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THE DECLINE OF THE MUSLIM LEAGUE AND THE ASCENDANCY OF THE BUREAUCRACY IN EAST PAKISTAN
1947-54

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JANUARY 1989

A THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY OF THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY
DECLARATION

This thesis is my own work.

A H Ahmed Kamal
31 January 1989
Canberra
This thesis looks at the career of the Muslim League in East Pakistan from 14 August 1947, the day it assumed political power, to the election of 8 March 1954, when it was massively defeated by a newly-formed United Front. Exploring the decline of the popularity of the League is one objective of the thesis. In the process, it also seeks to explain the nature of 'politics' in East Pakistan. In particular, the emergence of a state bureaucracy with paternalistic and undemocratic tendencies, is documented and analysed. This is shown to be a lasting legacy of the British Raj and of Muslim League politics in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The process through which the bureaucracy grew stronger by the day also entailed the growing alienation of the people from both the government and the ruling party, the League. Explaining this alienation is another concern of the thesis.

These themes are highlighted in a series of chapters devoted to certain specific and important issues that the League government had to deal with during its stay in power: politics of food procurement and distribution, abolition of zamindari and other exploitative feudal relationships, the problem of controlling water resources in a flood-prone country, and finally, the relationship between the people and the regulative institutions of the state such as the police and its auxiliaries. An examination of these issues usefully complements what students of East Pakistan politics have (rather selectively) emphasised so far: the Language movement of the 1950s, the crisis of federalism and problems of jute marketing. An argument is eventually built up on the nature of the state and 'nationhood' in East Pakistan. The preponderance of the bureaucracy in the colonial style of government, the peculiar history of Muslim nationalism in the subcontinent, the lack, in the League's history, of a tradition of anti-imperialist struggle and ideology, and finally, the weak nature of the ML's organisation and mass base, are all seen as factors that contributed significantly to the growing 'undemocracy' of which both East Pakistan, and later Bangladesh, were unfortunate victims.
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PREFACE

For the past can never cease to be present to us, and we are still asking ourselves: How could such a thing happen? - Gunter Grass 'What Shall We Tell Our Children?' (1979)

This thesis originates in a feeling of dissatisfaction about a state of stagnation that seems to have set in in East Pakistan scholarship, especially since the emergence of Bangladesh. The eventful twenty four years between the last day of the Raj and the creation of Bangladesh-the life span of East Pakistan- are now treated mainly as a background to the emergence of Bangladesh and Bengali nationalism in its post-colonial phase. Descriptions of this background, again, have become stale and static. Bengali politics and nationalism are traced back to the Language movement in East Pakistan in the early 1950s and to the step-motherly attitudes of the authorities in West Pakistan. All histories of Bangladesh are written as if we knew everything that was there to be known about what went wrong with East Pakistan, why East Pakistan as a political framework became untenable. As a result, the history of this 'background' has taken on a certain predictable quality; it is no longer a dynamic field of investigation were new mines of information are quarried everyday and the findings passionately disputed or where the contours change continually as new layers of history expose themselves to the historians gaze.

Yet, as I attempt to show in this thesis, there were many other issues apart from the Language movement and 'internal colonialism' that contributed to the growing Bengali disenchantment, firstly, with the Muslim League and all that it stood for, and secondly, with the political framework of East Pakistan. Issues to do with linguistic nationalism and economic exploitation of East Pakistan have been worked over, and I do not have much to add to the current literature on these subjects. What I document is a process of competition that took place in East Bengal society over the control of the three key resources of the nation: land, food and water. Actors in this competition were many and interest groups emerged around the different factors of class, ethnicity, factions and
political parties depending on the context. What also consistently emerged, however, was an elementary popular urge towards participation in the political process of East Pakistan, an urge that was continually quashed by an increasingly authoritarian state.

The Muslim League came to power in East Pakistan in August 1947, championing not only the cause of the Muslims, but also that of democracy, liberalism, and self-determination for East Pakistan people. In little over six years' time, it was voted out of power, and within five years of that, democracy itself was overthrown in East Pakistan. The State became a military regime. The process through which the state lost its representative character and became alienated from the people was also the one that resulted in the political decline of the Muslim League. This thesis documents this process by looking at certain key episodes in the early history of East Pakistan. All of these episodes show how, on different occasions, a high-handed, ex-colonial bureaucracy, including the regulative agencies like the police, proved itself to be entirely unsuitable for the historical task of protecting and fostering a fledgling democracy. Nor was the political leadership, given the history of Muslim nationalism, up to their task. The result was a political culture where the bureaucracy emerged as a most enduring and predominant element.

It is this that makes the present exercise relevant to the recent history of Bangladesh. It is a country that has seen repeated attempts at reestablishing democracy fail in the face of opposition from military-bureaucratic forces. Yet forces of populism have been persistent and sometimes strong. In all the disasters that the country has faced, both recently and in its colonial past - floods, famines, epidemics and even the green-house effect- evidence has always been there of popular initiatives and actions, of an unfulfilled urge on the part of the mass towards a participatory style of politics. For a nation that is now living dangerously and far beyond its means, the question of unleashing the 'creativity of the masses' in solving national problems has once more become crucial.. 'It is the magic of nationalism', writes Anderson, 'that turns chance into destiny'. The nationalism of the Bengali ruling class has proven itself to be bankrupt. What felt like
'destiny' in 1971 now looks like a missed historical opportunity. If there is still any magic left in Bengali nationalism, it must come from the 'nationalism' of the masses, who have so far been allowed only a limited role in the Bengali quest for self-determination. This thesis is an attempt to raise this question by examining a certain stage in the 'prehistory' of Bangladesh.
NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 The name of East Bengal was officially changed to East Pakistan in 1956. Prior to that it was referred to both ways in government documents. In the present study both names have been used.

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<td>Additional Deputy Commissioner</td>
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<td>ADM</td>
<td>Additional District Magistrate</td>
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<td>ARCP</td>
<td>Assistant Regional Controller of Procurement</td>
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<tr>
<td>ASI</td>
<td>Assistant Sub Inspector</td>
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<td>BIDE</td>
<td>Bangladesh Institute of Development Economics</td>
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<td>BSRR</td>
<td>Bangladesh Secretariat Record Room</td>
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<td>CID</td>
<td>Criminal Investigation Department</td>
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<td>CO</td>
<td>Circle Officer</td>
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<td>CPI</td>
<td>Communist Party of India</td>
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<td>CrPC</td>
<td>Criminal Procedure Code</td>
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<td>CSP</td>
<td>Civil Service of Pakistan</td>
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<td>DC</td>
<td>Deputy Commissioner</td>
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<td>DIB</td>
<td>District Intelligence Branch</td>
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<td>DM</td>
<td>District Magistrate</td>
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<td>DML</td>
<td>District Muslim League</td>
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<td>DO</td>
<td>Demi-Official</td>
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<td>DSP</td>
<td>Deputy Superintendent of Police</td>
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<td>EBLA</td>
<td>East Bengal Legislative Assembly</td>
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<td>EPR</td>
<td>East Pakistan Rifles</td>
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<td>FIR</td>
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<td>MCA</td>
<td>Member Constituent Assembly</td>
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<td>ML</td>
<td>Muslim League</td>
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<td>MLA</td>
<td>Member Legislative Assembly</td>
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<td>Partially Excluded Area</td>
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<td>Prime Minister</td>
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<td>PS</td>
<td>Police Station</td>
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<td>PUB</td>
<td>President Union Board</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rs</td>
<td>Rupees</td>
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<tr>
<td>SDC</td>
<td>Sub-deputy Collector</td>
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<tr>
<td>SDO</td>
<td>Sub-divisional Officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sec</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
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<tr>
<td>SP</td>
<td>Superintendent of Police</td>
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<td>UF</td>
<td>United Front</td>
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<td>Union Parishad</td>
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The State that was born on 14 August 1947 out of a national movement for a separate homeland for the Muslims of East Bengal drew its legitimacy and its capacity for social mobilization from one historical fact: a nearly universal commitment in 1946, on the part of the Muslim masses, to the demand for Pakistan and to the leadership of the Muslim League. The nationalist expectation that once colonial rule had ended, the party would be the single most important political institution in the new country also came true for the activists of the League. While emphasising the importance of the organisation, a Pakistani historian wrote that ‘it started its career in the new State with all the advantages that a party could wish for... The country looked to it not only with respect and gratitude, but also with a passion and affection not usually associated with a political group’. In 1947, the League symbolised the Muslim desire for freedom and change in East Bengal.

However, the change of regime in East Pakistan did not mean an abrupt and immediate transformation in the order of society. Rather it marked the beginning of a new political order that emerged as a part of the gradual and, one may perhaps say, extensive changes that were already taking place during the last phase of the Raj. The Muslim League took over where the British left off. It should also be remembered that this emergence of the Muslim League as arbiter of Muslim destiny in the sub-continent was not the result of any long-drawn historical process. Unlike the Indian National Congress, the Muslim League had neither an organized mass base nor a tradition of anti-imperialist struggle behind it. Its claim on popular allegiance was not based on any long association with the struggles of the Muslim masses.

Even in 1935 the League was a moribund organisation. And the elites regarded Pakistan, as the Zinkins bear out, ‘as anything but a pipe-dream even in 1940’. Yet in
the election of 1946 the veracity of the League’s claim to speak for the Muslims, especially of Bengal where they constituted the majority, was proved beyond doubt. The League captured 113 seats out of 121 reserved (Muslim) seats polling 20,36,775 out of 24,34,100 Muslim votes. Eighty percent of the Muslim voters had cast their votes.

The election was fought as a plebiscite on Pakistan, so the quality and merit of individual candidates was underplayed by the campaigners. Muslim youth of universities and colleges, professionals and mullahs, peasants and community leaders all combined their efforts to win the election - thus constituting the grand coalition of interests making up for Muslim Bengal’s Nationalism what Gramsci called ‘the national popular’.

The twists and turns of British Indian politics during the last years of the Raj contributed greatly to the rapid rise of the League in Bengal in the 1940s. A minor force in the late 1930s, the Bengal League boasted a membership strength of five lakh in 1944. According to Abul Hashim, the General Secretary of the Bengal League, the number of members exceeded the million-mark in 1946. This sudden increase of membership, however, was more an indication of the League’s popularity in those years than of its internal discipline or cohesion. It remained a party without any elaborate organisational structure or even a programme or manifesto. It was a ‘nationalist coalition’ of diverse and potentially antagonistic elements. A wave of popularity brought the League to power in Bengal in 1946. After independence, the Muslim League looked like the ‘national’ party to rule Pakistan.

After nearly seven years in Government, the League had a test of its popularity in East Pakistan in the First General Election of 8 March 1954, held on the basis of universal adult franchise. Sixty percent of the twenty million voters voted and the result was a complete disaster for the League: it only won ten seats out of the 237 Muslim Seats in the Provincial Assembly. All its leaders lost their seats. Even the Prime Minister was defeated by a relatively unknown student leader in the former’s home constituency.
The debacle of the League in 1954 has understandably led some historians to question its claims of being the representative organ of the Muslims in 1947. The question derives its salience also from the fact that even though the League had won the 1946 elections in Bengal very convincingly, the electorate was restricted to about 15 percent of the population. This criticism has its point and it is also true that the electoral data of 1946 cannot be directly compared with those of 1954. But the elections were not the only index of the League's popularity. That the League's 'war cry' for a separate homeland for the Muslims had, by 1946, captured the imagination of the Muslims of Bengal is admitted by scholars of all shades of opinion, including those not sympathetic to either the goals or methods of the League. So what went wrong in 1954? How did the Muslim League come to be completely eclipsed as a political party?

Scholars discussing this question have emphasised the role of charismatic leaders who over time withdrew their support from the League and became leaders of the opposition: Fazlul Huq, Maulana Bhashani, Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy, Ataur Rahman Khan, Abul Mansur Ahmad and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, to a name a few. It is true that these leaders played a critical role in turning the discontent of the masses against the Muslim League. But what gave rise to this discontent? How did the Muslim League lose its former popularity and appeal among the ordinary people of East Bengal?

Muslim League leaders have produced their own explanations of the defeat of 1954. In a post-election assessment, some League members 'doubted the purity of [the] conditions under which [the] election had taken place'-a rather unconvincing argument as the League itself was the ruling party at the time of the elections. Accusations of sluggishness, incompetence and dishonesty are levelled against other League members in their analysis. Again, the explanation seems rather partial, as it overlooks the popular mood of opposition to the League.

Scholars like Umar, Jahan, Ziring, Sayeed and others have pointed to other important issues that may have contributed to the fall of the Muslim League. Umar's well known
three-volume study of the Language movement in East Pakistan extensively details the political unrest that climaxed on 21 February 1952 in the tragic loss of lives caused by police firing at Dhaka. While Umar documented a host of movements other than the Language movement in East Pakistan, it is clear that his focus is on the latter, which he sees as an 'extreme example' of political protest in East Pakistan. Umar, however, does not consciously investigate the process through which the League lost its erstwhile popularity among the masses. Park points to the considerable damage done to the image of the League by a sharp fall in the price of jute - the most important cash crop of East Bengal immediately after independence. Afzal thinks the League's failure to evolve a universally acceptable federal formula contributed in a big way to its electoral defeat. Regionalism emerges as an important factor in some other studies as well. In effect, three issues get highlighted in most scholarly discussions of politics of East Pakistan in this period: the Language movement, the question of provincial autonomy and the fall in jute prices.

My aim in this thesis is partly to supplement these studies and to correct the somewhat urban and middle-class bias of the picture they paint. Urban, because the focus of these studies remains firmly fixed on the cities of East Bengal; middle-class, as the professional people are seen as the main agents of political change, and the politics of Dhaka and other district and sub-divisional headquarters occupy the centre of the stage in these analyses. I shift the focus to the villages, where the peasantry, both rich and poor, often collided with the policies, programmes and the officials of the Muslim League Government. Here one notices some deep continuities with the colonial past: issues to do with the use and control of land, food, and water dominate politics in the countryside as much as they did before independence. The bureaucracy itself, an old colonial institution, provided a key link with the past. A very important difference, however, was introduced by the fact of political independence, which had raised all kinds of expectations (see ch. 2). The poor in many places thought that an end had come to the officialdom of the Raj period, and engaged in activities that aroused the ire of the bureaucracy, which reacted with reflexes characteristic of the colonial times. The political
failure of the Muslim League, I argue, lay in not being able to take advantage of this popular enthusiasm and energy unleashed by independence and use it as a popular base for their nation-building efforts. Instead, faced with certain grave problems at independence—problems that also brought untold misery to people—their response was to rely on the wisdom of the bureaucrats who, of course, worked out solutions the Raj would have favoured. The defeat of the League in 1954 was the beginning of a process of the blighting of hopes that people had placed in ‘Pakistan’. The root of this failure lay in the League’s own history—the fact that their quick rise to power in the 1940s had not come, as in the case of the Congress, as a result of any sustained, mass-based, anti-imperialist politics. Their lack of political experience in dealing with bureaucracy often left East Pakistan politicians at the mercy of it.

Period of Study

While there are well-known and often reasonable objections to the practice of periodising history, ‘dates’ still seem to have a significance for this study. In this thesis I have dealt with events and issues from 14 August 1947, the beginning of the Muslim League rule in East Pakistan, till 8 March 1954, the day of the total ‘eclipse’ of the League from the political scene of East Pakistan. But in organising my material I have not attempted a linear chronicle of issues and events, as such an approach did not seem to be the best for the kind of analysis I have undertaken here.

Sources

This thesis draws heavily upon East Bengal Legislative Assembly proceedings, and disparate collections of primary materials in the Bangladesh Secretariat Record Room at Dhaka. The major sources used are the official records and reports, Gazettes and Gazetteers, contemporary pamphlets, literary writings in the vernacular, and biographies and autobiographies of political activists, mostly in the vernacular. Local and Calcutta based newspapers have also been used. However, given the antagonistic nature of the
relationship between East Pakistan and India in the early years, one cannot perhaps expect objective reporting from the Indian press. Therefore, selected issues of Calcutta based newspapers have been used only as corroborative evidence, to strengthen the argument. It may be relevant to mention here that opposition-minded politicians in East Pakistan, some of them even activists of the League, themselves read Indian newspapers. Tajuddin Ahmed writes in his diary on 8 October 1947, 'Decided to keep Azad and Ittehad in alternate months and Amrita Bazar [Patrika] regularly.' Obviously the control of the Muslim League Government on the press made some Indian newspapers attractive to those who differed with the official League. Document volumes published recently, apart from unpublished theses and published articles both in English and vernacular, had been a very useful source for this thesis.

Finally a word on the order of chapters to follow.

Chapter 2 of this Thesis gives a general picture of East Bengal society at independence. In particular, it analyses the many different interpretations that the word 'independence' came to bear. It provides a background to the Chapters that follow.

Chapter 3 deals with the politics of food, which assumed special importance to the people of East Bengal after the Great Bengal Famine of 1943, in the wake of which came independence. The Muslim League responded to the need of the people by adopting a number of measures, the most important of which was the programme for procurement of foodgrains from peasants possessing a surplus. But the programme, manifestly discriminatory and coercive, alienated large sections of the surplus peasants, who formed the core of the Muslim League support in the countryside. As a result they withheld their economic support for the new ruling group in State power, thus contributing to new alliances of social forces in the countryside.

Chapter 4 looks at the other side of the procurement policy: the politics of the distribution of food. Here again the government officials clashed with the poor peasantry in a
situation of overall scarcity of food. The result was not only the erosion of popular support for the Muslim League but also some significant changes to class relations in the countryside.

Chapter 5 examines the approach of the League government towards the land and rent question of the peasantry. This was one issue on which the League leadership and government exposed their class character. The peasants' urge for immediate solution of their problems graduated into insurgency. Helped along by the radicals, the peasants attempt to force a solution of the land and rent question brought forth a response from the state reminiscent of the colonial times. Moreover, in order to marginalise and contain these movements, the bureaucrats of the new state used rhetoric and language that only helped to split the nation along religious lines. I also examine how the Muslim League allowed itself to act according to the promptings of the bureaucracy throughout the history of this conflict.

Chapter 6 discusses the way the District Administration, very important to ML politics, succeeded in inhibiting popular attempts at solving the perennial problem of flooding, an issue of critical importance even today.

Chapter 7 examines the nature and impact of the Muslim League rule as expressed through the agency of the police. An attempt is made here to examine the extent to which the erosion of popularity of the League government was caused by police actions and the repressive nature of the regime.

The concluding chapter discusses the ML's competence as an organisation to bring about a democratic social order -creating space for popular participation- a goal to which it was at least formally committed by its ideology. It also discusses the relationship between the League and the bureaucracy which decidedly influenced the course of politics in these years. This chapter also sums up the overall argument of the Thesis.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


4 The ML captured 103 out of 111 rural seats in Bengal in the elections. See Time 1 April 1946, as cited in Shila Sen, Muslim Politics in Bengal, New Delhi, 1976, pp.197-8.

5 'Vote for a Muslim Leaguer even if be a Lamp post'; see Richard V Weekes, Pakistan, NY, 1964, p.86.

6 Mahmud Hossain, 'Dacca University and The Pakistan Movement' in Philips and Wainwright (eds.) Partition


9 Shila Sen, Muslim Politics, Appendix VII, Election Manifesto, 'Let Us Go to War'.


14 Sumit Sarkar, Modern pp.408-9; Amal Sen, Naraile Tebhaga Sangramer Samiksa, Dhaka, 1980; Shila Sen, Muslim Politics; Tajul Islam Hashmi, 'Peasants and Politics in East Bengal 1920-1947', Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Western Australia, 1987; See also my next Chapter.


ibid.


Throughout the text, I have rendered 'Dhaka' as it is spelt in current usage; similarly in translating and citing Bengali sources. In all other sources and publications cited, however, I have left the spelling as in the original-'Dacca'.

CHAPTER 2

INDEPENDENCE IN EAST BENGAL: INITIAL PERCEPTIONS AND RESPONSES OF THE PEOPLE

I

With the birth of Pakistan on the midnight of 14 August 1947 the eastern part of the Indian province of Bengal was partitioned and became what was later known as East Pakistan. It is reported that the Muslims, all over East Bengal, welcomed the birth of the new nation with shouts of azan (call to prayer). Tajuddin Ahmed, a young Muslim nationalist during the late 40's, mentioned in his diary that people all over the Muslim areas of Dhaka, which earned for itself the distinction of being the provincial capital of East Pakistan, were found busy, day and night, in erecting gates and decorations in preparation for Independence Day celebrations. Public and private buildings were illuminated at night and fireworks were let off. Crowds of 'holiday makers' thronged the streets, 'some riding trucks and some even on elephants'. The highlight of the day, according to a Statesman report, was a procession by Hindus and Muslims, which converged on Victoria Park, where speeches were made by leaders of all important political parties.

The celebration was not confined only to Dhaka. In the town of Barisal, victory gates were erected and musical soirees were organized. The day was observed by a public meeting in Sylhet where the siren on 14 August midnight announced that the district had ceased to be a part of Assam province of India. Batches of Muslims paraded the streets in procession. Provash Chandra Lahiry, a prominent District Congress leader, recollects that 'every face of the vast population' that turned up at Rajshahi, a north Bengal town, showed 'signs of radiant glow of fulfilment of a long cherished desire of winning freedom'. Even the tribal population of the border districts of East Pakistan were
apparently 'inspired and joyous' on achieving political freedom from the Raj. A communist activist and writer observed that 'like the others they too were overwhelmed with joy' at the imminent prospect of independence. On 15 August, meetings and processions were organised in Durgapur, Haluaghat, Nolitabari, and Bhatpur in Mymenshingh district by tribal leaders. They expressed their solidarity with the new nation state.

'Remarkable scenes of amity and concord were witnessed' at Dhaka and other places of the province on Independence Day. Striking descriptions of the happy and unbounded spirit of freedom that swept and surged across the entire provincial town of Dhaka come from the pages of Tajuddin Ahmed's diary. 'Astonishing surge of national energy' and 'euphoric' are some of the general expressions used by historians to describe the happiness over political independence. Obviously, to the observers of the festival of freedom the euphoria was unidimensional and unqualified. Nationalists have often seen in the varied responses of people to political independence a simple feeling of happiness at the creation of Pakistan. The intensity of the popular rejoicing should not, however, lead us to assume that all who celebrated the coming of independence shared one uncomplicated strand of feeling. The word 'euphoria' both reveals and hides the different and contradictory expectations that surrounded the idea of 'Pakistan'.

Till the day of its birth Pakistan lacked a precise definition. The Muslim League activists who worked up a vision of Pakistan for East Bengal Muslims failed to define the ideology of the new state in any precise manner even while they were engaged in outlining the principles of a new Constitution. There was, for instance, the liberal view of nationhood. At independence Jinnah told the nation:

We are starting with the fundamental principle that we are all citizens and equal citizens of one state... We should keep that in front of us as our ideal and you will find that Hindus will cease to be Hindus and Muslims will cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the state.
In the same speech Jinnah also asserted the 'complete' sovereignty of the Constituent Assembly as the Federal Legislature of Pakistan. In Dhaka, Maulana Bhashani, a Muslim nationalist leader, expressed similar expectations on the floor of the Legislative Assembly: 'Today the country is a free country and should be guided by the opinions of the people'. For such leaders, 'Pakistan' meant that the colonial experience of non-participatory, non-democratic, non-representative politics, was now to be comprehensively reversed.

'Today 12.00 p.m. sees the end of British Rule and the beginning of the Indian [sic] own government'. This is how Tajuddin Ahmed recorded his initial reaction to political independence in the pages of his diary on the 14 August 1947. He also wrote the word 'Independence' in bold letters at the top of the page as a concentrated expression of his own feelings. While rejoicing at the achievement of political independence one Muslim poet conceived of Pakistan as a land of 'eternal Id'. To many nationalists independence was the 'Indian Muslim's finest hour'. One nationalist leader even termed it the 'Pakistan Revolution'. To many of them, at least, it was an end to a 'barbaric rule' which has debased all kinds of human relationship and weighed heavily on the traditions, customs, and creative energies of the people.

In fact, nationalist writings and speeches describe the day as the culmination of all movements since the defeat of the Muslim Nawab at Plassey in 1757, while some others locate it in a chronology that begins with the unsuccessful uprisings of 1857, 'for it [independence] was something for which they had waited subconsciously for nearly a century'. 'Pakistan, the land of promise, the land of hope, the land for which thousands have sacrificed their lives' - statements like these abound in the nationalist literature. But the rhetoric makes the thousands who rallied round the Muslim League look like one 'Muslim people', irrespective of class or ethnic difference. The hopes and aspirations of the poor Muslims, however were often quite different from those of the elite. Besides as Jinnah and the Muslim League had never spelt out the nature of 'Pakistan' in any detail, a
conceptual space remained where many different perceptions about the latter could exist and jostle with one another.21

A ‘new era of history’ and the metaphor of dawn was often used to convey a sense of beginning.22 Anderson has rightly pointed out that the images of dawn, light, sun - all appear as symbols of revival and regeneration - conjured up at moments when nationalists’ lives appear to ‘run in tandem with the world’.23 It was a time when expectations ran in many different lines. Nationalist scholars have often simplified the complexity of the phenomenon.

II

Pakistan’s novelty was its territorial arrangement which baffled all hitherto known definitions of state formation. Pakistan ‘defied virtually every criterion of nationhood’ - says one historian in explaining the structural complexity of the new nation.24 The two parts of the new state were isolated from each other by more than a thousand miles of Indian territory, and the smaller eastern part, being only 54,091 square miles in area, had more population than West Pakistan which was almost six times larger.

Though it was a ‘hurriedly contrived’ all-India settlement,25 some nationalists see it as a novel experiment in nation-building.26 But to many others it appeared as an unfair partition,27 even ‘unnatural’. Perhaps to many it was an absurd state.28 The reasons for this kind of thinking were manifold. The way the British Indian empire, and more specifically the province of Bengal were divided was unacceptable to many. Some Hindu and Muslim leaders even tried to peddle the formula of a third state: a greater Bengal.29 But this was frustrated by political antagonism and by the ‘inertial power’ of competing Indian and Pakistani nationalism.30 Bengal was partitioned and, without Calcutta, Eastern Bengal looked more like a large overpopulated rural slum.31 The partition also occurred amidst chaos and bloodshed.32 One principal actor in the drama of partition
East Pakistan

has described it as the 'greatest administrative operation in history'.\textsuperscript{33} Till the day of its birth Pakistan represented a 'hazy and uncertain groping towards a separate state'.\textsuperscript{34}

Religious, ethnic, geographical and historical considerations were set aside in the criteria of a new state whose particular political geography was determined by arbitrary acts of the departing colonial power and of contending national political parties. Ziring observed that international boundaries were drawn 'retarding and restricting traditional mobility' among the people.\textsuperscript{35} The Radcliffe award, some Muslim League leaders complained, had adversely affected the province; the river systems had been artificially divided and excepting Karnafuly all the dam sites fell into West Bengal.\textsuperscript{36} The award of the Boundary Commission, many Muslim League members of the Assembly felt, made industrial expansion uncertain.\textsuperscript{37} And the way the Province was divided made traditional supplies of rice and paddy from the Hill Tipperah state and Cachar district of Assam to a number of thanas in Sylhet district difficult.\textsuperscript{38} The people of the Jaintia parganas, consisting of Kanaighat, Jaintiapur and Gwainghat police stations of the North Sylhet subdivision of the Sylhet district, suffered the greatest setback to their economic life. Suffering and deprivation followed as their normal trade channels with Assam were closed forever.\textsuperscript{39}

The state of the nation that started from scratch on 15 August 1947 worsened quickly as problems 'came crowding in with bewildering rapidity' in a land now inhabited by about 42 million people of which 29,481,099 were Muslims, 11,736,029 Hindus, 56,882 Christians and 1,179 Sikhs. The population density was 775 people per square mile, one of the highest in the world. Only 500 miles of road and innumerable, criss-crossing rivers and canals formed the life-lines of commerce and trade in the land.\textsuperscript{40}

East Bengal inherited only ten cotton factories out of 400 in India, none of Bengal's 106 Jute Mills, not a single iron and steel plant, paper mill, chemical work, coal mine or established hydro-electric project. It was left with only 49 seasonal jute bailing presses
working at 20 percent capacity), 58 small rice mills of all descriptions, three sugar factories and one cement factory. But contemporary official documents projected an optimistic outlook on the viability of Pakistan. One document published soon after independence said: 'the hope about the enormous potentialities of these neglected parts - a hope with which the new State was launched-is not a vain belief' and discussed the prospect of the production and the export of tea, tobacco, hides and skin, paper and petroleum in such a way as to boost the morale of the nation. The truth was that for decades the jute growing province had existed 'as a hinterland contributing to Calcutta's prosperity'.

East Bengal was also short of some other essential commodities, such as edible oil, sugar and textiles. Its four sugar factories produced annually 25,000 tons of sugar which was about half its requirement. Its six textiles mills produced annually 30,000 bales while it required about 250,000. Only twelve percent of the industrial establishment that was in existence in undivided Bengal fell to the share of East Bengal. There were only 7,000 industrial workers on 14 August 1947.

The period that surrounds independence is generally described as 'crisis ridden' in official documents. The new government 'inherited the first major calamity' which befell the province a fortnight before it assumed power, the floods in Chittagong and Noakhali which affected 500 square miles and over half a million people. Hundreds of houses had collapsed and cattle had been washed away and crops damaged extensively, adding to the food problem in the new state. As the flood receded an 'unprecedented cyclone' swept over Cox's Bazar, the southern-most area of East Bengal, affecting over 100,000 people. Natural disasters like flood and cyclones, and annual alluvial accretion and the loss sustained by erosion in the river systems, affected and continued to affect the lives of a considerable number of people of East Bengal.
But the most serious problem for the country was the shortage of cereals. An area producing about 7.8 million tons and consuming about 8 million tons of rice annually was faced with a threat of famine at a time when the memories of the Great Bengal Famine of 1943 were still fresh in the minds of the people. East Bengal received only 18,000 tons of food grains in terms of rice as its share of provincial stocks after partition. There was practically no wheat stocks in the province on 15 August 1947. Even Dhaka had not seen bread for four months prior to that date. The current stock of rice could barely meet two weeks’ requirements for the towns that came under the rationing system. The province’s monthly requirements stood 9,000 tons short of the total requirement of 39,000 tons. As the entire transport system was thrown into confusion by the migration of Hindu workers, deficit areas remained outside the reach of the food distribution agencies, though, ironically, it was the sale of foodstuff that kept the bankrupt provincial government running.

Obviously, there was a famine situation developing. As the Bengal Provincial krishak shabha put it in their open letter to both the Governments of East Pakistan and West Bengal:

The food prices have shot up to 30 taka per maund. Rationing had been introduced for 6 lakh people only ... As a result Hindus and Muslims are on wholesale starvation. The reports of death on account of starvation are on the increase. There has been large scale exodus of people from the villages to the towns. Over large areas of East Bengal real famine has set in.

Greenough described the entire period that immediately preceded independence as ‘one of disorder and distress’. The fact that millions of people were affected by food shortage, flood, and change of Government made independence look more like a new crisis than a new beginning.
When the colonial power left the country it was not the people but largely the functionaries of the state who took control of the government on behalf of the emerging nation. Nation-building in East Pakistan was fraught with administrative and political problems. ‘On August 15’, as a government document put it, ‘due to whimsicalities of division - the Provincial Exchequer was particularly empty and a special emissary was flown to Karachi for succour’.51 There was also a problem of shortage of officers. In the words of the officials the beginning of the new state was as follows:

August 14, 1947. A Dakota took off unobtrusively for Dacca from the Damdam airport near Calcutta ... As it landed about two dozen passengers stepped out. They were senior officers who had opted for Pakistan and had the experience required for manning some of the key posts in East Bengal... Only one Dakota flight to Dacca sufficed almost to exhaust the list of officials of that calibre.52

Even sometime later, Zinkin found an almost non-existent and ‘terribly inefficient’ administration in East Bengal.53 ‘Starting from scratch’, ‘teething period’, ‘narrow escapes’ were some of the phrases used to describe the experience of state building in East Pakistan in these years. Statesman of Calcutta, in a review of 9 March, wrote that ‘few states have began with an almost empty treasury, as this one [East Pakistan] did, and with a collapsed administrative machine’.54 Initially, it was this feeling of helplessness that characterized the response of the officials who were suddenly left to fend for themselves.

The story was no better in the seat of the Provincial Government either:

Dacca, ... a small district town ... was called upon suddenly to house not only the provincial Government and its vast staff and paraphernalia and also several central Government Departments .... The new Government was a fugitive in its own home ... Orders had often to be passed to scraps of waste paper and messages exchanged on bits of empty cigarette packets. Typewriters were few and far between. Telephones were a rare possession ... a luxury rather than a convenient instrument of administration... Officers often acted as their own messengers. There was practically no furniture.55
Sometime immediately after independence, the General Officer Commanding (GOC) the army in East Pakistan, recollected that there were only two infantry battalions; one of these had three Muslim companies, hardly qualified to be called an army. At the headquarters there were no tables, no chairs, no stationary, not even any maps of East Pakistan. The officers lived in huts which leaked almost incessantly during the heavy rains and during the nor'wester the roofs of the huts were sometimes blown-off. To a military officer, stationed at Dhaka during August 1947, it seemed that ‘the Province was in the grip of disorder and chaos’. ‘The resources, offering success against such conditions’, he further observed, ‘were now in sharp contrast, entirely inadequate’.

The police were, in their own appreciation, as badly off if not worse. Enforcement of law and maintenance of order continued to remain a responsibility of the police as it was during the Raj. In the General Summary of the Report on the Police Administration of East Bengal published in 1948, the Inspector-General of Police described the first year of independence one of ‘unprecedented stress and strain’. It is interesting however that in this period of initial uncertainty official documents refer to the state affectionately as ‘the Child State’.

Political independence generated an obvious uncertainty for the state machinery which sometimes found the ‘enthusiasm’ of the masses unmanageably wild. The functionaries perceived the state as a totality of Governmental functions only, while popular ideas and expectations of government often placed the political elite in a dilemma. On the one hand, the latter needed and desired the allegiance of the masses, whose expectations of the new state were sometimes completely utopian. On the other hand, the state apparatus needed to be consolidated, the structure already in place being that of the repressive, undemocratic, colonial state.
In the pre-independence days the Muslim League concentrated all its activities and energy on working towards a separate national identity for the Muslims of the subcontinent. The Muslim League had a vision of territorially separate Muslim states as indicated in the Lahore Resolution of 23 March 1940, but it did not develop any serious critique of the colonial state nor did it discuss in any of its forums the nature of the state that was to be. Essentially this nationalism was constituted negatively. Pakistanism became a euphemism for anti-colonialism and anti-Brahmanism. The question of a positive statement in regard to what it stood for was largely evaded. This has sometimes been justified on grounds of unity among the rank and file of the Muslim community of the Indo-Pak sub-continent and of the lack of time and intellectual resources. As a result the leaders of the Muslim League avoided all discussion about programme and policies.

Some activists of the League were only concerned with their fears of Hindu domination in an independent united India. Others hoped to recreate the glories of classical Islamic power. But no group had any clear conception of how the state of Pakistan was to be organised. Essentially elitist in approach, their principal goal was to project the interests of certain social classes as those of the entire community. They thus played up the idea of Islamic solidarity and romanticised to a fantastic degree Islam's imperial past; this in fact was a constant theme in the speeches and writings of many Muslim League activists. On the eve of independence a Muslim League leader of an East Bengal district proclaimed: 'Muslim India is going to regain her lost empire'. By projecting utopias on to an idealized primeval past the League tried to organise the intellectual and moral consent of the Muslims towards its goal of a nation state.

A separate state, when it eventually came, was more of an award from the British, 'a gift of matchless worth' as the Statesman editorial on Independence Day put it, rather than a nationhood achieved by prolonged political struggle against the colonial masters. This
consensual nature of transition from the colonial system was to bear important consequences for Pakistan. On 15 August, Pakistan retained the vice-regal system. Jinnah assumed the title of Governor-General and became the President of the Constituent Assembly while retaining the post of President of the Muslim League. Liaquat Ali Khan, a leader of the UP Muslim League, assumed the post of the Prime Minister.

A number of prominent Muslim League leaders of Bengal were thrown overboard by the manner of partition and the events that preceded independence. H S Suhrawardy, the Chief Minister of pre-partitioned Bengal, once dislodged from the Muslim League parliamentary party leadership, concentrated all his efforts towards improving the already deteriorating relations between the Hindus and the Muslims in Bengal. While the fanfare of the freedom festival was engulfing the riot-torn city of Calcutta, he was helping Gandhi to break his fast in the slum house of a poor Muslim. Fazlul Huq, for decades the leader of Bengal Muslims, was licking his wounds in his Calcutta residence, having been totally outmanoeuvred by Mr Jinnah in the Muslim League politics of Bengal. Abul Hashim, the secretary of the Muslim League, who gave the moribund organization a program and a provisional manifesto, enthralling young Muslim league students into action, was also caught in the confusion of partition. He threw his full weight behind the idea of a sovereign Bengal peddled by Suhrawardy. Unsuccessful in achieving this objective, he retired to his village home in Bardhaman. Maulana Bhashani, the President of Assam Muslim League, a leader of the immigrant Muslim peasants from East Bengal to Assam, and crusader for the campaign to include Sylhet, an Assam district, in East Pakistan, found he had no place in the new Muslim League set-up after independence, and in no time landed himself in the gaol of the Assam Government. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Abul Mansur Ahmad stayed back in Calcutta after the partition of Bengal. Ataur Rahman Khan, Kamruddin Ahmed, Shamsul Huq - all important Dhaka based Muslim League leaders were busy measuring their distance from Ahsan Manjil, the house of the Nawabs of Dhaka, the new centre of Muslim League power in independent East Pakistan. They were all to play important roles in oppositional politics after independence.
Khwaja Nazimuddin and Maulana Akram Khan took charge of the provincial Pakistan Government and the Muslim League organization respectively. Sir Frederick Bourne, a former colonial Governor, became the first Governor of free East Pakistan. Essentially, the Muslim League remained mortgaged to three centres; to Ahsan Manjil, for its leadership, to the owner of the daily Azad for its publicity and to the commercial house of the Ispahanis for its finance. In brief this was what the Muslim League looked like when political power was transferred by the Raj to this organisation in recognition of its claim to speak for the Muslims of India.

V

Marxist writings too find themselves in an uneasy state when facing the issue of independence of East Bengal. The Communist movement in India supported the Muslims' demand for self-determination while accepting the claim of the Muslim League to represent the nation. But no sooner did Pakistan come into being than the Communists were disillusioned. The relationship between the nationalists and the latter became tense and resulted in a parting of ways. Not only did they part ways they even tried to destroy each other through armed engagements in which the rallying cry of the communists was a slogan proclaiming the 'falsity of this independence'. Subsequent interpretations by Marxists of the nature of political independence in East Bengal bear marks of these early moments of bitterness.

Even years later, some of them were to dismiss the reality of independence by comparing it to 'Black Mahout for White elephant', or 'old wine in a new bottle'. The disillusionment with independence went so far for some radicals that they likened it to the coming of the Dark Age. As late as 1971 Dhananjoy Das, a former member of the Communist Party of India belonging to the district branch of Khulna, felt 'ashamed' for having been a participant in the Independence Day celebrations in August 1947. The recently published autobiography of a Muslim communist of Barisal does not even have anything to say about how it felt to be around at the time of independence from British
To many radicals, political independence was nothing but a change in the outward form of ruling and a result of collusion between the British, the Congress and the Muslim League. As one communist activist wrote once with some sarcasm: 'some change did take place, in place of British police Pakistan police set their camps'.

Another activist in the communist movement, however, recognised the support of the Bengali Muslims for Pakistan: 'The demand for Pakistan had aggressive and active support of the Muslims, at least of East Bengal', and adds: 'Even if it was mistaken or due to a lack of consciousness, the labouring Muslim population of East Bengal accepted Pakistan as something of their own.' This grudging acceptance of popular consciousness as 'true but mistaken' is also characteristic of Communist literature on Pakistan.

The reactions and expectations of the other important segment of East Bengal society, the caste Hindus, most of whom were organised under the banner of the National Congress, were also an important element in contributing to the complexity of East Pakistan politics. Let us start with Lahiry's response to political independence on 15 August 1947:

The President of the district Congress committee is, so to say, rather roped in to hoist the [Pakistani] flag [on 15 August 1947] with the President of the Muslim League, it seems, only to humiliate the organisation which stood for the independence of United India...The Bengal revolutionaries...could hardly become hilarious.

A sudden sense of defeat, frustration and betrayal gripped the minds of the upper caste Hindus of Eastern Bengal as soon as Pakistan was created. One Hindu leader expressed his disenchantment in the following manner: 'Hindus never wanted Pakistan. Pakistan has been thrust upon their unwilling heads'. Gyan Chakrabarty, a veteran communist activist of Dhaka, mentions that Pakistan was unacceptable to the Hindus right from the beginning, and a large scale exodus took place immediately after independence. According to him almost all government employees left East Pakistan at this time. In some places the reactions of the Hindu professionals was so bitter that
they plundered government property before leaving the country. Ajoy Bhattacharya
mentions that the caste Hindu employees of Sylhet hospital plundered the hospital's
property and then crossed over to India. The Hindu clerks and prisoners of Munshiganj
sub-jail were reported to have declined their quota of 'extra ration' granted to mark the
celebration of Independence Day. The leading class in the society of East Pakistan,
constituted by the upper caste Hindus, had turned overnight into political paupers. Their
vigour, hope, enthusiasm and expectation around political independence, and their
pessimism, bitterness and disillusionment in the event of the partition of Bengal— all the
complementary and contradictory states of feeling experienced by them during those
cataclysmic days of 1947 make a remarkable history which I shall not pursue here.
Lahiry’s sentiments capture a sense of failure that was to be shared by an increasing
number of upper caste Hindus who had lost their position of social leadership in spite of
being socially and economically dominant in East Bengal. Even the oppressed sections
of the Hindu society, the Scheduled Castes, threw in their lot with the Muslims of Bengal
in the sphere of Constitutional politics.

However, many caste Hindus belonging to various strains of radical politics in East
Bengal decided to stay on and contribute to the political life of East Pakistan. Troilokya
Nath Chakrabarty, being one of them, writes:

I decided that I would not leave the country. I should stay on in Pakistan. By
sharing the happiness and sufferings of the people of Pakistan I would stay on.
This country, East Bengal, is my country...why should I leave this country?

Like him a good number of communists stayed on only to suffer long years of
incarceration in the gaols of East Pakistan for wanting to contribute to the development of
secular politics in the country.

There was restlessness in the tribal belts also, where the ethnic minorities, especially the
Garos, felt that the new state lacked any definite policy on the question of ethnic
minorities. Hardly a month elapsed before a memorandum from the Tribal People's
Association of the Partially Excluded Areas of Mymensingh was submitted to the Prime
The memorandum originated from a meeting of the Garos on 24 August 1947 held at Rangrapara at Haluaghat in Northern Mymensingh. In the meeting the tribal people, numbering about 4000, demanded amalgamation of their territories, consisting of five police stations of Mymensingh, with the contiguous Assam Province of India. The very act of creating new nation states by the Raj on the basis of different nationalities opened up possibilities also for small ethnic groups to articulate their need for self determination. The process of the dismantling of the Raj inspired the tribal leaders and the people of the Garo Community to organise the Tribal People's Association to make such a demand. What made the Plain Garos, as they were known on the Eastern Bengal side, restless was the fear of a religious state forcing a geographical separation, thanks to the arbitrary nature of the Radcliffe Award, from sections of their community, who fell on the Indian side, the Hill Garos. The historical connections between the two Garos were disrupted by the Partition Award about which they had not even been consulted. The hopes and fears of the tribals at the time of political independence introduced issues that have remained salient in Bangladesh politics until now.

VI

The rhetoric of independence, in fact, becomes still more varied when we take into account the response of the rural masses on the day of independence. Tajuddin Ahmed observed that even as night fell and celebrations ended, people remained on the streets of Dhaka, many of them villagers from neighbouring districts, who came to take part in the freedom festival. Lahiry recorded from Rajshahi that as the day advanced 'the rural people in their hundreds and thousands' began to pour into the town. About one hundred thousand people, almost equally Hindus and Muslims, attended the Independence Day meeting at Dhaka. Tajuddin noticed on 15 August that the majority of the people were villagers from outside the district. According to him people came from as far as Comilla and Mymensingh to see 'Pakistan' in its concrete manifestation. As a
nation which lived in its villages,\textsuperscript{86} where geographical mobility was understandably quite limited, it was only the attraction of the idea of freedom, however conceived, that could bring these villagers in train loads to Dhaka, the centre of new power. But unfortunately, we do not know much about the 'street people' who roamed the streets of Dhaka the whole night. Both Hindus and Muslims seem to have attended the functions of the Day without any untoward incident. Amity was conspicuous, at least apparently, throughout the whole country.

But both Tajuddin at Dhaka and Lahiry at Rajshahi were disturbed by the manner of popular exuberance. The former was pained to see the lack of discipline among the people who had gathered to hear the leaders: they 'rushed always without taking seats'.\textsuperscript{87} This was not the only act of 'indiscipline' people indulged in; in the words of Lahiry nobody even cared to 'get himself booked for the trains'.\textsuperscript{88} Tajuddin also noticed that the people who came to Dhaka 'had to pay no train fare'. All this was disappointing to middle-class nationalist leaders.

There were other instances of indiscipline also. A government report mentions that 83 prisoners escaped from Munshinganj Sub-jail on 11 September 1947. They expected to be set free on Independence Day.\textsuperscript{89} The advent of independence was perceived by some other prisoners as an opportunity for release and subsequent self-improvement. An \textit{Azad} report on 14 September 1947 said:

\begin{quote}
Almost all prisoners of Dhaka central jail are on hunger strike. These prisoners prayed for release on the occasion of independence. They appealed to the Quaid-e-Azam and Khwaja Nazimuddin for release, so that an opportunity is given to them to purify their character.\textsuperscript{90}
\end{quote}

Independence was also widely perceived as an occasion for the abolition of the police and state institutions associated with the Raj. 'Now that Pakistan has been achieved, should there still be police, courts and Kutcheries, soldiers and sentries, Jails and lock-ups?' Ataur Rahman Khan, a district level Muslim League leader was asked by an elderly villager. Khan replied 'Why not? How could you protect the State without these institutions'. With a sigh the bewildered old man said, 'then what kind of Pakistan [have
we got]? Change the name please. You will name it Pakistan [yet] allow sins and corruption to exist'.

The colonial institutions of the State, especially the police and the judiciary, were perceived by this old man as being at odds with his notion of independence. Of course, there were reasons for this kind of response. 'The whole procedures of plaint, pleas, peons, and witnesses,' as Palit has written, 'was indeed prohibitive for the poor, due to expense, delay, harassment and formality of a written presentation'. As Bhattacharyya has observed in the context of tribal peasant rebellions in Mymensingh- quite often the peasants lost their lands through court cases. But the problem was not limited to tribal peasants only; the Muslim peasants lost huge amounts of money in litigations over land disputes. Writing about the condition of the peasants of Bengal delta during the first decades of this century, Panandikar observed that a large part of the profits from agriculture 'has been wasted away in litigation'. Immediately after independence Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Naimuddin Ahmed resented that the agriculturists were turned into street beggars through the machinations of the colonial law courts. Even the Floud Commission took note of this fact in 1940 that many share croppers lost their lands to court cases. Disadvantaged people appear to have had little confidence in the courts. Jitu Santhal, the leader of a tribal uprisings in Malda in the early 30's, said of the 'English Raj' that it was 'oppressive' as 'bichar cannot be obtained in government courts'.

The other institution associated with the administration of justice, the police, was equally feared. Islam mentions that 'the people [of Badarpur in Dhaka district] were terribly afraid of police'. Before independence the sight of the red turban [Police wore a red turban during the Raj] made people flee into the paddy fields and bushes nearby. In the opinion of the East Bengal Police committee, 'At no time, during nearly half a century that preceded the Partition did the police secure the confidence of the people. As the police, ill paid, corrupt and cruel, tended to be universally unpopular and remained the
visible symbol of alien oppression during the Raj.\textsuperscript{101} The political dream of the old peasant, mentioned earlier, was that such institutions be abolished.

The ordinary Muslim peasant often conceptualised Pakistan as a new moral community, when ethics of reciprocity and justice would dominate social life. Oppressed for ages by socially superior classes and by members of the colonial state, they invested the name 'Pakistan' with a sense of sacredness. As a popular poet said:

\begin{verbatim}
Always speak the truth
In the land of Pakistan.
Everything is pure in Pakistan,
Food and speech, all aspects of life.
Falsehood and bad deed
Must be shunned.\textsuperscript{102}
\end{verbatim}

The oppression that the Muslim peasantry had traditionally suffered had, as is well known, both a class and an ethnic/religious side to it. Moneylenders and \textit{zamindars} were mostly Hindus. In 1947, out of 2237 large land holders in Bengal only 358 were Muslims.\textsuperscript{103} The moneylenders, mostly from Banik and Teli castes, were perceived to be oppressors by the debtor Muslim peasants, who constituted almost 90 percent of the peasantry in debt.\textsuperscript{104} The rate of interest varied widely between 12 to 280 percent or even higher.\textsuperscript{105} In the early part of the century real indebtedness among the peasantry was much greater than the following figure quoted by Panandikar. He calculated that families occupying 185,869 out of 391,894 homestead plots were in debt and the total amounted to 4 1/3 lakhs. In Faridpur the total debt estimated to 230 lakhs was in fact Rs 11 per head, or roughly one-fifth of the annual income of the households.\textsuperscript{106} The total amount of debt in 1937, which stood at Rs 49 \textit{crore}, involved four lakh cases before the Arbitration Board.\textsuperscript{107} Added to this was the exaction through \textit{abwabs} by the \textit{zamindars} and their agents. Annual levies for the purpose of covering costs of collection and for the upkeep of the landlord's agents were exacted, apart from the rent, from the tenants. Special \textit{abwabs} like \textit{Khalbandi} (embankments) \textit{Dakhila Kharach} (Rent collection expenses) \textit{Pol Kharach} (Bridge expenses) \textit{dak Kharach} (Postal expenses) \textit{bhandari Kharach} (Market expenses), maintenance of schools, dispensaries, temples, \textit{sadiana} (Marriage expenses of the landlord's household) and finally \textit{begar} (unpaid labour) were
also collected. Sumptuary taxes from Rs 10 to 25 for the permission to use palanquin, Rs 20 to 40 for the use of large umbrellas or an elephant, and to dig tanks were imposed.\textsuperscript{108} In some districts like Barisal the \textit{abwabs} constituted about one-fourth, and even more, of the rental.\textsuperscript{109}

What was most resented by the Muslims peasants were all the feudal forms of oppression -illegal evictions, fortuitous fires, and demolition of the homesteads by the zamindar's men-that were inflicted on them when they were late to pay rent or for being recalcitrant and rebellious. Islam mentions that in Badarpur for violations of the law, an ordinary farmer would be beaten with a cane or shoes, whereas relatively powerful ones were only fined. This type of discrimination, as well as the ignominious punishment of being beaten with a cane or shoes, infuriated the Muslim villagers and they began to express their discontent with the Hindu zamindars.\textsuperscript{110} About Muslim peasants of Jagathpur, a village in Narail subdivision of Jesore district, Siddiqui brings out the stark social discrimination practised by the Hindu landowners towards the former:

Among the seven gantidars (Jotedars) who among themselves owned the entire village land, only one was a Muslim (and that too a petty gantidar)...The majority of the Muslims were employed as wage labourers and share-croppers in Hindu owned land. This together with the prevailing interpretation of Hinduism which downgraded both Muslims (as converts from low caste Hindus) and manual labour, made the Muslims of the village objects of various forms of social discrimination; they were called 'chotolok' (lowly people) openly; even the young children of the gantidars would address elderly Muslim peasants by their first names (which is a sign of disrespect). If a Muslim peasant visited the house of a Hindu, he would be offered at best a gunny bag to sit on; if a Muslim passed by the house of a Brahmin, water and cowdung would be sprinkled for purification of the polluted place.

Siddiqui also mentions that elderly villagers still recall an incident of 1940 when a small Muslim boy of a poor peasant family was tied up and detained for 24 hours by a Hindu gantidar for having trespassed into his mango gardens.\textsuperscript{111} In fact, tenants of all categories had to sit on the floor, mats or wooden benches; many zamindars even did not allow their tenants to wear shoes within their cutcheries (office of the landlord) or ride horses or elephants within the jurisdiction of the estate. Some even did not allow their tenants to dig ponds or wells or construct brickbuilt houses on their holdings. The slaughtering of cows by Muslim peasants was often not allowed by Hindu zamindars.\textsuperscript{112}
While Abul Mansur Ahmad, a Muslim nationalist leader, and others coming from a higher economic strata, recollect with some bitterness the social discrimination they faced from the Hindu zamindars and upper caste Hindus in their early life, the extent of social oppression of the poor Muslim peasants can only be guessed. Both Islam and Siddiqui conclude that it was these circumstances that paved the way for separatist politics in rural East Bengal.

Millenarian themes were deliberately emphasised in the attempts made to popularise the idea of 'Pakistan'. Spokesmen of the idea called for the abolition of brothels, alcoholic beverages and gambling, and drew on Islam to justify their stand. Slogans promising 'Land to the tiller' and 'End of moneylending' were a regular feature of Muslim League meetings and processions. It is said that once when some Calcutta labours told him that 'they [Hindu Leaders] say Pakistan will be for the rich, not for the poor' Jinnah retorted by saying, 'If the British left and that area [Bengal] did not become Pakistan, then the Hindus would never allow us to make any laws to free the Muslims from the yoke of Zamindars'.

In a public meeting in Chittagong, Nazimuddin pledged, 'If Pakistan is achieved your sons will be Munshifs, their sons will become Magistrates, Deputies, and Darogas'. 'When Pakistan was established', recollected Ayub Khan who was stationed in Dhaka immediately after independence, 'they [people] thought they will have no problem in life.' It is then not surprising that soon after East Pakistan was born the leaders of the weaving community, the jolás, should petition the government requesting a new social appellation and a rise in social status. They saw the demand as legitimate in the context of political independence.
Pakistan was achieved in the midst of huge peasant uprisings: the historic tebhaga or sharecroppers struggle and movement for the abolition of tanka and nankar forms of rent. Most of the areas of erstwhile Eastern Bengal and part of Assam, mainly the Sylhet district, were in the grip of peasant movements of variable intensity and nature in the decade that preceded political independence. All these movements originated in the pre-independence socio-political situation of East Pakistan. Most important of all was the share-cropper’s struggle, popularly known as the Tebhagar Larai. It was about the reduction of the produce rent from half of the produce to one-third; in fact, the movement has received its name from this particular expression of the demand by the struggling peasants. Communist historians have given a figure of six million peasants, spread over nineteen districts of pre-partition Bengal, who participated in the movement. Some historians have raised questions as to the accuracy of the number of participants in the struggle. But controversy over the number of participants in no way belittles the importance of the struggle which was launched by share-croppers and was later supported and helped by the Pradeshi Krishak Sabha, the peasant front of the Communist Party of India in Bengal. The importance of this struggle has been highlighted by a prominent activist who called it a ‘gigantic event’ that shook rural Bengal.

This movement itself did not aim at the destruction of the zamindari system or the very practice of share-cropping, which by the late 1930s had become the pattern of tenancy over about one-fifth of the cultivated land in Bengal and had gone up to almost one-fourth by 1946, involving over 35 percent of all cultivating families. The expansion of the sharecropping or barg, as it is popularly known, and other produce-rent-systems was caused by what Binay Chaudhuri called the ‘process of depeasantisation’-the alienation of raiyati land holdings from peasant proprietors who cultivated their own lands and their appropriation by classes of non-cultivators, reducing the former to bargadars. Peasant
indebtedness too, and the consequent expropriation of their land by money lenders was the most important factor in depeasantisation. This process of depeasantisation drew a large number of landless and semi-landless agricultural labourers into the movement, even though they did not have any share-cropping interests.

By challenging petty landlords, including jotedars, and money lenders, the movement, according to Hashmi, aimed at the eventual destruction of all intermediary interests in between the actual cultivator and the state. The impact of the movement that helped to introduce democratic practices in rural life has not escaped the attention of some of the communist activists, though historians have so long emphasized only the economic goal of the movement. In Bhabani Sen’s assessment tebhaga struggle was successful insofar as 40 percent of share-croppers obtained two-thirds shares of the crop, and the remaining 60 percent stopped paying abwabs or interests on loans in the areas involved in the movement. The latter also contributed to increasing the pressure on the government at least to announce the introduction of a Bill in the Legislature incorporating the demand of the share-croppers. However, the price of this achievement was very high indeed. About five thousand peasants were arrested and fifty killed, whereas not a single landlord was executed nor their houses burnt by the peasants. This restraint is often seen in peasant rebellions.

Unlike the tebhaga movement, the tanka movement was mostly confined to the tribal peasants, mainly the Hajongs in northern Mymensingh. The movement spread throughout a belt of fifty miles by ten and involved thousands of Hajong tribal peasants. The tankadars were predominantly Hajongs with a mix of Koch, Hadi, Dalu and Banai. Bhattacharyyya, while writing on the movement, ignores the presence of a large number of Muslim tankadars: Moni Singh, however, one of the most important leaders of the movement, recollects in his auto-biography the initiative that poor Muslim peasants took in the early part of the movement in 1937.
The *tanka* system belonged to a category of tenancies known differently in various regions of Bengal like *dhankarari, furor* or *chuktibarga*, where a fixed amount of the produce had to be paid as rent. Its origin is said to be much more recent than that of the *barga* system and one historian places it at the turn of the century. The *tanka per se* was peculiar to northeastern Mymensingh.

The *tanka* revolt, aimed at converting *tanka* rental in kind to a much lower rental in cash, was much more radical than the demand for two-third share of produce by *bargadars*, because the reduction of *adhi* to *tebhaga* would have still required a payment of more than 500 percent of what an ordinary tenant used to pay as rental in cash. In 1947, *tanka* rent per acre was Rs 40-70, whereas for the ordinary tenant the rent was only Rs six. For the *tanka* tenant rent in kind was three *maunds* thirty-three *seers* of paddy per acre, which was eight times more than the rent of other non-*tanka* tenants. This movement has been described as a 'legal movement for the development of the poor peasants' by Somnath Lahiry, a communist member of the Constituent Assembly of pre-independence India. From 1937 to January 1947 a number of peasants belonging to Hajong and Dalu tribes, including two Muslim peasants, gave their lives in their struggle for the abolition of the *tanka* system.

The *nankar* rebellion on the other hand was primarily aimed at abolishing the system of service tenure. In this system a tenant of an acre of land had to 'give' five to seven days of unpaid physical labour every month to the household of the landowner, apart from a requirement to be at the landowner's beck and call. The tenant also had no right in the *nankar* land. The daily assignment was usually very heavy requiring the members of the *nankar* family to pull together, while the *nankar*'s own plot, usually too small to provide a livelihood for his family over the year, was poorly tended, which reduced its yield. Corporal punishment was common for not turning up to work for the landlord, and additional tasks were given to make up for lost time. Not only that, *nankars* were forced to carry out the order of the landlord to discipline incalcitrant members of the section. Very often young daughters and wives of the *nankars* were sexually exploited by
landlords and by the male members of the landlord's family, for which there was no remedy excepting individual and/or collective resistance. The cost of this kind of resistance was always very high, ranging from eviction to murder by goondas of the zamindars, acts sometimes carried out with the help from police. The struggle against this 'barbarous' system engulfed almost half of Sylhet district during 1946 and the first half of 1947. Ten percent of the three million people of that district extended their active support to the struggle.136

With attainment of political independence, however, the struggles of the peasants around 'land and rent' questions were lulled and eventually suspended. The promise of independence and the partition of Bengal was seen by Communist activists as reasons for the peasants' retreat from the confrontation with the landlords and the functionaries of the state. Peasant activists and the members of the Krishak Sabha believed that the continuation of the struggle was unnecessary in the changed political circumstance. They expected that their demands would be accepted by the nationalist leadership when political power was transferred to the latter. Even recent writing on the sharecropper's struggles testifies to this. Cooper believes that such expectations weakened the tebhaga agitation.137

Muslim League leadership had publicly committed themselves to the abolition of zamindari, and other agrarian reforms. Some prominent regional leaders themselves contributed to the heightening of expectations on the part of the peasants. Giasuddin Pathan, a prominent League leader of Mymensingh, is said to have told the Muslim sharecroppers who were involved in the struggle under the organisation and leadership of the Krishak Sabha that they should not waste time and efforts for 'tebhaga', now that Pakistan was in the offing, they would get 'chaubhaga' - all four quarters of the produce. According to Moni Singh, the aforementioned leader of the Hajong rebellion in Mymensingh, this worked like magic. 'The peasants returned the paddy they had seized from the landlords'.138 The Muslim League, in fact, took some steps towards meeting the demands of the sharecroppers which suggested sanction for rural change.
On 22 January 1947, the Bengal Bargadar's Bill which promised to introduce shortly the tebhagha system throughout the province was published in the Calcutta Gazette. This announcement effectively dampened the agitation. Although reaction varied, the promise of legislation took the wind out of the sail of the movement. The Sharecroppers Bill acted as a kind of catalyst in agrarian relations, arousing both fears and hopes about imminent changes of importance. The Bill enhanced the image of the Muslim League Government especially among the Muslim peasants, though nothing was done towards translating the Bill into regulation. It is even said that important provincial Muslim League leaders like Khwaja Nazimuddin went about privately assuring the landlords that their interests would be protected. The prospect of having a national government also put a brake on the ongoing Nankar rebellion in the Sylhet district. Important activists like Ajoy Bhattachaya admitted that the ordinary Muslim masses of Sylhet expected that nankar problems would be solved amicably if the latter supported Pakistan.

The same prospect created frustration among the Hindu nankars. The situation was further complicated by the upper caste Hindus' hurried migration to India after Pakistan was achieved. Whatever little support that came from the former had disappeared. Haji Muhammad Danesh, one of the prominent krishak sabha activists, said that Hindus feared that in Pakistan, the land of the Muslims, they could be helpless. A clear distinction emerged on the question of joining with Pakistan or India during the Sylhet Referendum among the Hindu and Muslim nankars, which stopped just short of communal violence. Added to this, the partition of Karimganj sub-division, one of the important centres of the rebellion, created uncertainty about the future of the rebellion.
Pakistan was born in the middle of famine conditions. Yet it was remarkable that the Muslim peasants, unlike their Hindu brethren, did not leave the country. A Swadhinata report noted: 'Pakistan has been achieved. The Muslims expected the prices of commodities to come down...They are not particularly worried about resisting famines. They are not deserting their home either'.

Abdus Shahid, a political activist of the time, also recollects how political independence and confidence in the national leadership combined to give hope to many who otherwise faced the prospect of an impending famine.

A rural poet from Chittagong sang on the attainment of political independence:

In the imperialist oppression of 1943  
Million lives were lost,  
Let us found a Kingdom of peace  
In our free state, ending famines once for all.

Ever since the 1937 elections, Muslim leaders had always painted the future 'Homeland for the Muslims' as a land where the poor peasants dream of 'two square meals a day' would come true. In the context of 'post-disaster utopia' after the Great Famine, availability of rice to sustain oneself became the symbol of fulfilment. According to Greenough, to many peasants rice signified independence. The League activists adapted their political propaganda to these concrete grievances of local populations. The optimism of the ordinary Muslim peasants and their expectations of Pakistan no doubt reflected the presence of nationalist sentiments among sections of East Pakistan society. Given the nature of this society and its politics at their time however, nationalism would have been by and large an elitist sentiment. For, with dearth and famine around the corner, nationalism would have been only one among many contradictory forces impelling the poor to action.
Islam itself and the notion of egalitarianism inherent in Islam became a very important force, especially when the oppressors were seen as belonging to the hierarchical Hindu religion. Islam was so important in the day to day politics of those days that even secular demands were tinged by religious nationalism. The nascent Bengali linguistic nationalism of the 1950s also drew many of its metaphors and concepts from the idiom and institution of Islam. The earliest writings of the genre, while making a critique of the new state, still projected a vision of a just society as had been achieved under Omar, the second Caliph: 'When shall we get an ideal ruler like Hazrat Omar, when the era of the Four Caliphs will come back!'"152

The Muslim League propaganda acquired such popular response because it merged with pre-existing religious loyalties among the Muslim peasants.153 The League operated through customary forms of sociability, such as the jumma prayers, maulid sharifs, waj mahfils, and id prayers. Thus, by politicizing this associational life, the League managed to transform traditional loyalties into a political movement that expressed itself occasionally through communal strife and expressive separatist symbols.154

This in brief was the context in which the beliefs, practices and goals of the masses of Muslims of Bengal contributed towards the struggle for a separate homeland for themselves. Any attempt to understand the disenchantment with the Muslim League after independence has to take into account the initial hopes and expectations that brought the League into power in the first place.
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28 Kamruddin Ahmad, *Social History*, p.96.

29 For more on this, see Shila Sen's *Muslim Politics in Bengal*, New Delhi, 1976, and Sirajuddin Hussain's *Look into the Mirror*, Dacca 1974; Kamruddin Ahmad’s *Social History*, and Abul Mansur Ahmad’s *Amar Dekha Rajniti Panchas Bachar*, Dhaka.


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38 Fishery Bundle, B-progs, Sept. 1953, Nos. 461-472.


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44 ibid., p.6.

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50 Greenough, Prosperity, p.254.

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52 East Pakistan Forged Ahead, Home Political Bundle, p.1.


54 The Statesman, 9 March 1948, Calcutta.

55 East Pakistan Forges Ahead, pp.3-4, Emphasis mine.


57 Colonel Mohammad Ahmad, My Chief, pp.6-7, Lahore, 1960.


63 Speech by Manjurul Huq, Chairman, Reception Committee of Sub-divisional Muslim League Conference held on 4 May 1947, Umar (ed.), Dalil, p.19.

64 Kamruddin Ahmad, Banglar Madhyabitter Atmabikash, Vol 2, 1975, p.90, The Bengali Muslim gentry’s sense of ‘bewilderment’ at the partition of Bengal has been exaggerated by Banerjee. This was perhaps true for a small number of them. See D N Banerjee, East Pakistan, Delhi, 1969, p.45.

65 ibid., p.21.


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74 Letter from S. Bhattacharya, President Hindu Sevak Sangha, Sylhet, on 7 October, 1947, Home Political Bundle, Bangladesh Secretariat Record Room, Dhaka.


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80 ibid., see Jogen Mondol's letter of Resignation, Appendix v.


82 Home Political, B-progs, October, 1950, No 516.


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90 Azad, 14 September, 1947, Calcutta.
94 Umar (ed.) *Dali*, p.77.
107 EBLA, progs, Vol.1, No.3, p.94.

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Home Poll. Bundle, Memo No.60; This may help answer the question which Partha Chatterjee raises, as to whether the demand for Pakistan was 'any thing more specific than their desire to free themselves from zamindari domination', see Partha Chatterjee, *Bengal, 1920-1947. Vol. 1, The land Question*, Calcutta, 1984, p.171.


Hashmi, Thesis, P.308; Also Gnabrata Bhattacharyya, 'Leadership Entry'.


Bhabani Sen, *Smarak*, p.15.

ibid., pp.14-5.


137 Adrienne Cooper, Thesis, p.375.
138 Moni Singh, Sangram, p.97.
139 Cooper, Thesis, p.376.
142 ibid., p.251.
145 As quoted in Umar, Bhasha Andol, Vol 11, p.5.
146 Abdus Shahid, Atmakatha, p.137.
147 Pumendu Dastidar, Kabial Ramesh Shil, Dhaka, 1963, p.49.
148 Humaira Momen, Muslim Politics, p.57, Shila Sen, Muslim Politics, pp.80-83, Umar (ed.) Dalil, pp.77-79.
149 Greenough, Prosperity, p.228.
150 See Chapter 4.
153 Rafiuddin Ahmed has discussed this aspect of Bengal Muslim politics, see his Bengal Muslims, also Kamruddin Ahmad, Atmabikash, Vol. 2, p.49.
The birth of East Pakistan was attended by what has been described as a ‘near famine situation’. While this expression was used to distinguish the 1943 famine from that of 1947, according to some elected members of the EBLA there was little difference in the magnitude of the suffering that occurred in either situation. In fact, contrary to the term ‘near famine’, official documents and the non-official press of the time abounded in phrases and idioms that constructed an alarming picture of the food situation in the country in 1947. Articulate sections of the society described the situation prevailing in many parts of Eastern Bengal as famine affected. One official document admitted that the food situation was ‘most difficult and uncertain’.

A subsistence crisis was admitted by all whose opinion really mattered in the day to day politics of the then East Pakistan. One indicator of the crisis was the soaring price of food grains unmatched by the purchasing power of most of the people. But to combat the situation, that is to keep the prices of food grains within the means of the poor, the government went from ‘one experiment to another’. Nevertheless the price of foodgrains remained outside the reach of most of the people. This was so for most of the Muslim League’s term in government in East Pakistan.

One option open to the ruling elite in 1947 was to go for increased production. Yet, given the historical constraints on agricultural productivity in East Pakistan this was not a practical proposition. There was the complex hierarchy of interests in land that had grown since the Permanent Settlement of 1793, reducing the level of productivity. There was a great scarcity of agricultural inputs. Almost all ploughing was still being carried out by wooden ploughs.
drawn by underfed bullocks. The supply of improved seeds remained below requirements in terms of both quantity and quality and chemical fertilizer was used in less than one percent of the cultivated land. Moreover, scientific methods of irrigation were virtually non-existent.³

As a statistic the food deficit may not look very alarming, but if we look at the government’s attempts at that time to procure foodgrains from the surplus producers and distribute it among the needy, the magnitude of the crisis in East Pakistan after August 1947 will be revealed. During the food crisis, the elite in state power decided to rely on its existing ally, the surplus producers in the countryside. The particular policy of procurement of foodgrains came as a logical extension of this reliance. According to an editorial in Azad on 3 October, 1947, which hailed the food procurement drive, the government had two options in solving the crisis, to import foodgrains from abroad, or to procure foodgrains from within. It was also expected that farmers with foodgrain surpluses should voluntarily surrender their surplus to the government.⁴ The rulers depended largely on the enthusiasm displayed towards the new state by a large section of the surplus producers. The extent of the solidarity of the surplus producers was a test for the new state.

The surplus producers did not respect this demand for economic solidarity in addition to political support. To a vast number of them, the state imposition on their produce seemed extremely authoritarian. These conflicts and the resistance of the surplus producers tested the ruling elite’s ability to carry with them the mass of well-to-do peasants who were the reservoir of all of society’s wealth and energies. In these circumstances the executive wing of the government came to the fore,⁵ thus contributing to the erosion of the legitimacy of the party in power.
Before discussing the role of the executive let us review the price situation. The government figures showed that there had been a continuous rise in prices of food grains since 1945. The highest point that was reached in 1945 was Rs. 12.10 annas per maund, in 1946 it was Rs. 19.15 annas and in 1947 it was Rs. 28.13 annas. The government statement was questioned by an Azad report on 10 September of the same year which mentioned that rice was selling at Rs. 40 per maund at least in Mymensingh and Khulna, two of the surplus districts of East Bengal.

In fact, a large scale food shortage prevailed till September 1947 in Dhaka, Faridpur, Khulna, Mymensingh, Comilla, Noakhali, Chittagong and Sylhet districts of East Pakistan. Food prices were soaring everyday till the new crop was harvested which, along with some supply from the government warehouse, helped to bring the situation under control towards the end of the year. But by the middle of 1948 prices started to soar again. In September 1948, rice was selling at Rs 40 per maund in Jessore, Rs. 38 a maund in Khulna, and in Pabna and Kushtia it was selling at Rs 35 per maund. By early 1949, according to the statement of the Prime Minister, rice was selling at Rs 22 per maund in surplus areas, Rs 28 a maund in deficit areas and Rs. 26 a maund in self-sufficient areas. But the government figures which were made available to the public were contested by the elected representatives of the EBLA. According to Muhammad Israil, a Muslim League MLA, at Zinzira, one of the biggest rice markets in East Pakistan, situated near Dhaka, rice was selling at Rs 50 per maund on 14 February 1949, contrary to the government claim of Rs 45 for the same amount. Government sources claimed that in six out of 16 sub-divisional markets of the five deficit districts the price of rice in the second week of February 1949 varied from Rs 41 to Rs 45 per maund.
The highest prices were in Dhaka, Narayanganj and Manikganj sub-divisions of Dhaka district. In March 1949 there was a substantial scarcity of food in the district of Kushtia, and in the Kishoreganj sub-division of Mymensingh district where rice was selling, as information collected on 9 - and 10 March 1949 indicated, between Rs 40 to Rs 50 per maund. This information was produced by a Muslim League MLA who claimed to have gathered it from a confidential report of a tour of the area by a Parliamentary Secretary. Rice in fact was selling at Rs 40 per maund in Kishoreganj for several months prior to April 1949. By September 1949, the price of rice in North Bengal reached up to Rs 40 per maund and in the Jamalpur sub-division of Mymensingh district it reached up to Rs 54 per maund - an incredible rise in the history of food-price in the province.

From May 1949, the price of rice in Chittagong division ranged between Rs 40 to Rs 45 per maund according to Dhirendra Nath Dutta, an Opposition MLA of the EBLA. The situation was no better in October. Indeed Tajuddin Ahmed thought it was the 'hardest hit on the agriculturists' since 1943. He recorded the price in his diary on 31 October 1949 as Rs 35 to Rs 40 per maund of rice and Rs 26 to Rs 28 per maund for paddy since the beginning of October. Obviously, this referred to the price that prevailed in and around the district of Dhaka. The extent of the crisis caused by the price rise varied with the harvest and the prices continued to be unpredictable. Throughout 1950 and 1951 the price of food grains remained beyond the reach of the ordinary people.

The minister-in-charge of the Civil Supplies confirmed that the price of rice was high in January 1952. Tajuddin Ahmed's diary entry for 29 February 1952 reads: 'strangely enough, the price of paddy was as high as it was when the jute price was high. It sold at Rs 15 per maund on an average.' But by May 1952 newspapers were reporting panic in the countryside over the food situation and prices. On 1 May 1952 Azan, a weekly of Chittagong, mentioned in an editorial, that rice was selling at one and a half seer a rupee and feared that it would reach Rs. 40 per maund in no time. Dawn, a daily, on 21 May, Millat on 6 May and Azad on
11 May, published news items forecasting failure of Aus and Boro paddy in Chittagong and Rangpur districts. *Millat* reported on 18 May of the same year that rice was selling at Rs 50 per *maund* in Sylhet.

The government periodically attempted to give reasons for the price rise of food grains though more often than not they preferred to remain silent or simply to understate the price. The Prime Minister claimed that the inherited deficit of 158,000 tons in terms of rice in East Pakistan, which constituted 2 percent of the total consumption, deteriorated due to flood and by early 1949 the deficit stood somewhere between 250,000 and 320,000 tons. The high price was, according to the Prime Minister, due to the high price of jute and other agricultural commodities over the previous few months before April 1949. The immobilization of stocks in surplus areas was due to cordonning, speculative buying and selling by dealers and holding back by many of the large producers, and scarcity of consumer goods from India which led to the availability of too much money in the country. It was also compounded by a situation that existed after political independence when the traditional source of rice supply from Burma and India faced difficulties due to the disruption of normal trade channels.

The minister-in-charge of civil supplies identified the following factors in 1952 for the rise in food grain prices:

1. Speculative buying by traders with the object of hoarding and selling later with a considerable margin of profit.

2. A tendency on the part of non-producers to stockpile a whole year's requirements.

3. A tendency on the part of the producer-seller to hold up stock in anticipation of a further rise in the price.
4. Panic arising out of artificial cases mentioned above as well as exaggerated news circulated by certain newspapers and certain sections of the interested public.

5. Besides, the yield of Aman crop that year was slightly less than that of last year.\(^{15}\)

What the Minister did not take into account was the falling purchasing power of the cultivators and workers. By the middle of 1940’s, especially since the famine of 1943, the economic condition of the poorer peasantry had deteriorated badly.

While about 46 per cent of peasant families in the region held less than two acres of land in the late 1930s, the proportion of semi landless peasants in the post-famine period was about 75 per cent. These figures certainly do not suggest a prosperous peasantry in the region. According to Hashmi ‘no amount of profit out of jute improved the economic condition of the bulk of the peasants.’ The jute boom, which was popularly believed to have benefited the peasants of jute growing districts in the post-depression period, indeed benefited the rich peasants, traders and the middlemen.\(^{16}\) In a statement the Finance Minister of Pakistan gave the following figures that explain the falling purchasing power of the producers of cash crops: the index or the average price of all commodities moved from 100 in 1939 to 374 in 1948 and 214 in 1949.\(^{17}\)

The picture will be clearer if we take into account the following additional figures. Jute was sold at Rs 12 per maund around the beginning of 1951 whereas the average price previously was Rs 35. The betelnut price was Rs 10 per maund instead of its average sale price of Rs 75 per maund and moreover betelnuts were being taxed at the rate of Rs 10.5 annas per maund which eventually stopped betel nut sale altogether in the market. This information presented in the Youth Conference held at Dhaka towards the end of March 1951 paints a dismal picture for some of the most important cash crops of East Pakistan.\(^{18}\)
The food position during 1952-53 was not very satisfactory either. In the earlier months of 1952 the apprehended shortfall in the Aman crop of 1951-52 induced speculative buying and selling that pushed up the price 'at the time when it should have been low' (as a minister put it). In parts of the province there was a partial failure which led to speculation later in the year causing a rise in prices. Tajuddin Ahmed noted in frustration on 29 February 1952 that no initiative to cope with the situation was forthcoming from the government. Nor was there any sign that they at all bothered about it. This was not true either.

III

On 1 October 1947 exactly one and a half months after independence, the Government launched a province-wide programme for procurement of food grains. This first 'experiment', intended to solve the food problem, was to be followed by few others. For sometime, people's fate hung between two options: one laisser faire - throwing the people to the mercy of a market dominated by the speculations of traders and merchants - and the other, governmental control which meant throwing the lot of the consumers at the mercy and whim of the bureaucracy. The whole food debate revolved around these two options. The government decided to procure all surplus that might be available either with producers or with dealers of food grains. Hailed as a bold step to solve the food crisis that threatened the nation at its birth, the following measures were adopted by the government:

1. Maximum imports from outside.

2. Maximum internal procurement.

3. Maximum co-operation of the people to deal with dealers and hoarders - the two despised enemies of food distribution since the war and famine years.
This discussion will focus on the impact of the last two aspects of this policy.

The food-drive was inaugurated with a broadcast by the Prime Minister who announced that it was a collective national effort to deal with the most ‘serious situation’ facing the nation. He emphasised that these measures were essentially national in character. The service of all available government personnel in the surplus districts of Jessore, Khulna, Barisal, Bogra, Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Mymensingh and Sylhet were requisitioned for an all out effort to procure stocks of food voluntarily surrendered as well as those to be seized from hoarders. One newspaper, the Azad, carried editorials and news items in support of procurement and urging the people to co-operate whole heartedly.23

According to the claim of officials the food drive proved a success. Over 13,000 tons of rice was surrendered voluntarily within a fortnight. This was in addition to stocks seized during the drive and those procured as part of normal procurement operations of the Government. In order to prevent smuggling of food grains the Government decided to retain controls and tighten to the maximum the cordons around the perimeter of East Pakistan. The province was divided into four zones; three procurement and one central non-procurement zone. It was also decided to put an effective cordon on each procurement zone. By the beginning of 1948 the Government intensified these operations in the main three zones in order to meet their essential commitments and arrange for assistance to the deficit areas. As to the success of the operation the government claimed that the cordonning staff rescued 1 lakh and 50 thousand maunds of paddy from the hands of smugglers operating out of the surplus district of Khulna24.

In contrast, on 1 April 1949 the Prime Minister in a statement on the ‘food situation’ announced that the deficit that stood at 2% of the total consumption had worsened due to
flood. Natural calamities like flood, cyclone, and political calamities like communal conflicts both inside and outside the country from time to time aggravated the food situation in the province. Given such factors, the government failed to estimate the deficit accurately. Depending on the harvest of **boro** and **aus** the deficit in early 1949 could be somewhere between 250,000 and 320,000 tons.

To meet this deficit, supply of 54 **lakh maunds** of rice was expected to be acquired internally. But in 1948 under the voluntary procurement system a little under 21 **lakh** and 60 thousand **maunds** were procured. As it was quite inadequate for the requirements, the government introduced a scheme of compulsory levy upon large producers in surplus districts. The **East Bengal Compulsory Levy of Foodgrains Order, 1948** was published in an ‘extraordinary issue’ of the Dacca Gazette published on 19 September 1948. According to the Gazette notification the surplus districts for this purpose of procurement were Rajshahi, Bogra, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Mymensingh (with the exception of Kishoreganj and Tangail sub-division) Sylhet, Khulna, Jessore, Kushtia, and Bakarganj (present Barisal). The deficit districts were Faridpur, Pabna, Chittagong, Noakhali, Chittagong Hill-Tracts and Tippera (present Comilla) and Dhaka.25

It was decided that large producers would be subjected to compulsory levy. A ‘large producer’ was defined in the Gazette as a person or persons who habitually dined together or were doing so on the date of commencement of this order and those who cultivated as owner, tenant, **bargadar** or in any other capacity a land the area of which is not less than 10 acres under any one seasonal crop and grew there on paddy by himself with or without the aid of members of his family or paid labours or by **adhiars, bargadars** or **bhagidars**. It also included such cases where a person held or cultivated on behalf of himself and other members of a joint undivided family irrespective of whether they dined together or not. A ‘family’ meant a family of a large producer and included all persons living in the same mess
with him and dependent upon him but for the purpose of procurement, children below the age of 3 were not considered as members of the family.26

Under orders of Government all large producers were required to make a declaration by 30th September 1948 at the office of the Union Boards or to the Preliminary Surveyor appointed for the village. The declarations were to be confirmed; the above mentioned officials were to check it up by 15 October of the same year. After that an Inspector was to come to the village and after verifying the list of ‘large producers’ he was to assess the levy and publish his assessments. If any large producer was unhappy about the assessment he could appeal against it by 15 November 1948, albeit without the help of any lawyer and only on the basis of oral and documentary evidence. Imprisonment of up to 3 years, fine and confiscation of paddy was the punishment for false statements or for not complying with the order. Over and above the levied producers were to take the assessed paddy to a government warehouse or to a government agent or to an authorized mill. ‘You shall have to hand it over ... You will be told where to take your stock’;27 the language the government gazette used must have sounded to many producers as distinctly authoritarian and alienating.

In effect, the producers were being asked to show their support for the new state by making some sacrifices in the latter’s favour; that is, by abstracting from their immediate interests in the interests of a state which was meant, in the long term, to protect them. We of course have no way of knowing how many supported the government economically and how many did not. But we do have documents that strongly suggest that voluntary denial of goods was, from the government point of view, much less than satisfactory. The state therefore resorted to coercion in the form of a compulsory levy. The Prime Minister admitted that under voluntary procurement in 1948 the government received only 80 thousand tons - a quantity ‘quite inadequate,’28 despite the Prime Minister visiting Jessore and Khulna, and the ministerial team touring all the districts - holding meetings and ‘reminding the people of their responsibilities towards the new state.’29
To make this levy tolerable, and in order to get the full and willing co-operation of those of whom this compulsory levy had been demanded, important concessions were made. A consumption limit of 5 maunds per harvest of Aman of rice per person was allowed. An allowance of the expenses connected with cultivation was considered before calculating the surplus of which three-quarters was levied.

The yield was first estimated on the figures produced by the Agricultural department over a period of five years. Different yields were fixed in different parts of these districts according to local conditions - but no suit was allowed to be brought in any court of Law in respect of the preparation of the list, its publication or fixation of prices under the order.

The levy demands and the procurement of rice and paddy were approximately as follows:

Table 3.1

A district-wise break down of levy demand and internal procurement of rice and paddy in East Pakistan in the Year 1948-49. [Figures in maunds.]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>Levy Demand</th>
<th>Procurement Paddy</th>
<th>Procurement Rice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Rangpur</td>
<td>3,00,000</td>
<td>88,189</td>
<td>15,465</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Rajshahi</td>
<td>12,00,000</td>
<td>9,67,715</td>
<td>50,266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Bogra</td>
<td>5,00,000</td>
<td>2,27,490</td>
<td>17,702</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Dinajpur</td>
<td>14,00,000</td>
<td>5,12,718</td>
<td>6,18,344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Mymensingh</td>
<td>7,00,000</td>
<td>3,00,739</td>
<td>8,357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Sylhet</td>
<td>2,00,000</td>
<td>41,434</td>
<td>1,439</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Khulna</td>
<td>9,00,000</td>
<td>9,38,961</td>
<td>40,712</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Jessore</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>1,67,2334</td>
<td>40,712</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Kushtia</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>9,132</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Bakarganj</td>
<td>20,00,000</td>
<td>3,71,056</td>
<td>27,277</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: 72,30,000  36,24,669  7,80,292

Obviously, the target was not reached. It was also admitted by the government that the compulsory levy of 1949 was very hard and exorbitant. With a view to giving relief to the cultivators a system of graded levy was introduced. The levy for the peasants owning land between 10 acres to 20 acres was 1 1/2 maunds per acre; between 20 to 40 acres was 3 maunds per acre, and for 40 upwards the levy was 4 1/2 maunds per acre. This method did not prove very successful either. The Minister-in-Charge of Civil Supplies admitted as much in early 1953. The authorities realised that the price which was offered to the growers was not 'fair'. As a result the price of paddy and rice was increased to Rs 1 and Rs 1-8 respectively. On March 1953 the Minister admitted in the EBLA that this price was fairer than that which was previously paid. He said that as a consequence, procurement had started better in 1953 and tried to impress the House by saying that a small amount had been procured through 'voluntary' methods.31

We find from a study of 10,364 peasant households of East Bengal by the Floud Commission that for the surplus districts the percentage of families on whom the levy fell was much smaller compared to the number of families who held land below 10 acres.

Let us look at the figure of distribution of land in the surplus districts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>Above 10 acres</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Rajshahi</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Bogra</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Dinajpur</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Rangpur</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Mymensingh</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Khulna</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Jessore</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Kushtia</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Bakarganj</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since Sylhet, another surplus district, was in the province of Assam before partition it was outside the purview of the Floud Commission. To have a comprehensive picture of land ownership in the province as of 1940 the following table may be of relevance.

Table 3.3

Land Ownership in the Province of Bengal in 1940

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Land in Acres</th>
<th>Percentage of families</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 2</td>
<td>45.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-4</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-5</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-10</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 10</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total no. of families</td>
<td>10,364</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Source: Abu Abdullah, Land Reform and Agrarian Change in Bangladesh, BIDE November, 1973, p.10]

These figures, however, predate the devastating Bengal famine of 1943 in which 2.6 lakh families out of 65 lakh who owned paddy lands totally lost their holdings. This would have led to a concentration of land mostly in the hands of families who owned more than 10 acres. With this history of land transfer behind them, families with holdings of ten acres and above, should have found it within their means to accept the levy; and to rally round the new government when it was facing a crisis. Yet the nature of response from these producers tells a very different story.

The shortfall in the target of procurement, which was set with much consideration for the circumstances of the surplus producers, could be seen as a lack of solidarity that characterised the relations between the rich peasants and the state. Even the quantity which had been acquired had been through coercion. It was however not always the unwillingness of the surplus producers to surrender food grains that led to coercion. Rather, the manner in
which procurement was carried out showed a coercive state in operation. Indeed, one Muslim League MLA confirmed it thus: ‘the principle of levy on surplus producers is good but in execution of the scheme the officers of the department have brought disrepute and disgrace.’

IV

Reactions to the levy of foodgrains were sharp and terse as admitted even by the Prime Minister. Sometimes protest was couched in sensational and metaphorical expressions by the Hindu members of the Legislative Assembly who belonged to the Congress. One such diatribe ran thus: ‘[The Levy system] has created havoc in the countryside. It has set the people in open rebellion against the government measure. Injustices to the people and their miseries have pushed them to a breaking point.’

A prominent member of the Opposition accused the government of handcuffing the people and looting their paddy. Another member was even more unequivocal than many others. He said that ‘in most cases in the name of law, lawlessness has pervaded throughout the country, so far as the levy is concerned’. What were they complaining about? One Congress Member said that they were objecting to the ‘ways and means’ which had been and were being adopted to give effect to the policy of procurement.

In the Compulsory Levy Order a time-table was given for procurement but as alleged by a member from Khulna, it would seem that the government failed to keep to it. Forms could not be made available in time, and there was practically no publicity whatsoever. The forms were allegedly filled by officers on hearsay evidence and at times declarations were found to have been made by dead persons. There were cases of double assessment of persons who had the land in the Union and residence in another. In many places the draft levy list was not
published and where it was, it was done insufficiently and improperly. In many Unions the list was not prepared before the time fixed for filing objections. As a result very few people could file objections to the draft-list. Even these few cases were disposed of without making any local enquiry or investigation. Provisions for appeal were seen as 'farcical' by some members of the Assembly. At the time of hearing the appeal an amount exceeding Rs 25 in each case was demanded of the appellants as a contribution to an 'unauthorized and questionable fund'.

Even the appeals were not heard until the payments were made. The complaint from Bagerhat, a sub-division of Khulna, was that the levy had been made on estimated yield at the rate of an average for the entire district. Even the difference between sweet water and saline water area was ignored. Similar complaints came from other places. For Bakerganj (Barisal) for example, per acre production of paddy was calculated at the rate of 20 maunds. But such a blanket estimate did not correspond with reality. There were areas in Bakerganj, mentioned by the members of the Legislative Assembly, where per acre production of paddy did not exceed 12 to 13 maunds. The harvesting time, which was later in Bagerhat, as in many other places, was ignored. As a result estimation was done on the basis of standing crop. The loss sustained by producers due to insects, heavy rain and wind in that year, and theft and default by share croppers were not taken into consideration.

Khulna was by no means any exception. Complaints were made about the way levy was imposed in Bakerganj. *Naya Duniya*, a Communist weekly, carried out a detailed story about levy oppression in a number of police stations in Jessore. The government was accused of not paying even the labour cost of production and even the Prime Minister admitted that a cultivator did not get in some cases the full price of Rs 7-8 per maund.

In a broadside attack on the procurement policy of the Government Lalit Kumar Bal, MLA from Bakerganj, accused the implementing authority of 'inefficiency, superficiality,
irresponsibility and incompetence' which according to him created a serious discontent among the people whose just and reasonable grievances generated by the compulsory Levy Order were not attended to. He also brought additional charges against the implementing authority. The Order allowed a purchaser to purchase paddy below twenty maunds. But in Bakarganj there were 'innumerable cases' where quantities of paddy far below twenty maunds had been seized from the purchasers who procured the same for their family consumption. And what was 'most deplorable' was that rice was seized from the dwelling houses of small cultivators who had grown the rice themselves and had stored it for their own consumptions. There was actually no provision in the Order to seize rice and paddy from dwelling houses.

The preceding illustrations of oppressions as given by the Hindu members of the Assembly raise some questions. Were all complaints of coercion being made by the Hindu Members only? Were the Hindu surplus peasants resisting the Compulsory Levy of foodgrains through a reluctance to make the necessary sacrifice for a 'Muslim State'? And was protest being voiced only within the four walls of the provincial Assembly? Was the government consciously and selectively following a policy of discrimination and persecution against the surplus producers of a particular community as evidenced by the accusations? Had the battle that had apparently been resolved through a territorial division between the two predominant communities extended to the area of surplus extraction by the state? And was it only the Hindu surplus producers who had to bear the burden of sacrifice for the collective in giving away to the state their surplus? These are the questions that generally arise from the nature of the complaints.

While these complaints were not only made within the Assembly or by the elected Members, they nevertheless spearheaded the nonviolent resistance against the policy of compulsory food procurement by the Muslim League led government in East Pakistan. Lahiry, a Congress member of the Assembly, denied any connection with the current movements
against the government. He said that the Pakistan National Congress had not undertaken any agitational programmes. Its activities were confined to the assembly.42 Evidence shows, however, that local level community leaders were at the same time pressing the government to redress their grievances. Sometimes telegrams were sent by local level Hindu leaders to the Chief Secretary of the government for succour from the oppression of the levy.43

The Hindu Members of the Assembly did not raise the problem as a communal one though they were more vocal than their Muslim counterparts in the Assembly.44 Questions were raised by a Congress Member about the justification of the Levy system when it was necessary for only a handful of 8 lakh people in the province who were in the rationing scheme of the government.45 *Laissez faire* was an accepted creed for a large number of the Members of the Assembly. But for many others control was essential to face the economic situation since the great famine and war. One Hindu member summed up the argument in the following way:

I appeal to make better and efficient arrangements for procurement on just and reasonable basis so that the people may be ready to make over certain portion of the surplus paddy with satisfaction of mind for their brethren of the deficit districts in East Bengal.46

It was not that the Hindu Members *en masse* were against control. What they were protesting was the coercive manner in which the levy was being realised. None of the members of the Opposition made any remark or a statement that could be termed as 'communal' despite many provocations from the government bench in the Assembly.

Umar has argued that the reason behind the protests in the Legislative Assembly is that:

*The Congress members in the East Bengal Legislative Assembly belonged to the class of Zamindars, Jotedars, and Moneylenders. On top of that they generally represented the latters' interests.*47
This was also true for the Muslim representatives. They also came from the strata of the surplus producers. And the Muslim surplus producers were also affected directly by the procurement policy. If the complaints lodged by the Hindu members were true for all, then the Muslim surplus producers were also hit very badly. Yet we find that only a small number of Muslim members protested about the levy in the Assembly. While this protest was no less terse or dissimilar from their counterparts in the Opposition bench, the build up of Muslim opposition to the levy policy nevertheless was slow within the assembly. The Muslim member who first criticized the policy as 'suicidal', restrained himself with the words 'I don't want to say much about it.'

One important reason behind the economy of criticism by the Muslim members could be the specific nature of the composition of the First Assembly where all the Muslim members belonged to the Muslim League. An important faction of the League belonging to the Suhrawardy group were being wooed over by the dominant faction by the offer of different government positions at home and abroad. For those who failed to respond, threats of banishment followed. In other respects the members of the government party behaved like a disciplined army all through the career of the First Assembly. Indeed this was admitted by the Prime Minister himself.

This economy of criticism however could not be maintained. As coercion became a strong characteristic of the way the levy policy was implemented, even the ML members of the Assembly began to attack the policy, especially its implementation. Initially this protest was less stubborn than that of the Hindu Members. In this they were only representing the reactions of their respective constituencies. One woman member of the Muslim League, an early critic of the policy, stated that the levy had been oppressing most of the people in the villages. Another member who was from Kishoreganj, said that while people had 'entertained very great hope about the levy system' they found, to their dismay, that the remedy had proved worse than the disease. He maintained that the levy system had
seriously disturbed the peace and happiness of the people of the surplus areas. He also criticised the 'manner and the form' in which the levy system was given effect and wanted the government to note the disappointment and desperation of the people. He approved of the scheme but blamed the 'bad working of the Department' for these failures. Another member speaking in support of the scheme on the same day criticised the way levy was being implemented by 'irresponsible men'. He sadly concluded that the levy system had made the cultivators 'lose their hearts'.

By the beginning of 1950 the voice of opposition within the government party grew louder against the system and continued till the end of the First Assembly. The contents of the complaints can be summed up in the following:

I. Harrassment of the producers.

II. The principle of fixing levy was unfair, since it was not determined on the actual produce. Peasants were levied on an 'extraordinarily excessive' basis.

III. The system of review was short of the barest rights of the citizens. One had to pay money and 1/8 of the levied produce to qualify to appeal for review.

IV. The producers had to sell their land to meet the levy in several districts.

V. Procurement was uneconomic. Lots of money and men were involved to procure a small amount of paddy and rice. (Kushtia was a case in point).

VI. Inspite of repeated assurances by the Prime Minister nothing had been done for the sufferers.
By March 1953, in the opinion of some Muslim members, the procurement policy of the government had 'completely shattered' the economy of the common people. The elected representative of Khulna alleged that levy demand and loan collection notices had been served on the peasants in some places when Khulna had been going through a famine. In fact, by 1953 some of the districts considered to be surplus turned into deficit areas. Elected representatives demanded the withdrawal of those districts from levy demand.

Indeed allegations against the procurement policy of the government were launched right from the beginning of the First Assembly. Owing to its specific composition, opposition within the Assembly to the policy was far less representative than that which was actually occurring across the province. On 30 March 1949 one member of the Opposition informed the House that the compulsory levy of foodgrains had already created an agitation and the agitation was gaining strength and momentum.

As early as September 1947, A K Fazlul Huq issued a statement from Calcutta demanding the abolition of various types of control. In a leaflet published in January 1948 Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Naimuddin Ahmed asked the cabinet about the outcome of the 'seized paddy' and questioned the justification of the price that was offered to the producers of the surplus districts. Muslim League members outside the Legislative Assembly were definitely more vocal against the levy system than those inside. In a Memorandum to the Central Minister for Food and Public Health on 13 May 1949 the Muslim League leadership of Sylhet urged the Minister to stop paddy from being levied. The Provincial Muslim League in its meetings of the Working Committee held at Dhaka from 16 May to 18 May 1949 recorded in its resolution the complaints of the people about 'injustice, hardship and harrassment to which the innocent agriculturists have been subjected'. The 'unscrupulous execution of the Levy scheme' was held responsible for the above complaints. It was not only important Muslim League leaders and activists located outside the Legislature who made statements
against the levy scheme: Maulana Bhashani was prominent among those who criticised the food policy of the government in the Muslim League Worker's Conference which was held at Dhaka on 23 June 1949.59

In two different meetings held in January and November of 1952 the Hatiya-Ramgati Islands' Association expressed great concern over the government's procurement policy as it was in operation in the Islands. Those meetings condemned 'the high handed manner' in which the policy was being implemented. In a 'memorandum sent to the Chief Secretary of the Government of East Bengal regarding the needs and wants of the people of Hatiya-Ramgati Islands' frustration about the inaction of the government to the 'excesses perpetrated on the producers' was expressed. According to the opinion of the general body of the association:

The officers deputed to put the scheme into operation behave themselves as monarchs and uncrowned Kings of the Islands and are not only guilty of excess but also corruption of the worst sort. In assessing levy they take no rational view.60 Such a complaint was not unique for the Islands. An official commented, 'most of the problems [as instanced in the memorandum] are common to all rural areas.61

Surplus producers' resistance to procurement was not confined to the organised world of the Legislative Assembly and political parties alone. At individual levels they resorted to various other strategies to avoid levy or at least to minimise the severity of its impact. One important strategy was individual evasion. It was a practice that originated from the individualistic world of the peasantry. To the peasant of East Bengal conspicuously absent from the organised world of politics evasion was a safer tactic which minimised the risk for an individual producer in dealing with an aggressive state.

Evasion was perceived by the ruling elite as apathy to the national interest. Historians have remarked on this aspect of peasant behaviour in Pakistan. Vorys observed that to the vast majority of the population 'national interest' was rather hazy and a remote concept; certainly
a willingness to subordinate personal and parochial advantages to 'national interest' was rare. To one of the early observers of state and nation building in East Pakistan:

it was not poverty alone that made the task of the Provincial Government almost impossible, the mildness of any sense of national pride amongst the people was the greatest cause for the lack of public co-operation with the government.

To elicit sacrifice for nation-building as envisaged by the ruling elite the examples of wartime sacrifice of the citizens of England and America were glorified: 'there is consciousness in those places where as in our country there is none.' Consciousness stood for willing sacrifice in the interest of the nation. Nationalism took its pedagogic form as the state encountered resistance in its efforts to procure food grain. Members of the ruling elite suggested more nationalistic propaganda in the districts so that the people might become conscious and nation-minded.

The producers nonetheless continued to evade. The Prime Minister took note of this in his speech when he acknowledged that large producers were evading the levy. He further maintained that many of the initial statements filed by the 'would be assessees' were 'shamelessly untruthful'. To the official perception, these producers became 'selfish and did not at all feel for their neighbours;' that was why they failed to make the necessary sacrifice for their brethren in deficit districts. Thus the language of politics used by the state was that of a moral community. Describing the offending surplus producers as 'shameless' was to appeal to an assumed moral tie between the state, the surplus producers and the 'people'. Quite often this moral tie was projected by the ruling elite in state power as the basis of Pakistan - a Muslim brotherhood, a state for the Muslims.

The evasion on the part of certain classes of Jotedars who enjoyed the favour and indulgence of the procuring authority (as complained by the MLAs) not only jeopardised the scheme but revealed the networks of class relations that existed in the then East Pakistan society. The relationship between the implementing authority of the state and the surplus
producers emerged distinctly when the state went for forced levy. The contradictions that emerged left their mark on the nature of East Bengal politics. Before developing this argument, however, a couple of points need to be raised.

One method of evasion was to resort to corruption: bribing the procurement officials. From a study of some Narail villages in Jessore district we know that Rs 500 was collected from the surplus producers of the union to bribe the Levy officers. Thus in the first year 'no one in the Union was declared a surplus farmer and hence nobody had to sell paddy to the government'.

Secondly, in many areas the surplus producers took the initiative to vent their grievances through memoranda and petitions to the higher officials of the state. The Prime Minister admitted that 'there were numerous appeals against assessment'. In a Memorandum, the surplus producers of Atrai and Bagmara police stations of Rajshahi prayed to the Governor General for relief of levy after failing to get any response from different levels of authority in the province. The Memorandum endorsed a popular tract entitled 'Propagation of Truth'. This detailed in the vernacular the sufferings of the peasants in the area after political independence. It also accused the officials of being high handed and begged to be spared of their depredations.

But these forms of protests and actions seldom yielded results. In the words of the Prime Minister 'there is some justification for the indignation manifested when a non-bailable warrant of arrest is issued against an assessee who defaults in surrendering the levy demand and he is liable to be handcuffed and carried away to a court.' The procurement officers - perhaps spurred on by greed and in alliance with the police - used brute force on the producers. Protest and bitter resentment of such actions at times took the form of general strikes. In one such incident of excess by officials, about 5000 people of Kahaloo, a rural
police station of Bogra, gathered at the district headquarters on 15 May 1949 to demonstrate against the alleged zulum of the ARCP Staff.

The anger and frustration of the producers of foodgrains sometimes found expression in acts of violence. According to a Pakistan Observer report of 20 May 1949, the ARCP Patrol Staff looking for ‘surplus’ rice and paddy were mercilessly beaten up in a village within the Nandigram police station of Bogra. Of another incident, the Ananda Bazar Patrika reported on 14 February, 1949:

The conflicts that took place between the government and the peasants in some villages of Lengura Union of Durgapur Police Station ... had led to the killing of more than hundred peasants ... They refused to accept the levy imposed by the government on them and offered armed resistance.

In a press note issued on 16 February 1949, the government denied these allegations that were contained in a number of news items published in the Calcutta Dailies, the Ananda Bazar Patrika and the Hindustan Standard, which carried descriptions of the atrocities committed by the police and other functionaries of the government on the local population for the latter’s refusal to comply with the levy order. However, the press note admitted that the local people organised a number of meetings and processions to protest against the procurement policy of the government. A popular slogan said: ‘we will give our lives but not our rice.’ The Azad also published news items in the first half of February of the same year describing the conflicts that occurred between the government forces and the local producers on the issue of procurement of food grains. Moni Singh in his Jiban Sangram mentioned an incident that took place in Susang Durgapur police station of Mymensingh district towards the end of January 1949, where peasant volunteers seized the levied paddy which was forcibly taken away by the employees of the government. In his survey of peasant movements of the period Pramatha Gupta also mentions how for every day from the 3rd
week of January of the same year the paddy claimed by the government was seized by peasants in Goragao, Gouripur, Kalikapur, Gopalpur, and many other villages of Susang Durgapur police Station. Similar events also took place in Sherpur police Station. There were as well instances of more organised resistance against the food procurement policy of the government, which the government described as localised and more violent because of the supposed presence of the Communists in such peasant action.

V

The memorandum which contained instructions as to how compulsory levy scheme had to be implemented had the following directive to the District Magistrates:

You are requested to give wide publicity to the scheme, its aims and objects and the manner in which it will be worked. As far as possible non-official support should be enlisted and the co-operation of the political parties should be sought.

The members of the opposition complained that this directive was flagrantly flouted by the district administration. The demands of various socio-political organizations to participate or to procure and distribute food grains had been recurrent since independence. For many, political independence was synonymous with the right to participate in nation-building activities. Bureaucratic dominance was considered to be the essence of the colonial policy and hence viewed as a fact of the past. Right on the day of independence the Communist Party of India in an open letter offered its willingness to participate in activities relating to food procurement and distribution. Local leaders of both the Muslim League and the Congress felt frustrated at having been left out of these activities. They blamed the officials for keeping them out. A woman member of the opposition alleged that the government did not place any confidence in the people despite suggestions from various quarters.

As early as October 1947, when the District Magistrate of Khulna launched food procurement drive with the help of police - instead of forming an All Party Food Advisory Committee, as had
been desired by the government-the Azad carried a report about the 'resentment' of the people of Dumuria felt 'because of the procedure adopted by the District Magistrate for procurement of the food grains' \(^77\) One member of the opposition from Khulna pointed that whereas at least 30 thousand Maunds of rice could have been easily procured by the effort of the Congress and the Muslim League leaders along with the help of the people, only 7,000 maunds of paddy had been procured.\(^78\) He ascribed the shortfall due to the 'bungling of the officers'. From a Muslim League member came stronger accusation alleging that the officers did not pay any heed to the suggestion of leading figures in the localities.\(^79\) Yet another member of the League emphasised the need for co-operation between the employers of the Civil Supplies Department and the members of the government if the procurement drive was to be a success.\(^80\)

Sometimes complaints were directed against the non-Bengali officials of the province who were inherited from the Raj and placed in the higher echelons of the bureaucracy in East Pakistan. One such complaint was:

\[
\text{it is unfortunate that in this province people, who are foreign to our habits and ideas are allowed to guide the activities of the Department [The Civil Supplies]. It is quite natural that they cannot have any sympathy for us.} \]

Monoranjan Dhar of the Congress appealed to the government party to change their attitude towards the Opposition. He said that the Opposition was no longer the same as during the Raj. Opposition was to be considered, according to him, as 'the limb of the government'. He assured the government that procurement and distribution of the foodgrains could be improved if the latter sought co-operation with others.\(^82\) Even discussion in the Assembly was disliked by the government. One minister once asked the Speaker if the 'gentlemen opposite were not responsible for pushing up the food price' simply because the member from the Opposition wanted to discuss the food problem.\(^83\)
Instead, it was laid down in the official order that where the District officers felt that the estimated yield would not be appropriate they should confer with other officers concerned in the District and make the required changes. Such conferences, the Prime Minister claimed, were held in most districts and different yields were fixed in different parts of the districts according to local conditions.\textsuperscript{84} But popular opinion about the average yield was never sought. And it was always fixed at a higher level than what would have been a locally acceptable figure. A Youth conference held about this time blamed the Government for meeting the protests and grievances of the producers with only words and no action.\textsuperscript{85}

The actual procedure that was adopted to procure food grains is described well in a report submitted by the Chief Inspector of Procurement of Rangpur to the Assistant Regional Controller of Procurement of Rangpur on 10 May 1948:

Out of 16 Unions of Kaliganj p.s. 9 unions were undertaken between 27 to 30 April, 1948. Notices were served to 51 cases for 3312 maunds of Paddy ... The Cases were mainly based on the confidential list of hoarders submitted by the Inspector-Assessor of Lalmonirhat. I gave clear instruction to all of our staff to proceed cautiously and first to persuade people to make voluntary sales to the government failing which to acquire through directive notice.\textsuperscript{86}

This ‘confidential’ nature of the proceedings, even during the phase of so called voluntary procurement, became an important source of both official power and peasants’ discontent over the way such power was used. Without popular participation of any sort, not even participation by the political parties, the procurement scheme generated resentment. The Civil Supplies Department, alleged some members of the Assembly, remained ‘inefficient and corrupt’ in the absence of any public scrutiny.\textsuperscript{87}

Indeed, warnings to hoarders and big producers, threats to media and blaming the opposition became the alternative to popular participation in the procurement of foodgrains. Occasionally the threat of ‘shoot to kill’ was used against the producers who refused to abide by the levy orders notwithstanding the periodic warning issued by the government. The
following statement of the Prime Minister succinctly sums up the attitude of the government towards any public debate over the food problem:

The more we talk about these things [food problem], the more we discuss these matters, the more the people of the deficit area will suffer ... It is not a very healthy idea to discuss these matters publicly and thus add to the already deteriorated situation in the country.  

He appealed to keep ‘food out of politics’. The government by discouraging participation by the people and discussion by the articulate sections of the public on food procurement in fact allowed the bureaucrats and ‘experts’ to take control of the situation. The inevitable outcome was a return to the colonial ways of ruling. For the bureaucrats were only too familiar with their old methods of work and felt quite comfortable with the procedures already in place.

The District Magistrate, as usual, passed the Compulsory Levy Order to the Sub-divisional officer. He in turn passed it on to the Circle officer who again passed it on to the Union Board Chairman, the last link of the bureaucracy with the local government, for assessment, information and at times helping the government machinery to work out enforcement. The Union Board Chairman was thus entrusted with the task of drawing up the list of surplus producers and one of the Thana level officials was designated as the levy officer. Some ‘officers of lower grade’ were appointed as primary surveyors to make the assessment of paddy in the primary stage without actually going to the locality concerned. Some of them, it seems, even went ‘picnicing’ in the idyllic countryside forgetting blissfully their immediate task of assessing foodgrain yields.

VI

Umar has made two points in explaining the attitude of the Congress members to the internal procurement policy of the Government: one, that most of the producers, affected by the
Procurement policy came from the zamindar, jotedar and Moneylender class, and two, that in the social structure of the then East Pakistan they were mostly Hindus.

As this chapter has already stated, many Muslim League Members were quite vocal in their protests. Questions therefore are raised by Umar's two points. Firstly, what about the jotedars of whom many were Muslims? The following table computed from the 1911 census of India gives an indication of the religious composition of the rent-receivers of Eastern Bengal excluding Sylhet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Division</th>
<th>Muslim</th>
<th>Upper Caste Hindus</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rajshahi Division</td>
<td>37.22</td>
<td>20.04</td>
<td>42.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Excluding Darjeeling)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dacca Division</td>
<td>33.44</td>
<td>38.50</td>
<td>18.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chittagong Division</td>
<td>49.13</td>
<td>30.74</td>
<td>20.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Rajat and Ratna Ray are more emphatic about the numerical superiority of the Muslim jotedars in East Bengal. They write that "the social peculiarity of East Bengal ... was that the zamindars and talukdars in the area were mostly high caste Hindus while the large jotedars under them were almost invariably Muslims of peasant stock". While it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to compute the size of the Muslims and Hindus owning land 10 acres and above, one can say from the above evidence that in the surplus districts of East Bengal, Muslims definitely constituted the majority of jotedars. In fact, Umar later makes a statement confirming the numerical superiority of the Muslim jotedars, especially in North Bengal in his
discussion on the zamindari abolition, though he does not support his observations with evidence.91

Yet another relevant point, is that the sense of deprivation of the Hindu surplus producers could not have been simply ‘economic’. What agitated them and their representatives in the EBLA was also the ‘unfair and unjust’ plunder of their food grains by the functionaries of the state in collusion with the representatives of the local government. I would also offer a significant addition to Umar’s assertion that it was not only the Hindu surplus producers who suffered from the arbitrary and authoritarian practices of the officials.

The marginally surplus Muslim producers who were in the slot of 5-10 acres and those slightly above 10 acres were also the victims of coercion. Indeed, the agitation and resistance detailed in this chapter were to a great extent due to the imposition of levy on producers who owned agricultural land below 10 acres, for example the mostly middle peasants in the coastal areas of Khulna with six to twelve acres of land at the average. They were spread all over Rampal, Shyamnagar, Dakope, and Paikgacha police stations in southeast Khulna.92

If we look at the earlier Table 3.3 we will see that the families owning agricultural land between 5-10 acres formed big proportions of the producers in the surplus districts. There was an overriding temptation of the implementing authority to outrage that boundary. This has been amply testified by many who protested. A Congress Member from Barisal complained that ‘innumerable people’ who were in possession of far less than ten acres of paddy growing lands and even whose total quantity of lands were ‘far below’ ten acres had been assessed for the levy.93 Similar complaints came from a number of police stations in Jessore district early as September 1948. A report in Naya Duniya quoted an Inspector saying that they need not abide by the land ceiling to seize paddy.94 The people of Kahaloo in Bogra, alleged categorically that there were cases in which the poorest cultivators including
day labourers and helpless widows were levied when they met with the Minister and civil administrators in the government headquarters. Azad reported that on 2 October 1949 in Dewanjang Police Station of Mymensingh district 16 villagers were levied without any investigation. Many among them owned hardly 5 to 7 bighas of Aman producing land. Some of them didn’t even have the ploughs. In November 1949, some Muslim League members from surplus areas started complaining that producers possessing less than ten acres of land had been prosecuted.

The local Muslim League leaders in Sylhet urged the Central Minister to stop poor man’s paddy from being levied. Maulana Abdul Hai, a Muslim League MLA made a sharper accusation when he alleged that producers who did not have more than 10 acres of land had been levied whereas producers in some cases having 15 to 20 acres of land were spared. Organisations like the Democratic Youth League harped on this particular way in which the implementation of levy policy affected the small producers. At a conference of the Youth League in September 1948 it was alleged that the government was seizing food grains from ordinary producers while sparing the big jotedars and hoarders. Maulana Bhashani complained in June 1949 that there was proof that big jotedars and talukdars had reduced the amount of levy on their produce by using their personal influence. He claimed that he knew of a Parliamentary Secretary who had one thousand and sixty bighas of land but he was levied only fifty maunds of paddy. He further alleged that a Muslim League MLA who owned 500 acres of land was not levied more that 25 maunds of paddy. A Congress MLA complained that those who have thousands of bighas of lands were not levied. Similar complaints were made by Muslim League MLAs from Netrokona and Rangpur. The MLA from Netrokona blamed the Civil Supplies Officials for not assessing some, underassessing many and overassessing others. He contended that the ‘misery of the persons who were not fit to be assessed’ knew no bounds. Maulana Bhashani alleged, among many other things, ‘favouritism’ in implementing the levy scheme.
What appeared as favouritism to the Maulana was indeed the manifestation of the alliance between the jotedars, hoarders and the functionaries of the state that strengthened during the war and famine years and continued to grow only stronger with the change in the communal composition of the alliance. Due to the political defeat of the Hindus in East Bengal the Muslim jotedars were a rising force in the politics of the nation. Additionally, a huge number of Hindu Civil Servants had left the country immediately after independence in August 1947. As a result there was a significant depletion of Hindu personnel in the bureaucracy which left the Hindu surplus producers without administrative and bureaucratic protection.

More significantly, Department of Civil Supplies was manned almost wholly by the Muslim recruits closely related to the Muslim political elite through kinship and various other primordial ties. The number of Hindu personnel in Civil Supplies, manned by 10,962 persons in February 1950, was simply insignificant: the total number of Hindu Gazetted officers in the province was only 94.105 The Hindu Members in the Assembly brought allegations against such manner of recruitment.106

The Minister for Civil Supplies and some Muslim League members defended charges of corruption against these officers. This, in effect, indulged and supported the corrupt activities of these officers. The language they used in doing so was interesting for the familial idiom it used. One of them even asserted on the floor of the Assembly that the Civil Supply officers were their ‘own sons’. The Minister himself defended the officers of the department dismissing the allegations of corruption brought against them as ‘Mamull’ (insignificant) and emphatically told the Assembly that the officers, against whom charges of corruption were made, were ‘their sons, relatives, and neighbours’.107 But the Prime Mininster went a step further in the defence of the Civil Supplies officials. He blamed the Hindu Members of the Opposition for the failure of procurement and according to him the programme suffered not due to the corruption of the department but because of the ill-advised encouragement that was held out by some of the responsible members of the Opposition to the producers.108
The other unofficial personnel involved in the governmental activities of procurement of foodgrains were the Union Board Chairmen. The Hindus and small Muslim producers did not get a fair deal from them either. These Chairmen in the Surplus districts were mostly Muslims and surplus peasants, in fact big jotedars, who held land between 30 to 300 acres, at least in Dinajpur. The Survey and Settlement Report of Dinajpur mentioned that the jotedars mostly Muslims, were so powerful in Dinajpur that they captured more than 70 per cent of the memberships and 60 per cent of the Presidentships of the Union Boards. Hashmi also has reasserted the view that the Union Board executives were mostly well-to-do peasants or petty landlords.

The jotedars were more powerful as a class in Dinajpur, Rangpur, Bogra and in parts of Northern Mymensingh, and in Khulna and Bakarganj, all surplus districts where the procurement programme was in operation. By the nature of election to local bodies it was the jotedars who could come to these offices. It is interesting to point out that long after this period such a factor was noted in the First Five Year Plan document of Bangladesh. It acknowledged that 'locally elected bodies were never truly representative because the richer and influential classes managed to win the elections.' The election system failed to recognise the authoritarian nature of traditional power structure and no provision was made to protect the interests of the politically weak, depressed and exploited class of people.

Indeed 'it was unthinkable for a man of lower strata to contest the membership of the Union Board', writes Islam, discussing the political history of Badarpur, 'before 1947 ... [a Muslim Talukdar] was to be a nominee of the [Hindu] Zamindar; after 1947 he became the "nominating authority" replacing the Zamindar'. He in fact took over the leadership as an 'automatic and natural transformation'. This was not unique to Badarpur only. It happened all over East Bengal. Indeed the Union Board Chairmen were capable of
generating ‘fear and favour’ among the rural populace, a tradition that was fully in evidence in the procurement operations of the government.116

One Congress member alleged that the officers made assessment mainly in consultation with the local presidents of Union Boards without going to the locality concerned and without making proper enquiries.117 Siddiqui, in his study from Narail villages of Jessore, corroborates that the Union Board Chairman was entrusted with the task of drawing up the lists of surplus producers, and one of the thana-level officials was designated as the Levy officer whenever the government decided to go in for compulsory paddy procurement.118 In his report from Khulna, Taha, a political activist of the time, wrote that the peasants narrated their sufferings at the hands of money lenders, Union Board Presidents and local matbars.119 A Naobelal report alleged that a section of Procurement officials along with other agents created terror among the peasantry by their unfair and unjust activities.120 Undoubtedly most of these ‘agents’ came from the Union Board leadership of the day.

On the other hand, a President of an Union Board who happened to be a Hindu, sent the following Telegram addressed to the Chief Secretary on 4 May 1948:


This is a striking evidence of the change of communal composition of the traditional alliance in rural East Bengal after August 1947 on account of the political defeat of the Hindu zamindars, jotedars and Money lenders. The latter thus lost socio-political connection with the functionaries of the state. As a result it was they who bore the brunt of coercion. Even the complaints of coercion on the Hindu producers were dismissed by the dominant official perception of the day. The District Magistrate Rangpur wrote the following on 26 June, 1948 against a complaint of coercion against the procurement officials by the Hindu Union Board
President, that ‘this is a typical instance how the members of the minority community sometimes try to embarrass the Muslim officers and also the Majority community.’

One way to avoid or at least to minimise coercion was through bribing the Procurement officials (as we have witnessed in some Narail villages). As a result corruption assumed a form of mediation between individual and institutionalised authority, and thus the latter was reduced to a commodity obtainable at a price. A Muslim League MLA complained that in Daulatpur thana in Khulna, an Inspector of the Civil Supplies adopted a policy of excessive procurement in order to earn illegally. In a radiogram the Commissioner of Rajshahi informed the Secretary to the Governor about the corruption of procurement officials. In fact, MLAs and articulate sections of the society were quite vocal in airing their protests against the corruption of the Civil Supply officers.

Going by the number of corruption cases instituted against the officials of the Civil Supplies department one could say that bribing was frequently resorted to minimise the harshness of procurements. Till 31 July 1949 since independence 42 officials of the Civil Supplies department were convicted, 27 were dealt with departmentally and 450 and 303 cases were pending in court and with the Police respectively. As the Anti-Corruption department has never been noted for its efficiency and integrity, it would be fair to assume that many more cases of corruption simply went unreported.

In any case, the amount of levy and remission thus fixed was almost always a measure of the power of the buyer and the seller of official favour. In a society like that of East Bengal where most people were poor, official favour could be purchased by only a few. Corruption therefore assumed a class character. Thus for the Muslim small, and marginally surplus, producers, and for the Hindu surplus producers generally this escape route via bribing was unavailable, and this exposed them to larger doses of coercion. For the former, it was often their economic situation that left them vulnerable to oppression by the officials. For the Hindu
jotedars such coercion was generally due to their political isolation. For the marginally surplus and poor Hindu producers, however, it was the combination of both that made official coercion non-negotiable.

As a result, the Hindu surplus producers resorted to resource transfer, both human and material, across the border to India. Smuggling and migration were two common forms adopted for this purpose. This particular response of the Hindus reinforced the belief of the ruling elite of East Pakistan that the Hindus owed no allegiance to the new State. As a corollary to that belief, the government had no compunction about denuding the Hindus of their resources. Thus a vicious circle was formed in the relationship between the Hindus and the ruling elite in state power in East Pakistan which seriously disrupted the nation-building process.

VII

In post-independent East Pakistan surplus producers were required to sell their grain surpluses to a new state caught in a crisis of food shortage. Imposition of control in the grain market, as claimed by many in the government, was a pragmatic politico-economic strategy. But the government later admitted that the procurement scheme was not a success and blamed the selfishness of the producers and the unsympathetic attitude of some sections of the public, especially the Hindus, for the failure of the programme. Sometimes simple economic arguments, e.g., the surplus producer's unwillingness to sell their produce to the government at a price much lower than what was offered in the market, was put forward to justify the failure.126 The Government also admitted that the big producers sold their surpluses in the black market.

The Minister in charge of food came up with another interesting observation that the system of procurement that was introduced in 1943-44 famine and war years by the Raj had exposed
'all possible loopholes' in the system to the food dealers and producers. In 1945, the procurement of rice was 2,91,112 tons and it was 2,43,050 in 1946, and during the first six months of 1947 it was only 89,492 tons. The Minister admitted 'the complete break down of the system of procurement' by the middle of 1948. By the admission of the government it became clear that they failed to procure even the amount that colonial government managed to procure in its last days. This revealed the inadequacy of the support the ruling elite derived from the well-to-do peasantry in East Pakistan.

In fact, the producers interpreted independence in their own terms. What was supposed to be a sacrifice to an alien government was indeed an act of coercion to them. The producers did not want to yield to this same form of coercion when their own people assumed national leadership in their own state. To many of them freedom was the freedom of not having to bow to the dictates of the government.

On the other hand, the political elite failed to appreciate the situation that many marginally surplus producers were in. The latter did not possess any substantial reserves of resources. Many of them were not equipped to defend themselves from any man made or natural calamity. Besides, after the devastating famine of 1943, a great fear existed in the minds of the producers about unforeseen shortages. Many of them could hardly keep their head above water, especially in the context of rising prices of other essentials of peasant households like salt, clothes, compounded by the falling price of the cash crops. Thus, evasion became a rational choice for the producers.

As an economic argument it is quite important to understand the reason for evasion. The fact that the peasant felt strongly about their ownership of their own produce and presumed it to be the part of the natural order of things, needs to be considered. While the whole operation of levy was bureaucratic in nature, the producers had no participation in deciding the quantum and manner of levying. The bureaucrats quite often behaved like 'kings and
monarchs'; as a result the producers could not see justice and fairplay in the scheme. The popular tract that we have previously cited lamented the hardening attitude of the government towards the surplus peasants. Another popular song was more eloquent in pointing out the mischievousness of the government.

It is true that the big producers easily evaded this levy through their links in the system while the smaller ones suffered. As a result the response of the latter was conditioned by their familiarity with the coercive nature of the state during the Raj. They had fewer means available to them than did the big jotedars and landlords. They could not regulate the activities of the functionaries involved in procuring the food grains, protest arbitrary actions or defend themselves against brutal plundering except in isolated incidents. This lack of means at their disposal was a function of their ignorance of how institutions of the modern state worked, compounded by a lack of participation in public life. The absence of an institutional link between the leading class and the vast number of producers of food grains in the countryside in the surplus districts of the then East Pakistan is thus exposed.

The State faced two difficult tasks: first, that of eliciting maximum co-operation from the core of the 'Muslim State'- the Muslim surplus producers - and second, to coerce the minority Hindu surplus producers who figured significantly among the owners of the grain surpluses in East Bengal and were suspected of 'sabotaging' the 'Child State' by their opposition to the activities of the ruling elite in state power. But the state was also a child of a quasi-liberal colonial regime and as such it could not make overtly discriminatory laws to coerce the Hindu surplus producers. Instead, coercion was a matter of everyday practice, the working style of the bureaucracy. Such prospects were indeed feared by the Hindu leaders who occasionally cautioned the Muslim ruling elite not to make one law for the Hindus and another for the Muslims and reminded the latter that for the benefit of the state one should not think in terms of 'community', but in terms of the nation while making legislation. Nevertheless, the implementing agencies of the procurement programme discriminated between communities
and between classes, though such discrimination was illegal. Arbitrariness and coercion - the manifestations of this discriminatory practice - reigned supreme. The perceived and/or real 'threat' of 'sabotage' from inside and outside the country was played up, and perhaps it did exist, given a mighty neighbour - an embodiment of national power which was seen as antithetical to the cause of Pakistan. As one goes through the story of nation-building in East Pakistan, one can not but realise how stories of external threat (or from Hindu nationalism) were regularly and efficiently retailed to ensure the unity of the country. In fact, the threat was one 'essential' that the government could always supply, no matter how scarce other essentials! But the compulsory levy also produced an unintended result. According to a Congress member it showed 'one great thing'; 'it brought home to every Hindu and Muslim producer of the countryside, particularly, the unreality of the communal question'.

The Compulsory Levy of Food Grain Order, as it was implemented, divided the big and the small producers. However, this fostered the emergence of a new unity amongst small producers along class lines cutting across communal divisions in the countryside of East Bengal. This process later crystallized into the formation of the Awami League, a new political party, aiming to represent the interests of the small producers in the countryside. The big jotedars on the other hand who protected themselves from the compulsory levy and were made rich through the protection of the implementing officials and by the party in power, found to their dismay - in March 1954, when the first general elections were held - that their party, the Muslim League, now stood on a much narrower base of support.
NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 Umar recognised the difference between the famine in 1943 and that which occurred in 1948-49 in East Bengal. But he did not want to minimise the crises in the lives of the people caused by the latter. See *Bhasha Andolon*, Vol ii, p.15.

2 Eastern Pakistan, p.15.


5 Pedro Cavalcanti and Paul Piccone (eds), *History, Philosophy and Culture in the Young Gramsci*, Saint Louis 1975, p.79.


7 The Honourable Prime Minister Mr. Nurul Amin’s Speech in the Assembly. See EBLA, progs, Vol.3, No.3, p.296.

8 See EBLA, progs., Vol.3, No.3.

9 ibid, p.190.


11 *Pakistan Observer*, 21 May, 1949, Dacca.

12 Diary, entry on 31 October, 1949, Umar(ed.), *Dalil*.


14 Prime Minister’s Speech, EBLA, progs, Vol. 3, No. 3, p.296.

15 EBLA, progs. Vol. 9, No. 1, p.61.


17 The speech of the Finance Minister of Pakistan, from Umar (ed.) *Dalil*, p.155.

18 ibid, p.154.

19 EBLA Progs., Vol.10, No.1.

20 Diary, entry on 29 February 1952. Umar(ed.) *Dalil*.


22 Eastern Pakistan, p.16.

23 See *Azad*, 30 October, Editorial and numbers on 4 and 6 October.

24 Eastern Pakistan, p.17.
25 The Dacca Gazette, Extraordinary, 19 September, 1948, Dacca from now on, Gazette.
26 Gazette.
27 Instructions, Form A, Gazette, p.3.
28 EBLA, Progs on April, 1949.
29 Eastern Pakistan, p.17.
30 Gazette, p.2.
31 EBLA, progs, Vol. 10, No.1, p.482.
34 See section on food debate in the EBLA Progs, Vol.3, No. 3.
36 ibid, p.315.
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39 ibid, p.307.
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41 Naya Duniya 26 September, 1948, Calcutta.
43 Home Police, B-Progs, July 1948, Nos. 2077-80.
44 All through the career of the First Assembly the Hindu members were sensitive to policies of the East Pakistan government. See Kabir's Minority Politics.
46 ibid, p.334.
50 See Nazma Chowdhury, The Legislative Process; also Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Naimuddin Ahmed, Durbhaga Jana Sadharan, p.9.
51 EBLA, progs., Vol.11, No.2 p.354.
54 EBLA, progs., Vol.4, No.7, pp.80-81, p.129.
56 Azad, 10 October 1947.
58 Pakistan Observer, 20 May 1949, Dacca.
59 Ittehad, 26 June, 1949, Calcutta.
60 Memorandum of the Hatia-Ramgati Island's Association, Home Political B-Progs., July 1954, No. 308.
61 ibid.
63 Mohamad Ahmed, My chief, p.15.
64 EBLA, progs., Vol.3, No.3, p.347.
65 ibid, p.131.
68 The applicants sent memoranda on 18-12-52 to the District Magistrate Rajshahi, to the Minister of the Central Government, to the Revenue Minister and to the Governor of the Province.
69 Khademul Islam Mohamad Mafijuddin Sarker, Satya Prachar, Rajshahi, n.d.
71 Pakistan Observer, 20 May, 1949, Dhaka.
72 Moni Singh, Sangram, p.111.
73 Pramatha Gupta, Adibashi. p.93.
75 See Umar, Bhasha Andolon, Vol.2.
77 Azad, 1 October 1947.
78 Umar, Bhasha Andolon, p.38.
79 EBLA, progs., Vol.3, No.3, p.239.
80 ibid, p.222.
82 ibid.
84 ibid, p.229.
85 Umar(ed.), Dalil, p.56.
88 ibid, p.355.
89 ibid, See discussion on Food Debate.
92 Khulna Survey and Settlement Report, p.71.
94 Naya Duniya, 26 September 1948, Calcutta.
97 EBLA, progs., Vol.4, No.3, pp 5-6.
100 Umar(ed.), Dalil.
101 Ittehad, 26 June, 1949.
102 EBLA, progs., Vol.3, No.3.
103 ibid, pp.238-9.
104 Ittehad, 26 June, 1949.
105 EBLA, progs., Vol.4, No.7, p.287, p.86.
107 Ibid, pp.245-246.
108 ibid, p.355.
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CHAPTER 4

DEARTH, POLITICS, AND POPULAR RESPONSE

I

In the previous chapter I have highlighted the politics of procurement by the government of food grains from the surplus producers in the context of a growing food crisis. In this chapter I propose to examine what may be termed 'the politics of dearth' i.e. the problems that attended the question of distribution of foodgrains and the politics that marked the response of the poorer sections to the situation of chronic food shortage.

In early 1949 the situation with regard to food supply was described as 'alarming' by an opposition MLA in an open letter to a Central Minister of Pakistan. Members of the Legislative Assembly frequently used phrases like 'great calamity', 'desperate', 'disaster', 'grave' in describing the food situation in the province. The food problem was named 'the problem of all problems' by the leader of the Opposition in the EBLA in 1949. In their own documents the government admitted to having a 'crisis' on their hands. Indeed, it was a crisis that not only tested social relations in the country but was also to influence the course of East Pakistan politics.

I will argue in this chapter that the authoritarian nature of the initiatives taken by the ruling group in the sphere of distribution of foodgrains did much to diminish the euphoria that many of the poor had earlier displayed over political independence. I shall further argue that the poor, by their response to the food crisis, contributed significantly to the erosion of the political power of the Muslim League in East Pakistan.
II

The dearth that existed in East Pakistan in the early years was due more to price factors than to, say, substantial loss of crop on account of natural calamities, which did affect some areas. In Atrai and Bagmara police stations and in the lower regions of Rajshahi, for example, a chronic famine prevailed on account of continuous crop failures due to the flooding of the grain fields. But it is clear from the complaints made by the articulate sections of the society and from occasional admissions by the government that the human agency was the main factor in pushing prices beyond the reach of the ordinary buyers. Often, however, a different picture was painted in pro-government writings. The Azad editorial on 2 October 1947 blamed only natural disasters for food shortage and spared the government. The sentiment was echoed in Sobhan's observation that 'the problem is for some escape from the vagaries and ravages of nature... the perennial problem posed by too much and too little water at the wrong time. To this is added the intermittent catastrophes which come with a major flood, cyclone or tidal wave in the coastal regions.' The official explanation often made natural disasters look 'given and uncontrollable'. In official perception famine was one episode in a recurring cycle of natural disasters.

However, the role of natural disasters can be easily exaggerated. According to estimations made by Keith Griffin for a much later period, cyclical instability in food supplies owing to natural disasters was of the order of only 6.5 per cent for Bangladesh in the 1970s. A similar figure is most likely to have been applicable to East Pakistan also in its early years. One may not agree completely with the Krishak Sabha's description of the situation as one of 'famine in spite of abundance'; but it is difficult to overlook the large contribution that communal strife, administrative mismanagement, and the authoritarian approach of the government and the ruling party must have made to the price-induced famine that existed in East Pakistan during the rule of the Muslim League. To the people of Hajiganj in Comilla district, the famine appeared distinctly man-made,
'caused', they said, 'by the spreading corruption among a number of businessmen, government officials and the public'. During the run-up to the first general election held in March 1954, the Awami League blamed the Muslim League for creating an ‘artificial famine’ in the country. This was seen as one among the many misdeeds of the Muslim League government in East Pakistan.

But for a long time, the issue, to the official mind, was whether or not there was a famine in East Pakistan and it was never resolved even though a lot of heated debate was generated within and outside the Provincial Assembly. On 15 August 1947 the Bengal Provincial Krishak Sabha maintained in an open letter to the government of East Pakistan that ‘real famine has broken out’ over large areas of East Bengal. Almost a year later on 15 July 1948 the leaders of Sylhet Muslim League admitted in a statement that a famine existed in the district. In March 1949, a Muslim League MLA reported serious scarcity of food in the district of Kushtia and in Kishoreganj subdivision of Mymensingh district. In these areas, according to him, only one family out of hundred could afford two meals a day, about half of them lived on only one meal a day and the rest survived on the charity of others. Another MLA reported that a famine prevailed in the police stations of Bagmara, Mohanpur, Manda, Atrai, Singra, and Baraigram in the district of Rajshahi. Abdus Shahid in his Kara Smriti mentions a severe food shortage leading to a famine affecting Khulna district between 1948 and 1949. The food situation in this period was the subject of a passionate speech by a Muslim League MLA who reminded the Assembly of the ‘thousands of our country men [who] were starving and falling easy victims to death and pestilence’. The situation did not improve much after 1949. After a brief respite in 1950, Barisal and Khulna suffered a bad famine from 1951 to 1953 as a result of which twenty thousand people died in Khulna alone. On 27 April 1951, Yugantar reported severe food crisis also in Hatiya in Noakhali district.

In October 1952, Dhirendra Nath Datta, the Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the EBLA, informed the House that almost sixty per cent of the people were going without food in Chittagong and Dhaka divisions. Barisal was also reported to be in a state of severe
crisis with more than half of the population starving in Gourmadi and Mehendiganj areas. In the latter half of 1952 Ananda Bazar Patrika reported that a famine prevailed in Beanibazar and Zakiganj police stations of Sylhet. By the turn of the year, in the words of Kamruddin Ahmed, the country was in a ‘terrible state’ in so far as the food situation was concerned. Reports of ‘famine sales’ and consumption of ‘famine food’ by affected people featured prominently in the media and in the speeches of the members of the Assembly.

But the government insisted that there was no famine in any part of the country. At times members of the Assembly belonging to both the parties demanded that the government declare the deficit areas as famine-affected, but to no avail. To the government, famine remained a ‘dangerous word’ as it always had been throughout the career of the Raj. Not only the word, even the publication of food prices in the media brought harsh reactions from the authorities. Press notes were issued frequently to warn the media and ‘anti-social’ people not to exaggerate price figures of food items. The government imputed ulterior motives to the authors of these reports. ‘Some of these reports appear to have been motivated by the desire to create panic and alarm’, said a typical press note issued by the government. To the authorities, any reporting of death by starvation only showed ‘a lack of care for public welfare’ on the part of the reporter.

As popular discussions tended to exaggerate anyway, the government had very few means with which to combat the situation. They blamed all exaggeration on the cunning efforts of the hoarders, smugglers, and black marketeers to profit from the situation. But shortage was a real problem and once price rose, the government, unable to control the latter, could only struggle with its image of inefficiency and corruption that was being created in the public mind by the circulation of anti-government rumours and criticism.

Members of the Assembly failed to understand why areas badly hit by dearth were not declared as ‘famine affected’. One of them thought this to be ‘a colonial legacy’: the government was avoiding responsibility by taking shelter under the definition of famine as
enshrined by the Raj in the Famine Code.28 One Muslim League member even asked if it was to avoid giving relief to the affected areas that the government avoided declaring deficit areas as famine affected.29 In reply the Minister said that ‘famine implied many things’. ‘There were different stages, the first stage was distress, the second stage was scarcity, and the third stage was famine’.30 In a country where the lives of the poor were threatened as much by the vagaries of nature as by the machinations of greedy profiteers and whims of officials, any action that depended on this elusive definition of ‘famine’ invariably turned out to be a cruel joke on them. In fact, we could agree with Arnold that ‘famine was inherent in the nature of peasant society’. For peasants as a rule did not possess any substantial reserve or resources... a flood, a drought or a blight or a war might explain the immediate cause of a famine but the underlying reason lay deep in the social, economic and political subordination of the peasant66ry’.31 This aspect of peasant existence in East Bangal was expressed eloquently by Adhikary, a Congress Member of the EBLA:

Starvation with the whole family has become an everyday affair and they [the poor] slowly and silently die due to the effect of the starvation though not due to the starvation itself... Famine has become chronic in this province since 1943 and the people have become so much used to starvation that they accept the famine condition as normal.32

Whether the people accepted the famine condition as normal or not, the fact remained that areas that suffered from scarcity of foodgrains were not declared ‘famine-affected’. This attitude of the government was not only dependent on caution but originated mainly from a sense of paranoia from which the national government suffered continually.33 On 8 September 1948 in a speech at Atrai in Rajshahi, Mafizuddin Ahmed, the Minister in charge of food was reported to have said that ‘those who propagated that the country was facing a crisis like that of 1943 were trying to dampen the morale of the Pakistanis and they were the enemies of the state’.34 Thus the new nationalist government found it difficult to acknowledge honestly their own unpreparedness in handling the first crisis they faced immediately after assuming power from the Raj.
As early as 1 October 1947 the Government decided to retain control and tighten to the maximum the cordon lines around the perimeter of East Pakistan in order to procure foodgrains from the surplus districts. The intention was to facilitate easy flow of foodgrains within the same district as well as from one district to another so that scarcity in the rural areas of deficit districts could be eased. The Government took this action in order to depress prices of foodgrains in deficit areas by regulating and controlling supply from the surplus districts. This measure by itself failed to achieve the goal of price control for various reasons. However, the Government experimented with the cordon system without much success before it was finally withdrawn in October 1949.

But the Government’s most important commitment was to keep the urban population supplied with cereals. At the time of partition the towns of Dhaka, Narayanganj, Comilla and Chittagong were under a rationing scheme. On 7 March 1949, the towns of Brahmanbaria, Chandpur, Madaripur, Kushtia, and Sirajganj were brought under statutory rationing and again on 4 April of the same year Faridpur, Pabna, and Tangail towns were added to the rationing programme. Noakhali, Rajbari, and Saidpur towns were soon to follow, bringing the number to 15 towns in the province, and covering a population of 14 lakhs.

Besides the statutory rationed areas the Government had statutory commitments in regard to roughly six lakhs of labour to whom cereals were supplied through their employers. Non-statutory commitments, known as priorities, were gaols, hospitals, and the essential services including local bodies. A population of about five lakhs was to be catered for in the latter category. Altogether these 25 lakhs of people were the first beneficiaries of government food distribution scheme through controlled marketing. In April 1949 the government proposed to bring an additional 35 lakhs people under the
modified rationing in all deficit districts thus bringing the total to 60 lakhs for 'a reasonable supply of cereals' among the distressed.37

Under the rationing scheme A-class ration card holders, i.e. the poorest sections in the rural areas who did not pay any tax, were to get two seers of rice for an adult and one seer for a child for the whole week. The consumer's price for rice was Rs.20 per maund and for paddy it was Rs.12-8 annas till it was raised to Rs 21-4 annas for rice and Rs.13.2 annas for paddy in 1953.38

Rationing of foodgrains was a huge task for a government which was disorganized, panicky, and inexperienced in a country which miserably lacked all the necessary facilities to make such a commitment successful. East Bengal is a riverine country and the majority of movements were made by river. Not all routes, however, were navigable throughout the year. Stocks procured in the dry seasons had to be stored until the onset of the monsoon. There were again some points from which foodgrains were taken to a convenient head where trans-shipment was made into bigger boats fit for plying the big rivers like the Padma and the Meghna. For movement facility the government had only two flats, eleven barges, and several launches apart from an inadequate railway system.39

The difficulties thus were real but when these were put forward by the government as the reasons for not performing the task of food distribution, the critics of the government refused to listen. Among the articulate sections of the society, the government’s prestige suffered on account of the food situation.

Rationing, however, could not have been an adequate measure, for the very poor could not afford to buy foodgrains even at a subsidized rate; many of them would not even qualify to have access to the Scheme. They were the vagrants, the footloose section of the poor, who had drifted away from all community support structures and resources. Some of them were placed in the Destitute Homes and in other institutions of relief.
Immediately after partition of the province there were as many as 28 Central Destitute Homes, 35 Isolated Work-cum-Poor Houses and 40 temporary Orphanages in East Bengal accommodating a total of 12,000 inmates only. Apart from these there were 22 Vagrant Centres with 4000 inmates. Indeed too meagre compared to the need. For a growing number of landless people - a product of famine and post-famine economic situation - the government had the ‘East Bengal Land Colonisation Scheme’ for rehabilitation. The Scheme when implemented was expected to relieve the strain on the revenue of the province for the purpose of relief. A satisfactory repercussion on the food situation was also expected from the scheme. Although the government refused to accept the situation in East Bengal as famine affected, it adopted a number of measures to ease the severity of conditions arising out of the scarcity of food. Money was annually sanctioned under the Relief and Rehabilitation Head in the Budgets. Agricultural Loans, Test Reliefs and Gratuitous Relief. The latter was given in the form of doles in cash or kind, sale of foodgrains at concessional rates of prices or their free distribution and free house-building grants, all these measures introduced and developed by the Raj were adopted by the national government to face the situation created by food shortage in the province. But these measures evoked a storm of criticism both on account of principle and practice which contributed in a large measure to the growing unpopularity of the government and the ruling party.

IV

Even today in Bangladesh social statistics are not dependable; they were far less so in the late 40’s and early 50’s. Notwithstanding this difficulty the food policy of the government centered around a controversy over the degree of food shortage. A Congress MLA claimed that he had calculated it on the basis of Agricultural Statistics and as a result the story of deficit appeared to him quite strange. Monoranjan Dhar, another Congress member, exposed, through the contradictory statements made by responsible
members of the government, the whole myth of food shortage and refused to accept the justification of such 'a rigorous experiment' in the food sector by the government. He pointed out that the Civil Supply Secretary had said that the deficit was of one lakh ton, where as the government had announced a deficit of two lakh tons six months earlier, while in the recent past N M Khan, Director of Civil supplies, and the Prime Minister had given differing assessments of the food deficit. This erratic behaviour, according to him, was largely responsible for the lack of confidence in the government by the people. Monoranjan Dhar relied on the data produced by the different agencies of the Raj - the Land Revenue Commission, the Rent Enquiry Committee, the Famine Enquiry Committee, the Paddy and Rice Enquiry Committee, Settlement Reports, Collectors' Reports, Crop Cutting Experts' Reports - to calculate actual annual produce of foodgrains in the province. Maulana Bhashani also blamed the government for retailing the story of East Bengal being chronically deficit in food production. This to him, was a myth the Raj had produced to avoid responsibility for the famine of 1943. He bitterly criticized the periodic statements made by responsible members of the government retailing anomalous statistics of food deficit in the province.  

But two decades after political independence, Sobhan published a sceptical note on the official statistics for Rice Output in East Pakistan where he wrote 'Unfortunately their [Directorate of Agriculture of Government of East Bengal] method of gathering statistics remains decidedly primitive. They rely on visual estimates of the crop... This implies a visual estimate of the acreage which is multiplied by the officer's subjective estimate of the annual yield per acre, to give the production for the area under his jurisdiction'. He raised an important question: 'What is left undecided is how these figures came to be used at all and whether they were used for their political value'. Figures do assume political value and they definitely did so in the early years of nation building in East Pakistan. The statistics of deficit helped the government justify a rigorous levy of foodgrains for distribution among the distressed affected by shortage.
In fact, even within the ruling circles, opinions were sharply divided on the question of food policy. On 30 March 1949, the Minister in charge of Civil Supplies asserted that 'when there is shortage of food... there must be control. There must be rationing; otherwise the poor will die; none can save them'.49 But this solution was not uncritically accepted by the Chairman in the Muslim League Workers' Conference held in Dhaka on 23 and 24 June 1949. He approved of the control in food marketing in the context of the rapacious behaviour of the hoarders and black marketeers but he compared the policy to that of putting the cart before the horse when procurement was carried out before land had been nationalised.50 Tajuddin Ahmed also disapproved of control and cordon within districts. Instead he emphasised the need to strictly police the frontier.51 The Muslim League leaders of Sylhet in a memorandum on 13 May 1949 urged the Central Minister for Food and Public Health to withdraw 'all restrictions on free movement of rice and paddy within the district.52

Some members of the Muslim League wanted withdrawal of that levy but were in favour of controlling supply of foodgrains for the sake of the poor.53 Some other members believed that that levy policy could not improve the lot of the people in the deficit areas.54 Congress members were generally opposed to the idea of controlling trade in foodgrains.55 However, control as 'a necessary evil' in terms of procurement and distribution of foodgrains had the support of most of the people responsible for decision making in the then East Pakistan government.56 Above all, control was justified on the basis of helping the dearth affected people of the province. In the perception of the ruling group anybody who was against control 'did not represent the poor people'.57

To prove the point, on 20 March 1953 the Minister for Civil supplies claimed that 64,00,000 maunds of foodgrains were distributed among the poor people of the province. He further claimed that it was meant for those who could not purchase rice from the market.58 Some members of the Assembly were quite critical about these measures of the government which was supposed to help the poor. In some cases, it was said that the condition of the distressed had worsened due to the shortsighted policy of the
Government. A Muslim League MLA complained about the situation in Kishoreganj where a constant scarcity of food prevailed due to the cordonning system. Cordonning not only aggravated the food situation in some areas, it also generated regional antagonism and bitterness. Sabur Khan, a Muslim League MLA from Khulna sounded 'a note of warning to the government' that if immediate steps were not taken to feed the deficit pockets of the surplus districts, the starving people of those places would not allow any foodgrains to be exported out of the district.  

A Congress Member complained that some deficit areas were making 'an extra profit' by growing jute and other crops. The District Magistrate of Pabna made similar observation to the touring Governor of the Province. According to the DM the jotadars were profiting in deficit areas due to the policy of the government.

Cordonning however failed to achieve the goal of keeping the price within the buying capacity of most of the purchasers. And apart from generating regional antagonism, cordonning introduced a 'most vicious system of smuggling of foodgrains from surplus areas to deficit areas'. As a Congress Member of the Assembly put it: 'with a little bit of money in one's pocket one was allowed to pass into different areas with a large quantity of the stock.' Abdul Ahad, a member from Satkhira, reported on the on-going corruption in his area due to the system of cordonning. He alleged that an active collaboration existed between the smugglers and the cordonning officers. One MLA claimed that such corruptions led to the rise of price of foodgrains. According to him the payments the food dealers had to make to the Civil Supply officials were largely responsible for price rise. This allegation was substantiated by Abdus Salam, a Muslim League MLA. He told the Assembly that some traders while smuggling rice from the surplus areas paid only Rs 10-12 per maund and after bribing the police all along the route sold the same amount at Rs 26-28.

In fact, all the different measures the government took ran into problems. Within five miles of the border regions curfew, restricting movement of the people, was imposed to stop smuggling of foodgrains across the border. But it paralysed the movement of two
lakh people from sunset to dawn within 300 sq. miles in Satkhira a border region in Khulna district. A Muslim League MLA complained that the people as a result were practically locked up in a 'narrow [suffocating] atmosphere' within the curfew area. The control shops where foodgrains were sold to ration card holders were not easily accessible. 'Thousands of people coming from a distance of about 10 miles from their homes had to wait before a control shop from morning till sunset for five seers of paddy', complained Mashiuddin Ahmed, a Muslim League MLA from Manikganj, a deficit area in Dhaka district. Sometimes rotten foodgrains were distributed through these control shops. Quite often, the government was blamed for allowing foodgrains to rot in warehouses. Given an opportunity poor people preferred to buy dearer rice from the open market. In addition, the poor and deserving often did not receive any information regarding the availability of goods from the control shops. The problems of administration were perhaps not all that different from those encountered by the Bangladesh government in the 1970s:

The dealers generally sell most of the allotted goods in blackmarket, distributing only a fraction of these among the 'deserving'... if they [the poor] do not avail themselves at the first opportunity, they are usually told that supplies are exhausted. In these activities, [of the dealers] connivance of the UP [Union Parishad] functionaries is quite explicit, and in return for this they receive a share.

Siddiqui, the author of the lines quoted above, concluded that the modified rationing system catered very little to those for whom it was introduced. A group of researchers who observed the rationing system in a number of villages in Khetlal Police Station of Bogra district, concluded:

In practice the procedures are not followed by the Union Parishad members. They use their power of recommendation as a lever for exploiting the competing poor people for a ration card. Moreover if a poor peasant does not have money to buy his ration, the dishonest traders of the village often buy rationed goods at a lower price and sell them at a higher price.'

As I have said, both these findings on the rationing system in the countryside pertain to Bangladesh in the 1970's. The situation that existed then in terms of access of the poor to governmental resources was perhaps no better or worse than in the early years after
political independence from the Raj. We can only guess in absence of any hard evidence. But the guess is not altogether without foundation. Popular spokesmen for the poor like the rural Kabial (poet) Ramesh Shil recorded the misdoings of the food dealers in one of his songs.73

Grave problems attended the distribution of relief goods to the affected people. Even the Minister complained against the apathy of his own administration. He admitted before the Assembly that he had some money for test relief which he offered to the District Magistrate, yet none of them had put forward any proposal.74 The callousness of some of the District Magistrates went so far as to cause the displeasure of the Minister. On the request of a Muslim League MLA the Minister sanctioned some money for the affected people of Khulna but the District Magistrate opposed it as he felt that there was no necessity for such relief in the area.75 This was not an exceptional case. The Secretary of Barisal District Muslim League in a letter to the District Magistrate made similar complaints. He blamed the latter for refusing to acknowledge the need for relief in Barisal.76 At times mere bureaucratic paraphernalia delayed relief operations. Help was seldom available when it was needed most. Under fire from a section of the EBLA members, the Minister, explaining procedural delay said:

When the proposal came from the District Magistrate I at once sanctioned the money, ... under the rules it has to go to the Finance Department. Because, the Finance Department examines and scrutinises and then sanctions. So naturally some delay occurs but this is unavoidable.77

Coming at a time when such delay could mean loss of lives, it is not surprising that one Member sharply expressed the impatience and blamed the 'bureaucratic tradition of the British imperialism' for all the misdoings of the Civil Supplies Department.78

Towards the end of 1949 the Muslim League Government decided to form relief committees, which signalled a minor departure from the practice of the Raj. In the rural areas the committee usually included ‘respectable people, such as Head Masters, Sub-Registrars, MLA's, Members of the District and Union Boards’.79 But these Committees
had no activities whatsoever in many areas of the province. Naobelal complained in an editorial about the inaction of the committee which was supposed to function in Sylhet. The Secretary of Barisal Muslim League had the same complaint against the District Magistrate who presided over the relief committee there.80 The Minister admitted that 'the officials were doing everything according to their whims and they were led by impulse'. And in spite of his expectation of 'fair and equitable' distribution of relief goods, things continued as before.81

In this process the officials succeeded in retaining the image of authority in matters of distribution of relief and effectively scotched the possibility, however faint, of any alternative system of authority emerging on the basis of participatory actions in the sphere of food distribution. Political leadership thus lost its initiative to the functionaries of the state; this reduced the standing of the leaders in the eyes of the people they represented. Ramesh Shil, the rural poet mentioned before, said in a poem written about this time, that he would trust the District Magistrate but not political leaders on questions to do with the availability of rice from the government appointed dealers.82 Arnold's statement (in the context of the Madras famine of 1876-8) that dearth 'brought out the ambiguity in peasant attitude to the state: the expectation of a sympathetic response conditioned by resentment at official harassment and restrictions and by a deep suspicion of the state's motives'83 applies equally well to East Bengal after 1950.

A Muslim League member of the EBLA summed up the situation of the affected thus in March 1949:

Year after year the people are facing scarcity of food, famine and starvation. We, as their representatives have been, time and again, telling them that this is an infant state and in this state of infancy it is not in a position to make adequate provision for food and clothing. So, they should stand the sufferings patiently and we told them that the next year would be a happy year... When they found that in spite of our promises for improvement, the situation was going from bad to worse, they now refuse to wait any more for better days... They want food and nothing short of food can satisfy them.84

Rhetoric apart, this statement registered a change of mood among a large number of people who could no longer be described as 'mute, dumb and distressed'. The Leader of
the Opposition told the Assembly that there had been deaths from starvation and disease in Khulna and other parts of the province. These were described as 'silent deaths'. Yet dissatisfaction was growing and was soon to result in loud and persistent protests by the poor.

V

Let us begin our analysis of peasant resistance to government policy by discussing a report of the Executive enquiry on police firing at Chanhkhoir at Rajshahi on 12 January, 1948:

On 12.1.48 at about 3.35pm the Cordon Officer noticed a fleet of 25/30 boats approaching being conveyed by a mob of 100 men... armed mainly with lathis. They and boatman were shouting slogans, Allaho-Akbar [Allah is great] etc.. He [Cordon Officer] asked them to show permit and stop boats. They did not listen. Then a battle started. Every time they tried to attack fire was opened... Altogether 102 rounds of ammunition were used... 4/5 persons died and about 20 got hurt due to firing... The mob was so excited that they did not rest by injuring those two officers, they chased the Cordon Officer and the cordon party stationed there in spite of firing by police.

The report also mentioned that on 11 January of the same year about 500 boats were forcibly taken through Chanhkhoir. They were similarly 'convoyed by armed mobs on both sides of the bank of the river'. The people involved did not listen to the orders of the cordon staff to stop. And on the same day the police resorted to firing, far away from Rajshahi, in Harighose's Khal (Canal) in Khulna as the 'smuggler's along with the villagers of the locality attacked the police force from two sides. These are instances of violations of cordon restrictions that the government imposed on the movements of food grain within the province. There are also instances of armed resistance by the peasants even immediately after Independence. On 23 September, 1947, the Subdivisional Officer, Perojpur sub-division of Barisal district wrote the following to the Additional District Magistrate:

... in the morning of the 23rd September last (1947)... Regional Controller of Procurement, Barisal moved from Matibhang in Nazirpur P.S. with his men and the
armed force in search of boats in which paddy and rice were used to be smuggled out from this area to Faridpur district in large quantities... They had sighted a large number of paddy boats... then these boats were chased. The smugglers cried for help and a large number of people arrived with various lethal weapons and threatened them (the police party). He then added that 'It is a common knowledge that Bashbaria Khal which runs along the border of Gopalganj sub-division in Faridpur district has been the main route for smuggling out paddy and rice in large quantities'.

Here is another report published by the Azad on 16 October 1947:

On 12 October the D.I.G. Enforcement branch and the Additional Superintendent of Police along with a batch of armed constables stopped 150 to 200 paddy-boats in Kalagachia near Madanganj, a little south of Narayangang. The Police authorities alleged that the boats had passed the cordoned areas illegally... Meanwhile the villagers gathered at the place and urged the police to allow the paddy-boats to go... According to the Police source the following day about three thousand people from the neighbouring villages surrounded the police force and set the boatmen free.

The boats were subsequently released and the Police did not dare open fire on the people. These instances of boats carrying foodgrains and violating cordon restrictions with the help of local villagers shocked the administration. But this was not the only form popular resistance took nor was such resistance confined only to the areas mentioned. On 9 November 1948 the Patrol Officer of Procurement in Mathupur of Shariakandi PS in Bogra district was murdered by certain ‘active smugglers’, ‘whose number’, according to the District Magistrate, was ‘very great’. The ‘tragic’ incident happened on the river Jamuna. The incidents of cordon breaking were anything but exceptional. Given the difficulties of communication, (i.e., absence of faster and adequate transport and lack of personnel) and the vast commitment of the cordonning programme, it seems highly likely that the sub-divisional officer of Peroipur in Barisal district, was correct in saying that ‘they (the cordon breakers) usually moved in hundreds of boats together to break the cordon and did it successfully almost always’. Official reports raise more than one question. Why were such large numbers of people involved in breaking the cordon restrictions? Why did the villagers come to the help of the cordon breakers? And who were the cordon breakers anyway?

Even in normal years the peasants in East Bengal did not have a full year’s employment. The number of months of unemployment and underemployment varied from region to
region. But in many areas agricultural labourers resorted to seasonal migration within the province. A large number of this migration 'followed the crop', searching for employment as harvesters. The general direction of this short distance migration was from west to east. There were a number of trajectories. An important stream moved north from Kushtia, Pabna, and Rajshahi to Rangpur another from Noakhali to Comilla and another from Faridpur via Dhaka to Mymensingh and Sylhet. There was yet another important route from north to south. Agricultural labourers from Kushtia, Jessore and Faridpur migrated to Barisal and Khulna. This was for a long time an established pattern of rural migration in East Bengal during and prior to our period of study. According to an 1876 report: 'Some of the ryots from Dacca Fureedpore (Faridpur), and the northern part of Backergunje (Barisal) move into the neighbouring districts at harvest time... In Backergunje a number of men from different parts of the district find their way into the Sunderbuns in June for purpose of rice growing. They remain till December, and then return home, either taking their paddy with them, or after disposing of it locally'.

A Congress member informed the Assembly that the Dawal, as the migrant labour during harvesting season were called, lived mostly on the banks of the rivers like the Padma and the Meghna in the district, of Dhaka, Faridpur, Comilla, Noakhali and other places. They were mostly landless labourers. Another member informed the Assembly that during the harvesting season the reapers from some areas of Dhaka, Barisal, Rajshahi and Mymensingh went out to other areas. Eight to ten people were grouped together around one boat and all shared the cost of the boat. A recent research from three Faridpur villages has shown that about 40% of the working male population of these villages migrate to other areas for employment. They travel in groups following a trajectory that appears to have been relatively stable for at least the last seventy years.

Reaping normally concluded towards the end of April each year and the Dawals from Faridpur returned home about that time. This was when agricultural activities in Faridpur picked up momentum and many reapers found employment in the preparation of the fields for the local Aush and Aman crops. In the middle of the year, however, many of
them tried once more to find employment elsewhere. In the last two months of the year the reapers migrated to rural areas of Khulna and Barisal districts to take part in Aman harvest. In January they returned to Faridpur for the next round of migration to Sylhet and Mymensingh.95 A Sainik report on 25 March 1949 mentioned that fifty percent people of Gopalganj and Madaripur sub-divisions of Faridpur were reapers. They used to procure about six-month’s food grains from Barisal and Khulna.96

According to Faraizi, Dawali was organised by a combination of Shordars, Noukawalas (boat owners) and the Dawals numbering 30-35 persons altogether in a group coming from the same village or neighbouring villages. The mode of payment, investment, and sharing the harvest used to be decided in meetings held in the villages prior to forming the group and migrating to Sylhet and Mymensingh. Although the dawals came from divergent social and economic strata of the village ranging from small landowners to landless peasants; they were all from deficit households.97

All this evidence suggests that a lot of people in deficit districts depended for their survival on the crop produced in the surplus districts. But the Government policy of cordoning was adopted without any serious consideration being given to this simple and elementary fact about the peasant economy of East Bengal.

At the East Pakistan Language Worker’s Conference held on 23 June 1949 Ataur Rahman Khan stated that the sufferings of the reapers had reached a climax.98 A Congress Member complained that in the districts of Khulna and other places when the reapers were about to leave the places of work after reaping the harvest they were stopped by government officials and ‘were denuded of their paddy’.

The officers of the government department asked the reapers to sell their paddy on the spot and to purchase it again on return to their homes at higher rates99 despite the fact that in the Levy Order there was a provision for the payment of wages in terms of paddy to the reapers who usually carried away their earnings in kind outside the district. The
other groups of people who earned their living in kind in return for their labour and services included priests and maulavis, teachers, and dealers in betel-leaf, cane, earthen wares. No provision was made to allow these people to carry their earned paddy from one place to another - usually their place of residence. Even the reapers were not allowed to carry the paddy they earned but a draft system was introduced for the delivery of the paddy to them in their own districts. The draft system one may argue, showed some consideration towards the reapers, but it only added to their sufferings at both ends of the system: once, while depositing the paddy to receive a draft and again to get back the paddy against it in their own districts. The delay, irregularity and harassment entailed in the draft system only enhanced the difficulties of the reapers.

On 1 February 1948, in an editorial Azad highlighted the sufferings of the reapers after they had accepted the coupons and gone back to their villages to receive their quota of paddy from government warehouses. A member of the EBLA complained that the draft system was very complicated and as a result about 10 to 15 thousand reapers paraded in the streets of Khulna for three weeks demanding to be relieved of the system. Another member from Khulna informed the Minister that though movement of twenty maunds of paddy in a boat was permissible in the Order, the reapers were not allowed to carry back even that much paddy without permits. He further alleged that thousands of people had been unable to obtain permits on the ground that the application forms were out of print. Understandably, then, a number of reapers confronted a Minister in Khulna in early 1949, violated section 144 of CrPC that restricted movements in the streets of Khulna, and eventually violated cordon restrictions in an organised manner. The government officials tried to stop them by seizing the paddy boats that belonged to the reapers. The dawals were also arrested in large number. Abdus Shahid remembers meeting a number of peasants in Dacca Central Jail convicted for offences relating to cordon breaking. In the Sainik report it was claimed that about three lakh maunds of paddy were seized from reapers crossing the boundary of Barisal and Khulna districts. One MLA also informed the Assembly that three to four thousand paddy boats were seized by the government officials.
The Government's efforts to keep track of these violations of cordon restrictions was simply inadequate to the task. The statistics provided by the government seriously understated the scale and frequency of violation that took place. However, one can get an idea of the magnitude of violation of cordon restrictions from the statement by a Minister who said that 4,300 reapers had gone to Khulna in the year 1949 while the amount of paddy deposited to government warehouses was only 5,623 maunds. It was then deposited by only eight hundred of them. The Minister admitted that the reapers either evaded or smuggled the paddy outside the cordoned area or sold it locally.108 Obviously, the reapers were defying the Government orders either by evasion or by organised violation.

For the reapers the situation was desperate. The paddy they used to earn by working through the harvesting period in the surplus districts not only provided food to them and their families; it also kept the local supply reasonably steady for some months. Abdus Salam, a Muslim League MLA, aptly stressed the logic of food supply from the surplus to the deficit areas thus:

Dacca, Faridpur, Tippera, and few other districts are deficit. The local production can not sustain the people for more than two to three months. They have to buy from outside sources. The people of these districts used to bring paddy and rice from the surplus districts.

He also claimed that some people used to smuggle food grains from the surplus areas and thus helped maintain the supply in the deficit areas.109 In fact, that is how the food economy worked in East Bengal. But the government intervened strongly. As a result the peasants did not accept the imposition of restrictions on their fruit of labour and on the traditional right to take their paddy to their own villages. In this struggle of the reapers, the peasants, all along the route of the transfer of foodgrains, extended their support and joined in defying the government order. They could also see that if the reapers were stopped from bringing the foodgrains to the local markets they would have to suffer. So
in spite of firing' by the Police, according to a MLA, 'nothing happened': violation of cordon restrictions continued.\textsuperscript{110} And this explains the perplexity of the Sub-divisional Officer of Perojpur who observed the response of the villagers along the route of smuggling of foodgrains. in keeping with the tradition of his colonial training he described the peasants as if they were by nature 'desperate' and 'dangerous'.

The cordon restriction was, however, withdrawn in October 1949 as a result of a determined struggle of the reapers helped by the poorer section of the rural population and also by the persistent criticism of a section of the elite.

VI

Cordon was only one aspect of the bureaucratic solution to the food problem that affected the people of East Pakistan. Resistance and protests continued all through the period of the Muslim League rule in the province against the activities of the government functionaries and other agencies that added to the sufferings of the people caused by food shortage.

According to an Azad report on 24 September 1947, just a little over a month after independence, in Badalkot village in Noakhali district, about three thousand people attended a public meeting where they declared \textit{Jehad} against the corruption, black-marketing and hoarding of foodgrain by the people who were associated with food distribution. Similar meetings were held in different places of the province around that time.\textsuperscript{111} Azad also reported a meeting held at Magura in Jessore district on 24 September 1947. The report highlighted the united demonstrations of the Hindus and the Muslims against the 'smugglers, profiteers, and corrupt government officials'.\textsuperscript{112} In all these meetings the tirade of criticism was directed against persons perceived to be responsible for the deteriorating food situation in the country. Government officials were criticised strongly for their alleged complicity in aggravating the food problem. In a
meeting held at Hajiganj in Comilla district, on 13 February 1949, which was attended by about eight thousand people—quite a large gathering for a place like Hajiganj—the food policy of the government was severely criticised. Cordonning was blamed for 'spreading' corruption among businessmen, members of the public and the government officials. The latter's activities were termed as 'anti-State' by the speakers in the meeting. Many of these meetings were organised by the disgruntled elements of the local level Muslim League organisation, sometimes joined by the frustrated representatives of the Assembly. On many occasions locally prominent social leaders also addressed these meetings. Prominent among the speakers at Hajiganj meeting was a religious pir, apart from a Muslim League MLA.113

The anger of the people was sometimes sparked off by the coercion of the police and the cordon enforcing agents of the government. The Observer reported an incident at Comilla where 17 peasants who came to sell rice in the town market from the neighbouring villages were arrested. The rice they brought was seized. To protest such atrocity there was a 'complete hartal at Comilla on 29 December 1949. The Observer reported on 31 December that 'such a successful hartal was never seen before'.114

Sometimes peaceful protests turned into a violent encounter between the people and the law-enforcing authority. The magnitude of popular violence in these cases reflected the angry mood of the people. On 27 March 1949 a clash took place at Chandpur police station in Comilla between the people and the police over the arrest of a Railway employee who was alleged to have carried a bag containing half a maund of rice into the rationed area. In the opinion of the enquiring Magistrate, the crowd became 'rowdy and riotous'. In his report the Magistrate stated that 'the mob' wanted to teach a good lesson to the Havildar and the constables for their alleged interference with food movement.115

Government reports on such conflicts are miserably inadequate records of popular feelings and attitudes. However, as we have seen, there is enough in these documents to
suggest a strong degree of popular resistance to measures the Government adopted in the countryside in response to the food crisis.

On 10 April 1948, the Presidents of some of the Union Boards under Satkhira police station in Khulna wrote to the Chief Minister detailing the nature of police *jultum* (oppression) on the people of the area. The memorandum said:

> The Police and the Civil Supply officers whose activities were ... interfered with by these loyal citizens of Pakistan got infuriated and took recourse to violence, maltreatment and molestation and unnecessary harassment of the innocent loyal Muslim citizens of Pakistan residing within the aforesaid thana...

What provoked the *jultum*, according to the memorialists, were attempts made by the village people to stop smuggling of foodgrains across the border by dishonest traders. Sainik wrote on 28 November 1948 that 'the people were exasperated by control and blackmarketing and whenever the people were organised against the anti-social and corrupt activities, the government authorities with the help of people gave them trouble on any pretext'.

The authorities were quite ruthless in suppressing attempts by the rural poor to procure food on their own initiative. Quite a few people were killed in police firing while engaged in desperate attempts to rob from trains carrying foodgrains. The railway wagons carrying foodstuff became a common target of the famine threatened poor. Risky and dangerous as these attempts were, they highlight the desperate situation of the in the countryside.

On 2 May 1948, a Police report mentioned, 'one Abbas Ali got fatal injury as a result of a firing resorted to by the Railway Police, while he was carrying away a bag of sugar dropped from the goods train by his associates.' In another incident on 15 May of the same year a man was shot dead by the police when he started running after the Police challenged him leaving behind a bag of rice which he allegedly procured from an open wagon near Tejgaon Railway Station at Dhaka. Again on 3 December 1949, the
police opened fire on some people who were allegedly removing bags of atta from the wagons of a moving train near Chittagong Railway Station. On several occasions the famine stricken people organised themselves into groups and raided grain shops and wagons that belonged to the government. On the night of 24 July 1948 a grain shop was raided by about 40 people armed with deadly weapons. The Police opened fire to thwart the attempt. Again, at Parbatipur Station, in Dinajpur, on 9 August 1948, some people hurled stones at the police who were on duty on a goods train.

Most of the time the violence perpetrated by the authority was unequally matched by the poor who operated in small groups. In one incident on 16 August 1948 about 12 persons were seen ‘looting’ rice bags at Santahar Railway Station at Rajshahi. Two of the alleged looters overpowered the watchman and one Constable was hurt by thrown stones. The Constables on guard, however, managed to open fire and killed one of the attackers. The police had to open fire in a number of places and as a consequence killed a number of people. According to official reports the poor hurled stones and blows at the police which the latter answered with their bullets. In the year 1949 the police opened fire on 90 occasions in different districts of East Bengal, and according to the Inspector General of Police ‘In majority of the cases the Police had to fire in the apprehension of criminals and in preventing dacoity...’

The incidents discussed here bring into focus certain characteristics of the young post-colonial State in East Pakistan and its relationship to the people. Noticeable is the preponderance of the bureaucracy in the decision making process and a corresponding absence of any institutionalised structures allowing for popular participation in the making of policy. The resulting insensitivity of the state to the everyday problems of the countryside could only produce a degree of alienation between the ordinary people and the government. The strictly ‘law and order’ view of popular response to dearth that the state took, also reveals an active element of colonial legacy in its behaviour.
VII

There was yet another typical area of poor peasants’ struggle for survival at a time of scarcity which lacked legitimacy in the dominant ideology of the society. These were the acts that constituted ‘criminality’, especially the attempts to rob the better off. Such attempts not only continued to take place but became more frequent and desperate. On 9 September 1949 the weekly Sainik reported the increase in cattle theft and other kinds of thefts and robbery in the villages. The Hajiganj meeting of 14 February (see above) noted the sufferings of the people ‘due to excess of theft and robbery’. In a meeting held on 11 January 1952 the Hatiya Ramgati Islands’ Association observed that thefts and dacoities had increased beyond description during the preceding years. Satya Prachar, a popular tract, did not only mention increase in thefts in Atrai and Bagmara regions of Rajshahi district but also described in detail the various kinds of thefts the poor people had been driven to engage in by their circumstances:

Paddy, Jute, Fish, Mango,
Jackfruit, and vegetables
All are stolen.
Theft is endless
And it takes place
In broad day light
In huts and bazaars.

A village poor sentenced to gaol terms for theft confessed to Abdus Shahid that it was because of poverty that he resorted to stealing. The Inspector-General of Police mentioned that ‘acute economic distress hovered over the province amongst common people owing to the abnormal fall in the prices of jute as well as exorbitant high prices for essential commodities, and other daily necessities of life, a state of affairs which caused a... deterioration in the crime position.

An immediate and popularly understood symptom of dearth in East Bengal society was the increase of petty theft, robbery and burglary. One reason for the increase was the reduced level of rural charity which was the traditional means of distribution of food grain to the poor afflicted by shortage. Durthikkha, the Bengali word for famine, literally refers
to a situation characterised by want of alms (i.e. the spirit of charity). The popular tract we have quoted earlier described the situation in these very terms:

Being oppressed, the peasants  
Take to begging;  
It is difficult to give alms  
There are too many beggars around.130

As a noticeable increase in the number was reported a Member of the Legislative Assembly expressed his despair at the sight of so many of them.131 The villages of East Bengal always witnessed a certain number of beggars. They were mostly poor widows, the disabled, the deserted, and the religious mendicants.

But for the poor peasant forced by scarcity or poverty to go abegging, the choice was not a very easy one. Not to speak of begging, even going out to a government organised charity was a matter of shame for many peasants. Bhowmick mentioned one hunchback old Muslim woman saying 'Last time (1943 Famine) I stayed at home. But this time I had to go out to procure rice from a controlled shop.'132 The peasant notion of self-esteem stood as a barrier in their making this choice. Many peasants, of course, were pushed over that barrier by desperation. It was famine that turned them into beggars at the same time as it caused the usual flow of charity in the countryside to become a trickle. Barisal and Khulna, the two most affected districts considered, suffered from a lack of stock of foodgrains due to the ruthless plunder by the procurement machinery of the government and as a result the source of charity drained out for a large number of peasants.

However, the poor people's response varied according to the degree of affliction. When the disaster was total, survival became the only concern. But the responses, thus evoked, were not always confined within the moral world of the peasantry. Since the dearth in post independence East Bengal was caused by a crisis in the sphere of distribution rather than a total deficit caused by a natural or man-made disaster; the response of the affected often took the form of appropriation of food items and resources from those who ostensibly had more. The new leadership in the Government failed to
direct the response of those affected by food shortage towards more acceptable channels of politics. Every act of the poor peasant bred of frustration, desperation and despair eroded the moral assumption of the sacredness of private property on which rested the government and its policies.

Peasant actions that were often labelled 'criminal' could be both collective and individual in nature. Stealing became a significant form of response of the poor during dearth which heightened the social tensions between the haves and have-nots. The resulting crisis was also a moral one, as indicated by the following piece from the pen of a rural poet who, while describing the plight of the peasants in Atrai and Bagmara in Rajshahi, lamented:

Poverty destroyed their character
And drove them to sinful acts;
Their good sense has deserted them,
They do not obey the law of dharma 133

But these acts of defiance were manifested through surreptitious, dispersed, and mostly, individualised actions. Though stealing lacked the moral approval of the community, it performed the economic function of redistribution of resources.

In East Bengal the number of theft cases rose from 11,544 in 1947 to 12,027 in 1948; an increase of 483 cases.134 The incidents of thefts and burglaries per 100,000 of population showed no appreciable change for the better, if not worse, after independence. The theft cases in 1947 was 33.8 against 33.2 in 1948 while reported incidents of burglaries rose from 63.7 in 1947 to 65.5 in 1948.135 Of the few things the well-to-do ryots of East Bengal possessed livestock (mostly cattle) was the most valuable. Hence cattle was the obvious target for theft. Theft of cattle rose to 390 in 1948 from 364 in the previous year. But it shot up to 550 in 1949 and 596 in 1950. In 1952 there were 703 cases as against 723 in 1951. A decrease of 20 cases but nearly double that of 1947 figure.136 Sometimes cattle poisoning was resorted to allegedly by the poor Hindu untouchable caste of Muchis (Cobbler) who required the hide for their trade.
Understandably, the general poverty had brought about a decline in their fortunes. In 1948 eighty-two cases of cattle poisoning were reported against sixty-six in 1947. The Police unhesitatingly blamed the Muchis for this crime. The figure shot up to one hundred and six cases in 1951. And gradually police suspicion fell upon the Muslims apart from their traditional suspects.

Another novel form of crime was swindling. The number of cases reported during 1948 was 656 against 471 in 1947. And in 1949 it was 716, the highest till 1954. The Police Reports do not specify the location of the crimes but by the nature of the crime it can be assumed that it took place mostly in rural and peri-urban market places, small townships, river stations, and obviously in the Railway Stations. People wandering in search of food, shelter, and employment were the easy targets of the swindlers. The favourite method of swindling, as the Police Report of 1949 mentions, were the note-doubling, the bogus agency trick (fake commercial agencies) and false personifications - all of which promised sudden affluence and allured the eventual victims of these crimes. The prospect of easy money also made swindlers out of poverty-stricken people. The Police Reports mention that many of the swindlers were not professional. The highest number of professional swindlers in any one year between 1948 to 1954 was only six, in 1951.

The severity of shortage aggravated by the profit motive of the traders and hoarders provided immediate incentive to stealing and dacoity. The number of 'true cases' was 2,163 in 1948 against 1,965 in 1947, a 10% increase over the quinquennial average for the years 1943-1947 which was 1,926. 'The figures, disquieting as they are', wrote the Inspector-General of Police, 'indicate an increasing spirit of violence on the part of the dacoit.' The poor people's sense of collectivity was most evident in organising dacoities. The dacoits, according to a Police Reports, 'overwhelmed the victims by numbers'. The normal targets of the dacoits were surplus peasants, traders, hoarders in rural areas and quite often the boats in the rivers carrying merchandise to rural markets. In a Memorandum to the Prime Minister of Pakistan a large number of
'aggrieved' inhabitants of Chandpur, Raipura, Bhederganj, and Hijla police stations of Comilla, Noakhali, Faridpur and Barisal districts sought redress against river criminals who were 'great terror to the life and properties' of the memorialists.146

During dearth the nature of dacoity assumed a form particular to the situation of food shortage. Of all the reported cases of dacoity in 1948, 62 cases involved only foodstuff, and in 240 cases the stolen property was valued less than RS.200. In 1949, 20 cases where foodstuff was taken were reported while property worth less than RS.200 was robbed in 260 cases.147 The following table shows a trend in foodstuff looting and robbing of property valued less than RS.200 till 1953.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Food Stuff</th>
<th>Property Less than Rs.200</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Source: Report on the Police Administration of the Province of East Pakistan for the years 1950 to 1953: East Pakistan Government Press, Dacca.]

The looting of food stuff and small assets valued less than RS.200 was a sure sign of famine crimes in East Bengal. The Police Reports of 1950 and 1951 observed that 'high prices of essential commodities along with a spirit of lawlessness were among the main causes for the increase in dacoities.148

Let us look at the contemporary crime figures to get an overall picture of the situation.
Table 4.2

Crime figures in the Province of East Bengal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Dacoity</th>
<th>Robbery</th>
<th>Burglary</th>
<th>Theft</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>2,643</td>
<td>1,470</td>
<td>26,548</td>
<td>14,689</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1949</td>
<td>2,404</td>
<td>1,608</td>
<td>25,897</td>
<td>14,155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>2,918</td>
<td>1,459</td>
<td>24,437</td>
<td>13,906</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>1,469</td>
<td>1,312</td>
<td>22,666</td>
<td>13,625</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>974</td>
<td>1,044</td>
<td>19,208</td>
<td>12,150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>973</td>
<td>1,004</td>
<td>22,158</td>
<td>13,109</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Although these figures indicate a high incidence of crime, they show reported cases only. Many more went unreported. As the Police explained with regard to a particular kind of crime: 'The proportion of unreported river dacoities, is believed to be as large as ever. The victims of such heinous crimes find themselves in a situation which prevents them from undertaking long journey to the Police station to report such cases.' Sometimes 'better reporting' increased crime figures.

By 1951 the Police force had reportedly undergone a 'sudden and large' expansion. This expansion was a response to the increased 'criminal' activities that the food crisis caused in countryside. Even if there was a decrease in crime figures towards the end of the period, according to the Police Report of 1952 'it was mainly due to increased effectiveness of the method of control' and was no indication that the socio-economic factors causing a rise in criminal activities had disappeared. When strong measures were taken against dacoits and robbers, 'the criminals were found to have taken recourse 'to burglary and theft to earn a living'.

The Police, however, could reach only to the Thana level, the vast countryside was left in the hands of the village watchmen, recruited mostly from the rural poor. Dearth affected them too. The statistics of involvement of rural police in crimes show how this arm of control by the State got infected by the malaise that it was supposed to eradicate.

Table 4.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of Rural Police Convicted</th>
<th>No. of Suspects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1949</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Source: Report on the Police Administration of the Province of East Bengal for the years 1947-1953, EPGP, Dacca.]

The Inspector-General of Police reported in 1953:

the quality of work of Chowkidars [village watchmen] has deteriorated considerably. Owing to the constant rise in the prices of essential commodities their monetary wages have become very inadequate. Their monthly salaries range at present between RS.8 and RS.15. These small amounts do not help the Chowkidars much in getting their daily necessities of life. To worsen matters these small amounts are not generally paid to the Chowkidars regularly.
He concluded that the ‘inevitable result of these is that only very poor type of people come up to accept the post of a Chowkidar. It is not, therefore, at all surprising that poverty drives some of these poor people to criminal activity’.153

While poverty drove some of the Chowkidars to commit crime, the government also recruited its Special Police Officers from among the ‘criminals’ to keep vigil on the criminal activities of the poor. Thus the poor were on both sides of crime. The Police Report of 1950 mentioned that ‘altogether 1607 persons were appointed Special Police Officers against 195 in 1949 and 21 in 1948 to guard against ‘apprehended breaches of peace especially in connection with smuggling of food grains and other essential commodities’.154 Altogether 887 persons were appointed Special Police Officer in 1953 as against 2767 in 1952 and 1454 in 1951.155 Notwithstanding the complacency of the District Magistrate of Pabna who told the touring Governor of the province in August 1951 that ‘they were trying to round up the dagis (persons having previous convictions) and made them Special Constables which had proved very useful’;284 this particular measure of the government failed to protect the rural well-to-do from the ‘crimes’ of the poor.

From time to time the rural rich asked the government for ‘redress of this pitiable plight of the country without delay’ and maintained that it was impossible to lead their ‘simple lives and business and commerce due to excessive thefts and robberies.’157

Finding the village police force inadequate, corrupt and inefficient, the rural rich organised Village Defence Parties to protect their wealth and property from the dearth stricken peasants. The total number of Village Defence Parties reported to be in existence in 1949 was 1613 against 1518 in 1948. As crime figures went up so did the number of Village Defence Parties. There were 8305 of them in 1951 while it was 5937 in 1950. In 1952 it numbered 9015 and in 1953 it rose to 10,115.158 The members of the organisation made arrests by themselves and sometimes with the help of the police. Their performance was commended by the Inspector-General of Police in 1949.159
1951 they made 182 arrests by themselves and with the help of the police made 102 more.

The Village Defence Parties proved to be quite effective and increased in number every year. The representatives of the local government actively collaborated with the police in apprehending criminals and controlling crimes. A 1950 Police Report mentioned that the Presidents and Members of Union Boards took interest in the control of crimes and cooperated with the police. Apart from strengthening the Village Defence Parties to counteract 'criminal activities' of the poor, the rural rich meted out to the poor peasants their own form of justice. The surplus peasants, it was said, reacted with 'unmitigated ferocity' against any one they caught in the act of pilfering or stealing. Satya Prachar mentioned that 'persons who were caught while stealing were given a beating'. More often than not, such beating was merciless. As Arnold puts it, this form of punishment of the rural poor 'was a measure of the intensity of the conflict dearth created between those who grew and possessed grain and those who had to buy'.

VIII

The response of the poor to scarcity always had a tragic side to it. Taha reported regular cases of suicide in Paikgacha in Khulna. On 3 October 1948, Naya Duniya also reported that a poor woman from Madhupur village in Dinajpur district committed suicide by hanging 'as a last resort' after spending days without food. The Police reports, however, does not mention the reasons for suicide in rural East Bengal though it can be said without doubt that dearth remained the main cause. Among the rural poor more women committed suicide than the men.

In 1948 the total number of reported suicides was 2073 and it rose to 2489 in 1949, this particular year being the worst in terms of food shortage till 1954. In 1950, 1951 and 1952, the number of people who committed suicide were 2410, 2321 and 2331
respectively. The figure shot up to 2484 in 1953, during which the Province was again severely hit by food shortage. The poor who lived on the threshold of existence and suddenly found that that too was dwindling, realised that they had claim to nothing but their own lives.

Dearth thus introduced a great deal of dislocation in East Bengal society. This ‘famine’ however was localised in deficit areas and in deficit pockets of the surplus districts. The food situation was aggravated by lack of purchasing power of the poorer sections of the society and by depletion of resources since the 1943 famine and was worsened further by sudden change in the socio-political life in the province since August 1947. Many districts produced more than enough food to meet their requirements but due to the shortsighted policy of the government (made worse by the bureaucratic handling of the situation) the dearth-affected people were unable to avail themselves of that food. Many of the poor did not even protest or resist; they travelled far and wide in search of food, and sometimes went to far-off towns and cities where they expected to get food. Just as during the great famine thousands left for the cities; they did the same after August 1947. The Swadhinata correspondent reported that peasants were deserting villages in Dhaka district. Sainik also reported on 22 July and 8 August 1949 that hundreds of men, women and children flocked to Chandpur town due to food shortage in the rural areas surrounding Chandpur. The march of the poor to the town continued unabated. A Yugantar report on 9 July 1953 mentioned how famine affected people of Barisal, Khulna, Tippera, Noakhali and Dhaka districts were rushed to the towns from the villages.

According to an Azad report, from the second week of May 1949 onwards hundreds of Muslims from East Pakistan migrated to Assam in India. Before the Azad report was published, a Muslim League MLA informed the Assembly on 30 March 1949 that due to the scarcity of paddy and rice many people from Dhaka and Comilla were migrating to Hindustan. Even earlier on in 1948, a young poet full of Pakistani nationalism deplored this development in a poem: ‘with bags across the shoulders, they proceed to
Assam to seek fortunes. Disturbed by the migration of the rural poor, a MLA of the ruling party cautioned the government that Pakistan was being depopulated. He no doubt exaggerated the number of migrants going across to India but the actual number of dearth-affected people who migrated outside the country is not known. In response to a question in the Indian Parliament on 1 February 1950, Gopalswami Ayyanger, the Indian Home Minister, stated that nearly 450,000 Muslims from East Bengal had passed over into Assam between August 15, 1947 and November 1949. Again in an answer to a question by a Muslim League MLA from Chittagong the government admitted that between March and end of May 1948 approximately 10,000 people from Cox's Bazar alone migrated to Burma. The 'Comparatively easier life in Akyab, where plenty of food at a cheap price and plenty of land are available', according to the government, 'prompted them to migrate'. The total number of migrants compared to the population may not be very high but the absolute number was quite significant.

This phenomenon, of people 'voting with their feet' indicated a breakdown of the traditional institution of rural charity. East Bengal's 'destined providers of subsistence' failed to fulfil their obligation of the annadata. Social arrangements 'around those particular families whose members were able to provide both financial and physical facilities to the needy' proved inadequate for the situation. All the forms of altruistic cooperation as laid down by shariat that existed in the predominantly Muslim society of rural East Pakistan presupposed a familiarity and agreement with the way the community was organised. Hara observed in rural East Bengal of later time that a rich man was always expected to help the poor according to the principles of zakat. In fact, assistance in time of famine and disaster was perceived to be a right of the poorer sections in the society. Ellickson confirmed the continuation of this expectation in post-1971 Bangladesh villages. One reason offered by the villagers to explain the 'ruin of society' according to Ellickson, was due to the failure of the wealthy to give a fair share to the poor. In spite of this expectation rooted in their perceived bond the poor of East Bengal failed to get sustenance from the well-to-do at a time of actual scarcity.
IX

The spectacle of hunger-stricken emaciated human bodies marching out of rural hamlets towards alien countries was not a very happy sight to the Muslim nationalists. The memory of the great famine, for which the colonial administration and domination was blamed, was too vivid. National independence and national leadership had been posed as an alternative to the Raj, especially in mitigating the hardship of the common people. Now was to be the test of leadership, organisation and perhaps of nationalism itself. For many Muslim League activists adequate food supply was not only important to maintain the community but also politically necessary. To hold the loyalty of the people it was necessary to provide them with the foodgrains they required. An Azad editorial resented that the hizrat (migration) by Pakistani Muslims due to financial crisis could not be acceptable to any self-respecting Pakistani. The Dhaka District Muslim League in a Meeting on June 1949 expressed their concern at the news of migration from many areas of the country to India. Umar wondered under what circumstances the Muslims of East Bengal could migrate to India in search of food in less than two years of the achievement of Pakistan?

The prevalence of chronic food shortage hurt the self-respect of the Muslim League leaders and gave rise to a fear of Bolshevism. One Muslim League member almost panicked at the thought of an impending revolution. 'The poor will be angered', he told the Assembly, 'they will attack and stage a revolution'. On 26 April 1949, the Pakistan Observer editorialised the Communist menace to the country. It linked Communism with poverty. In March 1952, a Muslim League MLA warned the Assembly that 'the Communists we are afraid of; won't come from Moscow, they will emerge from the ranks of the unfed and unclothed'. He advocated adequate food relief to the famished.

Indeed by 1952 the confidence of the ruling group had been badly shaken. About three years earlier on 30 March 1949, a Muslim League MLA had claimed that 'in spite of the
fact that the people buy rice at such exorbitant prices in East Pakistan and remain half-
fed and unfed, they do not stir up a revolution, it is because of their love for Pakistan.'185

The desire to help the poor came from two sources; one religious, fed by the sentiments
of charity and the other was the fear of class war. Maulana Abdul Hai, a Muslim League
member of the Assembly referred to the instances of benevolence of the first Caliph of
Islam towards the poor while imploring the government to take care of the latter. But at
the same time he did not want to alter the status quo that prevailed in the social order of
the then East Pakistan. He feared, like most of his class members, that people might not
accept the situation of dearth and oppression for a long time and before it was too late
the equilibrium should be restored. To them the social order which maintained inequality
without restraining it too much was ideal.

The chronic scarcity which was largely man-made generated criticism from among the
ranks of the ruling party. Persistent food crisis was seen by the latter to have dampened
the very spirit of political independence. The disillusionment of the people was sufficiently
represented by the articulate critics of the system. In his Presidential speech before
launching the Awami Muslim League, Ataur Rahman Khan asked 'What is the meaning of
independence to the poor who are smarting under oppression? To them, independence
was meaningless.'186 To many Muslim League activists political independence was no
longer a Utopian dream but a reality to implement all their projects.

Often the situation that prevailed in East Bengal after political independence was
compared with that of pre- independence period. The irony for nationalism was that
colonialism fared better in that comparison. The leaders of the ruling group were
squarely blamed for this misery. The youth activists in a conference unanimously
resolved that the activities of the leaders had destroyed all the rosy dreams of political
independence.187 Records of written criticism of the ruling group by the non-literate rural
poor are naturally very few in number. However, a telling piece of evidence comes from a
letter, claimed to have been written by a member of the rural poor from Baithakhali, in
Sylhet district, to an editor of a weekly 'for whom and for what did we achieve Pakistan
Was it to die of starvation?'.


We have not yet got
The taste of independence;
How to console ourselves?
A numbness invades all our spirits.

To a radical critic Pakistan thus turned into a Fankistan (a land of empty promises).
The hopes that political independence held out to the people and the way they
constructed it, all vanished into the thin air for many and was proved to be a hoax for a
vast number of people in the class-divided society of East Pakistan. As a result a large
number of them lost their enthusiasm and it was increasingly manifested in their
abstention from participating in the annual nationalist ritual, the Independence Day of
14th August. 'Zeal of the people appeared to be meagre on the occasion of
Independence Day', Tajuddin Ahmed thus recorded the frustration of the people in his
diary on 14 August 1950. He vainly looked for any 'thrill among the people'. In fact,
people's distance from the celebration continued. A Yugantar report on 19 August 1952
mentioned that 'Independence day was lifeless in Dacca'. Both Tajuddin Ahmed and the
Yugantar report noted the suffering of the people as a reason for non-participation in
Independence day celebration. With a sad note Vorys remarked that 'The magic day of
Independence arrived, passed and receded into history'.

Though the masses were
'aloo' - as Tajuddin put it - from the celebrations, they were not passive in casting their
ballots in the first general election in the province. The threatened collapse of the society
by a class war did not happen; what happened instead was the wholesale rejection of the
ruling party from power through a peaceful 'ballot revolution'.

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2. See discussion on food situation in EBLA progs, Vol. 3, No. 3.
3. ibid, p.348.
9. K. Griffin, ‘Growth and Impoverishment in Rural Areas of Asia’, *World Development*, Vol. 7, Nos. 4 and 5. This point has also been emphasised by Kamal Siddiqui, ibid, p.56.
29 ibid, p.270.
30 ibid, p.271.
34 *Naya Duniya*, 26 September 1948, p.4.
35 *Eastern Pakistan*, p.19.
36 EBLA, progs., Vol. 4, No. 7, p.129.
37 EBLA, progs., Vol. 3, No. 3, pp.296-298
38 EBLA, progs., Vol. 10, No. 1, p.27.
39 ibid, p.217.
41 ibid, p.266.
42 See S D Khan, *Note*, p.39. In the countryside the government as a matter of policy preferred relief through Union Poor Funds to help the distressed in the shape of general gratuitous doles, whenever and wherever possible under the provision of the Bengal Rural Poor and Unemployment Act, 1939. This meant the Government had to make contributions to the Union Poor Funds from the budget provision under Gratuitous Relief usually equivalent to the amounts the Union Poor Fund Committee could collect from local subscriptions for purposes of relief to the destitute. But much later it was pointed out by Khan that the system of crediting receipts of local bodies and their merging in the provincial revenue was ‘morally improper’.
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CHAPTER 5

PEASANT REBELLIONS AND THE MUSLIM LEAGUE GOVERNMENT

I

We have noted, in chapter 2, the hectic and nervous attempts of the ruling elite to steer out of 'crises' that bedevilled the state in the eastern part of Pakistan immediately after political independence. At the same time there was a considerable range and variety of euphoric expectations, as well as the apprehensions that gripped different sections of the people in East Pakistan. The euphoria was short-lived however, and in fact turned sour for many of the tribals and poor Muslim peasants; some of their fears became a reality as well for a large section of the poor Hindu schedule caste peasants long before the year of independence ran out. The expectations and efforts for self-improvement of the people who lived mainly on the social and geographical margins of the new nation, clashed with the nation-building efforts of the Muslim League in power. These clashes followed peasant actions ranging from petitioning to armed resistance. In fact, the initial efforts of the Muslim League government in East Pakistan met with challenges from organized peasants which continued well beyond 1950, almost up to the middle of 1951.

These actions have been generally labelled the Hajong, nankar and Nachol bidroho, or rebellions, by communist activists and historians. The Hajongs were a section of the tribal population who lived on the northern fringe of Mymensingh district while the nankars were service-tenure holders in Sylhet district. And Nachol rebellion was named after a police station in the Rajshahi district where Santhals and poor Muslim peasants had clashed with the police in January 1950. All these areas bordered on the Indian dominion. Thus, while ethnicity, the social form of existence of the peasants and place-names were made use of by the radicals in naming these rebellions, authorities uniformly termed those rebellions 'communist disturbances'. In fact, very recent writings in the
pages of an English weekly bear witness to the continuing influence of the official description of the rebellion.¹

Radical historiography has committed two errors regarding these rebellions. Firstly, it has contented itself by concluding that these actions by the peasants, influenced by the left adventurism of the Communist Party leadership of those days, were ‘peripheral and marginal’, having little to do with the body politic of East Pakistan.² Secondly, that the counter-insurgency side of events from 1947 to 1951 has been relegated to a position of a minor theoretical problem. In strong contrast to this, the Bengali Nationalist discourse has relegated these rebellions to a place almost as negligible as that assigned to peasants in the social order.³

It is true that there was a considerable degree of intervention in these rebellions by ‘outside agents’ i.e. political parties, newspapers, intelligentsia. One could however argue that outside activists and ideological intervention in these rebellions were meaningful only in providing to the oppressed symbols like lal jhanda, party, slogans, and judicial and political information. This chapter focuses on the activities the peasants undertook - aided no doubt by the communist leaders and to a certain extent by the radical section of the Muslim League - to redefine their own place within the new nation. These activities were part of an essentially democratic struggle, spearheaded against the zamindari order of the society that continued to oppress a sizable section of the peasantry even after political independence. Significant sections of the peasantry drew inspiration from the fact of political ‘independence’ to stand up to the landlord and challenge his rule. As a result, however, these peasants were embroiled in a deadly battle with the fledgling state.

An important aim of this chapter is to analyse the strategies that the Muslim League government adopted to marginalise these peasant actions, while carrying out repressive measures no different from those employed by the colonial state and at the same time trying to give itself a legitimacy different from the one that the Raj claimed for itself. The
difference however was in the ‘marginalising’ rhetoric used by the League government, which marked a significant departure from the colonial practice. By strongly using a religious idiom, this rhetoric pitted the new state against the potential ‘nation’. Thus the history of these peasant rebellions helps to bring out a paradoxical characteristic of the post-colonial Muslim League government in East Pakistan: the same ideology of religion that lay at the origin of the state reduced its ability to unify the ‘people’ and the ‘nation’.

II

On 18 November 1949, Jatindra Nath Bhadra, a Congress Member of the East Bengal Legislative Assembly, moved the following adjournment motion to discuss a ‘definite matter of urgent public importance and of recent occurrence’.

The inhuman and most barbarous oppression by armed police and soldiers committed upon the Hindu population of village Saneswar, Ahirkuchi, Mehari, Ujirpur, Ulur, Nayagram, Panisail, Jogikona, etc., within the jurisdiction of Beanibazar and Barlekha police stations in the district of Sylhet, in the shape of molestation of women, looting, destruction of properties and desecration of deities from 18 to 24 August 1949. On 18 August 1949 the armed police fired upon the villagers at Saneswar which resulted in the death of five persons. Subsequently though there was absolute peace in the locality the armed police were reinforced by East Pakistan Rifles on 21 August. They were let loose upon the innocent Hindu villagers ... the Muslim mob also joined the EPR and armed police. Women were molested, the properties including cattle, paddy, cash and other valuables were looted. The ornaments from the persons of women were snatched away. Houses were broken, deities were desecrated. The atrocities continued for about a week.4

A discussion followed in the Assembly in which a number of members of the Opposition and one from the ruling Muslim League Party took part. In response to the motion and the subsequent discussion, Nurul Amin, Prime Minister of East Pakistan, made a statement. He asked for forty five minutes to make the statement for he had ‘so many facts’ to counter the contentions of the members of the Opposition. In the statement, he summed up the ‘history’ and nature of the incident that had taken place in some areas of
Sylhet since independence. To facilitate analysis, I shall quote the statement at some length:

I will not base my speech on the report of those who are directly concerned with the incident and of those sent along with the police, the Deputy Superintendent of Police, the Magistrate or officers who were deputed along with the police but I base my speech on the report made by the Commissioner of the Division... I sympathise with the Schedule Castes people for they are involved in this matter, but, at the same time, I would request the leader of the Schedule Castes to try to dissuade their ignorant, illiterate, unsophisticated people from the association of the communists and their sympathisers... Under the cloak of working for the abolition of Zamindars and Nankar systems these Communist workers gained support of some of Muslim Nankar tenants as well, but actually their main activities were devoted to preaching disruption and inciting people to acts subversive of law and order... In the beginning of August, 1948, some police constables while trying to arrest some person accused of rioting and wrongful confinement were attacked and injured by an armed mob and fire had to be opened in which one person (a Muslim) was killed. This firing, in which mostly Muslims were involved, had a wholesome effect on them; but the Communist-inspired anti-Pakistan activities of non-Muslims which were designed to bring the Government and the Pakistan State into disrepute, continued... The police under the command of responsible officers moved through the entire area to instil a sense of security among the law-abiding section of the people who encouraged them by harbouring and actively supporting the subversive workers of this area as well as those coming from the neighbouring areas in the Indian Dominion... So far as the general allegations are concerned, I have already stated that no case of molestation of women, desecration and defilement of any deity or temple or looting by the police or the East Pakistan Rifle People took place.5

The Prime Minister would not recognise the actions of the nankar peasants as having the aim of redefining their relations with the landholders. On the contrary, he repeatedly used the theme of lawlessness and chaos to denigrate these actions of the peasants. On the floor of the Legislative Assembly, members of the Muslim League often ascribed peasant actions to the 'enemies of the state'. As the speeches of the Ministers show, the other shorthand description for these 'enemies' was 'Communists' who were often made solely responsible for stirring up 'trouble' in the countryside.6

The Prime Minister in his statement justified police actions which were meted out against the 'communists' who were conspiring to destroy Pakistan. He recalled the 'history' of Beanibazar and Borolekha police stations of Sylhet since 1937, the alleged beginning of the communist movement in the area. He stated in the Assembly that the communists played with the 'poor, illiterate and backward people who do not understand their own
interests'. And he further suggested that they 'utilized them, suppressed and oppressed
them, but, at the same time, took advantage of them'. This, for the Prime Minister, was
sufficient reason to call the history of this area a 'bad history'. The tendency to judge
peasant history in ethical terms - good or bad - not only reflected how the Muslim League
leaders in the government saw this history in terms of their own interests. The rhetoric is
also important in showing us how certain moral codes came to be used by the leaders in
either appropriating or marginalising, from their point of view, aspects of the peasant's
past.

This discussion took place within the limits of a liberal institution, in this case the
Legislative Assembly, a legacy of the Act of 1919. The motion was given two hours' time
for discussion and it was talked out. In the ensuing discussion, the integrity of the
discussants who spoke for the motion was questioned by the Prime Minister. He said
that 'they were delivering speeches on the floor of the Assembly just to get prominence in
the press'. On the other hand, the report on which the Prime Minister based his
statement was questioned by the leader of the Opposition. The latter questioned the
authenticity of the report by officers against whom allegations were made. However, this
adjournment motion was accepted for discussion 'without taking any shelter under any
technicalities'. But the 'incidents' at Nachol were not allowed by the Prime Minister to be
discussed in the House. A motion tabled on 6 February 1950 by some prominent
members of the Opposition to discuss 'police and military oppression' was rejected on
'technical grounds'.

III

The partition of Bengal and the slicing of Assam affected the course of the peasant
struggles, specially for the Hajongs and the nankars. Some Communist activists of the
peasant movements of those days still hold the view that it was a well-conceived
conspiracy of the Raj - before handing over political power to their 'lackeys' - to prevent a
healthy peasant movement from turning into a new democratic struggle to radically transform relations between classes. The expectations built around political independence by nationalists of both kinds - the Communists and the religious fundamentalists - and by the peasants themselves made the ongoing struggle seem unnecessary at that point in time.

Among peasants, however the new nation-state raised expectations about their demands and aspiration which were unresolved during the last days of the Raj. Not only that, the ruling elite introduced new tensions to the already sensitized peasantry after their actions against the landlords and the state functionaries in the last days of the Raj. We would disagree with Bhattacharyya who maintained that the peasant revolts that flared up again in 1949 were in many respects discontinuous with the earlier ones, and that these revolts were aimed at the seizure of state power, in accordance with the new line adopted by the Communist party in the second congress in Calcutta in 1948.

Of course, Communists were largely responsible for organising the movement. On 15 August the tribal Hajongs while celebrating political independence hoisted Pakistan flags along with the Red flags which symbolized the presence of the Communist movement among the former. By September and October, 1947, however, the nankar rebellion was caught within the legal framework and lost much of its radical political potentiality. Ajoy Bhattacharya, a leading Communist activist of the nankar rebellion in post-independent East Pakistan, wrote, 'nothing more could be expected from the rebellion excepting economic and social reform.' The changed political circumstances and the public commitment of the Muslim League leadership to agrarian reforms, the confused state of the Hindu and tribal peasantry complicated by the Muslim peasants' optimism compelled the Communist leadership to halt the movements. In a statement they said:

This year the national Government is in power and before resorting to direct resistance against the national government we should offer them another opportunity to fulfill their pledges through legislation ... hence this year the share of the crop should be ascertained through mutual understanding.
But on 15 August 1947 meetings and processions were organized in Durgapur, Haluaghat, Nalitabari, and in Bhatpur in Mymensingh district by tribal leaders. Apart from expressing their solidarity with the new state they demanded immediate withdrawal of warrants issued by the colonial government for the arrests of activists and supporters of the Hajong rebellion, and also demanded the abolition of zamindari without compensation. The Hajong leaders met the District Magistrate and later the Governor of the province in January 1948 to demand the abolition of the tanka system of rent and the system of partial exclusion. Meetings were held in Mymensingh demanding tebhaga Ordinance also. And in Sylhet, according to Ajoy Bhattacharya, the rebellion continued despite the Communist party's call for suspension. In spite of all the setbacks the nankars, after political independence, refused to go back to the landlord's household to render service. Some nankar leaders made contacts with the Muslim League leadership to settle the problem.

Initially peaceful agitations were quite successful, especially in Chatal in Kishoreganj subdivision of Mymensingh. The Circle Officer intervened there to work out a negotiated settlement between sharecroppers and landlords. In Narail, in a sub-division of Jessore district, some landlords accepted tebhaga on the produce and gave receipts for the same to the sharecroppers. In Khulna large meetings were held when landlords demonstrated their unwillingness to accept the system of distribution and as a result a compromise was reached between the two conflicting groups. In Rangpur rallies and meetings were organized; and in Nilphamari the krisak sabha demanded in a memorandum the abolition of zamindari, withdrawal of tebhaga cases, reinstatement of evicted tenants, and the right to stack paddy at sharecroppers' homes. Attempts were also made to organise similar meetings in Dinajpur. In different areas of Dhaka district in the middle of 1948, mobilizations and rallies of peasants took place.

The struggling peasants and workers resorted to methods developed during the latter days of the Raj: petitioning, sending memoranda, holding public meetings, processions, and sending deputations to high government officials were the means through which they
expressed their demands. The organised means of articulating grievances and demands were most of the time the political parties. In other words, the quasi-liberal practices of the British colonial government had left their mark on the culture of 'popular movements' as well, and these movements in turn, now expected the new post-colonial state to respond favourably to demands couched in liberal terms. In adopting the liberal democratic approach, peasant leaders lost to the elites, and were forced to engage in more organised struggle: the story of Ismail Ali, and the struggle of nankars is a good illustration of this.

IV

As a way of solving the nankar problem peacefully some activists, especially Ismail Ali, who became disillusioned with the krishak sabha for its policy towards the referendum on Sylhet, made contact with the local Muslim League leadership after independence. About the same time Abdur Rob, a Muslim League member of the Legislative Assembly, himself a zamindar, took initiative to resolve the conflict between the tenants and the zamindars. He proposed to the nankars to go back to the earlier position of accepting the authority and the exactions of the zamindars. In fact, he suggested to the nankars that they give up some of the hard-earned gains of their struggles during the last days of the Raj.17

The participants in the discussion disagreed and as a consequence, on 16 September 1947 night, the police raided the krishak sabha office and arrested two Communist leaders. And around this time they also arrested Ismail Ali who was attempting to enlist political support for the nankars from the Muslim League.18 The weekly Sanghati published on 11 and 17 September 1947, hardly a month after independence, two reports on the plight of nankar peasants in Sylhet district. The weekly accused the
zamindars of lodging false cases against the tenants, and the police of collaborating with the former against the peasant movement.19

The limits of liberal peaceful protest against police oppression at Lautabahadurpur on 16 September were reached when the peasants of Beanibazar, Golapganj and Borolekha police stations organized a general strike and stopped working. The peasants also decided to enforce social boycott on the oppressive zamindars. Following this the krishak sabha organized a mass demonstration in Sylhet town. The peasants came from far off places, in some cases 20 to 25 miles from Sylhet town to join the mass protest. After the demonstration, which was peaceful, a meeting was held to emphasise the demands of the peasants.20 The peasants were familiar with all these forms of protest and articulation of their demands, and had used these means quite often, ever since they came into contact with outside politics and organisations.

The nankar peasants continued their struggle despite the fact that the krishak sabha failed to give any clear direction to the movement due to the confusion created by political independence and its offer of collaboration to the national government. Without waiting for any decision from the party the peasants enforced a social boycott on the zamindars, a traditional form of resistance often used in the nationalist movement.21

As a result police oppression was unleashed by the end of October and met with its opposite in the resistance of the peasants on 23 November. On that day, the movement turned into a rebellion in the Beanibazar police station in Sylhet. At the beginning of the harvest the peasants began to reap paddy from the land against which the zamindars lodged theft cases with the police. Four people were arrested in such cases of ‘paddy theft’. Then ‘a mob (armed with deadly weapons) attacked the police party in whose custody the accused were kept at Bahadurpur and attempted to rescue them by use of force’.22 About 500 people participated in the raid, of whom 54 were charged and 30 were arrested, the rest absconded.23
On 25 November the Lautabahadurpur branch of the *krishak sabha* sent the following telegram to the Prime Minister of East Bengal:

Zamindars with police help unlawfully seizing paddy of Nankar Kishans. Daroga indiscriminately arresting peasants. Yesterday Daroga arrested nine. Arrested persons mercilessly beaten with lathis ... Life and paddy insecure at Darogas unlawful acts. Your immediate intervention necessary without delay.24

The Provincial *krishak shabha* corroborated the facts on 27 November in another telegram to the Premier of East Bengal seeking intervention and added that armed police had been posted again in Lautabahadurpur and accused the police of collaboration with the zamindars. This turn of events after the end of the Raj perplexed many activists and sympathisers of the *nankar* cause. The *Sanghati*, in fact, asked in bewilderment 'Would there be no cessation of police oppression on the peasantry in Pakistan'.25

Meanwhile following a resolution of the provincial Muslim League to settle *nankar* disputes, a Committee was formed, which reached an agreement with the zamindars and the nankars on 2 January 1948. The nankars were represented by leaders who were acceptable to the Committee. The Communist activists involved in the struggle were not allowed to take part.26 The salient features of the agreed terms of settlement were:

1. Landlords should agree to convert half of the total Nankar holdings into rent paying holdings with occupancy right on payment of a nominal conversion fee of one year's rent. The rent will be settled at an equitable and fair rate by a Gazetted Officer with settlement experience. The landlord will resume possession of the other half as khas land.

2. Lands held at concession rates of rent by a nankar shall be assessed at the full prevailing rate of rent of the current time and the nanker shall be relieved of the obligation of rendering any service.

3. All disputes regarding land as to whether it is nanker, "Bhagi" or rent paying shall be decided by Revenue Officers of Gazetted Rank with settlement experience against whose decision an appeal will be before an officer not below the rank of Subordinate Judge whose decision shall be final.

4. No-rent campaign must be immediately called off, including economic and social boycott, and the tenants should from now pay their rent, rent in kind and "Bhagi" produce regularly. One year's arrear rent and paddy rent must be paid up by all tenants within a period of two months from the date of joining of the Gazetted
Officer. The remaining arrear should be paid up in instalments within a period of three years. Current rent and paddy must be paid up regularly.

5. All ejectment decrees with execution proceedings suits and all criminal cases and proceedings arising out of Nankar disputes should be held up until the settlement is given effect.

The Committee further suggested the withdrawal of all criminal cases arising out of nankar disputes. On 15 January 1948 the Prime Minister expressed in writing his desire to take action according to the terms of the compromise.

But, despite official settlement, the agitation continued in the nankar regions, due to the eviction of peasants. The officials involved in carrying out the terms of the settlement were accused of taking the sides of the zamindars. On 1 March, 1948, one employee of a zamindar was attacked by the peasants in Bahadurpur and on 27 March 1948 Sub-Inspector Karam Ali was assaulted, mostly by village women, during one of his nocturnal visits to the village. He had allegedly gone to satisfy his carnal desires. At the same time resistance to levy, procurement and illegal exactions increased in an ‘unorganized and spontaneous’ fashion as was noticed by some political activists.

The police camp in Lautabahadurpur continued to serve as a base for looting, burning peasant houses, raping and assaulting women, and for arresting and torturing rebellious peasants. The ‘land of eternal id’ was visited by occasional ‘choto keyamat’ or ‘little doomsday’ - as was remarked by a peasant woman whose house had been plundered and destroyed by police. On 18 August 1949 a huge assembly of peasants demanding the ‘Poor man’s Pakistan’ was attacked and fired upon by the police. Five persons were killed. East Pakistan Rifles were sent to Beanibazar police station and subsequently all of the 15 ‘affected’ villages, were ‘cowed down’. Sporadic struggle continued to take place in areas where peasant movement had developed before independence.
By March 1948, after the Second Congress of the CPI held in Calcutta, Communists embraced the Ranadive line, so called after the new Secretary V.T. Ranadive. Official policy on *tebhaga* during this period summed up the experience and aspiration of the struggling peasants in the following manner:

... the Kishans this year want to fight on tebhaga, but this year, not tebagha but the whole crop has to be brought to their houses as in either case they apprehend the greatest blow from the government or the jotedars. Their doubts are whether we can lead them successfully or not. But they say they have no other way but to fight. This is based on their experience of the constitutional hoax and on the confidence in their own fighting capacity revealed through tebhaga.34

It is true that the new line of the CPI gave fresh impetus to the resistance movement of the Hajongs, *nankars*, Santhals, schedule caste Hindus and the poor Muslim peasants of East Pakistan that they were already carrying out against the policy of levy and procurement of food grain by the government. Added to it was the dissatisfaction of these sections of the peasantry over the procrastination of the government in dealing with the *tebhaga* and the abolition of *zamindari*, *tanka* and *nankar* forms of rent and tenure. The restlessness of the peasantry expressed itself in several incidents of that period. Landlord property was attacked, granaries were looted in the tribal belts of Mymensingh by the Hajong, Dalus and the poor Muslim peasants. The latter sometimes used their own organisational form, labelled 'criminal gangs' by the authorities.35

The insurgents established control over 400 villages. Large tracts of lands were seized and distributed among the poor peasants. Grains seized from the government agencies were distributed among the people. 'People’s courts' were established in a gesture of replacing the colonial legal apparatus. The peasants stopped paying the landlords anything extra, and they also stopped paying the government any tax.36

In Nachol and Nawabganj area of Rajshahi, where *santals* formed the predominant section of the sharecroppers, peasants were led by Matla Sardar in conjunction with small groups of Communists led by Ila Mitra and her husband Romen Mitra. They
campaigned for tebhaga and the demand became popular. Ramu Sarkar, a participant in 1932 uprisings of the Santhals under Jitu Sardar. took an active part in this rebellion. An area of about twenty square miles was set up with village warning systems every two miles and armed peasant guards.

In an ambush the Santhals killed five policemen and an officer. As a result hundreds of police were sent to the area. Peasants were arrested and fired upon. Twenty two people were beaten to death, many tortured, hundreds of Santhals and Hindu peasants fled to India. Ila Mitra along with few other Santhals were arrested. Ila Mitra made a statement in the court in which she accused the police of physically torturing and raping her.

In Boitaghata, Dumuria, and Bagerhat police stations of Khulna, Struggle Committees were formed amongst the Hindu Schedule caste peasants to realize the demand of ‘land to the tiller’, abolition of the zamindari system, return of khas land to peasants and tebhaga. A police party, while entering a village called Kalsira in Bagerhat police station to arrest a Communist activist, tried to rape a woman. As a consequence a big crowd of schedule caste peasants organized themselves and attacked the police party to protect the honour of their women. One armed constable was killed and two other constables and the Sub-Inspector were injured. In retaliation the local ansars provoked a number of Muslim villagers inciting communal feelings and joined by police enforcements, committed inhuman atrocities against the villagers. Peasant houses were looted and demolished. Twenty people were arrested. Large number of schedule caste peasants fled to India.

Accusations and counter accusations were hurled by the media of both East Pakistan and India and the political leaders of both the countries started blaming the other for creating communal tension. As a result on 10 February 1950 communal riots started in Dhaka and other parts of the country. Taya Zinkin in her Reporting India quoted Pierra Dilan, a French-born zamindar of Comilla, who allegedly blamed the ‘stupid District Magistrate’ of Khulna who failed to understand the magnitude of the incidence of police
oppression in Kalsira and other surrounding villages. The Magistrate may not have been as innocent and naive as the word 'stupidity' suggests. The mentality of the functionaries of the new government and their experience in dealing with peasant rebellions in pre-partition days, I would argue, was largely to blame for the rise in communal tension. Hindu political leaders often complained against the inaction of the officials in protecting the lives and property of the Hindus. J N Mondol, a Central Minister in Liquat Ali Khan's cabinet, complained in his letter of resignation to Prime Minister on 9 October 1950, about police atrocities in some villages of Gournadi police station in Barisal district:

I wrote to the District Magistrate and the S.P. for an enquiry. A section of the local people also prayed for an enquiry by the S.D.O. But no enquiry was held. Even my letters to the District authorities were not acknowledged.40

What appeared to be 'stupidity' to a French-born zamindar was, in the opinion of the Members of the Opposition party in East Bengal Legislative Assembly,41 'seemingly studied indifference of the Government in tackling the growing lawlessness [which] was bound to encourage the outbreak of lawlessness in the country'. Religious distinctions and prejudices were used by the government and the landlords to crush the rebel centres in East Pakistan. Agents of government and the Muslim League told the Muslim peasants that it was 'well and good to refuse to pay levy and tanka, but Pakistan may be torn apart by this movement'.42

Many Muslim peasants joined in the attack on and plunder of property belonging to tribal, schedule caste and even poor Muslim peasants in different places43. As a result far greater migration of Hindus from East Bengal to India took place in 1950 than after the partition in 1947.
However, on 16 December 1950, after about two and half years of deliberation and amendments, the East Bengal Estate Acquisition and Tenancy Bill became an act. But the act could not come into operation for another six months during which time it had to be examined by a Central Government Commission and receive the assent of the Governor General of Pakistan. The bill was processed since its presentation on 7 April 1948 in the Legislature in a ‘Select Committee’ more than half of whose members were landlords and jotedars. All sorts of argument were placed in the Assembly to obstruct and oppose proposals that threatened the power and the interest of the land holders. However, this was seen as a victory of the more progressive elements in the League over the pro-zamindari lobby.

The Bill provided for the acquisition of rent-receiving interests by the State, envisaged the purchase of all landlord estates (excluding Khas) by the State and the abolition of all intermediary privileges, the abolition of intermediary tenures and conversion of former ryots (hereditary tenants) into proprietors paying taxes to the government. The limit for private holding was set at 33 acres. The burden of compensating the landowners was fixed on the peasants. The agrarian legislation passed in 1950 officially prohibited abwabs (illegal exaction) and free personal services in addition to the rent payable by tenants. Share cropping was allowed to exist within the definitional maze of the changed agrarian relations.

The bureaucracy on whom the implementation of land reform depended, finally ensured that nothing tangible happened. On 14 November 1952 the memorialists of Hatiya - Ramgati Island’s Association (See chapter 3, page 64) complained that the poor landless people belonging to the islands did not get lands although they had the ‘real right to get them’. They drew the attention of the government to ‘the most lamentable corruption’ prevalent in the khasmahal offices. On 10 July 1953 Chasi commented that there had
only been ‘a change of masters in the name of the abolition of zamindari’. ‘As a result,’ it said, ‘the agriculturists have fallen into the hands of heartless and cruel people’.47 The complaint was popular enough to be repeated by the poet we have quoted earlier. He wrote about the government officials ‘hardening attitude’ towards the peasantry.48 As Kamal Siddiqui has written, the ways of the tahsildar (revenue official) were a reminder to the peasantry that zamindari system, after all, was not yet over.49 As the peasantry was not involved in the implementation of the land reform laws the traditionally superior status of the zamindars and their agents persisted, as did the social and political inferiority of the peasantry. This reforms were scarcely significant. The Muslim zamindars succeeded in thwarting the intent of the reforms by evasion, or by simply disregarding them, whereas the Hindu zamindars largely succeeded in transferring resources to India. Besides, landlords were all entitled to compensation for the loss of their zamindari the burden of which the peasantry continued to bear for many more years.50

The Tanka system was abolished but by that time most of the Hajong peasants had been forcibly evicted and their lands resettled with Muslim immigrants from India. In fact, very few Hajongs were left to celebrate the victory of their struggle.51 But the fact that tenants had won the right to appeal to courts of law for protection was indeed a certain improvement in their legal position since the colonial period, though it was unlikely that the poor peasants would initiate the process even if the law accorded them the right. However, the tenants were obliged to settle for much less than their demands. ‘Land to the tiller’ remained a distant hope for most of them in spite of the struggles and the sacrifices of both Hindu and Muslim peasants of East Bengal.

It is true, as Bhattacharyya says, that in terms of the goals of the Communist movement these revolts marked a departure from the past traditions of peasant movements in many respects. The overwhelming bulk of the rebel peasants in tebhaga and tanka struggles came from backward communities of scheduled caste tribes. In the areas affected by the revolt, these communities were in the process of becoming Hindus;52 they had, in varying measures, adopted Hindu codes of conduct, and they had aspirations for a
'proper rank in the Hindu social order'. These aspirations ranged from claims to higher ritual rank to simple acknowledgement of communal dignity without a claim to specific ritual status. The movement for higher rank and ritual of the marginal Hindus also had its analogue among the Muslims. The major impediment to the realisation of these aspirations was the bureaucracy.

VI

It was only since the 1935 constitutional change in Bengal that the Muslim political elite of Bengal had any experience of running the government. The structure of the government was such that as ministers they were guided by and were dependent on the executive. This was specially true of times of crises. The executive had the authority and seemingly the training to do so. In colonial India the executive had the pretense of administrative neutrality vis-a-vis the ruled. The latter's perception and actions were recorded in regular reports which, through a process of bureaucratic filtration, eventually formed the basis of the advice that the secretaries gave to the ministers. The ministers' observation and understanding of political and social trends and tensions in the country were strongly influenced by the perceptions of the civil servants. In the absence of mass-based political organisation like that of the Indian National Congress, the dependence of Muslim politicians on the civil service machinery for information regarding popular movements and problems was almost total.

As early as December 1947, the Chief Secretary to the Government of East Pakistan, in a secret memorandum, drew the attention of all relevant government officials to the revival of agrarian agitation. He blamed the members of the Communist Party for doing so. He reminded the concerned officials to follow the Home Department Memorandum dated 18 January, 1947. He saw no change between January and December of the same year. 14 August had no place in his memorandum. He urged the officials to use...
their influence privately to settle such disputes amicably and where trouble was acute and widespread, to persuade the jotedars to accept a 60:40 basis of division. While doing so, however, they were told not to allow Communists and other agitators to create trouble.54

Thus a significant policy decision was taken at the highest provincial Civil Service level while the elected Government was supposedly administering the country. A 60:40 basis was offered against the practice of equal share of the produce by the landlord and tenants while the tenants demanded two-thirds of the produce. The offer was made secretly down the line of administration on the expectation that the jotedars could be persuaded to accept the offer- an offer, if had been made publicly by the ruling party, might have given a new direction to the movement and spared some valuable lives.

But as in the pre-independence days, as Bhattacharyya has observed: 'the Government strategy' was to have government officials to arbitrate landlord-tenant disputes ... rather than to let the Communists have the credit'.55 In the Fortnightly Report of Chittagong Division in the first half of June, 1940, the policy was stated in the following manner, 'Landlords should be confidentially warned against entertaining requests from tenants through the medium of political agents'. We should note that important word 'warning' which was replaced by the policy of 'persuasion' advocated in the earlier directive. But it was added in the same paragraph of the memorandum that if the jotedars did not agree to the 60:40 basis then 'warn them that otherwise Government might be compelled to legislate for a basis less favourable to them'. The bureaucratic aspiration to some kind of a bonapartist role is clear in that passage from 'persuasion' to 'warning'.

The civil servants were hostile to the idea of class organisation of the peasants. Used to operating in a ma-baap relationship with the peasantry during the Raj, they found the intrusion of politics and political organisations to represent the interests of the latter always unpalatable. They also believed that they were the only protector of the peasants from the oppression of the zamindars. The Chief Secretary while submitting a summary of the 'Hajong Disturbances' to the Prime Minister, observed that a Stipendary Magistrate with first class powers was posted with 'a view to give (sic) protection to the aboriginal
tenants of the area against the oppression of the landlord'. As well, any initiative by the peasants that conflicted with the interests of the ruling elite was seen as mindless reflex action devoid of any consciousness on the part of the peasants. There was always a manipulation theory to explain every gesture the poor made towards the realization of their collective interests. Hence every kind of mobilization which was not initiated by the ruling elite was suspect. Paternalism was not shaken at all by the change of August 1947.

From the Memorandum cited earlier, there emerges a concern for the peasants but that too originated from the fear of class politics and the organisational weakness of the new state. On behalf of the Muslim nationalist elites the executives were containing the crisis which the former faced from the struggling peasants in the early days after independence. In the process the executives were marginalising the vibrant demand of the peasantry for self-respect through land and tenancy reforms.

Like their predecessors, the functionaries failed to see the protagonists of the threat to law and order. The peasant's problem was seen as an administrative problem demanding administrative solution. Thus the demands of the peasantry were shorn of all political content by the leader of the ruling party and the head of the government in East Pakistan. In his first address to the Commissioners of Divisions and Heads of Departments, the Prime Minister suggested that the government, with the communist-led peasant movements around the corner, was 'faced with an essentially administrative problem'. The ruling elite could only find 'outsiders', 'conspirators' and manipulators in the peasant movement for without them the latter did not move. The official reports on the agrarian struggles were not only full of metaphoric abuses; there was a perception of a clear conspiracy against the state. Thus the Hajong rebellion was described by the District Magistrate in a manner that echoed the tone of his colonial predecessor: ' [The Hajongs] are at the mercy of the Communists and their main leaders are caste Hindu Communists'. And on 28 January the Parliamentary Secretary in his letter to the Chief Secretary cautioned the latter about 'the subversive movement for establishing adibastan' [A Homeland for the Tribals].
The same was true for the nankar peasants: 'ignorant, illiterate, unsophisticated people who do not understand their own interests.' The officials did not mention, excepting in one or two stray reports, the conflict between the zamindars and the nankars. In case of the tribal Hajongs one officer did recognize the fact that the 'tribal people were exploited by more advanced people of the plains', but no action followed from this perception. Even when a field executive mentioned in his report (to the Deputy Commissioner) the 'bitter disputes between the zamindars on one side and the Nankar tenants on the other', the observation came not as a recognition of the tenant's cause but as a justification for police help for the zamindars. The conclusion was that the zamindars had been compelled to pray for police help. One Intelligence Branch report reduced the nankar movement to the whims and personal vendetta of a particular Communist leader. In the opinion of the Intelligence Officer:

In the beginning of 1947 the Communist leader Ajoy Kumar Bhattacharjee renewed the activities in the shape of Nankar agitation after a nasty case over the conversion of his sister to Islam at the instance of a man of the local Muslim Zamindar.

If this was the perceived cause of the nankar rebellion by the officials, the conclusion about the direction of the movement could only be obvious. Almost with an air of discovery one report mentioned that 'it was interesting to note that the nankar agitation of the Communists was solely directed against the Muslim zamindars of the area.' On the other hand the Hajongs were described as 'enemies'. In the view of one official 'the Hajongs have never been credited for their extraordinary loyalty to the Government'. In fact, the closest the Hajongs ever got to being recognized as a people belonging to an independent country was when, after a police firing, one of them was described by an enquiring magistrate, as 'an apparently free citizen' of the state. Why apparently? Because the officials could not bring themselves to see other ethnic and religious groups as equal citizens of the state. Religious nationalism had not yet loosened its grips on the intellectual frame of the state and its officials, though some members of the ruling party
were pledging themselves from time to time to the idea of a secular state as the goal for the nation.

Indeed, the field official's confidence in dealing with the tenants was shaken by the presence of the Hindus and Communists. A report from the Superintendent of Police of the District Intelligence Branch betrayed this outlook. He felt that 'the tenants could be brought to a frame of mind amenable to reason and agreeable to an amicable settlement' but for the Hindus and Communists. The principal task of the state functionaries, to turn antagonistic contradictions into non-antagonistic ones and thereby to maintain class rule found its place in this expectation but the method of doing so preferred the use of force over persuasion as when the SP recommended 'action' against 'active agitators'. The executives also contributed to the creation of a social fear. The manner in which the incidents in the areas of the peasant movement were reported provides an important insight into the ideology of counter-insurgency practices. In a Confidential Report dated 11 September 1949 the SP Sylhet mentioned that in June of the same year at Mehari in Borolekha police station elaka, adjoining villages of Saneswar, a big procession was taken out with anti-state slogans which the SP said caused fear and alarm.

The official perception of the Communists and their activities were at times products of over-blown reports which themselves contributed to alarmist tendencies. By the middle of 1948, the officials felt that the nankar dispute in the district could not be put down unless drastic action was taken against the Communists. While it was necessary to get a government order to do so, the process of 'putting down' the peasants did not wait for government orders anyway. The field officials especially the police acted on their own and sometimes under the guidance of magistrates, which was a practice developed by the Raj and enshrined in the Police Regulation Book.

The civil servants and other officials of the state, however, did not speak with a single, orchestrated voice. At times emphases shifted in the language of the reports that spoke of the threat to law and order posed by the struggling peasants. For example, the first
information sent by the police through telegrams to higher officials at Dhaka after the police action at Saneswar clearly mentioned the ‘fact’ that the police were attacked with deadly weapons by the villagers before they opened fire. But in a subsequent report by the Commissioner of the Division it turned out to have been only an apprehension!

The actions the officials took against peasant movements were intimately bound up with their perception of themselves as ‘protectors’ of the people. As early as January 1948, an official suggested that the aboriginals might be told that the Government would always view the former’s special needs with great sympathy. Even the inclusion of a tribal representative to the newly formed Constituent Assembly was also suggested for consideration by the District Magistrate.69 That was in the very early days of victorious nationalism when the demands of the unassimilated social groups were still viewed with sympathy. With the development of tribal and peasant movements the bureaucratic remedies started to imitate colonial measures taken in similar situations. The Commissioner’s Report on the tanka movement of 19 April 1949 runs thus:

We should declare the area to be in a disturbed state and to post punitive police .. Another important reform that may be effected is the improvement of the means of communication.70

A flag march, as suggested by his colonial predecessor Bastin, was also suggested. Speed boats, a Minister’s visit, a ‘talking machine with batteries’ were all considered important in dealing with the agitation but the question of speedy tenancy reforms found no place in this report. Sometimes even individual officers who had had experience of handling peasant movements prior to political independence were brought to the scene. Important field officials, who, according to a Communist activist, had earned notoreity during the pre-independence nankar movement, were transferred on promotion to Sylhet district.71

The field executives were quick to shed any stance of neutrality and objectivity that might be professed by senior civilians. The Deputy Commissioner, while providing one of the higher government officials with materials so that the Prime Minister could give an answer
to the Notice of Adjournment motion brought about by Jatindra Nath Bhadra wrote, 'I hope Government will not stand this nonsense and the threats of the enemies of the state and will give a crushing reply and defeat to them.' This was not a case of an officer expressing his loyalty to the party in power, rather it was an act of affirmation of the civil-service ideology. The civil servants were not following any directive or policy guidelines given out by the party in power. They were in fact guiding the latter instead, and were taking initiative in handling the problems they faced.

When suggested by the Governor that the cases against the Hajong rebels which were lodged during the last days of the Raj be dropped, preferably at an early date if the Government so wished, the District Magistrate of Mymensingh took a very different view. From the Governor's note it is clear that the ruling party was considering the withdrawal of the cases. According to the Governor the Hajongs' principal preoccupation was with the criminal cases arising out of preindependence 'disturbances'. But the District Magistrate opined to the Assistant Secretary to the Government that the question of 'withdrawal of the cases might be dropped as the prosecution had already brought before the court whatever evidence was possible to secure'. Thus a step towards a political settlement of the Hajong demand by the ruling party was trapped within the narrow legal outlook of the bureaucracy who survived the Raj into the days of the national government.

In their attempt to destroy the peasant movement, not only did the bureaucracy distort the process of political solution, they also defied the authority of the political leaders in government. In response to a complaint against the police atrocities by a peasant activist the former Prime Minister Khwaja Nazimuddin ordered an immediate enquiry. These atrocities were committed on 1 April, 1948, after settlement of the nankar problem by the Muslim League. In fact, the Prime Minister was quite outraged by the nature of the police brutality that was unleashed on the nankars. In a note he wrote to the Chief Secretary on 1 April 1948 Nazimuddin expressed his anger in no uncertain manner: 'If the facts are found to be correct, even twenty five percent, the most drastic action has to be taken against the police personnel involved.'
The SDC on 4 August 1948 and the ADC on 31 August 1948 in two separate reports concluded that the petition indulged in exaggeration. Although the SDC confirmed the excesses perpetrated by the police, the ADC suggested that 'no action on the allegation was necessary'. One important reason for not taking any action was the alleged fact that the complainant was a Communist. As a matter of fact this was not true. Ismail Ali, the person in question, was a member of the Communist Party before independence. But during the Sylhet Referendum he dissociated himself with the Party because of the latter's policy on the Referendum. When he made this complaint he was an active member of the local Muslim League. For almost a year after the incident had taken place no reports were prepared on the matter, not to speak of taking any action as demanded by the Prime Minister. In the eyes of the bureaucracy this case lost its urgency after this lapse of time. The petition of Ismail Ali could not be traced either, and by that time Nazimuddin had been replaced by Nurul Amin as the Prime Minister.

In reports from the lower level of the judiciary critical remarks were sometimes made about the nature of police actions carried out in villages witnessing peasant unrest but actions were seldom taken for these lapses. Instead, as the official story moved up the bureaucratic hierarchy, there was a deliberate scaling down of the magnitude of police atrocities and a blowing up of the size of the threat that the struggling peasants posed to law and order. For example, the police radiogram immediately after the firing at Saneswar reported 'a mob of about six hundred' who attacked them; but the number of people swelled as the narrative developed. The number now included all the villagers (about two thousand people) with deadly weapons. In fact the villagers held jathas (spear), sulfi (forked spear), and lathis (bamboo staff)- all implements of labour and means of self defence that the peasants used in their everyday life. Against the organized force of the state armed with modern weapons those implements could hardly appear to be threatening or overwhelming to the lawful authority of the state, as was claimed by the officials in their reports. By contrast the reports maintained a conspicuous silence over the nature of police action and the magnitude of oppression of the villagers.
by the police. Although excesses committed by the police were occasionally recognized by higher officials they were not mentioned in the reports of the district administration. Most of the time these reports were meant to justify police firing, something required by the Police Regulation Book as ‘a routine’. Some occasionally sympathetic reports however contained pictures of police atrocities: the Police, in fact, raided the villages, looted the peasants’ homes and hearths, broke their utensils, took away their cattle and wealth, beat them and at times raped the peasant women. But this old form of oppression was now given a new name. Ila Mitra, a woman Communist leader of Nachol rebellion, mentioned to the Court the expression ‘Pakistani Injection’ that had been used by members of the Police force who raped her while she was being held in police custody.

In fact, the purpose of official coercion appeared to have shifted from punishment to repression. Torture was increasingly administered not always to obtain information or punish an activist in the movement, but to discourage people from forming political and social ties with the other. At least, that is how the SP, DIB, Sylhet measured the success of the police action in Beanibazar Police Station on 21 August 1949. He reported that ‘The injured persons who could not be arrested and who fled away are not getting support or help from the villagers.’

The officials were also engaged in exacerbating religious conflicts as a way of containing peasant and popular movements. The state found it convenient to appeal to the ‘primordial’ sentiments rather than to the civil sentiments of the people. So we find a Police Superintendent forming mujahid parties in Mymensingh in 1950 to ‘arouse the feelings and enthusiasm of the Muslim population’. This was not a case of the eccentricity of a particular police officer, rather it was the stated policy at least in some circles of the government. On 27 October 1949, the Director of Ansars issued a circular titled ‘Points for Publicity’ in which the Ansars were urged in the interest of national reconstruction to ‘work the audience up to a state of enthusiasm based on religious appeal where necessary and then utilise[d] that enthusiasm to the best advantage of [the]
To some executives religion thus became a powerful means of reinforcing patriotic loyalty. Even though there was a large number of Muslim participants and leaders in these rebellions, they were assimilated into the categories of ‘Hindus’ and ‘Communist’ and at times perceived as temporarily ‘misguided section of the movement’.

In the reports of field officials there was no equivocation about the communal composition of the struggling peasants. On 18 August, 1948 the Deputy Superintendent of Police and a Magistrate jointly sent a report to the Superintendent of Police and the Deputy Commissioner of Sylhet. They stated in the report that the Communist activities had spread over an area of some 15 villages inhabited purely by the Hindus in an inaccessible locality and situated in Beanibazar and Borolekha police stations. But initially the people who lived in the area of the struggle were divided conceptually into two categories: one local Muslim and law abiding Hindus and the other enemies of the state. Law abiding Hindus in this case were the Hindu zamindars who were cooperating with the functionaries in quelling the movements of the peasants; some of them were even ‘respectable’ in the perception of the officials. Some of the Hindu landlords in fact did render some positive cooperation to the functionaries in putting down the rebellion. From time to time, the Muslim League leaders appealed to the Hindu elites, and some of the latter joined in the efforts to resist any organized initiative of the peasants for land reform and self improvement.

But the perceived unity between the Hindu and the Muslim elites was tenuous. The peasant demand was viewed by the ruling elite from the position of Muslim nationalism, while it was defended by the Hindu elite from a similar communal standpoint which now became obvious in the discussion that took place in the EBLA following police action in the areas of peasant movement. The appeal of unity towards the Hindu elite by the Muslim ruling elite was weakened by mistrust. The executive thought that in a time of difficulty the Hindus would surely desert and hence considered it eminently desirable to plant some Muslims among the exclusively Hindu population. The Commissioner of Chittagong Division suggested an easy way of doing this: by giving away to Muslims any
lands that might come into the possession of the *khas mahal* (government land). He even suggested that the Government should adopt as a policy that ‘all future settlements of Khas Mahal lands in the affected villages would be concluded with Muslim tenants’ in Sylhet. The same measure was suggested in *Hajong* areas of Mymensingh. As a result according to a printed Bengali leaflet by the Communist party ‘one hundred and fifty thousand bighas of land in Mymensingh was seized by the State. On 13 July 1951, the Governor of the Province in his Tour Note for the district of Mymensingh recorded that ‘11,500 souls had been settled in the border areas along Assam;’ some of the refugee families had been given ‘vacated Hajong houses’. One important outcome of this approach was the nearly-forced emigration of a large number of non-Muslims to neighbouring India, resulting in a deep scar in the body politic of East Bengal. What started as a tactic on the part of the government - no doubt a lesson learned from the Raj - to deal with agrarian agitation ended as a downright and flagrant violation of all legality and human rights.

This kind of approach to agrarian agitations betrayed all the insecurity of the ruling elite. Firstly, there was the fear of a rival nationalism, that of Indian ruling elite, which was physically more powerful and organized. This sense of insecurity influenced the perspective of the officials to quite an extraordinary degree. The local officials often mentioned that ‘the Communists hailed from the Indian Dominion’ and a neat equation emerged about the social composition of the rebellious peasants. In a report dated the 21 August 1949 the Superintendent of Police, Sylhet described the procession of about a thousand (armed) peasants as ‘Communists who were one and all Hindus’. An equation was thus being clearly suggested: the terms ‘insurgent peasants’, ‘Hindus’ and ‘Communists’ had become interchangeable. This perspective dominated the outlook of both the bureaucracy as well as the Muslim League politicians.

Thus a process began by which the meaning of ‘Pakistan’ moved closer towards the conception of a ‘Islamic State’ that implicitly defined the non-Muslims out of the nation. And that was why, as early as December 1947, the District Magistrate of Mymensingh
could detect among a section of the ethnic population a ‘fear of Pakistan’. That initial fear of a nationalism based on religious solidarity made the religious and ethnic minorities anxious to define their place in the new nation. On the other hand the euphoria for Pakistan, as detailed in chapter 2, gave some sections of the Muslim peasants the sense of having a clearly defined place in their ‘Holy land’. One can argue that both the fear and euphoria of the concerned social groups were addressed by the Communist activists of East Bengal who tried to dispel the former and build on the latter.

Referring to the statement of the Prime Minister which spelled out the official view and actions of one such movement, we noticed that the narrative therein had actually evolved through a process of bureaucratic reporting, originating at the level of the field officer, and finally finding expression in the form of a public statement made by the Prime Minister in the Legislative Assembly. The PM however had only lent his office and name to a narrative he did not create. The narrative owed its origin in the office of the Deputy Commissioner who constructed it from the reports of the Intelligence Branch, a very specialized department created by the Raj to gather intelligence in order to help formulate actions by the administration against any organisation and/or individuals and movements engaged in any anti-State or anti government activities. This became the core branch of the counter insurgency establishment which always remained invisible before the eyes of the people but always extended its piercing gaze at any gesture of self assertion by any section of the people deemed hostile by the ruling elite. This department was in fact the dark room of the state apparatus where images of popular movements were developed, coloured and perhaps most of the time distorted. Indeed the DC depended mostly on the IB’s reports. He wrote to the Chief Secretary that as directed by him he had looked into the District Intelligence Branch report of the last 8 months as he put the final touches to the government’s version of the story of the nankar rebellion.

Thus the Prime Minister’s statement stood out as a testimony to a process through which the political elite started losing their initiative to the functionaries of the Muslim League Government in dealing with the struggling sections of the peasantry of East Pakistan.
The officials in their dealings with the peasant movement were engaged in a process of fabricating the theory of the nation. They were appealing to the religious solidarity of the majority community and thereby dividing the nation, while the ostensible goal of post-colonial nationalism was to unify it. Thus this new nation failed to set itself up as a transcendent reality to all the differences anterior to it.

VII

To sum up, the Prime Minister's statement in the Assembly could be seen as a part of the liberal democratic project of the state in which the Government was required to be answerable to the representatives of the people for its actions, especially police 'excesses'. It also shares another trait of the official mind that the Raj developed in the subcontinent: comforting generalisations, in which any action of the people must be construed as manipulation by outsiders. The theme of external manipulation of the masses -to borrow from Sarkar, one so dear to the colonialists,94 - was adopted by the Muslim League leaders with regard to the peasant movements immediately after independence in East Pakistan. It thus entered into the discourse of the post-colonial official nationalism almost from the very beginning of Pakistan. This blinkered vision not only led to a particular kind of action by the ruling elite which in so many ways continued the perceptions of colonial state functionaries and seriously disrupted the process of nation-building.

The Muslim League government in East Pakistan, immediately after independence, was faced with problems not dissimilar to those seen in parts of neighbouring India. The euphoria over 'independence' often led to a revitalisation of peasant/tribal movements based on radical demands and organised under radical leadership. The task of nation-building meant containing these movements and their radical potential without in any way jeopardising the 'unity' of the 'people', which the young state was supposed to represent.
In other words, the task was not simply one of repression but also one of ideology: what vocabulary and rhetoric would the ruling elite employ in order to marginalise any opposition while reinforcing its own legitimacy? The rhetoric that the Pakistan state developed was one that ultimately divided the ‘people’ or ‘the nation’. Unlike the Indian state, it could not neutralise opposition simply by branding it’s ‘enemies of the nation’ (that is, Communists). The Muslim League government went a step further and identified ‘Communists’ with the ‘Hindus’. The ploy did not work as much of the opposition to the government arose among the Muslims themselves. The marginalising rhetoric therefore sounded more and more empty as grievances against the government mounted and spread among the population.
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On 29 September 1948 the police opened fire on thousands of people who, defying a prohibition order under section 144 Cr PC, had assembled to cut a canal at Ramdas tek (Loop) of the Halda river at Madarsha in southern Chittagong. According to the executive enquiry held the day after ten people were killed, and twenty-two people were hospitalized with bullet injuries of various nature. Altogether 44 rounds of bullets were fired upon the people. This event highlighted an issue that was acquiring urgency in the countryside: the question of control of water resources. It also gave an indication the kind of popular politics that could evolve around that question.

The state violence through which a process of popular mobilization was crushed no doubt achieved its immediate goal of establishing ‘law and order’. The terrified villagers deserted the villages after the incident. But political mobilization continued to take place. Thousands of people rushed to the hospital in the district Headquarters in Chittagong to see the dead. A procession and a meeting to condemn the police firing was scheduled but could not be organised due to the imposition of section 144 of the Cr PC for one month in the district town.

In the meeting of the Muslim League workers which was held at Dhaka on 23 June 1949 Maulana Bhashani referred to the incident and condemned the government. The bitterness this incident generated among the people was reflected years latter in an election tract titled ‘Six Years of Zalimshahi’ published by the United Front in which the
shooting at Madarsha was mentioned as an important instance of the oppressive acts of
the Muslim League government.\textsuperscript{5}

The mobilization at Madarsha essentially addressed the question of water control - a very
important issue, that affected directly the lives of millions in the countryside in East
Bengal. The problem of untimely abundance and scarcity of water awaited solutions that
called for massive effort by the national government. However, the approach adopted
was often too bureaucratic. Ignoring the advice of several development experts that to
tame the rivers, to construct embankments and drainage channels, to excavate the silted
tanks and canals called for 'giant efforts' by human labour\textsuperscript{6} the Muslim League
government unhesitatingly adopted the bureaucratic approach to water control.

The other argument I will develop in this context will relate to the field executive,
especially the District Officers, who played a key role in shaping these schemes. These
officers who constituted an important part of the colonial district administration were
responsible for the development programmes of the national government. The experience
of Madarsha illustrated a conflict that was central to the process of nation-building in post-
independence East Bengal. This was the conflict between the bureaucracy and the
people. Time and again, the popular urge to participate in government programme was
thwarted by a bureaucracy nurtured in the traditions of colonial administration. A major
failure of political leadership lay in its inability to resolve, or even manage, this
contradiction. Our discussion of the control of water resources aims to highlight this
problem in recent East Bengal History.

\textbf{II}

Due to the long neglect by the colonial administration the river system reached a 'sorry
state' by the time the country became independent. Writing in 1926 Panandikar
mentioned that apart from the deltaic part the rivers in other parts of Bengal were silting
The changes in the Teesta during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the changes in the course of the Brahmaputra, Ganges or the Meghna during the last two hundred years, according to Abdur Razzaq, ‘had been more momentous facts’ in the life and labour of the people than ‘all the noisy activities of the government during the same period’.8

Water logging, drainage, salinity, and silting up of the river beds and canals and at times sudden changing of course by rivers became the salient features of the water system in the province. As early as September 1947 the League activists in the Workers Conference drew attention of the government to the condition of rivers and rivulets, canals and marshes, ditches and drains which needed re-excavation.9 Innumerable canals and large number of rivers were silted up. Important among them were the khal from Taltola to Lohajang and river Ichhamati in Dhaka district, the waterways in North Barisal, the north Bengal river system, especially the Karatoa, the Bangali, the Nagar, the Ichamati and the Fuljhore in the districts of Bogra and Pabna. The Gazna Bil in Pabna and Salta Bil in north Barisal needed immediate drainage. The canals between the Brahmaputra and the Dhaleswari were in a bad shape. The following canals (i) Narsingdi to Hatirdia via Shibpur; (ii) Baliapara to Narayanganj, (iii) Tetlaba Rupsi, (iv) Rajarbari to Pubail (v) Mugrapara to Narayanganj, (vi) Munshiganj to Dighirpar, and the rivers Sitalakhya, Banar, Buriganga, Bangsal-all in Dhaka district-needed immediate resuscitation. Panchkulia and Chitalmari khal in Bagerhat subdivision in Khulna were silted up. In Comilla the Gumti embankments which were built during the Raj developed breaches in a number of places and the re-excavation of the Titas close to Akhaura was long due. The Teesta and Atrai in the north Bengal and the canals linking Gourmudi and Shikarpur and Mahilara linking Nalchara - all in Barisal district were silted up. In Sylhet the river Surma was dead and the Kushiara was dying and all the little canals dried up. Over and above, the haor of Kaligot and Halir Haor of Dharmapasha police station in Sylhet were affected every year due to inadequate drainage.10
[Source: Haroun Er Rashid, Geography of Bangladesh, Dacca, 1977, p. 57]
The situation deteriorated every year and in 1951 the Governor of the Province drew
attention to the problem. He mentioned in his Tour Note that the mouth of Gorai in
Kushtia district had been silted up and was causing serious inconvenience to the
people.11 The District Magistrate of Kushtia reported that the natural drainage of the
area which existed 50 years ago had been closed 'on account of the silting up of the
rivers'.12 In Rajshahi the Bural, the Narad and the Old Atrayee were almost dead.13
The members of the Hatiya Ramgati Islands' Association informed the government that
the canals in the islands were in a bad condition.14 An additional problem was that of
salinity in the coastal Khulna rivers which needed embankments urgently. Gradual silting
of the Someswari, Nital, Kangsa, Khagra in Mymensingh district resulted in the failure to
contain the onrush of water from the Garo Hills as the depth of the river beds decreased
over time. As a result, Durgapur, Kamla Kanda, Netrokona and Mohanganj police
stations were badly flooded regularly. Almost every year, Netrokona subdivision was
affected by flood wrote the Yugantar correspondent.15 Feni sub-division was also
affected by flood almost regularly whereas the Sadar Subdivision of Noakhali had to
faced with the problem of water-logging. Regular inundation of paddy fields followed by
rains caused immense damage every year in parts of Begumganj, Ramganj and Senbag
police stations of Noakhali.16 On 4 July 1952 a serious flood in Gumti affected almost
half of the people in Comilla district. Large areas in the town were also inundated with
flood water. Vast areas of Bogra, Jessore, Netrokona and Sirajganj sub-division went
underwater in July that year. Increase in the water level in the Surma also caused flood
in Companyganj, Gosaihat and Jaintia areas of Sylhet.17 About Khulna, the Governor
observed in 1951 that saline water breaking the embankments had destroyed the rice
crop the year before and there was none in 1951 either.18 A Secret Report on the
Situation in East Bengal in the second half of June 1953 mentioned that the embankment
in Gumti was breached at a number of places due to high current and increased in
volume of water. An area of approximately ten square miles of cultivated land was
inundated causing damage to crops and hamlets. In fact, the breaches of the
embankment on this river became an annual feature.19 And the 12-mile long Dhuruy
Khal in Fatikchari police station in Chittagong got flooded regularly affecting people of
three to four police stations.\textsuperscript{20} And during the rains the low lying areas on either side of the Halda used to be frequently flooded causing damage to crops and property of the people.\textsuperscript{21}

Almost every year during the last days of the Raj and the beginning of the new rule, local flood caused crop losses that aggravated the food situation in the country. We know from our earlier Chapters that the government was trying various methods to tackle the food problem in the province. Those efforts were limited to the schemes of procurement and distribution of food-grains and, moreover, these were short term emergency measures. But the question of increasing the volume of food-grain production in the long run was directly related to the question of water management.

If one goes through the EBLA debates and discussions and the government documents and party resolutions during the years of Muslim League rule, one might conclude that the ruling elite of East Pakistan, contrary to accusations by Professor Abdur Razzaq, took the issue of water control quite seriously.\textsuperscript{22} A number of schemes were adopted and executed as a testimony to the development perspective of the government in the sphere of water control. The Minister for Irrigation told the Assembly that there was 'no irrigation proper in the province'. Colonial neglect was blamed for the problem. On the plea of heavy annual rainfall of about 80 inches, irrigation was perceived to be unnecessary in the region by the Raj. So the genesis of the incomprehension of the problem of water management lay, in the official perception, in an uneven distribution of rainfall which affected crops both ways - once by shortage and again by abundance of water.\textsuperscript{23} Over time the neglect of water management led to a number of serious problems for the region. 'There was so much water', observed Abdur Razzaq, 'that it required detailed, careful attention before it could be useful was an idea which just did not occur, not till the end of the British rule'.\textsuperscript{24}

The gross insensitivity of the colonial rulers to the ecology of the province was manifested in the railway construction programme undertaken in this part of the province
in 1897. The railways created a problem of water logging in various parts of the province.25 The area to the east of Kulaura-Sylhet railway line was 'greatly affected'; owing to the small numbers of bridges, the water could not be adequately drained off. As a result, at the onset of rain a vast area in the police stations of Kulaura, Fenchuganj, Baralekha, Beanilazar, and Gopalganj went under water.26 A memorandum from the inhabitants of Charkhai in Sylhet district informs us that the number of bridges on the Fenchuganj-Sylhet Railway Bridges were not sufficient for the drainage of water of the area.27 Again due to the construction of Bhairab Railway Bridge the water descending from the hills of Assam was stranded due to inadequate outlet. The sudden rise in the water level caused total destruction of crops. The bawa crop was regularly destroyed in Kishoreganj, a deficit subdivision of Mymensingh district.28 The District Magistrate of Mymensingh informed the Governor that the Bhairab Bridge caused flood in the haors. While touring Mymensingh, the Governor noticed a large sheet of water on both sides of the railway line beyond the Gaffargaon Railway Station. But before the next station the train crossed a river, by a railway bridge which almost adjoined the railway station after Gaffargaon. The surface of the water in the river seemed much lower than the sheet of water along the railway line. 'It appeared to be about 10 or 12 feet below the ground on both banks.'29 The Governor forwarded his observation to the relevant Department to attend to the problem created by the Bridge. The national Government inherited these problems. 'Alien rulers,' complained a Member of the Assembly, 'did not help us in this respect (water management) rather harmed us'.30

But the post-colonial government do not seem to have learnt from its own criticism of colonial practices. East Bengal started with about 600 miles of good road but immediately after independence a Five Year Road Plan was initiated by the government which set a target of five thousand miles of good road in the province. By August 1951 work on two thousand miles was nearing completion.31 The 'very ambitious scheme' of road building showed an equally large degree of callousness toward the ecology of the Province. To the thinking of many, the priority was wrong. They suggested that irrigation should have received priority over road building. But the ruling elite, for various reasons, went ahead
with road building. As a result a lot of crop lands were wasted,\(^\text{32}\) and areas prone to malaria were created all along the Dhaka-Aricha road in Manikganj subdivision in Dhaka district. Reverend A H Newnham, an Australian missionary in Mymensingh, informed the Governor that the eighty-five mile long border road which the government built along the Assam border had dammed up the river water and damaged crops as there were no culverts under the road.\(^\text{33}\)

The East Bengal river systems known for their abundance of silt made cultivation precarious in certain areas. Uneven accumulation of silt in the river beds resulted in collection of water in certain areas and lack of irrigation in other areas. The dead and dying rivers of Rajshahi were an important factor affecting public health.\(^\text{34}\) Malaria was rampant in the districts of Jessore and Kushtia as a result of the drying up of the rivers. A Member from Manikganj held the view that malaria increased in Manikganj because of the silted up rivers. The villages around Teesta, Atrai, Ichhamati were depopulated due to malaria and kala-azar.\(^\text{35}\) And Mymensingh became a hotbed of cholera, smallpox, kala-azar and malaria due to the silting up of Brahmaputra.\(^\text{36}\) In fact, malaria became endemic in many areas in the province due to water logging and claimed about 4 \textit{lakh} lives.\(^\text{37}\) Dead rivers and malaria, one of the biggest claimants of life in East Bengal, had causal connections.

There was yet another problem which affected the crops and which needed immediate attention. A 'pernicious weed' called water hyacinth introduced in Bengal as an 'ornamental plant' around 1916 turned into an 'unmanageable menace'.\(^\text{38}\) It covered most of the low lying areas, choking tanks, water ways and ponds all over. It impeded the flow of water, obstructed navigation and irrigation, harboured insects, pests and their louvae, caused high degree of evaporation and affected fish life through eutrofication.\(^\text{39}\) Water hyacinths destroyed lot of \textit{Aus} in many areas, and in Comilla, as told by a MLA, the \textit{Aman} could not be grown due to these weeds.\(^\text{40}\) For instance, an area of about 20,000 acres of paddy lands, stretching about 8 miles from Karanpur village of Akhaura Union to Pattan Union in Comilla district, were reported to be 'terribly menaced' by these
weeds. But the elimination of water hyacinths also was linked with the drainage of the water bodies.

The excavation of silted up rivers not only helped carry extra flood water but also made the rivers navigable throughout the year and destroyed malaria in the opinion of one Muslim League MLA. It would have also cleared water hyacinths. The problem created by dead and dying rivers was one that was raised in the Assembly by Members of all groups. They introduced a number of Motions in the March 1948 Session of the Assembly to draw attention of the government to the pitiable condition of the river system in the province. And it was not that the problems had not been perceived at all the levels of government. The Minister of Irrigation emphasised that the ‘Resuscitation of dead and dying rivers’ was connected ‘with the food of the country’, ‘the health of the country’ and in fact, ‘the entire life problem of the country’. In the discussions that took place in the Provincial Assembly the following were mentioned as reasons for water control:

(i) for protecting crops from recurrent flooding.
(ii) to save people from great loss and hardships caused by erosion of the Padma, Meghna and other rivers.
(iii) for irrigation of agricultural land to increase productivity.
(iv) to make proper drainage to make waterlogged areas cultivable and free from diseases.
(v) to make waterways navigable for economic development.

To achieve these goals, the elected representatives insisted that the Government developed ‘a definite, well thought out, comprehensive’ water control plan for the province including excavation of canals, re-excavation of khals, resuscitation of dead and dying rivers and erection of embankments. Indeed, the expansion of irrigation was perceived to be the panacea for the solution of food problems in the election manifest of the United Front also.
The demand for proper management of water became important after political independence. In a memorandum to the Government on 17 September, 1948, the inhabitants of Churkhai in Sylhet demanded canals in their area. The memorialists stressed the need for drainage of water from the locality which, then suggested, could be done by digging 'a good system of canals' joining the Surma. The members of the Hatiya Ramgati Islands' Association in their memorandum to the Government on 14 November 1952 demanded the government's 'immediate attention' to 'the old and silted-up canals' which were in most cases responsible for bad crops in the area and occasional failure of crops - especially in the lowlands of the region. They asked for re-excavation of old canals for drainage of water and excavation of new canals along with embankments along the sea-coast.

On 22 February 1949 a District Agriculture Officer in his memorandum to the Director of Agriculture mentioned the need of the local people for a canal connecting the Brahmaputra and Laksha rivers. The demand for excavation and re-excavations of silted up canals and rivers was regularly made through petitions, memoranda and at times in the form of resolutions in public meetings. In the Workers' Conference of the Muslim League held at Dhaka on 6 and 7 September 1947, it was resolved that 'immediate arrangements should be made' for the water management of the rivers in [East] Pakistan. A Muslim League activist of Bogra demanded water control arrangements for the Brahmaputra and Jamuna and an embankment for the Teesta. In the leaflet titled 'The Demand of the Poor People', Maulana Bhashani expressed the immediate need of proper irrigation in the country. He also demanded a 'comprehensive plan' for the elimination of water hyacinths. In an appeal to the Chief Secretary some people of Bagura union in Sailkupa police station demanded a canal linking the village Dalitpur with the river Kumar. They felt that the existing canal was inadequate to flush out all the rainwaters. 'When the public meet us they demand so many things', told a Muslim League MLA, 'of this the most modest demand is the re-excavation of small canals'. As the problem of water hyacinths persisted, the Muslim League Worker's
Conference on 23 and 24 June 1949 at Dhaka resolved to organise eradication of this weed from the province. Members repeatedly harped in the Assembly on the menace caused by the weeds to the crops.

However, the government did not sit idle. For the period between 31 March 1948 to 31 March 1949 Rs 8 lakhs were sanctioned for excavation and re-excavation and drainage works for Rajshahi, Pabna, Mymensingh, Barisal, Sylhet and Chittagong. The Minister for Irrigation informed the Assembly of 51 schemes for improving the drainage and sanitary conditions of the country and helping the 'Grow More Food' campaign. Six schemes were reported to be in progress in the district of Rangpur; Dinajpur had been allotted three and Kushtia two, while Pabna, Bogra, Jessore, Khulna and Faridpur were allotted one each. Two schemes were in progress in the district of Barisal. Comilla got seven including Gumti Embankment Scheme which was expected to save 50 square miles from devastating floods, five in Noakhali, seven in Chittagong, and five in Dhaka where as Mymensingh and Sylhet were assigned eight and nine schemes respectively. The total area expected to benefit from the schemes was about 263,000 acres of land in the province and 28 lakh mounds of extra food grains was expected from the schemes.

In 1953, Rs 1,000,000 for drainage schemes and Rs 600,000 for special repairs for Gumti Embankment and a further Rs 1,181,000 for a number of Irrigation Development Schemes apart from the giant Karnaphuli and Ganges Kobadak multi-purpose projects was made available.

Obviously, sanctioning money for projects and offering technical solutions to the problem of water control was perceived to be the only task of the government by the nationalist leadership. A large fleet of 36 dredgers from Holland was ordered, delivery of which was expected to have been completed by September 1953. The dredgers were expected to operate in Faridpur, Kushtia, Mymensingh and Dhaka, covering about 5,000 square miles. By 1953, according to the government claim, 126 drainage schemes had been completed and another sixty approved.
The government's policy of controlling water resources came in for severe criticism by many activists both of the Muslim League and other shades. Members of the Opposition alleged that the Government 'lacked any comprehensive policy' for water management. Provash Chandra Lahiry in fact, blamed the government for 'bad planning of the schemes'. Not only did many schemes survive only on the pages of the government Budget; but also some schemes shown in the Budget provision for 1950 had actually been initiated by the colonial government. Abdus Sabur Khan, a prominent Muslim League member complained that many projects announced in 1948 had never been taken up for implementation. In some places projects were left incomplete or suffered from poor execution. Laksmipur embankment was stopped well before it was completed. An Opposition member complained that embankment work started in Noakhali stopped after sporadic execution. The Hangor Khal embankment in Chittagong, completed at the expense of Rs 70,000, broke immediately after it was formally inaugurated by the Minister. In Noakhali Rs 10,000 to Rs 12,000 was spent for excavating small canals which silted up again. A District Agriculture Officer reported to the Director of Agriculture on 22 February 1949 that a canal excavated by the District Board had the same fate. Abdul Hakim Mia, a Muslim League MLA, was frustrated the way the Irrigation Department conducted itself. He urged the Minister to see that all undertaking had been completed within a reasonable amount of time and should not have ended in schemes alone. There were complaints and resentment about the inadequacy of funding for the irrigation schemes. According to a Muslim League MLA, 'The sum of Rs 2[1] 3/4 lakhs for the irrigation of the province' was 'most inadequate and insufficient'. Maulana Bhashani complained against corruption in executing irrigation schemes, essentially, in selecting and designing of projects. Even the Governor of the Province drew the attention of the government to the unmitigated corruption of the Irrigation Department. He wrote in his Tour Note that 'It was alleged that the Contractor usually pays 5 per cent of the total amount to the Engineering Staff'. He was also informed that the Overseers and Engineers of the Subdivisional Officers Standard in the Irrigation Branch were rich enough to afford motor cars. The mismanagement and corruption of the Department was also the subject of criticism in the Legislative Assembly.
Some members of the Assembly complained against the official planning of the schemes and disagreed with many such plans. They also believed that some schemes had added to the miseries of the people. River Narod was excavated and was silted up in the following year. Dakatia khal in Raipur was excavated without any consideration of how much excavation would be needed to facilitate the flow of water. The amount of work done in Dhurung khal in Fatikchari was inadequate. In some schemes more land was wasted than reclaimed. In some other cases the schemes were executed at a time when the aus paddy had just sprouted in the field. Members complained that 'many of the projects could be accomplished at a much lesser cost'. Some members were quite angry about the failure of schemes and demanded 'punishment' for the officers involved in executing the projects.

In the March session of the Assembly in 1953, Nawajest Ahmed, a Muslim League MLA, complained that even after three years some schemes were still awaiting completion.

The Muslim League government put a lot of emphasis on dredging and the executives drew big schemes for water management. In his interview with the Governor, the Superintendent of Irrigation of Rajshahi, clearly expressed his preference for dredging when the former raised the question of water control in Rajshahi. The officers had no faith in local initiative nor in mobilizing the local resources for this 'gigantic task'; whereas most of these undertakings were of collective character and would have required the cooperation of many people to be successfully implemented. The government was criticised by members of the Assembly for being too dependent on dredgers. Some MLAs brought to the notice of the Government the necessity for easy drainage system and for cutting small khalis to drain out standing water during the rains. A member from Noakhali insisted that the government take up 'extensive step' for cutting small canals to help drainage along the coastal areas of Sudharam, Companyganj and Lakhhipur police stations. Small schemes were in fact in great demand as they needed small amounts of money and could be executed within a very short time. The Muslim League member
from Manikganj emphasised that small projects of irrigation would have done 'enormous good to the people' of Manikganj by arranging outlet for egress of water.73

Along with the demand for small projects came the demand for popular co-operation in their execution. Some Congress members were quite vocal in their demands for non-official participation in water management schemes. Provash Chandra Lahiry insisted that irrigation projects should have been proposed by a committee composed of 'locally important people' and officers of the Government.74 The demand for committees came also from some Muslim League members, Madar Box being the most insistent among them. He urged the government to issue instruction to local officers immediately to form committees to expedite the execution of the schemes.75 Suggestions for forming committees at district and sub-divisional levels continued to be put forward in the Assembly.76 The need for coordination in the field of water management was obvious by the intensity and scale of the problem that afflicted East Bengal in those days.

In a country where administrative boundaries were quite arbitrary and rarely corresponded to the limits of river systems, appropriate embankments and drainage channels required, considerable co-operation between different landholders, villagers and even district officials.77 Simple solutions like involving 'locally important people' as suggested by some Congress and Muslim League members could perhaps extend the base of local participation to a certain degree but possibly would have failed to generate sufficient enthusiasm among the vast number of people without whose involvement at the level of decision making and participation in these projects, success could not be expected. Given the relationship between the rural power structure and the bureaucracy,78 many projects were privately determined. Many projects were taken up to the mutual advantage of both these groups. Popular consultation prior to taking up such projects was avoided most of the time. Irrigation projects were designed to save the land of influential persons and objections were often raised from purely personal consideration when execution of works had started. Sometimes public officials would not care to save agricultural lands by making slight changes to the projects. The ordinary
people, for whose benefits the projects were undertaken, were not consulted. This attitude received a lot of criticism both from elected representatives and from sections of the public. Petitions, memoranda were regularly sent to the concerned ministry by the affected people. Dhirendra Nath Datta urged the government to hold meetings with the peasants in all unions before taking up the projects.79

But rural participation in water control, as it was espoused by many political activists of the time, was a project in class collaboration.80 Without being linked to the question of land distribution to the tillers, the issue of water management remained at the level of rhetoric only. The members of the EBLA, true to their class interest, articulated the claim of the rural well-to-do to have a share in the water resources of the nation. This was what was behind the demand for 'committees'.

On many occasions the ordinary people demanded to be consulted. In a memorandum to the Executive Engineer of Irrigation Department of Bogra Division of the Government the people demanded to be consulted about the proposed project, for they differed with the official decision in respect of the design of the canal. 'A change in plan', they maintained, 'could have saved a lot of agricultural land'.81

However, the antagonism of the bureaucracy toward popular participation or consultation with their representatives remained unabated. Abdul Ahad, a member from Satkhira, told the Assembly that the Government departments were 'callous and negligent' towards the grievances of the people. The departmental officers allegedly 'did not feel like taking' the opinion of the members in matters of water management schemes. In fact, the officers did not give any importance to any of their suggestions.82 These were typical complaints by the elected representatives. Mujibur Rahman, a Muslim League MLA, demanded that 'people's representatives should be consulted in free Pakistan'.83

But the government continued to depend on the bureaucracy. Any complaint about problems arising out of too much and too little water was sure to be followed by an official
report, entailing all the administrative paraphernalia that went into making such a report, on the situation. The Governor observed in his Tour Note of Rajshahi on 20 August 1951 that he still thought 'owing to the difficulty of movement in the country most of the surveying work' was done by the subordinate staff without any supervision or spot checks by higher qualified officers. Some of the Muslim League members had very little faith in the reports of these officials. Members often asked the Minister if he could visit the areas where problems relating to water control arose for his personal inspection of the grievances of the people. For a canal from Kushiar to Mathura in Sylhet district, to cite one example, the Minister was requested to acquaint himself with the problem personally.

III

In areas such as Madarsha where a large section of the community was affected every year by floods and other related problems, control of water resources was a strong and popular demand. In a report to the sub-divisional officer of Brahmanbaria, on 12 June 1950, one Ansar commander mentioned the enthusiasm and the spontaneity of the people who ‘lined up for selfless services and co-operation since they found in the project a substantial remedy to their age-long sufferings.’ During his fieldwork in the early 50's in East Bengal, Aird noticed the enthusiasm and involvement of the people in building a road on their own in a village in Dhaka. ‘Working for the most part after hours by moonlight’, wrote Aird, ‘the villagers undertook to construct the road and on another occasion a school house’. Such instances of collective participation in solving day-to-day problems in the countryside were not rare. Madar Box informed the government of the willingness of the people to offer ‘free labour’ for water control schemes. The Ansar commander mentioned earlier claimed in his petition to the sub-divisional officer that he had encouraged popular participation to clear out water hyacinths, that ‘terribly menaced agricultural land of a large area in Comilla’. The problem and the perceived solution was discussed in a ‘vast public meeting’ and the people were involved in
planning the project also. As a result, 'in the course of five days', claimed the
commander, 'the entire work was completed'. The barrage was constructed and the vast
tract of land about 20,000 acres was saved from the regular arrivals of the menacing
water hyacinths.

Examples may be found of popular involvement in nation-building projects encouraged
and initiated by the officials of the government. But such instances were few and far
between, and what happened in Madarsha, where about thirty to thirty-five thousand
people gathered on their own determined to control the annual flooding in the river Halda,
was, in the end, more typical of the situation. The people themselves evolved a solution
here that conflicted with the official answer to the problem.

The Halda, the river which created the problem, runs through the hilly region of Fatikchari
police station and then separated Hathazari and Raozan police stations and merged with
the Karnafuli a little above the Kalurghat bridge in Chittagong. It took a very zig-zag
course although forming quite a number of loop-like bends on the way. But the course of
the river could be shortened, in fact, by several miles by cutting small canals between two
points of the loops. Indeed, it became necessary to do so. The Halda flooded the low
lying areas of the region almost regularly causing damage to crops and property of the
people. The local people thought that if they could somehow straighten the river course
by cutting canals at the big bends, all their miseries caused by flooding would be remedied.

So in the month of September 1948, the people of the affected areas became anxious to
cut the canals. After failing in their effort to seek help from the government which did not
respond 'on account of paucity of funds', the people by themselves evolved a solution.
In February 1948 the people of the affected areas called a conference at the village,
Nanupur in Fatikchari police station which the Minister for Local Self Government
attended and presided over. The presence of a Muslim League Minister in this
locally-organised conference and the name of a local Muslim League activist among the
dead on 29 September 1948 bear testimony to the involvement of local level Muslim League organisation in this effort of the villagers at Madarsha.

But, according to the enquiry report, ‘the views of the people’ ran counter to the opinion of the experts of the Irrigation Department. The Department relied on the dredgers, the much acclaimed means of water control of the day. Moreover, the experts did not agree to the ‘indiscriminate tampering with the natural course of the river’. The problem of flood control, according to the concerned experts, needed to be tackled on a ‘scientific basis’. The Sub-divisional Officer of the Halda project in his deposition told that the investigation was going on under his supervision which involved a collection of hydrological data of the Halda river and all its tributaries, which was to be followed by a detailed survey of the main river and its tributaries and an aerial contour survey of the Halda catchment by Pakistan Survey Party. And after the conclusion of this investigation a scheme would have been submitted to the government with suggestions as to how best the flood problem could be tackled.

But the people would not wait that long. Their familiarity with governmental activities, well known for its procrastination in executing such schemes, made them restive. Even a Muslim League MLA failed to understand the delay, when it was so easy to re-excavate the dead and decadent rivers with popular participation. He questioned the Minister, using patriotic hyperbole not altogether unusual, whether the nation would excuse the delay when millions of people were suffering. The main reason for the delay, according to him, was lack of cooperation between the people and the officials in executing the schemes and the latter’s deliberate reluctance to seek cooperation of the people. To him the delay was ‘quite unnatural’ because the people demanded the project.

But the government continued to depend on its officers for reports regarding problems created by rivers and canals. Thus when a MLA suggested that the difficulties created by two loops that had been formed between the villages Gopala and Jagannathpur in Sylhet district be removed, the Minister for Irrigation informed him that the Government could not
act before it had obtained reports from the local officers.95 The slow nature of bureaucratic response was often at loggerheads with popular demands and initiatives. In the three thanas of south Chittagong, for example, one more flood meant the loss of one more crop with the attendant sufferings.

In the month of September, after the monsoon, the people of the affected areas ‘became anxious’ to cut the canals and announced their intention to do so as widely as possible by the beat of drums. A mobilization took place. The details on the process of this mobilization - which perhaps involved after-work small meetings in the courtyard of affluent peasants, informing each other on the *hat* days, leaders convincing the sceptics to take part in the project and other usual elements that come into operation in such mobilizations - are lacking. However, we know from the enquiry report by the SDO that the people were mobilized and they in fact succeeded in cutting three small canals at (1) Mekhal, (2) Kottalighona, and (3) Gohira, towards the middle of September. The people then decided to cut the *khal* at Ramadas *tek*. It was the biggest bend and the proposed canal was to be a little over one-fourth of a mile long, shortening the river route by about five to six miles.

On 29 September, a large number of people of Chibatali, Gumardan, Dharmapur, Baktapur, North Madarsha, Gurdwara, and other villages of the three *thanas* assembled at the spot to excavate the canal. The people who assembled were very determined and as a testimony to their determination the SDO quoted a number of people saying that ‘we must cut the *khal* and save the lives of the people of three Thanas. we do not fear bullets’. The enquiry report laid sufficient emphasis on the resolution of the ‘violent mob’ to defy government order prohibiting the excavation of the canal. ‘A large body of people were engaged’, says the report, ‘in cutting these canals’ and there was ‘no effective opposition from the landowners who were only a few in number’.

But serious opposition came from the district administration. The report is not very clear about the nature of resistance the ‘few landowners’ offered to the project. The officer-in-
charge of Hathazari police station learnt that opposition to this contemplated project would come from three different sources. The owners of land through which the canals were to be cut, according to the SDO, 'naturally objected strongly to this course of action'.

The next serious objection came from the Fishery Department. And the Irrigation Department was also 'strongly against such indiscriminate cutting of canals'. The report mentioned that the number of landowners was few, yet the state sided with them. The state not only recognised the inviolability of private property but ruthlessly protected the right of the few along with its own interest. The interest of the community became secondary to the interest of private property and governmental priorities. In fact, whenever the private interests and the community interests were at conflict the state sided with the former. It was mainly from this standpoint that the officials attempted to dissuade the people from cutting all the canals that the latter had decided to go ahead with.

The official document admitted that 'all persuasive efforts failed and the villagers became adamant' to carry out the project. As a result section 144 of the Cr.P.C. was imposed and the administration was determined to confront the situation, if necessary with violence. In fact, the latter resorted to violence and opened fire on the people. Amongst the ten who died were Dr Abul Khair Chowdhury, a member of the Union Board and Secretary of the local School Committee and Abdul Jabbar Bali, a local level Muslim League activist. Earlier on the same year on 11 April the police opened fire at the site of the re-excavation of Eochia khal of Satkania in Chittagong district. The conflict between the Irrigation Department and the people arose from a controversy regarding the selection of a site of the proposed excavation scheme.

But the firing at Madarsha was decisive. It successfully stifled the process of self-mobilization by the people in the countryside on the issue of water management. We do not hear of other similar attempts during the Muslim League rule. It is known from the complaints of the members of the Assembly that many such collective efforts as the Hangoar Khal Embankment Committee for instance ‘appealed to the minister many times’
for government help in the project but after failing in their attempt they refrained from proceeding on their own to execute the scheme. Maulana Bhashani referred to Madarsha firing, in one of his speeches, as an act that 'stultified popular initiative' in the country. 99

Thus, the events at Madarsha marked a significant departure from the normal practice of participation by the people in changing and controlling their own environment. The 'apparent paradox', as observed by scholars, that arose from the rural people's reliance upon the government for support and their lack of confidence in the representatives of the state was much less evident in this case.100 Madarsha defied the bureaucratic assumption, shared by many elite political activists, that 'the rural people were passive, fatalistic, uninterested in initiating anything of their own, incapable of undertaking initiative to change their lives', and they needed constant prodding and supervision.101

For all these ills, a Muslim League member blamed the British for depriving the people of their capacity to act for themselves. He also observed that the people approached the government, even after the British had left, 'in good old fashion with prayers and petitions, with deputations and memoranda, urging upon the Government the urgent and imperative necessity of adopting immediate measures - as the Government may deem fit and proper'. The MLA lamented that the people could not think of any other method of redressing their grievances of their distress.102 But Madarsha showed quite a different pattern of political mobilization. The people there, in fact, made use of the changed political circumstance that was inaugurated in August 1947. They invited the Muslim League Minister and apprised him of the magnitude of the problem and resolved to go ahead with their own project bypassing the District Administration. The 'co-operation' which was advocated by the District Administration later in the form of postponing the excavation of the river was perceived by the people as only another version of the old practice of 'implicit subservience' to the directives of the Government in the name of co-operation. In the Government's perception, the people had deliberately disregarded their Union Board President's advice, who implored the participants, indeed being asked by
the District Administration, to maintain the status quo and follow the Government directives.103 But Madarsha enacted, if one may say so, a minor rebellion against all that bureaucracy stood for - that is ‘implicit submission and unquestioning surrender to powers that ruled’.104 The collectivity that expressed itself in a festive atmosphere- ‘the people in the mob were beating drums and playing sanais’- was subsequently demobilized by police action. The authoritarian intervention of the magistrate with the police force destroyed an alternative, albeit nascent, model of ‘participative efforts’ in nation-building.

The Commissioner of Chittagong Division mentioned in his report that ‘it was weakness to have allowed these lawless acts as they naturally encouraged the people to believe that they could continue these on much longer scale with impunity’.105 In the official perception the aspiration of the people to undertake such tasks ‘on much longer scale’ was admitted but at the same time the phrase ‘impunity’ suggested the juridical status of such acts. The commissioner thus reduced the whole practice of the flood affected peoples’ attempt at self-mobilization into a law and order problem which only needed to be contained and negated. The will and power of the new state succeeded in doing just this.

IV

Being pressed by the demand of the elected members of the Assembly, the Minister advised them to rely on the District Magistrate for solving the immediate and emergency problems arising out of too much or too little water in the province. He reminded the members of Section 25 of the Embankment Act of the Raj, by which the Collector who was also the District Magistrate had been empowered to take up any scheme of embankment or otherwise. The Minister told the House that he had issued orders to the Collectors concerned to take up some projects and he saw no reason why contrary to the allegations of the members, would have refused to do the works.106 The Governor also
suggested that the Collectors should have had no limit, contrary to what was imposed on him during the Raj, to fix the cess for water control projects. In fact, the District Magistrate was the central figure in deciding everything relating to the project of water control.

While forwarding the executive enquiry report on the police firing at Madarsha by the SDO Sadar ‘A’ of Chittagong to the Chief Secretary, the Commissioner commented that ‘the situation in the initial stages was manhandled and that considering the serious nature of the trouble that was obviously brewing, the District Magistrate himself should have intervened long before the occurrence’. He further commented that orders under Section 144 of Criminal Procedure Code were issued too late and could not possibly have been promulgated in all the villages. The Commissioner’s report suggests that there was a clear case of negligence on the part of the District Magistrate. The Commissioner believed that had the District Magistrate intervened earlier, it was possible that the ‘tragedy which occurred’ might have been averted. The Commissioner pointed his finger towards the District Magistrate but no disciplinary or departmental action against the latter was suggested. Ten people were killed, many more sustained injuries but the District Magistrate, being the protagonist of ‘the tragedy’, escaped any proceedings by the government.

The tradition of the Raj that made the District Officers unaccountable to the public for their negligence of duty continued throughout the whole period of the Muslim League rule in East Bengal. In his district the officer continued to exercise, as he did during the Raj, wide discretionary powers and was largely independent of his administrative superiors as his tenure in the office was secured.

The Pakistan bureaucracy, especially the civil service, inherited and further reinforced the ‘highly knit’ structure of the British bureaucracy in India. ‘It was a closed group - almost a caste of its own’, because membership was limited to those who had undergone the examination and selection procedures and no one could be appointed to it any other way.
The whole service demonstrated a remarkable ‘esprit de corps’. The CSP District Magistrate of Chittagong ‘being one of the brotherhood’ naturally got the benefit of it. The privileged officers of the Civil Service who held the posts of District Magistrate were politically more powerful in the Provinces than even the elected representatives simply because they were directly appointed by the Central Government and were bound by the directives of the Cabinet Secretariat. To a great extent this explains why the District Magistrate was only politely reminded of his failure to handle the incident at Madarsha as nothing could have happened to him in the particular context of his situation in the service structure of East Bengal during the period of our investigation.

The events at Madarsha underscore, once again, the importance of the District Magistrate, whom we have encountered so many times in the previous chapters, in perpetuating certain traditions of the state. The District Magistrate served as ‘a multi-purpose link’ between people and the government. Indeed, as ‘the local visible representative of the Government’ the District Magistrate controlled and supervised the administration of the districts. Police, jails, education, municipalities, roads, sanitation, dispensaries, the local taxation and the revenue of his district were ‘to him matters of daily concern’. He was also expected to make himself acquainted with every phase of the social life of the people and with the ecology of the country. He should also to have possessed ‘no mean knowledge of agriculture, political economy, and engineering’. This was the District Officer of William Hunter’s time, in the late 19th century India. He grew further in importance and power as the Raj faced more challenges to the power in the 20th century. Within the district, the stimulation of economic development, and the encouragement of local initiative was to be dependent on him as had been observed by Braibanti.

The Commissioner, the head of the Division who was to oversee the activities of the District Officers, rightly emphasised the role of the District Magistrate, who was the most important person in the chain of command that was involved in the incident at Madarsha. We have no document to show why the District Magistrate did not intervene personally,
as expected by the Commissioner, and did not accompany the police force to the scene of occurrence. But a number of propositions can be suggested based mainly on the assessment of the District Officers by the elected representatives and observations of scholars about the nature and method of district administration.

There were complaints of negligence of duties from various quarters against the District Officers. Members of the EBLA complained against the 'habitual negligence of district officers' in attending offices. Madar Box, a MLA, complained irregularities in the district officers' working habits: 'we never found them (district officers) attending offices regularly and people do not know when they attend office and when they leave office'. This irregularity, needless to mention, exposed people to all kinds of difficulties and harassment. The people who came to seek relief from the District Executive often allegedly ended up spending money and time to no purpose. The ways of the District Office influenced official behaviour in the subordinate office also. The Sub-Registrars in the Thana Headquarters, complained a MLA, 'come to the office around 2 to 2.30 p.m. after having a lunch and a siesta' The Vice-Chairman of Sylhet Local Board and the Vice-President of South Sylhet Sub-Division Muslim League complained to the Minister-in-Charge of Agriculture that 'thousands of poor peasants' went to Barlekha to bid for the beels as was announced by beat of drums, but the SDO did not turn up. A Congress Member of the Assembly reported that officers indulged in alcoholic beverages and gambling at night and remained hung-over during the day and it was in that state that they discharged their official duties. The Prime Minister, in a speech in the Assembly, mentioned that he was pained to learn that some of the District Officers did not attend offices punctually. The officers were doing it, he observed, 'in derogation of their duties and in contravention of the circulars' that were issued to them regularly. He promised the House 'more circulars' to ensure regular attendance in offices by District Officers and their subordinates.

Apart from irregularity in attending offices there were complaints of inefficiency and 'of a certain laxity' in the district administration. One member noticed 'inefficiency
everywhere’. Among various instances of inefficiency by the District Officers, the
callousness with which they attended the question of police firing was simply staggering.
They seldom applied their minds to this question. In a memorandum written on 14
December 1949, a Deputy Secretary of the Government of East Bengal urged upon the
District and Sub-Divisional Officers to make ‘an earnest endeavour’ to sift evidence and to
decide whether the firing was justified or not instead of making the enquiries as ‘routine
manner’.122 But this does not seem to have had much effect. ‘It has come to the notice
of the Government’, wrote an Under Secretary on 23 February 1953 ‘that in many cases
where reports were asked for from District Officers, they simply forward[ed] the enquiry
reports of subordinate enquiring officers without adding any comment of their own and
without scrutinizing the very obvious discrepancies in them’. This practice, apart from
being highly irregular, gave the impression to the Government that District Officers did not
carefully examine the papers, and tried to ‘avoid forming their opinion’ and ‘giving
Government the benefit of it’.123 The Government insisted that the District Officers gave
their own comments and opinion on matters of public interest. Sometimes the District
Officers even ‘failed to report events of considerable political and administrative
importance to the Government in time’.124

Again there was ‘unreasonable delay in the disposal of matters’, complained an MLA.125
It was reported that a large number of cases arising out of the violation of the Levy Order,
1948, were lying undisposed of. The Secretary to the Government of East Bengal
observed that the delay could have been due in some cases to lack of time and not
infrequently because District Officers were not interested in them.126 In the matter of
disbursement of compensation money for lands acquired by Government after the
partition, the District Officers failed considerably.

A memorandum circulated by the Department of Land Revenue pointed out that
‘unfortunately many District Officers did not submit their statements regularly inspite of
repeated telegraphic, radiographic, and DO [Demi-Official] reminders. The quarterly
returns from a particular district were received only after repeated reminders. Those
returns which were, however, received in time are found not to be in the proper form... The monthly and quarterly report never tallied with each other. The memorandum went on to say that the Revenue Department had, however, been continuously and seriously urging upon the District Officers to be up and doing to make payment quickly to the people whose lands had already been taken off, but it concluded, 'the success has not been appreciable'. A district-by-district run-down in the memorandum showed that, in certain districts, acquisition proceedings did not progress satisfactorily inspite of the number of circulars that had been issued to the District Magistrate from time-to-time. Those circulars were simply ignored. As a result a sum of Rs 10 lakhs which was allotted as compensation, for lands which were permanently acquired in Chittagong in 1953, was not distributed to owners of the land till early 1958.

Essentially the district administration had been an autocratic institution with a strong touch of paternalism. Colonial bureaucratic ethos of privileges, formalism and secrecy continued to constitute the life and work of the district officers of the nationalist government. In the Civil Service of Pakistan the District Magistrate assumed a grandiose style of carrying himself in his official as well as in his private life. Muneer Ahmad, a Pakistani scholar, gave picturesque details of all the typical signs of ostentatious power that made the District Magistrate seems so powerful and important in the district administration. 'There would be a huge peon with a big red turban standing in the door', wrote Ahmad, as was the norm during the Raj. The 'plentitude and excess' that marked the lifestyle of the District Officers during the Raj continued uninterrupted while the office was replaced by lesser beings, 'availing accelerated promotions for almost all offices'. Moreover, most of the district officers were 'young and inexperienced'. But compared to local standards they lived in luxury. Their 'bungalows were sturdy structures; their furniture was extensive; their food in plentiful'.

This kind of luxury in which the District Magistrates lived occasionally drew attention of higher executives and politicians. In his Tour Note on Kushtia the Governor made a special mention about the District Magistrate's house: 'the District Magistrate lives in a
specious house which originally belonged to an Englishman... There is a very large bedroom in it with a beautiful verandah'. The Governor was so impressed that he recommended that 'on future occasions when high officials come here they can without much inconvenience put up in this room'. Moreover, there was electricity in the house, a privilege not enjoyed by the town.134 These 'anglicised officers', complained a member of the Parliament from Chittagong, were being encouraged to adopt this life style, 'to live in the District Magistrate's bungalow on the hill top'.135 People had no easy access to him or to his office. There was a complicated paraphernalia to go through to have an audience with the District Magistrate. Access was much more difficult than writing one's name on a card as was believed by Ahmad.136 Goodnow observed that CSP officers who were in charge of districts spoke English fluently, were well groomed, wore conservative western clothes and rode to office in a chauffeur-driven automobile.137 Such was the aura as the post-independence District Magistrate created around himself that a Congress member compared him to 'a little nabab of the olden days'.138

In fact, some members of the Assembly were particularly unhappy with the way the District Officers lived and conducted themselves. According to them, they remained in their offices wearing 'coats and pants' and 'neckties' and seldom went to the villages to see things for themselves.139 Moreover, the isolation was aggravated by their 'aloofness' in their personal relationships with others. As a result District Officers were viewed as 'strangers' with some fear and suspicion.140 In this circumstance 'contact with villagers was reduced to official dossiers, as observed by von Vorys 'and perhaps at times to nostalgic memories' only.141

In deed, to make this small socially isolated group a key element in the implementation of government policies that aimed at consolidating the 'nationhood of the young country' could not but be a self-contradictory exercise.142 As the local ruler 'his duties included attending to distress caused by floods, famine or even clouds of locusts, waging an anti-flu or grow-more-food campaign, preparation of electoral rolls, control of prices, etc'.143 The office work was so varied that the District Officer was simply reduced to a 'signing
machine' as many would have believed and it is needless to say that such a concentration of duties in the hand of the District Officer predictably led to inefficiency\(^{144}\) in addition to the incompetence that generally marked the administration in the province. All these duties left him practically no time to acquire any first hand knowledge of the conditions prevalent in the districts, though for many District Magistrates this might not have been true. In any case it was often said of the District Officers that they seldom went to the village to see things for themselves.\(^{145}\)

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To save the situation at Madarsha the district administration hurriedly called a conference of the leading persons of the Unions involved in the project on 29 September in the district headquarters. They tried unsuccessfully to use the Presidents of the Union Boards, their traditional link with the rural world, to influence the villagers. But the latter were not to be dissuaded from undertaking further excavation in the Halda.

The administration in their traditional way of reaching the rural people depended on the President of the Union Board. That was how the history of the local government had evolved during the Raj. Rural and Urban Boards which were introduced in Bengal at the beginning of the twentieth centuries, following the Montague-Chelmsford reform of 1919 envisaged that chairmen of the Boards were to be elected and the bureaucrats were to withdraw from Local Government activity. However, in Bengal where a complete system of village councils was achieved the decision of local bodies still remained under the supervision of the bureaucracy.\(^{146}\)

The Union Boards of East Bengal consisted of eight to ten members elected from some twenty villages containing about 8,000 people. However, as events at Madarsha show, the District Officer would block any action of the Board or the villagers of which he did not approve.\(^ {147}\) All the presidents of the Union Boards and the members were reportedly...
involved in incidents in Madarsha. One of them was even a victim of police firing. The unity of the local Board and the local level Muslim League activists and the people of the villages were expressed through the ‘South Chittagong Flood Control Conference’ that was held before the confrontation. The popular expression of solidarity which involved thirty to thirty-five thousand people of thirteen unions was disregarded by the district officials. The District Officers’ response to popular initiative and mobilization can partly be assessed from their attitude to Local Government which was the grassroot organisation of the representative government in the country. They behaved as if they were allergic to the little authority and power the elected representatives of the Local Government wielded. Monopoly and centralisation of power and authority continued to be the norm for the executives even after independence from colonial rule.

In fact, some District Magistrates had very low opinions of the elected representatives of the Local Governments not to speak of the political activists and the ‘dumb, mute’ rural masses. The District Magistrate of Kushtia did not conceal his feelings when he told the Governor of the Province that ‘some of the Presidents of the Union Boards’ were ‘no help to the administration’. They were ‘no better than dumb creatures’. The reluctance of the District Magistrates and the Sub-Divisional Officers to relinquish power to the elected representatives of the Local Boards were nowhere so succinctly suggested than it was in a report on Union Boards by a young CSP Sub-Divisional Officer of East Pakistan. In the report he suggested continuation of the traditional practice of the Union Boards which ‘looked to the Sub-Divisional Officer for guidance and could never afford to be indifferent to his instructions’. ‘Unscrupulous politics’ - as politics in the village was allegedly dominated over by ‘touts and troublesome persons’ - after partition was blamed for the decline of the administrative control over the Union Boards. He observed that the ‘Union Boards instead of serving as primary administrative units, became primary political units’ and ‘politics became a part of their daily life’. He upheld in his recommendation the power of the District Magistrate or Commissioner to supersede or suspend Local Boards. ‘The independence of the Union Boards’ which led to establishment of direct relationships with the political leaders, was bitterly resented in the report. The Sub-
Divisional Officer was perhaps less discreet in expressing annoyance at the ‘exploitation’ of ‘visits of Hon’ble Ministers and other leaders in trying to impress the local officers’. The contact with the people had to be achieved, as suggested by him, on grounds of Government policy and ‘not according to the whims and satisfaction of Union Board touts’. In the true tradition of the ICS who ‘tolerated no outside interference’, he suggested continuation of the old relation between the local government and the district administration.

Such attitudes of field executives greatly hampered the attempts of Local Governments in executing rural development involving popular participation. Any gesture of self assertion by the villagers was resented by the field executives. That explained why on many occasions Union Boards were ‘eclipsed’ from the social polity as disputes regarding elections were not settled on time thus making them inoperative. ‘There was abnormal delay’, complained a political activist, in disposal of disputes in the Union Boards by the District Magistrates. ‘There should be no control and authority’, believed the young SDO, ‘on the Local Government, except that of District Magistrate and Sub-Divisional Officer subject to the control of Commissioner where necessary’.

Thus the attitude of ‘benevolent paternalism’ of the field executives often dampened ordinary people’s capacity for self-government and self-mobilisation. The casualty was ‘participative democracy’; a stifling of the political urge of the people, as happened at Madarsha. However, Madarsha remained a symbol of a process that generated local initiative - even if it meant going a different way from the path chalked out by the bureaucrats - to control the recurrent flooding that visited the peasantry in many areas of East Bengal. Indeed, Madarsha symbolised the ideals of political independence in which self-mobilization of the people was a fundamental right rather than a privilege. The bureaucracy, however, was never at ease with such a conception of political order.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


3 *Ittehad*, 3 October 1948.


10 This information about the condition of the rivers and canals and other water bodies were provided in the Legislative Assembly by the members of the Session on 29 March 1948. For more see EBLA, progs., Vol. 1 No. 3.

11 Tour Note, Kushtia, 29th July, 1956, p.3.

12 Ibid, p.10.


14 Memorandum, Hatiya-Ramgati, p.15.

15 Sen, *Chitti*, p.91.

16 EBLA, progs., Vol.10, No. 1, p.310.


18 Tour Note, Barisal.

19 Secret Report on Situation in East Bengal for second half of June 1953, Home Poll., Bundle, No.147.


23 EBLA, progs., Vol 10, No. 1, p.304.
26 ibid, p.80.
27 Agriculture, B-progs., April 1949, Nos. 100-102.
28 EBLA, progs., Vol. 3, No. 3, p.32.
29 Tour Note, Mymensingh, pp.18-19.
31 East Pakistan Forges Ahead, p.15.
32 EBLA, progs., Vol. 10, No. 1, p.98.
33 Tour Note, Mymensingh, p.,15.
35 ibid, Vol. 1, No. 3, p.31.
36 ibid, p.32.
40 EBLA, progs., Vol. 3, No. 3, p.142.
41 Home Police, B-progs., August, 1950, No. 299.
42 EBLA, progs., Vol. 7, No. 7, p.60.
44 ibid, Vol. 1, No. 3; Vol. 3, No. 3; and Vol. 10, No. 1.
46 Agriculture, B-progs., April, 1949, Nos.100-2.
47 Memorandum, Hatiya-Ramgati.
48 Agriculture, B-progs., April 1949, No. 191-192.
49 Umar, (ed.), *Dalil*, p.28.
50 ibid, p.35.
52 EBLA, progs., Vol. 4, No. 7, p.79.
Examples of such involvement of public persons are not rare in East Bengal. For more on these see Amit Bhaduri and Anisur Rahman (eds.) Studies in Rural Participation, Delhi, 1982, pp. 90-120.

Ittehad, 3 October 1948, Calcutta.

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ibid.

Evidence of the Sub-divisional officer, Halda Project, Enquiry report.

Enquiry Report, p.2.


Home Police, B-Progs.

Ittehad, 26 June 1949.

SIDA Report, p.60.


Commissioner's Report to the Chief Secretary, Home Police, B-progs., January 1955, Nos.1376-1378.


von Vorys, pp. 109, 116.
110 Hamza Alavi, 'Class and State', in Hassan Gardezi and Jamil Rashid (eds), Pakistan: The Roots of Dictatorship, pp.72-73.


112 In East Bengal the following posts have been earmarked for the CSP Officers:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chief Secretary</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member, Board of Revenue</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commissioners</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretaries</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint Secretaries</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deputy Secretaries</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provincial Transport Commissioner</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Magistrates</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional District Magistrates</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Judges</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional District Judges</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of Land Records and Survey</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Settlement Officer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Secretary to Governor</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary to Chief Minister 1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commissioner of Excise and Taxation</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registrar of Co-operative Societies</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registrar, High Court</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judges, High Court</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

81


113 A Hussain, Elite Politics in an Ideological State. The Case of Pakistan, Dawson, 1978, p.68. This point has been made by Sayeed also, see ibid, p.139.

114 Aslam, Deputy Commissioner, p.16.

115 Sayeed, 'Political Role', p.140.


118 EBLA, progs., Vol. 10, No. 1, p.346.

119 Agriculture, Co-operative and Relief, B-progs., September 1953, Nos. 461-472.

120 EBLA, progs., Vol. 10, No. 1, p.112.

121 ibid, p.18.


123 Home Political, B-progs., August 1953, No. 279.

124 Home Political Department, Memo No. 8281 (3) Political.
In fact, delay in payment of compensation for land acquisition was regularly complained by the affected. On one such issue four MLAs from different constituencies of Chittagong resigned from the Parliamentary party. They resented the delay and the amount of the compensation fixed by the District Administration for the land acquisition in Muradpur in Chittagong district. For more see, Tour Note, Chittagong.

Ralph Braibanti, Research, p.156.

Muneer Ahmad, The Civil Servant in Pakistan, Karachi, 1964, p.6

Kamruddin Ahmad, Social History, p.93.

Address of the Prime Minister in the Annual Conference of the Commissioners of Divisions and Heads of Departments, Home Political, Bundle No. 64.

von Vorys, Political Development, pp.117-118.

Tour Note, Kushtia, 29 July 1951, pp.9-10.

Extract from Speeches of Maulavi Farid Ahmad before the National Assembly of Pakistan, February 15, 1957, taken from Ralph Braibanti's Research, Appendix 4.

Muneer Ahmad, Civil Servant, p.6.


Lahiry, India Partitioned, p.21, also Firoz Khan Noon, From Memory, Lahore, 1986, p.240.


ibid, pp.117-118.

ibid, pp.117-118.


Aslam, Deputy Commissioner, pp.24-25.


Goodnow, Civil Service, p.121.

Tour Note, Kushtia, p.11.
149 Report by Syed Munir Hussain, CSP, Sub-Divisional Officer, Brahmanbaria, Home Poll., Bundle, No.152.

150 ibid., p.62.


152 Muneer Ahmad, Civil Servant, p.103.
The Muslim League's incapacity to control the police force and its eventual dependence on them as the mainstay of state power introduced tensions into the League itself; in addition, it directly contributed to certain developments in the realm of politics. I also intend to highlight in this chapter instances where the police could not be controlled by civil bureaucrats and magistrates. Much of the erosion of the legitimacy of the Muslim League rule in East Pakistan was caused by the brutality, unlicensed tyranny, and corruption of the police.

The press and the members of the Opposition in the East Bengal Legislative Assembly on many occasions exposed police atrocities on the population in a language that quite often verged on sentimentality. The Muslim League leadership in government explained police atrocities in terms of inexperience and indiscipline of the force. But people refused to see the regime as something different in intent and purpose from the police actions. Indeed, people's interpretation of 'political independence' did not fit well with what the police called 'law and order', and as a result a number of serious clashes occurred.

Police power was liberally employed to sustain the Muslim League rule; as a result 'police excesses' occurred at a regular rate. In a propaganda tract on the six years of Muslim League rule in East Pakistan that the United Front circulated at the time of the March 1954 election, cases of police atrocities featured prominently and the League was called a 'Murderer'. It was, in fact, the Front's pledge to limit police power that inspired the people to vote for the United Front in the first general election in the province.
II

East Pakistan police numbered 1083 officers and 12935 men during 1948. According to a report by the Inspector-General of Police, the department started with a shortage of 2,500 constables. In ‘a year of unprecedented stress and strain’ the *motussil* police, with its strength and equipment based on a condition that obtained half a century ago, was entrusted to tackle the problem that multiplied manifold due to the partition of the province. The police force, the officers complained, was pitifully small in 1948 compared to the population and the area of the country. There was one policeman for every 3.4 square miles and for every 2700 people. But even this represented a substantial increase in the intensity of policing of the society over the previous hundred years when in 1837 there was one policeman to every 15 square miles and to 3,900 people. Still policing was scanty, according to the Inspector-General of Police in 1948, who suggested ‘enlargement of strength and equipment of the Forces’.

There were altogether 428 police stations in the province of which 184 were without telegraph offices within easy reach. Most of the province was criss-crossed with rivers, and the only means of transport was provided by the slow-moving country boats. Ninety seven vehicles including motorcycles, of which four had been condemned, twenty eight steam and motor launches, sixteen wireless stations, most of which were closed down for lack of staff, constituted the infrastructure of the police department in August 1947.

Due to the partition of the Province, the district forces were to a large extent disorganised. According to the Inspector-General of Police ‘a heavy strain was placed on the police in connection with border troubles which were frequent. They were also called upon to guard the railway lines in connection with threatened strike and sabotage’. Eighty one border outposts were created as a temporary measure to deal with border troubles.

The belief that a decisive use of force was beneficial for the general maintenance of state power was colonial in origin, and behind this belief lay a persistent fear that unless the government intervened promptly and forcefully to suppress even minor outbreaks of
violence its authority could suffer.9 The outlook continued to influence the police and the leaders of the Muslim League. Indeed, the police emerged as the biggest single instrument used by the ruling party in dealing with the unsettled conditions created by the partition. ‘Strengthening the Police force’, the Prime Minister stated, ‘was an imperative necessity’.10 As early as February 1948 the Inspector-General of Police suggested an immediate increase in the strength of the force ‘in view of the vastly changed circumstances’. Disturbed border conditions, the influx of large number of refugees and the concomitant rehabilitation of them, and the general and considerable increase in crime were put forward as reasons to justify enlargement of the force.11 The Police Committee that was announced on 23 August 1949 to look into the police requirements of the province found the force inadequate. After giving their ‘anxious consideration’ to the question, the committee concluded that an increase of the size of the constabulary was ‘absolutely necessary’.12 As a result, the force was ‘enlarged in size’. In 1952 the number of constables reached 18,413. By June 1954, the strength of the total force reached close to 40,000.13

The increased spending on the police force put pressure on the ‘sick’ economy of the provinces. The Prime Minister admitted in the Assembly that ‘there [had] been a very big increase in the police budget’ and a large proportion of East Pakistan’s revenue now went to the Police Department. Not only were the local critics of the government unhappy about the expenditure on the police, the Central Government, according to the Prime Minister, ‘pointed its finger at the Police budget’. The Central Government, in fact, was ‘very bitter that such a large percentage of the revenue should go for the Police budget’.14

The sudden and very large expansion of the force also contributed to the lowering of its efficiency and discipline.15 Quick promotion for officers resulted in a fall in the quality of supervision.16 The Police Committee recognised that the greatest problem regarding improvement of the force involved the subordinate ranks; their knowledge, manners,
bearing and efficiency were not deemed satisfactory for the policing of 'a democratic society'.

To aid the police in rural areas, chowkidars and dafadars 'existed in one form or another' under the Bengal Village Self Government Act of 1919. The total number of dafadars and chowkidars employed in 1948 was 49,649. The number, however, fell to 40,051 in 1953. The Police Committee also recorded that 'the quality of the work of chowkidars' had deteriorated over the preceding two decades. The police authorities became sceptical about the efficiency of the rural police in their dealings with 'suspects' and 'proclaimed offenders'.

A conference of the Deputy Inspectors-General of Police with the Inspector-General held at Dhaka on 10 and 11 November 1947 unanimously concluded that 'a volunteer force' should have been raised to assist the police in the situation that obtained in the province immediately after the attainment of political independence. It was also resolved that each union would have had its own force. The Chief Secretary of the East Bengal Government also suggested that 150,000 men from the province be recruited to form what would be called the ansar organization. Of them 15,000 were to be trained in the use of arms. It was suggested that they could be recruited from the 200,000 or so Muslim League National Guards, a body already in existence in the province.

In 1948, the East Bengal Legislative Assembly passed the ansars Act 'to mobilize the resources of [the] Province to ensure the safety of the State and to prepare for the great task of social and economic reconstruction.' The ansars acted as auxiliary police and sometimes as an auxiliary defence force. Towards the end of September 1948 the activities of the ansars organisation received a further boost as a result of the decision of the government to recruit into the organisation as many able-bodied citizens of Eastern Pakistan as possible. It was also decided that 1,000 ansars for each sub-division would receive musketry training. By November 1948 about 70,000 ansars were recruited and 52,391 members of the ansars were trained in the use of fire-arms by January.
In presenting the Budget for 1951-52, the Finance Minister told the Parliament that the ansar organisation had justified its existence by providing an auxiliary Police Force for discharging police functions by rendering useful services to the State and the people.

The ansar activities were almost entirely controlled by a Deputy Inspector-General of Police and all the resources of the Police Department, including instructors and arms were made available to this organisation. Thus the Muslim League volunteers created and raised during the last days of the Raj to serve the community were disbanded and many of them were absorbed into the agencies of the State. Instead of the Party controlling the ansars, the latter were now being controlled by the police. The State created and maintained the ansars at a very low cost. Indeed, the per-capita cost of maintaining and strengthening all the forces related to law and order was not much. 'East Bengal Police', commented the Inspector-General of Police in 1948, 'was perhaps the cheapest in the world; the housing and clothing of the force left a great deal to be desired; the pay and emoluments did not increase commensurate with the increase in the cost of living'. The main basis for fixing the pay appeared to have been the standard of living of an average man of the strata of the society from which the constables were drawn. As far as the constables were concerned the pay seemed to have been fixed in the past on the basis that they could be classed as unskilled labourers, and with reference to what men of that class (from which the constables were drawn) generally earned in normal conditions.

The Police Committee observed that the pay of the lower police was inadequate but they did not recommend a rise in their pay; instead, the committee expected that the government would bring down the cost of living. This was a task that proved impossible for the Muslim League government to achieve. Obviously, the poorer sections of the police were left to live off the people. This attitude of the government was much resented by the police themselves. In a leaflet issued by some constables listing a set of
demands, they alleged that the Ministers of the Government did not think it necessary to increase their pay for they believed that the police were all corrupt.25

To assume that all the members of the force enjoyed this predatory life imposed on them by the State system would be to overlook their struggle to reform the latter. The lower police of Dhaka staged a strike in 1948 for higher pay and better amenities. The military intervened and killed four of them and injured several.26 Policemen were also at times affected by the issues that agitated the East Bengali community. Thus, while it is true that on 21 February 1952, the day of the language riot in Dhaka the police did fire on the crowd, it is also well known that many members of the force had sympathy for this movement aimed at securing for the Bengali language recognition as one of the state languages of Pakistan. Tajuddin Ahmed mentioned in his diary on 1 March 1952, while he was travelling in a train, he overheard a group of armed police headed by a havildar expressing support for the State Language Movement.27 Isolated instances of such kind were definitely there. But the force, along with its auxiliaries were in the main disliked by the people. As we shall see, there were reasons for this antipathy.

III

Often the behaviour of the police towards the people was as oppressive as it had been during the colonial period. To many a policeman political independence meant the beginning of a 'police Raj' - 'a regime in which the police occupied a crucial position in the ordering of rural and urban society, in the suppression of political opposition and in the maintenance of State and class control'.28

Of all the tyrannies of the police the worst was the indiscriminate use of firearms on flimsy grounds: from September 1947 till the end of August 1948 - within a year of independence - on no less than 58 occasions the police fired on people. On 2 September 1948, the Acting Inspector-General of Police, in a memorandum to all All Range Deputy Inspectors General of Police, found it necessary to point out to the Superintendents of Police that the 'police should not resort to firing until there [was] ample justification for
using it'. This memorandum seemed to have had very little effect on the trigger-happy force. In 1949 the police fired on people on 90 occasions all over the province.

According to the Inspector-General of Police, in the majority of cases the police had to shoot in self-defence. In the Police Order No. 1 of 1949, issued by the Inspector-General of Police on 21 April 1949, it was noted that ‘in recent months ... there has been an unfortunate increase in the cases of firing by the police’. The Inspector-General urged the Superintendents of Police to explain his instructions at muster parades at headquarters frequently in order that the subordinate police understood fully the implications of the use of force by them on members of the public. Obviously, the highest police bureaucrat realized that the lower ranks failed to understand the implication of using violent methods on the people while carrying out official instructions. As a result of this diagnosis, which had actually been made nearly a year before this order was issued, all the armed constables had to go through a ‘short period of intensive refresher course’ within three months of August 1948 in order to remedy this unsatisfactory state of affairs. However, the situation at best remained unchanged, if it did not actually worsen. The following table gives an idea about the frequency of police violence on the people of East Bengal during the early years of political independence.

In 1952 and 1953 there were 37 and 48 cases of use of fire arms by the Police.

The police, in fact, continued to abuse authority, to intensify tyranny, to violate customary rights, to interfere in the matters of civil disputes, and to thwart the people’s desire to participate in nation-building activities. In order to gain a better understanding of police excesses a number of incidents where police used firearms and killed people, are outlined below.

One such incident occurred in Gazaria beel of Manikganj police station in Dhaka district on 18 December 1948. According to the Secretary of the Manikganj branch of the Muslim League it was an ‘unjustified firing on unarmed peaceful public by Manikganj police ...
TABLE 7.1

District-wise breakdown of use of firearms by the Police in the Province of East Bengal, for the years 1948-1951

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>1948</th>
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<td>Dacca</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faridpur</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>Barisal</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>Comilla</td>
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<td>Hill Tracts</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Source: Report of the Police Administration of the Province of East Bengal, Years 1948-1951, EBGP, Dacca]
causing death and grievous injuries'.\textsuperscript{34} The police opened fire on poluas (Persons who catch fish with polos) numbering about three to four thousand while they were fishing in Gazaria Beel causing death to one person and injuring four others. This 'overzealous' act of a 'trigger conscious' officer-in-charge of a police station, according to the enquiring magistrate, 'greatly excited' the public. Processions condemning the incident continued for some days and a public meeting was held where the police action was condemned.\textsuperscript{35} The Enquiring Officer commented that 'the poluas fired upon were plying polos in tenant's rayati lands and were unarmed and did not threaten anybody and did not commit criminal trespass upon the landlord's portion of the beel and did not commit any mischief and formed no unlawful assembly'.\textsuperscript{36} In fact, according to him, the poluas were fishing on the tenants' land where they caught fish every year and were also entitled to do so. He concluded in his report that 'the Police firing in question was unnecessary and unjustified and the Officer-in-Charge's order to open fire was not according to law'.

The abrupt and brutal nature of police intervention was in evidence again within three months of the Gazaria beel incident. This time the violence occurred at a place called Buchahati Bamandanga in Gaibandha subdivision of Rangpur district on 16 March 1949. In this particular incident a sub-inspector and three armed constables opened fire on a large number of people who gathered to catch fish in a zamindar's beel. As a result three persons were killed and five others were injured.\textsuperscript{37} The Inspector-General of Police urged the subordinate officials 'to prevent similar further mischief by uninformed acts on the part of thana officers'.\textsuperscript{38} But this cautionary note failed to prevent such incidents from repeating. The police again opened fire on a gathering of about one thousand people who came to catch fish in Noai Mondol beel in Char Haripur police station of Sirajganj sub-division in Pabna district on 29 December 1951. As a result one person was killed and several others sustained injuries. This time it happened despite a circular issued by the Inspector-General of Police. A higher official commented on the incident that it was 'rather unfortunate that in spite of discussion ... on a similar ... firing the police have again interfered in a civil dispute'.\textsuperscript{39}
In all three incidents the police interfered with the customary rights of the villagers who came to catch fish in the marshes and swamps locally known as beel. After the incident at Noai Mondol beel at Char Haripur an official commented that it was a ‘matter of civil dispute between the alleged lessee and the villagers’ who contended that they caught fish in the beel every year. The observation of the Inspector-General of Police on case number 75 of 1949, i.e. on the police firing at Buchahati Bamandanga in Rangpur, was that ‘the Sub-Inspector argued with the people who had come to catch fish in pursuance of a customary right and tried to persuade them not to catch fish in the course of which altercation ensued’. The Enquiring Officer who investigated the Gazaria beel firing contended that the Officer-in-Charge of Manikganj police station was informed that the poluas caught fish every year in the beel.

In fact, the rights of the people to catch fish in the marshes and swamps of East Bengal was long established. The beels served ‘as a reservoir of fresh water fish ample enough to provide a secondary source of livelihood for a predominantly rice growing population of the province. As a result a large number of the villagers exploited the beels’. In 1923 O’Malley observed that ‘Besides regular fishing polo fishing is an old pastime indulged in by the villagers in the summer’. He also observed that men, women and children, sometimes numbering hundreds troop with polos in hand to the nearest beel. Normally polo fishing was followed by prior announcements to the neighbouring village bazars by indigenous means. The father of a ‘victim’ of police firing deposed to the Enquiring Officer that there was an ‘announcement by beat of drum that fish would be caught in Gazaria beel’.

In all the three incidents the police alleged that ‘a large mob armed with deadly weapons and fishing apparatus’ assembled to catch fish thus causing ‘apprehension of a serious breach of peace’. But according to practice and witnesses the poluas had no deadly weapon with them ‘as at polo baisas (competition) joties, tatas, katras, and koches were not allowed to be used’ and indeed could not be used since fishes did not float and hurling of such instruments was considered dangerous to the crowd of poluas. In fact
in all the three beels the villagers numbering more than thousands came to exercise their customary rights to fish and not with any common intention to assault the police. Rather, the police in their uncalled for intervention were not acting in their capacity of public servants. The visibility of these customary forces of collective behaviour made them convenient targets for members of the police force. One official commented that ‘the Police displayed indecent zeal on receipt of information of apprehension of breach of peace by not informing the Sub-divisional Officer and acting on their own’. In no cases there was any apprehension of breach of peace simply because there were no restraining parties to give resistance to the poulas.

The Inspector-General of Police commented that ‘the elements which entitled the Police to use firearms for the protection of fishing rights did not exist’ and therefore he dismissed the justification of the deputation of armed force. Commenting on the Gazaria beel firing the District Magistrate wrote in his confidential note that ‘Police administration in the Sub-Division has been in a bad way’. Cases of this nature where a thana officer acted in an ‘utterly irresponsible’ and irregular manner gave vent to deeper antagonism between the affected communities and the police. One official explanation was that this kind of action could only happen from ‘lack of assessment of situation due to lack of training’. This perception which was not uncommon in higher police bureaucracy overlooked or deliberately concealed the relationship between the powerful section of the rural world and the police.

It was invariably the dominant villagers who sought, and quite often ‘bought’ and utilised police power to their advantage. In all three cases the police acted on behalf of the owner of the land and intervened in the customary practice of fishing by the villagers in the beels. The Home Secretary in his note suspected that the officer-in-charge of Manikganj police station did act in the Gazaria beel firing case ‘from motives of gain’.

The use of firearms by the police being induced by powerful persons was quite common. On 22 January 1952 the police resorted to shooting in a village fair in Savar police station
in Dhaka district and killed one person. According to the report of the Executive Enquiry ‘there were two parties of gamblers in the mela (fair) and one of the parties influenced the police party to drive away the other’. Police intervention was not only confined to brutally attacking the customary rights of the people on such occasions, but also to interfering in land disputes between ‘parties’, the police word for contending groups. In fact, partisan policing continued to remain a prominent feature of public action in post-independent East Bengal Society.

On 31 March 1948 at Char Digaldi police station in Dhaka district the police intervened to stop ‘forcible harvesting of paddy’ by members of one ‘party’ from the land of another. As a result a conflict started and the police opened fire. And three persons were killed. A similar incident happened in Ghona Bashiapara in Satkhira police station of Khulna district on 9 December 1952. The police acted on behalf of one Aminuddin when some cart men were engaged to carry the reaped paddy of one Abdul Huq Gazi. The cart men refused to comply with the police order to divert the paddy to the house of the President of the Union Board. As a result the police assaulted the cart men and opened fire to disperse villagers who gathered to protest against the assault of the cart men. One of the most flagrant instances of partisan policing took place on 20 November 1952 at Nabinagar police station of Comilla district. The police intervened in a private land dispute and opened fire and killed four persons ‘most unjustifiably and unreasonably’. The Judicial Enquiry report on this firing used strong words to condemn this kind of police action that took place in Nabinagar.

On some other occasions, too, the police opened fire to disperse people who came to resist police actions considered illegal and unjustified by the people. On 29 March 1950 at Pukhali in Jessore district the police opened fire on the people who offered resistance to one head constable and a lower constable alleged to have come to terms with some members of the minority community who apparently/allegedly tried to transfer contraband articles and movable properties across the border to India in exchange for money. Sometimes subordinate police opened fire on the people out of revenge and hatred. On
13 October 1949, the Pakistan Observer reported that 'Following a scuffle between a boy and a police constable, attached to Kazipur police station, at Kazipur hat the latter was severely assaulted by the crowd ... On receiving this information, the Kazipur police, armed with guns, hastened to the spot and resorted to firing, wounding seriously one person' who later succumbed. Incidents of a similar nature where the police acted out of feelings of revenge were not infrequent. When peasants rebelled, police, on a number of occasions, opened fire and carried out wanton atrocities on the struggling peasants in revenge for rebellion.

Police atrocities were not limited to occasionally shooting people whimsically; in fact, instances of 'gross illegality committed by persons entrusted with the maintenance of law and order' were too many. Sometimes individuals in collusion with the police allegedly attempted to kidnap women whom they fancied. On 26 August 1951, the Sub-Divisional Officer in a Judicial Enquiry into police firing in Nagar-Kanda police station in Faridpur district mentioned that one Latif 'in collusion with the police ... attempted to elope Sahera Khatun, a widow from village Pukuria. On some other occasions the members of the law enforcing agencies were themselves allegedly involved in abducting women belonging to minority community. Indeed it was a recurrent complaint by the leaders of the Hindu community. In a petition to a Deputy Secretary of the Home Department, Rasaraj Mondol, General Secretary of East Bengal Schedule Caste Federation complained regarding the inaction of the police force in recovering a Hindu housewife allegedly abducted by an ansar Commander. He also alleged that 'as things stand the members of the minorities have lost all confidence in the police of the Kurigram thana.' Members of the minority community, especially their social leaders in the rural areas, brought many complaints against the police for the latter's alleged complicity with criminals. In one such complaint to the Chief Secretary, the President of the Baofal Union Board along with twenty-four other signatories of Morrelganj and Kachua police stations of Khulna district alleged that 'cows and bullocks of householders generally of minority communities were stolen away at night and through the agents of the authors of the crime intimation is sent to the owners and heavy ransoms are realised to restore them.'
further alleged that 'police authorities are aware of these crimes and perhaps of the authors thereof but no steps are known to be undertaken by them to prevent these heinous crimes'.

The complaint of communal disposition of the police was made very strongly by Jogen Mondol in his letter of resignation from the Central Cabinet. He alleged that the police pursued an anti-Hindu policy and carried out barbarous atrocities against Hindus on frivolous grounds. In fact, members of the minority community became panicky due to the changed political circumstances that deprived them of political power in post-independent East Bengal. But police zulum was uniformly applied to the social weaklings irrespective of caste and creed. The vertical ties that existed during the Raj between the lower police and the local elites - 'individuals with the wealth, influence, and authority to command their services' continued to be conspicuous and enduring in post-colonial East Bengal. It will be evident from a memorandum to the Chief Minister on 10 April 1948, by Presidents of Union Boards of Shyamnagar police station of Khulna district. The memorialists alleged that 'the police zulum on the Muslims went on increasing day-by-day as their pockets began to be filled up with money paid by the Hindu Zamindars'. They also alleged that 'the police had indiscriminately arrested respectable Muslim matbars (social leaders) on false and flimsy grounds and put them in hazat (lock up) without any rhyme and reason'. The incident that agitated the memorialists most was one that took place on 2 April 1948 when some people of Ranjan Nagar and neighbouring villages carrying coconuts and other merchandise worth about Rs 2000 from Nazimganj hat for business purposes, were robbed by members of the Border Police. When the villagers asked for money, some of them were taken to the police camp at Halderkhali and beaten to such an extent that one of them fainted and some others were wrongfully confined by the police and detained in the camp.

The Prime Minister noted the incident as 'a case of Border Police oppression', while forwarding this for investigation. 'The Zulum on the local people' reported a Member of the Legislative Assembly on 24 April 1948, 'had been done by the police so mercilessly
that they were forced to leave their houses along with their families.\textsuperscript{67} The reason for police atrocities against the people as perceived by the memorialists was the resistance of the local people to the smuggling activities of the locally powerful Hindu zamindars in collusion with the Border Police.\textsuperscript{68}

Many police outposts in the countryside, like the one I have mentioned, became centres of oppression for the socially disadvantaged groups in the countryside, be they Hindus or Muslims. The SDC Hakulaki reported that the nankar peasants after the police firing at Saneswar used to look askance at the police outpost. The sub-divisional officer of Gapalganj mentioned in a report on 21 February 1949 that 'some people, many of whom were musalmans, said that it was the wont of the constables of Maharajpur outpost to come out at night on patrol duty and extort money from the people ... and as such the outpost made itself a terror to the locality'.\textsuperscript{69}

Quite often the manifestation of police power was disproportionate to the degree of alleged crime committed by the people. Instances of police raids on the houses of alleged criminals were many indeed; and complaints about police excesses, harassment and misbehaviour towards the members of the family of suspected criminals followed the raids. One Amir Hamja of village Nimbari of Comilla district petitioned the Prime Minister on 7 January 1950 complaining of police atrocities during a raid on his house. The police allegedly plundered his household goods worth Rs 2000, misbehaved with his wife and other members of the family. All this happened when he was away from home. He also mentioned that similar raids were being carried out in other villages also by the police of Kasba police station.\textsuperscript{70} In another such complaint six persons of village Mohabbatpur of Noakhali district petitioned the Governor General of Pakistan, along with other officials in the hierarchy of administration, about police atrocities during a raid in their house on 20 May 1948, in their absence and without any warrant. The police allegedly destroyed household materials and abused the female members of the house who were present during the raid.\textsuperscript{71} Indeed, the police had an exaggerated view of themselves. In their dealings with people they were haughty, impolite, and quite often oppressive. On 16 May
1949, thirty signatories from the area under the jurisdiction of the Nawabganj police
station in Dhaka district petitioned the Prime Minister alleging that they had been
'groaning under various kinds of police zulum exacerbated by a havilder and the
constables attached to Nawabganj outpost'. Many complained in the petition that the
conduct of the police personnel unmistakeably showed that there was no power above
them, that they were independent of control and supervision, and that they were 'the
almighty and all powerful masters of the locality'.

The authority entrusted by the State on the police tended to give them an exaggerated
notion of their own power as though they were not accountable to anybody. In the
complaint of the Secretary of the Sandip Association of Chittagong district to the
Superintendent of Police on 20 July and again on 7 September 1952, signed by several
boatmen of Sandip steamer station, the misuse of power by the police personnel was
quite eloquent. The boatmen alleged that the police compelled them 'under threat of
physical torture' to carry them to the steamer at unusual hours of night which involved a
great risk to the safety of the boat and to their own lives. They further alleged that the
policemen dragged them from their houses late at night, if they showed reluctance,
without having any regard for the privacy of their womenfolk. Moreover,
they never paid the boatmen for their services. Some policemen demanded a total
obedience to their authority. In this context argument was perceived to be an affront to
their power. 'How dare you open your mouth in front of a Daroga' was the retort of a
thane officer to a nankar peasant leader. Here police power corresponded closely with
the feudal power that prevailed in the East Bengal Society. Norms of verbal deference
and silence as a sign of subordination to authority was demanded of the people by the
police officials. As a result quite often policemen resorted to feudal forms of
punishment and dealings with the people. One police sub-inspector of Ramgati police
station in Noakhali district was alleged to have said ' I can do and undo whatever I like,
because I am empowered to arrest anybody'. In an incident between a government
employee and a circle inspector of police in Lakshmipur police station in Noakhali, the
said officer allegedly told a bus driver that 'If you find these people [the employees
belonging to the Constructions and Buildings Department of the Government] run them down and bring them to me after they are killed'.

This particular policemen was sentenced after being found guilty by the Court for assaulting a government employee.77 But for most of the poor this option was simply unavailable. Lack of education and financial resources deprived the masses of even such rights as freedom from arrest and protection from police zulum. On the powers that the police exercised over the population, the constitutional checks had been almost inoperative.78

On 10 April 1948, the memorialists of Shyamnagar in Khulna after the police atrocities complained that 'nobody can dare lodge any information to the authorities concerned against the Border Police.79 ‘Some of the alleged victims of the police excesses', recorded a Civil Servant in his enquiry report on ... April 1948, ‘refused to make any statement'.80 After the police atrocities in some villages of Sylhet one affected woman deposed to the sub-Deputy Collector when asked if she could produce any witness in support of her statement, ‘No, through fear of zamindars and the police of the camp, nobody will dare give any evidence because as soon as you will go, police will come, catch hold of anyone who will depose, arrest him and realize money from him'.81

This apprehension and fear of a village woman proved to be real on a number of occasions. On 16 December 1947 one Amir Ali of Kandipara in Mymensingh district petitioned the Chief Secretary of the East Bengal Government alleging police atrocities which occurred following his lodgement of a criminal case against a sub-inspector of police attached to Graffargaon police station for the latter's 'high handedness, wrongful restraint, wrongful confinement, assault and extortions'. As the petition sought legal protection the police party raided and arrested some of the witnesses and mercilessly assaulted them 'regardless of their age'.82 After the police firing at Nabinagar in which four persons were killed, Jaj Mia, who belonged to the same party as these victims, was arrested when he went to Brahmanbaria to lodge a case against the police.83
incident of police torture on Ebadullah for lodging a criminal suit against the Officer-in-Charge of Salla police station in Sylhet clearly demonstrated how vulnerable the complainants were. In this case the complainant was brutally assaulted by the police in front of the very court where the hearing took place. According to a Naobelal report, this incident created great resentment among the people in and around Sunamganj subdivision. In fact, reports of police torture in custody after arrests resulting sometimes in death were not uncommon. One such incident that happened as a result of merciless beatings by the police of a suspect in a dacoity case created an uproar in the province and 'gave rise to violent public comments'. Even the Inspector-General of Police expressed his worries to the Superintendent of Police of Mymensingh about the serious nature of the incident.

Azan reported on 7 May 1953 yet another incident that happened on 6 May in Rangunia police station in Chittagong district in which an assistant sub-inspector of police caused death to a person by striking him with his danda (truncheon) while the former tried to escape arrest. When three people related to the deceased went to the police station to lodge a case against the assistant sub-inspector they were arrested. This kind of 'rash and negligent' act on the part of the police drew harsh comments from the executives who conducted the judicial enquiry into the incident.

Occasionally, police violence found its way into the prisons as well. A dramatic illustration of this was an incident that took place in the Khapra ward of Rajshahi district jail on 24 April 1950 when the police opened fire on the political detainees and the activists of the peasant uprisings of the preceding years and killed seven of them and injured many others.

It was quite difficult for the victims of police atrocities to seek justice defying 'all obstacles put in the way'. In fact, people were too demoralised even to lodge complaints against the police because of familiar police brutalities that used to follow the complaints. Even then the people dared to bring cases against the police for various crimes perpetrated on
them. The following table might give an impression about the extent and nature of police atrocities against the people of East Bengal.

### TABLE 7.2

Year-wise breakdown of criminal cases brought against the police in East Bengal between 1948-1953.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Allegation of Torture</th>
<th>Extortion</th>
<th>Bribery</th>
<th>Assault/ Wrongful Confinement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1949</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1953</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Obviously, many cases went unreported. Not only the poor peasants of East Bengal, most of whom did not dare report against the arbitrary and excessive use of force by the police, sometimes even people with social and professional standing felt too scared to seek justice against police oppression. In an incident that led to a clash between the police and railwaymen at Chandpur on 27 March 1949, the doctor, who attended the injured and later was himself assaulted by the police, ‘refused to make any statement’ against the police. He feared that such an act would have endangered the lives of his family members. The fear of harassment and victimisation of those who dared to
report or depose against police personnel was even noted in the Police Committee Report of 1953.90

For many in East Bengal silence became the language of coping with police violence. But silence was not total, nor was it all pervasive. When maintenance of public order had become synonymous with a vindictive spirit of police persecution the latter undermined their own legitimacy in the eyes of the people. On many occasions police became targets of mass vendetta. ‘Coercion was both a deterrent and a stimulant of protest. It aroused fear but it also provoked anger among the people’.91 East Bengal social scene was no different. As the elements of feudal power, supported by people donning uniforms and insignia bearing the sanction of the state power, continued to oppress the weaker sections of society, they also provoked short-lived, violent and collective resistance against ‘excessive’, ‘unfair’ and ‘unjust’ use of force by state agencies.

IV

Theoretically, there was scope for the people to seek redress from any high handedness or arbitrary, unjust and illegal actions of any public servants, be they members of the police force or civil service. But in the social context of East Bengal this scope was beyond the reach of most of the people. Going to court was an expensive affair and moreover litigations meant a lengthy process involving frequent absence from home of the adult male member or members for the courts were in district or sub-divisional headquarters. Bad communications, lack of boarding facilities in the small towns and unfamiliar life in the towns dampened the immediate anger of many who had been outraged by the police violence. As a result, seeking justice for transgressions of rights by the law enforcing authorities became the privilege of the rural well-to-do (though this does not mean that justice was always done to even this group).
It was through telegrams, petitions, memoranda, delegations and sometimes newspapers and public meetings that the affected vented their complaints to higher authorities. These liberal forms of protest were again available primarily to the rural elites. After the Sirajganj shooting the *Pakistan Observer* reported that ‘the leading persons of Kazipur’ have wired to the authorities protesting against alleged high handedness of the police.92 Many such protests clearly signalled a lack of confidence in the police as the aggrieved people would often demand non-police or even, non-official enquiry into police atrocities. Official enquiries were thought to be so partisan that the people quite often rejected them altogether.

Protest as an expression of conflict in response to police excesses and atrocities took different forms. Quite often violent means were adopted to defend personal and collective rights of the people if these were threatened and/or violated by the members of the law enforcing agencies. Life in East Bengal, especially in the countryside, was organised around traditional social norms which at times led to violent conflicts with the activities of the agents of the state, perceived to be a distant and outside entity by the masses of the rural people. On such occasions the villagers temporarily reversed the relationship that existed between the police and themselves. One element which played a role in the reversal was the villagers’ notion of honour and dignity which were themselves influenced by their perception of tradition.93 The incident, at Gabtoli Bazar in Mymensingh on 8 April 1953, when an O.C. along with some members of the rural police were assaulted, originated from an injured sense of prestige of ‘the accused number one’, a President of the Union Board. On the occasion of *Astami Snan* (a ritual bath on the second day of Durga Puja), a *mela* (fair), used to be held at a place about a mile from Gabtoli Bazar. But a year before the incident took place the President of the Union Board shifted the venue of the *mela* ‘by exercising his influence’ from the original place to Gabtoli Bazar. As a consequence of this shifting there was ‘riot between the President of the Union Board’s party and his opponents’ and two murders were committed. As a result no *mela* was allowed that year by the government, resulting in the disappointment and annoyance of
the President of the Union Board and his men. The Superintendent of Police observed that 'the President of the Union Board's position was also undermined before his men' and thus injured 'he wanted to take revenge' against the Officer-in-Charge of the thana who stopped the mela from being held. Abdus Shahid mentioned the anger of the people and the volunteers in Bakpur Surjamukhi mela in Barisal district in early 1948 when the daroga and his constables defied the order of the village volunteers of the mela by crossing the bamboo bridge which was prohibited from use during the mela. Shahid recalled that as a result of this blatant disregard of the orders of the volunteers, people in thousands encircled the police camp in the mela. The prestige of the village volunteers thus seen to be undermined by the police led to the intensification of anger of the people.

On many occasions the rural people resisted the police from a sense of what was 'right' and 'just'. When the police were on the 'wrong' side they faced a determined, though often short-lived, resistance from the people. Resistance to arrests and attempts to rescue arrested persons from the custody of the police provide interesting material for any attempt to understand the nature of the 'legitimacy' of the law enforcing authority in the eyes of the people.

In the Shyam Nagar incident on 10 April 1948, in the opinion of the memorialists, when some of the villagers were 'wrongfully confined' by the police and detained in the camp, some people from the detainees' own village came to their rescue. In another incident when the people found out at Pukra in Faridpur district that a widow's safety and honour were at stake, the villagers decided to protect her 'and they did [so] by chasing the police party'. The Pakistan Observer reported on 14 September 1949 that on 11 September 'the Police party had gone to the village of Habiganj in Sylhet district to arrest an alleged absconder. On arrival they were attacked by a crowd of villagers'.

On many occasions conflict arose between the police and the people from a contrary understanding and interpretation of legality. On 16 March 1954 the ASI of Faridpur police
station in Pabna district stated in his FIR that after arresting an accused the police were faced with resistance from the people who gathered 'unlawfully' and attacked the police party to forcibly 'free' the arrested. The ASI told 'the mob' that they had followed the law in arresting the accused but 'the mob' paid no heed. Here the police notion of legality and the people's notion of the same were opposite to each other and around this opposition a battle took place.

These kind of conflicts were of frequent occurrence. On 20 October 1951, at Auspara in Sylhet district one arrested person was rescued by villagers numbering about one hundred and armed with 'deadly weapons'. They injured six policemen and forcibly rescued the arrested from the police. Popular anger against all that 'constituted and symbolized' police power was evident in the incident at Koyachhara tea garden on 16 October 1949. After the arrest of their 'leader' the coolies armed with 'deadly weapons' and forming and 'unlawful assembly' attacked the police party and attempted to rescue the arrested person and also to snatch away the government muskets from police. In another incident on 2 July 1948 at Chowgacha in Jessore district the angry crowd 'made an attack' on the police outpost hurling brickbats following a scuffle between a policeman and some members of the public that resulted in the arrest of some of them. In fact, the people in the rural areas occasionally succeeded in forcibly rescuing the arrested persons. In 1948 there were seven such cases of forcible rescue by the people from the custody of the police. The same number of arrested were rescued in 1949. But the figure jumped in 1950 and remained almost steady till 1953 as the following table will show.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1948</th>
<th>1949</th>
<th>1950</th>
<th>1951</th>
<th>1952</th>
<th>1953</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of persons</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Source: Report on the Police Administration of the Province of East Bengal, for the years 1948-1953, East Bengal Government Press, Dacca.]
This trend suggests the declining legitimacy of the police in effecting arrests for 'crimes' which the people refused to accept. The extent of popular antipathy to all that constituted the regime of 'discipline and punish' is evident from the number of 'escapes' from police custody also.

Confinement is perhaps universally disliked but in the case of East Bengal society the prospect of quick and fair trial was rare. Cases involved lengthy proceedings, which was regularly resented by the Inspectors-General of Police. Unhealthy, inhuman conditions, lack of accommodation, regular tyrannies and brutalities that were associated with prison life made prison and police custody unacceptable to the convicts and prisoners awaiting trial.

'Police stations, instead of becoming a place of refuge and help for the oppressed and the poor', complained a Muslim League MLA, 'have become centres of oppression and terror'. Perhaps for all these reasons reinforced by the vast member of the society's attitude to the police and police justice the escapees from police custody were quite acceptable to the community. In fact, on many occasions even by the measure of the law of the land the 'accused' were innocent. We have so far no cases - in the early years of East Bengal - of people handing an 'escapee' over to the police. What led occasionally to their rearrests was the agility of the rural police and their informers - people mostly hated by the lower orders in the villages. Let us now look at the number of police escapees to have an indication of the magnitude of defiance of the system.
TABLE 7.4

Year-wise breakdown of no. of escapees from the prison and police custody in East Bengal between 1948-53

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1948</th>
<th>1949</th>
<th>1950</th>
<th>1951</th>
<th>1952</th>
<th>1953</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of escapees</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Source: Report on the Police Administration of the Province of East Bengal, for the years 1948-1953, East Bengal Government Press, Dacca.]

These are obviously instances of resistance offered within the arena of confinement organised and supervised by the police. The collective, however defined, outside the custodial world of the police is conspicuous by its absence from the actions that made escapes possible. There were instances of resistance organised individually or collectively within the four walls of the prisons or lock-ups that led to escape. But the 'community' is very much present in some other instances of resistance to the police. The Police Report of 1948 observed that in discharging public duties the police had to face 'numerous attacks'. There were as many as 131 cases of assault on the police resulting in the death of one constable and injuries to 232 officers and men of whom 11 were serious. Atrocity, humiliation and coercion - combined to give expression to police zulum - were now turned against them. Some constables were speared, killed and buried at Nachol in Rajshahi by the enraged Santhals, so that no trace of them was left behind. The daroga, whom we have met in Chapter 5, who was assaulted by the nankar peasants one night for allegedly gratifying his lust on peasant women, was subjected, according to Bhattacharya, to a combination of anger and revengeful feeling that had accumulated over time.

The act of taking the law into one's own hands was also a measure of the want of confidence in law enforcement agencies of the state. For the people who were involved in taking revenge against police personnel it could also mean that the liberal democratic
mechanisms of law and justice failed to replace the pre-existing norms and practice of power which remained real to both the police and the people. In this circumstance coercion could only generate resistance. This phenomenon was ruefully recognised by an Inspector-General of Police when he wrote that ‘For any opposition from the side of police in exercise of their lawful authority, the people build up a psychological resistance against them’ and if the actions were directed against a group or a large section of people, the feelings of the people were likely to be roused against the police for enforcing the law,’even within the strictly constituted lines of authority’.108 But the ‘constituted lines of authority’ remained hazy and complex both to the people and to a large section of the constabulary and the officers. In 1949 the Inspector-General of Police observed that cases of assault on the police had increased. In all there were 155 cases of assault on the police in 1949, resulting in injuries to 317 officers and men of whom 13 received serious injuries and two proved fatal.109 The trend continued. There were 151 cases of assault on the police resulting in the murder of one sub-inspector and three constables and 181 officers and men were injured of whom five were serious in 1950. The Inspector-General of Police admitted that ‘assault on the police was on the increase’ in that year too.110 There were one hundred and eleven cases of assault on police resulting in serious injuries to eight officers and men in 1951, but in 1952 the situation further deteriorated. ‘There were however more assaults on the police than in 1951’, commented the Inspector-General of Police.111 In 1953 the total number of assaults on the police was 112, including the death of two and serious injury of five officers and men.112

This trend of unabated acts of assault on the members of the law and order agency of the state proved that the arbitrary, coercive, partisan practice of the former did not go unchallenged, that police power was often met with ‘people power’, however fragile and short-lived. Through their actions the people who defied police power constantly displayed a notion of ‘community’ which was at variance and often in conflict with the juridical notions of the state. The sudden expressions of solidarity among the rural masses on the presupposition that there already exist affinal bonds which then became a ‘natural’ premise for collective action against the police, were an instance of this
phenomenon. The solidarity among the people against the agencies of external domination, especially the various law and order agencies, was their notion of 'a community based on the [so called] primordial loyalties of religion, habitat, kinship' as has been observed by Chakrabarty in his discussion of the jute workers' protests in Bengal. For the peasantry of East Bengal it is even more clearly evident.

On 20 October 1951 at village Auspara in Sylhet district police arrested Helal Uddin. 'His mother, brother and sister came out immediately and offered resistance to the police'; the Enquiry Report adds, 'they offered resistance to the police'. They raised hue and cry, calling for help from the neighbours... On hearing the incessant cries of Helal Uddin and his relations a large number of villagers ... advanced towards the police party.' Again 'responding to a cry of the arrested', wrote the Superintendent of Police of Faridpur on the incident on 4 November 1949 at Hossainpur in Faridpur district, '18 persons, all kin and neighbours, attacked the daroga and the constable with deadly weapons'. In another incident at Sultanpur in Sylhet, hearing the alarm of an arrested person, his sister and mother came out and resisted the police. The sister came out armed with an iron rod and dealt a blow on the head of the constable. 'There was a great row and many people including women and children, about 150 to 200 in all, gathered and rescued the arrested'.

The loyalties of kinship (real and imaginary) were so strong in these instances of resistance that even women and children also found a place in the state documents. In fact, women took quite an active part in resisting arrests of the male members of the family and sometimes of the village. In one case in Narail in Jessore district an old woman who happened to be the grandmother of the accused, closed the door when the police turned up, and helped her grandson to flee. Women often made use of inviolable customary practices in order to protect the accused from being arrested. In one such case a score of women were standing at the verandah of the hut where 'a proclaimed offender' took shelter in order to avoid arrest and the sub-inspector of police...
was resisted from entering the hut on the false plea that a woman had given birth to a child in the hut making the place 'impure' and thus inaccessible to male entry. At times the solidarity against police action cut across religious differences in a society where religion is often thought to have sharply polarised the Hindus and the Muslims. On 12 April 1948 a Muslim 'offender' was protected by a Hindu widow by offering the former a safe shelter against police pursuit.119

Faced with the resistance of kin groups, neighbours, co-residents of the same habitat, the state experienced real difficulties in pursuing its own goals. 'In the dacoity cases it is only the local people who could be competent witnesses', wrote a SDO to the DC Sylhet on the prospects of instituting cases against the peasant activists on 6 September 1949 'but the accused being their kith and kin', doubted the SDO, 'sufficient evidence may not be forthcoming'.120 In this instance the state was confronted with its own limits of coercion. The identification of collectivity among the struggling peasants by 'primordial' sentiments in some areas in Sylhet set the limit for the coercive power of the state. This was even recognised by its own functionaries.

Indeed, the very presence of police officers intensified a conflict situation. In the earlier mentioned incident at Chardigaldi, 'the very sight of police irritated the excited and rowdy mob'.121 'Trouble arose', wrote an enquiring officer on the use of fire-arms at Dhamrai on 22 January 1952, 'after the arrival of said police party'.122 Any agency related to the police had a similar fate. 'The inimical attitude sometimes of the public towards the Government Reporters is well known', wrote the memorialists, 'they are taken for IB (Intelligence Branch) officers and all filthy abuses, jeers, and vituperation are showered upon them. They become targets for direct attack and criticism'.123 Indeed, the police informers lived in peril of popular retribution.

On many occasions the 'mob' involved in private dispute changed their common object as soon as the police arrived. On 19 June 1949 the police party intervened to stop two groups fighting at Baidyer Bazar but this invited attack by both groups on the police.124
In another conflict between two villages in Mymensingh district on 12 April 1948, the police intervened only to invite determined attack from both. On occasions when the supporters of the Muslim League and the United Front clashed with each other during the campaign for the general election, the police intervened ‘to maintain peace and order’; then the target of the ‘unruly mob’ shifted and attacked the police party.

The everyday oppression which the police carried out alienated them from the people. On any pretext the anger of the people fell on them. Sometimes the conflict was carried beyond the immediate issue. Since partition Independence Day Tournaments were held in which the police participated in order to create ‘an atmosphere of goodwill and fellow feeling between the police and the public’. But on 14 August 1951 ‘wide spread lawlessness broke out in the town of Sylhet on the Pakistan National Day. The incident originated from a football match’. The Karimganj correspondent of the newspaper reported that ‘on August 14 a football match was arranged there in connection with Independence Day celebrations between the Police team and the Rest of Sylhet. Some players of the Police team ... wrongfully attacked some players of the Rest of Sylhet which was disliked by the public ... Objections were raised from the public against the offending players. The situations soon became grave and the police made indiscriminate ..... charge on members of the public. ... A clash between the police and the public ensued’. The government issued a press note on 15 August in which it said that, the Football match ‘Police-vs-Rest’ had to be abandoned as a result of rowdyism. There was an unseemly fracas between the protagonists of the two sides. The quarrel was unfortunately carried beyond the play ground and a number of persons received injuries, five of them serious. The Press Note that followed the incident mentioned that a curfew was imposed on that night and prohibited the assembly of five or more persons for one week in Sylhet.

On 17 September of the same year in the final of the Amulya Memorial Football Competition there was a clash between the police team and the team of the Merchant’s club of Barisal. The clash eventually involved the public and the police. The District
Magistrate strongly intervened and took action against the police personnel responsible for the trouble. In a note to the Commissioner of Dhaka Division, he wrote that 'it will be construed in various quarters ... as a 'victory' of the townspeople over the police'. The police and the public clashed again in Noakhali football field. The government was concerned at 'the growing number of such clashes between the police and the public at football matches'. In view of the situation the government considered stopping the police from playing matches with the public to avoid 'all chance of conflict'. The government was worried at the continuous 'criticism in the Press and from the political platform for every indiscretion committed by an individual or few individuals during a sporting event'. A similar incident took place on Bogra Football Ground in August 1953. As a result twenty one policemen and twelve members of the public were injured.

The District Magistrate of Barisal feared that the causes of the clash were 'deep-rooted'. The roots went far beyond the play ground. All the clashes turned out to be an enactment of minor rebellion, though short-lived by the people against the law and order agency. What were playful competitions between the police and the people within the boundary of non-antagonistic rules of the game changed codes in course of the game and turned out to be violent and antagonistic. Tension rose so much in the everyday life of the community that it took the slightest provocation to spread violence beyond the confines of the play ground. A solidarity of players, spectators, and a large section of the townspeople emerged against the police force. In Sylhet the crowd were reported to have attacked the car of the superintendent of police as the conflict spread and grew larger in size. Attacks took place far away from the place of conflict. On the Sylhet incident the Karimganj correspondent reported that two policemen on duty on the police-point at Bandar bazar were also attacked following the conflict in the football field. Hence the collective expressed itself by its opposition to the police and whatever stood as signs of police power.
Sometimes this 'unity' of the people against the police drew its legitimacy from a popular interpretation of political independence. In an incident of Rajoir in Faridpur when the peasants attacked the police to release arrested persons, one of the attackers allegedly said that the police in Pakistan had no power to arrest a man in an assault case. No doubt the law of the land did not bear out this supposition but that was what gave the angry peasants the 'right' to attack the police party.

Predictably, all the transient resistance of the people to police aggression created contexts for the state to strengthen and expand the police force in order to meet fresh challenges to its own power. Police power, thus, received sustenance from the sporadic, dispersed, short-lived 'flashes of anger' of the people. However for the political elite running the government in East Bengal, police actions against the people introduced tensions that gradually corroded the basis of their own unity.

V

The importance of the policeman was adequately recognised by the ruling elite in East Bengal. They seldom missed any opportunity to eulogise the services supposedly rendered by the police to nation-building. The Prime Minister, in an address to the police officials, defined their job as 'to hold the balance between man and man, between parties and parties, between all classes of citizens'137, and contrary to the colonial administrator's low opinion of the police, the Muslim League government claimed to have been 'actuated by sincere sympathy for the police force'. The ruling elite believed that they 'could not have industrial development, agricultural advancement, educational progress' without the hard work done by the policemen. Popular perception that the policemen were 'concerned only with criminals' was discarded by the ruling elite, instead the police were assigned the task of 'handling the people' in order to achieve an orderly society.138
The Prime Minister in a speech set the ideal for the police. 'By fostering a general respect for law and order', he said, 'we shall be able to build Pakistan on the ideals which the founder cherished so dearly, namely - a Pakistan where there would be no injustice, no distinction between man and man, when it comes to offer any protection to its citizens, and that the Government will always be guided by a sense of fair play and render help to those who need it and put down those who oppress the weak and the down-trodden'.

Obviously the police were assigned an important role in this scenario. The PM also stressed the neutrality of police in nation-building and state-building activities.

But the gap between officially stated 'ideals' and actual conduct of the police was particularly great. The consequence of this was not only resented by a large section of the people; the Muslim League in fact reaped the bitter harvest of the misdeeds of the force. To the people of East Bengal the police remained a 'spectacle of excess' as they were during the Raj. ‘The very name police’, according to a Member of the Constituent Assembly, 'was a terror to the people in the countryside'. In fact, all through the rule of the Muslim league in East Bengal the police-people relation was a sore point for the administration. One of the terms of reference of the East Bengal Police Committee which was appointed by the Governor of the Province on 23 August 1949, was to examine the relationship of the police and the public and to suggest ways to 'bring it into accord with modern conditions'.

For the Muslim League this was to remain an unattainable ideal till their last day in power.

Occasionally the Prime Minister urged the higher police officials to create an atmosphere amongst the subordinate staff of cooperation with the public. He felt that the general complaint of the public was against the lower ranks and asked the latter on occasions to stop 'chastising', 'abusing' and 'maltreating' the public and to avoid 'harsh treatment and method' towards the people. The Prime Minister was aware that the word 'Police was synonymous with zulum'.
Many Muslim League leaders and activists were concerned about the atrocities that the members of the force time and again unleashed on the people. Many of them perceived these actions as 'illegal and unjust'. Quite often they brought it to the notice of the government at Dhaka. They sent telegrams, wrote memoranda, and at times personally communicated it to the higher bureaucrats. As political leaders and activists of the ruling party on many occasions they acted as bridges between the government and the people. In a telegram as early as 22 December 1947, the MLA from Naogaon in Rajshahi informed the Home Minister of police atrocities in Ramnagar. He solicited the Home Minister's intervention and relief for the victims of 'police vandalism'.  

Giasuddin Pathan, a prominent Muslim league MLA and later a Minister, complained to the government about police atrocities in some villages of Mymensingh. In another telegram the Secretary of Teligati Union Muslim League of Netrokona sub-division in Mymensingh district informed the Prime Minister's secretariat on 18 June 1949 of police atrocities in villages Karatia, Bijoypur, Hatlar, Tenga Bali Kandi, Teligati in Atpara police station of Netrokona sub-division. He also solicited 'immediate preventative steps'. Sometimes Parliamentary Secretaries forwarded to the Prime Minister or the Minister concerned the grievances of the people against police action. The information of police atrocities at Gurudaspur of Rajshahi prompted a parliamentary secretary to ask for 'immediate judicial enquiry into the matter'. Sometimes incidents of police atrocities were reported to the District Officers for enquiry and action.

Instances of such attempts by individual Muslim League leaders to rectify police discipline and redress suffering of the people are many. Sporadic and arbitrary displays of coercive power by the police were perceived by many activists and leaders of the Muslim League as provoking hostility towards the Government and as posing serious threats to the rule of the Muslim League. They feared that police excesses contributed to the erosion of Muslim League popularity in the province. Sometimes individual initiative within the framework of the government was deemed inadequate to the need. Local level Muslim League leaders held public meetings and condemned the corruption and excesses by officers and members of the force. In one such meeting held in Sylhet on 19 November
1947 and presided over by the General Secretary of Assam Provincial Muslim League, the following resolution was adopted: 'The public of Sylhet puts on record its profound resentment and severe condemnation against the nepotism, favouritism, high-handedness and misbehaviour of the Superintendent of Police of Sylhet. The meeting further demands of the Government of Eastern Pakistan to cause immediate removal of the officer from the district'. There were other such meetings all over the province.

Some members of the Muslim League carried the criticism of the police right inside the Assembly. To many of them it appeared that the administration of the police department was far from satisfactory. One member thought that 'the police officers seemed to have achieved personal independence after the partition'. He resented at all those instances of officers of the police stations flouting the orders of the magistrates allegedly with impunity. This scandalous state of things, it is believed, needed immediate government attention. In fact, many League members from time to time condemned police excesses and gave contrary views to the necessity of granting more money under Police Head in the budget. Some members of the League in the Assembly time and again mentioned that the relations between the police and the people were not at all amicable.

Some of them even tried to improve the situation. In a note to the Deputy Secretary of the Home Department the Inspector-General of Police mentioned that ‘Mr Ahad, MLA, saw me over the case and expressed his anxiety for a compromise’ as he thought ‘harmonious relations between the police and the public was essential’. The police authorities responded to such Muslim League criticism in the Assembly by adopting the traditional measures of strengthening and increasing the number of supervisory staff; which only added to the coercive strength of the force. In response to the request, earlier cited, the Inspector-General of Police took steps to post a sub-divisional police officer at Satkhira for better supervision of the police against whom the affected people and the MLA complained of atrocities.
The police officials always resented interference of outsiders, including Muslim League MLAs and Ministers, in their affairs. The Police Committee in its recommendation especially discouraged this practice. In the conference of the Inspectors General it was agreed that in the interest of the police discipline there should definitely have been no extra departmental interference in matters of punishment and promotion of the police. Thus the police favoured and insisted on exclusivity and non-interference from the representatives of the public.

Even when it was found by departmental and judicial enquiries that police actions were unjustified, the finding was not made public and popular participation in enquiries relating to police actions was never encouraged. When the government intended to declare the police firing at Noai Mondol beel on 29 December 1951 unjustified, a higher bureaucrat differed with the government decision and referred to the practice of the Raj in this regard. 'No order is issued', reminded the bureaucrat, 'when the firing is considered to be unjustified'. This advice was accepted and followed by the government. As a result 'sometime', as the Commissioner of Chittagong Division noted, 'circumstances were occasionally exaggerated to justify police firing'.

There was a general tendency in the police department to 'protect its officers and men', and sometimes this tendency was carried to the extreme of supporting a subordinate officer at all costs, even when he was obviously at fault. When the police constables at Lauta Bahadurpur police camp in Sylhet were all transferred from the camp for their alleged indiscriminate torture of the villagers, the Superintendent of Police was unhappy about the decision and resented that this action by higher authorities as it had a dampening effect on the morale of the force. This perception of the superintending officials influenced their attitude in respect of taking the members of the force to task for any act of indiscretion. In fact, a Muslim League MLA complained against the 'ruffled feeling of higher officers when complaints were made against individual policemen'. The Prime Minister also took note of this tendency of shielding the subordinates by the superiors 'as a matter of routine', though he admitted that the police 'always got the
backing of the Government'. He appealed to the police to judge each case 'on its own merit'. But instead of taking the initiative to stop this practice the Prime Minister happily depended on the Deputy Inspectors-General of Police to 'take personal interest in this respect' so that this particular 'evil' would be eradicated.159

Due to the lack of popular control over the force, the relation between the people and the police deteriorated speedily. People's doubts and suspicions about the government, already instilled during the Raj, continued to exist. A number of the Muslim League MLAs time and again appealed to the government to work towards changing the 'old bureaucratic traditions' of the police and emphasised the need to overhaul the entire system thoroughly.160 But nothing happened which could claim to have been initiated by the spirit of nationalism. As a result many Muslim League activists lost interest in reforming the police. A glaring example of the lack of public interest in police affairs was evident in the response of the MLAs and MCAs to the questionnaire sent by the Police Committee. Only three out of forty four MCAs and twenty out of one hundred and sixty one MLAs who received the copies of the questionnaire 'cared to send in their replies'. This indifference of the elected representatives of the people towards reforming the police was considered 'most deplorable' by the Police Committee.161

This was only the reflection of the extent of alienation of the force from the society. But it was not only the police who were alienated, the Muslim League government, along with it, lost popular support for the misdeeds of the force.

As was the case before political independence, people continued to look upon the police as representing the government.162 The 'symbol of government in the rural areas', according to a senior official in Bangladesh as late as 1977, 'continues to be the police'.163 This aspect of the relationship was highlighted by a Muslim League MLA. While emphasising the importance of the discipline of the force, he said that 'they (the Police) will always discredit the Government and give them a bad name, and entail a serious trouble for the Government'.164
as the masses were concerned the Government meant the Police and the thana which was the backbone of the government. In fact, the importance of the police force for the 'prestige of the government' was adequately stressed in the conference of the Inspectors-General of Police. While emphasising the importance of the force, the conference resolved that 'if the police force failed, the whole administration would fail with it'.

Thus in the true tradition of the Raj the bureaucrats and the members of the ruling elite relied on the force for the maintenance of 'law and order' - a shorthand for class rule. In the experience of the people the 'old prejudice' of linking the government and the police flared up every time the masses came into direct conflict with the force. As a result the Muslim League, as the government party, suffered continual erosion of legitimacy in the eyes of the people. On 23 December 1947, in a memorandum to the Prime Minister, Amir Ali of village Sarifganj of Mymensing district expressed bewilderment at police behaviour when he wrote that 'repressions of police officers are inconceivable in these days of democracy and popular freedom and are only reminiscent of oppression perpetrated during the British Raj'. To this man, as to many of his compatriots, Pakistan was rendered meaningless by the 'high handedness of the police'. To the memorialists of Nawabganj in Dhaka district the police conduct 'humiliated Pakistan itself in the eye of the people'.

In fact, as we have stated earlier, the 'notion of Pakistan' did not go well with a police force that had been created and bequeathed to the new nation by the Raj. Every excess perpetrated by the police on the people reduced the euphoria born of political independence. Abdullah Sharif of Jessore, in his proposed model of the state, suggested the abolition of the police force which he termed 'superfluous' and incompatible with the national government based on 'democratic ideas, and Islamic spirit'. He suggested, after cataloguing all the evils of the police, conversion of the force to National Guards with the assurance of 'respect' for 'the voices of public opinion'.169
The police bureaucrats were not unaware of this fact. The Inspector-General of Police expressed his doubt if police officers fully realised their responsibility in the 'new set-up'. He reminded them that 'He who can secure the object in view by persuasion is a more useful officer than his comrade who relies too much on the assertion of his authority and thereby runs the risk of seeing that authority challenged'. The use of force, Inspector-General of Police reminded, was always followed by complaints and recriminations which embittered the relations between the police and the public. Time and again the stress was laid on the persuasive power of the force by the members of the ruling party and the higher police bureaucrats. The Prime Minister emphasised a 'change of outlook' of the force. He stressed that 'unless a change could be effected in the outlook under which the police is to be regarded as friends, the objective to set up an ideal administration would not be attained'. He demanded initiative from the police in this respect.

But the initiative was lacking. The police could not free themselves from the influence of the Raj as was evident in the assertion of the policemen in an incident of conflict with the people at Cox's Bazar on 3 September 1947. While carrying on 'wanton oppression' of the people the police allegedly shouted: 'shalara, Pakistan has not yet been achieved, the British police still exist'. This self-image of the rank and file in the police force continued to linger. Most of the higher officials in the force also continued to model themselves on the authoritarian practice of the Raj and always guarded their colonial heritage tenaciously. To a proposal by the Sylhet municipality for a piece of land in the Sylhet Sadar thana compound for erection of a memorial to shahid Alkas the Inspector-General of Police responded by saying that it was 'undesirable to encourage the erection of a memorial in the Thana compound for a victim of police firing'. Alkas was shot by the police in the last days of the Raj on 24 April 1947 when a procession of the civil resisters proceeded towards the Sylhet Sadar police station. 'This one incident' according to Mahmud Ali, General Secretary of Assam Muslim League, 'was a turning point in the movement' to join with Pakistan. And thus Alkas became a martyr to the cause of Pakistan. 'In the eyes of the public it was a national cause', noted the Deputy Inspector-General of Police, 'and Alkas was declared to have died [the] death of [a]
The Deputy Inspector-General failed to see the cause of the people and thus isolated the police from sharing the 'glory of the cause' for which Alkas died. The gap between nationalist spirit and colonial rule as embodied in the coercive police continued to exist, though the nationalists were in control of the state. Even to a higher police bureaucrat it was 'extremely undesirable' to erect a memorial of a nationalist shahid in the compound of a police station of an independent state.

Thus Pakistani nationalism failed to legitimise the police force on whom it largely relied to build the nation and protect the state. This, along with many other factors, contributed to the erosion of liberalism in state practice during the years of Muslim League rule in East Bengal. As a result the Muslim League, the political vehicle of nation building efforts, was alienated from the people much sooner than many political observers had anticipated.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


2 Police Report, 1948, p.66, Statement E. The number of the Officers does not include Superior Officers of and above the rank of Deputy Superintendent of Police.

3 *ibid*, p.10.


5 Police Report, 1948, p.44.

6 *ibid*, p.11.

7 *ibid*, p.3.

8 *ibid*, p.9.


12 The Police Committee, p.17.


14 Minutes of the Conference of Deputy Inspectors General of Police with the Inspector-General of Police held at Dacca on 30th November and 1st December 1953. Home Police (confidential) Bundle.


16 *ibid*, 1948, p.44.


19 Police Committee, p.58.


21 Home Police, B-progs., July 1953, No. 46-49.

22 Statement by the Honourable Mr Nurul Amin, Finance Minister, in presenting the Budget for 1951-52, EBGP, 1951, p.11.

23 Police Committee Report, p.44.

24 *ibid*, p.44.
The leaflet in Bengali entitled 'pulish bahinir daak', (Call of the Police Force), was forfeited to the Government of Pakistan on 11 June 1949, and the Notification of the same appeared in the Dacca Gazette on 23 June 1949. For the leaflet see Umar, Dalil, pp. 273-275.

Police Report, 1948, p.44.

Tajuddin Ahmed's Diary, 1 March 1952, in Umar, Dalil.

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51 Home Secretary's note on 25 October 1950, Home police Bundle No.71.
52 Home Police, B-progs., Nos. 639-622.
57 Pakistan Observer, 15 October 1949.
58 See Chapter 5 for details.
61 Home Police, B-progs., April 1949, No. 239.
63 David Arnold, Police Power, p.63.
64 Home Police, B-progs., September 1948, Nos. 74-78.
65 Home Police, B-progs., September 1948, Nos. 74-78.
66 ibid
67 Home Police, B-progs., August 1948, No. 192.
68 Home Police, September 1948, Nos. 74-78.
69 Home Police, B-progs., August 1949, Nos. 678-683.
70 Home Police, B-progs., July 1951, Nos. 52-95.
72 Home Police, B-progs., June 1949, Nos 230-231.
75 See Ranajit Guha's Elementary Aspects, pp.46-47, for a fine treatment of this aspect of feudal power.
76 Home Police, B-progs., February 1955, Nos. 750-753.
77 Home Police, B-progs., February 1955, Nos. 856-863.
79 Home Police, September 1948, Nos. 74-78.
80 Home Police, B-progs., September 1948, Nos. 228-40.
81 SDC Hakulaki to DC Sylhet, 16.12.48, Home Police, B-progs., Bundle 75.
82 Home Police, B-progs., July 1948, Nos. 2067-71.
86 *Azan*, 7 May 1953.
92 Pakistan Observer, 15 October 1949.
96 Home Police, B-progs., September 1948, Nos. 74-78.
98 Pakistan Observer, 14 September 1949, Dacca.
100 Home Police, B-progs., July 1952, Nos. 1-2.
102 Home Police, B-progs., November 1948, Nos 1-2.
103 See Police Reports for the period of study.
There is a growing literature on prison life mostly by political detainees in Bangladesh. Abdus Shahid's *Smriti*, Troilokka Nath Chakrabarty's *Jele Trish Bachar* are relevant for the point made here.

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154 Police Committee, p.7.
155 Home Police, B-progs., October 1948, Nos.88-108.
156 Home Police, B-progs., December 1953, Nos. 663-666.
157 The Police Committee, p.6.
159 Minutes of the Conference of the Deputy Inspectors-General with the Inspector-General.
160 See EBLA progs. of March 1949.
161 See police Committee Report, p.7.
162 David Arnold, Police Power, p.121.
165 Taamir-e-Millet, Series No. 3, Dacca, p.2.
166 Home Police, B-progs., October 1948, Nos. 88-108.
171 Minutes of the Conference of the Deputy Inspectors-General with the Inspector-General.
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TOWARDS A CONCLUSION: THE MUSLIM LEAGUE AND ITS RULE

I

In his characteristically arrogant style, Jinnah once dismissed the contribution of the Muslim League in achieving Pakistan. ‘Don’t talk to me about the Muslim League,’ he said in response to a question, ‘I and my stenographer created Pakistan’¹ This uncharitable comment came from a man who led the League with an absolute mandate from its members. Apart from the element of self-congratulation that it obviously contained, the statement also undermined the importance of the organisation, and slighted the sacrifice that others had made in the struggle for Pakistan.

Recognizably an overstatement, Jinnah’s remark nevertheless contained a grain of truth. While he had emerged as the ‘sole spokesman’² for the League and the Muslims in the 1940s, it was also true that the League had never been a mass-based organisation in the same way as the Congress had been. Moreover, Pakistan’s top leaders had no contact with the anti-colonial movement in Asia; neither did they take part in it nor had they, as Kamruddin Ahmad contends, ever tried to understand it.³ As a result the League organisation was never steeled through participation in anti-imperialist struggles, as was the case with the Congress. Hence its relation with the masses was not based on organisational linkages; what bestowed on the League the authority to speak for Indian Muslims was perhaps the political context of the 1930s and 40s, and the growing perception of Muslims that the Hindus were their main oppressors.

Till 1943 there was almost no provincial and district level organisation of the Muslim League in Bengal.⁴ A branch office of the Provincial Muslim League was set up only on 9
April 1944, at 150 Mogultooly, Dhaka. In fact, the Dhaka District Muslim League was confined within the precincts of the ‘Nawab Bari’ (House of the Nawabs). ‘Intrigues, faction-fights, takeover bids and knife-thrusts’, in the words of Tinker, were the salient features of the Bengal Muslim League before independence. The malaise in the organisation of the League not only continued after independence, but deteriorated considerably since then, seriously affecting the district, sub-divisional and lower level units. There was an uneasy calm at the organizational level so long as Jinnah was alive, but his death on 11 September 1948, ‘released forces within the League which were influential to limit its effectiveness, especially in East Bengal which was taking on’, as Ziring believed, ‘more and more the appearance of a political battleground’. By the time the League was in power in East Bengal it had developed three factions: the Dhaka or Nazimuddin faction, the Fazlul Huq faction and the Suhrawardy faction. The Dhaka faction was essentially traditional, conservative and represented by the landed (Zamindari) interests. The Suhrawardy faction was mostly ‘modernist’ in ideology and believed in changing the communal nature of the organisation after Pakistan was achieved. The Fazlul Huq faction was rural, with activists drawn from professional groups. The other small groups belonging to the Assam Muslim League led by Maulana Bhashani also added colour to the already faction-ridden East Bengal Muslim League politics.

After the partition the Nazimuddin faction came to power with the blessings and with help from the central Muslim League leadership. The activists of the League were now divided on the issue of whether or not to open up the Muslim League to the non-Muslim section of the society. In February 1948, in the council session held at Karachi, the All India Muslim League was divided into two separate organisations: the Pakistan Muslim League and the Indian Muslim League. Except for the Muslim League parties in the legislature, the existing structure of the entire organisation was dissolved and all the primary membership stood cancelled. Thus the reorganisation of the League involved fresh enrolment of primary members and the building up of the organisation from primary,
sub-divisional and district levels to the provincial councils, and finally the Pakistan Muslim League council and the working committee.10

This decision to 'close the door of the League' on the face of the people was bitterly resented by many League activists. Abul Mansur called this action of the League a 'political crime' entailing some ethical and moral lapses.11 The somewhat liberal criteria that existed before partition regarding election to various offices and organs within the party were now replaced by strict centralisation of directive and cautious control. This helped those already in control to strengthen their own positions by distributing favours to sections they favoured, thereby weakening oppositional groups in the organisation. It is not surprising that these developments gave rise to serious allegations of discrimination and partisan considerations within the League.12

Organising committees at district and sub-divisional levels were nominated by Akram Khan, the President of the Bengal Muslim League at the time of partition, in the first week of May, 1948, and receipt books for enrolment of primary members were distributed to organisers about the same time.13 This attitude was reflected also in the way candidates were nominated for the District Board election held in Bogra, immediately after partition, where allegedly an anti-League element was given nomination by the Provincial leadership, overlooking 'competent' League activists.14 By July 1948, the League organisation at the sub-divisional level and below had been constituted. The formation of more than one District League in a single district was reported from several districts; some of them accordingly had to be dissolved: in some other cases, their elections were declared invalid and fresh elections held. The process of reorganisation of the League generated serious dissatisfaction within the party ranks. Some disaffected members sought intervention from the central leadership, but the latter refused to overrule or bypass the provincial leadership in matters relating to the reorganisation of the League in East Bengal.15 The power of nomination of district and sub-divisional committees for enrolling primary members and constituting the League Committees at those levels gave the provincial organising committee headed by Akram Khan great scope to exercise
influence over the entire reorganisation process. Distribution of a meagre number of receipt books to these committees for enrolment purposes restricted the size of the party. As Nazma Chowdhury commented: 'The reorganisation policy in a way, demonstrated the limitations of the political style of those in power'—their inclination toward 'coterie politics' rather than an open competitive style of operation.\(^\text{16}\)

The newly formed League, as Ispahani observed, 'unfortunately lacked the enthusiasm, the determination, the discipline, the sacrifice, and above all else, the aim which propelled the All-India Muslim League onward to solidarity and greatness.'\(^\text{17}\) The control of the ruling clique over the organisation earned for the party the sobriquet 'Pocket League' from Maulana Bhashani. Similar criticism came from Suhrawardy who called the organisation a 'Sarkari League' (Government League).\(^\text{18}\) The internal crisis of the League came out into the open during the Council Session of the Pakistan Muslim League which was held at Dhaka on 18 and 19 June 1949.\(^\text{19}\) But the crisis now had reached down to most of the district and sub-division level organisations as well.

Unhappy with the changes occurring within the Muslim League, a large number of activists left the organisation, and, on 26 June, 1949, formed the Awami Muslim League, the Muslim League of the people, under the leadership of Maulana Bhashani.\(^\text{20}\) It was a major split, undoubtedly the biggest in the history of the Muslim League, but the party that survived the split failed to ensure unity and solidarity among its members and followers, though it was now more homogeneous than before. The old activists of the Muslim League held a meeting on 21st and 22nd July 1949 at the local Board Hall of north Sylhet. A motion of no confidence in the district and sub-divisional adhoc committees was passed at this meeting and communicated to them. Again on 19 August 1951 a League Workers' Conference was held in Sylhet, attended by many activists in the district and Sub-divisional branches, who expressed their sense of frustration about the provincial leadership. This atmosphere pervaded almost all the branches of the Muslim League all over the province.\(^\text{21}\) The League organisation in the province had virtually resolved itself into a chaotic tangle of small factions, 'each attached', as Callard has observed, 'more to
a person or an interest rather than representing a policy’. ‘At no stage,’ to quote Callard ‘has the power of the politicians rested upon solid electoral support.’\textsuperscript{22} The only by-election held in a Muslim seat in Tangail, in Mymensingh district, in April, 1949 saw the ruling party defeated. Their response was to postpone all other by-elections in an attempt to forestall any possible opposition in the assembly. The bitter experience of Tangail paralysed the organisation and stopped them from attempting a ‘thorough overhauling of policy’.\textsuperscript{23}

The absence of by-elections in 34 seats, nearly one fifth of the total membership of the Assembly, also hampered the organisational activities of the local branches.\textsuperscript{24} Traditionally what spurred political activities in the provinces was the mobilization around elections. By-elections were generally regarded as the barometer by which the ruling party could measure the degree of popular support they enjoyed. By postponing the elections the EBML deprived itself of this advantage. As a result the district and lower level organisations became indifferent to the public. The political result of the internecine factional fights and bickering for personal gain that went on inside the branches must have been quite frustrating for the rank and file membership. Opportunism became the only means of advancing one’s own political status, and the Muslim League now developed a sycophantic political style.

The resulting organisational problems were to become more obvious in the years that followed. In November 1951, for instance, four members of the Assembly from Chittagong resigned because of disagreement with certain government policies affecting the district. They resented the delay and the amount of the compensation fixed by the District Administration for the land acquired by the government in Muradpur in Chittagong district. It was stated that the members upheld the position of Chittagong district and city Muslim League regarding the issue.\textsuperscript{25} More defections and resignations took place from the parliamentary party after the police firing on 21 February 1952, as the League government failed to resolve the language issue and resorted to violence instead. Want of discussion within the forums of the organisation, and absence of by-elections, led to
serious inaction in the organisation. A 1953 Secret Report on the Organisation had this to say on organisational problems:

Except in Sylhet and Noakhali Muslim League activity was hardly perceptible elsewhere; and there too, it was more or less of an internecine character. In Sylhet the League was divided into two rival groups as already reported in the previous fortnight, and so far no effective action has been taken by the provincial Muslim League to bridge this gap. In Noakhali Mr. Abdul Hakim, General Secretary of the DML lost the confidence of the organisation. At a specially convened meeting on the 19th of June a resolution of no-confidence was moved against him and was passed by considerable majority. The DML in Comilla is divided into 3 groups each pulling in a different direction. In Rangpur, the Secretary of the DML Mashiur Rahman and some other MLAs have joined the opposition party and at the same time trying to create their own party within the organisation.

The report pointed out the 'obvious lack of discipline and cohesion' in the organisation.26

The District Magistrate of Khulna reported to the chief Secretary the existence of two strong factions in the district Muslim League.27 The District Magistrate, Barisal also had similar reports to send to the government. The powerful 'student faction', reported the DM, Barisal, was 'apparently not liked at all by the older generation' who had lost power to them.28 'All the self-respecting leaders of the DML', wrote one of the 'older generation' leaders of Barisal, 'were under a painful necessity of keeping themselves aloof from the organisation. One coterie Muslim League was formed with some school and college boys so much so that one happened to be the secretary of the Bakherganj [Barisal] District Muslim League'. He further stated that 'the DML...has got a working Committee from which all the MLAs were cautiously excluded'.29 In fact, the organisation became conspicuous by its inactivity at lower levels, which compelled the Working Committee of the DML, in its meeting of May 1949, to direct all the District, Sub-division, City and Union Committees to activate the organisation and to call meetings more frequently.30

The situation prevailing in the League sometimes attracted comment from sections of the media sympathetic to the cause of the League. Morning News, a Dhaka daily, compared the condition of the League to that of 'a sucked orange', and suggested that a revitalised Muslim League 'with less of the rulers and more of the ruled in it' could successfully perform the task of nation building.32
Many district and sub-divisional level activists were worried about the situation in the Party and communicated their feelings to central leaders, sometimes even to the Governor of the Province. The President of the Netrokona Sub-division Muslim League informed the Governor that ‘there was no activity in the Muslim League’. He also thought that the provincial leaders were not sufficiently active to revitalize the organisation.33. In July 1951, a district level Muslim League leader informed the Governor of the Province that the organisation was ‘not working in the villages like the Congress Party’.34. On 23 August 1951, Mahmud Ali, the former General Secretary of Assam Muslim League, wrote in Naobelal that in the last four years there had been no Muslim League activity in Sylhet. The Convenor of Sylhet ML Adhoc Committee, Myenuddin Ahmad Chowdhury, also resented the gross inactivity of the organisation in the district.35 ‘To many in the country’, as Smith has observed, ‘the leaders have seemed, in fact, to have clung to power but to have abdicated leadership’.36 Many supporters of the League were pained to see the condition of their organisation, and expressed their frustration through the media. In a letter to the editor of the Morning News, one Akhtar Hossain Joarder of Rajshahi wrote on 17 September 1952 that ‘the masses are estranged [from the League] and as such when any public meeting is held the present leaders do not get any audience. We have got League leaders and League Government’, he wrote further, ‘but no League minded people’37 Even Akram Khan, the President of the PML, admitted in his letter of resignation before the June 1949 Council Session that the popularity of the League was ‘waning rapidly’, and people were losing faith in the national organisation. He blamed the ‘internal weakness of the organisation’ for the unhappy situation of the Muslim League.38

‘Internal weakness’ was a major reason why no party elections were held after the reorganisation process in 1948. The elections which were scheduled in 1951 started taking place towards the end of the year; and this opened a pandora’s box of internal conflicts. In some districts and sub-divisions ‘parallel Leagues’ were formed, so that more than one League executive body was elected. But elections could not be completed in Sylhet, Narayanganj city, Barisal, Rangpur, Rajshahi, Khulna, Comilla, and Dhaka city in time.39 Internal conflicts and unresolvable differences were among the causes of this
situation. 'The factional struggles in the lower units of the organisation', Nazma Chowdhury has rightly observed, 'reflected the factional conflicts which prevailed in the upper echelons of party leadership.' Deep fissures had now been created in the party; conflicts of personality and power overshadowed the members' allegiance to the organisation. To some extent the state of the party can be assessed from a comment by Ananda Bazar Patrika on 20 June 1953: 'The Muslim League which took the reins of Government is now crumbling to pieces. There is no powerful and popular person in its ranks who may solve its internal problem. An institution which is busy about settling its own house in order cannot possibly rule the country in a proper way. In this circumstance the interest of the masses are bound to suffer.'

This lack of a mass base was pointed out by the DM, Khulna, in a Fortnightly Report to the Government on 26 October 1949. According to him mass contact was a thing which was dreaded by the district leadership, and thus no attempt at enrolment of members was being made. As a result 'instead of controlling and directing the party', the leadership did considerable damage to the organisation and lost touch with the people.

The legislative wing of the ML was similarly affected. The general climate of League politics made many of the legislators unresponsive to the expectations of the people. In previous chapters we have given a number of instances of Muslim League MLAs criticising, from time to time, various government policies, in order to make those more pro-people. But most of the time their criticism went unheeded. Some members harped on the bureaucratic nature of the government which, they felt, resembled more the Raj than 'national' government. Failing to reform the organisation and the Government, some of them defected and formed the Awami League Group in the provincial Assembly in February 1952. But most of the League MLAs were seemingly engaged in furthering their own personal ends and the interests of the class they represented. For these activities, they depended more on the civil servants than on the people, 'from whom their roots had been cut off', giving the bureaucrats an opportunity to establish their supremacy in the government. The alienation of the Muslim League leaders from the masses comes out
clearly from the following observation in the East Pakistan Police Committee report: ‘Of late, the use of armed police has been considerable as the security measures specially with regard to the Members of the Central and Provincial Government have been intensified’.45 By now a significant number of the Muslim League leaders had given up their idea of ‘Pakistan Revolution’ in exchange for bureaucratic and police protection.

II

All the key posts, including those of Secretaries of the East Bengal Secretariat, went to non-Bengalis after independence. There was only one Bengali46 among the 82 senior officers who opted for Pakistan. Kamruddin Ahmad, a contemporary political activist, observed that the bureaucrats in Pakistan were not only responsible for executing the policy of the government, but also took upon themselves the task of framing the policy.47 Ziring was even more eloquent in emphasising the importance of the bureaucracy in Pakistan. The East Bengal civil servants, drawn mostly from the Punjab, who knew little about the economic, social and cultural problems of the country,48 owed their allegiance only to the central executive. ‘Behind the facade of the cabinet, stood these permanent Civil Servants, tirelessly and ceaselessly advising the individual ministers as regards legislation and other matters’. In this way, Ziring went on to emphasise, ‘the Civil Servants matured virtually all government proposals, both executive and legislative.49

Thus the situation was one where the bureaucracy remained the predominant factor in the political processes of the province. It is in this context that one can perhaps appreciate the significance of the Morning News editorial on 12 August 1950, in which Mafizuddin Ahmed, East Pakistan’s Minister for Relief and Rehabilitation, was applauded for setting ‘a courageous example’ by holding a Press conference at Dhaka instead of allowing a Permanent Secretary to do the job, as had been the practice in the province. The editorial also exhorted the Minister ‘to see that no infringement of their powers and privileges takes place’. It hailed ‘the example’ as worth emulating by other Ministers.50
The provincial bureaucracy was run by a Chief Secretary, an ethnic Punjabi, on whom most of the members of the cabinet, including the Prime Minister were dependent. The Prime Minister also indirectly enhanced the prestige and influence of the Divisional Commissioners by arrogating to himself the Cabinet's power of rejection of any suggestion from the former regarding issues of governance. Kamruddin Ahmad thought that the Chief Minister of East Pakistan 'lacked personality', and that was why he failed to control the bureaucracy. Umar has also highlighted interesting examples to show how it was the Chief Secretary who took most of his important decisions on issues like the Language controversy in the province. Talking to Aziz Ahmed, the Chief Secretary of the province, Taya Zinkin had a feeling that 'his whole attitude was that of a colonial administrator.'

Zinkin also reports that at the mention of the Chief Minister, Nurul Amin, Aziz Ahmed said, 'what can you expect of him? He is an ass and a Bengali.' If this was the attitude of the Chief Secretary to the Chief Minister, which he unhesitatingly expressed to a representative of a foreign press, one can only imagine how less important Muslim League ministers would have fared in the eyes of the bureaucracy. Kamruddin Ahmad quotes Aziz Ahmed as saying 'I am the Government', and the media also from time to time confirmed the self-image of the Chief Secretary in the provincial administration. In fact, there are innumerable instances of the Chief Secretary reprimanding Ministers in the course of the day to day running of administration. The situation reached such an absurd state as to make Kamruddin Ahmad wonder who, between Nurul Amin and Aziz Ahmed, was responsible for the failure of democracy in East Pakistan.

What was happening at the Provincial headquarters of the administration influenced the lower levels of the bureaucracy as well. In the June 1949 Council Session of the ML many councillors complained to their leaders about the 'insults' the District Magistrates and other officers used to hurl at the League members of the districts. But the 'insults' continued almost without interruption from bureaucratic quarters. In a Memorandum on
20 March 1950, submitted to the Prime Minister on behalf of the Sylhet district Muslim Students' Association, the memorialists complained against the 'unbecoming and humiliating behaviour of the DM' towards Qazi Muhibur Rahman, a former councillor of the Assam Provincial Muslim League. The DM had the former arrested 'on personal grounds' allegedly to satisfy his vanity. 'It was too strong a shock for him (Qazi Muhibur Rahman) to stand' and as a result he fell ill inside the jail and later died.59 The reason for this 'excess', as stated by the memorialists, was that Muhibur Rahman had dared to speak against the DM to the Divisional Commissioner. Complaints also came in from the sub-divisions. The DML Secretary of Rangpur complained to the DM about 'a concrete case of an arrogant Government official [SDO, Nilphamari] who always undermined the prestige of the National Organisation.' Commenting on the complaint, even the Chief Secretary disapproved of the tactless manner in which the officer behaved towards the ML activists in the sub-division.60

In May 1949, the Working Committee in its meeting entreated the Government servants to be 'courteous' and 'helpful' to the citizens. The Prime Minister, in the first conference of the Commissioners, emphasised the need for politeness and sympathy in their dealings with others. And he assigned the officers the role of 'guides and friends' to the public.61 In fact the DMs acted more as guides than as friends to the League. In their Fortnightly Reports they almost regularly appraised and suggested ways to improve the performance of the League branches in the districts. In one such report the District Magistrate of Khulna wrote: 'It is time that the Provincial Muslim League thought (sic) seriously of the future of Muslim League Organisation in the district. It is in the hands of people who are not anxious to maintain the prestige and sustain the popularity of the organisation in the district'. He also suggested a role for the Provincial Leaders in the Report: 'Some provincial League officials should make mass contact and find out the weakness existing at the moment in the working of the present organisation and the impediments that are standing in the way of making the League a really powerful democratic body in the district'. The reason for concern was also spelt out by the DM who preferred this recommendation for 'the interest of not only the local administration
but in the ultimate good of the *dumb nuts masses* of the district.\(^6^2\) The elitist attitude expressed in this statement is too obvious to require any comment.

### III

The demand for restructuring the bureaucracy had been articulated since the birth of the new nation. As early as September 1947, an important resolution was adopted in the East Pakistan Youth Conference held at Dhaka on 26 September. It stated that activists who had made sacrifices in the struggle for Pakistan, and all those who had deeprooted connections with the soil, were to be recruited to the bureaucracy. For many activists, of course, liberty against foreign rule symbolized the absence of colonial state functionaries, or at least assumption of effective control over them. On 18 November 1947, the speakers in a meeting organised by the Muslim League at the local Muslim Institute, Mymensingh, expressed the opinion that the public should be at liberty to remove any Minister or official whom they thought ‘dishonest and inefficient’.\(^6^3\) The demand for popular control over the bureaucracy was articulated more strongly and regularly by the relatively lower level activists of the League, and their supporters. As early as January 1948, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Naimuddin Ahmed criticised the bureaucracy as ‘British created agents’ of oppression in a leaflet. They demanded trimming of the top heavy bureaucracy, by abolishing the useless posts of divisional commissioners, deputy secretaries, joint secretaries, aid-de-camp of the Prime Minister and Parliamentary secretaries, for all these incurred heavy drain on the exchequer. They asked for direct contact between the secretaries and the people, and demanded that the participants in the struggle for Pakistan take control of all aspects of life in the new nation.\(^6^4\) A number of elected representatives in the Assembly were in favour of abolition of ‘old relation between officers and the public’. ‘The *Raja-Praja* (King-Subject) relationship’, remarked an MLA, ‘would not exist any longer.’ There was now an expectation of exchange of ‘heart and mind’ between officers and the people.\(^6^5\) This sentiment was reiterated by members of the Assembly who failed to notice ‘any change of outlook of the officials’; to
them, they, the officers appeared to be the same as they were during the Raj.66 Their 'superiority complex and vanity', nurtured during British rule, were 'abundantly exhibited', some members thought, when officers came in contact with the people. Quite often people were 'slighted and neglected'.67 Mohammed Owais, a Muslim League MLA, criticised the officers on a number of occasions, and urged them to accept the fact that they were only public servants.68 But to most of the League MLAs reform of bureaucracy essentially meant some kind of a new relation between the officers and the people. Members suggested reforms to help 'change the outlook of officials, if necessary, by arranging 'training classes' in order to make the latter suitable to serve a Representative Government.69

Criticism of officials from outside the Assembly was more in the form of demanding disciplinary measures against them than anything else. A public meeting at Govindacharan Park in Sylhet, on 19 November 1947, presided over by the Secretary of the Assam Muslim League, demanded the 'immediate removal' of the Deputy Commissioner for his alleged 'highandedness and nepotism'. Such public demands for disciplinary measures against officials were a feature of the early years of post-colonial history.

A climactic point in the contest between ML activists and the bureaucracy, often represented by district Magistrates, was reached when a controversy broke out in Barisal, on the issue of selecting a president for a meeting scheduled to celebrate the first year of independence on 14 August 1948. The local League members wanted their president to have this honour, while the DM secretly sent off a telegram asking for CS's permission to preside over the meeting. 'To satisfy League izzat (Prestige),' wrote the DM, Barisal, to the Chief Secretary, 'I agreed to ascertain your opinion on the subject'.70 To the DM 'it was a childish matter', but to many League activists this symbolic act-of having the League President preside over Independence Day meetings- was a proof of the superiority of the organisation over the bureaucracy. Abul Mansur Ahmad, in his autobiography, recalled similar conflicts in Mymensingh.71
Access to state power made some League activists believe that they had a right to control the state machinery. The District Magistrate of Khulna reported that the League leaders of the district approached the Superintendent of Police and asked him to obey the 'unwritten law' that all cases of transfer and promotion of officers would have to be decided according to the wishes of the Muslim League. However, the District Administration had learnt to neutralise such pressures from the League. The Police Committee observed that 'MLAs do approach District Officers but the latter are able to withstand the influence'. The Committee thought that it was 'a breach of discipline' and 'gross violation of the principle of good and just government' even if a Minister of Government sent for an officer of a District.

Gradually the urge for popular control over the bureaucracy was eroded, as bureaucratic control over the political process increased. The ML activists soon found that their only recourse in the face of bureaucratic intransigence was the 'parliament of the street'. When the earlier mentioned SDO of Nilphamari did not cooperate with the sub-divisional Muslim League in distributing relief money on 19 December 1952, a 'huge procession' demanding enquiry against the SDO was staged by the League workers; and subsequently a 'complete hartal' was observed, demanding the resignation of the SDO.

When popular resentment was vented against officers the Government protected them; it was thought inexpedient to punish officers, as it could affect the 'morale and prestige of the service'. Most of the time the officers were defended and protected by the Ministers, and not infrequently by the Prime Minister, who thought that 'the Government and the people were one'. In fact, the League Government was very much dependent on the officers for administration of the country. This was partly due to the contribution of the latter to strengthening the League by securing Government support during the Raj in many 'devious ways' and partly because the League accepted the officer's image of themselves as 'intellectually and morally superior to the politicians'.

The Prime Minister used to yield too easily to all claims of 'superiority' on the part of the bureaucrats. He also credited the successful organisation and establishment of a stable government in the somewhat 'trying and strenuous condition' to a large extent to the untiring efforts and zeal of officers in charge of district administration. This was not merely an expression of gratitude of a complacent Prime Minister towards the members of the civil service, it was also an admission of the reality of the power relations that existed between the executive and the politicians of the League.

IV

In our attempt to understand the reasons for the decline of the Muslim League in East Pakistan, we have explored the less familiar side of early East Pakistan history. We have focused particularly on the process of transition to a post-colonial polity, by highlighting the relationships of various sections of the peasantry with the Muslim League and the Governmental bureaucracy in East Bengal.

The post-colonial political order in East Bengal was born with congenital defects that flawed all attempts at transition to a democracy. The most important instrument of this transition, the Muslim League, was wanting, as we already know, in organisational strength, and in its formal organisational linkages with the masses. Its particular history did not contain a tradition of mass struggle against the Raj. However, many activists of the League took initiatives to expand and strengthen the base of popular support, by espousing the cause of the people. But the League leaders in the government failed to take up the hegemonic task of broadening the scope of alliances with the masses, by including them in the process of making and implementing decisions that were critical to the development of democracy and nationhood. National unity could only sustain itself through voluntary participation of its constituent elements; thus the limits to participation were a sure source of decay of the Muslim League and democratic government. In order to ensure continued participation of the rural masses in land reform, water management
and in food procurement and distribution, beyond the immediate contingencies like natural disasters, it was necessary that the benefits were clearly perceived by the people. But due to the dominance of vested interests within the League and the presence of an 'overdeveloped' bureaucracy in the state, the League failed to encourage such initiatives from lower level activists and sections of the peasantry of East Bengal.

Over time, the bureaucratic hold over planning, organising and executing nation-building projects strengthened. Use was made of acts, rules, circulars, and orders framed by the British Government to centralise powers in the hands of the bureaucracy. Even fresh ordinances curbing freedom of association and speech were issued on the pretext of national security. At lower levels, the district bureaucracy continued to retain monopolistic control over all fundamental institutions and processes of decision making, as before. Thus, in the East Bengal political system, the Government led by the Muslim League failed to impinge on the administrative system forcefully enough to foster an atmosphere of democratic participation in all spheres of nation-building. The Muslim League rule saw instead a shift of power and authority in the favour of the civil service, already notorious for its abuse of power, its incompetence and corruption.

Being disgruntled with such administration both at the district and provincial level, many party activists dissociated themselves from the party and launched strong criticism against the government in various public forums. Quite understandably, zulum and corruption of officers are major themes in this critique, informed by juridical notions of power and contract in public affairs, which drew their legitimacy from the parliamentary democratic traditions of the British in their own country, and, philosophically, from the Enlightenment tradition of Europe. But this process revealed the helplessness of the liberal elements of the League before the wielder of real power, the bureaucrats. Tragically, the politicians were now reduced only to a role of brokers between the people on the one side, and the state on the other. In the end the activists of the League, including those in the Government, were forced to realise that even a petty official in the
'steel frame' was somebody they had to kowtow to for favour. To a certain extent this explains the ambiguity inherent in the relationship between officials and the people, a point we have discussed in chapter 4. Ziring observed that the people displayed little confidence in 'their representatives' and their experience taught them to look to other authority when their welfare was threatened.82 In December 1951 the Governor of the Province, in his tour diary, also noted this aspect of the people's behaviour towards 'office holders of political organisation'. He mentioned that the people had more confidence in public servants than in elected representatives.83 For this, the politics of the League had a lot to answer for. Instead of politicising issues concerning the 'welfare' of the people, the League activists started influencing and relying on public servants for distribution of the resources of the government of East Pakistan.

Gradually a situation developed when the ML was subject to the pull of two contrary forces: one of bureaucracy, that drew together a certain number of League politicians, especially those in the Government, often described as the 'Sarkari Dal' (Government's Party); and the other, of the activists who failed to make the League a mass based democratic organisation and felt frustrated at this failure. Whatever contact that was established between the people and the League in the preindependence period lingered on with the splitaway section of the League, now mobilized mostly under the banner of the Awami League (or People's League). By 1954 the point had been reached, to borrow from Gramsci, when the social classes became detached from their party in that particular form, with the particular men who represented and led them.84 The Muslim League was no longer recognised by these classes as their representative party any more.

As a result the Muslim League was rejected totally in the election of March 1954. But the dream and expectation which inspired large numbers of Muslim peasants of East Bengal and the middle class to rally round the demand for their 'holy land' remained unfulfilled. For many people, democratic participation in the affairs of the nation began and ended at the ballot-box. The victory at the polls turned out to be a defeat of the political party only.
The functionaries of the State managed to remain above the control of the elected representatives, and democratic checks on the former's increasing tendency to arrogate power to themselves proved to be lacking in force and authority.85

Through an elaborate and well contrived conspiracy, the rule of the bureaucracy continued till the ruling clique in Karachi decided to change the form of rule by imposing Martial Law on 7 October, 1958. The saga of a democratic form of state had come to an end by then. Never again could the Awami League make a comeback and consolidate political power, at least not within the framework of Pakistan. Even in Bangladesh, the new nation-state was relinquished too soon to the fold of the civil military bureaucracy. This time it took even less than 4 years for the bureaucracy to do away with the political system advocated by the Awami League. Ever since then, they have been in control of the political process in Bangladesh. In analysing the regression in Bangladesh politics after the Military takeover in August 1975, one cannot but be reminded of Marx's excellent comment in the Eighteenth Brumaire, 'Instead of society having conquered a new content for itself, it seems that the State only returned to its oldest form, to the shamelessly simple domination of the sabre and the cowl'.86

And in this process the political parties have been reduced to a position of helpless onlookers in the affairs of the state, only to be occasionally shocked to attention by the routine upsurge of the masses, claiming, usually unsuccessfully, their right to participate in the organization of their own lives and dreams.
# NOTES AND REFERENCES


2 Ayesha Jalal coined this phrase. See *The Sole Spokesman*.

3 Kamruddin Ahmad, *Social History*, p.191.


5 ibid. p.213.


12 ibid; Ataur Rahman Khan, *Ojaratir* and Nazma Chowdhury, *Legislative* p.68.


14 Umar (ed) *Dail*, p.29.


23 A memorandum to Abdus Sattar Pirzada, Minister of Pakistan Government, Department of Civil Supplies, Karachi, by A M A Hamid, Member, Pakistan Conssembly, Pabna, East Bengal, 18 May 1949, Home Poll., B-progs, Nos. 1491-1498.
24 Ziring, 'Failure', p.103.
25 EBLA, progs Vol.4 No.2, for more see Tour Note, Chittagong.
26 Fortnightly Secret Report, Home Poll., Bundle No.147.
31 Umar, Bhasha Andolon, Vol.1. p.239.
33 Tour Note, Mymemsingh, 11 July to 13 July, 1951, p.6.
34 ibid.
38 Nazma Chowdhury, Legislative, p.98.
39 Sen, Chithi, p.152.
40 Nazma Chowdhury, Legislative, p.101.
41 Ziring, 'Failure', p.333.
42 Ananda Bazar Patrika, 20 June 1953, Calcutta.
45 Police Committee Report, p.42.
46 Von Vorys, Political Development, p.110.
47 Kamaruddin Ahmad, Social History, p.93.
48 Zinkin, Reporting, p.40.
49 Ziring, 'Failure', p.8.
50 Morning News, 12 April, 1950.
51 Prime Minister's Speech at the Annual Conference of Commissioners and Heads of Departments on 10-11 January, 1949, Dhaka, Home Poll. Bundle No. 147.
52 Kamruddin Ahmad, *Social History*, p.99.
55 ibid, p.41.
56 Sen, *Chitti*, p.196.
57 Kamruddin Ahmad, *Social History*, p.105.
59 Home Poll. Bundle No. 147.
60 Home Poll., B-progs, December 1953, Nos. 332-335.
61 PM’s speech at the Annual Conference of the Commissioners of Division and Heads of Departments on 10-11 January, 1949, Home Poll. Bundle.
63 Confidential fortnightly Report of Mymensingh District for the week ending 29.11.47 Home Police, B-progs, April, 1949, Nos. 263-264.
66 ibid, p.79.
67 ibid, p.98.
68 ibid, Vol.10 No.1 p.350.
69 ibid, p.143.
70 D O from DM, Barisal, on 5-8-48, Home Poll., B-progs, March 1951.
74 Home Poll. Bundle No.137.
76 Annual Conference of Commissioners and Heads of Departments, 10-11 January, 1949, Home Poll. Bundle No.147.
77 Humayun Kabir, *Politics*, pp.53-54.
PM's Speech at the Conference of the Commissioners and Heads of Departments.


Tour Note, Bakarganj.


<p>| <strong>GLOSSARY</strong> |
|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| <strong>Abwab</strong>           | Illegal exaction.               |
| <strong>Adhiar</strong>          | Sharecropper.                   |
| <strong>Akbar</strong>           | Great.                           |
| <strong>Allah</strong>           | God.                             |
| <strong>Aman</strong>            | Main paddy crop sown during rainy season and harvested during beginning of dry season. |
| <strong>Anna</strong>            | One-sixteenth part of a rupee.  |
| <strong>Annadata</strong>        | Foodgiver.                       |
| <strong>Ansar</strong>           | Helper, Civil Armed Guard.       |
| <strong>Atta</strong>            | Coarse flour.                    |
| <strong>Aus</strong>             | Paddy sown in early rain and harvested during rainy season. |
| <strong>Azan</strong>            | Muslim call for prayer.          |
| <strong>Baich</strong>           | Competition.                     |
| <strong>Bargar</strong>          | See Adhiar.                      |
| <strong>Bawa</strong>            | Particular variety of rice grown in parts of Mymensingh. |
| <strong>Bazar</strong>           | Market.                          |
| <strong>Beel, Bil</strong>       | Marsh.                           |
| <strong>Begar</strong>           | Unpaid labour.                   |
| <strong>Bhag</strong>            | Share.                           |
| <strong>Bhagidar</strong>        | See Adhiar.                      |
| <strong>Bichar</strong>          | Trial/Judgement.                 |
| <strong>Bidroho</strong>         | Rebellion.                       |
| <strong>Bigha</strong>           | About one third acre.            |
| <strong>Boro</strong>            | Paddy grown in dry season.       |
| <strong>Char</strong>            | Accreted land from river.        |
| <strong>Chawkidar</strong>       | Village watchman.                |
| <strong>Choto</strong>           | Little                           |
| <strong>Crore</strong>           | Ten million.                     |
| <strong>Dafadar</strong>         | Rural police.                    |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dagi</td>
<td>Convict.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dainik</td>
<td>Daily.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dakhila</td>
<td>Rent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danda</td>
<td>Truncheon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daroga</td>
<td>Police sub-inspector.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dawal</td>
<td>Reaper, seasonal migratory agricultural labour.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhankarari</td>
<td>See tanka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dharma</td>
<td>Moral code, religion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durbikhkha</td>
<td>Famine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaka</td>
<td>Area</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gantidar</td>
<td>See Adhiar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goonda</td>
<td>Ruffian.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hajot</td>
<td>Police lock-up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haor</td>
<td>Large swamp.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hartal</td>
<td>Strike.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hat</td>
<td>Periodic market.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hizrat</td>
<td>Migration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Id</td>
<td>Muslim religious festival.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Izzat</td>
<td>Prestige, honour.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jatha</td>
<td>Spear.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jhanda</td>
<td>Flag.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jotedar</td>
<td>Stratum next to land lord and quasi-land lord.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julum/Zulum</td>
<td>Oppression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jumma</td>
<td>Friday prayer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kabial</td>
<td>Poet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katra</td>
<td>Spear.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keyamat</td>
<td>Doomsday.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khal</td>
<td>Canal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kharach</td>
<td>Expenditure.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Koch  Fishing implement similar to forked spear.
Krishak  Peasant.
Lakh  One hundred thousand.
Lal  Red.
Larai  Struggle.
Lathi  Bamboo staff.
Ma-Baap  Literally mother and father; indicates dependency relationship.
Mamuli  Insignificant, Ordinary.
Manjil  Mansion.
Matbar  Village faction leader.
Maulavi  Religious teacher.
Maulid Sharif  Muslim congregation chanting praise for Prophet Muhammad.
Maund  Nearly forty kilogram.
Mela  Fair.
Mofussil  Small town.
Muchi  Cobbler.
Mujahid  One who participates in religious war.
Mullah  Religious leader.
Musalmān  Muslim.
Nankar  Peasant paying service rent.
Nouka  Boat.
Noukawala  Boat owner.
Pir  Saint/Religious guide.
Pol  Bridge.
Polo  Bell shaped fish trap to catch fish in shallow water.
Polua  Person who catches fish with a polo.
Pradeshik  Provincial.
Puthi  Folk poem.
Rupee  Unit of currency.
Ryot  Tenant.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sabha</td>
<td>Association.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadiana</td>
<td>Relating to wedding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seer</td>
<td>2.057 lb.; nearly a kilogram.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shahid</td>
<td>Martyr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shalara</td>
<td>Literally wife's younger brothers; often used as a term of abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharia</td>
<td>The laws of Islam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shorder</td>
<td>Leader.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snan</td>
<td>Bath/Ritual bath.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufi</td>
<td>Forked spear.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talukdar</td>
<td>Landlord or tenure holder; usually collector of rent from raiyats.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanka</td>
<td>Fixed-rent in kind in some areas of Mymensingh.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tankadar</td>
<td>Who pays tanka.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tata</td>
<td>See Sufi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tehsil</td>
<td>Basic revenue collection unit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tek</td>
<td>Loop.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thana</td>
<td>Rural police station.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waz Mahfil</td>
<td>Assembly where religious speeches are delivered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zakat</td>
<td>The annual payment of one-fortieth of a Muslim's total assets as a poor rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zamindar</td>
<td>Landlord.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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