which they responded in a variety of ways. On the whole the ex-detenus rallied under the Congress banner, but with the object of utilising

46 G.I. Home Poll, F.No. 66/40, p. 11.
the force of Congress 'for Socialist or Communist ends'. They encouraged and organised associations of agriculturists, but their goal was not so much the welfare of the peasantry as mass contact with tenants. The activities of agitators including ex-detenu were equally prominent in the industrial areas. They were interested with the activities of students. In Chittagong, Tippera and Noakhali many of them received big receptions on their return and it was not long before they infused new life into Congress Committees in those districts. They took part in Congress efforts to capture control of local authorities. Released detenus were prominent throughout the year (1938) as 'active agents of the Congress', which appeared to have been accepted by the main revolutionary parties as the spearhead of the attack upon 'British Imperialism'. Concerted plans for revolutionary activity were, however, handicapped by the unresolved differences between the Anushilan and the Jugantar Groups, by the failure to evolve an agreed programme, by the lack of outstanding leaders and by a general absence of co-operation. 48

So early in 1939 when it was reported that ex-detenus were at work among the peasantry, fomenting agitation against the landlords and preaching communist doctrine the Home Minister took occasion in the Bengal Legislative Assembly to deliver a strongly worded warning. He criticised the activities as subversive. But he said that the secret societies to which the ex-detenus belonged, were as well organised as ever, and their aim was social revolution. 49

49 B.L.A.P., vol. LIV, No. 4, pp. 31-36.
In the last part of the Budget Session of the year the Assembly concentrated its discussion on the hunger strike of political prisoners in the Dum Dum Central Jail. Rai Harendra Nath Chowdhury, a Congress member moved the adjournment motion on the subject on July 11. He said that he was voicing the public regret - the regret of the man in the street - that politicals were still rotting in the jails of the province and they had gone on hunger strike, being driven to a state of despair.

Shamsuddin Ahmed, ex-Minister and the Leader of the Krishak Proja Party in supporting the motion, agreed with the Ministry that 'a large number of political prisoners had been released'. Curtis Miller spoke on behalf of the European Group. He said that the release of the prisoners was matter where important principles were involved and where every single case required special consideration on its own merit. He thought that the Government had taken liberal policy in the matter for which they commanded the sympathy of the House and the public. Sarat Chandra Bose supporting the motion said that nobody denied that those prisoners were guilty under this or that section of the Indian Penal Code but the question was whether the time was ripe to release those prisoners whose only crime was their dream for the liberation of their motherland and in this connection he cited the examples of Michael Collins, Kamal Pasha and De Valera. The Home Minister spoke on the Advisory Committee which was constituted with the members of all shades of political parties. Sarat Chandra Bose and Lalit Mohan Das nominated from Congress resigned on the ground that their approach to the question of release of the convicted prisoners differed fundamentally from that of most of the other members of the Committee. The Minister then justified the work
of the Government which in his opinion was democratic. The adjournment motion was then rejected by 116 to 81 votes. The Coalition Group, the European Group and a member of the Hindu Nationalist Party voted against while the Congress Party, the Krishak Proja Party, the Independent Scheduled Caste Group and some members of the Hindu Nationalist Party voted for the motion.

The situation began to change after the outbreak of the Second World War. There were signs of recrudescence of organised revolutionary activities after the outbreak of the war. Some of the revolutionaries recently released, were believed to be resuming their old activities. The release of the detenus also created an unemployment problem. In the spring of 1940, as a measure of precaution, some 20 of them were rearrested and detained - under the power granted by the new Defence of India Rules.

The Opposition, particularly the Congress, was very much touchy on the issue of the release of political prisoners. The Congress gave to it first and foremost importance. The Bengal Government was not unkind to the issue but it preferred to release the political prisoners group by group for political reasons. The Congress criticised the delay very much. The outbreak of the Second World War posed new problems and in the process substantially changed the perspective and policy. Under the Defence of India Rules there were arrests without any discrimination.
Major part of the Bengal Legislature in 1939 was occupied with Budget which was the longest session on record in the history of Indian legislatures. The winter session was very short although it dealt with some important legislations. In the meantime the Great War broke out and the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow proclaimed on September 3, without consulting the Indian leaders, that India was at war with Germany. Thereafter he hurriedly met Gandhiji and Jinnah on the next day in the personal capacity. The Viceroy asked for India's help in war efforts and said that at the end of the war, the British Government would be very willing to enter into consultations with representatives of the several communities, parties and interests in India and with the Indian Princes, with a view to securing their aid and co-operation in the framing of such modifications as might be deemed necessary in the Act of 1935. For the present, he would establish a consultative group representing all major parties in British India and the Indian Princes so as to associate Indian public opinion in the prosecution of the war.  

There was reaction throughout the country. Congress Ministries in six provinces resigned. The Bengal Ministry continued because the Muslim League and the Krishak Proja Party of Fazlul Huq supported the Indian Government's war effort.

The Bengal Government, however, took up the war resolution for discussion in the Assembly on December 13, 1939. The Chief Minister moved the following resolution - 'This Assembly associates itself with the world-wide abhorrence of the aggressive and...'

ruthless methods pursued by totalitarian Governments in Europe and declares its complete sympathy with the British Government for taking up arms against Nazi Germany in the defence of democracy and of the right of self-determination of the smaller and weaker nations which are now at the mercy of a few powerful and aggressive dictator-ridden states and cannot unaided, maintain their territorial integrity.

'This Assembly, therefore, authorises the Government to assure the Government of India of full co-operation in the successful prosecution of the war.

'This Assembly further authorises the Government to convey to His Majesty's Government that in consonance with the aims of the present war, as declared by that Government, and understood by India and consistent with the accepted ideal of the British Empire as a commonwealth of free nations, the attainment by India of the Status of a Dominion as defined in the statute of Westminster which is the declared policy of the British Government, should be implemented immediately on the termination of the war and the New Constitution formulated should provide sufficient and effective safeguards for the recognised minorities and interests and should be based upon their full consent and approval.'

Then he appealed to the House to discuss the question without passion or prejudice.

Several amendments were moved by Sarat Chandra Bose, S.P. Mookerjee, Shamsuddin Ahmed and others. Nausher Ali called the third part of the resolution as the ugliest one. W.A. Maker expressed the support of his Party to the Government resolution.

The resolution was carried by 142 to 82 votes on December 8. Nalini Ranjan Sarkar was the only member in the House who remained neutral and gave a critical speech on the resolution. After a few days he tendered his resignation from the Cabinet on December 26, and took his seat in the Opposition bench. In the meantime Shamsuddin also resigned from the Cabinet. After the resignation of Nalini Sarkar, H.S. Suhrawardy took charge of Finance. In his statement on resignation Nalini Ranjan expressed that the last part of the resolution was the main cause of his resignation. But the other portions of his speech show that he was not of late easy with the Cabinet where problems of communal tinge went to the extreme point. Besides there was a possibility of secret entente between Nalini Sarkar and the Congress for which correspondence was going on. Subhas Bose advocated a Congress Coalition Ministry in Bengal. He thought that Nalini Sarkar's resignation would bring down the Hug Ministry and then the Congress would be in a strong bargaining position for forming a Coalition Ministry in which it would hold decisive power. As long as Sarkar would not resign, Bose and the Bengal Congress were effectively prevented from overthrowing the predominantly Muslim ministry which, Bose thought, was encouraging communalism by both Muslims and Hindus.

Whatever might be the opinion of Subhas Bose, in Bengal the Congress was not amicable with the Proja-League Ministry and in the House communal issues were raised by both the ministerial and the Opposition parties. Communal feelings were growing, disturbances were taking place here and there. Excitements came from different corners. Two examples collected from two leaflets may

be cited in this connection. One was published by Khan Sahib Maulvi Akbar Ali (Vice-Chairman, District Board) and read on the occasion of the Muslim League Conference at Sirajganj, Pabna, 1939. The title of the Bengali leaflet was 'Muslim Jagarani' (Awakening of the Muslims) by Farukh Shire. Another Bengali leaflet was entitled as 'Hinduke Hindu raksha karibe' (Hindus will save the Hindus). Both the leaflets were exciting and were proscribed.

Crisis in Bengal Congress

For sometime the Bengal Congress was in the midst of a crisis. Subhas Chandra Bose, the President of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee early in 1935 had sent a unity proposal to the Secretary of the Committee. He said that the crisis in Bengal was due to the oppression of the Government on the one hand and on the other due to the misbehaviour of the Congress Working Committee. Undoubtedly, it could be said that the present crisis was to a large extent due to the disunity amongst the Congress ranks. The refusal of the Congress Working Committee to condemn the Government's decision on communalism and its calculated move to oust Bengal delegates, reflected to what extent the Congress leaders were unjust to the people of the province. Moreover, any dissident member of the Provincial Committee were used to lodge complaints against a fellow-member to the Working Committee. Bose made a fervent appeal to all the Congress workers irrespective of groups, to give up this habit forever.  

54 G.I. Home Poll., F.No. 37/27/39 - English translation of the leaflet in Appendix VI.  
55 G.I. Home Poll (1), F.No. 37/28/41 - English translation of the leaflet in Appendix VII.  
Meanwhile intra-party conflicts in the Province reached a climax. On the one hand, the All India Congress Committee and the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee had an uneasy time and on the other, there was persistent jealousies between the right wing and left wing Congressmen which were reflected on various issues. Subhas Chandra Bose though elected President of the All India Congress Committee was not accepted by all easily and that was no secret. Official report said, 'Probably the feeling which undoubtedly exists about the disciplinary action taken by Congress against Mr. Bose has its origin less in any affection for him than in exasperation at the attitude of the rest of "Political" India towards "Political" Bengal'.

In Bengal also Kiran Shankar Roy and Sarat Chandra Bose and their associates were strange bed-fellows. Gradually bitterness went to the extreme. On the eve of Party election, the B.P.C.C. was suspended and an ad-hoc committee was formed. Because of illness of Subhas Chandra, Sarat Chandra Bose as the representative of the B.P.C.C. to the Working Committee, and in consultation with the President and Secretary of the B.P.C.C. and some members including Satya Ranjan Bakshi of the Executive Council, submitted a memorandum to the President of all India Congress Committee. He refuted the charges levelled against the B.P.C.C. as baseless and said - 'When we come to examine the power conferred on the Congress Working Committee by Article XX of the Constitution of the Indian National Congress we find that the

56 Contd.
Letter of Subhas Chandra Bose to the Secretary, B.P.C.C. from Geneva dated January 30, 1935.

57 Fortnightly reports on the political situation in Bengal - G.I. Home Poll - F.No. 18/1/1939 - 18/12/1939.

Congress Working Committee has been given no power to appoint an "ad-hoc" Committee to conduct Congress elections in a province and thereby to withdraw from a Provincial Congress Committee one of its most important functions.⁵⁹

Obviously the condition of Congress in Bengal was not happy. In near future it became worse. A letter (dated 2.2.41) of Kiran Sankar Roy the 'orthodox leader of the Congress Party in the Bengal Legislature' depicted his gloomy views on the future of his party in Bengal. This was not without reason.⁶⁰

The internal condition of Bengal at the end of 1939 left the Bengal Government in a peculiar condition. The Government circulated an order on April 8, 1940 prohibiting publication in Bengal of any news or comment upon or with reference to the programme and activities of the suspended Bengal Provincial Congress Committee and of Subhas Chandra Bose and Swami Sahajananda, an ardent supporter of S. Bose or of any organisation with which Bose or Sahajananda was connected. On this order Santosh Kumar Bose of Congress called an adjournment motion in the House. The Speaker admitted the motion but said that during the discussion, the members would not be allowed to raise the question of Government having abused its power under the Defence of India Rules curtailing the liberties of the Press. Members could simply discuss it within the framework or limits of the Government order itself. Next day the motion was taken up for discussion and rejected by the House by 104 to 73 votes.

⁵⁹ Working Committee and Bengal Congress - Published by B.P.C.C., 1940, p. 16.
⁶⁰ G.I. Home Poll., F.No. 4/8/41 - Extracts from the letter to Rajendra Prasad in Appendix VIII.
Removal of the Holwell Monument

The arrest of Subhas Chandra Bose (July 2) without any trial or even charge was subject matter of adjournment motion in the House again in the monsoon session which commenced on July 15, 1940. Later from an announcement of the Secretary of State in the British Parliament it was disclosed that Bose's arrest was in connection with the movement for the removal of the Holwell Monument. Persons of the different communities mainly the Hindus and the Muslims participated in the movement. They strongly felt that the monument was a standing reproach to the people of India particularly to the people of Bengal who projected Nawab Sirajuddoula as the symbol of Bengali nationalism.

Some members - Surendranath Biswas, Rai H.N. Chowdhuri, A.M.A. Zaman and Niharendu Dutta Mazumdar - described the Black Hole Tragedy as a myth. The activities of Subhas Chandra Bose were described by Niharendu Dutta Majumdar as an attempt at Hindu-Moslem rapprochement. In this connection he also referred to the work of Bose in the Calcutta Corporation where he tried to work in collaboration with the members of Muslim League.

The Premier Fazlul Huq was in support of the removal but the only thing that stood in the way of removal, as it was thought by the Government was the Satyagraha movement. So he appealed to the leaders of the Satyagraha to call off the movement. A.R. Siddiqui also appealed to Sarat Bose to exert his influence to have the Satyagraha movement ceased. The Government

order to ban any news on the Holwell Monument agitation drew the attention of the House and Jalaluddin Hashemy called an adjournment motion on July 18. He condemned the 'order of the Government' which 'curtailed the elementary right of freedom of expression and freedom of association of the citizens'.62 Sasanka Sekhar Sanyal said that the question raised by the particular motion was very simple, but it involved grave consequences to the civil liberties of the people, particularly when the people of the province were said to be governed under a responsible and popular government. He further expressed that there might be persons and factors inside the Government who were interested in keeping up division. But he invited the rank and file of all parties, to stand together and find out a new formula and resist all attempts on the part of the Government to prevent the Hindu-Muslim unity, so much necessary, because the 'new independence' was knocking at the doors and it was only by standing shoulder to shoulder the much coveted independence could be achieved.63

While supporting the motion, Shamsuddin Ahmed said that he was reminded on that very morning that the Muslim League leader Jinnah had presided over a conference at the Halliday Park where a resolution was passed for the removal or destruction of the Holwell Monument.64 Nausher Ali commented that the removal was overdue. Atul Krishna Ghose also supported the motion. The attitude of the European Group was clear. They said in both the Houses that they had nothing to say against the removal of that infamous monument which had been adorning Calcutta. They might

63 Ibid, pp. 265, 268.
64 Ibid, p. 269.
have objection to the destruction of the monument.  

The Home Minister Nazimuddin gave a political statement to the House. He said that the intention of the agitation was not to remove the Hollwell Monument. The agitators deliberately wanted to be arrested so that the civil disobedience movement could begin. The end was not yet known, so the restriction had been imposed. The Forward Bloc which had a secret organisation behind, could start an all Bengal movement which might develop into a very serious situation. So it was purely in the interests of the people of Bengal that the order had been passed so that the movement might not spread, the incentive to take up satyagraha might stop and the movement localised altogether. The motion was put and defeated by 115 to 74 votes.

The Chief Minister, however, gave a statement in the House on July 23 regarding the issue. He stated - 'The question of Holwell Monument was discussed in the Coalition Party in May last and at that time we gave an assurance to the party that the decision of Government regarding the question of its removal would be announced within six months at the latest. The question was again considered at a meeting of the Coalition Party this afternoon. In pursuance of the assurance given to the Coalition Party in May last and as a result of the discussions in the party this afternoon, Government have decided to take immediate steps for the removal of Holwell Monument'. The Government also proposed to constitute a committee to enquire into the recent incident centring round the matter.

66 Ibid, No. 2, p. 86.
Following the statement of the Chief Minister the leader of the Opposition, Sarat Chandra Bose made the following statement on the next day regarding the suspension of Satyagraha movement. '.... I take upon myself the responsibility of advising the public to suspend the Satyagraha movement which was started by Sj. Subhas Chandra Bose in the beginning of this month for the removal of the Holwell Monument. The spontaneous support which the movement has received from members of both the Hindu and Muslim communities in our province has, I hope, demonstrated to the authorities that the united demand of both the communities was behind the movement. The movement has now achieved its object, and therefore, I consider it right that it should be suspended.

'\nThe authority to call off the Satyagraha movement altogether is vested in Sj. Subhas Chandra Bose who started it in the beginning of this month'. 67

Then Sarat Bose raised the question of the release of those arrested in connection with the movement, and also made a passionate reference to the students who were victims of brutal lathi charges on July 22. He also appealed to the students and the public outside the legislature to abide by the advice and co-operate with him and await the final decision of Subhas Chandra Bose. Finally, he alleged that his statement on this line sent to the press on 23rd night by Tarakdas Banerjee, acting Secretary of B.P.C.C. was not allowed by the Press Officer to be published. The Speaker of the House assured him that if he got a copy of the statement he would make necessary arrangement for its publication.

A large meeting was organised at Shraddhananda Park by the sponsors of the movement. The Chief Minister attended the meeting and extended his support to the cause of removal. The monument was at last removed in the next month. 68

Ministerial Crisis and Resignation of Fazlul Huq

In the last month of 1941 there was a dramatic change in Bengal’s political scene. On December 1, Fazlul Huq with his council of Ministers tendered resignation. A Government communique while announcing the resignation, affirmed that the Ministers would continue to remain in charge of their respective portfolios until the Governor decided whether or not he would accept their resignations. The Governor, John Herbert was not formally disposed to the formation of a fresh Cabinet under Fazlul Huq. His delaying tactics were very suggestive. He had something else in his mind. But when Nasimuddin failed to get the Hindu support, Herbert was compelled to allow Fazlul Huq to form a new Ministry which received co-operation from Sarat Chandra Bose and Shyamaprasad Mukherjee. 69

Though this change seemed dramatic there was a long history behind the genesis of ministerial crisis and further development. As the Muslim League was supporting the war efforts of the British Government the Muslim premiers of Assam, Bengal and the Punjab were invited by the Viceroy to join the National Defence Council. When they did it, Jinnah took exception because he was not consulted by the Chief Ministers and he threatened disciplinary action against them. So Fazlul Huq wrote a letter to Liaquat Ali Khan,

the Secretary of the All India Muslim League criticising the 'arbitrary conduct' of its President, Mohammed Ali Jinnah. Except for the pro-Jinnah elements in Bengal, who were no less powerful, it was felt in Muslim League circle in the province that Jinnah indulged in this trial of strength with the British Government, by threatening this as a retaliation against the Viceroy's refusal to allow the Muslim League to form government in other provinces after the Congress Ministries resigned. 70

A section of the Ministerial Coalition Party in Bengal took exception to the statement of Fazlul Huq. Among them were Ministers also. To condemn Huq on this ground, there was demonstration at the Calcutta Maidan. Demonstrations and counter-demonstrations led by the two groups - one led by Suhrawardy, Nazimuddin and other followers of Jinnah and the other led by Huq and his followers continued for some time. Efforts were made by the rest for a rapprochement between the two groups, but failed. On August 25, 1941 the Muslim League Working Committee asked Fazlul Huq to resign within 10 days. In fact, though Fazlul Huq had taken more active part in League activities from 1937, he often had a strained relationship with Jinnah and the national organisation. 71

He resigned from the All India Muslim League Council. In his letter of resignation to the Secretary of the Muslim League on September 8, 1941, he pointed the normal procedure through which he became the member of the National Defence Council in his official capacity, and there was nothing wrong in it. He further criticised Jinnah for his arbitrary wishes which were detrimental to the interests of the Muslims and of Bengal. 72

72 G.I. Home Poll., F.No. 17/4/41 - Poll (1).
The Bengal Provincial Muslim League Working Committee, met on September 13 and affirmed confidence in Jinnah. Immediately after the League Working Committee meeting at Delhi Fazlul Huq's supporters in the Assembly formed themselves into new body known as the Progressive Assembly Party. Afterwards on November 28, a bigger Party known as the Progressive Coalition Party was composed of the various parties in Opposition in the Legislature and the Progressive Assembly Party of Fazlul Huq. In this connection it can be recalled that when the relation between Jinnah and Huq became strained, it was reflected outside the legislature.

As stated before, inside the Legislature, half a dozen members, including some of the Ministerialist Coalition Party, gave notices of 'no-confidence' motions against the Finance Minister Suhrawardy, who was also the Secretary of the Provincial Muslim League. Again, when the Assembly met for the winter session on November 27, notices of two similar 'no-confidence' motions, one against the Home Minister Nazimuddin and the other against the Finance Minister were given by the members of the Krishak Proja Party. On that day the Chief Minister moved for adjournment for two days, in order to enable the various parties to an agreed settlement on the question of the Secondary Education Bill, which was the main official business for the session. The Speaker, Azizul Haque adjourned the House till December 8.

In the meantime further efforts were made for effecting a compromise between the two Opposition groups in the Ministerialist Coalition Party. On the other hand parties in Opposition took advantage of the recess to consolidate and strengthen their position in view of the possibility of 'no-confidence' motions being
taken up on December 8.\textsuperscript{73} The European Group in the Legislature was really anxious to retain its importance as a balancing force. It tried hard to persuade Huq to compromise his difference with the Nazimuddin group pointing out that, in case dissolution of the Cabinet occurred, the Governor was not bound to call on Huq to form a fresh Ministry.\textsuperscript{74}

**Second Ministry of Huq : League in the Opposition**

The developments regarding the Cabinet crisis reached a further stage on December 2. A meeting of the Working Committee of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League was held in Calcutta on that date to consider a requisition sent by Ispahani, and the resolutions of a meeting of the presidents, secretaries and workers of the district, sub-divisional, city and municipal Leagues in the province held on November 30, as well as the situation arising out of the resignation of the Cabinet. Akram Khan presided. The meeting passed four resolutions and, condemning the formation of the Progressive Coalition Party called on all members of the Legislature belonging to the Muslim League to constitute themselves into a new Bengal Legislative Muslim League Party.\textsuperscript{75} The rift was obvious.

Fazlul Huq himself analysed the political development of the time nicely with the following words - 'Towards the end of 1941, important political developments took place leading to the dissolution of the Cabinet which had been functioning in Bengal since the beginning of Provincial Autonomy .... On the 1st of December

\textsuperscript{73} I.A.R., 1941, vol. 11, p. 146.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{75} Star of India, December 3, 1941.
1941, without any previous indication whatsoever, six of my colleagues tendered something like mass resignation. Two other resignations followed and I accepted the suggestion of the Governor to tender my resignation as well, in order to enable the Governor to constitute another Cabinet. My conspiring colleagues moved heaven and earth to get Hindu colleagues, but they utterly failed in their attempt. On the contrary, all the various groups in the House rallied round me, and no less than 173 MLAs sent on their own account a memorandum to the Governor declaring that they were willing to work the Constitution under my leadership. About forty members, calling themselves the Muslim League Parliamentary Party in the Assembly, sullenly held aloof. I did my utmost to induce them to join me in forming an all-parties Cabinet, but they stubbornly refused to do so.

'One would have thought that the obvious course left for the Governor was to call me to form a Cabinet. But he adopted a course which was at once unusual and unconstitutional. He waited long to see if Sir Nazimuddin could secure a majority and it was only when he finally despaired of having Sir Nazimuddin as Chief Minister, and perhaps because of pressure from other quarters that Sir John after 10 days' hesitation asked me on the 11 December, 1941, to form a Cabinet. I shall not refer here to the manner in which my Party was crippled by the sudden arrest of Mr. Sarat Chandra Bose before I took oath of my office as Chief Minister ....

'It was for the first time that Moslems belonging to various points of view, Hindus belonging to the Congress and of other schools of thought together with various small groups and Scheduled Caste Groups all combined to co-operate in the administration on
purely national and patriotic lines'. 76

The newly formed Progressive Coalition Party under the leadership of Fazlul Huq met at his residence on December 4. The Party claimed to have a strength of around 120 members composed of the following groups: 77

1. Sarat Bose' Party
2. The Krishak Proja Party
3. The Progressive Assembly Party
4. The Independent Scheduled Caste Party
5. The Nationalist Hindu Group
6. Anglo-Indians
7. Labour

In the new Huq Ministry the distribution of portfolios was as follows:

A.K. Fazlul Huq - in charge of the Home and Publicity Departments
Nawab Hibibullah - Agriculture and Industries
S.P. Mookerjee - Finance Department
Santosh Bose - Department of Public Health and Local Self-Government
Abdul Karim - Education, Commerce and Labour
Pramatha Nath Banerjee - Revenue, Judicial and Legislative Departments
Hashim Ali Khan - Co-operative Credit and Rural Indebtedness Department
Shamsuddin Ahmed - Department of Communications and Works
Upendranath Barman - Forest and Excise Departments.

76 F. Huq: Bengal Today, (Calcutta, 1944), pp. 5-7; Also B.L.A.P., vol. LXV, July 5, 1943.
Reconciliation of Fazlul Huq and S.P. Mookerjee - the two apparently irreconcilable men - was regarded as a startling event in modern Indian political history. Nazimuddin with 43 Muslim League members became the leader of the Opposition and, in the language of Fazlul Huq, 'on the pretence of upholding the interests of the Muslim League in Bengal'.

Kiran Shankar Roy was the leader of the official Congress. This party consisting of 25 members in the Legislative Assembly promised responsive co-operation to the Government. The European group of 25 members were supposed to be with the Muslim League. But its official line was not to oppose the Government. Besides these, there were another 25 uncommitted members. They used to swing between the Government and the Opposition as revealed from the voting pattern of the time in the Assembly. The important feature of the new Assembly was that it commanded comfortable majority. It did not suffer the constraint of marginal majority like the first Coalition of 1937.

On December 8, the House met for a short while and was adjourned without transacting any business as a mark of respect to the memory of the Deputy Speaker, Ashraf Ali, who died on the previous night. A section of the House was, however, irritated by the reply of the Chief Minister that the Government was not proceeding with the Secondary Education Bill for the time being. He had to say this to the query of the Speaker over the matter. The Opposition also criticised Huq for not giving his consent to the motion of releasing the Khaksar leader, Allama Mashrequi.

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78 Bengal Today, p. 6.
79 Star of India, December 18, 1941.
The Chief Minister pointed out that the Khaksar leader was under detention under D.I.R. by the orders of the Government of India and the Bengal Government had nothing to do with his arrest and detention.

Here it may be noted that the name of Fazlul Huq was again struck off from the League in the Allahabad session in April 1942. Similarly the Provincial League, under the leadership of A.R. Siddiqui expelled the Nawab of Dacca and Khan Bahadur Hashem Ali from the Provincial League.

With the development of war, the situation in the international as well as national spheres changed rapidly. The 'enemies' were knocking at the door of the British Empire. Disappearance of Subhas Chandra Bose from India created repercussions in the mind of the British Government. In Bengal as elsewhere, major political activities had been restricted.\(^6\) Gandhi studying the political developments in the country launched 'Quit India' movement on August 9, 1942. As a result, all the important leaders and workers were imprisoned from all over India. In Bengal, Midnapore became the citadel of 'Quit India' movement. There, an independent local government was founded. The British rulers were very much agitated at this development and inhuman torture followed. This became an important matter of discussion in the Bengal legislature. Another interesting development of the period was the legalisation of the Communist Party. The influence of the 'red-flag' expanded.

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\(^6\) Confidential Report on the Political Situation in Bengal for the Second half of March 1942, G.I.Home Poll., F.No. 18/3/42.
The new Bengal Government faced some problems and several important issues came before the legislature. On the floor of the House the Chief Minister referred to the tense situation when Japan entered the war. There was the problem of A.R.P. (Air Raid Precaution) organisation of the Province. The provincial government had no responsibility for active defence, but they had a very real responsibility for ensuring that the passive defence measure taken for the protection of the citizens were adequate. So the Government had to look after the warning and lighting arrangements and also Fire Brigades. Besides, there was the problem of supply and price-hike of the necessities of life. The Chief Minister reiterated that the problem was complicated because Bengal was not self-sufficient as regards any of its food supplies except rice and had to depend on other provinces for oil, sugar, salt and so on. Even in the case of rice, difficulties had to be faced in securing adequate supplies to the public at controlled prices and the difficulties of price control were greater still. Particularly the provincial government had no control over the source of supply. The difficulties of transport further aggravated this problem. All these had cast their shadow on the coming year.

To give emphasis to the problem of strikes in Jute Mills in the vicinity of Calcutta, the Congress Party raised an adjournment motion on the subject before the actual working of the Bengal Legislature started in April 1937. After the election of the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker the Jute Strikes had been discussed
in the House and through stern criticism from the Opposition the Ministry took firm steps, the strikes were withdrawn and in course of time, specific labour policy was taken by the Government. Suhrawardy the Minister-in-charge claimed that the Labour Policy of Bengal Government was most successful in India.

The years 1938 and 1939 were eventful for the Bengal Legislature. In 1938 there was an attempt on the part of the Congress to form a coalition with the Proja Party. In this year the formation of the Publicity Department directed by Altaf Hussain was significant. The most significant event of the year was the survival of the Ministry in the trial of strength when the Opposition Congress and the Krishak Proja Party (dissident) moved no-confidence motions against all the ten individual members of the Cabinet. This time the Ministry gained some popularity. It also appointed the Land Revenue Commission known as Floud Commission during this year which submitted report in 1940.

The Congress opposition mainly took the detenus question as their plank and it was their prestige issue. They always demanded much more liberal policy in regard to the release of the political prisoners. The Bengal Government claimed that it was not unsympathetic to the political prisoners. But the restricted detenus policy of the Government was not liked by the Congress around whom the detenus rallied.

The year 1939 was a record for Bengal because its Budget session was the longest in history. During this year, India was dragged into the Great War for the British cause. As a consequence of the war situation in India in general and in Bengal in
particular changed. The war had its impact on politics and economy. The war resolution of the Bengal Assembly expected Dominion Status for the country just after the war. The Opposition criticising this war resolution, moved some amendments but were defeated. The League supported the war efforts of the British Government. For obvious reason the European Group supported it. At this time the resignation of the Finance Minister Nalini Ranjan Sarkar was significant.

In the meantime the internal crisis of the Congress divided the Party in Bengal. One was the Ad-hoc B.P.C.C. headed in the Assembly by Kiran Sankar Roy and the other was Suspended B.P.C.C. which was known as Bose Group in the Assembly. Sometime back the dissociation of Tamizuddin Khan Group from the Ministry added another crack.

The movement on the removal of Holwell Monument drew the Muslims and the Hindus together. Nawab Sirajuddaula became the symbol of unity. Fazlul Huq also was sympathetic with the movement. But the Government's policy could not support the satyagraha movement. The Holwell Monument however was removed by the active co-operation of the Chief Minister.

The end of the year 1941 saw the break of Fazlul Huq with the Muslim League and Jinnah. The Pro-Jinnah elements in the Bengal Muslim League desired to remove Fazlul Huq. There was a long story behind it. Huq had been expelled from the League and with the various opposition parties in the Legislature, formed the Progressive Coalition Party and formed Government which ruled upto March 1943. The Muslim League so long in power was relegated to the Opposition.