Chapter One
Famine, the Ministry and the Communal Agenda

The period between 1943 and 1945 is crucial in understanding the shift in the ideological world of Bengal's politics. This shift occurred within the context of the devastating famine which engulfed the Province in 1943-44 and the political processes of the post Quit India phase. The dynamic of this shift was structured by the absence of the Indian National Congress from the political scene and by the assumption of office by the Muslim League party.¹

The processes that took shape during this period and the direction that they subsequently followed were of crucial significance for the course of events that the Province witnessed in the following years.² Rapid communalisation of the Bengal society was one of the processes. Though communalism had always been an important factor in the political life of the Province, especially in the post non-Co-operation Movement

¹ The Quit India Movement dealt a decisive blow to the already fissured Congress organisation in the Province. Most of the Gandhian leaders known as the Khadi group were in jail, whereas a rump Congress with some leaders like Kiron Shankar Roy were active but this was most of the time in the precincts of the Legislative Assembly. The ban on the Congress also prevented the leadership and workers from doing any serious political work.

The party was in a disarray since the 1940s when Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose was expelled from the Party, and in 1940 he formed the Forward Bloc. The Bengal Congress which had reflected ideological and factional differences within in an intensive form since the early part of this century, was now split horizontally. In the organisational elections of 1940 the Provincial Congress Committee could fill only 406 seats; 142 seats remained vacant as the seven District Committees remained controlled by the followers of Subhas Bose. See, Result of the Congress elections in 1940, Government of India, Home (Political) Department (hereafter, Home Political), File No. 4/4/40- Political, pp. 1-3.

The Individual Satyagraha in 1940 and the Quit India Movement witnessed most of the Congress workers, especially the Gandhian workers incarcerated under the Defence of India Rules. This hampered the organisational activity as well as the relief work during the famine. For example, a correspondent touring the famine affected districts writes:

Relief works in Comilla suffered considerably due to the absence from the scene of the members of the famous Abhay Ashram. For over fifteen years, the Ashram had been doing excellent constructive work.... they were gaoled in 1942 together with other good men.

Narayan, T. G., Famine over Bengal, The Book Co. Ltd., Cal., 1944, p. 201.

² The Chapters III and IV will deal with the subsequent developments which affected the communal relations in the Province.
phase, there existed, at the same time, space for non-communal political action. The emergence of the Krishak Proja Party under Fazlul Huq as a major political force symbolises the presence of this non-communal space. The party under the leadership of Fazlul Huq took up the cause of the tenants (Proja). Its programme, to a great extent, therefore, was premised essentially on an economic agenda and invoked 'class' as defined by the particular agrarian structure of east Bengal. The narrowing down of this non-communal space was what characterised the predominant political statement of the period.

This took place within the context of the largest non-communal space for political action provided by the famine in the Province. The famine was catastrophic in nature. This was not only because of the death toll which reached the figure of 3.5 million, but also because of the way relief efforts were managed (or mismanaged). Thus, the famine of 1943 is still an issue which raises significant questions relating not only to the question of responsibility but also to its role in shaping (or not shaping) certain political processes in the subsequent period. Intimately connected to this was the increased legitimacy of the idea of Pakistan and the new found vigour of the Muslim League in the Province during the period.4

---


4 It is generally held that the Bengal Provincial Muslim League became a mass party only during this period under the dynamic leadership of Abul Hashim who was elected the General Secretary of the Party in November 1943. See Sen, Shila, *Muslim Politics in Bengal, 1937-1947*, Impex, Delhi, 1976.
These interrelated processes were the product of a political climate. The period 1943-45, in fact, presents to us some of the aspects of that particular political climate which had helped the Muslim League to grow, the idea of Pakistan to take deep roots, and the consistent dwindling of the space for non-communal political action.

The effect of the War in dislocating the socio-economic fabric of the Province has been extremely important to the understanding of the societal processes of post-war Bengal. In fact, the examination of the causes of the famine is intimately related to the dislocating impact of the War. Out of an approximate 3 million recruitments, Bengal had contributed around 125,000, of which a significant number came from the east Bengal districts.

With the entry of Japan, the War had entered a new phase and the advance of Japanese forces towards Burma had caused the entire eastern sector to rapidly become a war zone. The population of the coastal districts faced the problems of evacuation. An unofficial estimate gave the figure of around 2.5 lakh people being evacuated by the early months of 1942. This included 75 thousand people from Noakhali, 70 thousand from Feni, and 20 and 25 thousand from Tippera and Chittagong respectively. Figures, however, do not convey the untold human suffering which accompanied these forced and often rapid evacuation process. Imposition of strict censure and the virtual military

---


6 The districts which contributed to this were: Chittagong - 18000; Noakhali -17,263; Tippera - 12,858; Dacca - 13,332; Mymensingh - 7,718; Bakergunj - 8,781, etc. See, Entry on 18 August 1944, *Personal Diary, Richard, G. Casey Papers* (Microfilm), Reel No. I, p. 32.

control of the administration of these areas prevented the sufferings of the people to become known. The problems of the people were compounded by the Military atrocities, especially assaults on women. Many such cases - in Nibodhai (Barasat), Alokdia (Noakhali), Chanua (Noakhali) - were brought to light by local political workers. To add to the woes came the Japanese air raids which greatly destabilised urban life in the Province, i.e., in Calcutta, Dacca and Chittagong. The 'denial policy' adopted by the Government deprived a vast coastal belt of its major source of communication, i.e., boats of all sizes and varieties.11

In this landscape was emerging another discomforting phenomenon - prices of foodgrains were increasing. The price of rice was showing a fast upward trend even in a surplus district like Barisal. On the other hand, price of products like raw jute was kept low thereby hitting the eastern and northern jute growing districts. This had a direct bearing on the purchasing power of a vast segment of the population.13 By March 1943, the devastation caused by famine had already become noticeable and even the mildest government report drew a grim picture of the situation.14

13 For a discussion on the problems of the Jute growing districts prior to the War, see, Goswami, Omkar, 'Agriculture in Slump: The Peasant Economy of East and North Bengal in the 1930s', *IESHR*, XXI, 3, 1984, pp. 335-364.
14 Fortnightly Report (hereafter FR), March second half, 1943, *Home Political*, File No. 18/3/43. It said:

The period under review has been one of particular anxiety as regards food supply. An increase in crime, looting of paddy and hunger marches or demonstrations are
Even as the famine was beginning to dislocate the socio-economic fabric, the Fazlul Huq Ministry, which had recently won a vote of confidence in the legislative assembly on 27 March, was attacked with a renewed vigour by the Muslim League. The League which had been consistently attacking Fazlul Huq, as if sensing his weakening power, now came out more stringently against the Ministry, and Fazlul Huq in particular. Congratulating Syed Nausher Ali on being elected Speaker of the Bengal Legislative Assembly after defeating the Muslim League candidate, the *Star of India*, an organ of the Muslim League, commented:

The number of votes secured by Mr. A. R. Siddiqi is highly significant and indicative of the popularity of the League with the large section of the house despite ideological differences a pointer which must have given Mr. Huq and his supporters a nasty jolt. The fact that the Muslim League going from strength to strength... is irrefutably proved by the speakership election drama.

The realisation of the growing weakness of Huq energised the Muslim League leaders into action. They became more determined and wanted to pull out all the stops as Ispahani wrote to Jinnah, "to deal the knock out blow at Fazlul Huq." This did not go unnoticed by the colonial authorities, who saw the voting demands in the assembly as reported from many districts and there have been reports of deaths or suicide from starvation and selling of children for prostitution which however in some cases unsubstantiated.


15 The Governor unceremoniously dismissed the Chief Minister, Fazlul Huq, by forcing him to sign an already prepared resignation letter.


revealing an increasing determination on the part of the 'opposition to secure the defeat of the government'.

It was at this point of time that the results of the triennial elections in territorial constituencies of the six Legislative Council seats were announced on 25 March, 1943. All the six candidates of the government party faced defeat at the hands of the Muslim League nominees. The leadership of the Muslim League portrayed this victory as the further consolidation of Muslim unity. The Calcutta based League leadership began sensing the impending fall of the Huq Ministry and was quick to insist on demanding the resignation of Huq. These events further strengthened the determination of the Muslim League leaders in Calcutta to deliver a decisive blow to the Ministry. Ispahani, the closest confidant of Jinnah in Bengal, expressed this determination in a letter to Jinnah on 26 March 1943. He wrote:

Insaallah, our wound of having the majority of the Muslim M. L. As sitting opposite us, will soon be healed..... Fazlul Huq looks a picture of misery. Do not be surprised if the ministry fails sooner than anticipated....

The words were prophetic. The Governor was more than eager to see Fazlul Huq out. He sent for the latter on 28 March, and suggested that Huq should formally resign.

The Governor did not concede Fazlul Huq's request to allow him to consult his Party and

---

19 FR, March first half, *Home Political*, File No. 18/3/43.
20 FR, March second half, *ibid*.
21 *Star of India*, Cal., 26 March 1943, p. 2. Commenting on the result, Ispahani came out with a statement "congratulating... Muslim brothers and sisters for having given a sledge hammer verdict", and advised Fazlul Huq to "bow to the will of Muslim brotherhood and resign his office of Premier" (sic). *Ibid*.
23 It seems that the Governor had acted at the behest of the European group which was at this time openly aligning with the Muslim League. See, Menon, V. P., *Transfer of Power in India*, Calcutta, 1968, p. 150.
colleagues, and the latter, in fact, had to virtually put his signature on an already 'typed resignation letter'.\textsuperscript{24} Next day, when asked on the floor of the Assembly by Kiron Shankar Ray, through the Speaker, about the veracity of the rumour floating in the town about his forced resignation, he admitted the fact which resulted in the Speaker declaring that the Ministry was out of office.\textsuperscript{25} Thus, Fazlul Huq's premiership, which had begun in 1937, finally came to an end.

Describing the dismissal of Huq as 'an extremely tiresome constitutional crisis',\textsuperscript{26} Linlithgow, the Governor General, expressed his discomfort with the handling of the matter. In his letter to the Secretary of State on 2 April, he expressed his dismay at the 'light hearted manner in which Herbert had handled the situation.'\textsuperscript{27} He had been informed by the Governor himself that, at the time of resignation, Huq commanded a majority in the House as was evident from the division on 27 March in which he had won by 10 votes of the Congress members.\textsuperscript{28}

However, despite his outburst at the Governor for indulging in political games, what really concerned Linlithgow was a Ministry which would give effective support to the war efforts unlike the Huq Ministry which, according to Linlithgow, was 'dominated by somewhat sinister figure of S. P. Mukherjee in the background'.\textsuperscript{29} He found

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{Ibid.}
\item \textit{Amrita Bazar Patrika}, Cal., 30 March 1943, p. 1.
\item Linlithgow to Amery, 2 April 1943, \textit{ibid.}, p. 875.
\item \textit{Ibid.}, fn. 4.
\item Linlithgow to Amery, 4 April 1943, \textit{ibid.}, p. 893.
\end{itemize}
Nazimuddin, whom Herbert brought in as the new Chief Minister, more acceptable to him in this regard than Huq Ministry. 30

Thus, the first Muslim League Ministry was brought to office by an official fiat. The Muslim League was one of the participants in the multi-layered and multi-dimensional conflicts in Bengali society and manifestations of these conflicts in the political realm. The League, since its formation in 1906, was one of the actors in the process of the politicisation of the Muslims of the Province. 31 The role and the platform of the League, however, articulated the voice of the urban upper classes and particularly the Urdu speaking aristocracy of Bengal. On the issues of education, tenancy reforms and political participation, its voice was never the prominent one but, at the same time, with the patronage of the British, the League acted against those forces which demanded changes in the existing socio-economic and political order of the Muslim Society. The predominant political contestation was on agrarian and educational sectors and on both grounds the party had opinions which clashed with those of the vocal sections of the peasantry in east Bengal. In other words, the demands that the party espoused were radically at variance with the needs and interests of the vast Muslim masses of the Province.

30 Ibid.

The election of 1937 provided the party an opportunity to entrench itself in the political psyche of the Muslims of the Province. The elections also demonstrated the need for re-organisation of the party. The leadership, for this purpose, required a front devoid of any dissenting voice. Thus, a kind of homogenisation was needed for organising the party in the Province. The political process that ensued after the election witnessed operation of these twin processes characterising as well as providing direction to the agenda and actions of the League. The processes began during the election itself when the League attacked the Krishak Proja Party by accusing it of being a stooge of the Hindu Congress while projecting itself as the champion of the Muslims' interests as against those of the Hindus.\(^{32}\)

The election results, however, proved indecisive in so far as the question of affixing representative status on any of the parties was concerned. Out of 119 seats reserved for the Muslims, the League won thirty nine seats out of which very few were in the east Bengal and proved itself to be a party of the urban Muslims. The Krishak Proja, on the other hand, by securing thirty six seats, all from the rural areas, demonstrated its hold in eastern Bengal where the majority of the Bengali Muslims lived.\(^{33}\)

The post-election development saw the failure of the Congress Party to come into an alliance with the Krishak Proja Party and form the Ministry. The Congress's insistence on treating the release of the political prisoners as more important than the Krishak Proja Legislators' demand for the abolition of zamindari was said to be the cause

---


of this failure. The Muslim League soon came into the coalition led by the Krishak Proja Party and the Ministry was formed.34

II

The success of the Krishak Proja Party (hereafter, KPP) was intimately related to the burgeoning movement of the projas since the 1920s. In Fazlul Huq, the movement found a leader who could give the demands of the projas an efficient articulation. The election campaign proved this beyond doubt. He could expose, with the help of the young radicals of the proja fold, the anti-tenant basis of the Muslim politics. The League, therefore, tried to attack Fazlul Huq from the very beginning. Except for a honeymoon period, when the League was a part of the coalition Ministry, it constantly targeted Huq.35 The radical section of the Krishak Proja Party was however becoming restive due to the policies of the Ministry which they felt was drawing closer the landlord and the reactionary leadership of the Muslim League. Huq now attacked the Krishak Party members who brought a no-confidence motion against him as stooges of the Hindus36 - an allegation he himself had faced from the Muslim League quarters. This shows the operation of the logic of communalism. It is quite interesting to note that in their effort to establish hegemony over the community whose interests they claim to champion, the primary target of attack of almost all communal parties are the alternative or parallel

35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., p. 172.
voices from within that particular community and not from the other community. It is here that the fascist character of communal parties is most clearly manifested.

With the onset of the second World War, the provincial politics began to take new turns. Huq's relationship with Jinnah reached its dialectical best. While he was angry at the manner Jinnah asked him to come out of the War Council, which he joined along with the premiers of other non-Congress Ministries, it was he who proposed the Lahore resolution on 23 March 1940. The Lahore Resolution came at a time when the Congress and the militant KPP leaders were constantly attacking the Ministry for its communal and reactionary politics. This attack was portrayed by the League propaganda as efforts by the Hindus and their agents to oust a Muslim Ministry.

The dynamics of provincial politics was soon reflected in the alliances between various parties. Huq's programme and the work he did for the peasantry notwithstanding, what characterised his premiership was the growing communal polarisation of the Province. But it was the League which gained by this growing polarisation. Huq Ministry's policies which included reservation of job quotas for the Muslim Youth, attempts to bring changes in the controlling authority of the secondary education in the Province apparently aimed at opening doors of secondary education for the Muslim students, and an attempt to bring in agrarian change for which he appointed the Floud Commission in 1939 did not bring him any political dividend. On the one hand, his alliance with the Muslim League, and at times his own use of the language of the League, cost him many of his erstwhile KPP followers, and on the other hand, his actions agitated the minds of the Hindu middle classes which felt further threatened by the

communal drive into the arenas of education and jobs. His efforts to come to terms with the Muslim League repeatedly forced him to take recourse to communal rhetoric which ultimately benefited the latter. When, disillusioned with his policies, the radical section of the KPP brought a no-confidence motion against him, Fazlul Huq, along with the Muslim League, attacked them as pro-Hindu. Similarly, during the controversy over the Census operations in 1941, his utterings strengthened the communal rhetoric of the Hindu Mahasabha which was agitating against what it called a ‘partial census’.

The demographic factor had been a very significant aspect of the communal discourse in Bengal. In shaping of the Hindu and Muslim communal perceptions, the debate revolving around the comparative increase in the population of Hindu and Muslims in the Province had an important bearing. Publication of Col. U. N. Mukherjee’s book entitled *A Dying Race* in 1909 triggered off much debate and much apprehensions among a section of the Hindu middle class intellectuals. Comparing Census data, Col. Mukherjee had concluded that there was a possibility, as predicted by O’Donnel in 1891 Census Report, of Hindu extinction.

The demographic factor became politically more significant after the communal award (1932) and the operation of the provincial autonomy clause which saw election and formation of Ministries in 1937. A sense of loss of political power of the community was a point repeatedly stressed by the Hindu communal discourse, while on the other hand the colonial attempts of classifying tribes and other groups separately from the Hindus also added to the already circulating apprehensions.

On the other hand, the Muslim communal perception too was significantly influenced by the question of population. The argument in the forties in favour of Pakistan was quiet often an argument based on the demographic consideration. For example, Casey reported his conversation with Nazimuddin in these terms: “I asked him about Pakistan. He said he was just on the point of writing to Jinnah telling.... they want Bengal (less Burdwan Division), Assam, a subdivision of Bihar.... This would give them 58% Muslim in place of 51%.... He says that Muslims are more virile than the Hindus and breed faster. The debate on the comparative growth rate of Hindu and Muslim population in Bengal while taking a communal turn invariably brought to the forefront the fact that the Muslim men had abducted and forcibly married Hindu girls. See, Dutta, J. M., ‘Continued Abduction of Hindu Women - its Effect on the Bengali Hindus’, *Modern Review*, Cal., Oct. 1941, pp. 358-59. See also, ‘Will the Hindus Regain their Majority in Bengal? Yes’, *ibid.*, Dec. 1940, pp. 676-680; ‘Are the Bengali Hindus Decadent? No.’ *ibid.*, Jan 1940, pp. 36-41; ‘Estimated Population of the Muhammadans in Bengal at the Next Census’, *ibid.*, Aug. 1940, pp. 156-157; ‘No. of Hindus not properly recorded at the last Census of 1931’, *ibid.*, Sept. 1940, p. 294.

These perceptions made the demography a contested zone and the demand of Pakistan on the principle of ‘majority’ further complicated as well heightened these perceptions. The demand was, to a great extent, based on the demographic argument. Both the parties, therefore, were bent on proving that they were in great majority. It made the Census quite controversial when the Hindu communal forces constantly raised the voice against what it called the Partial Census, because not only that the Ministry with the complicity of the Colonial regime bent on proving the Hindus a minority, but also by deciding to categorise tribes not as Hindu, the Colonial authorities had, according to these forces, showed the anti Hindu attitude of the

---


39 The demographic factor had been a very significant aspect of the communal discourse in Bengal. In shaping of the Hindu and Muslim communal perceptions, the debate revolving around the comparative increase in the population of Hindu and Muslims in the Province had an important bearing. Publication of Col. U. N. Mukherjee’s book entitled *A Dying Race* in 1909 triggered off much debate and much apprehensions among a section of the Hindu middle class intellectuals. Comparing Census data, Col. Mukherjee had concluded that there was a possibility, as predicted by O’Donnel in 1891 Census Report, of Hindu extinction.
The Second World War and the Quit India Movement presented new realities. Contrary to the League's decision, Fazlul Huq supported the war efforts by joining the War-Council. This resulted in a conflict with Jinnah who did not approve of this, finally leading to Huq's break with the League and his subsequent resignation. He formed a new Ministry which included the Hindu Mahasabha leader Syama Prasad Mookerjee. This provided an edge to the League propaganda against him accusing him of being pro-Hindu. When read according to the contemporary grammar of politics, this meant that the Muslim League was the greater champion of Muslim interests than Fazlul Huq. Colonial authorities also did not take his proximity to Syama Prasad Mookerjee lightly.

The cyclone in Midnapore in 1942 and the onset of famine added a new dimension to the political scene. Syama Prasad Mookerjee resigned in protest against what he termed as the official intervention in provincial administration which made a mockery of provincial autonomy. Fazlul Huq further annoyed the colonial authorities by agreeing to the opposition demand for an enquiry into the military atrocities in Midnapore. The League, on the other hand, found in the famine an issue through which it could attack Fazlul Huq for allegedly following a policy of support to the Hindus. The label of "Ghaddar" or renegade that was raised in different places against

Colonial authorities. All these made the 1941 Census a bitterly contested census operation. (See, 'Hindus and the Census', Amrita Bazar Patrika, Cal., 18 Jan. 1941, p. 9; 'Coming Census', ibid., 3 Feb. 1941, p. 6.

40 It was the sudden arrest of Sarat Chandra Bose by the authorities that forced Fazlul Huq to invite Syama Prasad Mookerjee into the Cabinet. PBLA, Vol. LXV, 5 July 1943, p. 43.

41 See, Appendices in Mookerjee, Syama Prasad, Leaves from a Diary, OUP, 1991.

42 See, PBLA, LXV, pp. 43-45, for a detailed description of the relationship between Fazlul Huq and the Governor.

Fazlul Huq by slogan shouting crowds now stuck easily.\textsuperscript{44} Suhrawardy and other leaders of the League attacked the ministry most vociferously for its food policy - or lack of it. In fact, the attack was more that the Ministry's acts invariably favoured the Hindus in any policy matters.\textsuperscript{45} With the "deteriorating food position", Huq was now denigrated as a "weak kneed premier which the province did not need at a moment of such crisis".\textsuperscript{46}

III

The determination of the Muslim League to oust Fazlul Huq was matched by the Governor's constant support to the Muslim League and the last straw was the latter's assurance to the Legislative Assembly of an official enquiry into the military atrocities in Midnapore.\textsuperscript{47} In the districts in the meantime, the famine situation began to give shape to different modes of protest - hunger marches, quite often led by the Communists, being quite prominent - and this may have had some repercussions on the health of the Ministry.\textsuperscript{48} With rapid Japanese advance towards Burma and the virtual take-over of the administration in the coastal and border areas by the military,\textsuperscript{49} it was difficult for the

\textsuperscript{44} Star of India, Cal., Jan. 1943, p. 2.


\textsuperscript{46} FR, March first half, 1943, \textit{Home Political}, File No. 18/3/43.

\textsuperscript{47} Fazlul Huq, in his statement before the House presented a detailed story of how the Governor and the bureaucracy presented unlimited limitation in the way of his administering the province which was sharply in contrast to the way the League was favoured and was given preference in almost all matters. A. K. Fazlul Huq, 5 July, \textit{PBLA}, Vol. LXV, pp. 43-56.

\textsuperscript{48} FR, March first half, 1943, \textit{Home Political}, File No. 18/3/43; according to Nikhil Chakraborthy, then a correspondent for People's War, the news of these marches hit the morale of the Huq Ministry quite hard, in an interview on 14 Jan. 1996, New Delhi.

colonial authorities to accept the presence of a non-pliant Premier in this crucial Province. Therefore, when the Governor forced Huq to sign the resignation letter, it was with a view to serving the British interests.\textsuperscript{50}

The Governor took over the administration of the Province under Section 93 of the Government of India Act, 1935 in order to eventually hand it over to the Nazimuddin Ministry.\textsuperscript{51} Meanwhile, the food situation had already become precarious. Reports of further deterioration of food supply were pouring in from different districts.\textsuperscript{52} The price of rice was soaring and at the same time paddy looting incidents were occurring in many places - from Nurunamala in Bogra (North Bengal) to Bardia Bazar in Chandpur (Tippera),\textsuperscript{53} and from Rajshahi and Faridpur districts.\textsuperscript{54} Reports of looting of rice from country boats at places like Majlishpur, Brahmanbaria (Tippera) were being

\textsuperscript{50} The official version of the entire episode, however, did not indicate any such intention on the part of the colonial authorities. It says:

Mr. Fazlul Huq had several times publicly announced that he would be prepared at any time to resign if such a motion would facilitate the formation of an all-parties cabinet. On the 27th he repeated this announcement in the assembly and added that he had given His Excellency a written assurance to this effect. On the 28th H. E. enquired whether he was prepared to implement this assurance at once and the Chief Minister tendered his resignation which the His Excellency accepted. The resignation and its acceptance, at Mr Huq's request were not to be announced, and by inference were not to be taken as having effect, before 8 p.m. on the 29th, which would have given the Assembly an opportunity to conclude the voting on the budget demands. When the house met on the 29th, however before any business was transacted, series of questions were put by members of the orthodox Congress party in reply to which Mr. Fazlul Huq stated that he had the previous night been summoned by the Governor and 'made to resign', that his resignation had been accepted the same night and that with his resignation, in his view, "The Cabinet ought to be functus officio". The Speaker thereupon announced that, in his opinion "the ministry had ceased to exist" and forthwith adjourned the Assembly for a fortnight.

FR., March second half, 1943, \textit{Home Political}, File No. 18/3/43.

\textit{Amrita Bazar Patrika}, Cal., 1 April 1943, p. 1.


\textit{Amrita Bazar Patrika}, Cal., 2 April 1943, p. 1.

FR, March first half, 1943, \textit{Home Political}, File No. 18/3/43.
constantly reported at the time when the Governor was taking charge of the administration. The Government report also suggested the gravity of the situation:

The period under report has been one of particular anxiety as regards food supply. An increase in crime, looting of paddy an "hunger marches or demonstrations are reported from many districts and there have been reports of deaths or suicide from starvation and selling children for prostitution, which however, in some cases unsubstantiated.

The Governor invited Nazimuddin to form the Ministry on 13 April, but the latter found it difficult to muster enough support to take up the charge. While he was exploring possibilities, Huq and all other non-Muslim League parties were demanding an all party Ministry to face the 'most pressing problems of food' as the situation was becoming alarming. A newspaper report from Jessore said: "People are experiencing utmost difficulty due to high prices at which rice is selling." A similar situation arose in Netrakona where the price of rice had shot up "due to profiteering of merchants in the town." The Report further said that the local food committees were trying their best to ease the situation. In Chittagong, a largely attended public meeting under the auspices of the recently formed Central Food Committee, presided over by S. L. Khastgir, urged the Central Government to treat the food policy as an indivisible and integral part of war strategy. The meeting further proposed the adoption of a uniform policy regarding

---

55 Ibid.
56 FR, March second half, 1943, ibid.
57 Amrita Bazar Patrika, Cal., 3 April 1943, p. 3.
58 Ibid., 13 April, p. 3.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
food without any distinction between military and civil population.\textsuperscript{62} The colonial authorities, however, were not prepared to eschew such distinctions, and regarded the military population and the war as its main priority; all its policies were determined by this factor.

Nazimuddin finally formed his Ministry on 25 April. The Ministry consisted of 13 cabinet Ministers. Huq felt this as a further proof of partiality by the Governor because the latter had never allowed Huq, even after repeated requests, to expand his cabinet beyond eight.\textsuperscript{63} Thus, after about a month of political manoeuvres, the first Muslim League Ministry assumed office.

The situation was grave when the Ministry assumed office, and it was well aware of it. Suhrawardy, the most important Muslim League leader, assumed charge of the department of Civil Supplies. This, to some historians, heralded the ascendancy of the Department of Civil Supplies over that of Revenue - an event of significance especially regarding the policies that the Ministry would pursue during the next few months to face the challenge of famine.\textsuperscript{64} The Muslim League regarded the famine as a problem of shortage of food availability and its policies revolved around this assumption. The Department of Civil Supplies began to gear its activities towards increasing the supply of foodgrains. While, externally, it aimed to increase the supply with borrowings from outside the Province, the efforts of the Ministry to mobilise internal resources became a

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{62} \textit{Ibid.}
\item \textsuperscript{63} See, Fazlul Huq's statement, \textit{PBLA}, Vol. LXV, No. 1, pp. 60-61.
\end{itemize}
major source of controversy. At the very first instance, Suhrawardy held the previous Ministry responsible for the crisis. He said:

> When we came into office we were faced with utter unpreparedness for the coming crisis. The rise in prices and the panic amongst the people was a clear sign that dangers were ahead... there were no government stock and no reserve. Whatever was purchased was spent on priority undertakings in Calcutta.”

According to him, the shortage of supply and the ‘panic created out of this news’ were the contributory factors in creating the situation, i.e., a steep rise in the prices of essential commodities, especially foodgrains. This, according to him, was because the news of shortage had resulted in hoarding by consumers as well as producers and black marketeering by the business community. These in turn had resulted in the rise of prices.

> “There were two major factors”, he said, “that we had to deal with: one panic brought about by insistence on shortages, and the other greed brought about by speculative rise in prices. Both of them led to hoarding and maldistribution.”

To refurbish the provincial supply, the Ministry “abolished the zonal barriers” to facilitate the foodgrains to move from surplus to deficit areas. This was supplemented by the ‘Food drive’ during which the Government attempted to prepare a detailed report on the available supply of rice in the Province and also locate the supposedly hoarded foodgrains of the Province. In a sense, it was an anti-hoarding drive, launched between 7 June and 20 June 1943. Calcutta and Howrah were excluded from this for ‘some administrative purposes’

---

65 “Statement on Food situation in Bengal by the Hon’ble Minister of Civil Supplies.” (Read in the House by the Chief Minister) 5 July 1943. *PBLA*, Vol. LXV, pp. 80-81.


However, things did not change even after the drive. In fact they worsened. Not only the drive was not successful in unearthing foodgrains of the expected amount, it also spread panic and dissatisfaction. While the Minister for Civil Supplies tried to ward off any alarmist speculation and announced that the “foodgrains were coming into Bengal and more were being promised”, the Governor himself was presenting a much more serious situation. Writing to Linlithgow he said:

... I must invoke all my powers of description and persuasion to convey to you the seriousness of the food situation in Bengal. Hitherto I have studiously avoided overstating the case and I have faithfully reported any day-to-day alleviation of the position: I am now in some doubt whether I have not erred in the direction of understatement.  

69 *Ibid.* The anti-hoarding drive coincided with the free trade policy which was followed by the government with an anticipation of inflow of grain from the neighbouring provinces. The Governor, while writing to the Governor General, had expressed this hope even when he was fully aware of the alarming situation. He wrote:

Nazimuddin and Braund had just returned from Assam, while Suhrawardy had met Bihar officials in Patna. Although both these Provinces have expressed willingness to assist, supplies are very slow in coming in... no rice has so far reached us from Orissa for some time, and Braund does not disapprove of my apprehension at the situation.... I feel strongly that our drive to dig out hoards and improved distribution within Bengal should have coincided with stocks coming in large quantities under free trade. (Italics mine)


68 *Ibid.*, p. 83. See also the *FIC*, p. 55. The Commission records that a similar suggestion to undertake such a step was also given but at that time it was decided not to embark on this as this would be opposed by people who would feel panic at any such move. *Ibid.*, p. 56.


71 Herbert to Linlithgow, 2 July 1943, Mansergh, N.,(ed.), *op. cit.*, Vol. IV, pp. 42-43. The Colonial concern, however, was not primarily the food situation but rather the position of the Ministry in Bengal and its apprehensions were directed at any possible rapprochement between the Muslim League and the opposition. Writing to the Secretary of State, Linlithgow expressed his primary concern in these terms:

... Nazimuddin is a nice little man, but not outstandingly resolute or strong, and he is obviously very anxious in the first place to let some of the more innocuous prisoners out. For that there may be something to be said so long as the criterion is a pretty severe one. But he is also pressing very hard that his Hindu Ministers should be allowed to go and see Sarat Bose, and that I confess, I do not feel so enthusiastic about ... and Nazimuddin is inclined to suggest that if the same concession is not made to Goswami and Pain, he may lose Hindu support altogether. I doubt the Hindu support that he has in fact being worth a very great deal, but one is anxious always, in Bengal, to try to keep Hindu feeling reasonably sweet if possible. For all that my own instinct is, at this stage against allowing any move of this nature.

The Opposition was, in the meantime, consistently demanding that famine should be declared in the Province and the Government should apply generally the normal provisions for meeting famine conditions. Suhrawardy, however, was adamant and instead of declaring famine, committed his Department to the 'Food Drive' which was aimed at revealing the true position of rice/paddy available in the Province and simultaneously unearthing foodgrains which was hoarded. Soon he claimed that the 'Food Drive' was a success and predicted an improvement in the situation.

The 'Food Drive', according to him, had 'restored the confidence of the poor and transferred the panic to the minds of the hoarders.' The Opposition presented an entirely different picture and blamed Suhrawardy and his drive for the worsening situation. Nalinaksha Sanyal described it as "economically unsound" for "while the food drive was permitted to go on and while the village committees were allowed to have stocks estimated ostensibly for the purpose of maintaining local supplies, there was no restriction put on large purchases by outsiders in that very area and removal of the stock to Calcutta and other industrial areas". "One could not have", he further commented, "free trade and simultaneously self sufficiency. The two are economically contradictory". Ghiasuddin Ahmed of Mymensingh blamed the food drive for reducing

---

73 "In the first week of June 1943, the Government of Bengal launched a province-wide 'food drive'", says the Inquiry commission, "To ascertain the actual statistical position, to locate hoards, to stimulate the flow of grain from agriculturists to the markets, and to organise distribution of local surpluses as loans or by sales to those who were in need of food grains". FIC, p. 55.
74 Minister for Civil Supplies, 8 July 1943, ibid., p. 81.
75 Nalinaksha Sanyal, 12 July 1943, ibid., p. 293.
76 Ibid.
the surplus districts like Barisal and Khulna into deficit ones. He asked the Government to explain why Calcutta was left out of the drive and questioned the logic behind the Ispahanis being given the sole agency to procure rice and that too by providing the firm with financial advance of crores of Rupees. According to him, the anti-hoarding drive had resulted in no rice being available in the districts. In fact, he said, "it was a betrayal." Shamsuddin Ahmed of the KPP said that he had just returned from Noakhali district "where paddy was selling at Rs. 10 per maund and rice at Rs. 15 per maund and in Sandwip... Rs 18 per maund and even at that it was not available", and accused the Ministry of pursuing "an anti peasant policy". "It might be that some big jotdars or some big agriculturalists or some traders might have some hoards", he further said, "but as there was no bar to Calcutta firms making free purchases of foodstuffs in the mufassil, whatever rice could be had was transferred to Calcutta as Calcutta was excluded from the operation of the drive."

The Opposition attacked the Ministry for its food policy and its recruitment of Ispahanis as the sole agent and urged it vehemently to get Bengal declared as a famine hit Province. Suhrawardy, on the other hand, was announcing the success of the food drive even as the colonial authorities themselves were very pessimistic about it. The Governor wrote:

---

Our "food drive" in the district[s] has located 100,000 tonnes of rice (in stocks of 400 maunds and over) in the province.... But the essential fact remains that we cannot keep Bengal fed (certainly we cannot assume the responsibility of rationing in Calcutta or elsewhere) unless we can get foodgrains into Bengal from outside....

A close perusal of the colonial policy at this stage reveals the fact that even when the Governor was sounding his grave concern over the food situation, the Food Department of the Government of India was issuing strict instructions to the Province to do some good work in procurement and distribution rather than harping on help from outside, i.e., imports, for which the Secretary of State had already shown his dismissal attitude. The Ministry, which was brought into existence by the colonial regime, now found itself in an extremely difficult situation. The Ministry, facing a hostile Opposition (major attack came from the members of the erstwhile Progressive Coalition Party in by the Statesman for the first time, gradually began to fall back upon the colonial authorities for its support. The Governor, rather than Nazimuddin or Suhrawardy, seemed to be in a controlling position.

Unable to face the opposition charges, namely the recruitment of the firm of the and individual members from the deficit districts) and a non-friendly Press, joined Ispahanis as the sole purchasing agent and providing it with financial advance, and subservience to the colonial interests, the Muslim League members quickly took recourse to the evocation of community and religion. Abul Hashim, while defending

83 Herbert to Linlithgow, 2 July 1943, Mansergh, N.,(ed.), op. cit., Vol. IV, p. 44.
84 Memorandum by Government of India, Food Department, enclosed in a letter of 7 September 1943, from the Private Secretary to the Viceroy to the Private Secretary to the Secretary of State, ibid., pp. 196-200.
85 See, the regular correspondence between the Secretary of State and the Viceroy, Mansergh, N., (ed.), op. cit., Vol. III, p. 515.
Suhrwardy against the Opposition, said, "we are all Muslims. The Hon'ble leader of the house, the Chief Minister is a Muslim; The Hon'ble Minister in charge of civil supply is a Muslim, we Muslims believe in God. Let us, therefore, take it that providence in his wisdom has placed Mr. Suhrwardy in charge of the Supply department." 87

While the religious community was invoked by the Muslim League members, and the Opposition members asked the Government to own up to its responsibility for providing food for the people, the catastrophic nature of the famine began to get manifested in the forms of deaths and mass migration towards the cities, (e.g. Calcutta). Contrary to the assertion that the famine was a collective catastrophe, the 1943 famine demonstrated that it was a class famine where classes which were lower in the economic hierarchy suffered far more than the other sections. The small holders soon found out that their savings were exhausted and that they were unable to pay for the necessities of life. A conservative estimate puts this class to consist of approximately 2 million families (or 10 million people). 88 However, the worst victims were the landless labourers, the fishermen, the paddy huskers, the artisans and the school teachers. 89 And the demand as well as immediate necessity was for relief on a massive scale.

By August 1943, death on streets became an ordinary spectacle. It was at this time, in fact, that the Government as well as the political parties realised the absolute necessity of relief operations. Syama Prasad Mookerjee, expressing the Opposition's demand for letting the colonial authorities take the responsibility for the famine relief, had already in July said that it was impossible for one party Ministry to confront the

88 FIC, p. 66.
89 Ibid., p. 75.
situation created by the famine. He asked the Ministry to let the British government take the responsibility for feeding the people of Bengal and maintaining law and order. He also urged the Ministry not to indulge in the propaganda "of self help or of forcible loan of rice, that barely exists". 90

From April 1943 the usual technique of relief - cash for loans, doles and payment for test relief - were employed, but not on the scale required by the famine code. 91

From September 1943 onwards various relief organisations began their activities. 92 Almost all the political parties were engaged in relief operations. A Bengal Famine Relief Co-ordination Committee was formed which included members from the leading political organisation and it soon presented the Government with its programme. 93 The programme sought active Governmental assistance in dealing with the situation especially because it sought to provide people with cheap or free foodgrains. Meanwhile, in the districts, the Government had begun relief works but the officials were handicapped due to non-availability of rice. Ramizuddin Ahmed of Tippera said in the Assembly:

... no grain dole were distributed before December when the harvest of aman crop had already begun. So far as the free kitchens are concerned, it was the non-official public who began these through public donations and it was in the middle of October that Government began to distribute money to some areas. But the money was of no avail when no rice or paddy was available in the market even at Rs. 60 or 70 per maund. 94

---


91 FIC, pp. 69-75. See also, Brennan, Lance, op. cit., p. 543. He cites Revenue Department sources which say that the confidence that supply would come prevented any vigorous action in this regard. See ibid., fn. 5.

92 FR, Oct. first half, 1943, Home Political. File No. 18/10/43.


The Non-Governmental organisations and private initiatives tried to face this situation by asking relief from outside the Province and moral requisitioning from the people of the area itself. There were accusations of widespread corruption and allegations that the official relief works were used to enhance the fortune of the ruling party by helping its members to fill their coffers. The Governor, also Wavell, the Viceroy, was also aware of this but the colonial interest lay in keeping the Ministry intact even on the pretext of letting the colonised administer their own affairs at the crucial hour. The Governor General was constantly looking for an occasion to impose Section 93 and the Secretary of State prevented him from taking any such action. The Ministry, on the other hand, confessed its weakness and pleaded for colonial support.

Thus, what became a matter of singular significance was that the Muslim League Ministry acted as a cushion for the colonial authorities. On one hand, it helped it to run the war, apart from other things, by keeping Calcutta out of famine situation and thereby helping the industries to run smoothly, on the other, it saved the authorities from having to shoulder direct responsibility for a tragedy of such magnitude.

It was at this time that the meeting of the Council of the Muslims League took place in November 1943 which elected Abul Hashim as the General Secretary of the party. It is this election that is supposed to be the turning point in Bengal politics. Abul

---


96 Even as late as in January 1944 when the acute conditions created by famine subsided, Nazimuddin was sought the support of colonial authorities for its existence. Wavell noted in his diary, "He said things would be all right if his Ministry was given a chance and supported against his political enemies." See Moon, Penderal, *Wavell, The Viceroy's Journal*, OUP, Oxford, 1973 (Indian edition in 1977), p. 47.

Hashim was reputed to have made the party 'popular, democratic and radical' by his organisational tours and successful attempts at democratisation of the party.\textsuperscript{98} Hashim reorganised the party office in Calcutta and began, what he called his organisational tours, in February 1944.\textsuperscript{99} He went to Narayanganj (Dhaka), Chittagong, Feni (Noakhali), Brahmanbaria, Faridpur, Comilla, Mymensingh and a number of district headquarters of East and North Bengal during 1944-45.\textsuperscript{100} He wrote later:

I had to continuously travel in the districts of east and north Bengal with a lot of hard work. I not only went to the districts and sub-divisions but also to the important rural areas. I could not go to Bankura in West Bengal and the coastal areas of Noakhali in East Bengal - Sandwip, Hatia, and Ramgati.\textsuperscript{101}

He writes that he found most of the branches had leaders who did not have much contact with the masses.\textsuperscript{102} He went to these places and tried to correct the situation. In quite a few places, and here he gives example of Dacca, he was successful in forcing a change.\textsuperscript{103} His resolute and ultimately successful attempt in forcing an election in the Dacca Muslim League branch resulted in the victory of a non-Dacca Nawab family candidate against a Nawab family nominee for the executive committee and for the posts of President and Secretary of the District League.\textsuperscript{104} Thus, he writes, by the time the Party met for its next Council meeting in November 1944, the change was quite visible -
tremendous increase in the membership and a whole new crop of members with new
vigour. He gives the new membership figure which he said stood at more than five lakh
by 1944. This **regenerated** Muslim League is generally said to be the result of
dissemination of 'radical communistic ideals' that Abul Hashim presented to the masses.
the majority of them being the peasantry of East Bengal. The fact remains that the entire
change, especially the rapid increase in the membership took place when the famine had
just ravaged the entire countryside and the cities of Bengal, and the epidemic had begun
to kill people in thousands.

The Communist Party, on friendly terms with the League, accepted the fact that
the League played a timid role during the famine. The League Convention, which
took place in November 1944, and which Hashim said had reflected the 'new party',
had also reflected the anger that was there even among its members against their own
party. Abdullah-ahl-Baqui, ‘criticised the apathy of the government and exposed the
inefficiency of the government as shown in wastage of foodstuffs and the corruption of
the procurement machinery.' He said: “Mr. Suhrawardy poses as if he was baffled by
our difficulties, in reality he understands the problem involved, but he has to serve more

---

105 The figures he cites are:

| Location   | Figures  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barisal</td>
<td>1,60,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dacca</td>
<td>1,05,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faridpur</td>
<td>60,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noakhali</td>
<td>50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chittagong</td>
<td>40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinajpur</td>
<td>24,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raiganj</td>
<td>13,470</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jalpaiguri</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

See *ibid.*, p. 74. The Communist correspondent, Nikhil Chakraborty, also gives almost the
identical figure in his report on the Muslim League convention that took place in 1944. See


107 *Ibid*. 
than one master and hence his inability.\textsuperscript{108} There was, thus, the anger of the surplus districts against the Ministry for its food drive, while the members from the deficit district were in favour of quick rationing.\textsuperscript{109} So, the famine succeeded in creating an anger against the government and its policies within the fold of the party itself. An analysis of the Muslim League's success in mobilising the Muslim masses during this period must take into consideration these developments.

In November 1943, a Muslim League Relief Committee was organised with Moazzem Hossain Choudhury (Lal Mia) as the Secretary.\textsuperscript{110} The League, however, had the advantage of being in the Ministry and could, therefore, easily channelise the credit for the governmental relief measures to the party. The relief work by the Muslim Chamber of Commerce was a show by Ispahani who was already being widely criticised for receiving the patronage of Muslim League.

\textbf{IV}

While Abul Hashim was touring the state popularising Muslim League and exhorting people to join the Muslim League to achieve Islamic ideals,\textsuperscript{111} the Ministry was attacked in the Assembly for not taking up seriously the matter of religious education. Maulvi Abdul Rezzak and Shah Golam Sarwar Hussaini attacked the Ministry for its failure to introduce Quran classes in the School. This failure of the Ministry they said had believed

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{110} Hashim, Abul, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 63.

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.
their expectations from the Muslim League which had promised to establish Pakistan. These and similar attacks on the Ministry were indications of the fact that there was a substantial section of the Ulama which remained unattached to the League. But, at the same time, it was also clear that the idea of Pakistan had already been concretised in the psyche and the political imagination of a large number of Muslims.

'Control over secondary education' and the 'problem of priorities' between mass primary and secondary education had been unsolved problems not only in the educational history of the Province but also in its political history. Education has always been an arena of political contestation in modern Bengal. While education was instrumental in the politicisation of Bengalis - both Hindus and Muslims - soon, however, education itself became an instrument to retain political hegemony. The debate over the medium of instruction and the nature of education which had earlier demonstrated the fissures as well as the dynamics of the political consciousness of communities now entered a new stage in the 1940s when control over secondary education was seen as the panacea for tiding over the political crises.

The famine had already discredited the Muslim League Ministry and it had difficulty gaining allies as in addition to the attacks by the Hindu Mahasabha, Congress and KPP opposition, they were being criticised even by the orthodox section of the Muslims. The latter berated the Ministry for its failure to introduce and encourage

---


113 Sarkar, Chandi Prasad, op. cit., p. 69.
religious education in the schools.\textsuperscript{114} To add to the woes of the Ministry, some Scheduled Castes leaders were also disgruntled with it.\textsuperscript{115}

Therefore, by April 1943, the League was desperately in search of political allies and also something with which to attack and weaken the opposition. The issue of secondary education came in handy, and on 24 April 1943, the Education Minister, Tamizuddin Khan, introduced the Secondary Education Bill in the Assembly.\textsuperscript{116} It had earlier been published in the Calcutta Gazette on 8 April 1943 and the Minister had provided details of the Bill in a Press Conference in Calcutta on 10 April.\textsuperscript{117} Speaking on the object of the Bill, the Minister said:

The object of the Bill is regulation, control and development of Secondary Education in Bengal. On no other subject within the legislative purview in this province there has been a more unanimous demand for reform and yet no other attempt at reform has met with greater opposition from certain particular sections of people. No other legislative effort in this province has had a more chequered history or a longer period of travail.\textsuperscript{118}

The Bill sought to constitute a Secondary Board consisting of 53 members,\textsuperscript{119} majority of whom were either nominated or ex-Officio.\textsuperscript{120} The Bill provided that the Board “shall have power to direct, supervise, develop and control secondary education”.\textsuperscript{121} It also authorised the Board to “recognise regulate and inspect the

\textsuperscript{114} Abdul Wahed, \textit{PBLA}, Vol. LXVII, No. 5, p. 291.
\textsuperscript{115} See P. R. Thakur’s attack on the Ministry, \textit{ibid.}, Vol. LXV.
\textsuperscript{116} \textit{Star of India}, Cal., 25 April 1944, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{118} \textit{PBLA}, Vol. LXVII, No. 5, p. 104.
\textsuperscript{119} \textit{The Secondary Education Bill}, Government of Bengal, Alipore, 1944, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{120} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{121} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 7.
condition of the schools”. The elected members were to be elected by Hindu, Muslim, and Scheduled Caste teachers of separate electorate. Chapter IV of the Bill provided for school committees, again on the basis of communities, i.e., Islamic Secondary School Committee, Hindu Secondary School Committee, etc.

The introduction of the Bill in the Assembly attracted intense opposition. The entire Opposition demanded its immediate withdrawal. The Congress leader Nalinaksha Sanyal, Syama Prasad Mookerjee of Hindu Mahasabha and members of the Krishak Proja Party, all highlighted the communal content and the communal control as well as increased administrative control over the secondary education that it would usher in. The entire Opposition forestalled any attempt by the Ministry to rush the Bill through the Legislature.

Members like Abu Hussain Sarkar said that the Bill was introduced as an eyewash. He said “I think... that an opportune moment has been selected by this ministry to introduce this Bill to serve the purpose of propaganda literature... even after the passing away of that Famine, Ministry are not in a position to look into the bare necessities of the people.” Speaking of the proposed communal electorate in the Bill he said that “if this communal electorate is introduced, there would not be any Hindustan or Pakistan but simply gorostan” (Graveyard).

122 Ibid.
123 Ibid.
124 Ibid., p. 11.
125 Ibid., p. 12.
127 Ibid.
Some of the members of the Opposition, however, did not criticise the creation of a communal electorate as they thought it would overall serve well for the Muslim community, but they appealed "with folded hands and eyes full of tears" to the Ministry not to rush the Bill through but to "to create a public opinion first." What was evident from this line of argument is that the Muslim League had successfully shifted the agenda away from the Famine, issues of epidemic, and scarcity of cloth, sugar and other necessities, to the question of secondary education.

The Minister, however, tried to project the Bill as a product of the deliberation of a Select Committee constituted in 1942 and as such a continuation of the effort initiated in 1938 and which had always been opposed by the powerful forces. The present Ministry was just putting it before the Assembly for the approval of the House. On this ground, and on some other points, he labelled the opposition to the Bill as "senseless" and that the "antagonism came from a small but very influential section of the community". The opposition to the Bill did not, however, remain confined to the precincts of the Legislature and soon the voices of protest began to come from outside. An agitation along the lines of the one in 1940 began to take shape. A call for an 'All Bengal Protest Day' on 30th April was given. Prominent personalities like Acharya P. C. Ray, whose objection to the Bill was criticised by Tamizuddin Khan in the Assembly

128 Syed Badruddoja, 25 May 1944, ibid., pp. 517-519
129 Ibid., p. 519.
130 Ibid., Vol. LXVII, No. 5, p. 104.
131 Ibid., p. 105.
133 Ibid., 29 Apr. 1944, p. 3
and who had given a lead to the agitation against the Secondary Education Bill in 1940, came out into the open and called for "unrelenting opposition to the communal Bill". Scientist Meghnad Saha criticised the Bill for its 'retrograde character'. The students of Calcutta University protested against the attempt to impose 'bureaucratic control over education'.

The protest highlighted the potential of the Bill in sharpening communal consciousness. This was evident from the fact that while there were demands for the resignation of Hindu Ministers, the Ministry characterised the opposition to the Bill as essentially an attempt by the high caste Hindus to retain their monopoly over higher education through the Calcutta University which it labelled as the zamindari of Syama Prasad Mookerjee.

The provision for a separate communal electorate in the Bill heightened the already existing apprehensions of the Bengal Hindu middle classes that the Ministry was out to crush them. An all Bengal Secondary Education Bill Protest Conference was held

135 Ibid., 2 May 1944, p. 1.
137 Amrita Bazar Patrika, Cal., 5 May 1944, p. 3.
138 Ibid., 11 May 1944, p. 3.
139 Speaking on the allegations of the Muslim League members that the Calcutta University had become the personal fiefdom of Syama Prasad Mookerjee, Abdul Wahed commented: ... I ask them... From the days of his father Syama Prasad Mookerjee has some contribution... and sacrificed a lot for the Calcutta University and even if... agreed that they are enjoying a part of it, what sacrifice Khwaja Nazimuddin has accepted in their attempt to set up their empire over the schools of Bengal! Abdul Wahed, 17 May 1944, PBLA, Vol. LXVII, No. 5, p. 291.
in Calcutta University hall on 11 May which called for a country-wide agitation. The
cconference concluded on 12 May with the following resolutions being passed:

1. The present Bill must be dropped;
2. An autonomous and independent non-communal secondary board having the
advancement of education alone as its objective must be constituted;
3. If floating public opinion the Government set up its communal board that must be
boycotted. No school should seek affiliation to that Board;
4. The Bengal Education Council should authorise to take all necessary steps for
implementing the decision.140

Women's voices were reflected in one of the meetings which asked the
Government to drop the Secondary education Bill in its present form because they felt
that it destroyed the purpose of education itself.141 The meeting further said:

We are firmly convinced that if the measure is proceeded with in spite of the protest of so
many responsible elements in the country, it will destroy the purpose education itself in
the province. We are willing to develop secondary education on sound and progressive
lines.142

The teachers' protest against the Bill centered around questions of 'spirit' and
'cultural viewpoints' in education. According to Manoranjan Sengupta, the Secretary of
All Bengal Teachers' Association, apart from generating communal spirit and placing
secondary education under official control the Bill ignored the academic and cultural
view points which he thought were essential for National education.143 The Association
asked the Ministry to drop the Bill in its present form and have a scheme for the
development of Secondary Education in the Province and outside and publish the
detailed scheme to enlist public opinion.144

140 Amrita Bazar Patrika, Cal., 16 May 1944, p. 3.
150 Ibid., 22 May 1944, p. 3.
142 Ibid.
143 Ibid., 24 May 1944, p. 3.
144 Ibid.
While the League was trying to win the Scheduled Castes as its political ally, reports of communal tensions between the Namasudras and the Muslims were coming in from Jessore and Khulna districts. The riots at Mollahat (Khulna), Narail (Jessore) and Faridpur were indicative of the fact that everything was not as smooth as the League hoped. Opposition to Jogendra Nath Mandal and his party was already getting mobilised in his home district, Backerganj. Realising this Jogendra Nath Mondal was sent to the district to enlist support for the Ministry.

The League at the same time began to organise meetings in the districts to consolidate the support to the Ministry on the issue of the Secondary Education Bill. The Nilphamari League Conference held on 6 May, which was presided over by Fazlur Rahman adopted four resolution of which support to the Ministry was prominent. Meeting of the Perojpur Sub-Divisional Muslim League and the Students League were organised to support the Bill. In Calcutta too a meeting of the people of Noakhali passed a resolution whole-heartedly supporting the Secondary Education Bill.

---

145 FR, March second half, 1944, *Home Political*, File No. 18/3/44

146 Hindu Mahasabha was actively engaged in this and was supporting Upendra Nath Edbar, the Scheduled Caste M. L. A. from Backerganj, to organise members of the Scheduled Castes. He was explaining to the people 'the present position of the Bengal Ministry and their misdeeds and was preaching the dire necessity of the Hindu Sangathan among the Hindus'. See, the correspondence between Syama Prasad Mookerjee and Upendra Nath Edbar, *S. P. Mookerjee Papers*, Instalment II-IV, Subject File No. 90.


148 The other three resolutions were on *Pakistan, the Punjab affairs* and about a *maintenance allowance to Kabi Nazrul Islam*. See, *Star of India*, Cal., 15 May 1944, p. 2.


Students came out in support of the Bill in Noakhali and "paraded the town with loud slogans of Nazimuddin Ministry Zindabad."\(^{151}\)

On the other side the protest against the Bill brought together people from different political hues. Syama Prasad Mookerjee who had already emerged as the major opposition voice during the famine came out vociferously against the Bill. Kiron Shankar Ray, who was not quite prominent during the famine, now came out to preside over a protest meeting.\(^{152}\) It was around this time that the Government imposed a ban on a meeting scheduled to be held in Lora at Backerganj which was to be addressed by Syama Prasad Mookerjee.\(^{153}\) This added to the prevailing tension.

By the third week of June the strength of the Muslim League Ministry appeared depleted. The Governor on realising this prorogued the Assembly on 22 June to give the Ministry a breathing space.\(^{154}\) At this juncture eleven Coalition members crossed the floor on 23 June which further embarrassed the Ministry.\(^{155}\)

The League now embarked on a counter-offensive. It stepped up its efforts at projecting the Bill as an attempt to 'democratise education in Bengal' which it said, in a meeting at Calcutta, was being prevented by the "control over the Secondary Education by the coterie of high caste Hindus".\(^{156}\) To counter the opposition to the Bill it was decided in the same meeting to chalk out a plan of action. The meeting declared Muslim

\(^{151}\) Ibid., 25 May 1944, p. 3.

\(^{152}\) Amrita Bazar Patrika, Cal., 6 June 1944, p. 2.

\(^{153}\) See Pramatha Ranjan Thakur's attack on the Ministry, 5 June 1944, PBLA, Vol. LXVII, No. 6, pp. 141-142.


\(^{155}\) Amrita Bazar Patrika, Cal., 22 June 1944, p. 2.

\(^{156}\) Star of India, Cal., 27 June 1944, p. 2.
confidence in the Ministry by supporting the Bill and deciding on a programme of action which included:

1. Observance of an All Bengal Secondary Education Week;
2. Publication of pamphlets;
3. Journals to bring out special Secondary Education Bill issues,
4. Constitution of a Secondary Education Bill Committee of Action.\textsuperscript{157}

The entire Opposition's attack on the Bill concentrated on the provisions of communal and separate electorates which would be responsible for the members constituting the 'Secondary Education Board', and the increased official control that the Bill envisaged. The Muslim League's efforts were directed at portraying the Secondary Education Bill as a symbol of its crusade for furthering Muslim interests. It, therefore, demanded an unalloyed support from the Muslims. The support of the Pirs was enlisted to emphasise this effort and brought to the fore the Muslim League's attempt of 'evocation of community' in its political struggle to establish its hegemony. In Barisal, Muslim League was declared as the "only political organisation of the Muslims" by the Pir of Sirshina.\textsuperscript{158} He also said that the League had the support of Jamait-ulama-i-Islam and that the masses should also join it.\textsuperscript{159} The Conference passed resolutions sponsored by the Pir which included a resolution in favour of the early passage of the Secondary Education Bill.\textsuperscript{160}

\textsuperscript{157} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{158} \textit{Ibid.}, 19 August 1944, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{159} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{160} \textit{Ibid.}
While the Secondary Education Bill agitated the minds of the people in the Province, another issue, in the meantime, was rapidly coming into the political limelight which would eclipse other local issues and at the same time add to the already increasing communal polarisation. It was the Chakravarty Rajgopalachari Formula popularly known as the C. R. Formula.

With the entry of Japan on the war front in December 1941, the course of the World War had taken a new turn. It effected a change in the attitude of the Indians towards the war. It was no longer a war fought in some distant land. While the entry of Japan and its continued advance made international opinion force Britain to solicit Indians’ support, it made some Congress leaders with their base in the threatened areas, i.e. Madras, Bengal, etc., to express ideas which were at variance with that of the central leadership of the Congress.

The Coromandel coast was hit by Japanese bombs in December 1941 which was followed by evacuation of coastal areas. The districts of Noakhali, Tippera and Chittagong in Bengal presented a chaotic picture with large scale evacuation, breakdown of communications, and sudden spurt in the flood of refugees from Burma. The situation was made more difficult by the army atrocities and the complete breakdown of civil administration in these coastal areas. These events forced the leaders from the


affected regions to express themselves against the 'demoralisation of their people and to plea for the restoration of some sort of order'.

It might be due to this line of thinking that one of the leaders of Tippera, Kamini Kumar Dutta, wrote to the General Secretary of the AICC that there was a:

... general desire expressed by the public that if the people in the Congress organisation be permitted in the committees for maintaining internal peace and for establishing communal harmony, the results will be better.... Public is feeling depressed and alarmed at the idea that they are living in an absolutely unprotected condition.164

Rajagopalachari's thoughts, it may be suggested, were also moved to a great extent by similar considerations. The favourable inclination towards the Cripps proposals was, in fact, due to the same reasons.165 It was only when he realised, along with Nehru, that the British were not sincere in their wish to impart power to the Indians that he supported its rejection. He, however, was more concerned about the Japanese advance and felt acutely the need for a National Government which he realised could be possible only if a rapprochement was made with the Muslim League. It was now very obvious that the Hindu-Muslim question provided the perfect card for the British to deny the Indians any share in government. He said: "Politics of the minorities were good counter-offensive in old days against nationalism, but today nationalism is one great munition which India requires to be put into motion".166 This realisation made him approach the league with a changed attitude. This changed attitude was, however, not a strategy evolved only after the failure of the Cripps Mission. In December 1941 itself as

164 Kamini Kumar Dutta to General Secretary, AICC, 9 June 1940, ibid., File No. P-5 (Pt. II), pp. 197-199.

165 See the Note by Cripps on 28th March 1942. It says: "... so far as the whole scheme was concerned, he (Rajagopalachari) said he was in favour of its acceptance". Mansergh, N. (ed.), op. cit., Vol. I, p. 512.

166 'Summary of the Press Statement made by Rajagopalachari at Bezwada on April 15th' Linlithgow to Amery, ibid., p. 790.
his biographer suggests, he had talked of 'the India of the National Congress and the India of the Muslim League as together forming the India that Britain had to satisfy'.

After the failure of the Cripps Mission, he became more resolute in his attempts to solve this problem of 'rapprochement'. He got two resolutions passed by the Congress Legislative Party in Madras one of which favoured the formation of the Ministry (contravening the Congress resolution) and the other conceding the Muslim League demand of Pakistan. He took these steps without ever consulting his colleagues in the Working Committee. This sudden move created a furore in Madras where he found himself totally alienated from the rest of the Congress. On the other hand, his colleagues in the Working Committee were embarrassed because it was Rajaji - the symbol of the Congress in the south - who was going against the Congress stand. With the intention of getting the Working Committee to buy his idea, he pleaded for a Congress-League agreement. The plan was turned down by AICC by 120 votes to 15. After this, he opposed the Working Committee resolution of / on 14 July 1942. His break with the Congress was complete. Earlier he was asked to resign from the party which he did - an act which Gandhiji commended as ‘dignified'. The Quit India movement was launched and a civil martial law was established in the country. Rajagopalachari could only meet Gandhiji in jail on 27 February 1943, and gained Gandhi's go-ahead to carry on his mission. A month later, he met Jinnah in Bombay but did not disclose during the
minute long meeting that the proposal had met with Gandhi’s approval. Gandhi was released in May 1944 and, thereafter, a fresh move began by Rajagopalachari who entered into correspondence with Jinnah. The CR formula, as it came to be known, was revived and on the basis of this correspondence Gandhi began a dialogue with Jinnah in July 1944 which finally culminated in the Gandhi-Jinnah meeting in September 1944. The terms of the formula were as follows. When the war ended, a commission would demarcate the “contiguous districts” in North-West and East India having an absolute majority. In the areas thus demarcated, a plebiscite of the adult population would be taken. If the majority voted for a separate sovereign state, it would be given effect to, but border districts would have the option to join one of the new states. In the event of separation, mutual agreements would be entered into for safe guarding defence, commerce and communication. These terms would be binding when the British transferred full power to India.\(^{171}\)

The meetings that lasted for 20 days, produced little agreement. Gandhi’s approach was criticised by Jawaharlal Nehru,\(^ {172}\) Azad and others. The most strident criticism of the move, however, came from Bengal. Ashutosh Lahiry, a prominent Hindu Mahasabha leader later on saw in this event the downward slide of Gandhi’s magical powers. “The downward course of Gandhi’s monopoly of power as a leader started from

\(^{171}\) See Jinnah to Gandhi, 10 September 1944, Mitra, N. N., (ed.), \textit{op. cit.}, 1944, Vol. IV, pp. 135-137.

\(^{172}\) Gopal, S., (ed.), \textit{Collected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru}, OUP, Delhi, 1987, Vol. 13, pp. 455. Three weeks of growing perturbation and mental distress. I wrote then that I was not put out by various developments and the two proposals Bapu had made..., I take all that back. I am very much put out, angered and out of temper. The flood of sentiments, interviews, correspondence & C that have emanated from Bapu and the frequent utterances of Rajagopalachari, have overwhelmed me and others and I feel stilled and unable to breathe normally. For the first time in these years I have a sensation of blackness and sinking of heart.
this historic episode and the disillusionment about Gandhiji's magical power was complete."173 His indictment of Rajagopalachari was more severe. He wrote:

South Indian politicians had never able to appreciate the dangerous significance of the communal problem which was looked upon as a problem of Bengal and Punjab. Rajaji held that view that the Congress should accept the demand of the League, since it was holding up the achievement of Freedom.... Rajaji at one time publicly stated that if Bengal had a Muslim majority why should the rest of India suffer for it.... Rajaji's share in determination of All India Congress policy towards the problem created by the Muslim League had been most decisive, next only to Gandhi.174

The CR formula and the subsequent Gandhi Jinnah meeting soon became the focus of public attention. From July 1944, when the correspondence between Rajagopalachari and Jinnah and between Gandhi and Jinnah were released to the Press, political discourse in the Province began to take a different turn. What the Muslim League Press initially had thought as merely a 'gesture from Gandhi', soon become a point of intense discussion.175 From the middle of July and especially in August, the issue began to move political opinion and there were expectation as well as speculation about the results of the move. Gandhi's meeting fast overshadowed the CR proposals and the meeting was seen as a step towards an agreement between the Congress and the League.

In a meeting at Jessore in the first week of August, the District League Secretary, Habibur Rahman said:

To those who wish for the achievement of a Congress League settlement, the Gandhi-Rajaji formula is acceptable. Mr. Jinnah should consult his working committee and immediately start talk with Gandhiji....176

Ibid.


174 Ibid.

175 The Provincial Press Advisor’s Report on the Press for the first half July and second half of July, 1944, (hereafter Press Advisor’s Report), Home Political, File No. 18/7/44.

176 People’s War, Bm., 13 Aug. 1944, p. 3.
Similarly, the District Students League leader Musharraf Hussain, in the same meeting said: “Everything has become clear after Gandhiji-Rajaji formula and the Muslim League have now to come forward”. 177

A big public meeting was held at Narayanganj in Dacca “which welcomed Gandhiji’s proposals and pledged full support.” 178 Amir Ali on behalf of Muslim League and Birendra Dutta of Congress were there to support the call for joint support to the move. On the 5th August, there was a meeting at Coronation Park at Dhaka in which the Saroj Mukherjee of the Congress and Abu Salek of the League spoke supporting the move. 179

The provincial League leadership, while welcoming Gandhi’s move, now woke up to the issue of the partition of the Province that the CR formula advanced as a means of solving the deadlock. On August 20th the Provincial League Working Committee concluded a long session which decided in a overwhelming majority, “against the vivisection of Bengal and in favour of a united Bengal”. 180 In a meeting on the 19th August at Calcutta, Habibullah Bahar, a prominent member of the League and a Minister, said that Bengal should not be partitioned and the same sentiment was echoed by the League Secretary, Abul Hashim the next day. 181 The official report said that the Muslim circles support the proposals and favour them but prefer to await the outcome of

177 Ibid.
178 Ibid.
179 Ibid.
181 Ibid. See also, Hashim, Abul, op. cit., p. 66.
the projected conversation between Gandhi and Jinnah before committing themselves. But as the date of the proposed meeting drew nearer, opinions came to be “crystallised among the Muslims” reported the Government sources. Though a large political section voiced its support to this move by Gandhi as a step towards the solution to the communal problem, “bitterness” on the part of the Hindus was also reported.

The period between July 1944 and September 1944 witnessed the attention of the Province and its political force being concentrated towards the Gandhi-Jinnah meeting and “Gandhi’s failure to accept the Pakistan demand of Jinnah” which it was said by one section as the reason for the failure of the meeting. There was intense opposition from the Hindu Mahasabha and a section of the Congress leadership. The Communist workers attacked all those voices which tried to oppose the formula or Gandhi’s meeting with Jinnah as reaction from Hindu communal forces. This had the effect later on in establishing the academic and political position that anyone who supported Partition of Bengal in 1947 was Hindu communal.

What is important for the politics of the League was the fact that this was precisely the time when the mobilisation drive of the League was going on and the agitation on the Secondary Education Bill had tried to create sharp polarisation in the provincial politics. There were, however, voices which prevented any such sharp polarisation on the question of Pakistan on communal lines. The CR formula and the

---

182 FR, August first half, 1944, *Home Political*, File No. 18/8/44.
183 FR, August second half, 1944, *ibid.*
political attention that it attracted, had the effect of further narrowing down the space that existed between the communal and non-communal politics in the Province. All attention was now focused on Gandhi, Jinnah, and Pakistan. "It is no accident", wrote the Muslim League friendly Communist Party organ, "that the bulk of the enrolment was done during the three months from July to September when the country as a whole was expectantly waiting for the Congress and League to unite for freedom." Therefore, the ideological ambience of the mobilisation drive of Abul Hashim was created by these events and debates and what Hashim was doing was to give it a mobilised form.

The CR formula and Gandhi’s approach to Jinnah has been criticised because it is argued that it added to the prestige of Jinnah. It is advanced as a factor legitimising the Muslim League positions. Liaqat Ali Khan, for example, said that it was not the Lahore Resolution but Gandhi-Jinnah meeting which in fact concretised the goal of communal demand. "This is to justify the League position by putting the blame on the Congress (read Hindu leaders from the Muslim League standpoint). What is generally ignored is the fact that this was the extent to which Gandhi could go to satisfy the League positions without sacrificing the ideological position of the Congress which also determined, to a great extent, the ideological direction of the national movement.

Thus, while there were signs of deterioration of the communal relations in the rural east Bengal, the issues of the Secondary education and thereafter that of the CR formula provided an ideological support base to the mobilisation and politics on the communal lines. By the time the CR formula came to dominate the political scene,
famine was fast on its way out so far as the issue dictating the political agenda of parties in the Province was concerned.