

Question of Equality of Opportunity and the Communal Politics of Bengal (1935-1941) with Special Reference to 'Communal Ratio Act'

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In spite of a common language of which every Bengalese is proud, a shared culture and lifestyle and a common history since at least a thousand years, no Bengalese wanted the partition of Bengal from the core of their heart, yet the partition happened due to the gradual deterioration of communal harmony and thereupon undivided Bengal disappeared from the atlas on 15th August, 1947. Though, there were so many reasons behind the origin of communal politics in Bengal which were developed throughout the entire British rule or in some cases even prior to the advent of the British in Bengal as well as India. In this paper it is my humble effort to present before you how the politics of Bengal from 1935 to 1941 was communalized and subsequently led to the partition by centering the question of ensuring equality of opportunity in Government job for the Muslims of Bengal through the passing of 'Communal Ratio Act'.

British Policy to create gap between Hindus and Muslims of Bengal

It is well known to all that Ramsay Mac Donald, Prime Minister of England (1929-1935) had declared his much-talked 'Communal Award' on 10th August 1932. Keeping in mind the 'Communal Award' under the Government of India Act of 1935, out of 250 seats of the Bengal Legislative Assembly, Muslims of Bengal were provided 119 seats i.e. 47.6 % of the total seats, against their 54.8 % of total population. The Hindus were given altogether 80 seats i.e. 32% of the total seats while they constituted 44% of the total population in Bengal. The main objective of the British Rulers behind the arrangement of the disproportionate representations in the Bengal Legislative Assembly was to regulate the politics of Bengal by broadening the gap between the Hindus and Muslims.¹

Who Controlled Bengal Politics?

At that time there were five separate groups of Bengal who ultimately controlled the Bengal politics. They were - **i.** A upper class Muslim group that was mainly influenced by the non-Bengalee Muslims like KhwazaNajumuddin and H.S. Suhrawardy, **ii.** Muslim peasantry and professional classes consisted by

rural and middle class Muslims of Bengal, dominated by A.K. FazlulHuq **iii**. Hindu bhadrak class of Bengal under the fold of the Congress party dominated by the so-called 'big-five' of Bengal politics namely Sarat Chandra Bose, Bidhan Chandra Roy, NaliniRanjan Sarkar, TulsiCharanGoswami and Nirmal Chandra Chunder, **iv**. A non-Congress powerful and vocal Zamindar class and **v**. Scheduled Castes people particularly the Namasudras of Bengal led by JogendraNath Mandal.²

Political Stands of KPP and FazlulHuq

The most influential party among the Muslims communities particularly the East Bengalee Muslims was the KrishakPraja Party (KPP) of A.K. FazlulHuq. The Muslims cultivating classes constitute more than 90 per cent of the total Muslim population of Bengal.³ It was fact that the KPP was nominally a Secular political party but it had strong Muslim orientation and dedicated mainly for protecting the interests of farmers and ryots from any kind of exploitation and ameliorating their conditions.⁴ It was Huq whose main agenda was to a satisfactory solution of the bread problem i.e. 'Dal-Bhat' problem of Bengal and for that he wanted Tenancy Legislation (Amendment) Laws in Bengal (1928) and abolition of Zamindari system without compensation so as to give some relief to agriculturists.⁵ At that time the K.P.P. of FazlulHuq was the most influential political party in rural Bengal.

Political Stands of the Muslim League

At that time the Muslim League was almost insignificant in the politics of Bengal. To meet the challenge of the KPP, some of the Muslim League leaders, notably NawabKhwajaHabibullah, H. S. Suharawardy and M. A. H. Ispahani founded the United Muslim Party (henceforth UMP) on 25th May, 1936.⁶ NawabKhwajaNazimuddin, leader of the UMP accusing the **KPP for not being a purely Muslim organization**. By this time, the All India Muslim League (henceforth AIML) led by Mohammad Ali Jinnah (henceforth M A Jinnah) made their sincere attempts to win over the support of the Bengalee Muslims and for that reason Jinnah came to Calcutta to discuss with KPP leaders for further coordination. But as a result of the opposition of the UMP led by non- Bengalee Muslims to the question of the abolition of Zamindari system, it was impossible to reach any fruitful solution regarding the unity between the AIML and KPP. So, FazlulHuq emphatically declared, 'From this day onwards begins a grim fight between Zaminders and Capitalists on the one hand, and the poor people on the other. It is not at all a civil war in the Muslim Community but it is a fight in which the people of Bengal are divided on a purely economic issue.'⁷

General Election of 1937

Under the Government of India Act of 1935, the first general elections to the Provincial Legislatures were held in between 16-25 January, 1937. Out of 250 seats of the Bengal Legislative Assembly, the party wise position of that election were as follows: Congress- 54, Muslim League- 40, KPP- 36, Independent Muslim- 42, Independent Hindu- 37, European- 25, TKP (TipperaKrishak Party)- 5, Anglo Indian- 4, Nationalist- 3, Hindu Mahasabha- 2, and Indian Christian- 2. ⁸ The personal prestige and influence of FazlulHuq increased greatly when he emerged victorious by defeating Sir KhwajaNazimuddin in the election in his Zamindary at Patuakhali. It is important to note that during that time of election KhwazaNazimuddin was a member of the Governor's executive council and was an important member of the Muslim League.⁹

Stands of the Congress Party

After the election of 1937 when it was found that no party was in a position to form Government due to lack of absolute majority, then Governor Sir John Herbert invited Sarat Chandra Bose, leader of the single largest party i.e. Congress to form the Ministry, but he declined the offer because of the decision of Congress high command. This time Congress high command committed a Himalayan blunder for that Bengal had to pay heavy cost. It was decided by the Congress High Command that the congress would form Ministries only in those provinces where it got an absolute majority in the Assembly election and would not join hands with any other parties for Ministry making. ¹⁰

Stand of the Muslim League

At that moment FazlulHuq, leader of KrishakPraja Party requested Kiran Sankr Roy of the Congress to join him in a coalition government under his leadership. Sarat Chandra Bose was intending to agree and requested AbulKalam Azad, the then All India Congress president for permission to join hands with Huq, taking into account the special situation in Bengal, but the Congress high command turned it down despite repeated requests. Lastly Huq was compelled to take the support of Muslim League, which promptly agreed to join the coalition under Huq's leadership. As a result of the formation of Huq - League Ministry, the support base of the Muslim League among the Bengalee Muslims increased many times which gradually paved the way for the partition of Bengal as well as India. It has been presumed from different corner that history might have been

different if the Congress agreed to Huq's offer at this juncture. In that context, AmalshTripathy wrote "if Congress would have supported the Ministry headed by A.K. FazlulHuq from outside, then possibly he would not have to go to the Muslim League and Bengal also would not have divided."¹¹

Huq-League Ministry (1st April, 1937 – 7th December, 1941)

However, cutting across the party line FazlulHuq selected the ministers from both the Hindu and Muslim communities those who were 'the very best man, the very ablest man, man of sterling character and integrity.'¹²FazlulHuq formed his ministry with 5 Muslim and 5 Hindu ministers. The Muslim ministers were 1. Sir, KhajaNazimuddin 2. NawabHabibullah of Dhaka 3. H. S. Suharawardy 4. SayyidNauser Ali, and 5.NawabMosharof Hussain. The Hindu ministers were 1. NaliniRanjanSarkar 2. Maharaja Srishchandra Nandi of Kashimbazar 3. Bijay Prasad Singha Roy 4. Mukunda Bihari Mallick and 5. Prasannya Dev Roykat. Huq himself took the chair of Prime Minister of Bengal.¹³

Problems Faced by Huq-League Ministry

The newly formed ministry faced uneasy times from the beginning. Huq pressed his most important election agenda i.e abolition of the Zamindari system. But it was met with sharp opposition from one of the League ministers named Nawab Musharraf Hussain who declared that "he is willing to spend all his money to get Huq removed from the Cabinet".¹⁴Many members of the KPP were very much dissatisfied regarding the selection of ministers by FazlulHuq and his failure to theabolition of Zamindari system due to the strong opposition from the League members and thereupon 20 MLAs of KPP under the leadership of Shamsuddin Ahmed accused FazlulHuq for this failure.¹⁵In that circumstances at the aim of controlling the internal fray of the party FazlulHuq expelled 17 MLAs from the KPP. But that action of FazlulHuq was reversed to him because the expulsion of 17 MLAs prompted more members to leave the party and as a result of that FazlulHuq instantly became a minority within the ministry.

Joining of Huq in the Muslim League (at Lucknow in October, 1939)

In that situation, with severe opposition from his coalition partner i.e, Muslim League and the Congress Legislatures in the Assembly, FazlulHuq realized

that without understanding with the communal policy of Muslim League it was almost impossible for him to save his ministry and to counter the opposition in Bengal.¹⁶ Therefore, in order to overcome his 'Crisis of Existence' and save his Ministry he prepared to join hand with Jinnah as because Huq clearly realized that he could save his ministry only with Jinnah's support, that is why he joined the Muslim League in its annual session at Lucknow in October 1939 along with Siquander Hayat Khan of Punjab.¹⁷

Use of FazlulHuq's Stature by the Muslim League and 'Pakistan Resolution'

It is noteworthy that Jinnah never trusted FazlulHuq, but, he was aware that Huq was very much popular in Bengal and he had immense influence over both the Hindu and Muslim communities. That's why M.A. Jinnah, a very shrewd and farsighted politician tried to use Huq stature for enhancing supporting base of the Muslim League in Bengal and at the same time chalked out a plan to dissociate Huq first from the Hindus. He created such a situation that FazlulHuq had to move the historical "Lahore Resolution" on 23rd March, 1940 which was termed by the Hindus as well as nationalist newspapers as 'Pakistan Resolution'.

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Popularity of Huq-League Ministry

In the meanwhile, by a series of administrative and legislative measures such as –the Bengal Tenancy (Amendment) Act of 1938, the Debt Settlement Boards and the Money-lenders Act of 1940, FazlulHuq enhanced his popularity among the Muslim peasants. Though he was not able to become completely successful due to strong opposition of the Zamindar Class of both the Congress and the Muslim League, but people specially the rural Muslim population started realizing that this government always tried to save their interests from the exploitation of Zamindars and Money-lenders etc.¹⁹

Conflicting Psyche of Hindus and Muslims in Bengal

It is found that by the 1920s there had been emergence of a Muslim intellectual middle-class in Bengal, who cherished a dream or claim to enjoy both political power and job opportunities.²⁰ The key point of the conflict was the determination of the Hindu bhadralok classes to keep control over the social and

economic privileges which they had been enjoying since on-and a-half centuries and the equally vocal aspiration of the newly emerging middle classes from the Muslim community for a share of that privileges denied to them so long. This point was strongly brought out by Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy, a non-politicalscientist at the time of addressing a meeting of Muslim young men at Karachi on 26th October, 1932 in the following manner: “Hindu-Muslim differences were only among intellectuals for loaves and fishes of office. It was a lie to say that Islam was spread by sword. Hindus should have been annihilated if this doctrine was true. The real reason for the spread of Islam was democracy and brotherhood, and landslides in Hinduism were due to untouchability and the caste system. For centuries Bengal was ruled by Muslims, and yet ninety-nine per cent of zamindars were Hindus”,²¹

Communal Ratio Bill

Keeping in mind the said mental spirit as well as long standing demand of the middle-class Muslim intellectual of Bengal, the Huq-League Ministry brought a Bill named ‘Communal Ratio Bill’ which ran into serious controversies and imported a new political dimension in Bengal politics. The aim and objective of the said Bill was to ensure higher percentage of Government job for the Muslims. In case of materialization of the proposed bill it was decided that at least 50% government jobs would be reserved for Muslim community and in the subsequent period of about six months government would apprise the House about the Ratio of getting government service of different communities. A ‘Communal Ratio Officer’ was appointed in order to execute this government decision .²² Actually, by the Communal Ratio Act what FazlulHuq attempted to do was nothing more than what Chittaranjan Das had assured Bengal Muslims through his historic ‘Bengal Pact’ (1923)²³ Naturally, the Communal Ratio Act was welcomed by the Muslim Community specially the educated rural and urban Muslims, but, on the other hand Congress openly calling the ministry a communal ministry as well as Muslim government. As return of Congress as well as Hindu criticism against Communal Ratio Act, supporters of Huq-League Ministry raised the cry of ‘Islam in Danger’ which embittered Hindu – Muslim relation badly.

'Lotus Flower' and the word 'Shree'

Hindu Muslim relation in Bengal thus deteriorated on the controversy centering the 'Communal Ratio Act' then, Muslim demand for the removal of the 'Lotus Flower' and the word 'Shree' from the logo of the Calcutta University on the ground that these were Hindu symbols – also more embittered the Hindu-Muslim relations .²⁴

Senate and Syndicate of Calcutta University

A severe criticism thereafter started regarding the process of the formation of Senate and Syndicate of Calcutta University. Moulavi Abdul Bari, an MLA accused that out of 70 Syndicate and 100 Senate members, the number of Muslim members were only 01 and 21 respectively. Incidentally, after the establishment of the Calcutta University-there was only two Muslim Vice-Chancellor, Sir Hassan Suhrawardy (Sir Hassan Suhrawardy from 8.8.1930 to 7.8. 1934 and Sir AzijulHaque from 8.8. 1938 to 12.3. 1942) and Muslim employee were only 02 in number out of 180 clerical posts. Besides these, there were only 02 Professor belonging to Muslim community out of 88 Professors.²⁵

Debate Centering Poem of Rabindranath Tagore:

The communal atmosphere of the Bengal politics of Bengal was so polluted that that even the theme of the Poem '*BICHAROK*' and '*PUJARINI*' of RabindraNath Tagore became subject of criticism. In the Poem '*Bicharok*' Tagore wrote:

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(Raghunath said, why are you creating obstruction in my path? I am on my way to terminate the Muslims to feed the God of death.)²⁶

In the poem '*Pujarini*' the poet again wrote:

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(You should keep it in mind that no one could be worshipped other than the Vedas, the Brahmins and the king in this world. Forgetting this may be troublesome.)²⁷

In spite of showing adequate respect to Rabindranath Tagore, Mustagaswal Haque, MLA from Bagerhat commented, “But, we, who constitute Muslim Bengal will not tolerate any poem which definitely shocks Muslim sentiments and which outrages Muslim feelings”.²⁸ The most important dimension of the politics of Bengal was that when the Hindus were vehemently opposed the government decision to reserve the 50% Government job for the Muslims, at the same time the Muslims of Bengal irrespective of rural and urban areas particularly the educated section welcomed that type of courageous steps taken by the Government. Naturally, this decision of the Huq-League Ministry directly led to the increasing popularity of the Muslim League among the Muslims in Bengal and Muslim league emerged as a dominant political party thereafter. The inevitable consequence of that the Muslim League gradually emerged as a strong organization with mass support base in Bengal which completely changed the balance of Bengal politics.²⁹

On the basis of above discussion, it may be said that by centering the question of equality of opportunity in Government job for the Muslims of Bengal through the ‘Communal Ratio Act’, the communal bitterness between the Hindus and Muslims were so increased that started manifesting in the form of Hindu-Muslim communal riots in 1940 and 1941. As an inevitable consequence of the said fact the Muslim League became so powerful that in the general election of 1946 it secured 115 seats of the 121 Muslims seats³⁰ and got 83.64% of the total votes which could for the time being justify that the Bengal Muslims extended their support of Jinnah’s demand of ‘Pakistan’ and the scheme of partition on communal basis as if gained its momentum for future course of action.

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3. Statement issued by A.K. FazlulHuq, see Amrita Bazar Patrika, 1st September, 1936.
4. NitishSengupta, *Land of Two Rivers, A History of Bengal From The Mahabharata To Mujib*, Penguin, New Delhi, 2011, p.370.
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7. Fortnightly Report on the political situation in Bengal, 1st half of September 1936, Government of Bengal (Home political).
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10. NitishSengupta, *op.cit.* p.396
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15. Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal (1937-1947)*, ViswakosParisad, Kolkata, 2001, pp.102-103.

16. HumayunKabir, *Muslim Politics 1906-1947 and other Essays*, Calcutta, 1969, p. 43.
17. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, October 17, 1937.
18. AmalenduDey,*op.cit.* p.49.
19. 43. Shila Sen, *op.cit.*p.103.
20. Tazim Musshid, '*The House Divided*'. also see NitishSengupta, *op.cit.*p. 380.
21. R.C. Majumdar, *History of Bengal, Vol.4*, also seeNitishsengupta,*op.cit.* pp. 386-387.
22. Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings-Vol. LIII, No. 4, p. 297.
23. In order to forge unity among the Hindus and the Muslims, C.R. Das drafted the historic Bengal Pact of 1923. The main provisions of the pact were as follows: " i). The number of members of the two communities will be decided by their respective strength in Bengal's population, and the two communities will vote separately to elect their members. ii). The Muslims will have 60% and the Hindus 40% of the seats in local self-government institutions. iii). Fifty-five percent of the government appointees will be Muslims, but 80% of the vacancies will be filled up by them until the overall percentage of 55 was reached. iv). Music before mosques, usually a standard excuse for Hindu-Muslim riots, was to be banned. v). Killing of cows for religious purposes on the Bakr-Id day, a standard pretext for starting communal violence, was to be permitted and nobody will be allowed to object to it. vi). A committee with equal members of Muslims and Hindus will be appointed in every subdivision to supervise the implementation of the above terms." see NitishSengupta,*op.cit.*, pp. 338-339.
24. NitishSengupta,*op.cit.* p. 402.
25. Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings Vol. LII, No.4, 1938, p.360; also see Mohammad H. R. Talukdar, *Memoyors of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy-*

with a brief account of his life and work, The University Press Limited, Dhaka, 1987.p.5.

26. *RabindraRachanabali*, 4th Volume (Katha o KahiniKabyagrantha),p.74.

27. *RabindraRachanabali*,*op.cit*.p.29.

28. Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings Vol. LI, No.3, pp.606-607.

29. AmalenduDey,*op.cit*, p.43.

30. NitishSengupta, *op.cit*, p.454.