Studies on provincial politics in terms of political process, or on the provincial legislature in institutional terms in pre-independence India are not rare. Most researches of this nature are basically focused on the constitutional evolution in the course of interaction between national freedom movement and the imperial rule:

Research Focus:

The present research is not about provincial politics in terms of 'political process' view which normally focuses on the parties and pressure groups as providers of inputs of politics. Nor is it a study of the history of the provincial legislature as an institution. Our main objective in this research is to present the evolving scenario of Bengal politics as it had been reflected in the legislative arena at a crucial time in the history of undivided Bengal immediately before the partition of India in 1947.

Normally, provincial politics centres around activities within the confines of enacted, written and integrated constitution. This 'constitutional framework' as observed by Iqbal Narain 'can be termed as the institutional determinant of state politics' (or provincial politics). Besides this, the dominant socio-economic and political factors including elite structure and psychological bases act as major determinants. Of course, the phenomenon of 'state politics' emerged in India in the post-independence period. But its roots can be traced to the pre-independence days when the

* State Politics in India (New Delhi, 1976), p. XVI.
politico-administrative system in the provinces was sought to be made 'responsible' under the Reforms Act of 1919 and more particularly with the introduction of Provincial Autonomy in 1937.

With the growing discontent of the Indians against the alien rule and their demand for more power, the British Government began to concede gradually some constitutional rights which ultimately paved the way for responsible government. The Government of India Act, 1935 promised to introduce Provincial Autonomy in the eleven provinces - Madras, Bombay, Bengal, the United Provinces, the Punjab, Bihar, the Central Provinces, Assam, the N.W.F.P. (North West Frontier Province), Orissa and Sind. The provinces of Bengal, Bombay, Bihar, Madras, U.P., and Assam were to have bi-cameral legislatures. According to the eminent constitutional historian, A.B. Keith, the Act of 1935 presented, so far as Indian social conditions had permitted, the possibility of responsible government in the provinces.*

It is against this context that the present study has attempted to deal with the structure and behaviour of the legislature of undivided Bengal as an epicentre of provincial politics with its real roots in the socio-economic environment outside. The inauguration of Provincial Autonomy led to important structural changes in the provincial legislature. With the new social forces entering the legislature, the composition of the legislature had undergone a sea-change. Provincial Autonomy was introduced within the framework of a deliberately designed limited constitution. Still, within limitations the provincial legislatures and provincial governments tried to assert their rights. A new institutional relationship was

* Constitutional History of India (Edinburgh, 1936), Preface, p.VIII.
struck between the centre and the provinces and between the executive and the legislature. The national liberation movement had reached a stage when areas of autonomous action had to be conceded by the imperial rulers to stem the tide of freedom struggle. National politics had an all pervasive effect on politico-administrative institutions. At the same time, the provincial legislature had to react to constituency demands and the emerging environmental forces. How the Bengal legislature had been reflecting these currents and cross-currents of politics at a critical juncture of provincial political life constitutes an interesting research theme on the borderline of history and politics. The present research is an attempt at assessing this shifting political profile of Bengal as reflected in the legislature.

Methodology:

In conducting the research, basically the historical-analytical method has been followed. There is a consistent attempt in this work to relate the goings-on in the legislature to the events and processes outside. The legislative behaviour is a dependent variable although the institution itself had its own independent structure and process. In this research, the behaviour inside the institutional arena has been conceived as overtly dependent on the political processes outside in the larger social context.

The Indian freedom movement with its currents and cross-currents is a unique phenomenon that has been studied by researchers from a variety of angles. In this context the role of Bengal was significant enough from different perspectives. Bengal was the citadel of British power from the very beginning. Western education and
culture had a profound impact on Bengali society. A new elite was born out of interaction with the British. It was however, primarily the 'Hindu elite', as the Hindus took advantage of western education and culture and the Muslims were generally averse to it. Moreover the socio-economic conditions and 'population pattern' of Bengal was different from many other provinces. Bengal had a population with different cultures, religions, castes and creeds. Her land-economy was captured by the British at an early stage through the system of permanent settlement (1793). There was 'de-industrialisation' through the 'drain of wealth'. So there was large-scale economic disruption in Bengal's social life. In terms of population pattern, Bengal had her own peculiarity. Here the Hindus were in the minority and the Muslims constituted the majority. Amongst the landed class, the Hindus were greater in number than the Muslims. Most of the 'projas' were Muslims. Bengal played a prominent role in the freedom struggle of the country. She pioneered the revolutionary movement as well as constitutional agitations.

After long struggle India achieved her independence in August 1947. The final transfer of power was made at the negotiation table through a constitutional procedure. Some questions naturally come to mind in this connection. Bengal being the arena of so many discordant parties and groups, what had been her reactions to the constitutional concessions given by the Government of India Act 1935? How did she respond to, and utilize the opportunities thrown up by the Provincial Autonomy? What led to the partition of Bengal? These are some of the questions that provoked research enquiry and

1 Diagram No 2 & 3, p. 46.
2 Ibid No 1, p. 45.
the present research is a humble attempt to seek answer to these questions.

Historical studies often suffer due to paucity of source material. It is not the case with the present study. Here we could factually dig up a lot of historical materials. There were the legislative proceedings well-documented. Memoirs of eminent personalities and newspapers and periodicals of the time contained valuable information on the politics of pre-partition Bengal. Most of the surviving leaders could be interviewed and their narration of life experience has been a gold mine of evidence for research.

The study is concerned with momentous events of a transition period in history. It was a turning point of history of undivided India and Bengal. The present study is an attempt to capture the socio-political forces of this crucial period and to relate these to the performance of the legislation. There was a facade of democracy as reflected in the legislative institution set up under the 1935 Act. The institution was to facilitate the articulation of constituency demands and iron out differences in an open arena of contest and conflict. But, history seems to have its own logic. Bengal was partitioned and inspite of the release of democratic forces as if the institution suffered a paralysis of some kind. This research is a search for some modest explanations of Bengal's socio-political disorganisation within the framework of a newly contrived democratic set up introduced by British rulers at the fagend of imperial rule.
Historical Backdrop:

To trace the background, the history of Indian constitutional agitation and national liberation movement is a long winding one. Only the landmarks can be identified for our purposes. Rammohan Roy, the father of Indian nationalism first took the initiative for 'constitutional agitation' in India. One of his most important demands was the 'consultation of Indian public opinion before the enactment of any legislation'. Before the foundation of the Indian National Congress different associations, e.g. the British Indian Association (1851), India League (1875), the Indian Association (1876) etc. proceeded on the line of constitutional agitation and the birth of the Indian National Congress (1885) was regarded by many as the culmination. On the other hand discontents from different corners of the country flared up in the form of numerous movements, the culmination of which was the Revolt of 1857. The East India Company had to give up office and the administration of the country was directly taken over by the British Government.

The Indian National Congress opened a new era in the history of Indian freedom struggle. Though there was no political party as such in the beginning, the Congress provided a political platform to those who were becoming politically conscious. Moreover, since India is the land of different cultures, political groups were naturally formed on different lines. There came into being a separate political class within the Muslim community which was a significant feature of Indian politics during the period of freedom struggle. The Muslim League was formed in 1906 as a separate political forum for organising and articulating the demands of the Muslim community.

Under the Indian Councils Act of 1861, a Legislative Council
was formed in Bengal in 1862. The scope of the Act was very limited but on the working of it George Campbell said, '... Having sat both in the Governor-General's and in the Provincial Legislative Council (of Bengal) my strong feeling was that the native and non-official members were much more useful in the latter than in the former'. The Councils Act of 1892 provided for the expansion of the Imperial as well as the Provincial Councils. The Act failed to satisfy the nationalists and its inadequacy was apparent to all. Still in Bengal, persons like Surendra Nath Banerjea, Ananda Mohan Basu, Lal Mohan Ghosh, Ramesh Chandra Dutt, Abdul Latif, Ameer Ali and others on the Council seized every opportunity to highlight the popular sentiment. They exposed the violations of the most elementary democratic principles by the British Government and asked for remedies.

With the beginning of the twentieth century, many more events deepened the resentment of the Indians against alien rule. The reactionary and oppressive rule of Lord Curzon, the partition of Bengal (1905), the undemocratic pieces of legislation like the Calcutta Municipal Act and the Calcutta University Act 1904 (which brought the Corporation and the University completely under official control) stirred up the spirit of nationalism. The idea of Swaraj steadily spread to the different parts of the country. To satisfy the Indian mind and to rally the moderates, the Morley-Minto Reforms were introduced in 1909. It enlarged the functions of legislative councils. Election was indirect but the size of the electorate was however very small. Separate types of electorate were created and in the process communal representation was introduced for the first time. This led to the sowing of the seeds of divisions among the
two major Indian communities and the communal venom was introduced into the body politic of India. The Great War of 1914 accelerated the pace of a fresh political advance in India for more reasons than one. The Government of India was compelled to introduce some reforms because the circumstances in the country changed due to the impact of the war and due to some repressive measures of the Government. Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919 thus followed as a sort of historical necessity. The Government broadened the functions and privileges of the legislatures and introduced a system of Dyarchy in Bengal. The system of communal electorate was further intensified. In response to the repeated Indian demand for the establishment of responsible government in the provinces, the Indian Statutory Commission was appointed in 1927. Then through a tortuous process of recommendations and deliberations, the Government of India Bill was passed on August 2, 1935. The most important feature of the Act was the introduction of provincial autonomy. The Communal Award of 1932 played a vital role in this new system of Government and in the politics of the years following the implementation of the Act in 1937. Though the franchise was extended to a certain extent, it was not more than 14% of the population. The exact percentage of voters in Bengal was 13.4% only.

Provincial Autonomy:

April 1, 1937 was fixed for the implementation of provincial Autonomy. Accordingly, general elections were held in the winter of 1936-37. In Bengal different parties and groups fought the elections on the basis of their plans and programmes. The important parties in the fray were the Congress, the Muslim League, and the
Krishak Proja Party. The Krishak Proja Party was established by the middle class Muslims. It was a regional party no doubt, but as Humayun Kabir said, 'it looked after the interest of the people of all communities. It was a non-communal party'. Besides, there were the Hindu Nationalist Party and the Bengal Trade Union Federation. No party could get absolute majority in the elections. So, there were uncertainties in the formation of the Ministry. A.K. Fazlul Huq, leader of the Krishak Proja Party tried unsuccessfully to form a coalition with the Congress. He had then to lean on the Muslim League. The new legislature had unique features in terms of changes in the socio-economic background of the legislators and the legislative field.

The extent of autonomous decision-making by the legislature could be found in its functioning. The leadership of Fazlul Huq was significant judging from a number of major socio-economic legislations enacted during his tenure. The important Bills of the time were the Bengal Tenancy (Amendment) Bill, 1937, the Bengal Public Demand Recovery (Amendment) Bills, 1937 and 1938, the Bengal Money-Lenders Bill, 1938, the Calcutta Municipal (Amendment) Bills, 1939 and 1940, the Jute Ordinance and Jute Regulation Bill, 1939, to name a few. The establishment of Debt Settlement Boards was regarded as a benevolent measure of Fazlul Huq. The debates on the Primary Education and the Secondary Education Bill, 1940 created stormy scenes in the Legislature.

Some other important issues were raised in the legislature. The first to mention is the Adjournment Motion on Jute and Cotton strikes (1937). In this connection the Labour Policy of the

Government deserves special attention. The 'detenu' question was an important issue in the legislature which was clearly reflected in the debates. The appointment of the Land Revenue Commission was a very important step taken by the Huq Government. The reaction of the Bengal Government to the Second World War is of special significance and as such the legislature became the arena for lively debates on the issue. There was Ministerial crisis due to internal conflict of the constituent parties and Fazlul Huq had to resign in 1941. He formed another Ministry known as the 'Second Huq Ministry' which continued up to 1943. This time Fazlul Huq had to resign under pressure from the Governor, John Herbert. The relation between the Governor and the Legislature assumes special importance in this context.

An important feature of the Legislature during 1943-45 was the clamour for more money from the centre. The pressure on the province for 'War Damand' was acute during those days. The famine of 1943 had produced widespread reactions. Attempts have been made in this research to analyse its causes, and reflect on the policy of the government and the politics surrounding it.

Under the new constitution, the legislature had come to reflect the nature of the then Bengal society. In this context, the communal question and the communal conflicts and urban rural conflicts need to be highlighted to present the picture of contemporaneous society of Bengal. To put it briefly, the present research is thus focused on (a) the nature of legislative politics in pre-partition Bengal as articulated by the dominant societal forces and (b) the events leading to the partition of Bengal.
In line with the promise of responsible government, Provincial Autonomy was introduced within the constitutional framework. The people of Bengal as well as the people of India hoped that their aspirations would be fulfilled but in practice, limitations were deliberately foisted that had hamstrung the working of the legislature in Bengal. Different parties registered their presence in the legislature and in most cases they sought to evolve their own ideologies. The fact remains that the legislature proved to be an imposed institution that had increasingly lost relevance to the growing political aspirations of the people. The interested elite who accepted the legislature had to find out in the process their bases, platforms and workable ideologies.

The tasks before the new legislature were not easy to solve. There was the problem of Provincial finance which was quite a complicated one. This has been discussed in connection with the Budgets of different governments. Moreover, the legislature had to respond to the major socio-economic and political issues of the day, such as land problem, debt problem, industrial problem, detenu question etc.

Role of Political Parties:

The roles of the political parties, for example, the Congress, the Muslim League and the Krishak Proja Party, could be judged on the basis of their programmes. The parliamentary programme, the manifestos issued by the parties at the time of the election were more or less identical, though there were differences in degree. The Krishak Proja Party, for instance, had more of an agrarian orientation. Since no party could attain absolute majority in the election of 1937, coalition was inevitable. Although on paper there
was no basic difference in programmes and manifestos, the Congress did not stretch its hands of co-operation to the Krishak Proja Party, while its leader A.K. Fazlul Huq invited the Bengal Congress first to join the coalition. Fazlul Huq had no other alternative than to form a coalition with the League. There was in fact a strong opinion in Bengal that the Congress and the Krishak Proja Party should form a coalition government. The leadership in Bengal Congress was not quite averse to the idea. But all-India leadership of the Congress was suffering from a complex of ideological purity which ran counter to the ideal of a workable coalition. There was strong pressure from the Congress High Command which the provincial Congress leadership could not resist. Had the coalition been a reality, the polarisation of political forces in Bengal could have developed on completely different directions. This might have created opportunities for the end of communal politics in Bengal. Unfortunately, the Hindu-Muslim relation in later years became strained due to the prejudice of the Hindus on one side and the suspicion of the Muslims on the other. All-India politics had exerted its strong manipulative influence on provincial politics, as the country had been passing through a traumatic phase of communal disharmony at the fag end of imperial rule. The present research makes an attempt at delineating the broad features of provincial politics in Bengal at a period in Indian history when the country virtually stood on a political precipice and the future was struggling to be born.

Source Materials:

For source materials, both primary and secondary sources have been used. Among primary sources, the legislative proceedings of
Bengal (Assembly and Council), proceedings of the Central Legislature, House of Commons Debates, Archival Records, Party papers and private papers proved extremely useful. Many contemporary newspapers and periodicals have been consulted to understand social reactions to political events of the day.

Some important personalities of both the Bengals i.e. East and West Bengal, were interviewed. Not all of them were, however, members of the legislature. Yet, they were intimately connected with the events of those times. Important among them are Prafulla Chandra Ghose, Lila Roy, Sibnath Banerjee, Abul Hashim, Nalinakshya Sanyal, Misith Nath Kundu, Khagen Dasgupta, Prafulla Chandra Sen, Prabhu Dayal Himmat Sinka, Niharendu Dutta Majumdar, Pramatha Ranjan Thakur, Kazem Ali Mirza, Sunil Das, Sasanka Sekhar Sanyal, Mira Dattagupta and Azizur Rahman. Some of those personalities such as Lila Roy, Prafulla Ghosh died subsequently. Specific themes were identified for the purpose and informal conversational interviews had been taken from time to time. These focused interviews yielded rich insights into the politics and events of the period.

As regards secondary sources, quite a few published books have been consulted. These have been mentioned at appropriate places.

To sum up, the present research is an attempt to illuminate a relatively unchartered part of the history of politics in undivided Bengal, using the institutional arena of the legislature and drawing on the contextual forces impinging on the institution.