Chapter Four
Noakhali- Tippera Riots

The Noakhali-Tippera riot of 1946-47 signals the culmination of the pre-Independence communal violence in Bengal. The riot was a direct sequel to the 'Calcutta Killings' of August 1946, and therefore, believed to be a repercussion of the latter. A closer study, however, reveals that the Noakhali-Tippera riot (hereafter Noakhali riot) was different in nature from the Calcutta killings for more than one reason. First of all, unlike the latter, it was primarily an example of rural-centred communal violence, and therefore, invites a different treatment. Second, though news of the Calcutta killings sparked it off, the area had experienced intensive communal propaganda for quite some time which catalysed the rapid rupture of the peasant society. This resulted in forms of violence, hitherto not experienced by the populace of the Province. Finally, and importantly, it was the Noakhali riot rather than the Calcutta killings that had a greater psychological impact at the all India level owing to some of its constitutive elements. Reactions to Noakhali

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1 Bengal did not witness 'Partition Riots' in 1947, and despite sporadic clashes there was no major communal riot after the Noakhali riot - it remains the last major communal conflagration between the Hindus and the Muslims before the Partition. Thematically, the atmosphere of terror that was created in the villages and the patterns of violence which included mass conversions, forcible marriages and complete looting, demonstrated the 'total communalisation' as well as the climax of communal violence. Suranjan Das sees it as the riot which "completed the shift from the relatively unorganised and often class based communal violence to organised rioting with direct involvement of the organised political world". Das, S, op. cit., p. 201.

2 Though the towns of Noakhali, Feni and Comilla were sensitive they did not witness any violence as such, whereas about 350 villages in the region were affected. (Burrows to Pethick-Lawrence, 18 Nov. 1946, Mansergh, N., ed., op. cit., Vol. IX, p. 98.) It was only in the later phase, that panic and some violence was reported from Feni town, though restrained. This, therefore, makes the Noakhali riot a predominantly rural phenomenon.

3 Noakhali riot demonstrated the completeness of communalisation, and this was reflected in the extreme forms of violence. Mass conversion, forcible marriages and the methods of killings show the brutality that went into the making of this riot. One can argue that all communal riots, show at a particular point of time, the total communalisation of that society. But the Noakhali riot, with its violent forms and intensity, demonstrated the complete psychological rupture which alone can cause such an intense reaction.
occurred far and wide, and were intense. Reports of reaction poured in not only from the neighbouring districts, i.e., Chittagong, Barisal, and Faridpur, but also from other parts of the country. Reports from Bombay, Madras, UP, the Punjab etc., also talked of the deteriorating communal situation. The intensity of the reaction can be judged from newspaper reports, often exaggerated, in these quarters. A report from Allahabad said:

As the Pratapgarh-Allahabad passenger train stopped at Prayag station it is alleged some persons including girls checked the compartments to see if there were any abducted women from Noakhali and other districts of Bengal. One man was stabbed to death. The train was brought back to Allahabad station and then left with armed escort. (sic)

The worst reactions were, however, in the form of massacre of Muslims in Bihar and Garhmukteswar in U. P. The Bihar riot began on 25 October 1946, which was being observed as 'Noakhali Day'. A Report said:

A serious communal riot broke out in Chapra, Saran District, between 25th and 28th October, and further riots have since been reported from Bhagalpur, Patna and Monghyr districts. The number of deaths up to 3rd November was conservatively estimated at 445....

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Rioting in Noakhali and Tippera (hereafter, Noakhali riot) began in Ramganj Police Station area in the northern part of Noakhali district on 10 October 1946. The

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4 Reports of an exodus of Hindus which began around 19th October in Madaripur in the wake of communal tension was published in *Hindustan Standard*, Calcutta, 1 Nov. 1946, p. 1.

5 *Hindustan Standard*, Cal., 2 Nov. 1946, p. 5.


violence unleashed was described by the Congress M. L. A. of Noakhali, Haran Chandra Ghosh Choudhury, as "the organised fury of the Muslim mob". It soon engulfed the neighbouring police stations of Raipur, Lakshmipur, Begumganj and Sandip in Noakhali district, and Faridganj, Hajiganj, Chandpur, Laksham and Chudagram in Tippera district.

The devastation caused by such widespread violence was quite extensive. Statistics regarding casualties, however, remained typically doubtful. The Government sources constantly harped on the fact that the Hindu sources were exaggerating figures of deaths. If the 'Hindu Press' placed the figure in the thousands, the Muslim League Press went to the other extreme and even denied incidents of deaths. The official estimate showed a conservative two hundred. "Up to date the verified deaths by violence

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9 Burrows in his letter to Pethick-Lawrence wrote:

... the trouble quickly spread... over Ramganj police station as a whole. The western part of the neighbouring police station of Begumganj and to the south the northern part of Lakshmipur and part of Raipur police stations were also affected... and by the 20th in the district of Tippera where they had spread to the southern part of Hajiganj police station on the 13th, following the arrival of hooligan elements from Noakhali, and from there to the neighbouring police stations of Faridganj and Chandpur to the West and Laksham and Choudagram to the east during the next day or two.

10 "... the figures of deaths were grossly exaggerated by non-official Hindu sources and that the number will certainly be low in the three figure category." *Ibid.*, p. 100.

Non-Muslim League newspapers in Calcutta, in fact, published the telegrams which were sent to them in a state of panic. They published these telegrams without substantiating their content. Thus, they helped in maintaining a situation of panic. One such telegram which was widely publicised when the newspapers published it without substantiating the details, was sent from Tippera by a veteran Congress leader of the area, Kamini Kumar Dutta which helped spreading panic as well as the rumours about the nature of the riot.
in the two districts combined for the period of the actual disturbances is 131", wrote the Governor, "and I do not imagine that the figure will in any event exceed 200".\textsuperscript{11}

The reports of Mr. E. S. Simpson and Mr. R. Gupta, who were appointed to enquire into the disturbances, were not published by the Government. They, however, supported the official position that the number of deaths was not very large despite claims to the contrary.\textsuperscript{12} While Simpson found only 32 instances of murder in the area under the jurisdiction of three Police Stations in Tippera,\textsuperscript{13} Gupta also did not note mass killings, though other forms of destruction had evidently taken place on a large scale.\textsuperscript{14}

The damage to homesteads and huts was complete.

Simpson's report indicated the trend in some villages, viz., Paikpara in Faridganj Police Station, where 62 out of 66 homesteads and 496 out of 530 huts were destroyed by fire.\textsuperscript{15} He reported destruction of altogether 1073 homesteads and 4798 huts in three

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid. Lt. Gen. Tuker, of the Eastern command, writes, ‘Our estimate was that the total killed in this episode was well under three hundred’. Tuker, F., \textit{While Memory Serves}, Cassell and Company Ltd., London, 1950, p. 176.

\textsuperscript{12}See the copies of the reports, ‘Versions of eyewitness about Noakhali’, \textit{S. P. Mookerjee Papers}, Instalment II-IV, Subject File No. 149/1946, pp. 41-59.

\textsuperscript{13}Computed from the statistics provided by E. S. Simpson which constitutes appendix to his report. E. S. Simpson to the Additional Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Home Department, 5 November, 1946, \textit{ibid.}, pp. 51-52.

\textsuperscript{14}R. Gupta to P. D. Martyn, 6th November, 1946, \textit{ibid.}, pp. 53-59.

\textsuperscript{15}E. S. Simpson to the Additional Secretary, \textit{ibid.}, p. 51.
Police Stations in Tippera.\textsuperscript{16} His description of the devastation of Haemchar Bazar was succinct: 'It looks like destroyed by a high power Bomb'.\textsuperscript{17}

Gupta described the destruction of the house of Rajendra Lal Roy Choudhury of Karpara in similar words. He wrote, "At present it looks as if it has received a direct hit from a h. e. Bomb."\textsuperscript{18} The rioting crowd, according to eye witness and victims' accounts, used petrol to set the houses on fire after looting them.\textsuperscript{19} Looting was complete, as evinced by the condition of those houses which remained unburned, and the survivors who escaped. One touring party described the completeness of looting in these terms:

We found an expecting mother in her mature stage, at Jayak village vacantly looking at us for an extra piece of dhoti other than a rugged piece she had in her body... women folk of Panchgaon, Desgharia, Raipura, Nandigram and other places bitterly wept before us for an extra piece of cloth to change their ugly ones.\textsuperscript{20}

The fire and the loot left the refugees in a pitiable state. "In some villages I visited", wrote E. S. Simpson, "the few remaining Hindu inhabitants were living on coconuts (dabs), bananas (where available) and what is known as Kochu".\textsuperscript{21} The towns...

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., pp. 51-52.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 50.
\textsuperscript{18} R. Gupta to P. D. Martyn, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 55.
\textsuperscript{19} Almost all the eyewitness accounts talk about the completely burnt markets, homesteads, etc. The use of kerosene and petrol indicates the pre-mediated and organised nature of the attacks because not only did the attacking crowd have 'an abundant stock', as one victim informed, but in a place like Sandip island, a newspaper reported, which had no motor cars, the were reported to be investigating into the matter as to how petrol could be imported and used here for setting fire to houses. See \textit{Hindustan Standard}, Cal., 10 Nov. 1946, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{20} Samar Guha and Ardhendu Bhattacharya of National Service Institute, 'Versions of Eyewitness about Noakhali', \textit{op. cit.}, p. 21.
\textsuperscript{21} E. S. Simpson to the Additional Secretary, \textit{ibid.}, pp. 45-46.
of Chandpur, Comilla and even Calcutta received thousands of refugees who had lost all their material possessions. Even until 18 November, when the Governor sent his report, normalcy had not been restored. "Though disturbances have ceased, the area affected is not", he reported, "as yet, in a completely orderly condition. An indication of the unsettled state of affairs has been the attacks on the Police while carrying out their duties. The most spectacular of these attacks was made at the beginning of the month on a senior ICS officer and his Police party escorting Hindu refugees to a relief camp. Firing had to be opened on the hooligans who attacked the party on three occasions and seven persons were killed and ten wounded."22 The people whom the Governor was calling "hooligans", however, attacked the officer and the refugees in a very organised way and with the help of a substantial number of people. The official mentioned in the report sent his report in these terms:

As we approached the junction of two District Board roads at Kachua, we could see a large mob gathered on the Dutta Para road mainly in the vicinity of the bridge. Their numbers were augmented every minute by the number of men who were coming in on boats from the direction of Dasgharia as also from the west. We found that the mob had erected a sort of barricade of sheets of corrugated iron pieces of furniture, planks, etc., blocking the mouth of the roads. The mob began advancing forward... I noticed that those in the front ranks carried sheets of corrugated iron which they held in front of themselves as shield.23

In fact, the situation never returned to normal, and though the riot had begun on 10 October it never remained just a sporadic affair or a sudden eruption of violence. The entire area was ablaze with tension throughout the next few months. This prolonged

nature of communal violence also marks the uniqueness of the Noakhali riot, and the relevance of Gandhi's intervention has to be studied in this very context.  

On the other hand, the situation in the affected area was reflected in the popular psyche, even as late as May 1947. One of the local newspapers reported widespread lawlessness in the Noakhali villages:

The lawlessness was supplemented by the boycott of the Hindus by the Muslim villagers. For example on 23 March 1947, Yunus Mia Pandit while presiding over the meeting in Khilparato to celebrate Pakistan Day on 23rd March, criticised untouchability and absence of Purdah system among the Hindus and justified their boycott by the Muslims.

The completeness, as well as the continuation of looting in the region made the repatriation of refugees a difficult proposition. After touring the villages in Ramganj Police Station, a relief worker reported that "even after 4 months, people have not returned to many villages".

24 Gandhi's intervention in this matter is worth examining. His decision to come and stay in Noakhali has to be seen in the context and background of the complete communalisation of the society and its aggressive violent manifestation.

25 Desher Vani, Noakhali, 2 April 1947, p. 3. (Some issues of Desher Vani are available in the S. P. Mookerjee Papers.) Another report in the Hindustan Standard, Calcutta, 18 April 1947, p. 1, paints a distressing picture:

... recent happenings and the threat of economic boycott of the minority community and the persecution of the Muslims who are in the employment of the Hindus. A new technique has been developed in some areas of attempting to set fire to huts at night after locking up the ...... inside.... In broad daylight people are apprehended on the highway and their belongings are forcibly taken away.

See also, Amrita Bazar Patrika, Calcutta, 18 April 1947. Reports of houses being set on fire were numerous. For example, see Desher Vani, Noakhali, 19 March, pp. 2-4; 28 March, pp. 1, 4; 2 April 1947, pp. 3-5:

... on 20th March, the house of Kanai Bhowmik of Gopinathpur, P. S. Lakshmipur, was set on fire. At 2 O'clock in the morning, that of Harmohan Nath of Uttar Bhadri Village in Begumganj Police Station, was also set on fire the same night.

Ibid.

26 Desher Vani, Noakhali, 26 March 1947, p. 3. It was, however, not just the material loss that prevented repatriation, but also an all-pervasive fear and absolute lack of confidence.
The violence of such magnitude broke out on 10 October. "The immediate occasion for the outbreak of the disturbances was the looting of a Bazar in Ramganj police station following the holding of a mass meeting and a provocative speech by the person now arrested", wrote the Governor, "alleged to be the organiser of the disturbances - Gholam Sarwar Hussein."\(^{27}\) Gholam Sarwar, one victim claimed, had incited people to avenge the Calcutta killings in a public speech.\(^{28}\) This included an attack on the "Kutchery bari of Babu Surendra Nath Bose and Rai Saheb Rajendra Lal Ray Choudhury of Karpara".\(^{29}\) The crowd in Sahapur Bazar "10 to 12 thousand Mussalman" resorted to looting and destroying. Sahapur Bazar which the touring officer, Gupta, found completely devastated.\(^{30}\) The next action was the attack on the house of Rajendra Lal Roy Choudhury, the erstwhile President of the Noakhali Bar and a prominent Hindu Mahasabha leader in the district. A victim gives a graphic detail of the attack:

On the 10th Oct. 46 at about 8 A.M. a Muslim crowd of several thousand men, in batches of about 200 persons armed with deadly weapons passed by our house shouting Muslim League and other slogans such as 'Pakistan Zindabad', 'Larke lenge Pakistan', (sic) 'Want Hindu Blood' and 'Calcutta Retaliation' and moved towards the

\(^{27}\) Burrows to Pethick-Lawrence, 18 Nov., Mansergh, N.,(ed.), \textit{op. cit.} Vol. IX, p. 98.

\(^{28}\) Account by Jnanada Mohan Guha Raya, S/o late Kali Mohan Guha Raya, Village Shahapur, P. S. Ramganj, \textit{All India Congress Committee Papers} (hereafter AlCC papers), File No. CL-8, 1946, p. 353.

\(^{29}\) \textit{Ibid.}

\(^{30}\) R. Gupta to P.D. Martyn, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 56.
ex-M. L. A's house. At about 12 a.m. another mob including both outside and local
Muslims passed by our house shouting "Want Rai Sahib's head" "Sanyasi's Head" and on
their way towards the ex -M. L. A's house forcibly tried to drag away one Monoranjan
Bose of our house who was taken back by Rai Sahib and others. Immediately we sent
one Sailesh Roy of our house to P. S. Ramganj to lodge an ejahar but to our utter
misfortune he could never come back. On the same evening the mob looted and set fire to
Sahapur Bazar. On the 11th Oct. 46 at about 10 a.m. a crowd of about 700 Muslims
looted and set fire to all the houses of Southern Karpara and then attacked our house
with deadly weapons and shouting Muslim League slogans. In the scuffle that ensued in
trying to repulse the attack, one Brojonath Das of our house instantaneously (sic) died as
a result of an injury caused by a Konch thrown by one Monnu Mia of Nakaribari and
sometime after that the mob left our house and proceeded towards the house of Golam
Sarwar. After about an hour a mob of about 8/10 thousand Muslims led by Sarwar with
a gun in hand, proceeded towards our house shouting League slogans, "Sharwar
Zindabad ", `HINDUR RAKTA CHA' ( WANT HINDU BLOOD), "RAI SAHABER
MATHA CHAI" ( WANT THE HEAD OF RAI SAHIB), 'SANYASIR MATHA CHAI'
( WANT THE HEAD OF SANYASI). The numerical strength frightened us a great
deal. We, however, organised ourselves in two groups and took shelter in Rajen Babu's
building because the rest were kucha houses (about 100). The aged men including myself
(68 years old) women and children took shelter on the roof trying to repulse the attack
by throwing brickbats while the young men mostly guarded the building entrance with the
only available crude weapons usually meant for home use.... On reaching our house
Sarwar gave the lead by opening fire and the mob started wholesale looting and setting
fire to all our houses. By about 4 p.m. our defence completely broke down and they set fire to the building by spraying petrol and kerosene oil of which they had an abundant stock.... They asked us to come down and talk matters over with Baromiya and Chotomiya (Sarwar and his younger brother), who, they said, had forbidden further killings.... One Ledu Shaik, one Rajen Babu's client and others were persuading us to come down assuring safety on oath of KORAN. At this moment Sarwar ordered his men to go up by ladders and bring everyone down. The Goondas (Ledu Shaikh, Shamsul Haque, Abdul Rashid, Khalek, Sikandar, Kala Miya, Muslim Maji, Abdul Kasem, Doctor, Abul Hossan Choudhury, etc.) then came up in strength. The ladies were forced to get down. As soon as they got down they were struck and wounded, their ornaments and cash money being snatched away. The scattered men were overpowered, their hands were tied and forced to get down and murdered. Sarwar had declared a special reward for Rajen Babu's and Sanyasi's head. As soon as Rajen Babu was forced down, his head was chopped off and a batch ran away with it making a terrific shriek of joy (sic). 31

This and other attacks, on 10 and 11 October, seem to suggest that the violence was spontaneous. It was not; the frenzied psyche which made that "shriek of joy" possible had been building up for quite some time. The Government report as well as other sources support the fact that for some time now a volatile communal situation prevailed in the area. 32 Thus, in the third week of August, the Army had sent the 1/3rd


32 The Governor writes, "... the district had been in a particularly disturbed state for some time previous to the date of the outbreak of the disturbance". Burrows to Pethick-Lawrence, 18 Nov. 1946. Manserghi, N., op. cit., Vol. IX, p. 98.
Gurkha regiment to reinforce eastern Bengal as a note of alarm had been sounded from there.\textsuperscript{33} Lt. Gen. Tuker, of Eastern command, wrote, "Reports received at command H. Q. during the six weeks before the trouble started certainly indicated tension in the rural area, particularly in Noakhali and Chittagong".\textsuperscript{34}

The local Congress report, which was sent to the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee a few days before the riots began warned: "The Muslims masses have been converted into so many explosive bombs to explode any moment on the slightest pretext."\textsuperscript{35} The actual momentum to the riot was provided the week before October 10. The Muslims congregated in the mosques on 'Id day' (28 September 1946), were exhorted to avenge the Calcutta killings. The rumour of "Hindus (who) stealthily imported Sikhs and arms and kept them concealed in some important houses" spread rapidly.\textsuperscript{36} The crowd rushing out of the mosques raided a large number of Hindu houses.

\textsuperscript{33} Tuker, F., \textit{op. cit.}, p. 170.

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{35} 'Noakhali Situation', \textit{op. cit.}, p. 95.

\textsuperscript{36} H. C. Ghosh Choudhury, 6 Feb. 1947, \textit{PBLA}, Vol. LXXVII, No. 2., p. 39. It is quite interesting to note that in 1939 there were exactly the same type of rumours which had come to dominate the communal landscape. Rai Haran Chandra Sur, the local M. L. A. Made a statement on the situation. He said:

... From January 13, for about a fortnight, Muslim population in large numbers representing different Union boards, different associations and rival parties marched in processions, carrying flags and festoons and crying varying slogans. Simultaneously, some mischief mongers spread an unfounded rumour to the effect that Hindus were secretly conspiring to stop cow sacrifice on the occasion of the Bakr Id and for this purpose they had imported goondas from outside the province.
in search of 'the Sikhs' and arms. From October 2, there were frequent instances of stray killings, snatching of goods, and lootings throughout the district, and the authorities were well aware of these. General Tuker, however, informs us that the local authorities were quite in the dark. However, the district officials were regularly approached by the people, especially the Hindus, and were appraised of the prevailing situation. The President of the District Congress and the local M. L. A. met the Superintendent of Police and the District Magistrate on 12 September and informed them of "the apprehension of the Hindus of serious trouble during the Puja". The officials, for some unknown reason, acted very slowly, and the vicious rumours which

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37 'Noakhali Situation', *ibid.*, p. 95.

38 Jnanada Mohan Guha Roy, *op. cit.*, p. 353. See also, Diary of events, Acharya Kripalani's tour in Noakhali, *AICC Papers*, File No. P-5-1946, p. 87, for the chronology of the events:
- Sept. 28 - Id-day-Maulvi Ghulam Sarwar exhorts people;
- Oct. 2-8 - incidents of propaganda loot and extortion start;
- Oct. 10 - disturbances begin on mass scale.

39 He writes, "So little was the local civil administration perturbed by what was going on about them that the Commissioner of Chittagong on the arrival of the company protested against its being sent to him." Tuker, F., *op. cit.*, p. 171.

My first job the next day was to... go and pay my respect to the Superintendent of Police, Mr. Price and District Magistrate, Mr. Devali. They showed genuine surprise at my company coming to Comilla.... When they asked 'why has your company been sent to Comilla?' I replied, I was ordered to come... as the communal situation is pretty bad,... they both were more surprised than ever and said, 'what communal situation? Everything is perfectly peaceful here and always has been and we are expecting no trouble.... Two days later the Commissioner from Chittagong came to Comilla. He had heard nothing and was equally surprised.... At 3 p.m. on the 14th October the Superintendent of Police told me that very serious communal trouble had broken in the Noakhali district and also in the area about thirty miles south-west of Comilla.

The personal report of Captain Wimbush who was commanding 'A' company of the 4/2nd Gurkha, in Tuker, F., *ibid.*, p. 607.

were floating throughout the district were publicly countered by the authorities only as late as 7 October.  

The rumours and the communal preparedness indicated by the reports were the direct consequence of, and reaction to, the Calcutta killings. Noakhali Muslims had begun returning from Calcutta. This gave credence to the argument that the Noakhali Riot was a reaction to the Calcutta Riot. But, had it been just a spill over from the latter the other districts of the Province should also have reacted in the same manner as Noakhali. The argument that the presence of a large number of Maulvis who incited it also does not explain why the society did not react to them earlier. The singularity of the Noakhali riot lies in understanding why such an intense form of violence took place in a society not particularly known for its violent turns.

41 Professor Samar Guha and Ardhendu Bhattacharjee saw such a pamphlet issued on 7 October. They wrote, "Apprehending imminent trouble Nagendra Guha Roy a Congress M. L. A. issued an appeal to the authorities for proper protection. Even Superintendent of Police himself apprehending trouble issued a pamphlet asking people not to allow themselves to be carried". This was issued on 7th October. 'Versions of Eyewitness about Noakhali', op. cit., p. 30. Captain Wimbush of 'A' Company of 4/2nd Gurkha writes:
The Police did not inspire us; on certain occasions when we were going to make a raid on a village to arrest well known goondas we had proof that the police had given information of our intended move and we found that the men concerned had bolted. What was even more discouraging was the fact that when we occasionally did catch red handed goondas and send them to sub-divisional officer would release them on bail. It made us very angry... like it or not, the whole civil administration from top to bottom was communally minded.

Tuker, F., op. cit., Appendix VI, pp. 609-10.


43 Secretary, Bengal Provincial Congress Committee's Report, AJCC Papers, File No. P-5, 1946, p. 121. Even at the times of Wahabi and Farazi movements, Noakhali, which was a prominent center of these movements, did not witness inter-religious or inter-communal violence. Colonial accounts, not having much love for the Wahabis or Farazis, related that though they were intensely religious as well as quite orthodox they, however, did not commit acts of violence against the members of the other community (read Hindu). See Hunter, W. W., op. cit., p. 31.
What made the Noakhali Riot so distinct was the recourse taken to Islam, and its location in the entire episode - an aspect yet to be carefully studied. A close perusal of the acts of violence shows how efforts to legitimise these acts were attempted by taking recourse to Islam. This differentiates it from all other stages and forms of communal violence, where the point of contention stemmed from religious difference but religion was never the instrument to legitimise acts of violence. In Noakhali, however, it was not only the religion that constituted the identity of a particular community which was attacked violently, but also the symbols and the religion itself. And this was effected through the process of forcible conversion.

H. S. Suhrawardy, the Chief Minister, while answering the question of Dhirendra Nath Dutt on the floor of the Bengal Legislative Assembly, provided the figure of 9895 cases of forcible conversion in Tippera, while that for Noakhali was not known "but (which) ran into thousands". This submission came from the Ministry which had until now constantly maintained that the situation was not as grave as it was made out to be by the Hindu Press and Hindu propaganda. The Star of India clearly expressed the Government stand:

The reports appearing in the Hindu Press about mass conversion of Hindus have hardly any foundation. There have been cases, however, of Hindus going to Muslims out of sheer panic and offering to become Muslims. In almost all cases, the Muslims assured them they would be protected whether they remained Hindus or not.

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45 Star of India, Cal., 17 October 1946, p. 3.
This was made more explicit by a Muslim League legislator from Noakhali, Mujibur Rahman, who, responding to the Chief Ministerial statement, asked the latter whether he was aware of the fact that "the majority of the Hindu population gave up their religion out of fear". In all these cases, though deliberate attempts at conversion were denied by giving agency to the Hindus themselves, the argument brought out the fact that it was a state of fear or panic which would have forced the Hindus to give up their religion and accept Islam voluntarily. While Suhrawardy gave the figure of 9895 converts in Tippera, he was already in possession of Simpson's report which had estimated the number of conversions in three Police Stations of Faridganj, Chandpur and Hajiganj to be around 22550-22560, and the entire Hindu population of three villages, i.e., Gupti, Bachtali and Gobindpur of Faridganj Police Station. As regards Hindus volunteering to become Muslims, the term 'voluntary act' when qualified by the community's fear of destruction of their possessions and lives, meant something altogether different. Men with property were threatened; men without property were also intimidated. Fear stalked these villages. S. C. Ghosh, S. Ghosh and Bhatta of Karpara wrote, "On the 12th these miscreants planned to attack our house, one of the biggest houses with population of about 250.... In order to save our lives and properties..."


47 E. S. Simpson to Additional Secretary, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-53.
agreed to their proposal of conversion to Islam which they advanced as a condition precedent to our protection." The Zamindar of Panchgaon Lakshmi Mazumdar stated:

On 12th morning I called in some leading Muslim gentlemen for help and advice, notably Gholam Kibria (Late Mia of Bhaor, our Union Board President (U. No. 12), Nur Rahman (dismissed sub inspector of Police) and other people. They promised to save our life and property on conversion to Islam. Surrendering our guns and our agreeing to abide by their decision... I was told by a known Muslim to go to the nearby mosque with some other leading Hindu gentlemen like Chandra Kumar Mazumdar and others whom he named and told us that if we decided to save our life and property we must not make delay in making up our mind but must go to the mosque to be converted. We went to the mosque as we had no alternative where we found several Muslims armed with weapons.

These were definitely not voluntary acts, but were forced upon the population under threat of death. The Governor, in his report, accepted the fact that forcible conversion had taken place on a large scale.

The modus operandi of the phenomenon of forcible conversion indicates certain factors which went into making the Noakhali riot qualitatively different from other communal riots. A victim's account states:

The same night local Muslims in batches of 5 to 7 came to our house and asked us to get converted into Islam. We, out of fear, did not meet them. On the Saturday morning of 12 October around 200 Muslims came to our house and threatened that if we do not convert ourselves they would kills us. We, to save our lives, agreed to their proposal. Thus, the Maulavi Saheb of Shahapur High School converted me, and other members of my family into Islam. Then from amongst the crowd, the particular Maulavi Badu Mian and Mahmud Mian Patari forced us to destroy the images and photographs of all Gods and Goddesses. (Emphasis mine)
On 13 October they constructed a mosque in front of my house and later on Kudur Mian, Mujibul Huq Kerani and Khaliq Mian demanded one thousand rupees from me as contribution to the League.\(^2\)

Refusal to get converted was often met with violent reactions, as this particular experience details:

... these leaders assisted by the Mohammedans of the locality and neighbourhood localities joined the mob and looted everything they can. When this was finished they attacked my sons late Jasoda Kumar Roy, Prossanna Kumar Roy at Kergah and Chitta Ranjan Roy and my son-in-law Binode Behari Roy Marmundar of Babupur and asked them to get converted into Islam and to take beef. When they expressed unwillingness Mendi Meah of Abirpara cut the throat of my eldest son Jasoda Kumar Roy in the nature of Jabai and killed my two other two sons like wild beasts.\(^3\)(sic)

Though no circumcision is reported,\(^4\) the Hindu population was generally forced to perform certain practices as part of their allegiance to the new faith.\(^5\) The formula, as Simpson calls it, was the same almost everywhere. It included compulsion to wear a cap upon which was inscribed Pakistan, a lungi as worn by Muslims, to eat beef, recite the Kalma and offer prayers. Acharya Kripalani, the Congress President, on touring the affected villages wrote in his report:

Even after looting and arson and murder, the Hindus in the locality were not safe unless they embraced Islam. The Hindu population further to save themselves had to embrace en mass. As a sign of their conversion they were supplied with white caps used by the


\(^4\) E. S. Simpson to the Additional Secretary, *op. cit.*, p. 44. See also, Burrows to Pethick-Lawrence, 18 Nov. 1946, Mansergh, N., (ed.), *op. cit.*, Vol. IX, p. 99.

\(^5\) The Reports of E. S. Simpson, R. Gupta and J. B. Kriplani discuss these acts in details.
Muslims of the locality. Very often these caps were new and were stamped with the map of Pakistan with the words Pakistan Zindabad and Larke Lenge Pakistan.56

Thus, after conversion people were supplied with caps and copies of the Quran. The President of the Congress party noted that in one particular village, Khilpara, all the Hindus had been compelled to embraced Islam. Some Korans had been distributed and people were compelled to wear the Muslim dress. New caps with the league flag, a map of Pakistan and carrying the slogan 'Pakistan Zindabad' had been distributed in thousands.57 The fact clearly proves that all the arrangements were made by some very resourceful organisation in advance, accounting for the enormous quantity of cloth made available in days of strict cloth control. Simpson, Samar Guha and his associates, etc., also found the operation of a similar pattern in the method of conversion.58

Conversion was, however, at the same time, tried to be made permanent by forcing the victims to show adherence to their new faith. A victim's account denotes this clearly:

All the images of Gods and Goddesses have been broken and thrown away from the temples and dwelling houses. In brief, we are prevented from offering prayers and uttering mantras and cannot lead the Hindu mode of life. We are treated like slaves.... The Maulvie (sic) appointed by the Muslims, come every now and then and teach the Namaj. On Fridays, the Hindus are compelled to accompany them to the Mosque for Jumma. Wearing of Muslim caps and growing of beards have become the order of the

57 Ibid., p. 373.
day.... Muslims are asking the Hindus to purchase cattle and slaughter them with their own hands in Hindu houses on the coming Id day. 59

It is clear, therefore, that irrespective of the fact whether the riot was organised or not, the attack on religion was complete.

While the acts of forced conversion attacked the religious sentiments of the Hindus and brought communal violence to a high psychological pitch, it was the acts of violence against women, i.e., abduction and forced marriages that transported the Noakhali riot to a totally new arena of communal discourse. It gave credence to the Hindu communal discourse which had been depicting Hindu women as victims of the violent Muslim male. The instances of forcible marriages and abductions during the riot provided a retrospective justification for the Hindu communal argument which saw Muslim male violence on Hindu women as one of the primary reasons for the rapidly increasing Muslim population. 60

J. M. Datta, a statistician who wrote a series of articles on various aspect of Census figures and during the 1941 Census headed the campaign for 'impartial enumeration' that had been started in a big way by the Hindu Mahasabha, wrote: "The


60 The debate on the comparative growth rate of Hindu and Muslim population in Bengal while taking a communal turn invariably brought to the forefront the fact that the Muslim men had abducted and forcibly married Hindu girls. See Dutta, J. M., 'Continued abduction of Hindu women - its effect on the Bengali Hindus', Modern Review, Cal., Oct. 1941, pp. 358-59. See also, 'Will the Hindus Regain their Majority in Bengal? Yes', ibid., Dec. 1940, pp. 676-680; 'Are the Bengali Hindus Decadent? No', ibid., Jan 1940, pp. 35-41; 'Estimated Population of the Mohammedans in Bengal at the next Census', ibid., Aug. 1940, pp. 156-157; 'No. of Hindus not properly recorded at the last Census of 1931', ibid., Sept. 1940, p. 294.
surest way to destroy a nation or a community is to confiscate its women."  

61 He calculated the average number of abductions of Hindu women as 700 per year and concluded by saying, "... in any view, abduction of Hindu Women by the Mohammedans and their continued loss to the Hindu Community, so far as it affects the growth of the Hindus is a matter which cannot be neglected any longer without serious consequences."  

62 The large number of abductions of women and forcible marriages during the Noakhali riot may easily be placed within the ambit of this discourse. What

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

The demographic factor became politically more significant after the communal award (1932) and the operation of the provincial autonomy clause which saw election and formation of Ministries in 1937. A sense of loss of political power of the community was a point repeatedly stressed by the Hindu communal discourse while on the other hand the colonial attempts of classifying tribes and other groups separately from the Hindus also added to the already circulating apprehensions that the colonial authorities were out to crush the Hindus politically by reducing them to an extreme minority. This factor became further complicated with the demand of Pakistan as a separate homeland for the Muslims majority. The demand was, to a great extent based on demographic argument. This made the 1941 Census a bitterly contested operation. (See 'Hindus and the Census', Amrita Bazar Patrika, Cal., 18 Jan. 1941, p. 9; 'Coming Census', ibid., 3 Feb. 1941, p. 6). To the Hindu Mahasabha demand for an 'impartial Census enumeration' the Muslim League and even the Chief Minister, Huq, made statements which had communal tinge. They added to the communal propaganda which made the 'census' of 1941 a symbol and an arena of political contestation.

On the other hand, the Muslim communal perception was also significantly influenced by the question of population. The argument in the forties in favour of Pakistan was quiet often an argument based on the demographic consideration. For example, Casey reported his conversation with Nazimuddin in these terms: "I asked him about Pakistan. He said he was just on the point of writing to Jinnah telling... they want Bengal (less Burdwan Division), Assam, a subdivision of Bihar.... This would give them 58% Muslim in place of 51%.... He says that Muslims are more virile than the Hindus and breed faster." Entry on 5th September 1944, Personal Diary, Richard G. Casey Papers, Reel No. 1, p.58.

Forcible conversion, forcible marriages and mass exodus from the place brought these issues to the debate on comparative population growth.

Ibid.
was more significant was that it gave credence to, and validated, the hitherto debated and contested discourse.

The news of violence on women shook the Bengali Society. This is reflected in the appeals made by the provincial leaders. Labanya Prova Dutt issued an "appeal to the public and dealers for contributions of vermillion and Conchshell bangles for the riot affected women of Noakhali". The Muslim League Ministry also understood the importance of this fact. But it preferred to deal with it by minimising the gravity of the occurrences to the lowest possible degree. Answering the question on facts of abduction and forcible marriages, the Chief Minister delivered the figures of two (2) in Noakhali and five (5) in Tippera. His assertion came at a time when one of his own officers, Simpson had announced 716 cases of rapes and 157 cases of restraints from three Police Stations of Tippera i.e., Faridganj, Chandpur and Hajiganj.

Though the Press, especially the non-Muslim League ones, had exaggerated the numbers, often crossing the figure of thousands, Mrs. Sucheta Kripalani and Miss Muriel Lester's efforts at rescuing these hapless women, and the description of their condition in the Press and through the 'tales of the refugees' certainly created a different

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63 *Hindustan Standard*, Cal., 7 November 1946, p. 4.

One of the most important concerns of the Bengali Hindu Society was to take back the abducted and forcibly married girls into the Hindu fold. For example, "most urgent and imperative need now is to rescue the members' abducted women who were entombed in Burka and who for obvious reasons could not be approached by the military,... only a military police force composed of women or duly authorised women workers, fully protected by the military, could help in... work", said Dr. Amiya Chakravorty, who worked closely with Gandhiji. *Hindustan Standard*, 7 Nov. 1946, p. 3.


65 E. S. Simpson to Additional Secretary, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-53.
psychological world. The efforts of the Chief Minister to minimise their importance was
counter productive and embittered the Hindu community.\textsuperscript{66} However, without a detailed
or confirmed report, the numbers, figures and condition of the women remained a subject
of widespread speculation and exaggeration which further aggravated the Hindus.\textsuperscript{67}

Violence on women provided the necessary credibility for the Hindu communal
portrayal of the "Muslim men's virility and potential aggression". This again brought alive
fears expressed in the debate on the increasing Muslim population during the two census
operations of 1931 and 1941.\textsuperscript{68} This clearly shows the operation of the logic of communal
ideology.

What was important in Noakhali was not only the aggression on women but also
the consideration of women as repositories of the honour of the community and its
traditions. Conversion and forcible marriages together meant that the entire religious
complex of a population was sought to be forcibly changed. They were not just being
forced to convert into Islam, but also abducted and forced into marriages with Muslim
youth.\textsuperscript{69}

\textsuperscript{67} 'Calcutta observes Noakhali Women's Day, Dec 1', \textit{ibid.}, 29 Nov. 1946, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{68} A reaction of a follower of Gandhi provides a clue to the kind of emotion and frustration that
was generated by the aspects of the Noakhali riot:

\begin{quote}
Most urgent need now is to receive the numberless abducted women who were
entombed in Burkha and who for obvious reasons, could not be approached by the
Ministry.... It is intolerable that helpless women victims of a cold blooded planned
assault should suffer hourly distress and that we should be alive and still be unable to
save them.
\end{quote}

\textit{Hindustan Standard}, Cal., 7 Nov. 1946, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{69} See Chapter 1 for a discussion on this debate.
The local Muslim population either actively or tacitly participated in these acts. Muslim women in the affected areas, at times displayed their covert support. When Hindu women sometimes rushed into neighbouring Muslim homes in a state of panic, it was the women of the households who removed the vermilion mark and broke the conch shell bangles. This was, however, not out of any altruistic motive of hiding their identity from the attackers. N. K. Bose narrated the experience of a girl who told Gandhiji about how the ladies in a Muslim household asked her to become like one of them. A similar experience was detailed by Miss Muriel Lester who stayed in Noakhali during the period doing relief and refuge works. She wrote:

Worst of all was the plight of the women several of them had to watch their husbands being murdered and then be forcibly converted and married to some of those responsible for their death. These women had a dead look. It was not despair, nothing so active was there. It was blankness... the eating of beef and declaration of allegiance to Islam has been forced upon many women as a price for their lives. 

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69 One eyewitness thought forced marriages were 'the shortest possible way to make conversion a reality'. See Samar Guha and Ardhendu Bhattacharya. 'Versions of Eyewitness about Noakhali', op. cit., p. 28.

70 A substantial section of the Muslim population actively and tacitly supported the conversions that were carried out. H. S. E. Stevens, Chief Secretary, Government of Bengal to the Secretary, Government of India, Home (Pol), File No. 18/10/46.

Most assailants were known to the victims. For example, the residents of Sonaimuri village, P. O. Begunganj, provided the name and address of about 60 hooligans who were not arrested by authorities but who had been threatening the villagers. The Inhabitants of Sonaimuri Village to the President, Indian National Congress, AICC Papers, File No. CL-8/1946, pp. 381-383.


72 Bose, N. K., My Days with Gandhi, Orient Longman, Delhi, 1974, p. ...

73 Modern Review, Nov. 1946.
The nature of violence in these attacks forces one to look beyond the descriptions and seek a causal explanation. The Noakhali riot, as mentioned earlier, was generally seen as just a reaction of and retaliation to the Calcutta riot which had taken place seven weeks earlier.\(^{74}\) The Muslims returning from Calcutta brought with them exaggerated stories of brethren suffering in Calcutta which vitiated the already tense situation created by rumours.\(^{75}\) Ghulam Sarwar in particular and the Muslim League in general gave this reaction an organised form. Thus, the 'theory of reaction' and that of 'organised violence', actually constituted one logical whole. The organised crowd, similar pattern of the act of conversion everywhere, the large number of caps with Pakistan written on them and availability of cloth, petrol, etc., prove this argument.\(^{76}\)

A close perusal of the events and acts of the riot, however, reveals one pertinent point. An insistence on 'the fact that the riot was organised' minimised the extent of communalisation of Noakhali society. Communalisation was, in fact, complete and hence, the event needs to be studied from a different angle - the significant ideological make-up of the society which had made the riot one of penetrative violence. In fact, the

\(^{74}\) Noakhali riot is generally considered chronologically as well as thematically as a 'reaction' to, or extension of the Calcutta killings. What I have tried to argue in this study is that one should not premise itself on this 'reaction' aspect as it dilutes a number of other issues.

\(^{75}\) Emphasis on this aspect will dilute the fact that a substantial proportion of the Muslim population, barring some noble exceptions, was under the spell of communal ideology. By pinning the blame on the party or a person, we, in fact, tend to overlook the hegemonic presence of communal ideology.

\(^{76}\) 'Chittagong residents passed a restless day' on the Direct Action Day. A letter from Chittagong to Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee, S. P. Mookerjee Papers, Subject File No. 151, p. III. Chittagong, according to Lt. Gen. Tuker, was equally tense. See Tuker, F., \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 170-71, 607.
'organised core' of the rioting crowd was more like the executive wing of the completely communalised Noakhali society.

It was also not just a reaction to the Calcutta riot on account of the fact that Bengal had witnessed other riots, in the near past the Dacca riot of 1941. Noakhali never 'reacted' to them, nor in this manner. Second, there were other places which were communally as tense, such as Dacca, Faridpur, Chittagong. But they did not erupt like this. This also suggests that the roots of this particular violence have to be studied more carefully than has so far been done.

The completeness of communalisation could be seen in the nature and composition of the people involved in the communal violence in those villages. From the very beginning, i.e., 28 September, on the day of Id, Muslims were exhorted to avenge the Calcutta, killings. At this time, the 'organised core' was given lead by the erstwhile peasant leader Ghulam Sarwar. This core was composed of about 1000 to 1200 men which included some demobilised soldiers.\(^7\) The presence of this group gave the appearance of organised violence.

However, what was more significant was the fact that there existed, with some noble exceptions, a total collaboration and co-operation of insiders, i.e., neighbours of

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\(^7\) Tuker wrote:

Ghulam Sarwar's gang was estimated to be about one thousand, a certain number of ex-army personal were reported to be adherents. The main gang had split into smaller gangs of one hundred and fifty to two hundred and these had been working in conformity with an obviously worked out plan.

the same village and people whom the victims knew. Attackers were most often known to the victims. In cases where the victims sought help from people they knew, some facet of communal ideology was ever present in the way help was rendered conditional. Lakshmi Majumdar of Panchgaon stated that when he asked for help, his Muslim friends advised him to get converted first. In most cases, the victims were asked to convert to Islam by the persons whose help they had sought. This third group of people were the tacit supporters and included even Police officials. This was evinced by the latter's

78 In most cases people were attacked by inhabitants of their village. The Maulvi who converted people was often a local, and the hooligans who were also of the same village were supported by crowds coming to attack from outside. Thus, we need to correct the understanding of this riot put forth by the authorities, that it was "activity apparently organised of a body of hooligans who have exploited existing communal situations". Burrows to Wavell, Mansergh, N., (ed.), op. cit., Vol. IX, p. 98. See also Government of India, *Home Political*, File No. 5/55/46.

"Some held, as so often they do hold that the rioters were men", wrote the adjutant of the 1/3rd Gurkha regiment, "who had come in from outside. That is not so they were local inhabitants who worked up to a pitch of frenzy by such agitators as Ghulam Sarwar...." See Tuker, F., op. cit., p. 618.

79 See Lakshmi Babu's statement, 'Versions of Eyewitness about Noakhali', op. cit., pp. 64-68.

80 Ibid.

81 Police officials as well as the local Government Officials acted in a highly communal manner. The house of Lakshmi Majumdar, Zamindar of Panchgaon, was looted in the presence of the Superintendent of Police. See R. Gupta to P. D. Martyn, ibid., p. 55.

The Secretary, Noakhali District Congress Committee, gave an account of the situation prevailing there prior to the rioting:

In some cases the officers have been poisoned with communalism. The Hindu officers are apathetic and studious, cautious not to incur the displeasure of the other community and for the matter of that the Muslims.... Government and almost all Muhammadan officers are inclined towards the Muslim League and do not hesitate to condone the aggressive acts of the Muslim hooligans by helping suppression of evidence against them submitting false reports.

Tuker, F., op. cit., p. 178.
inaction on complaints to be present at moments of violence, thereby, tacitly supporting acts of commission of violence. In fact, when the house of the Zamindar of Panchgaon, Lakshmi Majumdar, was looted and he was asked to convert, the Superintendent of Police was present. Hindu policemen's houses were burnt too, and people in the vicinity of police stations were not spared.

This shows that communal ideology had a complete hegemonic presence. The physical reality of this was manifested in a total societal rupture. How this hegemony was established, therefore, becomes the crucial question facing historians.

II

The demography of Noakhali district had a distinct Muslim composition. A substantial, in fact, the majority of the local Muslim population had "descended from the aboriginal

82 Lakshmi Majumdar's statement, 'Versions of Eyewitness about Noakhali', op. cit., pp. 64-68.

83 R. Gupta stated, "These people residing so close to the thana are in such a state of terror still that they are reluctant to talk about what they have suffered as a result of looting... The Quarters of the Hindu Constables (yards from the thana) were gutted." R. Gupta to P. D. Martyn, 'Versions of Eyewitness about Noakhali', op. cit., p. 54. These instances show not only communalisation but also the confidence of communal elements by the time they actually resorted to violence.

84 Therefore, the total communalisation of Noakhali Muslims shows that at any particular juncture even a factor like communalism could become an overdetermined one. When the peasants of Noakhali attacked the Hindus, it was not as peasants that they attacked the latter but as Muslims. Communalism is a significant explanatory category in this context.

racies of the district". In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Wahabi movement made inroads into the religious psyche of the practitioners of Islam in this region. The area which was under the influence of the Wahabis during the early decades of the century were the districts of Barasat and Nadia. Maulana Imaduddin of Sadullapur, Noakhali, who was an associate of Syed Ahmed of Rai Bareily (who preached Wahabism and led the Wahabi army against the British) came to Noakhali after the defeat of the Wahabis in the battle of Balakot (1850), and propagated their doctrines among the Muslims of Noakhali and Tippera. Maulana Keramat Ali, who was married in Chunua village of Noakhali, and "wielded great influence in Faridpur and Backerganj" also propagated the message of Islam with renewed fervour. His influence on the society is described, as late as 1961, in these words:

The influence of Maulana Keramat Ali in the reorientation and rejuvenation of religious thoughts and beliefs and performances of Noakhali Muslims have been profound and lasting. Maulana Keramat Ali taught the essence of Islam and the country side was swept with an urge for practising in everyday life what Islam stood for. People found in his teaching the true values of Islam and rallied round his banner for self-less service to humanity. Each household became a stronghold of Islamic culture and prayers, fasting, Zakat and Haj were the main pillars of their activities.

86 Ibid. Also see, Webster, East Bengal and Assam District Gazeteers, Noakhali, Pioneer Press, Allahabad, 1911, p. 39. "Vast majority of the Shekh (Muslim cultivators) and lower sections of the community are descended from the aboriginal races of the district." Ibid.


88 Rasul, Khaled Masuke, op. cit., p. 27.

89 Ibid., pp. 27-28.

At the same time, Farazi doctrines also took deep root in Noakhali and the surrounding areas of Tippera.\textsuperscript{91} Hazi Shariatullah was the person who strengthened the Farazi tradition in the area.\textsuperscript{92} Thus, as Kaviraj points out, “the Wahabi and the Farazis were two separate streams in the Muslim revivalist movement in Bengal, side by side”.\textsuperscript{93} The streams of Wahabi and Farazi movements constituted what we know as the reform movement that swept across these parts of Bengal in the second half of the nineteenth century. Rafiuddin Ahmed opines that the clue to the “ties of understanding between the Ashraf and the Atrap and the emergence in rural Muslim society of a sense of identity, which included the distant patricians, were developments of the late 19th century”.\textsuperscript{94} “The reform movements”, he argues, “however limited in their direct impact, acted as a catalyst in all these and helped bring Muslim masses with Ashraf aspirations, although the elitist competition for loaves and fishes of office or jobs had nothing to do with their immediate problems”.\textsuperscript{95}

These reform movements also saw the propagation by the Anjuman societies, which vehemently attacked the syncretic elements in the socio-cultural life of rural

\textsuperscript{91} Rasul, Khaled Masuke, \textit{Noakhali Loksahitye Lok Jiboner Parichay} (Reflection of Folk life in the Folk literature of Noakhali), Bangla Academy, Dhaka, 1992, p. 26.

\textsuperscript{92} \textit{Ibid.}; also see, Kaviraj, Narahari, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 63-66, 100.

\textsuperscript{93} Kaviraj, Narahari, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 99.


\textsuperscript{95} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 37-38.
Bengal and tried to "rid Islam", as Rafiuddin Ahmed says, "of all that they considered spurious accretion, including much that was revered by the orthodox". 96 This added to Wahabi puritanism in the society.

All these factors contributed to the religiosity of the people which became quite visible to the occasional visitor in the early years of the twentieth century. 97 This was also emphasised by writers in the 1960s, and even 1980s. The Census authorities reported in 1961:

Traditionally, therefore, religion plays a very important part in the conduct and behaviour of the Muslims of Noakhali and is a very real thing to them. Prayers are punctually offered by them at the appointed time. Every village has its own mosque and it is rarely that one can find a grown up adult not responding to the call of prayers.... Maulavis and Hafizes form a very large section of the community and they run a number of private madarasas. Noakhali Maulavis proudly claim to have kept the banner of Islam flying all corners of the province for generations. 98

Writing on the popular culture and life in Noakhali, a writer recently said that the most striking fact about Noakhali's society is Islam, and the ways it influences the life of the people in this district. 99 Historians have linked the lower incidence of violence in that society to the predominance of religion. 100 It was true that the crime rate in this district

96  Ibid., pp. 58-59.
97  Apart from the normal religious symbols, visitors often came across some novel experiences in Noakhali. An Assistant Settlement Officer, himself a Muslim, experienced a new facet of Noakhali life. "Not once but several times", writes W. H. Thompson, "he had instances in which two venerable Muhammedans in their own village before all their acquaintances had sworn the exact opposite on the Koran". W. H. Thompson, op. cit., p. 29.
was relatively lower than that in other districts.\textsuperscript{101} In fact, the contemporary sources reveals that the predominance of Wahabi and Farazi movement in the district did not create situations of communal violence.\textsuperscript{102}

This brings us to a new problem. If, even in the days of Wahabi and Farazi ascendance, Noakhali did not witness conditions for violence against a particular community, then how do we explain the extent and nature of violence during the winter of 1946. If one accepts that the 'folk Islam', or what is termed the rural or little tradition of Islam by sociologists and social anthropologists, of rural Bengal with its syncretism, (which had been targeted by the Wahabis and other organised efforts to prune its un-Islamic practices), gradually followed the puritan or orthodox model of what Ernest Gellner calls 'high Islam', then one can suggest that the reform movements acted as catalysts in accelerating this societal movement.\textsuperscript{103} The Wahabi as well as the Farazi movements had a strong kernel of revivalism and fundamentalism. Despite claims by some authors that movements like Farazi had a strong component of class consciousness, the movements themselves clearly showed that sectarianism and revivalism were such strong components in their philosophy that they represented neither the whole

\textsuperscript{101} A comparative study of the crime rate of different districts of pre-partition Bengal will also be a valuable aid to analyse the agrarian structure, levels of violence, etc. Such a study for an earlier period brings out the fact that Noakhali, indeed, had a lower rate of crime and even political violence, in comparison with most of the other districts in the Province. See Khan, Bazlur Rahman, \textit{Politics in Bengal, 1927-36}, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1987, Appendices.

\textsuperscript{102} For a treatment of Wahabi and Farazi movement in Bengal, see, Kaviraj, Narahari, \textit{Wahabi and Farazi Rebels of Bengal}, People's Publishing House, Delhi, 1982.

Noakhali - Tippera Riots

community nor a class. If the history of Noakhali were to be studied from the point of view of Hindu / Muslim history (for that matter like the history of Pakistan is studied by some, or the land wars of the 18th and 19th century by Christopher Bayly), then the 1946 riot could be explained as the culmination of the struggle that the suppressed class and community had been waging since earlier times. This will vindicate the position of historians like Azizur Rahman Mallick, Muinuddin Ahmad Khan, and a host of other historians from Pakistan who see the movements of the Farazis and Wahabis as representative of the pre-history of Pakistan, because they represented the struggle of the Muslims for their liberation from Hindu domination. In the same vein or in the same logic, therefore, the genesis of the Noakhali Riot could be seen as the logical culmination


107 The Noakhali riot, according to this line of enquiry, would represent the conjuncture of the Muslim attack on Hindus because the latter had prevented the Unity of Islam in the shape of Pakistan. The fallacy of this treatment becomes apparent in the context of the Noakhali riot of 1946, because, in the month of October 1946, it was not the ‘religious agenda’ of Ghulam Sarwar which was the determining factor but the overdetermination of communalism.

Ghulam Sarwar, who had been fighting the League, at this point, accepted the agenda of the Muslim League, i.e., Communalism. What gave the riot its character was definitely the fact that it was the surrender of the religious leaders and their fundamentalist and revivalist positions to the communal agenda of the League. Thus, the Noakhali riot is a pointer to the situation when religious fundamentalism surrenders before communalism or gets mixed with it and provides justification for the latter’s violence. Simultaneously, the riot cannot be studied through the framework of ‘religious History’ or ‘History of Islam’, as it would do injustice to the historical context and at the same time would uncritically accept the idea of the inevitability of cultural conflict expressed most unhistorically by the conservatives like Samuel Huntington.

In “The Clash of Civilisation?” he writes, “The fault line between civilisations will be the battle line of the future... The most important conflict of the future will occur along the
of the 'march of history', or an inherent "cultural clash", if one accept the contention of historians like Hossainur Rahman, who says,

... Hindu Muslim conflict was not merely a religious one in the western sense of the word; it was cultural as well, the protest of an alien civilisation which could only be reconciled by new synthesis. But the reverse happened: all their antagonistic characteristic dormant for generations were quickened to new life by Hindu and Muslim leaders.108

However, the Noakhali society did not display the kind of inter-communal conflict and violence in the twentieth century which the other parts of the province had demonstrated. This suggests that the penetration of the Wahabi and Farazi traditions, which manifested itself in the religiosity of the people, was not conducive to communal violence. Wherein, then, lies the explanation for the exceptional nature of communal violence that took place in 1946?

The roots of this lay not in the backwardness of the region, revivalist movements or aggravation of the economic conditions themselves. These only provided the material and ideological background. It may be suggested that the clue to the violence be found in the ideology of communalism, and the politics based on it.

cultural fault line separating these civilisations from one another.” Huntington, Samuel P., "The Clash of Civilisation?" Foreign Affairs, 72: 3, 1993, pp. 22-49.

Rahman, Hossainur, Hindu Muslim Relations in Bengal, 1905-1947. Study in Cultural Confrontation, Nachiketa Publication, Bombay, 1974, p. 97. It is, therefore, not very difficult to understand why it is ultimately the ‘civilisational difference’ which is forwarded as the determining factor for the establishment of Pakistan. Khalid B. Sayeed, for example, says, "perhaps a dominant or decisive cause of Pakistan is that there has never been taken place a confluence of the two civilisation in India - the Hindus and the Muslims. They may have meandered towards each other, but on the whole the two have flowed their separate ways". Sayeed, Khalid B., Pakistan, The Formative Phase, OUP, London, 1968, p. 9.
The western district of Chittagong division, Noakhali, was described by W. W. Hunter in 1876 in these terms:

The present limits of the district of Noakhali contain population of 961,319 inhabitants and an area of 1852.18 square miles. The principle civil station which is also the chief town of the district is Sudharam of Noakhali, situated in 22°48'N and 91°6'E. The word Noakhali, which is never applied to the station, but only to the entire district, is taken from the name of a Khal or natural water course, which passes through the town of Sudharam and runs southwards into Meghna. Noakhali is bounded on the north by the district of Tippera and the state of hill Tippera and the district of Chittagong and by the eastern mouth of Meghna, known as Sandwip (Sandip) channel; on the south by the bay of Bengal and on the West by the main stream of Meghna.\footnote{Hunter, W. W., Statistical Account of Bengal, Vol. VI, p. 23.}

The features that characterised the predominantly agrarian society of East Bengal were typical of Noakhali and Tippera, i.e., mainly Muslim small holding peasants, and scattered uppercaste Hindu, rent-collecting and moneylending groups.\footnote{Bose Sugata, Agrarian Bengal Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919-1947, Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp. 183-4.} The bulk of the peasantry had rights of occupancy raiyats and were not sharply differentiated (at least till the survey of 1910). What differentiated the agrarian structure of Noakhali was that the Hindu high caste landed gentry had a relatively weaker presence here than elsewhere in the Province.\footnote{ibid., p. 184.} There were also lesser numbers of landlord agents here than anywhere
else in the Province. There was, however, a substantial population of untouchables and depressed castes both in Noakhali and Tippera.

Noakhali and Tippera were centres of radical peasant agitation since the 1920s. The area had responded to Gandhi's non-co-operation movement and produced some exceptional mass leaders like Muniruzzaman Islamabadi and Ashrafuddin Ahmad Choudhury - some of the staunch anti-colonial critics in the Province. Predominantly a jute growing district, Tippera was hard hit by the depression in the 1930s, and this had the impact of radicalising the peasant agitation which at this time began to take on strong organisational shape as manifested by the crystallisation of the Krishak Samities in the district. While the pro-Congress and pro-Krishak Proja Samiti peasant groups came into prominence under Maulvi Ashrafuddin Ahmed Choudhury and Abdul Malek, the groups under Asimuddin and Yaqub Ali showed communist sympathies. Leadership was mostly in the hands of the Maulavis and the religious leaders, a reflection of the religious texture of the society.

Noakhali, also a jute producing centre, was hit by the depression which created conditions for radical peasant agitation in the '30s. In this region, we come across Krishak Samiti factions of Rashid Ahmed, and of Ghulam Sarwar and Muhammad

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113 Census of India, Report on Bengal, Govt of India, Delhi, 1932, pp. 502-511.
Fazlullah respectively. Quite significantly, the major issue here was 'debt settlement'. Ghulam Sarwar emerged as the most prominent voice. He gave vent to his strong anti-Congress utterings and expressed his distaste for Fazlul Huq's supposedly pro-Congress feelings. In Noakhali too the leadership was in the hands of the religious leaders.

In the 1937 elections, five out of ten seats in Tippera were won by Tippera Krishak Samiti. The pro-Congress peasant leaders like Maulavi Ashrafuddin Ahmed Choudhury and Mukhleswar Rahman were disqualified by the colonial authorities from taking part in the elections. On the other hand, four out of six winners in Noakhali namely, Md. Ibrahim, Ghulam Sarwar, Syed Ahmed Khan and Abdur Rezak were local Samiti activist. Significantly, they were also part of the influential section of ulama in the region. Those activists whose activities the authorities thought as antagonistic to their interests were always prevented from participating in the political arena in the region. Therefore, the colonial authorities clamped down upon the activities of Syed Ahmed, who had shown an inclination towards the Congress.

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116 Ibid., p. 203.

117 Humaira, Momen, op. cit., p. 65.

118 The colonial authorities had much to worry about the activities of Ashrafuddin, who had been leading the 'mass-contact programme' of the Congress in the district quite successfully. See Bengal Congress Committee to Congress Mass Contact Committe, 16 August 1946, Rajendra Prasad Papers, File No. IX/3/6/31, as quoted in Bose, Sugata, op. cit., p. 208.

119 Ibid., p. 207.

120 Ibid., p. 209.
It seems that there was a congruence in the area of operation of the extremist factions of the Noakhali Krishak Samiti and that of extreme communal rioting in 1946. The corollary to this argument is that an extreme peasant consciousness (read class consciousness) was transformed into an extreme communal identity (communal consciousness). Drawing the argument up till 1946, is it possible to argue that the Noakhali riot was primarily a peasant uprising in which religion played an important role?

It has been argued that in almost all peasant wars, religion and religious symbols have played an important role. But, in the case of the Noakhali riot, there was nothing to indicate that the rioting crowd was fighting an agrarian battle by using religious symbols. There were hardly any demand or uniqueness about the rioting crowd which may be termed as 'peasant' or demonstrating grievances of the peasantry vis-à-vis the landlords. The attacks fully demonstrate that the identity of the victims zeroed in upon was, not as landlords or gentry, but as Hindus. Was this because of the "inadequacy of

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121 Ibid., p. 204. He wrote, "The extreme wing of the Krishak Movement was especially influential in Ramganj, Lakshmipur and Raipur Thanas (which became the scenes of the Noakhali riots of 1946). Ibid.

122 See Bak, Janos M., and Benecke, Gerhard, (eds.), Religion and Rural Revolt, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1984.

123 Sugata Bose links the riot to economic distress and sees it as a breakdown of the symbiotic relations which had been holding the peasant society together. The communal violence of 1946, for him, was the result of the continued economic dislocation that became acute with the "Depression Decade" of 1930s, and continued thereafter. This had the effect of squeezing the 'credit' available to the peasants, thereby affecting their day to day existence. The economic distress was aggravated by the war and the Famine resulting in the break up of this 'symbiotic relationship'. This, together with the radical peasant politics in the area, according to Bose, explains the "Noakhali-Tippera riot". See Bose, Sugata, op. cit., pp. 181-231.

124 See Part I of this chapter.
the peasant communal ideology" as Partha Chatterjee suggests, "to provide an adequate perceptual guide for the identification of friends and enemies in a situation of rapid agrarian change." \(^{125}\)

A study of the politics and protest in Noakhali and Tippera located within a historical context, however, presents a more complex picture. The districts had suffered tremendously during the 1930s and 1940s. The slump in the jute market had the effect of drying up of the traditional channels of credit in the predominantly jute growing districts of North and East Bengal, i.e., Mymensingh, Faridpur, Rangpur, Bogra, Pabna, and Tippera. \(^{126}\) A further setback was caused by the debt-settlement boards that began operating after 1935. Noakhali, which also had a substantial jute growing area, witnessed the stoppage of credit facilities from the moneylending class. \(^{127}\) What was crucial here

\(^{125}\) Chatterjee, Partha, 'Agrarian Relations and Communalism in Bengal, 1926-35' in Ranajit Guha (ed.), Subaltern Studies, Writings on South Asian History and Society, Volume, I, OUP, Delhi, 1982, p. 37. Since Partha Chatterjee does not accept the category of communalism as a tool of analysis or an ideology to understand peasant behavior, he is unable to explain why the peasants, labourers, and others attacked the landlords, peasants and moneylenders only as Hindus. (He, in fact, will not explain it because for him 'communalism' obscures any study of the 'second domain of politics', i.e., the subaltern level. See Chatterjee, Partha, Bengal 1920-47 The Land Question, K. P. Bagchi, Calcutta, 1984.

\(^{126}\) "The crisis came in 1930... the cultivators found themselves unable to meet the ordinary obligations of life, in normal times they would have tided over the crisis by resorting to the village Mahajan but on this occasion this source of supply practically dried up." DM Tippera to Under Secretary, Poll Dept., 26 Dec. 1931, Government of Bengal, Home Poll Dept., Confidential File 849(1-9)/31, as quoted in Bose, Sugata, op. cit., p. 190. For Bose, the drying up of credit facilities holds the key to understanding the rupture in the peasant society in East Bengal. See ibid., pp. 190-203.

Omkar Goswami also comes to a similar conclusion through his study of the slump in agriculture - jute - in the districts of North and East Bengal. See Goswami, Omkar, 'Agriculture in Slump: the peasant economy of East and North Bengal in the 1930s', IESHR, Vol. 21, No. 3, 1984, pp. 335-360

\(^{127}\) In answer to the question on moneylending, the Noakhali Landholders' Association as well as the Noakhali Bar Association submitted before the Land Revenue Commission that "village
was the fact that there was a significant section of radical peasant agitators who had been demanding total debt remission.¹²⁸

A district where the dominant characteristic of the household economy was its 'perennial indebtedness', the combined effect of the slump in the jute market, operation of the Debt Settlement boards, and the radical peasant politics based on the demand of complete debt remission created conditions which adversely hit the sections which needed credit. This found expression in the 'no rent' demand in these districts.¹²⁹ The outbreak of war in the eastern quarters of India imposed serious hardships on the population of Noakhali and Tippera. The forcible evacuation terribly angered the people.¹³⁰ Uptil April 1942, seventy five thousand people from Noakhali and twenty thousand from Tippera were evacuated out of a total of one and half lakh people.¹³¹ The situation was made worse by the serving of short notices and in fact, there were cases where only a 48 hour notice had been given. Government help was the last thing which


¹²⁸ The struggle for control over the Krishak Samities in Noakhali, particularly in the area of Lakshmipur and Ramganj thanas, led to the emergence of leaders like Ghulam Sarwar Hussaini and Syed Ahmed, both of whom had a "close connection with organised armed dacoity". (See Bose, Sugata, op. cit., p. 208). The extremist section led by Ghulam Sarwar demanded complete debt remission.

¹²⁹ There was an attack on Rajendralal Roy Choudhury's house. Later, in a meeting held under the Presidency of M. H. Ali, the District Magistrate of Noakhali, Ghulam Sarwar, M. L. A., at the request of the DM, asked the audience to pay the rent and other legal dues. See Star of India, Cal., 20 Feb. 1940, p. 3.


people received, and to complete the picture in Feni, some people were forced to evacuate again.

People had to practically carry their belongings on their head.\textsuperscript{137} Instances of oppression by the Police, and atrocities committed by the Military during the evacuation and afterwards were numerous. Harassment of villagers and molestation of women became a common feature.\textsuperscript{134} In Feni, about twenty thousand labourers engaged in the construction of a road for the Military went on a strike to protest against these oppressions and atrocities.\textsuperscript{135} Kamini Kumar Dutta, M. L. C., and a respected Congress leader, in his report to the Secretary, BPCC, described one of many such instances of violation:

These girls (Ayesha Khatun, aged 16 and Punjaberenesa, age 15) are son's wife and sister's daughter of one Abbas Ali Chaukidar, an old man. This old Chaukidar in tears did give the pitiable story to me. He told me that the girls wanted to run away when the alarm was raised of the raid by the soldiers but he advised them to remain inside assuring that as he was a Chaukidar in uniform the soldier will not molest his family members.

\textsuperscript{132} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 31.

\textsuperscript{133} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 30.

\textsuperscript{134} The incidents in the villages of Alokdiya and Chunua caused great consternation. In Alokdiya, a soldier attempted to molest Ameena Khatoon, wife of a villager, Ahsanullah. Later on the soldier killed Ahsanullah. Ameena Khatoon’s testimony says:

\textit{... All of a sudden I felt a pull from behind and turned to find another soldier pulling me by hand. I raised a cry and attempted to strike the man with the daw in my hand... the soldier... chased my husband to the south. A short while after I heard the sound of the gunshot and came to learn... that my husband had been shot dead by the soldier.}


The incident at Chunua village also involved the molestation of women. K. K. Dutta, whom the BPCC sent to enquire into the matter, found “the people very much agitated but they were”, as he said, “determined to resist any such aggression”. K. K. Dutta, M. L. C. to Secretary, BPCC, 23. 4. 1942, \textit{ibid.}, File No. G-31 (Part II), 1942, pp. 43-55.

\textsuperscript{135} Khitish Ch. Roy Choudhury, \textit{et al}, Noakhali to AICC, \textit{ibid.}, p. 69.
But he was disillusioned when he was forcibly removed from his house and the girls were raped... 136

The collapse of civil authority and the imposition of Press Censorship aggravated the woes of the people. The frustration of the inhabitants of the area found expression in the letter of these Congress workers:

Minor incidents of soldiers' zoolum, of course, are very common.... The situation in the Feni subdivision is very serious.... We appeal to all Indian leaders to take up the cause of Feni. We appeal to Smt. Naidu, Smt. Amrit Kaur and Begum Shah Nawaz to take up the cause of Indian womanhood. We approach particularly to Gandhi... and only Gandhiji's strong and just pen can possibly help in the matter, make the government realise the gravity of the question. 137

The local political workers earnestly appealed to the national leaders to come to redress the grievances of the local people. 138 However, before the leadership could react to these appeals, Gandhi gave the Quit India call. The suppression of the Congress and the other groups who supported the Quit India Movement was as complete in the Province as it was throughout the country 139.

Further, at this juncture, the Province was face to face with the devastating famine. Noakhali and Tippera, being deficit districts, were affected from the very beginning. Both the unavailability of rice as well as the soaring price of rice and paddy affected the districts. 140 The commandeering of boats by the British in Tippera, Noakhali

136 K. K. Dutta to Secretary, BPCC, 23.4.1942, ibid., p. 55.
138 Ibid.
139 See 'Review of the Revolutionary Matters', 1943, Intelligence Branch, File No. SS II.
140 Even those areas where evacuation did not take place were now hit badly. See Nazimuddin, 7 July 1943, Proceedings of the Bengal Legislative Council (hereafter PBLC). In this case,
and other coastal areas had seriously hampered the movement of food grain. The districts of Noakhali and Tippera soon became the worst hit regions, and in Noakhali, the three Police Stations of Begumganj, Lakshmipur and Ramganj were the most adversely affected areas, especially Lakshmipur.

A sample study of the effects of famine on the population of ten villages in the most adversely affected western part of the district, i.e., the Police Stations of Begamganj, Ramganj, and Lakshmipur, by an anthropologist, showed that some of the effects of the famine were far more crucial than those factors that had been shaping the peasant society of Noakhali prior to its outbreak. It showed that the period between March and December 1943 witnessed an increase in indebtedness, loss of property and changes in the occupation of certain groups of population, which exceeded the rate of change during the period 1939-1943.

therefore, it appears that we have to accept the contention that along with the crisis in 'entitlement' (FEE approach of Amartya Sen, 1981), though here it was primarily due to the inflationary side of the famine, 'food availability' (see Alamgir, 1984) was also an extremely important factor. See Goswami, Omkar, 'The Bengal Famine of 1943: Re Examining the Data', IESHR, XXVII, 4, Oct-Dec. 1990, pp. 335-364.

141 Prafulla Ghosh to Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, 24.4.1942, AIICC Papers, File No. G-31 (Part II), 1942, p. 32. Dr. Ghosh warned the leadership that the commandeering policy might lead to extreme food scarcity. The extent of the British fear of Japanese advance could be seen in the seizure of even bicycles. "In Comilla town, bicycles were seized. The first bicycles seized were that of Dr. Nripendranath Basu, General Secretary, District Congress Committee." Ibid., p. 33.


143 Ibid., p. 185.
The National leadership of the Congress had already launched the Quit India Movement to protest against the colonial apathy and, in fact, insensitivity to the suffering of the Indians. The happenings in Noakhali and Chittagong demonstrated the necessity of addressing this attitude of the British. Bengal was the worst hit as a result of the war, the famine, and the subsequent epidemic that ravaged the region. And in almost every situation, the role of the colonial regime (or lack of it) was obvious. But instead of an anti-colonial upsurge, 1946 saw the outbreak of a communal riot of acute intensity. Where does the explanation lie? The answer it may be suggested, lies in the nature of politics in the region.

These districts had been the arena of a sturdy Krishak movement since the 1920s and the leadership of the Maulavis and ulamas was quite prominent. But this Krishak movement was soon embroiled in provincial politics. And here, the ideological presence of nationalism and communalism became important.

The beginning of 1940 saw strong 'no rent' demonstrations by the peasants in the area over which Ghulam Sarwar's leadership held sway, i.e., Lakshnipur, Begumganj and Ramganj Police Stations.\textsuperscript{144} There were even attacks on the household of a prominent landlord.\textsuperscript{145} The changes in politics may be attributed to this liquidity crunch which the peasants were suffering from.

\textsuperscript{144} Star of India, Cal., 20 Feb. 1940, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid.
The period between 1941-43, when the Muslim League Ministry was not in power, witnessed an intense struggle between the Muslim League and the Krishak Proja Party in a bid to capture political space. The intensity of the antagonism that prevailed in the area between the two parties can be gleaned from the official description:

On 10 January 1942 Nazimuddin and his colleagues went to Noakhali where a black flag demonstration against them was organised by some people. The volunteers of Muslim League under the leadership of Maulavi Mujibur Rahman, Secretary, Noakhali District Muslim League, tried to snatch the black flag.... As a retaliation when the Chief Minister went to Noakhali, the students and the Muslim League workers behaved disgracefully. Maulavi Mujibur Rahman issued an objectionable leaflet which was a political squib attacking the coalition party.146

The arrest of Sarat Chandra Bose when he was all set to enter into an alliance with Fazlul Huq, had forced the latter to join hands with Syama Prasad Mookerji. This was a crucial shift which facilitated his being branded a pro-Hindu as well as his party, unable to serve either class or community interests. This 'fight for space' within Muslim politics, given the logic of communalism, invariably meant heightening the anti-Hindu attack, because only then could the League justify its claim to be the only authentic voice of the Muslims.147 This becomes clearer from a subsequent communication of the District Magistrate who, on 4 February, wrote:


147 In fact there were reports of "Mohammedan villages being poisoned with communalism" as early as in January 1939. See Harendra Kumar Sur, 16 March 1939, *PBLA*, Vol. LIV, No. 3, pp. 419-420.

One major ingredient of the politics of Communalism is to demand complete political allegiance of the followers - a point which brings communalism closer to Fascism as an ideology, as well as 'a politics' based on it. For a discussion on different manifestations of fascist ideology, see Sternhell, Zeev, 'Fascist Ideology' in Walter Laquer (ed.), *Fascism A Reader's Guide*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1976: Gregor, [121x768]Noakhali - Tippera Riots [157x723]269
He then accused me of taking strong action against the Muslim League leaders of this place and said that he had a discussion with the Governor about them. I told him that action had been taken in the district where it was necessary as the local leaders of Muslim League were propagating class hatred and communal passion in connection with their propaganda. He (Suhrawardy) said that the policy of the Muslim League was not to quarrel with the Hindus and that all their quarrel was with Fazlul Huq. I told him if that was so, why did Sir Nazimuddin allow Khan Bahadur Abdul Gafoor, the President of the Dist League to make a highly communal speech. I also mentioned to him that the Secretary of the District Muslim League, Maulavi Mujibur Rahman, Mukhtar had issued highly inflammatory pamphlet attacking not merely the Hon. Chief Minister, but the Hindu religion, Hindu Culture, and Society.... Mr. Suhrawardy had then to admit that these leaders had gone to some excess. (italics mine)

While the bureaucracy did not actively support the League, it did turn a blind eye to its anti-Huq tirade. The Chief Minister himself resented this attitude of his officers as he discerned the strong anti-Hindu aspect of it. Fazlul Huq wrote,

During the last seven months, the leaders of the Muslim League have had the greatest latitude in carrying on their propaganda throughout the province. In each meeting atrocious lies have been circulated about me and my cabinet generally. The sympathy of the Muslim officers for this anti-Hindu propaganda is well known and well established.  


There are problems in studying and analysing communalism within the Fascist paradigm, an issue that has been raised by Achin Vanaik. (See, Vanaik, Achin, ‘Situating threat of Hindu Nationalism: Problems with Fascist Ideology’, EPW, 19 July 1994, pp. 1729-1748.) But a comparative study of Communalism and Fascism as ideological structures which shape organisation of parties, i.e., communal parties, shows that there are striking similarities between the structure of the Fascist parties in Italy, Spain and France, the Nazi Party in Germany and the Parties in question in the present study. The colonial context was what made the contextual difference. Studying Communalism as well as Fascism as ideologies manifesting societal context and contemporary politics, will definitely be helpful in contextualising as well as analysing Communalism too. For a strong advocacy of studying National Socialism as an ideology see Davidowicz, Lucy, The Holocaust and The Historians, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1981.


149 Ibid., File No. 328/42

Fazlul Huq was very agitated and he wrote to the Chief Secretary about it:
It was at this juncture, when the area was already under severe crisis due to the evacuation, army atrocities and floods, that the famine appeared on the scene and by March 1943, it was a full-fledged reality. In a move of great significance, the Ministry of Fazlul Huq was dismissed and the Muslim League was asked to form the new Ministry.

Apart from its other manifestations, the famine also had an inflationary aspect. Ramkrishna Mukherji who was in Noakhali in December 1943, wrote:

... we can understand why these people were so much affected by the food crisis. In 1943 the prices of the food stuffs, specially of rice, began to soar up at a tremendous rate while these people could neither be provided from their small holdings nor could they manage to buy the necessities from their meagre income. The result was that those who had some assets began to sell them and those who had not such things or had lost them already either starved and faced the natural consequence of death or became sick and invalid or took to begging and depending on charity to maintain their physical existence any how.\(^{151}\)

People starved on the one hand because there was no rice to eat, and on the other because some sections did not have sufficient wherewithal to buy rice.\(^{152}\) It is this particular aspect of the economy of Noakhali and Tippera that has to be studied more

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I know that officials are League minded and I do not mind saying so very frankly to you. But as a Minister in charge of the Home department, I have had to resent very much the manner in which my administration is being flouted by even responsible officers. I am not making this remark on account of what had happened at Noakhali but this is my general impression.

\(^{150}\) Amrita Bazar Patrika, Cal., 1943, p. 4.

\(^{151}\) Mukherji, Ramakrishna, op. cit., p. 232.

\(^{152}\) Ibid.
carefully. Though out of the scope of this thesis, we will try to examine some of these features in greater detail.

The outbreak of war and the resultant market forces prompted the jute industry to induce the Government to fix price of jute, which the jute growers constantly complained was very low.\footnote{See Suhrawardy's admission of the fact that in June 1943 the Indian Jute Mill Association (IJMA) had fixed a maximum price for raw jute which the Government of Bengal considered low, and had approached the Government of India to bring the price up to a level of parity with the price of manufactured goods. Suhrawardy, 1 February 1944, \textit{PBLA}, Vol. LXVII, No. 1, p. 20. The manufacturers, however, did not increase the prices as they reasoned that the shortage of coal supply had forced them to close a number of mills - an argument that the Chief Minister did not contest. \textit{Ibid.}} The famine situation with its inflationary effect resulted in a further drop in price.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, Vol. LXVI, No. 2, pp. 250-255.} Representatives of jute growing districts constantly demanded a higher price for raw jute.\footnote{See Assembly Debate, 9 Feb. 1944, \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 320-25.}

Tippera, being a jute growing district, was significantly affected. The low prices of the cash crop further impinged on the peasant household economy because of the simultaneous rise in the price of food-stuff, which increased the gap between the revenue from agricultural products and the expenditure on food stuffs. Noakhali, neighbouring Tippera, also revealed that the peasant's household economy which was characterised by deficits, regularly forced him to take recourse to loans from the moneylending classes.\footnote{\textit{Report of Land Revenue Commission (Food Commission)}, Government Press, Alipore, 1940, Vol. V, pp. 536-585.} However, there was a rapid recession of moneylending in the area due to the combined...
effects of peasant agitation, formation of debt settlement boards and demands for total remission of debt. The under-rajyats and the agricultural labourers were the most seriously affected sections of the population.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 577-581.}

The famine worsened this situation. Mukherji's sample survey indicated a significant increase in the percentage of outstanding loans incurred mainly to meet the expenditure on food stuff in the period between March 1943 and December 1943 without any concomitant increase in their income to meet this increased expenditure.\footnote{Mukherji, Ramkrishna, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 190.}

The calamity had brought moneylending back, but now the lending class wanted a solid security. On the other hand, mortgages would not result in the liquidity necessary to buy food stuff in a tyrannically inflated market - only a sale would accomplish this. As a result, there was a rapid transfer of landholdings during this period.\footnote{Mukherjee in his survey in the two Police Stations of Noakhali after the famine indicates this. See Mukherjee, Ramkrishna, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 187.}

Thus, there was an immense change in the peasant economy of Noakhali and Tippera as the economy of subsistence was acutely hit. This, however, did not constitute a change in Noakhali's basic agrarian structure.

Hand in hand with this process was the effort of the Muslim League to entrench itself in the area by means of the relief work which it provided as a part of its governmental responsibilities. It was, therefore, not just a coincidence that the leaders from the area, i.e., Ghulam Sarwar, Abdur Rezzak, began to attack the Ministry in the
strongest terms from the beginning of 1944. By March 1944, with the famine situation no longer a pressing problem, Ghulam Sarwar's declamations against the Ministry reached a crescendo, and by the end of the year he pulled out all the stops in his war against the Muslim League.

This was incidentally the time when the League was at the peak of its mobilisation drive. The issues that the League raised such as Secondary Education and the applicability of the CR formula had caught the imagination of a substantial number of people.

It was at this time that the split in the local Muslim League, on the issue of elections to the District Board, occurred. We are informed that the League went on a reorganising drive soon after, beginning with the suspension of the persons involved in the split. What is interesting here is the line of attack chosen by Ghulam Sarwar to retain his political hegemony, and the Muslim League's counter offensive.

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161 See Ghulam Sarwar, 16 March 1944, ibid., Vol. LXIX, No. 2, pp. 205-06.
162 See Chapter 1 for a discussion on the theme.
163 There were demonstrations staged in Noakhali on the issue of Secondary Education Bill in which people supported the Ministry. See Star of India, Calcutta, 15 May 1944, p. 3.
164 FR, second half, January 1945, Government of India, op. cit., File No. 18/1/45.
165 Ibid.
Sarwar belonged to a Pir family, and had almost 3,500 disciples. In the 1930s, he emerged as a radical peasant leader in the district. His area of activity comprised of the Police Stations of Ramganj, Begumganj and Lakshmipur. He demanded complete remission of debts. Through the Krishak Samiti organ 'Krishak Vani', he propagated his idea of "elimination of Mahajan elements from Debt Settlement boards", and he even urged the cultivators to give evidence collectively against the Police in dacoity cases. He later on entered into electoral politics while retaining his "Samities as a separate movement".

With the onslaught of the famine, his attack against the Muslim League took an extreme turn. On 27 March 1944, he accused the Ministry of being responsible for the famine, and regretted the fact that he did not support Fazlul Huq against the Muslim League.

Further Report by Secretary, BPCC, AICC Papers, File No. P-5, 1946, p. 121. The Report says: There one Mr. Gholam Sarwar an ex M. L. A. started against the Hindu rich men. As far as we know he belong to a Pir family and has about 35,000 disciples. He is an ex M. L. A. having been a member of the KPP in the last Assembly and this time also he stood for election as a candidate for the same Party opposing the League candidate.

Ibid.

Alec Reid, who visited Noakhali in February 1949, described Ghulam Sarwar and his area of influence. About Sarwar he said:

Sayed Gulam Sarwar Hussaini, Pir of Daira Shariff, Dhampur, Noakhali. That is what he calls himself, for the sake of brevity let me simply refer to him as Gulam Sarwar by which name he has been most widely known in Bengal these past two years.


Bose, Sugata, op. cit., p. 203.

Ibid.

Rezzak, its failure to provide sufficient religious education in the primary schools. He even criticised it for putting a ban on the Hindu Mahasabha conference in Lori in Bakerganj district. Sarwar, however, retained his economistic line of attack against the League, and on this plank he entered into the election fray in 1945-46 as a Muslim Parliamentary Board candidate. His campaign, as a report suggests, "though economic in nature, naturally degenerated into communalism and the agents of the League took advantage of the situation thus created by the open propagation of Mr. Ghulam Sarwar and the whispering propaganda of the natives of Noakhali returning from Calcutta...."

The Muslim League's electioneering revolved around the slogan of 'Pakistan' and the invocation of the community's support towards it. It brought the entire campaign into the sensitive arena of 'Islam', 'Muslims' and 'Pakistan'. Ghulam Sarwar was defeated by the Muslim League Candidate Fazlul Karim by about 20 thousand votes in Ramganj cum Raipur Muslim Rural constituency. He polled 4,642 votes as against 24,336 of the League candidate. The defeat of Ghulam Sarwar, therefore, suggests the defeat of his political stance. On the other hand, the victory of the League shows the strength of the

170 Ghulam Sarwar, 13 March 1944, ibid., pp. 29-31. The major attack on the Ministry was from the other leaders in the area. Abdul Rezak attacked the Ministry for its failure to introduce religious education, particularly Koran classes, in primary schools. See, ibid., p. 26.

171 Ghulam Sarwar, 5 June 1944, ibid., Vol. LXVII, No. 6, p. 145.

172 'Further Report, Secretary BPCC', op. cit., p. 121.

173 See Chapter II.

174 Detailed Statement Showing the Result of Election to the Bengal Legislative Assembly, Return Showing the Result of Elections to the Central Legislative Assembly and the Provincial Legislatures in 1945-46, Government of India Press, 1948, Sl. No. 157, p. 131.
Pakistan demand, and its penetration into the popular psyche. At the same time, however, the anti League candidates, mostly those of the Jamait-ul-Ulama-i-Hind and the Muslim Parliamentary Board, fared better than any other candidates opposing the League any where in the Province. Abdur Rezzak of Jamait in Feni, Rezzakul Haidar Choudhury of Muslim Parliamentary Board in Noakhali North, and Manzurul Huq Shah of Jamait in Noakhali West, did better than any non-League candidates in the Muslim seats in the Province. This indicates that even though they were defeated they retained scope for their initiative.\(^{175}\)

Sarwar had opposed the Direct Action Day in the area. The Calcutta riot, however, provided him with the opportunity to regain the initiative. Realising the potential of the ideology of communalism, Sarwar abandoned his exclusive economic, i.e., peasant, agenda, and became a Leaguer. Around this time, Fazlul Huq had joined the League which, in a sense, paved the way for Sarwar's entry into the party.\(^{176}\) He brought to the fore the anti-Hindu rhetoric latent in his hitherto anti-landlord and anti-moneylender position. His ideas found fertile ground amidst the Muslim population, who were repeatedly reminded by the League that the Hindus were bound to destroy them unless Pakistan was established. By the time the Calcutta riots and the rumours surrounding it had made forays into the peasant psyche of Noakhali, the pro-peasant, economic content of Sarwar's rhetoric was completely lost into oblivion, and when the


\(^{176}\) Jnada Mohan Guha Ray, *op. cit.*
rioting mobs attacked Shahpur Bazar and the house of Rajendra Lal Roy Choudhury in
the region, Pakistan, Muslim League and Islam were the dominant motifs around which
the rioting crowd, tacit supporters and silent spectators got mobilised.

An explanation for this channelisation of the supposedly class-based agitation
into a community-based attack lies in an analysis of the political economy of the region.
But what defies this mode of explanation is the fact that it was religious hatred that made
this riot qualitatively different. Studying it as just a reaction to the Calcutta riot does not
explain the elaborate organisation and the religious fervour. The mobilisation of the
entire religious apparatus for a purpose which was either a reaction or, as some suggest,
an approximate class war made it unique. While absence of sharp differentiation
provided the economic foundation for a solid peasant bonding, religion concretised and

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177 Even the prominent Muslim League Minister, Mr. Shamsuddin Ahmed, who toured Noakhali questioned the argument of the riot being a class war. He said: "It had been said that Muslim ryots had retaliated on zamindars. If that was so why then were these forcible conversion". Hindustan Standard, Calcutta, 10 November 1946, p. 3.

For Partha Chatterjee, "the crucial element which deflected peasant agitation into
anti-Hindu movements was not that most zamindars were Hindus and that the grievances of the
predominantly Muslim tenantry consequently took on anti-Hindu overtones, but the fact that
Muslim rent receivers, where they did exist were considered part of the peasant community
whereas Hindu zamindars and talukdars were not". Partha Chatterjee, 'Agrarian Relations and
Communalism in Bengal 1926-1935' in Ranajit Guha (ed.), Subaltern Studies Writing on
South Asian History and Society, Vol. 1, 1982, p. 11.

This explanation together with his argument that lack of differentiation (till the onset
depression) of the East Bengal peasantry helped the peasant movement aim against the
exploitation of the zamindar's rent, abwabs, etc., (see, Partha Chatterjee, 'Agrarian Structure
in Pre Partition Bengal' in Ashok Sen, Partha Chatterjee and Sugata Mukherjee, (ed.),
Perspectives in Social Sciences 2: Three Studies on the Agrarian Structures in Bengal
1850-1947. OUP, Delhi, 1982) can explain the Noakhali riot only as a peasants' class war,
fought with the help of their notions of community.
cemented that bond in Noakhali society.\textsuperscript{178} Not going into the debate about the different racial characteristics among the Noakhali Muslims, it would suffice to say that religion, i.e., Islam, had a living presence among the Muslims of Noakhali.\textsuperscript{179}

What was happening in this period was that the political fight for space between the Muslim League on one side, and Ghulam Sarwar and the Krishak Proja on the other had resulted in the former's adoption of a posture which targeted Hindu religion and Hindu culture. Thus, it took the fight to a different plane - the level of communalism and culture - to fight its political battle.

By 1945-46, the terms for a fight between the Muslim League and the parties representing peasants' interests had already been set by the former's invocation of community and its politics of religion. Lacking an alternate agenda, Ghulam Sarwar's position of simply opposing landlords and moneylenders, which was fast losing out to the Muslim League's agenda, left him little space to manoeuvre. The election results of 1946 showed that while the Muslim League had established its hegemony, the religious leadership in the shape of the Jamait-ul-ulama-I-Hind and the other peasant leaders like Abdur Rezzak and Ghulam Sarwar who opposed the League did manage to get considerable number of votes. This suggest that they did not surrender their leadership.


\textsuperscript{179} "Muhammedans are not quite the same race as the Muhammedans of other districts.... The bulk of the Muhammedans in Bengal are the descendents of converts from the lower Hindu castes with only a level of the original Muhammadan invaders". Thompson, W. H., \textit{op. cit.}, p. 28.
At the same time however, the limitations inherent in the political agenda of the Krishak Proja movement forced Sarwar to surrender to a position which called upon the community with the promise of Nationhood. At this juncture, leaders like Ghulam Sarwar succumbed to the communal agenda, which had now become the hegemonic agenda. The line dividing his own economistic agenda (mixed with the religious) and that of the Muslim League, had always been very thin. Therefore, the shift did not require any great effort on his part, and he was helped by the presence of a communalised society. It is, thus, communalism which provided dynamism to the social process and mode of resistance. Finally, the most significant fact remains that there was the possibility of this communalisation of the society leading to uncontrollable consequences, as evinced by the Noakhali Riot.

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180 Here, we need to explain why the peasant movement in the other part of Bengal, i.e., West Bengal, led to the struggle against the colonial government while East Bengal witnessed a communal upsurge. It appears that it was the presence of an anti-colonial critique in the peasant agenda in the western part of the Province that explains the dominant position that Nation rather than Community occupied in the political imagination. Partha Chatterjee, however, thinks that it was due more to the absence of differentiation within the East Bengal peasantry which explains its solid community bond and consequent failure to identify the class enemy. In the western part, according to him, it was the advanced stage of differentiation that made the peasantry act against the colonial state. See Chatterjee, Partha [op. cit.]

B. B. Chaudhury, criticising this explanation of Chatterjee, writes:

The particular state of the peasant society in Eastern Bengal might preclude an acute conflict within it and thus create a sense of solidarity among the peasants when encountering a common adversary. Why should this sense of cohesion and solidarity be incompatible with the organisation of a movement against the government? A relatively advanced stage of differentiation in the peasantry might make a united movement of the entire peasant community somewhat difficult to organise, since certain issues might not be acceptable to all....

IV

The Muslim League, as we have seen, had been fighting for space in the political realm in the region. The strong presence of the Krishak Samities and peasant leaders in Tippera, and of radical peasant leaders in Noakhali prevented the League from establishing its hegemony. The famine and the subsequent changes it wrought saw the League making headway with its aggressive propaganda. It had its problems in Noakhali, but by the time the riot took place, the agenda and the terms for political activity had already been clearly set by the League. And it was a communal politics that it took recourse to, as a means to tide over the fissures in interests.

Once the riot broke out, the League's attitude was one of dismissal of the gravity of the situation, and to absolve the Noakhali League members. Notwithstanding his criticism of the happenings, Suhrawardy, from the very beginning maintained that the incidents taking place were just a 'problem of law and order'. In the leaflets that were dropped over Noakhali by an RAF plane, the Chief Minister reasoned that the Muslims

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181 See pp. of this chapter.

182 "Muslim League activity is reported from Rangpur, Noakhali and Rajshahi.... In Noakhali, local interest centred around the election of the District Board Chairman which resulted in the split in the Muslim League ranks." FR, January 1945, second half, Home Political, File No. 18/1/45.

183 FR, February 1945, first half, ibid., File No. 18/2/45.

184 Shamsuddin Ahmed was moved to tears during his visit to Noakhali town. Hindustan Standard, Calcutta, 25 November 1946, p. 1.

185 Ibid., 17 October 1946, p. 3.
should not indulge in such activities as they no longer had any reason to feel left out, because now the Muslim League had been given a share in the Interim Government.\textsuperscript{186}

The Provincial Muslim League leaders did pass a resolution condemning the lawlessness in Noakhali and Tippera district and exhorted the Muslim Leaguers to behave well.\textsuperscript{187} At the same time, however, they condemned the Hindu Press for the exaggerated reports of the happenings in Noakhali.\textsuperscript{188} The Press supporting the League, on the other hand, completely ignored the truth and reality of the situation and asserted that "there had been no incidents in Noakhali after 17 October and that the situation was definitely under control".\textsuperscript{189}

The Provincial League's Enquiry Committee report also played down the nature and extent of the violence and denied any validity to the events.\textsuperscript{190} It said that there had been no mass upsurge and that the incidents were not evidence of "a rising of one community against the other".\textsuperscript{191} It accepted that there were "instances of conversions..."

\textsuperscript{186} One hundred thousand such leaflets were dropped by an RAF plane. \textit{Hindustan Times}, Delhi, 20 October 1946, p. 1.

\textsuperscript{187} \textit{The Star of India}, 25 October 1946, p. 1.

\textsuperscript{188} \textit{Ibid}.

\textsuperscript{189} See a Press note which says: "Mr. Suhrawardy refutes Hindu Press canard. The communal disturbances at Noakhali district have been localised. The situation in almost all the affected areas is well in hand said Mr. H. S. Suhrawardy. He deprecated the coloured version of the news from Noakhali... The reports... about mass conversion of Hindus have hardly any foundation...." \textit{Ibid}., 17 October 1946, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{190} \textit{Ibid}., 25 October 1946, p. 2.

\textsuperscript{191} \textit{Ibid}.
and of stray marriages". The total number of deaths due to outrage, according to it, was "15 in Tippera and less than 100 in Noakhali". What it thought important to emphasise was the fact that "not a single scheduled caste man was either killed or injured" (sic). Thus, even at this stage the Muslim League leaders were conscious of the importance of the Scheduled Caste population and the need to project themselves as the latter's political ally vis-à-vis the Congress which claimed to represent all segments of society.

The reality, as was clear from the events in Noakhali and Tippera, was that the communal fury did not leave the Scheduled Caste population untouched. In most cases they were the worst sufferers, as in Haemchar. The League leaders soon, however, shunned their defensive posture and began to put pressure on the Police to withdraw all criminal cases against persons involved in the rioting. The manner in which the local Leaguers as well as the Muslim League Ministers defended the persons accused of murder, rioting, arson and, in a few cases, rape revealed the character of the upsurge.

192 Ibid.
193 Ibid.
194 Ibid. It should be noted that the Muslim League was trying to have a strategic alliance with the Scheduled Caste leaders and Jinnah had recently nominated J. N. Mandal to the Interim Government. Raj Mohan Gandhi suggests that Gandhi's visit to Noakhali was also guided by this attempt on the part of Jinnah. Gandhi, Raj Mohan, The Good Boatman, A Portrait of Gandhi, Viking, Delhi, 1995, p.
195 The adjutant of the 1/3rd of Gurkha Regiment writes: "The Chief Minister most unfortunately ordered the release on bail of goondas who had been arrested...." F. Tuker, op. cit., p. 618.
This added to the lawlessness to the extent that the local Hindu population was driven out of the villages of Noakhali and Tippera.\(^{196}\)

The Bihar riot, at this time, provided the rationale for the communal attitude and acts of the Leaguers and the League Ministers. Thus, the communal acts of one community legitimised and validated that of the other.\(^{197}\)

During the Calcutta killings, whatever might have been the attitude of the Muslim League Government in general and that of Suhrwardy in particular, at least there was a semblance of an effort at tackling the situation (though only after two days had elapsed), and Suhrwardy, along with the other leaders, toured the city in an effort to restore peace. But in Noakhali even this token gesture was lacking; there was instead a far more terrible attitude, where the Ministers prevented the administration from bringing to book the real culprits whose names were listed in the complaints.\(^{198}\) The Ministry constantly attempted to discourage even the relief workers operating in the affected areas. The culmination of this policy of actively conniving with the communal forces lay in the attack on Gandhi for his presence in Noakhali.\(^{199}\)

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\(^{196}\) See Desher Vani, Noakhali, 2 April 1947, pp. 2-3; Hindustan Standard, Cal., 18 April 1947, p.4; Amrita Bazar Patrika, 18 April 1947, p.5.


\(^{198}\) The residents of Sonaimuri village of Begumgunj Police Station wrote: "we have forwarded an application mentioning their very case and the names of the hooligans to the authority to immediately check but as ill luck would have it, we returned being frustrated as they paid no heed to it." The inhabitants of Sonaimuri village to the District Magistrate, n.d. November 1946, *AICC Papers*, File No. CL-8, 1946, pp. 379-383.

\(^{199}\) See the next chapter for a detailed discussion.
At the local level, some of the Muslim officials connived with the rioters. The general belief that prevailed among the Muslims was that "the Ministry would take no action if anything was done against the Hindus". The lawlessness that prevailed in the area was to a great extent the result of the active collaboration of the local officials with the rioters. This, then, was how a communalised society appeared.

The Congress had a strong presence in the area, especially in Tippera, where it had taken an initiative in the Krushak Samities. Ashrafuddin Ahmed Choudhury, a prominent peasant leader and Congress member, along with Kamini Kumar Dutta, held sway over the peasant agitation there.

The Congress workers in the area helped in the difficult task of evacuation and, as we have seen, voiced the people's anger to the higher leadership. Communal

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200 Even the Chief Minister was aware of the general attitude for in the leaflets that were dropped from air, he stated: "... I am told that my government will not take action against those who break the law in name of the Muslim League". Hindustan Standard, Delhi, 20 October 1946, p. See also, AICC Papers, File No. G-53, p. 132.

201 See, Prafulla Ghosh's letter to Nehru, 24.4.1942, AICC Papers, File No. G-31 (Part II), 1942, pp. 3-27. Similarly, local Congress workers, Kshitish Ch. Roy Choudhury, et al, wrote to the All India Congress Committee leaders:

The situation in the sub-division is very serious.... We appeal to the All India leaders to take the cause of Feni (sub-division). We appeal to Smt. Naidu, Smt. Amrit Kaur and Begum Shah Nawaj to take up the cause of Indian womanhood. We appeal particularly to Gandhi... and only Gandhiji's strong and just pen can possibly help in the matter, make the Government realise the gravity of the question.

propaganda was already at work and attempts were made to communalise cases of molestation of women; it was the Congress workers who tried to stop this.\textsuperscript{202} The Congress, however, found it difficult to help people because of its meagre resources.\textsuperscript{203}

The organisational fighting in the Bengal Congress also had its effect on the local Congress activities in Noakhali, while in Tippera a large section of the local Congress was dissatisfied with the officials at the District Congress level.\textsuperscript{204}

How far these weaknesses affected the party's ability to fight the prevalent communal ideology could have been evaluated properly had the Congress not given the Quit India call. In 1942, when the Noakhali-Tippera people were in a state of extreme privation, most of the Congress workers, especially the Gandhian workers, were not on the scene. The Noakhali District Congress Committee was declared unlawful by the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{202} K. K. Dutta in his report to the Secretary, BPCC, on 23. 4. 1942, regarding the incident of molestation in Chanua village wrote:
\begin{quote}
There is no communal feeling. The general mass both Muslims and Hindus are solidly united. Some mischief makers are trying to give a communal complexion to the affairs stating that Sikh soldiers have intentionally molested Moslem women but work of the Congress volunteers has frustrated that effort. In evacuation and in these affairs Congress workers have been helping the public there. (sic) (italics mine)
\end{quote}

\item \textsuperscript{203} "Due to the shortness of the time, serious weakness of the Congress organisation in Bengal since 1939 and the vastness of the task in the evacuation of the population of such a big area, we could not much help the people with the meagre resources at our disposal". Haran Chandra Ghosh Choudhury, President, Noakhali District Congress Committee to Jawaharlal Nehru, \textit{ibid.}, p. 79.

\item \textsuperscript{204} In 1940 itself, the peasant mobilisers like Yaqub Mia and Kamini Kr. Dutta clashed with the Tippera Sadar Congress Committee President, Nripendra Nath Bose, during the organisational elections where Yaqub Mia and his group, trying to prevent the election, said, "we have been suffering all these years...." See \textit{AICC Papers}, File No. P-5(Part II), 1940, pp. 125-131; 147-151.
\end{itemize}
Government of Bengal under the Indian Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1908. The President of the District Congress Committee was arrested on the charge of "keeping in his possession some prejudicial leaflets". These activists would come out of jails only in 1945 and miss the course of events that would lead the politics towards an intense electoral battle with great ideological underpinnings.

The Noakhali District Congress Committee described the prevailing collective psyche in Noakhali as "disclosing a state of mind amongst the Muslims" of extreme intolerance. It appreciated the situation correctly. However, the local Congress Committee in its report to the Provincial Congress Committee, confessed its utter helplessness. Even before the riot started, it appealed for protection:

The Hindus and those of the Mohammedans opposed to the League or to the acts of goondaism perpetrated in the name or the Muslim League demand adequate protection of their persons and properties from the Government of the country. (italics mine)

This feeling of helplessness arose in the face of the strong, collective communal antipathy. Its helplessness, as the report demonstrates, was heightened when it found that even officers were "poisoned with communalism".

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206 Ibid., 15 June 1943, p. 5.
207 It reported to the BPCC: "The present state of things prevailing in this district discloses a state of mind amongst the Muslims that if the Hindus are at all to live in this district they must live according to the way their Muslim neighbours want them to behave" (sic). Noakhali Situation, op. cit., p. 95.
208 Ibid., p. 99.
209 An interesting observation was made with regard to the attitude of the Hindu and Muslim officials:
Thus, the Congress reached a dead end. This was because all the 'remedies' suggested by the local Congress were addressed to, and depended on the active help of, the bureaucracy. There was not a single step that it could undertake. Hence, the local Congress which had been so active on the local political scene, found itself in 1946-47, relegated to a position from which it had no initiative left to fight communalism.

However, the District Congress Committee had anticipated some of the principles for fighting communal forces which Gandhi later on sought to apply in his Noakhali sojourn. Formation of Peace Committees in every village consisting of persons in whom both the communities had confidence was one of them. Similarly, the report contained some suggestions which, had they been implemented on time, could have at least minimised the level of lawlessness. These included increasing armed forces, and more importantly, improving communications so that the interior areas would become easily accessible.210

At the provincial level, the Congress Committee did nothing more than to apprise the bureaucracy of the terrible situation in the Noakhali villages.211 The leaders of the Provincial Congress Committee were constantly sent telegrams from the Noakhali

... Hindu officials are apathetic and studiously cautious not to incur the displeasure of the other community and for that matter of the Muslim League Government, and almost all Mohammedan officers are inclined towards the Muslim League and do not hesitate to condone the aggressive acts of the Muslim hooligans by helping suppression of violence against them and submitting false reports.

Ibid., p. 99. In the post-riot phase, this attitude of the Muslim officers was evident on a number of occasions. See Tuker, F., op. cit., pp. 178, 609-610, 617.

210

Ibid.

villages which, though at times "gave exaggerated figures of death and different forms of havoc done", revealed the gravity of the situation.

The President of the BPCC went to the additional Home Secretary, P. D. Martyn and impressed upon him the "necessity of taking strong action" which included "sending the military to the locality". "A European ICS Magistrate (in place of an Indian one) was sent by aeroplane to take the charge of the district." The fact that the Congress did not even appeal for the restoration of law and order to the Muslim League Ministry indicated its complete loss of faith in the Ministry. The appeal to the colonial authority/bureaucracy was indeed ironical, and it appeared to prove the colonial authority's much vaunted claim of being the honest arbiter between the two warring communities.

The Provincial leadership, however, demonstrated its utter helplessness and under the circumstances could do nothing beyond "sending Girija Prosanna Chakraborty, a member of the BPCC and inhabitant of the Noakhali district with a batch of volunteers and some money to help the situation and do whatever work of relief and rescue they could". The Provincial Congress expected the central leadership, who at that time headed the Interim Government, to intervene directly. This was why the leaders rushed to Delhi to "apprise the central leadership of the situation".

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212 Ibid., p. 54.
213 Ibid., p. 53.
214 Ibid.
216 BPCC, Secretary's Second Report to the AICC. 7 November 1946. He wrote: "There is a growing sense that if the Congress members in the interim government are so helpless and
The popular reaction forced a section of the Congress leaders to call for an organised defensive body to fight 'lawlessness'. Niharendu Dutt Majumdar called upon the youth to join the organisation “to protect peace loving people of the province irrespective of caste, creed and religion”. Sarat Chandra Bose, on the other hand, demonstrated his complete loss of faith in the League by calling for a strike on 4 November, 1946. Though finally the strike was called off after the members of the Interim Government reached Calcutta on 3rd November, the colonial authorities paid greater attention to this strike than the violent riots in Noakhali.

After his tour of Noakhali, Sarat Chandra Bose stated,
I have also advocated the formation of volunteer corps in each and every district of Bengal.... I took steps to form volunteer corps in some districts.... such volunteer corps should be drawn from all communities and sections of the people and they should be above communal and party consideration.... Our volunteer corps should be inspired by the ideals and spirit of the I. N. A....

The Noakhali riot and the violence associated with it, brought to the fore the helplessness of the Congress leaders in the face of extreme communalism. While the local leaders gave a call to organise defensive corps to deal with the situation, the central leadership was totally confused regarding the next course of action.

constitutionally handicapped then what is the good of their keeping there”. File No. P-5, 1946, AICC Papers, p. 131. This growing sense of helplessness was evident from other quarters also.


J. B. Kripalani, the President elect, who toured the affected areas, asked "every Bengali to defend himself and herself by whatever means he or she can think". Quoting the example of those "who defied the mob for full two days before (they) fell fighting". Kripalani said that this resistance was the closest approach to non-violence. This again reflected the extremely confused position of the leadership. This, however, was not strange because well before the Noakhali riot, Congress workers and organisations were finding it difficult to come to terms with extreme communal violence. This was well articulated in a note by Mridula Sarabhai, the then General Secretary of AICC. It said:

Recent communal conflict in Ahmedabad as well as trouble in other provinces have raised many organisational problems and have resulted in shaking up confidence in many of our fundamental basic policies. Congress committees and men are confused and do not know how they are expected to act in crisis.

Thus, the basic tenet of non-violence was also affected by this crisis. This was best articulated by Jawaharlal Nehru in his letter to Kapila Chatterjee. He wrote,

The working committee in consultation with Sarat Babu is passing a resolution on the subject. But we know that resolutions do not mean much. It is action that is required when a situation becomes so desperate.

You ask me about non-violence in these circumstances. I do not know what I would do if I was there but I imagine that I would react violently. I have no doubt whatever that violence in self-defence is preferable to a cowardly non-violence.

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224 Nehru to Kapila Chatterjee, *ibid.*, p. 173.
In the meantime the Congress Working Committee passed its resolution on the happenings in East Bengal. It appealed to "all the decent persons of all communities in Bengal and elsewhere not only to condemn these crimes, but also to take all adequate steps to defend the innocent from lawlessness and barbarity, no matter by whomsoever committed". It, in addition, warned against the "retaliatory outbreak of communal violence".\textsuperscript{225}

The Provincial Congress, however, was sceptical about the Congress policy on the communal situation. It said,

"We agree with the Working Committee that the remedy for communalism is not counter communalism but nationalism but at the same time we cannot ignore the natural reaction in the mind of the public who upto now were strong followers of the Congress....\textsuperscript{226}

Amidst all this confusion, there was no guideline to ascertain what could be done to arrest the rapid communalisation of society and its violent manifestations. While the talk of the formation of volunteer bodies by the Bengal leaders showed their utter helplessness before the extreme Muslim communalism, the eruption of violence in Bihar proved that the Congress leadership was not in a position to prevent the Hindu communal reaction from becoming an extreme one in the face of extremely violent communal onslaughts.

\textsuperscript{225} Ibid., pp. 139-140.

\textsuperscript{226} 'BPCC Secretary's Second Report to the AICC', \textit{op. cit.}, p. 131.
VI

The latter part of the nineteen thirties was marked by growing discontent in Noakhali, as we have seen, and this was manifest in the attacks on sections of people. In December 1939, a section of people had attacked the household of Rajendralal Roychoudhry in the Lakshmipur area. During the same period, Feni and Noakhali town witnessed communal tensions. People of even Congress persuasion showed an inclination towards the Hindu Mahasabha as a sense of insecurity gradually came to prevail in some areas. However, it is not very clear whether the Mahasabha made considerable inroads into Noakhali. They had a very powerful organiser in the person of Nalini Ranjan Mitra, a reputed teacher in the Khilpara High School, with strong Nationalist leanings. This then raises an important question, as to why leaders of such deep nationalist leanings gradually turned towards communal organisations.

A perceptible change took place from 1943 onwards, when the Mahasabha sent Brajesh Chakraborty Thakur to propagate and organise the Hindu Sabha in the District. He along with an ex-detenu Abala Kant Chakraborty toured the district and organised branches of the Sabha. Mahasabha was also gaining some strength in the

227 *Star of India*, Cal., 1939, p. 2.
District Board election, in 1945. Its strength was reflected through the fact that it supported Abdul Majid of the Muslim League. Abdul Majid was not the official nominee of the League and stood against the District League President, Goffran Ahmed, and won against the latter. This created a rift within the League.\textsuperscript{233}

The remarkable fact that with the concerted efforts of the Sabha activists there were 143 branches in 146 Unions of the District in 1945-46 as compared to 1943-44, when there were not more than ten Sabhas in the District.\textsuperscript{234} The famine, the Procurement Drive, and the fact that the Mahasabha was the only vocal opposition, contributed to this rapid increase, but the rapidly communalising political scenario also resulted in this shift.

This rapid growth of the Mahasabha was at a time when the Muslim League's political fortunes were at the peak. The political agenda was set by the struggle for supremacy between the League and the erstwhile peasant leader of the area, i.e., Ghulam Sarwar, but the struggle was fought at the cost of communal peace in the district. Soon after, the Noakhali riot took place.

The Mahasabha which went into political hibernation in the Province after its adverse electoral results, arrived again on the political scene with the Calcutta killings. However, it was the Noakhali riot that saw the Mahasabha making a concerted effort to

\textsuperscript{233} Nalini Ranjan Mitra to S. P. Mookerjee, 21 Jan. 1945, \textit{All India Hindu Mahasabha Papers}, File No. P-44, pp. 40-41.

\textsuperscript{234} List of Mahasabha Branches, \textit{ibid.}, File No. P-32, pp. 139-155. In 1943-44, the Sabha had only 8 branches in the district. See, \textit{ibid}. File No. P-14, pp. 138-139.
start an All India campaign. All the Sabha branches in the country passed similar
resolutions, and sent them to the Congress and other organisations,\textsuperscript{235} while trying to
mobilise popular opinion. The atrocities on women and the forcible conversion of the
Hindu populace of the locality provided the Mahasabha with digits around which it could
do this, an attempt that had begun in the past two decades.\textsuperscript{236} At its Gorakhpur session,
several resolutions were passed regarding the Noakhali riot.\textsuperscript{237}

In the Province itself, the riot provided the Mahasabha with an issue to spring
back into the political arena. On 31 October, Syama Prasad Mookerjee announced the
formation of Hindustan National Guards to "meet Bengal crisis". He said,

steps are being taken to inaugurate a body known as Hindusthan National Guards 'to
meet the need for a well organised and disciplined body of youths who will fearlessly
defend their rights and interests and the honour of our womanfolk at this supreme crisis
that threatens the very existence of Hindus in this great province.\textsuperscript{238}

He appealed "to all sections of Hindus irrespective of caste or class to join this
organisation and stand united at hour of peril".\textsuperscript{239} A 'Consolidation of Hindu Society
Board' was announced to remove all inequalities. S. P. Mookerjee stated that under the
auspices of the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha, a Board in the name of Hindu

\begin{footnotes}
\item[237] See Gorakhpur Resolution on Noakhali, \textit{All India Hindu Mahasabha Papers}, File No. 121, 1946, pp. 2-3.
\item[238] \textit{Hindustan Standard}, Cal., 1 Nov. 1946, p. 5.
\item[239] \textit{Ibid.}
\end{footnotes}
Sangathan Society was formed with Rai Bahadur Jatindra Mohan Choudhury of Nakipur as President and Treasurer. The object of the Board was to:

consolidate the Hindu society by removing all disabilities and inequalities in respect of enjoyment of social rights and privileges for the revival of which the learned pundits in Bengal have given their wholehearted sanction.\(^{240}\)

The Mahasabha now began to talk in terms of the Partition of the Province and Syama Prasad Mookerjee who had had already taken a lead role during the agitation over the CR formula and the Gandhi-Jinnah meeting began to assume the voice which was supposedly the voice representing the province. And ironically too because now this voice demanded the Partition which it opposed so bitterly a year and half ago. The agenda of the party saw an about turn.

VII

The Communist party had been organising the peasants in the districts for quite some time. But its presence was extremely week. But the presence of the radical peasant fronts and the earlier efforts by the Congress workers did not leave much ground for the

communist workers. However, the war years and especially the absence of the Congress provided an opportunity to the Party to make some inroads into this district. The colonial repression against the peasant leaders of the neighbouring Tippera also helped in this. It was only around this time that the Party made some Communist pockets in Hasnabad and of the 180 villages.

The Party could sense the trouble in this part of Bengal and had been reporting on this. At the same time it sensed what it called "the sinister role of bureaucracy and the police in fanning the flames of Fratricidal War". After the riots broke out the party focussed on the stout defence that the villages surrounding Hasnabad put and prevented the flames of violence to spread. However, what is significant is the fact that even now, the Party did not accept the hegemony of communalism and rather blamed the colonial policy for the riot. Joshi was calling Noakhali as "the poisoned fruit of British plan" when the people's Age correspondent was reporting about the communal atrocities from the villages of Noakhali. Attack on colonial policy here came in for making light the role of the League or Muslim variant of communalism in the entire episode.

241 People's Age, 13 October, 1946, p. 8.
242 Ibid.
243 Ibid., 3 Nov. 1946, p. 11.
244 Ibid., 27 Oct. 1946, p. 4; 3 Nov. 1946, p. 10; 10 Nov., p. 6; 17 Nov., p. 7.
VIII

Noakhali - Tippera riots (I have referred to it as Noakhali riot for the sake of convenience as well as because it started as well as showed its dominant features in Noakhali district first before spreading to the neighbouring district of Tippera) demonstrated the fact the the complete communalisation of a society as manifested through nature of the violence and the combination of forces had left society in a state of hopelessness.

If the famine had helped, as Suranjan Das writes, in brutalising consciousness on a mass scale, Noakhali created the occasion as well as the justification for the paralysis of conscience. Hope was the first and foremost victim and forced different political parties to create defence groups to tackle the communal problem. It was in this state of political helplessness that Gandhi decided to come to Bengal.

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