As a sequel to the British Government's decision to introduce Provincial Autonomy in India on 1 April, 1937\(^1\) general elections were to be held in the winter of 1936-37.\(^2\) Accordingly, different parties and groups started election campaign, and election manifestoes were prepared and published for electoral support.

**The Congress**

The intention of the Congress regarding Provincial elections was clear from the statement of the All India Congress Committee President, Rajendra Prasad. In an interview to the Press on Congress participation in the proceedings of the Delimitation Committee and enrolment of voters for the new elections, he said that the Congress had not taken any interest in the shaping of the constitution since Mahatmaji's return from the Round Table Conference in December 1931. It could not, therefore, at the fag end take any steps regarding the activities of the Delimitation Committee. As regards the enrolment of voters in the registers under the new constitution the Working Committee had not issued any particular instruction, but since it was likely that the Congress might participate in the elections it was just as well the Provincial Committee should take steps to carry on propaganda amongst...

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the people to get themselves enrolled as voters. The President continued that nothing would be lost by such action on the part of the Provincial Committees even if the Congress decided not to participate in the elections, which appeared to him unlikely. He said that he found from newspapers that the Bombay Provincial Congress Committee had already taken steps in that direction and was carrying on propaganda and he expected that other provincial committees might as well follow suit. On the selection of candidates there was difference of opinion in the Congress side particularly between Sarat Chandra Bose, the Working President of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee and the President of the Bengal Provincial Parliamentary Board, Bidhan Chandra Roy. Sarat Chandra Bose in disgust resigned from the membership of the Provincial Parliamentary Committee. After intervention from central party, Bose withdrew his resignation. B.C. Roy ultimately resigned from the presidency of the Provincial Parliamentary Party and said: 'It is not for me to apportion blame for present 'impasse'. I may trust that the central committee will not endow S. Bose with full powers to carry on elections so that the Congress candidates who desire to contest might be successful'.

The Congress did not want to accept office but prepared itself for election in Bengal reluctantly. But as a general trend the Congress raised the question of nationalism and independence during its campaign. The ideals of the Congress were put forth before the electorate. Those were stated in the Congress Election Manifesto released by the All India Congress Committee at the

3 G.L. Home Poll. File No. 4/12/36.
4 B.C. Roy Private papers. Subject File No. 48 (Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Library and Museum).
Bombay meeting on August 22, 1936. In his speech at Deshbandhu Park, Calcutta on November 5, 1936 Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru referring to the coming election, said that the Congress had decided to contest the election in view of the 'present situation'. But so far as the Constitution Act was concerned the whole attitude of the Congress was one of intense dislike and they wanted to put an end to it as soon as possible. In spite of this they had decided to contest the election and he maintained that there was no inconsistency in it. Having decided to contest the election, it was their duty to see that the Congress candidates were returned. They should send only those people who would fight inside the legislatures. It was a matter of vital importance and it was essential that Congress candidates must be real Congressmen and not merely four-anna members but men whose past records showed that they could fight for the freedom of India. These Congress candidates must be men who would be the standard-bearers of the policy which the Congress had adopted. If they supported the policy it was their duty to support the men. Two of the three criteria for the selection of the candidates laid down by the Congress Central Parliamentary Board were that those chosen should have a chance of winning the election and be able to provide their own finance. The B.P.C.C. however, had issued a Supplementary Election Manifesto. The process of Congress politics at different levels was complex in which the 'dynamics' of Congress factional conflict at the local and provincial level played the main part.

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5 Indian Annual Register, Vol. II, 1936, pp. 188-191. Text of the Manifesto in Appendix I.
6 Advance, November 6, 1936.
7 File No. 37, Appendix II.
The All India Muslim League at its 24th session held in Bombay in April 1936 passed a resolution recording its emphatic protest against forcing a constitution on the people of India.\(^9\) It also declared that the Provincial scheme of the constitution be utilized for what it was worth in spite of its most objectionable features which rendered real control and responsibilities of Ministry and Legislature nugatory. The League resolution moreover stated that the All India Federal Scheme was most reactionary, retrograde, injurious and fatal to the vital interest of British India vis-a-vis Indian States and was calculated to thwart and delay indefinitely the realisation of India's most cherished goal of complete responsible government and was entirely unworkable in the interest of India.

The All India Muslim League Parliamentary Board under the presidency of Mohammed Ali Jinnah adopted its manifesto and issued it from Lahore on 11 June 1936.\(^10\) The manifesto stated the principles of the League, which was formed out of the necessity of an all-India political organisation for the Muslims. It remembered with pride the League-Congress Pact of 1916 which was considered as a beacon light in the constitutional history of India. 'This pact', the manifesto maintained, 'will go down in Indian history as a landmark in the political evolution of the country, as signal proof of the identity of purpose, earnestness and cooperation between the two great sections of the people of India in the task of attainment of responsible government.'

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10 Ibid, pp. 299-301. Text in Appendix III.
However, in the context of the prevailing situation, the League decided to contest the Provincial elections under the Act of 1935. The League Parliamentary Board further decided that a Central Election Board be formed with power to constitute and affiliate provincial election boards in the various provinces. Under the chairmanship of M.A. Jinnah the Central Election Board was formed consisting of 35 members. Fazlul Huq of Bengal was included as a member of the Central Election Board but he was removed by Jinnah on November 2, on the charge of breach of the Bengal agreement and insubordination and disloyalty to and defiance of the principles and policies of the Central Board.\footnote{Advance, November 3, 1936.}
President Jinnah said, 'New problems have arisen today. It is not only the question of educating the middle class Muslims in India on western lines and providing them with jobs, it is only the question of infusing in them the ideals of Victorian liberation. On the contrary, present conditions compel one to go much deeper into the problems of the entire social regeneration of the seventy millions of Muslims, of extricating them from the terrible poverty, degradation and backwardness into which they have fallen and giving them at least the rudiments of civilized existence and making them free citizens of a free land'.\footnote{Appendix III.} For survival at least the necessity of change at the moment was to be realised. The League wanted change of the economic situation but at the same time it was clearly stated that it was 'opposed to any movement that aims at expropriation of private property'.\footnote{Ibid.}

The manifesto further stated, 'the main principles on which we expect our representatives in various Legislatures to work will...
be (1) that the present provincial constitution and proposed central constitution should be replaced immediately by democratic full self-government, (2) and that in the meantime, representatives of the Muslim League in the various Legislatures will utilise the Legislatures in order to extract the maximum benefit out of the Constitution for the uplift of the people in the various spheres of national life. The Muslim League Party must be formed as a corollary so long as separate electorates exist but there would be free co-operation with any group or groups whose aims and ideals are approximately the same as those of the League Party. The League appeals to Mussalmans that they should not permit themselves to be exploited on economic or any other grounds, which will break up the solidarity of the community'. The manifesto finally laid down the programme.  

The Board further adopted some special programme setting out the special and peculiar needs of Bengal. For election purposes the Muslim League for the first time became vigorously active and came in contact with the masses to a large extent. The League felt the need for a vernacular newspaper as its mouthpiece and the 'Dainik Azad' first came out on October 31, 1936. Maulana Akram Khan, the Editor of the Azad, repeatedly emphasised the point of 'mass contact'.

THE KRISHAK PROJA PARTY

Besides the Congress and the Muslim League the next important party in Bengal was the Krishak Proja Party of Fazlul Huq formally

14 Appendix III.
15 Star of India, September 12, 1936. Appendix IV.
16 Maulana Akram Khan, Mohammadi (Monthly), Asvin 1342 (Bengali).
founded in July 1929. Both the Congress and League were middle-class-based. In Bengal the majority of the population were Muslims and most of them were peasants or Projas. The Zamindars were mostly Hindus. Some Muslim League leaders were elites of the society. On the one hand there was a gulf of difference between the Hindu Zamindars and Muslim peasants and on the other, between the Muslim League Zamindars the Muslim elite and the peasants. There was a vacuum in the political and social sphere in Bengal. That was filled up by Abul Kasem Fazlul Huq.

The Krishak Proja- raiyat movement had a long history in Bengal. It started from Barisal district. The name of Aswini Kumar Datta is closely connected with the Krishak movement. In 1914 in the Jamalpur sub-division on the basin of Kamaria a big Proja Conference was held. In the Mohammadi and in the Muslim Hitaishi, advertisements and deliberations of the Conference were published.\(^\text{17}\) At that time the important Krishak leaders were Fazlul Huq, Khan Bahadur Hasem Ali Khan, Bhegai Haidar, Hasem Talukdar, Banikantha Sen, Khan Bahadur Alimuzzaman Chowdhury, Rajibuddin Tarafdar, Akram Khan, Maniruzzaman Islamabadi.\(^\text{18}\) It was stated in the Modern Review that, it was in 1921 that the late Keshab Chandra Ghosh and his co-workers inaugurated the Proja or Tenant Movement in Bengal. P.C. Roy, Pran Krishna Acharya, Krishna Kumar Mitra, Maulvi Abdul Karim and Maulvi A.K. Fazlul Huq joined it. Subsequently Abdur Rahim also joined. At that time both the Hindus and the Mussalmans joined the movement and worked for the cause of the tenants.\(^\text{19}\)

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19 April, 1937, p. 488.
In 1921 under the presidency of Hashem Ali Khan the Proja Conference of Agailjhara was remarkable in the history of Proja movement. There was a massive rally of peasants - both Muslims and Namasudras - from different parts of the province. Banikantha Sen, Hashem Talukdar and Majed Kazi were the main organisers.\(^{20}\)

Leaving aside the history of the Proja movement one thing to be noted here is that Fazlul Huq and his associates at that time realised that the Projas were the nerve centre of the social, political and economic life of Bengal, be they Muslims or Hindus. They were connected with the soil and they were the poorest of all the classes of society. Their development would bring about overall development of the country. Fazlul Huq tried to give the Proja movement a definite shape. In 1928 in the Bengal Legislative council on the deliberations of the Tenancy Bill, irrespective of Party affiliations, the Hindu members voted against the Bill and the Muslim members in favour of it. This had a reaction on the current politics of the Province. In the next year under the leadership of Subhas Chandra Bose the Krishnanagore Congress Conference revoked the Bengal Pact of Chittaranjan Das. In the same year the All Bengal Proja Samiti was founded. Abdur Rahim was its President and Akram Khan was the Secretary. Maulvi Muzibur Rahman, Fazlul Huq, Abdulla Suhrawardy, Khan Bahadur Abdul Momin were Vice-Presidents and Joint Secretaries were Shamsuddin Ahmed and Tamizuddin Khan. 'Chasi' was the weekly mouthpiece of the Proja Samiti which eventually turned into a Party.

\(^{20}\) Habibullah, p. 27.
In 1936 the name of the Nikhil Banga Proja Samiti was changed into Nikhil Banga Krishak Proja Party to give it a broad connotation. The Krishak Proja Party based its policy on the needs of the local peasantry but it would be a mistake to regard it as an instrument for fighting merely for economic rights. Economic questions naturally dominated the platform of the party but it had also a definite outlook and programme. Fazulul Huq himself said, 'today the Nikhil Banga Proja Samiti is faced with one of the gravest issues in its short but stormy career. We started the Samiti as a non-communal party, based on the fundamental economic interests of the vast masses of the people of our country and set before us an ideal and a programme which cut across the divisions of communities and classes. We brought before the people of Bengal an issue which divided the country from top to bottom on a question of principle and not of personalities'. The Krishak Proja Party was dominantly Muslim in composition and leadership, no doubt, but it was non-communal in its concept and approach and promised a field of activities for the peasantry of all communities. The aims and objects and programme of the Nikhil Banga Krishak Proja Samiti for the ensuing election were duly publicized.

Hindu Nationalist Party

The Secretary of the Hindu Nationalist Party issued Election Manifesto of the Party with 9 points programme. They wanted to fight the Communal Award, to promote friendly relations with the members of sister communities, to work for the release of detained

22 Amrita Bazar Patrika, September 1, 1936.
23 Humayun Kabir, op. cit., p. 23.
24 Amrita Bazar Patrika, September 10, 1936, Appendix V.
prisoners, 'to bring about a more intimate and cordial relationship between landlords and tenants', to tackle the problem of unemployment, to reorganise the educational system of the province and so on.\textsuperscript{25} Swami Satyananda, Secretary of the Bengal Provincial Hindu Sabha denied that it had formed any alliance with any other association. He stated that B.C. Chatterjee was not the Sabha's President and that he had no hand in the formation of Hindu Nationalist Party.\textsuperscript{26} In a lengthy statement, Bhagirath Chandra Das, along with other things, made it clear that 'for the coming election it has decided to work jointly with some Nationalist leaders of the important associations such as the Indian Association, Bangiya Jana Sangha (All Bengal Backward Classes Association) and the British Indian Association who are in agreement with our principle and we all have jointly formed a party called the Hindu Nationalist Party. The leaders and workers of many other caste Associations of nationalistic outlook have also joined it. It is really a united Hindu Party which is not opposed to Congress ideals but which is formed to contest the coming election in cooperation with one another to safeguard the legitimate Hindu interests. For various reasons we think that the Hindu Sabha alone ought not to run its own candidates. Hence we have formed a coalition party with all other important groups, whose joint action will ensure success for the party in the coming election'.\textsuperscript{27}

Bengal Trade Union Federation

The Election Manifesto of the Bengal Trade Union Federation duly presented the Workers' demand and labour members' duty. The

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{25} The Amrita Bazar Patrika, November 6, 1936.
  \item \textsuperscript{26} Ibid, November 9, 1936.
  \item \textsuperscript{27} Ibid, November 20, 1936.
\end{itemize}
organisation was affiliated to the National Trade Union Federation. It stated that since its inauguration in 1918 it steadily tried to improve the conditions of labour. Regarding the labour members' duty, the Bengal Trade Union Federation released to the Press that only 8 seats had been given to labour out of 250 seats in the Bengal Legislative Assembly. So it stated the following: 'Workers therefore, have a very limited choice and they have to select the very best candidates who may be trusted to fight their cause in and outside legislature. The elected candidates for Labour in the legislature must be experienced men who have a thorough and intimate knowledge of Labour conditions in this country and elsewhere. It is to be remembered that work in the legislature must be law making, and there is a vast field for labour legislation in this country. The group of Labour members in the Legislature will have to largely employ themselves in drafting and introducing Bills with a view to improving the condition of the working classes and giving them incidentally a definite political status in the scheme of the Government. The Labour members will have to constantly exert their influence on the administration so that the Labour movement may grow unhampered. The work in the legislature will have to be supplemented by constant endeavour in the direction of organising strong Labour Unions and guiding their activities towards constructive channels so that, in the not very distant future, the Labour movement may develop sufficient strength not only to stand on its own legs but also to create conditions favourable to the organisation and establishment of a Socialist State in which the workers will be their own masters'.

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28 The Amrita Bazar Patrika, November 16, 1936.
The Federation regarded the new constitution far short of fulfilling the demands of the workers, but at the same time it proposed to make whatever use might be possible of it. It was also ready to show full sympathy to the Indian National Congress so far as it worked for the freedom of the people of the country, but its main object was the establishment of rights of the workers. To fulfil the objects it placed its demands for the workers and the agricultural labourers.29

29 The Amrita Bazar Patrika, November 16, 1936. The demands were as follows:

1. Security of tenure in service,
2. One month's leave in the year with full pay,
3. Introduction of Provident Fund, Sickness Insurance and old age pension,
4. Work for the unemployed by slum clearance, drainage and other improvements in the labour centres. For the rest of the unemployed a weekly allowance,
5. Better housing,
6. Adequate wages and the establishment of a Wage Fixing Machinery for every industry.
7. Better means of settling trade disputes,
8. Hours of work to be reduced to not more than 44 a week,
9. Free periodical medical examination and treatment and establishment of free hospitals for workers,
10. Free primary education,
11. Provisions for recreation and amusements,
12. Reorganisation of organised Trade Unions,
13. Establishments of Co-operative Banks and Savings Banks, specially for the benefit of the workers,
14. Removal of drug shops from Labour areas,
15. Freedom of association and of speech to rescue the tea plantation labour from the influence of planters,
16. Establishment of technical institutions for the benefit of the children of workers, more particularly for the Jute Industry,
17. Creche for Women Workers and maternity benefit.

Demands For Agricultural Labour

1. Minimum Wage of at least Rs. 10/- a month or six annas a day and free meal,
2. Free land for housing,
3. Credit-facilities to buy land,
4. Ownership of land and unrestricted right of acquisition and transfer by actual cultivators,
5. Fifty percent reduction of rent of actual cultivators and no enhancement of rent in case of improvement of land by them,
6. More democratisation of Co-operative Credit Societies,
Election Campaign

The Congress formally decided to launch election campaign from November 16 and the acting President of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, Sarat Chandra Bose, gave notice to district Congress Committees in this regard. The election campaign was inaugurated at the Albert Hall, Calcutta. The main issues highlighted in the meeting were the wrecking of the constitution and the establishment of 'Purna Swaraj'. The leaders appealed for help and co-operation from the people. In the meantime, in November 4 from Bombay, M.A. Jinnah the President of League Parliamentary Board expressed a view that it could co-operate with the Congress for election purposes. In his opinion it was obvious that they did not agree or did not endorse the programme and policy of the Congress, but in various legislatures the Congress Party or any other party which stood for progress and welfare of the motherland naturally could receive the League's co-operation as they reasonably expected to receive others' co-operation for the same object. That idea was nipped in the bud and he had been criticised for that by Jawaharlal Nehru in his speech at Deshbandhu Park, Calcutta.

There had already been negotiation between the Krishak Proja and the Muslim League for co-operation in the election. On August 18, 1936 a draft agreement was drawn up between the Proja Party and the

7. State organisation of marketing agricultural products and well-planned irrigation and transport facilities,
8. Immediate adoption of measures of rural development and sanitation,
9. Propagation of knowledge through cinemas and other shows and moving libraries,
10. More hospitals, charitable dispensaries and play-grounds in rural areas,
11. Free primary education.

30 Advance, November 5, 1936.
31 Ibid, November 6, 1936.
Muslim League, setting forth definitely the conditions under which the two organisations could co-operate in the matter of the election of Muslim members. One of the essential conditions of this agreement was that the Proja Party should retain its separate entity and that the aims, objects and programme of the Proja Party should be accepted without reservation by the Muslim League. An all-India Programme had been chalked out for the United Muslim Party for ensuing election. But there were differences of opinion between the Nawabs, Khwajas and Fazlul Huq and his Proja Party. Jinnah took the side of the former and Fazlul Huq was expelled from the Central League Parliamentary Board as well as from the Provincial League Council dominated by Ispahani-Suhrawardy and led by Jinnah. Consequently Fazlul Huq had been blamed and attacked by the Azad and the Star of India in abusive languages for many days. Since this pre-election period Fazlul Huq had to face this non-Bengali aspersion, which was growing stronger during the later years.

Unity call for the Muslims, that is, in favour of the Muslim League, came from many religious corners. For example His Holiness Hazrat Maulana Shah Sufi Abu Bakr Siddiqui, Amir-i-Shariat, Bengal and President, Jamait-e-Ulema, Bengal had repeatedly issued the following appeal:

'I do hereby inform my disciples and brethren that it is imperative on the part of the Muslims of Bengal to unite into a solid single party on the occasion of the coming elections to the Bengal Legislature, otherwise great harm will be done to the Muslims and peasants of Bengal.

32 Particularly from September to March these two papers attacked Huq and his Party very often in news items and editorials.
'The Bengal Muslim League Parliamentary Board has been formed to bring all the Muslims into one fold. We are all members of the same Board.

'Further I would tell you that the Muslim League Board is the true Muslim Party and real Muslim Proja Samiti, because all the Muslim well-wishers of the Projas are in it. According to the dictates of Islam the formation of such a United Party is indispensably necessary. The Jamait-e-Ulema of Bengal and Assam is working in co-operation with that Party.

'My earnest appeal to you, therefore, is that you should not bring about the destruction of your community by casting your votes in favour of the nominees of the Proja Samiti or any groups subservient to the Hindu Congress in preference to the nominees of the true Muslim and real Proja Party and the Jamait-e-Ulema. I hope, you will keep my request and vote for the nominees of the real Muslim Party'.

Thus Fazlul Huq had to fight against this sectarian force. However, his election campaign roused the rural people of Bengal. He started his campaign from the door of the Nawabs of Dacca. That was exciting and significant. Patuakhali was the battlefield for Nazimuddin and Fazlul Huq. The speeches of Fazlul Huq with local dialect and accent had great appeal for the rural people particularly for the people of east Bengal.

The Muslim League's attack was sometimes severe. There were also charges and counter-charges of government patronage from

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33 Star of India, November 15, 16, 1936.
opposite sides, that is, from the Congress, the Muslim League and the Krishak Proja Party. It could be expected that the Congress candidates were financially in good position because, as has been stated before, it was the direction of the Congress High Command that one of the criteria of a candidate should be that he must be ready to finance his own election. In comparison to this most of the candidates of Fazlul Huq's Party were men from the common walks of life. Their main strength was the goodwill of the people. In the Midnapore Sadar General constituency it was alleged by H.S. Suhrawardy that the other contestants Rai Bahadur Sambhu Chandra Dutt, Vice-Chairman, District Board, Khan Bahadur Alfazuddin Ahmed, nominated members, District Board, and others were openly holding election meetings within the thana compounds and subordinate government officers of the district were indulging in election canvassing.35

Fazlul Huq, however, in his election call at Dacca enchanted the people with the following speech:

'From now onward begins the grim fight between Zamindars and Capitalists on one side and the poor people on the other. It is not at all a civil war in the Muslim community, but it is a fight in which the people of Bengal are divided on a purely economic issue..... You know much more than I do, the appalling misery that prevails in villages and how thousands are dying every day in rural areas of Bengal in actual starvation and semi-starvation. The problem of Dal (pulse) and Bhat (rice) and some kind of coarse cloth to cover out nudity is the problem of problems which stares

35 Advance, December 30, 1936.
us in the face and which must be solved immediately. This is the very problem which we will have to face as soon as we enter the Assembly. An obvious and immediate solution to the problem will be by effecting drastic economy in the cost of administration, by reducing taxation on the poor, by repeal of such taxation as tells heavily on the masses and by a thorough overhauling of the Bengal Tenancy Act and other Acts in the interest of the raiyats. To all these measures Zamindars, Capitalists and those holding vested interests will offer strenuous opposition. It is, therefore, inevitable that there will be a division of the country into two main classes, those of the rich and the influential on the one side and the poor and the helpless on the other. We represent the latter; we are sure you do the same'.

The preparations of the Congress for the General Election to the Bengal Legislature were without much fanfare. An interesting feature of the elections was the prominent part played in some areas by 'Krishak Samitis' and their attacks levelled against the Zamindari System. The result was that, the under-privileged population of Noakhali district were awakened so much so that there all the elected candidates save one were not even matriculates. Though in many cases party alignments were not made clearly until after the legislature met - three definite parties - the Congress, the Muslim League and the Projas secured most support at the polls.

Election Results

The number of seats occupied by the parties groups and independents in the Bengal Legislative Assembly were as follows:

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Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Congress Caste Hindus including an independent Congress</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congress scheduled Caste Hindus (including one who captured a non-reserved seat)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congress Labour</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>54</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Caste Hindus (including Tea Garden Labour Member)</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Scheduled Caste Hindus (including one who captured a non-reserved seat)</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu Nationalists</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu Sabha (both S.C. Hindus)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>42</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim League</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenant (Proja) Party</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Muslims (including two Muslim Labour Members)</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europeans, Ango-Indian and Indian Christians</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>248</strong>*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Two members returned from two constituencies each. Thus 250 seats in the Bengal Legislative Assembly were filled up.

( Source : Home Poll. Fortnightly Report-18/1/37 (First Half)

The general analysis of elections to the Bengal Legislatures was as follows:

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38 K.W. to F. 129/37, Poll (Cmd 5589).
Table 2

Bengal Legislative Assembly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class of Constituency</th>
<th>No. of seats</th>
<th>No. of seats filled without contest</th>
<th>No. of candidates polled to No. of electors in contested constituencies</th>
<th>P.C. of votes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Urban</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot; Rural</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>40.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mohammedan Urban</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>44.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot; Rural</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women's General Urban</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20.48</td>
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<td>&quot; Mdn. Urban</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>28.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglo-Indian</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>45.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>56.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian Christian</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commerce &amp; Industry</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>96.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Landholders</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>83.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour :</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot; Trade Union</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot; Factory &amp; Colliery</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>47.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot; Tea Garden</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>93.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>594</td>
<td>40.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Provincial percentage of Votes in contested Constituencies - 40.5
Number of Candidates who forfeited deposit - 120
Total electorate - 6,695,483
Total number of Voters in contested Constituencies 6,299,429
Total number of Votes polled - 2,586,404
Number of Constituencies with more than one seat - 32
* Including one seat reserved for women.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class of Constituency</th>
<th>No. of seats</th>
<th>No. of seats filled without contest</th>
<th>No. of candidates for contested seats</th>
<th>P.C. of Votes polled to No. of electors in contested constituencies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>31.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Urban</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>31.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot; Rural</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>59.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Md. Urban</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>49.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Md. Rural</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>77.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>30</strong></td>
<td><strong>11</strong></td>
<td><strong>50</strong></td>
<td><strong>46.6</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Provincial percentage of votes polled in contested Constituencies - 46.6
Number of Candidates who forfeited deposit - 7
Total Electorate - 19,610
Total number of Voters in contested Constituencies - 12,005
Total number of Votes polled - 5,593
Number of Constituencies with more than one seat - 1
While assessing the elections of 1937 Humayun Kabir rightly pointed out that - 'The elections proved a great educative force and the results at first looked extremely hopeful. When one looked at the alignment of forces on India's Parliamentary map, it seemed that the forces of progress had triumphed everywhere. Among the Hindus, the Congress swept the polls and stalwarts of the past regime were overwhelmed. Among the Mussalmans also, the reactionary elements were discredited if not destroyed. In Bengal the League representing the vested interests was demoralised by Fazlul Huq's victory on a Proja ticket over the Bengal leader of the League'.

It is noteworthy that Fazlul Huq was elected from two constituencies i.e. Patuakhali and Pirojpur. The success of the Congress and the Projas was greater than was generally anticipated. The election results of the Congress proved their general efficiency in the matters of the Congress machine. Ten of their Candidates were returned to the Council and sixty to the Assembly in which they formed largest political unit. A feature of the election was, the capture of five out of the eight Labour Constituencies by the Congress Candidates of Communist complexion.

The Azad in its editorial admitted the failure of the League in the name of the Muslims, in an indirect way. Prominent among the stalwarts of the old regime rejected by the voters were N.K. Basu, former leader of the Opposition, B.C. Chatterjee, leader of the Nationalist Group, the Maharaja of Santosh, and Khwaja Nazimuddin. Nazimuddin was later elected from North Calcutta Constituency left by Suhrawardy who had been elected from two constituencies and the

39 Quoted by the author in her article presented to the Indian History Congress Seminar 1976 and published in the Proceedings. ("The Bengal Legislature of 1937 and its characteristics").


41 February 11, 1937.
Pirozpur Constituency left by Fazlul Huq was occupied by Syed Mohammad Afzal.

Out of the 250 seats in the Assembly no single party was in a majority. For a while after the results of the elections were known, there was speculation about how the various groups would sort themselves out. Fazlul Huq, to raise his strength to a clear majority, approached the Congress for co-operation and eagerly talked with the leaders of the Provincial Congress. The Congress refused that proposal and that had been regarded by many 'as a blunder for the Congress and proved unfortunate for Bengal'. A Congress-Projā coalition would have put itself on the road to Hindu-Muslim understanding. There was also speculation for some time whether the Congress would be able to attract the Independents, the Nationalists and the Hindu Sabha numbering fortytwo, and possibly the thirtyeight members of the Proja Party in the Assembly. Such a combination would have had a clear majority in the Assembly. But as stated earlier, as a result of the Congress refusal to Fazlul Huq, events turned out otherwise. All was set at rest by the statement issued to the Press over the signatures of Fazlul Huq and Nawab of Dacca that the leaders of the League and the Proja Parties decided to co-operate under the leadership of Abul Kasem Fazlul Huq for the purposes of working on the Constitution. Thus the coalition effected by Fazlul Huq between the Muslim League, the Proja Party and a number of influential 'Independents' relegated Congress inevitably to the role of Opposition.

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42 Ram Gopal, Indian Mussalmans (Bombay, 1959), p. 246; Also K.P. Biswas, pp. 34-35. K.P. Biswas as a veteran journalist pointed out that the decision of Congress High Command over the entente question was a plea. It was the personality conflict in Bengal Congress which prevented the leaders to spread a hand of co-operation to Fazlul Huq. Some thought that the insistence of
There was some natural grumbling over the selection of Ministers. But that was resolved and Fazlul Huq formed a ministry of eleven members of whom five were Muslims and five Hindus except the Chief Minister. The portfolios were distributed as follows:

- Fazlul Huq: Education
- Nalini Ranjan Sarkar: Finance
- Nazimuddin: Home
- Bijoy Prasad Singh Roy: Revenue
- Habibullah Bahadur: Agriculture and Industry
- Sris Chandra Nandy: Communication and Works
- Suhrawardy: Commerce and Labour
- Musharraf Hossain: Judiciary and Legislature
- Nausher Ali: Local Self-Government
- Prasanna Deb Raikat: Excise and Forest; and
- Mukunda Behari Mullick: Cooperation, Credit and Rural Indebtedness.

The Muslim League members were not satisfied with this distribution. Fazlul Huq also had been criticised by some of the Proja members for this coalition. In an open letter to the Press it was asked - 'Who gave you the right to merge the Proja Party, its aims and ideals in the reactionary League? Were you not returned on a definite mandate from your constituency'? From the composition of the Cabinet, its personnel and distribution of portfolios, it was clear that the election programme of the Krishak Proja Party and Fazlul Huq was at the mercy of reactionary groups and vested interests represented by the Nalini-Nazimuddin-

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Fazlul Huq to include Nalini Ranjan Sarkar in the Cabinet, who was driven from Congress was an important cause for the breakdown of the coalition talks.

43 Forward - April 12, 1937.
Musharruff - B.P. Singh Roy combination.\textsuperscript{44} There was disaffection in the ranks of the Projas after the publication of the names of Ministers. They thought it a violation of election pledges and considered that Huq Cabinet was exposed as reactionary and there was 'good bye' to Proja Programme. Some 28 M.L.A.s from Proja Group appealed to all M.L.As that those who had Proja ticket, to see that the Proja Programme and ideals were not sacrificed for any consideration whatsoever.\textsuperscript{45} The Congress and non-Congress Hindus were not also satisfied with the selection of Ministers.

The leadership of the different parties and groups in the new legislature was provided by important personalities. The coalition, the Congress and the Europeans were led by Fazlul Huq, Sarat Bose and George Campbell respectively. Shamsuddin Ahmed (Kusthia) and Abu Hussain Sarkar were the leaders of the Independent Krishak Proja group and their whip was Nawabjada Hasan Ali (Mymensingh). The leader of the Independent Proja Party was Tamizuddin Khan (Faridpur). Niharendu Dutt Mazumdar represented the Krishak Mazdur faction which existed for sometime. The spokesman of the Ulema Party was Shahnulla (Chittagong). The leader of the Independent Nationalists was Jatindranath Basu (Shyamaprasad Mukherjee used to sit in this bench). Besides these, there were 'Zamindars Bench', 'Labour Bench' etc. It has been pointed out by a scholar of twentieth century Bengal that there were two striking features of the composition of Bengal Legislative Assembly - (a) the absence of any single dominant party (as noticed before) and (b) the number of its members, of whatever party allegiance, who claimed to represent the tenancy.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{44} Sila Sen, Muslim Politics in Bengal - 1937-47 (New Delhi, 1976), p. 95.
\textsuperscript{45} Advance - March 30, 1937.
Independently of the other activities of the Congress outside, it was only to be expected that inside the legislature its presence as a strong and compact body, backed by a powerful all-India organisation already in power in most of the provinces and largely swayed by the magnetic personality of Gandhiji, would make itself felt. Whether, had this factor been absent, the policy adopted by the Government in such matters as the treatment of 'political prisoners', the introduction of 'Prohibition', 'Retrenchment' or 'Tenancy Legislation' would have taken the form that it actually did, must remain a matter of conjecture. The Cabinet commended enough support. But in fact 'the coalition had to pay attention to the Congress due to a constitutional opposition. That the latter was developing its proper role as such, instead of remaining a non-cooperating body devoted only to destructive or obstructive tactics seems to have been felt in constituencies'.

The Congress was keen to capture power in the local bodies and also in exerting their influence over students and labour. Their eagerness to win over title-holders reflects a 'conservative complexion' of their character.

The role of the Congress in the Legislature itself though sometimes exciting was singularly ineffective and their attempts to shake the Ministry were fruitless. In early days of the new legislature in one occasion Sarat Chandra Bose indulged in a 'walk out' alleging that the Government had refused to give satisfactory information regarding the rumoured death of hunger-strikers of Andamans. But that was ill-chosen. Not merely was the Home

48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
Minister able to inform the House the same day that Sarat Bose's information was wrong, but three days later the Chief Minister stated that the hunger-strike itself had been abandoned by all but seven of the convicts.

Future activities of the legislature, however, will show the character of the ministerial group, their associates and of the Opposition. Here only some important and interesting characteristics of the legislature can be mentioned. There was difference between the old and new system - franchise was broadened, membership was enlarged, idea of responsible government was implanted. There was change in dress, language, manner, nature, importance and character of the legislature. The first thing though merely a formal one, which drew attention was the order of the Speaker for thoroughly recasting the sitting arrangements of the different parties inside the Assembly Chamber during the budget session of 1936-37. The main object behind the arrangement was to obviate as far as possible the undesirable impression being conveyed to a casual visitor that the House was divided on purely communal or sectarian lines.50

A picture of rural Bengal was revealed in the new legislature. In the previous period of dyarchical rule when franchise was strictly limited, only Rajas, Zamindars, Barristers, Rai Bahadurs and Khan Bahadurs would come in the legislature. They were British replica of the Indians in dress, behaviour and language. Then Khadi almost turned into a 'dress of meeting' and there was no novelty in it. The 'darwari' (official) dress of the Muslims also was changed and in many cases lungis, pyjama and punjabis became the natural dress

50 Amrita Bazar Patrika - July 10, 1937.
for the East Bengal Muslim members and 'dhuti' and 'punjabi' for some of the Muslim members of West Bengal.

The change in conversation was noticeable. The rural members used to speak in their mother-tongue. They demanded to speak in Bengali in the House. Some members used to speak in Bengali in the Assembly. It was not because that all of them did not know English, but because of their desire to impress the House or they had fascination for the language. A unique example was Jalaluddin Hashemy of Khulna. Fazlul Huq and even Nazimuddin sometimes used Bengali to impress the House.

The repercussions of the Assembly debates of those days on the media were also remarkable. Communal ideas were being spread. The Azad and the Star of India would attack the Amrita Bazar Patrika, the Jugantar, the Ananda Bazar Patrika and the Basumati for spreading communalism and vice versa. Contemporary editions of the above mentioned newspapers proved it. Sometimes the House would discuss communal problems with excitement. But that bitterness would rarely spread outside the House. Personal relations of the members of different communities were like that of the pleaders of plaintiff and defendant.51

But the real change came with the functioning of the idea of Provincial Autonomy as was envisaged by the constitution of 1935. This has been discussed in the following chapters incorporating the proceedings of the Bengal Legislative Assembly and the activities and opinions of the different parties and groups in relation to budgets, legislations and other important matters.

51 Biswas, op.cit., p. 122.
On the eve of the provincial elections of winter 1936-37, the election programme and promises of the three important parties - the Congress, the Muslim League and the Krishak Proja were more or less same in content. They talked of tenancy reforms, amelioration of the condition of poor masses, labour legislation and of other benevolent measures to the benefit of the people. There were other small parties and groups like the Hindu Nationalist Party, Independent Krishak Proja group, Independent Scheduled Caste group, Labour Party or Krishak Mazdoor group. There were also some other candidates besides the independents whose party affiliation could not be exactly known before the formation of the coalition Ministry. In spite of the best efforts of Fazlul Huq, the Congress did not form any coalition government with the party. Ultimately he joined the Muslim League and the Coalition Government of the Krishak-Proja-Muslim League Party emerged.

The new legislature had some special characteristics of its own. Franchise was broadened and the new members of rural Bengal gave new colour to the Assembly. Conditions of the common men were often discussed in the House. There were changes in language, dress and manners of the members. The legislators despite limited sphere of responsible government, began to talk about the people and their problems.