

United Bengal Scheme and the Partition of India

Dr. Chhawang Subba

Assistant Professor of History, University of Gour Banga

Abstract: *The partition of India is one of the most significant events in the history of India for its sheer potential for changing the whole course of Indian history. The partition was not only of the sub-continent but the sentiments and nationalism as well. At the time of partition, few of the intellectuals of Bengal tried to avoid the partition of India in general and Bengal in particular. Their objective was to establish a United and Independent Bengal, which would be free from either India or newly formed Pakistan. How this idea came into being and who were the exponents of this idea and how successful or unsuccessful it became is the theme of this article. It tries to examine the almost forgotten chapter of partition history about Bengal.*

Keywords: Partition, Potential, Sentiments, Intellectuals, Theme

India was never a unanimous political unit throughout its centuries of history. India's diversities in ethnicity, languages, faiths, customs and traditions, its political and economic relations were so varied that it was rightly termed by historians as more a geographical expression than a nation. In this diversity, Bengal was somehow different and stood itself up from the rest of the provinces of India. Bengal was somehow able to develop its political history without any significant hindrance. It had perhaps the brightest prospect of growing into a nation-state.¹ But unfortunately, the dictates of the British colonial state did not allow the development of Bengal politics to move that way. Religion and sectarianism played a great part in the propagation of Akhand Indian nationalism or two-nation theory which was used drastically by the leaders for the fulfilment of their agendas. But all the leaders and intellectuals were not in favour of pan-Indian nationalism and the two-nation theory. They came forward with an independent formula to determine the political destiny of this region; they came forward with the idea of United Independent Bengal.

The move of United Bengal was officially initiated by the last Chief Minister of United Bengal, Husain Shaheed Suhrawardy for and 'independent, undivided and sovereign Bengal' in a divided India on the eve of the partition. The move was first announced at a press conference held in Delhi on 27 April 1947.² Abul Hashim, the Secretary of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League, Sarat Chandra Bose, the elder brother of Subash Chandra Bose, and Kiran

Shankar Roy, the leader of the Bengal Congress Parliamentary Party, were closely associated with this move and played a very significant role in it.

The idea of Pakistan, which gradually gains currency through the Bengal Provincial Muslim League and the East Pakistan Renaissance Society during the first half of the 1940s, was regarded by the Bengali Muslims as their ultimate goal. But still, there was some confusion regarding the implementation of the Pakistan concept. The Muslim League, which was the torch-bearer of the Pakistan demand on all Indian bases, envisaged Pakistan as a new and separate homeland for all the Muslims residing in India. But on the other hand, the Bengali Muslims supported the Pakistani idea as a solution to their long-pending demand for their identity and autonomy. Most of the Bengali Muslims did not want the partition but just recognition of their community within the ambit of Bengal.

All sections of the Muslim intelligentsia of Bengal did not endorse the idea of Pakistan. Some of the literati of the Muslim Sahitya Samiti era tried to nullify the concept of Pakistan. A bipolar division was manifested in the thoughts of the Muslim intellectuals of Bengal on the issue of Pakistan concept. Intellectuals like Nazrul Islam, Muzaffar Ahmed, Motahar Hossain Chowdhury, Fazlul Huq, Humayun Kabir etc. expressed liberal and broad ideas in spite of the domination of communal ideas in the political and intellectual thought of the Muslim intellectuals in the period. Some Muslim writers opposed the Pakistani idea. Rezaul Karim, a life-long Congressman, wrote in detail, in opposition to the Pakistan idea. His book, *Pakistan Examined*, which was published in 1941, was his answer against the idea of Pakistan. He admitted the existence of cultural identity but refused to believe that a Muslim, as a member of a religion, automatically followed a Muslim culture, as many Muslims adopt a culture that is neither Islamic nor Hindu. The culture was an organic expression of place and environment, so it assimilates, adapts, and amalgamates all the surrounding conditions of the age and therefore, Hindus and Muslims hold a common culture brought out by their environment.³ As such, there is no need for Purba Pakistan or distinct literature and culture for Bengali Muslims. Karim blamed Pakistan's demand for a cleaver hint of the imperialistic power to keep alive the dying embers of communalism.⁴ Karim also mentions how it was imperialist to think of division, whereas Habibullah Bahar and the Renaissance Society saw it the other way around. Other intellectuals prominent in Bengali Muslim public life, like S. Wajed Ali, Kazi Abdul Wadud and Humayun Kabir were also not in favour of the idea of Pakistan.

Muslim League tasted a huge victory at the provincial election of Bengal in 1946. This victory was a very significant one. This victory revealed the fact that the Muslim mass favoured the idea of Pakistan and rejected the concept of undivided India in general and Bengal in particular, in spite of the opposition group propagating the idea of undivided and sovereign Bengal.

Now, the idea of Pakistan and the division of India became the sole objective of the Muslim League and its leaders in Bengal. The Hindu Mahasabha, which was once a part of the coalition Ministry of Fazlul Huq, supported the proposal of partition of Bengal. Mahasabha leaders like N. C. Chatterjee and Shyama Prasad Mukherjee advocated in favour of the Bengal partition.⁵ The Bengal Provincial Congress Committee adopted a proposal for the partition of Bengal. Its president, Surendra Mohan Ghosh supported the partition on the pretext that an undivided Bengal in divided India is an impossibility, and the partition is the only way to stop the growing communalism between the two communities of Hindu and Muslim in Bengal. The various industrial and commercial organizations in Kolkata owned by both Bengali and non-Bengali Hindus came forward in support of the Bengal partition.⁶ Further, most of the influential Hindu dailies such as *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*, *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, *Hindustan Standard* engaged in constant propaganda, championing the partition demand among Hindus.

H. S. Suhrawardy, Abul Hashim and Fazlur Rahman formed the minority group in the Bengal Muslim League and supported the establishment of the undivided and sovereign Bengal.⁷ Suhrawardy said, "Indeed by the same analogy the wishes of all the peoples of Bengal, Muslims, Hindus and Scheduled Castes and others ought to be ascertained on the question of the partition of Bengal, which can only be undertaken if there is a substantial majority in its favour. It is these fundamental factors peculiar to Bengal which differentiate the question of partition of Bengal from the Muslim demand for the division of India, apart from such factors as economic integrity, mutual reliance and the necessity of creating a strong workable state."⁸ Suhrawardy also criticized those Hindu leaders who wanted the partition of Bengal. Abul Hashim, secretary of the Provincial Muslim League, supported the stand taken by Suhrawardy about independent and sovereign Bengal. He urged the Hindus and Muslims to restore Bengal's lost prestige to secure an honourable place in the history of the country.⁹ Abul Hashim tried to win the confidence and support of the Bengali Hindus in favour of the independent and sovereign Bengal. He did not believe that the Hindus of Bengal would be denied their legitimate rights in the independent Bengal. Abul Hashim intended to safeguard the interests of the people of Bengal and to recognize the nationality of Bengal. He said that the Hindus and Muslims of Bengal should work unitedly without any interference of the Indians on them.¹⁰

The demand, which was submitted by the minority group of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League under the leadership of Suhrawardy and Abul Hashim, for an independent and sovereign Bengal, got an immediate and vocal response from the Hindu political intellectuals of Bengal. Sarat Chandra Bose opposed the idea of Pakistan and branded the partition as "suicidal to the cause of Indian independence and also the cause of social progress."¹¹ Like the Muslim political intellectuals, Sarat Chandra Bose believed that the partition would help the imperialists, communalists and reactionaries to exploit

Bengal. The government should not look to communal interests but the common welfare of all the communities.

The Muslim intellectuals belonging to the Krishak Praja Party did not approve of the partition of Bengal. The Praja leaders in an appeal urged every patriotic Indian to stop communal warfare. They felt that no fruitful purpose will be served by the division of the Punjab and Bengal. Humayun Kabir, former General Secretary of the Krishak Praja Party opposed the partition of India and Bengal. He strongly criticized the short-sighted policy of the Muslim League, which was paving the way for the partition of Bengal. He also blamed League for working on their interests only and depriving the people of their rightful aspirations. Once a strong and most influential person in Bengal, Fazlul Huq, also criticized the idea of partition of Bengal. He wanted to solve administrative and communal problems, keeping intact the united India and Bengal.

Akram Khan, who was the President of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League and the leader of the majority group in the provincial Muslim League vehemently, supported the demand for partition of India and Bengal. He advocated for every opinion shared by Ali Jinnah about portion.

The Muslim intellectuals, especially those belonging to East Bengal had to answer a very significant question, which formed the basis of diverse opinion among the Muslim intellectual class—to which would the intelligentsia be loyal- the historically determined regional culture, including the status of a homogenous Bengali speaking community or the new politically determined culture embodied in the nation of Pakistan? The Muslim political intellectuals who belonged to the two groups among themselves in the Bengal Provincial Muslim League had a different stand regarding the partition of Bengal. Suhrawardy and his followers thought that there should be a united and sovereign Bengal for the Muslims. On the other hand, Akram Khan, echoing his master's sentiments, wanted to include Bengal as a unit in the new state of Pakistan. The Hindu intellectuals had a vital say in this matter. The Hindu Mahasabha and the All-India Congress supported the division of Bengal. The Hindu political intellectuals branded Suhrawardy as a communal politician. His arguments in favour of a free and united Bengal could hardly satisfy the Hindu intellectuals. The rational element was not visible in his plan for a united and sovereign Bengal because from the practical point of view such a sovereign Bengal could hardly be established. Thus, Bengal was destined to be partitioned for the second time.

Scholars differ as to the origin of the idea of a United Independent Bengal. The majority of them, however, hold that it was a counter proposal on the part of H.S. Suhrawardy designed to avert the partition of the province. Suhrawardy held the view that if Hindus and Muslims were united, Bengal could have the adjoining districts of Manbhum and Singbhum, possibly the district of Purnea, from the Bihar province and the Surma valley of Assam

through the principle of the right of self-determination. He further hoped that when the tussle would disappear, the rest of Assam might join Bengal to constitute a single state. This came to be known as his ideal of 'Greater Bengal'. It should be noted that even before Attlee's February announcement and the subsequent Hindu Mahasabha agitation for partition, Abul Hashim held several meetings with Sarat Bose and some of the I.N.A. officers in January 1947 'to make Bengal an independent and sovereign state.'¹² On 17 January Suhrawardy stated: 'It is my earnest desire to make Bengal a great and prosperous country by the joint efforts of the Hindus and the Muslims.'¹³ Therefore, it was evident that long before the actual partition initiative came into effect, Suhrawardy and Hashim envisaged a separate independent and sovereign state in North-East India. However, its nomenclature ranged between Eastern Pakistan, Bangasam, Greater Bengal and United Independent Bengal.¹⁴

The views of Mohammad Ali Jinnah with regards to the United Bengal hold a significant place. Jinnah showed eagerness towards this idea. Undoubtedly, Jinnah's choice was to get the whole of Bengal for Pakistan and he might have regarding the preservation of a United Bengal outside the Indian Union as the first line of action. And if the pro-Pakistani forces in Bengal failed to bring Bengal into Pakistan, this would not matter as long as the whole of Bengal remained outside India, becoming, as Jinnah thought, 'a strong ally of Pakistan.'¹⁵ Thus, at a certain stage, Jinnah thought it much better to allow Bengal to remain united and independent than to have a divided Bengal with its most prosperous part including the much-coveted Calcutta city joining the Indian Union.

In the given historical situation and considering the ultimate failure of the idea of United Independent Bengal, Fazlul Huq, H.S. Suhrawardy, Abul Hashim was the most popular and key Muslim leader in Bengal. There was no denying that they were in favour of the establishment of a nation-state of the Bengalis. But they had not been able to give concrete shape to their thought and idea rigidly and with all far-sightedness. There might be several reasons for this failure. However, what was the most important was that, due to personality clashes and rivalries for power among them that they were unable to give necessary leadership at this stage to the efforts towards establishing such a state. The All-India Muslim League leadership exploited these weaknesses of the Bengal leaders most successfully in favour of establishing their version of a single Pakistan state.

The best possibility of success for the move of a United Independent Bengal lay in a Hindu-Muslim common stand in support of the scheme against their central commands. But this required good inter-communal relationships and a strong sense of Bengali nationalism; that was not there. Because of the antagonistic interests of the two communities in the given socio-economic setting, it was extremely difficult to evolve any common Bengali nationalism.

Notes and References (Endnotes)

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