

"A Land of Eternal Eid"—Independence, People, and Politics in East Bengal

Ahmed Kamal

With the birth of Pakistan on the midnight of 14 August 1947 the eastern part of the Indian province of Bengal was partitioned and became what was later known as East Pakistan. It is reported that the Muslims all over East Bengal welcomed the birth of the new nation with shouts of *azan* (call to prayer).¹ Tajuddin Ahmed, a young Muslim nationalist during the late 40's mentioned in his diary that people all over the Muslim areas of Dhaka, which earned for itself the distinction of being the provincial capital of East Pakistan, were found busy, day and night, in erecting gates and decorations in preparation for Independence Day celebrations.² Public and private buildings were illuminated at night and fireworks were let off.³ Crowds of "holiday makers" thronged the streets, "some riding trucks and some even on elephants." The highlight of the day, according to a *Statesman* report, was a procession by Hindus and Muslims, which converged on Victoria Park, where speeches were made by leaders of all important political parties.⁴

The celebration was not confined only to Dhaka. In the town of Barisal, victory gates were erected and musical soirees were organized.⁵ The day was observed by a public meeting in Sylhet where the siren on 14 August midnight announced that the district had ceased to be a part of Assam province of India. Batches of Muslims paraded the streets in procession.⁶ Provash Chandra Lahiry, a prominent District Congress leader, recalls that "every face of the vast population" that turned up at Rajshahi, a north Bengal town, showed "signs of radiant glow of fulfilment of a long cherished desire of winning freedom."⁷ Even the tribal population of the border districts of East Pakistan were apparently "inspired and joyous"

1. Ashabuddin Ahmad, *Ashabuddin Rachana Sangraha*, (in Bangla) Vol. 3 (Chittagong 1982), p. 55.

2. Tajuddin Ahmed's Diary, from now on Diary, in Badruddin Umar's *Bhasha Andolan Prasangye Kotipoy Dalil* (in Bangla) (Dhaka, 1984).

3. *ibid.*

4. *The Statesman*, 15 August 1947, Calcutta.

5. Hedayet Hussain Murshed, *Altaf Mahmud* (in Bangla) (Dhaka, 1982), p. 7.

6. *The Statesman*, 15 August 1947.

7. Provash Chandra Lahiry, *India Partitioned and Minorities in Pakistan* (Calcutta, 1964), p. 1.

on achieving political freedom from the Raj. A communist activist and writer observed that "like the others they too were overwhelmed with joy at the imminent prospect of independence."⁸ On 15 August, meetings and processions were organised in Durgapur, Haluaghat, Nolitabri, and Bhatpur in Mymenshingh district by tribal leaders. They expressed their solidarity with the new nation state.⁹

"Remarkable scenes of amity and concord were witnessed" at Dhaka and other places of the province on Independence Day.¹⁰ Striking descriptions of the happy and unbounded spirit of freedom that swept and surged across the entire provincial town of Dhaka come from the pages of Tajuddin Ahmed's diary. "Astonishing surge of national energy" and "euphoric"¹¹ are some of the general expressions used by historians to describe the happiness over political independence. Obviously, to the observers of the festival of freedom the euphoria was unidimensional and unqualified. Nationalists have often seen in the varied responses of people to political independence a simple feeling of happiness at the creation of Pakistan. The intensity of the popular rejoicing should not, however, lead us to assume that all who celebrated the coming of independence shared one uncomplicated strand of feeling. The word "euphoria" both reveals and hides the different and contradictory expectations that surrounded the idea of "Pakistan."

Till the day of its birth Pakistan lacked a precise definition. The Muslim League activists who worked up a vision of Pakistan for East Bengal Muslims failed to define the ideology of the new state in any precise manner even while they were engaged in outlining the principles of a new Constitution.¹² There was, for instance, the liberal view of nationhood. At independence Jinnah told the nation :

We are starting with the fundamental principle that we are all citizens and equal citizens of one state. . . . We should keep that in front of us as our ideal and you will find that Hindus will cease to be Hindus and Muslims will cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the state. In the same speech Jinnah also asserted the "complete" sovereignty of the Constituent Assembly as the Federal Legislature of Pakistan.¹³ In

8. Satyen Sen, *Bangladesher Krisaker Sangram* (in Bangla) (Dhaka, 1964), p. 57.

9. Pranatha Gupta, *Muktijudhey Adibashi* (in Bangla) (Calcutta, 1982), p. 88.

10. Diary, entry for 15 August 1947, Umar (ed.), *Dalil*.

11. L F Rushbrook Williams, *The State of Pakistan* (London, 1962), p. 35. Adrienne Cooper, *Sharecropping and Sharecroppers' Struggle in Bengal 1930-50*, Unpublished Ph.D Thesis, London University, 1984.

12. Mustaq Ahmad, *Politics without Social Change* (Karachi, 1971), p. 3.

13. MA Jinnah, "Presidential Address to Constituent Assembly of Pakistan" no 11 August, 1947, See Jamiluddin Ahmed, (ed.), *Speeches and Writings of Mr. M A Jinnah*, Vol 2 (Lahore, 1964), p. 402.

Dhaka, Maulana Bhashani, a Muslim nationalist leader, expressed similar expectations on the floor of the Legislative Assembly: "Today the country is a free country and should be guided by the opinions of the people."¹⁴ For such leaders, "Pakistan" meant that the colonial experience of non-participatory, non-democratic, non representative politics, was now to be comprehensively reversed.¹⁵

"Today 12.00 p.m. sees the end of British Rule and the beginning of the Indian [sic] own government." This is how Tajuddin Ahmed recorded his initial reaction to political independence in the pages of his diary on 14 August 1947. He also wrote the word "Independence" in bold letters at the top of the page as a concentrated expression of his own feelings.¹⁶ While rejoicing at the achievement of political independence one Muslim poet conceived of Pakistan as a land of "eternal Eid."¹⁷ To many nationalists independence was the "Indian Muslim's finest hour."¹⁸ One nationalist leader even termed it the "Pakistan Revolution."¹⁹ To many of them, at least, it was an end to a "barbaric rule" which had debased all kinds of human relationship and weighed heavily on the traditions, customs, and creative energies of the people.

In fact, nationalist writings and speeches describe the day as the culmination of all movements since the defeat of the Muslim Nawab at Plassey in 1757, while some others locate it in a chronology that begins with the unsuccessful uprisings of 1857, "for it [independence] was something for which they had waited subconsciously for nearly a century." "Pakistan, the land of promise, the land of hope, the land for which thousands have sacrificed their lives"—statements like these abound in the nationalist literature.²⁰ But the rhetoric makes the thousands who rallied round the Muslim League look like one "Muslim people," irrespective of class or ethnic difference. The hopes and aspirations of the poor Muslims, however were often quite different from those of the elite. Besides, as Jinnah and

14. East Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings, Vol 1, No. 3, p. 7, from now on EBLA, progs.

15. Clive Y Thomas, *The Rise of the Authoritarian State in Peripheral Societies*. (New York, London, 1984), p.97.

16. Diary, Umar (ed.) *Dalil*.

17. Talim Hossain, "Pakwatan" as cited in Syedur Rahman, *Purba Banglar Rajniti Sangskriti O Kabita* (in Bangla) (Dhaka, 1983), p.172

18. Kalim Siddique, *Conflict, Crisis and War in Pakistan* (London, 1972), p. 54

19. Abul Mansur Ahmed, *End of a Betrayal and Restoration of Lahore Resolution* (Dacca, 1975), pp. 156-8.

20. Begum Saïstha Ikramullah, *From Purdah to Parliament* (London, 1963), p. 158, and A. B M Habibullah, "Plassey to Pakistan," *Statesman*, Independence Day Supplement, 15 August 1947, Calcutta. Also see poems written in Bangla on Independence in Syedur Rahman, *Purba Banglar Rajniti O Kabita, Mashik Mohammadi*, Nos. 7, 9, 10, 11, year 20, pp. 577, 721, 796, 881, 895,919, Calcutta Bhadra, 1354 (Bangla Year).

the Muslim League had never spelt out the nature of "Pakistan" in any detail, a conceptual space remained where many different perceptions about the latter could exist and jostle with one another.²¹

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

II

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

Though it was a "hurriedly contrived" all-India settlement,²⁵ some nationalists see it as a novel experiment in nation-building.²⁶ But to many others it appeared as an unfair partition,²⁷ even "unnatural." Perhaps to many it was an absurd state.²⁸ The reasons for this kind of thinking were manifold. The way the British Indian empire, and more specifically the province of Bengal was divided was unacceptable to many. Some Hindu and Muslim leaders even tried to peddle the formula of a third state: a greater Bengal.²⁹ But this was frustrated by political antagonism and

29. For more on this, see Shila Sen's *Muslim Politics in Bengal* (New Dehli, 1976), and Sirajuddin Hussain's *Look into the Mirror* (Dacca, 1974); Kamruddin Ahmad's *Social History*, and Abul Mansur Ahmad's *Amar Dekha Rajnitir Panchas Bachar* (in Bangla) Dhaka.
21. F. E. Zukhov, a Soviet authority on South Asia noticed "many meanings" in the concept of Pakistan; see D. Overstreet and Windmiller, *Communism in India*, (Berkeley, 1959), p. 254.
22. See Syedur Rahman, *Rajniti O Kabita*, Poems on Independence, and Nos. of *Mashik Mohammadi* referred to earlier.
23. Benedict O' Gorman Anderson, "A Time of Darkness and a Time of Light, Transposition in Early Indonesian Nationalist Thought" in Anthony Reid and David Marr (eds.) *Perceptions of the East in South-Asia* (Singapore, 1979), p. 247.
24. Barbara Metcalf, "The Case of Pakistan," in Peter Herkel and Ninian Smart (eds.) *Religion and Nationalism in the Modern World* (New York, 1983), p. 107.
25. Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 293.
26. Kamruddin Ahmad, *The Social History of East Pakistan* (Dacca, n.d.), p. 89.
27. Chaudhry Mohammad Ali, *The Emergence of Pakistan* (New York and London, 1967), pp. 203-221, also Abul Mansur Ahmad, *Amar Dekha*, p. 257.
28. Kamruddin Ahmad, *Social History*, p. 96.

by the "inertial power" of competing Indian and Pakistani nationalism.³⁰ Bengal was partitioned and, without Calcutta, Eastern Bengal looked more like a large overpopulated rural slum.³¹ The partition also occurred amidst chaos and bloodshed.³² One principal actor in the drama of partition has described it as the "greatest administrative operation in history."³³ Till the day of its birth Pakistan represented a "hazy and uncertain groping towards a separate state."³⁴

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

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

30. Paul R. Greenough made this observation in his *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943-1944* (New York, 1982), p. 8.

31. *Eastern Pakistan through Six Months of Independence*, East Bengal Government Press, from now on GOEB, 1948, pp. 5, 29.

32. See Metcalf, "Pakistan," p. 170.

33. Mount Batten's Address to the Indian Constituent Assembly at New Delhi, 15 August 1947, taken from Ayesha Jalal, *Spokesman*, p. 293.

34. Khalid B. Sayeed, *Pakistan: The Formative Phase* (Karachi, 1960), p. 102.

35. Lawrence Ziring, "The Failure of Democracy in Pakistan: East Pakistan and the Central Government 1947-1958," unpublished Ph D thesis, Columbia University, 1962, p. 10.

36. EBLA, progs, Vol. 1, No. 3, p. 39.

37. *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 143.

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

39. *The Dacca Gazette*, 22 Nov., 1951, Parti, Dacca, p. 1225.

and canals formed the life-lines of commerce and trade in the land.⁴⁰

East Bengal inherited only ten cotton factories out of 400 in India, none of Bengal's 106 Jute Mills, not a single iron and steel plant, paper mill, chemical work, coal mine or established hydro-electric project. It was left with only 49 seasonal jute bailing presses (working at 20 percent capacity), 58 small rice mills of all descriptions, three sugar factories and one cement factory.⁴¹

But contemporary official documents projected an optimistic outlook on the viability of Pakistan. One document published soon after independence said: "the hope about the enormous potentialities of these neglected parts—a hope with which the new State was launched—is not a vain belief" and discussed the prospect of the production and the export of tea, tobacco, hides and skin, paper and petroleum in such a way as to boost the morale of the nation. The truth was that for decades the jute growing province had existed "as a hinterland contributing to Calcutta's prosperity."⁴²

East Bengal was also short of some other essential commodities, such as edible oil, sugar and textiles. Its four sugar factories produced annually 25,000 tons of sugar which was about half its requirement. Its six textiles mills produced annually 30,000 bales while it required about 250,000.⁴³ Only twelve percent of the industrial establishment that was in existence in undivided Bengal fell to the share of East Bengal. There were only 7,000 industrial workers on 14 August 1947.⁴⁴

The period that surrounds independence is generally described as "crisis-ridden" in official documents. The new government "inherited the first major calamity" which befell the province a fortnight before it assumed power—the floods in Chittagong and Noakhali which affected 500 square miles and over half a million people. Hundreds of houses had collapsed and cattle had been washed away and crops damaged extensively, adding to the food problem in the new state. As the flood receded an "unprecedented cyclone" swept over Cox's Bazar, the southern-most area of East Bengal affecting over 100,000 people.⁴⁵ Natural disasters like flood and cyclones, and annual alluvial accretion and the loss sustained by erosion in the river systems, affected and continued to affect the lives of a considerable number of people of East Bengal.⁴⁶

But the most serious problem for the country was the shortage of cereals. An area producing about 7.8 million tons and consuming about 8 million tons of rice annually was faced with a threat of famine at a

40. *East Pakistan Forges Ahead, Home Political Bundle.*

41. Nafis Ahmad, *An Economic Geography of East Pakistan* (London, 1958).

42. *Eastern Pakistan*, pp. 30-32.

43. East Bengal Province, Home Police, B-progs, June, 1951, No. 102.

44. *ibid.*, p. 6.

45. See *Eastern Pakistan, East Pakistan Forges Ahead, GOEB.*

46. Abdur Razzaq, *Bangladesh: State of the Nation* (Dhaka 1981), p. 7.

time when the memories of the Great Bengal Famine of 1943 were still fresh in the minds of the people. East Bengal received only 18,000 tons of food grains in terms of rice as its share of provincial stocks after partition. There was practically no wheat stocks in the province on 15 August 1947. Even Dhaka had not seen bread for four months prior to that date.⁴⁷ The current stock of rice could barely meet two weeks' requirements for the towns that came under the rationing system. The province's monthly requirements stood 9,000 tons short of the total requirement of 39,000 tons. As the entire transport system was thrown into confusion by the migration of Hindu workers, deficit areas remained outside the reach of the food distribution agencies, though, ironically, it was the sale of fodstuff that kept the bankrupt provincial government running.⁴⁸

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

The food prices have shot up to 30 taka per maund. Rationing had been introduced for 6 lakh people only. . . As a result Hindus and Muslims are on whole-sale starvation. The reports of death on account of starvation are on the increase. There has been large scale exodus of people from the villages to the towns. Over large areas of East Bengal real famine has set in⁴⁹

III.

Greenough described the entire period that immediately preceded independence as "one of disorder and distress."⁵⁰ The fact that millions of people were affected by food shortage, flood, and change of Government made independence look more like a new crisis than a new beginning.

When the colonial power left the country it was not the people but largely the functionaries of the state who took control of the government on behalf of the emerging nation. Nation-building in East Pakistan was fraught with administrative and political problems. On August 15, as a government document put it, "due to whimsicalities of division—the Provincial Exchequer was particularly empty and a special emissary was flown to Karachi for succour."⁵¹ There was also a problem of shortage of officers. In the words of the officials the beginning of the new state was as follows :

August 14, 1947. A Dakota took off unobtrusively for Dacca from the

47. *Eastern Pakistan*, p. 3.

48. Abdus Salam, "My Faith as an Editor," *Pakistan Day Supplement, Pakistan Observer*, 15 August 1966, as quoted in D N Banerjee, *East Pakistan, A Case Study in Muslim Politics* (Delhi, 1969), p. 46.

49. Badruddin, Umar, *Purba Banglar Bhasha Anolon, O Tatkatin Rajniti*, (in Bangla) Vol. 11 Dhaka 1975, p. 9.

54. Greenough, *Prosperity*, p. 254.

51. *Eastern Pakistan*, p. 1.

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

Even sometime later, Zinkin found an almost non-existent and "terribly inefficient" administration in East Bengal.⁵³ "Starting from scratch," "teething period," "narrow escapes" were some of the phrases used to describe the experience of state building in East Pakistan in these years. The *Statesman* of Calcutta, in a review of 9 March, 1948, wrote that "few states have begun with an almost empty treasury, as this one (East Pakistan) did and with a collapsed administrative machine."⁵⁴ Initially, it was this feeling of helplessness that characterized the response of the officials who were suddenly left to fend for themselves.

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

Dacca. . . a small district town . . . was called upon suddenly to house not only the provincial Government and its vast staff and paraphernalia and also several central Government Departments . . . *The new Government was a fugitive in its own home.* Orders had often to be passed to scraps of waste paper and messages exchanged on bits of empty cigarette packets. Typewriters were few and far between. Telephones were a rare possession, a luxury rather than a convenient instrument of administration. Officers often acted as their own messengers. There was practically no furniture.⁵⁵

Sometime immediately after independence, the General Officer Commanding (GOC) of the army in East Pakistan recollected that there were only two infantry battalions ; one of these had three Muslim companies, hardly qualified to be called army. At the headquarters there were no tables, no chairs, no stationary, not even any maps of East Pakistan. The officers lived in huts which leaked almost incessantly during the heavy rains and during the nor'wester the roofs of the huts were sometimes blown-off.⁵⁶ To a military officer, stationed at Dhaka during August 1947, it seemed that "the Province was in the grip of disorder and chaos." "The resources, offering success against such conditions," he further observed, "were now in sharp contrast, entirely inadequate."⁵⁷

The police were, in their own appreciation, as badly off, if not worse.

52. *East Pakistan Forges Ahead*, Home Political Bundle, p. 1.

53. Taya Zinkin, *Reporting India* (London, 1962), p. 40.

54. *The Statesman*, 9 March 1948, Calcutta.

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

56. Muhammad Ayub Khan, *Friends not Masters : A Political Autobiography* (London, 1967), pp. 22-23.

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

Enforcement of law and maintenance of order continued to remain a responsibility of the police as it was during the Raj. In the General Summary of the Report on the Police Administration of East Bengal published in 1948, the Inspector General of Police described the first year of independence as one of unprecedented stress and strain. It is interesting however that in this period of initial uncertainty official documents refer to the state affectionately as "the Child State."

Political Independence generated an obvious uncertainty for the state machinery which sometimes found the "enthusiasm" of the masses unmanageably wild. The functionaries perceived the state as a totality of Governmental functions only, while popular ideas and expectations of government often placed the political elite in a dilemma. On the one hand, the latter needed and desired the allegiance of the masses, whose expectations of the new state were sometimes completely utopian. On the other hand, the state apparatus needed to be consolidated, the structure already in place being that of the repressive, undemocratic, colonial state.

IV

In the pre-independence days the Muslim League concentrated all its activities and energy on working towards a separate national identity for the Muslims of the subcontinent. The Muslim League had a vision of territorially separate Muslim states as indicated in the Lahore Resolution of 23 March 1940, but it did not develop any serious critique of the colonial state nor did it discuss in any of its forums the nature of the state that was to be. Essentially this nationalism was constituted negatively.⁵⁸ Pakistanism became a euphemism for anti-colonialism and anti-Brahminism.⁵⁹ The question of a positive statement in regard to what it stood for was largely evaded. This has sometimes been justified on grounds of unity among the rank and file of the Muslim community of the Indo-Pak subcontinent and of the lack of time and intellectual resource.⁶⁰ As a result the leaders of the Muslim League avoided all discussion about programmes and policies.

Some activists of the League were only concerned with their fears of Hindu domination in an independent united India. Others hoped to recreate the glories of classical Islamic power. But no group had any clear conception of how the state of Pakistan was to be organised.⁶¹ Essentially elitist in approach, their principal goal was to project the interests of certain social classes as those of the entire community. They thus played

58. Humayun Kabir, *Muslim Politics, 1906-47 and Other Essays* (Calcutta, 1969), p. 94.

59. See Habibullah Bahar's speech in EBLA, progs., Vol. 1, no. 4, p. 26.

60. Talukder Maniruzzaman, "National Integration and Political Development in Pakistan," *Asian Survey*, December 1967, Vol. 7 No. 12.

61. Keith Callard, "The Political Stability of Pakistan," *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. xxix, No. 1, 1956, p. 8.

up the idea of Islamic solidarity and romanticised to a fantastic degree Islam's imperial past;⁶² this in fact was a constant theme in the speeches and writings of many Muslim League activists. On the eve of independence a Muslim League leader of an East Bengal district proclaimed: "Muslim India is going to regain her lost empire."⁶³ By projecting utopias on to an idealized primeval past the League tried to organise the intellectual and moral consent of the Muslims towards its goal of a nation state.

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

A number of prominent Muslim League leaders of Bengal were thrown overboard by the manner of partition and the events that preceded independence. H S Suhrawardy, the Chief Minister of pre-partitioned Bengal, once dislodged from the Muslim League parliamentary party leadership, concentrated all his efforts towards improving the already deteriorating relations between the Hindus and the Muslims in Bengal. While the fanfare of the freedom festival was engulfing the riot-torn city of Calcutta, he was helping Gandhi to break his fast in the slum house of a poor Muslim. Fazlul Huq, for decades the leader of Bengal Muslims, was licking his wounds in his Calcutta residence, having been totally outmanoeuvred by Mr Jinnah in the Muslim League politics of Bengal. Abul Hashim, the secretary of the Muslim League, who gave the moribund organization a programme and a provisional manifesto, enthusing young Muslim league students into action, was also caught in the confusion of partition. He threw his full weight behind the idea of a sovereign Bengal peddled by Suhrawardy. Unsuccessful in achieving this objective, he retired to his village home in Bardhaman. Maulana Bhashani, the President of Assam Muslim League, a leader of the immigrant Muslim peasants from East Bengal to Assam, and crusader for the campaign to include Sylhet, an Assam district, in East Pakistan, found he had no place in the new Muslim League set-up after independence, and in no time landed himself in the gaol of the Assam Government. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Abul Mansur Ahmad stayed back in Calcutta after the partition of Bengal. Aatur Rahman Khan, Kamruddin Ahmad,

62. Rafiuddin Ahmed, *Bengal Muslim, 1871-1906* (Delhi, 1981), p. xxii.

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

Shamsul Huq—all important Dhaka based Muslim League leaders were busy measuring their distance from *Ahsan Manjil*, the house of the Nawabs of Dhaka, the new centre of Muslim League power in independent East Pakistan.⁶⁴ They were all to play important roles in oppositional politics after independence.

Khwaja Nazimuddin and Maulana Akram Khan took charge of the provincial Pakistan Government and the Muslim League organization respectively. Sir Frederick Bourne, a former colonial Governor, became the first Governor of free East Pakistan. Essentially, the Muslim League remained mortgaged to three centres; to *Ahsan Manjil*, for its leadership, to the owner of the daily *Azad* for its publicity and to the commercial house of the Ispahanis for its finance.⁶⁵ In brief this was what the Muslim League looked like when political power was transferred by the Raj to this organisation in recognition of its claim to speak for the Muslims of India.

V

Marxist writings too find themselves in an uneasy state when facing the issue of independence of East Bengal. The Communist movement in India supported the Muslims' demand for self-determination while accepting the claim of the Muslim League to represent the nation.⁶⁶ But no sooner did Pakistan come into being than the Communists were disillusioned. The relationship between the nationalists and the latter became tense and resulted in a parting of ways. Not only did they part ways they even tried to destroy each other through armed engagements in which the rallying cry of the communists was a slogan proclaiming the "falsity of this independence." Subsequent interpretations by Marxists of the nature of political independence in East Bengal bear marks of these early moments of bitterness.

Even years later, some of them were to dismiss the reality of independence comparing it to "Black Mahout for White elephant" or "old wine in a new bottle."⁶⁷ The disillusionment with independence went so far for some radicals that they likened it to the coming of the Dark Age.⁶⁸ As late as 1971 Dhananjoy Das, a former member of the Communist Party of India belonging to the district branch of Khulna, felt "ashamed"

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

65. *ibid.*, P. 21.

66. P C Joshi, "They Must Meet Again," Bombay, Sept. 1944, p. 7, as cited by Shri Prakash in "CPI and the Pakistan Movement," in Bipin Chandra (ed.) *The Indian Left* (Delhi, 1983).

67. Abdus Shahid, *Atma Katha*, (in Bangla) Vol. 1. (Dhaka, 1984), p. 146, also Abdul Matin, "Maulana Hamid Khan Bhashani Prasangey" in Shahriar Kabir (ed.) *Maulana Bhashanir Rajnaitik Jiban O Sangram* (in Bangla) (Dhaka, 1978), p. 147.

68. Sardar Fazlul Karim, *Nana Kathar Parer Katha* (in Bangla) (Dhaka, p. 5).

for having been a participant in the Independence Day celebrations in August 1947.⁶⁹ The recently published autobiography of a Muslim communist of Basal does not even have anything to say about how it felt to be around at the time of independence from British rule.⁷⁰ To many radicals, political independence was nothing but a change in the outward form of ruling and a result of collusion between the British, the Congress and the Muslim League. As one communist activist wrote once with some sarcasm: "some change did take place, in place of British police Pakistan police set their camps."⁷¹ Another activist in the communist movement, however, recognised the support of the Bengali Muslims for Pakistan: "The demand for Pakistan had aggressive and active support of the Muslims, at least of East Bengal," and added: "Even if it was mistaken or due to a lack of consciousness, the labouring Muslim population of East Bengal accepted Pakistan as something of their own."⁷² This grudging acceptance of popular consciousness as "true but mistaken" is also characteristic of Communist literature on Pakistan.

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

The President of the district Congress committee is, so to say, rather roped in to hoist the (Pakistani) flag (on 15 August 1947) with the President of the Muslim League, it seems, only to humiliate the organisation which stood for the independence of United India... The Bengal revolutionaries... could hardly become hilarious.⁷³

A sudden sense of defeat, frustration and betrayal gripped the minds of the upper caste Hindus of Eastern Bengal as soon as Pakistan was created. One Hindu leader expressed his disenchantment in the following manner: "Hindus never wanted Pakistan. Pakistan has been thrust upon their unwilling heads."⁷⁴ Gyan Chakrabarty, a veteran communist activist of Dhaka, mentions that Pakistan was unacceptable to the Hindus right from the beginning, and a large scale exodus took place immediately after independence. According to him almost all government employess left East Pakistan at this time.⁷⁵ In some places the reactions of the Hindu professionals was so bitter that

69. Dhananjoy Das, *Amar Janmabhumi Smritinmoy Bangladesh* (in Bangla) (Calcutta, 1971), p. 13.

70. Abdus Shahid, *Atma Katha* (in Bangla) Vol. 1, (Dhaka, 1984), p. 148.

71. Nokul Mallick, *Amar Jiban O Dumuriyar Krishak Andolon* (in Bangla) n.d., p. 7.

72. Amal Sen, *Narailer Tebhaga Sangramer Samiksa* (in Bangla) (Dhaka, 1980), p. 34.

73. Lahiry, *India Partitioned*. pp. 2-3.

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

75. Gyan Chakrabarty, *Dhaka Zillar Communist Andoloner Atita Yuga* (in Bangla) (Dhaka, 1972), p. 131; also Satyen Sen, *Monorama Mashama* (in Bangla) (Dhaka, 1970), p. 127.

they plundered government property before leaving the country. Ajoy Bhattacharya mentions that the caste Hindu employees of Sylhet hospital plundered the hospital's property and then crossed over to India.⁷⁶ The Hindu clerks and prisoners of Munshiganj sub-jail were reported to have declined their quota of "extra ration" granted to mark the celebration of Independence day.⁷⁷ The leading class⁷⁸ in the society of East Pakistan, constituted by the upper caste Hindus, had turned overnight into political paupers. Their vigour, hope, enthusiasm and expectation around political independence, and their pessimism, bitterness and disillusionment in the event of the partition of Bengal—all the complementary and contradictory states of feeling experienced by them during those cataclysmic days of 1947 make a remarkable history which is however, beyond the scope of this paper.⁷⁹ Lahiry's sentiments capture a sense of failure that was to be shared by an increasing number of upper caste Hindus who had lost their position of social leadership in spite of being socially and economically dominant in East Bengal. Even the oppressed sections of the Hindu society, the Scheduled Castes, threw in their lot with the Muslims of Bengal in the sphere of Constitutional politics.⁸⁰

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

I decided that I would not leave the country. I should stay on Pakistan,

By sharing the happiness and sufferings of the people of Pakistan I would stay on. This country, East Bengal, is my country . . . why should I leave this country ?⁸¹

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

There was restlessness in the tribal belts also, where the ethnic minorities, especially the Garos, felt that the new state lacked any definite policy on the question of ethnic minorities. Hardly a month elapsed before a memorandum

76. Ajoy Bhattacharya, *Nankar Bidroho* Vol, 11 (in Bangla) (Dhaka, n,d), p, 147.

77. Jail Bundle, B-progs, February, 1956, Nos 1-18.

78. In Dhaka Hindus formed 59 percent of the population and possessed 85 percent of urban property immediately after independence. For a more detailed statement on the economic and professional strength of the upper caste Hindus see Jayanta Kumar Ray, *Democracy and Nationalism on Trial*, p. 35. EBLA progs, Vol, 1, No, 4 p, 15; and Eastern Pakistan, See also Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal, Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1990-1947* (London, New York, 1986), p. 230.

79. For a a brief treatment of those aspects of Hindu politics see Muhammad Golam Kabir, *Minority Politics in Bangladesh* (Delhi, 1980).

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

81. Sri Troilokya Nath Chakrabarty (Maharaj), *Jeley Trish Bachar O Pak Bharater Swadhinata Sangram* (in Bangla) (Mymensingh, 1968) p, 361.

from the Tribal People's Association of the Partially Excluded Areas of Mymensingh was submitted to the Prime Minister of Eastern Pakistan.⁸² The memorandum originated from a meeting of the Garos on 24 August 1947 held at Rangrapara at Haluaghat in Northern Mymensingh. In the meeting the tribal people, numbering about 4000, demanded amalgamation of their territories, consisting of five police stations of Mymensingh, with the contiguous Assam Province of India.⁸³ The very act of creating new nation states by the Raj on the basis of different nationalities opened up possibilities also for small ethnic groups to articulate their need for self-determination. The process of the dismantling of the Raj inspired the tribal leaders and the people of the Garo Community to organise the Tribal People's Association to make such a demand. What made the Plain Garos, as they were known on the Eastern Bengal side, restless was the fear of a religious state forcing a geographical separation, thanks to the arbitrary nature of the Radcliffe Award, from sections of their community, who fell on the Indian side, the Hill Garos. The historical connections between the two Garos were disrupted by the Partition Award about which they had not even been consulted. The hopes and fears of the tribals at the time of political independence introduced issues that have remained salient in Bangladesh politics even now.

VI

The rhetoric of independence, in fact, becomes still more varied when we take into account the response of the rural masses on the day of independence. Tajuddin Ahmed observed that even as night fell and celebrations ended, people remained on the streets of Dhaka, many of them villagers from neighbouring districts, who came to take part in the freedom festival.⁸⁴ Lahiry recorded from Rajshahi that as the day advanced "the rural people in their hundreds and thousands" began to pour into the town.⁸⁵ About one hundred thousand people, almost equally Hindus and Muslims, attended the Independence Day meeting at Dhaka. Tajuddin noticed on 15 August that the majority of the people were villagers from outside the district. According to him people came from as far as Comilla and Mymensingh to see "Pakistan" in its concrete manifestation. As a nation which lived in its villages,⁸⁶ where geographical mobility was under-

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

83. For more on the Garos see Pierre Bassaignet "Tribes of the Northern Border of East Pakistan," in Bassaignet (ed.) *Social Research in East Pakistan* (Dacca, 1960), pp. 150-52, also Gautam Bhadra, "Paglai Dhum": *Mymensingher Krishak Bidroho*, in *Saradiya Anustupa*, (Calcutta, 1986).

84. Diary, in Umar (ed.), *Dalil*.

85. Lahiry, *India Partitioned*, p. 1.

86. In 1941 Census out of every 1000 people of Bengal only 99 lived in towns, See Nafis Ahmad, *Statesman*, 15 August 1947, Supplement, Calcutta.

standably quite limited, it was only the attraction of the idea of freedom, however conceived, that could bring these villagers in train loads to Dhaka, the centre of new power. But unfortunately, we do not know much about the "street people" who roamed the streets of Dhaka the whole night. Both Hindus and Muslims seem to have attended the functions of the Day without any untoward incident. Amity was conspicuous, at least apparently, throughout the whole country.

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

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

Almost all prisoners of Dhaka central jail are on hunger strike. These prisoners prayed for release on the occasion of independence. They appealed to the Quaid-e-Azam and Khwaja Nazimuddin for release, so that an opportunity is given to them to purify their character.⁹⁰ Independence was also widely perceived as an occasion for the abolition of the police and state institutions associated with the Raj. "Now that Pakistan has been achieved, should there still be police, courts and Kutcheries, soldiers and sentries, Jails and lockups." Aaur Rahman Khan, a district level Muslim League leader was asked by an elderly villager. Khan replied "Why not? How could you protect the State without these institutions?" With a sigh the bewildered old man said, "then what kind of Pakistan [have we got]? Change the name please. You will name it Pakistan [yet] allow sins and corruption to exist."⁹¹

The colonial institutions of the State, especially the police and the judiciary, were perceived by this old man as being at odds with his notion of independence. Of course, there were reasons for this kind of response. "The whole procedures of plaint, pleas, peons, and witnesses," as Palit has written, "was indeed prohibitive for the poor, due to expense, delay,

87. Diary entry on 14 August 1947, in Umar (ed) *Dalil*.

88. Lahiry, *India Partitioned*, p. 1.

89. Jail Bundle, B-progs, February 1956, Nos. 1-18.

90. *Azad*, 14 September, 1947, Calcutta.

91. Aaur Rahman Khan, *Sairacharer Dash Bachar* (in Bangla) (Dhaka, 1947), p. 45.

harassment and formality of a written presentation."⁹² As Bhattacharyya has observed in the context of tribal peasant rebellions in Mymensingh—quite often the peasants lost their lands through court cases.⁹³ But the problem was not limited to tribal peasants only; the Muslim peasants lost huge amounts of money in litigations over land disputes.⁹⁴ Writing about the condition of the peasants of Bengal delta during the first decades of this century, Panandikar observed that a large part of the profits from agriculture "has been wasted away in litigation."⁹⁵ Immediately after independence Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Naimuddin Ahmed resented that the agriculturists were turned into street beggars through the machinations of the colonial law courts.⁹⁶ Even the Floud Commission took note of this fact in 1940 that many share croppers lost their lands to court cases.⁹⁷ Disadvantaged people appear to have had little confidence in the courts. Jitu Santhal, the leader of a tribal uprisings in Malda in the early 30's, said of the "English Raj" that it was "oppressive" as "bichar cannot be obtained in government courts."⁹⁸

The other institution associated with the administration of justice, the police, was equally feared. Islam mentions that "the people [of Badarpur in Dhaka district] were terribly afraid of police." Before independence the sight of the red turban [Police wore a red turban during the Raj] made people flee into the paddy fields and bushes nearby.⁹⁹ In the opinion of the East Bengal Police committee, "At no time, during nearly half a century that preceded the Partition did the police secure the confidence of the people"¹⁰⁰ As the police, ill paid, corrupt and cruel, tended to be universally unpopular and remained the visible symbol of alien oppression during the Raj.¹⁰¹ the political dream of the old peasant, mentioned earlier, was that such institutions be abolished.

The ordinary Muslim peasant often conceptualised Pakistan as a new

92. Chittabrata Palit, *Tensions in Bengal Rural Society* (India, 1975), p. 81.
93. Jnanabrata Bhattacharyya, "An Examination of Leadership Entry in Bengal Peasant Revolts, 1937-1947," *Journal of Asian Studies*, August, 1978, Vol xxxvii, No. 4 p. 626.
94. Umar (ed.) *Dalil*, p. 77.
95. S G Panandikar, *The Wealth and Welfare of the Bengal Delta* (Calcutta, 1926), p. 150.
96. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Naimuddin Ahmed, *Purba Pakistaner Durbhaga Jonosadharan* (in Bangla) (Dhaka, 1948), p. 2.
97. R K Mukherjee, *Dynamics of a Rural Society* (Berlin, 1957), p. 30.
98. Tanika Sarkar, "Jitu Santal's Movement in Malda, 1924-1932: A Study in Tribal Protest" in Ranajit Guha (ed.) *Subaltern Studies*, Vol. iv (Delhi, 1985), p. 159.
99. A K M Aminal Islam, *Bangladesh Village Conflict and Cohesion* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1974), p. 104.
100. Report of the East Bengal Police Committee, 1953, East Bengal Government Press, Dhaka, 1954. p. 5.
101. Tanika Sarkar, "National Movement and Popular Protest in Bengal, 1928-1934," Unpublished PhD Thesis, Delhi University, 1980. p. 8.

moral community, when ethics of reciprocity and justice would dominate social life. Oppressed for ages by socially superior classes and by members of the colonial state, they invested the name "Pakistan" with a sense of sacredness. As a popular poet wrote :

Always speak the truth

In the land of Pakistan.

Everything is pure in Pakistan,

Food and speech, all aspects of life.

Falsehood and bad deeds

Must be shunned.¹⁰²

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

102. Kazi Abul Hossain, *Jinnah Nama* (Dhaka, 1961), (enlarged edition), p. 90.

103. D N Wilber, *Pakistan: Its people, Its Society, Its Culture* (New Haven, 1964), p. 219.

104. K M Shamser Ali, "Proshashonik Sangskare Sarkari Karmacharir Bhumika," in Nilufer Begum (ed.) *Smriti-charana, Probin Proshashakder Aviggata* (in Bangla) (Dhaka, 1984), p. 79.

105. See Hashmi, Thesis, p. 40.

106. See Panandikar, *The Wealth and Welfare*, p. 181.

107. EBLA, progs, Vol. 1, No. 3, p. 94.

108. Panandikar, *The Wealth and Welfare*, p. 102.

In some districts like Barisal the *abwabs* constituted about one-fourth, and even more, of the rental.¹⁰⁹

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

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

Siddiqui also mentions that elderly villagers still recall an incident of 1940 when a small Muslim boy of a poor peasant family was tied up and detained for 24 hours by a Hindu *gantidar* for having trespassed into his mango gardens.¹¹¹ In fact, tenants of all categories had to sit on the floor, mats or wooden benches ; many *zamindars* even did not allow their tenants to wear shoes within their *cutcheries* (office of the landlord) or ride horses or elephants within the jurisdiction of the estate. Some even did not allow their tenants to dig ponds or wells or construct brickbuilt houses on their holdings. The slaughtering of cows by Muslim peasants was often not allowed by Hindu *zamindars*.¹¹² While Abul Mansur Ahmad, a Muslim nationalist leader, and others coming from a higher economic strata, recollect with some bitterness the social dis-

109. Hashmi, Thesis, p. 31.

110. Aminul Islam, *Bangladesh Village*, p. 99.

111. Kamal Siddiqui, *The Political Economy of Rural Poverty in Bangladesh* (Dhaka, 1983), p. 257.

112. Hashmi, Thesis, p. 53.

crimination they faced from the Hindu *zamindars* and upper caste Hinds in their early life, the extent of social oppression of the poor Muslim peasants can only be guessed.¹¹³ Both Islam and Siddiqui conclude that it was these circumstances that paved the way for separatist politics in rural East Bengal.

Millenarian themes were deliberately emphasised in the attempts made to popularise the idea of "Pakistan." Spokesmen of the idea called for the abolition of brothels, alcoholic beverages and gambling, and drew on Islam to justify their stand.¹¹⁴ Slogans promising "Land to the tiller" and "End of moneylending" were a regular feature of Muslim League meetings and processions.¹¹⁵ It is said that once when some Calcutta labours told Jinnah that "they (Hindu Leaders) say Pakistan will be for the rich, not for the poor" he retorted by saying, "If the British left and that area (Bengal) did not become Pakistan, then the Hindus would never allow us to make any laws to free the Muslims from the yoke of Zamindars."¹¹⁶

In a public meeting in Chittagong, Nazimuddin pledged, "If Pakistan is achieved your sons will be Munshifs, their sons will become Magistrates, Deputies, and Darogas."¹¹⁷ "When Pakistan was established," recollected Ayub Khan who was stationed in Dhaka immediately after independence, "they (people) thought they will have no problem in life."¹¹⁸ It is therefore not surprising that soon after East Pakistan was born the leaders of the weaving community, *jolas*, should petition the government requesting a new social appellation and a rise in social status. They saw the demand as legitimate in the context of political independence.¹¹⁹

Pakistan was achieved in the midst of huge peasant uprisings: the historic *tebhaga* or share croppers, struggle and movement for the abolition of *tanka* and *nankar* forms of rent. Most of the areas of erstwhile Eastern Bengal and part of Assam, mainly the Sylhet district, were in the grip of peasant movements of variable intensity and nature in the decade that preceded political independence. All these movements originated in the preindependence socio-political situation of East Pakistan. Most important of all was the share-croppers' struggle, popularly known as the *Tebhagar*

113. Abul Mansur Ahmad, *Amar Dekha*, p. 14; Chowdhury Kudrat-e-Ghani, *Unnayan O Amlatantric Rajniti*, in Nilufer Begum (ed.) *Smriti Charan* (Dhaka, 1984), p. 29, also Kamruddin Ahmad, *Atmabikash*, Vol. 1, p. 70.

114. EBLA, progs, Vol. 1, No. 3, p. 155, also Umar (ed.) *Dalil*, p. 35.

115. Abul Mansur Ahmad, *Amar Dekha*, p. 248.

116. Sirajuddin Hossain, *Mirror*, p. 1.

117. Syedur Rahman, *Rajniti O Kabita*, p. 10.

118. Ayub Khan, *Friends*, p. 79.

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

their lives in their struggle for the abolition of the *tanka* system.¹³⁴

The *nankar* rebellion on the other hand was primarily aimed at abolishing the system of service tenure. In this system a tenant of an acre of land had to "give" five to seven days of unpaid physical labour every month to the household of the landowner, apart from a requirement to be at the landowner's beck and call. The tenant also had no right in the *nankar* land.¹³⁵ The daily assignment was usually very heavy requiring the members of the *nankar* family to pull together, while the *nankar's* own plot, usually too small to provide a livelihood for his family over the year, was poorly tended, which reduced its yield. Corporal punishment was common for not turning up to work for the landlord, and additional tasks were given to make up for lost time. Not only that, *nankars* were forced to carry out the order of the landlord to discipline inalcitrant members of the section. Very often young daughters and wives of the *nankars* were sexually exploited by landlords and by the male members of the landlord's family, for which there was no remedy excepting individual and/or collective resistance. The cost of this kind of resistance was always very high, ranging from eviction to murder by *goondas* of the *zamindars*, acts sometimes carried out with the help from police. The struggle against this "barbarous" system engulfed almost half of Sylhet district during 1946 and the first half of 1947. Ten percent of the three million people of that district extended their active support to the struggle.¹³⁶

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

Muslim League leadership had publicly committed themselves to the abolition of *zamindari*, and other agrarian reforms. Some prominent regional leaders themselves contributed to the heightening of expectations on the part of the peasants. Giasuddin Pathan, a prominent League leader of Mymensingh, is said to have told the Muslim sharecroppers who were involved in the struggle under the organisation and leadership of the *Krishak*

134. Promatha Gupta, *Muktijudhey Adibashi* (Calcutta, 1982), pp. 50, 127.

135. *Cross Roads*, 1 Sept. 1950, As cited in Yu V Gankovosky and L R Gordon-Polonskya, *A History of Pakistan* (Lahore, n. d.), p. 141.

136. Ajoy Bhattacharya, *Nankar Bidroho*, Vol. ii Dhaka, p. 234 ;

137. Adrienne Cooper, Thesis, p. 375.

Sabha that they should not waste time and efforts for "tebhaga" now that Pakistan was in the offing, they would get "chaubhaga"—all four quarters of the produce. According to Moni Singh, the aforementioned leader of the Hajong rebellion in Mymensingh, this worked like magic. "The peasants returned the paddy they had seized from the landlords."¹³⁸ The Muslim League, in fact, took some steps towards meeting the demands of the sharecroppers which suggested sanction for rural change.

On 22 January 1947, the Bengal Bargadar's Bill which promised to introduce shortly the *tebhaga* system throughout the province was published in the Calcutta Gazette. This announcement effectively dampened the agitation. Although reaction varied, the promise of legislation took the wind out of the sail of the movement.¹³⁹ The Sharecroppers Bill acted as a kind of catalyst in agrarian relations, arousing both fears and hopes about imminent changes of importance. The Bill enhanced the image of the Muslim League Government especially among the Muslim peasants, though nothing was done towards translating the Bill into regulation. It is even said that important provincial Muslim League leaders like Khwaja Nazimuddin went about privately assuring the landlords that their interests would be protected.¹⁴⁰ The prospect of having a national government also put a brake on the ongoing *Nankar* rebellion in the Sylhet district. Important activists like Ajoy Bhattacharya admitted that the ordinary Muslim masses of Sylhet expected that *nankar* problems would be solved amicably if the latter supported Pakistan.¹⁴¹

The same prospect created frustration among the Hindu *nankars*. The situation was further complicated by the upper caste Hindus' hurried migration to India after Pakistan was achieved. Whatever little support that came from the former had disappeared.¹⁴² Haji Muhammad Danesh, one of the prominent *krishak sabha* activists, said that Hindus feared that in Pakistan, the land of the Muslims, they would be helpless.¹⁴³ A clear distinction emerged on the question of joining with Pakistan or India during the Sylhet Referendum among the Hindu and Muslim *nankars*, which stopped just short of communal violence. Added to this, the partition of Karimganj sub-division, one of the important centres of the rebellion, created uncertainty about the future of the rebellion.¹⁴⁴

VIII

Pakistan was born in the middle of famine conditions. Yet it was

138. Moni Singh, *Sangram*, p. 97.

139. Cooper, Thesis, p. 376.

140. Kamruddin Ahmad, *Atmabikash*, Vol. i. (Dhaka, 1975), pp. 116-7.

141. Ajoy Bhattacharya, *Nankar*, Vol. ii, p. 167.

142. *Ibid.*, p. 251.

143. Cooper, Thesis, p. 380.

144. Ajoy Bhattacharya, *Nankar*, Vol. ii, p. 243.

remarkable that the Muslim peasants, unlike their Hindu brethren, did not leave the country. A *Swadhinata* report noted: "Pakistan has been achieved. The Muslims expected the prices of commodities to come down . . . They are not particularly worried about resisting famines. They are not deserting their home either."¹⁴⁵ Abdus Shahid, a political activist of the time, also recollects how political independence and confidence in the national leadership combined to give hope to many who otherwise faced the prospect of an impending famine.¹⁴⁶ A rural poet from Chittagong sang on the attainment of political independence:

In the imperialist oppression of 1943

Million lives were lost,

Let us found a Kingdom of peace

In our free state, ending famines once for all.¹⁴⁷

Ever since the 1937 elections, Muslim leaders had always painted the future "Homeland for the Muslim" as a land where the poor peasants' dream of "two square meals a day" would come true.¹⁴⁸ In the context of "post-disaster utopia" after the Great Famine, availability of rice to sustain oneself became the symbol of fulfilment. According to Greenough, to many peasants rice signified independence.¹⁴⁹ The League activists adapted their political propaganda to these concrete grievances of local populations. The optimism of the ordinary Muslim peasants and their expectations of Pakistan no doubt reflected the presence of nationalist sentiments among sections of East Pakistan society. Given the nature of this society and its politics at their time however, nationalism would have been by and large an elitist sentiment. For, with dearth and famine around the corner, nationalism would have been only one among many contradictory forces impelling the poor to action.¹⁵⁰

Islam itself and the notion of egalitarianism¹⁵¹ inherent in Islam became a very important force, especially when the oppressors were seen as belonging to the hierarchical Hindu religion. Islam was so important in the day-to-day politics of those days that even secular demands were tinged by religious nationalism. The nascent Bengali linguistic nationalism of the 1950s also drew many of its metaphors and concepts from the idiom and institution of Islam. The earliest writings of the genre, while making a critique of the new state, still projected a vision of a just society as had been achieved.

145. As quoted in Umar, *Bhasha Andolon*, Vol 11. p. 5.

146. Abdus Shahid, *Atmakatha*, p. 137.

147. Purnendu Dastidar, *Kabial Ramesh Shil* (Dhaka, 1963), p. 49.

148. Humaira Momen, *Muslim Politics*, p.57, Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics*, pp. 80-83, Umar (ed.) *Dalil*, pp. 77-79.

149. Greenough, *Prosperity*, p. 228.

150. See Chapter 4.

151. Gellner sees it as a "latent egalitarianism" of Islam. See Ernst Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (England, 1983), p. 17.

under Omar, the second Caliph : "When shall we get an ideal ruler like Hazrat Omar, when the era of the Four Caliphs will come back !"¹⁵²

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

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

In a bibliography, an attempt has been made to present a survey of the idea of the debates that went on among the scholars regarding the decipherment of the Indus Script. The bibliography has been presented in a chronological order.

Langdon, S. "The Indus Script," in Marshall, John H. ed. *Mohenjadaro and the Indus Civilization*, Pt. II. London : Arthur Probsthain, 1931.

The main contentions of this article are that the Brahmi script had its origin in the Indus writing, the transliteration of the Indus script from the Brahmi was not possible, and the state do not supply adequate materials for decipherment of the script. It was not possible to separate word and sign-groups, the declensions and verb inflections could not be detected, and pronouns were totally absent. Until larger inscriptions are found proper decipherment was not possible.

Langdon determines a few factors which, he believes, would facilitate decipherment. By analyzing the signs he comes to the conclusion that the script was unconnected with Sumerian or Proto-Semitic signs. Indus signs resembled the Egyptian hieroglyphy more than they did the Sumerian linear and cuneiform systems. The presence of detached accents in the Harappan script was different from either the Sumerian or the Proto-Semitic. Langdon is convinced that all attempts to derive Brahmi from the Semitic languages were failures. He ventures to determine the chronology and the nature of the script, and establishes the direction of writing to be from right to the left. On an analysis of the determinatives, and the con-

152. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Naimuddin Ahmed, *Durbhaga Jonosadharan*, p. 7.

153. Rafiuddin Ahmed has discussed this aspect of Bengal Muslim politics, see his *Bengal Muslims*, also Kamruddin Ahmad, *Atmabikash*, Vol. 2, p. 49.

154. See Partha Chatterjee, "Agrarian Relations and Communalism in Bengal, 1926-35," Ranajit Guha (ed.) *Subaltern Studies*; Vol. 1, Delhi, 1982, also for a fine treatment of this aspect in UP politics see Gyan Pandey, "Rallying Round the Cow," *Ibid*, Vol. 2, Delhi, 1983, also Hashmi, Thesis, p. 44.