Communalism is an ideology, and like all ideologies it is socially constructed. It cannot be separated from the politics of the time, nor can it be distanced from the material foundations of society and the political configurations.

The dynamic nature of communalism has to be grasped at every phase of its manifestation. Political parties are one of the prime channels through which it is articulated. The nature and characteristics of its transformation can be understood by reading the changes of the agenda and the role of different political parties.

The famine of 1943 appeared on Bengal’s provincial landscape with significant implications. It was a tragedy which left three million people dead and the entire socio-cultural fabric crumbling. “Any revolutionary whose convictions as to the necessity of a major revolution are wavering”, writes Llosa’s protagonist, after seeing the tragedy of the famine in the hills of Salvador, “ought to take a look (at the situation).... it would put an end to all his doubts.”1 But there was no revolution to speak of, nor just ‘simple’ violence, in Bengal during the entire period. Instead, what the province witnessed two years later was the violence in Calcutta and Noakhali. Hindus killed Muslims and the Muslims killed Hindus; it was not hunger but communal identities which dictated this violence.

An explanation for this lies in the political agenda that the different political parties followed during the famine period. The deepening economic crisis caused by the famine coincided with the assumption of Ministry by the Muslim League. The colonial presence and its need to have a Ministry that was supportive of its war efforts brought into power the Muslim League Ministry which not only cushioned the

colonial authorities but also saved it from shouldering the burden of the guilt of causing the death of a multitude of Bengal's impoverished population. While the newly appointed Secretary of the party was engaged in democratising it and giving people the radical message of Pakistan, his own party was defending the measures, diktats and whims of the colonial rulers.

The Communist Party, which was having a difficult time as it was opposed by all sections of the nationalist forces, found the time opportune to rehabilitate itself as the famine provided it with the space for this. While pursuing relief works and mobilisation activities the Party put forward the national unity line as its political line, and favoured the contemporary political set up and the colonial arrangement of having the Muslim League Ministry. Simultaneously, the period also found the Party steadfastly campaigning for the CR formula; and it attacked all the forces that opposed this as Hindu communal forces led by Syama Prasad Mookerjee. The colonial authorities and the Ministry found in the Communist Party a supporter which morally and ideologically legitimised their actions. The Party's policies and mobilisation processes, on the one hand, diluted the critique of colonialism, and, on the other, indirectly strengthened the communal agenda and accorded legitimacy to the demand of Pakistan.

It was at this juncture that the Hindu Mahasabha tried to capture the nationalist space provided by the absence of the Congress and all other forces which were suppressed once the Quit India call was given. The famine period and the presence of the Muslim League Ministry had given it the opportunity to blend its communal rhetoric with criticism of the colonial authorities. Gandhi- Jinnah meet and
the CR formula also gave it a chance to entrench itself as the foremost nationalist and
the champion of the interests of Bengal. The political conjunctur of the period
helped it to capture the limelight for some time. Therefore, the Mahasabha had the
opportunity of changing the contour and character of its politics and to entrench itself
in the political mind of the province by transcending its hitherto narrow limits.

It is generally assumed that the democratisation and popularisation of the
Muslim League was a product of the efforts of Abul Hashim's energetic efforts to
make the party a broad based and democratic party. The ideological ambience under
which mobilisation process took place was created by the agitation over the
Secondary Education Bill, the CR formula and the Gandhi- Jinnah meeting. These,
strengthened communal overtones of the provincial politics, as also concretised the
'Pakistan' imagination both for the Hindus and Muslims.

The post war expectations and the upsurge of nationalist sentiments were
reflected in the agitation for the release of the Indian National Army officers. This
culminated in the demonstrations in Calcutta in November and a much more
widespread disturbance in February 1946. The widespread sympathy for the INA
made the League leadership soon take up the INA case. It found Capt. Rashid Ali's
case convenient for this purpose as it could present it in communal colour too, and
thereby, attack what it saw as the anti-communal platform that the INA had
provided. After the Rashid Ali day demonstration it also could claim an anti-colonial
legacy. Therefore, by February 1946, the League could present itself as a true front
for liberation with the Congress as the only obstruction.
The elections of 1945-46 proved to be a major channel for launching this propaganda campaign in a vigorous way. The elections, it appears, was the first national one, as the question of the nation was put before the people. Thus, by 1946, we have a society which was ready to erupt into orgies of communal violence. Election results showed two contrary developments. While the Muslim League representing the Muslim face of communalism had succeeded in establishing its hegemony over the Bengali Muslims, the Hindu Mahasabha failed as a political party to capture the imagination of the Hindus. It was, however, resurrected from its low ebb by an extreme form of Muslim communalism as demonstrated by the Noakhali-Tippera riot.

The elections and the events thereafter show that there was a positional difference between the Muslim League which had already reached the extreme phase and the Hindu Mahasabha in Bengal which was, despite its rhetoric, still in its liberal communal phase. However, the communalism of the Muslim League helped the Hindu Mahasabha to transcend this liberal phase and attempt to go over to the extreme form.

By November 1945, it had become clear that the Mahasabha had very little support among the populace and its workers were reluctant to fight the Congress in the ensuing elections for the Central and Provincial Legislative Assemblies. Therefore, while the strong nationalist sentiment paradoxically paved the way for the Muslim League to overcome its pro-colonial character and helped it to present itself as an anti-colonial front, Hindu Mahasabha failed to do so.
Sustained efforts at communalising society became manifest when, just after a few months of the INA agitations, Calcutta erupted into ghastly communal riots. All memories of class and communal solidarity against the colonial power were forgotten. The Calcutta riot may be seen as a culmination of the political process ushered in by the colonial and communal politics.

The Noakhali riot demonstrates the nature of violence that communalism produces once it enters a region where agrarian radicalism and religion were living traditions. Communalism not only defined the attributes of a class enemy, it also provided a religious identification for that enemy which gave religious legitimacy to an attack on that enemy.

The Noakhali riot also shows different contours of communalism. Here the clash between the League and the other parties with a strong peasant base for space had resulted in attacks on the Hindus. This being so the ultimate collapse of the anti-League front meant the collapse of this radical peasant agenda which also had a substantial amount of religious element too. But what happened was that to retain the initiative the attack on Hindus was radicalised. The riot in Noakhali demonstrated the fact that the communalised rural locale, in this case a society with a predominantly Muslim population and a blend of religious orthodoxy, responds in ways which are much deeper in meaning than action - reaction based urban communal violence. Noakhali had seen the Wahabi and Farazi traditions and there is unanimity among the scholars that the Muslim society here had a living presence of Islam. The leadership which emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century also came from the religious leadership. The opposition to the League and its policies
came from this section. The famine period and the war saw the League establishing itself in the region. Simultaneously, the anti-League critique was fast losing its hold. The election of 1946 saw the rout of the anti-League candidates, but at the same time the Ulama section which had been opposing the League received votes greater than these non-League candidates. This showed that they still had some initiative left. With the Calcutta riot this opposition collapsed, and the same section which was criticising the League took the initiative to attack Hindus. One may point out here the fact that the Noakhali riots symbolised the combination of communalism and fundamentalism where communalism provided the ideological hegemony under which the Islamic elements were interpreted and Pakistan supplanted.

Writing on the significance of events, Gramsci had said: “Events are the real dialectics of history. They transcend all arguments, all personal judgements, all vague and irresponsible wishes.... Events present themselves as universal fatality.... Men as individuals and en masse find themselves as a universal fatality.” Riots are also events. Events create their own logic. Bengal during 1946-47 brings this out quite forcefully. The Calcutta killings and the Noakhali riots created a situation where the political parties and personalities found themselves in crisis. Not only the parties, but even the personalities found themselves entrapped within the crisis and in a situation of universal fatality.

Gandhi’s attempt was a hard fought battle against this sense of fatality, which in turn had produced the sense of inevitability that Partition demonstrated. Herein lies the importance of his intervention.

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The demand for Pakistan and its concretisation in the imagination and the minds of a substantial section of the provincial population went together with the communalisation of the social fabric. Communal riots were the result of this communalisation. The former were the symptoms rather than the disease. Hence, the proper arena of historical analysis should be communalism and the forces that helped it to become a socially produced ideology and later on enable it to hegemonise society. Gandhi’s intervention was a pointer towards this. He tried to breach communalism at the ideological level which provided legitimacy to communal violence. The logic of fatality or inevitability produced by the Calcutta and Noakhali riots, he showed, could be countered only at the level of ideology, i.e., countering communalism ideologically.

Attempts to draw an analogy with events in other countries brings Fascism into the discussion. Fascism, like communalism, is also an ideology and, as studies have shown, its ideological prerequisites and methods it applies in its efforts to establish hegemony are similar to those of communalism.

Fascist ideology is born of a political tradition that considered the individual a function of the group life. “This view of man as an integral part of an organic whole is the basis of Fascism’s political philosophy.” The propaganda of the Muslim League during the election of 1946 always invoked the so-called ideals of the Muslim community. Its political creed was also based on creating a ‘solid monolithic community of the Muslims’ which could fight the League’s political battle. On the other hand, Muslims who did not subscribe to its creed were ostracised in the name

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of community. Similarly, Hindu Mahasabha's campaign was for a 'Hindu Rashtra' or community.

Other parallel ingredients were also present in the Bengal situation which make communalism strongly resemble Fascist ideology and methods. These included the creation of paramilitary forces, such as the Muslim National Guards and the Hindustan National Guard; and propaganda on a massive scale with rhetoric which catered to emotional rather than rational aspects of politics.

Analogies, to be historically valid, should be drawn from historically congruent categories and here I think communalism, as this empirical study suggests, resembles Fascism more than the post-Medieval European riots or Medieval Indian land wars.

Similarly, communalism exists not simply in epistemology or intellectual domains of a society. It is an ideology, and hence, socially produced. It will not be out of place here to quote Callinicos, who says: "Ideology is a concrete attribute of human individuals.... Explaining why an individual holds ideological beliefs is a matter of analysing social processes, not of diagnosing intellectual error or individual pathology". It is necessary to analyse and understand those social processes which

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4 Creation of Muslim National Guards, their active participation in the Noakhali riots and in the preparation of the Calcutta riots, etc., on the one hand, and Hindu Mahasabha's efforts to create Hindustan National Guard ostensibly for defensive purposes, show parallel developments with Fascist practices. For e.g., what Linz says Fascism to an extent was true of the Bengal situation also. He says: "The discovery of the parliamentary political organisation rearg to use violence against its opponents, rather than electioneering or conspiring, was a tragic innovation that made even minor Fascist parties a significant factor in the crisis in many European democracies." Linz, Juan J., 'Comparative Study of Fascism', in Laqueur, Walter, (ed.), op. cit., p. 15.


are behind the ideas which are "social products, which cannot be understood by the philosopher outside history".\textsuperscript{7}

It was in order that he enter into an ideological contestation that Gandhi visited and roamed around the Noakhali villages. This may appear as "an isolated personal effort", but in this "finest hour" as his Noakhali experiment has been described, Gandhi was not representing "himself" alone but an entire stream of forces that had been contesting the communal ideology since its emergence. It (his experiment) had not yet given in to the universal fatality. Hope, for it, was still alive. And it wanted the embers of hope to keep burning in the villages of Noakhali. It is in the realm of hope, Gandhi knew well, that all ideology finds its fullest expression, and he felt so would the anti-communal ideology.

\textsuperscript{7} Giddens, Anthony, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 209.