

**THE DECLINE OF THE MUSLIM LEAGUE AND THE ASCENDANCY
OF THE BUREAUCRACY IN EAST PAKISTAN**

1947-54

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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'.¹ 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.² And the elites regarded Pakistan, as the Zinkins bear out, 'as anything but a pipe-dream even in 1940'.³ 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.⁴

The election was fought as a plebiscite on Pakistan, so the quality and merit of individual candidates was underplayed by the campaigners.⁵ Muslim youth of universities and colleges, professionals and *mullahs*, peasants and community leaders all combined their efforts to win the election⁶ - thus constituting the grand coalition of interests making up for Muslim Bengal's Nationalism what Gramsci called 'the national popular'.⁷

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 1944.⁸ According to Abul Hashim, the General Secretary of the Bengal League, the number of members exceeded the million-mark in 1946.⁹ 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.¹⁰ It was a 'nationalist coalition' of diverse and potentially antagonistic elements.¹¹ 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.¹²

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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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 name a few.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ Accusations of sluggishness, incompetence and dishonesty are levelled against other League members in their analysis.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ Afzal thinks the League's failure to evolve a universally acceptable federal formula contributed in a big way to its electoral defeat.²¹ Regionalism emerges as an important factor in some other studies as well.²² 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 Dhaka²³ 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

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- 3 Maurice and Taya Zinkin, 'Impression, 1938-47', in CH Philips and MD Wainwright (eds.) The Partition of India, Policies and Perspectives 1935-1947 London 1970, p.548.
- 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.
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- 16 Aziz, Party Politics, p.72.
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- 18 See Umar, *Bhasha Andolon*, Vols.1-3 Dhaka, 1970, 1975, 1985. On the importance of the Language issue in East Pakistan Politics, see Khalid B Sayeed, Politics in Pakistan, The Nature and Direction of Change, New York, 1980, p.35 and Stanely Maron 'The Problem of East Pakistan', Pacific Affairs, Vol. xxviii, No. 2, June 1955, pp.133-4.
- 19 Umar, East Pakistan Politics and Society, Dacca, 1980, p.7.
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23. 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'.
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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).¹ 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.² Public and private buildings were illuminated at night and fireworks were let off.³ 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.⁴

The celebration was not confined only to Dhaka. In the town of Barisal, victory gates were erected and musical soirees were organized.⁵ 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.⁶ Provash Chandra Lahiry, a prominent District Congress leader, recalls 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'.⁷ 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.⁸ On 15 August, meetings and processions were organised in Durgapur, Haluaghat, Nolitabari, and Bhatpur in Mymensingh district by tribal leaders. They expressed their solidarity with the new nation state.⁹

'Remarkable scenes of amity and concord were witnessed' at Dhaka and other places of the province on Independence Day.¹⁰ 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'¹¹ 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.¹² 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.¹³ 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'.¹⁴ For such leaders, 'Pakistan' meant that the colonial experience of non-participatory, non-democratic, non-representative politics, was now to be comprehensively reversed.¹⁵

'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.¹⁶ While rejoicing at the achievement of political independence one Muslim poet conceived of Pakistan as a land of 'eternal Id'.¹⁷ To many nationalists independence was the 'Indian Muslim's finest hour'.¹⁸ One nationalist leader even termed it the 'Pakistan Revolution'.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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

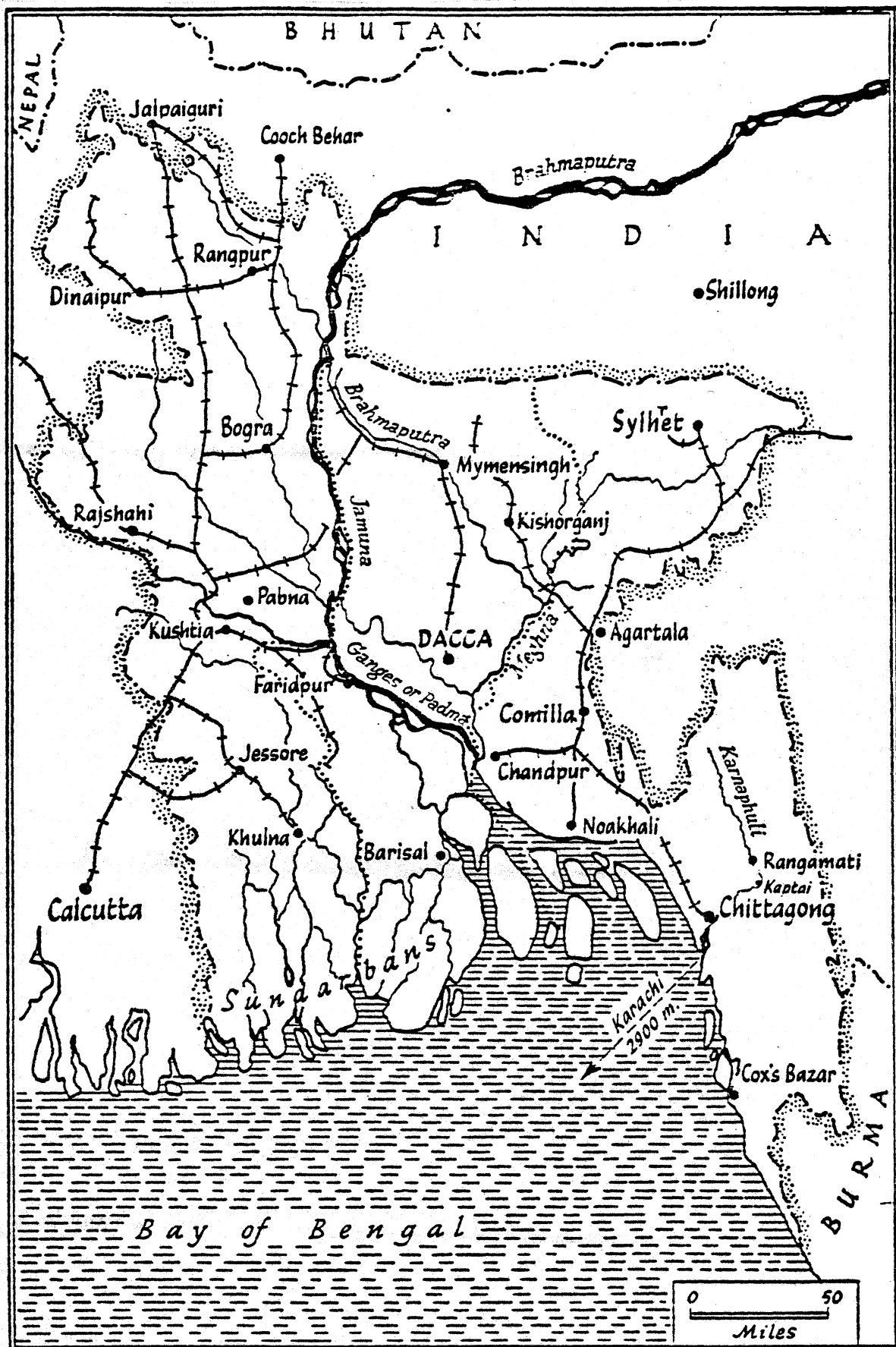
A 'new era of history' and the metaphor of dawn was often used to convey a sense of beginning.²² Anderson has rightly pointed out that the images of dawn, light, sun - all appear as symbols of revival and regeneration - conjured up at moments when nationalists' lives appear to 'run in tandem with the 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



[Source: L F Rushbrook Williams, The State of Pakistan, London, 1962, p. 42]

has described it as the 'greatest administrative operation in history'.³³ Till the day of its birth Pakistan represented a 'hazy and uncertain groping towards a separate state'.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.³⁵ The Radcliffe award, some Muslim League leaders complained, had adversely affected the province; the river systems had been artificially divided and excepting Karnafully all the dam sites fell into West Bengal.³⁶ The award of the Boundary Commission, many Muslim League members of the Assembly felt, made industrial expansion uncertain.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.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.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.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.⁴¹

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'.⁴²

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 250,000.⁴³ 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 1947.⁴⁴

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.⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶

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.⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸

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 whole-sale 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.⁴⁹

Greenough described the entire period that immediately preceded independence as 'one of disorder and distress'.⁵⁰ 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.

III

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 begun 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 on 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.⁵⁶ 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'.⁵⁷

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.

IV

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 sub-continent. 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.⁵⁸ Pakistanism became a euphemism for anti-colonialism and anti-Brahmanism.⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰ 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.⁶¹ 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;⁶² 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'.⁶³ 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, enthusing 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. Aatur Rahman Khan, Kamruddin Ahmad, 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.⁶⁴ 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 finance⁶⁵. 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.⁶⁶ 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'.⁶⁷ The disillusionment with independence went so far for some radicals that they likened it to the coming of the Dark Age.⁶⁸ 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 1947.⁶⁹ 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

rule.⁷⁰ 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'.⁷¹

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.'⁷² 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.⁷³

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'.⁷⁴ 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.⁷⁵ 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.⁷⁶ 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.⁷⁷ The leading class⁷⁸ 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.⁷⁹ 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.⁸⁰

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?⁸¹

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

Minister of Eastern Pakistan.⁸² 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.⁸³ 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.⁸⁴ Lahiry recorded from Rajshahi that as the day advanced 'the rural people in their hundreds and thousands' began to pour into the town.⁸⁵ 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,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'.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'.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.⁸⁹ The advent of independence was perceived by some other prisoners as an opportunity for release and subsequent self-improvement. An Azad report on 14 September 1947 said:

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.⁹⁰

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'.⁹¹

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'.⁹² As Bhattacharyya has observed in the context of tribal peasant rebellions in Mymensingh- quite often the peasants lost their lands through court cases.⁹³ But the problem was not limited to tribal peasants only; the Muslim peasants lost huge amounts of money in litigations over land disputes.⁹⁴ 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'.⁹⁵ 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.⁹⁶ Even the Floud Commission took note of this fact in 1940 that many share croppers lost their lands to court cases.⁹⁷ 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'.⁹⁸

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.⁹⁹ 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'.¹⁰⁰ As the police, ill paid, corrupt and cruel, tended to be universally unpopular and remained the

visible symbol of alien oppression during the Raj.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:

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.¹⁰²

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 *zamindars* were mostly Hindus. In 1947, out of 2237 large land holders in Bengal only 358 were Muslims.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.¹⁰⁴ The rate of interest varied widely between 12 to 280 percent or even higher.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.¹⁰⁶ The total amount of debt in 1937, which stood at Rs 49 *crore*, involved four lakh cases before the Arbitration Board.¹⁰⁷ Added to this was the exaction through *abwabs* by the *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 *abwabs* like *Khalbandi* (embankments) *Dakhila Kharach* (Rent collection expenses) *Pol Kharach* (Bridge expenses) *dak Kharach* (Postal expenses) *bhandari Kharach* (Market expenses), maintenance of schools, dispensaries, temples, *sadiana* (Marriage expenses of the landlord's household) and finally *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.¹⁰⁸ In some districts like Barisal the *abwabs* constituted about one-fourth, and even more, of the rental.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*.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. 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*.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.¹¹³ 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.¹¹⁴ Slogans promising 'Land to the tiller' and 'End of moneylending' were a regular feature of Muslim League meetings and processions.¹¹⁵ 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'.¹¹⁶

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'.¹¹⁷ '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.'¹¹⁸ It is then not surprising that soon after East Pakistan was born the leaders of the weaving community, the *jolas*, 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.¹¹⁹

VII

Pakistan was achieved in the midst of huge peasant uprisings: the historic *tebhaga* or share croppers 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.¹²⁰ Some historians have raised questions as to the accuracy of the number of participants in the struggle.¹²¹ 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 *Pradeshik 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.¹²²

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 share-cropping or *barga*, 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 depeasantisation¹²³. 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.¹²⁴ 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.¹²⁵ 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.¹²⁶ However, the price of this achievement was very high indeed. About five thousand peasants were arrested and fifty killed¹²⁷, whereas not a single landlord was executed nor their houses burnt by the peasants. This restraint is often seen in peasant rebellions.¹²⁸

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.¹²⁹ Bhattacharyya, 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, recounts 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*,¹³⁰ 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.¹³¹ 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.¹³² 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.¹³³ 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.¹³⁴

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.¹³⁵ 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 share cropper'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.¹³⁹ 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.¹⁴⁰ 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.¹⁴¹

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.¹⁴² 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.¹⁴³ 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.¹⁴⁴

VIII

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'.¹⁴⁵ 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.¹⁴⁶ 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.¹⁴⁷

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.¹⁴⁸ 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.¹⁴⁹ 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.¹⁵⁰

Islam itself and the notion of egalitarianism¹⁵¹ 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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CHAPTER 3

FOOD, PEASANTS, AND POLITICS

I

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.¹ 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'.²

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.

II

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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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*.⁸

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.⁹ 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.¹⁰

From May 1949, the price of rice in Chittagong division ranged between Rs 40 to Rs 45 per *maund* according to Dharendra Nath Dutta, an Opposition MLA of the EBLA.¹¹ 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.¹² 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.¹³ 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 cordoning, 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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 others²¹. For sometime, people's fate hung between two options: one *laissez 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.²²

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 cordoning 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.³⁰

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*.]

Districts	Levy Demand	Procurement Paddy	Rice
1. Rangpur	3,00,000	88,189	15465
2. Rajshahi	12,00,000	9,67,715	50,266
3. Bogra	5,00,000	2,27,490	17,702
4. Dinajpur	14,00,000	5,12,718	6,18,344
5. Mymensingh	7,00,000	3,00,739	8,357
6. Sylhet	2,00,000	41,434	1,439
7. Khulna	9,00,000	9,38,961	40,712
8. Jessore	30,000	1,67,2334	40,712
9. Kushtia	10,000	9,132	Nil
10. Bakarganj	20,00,000	3,71,056	27,277
Total:	72,30,000	36,24,669	7,80,292

[Source: East Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings, Vol.3, No.3, p.296 and Vol. 9., No. 1. Dacca, p.88]

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 3.2
Percentage of families with land above 10 acres

Districts	Above 10 acres
1. Rajshahi	14.6
2. Bogra	7.1
3. Dinajpur	15.0
4. Rangpur	11.2
5. Mymensingh	6.5
6. Khulna	7.6
7. Jessore	13.6
8. Kushtia	11.8
9. Bakarganj	1.2

[Source: Floud Commission Report, 11, Pp.114-115]

Since Sylhet, another surplus district, was in the province of Assam before partition it was outside the purview of the Flood 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

Land in Acres	Percentage of families
Less than 2	45.8
2-3	11.0
3-4	9.3
4-5	7.5
5-10	16.1
Above 10	7.7
Total no. of families	10,364

[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.³² 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.'³³

IV

Reactions to the levy of foodgrains were sharp and terse as admitted even by the Prime Minister.³⁴ 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.'³⁵

A prominent member of the Opposition accused the government of handcuffing the people and looting their paddy.³⁶ 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'.³⁷ 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.³⁸

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.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰

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.⁴¹ 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, a 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 latter's interests.⁴⁷

This was also true for the Muslim representatives. They also came from the strata of the surplus producers⁴⁸ 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.'⁴⁹

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.⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹

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.⁵² 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.⁵³ 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. In spite 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.⁵⁴

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.⁵⁵

As early as September 1947, A K Fazlul Huq issued a statement from Calcutta demanding the abolition of various types of control.⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸ 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.⁶² 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.⁶³

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.⁶⁴

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 assesses' were 'shamelessly untruthful'. To the official perception, these producers became 'selfish and did not at all feel for their neighbours';⁶⁵ 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'.⁶⁶

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'.⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸ 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.⁶⁹

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'.⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹ 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 government⁷². 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.⁷³ 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.⁷⁴ 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.⁷⁵ 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.⁷⁶

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:

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 ⁸¹

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.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.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.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.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.⁸⁸

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.⁸⁹

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 3.4
Religious Composition of Rent Receivers in East Bengal

	Muslim	Upper Caste Hindus	Others
Rajshahi Division (Excluding Darjeeling)	37.22	20.04	42.74
Dacca Division	33.44	38.50	18.06
Chittagong Division	49.13	30.74	20.13

[Source: Census of India, 1911, Vol. V, Pt. 2, pp. 222-3 and 379-81, taken from Partha Chatterjee, *Agrarian Relations and Communalism in Bengal, 1926-1935*, in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies*, Vol. 1, Delhi, 1982.]

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'.⁹⁰ 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.⁹⁵ 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.⁹⁶ In November 1949, some Muslim League members from surplus areas started complaining that producers possessing less than ten acres of land had been prosecuted.⁹⁷

The local Muslim League leaders in Sylhet urged the Central Minister to stop poor man's paddy from being levied.⁹⁸ 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.⁹⁹ 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.¹⁰⁰ 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 than 25 *maunds* of paddy.¹⁰¹ A Congress MLA complained that those who have thousands of *bighas* of lands were not levied.¹⁰² 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.¹⁰³ Maulana Bhashani alleged, among many other things, 'favouritism' in implementing the levy scheme.¹⁰⁴

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 '*Mamul*' (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 Minister 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 Presidencies of the Union Boards.¹⁰⁹ Hashmi also has reasserted the view that the Union Board executives were mostly well-to-do peasants or petty landlords.¹¹⁰

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.¹¹¹ By the nature of election to local bodies it was the *jotedars* who could come to these offices.¹¹² 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.¹¹³

Indeed 'it was unthinkable for a man of lower strata to contest the membership of the Union Board', writes¹¹⁴ 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'.¹¹⁵ 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:

Minority community [of] my community panic stricken. Procurement officers indiscriminate house search. Forcible entry [into] houses in owners absence [and] seizing paddy without weightment. Pray immediate attention and steps.¹²¹

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.'¹²²

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.¹²³ In a radiogram the Commissioner of Rajshahi informed the Secretary to the Governor about the corruption of procurement officials.¹²⁴ 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.¹²⁵ 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 1948.¹²⁷ 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.¹²⁸ Another popular song was more eloquent in pointing out the mischievousness of the government.¹²⁹

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.¹³⁰ 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'.¹³¹

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 crystalized 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,¹³² 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.
- 3 World Bank Report on Land and Water Sector Studies, Bangladesh, Vol. 1, 1972, pp. 62-67, also Ramkrishna Mukherjee Six Villages of Bengal, Bombay, 1971.
- 4 *Azad*, 3 October, 1947.
- 5 Pedro Cavalcanti and Paul Piccone (eds), History, Philosophy and Culture in the Young Gramsci, Saint Louis 1975, p.79.
- 6 Umar, *Bhasha Andolon*, Vol. ii, pp.16-17.
- 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.
- 10 Umar, *Bhasha Andolon*, Volii, p.61.
- 11 Pakistan Observer, 21 May, 1949, Dacca.
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