Chapter Three
The INA, Elections, and Calcutta killings

The early part of 1945 saw the colonial authorities disturbed over certain developments in the Province. On the one hand, Gandhi's intended visit to Bengal created problems for them, while on the other, the Governor was worried by Nazimuddin's information that there was a possibility of co-operation with the Congress. Colville, the officiating Governor General, felt that any such rapprochement between the Muslim League and the Congress leading to the formation of a coalition Ministry in Bengal might cause "a rise in political temperature". He also felt that it would prejudice the discussions that were taking place between Wavell and the Cabinet in London. Such a possibility would then have raised the question of the release of political prisoners. Therefore, he disapproved of any show of encouragement to Gandhi's visit, and to the process of formation of a coalition Ministry.

Colville wrote to the Secretary of State that he "would advise the Ministry not to give any encouragement to Gandhi to visit Midnapore". He also said that there seemed

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1 Casey wrote to Colville:

... Under outward appearance of quiet there has been considerable political manoeuvring in Bengal of late.
2 The principal factors are:
   (1) Stress and personal ambitions among League Ministry and its followers.
   (2) Approach to Nazimuddin by Kiron Shankar Roy, leader of orthodox Congress in Bengal, on the question of the formation of a League-Congress Ministry. This approach took place on March 21st and Nazimuddin told me about it today, March 22nd.
   (3) Alleged negotiations between orthodox Congress and forward block group (Sarat Bose) for re-amalgamation of Bengal Congress.
3 Suggestions for a visit of Gandhi to Bengal including Midnapore are part of the background.

2 Colville to Amery, 23 March 1945, Ibid., p. 717.

3 Ibid.

4 The release of political prisoners was the major political question on which the Bengal Congress took an adamant position. This prevented the Provincial Congress from forming a coalition with Fazlul Huq in 1937.

"little indication that possible advantages of a proposed coalition outweigh disadvantages of having a Ministry that will press for release and possibly resign on the issue."

While the colonial authorities deliberated upon the possible repercussions of any such rapprochement on the provincial political scenario, the Ministry suffered a defeat on 28 March, when 21 members of Nazimuddin's tottering coalition crossed the floor and the Ministry's "Agricultural budget" (sic) was defeated by 106 votes to 97. The Speaker, Syed Nausher Ali, declared the Assembly *functus officio* (out of office). Thus, after remaining in office for two years, the Opposition sent the Ministry packing in a dramatic manner that was reminiscent of the way it was once ushered into office by the colonial authorities.

The Governor had already shown his predilection for administering the Province without a Ministry. At this juncture, he wrote to the Governor General that Section 93 should continue till a new Legislative Assembly was elected. He wrote:

The situation in Bengal is such that I am convinced that a substantial period of Section 93 Government is essential. Combining the prospective food situation and many other problems facing this province with the expected intensification of war against Japan (when presumably Bengal will be an even more important British base than now) I cannot contemplate without grave anxiety the drag which an inevitably corrupt and inefficient Ministry would place on Bengal administration... further it is essential that with a view to new elections and a revitalised and cleansed legislature... I therefore contemplate period of Section 93 government until new elections... I believe that we will be able to show substantially better results under Section 93 than under any Ministry.... I trust that my advice as regards the prolongation of Section 93 will be accepted by yourself and by Secretary of State.

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9 Wavell had written in June "after six months of experience of Bengal politics and administration, Casey is burning to take over the province under Section 93". Moon, Penderal, *Wavell, The Viceroy's Journal*, OUP, Delhi, 1977, (first published in 1973), p. 77.

It is quite clear from the above that though he had mentioned the possibility of a
colalition to Colville, he would not have facilitated such a move even if the Governor
General had advised him to do so. He kept on impressing upon the authorities the need
to have elections before revoking Section 93\textsuperscript{11} - a request the authorities were not very
keen to concede.\textsuperscript{12} The reason for not holding an early election, however, was explained
in terms of the prevailing Indian situation, as becomes clear from the official
correspondence. Colville wrote to Amery:

If general elections were held all over India, Pakistan would be a vital issue, and in view
of the possibility of early constitutional changes the elections would presumably be
treated as of quite exceptional importance and be fought with the utmost vigour and
bitterness. Communal antipathies might be accentuated, and at the end of the elections
Congress and the Muslim League might be even further apart than they are now.\textsuperscript{13}

'Communal antipathy' had by now attained such an autonomy that it was even
cited by the colonial authorities as a factor for holding them back from committing
themselves to an early election. By virtue of the existence of this autonomous realm, the
British now convincingly played the role of the 'honest broker' in the arena of political
'negotiations', while in the social sphere, the colonial presence was justifiable as the
variable that prevented communal antipathy from bursting into a communal
conflagration.

The communal situation prevailing in some parts of the Province indeed
substantiated such a justification. The other face of this argument was that while an

\textsuperscript{11} Entry on 13 June 1945, Casey's Diary, \textit{Richard G. Casey Papers}, (Microfilm) Reel No. 2, p. 62.

\textsuperscript{12} Memorandum by the Secretary of State for India, War Cabinet Papers, W. P. (45) 218, 5 April

\textsuperscript{13} Colville to Amery, 2 April 1945, \textit{ibid.}, p. 808.
alliance between the Congress and the League would lessen the bitterness between the
two communities, it would be fraught with the problem of 'raising the political heat'.

The Governor, in his letter to the Governor General in September 1944, had referred to
the report of the District Magistrate of Dacca:

No Hindu or Muslim, no matter how upright, honest or public minded he may be, is to be
trusted for a single moment when he is making a statement about members of the
opposite community and their actions. Dacca is divided throughout the 24 hours, into two
camps, each of them feeling a deep rooted distrust of anything said or done by the other.
The vast majority would never commit any crime or violence themselves - but
communalism has taken such a hold on even the wisest and soberest that they do not, for
one moment, consider that a crime committed by a member of the other.

The state of mind provides an atmosphere in which the youth of Dacca know for
certain that no matter what excesses they commit, they will not be given away by their
community.

In the same vein he argued: "I believe that Section 93 would remove the main
present cause of trouble in Dacca".

The reading of the authorities, however, was incomplete as they did not even
comment on the wrath of the famine in the Dacca region. The Governor made repeated
efforts to understand how the Provincial leaders defined Pakistan. At the same time, he
administered a note of caution to Nazimmuddin on what he called the "Mussalmanisation
of the province". He wrote:

14 Casey to Colville, 23 March 1945, Ibid., p. 715.
15 ... the principal problem which is exercising my mind is the attitude I should take in
the event of offer of a straightforward combination between Kiran and Nazimuddin as
basis of a League-Congress Ministry and on the assumption that such a combination
would promise, (a) a stronger government free from the vacillations of venal
supporters, (b) Hindu satisfaction and decrease of communal bitterness, (c) decline of
the influence of the more virulent sections of Mahasabha, and (d) possible receding
into the background, so far as influential politicians in Bengal are concerned, of
demands for Pakistan....
16 Ibid.
17 See fn. 2, p. 1, of this chapter.
18 From a report by the District Magistrate of Dacca, commenting on the outbreak of stabbings in
Dacca in June. See, Entry on 30 July, Casey’s Diary, op. cit., Reel No. 1, p. 2.
19 Entry on 29 July 1944, Casey’s Diary, op. cit., Reel No. 1, p. 2.
I repeated to him (Nazimuddin) that I was convinced that he was trying to go too fast in respect of the Mussalmanisation of administration - and that I did not desire to impress on Hindus that eastern Pakistan would be a joint Muslim-Hindu enterprise. I said that I thought that it was rather significant that Ayyar, Mitter and Lakshmanan were all leaving the Bengal administration in one month. I said that I realised there were ostensible reasons to explain why each one was leaving - but that I was convinced that the real reason was that the Government was making it clear that no Hindus were wanted - and that, if the drift went on, it would be an extremely bad thing for Bengal - as there were a wholly insufficient number of qualified Muslims to take their places. He took all this in gloomy silence...18

He evinced a deep interest in the 'state of Pakistan' frequently even surpassing that of Suhrawardy,19 now the most important leader of the League in the Province. The defeat of the Ministry came as a relief to him, though he made known his displeasure with "the decision of the Speaker" as he thought it should have rightly been taken by the Governor himself.20

The League, however, did not take the dismissal lightly and soon the leaders began attacking those whom they thought responsible for this. Suhrawardy pinned the blame on the Marwaris and the Hindu Banias. A report said, "As the discussion bell rang, Mr. Suhrawardy... shouted... and said that if they were defeated today they would go out because there was a conspiracy of black marketers and profiteers on the other side. He added that the Opposition was supported by hoarders, profiteers and black marketers and were trading with Marwari money."21 While addressing the meeting of the Calcutta Hawkers' and Vendors' Union, he said, "Marwaris have challenged me to prove allegations of bribery with which they purchased some members off and defeated the Muslim League Ministry".22

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18 Entry on 14 October, 1944, ibid., Reel No. 1, p. 110.
19 Entry on 15 October 1944, ibid., p. 27.
20 "It was my function to say whether there was a Ministry in office, not the Speaker's." Casey, Richard G., Personal Experience, 1939-46, London, 1962, pp. 216-7.
Technically speaking, of course, the men responsible for the defeat were the
twelve members of the Ministerial party who had voted along with the Opposition.\textsuperscript{23}
They blamed the Ministry for various lapses which included "the doubling of sales tax,
agricultural income tax, indiscriminate and judicious distribution of contracts, patronage
to relations and friends, nepotism and favouritism of a reprehensible character".\textsuperscript{24}

Their statement revealed signs of fissures in the Muslim League on issues such as
the working of the Cabinet and the programmes and policies of the party. However, by
accusing the Marwaris and Hindu Banias, the League leadership tried to externalise these
internal feuds which, in turn, helped it to construct a vicious other on whom it could
transpose the blame. At this juncture, the memory of the famine was resurrected and the
attention of the Muslim masses was directed towards the profiteers and hoarders who
had played havoc with Muslim lives.\textsuperscript{25} The League Ministry offered itself as the only
saviour of the people in the light of the continued active presence of these elements.

In a meeting at Mohammed Ali Park on 22 April, Suhrawardy's meritorious
services during the famine, in checking the black marketers and making the rationing
scheme a success, was remembered with gratitude.\textsuperscript{26} The Greater Calcutta League
Conference held on 23 April, demanded the revival of the League Ministry, and declared
that under no circumstances would the Muslims tolerate an anti-League Ministry in
Bengal.\textsuperscript{27} The League, therefore, brought back the famine and the sufferings wrought by

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Star of India}, Cal., 7 April 1945, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Amrita Bazar Patrika}, Cal., 4 April 1945, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Star of India}, Cal., 25 April 1945, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Ibid.}, 24 April 1945, p. 3.
it into the political discourse as a means to present itself as the protector of the Muslim masses.

The Bengal Provincial League had been trying since the 1930s to organise students. In fact, the activities of youth and students proved to be the best manifestation of its disseminated ideological content. Communal clashes on the issues of singing 'Vande Mataram' and celebration of Saraswati Puja became quite regular in schools and colleges. In February 1943, Dacca University had witnessed one of the worst communal fracas between the Hindu and Muslim students. In Pabna, the Hindu students of Edward's College went on a strike protesting against the "slaughter of goat" on the Id day by the Muslim students in the College premises. Incidents of similar nature go to suggest the bitter communal polarisation that had come to dominate the province by this time. It was the emblem of Pakistan that was now used to mobilise the Muslims. In Murshidabad and Dacca, party meetings were organised and resolutions on Pakistan and the Secondary Education Bill were passed. In Rangpur, Rajshahi and Noakhali the party was active in mobilising public opinion around Pakistan.

There were two distinct interpretations that emerged regarding the meaning of Pakistan, though their political content was the same - a free, independent, but separate Nation. Speaking at Pakistan Club, Abul Hashim gave his interpretation:

Pak means only this that in countries like Assam, NWFP, Punjab, Baluchistan... the people must have completely free and independent State but this does not mean that we are asking freedom for us only but freedom for the whole of India.

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26 FR, February second half, 1944, *op. cit.* File No. 18/2/44.
30 FR, January first half, 1945, *op. cit.* File No. 18/1/45.
31 FR, January second half, 1945, *ibid.*
On the other hand, there were people who abhorred this interpretation of Pakistan, especially the leadership in the shape of Nazimuddin, Akram Khan and those who constantly labelled Abul Hashim of being a Communist. Their idea of Pakistan and suspicion of the Communists was articulated by Liaqat Ali Khan while addressing students on 11 May:

My young friends who believe that Communism or through Communism they will secure Pakistan are greatly mistaken. They may secure Pakistan of the conception of Communism but they will not secure the Pakistan of Islamic conception. Pakistan has no meaning for me if it is not of Islamic conception.33

Regarding the tactics of the Communists, he said, "I warn you against the great danger of Communism to Islam.... I do not want any Muslim to come to our Muslim League received with open arms and then to play the part of Shivaji".34

The demand and the symbol of Pakistan now began to submerge the differences between the demands of class and that of community. It was not just a channelisation of these notions, and this reflects the hegemonic and over determining nature of the Pakistan idea. The earlier sharpness of the debate, and the fiery contest between those who demanded prioritising primary and mass education for the Muslims and those demanding reservations, etc., in Secondary and Higher education, were gradually blunted and the prolonged agitation over the Secondary Education helped in this.35 Now the students were asked to both "agitate for a Muslim University in Bengal" and take "steps for free primary education for the Muslim masses".36 This reflected the process of

33 Ibid., 12 May 1945, p. 1.
34 Ibid.
35 For a detailed discussion on the differences and debates between different sections of the Muslim leadership over the question of education, see Sarkar, Chandi Prasad, Politicisation of Bengali Muslims 1909-1928, K. P. Bagchi, Calcutta, 1991, pp. 60-70.
36 Star of India, Cal., 3 January 1945, p. 3.
homogenisation engendered by the movement, a delicate compromise of the interests of class and community. Speaking at the 8th session of the All Bengal Muslim Students' League in Kushtia on 1 January 1945, Prof. A. B. Halim, former Vice Principal of Aligarh College, asked the students to join the Pakistan movement because "Muslims of Bengal have taken a back seat in the whole of Muslim India". Coming in the wake of the Secondary Education Bill fiasco, the session passed a resolution demanding "a separate Muslim University in Bengal" and asked "the students to join the Muslim League" because "the Muslims could not rely upon their elder brothers the Hindus for the defence of their culture".

The League also tried to penetrate the domain of organised labour, where again the Communists were quite active. It tried to organise railwaymen and jute mill workers. The Railway Muslim League's first session was held at Lilooah on 23 April under the Presidentship of the League M. L. A., S. M. Nauman.

The League's influence in Provincial and National politics had certainly increased since 1943. The ravages of the famine and the subsequent epidemic did not affect this growth. The announcement of elections enthused the party, as it perceived a major contest that could translate its influence into a hegemonic presence.

Ibid.

Ibid. See also FR, first half, January, 1945, op. cit., File No. 18/1/45.

Star of India, Cal., 3 May 1945, p. 3.
II

The famine, the Secondary Education bill and the Gandhi-Jinnah meetings were the macro issues which catapulted the Mahasabha and Syama Prasad Mookerjee as one of the predominant political voices in the Province. This was facilitated by the absence of the Congress. However, the need for organisation remained was a constant refrain that shaped its policy of stealing space from the Congress - its main rival. It directed its activities towards building a strong organisation.

The famine period, as we have seen, provided the Mahasabha with the opportunity and scope to reach beyond the middle classes, into different sections and classes of the population. It also helped it increase its membership. This stimulated the Party in Bengal to launch a membership drive in 1944 with the objective of enrolling one lakh members into its fold within three months. Subsequently, ad hoc committees were formed in almost all the districts, and the Vice President of the Provincial Mahasabha was put in charge of organisational matters. In a circular to the President of Rajshahi District Hindu Sabha, he wrote: "I am confident that you are going forward and moving in the matter with determination". Dhirendra Kumar Biswas and Purnachandra Chakravorti were sent to organise the Mahasabha branches in Rajshahi. In Noakhali, Brojesh Chandra Chakraborti Thakur was in charge. The mode of organisation was to

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40 Ashutosh Lahiry to Rai Surendra Nath Gupta Bahadur, 9 Jan. 1945, S. P. Mookerjee Papers, Instalment II-IV, File No. 74, Part III, p. 66. Manoranjan Choudhury, however, indicated that the target of the Mahasabha was to enrol 4 lakh members by 30 Nov. 1944. See, Manoranjan Choudhury, Secretary BPHM, 18 August 1944, ibid., File No. 120, p. 1.

41 Ibid.

42 Ashutosh Lahiry to Rai Surendra Nath Gupta Bahadur, 14 August 1945, ibid., pp. 36-38.

propagate Mahasabha's ideas during festivals like Jhulan and the Janmastami celebrations in honour of Krishna,\(^{44}\) organising Widow Remarriages\(^{45}\) and 'Bhagwat readings' or meetings where the religious text, Bhagwat, was read. On these occasions, Mahasabha leaders of the locality made speeches and encouraged people to join the Mahasabha fold.\(^{46}\) Thus, the major platform which the Mahasabha tried to utilise for its organisational activities was the cultural and religious one offered by Hindu society.

The political expediency of presenting a Hindu front had been the guiding factor in the Sabha's efforts to mobilise the Scheduled Caste population. In Bakerganj, which had a substantial population of Scheduled Castes, a very active scheduled caste leader, Upendra Nath Edbar, helped the party in this effort.\(^{47}\) A conference of Mahasabha workers' was organised during the Puja vacations.\(^{48}\)

\(^{44}\) The Mahasabha was directly and indirectly helped by Bharat Sevashram Sangha in these matters. The Mahasabha organ reporting on the organising activities said: Bolpur Jhulan utsav - on the occasion of Jhulan Jatra, President of the Sevashram Samity, Shri Pandarikaksha Hati... and organiser of Bengal Hindu Mahasabha Anandi Kinkar Ray... a week long celebration was organised... attended by thousands of people. Secretary of the District Hindu Mahasabha was also present there. *Hindustan*, Cal., 23 August 1945, p. 26.


\(^{45}\) Widow remarriages were encouraged. Interested people were asked to come to the Mahasabha. Vidhaya Vivah Sahayak Sabha, a Mahasabha organ, advertised these marriages. The local Hindu Sabha branches were active in this field. However, how far these activities helped the Mahasabha to entrench itself in the popular psyche is a question that needs to be further probed. News of these marriages and advertisements for assistance came out regularly in the Mahasabha organ. See news item on Widow remarriage, *Hindustan*, Cal., 6 Sept. 1945, p. 45; 27 Sept. 1945, p. 127; 20 Nov. 1945, p. 207.

\(^{46}\) See news of Bhagwat readings in Mymensingh on 8 August in which Jagadish Shastri, the Preacher, apart from reading the religious texts, spoke about the significance of Hindu Sangathan and Sangha. *Hindustan*, Cal., 30 Aug. 1945, p. 44.


Notwithstanding its active involvement in these organisational activities, the party distinctively lacked appeal among the lower classes. The leaders were conscious that the party's reach had not yet gone beyond certain sections of the population. Syama Prasad Mookerjee articulated this feeling of the Mahasabha leadership. "If Mahasabha remains an organisation confined only to a section of the educated upper classes completely detached from the mass contact, it is bound to prove a distant failure."^{49}

It was only around 'Hindu interests' that the Sabha attempted to attract people. For members like Manoranjan Choudhury, this was because the Mahasabha lacked any economic perspective.\footnote{Mookerji, Syama Prasad, \textit{Awake Hindustan}, p. 34.} He directed the leadership's attention towards this lacuna and assured them that given responsibility, he would be able to recruit the requisite numbers. The economic agenda that he provided in his appeal, however, was nothing more than an economic code of conduct for the individual Sangathan member. He suggested, for example, "that no Sangathanist shall spend more than 50 rupees per month" or that "they shall only travel in buses or in the third class compartment" (sic).\footnote{Manoranjan Choudhury, Secretary BPHM, 18 August 1944, \textit{S. P. Mookerjee Papers}, II-IV Instalment, File No. 120, pp. 1-5.} He did not have an economic perspective of the societal problems.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 4-5.}

The digits around which the party tried to invoke the solidarity of the Hindus and its identification with the Mahasabha were, the role of Hindus, and the attitude of the Congress towards the Muslim League demands due to which the Congress was advocating 'a false and unpractical Nationalism'. Speaking at the Tajpur Union Mahasabha meeting, its Secretary, Prasad Chandra Chakrabarty, told the audience:

\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}}
Congressmen like Gandhiji, etc., are running after an indefinite and unpractical nationalism by rejecting Hindutva. But inspired by Chatrapati Shivaji and Maharana Pratap, the Mahasabha leaders are eager to arouse India's own Hindutva identity. One wants to dig a new river and bring water into it while the aim of the other is to desilt the powerful river which has been there for ages.\footnote{53}

The Hindu Mahasabha proclaimed itself as the true and exclusive representative of Hindu interests which "coincided with those of the nation itself".\footnote{54} On the question of allowing non-Hindus to become members of the Mahasabha, Savarkar declared:

If for economic and political reasons non-Hindus are allowed to join the Hindu Mahasabha then only the unity of the Hindus will be destroyed. It is because in Bharatvarsha every political problem is related to religious or cultural problems and every religious and other problems are part of the political problems. On the other hand, though the Pakistan Movement has taken a political shape yet it is enmeshed basically with religious problems. Hindu Mahasabha is the temple of the Hindus. Here only the Hindus have the right to worship national Shiva.

We dare not change this temple into mosque or bazaar. In case we commit this mistake Hindus will lose their freedom, as Congress has seen its downfall.\footnote{55} (Italics mine)

Thus, the reason for Congress's supposed downfall, according to Savarkar, was that it allowed non-Hindus to become its members.

The Mahasabha's increased participation in the politics of the Province and acquiring of some space during 1943-45 was facilitated by the Ministry's acts of omission and commission. Its attempts to adjust between the parallel currents of communal antagonism and nationalism sweeping over the Province, had given the leadership here a political language which was at variance with that of its national leadership. Syama Prasad Mookerjee could appreciate the nationalist leaders better than other Mahasabha leaders from other provinces became apparent during the Amritsar session of 1943 when

\footnote{53}{\textit{Hindustan}, Cal., 5 Sept. 1945, p. 44.}
\footnote{54}{Mookerjee, S. P., \textit{op. cit.}}
\footnote{55}{Veer Savarkar's wire to S. P. Mookerjee, 17 August 1945, \textit{S. P. Mookerjee Papers}, Instalment II-IV, File No. 90.}
Syama Prasad Mookerjee pacified the crowds which were infuriated by the anti-Congress statements made by some Mahasabha leaders.\textsuperscript{56}

Its fight against the Muslim League Ministry also added to its realisation of the operation of communal politics as well as its limitations. This became apparent in the council meeting of the All India Hindu Sabha held in Delhi in August 1945, where the representatives from Bengal struck a restrained note. Bhojraj Ajwani, a representative from Sind moved a resolution to the effect that "if the Government did not accept the Mahasabha demands, the Mahasabha should resort to direct action".\textsuperscript{57} The representative from Punjab, Lala Hardayal, supported this for he felt, "if direct action was carried out Congress would lose its popularity".\textsuperscript{58} The response of the representatives from Bengal was cautious. N. C. Chatterjee, the President of the Bengal Provincial Mahasabha, opposed the resolution and said that "it was useless to decide on direct action without making sure whether Mahasabha had adequate resources".\textsuperscript{59} Similarly, Ashutosh Lahiry, the Vice President who was also in charge of organisational matters said, "he had been to different places recently and nowhere he found Mahasabha powerful enough to launch a direct action".\textsuperscript{60}

A similar note of realism was struck by the Calcutta Mayor, D. N. Mukherjee. He said: "if the committee approved the proposal of direct action, he would be glad to enrol himself for the purpose of launching it but the question was whether they had considered

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  \item[57] \textit{Ibid.}, 1945, Vol. IV, p. 154.
  \item[58] \textit{Ibid.}
  \item[59] \textit{Ibid.}
  \item[60] \textit{Ibid.}
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their position fully".\textsuperscript{61} He further added that "his tour of UP and Lahore had showed that they did not have sufficient support. Their first requirement was to organise the people and establish mass contact".\textsuperscript{62}

Notwithstanding this realisation of the limited social base of the party, the Sabha leaders began, with a sense of confidence, their electoral preparations. In January 1945 itself, Ashutosh Lahiry, the Secretary of the Standing Election Board, asked the members to get themselves registered in the voter's list for the coming elections to the Central Legislative Assembly.\textsuperscript{63} Issuing a circular to the branch Sabhas he requested them to "immediately apply to the appropriate authorities for registration".\textsuperscript{64} This confidence was also due to the good performance of the Mahasabha candidates in the recently held local elections in different parts of Bengal. The Mahasabha candidates did extremely well in Suri (Birbhum),\textsuperscript{65} an area severely affected by the famine. It also played an active part in the local, District and Municipal elections in Dacca,\textsuperscript{66} Barisal,\textsuperscript{67} and Noakhali.\textsuperscript{68}

In Noakhali, the active role of the district Mahasabha leaders in helping\textsuperscript{69} Abdul Majid get elected against the Muslim League nominee as the District Board Chairman was significant. Kirti Jebon Ghosh, the treasurer of the District Mahasabha, became the

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., p. 155.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{63} Ashutosh Lahiry, Secretary, Standing Election Board, Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha, Circular No. 5, 10 January, \textit{S. P. Mookerjee Papers}, Instalment II-IV, Sub. File No. 70, Part II, p. 229.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{65} \textit{S. P. Mookerjee Papers}, Instalment II-IV, Sub. File No. 90, pp. 100-104.
\textsuperscript{66} Surya Kumar Basu, President, Dacca District Hindu Mahasabha, 27 February, 1945, \textit{ibid.}, pp. 93-94.
\textsuperscript{67} Sarat Chandra Guha to S. P. Mookerjee, \textit{ibid.}, p. 146.
Vice Chairman by defeating the League supported candidate.\textsuperscript{69} The defeat of the District League President led to a split in the League.\textsuperscript{70}

The Noakhali election was significant for other reasons as well. Nalini Ranjan Mitra, the headmaster of Khilpara High School in Noakhali and a prominent Mahasabha activist of the locality, in his letter to Syama Prasad Mookerjee, provided a picture of the political configuration during the District Board elections. He wrote:

In the election of Chairman and a Vice-Chairman of the District Board Noakhali, the League nominee (for Chairmanship) Khan Bahadur Abdul Goffran M. L. C. was defeated by our nominee Abdul Majid M. L. A. (Secretary, Bengal Parliamentary Board) by 20-21 votes. The League nominated for Vice-Chairmanship Babu Saral Saha BA (communist who took an oath of allegiance to the League in an open meeting of the League) was defeated by our nominee Babu Kirti Jibon Ghosh BL (Treasurer, District Mahasabha) by 21-20 votes. Abdul Majid M. L. A. sought nomination for DB Chairmanship but Goffran party (the majority party in the League) did not support him. Abdul Majid is the Vice-President and Goffran is the President of the District League. Between Majid and Goffran there was then contest to capture the Chairmanship of the District Board Majid being disappointed by the League left the party and joined us - the Zamiat ulema and the Hindu group in the District Board - according to previous arrangement defying the decision of the League. Disciplining action may be taken against him. This is a definite victory for the ulema party and the Hindu Mahasabha party in the District board against the League party.\textsuperscript{71} (Italics mine)

The Mahasabha was not invited by Wavell to take part in the deliberations in Simla. The Party took strong objection to this. But by treating the Congress as a caste based Hindu party and by trying to demote it to a status on par with the Muslim League, Wavell provided ammunition to the Mahasabha to sharpen its attack against the Congress. The Congress was now accused of succumbing to colonial pressure and accepting 'parity status' which the League in collusion with the colonial authorities had been trying to impose on it. The Mahasabha declared a 'bandh' (closure) on 8 July 1945 to protest

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., p. 41.

\textsuperscript{70} FR, February first half; 1945, Government of India, \textit{Home Political}, File No. 18/2/45.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.
against such a treatment being meted to the 'majority' community.\textsuperscript{72} It also organised a protest week against the Viceroy's proposals. "It argued that the plan proposed to place the Hindu Community at the mercy of Anglo-Muslim domination."\textsuperscript{73}

The release of the Congress leaders resulted in a rapid change in the political mood of the people. The Mahasabha was in some discomfort because it soon realised that the people were forgetting the party's relief and other activities of the past two years. Its grievance was articulated in a circular to the District and sub-divisional Sabhas. It said:

Very few remember now that it is mainly the Hindu Mahasabha which saved thousands of Hindus of the rural areas of the Narayanganj sub-division from worst fate in 1941, which ran to the relief of the cyclone afflicted (sic) Hindus of Midnapore and which fought against the terrible famine of 1943 and saved lives of millions of people of the province. The fight against Pakistan has been solely carried out by the Hindu Mahasabha and that Pakistan still remains a far-off cry is largely due to the opposition organised exclusively by the Hindu Mahasabha. Besides during the last eight years every measure, administrative or legislative, that was designed to crush the Hindus or stifle their just rights have been fought against by the Mahasabha alone.\textsuperscript{74}

It blamed the 'shortness of people's memory' for this forgetfulness on the part of the people. It said, "The general mass of people have got short memories and are easily misled by unreal slogans. Our services have, therefore, to be persistently hammered into the ears of the people".\textsuperscript{75}

It is significant that both the Hindu Mahasabha and the Muslim League attempted to resurrect the memory of the famine into the political discourse. Hindu Mahasabha election manifesto, on the other hand, showed that the party was trying to adjust to the

\textsuperscript{72} \textit{All India Hindu Mahasabha Papers}, File No. C-70, p. 3.


\textsuperscript{74} 'Election Circular No. 12 August 1945', Secretary, Parliamentary Board, BPHM, \textit{S. P. Mookerjee Papers}, Instalment II-IV, Sub File No. 70, Part II, p. 235.

\textsuperscript{75} \textit{Ibid.}
tension that characterised the clash that existed between the notions of 'community' and 'Nation', and a politics based on these notions.

The same line was adopted by N. C. Chatterjee in his election tours in Bengal. For him, "Quit India could not be a real election issue." Why? Because the Hindu Mahasabha found it difficult to stand before the massive popularity that the Congress and its leaders enjoyed.

The linguistic images in the propaganda campaign indicated the fact that the Hindu Mahasabha and the Muslim League both painted the communities they claimed to represent as communities which were defeated, oppressed and constantly being attacked. However, there lay a major difference in the manner and meaning inherent in the two sets of campaigns. While the Muslim League declared the Muslim community 'as the community at the receiving end', the language and content of its propaganda was aggressive and betrayed signs of confidence arising out of its sense of superior might. On the other hand, the Hindu Mahasabha campaign never gained aggressive overtones as the party realised its organisational weakness. The increasing determination of the people to throw the British out had, in fact, rendered the Mahasabha unsuccessful in entrenching itself in the popular imagination.

The lack of popularity was also spoken of as lack of organisation, and this became a constant refrain to enable it to steal space from the Congress, which was the imperative during this time. N. C. Chatterjee declared in his election tour,

If Hindu Mahasabha wants to be successful it is vital that the organisation should be strengthened throughout the country. The Working Committee's appeal should be responded to in right earnest. The leaders in the district are generally with the Hindu Mahasabha, but they lack contact with the masses and the students. In some districts

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76 Nationalist, Cal., 21 Sept. 1945, p. 2.
77 Sengupta, Amalcndu, op. cit., p. 35.
Students Federation has been organised and the Mahasabha has secured the willing allegiance of a batch of young workers.\(^78\)

Thus, the failure of the Mahasabha to transform itself into an aggressive political organisation like the Muslim League had the consequence of restricting the political choices of the Mahasabha.

Its election manifesto declared that "National Unity and full Independence"\(^79\) were two points which it would place before the electorate. It also blamed the system of separate / communal electorate for spreading the communal virus. It denied that there would ever be a true representative voice on real issues through this system.\(^80\) No judicious election could take place unless this system was replaced by a joint electorate.\(^81\) The Pakistan demand was rejected because it entailed Partition of the country. Simultaneously, it argued that India was the land of Hindus, and that Pakistan was an absurd concept.\(^82\) The fight against the partition was to be a fight of the Hindus and hence, it proclaimed that "a Hindu should not be a party to any partition as long as he was alive."\(^83\)

"In this religious battle", it further expected, "Hindu Mahasabha will not be deprived of the Hindu sympathy."\(^84\) Thus, while the League declared the election as well as the fight for Pakistan a religious battle - a Jehad, for the Mahasabha too, the election,

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\(^{78}\) Nationalist, Cal., 21 Sept. 1945, p. 1


\(^{80}\) Ibid., p. 392.

\(^{81}\) Ibid.

\(^{82}\) Ibid., p. 394.

\(^{83}\) Ibid.

\(^{84}\) Ibid.
which was going to be crucial in determining the question of 'national unity and independence', was the battle of the Hindus. The essential unity of India, for Mahasabha, was shown by the help rendered by all parts of this country.85

This was why, for the Mahasabha, movements organised by a group which did not represent the 'Hindu opinion' was of no consequence. Therefore, it declared that "Quit India movement could not be an election issue". This was more so because the Mahasabha was at a loss to explain its role in it, and contest the Congress whose leadership had gone up in popular esteem. It was at this juncture that the Mahasabha tried to justify Syama Prasad's participation and subsequent role in the Ministry, as one inspired by an exalted sense of Nationalism and a sense of serving the interests of the community.86 Therefore, when the Quit India movement was made an election issue by the Congress, Hindu Mahasabha tried to sideline it.

Thus, while the League busied itself with strengthening its ideological attack against any criticism of the unity of the community and the demand of Pakistan, the Mahasabha searched for issues and workers to fight the Congress. The Secretary of the party's Parliamentary Board complained of the paucity of workers.87 He at the same time said that there were "enough village people anxious to do voluntary work for the Mahasabha but they must be properly approached and roused into action". He said he had found Hindus eager to work for the party but "one must go to them, explain the programme of the Mahasabha to the people...."88 With the idea of 'Nation' rapidly capturing public imagination, people had begun to question the Mahasabha's stand, and

85 Ibid., p. 393.
86 'Dr. Syama Prosader Nirbachane Protidwandita', Hindustan, Cal., ... November 1945, p. 207.
87 Ibid.
88 Ibid.
whether it would or it could undertake the cause of Nationalism. Upendra Nath Ball writing on 6 October 1945 from Midnapore, where the Mahasabha had engaged in relief work, enquired whether the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha would contest elections for the Nationalist cause.\footnote{Ibid.}

To reach out to a wider audience the party began publishing *The Nationalist* in 1944, and through it tried to provide its electoral campaign with a more elaborate and systematic character. The party asked all the Provincial and District Sabhas to subscribe to the organ.\footnote{Manoranjan Choudhury, Secretary, All India Hindu Mahasabha, Circular to all District and Sub Division Hindu Mahasabhas, *S. P. Mookerjee Papers*, File No. 74, Pt. I, p. 6.}

The Mahasabha, however, began to feel tensions between the strands within its ideological position. With the landscape being captured by the image of the 'nation', the legitimacy of its nationalist credentials came under close scrutiny. This forced the Mahasabha to bring out a bulletin for its workers, to enable them to answer questions such as the political stand of the Mahasabha *vis-à-vis* the Congress.\footnote{Mahasabha Parliamentary Board, Bulletin No. 1, 'Congress Vs. Mahasabha', *ibid.*, pp. 12-23.}

The leadership tried to adopt a tough posture against the Congress, and on the question of Independence. Trying to delegitimise Congress of its representative character, the Mahasabha proclaimed itself to be the unequivocal guardian of Hindu interests. "We must have courage to face the stern realities that the Congress policy of appeasement has merely widened the national resistance and has greatly jeopardised the legitimate rights of the Hindus as such",\footnote{S. P. Mookerjee's Speech at All India Hindu Mahasabha Committee's Meeting at Delhi, April 1945, Mitra, N. N., (ed.), *op. cit.*, 1945, Vol. I, p. 297.} declared Syama Prasad Mookerjee.
What was the Hindu Mahasabha's alternative then? For the Mahasabha, the answer to the vexed problem of Pakistan, or the 'Muslim League's reactionary demands' lay in a strong and mobilised Hindu opinion. The All India Committee of the Mahasabha declared in its annual meeting in 1945 that they had offered a just and fair basis for political settlement between Hindus and Muslims. It said,

If Hindu opinion is correctly mobilised, there will be no occasion for any non-Muslim organisation to run after the Muslim League for a temporary patched up solution. The Muslim community is bound to discover their folly and unwisdom of its own leaders and come to an agreement with a just and equitable basis.93

The Mahasabha now drew attention to the "three issues before the country... [1] Pakistan, [2] Parity, and [3] Communal Award ".94 N. C. Chatterjee accused Congress of conceding Pakistan by accepting the Wavell Plan.95

The real enemy of the Mahasabha was not the Muslim League but its rival among the Hindus. N. C. Chatterjee invariably brought home the point by arguing:

We can understand a Muslim advocating Pakistan because he is misled into thinking that a communal rule based on the Shariat will further his communal interests. But it is the clear duty of the Hindus not to cast their votes in favour of any Hindu who accepts either Pakistan or parity in any shape or form.96

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93 Ibid., p. 299.
94 Nationalist, Cal., 21 Sept. 1945, p. 2.
95 He said:
The Wavell Plan was based on the Bhulabhai-Liaqat Ali Pact. The tragic pact had the blessings of Mahatma Gandhi. The pact was based on Congress-League parity. It was unfortunate that Congress which calls itself a national organisation reduced itself to the same position as that occupied by an avowedly anti-national and communal organisation. The recent resolution passed by the Congress Working Committee declared its opposition to Pakistan but its provision connotes the acceptance of Pakistan by the back door. The resolution declared that Congress cannot think of compelling the people of any territorial unit to remain within the Indian union against their will. That really means that if the majority of people of any district or of any province or of any territorial unit chooses to accept Pakistan, then the Congress will not oppose it. That is destructive to India's integrity.

N. C. Chatterjee Papers, pp. 48-49.
The question of parity was, for the Mahasabha, the major point of attack against the Congress. It accused the latter of accepting parity with the Muslim League and, thereby, sacrificing national interest. This was because parity meant "horizontal distribution of communal poison throughout the body polity". Further, according to him, the acceptance of the principle would mean "30 crores of Hindus should be reduced to the position of a minority of 8½ crore". Thus, to accept a position of parity with the Muslim League by logical extension meant accepting the parity of Hindus and Muslims in other fields also. Since the interests of the Hindus coalesced with that of the nation, Congress was said to have sacrificed national interests. Hence, Hindus were asked not to vote for it.

Similarly, "Congress did not reject the demand for Pakistan unequivocally whereas only the Hindu Mahasabha has the courage to reject the triple curse of Parity, Pakistan and anti-national Communal Award". Hence, people should favour the latter according to the Mahasabha. The perceptible change in the political mood of the country and the Province began to challenge the confidence of the Sabha workers.

It was, however, at the same time aware of the weakness of its position and hence, was also trying to fall back on its original fortress, the politics of culture. In a bid to collect information about the Bengali society Manoranjan Choudhury, who was also the Secretary of the All India Hindu Mahasabha, wrote letters to Digindra Narayan Bhattacharya, Vidya Bhushan of Maldah requesting that he inform him about the

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97 'Congress O Agami Nirvachan' (Congress and the Coming Election), Hindustan, Cal., 27 Sept. 1945, p. 84.
98 N. C. Chatterjee in his Election speech at Rangpur, op. cit.
99 Ibid.
100 Ibid.
condition of the "Hindu society in Bengal". He wrote a similar letter to Nalini Ranjan Chakravorty of Mymensingh. In October there was a trouble at Lalmonirhat in Rangpur during the time of immersion of image of Durga. There were similar problem in Sandwip, Noakhali. Dacca also witnessed bigger trouble as 4 images in Dacca and a newspaper reported that 100 images remained unimmersed in Rekabi Bazaar. In all these situations, the Mahasabha came out to play the role of guardian of the community's religious rights.

At the local level, the Mahasabha workers were in no mood to fight the Congress. That is why the leadership complained about lack of workers. The Mahasabha tried to adjust itself to the popular mood. A Conference of Presidents, Secretaries, and workers of the District and Subdivisional Hindu Mahasabhas of Bengal took place on 1 October 1945. The Conference recorded its emphatic protest "against the use of Indian soldiers for the suppression of freedom movements in Indo-China, Malaya and Java, and urged upon the Government of India "to recall all Indian Units...". Syama Prasad, on 22 October, announced the Mahasabha decision to observe INA Day on 4 November. He also announced that the Mahasabha was opening an office to help the INA personnel. By November 1945, when the INA

102 Ibid., p. 156.
103 Amrita Bazar Patrika, Cal., 20 Oct. 1945, p. 3.
104 Ibid., and 22 Oct. 1945, p. 5.
105 BPHM, Election Circular 2, ibid., pp. 235.
107 Amrita Bazar Patrika, Cal., 23 Oct. 1945, p. 3.
108 Ibid.
agitation was at its peak, the members and sympathisers were in no mood to fight the Congress. Writing to Syama Prasad Mookerjee from Pana on 20 November, Mohendra Mohan Roy said, "It would have been better if you could get two Hindu Mahasabha candidates elected unopposed by meeting Sarat Chandra Bose.... Later on Hindu Mahasabha may not win even a single seat".\textsuperscript{109}

At this juncture, when the elections for the Central Legislative Assembly were due in a couple of days, the leadership also showed signs of cracking. Sarat Bose publicly asked the Mahasabha to withdraw all its candidates, while Syama Prasad Mookerjee appeared to be giving up the fight by trying to reach a compromise on the electoral front. Responding to a request from a Mahasabha worker to patch up an electoral compromise with the Congress, he wrote:

I am always prepared to come to a settlement with the Congress regarding the ensuing elections. It is up to Sarat Chandra Bose to make a gesture. His public statement requesting me to withdraw all Hindu Sabha candidates is not a solution of the present problem. Is there no scope for Sarat Babu and myself to serve the province? It is now up to you to raise your voice.\textsuperscript{110}

The Congress leadership, particularly Surendra Mohan Ghosh\textsuperscript{111} and Sarat Chandra Bose,\textsuperscript{112} had taken a tough stand against the Mahasabha, and national sentiments were so high that even the popularity that Syama Prasad Mookerjee had gained since 1943 was of no avail. The Central Congress leadership also took a tough posture. Vallabhbhai Patel, while writing to Nehru, disapproved of any efforts at compromise. Even before the November demonstration in October, he wrote:

\begin{itemize}
    \itemрешение 111: Surendra Mohan Ghosh, Interview on 16 June 1973, Oral History Transcript, NMML.
\end{itemize}
... there is absolutely no need as the Congress will easily secure all the seats in the Central Assembly. So far as non-Muslim constituencies are concerned, except perhaps Dr. S. P. Mookerjee's own seat, which by courtesy the Bengal Congress may think it proper to allow without contest. There is no other place where we can allow anyone else to get in.\textsuperscript{113}

Similarly, he wrote to Rajendra Prasad about the tough stand that the Congress should adopt towards the Mahasabha,\textsuperscript{114} and his feeling that the days of the Mahasabha were numbered. He wrote to Nehru, "... Hindu Mahasabha will be finally finished this time...."\textsuperscript{115}

The realisation of the strong desire for freedom as well as the appeal that the Congress leaders had among people was forcing the Mahasabha to adopt a compromising posture in the electoral arena.

III

On 14 June 1945, Wavell, in his broadcast speech, announced his decision to convene a conference at Shimla on 25 June 1945.\textsuperscript{116} Subsequently, Nehru, Azad, Patel and Narendra Dev were released on 15 June.\textsuperscript{117} The Shimla conference failed to arrive at any


\textsuperscript{114} Sardar Patel to Rajendra Prasad:
I do not think that the Hindu Mahasabha can get any seat except in Bengal. It has no strength in any other provinces. My view is that excepting Syama Prasad, there was hardly any man whom we can accept sacrifice our seat instead. On the side League is attacking us and we have to rely largely upon our strength in non-Muslim constituencies. We cannot afford to surrender without cause any of the seat which can easily secure. If in an individual case we find that Hindu Mahasabha has a 50% chance against the Congress we can settle with them and allow them that seat. But I personally feel that there will be no such case in the whole of India.

\textsuperscript{115} Vallabhbhai Patel to Jawaharlal Nehru, 7 Nov. 1945, \textit{ibid.}, p. 71.


\textsuperscript{117} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 72.
settlement between the parties. The meeting, while failing to solve the already vexatious problems, created some more. The Viceroy's attempt to treat the Congress as a Caste Hindu party created trouble for the Congress, and this was more so in a province like Bengal. However, the announcement of elections in the coming winter, and the end of the war, provided some hope and expectation to the people. It was around this time that the issue of the Indian National Army began to agitate the popular mind.

The formation of the Indian National Army was announced on 5th July 1943 when Subhas Chandra Bose arrived in Singapore to take over the Presidentship of the Indian Independence League from Rash Bihary Bose, at a conference held by the delegates. The Indian Independence League had been formed at a conference in Bangkok, between 15th and 23rd June, 1942. "Over 100 delegates, representing Indians in Japan, Manchukuo, Hongkong, Burma, Borneo, Java, Malaya and Thailand, as well as representatives of Indian Army (prisoners of war) in Malaya and Hongkong were present." Japanese co-operation was extended from the very beginning, but soon their interference created problems for the League, which wished to chart an independent existence. Netaji arrived at this crucial juncture, to take upon himself the mantle of leadership. The Indian National Army went into action on 4 February 1944, and on 18 March 1944 they crossed the Indo-Burma frontier. Along with Japanese detachments, the INA surrounded Imphal after taking Morai and other villages. But the lack of air support and the disruption of supplies owing to the monsoon forced the Indian National army to withdraw. Afterwards, however, with the advance of the British forces, around 6,000 Indian National Army soldiers surrendered in the Far East. After the surrender they were brought to India. The personnel of the Army were later on grouped into four

\[^{118}\text{Ibid., Vol. II, p. 194.}\]
categories, i.e., White, Grey, Black, and Dark, according to the degree of their disloyalty to the Crown, and the brutality displayed in their treatment of the British soldiers. The authorities decided to try them for these acts. The venue chosen for the court martial was the Red Fort of Delhi.\(^{119}\)

Bengal, which had faced the worst during these years of War, and which was the closest point from which the INA wanted to enter India, witnessed a tremendous upsurge of popular sentiment on this issue. A visible change in the popular mood could be discerned from September onwards, and with the release of Sarat Chandra Bose on 14 September, this began to take an organised form. The announcement of the trial of some INA officers generated hectic activity in the political realm. From the middle of October 1945, this became the most important political issue agitating the minds of the people in the Province. On 19 October, the Congress President Surendra Mohan Ghosh announced the establishment of a Fund for the INA personnel.\(^{120}\) Syed Nasher Ali was made the Chairman of this proposed Fund.\(^{121}\) It was the Congress in the province which led the populace, spearheading the moves to attack the colonial authority for its decision on the trial.

The INA brought two issues to the forefront of Indian political life - a strong national sentiment, and an essentially non-communal platform for the Indian fight for freedom. The non-communal character of the INA became more sharply focused when the colonial authorities decided to court martial Major Shahnawaj Khan, G. S. Dhillon,


\(^{120}\) *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, Cal., 21 Oct. 1945, p. 3.

\(^{121}\) *Ibid.*
and Prem Sehgal, a Muslim, Sikh and Hindu officer respectively in the INA. The news had an electrifying impact on the popular imagination.

The Congress tried to give an organised voice to the demand for the release of the INA officers, because they, the nation believed and as expressed succinctly by H. N. Kunjru, "were soldiers of freedom", and that "the treason law did not apply to them".122

The Congress had been under constant attack from the Muslim League, the Mahasabha and the Communist Party on the one hand, and the colonial authorities on the other. It had also experienced, quite recently, the colonial complicity in the attempts to reduce it to a Caste Hindu organisation. Therefore, the need to prove its secular credentials was urgent. The INA issue provided it with the perfect medium through which it could make its ideological stand clearer to people.

The role of the Congress in the political life of Bengal has been studied mostly from the point of view of assessing the effects of internal dissensions on it,123 or its decline.124 Similarly, its failure to take on the challenge posed by different forces operating in the political realm of the Province has also been studied. Muslim communalism, and the increasing influence of the Muslim League in provincial politics, has also been discussed as a part of such studies on the Congress’s failure.125

Some historians have conveniently branded the Congress politics as representing 'Hindu Nationalism'.126 Yet, it is obvious that its position in Bengal vis-à-vis

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123 See Ray, Rajat, Urban Roots of Indian Nationalism, Vikas, Delhi, 1979.  
126 Gallagher, John, op. cit., p. 160. In the hands of the neo-Cambridge historians, i.e., C. A. Bayly, the Congress leaders' politics has been made a part of the same politics as that of the
communalism was of a peculiar character, owing to the fact that in this Province Muslims were in a majority, and the agrarian structure was such that it weighed heavily on this section. In the 1930s, the operation of the Communal Award had reduced the most politically vocal segment of the population, i.e., the Hindus, into a statutory minority. The Communal Award encountered intense opposition not only from the Hindu Mahasabha, but also from the Congress sections. The emergence of the Muslim League as the ruling party [after it had overthrown the Krishak Proja Party in 1943] gave the Hindu Mahasabha opportunities to push the Congress towards a communal position. However, the Congress's objective of representing all communities and classes was an ideological imperative, one that could enable it to recruit and win the Muslim masses. Thus, it could not afford to succumb to the Hindu communal political line.

The Congress was, therefore, working against heavy odds. It was situated between this imperative of maintaining the doctrinal purity of its secular nationalism, and the necessity of catering to the political exigencies in the Province. With the launching of the Quit India Movement, most of the Congress leaders were interned and the Congress

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127 Acceptance of the Communal Award generated a lot of heat in Bengal, and there were protests from Hindu Mahasabha and other sections of the Hindu population. See, *Advance*, Cal., 21 Aug., 1932; *Liberty*, 5 September, 1932.

Protests were even heard from the Congress ranks, e.g., Protests of Khulna Congress Committee, Telegram, 6 September 1934; Pabna Congress Committee (Jessore), 12 August 1934, etc., addressed to All India Congress President, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, *AICC Papers*, File No. G-24 of 1934-36, as quoted in Gallagher, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

128 It gave the Muslims 119 seats of the total 250 seats in the Provincial Legislature, and 78 to the Hindus which was fragmented even more later by awarding 30 seats to the Scheduled Castes in accordance with the Poona Pact of 1932. See for detailed discussion *AICC Papers*, File No. G-24 (I) 1936, NMML; *Communal Award: General Correspondence by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru; Bengal Anti-Communal Award Movement: A Report*, Calcutta, 1939; Gallagher, *op. cit.*; B. N. Dutta Roy, (ed.), *Sir N. N. Sirkar's Speeches and Pamphlets*, The Book Company, Cal., 1934.
Committees were banned. The post-Quit India Movement period saw two parallel developments. While the Muslim League had organised itself in a massive way, and in the distress period succeeded in giving its programme radical overtones, the Congress was without its leaders, and the few that remained outside, were involved in debates within the precincts of the Legislative Assembly. These mostly agitated for the release of the political detenues and for the removal of the ban on the Congress Committees.

On the other hand, we have already seen that the Hindu Mahasabha was engaged in organising the Hindus under its aegis. The Communists were also at large and attracted a number of Congressmen into their fold when they came out of detention. Thus, from all quarters, the Congress appeared to be in a disadvantageous position.

However, some historians have argued that imprisonment saved the Congress leadership from sharing any responsibility for the wartime problems which were a matter of great public criticism. Nevertheless, the imprisonment of the leadership did prove fatal to the party organisation and its peasant base, especially that of East Bengal.

In reply to the question of the release of political prisoners and removing the ban on the Congress Committees, Chief Minister Khwaja Nazimuddin said that "he found that a ban was imposed on five district committees in Bengal in 1942", Mitra, N. N., (ed.), op. cit., 1945, Vol. I, p. 195.

Ibid., pp. 192-97.

A letter from the Secretary of the Chittagong District Congress Committee to J. B. Kriplani, Secretary, AICC, dated 7th August, 1945, provides an example of this. It says: "During the last few years, there has been a tremendous change over the mentality of the people. Some of the members of the then District Congress Executive have changed from right and left and some 4/5 owe allegiance to Communist Party of India". AICC Papers, File No. P-5, p. 467.

See Sumit Sarkar: From the point of view of the Congress leaders, imprisonment and defeat paradoxically brought certain benefits. Isolation in jail helped them to avoid taking a clear public stand on the pro or anti-Japanese War issue... much more important was the fact as D. D. Kosambi pointed out... 'glamour of jail and concentration camp served to wipe out the so-so record of the Congress ministries in office, thereby restoring the full popularity of the organisation among the masses'. ['Bourgeoisie comes of Age in India' in Kosambi, Exasperating Essays, Poona, n.d., p. 17.]


Sumit Sarkar agrees with this when he says:
Three important events, having a significant bearing on our study, took place at this time. First, the release of the political prisoners began to take place during August-September. The second significant change took place in the shape of the release of INA officers, which soon turned into a movement that provided a very conducive atmosphere for the Congress leaders to reorganise the party, now in a total disarray, for the coming elections. Suppression of the organisation since the Individual Satyagraha in 1940 and the Quit India movement, had left the faction ridden Congress in the Province completely paralysed. Third, it was at this juncture that the Communist party was presented with a chargesheet by the All India Congress Committee on 21 September 1945, in which it was asked to show cause for its "incessant propaganda through newspapers, pamphlets and books and meetings, and otherwise in favour of the war effort, calling the war as it affected the people of India a people's war". 134

IV

The Communist Party had been demonstrating its equidistance from the Congress and the Muslim League, and it asked Muslim Congressmen to act as the Muslim League's unofficial interpreters inside the Congress. However, the party maintained that the allegations against its members, viz., Sajjad Zaheer, Z. A. Ahmed, and K. M. Ashraf, that

134 Brutal repression must have exhausted many peasant bases, built up through years of Gandhian constructive work or radical Kisan Sabha activity. It is significant that Bihar, Eastern U. P. and the Maharashtra, Karnataka countryside played little or no part in the anti-imperialism upsurge of 1945-46, while most of the rural Gandhians of Midnapur and Hooghly found themselves largely pushed aside in Bengal Congress politics in the post-war and post-Independence period. 

Ibid., p. 405.

they were "asking the Muslims of U. P. to leave Congress and join Muslim League" were totally unfounded.\footnote{Peoples' War, Bombay, 7 Jan. 1945, p. 1.}

The party proclaimed itself as the "only non-Muslim Party which accepted the demand of Pakistan". On 7 January 1945, Sajjad Zaheer wrote in *Peoples' War*:

We communists work for bringing the Congress and the Muslim League together into a brotherly unity for National Government.... In fact what we have been telling the Muslim Congressmen is that they should remain inside the Congress and thus act as the bridge between the brother Congressmen and the League by interpreting to them the League demands.... We are likewise pleading with Muslim League that they cannot win Pakistan except by brotherly unity with Congress and by joining the campaign for release of leaders.... all Muslim Congressmen, Hafizur Rahman, Mr. Mujaffar Hussain and Shahid Fakhri testify to this....\footnote{Ibid.}

This attitude, technically, followed from the 'unity line' of the party wherein all problems of high communal content were viewed as a tussle or fight between the Congress and the League; in effect a complete reduction of the ideological battle to a merely tactical plane. This also meant conceding the League's demand - recognition of its status as sole representative of the Muslims in India, who were supposed to have constituted a nation. The logical conclusion from the party line, therefore, was the reduction of the Congress to a Hindu party, which even the colonial authorities had found a difficult task.

The Communist Party in Bengal was no exception to this line of its central leadership's thought. The Muslim League in Bengal had taken up the issue of the eviction of illegal migrants by the Assam Government in March 1945. It tried to project and propagate this act as one displaying the communal, partisan attitude of the Assam Government with the objective of evicting the Muslim settlers of Bengal. The Communist Party sought to act as the arbiter between the Congress and the League as,
in its view, they were "likely to come to blows unless they accept the Communist arbitration plan"\textsuperscript{137} As an official put it:

\textit{This attitude of equidistance was increasingly seen even by the colonial authorities as flattery of the Muslim League. This reached to the extent of ignoring and, at times absolving the leaders of the League their culpability in matters, which even the party thought were, of unsavoury nature.} \textsuperscript{138} (\textit{Italics mine})

What seemed important to the Communist Party was the fact that the Muslim masses were joining the Muslim League, an obvious sign that the party was democratic and the demand for Pakistan was not a communal one.

Since Pakistan was not a communal demand, the leaders argued, its acceptance by the Congress would strengthen the movement for National liberation. Z. A. Ahmed, while speaking to Nehru, expressed this conviction:

\textit{We are convinced that the acceptance of Pakistan would not weaken but strengthen the Congress in the sense that it would lead to a mighty united front of our two premier national organisations which would enable us to get freedom and isolate all communal and reactionary pro-imperialist elements.} \textsuperscript{139}

The Punjab and Bengal were two Provinces where the party was most active in consolidating the League's sway over the Muslim masses. Jubilant over the League's progress in the Punjab where the party had played a crucial role in this progress, Romesh Chandra wrote:

\textsuperscript{137} \textit{Ibid.}, 11 March, 1945, p. 1.

\textsuperscript{138} Crackness, F. G., \textit{Review on the People's War}, 26.5.45, Government of India, \textit{Home Political}, File No. 7/2/45. This reached the extent of ignoring and, at times absolving the leaders of the League their culpability in matters, which even the party thought were, of 'unsavoury nature'. A Government report reviewing the party organ stated:

\textit{The editorial is devoted to scolding the Aligarh students for their alleged demonstration against Azad. The names which they are said to have called him seem to have come from Dawn editorials, but Mr. Jinnah gets no share of his blame and is described as an esteemed national leader deserving of the highest honour.} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{139} Ahmed's Talk with Nehru, 4 June 1945, File No. 9/45, \textit{P. C. Joshi Archives}, J. N. U.
The Punjab League manifesto has opened the doors of the League to every Progressive Muslim... In a number of districts, the first trickle of Ahrars and Khaksars into the League is becoming a steady stream.\textsuperscript{140}

He declared the Lahore resolution as "neither religious nor indefinite",\textsuperscript{141} and that the movement for Pakistan had,

strong democratic essence in that... in Pakistan, minorities (Hindus) will always have adequate, effective and mandatory safeguards regarding their cultural, religious rights.... Pakistan will be a democratic state completely free from sovereign control like rest of India.... Pakistan will be a creation of all the people of Pakistan without distinction of caste or creed.\textsuperscript{142}

The Party even took upon itself the task of defining the 'freedom' content in the Pakistan demand. "The League leaders did not define in this way but it is truly the freedom content of the picture of Pakistan that inspires the bulk of the Muslims populace. Sindhi, Baluchh, Punjabi, and even Pathans do really rally round the Muslim League...."\textsuperscript{143}

This was the strategic layout when the colonial authorities began to release the Congress and other leaders who went to jail during the Quit India Movement. Their release made the Communist party workers uncomfortable due to the Congress leaders' enhanced popularity. Their bitterness towards the Communists for the latter's role during the Quit India movement made them attack the latter on the political platform.\textsuperscript{144} The situation worsened with the rising post-war nationalist ferment on the eve of the INA movement. Changes in the popular mood were discerned by other party workers in

\begin{footnotes}
\item\textsuperscript{140} *People’s War*, Bom., 22 July 1945, p.5.
\item\textsuperscript{141} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{142} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{143} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{144} Almost all the memoirs and works on the party give graphic details of the intense, popular anger, and how the Party members fought their way. See Sengupta, Amalendu, *op. cit.*
\end{footnotes}
Rangpur, Calcutta, Sylhet and other districts of Bengal. There were eager expectations all around, and all classes were expecting some major steps to be taken by the colonial authorities. The peasant leaders discerned an expectation of fulfilment of the class demands along with the National demands.

The organised sections of Communist workers were mobilised to explain the party's stand to the people. In Dhaka, one of the key functionaries of the party at that time later wrote, "at that time we also organised meetings at various places in our district to explain our feelings... Our campaign gained a lot of strength by the attendance of thousands of textile workers who came out in procession with hundreds of red flags". In places like Rangpur, where the Communist Party had gained a foothold, the Party realised that the colonial authorities were bent on suppressing any peasants protest.

On the eve of the Shimla conference, when the Hindu Mahasabha was attacking the Congress in Calcutta for its supposed surrender to the colonial pressure of treating caste Hindus as equal to Muslims, the General Secretary of the Communist Party, P. C. Joshi declared that the "Hindu-Muslim parity must be there". The failure of the Conference was blamed on both sides because "both sides banked on Wavell, both tried to ignore each other, both forgot the people amidst their airy principles and their high sounding claims, brothers they stood apart and not together at this very crucial

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147 Mukherjee, Sudhir, and Ghose, Nripen, *op. cit*, pp. 85-86.

juncture.”

Thus, the Congress stand of representing all sections of the people was not accepted by the Communist Party.

Despite these failures, however, the party was fast becoming powerful amongst the labour and the peasantry. The organisational activities which began in 1943 in the absence of the Congress leaders had by now resulted in the party’s successful control over the Tramway Workers’ Union and other unions of the Howrah and Budge-Budge area. On these fronts, the party advanced the theory that the Communists represented the interests of workers and peasants.

At this time, the party was also trying to argue that it was wrong to think the demand for 'Pakistan' was withholding India’s independence. Adhikari wrote:

The British imperialists have given pledges for Pakistan as for Akhand Hindustan with equal levity. Pakistan can never be won by relying on their pledges. Pakistan can only be won when Congress, and League and Nationalist Muslims come to a Common understanding on the question and are able to forge a Congress-League joint front for breaking the deadlock and for a free Pakistan in free India.

This means the remaining doubts of the Congressmen must be removed. There was a time when Congressmen thought Muslim League want Pakistan but not freedom. That doubt has now been cleared up. Now Congress realises that whenever it talks about Pakistan it knows that it is to be gained through independence of India.

We will win independence of India by conceding Pakistan to our Muslim brothers, but do we thereby lose the unity and integrity of India - the common heritage of our National Movement.

The answer to this question was soon given by Adhikari himself. He wrote:

The answer to this question which a patriotic Muslim Leaguer must give is - certainly not as long as you are not thinking of a united India - Constitution in which Pakistan state is not free but subordinated against its will to the central state.

The Congress leadership was already embittered with the Communists because of their role during the 1942 Movement, and thereafter, the constant attack against it.

Finally, the Congress Working Committee at its meeting at Poona in September 1945

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150 Ibid., 4 April 1945, p. 1.

151 Ibid.
appointed a sub-committee consisting of (1) Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru (2) Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and (3) Pandit Govind Vallabh Pant, "to go into the complaints and charges of indiscipline which the AICC office had received against Congress members of the Communist Party".

On the basis of the report of this committee, AICC charge-sheeted the Communist members of the AICC on 21 September 1945. Reacting to this, the Communists left the Congress. The Congress-Communist conflict reflected on a larger domain the clash between the fundamental policies of the two parties, their understanding of communalism and their particular political positions which were premised on that understanding. Communalism was one area where their understanding completely differed. These positions, gradually, became mixed with the renewed nationalist ferment in the winter of 1945.

The party General Secretary, accusing the Congress of anti-League and anti-Communist policy, said that "the Congress high command is giving direct encouragement to the forces of civil war" and subsequently, asked its members to resign from the Congress.\footnote{Mitra, N. N., (ed.) op. cit., 1945, Vol. II, p. 118.}

Simultaneous with the upsurge of national sentiments was the electioneering process. For the League, it was Pakistan which was the crucial slogan. Muslims were asked to rally around the League as it was the true representative of the Muslims. Islam became the mobilising point. Pir and Maulvis, as we have seen, rallied around the Jamait-ul-
Ulama-i-Islam. Now, the League began to attack the non-League parties and individuals, such as the Nationalist Muslims, the Krishak Proja Party, etc., as anti-Islamic. Jamait-ul-Ulama-i-Hind was declared as working for Hindus, while the Jamait-ul-Ulama-i-Islam was for Islamiat. Similarly, it was said:

They remembered the prayer, but they forgot the chain of armour donned by the Prophet Muhammed when he went forth to fight the unequal battle with the infidels... They misled the Muslims to the unworthy tenets of ahimsa. 153

The change in the entire discourse was evident in the fact that the anti-League people were no longer addressed as betrayers or Ghaddar, as they were by the League before 1943. They were now addressed in religious terms, more often referred to as Shaitan (the Evil one). Addressing a meeting in Netrakona on 20 November, Maulvi Tamizuddin Khan said that the "Non-League Muslims who were trying to create disruptions in the League Party and the Communist Party are Shaitan". 154

Commenting on the nature of the League politics on the eve of the election, Maulana Azad later on commented:

In fact, the elections in Bengal were hardly an election in the normally understood meaning of the term. It was more in the nature of a crusade in which worst religious passions were excited than an election in the modern age where political parties placed before their constituencies alternate programmes to be carried out through legislatures. 155

Similar ideas were expressed by Humayun Kabir when commenting on the nature of the election campaign by the League:

Another feature of the present Bengal elections was the constant fanning of religious fanaticism. On behalf of the League it was preached in meetings and throughout pamphlets that any body who voted against the League would incur divine displeasure. The effect of such propaganda on the illiterate masses can be easily understood. In many
cases, the electors lost their freedom of judgement on account of interference by their religious teachers and threats of divine displeasure and punishment in the after life.\textsuperscript{156}

The League attacked any force which tried to challenge its attempt to create a homogenised Muslim front. This should be seen in the light of its decision to treat the election as a plebiscite for Pakistan and a vindication of its claim to be the sole representative of the Muslims. It was at this juncture that the Nationalist Muslims tried to come together under one platform to fight the League. The initiative was taken by the Jamait-ul-Ulama-i-Hind, a stout opponent of the League, and its 'Pakistan' and 'two nation theory'. A conference of all the non-League Nationalist Muslim organisations was called in Delhi on 18 September 1945.\textsuperscript{157} They decided on a common policy to fight the election against the Muslim League. This was followed by another conference on 2 October in Karachi, where it was decided to "set up a Nationalist Muslim Parliamentary Board to select candidates and conduct the forthcoming elections".\textsuperscript{158} It was also decided that a "new political alternative for the Muslim masses in the provinces" will be presented.\textsuperscript{159}

The kind of propaganda launched by the Muslim League could not be answered back by the Congress because of the differences in perceiving the elections as such. While Muslim League declared the election to be the battle for Pakistan, for Congress "it was a small test... a preparation for the greater things to come".\textsuperscript{160} It cannot be denied

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 14 April 1946, p. I.


\textsuperscript{158} \textit{Ibid}. The Board, it was decided, would "consist of 21 members having 8 representative of Jamait-ul-Ulama-i-Hind and Muslim Majlis, 3 Momin conference, and Krishak Proja Party each, 2 of Anjuman Watan and 5 other Parties. Maulana Hussain Ahmed Madani was elected Chairman of the Board."

\textsuperscript{159} \textit{Ibid}.

\textsuperscript{160} The Congress Election Manifesto declared "Many a time the people of India have taken the pledge of independence; that pledge has yet to be redeemed, and the well beloved cause for
that the Congress also took the election seriously, but the kind of appeal to the emotions and psyche which the Muslim League had among the Muslim masses was not to be matched. In this atmosphere, the Nationalist Muslims faced tremendous problems and even Congress had difficulty in supporting them for reasons of political expediency. Any kind of Congress help would easily attract flack from the Muslim League, and strengthen its oft repeated claim that the Nationalist Muslims were stooges of the Hindu Congress. This could easily have proved detrimental to the interests of the Nationalist Muslims as well as of the Congress.

To add to this, the Muslim League had succeeded in its efforts to bring the election campaign down to the issue of Islam where the election itself was designated a religious battle. The Nationalist Muslims were forced to fight on the former's terms because, unlike the 1937 election, by this time the Muslim League had embraced all other non-communal issues, for example, abolition of Zamindari without compensations. The Nationalist Muslims, therefore, depended on the appeal and the support of the Jamait-i-Ulema-i-Hind and its leader Maulana Hussain Ahmed Madani to counter the religious appeal of the League. A report from Tippera suggests the intensity of the opposition to such efforts by this section. It claimed:

A big conference of the Nationalist Muslims was organised inviting Maulana Madani in which there was a clash with the Leaguers and Ashrafuddin Ahmed Choudhury who had organised the conference, "mustered his forces and challenged the League to a free fight". The Conference passed off with minor mishaps.\textsuperscript{161}

\textsuperscript{161} Secret Report on the Political Situation in Bengal for the first half of Feb. 1946, I/P and /5/153, India Office Records and Library, as quoted in Bose, Sugata, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 222.

which it stands, and which has summoned us so often, still beckons to us. But the time is coming when we shall redeem it in full, but not by the election, but what comes after it. Meanwhile this election is \textit{a small test for us (stalics mine)}, a preparation for the greater things to come. Let all those who care and long for Freedom and the independence of India meet this test with strength and confidence, and march together to the free India of our dream." \textit{Ibid.}, p. 112.
Therefore, while the League succeeded in bringing the entire discourse to religion, attempts were made to oppose it on this very ground.

To compound the problems, the Nationalist Muslims had to face attacks of League's volunteers. The attacks were carried out against all the non or anti-League Muslim Leaders. On 22 October, the meeting of Mashriqui, the leaders of the Khaksars who was bitterly opposed to Jinnah, at The University Institute Hall was disrupted by the League volunteers.162

The results of the elections were, therefore, never accepted gracefully by any party due to the recourse to violence that was a part of the process from the very beginning.163

However, what seems to have proved fatal for the Congress's attempt to fight Muslim communalism at this stage was the fact that the Nationalist Muslims themselves failed to understand the current Muslim opinion. They also failed to understand the logic, in fact the very phenomenon of communalism, which even for a veteran Congress leader like Ashrafuddin Ahmed Choudhary "was a fight between the top leaders of the Congress and the Muslim League.... masses had no role in it".164 This was unfortunate


163 There were a series of claims and counter claims regarding the fairness of the election, Maulana Azad issued a statement saying that "the election in Bengal had been reduced to mockery" Allama Mashriqui, the Khaksar leader, said that he entirely agreed "with the Congress President that the Muslim League could not possibly have secured the number of seats that it has if British officials had not openly supported it everywhere". On the other hand, Suhrawardy replying to the Congress President’s statement said: If there has been any official interference during the recent elections in Bengal, it has been on behalf of the Congress. Mitra, N. N., (ed.), op. cit., 1946, Vol. I, p. 48.

164 Later, writing to the Congress President, he deplored the Working Committee resolution on accepting Pakistan and the Partition of India. He wrote: "It is a fight between the Congress and League organisations. If it is inevitable (partition) which appears to be so let the members of two organisations fight it out amongst themselves with whatever arms they can secure and decide the issue once for all". Ashrafuddin Ahmed Choudhury to J. B. Kriplani, 30th April 1947, AICC Papers, File No. CL-8, 1946.
for the Congress which, as Kripalani wrote to Ashrafuddin Ahmed Choudhury, "depended on the Nationalist Muslims for its policies regarding the Muslims".  

The Congress, on the other hand, had to fight the forces of Hindu communalism especially that of the Hindu Mahasabha. But given the latter's limited mass base and its failure to capture the imagination of the people, the Congress had no difficulty in defeating the Hindu Mahasabha candidates in the election arena. However, in the post-election phase, changes in the overall situation in Bengal brought the Hindu communal forces to the forefront, and it was then that the Congress had to face a lot of problems.  

So far as the Congress was concerned the campaign for the elections for the Central and the Provincial Legislative Assemblies began around the third week of October, with the INA movement in the air. Most of the time, there was little to distinguish an election meeting from a meeting to demand release of the INA officers. In Barisal, a report says,  

At the conclusion of INA Day function the President at the instance of the District Congress Committee invited speakers to address the meeting on the coming Assembly election.  

The trial of the three officers of INA began on 5 November 1945. The Province witnessed an upsurge of activities. On that date, Calcutta observed 'INA day' and about a lakh of people turned out in Shraddhanand Park. Nausher Ali, the Chairman of the INA fund, spoke about the non communal character of the INA and exhorted people to shun communal politics.  

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165 "In its policy towards the Muslims or the League, the Congress was first guided by the Ali brothers and then by Dr Ansari and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. After the death of Dr Ansari, it has been guided by the Maulana Saheb and Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan. What more could it do". J. B. Kripalani to Ashrafuddin Ahmed Choudhury, 13 May 1947. Ibid.  


167 Ibid., 7 Nov. 1945, p. 5.  

168 Ibid.
Reports from places like Faridpur, Jessore, Rajshahi, Nabdwip, Jhargram, Barisal, Malda and Satkhira talked about the observance of the 'INA day' by the Congress. So far as organised articulation of the movement was concerned, the Congress leadership provided it with the requisite voice. Nehru and Sarat Chandra Bose were its undisputed leaders.

Bengal, especially Calcutta, witnessed another popular upsurge on 22 November, in the wake of a call given for a strike to protest against the trial and sentencing of the three leaders. This was at a time when the electioneering was on, and the issue of the INA soon made 'national freedom' from colonial rule the predominant political will of the people. Thus, the agenda for the election was Freedom.

While the protest against the trial of the INA officers was a parallel process, characterising the predominant political statement of the province, the INA agitation suddenly took the upper hand when, on 21 November, a strike call of the Bengal Provincial Students Federation led by the Revolutionary Socialist Party demanding the release of the INA prisoners, stole the march over the events.

A huge student rally marched towards Dalhousie square along Dharmatolla Street. Armed Police on horseback barred the path of the procession around 3 p.m., and the students sat en mass at the Madan Street and Dharmatolla Street crossing. The students wanted Sarat Chandra Bose to come and address them. He refused and sent a message to the students asking them to disperse. The students refused to disperse and

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169 Ibid., 10 Nov. 1945, p. 2.
170 Ibid.
171 Ibid., 15 Nov. 1945, p. 7.
172 Ibid.
173 Ibid.
rejected the appeal. At around 6 p.m., the Police opened fire at the students and made repeated cavalry charges, killing at least one student and injuring several. As a reaction to the police firing, Calcutta tram workers went on a complete strike, followed by the bus workers and rickshaw pullers. On the next day, there was a complete strike in Calcutta and the suburbs. The troops came out to control the city, but in lanes and bylanes of Calcutta, barricades were put up to keep the troops out of bounds. Muslim students came out in procession with the League flag and were embraced by the Hindu students. The scenes of the tying together of the League and Congress flag, were described movingly and vividly by Gautam Chattopadhyay, an eye witness and student leader of those days.

The anti-colonial feeling of the entire upsurge was remarkable. Writing to the Secretary of State on 27 November, Wavell said:

Casey was impressed by the very strong anti British feeling behind the whole demonstration, and considers the whole situation still very explosive and dangerous. Root cause of it all he thinks and I agree lies in the inflammatory speeches of the political leaders during the last month or two, working on the unstable minds of the youthful Bengali. So long violent speaking goes on, we shall have to expect outbreaks of this kind.

The colonial authorities did not give any credence to the anti-colonial sentiments that were being expressed, and blamed it all on the "violent speeches of the leaders". The Muslim League leadership, however, could not take the participation of the Muslim students lightly. The Calcutta District Muslim League Secretary, S. M. Usman, immediately issued a statement asking the Muslims to stay clear of any such demonstrations. He said:

The demonstration by the students and the Hindu public against INA trial has created a critical situation in Calcutta. Mobs are getting out of control and in some places the police is resorting to firing. It has been brought to my notice that Muslim League flags

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174 Ibid., 22 Nov. 1945, p.1

were also flying amongst the demonstrators. I would like to inform the Muslim citizens of Calcutta that the Muslim League flags among demonstrators should not mislead the Muslim citizens of Calcutta. They should abstain from all such demonstration. They should not be seen sightseers (sic) of such demonstration.  

The participation in this demonstration was unwelcome not only because of the leaderships' fear of radical politics, but because it was not oblivious to the fact that the participation was based on anti-colonial feelings. This stand could easily demonstrate the fragility of the ideological content of the Pakistan demand, based as it was on the creation of an exclusivist psyche. This was evident in Bengal, Punjab, United Provinces and most other places from where reports were coming in. Therefore, such exclusivity could easily be shattered by a front embracing anti-colonial agenda. It was, therefore, on this ground that the League leadership now took up the cause of the INA officers. No League leader, not even Jinnah, had earlier pleaded for the release of the officers. The November upsurge, however, had sent different signals and not very long after, on 25 December, the leaders met in Lahore at Mamdot's house and decided to take up Capt. Abdur Rashid's case. Capt. Abdur Rashid of the I. N. A. was convicted and sentenced to seven years imprisonment. The League gave a call for Capt. Rashid Ali Day on 12 February. Calcutta, once again erupted and witnessed unprecedented violence on the part of the Police in dealing with what essentially began as a students' demonstration.

Disturbances broke out in Calcutta on 11 February 1946, following demonstrations protesting the sentence imposed on Capt. Abdul Rashid of the Indian National Army. On 12 February 1946 people came out in a mile-long procession to

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protest against the Police firing on students on the previous day. "Calcutta, on February 12, presented a grim picture. Public transport was completely paralysed. Tram, Bus and Rickshaw workers had gone on an indefinite general strike, responding to the call of the CPI controlled union".\textsuperscript{179} A mammoth meeting was held at the Wellington Square to condemn Police lathi charges and firing. The procession was led by Mr H. S. Suhrawardy and Satish Chandra Das Gupta of Khadi Pratisthan, the two leaders moving arm-in-arm, under Congress and League flags tied together and held aloft by the volunteers.\textsuperscript{180}

The sequel to the meeting and the procession was a complete paralysis of the city's civic life with frequent opening of fire by the Police on people trying to set aflame Military lorries, Post Offices and Tram Depots. On the third day, i.e., 13 February, Police opened fire about 15 times and some sections of the town were soon handed over to the army.\textsuperscript{181}

The echo of the anger against the colonial authorities was heard from almost all over Bengal.\textsuperscript{182} Students of Dacca University left their classes.\textsuperscript{183}

Gautam Chattopadhyay, a participant, and later, a chronicler of the events, later claimed, in a rather exaggerated manner, that "the stage was set in February 1946 for a victorious conclusion of the long and complex struggle for Indian independence". This

\textsuperscript{179} \textit{Amrit Bazar Patrika}, 13 February 1946, p. 1.


\textsuperscript{181} For details see, \textit{ibid.}, pp. 269-284.

\textsuperscript{182} \textit{Star of India}, Cal., 14 Feb. 1946, p. 1.

\textsuperscript{183} \textit{Ibid.;} see also, \textit{Amrita Bazar Patrika}, Cal., 13 Feb. 1946, p. 1; 14 Feb. 1946 p. 1. For reports of protest meetings against the Military firing in Calcutta, also see, \textit{ibid.}, 17 Feb. 1946, p. 1. 5.
was because, he argued, the Hindu-Muslim unity shown during the tumult could have easily been channelised into the anti-imperial struggle.\textsuperscript{184}

While he saw a complete Hindu Muslim front forged on the eve of the Rashid Ali Day - a unity strong enough to challenge the Colonial might, a section of the Muslim League leadership, which was preparing the ground for the agitation was quoting Rashid Ali as saying that his predominant interest in joining the I. N. A. was his desire to serve the Muslim community. A report said:

Reading from written statement in a clear ringing voice, he declared, 'I was cut off from the rest of the world and could get only such news as were supplied by the Japanese. I was convinced that the non-Muslims who were the moving spirit in the I. N. A. were going to invade India with the help of the Japanese. I was also convinced that this would result in the domination of India by the non-Muslims by the Japanese. In order to safeguard the interests of my community I decided like most of the other Muslims to join the I. N. A. in order to arm myself and thus be in a position to safeguard the interests of my community in India...\textsuperscript{185}

Similarly, criticising the assertions of the I. N. A. officers of the non-communal spirit of the I. N. A., it was said:

There was no communal difference in the INA and among the 25 lakh of Indians in East Asia over whom the Provisional Government exercised authority, thus observed Shah Nawaz, replying to an address of welcome presented to him on behalf of the Hindu public of Calcutta. The falsity of such utterances becomes apparent when compared with the sensational disclosure made by Capt. Abdul Rashid, that the I. N. A. under the leadership of Mr. Subhash Bose had no other aim than to establish Ram Rajya under the aegis of Japanese Government.\textsuperscript{186}

It also argued that Subhash Bose's communalism reflected in the fact that no Muslim had access to the secrets of the Government, \textit{Bande Mataram} was retained and the two journals brought out by the Government, i.e., Purna Swaraj and Jai Hind,


\textsuperscript{185} \textit{Star of India}, Cal., 28 Jan. 1946, p. 2.

\textsuperscript{186} \textit{Ibid.}, 13 Feb. 1946, p. 5.
distinctively stank of “Hinduism”\textsuperscript{187} It also said that the communalism in the I. N. A. also reflected in the way the Hindu and Sikh soldiers committed atrocities and “showered bullets on Muslim soldiers”\textsuperscript{188}

Thus, one has to be cautious while imposing a revolutionary, anti-colonial attribute without examining the stream of ideological inputs that went into the making of such movement as the Rashid Ali Day demonstration.

But why did the Congress play a very limited role in the entire event. The first reason which may be given for such a back-seated role was the disavowal by the Congress of any isolated violent action at this stage. As the Congress President Abdul Kalam Azad in his statement on February events argued: “our struggle for Independence has reached a stage when sporadic and isolated action of individuals and groups served as a hindrance rather than help”\textsuperscript{189}

The local Congress leaders were in fact very apprehensive of the law and order situation, and “apprehending danger the leaders of public opinion, including BPCC President and other responsible Congress leaders, Muslims League and Communist Party leaders met at Khadi Pratisthan to devise ways and means how to ease the situation. They decided to organise a meeting next day as a protest against the police firing and lathi charge on peaceful processionists”\textsuperscript{190} Thus, the leaders were working out ways to avoid 'danger', and it was not only the Congress which was involved in such an operation.

\textsuperscript{187} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{188} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{190} A Report by the Secretary, Bengal Provincial Congress Committee [hereafter BPCC], to Mahatma Gandhi, dated 18 February 1946, \textit{AICC Papers}, File No. P-5 [Pt. 1], 1946-47.
However, what was important was the communal colour under which the Rashid Ali Day was organised on 11th February. Though, the Congress report did not say anything about this fact, its absence from any initiative was obvious. The strike on 11th February was called by the Muslim Student League and supported by the Students Federation (the Communist students wing). This suggests that the Congress leaders were conscious of the fact that calling an all-India demonstration demanding the release of Capt. Abdul Rashid alone, was the culmination of the Muslim League’s attempt to communalise the INA issue too.

True, the demonstration was joined by the Muslim masses in a big way, but it appears that the mobilisation drive for the election on a communal basis had more to do with it than a sheer anti-imperialist impulse. To add to it, even the communist leader, Somnath Lahiry, who had criticised the Congress leaders for their betrayal, confessed later that “there was a limitation in the Rashid Ali Day - it had a communal side. Since the League had supported it, ordinary Muslims from bustees jumped into it. Entire bustees got involved into it. As soon as the League became silent they also went back”.

What is important for us is the question whether even at this stage Congress lost a chance to forge a Hindu-Muslim front by not taking the lead of an anti-imperial

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191 The Report says, “On the 11th February the Muslim League and the Communist Party organised a demonstration and a procession as a protest against the conviction of Capt. Abdul Rashid of the INA”, *ibid.*


193 In his article ‘Prostut Hou’ [Prepare yourself] which appeared in the Communist organ *Swadhinata* on 16th February, he wrote that “the Communists had to take the reign of the movement against the imperialist powers, as the other parties, i.e., Congress and the League were not ready to fight”. Quoted in Sengupta, Amalendu, *Utal Chollis: Asamapta Bilab* [Tumultuous Forties: Unfinished Revolution], Pearl Publishers, Calcutta, 1989, pp. 79-82.

upsurge. It appears that the limitation that Somnath Lahiry talked of, and the spontaneous character of the entire reaction made it difficult for Congress to forge this unity. Hailed by some as one of the biggest opportunities for a joint Hindu-Muslim assault on the colonial regime, we have, however, seen how there were unmistakable signs of presenting Abdul Rashid's case as a divisive legacy. From the beginning, there were attempts to present Capt. Abdul Rashid as a crusader for the Muslim cause. He was supposed to have joined INA to protect Muslim interests. According to a Muslim League organ, he is said to have stated:

I was cut off from the world, I was convinced that the non-Muslims who were the moving spirit in the INA were going to invade India with the Japanese. I was convinced that this would result in domination of India by the non-Muslims and... in order to safeguard the interests of my community I decided like most of the other Muslims to join the INA in order to arm myself and thus in a position to safeguard the interest of my community.195

The League also tried to attack the non-communal basis of the Indian National Army in its appeal, accusing the INA of visualising a "Ram Rajya" and "excluding Muslims from positions of trust".196 While Subhash Bose was said to have reflected his communalism in the I. N. A. in different ways League volunteers broke his portraits along with the Congress tricolour.197 Therefore, every attempt was made to shatter the non-communal legacy of the INA, and thereby, also the possibility of formation of any joint anti-colonial and non-communal front.

Whatever might have been the implications of this demonstration, it certainly added to the prestige of the League. While INA brought Nationalism on the agenda and

198 *Hindustan Standard*, Cal., 1 Feb. 1946, p. 3.
helped Congress to boost the morale of the populace, it also helped the League justify its claim that it was also nationalist and fighting the colonial authorities. So, the INA movement proved beneficial to the League in the sense that it normalised the communal content. The February demonstration caught the imagination of the Muslim masses in Bengal, who for the first time in the post-war era could vent their anti-imperialist feelings. But the direction it took was communal. Muslims were asked to sink their differences because, as the Muslim leaders said, their political enemy "had declared war against Muslim aspirations". The INA demonstrations and the presence of other Muslim groups under the leadership of Jamait-ul-Ulama-i-Hind constituted a common challenge to the construction of a collective psyche, which would assure victory to the League in the coming elections. It adopted two strategies to counter this challenge. First, it began to strengthen its ideological position by sharpening its rhetoric, couched in religious and cultural terms. The League was now painted as the advance guard of the "cultural defence that the Muslims required in the face of the Hindu attack on it". The support of the Ulema was crucial to validate this claim. It was quite significant, therefore, that the League sponsored the creation of the Jamait-ul-Ulama-i-Islam in October to counter the Jamait-ul-Ulama-i-Hind. Its first conference was held in Calcutta from 26 to 29 October 1945, to "mobilise forces of Islam for Pakistan and the renaissance of the Millat".

The League president, Maulana Akram Khan, while opening the conference, said: "As one of the founders of the Jamait-ul-Ulama-i-Hind, Delhi, I wholeheartedly

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199 'Let us go to war.' See Appendix I.

200 *Star of India*, Cal., 24 Oct. 1945, p. 3.

welcome the first session of the newly formed All India Jamait-ul-Ulama-i-Islam in the capital of Islamic Pakistan”.\(^{202}\) (Italics mine)

The resolutions passed in the conference in fact projected the idea of a solid Islamic unity, with the Muslim League as its vanguard. The Muslims of Bengal were asked to sink their differences.\(^{203}\) Why should they do this? The answer came from Maulana Azad Subhani, a respected Leaguer, “We are weak, We are being beaten, crushed, but there is a spark which burns, an inspiration which shivers through our frame..., the unmistakable signs of our revival - a supreme renaissance.... the time is not far when the Muslim nation will rise.”\(^{204}\)

Thus, the 'Muslim Nation' was seen as being "beaten and crushed", and the people were exhorted now to join the Islamic unity to 'rise'. There was a radical change in the political rhetoric with the frequent use now of 'Enemy', Crushing', 'Suffering', etc., in fact the use of the metaphor 'War'. One of the best expositions on the theme had come from Lt. Col. Hussain Suhrawardy. Speaking at Pakistan Club, he identified the Muslim League's fight with that of the Muslims and drew attention to the manner in which they "suffer as an enemy Nation suffering to get freedom.”\(^{205}\)

On the ideological front, therefore, a complete identification of Islam and Muslim Nation was sought to be created. The election of 1946 presented itself as the culmination of this process. The interests of the Muslim Nation were sought to be satisfied only

\(^{202}\) Ibid., 24 Oct. 1945, p. 3.

\(^{203}\) Ibid.

\(^{204}\) Ibid., 27 Oct. 1945, p. 3.

\(^{205}\) Ibid., 30 March 1945, p. 3.
through the creation of a Nation-State called Pakistan. The second important aspect of the strategy unfolded itself as the electioneering progressed.

Creation of a united Muslim front was a process that went along with the construction of a vilified 'other' - the Hindu front. Owing to the operation of the logic of separate electorates, the Muslim League had to fight the non-League and the Nationalist Muslims in this arena. This vilified 'other' - the Hindu - was the enemy, but these were the people who posed the challenge directly in the electoral arena.

The League's method of confronting this section was direct - it tried to silence them by using terrorising tactics. Bengal witnessed wide-spread attacks on the non-League and Nationalist Muslims. Humayun Kabir was assaulted, Major Shahnawaj, the I. N. A. officer who was championing the anti communal cause of the Congress, was assaulted by the League Press as a stooge of the Congress, was "assaulted in front of the Nakhoda Masjid until the Khaksars rescued him". The people who attacked him", the report said, "asked him to join the League".

Habibur Rahman Choudhury, a non-League candidate from Kasba-Burichang in Comilla, was kidnapped by 100 hooligans near Salbandi Railway Station and was taken to Gaffargaon from where he was released after 8 days. The Krishak Proja Party candidate from Serajganj Central Mohammedan constituency, Barat Ali, was attacked by a "mob shouting League slogans at village Pratap (P. S. Uttarpura)". The newspaper report said that he "could escape only when he signed a bond saying he would never

207 Ibid., 28 Jan. 1946, p. 3.
208 Ibid.
209 Ibid., Cal., 4 March 1946, p. 3.
210 Amrita Bazar Patrika, Cal., 3 March 1946, p. 4.
The INA, Elections and Calcutta Killings

contest against the League. The Bengal Muslim Parliamentary Party which was fighting the League, in its appeal to the Muslim electorate, focused on this phenomenon:

Our main opposition is from the Muslim League fold. While we stand for popular ideals and progressive ideologies, the League stands for what it is showing everywhere. Their appeal they know cannot reach the Muslim public. ... recourse to armed goondaism and organised vandalism. The Muslim public will not fall victim to this hooliganism and will refuse to do anything to do with this organised goondaism. The Muslim mass is with us and will not support the vested interest of black-marketers and profiteers whatever reign of terrorism the Leaguers might try to create.

The terrorising methods of the League party workers were matched by the aggressive tone of its Election Manifesto which declared the election a religious war – Jehad. Similarly, in Calcutta and its surrounding areas, a victory celebration on 11 January 1946, was organised to pray for victory in the ensuing Provincial Assembly elections. The Muslim League issued detailed directions for the celebrations:

Special thanks giving prayers for the success achieved and for the cent per cent success in the coming elections; 
Meetings in the Central Mosques to be held, the printed message of the Calcutta Muslim League to be read out; 
Charghnai - illumination of the Muslim houses; 
Muslims of Howrah, Calcutta, Metiaburuz, 24 Parganas should make house to house collection for the Muslim League Election Fund; 
Muslim League broadcasting centres will be opened where National poems of Pakistan will be read out.

The 'celebrations' and the way the Bengal Provincial League thought of observing it, provides a clue for the later events. It was not just a coincidence that some of the worst affected areas during Calcutta riots of August 1946, i.e., Metiaburuz.

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211 Ibid.
212 Ibid., 14 March 1946, p. 3.
213 'Let Us Go to War', Appendix I.
214 Star of India, Cal., 9 Jan. 1946, p. 5.
215 Ibid.
Howrah, 24 Parganas, etc., were also ones where the Calcutta Muslim League concentrated on ‘celebrating’ and campaigning for election funds.

It was in these circumstances and under such created situations, that the elections took place. As expected in the political circles, the Muslim League swept the Muslim seats, validating its position as the "sole spokesman of the Muslims". Its rivals, the Krishak Proja Party and the Nationalist Muslims were routed.

VI

The Communist Party saw the coming elections as “a great programmatic battle between Indian parties”, and declared:

other parties claim the monopoly of patriotism and wisdom and will put the blame on each other for coming in the way of the freedom of India.

... Ours is the only party that will do nothing of the sort, but tell people the simple truth that India's main parties by fighting each other will not bring Indian freedom nearer.

Therefore, it kept on treating, ideologically speaking, the programmes of the Congress and League at the same level, and each was seen as fighting for establishing domination over the other. The Party claimed that the Communist Party's "vision of freedom stood apart from those of the Congress and the League. Based on the


217 Ibid.

218 Ibid., p. 5.

... Our purpose in contesting the elections is not to expose the Congress and the League and glorify ourselves, but to popularise among the electorate such a vision of free India that ensures freedom to all and does not become the domination of some over others, based on principles that can and must unite all freedom-loving Indians.
The assumption that it was the “accepted leader” of the labouring classes, the Party decided to field candidates for all labour seats:

... Our party will put its own candidates in almost all labour seats to demonstrate that it is the accepted leader of the working-class. We will also contest such rural seats, both general and Muslim, where we are the existing majority of the people to demonstrate the strength and vitality of the organised Kisan movement.219

But, the Communist candidates were asked not to stand against the League candidates for the Muslim seats, and in return they were promised the Muslim League support in the labour seats.220 The Party ultimately put 11 candidates for the General rural seats, 2 for the Muslim rural seats and 7 for the Labour seats.

VII

The election of 1945-46 was, from the Muslim League point of view, the final battle for Pakistan. In the elections for Bengal Assembly, it won 113 seats as compared to 3 by the Krishak Proja Party. The Nationalist Muslims failed to gain any seat. A detailed analysis of sectoral votes would show the extent of penetration of the League in rural areas where the Krishak Proja Party had an edge in the previous election of 1937. The

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220 *Ibid.*, p. 94. Hashim wrote:

The leftists in the Muslim League had good relations with the Communist party. I had warned the leaders of the Communist party that if there was any contest between the Muslim League candidates and the Communist party in the Muslim seats, the relation would not remain good. We assured them that we would support the Communist party in the seats reserved for the labour. The Communist party did not agree and said that it had some pockets in the Muslim majority areas and in these pockets their victory was certain. They put up some candidates in Noakhali and Mymensingh. All the candidates nominated by the Communist party were defeated and lost their deposit. We, true to our assurance, however, supported the Communist candidates in the labour seats.
The table below shows the votes polled by different parties in the 1946 elections for Provincial Legislature.

Table I: 1945-46 Elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>No. of Votes Polled</th>
<th>Percentage of Votes</th>
<th>No. of Muslim Votes Polled</th>
<th>Percentage of Muslim Votes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Urban / Rural</td>
<td>Urban / Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congress</td>
<td>2,337,053</td>
<td>42.2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11,759</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim League</td>
<td>2,057,830</td>
<td>37.2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>95</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>205,805</td>
<td>89.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KPP and Nationalist</td>
<td>272,880</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>713</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu Mahasabha</td>
<td>78,981</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communists</td>
<td>736,883</td>
<td>13.83</td>
<td>556</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pro-League Muslims</td>
<td>157,197</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Return showing the Results of Elections to the Central Legislative Assembly and the Provincial Legislatures in 1945-46, New Delhi, Government of India Press, 1948, pp. 110-136.

The table clearly shows that the penetration of Muslim League in the rural areas was almost complete. Thus, its hold in the period took a qualitative turn as compared to the pre-1937 period, when it was still confined to the urban areas. This could be easily
gleaned from contrasting the sectoral votes that the Muslim League and Krishak Proja Party polled.

From a meagre 26.52% of the rural Muslim vote that it polled in 1937, the Muslim League increased it to 89.6%. On the other hand, the Krishak Proja Party which had secured 31.5% of the rural Muslim vote in 1937, could gain a meagre 7.1%, that too when the Nationalist Muslims and the Jamait-ul-ulama-i-Hind was supporting it in the electoral battle. This in a way sounded the death-knell of the Krishak Proja Party. This also vindicated Abul Hashim's efforts at making the party broad-based and giving it a new orientation.

The elections witnessed a very high percentage of voters' participation, especially in East Bengal where the percentage turn out was very high. In areas like Tippera and Noakhali, the turn out went to the extent of 79%. In comparison, the turn out in the general seats was lower, with the exception of one or two seats, such as in East Bengal where Jogendra Mondal was contesting, the turn out was below 50%. This goes to show that, notwithstanding the allegations of wide-scale violence and official connivance, the high turn out was a measure of their strong appeal. And this appeal took the form of votes for the League, and its demand of Pakistan.

For the Mahasabha, the election results proved disastrous. It not only lost to the Congress, but the insignificant number of votes that it polled exposed its inherent weakness. Sarat Chandra Bose defeated the Mahasabha candidate by 7,290 to 88 votes.

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while Syama Prasad Mookerjee, despite his stature, could secure only 346 votes against 10,216 of his Congress rival Nagendra Nath Mukhopadhyay.\(^{222}\)

In the elections for the Provincial Legislative Assembly, Mahasabha could field candidates for only 23 seats out of the total number of rural seats, and 3 for the 6 Urban seats. Its candidate for Calcutta (East), Sarojendra Prasad Bagchi polled 27 votes against the 12,305 polled by Jyotish Chandra Ghose of the Congress. Patita Paban Chatterjee who stood as the Sabha candidate from Calcutta (Central) polled only 217 votes against 13,566 of the Congress candidate. It did better in the North Bengal Municipal seat where its candidate polled 1,393 votes against 22,902 votes of the Congress candidate. Thus, in urban Bengal, it was totally rejected. In rural areas, all of its 23 candidates were defeated and most of them lost their deposits. In the area where it was most active, i.e., Birbhum, Bakerganj, Noakhali, Jessore, Khulna, and other places in Mymensingh and Faridpur, its candidates were rejected.\(^{223}\)

It is not clear how far these electoral results reflected the ongoing ideological contestation at the societal level. This was particularly because the franchise was so limited. The fact, however, remains that the Hindu Mahasabha was totally rejected by the people at the very first chance they got to prove their electoral preference.

Does it, then, mean that the people who had voted for the Congress, necessarily rejected the Hindu communal stance of the Mahasabha, and deliberately opted for the nationalist Congress to get what they wanted at this historical juncture, i.e., freedom? Or, can one argue, that at this juncture, when the tide of nationalism was very strong the Hindu communal strand had not expressed itself only through the Hindu Mahasabha, but

\(^{222}\) *Return showing the Results of the Central Legislative Assembly and the Provincial Legislatures in 1945-46*, Government of India, New Delhi, 1948, pp. 13-15.

\(^{223}\) *Ibid.*
had channelised its voting preference to the Congress? This is a question that remains to be explored more deeply, and the present work does not attempt to probe into this channelisation.

The results were disastrous for the morale of the communists. Only Jyoti Basu who defeated Humayun Kabir by 8 votes in the Railway labour constituency and Ratan La Brahmin could come out successfully. The Party sources lamented that there was a big gap between the “expectations and the actual results.” The Party, trying to analyse the results, saw a new nationalist upsurge behind this failure of the Communists. “With the release of the Congress leaders a new political upsurge began to sweep the country,” said the Party Letter. “People felt that all the issues can and must be solved through the immediate realisation of freedom.” However, the Party never gave up its earlier line of consistently seeing the League as the main instrument of liberation for the Indian Muslims. Its said: “Election results showed that the vast masses regard the Congress as the freedom front, as their main instrument of liberation. They equally showed that the Muslim masses regarded the League as their organisation which they must line up with to secure freedom.” At the same time it maintained that the Congress, in fact, Congress had exploited the sentiments of the backward sentiments of the labouring classes. The party presented its analysis in these terms:

The labour seats won by the Congress were mostly won by exploiting, in a period of rising political upsurge, the broad national sentiment of backward, mostly unorganised workers and in cases of advanced workers, by fanning the prejudices against the League and the demand for self determination. The Congress also invariably utilised the Bose's men and in many centres police and goonda terror was let loose against the Red Flag.

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225 Ibid.

226 Ibid., p. 2.

227 Ibid., p. 5.
The Leaders from different districts maintained that Congress organisation as well as its election campaign was not in as good a condition during the election as that of the Communist Party.

The campaign of the Congress candidate against whom we fought, was very weak compare to us. The number of our workers was also very big ... But after the election it was seen that our candidate got around six thousand votes while the Congress candidate got more than 30 thousand.\(^228\)

There was a general helplessness in the Congress.\(^229\) Similarly, in Mymensingh where the Communists were organising the peasants and the Hajongs for a long and successful struggle. "The Congress organised relatively less number of meetings than us,"\(^230\) but even then it got all the seats. Explaining their defeat, Moni Singh said,

Middle classes were at that time generally against us. They said that we had helped the British by opposing the Quit India Movement by calling World War as People's War.

Therefore, the Congress success at the election was explained in terms of its exploitation of the prejudices of the backward sections of the leaders while in the non-labour seats. peasantry, its success was shown to be the victory of the middle classes who were against the communists for their role in the Past. League's victory was not commented upon very much. For the Communists in Bengal the rehabilitation during the famine, therefore brought them members but the agenda of nationalism brought to the surface the fact that for a substantial number of people at that juncture, freedom was far more important an issue than the one put before the people by the Communist Party.

\(^228\) Chakraborty, Jnan, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

\(^229\) *Ibid.*

VII

Despite its resounding victory, the Muslim League did not have an absolute majority in the Bengal Assembly and Suhrawardy, once called upon to form the Cabinet, met both Maulana Azad, then the Congress President, and Kiran Shankar Roy, the leader of the Bengal Congress Assembly, from April 11 to April 14, 1946. The Congress Working Committee set the guidelines for Roy’s talks with Suhrawardy. They were:

- Barring the Premier, the number of Ministers from the Congress and the League Parties must be equal;
- either the Home or the Civil Supplies Portfolios must be allotted to a Congress Minister;
- an anti-Corruption Board must be established;
- all categories of political prisoners, convicted or otherwise, should be released;
- comprehensive steps for ameliorating the hardship of the masses in response to cloth and food storage should be taken;
- there should be no introduction of any communal legislation of a controversial nature without mutual agreement.\(^231\)

The talks for a coalition Ministry finally broke down as the League could agree neither to the condition of equal number of Ministers nor that the Home portfolio be given to the Congress. The ‘political prisoners issue’ was also problematic for the League.

Kiran Shankar Roy, on the other hand, issued a statement that he would like to make it clear that there was no ideological bar to the Congress party co-operating with the Muslim League, provided the issue of Pakistan was kept out of the provincial politics.\(^232\) However, a critical perusal shows that the Congress was not very keen on joining the Cabinet, nor the All India Muslim League on taking it in.

The same cannot be said about Suhrawardy. Historians of the period are of the opinion that he wanted a League-Congress coalition quite seriously.\(^233\) But why? Here I

\(^{231}\) Statesman, Cal. 15 April 1946, p. 1.

\(^{232}\) Star of India, Cal., 23 April 1946, p. 1.

\(^{233}\) Chattopadhyay, G., op. cit., p. 205.
think Suhrawardy was motivated by the idea of a 'greater Bengal'. In his meeting with the Cabinet Mission, he had demanded a "Redistribution of boundaries of Bengal so as to include Jharkhand State, Singhbhum, Manbhum, and Santhal Pargana". In quite the same vein, he said later that "the question before the country now was one of Pakistan and Hindustan. Once this was conceded, it would be for the Pak State to define the status of its constituent unity". The unity he added should so far as possible be a workable one, and should conform to the conditions of "linguistic and cultural affinities". Suhrawardy wanted the whole of Assam and Bengal to be included into Pakistan, and here he put aside religion as the deciding factor. But for him, Pakistan state was for all the Muslims of India. His idea of a Bengal that was not partitioned was articulated in his discussion with the Cabinet committee, on 8 April 1946. He was very conscious of the communal divide of the Province, and anticipated the demand for its partitioning. He said, "Bengal ought not to be dismembered and I believe that my Hindu friends also would like Bengal to remain one entity".

One may point out here, the Muslim League's, and especially Suhrawardy's, support to the Tribal demand for a separate Jharkhand state neighbouring Bengal, was part of its policy of using all divisive avenues. It not only supported the cause of Jharkhand, but even effectively campaigned for the Scheduled Caste organisations' demands. From the beginning of 1945, we encounter the Muslim League actively...
supporting the President of the Scheduled Caste Federation, P. N. Rajabhoj’s diatribe against the Congress.²³⁹ This, I believe, was done in part to divert the Congress energies. An equally important reason was that in East Bengal, i.e., Faridpur, Jessore, Khulna and Bakerganj, the Federation had a substantial following. If it could be won on the side of the League, then any demand for the Partition of the Province could be thwarted through its organised support to the Muslim League. The League was conscious of the fact that the support of the Scheduled Caste Federation in any future combination of things, was essential to its demand for Pakistan.

On similar lines, the Jharkhand demand was also supported. Here, Suhrawardy came out actively to help Jaipal Singh, the President of the Adivasi Mahasabha, to address a public meeting along with the Muslim League. He even formed the League-Jharkhand Friendship Council on February 1946, which was called Jharkhand-Pakistan Conference.²⁴⁰

At this juncture, Suhrawardy anticipated a demand for the division of Bengal. He, therefore, wanted the Muslim League’s reach to extend to the other flank of West Bengal so as to utilise this friendly base in case of the demand for Partition. Therefore, the support to Jharkhand was basically a counter move to check any future demand for partitioning of the province. This reasoning emerges from the incongruities in Suhrawardy’s technical as well as ideological stands on the issue. On the one hand, he supported Jharkhand, on the other he wanted it inside Bengal. Again, he supported a

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²⁴⁰ Ibid.
separate Jharkhand state while simultaneously demanding that cultural and linguistic affinities should be recognised, and therefore, “in case Jharkhand state is not carved out then Bengali section be added to Pakistan”. 241

It became clear, then, that the plan for including the whole of Bengal into Pakistan had already existed in Suhrawardy’s schema, and his move to bring the Congress into the Cabinet was a tactical one intended to forestall any counter moves, and to also build a joint front against the Partition of Bengal. Suhrawardy finally formed his Cabinet on 23 April and thus began the last Muslim League Ministry in pre-partition Bengal.

VIII

The Direct Action Day

Reports from different parts of Bengal indicated the deteriorating communal situation. 242

The Direct Action Day call combined communal ideology with the anti-colonial urges of the Muslim community. The League, therefore, was driving towards what could be called a religious Nationalism in a colonial context. However, devoid of the anti-colonial critique which could have built an ideological ambience, the idea of freedom which flowed from the League was created, disseminated, sustained and provided outlets, through an anti-Hindu ideology and activities. This was, in precise terms, communalism in its Muslim variant.

241 Ibid., 12 Feb. 1946.

While this was going on in Bengal, on the central stage an entirely different act was being staged. The Cabinet Mission deliberations finally concluded with the announcement of the 'Draft Plan' on May 16, 1946. The Mission criticising the Pakistan plan as impractical, and incapable of solving the communal problem, suggested instead a loose federation with three major groupings of Provinces. Sufficient autonomy was granted to the groupings.

Though the Muslim League did not like this criticism of its Pakistan proposal, it welcomed the grouping system which it said would form the basis of Pakistan. It accepted the scheme on June 6, 1946.

However, the League soon retracted its answer when it became clear that the British Government would not sacrifice the Congress at its altar. Nehru's press statement on 10 July was cited as proof of Congress intransigence. It termed the proposals of the Cabinet Delegation a betrayal by the British. The League resorted to Direct Action to redress this betrayal. The All India Muslim League, in its Council meeting at Bombay on 27-29 July 1946, passed two resolutions. The first rejected the Cabinet Mission Plan and, the second, resolved to resort to Direct Action to achieve Pakistan. The second resolution said:

Whereas the Council of the All India Muslim League has resolved to reject the proposals embodied in the statement of the Cabinet delegation and the Viceroy dated 16th May 1946 due to the intransigence of the Congress on one hand; and the breach of faith with the Muslims on the other; and whereas Muslim India has exhausted without success all efforts to find a peaceful solution of the Indian problem by compromise and constitutional means; and whereas the Congress is bent upon setting up of caste-Hindu Raj in India with the connivance of the British; and whereas the recent events have shown that power politics and not justice and fair play are the deciding factors in Indian affairs and whereas it has become abundantly clear that the Muslims of India would not rest contented with anything less than the immediate establishment of independent and fully sovereign state of Pakistan and would resist any attempt to impose any constitution making machinery or any constitution, long term or short term or the setting up of any interim Government at the Centre without the approval and consent of the Muslim League; Council of the All India Muslim League is convinced that now the time has come for the Muslim Nation to resort to Direct Action to achieve Pakistan to assert their
vindicate their honour and to get rid of present British slavery and the contemplated future caste-Hindu domination.\textsuperscript{243}

To put this into effect, the Working Committee of the Muslim League declared 16 August 1946, as 'Direct Action Day', instructed the Muslims to "suspend all business on the 16th of August and observe complete Hartal" and directed the provincial district Leagues to "hold public meetings throughout the country on Friday" in order to explain the two resolutions to the Muslims. The call for the Direct Action Day was taken up quite zealously by the Bengal Provincial Muslim League, and witnessed the aggressive character of the communal passions that had been accumulated in the society during the past few years. Evidence suggests that the aggressive manifestation of the Direct Action Day was not simply an organised affair of the League. Before such an organised action played havoc with society, the society had already been divided vertically and the League's race was to provide, apart from the wherewithal for an organised outlet of the communal outburst, ideological sustenance for it. The Direct Action Day rioting which resulted in the worst communal carnage in Calcutta, was in fact a violent manifestation of the ideological communal divide of Bengali society.

IX

Direct Action Day in Howrah began with a procession which started around "8 to 9 a.m. at Salkia, Shibpur, Panchanantola, Kali Babu's Bazaar and other places. Mr. Sharif Khan M. L. A., the leader of the Howrah Muslim League was found to lead a procession at Panchanantola Road where the few Hindu shop keepers, who kept open their shops,
were asked to close their shops". In Chandpur, Tippera district, "the Muslim shops and business were kept closed in observance of hartal. The Hindus did not close their shops and their business. The Muslim volunteers were seen to move in (sic) the markets asking all shop keepers to close their shops. They forced the fish sellers to go out of the market and stop their business for the day". In Chittagong, "the Hindus passed a restless day. There was hartal - some Hindu shops remained open. Muslim volunteers forcibly shut the doors in some cases and at places there was intimidation".

In Calcutta, however, the day did not begin with just forcible closure of Hindu shops. From the early morning, about 8 a.m., news of violence began to pour in from central and north Calcutta. Police Stations of Bow Bazaar and Hare Street, soon realised that the situation was grave, and that they were seriously outnumbered to handle such an emergency. Military Intelligence which kept a strong vigil on the movements around the city, reported acts of violence early in the morning and its rapid spread.

The Congress Secretary in his report said:

At 7.30 a.m. we got reports from Fulbagan area under P. S. Entally that passers-by were being molested, robbed of their purses, specks, and other valuables in their possession by Moslem hooligans of the locality who were shouting "PAKISTAN KAEM HO CHUKA"... By 11'O Clock (sic) in the morning the whole of Dhumtollah Street and

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246 A letter from Chittagong to Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee. S. P. Mookerjee Papers, Instalment II-IV. Sub. File No. 151, p. 111.


248 'General Diary. Hare Street Police Station'. 16-20 August. ibid.

249 'Diary of Events of Eastern Command Intelligence Centre from 16 to 20 August 46', ibid.
Circular Rd. from Rajabajar... Moulali seemed to have been completely under the sway of the Moslem goondas.*230*

The central and northern part of the city had witnessed violence on Rashid Ali Day too. Unlike in February, this time the Muslims attacked the Hindus, and the anger was not against the colonial authorities, though the leadership tried to show that their Direct Action was as much against the authorities as it was against the Congress.

The meeting of the Muslim League was to take place in the Maidan at 4 p.m., but by that time rioting had already begun in full scale in the northern and central parts of the city. Muslim processions coming from Tollygunj, Howrah \(^{251}\) and 24 Parganas \(^{252}\) to the Maidan, attacked and looted Hindu houses and people on the roadside, with or without provocation. As the momentum for a clash built up, most of these places saw the Hindus organised and ready to repulse any attacks. Suranjan Das has shown how a counter mobilisation of the Hindus had also been in progress during the last few days. Provocation of a different nature came. Wrote one eye witness,

> When a procession under the auspices of Muslim League passed through the street the processionists shouted the slogans of *Larke lenge Pakistan* and *Hindu Congress Barbud*. One Hindu boy out of fun shouted *Larke lenge Hindustan* whereupon two Muslim boy rushed to him and struck him with Lathis. This was the signal for trouble.\(^{253}\)

(Italicics mine)

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\(^{253}\) Mukherjee, B., Managing Director, Darjeeling Bank Ltd., *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, Cal., 26 March 1946, Letter to the Editor, p. 5.
Hence, by the time the meeting at the Maidan could begin, the Direct Action was already in progress. The enemy, whose identity was defined in religious terms, had been targeted with the fury and violence of the mob shouting 'Larke lenge Pakistan'.

The fact that the hooligans and even common people were well equipped with deadly weapons, and that the entire affair was well arranged was borne out by the reports of the on-the-spot correspondents, as well as the accounts of eye witnesses.\footnote{Tarapada Banerjee, the Nadia District Congress Committee President, describing his experience on his arrival at the Sealdah Railway Station on that eventful day, said:}

\begin{quote}
the elaborate arrangements I found in front of the station on the day of the proposed Direct Action could by no means be construed as meant for peaceful observance of the day, nor could they be described as a full fledged armed action against imperialism. A crowd of over one thousand fanatics armed with big lathis, drawn daggers, iron rods and house breaking implements and shouting slogans like “Larke Lenge Pakistan” and “Muslim League Zindabad” had collected at the road crossing and breaking heads of passers by of other community.\footnote{For detailed study of the composition of the rioting crowd and the other components of the violence that is associated with the Calcutta Riot, see Das, Suranjan, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 161-192. See also, Chatterjee, Joya, \textit{Bengal Divided, Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-47}, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 238.}

Very soon the entire north and central parts of Calcutta became scenes of civil war. Reports from Kidderpore, Metiaburuz and Howrah were also not good.\footnote{Mitra, N. N., (ed.), \textit{op. cit.}, 1946, Vol. II, p. 182.}

The Hindu reaction which was sporadic on the first day and in the initial hours of the 17th, began to wrest the initiative for organised reprisals, and soon showed its determination to outdo the kind of violence indulged in by the Muslim section of the population. Sandip Bandyopadhyay, in his recent work on the riot, says,

\footnote{Files containing reports on ‘violence, police actions and actions taken by various departments during and after the riot are available in West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta. See, \textit{Home Political}, Confidential File Nos. 351/46 Part B; 351/46 Part B, I-XI; Report on the Muslim Hindu Conflict in Calcutta on Direct Action Day’. No File No., 1946; ‘Diary of events of Eastern Command Intelligence Centre from 16th August to 20th August’. No File No., 1946. Recently, Suranjan Das has done a comprehensive work based on report of Police and the Calcutta Disturbances Enquiry Commission Report. See, Das, Suranjan, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 161-190.}
The physical exercise which one day had started as part of the freedom movement against the foreign rule, that power, that physical strength - arms, were now employed in killing brothers. Although tragic but one has to accept the truth that many members of the clubs and committees with Swadeshi underpinnings had taken part in the riot. The Hindu youth joined initially with a feeling of self defence which was mingled with the consciousness of the duty to free Bengal of the Muslims, as the Muslim youth had felt it a moral and religious duty to join the Direct Action. Foundation of this consciousness was prepared by the 'Awake Hindu' campaign of the Hindu Mahasabha.\(^\text{257}\)

The Kidderpore area, and especially Metiaburuz, were the scenes of utmost cruelty. Bustees were wiped off and loss of life here alone amounted to 600 according to the lowest available figure. But at this time, near the Kesoram Mills of the Birlas, sources reveal around 500 Oriya workers were brutally killed which forced the Orissa Chief Minister to come to Calcutta to enquire into the events.\(^\text{258}\)

There were also attacks on non-League Muslims during this riot. They became victims of the communally charged aggression. One of the worst sufferers was Syed Nausher Ali, who had been an enemy of the League since long. Syed Nausher Ali was a direct offender - he had forced the Nazimuddin Ministry out by giving his now famous Speaker’s ruling. “I distinctly remember”, he said, “that four or five days before August


\(^{258}\) The killings of the Oriya workers brings out an element of the communal ideology which though ubiquitous as far as communalism is concerned goes unnoticed. This is the idea of revenge which is transferred irrespective of context.

On January 7, 1946, the Provincial Labour Unit stationed at Chittagong attacked the villagers of Kasaipara and killed a few people and set houses on fire after some personnel of the corps had been attacked by the villagers when he tried to molest a woman Surujuveal wife of Bidgha Mian of Kasaipara. (See Baroda Prosad Nandy, Secretary, Report of Chittagong District Congress Committee, \textit{AICC Papers}, File No. P-5 (Pt-I).

Congress and all other political parties and people rose against it and felt outraged at this barbarity but Muslim League attempted to give it a purely Muslim colour. So that, it seems, it could help it vilifying ‘the other’ a bit more. (Akram Khan, the president of the provincial League, issued a statement saying that "the Muslims were aggrieved and demand punishment", See \textit{Ananda Bazar Patrika}, Cal., 15 Jan. 1946, Muslim League instituted an Enquiry Committee under Habibullah Bahar and observed 15 January as Chittagong Day. \textit{Star of India}, Cal., 16 Jan. 1946, p. 1.

It soon came out that the Chittagong unit of the Provincial labour unit was from Ganjam [Orissa].
16. A number of people went past my house at about 3:30 crying ‘Finish Nausher Ali, enemy of the community’. I had heard similar slogans previously also. Reports of similar speeches and meetings reached me and I was warned by some friends against apprehended danger’. He was finally rescued by the Police, and when on 24th October he returned with Military pockets, he found his house in a devastated condition with the Muslim League flag hoisted on top, and a notice at the gate saying ‘Muslim League Office’.

Calcutta was taken over by the communal frenzy and, until the evening of 19th August, the situation remained unchanged. The death toll mounted to around 5000, though the actual figure was never known. The injured, looted and homeless were numberless. Harrowing tales of the Calcutta riot kept on appearing in the newspapers for several weeks, until the winter of 1946, when the riots in Noakhali would surpass the brutality of the Calcutta riot.

The testimonies of survivors only touched the outer core of the violent manifestations. Wrote Shaista Ikramullah,

As we entered the town further ghastly sights of violence met our eyes, dead bodies lay strewn everywhere. I clearly saw the body of a person lying on the marble steps of the porch of a house, his head was neatly severed from his body and lying a few feet away. I saw a Sikh clad only in shirt and shorts, without his turban, being chased by a man with an unsheathed sword, panting after him like an animal after its quarry.

Similarly, P. S. Mathur, an officer in Suhrawardy’s office, later wrote,
... we had gone about wearing iodine masks for three days and nights preceding this visit (of the Governor General Lord Wavell) and picked up from the street 5,869 dead bodies, whole and mutilated, and disposed of them through mass burials and cremations.\textsuperscript{263}

The police was absent in the initial hours, and they remained so when their need was felt the most; when they finally appeared on the scene they were hopelessly outnumbered. The absence of the police was generally related to the declaration of a holiday by the Ministry and its collusion with the Muslim League rioters.

Suhrawardy, speaking on the floor of the Assembly, blamed the new police arrangement that was introduced that very morning for the first time, as the main reason for the ineffectiveness of the police force. To add to the problem was the extremely arrogant colonial attitude taken by the English police and administrative officials. An official in Suhrawardy's office overheard a police officer replying to a caller who had requested help in the form of some European Sergeants, "Kya bolega mister, aap jo mangta hai us rakam ka sergeant to aap ka hi hookum ki saath India Quit kar gaya".\textsuperscript{264} Quite obviously, the colonial anger regarding the Quit India Movement still remained. This anger forced the Police Commissioner, Hardwick, to sarcastically reply that one should rather go to the Congress office for help. "Who am I to interfere in your affairs. The Hindus want us to get out. The Muslims want us to leave the country to them. I am so helpless. Why not ring up the Congress office."\textsuperscript{265}

While the colonial authorities demonstrated their latent anti-Congress attitude and hatred for the national liberation movement, by expressing their inability to help the Hindus, and after sometime the Muslims too, a number of Muslim officials also showed

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{263} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 47.
  \item \textsuperscript{265} \textit{Ibid.}
\end{itemize}
their anger against the Congress. When approached for protection, the S. D. C. of Chandpur, Mr. A. A. Khan was reported to have retorted that "the Muslims did not ask for any protection when the Congress people organised processions, so why should the Hindus ask for protection when the Muslims were going to lead a procession in observance of Direct Action Day".²⁶⁶ Similar incidents were also reported from Chittagong.²⁶⁷

News came in from other quarters also, but Calcutta was the epicentre of the disturbances. It appears now from a chronological distance, that Calcutta was preparing herself for this communal holocaust. The manner in which intense communal propaganda was carried on in its heart, it was but natural for the city to explode sooner or later. The city was the hub of the entire electioneering activities / campaign and the intense communal feeling generated thereof.²⁶⁸

Calcutta riot has recently been studied thoroughly by Suranjan Das. He has brought out the fact that the riot started as a planned confrontation as the "parties, i.e., the Hindus and the Muslims, were preparing themselves for it".

²⁶⁶ 'A Short Statement of the tragic happenings on 16th Aug. 46 in observance of 'Direct Action' Day in Chandpur District District Tipperah', op. cit., pp. 103-104.
²⁶⁷ A letter from Chittagong to Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee, S. P. Mookerjee Papers, Sub File No. 151, p. 111.
²⁶⁸ The pamphlets issued just before the Direct Action Day by the Calcutta District League's Secretary, S. M. Usman, bears this out. For example, in one of his pamphlets, he gave enough indication of the impending danger:

In this month of Ramzan, the first open war between Islam and Kafirs started and Mussalmans got the permission to wage Jehad... and Islam secured a splendid victory.... according to wishes of God, the All India Muslim League has chosen this sacred month for launching this Jehad for achieving Pakistan.

The Calcutta District Muslim League's preparations for the Direct Action were elaborate. The Party announced on 9 August that the Direct Action day in Howrah, Hooghly, Metiaburz and 24 Parganas would be observed under the direct supervision of the Calcutta District Muslim League. The Working Committee of the League met on 5 August to decide upon the programme for the Direct Action Day. Presided over by Khwaja Nazimuddin, it decided:

1. to observe complete hartal and general strike everywhere;
2. to explain and reiterate the resolution of the League Council about Direct Action before the congregation in all Mosques before the Jumma prayer;
3. to offer Munazat for the freedom of Muslim India, Muslims of the world and for the people in the east in general;
4. to hold peaceful procession and demonstration;
5. to hold open air meetings and to reiterate the full support for the League Council resolution;
6. to request all other parties to observe complete hartal on that date and to take part in the demonstrations but the request must be made in peaceful manner.

Suhrawardy, announcing these directions, added:

There is one very important clause which I should earnestly commend to the notice of everyone and that is that all demonstrations, processions, meetings, protests, closing of shops, observance of Hartals, etc., should be absolutely peaceful. There must not be violence of any kind.

Emphasising the need for discipline, he said:

This is our first step which we are taking in pursuance of our new policy and we must be absolutely disciplined. Let us show the world that we can perform our task with complete discipline and that we have sufficient control over the orders issued by the high command of the Muslim League.

The leadership, Nazimuddin, and Suhrawardy, all emphasised the need for the peaceful observance of the Day. At the same time, however, the League leaders from

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Jinnah downwards were unequivocal in their stance to not commit themselves towards the peaceful observance of the Day. Instead, responsible leaders like Liaqat Ali even said that the Muslims were not going to be restrained by any constitutional means. They were ready to use even extra constitutional means to "resist". But resistance against whom?

From the time of the Gandhi-Jinnah meetings, the impression had been circulated by the League leadership that the British had ceased to be the 'main' player, and the 'obstacle' in the way of the Muslims getting their Pakistan was the Congress, Gandhi, and ultimately, the Hindus. For the sections of the population who had concretised Pakistan in their imagination, before long they would be getting what was promised. The election campaign had told them that the election was the Jehad to win Pakistan. Thus, after the electoral victory the Direct Action was the logical step towards winning that Pakistan. While the Council meeting of the League witnessed evocation of violent action by members in so many forms, the character of the action was defined by the Calcutta District League. A pamphlet issued by its Secretary said:

Muslims must remember that it was in Ramzan that the permission for Jehad was granted by Allah, it was in Ramzan that the battle of Badr - the first between Islam and heathenism was fought and won by 313 Muslims and again it was in holy Ramzan that 10,000 Muslims under holy Prophet conquered Mecca and established the kingdom of heaven and the commonwealth of Islam in Arabia. Muslim League is fortunate that it is starting its fight in this month...

Thus, the Direct Action was elevated to the level of a fight complete with religious symbolism, and invoked the religious emotions rather than the political ideology of the followers. It was declared a fight between the Muslims and the Heathen and the fight was equated with the Jehad in the month of Ramzan.

Star of India, Cal., 9 August 1946, p. 1.
The identity of the enemy was further specified, and the religious identification of the enemy was placed before the people. In a similar pamphlet issued by S. M. Usman, the Secretary of the Calcutta District Muslim League, it was declared:

By the grace of God, we ten crores in India, through bad luck have become slaves of the Hindus, and the British. We are starting a Jehad in your name in this month of Ramzan. We promise before you that we entirely depend on you. Make us victorious over the kafirs, enable us to establish the kingdom of Islam in India.274

The Muslims, for whom the elections were essentially a Jehad, were once again asked to participate in this war. Earlier it was through ballots, but now the method and weapons were left unspecified.

The League leadership in Bengal called upon its National Guard to prepare for the Day. The Bengal Provincial National Guard, which had opened its recruiting centre on 10 July,275 started its Training Centre in Calcutta on 14 July,276 and on 1 August, it decided to hold a rally in which, a report suggested, Nazimuddin and Akram Khan were to be accorded a salute.277

It was quite evident that the National Guard which had recently been reorganised was working very closely with Khwaja Nazimuddin and Akram Khan, and not with people like Abul Hashim. On 12 August, the National Guard asked all its units to report to the Calcutta Training Centre. A National Guard communiqué said:

All units of Bengal Muslim National Guard are hereby informed that they must reach the training centre at Muslim Institute, Wellesley Street at 8.30 a.m. on 16 August.... Officials of each unit are instructed to see that strict discipline is maintained by the Guards while on duty.... Guards use their Salar Caps.278

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275 Ibid., July 1946, p. 3.
277 Ibid., July 1946, p. 3.
278 Ibid., July 1946, p.5
It was at this juncture that the Chief Minister declared a Public holiday on 16 August. This created consternation in Calcutta, especially amongst the Hindus. The Congress moved an adjournment motion in the Assembly on this issue, but the Speaker ruled the motion out of order. It was thought "absurd that the Party in power should declare a public holiday to support the Party's political action."

During the election process, League propaganda, rhetoric as well as methods adopted by it, had substantially vitiated the communal situation in Bengal. There was a sharp deterioration in the law and order situation especially in eastern Bengal. This was intimately connected to the growing communal aggressiveness which took the form of dacoity, burglary, abduction, etc.

The League's effort to continuously keep open an anti-Hindu front was reflected when it took up the case of eviction of illegal immigrants from Assam. The preponderance of Muslims among the immigrants, and the presence of a Congress Ministry in Assam made it very convenient for the Bengal Muslim League to colour the entire episode as a drive against the Muslims. The campaign was launched in a massive way by the League and it even thought of taking direct action against the evictors who,

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279 Statesman, Cal., 13 August 1946, p. 5.

280 See, for example, a newspaper report: "there has been an increase in the robbery in trains in Dacca-Bhairav Sector". Hindustan Standard, Cal., 5 Jan. 1946, p. 3.

281 By March 1946, the pattern of robberies becomes clear. A newspaper reported, "Goondaism in Bhairav Sector is increasing. One feature of these robberies is that generally Hindu passengers have to bear the burnt of the degradation of these gangsters and Muslim passengers are left untouched. It must be recalled that Bhairav Bazar was the area where the great devastation took place in 1941". ibid., 4 March 1946, p. 5. Similarly, in Madaripur, "Muslim League volunteers defiled the National flag and portrait of Netaji". ibid., 1 Feb. 1946; while in Chittagong the famous "CHANDRANATH TEMPLE was desecrated", ibid., 17 May 1946, p. 7.

282 Star of India, Cal., 2 May 1945, p. 1.
according to the terminology of the League leaders, were Congress and Mahasabha people. The issue raised a lot of passions in Bengal.281

Calcutta riot, from one point of view, shows other facets of the League’s politics.

On the eve of the Direct Action Day, we find that the charge and direction of the observance of the Direct Action Day had been vested in the Calcutta District Muslim League,284 and hence, the Bengal Provincial Muslim League was not very aware of the preparations being made. This may be the reason why Abdul Hashim, one of the stalwarts of the party, said later that he took his children with him to the Maidan where the meeting was scheduled to be held.285 To substantiate our argument we find that the areas assigned to the Calcutta District League for organising the victory celebrations in January and later for organising people on Direct Action Day, were the spots where the trouble really occurred. The areas were ‘Howrah, Hooghly, Metiaburuz and 24 Parganas’.286 On this circumstantial evidence, the Calcutta District Muslim League stands convicted for the rioting.

Again, the Calcutta District Muslim League was under the control of the non-Bengali Muslims and the business class of Calcutta, who supported the politics of the All India Muslim League, and were the traditional loyalist supporters of the M. A. H. Ispahani and Nazimuddin section of the Provincial League. At the same time, however, to repose the burden on Suhrawardy and the League, and on the other hand blame the Congress leadership for uttering irresponsible statements or being eager to arrive at a

281 Ibid., 2 July 1946, p. 5.
compromise with the colonial authorities, leads one to the fallacy of ignoring *the culpability of the communalised masses of people*, who alone could commit acts of such communal depredations. Here, the role played by Suhrawardy becomes crucial. He has been accused - at times with sufficient evidence, valid enough to prove his role - of being responsible for the entire riot. But he has also been stoutly defended. "What happened in Calcutta", said Abul Hashim, while speaking on the No Confidence motion, "did happen not due to Mr. Suhrawardy or his Ministry, but in spite of them".287 Defence of Suhrawardy has even led a historian to challenge the sources by terming them 'Hindu Sources'.

Suhrawardy has been accused not only of being responsible for the Calcutta Killings in 1946 but also of having organised them. Though as a Chief Minister, Suhrawardy was responsible for law and order in Bengal, it must be remembered that 16 August was declared by Jinnah not by Suhrawardy.

In this case, the effort is to pass the blame on to Jinnah. Similarly, the author further clarifies that according to "S. A. Masud, who defended Suhrawardy on behalf of the Muslim League along with B. A. Siddiqui, an enquiry into the killings revealed that the riots had begun before Direct Action had begun, before Direct Action was defined. He places the blame squarely on Mahasabha and Hindu communalism".288 Here, the person who had defended the accused was again brought back to defend the same accused.

Reposing the blame for the killings on Suhrawardy, or defending him and then passing the blame on to Hindu communalism, ignores the fact that Muslim communalism had now reached an extreme phase and had established complete hegemony over the

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Muslim population of the city. The idea that the electoral victory would guarantee Pakistan had been taken seriously by the people. When the leadership, after its rejection of the Cabinet proposals, told them of the betrayal by the colonial authorities and the Congress, and presented them with a 'Direct Action' to achieve their desired goal, it was the hegemonic presence of the communal ideology that guided the direction of this Direct Action. It was, therefore, the ideology of communalism and its sway over the populace that determined the character of communal violence that the city witnessed during these days. In fact even Suhrawardy accepted this when, as quoted by a close associate of his, during the very early phase of the Calcutta riot he said,

> The Congress leadership has long passed into the hands of Militant Hindus and the Muslim leadership into the hands of the Mullahs and some of those bearded folk seem to chase me wherever I go.\(^{289}\)

What Suhrawardy forgot to say on that occasion was that he himself was one of the actors responsible for the impasse, and he was as entrapped in the logic of communalism. He had to go ahead with the communal agenda and enter into a more extreme communal arena. There was no looking back if he wanted to retain his leadership over those masses who had elected him as their leader.

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The Calcutta-Riot was, in fact, the first testing ground for the Congress in its attempt to take on the extreme communalism of the Muslim League. The ground for communal mobilisation on the part of the Muslim League had already been prepared. The question which naturally agitates the mind is the role of the Congress in the entire episode. Was it

in a mood to confront the Muslim League on the question of the 'Direct Action Day' strike, and thereby, help in preparing the ground for a large scale confrontation between the Muslims and the Hindus of Calcutta? Then again, one may ask how the Congress perceived the entire confrontation between the two communities and whether it developed any ideological or strategic counter to this phase of communalism which had led to the confrontation.

On 16 August 1946, crowds in Howrah, Chandpur and the suburbs of Dhaka created violent situations by attacking Hindu shops and temples, etc. Calcutta was no exception; rather this centre of radical politics saw even its communally mobilised people getting the most radical version of communal texts. On the question of how the Hindus reacted so quickly and ferociously, historians have argued that there was a parallel communal mobilisation, led especially by the Hindu Mahasabha, going on among them. They argued that the Congress itself was fast getting influenced by the Hindu Mahasabha and other Hindu communal elements. This led the Congress to create a confrontational situation vis-à-vis the Muslim League as regards the observance of 16th August as Direct Action Day. Thus, Congress, according to this argument, was pushed to the Hindu corner, and prepared the Hindus for a counter attack. The report of the Secretary of the Provincial Congress read:

You are aware that the Moslem League Ministry in Bengal declared the 16th of August the day of "DIRECT ACTION" as a public holiday at the teeth of the united opposition of all parties barring the Muslim League. As the Congress party in the assembly moved


on the 12th August an adjournment motion on this issue to censure the Government and to place the view of the opposition in this connection, but the Speaker [Muslim Leaguer] ruled the motion out of order whereupon the Congress party withdrew from the House as a mark of protest against this arbitrary decision of the Speaker.294

Was the Congress attitude one of confrontation? It seems it was not, because the Congress adjournment motion arose from its belief that it was absurd that the party in power should declare a public holiday to support the party's political action. Moreover, given the communal attitude of the Ministry, its step in declaring a holiday created a great deal of apprehension.

To add to this, the popular mood, as it appears from the newspapers and other writings, was also quite confused and apprehensive.295 This mood was heightened by the utterances of responsible Muslim League leaders. Thus, the declaration of public holiday was naturally perceived with all kinds of suspicion and Congress, it seems, was correct in taking up the issue with the Government.

The disallowing of the adjournment motion, and the Opposition walk-out naturally intensified the reigning apprehensions and confusions. Obviously, self-defence mechanism attracted organised self-defence, in the form of Hindu Shakti Sangh and the up country roughs.296 But what was the Congress doing in this situation?

On 14 August, the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee organised a mass meeting in which all "shades of public opinion were expressed".297 The meeting was described as 'provocative' because "K. S. Roy urged the audience to pursue normal


295 Sec. Amrit Bazar Patrika, Cal., 7, 8, 9 Aug. 1946.

296 Das, Suranjana, op. cit., p. 169.

business on 16th August".298 While "Congress President Surendra Mohan Ghosh described the declaration of public holiday on 16 August as an attempt to force the hartal on the Hindus".299 A Sikh and a Gurkha leader promised their community's support to the Congress and prophesied a 'good thrashing' for the Muslims.300

The Muslim League leaders alleged that the Hindu Mahasabha and Congress created an air of "coming disaster on Hindus" in Calcutta, by raising the fears against impending Muslim violence.301

On the other hand, the Congress sources said that it had organised the meeting of 14th August "to combat the feeling of helplessness, insecurity and frustration among the general public".302 The report of the Provincial Congress Committee rejected the assumption that the Congress leaders had built up a confrontational atmosphere in the meeting as the official charges of the Muslim League suggested. The leadership also requested, just as Suhrawardy had requested the Muslim masses, to remain peaceful. The report said, "A joint appeal was issued requesting the people to remain calm and peaceful and to avoid provoking or being provoked under all circumstances".303 It further said that "as a result of this most of the Hindu shops and business houses remained closed on 16th August to avoid clashes".304

299 Extracts from the Report by the Commissioner of Police, Calcutta, on the Political Situation and Labour Unrest, West Bengal, Home [Poll] Dept.
300 Ibid.
301 Ibid.
302 L/P8, J/8.655, India Office Library and Records as quoted in ibid.
303 Ibid.
304 Ibid.
Thus, the Congress source absolves the Congress of any provocative posture altogether. In the final analysis, however, the Congress actions added to the constitution of that collective Hindu psyche which was apprehensive of the aggressive posture of the Muslim League.

The riot started on the morning of 16th August, and took a serious turn by the evening when the crowd returning from the Muslim League's Direct Action Day meeting at 'Maidan' began attacking shops and houses on the way. Till 20th August, Calcutta remained in the grip of communal violence. And Congress, as an organiser of public opinion, found itself helpless in the face of the communal fury. There was no anti-communal strategy or drive that was launched, and the best it could do was to organise Peace Missions, and issue appeals to stop the fratricidal warfare.

The situation, however, revealed that the Congress was fast accepting the reality of the Muslim League's hegemony over the Muslim mind and thus, any appeal to the Muslim had to be routed through the Muslim League. The Congress report on the riot makes this very clear. It said:

On the 16th morning when we found the communal situation fast deteriorating and the mad orgy of violence being let loose, we contacted several times the League Secretary and the League Mayor, Mr Osman and sought to explain the real situation in order to enlist their sincere co-operation in the matter of restoring peace and communal harmony in the city. But unfortunately, our efforts failed to evoke sufficient response from League head quarters. However, the Mayor of Calcutta was prevailed upon to go out with me [Kalipada Mukherjee, the Secretary, BPCC] on a joint peace mission. But before we could actually go out on the peace mission, the BPCC office was attacked... of course, (sic) the Mayor Mr. Osman and myself went out on a peace mission and visited some of the affected areas and sought in vain to bring about the communal harmony.

305 Ibid.
The irony of the entire efforts of the BPCC Secretary was that he had to ‘enlist the support’ of Mayor Osman who had been one of the persons giving direction to the fury of the communally charged and mobilised Muslim populace of the city on the eve of the Calcutta riot.

Further, the Congress from the very beginning had been viewing the entire riot as a law and order problem, and soon became frustrated by the fact that the Muslim League Ministry had failed to carry out its primary responsibility of maintaining law and order. Sarat Bose’s attack on the Governor was also directed to the same point, i.e., "he failed to maintain the law and order". He said:

The Governor has completely failed in the discharge of his special responsibilities to maintain law and order in the city. Whether it is due to utter incompetence or to surrendering himself completely into the hands of the Bengal Ministry, it is difficult for me to say... the Governor has proved himself unfit. The Governor should be recalled and the present Ministry should be dismissed... what has happened in Calcutta will be very useful to British imperialist and reactionaries in working on their propaganda that India is not fit to govern itself.308

He was correct in this regard. This shows that communalism had now entered a completely new phase which would require a strong authority to maintain law and order. And the British authorities, clearly, were not ready to do so. The Congress was helpless. The best it could do was to prevent a Hindu communal reaction under the aegis of the Mahasabha.

XI

The Mahasabha’s defeat in the election was complete. But this did not mean that as an ideological force it was of no count. Given the manner in which the politics of the nation

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was developing, it had all the potentiality to rise from the ashes of its electoral defeat. The Cabinet Mission and its ensuing discussions, and the presence of the League Ministry provided it with a weapon to keep alive the Hindu communalist option to hit back at the Congress. But this time it was not just an opportunity to hit out at the Congress but to fight the League as well. The League's declaration of Direct Action Day also provided space for the Mahasabha to launch into a new phase of communalism, i.e., extreme communalism.

While a collective psyche for mass violence was being prepared by the Muslim League, the Mahasabha, was also preparing the psychological basis and justification for a counter-communal attack, though apparently on the grounds of defence. The Hindu Mahasabha pamphlet entitled '16th August Beware' asked the Hindus to give a suitable answer to the Muslim League hartal. It read:

> It is the duty of every Hindu to carry on as usual his normal occupation. The Hindus must make organised efforts to see that no Hindu, Non-Muslim or non-League Muslim is forced to join the hartal. We, therefore, request the public to continue on that day their normal work. They must not yield to any coercive measures. Remember that to join the hartal is to support the demand for Pakistan.\(^ {309}\)

The student wing of the Mahasabha also joined the platform to urge Hindus against joining the hartal. It said: "The Hindus must make organised efforts to see that [none] is forced to join the hartal [on 16th August]... Remember that to join the hartal is to support the demand for Pakistan".\(^ {310}\)

This propaganda was, however, not suggestive of an aggressive overtone nor much of a challenge to the Muslim League sponsored 'Direct Action Day' hartal of 16th August. Did the Mahasabha have the organisational strength and ideological hegemony

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\(^ {310}\) *Star of India*, Cal., 21 Sept., 1946. Also see Das, *op. cit.*, p. 169.
to pose such a challenge or to mount a counter attack? As we have already mentioned, its leaders were always conscious of their organisational weakness. The Hindu Mahasabha in Bengal was in a state of confusion. Its programme and the composition of its membership had given it the character of a liberal communal party despite its militant rhetoric. The famine had given it an opportunity to enlarge its mass base as well as to transcend the middle class agenda. The re-emergence of the agenda of freedom through the medium of the I. N. A., and its concretisation through the elections of 1945-46, however, snatched away an ideal opportunity to measure its appeal, and to penetrate the Bengali society. This was because of several factors which included its lack of mass base and the nature of its leadership. Then, what did it want or hope to achieve? Did the Mahasabha have any independent role to play?

Though Suranjan Das in his recent study has tried to show that a communal mobilisation parallel to that of the Muslim League was going on, it would be quite far fetched to equate the two mobilisations.

It was not the Hindu Mahasabha but Hindu communal ideology which was structured and empowered in the wake of the riot, and it strengthened the Mahasabha. It was only after the riot that we find in the language, idiom and demands of the Mahasabha a radical shift. And this was its moment of entree into the extreme phase.

The riot in Calcutta, however, had shown how in a mass frenzy all other boundaries were forgotten. Once the riot began, it required no political party, let alone

311 The liberal communitarian demanded separate communal rights, safeguards, reservations, etc., within the broad concept of one Indian nation-in-the-making. He accepted national unity as the ultimate goal as also the concept of the ultimate common interests of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians. Liberal communitarianism had also a rather narrow social base. Politically it was based mainly on the upper and middle class. Bipan Chandra, et al, India's Struggle for Independence, Penguin, Delhi, 1989, p. 428.

312 Das, Suranjan, op. cit., p. 166.
the Hindu Mahasabha, to tell people how to kill each other. But, how did the Mahasabha perceive the communal riots, and did it have any action plan to counter them?

Unlike the Congress and the Communist Party which always tried to mediate between the two rioting communities either through Peace Missions or by actively working against the communal forces, Hindu Mahasabha did not have any direct role in stopping the communal fire during the Calcutta riot. The basic pre-requisite for the Mahasabha's idea of communal harmony was that the Hindus should be strong and organised. 313

In this strategic perspective, the problems were of two types. First, what about the Hindus who were weak and not organised. Thus, though the Hindu Mahasabha could openly champion or incite the Hindu population in predominantly Muslim localities like Kidderpore, in situations of actual rioting it did not come to their aid. Though the Mahasabha and its front organisations such as Shakti Sangha had their branches throughout the city, they could hardly do anything except help the Hindu riot victims. Given the intensity of communalisation of the society on the eve of the 16th August riots, the responsibility for which squarely lay on the Muslim League leadership and its heightened communal overtones, Hindu Mahasabha's role has to be located in the process of communalisation rather than in the riot itself.

Secondly, on a larger scale, what could the East Bengal Hindus do as a minority in a Muslim majority area - a question that the Hindu Mahasabha had to face while

313 See, N. C. Chatterjee's speeches collected in Hindu Mahasabha Tracts.
demanding the partitioning of the Province. The answer it gave was that the strong
Hindu West Bengal would protect the Hindus of East Bengal.

Whatever role the Mahasabha played during the Calcutta riots, the riot itself and
the role of the Muslim League Ministry gave credence to its stance that the latter was
out to trample the Hindu population. This was bolstered by the coverage given to Syama
Prasad Mookerjee's spirited attack on Suhrawardy during the no-confidence motion
moved in the Bengal Legislative Assembly. His antagonistic stance, which included
calling Suhrawardy the 'Biggest Goonda', must have catered to a large number of
frustrated Hindus who felt helpless because of the manner in which the Government had
brought about this calamity.

For the Communists, who were in the forefront organising one of the biggest Postal
Strikes on 29 July which witnessed the unity of the workers belonging to both the
communities, the Calcutta riot came as a surprise and a shock. The Party realised the
communal side of the Direct Action and it tried to channelise the agenda of the Muslim
League towards an anti-colonial one. In Calcutta and Dhaka, it decided to support
the League call and join the demonstration in a bid to take it to the anti-colonial level.

314 Constant flow of letters from the East Bengal Hindus demonstrates this fear and insecurity. See, S. P. Mookerjee Papers. File Nos. 74 and 90.
315 See Anand Bazar Patrika, Cal., 5 April, 1947.
Realisation soon dawned upon the Communists that they themselves were the most unwanted elements in the entire scenario. During the riot, when they tried to intervene, they were branded as agents of the Muslims in the Hindu areas while in the Muslim areas their loyalty was suspected. Thus, the eruption of a communal riot in a society which had seen sustained communalisation, meant that communal identification became the only source of political legitimacy.