Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia

The Communalization of Class Politics in East Bengal, 1920-1947

Taj ul-Islam Hashmi
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To the poor peasants of Bangladesh —
the first victims of politics
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Preface and Acknowledgments

During a substantial stay in some East Bengal villages in the summer of 1971, when East Pakistan was in the traumatic process of being transformed into Bangladesh, it first dawned upon me that peasants were not stupid, devoid of political consciousness. Discussions with different types of peasants revealed that at least the upper echelons were aware of the implications of the liberation struggle for Bangladesh and the superpower involvement in it. Richard Nixon and Indira Gandhi were familiar names. Ordinary peasants often quoted the Bengali news readers and commentators of the BBC world service and the Voice of America. Well-to-do peasants who owned transistor radio sets regularly tuned into the British, American and Indian radio stations. Many inquisitive and worried peasants asked me (then a fresh graduate from Dhaka University) how their cherished Sonar Bangla (golden Bengal) would improve their socio-economic conditions. Many peasants also took part in the liberation struggle as members of the Mukti Bahini or freedom fighters. Almost everyone, with a few exceptions who collaborated with the Pakistan armed forces, was a keen supporter of Bangladesh. After the emergence of Bangladesh, things did not change to the expectations of the masses, but rather deteriorated so much that Henry Kissinger is said to have coined the phrase "bottomless basket" as a denotation for Bangladesh, because of the rampant corruption of a big section of the Bengali bourgeoisie at that time. I was provoked to write the history of the peasants' glorious role in the Liberation Struggle which was being overshadowed by claims and counter-claims of heroism and sacrifice by members of the privileged, parasitical urban elites. This work may be regarded as a prelude to the history of the freedom struggle that eventually led to the creation of Bangladesh. This is an attempt to shed light on the peasant politics, almost synonymous with Muslim politics in the region, during the significant period between 1920 and 1947 when East Bengal was going through the political process that culminated in the creation of East Pakistan in 1947.

After undertaking this project, I was convinced that it was neither possible nor desirable to discuss the process of politicization of the peasantry in the region without understanding the peasants — their way of life, aims and aspirations, modus operandi and philosophy. I felt it incumbent upon me to study the peasantry from below to understand these complex phenomena. Urban politicians, both with peasant and non-peasant backgrounds have also been studied here, as they were instrumental in mobilizing the peasants in all major political movements in the region in the modern times, mostly with a view to
serving their own class interests. Consequently the "heroes" of Carlyle and the "elites" of Broomfield had to share the limelight with the "rural idiots" of Marx.

The study of the rural population in an underdeveloped region like Bangladesh has many problems. The peasants left behind very little in the way of written documents other than a few folk songs and rustic literary works by a section of the half-literate peasants. In the traditional sources, there is very little about the politics of the peasants. In government records, they are often referred to as "ignorant masses" or "unsophisticated rustics". In the course of my investigation, I found that writing the history of East Bengal peasants mainly depending on the "non-traditional" — oral sources and folk-literature — would be problematic and unacceptable to many scholars. However, I gathered important information from my scores of interviewees, who ranged from ordinary cultivators to highly qualified urban professionals. It may be mentioned here that many "traditional sources", including the confidential Government of Bengal files and reports covering the period between 1942 and 1947, which are supposed to be only available in the Writers' Building archives (Calcutta), are not accessible to scholars for unknown reasons. I confronted this serious problem while collecting data for my work. For this period, I had to mainly depend on non-traditional and secondary sources.

During the course of this study, people from different walks of life in Bangladesh, India, Australia and Singapore helped and encouraged me in different ways. They include my former teachers and colleagues at the Universities of Dhaka, Western Australia and the National University of Singapore. I am grateful to all of them. I especially remember with gratitude my teacher, the late Professor A.B.M. Habibullah, Professors Abdur Razzaque, Imamuddin, Ahmed Sharif, Latif Akanda, Sufia Ahmed, Mufakharul Islam, Sirajul Islam, B.K. Jahangir, Dr. Perween Hasan, Dr. Ahmed Kamal and others who helped me in various ways in preparing this work. My supervisors, the late Dr. Hugh Owen and Professor Peter Reeves, always were exceedingly helpful and thought provoking. Hugh's meticulous care and comments on my drafts, pointing out when a comma was not enough or when the article was missing in a sentence, will be ever remembered with thanks. Peter's mild warning: "Don't forget mate, writing a Ph.D. thesis is the toughest job on earth—one who can do it can do anything," not only restrained my complacency but later it has also embellished my self-esteem. I found Professor John McGuire, Dr. Kenneth McPherson, Professor Soumen Mukherjee and other academics
in Australia extremely helpful. I am thankful to Professor Ranajit Guha for his suggestions, especially for pointing out the significance of the subordinate-superordinate conflict in resolving the problem under review. In India, I benefitted much from the suggestions of Professor Barun De, my co-supervisor. Professors Margaret Case, Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri, Sumit Sarkar, Harbans Mukhia and Ravinder Kumar helped me in various ways. I am especially thankful to the staff of the Reid Library (Perth), Dhaka University Library, West Bengal State Archives, the National Archives of India and the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in New Delhi for their assistance. I am also thankful to the India Office Library (London) and Cambridge University for providing me with manuscripts of private papers and rare Bengali books and microfilms and photocopies. My numerous friends are remembered (too many to mention) for their help and encouragement.

I also acknowledge here with thanks the tremendous support and cooperation extended to me by the interviewees. Without their support, I believe, this work would have remained incomplete.

I am grateful to the University of Western Australia for awarding me a research scholarship, which enabled me to undertake this project. I am thankful to the syndicate of Dhaka University for granting me study-leave, which made this work possible.

Special thanks are due to Professors Ernest Chew, Edwin Lee, Drs. Andrew Major, Paul Kratoska and Habib Khondker of the National University of Singapore for their suggestions and help. I acknowledge with thanks the services of Rohani and Maliga, who cheerfully typed the manuscripts and of V.L. Forbes of the geography department, University of Western Australia, for drawing the maps.

Without the encouragement and help of my parents this work would not have been possible. My wife, Neelufar, deserves special thanks and appreciation for her help and assistance in every stage of this work. I am grateful to her for her patience, care and constant encouragement. My daughters, Shakila and Sabrina, and sisters, Jasmin and Nasreen, helped me in different ways. I am grateful to all of them.

I also would like to take this opportunity to thank the Westview Press for publishing this work.

Taj Hashmi
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<tr>
<td>ABP</td>
<td>Amrita Bazar Patrika</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BHS</td>
<td>Bangladesh Historical Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BLAP</td>
<td>Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings</td>
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<td>BLCP</td>
<td>Bengal Legislative Council Proceedings</td>
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<tr>
<td>BPKS</td>
<td>Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha</td>
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<td>BPP</td>
<td>British Parliamentary Papers</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPI</td>
<td>Communist Party of India</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSP</td>
<td>Congress Socialist Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSSH</td>
<td>Comparative Studies in Society and History</td>
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<tr>
<td>DM</td>
<td>District Magistrate</td>
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<tr>
<td>DUS</td>
<td>Dacca (Dhaka) University Studies</td>
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<td>EPW</td>
<td>Economic and Political Weekly</td>
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<tr>
<td>GB</td>
<td>Government of Bengal</td>
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<td>GI</td>
<td>Government of India</td>
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<tr>
<td>GFR</td>
<td>Governor's Fortnightly Report</td>
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<td>GP</td>
<td>Government of Pakistan</td>
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<tr>
<td>HFR</td>
<td>Home Fortnightly Report</td>
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<td>HPF</td>
<td>Home Political File</td>
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<td>IAR</td>
<td>Indian Annual Registrar</td>
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<td>Indian Economic and Social History Review</td>
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<td>IGP</td>
<td>Inspector General of Police</td>
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<td>JCCP</td>
<td>Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics</td>
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<td>JPS</td>
<td>Journal of Peasant Studies</td>
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<td>KPP</td>
<td>Krishak Proja Party</td>
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<td>MAS</td>
<td>Modern Asian Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>ML</td>
<td>Muslim League</td>
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<td>NCO</td>
<td>Non-Cooperation Movement</td>
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<td>NMML</td>
<td>Nehru Memorial Museum and Library</td>
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<td>RAB</td>
<td>Report on Administration of Bengal</td>
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<td>RBAEC</td>
<td>Report of the Bengal Administration Enquiry Committee</td>
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<td>RNPB</td>
<td>Report on Newspapers and Periodicals in Bengal</td>
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<tr>
<td>SDO</td>
<td>Sub-Divisional Officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>SP</td>
<td>Superintendent of Police</td>
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<tr>
<td>SSR</td>
<td>Survey and Settlement Report</td>
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<td>TKS</td>
<td>Tippera Krishak Samity</td>
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<td>UMP</td>
<td>United Muslim Party</td>
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Map 1  East Bengal: Land-Tenure and Areas under Peasant Movements
Map 2  Rice Production in East Bengal: Surplus, Self-supporting and Deficit Districts
Introduction

"False consciousness is a diffused state of mind; ideology is a theoretical crystallization.... Racist false consciousness denies history... Instead of explaining the Jew through history, it claims to explain history through the Jew."
— Joseph Gabel

In spite of a substantial number of works on different aspects of the socio-economic and political history of East Bengal (Bangladesh since 1971), there has been little discussion on the peasantry in the region. The study of peasants in general, and their politics in particular, is often subject to our "global" and "imperialistic consciousness" in the language of D. B. Miller. He has rightly pointed out that our preconceived notion that the peasants are homogeneous and politically inert "leads us once again to concentrate on what we see as the centre of the political stage, the metropolis... until such time as they [peasants] are again defined as of historical significance."

Some other scholars are also critical of the historiography which only portrays the "dramatic moments" when peasants have "influenced the course of constitutional devolution" or have participated in political actions leading to the eventual withdrawal of colonial rule.

A bird's eye view of the socio-political history of East Bengal during 1920-47 suggests that there is little scope for writing the story of the region in the thrilling terms of revolutionary peasant war. The twentieth century may be the century of "peasant revolution," but not in East Bengal. Though a handful of peasants in certain sub-regions resorted to armed struggle against the exploiting classes and the government, these short-lived sporadic rebellions did not subsequently influence the overall politics of the region. The paucity of discussion of the politics of peasants in the region, however, does not suggest the prevalence of an "uneventful normality" in the life of the region, not because of the so-called bourgeois nationalist historians, who according to Ranajit Guha, regard the pre-World War I period as the "prehistory" of the freedom movement, but for other factors as well. It is difficult to establish the peasantry as the "maker and breaker of revolutions". Peasants in East Bengal in the first half of the twentieth century cannot be simply ignored as "representatives of the unchanging remnants of the past, "totally dependent on their masters", or as "rural idiots" or a "sack of potatoes," to paraphrase the Eighteenth Brumaire.

Peasant politics connotes much more than the "periodic eruption of the peasantry". The case of East Bengal confirms the view that "the
river of historical change" often originates in the villages. But peasants' conscious efforts to change oppressive systems have often been ignored by the ruling class as problems of "law and order" or as natural disasters—their insurgencies throughout the sub-continent have been regarded as "external" to their consciousness.7

This study demonstrates that politically, the peasantry in East Bengal was one of the most important forces during the period under review. Peasants' political activities, motivated by conscious efforts to improve their socio-economic conditions, led to the creation of a separate homeland for the Muslims in the region, East Pakistan, and in the long run the state of Bangladesh. In short, this study is an attempt to show how religious, kinship and factional ties cut across class alignments, leading to the communalization of class struggle between the peasants and the exploiting classes in the region.

In order to understand the intricacies of the politics of the peasants, we must define "peasants" and "politics" in the context of the region during the period of this study. There are many variations in the definition of "peasants". We find Wolf's definition useful in comprehending the peasantry in East Bengal. His peasants are cultivators, "existentially involved" in agriculture, taking "autonomous decisions regarding the process of cultivation". His exclusion of the landless labourers from the category of peasants is, however, not acceptable to us,8 as landless labourers of the region identified themselves as peasants vis-à-vis landlords and other agents of exploitation. Again, most of them being dispossessed tenants, they always aspired to the status of landholding cultivators. Though by 1940 about 21 per cent of the cultivating families of the region had been agricultural labourers,9 their position always fluctuated between the status of total landlessness and semi-landlessness, at least prior to the Great Famine of 1943-44. We may agree with Shanin that to be a peasant, one does not need to have legal ownership of the land one cultivates; that may lie with the tiller, the landlord or the state.10 So long as one takes "autonomous decisions" and participates in the process of cultivation, one remains a peasant. In respect of the different categories of cultivating classes in the region, the sense of belonging to, and above all, identifying with, a particular group on the part of a category for political purposes, should determine its place in the agrarian structure.

Unlike commercial farmers, peasants have only incomplete access to the market. They mainly produce for subsistence and sell their surplus to buy goods they do not produce and to pay rental and taxes. In short, they run households, not business concerns in the economic sense.11 But the categories, who sometimes sublet their holdings to members of the lower categories and are themselves hardly engaged in
cultivation, may be regarded as exceptions. Since they take part in agricultural pursuits unlike the landlords, they remain peasants—in spite of their exploitation of wage labourers and sharecroppers.\textsuperscript{12} In relation to the landlord classes, who obtained rent from their tenants and paid revenue to the government, all tenants in the region, irrespective of their wealth and status, were peasants.

In the presence of so many contradictory definitions of the "rich", "middle" and "poor" peasants, it is difficult to fit the different categories of East Bengal peasants into the above mentioned categories. In order to avoid confusion one can broadly characterise the rich peasants as those who mainly employed labourers, sharecroppers or tenants with no rights on their holdings to farm the land. The middle peasants were mainly depended on family labour, while the poor ones worked for others as labourers, sharecroppers or tenants-at-will. Broadly, the jotedars, ryots and under-ryots can be classified respectively as the rich, middle and poor peasants of East Bengal during the period under review.

The jotedars or intermediaries between the zamindars and the lower peasants, overlapped both landlords and rich peasants. All jotedars holding more than 33 acres of land should be presumed to be "tenure-holders", holding land directly under a "proprietor" or zamindar, until the contrary is shown, under the provision of the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885.\textsuperscript{13} Though misleading, this differentiation of tenants mainly on the basis of wealth, not on the basis of differences in the production relations, helps us locate the category of rich peasants, who due to the sheer quantum of land in their possession had to employ wage labourers, sub-tenants and sharecroppers in farming. Many jotedars, like Chinese rich peasants,\textsuperscript{14} also engaged in commercial and industrial pursuits and often had moneylending business in the countryside. Besides the jotedars there were other categories of rich peasants employing sharecroppers and sub-tenants throughout the region. In different districts they were known as talukdars, haoladars, laidars, basunias, and mandals. For avoiding confusion, all these intermediaries between the zamindars and the middle-poor peasants have been broadly classified as jotedars, in this study. Rich peasants, besides the rent-collecting jotedars (or petty landlords), were broadly known as projas or tenants (of zamindars), although technically most jotedars, excepting the tenure-holders, were projas too.

Locating the middle peasants in the region is more difficult than locating the rich ones. Middle peasants are independent peasant proprietors who normally do not exploit the labour of others nor is whose labour exploited by others. A middle peasant in East Bengal could be a sharecropper or labourer as well to supplement his income.
His class should be determined by the principal relation of production from which he drew his livelihood.\textsuperscript{15} Broadly, we can characterise ryot or raiyat one, "who has acquired a right to hold land for the purpose of cultivating it by himself, or by members of his family, or by servants or labourers",\textsuperscript{16} as middle peasant. Despite the usage of the term ryot and proja to denote an amorphous tenant monolith vis-a-vis the zamindars, ryots holding more than 33 acres should be presumed to be rich peasants. However, this does not mean that they should be regarded as "tenure-holders" as defined by the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885.\textsuperscript{17}

All categories below the middle peasants can be broadly classified as poor peasants in East Bengal. The non-occupancy ryots and under-ryots (tenants of the ryots), who did not enjoy security of tenure, as their rental could be enhanced and they could be even evicted from their holdings more easily than the ryots, come within the category of poor peasants.\textsuperscript{18} They are also known as krishaks or cultivators. But this term again, does not specify any particular class of peasants, as the middle peasants are also called krishaks. In short, irrespective of ones wealth, a rich sharecropper as well as a non-occupancy ryot with inferior rights, represented the poor peasants. Agricultural labourers, in spite of having different production relations, can be categorised as poor peasants because of local custom and their sense of belonging to and affiliation with the latter. This affiliation played a vital role in the history of peasant mobilization in the region during the period.

There are some inner contradictions in every peasant society, which are well reflected in peasants' politics. Though some Marxists ascribe the "class-in-itself" mentality to the peasantry, throughout history, far from being a "fading remnant of pre-capitalist society", it often registered its "class-for-itself" mentality vis-a-vis non-peasant outsiders.\textsuperscript{19} The basic contradiction in the peasant society is its perpetual sense of deprivation and exploitation in the hands of non-peasant outsiders and its servility to urban leaders at the same time. There is no reason to doubt that East Bengal peasants, like their counterparts elsewhere, regarded themselves as the "basic type of humanity", harbouring a deep sense of injustice against the "untypical minority",\textsuperscript{20} the outsiders. An important aspect of this study is to explore why middle and poor peasants accepted the non-peasant outsiders and the exploiting rich peasants as their leaders most of the time. Was it due to their "class-in-itself" mentality or fatalism? Before rejecting the peasants as "rural idiots" one must elucidate the political culture of the non-peasant working-class people for a comparison with peasants. From an empirical study of British workers, it is evident that other than the "proletarian workers", who mainly work in mines and
dockyards and live in close proximity with fellow workers, those in small towns and large-scale industries are either "deferential" or "privatized"—devoid of "class-for-itself" mentality. They are primarily interested in securing economic prosperity, are more individualistic or selfish than having collective loyalty to their group. In the light of the above discussion it is unfair to single out the peasants as the only politically "inert" and "fatalist" group in the society.

A debate is going on between the "moral" and "rational" economists whether or not peasants are fatalistic or rational. The former group of scholars believe that peasants are satisfied with bare subsistence and rebel only when their subsistence is threatened, especially after the advent of capitalism in agriculture. A prominent Bengali Muslim "pro-peasant" politician, also believed that Bengali peasants were fatalistic, as they were found praying to God "in the hot blazing sun" for the salvation of their souls when their children were dying of malaria as they were too poor to afford any medicine for them.

In the 1870s, about one hundred years before the dissemination of the "rational economy" theory, Sir Henry Sumner Maine in his *Village Community* questioned the validity of the theory that authority, chance, and custom were the main sources of law in "primitive communities" of India. He has rightly observed the Indian peasants' faith in traditional brotherhood was shaken as the co-sharers wished to have their shares separately. Individualism and self-interest of peasants were stronger than sense of identification with the needs of their community.

One may possibly agree with the view that the Indian peasants' attempts to establish an "alternative order" have been wrongly presented as their "restorative" struggle by some historians. Peasants in East Bengal seemed to have taken risks or gambled for a better future, as they were not always satisfied with bare subsistence. There is again no standard scale to measure the "subsistence level" of peasants, as suggested by the "moral economists". Peasants, we believe, like normal human beings, always aspire to better socio-economic condition. In short, peasants have similar characteristics everywhere. There can be hardly any specimen of "active" and "revolutionary Buddhist peasants" or "passive" and "fatalistic" non-Buddhist Bengali peasants, as propounded by some scholars. We suppose, peasants are not at all different kinds of human beings, but are in more difficult circumstances than the urban people. Peasants in general are God-fearing and awe-stricken by the ravages of nature and nourish a tremendous inferiority complex. They, on the one hand, regard themselves as the most useful people as growers of food, on the other hand, they consider it better to "work with one's head" than with one's hands. Yet they compromise with the society by selling their
labour, paying taxes and respecting the non-peasant outsiders. In their heart of hearts they often cherish the desire that their posterity will one day become like a townsman, educated and well placed in life.29

There is yet another problem in understanding peasant politics—the controversy regarding the role of different categories of peasants in the overall politics of a region. Most scholars engaged in the debate are, however, concerned with the violent, revolutionary politics of peasants which aim to change the socio-economic and political structures of the society. No social structure is, however, immune to revolutions, only some are more vulnerable to revolutionary tendencies depending on the structural differences.30 The mere economic distress of the masses does not necessarily bring about peasant revolutions. There is no hard and fast rule either that a particular category of peasants would behave in a similar way in every society vis-a-vis revolutionary movements. Relatively better off French and south-western German peasants revolted while the poorer peasants remained passive in Russia, Poland and Britain. In China, on the other hand, poor peasants were the vanguards of the revolution of 1949. One can possibly agree in this regard with the notion that weak landlords or state machinery and strong peasants help the cause of revolutions.31

T. R. Gurr's explanation that the relative deprivation of a given population leads to frustration and ultimately to aggressive behaviour, is partly correct. Muller is more acceptable in this regard. According to him: "Many people in a state of objective deprivation adjust their expectations to their situation". To them their "low socio-economic rewards are simply their just deserts" [emphasis added]. Rejecting the "psychological explanation" of Gurr as the chief cause of aggressive political behaviour on the part of the masses, Muller asserts that a "dissident or challenging group" [emphasis added] is needed to stir them.32

In spite of their immoderate analyses of peasants' violent behaviour, both Hobsbawm and Migdal can be useful in explaining violent as well as non-violent political behaviour of the peasants. One may partially agree with the former that peasants revolt when they experience "new and unexpected hardships" during and after a famine or war and "when the jaws of the dynamic modern world seize the static communities in order to destroy and transform them."33 Though Migdal, with his anti-Marxist approach, emphasises that all elements of social change trickle down to the masses from above while the masses are incapable of comprehending their problems, still less able to solve those by themselves, we cannot reject outright the importance of "culture contact" of peasants with the outside world in bringing about peasant movements. It is, however, difficult to say if "culture
contact" is more important than economic constraints and exploitation by the upper classes in bringing about peasant rebellions.\textsuperscript{34}

The reciprocity between peasants and non-peasant outsiders plays an important role in involving peasants in non-violent political activities as well. This involvement takes place on a give and take basis. "Politics for peasants starts at the level at which they can trust outsiders.... Increases in market participation have taught peasants that outsiders are willing to fill certain needs, if there is something to be given to them in return," observes Migdal.\textsuperscript{35} This observation can be regarded as a linchpin of this study. It, however, does not mean that peasant movements take place only under outside leadership, but only when peasants find leaders who have "proved to be on their side in the struggle against an overpowering (class-) enemy."\textsuperscript{36} Huizer has justifiably rejected Migdal's hypothesis that peasants participate in "institutionalized" revolutionary movements only to solve "certain individual and local problems". Migdal has ignored such factors as peasants' indignation and anger about injustice and oppression suffered. We may agree with the view that peasants' awakening depends on leaders "who are able to voice and express clearly what most people more or less vaguely feel." The leaders could be local or outsiders, depending on the situation.\textsuperscript{37}

We, however, cannot undermine the role of ideology in mobilizing peasants against the exploiting classes. Bhambhri may be cited in this regard:

Localized and scattered peasantry cannot be mobilized without a powerful social ideology, a strong party and an effective leader .... A peasant has never made history, he can be mobilized to make history under proper leadership and with alliances.\textsuperscript{38} [emphasis added]

There is, however, an opposite view. Guha's "Subaltern School" is leading in this regard, over-emphasising the importance of the "politics of the people" and their "autonomous domain", said to have originated neither from the elite politics "nor did its existence depend on the latter". This school propounds that the "subaltersns" were "the principal actors" in the anti-colonial movements in the sub-continent. And it also asserts that unlike in the domain of the elite politics, mobilization of the "subaltersns" was achieved horizontally not vertically.\textsuperscript{39}

We may partially agree with the "Subaltern School". No body can deny the existence of a "relatively autonomous culture" of the masses, or "mind of their own", to paraphrase Sumit Sarkar.\textsuperscript{40} But we cannot deny at the same time that mobilization of the masses is primarily done from the top. Without disputing Guha's assertion that peasant movements are political in nature, sometimes aimed at establishing an
"alternative order", we are more in agreement with the view that the "Subaltern School" is over-exposing the "autonomous domain" thesis rejecting most previous historiography as elitist or as the "prose of counter insurgency". Guha at times could be misleading for undermining cultural hegemony of elites, which often neutralizes and pacifies completely the "subaltern" militancy. Though he has cited examples how ruling ideologies of the sub-continent at times glorified the cult of *bhakti* or devotion with a view to subjugating the underdogs in the society, he has not taken account of any external factor other than the "self-awareness via a series of negations" of the "subalterns" for the growth of class consciousness among them. One would rather side with Lockwood's study of subordinate classes in Western Europe, revealing that the subordinate people in general justify there lowly position in the hierarchy as legitimate, "necessary, acceptable, and even desirable part in a natural system of inequality". It is difficult to establish that: (a) there are insufficient means to spread dominant ideologies among the masses; and that (b) religion and common culture of the masses cannot be manipulated or appropriated by the elite for its own political advantages, as stipulated by Abercrombie and Turner.

David Hardiman's study of the Devi Movement among the tribals of South Gujarat in the 1920s, depicting a socio-political movement waged in the names of a *devi* or a goddess called Salabai and Gandhi, is a good example of how elites manipulate and appropriate mass religion and culture for their own political advantages. One may, in this regard, justify his criticism of "socialist histories" for ignoring the religiosity of the masses as mere superstition without any bearing on their political activities. It is, however, difficult to prove that the tribals, who are often wrongly lumped together with peasants, "have shown an ability to respond to bourgeois initiatives by taking those ideological elements which have proved adaptable to their needs while rejecting those that have not... reactionary values propagated by bourgeois social reformers have failed to take firm root." On the contrary, this study aims at showing that masses are not capable of differentiating between good and "reactionary values", to paraphrase Hardiman. One may assume that what Gramsci has called "passive revolution" has taken place throughout the peasant world, most certainly in East Bengal — peasants being represented by elite politicians, and even after the formation of nation states, the former have not become a constituent part of the state.

In accordance with Gramsci we may assume that consent and coercion co-exist in every society, as the dominant group enjoys the prestige and confidence of the masses "because of its position and function in the world of production". And the state apparatus "legally
enforces discipline on those... who do not consent. "47 Masses at times are not aware of their own role as are they unaware of the role of the "other side" or the superordinates. Further agreement with Gramsci leads us to the conclusion that:

Critical understanding of self takes place therefore through a struggle of political 'hegemonies' and of opposing directions, first in the ethical field and then in that of politics proper. . . . the unity of theory and practice is not just a matter of the historical process, whose elementary and primitive phase is to be found in the sense of being 'different' and 'apart'.48

This study aims at examining the mutual relationship between lower peasants and their patrons — immediate rural ones and the remote urban elite—and the impact of urban, "constitutional politics" on the rural "unorganised" politics of peasants and vice versa. In doing so, one may find Guha's denial of patrons' important role in the mobilization of peasants, unacceptable. Despite our agreement with him on flaws in elite historiography for its denial of peasant consciousness, we find his total rejection of charismatic outside leaders and their advanced political organizations as mobilizers of peasants, unacceptable. His unsubstantiated assertion that only in the domain of elite politics mobilization is achieved vertically whereas that of the "subaltern politics" is always horizontal, is problematic.49 His examples are mostly confined to the Santal tribal uprisings of the 1850s and the tebhaga movement of the 1940s.50 In both the movements the participants were tribals, though some non-tribals took part in the latter. One simply cannot ignore the fact that tribals are mainly mobilized through their chiefs, which cannot be horizontal in character, because chiefs are sort of patrons as well. Above all, tribal societies are not the ideal peasant societies, and in the region of this study, they represented but a very insignificant minority group of peasants. Examples of tribal insurgencies do not always help our understanding of typical peasant politics. Again, contrary to the assertion of Guha, that outsiders can hardly influence the peasants, one may point out that the sharecroppers' tebhaga movement (and also the Telengana uprising) in the region was led by communists — both the top leaders and the ideology were non-peasant outsiders and non-peasant (if not elite) concept, respectively.

One may agree with the view that both Guha and Gyan Pandey have over-emphasized peasants' "autonomous domain" as a factor to mould peasant politics in colonial India, and that neither the slogan "Inqilab Zindabad" (Long Live the Revolution), quite popular among the Indian masses, is "subaltern" in origin nor Baba Ramchandra, the hero of Awadh (U.P.) peasants was a typical peasant. A Brahmin from
Maharashtra, who had been to Fiji for several years, quite experienced and exposed to the world outside the hamlet, cannot be cited as a grassroots leader, as Pandey has done in his study.\textsuperscript{51}

Since this study is not aimed at giving a chronological account of peasant movements in the region during 1920-47, along with the dramatic moments and the periodic eruptions of peasants involving violence, what peasants do between revolts is the main focus of attention here. It is true that if revolts are "extraordinary", there are "ordinary" times too when peasants register their resentment towards their superiors in the forms of "foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage" etc.\textsuperscript{52} Peasant politics does not necessarily connote violence. Some recent works, including the \textit{Subaltern Studies}, implicitly suggest this.\textsuperscript{53} Sumit Sarkar seems to be right in assessing "subaltern militancy" in Bengal. He has pointed out some conceptual problem in some "subaltern" writing for excluding the period of "much longer time spans of subordination and collaboration" on part of the "subalterns". We may fully agree with him that subordination and revolt are the extreme poles in the "subaltern" mode of behaviour. One may cite Hamza Alavi in this regard, who holds that the "uneventful normality" of peasants' life is equally important for an understanding of peasant politics.\textsuperscript{54}

While evaluating peasants' political behaviour, oversimplification of their perception of politics and reality can be problematic as well. Patnaik has correctly pointed out the flaws in Bukharin and Croce for their sweeping remarks observing mass perception of politics—the former denies the existence of any commonsense among the masses while the latter puts too much emphasis on mass commonsense.\textsuperscript{55} Our task is not only to identify the state of subjugation of East Bengal peasantry, but also to explore its perception of this subordination in rebellious and non-rebellious stages. Peasants' experience of powerlessness and dependency on their superiors can be realised through their "hidden transcripts" or "popular religion and culture, folk-tales, proverbs and sayings, gossip, nicknames, narratives, memoirs, festivals, folk-history, popular theatre and so on."\textsuperscript{56} It is, however, polemical if the "hidden transcripts" are by-products of the cultural hegemony of the elites or of the "autonomous domain" of the peasants. One may agree with Guha that peasants learn to "recognise" themselves not by their own attributes but by those of their superiors. His concept of "negation" is quite useful for an understanding of peasant defiance of the superordinates.\textsuperscript{57}

As mentioned earlier, we cannot deny the impact of the dominant culture in the transformation of the mass culture. Raymond Williams seems to be right that hegemony goes beyond culture and ideology,
although simultaneously, dominant culture "produces and limits its own forms of counter-culture," dialectically. The superordinates also know how to incorporate a part of the "anti-thesis" by constructing a "surrogate synthesis" to block the real "synthesis" or revolution from below through deviations—nationalism, fascism, religious chauvinism and even socialism. One may suggest that when classical hegemony fails to contain the mass-discontent after the exposure of the masses to the alternative, radical ideologies, the superordinates try to appropriate these beliefs to divert the mass-fury to a safer channel. Both the Muslim League and Congress parties successfully manoeuvred the Muslim and Hindu masses respectively, either by promising "land to the tiller" or "swaraj for the masses", and even "scientific socialism" throughout the sub-continent during the period of this study.

The story of peasant mobilization in the region, and for that matter in the sub-continent, is one of "imperfect mobilization", the understanding of which requires an in depth study of peasants' aspirations; modus operandi; values and norms; religious beliefs and practices and above all, their links with non-peasant outsiders. It has been discussed earlier that peasants are very much like everybody else in the society—aspiring for a better life, peace and minimum subsistence.

So long the ruling class, landlords and others superordinates in the society have legitimacy in their eyes, peasants do not revolt. Their aspirations for an alternative order or political power grow out of desperation, in extra-ordinary situations. In general they are a political. When pressed for an opinion which has political implication, the average peasant either pretends ignorance or refers to the village headmen, priests or teachers. In normal circumstances, they would tell the investigator with a gesture implying: "They [their superiors] know better, after all we are ignorant, illiterate cultivators." During a peasant uprising, war or nationalist movement, there is a complete different scenario — every one of the "ignorant cultivators" has his version and interpretation of the story. I observed this while doing field work in the rural areas of Bangladesh in connection with this study.

This happens either because of ideological indoctrination of peasants for a cause—agrarian, national or religious — or they are emboldened by (violent) law-breaking movements by other sections of the society against the government or other exploiting classes, often their common enemies. One may find similar interpretation in Froissart suggesting that peasants revolt when they see others doing the same, though this explanation smacks of over-simplification.

There might be some truth in the assertion that Muslim peasant rebels under Titu Mir (a 19th century Bengali peasant leader) fought their exploiters with a view to establishing an alternative political
order in parts of western Bengal, but it is also true that the peasants initially had tried in vain to settle their dispute with the local Hindu zamindar through the police and judiciary. It is not irrelevant here to mention that Titu Mir, Shariatullah and some other Muslim reformist leaders of the 19th century were primarily motivated by Islamic ideology ("fundamentalism") aimed at establishing Dar-ul-Islam or abode of Islam in place of British hegemony, Dar-ul-Harb or un-Islamic abode of war. Both Titu Mir and Shariatullah had been to Arabia, to the pilgrimage, and had been exposed to the militant Islamic reformist movement of the period. So, it would be difficult to establish that peasant insurgencies in the name of Islam was purely a by-product of the peasants' "autonomous domain".

The Santal uprising of the mid-19th century might have been grassroots reaction to exacting landlords and colonial rule, but Guha is difficult to agree with for assuming that the Santal tribals primarily wanted the destruction of British colonialism itself. We may subscribe to the moderate view of Sumit Sarkar that unlike landholding peasants, tribals launched "far-ranging" and "millennial" movements, "often inspired by rumours that British rule itself was coming to an end."

All attempts to understand peasants' political activities and perception of politics and hegemony through theories that do not correlate their ethical code of conduct with their material condition, are bound to be failures. "Economism" itself does not answer the question why peasants revolt or remain quiet. We may rather agree with the view that in pre-capitalist societies, masses do not always act to safeguard their economic interests but their "social standing", "social claims" and "social assets". According to Hobsbawm class consciousness in pre-capitalist societies is "primarily non-economic", while Gramsci has perceived that economic crises do not produce fundamental events directly, they can only create more "favourable ground for the propagation of certain ways of thinking". Oversimplification of Marxian Historical Materialism poses serious problem in this regard. Marxism is not pure economics; it has room for other factors which are said to have motivated human action throughout history. The rejection of "economism" does not mean that economic factors, such as "sarkari, sahukari and zamindari" (or government, moneylender and landlord) exactions, in the language of Guha, do not play any role in mobilizing peasant support for anti-exploitation movements. It is indeed difficult at times to draw a line between "purely economic" and "social" grievances of peasants as there are no such watertight compartments.

When "economism" is the sole parameter of evaluating peasant unrest or political mobilization, it fails in explaining why sometimes middle peasants mobilize poor peasants against rich ones not only for
their sectional benefit but also for "moral or religious reasons, difficult to explain materialistically [emphasis added]." In East Bengal during the period under review, on several occasions, scions of rural and urban aristocracy not only mobilized poor peasants, sharecroppers and tribals against the government but also led them against their own families and class holding land and assets in the countryside. Ideologies—Marxist, Islamic or those emanating from moral and other sources—might have motivated their action, which apparently or in reality, went against their class interests.

Whether one calls it "the fanatic spirit of religious superstition", the fact remains that in the Santal uprising of the 1850s, religion and ethnicity played important role. From Guha we learn that "religiosity was . . . central to the hool" [Santal rebellion]. Elsewhere in the region, during our period of investigation as well, religion and ethnicity did not reverse their role in this regard. We have several examples of "liberation theologians" in the Latin American style, who lived among peasants with long-term commitment to their cause—the abolition of landlordism and usurious moneylending system. We may agree with the view that "not to face up to the religious aspect of rebel solidarity and ascribe it to a phoney secularism is to falsify the intellectual history of the peasantry." Even when one emphasises the secular aspect of religion as a peasant-mobilizer for achieving mundane goals, one may pose the question in the Gramscian style: "But why call this unity of faith 'religion' and not 'ideology' or even frankly 'politics'?

Partha Chatterjee has rightly evaluated Bengal peasants' perception of religion and organized state during 1920-47. According to him, religion provided them with a "code of ethics, including political ethics"; and organized state was "something distant" in their consciousness with which they had "certain norms of reciprocity". This "code of ethics" may, however, mean different things to different peasants, depending on the situation. Sometimes peasants are mobilized in the name of restoring their faith, in movements with "religion-as-aim", but often religion becomes the frame of revolt in movements with "religion-as-reason". The first category of movements involves peasants in a holy war (jihad or crusade) against the "enemy of the faith". The "enemy of the peasants" is easily converted into the "enemy of the faithful" when the peasants concerned suffered religious persecution in the hands of the same exploiting class(es). Muslim peasant insurgencies in the 19th century Bengal under Titu Mir and the Faraizis belonged to the first category. The second category of movements was more prevalent and successful in the region during 1920-47, when Muslim urban elite in alliance with its rural counter-part, mobilized Muslim peasants with religion as the hegemonial ideology with a view to establishing "social justice" as sanctioned by
Islam. This does not buttress the hypothesis that peasants are only prone, however, to fight for rights under religious rather than secular flags. We must not forget that peasants in France assisted revolutionaries in the dechristianisation ceremony in the 1790s and peasants in China, Vietnam and elsewhere swelled the ranks of communist revolutionaries. Similar to their counterparts elsewhere, Bengali Muslim peasants were at times available for secular (and even communist) movements. It is noteworthy that peasants joining the communist movements to get a better deal in life in the region, simultaneously adhered to their religious faith, which was supposed to be in conflict with communism. This indicates that peasants also take a functionalist approach to their faith or a new ideology, so long the cause remains morally valid. Economic motivations remains an important factor behind most peasant unrests.

The chances of peasant rebellions increase in times of national crisis. The decline of the power of the landlords, commercialization of agriculture on a large scale, the enfranchisement of the upper peasantry and the middle classes and above all, peasants' demand for higher social status are all correlated. The large scale cultivation of jute as a cash crop in the wake of the First World War and the simultaneous extension of the franchise among the upper peasantry in the region contributed to making the lower peasantry restive. The potential of making more profit out of jute under a better land tenure system from the view point of the lower peasants and their desire to get the vote as a means to attain more power to improve their socio-economic conditions, seems to be largely responsible for greater political activity among them during 1920-47.

So far as resolving the problem regarding the political role of different categories of peasants is concerned, it does not appear that it can be resolved without settling the issue—what do we mean by the terms "politics" and "political"?

Literally everything that concerns or belongs to the "polis" or city, or the community as a whole, is politics. But generally "the term is reserved for those common affairs which are under the direction of an authority... State." A political act is one "exercised in power perspectives", and a political movement "is a continuing political act performed by an aggregate of persons in a power perspective of elaborated identifications, demands and expectations." What is power? Power is different from influence and authority. A priest or teacher may be influential and a court has authority. Power on the other hand, is "the capacity of an individual or group of individuals, to modify the conduct of other individuals or groups in the manner which he desires, and to prevent his own conduct being modified in the manner in which he does not" [emphasis added]. In further agreement
with Tawney, we may assume that most forms of power again have "economic roots and produce, in turn, economic consequences". Another important aspect of power is that it is not legal recognition which makes it, rather it secures legal recognition.  

Hobsbawm’s definition of the politics of peasants further elucidates the concept. According to him, the politics of the peasants are those activities in power perspectives "in which peasants are involved with the larger societies of which they form part... the relations of peasants with other social groups, both those which are their economic, social and political ‘superiors’ or exploiters and those which are not." Understanding the politics of the peasants becomes easier when one includes all activities performed by peasants in private associations, unions, religious organizations, clans, tribes and factions.

Although F. G. Bailey has excluded violence from the scope of politics, as it is more warlike to him, one should include violent peasant movements, which are often short-lived, sporadic, confined to a small territory, "unpremeditated" against individuals or groups for the redress of their immediate grievances, within the scope of this study. Violent movements, jacqueries and or "Mafia-type" acts of "social banditry", can be regarded as expressions of the elementary stage of political consciousness of the illiterate, "primitive rebels". Hobsbawm has not, however, underestimated these "pre-political" activities, which expressed inarticulate people's "aspirations about the world", as their acquisition of political consciousness "has made our century the most revolutionary in history". Guha has rightly gone a step forward by including both the violent and non-violent activities of the peasants within the scope of politics. Although peasants have "a very limited political horizon" as they are primarily concerned with the "politics" of their "family, village and caste", they cannot be simply rejected as "pre-political" elements for these reasons. They are not altogether different from their urban counterparts—like them they also forget their internal, factional and other local conflicts when they confront a common enemy.

The object of this study is not to present the East Bengal peasants as the main participants in the nationalist movement, as Chalmers Johnson has done with the Chinese peasantry. This is not merely because their mutual differences, but also because nationalism is an elite concept, hardly realised by peasants. To cite David Arnold: "Left to himself, the peasant is self-absorbed and introspective, a byword of parochialism." Nationalism might have partially aroused the patidar middle peasants of Gujarat, but it is difficult to agree with Hardiman that both Myron Weiner and Washbrook are wrong for arguing that "nationalist" agitations by Indian peasants were
byproducts of factional and other local conflicts. It is equally true that peasants in East Bengal actively took part in movements, which they thought were those for "national liberation", almost always faithfully obeying their patrons and spiritual leaders and avoiding the Hindu bhadralok nationalists during the period.

Local, horizontal or intra-class (factional) and vertical or inter-class conflicts between different categories of tenants and landlords, typical of a stratified society, determined the politics of East Bengal villages. Peasant leaders, often of the same status, fought each other for land, wealth and pre-eminence, while their followers were socially heterogeneous and attached to their factional chiefs by kinship and economic ties. Unequal land distribution and scarcity of land promoted factionalism or patron-client relationship in the region. Under this arrangement the patrons emerged as legitimate authorities, typical of all such relationship. These factional ties, as usual, divided the lower peasantry to such an extent that in most cases it developed sharp horizontal conflicts between neighbours belonging to the same class. Among Namasudra peasants as well, intra-village rather than caste ties were stronger.

The strong patronage of landlords indicates that peasant mobilization in the region must have been locally organised under the guidance of local patrons, mostly jotedars. Since strong patronage weakens peasant solidarity, the growth of large scale peasant mobilization by outsiders was the least expected phenomenon in this economically backward region. The "cultural obstacles" to widespread peasant movements, caused by strong patronage, could only be overcome by leaders trusted by the peasants, with "realistic" economic motives, in the language of Galjart.

In peasant societies with strong patronage, leaders must have charisma in addition to other qualities to counterbalance the patrons' awe and power over their clients. Since patrons are less dependent on their clients, more so in densely populated pre-industrial economies, leaders who can inspire confidence among the latter by providing alternative material, psychological and moral support, can successfully lead them, even against the former.

The cost-benefit analysis of the economically dependent peasants is well reflected in a study on sharecroppers in Java and Bali. When a sharecropper was asked to support a certain (outsider) politician, which might make his landlord suspicious about him, he answered: "yes, but have you another piece of land for me in case my landowner starts to get rid of me? If you haven't, I won't!" In East Bengal, things were very similar to Indonesia—economic bondage rather than ideology remained the main binding element between the poor peasants and their superiors.
One of the main objectives of this study is to show why outsiders succeeded in mobilizing the bulk of the peasantry. Did the urban leaders then put forward "realistic" programme? It aims to investigate the factors leading to the mobilization\(^95\) of the different categories of peasants mostly by vague programme emanating from the elites transmitted through village headmen, priests and patrons, allies of the urban elites. In short, this will examine why mobilization on class lines failed and that on communal lines succeeded in the region.

If we accept Shanin's broad classification of peasant movements—first, independent class action; second, guided political action; and thirdly, fully spontaneous, amorphous political action,\(^96\)—it seems that, "guided political action", the most common type was prevalent here in East Bengal. The "fully spontaneous" political action, symptomatic of peasants' accumulative frustration, being violent at times, was no longer the dominant theme in peasant politics of the region during the period. "Independent class actions" came under outsiders' (communist) control at the rudimentary stages. In the long run, the politics of the elites devoured that of the peasants, sometimes by arousing genuine consciousness but mostly by arousing "false consciousness" among peasants. Like elsewhere, urban leaders succeeded in mobilizing peasant support to reach their own goals, by promising land reform and a better life.\(^97\) Joseph Gabel's definition of "false consciousness" helps us understand the phenomenon in the context of peasants' eventual mobilization on communal rather than class lines in the region. He thinks that: "false consciousness is a diffused state of mind; ideology is a theoretical crystalization." His analysis of anti-Semitism is pertinent for understanding the ascendancy of anti-Hindu communalism among East Bengali peasants. According to him, "racist false consciousness denies history: racist ideology tends to build on false consciousness a pseudo-history which, instead of explaining the Jew through history, claims to explain history through the Jew [italics in original]." Ron Eyerman on the other hand, in consonance with the Marxists, believes that "consciousness is always something individual", while "false consciousness" is a creation of capitalism. His explanation might be accepted that, "false consciousness", a by-product of ideologies of the upper classes, which is incorporated into individual consciousness through the mass media, educational institutions and other means, tends to blunt the class consciousness of the lower classes to maintain the hegemony of the upper classes.\(^98\)

The concept of "false consciousness" has its critics both in the Marxist/neo-Marxist and anti-Marxist schools. Michael Mann rejects it as a "dangerous concept". Contrary to the notion of class struggle, he puts forward his "consensus theory" stressing on the "normative acceptance" of inequality by the working class people as "legitimate".
He is not prepared to accept the "normative acceptance" of one's own inferior position as a by-product of "false consciousness" unless one can at least demonstrate that "an indoctrination process has occurred, palpably changing working class values." He insists that it is difficult for the mass media and other "indoctrination agencies" to change the existing values in the society.99 We find him difficult to agree with. Jorge Larrain is more acceptable than Mann. Larrain, believes that ideology is "the terrain of a struggle", the medium through which the class struggle or the conflict between the dominant and dominated ideologies takes place.100 The outcome of the struggle depends on the level of "ideological maturity" or "class consciousness" of the dominated class, as perceived by Lukacs.101 We cannot agree with the opposite view of Althusser, who denies any correlation between ideology and consciousness. To him ideology is "a pure illusion", "a pure dream"—a concept which has nothing to do with consciousness.102 We may find Larrain acceptable also because he believes that ideology is "not a distorted representation of reality". He is very useful in resolving the debate on the correlation between ideology and consciousness "false consciousness" as he neither defends "a concept of ideology defined as false consciousness: nor does he disagree with every single aspect of these criticisms.103 The concept of "false consciousness" gets a new dimension in Raymond Williams' discussion, that in a class society "all beliefs are founded on class position", but it is difficult to agree with him that "the systems of belief of all classes—(other than the proletariat)—are then in part or wholly false" [emphasis added].104 Williams seems to be tremendously influenced by Engels, whom he quotes to substantiate his view: "Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker, consciously indeed but with a false consciousness [emphasis added]."105 The notions of "true" and "false" consciousness remain problematical when one ignores that every ruling class tries to "represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of society."106 The problem is compounded when one over-emphasises the notion of "bourgeois false consciousness", upholding the view that the bourgeois needs this kind of "false consciousness" in order to "veil from himself, and hopefully from others, the true nature of bourgeois rule", with a view to legitimizing his rule.107 It is noteworthy that sometimes members of privileged classes represent the interests of the lower classes, by identifying themselves with the latter, as it happened during the French Revolution. This also happened in East Bengal when both the Muslim elite and peasants had common class enemies (and rivals, in the case of the former) in the Hindu aristocracy and professional classes.

One may ponder, and argue that since most lower peasants in the region could not differentiate themselves with the upper ones in
absolute class terms, the former were a "class-in-themselves". Peasants' sense of belonging to a subordinate class and the understanding of their immediate class interests, do not always develop simultaneously, unlike among members of the privileged classes.\(^{108}\) We may assume that this awareness, which only comes into existence "at the historic moment",\(^{109}\) is a prerequisite to revolutionary changes — a difficult thing to happen among backward peasant communities. Miliband's "third level of consciousness", not much different from Lukacs' "ideological maturity", which connotes a particular perception of what a class' advancement requires,\(^{110}\) does not grow quite often everywhere. Cultural hegemony of the elites and false promises and hopes generated by them retard its growth. One may cite Marx in this regard: "It is not the consciousness of people that determines their existence but it is their social existence that determines their consciousness."\(^{111}\)

Besides the politicians, the government can also influence peasants by arousing false hopes and aspirations. Peasants in the region learnt many things from the government. At one stage, it was the only "protector" and "ally" of the peasants. By the turn of the twentieth century, when Bengali Hindu *bhadralok* classes\(^{112}\) had been disillusioned with the Raj and were busy promoting anti-British agitations, the government became more interested in promoting the peasant-cause, which conflicted the *bhadralok* interests in general. Their communal differences— pro-landlord *bhadralok* being predominantly Hindu and peasants overwhelmingly Muslim—further accentuated the conflict. The core of East Bengal peasant and Hindu *bhadralok* politics in the first half of the twentieth century lies in the following assertion by Sumit Sarkar:

> The intelligentsia's (*bhadralok's*) indifference to peasant problems did not result merely from immediate material interests; behind it lay also the long *bhadralok* tradition of contempt or at least condescension for the men who worked with their hands, the sense of alienation flowing from education through a foreign medium [English], as well as by the fact that the line of demarcation between *bhadralok* landholders and peasant commoner tended in some districts to merge with that separating Hindus from Muslims.\(^{113}\)

Without involving ourselves with the details of the *bhadralok* — peasant dichotomy now, it can be held that peasants in East Bengal were much influenced by the government as well as by *bhadralok* politicians. Peasants' methods of implementing their political programme, like those of their counterparts elsewhere in the sub-continent were: petitioning; voting; demonstrations and marches; Hijrats or mass
emigrations (to Assam or other sub-regions); Satyagraha or passive resistance; no-rent and no-tax movements; spontaneous elemental revolts; organized armed struggles and guerrilla warfare. Not all categories of peasants, however, responded in the same way to government's and landlord's exactions and oppressions. To understand this, one must understand the psychology and political *modus operandi* of different categories of peasants.

While Wolf, Alavi and other scholars hold that the poor peasants are the least militant class while the middle peasants sustain struggles longer than other categories, others think that the poor peasants demonstrate the greatest militancy and radical political action despite their "servile habits" and dependency on landlords. Charlesworth and Pouchepadass are the bitterest critics of the "middle peasant thesis". The former rejects outright the middle peasants as the most revolutionary category. To him, "a strengthened middle peasantry", can be a "consequence" not the "cause" of successful peasant militancy. The latter, it seems, supports Mao Tse-tung's view on the positive role of poor peasants in relation to the Chinese revolution of 1949. Mao, the greatest peasant-mobilizer of the twentieth-century, not only rates the poorest peasants as the most revolutionary, but also rates the middle peasants as "vacillating" because they think that the revolution will not do them "much good". He includes the rich peasant category within the enemies of peasant revolution. Engels has also identified the poorest peasants, especially the wage labourers, as the "natural allies" of revolution.

In the context of South Asian peasantry, Mao's and Engels' analyses seem to have been corroborated by Stokes, and Tharamangalam. The former has not only identified the rich peasants as the upholders of the status quo, but has also termed the jotedars of Bengal "parasitic" and agents of communalism. The latter has shown the revolutionary role of the poor and landless peasants and "indifferent" and "hostile" attitude of the middle and rich categories respectively, towards "class struggle".

Hardiman, on the other hand, holds that it was the rich peasants of Gujarat, who first demanded a share of the political power, which had gradually been transferred to the bourgeoisie from the British. Lenin has also visualized the anti-feudal potential of the Kulaks or rich peasants in Russia.

Without being polemical about the role of different categories of peasants in bringing about politico-economic and social changes in a society, it must be pointed out that we are not only concerned with "peasant revolutions" but also peasants' role in political changes through constitutional means, so far as the peasants in modern East Bengal are concerned. Different categories of peasants can become
"revolutionary" in different contexts. Rich peasants, for example, can revolutionary when their objects are the abolition of feudalism or sharing political power with the bourgeoisie.

So far as this study is concerned, the expression "East Bengal" refers mainly to the region which became East Pakistan in 1947 and Bangladesh in 1971. The district of Sylhet was incorporated in East Pakistan, but since during 1920-47 it was a part of Assam, it is outside the scope of the study. For the sake of convenience, the sub-division of Kustia in Nadia district has been included as an object of this study for its close affinity with the region.

The study, in short, is an attempt to study the reasons why millions of peasants of the region came to support the movement for a separate homeland for Indian Muslims, which has had a lasting impact on the socio-political history of the sub-continent. The concept of a separate socio-political and economic entity of East Bengal, crystallized by the politics of the upper peasantry, in the long run led to the creation of Bangladesh.

Notes

4. R. Guha, Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India, p. 4.
8. E. Wolf, Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century, p. XVIII.
14. See Mao Tse-tung, "How to Analyse the Classes in the Rural Areas", p. 139.
15. V.I. Lenin, The Development of Capitalism in Russia, passim; Mao Tse-tung, op.cit., pp. 139-40; Alavi, "Peasants and Revolution", pp. 293-5.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid. Chs VI and VII.
29. Redfield, op.cit., pp. 64-6, 74-5.
31. Ibid., pp. 454-74.
33. Hobsbawm, Primitive Rebels, pp. 24-5.
34. See Migdal, op.cit., pp. 19-23.
35. Ibid., pp. 193-4, 212-14.
37. Ibid., pp. 22-3.
42. Elementary Aspects, pp. 18-20.
46. Ibid., p. 217.
47. A. Gramsci, Prison Notebooks, p. 12.
48. Ibid., p. 333.
49. Elementary Aspects, p. 4.
50. Ibid., passim and "The Prose of Counter Insurgency", Subaltern Studies II.
51. M. Mukherjee, op. cit., pp. 2113-14; G. Pandey, "Peasant Revolt and Indian Nationalism", Subaltern Studies II.
53. Subaltern Studies I, p. 4; Elementary Aspects, p. 4.
55. Arun Patnaik, "Gramsci's Concept of Common Sense", p. 4.
57. Elementary Aspects, pp. 18-20, 67-70.
58. R. Williams, Marxism and Literature, pp. 109, 114.
60. Ibid., p. 10.
62. See Ibid. ; W. W. Hunter, Indian Musalmans.
63. Subaltern Studies II, pp. 31-2; Elementary Aspects, passim.
68. Subaltern Studies I, p. 25; Elementary Aspects, p. 8.
70. Subaltern Studies II, pp. 34-5.
73. P. Chatterjee, "Bengal Politics and Muslim Masses...", pp. 32-3.
74. J. M. Bak and G. Benecke (eds), Religion and Rural Revolt, pp. 2-5.
75. See H. Landsberger, "Peasant Unrest...", in Landsberger (ed), Rural Protest, pp. 24-5.
79. E. Hobsbawm, "Peasants and Politics", p. 3.
82. Hobsbawm, Primitive Rebels, pp. 2-7, 13-56.
83. Elementary Aspects, "Introduction" and "Territoriality".
24

Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia

84. Bailey, op. cit., p. 140.
85. See C. Johnson, Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power.
89. R. Nicholas, "Structure of Politics in the Villages...", p. 248.
95. "Mobilization is the process whereby social units--whether "individuals or groups--are led to expend an amount, and sometimes a large amount of the resources at their disposal: time, money, energy, enthusiasm, in order to attain a goal which they share with other units... Mobilization will take place when individuals are unable to bring about a desired situation by their own efforts [emphasis added]". See for details C. Tilly, From Mobilization to Revolution, pp. 7-10.
98. See J. Gabel, False Consciousness, pp. 7-13; R. Eyerman, False Consciousness and Ideology in Marxist Theory, pp. 22, 120-47.
100. J. Larraín, Marxism and Ideology, pp. 47, 89.
102. L. Althusser, Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays, p. 150.
104. R. Williams, op. cit., p. 55.
105. Ibid., p. 65.
108. Ibid., p. 22.
111. Marx, A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, p. 11.
121. See Landsberger, op.cit., p. 35.
Village Community, Land System and Politics in East Bengal: A Background

"My father, sir, was born in debt, grew in debt and died in debt. I have inherited my father's debt and my son will inherit mine."

— An East Bengali peasant

Since "the village is the peasant's world," an illustration of the village community and its relationship with peasant behaviour in East Bengal during the period will help us understand the peasantry and its politics.

Villages in this region were quite different from their counterparts elsewhere in South Asia. Elsewhere a close collection of houses belonging to the cultivators was situated over an area of two or three miles with a number of shops and a common meeting place frequented by the villagers. In East Bengal, on the contrary, the whole countryside, except what was actually required for residential purposes, was under cultivation and the villagers had no common meeting place other than the weekly market places or hats and the congregational mosques. The homesteads were not very closely packed together, except in some parts of Tippera and eastern Mymensingh on account of the dearth of high ground. The homesteads were built normally on high ground, surrounded by trees, with courtyards in the front and ponds or pools in the backyards. Shops were practically non-existent. Hats were in close proximity. Villagers used to sell and buy goods in the hats on the market days, normally two days a week. A cultivator would go to a hat not only for business. He might sell a pumpkin or buy a bottle of kerosene oil, but his main purpose in going there would be meeting friends and hearing the news of the neighbourhood, including nearby towns. In some prosperous villages, mostly trading centres and river ports or ganjes, there were daily bazaars too. Villagers in the neighbourhood of towns had connections with them by waterways or highways.

The villagers learnt about the towns and the government through a number of government officials, some staying in villages, such as the local police officers, constables, health officers and circle
officers, and through the *chaukidars* and *daffadars* or the village policemen and watchmen. The villagers held the government officials in high esteem. In the 1920's the government started sending publicity officers and demonstrators to the villages to make the masses aware of the sanitation and health problems. By the early 1930s these publicity officers were demonstrating means of eradicating water hyacinth and malaria through moving-picture and magic lantern shows. Along with their projectors and magic lanterns they carried anti-nationalist political propaganda and village uplift programmes to the villagers. The Co-operative Movement and the *panchayats* (rural consultative bodies) to run local administration and the Union Boards from the early 1920s, were means for the government to come into close contact with the masses. The elected Union Board office-holders created a sense of participation in the administration among the well-to-do enfranchised peasants. Above all, these institutions strengthened the hands of the Union Board officials by eroding the power and influence of the *zamindars*. Besides the Union Board office-bearers, the local *zamindars* — and in their absence, the *talukdars*—jotedars, mandais, *pradhans* (or headmen) and the *maulvis* of the local mosques or *madrassas* were quite influential and sometimes settled petty disputes among villagers.4

The village headmen and Union Board executives were mostly well-to-do peasants or petty landlords. The headmen were the "makers of public opinion" in the village and often the "means of lightening the darkness of rural life" in a world where the newspaper was a luxury and other modes of modern communication unknown.5 The headmen — known as *sardars*, *matabbars*, *pradhans* or *paramaniks* — represented their own factions. Kinship (*gushti*) and lineage (*bangsho*) were important factors in forming factions. A village community in the region was composed of *khanas* (house-holds), *baris* (homesteads), *gushtis* (lineages), *samajs* (rural societies) and *atmiya-swajana* (kinsmen). A village in East Bengal (*gram*) was composed of several *paras* or localities, which was a smaller unit than an official village or *mouza* (revenue unit).6

Besides the landlords, their tenants, *mahajans* or moneylenders, labourers and sharecroppers, the countryside was also inhabited by the fishermen, blacksmiths, weavers, potters, barbers, physicians (quacks) as well as priests, craftsmen and artisans. The *pir sahibs* or spiritual guides of Muslims, *fakirs*, *bauls* or mendicants and minstrels, wizards and witches or *ojhas* and *fakirnis* were integral parts of the village community. Though every village did not necessarily accommodate all these categories.

Unlike the situation in north-western Indian villages, in an East Bengal village, a source of drinking water was near every homestead.
But the water of the adjacent ponds and pools, or nearby rivers and creeks was not pure. During the period, tube-wells were almost non-existent in the countryside. As a result the general health of the villagers was very poor throughout the region.  

The village communities in the region were not "little republics" or isolated, self-sufficient units. Nor were the villages very peaceful places to live in. Besides the landlord-tenant and moneylender-debtor frictions, factional frictions and rivalries or doladoli prevailed in every village. Carstairs' accounts reveal rivalries and tensions between the rich and the poor, among landlords and tenants of different categories: "harmony was the exception rather than the rule." It also appears from his accounts that the bulk of the peasants accepted the social order and tried to live in peace, and the samaj was powerful enough to settle petty disputes though the panchayats or the cutcheries or courts of landlords. Another British government official observed that the Bengali Muslims were by nature "the most quarrelsome, litigious, vindictive race in India".

Despite all the conflict there remained some sort of discipline and co-operation in the countryside. The peasants had plenty of leisure and in the rainy season most of them remained unemployed. After the harvest of Aman rice in early winter, they sometimes went on "fishing expeditions", illustrating their "corporate sense" and "quasi-military" discipline. During the winter, the villagers participated in different sorts of religious and recreational activities. The Muslim peasants attended religious meetings or waz mahfils and milads, which were addressed by local and visiting ulama. The topics of discussion varied from the purely religious to political. Sometimes anti-zamindar and anti-Hindu propaganda was spread by ulama in these religious gatherings. Both Muslim and Hindu peasants in large numbers attended jatras or folk theatre shows, kaviganer ashars or musical performances by local or visiting bards. Sometimes anti-British plays and songs were performed in these jatras. During rainy days and moonlit nights peasants listened to stories from Bengali pathis or lyrical folk literature, mostly depicting stories (often imaginary) of Muslim heroes like Ali, the fourth caliph; Hanifa Palwan; Hassan-Hossain and Muslim saints. Quite often, the subject matter of these stories was the Muslim heroes who defeated and humiliated the non-Muslims, especially the Hindu gods and goddesses. These stories, narrated by the ulama and the literate village headmen, were the sources of communal solidarity and extra-territoriality among the Muslim masses. Some scholars think that most Muslim peasants did not live for the future but for the past, which was always "happier than the present". Most of them again, were oblivious of their own heritage and pedigree, not even remembering their grandfathers'
names. However, this does not mean that they were not susceptible to appeals made in the name of "restoring the past glories" of Islam by the ulama, or any other political group interested in mobilizing them on communal lines.

Muslim solidarity in rural Bengal was achieved through the mallas, especially during the Islamic reform movements of the 19th century under the so-called Wahhabi, Faraizi and Tayuni preachers. We may agree with Rafiuddin Ahmed's classification of the ulama into two groups — the traditionalist and the fundamentalistion "reformist" — and may partially share with his view that the latter failed to establish fundamentalism in Bengal due to the strong hold of the traditional mallas. He has confused Maulana Karamat Ali's Tayuni school with the traditional one for his legalizing Juma and Eid congregational prayers in British India, which, according to many fundamentalist reformers, was tantamount to recognizing British authority over Indian Muslims. Karamat Ali, it seems, was a pragmatic leader, the forerunner of Islamic modernism in Bengal; who did not discard orthodox and mystic (sufi) Islam. He and his successors, along with their disciples (muridan) among Muslim peasants and upper classes, left a lasting impression on the Muslims of Bengal. His influence was not only reformist but eventually separatist, so far as the Bengali Muslims are concerned. We may agree with Rafiuddin Ahmed that in the second-half of the 19th century the "traditional" and "reformist" and other shades of Muslims putting aside their differences emphasized on "their separation from all others, particularly the Hindus". Under the influence of the Pan-Islamist Jamaluddin Afghani (1838-97), educated Muslims, mallas and the Muslim masses were jointly motivated to save their religious identity. Islamic anjumans or associations formed by the ulama and Muslim elites, along with maktabs and madrassas (religious schools and seminaries), itinerant maulvis and pirs were actively engaged in the campaigns of Islamization in the urban and rural areas of Bengal. In the second-half of the 19th century Islam was no longer preached by the typical village mulla. Henceforth Islam became more political and anti-Hindu after the Muslim set backs in local elections in the hands of Hindu bhadralok. The ashraf forged ties with the rural Muslims through the anjumans, pirs, maulanas, maulvis and village mallas, recruiting them as agent for propaganda in the rural areas. Muslim newspapers and periodicals in Bengali played an important role in this regard.

The anjumans brought together Muslim landlords, ulama and government officials. The richer classes and officials controlled the proceedings of the anjumans. "To the rural rich this collaboration was all the more important in view of their growing conflict with the Hindu land-holders over the control of the local government bodies," observes
Rafiuddin. He has rightly pointed out that Muslim *jotedars* and traders (often moneylenders) organized the rural Muslims on communal lines "through clever use of the *mullahs' influence*" and that many *anjumans* were born of "active collaboration" between the *ulama* and Muslim land-holders. The *anjumans* established *madrassas*, collected *zakat* (charities) and donations, maintained local mosques, gave loans (interest free) to poor Muslims and organized *waz mahfils* for the propagation of Islam. Consequently Muslims became more conscious about their religion discarding Hindu customs, dressing themselves as Muslims and boycotting Hindu festivals. By the turn of the 20th century elements of the so-called Islamic syncreticism said to have existed in medieval Bengal, was fast disappearing. During the Partition of Bengal (1905-11) the bitterness between the Hindus and Muslims was further accentuated. Communal bitterness was so intense that "by 1905 the building blocks which eventually went into the making of Pakistan were already there".18

Although the annulment of the Partition in 1912 disillusioned the Muslims in general and shook their faith in the government, instead of turning anti-British, they became more anti-Hindu throughout the region. Meanwhile they achieved separate electorates in 1909, as well as a national Muslim organisation — the Muslim League — and several vocal Muslim representatives in the Legislative and Executive Councils, Nawab Syed Nawab Ali Chudhuri, Nawab Syed Shamsul Huda, A. K. Fazlul Huq and Nawab Khwaja Salimullah of Dacca.19

1914 onwards began the period of peasant mobilization on a larger scale — not only by the *ulama*, but also by the Western educated Muslim and Namasudra leaders of the region. The proposed amendments of the Tenancy Act in 1914, which favoured the tenants, aroused special interest among the *jotedars* and well-to-do peasants, who expected firmer rights over their holdings. They organized the first *proja* or tenant conference at Kamarerchar in Jamalpur (Mymensingh) in 1914, where men like Fazlul Huq, Maulana Akram Khan, Maulana Muniruzzaman Islamabadi, Maulvi Rajibuddin Tarafdar and other Muslim leaders having upper-peasant backgrounds and connections, demanded better rights for the tenantry and criticized the *zamindari* system. Soon, under the patronage of Governor Ronaldshay, several peasant and Namasudra organizations came into being. In late 1917 Fazlul Huq and a group of Muslim lawyers and journalists founded the Calcutta Agricultural Association. In 1920 the Bengal *Jotedars' and Ryots' Association* was formed.22

Against this background, the introduction of the Union Boards, allegedly formed with "anti-Permanent Settlement" objectives, and the extension of the franchise by the Government of India Act 1919, also known as the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms (hereafter Montford
Reforms), which granted 33 rural seats to the Muslims in the Bengal Legislative Council and increased the number of voters from 9,000 to 1.5 million, the majority of whom were cultivators, in the whole province, alarmed the Hindu bhadralok and zamindars. These Acts created great enthusiasm among the well-to-do, enfranchized peasants, who formed their own associations which, although they did not achieve anything immediately, were the precursors of the major Muslim peasant organization of the later days — the Proja Party, formed by Fazlul Huq in 1929.

It is evident from different contemporary sources that peasants were also enthusiastic about the Survey and Settlement Operations, the Co-operative Movement, Union Boards and other government measures including the formation of the Debt Settlement Boards to curtail moneylenders' power. The Settlement Operations made the tenants conscious of their rights. Consequently they resisted landlords' attempts of enhancement of rent. In some districts, these Operations discouraged the practice of exacting abwab from tenants. When the Tenancy Amendment Bill was on the anvil in the mid-1920s, peasants formed their own organizations to organize themselves against the zamindars and tenure-holders whose rights, they anticipated, were going to be curtailed by the Act. In some districts, anciticapting occupancy right, even sharecroppers became assertive of their rights.

By mid-1938, in most districts of the region, a "no-rent" tendency had developed among a large section of the tenants. They were somehow convinced by their leaders including their representatives in the Bengal Assembly, "that the landlords had no right to the land," and "that the land should be taken away and given to the tillers of the soil". The Land Revenue Minister felt that the Tenancy Bill "had had a psychological effect on the tenants, "and that the "no-rent" mentality of peasants was "the natural result of the constitutional reforms". According to the Commissioner of Dacca, the "no-rent" mentality was due to the tenants' belief that the "Proja Party would bring in a millennium". Usually non-Congress MLAs, Shamsuddin Ahmed of Kustia, Jalaluddin Hashemy of Khulna, Ashraf Ali Khan of Rajshahi and Abu Hossain Sarkar of Rangpur for instance, were responsible for giving "exaggerated ideas" of what the Tenancy Act would do for the tenants. Some MLAs made "improper speeches" urging the peasants not to pay rent until "forced to do so". Consequently peasants grossly misunderstood the tenancy legislation thinking that the government was on their side. They spread rumours that "arrears of rent would be cancelled," soon. Peasants in many districts stopped the repayment of debts to their moneylenders in the 1930s and 1940s under the impression that the Debt Settlement Boards and the Bengal Agricultural Debtors Act had granted them moratorium.
gradual extension of the franchise increasing the number of Muslim (peasant) voters in the region had its desired effect. The peasants' expression of excitement about the prospect of getting the vote has been reflected in their folk songs (discussed in Chapter 6). They used their votes, especially in the joint-electorates at the Union Board level, as weapons to curtail the power of hitherto dominant Hindu bhadralok classes (discussed in Chapter 4). It is evident from their voting pattern in the different local and Legislative Council/Assembly elections that peasants realized the importance of their votes as means of changing their socio-economic conditions. Some grassroots leaders warned them about the deceptive vote-seeking babu (gentleman).

The babus are hopeless people. On the eve of elections they are very polite and submissive. They promise paradise, rural development and various benefits. Once the tenants elect them, they simply disappear in their own paradise, you cannot get hold of them again.... The peasants' roads remain muddy, villages under water, with epidemics. One who makes big promises, I wonder, will be ever back to the villages.

The long-term impact of tenancy legislation and the extension of the franchise down to the well-to-do peasants has been well explained by a government Report in 1918:

Our rule gave them [peasants] security from the violence of robbers and the exaction of landlords, regulated by amounts of revenue or rent that they had to pay, and assured to both proprietor and cultivator — in the latter case by the device of the occupancy right — a safe title in their lands. The change was so great that they sank into a condition of lethargic content; even yet they have barely realized that Government has any other gifts to offer; as for the idea of self-government, it is simply a planet that has not yet risen above their horizon.

But there are signs of awakening. They have already learnt an important lesson — that it is legitimate to bring their troubles to the note of the government and that a good Government will listen to them with sympathy....

Hitherto, they have regarded the official as their representative in the councils of Government; and now we have to tear up that faith by the roots, to teach them that in future they must bring their troubles to the notice of an elected representative — further, that they have the power to compel his attention.

The Report also predicted the future political code of conduct of the peasant: "Eventually it will dawn upon him... that because he has a vote he has the means of protecting himself.... It will occur to him eventually that if landlords are oppressive and usurers grasping and
subordinate officials corrupt he has at his command better weapon than the lathi or the hatchet with which to redress his wrongs."

The above observations were almost prophetic as far as the political behaviour of the peasants in East Bengal in the subsequent period of this study is concerned. Different categories of landlords and tenants, under-tenants and landless labourers fought for their respective "rights", which they believed they were entitled to. The zamindars wanted to get rid of the intermediaries for the loss of income from abwab and nazar, as jotedars in their turn as landlords collected these from their tenants. This attitude is well reflected in various memoranda of the landlords' associations to the Fland Commission in 1940. The jotedars wanted the status of proprietors and called themselves talukdars to elevate their social position. The occupancy ryots wanted lower rates of rental and more assured rights over their holdings, while the non-occupancy ryots aspired to permanent occupancy rights, the sharecroppers to permanent rights and two-thirds of the crop, and the landless labourers to the status of grihastas or husbandmen to get a higher social position as well as permanent tenures. The middle and rich peasants' aspiration to become bhadralok was the dominant theme in the politics of the peasants throughout the region. During 1920-47, due to several government measures and rise of political consciousness among the well-to-do peasants, the zamindars' power was waning and the hopes of the occupancy ryots and jotedars were increasing. Both the zamindars and the dominant tenants looked on the other "with considerable suspicion and jealousy". Some observers held that the prosperity of the rich and upper middle peasants "awakened them to a sense of their inferiority". The significance of the peasantry and the impact of its politics lie in the fact that most of the population in the region was agrarian, about 80.66 per cent in 1921. There was too little land for too many peasants. Roughly the tiller-land ratio was 1:2.5 acres in 1921. The lack of industries and job opportunities ensured that agriculture remained the only means of livelihood for almost the entire population.

By 1921 East Bengal had a population of about 29,687,701, the average density being 660 per square mile. The bulk of the population was Muslim, as was first realized after the census of 1872 — mostly converts from lower caste Hindus and Buddhists.

Table 2.1 indicates the number of Muslims, high caste and Scheduled Caste Hindus in the region. It is interesting that many Muslims, especially the educated well-to-do ones, claimed their alien origin up to the first half of the twentieth-century to get higher social status, as Aryan or Semitic descent was considered superior in all respects among the local people. Hence Syeds or descendants of the
Table 2.1
Breakdown of Hindu and Muslim Populations in 1941 in Different Districts of Bengal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Muslim</th>
<th>Scheduled Caste</th>
<th>Caste Not Returned</th>
<th>Other Hindus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bakarganj</td>
<td>2,567,027</td>
<td>427,667</td>
<td>246,288</td>
<td>284,674</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bogra</td>
<td>1,057,902</td>
<td>61,303</td>
<td>46,148</td>
<td>80,081</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chittagong</td>
<td>1,605,183</td>
<td>57,024</td>
<td>150,832</td>
<td>250,218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chittagong</td>
<td>7,270</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>971</td>
<td>3,629</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hill Tract</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dacca</td>
<td>2,841,261</td>
<td>409,905</td>
<td>454,280</td>
<td>495,947</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinajpur</td>
<td>735,382</td>
<td>344,638</td>
<td>35,730</td>
<td>233,490</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faridpur</td>
<td>1,871,336</td>
<td>527,496</td>
<td>270,668</td>
<td>208,074</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessore</td>
<td>1,100,713</td>
<td>314,876</td>
<td>130,922</td>
<td>275,301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khulna</td>
<td>959,172</td>
<td>470,550</td>
<td>186,286</td>
<td>320,857</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kustia*</td>
<td>381,261</td>
<td>32,022</td>
<td>23,343</td>
<td>82,057</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mymensingh</td>
<td>4,664,548</td>
<td>340,676</td>
<td>373,333</td>
<td>582,629</td>
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<tr>
<td>Noakhali</td>
<td>1,803,937</td>
<td>81,817</td>
<td>57,314</td>
<td>273,130</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pabna</td>
<td>1,313,968</td>
<td>114,738</td>
<td>87,540</td>
<td>181,477</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajshahi</td>
<td>1,173,285</td>
<td>75,650</td>
<td>93,028</td>
<td>160,552</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rangpur</td>
<td>2,055,186</td>
<td>495,432</td>
<td>111,903</td>
<td>242,574</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tippera</td>
<td>2,975,901</td>
<td>227,663</td>
<td>171,778</td>
<td>480,539</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Until August 14, 1947 it was a sub-division of Nadia district. Later it was incorporated in East Pakistan as a district.

(Source: Census of India, Vol. 5, 1941)

Prophet of Islam, Sheikhs, Mughals, Pathans, Khans and similar surnames prevail among the local Muslims. Sometimes they changed their family names and titles after acquiring wealth and education. "Last year I was a Jolaha (weaver), this year I am a Sheikh; next year, if prices rise, I shall be a Saiad", as the saying goes in the region. The well-to-do, educated Muslims regarded themselves as the ashraf — cultured, noble and gentle. The rest were looked down upon as the atraf or ajlaf, meaning low-born rustics.
Most of the population — except the majority of the bhadralok, factory workers, government officials, domestic servants, daily labourers, shopkeepers and other menial classes — lived in the villages. While the whole of Bengal had an urban population of about 4 per cent, in East Bengal it was only about 2.5 per cent in 1921. About 77.3 per cent of the population was, again, directly dependent on agriculture. The urban population was, in fact, hardly urban in the true sense of the term. Most government servants, shopkeepers, factory workers, rickshaw pullers, hackney-carriage drivers and others, who stayed and worked in small towns or in Calcutta, had their families and close relatives in the village homes. They visited them during religious and family celebrations.

The bulk of the population was illiterate. A few could afford to send their children to the neighbouring towns for tertiary education. A fortunate few could send their children to Calcutta, Dacca, Aligarh or Deoband. The average percentage of literates was about 8.9 in 1921. From the Census Report of 1921 it appears that the number of literates among Muslim cultivators was often inflated, and even those who could just sign their name or read the Quran without understanding a word also registered themselves as literate, as some prestige was attached to literacy. The rate of literacy was the highest among the high-caste Hindus, the Baidyas being followed by the Brahmins, Kayasthas, Subarnabaniaks, Gandhabaniaks and Sahas. The Namasudras or the Scheduled castes and the tribals — Garos, Santals, Rajbanis, Hajongs — had the lowest rates of literacy.

The land system which prevailed in the region in 1920 was very complicated. About four-fifths of the lands were "permanently settled" and the rest was either revenue free, "temporarily settled" or crown estates, known as khasmahals. The new land system, which was introduced in 1793 under the Permanent Settlement regulations by the British, was one of the "unsuccessful and really absurd and in practice really infamous experiments in economics", in the language of Marx, who has also described it as a "caricature of English landed property on a large scale," which led to the mass expropriation and impoverishment of the actual cultivators.

In the ancient times, the king had exacted a share of the crop, normally one-sixth of the yield, from the cultivators, who had been practically the owners of their family holdings, landlords being nonexistent. The concept of joint ownership of land was also unknown in the region. During the Muslim rule the rights and liabilities of the cultivators almost remained the same as in the previous periods, only the state's share varied from time to time between one-third and one-half of the produce. Under the Mughals, the zamindars in Bengal were much more powerful than their counterparts elsewhere in the empire.
Though they did not enjoy proprietary rights and were under government surveillance, their rights were certainly superior to those of the peasants. After some experiments with the land revenue system, the British government introduced the Permanent Settlement in 1793. With a stroke of a pen, the lands under the Decennial Settlement made in 1789, were settled permanently. The rate of revenue due to the government by the zamindars was declared "unalterable" for ever by the government. This act not only conferred proprietary rights to the zamindars, but also obliterated the rights of the peasants and the jotedars, "lords of the soil", in the language of Ratnalekha Ray, who predate the Settlement as a landowning class. Under the new arrangements, although the rate of revenue payable by the zamindars was fixed permanently, the rate of rental due to the zamindars by the tenants was not fixed in perpetuity. The zamindars were also given the benefit of any future increase in the value of the state's share, as the rate of revenue was "unalterable".

Soon after the introduction of the new system, many old zamindars were replaced by a new class of more exacting landlords, who mostly came from merchant classes and paid little regard to the customary rents. Consequently rents became competitive and the payment of abwab or illegal cesses became institutionalized. According to Sanjeeb Chatterjee, by 1827 the ryots or tenants had become "the actual slaves of the landholders... liable to be mortgaged, bartered or let to hire, the same as his oxen and his goats, at his will and pleasure".

Between 1799 and 1858, several legislative measures were adopted by the government to regulate the land revenue administration of Bengal. But these acts and regulations only strengthened the hands of the zamindars. Act X of 1859 was the first effective step of the government to protect the interests of the tenants holding lands at fixed rents since 1793 through their predecessors and those holding the same land for at least 12 years. Peasants of these two categories got an "occupancy right" to their land, the rental on which could not be enhanced under the new law "except under special circumstances". The majority of the ryots, belonging to the "non-occupancy" category, remained unprotected. Act VIII of 1885, known as the Bengal Tenancy Act, guaranteed fixity of tenure to those ryots who had held land within the boundaries of the same village for 12 years. However, the Act retained landlords' power to enhance rent through court, but ryots as fixed rates and with occupancy rights could not be evicted by their landlords. But long after the Act zamindars and tenure-holders, taking advantage of the ignorance of ryots, continued to collect abwab, enhance rents and distrain ryots' property.
The agrarian structure that emerged out of the Permanent Settlement was composed of the zamindars at the top, beneath them the tenure-holders (both independent and dependent), then the ryots, and the under-ryots below them. The sharecroppers, commonly known as bargadars, adhiars and bhagchashis, were at the bottom of the structure, along with the landless labourers or khet-mazdoors. It is, however, difficult to determine the rights, status and economic conditions of different categories of landlords and tenants in the agrarian structure. 62

Under the provision of the Tenency Act, the zamindars and the revenue paying tenure-holders, also known as patnidars and independent talukdars, were proprietors. The zamindars were on top of the hierarchy so far as social status and power were concerned. Big zamindars were sometimes called rajas or maharajas. The revenue-paying independent talukdars, along with the zamindars, should be excluded from the category of peasants. Unlike those of the jotedars, after 1885, the rights of the proprietors (zamindars and independent tenure-holders or talukdars) lay not in the lands but in their rental. They might, however, have owned private lands, known as khamar or nijjote, tilled by labourers or sharecroppers. 63

From the intricacies of the land-tenure system in undivided Bengal it is difficult to determine the status of a particular land-holder and it is almost impossible to distinguish a tenure-holder from a ryot and a ryot from an under-ryot. All zamindars and independent talukdars were not big landlords either. Many ryots held more land than some zamindars and talukdars. As under feudalism, vassalage did not always imply inferiority; in East Bengal as well, many jotedars or vassals held more land under their control than their zamindars.

Out of the total of 28.8 million acres of land in the region, excluding Sylhet and Chittagong Hill Tracts, more than 20 million acres — about 70 per cent — were controlled by the ryots and under-ryots by the early twentieth-century. 64 By 1921, about 87.03 per cent of the cultivators were occupancy-ryots, while only 4.2 per cent of the population had proprietary rights and about 8.74 per cent composed the landless and semi-landless categories. 65 By the late 1930s, the proportion of landless and semi-landless peasants rose quite substantially — by then about 47.29 per cent of peasant families had less than two acres of land in the region. 66

The region can be sub-divided into three broad sub-regions, on the basis of the differences in agrarian structure — (a) the zamindar-dominated central and north-western sub-region; (b) the middle peasant-dominated south-eastern sub-region and (c) the jotedar-dominated sub-region (see map I). From the extent of economic freedom, freedom in decision making, dependence on landlords and money-
lenders in the different sub-regions, one can locate the major participants in the so-called pre-political as well as political activities of the peasants. The greater freedom of peasants in a particular sub-region indicates their potential to launch "independent class action", while the lack of it indicates their potential as a political force in a "guided political action". Peasants under both the zamindar- and jotedar-dominated sub-regions had the greatest propensity to follow leaders from outside the peasant community.

The zamindar-dominated sub-region included districts of Dacca, Mymensingh, Faridpur, Bakarganj (Barisal), Pabna, Rajshahi and parts of Bogra-Dinajpur-Rangpur. The middle peasants were dominant in Tippera, Noakhali and Chittagong districts. And the jotedars were very powerful in Dinajpur, Rangpur, parts of Mymensingh-Pabna-Bogra-Rajshahi, Jessore, Khulna and eastern Nadia (Kustia).

The position of the peasants in the zamindar-dominated sub-region stands out in high relief when contrasted with that in the middle-peasant dominated sub-region. In Bakarganj (Barisal) peasants had to pay higher amounts of abwab or illegal cesses to their zamindars than peasants in the neighbouring district of Noakhali. In Bakarganj, subinfeudation was very high too.\textsuperscript{67} In Dacca, tenants were sometimes forced to give begar (free labour) to their landlords. As in Bakarganj, abwab constituted about one-fourth, and even more, of the rental. Illegal evictions, "fortuitous fires" and destruction of homesteads by zamindars' elephants were part of the miserable lot of the tenantry in this district.\textsuperscript{68}

The lot of the Mymensingh-Faridpur tenantry was not altogether different. In parts of Pabna and Bogra districts rents without abwab were not acceptable to landlords. Sometimes abwab constituted 50 per cent of the actual rental. In most cases the ryots were not aware of the extent of abwab and rental. The ryots in Pabna and Bogra had to pay the zamindars four times the rent as salami, or transfer fee, on inheriting the tenancy. Illegal exactions and evictions of tenants were very common. The average cultivator in Pabna and Bogra could find neither the "courage nor the wherewithal to stick up for himself", unless backed by "persons of influence", observed a Survey and Settlement Officer.\textsuperscript{69}

In the Tippera-Noakhali sub-region — the most volatile politically — the zamindars were almost non-existent as a dominant class. While in Dacca, Bakarganj, Faridpur and Mymensingh the ratios of zamindars' agents and rent paying peasants were 1:84, 1:99, 1:150 and 1:216 respectively, in Tippera and Noakhali these were 287 and 289 peasants, respectively, against one agent of a landlord.\textsuperscript{70} Peasants in Tippera and Noakhali enjoyed the greatest security of tenure. No enhancement of rent was made in this sub-region in 20 years. Even the
collection of legal rent was difficult in some parts of the districts. Most lands were in the hands of occupancy ryots. Bargadars hardly existed there as a class. This was imputed to the "strength" of the peasants in the sub-region. According to the Survey and Settlement Officer it was the landlord in Noakhali who was in difficulties rather than the tenant.\textsuperscript{71}

Religious leaders, \textit{pirs} and \textit{maulan}as were quite powerful in the countryside. Their religiosity has been identified as a factor why, contrary to the practice of their Bakarganj neighbours across the Meghna, Noakhali peasants seldom resorted to violence.\textsuperscript{72} Peasants in the neighbouring Tippera district, chiefly in the south bordering Noakhali, in Hajiganj and Chandpur sub-divisions, were also very religious. Peasants in Brahmanbaria, Matlab, Nabinagar and parts of Comilla were not so religious;\textsuperscript{73} hence the influence of non-religious leaders quite strong in these areas. Although \textit{zamindars} and \textit{jotedars} were not powerful in Tippera, moneylenders were quite exacting in parts of Daudkandi, Muradnagar and Nabinagar \textit{thanas}. They often grabbed lands from indebted peasants.\textsuperscript{74} The occupancy \textit{ryots} and tenure-holders who enjoyed the greatest amount of freedom in Tippera, Noakhali and Chittagong, were in the forefront of the leadership in most peasant movements in the sub-region. Peasants could be easily motivated to join the anti-British movement as \textit{zamindars} were not the dominant exploiting class in the sub-region. The moneylenders, being mostly non-\textit{bhadralok} Hindus, were identified by \textit{bhadralok} leaders as class enemies of the peasants.

The northern, \textit{jotedar}-dominated sub-region running across Dinajpur, Rangpur with scattered tracts in Bogra, Rajshahi and Mymensingh, was regularly reported to be "politically inert" and the "least volatile" part of East Bengal until the late 1940s. In the southwest, Jessore and Khulna, \textit{zamindars} were not dominant either. In Khulna, especially in the coastal areas, \textit{zamindars} and \textit{talukdars} had to be "benevolent" landlords, as they needed the support of their tenants in the construction of embankments or \textit{bundhs} to prevent saline water from entering the fields.

The peasants in the coastal areas of Khulna were mostly middle peasants having six to 12 acres on the average. These powerful peasants coveted a rise in social status. They virtually controlled the rural areas in Rampal, Shyamnagar, Dakope and Paikgachha in southern Khulna.\textsuperscript{75} But elsewhere in the district \textit{jotedars} were dominant throughout the period. The \textit{jotedars}, mostly Muslim, 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, although Muslims constituted only slightly more than 50 per cent of the population in Dinajpur, excluding Balurghat subdivision,
which is now in West Bengal. The jotedars held up to 4,000 acres of land per family. They often kept elephants as a mark of prestige and power. They constituted the rural aristocracy, and were, in short, "the leaders of the village". Their lands were tilled either by labourers or sharecroppers. They also held the moneylending business along with the Hindu businessmen.\textsuperscript{76}

East Bengal districts again formed three different groups on the basis of economic condition. Chittagong, Bakarganj and Dinajpur constituted the "surplus" group so far as the production of rice, the staple food, was concerned; Rangpur, Bogra and Jessore were in the "self-supporting" category; Noakhali, Tippera, Faridpur, Dacca, Mymensingh, Pabna, Rajshahi and Khulna were "deficit" districts.\textsuperscript{77} It is, however, difficult to correlate the economic condition of the masses with their politics, without further elaboration of he point. Correlation of the presence of a larger proportion of economically worse-off sharecroppers in Rangpur, Dinajpur and Khulna,\textsuperscript{78} and the relative "calmness" of the peasants so far as their political activities in those districts are concerned, bears out the hypothesis that strong patronage is a hindrance to the growth of political activity among improvised, dependent peasants. The politically active behaviour of Tippera-Noakhali peasants suggests that poor but independent peasants are the most volatile force in the countryside.

Correlation of agrarian relations with political behaviour of peasants in the region may be comprehended when one spells out the sub-regional variations, especially in the proportions of different categories of landlords and peasants and in the distribution of lands in different sub-regions. The sub-regional variations also dispel the myth of the prevalence of a homogeneous and undifferentiated peasant community in terms of wealth and power in East Bengal during the period under review. The following tables may be helpful in this regard:

\begin{table}
\centering
\caption{Percentage of Agricultural Land in Direct Possession of}
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|c|}
\hline
 & Proprietors: & Tenure-holders: & \textit{Ryots} & Under: \\
 & (\textit{Zamindars} & (families with & & ryots \\
 & and independent & more than 100 & & \\
 & \textit{talukdars}) & bighas of land) & & \\
\hline
Dacca & 8.79 & 5.84 & 84.23 & 1.14 \\
Mymensingh & 13.42 & 7.96 & 73.35 & 3.27 \\
Faridpur & 2.89 & 8.50 & 79.50 & 9.11 \\
Bakarganj & 9.23 & 26.42 & 60.68 & 3.97 \\
Chittagong & 22.55 & 50.73 & 23.43 & 3.29 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}
From the above tables it is evident that, roughly more than 70 per cent of agricultural lands were held by ryots or occupancy tenants, and the zamindars and independent tenure-holders occupied less than ten per cent except in Chittagong and Mymensingh. Besides some tracts in north-western and south-western districts, by the late 1930s the area under per family on the average was uneconomical in most districts. It is, however, clear that poor and lower-middle peasants composed the bulk of the peasantry throughout the region. Even in the so-called "surplus" and "self-supporting" districts, in Dinajpur alone, for example, about 16 per cent of peasants were either in a state described only as "above starvation" or of "starvation" by the late 1930s. In the northern districts it was not the zamindar but the jotedar, who was
responsible for the "blood sucking" of the peasants. The jotedars, who were liable to eviction by their proprietors, were more powerful as a class in Dinajpur, Rangpur, Bogra and in parts of northern Mymensingh, and in Khulna and Bakarganj, especially in the coastal regions. They in fact were the "real landlords" and "actual masters" of the lower peasants, who were dependent on them in all respects. In Noakhali and Tippera the rich peasants were not as powerful as their counter parts in the north-west and south-west. Here the peasants' custom did not grant "any sort of authority" to the village chiefs, which might have been responsible for frequent incidents of mob violence or jacqueries by peasants.

Although the study reveals that the zamindars were not the only exploiting class in rural East Bengal, the central theme of the politics of the peasants remained the abolition of the zamindari system throughout the period. This was mainly due to the independent talukdars' and jotedars' anti-zamindar propensity. What the different categories of rich peasants aspired to is very important in understanding the politics of the peasants.

A retired British government official observed: "As usual in Bengal, there were such extraordinary intricacies and complications of conflicting rights, so many different kinds of tenants, so much uncertainty and dispute about boundaries, rates, status, privileges — disputes about everything that was disputable — that it was enough to drive one mad." While evaluating the land system of the region one must keep in mind that the number of estates, tenures, ryoti interests or under-ryoti interests do not give us the equal number of landlords, tenure-holders, ryots or under-ryots. The same person might have held more than one interest and there might have been many co-sharers in the same interest. A survey carried out by the Floud Commission shows that out of a sample of 11,315 families 13.77 per cent had more than five interests. The presence of more than one interest in a particular piece of land indicates that subinfeudation was rife throughout East Bengal. There were, sometimes, eight to 20 or even 50 intermediaries between the proprietor and the tiller of the land.

The reasons for the extent of subinfeudation in the region, which predates the Permanent Settlement, might have been due to the bhadralok prejudice against holding the plough, and also the climate and culture of the people. The proprietors farmed out their estates to anyone who would give them the largest amount of premium; the farmers also did the same and thus "farm within farm became the order of the day, each resembling a screw upon a screw, the last coming down on the tenant with the pressure of them all." The
situation can be grasped from the following model of a subinfeudation tree:

The Zamindar (with an estate of 2000 acres and a revenue of Rs 200).

4 Talukdars (each with a subordinate taluk of 500 acres and each paying a rent of Rs 100 to the zamindar).

20 Osat Talukdars (each with a tenure of 100 acres and each paying a rent of Rs 50 to one of the 4 talukdars).

80 Haoladars (each with a tenure of 25 acres and each paying a rent of Rs 25 to one of the 20 osat talukdars).

160 Nim Haoladars (each with a tenure of 12.5 acres and each paying a rent of Rs 20 to one of the 80 haoladars and which he had sublet in turn to two cultivators in an ordinary ryoti lease stipulating the payment of a rent of Rs 15 a piece).

The situation was very confusing, not only for an outsider but for the landlords and the tenants as well. As a result of the coparcenary ownership of land, the cultivators had to pay abwab to a host of landlords, because the landlords were not always aware of their actual tenants and the tenants had a very vague idea about their actual landlords. The situation was so chaotic that during the survey and settlement operations the settlement camps were sometimes turned into "lost property offices" where the landlords came to find their lands and tenants came to find their landlords.

It is quite interesting that instead of fighting their immediate landlords, who were not among the least oppressive, the lower peasantry — mostly Muslim and some Namasudra — were chiefly mobilized against the more distant Hindu zamindars, mahajans and bhadralok. Without contesting the fact that zamindars were very oppressive — they resorted to various violent, inhuman activities in order to extract rent and abwab from their tenants — it can be held that after 1938, when the zamindars' power to extract a transfer fee from the tenants (at the rate of 20% of the price of a piece of land) and their right of pre-emption were abolished by the Tenancy Amendment Act, there was hardly any scope to stir up the lower peasantry against zamindari oppression. Yet there was no recess in the anti-zamindar movements by the lower peasantry.

Besides the zamindars and lawyers, the peasants did not like the moneylenders either, mostly Hindus again, for their exploitation. Most of them came from the Saha, Banikya and Tele castes. Local
shopkeepers, wholesale merchants, landlords, goldsmiths and even lawyers had pawn shops in the villages and trading centres. The rate of interest was very high — it could be between 12 and 280 per cent or even higher. One account by Sir Abdel Kerim Ghuznavi suggests that a certain Naziruddin of Chandpur, Tippera, who had borrowed Rs 22 from a local Hindu mahajan in 1915, was in 1928 asked to repay Rs 26,000.94 Sometimes peasants borrowed paddy from the richer peasants or landlords. For each maund (about 38 kilograms) they had to repay one and a half or two maunds after harvest.95

It is difficult to agree with the views that the peasants were indebted because they spent lavishly on wedding feasts and gold ornaments,96 or because of the "laissez faire policy" of the government.97 It is evident from the Survey and Settlement Reports that between 45 and 50 per cent of the cultivators in the region were indebted. Another report indicates that the class of peasants who existed between "comfort" and "positive want" was the most heavily indebted.98 There must have been many cultivators like the Mymensingh ryot, who had told the Settlement Officer in 1929: "My father, sir, was born in debt, grew in debt and died in debt. I have inherited my father's debt and my son will inherit mine."99 During the Great Depression of the 1930s and the Famine of 1943-44 a large number of occupancy ryots were turned into landless or semi-landless peasants, as they could not repay their loans to the mahajans. Many mahajans advanced money to the cultivators against their mortgaged landed properties.100 Consequently by the mid-1940s a large number of occupancy ryots, about 75 per cent of the peasant families, had either become totally landless or semi-landless. The large scale destitution of the peasants inflated the number of bargadars and labourers, and the rich peasants emerged as the new class of landlords and money-lenders.101 In actuality, after the Tenancy Amendment Act of 1938 and some other pieces of legislation curtailing the power of zamindars, the jotedars (the bulk of them Muslims) emerged as the chief exploiting class in the rural sector.

The well-to-do tenants, even big jotedars, did not enjoy equal social status with the zamindars. In most cases the Hindu zamindars treated their Muslim and Namasudra tenants as nothing more than servants, untouchables and "even as livestock".102 In most cutcheries (courts of the landlords) there were different types of sitting arrangements. Only the bhadralok were shown the courtesy of a chair, tenants of all categories usually sitting on the floor, mats or benches. Many zamindars did not allow their tenants to wear shoes within their cutcheries or ride horses or elephants within the jurisdiction of their estates. Some did not even allow their tenants to dig ponds or wells or construct brick-built houses on their holdings. Cow-slaughtering by
Muslim peasants was often not allowed by Hindu zamindars. The servility of Muslim tenants is reflected in an instance in a Jessore village of their allowing the Hindu landlord to rub the soles of his feet on their shaven heads to relieve an itch caused by the marshy soil.104 The peasants generally bore such humiliations with patience, because they were afraid of the landlords’ power and the ineffectiveness of the judiciary to protect their rights. But under the changed circumstances, with the shift in government policy towards peasants and Muslims after the First World War, and the advent of "pro-peasant" leadership, who successfully brought together economics and politics by reconciling the "dialectical conflict between immediate interest and ultimate goal", to paraphrase Lukacs,105 paved the way for long-term programme-oriented "constitutional" politics involving the peasants. Our hypothesis drawn in the previous chapter is strengthened by Rafiuddin Ahmed’s assertion that "material concerns alone were no longer the sole determinant of the relationship between the urban educated and the rural masses, the rich Muslim land-holder and his poor landless co-religionist". As mentioned earlier, mullas and preachers mediated between the ashraf and Muslim masses and mobilized the latter politically "by conveying the urban message to the countryside".106

Notes

1. Shanin, "Peasantry as a Political Factor", p. 244.
3. Ibid., pp. 392-3; Appendix to Report, Royal Commission on Agriculture in India, p. 48.
5. Dinajpur SSR, p. 16.
6. See Inden and Nicholas, op.cit., pp. 3-34; A. Chowdhury, Agrarian Social Relations and Rural Development in Bangladesh, pp. 29, 40-1; W.V. Schendel, Peasant Mobility, passim.
8. R. Carstairs, The Little World of an Indian District Officer, pp. 26, 103-6.
10. Dinajpur SSR, p. 16; Bhattacharyya and Natesan (eds), op.cit., pp. 38-43.
11. H. Gupta, "Goila (Bakarganj)", in Bhattacharyya and Natesan (eds), op.cit., p. 151; Thorp, "Masters of Earth", pp. 51, 103-5.


18. R. Ahmed, op.cit., p. 190


27. *RNPB*, 21 April 1923, p. 318; *RAB* 1923-24, p. XXV.


29. Ibid., pp. 4-11; HPF, 283/38.


33. Ibid., pp. 120-1.

34. *Pabna-Bogra SSR*, p. 66; Floud Report, III and IV, passim.

35. Ramkrishna Mukherjee, *The Dynamics of Rural Society*, pp. 50-2; *Tippera SSR*, pp. 146-7; *Pabna-Bogra SSR*, pp. 66-7; Floud Report, p. 67.


37. Ibid., p. 107.

38. *Pabna-Bogra SSR*, p. 73.


40. Ibid., pp. 382-3.


47. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict*, p. 11.
49. Ibid., pp. 286, 291, 380.
58. S.C. Chatterjee, *Bengal Ryots*, p. XI.
63. See L. Kabir, op.cit., passim.
64. GP, *Economy of Pakistan*, p. 63.
69. See for details *Pabna-Bogra SSR*, p. 52-61.
70. *Tippera SSR*, p. 16; *Noakhali SSR*, p. 25.
72. Ibid., pp. 27-30.
73. *Tippera SSR*, pp. 21-3.
74. Ibid., p. 130.
78. See for details about the proportions of sharecroppers in different districts of the region, Table VIII in Chapter 7.
80. Ibid., pp. 21-6.

Noakhali SSR, pp. 27-30.

Beames, op.cit., p. 284.


Bakarganj SSR, p. 52.


Dacca SSR, p. 47; Bakarganj SSR, pp. 78-9; Appendix, Royal Commission on Agriculture, p. 47.

Sirajul Islam, "The Bengal Peasantry", p. 49.


Interview with Haripada Saha.

Cited in J. Meszaros, op.cit., p. 3.

Mobilization for Insurgency: Peasants in the Khilafat Movement, 1920-22

"The Swaraj stands for a golden age when prices should fall, taxation should cease, and when the State should refrain from interfering with the good pleasure of each individual man."

— An East Bengali peasant

I

"Punjab and khilafat are mere shibboleths picked up by the anti-Government party in their march towards Revolution", observed Saiyid Nawab Ali Chaudhuri in May 1921. According to him the political unrest in Bengal was more due to economic conditions among the people than anything else. A colleague of his in the Government of Bengal, P.C. Mitter, held that "not more than 2 to 3 thousand people" had "made up their mind not to be convinced by the government while the 42½ millions who reside in rural areas do not take any interest in pure politics as such." He, however, agreed that the economic question was "the question" which interested the masses most and that their "placid contentment" was being disturbed by a handful of agitators.¹

A close look at the overall political situation of Bengal, East Bengal in particular, in the post-First World War period reveals a somewhat different picture. The post-War political agitation, which also involved the peasantry, was undoubtedly a by-product of the economic situation, but it was certainly not a movement by "2 to 3 thousand people".

Though the peasantry for the first time spontaneously joined the anti-British movement under the leadership of the Congress in East Bengal, the Khilafat-Non-Cooperation Movement was not the sole motivating force behind the mass upsurge, which even outlived the movement. During the anti-Partition of Bengal, Swadeshi Movement of the Hindu nationalists, we have seen the apathy; and in many cases hostility, on the part of the Muslim masses towards the movement throughout the region, under the aegis of the proja or rich peasant-cum-jotedar leaders. Their solidarity and dislike for the Hindu bhadralok, zamindar and mahajan classes are well reflected in the Jamalpur riots of 1907 and the Kamarer Char Proja Conference of 1914 in Mymensingh district. Till then one thing was evident from the activities of the peasants that they did not identify themselves with the
Hindu *bhadralok* nationalists, but rather opposed them. But their participation in the struggle for *swaraj* and *khilafat* along with the Hindu leaders and masses, apparently indicates a turning point in the history of peasant politics in East Bengal.

Cantwell Smith suggests that behind the Hindu-Muslim entente worked the political discontent of the "influential Muslims", who by 1912 eschewed loyalty to the British and "outgrew their dependent position within the imperial system, and began to express their dissatisfaction" as the Hindu bourgeoisie had done after reaching a similar stage some decades earlier. This analysis is possibly not applicable to the situation in East Bengal. Here the agitation and peasant mobilization were not solely motivated by the influential Muslims' dissatisfaction with the Raj. The observations of C.F. Andrews are more appropriate: "not Khilafat, not Punjab, but the whole misery of a continent, oppressed and crushed by an outrageous system of imperial aggression" worked as the steering force behind the movement. The agrarian crisis, though precipitated by the War, was a creation of the British tenancy system which polarized the agrarian society between a small minority of prosperous landlords and a large number of tenants, sharecroppers and landless labourers.

The quinquennium between 1914 and 1920 is very significant so far as the economic history of the region is concerned. The sudden rise in the price of jute and fall in the price of rice during 1914-17, the chief cash-crop and staple food respectively, had mixed effects on the agrarian population. Though the jute boom did not substantially change the lot of the poor peasants, who did not have proper access to the market due to the presence of several grades of powerful intermediaries, this boom enriched the upper echelons of the peasantry, from which emerged a newly prosperous class of peasants, who by then had started building houses with corrugated iron sheets and sending their sons to local schools and colleges, and were becoming used to modern amenities of life. The poorer section of the peasantry, which also got some benefit out of the jute boom, was awakened to a sense of its inferiority by the prosperity and the potential of getting more benefit out of the jute boom provided that it had better access to the market and better terms from the landlords. This agitated the poorer section of the peasants during the period. As the rise and fall in the prices of jute and rice did not take place correspondingly, the state of despondency of the lower peasantry can well be imagined from the reports of an increasing number of violent incidents of *hat* (village-market) looting in the countryside in early 1918. In spite of the rise in jute price, the per capita net availability of rice was sharply declining during 1916-21. In 1916-17 while the per capita net availability was 4.81 maunds (1 maund = 38 kilograms approximately) per year, in
1918-19 it was only 3.63 maunds and in 1920-21 it was no more than 4.65 maunds. There was a sharp decline in the total yield of rice in Bengal; in 1918-19 it fell by about half a million maunds from the level of 1917-18. Consequently there was a rise in the price of rice. Taking the pre-War price of rice as 100, it stood at 162 in early 1919, 192 in early 1920 and 147 in late 1921. Meanwhile, there was a substantial decline in the jute price. In 1921 it dropped to six rupees per maund from twenty-five rupees in 1919. In 1921 there was a sharp decline in the jute production as well, from between eight and ten million bales in 1913-19 it dropped to four million bales in 1921. During the period immediately following the War, on the average there was an increase of prices of almost all non-agricultural goods by about 50 per cent without any corresponding rise in wages. During the period when the well-to-do classes became even better off, the poor became poorer.

The post-War slump not only hit the agriculturalists, but also industrial labourers, professional classes or the *bhadralok* as a whole were adversely affected by it. The lack of purchasing power of the people arrested the growth of industrial production. During 1921 the jute mills of Calcutta worked only four days a week. There was a sudden recession in the share market. The terms of trade between agricultural and industrial goods were not favourable to the cultivators. By 1920 the wholesale prices of consumer goods rose by 118 per cent in comparison to the pre-war period, while the retail prices rose even higher. Consequently by late 1920 the value of the rupee had fallen to just half of the maximum recorded in early 1920 in relation to the pound sterling. The influenza epidemic of 1919 and the severe flood in East Bengal villages in mid-1920 were the last straws.

The sudden shrinkage of job opportunities due to the large-scale retrenchment of the additional clerks, petty officials and labourers after the War, caused great resentment among the lower middle class people. The educated unemployed youths, mostly coming from the *bhadralok* classes, provided the workers and volunteers in the Non-Cooperation Movement.

In summary, the period between 1914 and 1922, was one of bad harvest, epidemics, inflation, unemployment, insecurity for the lower and upper peasants, professional classes, industrial workers, students, businessmen and landlords. The combined dissatisfaction of all these classes made them readily available for the movement. The bulk of the peasants were so hard hit by the crisis that they could occasionally afford to buy a *hilsa* fish only after a good harvest, a bad harvest normally plunging them into debt.

These circumstances might prompt one to accept the "bad harvest theory", which correlates economic distress with political
unrest among peasants. But one cannot really ignore the impact of middle class unemployment, the political aspirations of the bourgeoisie, and the role of religion, as important factors which widened the "very limited political horizon" of the peasantry. The undercurrent of peasant politics flowing beneath the so-called constitutional politics of the urban bourgeoisie, also played an important role in arousing mass-consciousness among the peasants in the region. The Khilafat-Non-Cooperation issue might have contributed substantially in this regard, but from the level of peasant participation in the movement it is not prudent to hypothesize that it was only the Congress Party under Gandhi that galvanized them to action. The Khilafat-NCO Movement in East Bengal, to a great extent, was an extension of the peasant movement, which had not subsided during the period. This, however, does not mean that the Khilafat-NCO Movement was initiated by the peasants. They depended on urban leaders for guidance and interpreted the movement in their own way under local leadership.

While evaluating the Khilafat-NCO Movement and its impact on the politics of the peasants in East Bengal it appears that, in contrast to the situation in north-western India, classes which were motivated most in the name of the religion and self-rule, were the different categories of peasants.

II

In spite of the government and the loyalists' campaigns against civil disobedience and non-cooperation, the peasantry consistently continued to follow the ulama (Muslim theologians) and other leaders who asked them to support the movement, throughout the period. They paid little heed to the appeals of pro-government ulama. Nawab Syed Nawab Ali Chaudhury, a zamindar politician from Dhanbari, Mymensingh, had failed miserably to capture their imagination despite his appeals to them to obey the law of the land in the name of God and the Holy Koran, during the Rowlatt Satyagraha in 1919. It is significant that they paid heed to the appeals made in the name of their religion, even though these appeals were made by non-Muslim communists and "terrorists" like Trailakya Nath Chakravarty ("Maharaj"). Chakravarty was quite successful in mobilizing Muslim peasant support for the movement by telling them stories about the so-called government desire to desecrate the holy cities of Mecca and Medina by opening liquor shops. He also told them that the government, which was responsible for killing "1400" men, women and children at Jallianwala Bagh, was encouraging the police to outrage the modesty of Muslim women and selling of liquor with the aim of destroying the religions of the people. The peasants followed him in opposing the government's
survey and settlement operations believing him when he alleged their object was enhancement of rents. It appears that, peasants hardly responded to religious appeals having no reference to their economic distress and its remedy.

It seems that lower peasants were easily motivated by rumours of impending changes in the whole socio-economic and political structures to their advantage. These rumours made room for speculations among them and they soon spread them in the countryside with further concoctions and exaggerations. Due to the ambiguity in the interpretation of swaraj, they were expecting radical changes in the socio-economic and political systems, which would help realize their "utopia". Gandhi's foreshadowing the attainment of "swaraj within one year", first by 1 September 1921, then by 1 October, 30 October, 31 December 1921, might have aroused unprecedented expectations among the masses. In many places the peasants believed that the government's fall was impending and some even believed that it had already abdicated. Some mullas even spread rumours, to antagonize the Muslims towards the government, that the government was going to introduce juma prayers on Sundays instead of Fridays and that the Koran was going to be proscribed soon. The prevalence of the prophesy among the Muslim masses of the region that, after the fall of Constantinople into the hands of the Europeans, and after the mass humiliation of the Muslims everywhere by the "infidels", Imam Mahdi or the messiah would come to restore Islam throughout the world, aroused great enthusiasm and expectations among them. These rumours made them more dependent on the ulama.

Lord Zetland, the then governor of Bengal, suggested that Muslims agitators under the leadership of local mullas and outside leaders like Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Maulana Akram Khan and Maulana Abdul Bari Firangimahal, had been active in the countryside of East Bengal. He also mentions the seizure of a leaflet, containing the "violent" and "fanatical" speech of Maulana Bari, in March 1920. It appears from the diary that after being reprimanded by the government, the Nawab of Dacca along with Fazlul Huq helped in distributing anti-NCO leaflets in the mofuss (periphery) on behalf of the government, which did not have much impact on the masses. The impact of Gandhi was so deep rooted among the peasants that many believed him to be an Avatar or incarnation of God who could not be killed or destroyed by the British soldiers as he continued to appear again and again.

The ratification of the Calcutta Special Congress resolutions of September 1920 at the Nagpur Annual Session in December 1920, where C.R. Das read out the Congress programme of NCO, gave the movement further momentum. It was specially due to the change in the
Congress constitution, making the attainment of swaraj the chief objective of the party. But the Muslim masses in East Bengal were probably more affected by the Muslim League programme adopted in Calcutta in September 1920, which was more radical than the Congress one. It advocated “immediate” boycotting of the law courts, government aided educational institutions and “British goods” rather than “foreign goods.” The social ostracization of all opponents of the NCO programme was also advocated by the League. The Muslim League had the advantage of reaching the Muslim masses as by the late 1920s many ulama and most Muslim members of the Congress and Khilafat Committee had close links with the League as well as with the masses.

As the Movement was "purely Muhammadan" and "partly religious" in East Bengal, initially the masses were not so interested in the secular, nationalist aspects of the movement. There is hardly any reason to believe that only the north-west Indian Muslims, especially the traders, were opposed to the boycott of British goods and to the excessive emphasis on the use of the spinning wheel or charkha to produce khadi (also khaddar) or raw cotton threads as a means of attaining swaraj. The upper echelon of the Muslim leadership of the ashraf (aristocrats), having connections with the traders and vested interest groups, also opposed the concept of NCO and boycott. This is reflected in the following lines of a satirical Urdu poem published in the Aligarh Institute Gazette on 8 November 1922 to ridicule Gandhi for his ideas:

How can khaddar break the shackles of slavery? Gandhi has probably said so as a joke.

Not only were Fazlul Huq, Nawab Habibullah and Nawab Ali Chaudhury in the forefront of this group, but also Maulana Abu Bakr, the pir (Muslim saint) of Furfura, who had earlier said that Prophet Muhammad had shown him a piece of khadi cloth in a dream, later on spoke against the NCO and boycott of British goods at the annual session of the Anjuman-i-Waizin where the Muslim merchants of Kidderpore and Chandny, Calcutta, were present. They were his spiritual disciples or muridan and were opposed to the boycott of British goods, which went against their economic interests. From the vacillating behaviour of the ashraf vis-a-vis the NCO programme, it appears that initially they had to support the movement as there was a tremendous pressure from the "plebeian clergy", in the language of Engels, in support of total boycott of the government, because the
mofussil mulls had nothing to lose by boycotting the government as they were not employed by the government and had no connections with the government court. Having lower class connections and origins, in spite of their status as clergy, they sympathized with the socio-economic problems of the lower peasantry. Besides the mofussil mulla, the peasants of all categories, irrespective of the Khilafat-NCO issues, had become restive by 1919 due to severe economic hardship. The ashraf, their allies in the upper echelon of the jotedars, represented by men like Fazlul Huq and the "aristocratic clergy" or the pir sahibs, it seems, supported the movement half heartedly, partially to maintain their control over the masses and partially out of compulsion, lest the masses turned violent or joined the Hindu camp. Later on, when peasants became assertive and questioned the legitimacy of the landlords and challenged the oppressive police and agents of landlords, the well-to-do leaders tried to restrain them in vain. While the lower clergy and khilafat volunteers, mostly with lower peasant backgrounds, had been preaching the "doctrine of disaffection" among the lower peasantry mainly through the congregational gatherings in mosques, the aristocratic clergy and the anti-NCO ashraf-jotedar leaders resorted to communalism to divert the nationalist-cum-class movement of lower peasants by secretly appointing pro-government mulls to counterbalance the NCO propaganda.  

For the sake of convenience and better understanding of the problem one can divide the period of mass agitation, active and passive resistance to the Raj in the name of religion and nationalism, into two parts: the nationalist phase and the class-cum-communal phase. On most occasions, however, these aspects overlapped and so are very difficult to differentiate from each other. In general, the Congress, the Jamiat-ul-Ulama and the anti-British leaders of the Muslim League, promoted nationalism using the khilafat issue as an excuse. The well-to-do Congress leaders, both Hindu and Muslim, the conservative, pro-government Muslim League leaders and the ulama having ties with the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, on the other hand, put greater stress on the communal differences between the Hindus and the Muslims, which later aroused communal bitterness between the two communities, not long after the movement was called off in February, 1922.

One of the most significant aspects of the movement in rural East Bengal was probably that there was very little sub-regional variation in the peasants' overall political behaviour and in the intensity of agitation, in contrast to the subsequent period. From the intensity of a particular type of agitation in a sub-region, the boycott of elections by the peasants for example, one may assume that the well-to-do enfranchized peasants mainly took part in this agitation. But
in general, it is very difficult to draw a line between the zamindar-dominated peasants of Dacca-Mymensingh and the jotedar (rich peasant having tenants)-dominated peasants of Rangpur-Dinajpur sub-regions, for example, so far as their political behaviour during the movement is concerned. Everywhere the movement was more or less confined to boycotting British goods; promoting home spun cloth or khadd; boycotting government officials, educational institutions, law courts, jute cultivation and waging no-tax movements. In some places the no-tax was being transformed into a no-rent movement. The transformation of the entire movement from religion-national for the attainment of the elusive swaraj and the restoration of the khilafat to communal, or class in a rudimentary form, was chiefly a post-Khilafat-NCO development.

As mentioned earlier, the quick response of the peasants to the appeals of the outside leaders in support of the movement suggests that there had already been some ground work by local leaders among the peasants before the inception of the movement. The numerous krishak, proja and jotedar organizations along with the Anjuman-i-Islamias or the Islamic Associations, quite common in almost every district of the region in those days, were probably instrumental in mobilizing the peasants against their exploiters - both imaginary and landlord - moneylenders. The rural masses' response to the urban leaders was so spontaneous that while the appeals to observe a hartal or public strike on August 1, 1920, was a failure in Calcutta in spite of the presence of most leaders and volunteers in the city and in most towns excepting Chittagong, Dacca, Pabna and Rajshahi in East Bengal, the countryside of the region in most districts observed complete hartal. Villagers boycotted government offices, schools and closed down shops in the rural bazaars and hat, without fully grasping the issues of khilafat and swaraj.  

The intensity of rural participation in the movement was so great that it is fair to ascribe the movement to a by-product of peasant insurgency in the region. Different contemporary government and private sources may be cited in support of the above assertion, which reveal that only about ten per cent of the Bengali intelligentsia was "politically minded" and only about half of them were active agitators, the rest being pro-government. Out of twenty Muslim lawyers in Chittagong none took part in the movement, not a single highly qualified Muslim joined the movement in Dacca and out of about two hundred Muslim lawyers and graduates in the seven districts of Rajshahi division, only one showed some interest in the movement, observes Maulana Islamabadi, a front ranking leader of the movement in East Bengal.
Who then were the mobilizers of the masses? Was it purely a movement led by Hindu nationalists and the _ulama_? It has been mentioned earlier that though the _nawabs_, aristocrats and the budding middle classes from among the Muslims had initially supported the movement, they later backed out and opposed it. In some places upper-middle peasants or petty _jotedars_ led the movement with support from the rest of the lower echelons of the peasant community. The "plebeian clergy" and the lumpen-proletariat or the landless and semi-landless peasants also took part in the movement, the former out of conviction and the latter of expediency, hoping for booty from the expropriation of the richer classes. The _jotedars_ in many places took advantage of the movement to defy the authority of both the government and local _zamindars_ by establishing arbitration courts in the villages with themselves as presidents. They also got verdicts against their tenants and often collected rent at the desired rates from them with the help of _swaraj_ volunteers. Along with _zamindars_ and big independent _talukdars_, many _jotedars_ also opposed the movement after several incidents of peasants' attacking their property.

The first major success of the movement in rural East Bengal was achieved after the mass boycott of the elections for the Legislative Council in November 1920. The extent of the boycott in the region was the highest in the sub-continent. This was not due to the propaganda of so-called "paid agents". The illiterate Muslim voters in the countryside believed that casting votes under the circumstances was an act of sin or _gunah_. The _swaraj_ and _khilafat_ volunteers' efforts and the "natural apathy" of the peasants to voting were responsible for the success of the boycott.

The Faraizi and the "Wahhabi" or Ahl-i-Hadis _ulama_, including Pir Badshah Mia of the Faraizi sect, took leading roles in boycotting the elections. The _ulama_ and the general masses were so influential and assertive that men like Fazlul Huq and Nawab Habibullah, who later opposed the movement, either kept silent on the issue or did not openly plead in favour of voting in their own constituencies.
opposition of the ashraf and richer jotedar leaders, who had pro-government attitudes, about 80 per cent of eligible voters abstained from voting during the 1920 Council elections in Bengal, while only about 30 per cent did so in Madras, 64 in the Punjab and 67 in the U.P. The figure would have exceeded 90 per cent had separate accounts of East Bengal been taken.

The boycott of the government by the urban bourgeoisie was negligible. By the end of 1920, only one title-holder (titles were conferred on loyal Indians by the British) had relinquished his title in the province. Only ten honorary office holders resigned and eight refused to attend government functions, while only six pleaders, "the most prominent earning not more than Rs 150 a month", gave up practice by the end of the year. The boycott of foreign goods was "practically nil" in the urban centres of Bengal.

After the meteoric rise of C.R. Das on the political horizon of Bengal after his successful entente with the Dacca based militant nationalists, the Anushilan Samity, and after his regaining the confidence of the Congress hierarchy by giving up his legal practice and his proposals of total boycott of the government at the Nagpur session of the Congress in December 1920, there was a rise in student militancy throughout Bengal. But the student strike collapsed soon in most urban centres and by February 1921 most educational institutions were reopened. In East Bengal, however, especially in the rural areas, the strike lasted longer. Here the Muslim students went on strike from November 1920, before the Nagpur session of the Congress. The Muslim students of rural East Bengal, many of whom did not return to their class rooms till the end of the movement, were among the most effective propagators of the doctrine of swaraj and khilafat among the masses. By early 1921 the movement had reached the remotest villages in the region. The Khilafat Committees were taking over local Anjuman-i-Islamia office, the mullas and the Khilafat-Congress volunteers established grass roots contacts throughout the region. Their "back to the village" campaign attracted a large following among the peasants. Das' Palli Sanganthans, or village organizations, aimed at establishing swadeshi (patriotic and indigenous) schools and handloom factories in the villages, and distributed charkhas and cotton seeds free of cost among the peasants. Peasants also responded warmly by collecting mushti bhiksh or handfuls of rice as donations from the villagers to the khilafat-swaraj fund. In parts of Noakhali, Tippera and Mymensingh, the campaign for spinning and wearing khadi or khaddar clothes became quite popular among the villagers. But as a whole Muslim peasants did not accept the charkha en masse, because of its poor return economically and because of their prejudices and false pride, as they regarded spinning as below their dignity.
Though peasants were quite enthusiastic about enjoying the fruits of the "impending" swaraj, as a whole they did not turn anti-government throughout the region. It seems from their behaviour that, since they believed that the British Raj was going to abdicate soon, there was not much point in respecting the police and other oppressive officials, but they also believed in taking advantage of whatever the government was granting them as concessions, in the form of local self-government, co-operative societies and tenancy laws. It also appears from their behaviour that, after Gandhi had "pessimistically" declared in late 1921 his inability to fix a date when swaraj could be attained, peasants found it expedient to co-operate with the government in the "interim period", and to settle the score with the local agents of exploitation in the meantime. Therefore, there was a lack of uniformity in the political behaviour of the peasants during the period. But as a whole, they were turning more anti-Hindu than anti-British from early 1921, partially due to the reluctance of the Hindu nationalists to mobilize the Muslim masses, and partially due to the gradual disenchantment of the ashraf and jotedar leaders with the bhadralok nationalists. The predominance of Hindu bhadralok in the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee under Das and the exclusion of Muslims from his Board of National Education created a rift between the Khilafat and Congress or the Muslim and Hindu hierarchies in the province.

As mentioned earlier, the government's attempt at "immunizing" the Muslim masses from the nationalist agitation was bearing fruit during the height of the movement. The sudden shifts in the policies of Fazlul Huq, Nawab Habibullah and other leading ashraf and jotedar politicians of the region in favour of loyalty to the government, and the sudden intensification of anti-zamindar, anti-mahajans activities of the government-sponsored peasant associations during the period, suggest that Muslim and Namasudra peasants of the region could not be kept on the "nationalist" track for long. Besides encouraging peasant associations, the government also promoted the Union Boards and Co-Operative Societies in the countryside, apparently with the innocuous motive of promoting agriculture and local self-government. But in actuality these organizations, and the peasants' exposure to "nationalist" politics through nationwide agitation, strengthened the position of the peasants and in the language of a contemporary sociologist "no longer the established rights of the zamindars stood as sacred taboos" among the peasantry. The Settlement Operations, meanwhile, had made the peasants aware of their rights and less inclined to pay illegal ceases to the landlords. In certain districts peasants were so disposed to claim their rights through government machinery that the Non-Co-Operators had to ask them to do certain things in the name of
Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia

the government. This indicates that many peasants genuinely believed in the goodness of the government and blamed the exacting government officials along with the agents of the zamindars for their distress.

The jute boycott campaign of 1920-21, sponsored and initiated by the jotedars and well-to-do peasants due to the slump in the jute market, was paradoxically supported by the indigenous jute merchants with a view to damaging European trade. In many places the peasants were told by the Khilafat-Swaraj volunteers and leaders that the government desired an increase in the acreage of food grains at the cost of jute.

The predominantly Muslim jotedar and well-to-do peasants, and Hindu bhadralok nationalists supported the jute boycott campaign with different motives. The former not only wanted a better price by reducing the amount of jute, but also might have understood the long run implications of it. The absence of any alternative constructive programme to compensate the financial loss of the cultivators due to the boycott, the jotedars believed, would force the cultivators to adopt "other methods" to improve their position. The jotedars wanted to initiate an anti-zamindar no-rent movement throughout the jute boycott campaign. They were quite successful as the no-rent movement spread throughout the region following the jute boycott campaign.

The Hindu bhadralok nationalists, on the other hand, not only tried to promote the interests of the indigenous jute merchants, but also wanted to mobilize the peasants against the government, holding it responsible for the slump. By December 1920, the Non-Co-Operators had succeeded in forming branches of the Krishi Banijya Unnati Sahba or the Association for the Welfare of Agriculture and Trade in parts of Pabna, Bogra Rajshahi, Dacca and other jute growing districts. The Association preached the doctrine of NCO, reduction of jute cultivation, introduction of the charkh, village courts and boycott of government offices and officials. The Association held big public meetings at different places in the countryside, which were addressed by Maulvi Rajibuddin Tarafdar, Maulvi Afsaruddin and Babu Suresh Chandra Bhattacharjee, among others. Besides the above Association several other bodies, including the Khilafat Committees and the Congress, organized anti-jute cultivation rallies in the countryside. At one such rally at Buktabali Char, a village two miles from Narayanganj, Dacca, which was organized by the Indian Jute Merchants' Association, about 3000 peasants listened to leaders like Shirish Chatterjee, a pleader and supporter of C.R. Das from Dacca, Beni Madhab Mukherjee and Maulvi Imamuddin. They urged the peasants to fight the "enemies of Islam" and cultivate other crops instead of jute. The response was quite favourable to the leaders. At another meeting at Delua in Sirajganj,
Peasants in the Khilafat Movement

Pabna, about 10,000 peasants agreed to stop jute cultivation and non-cooperation with the government. Numerous meetings were held in the Rangpur, Mymensingh, Noakhali and Tippera countryside under the leadership of local jotedars and talukdars. The peasants were so moved by the arguments of the speakers that in some places they swore in the name of God to stop jute cultivation with a view to strengthening the cause of the movement.\(^{60}\)

The spontaneous response of peasants to the call to restrict jute cultivation does not, however, indicate that they did so only to strengthen the cause of swaraj and khilafat. There is hardly any reason to believe in the government assertion that it was "impossible to convince the cultivator that to grow paddy at 5 to 7 rupees per maund was a better economic proposition than growing jute at six to twelve rupees per maund".\(^{61}\) Due to the low price of jute during 1920 and 1922, the cultivators had hardly any incentive to grow the crop, consequently there was a substantial decline in jute cultivation in 1921, before the inception of the anti-jute campaign.\(^{62}\) So it is difficult to agree with the proposition that the peasants reluctantly agreed to restrict jute cultivation due to the pressure from the Khilafat-NCO leaders from the top. One can hardly agree with Rajat Ray that the "campaign ended in failure"\(^{63}\) because on the average, there was a decline in the yield of jute in 1920-21 from that of 1919-20 by about thirty per cent.\(^{64}\) From six million bales in 1920 it fell to four million in 1921, while it was between ten and eight million bales during 1913-1918.\(^{65}\) The cultivators gradually increased jute-acreage from 1922-23, when the value of the marketed crops, including jute, increased substantially. By 1922-23, the value of jute as the percentage of the value of the total marketed crops in Bengal increased to 31 per cent from 19 per cent in the previous financial year.\(^{66}\) The tremendous success of the jute-restriction campaign in the region is evident from the following table.

**TABLE 3.1**

The impact of Jute-Restriction Campaign on Jute Output

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Acreage of jute (in '000s)</th>
<th>Output of jute (in '000 tons)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rajshahi</td>
<td>1920</td>
<td>762</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Division</td>
<td>1921</td>
<td>457</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1922</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1923</td>
<td>477</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1924</td>
<td>811</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1925</td>
<td>822</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From this table two things become clear — firstly, during the jute-restriction campaign in 1921-22, there was a substantial decline in jute-acreage, and secondly, the level of production did not reach the optimum level of the pre-boycott period until 1926. The evidence refutes the contention that there were no "special agrarian grievances to be exploited" by the politicians in the region during the movement.

It is also evident from the statistics that the jute-restriction was not solely a by-product of the Khilafat-NCO propaganda. Had the peasantry been compelled to restrict jute cultivation by the leaders of the movement, the production level would have reached the optimum level by 1923, after the withdrawal of the movement in early 1922. The movement as well as the slump, played an important role in this regard. The slump, however, proved to be a convenient weapon in arousing anti-government feeling among a large number of peasants, who, it seems, supported the boycott of jute with the hope of attaining swaraj.

IV

By early 1921, the "purely Muhammadan" and "partly religious" movement was changing colour very fast. Some sort of swadesi feeling or pride in one's own country was developing among peasants. From mid-1921 onwards, the joint Hindu-Muslim command under C.R. Das, J.M. Sengupta, Maulana Islamabadi, Maulana Akram Khan and other leaders of the province was increasingly emphasizing the economic and political rather than the religious aspects of the movement. Swadeshi
songs, jatra or folk theatre groups were also being patronized by the leaders. The kabiyals or local bards like Haricharan Acharya of Jaydebpur, Dacca, Mukundo Das of Barisal and Romesh Sheel of Chittagong were prominent among those who popularized the message of swaraj and khilafat among the rural masses through their songs. The village bazaars, hat and other public places were the venues of their public performances. They also sang in public meetings, organized by the Congress or Khilafat Committees, in intervals between the speeches. Hari Acharya’s

हिन्दू-मुसलमान, एक मायेर गणन /
एक सुंदर गाँव, भारती एक जान गाँव,
उल्टी ज्याँवरी, मदिनी अलमारी।

became very popular among the masses during these days. This song promoted fraternity between the Hindus and Muslims, who are said to have originated from the same mother or motherland, and their unity can make the earth tremble or drive away the British. Two such songs, composed and sung by Romesh Sheel during the famous railway strike in 1921, aroused mass excitement in Chittagong and the neighbouring sub-regions. One of the songs depicts how terrible it was to live under the British and why it was no longer possible to keep one’s mouth shut in acquiescence when the British rulers were calling the Indians "damn" and "bloody" after sucking their blood. It urges the working classes to support the railway strike under the leadership of J.M. Sengupta. In the other the British Raj was being threatened with dire consequences in the event of "not restoring the throne of the Khalifa". They were also told to quit India as the Hindus and Muslims would not forgive them.

Though the question of "restoring" the khilafat remained the main theme of most political speeches, these speeches also contained more mundane and secular issues. In some of the political meetings - the Bengal Provincial Conference, held at Barisal in March 1921, for example - none of the speakers mentioned the cause of the khilafat. At the Khilafat Conferences of 1921, though some of the Muslim leaders tried to arouse the religious passion of the audience by making false allegations against the British of desecrating the tomb of the Prophet in Medina, and by telling stories about the alleged British excesses in Mecca under Lord Kitchener, some speakers praised Soviet Russia and equated Gandhi with Lenin.

The masses in many places were losing interest in the Khilafat cause after being disillusioned with some of the leaders who embezzled khilafat funds. The appeals of the opponents of the movement
especially from among the ulama, Maulana Abu Bakar of Furfura being the most prominent, also aroused confusion among the masses. However, it did not weaken the mass appeal of religion in arousing anti-British sentiment among the peasants. Leaders like Maulana Golam Sarwar Hossaini, who later emerged as a prominent member of the Proja Party under Fazlul Huq and earned a bad name for instigating the communal riots in Noakhali in 1946-47 - were not politically insignificant in the region. Their anti-British propaganda, with a tinge of anti-Hindu malice, created great enthusiasm among the peasants for breaking British laws and boycotting the government. Golam Sarwar incited his followers by calling the British officials "white rats" and by his public assertions like "I piss upon the laws of the British."72

The nationalist fervour of the masses was further accentuated after the Gurkha outrage on the half-starved striking coolies of British tea gardens of Assam, stranded at Chandpur railway and steamer stations in Tippera. The government's resistance to the desertion of tea gardens by the coolies in support of the NCO, was stubbornly opposed by leaders like C.R. Das, J.M. Sengupta and other Hindu and Muslim leaders of the region. The railways and steamer strikes organized by Sengupta in protest against the Gurkha outrage on the coolies and the hapless deaths of many coolies on the railway and steamer stations in mid-1921, were soon followed by mass agitation against the government in the neighbouring districts of Chittagong, Noakhali and Barisal.73 The mass fury, diverted into channels, almost independent and isolated from each other, aroused great confusion and deviations from the actual programmes of the movement throughout the countryside. The pro-government Muslims and Namasudras, the anti-government Hindu nationalists and the anti-government Muslim nationalists belonging to the Khilafat Committees, Congress, local Anjuman-i-Islamias, Muslim League and other groups, were leading the masses to serve their own interests. The jotedar-ashraf dominated anti-zamindar and anti-government groups fared well in the long run. At times, however, it is difficult to differentiate the anti-government and anti-Hindu Muslim groups, for the constant twists and turns in their political ideologies.

Though peasants mostly acted on their own under local leadership and their movements had little relevance to the programme of the central Khilafat and Congress organizations, in places, such as Tippera, Mymensingh, Barisal, Pabna and Rajshahi, where the Congress had better organizations in the rural areas than elsewhere in East Bengal, peasants tended to follow the directives of the nationalists, at least in the beginning of the movement.
In most places, however, the anti-NCO ashraf and jotedar had their own organizations, which sometimes avowedly promoted anti-Hindu sentiments among the masses. The Faridpur District Muslim Association, a rival body to the District Anjuman-i-Islamia, was one of them under the leadership of local ashraf and professional classes. Khan Bahadur Abdul Gani, Golam Mawla Chaudhury, Alimuzzaman Chaudhury, Khan Bahadur Rahmatjan Chaudhury MLC and Mesabahuddin Chaudhury MLC, the leading landlords of the district, were the chief patrons of the Association. In Barisal, Dacca and the adjoining districts there were quite a few loyal Muslim associations, which in the long run succeeded in dissuading the peasants from non-co-operation and boycott. As mentioned above, the loyal Muslim leaders had close connections with the Khilafat Committees and the district Anjumans. Under the influence of the urban ashraf and anti-Hindu jotedar leaders, the rural ulama and the khilafat volunteers quite surreptitiously, or unknowingly, were strengthening the doctrine of Muslim solidarity and the concept of superiority of Islam among the Muslims of all shades. Although some of them joined hands with their Hindu compatriots in the struggle for Swaraj, most of them had sympathies with the anti-zamindar, anti-mahajan feeling of the lower peasantry.

The peasants quite often acted on their own, without paying much attention to the code of conduct of the non-violent Non-Co-operation movement, as conceived by Gandhi, or without understanding the implications of the programmes of the movement, which mostly led to "lawlessness" from the government point of view. But their violent acts against the police, chaukidar, zamindars, mahajans and their agents reveal their desire to get justice and to establish a political order by curbing the power of their superiors. The essence of class struggle is not altogether impossible to decipher from their violent actions, directed against government servants as well as local agents of exploitation. Several case studies of peasants behaviour in relation to government and indigenous exploiters will help illuminate the situation.

In some Mymensingh villages peasants observed a harta or general strike in April 1921, as a mark of protest against government restricting C.R. Das from visiting the District. They also attacked some government servants. But simultaneously they attacked local agents of zamindars in different places. A Sub-Registrar of the Land Registration Department was assaulted for wearing European clothes, a hat and coat, while a nai or deputy of a zamindar was beaten up with shoes, apparently for not attending a meeting organized by the Khilafat-NCO Committee. Many villagers flatly refused to attend police investigations believing that the government authority had ceased to exist.
In parts of Tippera, Dacca and Rajshahi districts, lower peasants supported the anti-Union Board movement of the Congress. This movement was mainly organized by Hindu zamindar, mahajans and bhadralok who opposed the formation of the Boards to equip the well-to-do peasants with more political power at the cost of their vested interests and power. The movement was more successful in areas where jotedar were not preponderant and Congress had the support of local Muslim leaders. In Akhaura and some other parts of Tippera even domestic servants boycotted their British masters in support of the movement. In Kerraniganj, Dacca, along with the domestic servants, the boatmen who ferried government clerks across the Buriganga refused to carry them in their boats. Poor peasants paradoxically supported the movement without understanding what the Union Boards stood for. However, very soon a large number of Muslim jotedars and well-to-do peasants irrespective of their previous political affiliations, welcomed the Union Boards, realizing their importance in partially fulfilling their cherished goal - the curbing of zamindars’ political power and influence over rural society. They successfully turned peasants against the anti-Union Board tide. They were more successful in Bogra, Rajshahi, Pabna, Rangpur and Dinajpur, where the Hindu bhadralok and zamindars were not so dominant. This was the beginning of the break in the marriage of convenience between the Hindu and Muslim nationalists.

In parts of Rajshahi, Nadia, Pabna, Jessore and Khulna, where Hindu and Muslim nationalists organized a movement against the Midnapore Zamindari Company, British in ownership and composition, which earned notoriety for its exactions and oppressive methods in collecting rent, especially from the utbandi tenants, who had no rights on their holdings. At their instigation, a no-rent mentality grew among the tenants of the Company. In parts of Rajshahi and Nadia serious friction occurred between the landlords and the tenants. As these peasants were in conflict with a British owned zamindar estate, the Hindu Congress leaders found it quite convenient to support the no-rent movement.

By mid-1921, the no-rent mentality was growing in Chittagong and the adjoining districts of Noakhali and Tippera. Here the mobilizers of the lower peasantry were either mullas or those Hindu and Muslim leaders who used to draw a parallel between Lenin and Gandhi and sought allies in Soviet Russia. The movement soon drew the support of local police. In some places in Dacca, Mymensingh and elsewhere the police are said to have shouted "Gandhi ki jai" or "victory to Gandhi." In many places the chaukidars distributed charkhas among villagers and helped assemble them for khilafat meetings. In the six months following January 1921, the masses in the mofussil of
Chittagong became "actively disloyal", in the language of the District Magistrate. He apprehended further deterioration of the situation as the peasants were being instigated by the lawyers and other *bhadralok* leaders to loot government property and refuse to pay rent to the *zamindars* and tax to the government.81

Tippera was another hotbed of agitation, and by March 1921 it had become a "cause for the greatest anxiety" to the government, with five "determined attacks" on the police at Chauddagram in the district between 13 February and 9 March. On 24 February, a mob of about two hundred peasants attacked the police with *lathis* and sharp weapons at Chauddagram, which resulted in several deaths on the peasants' side. The villages of Nalkuri and Mohini were the most volatile areas in Chauddagram, where peasant volunteers were so well organized under local Muslim Congress and Khilafat leaders that the police encountered bitter resistance from them. In the neighbouring district of Noakhali, the police remained the chief object of attack by the peasants, who considered it the "right time" to take revenge against the oppressive, exacting policemen.82 The absence of *zamindar* as a dominant class in the Chittagong division might have exposed the police and *chaukidars* as the main targets of peasant attack.

June and October 1921 saw a comparative lull in the movement in the countryside. This was possibly due to the monsoon and the peasants' preoccupations in the fields harvesting *aus* rice and jute. By November the movement had been revitalized, especially in the Chittagong division after the Gurkha outrage on picketers near the Chittagong railway station in October 1921, which caused severe injuries to more than a hundred agitators.83

Soon Tippera and parts of Noakhali became volatile again. The police became the chief objects of attack, and no-tax and no-rent became pervasive throughout the sub-region. The *chaukidars* ceased to work for the government in many places in the Tippera district from November 1921.84 In the Tippera-Noakhali sub-region, it seems from the intensity of attacks of police and government officials and the extent of the no-tax, no-rent campaign, that the movement was aroused more by the secular slogan of attaining *swaraj* or peasant-labour *raj* than by the religious slogan of restoring the *khilafat*. It was partially due to the preponderance of pro-Congress Muslims in the region, including Ashraffuddin Chaudhuri, Asimuddin Ahmed, Abdul Malek, Yaqub Mia or Borro Mia. Some of them later established close contacts with the communists.

In the north-western districts of Rangpur, Dinajpur and parts of Rajshahi and Bogra, there was also a greater propensity towards organized boycott of the police and *jotedar* than waging a purely religious movement for the sake of the *khilafat*. Peasants in many
places in this sub-region refused to pay the chaukidari tax on the ground that the chaukidar were merely "servants of the police and not of the villagers" and that the collection and assessments of these taxes were unfair. Initially, the absence of zamindars as a dominant class was to the advantage of the jotedar leaders of the movement, who supported the cause of swaraj and khilafat. But after the rapid transformation of the movement into an anti-jotedar no-rent movement in parts of Rangpur and Dinajpur, the jotedar and independent tenure-holders of the sub-region turned against the movement. The anti-jotedar movement in the Rangpur and Dinajpur sub-region could not reach the stage of insurgency and open defiance of the jotedars by poor peasants, because quite a large number of them were either bargadars having no independence and strength to sustain rebellion, or were non-local peasants from the other side of the Brahmaputra, generally known as the shershabadiyas, who did not enjoy equal social status with the indigenous cultivators. Besides them, the subservient tribal peasants, mostly the Rajbansis, did not have any common cause with the movement for swaraj and the khilafat. The absence of a dominant group of middle peasants, and the dominance especially in western Rangpur and Dinajpur districts of the non-local Hindu bhadralok, who were more committed to waging a movement on nationalist lines than on class lines during the period, also strengthened the movement for swaraj and khilafat among the non-tribal Muslim peasants.

Among the Muslim peasants of Dinajpur and western Rangpur, the influence of the famous Ahl-i-Hadis or "Wahabbi" leaders, Maulana Abdullah al-Baki and his brother Maulana Abdullah al-Kafi, was tremendous. The former took the leading role in mobilizing them on national lines. Northern Rajshahi and north-western Bogra were also influenced by them. Their influence was more evident on the members of the Ahl-i-Hadis sect. Maulana Baki introduced drilling and physical training among the rural volunteers, who were the main cadres of the anti-government movement in the sub-region.

The movement was so intense in parts of Nilphamari subdivision of Rangpur district that the rebel peasants established "free villages" and a swaraj thana or independent police station in the locality. One Geyasuddin Ahmed, popularly known as the "Gandhi-Daroga" or the police chief of Gandhi, was the head of the "independent police-station" who used to assemble the volunteers by blowing a bugle. On 21 December 1921, the peasant volunteers attacked a contingent of armed policemen at the Nilphamari Bazaar. The skirmish caused several casualties on the rebels' side. Later the District Magistrate went there with a large number of troops and succeeded in suppressing the rebellion. The peasants soon succumbed to the pressure and cleared their dues, including the chaukidari tax, to the government.
February 1922 the government took further action against the rebel peasants. The Sub-Divisional Officer of Kurigram demolished the "Swaraj-Market" at Barua's Hat, near Ulipur, established by peasants as a mark of protest with a view to boycotting the original market at Ulipur, owned by a zamindar. The peasants, however, attacked the Sub-Divisional Officer and the armed policemen with lathis and dao. The police retaliated by opening fire on the mob, causing three injuries. Consequently the whole sub-region became volatile, the masses no longer being under the Congress Committees. In many places the Congress volunteers helped the police restore order in accordance with the Congress programme of maintaining non-violence. Even after the movement had been formally called off in February, at Phulchhari in Rangpur district a mob attacked a Circle Officer of the government who went there to recover the arrears in chaukidari tax from the peasants in April. Here the police had to open fire on the mob, which resulted in one death.88

Besides Rangpur and Dinajpur, in every northern district, especially where the zamindar were not preponderant, village governments or "free villages" were established under the aegis of the local Anjuman-i-Islamias. The peasants had their own courts or salish in every village in the north. These salish courts settled local disputes, which led to a substantial fall in the number of litigations in the sub-region.89

By late 1921 the movement had reached its climax in the northern districts. After the establishment of "free villages" and a network of khilafat and swaraj committees in the rural areas, the peasants took a keen interest in picketing liquor and ganja (marijuana) shops in the village markets and hat. They also demanded the boycott of British goods which often led to disputes between themselves and the shopkeepers. Police intervention was quite common. Several violent incidents took place in the bazaar of Sirajganj town, in Pabna district, which led to the looting and wrecking of the liquor, ganja and opium shops of the town in early 1922. In early January at the Chandaikona hat in Sirajganj sub-division the police attacked the Khilafat volunteers while they were picketing against European goods and intoxicants. The peasants who were present in the hat, attacked the police party and snatched away their rifles. This annoyed the District Magistrate, who accompanied a platoon of armed policemen to the Salanga hat, on the border of Pabna, Bogra and Rajshahi districts, on 27 January 1922. The District Magistrate also wanted to demoralize the agitators by demonstrating the might of the Raj, which they had thought non-existent by that time. The police arrested several volunteers, including one Abdur Rashid, son of a local pir sahib. When Abdur Rashid, who later became famous as Maulana Tarkabagish, was
asked his name by the British Superintendent of Police, he replied "volunteer" and this infuriated the superintendent so much that he struck him with a bayonet. This angered the mob. They struck the superintendent and his deputy, inflicting severe injuries. This led to police firing on the mob, killing eight men and several cattle. Peasants from the neighbouring villages rushed to the hat with lathis, spears and swords and surrounded the police party, who ran out of ammunition. Abdur Rashid and some other volunteers restrained the mob from attacking the Magistrate and the policemen with great difficulty. The villagers asked Abdur Rashid to inform Gandhi "maharaj" to send his troops against the British police, and were quite frustrated to learn that Gandhi had no troops. Then they jeered Gandhi and the volunteers for waging a movement against British when they had no armed forces of their own.90

The Salanga hat incident reveals not only the peasants' dislike for the government exactions and their scepticism about non-violence as a means to attain self rule, but also that they nourished some romantic notions about Gandhi's power, believing that they were no longer under British rule but under the swaraj promised by Gandhi and other leaders. Another incident illustrates the level of their hatred for the police - one peasant, who had been fatally wounded, refused to take water from the hands of a policeman before breathing his last.91

The mass boycott by the peasants of the government survey and settlement operations in Bogra and Pabna districts during the height of the movement in 1921 showed what could be done by mobilizing the poor and middle peasants in the name of independence and economic self-sufficiency, which to them were synonymous. According to the Pabna-Bogra Settlement Report: "The coming of the Settlement united people in an immediate and understandable grievance against Government and opposition to the Settlement became the test of Swaraj."92

Their opposition to the Settlement operations, which originated at Mokamtala, a village in Sibganj police station of Bogra district, only six miles from the so-called "Wahhabi belt" in Rangpur, suggests that genuinely anti-British "Wahhabi" maulvis were behind this agitation. They had been preaching since the inception of the Khilafat-NCO movement that the abdication of the British was impending or had already been accomplished, hence co-operation with the agents of the Raj was unnecessary and immoral. The mandals or village headmen, whom the Settlement Report dubbed "tyrants in the old Greek sense, despots in their little empires," were also behind the movement. As jotedars and well-to-do peasants, they apprehended that the records of rights prepared by the Settlement Operations would favour their tenants, who in many cases had been paying rent based on faulty
measurements of their holdings due to the machinations of the jotedars. So the agents of the jotedar among the Khilafat volunteers spread rumours in the hat and other public places that those who assisted the Settlement officials, by selling foodstuffs to them or in any other manner, would be boycotted after the attainment of swaraj, and that they would be even "excluded from swaraj". The peasants were also told by the jotedars and the panchjan — literally "five men" or the village headmen — that the motive of the Settlement Operations was to impose new taxes on the peasants en masse.93

Consequently the peasants violently attacked the Settlement officials and compelled the petty clerks and amins (or surveyors) to desert the fields. Even the presence of armed police could not cow the peasants. They had well organized methods of communicating with neighbouring villages, who could be assembled in the wide fields by beat of drums or by "far carrying cries". Soon the movement engulfed villages in Sibganj, Kahaloo, Bogra, Buriganj and Khetlal areas of Bogra district.94

It is quite significant that the poor peasants, who took an active role in the anti-Settlement campaign, had been "reasonable", even at the worst of the agitation, when their headmen were absent. If they were pressed for an opinion they would refer to the panchja for the answer. The influence of the panchjan was so strong that at Khetlal, after the president of the panchayat had asked the peasants to cooperate with the Settlement, in the presence of government officials, the opposition soon fizzled out. Their headmen's decision not to join the movement as their rivals in the neighbouring villages had joined it, kept the peasants indifferent to the agitation.95 After the withdrawal of the NCO in February 1922, the anti-government movement subsided in the sub-region. The government officials and loyal leaders convinced the masses of the benefit of a map or record of rights, which, they emphasized, would continue even after the attainment of swaraj.96

Though it appears from the above examples that the poor and middle peasants' participation in an anti-government movement greatly depended on the attitude towards the movement of their immediate landlords or patrons (jotedars and village headmen respectively), in most cases, once the peasants were aroused and involved in a movement mostly by the ulama and khilafat volunteers, students and the bhadralok, it was quite difficult to dissuade them. It has been mentioned earlier that the peasants were quite sincere about the cause of the movement, as due to their simplicity they genuinely believed that the attainment of swaraj would lead to the attainment of "their" swaraj and that the struggle for the protection of khilafat was obligatory from the religious point of view. Most Muslim peasants believed that they were fighting a jihad or holy war against "infidels" and
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donated large amounts to the *baitul mal* or treasuries especially there established by the *ulama* in the village throughout East Bengal. Their enthusiasm for the cause was partially reflected in the successful observance of *hartal* and boycotts of British goods. On 27 December 1921, when a general strike was being observed protesting against the visit of the Prince of Wales to India, the *mofussil* areas observed more successful *hartals* than Calcutta, where the Prince was warmly received by a large crowd at the Maidan. As already mentioned above, peasants in most places were more militant than the leaders and the volunteers. While on the surface politics meant talks about round table conferences civil disobedience and revision of the Treaty of Severs, underneath the surface there was a "strong undercurrent of disorderly elements, mainly Muhammadan", which was carrying the masses towards violence.

The refractory attitude of the peasantry which resulted in the withholding of taxes and rents, and literally the waging of war on the police and government officials, in almost every district of the region, not only perturbed the *zamindar*, who felt themselves ousted from their long established position as the "natural leaders" of the *ryots*, but at the same time alarmed the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee. It advised the District Committees to restrain the masses from becoming violent and launching a civil-disobedience movement without Congress approval. But, to their dismay, the Congress leaders found the Muslim masses under the full control of the *mullas* and young *khilafat* volunteers everywhere in the region.

While evaluating the role of the peasantry in the movement in different sub-regions of East Bengal, one hardly comes across any glaring differences or variations in the nature of peasant behaviour which can be typified as characteristic of a certain sub-region, due to its different agrarian structure or agrarian relations. In this regard, one cannot possibly agree with Rajat Ray's postulation that NCO succeeded most where the "tyranny of an upper caste landed gentry was relatively weak". The peasant insurgencies in the *zamindar*-dominated areas of Rajshahi, Bogra, Pabna, Dacca, Mymensingh, Faridpur, Bakarganj and other districts of the region contradict his assertion.

One can cite a few examples of peasant unrest in a typical *zamindar*-dominated district, Mymensingh. In many powerful *zamindar* estates of the district, in Muktagachha, Susang-Durgapur, Santosh, Dhanbari, Karotia, Nalin and Hemnagar, the government virtually ceased to exist by early 1922. In many villages in the district, the *chaukidars*, police and collaborators of the police were ostracized by the peasants. Some *chaukidars* were not even allowed to use the village wells for drinking water. There are instances of peasants' demanding
double the normal price for food to policemen. In many cases, they refused to sell anything to a government servant. In parts of Tangail subdivision, the police and chaukidar had to procure food from outside the rural areas. In some villages of Sherpur, in northern Jamalpur, the anti-zamindar sentiment of the peasants was so strong that, under local Khilafat Committee leaders they not only stopped paying rent to the local Hindu zamindar, but in the village of Ghagralaskar they also attacked the office of the zamindar, defying the police in March 1922.102

One interesting aspect of the movement in Mymensingh was the chaukidars' joining the movement at Karotia, where peasants became violently anti-government for arresting the local Muslim zamindar, Wajed Ali Khan Panni (Chand Mia), for support for the movement.103 This incident also suggests that where the zamindar were with the movement, the peasants were in general anti-government.

In short, the peasants throughout Mymensingh, Pabna and other zamindar-dominated districts were quite active in resisting the police, chaukidars and tax-collectors. In some villages of Islampur, Mymensingh, one government tax-collector was driven out of the villages by the peasants under the leadership of the local village headmen, who told them that since they had become "independent", they were no longer under the jurisdiction of the British empire. At Pingna, at the Sarishabari thana, the munsif or magistrate was ridiculed and threatened by the peasants for illuminating the court building on 24 December 1921, in honour of the visit of the Prince of Wales to Bengal.104 Defiance of the zamindars, who did not openly support the movement, was quite common among the peasants. In many places they refused to pay rents on the pretext that the zamindar did not stop paying revenue to the British government.105 In Mymensingh some peasants explained to the government informers that they had been assured by their leaders that by subscribing to the swaraj-fund they would be exempted from paying any taxes in the future. The bold ones asserted that since they lived in the land of God, they were "not to pay anything to anybody in the world". Their leaders, however, were "less keen" on no-rent, but they had hardly any "real control" over the masses.106 In northern Mymensingh, many Hajong (tribals) and Muslim tenants of the Susang-Durgapur zamindars enlisted themselves as swaraj-khilafat volunteers and continued their anti-zamindar, anti-government movement long after the withdrawal of NCO in 1922.107

The Khilafat-NCO movement gradually fizzled out in the region. It was not only because Gandhi had called it off in February 1922 after mob violence in a village in north India, but was also due to the inherent weaknesses and contradictions of the movement. After the
movement reached its climax in December 1921, the peasantry was getting more and more impatient to get their fruits of swaraj, which was said to have been achieved or imminent. The corruption of leaders and khilafat volunteers also disillusioned the masses. Government propaganda and the growth of communal solidarity and separatism among the Muslims proved disastrous for the movement.

Though the defiance of the government and its laws continued unabated throughout rural East Bengal even after the formal withdrawal of the movement in 1922, in many places the collection of the Union rates and chaukidars taxes were returning to normal. Peasants in the "volatile" districts like Tippera and Noakhali, including those of the "troublesome" Chaudagram thana of Tippera, were "coming to their senses", taxes were being paid by April 1922. Though some resistance to the government continued in almost every district—chaukidars were being beaten up, government property being looted and destroyed by peasants - the anti-government as well as anti-zamindar aspects of the movement subsided by early 1922.

In many places, in spite of the general notion among the peasants that in the event of attaining swaraj they would not need to pay any taxes to the government, by the first half of 1922 they had been convinced that withholding zamindars' rent would not do any good to their movement. They continued, however, to oppose the collection of illegal cesses by the zamindars. This indicates that the bulk of the peasants did not question the legitimacy of the zamindari system, despite the defects inherent in the system.

The peasants might have been disillusioned with swaraj after experiencing the nature of "justice" dispensed by the swaraj courts in the countryside. The jotedars not only exploited the peasants by fixing higher rates of rental through these courts, as has been pointed out earlier but also "regularly pocketed" the money collected as fines through these courts. At Kodali, a village in Kishoreganj, Mymensingh, for example cases were decided by the Koran and a kind of "divining rod method", which amounted to tossing up in the name of dispensing justice. In some cases petty offenders were heavily fined, while offences like robbery and grievous injury were dismissed with a fine of a few rupees. If the above allegations are even partially true, they were more than enough to disenchant the masses with the leaders of the movement in the countryside.

Though we may agree with Rajat Ray that "the mass character of the movement, at least in its origin, was not the result of a ground-swell from below, but of the reaching-down of organization from above", it is difficult to agree with him that jotedars were the vanguards of the movement. Without disputing his argument that jotedar in the northern districts and elsewhere carefully avoided stirring up the
sharecroppers and under-ryots, apprehending movements against themselves,\textsuperscript{111} it is preposterous to suggest that \textit{jotedars} were the sole determinants of the movement. The evidence clearly suggests that the overall socio-economic, political, national and international factors were also responsible for the movement.

The understanding of the problem, whether or not the lower peasants took an active role in the movement in the region, and if so, whether their socio-economic problems or their religious and nationalist sentiments were responsible for their participation in the movement, is exceedingly difficult. Contemporary observers as well as modern historians give contradictory versions of the story, possibly from their subjectivities and motivations. There might be some truth in the government assertion that the leaders of the movement were mainly responsible for arousing mass expectations by making promises of the "wildest character" — rent free lands, cheap food and clothes and even free railway passes.\textsuperscript{112} J.B. Kripalani, a prominent Congress leader who participated in the movement, on the other hand felt that the agrarian nature of the movement overshadowed nationalism: "Because of the constant harping of the Kisan-zamindar problem British imperialism had receded to the background."\textsuperscript{113} The truth is probably in between the above two extreme assertions.

The extravagant promises of the nationalist leaders might have raised the hope level of the masses, but so far as the peasantry in East Bengal was concerned, it was not solely galvanized by nationalist propaganda. And so far as the question of pushing imperialism into the background was concerned, it can be emphasized that, at least in East Bengal, the Congress or other political groups involved in the Khilafat-NCO movement, had hardly any anti-zamindar propensity or preference for an anti-zamindar campaign to nationalism, during the period under review. Even the Bardoli Resolutions of the All-India Congress Committee of 11 and 12 February, 1922, taken in the wake of Gandhi's formally calling off the movement, do not suggest that the Congress wanted to hit the zamindari interests. Instead the Congress held that circumscribing the "legal rights" of landlords was "contrary to the resolutions of the Congress" and "injurious to the best interests of the country".\textsuperscript{114}

In the light of the above discussion it is evident that while the lower peasants in the region, like their counterparts on the Malabar coasts or at Chauri Chaura, might have been initiated to the doctrine of civil-disobedience by the leaders from above, they soon followed a totally different path, one which led to mob violence against all agents of exploitation and withholding of all payments to landlords and moneylenders. By November 1921, when the movement had reached the remotest village and aroused the poorest peasant, peasants who did
not have any obligations to the government so far as the payment of any taxes was concerned, interpreted the NCO to their own advantage by withholding the payment of rents and interests to their landlords and moneylenders. Broomfield has probably the most acceptable version of the story:

The peasants needed little urging, for economically they had a bad year and politically a very active one. Indeed, they had their own ideas as to where the line should be drawn in the payment of revenue. To the dismay of the politicians, many peasants were soon refusing all rent, whether to the Government or to individual landlords.\(^{115}\)

That the nationalist press in Bengal warned Gandhi of the “danger” of “playing with the masses” has already been mentioned. The nationalist leaders, especially those representing the Hindu bhadralok - C.R. Das and his lieutenant J.M. Sengupta for example - were also perturbed by the way the movement had been drifting towards class antagonism by late 1921. The former desperately felt the necessity of organizing the masses to divert them from the communists. Their fear was precipitated by the communist leaflets distributed among the delegates and members of the Congress at the Ahmedabad session of the party in December 1921. These leaflets, signed by M.N. Roy and Aboni Mukherjee, urged the Congress members to identify with the demands of the trade unions and Kisan Sabhas for the establishment of a labour-peasant raj by shunning co-operation with the indigenous and foreign capitalists.\(^{116}\) This was an ominous development for Das, Motilal Nehru and other conservative leaders of the party. Their fear of losing ground in the peasant front to the communists is reflected in Motilal Nehru’s interest in organizing Kisan Sabhas in the U.P. and Das’s appeals to the Congress workers to organize the peasants and workers, to take the wind out of the communists’ sails. At the Gaya session of the All-India Congress in December 1922 Das emphasized that the cause of the NCO would not suffer if the Congress exploited the workers and peasants. He held that: “If the Congress fails to do its duty, you may expect to find organizations set up in the country by labourers and peasants detached from you, dissociated from the cause of Swaraj, which will inevitably bring within the arena of the peaceful revolution class struggles and the war of special interests”. He also urged the Congress members to make use of the “selfishness”, of the workers and peasants for the cause of attaining swaraj.\(^{117}\) His persistent endeavour to come into contact with the peasant masses in the region through the Palli Sanskar Samity or Rural Reconstruction Society and his emphasis on attaining “swaraj for the masses, not for the classes”,\(^{118}\) reflected the Hindu bhadralok desire of mobilizing the
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peasants on purely nationalist lines while simultaneously protecting their own class interests. J.M. Sengupta of Chittagong was also appalled by the growth of "race hatred and violence" among the masses after the withdrawal of the NCO. In April 1922 he apprehended that the mass movement would bring about the downfall of the merchants, traders and zamindars of Bengal. So it is not fair to hold that the Khilafat-NCO movement was the sole motivating force in arousing mass discontent in the region, nor is it true that the leaders from urban centres were the main organizers of the peasantry. The peasant's own understanding and interpretation of "swaraj" and "khilafat" geared the movement forward. The ulama and their local agents among the rural ashraf or mullas associated with mosques and madrassas were the main organizers of the peasants. The issues of "protecting their religion" and attaining swaraj had special meaning to the peasants. They could not differentiate the exacting government officials from the more exacting agents of zamindars and mahajans, whom they confronted more often than the government officials. The white sahibs, in most cases, remained an unknown quality to the bulk of the peasantry. From the days of the Swadeshi movement in the first decade of the twentieth-century to the inception of the Khilafat-NCO movement, the peasants had been told by their leaders that the Hindu bhadralok in general and the zamindars, mahajans and other Hindu exploiting classes in particular, rather than the British, were the main enemies and exploiters of the masses. The short-lived honeymoon between Hindus and Muslims of the sub-continent, which did not outlast the movement, was followed by bitter communal antagonism between the two communities throughout the region.

The sudden withdrawal of the movement by Gandhi not only disillusioned a section of the bhadralok nationalists, who did not have conflicting interests with the peasants, but also aroused suspicion and anger among the ulama, rural ashraf, jotedars and the lower peasantry who were led to believe that the Hindu nationalists, including Gandhi, were not sincere in their commitments to swaraj and khilafat. The withdrawal might have relieved the Hindu bhadralok politicians, as "Gandhi had leapt off the tiger first" but it also damaged the understanding between the Hindu and Muslim leaders and masses, which according to Gandhi "would not arise in a hundred years." The already estranged ashraf and jotedar leaders, with their pro-government attitude, emerged as influential proja or peasant leaders in the wake of the movement. The bulk of the ulama and rural ashraf was with them. The withdrawal of civil disobedience against the government precipitated their rise, because firstly, the discontinuation of the movement, when the slump in the jute market was continuing unabated, could be easily taken advantage of by the anti-Hindu, pro-
government leaders; and secondly, the revival of Islamic solidarity and
the re-appearance of the ulama to the political scene after a lapse of
about half a century, brought about communal solidarity among the
peasants. The government's encouragement of and acquiescence in
peasant organization on class-cum-communal lines quickened
communalization of the class struggle in rural as well as urban East
Bengal in the subsequent period. A relatively better harvest in 1922
made the peasants "peaceful and law abiding", at least for the time
being, but this did not solve the long standing communal-cum-class
antagonism between the predominantly Hindu zamindars, mahajans,
bhadralok and the Muslim peasants of the region. Under the ashraf-
ulama-jotedar triumvirate.

Soon it dawned upon many Bengali Muslims that they did not
have any home in the Middle-east especially after the dismemberment
of the institution of Khilafat by Mustafa Kamal, the new leader of
Turkey. A section of them joined hands with Hindu nationalists, while
others swelled the ranks of the anti-Hindu communalists. During the
last days of the movement in February 1922 a section of the Bengali
Muslim press already started championing the Muslim cause putting
Hindu-Muslim unity, the main theme of the Khilafat-NCO campaign,
at great stress. The Islam Darshan reiterated the communal theme:
"Every Muslim should bear in mind that for us, Islam comes first and
after that country; religion takes precedence over motherland. We are,
first of all Muslims and only after that we are Indian."123

Notes

1. HPF, No. 195/1921 (1-11); Tarit Bhushan Roy, MLC, held that the real
depth of the Non-Co-operation were economic. See his letter to the
Editor, ABP, 23 Dec. 1921.


3. C. F. Andrews Papers, Andrews to Rabindranath Tagore, 28 Oct. 1920,

4. R. I. Crane, "The Indian National Congress and the Indian Agrarian


7. Pabna-Bogra SSR, pp. 73-4.

8. HFR, File Nos. 18/118, 18/4/18, first halves of January and April, 1918.

259.

10. HFR, 2nd half of May, 1919; R. Williams, India in 1920, p. 136.

11. HFR, 1st halves, Jan. and Sept. 1918; April 1919; May 1920; April 1921;
2nd halves, April; Aug.; Oct. 1918; Aug. 1919; ABP, 1918-21, passim.

15. *India in 1920*, pp. 77-81, 94-5, 153; *India in 1922-23*, pp. 123, 150-3.
18. Hilsa fish is a delicacy in Bengal, see *Pabna-Bogra SSR*, p. 35; *India in 1920*, p. 134.
21. HFR, 2nd half, April, 1919.
22. HPF, 39/1921, SL, no. 104.
23. *India in 1922-23*, p. 256.
27. Ibid., 14-15 March, 1920.
28. Ibid., 17 March 1921.
32. Interview, Maulana Tarkabagish.
33. HPF, 395/1924 (1-3).
35. HPF, 195/1921.
36. HPF, 395/1924
37. HPF, 195/1921.
38. The Sultan, 22 June, 1923.
41. HPF, 395/1924.
42. Ibid.
44. *India in 1920*, Appendix III, p. 248.
45. HPF, 395/1924.
46. GI, Home Pol. Deposit 847/1922; HFR, 2nd half, Dec 1920; Zetland Papers, Ronaldshay to George V, 1 June, 1921.
49. India in 1922-23, p. 256.
53. RAB, 1922-23, p. 12.
54. HPF, 395/1924.
55. Ibid; HFR, 2nd half, April, 1922.
56. HPF, 395/1924.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid; ABP, 2 Feb. 1921.
59. ABP, 5 Feb 1921; Interview, Maulana Tarkabagish.
60. ABP, 17 Feb. & 2 March 1921.
61. HPF, 395/1924
65. India in 1922-23, pp. 150-1.
67. HFR, 2nd half, April, 1922.
68. P. Chanda, Ganokabiylal Ramesh Sheel O Tnr Gan, pp. 13-14; Interview, Hemango Biswas.
70. HPF, 395/1924.
71. Ibid., Zetland Papers, Ronaldshay to Montagu, 23 June, 1920
74. HPF, 278/1923; HPF, 209/1921.
75. HPF, 395/1924.
79. HPF, 39/1921, Sl. No. 81.
80. HPF, 395/1924.
81. HPF, 39/1921, Sl. No. 81.
82. HPF, 395/1924; ABP, 11, 26 and 28 March, 1922.
83. HFR, 1st and 2nd halves, Nov., 1921; HPF, 395/1924; IAR, 1922-23, p. 793.
84. HPF, 395/1924.
85. Ibid.
86. HPF, 678/1922; Ibid., 395/1924.
87. Ibid.
88. Ibid; ABP, 1 March, 1922.
89. Interview, Maulana Tarkabagish.
91. Interview, Maulana Tarkabagish.
92. Pabna-Bogra SSR, p. 93.
93. Ibid., pp. 93-4.
94. Ibid., p. 94; HFR, 1st half, Nov., 1921.
95. Pabna-Bogra SSR, pp. 93-5.
96. Ibid., pp. 94-5.
98. Ibid., pp. 392-4; Zetland Papers, "My Bengal Diary", 25 Dec., 1921; HFR, 2nd half, Dec., 1921 and 1st half, Jan., 1922.
99. HFR, 1st half, Jan., 1922.
100. Ibid., 1st half, Jan., 1922 and 2nd half, Apr., 1922; "Congress Publicity Board Bulletin", ABP, 29 Jan., 1922.
102. HPF, 14/1922.
103. Ibid.; ABP, 11 and 16 March, 1922.
104. Ibid.
106. HFR, 1st and 2nd halves, January 1922.
107. P. Gupta, Je Sangramer Shesh Nei, pp. 34-5.
108. HFR, 1921-22, passim.
109. HPF, 395/1924.
111. Ibid., pp. 406-7.
120. Broomfield, Elite Conflict, p. 226.
121. India in 1922-23, pp. 253-4.
122. Ibid., p. 203.
123. Cited in C. Sarkar, "Bengali Muslim Politics, Society and Culture During the Khilafat-Non-Cooperation Movement".
4

The Communalization of Class Struggle, 1923-29

"Psychologically, it [communalism] is like a habit-forming drug which, so long as it is administered, is needed in ever-increasing doses."

— Wilfred Cantwell Smith

I

In understanding the development of "communal" antagonism in rural East Bengal during 1923-29 one must answer the following questions: Were "communal" disturbances in the region repercussions of communal riots in Calcutta and elsewhere in the 1920s? Is there any foundation to the theory that the upper-class Hindu refusal to concede 55 per cent of the jobs to the Muslims was the main reason for "communal" disturbances in rural East Bengal? The intricacies of the problem suggest that there are elements of truth in the above suggestions. It is partially true that all communal conflicts in rural areas of the region originated in the agrarian sector and were inter-class by nature. In this regard Cantwell Smith's analysis is helpful. He holds that although the "Wahhabi" movement did not estrange the lower-class Muslims and lower-class Hindus, by using a religious ideology as a symbol of class struggle, typical of "pre-industrial" societies, it encouraged communal behaviour and made a considerable section of Muslims "more susceptible to later communalist propaganda than they might otherwise have been".1

Like the so-called Wahhabi movement of the nineteenth century, the Khilafat movement had also tremendous impact on the Muslim masses of the region. The formal appearance of the ulama in the arena of politics injected a new dose of religious fervour into the body politic of the Muslim society.

The withdrawal of the movement reduced the importance of nationalism, while Pan-Islamism and Muslim solidarity vis-a-vis the Hindus emerged as more important political issues among the Muslims, irrespective of class and profession. This, however, does not mean that the peasants totally lost interest in anti-British movements. Till before the formal and almost complete polarization of the masses on communal lines by 1926, peasants in many districts regarded the government as the sole exploiter. In parts of Mymensingh, Dacca, Bogra, Tippera and Chittagong, Muslim peasants continued to boycott
Figure 4.1
Jute Price in Bengal, 1922-28

(Source: ABP, 1922-28)
British goods and government officials in early 1923. In some Noakhali villages the anti-British movement was so strong that even Maulana Abu Bakr Siddique, the pir of Furfura, who had previously opposed the boycott of British goods in 1921, chose to speak in favour of the NCO and boycott of British goods in early 1923 in these villages. The post-Khilafat anti-British agitation in the countryside was mostly led by the ulama. Under the influence of the ulama and other Pan-Islamic leaders of the Anjuman-i-Islamias (Islamic Associations), Muslim peasants in many places believed that the promised swaraj was coming soon and their economic salvation lay with the preservation of their faith, the khilafat and the interests of the Muslim world outside India. In many cases peasants continued to give subscriptions to fictitious khilafat funds raised by local khilafat committees, and even by Muslim landlords, in the mid-1920s. Consequently "lower class Islam" became "purer but more communalist".

The ulama and bhadralok Muslims belonging to the Congress ushered in a period of fresh peasant insurgency in the region, when peasants in some places showed total disregard for law and the established hierarchies in the society. Middle and poor peasants in some places started flouting dominant jotedars, zamindars and mahajans as well. To cite a Government Report: "It was not to be expected that the incessant abuse of constitutional authority which accompanied the preparations for civil disobedience would pass without manifestations of violence." After the anti-exploitation campaign of Muslim peasants against Hindu zamindars, mahajans and bhadralok had turned communal, the government quite justifiably observed that a few "idealists", who had signed the Lucknow Pact, could not conceal the breach between the two communities. The government held that the Khilafat agitation had fostered "aggressive sectarian passions" among the Muslims and "upon the abolition of the Khilafat, this exasperated communal self-consciousness remained; unable now to vent itself upon government, it turned upon the rival community". The government also realized that since the tenantry was mostly Muslim and the landlords Hindu, this factor could always be used to give a communal aspect to the conflict between them. But this analysis is incomplete. Besides the "aggressive sectarian passions" aroused by the Khilafat movement, there were other internal and external factors which communalized the class struggle in the countryside of the region. The sudden fluctuations in the price of jute and the overall politics of the metropolis, participated by the government and Hindu-Muslim elites, which had close linke with the mofussil, were equally important in changing peasant behaviour during the period.
Figure 4.1 shows that 1923 and 1924 were bad years for the peasants so far as the price of jute was concerned. In 1925 and 1926 there was almost a 100 per cent rise in the price of jute. 1927 and 1928 again brought misery to the jute growers. The slump in prices and the short-lived prosperity brought about by the sudden rise in jute price during 1925-26, for the last time till after the end of the Depression in the late 1930s, had a tremendous impact on the agrarian economy and agrarian politics of the region.

Though at the beginning of the twentieth century peasants regarded jute as a wonderful crop as they could afford all the luxuries of rural life, during the First World War the jute price abruptly went down to five rupees per bale. After a considerable recovery it again fell in 1923. The unpredictability of the jute price created great uncertainty in the rural economy. The sudden slump in the jute price plunged the lower peasantry into debt. Consequently by 1925 many rural bards and writers, coming from lower peasant families, had started ridiculing peasants for jute cultivation. They also blamed the non-Bengali and Bengali Hindu merchants for the wretched condition of the jute growers. Their writings provide examples of bitter communal feeling among a section of the peasantry.

One such poet, Abed Ali Mia of Rangpur, discouraged jute cultivation because of its adverse effect on health and sanitation. He was critical of those cultivators growing jute without realizing that the Marwari traders, who gave a nominal price to the cultivators, were amassing wealth. He also held that the exploiting non-Bengali merchants were becoming fatter by gluttonising with milk and butter at the expense of the poor peasants. He asked them to restrict jute acreage to get a better price in the future. Another rustic poet from Mymensingh was equally vocal about the non-Bengali exploitation of peasants:

पाँच आसिका मथन देशेत गौंध लिम्ह, ।
पश्चिमा ऴर भान देखन करिन।....
वथन तारे छात देख पाल्ला निन, ।
बाघनङ्गिरे गरे देख किन्कु ना बरिन। ।
ना पाहित खाइव यान घुसौर मूर, ।
वनामारे अत गाए, भूषे देख अर। ।
ना मिनेन बाघनङ्गिरे केलुने गाए, ।
बुके हेत पान देख बाघनङ्गिरे जात। ।
देशेत पश्चिमा अपाग हस अह। ।
आर केह देखे गेने जागा हबे नाई।
When jute came to this land the Poshchima (north-west Indians) also came and occupied the country .... Now they are the moneyed people. They do not pay any regard to the Bengalis. These alien people, who once could not get chhattu (ground grains), Look! are now eating Balam rice. The Bengalis on the other hand are not getting Rangoon rice or coarse rice of Burma. The Bengalis have become mute. The Poshchimas are only getting shelter in Bengal, nowhere else will they have a place.12

Some of these folk-writers presented the Hindu and Marwari merchants as mainly responsible for the slump and fluctuations in jute price. "In one year the Marwari millionaires give a good price for jute only to exploit you in the next three years", held one of them.13 Some of the folk writings, including popular songs and poems, were full of venom. These not only identified the usurious mahajans and the exacting zamindars as "great burdens" for the peasantry14, but also openly asked Muslim peasants to boycott Hindu shopkeepers, zamindars and mahajans. Abdul Aziz of Noakhali, for example, urged rural Muslims: "Remember further, always buy from a Musalm. When you buy from the shop of a bijati [one belonging to another relgion], he would spend that money to worship his Shiva and Kali and Durga. For a saving of two or four pice, do not disregard Islam."15 Yet another Muslim bard vilifies the Hindu zamindars and their agents:

I think... of the great zamindar, who does not recite the name of Allah even once in a month. The raja, the zamindar and all their amla [servants], suck the proja like jackals and dogs.16

This folk literature, reflects the general feelings of the Muslim masses towards their Hindu neighbours: shopkeepers, moneylenders and zamindars. It also indicates that the phenomenon called "communalism" was not solely a creation of the so-called organized politics from above. Communal riots in Calcutta or elsewhere in the sub-continent might have added fuel to the flame of communal hatred in the countryside, but were certainly not the main factor behind communal disturbances there. After the Calcutta riots of 1926 and their repercussions in Pabna, which flared up in communal riots, which will be discussed later, some Muslim rural bards narrated the stories of Calcutta riots in their poems. Often concocted versions of the truth, these probably aroused anti-Hindu communal passion among rural Muslims. In these poems, the government was quite often portrayed as an impartial protector of the Muslims.17

Without contending the views of Maulana Mohamed Ali that the Bengali Muslims had been "made to fight the battle of their rulers, against their neighbours"18, it can be held that by the mid-1920s communalism had penetrated quite deeply into the rural society.
Though sounds paradoxical to correlate peasant unrest with the apparent "economic prosperity" of peasants in 1925-26, when the jute price was very high, there was a substantial increase in the number of disturbances in the agrarian sector. It should be pointed out that after the expansion of jute acreage by about 13 per cent in 1914-15 as a consequence of the high prices of 1911-13, there was a sudden slump in the prices after the loss of the German and Austro-Hungarian markets due to the War. In spite of the recovery in the prices of jute in 1915-16, the real price of jute during the War was more than 32 per cent lower than the pre-War average. Meanwhile, there had been a substantial increase in the moneylending business. By the 1920s, with the rise in population pressure in the region, there was a sharp rise in the sharecropping system, which indicates that the average peasant families had become more pauperized than in the pre-War period. Omkar Goswami has shown how the increase in peasant indebtedness and decline in the occupancy holdings were accompanied by signs of resentment against the mahajans among peasants. It seems plausible that in bad years, when the jute price was very low, peasants were easily aroused against their moneylenders and local jute merchants (often the same group of people), whom they held responsible for the slump in prices. While in 1925-26, when the jute price was exceptionally high, the erstwhile occupancy tenants who by then had been partially or fully converted into sharecroppers, did not want to part with half or more of the crop as the share of the jotedars, who in many cases had acquired their land when they failed to repay their debts.

Of all the "external factors" responsible for the growth of peasant solidarity (which later could not always be differentiated from communal solidarity in the region), government initiatives were the most important. Though the government did not want to create an atmosphere of perpetual class wars and violence in the countryside or anywhere in the sub-continent, as mentioned earlier, government attempts to increase the representation of the Muslims, Namasudras and peasants in the elected offices — from the Union Boards to the Legislative Assembly levels — in the wake of the War, aroused an unprecedented sense of self-importance as political beings among the enfranchised section of the peasantry. During 1922-23 the government of Bengal re-emphasized the importance of the Union Boards and rural co-operative societies with a view to drawing the peasants into collaboration with the government and possibly also to curb the influence of C.R. Das and other "pro-Bolshevik" politicians on the peasants. The government was also showing a keen interest in rural development and the welfare of the bargadar, who was "little more than a serf on the land he once called his own." During the 1920s the government also took steps to assure security of tenure to occu-
pancy ryots, to regulate usury, establish malaria eradication bodies, local self-governing institutions and above all, to start the Survey and Settlement Operations to establish the records of rights on land by the different categories of landlords and tenants. These government steps played an important role in communalizing the bulk of the peasantry, as the zamindars, mahajans and Hindu bhadralok, being apprehensive of losing their vested interests and grip on the peasants, opposed these government measures as hindrances to the attainment of swaraj, while Namasudra and Muslim leaders in general welcomed these measures.

The Bengal Tenancy Act Amendment Bill, introduced in 1923, and the formation of the Royal Commission on Agriculture in 1926 became the targets of the bitterest attack by the Hindu bhadralok. The Hindu press often portrayed these measures as anti-nationalist. "The demand for Swaraj has become so acute and unavoidable that it is now necessary to divert the minds of the people from politics to something else," observed one Hindu newspaper. The Hindu zamindars and bhadralok classes in general found the essence of the "divide and rule" policy of the government in these measures. One Hindu newspaper thought that the Tenancy Bill was communal in nature, as it apprehended that "Muhammadan peasants will try to take advantage of this opportunity to place the zamindars in a tight corner." The Tenancy Bill of 1923, was not a purely government initiated move. Many ashraf and jotedar leaders of Bengal and a few Hindu leaders as well, had clamoured for tenancy legislation to ameliorate the condition of the peasants long before the introduction of the Bill. Soon several peasant and tenant associations were floated throughout the region along with the government sponsored Agricultural Associations and Proja Samities. Numerous protest meetings were held in different places under the aegis of zamindars, talukdars and jotedars against the Bill. The zamindars blamed the tatkudars, jotedars and other intermediaries for the exploitation of the peasantry, while the talukdars and jotedars were in a great dilemma. On the one hand, they held the zamindars responsible for the plight of the projas, a supposed undifferentiated monolith. On the other hand, they were not happy about certain provisions of the Bill, such as the proposed extension of occupancy rights to under-ryots and bargadars. They bitterly criticized the continuation of the right of pre-emption of zamindars, in the Bill. A pleader from Jamalpur, Mymensingh, with jotedari interests, equated the proposed granting of occupancy rights to the bargadars with the principles of Bolshevism. Until these provisions were dropped from the Bill by the government in May 1923, probably to pacify the talukdar-jotedar classes and a large number of middle peasants having under-ryots and bargadars as tenants, the upper
peasants continued to organize anti-Tenancy Bill meetings throughout the region.\textsuperscript{32} For their common class interests vis-a-vis under-ryots and bargadars, Hindu and Muslim talukdar-jotedar-mahajan jointly organized protest meetings condemning the Bill. In such a meeting some jotedars held that swaraj would be possible only "through the jotedars and ryots".\textsuperscript{33} After the impending threat of losing their vested interests had gone, the Muslim talukdars and jotedars, who had been opposed to the Bill along with their Hindu counterparts, reverted to their anti-Hindu, anti-zamindar policy. In short, the Bill helped in widening the gulf between Hindus and Muslims in general, and jotedars and zamindars in particular. With a few exceptions, Hindus opposed it and Muslims were in favour of it after May 1923. The jotedars demanded the abolition of zamindars' right to collect abwab and their right of pre-emption, while zamindars opposed the proposed grant of permanent rights of tenure to the temporary jotedars, having 33 acres of land, with retrospective effect.\textsuperscript{34}

Thus the Bill can be held responsible for accentuating communal feelings between Hindu zamindar-bhadralok and Muslim-Namasudra talukdar-jotedar classes. The urban ashraf, including the highly urbanized Muslim zamindars, and the lower peasantry supported the talukdar-jotedar classes despite their lack of common class interests with them. The former did so mainly out of communal and broader class interests and the latter, it seems, supported the talukdar-jotedar classes under the influence of communalism and strong patronage ties.

The ashraf made common cause with their rural counterparts including the ulama and big talukdars and jotedars. As the English-educated Muslim bourgeoisie and zamindars had bitter competitions with Hindu zamindars, mahajans and the bhadralok classes, they found it convenient to support the ulama, talukdars, jotedars and even the lower peasantry for long term advantages. Separate electorates must have been another factor in this regard. One can probably agree with Nazmul Karim that:

The upper strata of the Bengali Muslim community in its bid for securing the leadership of the Muslim peasants sometimes even supported and led movements for land reforms and such other legislative measures, which were as such against their class interest. The Muslim upper class could very well perceive that the advocacy for the protection of Muslim communal interest in the form of jobs, etc., would benefit them more than the protection of their narrow class interest.\textsuperscript{35}

The constant harping on the communal theme by the ulama-ashraf-jotedar triumvirate diverted the peasant movement. Partha Chatterjee is probably correct in his assertion that while Muslim
peasants in the region considered Muslim rent-receivers as part of the peasantry, the Hindus were not so regarded. Many Muslim zamindars, talukdars and jotedars who had connections with various proja or tenant associations and other political parties and groups, were also responsible for creating this myth by openly supporting tenant interests within and outside the Legislative Council.

The jotedar-zamindar conflict or the Muslim elite versus the Hindu elite conflict, occupied a major portion of the proceedings of the Bengal Legislative Council during the period. Out of the 39 Muslim Members of the Legislative Council (MLCs), 26 represented East Bengal constituencies and most belonged to jotedar and well-to-do peasant families. After May 1923 they almost unanimously supported the Tenancy Bill. The Hindu MLCs, mostly representing the zamindars, traders and the bhadralok classes, voted with one or two exceptions, against the Bill. As discussed above, the Bill accelerated the "gradual merger" of the ashraf with the jotedar and lower peasant classes belonging to the Muslim community, leading to the creation of a new Muslim middle class which ultimately led to the Muslim separatist movement for Pakistan in East Bengal. Muslim MLCs like Fazlul Huq, Abdul Jabbar Palwan of Mymensingh, Shah Abdur Rauf of Rangpur, Yakuinuddin Ahmed of Dinajpur and Kasimuddin Ahmed of Rangpur, all of whom had talukdar-jotedari interests, found it convenient to collaborate with Muslim zamindar and ashraf MLCs like Shah Syed Imdadul Haque of Mymensingh, Sir Abdur Rahim of Midnapore, Khan Bahadur Azizul Huque of Nadia and Ashraf Ali Khan Chaudhury of Natore (Rajshahi), as well as with men like Asimuddin Ahmed of Tippera and Syed Nausher Ali of Jessore, who represented the lower peasantry. Irrespective of class, Muslim leaders in general supported the Tenancy Bill. Due to Hindu aristocrat and bhadralok opposition to the Bill, the legislature could not settle the "conflicting class interests with justice and fairness to all" nor did it lay "the foundation of true nationalism in this Province", contrary to the expectations of Sir Provash Chandra Mitter, who introduced the Bill in the Council. Soon the controversy over the Tenancy Bill engulfed the entire province. The publicity of Hindu opposition to and Muslim support for the Bill quickened the polarization of the Hindu-Muslim population on communal lines.

II

The Hindu bhadralok in general did not appreciate the widening of the franchise and the promotion of the peasants' cause by the government, as they were rightly apprehensive that they would lose their dominance in the arenas of economics and politics as a result of
these measures. By the mid-1920s, they had already started losing their pre-eminence in the services and the dearth of job opportunities after the War made them bitter towards the government and its new allies, the Muslims. The high-caste Hindu bhadralok's control of the Local Boards throughout the region was declining fast in the post-Khilafat years, as reflected in Tables VI and VII, and this signalled the ascendancy of the hitherto subjugated Muslim majority in the elected offices. Even joint-electorates failed to keep Hindu supremacy in the local self-government institutions, which previously they had enjoyed quite disproportionately to their number. By 1926 Muslim public opinion became so hostile towards Hindus of all categories — those who had joined the Khilafat-NCO Movement or the "no-changers"; the Swarajists or the "pro-changers" and the protagonists of Hindu revivalism — that in the Council elections only two Swaraj Party Muslim candidates were successful as against 19 in the elections of 1923. By then the Swaraj Party had lost its credibility as a non-communal organization among Bengali Muslims.

Though all the above categories of Hindu politicians had conflicting class interests with the peasants in general, all excepting the active supporters of the Shuddhi and Sangathan movements, who believed in the forced conversion of the Indian Muslims into Hindus, abstained from openly attacking the Muslims on the ground of their faith. Some of them even tried to appease the urban as well rural Muslims with promises of a better deal after the attainment of independence from British rule. Chitta Ranjan Das, also known as the Deshabandhu (friend of the country) was the most prominent among the Hindu nationalists of Bengal who tried to come to an understanding with the Muslims. Some Muslim politicians of the region even believed that but for his "untimely" death in June 1925 the Hindu-Muslim conflict could have been resolved in Bengal.

A contemporary of Das, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, the famous Bengali writer, portrays Das and his Hindu-Muslim Pact also known as the Bengal Pact, quite differently:

Deshanbandhu smiled and asked me, 'Do you believe in the Hindu-Muslim unity? I said, 'no'. Deshabandhu said, 'But your love for the Muslims is well known.... Yet what alternative do we have? Just imagine what will happen in another ten years!' [emphasis mine] I said, 'This does not exactly express your love for the Muslims. I mean, the way your face pales at the thought of what will happen ten years from now, it does not seem your ideas are very far from mine. Anyway, numbers are not the only thing.'
McPherson’s assessment of the Hindu Politicians of the region including Das, is helpful in understanding the situation:

On purely national issues the Bengali Hindu was second to none, but within Bengal the Hindu urbanised middle classes and landowners were nervously aware of the economic hegemony they exerted over the Muslim masses. They feared to encourage Muslim political activity in case they themselves were threatened and they needed the constant prodding of Das to exhibit some measures of support for Muslim interests.46

Das’ Bengal Pact was an agreement between some leading Hindu and Muslim nationalists of Bengal signed in a meeting of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee on 16 December 1923 in Calcutta under his presidency. "In order to establish real foundation of Self-Government" in Bengal, the signatories of the Pact resolved to share power in the Local Boards in the proportion of 60 per cent to the majority community and 40 to the minority community in every district of Bengal. Regarding government posts, the Muslims were assured that 55 per cent of jobs would be reserved for them and until their quota was fulfilled they would continue to get 80 per cent of jobs. The Muslims were also guaranteed that no music would be played in front of mosques and no legislation in respect of cow-killing for food would be taken up in the Council. The most ambiguous language of the Pact was that it would be implemented "when the foundation of Self-Government is secured".47

This ambiguity and Hindu opposition to the Pact, especially the opposition of the "no changers" and the Hindu Mahasabha, instead of bridging the gap between the two communities, widened it and encouraged further manoeuvring by the communal forces. The pro-Congress Amrita Bazar Patrika criticized Das for signing the Pact. It held that, as only 47 Swarajist MLCs, including 30 Muslims, out of a total 114 members had signed the Pact, it did not represent the views of the Bengali community. The Patrika, asserting that Burra Bazar of Calcutta, an important base for the Hindu Congressites, would not "touch" any nominee of Das in the next elections, held that Burra Bazar would also expect cow-protection.48 Hindu bhadralok held meetings in protest against the Pact at different places in the region. Bepin Chandra Pal, Surendranath Banerjea and Maharaja Manindra Chandra Nandy were prominent among the opponents of the Pact. Das, J.M. Sengupta and a few Hindu bhadralok were too small a minority among Hindus. Hindu bhadralok opposed all attempts to grant 55 per cent of seats to Muslims in the Council though in some East Bengal districts Muslims comprised 90 per cent of the population.49
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Percentage of Muslims in Total population*</th>
<th>Percentage of Seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bakarganj</td>
<td>70.56</td>
<td>54.7  56.4  56.4  56.4  56.4  57.7  65.4  64.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bogra</td>
<td>82.49</td>
<td>N.A    59.25  59.25  59.25  59.25  59.25  59.25  59.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chittagong</td>
<td>72.81</td>
<td>N.A    56.66  56.6  76.66  76.66  76.66  76.6  73.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dacca</td>
<td>65.36</td>
<td>29.7   29.8  31.5  29.8  28.7  24.5  44.8  44.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinajpur</td>
<td>49.07</td>
<td>35.1   40.0  37.8  51.1  51.1  51.1  60.0  62.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faridpur</td>
<td>63.46</td>
<td>42.2   45.4  43.4  43.4  43.4  52.2  52.2  52.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessore</td>
<td>61.75</td>
<td>33.3   33.3  43.83  42.46  43.8  43.83  64.38  60.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khulna</td>
<td>49.75</td>
<td>35.8   37.9  37.93  37.93  39.6  36.2  36.2  36.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mymensingh</td>
<td>74.91</td>
<td>62.0   61.0  65.5  65.5  64.5  67.7  65.5  65.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noakhali</td>
<td>77.57</td>
<td>70.37  68.75  68.8  N.A.  68.75  68.75  70.0  70.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pabna</td>
<td>75.82</td>
<td>50.0   47.2  47.2  47.2  58.3  50.0  55.5  66.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajshahi</td>
<td>65.54</td>
<td>60.0   66.6  68.7  68.7  68.7  68.7  70.8  75.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rangpur</td>
<td>68.03</td>
<td>54.54  53.7  53.7  53.7  51.85  51.85  51.85  53.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tippera</td>
<td>74.12</td>
<td>52.77  65.96  63.8  63.8  68.09  70.21  64.0  65.96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Adapted from John Gallagher, 'Congress In Decline: Bengal, 1930 to 1939,' Modern Asian Studies, Vol. 7, No. 3(1973), pp. 602-3.)

* Based on the Census of 1921.
** No elections were held due to the Non-Cooperation movement.
The Hindu opposition to the Pact gave an opportunity to the Muslim conservatives to launch a countrywide propaganda against the Hindus. Some of them demanded the immediate implementation of the Pact. Nawab Musharraf Hossain, in a resolution in the Council on 12 March 1924, asked for 80 per cent of jobs for Bengali Muslims in accordance with the principles of the Pact. This move irritated Das, who held that the government was neither pro-Hindu nor pro-Muslim but opportunistic. He objected to anything taken from the government either by the Hindus or by the Muslims until their rights were recognized.

After the formal rejection of the Pact by the Congress under the influence of Gandhi at Coconada on 29 December 1923, Muslim liberal nationalists as well as fundamentalist ulama started organizing anti-Swaraj Party and anti-Das meetings throughout the region. Soon the question of implementing the Bengal Pact emerged as the most important political question for Muslim elites and their rural counterparts, who had aspirations to political power and job opportunities, irrespective of the attainment of the elusive swaraj or self-rule. Das was being labelled a hypocrite by Muslim leaders. Under the influence of Pir Abu Bakr Siddique of Furfura, Maulana Ismail Siraji, Nawab Musharraf Hossain, A.M. Abdul Hamid of Pabna and other leaders, along with the upper echelons of the Muslim peasantry who had aspirations to political power and job opportunities, the lower echelons were also mobilized in the name of protecting their religion. Many Muslim leaders tied agrarian issues to the communal ones.
Consequently anti-zamindar, anti-Swarajist and anti-Hindu revivalist movements became synonymous to the Muslim masses. Though Das and other leading Hindu Swarajists had no links with the Suddhi and Sangathan movements of the Hindu fundamentalists, some Hindu nationalists' support for the communal Hindu Mahasabha during this period strengthened Muslim solidarity throughout the region. During these days Ismail Siraji wrote some of his books, including \textit{Rai Nandini} to glorify the heritage of the Muslims attacking Bankim Chatterjee and other exponents of Hindu revivalism in Bengal.

The period between 1924 and 1925 can be regarded as one of transition. It witnessed the sudden rise in the intensity of communalism throughout Bengal, which had its first major outburst in the Calcutta riots of 1926, followed by Hindu-Muslim riots in many parts of Bengal. Though several attempts were made to bridge the gulf between the two communities by leaders like Das, Akram Khan and H.S. Suhrawardy, the ascendancy of the conservative and "fanatic" mullas and Hindu revivalists in the wake of the sudden slump in jute market and the introduction of the controversial Tenancy Act Amendment Bill foiled these attempts. The breach between the two communities is further evident from the holding of two rival conferences at Sirajganj in June 1924. The Bengal Provincial Conference, organized by C.R. Das, Maulana Akram Khan and other prominent Hindu and Muslim leaders of the Swaraj Party was overshadowed by the more successful Muslim Conference under the aegis of Maulana Ismail Hossain Siraji, Musharraf Hossain, MLC, Abdul Jabbar Palwan, MLC, Maulvi Ebrahim Hossain, Syed Akber Ali and Maulvi Abdul Majid. In spite of Akram Khan's assertion that Das' swaraj did not stand for "Hindu Raj", most Hindu leaders and delegates at the Conference belied this assertion by opposing the Bengal Pact. The bulk of the Muslims were consequently convinced that Hindu opposition to the Pact amounted to Hindu desire to exclude them from the benefits of swaraj. Siraji's conference drew a much bigger Muslim crowd than that of Das. The latter conference was more successful, because besides championing Muslim cause, it demanded drastic tenancy reforms for the benefit of the tenantry. This reflected the growing anti-zamindar, anti-Hindu agitation of the peasants in the region.

There might be some truth in Abul Mansur's statement that Siraji told him on the eve of the conferences at Sirajganj that there was no need for a Hindu-Muslim Pact since the Amir of Afghanistan would come to India "within six months" to establish Islamic rule. The chief motivating factor behind Siraji's anti-Swarajist conference seems to have been the anti-zamindar, anti-Hindu agitation of Muslim peasants in the region. Although some ashraraf and a few middle class
Muslim leaders, mostly from West Bengal, tried to maintain some sort of understanding with the pro-zamindar and anti-peasant Hindu leaders, the jotedar, rural-ashraf and middle peasant leaders, who were represented by Siraji, Palwan, Asimuddin, Ebrahim Hossain and others, were avowedly anti-zamindar and in favour of more representation for the well-to-do peasants in the elected offices and government jobs. In this regard one may cite the examples of some of the leading Muslim aristocrats' opposition in 1924 to the widening of the franchise to the upper-middle peasantry.

From the subsequent swing in the ashraf and Muslim bhadralok politics — their growing support for the jotedar-middle peasant policy of confronting the Hindu aristocracy and bhadralok classes — it appears that, government encouragement of anti-Swarajist forces (anti-Hindu and anti-zamindar in actuality) and the growing power of the jotedar and other enfranchised sections of the peasantry, led the Muslim aristocrats and middle class leaders to change their policy. One may argue that Muslim ashraf leaders opposed the widening of the franchise to maintain their socio-economic privileges, while, on the other hand, their collaboration with the jotedar-ryot categories smacked of their desire to further their class interest which mostly conflicted with the advanced Hindu aristocracy and bhadralok classes. In doing so, the Muslim ashraf and bhadralok leaders did not hesitate to arouse communal passion among the Muslim and Namasudra masses. Some of them played a dual role. They tried to come to an understanding with Hindu aristocracy and bhadralok and at the same time tried to win over the enfranchised section of the peasantry whose support they needed to run the elections held on the basis of separate electo-rates.

The government-ashraf alliance is evident from the understanding of A.K. Ghuznavi (a minister of the Bengal Government, who had earlier opposed the extension of the franchise), with the organizers of the anti-Das Muslim Conference at Sirajganj. The Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO) of Sirajganj took a keen interest in the success of the Conference with a view to weakening the influence of the Hindu Swarajists under Das. In a confidential note the SDO held that the Muslim Conference at Sirajganj was supported by the "entire" Muslim population of Pabna district out of "gratitude" to the government for its help in spreading education among them. Their "dislike of Hindu methods", "their desire to assert themselves before their zamindars and mahajans" and their desire to "show their independence" were also held responsible for their support of the Conference. The resolution of the Conference spelled out that, "the Muslims should refrain themselves from joining hands with the Hindus in the Swaraj movement so long as the Hindus not by lip-friendship and paper-pacts
but by their action prove themselves true friends of Islam in safeguarding their [Muslim] interests ... should all unite and form a compact of their own for their self-determination." Resolutions demanding legislation to benefit the tenantry by curtailing the power of the zamindars and moneylenders were also passed in the Conference. This reflected the sentiments of the upper peasantry as nothing against the jotedars was mentioned in the resolutions.

These resolutions, initiated and passed by jotedar-ryot leaders, indicate that in East Bengal, the seeds of communalism were first sown not by the Muslim elites, but by leaders belonging to the rural-ashraf and semi-urban professional classes having jotedar-ryot backgrounds. Most Muslim newspapers and periodicals in Bengali, who used the expressions "Muslim" and "peasant" quite synonymously, were owned by Maulana Akram Khan, Maulana Muniruzzaman Islamabadi and Abdul Jabbar Palwan, who either represented the lower middle classes or jotedars. These periodicals, which were mainly subscribed to by Muslims in the mofussil, took a leading role in vilifying the Hindu press and Hindu Congress and Swarajist leaders as "friends of the zamindars". One Muslim periodical interpreted the Congress and Swarajist opposition to the Tenancy Bill as the Hindu attempt to kill two birds with one stone — to silence the anti-zamindar movement and to hit the Muslim interest in general.

After the death of C.R. Das in 1925 the bulk of the Swarajist and ashraf leaders, including Maulana Akram Khan, Sir Abdur Rahim, H.S. Suhrawardy and Muslim zamindar politicians, including Nawab Habibullah, Nawab K.G.M. Farouqi, Nawab Musharraf Hossain and Wajed Ali Khan Panni (Chand Mia), gradually alienated themselves from the Hindu nationalists. The Swaraj Party's formal rejection of the Bengal Pact on 22 May 1926 at Krishnanagar, on the ground that the Pact had "proved a fruitful source of communal discord and had unduly encroached upon the rights of the Hindus", hammered the last nail into the coffin of Hindu-Muslim unity in Bengal.

Meanwhile, some Hindu and Muslim aristocrat and bhadralok politicians, Bejoy Prasad Singh Roy (zamindar), Raja Monilal Singh Roy (zamindar), Nawab Habibullah (zamindar), Nawab Musharraf Hossain (zamindar), Sir Abur Rahim, J.L. Banerjee and Khan Bahadur Ekramul Huq, for example, tried for some time in 1925-27 to organize the peasants on non-communal lines without much success. During the high noon of communal antagonism, Nawab Habibullah tried to float a "Hindu-Muslim Party" in 1926. He and some Hindu and Muslim zamindars presided over peasant conferences during the period, when the main theme of these conferences was "to wrest power form the zamindars". It seem the growing tide of communist activity made some zamindars apprehensive of "class wars" in the region and this led
them to seek devices that might contain the "Bolshevik revolution". Despite the attempts by the so-called Tenants' Group in the Legislative Council under the leadership of the "nominated, elected, zamindar, moderate, independent Swarajist", which included Sir Abdur Rahim, J.L. Banerjee, Nawab Habibullah and B.P. Singh Roy, these failed to mobilize the peasantry on non-communal lines. In some conferences leaders like Habibullah had to say that they were trying "for the improvement of the Muslim community especially of the ryots".69

The marriage of convenience between the Hindu and Muslim upper classes was short-lived, because the Muslim aristocracy had to depend on the support of the enfranchised Muslim bourgeoisie, petty bourgeoisie and peasants, who had again conflicting interests with the dominant Hindu zamindar and bhadralok classes. On the other hand, the Hindu and Muslim aristocrats' joint protest against the recommendations of the Simon Commission, especially that to abolish the zamindari system70, took the wind out of the aristocrats' sails. Leaders like Fazlul Huq, who realized "better and much earlier" than the "nationalist" Muslims that the Swarajists would not favour agrarian reforms against their class interest, succeeded in mobilizing support from the peasants. They were more at home with peasants than the elites of the metropolis. Though initially Huq and his lower-ashraf-cum-jotedar friends mobilized the peasants on class lines, soon this mobilization took a communal turn.71 The vacillating and nervous Muslim ashraf, who had failed to protect their class interest without government and jotedar support, soon joined hands with Fazlul Huq and his group. The inclusion of Sir Abdur Rahim and other erstwhile "nationalist" Muslims in the ranks of the proja groups, communalized the ashraf. As an illustration, while Sir Rahim's presidential address at the All-India Muslim League session at Aligarh in December 1925 was not avowedly communal, it criticized the Hindu Swarajists, who were mostly zamindars, for obstructing the Tenancy Bill, beneficial to the "dumb millions of cultivators of whom the majority are Muslims".72 For the first time Muslim League registered its concern at the plight of the Muslim peasants of Bengal at the hands of their Hindu exploiters.

III

While the ashraf and atraf Muslims of the region, despite their economic differences, were being unified on the basis of their supposedly common politico-economic and social interests, common heritage and destiny as Muslims, the Hindu community remained divided to a great extent, between the high-castes and the low-caste Namasudras. Socio-economic differences between the two categories were so glaring and
the sense of deprivation so strong among the latter that on many occasions the Namasudras found it necessary to co-operate with their Muslim neighbours against the high-castes.\textsuperscript{73} Despite the endemic communal rivalries between Hindus and Muslims, Namasudras and Muslims seldom fought each other on communal issues. A few cases of rioting between Namasudra and Muslim peasants in parts of Faridpur and Jessore in the early 1920s were not communal by nature. The former's opposition to the Khilafat-NCO movement was mainly responsible for the conflict.\textsuperscript{74} Soon after the unity between the Muslims and the high-caste Hindus had broken down after the Khilafat movement, the Namasudra-Muslim relationship improved substantially throughout the region. The high-caste opposition to the enfranchisement of Namasudra peasants was mainly responsible for the rift between the two categories.

By 1926 the Namasudras under the leadership of Mukunda Behari Mallick, a pleader of the Calcutta High Court, had started agitation throughout East Bengal for free primary education, special quotas in educational institutions and greater representation in the Council and local self-governing institutions.\textsuperscript{75}

Many Muslims took full advantage of the rift between the high-caste and Namasudra Hindus. In a joint Namasudra-Muslim peasant meeting at Ratanganj, Jessore, on 1 January 1927 a Muslim lawyer of Narail sub-division spoke against the caste system, while another Muslim pleader tried to establish the superiority of Islam and urged the Namasudras to embrace Islam. Most Namasudras of the locality boycotted the high-caste Hindu \textit{baruis} (betel plantation owners) as a mark of protest.\textsuperscript{76}

The Namasudra-Muslim solidarity was bitterly criticized by most Hindu \textit{bhadralok}. They held that the Muslim "motive in making alliance with the lower class Hindus is to oppress the upper class on the one hand and to convert the lower class Hindus into Muhammadanism on the other".\textsuperscript{77} Despite Hindu \textit{bhadralok} opposition to Namasudra-Muslim unity and their warning about the Muslim "motive" of converting them into Muslims, the Namasudras paid little heed to the Hindu \textit{bhadralok} appeals. Hindu \textit{bhadralok} opposition to give equal social status to the Namasudras, their opposition to give separate electorates to the Namasudras and the widening of the franchise further alienated the Namasudras from their upper class co-religionists.\textsuperscript{78} Ignoring communal provocations and enticements from the Hindu \textit{bhadralok}, Namasudra leaders like Revati Mohan Sarkar, MLC, remarked that as lower class Hindus and Muslims, the lower classes, irrespective of their faith, should unite "on a new economic basis."\textsuperscript{79} By 1928 the Namasudras in general rejected the Hindu \textit{bhadralok} argument for non-co-operating with the Muslims.\textsuperscript{80} It seems that the
government and some Muslim ashraf and bhadralok advocacy of mass enfranchisement of the rural population irrespective of their level of literacy, played an important role in alienating the Namasudras from the high-caste Hindus. The disenchantment of the Namasudras with their high-caste co-religionists was very significant as far as the overall politics of the region was concerned. As the Namasudras formed about 20 to 30 per cent of the total population of Jessore and Faridpur and 10 to 15 per cent in Dacca, Bakarganj, Pabna and Rajshahi districts, their alienation from the high-castes weakened the position of the latter in relation to the Muslims.

So far as the relationship between the Muslims and the non-Muslim tribal peasants was concerned, in spite of the latters' numerical strength, as they constituted about 40 to 50 per cent of the total population of Dinajpur, 20 to 30 per cent of Rangpur and 10 to 15 per cent of Mymensingh, the Rajbansis, Santals, Oraons, Garos and Hajongs could not challenge the overlordship of their landlords. In Dinajpur-Ranjpur sub-region, the predominance of the Muslim jotedar classes and in Mymensingh the dominance of the powerful high-caste Hindu zamindars subdued the tribals despite their "ethnic solidarity" until the emergence of outside, non-tribal leadership from Hindu bhadralok communists in the 1930s and 1940s. The tribals' socio-economic servility as bargardars, tankadars (sharecroppers with no rights and security of tenure) and labourers hindered the growth of class conflicts in Dinajpur-Rangpur and Mymensingh. In parts of Bakarganj, Faridpur and Noakhali districts, the relatively undifferentiated Muslim peasants were easily mobilized against the high-caste Hindu zamindars and moneylenders. This was mostly done on communal lines.

Despite its relative homogeneity in comparison with the Hindu community, the Muslim community of the region was not free from inner contradictions and sectarian differences. These differences often led to serious conflicts, particularly between the adherents of the Hanafi and the Ahl-i-Hadis or La-Mazhabi schools. Religious polemics or bahas between the ulama of the Ahl-i-Hadis and the Hanafi schools, which were often classified as the extremely anti-British and the moderate "pro-British" schools respectively, were quite common in the northern sub-region. These sectarian differences were, however, more due to the differences in the observance of rituals than due to economic or class differences within the Muslim peasantry. The sense of belonging to a "monolithic" peasant or Muslim community was never hampered by the sectarian differences of peasants. This is evident from the numerous peasant movements against the British and Hindu agents of exploitation, which were spontaneously participated by both Ahl-i-Hadis and Hanafi peasants, throughout the British period.
religious debates were, however, responsible for the arousal of interest in the rituals of Islam among the bulk of the Muslim peasantry throughout the region. These also strengthened the hold of the ulama on the peasants, who played an important role in the subsequent communalization of the agrarian struggle on a large scale.

IV

By early 1926 the Muslim urban elites were roughly divided into four prominent groups, led by Sir Abdur Rahim, his son-in-law H.S. Suhrawardy, A.K. Ghuznavi, Akram Khan, and Fazlul Huq. But as a whole, there was not much difference in the class interests of the leaders. Both Sir Abdur Rahim and Ghuznavi were in favour of working the Reforms and protecting Muslim interests, while Suhrawardy held anti-government views and was "prepared to oppose the Hindus only when there was a conflict in the interests of Hindus and Muhammadans." The Akram Khan group, on the other hand, was prepared to seek election on a Congress ticket if the Hindus gave immediate effect to the Bengal Pact. The Fazlul Huq group's main plank was the protection of proja interests. Meanwhile, the Swaraj Party and the Congress rejected the Bengal Pact and by June 1926 the Pact had become "as dead as mutton" as the Hindus in general were sick of it. Their rejection of the Pact, to quote a government Report, proved catalytic so far as the change in tune of the Muslim leaders was concerned. By late August Fazlul Huq's Muslim Council Party, which had earlier tried to form an alliance with the Hindu Swarajists, coalesced with the Suhrawardy group and formed the Independent Muslim Party, which was also joined by the Akram Khan group. On the eve of the Council elections in late 1926, the Bengal Muslim Party of Rahim and the Independent Muslim Party remained the two most important Muslim political parties in Bengal to contest the elections.

The election results of 1926 also suggests that by then the communal solidarity of Muslim peasants had become stronger than class solidarity. This was reflected in the easy victories of Muslim zamindars and ashraf like Khwaja Nazimuddin of the Dacca Nawab family in Bakarganj, Ashraf Ali Chowdhury in Rajshahi, Nawab Habibullah in Dacca, Nawab Altaf Ali in Bogra, Nawab K.G.M. Farouqi in Tippera and A.K. Ghuznavi in Mymensingh. Most of these zamindar politicians, again, represented the communal Muslim organizations of East Bengal. Jotedar and Middle peasant candidates belonging to
the Proja Samities and Ryot Sabha did not fare well in the elections where they had to contest with *ashraf* and *zamindar* candidates. Muslim peasant leaders coming from the *jotedar* and substantial peasant families — Rajibuddin Tarafdar of Bogra, Abdul Jabbar Palwan, Khush Muhammad Chowdhury and Alauddin Talukdar of Mymensingh, for example — were simply routed by *ashraf* and *zamindar* candidates. Palwan and Talukdar scored less than 10 per cent of the votes cast in their constituencies.90 Representatives of the Bengal Muslim Party and the Independent Muslim Party captured only two Muslim seats in the elections.91

The victory of Muslim *zamindar* candidates, Nawab Habibullah and Khwaja Nazimuddin, for example, might be attributed to the "anti-*zamindar*", "pro-peasant" nature of their programme, which included the abolition of *abwab* and transfer fee or *salami*. But this explanation is substantially vitiated by the fact that the *ulama* in most cases played a leading role in influencing the voters in favour of the candidates. In some cases influential *pir sahibs* issued *fatwas* or religious decrees favouring particular candidates, so that their *muridan* (followers) cast votes in favour of those candidates. Maulana Abu Bakr of Furfura and Maulana Ruhul Amin, for instance, issued *fatwas* in favour of Maulvi Ishaque of Bogra while A.K. Chuoznavi of Mymensingh was supported by the Anjuman-i-Islamia of Mymensingh and the newly formed Tangail Anjuman-i-Islamia Tenants’ Association against Alauddin Talukdar of the Ryot Sabha.92

In assessing the role of the *ulama* in determining the election results in 1926 in the region, one may draw a parallel with the Muslim peasants of the Punjab who were very considerably influenced and mobilized by *pirs* and *ulama* during the elections of 1937 and 1946.93 Unlike those in the Punjab, most of the *ulama* in East Bengal did not belong to the landed gentry. Except for a few prominent *pir sahibs*, who came from north India and West Bengal, most *pirs*, *maulanas* and *maulvis* represented the lower echelon of the peasantry in the region, having dependent position in relation to the *ashraf*, *jotedar* and *bhadralok* classes. As agents of orthodoxy and Islamic revivalism, with a tinge of rusticity and fanaticism in their appeals, the *pirs* and other categories of the *ulama*94 aroused religious solidarity and fanaticism among a large section of the peasantry. The constant harping on by the *ashraf*, *jotedars* and the *ulama* the idea that the Raj was going to crumble and with it the power of Hindu *zamindars*, *mahajans* and the *bhadralok*, convinced the peasants that they need obey nobody, especially when their patrons — the *jotedars* and the *ulama* — were with them. Their religious faith was quite different from the "sophisticated religion". It also moulded their political activities to a large extent. Peasants often interpreted religion in their own way and found
in it a solution to their frustrations under the influence of the *ulama* of the "Whahhabi", Faraizi and other schools. The *ulama* told them in an almost Calvinist style, that the Muslims were the chosen people of God who were supposed to dominate the non-Muslims.

The elections results of 1926, do not, however, give us a true picture of the impact of religious solidarity of the lower peasantry, as they did not have the vote to determine the composition of the Legislative Assembly at that time. As the elections were held in separate electorates, there was no scope for contest between Hindu and Muslim candidates. The impact of religious exclusivity and communalism was profound on the Local Board elections held in joint electorates in the post-Khilafat period throughout the region.

The Local Board election results, as reflected in Tables 4.1 and 4.2, suggest that the upper-caste Hindus, hitherto dominating the Local Boards quite disproportionately to their number (their proportion of the total population being 8.31 per cent on the average) were fast losing their predominance in these Boards during the period under review. In districts where the Namasudras and the *ulama* belonging to the Faraizi, Ahl-i-Hadis and Tayyuni school of Karamat Ali were influential, the high-caste Hindus started losing their political power from as early as 1922. The preponderence of a substantial number of occupancy tenants among the Muslims in Jessore, Faridpur and Bakarganj districts, were again responsible for the success of Muslim candidates in the Local Board elections, as they could assert themselves more effectively in relation to the high-caste Hindu *bhadralok* than their counterparts in districts with inferior tenancy rights. The case of Khulna seems strange, as the Muslim membership in the Boards remained almost static throughout the period. Having the highest proportion of Namasudras — about 40 per cent of the total population — the high-caste domination over the Boards could not be altered in this district. But the fact that the combined number of sharecroppers and agricultural labourers was the highest in the district — about 50 per cent of the total agrarian population — provides a clue; the Muslim and Namasudra sharecroppers and labourers could not outvote their "patrons", the high-caste Hindu landlords, as their fear of eviction from their temporary holdings compelled them to remain submissive to the landlords.

The election results in the district of Dacca are also significant. Table 4.2 indicates that in the Sadar sub-division the Hindus suddenly lost more than 50 per cent of the seats in the local Boards in 1927-28. This was not altogether unexpected after the communal riots of 1927 in the district. But the case of Manikganj sub-division was quite different from the rest of the district. Here one finds that the Muslims who had captured only 11.1 per cent of the seats in 1920-21, capturing
twice as many in 1922-23. This percentage was almost re-doubled in 1927-28 when they won 40 per cent. This was most likely due to the Saha moneylender-Muslim cultivator conflict in the sub-division, which will be discussed later.

The introduction of self-governing institutions and the widening of the franchise, as discussed earlier, were not appreciated by the Hindu zamindars and bhadralok. Their opposition to the formation of the Union Boards in the mid-1920s indicates their apprehension of Muslim and peasant domination of the Boards.

The Hindu bhadralok defence in support of their boycott of the Boards, who regarded them "evil" government institutions to impose more taxes on the rural masses and to break the nationalist movement, does not seem convincing. A pro-Congress Bengali daily went a bit farther in its opposition to the Boards. It held that those who were elected as office bearers of the Union Boards were "pro-government". It even labelled A.K. Ghuznavi a "communalist" for demanding proportional representation for Muslims in the Local Boards.99 One liberal Hindu daily criticized the Hindu bhadralok for their opposition of the Union Boards, while they had no objection to taking travelling allowances from the government as members of the Legislative Council, District Boards and municipalities.100 One Muslim newspaper exposed the real motive behind the Hindu bhadralok opposition to the Union Boards. Hindu zamindars, mahajans and babus, it asserted, were afraid of the Muslims who were illiterate but in the majority.101 By the mid-1920s the Hindus and Muslims were polarized to such an extent that the Hindu fear of losing elections, held in joint electorates, was quite genuine. This is evident from the Local Board elections in Mymensingh in 1927, for instance. In one constituency, according to the District Magistrate: "Not a Hindu has been elected".102

By 1926, besides the "communal" Hindu and Muslim political organizations, a few non-communal cultivators' associations or krishak samities had come into being, mostly under communist leadership. Unlike the proja samity leaders, who mostly represented those "middle class people who held occupancy holdings" and "desired to take all that they could from the landlord and grant nothing to the under-ryot and sharecropper", the "cultivators' groups" represented the lower peasantry.103 In spite of their organizing a few successful peasant meetings, which demanded the abolition of all intermediaries between the state and the cultivators,104 the krishak samities were soon eclipsed by the growing influence of the communal organizations like the Hindu Mahasabha, Shuddhi and Sangathan and their Muslim counter-organizations of the Tanzim, Tabligh and the Anjuman-i-Islamias. The pro-zamindar attitude of the Mahasabha and other Hindu communal groups, as reflected in the press, gave a tremendous
fillip to communal mobilization of the peasantry. The editorial of the Hindu Mission may be cited in this regard. On 17 August 1928 the newspaper wrote that the Hindu zamindars were actually protectors of Hinduism and Hindu cultivators, and that if the powers of the zamindars were circumscribed, the Muslim peasants would come to power and Hinduism would not survive in northern and eastern Bengal.105 Meanwhile, some leading Hindu zamindars also joined the Shuddhi and Sangathan organizations. They also addressed public meetings urging the Hindu villagers to "find out means of consolidating the Hindus". Their support of the anti-Muslim Patuakhali Satyagraha in 1927 which led to the police firing on a Muslim mob resulting in several deaths in a village in Bakarganj district,106 spoiled all attempts at mobilizing the peasants on class lines, by the pro-communist leaders of the krishak samities and the various "workers" and "peasants" organizations. The non-communal class-based organizations were mostly led by high-caste Hindu bhadralok communists, having very little connection with the Muslim peasants. The Labour Swaraj Party of Hemanta Kumar Sarkar, Muzaffar Ahmed, Qutbuddin Ahmed and poet Kazi Nazrul Islam, formed in December 1925, and renamed the Labour and Peasant Party in early 1926,107 did not succeed in mobilizing peasant support for its anti-jotedar, anti-occupancy-ryot pronouncements. It failed to lead the peasants in the "right direction from misdirected communal hostility to a class struggle", as it declared war simultaneously against the government, zamindars, mahajans, brokers, lawyers and mullas. The powerful rural elites, the talukdars and jotedars, became the main targets of attack by the Party.108 Consequently the government, zamindars, the bhadralok classes, and above all, the Muslim rural elites became hostile towards the party. Soon the activities of the party came to an abrupt end after the government had started the Meerut Conspiracy Case in 1929, implicating the top leaders of the party, including Muzaffar Ahmed, in seditious activities against the government. Consequently the anti-zamindar, anti-mahajan movement of the peasants continued to be led by the Muslim jotedar and occupancy-ryot groups, in collaboration with the ulama, ashraf and the Namasudra leaders, who had all grievances against the high-caste Hindu zamindars, mahajans and bhadralok. The pro-zamindar Hindu Mahasabha, on the other hand, spread in all the districts of Bengal, except the Chittagoing Hill Tracts, by late 1927.109
Under the changed circumstances of the post-Khilafat days when the peasants were again appealed to in the name of preserving their faith and protecting their socio-economic rights by the ashraf, ulama and jotedar leaders, the government was almost excluded as the target of attack in the programmes. The impact of this kind of avowed anti-high-caste Hindu propaganda was tremendous. The peasant masses, who had, during the Khilafat Movement directed their militancy more against Hindu landlords, moneylenders and exacting government officials, especially policemen, than against the Raj itself, this time went one step farther — high-caste Hindus (sometimes the lower-castes as well) became the targets of attack irrespective of their socio-economic backgrounds. As in the Khilafat days, again the extent of peasant militancy and its grassroots connections indicate that the undercurrent of peasant discontent was not only stronger than the political discontent of the elites, but also capable of directing itself against its "enemies" both real and imaginary, quite independently of the outsiders.

The culmination of the communal insurgencies in the countryside coincided with the communal riots in Calcutta, Dacca, Pabna, Kustia and some other urban areas during 1926-28. This certainly indicates that the Calcutta riots of April 1926, which originated in the controversy over music in front of a mosque, influenced communal violence elsewhere in the province. But this does not mean that the disturbances in the countryside were solely motivated by external factors. One can reject Shila Sen's suggestion that the controversy regarding music in front of mosques originated in the anti-music organization which Sir A.K. Ghuznavi launched in August 1924. Long before 1924, playing music and slaughtering cows had created tension in the rural areas. The local mullas and other members of the rural ashraf started opposing music near mosques, especially during evening prayer, in the wake of the Khilafat movement. By then this question, along with the Muslims' right to slaughter cows, had become important issues in the mofussil. In many places the resurgence of anti-moneylender campaigns by peasants in 1923, especially after the sudden slump in jute prices, strained Hindu-Muslim relations. By late 1923 "a bitter and tense situation" between the two communities had developed in some districts. Some pirs and mullas were very active propagating the idea that cow slaughtering was essential, an important ritual for the Muslims, while advising the Hindus mockingly to protect their "mothers" (cows are regarded as such by many Hindus) by keeping one in every Hindu house. Rural Muslims objected to the playing of music near mosques to such an extent that by early 1924
some of their leaders suggested that all music should be stopped in the evening as there was "no fixed time" for evening prayer. These instances suggest that even before the mass conflagration of communal violence in the urban centres, the local roots of communal hatred and mistrust further nourished by the post-Khilafat economic uncertainties due to the fluctuations in jute prices and the proposed Tenancy Act amendments, played a greater role in straining the Hindu-Muslim relations in the countryside than the propaganda from the outside.

An appraisal of some of the major examples of communal violence in the countryside during the period will help establish the hypothesis that communal riots in the rural areas were actually agrarian conflicts between landlords and tenants, moneylenders and debtors, and expressed in the locally developed mode of conflict. Anti-social elements found an opportunity to enrich themselves by looting the property of the victims. Many of the hooligans, belonging to the lower peasantry, believed that they were participants in a holy war or jihad against the enemies of Islam. This "holy war", however, caused panic among all sections of the Hindu community. Abduction of Hindu women by Muslim hooligans in rural East Bengal greatly perturbed Gandhi, who had been seeking means to restore better understanding between the two communities of India.

A survey of the year 1926, the most eventful year in terms of communal disturbances throughout Bengal, suggests that in Pabna, Nadia, Dacca, Bakarganj, Khulna, Mymensingh, Noakhali and Tippera, where the disturbances alarmed the government as well as politicians and their followers in both communities, they originated in the rural areas and from there spread to the urban centres of the respective districts. The Calcutta riots of April 1926 did not begin this phase in the history of communal riots in rural East Bengal in the 1920s.

Pabna, for instance, a district in the north-western sub-region, had been a centre of peasant insurrections almost throughout the British period. In early 1920s these insurrections took a communal turn. In early 1924, landless cultivators, mostly bargardars of local Hindu landlords, started boycotting the landlords in Chatmohar, a village in Sirajganj sub-division. The bargardars refused to reap the winter rice crop from the Hindu jotedars' holdings as a mark of protest against the prevalent sharecropping system. In some places the jotedars had to reap their crops themselves or by Hindu labourers. By 1925 the refractory bargardars in the neighbouring area of the Shahzadpur police station had openly rebelled against their Hindu jotedars, refusing to accept barga terms for the next year or to carry the landlords' share of the crop to their houses. They only reaped one-half of the crop, leaving the rest to be reaped by the jotedars. From a contemporary account it appears that the "abnormally high price of
jute" in 1925-26 made the bargardars refractory as they did not want to give one-half of the jute crop to their landlords. Soon communal passions were aroused, continued the observer, and "this blaze of communal passion found expression in the riots of 1926, which were aggravated by the economic conditions and much latent agrarian unrest."\textsuperscript{19} Bargardars elsewhere in the district — at Chatmohar, Atgharia and other places — also revolted against Hindu landlords in 1925. They looted hats and shops of Hindu merchants and money-lenders. But their movement did not last long as the jotedars set about replacing the rebellious bargardars with new ones. Scarcity of land, in the long run, compelled the rioting bargardars to come to terms with their jotedars.\textsuperscript{120} The failure of the bargardars' revolt also indicates that Muslim jotedars of the district might have sided with their Hindu counterparts against the rebels as the movement was turning explicitly into a class war.

Some Muslim jotedar and middle class leaders having connections with the urban areas exploited the communal sentiment of the Muslim peasants in some areas of the district. In January 1926 the Muslims of Salap, for example, were stirred up against the Hindus on the eve of the District Board elections. Maulvi Khan Saheb Moazzem Ali Khan, a member of the Pabna District Board, was the main agent provocateur. He and other Muslim leaders of the locality employed local mullas to arouse anti-Hindu sentiment among Muslims. Moazzem Ali Khan declared in public meetings at different places in Sirajganj subdivision that the Muslim bargadars should boycott Hindu jotedars.\textsuperscript{121} Besides the Hindu jotedars, Hindu mahajans and bhadralok became the targets of Muslim peasants in the district. A Hindu mahajan was murdered in January 1926, presumably by a Muslim debtor. One rich mahajan, Banamali Saha, was stabbed at Ullapara for exacting high interest from his debtors\textsuperscript{122}, presumably by an indebted peasant. These instances reveal that the ashraf and jotedar Muslim leaders not only exploited the communal sentiment of the peasants, but also identified the Hindu jotedars and mahajans as the chief exploiting classes. The employment of the mullas and professional hooligans or goondas served their purpose quite well — they successfully sidetracked the middle and lower peasants from economic issues by communalizing the conspicuous class conflicts in the agrarian sector. The Muslim ashraf and jotedars thus protected their class interests.

The appeals of the Tanzim Committees to the Muslims, by means of handbills and speeches by mullas, to boycott Hindu festivals and fairs throughout East Bengal during 1925-26 had a tremendous impact on the peasant masses. They were usually more enthusiastic than their leaders for the success of the boycott. They not only boycotted the Hindu puja festivals in many places throughout the region, but also
desecrated Hindu images and temples. At the behest of the mullas, Muslim peasants, boatmen, fishermen and others in many places did not allow Hindus to immerse their images during the Durga and Kali puja festivals. Pabna led in this respect.\textsuperscript{123}

In Pabna the communal disturbances of July 1926 started with the desecration of Hindu temples belonging to the zamindar of Sitlai, Babu Jogendra Nath Maitra and Babu Indujyoti Majumdar, Chairman of the Pabna Municipality.\textsuperscript{124} The former was again a patron of the Hindu Mahasabha in the district, while the latter was disliked by the Muslims who aspired to the position he held. Consequently it seems, mullas, and the politically ambitious Muslim middle class leaders with jotedar or middle peasant background, found a common enemy in the Hindu zamindar-bhadralok category. After some leading Hindu bhadralok of Pabna, including the zamindar of Sitlai, had lodged a complaint with the District Magistrate that some idols had been removed from their temple at night presumably by Muslims, several incidents of idol breaking and playing of music in front of mosques took place in the town. Soon rumours spread in the neighbouring villages that Hindus had destroyed a mosque in Pabna town. The local mullas and Muslim bhadralok leaders took a leading part in spreading these rumours. As a result, a large number of Muslim peasants attacked Hindu houses in Pabna town and destroyed some Hindu property. Led by Local mullas, peasants marched from one village to another chanting anti-Hindu slogans and inciting villagers to violence. On 4 July "serious developments" occurred about 12 miles from Pabna at Sujanagar hat, where several Hindu shops were looted. When the police arrested a man with stolen cloth, a large armed Muslim crowd attacked the police and rescued the prisoner. In another incident, the police fired on a Muslim mob at Char Tarapur, wounding seven persons, who were looting Hindu property. Mass looting of Hindu property continued to 8 July by which time 29 shops and 156 houses, all belonging to Hindus, had been looted. Many Hindu families from villages in the areas of Sujanagar, Atgharia and Santhia police stations took shelter in the Pabna town. Marwari shops, whose owners were also moneylenders, and Hindu jotedars' houses were the main targets of attack by the Muslim mob.\textsuperscript{125} In some areas disturbances continued till 10 July. The Commissioner of Rajshahi Division gave a vivid account of the disturbances emphasizing that the anti-Hindu, or more precisely, the anti-Hindu money-lender and landlord, movement of the Muslim peasants had grassroots organization and support:

\begin{quote}
It seems likely that there is an organized nucleus of possibly some hundred of Mumahmmadans who have come largely from the char (river island) areas on both sides of the Ganges and who, after looting a house or shop, disperse into the neighbouring
\end{quote}
villages where they find food and shelter from their fellow Muhammadans and stir them up with tales of the desecration of mosques and then with their aid attack some other villages. \textit{They have spies and skirmishers to watch for the arrival of any police force, when they again disperse and are sheltered by their co-religionists.} \footnote{emphasis added}

It also appears from the Commissioner's report that Pabna peasants, with their "tradition of looting", were led by local mullas and jotedars, including some aspirants to the elected offices of the local boards, and that at times as many as 5,000 Muslim peasants assembled in a single \textit{hat} to loot Hindu shops. \footnote{127}

Other cases in the adjoining districts of Dacca, Mymensingh, Faridpur and Nadia (Kustia) and in the south-eastern districts of Noakhali and Bakarganj reveal that economic rivalry between Muslim jotedars and Hindu zamindars-mahajans was primarily responsible for most communal frictions. It is noteworthy in this regard that in Rangpur, Dinajpur and Chittagong, where Muslim jotedars-takludars (and sawdagars or merchants in the case of Chittagong) were in the dominant position, hardly any communal fracas occurred.

The case of Manikganj, in Dacca district, has some similarities with that of Pabna. Here too, Muslim fundamentalists and revivalists fanned jotedar-bargadar and mahajan-debtor conflicts as the bargadars and debtors were Muslims. As discussed earlier, the Tenancy Amendment Bill had already alarmed the jotedars by incorporating a provision to grant occupancy rights to the bargadars. Even after the withdrawal of this provision from the Bill, many jotedars remained sceptical about the nature of the Bill till its enactment in 1928. The Vaishya-Saha jotedars of Manikganj sub-division, whose notoriety as money-lenders was also quite well known in the district, were trying to eject their Muslim bargadars from their holdings. This triggered off the pent up anger of the bargadars towards their landlords. They refused to cultivate the lands on the \textit{barga} or sharecropping system. \footnote{128} This friction soon turned into communal antagonism between the Hindus and Muslims of the area and great communal tension prevailed in the district during 1926-28.

An anonymous letter published in the \textit{Amrita Bazar Patrika} suggests that relations between the Muslim cultivators and the Saha landlords of Manikganj had been bitter since 1924. The cultivators had been boycotting Saha lands, which thus remained uncultivated, and the landlords were robbed and attacked by their tenants on several occasions. \footnote{129} Mostly local maulvis were behind the peasants as \textit{agent provocateurs}. \footnote{130}

The long drawn out conflict between the Saha mahajans-cum-bargardars continued throughout 1924-28. The attempts made by the
Sub-Divisional Officer, K.C. Chunder, in March 1924 to settle the dispute through a joint Hindu-Muslim conference failed to bring about peace as the peasants’ demand for a reduction in the rate of interest to one per cent was turned down by the Sahas. This and the Sahas’ refusal to grant occupancy rights to the bargardars led to several incidents of looting, violence and destruction of Saha property. The anti-Saha peasant insurgency soon engulfed the areas in Kaliakoir, Ghior, Dhamrai and the neighbouring Tangail sub-division of Mymensingh district. By late 1925 the anti-jotedar, anti-mahajan feeling of the lower peasantry in the Dacca-Mymensingh sub-region became alarmingly intense for both Hindu and Muslim jotedar-moneylender class. This is reflected in several attempts by local and outside Muslim jotedar and bhadrak politicans to settle the dispute without making any major changes in the bargadari system. Fazlul Haq, Shah Syed Emdadul Huque, an MLC from Tippera, and some other leading proja and Muslim leaders of the region held a Social and Ryot Conference at Ghior, near Manikganj on 15 February 1926 with a view to settling the dispute. The resolutions of the conference were elusive, conciliatory and anti-bargadar in essence. Though it resolved that under-ryots be treated as ryots, it opposed all attempts to abolish the bargadari system and the granting of occupancy rights to bargardars. In spite of the fact that the conference was attended by about 30,000 peasants of the area, the resolution in favour of adopting "peaceful means" for the settlement of the dispute between the Sahas and Muslims had little impact on the militant bargadars. From the continuation of the anti-Saha jotedar movement of the peasants on class-cum-communal lines, it is evident that local mullas and bargadars themselves took the leading role in the movement till 1928. The communal disturbances in Dacca city in 1926 might have given an additional fillip to the movement, but it was practically quite independent of external influence and leadership.

Communal disturbances in the neighbouring Kustia district (until 1947 a sub-division of Nadia) originated in the town, and mullas and Muslim peasants from the neighbouring villages went to the town to attack Hindu zamindars and bhadrak. By early 1927 the issues of cow slaughtering by Muslims and playing of music by Hindus around mosques had become two principal bones of contention between the two communities in Kustia town.

The three days’ sitting of the "Conciliatory Board" under local Hindu-Muslim leaders failed to reach agreement by 11 February 1927 to settle the dispute over the playing of music. The rumour that the Sub-Divisional Officer had granted permission to Maulvi Hakimuddin Ahmed, alias Hikmat Joardar, to open a beef stall in the market, was mainly responsible for the failure of the Board, headed by local Hindu
and Muslim elites. The Hindu population of the district resented the idea of allowing the Muslims to open a beef stall in the town. Their opinion was accurately reflected in an editorial of the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* that the "motive of this new move" in Kustia was to harass the Hindus as the Muslims had been living without beef for the previous one hundred years and Kustia market had done without a beef stall.

Meanwhile Muslim villagers slaughtered cows at several places in the district. The villagers took the lead in this regard. As a mark of protest, the Hindus of Kustia town observed a three day *hartal* (or general strike) in late February 1927. On 25 February, while about 2,000 Hindus were holding a protest meeting in the town, hundreds of "unknown Muhammadans" with *lathis* (sticks) were threatening the Hindus.

Soon religious issues besides the economic ones became important to the bulk of the Muslim community in the district. Local Muslim leaders, mostly the *ulama*, emerged as the new leaders. Maulvi Afsaruddin Ahmed, his brother, the famous Proja Party and Congress leader Shamsuddin Ahmed, Shamser Ali, Eman Ali and other local Muslims having lower middle class and jotedar connections, spoke against the *hartal* and boycott of Muslim labourers by the Marwari merchants of the town. The main theme of their speeches was anti-*zamindar*, anti-*mahajan* and anti-Marwari trader. Afsaruddin's speech was very provocative. He urged the Muslims to resist Hindu attempts to stop the slaughter of cows. He alleged that the Hindus were trying to cripple the Muslim lower classes. He also cited the example of the Calcutta riots of 1926 and held that if the Hindus were allowed to play music in front of mosques, the Muslims were also entitled to slaughter their own cows in their own houses. The Muslim population of the town as well as of the neighbouring villages quickly responded to the appeal of their leaders by openly slaughtering cows in mosques and private residences. Their defiance of the Hindu well-to-do classes did not stop there. They also attacked several Hindu merchants and moneylenders. A Hindu merchant was forced to pay Rs 25 by some 50 Muslim peasants as the "price for his life" at the local *cutchery* of a *zamindar* at Kaburhat village. The *ulama* and local Muslim leaders held secret meetings almost every day in the remote villages to plan programmes of attack on Hindu property. Afsaruddin and other *mullas* were busy inciting Muslims against Hindu. Many panic-stricken Hindus, as a result took shelter in the town.

Soon the disturbances in Kustia infected the neighbouring Pabna district, where Muslim peasants again over a wide area attacked Hindu landlords, moneylenders and professional classes. They had looted several *hats* by February 1927. They looted paddy from Hindu *jotedars'*
granaries and broke Hindu images at Shibpur, Sonapur and some adjoining villages. Muslims attempted forcibly to convert Hindus in several villages. Local ulama, such as Maulana Javed Ali, and well-to-do Muslim peasants, such as Mansur Haji and Baban Haji, were some of the leaders who were later arrested. Similar sporadic communal disturbances also took place in Madaridpur (Faridpur), Tippera and Bakarganj districts.

In Bakarganj the civil administration lost control of the situation. The trouble in this district began after the Hindu Dharma Rakshini Sabha (a Hindu organization akin to the Shuddhi and Sangathan movements) had organized a procession of about 5,000 Hindus who played music in front of mosques in Barisal town in early 1927. The sequel of the music controversy was the Kulkati incident where police opened fire on an armed mob of the Muslim peasants, killing several of them in front of a mosque.

On March 2, a mob of about 1,000 Muslims armed with spears, swords and sticks, assembled in front of a newly constructed mosque at Kulkati village, in the area of Nalchiti police station, with a view to resisting a Hindu procession intending to pass the mosque with music. The procession of Hindu pilgrims with music on the Jhalkati-Nalchiti road, leading to the Shiva temple at Ponabalia village, was an annual event, which had never been stopped by the local Muslims. The activities of the Hindu revivalists in the area, having close links with the local Congress and Hindu bhadralok-landlord classes, might have provoked the Muslim leaders to oppose the procession. Communal disturbances in Calcutta and elsewhere in the region might have added fuel to the flame. The hastily built mosque by the roadside may be regarded as a pretext to pick a quarrel with the Hindus on the part of some Muslim leaders.

The Hindus, who already apprehended Muslim resistance to the procession, approached the District Magistrate, E.N. Blandy, a British Civilian, to allow the procession. Satindra Nath Sen, a local Congress leader, was the main organizer of the procession. Blandy went to Kulkati with armed policeman and a platoon of Gurkha soldiers on March 2, at the request of the Hindus. In the early hours of the day a Hindu procession passed the mosque with music. An armed Muslim mob gathered around the mosque by 10 am chanting anti-Hindu slogans and "Allah-u-Akber" (Allah is great). Though initially the mob was compelled to retreat across a ditch, about six feet wide, by the road, they soon gathered strength and started abusing the police party, waving their spears and swords. Maulvi Saaduddin, a local maulvi, and several non-local maulvis were the main leaders of the Muslims. After the arrest of Saaduddin some of the mob crossed the ditch on to the road chanting "Allah-u-Akber". This led to the police firing which killed
at least fourteen Muslims. In spite of several contradictory and exaggerated versions for the story, the gravity of the situation can be guessed from a statement by the District Magistrate. Contrary to his previous statement, Blandy admitted that not 37 but 3314 rounds were fired at Kulkati to "disperse" the "violent mob". From the Non-Official Muslim Enquiry Committee's report and other local sources it appears that the police firing on the so-called "unarmed" Muslims was unprovoked, hence unnecessary.

The Kulkati killing agitated Muslims throughout Bengal. Though the Muslims were victims of police firing, the wrath of most Muslim leaders was directed against the Hindus. The local Muslims believed that Satin Sen was instrumental in precipitating the police firing by "misleading" Blandy into believing that the chanting of "Allah-u-Akber" by the mob was the signal for an immediate attack on the police party. Muslim leaders like Sir Abdur Rahim, Nawab Habibullah, Fazlul Huq and Nazimuddin rushed to Kulkati. They all blamed the Hindus for the killing. Sir Abdur Rahim, in the course of a fiery speech in Urdu at Barisal on 7 March, asked the Muslims not to feel dejected but to follow the leadership of Khan Bahadur Hemayetuddin, a local Muslim leader. In a letter to the pro-government Englishman he wrote:

I say, Sir that the word "massacre" which I used is the only fit description of what happened, and I repeat that some of the features of this occurrence can only find a parallel in the happenings at Jallianwalla Bagh under a martial law regime.

In spite of Sir Abdur Rahim's and Fazlul Huq's bitter criticism of the District Magistrate, Muslim public opinion remained avowedly anti-high-caste Hindus. Blandy, not the British government was singled out as the pro-Hindu, anti-Muslim element by the Muslims.

The Kulkati incident is an example of how local socio-economic factors could involve peasants in broader movements waged in the name of their religion, led primarily by the mullas and other members of the rural ashraf. There is hardly any reason to accept the view that the "Hindu-Muslim unity", shown in the anti-Union Board movement at Laukati, a village not far from Kulkati, under the leadership of Satin Sen in 1926, led the government to break this unity in accordance with its "divide and rule" policy. This assertion of Buddha-deva Bhattacharyya has not been authenticated. His under-emphasizing of the local Hindu Congress leaders' zamindar and bhadralok connections and some leaders' pro-Hindu and anti-Muslim bias, does not explain the situation. He, on the other hand, over-emphasized the anti-British nature of the Patuakhali Satyagraha (or passive resistance) against the government under the leadership of Congress leader,
Satin Sen, which continued up to 1928 in support of Hindus' right to play music on public roads, irrespective of the location of mosques.\textsuperscript{148}

Scores of incidents of communal disturbances in the countryside throughout the region during the period suggest that these were not only due to local socio-economic questions, but also due to the Muslim peasants’ growing awareness of their "racial superiority". The growth of Islamic studies among a section of the peasantry was partially responsible for arousing "religious enthusiasm" and "strict orthodoxy" among Muslim villagers.\textsuperscript{149} In this regard one may cite that after the United Province or U.P. (now Uttar Pradesh), East Bengal had the second highest number of graduates from the Deoband Madrassa, the most famous seminary of Indian Muslims\textsuperscript{150}, who held positions in thousands of mosques and madrassas throughout the region.

According to a high government official, by 1926, under the influence of Muslim marriage registrars or kazis, the "itinerant maulvis" and the so-called "semi-mad half-educated maulvis", Muslim peasants in general were no longer prepared to accept Hindu landlords and moneylenders as their superiors. Citing the report of the District Magistrate of Mymensingh, the official observed that behind the Hindu-Muslim conflict was "the economic rivalry of Hindu landlords and Muhammadan talukdars or jotedars".\textsuperscript{151} Communal disturbances in 1925-26 at Pingna in the Tangail sub-division of Mymensingh district, originating in an alleged aspersion upon the Prophet of Islam in a pamphlet issued by some local Hindus, and clashes between Hindu moneylenders and Muslim debtors in some Faridpur and Noakhali villages during the period are all said to have been organized by local mullas. Muslim organizations like the Tanzeem, Khademul Islam and Anjuman-i-Islamia with grassroots connections and ashraf-jotedar patronage were mainly instrumental in fomenting communal violence in the countryside.\textsuperscript{152}

The mobilization of the peasants on communal lines was facilitated by the obdurate attitude of high-caste Hindu politicians and landlord-moneylender classes, both those belonging to the "loyalist communal" organizations, like the Landholders' Association, and the "disloyal communalists", like the adherents of the Shuddhi-Sangathan and the Hindu Mahasabha. The radical anti-zamindar, anti-capitalist Hindu leaders failed to win over the Muslim masses as they did not have good contacts with the Muslims. The prevalent atmosphere of communal hatred made their task more difficult.

A few moderate nationalists like C.R. Das, and afterwards J.L. Banerjee and J.M. Sengupta, failed to contain the communal hysteria of the reactionaries and the communal-cum-class hatred of Muslim peasants towards their Hindu exploiters. Banerjee warned the Swarajist MLCs in vain in 1928 that if nothing was done to protect
peasant interests, a "mass conflagration" might begin to destroy the zamindars and others in power. Sengupta's warning in this regard also went unheeded. He wanted the Congress to do something to avert a civil war before freedom was attained, by adjusting the interests of the zamindars and their tenants. Instead many Congress MLCs tried their best to curtail the power of the well-to-do peasants including jotedars, by proposing motions to grant more concessions to the under-ryots and bargardars to the dismay of the Muslim jotedars. Sometimes Hindu bhadralok politicians, according to Abul Mansur Ahmed, encouraged ultra-leftism with a view to crushing the anti-zamindar movement of Muslim middle class leaders.

The Hindu bhadralok and zamindar attempts to differentiate the ryots into jotedars and under-ryots did not succeed. Firstly, because the Hindu upper classes did not have good contact with the lower peasantry. Secondly, as their co-religionists and "patrons", the jotedars had greater control over the under-ryots and bargardars. Last but not least the notion prevalent among the Muslim that they were the "havenots of Bengali society", belonging to an amorphous proja community vis-a-vis the Hindu landlords, must have absorbed their class consciousness into communalism. This facilitated the formation of a joint-front of the rich, middle and poor peasants under the ashraf-ulama-jotedar triumvirate against the Hindu zamindar-mahajan-bhadralok classes. This joint-front, a by-product of the lower peasantry's "false consciousness", was, to some extent, resembled the "third estate" of the pre-revolutionary France.

The crystallization of the jotedar-under-ryot front against the zamindar was also possible because of the impending decline in the power of the zamindar, as proposed by the Tenancy Act Amendment Bill, which was already on the anvil in the mid-1920s. After the "overarching power structure" with zamindars at the top had been weakened, the jotedars, whom the lower peasants saw as their more fortunate fellows-cum-patrons, moved into the "vacuum" left by the "retreating" zamindars, in the sense Wolf has used these words.

In short, the peasant insurgencies in the region during 1923-29, carried out in the name of religion, also indicate that the jotedar-zamindar conflict overshadowed the jotedar-under-ryot or jotedar-bargadar conflicts and this was possible only after the jotedar had succeeded in gaining the confidence of the ashraf and the lower peasantry. The ulama played a vital role in bridging the gap between the "religion of the sophisticated" and the "religion of the peasantry", which ultimately led to the formation of new ethics and values, having greater affinity with the religion of the "rustic" masses. This can be explained as a compromise between the scripture and popular beliefs, which is not altogether a new phenomenon in the
The external elements — the *ashraf* and the *ulama* — were very important in changing the outlook of the peasant. Under their influence he was first communalized. Then he was politicized.

### Notes

3. Ibid., 23 Feb. 1923.
6. *RAB*, 1922-23, p. X.
7. Ibid., 1925-6, pp. i-ii.
8. *HPF*, No., 689/1933 (1-3).
9. In 1907 a rural bard of Mymensingh praised the qualities of jute, as jute growers had better houses and were affluent in comparison with other cultivators. See Sugata Bose, "The Roots of 'Communal' Violence in Rural Bengal", p. 470.
20. The rates of interest on loans advanced by mahajans generally varied between 40 to 75 per cent. In some places about 80 per cent of peasants was in debt in the late 1920s. See O. Goswami, op.cit., pp. 342-3.
30. Ibid., 20 March 1923.
31. Ibid., 13 May 1923.
32. *RNPB*, week ending 5 May 1923, p. 355; *ABP*, April-May 1923.
33. *ABP*, 4 April 1923.
37. Shah Syed Imdadul Huque for example, being himself a zamindar, advocated the cause of the ryots and bargadars, including the abolition of abwab and pre-emptive rights of the zamindars. See *ABP, 17 April 1923*.
38. See *BLCP*, 1923-28, passim.
41. See Statesman, 8 Aug. 1928.
43. Statesman, 1 Dec. 1923; RAB, 1925-26, p. xix.
44. A. M. Ahmed, op.cit., p. 56.
49. Ibid., 23-29 Dec. 1923.
50. IQR, April-June 1924, pp. 415-17.
51. Ibid., p. 417.
52. ABP, 31 Dec. 1923.
53. Ibid., 6 Jan. and 18-19 March 1924.
54. See for details about the increase in illegal exactions by zamindars from tenants and mass ejection of non-occupancy tenants and sharecroppers by landlords during 1924-25 apprehending the "expropriatory" nature of the Tenancy Bill, RLRAB, 1924-25, p. 14.
55. IQR, 1924, Vol. I, pp. 666-70
56. RAB, 1924-25, p. xi.
58. HPF, No. 25/1924.
59. Abdel Karim Ghuznavi (zamindar), Syed Nawab Ali Chaudhury (zamindar) and Syed Erfan Ali (barrister and president of the Bengal Central Ryot Association) opposed the enfranchisement of peasants by the Act of 1919. See for details Report of the Reforms Enquiry Committee 1924, Appendix No. 5, pp. 210-11, 221, 238.
60. HPF, No 219/1924 (9).
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid.
64. See for details RNPB, week ending 23 June 1923, pp. 514-15; week ending 6 Sept. 1924, p. 809.
65. Muslim Hitaishi, 3 Oct. 1924.
68. Ibid., 8 and 12 Dec. 1926, 4, 5, 18 and 22 Feb. 1927.
70. Nawab Khwaja Habibullah and Maharaja Shashi Kanta Acharya were prominent opponents of the Simon Commission. See ABP, 8 Dec. 1927.


75. *ABP*, 5 Jan 1926.

76. Ibid., 8 Jan. 1927.


78. *ABP*, 1926-28, passim.

79. Ibid., 1 Jan. 1928.


83. Ibid.


85. R. Ahmed, op.cit., passim; M. Ahmad Khan, op.cit., passim; Interview with Maulana Tarkabagish.


87. Ibid.


89. *ABP*, 24-25 Nov. 1926.

90. Ibid., 24-26 Nov. 1926.

91. *RAB, 1925-26*, p. xix.

92. *ABP*, 5 and 16 Nov. 1926.


96. In Jessore, Bakarganj and Faridpur the Namasudras constituted about 15 to 30 per cent of the total population. In these districts the Farazi and Tayyuni ulama were quite influential over the Muslim peasants. In Rajshahi, Dinajpur and Rangpur the "Wahhabi" ulama were powerful in some areas.

97. See *Jessore, Faridpur and Bakarganj SSR*.


103. *HPF, F112-IV-26/1926*. 
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104. Ibid.
111. GI, *HPF*, No. 25/1923,
113. Ibid., 27 Dec. 1923.
114. Ibid., 28 March 1924.
119. Ibid., p. 74.
120. Ibid.
123. See "Report on Communal Situation in Bengal", *HPF*, No. 516/1926 (1-4); A petition by Radhica Bhushan Ray (zamindar of Tarash, Pabna), Jnanada Govindo Chowdhury (zamindar of Tantibond) and others to the acting Governor of Bengal, 18 Sept., 1926, "Hindu-Mussalman Disturbances in Pabna, 1926", *HPF*, No. 317/1926.
126. W.A. Marr, Commissioner, Rajshahi Division to A.N. Moberly, Chief Secretary, GB, 10 July 1926, *HPF*, No. 317/1926.
129. *ABP*, 4 March 1926.
130. *HPF*, No. 25/May 1924.
131. *ABP*, 2 April 1924.
132. Ibid., 30-31 Jan 1926.
133. Ibid., 17 Feb. 1926.
134. Ibid., 12 Feb. 1926.
135. Ibid., 11 Feb. 1927.
136. Ibid., 1 March 1927.
137. Ibid., 2 March 1927; *HPF*, No. 140/1927.
138. *ABP*, 5 and 8 March 1927.
139. Ibid., 16 Feb. 1927.
140. Ibid., 15 Feb. 1927.
141. Ibid., 3 and 6 March 1927; Interview with B.D. Habibullah.
143. *ABP*, 10 March 1927; Interview with B.D. Habibullah.
144. Interview with B.D. Habibullah.
145. *ABP*, 6, 8 and 10 March 1927.
146. Ibid., 10 March 1927.
147. See B. Bhattacharyya, op.cit., p. 130.
148. Ibid., pp. 128-51.
149. A.N. Moberly, Chief Secretary GB, to H.G. Haig, Secretary GI, 4 Nov. 1926, HPF, No. 516/1926.
150. See B. Metcalf, op.cit., p. 110.
151. Moberly to Haig, HPF, No. 516/1926.
159. Here "estates" can be interpreted as "social collectives to mean groups of individuals or families, who are tied to one another by virtue of shared traditions or because of their common interests and their common perspective". Estates are "communal collective" while classes are "societal collectives". See for details F. Toennies, "Estates and Classes", pp. 49-50.
160. See E. Wolf, *Peasants*, p. 16.
161. See for details about the religions of the "sophisticated" and the peasants ibid., pp. 105-6.
Rebellion to Conciliation: The Capitulation of the Krishak and the Ascendancy of the Proja, 1929-36

"Since the Hindus are running the Congress, a Hindu organization, with a non-communal name, we will also run the Proja Party, a Muslim organization, with a non-communal name."

— Maulana Akram Khan

I

The period between 1929 and 1936 was extremely eventful and significant so far as the involvement of peasants in the politics of the region was concerned. This period witnessed not only large scale immiseration of the peasantry, especially the poor ones including the wage labourers, due to the Great Depression, but also the Civil-Disobedience Movement under the leadership of Gandhi. The emergence of the All-Bengal Proja Party, which signalled the formal appearance of the projas in the arena of "peasant politics", was another important event of the period. Contrary to the observations of Cantwell Smith and Bipan Chandra that during the "high tide" of the anti-imperialist struggle of the Indians, communal antagonisms were forgotten and communal distinctions suspended, this period witnessed the further polarization of the masses on communal lines — and nowhere more than among the peasants of East Bengal. As in the previous five years, 1929-36 also saw communal violence, looting of village markets and moneylenders’ property, attacks on zamindars’ property and their agents by Muslim peasants. Yet this period had some glaring dissimilarities from the previous one. A plethora of evidence suggest that in some areas the peasants were not solely motivated by communal propaganda but also responded to the nationalists’ appeal to boycott the British Raj. Due to the predominance of the ulama, rural ashraf and the jotedar leaders, the short-lived anti-British attitude of the peasants in certain districts which could develop into "peasant nationalism", was transformed into an anti-high-caste Hindu movement.

The mobilization of the peasants on class lines in some districts by the communists and other radical groups, is also an important
aspect of peasant politics during 1929-36. It had a long lasting impact on the subsequent politics of the peasants and of the region in the 1940s. During 1929-36 attempts to peasant mobilization on class lines did not change the overall leadership pattern of peasant movements in the region — the *ulama-jotedar-proja* triumvirate continued to play the most important role in the arena of rural politics.

In spite of several major and numerous minor agrarian riots in the countryside during the period, it was one of the gradual ascendancy of legislative or constitutional politics, replacing the militant, so-called pre-political methods on the part of the peasants. The constitutional *proja* movement, led by the well-to-do peasants and tenure-holders, who as tenants or *projas* of the *zamindars*, and as landlords or *jotedars* of the *under-ryots*, created the myth of a monolithic *proja* community among the lower echelon of the peasantry. Each piece of legislation with bearings on agrarian problems increased the social prestige, political viability and reliability of these leaders, the self-proclaimed "initiators" of such legislation, among the lower peasantry. With its extensive patronage of the *proja* movement and successful projection of itself as the sole champion of the Muslim and Namasudra masses, the government succeeded in convincing the bulk of the peasants and their leaders about the efficacy of constitutional politics. The nationalists lost support among the peasants not only for their landlord-moneylender connections, but also for their opposition to the local self-governing institutions and to the widening of the franchise. The arrival of the communists at the scene was also untimely. They were mostly high-caste Hindus and went to the peasants when they had already been antagonized by other high-caste Hindus in the post-Khilafat days. The communists' avowed anti-religious stand and anti-communist propaganda by the government, *ulama*, *ashraf* and *jotedars* took the wind out of their sails.

This period signalled a distinct phase in the politicization of the peasants, although mobilization of the lower-peasants — *krishaks* or cultivators — by the upper peasants was not a new phenomenon in the region. However, the differences in the approach of the leaders from the previous periods and peasants' response from below, were sometimes subtle and sometimes quite striking. The leaders for the first time came forward with programmes, incorporating demands like the abolition of the *zamindari* and moneylending (or *mahajani*) systems, the introduction of free and compulsory primary education for the children of the peasants and tenancy laws for the benefit of the tenantry. The most striking aspect of the peasants' political behaviour by the end of the period was their gradual acceptance of legislative and constitutional politics as the best way to redress their socio-economic grievances.
The contradictory information regarding the economic conditions of different categories of peasants, landlords and the non-agricultural population during the Depression is often misleading. Several sources inform us that economic distress and scarcity were "not known" among the peasants in general, as many of them were able to afford to live under tin roofs and used an "amazing quantity of cheap luxuries." Some contemporary experts on the land revenue administration argued that the tenantry as a whole was in comfort as only about four to five per cent of the value of the crops was paid as rent.

Citing the Survey and Settlement Reports, the Royal Commission on Agriculture tried to establish that as the government received only 0.4 per cent and the landlords about five per cent of the gross agricultural products, the cultivators were not necessarily wretched — one-half of them lived "in comfort" and only about four per cent were in want. The same Report, however, reveals that the intermediate class between "comfort" and "positive want" — about 46 per cent of the peasants — was "the most heavily indebted" and that the class in "comfort" was not free from debt either. The average annual per capita income of peasants was between 29 and 60 rupees, the corresponding minimum requirement was between 48 and 56 rupees, which underscores the plight of the poor peasants during the period. The reports of large numbers of suicides by hungry peasants in the early 1930s throughout the region, substantiates the view.

Despite some writings on the zamindars' and big landowners' "plight", based on the decline in revenue collection from the zamindars by the government from an average of 98.4 per cent of the assessment to 89.6 percent in the 1930s, the decline in revenue collection from the cultivators in estates directly controlled by the government was much higher. It was only 40.11 per cent in 1932-33. This suggests that the zamindars continued to exert pressure on their tenants in efforts to collect their dues in spite of the bad harvest and the slump in prices of agricultural products. This, however, led to further deterioration in the already tense tenant-zamindar relationship as the former "felt the payment of one rupee more than they had felt the payment of Rs 3 in years when the prices of jute and paddy were normal." The relationship was further aggravated as most zamindars continued to extract abwab from their tenants during the Depression. After the first signs of the Depression, the price of jute fell from Rs 63 per bale in April 1929 to Rs 57 in June and Rs 35 in July. By 1933 one bale would not fetch more than Rs 15, which was even less than the cost of production. According to the secretary, the Bengal Board of Revenue: "Distress was worst in the jute growing districts, which owing to half a century of prosperity are densely
The Depression, in short, hit the peasants hard. During the slump, many *ryoti* holdings passed to the moneylenders and rich peasants who, after acquiring these holdings at a nominal price, in many cases sublet them to the original tenants on produce rents. What Binay Chaudhuri has termed "depeasantization" of the peasants, after they had lost their holdings by distress sales and mortgages, was higher in the densely populated districts of Tippera, Noakhali, Mymensingh and Dacca than in the relatively thinly populated ones. All sections of the agricultural population did not suffer uniformly during the Depression. There were again, sub-regional variations in the degree of distress. While in Bakarganj, Chittagong, Dacca, Faridpur, Khulna, Noakhali, Pabna and Tippera, on the average, 64.3 per cent of the cultivating families had less than two acres of land, in Bogra, Dinajpur, Jessore, Mymensingh, Rajshahi and Rangpur, the corresponding figure was 27.8 per cent. This suggests that the former group of districts had the largest concentration of poor peasants in the region.

Districts like Tippera, Noakhali, Chittagong and Jessore having fewer sharecroppers, on the other hand, had the greatest concentration of independent, hence politically active, peasants in the region. These factors also determined the nature of peasant politics in different subregions during the period. Putting aside the economic distress of the peasants during the Depression, the prevalent political situation of the sub-continent played an important role in shaping the politics of the peasants in East Bengal.

The government had special reasons to be apprehensive of the nationalist movement during the early 1930s, as Civil-Disobedience was becoming powerful in the countryside and smaller towns. Peasants were not totally immune to nationalist propaganda, especially in the Hindu-dominated districts. The government was soon disillusioned with the Hindu *zamindars'* reliability as a class to protect the interests of the Raj, after many of them had supported the Swarajya Party by contesting the Council elections of 1923 as candidates of the Party. The "Swaraj funds" were mainly raised by donations from the *zamindars* in Bengal.

Consequently the government was pursuing an anti-nationalist policy by enacting pro-peasant laws, which directly threatened the power base of the Hindu *zamindar-bhadralok* classes, the allies of the nationalists in the region. The recommendations of the Indian Statutory Commission in 1930, which considered that, while the abolition of the *zamindari* system would only entail an annual loss of ten million rupees to the government, it would immensely benefit the
cultivators of Bengal,¹⁹ might have further emboldened the anti-zamindar jotedars and lower peasants.

The government by then was also convinced that so far as their voting pattern was concerned the peasants in Bengal were subject to the influence and coercion of the landlords and moneylenders. It held that they had voted in the 1920s in favour of influential people rather than in favour of any political party. It, however, noticed the growth of communalism or hatred towards Hindus in general among Muslim peasants after the communal disturbances of 1926.²⁰ From the subsequent events it appears that the government wanted to strengthen the hands of the peasants by exploiting their anti-zamindar sentiment.

During these days of communal and class conflicts between the Hindus and Muslims of the region, and when Civil-Disobedience and the "terrorist" activities were at its peak, the government had to side with the anti-nationalist, anti-terrorist groups, who mostly represented the Muslims and peasants in East Bengal. It ignored the appeals of the pro-government Hindu zamindars and bhadralok, who were opposing the extension of the franchise to the middle peasants. The zamindars were especially perturbed at the idea of granting greater representation to the talukdars and jotedars in the local self-governing institutions. Their greatest concern was that this would give the peasants "a permanent majority" in the Legislative Council, which would do "uncalculable harm" to the cause of the zamindars.²¹ Some bhadralok suggested that a "no representation without taxation" policy be adopted to restrict the return of a large number of Muslims in the local and District Board offices.²² The Hindu bhadralok opposition to the extended enfranchisement of the Muslims and their "greater" representation in the elected offices further embittered Hindu-Muslim and peasant-landlord relationship.

The government, which by the end of 1928 had been perturbed by the "seditious" speeches of Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Bose, was further alarmed by the growth in communist activities in 1929.²³ The formal beginning of Civil-Disobedience under the leadership of Gandhi in December 1929 at the Congress session in Lahore, stirred the masses throughout the sub-continent. The declaration of 26 January 1930 as "Independence Day" by the Congress, added fuel to the mass agitation, although the government decided not to interfere with the celebrations of the day.²⁴

Although Civil-Disobedience had considerable success in urban Calcutta and rural Midnapore,²⁵ in East Bengal the movement had little impact on the peasant masses. Here the armed resistance to the Raj by the supporters of the Jugantar, Anushilan and other extremist groups posed the greatest threat to the government for their contacts
with the rural masses through their *ashrams* or sanctuaries. The so-called terrorists and the "rural Gandhian" were, however, more concerned with mobilizing Hindu youths. Their connections with the trader and moneylender families, and their opposition to socialism and support for the caste and *zamindari* systems confined their activities mainly to the high-caste Hindu *bhadralok*.²⁶

But soon the leading communist leaders of India, including Muzaffar Ahmed of Bengal, were implicated in the anti-state Meerut conspiracy case in 1929 and were put behind bars. In prison, they converted many "terrorist" fellow prisoners into communists.²⁷ This later influenced the course of peasant movement in the region. In some districts, peasants were being mobilized by the communists to the chagrin of the government and the well-to-do classes. So both the government and the Hindu as well as Muslim *bhadralok* classes tried to neutralize the effects of the Congress radicals under Subhas Bose and the communists. The political understanding between the Subhas group, which had the support of the "Big Five", Nirmal Chandra Chunder, Dr Bidhan Roy, Nalini Ranjan Sarkar, Sarat Chandra Bose and Tulsi Charan Goswami,²⁸ and some communists, became an additional source of trouble for the government. Meanwhile, the Workers' and Peasants' Party had been formed in 1927, under the leadership of Muzaffar Ahmed, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Hemanta Kumar Sarkar and others, who had close connections with the peasants. This party was opposed to the government as well as the indigenous landlords and capitalists. Under the influence of the party peasants in some places became aware of communism and openly talked about Lenin and the Bolshevik Revolution.²⁹ The growth of communist activities was so intensified in the region by early 1930s that poet Rabindranath Tagore, himself a *zamindar*, registered his concern at the growing influence of the "Bolsheviks and Fascists" in East Bengal, who wanted to "crush the *zamindars*" and "kill the mahajans."³⁰

This was the period when due to the partial success of the Congress in mobilizing peasant support for the Civil-Disobedience Movement in certain districts, militant activities of peasants and Hindu *bhadralok* "terrorism", which culminated in the Chittagong Armoury Raid in April 1930 under the leadership of Surjya Sen, The government was losing control in the *mofussil*. The Congress under Gandhi was worried at the turn of the events following the initiation of Civil-Disobedience. The morale of the police and civil servants was on the wane. Many Indian civil servants felt uneasy as to their fate when *swaraj* would come.³¹ One experienced government official observed in 1931 that the police were hardly feared by the masses: "Where one *lal puggree* [red turban, meaning an Indian policeman] was enough to do a job of work a few years ago, ten are required now."³²
The Congress under Gandhi as usual was prepared to go only "part of the way towards introducing part of the masses to certain aspects of politics," apprehending violent mass upsurge throughout the subcontinent.

Despite the concern of the Congress leaders to mobilize the masses against the government alone and oppose all attempts to movements against zamindars and capitalists, the peasants under the leadership of local Congress leaders and leaders of different other political and religious organizations drifted away from the Congress path of non-violent Civil-Disobedience. The sub-regional variations in the agrarian relations and nature of leadership were responsible for the different types of peasant movements during the period. In the zamindar-dominated districts, peasants could be easily mobilized against the zamindars and in favour of the government by the Muslim and Namasudra leaders of the pro-government proja associations. But where zamindars were not dominant, their movement could be turned as easily against the government as against capitalists, depending on the nature of leadership.

II

Though there is evidence to support the general assertion that "the Muslims in general were against the Civil-Disobedience Movement," Muslim peasants, along with Namasudras, took part in the movement at different places. The peasant leaders, including those belonging to the clandestine Communist Party of India, went to the countryside with a view to mobilizing peasant support for Civil-Disobedience and national freedom. Some of them, however, were against Civil-Disobedience and put forward programmes of radical land reform and anti-moneylender measures. Due to the anti-zamindar and anti-mahajan programme of the communist and Congress-socialist workers, who also supported Civil-Disobedience, in areas where zamindars were predominant, many peasants were attracted to the nationalist camp. In Mymensingh, for example, Dhiren Goswami, Nirad Chakravarty, Moni Singh, Nagen Sarkar and some leading Hindu communist leaders, who mostly represented high-caste Hindu bhadralok, organized Civil-Disobedience in the countryside. The first batch of swaraj volunteers who were arrested in the district, included communist leader Rabi Neogi and some landless tribal peasants. The CPI, the Young Comrade League, founded in 1929 by the communists of the region, and the Anushilan and Jugantar groups fought together in Mymensingh. Many Muslim peasants of Mymensingh joined the Young Comrade League for its anti-zamindar programme. Abdul Jalil,
a poor Muslim peasant of the district, was an influential leader of the group.35

Despite the Muslim ashraf's and pro-government ulama's opposition to Civil-Disobedience, the active support of a large number of Muslim and tribal peasants was behind the success of the anti-Union Board and anti-Chaukidari movement of the Congress and its leftist allies in some parts of rural Mymensingh. In parts of Netrokona and Tangail sub-divisions some Union Board office-bearers were forced to resign and successful hartals were observed at different places. Peasants picketed in front of liquor, opium and ganja shops and burnt British cloth in hats and rural bazaars. After the arrest of Gandhi, picketings and hartals were observed in small village markets and trading centres. Some peasant volunteers, also known as "Gandhi's volunteers" (or volantys among masses), burnt down post offices and other government offices in the interior of Mymensingh.36

But soon, under the influence of the Mymensingh District Anjuman-i-Islamia, the anti-Civil-Disobedience Movement began gathering momentum throughout the district. Bad blood between the Muslims and Hindus in the urban and rural areas of the district soon weakened the base of Civil-Disobedience.37 The active opposition of the ashraf and the ulama was soon followed by the terrible Hindu-Muslim riots in the countryside of Kishoreganj sub-division, which will be discussed later. From the sudden reversal in the role of the Muslim peasants vis-a-vis Civil-Disobedience in Mymensingh, it appears that they were chiefly attracted to the movement for its anti-zamindar, anti-moneylender character, which was, to a great extent, a local variation of the movement in the district. They joined the Muslim communal group, represented by the ulama and the ashraf, for its emphasis on alleviating the economic distress of the peasants. These leaders opposed the Hindu bhadralok-sponsored Civil-Disobedience, which was said to have been responsible for the slump in prices of the crops.38

So far as peasants' support for the Civil-Disobedience in zamindar-dominated areas was concerned, there might be some truth in the government version of the story that the peasants supported the movement under pressure from their Hindu landlords.39 The wavering attitude of the peasants is well reflected in their behaviour in parts of rural Bakarganj, where earlier the Muslim and Namasudra peasants had supported Civil-Disobedience only to withdraw at the behest of the Muslim leaders. In Pirojpur sub-division, for example, about 800 peasants participated in an anti-Civil-Disobedience protest meeting in late 1930.40 In a large public meeting at Barisal town in June 1930, presided over by Fazlul Huq, Muslim and Namasudra masses took a vow to oppose Civil-Disobedience.41 Reports of increasing Congress activities in parts of Bhandaria, Bhola, Pirojpur and Swarupkathi in
mid-1931 suggest that the Namasudra and Muslim peasants were forced to join the Congress movement by the Hindu haoladars (jotedars) and zamindars, who were predominant in these places. The Muslim peasants' support for the movement in Pirojpur was also due to the influence of some local Jamiat-ul-Ulama leaders who openly supported the movement. Elsewhere in the district the peasants were "solidly anti-Congress."

In parts of Bogra, Pabna and Dinajpur, in the north-western sub-region, where peasants had been mostly inert and passive politically in the 1930s, some peasants supported the Civil-Disobedience Movement. But their support was mainly motivated by economic reasons and by the ulama and other Muslim leaders who joined the Congress movement. They especially supported the anti-jute cultivation campaign due to the low price of the crop and the anti-liquor, anti-opium movement for religious reasons. But many of them soon started opposing Civil-Disobedience as it required students to leave schools. They were also opposed to participation of women in public meetings and demonstration. The well-to-do peasants, who had tax and cess obligations to the government, continued to withhold their dues throughout the northern sub-region. It is, however, difficult to agree with the government informer that the non-payment of taxes was solely due to the peasants' desire to paralyse the government. The Depression might have encouraged them to do so, while Civil-Disobedience emboldened them and provided them with an excuse to evade payments.

The relatively independent occupancy ryots and jotedars of Rajshahi and Chittagong divisions, who were not cowed by the zamindars, it seems, supported the no-tax movement for economic as well as political reasons. Many poor and middle peasants, who had no tax obligations to the government, even shouted anti-government and pro-Gandhi slogans during the early 1930s in parts of Rajshahi division. "Desher joinno lorte hobe, phanshi kashte jhulte hobe", or "We will have to fight for our country and sacrifice ourselves to the gallows", was a common slogan in the countryside of Rajshahi.

The peasants' involvement in the nationalist movement, it seems, depended very much on the attitude of the local Congress and other nationalist leaders towards peasant participation in the movement, and not vice versa. The peasants in general, hardly had any inhibitions about joining a particular brand of leaders if they promised better socio-economic and political prospects for them. Wherever the Congress interest coincided with that of the peasants and did not conflict with that of the local elites, the peasants were mobilized on nationalist lines. The Bandabila anti-Union Board satyagraha in Jessore and the Brikutsa satyagraha in Rajshahi illustrate this.
Some local leaders, as well as nationalist leaders of Subhas Bose’s stature, were behind the Bandabila anti-Union Board movement. Muslim and Namasudra peasants of the village were convinced by Bijoy Chandra Roy and other local Congress leaders of Jessore that since C.R. Das had established the Palli Sanskar Samity (or the Rural Reconstruction Society) to look after the rural development works, the Union Boards were useless and oppressive as peasants were required to pay taxes to the Boards. Consequently peasants boycotted the first two elections held in 1928 to form a Union Board at Bandabila. In the first election only about ten per cent of peasants cast their votes, in the second one none exercised their suffrage.47 By early 1929 the success of the boycott of elections emboldened the Congress leaders so much that they started a no-tax movement in the locality. In spite of the formation of a Union Board by government nominated office bearers, with Haridas Gangopadhyay as the president, most villages, including the chaukidars and dafadars, non-co-operated with the Board fearing ostracization. Prominent Muslim leaders like Ismail Hossain Siraji and Jalaluddin Hashemy, and local leaders, mostly semi-educated villagers like Thanda Khan, Sona Mia, Abdul Maulvi and scores of upper-caste Hindu and Namasudras led the peasants. Krishna Binode Roy was the most prominent among the communists who led the movement.48

By October 1929 the government took retaliatory and persuasive actions. Several arrests were made and the cattle and other movable property of the tax-withholders were put up for auction by the government in the village. But due to the solidarity of the peasants, not a single bidder came forward from among the villagers.49 By early 1930, the movement spread to the neighbouring villages, where the peasants decided not to pay any taxes to the government until the Union Boards were withdrawn from their localities.50 The movement, however, did not last long. From March 1930 it was fading away and soon it fizzled out totally. It is difficult to agree with Bhattarcharyya that the movement died out because of the impending Civil-Disobedience Movement,51 since non-payment of taxes and boycott of government offices were important aspects of Civil-Disobedience. The movement fizzled out because most peasants were not benefitting from the no-tax campaign as they had no tax or cess obligation to the government. Many peasants instead withheld rents to the zamindars and interest payments to the mahajans, who were quite preponderant in Jessore. This may have alarmed the high-caste Hindu bhadralok leaders, who had zamindari and mahajani interests. The employment of maulvis and pirs by the government to dissuade the Muslim masses from the movement might have worked.52 What is striking here was the opposition of Syed Nausher Ali, a renowned Congress and Proja leader of the district and the Chairman of the
District Board. Along with some other Muslim Proja Party leaders he opposed the anti-Union Board movement of the Congress.\(^{53}\) The Proja and Namasudra leaders' advocacy of the Union Boards as "checks upon the collection of abwab" by zamindars,\(^{54}\) probably influenced the peasants to withdraw their support from the satyagraha. The growing solidarity between the Namasudra and Muslim peasants of Jessore, which led to the demand for tebhaga — or two-thirds of the crops — by the sharecroppers in parts of Jessore, Khulna and Faridpur as early as in May 1929,\(^{55}\) discouraged the high-caste Hindu leaders from further arousing the peasants. The resurgence of the movement for higher social status and for the right to enter temples among the Namasudras in the early 1930s\(^{56}\) was certainly a dissuasive factor so far as the high-caste Hindu bhadralok's interest in the mobilization of the Namasudras was concerned. By then, it seems, the Proja and Namasudra leaders' growing faith in government-sponsored constitutional methods as possible remedies of the grievances of the peasants, pricked the shortlived bubble of boycott and no-tax at Bandabila and elsewhere in the region.

The case of the Brikutsa satyagraha shows how the peasants could be mobilized by the high-caste Hindu bhadralok leaders of the Congress when the issue was the curtailment of the power of the zamindars. The Muslim peasants of Brikutsa village in Rajshahi district were mobilized against the local Hindu zamindar by some leading Hindu Congress leaders, including Satish Chandra Dasgupta, the "Gandhi of Bengal", Panchanan Banerjee and Provas Chandra Lahiry. They organized a satyagraha or mass boycott of the zamindar in 1931.\(^{57}\) It is interesting that Dasgupta, who had defended the zamindari system and believed in the attainment of socialism through the caste system,\(^{58}\) expressed his solidarity with the Brikutsa peasants. This was possible because the zamindar concerned was an opponent of the Congress having strong support from the District Magistrate of Rajshahi.\(^{59}\)

The movement against the zamindar, Panchanan Banerjee, and his son, Bireswar Banerjee, became so intense that as at Bandabila, peasants here refused to bid in the auction of the attached property of peasants and their leaders. Their main demands were the abolition of abwab and rent enhancements, and more secure rights over their holdings. Their obduracy against the zamindar led to government interference in the matter to settle the dispute. Ultimately the peasants achieved most of their demands through government interference.\(^{60}\)

The peasants certainly felt obliged to the government for intervening to relieve them from the exactions of the zamindar. Though the peasants warmly responded to the non-violent programme of the
Congress and adopted khaddar and charkha to some extent, their primary concern was to get rid of the exacting zamindar. Before the Congress developed any link with the peasants of the locality, the peasants had gone to the local Congress leaders urging them to lead their movement against the zamindar. The Congress succeeded in mobilizing them, firstly, because the zamindar had close links with the government and opposed the Congress; secondly, because the communal question did not pose any threat to the mobilization of the Muslim peasants by the Hindu Congress leaders as the Hindu zamindar whom they confronted happened to be the common enemy of both the Muslim peasants and their Hindu leaders. One is not sure how the Congress leaders of the region would have responded to the invocation of the peasants had the zamindar concerned been a supporter of the Congress. The Brikutsa satyagraha and some other anti-zamindar movements of the peasants in parts of north-western East Bengal reveal that the peasants were primarily interested in getting a better socio-economic deal than in achieving the elusive swaraj, as promised by the Congress. By 1931, many ordinary cultivators in the sub-region — those of the Tepa zamindari estate in Rangpur, for example — believed that since they had been "practically maintaining" the zamindars, the latter had some obligations to pay back some of the money to the tenants during the hard days of the slump.

It is difficult to establish from the boycott of British goods in several hats of Pabna district by the peasants, and in some cases, the acts of looting and arson which destroyed hats mostly owned by local zamindars, that they were solely motivated by the Civil-Disobedience. The pro-Congress ulama, chiefly Maulana Abdullahil Baki, Maulana Abdullahil Kafi and Asaduddaula Siraji might have attracted many Muslim peasants to the Civil-Disobedience Movement in the north-western subregion, but so far as the peasants’ enthusiasm for the no-rent movement was concerned, which far exceeded their interest in Civil-Disobedience, it appears that they were prepared to support a Congress programme as long as it coincided with their aspirations to better socio-economic rights vis-a-vis the zamindars and mahajans. But when their interests conflicted with those of the Congress party, they did not hesitate to collaborate with the government or other anti-Congress forces with a view to attaining their goals.

From the subsequent political developments in the countryside, especially among the Muslim villages, it appears that the "Frontier Gandhi", Abdul Ghaffar Khan, was correct about the Muslim peasants of the region. After addressing several peasant meetings in 1934 in the region he held that: "it only needed someone to light up the spark of life that was still alive." Unfortunately for the Hindu nationalists, who mostly had connections with the landed gentry and the money-
lenders of the region, it was the Muslim jotedars — who were the forerunners of the Proja Party — the ashraf and the ulama, all who had the direct or indirect blessing of the government, kindled that "spark of life."

The lower peasantry had hardly any genuine interest in the socio-economic conflicts between the advanced Hindu upper classes and the rising Muslim middle classes. The attempts of the government, the ashraf-jotedar and the Hindu zamindar-bhadralok classes to knead the dough to their own advantage by using the countryside as the kneading-trough had their respective effects on the political behaviour of the lower peasantry. Excepting a handful of politicians who believed in the efficacy of violence as a means to attain their political objectives, constitutional politics of most politicians was replacing the so-called pre-political methods of agitation among the lower peasantry during the period. With a few exceptions in the middle-peasant dominated areas, the middle and poor peasants throughout the period were pulling the rope for their patrons in their tug-of-war with their rivals.

III

The government took several measures to immunize the masses from the nationalist, communist and "terrorist" propaganda, even before the inception of Civil-Disobedience. In the 1930s it increasingly mobilized them as a deterrent to the Congress and the Communist Parties. These measures can be broadly classified as legislative, executive and demonstrative.

Among the legislative measures, which directly concerned the cultivators or were deemed beneficial to the peasants by their leaders, were the Bengal Rural Primary Education Act, 1930; the Bengal Moneylenders’ Bill, 1932; the Bengal Municipal Act Amendment Bill, 1932; the Bengal Local Self-Government Amendment Bill, 1933 and the Government of India Act, 1935. The "Communal Award" announced by the British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald on 16 August 1932, was a precursor to the Act of 1935. It caused great resentment among the Hindu bhadralok and the zamindars as it curtailed their power in the proposed Legislative Assembly of Bengal. Insofar as Bengal was concerned — the Award granted 120 seats to the Muslim community, 30 to the Scheduled Castes and 10 for the Depressed Classes in an Assembly of 250 members. The Rural Primary Education Act of 1930 infuriated the Hindu zamindars and bhadralok so much that Kumar Shib Shekhareswar Roy, a Hindu minister of the Government of Bengal, who was a big zamindar, resigned his post in protest. Though most Hindu members of the Bengal Legislative Council opposed the Bill on the pretext that its enactment would require the
zamindars to pay 1.5 pice per rupee as an education cess along with the revenue, in actuality they did not like the proposition to grant free primary education to the peasants. The issue incited communal bitterness. The Legislative Council as well as the broad political arena of Bengal was sharply divided on communal lines — the Muslims in favour of the Bill and the Hindus opposed to it. According to a government report: "The real cleavage was between tenants and landlords."

The Municipal Act Amendment Bill and the Self-Government Bill, like the Primary Education Bill, incurred the displeasure of the high caste Hindu in general because they reserved seats for the Muslims and Namasudras in the municipalities and other local-self governing bodies. The Moneylenders' Bill also caused great resentment among the Hindu bhadralok on account of its proposed restrictions on the prevalent exorbitant rates of interest.

By 1934 the strained relations between the indebted peasants and the creditors led to several violent attacks on moneylenders in the interior of almost every district. In Tippera the local Krishak Samity leaders mobilized the peasants against the moneylenders. Aziz Ahmad, the Subdivisional Officer of Chandpur, took initiatives to settle the disputes between the creditors and the debtors through government machinery. This led to the formation of Debt Arbitration Boards in the subdivision in 1934. By 1935 the Boards reduced the amount of debt by 52 per cent in the subdivision. Soon the government followed the example of Chandpur by establishing Debt Settlement Boards throughout the region. In accordance with the report of the Board of Economic Enquiry, the government enacted the Bengal Agricultural Debtor's Bill in December 1934 empowering the district officials to establish Debt Settlement Boards with a view to making "amicable agreements" between the debtors and creditors. According to a contemporary government report the act "expropriated" the rights of the creditors and "jeopardized" the security of the landlords. The zamindars, mahajans and the Hindu bhadralok in general disliked the establishment of the Boards, while the Muslim politicians and the peasants in general were quite enthusiastic about the act.

Of all the legislative measures, the Government of India Act in 1935, was the bitterest pill for the hitherto dominant Hindu bhadralok. The enlargement of the electorate by about 600 per cent in Bengal, enfranchising four new Muslims to three new Hindus, and the reduction of the urban weightage reaffirming the Communal Award by granting 120 seats to the Muslims and 30 to the Scheduled Castes in the Bengal Legislative Assembly of 250 members, greatly shocked and infuriated the high-caste Hindu bhadralok. The grant of the vote, at least down to the level of the well-to-do middle peasants, who paid
the *Chaukidari* tax or a Union rate of not less than six annas per year, not only raised their hope level, but also increased their self-confidence and trust in the patronage of the government. The Hindu *bhadralok* opposition to the act must have drawn the Muslim and Namasudra masses closer to the government and the *ashraf-jotedar* politicians. The Congress in Bengal hammered the last nail into the coffin of Hindu-Muslim unity by opposing the Communal Award at the Dinajpur session of the Provincial Committee in April 1935. In spite of a "pronounced socialist atmosphere" and pro-peasant speeches by many Hindu leaders of the Congress, most Muslim delegates walked out of the session. These disillusioned Muslim Congress leaders later fortified the Muslim-cum-peasant camp against the Hindu-cum-landlord front.

As stated above, the government employed the officials along with a group of loyal *zamindars* and the office-bearers of the Union Boards to counteract the nationalist and "terrorist" activities. The *ulama* and the Union Board officials proved more effective than the *zamindars* and government officials in this regard. Both the Civil-Disobedience and the "terrorist" activities were dying out in the countryside by mid-1931.

Besides the government officials and other loyal elements in the interior, the government also employed a group of specially selected propaganda and publicity officers to counteract the nationalist propaganda in the rural areas of the region. They were sent to the remotest villages with magic lanterns, cinema slides and projectors to publicise the government measures taken in support of the rural masses. The villagers who attended in large numbers the magic lantern and cinema shows, were asked to support the Village Reconstruction Programme and the Union Boards, by the publicity offices or "lecturers." In many places the magic lanterns showed the "hard heartedness" of the village moneylenders and the greatness of the "benign government", which helped peasants with credit on liberal terms. These shows might have strengthened the pro-government and anti-*zamindar*, anti-*mahajan* sentiment of the peasants.

The Congress also sent propagandists to the countryside of Bengal with magic lantern slides and projectors. Their main theme was to portray the government as the sole exploiter of the masses. They also challenged the government assertion that the Indians were petty and incapable of inventing modern machinery. The Congress slides and propagandists, like the famous Jnananjan Neogi, not only preached the "drain theory" as the root of poverty and misery of the Indians, but also urged the villagers to support Civil-Disobedience and the movement for *swaraj* by boycotting the British offices and goods. They also urged them to remember the ideals of the martyrs like Khudi Ram and Jatin.
Mukherjee who were executed by the government, and the sacrifices of Shivaji, Gandhi, Garibaldi and Kamal Pasha of Turkey.\textsuperscript{76}

Some contemporary sources reveal that though peasants were attracted to the Congress magic lantern shows, the Congress propaganda was not so effective among the Muslim peasants, excepting in some parts of Tippera and Noakhali sub-region. The opposition of the Muslim jotedars and village headmen undermined the Congress propagators in capturing the imagination of the rural masses. The government propaganda was more effective because the publicity officers not only showed movies, which drew thousands of villagers to the shows, but also distributed good varieties of seeds, fertilizers, medicine and even tea leaves free of cost among the masses. The mullas and the Union Board office-bearers proved to be bulwarks of government strength even in Congress strongholds. The Village Reconstruction programme of the government had a much greater impact on the rural masses than the Congress propaganda for swaraj.\textsuperscript{77} In spite of the magic lantern propaganda and speeches of Congress workers in the countryside throughout the period, by 1936 only 16.5 per cent of peasants and workers in the district of Dinajpur supported the Congress — this being the highest in the whole of East Bengal. The second highest proportion of Congress supporters among the peasants and workers was in Jessore (5%). In Noakhali only one per cent of peasants and labourers supported the Congress. Elsewhere the Congress following in the agrarian population was either "negligible" or "nothing worth mentioning".\textsuperscript{78}

By early 1930s the Congress leaders had practically no control over the peasant masses in the region. The counter-insurgency of the government and the activities of some radical labour and peasant groups in the rural areas indicate that the Jugantar-Subhas Bose group and communists had some influence over the peasantry in certain districts where the Hindu zamindars were not preponderant. In parts of rural Noakhali and Tippera, under the influence of the Congress Socialists and communists, many peasants were convinced that there was no need to pay anything to anybody.\textsuperscript{79} But it is evident from some other sources that the peasants in the Tippera-Noakhali sub-region were primarily mobilized on class lines, hence the "only problem" causing any "real anxiety" to the government was the "inevitable clash" between the debtors and the moneylenders. Had nationalism been the main motivating force behind peasant insurgency in the sub-region, the government would not have shown sympathy with the indebted peasants.\textsuperscript{80}

However, in comparison with other districts, the Tippera-Noakhali sub-region witnessed more peasant activity on class and nationalist lines in the first half of the 1930s. Meanwhile, in other
districts localized small peasant organizations had been merged with the broad-based Proja Party. Peasant movement throughout the region was taking a communal turn under the leadership of the jotedars and the ulama, who engendered proja-cum-Muslim solidarity among all sections of the peasantry. Namasudra peasants, with a few exceptions, were also mobilized under the banner of the Proja Party against the high-caste Hindus. Soon the localized, independent krishak or cultivator organizations of the Tippera-Noakhali sub-region were virtually eclipsed by the newly emerging Proja Party. Though the Tippera Krishak Samity retained its name and its connections with the Congress Left and communists, in actuality the lower peasants were supporting Fazlul Huq and his Proja Party. Until the Proja Party got the blessing of the ashraf after the Legislative Assembly elections of 1937 (which will be discussed later), it maintained a working understanding with the pro-Congress Krishak Samity for the sake of political expediency. A detailed discussion of the transformation of the Tippera-Noakhali krishak movement into the proja or tenant movement of the region, requires an understanding of the political process which led to the formation of the Proja Party or the ascendancy of the well-to- peasants and jotedars and the ascendancy of communalism in the arena of peasant politics.

IV

The peasants' attitude towards landlordism and usurious moneylending by the mahajans, and their spontaneous response to nationalist, communist, krishak, proja and other groups suggests that this resulted mainly from their desire to get rid of exploitation. According to a government official at the beginning of the period under review, peasants in certain places questioned the legitimacy and utility of the zamindars as a class. Many peasants wanted to "teach them a lesson" by withholding rent. Some peasants were unhappy with the inadequacy, as they saw it of the measures taken by the government to improve communications, public health and education. They were also unhappy with some government officials for their behaviour. However, in spite of their dislike for some government officials and resentment at the inadequacy of the government's welfare measures, the peasants in general sought the help of the local officials and expected very little of their elected representatives prior to the formation of the Union Boards. After the gradual extension of the franchise, peasants developed a sense of belonging to the local self-governing bodies, and to a lesser extent, to the Legislative Council. By the mid-1920s, a section of the peasantry was grasping the idea that the Council members had some obligations to them as they could
replace them by their vote. "To this extent the political education of the people began", observes a government report.82

Without contradicting the argument that Hindu zamindar and bhadralok opposition to the enfranchisement of peasants and legislative measures to protect peasant interests led to the organization of anti-zamindar anti-mahajan peasant associations, the sudden intensity in peasant agitation was also due to the government design of extending "political education" to the masses.

Besides the extension of the franchise and the formation of the Union Boards, whose members were elected by villagers in joint-electorate system; through various legislative measures providing better tenancy rights and free primary education to the peasants, the government also promised further boons to them including the drastic measures to curtail the power of the moneylenders. Peasants learnt through their elected representatives and the pro-government Muslim leaders, mainly the ulama, ashraf and those connected with the local Anjuman-i-Islamias, about the "leniency" and "pro-peasant", "pro-Muslim" attitude of the government. In the 1930s, the government also strengthened its propaganda machinery. Government publicity officers and under-cover agents were active in the countryside, organizing magic-lantern and cinema shows, which drew large crowds. From the subsequent attitude of peasants in general, as reflected in the anti-moneylender riots of the 1930s, it appears that government propaganda, projecting itself as the friend of the peasants, was successful in winning over a large section of the peasantry.

Like some peasant organizations of the early 1920s, the Proja Party had the indirect blessing of the government. Thought peasants supported the anti-jute cultivation campaign of the Congress in 1929, when jute was fetching a low price, the chief organizers of the movement were Muslim and Namasudra leaders who would invariably speak against the zamindars and the mahajans. Meetings organized by the Congress and the Communist Party with purely anti-government programmes were poorly attended by the peasants.

Rich peasant (jotedar) and a few ashraf and local leaders like Rajibuddin Tarafdar of Bogra, Abdul Jabbar Palwan of Mymensingh, Maulvi Tamizuddin Khan of Faridpur, Jalaluddin Hashemy of Khulna, Syed Nausher Ali of Jessore, Maulana Akram Khan, Maulana Ismail Hossain Siraji, Maulvi Mujibur Rahman, Shamsuddin Ahmed and B.C. Mondal (Namasudra leader) were more successful in mobilizing peasant support than the high-caste Hindu Congress leaders.83

When peasants were actively supporting the anti-jute campaign of the Congress in 1929 which led to the sharp decline in jute acreage in parts of Pabna, Dacca, Mymensingh, Tippera and Jessore,84 pro-government politicians like Sir Abdur Rahim were busy mobilizing
peasant support for his Bengal Krishak and Ryot Sabha, which was originally a branch of the pro-zamindar Indian Association.85

In the case of the Namasudra peasants, there were also signs of great unrest against the high-caste Hindus from 1929 onwards. When the Namasudras of Munshiganj (Dacca) were observing a satyagraha against the high-caste Hindus at the local Kali temple to get the rights of temple entry in 1929, the government tacitly supported the Namasudras.86 By the mid-1929, Namasudra leaders had intensified their anti-high-caste Hindu campaign throughout East Bengal. Simultaneously, there had been a sharp increase in the anti-Hindu propaganda by some mullas and "self-made" Muslim leaders throughout the region.87 These campaigns were intensified, it seems, after the Congress Left and the Communist Party had come to an understanding with a view to organizing a "Bolshevik Revolution" in India.

The communist bogey seemed to be a real threat to the government after a large infiltration of communists into the All-Bengal Proja Samity, which had originally been formed by Sir Abdur Rahim, Maulana Akram Khan, Rajibuddin Tarafdar and Shamsuddin Ahmed in Bogra in 1925 with a view to protecting tenants' interests through "constitutional" means. After the Krishnanagar conference in 1926, the communists emerged as influential leaders of the Samity. There it was decided in February 1926 to form a separate organization for the actual cultivators or krishaks throughout Bengal. The Krishak Samities of Tippera and Noakhali were the most powerful ones. In Tippera, the Samities added the hammer and sickle to their red flags, as symbols of their solidarity with the Communist Party.88

The simmering disaffection of a section of the peasantry, which was under communist and Congress Left control, could be a real source of trouble for the government, especially after the proposed enactment of the Sarda Bill in 1930, which greatly perturbed both the Hindu and Muslim communities, for its proposed restrictions on child marriage. Muslim masses were urged by the ulama not to obey the Act. Protest meetings were held almost everywhere in the region.89 Peasants' resentment against the Bill is reflected in a folk song of the Rajbansi peasants of the northern districts:

২, রে আইনেছে রাইনের [আইনের] ধারা,
ছুস্ন রহির কাড়া কাড়া [কড়া কড়া],
গাড়িবে দুনামার দাঁড়ি
নামে নামে বেশা [বেশা]।
২, রে ছোট কইনা, ছেটি বর,
The peasants were urged to marry their children in the year 1929, as from the following year they would not be allowed to marry unless the groom grew a beard and the bride was quite old by their standard. The upshot, the peasants were warned, would be great promiscuity in society, leading to the destruction of social order.90

The government would have faced a serious peasant uprising by late 1929 due to the sudden slump in prices of crops, which was taken advantage of by the communists and the militant nationalists, but for the estrangements between the Muslims and Hindus over the questions of tenancy legislation, slaughter of cows, playing of music before mosques and Hindu-Muslim revivalist movements. Many Muslim Congress leaders objected to the singing of "Bande Mataram" or "Glory to the Motherland" by Hindu nationalists in Congress meetings and public gatherings, considering the song as opposed to the tenets of Islam.91

Most prominent Muslim leaders of Bengal, Sir Abdur Rahim, Fazlul Huq, Akram Khan and others, were disillusioned with the Hindu Congressmen by late 1928. They were estranged from the Swarajyya Party by its close connections with the Hindu Maha-sabha.92 Sir Abdur Rahim had a special grievance against the Hindu bhadralok for excluding him from the ministry.93 In mid-1929 they were in the forefront of the newly formed All-Bengal Proja Party. From the inclusion of pro-government and avowedly anti-Hindu leaders like Sir Abdur Rahim in the Proja Party — he being the founder president — it appears that the party had the indirect connections with the government. The government, which registered its concern at the "lack of leaders, generally acceptable to the community and strong enough to lead" the Muslims of Bengal, wanted a good understanding between the Muslim members of the Council who did not want swaraj immedi-
ately and those who promoted the agricultural interests of the tenants as against the zamindars. 94

Soon, in accordance with the government's desire, out of 39 Muslim Council members (MLC) 30 formed a parliamentary alliance in July 1929. This group was known as the Bengal Muslim Party. It included, among others, Nawab Habibullah, Nawab K.G.M. Farouqui, Khawaja Nazimuddin, Nawab Musharraf Husain, Altaf Ali, Sir Abdul Halim Ghuznawi, the leading zamindars of Bengal, and Sir Abdur Rahim, Fazlul Huq, Akram Khan and Shamsuddin Ahmed. There was yet another smaller group of 18 Muslim MLCs who formed the Proja Party on 1 July 1929 at the residence of Sir Abdur Rahim, in the presence of Nawab Habibullah, Khwaja Nazimuddin and other leading Muslim zamindar MLCs. 95

Despite its name there is hardly any reason to subscribe to the view that the Proja Party was an organization of the lower peasants. Sir Abdur Rahim, the president, Akram Khan, the secretary, Fazlul Huq, a vice-president, Shamsuddin Ahmed and Tamizuddin Khan, joint-secretaries of the party, had hardly anything in common with the peasants. They either represented the ashraf or the jotedar-talukdar classes. The party was not even a by-product of the cleavages between Fazlul Huq and Nazimuddin groups or between the jotedar and ashraf groups in the Council. Any member of the Muslim group of legislators belonging to the Muslim League, Bengal Muslim Party of the Muslim Legislators' Association, also known as the United Muslim Party (UMP), had the option to join the Proja Party. 96 The formation of the Proja Party with the blessing of Muslim aristocrats of Bengal, it seems, was motivated by the prevalent communal politics of the region, which ultimately polarized the Bengal politics between Hindu and Muslim or zamindar and proja groups. This is true that, "party rivalry among the Muslim upper ten and a genuine interest for the cause of the neglected mass of Bengal went together to the inception of the Proja Movement." 97 It is, however, difficult to accept that the party was "purely non-communal and economic" by nature and composition, in spite of the fact that it promoted non-violent, parliamentary methods. 98 In actuality, the Proja party later proved to be "a political phenomenon rather than a party", 99 as it was accommodating people with conflicting views and interests without sticking to a fixed set of principles and programme. Abul Mansur Ahmed, a Proja leader from Mymensingh and a lieutenant of Fazlul Huq, is probably correct in evaluating the Proja Party as a communal organization of the Bengali Muslims who aspired to higher socio-economic status for the projas, a synonym for Muslims in East Bengal. He rightly holds that it was a jotedar and rich-peasant party, opposed to the granting of occupancy rights and better terms to the under-ryots and sharecroppers.100 As Maulana
Akram Khan is said to have remarked: "Since the Hindus are running a Hindu organization with a non-communal name, the Congress, we will also run a Muslim Organization, the Proja Party with a non-communal name."\textsuperscript{101} It seems that far from being genuinely interested in advancing the cause of the lower peasantry, the petit-bourgeois leaders of the Proja Party were utilizing the party to serve their own class interests.\textsuperscript{102}

Most of the \textit{ashraf-jotedar} leaders of the Proja Party only shared with the lower peasantry their hatred and grievances against the high-caste Hindus. Most did not care about protecting peasant interests in the early 1930s, excepting a handful of leaders like Maulana Muniruzzaman Islamabadi, Maulvi Mujibur Rahman, Shamsuddin Ahmed and Maulvi Tamizuddin Khan.\textsuperscript{103} Men like Nawab Habibullah and Fazlul Huq, even on the eve of the formation of the Proja Party, supported the candidature of Maharaja Sashikanta Acharya, the Hindu zamindar of Mymensingh, who contested the Bengal Council election from the Dacca University constituency in 1929.\textsuperscript{104} This again reflects the dichotomy and half-hearted support of some top leaders who promoted the \textit{proja} movement.

Some \textit{proja} leaders, despite their higher socio-economic background, were genuinely interested in protecting the interests of the lower peasantry. They were more interested in converting the Proja Party into a nationalist, anti-exploitation and secular organization. Shamsuddin Ahmed and Maulvi Abdul Karim were prominent \textit{proja} leaders who advocated joint electorates in Bengal for the protection of the peasants, who were in the majority, at the Bengal Presidency Muslim League Conference in April, 1932. This resolution was turned down by Muslim League at Howrah in October, and again in Delhi in November, 1933. The proposal to launch a joint Hindu-Muslim mass movement against the government and the \textit{zamindars-mahajans} was not appreciated by Muslim leaders belonging to the League and Proja Party.\textsuperscript{105} The communal and anti-Civil-Disobedience Muslim leaders had substantial mass support. So much so that Shamsuddin Ahmed and his followers were driven out of the Bengal Muslim Conference in Faridpur in June 1930 for their sympathy with Civil-Disobedience. The organizers of the conference had the support of a large number of peasants who attended the conference, carrying \textit{lathis}. Syed Akber Ali of Sirajganj, Maulvi Daulat Ahmed Khan of Tippera and Abdus Sattar, a pleader from Chandpur, with \textit{jotedar} connections, were vocal against Civil-Disobedience and Hindus. "Let Hindus fight alone", they shouted.\textsuperscript{106}

As discussed earlier, by early 1930s, due to the Bengal Congress' dependence "on sentiment rather than organization, on middle class allegiance rather than awakened mass consciousness" (in the language
of a contemporary Proja and Congress leader), peasants were not generally attracted to the Congress. Landlordism and exploitation by moneylenders overshadowed imperialist exploitation of the peasant masses. Even before the inception of the Proja Party in 1929 the lower peasants became so hostile towards Hindu zamindar-mahajan-bhadralok classes that, it was no longer possible for the leaders to mobilize them against the government. The anti-zamindar peasant insurrection at Dublaghati in Naogaon sub-division of Rajshahi district in 1930-31, under the leadership of an octogenarian Asthan Molla, who represented a lower peasant family, reveals that the lower peasants depended more on local leaders and government support than on the leaders from above. When of course, the government did not support their no-rent movement, they were mobilized under local leaders like Asthan Molla, who had no formal education and political experience. Muslim leaders having close connections with the Congress, in most cases promoted religious as well as peasant interests, although they mostly represented the upper peasantry or jotedar.

In short, it can be deduced that the Proja Party became the common platform of the erstwhile Congress supporters, the "loyalists" and the anti-high-caste Hindu elements in the Muslim and Namasudra — jotedar, middle and lower peasantry. It gave birth to a new trend in the politics of peasants as well as of elites of the region. It also linked the ashraf and jotedars by a marriage of convenience — the former needed the help of the latter to reach the masses and the latter depended on the former as allies and patrons to fight the powerful Hindu zamindar-mahajan-bhadralok triumvirate, their common class enemy. Most of the time the lower peasantry remained acquiescent, though not passive, to the politics of its patrons-cum-class enemies. But various factors, which have been touched on earlier, compelled the lower peasantry to suspend its struggle against its immediate landlords in most cases throughout the period under review. The arousal of communal solidarity and the sense of belonging to a supposititious Proja or tenant community among the lower peasantry precipitated the subordination of the krishak politics to that of the projas. The undercurrents of the new political flow, having indigenous sources, were sometimes quite powerful and independent of the flow on the surface. At times, the appeals of "constitutional" politics of the Proja leaders remained unheeded by the lower peasantry. Consequently the rural masses expressed their contempt for oppressors and their desire to get a better deal in the society through violence.

The previous discussions on peasant unrest at Brikutsa, Bandabila and elsewhere in the region, suggest that the sub-regional variations in land system, agrarian and social relations and nature of leadership did not produce the same type of peasant protest every-
where. The study reveals that the sub-regional differences in the nature of peasant protest were gradually disappearing as the proja movement was virtually engulfing the local-based peasant associations and movements by the end of the period.

V

It is evident from earlier discussions that high-caste Hindu zamindars, mahajans and the bhadralok in general, were quite preponderant in parts of the Dacca-Mymensingh sub-region. There had been communal disturbances in parts of the zamindar-dominated sub-region before 1929, in Dacca, Mymensingh, Bakarganj, Pabna and elsewhere. So peasant mobilization on communal lines was not a new phenomenon in the sub-region. The Civil-Disobedience Movement and the Depression further accentuated the embittered Hindu-Muslim or peasant-landlord, debtor-moneylender relationship in the sub-region. But what is striking here in the incidents of rioting and arson is that, they were committed by the masses in the name of the government. Contrary to the prevalent notion of the Hobsbawmian school, which attributes the mass-violence to the "pre-political" characteristic of the masses, supposedly lacking political organization and premeditation of the participants, the violent actions of the Muslim masses, perpetrated against the life and property of some local exploiting classes were thoroughly well-organized, pre-planned and motivated by political aims.

In Dacca the riots of 1930 originated in the city, first in January-February, and later in May-June. These necessitated the deployment of a large number of police force by the government for the safety of the Hindus in general and the well-to-do classes in particular. The conflict arose out of socio-economic rivalries between the Muslim and Hindu merchants, petty shop keepers, landlords and professional classes. The playing of music in front of a mosque by some Hindu musicians accompanying a procession became the proximate cause of the disturbances.

Though there is no positive evidence of either the government's or the Nawab of Dacca's alleged encouragement of the rioters, the Muslim mobs are said to have shouted slogans: "Nawab Bahadur ki Jai" [Victory to the Nawab] and "British Governmenter Jai" [Victory to the British Government]. According to the report of the Dacca Riot Enquiry Committee, poor Muslims' dissatisfaction with frequent calls for hartal by Hindu Congress leaders during the Civil-Disobedience Movement were the main causes of the riots. It is difficult to believe that the government was behind the riots as some policemen are said to have taunted the Hindus who had sought government
assistance by asking them to go to the Congress for swaraj.\textsuperscript{114} Previously peasants had become violent against their Hindu landlords, moneylenders and neighbours in different parts of the region, without getting any hint of "government support" or "assurance of impunity." Contrary to the assertion of Tanika Sarkar,\textsuperscript{115} the government was greatly relieved after the armed police had restored order in the riot-stricken villages of Kishoreganj (Mymensingh) in 1930. Government's concern at the deterioration of relations between the peasants and Hindu mahajans in parts of Tippera district in January 1933, also contradict Sarkar's assertion.\textsuperscript{116}

Riots in Dacca city were soon followed by disturbances in the neighbouring villages. At Ruhitpur, Matuail, Ati, Jinjira and Mirpur, Muslim peasants looted Hindu shops in the local hats and bazaars. Hindu Sabha leaders and mahajans were the chief targets of attack. Hukum Ali Matbar, the President of Ruhitpur Union Board, was the agent provocateur, who spread the rumour to the effect that the government had given seven days' "licence" for Muslim debtors to take any action they liked against Hindu moneylenders. The Nawab of Dacca was also said to have been mentioned as a sympathiser of the debtors. Consequently Muslim peasants looted a large number of Hindu shops and houses — 119 in one day, at Ruhitpur alone. Most of the victims, whose property was looted or burnt down, were merchants and moneylenders belonging to the Saha caste. Hundreds of Muslim peasants, including the indebted ones, surrounded Hindu houses and shops, looted their property and destroyed debt deeds lying with the moneylenders to evade further repayment of debts.\textsuperscript{117}

There might be some truth in the assertion that several "emissaries" from Dacca city had gone to the villages before the local riots. The nature and extent of the disturbances suggest that these acts were committed according to a preconceived plan.\textsuperscript{118} The anti-Civil-Disobedience attitude of Nawab Khawaja Habibullah and some other leading Muslim politicians of Dacca city, might have indirectly influenced the course of action, which eventuated in rioting. But it is difficult to agree with the view that the government and the Nawab of Dacca were the main instigators of the rioters. It is far less likely that Muslim merchants of Dacca were behind the rioters as they wanted to eliminate the Hindu merchants, who skimmed off the "cream of commerce" through usurious practices. These hypotheses of Tanika Sarkar have not been supported with any evidence at all.\textsuperscript{119} Some private and government sources reveal that the Nawab of Dacca and other influential members of his family went to the riot-affected villages of Maipur, Ati and Ruhitpur. The former even chastised those who had spread the rumour among the villagers about his alleged support for the looting of Hindu property.\textsuperscript{120}
The government's reaction to the riots is hardly consistent with any encouragement to the rioters from that quarter. Out of 138 accused persons 71 were convicted. Hukum Ali Matbar, the President of Ruhitpur Union Board, was sentenced to six years' rigorous imprisonment. Dr Momtaz Khan, another instigator of the riots, got five years' imprisonment. Other convicts, Ainuddin, Jabbar Matbar, Mohar Ali Chaukidar, Osimuddi, Azimuddi, Gafa, Samiruddi, Lal Mia were imprisoned for various terms. From their names it is evident that most of the rioters belonged to illiterate lower peasant families. Their involvement in the riots suggests that the prevailing economic distress of the poor and lower middle peasants might have been the main reason of the disturbances.

Had the anti-Civil-Disobedience campaign of the government and the loyal politicians of the region been responsible for the riots, there would have been similar disturbances throughout the region, where Hindu moneylenders were quite preponderant. It seems that the Report of the Dacca Disturbances Enquiry Committee has given a balanced view regarding the causes of the riots: ill feeling resulting from the riots in Dacca city of January 1930; economic distress of peasants due to the Depression and the exactions of Hindu moneylenders and landlords; the Muslim fear of political domination by Hindus in the event of India's getting self government and the Hindus' recognition of Muslims as the chief obstacles to the coming of home rule. Several sporadic incidents of violent attacks on Hindu moneylenders and landlords in some districts of the region suggest that the intensification of economic distress during the Depression and the growth in the influence of the ulama and some radical politicians over Muslim masses revived anti-Hindu sentiment among them. As a result, serious communal tension prevailed in parts of Mymensingh, Noakhali and Pabna. In some of the riot affected villages in Dacca, the rioters not only indulged in looting and arson but also destroyed Hindu idols and temples. Killings of Hindu landlords and moneylenders in Faridpur, Mymensingh, Bakarganj, Khulna and Noakhali were quite common in the 1930s. These incidents are suggestive of the local roots of peasant insurgency, which often took a communal form, under the leadership of local jotedars and mullas. The "emissaries" from the urban centres seem to have played a subsidiary role in creating tension in the countryside. The anti-Congress "emissaries" from the urban areas might have been interested in curbing the influence of pro-Civil-Disobedience leaders, but it is highly improbable that they would instigate the poor peasants to attack the well-to-do classes, which would lead to an open class struggle in the countryside. Examples of "communal" disturbances in parts of rural Mymensingh in July 1930 make it clear however, that some ulama and outsiders from the cities
fomented communalism in order to weaken the growing influence of the communists among the poorer section of the peasantry.

As postulated in the beginning of this discussion, communal antagonism between the two communities did not decline during the Civil-Disobedience Movement due to its so-called "subsumption in broader movements" [the Civil Disobedience]. It is very difficult to determine the exact nature of agrarian riots in parts of rural Kishoreganj (Mymensingh) in 1930. To some, the disturbances resulted from premeditated designs of Muslim communalists to attack Hindus in general, to others, they resulted from economic distress of peasants. The incidents of Muslim peasants' looting Hindu property and killing Hindu moneylenders in the countryside may not be "unconnected with the Civil-Disobedience campaign." The violent death of one Sobhan Sheikh in Mymensingh town in May 1930, which resulted from a Hindu-Muslim fracas on the issue of Civil-Disobedience, may lead us to the assumption that there were similarities between agrarian disturbances in Dacca and Mymensingh, as riots in the urban areas were followed by agrarian riots in both the districts.

The generally accepted version of the Kishoreganj riots is misleading. The story goes that a "remarkable outbreak of riot and pillage" in the Kishoreganj subdivision of Mymensingh began on 11 July 1930. The mob attacked houses of moneylenders and demanded from them all documents concerning debts of local peasants. They looted and in some cases burnt down the houses and shops of moneylenders on the latter's refusal to part with the debt deeds. It was also reported that "mischief makers" from outside the district, across the Brahmaputra, the Bhawal area of Dacca district and Noakhali, had told Muslim cultivators of some Kishoreganj villages about the government allegedly siding with the indebted cultivators and its "desire" not to take any action against those who demanded their bonds back from their moneylenders.

Though the peasants started their anti-mahajan movement with an attack on the house of a Hindu moneylender, Babu Surendra Nath at Chandipasha village in the area of the Pakundia police station around 12 o'clock on Friday, 11 July, soon the mob, "several thousand" strong, attacked and looted numerous shops and houses belonging to both Hindu and Muslim moneylenders. By 13 July, 33 bazaars, including those of Chandipasha, Narandi, Jangalia, Jaitra, Lakhia, Kaliachapra and Pakundia, were looted by Muslim peasants in the area of the Hossainpur, Pakundia and Kishoreganj police stations. According to the District Magistrate of Mymensingh, the disturbances were primarily caused by the peasants' economic distress. "Hindus have not been threatened or looted as Hindus but as moneylenders and many Muhammadan moneylenders have been equally threatened or
"looted", reads his wire to the higher authorities in Calcutta. He also held that due to the false propaganda of Hindus that the government was supporting the Muslims, the Muslim miscreants readily believed in the propaganda that the government had granted immunity from arrest or any retaliation to the Muslims. Further information on the disturbances suggests that only moneylenders were attacked by peasants, who did not shout any anti-Hindu slogans at all. Their main slogans were "Allahu Akber" [God is great] and "Down with the mahajans." Their attacking Muslim moneylenders has been corroborated by a local Hindu moneylender of Mathkhola village. So far as the incident of killing ten Hindus in the village of Jangalia is concerned, from different sources it appears that, Krishna Roy, a rich talukdar, moneylender and the president of the local Union Board, was killed along with nine members of his family, only after he and his son had shot and killed two of the rioters in self-defence. The incident has been vividly depicted with slight exaggerations in a popular song composed by Lakshmikanta Kirtaniya, a local bard of Mathkhola village. The story goes that: "Kisto Roy [Krishna Roy] of Jangalia wanted to give Rs 40,000 to the looters, yet he and his family members were not spared. The mob set fire to the hay stack in the courtyard of his house after their failure to break in. Kisto Babu went upstairs and killed fifteen rioters with his gun. But soon he ran out of cartridges and this was quickly transmitted to the mob by his Muslim servant. Then the mob entered his house and killed all the inmates." The song also reveals that Krishna Roy had a beautiful two-storied house and a car, which the Muslim villages were not even allowed to touch. From various sources it is evident that Krishna Roy, his only son, his brother, nephews, father-in-law and three servants were hacked to pieces by the mob, his brother's wife was the sole survivor of the attack. This being the only instance of peasants' taking part in murder of moneylenders during the Kishoreganj disturbances, which continued for three-four days. This indicates that the prime objective of the peasants was to destroy the debt deeds to evade repayment of debts in the bad days of the Depression. Other participants in the campaign, being poor peasants and landless labourers wanted to make fortune by looting the property of the rich, enviable and oppressive moneylenders and merchants. Tanika Sarkar is probably correct that the killing of Krishna Roy and his family members resulted out of social envy of the poor, indebted peasants of the locality. As discussed earlier, there are various contemporary and recent theories regarding the actual nature of the Kishoreganj disturbances which are often misleading. Before refuting the prevalent hypotheses that: the collective violent actions of peasants in the region were
"fundamentally religious"; the Muslim "opposition" to Civil-Disobedience was the main factor behind the disturbances; the Mymensingh cultivators' aspirations to bhadrakok status were responsible for the attacks on Hindu moneylenders; the Mymensingh peasants' "gullibility" to the preaching of mullas and maulvis and the "active connivance" of government officials with Muslims to "strike back at the Hindu bhadrakok" were responsible for the riots, one should critically appraise the situation which was responsible for the riots.

As most government officials, journalists and agents of the landlords and moneylenders had an anti-peasant bias, it is not safe to draw conclusions about peasant insurgencies from reports of government informers and journalists. These reports, "the prose of counter-insurgency" in the language of Guha, regard political activities of peasants "external" to peasant consciousness, as by-products of their spontaneous, unpremeditated pre-political behaviour. Some recent works on the Kishoreganj riots and agrarian disturbances elsewhere in East Bengal in the 1930s, are mainly based on the so-called "primary sources", or confidential government papers. Any allusive remarks regarding the agrarian riots in the region, holding the external factors — "government connivance" and communal propaganda by outsiders — chiefly responsible for these disturbances, amount to total disregard of the political capability of peasants.

Sugata Bose seems to have taken a balanced view regarding the Kishoreganj disturbances. He has pointed out how the disruption of rural credit during the Depression broke the ties between (Hindu) moneylenders and (Muslim) peasants, paving the way for communal politics which ultimately provided the basis of the "national bond" and "political organization" among the peasants. The drying up of rural credit on the one hand and the difficulties in repaying the debts on the other, during the slump, tarnished the image of rural moneylenders as "patrons" of the poor. The ulama and other elements who asked the peasants not to repay their debts to the mahajans, assuring them of impunity from government retaliation, emerged as the new groups of "patrons" by registering their concern at the plight of the indebted peasants.

Several reports of attacks on Namasudra peasants, which led to one death and to another having his tongue and nose cut off by some Muslim peasants at the village of Jaitara, and the reported exemption of Muslim property from looting in some cases, bred the notion that the riots were purely communal. But a plethora of evidence from private and government sources suggests that peasants also attacked Muslim moneylenders. The District Magistrate has given at least eight names of Muslim moneylenders who were attacked by the mob. On the
question on non-mahajan Hindus’ being attacked by the rioters, the District Magistrate held that many poor Hindus had at least a few documents of debt bonds from Muslims, as they had mahajani business as well. Incidents of attack on Muslim moneylenders, jotedars and talukdars who tried to protect some Hindu moneylenders’ lives and property, were not rare.\textsuperscript{142}

Since agrarian riots and attacks on moneylenders and landlords’ agents under non-religious, even communist leaders, predate the Kishoreganj disturbances, it is not fair to describe the Kishoreganj riots as “fundamentally religious” disturbances. Even in parts of Kishoreganj and elsewhere in Mymensingh district, under the influence of the nationalists, “terrorists” and communists, peasants revolted against their landlords and moneylenders in 1929 and 1930, which culminated in the killing of the manager of the Arai Ani zamindari estate at Baghaitola \textit{hat} in the area of the Haluaghat police station. Peasants at different places demanded oil, salt, cloth, spades, knives and other commodities from merchants in \textit{hats} and bazaars, in exchange for agricultural goods during the slump. The shop-owners’ refusal to barter their goods led to violent clashes and looting of shops, mostly owned by Hindu traders and moneylenders in different districts.\textsuperscript{143} In Mymensingh, the radical Congressmen and supporters of the Anushilan and Jugantar groups and the communist Young Comrade League, were behind the peasant insurrections in late 1929 and early 1930. Moni Singh, Nagen Sarkar, Dharani Goswami, Promotho Gupta and some other Hindu and Muslim young communists were the main leaders. According to Promotho Gupta, the anti-zamindar, anti-mahajan movement was first started in Mymensingh district by the communists. The first target of their attack was a Muslim moneylender-cum-talukdar of Jangalia village, where later Krishna Roy was killed along with his family by a mob of peasants. Here in early 1930, Hindu and Muslim peasants involved in the anti-mahajan movement, took away debt deeds from moneylenders and destroyed those to evade repayment of debts.\textsuperscript{144} Gupta holds that no sooner had the movement started than communal politicians from Dacca and Noakhali hurried there, and that meanwhile there had been severe communal rioting in Dacca and Mymensingh. The leading members of the Young Comrade League, in the meantime, had been arrested after the government’s crackdown on communists in early 1930. This, Gupta observes, gave an open hand to the communalist \textit{mullas}, who took over the leadership of the insurgent peasants of the district. It appears from his account that under the aegis of the \textit{mullas}, a Muslim voluntary organization, the Khademul Islam, came into being, which despite its communal attitude, did not incite peasants to attack all Hindus. It asked the Muslim peasants not to make attacks by night, not to attack women and children and to
wrest debt deeds and documents from moneylenders without resorting to violence unless they were attacked first.\footnote{145} Dharani Goswami, another communist leader of Mymensingh, holds that the peasant insurrection of Kishoreganj in 1930 was purely a movement on class lines, though it had an apparent communal facade.\footnote{146}

The zamindar-mahajani exactions embittered the tenant-landlord and debtor-moneylender relationships so much that the lower middle and poor peasants could be mobilized by any political group having an anti-zamindar and anti-mahajan programme. The local Anjuman-i-Islamias or Islamic Associations, which were mainly organized by the ulama with ashraf and jotedar patronage, had to voice the feeling of the Muslim masses, firstly, in order to protect them from the wrath of the masses, and secondly, for the sake of strengthening Muslim solidarity against the Hindu bhadralok classes, who incidently were inseparable from zamindars and mahajans. The Anjuman-i-Islamia of Mymensingh did not fail in this regard. From its resolutions taken at a meeting at Kutubpur, near Muktagachha on 12 July, 1930, it appears that it was organizing a no-rent, no-abwab and no-interest movement against the local zamindars and mahajans. It advised the peasants no to give tolls to zamindars' men for selling commodities in hats and bazaars. The peasants were only asked to pay rent in cash, not beyond the recorded amount. They were also advised to bring their grievances to the notice of zamindars. If they were not redressed, peasants were asked to subscribe five annas each for "taking proper steps in the matters." The most significant aspect of the meeting was the following assurance from the leaders: "The day is coming when Government at their own expenses will eagerly take Mahomedan boys for education and employment." Among others, the meeting was addressed by some Muslim lawyers of the district, including Tayabuddin Ahmed and Abdul Karim.\footnote{147}

It is evident from the resolutions of the meeting it is evident that though the rural-ashraf or lower clergy, who had genuine sympathy and affiliation with the lower peasantry, initiated the anti-zamindar and anti-mahajan movement, the jotedars and leaders having close contact with the urban-ashraf who were with the Proja Party, influenced the rural-ashraf to include pro-government propaganda as a part of the creed of the Anjuman. The urban middle class leaders, however, did not impose their anti-Civil-Disobedience ideology on the rural-ashraf leaders. So, from a few anti-Congress resolutions of peasant meetings, it should not be generalized that the anti-zamindar, anti-mahajan movement of the peasants was also against Civil-Disobedience. The condemnation of Satish Chandra Roy Chaudhuri, who was a member of the Congress and an MLC from Hossainpur in Kishoreganj, by local peasants does not seem to have anything to do
with his political affiliation. He, as an exacting agent of the Atharabari zamindari estate, was very unpopular among the peasants and this was the main reason of peasant agitation against him.\footnote{148}

So far as the question of peasant's "apathy" and "opposition" to Civil-Disobedience is concerned, it can be held that Muslim peasants in general were not opposed to the movement. It has been discussed earlier that a section of the pro-Congress ulama was active in mobilizing mass support for the cause of the movement. Everywhere the anti-British movement did not receive lukewarm response from the peasant masses. In areas, where zamindars were not preponderant, the movement was more intense, but in places, such as zamindar-mahajan-dominated Dacca and Mymensingh districts, there was no dearth of mass support for Civil-Disobedience. But in zamindar-dominated districts peasants often related the anti-government, no-tax and boycott movement with the anti-landlord, no-rent movement. A few anti-Civil-Disobedience meeting in towns and some villages, mostly organized by the ashraf and jotedar leaders, should not mislead us to the conclusion that the lower peasantry was against the Civil-Disobedience Movement.

In central East Bengal — Dacca, Mymensingh, Faridpur and Bakarganj — the Hindu bhadralok and the ulama were quite influential over the masses. So far as the spread of anti-government ideology was concerned, Hindu bhadralok, mullas and rural bards, folk singers and folk theatre groups or jatra-parties carried the message of Gandhi and Civil-Disobedience in the interior. Mukundo Das of Bakarganj; Hari Acharyya and Gobinda Das of Jaydebpur, Dacca; Hemango Biswas of Habiganj, Sylhet, and numerous other folk singers or kabiyyals were quite popular in the countryside of this sub-region. Through their endeavours and nationalist songs the concepts of desh or one's own motherland and patriotism reached the rural masses by the early 1930s. The slogan "Bande Mataram" or "Glory to the Motherland" also became quite popular among a large number of Hindu-Muslim peasants. According to Hemango Biswas, the following song, composed by Gobinda Das, was very popular among peasants of Dacca - Mymensingh sub-region in the 1930s:\footnote{149}

"খান্দে, খান্দে," কারিন্দ কারে ? এ দেশ তোমার নয়।
হয় বুলা, গভী নিয়ে, তোমারই কা হাড় যায়,
পারের পানে, গোরা মনে, এগিয়ে কেন করে?
এরো চেতে শষণ মহা, তোমায় নয় তো একটি হৃদের
হুমা কেবল চারে মানিক, গাজের মানিক নয়।
"খান্দে, খান্দে," কারিন্দ কারে ? এ দেশ তোমার নয়।
What do you mean by your own country? This country is not yours. The Jamuna and the Ganges are not yours either, because they carry white soldiers and foreign merchandise. The paddy field do not belong to you. You are only supposed to till the soil, not to own the crops.

It appears that during and after the riots in parts of Kishoreganj subdivision, lower peasants irrespective of their religious affiliation, supported the anti-British movement by picketing against liquor and other intoxicants in rural bazaars and hats. Due to the influence of some pro-Congress ulama, Maulana Abdur Rashid of Charfaradia, Maulana Abdul Hamid or Nilganj (who later became an MLA) and Maulvi Mirza Ali of Pakundia in Kishoreganj sub-division, for example, Civil-Disobedience was quite popular in the riot affected villages of Kishoreganj. Some local observers hold that Muslim masses were very active in the anti-British movement. Besides local ulama, Congress volunteers from the Abhoy Asram of Tippera, a Congress training centre in Comilla town, came to Mymensingh to teach the masses the use of spinning wheel. The predominance of Muslim peasants in the forefront of Civil-Disobedience is also evident from a confidential letter of the District Magistrate of Mymensingh, who expressed that the movement could have been contained in the district but for the Muslim peasant support for it.

While assessing agrarian riots in parts of Kishoreganj and elsewhere in the region in the early 1930s one should avoid oversimplifying the issue by simply portraying the riots as by-products of the interaction between the "organized politics" on the top and the "peasant-communal politics" in the bottom. In summarizing the story of "communal" disturbances in rural East Bengal during the period under review it is not enough to state that some unidentified mullas or "emissaries" from urban areas went to the riot affected villages on the eve of the rioting, carrying bundles of fantastic rumours to stir up the masses. One should not ignore the inner matrix of rural and peasant politics. Besides the so-called outsiders, ulama and peasant leaders coming from the lower middle and poor peasant families belonging to political parties like the Congress, Communist Party or even locally organized Krishak Samities, Anjuman-i-Islamias or other quasi-political groups were also quite important in mobilizing anti-landlord, anti-moneylender sentiment among the lower peasantry. There is, however, no denying the fact that peasants in parts of Kishoreganj were motivated by such rumours that the Nawab of Dacca had become the master of 13 districts and the government had granted swaraj for a fortnight. This is evident from their behaviours — when they confronted the Circle Officer of Kishoreganj in village Jaitara on 12 July, they asked him why he had come to interfere "when
the authorities had done nothing of the kind at Dacca." In another case, a dying rioter, shot by police firing at village Ashutia under Hossainpur police station on 14 July, cried at his top, "Ami British Governmenter Proja, Dohai British Government" (I am a subject of British government, don't kill me for the sake of British government). These incidents reflect peasants' state of perplexity as to why they were being hindered from attacking the moneylenders when the government had "granted immunity" to do so.155

From the appraisal of agrarian riots in Dacca and Mymensingh districts it is difficult to establish whether or not the local maulvis spread rumours of the so-called government partiality for peasants, or the "outsiders" were responsible for this, as suggested by some Hindu newspapers.156 It seems peasants in general, including those who could pay their dues, "were inclined to take advantage of the exhaustion of the resources of landlords", by responding to appeals of withholding their payments and snatching away landlords' property.157 It can be concluded by outright rejection of the hypothesis propounding government support for the rioters, that the government was firmly against the riots and this is reflected in the police actions.158 Simultaneous invasion on moneylenders' houses and shops in a large area of more than 150 square miles indicate their organized nature. Local mosques were the centres of agitation and local ulama, including the pro-Congress leaders like Maulana Abdul Hamid of Nilganj (Kishoreganj), were the chief organizers of the anti-mahajan movement.159 The nature of peasant insurrections in parts of central East Bengal were premeditated actions of politically conscious poor and middle peasants, who had the aspirations to socio-economic freedom from zamindars and mahajans. In Kishoreganj and elsewhere in Mymensingh, the struggle, initiated by communists, sustained and organized by ulama and lower-peasant leaders, who by early 1930s had their own organizations,160 certainly depicted the elementary aspects of political aspirations of krishaks. The projas or upper peasants, who were emerging as a political force in early 1930s, did not become a dominant power until the second-half of the 1930s. From the names of the convicts, remembered locally by some senior inhabitants, such as, Dhonar Bap (father of Dhona), Bhashar Bap (father of Bhasha), Mozid (perverted form of Abdul Majid), indicate that poor and illiterate peasants were predominant among the looters and rioters in Mymensingh,161 as was the case with Dacca disturbances. The landless labourers, who were almost totally unemployed in June-July (during the disturbances) took part in the looting along with the actually indebted peasants.162

The communal disturbances in the countryside of the region may be imputed to the machination of urban ashraf and their rural counter-
The *ashraf-jotedar* leaders of the Proja Party and other Muslim political groups succeeded in central and north-western sub-regions, where Hindu *zamindars* and *mahajans* were preponderant. In the Tippera-Noakhali sub-region, due to the relative independence of lower peasantry and the absence of Hindu *zamindars* as a dominant class, the communal politics of the *ashraf-jotedar* classes did not fare well in early 1930s. The predominance of nationalist-cum-leftist politicians in this sub-region was also responsible for a different pattern in agrarian politics during the period.

Though there are contradictory, exaggerated, and often misleading reports about the nature and intensity of agrarian unrest in Tippera-Noakhali sub-region, one thing is evident — this was politically the most volatile sub-region in East Bengal in the 1930s, and was a constant source of trouble both for the government and for the landlord-moneylender classes. In general, agrarian unrests in the sub-region were on class lines, peasants being organized by Congress and communist workers. But in parts of Tippera and in many places in Noakhali, peasants were also mobilized on communal lines by local *mullas* and *proja* leaders. According to some Hindu newspapers Muslims were taking vengeance on Hindus in the Kishoreganj style, while some Muslim, as well as anti-moneylender Hindu press, portrayed the disturbances as by-products of economic distress and exactions on the part of landlords and moneylenders. To some observers, agrarian unrests in the sub-region were "Congress sponsored communist" activities. The *Hindu* provides a glaring example of the prevalent confusion regarding agrarian unrest in the sub-region. It held that the Muslim District Magistrate of Noakhali, Nurunnabi Chaudhuri, along with other Muslim officials, had been inciting the Krishak Samity against the Hindus in general. It apprehended that unless the District Magistrate was transferred from the district, agrarian unrest would take a "communist turn" and "subsequently a communal turn" in the Dacca-Kishoreganj style. It also appears from the paper that like Kishoreganj, Krishak Samities in Noakhali were organizing peasants in local mosques through the "Masjid [mosque] Committees." This indicates that local *mullas* were behind peasant agitations in parts of Noakhali and Tippera as well. But it is quite interesting that the *mullas* in this sub-region had close contact with Congress socialists, "terrorists" and communists, unlike in the central and north-western sub-regions. The absence of a predominant *jotedar* class, a traditional ally and sponsor of conservative *ulama*, in this sub-region was mainly responsible for this.

There were, however, some similarities in the mode of action against moneylenders, landlords and other exploiting classes of peasants in Noakhali and Tippera, with those of the central sub-region.
Looting of hats and bazaars, owned by local landlords and money-lenders, and selective attacks on moneylenders by peasants became quite common in parts of Noakhali and Tippera. Unlike Tippera, the anti-moneylender movement took a violent turn in Noakhali. There was also a tinge of anti-Hindu feeling among Noakhali peasants as local pirs and mullas, who often led Krishak Samities, fomented anti-Hindu sentiment among the masses, asking them to attack and boycott Hindus in general. A section of Noakhali peasants, especially those in the north bordering Tippera, was under communist control — carrying red flags, wearing red caps and distributing "red leaflets" — threatening landlords and moneylenders. There was, however, no indication to say that the peasants waged "a war of all against all", as propounded by the pro-moneylender Projar Katha. It is reasonable to believe that in spite of their "communal" attitude towards their Hindu neighbours besides the moneylending classes, Muslim peasants of Noakhali were chiefly mobilized on class lines, their main demands were the abolition of the zamindari and mahajani systems. The Commissioner of Chittagong Division seems to be right that economic distress, mahajani exploitation and the non-availability of credit, other than peasants' infatuation for communism, were responsible for peasant unrest in Noakhali.

Some confidential government sources suggest that after the Gandhi-Irwin Pact of March 1931 there was a lull in Congress activities in rural Noakhali. But the anti-Pact Subhas Group, with communist and "terrorist" support, was inciting the peasants to fight for independence. This had very little effect on the Muslim peasants, who were least interested in "politics" and preferred to be on the fence watching the struggle between the Congress-left and the government. The arrival of Fazlul Huq, Nawab Habibullah and Maulvi Wajid Ali in Noakhali in May 1931, aroused communalism to such an extent that the Commissioner apprehended riots on Kishoreganj style.

Soon under the influence of Krishak Samities, which by early 1932 had become quite independent of the Congress, the no-rent and no-interest movement became so powerful that even erstwhile pro-Congress Krishak Samity leaders asked for government intervention to check the activities of the peasants in the countryside of Noakhali. By early 1935, when the communists and "terrorists" had been subdued by the government, there was a serious "breach of the peace" in some Noakhali villages, as local Krishak Samities had captured most of the Local Boards' elected offices. Due to the ascendancy of the Proja Party, with its avowedly anti-zamindar, anti-mahajan programme, and tacit acquiescence to communalism, the Congress and communist attempts at mobilizing peasants on class lines failed miserably.
Tippera, according to a government official, contained "more disturbing elements" than other districts, due to strong Congress bases and the influence of Ashrafuddin Chowdhury. Congress was more powerful in this district than elsewhere in the region. As mentioned earlier, due to contradictory evidence, it is difficult to assess the real nature of peasant unrest in Tippera. The most common explanation as to the nature of the unrest is that, the Congress and the Communist Party were trying to stage a "Bolshevik" revolution in the sub-region with peasant support.

An objective analysis reveals that as in the neighbouring Noakhali district, peasants in Tippera joined the anti-government, anti-moneylender movement not out of communist convictions, rather than economic distress and exploitation by moneylenders and landlords. A government Member stressed that: "No advice can be more palatable to this ordinary cultivator — although given in whisper — than to tell them not to pay rent." Citing the examples of Pabna and Mymensingh peasant uprises, engineered by agitators like Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, who promised a moratorium on all debts, he held that "Maulvis and Maulanas, Mahatmas and Saints" were chiefly responsible for peasant insurrections in Tippera. Unlike other districts, all the three broad classes of peasant leaders — the "professional, selfish maulvis and maulanas", the "babus from towns" and the "semi-Bolsheviks", were simultaneously stirring peasant unrest in this sub-region. The predominance of Muslims in the District Congress Committee, and in the Krishak Samity, which although was not a branch of the Congress, but was locally controlled by a set of "non-communal" leaders with pro-peasant sympathies, moulded the peasant politics in Tippera.

Meanwhile, before the split in the Congress between pro-Gandhi and pro-Bose groups was evident after the Gandhi-Irwin Pact in 1931, the anti-government sentiment of the peasants had been further aroused due to police excesses and arrests of a large number of Congress leaders, including Ashrafuddin Chowdhury, Kamini Datta, Dhiren Datta and others on 17 March 1930. They started violating government regulations by coming out on public thoroughfares in protest of the arrests on Fridays after the Juma congregational prayers in mosques. In one such protest rally at Mahini bazaar near Hasnabad in Tippera, peasants confronted Gurkha troops, which resulted in the death of four peasants. The troops also resorted to looting and rape at Hasnabad. In February 1931, there was a recurrence of violence — a large number of peasants attacked the police force which tried to disperse them from campaigning against a local landlord in a village. By early 1931, due to police excesses and anti-government leadership of Krishak Samity leaders — Asimuddin Ahmed of Barura;
Abdul Malek of Burichang; Maulana Muklesur Rahman of Chaudagram; Maulvi Iradatullah of Gopinathpur; Maulvi Abdul Jalil of Gazipur; Maulvi Abdul Wahed, a lawyer from Comilla town; Krishna Sundar Bhowmik, a Hindu lawyer from Comilla; Shah Syed Emdadul Haq (Lal Mia) of Bhokshar (President of the Samity); Moqbul Mia (Boro Mia) and numerous local Hindus and Muslims — peasants in large number supported the Civil-Disobedience Movement in the sub-region. The revitalization of Tippera Krishak Samity with the support of the pro-Subhas Bose faction of the Congress intensified the anti-British and anti-capitalist peasant movement in Tippera and parts of Noakhali. The leaders were mostly Muslims, who "under the auspices of Congress", were preaching "Bolshevism" among the peasants.

The Tippera Krishak Samity became more prominent after it had organized a big peasant rally of about 5000 peasants in Comilla town on May Day, 1931. The rally, under the leadership of Abdul Malek, chanted slogans against the government and moneylenders. The peasants demanded that rate of interest on loans should not be higher than 1/2 per cent. The demonstrators were predominantly Muslims. The Congress was not officially associated with the rally. Although a few Congress leaders joined them, most congress leaders, having connection with the radical Congressmen who had close links with the communists, the pro-Bose Congress had to support militant peasant demonstrations to withstand the anti-Bose group under J.M. Sengupta of Chittagong. According to Ashrauddin Chowdhury, the most influential Muslim Congress leader of the region in the 1930s and 1940s, the Congress was interested in organizing the peasants in Tippera and elsewhere not with a view to "saving them from the evils of feudalism", but to strengthen the freedom movement. Some prominent Krishak Samity leaders and supporters reveal that Congress leaders including Ashrauddin Chowdhury, who had zamindari and talukdari interests, had no genuine interest in mobilizing peasants against zamindars.

From the nature of the Krishak Samities' activities in different parts of Tippera-Noakhali sub-region, it seems that government assessment of the Samities was right that: "There is little co-ordination of effort between individual Samities." Consequently despite Congress and Communist Party attempts, the Samities were not organized on a wider political basis. By late 1931 poor peasants and "impoverished taluqdars" were attracted to the Samities in villages in the areas of the Chandina, Nabinagar, Laksam and Kasba police stations of Tippera. "Almost everybody in the village is a member of the Samity except the mahajans", observed the District Magistrate. It appears that indebted peasants joined the Samities with the belief that they would not have to repay their debts by joining them. Others joined out of
pressure and threats of ostracism by Krishak Samity members. Moneylenders in many villages in Brahmanbaria sub-division were compelled to surrender their debt deeds to Samity members.\(^{191}\)

It is difficult to come to a definite conclusion regarding the Krishak movement in the Tippera-Noakhali sub-region by relying on government reports. The District Magistrate of Tippera's report in this regard is misleading. He held that the movement flourished with Congress support and the existing economic distress of peasants. While stressing the role of the communists in the movement, he observed that there was a "distinct tendency" of the movement towards communalism, as Muslim debtors were being mobilized against Hindu mahajans by mullas on Fridays after Juma prayers near mosques, while in the name of preaching the doctrine of Islam the leaders advocated "socialism of a wild nature."\(^{192}\) The apparently ambivalent statement of the District Magistrate turns into an important source of information, when examined in the light of some other information. Communist attempt to mobilize Muslim peasant support for the cause of a class war in the countryside in the name of establishing Islamic rule, free of exploitations, suggests that although the average Muslim peasant was averse to the doctrine of communism for its alleged "support for incest" and anti-Islamic stand,\(^{193}\) the communists partially succeeded in mobilizing mass support for class struggle through a large number of Muslim cadres and leaders, including some mullas, maulvis and maulanas. Mention may be made of Maulana Muklesur Rahman, Maulvi Iradatullah and Maulvi Abdul Jalil. Muklesur Rahman, who also served as secretary of Tippera Krishak Samity, was a madrassa-educated mulla from Noakhali. After coming into contact with communists in Calcutta he went to the rural areas of Noakhali and Tippera as a communist organizer. Till his arrest in 1934 in connection with a robbery, he was an active Krishak Samity leader and was respected by Muslim peasants as a religious leader as well.\(^{194}\) It appears from some local sources that many Krishak Samity supporters believed that there was no contradiction between "true Islam" and communism.\(^{195}\)

As mentioned earlier, the communists and radical non-communal nationalists were not the only political forces in this subregion, nor was there any dearth of communal anti-Hindu leaders, hence the local and periodical variations in the nature of peasant movement in the sub-region. In localities where Hindu landlords were very powerful and oppressive, such as Kalicharan Bhowmik and Krishnamohan Majumdar of Shilmuri, who had zamindari estates in villages in the area of the Chandina police station, who imposed restrictions on cow slaughtering by Muslims, Muslim peasants were easily aroused by communal forces.\(^{196}\) By 1933, krishak movement was turned communal in parts
of Noakhali, Tippera and the neighbouring districts of Bakarganj, Chittagong, Dacca and Mymensingh. Violent attacks on Hindu moneylenders, *talukdars* and merchants, which often were fatal, became endemic in several districts of Rajshahi, Dacca and Chittagong divisions.

The government was concerned at the impending outbreak of a large-scale communal rioting throughout East Bengal villages as a result of agrarian unrest. In parts of rural Noakhali, local *mullas* dissuaded Muslim peasants from participating in Hindu festivals, fairs and boat races during Hindu religious festivals. One Babu Harendra Nath Das had to publicly apologise to local Muslims in a village in the area of the Laxmipur police station, for "offending the feelings" of Muslims by "certain incidents" during the performance of Krishnalila (folk drama depicting the life of god Krishna) at his residence. According to a secret police report, Muslim peasants of the locality actually wanted to boycott the local bazaar owned by Harendra Nath, who had pawn shops in the bazaar.

By 1934 the anti-*mahajan*, anti-*landlord* movement of the Congress Socialists and communists was joined by the erstwhile "terrorists" in parts of Noakhali and Tippera and elsewhere in the region. Many Muslim peasants in Noakhali and Tippera villages were harbouring the Chittagong armoury raid absconders, which led to the declaration of Noakhali as an "emergency area" by the government in 1934. Under the influence of the "terrorists", some leading Krtishak Samity leaders, including Maulana Muklesur Rahman, attacked moneylenders believing that they were "fighting for the people" by taking "blood from the breast of *mahajans*".

The militant peasant insurrections in parts of Tippera-Noakhali and Dacca-Mymensingh sub-regions had taken such a violent turn by 1933-34 that the Government, Congress and Proja Party leaders, including the militant but constitutionalist leaders of Krishak Samities were alarmed at the impending class war in the countryside. The formation of the Langal Samity (Plough Association) under the leadership of lower peasantry at Faridganj and some other villages of Tippera became a source of additional trouble for its avowed anti-private property campaign, for the government as well as for the landlords and rich peasants. But due to the combined manoeuvring of the government and the rich peasant and non-cultivating classes, passant insurrections on class lines were no longer considered as threats by the government and its allies in the mid-1930s. By early 1934, the Commissioner of Chittagong Division quite confidently assessed that the political situation of the turbulent Tippera-Noakhali districts was "under control." "Little more will be heard of Krishak Samities" in the sub-region, he observed. Elsewhere in the region
violent krishak agitation was giving way to non-violent "constitutional" politics of the Proja Party and other pro-government ashraf-jotedar political groups. But contrary to the government complacence, the situation did not remain so tranquil afterwards. Interestingly, despite government dislike for militant peasant movements on class lines and no-rent movements, it took several legislative measures to curtail the power of the zamindars and moneylenders in the late 1930s which led to the wide-spread no-rent movement in the region. Meanwhile, many radical "leftists" swelled the ranks of the Proja Party. This will be discussed in the next chapter.

VI

The foregoing discussion suggests that the period between 1929 and 1937 witnessed the eclipse of the localized, sporadic and violent aspects of peasant to the non-violent and centrally organized "constitutional" politics of urban bourgeoisie of the region. With tacit government support, rich peasants, along with petty landlords and upper-middle peasants, allocated a diminutive and subservient role to the lower peasantry in the arena of politics. From the subsumption of krinak politics to that of the elites, it appears that although the anti-zamindar, anti-mahajjan programme of the Proja Party and other radical political groups attracted the krishak towards "organized" politics, their socio-economic subservience to their immediate landlords, mostly jotedars, was mainly responsible for this shift in their political behaviour. Because, the lower peasantry could not afford to antagonize patrons, who were behind the "organized" politics during the 1930s. The variations in the degrees of differentiation among peasants, contrary to the assumption of Partha Chatterjee that differentiation among the peasantry in East Bengal was in an "embryonic stage" in the early 1930s, were also important so far as the presence or absence of peasant insurgencies in particular areas are concerned. However, government propaganda and patronage of the Proja movement and the ubiquitous communalism transcended the boundaries of sub-regional variations in agrarian relations by the end of the period, which later played decisive roles in the overall politics of the region.

When the rising tide of peasant militancy, especially in the middle peasant dominated Tippera-Noakhali and parts of Dacca-Mymensingh sub-regions, alarmed both the government and the upper echelon of the Proja Party, Krishak Samity and Congress, the Muslim League did not emerge as a political force until early 1937, in the region. Nawab Habibullah of Dacca, Sir Abdur Rahim, Maulana Akram Khan and a few Muslim leaders, who later became prominent leaders
of the Muslim League, took interest in the affairs of the peasantry as individuals, not as Muslim League leaders during the period. Till early 1937, the politics of the peasants in the region was dominated by rural-ashraf and jotedar-proja elements. Most of the above categories of leaders promoted pro-government, and at times, communal, proja movement to withstand the anti-government and anti-capitalist krishak movement.

Despite the government's stand of maintaining a positive neutrality towards all political parties in the sub-continent, it encouraged ministers and district officials to attend proja conferences throughout the region. The government in many cases assisted the "right type" of krishak and proja parties with financial help and publicity, believing that in the absence of a "government party", the loyal peasant associations should be given proper "guidance." The Chief Secretary of the Bengal Government asserted that: "It will be a mistake to think that the krishak and proja samities can be got rid of.... They have come to stay and will in all probability be the basis of important political parties of the future... and an organization of cultivators for the protection of their own interests is a purely legitimate thing." It is also evident from the Chief Secretary's report that the government was in favour of "bodies formed to promote the interests of cultivators", not those which were "part of the electoral organization of a political party." In early 1932 the government declared the pro-communist Tippera Krishak and Sramik Samity illegal for "transgressing the law." In many places the government directly intervened so that local Congress leaders did not control proja samities (tenant associations). In Mymensingh, the district official openly supported Muslim proja samity leaders as against pro-Congress leaders who tried to capture the samities in 1933. At Muksudpur in Gopalganj sub-division of Faridpur district, the Sub-divisional Officer supported the local Muslim and Namasudra peasants who opposed Bamandas Vidyasagar of Jessore, an absentee high-caste Hindu jotedar, for his attempts to collect abwab from them. The Chief Secretary Blandy went further in their support — he categorically announced that no action would be taken against those peasants who looted the local cutchery (revenue office) of the jotedar, since their movement was not against the payment of rent, hence not "dangerous."

The jotedar-talukdar and even Muslim zamindars, who, according to Partha Chatterjee, "were considered part of the peasant community" despite their status of rent-receivers unlike their Hindu counterparts, gave attention to organize krishak-proja associations on "constitutional" lines with a view to contesting the elections for the Legislative Council in early 1937. One is not sure whether or not under
pressure from the "radical" group of the Proja Party, represented by leaders like Shamsuddin Ahmed, Shah Abdul Hamid, Abdul Wahed Bokainagari, Foyezuddin Hossain and others, some having close connections with communists, the prefix of "Krishak" was added to the All-Bengal Proja Party at a conference of the party in Dacca in 1936.209 One can assume that despite some ashraf leaders' opposition to the change of name of the Proja Party,210 there was not any fundamental change in the structure of the party in spite of its demands for the abolition of the zamindar system and the introduction of other pro-peasant legislative measures. Muzaffar Ahmed of the Communist Party was probably nearer the truth that the change of name of the Proja Party was done to befool the militant lower peasantry by the bourgeois leaders of the party, including Fazlul Huq.211 Soon the Krishak Proja Party (KPP) and Tippera Krishak Samity came to an understanding on the eve of the elections of 1937, keeping aside "unconstitutional" means of redressing the grievances of the peasants. The krishaks or lower peasants throughout the region were attracted to the creed of the KPP and Krishak Samity. Government propaganda, economic bondage of lower peasantry to jotedars and mahajans, communal propaganda and Hindu-Congress leaders' opposition to major tenancy reforms led the lower peasants en masse to join the proja camp by late 1936.

In districts where Hindu zamindars and moneylenders were dominant, peasants were more anti-Hindu than in districts where Hindu zamindars were not dominant. In tracts where sharecroppers and labourers were preponderant, in parts of north-western and south-western East Bengal for example, they could not mobilize themselves against the jotedars for their wretched condition during the Depression and also due to the absence of well-organized political parties on class lines. Relatively independent poor and middle peasants, in parts of Tippera and Noakhali districts for example, provided the best specimens of peasant militancy and organization unlike the disorganized, sporadic examples of violence and banditry as shown by peasants in Hindu zamindar-mahajan dominated districts of Dacca and Mymensingh. Due to the successful manoeuvring of the situation by the government and Muslim and Namasudra peasant leaders and also due to the failure of the Congress and the Communist Parties to capture the imagination of the lower peasants, the bulk of the peasantry was convinced that the only means of attaining socio-economic justice was through the change of system rather than elimination of the exploiting classes by force. This was a turning point in the process of politicization of peasants in the region, which signalled a new beginning in the political course of peasants.
Notes

5. Ibid., p. 47.
8. A. Ghosh and K. Dutt, op. cit., pp. 100-1.
10. Ibid., 1931-32, p. 17.
11. Ibid., pp. 17-19; Ibid., 1932-33, p. 17.
15. B. B. Chaudhuri, "The Process of Depeasantization in Bengal and Bihar, 1885-1947".
20. Ibid., pp. 197-9, 206.
22. Keshab Chandra Banerjee of Sutrapur, Dacca city to B.P. Singh Roy, 8 May 1931, B.P. Singh Roy Papers.
23. D.A. Low, "'Civil Martial Law': The Government of Indian and the Civil Disobedience Movements, 1930-34", in Low (ed.), *Congress and the Raj*.
30. See P. Chaudhuri, *Ryoter Katha* [Bengali], preface.
31. GB, HPF, No. 345/1931.
32. Ibid.
34. See *RAB*, 1929-30, pp. xxiv-v.
36. GB, HPF, No. 511A/1930; *ABP*, 11 May 1930; Interview with Gobinda Saha.
37. Ibid
38. See GB, HPF, No. 613/1930.
39. Ibid., No. 599/1930.
40. Ibid.
43. GB, HPF, No. 345/1931.
44. A.B. De, District Magistrate Bogra to Under Secretary GB, 27 Aug. 1930, GB, HPF, No. 598/11930, "Congress Agitation in Bogra - 1930".
45. Ibid.
46. Interview with Annada Sankar Ray.
49. Ibid., p. 61; *ABP*, 24 Nov. 1929.
50. B. Bhattacharyya, op. cit., p. 62.
51. Ibid., pp. 62-3.
52. Ibid., pp. 66. 70.
53. See *ABP*, 29 Oct. 1929.
55. HFR, 1st half, May 1929.
57. B. Bhattacharyya, op. cit., pp. 206-10; Interview with Annada Sankar Ray.
60. Ibid., pp. 206-12.
62. *ABP*, 30-31 May, 7 June 1930.
64. Badshah Khan (Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan), *My Life and Struggle*, pp. 152-3.
67. *RAB*, 1929-30, p. XXV.
70. GB, HPF, No. 1028/1935; *RAB*, 1934-35, p. XXXV.
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73. RAB, 1934-35, p. iv.
74. Chief Secretary GB, W. Prentice to B.P. Singh Roy, 9 Sept. 1930. B.P. Singh Roy Papers, 1930-1937; GB, HPF, 345, No. 18 (II)/1931.
76. GB, HPF, No. 492/1929 (1-2); Ibid., No. 116/1931; No. 149/1932.
77. Ibid., No. 345 (II)/1931; No. 805/1931; No. 149/1932.
79. GB, HPF, No. 873/1933.
80. Ibid., No. 384/1932.
81. Ibid.
83. See ABP, Jan.-June 1929, passim.
84. Ibid., 20-24 Feb., 24 March, 3 April 1929.
85. Ibid., 11 Nov. 1923, 24 April 1929.
86. GB, HPF, No. 610 (1-5)/1929.
87. ABP, 11 June 1929, 28 July 1929.
88. A. Rasul, Krishak Sabhar Itihas [Bengali], pp. 50-2.
89. ABP, 1 Nov. 1929.
90. C.C. Sanyal, The Rajibansis of North Bengal, p. 213.
92. HFR, 2nd half, July 1928.
93. Ibid., 1st-2nd halves, April-May 1929.
94. RAB, 1928-29, pp. xvi-xvii.
95. Ibid., HFR, 1st half, July 1929; Statesman, 2-4 July 1929; ABP, 3 Sept. 1929.
98. Ibid.; H. Kabir, Muslim Politics 1906-47 and Other Essays, pp. 22-3.
99. S. Natarajan, Indian Parties and Politics, pp. 24-5.
101. Ibid., p. 165.
104. ABP, 28 May, 1929.


108. Interview, Annada Sankar Ray.

109. Interview, Maulana Tarkabagish.


111. GB, HPF, No. 444/1930, Part II; *HFR*, August 1930; *ABP* 27 May 1930.

112. Ibid., 29 June, 1930.

113. Ibid., 6 July, 1930.

114. See P. Chatterjee, "Agrarian Relations and Communalism," pp. 33-4; GB, HPF, No. 444/1930, Part II.


116. IGP's Report, B.P. Singh Roy Papers, 11 August, 1930; DM Comilla to Deputy Secretary, GB, 18 January 1933, GB, HPF, No. 384/1932.


118. *ABP*, 6 and 10 June, 1930.


120. W.D.R. Prentice, Member Political, GB, on the riots in Dacca district, *BLCP*, 26 August, 1930, pp. 845-6.

121. GB, HPF, No. 444/1930, Part II.

122. See *Report of Dacca Disturbance Enquiry Committee 1930*, passim.

123. *ABP*, 6 and 10 June, 1930.


126. Nalini Ranjan Sarkar, a high-caste Hindu politician of the region held that the movement was purely communal by nature. See his statement in *ABP*, 1 Aug. 1930; See GB, HPF, No. 613/1930 for the opposite view.


128. See for details GB, HPF, No. 435/1930; *ABP*, 18 May and 4 June, 1930.


131. DM Burrows to Chief Secretary Hopkyns, 18 July 1930; Burrows' telegram to Calcutta, 17 July, 1930, GB, HPF, No. 613/1930.

132. Interview, Rasharaj Saha Chowdhury.


144. Ibid., p. 42; Interview, Rasharaj Saha Chowdhury.


146. See D. Goswami, "Ekti Krishak Bidroher Kahini".


149. Interviews with Hemango Biswas; Rasharaj Saha Chowdhury; Gobindo Saha; Ruhini Kumar Saha; Kshetro Mohan Saha.

150. Ibid.

151. Interviews with Maulana Abdul Halim Husaini; Rasharaj Saha Chowdhury; Gobindo Saha.

152. Burrows to Chief Secretary Hopkyns, 1 July 1930, *GB*, HPF, No. 511/1930.


156. *Charumihir* (Mymensingh), 22 July 1930.


158. See *GB*, HPF, No. 613/1930.

159. *ABP*, 16 July 1930; Interview, Maulana Abdul Halim Husaini.


161. Interview, Gobindo Saha.


164. **RNPB**, April 1933, p. 92.
165. Ibid., p. 93.
167. Hindu, 13 and 20 May, 1933.
168. Interview, Shamsuddin Ahmed.
170. Ibid.
171. **Projar Katha**, 29 June, 1933.
172. **RNPB**, June-August, 1933, passim.
173. Commissioner W.H. Nelson to Chief Secretary, GB, 28 May and 20 June, 1931, HPF, No. 105/1931 (1-14).
174. Ibid.
175. GB, HPF, No. 849/1931.
176. **RAB**, 1934-35, p. XXX.
177. Ibid.
178. GB, HPF, No. 105/1931.
180. Ibid., 2nd half, Dec. 1931.
181. A.K. Ghuznavi on government attitude towards peasant conferences, GB, HPF, No. 112/1933; for details about Maulana Bhashani’s activities among peasants see GB, HPF, No. 885/1933; RAB, 1932-33, p. xii; HFR, December, 1932.
182. Interview, Shamsuddin Ahmed.
184. **RAB**, 1931-32, p. XXV.
186. GB, HPF, No. 245/1931; Ibid., No. 849/1931.
188. Interviews with Ramizuddin Ahmed and Shamsuddin Ahmed.
189. **RAB**, 1934-35, p. XXX.
190. DM N.C. Bose to Under Secretary, GB, 26 December, 1931, GB, HPF, No. 849/1931.
191. Ibid.
192. Ibid.
195. Interview with Shamsuddin Ahmed.
196. Interview with Nazimuddin; GB, HPF, No. 105/1931.
197. HFR, 1st half, May 1933.
198. GB, HPF, No. 885/1933.
199. For details about Chittagong armoury raiders’ connections with peasants in the sub-region see HPF No. 284/1934 (5-8); A. Singha, *Chottogram Yubo Bidroho*, Vol. II [Bengali]; HFR, August, 1930.
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200. See Report by the Officer-in-Charge of Laksam police station (Tippera), GB, HPF, No. 880/1934.

201. HFR, 2nd half, January, 1934.

202. Ibid., 1st half April, 1934.

203. See his "Agrarian Relations and Communalism ...", pp. 36-8.

204. Chief Secretary GB, H.J. Twynam to Divisional Commissioners, 8 July 1936, GB, HPF, No. 168/1936 (1-2), "Policy of Govt as regards Peasants' Conferences and Meetings", GB, HPF, No. 112/1933 (1-6); Interview, Maulana Tarkabagish; DM Bogra, Nurunnabi Chowdhury to Commissioner Rajshahi Divn, 21 Aug. 1935, GB, HPF, No. 839/1935.

205. GB, HPF, No. 168/1936 (1-2).

206. RAB, 1932-33, pp. xl-xl.

207. GB, HPF, No. 565/1935.

208. P. Chatterjee, "Agrarian Relations and Communalism", p. 11.


210. Maulana Akram Khan, Khan Bahadur Abdul Momen and H.S. Suhrawardy were the prominent opponents of the 14-Point Programme of the party. The change of name, "Krishak Proja Party", was also opposed by them. They branded the party as "pro-Hindu" and "pro-Congress". See J. De, op. cit., p. 32; A.M. Ahmed, op. cit., p. 111.

The Eclipse of the Proja and the Ascendancy of the Ashraf, 1937-41

"I submit to my leader Mr Jinnah.... I have entirely thrown myself at the disposal of Mr Jinnah."
— A.K. Fazlul Huq, October 15, 1937

Jinnah arrived in Calcutta on 17 August 1936, at the invitation of the three important political parties of Bengali Muslims — the Krishak Proja Party (KPP), the Muslim League (ML) and the newly formed United Muslim Party (UMP) — to settle their differences. The forthcoming elections of the provincial legislature under the new constitutional arrangements had precipitated the unity move. The Act of 1935 not only enlarged the electorate by about 600 per cent by enfranchising about six million people in Bengal, but also drastically reduced urban weightage and enfranchised four Muslims for every three new Hindu voters. The ashraf or the Urdu-speaking urban Muslim elites and aristocrats, who had little contact with the rural masses, needed the support of the projas or "tenants" — here meaning the well-to-do section of the peasantry — for their success in the elections as the former were predominant in the provincial Muslim League and had close connections with the peasant masses. A.K. Fazlul Huq and other proja leaders on the other hand, wanted the protection of the ashraf against the Hindu aristocracy and bhadralok. This is well reflected in the presidential speech of Fazlul Huq, the President of the KPP, in a meeting in Calcutta on 18 August 1936 which was also attended by the President of the All-India Muslim League, Mohammed Ali Jinnah. Huq not only urged Jinnah to take the lead in breaking group and coterie interests among the Bengali Muslims, but also said: "We look to you to dispel all illusions, to proclaim in unambiguous language the identity of communal and national interests, and to warn the simple and unwary against the insidious forms which reaction adopts to serve its ends." This attitude of Huq and the majority of the proja leaders signalled the beginning of the process which brought about the ascendancy of the ashraf in the political arena of Bengali Muslims in the wake of the elections, and almost the complete capitulation of the proja to the ashraf
subsequently. From this statement of Huq it also appears that by then his group had identified itself with the Muslim League.

Though the events leading to the "unconditional surrender" of the proja to the ashraf were quite dramatic, this was not altogether unexpected. The most fascinating part of the story during 1937-41 is the successful mobilization of the under-ryots and bargadars by the ashraf through the machination of the proja against the Hindu zamindars, mahajans and the bhadralok in general. It is equally interesting how the nationalists, socialists and communists failed to make much headway in the peasant front during the period under review.

A large section of different categories of peasants — ryots, under-ryots and bargadars — was convinced that the abolition of the zamindari, mahajani and bargadari systems was possible through legislative politics and that their own representatives in the legislature were capable of improving their condition. A smaller but assertive section of them, however, did not believe in constitutional means as the best way to ameliorate their condition.

The Muslim elites and the semi-urban leaders of Bengal, mostly emanating from rich peasant families, were in mutually hostile political groups on the eve of Jinnah's attempt to reorganize the Muslim politicians under the banner of Muslim League in 1936. The gulf within the rank and file of Muslim Leaguers, created in 1927 over the question of supporting or boycotting the Simon Commission, between the pro-Commission Sir Muhammad Shafi and the anti-Commission M.A. Jinnah groups, remained unbridged till 1936. Many important League members had either floated new organizations or joined other groups in the meantime. Kabiruddin Ahmed of Malda, for example, was associated with the Central National Mohammedan Association, Mirza Abul Hasan Ispahani and Khwaja Nooruddin formed the New Muslim Majlis, and men like Fazlul Huq, Shamsuddin Ahmed and Jalaluddin Hashemy were busy organizing the Nikhil Banga Proja Samity. In the meantime, differences grew within the Proja Samity between the supporters of Fazlul Huq (mainly East Bengalis) and Khan Bahadur Abdul Momin of Burdwan (mainly West Bengalis), apparently over the presidentship of the party, at the Proja Conference at Mymensingh in early 1935.4

Since the very inception of the Proja Samity in 1929, there had been a sharp distinction between two broadly divided groups within the party hierarchy. One of the groups was led by men like Maulana Akram Khan, Sir Abdur Rahim (Urdu-speaking), Dr. Abdullah Suhrawardy (Urdu-speaking) and Khan Bahadur Abdul Momin, a retired civil servant. The other group was represented by the moderate, "progressive" politicians, having close contact with the rural masses.
Many of them came from lower peasant families of East Bengal. Fazlul Huq, Maulvi Mujibur Rahman, Maulvi Abdul Karim, Fayezuddin Hossain, Mujibur Rahman Phulpuri, Shamsuddin Ahmed, Shah Abdul Hamid, Abdul Wahed Bokainagari and Azizur Rahman of Jamalpur were the prominent leaders of this faction. Some of them had close connections with Muzaffar Ahmed, Hemanta Kumar Sarkar and other communist leaders of Bengal. The so-called radical Proja leaders selected Fazlul Huq as their leader and remained a strong pressure group within the party.

The pretentious change of name of the Proja Party into the Krishak Proja Party in 1936 and Fazlul Huq's re-election as the president of the party, did not in fact bring about any substantial change in the nature of the party. The rift between the ashraf and the projas was accentuated for the time being. Men like Akram Khan, Khan Bahadur Abdul Momin and Husayn Shaheed Suhrawardy tried for some time to continue with the Proja Party. While ashraf leaders, including Khwaja Nazimuddin, on the other hand, vilified the KPP as a pro-Hindu, pro-Congress and pro-communist organization on account of its advocacy of the transfer of absolute proprietary rights of land to the tillers, free and compulsory primary education for the rural masses and drastic amendments of the Tenancy Act for the benefit of the cultivators. Paradoxically though, most of the peasants were Muslims, whom Khwaja Nazimuddin and his Muslim League party claimed to represent in the region. These programmes, known as the Dacca Manifesto or the 14-Points of the KPP infuriated some ashraf leaders so much that they branded the party an "advocate of class struggle", holding that the United Muslim Party (UMP) was the true representative of the peasants. Some ashraf leaders, including Nawab Habibullah of Dacca, emphasized on reorganizing the UMP with a view to popularizing the party among peasants and workers. This is, however, not true that the UMP was "hurriedly formed" by the Nawab of Dacca and others "to prevent Jinnah any access" to Bengal politics.

While the UMP and the KPP were squabbling, vilifying each other as the enemy of peasants, Jinnah was busy reorganizing the Muslim League in Bengal. It does not seem correct that he was doing so to challenge Fazlul Huq's leadership, as until mid-1936 the latter was also trying to revive the Muslim League in the province. Keeping in view the impending elections of the provincial legislatures, Jinnah invited Muslim leaders from the different provinces of India to attend the meeting of the Muslim League Central Parliamentary Board in Lahore on 6 June 1936. Out of 40 invitees from Bengal, including Fazlul Huq, Nawab Habibullah and H.S. Suhrawardy, only Mirza Abul Hasan Ispahani and Abdur Rahman Siddiqui of the Calcutta-based New Muslim Majlis attended the meeting, where Fazlul Huq and
Ispahani were included in the Parliamentary Board as members from Bengal by Jinnah.\textsuperscript{13}

Though Huq and some leading members of the KPP wanted to collaborate with Jinnah and other Muslim political groups in Bengal for the purpose of the elections, the League-KPP entente was very short-lived. It failed not only because Jinnah wanted the total merger of the KPP with the League, like the merger of the UMP and the New Muslim Majlis with the League, and because of his alleged objection to the abolition of the zamindari system without compensation,\textsuperscript{14} but there were some other reasons for the break-up of the entente. The announcement of the formation of the League Parliamentary Board for Bengal on 25 August disillusioned Huq and the leading KPP leaders who wanted to collaborate with Jinnah. While the UMP was represented in the Board by 15 members, and the League and the Majlis by 7 each, the KPP as a party was not represented in it, though Fazlul Huq, Syed Nausher Ali and three other KPP leaders were included in the Board. The Board, in short, was dominated by the ashraf and the henchmen of Jinnah. Huq and his followers became quite sceptical about the prospect of forming a ministry under his leadership in Bengal by forming an electoral alliance with the ashraf. The ashraf, on the other hand, did not want a League-KPP entente.\textsuperscript{15} After the merger of the UMP and the Majlis with the League, the ashraf were confident of winning the elections without the KPP's formal support. By then some of the leading "rightist" KPP men had already leaned towards Jinnah. The landed aristocrats within the League Parliamentary Board also did not like the KPP's anti-zamindar stand and "Hindu connections". But nor were the KPP "radicals" happy about Huq's overtures to Jinnah. By late August both the ashraf and the projas wanted a breakdown of the alliance, but wanted to "make the other responsible for the breakdown".\textsuperscript{16} Soon they found a scapegoat in Fazlul Huq, who took the "credit" for breaking up the alliance with the "nawabs and zamindars" for the preservation of peasant interests. He simultaneously blamed the Governor and British bureaucracy with the non-Bengali Muslim businessmen of Calcutta for the break-up of the League-KPP understanding.\textsuperscript{17}

The KPP withdrawal from the League Parliamentary Board on 8 September 1936 was due to the conflicting class interest and mutual mistrust of the ashraf and projas rather than anything else. While the UMP had "no clear issue on which to approach the electorate", the KPP — "besides regular flirtations with Congress" — had the rural base in the krishak samities (peasant associations) to mobilize peasant support on class lines that "paralleled communal divisions". Huq's short-lived pre-election alliance with the League did not break down solely on account of his connections with the Congress, which was said to have
financed his election fund, but was possibly also due to his "unpredictable" nature, in the language of D.D. Taylor for he was "connected to all groups but committed to none".18 But there were some other important factors in influencing Huq's and KPP's stands vis-a-vis the other political parties. From the vacillating attitude of Huq and some of the leading KPP leaders towards the zamindars, ashraf, the Congress and the communists, during August 1936 and April 1937, from their alliance with the League to its breakdown and from their formal "surrender" to Jinnah, it appears that there was a tremendous pressure on them from the lower echelon of the KPP, which was committed to the abolition of the zamindari system with a view to installing the projas to power with the help of the ashraf. Fazlul Huq had to yield to this pressure before the elections, especially because the ashraf did not want his ascendancy as the Chief Minister, and the Hindu Congressmen, in most cases, did not support the agrarian programme of his party. The Bengal Congress opposition to the Communal Award in 1935 had already antagonized the Muslims and low-caste Hindus.

The peasant militancy, especially in Mymensingh, Bakarganj, Noakhali and Tippera districts, the strongholds of the KPP and Krishak Samity in 1936,19 and the predominance of Congressites in the Krishak Samity in the Tippera-Noakhali sub-region,20 compelled Huq and his group to identify with the agrarian masses. The KPP had to depend on the support of the Namasudra peasants too, especially in parts of Bakarganj, Faridpur and Khulna districts. These peasants mostly represented the lower-middle and poor categories.21

The anti-zamindar, anti-mahajan sentiment became so strong among the masses on the eve of the elections that even the zamindar-dominated League and Congress had to say something against these classes. It is not fair to hypothesize, as Humaira Momen, Arnalendu De and others have done, that the League manifesto contained "a hint that it would oppose the abolition of landlordism", and that the KPP programme was more radical than those of the Congress and League.22 In Shila Sen one finds another exponent of the theory that KPP's radical programme and promises of providing dal bhat (literally rice and lentil soup or bare subsistence) to the masses attracted them towards it.23 On the contrary, one finds that the Congress and League manifestos were quite "radical", so far as the abolition of landlords' exactions was concerned. The League also wanted free education for the rural masses. It may be pointed out that the KPP did not put forward a secular programme at all. Like the League, it also supported the protection of the religious and other rights of the Muslims in accordance with the wishes of the ulama. It also advocated the protection and promotion of the Urdu language and script, a universal
demand of Indian Muslims. The protection of religious rights of Indian Muslims was the first point in the 22-point KPP programme. One, however, notices a contradiction between the "Aims and Objectives" and "Programme" of the KPP, which were circulated together in September 1936. While in its "Aims and Objectives" the KPP was asking for the abolition of the Permanent Settlement or zamindari system by "legal and constitutional means", in the "Programme" the party was demanding the curtailment of certain privileges of the zamindars and more rights for the tenantry. 24

The election results suggest that these programmes and manifestos played very little role in moulding public opinion, as several powerful zamindars were returned from the rural constituencies. Bogra, Tangail, Rajshahi and even Tippera, a strong Krishak Samity centre, had zamindar MLAs returned with rural votes. 25 It should be pointed out in this regard that although the KPP-TKS captured 41 rural seats from East Bengal and two from West Bengal, the League did not cut an altogether poor figure in the countryside. It captured 26 rural seats from East Bengal and eight from West Bengal. 26

The polling of 31.78 per cent of the rural votes by the KPP as against 26.52 by the League 27 does not suggest that "the cries for zamindari abolition struck a cordant note among the rural electorate", 28 because the League also stood for the abolition of the zamindari system. Personalities rather than parties were important in determining the election results in the rural constituencies. 29 The success of the independent candidates, who captured three out of four available seats in Rajshahi (a zamindar-dominated district), three out of six in Noakhali (a strong base of the Krishak Samity), and two out of four in Dinajpur rural constituencies, 30 proves this. This, however, does not mean that the programmes of drastic land reform did not appeal to the voters. Besides the enfranchised peasants, the other categories were also aroused by the anti-zamindar propaganda of different political parties and personalities, 31 which will be discussed later.

One may raise the question: "Why did the KPP refrain from contesting the General and Scheduled-Caste seats in the elections, especially when its programmes were "close" to those of the Congress? A KPP-Congress alliance seemed likely due to their "similarities". The KPP's success in capturing most rural seats has been imputed to its "secular" and "non-communal" programme by some scholars. 32 Since the KPP broke the electoral alliance with the League, which was followed by Fazlul Huq's famous press statement stressing that there was "no difference whatever between the Hindus and Muslims for their interests are welded into one another, together, we are confident, they shall triumph"; 33 it seems the KPP and the Congress had a secret
electoral alliance. The KPP refrained from contesting the General and Scheduled Caste seats and the Congress did not nominate any candidate for the Muslim seats. Humaira Momen is of the opinion that the KPP did not openly support the Congress for fear of Muslim League propaganda, branding it as a pro-Hindu, anti-Muslim organization.

It is misleading to believe that the KPP victory in the elections in rural constituencies of the region was solely due to its anti-zamindar campaign. The League programme was also anti-zamindar. Fazlul Huq trounced Khwaja Nazimuddin by more than 10,000 votes at Patuakhali (Bakarganj). Nazimuddin had zamindari estates in Bakarganj and was related to the Nawab of Dacca. Besides Huq’s anti-zamindar stunt, he also utilized the services of ulama to counteract the propaganda of the pro-Muslim League ulama. Besides speaking against the zamindari system, Fazlul Huq also appealed to the voters to support him for the sake of Islam.

There was hectic electioneering in places where prominent leaders stood as rival candidates. But as a whole the turnout of voters was only 40.5 per cent on the average, slightly more in the countryside. In a Bakerganj constituency only 22 per cent of the voters turned out and only 36.3 per cent voters exercised their suffrage overall in the district in which the KPP secured the highest number of seats, eight out of nine available. In most places the electorate was indifferent. Neither the KPP nor the League had grassroots organizations and neither could put up candidates in all the rural constituencies. For the average villagers the election was a raffle, a tamasha or a good pastime. They were attracted to the symbols of different candidates — ploughs, carts, dhekis (husking machines), boats, umbrellas, hurricane lamp. Some peasants even asked the polling officers and agents, which of the ballot boxes was favoured by God or by their head man. Lawyers were the most successful candidates in rural areas for their "power" to fight the landlords in the courts of justice. About 60 per cent of the successful candidates from rural areas was represented by lawyers, 15 per cent by land-holding classes, mostly jotedars, and the rest traders, doctors, teachers and others.

From the general state of mind of the peasant voters it appears that they were God fearing, loyal to the village headmen and, to some extent, to the landlords, including the zamindars. But the election manifestos of different party and independent candidates, with their anti-zamindar, anti-mahajan pronouncement, might have aroused great expectations among them. In some places these sentiments were further aroused by folk songs and theatres. In one song the peasants were asked to vote for the abolition of the zamindari system:
The Eclipse of Proja

We must finish the zamindars and issue summons against them to show cause why they should not be ejected. We must set right this poor country, we must not beg food from other nations. We must work hard on our own land and expel famine from Bangladesh [meaning the undivided Bengal]. Go, all peasants go, and vote against the zamindari system. 

In another song, they were urged to be careful about the so-called friends of the poor who, it warned, wanted nothing but their votes to become MLAs and ministers and would not be available to the poor after the elections were over.

Some scholars are of the opinion that the 1937 elections were fought on issues of conflicting class interests and the economic distress of the peasantry, and that the "undue emphasis" on religious or communal solidarity against Hindus "found little appeal in a province noted for its lack of religious fanaticism." Enayetur Rahim, however, argues that, though communal politics had "no appeal" to the villagers where communities were "bound together as a class through common experiences of economic deprivations", communal awareness
among the masses could be generated through constant appeals in the name of religion by "pointing out the difference in faith of the haves and the have-nots".44

One can probably agree with the view that during and immediately after the elections, Islamic solidarity became stronger among the Muslims than the questions of economic reforms. The employment of the ulama by both the major Muslim parties to propagate their cause in the name of Islam, created a sort of religious revivalism among the common masses. The fatwa of Maulana Abu Bakr Siddiqui, the influential pir of Furfura, in support of Muslim solidarity and against those who promised to abolish the zamindari system overnight, on the eve of the elections, might have aroused antagonism among a section of the Muslim peasantry, especially his muridan, towards the radical KPP, Congress Socialists and CPI leaders.45

The elections not only faded the demarcating line between class and communal conflicts in the region, but also reduced the sub-regional differences in the nature of political behaviour of the agrarian population. While the KPP captured 25 of its total 41 East Bengal seats (it did not contest urban seats) from the districts of Bakarganj, Mymensingh, Faridpur, Tippera and Khulna, the League captured 15 of its 19 rural seats from Dacca, Rangpur and Chittagong districts.46

In the KPP districts, except Tippera, the Hindu zamindars predominated as the chief exploiting class and this facilitated the task of mobilization on class lines. The availability of Fazlul Huq along with Hashem Ali Khan and Poet Mozammel Haq in Bakarganj; Abul Mansur Ahmed, Maulana Shamsul Huda, Abdul Wahed Bokainagri and others in Mymensingh; Yusuf Ali Chaudhury (Mohon Mia) in Faridpur; Jalaluddin Hashemy and Abdul Hakim in Khulna and a group of prominent Hindu-Muslim Krishak Samity and Congress leaders in Tippera, including Asimuddin Ahmed, Ramizuddin Ahmed, Abdul Malek, Yaqub Mia and Dhiren Datta, made the task easier for the KPP-Krishak Samity group. The success of the League in Dacca indicates the predominance of zamindars in the district. Three of the MLAs had direct links with zamindar families. The money and influence of the Nawab of Dacca, bitter Hindu-Muslim relationship and the existence of powerful Hindu trader-moneylenders in the district strengthened the League in the countryside as well. The League success in Rangpur was due to the absence of a dominant Hindu zamindar class and the existence of a powerful Muslim jotedar class in the district. The jotedars did not find the KPP theme of mobilizing peasants on class lines very attractive. In short, the elections of 1937 indicate that election manifestos hardly influenced the peasant voters' voting pattern. Wealth, and influence of candidates mattered a lot in their success in the election. The victory of relatively young, 27-year old
Nawabzada Hasan Ali Khan, a zamindar of Dhanbari (Mymensingh), of the KPP against his veteran Muslim League rival, "Principal" Ibrahim Khan, may be cited as an example.  

In Chittagong, and partially in Noakhali, the League fared well in the elections. Rich merchants and lawyers were behind this success in Chittagong. The religiosity of the common Muslim, exploited by pirs and mullas is both the districts, accounted for the easy victory of the Muslim League. The failure of the KPP-Krishak Samity alliance to capture more than two seats in Noakhali, a strong base of the Krishak Samity, seems quite strange. The absence of a dominat Hindu zamindar class in Noakhali was probably responsible for the success of the League and independent candidates. Greater stress on Muslim solidarity than on the abolition of the zamindari system by League and independent candidates, it seems, played the decisive role in their success in the elections in the district. One of the successful KPP M.As in Noakhali, Maulana Golam Sarwar (who later led the anti-Hindu rioters in the district in 1946-47), himself was an influential pir.

Unlike the case in Chittagong, krishak solidarity was, however, strong in Noakhali, due to the relative independence of peasants and greater economic hardship of the lower peasantry. Peasants' trust in politicians with ordinary social background led to the election of poorer candidates with little education in the district (none being a matriculant). "It illustrates the extent to which the less fortunate members of the community have become articulate under the new franchise", observed the Divisional Commissioner of Chittagong. Most rural voters' understanding of the importance of their votes was probably responsible for the success of peasant candidates in the elections.

The period between the formation of two coalition ministries in Bengal with Fazlul Huq as the Chief Minister, first in April 1937 and again in December 1941, was important for an understanding not only of the controversial personality of Fazlul Huq the "political grasshopper" of Bengal, but also of the mofussil as well as metropolitan politics, which were turning sharply communal. Despite the contradictory stories about the failure of the formation of the "more likely" coalition between the Congress and the KPP, the League and the KPP came to an understanding in April 1937 to form a coalition ministry with Huq as the Chief Minister. One may agree with the view that the Congress-KPP coalition could not materialize due to initial Congress opposition to accept office. But there is hardly any reason to believe that the Congress-KPP coalition failed to materialize on account of the Congress leaders' opposition to the enactment of the Moneylenders' Bill.
and their insistence on putting the clause "release of all political prisoners" before the "amendment of the Tenancy Act" in the joint-declaration of the two parties.\textsuperscript{54} There is probably some truth in the assertion of a Hindu \textit{bhadralok}, who held that by early 1937 the polarization of the Bengali Muslims and Hindus on communal lines had proceeded so far that a Muslim was no longer aroused by economic programme. "A Muslim is more true to his own community", he observed.\textsuperscript{55}

Besides a handful of grassroots KPP leaders like Asimuddin Ahmed, Muklesur Rahman, Abdul Malek and Yaqub Mia, most workers and leaders of the party had close ties with the League and other Muslim organizations. The observations of a Hindu daily, the \textit{Kesari} of Calcutta, seems more objective that the Muslim League-KPP compromise though done for "consideration of self-interest" of the leaders, was quite popular among the Muslims.\textsuperscript{56} Meanwhile, the bulk of the Namasudra community had joined the Congress. None of them contested the 1937 elections with KPP tickets. This virtually turned the KPP into a purely Muslim Organization like the Muslim League.

So it is not fair to hold that Fazlul Huq "hastily" signed an agreement with the League without hearing the "last word" from Sarat Bose, the Congress leader of Bengal.\textsuperscript{57} Under tremendous pressure from the rank and file of the KPP and Muslim League, the KPP-Muslim League and the Independent Muslim MLAs formed an alliance on 26 February 1937 after 109 Muslim MLAs had decided to join the League at the Calcutta residence of Nawab Khwaja Habibullah of Dacca.\textsuperscript{58} This led to the formation of the League-KPP coalition ministry in April, sarcastically called the "Khwaja-Proja coalition" by the Congress press.\textsuperscript{59} The new ministry accommodated only two representatives of the KPP, Huq himself and Syed Nausher Ali, the rest being three Hindu and three Muslim \textit{zamindars}, one Muslim and one Hindu representatives from Calcutta and one Namasudra representative from East Bengal.\textsuperscript{60}

The Hindu aristocracy and the \textit{bhadralok} were not happy with the new ministry on account of its avowed anti-\textit{zamindari}, anti-\textit{mahajan} programmes. Communal hatred might have aggravated the situation. This is reflected in the headlines of a Congress (Hindu) newspaper immediately after the formation of the ministry: "Muslim Raj in Bengal Complete"; "All Nation-Building Departments Go to Muslim"; "Mr Huq Fails to Keep Promise — Hindu Ministers Offered Inferior Positions in the Bengal Cabinet."\textsuperscript{61} The Hindu press was so biased and inimical to the Muslims that even the granting of important portfolios, such as Finance, Revenue and Communication to Hindu ministers, did not pacify it. This simmering dissatisfaction of the Hindu \textit{bhadralok} towards the ministry soon infected the entire society, and
the two communities.

The rival proja leaders, who did not support the formation of the ministry with the Muslim League and zamindars, on the other hand, played an important role in restraining the Huq government from drifting too far to the right. They worked as a pressure group by mobilizing a section of the peasantry on class and nationalist lines. The exclusion of Shamsuddin Ahmed (Secretary of the KPP) from the cabinet (probably due to the pressure of the zamindar colleagues of Fazlul Huq for his anti-zamindar stand), and the abandoning of the key principles of the party antagonized the radical faction of the party towards the ministry.62

The greatest obstacle to the ministry however, came from the Hindu propertied classes. While some Hindu zamindars and bhadralok openly criticized the ministry for its "anti-zamindar" stand,63 the more tactful Hindu leaders, it seems, tried to sabotage the moderate tenancy legislation of the government by promoting the more radical peasant demands of the Kisan Sabha. They put greater emphasis on the expropriation of the jotedars by granting occupancy rights to the bargadars than on the abolition of the zamindari system.

By 1934 a large number of communists had infiltrated the Congress after the banning of the Communist Party of India by the government. Anti-zamindar, anti-capitalist elements within the Congress were also being organized under the banner of the Congress Socialist Party of Jaya Prakash Narayan in mid-1930s. On the eve of the elections of 1937 the anti-zamindar, anti-moneylender programmes of different political parties reached the remotest village in the region. This aroused great expectations among all sections of peasants about the "impending" legislation against all the exploiting classes. Many KPP, Muslim League and Congress leaders, having rural and peasant background popularized the anti-zamindar, anti-capitalist programmes among the peasants.

After the elections, these rural-based MLAs, mostly petty lawyers, jotedars, teachers and ulama, formed numerous "peasant" groups within the Legislative Assembly. The growing unrest in the countryside, accentuated by the continuation of the Depression and political reasons discussed earlier, led to the formation of these groups. Most of them represented the jotedars and middle peasant interests. A few, like the Parliamentary Peasant and Labour Party under communist and Krishak Samity leaders — Bankim Mukherjee, Niharendu Datta Mazumdar, Asimuddin Ahmed, Syed Ahmed Khan and Dewan Mustafa Ali — had close links with the lower peasantry and worked as a pressure group in the Assembly. This group was also instrumental
in encouraging the formation of the Rebel Proja Party against Fazlul Huq.64

The formation of this party by 21 "left wing" Muslim MLAs and MLCs in August 1937 must have strained the nerves of Fazlul Huq and his supporters. Though the Governor welcomed it as a "more responsible" and "constructive form of opposition", he was right in his assessment that Huq would be put on "one side of the fence", meaning he would have to rely more on the League and pro-landlord groups.65 On 15 October Huq not only rejoined the Muslim League at the Lucknow session of the party, but also submitted to Jinnah. Assuring him his total support Fazlul Huq said: "I submit to my leader Mr. Jinnah.... I have entirely thrown myself at the disposal of Mr. Jinnah." He also said that the KPP had been formed for a "purely economic programme" whereas the League had been a "political organization" of the Muslims. He promised to sacrifice anything for Islam as well.66

Far from being a "constructive opposition", the Rebel Group leaders were mostly non-committal and vacillating. Most of the 21 "rebels", whose ranks were swelled afterwards by another 18 defectors, were bargaining with Huq for ministerial and other lucrative posts. Men like Nawabzada Syed Hasan Ali Chaudhury, son of the late zamindar Nawab Ali Chaudhury, could not have any genuine grievance against the zamindari system, the question of whose abolition was supposedly the chief point of difference between the Rebel and Huq groups. Yet Hasan Ali was with the "rebels." Later two of the "rebels", Shamsuddin and Tamizuddin Khan, accepted cabinet posts under Huq.67

In spite of several defections from both the Rebel and pro-government KPP, the formation of the Rebel Group widened the gulf between the ashraf and krishak factions. The richer projas mostly remained with Huq and the poorer ones sided with the "rebels." The latter organized peasants on class lines, while the former fully identified themselves with the anti-Hindu Muslim communalists. The story remains incomplete without a discussion of the attitude of the high-caste Hindu leaders of the Congress in Bengal.

By the 1930s, the Congress in Bengal had already damaged its reputation in the eyes of the Muslim agricultural classes by opposing the Tenancy (Amendment) Act of 1928. During and after the elections of 1937 the Congress wanted to refurbish its tarnished image. The landlords and bourgeois leaders of the Congress wanted to kill two birds with one stone by rehabilitating the party in the eyes of the masses and at the same time gaining a breathing space for further manoeuvres.68

But the Congress policy was incoherent and the party was divided over the agrarian issues. While the leaders in the Assembly
supported extremist amendments to the Tenancy Bill "in the hope of splitting the Ministry's support", the Congress press and others outside the Assembly were quite nervous about the Tenancy Act (Amendment) Bill of 1937. At last Sarat Bose, the Congress leader in the Assembly, condemned the Bill on the specious ground that it did not go far enough. But the Congress in Bengal confronted an awkward situation when the Tenancy Bill was put to the vote: it could neither vote for it nor dare to vote against.

From then onwards the lower and upper peasantries were quickly mobilized on communal lines as "Congress" and "Hindu" became synonymous. The inherent class antagonism was subordinated for the time being under communalist leadership. The organization of peasants on purely class lines produced some sporadic and short-lived movements in some areas. Keeping in view the sub-regional variations in the nature of agrarian relations, leadership and political traditions and culture of the peasants, one can probably assume that the polarization of the peasants on the basis of religious differences was further accentuated after 24 out of 30 scheduled caste MLAs had defected from the Huq government to the Congress in 1938 on Gandhi's advice. Their defection hardly left any solid basis for the KPP's claim of representing both the Hindus and Muslims of the province. So by then the KPP had lost its secular image and practically merged with the Muslim League.

III

Since the mobilization of peasants on class lines was confined to particular tracts during the period, its importance as a determining political factor remained diminutive. But the anti-government, anti-zamindar propaganda by the communists and former ("terrorist") detenus perturbed the government. The general awareness brought about by the Act of 1935 and the subsequent elections held under the Act in 1937, among the franchised and non-franchised sections of the peasantry, was further accentuated by several pieces of legislation curtailling the powers and privileges of the zamindars and mahajans. This is evident from the observations of the Governor in a Revenue Conference in 1938, specially held to deal with the "no-rent mentality" of peasants in the region. The branding of the zamindars as "agents of British imperialism" by the communists and pro-communist Krishak Samities and their demands for the reduction of rent by 50 per cent and complete remission of arrears of rent were responsible for class antagonism in the countryside. A section of the peasantry was convinced that the Tenancy Amendment Act was "only an instalment
of future benefits”, due to the extravagant promises made by some KPP, communist and Krishak Samity leaders.

The Revenue Conference proceedings of 1938 and the confidential Home Department files reveal that apart from the pro-communist Krishak Samity leaders, many KPP MLAs with avowed anti-communist attitude, were busy inciting the peasants to withhold rent payment to their landlords suggesting to them that the government through legislation would soon expropriate the landlords. Consequently as the Revenue Minister felt, the Bengal Tenancy Act Amendment Bill "had had a psychological effect on the tenants". He also mentioned the Bengal Agricultural Debtors Act, which by imposing a sort of moratorium on all repayments of debts, had encouraged peasants not to repay their debts and interests to their moneylenders. One may agree with the confidential report of the Commissioner, Dacca division, that the no-rent mentality among peasants was due to their belief that the Proja Party through legislation "would bring in a millennium". Similarly one finds reason in his assertion that peasants in Mymensingh believed their MLAs, Maulvi Abdul Hakim and Maulvi Shamsul Huq, who took the credit for passing the Tenancy Act (Amendment) of 1938 and induced them to withhold payments of rents in order to "force the hand of the government in bringing that measure into law." The District Magistrate of Rajshahi rightly pointed out that there had been gross misunderstanding about the tenancy legislation among the peasants due to the "exaggerated idea" given by their MLA Ashraf Ali Khan. The District Magistrates of Rangpur, Tippera, Nadia and Khulna also implicated MLAs, Abu Hossain Sarkar, Maulvi Makbul Hossain, Maulvi Shamsuddin and Jalaluddin Hashemy respectively, in this regard.72

In spite of the emergence of the Kisan Sabha, and the Congress Socialist Party and Jawaharlal Nehru's ascendancy as a powerful Congress leader, who professed to be a socialist in those days, the period did not witness much peasant activity on class lines in the region. Excepting in parts of Tippera, Noakhali and Mymensingh, the peasants' awareness as a class in themselves was reflected rather in their participation in non-Congress peasant movements. It is, however, quite difficult to differentiate the Congress, CPI, Kisan Sabha, Krishak Samity and Rebel Proja Party movements, as many of the leaders belonged to more than one of these organizations simultaneously. Muzaffar Ahmed, Bankim Mukherjee and some other prominent CPI and Kisan Sabha leaders were urging the peasants to join the Congress for purna swaraj or full independence,73 and the Krishak Samity leader Asimuddin Ahmed was active enrolling Muslims as Congress members in the countryside of Tippera.74
Peasant insurgencies on class lines were hindered by the relative backwardness and indifference of the poor peasants. Contrary to the general hypothesis and observations of some of the leading CPI and Kisan Sabha leaders, there was a greater propensity to refuse to pay rent among the better off, than among the poor peasants. In tracts with substantial number of non-Muslim tribal peasants, who had hardly any reason to support Muslim or Hindu communalists, there were successful "no-rent" movements on class lines only when the bulk of the leadership came from local Muslims.

In evaluating the so-called non-communal peasant movements of the period, organized on class lines mainly under the aegis of the Congress-backed organizations, the question may be raised: Did Congress mobilize the peasants against zamindars and mahajans (mainly Hindu) only to defeat moderate tenancy reforms of Huq government? Did it really want to commit political harakiri? In actuality, the class-cum-communal hatred against Hindu zamindars, mahajans and the bhadralok had become so pervasive by mid-1930s that the Congress had little alternative to joining the flow emanating from the countryside. The CPI and the former political detenus-turned-communists had little alternative but to turn to the Congress after the formal banning of the CPI in 1934, which was not withdrawn till early 1942.

The Congress failure to capture a single Muslim seat in the elections of 1937 in Bengal, on the other hand, initiated a new concern among a few leading Congressmen like Jaya Prakash Narayan, who felt the need of diverting the Muslim masses from the "communalist forces." Soon Jawaharlal Nehru came to East Bengal to enlist mass support for the Congress. He spoke in favour of protecting the rights of the peasants and labouring classes. He said: "If you and I must speak the same language we must speak for the peasants." His anti-zamindar, anti-capitalist speech was not greatly appreciated by the Hindus, who formed about 90 per cent of the 8000 crowd at the Chittagong Parade Ground in June 1937. Thousands of peasants went to receive him at Laksam railway station in Tippera, chanting anti-government, anti-capitalist slogans, under the leadership of Ashrafuddin Chaudhury, Asimuddin Ahmed and Abdus Sattar of the Tippera Krishak Samity. They also held numerous peasant rallies in the Tippera-Noakhali sub-region. The detailed reports of these rallies indicate that Muslim peasants did not support the Congress unconditionally nor did they even totally forget their religious differences with the Hindu landlords and moneylenders.

By the end of 1937 the Krishak Samity agitation had taken an acute turn in parts of Noakhali and Tippera. Cases of looting of landlords' granaries were reported. Several zamindars' khas (personal)
possessions were forcibly occupied by landless peasants in some Noakhali villages. Mathura Mohan Sharma, a Hindu mahajan of Parbatinagar village in the area of Laxmipur police station, was killed by two Muslim peasants in late 1937. The mahajan’s refusal to forgo a part of the decreetal amount of their debt led to his murder. Prior to the incident the mahajan had been called by the local Krishak Samity to a baithak or indoor meeting in its office to settle the dispute. Later, it was believed, he was killed by the Samity men. The number of armed robbery in 1936 in the Noakhali countryside had risen remarkably, most victims being Hindu moneylenders. According to a confidential police report, these were committed by local Muslim members of the Krishak Samity. These violent incidents indicate that the Congress had hardly any control over the Krishak Samities. It seems local anti-Congress, anti-Hindu Muslim peasant leaders were behind these premeditated violent acts. This, however, neither indicates the preponderance of the "autonomous domain" of the so-called subalterns, nor the "incomplete hegemony" of the elite culture over that of the masses. It is true that the illiterate masses, at times, have their own ways of settling the scores with the oppressive superordinates through violence, and that their own interpretations of events and different aspirations vis-a-vis the elites lead their politics to a different channel. But this does not mean that the non-peasant elites, including the village mullas, had no role to play in violent mass upsurges as leaders and agents provocateur. By 1937, as elsewhere in the region, the mullas and the pro-Muslim League elements had become powerful in the Tippera-Noakhali sub-region. By then the CPI almost lost contact with the masses after the government had banned the party in 1934.

What the Divisional Commissioner of Chittagong had indicated in April 1937 about the unlikelihood of Congress’ success in securing Muslim support in rural Noakhali, was evident from the ascendancy of Maulana Golan Sarwar Hussaini in the Krishak Samity. His election as an MLA from Noakhali as a Krishak Samity candidate signified that the rural Muslims in the district were more stirred by religious orthodoxy than economic programmes. Golam Sarwar, however, spoke about the economic distress of the Muslim masses, always indicating their redress in the expropriation of Hindu zamindars and money-lenders. Soon a split between the Krishak Samity and Congress was evident in Noakhali and elsewhere on account of Congress’ opposition to the Debt Settlement Boards. But due to its opposition of the Huq ministry, the pro-peasant faction of the Congress failed to acquire a niche in the body politic of the Muslim agrarian society of the sub-region or elsewhere in East Bengal. Though several Congress branches were opened in the villages after the elections of 1937 in Noakhali,
Muslim cultivators in general were hostile towards the Congress. When they were asked to join the Congress they retorted in several Congress meetings, that it was up to the Hindus to join the Muslim League of Mr Jinnah. By then, most of the Noakhali Krishak Samity members, who had supported the Huq ministry and who wanted to see how far the government would go to meet their demands, were getting district officials' support vis-a-vis the zamindars. In spite of government attempts, the zamindars remained indifferent and did not try to help the peasants. Consequently the peasants were convinced that the government was on their side, the Hindu zamindars and mahajans were not. Besides these factors, there was a tremendous misunderstanding with regard to the Tenancy Act among the cultivators. The self-proclaimed "authors" of the Bill had been telling them that no payment of rental was necessary.

The case of Tippera peasants was not altogether different. The main differences in the nature of krishak movements between the two districts were that firstly, in Noakhali, as mentioned above, there had been violent eruptions of the peasants, especially the indebted ones, which led to the death of some Hindu moneylenders and there had been instances of hat looting and forcible seizure of khas possession of zamindars. In Tippera, the movement in general remained non-violent and agitational. Secondly, in Noakhali, there was no decline in the collection of rental by zamindars and intermediary landlords; in fact, the collection for the year 1938 was higher than the previous year in many estates. In Tippera, especially in the region of Nabinagar, Kasba, Bancharampur and Muradnagar, which had been "notorious" since 1927-28, there was a marked fall in the collection of rental, mainly due to the campaigns of Krishak Samity workers under the leadership of Maulvi Maqbul Hossain MLA. The situation was more or less the same on the borders of Laksam and Chauddagram thanas and parts of Chandina thana in Tippera district. There was a fall of 16 to 37 per cent in the total collection of rental in Tippera in 1938 due to the "no-rent" campaign.

Unlike Noakhali, due to the predominance of anti-British politicians in Tippera, there was a sharp decline in the collection of government dues, including the Chaukidari tax and payments due to the Cooperative Societies. "Deliberate misrepresentation and genuine misunderstanding" of the provisions of the Tenancy Bill were responsible for the non-payment of rental. In some Brahmanbaria villages in Tippera district peasants refused to repay their debts to their moneylenders, considering the Debt Settlement Boards as means of evading their obligations. Though initially Krishak Samity and Congress leaders of Tippera had shown interest in the "no-tax" campaign with a view to mobilizing the peasants on nationalist lines,
from the subsequent development of "no-rent" mentality among peasants, it appears that the upper-middle class leaders of the Congress, including Ashrafuddin Chaudhury, who had jotedari-talukdari interests, were not behind the "no-rent" campaign. As in Noakhali, the ulama and lower-middle class peasant leaders, including some pro-communist Muslims, were the chief organizers of the "no-rent" campaign in Tippera. The predominance of Hindu moneylenders in the district, as elsewhere in the region, in the long run weakened the class-based movement in the agrarian sector. Subsequently, under the pervasive influence of communalism, moneylenders were solely identified as Hindu exploiters by the bulk of the Muslim peasantry.

In spite of some pro-Congress and communist elements within the Krishak Samity, the peasant followers of the Samity were not very concerned about the Kisan Sabha's anti-imperialist, anti-War stand. Like their counterparts in Noakhali, Tippera peasants were also positive about the Fazlul Huq ministry, expecting further boons of it. Internal cleavages in the Tippera Krishak Samity, especially between Kamini Datta and Akhil Datta, might have disillusioned the peasants. From their subsequent opposition to the abolition of the zamindari system in the early 1950s, one can well imagine the nature of Kamini Datta's and Dhiren Datta's leadership vis-a-vis the anti-zamindar movement of the Tippera Krishak Samity in the 1930s and 1940s. It is, however, difficult to say whether some Congress leaders' "half-hearted" support for the anti-zamindar, anti-mahajan campaign of the peasants, or the anti-zamindar, anti-mahajan stand of the KPP-League coalition ministry of Huq, turned Congress meetings and agitations into the "least important events" in Tippera. The Tippera Krishak Samity, by late 1937, had been sharply divided over the Huq ministry. In parts of Noakhali, its promoters as a whole were supporters of the ministry.

The holding of the All-India Kisan Sabha conference at Comilla town in Tippera district on 14 and 15 May 1938 was disastrous for the communists. About a thousand "genuine krishaks" attended the Conference. They got free shirts and food from the organizers, which might have been the main attractions for most of them. Due to the opposition of the Muslim League, which exploited the communal sentiment of Muslim peasants, the conference was almost a total fiasco. After the arrest of some of the leading Krishak Samity leaders of the sub-region by the Huq government, including Syed Ahmed Khan, MLA, and Yusuf Ali, the pro-communist Samity became very weak in the sub-region. Soon Asimuddin Ahmed left the Congress to reorganize the Krishak Samity with the support of the "rebel" KPP leaders. Meanwhile, all attempts by the CPI to forge unity between the "rebel" KPP and Kisan Sahba, had failed. A few "rebels"
like Syed Nausher Ali, Syed Ahmed Khan and Abu Hossain Sarkar, became Kisan Sabha executives.106

By early 1939, with the increase in popularity of the Muslim League and Fazlul Huq in Chittagong division, only six Krishak Samity candidates had been elected in the Union Board elections in eight unions. The visits of the members of the Land Revenue Commission, the Paddy and Rice Enquiry Committee and the Chaukidari Enquiry Committee in the countryside, meanwhile had earned the peasants' confidence in the government. The Muslim League was also exercising a "restraining influence" in the countryside.107 After the outbreak of the War in 1939 the Congress Socialist Party and the CPI also drifted apart and the former detached itself from the peasant front of Bengal. It was a great setback for the Kisan Sabha-Krishak Samity movement throughout the region, which paved the way for the pro-government Muslim peasant organizations.108

In parts of Mymensingh district the Congress Socialists, former detenus, communists and "rebel" KPP men however, tried to mobilize peasants on class lines. By late 1937 "rebel" KPP leaders like Abdul Wahid Bokainagari, Maulana Shamsul Huda, Abdul Hakim, Abul Mansur Ahmed and Hasan Ali Chaudhury and the CPI and Krishak Samity leaders like Niharendu Dutt Mazumdar, Bankim Mukherjee and Asimuddin Ahmed had found common ground to launch anti-zamindar and anti-Fazlul Huq movements.109 But the peasants in general were not interested in an anti-Fazlul Huq movement but in rural uplift and the Debt Settlement Boards.110 As the bulk of the peasantry believed that the Fazlul Huq government was going to abolish the zamindari system and curtail the powers of the Hindu bhadralok and moneylender classes, at the anti-Huq Kisan Sabha conference of Kishoreganj (Mymensingh), held on 18 and 19 March 1939, only about 15 per cent of the audience comprised peasants. The counter propaganda meetings of the Muslim League in favour of the ministry drew greater crowds in the mofussil.111

Krishak agitations on class lines had some impact on the Muslim peasants when some of the local ulama or Muslim proja leaders led the movements, and when they had specific grievances against local landlords or moneylenders (especially when the exploiting classes represented the Hindus as well). This is evident from an incident of establishing a "rival" hat on a Hindu zamindar's property by his Muslim tenants at Hossainpur Bazar in Kishoreganj sub-division, in early 1939. According to the District Magistrate "the trouble directly arose as a result of the inflammatory no-rent speeches delivered by released detenus...backed by equally inflammatory leaflets circulated in Hossainpur Bazar over the signature of Maulana Shamsul Huda, M.L.A."112
The communists, ex-detenus and the Congress Socialists were not a united force. A group called the Kishoreganj Sub-divisional Congress Communist Party came into being at Kishoreganj in 1940 under the leadership of an ex-detenu Nagen Sarkar, with an avowed anti-CPI, pro-Congress programme. Local leaders like Sudhindra Roy (Khoka Roy), Wali Nawaz Khan and Jagadish Bhattacharjee were with him. This party held numerous public meetings where slogans like "long live revolution", "victory to the peasants and workers" and "down with Communist Party" were shouted and Gandhi was warned of the consequences of a compromise with the British. Nagen Sarkar's anti-jotedar and anti-zamindar "land to the tiller" programme was very popular among the bargadars and labourers in Katiadi and Pakundia areas of Kishoreganj sub-division.

But after the differences between the "leftists" and "rightists" within the Congress and Kisan Sabha members, especially among the ex-detenus from the Andamans had surfaced in the agrarian front as well, by early 1939 peasant mobilization on class lines was almost in total disarray everywhere in the region. After the Comintern at its seventh Congress in 1935 had decided to forge a united front with the "nationalist bourgeoisie" against imperialism and fascism, which was spelt out by Rajni Palme Dutt and Ben Bradley in early 1936 (also known as the Dutt-Bradley Thesis), most CPI (then clandestine) followers favoured an understanding with the "progressive" Congress leaders for the sake of national liberation. The subsequent political development in the agrarian sector proved that for most peasants the removal of immediate socio-economic distress was more important than the expulsion of the imperialists. The Hindu and zamindar connections of the Congress and the ex-detenus, all of whom had not been converted to non-communal ideology in the Andamans, might have alienated peasants from the United Front.

IV

The Tanka movement of the tribal peasants (mainly Hajong), against the high-caste Hindu zamindars in northern Mymensingh was one of the well-organized poor peasant insurrections in the history of modern South Asia. It was a movement organized on class lines by the communists. But in actuality, various other factors were behind the movement.

The Hodi, Hajong and other aboriginal tribal peasants of the Garo Hills region have long traditions of fighting against oppressive landlords and rulers. The famous Pagal Bidroho (rebellion) in the 1820s in the neighbouring Sherpur under Tipu Sardar, whom the local Hindu zamindar Harachandra Chowdhury described as the "Louis
Blanc of East Bengal", and the subsequent tribal and non-tribal rebellions under Dubraj, Janku Pathar and Mona Sardar of Susang Dangapur, whom the zamindar killed by crushing under the heels of an elephant in late nineteenth-century, confirm their fighting traditions. After the passing of the Garo Hills Act in late nineteenth century the tribal peasants were subjected to the local zamindars, who compelled them to pay a fixed amount of rental in kind irrespective of the yield. The system, known as tanka or dhan karari was more exacting than the barga or crop-sharing system. Besides these exactions, the Hajong peasants had to work as lathials (clubmen) of the zamindars and had to help them in Hati Kheda (elephant catching) operations. They had a very low social status and were regarded as untouchables by the high-caste Hindu landlords. By mid-1930s when communist leader Moni Singh, who hailed from Susang Durgapur and was a nephew of the Maharaja of Susang, came into direct contact with the Hajong tribals, they had already developed some political awareness. By 1924 under the leadership of Kedar Chakravarty, a Brahmin, the Hodi peasants of the locality were mobilized against untouchability. Their number swelled to more than 10,000 in about one hundred villages. By 1928 the Hajongs, Dalus and other tribals joined them and the movement for equal social status became so powerful that even the powerful zamindar of Muktagachha, Maharaj Shashi Kanta Acharyya, lent his support to it. So it can be assumed that the tanka movement was not "engineered by outsiders", without any support from the peasants. 

According to Moni Singh and Promotho Gupta (two active leaders of the tanka movement), when the former was interned at his family village, Susang Durgapur, and was under strict police surveillance, he came into contact with the Muslim and Hajong cultivators of the locality. The Muslim tankadars of Dashal village asked Singh to lead their movement against the zamindars. They went to him knowing that he was a communist labour leader with sympathy for the poor masses. But Moni Singh declined to lead their movement telling them that he had come home to see his mother and would soon go back to Calcutta to organize the labourers. This happened in November 1937. Till then he believed that the organization of the industrial labourers should precede to that of the peasants for the sake of swaraj and revolution. Meanwhile Moni Singh had contacts with the Hajongs, who complained about their illiteracy and untouchability. At his instructions Upendra Sanyal, a local high-caste former "terrorist", established a number of primary schools in the tribal locality. The local CPI leaders also sent a Brahmin priest amongst them to perform their rituals, hitherto denied by the local high-caste landlords.
From the spontaneity and quick spread of anti-zamindar directives among the peasants, it can be deduced that besides the communists there were other political forces and factors behind the agitation. A confidential government source indicates that the tanka movement was engineered by Moni Singh and financed by the Congress. The same source also reveals that due to the tenancy reforms and "to the hope that the Proja Party would bring in a millenium", the peasants opted for a "no rent" movement. Local MLAs, including Maulvi Abdul Hakim and Maulana Shamsul Huda, the government believed, had been inciting the peasants.124 Maulana Abdul Hamid Shah of Nilganj (Kishoreganj), who was an MLA, is said to have played the same role.125 Joint Hindu-Muslim peasant meetings and rallies were also held in different places. The Mymensingh District Kirshak Samity Conference at Kewat Khali Maidan, held under the presidency of Muzaffar Ahmed in February 1938 was attended among others by poet Kazi Nazrul Islam, Proja leader Abul Mansur Ahmed and communist peasant leader Faizuddin. This conference and several other small and large peasant meetings were also attended by the tribal peasants of the district, where anti-landlordism and anti-imperialism were the main themes of the speeches. By 1938 the communists and "rebel" proja leaders established a network of organizations throughout Mymensingh. These meetings and the anti-zamindar, anti-capitalist propaganda of the speakers frightened the Muslim League and other conservative leaders so much that at the second conference of the Mymensingh District Krishak Samity at Kishoreganj they spread pages of the Quran on the roads leading to the conference to incite Muslims against the Samity. But due to the intervention of some Samity leaders the peasants remained clam, ignoring the provocation. The Samity gained support from the Muslim and tribal tankadars of the district by demanding the abolition of the tanka systems.126 Meanwhile the Huq government had appointed a team to make a cadastral survey of the area under the tanka system. The government expressed its desire to grant full ryoti rights to the tanka tenants.127 As the bulk of the tanka landlords were Hindu zamindars and talukdars, the tanka revolt did not threaten the larger segment of the society.128 Most KPP and Muslim League leaders, it seems, supported the movement, as they also wanted to curtail the powers of the Hindu landlords. But when a large number of landless and semi-landless Muslim peasants of north Mymensingh were being mobilized against Muslim jotedars by the communists, the government machinery as well as pro-government mullas, mainly from Noakhali and Sylhet, rushed there to dissuade the peasants from supporting the communists. Under government pressure and the threat of eviction from their holdings by their landlords, the bulk of the Muslim peasants withdrew their "no-
rent" campaign. A handful of communist supporters came to Moni Singh in private, telling him that they were with him but dared not support him openly as they apprehended social ostracism and other punishments by the mullas and jotedars. These factors, according to Moni Singh, were mainly responsible for the confinement of the movement to the non-Muslim tribal peasants. Most of his supporters were poor Hajongs, only three being well-to-do peasants.

Apart from the tanka tenants, the Hajong and other tribal peasants of Susang Durgapur and the adjoining hilly areas of Mymensingh, an area stretching about 80 miles by ten miles, also took part in militant movements against the nankar, bhawali and khamar systems. During 1937-38, the nankar or the bonded agricultural labourers of the landlords, revolted against the zamindars at Chander Nagar, Nakshi, Nakhla and other villages around Sherpur in north Mymensingh. Local Hindu communist leaders including Rabi Neogi, Jiten Sen and Hemanta Bhattacharyya were the leaders. Besides demanding the abolition of the nankar system the scheduled-caste labourers wanted the right to enter temples. In return they agreed to work as the zamindars' household servants. The bhawali and khamar tenants also joined the nankars in their struggle under Kisan Sabha leadership. In addition to the bhadralok communists, leaders from among the tribals, like Balai Sarkar, Jai Chand, Kailash and Dinesh, organized mass boycotts of zamindars in the area. The Hodi, Santal, Hajong and other tribal peasants successfully resisted the collection of tolls from hats by the zamindars by establishing their own hats in the Sherpur-Nalitabari area in late 1930s and early 1940s. From the nature of the movement it appears that the tribals were not only mobilized on class lines, but that their ethnic and caste solidarities also played important roles in the movement.

After the outbreak of the War in 1939 many communist and Congress Socialist workers took shelter in the countryside to avoid arrest. In Mymensingh alone, hundreds of them were actively engaged in the anti-War propaganda in the rural areas. Hilly terrain and the forests of Susang Durgapur, Nalitabari, Sherpur, Haluaghat and Madhupur were suitable sanctuaries for them. Their campaign was quite successful among peasants, who stopped contributing men and money to the War. Some peasants were trained in guerilla warfare and taught how to make bombs. By early 1940s about a thousand armed guerillas had been raised from among the peasants. They were entrusted with the task of attacking the local government offices, zamidars' cutcheries and mahajans' gaddis or shops. The whole hilly region was divided into sectors — Susang in the east, Nalitabari in the west and Haluaghat in the centre — which were under three guerilla commands under the CPI. The guerillas established their own people's
courts" to try the captured "agents" of the government and local agents of exploitation. Peasant volunteers also collected subscriptions from the villagers to run their "government" in the "liberated areas" of northern Mymensingh. Such was their solidarity that they did not go to the government's courts of justice for settling their disputes during the period. Despite the arrest of several peasant workers in 1941 on the eve of the harvesting season, none of the convicted peasants suffered any loss since their neighbours reaped their crops for their families.

The German invasion of Soviet Russia in 1941 signalled a volteface in the history of communist movement in the sub-continent. Like communist cadres elsewhere in the sub-continent, the peasant volunteers of northern Mymensingh also participated in thousands in the anti-Fascist "People's War." The militant communist peasant movement of the sub-region could not spark the peasant discontents in the plains among the Muslim and Namasudras, because the change in the character of the War, from the "Imperialist" to the "People's War" from the communist viewpoint had harnessed the movement. Without contradicting the Bengal Kisan Sabha's claims of raising about 50,000 anti-Japanese peasant volunteers in Bengal during the War, it can be assumed that its acceptance of government help not only created further divisions within the party cadres and supporters, but also restricted the peasant movement within the hilly terrain of Mymensingh among the tribals. This ultimately disillusioned those who wanted to organize a united peasant movement against indigenous and foreign exploiters. The break between the Congress Socialists and the CPI by late 1939 and the bitter relationship between the communists and the Forward Bloc of Subhas Bose at the same time, might have been great divisive factors for the CPI. The CPI's subsequent support for the Muslim League's Pakistan demand further weakened peasant mobilization on class lines in the region. In the language of Overstreet and Windmiller: "The 'people's war' had been won, but it had cost the Indian Communists dearly."

Further discussions of peasant militancy during the period lead us to the conclusion that the organization of the tribal peasant was not "unidirectional", in the language of Bhattacharyya. One can agree with the view that the tribal peasants were mobilized after the "emergence of a mutuality between them and the mobilizers' programatic goals." Without entering into the debate whether the backward peasants accepted the upper-caste, "outsiders", who often were sons of landlords as their leaders, because of the "traditional mode of compliance with the dictates of social superiors" in a hierarchical society like that of Bengal, one can probably disagree with Bhattacharyya, who holds that by following the alien bhadralok leaders, the peasants
"risked retribution from the main body of the society". From the experience of Moni Singh, who was one of the chief organizers of the *tanka* revolt at Susang Durgapur area, it is evident that the scheduled-caste tribal peasants and their Muslim counterparts had been suffering from an endemic inferiority complex. When Moni Singh asked them to unite some one from them told him: "How can you weigh frogs in a scale? They always tend to jump out." They, like peasants anywhere, had a very low estimate about themselves and their capabilities. It was, however, clear to them that if a "prince" like Moni Singh would agree to lead them they would be safe from the retribution of the awe-inspiring zamindars and *bhadralok*. It appears that the unequal treatment meted out to the Hajongs by their high-caste superiors so far as the observance of rituals were concerned, created communal hatred between the two. This is evident from an instance, when some *nankar* peasants agreed to work as menials of their high-caste zamindars in exchange for equal rights to perform the rituals of worship in the temples. As the neighbouring Garo peasants, who were not better off economically than the Hajongs or other tribals, remained inert politically in most cases and did not agitate against their landlords, this might have been due to the absence of any communal conflict between themselves and their landlords as most of them were Christians and were under the influence of the European missionaries. The Garos in certain places collaborated with high-caste Hindu zamindars, who utilized their services to crush the rebellious Muslim and other tribal peasants. In October 1938 serious rioting took place at Jhinaigati Hat in Jamalpur sub-division in the district. Three Muslim supporters of a Muslim talukdar, who owned the *hat* were killed by some Garo supporters of the Arai Anna zamindar, who established another *hat* about 150 yards from the old one in order to improve his income.

The examples of peasant mobilization on class lines in parts of Dinajpur substantiates the argument that mobilization of peasants on class lines was quite difficult. The subsequent peasant movements in parts of Mymensingh, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Jessore, Khulna, Rajshahi and other parts of the region, which were mainly waged in the name of "class struggle", developed from the earlier class-cum-communal phase of the struggle.

There was a serious breach of the peace in certain villages in the area of Nawabganj police station in Dinajpur. Peasants under the leadership of an independent MLA Nishitha Nath Kundu and other Hindu *bhadralok* leaders resisted and attacked a police party and the president of the Chander Hat Union Board near Nawabganj. The most significant aspect of the story is that, "all his volunteers were Kshatriyas [Hindus] while the President of the Union Board and those who
supported the police were Muslims. Another version of the story also suggests that the movement was quite communal. Kalimuddin Mondol and Ashimuddin Mondol, two Muslim peasants who had been amongst the volunteers, probably as police agents, later informed the police about Nishitha Kunda's alleged order to "dishonour" the Muslims of Mandarpur and Bhaluka Jaipur for helping the police.

The nature of the movement was not altogether different from other violent mass upsurges in East Bengal, which have been discussed earlier. In many places the peasants were defiant of the government, police and zamindars and with lathis and spears in their hands surrounded government officials and zamindars' agents. Their slogans were not different from those chanted by Tippera and Noakhali Krishak Samity members: "Down with zamindari systems", "Down with British imperialism", "Long live Revolution", "Crush police atrocities." Their programmes themselves were not communal at all. Like their counterparts in Susang Durgapur, the tribal Rajbansis and other scheduled-caste peasants of Dinajpur were emboldened by the assurances of Nishitha Kundu, Prem Hari Barman, Shyama Prasad Barman (three local MLAs) and other bhadralok communist leaders. Although there were reported cases where some arrested krishak volunteers are said to have "repented" for their past deeds, and expressed their "helplessness" in relation to the "duress and pressure" from the Samity, who could ostracize them as well, it is evident that their "repentances" and "recantations" were not genuine, as soon they rejoined the Nishitha Kundu's group. By mid-1940 the krishak movement in the district "developed into a worst phase", observed the District Magistrate.

Some Rajbansi tribal peasants looted grains from landlords' fields and fish from their ponds. They frequently paraded on streets and in village markets with lathis, intimidating jotedars and ijaradars or lease-holders of hats, demanding the reduction of rentals, interests on debts and the abolition of tolls levied from the vendors in hats, usually the cultivators themselves. They also demanded higher prices for jute and other crops. High-caste Hindu communist leaders were the main mobilizers of these tribal and Scheduled-Caste peasants in Dinajpur. From the nature of the movement it seems the continuation of the Depression and incitement by outsiders were chiefly responsible for the unrest. Even some local rich peasants and zamindars expressed anxiety at the "excessive demands" of the government from the peasants despite the continuation of the Depression.

Although economic distress and the alleged high-handedness of jotedars, ijaradars and the government affected the poor Muslim peasants as well, the movement was chiefly confined to the low-caste Hindu peasants. Why did not the "more alert", "energetic and better
informed"149 Muslim peasants of Dinajpur revolt? The "cultural and economic superiority" of Dinajpur Muslims along with their predominance in the Union Boards, in contrast to the situation in most districts of the region,150 may be given as possible explanations for the absence of unrest among Muslim peasants. But the dominance of Muslim jotedars — as landlords, rural elites, Union Board officeholders, and above all, as "patrons" of the lower peasantry (bargadars in most cases) — was the main reason why the economically worse off Muslim peasants did not revolt. It may be mentioned here that quite a large number of the poor peasants, bargadars and labourers in the district, being outsiders from the lower Gangetic islets and Mymensingh district, and locally scorned as shershabadiyas,151 could not assert themselves against the jotedars. The bargadars' economic bondage and inferior social status, might have dampened their "class for itself" consciousness. The employment of ulama to arouse communal solidarity among Muslim bargadars and other categories of the lower peasantry was another hindrance to the growth of class consciousness among the Muslim peasants. Some local Muslim leaders like Hafizuddin Chaudhuri, MLA, and Maulvi Aftab Hossain, the president of the Chanderhat Union Board, were mainly responsible for communalizing the whole issue.152 The mobilization of the Rajbansis and other Scheduled-Caste peasants by Hindu communists might have been possible because the leaders promised higher social status to them in relation to the high-caste Hindu and Muslim landlords. Possibly their leaders, Nishitha Kundu and others, also identified their class enemies as Muslims as well.

In other districts of the north-western sub-region, there was simmering discontent among sharecroppers and other categories of poor peasants. But as elsewhere, both Hindu and Muslim upper-class leaders succeeded in blunting their class-consciousness with anti-communist and anti-zamindar propaganda. Some of them even advocated government intervention to solve their socio-economic problems. Muslim League and KPP leaders were in the forefront of the leaders who advocated government intervention to solve the problems of the peasants.

Both the pro-Fazlul Huq and the "rebel" factions of the KPP and the Muslim League held public meetings where for the sake of "keeping pace in the race",153 wild promises were made to the peasants, which the leaders knew they would not be able to fulfil. The anti-zamindar speeches of the communists, it seems, compelled men like Fazlul Huq and his colleagues in the Assembly, including zamindars like Nawab Habibullah, Khwaja Nazimuddin, Nawab Musharraf Hussain, Mohammad Ali of Bogra and B.P. Singh Roy, to speak against exacting zamindars, jotedars and mahajans. Their promises and the spread of
rumours about the impending abolition of the zamindari-mahajani systems, through tenancy legislation, Debt Settlement Boards and the Floud Commission, aroused unprecedented expectations among the peasants of northern district. The ashraf, who in many cases had zamindari-talukdari interests, supported drastic tenancy reforms and other measures for the benefit of the peasants. The slightly better off middle peasants like Rajibuddin Tarsafdar, Maulana A.R. Tarkabagish, Maulvi Ardes Mian of Rajshahi, Maulana Abdullahel Baki and some Hindu leaders of the sub-region, including Naresh Chandra Bose, Nalini Ranjan Chakravary and N.K. Adhikari of Bogra, worked as a pressure group, which brought the urban leaders to the countryside into the midst of the masses. Although some of the proja leaders spoke against the zamindari system, Fazlul Huq and his ministers, B.P. Singh Roy and Nalini Rajan Sarkar especially, asked the peasants to "adjust their affairs" with the zamindars. Nalini Ranjan Sarkar in his presidential speeches at the Bogra and Hili (Dinajpur) proja conferences in 1937, however, warned the peasants against those who fostered class antagonism and "utopian ideas" of establishing a classless society. He sought peasants' support for the government, asking them who else could be better than Fazlul Huq, Khwaja Nazimuddin and Nawab Khawaja Habibullah.

These pro-government, conciliatory speeches did not have an appeal to all peasants. In places where poor peasants had communal differences with their landlords, or where they were the "sons of the soil" unlike the shershabadiyas of Dinajpur and Rangpur, they were easily motivated on class lines. In some Rajshahi villages Muslim peasants forcibly occupied some Hindu zamindars' khas lands. The clashes between landlords and tenants in parts of Faridpur, Rangpur and Pabna districts can also be seen as clashes between the two rival communities.

As it is difficult to differentiate peasant movements along class lines from those along communal lines in the region during the period under review, it is also difficult to locate the political affiliation of particular groups of peasants. In some places, despite the major ideological differences between the CPI and the KPP leaders at the top levels, local communist and proja leaders found it convenient to cooperate with each other in their fight against their common enemies, the zamindars and moneylenders. There are several examples of joint CPI-KPP operations against the local agents of exploitation in parts of Jessore, Khulna, Kustia and Bakarganj in late 1930s. Although in certain places krishak movements on class lines were over-shadowed by Fazlul Huq's visits, Muslim peasants in many places protested against Fazlul Huq, demanding immediate abolition of the zamindari and sharecropping systems.
Though "rebel" leaders, like Syed Nausher Ali, Shamsuddin Ahmed (the former after being dismissed from the Fazlul Huq cabinet and the latter before his inclusion in it and after his dismissal) and Jalaluddin Hashemy, succeeded in attracting some audiences in their anti-Fazlul Huq meetings, peasants in general were hardly concerned about the factional squabbles within the KPP. In most cases, the relatively independent lower peasantry reacted on its own to the excesses of its landlords and moneylenders, and listened to the "outsiders" who assured it of "immunity" from police action for its violent activities. The Manikganj bargadars (in Dacca district), for example, were more interested in retaining their possessions, "if necessary by force", than in the political affiliation of their leaders.162

The grassroots interpretations of the implications of the Tenancy Amendment Bill (Act in 1938), the Debt Settlement Boards and above all, the anti-zamindar, anti-mahajan election manifestos of the different political parties, were quite different from the reality. Peasant militancy often took a violent turn, which was certainly contrary to the KPP's and Muslim League's codes of conduct, yet often peasant followers of these organizations turned violent. Though some contemporary sources portrayed the Krishak Samities as organizations committed to installing "the doctrines and principles of communism into the agrarian population",163 the Krishak Samities in some tracts, Rajshahi for example, had nothing to do with the Congress Socialists or communists.164 Again when a certain Dr S.P. Chaudhuri, a Congress leader, was addressing an anti-zamindar rally, attended by about 15,000 peasants, at Bilmaria, Rajshahi, many pro-Muslim League peasants demanded his resignation from "pro-zamindar" Congress.165 This suggests that the League and the KPP had greater influence on the peasants in north-western and central East Bengal than the Congress and the CPI. Local KPP leaders and their lieutenants from among the peasants led the protracted peasant movement in the Atrai and Raninagar areas, in Naogaon sub-division of Rajshahi district, which later took a violent turn.

The peasant unrest in Atrai and the neighbouring areas in Rajshahi district stirred the whole administration of Bengal in mid-1938. From the district administrators to the Chief Minister all were concerned about the agitation promoted by the "supporters" of the government. Local KPP leaders are said to have compelled ordinary cultivators to join their organization. Ashraf Ali Khondokar, the secretary of the Naogaon Sub-divisional KPP, and some local leaders — Maulvi Moslem Ali Molla, Maulvi Ahsanullah Molla (Asthan Molla), Sital Paramanik, Laloo Mandal, Mohan Chand, Kismat Haji and certain other illiterate or semi-literate peasants — were the main organizers of the movement. They not only forced "non-members" to
join their party, but also looted the property of some agents of zamindars, including the employees of the maharaja of Natore. At Kasimpur, a village in the area of Raninagar police station in Naogaon, some peasants attacked a police party and killed a Chaukidar in May 1938. The involvement of the local KPP supporters in violent anti-zamindar, anti-mahajan activities is evident from Ashraf Ali Khondokar's remarks after hearing the news of the murder of a chaukidar by his men. He felt that the police had been "rightly served." Some local mullas and anti-Hindu communal leaders, mostly jotedars, were the main organizers of the peasants. The incidents of "catching and beating" the "non members" and Hindu mahajans and naibs (landlords' agents) soon took on communal colour.

The anti-zamindar and anti-Hindu feeling among Muslim peasants became so intense in the wake of the 1937 elections that some Muslim zamindars — Ashraf Ali Khan Chaudhuri, an MLA from Natore and Akber Ali Akanda of Naogaon for instance — started discarding "Hindu customs" and symbols of aristocracy. They adopted "Muslim dress" — sherwani-paijama and Jinnah Cap — discarding the dhoti (worn by Hindu men), and grew beards like devout Muslims. The former even did not want to be addressed as "Chaudhury Sahib", which smacked of a connection with the aristocracy. The latter removed two statues of lions from the gateway of his residence, as a gesture of discarding the "idolatrous" practice of the Hindus.

The growing popularity of "Islamic values" and "customs" was more evident among the ashraf and the peasantry than among the Muslim middle classes. This indicates that the ashraf were coming closer to the atraf through the ulama, rural ashraf and the jotedars. The ascendancy of the ashraf, sometimes to the discomfiture of some "rebel" and "nationalist" KPP leaders, was evident from the growth of communal disturbances in the countryside in which local KPP leaders and workers took leading roles, quite independent of the moribund KPP in the post-elections period. By early 1937, as discussed above, Fazlul Huq along with most leading KPP men, had already surrendered to the ashraf under Jinnah.

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Soon after the elections virulent communalism infected the entire political milieu on a much larger scale than before, to the point where sub-regional variations in the nature of peasants' political activity were blurred. Fortunately for the government and more so for the communal forces, both Hindu and Muslim, neither the CPI nor the non-communal faction of the KPP and the Krishak Samity had much control over the peasant masses after the elections. Due to the vacillations of Fazlul
Huq "between a pro-Congress attitude and membership of the Muslim League", the KPP remained only a political "phenomenon." It existed as a political party "only for one general election."171 Fazlul Huq's earlier "flirtations" with the Congress had earned him a bad name among the ashraf leaders of the UMP and Muslim League,172 so that after forming a coalition government, mainly with the blessing of the ashraf, he had to be cautious and sometimes avowedly communal to retain their confidence.

Reinforcing the ashraf's and the proja's (mainly jotedars) open commitment to communalism, the Hindu bhadralok's and zamindars' communal passion was greatly responsible for the anti-Hindu stand of the Fazlul Huq government. The intransigence of the Hindu Congress leaders vis-a-vis the Muslim- and peasant-interest is reflected in their opposition to major tenancy reforms in Bengal. The Congress press revived the communal issue to vilify the Tenancy Bill. In an editorial, the Amrita Bazar Patrika observed that anti-zamindar propaganda in Bengal was chiefly motivated by communalism.173 In another editorial, the Patrika held that the genesis of the "pernicious Bill" lay in the "iniquitous" Communal Award because it had granted the majority to the Muslims in the Bengal Legislature.174

The communal situation was further aggravated after the virtual exit of Subhas Bose from the political arena of Bengal, even before his flight to Germany in 1940. After the death of J.M. Sengupta in 1934, Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy emerged as the rival of Bose with Gandhi's and Nehru's support. By early 1940 the Congress in Bengal came under the control of the conservative Hindus, after many anti-Bose District Congress leaders had collaborated with Dr Roy by refusing to send the pro-Bose Forward Bloc delegates to the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee's conference.175 Meanwhile, the Hindu revivalists were being mobilized under Syama Prasad Mookerjee of the Hindu Mahasabha. Mookerjee harangued the Hindu populace throughout the region. The main themes of his speeches were that the anti-Hindu "sinister Anglo-Moslem conspiracy" was responsible for the "misery" of Hindus and that harmonious communal relationship was more important for the Muslims of India, as an assurance of their safety, than a matter of "primary concern of Hindus".176

The open anti-Muslim pronouncements of the Mahasabha and the subtle anti-Muslim propaganda in the Hindu press gave the League and other Muslim organizations an opportunity to revive their "Islam in danger" slogan. The alleged persecution of Muslims under Congress governments in Bihar, U.P. and elsewhere worried many Muslim leaders in Bengal. The publication of the Pirpur and Shareef Reports on Muslim sufferings under Congress rule177 and of the pamphlet by Fazlul Huq on the same topic178 might have aggravated the commu-
nal situation in the region. The Coalition Party, in the meantime, had promised to grant 60 per cent of government jobs to the Muslims and other protective measures for the benefit of the peasantry,\textsuperscript{179} while most of the Hindu \textit{bhadralok} and \textit{zamindars} were opposed even to granting 50 per cent of jobs to the Muslims.\textsuperscript{180} By mid-1938 Fazlul Huq felt that: "In this communal-ridden country, nothing is more effective than communal appointments which immediately catch the public eye."\textsuperscript{181} Till late 1941, before forming a coalition government with Hindu Mahasabha, Huq remained avowedly communal, bitterly anti-Hindu, anti-Mahasabha and anti-Congress. He made several communal speeches in the All-India Muslim League sessions during 1937-41 period. He did so, possibly to "catch the public eye" (in his own words) and also to be in the good books of the \textit{ashraf} leaders of the Muslim League.\textsuperscript{182} Some Muslim MLAs, including Abul Hashim of Burdwan and Poet Mozammel Huq of Bhola (Bakarganj), echoed the sentiment of the arch communalist Muslims. The former told the House that Muslim \textit{zamindars}, like the Nawab of Dacca, were benign in relation to their tenants while Hindu \textit{zamindars} and lawyers were "communalists of the worst type".\textsuperscript{183} The latter, on the other hand, characterized all Hindus as enemies of Muslims. He told the House that the Muslims of Bengal were not going to tolerate "the unsympathetic tyranny of Hindu majority". He asked the Hindus to concede the Muslim demand for 50 per cent of jobs in the administration, otherwise, he warned them: "We will get hold of your throat to realize every farthing of our share.... Today we will have to declare that the Hindus are the arch enemies of the Muslims, including the Hindu deva [angel] Mahatma Gandhi and the great pundit Jawaharlal, the Mukherjees, Benerjees, Chatterjees, Duttas, Boses, Biswases, Sinhas ["Lions"], Elephants and Tigers."\textsuperscript{184}

Outside the Assembly communal propaganda was even more intense, the local anti-Hindu leaders being more powerful and popular among the rural Muslims than the educated urban ones.\textsuperscript{185} After the elections of 1937, communal strife in the countryside was not confined to the \textit{zamindar}-dominated sub-regions, middle peasant-dominated districts like Noakhali and Tippera were also infested with the malady. In parts of the Ramganj-Laxmipur area of Noakhali, the anti-moneylender movements became synonymous with the anti-Hindu ones. There was probably some co-ordination between the pro-communist and pro-KPP Krishak Samity leaders in the sub-region. While some Muslim communal leaders like Maulana Golam Sarwar, MLA, were encouraging their followers to obstruct investigation in a Hindu moneylender murder case in Noakhali, some "left wing" Krishak Samity leaders — including Maulana Muklesur Rahman, "the father of the Krishak
movement in Tippera" — were said to have been directly involved in such attacks.186

A few Krishak Samity leaders like Syed Ahmed Khan and Asimuddin Ahmed, two MLAs from the Tippera-Noakhali sub-region, joined hands with local Hindu Congress and CPI leaders to mobilize the peasants on class-cum-nationalist lines.187 But most Muslim Krishak leaders were leaning increasingly towards the Muslim League under the influence of Fazlul Huq and some of his Muslim ministers. The Home Minister of Bengal, Khwaja Nazimuddin even supported Golam Sarwar, despite his notoriety for his reputed involvement in the murder of a Hindu moneylender. Nazimuddin supported him for his anti-Congress stand. In a confidential note he also instructed the District Magistrate of Noakhali to try to reconcile Golam Sarwar and other Muslim Krishak Samity leaders, and to convert the Samity into a subsidiary organization of the Muslim League.188

The subsequent political developments in this middle peasant dominated sub-region indicate the ascendancy of the Muslim League. With the encouragement of the Fazlul Huq ministry, Golam Sarwar, who was also an influential pir sahib, succeeded in organizing thousands of Muslim peasants, including his muridan (disciples), against local Hindus of all categories including zamindars, their agents, moneylenders and government officials. He also published anti-Hindu articles in the Krishak Bani (Voice of the Peasants), a weekly published and edited by him in Noakhali.189 By late 1939 he had become so powerful and popular among the Muslims of Noakhali that he openly incited Muslim peasants to attack their Hindu landlords and moneylenders, assuring them impunity under the Fazlul Huq ministry. He told the Muslim masses that since they were in the majority in the province, if they were to "make water" the Hindus would be "washed down into the Bay of Bengal". He persuaded thousands of Muslims in the district to join the Muslim League, telling them that Muslim raj had been re-established after 250 years. Subsequently violent attacks on Hindu moneylenders and landlords' agents became endemic throughout the sub-region.190 By early 1939 the Muslim League had become so popular among Noakhali peasants that the Kisan Sabha and communist leaders, including Muzaffar Ahmed, could hardly hold successful meetings in the countryside. Most meetings were broken up by Muslim League volunteers from among the peasants.191

Though most communal disturbances in the countryside had local agrarian origins, after the formation of the League-KPP ministry under Fazlul Huq neither the ashraf nor the proja leaders had any alternative to fomenting these disturbances for the sake of protecting their class interests. A "Muslim" ministry under Fazlul Huq had been quite vexatious to the communal Hindu bhadralok and aristocracy for
attacking their class interests. It did so through such legislation as the Tenancy Amendment Act of 1938, which abolished the zamindars' transfer fee and the right of pre-emption (so far as the tenants' land was concerned); the Bengal Agricultural Debtors Act, which led to the formation of the Arbitration Boards and the grant of a moratorium to the debtors and the Moneylenders Act, which abolished compound interest. These all further embittered the Hindu-Muslim relationship.\textsuperscript{192} The pent up anger of the Hindu upper and middle classes needed no further provocation for an outburst. Yet provocations came from the Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha. Flimsy religious questions and narrow communal interests continued to provide good excuses to the Hindu and Muslim militants in the region. Minor agrarian and quasi-religious disturbances between Muslim peasants and Hindu \textit{bhadralok} classes subsequently emerged as the most important political issues.

The Muslim League fomented agrarian troubles in different districts of the region in communal ways. By 1938 most KPP MLAs had joined the League. Examples from Pabna, Dacca and Khulna show ways in which the \textit{ashraf} and the well-to-do, educated \textit{proja} leaders manipulated the situation to their advantage.

In Pabna the trouble started when \textit{bargadars} refused to supply seed and one-half of the yield to a \textit{jotedar} in the village of Ramnagar (in the area of the Ullapara police station), in early 1937. In retaliation the \textit{jotedar}, a Hindu, Manujeswar Rajak let the lands to local Namasudras instead of the Muslim \textit{bargadars}. This created tension in the area. Muslim village headmen came forward to protect the interests of the Muslim \textit{bargadars},\textsuperscript{193} it seems, at the behest, of local \textit{ulama} and \textit{proja} leaders. The Ramnagar \textit{bargadar-jotedar} conflict soon aroused a great communal upsurge throughout the district. By June 1937 temples had been desecrated in many villages in the areas of the Ullapara and the neighbouring Belkuchi police stations. But the influential Muslim leaders of the district, including two Muslim MLAs, Abdullah al-Mahmood and Abdur Rashid Mahmood, and Syed Akber Ali, Osman Ghani and Dr Jasimuddin Ahmed denied that Muslim villagers had been involved in the desecration of Hindu images. They went further and asserted that local Hindus under the leadership of the Hindu Mahasabha had desecrated their own temples in order to alienate the Hindu landlords from their Muslim tenants.\textsuperscript{194} In spite of the Muslim leaders' denial, there is circumstantial evidence suggesting that local Muslim League leaders took full advantage of the conflict between the Muslim \textit{bargadars} and Hindu \textit{jotedars} of some villages in the district. In order to confine the \textit{bargadar-jotedar} conflict to a Muslim-Hindu confrontation, local Muslim League leaders tried to identify the Hindu
Congress and Mahasabha supporters with the district's oppressive landlords and moneylenders.  

The Dacca riots of March 1941, unlike the communal disturbances in the district in the 1930s, originated in the city. The murder of a local Muslim on 17 March in Ramakanta Nandi Lane by some Hindu hooligans, who were observing the Holy festival, unleashed a reign of terror in the city. This continued for about a month and resulted in 54 deaths, 27 from each community. Soon the disturbances engulfed the countryside of the district. The worst-hit areas were the Hindu villages in Narsingdi, Raipur and Shibpur areas. Muslim peasants attacked thousands of Hindus in 81 villages, affecting more than 15,000 persons. About 10,000 Hindus from Narsingdi-Raipur area fled to Agartala. In many places whole villages were razed to the ground by the rioters, whose general slogans had been "Allahu-Akber" (God is great), "Pakistan ki-jai" (Victory to Pakistan), "Huq Sahib ki-jai" (Victory to Fazlul Huq), and "Nawab Sahib ki-jai" (Victory to the Nawab of Dacca). There was tremendous mass support behind the rioters who not only looted Hindu property but also forcibly "converted" some Hindus into Muslims. From the nature of the campaign of the rioters it is evident that local supporters of the Muslim League government and Pakistan took part in the rioting under the leadership of local Muslim League leaders who had close connections with the Nawab of Dacca and other leaders at the top. 

In Khulna district, the communal disturbances at Gangchar, a village in the area of Mollahat police station, originated in a petty altercation between a Namasudra and a Muslim peasant in March 1941, and was intensified by the local Hindu and Muslim bhadralok classes. By early 1940s agents provocateur, like Golam Sarwar of Noakhali, had been busy spreading rumours in the countryside about the alleged killing of Muslims in the urban areas by Hindus. Consequently there was hardly any peace and tranquillity in the rural areas of East Bengal.

The Census of 1941 gave the communal leaders another opportunity to stir up the masses. Under their influence both the Hindus and Muslims were apprehensive of being left out of the Census list, which might lead to their eventual minority status. This greatly accentuated the prevalent communal differences between the two communities. According to a government observer: "In local politics the 'census war' on communal lines over-shadows all other matters of interest." 

Meanwhile, the enactment of several pieces of pro-peasant legislation and the reiteration of anti-Hindu, anti-zamindar-majahan propaganda by different categories of Muslim leaders, volunteers, workers and supporters of the Muslim League in the countryside, had
aroused extravagant expectations among the Muslim populace. According to the Governor of Bengal there had been "a regular organized campaign" in East Bengal in favour of the Tenancy Bill. He received 410 telegrams and letters asking him to assent to the Bill before 31 May 1938. Most of these telegrams and letters had forwarded resolutions passed at meetings attended by "vast numbers of tenants". The Governor seems to be correct in his assessment that Fazlul Huq and his men had evoked forces which they could not control. Neither Fazlul Huq nor his ashraf colleagues in the ministry could ignore the tremendous pressure from the lower peasantry who wanted radical land reforms and legislation to curb the power of the Hindu bhadralok and moneylending classes. They could hardly ignore the no-confidence motion brought against the ministry by the "rebel" KPP MLAs who had close links with the lower peasantry and the communists. In addition to the pressure from below, Fazlul Huq and the majority of the proja leaders who had joined the Muslim League after the elections of 1937, had pressure from above, from the ashraf as well as from the British, who were not prepared to concede the demands of the radical peasant leaders. The Tenancy Amendment Act and other pieces of legislation were re-drafted by the Huq ministry so as to come to an agreement with the zamindars and big jotedars without antagonizing the lower echelons of the peasantry. The Muslim zamindars, including those in the cabinet, surrendered some privileges with a view to weakening the power base of the rival Hindu bhadralok classes. The jotedars' and ashraf's joint endeavour to communalize the class conflicts between the landlord-moneylender and tenant-debtor classes reflects their desire to protect the interests of the Muslim zamindars and jotedars.

The proja-ashraf alliance was inevitable not only because both of them believed that the Hindu Congress leaders wanted to hit the British at the cost of the Muslims, but also because of their apprehension that the communists would "take over" by exploiting the agrarian unrest. Fortunately for the ashraf and the proja, especially the jotedars, whom Jinnah and Fazlul Huq represented respectively, by 1941 the bulk of the Muslim peasantry had been totally disenchanted with the Congress and other organizations under Hindu leadership due to the pervading influence of communalism. Jinnah and Pakistan became the catch-words everywhere in the region among Muslim peasants, the bulk of the Namasudra peasants being in the Congress camp for the time being. The Muslim League proved to have the most powerful ideology for the Muslim masses and elites in the 1940s. By then the "anti-feudal" struggle of the peasants had been channelled into a "religious stream" and "the religious aspect of bourgeois nationalism" of Bengal. The marriage of convenience
between the *ashraf* and the *projas*, which was essential for mutual succour in the post-election period for the formation of a viable Muslim ministry to contain Hindu dominance, in fact, signalled the capitulation of the *projas* to the *ashraf*. The wealth, influence and the growing popularity of the *ashraf* leaders, mainly Jinnah, among the Muslim masses overshadowed the popularity of Fazlul Huq. The formation of the coalition ministry with the Hindu Mahasabha leader Syama Prasad Mookerjee by Fazlul Huq in December 1941, which lasted for about a year, signalled the total eclipse of the *proja*, as this ministry did not have any legitimacy among the bulk of the Muslim peasantry.

**Notes**

1. See *The Govt of India Act, 1935*, 5th and 6th schedules.
11. Ibid., p. 96.
18. HFR, 1st half Sept. and 2nd half Nov. 1936; David Denis Taylor, "Indian Politics and the Elections of 1937", pp. 175, 186-7.
19. HFR, March and April 1936.
20. Ibid., 1st half Feb. 1936.


26. The election figures found in the *British Parliamentary Papers* (BPP) often contradict those of the newspapers. This discrepancy was due to the inflated accounts given by both the ML and KPP by including some of the independent MLAs' names in their respective lists of successful candidates. From the "Return Showing the Results of Elections in India, 1937" of the BPP of 1937-38, Cmd. 5589, XXI, it appears that the ML captured 40, KPP 37, Tippera Krishak Samity (TKS) 6 and the independents captured 34 seats from East Bengal and that the ML captured 19 rural seats from East Bengal out of its total 22 from the whole of Bengal, while the KPP-TKS jointly captured 43 rural seats, 41 from East Bengal. The newspapers, the *ABP* for example, reveal different figures. According to the *ABP* the ML captured 34 rural seats, 26 from East Bengal and the KPP-TKS had 46 rural seats to their credit of which 44 were from East Bengal. See *ABP*, 1 Feb. 1937.

27. See H. Momen, op. cit., p. 63.


32. Jatin De, op. cit., p. 37; H. Nugent, op. cit., p. 147.

33. *Star of India*, 1 Sept. 1936.


35. Ibid., pp. 56, 59.

36. Ibid., pp. 60-1; Interview with B.D. Habibullah; *ABP*, 20 Jan. 1937.


42. Ibid., pp. 235-6.

43. Holloway, op. cit., pp. 24-5.

44. E. Rahim, "Provincial Autonomy, p. 150.

45. Ibid., pp. 148-9; *Star of India*, 14 Nov. 1936.


48. Ibid.


50. See John Broomfield, "Four Lives: History as Biography."
52. K. Ahmed, op. cit., pp. 36-7; Dipankar Datta, op. cit., p. 38.
55. See a letter by Amulya Bhattacharya in the *ABP*, 20 April 1937.
57. A.M. Ahmed, op. cit., p. 139.
60. Fazlul Huq formed the ministry with eleven ministers, including six zamindars, and contrary to the KPP Manifesto, which advocated a maximum of Rs1000 per month as a minister's salary, the ministers' salaries were between Rs2500 and 2000. Fazlul Huq received Rs3000 per month as the Chief Minister. See for details HFR, 2nd half March 1937; *ABP*, 1 April 1937 and Appendix I.
61. *ABP*, 1 April 1937.
63. For zamindar MLAs' opposition to further amendments of the Tenancy Act see *BLAP* 1937-40 passim; Floud Report, II-VI; *ABP* 11 March 1937.
64. GFR, 19 Aug. 1937; *ABP* 27, 28 Feb., 14 March, 1 and 10 April 1937.
65. GFR, 19 Aug. 1937.
68. GFR, 23 June 1937.
69. Ibid., 6 Oct. 1937.
70. R. Coupland, *Indian Politics 1936-1942*, p. 28; See *ABP*, 18 Oct. 1937, for Sarat Bose's statement assigning reasons why the Bengal Congress did not support the Tenancy Amendment Bill. He alleged that the framers of the Bill had "sided with vested interests and went against the peasantry".
74. Ibid., 29 Sept. 1937.
According to the Governor, John Anderson, Congress in Bengal, "in its passion for seeing the end of a Ministry which it cannot dominate", was trying to radicalize the peasantry with a view to overthrowing the Huq government. He also reveals that Tulsi Charan Goswami, a Congress MLA, told Sir B.P. Singh Roy that the right-wing Congress MLAs had voted against the government with the "rebel left-wingers" of the KPP. Goswami is said to have remarked: "We tried to commit suicide but could not." See GFR, 7 Sept. 1937.

See All-India Congress Socialist Party's Secretary Jaya Prakash Narayan's statement on the 1937 election results, ABP, 17 Feb. 1937.

GFR, 14 June 1937.


GFR, 2nd halves, April and June 1937; HFR, April 1937, 1st halves, June and July 1937.

GFR, 2nd half, Dec. 1937.


GFR, 1st half, May 1937.

Ibid., 1st half, June 1937, 2nd half, Sept. 1937; HFR 1st half, May 1937.

GFR, 1st half, May 1939; HFR, 2nd halves, June 1937 and Aug. 1938.

HFR, 2nd half, Nov. 1937.


Ibid.

Interviews, Maulvi Nazimuddin, Abdul Ghani Miaji and Shamsuddin Ahmed.


Ibid., pp. 8-9.

Ibid., p. 2.

GFR, 1st half, Nov. 1937.

A. Rasul, op. cit., p. 60.

HFR, 2nd half, Feb. 1939; GFR, 2nd half, Feb. 1939.

GFR, 2nd half, Oct-Nov. 1937.

Interview, Maulana Tarkabagish.

GFR, 2nd half, Sept. 1937.

Ibid., 1st half, Feb. 1938; HFR, 2nd half, Nov. 1937.

HFR, 2nd half, April 1938; GFR, 3 June 1938.

Ibid., May 1938, 1st half, June, 1938.

A. Rasul, op. cit., pp. 70-1.

Ibid., pp. 78, 92, 278-9; Interview, Shamsuddin Ahmed.

GFR, 21 Jan., 8 March 1939; HFR, 1st half, Jan., 2nd half Feb. 1939.

A. Rasul, op. cit., p. 92.

ABP, 2 Sept. and 16 Nov. 1937.

GFR, 2nd half, Oct. 1937.

Ibid., 2nd half, March 1939; HFR, 1st half, Aug. 1937.


Ibid., File No. W-184/1940.
114. Interview, Rasharaj Saha Chowdhury.


120. According to the Commissioner of Dacca Division, peasants were indifferent to the Tanka Movement. See "Proceedings, Revenue Conference 1938", p. 4.

121. Promotho Gupta, *Je Sangramer Shesh Nei*, pp. 48-9; Interview, Moni Singh.

122. Interview, Moni Singh.

123. Ibid.


126. Ibid.


129. Interview, Moni Singh.


132. Ibid., pp. 65-71.


134. Ibid., pp. 71-3; A. Rasul, op. cit., pp. 106-8; Files of the *Ganajuddha and People's War*, CPI Office, Ajay Bhawan, New Delhi.


137. J. Bhattacharyya, op. cit., p. 620.

138. Ibid., pp. 620-1.

139. Interview, Moni Singh.


141. Interview, Subhash Chandra Nakrek.

Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia

143. DM J.P. Roy to Commissioner A.J. Dash, 8 July 1940, GB, HPF, No. W-510/1940.
144. Officer-in-Charge, Nawabganj Police Station, A. Ahmed's report, 8 July 1940, GB, HPF, No. W-510/1940.
145. DM's reports, 8 and 11 July, 25 Nov. and 3 Dec. 1940; ibid.; B.P. Singh Roy Papers, File 3(I).
147. Ibid.
149. Dinajpur SSR, p. 9.
150. The following table reveals how powerful the Muslims were in Dinajpur as Union Board office bearers in early 1940s:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-divisions</th>
<th>Muslims:</th>
<th>Non-Muslim</th>
<th>Muslims:</th>
<th>Non-Muslim</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Thakurgaon</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>191</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sadar</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>447</td>
<td>219</td>
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<tr>
<td>Balurghat</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>162</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total:</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>1102</td>
<td>572</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ibid., p. 9-10.

151. Ibid., pp. 9-18, 25.
152. Ibid., p. 9.
153. GFR, 21 April, 1939.
154. ABP, 12 April, 20 May, 5, 11, 14, 19-22 June 1937.
155. See Nalini Ranjan Sarkar's printed speeches (in Bengali), delivered at the Bogra and Hilli proja conferences in 1937, B.P. Singh Roy Papers; ABP, 20-22 June 1937.
156. Ibid.
157. GFR, 23 June 1938 and 21 Jan. 1939; HFR, 1st half, June 1938.
158. Ibid., 1st half, Nov. 1940; DM Faridpur to the Revenue Minister, GB, 27 Feb. 1939, B.P. Singh Roy Papers, Files 3(I); HFR, 1st halves Feb. and July 1938, 2nd halves March and April 1938.
159. HFR, 1st half, May 1937 and 2nd half, June 1938; GB, HPF, No. 47/1939.
160. HFR, 1st half, June 1937.
161. Ibid., 1st half, June 1938 and 2nd half, Jan. 1939.
162. GFR, 1st Half, March 1939 and 2nd half, Oct. 1941.
163. Ibid., 8 Feb. 1938.
165. HFR, 2nd half, Aug. 1938.
166. GB, HPF, "Trial of Cases at Atrai, Dist Rajshahi", DM to the Chief Secretary, 22 July 1938, Reports of Sub-Inspector N.C. Sen of the Naogaon Police Station, 24 May 1938, File No. 265/1938; Interview, Annada Sankar Ray.

167. SP Rajshahi's Report for the month of May 1938, ibid.

168. Ibid.


170. Interview, Annada Sankar Ray.

171. S. Natarjan, op. cit, pp. 24-5.


173. For Bengal Congress and Hindu bhadralok opposition to major tenancy reforms in Bengal see editorials of ABP, "Tenancy Legislation in Bengal", 21 June 1937, "Why Single out zamindars?", 3 Nov. 1937; Nagendra Nath Sen, a Hindu lawyer, referred to the Tenancy Bill of 1937 as an item "made to order" and held that the "mischievous propaganda" outside the Assembly was more powerful than the MLAs, see his "Bengal Tenancy Amendment Bill: Points for Consideration", ABP, 20 Dec. 1937.


177. See Pirpur and Shareef Reports.


179. After the expulsion of Syed Nausher Ali and the inclusion of Shamsuddin Ahmed and Tamizuddin Khan in the cabinet, the Coalition Party under Fazlul Huq promised to grant 60 per cent of the government jobs to the Muslims, to reduce rental, to fix a minimum price of jute for the benefit of the peasants. See HFR, 2nd half, Oct. 1938.

180. Bijay Chand Mahtab to B.P. Singh Roy, dated London 5 July 1939. Mahtab apprehended that Hindus would be "side tracked" by Muslims, who were getting appointed "over their heads". See B.P. Singh Roy Papers, File 3, 1936-41.


188. Ibid., Home Minister Nazimuddin to IGP, 16 May 1937.
189. Ibid., Golam Sarwar to Chief Secretary, GB, 2 June 1937.
191. GFR, 6 April 1939; HFR, 2nd half, March 1939.
193. *ABP*, 17 April 1937.
197. Ibid., pp. 32-53; *BLAP*, 9 April 1941, pp. 184-8, 198-200; HFR, April 1941; *ABP*, 19-25 March 1941.
198. *ABP*, 18 March 1941; HFR, 1st half, April 1941; R. Coupland, *Indian Politics 1936-1942*, pp. 35-6.
199. HFR, 2nd half, June 1941; GFR, 7 June 1940; *BLAP*, 2 April 1941, pp. 239-40; *ABP*, 2 April 1941.
201. HFR, Feb. 1941.
202. GFR, 2nd halves, April-May 1941.
204. GFR, 2nd half, Aug. 1937, 1st half, April 1940.
207. See Azizul Huque, op. cit., passim; *BLAP*, 10 Sept. 1937, p. 1254.
7

The Struggle for a Peasant Utopia: The Tanka, Tebhaga and Pakistan Movements, 1942-47

"How many Hindus did you kill? Only lip-service to the Muslim cause won't do any good."
— An educated Bengali Muslim in August, 1946.

I

It is hardly metaphoric to describe the period between 1942 and 1947, in the context of East Bengal, in Charles Dickens' words: "It was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair". For the zamindars, jotedars having sharecropper tenants, and the mahajans, it was certainly not "the best of times", because by then the bulk of the peasantry had been convinced about the "impending" abolition of the zamindari, mahajani and bargadari systems. A section of the lower peasantry believed that a millennial movement was in the offing (or had already been started) to establish their cherished "peasant utopia." Different categories of peasants had different concepts of the utopia — to some it was to be attained after the abolition of the zamindari and mahajani systems, to others it would come after the tanka and bargadari systems of sharecropping were abolished, while the bulk of the peasants, being Muslims, regarded the attainment of Pakistan as the final step towards an egalitarian system under a new state run entirely by the fellow Muslims.

This period, in short, witnessed the culmination of the communalization of class struggle in the region which led to the creation of Pakistan with grassroots support. The jotedars or rich projas, who in the meantime had identified their interests with those of the ashraf and the Muslim bourgeoisie, belonging to the Muslim League (ML), played the most important role in mobilizing the krishak, who had already been eclipsed by the proja by the mid-1930s, were easily mobilized by their "patrons" — the Muslim projas (jotedars), often their immediate landlords, factional chiefs and village headmen. The ascendency of the jotedars as important rural allies of the urban ashraf is an important aspect of the study.

During the 1940s, besides the movement for a separate homeland for the Muslims, Pakistan, under Jinnah and the League, the "Quit India" movement of Gandhi and the Congress, the tanka and tebhaga
movements of sharecroppers (mainly tribals) under the communists, the War and the Famine of 1943-44 also moulded the politics of the peasants in East Bengal.

Fazlul Huq’s inclusion in the Government of India’s Defence Council, which was contrary to the Muslim League policy, confronted Huq with a great political crisis, which ultimately brought about his downfall as the Premier and formalized the ascendancy of the ashraf. Though Fazlul Huq resigned from the Council under pressure from Jinnah, like his counterparts in the Punjab and Assam, Sir Sikandar Hyat Khan and Sir Mohamed Saadullah, he simultaneously resigned from the Working Committee and the Council of the Muslim League in September 1941, considering Jinnah’s action as the President of the ML "unconstitutional in the highest degree." Soon Fazlul Huq withdrew his resignation from the ML expressing his loyalty to the party and regrets for hurting the feelings of Jinnah and "other friends." It seems quite strange that, in spite of the ML Working Committee’s quick acceptance of his explanations reinstating him as a Muslim Leaguer on 16 November 1941, he joined hands with the Hindu Mahasabha, Forward Bloc and other anti-Muslim League Hindu forces in the province.

This sudden shift in Huq’s policy, of joining Syama Parasad Mookerjee and other Hindu and Muslim opponents of the League, cannot be simply explained as an expression of his "impulsive" temperament, as construed by some historians. It is probably true that Huq wanted to capture the spotlight as an all-India political figure, which was reflected in his letter to Governor Herbert, asking for "some kind of all-India occupation ... for the purpose of organizing the war effort among Muslims", and this can be the main reason for his defiance of Jinnah’s leadership. By late 1941 he had probably become confident of his power and popularity among the masses and wanted a show-down with the ashraf with Hindu bhadralok and krishak-proja support. Some influential KPP "rebel" leaders like Abul Mansur Ahmed, Shamsuddin Ahmed, Hashem Ali Khan, Jalaluddin Hashemy, Wahiduzzaman and Azizul Huq (Nanna Mia), along with the "leftist" Krishak Samity leaders, meanwhile had exerted pressure on Huq to leave the League. Until he was confident enough of his strength to withstand the opposition of the ashraf, he told the radical group: "Wait and see." Some of the ashraf leaders, in the meantime, had warned Jinnah about the manoeuvring of the "clever fox" Fazlul Huq, who had been co-operating with the Hindus to "divide and crush the Muslims." His starting a Bengali Daily, Navayug, was also described as an attempt "to revile the Muslim League." However, the subsequent political developments indicate that both the ashraf leaders, mainly
Jinnah, Nazimuddin, H.S. Suhrawardy and Ispahani, and Huq himself, overestimated his power and influence over the peasants.\textsuperscript{7}

On 27 November 1941 Huq met Sarat Bose of the Congress and Syama Prasad Mookerjee of the Mahasabha to make a blueprint for the Progressive Coalition Party under his leadership with Sarat Bose as the deputy leader.\textsuperscript{8} The League high command soon learnt about this and decided to expel Huq from the party. On 1st December the League ministers in the cabinet resigned and on the 12th Huq formed the Progressive Coalition Ministry with Syama Prasad Mookerjee, Shamsuddin Ahmed, Nawab Habibullah and others.\textsuperscript{9} This signalled a new phase in the politics of the region. Although the Hindu press welcomed the new ministry as the harbinger of Hindu-Muslim unity, the Muslim press vilified it as an anti-Pakistan, pro-Hindu gesture on the part of Fazlul Huq.\textsuperscript{10} Not only Jinnah but also \textit{proja} leaders including Yusuf Ali Chaudhuri (Mohan Mia) and Abdus Salam Khan (Badshah Mia) openly condemned Huq as a traitor. In numerous large public meetings Muslim League and \textit{proja} leaders told the audiences that the League under Jinnah stood for the Muslims and that Pakistan did not mean suppression of the Hindus. It is noteworthy that this time men like Mohan Mia could publicly compare Huq with Mir Jafar (the commander-in-chief of Nawab Sirajuddaula, who sided with the British) for siding with the enemies of Jinnah, Islam and Pakistan.\textsuperscript{11} They could not have done this before because of Huq's immense popularity among the masses.\textsuperscript{12} By early 1942 Huq and his ministers had lost their credibility even in Bakarganj, the home district of Huq and a strong base of the KPP. In January 1942 when Huq and a few ministers of his cabinet went to Bakarganj, most Muslim lawyers of Barisal town boycotted a reception given in their honour. Even Muslim shopkeepers observed a \textit{hartal} (general strike), putting down the shutters of their shops as a mark of protest against their visit. In most places Huq and his ministers were received with black flags and rotten eggs by the angry masses.\textsuperscript{13}

Mass enthusiasm for Pakistan was so strong that in the by-elections for the Assembly in early 1942, the ML candidates routed the Coalition Party's nominees in rural constituencies.\textsuperscript{14} One minister of the cabinet, Abdul Karim, was also unseated. The League, which had only 49 supporters in the Assembly in December 1941, gathered enough strength to challenge the coalition in early 1942.\textsuperscript{15} Due to the enormous pressure from the \textit{ashraf} and the erstwhile supporters of the KPP from among the \textit{projas} and \textit{krishaks}, by the mid-1942 Huq had reached the brink of total political bankruptcy. At one stage, he tried in vain to leave the scene by taking some ambassadorial assignments to the Middle East through the Governor. He also tried to become a member of the Viceroy's Executive Council.\textsuperscript{16} Afterwards he tried to
consolidate his position by forming the Progressive Muslim League in June 1942, probably with a view to bargaining with Jinnah. He also expressed the desire to settle his differences with Jinnah by professing his loyalty to him and to the League. Simultaneously, he tried to bring Suhrawardy into the cabinet to split the League. But to Huq's chagrin neither was he re-admitted to the League nor did he succeed in splitting the party, which by then had become very popular among all sections of rural and urban Muslims. On 29 March 1943 the governor forced him to resign from the premiership. His replacement by Khwaja Nazimuddin, who formed a Muslim League government in Bengal, was a major step towards the ascendancy of the ashraf in the arena of politics in the region.

Meanwhile, the Congress under Gandhi had launched the "Quit India" movement in August 1942. The movement was not only opposed to aiding the British in its War effort, but was also aimed at the abolition of the Raj. In urban East Bengal the movement took a violent turn. Severing telegraph and railway lines and damaging government property became common in many places. Strikes in educational institutions and mills and factories around Dacca and Narayanganj were quite successful. But the rural masses in general and the Muslims in particular were indifferent to the movement. The Muslim League organized its cadres and supporters against the movement considering it a "declaration of war against the Muslims", because the Congress was opposed to the demand for Pakistan.

The government was perturbed at the growing pressure of the Japanese and the Indian National Army (the Azad Hind Fauj) of Subhas Chandra Bose on the Burma front after 1942. Anti-War and pro-Subhas Bose posters were being distributed in several districts, especially in the Chittagong division, by the Indian People's Revolutionary Party and the Communist League. The government was worried about any reconciliation between the Forward Bloc and the "orthodox" groups of the Congress, represented by the Bose brothers, Subhas and Sarat respectively.

For the CPI, which had a dual commitment to the allies of the Soviet Union and to the peasantry, the period between late 1941 and late 1945 was a difficult one. While it criticized the British for their failure to save Malaya and Burma from the Japanese Aggressors and for their alleged persecution of "patriotic" Indians, it supported British war efforts and the "grow more food" campaign. It even collaborated with the British to the extent that it identified the pro-Japanese "fifth columnists", not the zamindars, as the real enemies of the peasants. Some communists even urged the peasants to support the "patriotic zamindars" to consolidate the anti-Fascist unity of the people. There were, however, great contradictions in CPI policy. Although the Deoli
Thesis of the party propounded the "people's war" theory after the German invasion of the Soviet Union, there were many communists and pro-communist Kisan Sabha leaders who believed in fighting both the Fascists and the British imperialists simultaneously.\footnote{22}

The ambivalent attitudes of the government and the CPI in relation to strengthening the anti-Fascist war created problems for both parties. The former wanted to establish the latter as a counterpoise to the Congress, realizing well the dangers of the dissemination of communist ideas among the villagers.\footnote{23} Most communists, on the other hand, realized that they had no alternative to supporting the government. They believed that since peasant uprisings had been sporadic and the Kisan Sabha had little influence over all categories of peasants in Bengal, the peasants would be better organized with government support.\footnote{24} Between 1942 and 1945, the CPI recruited a large number of volunteers from among the peasantry, especially in East Bengal districts, to resist Japan and aroused "patriotic" feeling among the peasantry. By March 1945 the CPI had recruited about 50,000 peasant volunteers under the banner of the Kisan Sabha in the region.\footnote{25}

The CPI also established its own cultural organization, the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), in Bengal in 1943, with Hemango Biswas, Salil Chowdhury, Khaled Chowdhury and other pro-communist singers and musicians of the region to popularize anti-Fascist and Marxist ideals among the masses. Some of the IPTA songs and plays were avowedly anti-British and anti landlord. This song became very popular among peasants during the War:

\begin{center}
\textbf{টেমার কাঠটারে নিয় জেরে শান গো কিঞ্চ জই,}
কাঙ্ঠটারে নিয় জেরে শান।
জান কীন আর মেন কীন, আর দিন না, আর নিব না, বকে বন ঠান, জাঁদের পান রেখ।
টি জামি পে নায়ন চানায়, জেরে গোলা, আর তা মোগা গবেষ না।...
নিয় জেরে গহে মেঘুন, কোহেরে মেঘুন।
বিদেশী পুরুষ গহে, দুষাবে জাপান।}
\end{center}
Sharpen your sickle my dear peasant. We have taken a vow to protect our hard grown rice crops at the cost of our lives. All lands belong to the tillers, we have tolerated enough oppression. We are no longer prepared to tolerate any more .... Look peasant! Your house is burning and there is storm outside. Foreigners are running your government and the Japanese threaten your freedom.26

The anti-Japanese, anti-colonial and anti-capitalist songs of the IPTA aroused considerable enthusiasm among poor peasants, especially sharecroppers of the region. The War and the Famine of 1943-44 sharpened their anti-exploitation sentiment. They first came across the terms "black marketeers" and "hoarders" — "kalo bazaris" and "majuddars" — during the Famine. The lower peasants’ intense hatred for the hoarders, landlords, moneylenders and as a whole for the War is reflected in numerous songs composed by unknown peasants and rural bards. According to Hemango Biswas the following songs were very popular among peasants, one in Chittagong district and the other throughout the region:27

This song depicts the plight of women whose husbands have gone to the War and have not returned.

The soil of Chittagong is red, I have written letters to your brother, My dear sister-in-law, your brother has gone to foreign lands. And has not returned home. A man who is a soldier, Why does he get married at all?

The next song evokes the plight of the masses during the Famine:
We are on the verge of total destruction, golden Bengal is under the ravaging famine. People have turned mad from hunger. Suckling babies are dying in their mother’s arms. The helpless parents are crying with their dead children.

Even with the Famine and the War and in spite of the growth in communist activities in certain tracts, especially among landless and semi-landless peasants, sharp cleavages within the leftist forces prevented the communists from making much headway in the peasant front. The growth in communal politics was partially responsible for this. The Congress Socialist Party (CSP) of Jaya Prakash Narayan and other leftist groups were hostile towards the CPI. Narayan issued special instructions to some party members from the Deoli Detention Camp in October 1941 to isolate the communists in the rural areas. He was also opposed to organizing a countrywide peasant movement. Besides the Congress Socialists, who had wielded great influence with the Krishak Samity leaders in Tippera and Noakhali, the Radical Democratic Party of M.N. Roy also opposed the CPI for its pro-British policy after 1941. On the other hand Roy supported the Muslim League demand for Pakistan. During the Famine both the CSP and the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) tried in vain to mobilize mass support in the rural areas of the region with the aim of raiding police stations, courts and looting food grain and establishing "free" villages.

The Radical Democrats of Roy were not the only "radicals" to support the ML. Many prominent CPI leaders, including P.C. Joshi and Sajjad Zaheer, supported the demand for Pakistan considering the "Quit India" resolution of the Congress as "misguided" and "pernicious." This might have contributed to the strength of the ML throughout the region as elsewhere in the Muslim majority provinces.

It seems that due to their mutual squabbles the leftist peasant and national organizations were losing popularity in their strongholds in Tippera, Noakhali, Mymensingh, Pabna and Jessore districts in the
early 1940s. The secession of the CSP and the Forward Bloc from the Kisan Sabha in late 1941 must have bred dissension among the peasant followers of the Sabha, in spite of the apparent growth in the primary membership of the party in Bengal during 1942-45. The Kisan Sabha in its annual report for 1943 admitted that in spite of a growth in the "political awareness" of the peasants there was a dearth of "organizational strength" among them.

While the communists, nationalists and the numerous revolutionary and socialist groups were engaged in mutual conflicts, the League was being reorganized under Abul Hashim, the "radical" General Secretary of the party in Bengal. After his election in November 1943 as the General Secretary with the help of H.S. Suhrawardy and other opponents of the "feudal" interests in the League (especially belonging to the "Ahsan Manzil" of the Nawabs of Dacca), Abul Hashim succeeded in capturing the imagination of the cadres and ordinary followers of the party by his "Islamic Socialism". His radical ideas, as reflected in the Draft Manifesto of the ML (published in March 1945), were borrowed from both Islam and Marxism. The ML's stress on equality before the law, the abolition of the zamindari-mahajani systems and the "land to the tiller", as reflected in the Manifesto, soon succeeded in enrolling a large number of Muslim peasants. The reasons for the phenomenal rise in the popularity of the ML among Muslim peasants in the region was reflected in the following letter from a Bengali Muslim Leaguer to Jinnah:

In an agricultural long-suffering, landlord-Mahajan-ridden Proja country like Bengal any mass movement is bound to become egalitarian or socialistic in outlook and character.
And naturally the Bengal League is more and more becoming imbued with socialistic and anti-capitalist outlook.
Particularly because abolition of Zamindari Landlordism and Permanent Settlement has become the economic creed of the Bengal League and of every Bengali Muslim, he be a Zamindar or Proja.

The ascendancy of Suhrawardy as the Chief Minister of Bengal in 1946, after the Nazimuddin ministry had fallen in March 1945, does not mean that the ML became a progressive organization nor does it signify the eclipse of the ashraf under Jinnah. Rather it indicates that, irrespective of the factional cleavages between the pro-Nazimuddin and pro-Suhrawardy ashraf groups, the party would have in any case gathered strength for its religious and socio-economic appeals. The virtual destruction of the Congress as an organization after the mass arrest of its leaders during the "Quit India" movement and the failure to mobilize the peasants by the leftist forces facilitated the growth of
the League in the region. By mid-1945 the League had broken the monopoly of the leftist organizations by incorporating radical socio-economic programmes as well. By then many Muslim leaders believed that Pakistan stood for progressive, democratic and even socialist values. Consequently many KPP leaders urged the peasants to support Pakistan and the few anti-League KPP leaders also supported the radical economic programme to mobilize peasant support without much success as the League had captured the imagination of the bulk of the peasant masses as the only political party of the Muslims of Bengal.36

II

By 1947, when the Muslims of all shades of opinion in Bengal were considering the pros and cons of Pakistan as propounded by ML leaders in Delhi in 1946, on the one hand, and of an independent East Pakistan with East Bengal, Assam and parts of West Bengal,37 on the other, much change had taken place in the socio-economic and political climate of the province. The cataclysmic effects of the Famine and the War on the lower peasantry intensified the existing conflicts between the supporters and opponents of Pakistan, the Muslims and Hindus respectively.

From the beginning, the Muslim public opinion towards the War had been "favourable" from the British point of view, with a few exceptions who were under the influence of some north Indian Jamiat-i-Ulama leaders.38 However, peasants were hardly aware of the implications of the War and were quite apathetic towards the "resist Japan" slogan in most cases.39 Only after the influx of refugees from Burma brought "hair raising stories of atrocities and sufferings" of the Burmese at the hands of the Japanese soldiers in 1942 and after the bombing of the Chittagong airport in May 1942, there was some panic and a great deal of confusion among the rural masses in parts of Chittagong, Noakhali and Tippera districts.40 The "denial policy" of the government aimed at checking the Japanese advance into Bengal by removing food grain from Bengal and by destroying thousands of boats in the coastal districts of this region, antagonized the bulk of the rural population towards the government.41

Meanwhile, consecutive crop failures in 1942 and 1943, discontinuation of the rice supply from Burma after the Japanese occupation, and the large scale hoarding and black-marketing of rice by speculating traders, brought about the largest famine in the history of the twentieth century Bengal. About two million people, mostly women and children, perished in a few months in 1943-44.42 According to some estimate the toll exceeded 3.5 millions.43
The worst affected peasants were from the group owning less than two acres of land. About 260,000 peasant families in the whole of Bengal became totally landless. Most of them were forced into agricultural labourer category in the wake of the Famine.\(^4^4\) Peasant militancy during and after the Famine had been greater in the "very slightly or not affected" districts of the region, in Dinajpur, Rangpur, Jessore, Khulna and Mymensingh, than in the "worst affected" or "severely affected" districts of the region.\(^4^5\) This probably indicates that the poorest of the poor among peasants were too weak to mobilize themselves against the agents of exploitation.

The economic distress of the lower peasantry, though accentuated during the Famine, had already started after the drastic legislative measures of the late 1930s and early 1940s restraining the power and privileges of the moneylenders. The inadequacy of alternative credit arrangements for the peasants in the wake of the anti-moneylender acts led to the drying up of credit which reduced the purchasing power of the poor peasants even before the Famine. They had started the distress sale of their holdings, which led to mass "depeasantization", before the signs of the Famine appeared in 1943.\(^4^6\)

Though most peasants were apathetic towards the War, a "whispering campaign" did have some impact implanting among them such ideas as that the Japanese were not at war with the Indians but gave them preferential treatment in territories they occupied.\(^4^7\) The rumours about excesses of the allied soldiers in various districts also created anti-British sentiment among a large number of peasants. The poor peasants, who in some cases were the victims of rape and abduction of their women by the troops, actively participated in all anti-War campaigns.\(^4^8\) According to the Commissioner of the Dacca division a large number of peasants believed that the Famine was due to the deliberate government attempt to punish the Bengalis for not supporting the War effort.\(^4^9\)

While the KPP and other political parties in the opposition were vilifying the Muslim League ministry for the Famine, the CPI was in favour of the ministry and critical of the British bureaucrats. In some places in the northern districts, due to communist-Muslim League understanding, there was hardly any antagonism between the pro-CPI Krishak Samities and the pro-League jotedar\textsuperscript{s} before the inception of the tebhaga movement after the War.\(^5^0\)

While the CPI and some Muslim leaders were trying to find a workable solution to end communal strife throughout India and the ML and its opponents were busy in mutual vilification especially regarding the Famine, poor peasants in some tracts were taking their decisions — in the main, independently of the parent organizations which they supported — to redress their grievances during the Famine. Besides
reacting to the military excesses on their lives, honour and property, they resorted to violence against local landlords, moneylenders and hoarders of foodstuffs, contrary to the assertions by some scholars that landless and semi-landless peasants of the region in general remained "fatalistic" and died "passively in front of bulging food shops", during the Famine. But as mentioned earlier, poor peasants in the "worst affected" districts were relatively less militant than those in the "slightly affected" districts.

The poor peasants' violent actions were not contingent upon the availability of outside leaders. As early as September 1942, when the signs of the Famine were just appearing, reports of extensive hat looting in Mymensingh, Rajshahi, Dinajpur and some other places were reaching the government. In late September a big crowd of Muslim peasants, mostly landless and semi-landless, attacked the granary of a Hindu zamindar at Atharabari in Mymensingh, which led to firing by some employees of the zamindar on the mob, causing several casualties. Several cases of hat looting by poor peasants were reported from Tippera villages in November. Anti-War movements, acts of terrorism, arson, the looting of post offices by poor peasants became endemic throughout the region by December 1942. There is hardly any evidence to suggest that these acts were committed at the behest of the Congress or any organized political group. Congress strongholds of the 1930s in parts of rural Tippera and Noakhali had relatively few incidents of looting.

In parts of Dinajpur and Rangpur some local Congress leaders had a good understanding with some "rebel" CPI leaders and workers. The former organized several "hunger marches" by poor peasants and labourers against the government with a view to mobilizing mass support for the "Quit India" movement. These marches sometimes led to the looting of food grain from local jotedars' granaries and Marwari traders' shops. The "rebel" communists, on the other hand, being disillusioned with the central leaders' policy of collaboration with the British and believing that a conflict between Russia and the Allied Powers was imminent, established a short-lived rapport with the local Congress. Some Congress leaders' dislike for the Marwari traders and pro-Muslim League jotedars of the sub-region might have strengthened their ties with the "rebel" communists, who were partially responsible for the looting of Marwari and jotedar property. It is, however, difficult to say whether the Congress, CPI and other political groups had any alternative to opposing the Marwari trader-moneylenders and the jotedars in the north when poor peasants were bitterly anti-government, anti-Marwari and anti-jotedar. This is reflected in the songs they composed and sang during the Famine:
"Advance peasant, the evil government is taking away your paddy grown with your toil." And:

You cunning Marwari, you came to my country as a pauper, carrying only an earthen pot to drink water. But gradually you have turned yourself into my landlord by grabbing my land. After taking my land now you hit me on the head if I demand *tebhaga* — or two-thirds of the yield — out of hunger.\(^55\)

In the wake of the War, had the communist movement been confined to the mobilization of poor peasants, including *bargadars* and labourers, against non-Muslim Marwari moneylenders and Hindu *zamindars*, the Muslim *jotedars* of the northern districts would have remained acquiescent. But by mobilizing *bargadars* and labourers against the Muslim *jotedars* as well, the communists antagonized these rich Muslim peasants who were closely linked with the local Muslim League hierarchies. Despite the CPI's open support for the Pakistan movement, which it regarded as a movement for Indian Muslims' self-determination, the communists quickly lost Muslim *jotedar* and *ashraf* support. Although the major Hindu political parties, especially the Congress and the Mahasabha, wanted to eliminate the CPI as a political force, a marriage of convenience was impossible between the Hindu and Muslim politicians of the region as they had conflicting class and communal interests. These differences led to the
mobilization of the lower peasantry by the *ashraf* and *jotedars*, on communal lines.

### III

Although peasant insurrections on class lines occupied but a short time, they substantially influenced the overall politics of the region in the 1940s and even afterwards. These insurrections by poor peasants, mainly sharecroppers and agricultural labourers, alarmed and finally united the *ashraf-jotedar* and Muslim *bhadralok* classes under the banner of the Muslim League also in the *jotedar* (Muslim) — dominated sub-regions, where Hindu *zamindars* and *bhadralok* classes were not predominant socially or economically.

Broadly, these revolts, manifesting the growth of class consciousness among the poorer section of the peasantry, can be classified into the *tanka* and *tebhaga* movements. The *tanka* movement was confined to the tribal peasants, mainly Hajongs in northern Mymensingh, while the *tebhaga* engulfed almost the whole region, but was more intense among the tribal sharecroppers (who were quite different from the typical peasants) of Dinajpur and Rangpur than among the Muslim and Namasudra sharecroppers elsewhere. With J. Bhattacharyya it may be agreed that these revolts were probably the most extensive in the history of the East Bengal peasantry. But the figure of six million peasant participants given by Abdullah Rasul sounds too high.

The *tanka* revolts differed markedly from the *tebhaga* revolts. The agitation to convert *tanka* or fixed rental in kind to a much lower rental in cash was more radical than the demand for converting *adhi* or fixed rental in kind of one-half of the yield to one-third or *tebhaga*, because the reduction of *adhi* to *tebhaga* would still require a payment of more than 500 per cent of what an ordinary tenant used to pay as rental in cash. The *tanka* movement spread throughout a belt of 50 miles by ten in northern Mymensingh and involved thousands of Hajong tribal peasants, who established a "Hajong Raj" under communist leadership. It is difficult to agree with Dhanagare, who cites examples of well-organized attacks on police stations, post offices and *zamindars'* offices by as many as 5,000 tribals at a time, but then inconsistently holds that the resistance in the area "was only a small-scale uprising" with "Jacquerie elements" pre-dominant.

Under the supervision of some high-caste Hindu communists like Moni Singh and Bhupen Bhattacharyya, the "insurrectionist phase" of the *tanka* movement developed during 1942-45. Meanwhile several government measures and recommendations, the cadastral survey of the Garo Hills area and the act of 1939 granting tenancy rights to the
tankadars, might have emboldened the Hajong sharecroppers. The de jure recognition from the government of their ryoti rights and the end of the "imperialist war" with its transformation into the "people's" one, from the communist viewpoint in late 1941, accentuated the anti-zamindar tanka movement. Henceforth, the local agents of exploitation not the government, became the chief targets of attack by the CPI. It is, however, difficult to establish that by "extending military training" to communist guerrillas during 1942-45 the government intensified peasant militancy in the sub-region.61 In actuality the government had substantial reservations about arming the communists. Most communist leaders during 1942-45 were under close police surveillance, in spite of their "pro-government" policy.62

Local high-caste Hindu communist leaders, including Moni Singh, Bhupen Bhattacharyya and Sukumar Bhawal, who had been organizing the Hajong peasants since late 1930s, had earned Hajong peasants' confidence and support for the CPI by mid-1940s. Their success was also due to their promise of establishing a "Hajong Raj" and social equality between the tribals and the high-caste Hindus. By the 1940s the Hajongs' spontaneity, discipline and respect for the communist leaders were intense: for instance one Hajong "comrade" (as the pro-CPI tribals addressed each other), who had been accustomed to beating his wife frequently, never hit her again after Moni Singh had ridiculed him as an "imperialist" for this behaviour. Again, one Hajong "comrade", who had a bad name for drunkenness, stopped drinking for good after Moni Singh gave him the option of leaving the Party or dropping his drinking habit.63 At the height of police and military operations in early 1947, when Hajong peasants were under the threat of police raids which often resulted in deaths, mostly on their side, they did not leave the CPI despite the attempted persuasion by some Congress leaders. In reply to the congress leaders who argued that communists were "very few" in India, a sixteen-year-old Hajong of Laxmikura village said that they had heard about communist organization existing throughout the world and since the workers and peasants were in the majority, they could change their lot if leaders like Lenin and Stalin would lead them to the path of victory.64 Their support for the CPI was also reflected in the retort of two old Hajong sharecroppers to the Congress leaders who asked them to join their party:

You babus have now come to embrace us! When the baby is dirty with its own excretion, nobody likes it. When the mother gives it a wash, everybody comes to love the baby. What does the baby do? Does it leave its mother? When the communist mother has cleaned the baby then you people have come to embrace it, hug it, is not it so?65
The tanka sharecroppers’ movement during the last two years of the "people’s war" attracted the attention of many prominent communist and peasant leaders of India. The All-India Kisan Sabha held two conferences in the district, first on 10-12 May 1943 at Nalitabari, a village in Jamalpur sub-division, and the second at Netrokona on 5-10 May 1945. Among communist leaders, Muzaffar Ahmed and Bankim Mukherjee attended the first conference, and P.C. Joshi, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, Baba Gurmukh Singh and some delegates from the USSR, Burma, Britain and Ceylon attended the second. Thousands of peasants and peasant volunteers, including women, attended these conferences, and the experience not only emboldened them but might have widened their mental horizon as well. The organizers of these conferences urged the continuation of the tanka movement, as well as supporting the tebhaga movement, which by then had become popular among the sharecroppers of a number of districts. The tacit support of the government for the anti-zamindar tanka movement soon attracted a large number of Muslim poor peasants to the movement. Poor peasants — Jameshwar, Birat, Jatin, Jamiat Ali, Kangal Das and Jaladhir Pal — later emerged as important leaders of the Kisan Sabha in the area. The Sabha also organized a cultural front, Kristi Bahani, to attract peasant support through songs and plays. Nibaran Pandit, Akhil Chakravarty and Nishimoni were among the popular artists of the front.

With the end of the War ended the short-lived rapprochement between the government and the CPI. The continuation of the tanka system despite the victory of the Red Army of the USSR disillusioned a section of the Hajongs, who had been told by their mentors that they would be totally free after the War. Instead in December 1946 the government appointed a British civil servant as the new District Magistrate of Mymensingh who did not believe in showing any leniency to the tribals. Soon a virtual reign of terror was unleashed in the tribal areas of the district which resulted in the deaths of several Hajong peasants, including women, the burning of more than a hundred Hajong villages, the looting of property and the rape of Hajong women by police and soldiers.

Before the government crackdown on the tribal insurgents, who by the end of the War had established a sort of a "liberated territory" in the hilly areas of northern Mymensingh, the Hajongs had several fights with the local zamindar. The Hajongs’ open defiance of zamindars and jotedars was a matter of great concern to both the League and the Congress. The CPI established dharmagolas or people’s granaries during the Famine to store food for distribution among the poor. This the ML and Congress leaders did not like. The growing influence of the CPI among the tribals and the Kisan Sabha’s stress on the realization
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of *tebhaga* at the sixth annual conference of the party at Kishoreganj (Mymensingh) in 1944, perturbed the *jotedars* and *zamindars* of the district. The most alarming news for the well-to-do classes in the district was the Kishoreganj resolution which demanded the return of all lands to the former owners who had sold them during the Famine at nominal prices.69

The first major confrontation between the Hajongs and the *zamindar* of Susang Durgapur took place in May 1945 at Lengura Bazaar. The *zamindar* had suddenly demanded a toll from the sellers of different commodities in the bazaar, which was within his estate, and he destroyed the bazaar during the Netrokona Conference of the Kisan Sabha when most Hajongs were at the Conference. When Moni Singh, a close relation of the *zamindar*, went to the bazaar with a few followers, he was attacked by the *lathials* of the *zamindar* and local policemen. They confined Singh and his men in the *zamindar’s cutchery* in the bazaar. But thousands of Hajong peasants from the neighbourhood surrounded the place shouting: "Comrades, the day of the final struggle has arrived". Moni Singh restrained them from attacking the policemen and the *zamindar’s lathials* by convincing them that the day of the "final struggle" had not yet arrived and the CPI had not yet taken any decision in this regard.70

Immediately after the War, on a September evening in 1945, the Kisan Sabha (pro-communist) observed a victory celebration at Susang, where Moni Singh urged them to prepare for the "final struggle." Afterwards innumerable open meetings and *baithak* (closed door meetings) were held throughout the district. Gradually Muslim sharecroppers and labourers were attracted to the Sabha. By early 1946 Moni Singh had become a legendary figure among the poor peasants of the tribal area. Many of them believed that he and his white horse had supernatural power to evade detection by the police. By then a well-disciplined "peasant army" had been raised, containing several thousand Hajong men and women armed with spears, swords and hand made guns. Throughout the area where they lived tribals frequently attacked police stations, post offices and disruption of tele-communication lines became endemic throughout the tribal areas.71 These acts provoked police action which continued till early 1949.

Meanwhile, as the demands for introducing *tebhaga* had become quite strong along with the demand for the abolition of the *tanka* system, throughout Mymensingh, Muslim League leaders started a vehement campaign against the communists, who were mostly Hindus, on communal lines.72 Ghiasuddin Pathan, a prominent League leader of the district, is said to have told the Muslim sharecroppers who were with the communists that they should not waste time and energy for "*tebhaga*", literally meaning three shares, since Pakistan was in the
offing, they would get all lands or choubhaga, literally all the four quarters, after the mass expropriation of the Hindu landlords. This sort of anti-Hindu propaganda, in the wake of the Calcutta and Noakhali riots in 1946-47, shattered the fragile Hindu-Muslim unity in Mymensingh and elsewhere in the region.

After the death of a pro-communist student by police firing in Mymensingh town on 22 January 1947, anti-government activities by the communists suddenly rose in the tribal belt. The tribal peasants, who had in the meantime clashed with the police on some other issues, which resulted in the death of a small child of a Hajong peasant on 8 January, became more violent against the police who were stationed in the area on the pretext of searching for arms and "miscreants".

The establishment of police and border security force camps in the Durgapur-Kalmakanda-Nalitabari belt emboldened the zamindars and jotedars to send their men to collect their share of tanka and barga crops in this tract. On their refusal to part with the crops the landlords implicated the Hajong sharecroppers of Baheratali village in looting their crops. On 31 January the District Magistrate sent about 25 armed soldiers and a magistrate to Baheratali after the Hajongs had chased out a smaller police party on the previous day. The troops raped two Hajong women, and dragged out a young house wife, Kumudini. About 80 men and women confronted the troops demanding Kumudini's release. One middle aged Hajong widow, Rashmani, advanced with a dao (carved kitchen knife) and killed the soldier who was holding Kumudini, whereupon she and a man were killed by another soldier. But a large number of armed Hajongs soon chased out the troops, who left behind three bodies and two rifles.

This killing of soldiers in self defence by the Hajongs was followed by mass destruction of Hajong villages and a large number of arrests throughout the hilly sub-region. No legal aid was allowed to the convicts. When communist and trade union leaders including Jyoti Basu, MLA (who later became the Chief Minister of West Bengal) and Snehangshu Acharyya, son of Maharaja Sashi Kanta Acharyya of Mymensingh, went to Nalitabari to enquire about the situation, they were not allowed to enter the village by the District Magistrate. The intensity of the oppression of the tribal peasants by the police is revealed by several contemporary sources. According to a Non-Official Enquiry Committee this was comparable with "the depredation of the modern 'Nadir Shah'". From some confidential government reports it appears that the communists' hold on the "rebels" was very strong. They established almost self-sufficient autonomous village governments in the hilly area of Mymensingh. The "rebels" are said to have detained many mahajans and forced people to join the CPI and give subscriptions to the Party.
According to Moni Singh, the lion's share of credit for the resistance movement goes to the Hajongs themselves. He holds that the CPI only politicized them; organization, courage, dedication and initiative in fighting with a view to changing the oppressive systems were solely theirs. They were so well-organized that a newspaper reporter remarked: "Looking for a Hajong in this [in the hills] is like looking for a needle in haystack."

As discussed earlier, by early 1947 the tanka movement had become a part of the large wave of the tebhaga. But the Hajong peasants endured the combined opposition of the government, Muslim League, Congress and Hindu-Muslim zamindars and jotedars more than did their Muslim and Rajbansi counterparts. They did so because of the following factors: their militancy unlike that of their Muslim counterparts could not be dampened by any distracting force like anti-Hindu communalism. Their anti-landlord and anti-high-caste sentiments were combined against the same group of people — unlike the Muslim sharecroppers, who had conflicting class interests with Muslim jotedars and communal differences with Hindu zamindars and mahajans. The difference between the patron-client relationship of the Hajong and Muslim sharecroppers was important — in the former case their tribal chiefs and some members of the zamindar family, especially Moni Singh, were the patrons, while in the latter case the patrons being their immediate class enemies, the Muslim jotedars, resorted to communalism as a distraction, which only cast the Hindus in the role of the real enemies of the sharecroppers. The absence of any major contradiction between the communist concepts of communal ownership of property and the tribal tradition of joint ownership of land, forests and fisheries, paved the way for communist success among the Hajongs, while communism's denial of God and religion became a major obstacle to its growth among the Muslim peasantry. Poor communications in the dense forests and hilly terrain of northern Mymensingh enabled the communists to find sanctuaries and establish guerilla training centres. Last but not least, the fighting tradition of the Hajongs and the availability of arms helped them sustain. In this respect, one may point out the advantages of mobilizing the tribals, which is, in general, vertical by nature, than mobilizing the peasants, who live in faction ridden societies where the mobilization process has to be horizontal by nature.

Despite the intensity of the tanka movement, which had both grassroots support and organization, as it was confined to an insignificant minority — the low-caste Hajong tribals — in the long run it could not withstand the opposition of the government and the powerful Muslim ashraf and rich peasant classes. The partition of Bengal in August 1947 had cataclysmic effects on the movement. With the open
support of the Muslim League government of the newly created province of East Pakistan, the *ashraf-ulama-jotedar* triumvirate successfully branded the leaders of the movement — mainly high-caste Hindus — "Indian agents" and "enemies of Pakistan and Islam". Consequently under the tremendous pressure of the government, notably its police and the armed forces, most Hajongs and their communist leaders crossed the border into India and the movement fizzled out not long after the creation of Pakistan.  

This movement has not received much attention from historians, because unlike the *tebhaga* movement, which was directed against a large number of petty landlords and *jotedars*, *mahajans*, middle peasants and the land-holding middle classes, this movement aimed at circumscribing the power of a small section of *zamindars*. The lack of authentic and objective work on the movement, especially in English, is a great hindrance to its proper evaluation. The Bengali works by Pramatha Gupta, Abdullah Rasul and Satyen Sen and Sunil Sen's *Agrarian Struggle* are written from communist point of view, and are not free from passionate rhetoric. The academic studies by Bhattacharyya and Dhanagare, on the other hand, are neither adequate nor free from subjectivity — the former greatly depended on the accounts given by some communist participants while the latter tended to underestimate the movement, as discussed earlier.

**IV**

So far as the *tebhaga* movement is concerned, the availability of a substantial amount of primary and secondary sources has made the task of writing its history much easier. Again, as this is undoubtedly one of the most famous peasant movements of the modern times in South Asia, it attracts the attention of many modern "peasant authorities", although the movement itself does not connote the destruction of landlordism or the sharecropping system. But though the movement was apparently confined to the sharecroppers who wanted the reduction of their rental paid in kind from one-half to one-third of the yield, the participation of a large number of landless and semi-landless agricultural labourers in the movement, who did not have any *bargadari* interests whatsoever, suggests the wider implications of the movement. By challenging the overlordship of petty landlords including *jotedars*, *mahajans*, middle peasants having sharecroppers as tenants and the *bhadralok* who had sublet their holdings to sharecroppers, the movement, in fact, was aiming at the eventual destruction of all intermediary interests in between the actual cultivator and the State.

Contrary to the general belief that the movement was initiated and sustained by the CPI, there is evidence that in the early 1920s,
even before the inception of the CPI, there had been several attempts to elevate the position of the sharecroppers in the region by some "pro-peasant" politicians. A section of the Proja Party as well as the government were considering measures to give better rights to the bargainars. The Floud Commission's criticism of the 1928 Tenancy (Amendment) Act for its failure to protect the bargainars and for its advocacy of tebhaga might have emboldened the bargainars. The Bengal Kisan Sabha, which later took a leading role in mobilizing mass support for tebhaga, popularized the demand for better rights for bargainars and labourers. It did not, however, categorically demand the introduction of tebhaga before the publication of the Floud Report in March 1940. In its Memorandum to the Floud Commission the Sabha demanded ten-sixteenths of the crop as the sharecroppers' share, which was slightly less than two-thirds, as stipulated by the demand for tebhaga. For the first time the Kisan Sabha demanded two-thirds of the crop for the sharecroppers at its fourth annual conference on 9 June 1940 at Panjia, a village in Jessore district.

Though the Kisan Sabha had repeated its demand for tebhaga at the Nalitabari Conference in May 1943, it did not take any bold decision regarding tebhaga at its next Conferences at Phulbari (Dinajpur) on 29 February to 2 March 1944 and at Hatgobindapur (Burdwan) on 13-14 March 1945. Being predominantly under CPI control, the Bengal Kisan Sabha at that time put greater stress on the "grow more food" and anti-Fascist campaigns. While the central leaders of the Kisan Sabha were almost silent about the tebhaga demand, local leaders and cadres from the lower peasantry were enthusiastic about achieving their goals. At the Phulbari (Dinajpur) Conference, thousands of poor peasants shouted slogans in support of tebhaga and the abolition of illegal exactions by landlords and moneylenders. Their main demand was the transfer of proprietory rights over land to the tillers. By the early 1940s, according to the police chief of Rangpur, the potential for violent insurgency had already existed among the district's bargainars, who only needed someone to spark the flame. When the Kisan Sabha had a formal enrolment of 255,000 primary members in Bengal by early 1945, it was no longer possible for the leaders to ignore their demands. It is reasonable to assume that the majority of the members were from East Bengal districts, especially from the tribal dominated tracts of Mymensingh, Rangpur and Dinajpur and from among the Namasudras of Jessore, Khulna, Faridpur and Bakarganj. The "leftist" Krishak Samity members of the Tippera-Noakhali sub-region, being predominantly Muslim, soon succumbed to the communal propaganda of the Muslim League. Thus the pro-CPI Kisan Sabha was left with little alternative to concentrating on the mobilization of the non-Muslim
peasants, especially the tribals, who were not vulnerable to Muslim League propaganda. The Kisan Sabha's numerous rallies and conferences in the tribal-Namasudra tracts of Mymensingh, Jessore, Dinajpur and Rangpur during the period and its claim to replace the British Raj aroused great enthusiasm among the lower peasants of these districts. The bargadars, whose ranks were swollen by the mass impoverishment of the middle peasants after the Famine of 1943-44, found the Kisan Sabha's anti-hoarder, anti-black marketeer stand an attractive plank, as most of these exploiting people happened to be local jotedar-mahajans.

It is difficult to agree with Hamza Alavi that the post-Famine period fulfilled the objective condition of the bargadar revolt on account of a shortage of labour since a large number of poor peasants had died in the Famine and many others had become unemployed after the War. The post-War unemployment, again, does not support his hypothesis of a labour shortage in agriculture in the region. The figures of mass "depeasantization" of occupancy tenants in the wake of the Famine, on the other hand, suggest a tremendous rise in landlessness among poor peasants. In Nilphamari (Rangpur) alone, land alienation by subsistence peasants rose by 1,000 per cent during the Famine. Forty-one per cent of peasants in Rangpur, for instance, were mainly living as bargadars (or "adhiars", as they were known locally) or sharecroppers and about 66 per cent of them were below the subsistence level.

The actual rebellion first started in September 1946 in parts of Dinajpur-Rangpur sub-region, mainly under local middle-peasant leaders, who had very little contact with the CPI. The rebellion was so sudden that the top leaders of the Bengal Kisan Sabha had failed to foresee it in May 1946, at the ninth annual conference of the party at Moubhog (Khulna). Soon the sharecroppers' rebellion engulfed 19 districts of the province. The rebels in most places surrounded jotedars' houses and took two-thirds of the crop from their granaries to store in the Panchayat Khamars or people's granaries. In one single day in some villages of Domar in Rangpur district, the local peasant leaders having some links with the District Kisan Sabha organized several hundred lathials and volunteers. Initially the leadership came from the impoverished middle peasants, but the landless sharecroppers and wage labourers fought well beside the middle peasants. However, it does not mean that the middle peasants were not militant. Both Alavi and Dhanagare have mentioned the militancy of the middle peasants, though the latter has misinterpreted the former's stand vis-a-vis the role of the middle peasants in the tebharga movement.
The breakdown of the percentages of landless labourers, bargadars, semi-landless peasants and lands under the sharecropping system in the region reveals that the intensity of landlessness and cropsharing as a mode of production in an area and the tebhaga movement were hardly correlative. The following Table substantiates the facts:

What one would expect from the Table is higher intensity in bargadar-labourer unrest in districts like Khulna, Pabna, Faridpur and Bogra with higher percentages of bargadars, labourers and semi-landless categories than in Dinajpur, Rangpur, Mymensingh and Jessore, the most volatile districts so far as the tebhaga movement is concerned. These data also indicate that relatively prosperous peasants with greater independence were more militant than their impoverished, dependent counterparts. When we take into account the nature and extent of the movement in the different tracts of East Bengal, the hypothesis propounding the pre-dominance of the middle peasants and tribal elements as the main factors of the tebhaga movement becomes a viable proposition.

**TABLE 7.1**
The Percentage of Families with less than Two Acres of Land, Bargadars and Agricultural Labourers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Families with less than 2 acres of land</th>
<th>Bargadars:</th>
<th>Agricultural Labourers:</th>
<th>Total % of Bargadars and Labourers:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bakarganj</td>
<td>61.8</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>30.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bogra</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>39.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chittagong</td>
<td>60.3</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>13.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dacca</td>
<td>62.4</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>29.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinajpur</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>37.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faridpur</td>
<td>81.5</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>39.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessore</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khulna</td>
<td>55.6</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>55.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mymensingh</td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>27.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noakhali</td>
<td>65.3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>20.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pabna</td>
<td>64.1</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>41.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajshahi</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rangpur</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>32.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tippera</td>
<td>63.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Floud Report, Vol. II, Table VIII (b and d), pp. 114-17)
In areas where both the jotedars and bargadars were Muslims, despite greater economic hardship and exactions by the jotedars, the bargadars were relatively inert and were much more dependent on outside communist agitators than in areas where the two classes belonged to two different faiths. Peasant inertness in the former cases may be attributed to the arousal of communal rather than class-consciousness by the pro-jotedar elements.

In most districts, the customary share of the bargadars was one-half of the crop, which was usually stocked in the jotedars' farm houses by the bargadars, who did not get anything for carrying and threshing the crop. The patron-client relationship in most areas in the central and south-eastern sub-regions was so strong that all attempts by outsiders to incite bargadars against their lessors failed as the tenants did not dare oppose their patrons. Bakarganj is a glaring example where bargadars were apathetic to the movement even though in some cases they were left with only one-third of the crop. Jessore provides a unique example where, in spite of very insignificant proportions of bargadars (4.2%) and labourers (7.9%), and where the number of semi-landless peasants was one of the lowest (28.5%) in East Bengal, there was some bargadar unrest during the period. But closer observation leads us to the reasons for such a variation. Firstly, the poor peasants in Jessore were stirred up by local communists. Secondly, parts of Narail sub-division, where the tebhaga movement took a serious turn, were notorious for jotedars' exactions — in some places they took three-quarters of the crop if they provided implements and manures. Collection of two-thirds by the jotedars was quite common in this district. In Magura sub-division the movement was confined to Namasudra bargadars, who were easily mobilized against their Muslim jotedars by local and non-local communists. Jhenidah sub-division was the mirror image of Magura. Here leaders stirred Muslim bargadars against high-caste Hindu and Namasudra jotedars. Parts of Jessore and Khulna had the notoriety of having serious communal riots in the past. Bitter communal antagonism between the two communities in Sirajganj (Pabna) and Satkhira (Khulna) might have quickened the process of bargadars' mobilization against their jotedars representing rival faiths. Similarly, tribal and Namasudra bargadars in northern and southern sub-regions respectively, could be easily mobilized against jotedars having different ethnic, religious or caste identities.99

It was Dinajpur where the tebhaga demand was first raised by the sharescroppers after a lull of about six years in late 1946. The villages in the area of Atwari police station, especially Rampur, were the hotbed of agitation. Local Rajbansi peasant leaders, Ramlal Singh, Pathal Singh and Rajen Singh, became active communist organizers under the leadership of Sushil Sen, a high-caste Hindu bhadralok.
When sharecroppers of Rampur village went to cut the paddy on the plot of a Rajbansi bargadar called Phuljhari, with a view to stocking the crop in the "people's granary" instead of the jotedar's, the police came and arrested Sen, but only after clashing with the peasants. Soon the news of the clash spread throughout Thakurgaon sub-division. Such leaders as Haji Danesh, Kali Sarkar, Hrishikesh Bhattacharyya, Gurudas Talukdar and Sunil Sen started organizing the bargadars. Within a fortnight the movement engulfed 22 of the 32 police stations of Dinajpur. Thousands of peasants joined the Kisan Sabha, including wage labourers, middle peasants and a few rich peasants. Rajbansi women also took an active part in the movement. Their main slogans were "Inqilab Zindabad" [long live revolution] and "Tebhaga Chai" [we want tebhaga].

Most Kisan Sabha members were bargadars and labourers. Not all cadres and supporters of the Kisan Sabha were communists, but some of the active communist leaders of Dinajpur had a poor peasant background. Monglu Muhammad of Rampur village, Rup Narayan of Phulbari, who also became an MLA in 1946, Bachcha Muhammad, Chiar Shai Sheikh, Samiruddin, Bachcha Munshi, Lal Muhammad Munshi, Pradhan Majhee and Spasta Ram Singh were prominent among them. Some of them were totally illiterate. The poor peasants of Dinajpur-Rangpur sub-region learnt from the communists that the exploiting interests should be overthrown by an inquilab or revolution. In most cases they lost faith in the law-enforcing bodies of the government. Under the influence of the CPI a section of the peasants learnt about the revolutionary activities of Chinese peasants under Mao Tse-tung. They became familiar with the names of Chiang Kai-shek and President Truman, as has been depicted in some songs composed by Khabir Sheikh, a poor peasant in Dinajpur (of Phulbari village). When Chiang Kai-shek went to the USA to meet President Truman in late 1945 Khabir wrote these songs:

दुबारा बने भारत के ठाकेर वायसे
पाहा त-पाहा किस्मे ना।

शेर तारा चिरमूं चाहा,
अब करो तेर बुद्धीभाषा।

जब नात तेरे खाने लू भुनने पैर
जबलचा तेर राखने ना।
The frog [Chiang Kai-shek] is boasting that it can destroy mountains by kicks. Listen you idiot Chiang, if your 'big brother' Mao Tse-tung hears this he will simply kill you.

And:

After seeing everything I have become blind O my dear grandfather Truman. After hearing the stories about China, I think to myself, that fighting is probably not coming here. But when I look at Korea, I tremble with fear O my grandfather Truman.

The communists, who were mostly the non-local Hindu bhadralok from the south-eastern districts, were not initially accepted by the tribal and Muslim peasants of Dinajpur. It was only after the tribal chiefs and local Muslim peasant leaders had announced the tebhaga programme quite independently of the CPI in September 1946, that the CPI and Kisan Sabha leaders were successful in organizing the poor peasants in the sub-region. They taught them how to resist police excesses without foreseeing that the poor, unarmed peasants would ever think of waging an armed struggle against the government and jotedars. Some of the CPI directives were ludicrously simple, such as asking the women cadres and supporters of the tebhaga movement to face the armed police force with broom sticks and chilli powder sprays. Despite their limitations, the communists aroused mass enthusiasm for the movement by establishing training camps in the rural areas of Dinajpur and Rangpur.

Between December 1946 and February 1947 the police and sharecroppers clashed on at least five major occasions when 31 peasants and one policeman were killed. After the clashes in some villages in the area of Atwari police station which led to mass arrests of peasant participants and leaders, the militant adhiars continued on their own initiative to stack paddy in their own granaries — which
they soon followed up by breaking into *jotedars’* granaries and looting the entire crop. This was done after the publication in the *Calcutta Gazette* on 22 January 1947 of the Bengal Bargadars Temporary Regulation Bill, which promised to introduce the *tebhaga* system shortly throughout the province.\(^{107}\) Meanwhile, the Sub-Divisional Officer of Thakurgaon had tried in vain to achieve a peaceful settlement of the dispute between the *adhiars* and *jotedars* as some peasants chanted slogans demanding the entire crop and "*langal jar jami tar*" ["land to the tiller"] instead of the *tebhaga*. By early 1947, according to the government, a parallel government had been established in parts of rural Dinajpur and Rangpur. Attacks on police parties by armed *adhiars* and labourers were quite common in some areas of Dinajpur and Rangpur. The police firings at Chirir Bandar on 4 January, at Khanpur on 20 February and at Thumnia on 22 February resulted in the death of several *adhiars*. At Khanpur alone, between 22 and 26 peasants were killed. About 1,200 peasants were arrested and about 10,000 were wounded by police and *jotedars* in Dinajpur during December 1946 and February 1947.\(^{108}\)

Police firings and *jotedars’* excesses led to mass mobilization of *adhiars* and all categories of poor peasants, fishermen, barbers, blacksmiths and other menial classes against the *jotedars* and the government. In Rangpur, for instance, after the brutal killing of a Kisan Sabha volunteer, Tag Narayan, of Khagakhari Bari village in the area of Dimla police station, by a local Muslim *jotedar*, Masihur Rahman (Jadu Mia) in December 1946, thousands of *adhiars* and labourers organized protest meetings and rallies throughout the district. According to some observers, local Muslim *jotedars*, who had been totally boycotted by their *adhiars* after the killing of Tag Narayan, instigated communal riots in Syedpur town, not far from Khagakharhi Bari village, to communalize the *adhiar-jotedar* conflict. But the *adhiars* and agricultural labourers under communist leadership showed tremendous restraint in abstaining from killing Muslim *jotedars* and their agents, which they would have been capable of doing.\(^{109}\)

Somenath Hore, a Bengali journalist, who went to Rangpur villages in December 1946, has given a vivid account of the *tebhaga* movement in Nilphamari sub-division in his diary. His sketches depict *adhiars’* militancy and discipline, especially their marching with the Red Flag, *lathis* and sickles, indicate that the movement was well organized. From his accounts it appears that local *adhiars* and labourers were too articulate to be dismissed as a "sack of potatoes". They defied the League and Congress leaders, who quite unitedly were opposing the movement, telling them that it was unnecessary on the "eve of the enactment of the Tebhaga Bill". The poor peasants of the
area are said to have understood the implications of communal provocations by jotedars. In some cases they even defied the authority of the government by declaring in public meetings that the adhiars would make their own laws to try the jotedars and all exploiting interests. Many poor peasants believed that they had become swadhin or independent. One elderly tribal peasant felt that the Congress had done nothing for them in the last 60 years and that the "comrades" were their real friends. It also appears from the diary that, though some jotedars were prepared to concede tebhaga, they urged the CPI leaders not to destroy the "raja-proja [landlord-tenant] relationship". The so-called "projas" or adhiars, according to the account, wanted the "total destruction" of landlordism. The above account smacks of pro-CPI bias. In some isolated cases sharecroppers might have challenged the legitimacy of the sharecropping system, but in general, they did not demand the total destruction of landlordism, despite CPI propaganda. One should not overlook the restraining impact of peasants' "moral economy", which does not legitimize the expropriation of landlords.

Elsewhere in the region — Mymensingh, Khulna, Jessore and parts of Dacca — bargadars fought jotedars and the police, mostly under local peasant leaders. Some of them even came from the ranks of bargadars. Farazatullah and Hiralal Bain (a former professional lathial of landlords) of Shobana Union (an administrative unit under a Union Board) in Khulna district and Anima, Phulmati and Sarala Bala Pal, three leading women volunteers of the Kisan Sabha in Narail (Jessore), were some of the leaders who came from among illiterate poor peasants. In parts of rural Narail the bargadars were so well-organized that even armed policemen hesitated to enter their villages. On one occasion the bargadars and labourers encircled about 50 armed policemen and kept them as hostages for several hours in a football field at Raghunathpur village in Narail. Local bargadar leaders wanted to appropriate their rifles but the CPI leaders from the metropolis pacified them. According to Mudassar Munshi, a local militant bargadar leader: "Our battle was lost that very day." In Netrokona, Jamalpur and some other areas of Mymensingh district the tebhaga movement was crushed by the combined efforts of Hindu zamindars and Muslim jotedars who helped the police and aroused anti-tribal feeling among Muslim bargadars.

Besides communalism, other factors also contributed to the failure of the tebhaga movement. Its main drawback was that unlike the tanka movement, it antagonized a larger section of the land-holding classes. This sectional movement of bargadars or adhiars was diametrically opposed to the economic interests of jotedars, other rich peasants and some middle peasants who had sharecroppers as tenants.
Instead of accepting the extreme views of Dhanagare, who thinks that the movement did not pose any threat to the prevalent socio-economic and political systems, although the government is said to have realized the urgency of it,\textsuperscript{114} one can point out that the degree and extent of the movement were not as intensive as depicted in the writings of communist and Kisan Sabha leaders, activists and sympathizers. We may partially agree with Adrienne Cooper who thinks that: "To portray [the] sharecroppers' movement as 'partial struggles' aimed at obtaining limited economic gains for poor peasants is to present an unimaginative view of these events."\textsuperscript{116} Agricultural labourers and others, who had no connections with the croplsharing systems, joined the movement probably because they believed that they would achieve "tebhaga today, land tomorrow".\textsuperscript{116} The labourers also shared with the bargadars "a common hatred" for the jotetars for taking away their lands. The middle peasants supported the movement in the hope that this would culminate in an anti-zamindar movement, to their benefit.\textsuperscript{117}

Though CPI leaders were partly successful in stopping communal riots in Rangpur villages after the Syedpur riots in the wake of the killing of Tag Narayan by jotetar Masihur Rahman (Jadu Mia), and at Hasnabad in Tippera district after the Noakhali riots of late 1946,\textsuperscript{118} they could not do so in tracts without a communist following among peasants. Even in parts of Dinajpur-Rangpur sub-region, where the pro-CPI Kisan Sabha had grassroots organization, the Pakistan movement had gathered such momentum by early 1947 that many high-caste Hindu communist leaders had to hoist the green and white flag of the Muslim League (and Pakistan) along with the Red Flag of the CPI in public meetings in order to attract Muslim peasant support. The Hindu and Muslim communist leaders often joined their Muslim peasant supporters in congregational prayers with a view to showing that religion and communism had no contradictions. They selected Haji Danesh, a Congress leader of Dinajpur with a religious bent of mind, as a leader of the Kisan Sabha to counteract Muslim League propaganda that the protagonists of tebhaga were atheists. Adrienne Cooper has rightly pointed out that the Muslim League by 1944 "could argue with the Muslim peasants that the Zamindari system would be abolished with the achievement of Pakistan, that the Muslim League was a more appropriate vehicle for poor peasant demands than the B.P.K.S., and they would have a better life under an Islamic state.... In this process maulvis and maulanas (religious leaders) played an important role justifying separatism and guaranteeing that many Muslim peasants believed that a Muslim state was a moral right."\textsuperscript{119}

From the compromising attitude of most CPI leaders, it is most unlikely that they aroused "a revolutionary rural democratic spirit"
among the poor peasants of Dinajpur-Rangpur sub-region, as claimed by some leaders.\textsuperscript{120} The truth probably lies between such sweeping comments such as, on the one hand, "the tebhaga movement reflects the highest level of political consciousness of the peasants, which was different from [pre-political stages of] 'social banditry'";\textsuperscript{121} and on the other, the "politicization" of the peasants weakened their "rebellious impulse".\textsuperscript{122} The prevalent socio-economic and political systems were not congenial to militant peasant movements in the region. Though there is no denying the fact that economic reasons were inherent in the spontaneity of the sharecroppers, landless labourers and marginal peasants in their joining the tebhaga movement, there was, however, a promise of impunity from the leaders which aroused mass support for the movement. The illiterate, poor peasants were hardly aware how powerful were the government machinery, the jotedars, the zamindars and other agents of exploitation. Above all, the bulk of them did not question the legitimacy of the sharecropping system. They simply wanted some relief — and what was the harm if the entire crop or the lands were to come to them as a bonus by doing certain things in accordance with the leaders? But as soon as their lathis, bows and arrows proved ineffective against 303 rifles and machine guns, they yielded to authority. The movement failed also because the bulk of the sharecroppers who were Muslims, regarded their immediate landlords or Muslim jotedars not only legitimate but also as their patrons and "natural leaders". The strong influence of the ulama and the ashraf on the jotedars as well as on the poor peasants soon revitalized the old demon, communalism, which hammered the last nail into the coffin of the tebhaga movement. In short, the objective conditions of a peasant revolution in the region were lacking as the "conservative forces" in the countryside had not yet been weakened.\textsuperscript{123}

The poor and middle peasants had another difficulty in mobilizing themselves against the rich peasants in most parts of Dacca, Chittagong and Rajshahi divisions. The predominance of Hindu zamindars, mahajans and bhadralok in these districts pushed the jotedars as a dominant class into the background. So, the jotedars in most districts could hardly be differentiated from the broad "subaltern" category of projas. These projas in most places in Dacca and Chittagong divisions and parts of Jessore, Khulna, Pabna and Bogra in Rajshahi division had strong bands of private armies in their lathials which was not so common in Dinajpur-Rangpur sub-region. Above all, besides blood and factional ties, the common bond of religion between the jotedars and the rest of the peasantry proved too strong to be snapped by the doctrines of class struggle.
V

The essence of the story which tells us about the ascendancy of communalism in rural East Bengal in the 1940s can be found in the CPI's failure to comprehend "the mass irrationality underlying the Hindu-Muslim conflict". It simply underestimated communalism, as a factor having a "narrow social base" which, it believed, could be "rapidly liquidated" by the progressive forces. In tracts with high intensities of communist activities, communalism emerged as a potential — subsequently real — threat to the communist and non-communal peasant movement. The Tippera-Noakhali sub-region, which had been a strong base of the radical Krishak Samity, lost its pre-eminence as a centre of radicalism in the mid-1940s, and instead, on the eve of the partition of India, was the setting for some of the bitterest communal riots in the history of East Bengal. These riots indicate that the communist ideology had only touched the veneer of the peasant society. The movement on class lines being confined to a small section of the total population in Bengal (mainly tribals), the rest of the peasantry was vulnerable to the arousal of communal sentiment by small incidents and simple provocations.

The KPP failed to re-emerge as a political power after the 1946 elections for the Legislative Assembly. The KPP and its leaders, including Fazlul Huq, who had been overshadowed by the League under Jinnah by early 1940s, further lost credibility among Muslims by hobnobbing with the Congress on the eve of the elections. The KPP's unscrupulous use of the food situation during the Famine failed to discredit the League among the masses. Its "pro-Congress" overtures earned it a bad name among the Muslims, who by the early 1940s had been committed to the League. Consequently the KPP managed to capture only three seats in the elections of 1946, two in Bakarganj being won by Fazlul Huq. Pro-Congress "nationalist" ("non-communal") Muslims, including Ashrafuddin Chowdhury of Tippera, failed miserably in the elections. Most Muslim candidates, even Nawab Habibullah of Dacca, who contested the elections with Congress tickets, failed against ML candidates, some being almost obscure and less prominent economically or socially than their rivals. It is hard to believe that formerly influential proja leaders, Rajibuddin Tarafdar of Bogra, Kazi Imdadul Haque of Rangpur, Syed Nausher Ali of Jessore, Dr Mafizuddin of Bogra, Jalaluddin Hashemy of Khuna, Abu Hossain Sarkar of Rangpur and Abdul Latif Biswas of Dacca, who contested the elections as Congress or Congress-backed Jamiat-ul-Ulama-i-Hind candidates, were defeated simply because the League resorted to "unfair means", as alleged by Maulana Azad, Fazlul Huq and Humayun Kabir. In most constituencies the "nationalist" Muslim candi-
dates forfeited their election deposit. A few examples highlight the situation: in Mymensingh East (Rural) against the League's Nurul Amin who polled 26,719 votes, KPP's Abdul Wahid Bokainagari polled only 219; in Bakarganj West (Rural), against the League's Maulana Qasim who polled 13,198 votes, the famous KPP leader Hashem Ali Khan managed to get only 205 votes. While the "Nationalist" Muslim candidate Ahmed Ali received 1,642 votes against the League's Abdus Sabur Khan's 21,895 in Khulna Sadar; Tayebuddin Ahmed of the KPP polled only 342 votes against the League's Khurram Khan Panni, a local zamindar, who obtained, 16,826 in Tangail South (Rural).128

The League in total captured 113 seats, out of 121 reserved for Muslims (including 103 out of 111 rural seats), polling 203, 6,775 out of 243, 4,100 Muslim votes in the whole of Bengal. About 80 per cent of the Muslim voters exercised their suffrage. They mostly voted for the League, it seems, for its programmes to protect Muslim and peasant interests.129

Meanwhile, prominent KPP leaders like Maulana Abdullah al-Baki, Abul Mansur Ahmed, Nawabzada Hasan Ali Khan and Sham-suddin Ahmed of Kustia had joined the League. The "most useful and important section of the young, militant and intellectual members" of the KPP joined the pro-partition East Pakistan Renaissance Society, which was an important platform for publicizing the Pakistan doctrine among the Muslims of Bengal.130 The mass defection of important KPP members to the League by early 1946 led to the de facto liquidation of the KPP. The League made ample room for both the extreme right and "progressive" KPP men. By 1944 the League meant "everything to everybody." On account of Jinnah's "progressive" pronouncements against exploitation and theocracy, many "radical" Muslims joined the League during the period. On the eve of the 1946 elections radical slogans like "land to the tiller"; "labourers are the owners of industries"; "crush the vested interest groups" and "Pakistan stands for the workers and peasants" were chanted from the Muslim League platform. The abolition of the zamindari system without giving any compensation to the landlords became an important objective of the party after the Gaffargaon Conference of the Bengal Muslim League, held on 12 January 1946 under the presidency of Liaquat Ali Khan, the right-hand man of Jinnah.131

The League's advocacy of fixed prices and better distribution of food and its successful portrayal of the Hindu zamindars, mahajans and merchants as the real causes of the Famine of 1943-44, tilted the balance in its favour.132 The ML leaders also blamed the Famine on the short-lived Huq-Mookerjee coalition ministry. This became easier as many Muslim leaders, in the wake of the Famine, had circulated stories throughout the region about the alleged opposition of some
Hindu leaders to sending food grain to East Bengal "to teach a lesson" to the Muslims who demanded Pakistan. The elections gave further opportunities to the supporters of the ML to spread fictitious stories about the alleged oppression of Muslims by Hindus in Bengal and elsewhere in the sub-continent. The pro-ML Jamiat-ul-Ulama-i-Islam played an important role in popularizing the ML among the rural Muslims during the elections. Due to the avowedly communal appeals, the ML had the edge over the CPI, Congress and other groups in the countryside.

In short, the ML's anti-Congress and anti-Hindu propaganda, along with its promises of radical land reform after the achievement of Pakistan, further alienated the Muslim peasants from the Congress and the CPI. The voting pattern of the rural Muslims in the region tend to confirm Shila Sen's assertion that the demand for Pakistan had great appeal among the Bengali Muslims and that "in Bengal the Pakistan movement was mass based and democratic". In short, as Ahmed Kamal has shown, Pakistan movement in East Bengal promised everything to every Bengali Muslim irrespective of his class background. There was something very vague about the economic programme in the movement, but Muslims in general and peasants in particular expected a better deal in all spheres of life. Food, clothing, shelter, education, jobs and above all, freedom — which to a peasant meant the abolition of the police force, courts and cutcheries, jails and lockups, along with all other agents of exploitation — were to be attained in Pakistan, they believed. Pakistan also signified the restoration of the early caliphate and a land of "eternal Eid" or joy to the bulk of the Muslim masses in the region.

The CPI, Congress and other leftist and nationalist groups lost ground also due to internal differences and mutual squabbles. In some places due to Congress and ML opposition, the CPI could not openly campaign in support of its candidates in the elections. The CPI's concentration of most leaders and workers in the urban and industrial centres further weakened its grip on the peasants, excepting a handful of tribal Hajongs and Rajbansis. Paradoxically, the party was more concerned about the impact of the proposed abolition of the zamindari system on the non-peasant classes than putting an alternative programme to that of the League to draw mass support after the War.

When the CPI in Bengal under Hindu bhadralok leadership failed to develop "an authentic peasant organization", the League put forward programmes of radical land reform. The large influx of anti-zamindar and anti-mahajan KPP-men into the League also helped transform it into a "workers' and peasants' party." Though the ashraf leaders of the party had some reservations about the proposed
expropriation of the zamindars, it seems, under the tremendous pressure from the new members of the party, the League high command had to accommodate anti-zamindar, anti-mahajan programmes, which were again mostly meant to circumscribe the power of the Hindu bhadralok classes. League leaders of all categories — ashraf, ulama, jotedars and bhadralok — however, put greater emphasis on the attainment of Pakistan as the pre-condition for attaining an exploitation-free society or a "peasant utopia". Soon the demand for Pakistan became an integral part of the demands for the abolition of the zamindari-mahajani systems and better job and educational opportunities for the Muslims of the region. The Hindu opposition to the Pakistan demand, generally motivated by economic considerations as the Hindus would be the main victims of any anti-zamindar, anti-mahajan measures, led to serious communal disturbances throughout Bengal.

The holding of "Pakistan Conferences" by the League in every district, where the speakers harangued the masses about the need to achieve Pakistan "not by begging but by revolution", provoked the Congress and Hindu Mahasabha to hold counter conferences to oppose Pakistan in the 1940s. Due to the fervent communal propaganda on both sides — the ML promising the restoration of the Badshahi or Muslim rule, and the Congress-Mahasabha leaders (in Bengal, quite often the same people belonged to both the parties) promising the establishment of the Ramarajya or Hindu domain — by mid-1940s, the differences between the economic and religious issues had been blurred in most places. The so-called "communist belts" of Dinajpur-Rangpur, Jessore-Khulna, Tippera-Noakhali and northern Mymensingh were no longer immune to communal violence. Communal clashes were not anymore spasmodic conflicts between rich and poor. By mid-1940s these had degenerated into indiscriminate fighting between the two communities. The countryside as well as the small towns of the region again witnessed inter- and intra-class conflicts between Hindus and Muslims, the main issues being desecration of temples and playing music near mosques.

In parts of Faridpur, Jessore and Khulna, riots between Namasudra and Muslim peasants during the period were only smaller than the Noakhali riots of 1946-47. Things took a serious turn at Mollahat in Khulna on 25 May 1944 over a dispute between a Namasudra and a Muslim peasant about a piece of land. Looting and rioting in a few square miles of Khulna and neighbouring Jessore resulted in six deaths, five among Muslims, and in the burning of 521 houses. Narail (Jessore), an important centre of the tebhaga movement was also affected by serious riots between poor Namasudra and Muslim peasants. Nothing is clearly known about the instigators of the riots,
except reports of virulent speeches by the ML and Mahasabha leaders. Some Namasudra peasants of Mollahat, who apologized to the District Magistrate of Khulna, told him that they had been misled by some "interested persons." In March 1945, Muslim peasants attacked Hindu students of Carmichael College in Rangpur town at the instigation of some Muslim students and leaders of the town. It was not always local grievances that caused disturbances. The reported alleged defilement of a mosque in Gwalior State in west India by Hindus, for instance, led to serious rioting in parts of rural Jessore in May 1946.

By August 1946 Muslim peasants in East Bengal had become so committed to the idea of Pakistan that it was no longer a political or economic issue; for them it had an emotional and religious appeal. Especially after the great Calcutta riots in the wake of the Direct Action Day on 16 August observed by the Muslim League government, which resulted in more than 4,000 deaths, the situation was highly inflammable as the entire region came to the brink of a civil war. By then the antagonism between the two communities had become so intense that even senior lawyers and judges supported rioting as a means to attain their political goals. A highly educated Muslim friend of Abul Mansur Ahmed is said to have asked him: "How many Hindus did you kill? Only lip-service to the Muslim cause won't do any good." Even a top Muslim League leader like Khwaja Nazimuddin is said to have remarked that the Direct Action meant not an anti-British but an anti-Hindu movement on the part of the Muslims. Consequently from the behaviour of Muslim peasants of all categories vis-a-vis their Hindu landlords, moneylenders and lower class neighbours, it is evident that there was hardly any difference of opinion between the communal League leaders and themselves with regard to the Hindus.

Soon after the Calcutta riots Noakhali followed suit. The riots in Noakhali were certainly parts of the struggle between the "haves" and "have nots", primarily between Hindu landlords, moneylenders and Muslim peasants. These riots also reflected the "different meaning" of Pakistan for the Muslim masses. After the great Calcutta killings of 1946 most Muslims in the region felt that Pakistan was the "only solution" to the constitutional problem. The riots in Muslim majority districts of East Bengal were probably regarded by many Muslims as the only way to achieve Pakistan.

The Noakhali riots of October 1946, which were grossly exaggerated in the Hindu press, undoubtedly provided specimens of the most gruesome acts of violence in the history of East Bengal villages. About 372 Hindu villages were destroyed, thousands of homesteads were looted and burnt down and about 220 Hindus, including some moneylenders, lost their lives in the district. One Rajendralal Roy
Chowdhury, a lawyer-moneylender, who was also the president of the local Hindu Mahasabha, became the first victim on 10 October in a village near Sonaimuri. Both religious fanaticism and the desire to profit from a campaign of loot motivated the Muslim masses to attack their Hindu neighbours. According to a contemporary observer most of them were committed to the establishment of a "local Pakistan", which would be "wholly Muslim in composition." This led to the mass attack on Hindus. Though the disturbances had an "agrarian tinge ... their primary incentive was communal".

From the Noakhali disturbances, especially the forcible conversion of Hindus to Islam and the abduction of Hindu women by Muslim hooligans, mostly peasants, in a large area of the district, it is difficult to believe that Maulana Golam Sarwar Hussaini was mainly responsible for these acts. Hussaini, a former KPP MLA, who was unsuccessful in the 1946 elections as a pro-Congress Jamiat-ul-Ulama candidate for the Assembly, was, however, the main agent provocateur. But the spontaneity of the anti-Hindu movement throughout the Tippera-Noakhali sub-region, including Sandwip, an island in the Bay of Bengal, suggests that anti-Hindu rioting would have taken place without Hussaini. However, he gave the initial leadership after losing his son-in-law in the Calcutta riots. Being an influential pir in areas in the Ramganj, Begumganj and Laxmipur police stations of Noakhali, he had a large Muslim peasant following who regarded the killing of Hindus as a sacred ritual. The League National Guards and local leaders of the party were the main organizers of the riots, who had instigated Muslim peasants and other villagers to boycott Hindu landlords, moneylenders, shopkeepers and other classes while observing the Direct Action Day in August 1946, two months before the outbreak of the disturbances.

By early 1947, though there had been a decline in the incidents of looting and rioting in the Tippera-Noakhali sub-region mainly due to the peace missions by Gandhi and Suhrawardy (the Chief Minister of Bengal), communal bitterness reached its height due to the League and Mahasabha campaigns on communal lines throughout East Bengal. The Hindu and Muslim press did the rest in widening the gulf between the two communities. By April 1947, Noakhali could no longer be singled out as the "lawless region" since the situation was not much better in the districts of Dacca, Mymensingh, Faridpur, Jessore, Pabna, Bogra and Rangpur. Muslim peasants were in the forefront, defying law and order in the names of Islam, Pakistan and Jinnah Sahib (Mr. Jinnah). By then the cry "Islam in danger" not only drew armed lungiclad, drunk Muslims to the pavements of Park Street and Chowringhee in Calcutta or Islampur and Nawabpur in Dacca, it also reverberated along the bamboo-hedges of rural East Bengal.
What appears from the Muslim peasant behaviour towards the Hindu landlords, moneylenders, the _bhadralok_ and the lower classes is that the peasants became confident of their "newly acquired" power and belief that they had already become "independent". After the mass exodus of Hindus from most villages in riot-affected areas of Noakhali and parts of Tippera, an elderly Muslim poor peasant is said to have remarked that they had achieved Pakistan as the region between Feni and Chandpur had been "liberated". Muslim peasants' spontaneity in forcibly converting Hindus and marrying their women reflects their desire to humiliate and belittle their class and communal enemies. These acts gratified their hidden desires, which they thought they could fulfil after Pakistan was attained reflecting what James Scott calls the "hidden transcript" of peasants and other subordinate groups in the society. This attitude reflects the typical peasant notion of his "utopia".

As discussed earlier, the sub-regional variations in the socio-economic structures, agrarian relations, the extents of landlessness, demographic pressure and the levels of political consciousness of peasants, were responsible for the variations in the degree and nature of peasant insurgency in different areas. The high intensity of economic distress in the post-Famine period in parts of the riot affected areas of Noakhali and Tippera along with the relative independence of the Noakhali-Tippera peasants, turned them violent at the slightest provocation from their leaders. The political culture of poor peasants in this sub-region, to a great extent, had been moulded by the "Bolsheviks" who taught them the violent way of redressing their grievances long before the disturbances in 1946. The poor peasants in the Rangpur-Dinajpur, Pabna-Bogra, Jessore-Khulna and Dacca-Mymensingh areas did not turn "communal" to that extent when compared with their counterparts in the Noakhali-Tippera sub-region, because the immediate exploiting classes in Rangpur, Dinajpur and parts of Pabna, Bogra, Dacca and elsewhere were Muslim _jotedars_. The poor peasants in Rangpur-Dinajpur were again mostly bonded labourers and sharecroppers. By late 1946, poor peasants in parts of Rangpur, Dinajpur, Jessore, Khulna and Mymensingh, had been under communist control, fighting for _tebhaga_. It is, however, not absolutely true that the _bargadars_ and _tankadars_ under communist control were not motivated by communal issues. Their aspiration to get higher social status vis-a-vis the high-caste Hindu landlords in Mymensingh and Muslim _jotedars_ in Rangpur and Dinajpur, may be easily identified as a by-product of tribal and communal exclusivities. One can agree with Guha: "This apparent spontaneity was nothing but a measure of the displacement of class solidarity by ethnic solidarity."
For the Muslim bargadars and other categories of poor peasants there was hardly any communal motivation to stick to the tebhaga or other anti-jotedar movements. As discussed earlier, the introduction of the Bargadars Bill, commonly known as the Tebhaga Bill, was an important factor in dissuading the Muslim bargadars from the movement, although the bill was never intended to be enacted as law by the Suhrawardy government. It was nothing but a carrot to draw poor Muslim peasants' support for the Pakistan movement. This bill was followed by another radical bill, the State Acquisition and Tenancy Bill designed to abolish the zamindari system, tabled on 21 April in the Assembly by the Muslim League government. This bill got wide publicity throughout the region through the government and Muslim League media. Most peasants and some of their leaders believed that the bill was intended to translate the "land to the tiller" slogan into action. Leading KPP leaders, Syed Nausher Ali and Abu Hossain Sarkar, for example, who had sympathized with the tebhaga movement, soon became inert and gradually withdrew their support from the CPI. Suhrawardy's anti-communist stand, which was very popular among most Muslims, especially among the rich and middle peasants, succeeded in neutralizing the effects of the CPI on Muslim mass groups. Through various radical promises, which worked as stunts, the League virtually took the wind out of the sails of the CPI after April 1947. Meanwhile, the Congress and other predominantly Hindu groups had been thoroughly discredited among the bulk of the peasantry as enemies of Islam and Pakistan and as the protectors of the zamindars and mahajans. Dhanagare has rightly pointed out the devouring impact of communal politics which led to the desertion of a large number of Muslim peasants from the Kisan Sabha, but he has understressed the implications of the demands for the abolition of the zamindari-mahajani systems, which had a tremendous impact on the bulk of the peasants. The League's success in enlisting peasant support for Pakistan lay in these demands, which had both communal and class appeals. This was possible by the successful marriage of convenience between the ashraf and Muslim jotedars, who jointly aroused "false consciousness" among the lower echelons of the peasantry. In the long run, this signalled the ascendancy of the jotedars as a dominant class in rural East Bengal, which later played a decisive role in the history of the region.

In the light of the foregoing discussion one may agree with those who blame the vacillating and compromising communist leadership for the failure of the class-based peasant movements of the 1940s. There is some truth in the assertion that at times the communists were opportunistic, mainly interested in mobilizing the sharecroppers with a view to strengthening their urban-based movements of industrial
workers and proletariats, said to have more revolutionary potential than the peasants and that this was reflected in the total non-representation of poor peasants in the CPI or Bengal Kisan Sabha Central Committees during the period. One may further Lynch the CPI for not hitting the British imperialism when it was at its weakest, mobilizing peasants for the "Greater Bengal move" in 1947, defying the "one nation" and "two-nation" theories. The sharecroppers are also said to have been prepared to "go any length despite their limited grasp of revolutionary theory". But we think this sort of reasoning only underestimates the impact of the "two-nation theory", propounding separate nationhood for all the Muslims of the sub-continent, cutting across class, ethnic and other differences. Without contesting the view that the CPI leadership was vacillating, at times betraying the peasant cause, the main reason why the movements failed was their total dissociation with the broader nationalist or separatist movements, which divided the different categories of peasants and sharecroppers by capturing their imagination, promising them their respective "peasant utopias". Last but not least, rich and middle peasants and the sharecroppers had different "utopias". The movement for Pakistan, a separate homeland for the Muslims, seemed to have blurred these differences, leaving the smaller section of the tankadars and bargadars, mostly non-Muslim tribals, to their miserable fate.

Notes

3. Ibid., pp. 330-1; HFR, 2nd half, Nov. 1941.
5. GFR, 1st half, May 1941.
10. GFR, 2nd half, Dec. 1941.
11. SP Faridpur to Chief Secretary, GB, 17 July 1942, GB, HPF, No. 1/1942.
12. See Chapter 5.
16. Fazlul Huq to Governor Herbert, 2 June 1942, Linlithgow to Amery, 1 May 1942, cited in Helen Nugent, op. cit., p. 326.
20. HFR, 1st half, June 1942; GB, Commissioners’ Fortnightly Reports, 2nd halves, May 1942 and Jan. 1943, HPF, No. W-102/42.
26. Interview, Hemango Biswas.
29. HFR, 1st half, Feb. 1943.
30. Ibid., 1st half, June 1943.
32. According to Abdullah Rasul the primary membership of the Kisan Sabha in Bengal rose from 35,000 in 1942 to 1,24,872 in 1943, 1,78,500 in 1944 and 2,55,000 in 1945, see his Krishak Sabhar Itihas, p. 278.
38. GFR, 17 Nov. 1939; Abdul Awal, Maujud a Jang-i-Europe ke Mutallaq Jamiat-i-Ulama-i-Hind ka Aham Bayan (Urdu), passim.
41. Woodhead Report, pp. 25-7; GB, HPF, No. 362/42 (S.L. 22)
45. Mahalanobis et. al., op. cit., p. 6.
47. HFR, 1st half, Feb. 1942.
49. Ibid., 1st half, May 1943.
52. HPF, No. W-102/42.
53. HFR, March-July 1943.
54. Ibid., 1st half, March 1943.
64. Promotho Gupta, *Je Sangramer*, p. 103.
65. Ibid., pp. 102-3.


68. See Promoto Gupta, *Mukti Juddhe Adibasi* [Bengali], pp. 50-3.


70. Satyen Sen, *Bangladeshher Krishaker*, pp. 60-74; Interview, Moni Singh.

71. Ibid.

72. *HFR*, 2nd half, Nov. 1946.

73. Interview, Moni Singh.


80. Interview, Moni Singh.


82. Interview, Moni Singh.


84. *Pabna-Bogra SSR*, pp. 71-2; N.C. Sen, Director, Land Records and Survey to the Settlement Officer, Mymensingh, 29 July 1939, B.P. Singh Roy Papers, File No. 3(I).


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88. Ibid., pp. 120-1, 131-8.
90. SP Rangpur, W.A.B. Price to IGP, GB, A.D. Gordon, D.O. No. 1308, 6/7 April 1941, Dimla, Rangpur, HPF (File cover missing, available at the West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta).
91. A. Rasul, Krishak Sabhar, p. 278.
92. For the remote and immediate causes of the tebhaga movement see H. Alavi, "Peasants and Revolution", pp. 321-3.
94. Interview, Aboni Lahiri.
99. See the Sub-Divisional Officers' Reports to the Additional Secretary of Revenue, GB, "Relation Between Bargadars and Their Landlord — Tebhaga Movement", GB, Dept. of Land and Land Revenue File, No. 6M-38/47, Proceedings 'B' of Dec. 1948, 15-107; Adrienne Cooper, Sharecropping and Sharecroppers' Struggles, pp. 176, 250-58.
100. Sunil Sen, Agrarian Struggle, pp. 36-41; Interview, Sunil Sen; Interview, Aboni Lahiri; M. Kamal and A. Kamal, op. cit., pp. 113-16.
107. Interviews, Sunil Sen and Aboni Lahiri.
110. See for details Somenath Hore, "Tebhagar Diary" [Bengali], pp. 1-59.
113. HFR, 1st half, March 1947; P. Gupta, Je Sangramer, p. 104; Interviews, Moni Singh and Aboni Lahiri; Interviews Noor Jalal and Mudasser Munshi (peasant leaders of Narail, Jessore), by Kamal Siddiqui et. al., op. cit., p. 153.
117. Sunil Sen, Agrarian Struggle, pp. 82-3.
118. Ibid., pp. 40-1; A. Rasul, Krishak Sabhar, pp. 151-3; Satyen Sen, Gram Banglar, pp. 24-8.
120. Ibid.
122. Dhanagare, op. cit., p. 175.
123. J. Broomfield, Mostly About Bengal, p. 229.
124. Overstreet and Windmiller, op. cit., p. 263.
126. HFR, July-Aug. 1945, March 1946.
128. "Bengal Election Results", ABP, 26 and 28 March and 1 April 1946.
129. The Times, 1 April 1946; Shila Sen, op. cit., pp. 197-8.
130. Jatin De, op. cit., p. 44.
131. Interview, Maulana Tarkabagish; Gankovsky and Gordon-Polonskaya, op. cit., p. 94.
132. Gankovsky and Polonskaya, op. cit., pp. 78-80, 94.
134. HFR, 1st half, March 1946.
136. HFR, 2nd half, March 1946; ABP, 22 March 1946; P. Gupta, Je Sangramer, pp. 93-4.
137. A. Rasul, Krishak Sabhar, pp. 149-50.
139. HFR, 2nd halves, March-April and May 1944.
140. Interview, Moni Singh.
141. HFR, 1st halves May and Dec. 1943, 2nd halves, May and June 1944, 1945-47 passim.
142. Ibid., 2nd halves, July-Aug. and 1st half, Oct. 1944, 1945-47 passim.
143. Ibid., 2nd half, March 1945.
144. Ibid., 1st half, May 1946.
147. The Times, 16 Oct. 1946.
149. HFR, May-Oct. 1946.
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151. According to *The Times* correspondent the actual number of casualties was "certainly not in the four-figure category", *The Times*, 21 Oct. 1946 and 10 Feb. 1947; "Indian Communal Strife: I - Origin of the Riots in Eastern Bengal"; HFR, 1st half, Nov. 1946; Interview, Dr. Nihar Majumdar; Ian Stephens, *Pakistan*, p. 110.


154. Interview, Sirajul Haq Majumdar.


156. HFR, Oct. 1946--April 1947; Sukumar Roy, *Noakhalite Mahatma* [Bengali].


158. Interview, Sirajul Haq Majumdar.


161. See Mahalanobis et al., op. cit., p. 6.


Conclusions

"The trouble with a wrong ideology is that it is inefficient."
— Wilfred Cantwell Smith

Although under the changed circumstances in the post-First World War period the peasants' methods of expressing their aspirations about the world sometimes remained pre-political in the Hobsbawmian sense of the term, besides the short-lived violent peasant insurrections peasant movements throughout the period mostly reflected the political aspirations of peasants to change the socio-economic and political structures.

With the emergence of western educated leaders in the arena of the politics of the peasants, transcending the boundaries of villages and communities, the rural-based upper peasant leaders and the rural elites, including the ulama, emerged as a political force to play an important role in moulding the subsequent politics of the region. The Namasudra and other non-Muslim peasants had their indigenous leaders too, who had close links with urban Hindu as well as Muslim bhadralok leaders, to champion their cause. The leadership, however, did not emerge out of the blue. Under the changed socio-economic and political circumstances, which precipitated a significant shift in the attitude of the government towards the bhadralok and non-bhadralok classes, both the urban leaders and their rural followers needed each other more than ever before.

Most peasants believed that, being illiterate and poor, they were incapable of leading their movements against the exacting landlords and moneylenders without the help of educated outsiders and their educated, well-to-do "kith and kin" — patrons and religious leaders with strong rural connections. The leaders, both urban and rural based, on the other hand, needed not only peasant votes after the extensions of the franchise in 1919 and 1935, but also peasant support to fight their enemies, the rival elites or the government. The various divisive measures of the government, including the granting of separate electorates and the promises of radical anti-zamindar and anti-moneylender legislation, brought the Muslim masses closer to the Muslim aristocracy and middle classes whose interests conflicted with those of the Hindu zamindars, moneylenders and bhadralok classes. The urban-based Muslim ashraf — the Nawabs, Khvajas,ispahanis, Suhrawardys and Adamjees — wanted a foothold in the mofussil to fight their politico-economic rivals, and established common ground with the jotedars, ulama and other elements of the budding Muslim
middle classes from peasant backgrounds by laying increasing stress on the themes of the "common enemy" and "Islam in danger".

The *ashraf-jotedar* understanding ultimately led to the absorption of the Proja Party by the Muslim League after the 1937 elections. This was essential for the success of Muslim upper peasantry and *jotedars*, who, unlike the radical *proja* and *krishak* leaders, did not want radical land reform to give land to the tillers. They were simply interested in the expropriation of the Hindu *zamindars* and *mahajans* to install themselves as the supreme landlords and moneylenders. They also wanted to circumscribe the power of the Hindu *bhadralok* classes to get more job and professional opportunities. Most *jotedars* being as conservative as the *ashraf* in relation to giving more rights to the lower peasantry, assisted the *ashraf* and the *ulama* in nourishing the "culture of repression" among the lower peasantry by arousing communal and ethnic sentiments. Both the League and Proja Party leaders diffused "false consciousness" among the lower peasantry. The League successfully manoeuvred in creating a sense among Muslim peasants of belonging to a monolithic Muslim community, while the Proja Party tried to create a sense among all categories of Muslim and Namasudra peasants of belonging to an amorphous, monolithic *proja* or tenant community. After the virtual destruction of the non-communal *krishak* movement under communist and "nationalist" peasant leaders in late 1920s and after the failure of the Proja Party to enlist Namasudra peasant support, the two broad categories — Muslim and *proja*—became synonymous under the influence of the slogan "Islam in danger".

In accordance with the tenets of revivalist Islam, the prevalent hatred for everything Hindu was intensified among all categories of Muslim peasants. The contemptuous and derogatory expressions, coined long before the advent of the Raj, to denote non-Muslims, such as *kafirs* (non-believers), *mushriks* (polytheists) and *malauns* (the cursed ones), were used ever more frequently by the Muslim masses. Under the influence of the *mullas* and folk-litterateurs, Muslims of the region learnt how to express their contempt for the Hindus and their religion, their gods and goddesses, during the period. Even a dead Hindu was not spared. The *mullas* taught Bengali Muslims to wish eternal hell-fire, or *मल्ला मल्ला* to all Hindu souls. This is still done in the region.

Moreover the strengthening of religious, caste and ethnic solidarities paved the way for Muslim, Namasudra and communist leaders to lead Muslim, Namasudra and tribal peasants respectively, and strong kinship and factional ties between the upper and lower echelons of the peasantry strengthened patron-client relationships. These ties deterred the growth of the concept of a "class-for-itself" among the
lower peasants. Unequal land distribution and demographic pressure further strengthened links of patronage. The intensification of the competition for the favour of a limited number of "patrons" among the swollen mass of poor, landless peasants, especially after the Famine of 1943-44, removed the jotedars and other well-to-do peasants from the position of exacting landlords to that of benevolent annadatas (providers of food) in the eyes of the landless and semi-landless peasants, who were dependent on the jotedars for lands under cropsharing arrangements. The strong patronage and factional networks, as usual, widened the scope for horizontal or intra-class conflict within the agrarian society of the region.

Despite the increasing prevalence of these intra-class conflicts, members of the lower echelons of the peasantry challenged the authority of Hindu zamindars, mahajans and bhadralok classes, though in some cases they did not have any direct conflict of interest with them. This cannot be explained in terms of Froissart's hypothesis that peasants revolt because they see others doing so, without knowing why they do so. Neither can one agree with Guha that mere subordination of the masses has the potential to breed insubordination and that "this negative condition of their social existence rather than any revolutionary consciousness" enables the peasants to fight their enemies.

We also found Dhanagare's hypothesis untenable for assuming that peasants revolt only after the commercialization of agriculture or after the "transition from a consumption-oriented economy to a cash or market economy in the countryside." This study shows that all categories of peasants are not equally affected by commercialization of agriculture. Not only the 18th/19th-century peasant rebellions in the region are unexplainable in terms of Dhanagare's theory, but also the subsistence-oriented poor peasants' and sharecroppers' movements during the period of this study need other explanations. We may cite ideologies and leadership as the decisive factors in this regard.

Contrary to these views, this study reveals that the lower peasantry partly succeeded in overcoming cultural obstacles to staging rebellions against its real or mythical exploiters mainly with the help of peasant leaders representing the upper peasantry. But at the same time, the lower peasantry was also deflected from attacking a major part of its real enemies — the jotedars and other rich peasants. Under the influence of "false consciousness" both Muslim and Namasudra poor peasants fought against each other.

The leaders belonging to the ashraf, ulama and other non-cultivating classes mobilized the lower peasantry through the rural ashraf and rich peasants by sympathising with the lower peasants' deplorable condition and justifying their demands for the redress of
particular grievances. These leaders also assured peasants of "imminent support" from other quarters of society for the redress of their grievances, which includes promises of a drastic land reform to grant more rights to the tillers. The peasants learnt from these leaders that the "promised land" of the Muslims of the sub-continent, Pakistan, stood for an egalitarian society, which would grant land to the tillers and higher socio-economic status and more job opportunities to the children of peasants. These opportunities, the leaders told them, were in the offing or just needed a little push through the concerted action of all categories of peasants either by attending Muslim League meetings or by attacking the Hindu zamindars and mahajans.

Both the League and Proja Party leaders (before their formal subsumption by the League) urged the peasants to support them for the success of their respective programmes. The communist and "nationalist" leaders, mostly belonging to the Congress party, also promised land to the tiller and other socio-economic advantages to the lower peasantry. But appeals made in the name of religion, especially by the "patrons" and factional chiefs, proved to be the most effective in mobilizing peasant support for any movement in the region.

Some spontaneous peasant movements — the Tanka movement, for example — were initiated by local peasant leaders who had poor peasant backgrounds. But as soon as these peasants came into contact with some non-peasant outsiders who demonstrated sympathy with their cause, they entrusted the outsiders with the onerous task of leading their movement against local landlords. This again reflects the poor tribal peasants' lack of confidence in their own capabilities and lack of self-esteem. The intra- and inter-class conflicts in the countryside, along with the outbreak of famine, a slump in the prices of crops, a war or nationwide upheavals helped install outsiders as peasant leaders. Peasants accepted the outsiders — the ashraf, ulama and bhadralok — as their leaders, not considering them totally aliens or non-peasants. Many members of the ulama and bhadralok had peasant backgrounds and close links with their native villages. Though many of them lived in the neighbouring towns or Calcutta, they were regarded by the peasants as their kith and kin. The ashraf, including the upper clergy or the pir sahibs had a special appeal to all sections of the peasantry.

In short, the marriage of convenience between the ashraf and the jotedar-occupancy ryot categories was the determining factor in mobilizing the lower peasantry on communal lines throughout the region. The rich peasants thought that they had better socio-economic and political prospects in collaboration with the ashraf, who had wealth and influence to fight the powerful high-caste Hindu zamindars, mahajans and bhadralok, the common enemies of the ashraf, ulama,
Conclusions

jotedars and the lower peasantry. After the Tenancy Amendment Act of 1938, which further weakened the power and position of the zamindars, the jotedars and the occupancy ryots emerged as powerful classes in the countryside. This worked as a catalyst in the process of disestablishing the zamindars and Hindu bhadralok as dominant classes in the region. The recommendations of the Land Revenue Commission in 1940 in favour of the abolition of the zamindari system further emboldened the upper peasantry to challenge the legitimacy of the zamindari system. The absence of any parallel piece of legislation to strengthen the position of the lower peasantry left it at the mercy of the rich peasants and non-peasant leaders long after 1947. The ashraf and proja leaders' false promises, including the Bargadars Bill of early 1947, which the Muslim League government of Bengal never intended to enact into law, were mere carrots.

By 1947, false promises, communalism and above all, the economic dependence of most peasants on the upper peasantry, blurred the sub-regional differences in the nature of the peasants' political behaviour. The relatively independent middle peasants of the Tippera-Noakhali sub-region, along with the lower peasants of the jotedar- and zamindar-dominated sub-regions, succumbed to the appeals made in the name of religion and radical economic reforms by the Muslim League. Meanwhile the bulk of the Namasudra peasants had been won over by the high-caste Hindu Congress leaders. Consequently the League was transformed into a mass organization by "channeling into a religious stream" the anti-zamindar struggle of the peasantry and the reactionary aspect of bourgeois nationalism of the Bengali Muslim bourgeoisie (mainly with jotedar backgrounds).4

This study, in short, has attempted to establish the following hypotheses: (a) peasants are not always fatalistic; (b) economic grievances alone are not the sole determinants in bringing about peasant movements; (c) peasants' so-called autonomous domain or culture is often subject to elite domination and manipulation, quite often, the latter "represents" the former with their consent; (d) strong patronage can only be broken by ideologies and charismatic leadership; (e) above all, peasants' submission to their superiors is not only due to their pragmatic considerations (the knowledge of their helplessness vis-a-vis the power of the state machinery, landlords and moneylenders) but also due to their normative acceptance of social inequality.

Quite illuminating are the case studies of peasants' political activities in East Bengal from the Khilafat to the Partition days. This is interesting how the superordinates produced their "surrogate synthesis" after incorporating the peasants' "anti thesis", through nationalism, pan-Islamism, Muslim separatism, and even "scientific socialism." In short, this is a story of imperfect mobilization of the
peasantry, where religion and ethnicity played much more important roles than the doctrines of class struggle, quite contrary to the popular assumptions.

Peasants' participation in the Khilafat-NCO movement undoubtedly indicated their desire to get rid of the British paramountcy, but it also highlighted their aspirations for social justice. After a long absence since the 1870s, the re-appearance of the ulama in the political arena (under ashraf-jotedar patronage) during the Khilafat days, nationalism receded to the background pushing Islamic revivalism, if not pure communalism, to the forefront of Muslim/peasant politics in the region. From the examples of peasant militancy against the dual dominance of the British imperialism and the local agents of exploitation (mostly Hindu) during the Khilafat movement, it is evident that there was mutual reciprocity between peasants and some of their local exploiters. This goes against the general assertion of the "Subaltern School" which denies the existence of any "unity of interest" between peasants and their "native exploiters". In the post-Khilafat days, under the aegis of the powerful patrons — the ashraf-ulama-jotedar triumvirate — peasants in general eschewed anti-colonialism, considering the Hindu exploiting classes as their main enemies. This also negates the "Subaltern" hypothesis that though dominant, the British colonial rule failed to hegemonize the Indian masses. On the contrary, the history of the subsequent period, following the failure of the Khilafat movement up to the Partition of 1947, is one of the gradual ascendency of the Muslim elite as a dominant political force, who jointly with the British raj substantially hegemonized peasants in the realm of their political culture.

By 1929, class struggle had quite substantially been communalized. Economic distress during the Depression of the 1930s, presumably due to the "machinations" of the Hindu zamindars and mahajans, led to the further capitulation of the poor and middle peasants and the eventual ascendency of the jotedars as a dominant political power. This was also the heyday of Muslim communalists — the ashraf-ulama-jotedar triumvirate. It is, however, very significant that the 1930s earmarked the new development in the political behaviour and attitude of peasants in the region — peasants being convinced that their "emancipation" lay in the programme-oriented politics of the elites, which would abolish the exploiting land-tenure and moneylending systems, mainly through the legislature. For its promises of further tenancy legislation to benefit the peasants, spread of mass education through free primary education and measures to curb the powers of the moneylenders and Hindu bhadralok classes, the government projected itself as the champion of the Muslim masses during the 1930s and 1940s. This, however, does not mean that
peasants altogether discarded violent means to redress their grievances. On the contrary, quite often they resorted to violence against Hindu moneylenders and other agents of exploitation, assuming government sanctions behind their violent acts or total immunity from punishment.

The Legislative Assembly elections of 1937 signalled the ascendancy of the *ashraf* and rich *jotedars*. The lower peasants and even the *proja* leaders accepted the *ashraf* as their leaders, entrusting them with the task of uplifting their socio-economic conditions. As discussed earlier, this completed the process of subsumption of the *proja* or peasant politics into the broad Muslim politics of the Muslim League, the most important political platform of Indian Muslim elites of the time. By 1947, the tide of radical class-based peasant politics in the region was flowing through the channel of communal politics and met its doomsday not long after the Partition.

Though the political activities of the upper peasantry had culminated in the creation of Pakistan in its eastern wing, the joint exploitation by the *ashraf* and West Pakistani ruling classes soon frustrated the ambitious Bengali Muslim bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie, mainly emanating from the upper peasant families. This soon shook the foundation of the "two-nation-theory" of Jinnah. In this regard, one may agree with the view that: "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." The lower peasants of East Pakistan were once again mobilized by their patrons — *jotedars* and professional elites — and the petty-bourgeoisie, in the name of Bengali nationalism and a society free from exploitation. This eventually led to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, signalling the ascent of rich peasants and their urban allies to politico-economic power. The bulk of the lower peasants was again left to its miserable fate. Consequently poor peasants in general lost faith in the urban leaders and their *jotedar* counterparts. But being politically unorganized and economically dependent on rich peasants, the poor peasants of the region (more than 50 per cent being landless) turned fatalist not long after the emergence of Bangladesh. The leftist forces, who had hardly managed to reach beyond the thin veneer of the peasant society, lost ground due to mutual squabbling and collaboration with ruling powers. Hence the tremendous increase in the activities of the Islamic "fundamentalists" and fatalists who literally attract millions of poor Muslim peasants throughout the region.
Notes

2. Ibid., pp. 11, 225.
Appendix I

The First Fazlul Huq Ministry of Bengal formed in March 1937:

A.K. Fazlul Huq - Premier (Education), KPP, Muslim, lawyer.
Khawaja Nazimuddin - Home, ML, Muslim, zamindar.
Nawab Khawaja Habibullah - Agriculture and Industries, ML, Muslim, zamindar.
Nawab Musharraf Hussain - Judicial and Legislative, ML, Muslim, zamindar.
Husayn Shaheed Suhrawardy - Commerce and Labour, ML, Muslim, lawyer.
Syed Nausher Ali - Public Health and Local Self-Govt, KPP, Muslim, lawyer.
Bejoy Prasad Singh Roy - Revenue, Independent, Hindu, zamindar.
Sris Chandra Nandy - Communication and Works, Independent, Hindu, zamindar.
Prasanna Deb Raikut - Excise and Forest, Independent, Namasudra Hindu, zamindar.
Mukunda Behari Mallick, Co-operative, Credit and Rural Indebtedness, Independent, Namasudra Hindu, lawyer.

[Source: HFR, 2nd half March 1937; ABP, 1 April 1937].

Appendix II

The list of "Rebel" and "Loyal" MLAs during the First Term of Fazlul Huq Government:

In August 1937 the following twenty-one MLAs and MLCs declared their defection from the Government party:

1. Shamsuddin Ahmed;
2. Maulana Muniruzzaman Islamabadi;
3. Abu Hossain Sarkar;
4. Gyasuddin Ahmed;
5. Asimuddin Ahmed;
6. Abdul Majid;
7. Syed Jalaluddin Hashemy;
8. Muhammad Abul Fazl;
9. Syed Hasan Ali Chaudhury;
10. Humayun Kabir;
11. Maqbul Husain;
12. Abdul Hakim;
13. Chaudhury Moazzem Hussain;
14. Abdul Wahed Bokainagari;
15. Fazlur Rahman;
16. Kazi Emdadul Huq;
17. Syed Ahmed Khan;
18. Shahed Ali;
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19. Aftab Ali;
20. Jonab Ali Mazumdar;

In March 1938 another thirteen MLAs and MLCs formally withdrew their support from the Huq Government for its "failure" to keep the KPP pledges made before the elections. They were:

1. Maulvi Tamizuddin Khan;
2. Hamidul Huq Chowdhury;
3. Dr. Sanaulla;
4. Syed Abdul Majid;
5. Dewan Mustafa Ali;
6. Gyasuddin Ahmed Chowdhury;
7. Fazlur Rahman;
8. Dr. Mafizuddin Ahmed;
9. Muhammad Ibrahim;
10. Ahmed Ali Mirdha;
11. Yusuf Ali Chowdhury (Mohon Mia);
12. Shah Syed Golam Sarwar Hussaini;

In August 1937 thirty-two MLAs and MLCs declared their allegiance to Fazlul Huq though later in March 1938 five of them (Shah Syed Golam Sarwar Hussaini; Gyasuddin Ahmed Chowdhury; Syed Abdul Majid, Yusuf Ali Chowdhury and Dr. Mafizuddin Ahmed) joined the "rebels". They were:

1. Khan Bahadur Hashem Ali Khan;
2. Muzammil Huq;
3. Haji Tofael Ahmad Chowdhury;
4. Mafizuddin Chowdhury;
5. Shah Syed Golam Sarwar Hussaini;
6. Maulana Muhammad Abdul Aziz;
7. Khan Bahadur Syed Muhammad Afzal;
8. Maulana Shamsul Huda;
9. Gyasuddin Ahmed Chowdhury;
10. Mirza Abdul Hafiz;
11. Abdul Hamid Shah;
12. Waliur Rahman;
13. Abdul Hakim (Khulna);
14. Syed Abdul Majid;
15. Abdul Hakim Vikrampuri;
16. Muhammad Israel;
17. Abdul Wahab Khan;
18. Mesbahuddin Ahmed Chowdhury;
19. Khorsheed Alam Chowdhury;
20. Rajibuddin Tarafdar;
21. Mohammad Hasanuzzaman;
Appendices

22. Abdul Kader;
23. Syed Mostagaosal Huq;
24. Sadruddin Ahmed;
25. Khan Saheb Hatem Ali;
26. Aftab Hossain Joardar;
27. Yusuf Ali Chowdhury (Mohon Mia);
28. Khawaja Nasrullah;
29. Shamsuddin Ahmed Khondoker;
30. B.C. Mandal (Namasudra);
31. Dr. Mafizuddin Ahmed;
32. Muhammad Ishaque.

[Source: ABP, 19 and 21 Aug. 1937 and 15 March 1938].
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Glossary</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>abwab</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>plural of <em>bab</em> or an opening (gate), illegal cesses collected by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>landlords from their tenants in different names and with different</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>excuses</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>adhiar</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sharecropper in Rangpur-Dinajpur sub-region (elsewhere <em>bargadar</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anna</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>one-sixteenth of a rupee</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Anjuman-i-Islamia</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Islamic Association</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>ashraf</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Urdu-speaking Muslim elites</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>bargadar</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>sharecropper</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>bandar</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>river port</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>bhadralok</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>literally gentleman, people belonging to professional elite classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>basunia</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>rich peasant (<em>jotedar</em>) in Rangpur-Dinajpur sub-region</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>baithak</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>indoor meeting</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>charkha</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>spinning wheel</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>chaukidar</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>village watchman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>chukanidar</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>kind of intermediary landholder</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>cutchery (kachari)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a <em>zamindar</em>'s court or office</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>daffadar</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>village policeman</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>dao</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>sickle-shaped knife</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>desh</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>dhoti</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>typical Hindu male loin cloth in South Asia</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>faria</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intermediary between jute growers and jute merchants</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>fatwa</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>religious dictum by Muslim theologians</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>ganj</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>small trading centre</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>gram</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>guntidar</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>kind of intermediary landholder</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Haj</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>pilgrimage by Muslims to Mecca and Medina</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>haoladar</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>kind of intermediary landholder</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>hartal</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>general strike</td>
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<td><strong>hat</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>weekly village market</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>ijara</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>lease, hence <em>ijaradar</em> or lessor</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>jalsa</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>jatra</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>folk-theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>jotedar</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>most common kind of intermediary landholder between <em>zamindar</em> and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lower peasants</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>kabiyal</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>rural bard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>kafir</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>infidel in the eyes of Muslims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>kalo bazari</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>black marketeer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>khaddar (khadi)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hand-spun and hand-woven cloth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>khas</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>crown land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>khet mazdoor</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>agricultural wage labourers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
khutba  sermon by a Muslim priest, normally delivered after Juma congregational prayers
kirtan  hymn sung by Hindu devotees
kisak or krishak  cultivator
khamar (nij jote)  zamindars' personal lands tilled by labourers or lessees
Khilafat  Caliphate
ladhar  intermediary landholder in Khulna and Jessore
lathi  stick
lathial  professional fighters hired or employed by landlords
lungi  male loincloth worn by Bengali Muslims
madrasa  religious schools for Muslims
mahajan  moneylender
malaun  the cursed one, denotes Hindus in East Bengal
mandal  village headman
Marwari  non-Bengali traders from Marwar (Rajasthan, North India)
matabbar  village headman
maulana  well versed Muslim theologian
maulvi  educated Muslim with a religious bent of mind
milad  a typical South Asian religious function to commemorate the birth of the Prophet of Islam
mofussil  periphery, rural areas
mojuddar  hoarder
mulla  Muslim priest
murid  plural of murid, spiritual disciples of a pir sahib
mushrik  polytheists (non-Muslims)
naib  literally a deputy, landlord's agent and rent collector
nankar  agricultural labourer holding lands without any rights
pir sahib  spiritual guide of Muslims
pradhan  village headman
pramanik  village headman
proja (pra)  tenant
ryot (raiyat)  tenant
sabha  meeting or association, hence Kisan Sabha
samaj  society
samity  association, hence Krishak Samity
Sangathan  Hindu revivalist organization
satyagraha  non-violent civil disobedience introduced by Gandhi
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shuddhi</strong></td>
<td>Hindu revivalist movement aimed at conversion of Muslims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>swadhin</strong></td>
<td>independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>swaraj</strong></td>
<td>self-rule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tabligh</strong></td>
<td>Muslim missionary and revivalist movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tanzeem</strong></td>
<td>Muslim revivalist movement to counteract Shuddhi and Sangathan movements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>tanka</strong></td>
<td>system of cropsharing whereby a tenant was required to pay a fixed quantity of crop to a landlord</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>tebhaga</strong></td>
<td>literally three shares, movement by sharecroppers for two-thirds of crops from landholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>thana</strong></td>
<td>police station or area in the jurisdiction of a police station</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ulama</strong></td>
<td>plural of <em>ailim</em>, Muslim theologians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>waz mahfil</strong></td>
<td>religious gathering addressed by <em>ulama</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>zamindar (zemindar)</strong></td>
<td>landholder, a landlord with proprietary rights in Bengal and Bihar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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About the Book and Author

Dr. Hashmi’s study brings to light the important and often-ignored role of East Bengali peasants in the formation of Pakistan. The author shows how religion and ethnicity played more important roles than did class differences in this process.

Because most zamindars, moneylenders, and professional elites in East Bengal were high-caste Hindus, and peasants and other working-class people were mostly Muslims, religion and ethnicity always had the potential to become more important than class differences. The British government, apprehensive of the Hindu nationalists, helped develop the Muslim and low-caste peasant cause to counteract Hindu nationalism. Similarly, Muslim elites and bourgeoisie supported the government’s efforts because of their own conflicting interests with the Hindu nationalists. Ultimately, both the Muslim aristocracy and rich peasants collaborated in arousing a “false consciousness” between themselves and the poorer peasants, thus weakening the class struggle and paving the way for the peasants’ support of a homeland for Indian Muslims.

Taj ul-Islam Hashmi is lecturer in history at the National University of Singapore.