THE PARTITION OF BENGAL AND ASSAM, 1932–1947

Contour of freedom

Bidyut Chakrabarty

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The fragmentation of Bengal and Assam in 1947 was a crucial moment in India's socio-political history as a nation state. Both British Indian provinces were divided as much through the actions of the Muslim League as through those of Congress and the British colonial power. Attributing partition largely to Hindu communalists is, therefore, historically inaccurate and factually misleading.

The Partition of Bengal and Assam, 1932–1947 provides a review of constitutional and party politics as well as of popular attitudes and perceptions. The primary aim of this book is to unravel the intricate socio-economic and political processes that led up to partition, as Hindus and Muslims competed ferociously for the new power and privileges to be conferred on them with independence. As shown in the book, well before they divorced at a political level, Hindus and Muslims had been cleft apart by their socio-economic differences. Partition was probably inevitable.

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DEDICATED TO PABLO, BARBIE AND
TUTUN FOR THEIR CRITICAL
APPRECIATION OF MY CREATIVITY

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABBREVIATIONS

ABP	*Amrita Bazar Patrika*
AICC	All India Congress Committee
BLC	Bengal Legislative Council
BPC	Bengal Provincial Congress
BPCC	Bengal Provincial Congress Committee
CPI	Communist Party of India
CSASC	Centre for South Asian Studies, Cambridge
IAR	Indian Annual Register
IESHR	*Indian Economic and Social History Review*
IOR	India Office Records
IS	*Indian Struggle*
JAS	*Journal of Asian Studies*
JNP	Jawaharlal Nehru Papers
JNSW	Jawaharlal Nehru Selected Works
JPS	*Journal of Peasant Studies*
KPP	Krishak Praja Party
MAS	*Modern Asian Studies*
ML	Muslim League
NAI	National Archives of India
NMML	Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
PCC	Provincial Congress Committee
WBSA	West Bengal State Archives

INTRODUCTION

The 1947 Great Divide is the most significant signpost in the evolution of South Asia as a socio-political unit.[1] After having drawn the boundaries of two independent states, India and Pakistan, the British had finally withdrawn. If there was cause to rejoice at the end of colonialism, the celebrations were undoubtedly marred by a tragic partition along religious lines which took an unacceptable toll in human life and suffering. The process of decolonisation was, on the one hand, a clear failure of the nationalist leadership who strove hard to sustain India's political unity since Pakistan was born on the basis of two-nation theory. On the other hand, for those supporting the demand for a separate Muslim state, colonialism came to an end with a clear positive note. Partition is therefore centrally constitutive of nationhood. Not only was India redefined; Pakistan was also articulated in socio-political terms in the wake of the struggle, and spearheaded by the Muslim League, linking Muslims irrespective of socio-economic status to form a sovereign Muslim state. Partition is a moment of contest as well. Both the Hindus and Muslims redefined their identities through a process of contestation of vision, contestation of beliefs and contestation of history. The period between 1932 and 1947 sharply shows the mutation in the formation of Hindus and Muslims as communities opposed to each other in the political arena. What was distinctive about this period was the growth of the communities as political units in a permanent adversarial relationship. This was further consolidated following the introduction of the communal electorate in the 1937 provincial elections. With the acceptance of the principle of majority, Muslims automatically became the most powerful community in Bengal and Punjab by their sheer demographic strength. In other words, religious identity as a demographic category became probably the single most crucial criterion in determining the distribution of governmental power in these Muslim-majority provinces. Yet it would be entirely wrong to gloss over the internal differences among the Muslims that rallied around the campaign for Pakistan as a bloc. So, the questions that need to be asked are how and why did the idea of Pakistan cause such excitement? How could so many disparate groups attain the

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goal of Pakistan? How could a highly stratified community, united only by religious ties, act in unison to fight for Pakistan? What were the factors that bridged the regional, class and sectional chasms to develop overriding interests in a separate Muslim state? In other words, how and why did the two-nation theory strike roots undermining the syncretistic tradition? Answers to these questions may not be easily available, although, drawing upon empirical materials from Bengal and Assam, an attempt will be made here to tackle some of them. Undoubtedly, the political history of the partitioned provinces provides significant clues to grasp the processes that finally led to partition, which Jinnah described as 'a surgical operation' to cut India into two halves.[2]

The respective nations of India and Pakistan began their journeys as soon as the transfer of power was formally executed following the acceptance of India's bifurcation by even the Gandhian Congress, which always held views challenging Jinnah's two-nation theory. What this signifies is the immense importance of partition, which is usually conceptualised in contrasting ways. For the Congress, partition was but a decisive milestone in the growth of a nation state that failed to negotiate a satisfactory solution to the problem of religious difference. To the Muslim League and its supporters, partition was associated with victory and liberation from both the British rule and possible Hindu domination in future India. So what was 'nationalism' to the League was 'sectarianism' to the Congress. In grasping these binary opposite ideological configurations, the Great Divide seems to be equally significant. Partition was therefore not merely an imperial device, it was also the culmination of a process that began unfolding with the consolidation of Muslims as a distinct socio-political community.

Notwithstanding the definite role of the *divide-et-impera*,[3] the acceptance of the League as the true representatives of the Muslims in the Muslim-majority provinces of Bengal and Punjab clearly indicates a radical change in India's political landscape. It had become clear by 1940 that Bengal and Punjab 'will significantly count in a settlement of Moslem problems . . . [and] if these two provinces withdraw support, Jinnah's position might rapidly be undermined'.[4] By associating the Congress with the Hindus, the largest section of India's Muslim population articulated their vision of freedom in terms of Jinnah's two-nation theory. Thus the future of India was decided not only by those who remained decisive in 'high politics', but also by those actors at the grassroots who translated the idioms of 'divisive' politics in terms of concrete plans and programmes. In other words, though the *Quaid-i-Azam* was the architect of the two-nation theory, his role as the founder of a separate Muslim nation state was largely supplemented by those League volunteers who genuinely believed, due to a complex web of events and happenings in the 1940s, in Pakistan as the fulfilment of their aspired goal. In espousing the cause of Pakistan,

what figured prominently were communal sentiments directed against the Hindus for their alleged conspiracy with the British to defeat the League campaign.[5] In fact, the 1945 Direct Action resolution was adopted by the Muslim League to 'protest against the "letting down" of the Muslim League by the Viceroy and Cabinet delegation, "under pressure" from the Congress and against the evident desire of the Congress to dominate the Muslims and other minorities in India'.[6]

The 1947 Great Divide

Partition is 'the moment of the constitutional establishment of two dominions with accompanying bloodbath'.[7] Pressing for a separate Muslim state, the 1940 Lahore resolution was the first official pronouncement of Pakistan or partition by the Muslim League. Though the term 'Pakistan' was nowhere mentioned, by demanding an independent state/states for the Muslims, the resolution translated the goal of a sovereign Muslim state in concrete terms.[8] Seeking to organise Indian Muslims around the Pakistan demand, the resolution was remarkable for at least two important reasons; first, that the resolution was proposed by Fazlul Haq, the most popular Muslim leader in Bengal, suggests the growing dominance of the League in the Muslim-majority provinces; and secondly, for the first time an unequivocal demand was formally articulated insisting that the areas in India in which Muslims constituted a majority should be made into an independent state containing autonomous and sovereign units.[9] Furthermore, it argued that Indian Muslims constituted a majority-nation in the north-west and east of India, and ought to be treated at par with the Hindu majority in all future constitutional negotiations.

The idea contained in the resolution was not novel. Since it was proposed formally in an annual session of the League, which 'had, by then, the backing of the Moslem population of India', it was, as Khaliquzzamman reminisced, 'an avalanche which uprooted all the old fossilised structure of the political shibboleths which had kept the minds of Indian Muslims engaged for about a century, and paved the way for a direct march towards a definite goal'.[10] Writing on this resolution, Edward Benthall insisted that 'it would be dangerous to brush Pakistan lightly aside because there is no doubt that the scheme has fired the imagination of millions of Moslems throughout India'.[11] On another occasion, he further reiterated that 'the Moslems are not prepared to subject themselves to the majority community which encircles them, and assertions are openly made that civil war will follow any settlement that places the Moslems into the hands of the Hindu majority'.[12] This is what guided the official assessment of the situation. Wavell, responding to the Bengal Governor, Casey, wrote, 'I do not believe that Pakistan will work. It creates new minority problems quite as bad as those we have now and the Pakistan state or

states would be economically unsound . . . but for the mass of Muslims, it is a real possibility and has very strong sentimental appeal. [Hence] we cannot openly denounce Pakistan until we have something to offer in its place'.[13]

Despite doubts regarding Pakistan's viability, the colonial power became increasingly sensitive to the claims advanced by the Muslim League. By 1945, not only did the League insist on 'the division of India as the only solution of the complex constitutional problem of India'[14], its election campaign was also based on the issue of Pakistan. If the Muslims voted in favour of the League in the 1946 elections, 'the League will be entitled to ask for Pakistan without any further investigation or plebiscite'.[15] During the election campaign, Jinnah also identified the areas constituting Pakistan. According to him, those provinces with a clear Muslim majority naturally belonged to Pakistan and hence Sind, Baluchistan, the North West Frontier Province and Punjab in the north-west of India, and Bengal and Assam in the north-east, were provinces earmarked for Pakistan. The forthcoming elections, he declared, 'will decide the matter once for all and when they are over, Pakistan will become an immediate reality'.[16] In Punjab, Jinnah and his League colleagues were reported to have drawn on the religious sentiments of the Muslim voters by underlining that 'the question a voter is called on to answer is – are you a true believer, or an infidel and a traitor?'.[17] As the poll outcome revealed, the 1946 election was a referendum for the League.[18] While in the first provincial poll, in 1937, the League failed to make an impact even in the Muslim majority provinces by 1946 it became the only representative of the Muslims by polling in most (if not all) cases close to its maximum natural strength. This was a remarkable achievement in terms of both leadership and organisation.

An unambiguous verdict in favour of the Muslim League in the Muslim-majority provinces in the 1946 elections radically altered India's political landscape, in which the League emerged as a stronger party in its negotiations with the British in the last phase of the transfer of power. The idea that Muslims were more than a political minority and were in fact a significant political entity gained momentum following the resignation of the Congress ministries and their refusal to co-operate with the war effort. In that particular context, the League's strength rose in its bargaining with the British for 'a parity' with the Congress in future constitutional negotiations. Furthermore, it was also easier for the League to justify its claim as the only organisation to speak on behalf of Indian Muslims following the 1946 poll outcome. Immediately after the results were announced, the League, in its April session, therefore modified the Lahore resolution so that instead of demanding 'independent states' it now argued for 'a sovereign independent Muslim state,'[19] presumably to secure the consolidation of a single Muslim constitutional entity. After all, the League demand for

parity 'rested on the claim that it represented a cohesive entity known as the Muslim nation'. By demanding 'independent states', the Pakistan resolution 'threatened to undermine the idea of Muslim solidarity and, with it, the basis of the League's political ideology'.[20]

In the penultimate year of the transfer of power the League secured parity with the Congress, and in the 1946 Shimla conference the League and Congress representation was equated.[21] What originated in the form of the Lahore resolution became feasible, and Jinnah's appeal to 'unsettle the settled notions . . . of Muslims being a minority [that] had been around for so long'[22] was finally translated into reality. Thus, not only did the *Quaid-i-Azam* succeed in dramatically altering the role of the Muslims in the overall constitutional settlement on the eve of the Great Divide, he also transformed the Muslim community into a nation[23] by ascertaining 'territorial sovereignty to a heterogeneous community turned homogeneous nation'.[24] The Muslim community for Jinnah was, therefore, not 'an abstract historical–political entity . . . but a separate nation with distinct interests [which] could not be treated only as a minority'.[25]

That Muslims constituted a self-determining political community was always emphasised, to completely dissociate from the Hindus seeking to establish 'a Hindu Raj'.[26] The Hindu–Muslim schism was not merely based on religious differences but also on certain fundamental principles guiding their respective lives. As Muslims drew upon completely different sociocultural values, it was unthinkable that they could live as 'a mere minority in a Hindu-dominated India'. While explaining the Hindu–Muslim chasm in colonial India, Ambedkar thus argued that the Hindu–Muslim 'antagonism . . . is formed by causes which take their origin in historical, religious, cultural and social antipathy of which political antipathy is only a reflection. These form', he further elaborated, 'one deep river of discontent which, being regularly fed by these sources, keeps on mounting to a head and overflowing its ordinary channels'.[27] Hence Ambedkar held the Hindus equally responsible for the rise of Muslim separatism that was finally resolved in the emergence of Pakistan as a nation.[28]

Although Islam was not the only driving force behind the Great Divide, it had undoubtedly fed 'the religiously based communalism'[29] that grew in importance in a conducive political environment during the war and its aftermath. The League strategy appears to have been guided by two well-defined considerations. On the one hand, by demanding favour as the League co-operated with the war efforts, its leadership resorted continuously to pressure tactics.[30] On the other, the League was engaged in virulent propaganda seeking to mobilise the Muslims along communal lines, as the following appeal from *The Star of India* clearly illustrates:

> The time has come to the little rats to know that the lion is not
> dead, only sleeping; the challenge is to be accepted; the enemy is

to be met on its own ground; Mussalman cannot resort meanness and traceries which characterise their political enemies; the Hindus will see to whom Bengal belongs; they shall be taught the lesson they need.[31]

The consolidation of Muslim communal forces was matched, if not surpassed, by the rising tide of Hindu communalism.[32] Especially in the aftermath of the Calcutta riot, Hindu communalism grew at an alarming rate, resorting to intimidation, coercion and terror. Meetings were organised by the Hindu Mahasabha to defuse the drive for Pakistan,[33] and its leader, B. S. Moonjee launched a campaign supporting violence, if necessary, to protect the Hindus from communal attack.[34] Probably its worse form was articulated in the 1946 Bihar riot, where the organised Hindu bands wiped out the Muslim villages in the Patna, Gaya and Monghyr districts. Apart from the Hindu Mahasabha, which had a direct role, the Congress workers were also reported to have incited riots in many cases.[35] The Bihar riot made the Hindus vulnerable in Bengal and part of Assam, where they constituted a minority. What strengthened the movement for partition in Bengal was certainly the feeling that 'Hindus were not safe in the League-ruled Bengal'.[36] The Congress leadership gradually realised that however undesirable the partition of Bengal (and Punjab), there was really no alternative to it. Its reluctance officially to endorse the Mahasabha-sponsored 'communal' campaign for partition alienated a large number of Hindus in rural Bengal. The Congress was identified 'as being incapable of dealing with the Muslim challenge and safeguarding Hindu lives'.[37] It became increasingly clear that 'the claim that the Congress represents India is less and less true since it cannot now claim to represent all the Hindus, apart altogether from its claim to represent the Moslems and other minorities'.[38] This certainly projected the Hindu Mahasabha as the sole representative, and its leader, Shyama Prasad Mookherjee, as the sole spokesman (*sic*) of the Hindus.

B. R. Ambedkar, in his book *Pakistan or the Partition of India*,[39] endorsed the claim for Pakistan in terms of realist politics. According to him, partition was possibly the best solution to resolve the constitutional impasse in India, for two reasons. First, given the hostility of the Muslims to the idea of a single central government, inevitably dominated by the Hindu majority, it was certain that if there was no partition, the animosity and suspicion between the communities would remain: 'burying Pakistan is not the same thing as burying the ghost of Pakistan'.[40] Furthermore, given the demographic composition of what was proposed as Pakistan, there was no doubt that it would be a homogeneous state and hence free from communal bickering and mutual distrust. Secondly, Ambedkar felt that in united India, where more than a third of the population was Muslim, 'Hindu dominance could be a serious threat to the very existence

of the polity'. In such a state, Muslims apprehending the tyranny of the Hindu majority were likely to organise themselves into 'a theocratic party', provoking in turn the rise of Hindu fundamentalist forces seeking to establish 'a Hindu raj'. Partition would radically alter the situation where Muslims in Hindustan would be 'a small and widely scattered minority' joining different political parties in accordance with what they consider 'as most protective' of their socio-economic and political interests. As a result, a party like Hindu Mahasabha that drew on the principle of 'a Hindu raj' would gradually disappear. Persuaded by the logic of his argument, Ambedkar suggested that the lower castes of Hindu society should join hands with the Muslim minority to fight the Hindu high castes for their rights of citizenship and social dignity.[41]

It would not be irrelevant to refer to Iqbal's arguments defending the demand for Pakistan. Conceptualising Pakistan in two-nation theory format, Iqbal offered a map of the redistribution of territory forming a Muslim state comprising the north-west part of India and Bengal.[42] His blueprint for Pakistan was based on language, race, history, religion and economic interests within the federal system, with maximum autonomy for the provinces. In order to protect Muslim identity and form a strong political unit, he suggested the idea of bringing together the north-western states of Punjab, Frontier, Sind and Baluchistan under one state, of which Bengal would invariably be a part given the Muslim preponderance in its demography. Such a state would cement the bond among the Muslims by creating 'a sense of responsibility and patriotism'. Unlike Ambedkar, who had a realistic aim of proper administration of the subcontinent in the aftermath of the British rule, Iqbal had a wider spiritual agenda of creating 'an Islam' capable of containing 'the influence of Arab imperialism [that] had shackled its civilization, culture, *shariat* and education for centuries'.[43]

There is one final point. The 'high politics of India's partition'[44] also epitomise the role of the last Viceroy, Louis Mountbatten. Despite his expressed desire to sustain India's unity following the Cabinet Mission plan, he soon realised after reaching Delhi that 'the Cabinet Mission plan and a unitary government were no longer feasible propositions and it was quite plain that a truncated Pakistan offered the only prospect of an agreed settlement'.[45] Once it had been decided, the Viceroy was keen to transfer power at an earlier date than June 1948. In his perception, an early withdrawal would certainly be advantageous to the British interests, and the substantial gains were as follows:

(a) the terrific world-wide enhancement of British prestige and the enhancement of the prestige of the present government; (b) the completion of the framework of world strategy from the point of view of Empire defence; (c) the early termination of present responsibilities especially in the field of law and order; (d) a

further strengthening of Indo-British relations which have enormously improved since the statement of 20 February, 1947.[46]

Although India became free earlier than had been decided, due to Mountbatten's insistence, he was also criticised on two counts: first, in 'a true Machiavellian style',[47] the last Viceroy took the advantage of the lack of consensus among the Congress, Sikh and League politicians and imposed his own 'solution' on the Indian question. Second, his plan to transfer power almost a year in advance plunged both the new-born dominions into serious administrative and political crisis. Owing to the suddenness of the event, the government failed to take adequate steps to prevent the human massacre during the transfer of population in Punjab. On the basis of his own experience as 'an insider', W. H. Morris Jones, however, exonerated Mountbatten for his responsibility, underlining that 'a slower process would probably have produced not less but more of both slaughtering and suffering'.[48] Similarly, Mountbatten was also absolved of the charge that, due to the rivalry among the Indian representatives, the Viceroy had easily made his way in so far as the actual transfer of power was concerned. As Nicholas Mansergh argued, the partition emerged from a triangular situation involving the British, the Congress and the League which itself limited the freedom of manoeuvre that even the most purposeful or enlightened of leaders enjoyed. It was therefore difficult for a single man to change the course of action in circumstances where the British government, though a key player, gradually became peripheral once the announcement of the final withdrawal had been made. The divided landscape of the two independent dominions that finally emerged was, therefore, the outcome of a peculiar unfolding of events in which those who participated 'were in a measure, not always fully realised, the prisoners of a pattern of politics which always pressed in upon their liberty of action'.[49]

The 1946 Calcutta riot and afterwards

There is no doubt that the killing and looting that began in Calcutta in August and then spread to Noakhali, Bihar and other parts of India played a decisive role in bringing about partition. What was conspicuous about these riots was the growing communalisation of Hindus and Muslims, who participated in the mayhem as antagonistic competing blocs. As Krishnan wrote:

> The Great Calcutta Killing of August 1946 was a turning point in Indian history. ... It was like a civil war in which the provincial government [of the Muslim League] had become partisan. ... The British Government found itself unable to maintain law and

order. . . . It was also now evident to Indian leaders that it would be more prudent to accept Pakistan than to let the country to slip into civil war and chaos.

Starting in August 1946 India suffered an unprecedented communal violence for nearly a year. . . . The process started with the Calcutta outbreak of 16 August 1946, was continued in Bihar and Noakhali, and ended in the Punjab carnage of March 1947. These riots convinced the overwhelming majority of Hindus and Muslims that the partition of the subcontinent was inevitable.[50]

This is not, however, to argue that the 1946 riots were solely responsible for partition. What resulted in the vivisection was certainly the well-grounded Hindu–Muslim chasm, nurtured historically by a process in which not only had these communities played significant roles, but the contribution of the British Government was equally significant. By 1944, as the official reports show, 'the demands of Hindus and Muslims have crystallised into irreconcilability'.[51] The 1946 partition riots seem to have accelerated the pace of the constitutional negotiations that finally culminated in the Great Divide. Thus Suhrawardy, who was alleged to have played a decisive role in the Calcutta riot, wrote: 'Jinnah's Direct Action strategy, bathed in the blood of the Muslims of Calcutta, won him a great political victory and made Pakistan inevitable'.[52] Partition became inevitable because the tension, argued Parcival Spear, 'could no longer be restrained within peaceful bounds, and to the bloody August riots in Calcutta (where Hindus were the sufferers) was added the communal outbreak in Bihar (where Muslims were the victims)'.[53]

As the history of the subcontinent unfolded, Jinnah's idea of Pakistan that was 'a thing of laugh at five years ago . . . [became] the slogan and watchword of the Muslim masses'.[54] The Muslims gradually became so powerful that 'a Moslem movement would be a spontaneous movement needing no political agitation to stir it up if their rights were in jeopardy'.[55] In August 1947, Jinnah achieved Pakistan but did not get what he wanted.[56] What finally emerged as Pakistan was 'but two spaces of map, without a natural frontier along the new dividing lines, without a ready capital, without the apparatus of national government or much trained skill to exercise it, a weak and feeble infant, a dry-mouthed end to a romantic dream'.[57] India also paid a heavy price for freedom – the communal forces were neither defeated, nor was unity totally achieved. The story of the decolonisation of India is not only about the emergence of the Muslim League, with its demand for a sovereign Muslim state from March 1940 and its mobilisation of Muslim provincial support, but also about British and Congress tactics which contributed to the rise of the League and the solidification of its communal support. Also, the circumstances of

'a declining empire may have continued as much to Muslim political unifi-
cation as the League's appeal to the nationalism' supposedly inherent in
Muslim religious communalism.[58] The Raj came to its end 'amidst convul-
sions in which not only Hindus and Muslims, but also Sikhs and Muslims
slaughtered one another, a holocaust unprecedented'[59] in India's recent
history. If the British, argued Penderel Moon, 'had been bold enough and
uninfluenced by the glamour of empire, wise enough to launch India as a
Dominion some fifteen to twenty years earlier, much bitterness and feeling
of frustration, perhaps the tragedy of partition, would have been
avoided'.[60]

Partition and memory

Partition is a living memory; its story is still unfolding more than fifty years
after the subcontinent was divided. Today the overwhelming memory of
1947 for people across the whole of north India and Bengal remains that
of *batwara* or *vibhajan* (partition), and not *azadi* or *swadhinata* (independ-
ence). There were diametrically opposite views on the nation that
appeared following partition. The construction of nationhood meant the
dislocation and violent displacement of those identified as 'aliens'
overnight.[61] The divergent 'voices' that emerge are articulated in the
contemporary literature through contested visions of independence,
national identity and citizenship.[62]

What this study is (not) about[63]

Partition was a defining moment in South Asian history.[64] Communities
were constituted, deconstituted and reconstituted.[65] Nations were born.
Thus partition was the terminal point of a political negotiation in which
the communal schism between Hindus and Muslims appears to have been
decisive in demarcating the boundaries of the newly emerged nations. It is
now well established that the colonial power, for obvious reasons, clung to
divisive policies to sustain its rule. Partition was not forced upon the sub-
continent, but it emerged as the best possible alternative at a particular
historical conjuncture. Even the Congress that never accepted the two-
nation theory was forced to swallow its outcome, possibly to avoid a
further bloodbath in the name of protecting communal pride and interests.
On a simplistic reading of historical processes, this may perhaps be attri-
buted to the failure of the nationalism that the Gandhi-led Congress nur-
tured and refined over decades. What is missing is the growing complexity
of the socio-economic and political milieu in which the 'nationalist' agenda
had also undergone dramatic changes. In other words, since nationalism
everywhere has been the product of particular/or distinctive histories, its
articulation is certain to vary substantially in accordance with specific

historical circumstances. In the history of India's freedom struggle, partition is therefore a remarkable sequence in the formation of competing and jostling communities with a specific political agenda.

Another important point to make before placing this study in relation to the available literature is the significant role of religion in cementing the communal bond. What counted more and more in the context of partition were 'believer and non-believers, Hindus and Muslims and Sikhs'.[66] As is evident, the campaign for partition – whether spearheaded by the Hindus or Muslims or Sikhs – gained momentum even in the villages in the name of 'a service to religion'. Colonialism separated Hindus and Muslims by its divide and rule strategy. What accounted for the gradual consolidation of these two rival blocs was probably the logic internal to these communities, which, of course, had its root in the larger socio-economic and political environment. For instance, the rise and consolidation of Hindu blocs in the 1920s in Bengal drew largely upon 'communal common sense of dying Hindu'. The Hindu demographic strength was certain to decline, as the argument runs, in view of the proliferation of Muslims due to reasons connected with their social system. The fear of being outnumbered by Muslims appeared to be an effective instrument for those 'engaged in the mobilization for an exclusive Hindu constituency'.[67] Equally important was the process that led to the construction of a Muslim bloc and consequently the 'othering' of the Hindus. With their economic prosperity at the grassroots through jute cultivation, Muslims gradually emerged as key players in 'high politics', and demands were placed for reservations of seats for the community in educational institutions and government employment. Since the progress of a people is evidenced 'by the increase of wealth and knowledge',[68] several leading Muslim intellectuals of various districts constantly emphasised the necessity of material improvement for their community. Islam had a role to play, and thus Usman, the model farmer in *Adarsha Krishak*, 'calls out the *azan* when he goes to work in his fields',[69] indicating the commitment to community imperatives along with dedication to profession.

It is now evident that, whatever the approach and howsoever diverse interpretations, 'the fact is that Hindu-Muslim partnerships exploded in the 1940s, and the weakness of the secular ideology – the emblem of the desire to create a world beyond religious divisions – became all too clear to that generation'.[70] Although religion played a crucial role in the formation of Pakistan, the Congress failure to assess the minority problem in the proper perspective was equally responsible for the alienation of the Muslims from the Gandhi-led nationalist movement. Notwithstanding the Congress negotiations with a handful of elite Muslims in the wake of the 1916 Lucknow Pact and the 1922–23 Congress–Khilafat merger, the chasm between the Hindus and Muslims was always exploited to advance the cause of the respective communities. How was this possible? In his article

'The Muslim Mass Contact Campaign: analysis of a strategy of political mobilization',[71] Mushirul Hasan argued that the elite-level pacts appeared futile in view of the genuine socio-economic differences between the Hindus and Muslims. In this thoroughly researched piece, he also underlined that the 1937 Mass Contact Campaign, probably the last serious Congress attempt to attract Muslim support, 'ran into serious trouble within two years of its launching, not so much due to Muslim League's opposition or the lack of Muslim support but because of Congress' own reluctance to pursue it with any vigour or sense of purpose'. The Congress decision to abandon the struggle of mass contact for ministry 'allowed Jinnah perhaps involuntarily to take advantage of deteriorating communal relations and rally his community around the divisive symbol of a separate Muslim homeland'. The scenario appears complete in view of the carefully devised scheme of political representation of the British and Jinnah's success in reaping the benefit in his favour. Farzana Shaikh has shown that, in the formation of Pakistan, what was crucial was the institutionalisation of politics on the basis that Congress could not represent Indian Muslims.[72] Similarly, the argument put forward by R. J. Moore that Pakistan 'would not have emerged without [Jinnah]' shows the extent to which Quaid-i-Azam intelligently manipulated the otherwise conducive socio-economic and political reality towards the attainment of Pakistan.[73] Supporting Moore's assessment of Jinnah, Akbar Ahmed attributed the success of the campaign for Pakistan to Jinnah by asserting that 'when a leader who commands respect in the Muslim community appears and can focus on a cause, Muslims are capable of moving mountains'.[74] True, Jinnah spearheaded the campaign for Pakistan; his success, however, was attributed to a society ravaged by the communal disharmony, imperial exploitation and other divisive tendencies so obvious in a colonial set-up. At the ground level, particularly in Bengal, the Hindu–Muslim hiatus, at least in socio-economic terms, was exploited by those supporting the Muslims (including the Muslim League) to highlight the economic tinge of communal schism; at the level of organised politics, the Congress' reluctance to come to terms with the Muslim leadership immediately after the first provincial elections in 1937 institutionalised a sense of persecution in Muslims. Thus emerged, as Moore argues, 'the essential link between Jinnah's leadership and the emergence of Muslim national consciousness', because Jinnah 'personified the Muslim sense of persecution by Congress denial of their achieved status'.[75]

A landmark in the history of partition was the remarkable success of the Muslim League in mobilising Muslim support, irrespective of class, for a separate Muslim homeland in Bengal and Punjab, when it had had no significant support base before 1940. Both David Gilmartin and Ian Talbot attribute the success of the Pakistan campaign in Punjab to a prevalent religious leadership that shifted its loyalty from the Unionist Party to the

Muslim League. Politically, it was probably the most conclusive step towards the creation of a separate Muslim homeland. An argument highlighting the growing influence of the Muslim religious leadership in mobilisation seems plausible, especially in the light of a sudden eclipse of the national-secular forces in the province, which Jinnah called, 'the cornerstone of Pakistan'. In order to delineate the background of the religious support for the Pakistan movement in Punjab, Gilmartin[76] looks into the connections between the structure of religious leadership and the structure of Muslim politics in twentieth century Punjab. By analysing the role of the revivalist Sajjada Nashins in garnering support for Pakistan, Gilmartin demonstrates the extent to which religion and religious symbols acted as crucial variables in the 1947 Great Divide. In his view, the support of Sajjada Nashins to the Muslim League largely accounted for latter's triumph in the elections in 1946. The victory, to quote Gilmartin, 'was a sweeping religious mandate for Pakistan and marked the most important step on the road to Pakistan formation'.

Talbot's formulation, couched more or less in a similar fashion, is a further elaboration of Gilmartin's thesis. By concentrating on the growth of the Muslim League in the Punjab, he has shown the overarching importance of traditional social and religious networks in mobilising political support. According to his findings, the League was able to create and sustain its strong political base by relying on 'the *sufi* and kinship networks'. It was mainly through these and through the linking of the Pakistan scheme to the solution of the villagers' wartime economic difficulties that 'League politics were able to reach down and embrace the rural voters who held the key to the successful creation of a new Muslim nation-state'. A thorough study of the Punjab situation therefore reveals the complex interplay of religion and politics in the rise of Pakistan. It also shows the extent to which Pir's *fatwas* and landlords' economic influence and their leading position in the kinship networks acted favourably in the process that led to the vivisection of the subcontinent of India.[77]

While conceptualising the communal identity of both Hindus and Muslims in the context of the freedom struggle, religion has rightly been emphasised as a significant ingredient. Partha Chatterjee's article 'Bengal politics and the Muslim masses, 1920–47'[78] is an attempt to articulate theoretically the process in which Islam played a crucial role in organising the Muslim peasants against the Hindu zamindars. Since in Bengal peasants were largely Muslims and landlords Hindus, the Hindu–Muslim chasm had acquired a class dimension.[79] Hence, riots and other skirmishes involving Hindus and Muslims always had a class tinge. For instance, as Chatterjee argues, a study of riots in east and north Bengal in the 1920s and 1930s shows that 'the ideology which shaped and gave meaning to the collective acts of the peasantry was fundamentally religious'. He further adds that religion in such a community 'provides an ontology, an

epistemology as well as a practical code of ethics including political ethics'. When this community acts politically, the symbolic meaning of particular acts – their signification – must be found in religious terms'.[80] In the case of Bengal (and also Assam), it was Islam which provided the peasantry with a readymade organising principle for a specific type of politics. Moreover, given the social composition of peasants and zamindars, a continued climate of peasant agitation regarding zamindari oppression was 'translated in the Muslim-dominated areas into ideological terms that were pronouncedly anti-Hindu'.[81] In such a context, the Congress support to the zamindars, the majority of whom were Hindus, strengthens further the characterisation of the Congress as a communal organisation – and thus the alienation between the Congress and the Muslims appeared unbridgeable. In his analysis of the Bengal agrarian class conflict, Sugata Bose reiterated the point by underlining that the consolidation of Hindu–Muslim communal identity owed largely to the changes in the key elements of the Bengal agrarian social structure. According to him, with the rupture of rural credit relations in the aftermath of the Great Depression of the 1930s 'the unequal and symbiotic social networks in east Bengal were torn apart'.[82] Since the talukdar-mahajans and trader-mahajans no longer played the role of guaranteeing the peasants subsistence, 'the old deference disappeared [and] in the small peasant economy of east Bengal, they had ceased to perform any useful function. Once a political challenge came within the realm of possibility, the strength of a religious identity was exploited as a readily available and, for the privileged co-religionists, a safe ideology'.[83] Religion, described as an integral component of communal consciousness, imparted, concludes Bose, 'a sense of collectivity and ideological legitimation in a specific historical conjuncture when the balance of class power in the countryside has already changed'.[84]

While Partha Chatterjee and Sugata Bose draw upon the socioeconomic and political processes at the grassroots to grasp the growth of communal consciousness that was articulated in the movements, by both the Hindus and Muslims, demanding partition, Leonard Gordon looks at the institutional politics to gauge the importance of religion and the cultural distinctiveness of Bengal in the so-called separatist politics. In his 'Divided Bengal: problems of nationalism and identity in the 1947 partition',[85] Gordon explains partition in terms of an intelligent handling of the demand for a separate Muslim homeland by the provincial leadership following the Muslim League's rise to prominence. When the Pakistan resolution was adopted in 1940, the League was confident that a sovereign Muslim state was to be formed in those areas where Muslims constituted a majority. As is evident, the Pakistan formula was presented to the Muslims in Bengal as the only device to escape Hindu domination. Two distinct voices were recorded by Gordon to substantiate his point. Abul Hashim, the General Secretary of the League, argued for a multinational

state drawing its sustenance from the laws of Shariat. In his words, 'it is not in the contemplation of the Muslims to reserve any advantage for themselves, except their right to govern their own society according to the laws of Shariat'.[86] The other voice was that of Abul Mansur Ahmad, a former Congress member who joined the League in 1940. For Ahmad, Pakistan meant 'cultural autonomy'. By culture, he meant Bengali culture and literature, developed, to some extent, by the Hindus as well. While characterising the Bengali culture, Ahmad was quite emphatic that 'it was to be Bengali culture freed from Hindu linguistic and religious shackles; it was to be Muslim but distinctive from [that] of West Pakistanis. So it was to be Bengali and Muslim, but divergent from the culture of Bengalis [of West Bengal] and other Muslims'.[87] Gordon thus inferred that 'religious and cultural factors and interests' played a crucial role in rallying the Muslims around the demand for Pakistan despite differences among themselves in class terms. Simultaneously with Muslim consolidation as a community, a process that helped to crystallise Hindu communal identity loomed large. Undoubtedly, the Shyama Prasad Mookherjee-led Hindu Mahasabha had a significant role in popularising the demand for partition at the grassroots. What made Mahasabha acceptable to the Hindus in rural Bengal was certainly the extreme communalism of the Suhrawardy ministry, which was held responsible for 'the 1946 August bloodbath in Calcutta and Noakhali'. Hindus pledged to 'fight for partition ... to avoid Muslim rule, in free Pakistan, or in united independent Bengal, or in free federated India'.[88]

Partition was made possible because of an environment in which the Hindu–Muslim relationship was articulated in antagonistic terms. Several factors were at work. The growing social distance between Hindus and Muslim in quotidian life, intense competition for jobs and education, the politicisation of religion and the use of religious symbols were factors that further aggravated the situation. Nationalism – whether of the Congress or League variety – was nurtured in peculiar circumstances where the religiously informed cultural identity of both the Hindus and the Muslims figured prominently in the final negotiation for power with the British. Since the Hindu–Muslim cultural identity was constantly redefined in the light of historical needs and future aspirations, it would be theoretically misleading and factually wrong to 'essentialise' communal identities in terms of fixed socio-cultural characteristics. It is true that religion provided the necessary bond to construct a community at a particular historical juncture, but its effectiveness in consolidating the bond by placing one community against another depended a great deal on the circumstances in which the role of the colonial state was no less significant. In other words, apart from the centrality of the colonial state in this process, Hindu–Muslim identities were not just products of colonial institutions and economic changes, but were created by the communities on the

strength of inherited cultural resources as well as invented traditions.[89] It is also important, in grasping the processes that led to partition, to underline that overemphasis on 'the cultural roots of Indian nationalism leaves unexamined the myriad subaltern contestations of an emerging mainstream nationalism which like its adversary, colonialism, may well have only achieved dominance without hegemony . . . Continued privileging of religious distinctions thwarted many well-meaning attempts at accommodating differences within a broad framework of Indian nationalism'.[90]

There is no denying that the explanation of partition in terms of binary opposition between secular nationalism and religious communalism is too simplistic to capture the complex unfolding of processes preceding the Great Divide. While dwelling on the structural contour of politics, based on the above binary opposition, Ayesha Jalal has brought out the multi-layered Muslim identity that can hardly be subsumed by a blanket category like 'religious communalism'. In her words, '[e]xploding communalism to uncover the manifold and contradictory interests driving the politics of Muslim identity in South Asia might enable a better appreciation of difference as a lived cultural experience, one that is forever changing in response to broader historical dynamics, rather than an abstract, sterile and essentialised category awaiting a fresh round of scholarly bandaging'.[91] In a recent work, Jalal reiterates the argument by underlining that 'the strategic essentialising of religious community is deemed more important than its utility as a point of reference for the assertion of cultural difference'. She therefore concludes that overemphasis on the Islamic dimensions of the discourse of Muslim identity, as if these are unproblematically singular in meaning, 'ignores the spatial and temporal aspects of historical change that shaped the emerging contradictions and contestations within the community of Islam in India'.[92] In the entire configurations, the role of the colonial government was no less insignificant. Colonialism had invested religion, argues Jalal, with greater significance through its peculiar configuration of the domain of the 'public' and the 'private'.[93] It played havoc because the growing sense of cultural differences was translated into a politics of identity devoid of considerations, other than that of the religious community through well-crafted constitutional devices, adopted during the course of twentieth century.

Undoubtedly, identity – whether Hindu or Muslim – is constructed through a complex process of contestation. It is also acknowledged that exclusive identity does not develop in a vacuum and derives sustenance, if not inspiration, from the perception of the other. What is, however, clearly visible is the significant role of religion in this process. Religion provided the idiom, vocabulary and symbols for support mobilisation. Muslims were, informs Tazeen M. Murshid, recruited in the name of Islam that defined 'community or the *millat*'. The Muslim League, seen 'as the house of Islam came to be equated with Islam and all those Muslims who

supported parties other than the League were labeled as traitors to Muslims and to Islam'.[94] It was therefore not surprising that Kazi Nazrul Islam, despite being a Muslim, failed to be elected and even lost his deposit simply because 'not only was he believed to an atheist because of his communist sympathies, but he was also considered to a *kafir*, because of the nature of his literary output and his lifestyle including his marriage to a Hindu woman'.[95]

The role of the colonial state was formidable in the consolidation of political interests around the communally divided Hindus and Muslims. 'By treating the Muslims as a separate group, [the colonial state] had', argues David Page, 'divided them from other Indians. By granting them separate electorates, it institutionalized that division'.[96] For Gilmartin, the role of the British electoral system in shaping the meaning of Muslim community cannot be understated.[97] The introduction of separate electorates drew upon the principles that had long helped to defend and consolidate the organisation of the colonial state. In this sense, Muslim identity became an identity defined less by ideology than by 'common heritage and common descent'. For the British, the importance of a such a definition of Muslim community 'lay in the fact that it allowed them to appropriate the concept to strengthen their own political system while underscoring the illegitimacy of appeals to religious symbols as defining elements for the state system'.[98] Communally compartmentalised electorates, Jalal points out, 'had helped transform the case of Muslim distinctiveness into an assertion of nationhood at the level of all-India political discourse'.[99] The resort to Islam was the single most important mobilisational device to generate support for a movement seeking a separate Muslim homeland. In Bengal and Assam, as will be shown below, the League's strategy was to draw upon the Hindu hatred for Muslims that was always equated with 'Islam in danger'. The well-publicised Pirpur report, prepared by the League and presented before the All Indian Muslim League session in 1940, articulated the Muslim fear of being submerged by Hindu domination if a sovereign Muslim state was not formed. The Congress campaign for Ramrajya, the endeavour to impose Bande Mataram in the legislature and its preference for Hindi as a compulsory language in the Congress-ruled provinces were issues that alienated the Muslims from the Congress that was, by 1940, identified with the Hindus.[100] In consequence, a space was created which the League filled by a consistent organisational effort by its able leadership. As a contemporary report suggests, by the middle of 1944 the League membership had increased dramatically by enrolling about 550 000 members from rural Bengal.[101]

The League gained in an atmosphere where the two-nation theory inspired the imagination of Muslims in rural Bengal and Assam as being the best possible means to avoid the Hindu Raj. For them, Pakistan

promised protection from 'the possible atrocities of a Hindu-headed polity'.[102] Perhaps the essential appeal of Pakistan was the hope it held of freedom from Hindu domination. M. A. Ispahani, a business magnate from Bengal, articulated the feeling by saying that there was 'an almost fanatical determination among Muslims not to be dominated by Hindus [for] it was impossible for the Muslims to achieve economic emancipation at the hands of the Hindus'.[103]

In its campaign for Pakistan, the League had succeeded in bringing to the forefront the *mullahs*, *moulvis* and other religious men who had a readymade support base among the rural Muslims.[104] It would not be an exaggeration to say that without their contribution in gradually expanding the Muslim League support base, the Pakistan campaign would have lost much of its vigour. Rafiuddin Ahmed has shown how itinerant mullahs or religious preachers prompted the masses to look beyond the borders of Bengal in search of their supposed Bengali Islamic past and attach 'greater importance to their being Muslim as opposed to their local or regional identity'. This new emphasis proved crucial to 'the subsequent emergence of a measure of social cohesion in a diversified and even culturally polarized community'.[105] The preachers seeking to Islamise the masses emerged as powerful agents in the political mobilisation of the rural Muslims. Given the uncritical acceptance by the people at the grassroots, not only did they play significant roles in shaping the attitudes of the ordinary Muslims, they also provided the required link between the upper classes and poorer peasantry. In the growth and consolidation of a Muslim communal identity especially in the 1940s,[106] the first victim was certainly the syncretistic tradition in Bengal, so assiduously nurtured in the nineteenth century, to evolve an alternative Bengali identity, as Asim Roy so brilliantly demonstrated.[107]

Despite the absence of coherent political ideology and differences, internal to the Muslims as a community, in 1946 the Bengal Muslims voted for the Muslim League and hence for the creation of Pakistan almost unanimously. The League secured by far the largest percentage of Muslim votes in Bengal, as compared to the other provinces.[108] If the results of the 1946 elections alone are taken as the basis, Jinnah appears, comments Jalal, to have 'gone some way towards vindicating his claim to be the spokesman of the Indian Muslim'.[109] The Pakistan demand, despite being vague and imprecise, had brought the Muslims together under the League banner.[110] The idea as projected, informs Tazeen Murshid, allowed people to conjure up whatever meanings or attributes took their fancy. It offered the hope of a separate state for the Muslims to realise more fully their distinct religious and cultural identity. For the bulk of the Muslim peasantry, Pakistan 'became the dream of a promised land, a utopia, or a return to the age of *Khulafa-i-Rashidin*. It had a millennial appeal which, for a while, covered up the deep divisions within the Muslim community'.[111]