Chapter II
Independence Or Partition?

In this chapter, I first try to explain changes in Hindu-Muslim relationships in Bengal around the time of Partition. I have used fieldwork, life stories and census data as my sources. I have also explored fictional narratives as clues to how the relationship was perceived and imagined. I have tried to show that the numerical preponderance of Muslims in the province of Bengal before 1947 and their consequent minority status in the state of West Bengal after 1947 did not always matter in this regard. There was considerable migration of the middle and upper middle class Bengali Muslims around 1947. I have tried to analyse the reasons behind this migration which jeopardized the socio-cultural movement that had been building up within the community since the late 19th century. Naturally, East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) gained from such a migration. But to the middle class Muslims of West Bengal, 1947 came more as partition than independence. It was the partition of a dynamic social movement as well as of geographical territories. It was also a partition of families and relationships at the personal, individual level. In the concluding part of the first section, I have discussed the different categories of the Bengali Muslim middle class which stayed back in West Bengal after 1947.

The second section of this chapter traces the major socio-political events which befell the Muslims of West Bengal, between 1947 and 1992. The emphasis has understandably been on the middle class and it is written on the basis of evidence from interviews with all the three segments - the upper, middle and lower strata, of the middle class. However, these interviews have not always been fully worked on here as they have been taken up in greater detail in the following chapters which deal with the education and employment, domestic, social and political status of Bengali Muslim women. Bengali Muslim women’s memories of riots form an entire chapter (Ch. VI). The section is this chapter is designed to serve as a synoptic account of the major events of the period, an understanding of which is necessary to explain the other related trends. Significant activities of the Congress government when it was in power in West Bengal which touched the lives of Bengali Muslims and the reasons for the increasing popularity of the communists have been discussed here. The impact that the refugees from East Bengal,
particularly their women, had on the social life of West Bengal during the period has also been touched on. During the post-1947 period, the already existing middle class among Bengali Muslims made room for newer entries into its order. This aspect has also been looked into in this chapter.

I

In undivided Bengal until August 1947, Muslims formed the majority in the population. I give the figures of the total population of Bengal between 1921 and 1951 which shows the numerical preponderance of Muslims before independence and the drastically altered situation after the partition:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total population (Bengal)</th>
<th>Total HINDU population</th>
<th>Total MUSLIM population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>47,592,462</td>
<td>20,809,148 (43.84%)</td>
<td>25,486,184 (53.55%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>51,087,338</td>
<td>22,212,069 (43.47%)</td>
<td>27,810,100 (54.43%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>61,460,377</td>
<td>25,801,724 (41.98%)</td>
<td>33,371,688 (54.29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>24,810,308</td>
<td>19,462,706 (78.44%)</td>
<td>4,925,496 (19.85%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(for W. B. only)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table – A¹

The Muslim population was especially dense in the Dacca, Chittagong and Rajsahi Divisions as the table below proves:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total HINDU population</th>
<th>Total MUSLIM population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dacca</td>
<td>3,813,051 (29.88%)</td>
<td>8,946,043 (70.11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chittagong</td>
<td>1,432,108 (24.74%)</td>
<td>4,356,207 (75.25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajsahi</td>
<td>3,487,125 (35.44%)</td>
<td>6,349,689 (64.55%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dacca</td>
<td>3,958,870 (28.70%)</td>
<td>9,833,289 (71.29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chittagong</td>
<td>1,546,243 (23.51%)</td>
<td>5,030,088 (76.48%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajsahi</td>
<td>3,721,726 (35.91%)</td>
<td>6,640,303 (64.08%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dacca</td>
<td>4,621,637 (27.89%)</td>
<td>11,944,172 (72.10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chittagong</td>
<td>1,755,176 (21.54%)</td>
<td>6,392,291 (78.45%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajsahi</td>
<td>3,673,809 (32.79%)</td>
<td>7,528,117 (67.20%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table – B²

¹ This table has been prepared from Census of India, 1921, vol. V, Part II, by WH Thompson, Calcutta, 1923, p p. 28-29.
² Census of India, 1921, op. cit., pp. 22-23.
Most Muslims in all the Divisions belonged to the agrarian masses. A survey of the Census records proves that Chittagong was an exception where the urban Muslim population was equal to or marginally exceeded that of the Hindus. The census data of 1941, which shows the comparative urban population in the three divisions, may be cited as an example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total HINDU population living in towns</th>
<th>Total MUSLIM population living in towns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>Dacca</td>
<td>3,88,047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chittagong</td>
<td>1,167,69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rajsahi</td>
<td>2,569,14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table - C

Since most Bengali Muslims had a rural and peasant profile, Muslims came to be known as a community of ‘chashas’ or peasants which is a pejorative and contemptuous term.

M.R. Akhtar Mukul, son of a Dinajpur court Inspector during the 1940s, narrates in his autobiography that when he went to school in Dinajpur, he was one of the only two Muslim boys in his class of fifty students. The other boy was the son of a rich local jotedar. Most Muslims in Dinajpur were too poor to afford to send their sons to school. The headmaster was amazed when Mukul took up Sanskrit instead of Persian as his optional subject in the language group. The treatment Mukul received at the hands of panditmoshai, who taught Sanskrit, establishes the point that Muslims were looked down upon as a community. He says, ‘Panditmoshai could not stand the idea of a Muslim boy studying Sanskrit. My very presence seemed to irritate him. He used to ask me a lot of questions. If I failed to answer any of them, he used very strange abuse. I had a feeling that his hatred against Muslims was much greater than his love for Hindus.’

Such anecdotes are not rare in the autobiographical accounts of persons who grew up in East Bengal in the early 20th century. Abul Mansur Ahmad recalls that the zamindar of his village used to host jatra or roving theatre shows on the occasion of Kali Puja

Census of India, 1931, op cit, p. 220.
Census of India, 1941, op cit, pp. 44-45.
3 Census of India, 1941, op. cit. p. 59.
5 Ibid, p. 10.
every year. But, here too, as in the kachhari (office) of the zamindar, only the upper caste Hindu bhadrakol were supposed to sit and watch the play, while the majority of the spectators, the Muslim peasants, were kept standing. Of the 35 teachers in his school in Dacca, only the Persian teacher was a Muslim; of the 1500 students in the school, Muslim boys numbered less than 300. He remembers that he was perpetually taunted by a teacher in the school who used to call him Miya saab.

Although the two communities are generally credited to have lived peacefully side by side for generations, these examples, nevertheless, prove an undercurrent of Hindu intolerance. Instances from the lives of M R Akhtar Mukul and Abul Mansur Ahmad demonstrate how shabbily even the economically and academically advanced section among the Bengali Muslims would be treated. We can then well imagine what Muslim lower classes had to live with. We catch a glimpse of it in the autobiography of Manikuntala Sen. Recollecting her early days in Barisal in East Bengal, she narrates an incident which took place at her elder sister’s house in Gaila village: One day a poor Mussalman entered the precincts of the house to cross over to the other lane. The man, a vendor of firewood, was accused of polluting the kitchen that was nearby and was beaten up with shoes. He, however, failed to understand why he was prevented from passing through when even a dog could use the private thoroughfare with impunity.

Even where intolerance was not overt, Hindus and Muslims, who had nurtured friendship for generations, normally avoided more intimate contact, like commensality. The wide social pervasiveness of the taboo against this has also been reflected in the popular literary texts composed on the theme of Hindu-Muslim relations in Bengal. For instance, in Abul Fazl’s novel Ranga Prabhat, the protagonist Kamal inherited a three-generation old tradition of friendship with the family of Charubabu. In a tragic realisation towards the end of the story, Kamal records that in spite of the close relationship, he had

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6 Abul Mansur Ahmad, Amar Dekha Rajnitir Panchas Baacher, Dhaka 1975, p. 24. The proper treatment of Muslim tenants in the zamindars’ kachhari later became an item in the list of organized demands made on behalf of the Praja Movement in East Bengal from the 1920s and the slogan for Pakistan was viewed as an attempt to seek respite from such humiliation.
7 Ibid, p. 31.
8 The Earl of Lytton, for instance, in Pundits and Elephants: Being the Experience of Five Years as Governor of an Indian Province, London 1942, p. 46, had noted how the rank and file of the two communities coexisted peacefully and that it was only at rare intervals, when religious feelings became inflamed that they treated each other as enemies.
never eaten a meal in their home. Nor had he ever invited them to his home because it was not done. But even if he had, they would not have dined there.  

The situation in West Bengal before or after 1947 was not much different. We can refer to a novel, Jyotirmayee Devi’s *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*, as a piece of fictional literature which conveys this very successfully. Sutara, a victim of the Noakhali riots, was sheltered by her father’s friend and colleague, Tamiz Saheb. Tamiz’s daughter, Sakina, was her friend. The two families maintained a cordial relationship, though they too, did not dine with one another. But the riots exposed how fragile the relationship had been. The very fact that Sutara stayed in a Muslim family for some time before she could be taken away to Calcutta by her brother, degraded her in the eyes of his mother-in-law.  

A polluted Sutara had to be bathed and purified in the Ganga and could no longer be allowed to touch household articles or enter the kitchen. She had to be sent away to a boarding school apparently for the unpardonable sin she had incurred by living among Muslims. This event could not be forgotten even after more than a decade had passed and it haunted her till the end of the novel. After Sutara joined a Delhi college as teacher, a Hindu man, Promod, proposed to marry her in 1957. But the outraged mother of Promod said that she was ready to accept even a *mem* (European girl) as her daughter-in-law but she had great reservations against ‘someone who has stayed among Muslims’. In this novel, the Noakhali riots revealed the fragility of the apparently cordial relationship that the two communities maintained with each other.

However, Hindus were not a homogeneous category and the lower caste, lower class Hindus could not afford to maintain this kind of social distance from well-to-do Muslims. Purity-pollution taboos could not transcend the barrier of class. In the villages, as in Bamsor even today, lower caste Hindus like the Mals work as domestic servants in the houses of middle class Muslims. They also eat there. The taboo prevailed mostly among the upper caste, middle class Hindu *bhadraloks* whose ritual inhibitions were so severe as to prevent interaction even with Muslim social equals. Even if all such Hindus

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12 Ibid.  
13 Ibid. p. 43.  
14 Ibid., p. 135.
did not actually despise Muslims, Muslims were certainly believed to be 'different'\textsuperscript{15} and polluting and hence a physical distance was scrupulously maintained.

It is also true that socially and culturally privileged Muslims were few and far between. The situation worsened in West Bengal after 1947 when the small class of educated professional Muslims went away to Pakistan. The following table shows a comparative list of the total Hindu and Muslim populations in Calcutta and Burdwan over the years along with their respective percentage share in the total population.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Total HINDU population</th>
<th>Total MUSLIM population</th>
<th>Total population (incl. other communities)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>6,43,013 (70.83%)</td>
<td>2,09,066 (23.02%)</td>
<td>9,07,851</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>1,12,231 (77.99%)</td>
<td>2,66,281 (18.51%)</td>
<td>1,438,926</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>8,22,293 (68.71%)</td>
<td>3,11,155 (26%)</td>
<td>1,196,734</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>1,23,872 (78.62%)</td>
<td>2,92,471 (18.56%)</td>
<td>1,575,699</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>1,531,512 (72.62%)</td>
<td>4,97,535 (23.59%)</td>
<td>2,108,891</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>1,393,820 (73.72%)</td>
<td>2,36,665 (17.81%)</td>
<td>1,890,732</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>2,125,907 (83.41%)</td>
<td>3,05,932 (12%)</td>
<td>2,548,677</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>1,835,106 (83.73%)</td>
<td>3,41,787 (15.60%)</td>
<td>2,191,667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>2,457,144 (83.94%)</td>
<td>3,74,126 (12.78%)</td>
<td>2,927,289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>2,598,875 (84.30%)</td>
<td>4,67,669 (15.17%)</td>
<td>3,082,846</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>2,617,589 (83.13%)</td>
<td>4,46,932 (14.19%)</td>
<td>3,148,746</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>3,219,642 (82.21%)</td>
<td>6,72,227 (17.17%)</td>
<td>3,916,174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>2,706,511 (81.89%)</td>
<td>5,06,942 (15.34%)</td>
<td>3,305,006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>3,938,376 (81.45%)</td>
<td>8,50,951 (17.60%)</td>
<td>4,835,388</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Calcutta</td>
<td>3,546,431 (80.60%)</td>
<td>7,79,433 (17.72%)</td>
<td>4,399,819</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Burdwan</td>
<td>4,821,490 (79.69%)</td>
<td>1,182,755 (19.55%)</td>
<td>6,050,605</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table D\textsuperscript{16}

I have mentioned the predominantly rural nature of the Bengali Muslim population before 1947 earlier. This pattern did not change after Independence. Even as late as 1991, of the

\textsuperscript{15} The nature of this difference may be gauged from the following comment of a man at a village adda before 1947, in Gourkishor Ghosh's novel, \textit{Jal Parey Pata Naray}. Calcutta 1978. 3\textsuperscript{rd} edition 1997, p. 12: 'Let them (Muslims) alone! They will do exactly just the opposite of what do. We pray facing towards the East. they offer their Namaz facing westwards. On returning home, we wash our feet first, they will wash their hands...'

\textsuperscript{16} The table has been prepared from Census of India. 1921, vol. V Part II, Table VI, Religion, pp. 28-29. Census of India. 1931, vol. V Part II Tables, p. 220.
Census of India. 1941, vol. IV, Bengal. Table XII, Community, pp. 44-45.
Census of India. 1961, Table C-VII, Religion.
Census of India. 1991, West Bengal State District Profile, p.1.
total Muslim population of Burdwan (1,182,755), 914,208 (77.81%) lived in rural areas and 268,547 (22.19%) lived under the Burdwan Municipal Area. If we subtract the subaltern classes of rickshaw and vanpullers, paan and tea stall owners, fruit sellers and vegetable vendors, tailors, masons and casual labourers as well as labourers engaged in the small scale industries in the tertiary sector who were mostly Muslim (about whose exact number no precise data is available), we may safely assume that the number of Muslims in the town, able to match the Bengali Hindu middle class in socio-economic and cultural terms, would be insignificant.

A glance at Table D establishes the point that the Hindu population in Calcutta and Burdwan rose by more than 10% between 1941 and 1951. The percentage decline in the Muslim population during this period was from 23.59% to 12% in Calcutta and from 17.81% to 15.60% in Burdwan. The decline in the Muslim population of Calcutta may be explained in terms of the Muslim exodus in the wake of the partition, which took away with it the cream of the social leadership that was initiating changes among middle class Muslims.

Despite the decline in the percentage share in population, the Muslim population in Burdwan did not show any absolute decline unlike Calcutta. Table D proves that it actually rose from 2,36,665 in 1941 to 3,41,787 in 1951 though the decadal increase was much less as compared to the later decades. Along with the migration of a handful of Muslim families away from Burdwan, the percentage decline in the Muslim population may actually be explained by the influx of Hindu refugees from East Bengal. The number of refugees coming to West Bengal during 1946-51 may be cited as a reason for the phenomenal growth of the Hindu population and the consequent decline of the relative percentage share of Muslim population.

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17 Census of India. 1991, Part IV-B (ii) Religions, Table C-9.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Migration of refugees from East Pakistan to West Bengal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>58,602</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>4,63,474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>4,90,555</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1949</td>
<td>3,26,211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>11,72,928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>47,437</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table E

Though the above figures represent the total extent of migration of Hindu refugees from East to West Bengal, a considerable section among them had settled in Calcutta and Burdwan. Extensive areas around Jadavpur, Garia and Behala in South Calcutta and Dum Dum in North Calcutta are still identified as "refugee areas" by older residents of Calcutta. In Burdwan, new areas like Nutan Pally, Sibsankar Colony, Khanpukur Colony (Kalna Gate), Sadarghat Canal Par Colony, Tejganj Canal Par, Barodauri Colony (Kanchannagar), Rathtala, Rabindra Colony (Uday Pally) sprang up as refugee rehabilitation areas in the post - 47 period.

The unprecedented communal violence of 1946 was widely understood to be the sign of a cataclysmic transfer of power and waves of people began to flow in and out of West Bengal. It is true that the tragedy of partition in Bengal was on a smaller quantitative scale as compared to Northern India. V.P. Menon, for instance, gives an exact figure of 5½ million non-Muslims (Hindus and Sikhs) crossing into India in the north and an equal number of Muslims moving out into Pakistan from various parts of North and Central India. He gives the figure of 1½ million non-Muslims crossing the border from East to West Bengal. He does not however mention the Muslim population which crossed into East Bengal from West Bengal and Bihar.

It is interesting to note that most of what we watch or read as partition narratives in West Bengal speaks of the trauma of the Hindu refugees from East Bengal. We may

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18 Reports of the Committee of Review of Rehabilitation Work in West Bengal, Calcutta, 1946-51.
21 The Muslim migration from West Bengal to the East has also been overlooked by many others, like Renuka Roy who says, "The number of Muslims who ultimately left West Bengal was negligible, many of them returned... (italics mine) in 'And Still They Come', My Reminiscences, Delhi 1982.

Serious academic work\(^{23}\) also focused on the Hindu migrants from East Bengal. They overlook the tragedy or ‘human history’\(^ {24}\) of the Muslim population which went away from India or of the parts of their families which were left behind. While trying to write the contemporary history of Bengali Muslim women, we cannot afford to overlook either. Both made a profound impact on the cultural life of Bengal in the years after 1947.

Exact figures regarding the outflow of Muslim population in the wake of partition could not be traced. The Census of Pakistan (1961) refers to this in very vague impressionistic terms. “Many Muslims … returned to their original homes in East Bengal during the decade. Very large movements of population on a communal basis occurred as a result of partition. Many Muslims from India migrated to East Bengal … the net migration into the province during the decade (1951-61) has been about 4 lakh (italics mine)....\(^{25}\) The Indian Census also recorded that about 1,31,000 Muslims had left Calcutta on the eve of the 1951 Census.\(^{26}\)

While Kingsley Davis notes that, ‘the estimate of urban migration is very difficult to make’\(^ {27}\), Imtiaz Ahmad also writes, “The size of the educated middle class among the Muslims greatly declined as a result of the Partition. There is no data to enable us to

\(^{22}\) *Natun Ihudi* was first performed in Calcutta in 1951 and published from Calcutta in 1957.


\(^{24}\) I borrow this term from Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta (eds), *The Trauma and the Triumph, Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, Calcutta 2003. Introduction, p. 1.


\(^{26}\) Census of India, 1951, vol. VI, part III. West Bengal, p. xvi.

estimate the extent of migration of the employed middle class to Pakistan, but it would not be entirely unfair to assume that the number of persons belonging to the educated middle class was considerable.\textsuperscript{28}

There are several possible answers as to why middle class Bengali Muslims went away from West Bengal. It goes without saying that those who faced the trauma of riots, whose persons and property were damaged, left their homes in search of security. This outflow started with the Calcutta killings of August 1946 and continued till 1965 as a result of the recurrent riots and the insecurity generated due to the Indo-Pak war. The high-profile political and upper middle class family of Abul Hashim in Burdwan for instance, which initially had no desire to migrate,\textsuperscript{29} left for Pakistan in the wake of the riots of 1950 in which they were attacked and their house was burnt down.

Among those who left West Bengal at that time were also those who were not directly affected, but who, nonetheless, suffered from a certain fear psychosis due to the recent political events and who also feared future attacks. Yaqub Ali, an Assistant Engineer in Nadia District, who was not a direct victim of violence, left for Dhaka. His family was said to be ‘eyed with silent menace’\textsuperscript{30} by some of his Hindu neighbours. The fear of future disturbances loomed large in the minds of Bengali Muslims at that time. Badruddin Omar recalled, ... ‘There was a sense of insecurity in the minds of Muslims following Partition, and many of them felt humiliated, like second class citizens.’\textsuperscript{31} Abul Mansur Ahmad wrote that many of his fellow lawyers at the Alipore court asked him, “How come you are still here? You wanted Pakistan and now you have got it. Why on earth are you still here?”\textsuperscript{32} Rashida Khatun of Burdwan distinctly remembers that this went on till the mid fifties. “Hindu neighbours and friends would ask, ‘So, when are you going?’ It is not that all of them had a definite purpose of hurting us... They used to ask us when we were leaving or if we had already left..... some, of course, had a definite communal mischief in their tone. Trying to explain that we were not going to leave our

\textsuperscript{28} Intiaz Ahmad. ‘Economic and Social Change’. Article in Zafar Imam (ed.) Muslims in India, Delhi, 1975, p. 249
\textsuperscript{29} Abul Hashim’s son, Badruddin Omar, tries to prove that his father had no plans of migration by stating that they had built a new house in the town after 1947. Interview with Tridibsantapa Kundu, Natun Chithi, Sarad Samkhya (Festival edition), Burdwan, 1998, p. 95.
\textsuperscript{31} Badruddin Omar, Interview with TS Kundu, op cit., p. 96.
\textsuperscript{32} Abul Mansur Ahmad, Amar Dekha Rajnitir Panchas Bachhar, op cit., ch. 15, p. 268.
country was futile, nobody cared to listen. They would sometimes bluntly put the question as a comment and walk away.\textsuperscript{33} Many Muslim women I interviewed in Calcutta and Burdwan shared her experiences.

The idea of an Islamic nation about to be born had fired the imagination of many educated Muslim youth. Some were ardent League supporters; some, though not politically very active, were inspired by religiosity; there were yet others who went to Pakistan to live in a State governed according to the principles of Islamic socialism – a unique package of purity (Pak), religiosity and socialism whose idea encouraged a section of the Bengali Muslims, like the educated young heroes of the novels \textit{Ranga Prabhat} and \textit{Nongor}, to opt for Pakistan.

The hope for better prospects and `tremendous employment potential'\textsuperscript{34} in a tension free environment where Muslim socio-cultural hegemony would be unchallenged, motivated many Bengali Muslim professionals to opt out of West Bengal at the initial stages. The entire infrastructure was going to be built up anew and it would provide a platform free from Hindu competitors. A large number of government employees, teachers, doctors, lawyers and businessmen thus went away. It deserves to be mentioned in this context that the rich Muslim businessmen, hoteliers and industrialists in Calcutta have mostly been non-Bengali, both before and after 1947. Along with the daughters and wives of those Muslim men who opted for Pakistan, many Bengali Muslim women who had attained remarkable academic and professional achievement, also went away.

We must remember that many of these people who had come from various East Bengal districts to study or work in Calcutta preferred to go back to their `original homes'\textsuperscript{35} in the event of an inevitable territorial separation. Of the 275 families I interviewed in Calcutta, as many as 218 (79.27%) said that they have relatives in Bangladesh, erstwhile East Pakistan. Of these 218 again, 132 (60.56%) said that these relatives already had some pre-Partition roots in East Bengal and they preferred to return 'home' with Partition.

Among the better known examples, we have Fazilatunnessa who had joined the Bethune college in 1928 as Professor of Mathematics. She was originally from Tangail in

\textsuperscript{33} Interview with Rashida Khatun, b. 1929, 27.4.03, Burdwan.
\textsuperscript{34} Intiaz Ahmad, \textit{Economic and Social Change} in Zafar Imam, op. cit., p. 249.
\textsuperscript{35} Census of Pakistan, 1961. Supra Footnote 23.
East Bengal. Akhtar Imam, who won the Gangamani Devi Gold Medal in 1937 for securing the highest marks among girls in the Calcutta University came from Dhaka, and Hamida Khanam was from Pabna. Samsur Nahar Mahmud had her ancestral roots in Noakhali and Chittagong. Both Hamida and Samsun Nahar had been teachers in the LBC. All of them went away after Partition. Perhaps a combined consideration of career and the ‘call of the motherland’ motivated these migrants. Of the 218 families in Calcutta which said they have relatives in Bangladesh, only 86 (39.44%) said that their relatives who went away had no previous roots in East Bengal but had gone there in search of better careers in a new state.

The same thing happened with the SMGS and the LBC girls. I have shown in the last chapter that both these institutions had served as intellectual refuges for Muslim students coming from East Bengal. In fact, it is remarkable that despite the general social hostility against women’s education (as I have shown in chapter I), both Hindu and Muslim girls from East Bengal were academically more advanced and more ambitious than the girls of West Bengal, except Calcutta, before partition. It was their example which had inspired the girls of West Bengal during pre-Partition days. With partition, almost all the Muslim girls went back to their ‘homes’ in East Pakistan; or settled there after marriage. Some of them made brilliant careers in East Pakistan, later Bangladesh.

The following table prepared from a souvenir of the Sakhawat Memorial Girls’ School Alumni Association, Dhaka, 2001 establishes my point:

41 The case of Hindu girls may be verified from Mankikutala Sen, Sediner Katha, op cit., p. 35, where she says that the girls’ hostels in Calcutta during the forties were filled with residents from East Bengal.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name, Year and Place of Birth</th>
<th>Year of matriculation from SMGS</th>
<th>Years at LBC</th>
<th>Later profession in Pakistan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fatema Salam b. 1924</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>BA -1943</td>
<td>Social work. Secretary, later President of All Pakistan Women’s Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husna Banu Khanam</td>
<td>1941</td>
<td></td>
<td>Social Work, Vocal Artist, Dhaka Radio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilkis Nasiruddin</td>
<td>1942</td>
<td></td>
<td>MA, Leeds, UK Rabindra Sangeet Artist, Radio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jahanara Begum b. 1925</td>
<td>1941</td>
<td>IA – 1943 BA – 1945</td>
<td>Social work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuba Khanam b. 1934 Satkhira</td>
<td>1947</td>
<td></td>
<td>1950 – went to London to study nursing. Chief Matron, Maternity and Child Welfare Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurjahan Begum b. 1926 Calcutta</td>
<td>1942</td>
<td>IA BA – 1946</td>
<td>Journalist, Editor – Begum magazine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nazma Alam Choudhury 1925</td>
<td>1942</td>
<td>IA – 1944</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dil Afroz Haque b. 1922 Calcutta</td>
<td>1938</td>
<td>BA (Hons.): 1st Class 1st MA – 1945</td>
<td>Taught at LBC and Aligarh Muslim University, 1946-48. Principal, Viqarunnessa School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahe Munir b. 1926</td>
<td>1941</td>
<td>1943, IA</td>
<td>Social work President, Women’s Voluntary Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nausaba Khatun</td>
<td>1941</td>
<td></td>
<td>Professor, Dhaka University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maliha Khatun b. - 1928</td>
<td>1942</td>
<td>Graduated from Dhaka</td>
<td>Principal, Teachers’ Training College, Dhaka</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The adjoining photograph was taken on one such meeting of the SMGS Alumni Association in Dhaka.42

The list is not exhaustive and there were many more among the SMGS alumnae, like Sultana Zaman who taught at the Dhaka University and the Magsaysay Award Winner, Taherunnessa Abdullah.43

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42 Photo courtesy: Santwana Choudhury, Teacher, SMGS and convenor SMGS Alumnae Association, Calcutta.
From the writings of Rabeya Khatun and Atia Haq, who were students in the first batch of the LBC, we get a few other names, like that of Mehrunnissa, a LBC alumna, who became a renowned lawyer in East Pakistan. Rabeya Khatun herself received a training in physical education from Homarton College, Cambridge, and eventually became the president of Bangladesh Women's Sports Development and Regulation Council. She acknowledged her great debt to the LBC in this regard, "There was a disaster in the Education Department of East Pakistan after Partition. Students of the LBC took up this particularly difficult task of becoming administrators and teachers in girls' schools and colleges. With great sincerity and devotion, they preserved and developed these institutions."  

It would be highly speculative to say whether these women would still have gone away if there was no partition; or if they could still have made equally brilliant careers had they stayed back in West Bengal where the competition from a large range of competent Hindu women would have been considerable. The number of those who migrated to Pakistan from Burdwan was comparatively small than that from Calcutta. Only 48 of the 110 families (43.64%) I interviewed in the town said that members of their families had settled in Pakistan. However, this percentage is not very representative as it leaves out the range of families which migrated away wholesale. The families of 'Yasin Ukil' (lawyer), 'Najem Daktar' (doctor), 'Rakhu Daroga' (police officer), etc. which migrated wholesale to East Pakistan through sale or exchange of their property still continue to live on in the popular memory of the older generation of the Bengali Muslim middle class in the town. References to these important families came up during my interviews a number of times. In the case of migrants from Burdwan too, the propelling factor was better prospects of career advancement, or of property inheritance, or both.

Of those middle class Bengali Muslims who stayed back, there were a few secular people, committed either to the political ideology of the Congress or to communism.

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43 Interview with Santwana Choudhury, 23.07.03, verified from the records of the school.
46 Gargi Chakravarty also holds that such 'good opportunities and lucrative jobs... would not have been so easily available had they stayed back,' Coming Out of Partition: Refugee Women of Bengal, New Delhi 2005, p. 120.
They chose not to go to Pakistan. Some, like Nasima Banu’s father, though not active in politics, were ideologically opposed to partition. Such families were also not affected directly by riots.

Some were not convinced of the viability of the new nation - state about to be born, and thus preferred not to exercise their option. This is reflected in Abu Rushd’s novel *Nongor*, where Rahim advises his brother Kamal, “Why do you want to leave your country and go to die in Pakistan? How long will Pakistan survive?... Any fool knows that the so-called Pakistan has nothing. No coal, no iron, no oil, it only has jute. One day jute will not be enough to save Pakistan.”

There was another section of the landholding middle class, whose strong sense of property and village identity prevented them from going away. It was very difficult to exchange rural properties because these were jointly owned and also because Hindu migrants from East Bengal looked for urban property in non-Muslim surroundings. Above everything else was the emotional attachment to one’s ancestral property. This conclusion has been drawn on the basis of many interviews, like that with Shakila Khatun. She says, “My uncle, a doctor, had already married in Khulna and started practising there. My father was a teacher and he, too, got a job in East Pakistan. We had huge agricultural property in Baduria, 24 Parganas. There was much talk about exchanging our property with Hindus from East Bengal. It was almost settled a number of times. But every time my father went to East Bengal to finalize things he found that the property to be exchanged with was not good enough. Many of our relatives went away but we continued to live in Baduria. I have come to Calcutta after marriage”. Shakila, however, believed that it was actually her father’s emotional attachment to the land and his reluctance to part with it was what prevented the exchange. He went to East

47 The family of Nasima Banu, b. 1930, has an interesting story to offer. They originally hailed from Barisal but had settled in Calcutta where her father, Yusuf Ali, nephew of AK Fazlul Haq, was the Registrar of Assurances. Four among the six siblings went away to Pakistan after Partition, motivated by career consideration. Her father chose to remain in India. Nasima joined the Communist Party, married Amalendu De and settled in Calcutta. It was only during the 1964 riots that her youngest sister, Tasnim Banu was attacked in Rourkela. The trauma that Tasnim underwent at that time with two little children led her to decide to leave India. Though Tasnim’s husband, a doctor, initially had a very tough time in East Pakistan (because he made a late start and the political situation there was not very secure either), they never thought of returning to India anymore. My interview on 19.9.2003.
49 My interview with Shakiba Khatun, b. 1936, Calcutta, 16.7.03.
Bengal for several rounds of talk only to avoid domestic trouble. Shakila’s mother had all her relatives in East Pakistan and was very eager to migrate.

If Shakila’s father’s problem was one of emotional attachment to his property, the account of Jahanara Begum of Burdwan represents a more practical problem. She says, “Our house in Burdwan was a small one storey affair but our real property included vast stretches of agricultural land, quite a few ponds and houses in our village near Kalna. The property was jointly owned by my father and uncles. My father worked as a clerk in the postal department. No one else in the family had a government job – they did not want to migrate either. My father nurtured the idea of going to Pakistan for some time but could not find any Hindu from East Bengal who would exchange their property with ours ... We finally had to drop the plan of going to Pakistan because a large part of our standard of living was maintained from the agricultural income. We could not go away to an unknown country depending on my father’s income alone.”50

Abul Hossain of Bamsor who was in his teens at the time of partition said, “There were enough reasons for feeling insecure and the news that the times were not very safe for Muslims did reach the village....There was no assurance from the Hindu community that they would never attack us. But we were so deeply rooted here with all our land. We have been here since Allah knows when... Partition to us was like an event in urban politics with which we actually had very little to do. The question of our leaving the country did not arise because we did not want to leave; we (i.e. people of my father’s generation), were not educated enough to start a career in an unknown land either. People did not even need to go to the town very often and had nothing to bother so long as they were safe in the village.”51

‘Badru Mia’s son,’ two gentlemen in the village recollected,52 was the only man who went away to Pakistan during Partition. But he had already left the village and was working in the Railways in Calcutta for quite some time before he migrated. He also had a sister who was married in East Pakistan and this made it easier for him to shift. Nobody belonging to Badru Mia’s family now lives in Bamsor.

50 My interview with Jahanara Begum, b. 1939, Burdwan, 19.2.03.
51 My interview with Abul Hossain, Bamsor, 22.10.03.
52 a) Abul Hossain, Bamsor, 22.10.03.
   b) Md. Asaduddin Layek, Bamsor, 22.10.03
Along with these three major groups of middle class Bengali Muslims who stayed back in West Bengal after 1947 and whose women form the subject of my study, two new sections of the Bengali Muslim middle class emerged during the period 1947-92 due to horizontal and vertical socio-economic mobilization. But before we look into different aspects of the lives of women belonging to this category, the socio-political background of the Muslims during 1947-92 will be reviewed in the following section. The major events of the period are still fresh in the minds of the people of West Bengal because they belong to a very ‘near past’. I still felt the necessity of incorporating a separate section on it because I have used material that I had collected through long sessions of interviews with the participants in my research. Their versions had been occasionally cross checked with other sources. It will help us to comprehend similarities and major points of difference in the perception of Bengali Muslims vis-à-vis other sections of people in West Bengal.

(II)

I have already said that 1947 was more partition than independence to middle class Muslims of West Bengal. It was not only a partition of geographical territories but also of a dynamic cultural movement particularly among their women. At a personal level, the partition of families continued till the mid 1960s. But all hoped that August 15, 1947 would usher in a new history. The atrocities of the holocaust were sought to be wiped out from public memory and fresh beginnings made. There were remarkable signs of a return to communal amity and joint processions were taken out amid signs of general rejoicing through areas which were badly hit by riots only a year ago. As one of my informants recalled, “It was hoped that reduced to a minority after 1947, Muslims were no longer in a position to threaten the Hindus or be threatened by them … the Hindus would have nothing to fear from the Muslims anymore and the nightmare of riots was over.” Colourful marquees were erected at many places in Calcutta and Burdwan and

53 This was mentioned by almost all respondents above 60 years of age in Calcutta and Burdwan. Also, newspapers like The Statesman, Ananda Bazar Patrika, etc. August 15-16, 1947.
54 Interview with Syed Abdul Halim b. 1930 Burdwan, 25.2.2003.
the Indian tricolour hoisted, rose water was sprinkled on the streets and people of different communities held each other in close embrace.\textsuperscript{55}

But riots did break out again in Calcutta within a fortnight, on September 1, 1947.\textsuperscript{56} Muslims in West Bengal learnt an early lesson that the nightmare was not over yet; only their position had further deteriorated due to their minority status and the future could be disastrous if the Hindus turned hostile. They had fewer resources for resistance than they had during the pre-47 period. They continued to live in a state of perpetual insecurity which was aggravated during the riots of 1950, 1964, 1965, and so on. This contributed to the growth of a minority complex as they watched with apprehension the periodic decline in communal relations in the state and elsewhere in India. Any violence done to Hindus in Pakistan was feared to portend serious repercussions for Muslims in West Bengal. The riots of 1950 are a case in point. There were some other threatening instances which were mentioned by different individuals and families in the course of the interviews.

The West Bengal Special Power Bill, renamed as the West Bengal Security Bill was introduced in the Assembly on 27 November, 1947. It was designed to make special provisions for the ‘prevention of illegal acquisition, possession or hoarding of arms’\textsuperscript{57} and it was mentioned that ‘saboteurs, communal mischief-mongers and foreign agents and spies would have enough reason to fear from it’.\textsuperscript{58}

Despite a storm of protest against the Act, staged under communist leadership during December 1947, the Act was to stay on the Statute Book until the first United Front Ministry came to power in 1967. Muslims in West Bengal as elsewhere, could very easily be harassed through such instruments. Many Muslims who had close relatives in Pakistan severed relations with them and even stopped writing letters for ‘fear of being watched’ by the police or the Intelligence Branch.\textsuperscript{59} Even if they could avoid being targeted at an official level, they found it very difficult to cope with a situation where the

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\textsuperscript{55} Supra footnote 51.
\textsuperscript{56} The northern part of the city was worst affected and a Government Press Note placed the death toll at 291 along with 292 injured. \textit{Amrita Bazar Patrika}, September 2-6, 1947.
\textsuperscript{57} The Bill which was consequently made into West Bengal Act XIX of 1950 was published in detail in the Calcutta Gazette, Part IV, Suppl., July – December 1947, December 18, 1947, p. 12.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{59} Interview with Md. Fazle Qader, Calcutta, 12.08.04. Interview with Begum Maryam Ajjj, Calcutta, 7.8.04.
general social attitude branded every Muslim as pro-Pakistani.\textsuperscript{60} This was, as Ranabir Samaddar has remarked, ‘the decade in which the nation not only became decisively anti-Pakistan but also, more crucially, anti-Muslim.’\textsuperscript{61} Many families disclosed that during the 1960s they received anonymous letters which addressed them as ‘agents of Pakistan’\textsuperscript{62}.

Abdul Aziz Al-Aman, who was a literary enthusiast at that time, had regular exchanges with intellectuals in East Pakistan who wrote for his magazine, Jagaran. He would go to Dhaka and stay with his friends, with many of whom he had studied with in Calcutta till they went away to Pakistan.

“One day in 1965, there was a poster in our para (neighbourhood) in Batanagar which addressed him by name and stated ‘Pakistaner guptachar nipat jao’. (Down with the spy of Pakistan) We were very scared”, revealed his widow.\textsuperscript{63} Even those who did not have so direct a contact with Pakistan, were not spared. “It was an age when patriotism was not enough. A Muslim always needed to give ample proof of it,”\textsuperscript{64} said Layek Moinul Haq who was nineteen years old in 1965. He vividly remembered that his father, Md. Hossain and other Muslim advocates in the Burdwan Court had felt cornered during the Indo-Pak War.\textsuperscript{65} He showed me a handbill which Muslim lawyers had brought out as proof of their loyalty denouncing ‘the Pakistan aggression on the pavitra holy land of India’.\textsuperscript{66} Many of these senior Muslim lawyers were former Congress activists who appealed to the masses to join a public meeting on September 19, 1965 on the same issue.

Shortly after the partition, the proposal of the Hindu Mahasabha for a population exchange also alarmed the Muslims. The Mahasabha members believed that the exchange of population along with property was the only remedy in view of the huge Hindu refugee influx from Pakistan and the consequent pressure of population on land and food in West Bengal. It advised the Indian government to move for a peaceful exchange of population ‘without further delay’\textsuperscript{67} because refugees could not be settled unless “10 or 15 lakh Muslims (were) made to leave these ceded districts”.\textsuperscript{68}

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{62} Private Memoirs, Syeda Jolekha Khatun, My Interview with Maryam Ajij, 7.8.04.
\textsuperscript{63} Interview with Begum Maryam Ajij, 7.8.04.
\textsuperscript{64} Interview with Layek Moinul Haq, b. 1947, 23.8.03.
\textsuperscript{65} Confirmed from interview with Syed Siraj Ali, 31.8.03.
\textsuperscript{67} Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha Papers, file no. p116; NMML.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.
Their proposal gained wide circulation through Mahasabha propaganda. However, both the Congress\textsuperscript{69} and the Communist Party were opposed to this approach and no actual steps were taken. But wild rumours that Muslims would soon be driven out of India created considerable panic among them. Many of them at that point regretted that they had stayed back in West Bengal.

The West Bengal State Government, apprehending a confrontation with Pakistan on the Eastern Front, initiated the Nadia Eviction Plan during August-September, 1951. The fact that Bengali Muslims living in the border areas of the Nadia district were actually uprooted to make room for Hindus created considerable insecurity in the minds of Bengali Muslims elsewhere in the state. It came as a rude shock to many Muslims who believed that such a step amounted to a lack of confidence on the part of the Government in the loyalty of the Muslims. It also demonstrated that Muslims could, at any time, be evicted by the government in the name of national interest.

But, fortunately in this case too, the Central Government, led by Nehru, took bold steps to discard the measure at least from the perspective of military strategy and political pragmatism.\textsuperscript{70} Timely intervention from the Centre prevented major disasters during both the instances but the memories of such possibilities left “a deep scar in the minds of Muslims which took a long time to heal”, according to Md. Fazle Qader of Calcutta and Syed Abdul Halim of Burdwan.\textsuperscript{71}

Another grave crisis to which many Muslims referred related to the refugee occupation of uninhabited property. Many people in West Bengal had vast stretches of open habitable land, which were not put to any productive use. In many cases, even the boundaries were not well defined. With the coming in of the refugee tide, there was a tremendous pressure on land in West Bengal. The name Jabardakhal Colony, by which many refugee colonies were known, refers to the process of forcible occupation of such vacant plots by the refugees. Such land in many cases belonged to individual owners but

\textsuperscript{69} Nehru in a letter to Dr. B.C. Roy dated 25.8.48 wrote, “To say of a group of Indian nationals that we shall push them out because some people elsewhere are not behaving as they should is something which has no justification in law or equality”. Office of the Chief Minister, West Bengal. In a statement before the Parliament on 23.2.50, the PM ruled out as ‘totally unrealistic’ vague suggestions of exchange of population.

\textsuperscript{70} In a letter to Dr. B.C. Roy dated 15.9.51, Nehru stated that measures like the Nadia Eviction were “not in keeping with our problems and proclaimed practice…. I should like you to look into this matter and take steps to rectify any such action which might have been taken”, op.cit.

\textsuperscript{71} My interview with Md. Fazle Qader, Calcutta, 12.8.04. My interview with Syed Abdul Halim, Burdwan, 25.2.03.
there was a basic difference. "A Hindu landlord dealing with such forcible occupants would only be dealing with it from the property aspect; but for a Muslim landlord dealing with Hindu refugee occupants from East Bengal, it was a very sensitive affair and they had to be very cautious lest it took a communal turn", said Kazi Md. Ali, senior advocate and bar-at-law, Supreme Court of India. It was thus that Arfan Ali Mondal lost his land to the Viveknagar Colony. Kazi Md. Ali's family also lost large plots of land to the refugees in Serampore.

Land belonging to Muslims was not deliberately or exclusively targeted for forcible occupation. But the interviews certainly revealed that Muslim landlords parted more easily with their land, considering the troubled times they already were in. In most cases, they preferred not to go in for a show of strength, apparently for reasons as explained by Kazi Md. Ali. Most of the jabardakhal enterprises were backed by Communist leadership.

It is remarkable that most Muslim landlords who now recall their losses, hold the administrative failure of the Congress Government responsible rather than the Communists who actually organised such action. This is probably connected with the repressive and discriminating aspects of the Congress government against Muslims which outweighed what they had suffered due to Communist intervention in their capacity as landlords.

Golam Jilani of Burdwan complained that the then Congress MLA Jaharlal Banerjee took the initiative in settling a large number of refugee families on their land in Kumirkola village, Burdwan district, on the southern side of the Damodar river. The family was not given any compensation in lieu of the large plots of land that were occupied. The Congress government was indecisive about its stand in the matter. It brought out a Gazette Notification in 1950, instructing refugee squatters to vacate occupied places or face forcible eviction. But the United Central Rehabilitation Council, founded in 1950 by a section of the refugees under Left leadership, soon took the eviction order to the High court which adjudicated that if a person occupied any land in an unauthorized manner at a stretch for more than three months, he could be evicted only

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72 My interview with Kazi Md.Ali, b.1935, Calcutta, 17.6.03.
73 Gargi Chakravartty, op.cit., p.56.
74 My interview with Golam Jilani, Burdwan, 11.3.03.
through a civil suit. No criminal charges could be made and even the police could not intervene. This made it difficult for the landowners to get the squatters to vacate the land, as a civil suit would involve a lot of time and incur a high expenditure. Not only was the ambiguity of the Congress official policy displayed in the matter of jabardakhal, it also disappointed the people of West Bengal in various other matters. The conscious political choice of the middle class Bengali Muslims gradually shifted to communism in the context of such post-1947 problems. Muslim League activities were confined to the Muslim majority district of Murshidabad. Considering the numerical insignificance of the Muslims elsewhere in the state and the migration of the Muslim communalist leaders to Pakistan, there was no effect to build up a Muslim party. The anticipation of communal riots and the steadfast secular activism of the CPI attracted Bengal Muslims to it. Many of the pre-1947 communists, like Muzaffar Ahmed, Mansur Habibullah and others had not migrated to Pakistan. Their activities had some role in convincing the Muslim voters about the credibility of communist candidates. The choice gradually tilted more towards the CPI(M) in Calcutta and Burdwan, after it was born in 1964.

As a part of the pre-1947 legacy when the Congress was synonymous with nationalist politics, a number of middle class Bengali Muslims had flocked to the Congress but the Congress failed to live up to the expectations of the people. The senior Congress leadership was aware of major flaws in the party organization. A letter from Dr. B. C. Roy to Nehru, dated 17 April, 1951 stated that “In this province we have not only the question of East Bengal and West Bengal ...not only have we the problem of the Communists and Forward Bloc,” but also “we have in this province the problem of a large number of seasoned Congress workers who have definitely left the Congress and (are) out to down the Congress and the Congress government at every available opportunity.” The statement of Dr. B.C. Roy implies that already by 1951, the Communists had become a formidable force in the state and the faction fights within the Congress leadership tarnished the public image of the party. The educated Bengali bhadralok, both Hindu and Muslim, looked for a suitable alternative.

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76 This is not my personal comment but an inference drawn from the analysis of interviews taken during field work.
77 Letter from Dr. B.C. Roy to Nehru dated 17.4.51, office of the Chief Minister, West Bengal.
Sajal Basu mentions that the bhadralok section of the Bengali population was disaffected and isolated from the Congress due to its, “negligence in adequate refugee rehabilitation”. The issue of refugee management may not have concerned the Bengali Muslim middle class directly; but the land and food problems which were aggravated with the coming of the refugees, also had their impact upon them. Even Dr. B. C. Roy admitted these problems. “The main trouble with the people of Bengal has been want of food, want of employment and want of land ... in which they could settle themselves,” he said. But no effective step was initiated by the State government until it was coerced through mass movements initiated by the Leftists. Despite its shortcomings, the Congress government stayed in power continuously for two decades upto 1967. The disillusionment of the people of Bengal was, however, complete after it returned to power in 1972. This last term of the Congress government in power marked a well-organized regime of oppression against the opposition parties and total anarchy in the field of education. The middle classes were now totally disillusioned.

Though the CPI (ML) was officially born on May 1, 1969, Naxalite activities had stirred the Bengali youth since 1967. In a stagnant socio-economic condition, their frustration found vent through massive violence, which was believed to be only a transient phase in the process of revolution. Despite certain major political errors that it committed, the Naxalite movement had been able to instill a dream of social transformation in the minds of a considerable section of the Bengali youth. Although a

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78 Sajal Basu, Politics of Violence A Case Study of the West Bengal, Calcutta, 1982. There is an indirect acknowledgement of the refugee discontent in a letter written by Dr. B. C. Roy to Nehru on 20.5.57. in which he says, “During the last election we lost heavily in the town and industrial areas mainly because of these two factors, namely, where there were refugee concentration in transit camps, they voted against the government to show their displeasure with their conditions”...

79 Letter from Dr. B. C. Roy to Nehru dated 30.12.49.

80 Between 17.3.70 and 22.4.71, 963 CPI (M) members were murdered by congress activists or Police, according to Jyoti Basu, Cry Halt to this Reign of Terror, CPI (M) publication, Calcutta, 1971 and Congressi Hinga Khun O Santrasher Nanga Chitra, CPI (M), Calcutta, 1972. Both publications also carry a detailed list of those injured, arrested, evicted from locality or whose houses have been burnt. Between April 1971 and March 1972, more than 600 CPI (M) cadres were reportedly murdered. Jyoti Basu, Paschima Bonge Sangsadidaa Gunatantar Dhongsha, CPI (M) Publication, Calcutta, 1972.

81 University and Colleges were practically run by Chhatra Parisad (students’ wing of the Congress) leaders. In some colleges, teachers met to decide whether mass copying should be allowed or invigilation should be in the hands of Chhatra Parisad cadres. Due to excessive governmental pressure & interference, vice - chancellorship crisis had taken place in Kalyani, Burdwan, Rabindra Bharati, etc. Ananda Bazar Patrika, 21.1.75.

82 The CPI (ML)’s faith in the spontaneous militancy of the oppressed masses led to two other massive errors; one tactical, the so-called annihilation campaign and the other ideological, a glorification of violence and armed struggle. Partha Chatterjee. The Present History of West Bengal, Essays in Political Criticism, Delhi 1997, p. 66.
few Muslim individuals like Azizul Haque were involved in the movement, I have often wondered why the Muslims as a community were not more moved by it. The call of this party was secular, so at one point of time I thought it was naive to look for the participation of one community or the other as a religious community in it. But my point in probing the issue with my participants was that if the Bengali Muslim middle class was disillusioned with the Congress, why was their participation so marginal in the Naxalite Movement which promised a total social change?

Sahana Khan (b.1952) was a CPI (ML) activist drawn into the movement by her brother. According to her, the Naxalite Movement basically had an intellectual appeal among the urban youth in Calcutta. Most of the Muslim boys who had come to Calcutta to study during the late sixties, however, had a very distinct career orientation and preferred to stay clear of politics. The restrictive nature of the Muslim community was itself another constraint. Institutionalised Islam in West Bengal (perhaps everywhere) wields a great deal of social control over its members and expects each individual to act according to the pre-defined norms of behaviour. The slightest digression is widely criticized within one’s social circle and individuals/families can be ostracised by the community for improper action. Most importantly, considering the persecution Naxalites faced, participation in the movement would have further endangered the Muslims families who were already living as members of a suspected minority population. Cautious Muslims thus avoided any contact with the revolutionary group.

More suited for the Muslims was the politics of the mainstream communists. Communists had gained wide publicity among the people for their secular ideology and social service. Their exemplary relief activities during the 1943 Famine and the 1946-47 riots had already earned them a glowing reputation. They had shown great initiative in restoring communal harmony during the communal riots in the post independence era. Soon after the September 1947 riots, the Santi Sena, literally the Peace Force, a communist-dominated group for social work, organized a get together of Hindu and

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83 My interview with Sahana Khan, Calcutta, 20.8.03.
84 Sahana recalled that she was for a long time derided as ‘inquilabi’ by her relatives when they met in social functions, like marriages. Girls of her age avoided contact with her and she was not regarded as normal by others in her village near Basirhat. Hindu girls in the Party, according to her, faced lesser social criticism.
Muslim women to celebrate Id and Durga Puja, thereby restoring the confidence of the people.\footnote{Renu Chakravarty, *Communists in Indian Women's Movement*, New Delhi, 1980, p. 108. The Communist initiative in fighting communalism has always been remarkable. The pre-1947 tradition was continued during the 1950, '64, '68, riots, etc. Minor clashes in Park Circus, April 1967, Champdani, March 1969, were also seriously dealt with. The effectiveness with which the post-1947 communal disturbances have been dealt with by the Left Front Government has amply demonstrated that their commitment to secularism is consistently genuine and not merely a gimmick to win the votes of a threatened minority.}

Letters written by Chief Minister Dr. B.C. Roy to Nehru on different occasions establish that he was aware of the communist potential in West Bengal and regarded it as a 'menace'. The Muslim state of Hyderabad was incorporated into the Indian nation through a military operation (Operation Polo) in September, 1948. According to a report compiled by Pandit Sundarlal and Qazi M. Abdulghaffar (*A Report on the Massacres, Rape and Looting and Seizure of Property in Hyderabad*), the pogroms that followed the accession claimed the lives of 200,000 Muslims. It was feared in the official circles that this would be resented by Muslims elsewhere in the country. Dr. Roy, however, assured Nehru that there was "nothing to fear from the Muslims as such",\footnote{Letter from Dr. B.C. Roy to Nehru, dated 13.9.48, *op. cit.*} unless they until they were provoked by the Communists.\"The Communist Party will... hope that anarchy and confusion will prevail and they will have an opportunity to thrive under such a situation.\"\footnote{Ibid.} In the first General Election (1952), the Communist Party of India could win as many as 30 Assembly seats in Bengal.\footnote{S.V. Kogekar and Richard L. Park (eds.): *Reports on the Indian General Election, 1951-52*, Bombay, 1956, D.N. Banerjee, *West Bengal*, p. 172.} By 1957, Communists in West Bengal used the slogan of an 'alternative government',\footnote{1957 General Elections, pamphlet of the Communist Party of India, Calcutta, not dated, p. 3.} and 101 communists contested the elections as against 70 in the 1952 elections.\footnote{Ibid.}

The growing influence of the Left and especially the Communist Party in organizing urban opposition to the Congress rule was "dramatically felt"\footnote{Partha Chatterjee, *The Present History of West Bengal Essays in Political Criticism*, Delhi, 1997, p. 188.} in the 1957 elections, when the Party won as many as 15 Assembly seats from Calcutta and its industrial suburbs. Even in the Bowbazar constituency, Chief Minister Dr. B.C. Roy could defeat his rival, trade union leader Md. Ismail by only a very narrow margin of 540
Communist influence in Burdwan was so great that Dr. B.C. Roy sought to counter it by starting his election campaign from Burdwan well in advance for the 1962 elections. He addressed an election meeting at the Burdwan Town Hall on October 1, 1961. Throughout the period, Communists were successful in bringing up certain issues which touched ghatis and bangals (terms used to refer to people of West and East Bengal respectively), Hindus and Muslims alike. Their ability to combine, formulate and implement a joint programme of action, and their capacity to mobilize effectively different sections of the people gained them remarkable popularity. There was an organised resistance to the hike in tram fares in July 1953, followed by the teachers’ agitation in February 1954. In December 1954, men of the armed and other branches of the Calcutta police went on a hunger strike. In January 1956 there was a 2-day All India Bank Employees’ Strike and when the employees returned to work on 9th January ‘with a new sense of confidence and loyalty to their leaders ..it was a big victory for the trade union leaders belonging to the Communist fold.’ In 1956, Communists led the resistance movement against the Bengal Bihar Merger proposal.

These were issues on which there could be no communal divide. The class-based ideology of communism could successfully bring middle class Hindus and Muslims under its banner through these movements. Even in places where middle class participation was not necessarily conspicuous, there was total public sympathy for the movements staged along secular lines and centring on economic demands.

Communist leadership in the workers’ strike in the Asansol-Kulti region following the police firing on workers of Indian Iron and Steel Company (IISCO), Burnpur on July 5, 1953, the engineering workers’ strike on February 16, 1968, the jute and cotton textile workers’ strike on April 15, 1968 and the protest strike of teachers on May 10, 1968 demanding an enhanced salary scale, regular payment of salary and pension to employees, etc, may be cited as examples. The biggest movement led by the
Communists centred around food scarcity during 1952, 1959 and 1966. All these widened the middle class support base of the party.

It is very difficult to locate the precise extent of Muslim participation in these movements because of a dearth of document any documentary evidence. But we can safely assume that some of the Muslim workers who would be present in IISCO, Burnpur or the jute and cotton textiles as well as some of the Muslim school teachers would join in these movements.

Even when participation was not overt, the secular, labour or economic issues raised by the communists were attractive to Muslims and this tended to draw their sympathy and support for the communists. This statement is based on what was pointed out by three of my respondents and other political leaders I interviewed. “This was a platform where Muslims were not treated only as Muslims, low and despicable. They were treated as a part of the toiling masses among whom there could be no communal divide ... That there could be a community of teachers ... not Hindu teachers and Muslim teachers ... this message was very important to the teachers themselves and they flocked to the communists”, explained Sufi Nur Afroze Selina who is a school teacher and ABTA activist.

That the impact of the Food Movement was also profound upon Bengali Muslims may be gauged from contemporary writings. Sahani Ekti Meyer Naam, a novel written by Abdul Aziz Al-Aman, deserves to be mentioned in this context. However numerically meagre the participation of Muslims might have been in the Movement, Al-Aman imagines heroine, Sahani, at the demonstration. The novel was not inspired by any real life event.

It is significant that the author was impressed by the Food Movement and included a section on it in his novel. Sahari’s son Siraj, is killed in the demonstration. Sahani cannot recover from the personal loss but at the same time she feels proud that she

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97 My interview with Sufi Nur Afroze Selina (b. 1947) on 27.5.03, Burdwan.
99 Ibid, p. 79.
100 My interview with the author’s widow, Begum Maryam Ajij (b.1936) on 7.8.04, Calcutta.
is a martyr’s mother. She can thus associate herself with the cause for which many Hindus have also laid down their lives.

The greatest contribution of the Communists in West Bengal was in containing communalism. The hostility and historical prejudice against the Muslims due to the insult and injury the Hindus faced in East Bengal could have become an integral part of Bengali Hindu consciousness. But as the refugee movement in West Bengal was from the beginning in the hands of Communist leadership, communal sentiment of the refugees could never become overt. The Communist call to the refugees was open and direct as may be discernible through Bengali leaflets like *Purva Bangla theke agato bastuharader prati communist partyr dak* (Call of the Communist party to East Bengal Refugees, date and place of publication not mentioned). Internal evidence suggests that it was issued sometime in 1950. In fact, the Communist leadership of the Refugee Movement prevented any large scale massacre of Muslims\(^{101}\) during the post partition riots for which the Muslims seemed to be grateful.\(^{102}\)

The spontaneous participation of refugee women in different socio-economic and political activities during the post partition period was also of great significance. Post-47 West Bengal was like a ‘melting pot’ in which the traditional social attitudes regarding women were being reformulated in the face practical necessities. The old joint family system had to be discarded,\(^ {103}\) many of the orthodox social customs\(^ {104}\) were done away with and the traditional physical divide between the public and private worlds also withered away.\(^ {105}\) All this restructured the entire social order, preparing the old for the new. The ‘new woman’ who thus emerged have been celebrated in fictional representations in the characters of Nita, Mira or Sutara.\(^ {106}\)

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\(^{101}\) This has been indirectly referred to by Prafulla Kumar Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal*, Kalyani 1990, p. 110. “Had the million refugees supported by the local Hindus gone on the rampage in 1950, not even the Army could have prevented the total uprooting of the Muslim population of West Bengal. This was exactly what happened in East Punjab. Nehru could not prevent the Punjab Killings.”

\(^{102}\) My statement is based on an analysis of the interviews.


\(^{104}\) Gargi Chakravartty, op. cit., p. 84.


All these three characters express the realities of social change. They typify the various experiences of the first generation of women who came out of the home to work. Nita is shown to die of overwork; Mira, the daughter of a rich zamindar of East Bengal also takes a lot of time and undergoes various tumultuous experiences before she adjusts to the new situation. Sutara, however, is shown to have boldly accepted the challenges of life and establish herself through education and employment, all by herself.

These themes were entirely new in Bengali literature and were a reflection of the new social changes that were taking place in the social life of West Bengal. The older Hindu residents of West Bengal (the ghatis), who had not faced the cataclysmic changes that East Bengal refugees faced, were not initially sympathetic and regarded these new women as being too aggressive, violating gender norms.

Middle class Bengali Muslims initially found it very difficult to adjust to the changing social milieu. Apprehensive about losing their identity\(^\text{107}\) in a period when socio-cultural changes were taking place very rapidly, Bengali Muslims initially recoiled from any radical change. Women who were in their teens and twenties during the 1950s felt that there was a great deal of religio-social and familio-patriarchal monitoring over their activities at that time.

But middle class Bengali Muslims could not for long shut out the great social changes that were taking place. In spite of the international and internal political turmoils, like the Indo-Pak war of 1965, occasional riots and an internal political instability in West Bengal which accentuated after the split in the Communist Party in 1964, the rise and fall of two United Front Ministries in 1967 and 1969, etc, the need for change was apparent from the 60s onwards.

It was now felt by all sections of the middle class Bengali Muslims, a ‘microscopic minority’\(^\text{108}\) as a social category among Muslims in Bengal, that they had to reformulate their socio cultural norms to keep pace with the changing times. It was from the sixties that this society under the stress of competition with the Bengali Hindu middle

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\(^{107}\) Identity being a complex phenomenon formulated through distinct socio-cultural behaviour of a particular group based on its religious identity.

\(^{108}\) This is because the higher economic class among Muslims in Bengal still comprises the non-Bengali business elite and the Bengali Muslims largely belong to the poorer professional and agricultural groups.
class, began to change its outlook. It was from this time, again, that the attendance of Bengali Muslim girls in schools and colleges and their participation in employment showed an increase along with a relaxation in the purdah restrictions. The Bangladesh Liberation War (1971), commented twelve women, boosted their morale, as it confirmed the primacy of culture over religion. The secular class-based ideology of the Left Front government in power in Bengal since 1977 also gave them a sort of confidence. These points have been substantiated in the following chapters.

These were the major political and historical forces to which the already existing Bengali Muslim middle class was exposed during the period 1947-92. Along with it, the Bengali Muslim middle class in Calcutta and Burdwan was joined by two other categories which emerged during the period.

One of these was due to the horizontal mobility of the propertied class from the villages of West Bengal. There has been a series of land reform measures in post independence India which created considerable pressure on them. Mention may be made of the West Bengal Land Reform Act 1956 and 1972 which fixed a ceiling on land on the basis of family holdings in place of personal holdings; or the West Bengal Land Reform (Amendment) Act 1970 whereby the right of cultivation of the Bargadar has been made hereditary. A proclaimed policy of the Left Front Government has been “to implement land reform measures within the existing legal parameters, to enable the rural poor to benefit from the process of development” The “land grab” movement also created considerable pressure upon the rural propertied classes. Along with these, the fragmentation of agricultural property due to the Muslim Inheritance Law and impoverishment due to growing families led the rural middle classes to shift towards urban centres in search of education and employment. In most cases, such migration was not wholesale. The younger generation went to urban centres in the first place, while the older generation of parents remained in the village to look after the property. The initial

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109 My interviews with Miratun Nahar (b. 1949) on 1.9.03, in Calcutta and Sufi Nur Afroze Selina (b. 1947) on 27.5.03, in Burdwan may be cited as exemples. Ten other women mentioned this point.


111 The Left Parties organized extensive land grab movement after the United Front came to power in 1969. One account of the CPI (M) puts the total land grabbed during 1969-70 at 3 lakh acres while the same source gives the figure to be 2.75 lakh acres Conspiracy to Wreck United Front, CPI (M) Publication, Calcutta, 1970 p. 9. p. 32. The data as to how much of the total land grabbed actually belonged to Muslims however was not available anywhere.
funding for education or the business capital came from such property. In many families, aged parents were later accommodated when the son got a job or settled down. Rural property then was either sold or left in charge of a caretaker, who could be a loyal servant or a poor relative. The first generation of migrants bear a deep sentimental attachment to their villages where they have spent a considerable portion of their childhood (in some cases, even youth). These bonds naturally weaken in the next generation, who are born in the town and the city. For instance, Khondekar Nasirul Islam, an officer in the Indian Railways was the first in his family to come to Burdwan town for college education from a village in the district. He, in turn, brought three of his brothers to the town, who have eventually settled in different parts of the country. His wife, Masuda Begum, told me that he has always retained contact with his ancestral home. A portion of their property (ponds and orchards) was sold out; a significant portion of the agricultural land is still there and is looked after by his cousins, who are apparently less affluent.

There has also been a significant vertical mobility among the lower economic groups during the period, in both rural and urban areas. Apart from engaging in business, an ambitious younger generation has also achieved its entry into the middle class through sheer academic and professional merit. Improved communications also played a considerable role in rururban mobilisation. For instance, the number of students (both boys and girls) coming to study in Burdwan town from Bamsor has increased since the seventies after a road connecting the two was constructed and communication had become easier and faster.

Thus the Bengali Muslim urban middle class during 1947-92 may be said to have comprised the following sections:

a) an already existing category of the middle class which experienced the pressures of all the contemporary socio-political forces during the period and consequently changed (even if partially), its social outlook from the 60s and the 70s,

112 My statements are made on the basis of the interviews
113 My interview with Masuda Begum (b. 1948), 24.6.03, Burdwan.
b) a portion of the rural propertied classes which shifted to urban centres for education and employment due to various pressures to which it was subjected and also the growth of newer aspirations,

c) a section of both the rural and the urban lower economic classes which either through business or white collar jobs gained entry into the middle class.

The educational, economic, social, domestic and political status of the women belonging to all these three sections of the Bengali Muslim middle class is probed in the following chapters.