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**Dr. Jekyll, Mr Hyde or Bengali Hamlet?  
Hussein Shaheed Suhrawardy as the last Prime Minister  
of undivided Bengal\***

**Abstract**

Up to the present day Suhrawardy remains a controversial figure in both parts of Bengal, with Hindus often seeing him as their fierce persecutor and Bangladeshi Muslims hailing him as their country's forefather and preacher of communal unity. This article analyses his actions during the period of his Prime Ministership (1946–1947) looking for the sources of the above dichotomy. It argues that although Suhrawardy displayed a mild communal bias at times, circumstances made him inconsistent, being as he was trapped between right wing of Muslim League, the Hindu masses unwilling to trust him and (until the end of 1946) Congress ambitions to inherit the whole Raj. The need to act quickly due to Viceroy Mountbatten's haste, as well as the PM's lack of social skills were other factors contributing to failure of his last initiative – United Bengal Scheme – despite his genuine efforts towards Hindu-Muslim settlement and agrarian reforms.

**Keywords:** Hussein Suhrawardy, Muslim League, Partition, Bengal, the politics of caste and communalism, Indian National Congress, Hindu Mahasabha, tebhaga, decolonization, Great Calcutta Riot

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\* The author expresses his immense gratitude to Prof. Elżbieta Walter (Warsaw), Prof. Nariaki Nakazato (Tokyo) and Saleena Karim (Nottingham) for their invaluable help.



Shortly after the Great Calcutta Riot in 1946 Gandhi was discussing the situation in Bengal with his British friend Horace Alexander, and the conversation switched into the Prime Minister of this province, Hussein Shaheed Suhrawardy. According to Alexander's account,

"I think I spoke of some of his good qualities, which I had noticed during those earlier years. 'Do you realize that he is a bad man?' asked Gandhi. I replied 'Yes, I daresay; but I am not quite sure what you mean by that. We are mostly partly bad and also partly good, aren't we?' 'Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde' he commented".<sup>1</sup>

Suhrawardy (1892–1963), from 1920s to death an eminent figure in Bengali and later Pakistani politics, doesn't have much luck for historiography. His only biography<sup>2</sup> was written by his cousin Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah – also a politician – and even though Bangladesh hails him as one of its founding fathers, he never got as much attention from scholars as for example his longtime rival Fazlul Huq. Specifically, his cabinet in Bengal – in office from April 1946 to August 1947 – has never been subjected to a thorough analysis on its own, even though that was the one time in his life when he had real power and the way he used it still arouses fierce controversies, with rampant myths being part of the scholarly discourse. The three most important questions I want to answer in this study are: What was his attitude towards Bengali Hindus, who were at this time becoming more and more distrustful towards the Muslim Prime Minister? Were his much-trumpeted reformist initiatives real or were they just empty promises to begin with? And finally: what in fact was his last, and failed, initiative, i. e. the United Bengal Scheme? A desperate measure devised at the last moment, like "Pakhtoonistan" proposed at almost the same time by Red Shirts in NWFP, or an idea with deeper roots? A plot to give Pakistan a control over Hindus from West Bengal or an effort towards inter-communal settlement to outmaneuver both the group opting for unitary Pakistan governed from Karachi and pro-Partition section of Hindus?

These three problems have common ground. Measuring the extent of Suhrawardy's communalism, and a deeper analysis of his legislative initiatives, helps to establish how sincerely he preached Hindu-Muslim amity in United Bengal. The fourth question, which – as it will be shown – can be addressed only after answering the first three, is: how was Suhrawardy placed in the colonial structure of power at this period? Does his case (and how) broaden our knowledge about the position of elected leaders in the provinces

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<sup>1</sup> Horace Alexander, *Gandhi through Western Eyes*, London 1969, p. 139.

<sup>2</sup> Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah, *Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy: A Biography*, Karachi 1991. There is also a long biographical sketch by M.H.R. Talukdar, which is a foreword to Suhrawardy's memoirs (*Memoirs of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy with a brief account of his life and work*, M.H.R. Talukdar (ed.), Karachi 2009). It derives strongly from the relations of his relatives and co-workers, and thus (like the previous work) rarely has anything else to say than praising Suhrawardy's virtues.

of the British Raj just before Partition? How wide their scope of maneuver was, especially vis-à-vis their Governors and the Viceroy?

Aside from the well-analyzed case of United Bengal Scheme, none of the detailed issues amounting together to a holistic picture enabling an answer to those questions is covered by the existing historiography in a way which would justify relying on footnotes. There are two reasons for that. Firstly, several sources were just recently made available for wider audience (Bengal Assembly and Council Proceedings, many documents from West Bengal State Archives), or indeed the general public (Cabinet Papers of Bengal, some printed memoirs); secondly, the existing scholarly literature is mostly concerned with differently posed problems. For example, Joya Chatterji's book analyses the political steps and worldview of both pre-Partition Hindu politicians and urban masses, but (as her topic is Hindu communalism) it omits the question whether they correctly interpreted the intentions of their Muslim counterparts, although whatever approach Hindus from this time took or endorsed was to some extent a response to what Muslims were doing.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Harun-or-Rashid in his work brilliantly reconstructs a cold war between Jinnah and Suhrawardy, as well as the latter's struggle for keeping Bengal united, but Hindus are largely absent from his story.<sup>4</sup> Suranjan Das deals with pre-Partition riots in Bengal but their political context is at times wrongly (or not at all) interpreted.<sup>5</sup> Researchers of "high" politics and of *tebhaga* movement rarely consider the possibility of those issues having any common ground. And so on.

To date, the only work that addresses those questions as interlinked (and that too without a fourth one) is Bidyut Chakrabarty's book. Not only however, are his conclusions the polar opposite of mine, but – as will be shown via examples – objections can be raised against the methodology he used to deliver them.<sup>6</sup>

### A road to prominence

Suhrawardy, a scion of one of most prominent Muslim families of Bengal, made his political debut in 1923, being elected for the first time into the Bengal Legislative Council (upper chamber of provincial parliament). Together with many other Muslim leaders he soon entered into the famous Bengal Pact, which guaranteed Bengal Muslims 60% of mandates in local bodies and 55% government posts (it should be remembered that they constituted 54.7% of Bengalis, according to 1941 census). The Pact's architect, Chittaranjan Das, President of Bengal Provincial Congress Committee [BPCC] and Gandhi's rival, became Suhrawardy's closest political mentor; the alliance soon made Das Mayor of Calcutta and Leader of the biggest fraction in the Council, while young Suhrawardy

<sup>3</sup> Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, Cambridge 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Harun-or-Rashid, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh: Bengal Muslim League and Muslim Politics, 1906–1947*, Dhaka 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal, 1905–1947*, Delhi 1991.

<sup>6</sup> Bidyut Chakrabarty, *The Partition of Bengal and Assam, 1932–1947: Contour of freedom*, London 2004.

became his Deputy in both functions. The alliance died with Das one year later, and shortly after that in 1926, Hindu-Muslim riots took place. When Suhrawardy – practically the only high-placed Muslim in a city inhibited in one-fifth by them – was accused by Calcutta *bhadraloks* [Hindu upper class] for orchestrating disturbances, his political black legend was born.

And it grew rapidly. The idea that Suhrawardy was a “godfather of the Calcutta underworld”<sup>7</sup> became so well-ingrained in the historiography that for example Ayesha Jalal did not even feel the need to document it by footnote. Yet none of the incidents that supposedly reveal Suhrawardy’s shady contacts with *goondas* [thugs] as given in Suranjan Das well-known book – or elsewhere – stand up to scrutiny when one searches for hard evidence, instead of relying on anecdotal evidence or British prejudice. The Calcutta riot of 1926, which should be allotted more space here as a formative experience for young politician, is a typical example.<sup>8</sup> That’s not to say he had no disreputable followers; indeed in Calcutta during the late colonial period it would be difficult to find an influential politician who hadn’t. But that is one thing and being a “godfather” of *goondas*, not to mention the mastermind of the Muslim underworld’s atrocities against Hindus, is another; there is no conclusive evidence he ever used “his” people as mischief-makers, neither in the 1920s nor at the later years.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Ayesha Jalal, *The State of Martial Rule: The origins of Pakistan’s political economy of defence*, Cambridge 1990, p. 254.

<sup>8</sup> Das actually introduces Suhrawardy in connection with the aforementioned riot: “The Muslim Deputy Mayor of the Calcutta Corporation Suhrawardy, along with local goondas such as Mina Peshwari and Allah Baksh Peshwari, were found inciting their coreligionists. During some looting of Marwari stores Suhrawardy was himself present on the spot” (Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal*, p. 95). In the document referenced by Das in a footnote as the source of his information we find nothing like that. Neither had anyone “found” Suhrawardy “inciting” it, nor was it proved in any defensible way or followed sooner by colonial authorities. Allah Baksh is mentioned only as a leader of illegal demonstration, not as a noted *goonda* (neither is Meena, but his criminal record is known from other sources). The police, it seems, hardly had evidence that they had done anything that could be used as a pretext to get rid of them due to their political activity, so “both of these men, if they could be found and *if no specific charge could be proved against them* [italics mine], would be removed from Calcutta under the terms of *Presidency Area Security Act*”. As for the looting of Marwari shops, the document does not say that Suhrawardy was there when the act was being committed, but that when the policemen arrived they saw him nearby and “his attitude was such as to create suspicion”. Who knows, however, if that was really a sign of his attitude or of the anti-Muslim bias of the officers? See *Question of the internment under Regulation III of 1818 of Mr. Hasan Sahid Suhrawardy, Deputy Mayor of Calcutta and a notorious communal leader in Bengal. Uses and limitations of Regulation III of 1818 particularly in regard to its use as a general means of dealing with communal disturbances*, File No. 209/26, Home (Poll.), National Archives of India, New Delhi [hereafter NAI], pp. 3–4.

<sup>9</sup> There are works that try to make such use of the fact that Suhrawardy as a barrister negotiated terms of surrender between aforementioned Meena, accused of rioting, and police; even though it is only reasonable to expect that he knew the prominent Muslims from his constituency or that he organized defense for them. In a hyperbolized way – it may even be said that there was a tendency to counter his growing black reputation with a white one – we find it in his cousin’s memoirs, where she informs us that “Shaheed had managed to save persons practically from the gallows” (Suhrawardy Ikramullah, *Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy*, p. 25). About the Meena episode see Hamidul Huq Chowdhury, *Memoirs. Autobiography*, N&M Schede, 2012 (I used the digitized version on Google Books), p. 45. As for the riot itself, see Pradeep Kumar Dutta, ‘War Over Music: The Riots of 1926 in Bengal’,

What cannot be denied is that the 1926 riot was a turning point for Suhrawardy. As he himself wrote,

“The Hindus demanded I should not help the oppressed Muslims, who were only 22 per cent of the populations and were being victimized and oppressed by the Hindu police, even with legal and moral assistance. Their insistence was so vehement and unfair that I was forced to the conclusion that the talk of Hindu-Muslim unity was a myth and that the Hindus wanted nothing but complete surrender from the Muslims as the price of unity (...) It appeared to me that the only hope for Muslims was to stand on their own legs and look after their own separate interests if they wanted to survive and progress”.<sup>10</sup>

In others words, at this time he began to develop a ‘communally-minded’ approach towards politics which Francis Taker, G.O.C. of the Eastern Command (1946–1947), much later summed up as follows:

“Mr. Suhrawardy is not alone in his attitude: it is shared by very many important personages in Indian political life. (...) He was no exception. He thought, argued and talked Muslim League: to him there was no other side, despite the position which he came to hold as Chief Minister in a province which was almost equally divided between the two communities”.<sup>11</sup>

This judgment was probably a little too harsh. Yet even Shaista Suhrawardy, understandably loyal to her cousin’s memory, wrote about him:

“Their [Hindu politicians from Congress] communalism made Shaheed Bhai communal, he would henceforth champion only the cause of his community since the ideal of nationalism which he had tried to follow had proved to be a mirage”.<sup>12</sup>

The next decade Suhrawardy spent on unsuccessful experiments with politics – in the company of various political orphans of Bengal Pact – and on far more successful organizing of trade unions in Calcutta. That provided him a political base he could rely on, feeling in Calcutta more at ease than his equally aristocratic rivals, as he had his followers close at hand.

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*Social Scientist* 18/205–206 (1990), pp. 38–48; Anne Hardgrove, *Community and Public Culture: The Marwaris in Calcutta*, New York 2004, pp. 158–160.

<sup>10</sup> *Memoirs of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy*, p. 103.

<sup>11</sup> Francis Taker, *While Memory Serves*, London 1950, p. 122.

<sup>12</sup> Suhrawardy Ikramullah, *Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy*, p. 26.

This bore fruit when introducing diarchy in the Raj galvanized party activity, and Mohammed Ali Jinnah, steadily rising to the status of indisputable *Quaid-i-Azam* (“Great Leader” as he was dubbed a few years later) of the All-India Muslim League [AIML], saw in Suhrawardy a suitable person to expand the League’s source base in Bengal. Having a strong rival in Fazlul Huq’s *Krishak Praja Party* [Peasants’ Party, KPP], with mostly aristocrats or non-Bengali figures (like Hassan Ispahani) in League’s camp, such consolidation was needed like an oxygen. On his part, despite not being in the best terms with Jinnah or his new party colleagues (beginning with Khawaja Nazimuddin and his cronies), Suhrawardy saw an opportunity in the fact that AIML was an all-India organization. So he merged his Bengal Muslim Conference and All United Bengal Muslim Party with it, being rewarded with a position of Secretary of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League [BPML], which he was able to hold also after Huq’s entry into the League, following the KPP-BPML coalition after the election. Due to this he was also able to force Jinnah to agree with his ideas of reorganizing the party. Among the steps he took were lowering the membership fees and age limits for candidates, as well as letting students join the BPML. He also considerably broadened the party’s source base, looking for able youngsters. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman – future *Bangabandhu* – has left a revealing account of Suhrawardy visiting his village and asking “affectionately” about a local branch of Muslim League; as it did not exist, Mujib was asked to create one with Suhrawardy’s assent.<sup>13</sup>

The newcomers routinely saw a benevolent boss in him – something only Fazlul Huq and (later) Abul Hashim among the major Bengal Leaguers were able to achieve. The problem was, Suhrawardy did far worse when dealing with his equals. Caustic and proud, he was usually convinced – often with good reasons – that he was wiser than the people he spoke with, and the memoirs left by some members of this rather big group (as well as other sources, including even Shaista Suhrawardy’s book<sup>14</sup>) indicate that they sensed it. Even Jinnah, theoretically his superior – who arguably shared some of those traits – wasn’t spared. Suhrawardy’s known letters to *Quaid* – both from 1930s and 1940s – are a rare mixture of desperate pleas and vitriolic comments; his remarks to British officials, such as “Mr. Jinnah will listen to someone for two minutes or so and then get impatient”,<sup>15</sup> add to this picture. Toker admitted he had a “nimble brain” but also had the

“irritating habit of saying things that he knows full well should get a rise out of the other man – a bit unfair (...) and not the way to make good friends (...) He is too prone to think that the other side will readily forget an injury that he wishes to be forgotten”.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, *The Unfinished Memoirs*, (trans.) Fakhrul Alam, Dhaka 2012, p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> See Suhrawardy Ikramullah, *Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy*, pp. 12–13.

<sup>15</sup> Note by Sir T[erence] Shone [Britain’s High Commissioner in India], 17 April 1947, *The Transfer of Power, 1942–1947* [hereafter TOP], vol. X, Nicholas Mansergh (ed.), London 1981, doc. 163, p. 294.

<sup>16</sup> Toker, *While Memory Serves*, pp. 121–122.



In sum, he was able neither to build up real teamwork nor long-term equal alliances – thus alienating even those he desperately needed, like Abul Hashim in late 1946<sup>17</sup> – and furthermore, he did not tolerate ambitions in his milieu. As will be shown, he surrounded himself mostly with largely anonymous party workers or young lieutenants, who had no real backing. Stephen Hatch-Barnwell, an Indian Civil Service member who left valuable memoirs and knew Suhrawardy well, compared him to a banyan tree: no plant could grow tall in its shadow.<sup>18</sup> Such reflections were common.<sup>19</sup>

At the beginning of the 1940s however, Suhrawardy wasn't even the tallest tree in Muslim Bengal, and so when in March 1940 the famous Lahore Resolution demanding "Independent States in which the constituent units shall be autonomous and sovereign" was moved, it was Fazlul Huq whom Jinnah asked to do this.<sup>20</sup> How little the Bengalis' visions for the future as derived from this resolution overlapped with the one Jinnah nurtured is the subject of other well-documented works<sup>21</sup> and need not be discussed here, except to underline that it was also the case with Suhrawardy. "I don't understand this sophistry about a Muslim state and not an Islamic state" – his cousin Shaista asked him once. "What is the difference?". Formulating the answer took a great deal of thinking, and even then it was chaotic: "The difference is, in a Muslim state the Muslims being in a majority are in a position to safeguard their interest and plan and achieve economic prosperity".<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> The correspondence between Government of Pakistan and Governor of East Bengal from 1950 recalls how Suhrawardy used to receive even "the most respectable man" when being the PM: he greeted his visitors "lying on his bed with his legs outstretched and people seeing him in his bed had to talk to him standing by his side". Then Suhrawardy was addressing them in "a bantering tone" if not showing "his authority by shouting at them" (quoted from Ilhan Niaz, *The Culture of Power and Governance of Pakistan, 1947–2008*, Islamabad 2010, p. 246). The author sees this as his general tendency, but since all the supplicants subjected to such treatment he mentions by name were members of the rival faction in BPML (Khawaja Nazimuddin, business tycoons Adamjee and Dawood), this may have been the main reason of the PM's conduct. Whatever it was, such humiliation of the people whose backing Suhrawardy may have well needed in future (aside from political meaning those three had by themselves, they were also close to Jinnah) shows his shortsightedness and/or thoughtlessness when the social skills were concerned.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Hatch-Barnwell, *The Last Guardian. Memoirs of Hatch-Barnwell, ICS of Bengal*, Dhaka 2011, p. 167. In fact, the banyan prevents that not by its shadow but by its extensive rootage; one shouldn't expect botanical accuracy from metaphors, though.

<sup>19</sup> See for example the letter to Jinnah sent by one half-anonymous party worker just before 1946 elections, which asserts that "Mr. Suhrawardy is a man of outstanding ability" but "his tongue is wild, his manners shocking, his temper autocratic, his sincerity and honesty questionable. He is the epitome of power politics. (...) He suffers from the delusion that people rally around him in spite of his contemptuous treatment of them, because they love and admire his personality and ability. The fact is nobody loves and admires him". Saudur Rahman to Jinnah, 12 February 1946, *Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah papers* [hereafter JP], ed. Z.H. Zaidi et al., Islamabad 2006, vol. XII, doc. 493, p. 568.

<sup>20</sup> Full text of the Resolution in: Syed Sharifuddin Pirzada (ed.), *Foundations of Pakistan: All-India Muslim League Documents: 1906–1947* [hereafter FOP], vol. II: 1924–1947, Karachi 1970, pp. 340–341.

<sup>21</sup> See especially Neilesh Bose, *Recasting the Region: Language, Culture and Islam in Colonial Bengal*, Oxford 2014, pp. 187–236.

<sup>22</sup> Suhrawardy Ikramullah, *Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy*, p. 14.

This, it seems, was all he wanted, yet that was no proper reply to the question – quite important for both *bhadraloks* and a substantial part of League’s rank and file. The same may be said (at this time) about the idea of “Bangsam” – i. e. independent state of Bengal and Assam, along with the question of whether such a state where Muslims would be only a tiny majority should be a “Muslim state”.

Meanwhile, after Huq’s departure from the BPML and his political downfall, he was replaced by Khawaja Nazimuddin as Bengal PM, and Suhrawardy was entrusted with the key Civil Supplies Ministry. His controversial role at this post, including the organization of raids to recover hidden grain, is also well covered by other authors and need not be reviewed here in detail.<sup>23</sup>

At the same time, the Working Committee of the AIML forbade the combining of party and government posts, forcing Suhrawardy to choose between resigning either as minister or BPML secretary. He chose the latter, and the election of young Burdwan worker (and Suhrawardy’s relative) Abul Hashim into this position proved to be a turning point for the BPML, which became increasingly left-leaning. Due to the enormous flow of new members and sympathizers captured by this program, the influence of the conservative wing in the BPML began to wane.<sup>24</sup> Suhrawardy acted as a mediator – a greatly needed role since at times there were even outbreaks of physical violence between factions. Personally he was closer to leftists, but only slightly. “Hashim” – he said once – “I don’t appreciate your insistence on ideology. Ideology has never been of any use to me in public life”.<sup>25</sup>

Soon both Suhrawardy’s aspirations to assume power in the BPML and Hashim’s leftist turn were given the green light. After Nazimuddin’s government was defeated in one ballot and the Speaker of the Assembly, Nationalist Muslim Syed Nausher Ali, threatened to obstruct its functioning once the Cabinet lost its majority, Governor Richard Casey dismissed both bodies and ruled himself till the end of the war.<sup>26</sup> Only after Partition did Nazimuddin’s faction fully recover from this blow. When Clement Attlee’s government announced fresh elections in India, the BPML was mostly under the control of Suhrawardy and Hashim, although the staunchly conservative *maulana* [Islamic teacher] Akram Khan was still its President; his and Nazimuddin’s followers still had to be acknowledged, in part because of the *Quaid’s* patronage. Yet the left set the tune – and due to the blend of religious and leftist slogans presented by the BPML, Muslim villagers began to treat Pakistan as a place where it would really be possible to meet the needs of everyone. As is broadly described by Ahmad Kamal (whose brilliant book is a study of those hopes

<sup>23</sup> See Cormac Ó Gráda, *Eating People is Wrong, and Other Essays on Famine, Its Past, and Its Future*, Princeton 2015, pp. 38–91.

<sup>24</sup> See Hashim’s manifesto: *Star of India*, 23 March 1945, as well as: Harun-or-Rashid, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh*, pp. 154–156; Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal 1937–1947*, Delhi 1976, pp. 187–189; Abul Hashim, *In Retrospect*, Dhaka 1998, pp. 80–86.

<sup>25</sup> Abul Hashim, *In Retrospect*, pp. 59–60.

<sup>26</sup> See *Personal Diary*, R. G. Casey, Photo Eur. 48, India Office Records, British Library, London [hereafter IOR], vol. III, pp. 335–339 [hereafter Casey’s Diary] and M.K.U. Molla, *The Bengal Cabinet Crisis of 1945*, *Journal of Asian History* 14/2 (1980), pp. 127–148.



crumbling after Partition), for this group the League meant Pakistan, and Pakistan meant end of all oppression – by Hindu moneylenders and landlords, but also by police and bureaucracy, perhaps including even the disappearance of debts and taxes. The exact political shape of future Pakistan was undefined as usual, letting everybody dream whatever he wanted. Jinnah’s deliberate vagueness helped. As he liked to say, “It is no use telling you about Pakistan at a stage when even a Muslim child understands it”.<sup>27</sup>

### Suhrawardy’s first months as PM

Provincial elections took place between 18th and 24th March; in Bengal the Congress secured 90% of votes from the “general” – i.e. non-Muslim – category, getting 86 seats. The Muslim League won 114 out of 123 ‘Muslim’ seats – in fact 116, as two independent Muslim candidates soon joined forces with her. As 25 seats were reserved for Europeans who customarily voted with the Government, the League’s domination was secured,<sup>28</sup> also because the elections had exposed the political impotence of both pro-Congress (“Nationalist”) Muslims and the religious right in Bengal. Yet Suhrawardy “was not in the least doubt that the Muslim League would be returned to power but professed to be in doubt as to whether he would be asked to form the ministry” as “he was at the time asserting that Britain had let Islam down all over the world, was highly critical of the British in India and elsewhere and said that Britain was now a third-class power”.<sup>29</sup> This was demonstrated not only in words: in February 1946 he took part in mammoth anti-British demonstrations (which turned into riots, although at this time Suhrawardy tried to help restore order) demanding the release of prisoners from the Indian National Army, which during the war had fought on the Japanese side. At this time League was at the forefront of protests since the prisoner in question was Muslim, Captain Abdul Rashid Ali, who unlike the previous ones shared Jinnah’s ideas. Suhrawardy, leading a mass procession along with Satish Chandra Dasgupta from Congress, hailed Hindu-Muslim unity against colonial misuse of power, adding:

<sup>27</sup> Speech at a public meeting held to celebrate the Victory of Muslim League in the Central Assembly Elections, 11 January 1946, K. A. K. Yusufi (ed.), *Speeches, Statements & Messages of the Quaid-e-Azam*, Lahore 1996, vol. IV, doc. 795, p. 2150.

<sup>28</sup> Full results (with comments) in Harun-or-Rashid, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh*, pp. 214–215 and *Franchise: Elections in Bengal 1946*, L/P&J/8/475, IOR. Full list of Member of Legislative Assembly [M.L.A.’s] with their constituencies: *Assembly Proceedings, Official Report, Bengal Legislative Assembly* [hereafter BLA], vol. LXX, First Session, 1946, 14 May 1946, pp. iii–viii. A number of votes the candidates got: *The General Elections (1945–46): The Legislative Assembly – Bengal*, File No. 106/3/45-R, Reforms Office, NAI. See also characteristics of some freshly elected M.L.A.’s written by Governor: Burrows to Wavell, 11 April 1946, *Bengal Politics: Documents of the Raj* [hereafter BP], vol. III: 1944–1947, eds. Enayetur Rahim, Joyce L. Rahim, Dhaka 1999, doc. 219, pp. 137–139. Note that the frequency was extremely high: out of 8 496 992 Bengalis entitled to vote, 8 028 023 exercised that right.

<sup>29</sup> Tucker, *While Memory Serves*, p. 121.

“Let it not be misunderstood that we are against the individual Britisher. I have heard to-day some people speaking of revenge. This spirit is entirely wrong. We shall eradicate British imperialism root and branch, but we take no revenge”.<sup>30</sup>

It was also Suhrawardy who, after ferocious speeches were given at Dalhousie Square suggested that the public disperse, as he wanted to avoid disturbances and spilling of blood. Yet later the disturbances still occurred, compelling the Bengal Governor Richard Casey to unjustly state that “Suhrawardy has no recognized authority over his followers”;<sup>31</sup> maybe “full control” should have been put here instead.

All this could have been a considerable obstacle after the elections if Casey was still Governor, but he was not. Frederick Burrows, who replaced him in February 1946, soon developed a far better opinion about Suhrawardy, although that didn’t mean he overlooked the new PM’s flaws. That was summed up in his confession to Viceroy Archibald Wavell that the Bengal PM was “almost the only Indian politician he knew capably of taking a long view, but that he was a cad and untrustworthy”;<sup>32</sup> in July 1946, he added that “as Chief Minister he has so far shown a sense of responsibility for which his previous record and reputation had not entirely prepared me and he has scrupulously honoured all the understanding with me on the basis of which he took office”;<sup>33</sup> thus “my personal relations with him have continued to be, generally speaking, cordial”.<sup>34</sup>

Suhrawardy-Jinnah relations were rapidly becoming less cordial, and not without reason. When Harun-or-Rashid in 1982 asked League workers who had participated in the 1946 electoral campaign how they had visualized Pakistan’s future shape and why they gave no opinion about this problem before the elections, the answers were surprisingly similar: anti-Hindu resentment was so deep that nothing more was needed when campaigning, and besides, more elaborate schemes could have turned out to be divisive for the party and its sympathizers.<sup>35</sup> Yet many of them were dreaming of “Pakistan” meaning independent Bengal, maybe with Assam or at least Sylhet as well; hadn’t Lahore Resolution envisaged “sovereign independent states” at the west and north-east India? Now the elections were won (in Bengal), and the winners had to be more precise.

In 1945 in Lahore a book by one S. Rahman (a Bengali Muslim) entitled *Why Pakistan?* was published in which the author suggested the partition of India into three pieces: Pakistan (Sindh, Punjab, Balochistan, NWFP), Bengsam (Bengal and Assam)

<sup>30</sup> *Indian Annual Register* [hereafter IAR] 1946, vol. I, p. 272. See also: See also: Gautam Chattopadhyay, *Bengal Electoral Politics and Freedom Struggle 1862–1947*, New Delhi 1984, pp. 200–202 and Ishan Mukherjee, *Agitations, Riots and the Transitional State in Calcutta, 1945–1950* (PhD diss., Cambridge University, 2017), chapter II.

<sup>31</sup> Casey’s Diary, vol. IV, p. 338.

<sup>32</sup> Archibald Wavell, *The Viceroy’s Journal*, Penderel Moon (ed.), London 1973, p. 428.

<sup>33</sup> *The Bengal Ministry 1946*, L/P&J/7/5472, IOR, p. 64.

<sup>34</sup> *The Bengal Ministry* [document written on January 1947], L/P&J/7/5472, IOR, p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> Harun-or-Rashid, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh*, pp. 201–202.

and Hindusthan. In 1946, it was reprinted in Bengal with an enthusiastic foreword by Suhrawardy; notably, the foreword was dated 3<sup>rd</sup> April, the very day he became Prime Minister. Three days later he was interviewed by an American journalist, who heard from him that the ideal solution of the Bengal's problems would be one "sovereign zone" for all Bengali-speaking people, regardless of religion. How was that compatible with waving Pakistani banners<sup>36</sup>?

And what was to be put on those banners? Shortly after the election results became known, and before Suhrawardy could form his Cabinet, he had to participate along with other prominent BPML politicians at the AIML's conference in Lahore. During this session, on 8th April, the PM also met members of the Cabinet Mission, who had been sent by London to propose the best possible scheme for the transfer of power. According to Wavell – who admittedly did not like him one bit –

"he made a very bad impression on the Delegation. He put forward all the stock arguments about Pakistan (...) When I did tackle him on the defense of Eastern Pakistan, it was obvious that he had never given it a moment's thought, and he tried to ride off generalities: that no country could defend itself alone nowadays, and so on. He then indulged himself with a hymn of hate against Hindus (...) he went on to claim that Bengal had been deliberately starved out by the other Provinces in 1943, and that this proved that there was no unity in India".<sup>37</sup>

The next day the Mission received an additional letter from Suhrawardy, in which he warned against giving Nehru too much power, due to his tendency to use the police and the army to suppress Muslim demands. The Mission members could thus "be responsible for a little civil war".<sup>38</sup>

A little civil war awaited League itself the same day, when Liaquat demanded Suhrawardy to move the final resolution of the session. It must be noted that as its draft had been prepared by special sub-committee with Hassan Ispahani (Jinnah's friend and a wealthy Calcutta businessman of non-Bengali origin) as the only "Bengali" member, its contents weren't previously known to Bengali delegates – and turned out to be a shock for them. The phrase "Muslim states" from the Lahore Resolution disappeared altogether, and "independent sovereign state" comprising of two "zones" (Punjab-NWFP-Sindh-Balochistan and Bengal-Assam) replaced it – most probably due to Jinnah's influence.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> *Star of India*, 6 April 1946. British officials openly asked the PM the question: "Would the Hindu in Muslim majority areas also be aliens?" but did not get a satisfactory answer ("Mr. Suhrawardy said that he was not prepared to commit himself to a logical answer to the constitutional aspect at this stage"). Note of Meeting between Cabinet Delegation, Field Marshall Viscount Wavell and Mr. H. S. Suhrawardy, 8 April 1946, TOP vol. VII, doc. 67, p. 164.

<sup>37</sup> Wavell, *The Viceroy's Journal*, pp. 239–240.

<sup>38</sup> Mr. Suhrawardy to Cabinet Delegation, 9 April 1946, TOP vol. VII, doc. 77, enclosure, pp. 195–196.

<sup>39</sup> Full text of the resolution and some memoirs about the circumstances of its preparation: Choudhry Khaliqzaman, *Pathway to Pakistan*, Lahore 1961, pp. 340–345, see also: Harun-or-Rashid, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh*, pp. 233–236.

Abul Hashim, more open on his opinion than Suhrawardy, picked a fight immediately, only to hear the *Quaid*'s nonsensical excuse that the last "s" in "states" was a "printing mistake" made in 1940.<sup>40</sup> *Maulana* Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani from Assam was aghast as well, but since no delegate from outside eastern "zone" cared and Nazimuddin's faction in Bengal had no problems with that change, the protest was doomed.

Suhrawardy's stance was more complicated. Defying Jinnah face-to-face at this stage could have resulted in an open schism inside the BPML, thus diminishing the chances of Bengal's independence in any form (and the PM's own position). Granted, this calculation wasn't easy to see from the outside considering the fiery statement which Suhrawardy made while moving the final resolution:

"The Congress was saying: hand over power to us. We shall sweep away all opposition. We shall suppress the Muslims (...) This I call insanity induced by the lust for power. It would be sheer blindness if the Cabinet Mission decided to put the destiny of India in the hands of this murderous gang".<sup>41</sup>

Then again, it shouldn't be forgotten what Gandhi said about Suhrawardy a year later (although in quite a different context): "What a curious man! It matters nothing to him what he says. (...) But the future is the child of the present".<sup>42</sup> And having taken into account how Suhrawardy tried to deal with the Hindu opposition back in Bengal, it seems that his hardline spits in Lahore were mostly a smokescreen.

The interview that he gave shortly after (13<sup>th</sup> April) to *Star of India* confirms this suspicion. He said, inter alia, that Bengal could not be divided and that the one important problem faced by the nation was the case of "Pakistan and Hindusthan"; once the former was created, then would come the time to define the exact status of the Pakistan zones.<sup>43</sup> At the same time (11<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> April) the BPML and Bengali Congress engaged in coalition talks. It's revealing that even Surendra Mohan Ghosh, who would just a few months later be one of the greatest opponents of the PM, was optimistic about the prospects of such a Bengal Pact-type grand alliance.

Nothing came of it, though, since the Working Committee of All-India Congress Committee [AICC] gave Bengali leader Kiran Sankar Roy unworkable conditions for such a coalition – the main bone of contention being the even number of ministers for both parties (excluding the PM). There was one more important issue: The Congress demanded an assurance that no controversial regulation which could impact communal relations would be passed without the assent of both parties. In the worst scenario this

<sup>40</sup> See the above and also: Abul Hashim, *In Retrospect*, pp. 125–126; Ali M.S. Alghamdy, *Leadership and political development: a study of South Asian experience since 1967* (PhD diss., Aligarh Muslim University, 1990), p. 167; Mirza Abol Hassan Ispahani, *Qaid-e-Azam Jinnah as I knew him*, Karachi 1976, pp. 144–145.

<sup>41</sup> FOP vol. II, p. 514.

<sup>42</sup> Pyarelal, *Mahatma Gandhi – The Last Phase*, vol. II, Ahmedabad 1958, p. 182.

<sup>43</sup> *Star of India*, 13 April 1946.

could have prevented the new Bengal parliament from doing pretty much anything. It soon became obvious that even buying fertilizers can be “controversial” in a “communal” way.

So the talks ceased. There can hardly be any doubt however that at this stage Suhrawardy was open to a bipartisan provincial alliance to try and keep Bengal in one piece. Privately he confessed that “I was not an all-India leader, I was the leader of the Muslims of Bengal only, and in the Pakistan I had envisaged, Bengal would have remained an entity and the Muslims would have been in a majority there. They alone were my concern”.<sup>44</sup>

And yet he still tried to negotiate with Hindus – a risky step in his situation. For Nazimuddin’s faction, which enjoyed Jinnah’s patronage, merely engaging in these talks was seen as an outward treason of the Muslim cause.<sup>45</sup> At the very least, Suhrawardy thought that a Hindu-Muslim settlement on amicable terms was a necessary condition for not only Bengali Hindus but also Muslims if were to have a future, since – as he began to understand – not only in Congress-led India, but also in unitary Pakistan Bengali Muslims would be receiving orders from people elsewhere who did not necessarily care about their interests.

Another factor influencing Suhrawardy’s position was something he never fully understood (as Gandhi would later observe): words are not wind. Having agreed in Lahore to be the resolution-mover, the Bengal PM thus agreed to back Jinnah’s politics, deepening the *bhadralok*’s distrust – and this was another reason the talks died prematurely. The pattern that had to repeat itself more than once in the future was set.

In spring 1946 this wasn’t entirely obvious, however. In order to send a signal that a coalition was still possible if Congress were to somehow tone down its demands, Suhrawardy appointed only seven Ministers to his Cabinet, giving more than one Ministry to any of them – thus nobody would have to be expelled if an alliance was to be forged. The new Government was sworn in on 23<sup>rd</sup> April, and apart from the Prime Ministership, Suhrawardy took Internal Affairs for himself. Five out of six other League members were for a long time his political followers,<sup>46</sup> and the sixth one, Shamsuddin Ahmad (in charge of Commerce, Labour and Industries), in the past Secretary General of KPP, was close to Abul Hashim’s leftists (and had some ties with Communists as well). The last Minister was Jogendranath Mandal (Works and Buildings, Judicial and Legislative) – a living symbol of the League’s co-operation with Bhimrao Ambedkar’s *dalit* movement.

<sup>44</sup> Suhrawardy Ikramullah, *Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy*, pp. 59–60. It should be underlined, though, that Bengali Muslims are put here not against Bengali Hindus but against Muslims from other parts of British Raj.

<sup>45</sup> “I think any unbiased reader of the published correspondence would admit that Suhrawardy took up and maintained a reasonable and consistent attitude throughout the negotiations and made the other party as favourable an offer as could be expected in present conditions” was the opinion of Governor Burrows, who in the same letter included a detailed description of the coalition talks. Burrows to Wavell, 25 April 1946, BP vol. III, doc. 220, pp. 141–142. See also: Harun-or-Rashid, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh*, p. 224.

<sup>46</sup> Those were: Ahmad Hossain (Agriculture, Forests and Fisheries), Khan Bahadur Abdul Ghofran (Civil Supplies), Khan Bahadur Mohammed Ali Bogra (Finance, Health, Local Self-Government), Khan Bahadur A.F.M. Abdur Rahman (Relief, Cooperative Credit, Irrigation and Waterways) and Syed Moazzamuddin Hussein (Education, Land, Land Revenue).

As Burrows observed, “half of the eight members are almost completely untried men”; although they worked “very harmoniously together as a team”, he had an impression that “in a political sense (...) they tend to be a second rate lot, with at most only two good brains among them”.<sup>47</sup> The brains in question belonged to Suhrawardy and Mandal.

A more acute problem with this group was its composition. Most of the nominees had the virtue of loyalty but did not have much clout individually, thus narrowing government’s source base and limiting its scope of maneuver. This shows again what Suhrawardy’s approach to politics looked like – and its side effects. Trusting almost nobody but those over whom he could exert control, the PM showed who would not be in charge in “his” Bengal: Caste Hindus and conservative Muslims. To be frank, it wasn’t exactly his intention or his fault.

Due to the failure of coalition talks with Congress, finding a *bhadralok* candidate for a ministerial post with any real backing was close to impossible, so Suhrawardy can hardly be blamed for not including any in his Cabinet. Yet not only Joya Chatterji in her well-known book<sup>48</sup> but also *bhadraloks* themselves did just that. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee of the Hindu Mahasabha, who was until Partition the most vociferous enemy of Suhrawardy in the Assembly, genuinely feared that

“if Bengal is converted into Pakistan (...) Bengal Hindus are placed under a permanent tutelage of Muslims. Judging from the manner in which attacks on Hindu religion and society have been made, [this] means an end of Bengali Hindu”.<sup>49</sup>

The PM’s unrestrained tongue did not help. In the quarrelsome atmosphere of political debates he still – between one attempt to forge an alliance with the BPCC and another – couldn’t resist making statements such as “Among my caste Hindu friends I know there are many who are sick of Congress tyranny and who are prepared to give a chance to the Muslim League to administer this province in the interest (...) of justice and fair-play”.<sup>50</sup> It’s even hard to say if he really thought so or knowingly inflated the influence of the tiny part of *bhadraloks* which was open to cooperation with him.

And, of course, the accusations about lack of justice or fair-play were prominent throughout his tenure. For example, the Government was keen on financially helping Islamia College in Dacca, making it sort of counterweight towards the Hindu-dominated Calcutta University (where Shyama Prasad Mukherjee was a Vice-chancellor). The reply of the opposition was automatic and simple: Calcutta University is not a communal institution, while Islamia College is – so does it mean that the Government wants to bar Hindus from education? It’s a testament to the fierceness of communal rivalry that

<sup>47</sup> *The Bengal Ministry 1946*, L/P&J/7/5472, IOR, p. 64.

<sup>48</sup> “His first act as Prime Minister was to revoke the long-standing principle of Hindu-Muslim parity in the ministry”. Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, p. 230.

<sup>49</sup> Private note quoted in: *ibidem*, p. 231.

<sup>50</sup> BLC, First Session, 1946, No. 14, 15 August 1946, p. 264.



this problem, hardly the most important Bengal faced, made both chambers of Bengal Parliament quarrel for dozens of hours. Still, the Hindus (and some of their Muslim allies like Humayun Kabir from Congress) were right to point out that this exposed the anti-Hindu mood of the BPML: Fazlul Huq's government would not have endorsed such a communal divide of students, even though Huq also financed Islamic education extensively (and faced Hindu accusations for this).

Suhrawardy, working in haste and under pressure from his party's conservative wing, forced pro-Muslim initiatives of this kind without any much-needed tact, knowing that Congress wouldn't be able to singlehandedly block it. Admittedly, his government did not refrain itself from making a few genuine and petty anti-Hindu moves either: when in July the budget draft for next year was presented, it included a comprehensive irrigation and drainage scheme which openly excluded Hindu-dominated Western Bengal.<sup>51</sup>

A discreet promotion of Muslims to government posts and elsewhere took place as well.<sup>52</sup> But was Suhrawardy's Cabinet any more biased (or corrupt) than, for example, state governments in the United States<sup>53</sup>? The nature of grievances put in the Assembly or in the press – most of them of a kind noted above,<sup>54</sup> aside from accusations concerning riots, which will be described later – does not suggest this was the case. The main difference was that Americans had not known internal conflicts at this scale for over a hundred years, nor were they preparing to fight for their political future after decolonization. Favoritism in this context was seen as something more than favoritism – as a nefarious anti-Hindu plot; every new Muslim becoming, say, a Superintendent of Police was perceived as a Government messenger sent to brutally quell any anti-Pakistan drive, the theory receiving additional backing if any of them actually pursued communal politics. And any other initiative of Suhrawardy was seen in similar light.

That doesn't mean that his mistakes and steps perceived (at times correctly) as communal were not part of the problem. By themselves, though, they were not so severe as to justify the popular image of Muslim oppression and domination: this is how they were seen, though, due to mutual distrust after 1943 famine and to the fact *bhadraloks* were used to take their control of crucial sphere of public life (say, Education) as a natural consequence of their "civilised" background. In fact, both the main parties are to be blamed for invoking a communal rhetoric and way of thinking in every possible dispute, thus ensuring that an amicable settlement became impossible. This is what happened

<sup>51</sup> BLA, vol. LXXI, part 1, Second Session, 1946, 24 July 1946, p. 37.

<sup>52</sup> And *dalits* too, by the way, as the number of accusations towards "Mandal, Barori & Co." suggests.

<sup>53</sup> The parallel has originally been drawn by one American analyst who compared Suhrawardy to the members of notorious Tammany Hall clique. See Phillips Talbot, *An American witness to India's partition*, New Delhi 2007, p. 187.

<sup>54</sup> For example, the Muslim quota in Calcutta Medical College was raised from 21 to 41 (out of 100), and if the Muslim candidates did well enough at the exam they could also apply to places from the "general" category (see *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 10 July 1946). There were also rumors that in one school the Government intervened discreetly in order to compel it to admit weaker Muslim students (memorandum of Indian Association, 16 May 1947, All-India Congress Committee Papers, File No. CL-14D/2, Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, New Delhi [hereafter NMML], p. 324).

with the debate over the further control of jute prices, although the problem was more complicated here;<sup>55</sup> and the issue of Bengal's co-financing of a fertilizer factory in Bihar in exchange for access to its products. (What would this access look like, asked the BPML reasonably, if after decolonization Bihar fell under full control of the AICC – possibly as a part of another country than Bengal<sup>56</sup>?) How could a nationalization of Calcutta trams or power plants be done or even reasonably planned, when the BPCC saw it as nothing more than “Pakistaniization”<sup>57</sup>?

The PM's relations with the conservative fraction of the BPML were no better. His politics towards this group was a mixture of ill-thought concessions and blows delivered in an unnecessarily provocative way. Seen from a distance he certainly lacked subtlety, but it's doubtful whether having more of it would have changed anything, given the ideological rift between both camps and bad blood between them from the previous years.

Suhrawardy offered to Nurul Amin, a prominent member of Nazimuddin's faction (later the PM of East Bengal), the job of Assembly Speaker – which was meant as an olive branch, while in fact the nominee wasn't at all grateful and soon turned against him. But what ultimately struck the PM even worse was his early triumph during the election for Mayor of Calcutta. An unwritten law stated that Hindus and Muslims would rotate at this post every year; as it was time for a Muslim, Ispahani offered himself as a candidate for the Mayoralty and got support from League members of the Calcutta Corporation. Yet a few days before the deadline Suhrawardy suggested Syed Muhammad Usman instead, using his influence in the Corporation to succeed. Thus the little-known teacher of Bihari descent, whose only political experience was two-year membership of Calcutta Council and whose only visible qualification was his loyalty towards the PM, got a city with about 4 million inhabitants (estimates vary) to rule.<sup>58</sup> Every scrap of loyalty which conservative-leaning Muslim newspapers like *Morning News*, *Star of India* or *Azad* had towards Suhrawardy immediately went out of the window (and due to the

<sup>55</sup> During the war prices were controlled; but now the BPML – due to the landlords influence – was going to put an end to this. The BPCC demanded fixing a minimal price for jute, and a very high one – more than twice as high as during the war and more than traders were paying in 1946. The reason for this was sheer anti-League populism. At the same time the Congress-controlled Interim Government (in operation from August 1946) wanted to artificially maintain prices as they were, imposing a ceiling: one reason was Nehru's leftist idealism seeing this as an opportunity to make peasants cultivate rice instead (this was one of the reasons of the war system as well), while Congress-tied businessmen like G.D. Birla, lobbying from behind the scenes, just wanted to have cheap raw material. Suhrawardy, disorientated, saw this as some kind of Congress (and more generally Hindu) plot to plunge Bengal's economy into chaos. See *Bengal Legislative Council Debates* [hereafter BLC], First Session, 1946, No. 9, 6 August 1946, pp. 173–174; BLC, vol. LXXI, part 3, Second Session, 1946, 25<sup>th</sup> September 1946, pp. 287–289; BLC, vol. LXXII, part 1, First Session, 1947, 17 February 1947, pp. 268–271; Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919–1947*, Cambridge 1986, pp. 223–224. But there was more to it than that: since the majority of Indian jute was grown in Bengal, British and Hindus were afraid that the BPML may use the threat of cutting transports to blackmail Congress. Burrows to Wavell, 5 September 1946, R/3/2/58A, IOR, p. 31.

<sup>56</sup> BLC, vol. LXXI, part 1, Second Session, 1946, 31 July 1946, p. 154.

<sup>57</sup> BLC, First Session, 1947, No. 20, 18 March 1947, p. 409.

<sup>58</sup> For Usman's short biographical note see *Star of India*, 30 March 1944.

fact that *Millat* was rather pluralist, not sparing the PM from criticisms if it considered them deserved, the government was left without “his” media until the launch of *Ittehad* in January 1947). Jinnah was irate as well.<sup>59</sup> What deepened the resentment of conservatives (and Hindus) was the fact that Usman soon proved to be quite an inept administrator.<sup>60</sup>

While Bengal’s political life revolved around the aforementioned and similar disputes, the Cabinet Mission led by Lord Pethick-Lawrence, which arrived in India in March, was trying to produce the scheme of transferring power to Indians in a way that was acceptable for both the leading parties in the Raj. On 16<sup>th</sup> May the Mission announced its new plan, which was to convert India into a loose federation of three Groups – B containing four north-western provinces, C containing Bengal and Assam and A – the rest.<sup>61</sup>

According to Burrows, the plan was appreciated by both Bengali Hindus (this soon proved to be a little overoptimistic) and Muslims. The one thing he feared was the possibility that Jinnah may not agree to it and instead launch an anti-British movement; such a situation would force Suhrawardy to resign with devastating consequences for communal relations, even though his Ministers “all wanted to stay in office and were not very keen Pakistanis”.<sup>62</sup> Yet the PM was hungry for more than power. Suhrawardy hinted at what this was during an interview on 21<sup>st</sup> June, when he said that that in the course of twenty years Bengal will become independent.<sup>63</sup> The *Quaid* did not comment this – perhaps he was being opportunistic, or satisfied that the Bangsam idea was being shelved at least temporarily. At any rate, whatever Pethick-Lawrence’s intentions were, the idea of Group C turned out to be a clever move, as it appealed to Bengali Muslims over Jinnah’s head: firstly, it meant that Muslims from Western Bengal and the whole Assam would belong to the majority community (as opposed to what would be the case if those provinces were partitioned), and secondly, it had the potential to eventually loosen the *Quaid*’s burdensome grip over the BPML – a rosy perspective as far as Suhrawardy and the leftists were concerned. Of course, there were protests of some Bengali party workers who did not understand why Jinnah had departed from “absolute Pakistan”,<sup>64</sup> yet they were clearly a minority.

<sup>59</sup> See a description of his first meeting with would-be Mayor after the voting in Ispahani, *Qaid-e-Azam Jinnah as I knew him*, p. 105.

<sup>60</sup> See *Star of India*, 22 July 1946; *Star of India*, 26 July 1946; *Star of India*, 31 July 1946. It should be noted that *Star of India* had heavy ties with Ispahani and his business milieu, but the failures of the city’s administration were real enough.

<sup>61</sup> Statement by the Cabinet Delegation and Viceroy, 16 May 1946, TOP vol. VII, doc. 303, pp. 582–591.

<sup>62</sup> Record of meeting of Cabinet Delegation and Field Marshal Viscount Wavell with Sir F. Burrows, 24 May 1946, TOP vol. VII, doc. 367, p. 675. Burrows himself was convinced that in Group C “whatever happens the Hindus will control Bengal within a few years of a new Constitution coming into being” due to their economic superiority and political cunning (Wavell, *The Viceroy’s Journal*, p. 277).

<sup>63</sup> Chitta Ranjan Misra, H.S. Suhrawardy’s Dilemma: Pakistan or United Independent Bengal, in: *Reflections in History: Essays in Honour of Professor Amalendu De*, eds. Keka Dutta Roy, Chitta Ranjan Misra, Kolkata, 2009, p. 164; also Harun-or-Rashid, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh*, p. 265.

<sup>64</sup> The best example is an almost threatening letter from the President of Calcutta branch of the BPML: Raghbir Ahsan to Jinnah, 17 May 1946, JP vol. XIII, doc. 94, pp. 128–129.

Rejection of the plan by Congress and Wavell's subsequent refusal to create an Interim Government composed entirely of Leaguers (as he had carelessly promised before) infuriated the League and made her close ranks, explaining the tense atmosphere during its Council Meeting in Bombay (27<sup>th</sup>–29<sup>th</sup> July 1946). Hardly anybody (including Bengalis) protested when Jinnah suggested resorting to "direct action", explaining:

"Throughout the painful negotiations, the two parties with whom we bargained held a pistol at us; one with power and machine-guns behind it, and the other with non-co-operation and the threat to launch mass civil disobedience. This situation must be met. We also have a pistol".<sup>65</sup>

What this "pistol" was? It seems Jinnah himself wasn't sure, and nor did he elaborate. Apparently he envisaged something like Gandhi's civil disobedience movement from the 1920s, although he spiced this not-so-very-radical perspective with words like "revolt", while his followers such as Feroz Khan Noon went even further and tried to scare Hindus by drawing comparisons with Genghis Khan or Hulagu. Yet when Burrows met Suhrawardy and Nazimuddin shortly afterwards he was shocked that "neither of them seems to have the foggiest idea what is intended by "direct action".<sup>66</sup>

The *Quaid*, being for most of his life a politician dealing with his equals and not a leader of the masses, likely did not know at this stage what such an approach could unleash – this is debatable, however. Who didn't know that for sure were Suhrawardy and British authorities in Bengal. At this period strikes and processions were regularly paralyzing Calcutta, but that did not necessarily mean large-scale bloodshed. On 28<sup>th</sup> July there was a general strike in Calcutta (an act of solidarity with postal workers demanding higher wages), and Burrows, pleasantly surprised, noted that "considering the very large numbers involved, there was remarkably little violence, the demonstrators making more use of their lungs than their fists"<sup>67</sup> unlike, for example, in February.

Even when the official program was announced – including a strike, the gathering at Calcutta's Maidan and the prayer for freedom of Muslim India – it wasn't clearly said against whom all this was being done and what behavior was expected from the BPML's followers. Or rather, the signals were different and at times mutually exclusive. Abul Hashim preached Direct Action Day as a day of solidarity of all Bengalis against British ambitions to shape their future.<sup>68</sup> Nazimuddin vaguely remarked: "There are a hundred

<sup>65</sup> FOP vol. II, pp. 544–562 (quote from p. 560).

<sup>66</sup> Tyson to Folk, 2/3 August 1946, Tyson Collection, MSS Eur. E341/40, No. 362, IOR.

<sup>67</sup> Burrows to Wavell, 5 August 1946, BP vol. III, doc. 226, p. 162. This was the reason that extensive preparations made for a fight on both sides may have been partly overlooked too. For example during Jinnah's visit in Calcutta in February Muslims greeted him with *lathi* in their hands – defying the ban for carrying weapons in public – yet no riot followed. See *Calcutta Disturbances Commission of Enquiry, Record of Proceedings, Minutes of Evidence* (hereafter *Minutes*), vol. X, Alipore 1947, p. 39 (Shakurul Hossain).

<sup>68</sup> See Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, *The Unfinished Memoirs*, p. 66 and Nariaki Nakazato, *The Politics of a Partition Riot: Calcutta in August 1946* in: *Muslim Societies: Historical and comparative aspects*, Tsugitaka Sato (ed.), London 2004, p. 114.

and one ways in which we can create difficulties, specially when we are not restricted to non-violence. The Muslim population of Bengal know very well what Direct Action would mean and we need not bother to give them any lead”.<sup>69</sup> And the PM did what he routinely did when those two factions were at odds – he remained silent. His only public speech about this was his criticism of the Hindus interpreting Nazimuddin’s words as a call against them.<sup>70</sup> What cannot be disputed is the PM’s energy in organizing the celebrations of 16<sup>th</sup> August – which H. A. Barari, future Governor of Haryana (in 1946, student of Presidency College) and no friend of the Muslim League, later interpreted in an interesting way. In his opinion, the PM wanted a well-organized mass protest to show his prowess not only to the Congress, but also to Jinnah – proving to the *Quaid* that he was irreplaceable.<sup>71</sup>

Later, much was written about the BPML politicians’ alleged involvement in preparing for the riots, ranging from (unproven) rumors that weapons were being made under their direct supervision, to the accusation that making Direct Action Day a holiday was a kind of indirect go-ahead for Muslim *goondas*.<sup>72</sup> It’s not impossible that the rank and file of the BPML contributed to planning riots (as in the case of the BPC and Mahasabha), but the Enquiry Commission had later found absolutely no proof that the PM was part of it. The only evidence, and it is quite thin, could be his remarks about the possibility of disturbances. When Donald Ross Hardwick, Commissioner of Calcutta Police, asked him “Can you ensure that young hot-heads will abide with the order?”, the PM admitted there “may be some clashes”.<sup>73</sup> One Delhi journalist also heard from him on 9<sup>th</sup> August that he could hardly guarantee that no disturbances would happen at all.<sup>74</sup> Later *bhadraloks* saw in this a cynical announcement of a massacre coming from its leader’s mouth. However, it may have been also a sign of his realistic perspective. Calcutta’s mass meetings and strikes were notoriously unpredictable, and after February disturbances, the BPC knew this as well as Suhrawardy did.

At the same time an important declaration was made, which in this situation was either overlooked or misunderstood. Viceroy Wavell, pressed by Whitehall, grudgingly invited Congress to form the Interim Government on its own, as at this time the alternative was only between asking the AICC or the AIML to do so. This caricature of the Cabinet Mission Scheme was made even more bitter for the League due to the Congress’ cynical statement of 10<sup>th</sup> August, when the party claimed acceptance of Scheme asking its rivals to do the same – of course, excluding the safeguards for them which were the essence of the plan. This meant that not only Pakistan, but even any autonomy for Muslim-majority

<sup>69</sup> Quoted from: BLA, vol. LXXI, part 3, Second Session, 1946, 19 September 1946, pp. 90–91.

<sup>70</sup> BLC, First Session, 1946, No. 14, 15 August 1946, p. 265.

<sup>71</sup> H. A. Barari, *Kolkata: To be Young Was Paradise*, New Delhi 2006, p. 149.

<sup>72</sup> In fact – it seems the PM was ashamed to admit this after disturbances – the vacation idea wasn’t his; the one who suggested it was Ronald Leslie Walker, secretary of Bengali government, and Burrows went along with it.

<sup>73</sup> *Minutes*, vol. II, p. 90 (Hardwick).

<sup>74</sup> Talbot, *An American Witness to India’s Partition*, p. 188.

zones was endangered.<sup>75</sup> The League's understandable grim fury over this development – a feeling that “the Congress has combined with Great Britain and it has become an Anglo-Fascist organization”<sup>76</sup> as Shamsuddin Ahmad put it later – prompted Suhrawardy to retaliate. The cannon used against the “Fascist” menace was of heavy caliber: the PM warned that “a probable result” of bypassing his party in the transfer of power would be

“the declaration of complete independence by Bengal and the setting up of a parallel Government. We will see that no revenue is derived by such Central Government from Bengal and consider ourselves as a separate State having no connection with the Centre. The League is not, however, itching for a fight, such direct steps will be resorted to by the League only if it is forced to”.<sup>77</sup>

*Bhadraloks* treated that as obvious proof that Suhrawardy was planning to change future Bengal into a second Pakistan, or rather, first Pakistan. The reality was not that simple. Judging from the lack of mentions about the topic in Jinnah's correspondence from the relevant period, it seems that Suhrawardy made this very important announcement without even consulting AIML's High Command, whatever the latter might have thought. Strangely, *Quaid-i-Azam* did not react even later on – did he think that after the riots the situation had changed too drastically for such a development to be possible?

One more incident went largely unnoticed in the atmosphere of hysterical suspiciousness. As a sign of goodwill, on 14<sup>th</sup> August the PM persuaded Burrows to release all but one of the Bengalis who had been convicted in the 1930s for terrorism (albeit viewed as political prisoners by many), a move that Congress and Bengali Hindus in general had demanded loudly for months.<sup>78</sup>

But the *jihadi* language of many League politicians – including Mayor Usman, who had to explain publicly that he didn't mean anything malicious towards Hindus when invoking the battle of Badr and other military triumphs of early Islam as an example Bengalis should follow<sup>79</sup> – was too suggestive in the eyes of Hindus and many Muslims

<sup>75</sup> See Wavell, *The Viceroy's Journal*, pp. 330–332 and Abul Kalam Azad, *India Wins Freedom*, New Delhi 1988, pp. 166–167.

<sup>76</sup> BLA, vol. LXXI, part 3, Second Session, 1946, 19 September 1946, p. 111.

<sup>77</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 11 August 1946.

<sup>78</sup> Gandhi to Burrows, 10 March 1946, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* [electronic book: Viewed 25 November 2017 <<http://gandhiserve.org/e/cwmg/cwmg.htm>>], vol. 90 (New Delhi 1999), doc. 80, p. 59; *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 26 July 1946; Burrows to Wavell, 6 September 1946, BP vol. III, doc. 227, p. 165; Abul Hashim, *In Retrospect*, p. 131; Wavell to Pethick-Lawrence, 21 August 1946, TOP vol. VIII, doc. 187, p. 276. In total, 29 were released. It should be added that most of them became Communists in prison and so the gesture was made to the Communist Party of India [CPI] as well.

<sup>79</sup> *Star of India*, 12 August 1946; *Star of India*, 15 August 1946 (explanations). For similar statements and pamphlets see *Note on the Causes of the Calcutta Disturbances, August 1946*, Alipore 1946, MSS Eur. D911/12, IOR, enclosure C, doc. 6, p. 19; Gopal Das Khosla, *Stern Reckoning: A Survey of the Events Leading up to and Following the Partition of India*, New Delhi 1989, pp. 51–52; IAR 1946, vol. II, p. 68; *Minutes*, vol. II, p. 9



that what League now really wanted was to crush her enemies. Jinnah seemed perturbed about those moods himself, and on 14<sup>th</sup> August saw fit to remember his party that “Direct Action Day on Aug. 16 has been fixed for the purpose of explaining to the Muslim public all over India the resolutions passed by the Council of the All-India Muslim League on July 29 at Bombay and not for the purpose of resorting to direct action in any form or shape”.<sup>80</sup>

Bengali ruling circles – both government and colonial officials – were more optimistic. During a Cabinet meeting on 15<sup>th</sup> August, with Governor Burrows present, neither side put the topic of possible clashes on the table, concentrating on restocking of fishes in inland waters and similar topics instead.<sup>81</sup>

### Suhrawardy and the Great Calcutta Riot

Since most historians – and Indian policymakers, for that matter, if Leonard Gordon’s interviews are of any indication<sup>82</sup> – see the orgy of killing which took place in Calcutta between 16 and 20<sup>th</sup> August (or indeed longer, but not for such a scale) as a turning point in making Partition inevitable, the Great Calcutta Riot deserves especially close analysis in context of Suhrawardy’s politics. There is also another reason to do this: in the case of no other event was his role so shrouded in myth, and instances of his apparently evil acts so numerous. A historian without the drive to verify all that material often takes for granted that there is no smoke without fire. The best example is an urban legend about the PM making Hindu police officers leave key posts in the city not long before the riots, thus ensuring that on 16<sup>th</sup> August Muslims would be in charge at 22 out of 24 police stations in Calcutta. Sadly, this fable has found its way even into the books of renowned scholars.<sup>83</sup>

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(Binny). It should be noted, though, that some leaflets from this time appear to be fakes produced to discredit the BPML (see BLA, vol. LXXI, part 3, Second Session, 1946, 19 September 1946, p. 119; *Minutes*, vol. VI, p. 99 [Dutta]; *Minutes*, vol. III, p. 185 [Walker]); the same goes for well-publicized documents about the AIML’s genocidal intentions, revealed by one Habibur Rahman, who according to British intelligence probably never existed (*Copy of D/O Report*, 9 November 1946, *Communal disturbances in Calcutta or elsewhere commencing from 16th August, 1946, consequent of the declaration of the “Direct Action Day” of the All India Muslim League*, Intelligence Branch, File No. 717/46, part 1, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata [hereafter WBSA], pp. 109–110).

<sup>80</sup> *Star of India*, 15 August 1946.

<sup>81</sup> Cabinet Papers [of Bengal, hereafter CP; digitized version of those is accessible in West Bengal State Archives and other research institutions in Kolkata], 15 August 1946.

<sup>82</sup> See Gordon, *Divided Bengal*, p. 304.

<sup>83</sup> For a recent example see Bidyut Chakrabarty (*The Partition of Bengal and Assam*, p. 100), who took this from Suranjan Das (*Communal Riots in Bengal*, p. 178), who in turn relied on Gopal Das Khosla’s pamphlet (*Stern Reckoning*, p. 49) based on information provided by Pyarelal (*Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. I, p. 253). Gandhi’s secretary – the first link of this (typical) chain – did not disclose his source, and it seems he simply put a singular case of gossip into his book. From the archive material we know that the information is flagrantly false: in fact, 13 Muslim officers and 11 Hindu officers were in charge of stations during the riots, the numbers being vouched for by Hardwick. Furthermore, while the Deputy Commissioner responsible for southern Calcutta was Muslim

From the morning of 16<sup>th</sup> August armed groups of Muslims and Hindus were roaming through Calcutta's streets, looting, beating and killing the members of the "opposite" side – encouraged by the police's *Emergency Action Scheme*, conceived after the riots in November. Under the scheme most policemen were to disappear from the streets and regroup at Headquarters, thus being able to intervene in bigger units. Since the new plan was untested, overlooked the necessity of having armed men visible in discouraging people to riot, and wasn't even properly explained to police stations, it failed miserably.<sup>84</sup> The chaos was such that Hardwick, who toured the city at about 10 A.M. and happened to go by lanes where nobody fought at that time, was falsely led to assume that the same was true throughout the whole city.

At the same time the BPML leaders were alarmed – one of the signals of trouble were the phone calls of Surendra Mohan Ghosh of the BPCC to Nazimuddin and Suhrawardy. According to the PM, he was to meet Ghosh to talk about posting League and Congress volunteers at the city's key points, and at about 11 A.M. he came in his limousine to the place of the meeting – the crossing near Sealdah Railway Station, which had been under the sway of Muslim *goondas* for some time.<sup>85</sup> Accompanied by Dharendra Narayan Mukherjee (chief whip of the Congress Party in Bengal Assembly) and Bhupesh Gupta (a well-known CPI politician), he surely hoped to quell the riots by the power of his authority, while showing also that the opposition has the same purpose.<sup>86</sup> At the rendezvous they met an inspector from the Special Armed Branch who openly discouraged the PM from following due to the extreme aggressiveness of the mob, only for Suhrawardy to reply that he considered it his duty to go on. The first group of troublemakers that they met relented when told not to block the street and to obey orders, but the second

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(Shamsul Doha), his northern counterpart was a Hindu, Rai Bahadur S. N. Mukherjee. See *Minutes*, vol. II, p. 115 (Hardwick); it should be noted that Das had access to this volume. Note also that British sources from this time do not mention the PM ever trying to personally engage in appointing or removing police officers. That changed early the following year; two sources from May 1947 prove that the number of high-ranking Muslim officers in the Calcutta police indeed increased by then, but aside from the fact that the exact numbers given by those sources differ a little, they are still nowhere near those found in Pyarelal's work. Cf. BLA, vol. LXXII, part 3, First Session, 1947, 6 May 1947, pp. 376–377 and memo of Indian Association, 16 May 1947, AICC Papers, File No. CL-14D/2, NMML, p. 315.

<sup>84</sup> See for example: *Minutes*, vol. II, pp. 206–207 (Hardwick); *Minutes*, vol. IV, p. 231 (Norton-Jones); *Minutes*, vol. V, p. 74 (Sircar); *Minutes*, vol. VII, p. 105 (Mondal); *Minutes*, vol. XI, pp. 118–119 (Routh); Burrows to Wavell, 22 August 1946, TOP vol. VIII, doc. 197, enclosure, p. 295. For detailed description of the plan itself see Nakazato, *The Politics of a Partition Riot*, pp. 120–121. On 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> August there was even a serious debate about disarming the constables on duty (!) to avoid the possibility of accidental provocation of the mob; the idea was dropped, but this certainly had an impact on the ones it concerned.

<sup>85</sup> *Report on Calcutta Riot*, 18 September 1946, AICC Papers, File No. G-53, NMML, pp. 47–48 (report by Kalipada Mukherjee, BPCC Secretary).

<sup>86</sup> It should be remembered that when a representative of executive power was present on the spot, it was he who decided about using force or opening fire by the constables. *Police Regulations, Bengal, 1943*, vol. I, Alipore 1976, reg. 151, p. 65.

group threw brickbats at the PM, although Mukherjee begged them to stop. This caused Suhrawardy to retreat.<sup>87</sup>

Later the PM was unjustly accused of deliberately choosing to intervene in an area where the Hindus had overwhelmed the Muslims during the clashes. But Suhrawardy hardly could have known what exactly was happening at the north part of the city and which side had the upper hand at that particular place (some two hours earlier the ones who had the stations' surroundings under their sway were the Muslim gangs). Information from the police stations (if the phone lines even worked) were supplied not to him but to police HQ, which was only subservient to the PM in principle, and so getting up-to-date news was very problematic. Also, one cannot exclude the possibility that it looked the same from the other side, i. e. it was the fact that Suhrawardy happened to meet Hindu rioters defeating Muslims that convinced him the same must be the case everywhere else.

Only after the second tour about the city, between 1 and 2 P.M., Hardwick understood that the rioting was serious indeed – and that he didn't have enough subordinates to suppress it, so military support should be called from Fort William. However he needed the agreement of Governor Burrows and Brigadier Eric K.G. Sixsmith.<sup>88</sup> Thus the Commissioner called for them, and in the meantime he consulted with Suhrawardy (about 2.30 PM). The PM agreed that the military should be used and then he came to Maidan, telling one high-ranked police officer: "I shall make my speech a very brief one. Tell them all to go off home as soon as possible".<sup>89</sup> Before reaching Maidan, he tried once more to assess the seriousness of riot situation, coming with Ispahani to Bhowanipore in a Red Cross car. After both of them had been greeted by brickbats, they could have no more doubts.<sup>90</sup>

At the same time officers from Fort William demanded confirmation that they were not being called for nothing. Since even Hardwick did not grasp the graveness of the overall situation and thus did not believe the soldiers were absolutely needed, Sixsmith had reasons to hesitate. From 3 to 4 P.M. Hardwick, Burrows and Sixsmith toured the city by cars – not finding many cases of communal fighting. This was perhaps to be

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<sup>87</sup> Reconstruction of the chronology based on Nakazato, *The politics of a Partition Riot*, pp. 118–119, see also Mukherjee's relation: BLA, vol. LXXI, part 3, Second Session, 1946, 20 September 1946, pp. 134–135 and *Minutes*, vol. VI, pp. 182, 189–191 and 232–234 (Smith). It should be added that Ghosh, being (probably) late, hadn't located the PM right away and from that time became convinced that Suhrawardy was orchestrating the riot according to a plan prepared in advance. See *Surendra Mohan Ghose*, interview, Oral History Transcript no. 301, NMML, p. 290.

<sup>88</sup> Sixsmith was at this time the Commander of Fort William and the highest-ranked officer in Calcutta due to the absence of his superiors, Gens. Francis Taker and Francis R.R. Bucher.

<sup>89</sup> *Minutes*, vol. IV, p. 260 (Norton-Jones). The same officer recalled that the PM demanded in vain a "very large number of pickets at all places where the two communities converge to try to keep them apart". It may be noted that Rakesh Batabyal's recently published theory that Hardwick could have summoned the military by himself (Rakesh Batabyal, *Communalism in Bengal: From Famine to Noakhali, 1943–47*, Thousand Oaks, London 2005, p. 251) is wrong; this was possible only in emergency cases when he wouldn't have any contact with the Governor.

<sup>90</sup> *Minutes*, vol. II, pp. 196–197 (Hardwick).

expected since most of the Muslims (estimates vary from tens of thousands to one million), including the processions which had been attacked during the previous hours, were at Maidan now. The fighting was also fierce in the suburbs, where the officials didn't go.<sup>91</sup> After this Burrows agreed with the officers that using the military would be "premature", leaving Hardwick helpless.

Meanwhile at the mammoth gathering, which began at last at 4 P.M. Suhrawardy delivered, in the words of the Governor, "a Laodicean speech, of which his audience naturally remembered the hot passages more clearly than the cold". Verifying this judgment is not easy: as the intelligence "by a culpable omission sent only one Urdu shorthand reporter to the meeting (...) no transcript of the Chief Minister's speech is available".<sup>92</sup>

Said reporter made an abstract of the speech in Urdu:

"He [Suhrawardy] urged the audience to follow the League and the lead of Mr. Jinnah conscientiously and not to do so blindly (...). He had no mind to detain the audience longer. This day would prove to be the first step towards their struggle for emancipation. They should return home early for *iftar*. He had found the Muslims peaceful in course of visit to Mahallas [quarters] in the morning, when he made arrangements for volunteers. He had seen to Police and Military arrangements who would not interfere. The audience should move in groups and defend their co-religionists".<sup>93</sup>

Much has been said about the meaning of the last sentences, beginning from Burrows' resentment over the "most mischievous statement (...) whatever he may have meant to convey by this – and it emphatically is not a fact that the Police received any orders to 'hold back' – the impression an uneducated audience would form of such a statement by the Home Minister must have been that it was an open invitation to disorder".<sup>94</sup>

But let's look at those words and their context again. A short while earlier the PM immediately agreed that the army should be called in to deal with the riots – and at the Maidan he could not have already been aware of Sixsmith's refusal. Thus it is not possible for his words to mean – as some have misunderstood them – that Muslims were given *carte blanche* to loot Hindu shops or houses with impunity, and no one would interfere. What the PM seems to have really meant was the opposite: considering Hindus to be the prime aggressors, he wanted to save his co-religionists from them, so those present at the gathering were asked to go home without delay and in groups for safety reasons.

<sup>91</sup> See for example Suhrawardy Ikramullah, *Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy*, p. 55; *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 5 September 1946 (Karam Chand Thapar's relation) or Talbot, *An American Witness to India's Partition*, p. 190.

<sup>92</sup> Burrows to Wavell, 22 August 1946, TOP vol. VIII, doc. 197, enclosure, p. 297.

<sup>93</sup> Quoted from: Nakazato, *The Politics of a Partition Riot*, p. 115. A substantial portion of the documents concerning the years 1945–1947 (along with the original catalogue) from West Bengal State Archives was lost or misplaced when the whole 20<sup>th</sup> Century Branch was being moved to another building in 2014–2016, preventing me (during my 2016–2017 research trip) from finding many of the files Nakazato had used a decade earlier.

<sup>94</sup> Burrows to Wavell, 22 August 1946, TOP vol. VIII, doc. 197, enclosure, p. 297.

But the Article 144 of Indian Penal Code, routinely put into operation in case of rioting, prohibited any “assembly” of more than five members during emergencies, empowering policemen to open fire if said members didn’t disperse. (The fact that Burrows did not use this article – that would be done only the next day – couldn’t have been known to the PM either.) This was what Suhrawardy was referring to: he mentioned that neither the police nor the army would harass such groups as long as they acted peacefully, or defensively in case of attack.<sup>95</sup>

If these were his real intentions, it might be said that the PM, unnerved by what he saw in the town, completely forgot about weighing his words.<sup>96</sup> Hamidul Huq Chowdhury, a member of a rival (Nazimuddin’s) faction in the BPML, may not have been the most objective witness, but he had valid reasons for saying that Suhrawardy’s speech proved harmful because “a great deal of heat was produced”.<sup>97</sup>

The PM and some politicians accompanying him (Abul Hashim and Syed Muhammad Usman among them) went straight from the Maidan to Police Headquarters at Lal Bazaar, and left no earlier than 4 A.M. the next morning. His first step was to demand that Sixsmith place army pickets about the town, which was refused.<sup>98</sup> When a Vice-Commissioner sent for reconnaissance confirmed that the situation was grave, Suhrawardy increased pressure upon the British officers and civil officials, even refusing to let Walker leave the room.<sup>99</sup> Allegedly the PM even made the threat that “if this situation cannot be controlled, I must resign”.<sup>100</sup> At last, due to his influence and incoming news about worsening fights, troops were sent – but not before 11:30 PM.

The doubts about Suhrawardy’s approach towards police and his influence over its decisions soon became a grave bone of contention. Burrows complained to Viceroy that the

“Chief Minister spent a great deal of time in the Control Room in Lal Bazaar, often attended by some of his supporters. This made it extremely difficult for the Commissioner of Police, who was primarily responsible for handling the situation, to give clear and balanced decisions on all

<sup>95</sup> In fact, at least one such group had a police escort. As Hardwick later told the Enquiry Commission, said escort used tear gas to repel Sikhs from attacking the Muslims whom they were defending. *Minutes*, vol. III, p. 28 (Hardwick).

<sup>96</sup> Army reports and other sources suggest however that his speech wasn’t so definitive, since the Muslim gangs went to loot and burn Hindu premises without waiting for the end of the meeting or even to hear Suhrawardy’s words. Their actions both incited some of their co-religionists coming back from Maidan a little later, and provoked a fierce Hindu reaction. See *Minutes*, vol. VI, p. 155 (Dutta); *Minutes*, vol. X, p. 130 (Ahmed); Nariaki Nakazato, *The Role of Colonial Administration Riot System and Local Networks during the Calcutta Disturbances of August 1946 in: Calcutta: The Stormy Decades*, eds. Tanika Sarkar and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, New Delhi 2015, p. 291.

<sup>97</sup> Hamidul Huq Chowdhury, *Memoirs*, p. 69.

<sup>98</sup> See *Minutes*, vol. IV, p. 136 (Sixsmith) and Toker, *While Memory Serves*, p. 158.

<sup>99</sup> P.S. Mathur, *The Great Calcutta Killing*, *The Illustrated Weekly of India* 19 August 1973, p. 47; *Minutes*, vol. II, p. 199 (Hardwick); *Minutes*, vol. III, pp. 125–126 (Walker); *Minutes*, vol. IV, p. 167 (Sixsmith); *Minutes*, vol. V, p. 94 (Sircar).

<sup>100</sup> *Minutes*, vol. II, p. 200 (Hardwick).

the numerous calls for help that were pouring in. It is not of course the function of the Minister to direct detailed operation, but the position was one of considerable delicacy as the Commissioner of Police could not insist on the extrusion from the Control Room of the Minister responsible for law and order. Short of a direct order from me, there was no way of preventing the Chief Minister from visiting the Control Room whenever he liked; and I was not prepared to give such an order, as this would clearly have indicated complete lack of faith in him".<sup>101</sup>

What were the PM's motives? The Muslim side tried to portray him as a hero who just tried to help all people in need,<sup>102</sup> while Suhrawardy himself commented:

"I was thus able to watch the course of the disturbances and how the reports were dealt with and action was taken on them, and I have no doubt that not being entirely dumb I offered suggestions when I deemed it expedient (...) I am certain that such is the perversity of human nature, had I not been there I would have been charged with dereliction of duty".<sup>103</sup>

British officials, especially the ones bothered by him, saw it differently. Hardwick strongly disapproved of "Suhrawardy's continual presence in the Control room on the first day [of the riot] with many M. League friends and his obvious communal bias".<sup>104</sup> Later he told the Enquiry Commission that at the time "concentration on work was made impossible' because of Suhrawardy's interference and the presence of his 'friends" (Abul Hashim being one of them) in the control room.<sup>105</sup> The Governor's Secretary Ian Tyson was angered by the fact that when he was calling Hardwick, "as often as not" the phone was picked up by Suhrawardy, who, by "interfering with every order and intercepting all information" with his "hangers" had driven police officers "nearly mad".<sup>106</sup> Walker has similar recollections.<sup>107</sup> Inspector-General of Bengal Police, S.G. Taylor, summed it up with the words: "With such irresponsible and unscrupulous persons in authority it was extremely difficult for the police to deal with these dangerous situations".<sup>108</sup>

<sup>101</sup> Burrows to Wavell, 22 August 1946, TOP vol. VIII, doc. 197, enclosure, p. 297.

<sup>102</sup> See Suhrawardy Ikramullah, *Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy*, p. 56 or Tamizuddin Khan, *The Test of Time: My Life and Days*, Dhaka 1989, p. 146.

<sup>103</sup> BLA, vol. LXXI, part 3, Second Session, 1946, 20 September 1946, p. 162.

<sup>104</sup> Wavell, *The Viceroy's Journal*, p. 339.

<sup>105</sup> *Minutes*, vol. II, p. 70 (Hardwick). The Commissioner admitted however that since Suhrawardy was technically in charge of the police in his capacity as Minister of Internal Affairs, he had valid reasons to be present.

<sup>106</sup> Tyson to Folk, 23/24 August 1946, Tyson Collection, MSS Eur. E341/40, No. 365, IOR. On 18<sup>th</sup> August Tyson even demanded that the "Hon'ble Chief Minister not spend so much time in the Control Room, since his presence attracted persons who had no business to be in this room". *Minutes*, vol. II, p. 72 (Hardwick).

<sup>107</sup> *Minutes*, vol. III, pp. 89–90 and 128 (Walker).

<sup>108</sup> Stanley G. Taylor, *Final Years of Stress in Bengal*, MSS Eur. F 161/45, (microfilm), IOR, p. 9.



After the riots most Hindus had no doubts that Suhrawardy had behaved like Nero fiddling during Rome's fire, rejoicing over Hindu suffering and trying only to help the Muslims – or at least that his presence at Police HQ was suspicious, since it did not bring about more definitive moves towards suppressing the riots.<sup>109</sup> “How is it that within a stone's throw (...) from Lalbazar police station shops were looted, people were murdered and all sorts of offences were committed without the police moving an inch?” – thundered Shyama Prasad Mukherjee when the motion of no-confidence to the Cabinet was later discussed in the Assembly. “Am I responsible for that?” – asked the PM. “Of course, you are responsible. If you have got the guts to say that you are not responsible, let us know that”.<sup>110</sup> Some among the British shared this judgment, and some scholars followed: for example Suranjan Das meticulously chose to highlight, from all the documents available, only the fragments showing the PM in a negative light.<sup>111</sup> Yet other colonial officers had a different opinion. P.D. Martyn, Additional Government Secretary, thought that the PM at this time was “a subdued man” thinking that his decision from 19th August to refuse all interviews was a telling sign.<sup>112</sup>

As complaints like those quoted above far outnumber exact examples of PM's interventions in source material, we will probably never know the reasons for his quarrels with police officers in those fateful days. Some passages in the British documents<sup>113</sup> suggest however, that it was mostly about cases such as sending policemen to rescue groups of Muslims,<sup>114</sup> or making them guard mosques.

Of course, the interpretations of the PM's motives may indeed vary, and there are more possibilities than the ones presented above. Nariaki Nakazato, who used probably the broadest source base of all the scholars researching the riot to date, reached the conclusion that the PM was doing a “theatre” performance, intervening in such unimportant (?) cases only to present himself to the British as a competent leader and Bengal's “strong man”.<sup>115</sup> I'm unconvinced of this, firstly because this argument is based on the unspoken assumption that Suhrawardy really could have expected professionalism and impartiality from the police, and secondly due to colonial officials being invariably (and visibly) irritated by his interference. He certainly did not get an image-boost in their eyes that way.

In my opinion it's more probable that Suhrawardy, basing on the reports of his co-religionists (as Hindus rarely sought help from *him*), actually believed that the police

<sup>109</sup> The comparison to Nero had actually been made, and more than once, cf. BLC, First Session, 1946, No. 20, 17 September 1946, p. 34 and Jagannath Swaroop Mathur to Nehru, 21 August 1946, AICC Papers, File No. G-53, NMML, p. 100, see also: BLA, vol. LXXI, part 3, Second Session, 1946, 19 September 1946, p. 105.

<sup>110</sup> BLA, vol. LXXI, part 3, Second Session, 1946, 20 September 1946, p. 142.

<sup>111</sup> Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal*, pp. 178–179.

<sup>112</sup> *Memoirs of P.D. Martyn, C.I.E., C.B.E., B.A., I.C.S. (retd)*, MSS Eur. F180/13, IOR, p. 29.

<sup>113</sup> *Minutes*, vol. II, p. 70 (Hardwick); *Minutes*, vol. III, pp. 128–129 (Walker); *Minutes*, vol. IV, pp. 260–261 (Norton-Jones).

<sup>114</sup> A few examples could be found in Suhrawardy's obituaries, see *National Assembly of Pakistan Debates*, 9 December 1963 (Viewed 5 May 2018 <[http://na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1446181035\\_139.pdf](http://na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1446181035_139.pdf)>).

<sup>115</sup> Nakazato, *The Role of Colonial Administration Riot System*, p. 278.

as a whole was treating Muslims worse, as in 1926. To begin with, in the Special Armed Branch – at the first line of dealing with the rioters – there were more than 1000 Gurkhas out of around 1160 members, and Gurkhas were no longer impervious to anti-League propaganda.<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, such discrimination did indeed exist in some parts of Calcutta. When checking the police report of arrests made between 16<sup>th</sup> of August and 6<sup>th</sup> of September, we discover that in Ballygunge – where the Hindus were the attackers and after four days “there were hardly any Muslims left”<sup>117</sup> – the constables arrested one Hindu and... 21 Muslims. No less bias can be seen in the case of Bowbazar area, where the fight was more evenly fought. It was also the headquarters of probably the biggest Calcutta army-gang (400–800 armed men), led by Hindu Gopal Chandra Mukhopadhyay a.k.a. “Patha” [“Goat”]; he was a butcher], who later recalled:

“We thought if the whole area became Pakistan, there would be more torture and repression. So I called all my boys together and said it was time to retaliate. If you come to know that one murder has taken place, you commit 10 murders. That was the order to my boys.”<sup>118</sup>

Yet only 18 Hindus were arrested there, contrasting with 253 Muslims. It might be added that one Hindu Sub-Inspector of Police (working in Lal Bazaar) publicly said about Patha long after the riots that “he looked like a gentleman. He was a criminal, but he was very helpful to the poor. During the riots, he came out to rescue Hindus”.<sup>119</sup> Under these circumstances, Suhrawardy’s distrust towards Hindu constables begins to seem understandable – even if it was pitifully one-sided. The aforementioned statistics show also that for example the police station in Hare Street – a few hundred meters from Writers’ Building, which housed the Bengal government – arrested 94 Hindus and only 9 Muslims; while no Muslims and several Hindus met the same fate in Jorabagan, Alipore and elsewhere.<sup>120</sup> But the cases of anti-Hindu discrimination had a far lower chance of reaching the PM at all.

<sup>116</sup> The numbers available in the sources differ a little. The numbers I use here are (in my opinion) most reliable, since the author had access to official data (Tyson to Folk, 12 July 1947, Tyson Collection, MSS Eur. E341/41, No. 411, IOR). During the riot there was one case of Gurkha sepoy shooting Muslim civilians. *Minutes*, vol. II, pp. 190–191 (Hardwick). Some Gurkhas were also speakers at the anti-League demonstration that Congress led on 9<sup>th</sup> August.

<sup>117</sup> Manikuntala Sen, *In Search of Freedom: An Unfinished Journey*, (trans.) STREE, STREE, Calcutta 2001, p. 171.

<sup>118</sup> Quoted from: Debjani Sengupta, A City Feeding on Itself: Testimonies and Histories of Direct Action Day, in: *Sarai Reader 06: Turbulence*, eds. Monica Narula et al., Delhi 2006; Viewed 3 July 2019 <<http://sarai.net/sarai-reader-06-turbulence/>>, p. 288.

<sup>119</sup> Andrew Whitehead, Duty does not permit repentance – The butchers of Calcutta, *The Indian Express*, 1 July 1997 (<http://web.archive.org/web/20131104205825/http://expressindia.indianexpress.com/news/ie/daily/19970701/18250453.html>).

<sup>120</sup> All numbers taken from: *CP’s Report regarding number of persons arrested in connection with the Calcutta Disturbances of Aug 1946*, Bengal Home (Poll.), Confidential, File No. 401/46, WBSA.

The question is, of course, whether he would have cared even if all the information had been available to him. Still, even excluding any evidence of dubious credibility or given by persons close to him, it is proven that the PM provided help to Hindus, too. When D.P. Khaitan, a Marwari (and a person known for his disdain towards the Pakistan idea) appeared in Lal Bazaar seeking help, Suhrawardy used his influence to send about 70 policemen to rescue Khaitan's relatives and neighbors.<sup>121</sup> In another case, the PM demanded that police be sent to Brahma Girls School when Lal Bazaar got wind that it was being attacked.<sup>122</sup>

Yet, generally speaking, Burrows wasn't wrong when he observed tartly that "the Chief Minister showed an exasperating preoccupation with the sufferings undergone by members of his own community".<sup>123</sup> As an example, he tried a few times to make policemen release his co-religionists after they were arrested, and he succeeded at least once: on 18th August officers from the police station at Park Street had to release seven Muslims accused of looting.<sup>124</sup> That made Hindus understandably suspicious, and Shyama Prasad Mukherjee pointed out this case at the Assembly. The PM replied that the people in question were not thieves and had proved that the food they had bought and not stolen, while constables stole a basket of eggs from them. Suhrawardy added that he ordered the constables to return the basket and let the innocents go, but after he was berated by the British for interfering, he decided to abstain from doing so in the future.<sup>125</sup>

However suspicious this particular case looks, it hardly compares to the rampant accusations made against the PM shortly after the riots, which included his supposedly helping, covering for or even commanding Calcutta *goondas*. This was something many were (and still are) talking about, but there is scant reliable data to support it.<sup>126</sup>

<sup>121</sup> *Minutes*, vol. II, pp. 158–159 (Hardwick); *Minutes*, vol. IV, p. 300 (Norton-Jones).

<sup>122</sup> *Minutes*, vol. X, p. 20 (Shakurul Hossain).

<sup>123</sup> Burrows to Wavell, 22 August 1946, TOP vol. VIII, doc. 197, enclosure, p. 297.

<sup>124</sup> *Minutes*, vol. II, pp. 73 and 96–99 (Hardwick). Mayor Usman also tried to do so (see *Statesman*, 19 August 1946), but to no avail.

<sup>125</sup> BLA, vol. LXXI, part 3, Second Session, 1946, 20 September 1946, pp. 142–143, 167. Indeed he didn't intervene directly any more, yet Walker per his orders enquired District Commissioners of nearby districts many times about the reasons for the arrests of some Muslims – a light form of pressure, one may argue (*Minutes*, vol. III, pp. 87–88 [Walker]). The question remains of how severe the crimes were of the persons the PM tried to help. Significantly, after the February riots Governor Casey noted that Suhrawardy called him and "tried to get me to have the students who were arrested on the morning of Feb. 11<sup>th</sup> released without trial. He did not make any representation on behalf of those who had been concerned with violence in any way". Casey's Diary, vol. IV, p. 342.

<sup>126</sup> The enquiry confirmed that during a riot Suhrawardy was once seen with one Rajab Ali from Beliaghata, an unofficial leader of the neighborhood and a League worker, who had previously received a police warning for inciting his neighbors against Hindus. See *Minutes*, vol. V, p. 151 (Mukherji) and *Minutes*, vol. X, p. 61 (Shakurul Hosain). The first of the two sources listed here was utilized by Nariaki Nakazato, but contrary to his assertion, nothing in its content allows us to declare Rajab Ali "a well-known *goonda*" (Nakazato, *The Politics of a Partition Riot*, p. 133). That is not to say that thugs did not get any help from some officials. During the investigation it was discovered that a few Muslim gangs obtained a list of Calcutta Hindus with registered guns in advance, enabling them to coordinate attacks. This leaked information was not necessarily supplied by higher authorities, however.

Another problem is the common line of reasoning in historiography taken as follows: during the riots the PM met influential Calcutta Muslims known for their communal outlook, *ergo* he probably incited them.

Yet many, if not most, Calcutta localities had their respected “Muslim” and “Hindu” leaders, and obtaining their cooperation was necessary if one hoped to exert any control over their followers. British officials were doing exactly that on a regular basis at this time;<sup>127</sup> thus if the Muslim PM wanted to *pacify* the rioters, seeking the help of those people (who, as his co-religionists, would be more eager to listen to him than Hindu ones) would be one of the best ways. This, of course, is neither the only one of his possible motivations to conduct those talks nor is it proof that he *didn't* meet them for the more malicious reasons that he was accused of. Such proof is in my opinion supplied by the chronology of events. All those meetings took place long after the military was employed to deal with hooligans (as the PM spent the night from 16<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> August and a substantial part of the next day in Lal Bazaar or with Burrows and other officials). Bearing in mind that he had no control over the army and hardly any (although he tried) over the police, how could Suhrawardy possibly have benefited from inciting trouble at this time, even if he had such intentions?

When identifying those intentions the same mistake is often being made: it is presumed that Suhrawardy was the *goonda* overlord full of communal hate, and this presumption becomes the lens through which his actions and words are seen. Thus, for example, his (admittedly, untactful) outburst towards Taylor about Muslims arrested in 24 Parganas<sup>128</sup> is routinely taken not as the protest of a politician who seriously believed that his community was being treated the worst, but as a token of his venomous anti-Hindu bias. The same way of reasoning is applied to his conversation with General Bucher (who appeared in Bengal on 18<sup>th</sup> August). Taylor, who accompanied them during their drive around Calcutta, recalled later:

“Chief Minister’s own attitude during the rioting was reprehensible. (...) As they drove, the Army Commander said: ‘This is all extraordinary, in the

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<sup>127</sup> For example, at Howrah British authorities called for an intercommunal peace march on 18<sup>th</sup> August; Muslims attended due to the influence of Sharif Khan, M.L.A. (who was accused of rioting during previous days), but Hindus, who despite pleas brought *lathis*, “informed us that their confidence could not be restored unless they heard from their leader Kuar Singh”. British began looking for him frantically and with good reason; only after he was traced in central Calcutta, transported to his locality and forced to co-work with Sharif Khan, peace was restored. It’s not that police didn’t know that these two individuals “had control over the *goondas*”; in fact this was the very reason they had to be dealt with. Report of Superintendent of Howrah police concerning Direct Action Day, *Communal disturbances in Calcutta or elsewhere commencing from 16th August, 1946, consequent of the declaration of the “Direct Action Day” of the All India Muslim League (Howrah)*, Intelligence Branch, File No. 717/46 (Howrah), part 1, WBSA, p. 13.

<sup>128</sup> “Very well then you will tell the Superintendent of Police that if he has occasion to arrest any Mohamedans in future he will arrest at least as many Hindus!”. Taylor, *Final Years of Stress in Bengal*, p. 8.

Army Hindus and Mohamedans live and work very happily together'. To this, the Chief Minister replied: 'We shall soon put an end to all that'.<sup>129</sup>

Bucher (later also Suranjan Das and Bidyut Chakrabarty, the latter calling this passage "revealing"<sup>130</sup>) took this as a proof of the PM's radical communalism<sup>131</sup> – although a closer look soon reveals that this is not the case. As the decolonization was approaching, the perpetuation of Hindu-Muslim brotherhood in the army was possible only if a) India was left undivided and the colonial army as a whole was put under the control of the Congress-dominated central government, or b) the latter happened *despite* the partition of India (this scenario, which might seem silly for modern reader, was at this time treated as absolutely possible and greatly feared among Muslims). Of course, all this was far clearer for Suhrawardy, who was at the forefront in countering Nehru's aggressive political moves, than it was for Bucher, who was totally ignorant about Indian political life.<sup>132</sup> Tucker, being more perceptive (although at times hopelessly biased) observer, recalled the incident in another way:

"He was asked why Hindus and Muslims could not live in friendship in civil life when they managed so well in the Army. Mr. Suhrawardy replied that Hindu and Muslim unity would not exist very much longer in the Army. He was right and we knew it".<sup>133</sup>

It should be noted in this context that though British opinions about Suhrawardy varied, military colonial officers from Bengal comprised the only subgroup who collectively subscribed to the image of the PM as a radical communalist and sworn enemy of Hindus. Aside from documents left by Bucher and Sixsmith, there is also an oft-cited anonymous report by a high-ranked Calcutta officer to the General Headquarters in Delhi, which overall is icily emotionless, but not when talking about the PM:

"There is hardly a person in Calcutta who has a good word for Suhrawardy, respectable Muslims included. For years he has been known as 'The king of the goondas' and my own private opinion is that he fully anticipated what was going to happen (...) and probably organised [*sic*] the disturbance with his goonda gangs".

<sup>129</sup> Ibidem, p. 7.

<sup>130</sup> Chakrabarty, *The Partition of Bengal and Assam*, p. 100; Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal*, p. 271 (the latter treats this evidence as unconfirmed).

<sup>131</sup> As he told straightforwardly to the Viceroy. See Wavell, *The Viceroy's Journal*, p. 339.

<sup>132</sup> During the enquiry after Great Calcutta Riot, it emerged that Bucher, who was responsible for pacifying the previous big riot in Bengal (the February one), did not even know why it started in the first place. *Minutes*, vol. III, p. 6 (Bucher). His subordinates were no better. See *Minutes*, vol. IV, pp. 129–133 (Gregory).

<sup>133</sup> Tucker, *While Memory Serves*, p. 162. Granted – unlike Bucher and Taylor, Tucker was not there and knew this exchange of words from second-hand evidence. But it may be argued that this was precisely the reason that he – being no friend of Bengal's PM – could have afforded himself to be objective.

In the next paragraph, the author expressed his hope that a no-confidence motion prepared by Opposition in Bengal Assembly would lead to the fall of Suhrawardy and his “goonda Raj”.<sup>134</sup>

It is quite possible that this overtly negative tone was used by soldiers to divert attention from their own actions (or inactions). Nariaki Nakazato’s intuition that officers agreed their depositions to present themselves in the best possible light is confirmed by Bucher’s secret circular from 26<sup>th</sup> August, which was intercepted and published by Communist newspaper *Swadhinata*. Bucher asked his subordinates to emphasize the following points when they were later interviewed: a) a lack of enough troops at a given place and the need to increase their numbers, b) the army’s achievements in restoring the order, c) the fact that the army may have intervened earlier, but civilian authorities did not want it.<sup>135</sup>

Judging from the evidence collected later by the Enquiry Commission, this course had indeed been followed, for Sixsmith shamelessly explained that the military could have acted no sooner than at 2 PM on 16<sup>th</sup> August, but Burrows and Suhrawardy (!) were against it.<sup>136</sup> The press gave publicity to this nonsense, thus further backing theories about the PM’s guilt; the latter again could not have challenged this without turning the military against him – about the last thing he needed when the problem of eventually having to defend independent Bengal seemed to be around the corner. No wonder the *Tommies* found him to be such an easy target of blame.

In fact, Ispahani’s remark that “in any case, they [Muslims] constituted only 24% of the population of Calcutta and they would not choose this city to indulge in rioting which in any event was not in their interest”<sup>137</sup> despite its crudeness is valid, and Tazeen Murshid rightly adds that “as Chief Minister, he [Suhrawardy] would be held responsible for any breakdown in law and order which would also discredit his ministry. He could not want a riot on his hands while he was in government”.<sup>138</sup>

<sup>134</sup> Report to Headquarters, 24 August 1946, WO 216/662, National Archives, Kew, p. 3.

<sup>135</sup> *Newspapers – Action against – Swadhinata, a communist paper of Calcutta – Prosecution under section 5 of the Official Secrets Act, 1923*, File No. 33/19/47, Home (Poll. I), NAI; see also: *Minutes*, vol. IV, p. 56 (MacKinlay); Nakazato, *The Politics of a Partition Riot*, p. 127. Bucher tried to defend himself by saying that whoever was responsible for the leak has modified the document’s contents to denigrate him. *Minutes*, vol. III, p. 15 (Bucher).

<sup>136</sup> *Minutes*, vol. III, p. 6 (Bucher).

<sup>137</sup> Ispahani, *Qaid-e-Azam Jinnah as I knew him*, p. 231. According to the 1941 census, 1,531,512 Hindus and 497,135 Muslims lived in Calcutta (see undated memorandum by Sir. S. Cripps, TOP vol. VII, doc. 71, p. 178) but in fact we don’t know what the figures were on the eve of Partition due to the enormous flow of people into the city during the war. It was estimated that in 1945 there were about 4 million inhabitants.

<sup>138</sup> Tazeen M. Murshid, *The Sacred and the Secular: Bengal Muslim Discourses, 1871–1977*, Calcutta 1995, p. 177. Another thing is that PM himself was into conspiracy theories here, only blaming somebody else. During cabinet meeting he once remarked about the riot “it was clear the concerted attempts were being made to bring about the downfall of the present Chief Minister if not of the whole ministry”. Shamsuddin Ahmad added an equally absurd claim: “Recrudescence of trouble in Calcutta was a direct result of a deliberate policy followed by the Congress with the object of humiliating the Bengal Government and the Ministry in the eyes of the world”. See CP, 23 October 1946, pp. 4 (first quote), 7–8 (second quote). Such suggestions were also vocalized in the Assembly when the motion of no-confidence was debated, see Tafazzal Ali’s speech: BLA, vol. LXXI, part 3, Second Session, 1946, 19 September 1946, p. 114. With noteworthy inconsiderateness, the PM also made a similar



The PM had more problems with explaining himself in the Assembly, being indeed between the devil and the deep sea. He couldn't (as Congress wished) have dismissed Hardwick or explain in public that his attempt to use the army had been blocked by Burrows and Sixsmith, because he would have lost all the credentials he had in colonial circles, severely hampering his chances in the coming game for Bengal's future after decolonization, and possibly losing the Prime Ministership as well (it's not impossible he knew that shortly after the riots the Viceroy wanted to replace him). Thus he had to defend the police – also because he knew that Hardwick, despite being the most severely criticized of all the colonial officials, was actually less guilty than many of them. The PM put all the blame on the *Emergency Action Scheme* for the scale of the disorder – which was certainly not a lie, but not the whole truth either. About Burrows (who was much relieved that the PM did not throw the Police “to the wolves”<sup>139</sup>) he did not dare to utter even a single word.

No matter what his explanations, after the riots most Hindus saw Suhrawardy as a perpetrator of Calcutta's carnage and nothing else. That was also a reason that the Peace Committees, established in Calcutta on the PM's order by a Muslim called K.F. Sobhan, proved a failure. Although the nominee himself made a positive impression even on Gandhists (like Horace Alexander or Sudhir Ghosh),

“all he could get from the Hindu leaders is a ‘Yes, of course, but’ – the ‘but’ meaning of course ‘We don't trust Suhrawardy’”.<sup>140</sup>

That did not prevent the BPCC from resuming coalition talks with Suhrawardy at the end of August (both sides were severely pressed by Burrows, who was afraid of recurrences of communal trouble or possible downfall of the Cabinet leading to political chaos). The very fact that Kiran Sankar Roy and other prominent leaders of the BPCC were open to such a possibility suggests they did not believe the more serious accusations against the PM.<sup>141</sup>

The settlement proved impossible because of the AIML's veto. Nazimuddin's faction tried to retain control of the BPML in view of the PM's weakened political power after the riots and was helped by Jinnah, who flatly refused to agree on any coalition not made on an all-India basis.

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accusation – openly blaming Congress for “provoking” Muslims – during an interview addressed exclusively to foreign press, see S. P. Mookerjee Papers, Installment II–IV, Subject File No. 151, NMML, p. 84.

<sup>139</sup> Burrows to Wavell, 21 September 1946, R/3/2/58A, IOR, p. 39.

<sup>140</sup> Alexander to Agatha Harrison, 24 October 1946, L/P&J/8/655, IOR, p. 86; see also *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 8 November 1946.

<sup>141</sup> On 19<sup>th</sup> August Roy, Suhrawardy and others came together to make an appeal for peace; at this time the PM also suggested an all-party round table conference, but since the Mahasabha refused to cooperate with the CPI the idea was abandoned. See Jyoti Basu, *Memoirs: A Political Autobiography*, (trans.) Abhijit Dasgupta, Calcutta 1999, chapter VII.

“Perhaps he trusts Suhrawardy as little as I do” – commented Wavell. “I dislike him [Suhrawardy] and distrust him intensely. I have always thought him a dishonest and self-seeking careerist with no principles”.<sup>142</sup>

Still, the Viceroy did agree that leaving Jinnah out of Indian central government would be catastrophic for Bengal, and so he allowed Suhrawardy to be one of the mediators between him and the *Quaid*.

The negotiations lasted for a few weeks, and to make matters worse Jinnah tried to hasten them by telling the press that the Calcutta disturbances were symptoms of an approaching civil war, which may follow the same pattern if a League-Congress settlement doesn't come soon enough to help avoid it. As Jinnah was convinced that Bengali Hindus were the greater perpetrators of the violence during the Great Calcutta Riot, his position was that nothing short of giving him the fair share of the power could avert the cataclysm. The fact that he thus undermined every surviving bit of Suhrawardy's credibility – as of course the Hindus saw Jinnah's statements as a warning of the next “holocaust” planned by the League, and that such an action was being tried in Calcutta too – did not interest the *Quaid*. Similar rhetoric was followed by Nazimuddin.<sup>143</sup>

And there was also the PM's struggle for power with the centre. To protest against the Congress-led Interim Government of India being sworn in, Suhrawardy followed through with his threat from 7th August and cut all contacts with said Government, forbidding his ministers from participating in any conference organized by Delhi,<sup>144</sup> to the *bhadraloks'* utmost horror. At the same time he still developed his vision of independence with a joyful spirit that hardly reflected the situation on the ground – or his earlier reflections, as noted by his secretary P.S. Mathur on 17<sup>th</sup> August.<sup>145</sup> As the PM said in September's interview to the journal *Hindu*,

<sup>142</sup> Wavell, *The Viceroy's Journal*, p. 348 (noted on 8<sup>th</sup> September).

<sup>143</sup> Abell to Wavell, 14 September 1946, TOP vol. VIII, doc. 318, pp. 318–319.

<sup>144</sup> “Germs are no respecters of Provincial boundaries” – Burrows commented sadly when the Health Minister canceled his attendance at conference about fighting epidemics. Burrows to Wavell, 5 October 1946, R/3/2/58A, IOR, p. 31.

<sup>145</sup> Here are excerpts: “Calcutta has passed into the hands of hooligans. They are not Hindus, they are not Muslims, they are sheer murderers, looters and bad characters. They are a fraternity of their own. Their leaders are respected and feared more than any one of us. They do not know what is direct actions. They know this is their day, their opportunity. The Congress leadership has long passed into the hands of militant Hindus and the Muslim leadership into the hands of the Mullah and some of those bearded folk seem to chase me wherever I go. No one will listen to me even if I cry hoarse on street corners. They will not listen to Kiran [Sankar Roy], or Sarat [Chandra Bose] or Jogesh [Chandra Chatterji from Revolutionary-Socialist Party of India] or anyone. What we leaders say, the masses do not understand. What the people want, we leaders do not care to listen to (...) This is not the fault of the people. We are at fault. Sometimes, and it is so often, we do not know what we are aiming at. If I were a Hindu, I would want a ‘Ram Rajya’ in India. What is Pakistan? The masses think it means the return of Sultans and Nawabs and the Kazi and the Khalifa. (...) No force will be adequate, I tell you, none. We do not want to live in peace. Even if the British quit we will be after each other's throats. We will fight a hundred years war. We have to live through this ordeal”. Mathur, *The Great Calcutta Killing*, p. 47. We might ask: If these are indeed the authentic words of Suhrawardy, did Mathur, PM's secretary, really note this half-page monologue

“People ask me to treat Bengal’s problem differently from the rest of India, to cut myself adrift from All-India politics and the All-India struggle. But in so doing they are actually admitting in a sense, the principle of Pakistan for you recognize that regions have their own problems to settle. I, too, believe in the future of an independent Greater Bengal where the people of Bengal should solve their own problems. I firmly believe that Bengalis when charged with the problem of looking after their own destiny will never fight among themselves but will cooperate in the grand endeavor to make it great and prosperous”.

Asked why he wouldn’t take the initiative himself, he replied: “The catch is that you [Hindus] don’t accept its separate destiny. While the Congress in Bengal would like to have separatism in practice, they are not prepared to accept it in principle”.<sup>146</sup>

Suhrawardy still did not see or didn’t want to see that this reluctance was no longer only the result of *bhadralok* egoism. To quote what he had soon to hear from M.L.A. Bimal Comar Ghose:

“You have your League government. Bengal is virtually a Pakistan province (...) But what have you achieved? You have generated fear, distrust and resentment in the hearts of the Hindus, but that may not worry you”.<sup>147</sup>

This was not hyperbole. Hindu enmity towards Suhrawardy and his party ascended to new heights, a development far more visible outside of parliamentary debates, where most speakers still used polite, Aesopian language. Joya Chatterji quotes in her book a few brochures circulating during the last year of colonial rule among (urban) Hindus, such as:

“Let us always remember (...) the atrocities committed by those who deem it to be their religious duties to erect mosques on Hindu lands, to ravish Hindu women, destroy and defile Hindu places of worship (...) who, while celebrating their Direct Action Day on 16 August lost in a religious frenzy converted into one channel by ripping open with a sharp cutting instrument the vaginal passage and the anus of our dear mothers and sisters having raped them before”.<sup>148</sup>

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during the carnage? What suggests their authenticity, or at least closeness to the PM’s real words, is their content: Suhrawardy openly admits his communal sympathies and even inadequate contact with the masses, as well as his unstable state of mind. If Mathur wanted to whitewash his employer, he probably would have done so more thoroughly.

<sup>146</sup> *Star of India*, 17 September 1946.

<sup>147</sup> BLA, vol. LXXI, part 3, Second Session, 1946, 25 September 1946, p. 274.

<sup>148</sup> Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, p. 243.

Chatterji concludes that “the British were now regarded as mere accomplices in Muslim crimes and the Governor and Viceroy took second place to Suhrawardy in the new demonology of Hindu communalists”.<sup>149</sup> The proceedings of the Assembly debate (19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> September) about the aforementioned motion of no-confidence – rejected at the end – confirm this judgment.

A few days after the debate the Cabinet promulgated a new Order prohibiting ‘within Bengal the printing, publishing and distribution of any document (...) relating to any incident in any communal disturbance in the Province, if such reference contains particulars in which the incident occurred, the manner in which death was caused to any person, the name and community of any assailant or victim’ and so on.<sup>150</sup>

British appraised those regulations: Burrows openly endorsed it, and Toker judged that “in Bengal the government clamped down a heavy foot on the Press in a fairly successful attempt to quench its communal fire”.<sup>151</sup> Hindus, of course, were less happy: at the beginning of October, 21 press titles suspended their publication for a week in protest.<sup>152</sup> It must be admitted that the new regulations were not being enforced in an unbiased way: *Amrita Bazar Patrika* soon observed that nobody lifted a finger against Muslim newspaper *Morning News* despite communal disturbances in Calcutta being described there in an anti-Hindu light.<sup>153</sup> Still, it didn’t mean resigning from the carrot to rely on the stick. On 29<sup>th</sup> September the PM, accompanied by two ministers – Shamsuddin Ahmad and Jogendranath Mandal – and Kiran Sankar Roy, visited Dacca to deliver a speech. When Muslims greeted him shouting “Pakistan Zindabad” and “Allah Akbar”, provoking Hindus to answer with “Bande Mataram” and “Jai Hind”, the PM commented that in the current situation all those slogans were misplaced and should be replaced with “Hindu Muslim Ek Ho” [Hindus and Muslims are one]. He condemned the riots and suggested both sides a public oath that they would preserve the peace in their *mohallas*.

According to press reports, many people from the crowd wanted to comment on the PM’s words, but nobody was allowed to as the PM feared that this would lead to communal quarrels again.<sup>154</sup> This seems symbolic. Suhrawardy’s declarations of goodwill may have been in part genuine, but by refusing to let dissenting voices have their say, he saw what he wanted to see, not realizing what people really had against him – and thus undermining whatever he could have accomplished.

The same could be said about his method of defending press censorship in the Assembly:

<sup>149</sup> Ibidem, p. 242.

<sup>150</sup> *Press note*, R/3/2/58A, IOR, p. 25.

<sup>151</sup> Toker, *While Memory Serves*, p. 180.

<sup>152</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 2 October 1946; *People’s Age*, 20 October 1946; Tyson to Folk, 12 October 1946, Tyson Collection, MSS Eur. E341/40, No. 372, IOR.

<sup>153</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 26 October 1946.

<sup>154</sup> *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 9 October 1946.

“Who wishes to gag newspapers or to black out authentic news? But if the news is presented in a form which provokes one section of the people against another, I think it is the duty of Government to take steps to stop it (...) I find that the Hindu newspapers now go to the extent of stressing the fact that more Hindus have been killed than Muslims. Those papers are read by the Hindus and what effect has it on the Hindu community? – retaliation. In order to give a colouring to the statement they give the names of the persons who have been assaulted. I checked them against the police reports and I found that the Muslim names had been left out. (...) And the same with Muslim newspapers. (...) Some say that it was the intention of Government to black-out news from East Bengal – perfectly ridiculous! We have no intention of blacking out news but we refuse to allow the newspapers to represent cases in such a way that there is that spirit of retaliation which eventually arises. The news will be printed and the locality will be there - only the name of the subdivision in East Bengal or elsewhere but there will be no indication who is attacking whom”.<sup>155</sup>

“In East Bengal or elsewhere”. The PM indeed desperately lacked the gift of weighing his words when it mattered. It’s not surprising therefore that this phrase was retroactively seen as ominous threat when a few weeks later a great anti-Hindu pogrom occurred there.

### “I know enough of you”. Suhrawardy and Noakhali riot

The Noakhali riot began on 10<sup>th</sup> October, at the height of the *Durga Puja* celebrations. In Calcutta and Delhi however, the news was received only on 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> October (sources vary), and beginning from 16<sup>th</sup> October the Hindu press was reporting on a pre-planned extermination of its co-religionists in Noakhali, resulting in about 5000 deaths. The source of those numbers was Surendra Mohan Ghosh, who of course based his figures on witness accounts of refugees fleeing from Eastern Bengal.<sup>156</sup>

The undeniable part of those information was that the pogrom had indeed been planned beforehand.<sup>157</sup> Somebody carefully chose the best possible date (between the end of District Magistrate’s tenure on 10<sup>th</sup> November and assuming office by the new one on 16<sup>th</sup>), the guardians were put on the main roads to/from area in question, the phone and telegraphic lines cut and a petrol to burn buildings obtained in advance (even

<sup>155</sup> BLA, vol. LXXI, part 3, Second Session, 1946, 28 September 1946, p. 370.

<sup>156</sup> See *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 18 October 1946 (and next issues). *Sunday Times* (London) even mentioned 6000. Such statements were regularly repeated later, even in *Indian Annual Register*, although the relevant volume was printed in 1947 when better estimates were already available (IAR 1946, vol. II, p. 37).

<sup>157</sup> For a study of the Noakhali riot see Anwesha Roy, *Making Peace, Making Riots: Communalism and Communal Violence, Bengal 1940–1947*, Cambridge 2018, chapter V and Batabyal, *Communalism in Bengal*, pp. 270–322.

on Sandwip island, which lacked cars), to name only a few examples. This time there was no enquiry commission, but the known witness accounts strongly suggest that a few local League officials, beginning with the Superintendent of Police, aided the rioters. For many victims, this implied that the Government wasn't innocent either.

To make matters worse, the PM acted on whatever his subordinates at Noakhali had told him (he pointed to "dispatches from Noakhali" as his source), and succumbed to the instinct of defending his co-religionists.

"The reports appearing in the Hindu Press about 'mass conversions' of Hindus have hardly any foundation. There have been cases, however, of Hindus going to Muslims, out of sheer panic, and offering to become Muslims. In almost all cases, the Muslims assured them they would be protected whether remained Hindus or not".

As if that was not enough,

"the allegation that a certain Muslim called Gholam Sarwar had started the trouble in the District is completely without foundation. Mr. Sarwar is reported to be touring the surrounding localities pacifying the people and doing his best to stop the disturbances from spreading".<sup>158</sup>

In fact, *maulana* Gholam Sarwar was the main leader of Noakhali rioters present on the spot, and was arrested on 22<sup>nd</sup> September. Upon reading this one can understand how for many Hindus the PM was nothing short of a notorious liar.

But the problem belied something else, and this is best shown from the meeting of a Hindu delegation – including freshly elected President of the AICC J.B. Kripalani – with Suhrawardy, and Burrows (who had been ordered by the PM to cut short his rest in Darjeeling and visit Noakhali).<sup>159</sup> As per the account of Purushottam Das Tandon (later the short-term President of the AICC), a fierce quarrel between Suhrawardy and *Ananda Bazar Patrika* editor, C.K. Bhattacharji, followed. When the PM said that no more than 100 persons perished in the riot, Bhattacharji asked: "Do you know what you are talking about?". "My dear chap, you always exaggerate" – was the answer. "Don't try to convince me, Suhrawardy, I know enough of you" – Bhattacharji responded sharply.<sup>160</sup>

The PM was right about the exaggeration – we now know that there were about 300–400 victims, not "thousands".<sup>161</sup> Still, this was said in the wrong way and the wrong moment, and was taken as an outplay of cynicism. For most *bhadraloks* it became the undeniable

<sup>158</sup> *Star of India*, 17 October 1946.

<sup>159</sup> See Tyson to Folk, 18/21 October 1946, Tyson Collection, MSS Eur. E341/40, No. 373, IOR.

<sup>160</sup> *Hindusthan Standard*, 8 November 1946.

<sup>161</sup> See Chakrabarty, *The Partition of Bengal and Assam*, p. 106; Simpson to Martyn, 5 November 1946, S.P. Mookerjee Papers, Installment II–IV, Subject File No. 149, NMML, pp. 44–45.



proof that the Bengal's PM bore (at least moral) responsibility for the pogrom; instead of apologizing for the murder of Hindus at the hands of his co-religionists with League slogans on their lips, he quarreled over numbers! Furthermore, the numbers he offered himself were seriously – and unwittingly – underestimated. Since at this time Burrows and other British officials also actually thought there were about 100 victims,<sup>162</sup> Suhrawardy, for a lack of better sources, began to repeat the same. The PM also pooh-poohed information about the release of Noakhali thugs on bail (“impossible” he commented, and once he was informed that it was indeed true he asked District Commissioner of Tippera to make an enquiry), and the stories about forced conversions were met with the response that forcing a person to wear the Jinnah cap doesn't count as true conversion.

Tandon, as well as the *Hindusthan Standard* (where this story was printed), was up in arms after hearing all this, and no wonder.<sup>163</sup> Yet the numbers the PM was citing matched semi-official British estimates, and were still far closer to the real ones than the few thousands that the “dear chap” was talking about. It may also be noted that the PM's comments on conversion, though really un-statesmanlike and probably said with the purpose of simple out-talking the opponent, were at the same time similar to what Gandhi and Congress leaders told the victims.<sup>164</sup> British authorities shared this perception of the pogrom: indeed the first time Noakhali was mentioned during Bengal cabinet meetings was in context of the debate – with Burrows present – about the legal possibilities of punishing Surendra Mohan Ghosh for sowing the wind.

Nevertheless, this is what Hindus accused the PM of, and more vocally (Kripalani, for one<sup>165</sup>). Yet even Taylor, despite his intense dislike of the PM, “was sure that the movement had not the backing of the Muslim League” i. e. party leadership and government.<sup>166</sup> Sudhir Ghosh from Congress, who held Suhrawardy in comparably low esteem, blamed him for the Great Calcutta Riot, but not for the Noakhali pogrom; he merely suspected that the PM knew who was responsible. “Those who use those hooligans” – guessed Ghosh – “are Muslim Leaguers; Suhrawardy knows very well who they are and he could call these men and say ‘stop’ and this lawlessness would stop”.<sup>167</sup> The PM in fact lacked omnipotence towards party cadres, as will be seen; it is possible, however, that he knew the identity of the pogrom's masterminds.

Later, during a private conversation with Horace Alexander, Suhrawardy said about one of riot leaders, a Muslim M.L.A., that this person “is now going about arm-in-arm

<sup>162</sup> Burrows to Wavell, 23 October 1946, *Disturbances and riots – Communal – Noakhali*, File No. 5/55/46, Home (Poll. I), NAI, p. 19. It should be noted though that while the number of “about 282” killed given in his memoirs is close to the actual figure (although its source is not known), Suhrawardy adds some absurd information about “four women (...) abducted of whom three were subsequently restored” and with remarkable obtuseness refers to a pogrom as “repercussions” and “revenge” for killing *imams* and *muezzins* of Noakhali descent during the Great Calcutta Riot (*Memoirs of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy*, p. 105).

<sup>163</sup> *Hindusthan Standard*, 18 October 1946.

<sup>164</sup> See for example *Surendra Mohan Ghose*, p. 298.

<sup>165</sup> J. B. Kripalani, *Gandhi: His Life And Thought*, Bombay 1970, p. 256.

<sup>166</sup> Notes by Wavell, 31 October 1946, TOP vol. IX, doc. 8, enclosure, p. 14.

<sup>167</sup> Ghosh to Cripps, 31 October 1946, TOP vol. IX, doc. 14, enclosure, p. 26.

with the District Magistrate, pretending to be the most ardent peace-maker. This is the man Suhrawardy told Muriel Lester and me he might have to hang, whatever damage he thereby suffered with Muslim bigots".<sup>168</sup>

Maybe that was just cajoling. Or maybe the PM was sadly aware that he had scant control over the BPML's radical wing, as by going against it openly, his own position would be "damaged". The identity of the M.L.A. mentioned here is uncertain; Gholam Sarwar was no longer an M.L.A., nor did he ever accompany the District Commissioner at any time.<sup>169</sup> The description is actually more suggestive of the Secretary of Noakhali's branch of the BPML, Mujibar Rahman, who insisted during parliamentary debates that accusations against Muslims are mostly the propaganda of Congress or Mahasabha.<sup>170</sup>

On the other hand, the PM's letter to Jinnah sent several days after the riots seems as if it was written with a purpose of thwarting every single accusation against League.

"Local Muslims and Muslim Leaguers have condemned these outrages and have kept themselves aloof from it. On occasions they have resisted the hooligans, on occasions they have combined with the Hindus to resist the hooligans. Local Muslim League MLAs have all written [*sic!*] to me to send enough police to stop these outrages which they consider a blot on the Muslim League. More than anything else, this clearly shows that this has not been done by the Muslim League and Muslim Leaguers understand that it is against the policy of the Muslim League".<sup>171</sup>

Whom did Suhrawardy feed with lies, then? The *Quaid*, with whom he had complicated relations, but needed him (and was likewise needed by him) for logrolling? Or the Gandhists he knew? The first option seems more probable to me due to the fact that Suhrawardy had far fewer reasons to lie to Alexander or Lester; on the other hand, admitting to Jinnah that Muslims are the guilty ones here would have been a major gift to the PM's political rivals. Not that the latter were resting; Nazimuddin's faction soon

<sup>168</sup> Alexander to Agatha Harrison, 24th October 1946, L/P&J/8/655, IOR, p. 87.

<sup>169</sup> This doesn't mean that he is to be written off as the M.L.A. in question. Communist biweekly *People's Age* (10 November 1946) wrote with amazement that in the first days after the pogrom Gholam Sarwar had been invited by Superintendent of Police (also suspected, probably rightly, for helping the rioters) to the meetings of peace committees. Maybe this is what Suhrawardy meant, and Alexander remembered it in a distorted way.

<sup>170</sup> BLA, vol. LXXII, part 3, First Session, 1947, 21 April 1947, p. 94. There is more circumstantial evidence to substantiate his possible guilt. Noakhali's District Commissioner, Edward McNerny, later confessed to Gandhi that "a certain Muslim member of the Legislative Assembly was raising a private army under the garb of Red Cross volunteers" – this time it could not have been Sarwar, as he was already in prison. Pyarelal, *Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. I, p. 377. Also, when on March 1947 Eastern Bengal experienced riots again, Mujibar Rahman and Fazlur Karim, his fellow M.L.A. from Ramganj, were alleged to be perpetrators (Nirmal Kumar Bose, *My Days with Gandhi*, Calcutta 1953, p. 225). This topic needs more extensive research.

<sup>171</sup> Suhrawardy to Jinnah, 26 October 1946, JP vol. XIV, doc. 183, p. 229.

launched fierce attacks against the Government, accusing policemen of abusing Muslims and the PM of inaction over this.<sup>172</sup>

The conservatives were not the only ones. On 19th October the Working Committee of the BPML issued a statement condemning Noakhali riot, describing the perpetrators as “misguided by designing miscreants”.<sup>173</sup> And just six days (!) later the report of the Enquiry Commission created by the BPML appeared. This document was immediately and rightly labeled as sheer nonsense, since it stated that

“There has been no case of rape and abduction and no general killing and general arson. There are instances of conversion and stray marriages. The total number of deaths due to the outrage in Tipperah is 15 and in Noakhali it is less than a hundred. Not a single Scheduled Caste man was either killed or injured (...) Not only the Muslims took newly converted Hindu girls in marriage but also they gave Muslim girls in marriage to newly converted Hindus”.

Any claim to the contrary was “a monstrous lie deliberately organized” with the obvious intention “to humiliate the Muslims in the public esteem both in India and outside (...) to discredit the Muslim League ministry” and “to fan trouble in other parts of the Province and country where Hindus are in a majority”.<sup>174</sup> What should be noted is that the BPML’s left wing had a strong position in said Commission, with Shamsuddin Ahmad as member and Abul Hashim as Chairman.

Compared to the aforementioned, the PM in fact did quite well. He publicly described the rioters who claimed their allegiance to the BPML as enemies of both Muslims and the League.<sup>175</sup> Noakhali Hindus soon heard from him during the meeting: “I’m very sorry to hear that you’ve been the victims of aggression. I came here to save you and I assure you that those who are guilty will be punished”.<sup>176</sup>

Again, the question is whether or not those were just empty words.<sup>177</sup> A closer analysis of the PM’s approach towards Gandhi’s peace mission may help in finding the answer. At

<sup>172</sup> See *Secret Report on the Political Situation in Bengal for the first half of February, 1947*, R/3/2/59A, IOR, p. 71 and BLA, vol. LXXII, part 1, First Session, 1947, 6 February 1947, p. 46.

<sup>173</sup> *Star of India*, 21 October 1946.

<sup>174</sup> *Star of India*, 25 October 1946.

<sup>175</sup> *Hindusthan Standard*, 18 October 1946.

<sup>176</sup> BLA, vol. LXXII, part 1, First Session, 1947, 6 February 1947, p. 48.

<sup>177</sup> Suranjan Das (*Communal Riots in Bengal*, p. 200) ascribes the release on bail of many riot perpetrators to pressure exerted by Suhrawardy and Huq, basing his information on the journal *Modern Review*. The tendency is a fact, see Tucker, *While Memory Serves*, pp. 177, 272–273; for an exemplary complaint from riot victims: Residents of Sonaimuri to Kripalani, [November 1946], AICC Papers, File No. CL-8, NMML, pp. 224–226. Yet the PM’s personal interference is unconfirmed; it may have been just the solidarity of Muslim prosecutors and/or judges with their co-religionists, or other factors. For example, Edward Skinner Simpson – an ICS member sent by the Government to make a report about the Noakhali pogrom, observed that rioters were being released on bail extremely liberally, but he ascribed that in part to a lack of space in prisons; see Simpson to Martyn, 5 November

first Suhrawardy was reluctant to endorse *Bapu's* efforts: "I was against it because I felt that his arrival here would excite the Hindus considerably and also make the Muslims suspicious".<sup>178</sup> Yet maybe it was in order to dispel suspicions that the PM declared his readiness to join the Mahatma after his arrival. As for Gandhi, despite not being sure what to make of Suhrawardy, he wanted to believe at him – and since Suhrawardy was the democratically elected PM, *Bapu* felt that he must work with him, rather than with colonial authorities.<sup>179</sup>

However, since at this time news of November's Bihar carnage began to pour into Bengal, the PM changed his mind. Accompanying Mahatma instead of helping Bihar victims would be considered treachery to the Muslim cause (not to mention the PM's other political duties, beginning with the reconstruction of his Cabinet). Still, this only further aroused suspicions that his offer was mere lip service from the beginning, due to his indifference to Gandhi's pleas and Congress' demands. Evidence that this wasn't the case however can be found in Suhrawardy's suggestion that his daughter (who was previously engaged in relief work during Great Calcutta Riot) may go instead. She was quite keen on the idea until her father's party colleagues enlightened her to the fact that the presence of an unveiled Muslim girl in Mahatma's retinue would horrify her conservative rural co-religionists. Since covering the face was out of the question for the PM's daughter, in the end she didn't go.<sup>180</sup> Instead, the government sent two parliamentary secretaries and Minister of Commerce Shamsuddin Ahmad.

Unlike the secretaries, Shamsuddin soon began to publicly express his shock over what he saw and heard at riot-stricken areas – without sparing his party colleagues from blame, as one of his more striking discoveries was that a few of them were involved in the pogrom. He even went as far as to openly ridicule their explanations that the reasons behind the pogrom were "economical", comparing the riot to medieval Mongolian atrocities instead; *Morning News* labeled him a "lackey" of Congress for this, but when calls were made for his dismissal, the PM ignored them.<sup>181</sup> More than that, Shamsuddin

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1946, S.P. Mookerjee Papers, Installment II–IV, Subject File No. 149, NMML, p. 36 and 40. Furthermore, in the Sessions Courts dealing with the rioters, most of the jurors were Muslims – leading the Congress M.L.A. Dhirendranath Datta to suggest that a Special Bench should be set up by government to judge those cases instead (BLA, vol. LXXII, part 1, First Session, 1947, 14 March 1947, p. 202).

<sup>178</sup> Suhrawardy to Jinnah, 26 October 1946, JP vol. XIV, doc. 183, p. 228.

<sup>179</sup> See their first talk at this time: Pyarelal, *Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. I, p. 358. Shortly after upon hearing one of his volunteers criticizing Muslims for a lack of condemnation of the pogrom, *Bapu* replied: "I have heard nothing but condemnation of these acts from Shaheed Suhrawardy downwards since I have come here". *Talk with relief workers*, 7 November 1946, CWMG vol. 93, doc. 1, p. 2.

<sup>180</sup> Pyarelal, *Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. I, p. 363.

<sup>181</sup> See for example: *ibidem*, p. 373 ("The issue of Pakistan versus Hindustan was not going to be settled by the slaughter of Hindus where Muslims were in a majority and *vice versa*. No Government worth its name could stand silently by and let the majority oppress or exterminate the minority. All that had happened – forcible conversions and the like – was un-Islamic"), BLC, First Session, 1947, No. 2, 6 February 1947, pp. 37–39; *People's Age*, 8 December 1946; *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 31 October 1946; *Hindusthan Standard*, 10 November 1946.

was still one of his most trusted confidants, taking part (see below) in secret talks with the Forward Bloc in January.

Notably, before the visit Shamsuddin – like most Leaguers and Cabinet members – was convinced that “the situation of the district was now such that the Muslims were feeling even more insecure than the Hindus”.<sup>182</sup> not to mention his co-authoring of the nonsensical “enquiry” report quoted above. It is evident that it what influenced this opinion wasn’t ill will, but the character of information flowing from Noakhali Leaguers. This partly explains Suhrawardy’s early position as well.

Thus the political reasons mixed with a lack of proper information and mild anti-Hindu prejudices resulted in a skeptical attitude towards the accounts of the atrocities. This (among other factors) made him incoherent; yet the fiery moods of both sides loomed so large at this time that Suhrawardy’s stance may seem *via media* in comparison, which is how, in all probability, he saw his role. There is no denying that his course was liked neither by Hindus nor by right-wing Muslims. For example, he demanded – unsuccessfully – that Burrows and Toker forbid the soldiers posted in Noakhali after the riots from intervening in the villages. Indeed Muslim fears in this case are understandable when we consider that the commander of these forces was Colonel Ram Chandra Thapar, a Hindu who certainly wasn’t above communal bias.<sup>183</sup>

Yet the PM stood against the right wing of his party and cabinet when the latter demanded that the troops be recalled altogether. What the ministerial supporters of this proposition heard from him is revealing when compared with his earlier press comments:

“The situation had by no means so far improved as to make possible the withdrawal of military forces from that area. A very large number of Hindus had been forcibly converted and although they were being fed (often by cow meat) and looked after in their villages, they were being kept there virtually as prisoners. As regards the people who had left, they could not, after what had happened, be expected to return to their homes without fear, unless they had visible proof that the police and the military were available for their protection”.<sup>184</sup>

He did not use such words in the Assembly – remaining silent when the Noakhali riot became the subject of debate. But he had good reasons, as taking another stance would have endangered his position from various sides. Not only was Nazimuddin and Akram

<sup>182</sup> CP, 14 November 1946, p. 3.

<sup>183</sup> See his letter about Great Calcutta Riot: Thapar to Smith, 8 November 1946, Major H.H.L. Smith Papers, Documents. 1040, 88/28/3, Imperial War Museum, London. Also, following the investigation into the number of persons injured during arrest by the police or army, the result was 138 (BLA, vol. LXXII, part 3, First Session, 1947, 29 April 1947, p. 252); this suggests that the accusations weren’t entirely unfounded. See also Toker, *While Memory Serves*, pp. 175–176 and *Secret Report on the Political Situation in Bengal for the second part of October, 1946*, L/P&J/5/153, IOR.

<sup>184</sup> CP, 7 November 1946, p. 4.

Khan's faction in an aggressive mood, but Abul Hashim's speech, denying any rape cases and suggesting that Hindus came out against Muslims first,<sup>185</sup> can only be labeled as quite scandalous. Fazlul Huq (who had recently been readmitted into the BPML) made an even worse impression, claiming that 99% of accusations against Noakhali Muslims were fabricated (and that he could easily prove their innocence in court if he was their advocate). He also criticized Suhrawardy's government for letting the troops stay in Noakhali and Tippera. According to Huq, the soldiers posed a threat to the peaceful Muslims of those districts...<sup>186</sup>

Neither of the two visited the riot-stricken areas, and due to their prickly relationship with the PM, probably neither of them had any access to figures from government documents either. Therefore we cannot exclude the possibility that they simply naively believed their co-religionists trying to whitewash themselves. Another interpretation is possible as well – the one Mukherjee openly spat out during the parliamentary debate; namely that both speakers, who at this time were contesting the seat of the President of the BPML, were less concerned about the truth than about the campaign.<sup>187</sup>

Whatever the reasons, leftist faction of the BPML (with exceptions like Shamsuddin Ahmad), which normally avoided communal quarrels, joined forces with those who in fact negated the whole pogrom. In this case, even if the PM really had any verified information about the eventual role of certain Noakhali Leaguers in the pogrom (and not only suspicions), announcing it publicly was out of the question. Or maybe, as he claimed on another occasion, he really thought that Noakhali is not such a severe case compared with Bihar.<sup>188</sup>

Still, a communal streak *can* be seen in his attitude, and once again we can see this from a couple of examples. When in January 1947 a clash between students a police occurred in Mymensingh – due to arrests of demonstrators proclaiming solidarity with Vietnam Communists in Calcutta the day before<sup>189</sup> – the PM found far more bitter words for the students in the Assembly than he ever did for the Noakhali rioters. That was telling, as was the fact that the Bihar PM had received a long note from Suhrawardy

<sup>185</sup> He was referring to the employment of some Sikhs by Lakshmi Majumdar, a Hindu *zamindar* from Noakhali, who felt insecure after the Great Calcutta Riot; in Muslim propaganda, this was transformed into a veritable invasion of the raging Sikh horde into the local Muslim areas. It must be noted, however, that Majumdar once ordered his Sikhs to fire when a group of villagers came to him with some complaint. BLA, vol. LXXII, part 1, First Session, 1947, 6 February 1947, pp. 42–43.

<sup>186</sup> BLA, vol. LXXII, part 1, First Session, 1947, 6 February 1947, pp. 55–56.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibidem*. Admittedly on another occasion Huq described Noakhali rioters as “fiends” and the “most degraded specimens of humanity” (even though in his opinion there were really only a handful of them). See Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal*, p. 193. That suggests he was sincere – not to be confused with being right.

<sup>188</sup> The tendency to bid for who suffered more – Hindus in Noakhali or Muslims in Bihar (in fact the latter riot brought far more victims) – was a recurring motive during the Assembly's debates or elsewhere. Wavell wrote in his diary that for the Bengal PM “Calcutta and East Bengal had of course been gentlemanly differences of opinion” compared with Bihar riots (Wavell, *The Viceroy's Journal*, p. 408).

<sup>189</sup> As for said disturbances, see BLA, vol. LXXII, part 1, First Session, 1947, 28 February 1947, p. 528; BLA, vol. LXXII, part 2, First Session, 1947, 11 March 1947, pp. 104–108; *Secret Report on the Political Situation in Bengal for the second half of January, 1947*, R/3/2/59A, IOR.



listing several well thought-out steps for its recipient to take, in order to retain the trust of Bihari Muslims after its riots – some of which would be equally suitable in Noakhali’s case, but (mostly) were not put into action.<sup>190</sup> This is not to say he did nothing for Noakhali victims. When he suggested that Muslims should rebuild the victims’ houses for free, even the puzzled Viceroy noted “Suhrawardy has been quite sensible lately”.<sup>191</sup>

Gandhi meanwhile, who had admitted at Noakhali that he didn’t know how to deal with Suhrawardy and what to think about him,<sup>192</sup> also received substantial help from him,<sup>193</sup> even in arresting some of the riot perpetrators, though the AIML’s High Command was irritated by this.<sup>194</sup> Yet when the BPML’s right wing went on to accuse the Mahatma of anti-Muslim bias, the PM responded reactively as usual, putting political considerations first. Burrows noted:

“I am not surprised that the Muslim leaders of Bengal are exceedingly exasperated with the publicity that the astute Mahatma has secured for Noakhali in recent issues of *Harijan* and Suhrawardy has been provoked into sending him two ‘brutally frank’ letters telling him bluntly that the horrors of East Bengal are not a tithe of the horrors of Bihar. The purpose of the letters is no doubt partly to raise Suhrawardy’s stock with his party, who have been accusing him of appeasing the Hindus”.<sup>195</sup>

“Give him my love and tell him to go to Bihar as soon as possible”, Horace Alexander heard when he asked the PM if he should bear a message from him to Gandhi in Noakhali.<sup>196</sup> This may seem similar to what Nazimuddin’s faction was saying; minus the love.

### Reorganization of Cabinet and *tebhaga* movement

In November 1946, ostensibly due to Jogendranath Mandal being elevated into Nehru’s Interim Government (from League’s nomination), Bengal’s Cabinet was reorganized in a way that dismayed both the left and right wing of the BPML. There was nothing strange about the fact that Suhrawardy fulfilled Mandal’s request to include an Ambedkarite *dalit* or two in his place, although it must be noted that one of the PM’s nominees – Dwarkanath Barori (the other being Nagendra Narayan Roy) had only a few days earlier

<sup>190</sup> A note on Bihar by Huseyn Shaeed Suhrawardy, [undated], JP vol. I, part 1, doc. 43, enclosure, pp. 94–100.

<sup>191</sup> Wavell to Pethick-Lawrence, 22 November 1946, TOP vol. IX, doc. 77, p. 143.

<sup>192</sup> See Bose, *My Days with Gandhi*, p. 99.

<sup>193</sup> “Whenever he ran into difficulties, he appealed to Suhrawardy for help, and to some extent he got it” (Alexander, *Gandhi through Western Eyes*, p. 140).

<sup>194</sup> See Birla to Pyarelal, 18 November 1946, in: Ghanshyam Das Birla, *Bapu: A Unique Association*, vol. IV, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay 1977, p. 316.

<sup>195</sup> Burrows to Colville, 6 December 1946, BP vol. III, doc. 233, p. 181.

<sup>196</sup> Alexander, *Gandhi through Western Eyes*, p. 140.

defected from Congress to the Scheduled Castes' Federation. Fazlur Rahman – the only new Muslim given a ministerial post – was hitherto associated with the conservatives, but he was ready to break those allegiances; still, while he later proved to be an able Revenue Minister, he lacked a substantial party backing. The fourth nominee was a Caste Hindu landlord from Uttarpara, Tarak Nath Mukherjea<sup>197</sup> (Member of Legislative Council), who was a longtime fellow traveler of the BPML, and so staunchly loyal that he had no qualms with praising the idea of Pakistan. Either he was chosen simply as the PM's follower, or Suhrawardy hoped this might help in mending his relations with *bhadraloks*. If he thought the latter, he was wrong. Mukherjea immediately became such a target of hate that the British expressed concern that he may soon "be openly insulted, even if not actually assaulted".<sup>198</sup> Whichever version of the PM's motives is true, his behavior is nevertheless significant, since expanding his source base within the BPML for the price of (possibly) weakening his own position in the Cabinet was out of the question.

Somehow at this time the PM distanced himself from the leftist faction too – although unlike with the case of the conservatives, we don't know the exact reasons.<sup>199</sup> Notably, the rift is never mentioned in Jinnah's correspondence. Suhrawardy seemingly wanted to retain the facade of cooperation with the leftists when dealing with AIML's High Command.

Nevertheless, the PM did not abandon the program of social change which in part gave him the power he now wielded. His plans to get rid of the *zamindari* system amply show this.

Suhrawardy's tenure as PM was during the peak period of the *tebhaga* movement, meaning "two-third", a part of the crop that sharecroppers wanted to get for themselves. The movement itself is well covered by historiography (although with a catch).<sup>200</sup> Since in 1935 a new electoral system gave the rural electorate a decisive voice in the parliamentary elections, *Permanent Settlement* – a system imposed by the British shortly after conquest

<sup>197</sup> Mukherjea got the Irrigation and Waterways Department, Roy – Judicial and Legislative, Fazlur Rahman – Land, Land Revenue and the Jails Branch of the Home Department, Barori – Works and Buildings.

<sup>198</sup> *Secret Report on the Political Situation in Bengal for the second half of November, 1946*, R/3/2/59A, IOR, p. 121.

<sup>199</sup> Kamruddin Ahmad (*The Social History of Bengal*, Dacca 1970, p. 76), who witnessed these fluctuations firsthand, much later recalled some cases of corruption among Abul Hashim's co-workers, for example selling civil supply permits, mentioning that Hashim himself was unaware of this. Surely, however, this is not enough to explain the growing distance between him and the PM; it is more likely that Suhrawardy was alarmed by Hashim's ambitions to become President of the BPML (see below).

<sup>200</sup> The most serious (and less serious as well) works about the movement are written by veteran Communists, often describing their own youth (see for example Somnath Hore, *Tebhaga: An Artist's Diary and Sketchbook*, [trans.] Somnath Zutshi, Seagull, Calcutta 2009; Ashok Majumdar, *The Tebhaga Movement: Politics of Peasant Protest in Bengal 1946–1950*, Delhi 2011; Abani Lahiri, *Postwar Revolt of the Rural Poor in Bengal: Memoirs of a Communist activist*, [trans.] Subrata Banerjee, Seagull, Calcutta 2001), who despite having access to valuable source material can nevertheless hardly be called objective (the same applies to the famous book of their younger but no less fervent Dutch colleague: Peter Custers, *Women in the Tebhaga Uprising: rural poor women and revolutionary leadership, 1946–47*, Calcutta 1987). The one important work which doesn't belong to this group is Boudhayan Chattopadhyay, *Agrarian Structure, Movements and Peasant Organisations in India*, vol. IV: *West Bengal*, New Delhi 2004.

of Bengal, which gave landlords (called *zamindars*) the power to collect taxes – was questioned with more and more zeal. This trend was frightening also for the *jotedars*. These major leasers of *zamindari* lands at first posed as middlemen between *zamindars* and small folk, being responsible for collecting taxes and rents, but in the course of time had become largely independent. The *jotedars* in fact represented even greater political power at this time, having no less than 40 M.L.A.'s in the current Assembly. The lobby (often overlooked) of petty investors who bought subleases as a safe investment comprised a substantial force, too; in the mid-1940s there were about 1,950 *zamindars*, but also about 15 million big and small beneficiaries of the whole system. Suhrawardy labeled the latter “bloodsuckers” and was for abolishing all rent-receiving interests, yet he knew that “it will be a long time before any government of Bengal would be in a position to do that”.<sup>201</sup>

Before 1946 the only government that seriously tried to take on this challenge was the first Cabinet of Fazlul Huq (1937–1941). A body he appointed for this task, popularly called the Floud Commission, ultimately recommended abolishing *zamindari* system altogether and giving rights of ownership to the tenants.<sup>202</sup> Due to Huq's political weakening not much more was done at that time, and when Bengal was struck by a great cyclone in 1942, and famine followed (not to mention the province being a potential war zone), reforms had naturally been put on hold. Thus when the war ended, rural Bengal was starving and more eager on the idea of abolishing/reducing tenancy rents than ever – without relying on the authorities.<sup>203</sup> As for the latter, even before the elections in 1946, the British intended to get rid of *Permanent Settlement* by buying the lands (exceeding the land ceiling) from *zamindars*, although due to a lack of funds the plans were modest, involving at first only 5 (out of 27) Bengal districts; it was estimated that it would not be abolished throughout the whole province before 1970.<sup>204</sup> When both chambers of parliament constituted, fierce debates followed.

The BPCC was stuck. On the one hand it was unable to ignore the Nehruwian and Gandhian approach, which clearly hailed land reforms. On the other, despite the presence of some leftists (like Dhirendranath Dutta, Abul Hashim's Hindu counterpart) more of the Congress M.L.A's in Bengal were in favour of retaining the *status quo* than those of the League. The fact that Muslims were in power offered an easy workaround to this dilemma. The BPCC insisted that reforms were a must, but not to be entrusted to the

<sup>201</sup> BLA, vol. LXXII, part 1, First Session, 1947, 12 March 1947, p. 134; BLA, vol. LXXII, part 3, First Session, 1947, 21 April 1947, p. 129 (numerical estimations); CP, 27 June 1946, p. 5 (first quote); CP, 2 May 1946, p. 10 (second quote); Hatch-Barnwell, *The Last Guardian*, pp. 29–30, 75–76.

<sup>202</sup> *Report of the Land Revenue Commission Bengal*, Vol. I, *With Minutes of Dissent*, Alipore 1940, see also: Hatch-Barnwell, *The Last Guardian*, pp. 78–80; Chattopadhyay, *Bengal Electoral Politics*, pp. 162–164; Samindra Mohan Biswas, *Sher-e-Bangla Fazlul Huq (1906–1947): In The Cross-Currents of Provincial and National Politics of India*, Kolkata 2011, pp. 190–195.

<sup>203</sup> See Adrienne Cooper, *Sharecropping and Sharecroppers struggles in Bengal, 1930–1950*, Calcutta 1988, p. 167.

<sup>204</sup> See *Statesman*, 24 September 1945 and BLC, First Session, 1946, No. 8, 5 August 1946, p. 148.

BPML, since it would surely tarnish it on every level by corruption, dishonesty and an anti-Hindu bias.<sup>205</sup>

At first Suhrawardy avoided declaring anything concrete in public, partly due to complicated nature of the problem itself.<sup>206</sup> That said, the protocols of the Bengal cabinet give the impression that it had a surprisingly pro-rural approach. There was hardly any opposition to those reformatory plans, aside from a critique made from the left by Shamsuddin Ahmad, whose radicalism matched that of Dhirendranath Dutta or Communist M.L.A. Jyoti Basu (future Chief Minister of West Bengal).<sup>207</sup>

Being concerned with these debates, the authorities in Calcutta overlooked the increasingly tense atmosphere (owing also to bad crops) in the interior. When between September and November 1946 the *tebhaga* movement began to develop rapidly, ultimately encompassing 26 of 27 Bengal districts (Boudhayan Chattopadhyay lists 31 subdivisions in 16 districts as regions where one can say about intensity of the movement), at first nobody knew how to react.<sup>208</sup> Taking paddy from the landlord's field to village granaries and settling scores with *zamindars* or *jotedars* in other spheres may have been labeled as disturbances provoked by the Communist agitation, or an effect of local grievances (the latter being closer to the truth<sup>209</sup>). Governor Burrows assumed the former attitude. The BPCC was mostly silent, unsure how to tackle this touchy topic that hardly fit into

<sup>205</sup> See the protocols of Assembly debate about this: BLA, vol. LXXI, part 2, Second Session, 1946, 13 August 1946, pp. 146–165.

<sup>206</sup> The typical points of discussion both in the Assembly and the Cabinet were the consequences of banning subleases (a total ban could have helped to avoid malfeasances leading to landlessness, but would also harm those unable to work on the field themselves, like widows, minors or disabled people), possible exemptions from land reforms (like *waqfs*, a Muslim type of charity foundation, which in Bengal more often than not benefited the donor's family and helped it retain control over the donated land) or finding *via media* between making the land ceiling real and depriving Bengalis of the possibility to give part of their land as a gift or dowry.

<sup>207</sup> For example, the PM had to explain to Shamsuddin that the liquidation of the *zamindari* system would certainly not bring a gigantic budget surplus “so long as the interest charges on the money which will have to be borrowed to pay the compensation remained payable”. In order to get more money from this operation, which would have also forced heavy investments into building a state-owned fiscal system to replace the landlords' services, the government would have to greatly increase the villagers' taxes. When the Minister of Commerce replied that up to the present the *zamindars* had been blocking all government initiatives for improving conditions in villages, i. e. introducing new breeds of livestock, and the tillers would happily pay bigger taxes out of sheer gratitude for having been freed from the landlords' clutches, the unenviable task of talking him gently out of this nonsense fell on Suhrawardy. CP, 27 June 1946, p. 4.

<sup>208</sup> For more detailed information about the expropriation of paddy, aside from works mentioned in previous footnotes see Ashim Kumar Sarkar, *Nationalism, Communalism and Partition of Bengal (Maldah 1905–1953)*, Kolkata 2013, pp. 146–151 or Sati Dutta, *Classes and Communities in the Peasant Movement of Khulna District in Undivided Bengal (1938–1947)*, in: *Bengal Miscellany*, vol. III, eds. Chittabrata Palit, Kabita Ray, New Delhi 2011, pp. 121–123. Data taken from Majumdar, *The Tebhaga Movement*, pp. 67–69 and Chattopadhyay, *Agrarian Structure*, vol. IV, p. 235. The number of districts does not include Calcutta itself.

<sup>209</sup> In March 1947 all subdivision officers were asked to fill in questionnaires about land arrangements at their subdivision and the *tebhaga* movement; the results are easily available in Boudhayan Chattopadhyay's book (*Agrarian Structure*, vol. IV, pp. 277–381). Most of the reports list “locals” as the leaders – meaning either local Communist workers or simple villagers. At times there are even mentions of the CPI members not participating in the movement, but watching with interest over its development (see for example p. 349).

Congress' narrative about the communal conflict. The BPML as a ruling party could have been a little more open about its internal differences. The conservatives, many of whom were landlords themselves, began to suggest that Muslims did not need *tebhaga* – what was preventing them from getting fair share of land was the oppression of Hindu *zamindars*, a problem Pakistan would solve at once. Newly appointed minister Fazlur Rahman, a moderate reformist, replied that the villagers' demands were justified and that the BPML had a unique opportunity to broaden its base at the expense of the Communists. Shamsuddin Ahmad shared this view.

While not succumbing to the demands of radical leftists, until the first months of 1947 the PM was still closer to this group than to the exponents of landed interests. He was even ready to act more hastily than before, going – moderately – with the *tebhaga* flow. With his backing, Fazlur Rahman prepared a new bill draft reducing the landlord's share to one third and protecting sharecroppers from evictions. To avoid an Assembly debate, which could have cost them dearly, they tried to put this act into effect as a Governor's Ordinance. Burrows flatly refused; he didn't want to antagonize landlords and was frightened that such a step would cause chaos at the interior, thus preventing Bengal towns from being adequately supplied – which was a recipe for new riots.<sup>210</sup> At least the project of *Bengal Bargadars Temporary Regulations Bill* – or *Bargadar Bill* for short – was publicized on 22<sup>nd</sup> January. It wasn't revolutionary – indeed it mostly repeated the recommendations of the Floud Commission – yet it was an important step in this situation. According to the Bill, *jotedar* could take half of a tenant's crop as rent if he provided him with a plough, draught animals and fertilizers beforehand, otherwise he could only demand one third. The right to evict tenants was limited to cases of not paying the rent, misuse of land or a situation in which the landlord wanted to use the land himself. All this was to last for two years, as the optimistic assumption was that the final liquidation of the *Permanent Settlement* would be completed in the meantime.<sup>211</sup>

That wasn't the end of pro-*tebhaga* steps taken by the PM. On 17<sup>th</sup> December in a press note he suggested that landlords should seek a compromise with villagers – at a time when *jotedars* presented the protesters as dangerous criminals.<sup>212</sup> At the disturbed Kishoreganj district in Mymensingh – governed by the notoriously brutal Commissioner Reginald Bastin – Suhrawardy himself appeared with Kishoreganj's Subdivisional Officer, expressly to ensure that he was for *tebhaga* since 1940 and that all arrest warrants (numbering more than 500) issued for workers of the movement would be canceled.<sup>213</sup>

<sup>210</sup> See Burrows to Wavell, 7 January 1947, R/3/2/59A, IOR, p. 102; *The Bengal Ministry*, L/P&J/7/5472, IOR, p. 8; Bose, *Agrarian Bengal*, pp. 265–268. It's indeed strange that Burrows, an ex-trade unionist, regarding the movement had only to say that in India sharecropping “is ancient and widespread” and so any claims of the cultivators to more than 50% of their crop have “no pretense of a legal basis”, even disregarding some District Magistrates who thought otherwise. Burrows to Wavell, 24 December 1946, BP vol. III, doc. 234, p. 184.

<sup>211</sup> Sunil Kumar Sen, *Agrarian struggle in Bengal, 1946–47*, New Delhi 1972, pp. 47–49; Cooper, *Sharecropping and Sharecroppers struggles in Bengal*, pp. 188–189.

<sup>212</sup> Custers, *Women in the Tebhaga Uprising*, p. 134; *People's Age*, 29 December 1946.

<sup>213</sup> This decision was soon overturned by Commissioner Bastin (who wasn't present in his district at that time); workers had to be released only on bail (if at all). *People's Age*, 26 January 1947; *People's Age*, 9 February 1947.



On 12<sup>th</sup> January the PM met the delegation of the Communist-related organization *Bengal Provincial Krishak Sabha* [Tillers' Assembly], which also heard from him that *tebhaga* is a reasonable demand.<sup>214</sup>

It is also proved beyond doubt – primarily by Adrienne Cooper – that the Governor, not the PM, was the driving force behind the repressive measures used widely from February (and less widely from December).<sup>215</sup> Yet Suhrawardy's approach also changed at this time, and in a notable way. When during cabinet meeting at 27<sup>th</sup> February Shamsuddin Ahmad suggested arresting the main agitators and leaving the tillers alone, he was opposed by Martyn and backed by a few other ministers, but not the PM. The next day Suhrawardy attacked *tebhaga* leaders at the parliamentary tribune:

“No Government, Sir, however sympathetic it may be towards the reasonable demands of the people can allow lawlessness and defiance of authority to nullify it. It is a matter of greatest regret to Government that innocent and law-abiding cultivators have fallen prey to this agitation and have resorted to such steps as made it incumbent on our forces of law and order to use force against force”.<sup>216</sup>

In fact, despite the unwisely bellicose rhetoric of radical journals like *People's Age*, CPI workers at the interior were almost always a moderating force – at times putting themselves at risk because of it, since after a bloody police raid it wasn't safe to try and persuade angry villagers that retaliating will only make matters worse. Even pro-Communist researchers corroborate that, if only to criticize fellow leftists for this approach.<sup>217</sup> Suhrawardy himself once let slip that “[Communists] had been clever in remaining non-violent; he sometimes wished they had gone in for violence, as it would then have been easier to deal with them”.<sup>218</sup>

What made him choose a confrontational course, then? Primarily it was Attlee's famous statement from 20<sup>th</sup> February 1947, making it clear that decolonization of India will come in no more than a few months. If Bengal's future was to be decided in such a short time, with colonial authorities and the provincial Assembly (along with its powerful landlord lobby) playing key roles, chaos had to be avoided at all cost. Suhrawardy began to share the Governor's fear that the food supply of Calcutta was in danger. A new law could for

<sup>214</sup> *People's Age*, 12 January 1947.

<sup>215</sup> Cooper, *Sharecropping and Sharecroppers struggles in Bengal*, p. 174. Between December 1946 and February 1947 there were at least five clashes between villagers and police, resulting in the deaths of one policeman and 31 protesters, as well as 1200 arrests. Taj ul-Islam Hashmi, *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia: The Communalization of a Class Politics in East Bengal, 1920–1947*, Boulder 1992, pp. 243–244.

<sup>216</sup> BLA, vol. LXXII, part 1, First Session, 1947, 28 February 1947, p. 526. The PM also refused to meet a village deputation that accused Tamluk (Midnapore district) police of brutality, and his secretary told the villagers that the case may be investigated by the District Commissioner. *People's Age*, 23 March 1947.

<sup>217</sup> See Custers, *Women in the Tebhaga Uprising*, pp. 102–103; Hore, *Tebhaga*, pp. 46–47 and Cooper, *Sharecropping and Sharecroppers struggles in Bengal*, p. 167.

<sup>218</sup> Note by Sir T[erence] Shone, 17 April 1947, TOP vol. X, doc. 163, p. 293.



example make *jotedars* leave lands fallow rather than lease them – which tenants may interpret as a go-ahead to forcibly take land for themselves.<sup>219</sup> In effect, the PM canceled his endorsement to *Bargadar Bill*, which had already been discussed in the Assembly.

This may not have been the only reason for his volte-face. Between 20<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> February he was visited by two *jotedar* delegations.<sup>220</sup> How they described the situation at the interior may be deduced from the fact that one of them was from Jalpaiguri – a district from which fear-mongering messages were being sent at this time about the CPI allegedly establishing a “parallel government”.<sup>221</sup> But that was not the first time the landlords had expressed such panic, their visits may have rather convinced Suhrawardy that following the *pro-tebhaga* course risked opening a rift inside the BPML during the crucial months.

As will be shown, he was right. But the very same fact – that his reform plans caused panic among landlords from both main parties<sup>222</sup> – reveals that his projects in that matter had no communal sources, and Hindus would have benefited from them as well as Muslims. This not only reaffirms the PM’s sincerity – despite all his maneuvers – in his efforts towards Hindu-Muslim settlement, but also sheds new light on his regular cry that *bhadraloks* do not represent “the people”. This is also the reason why Bengali Communists backed the United Bengal Scheme just after its announcement. Despite severe verbal clashes with Suhrawardy in Assembly in the preceding months, they still trusted his (and Abul Hashim’s) reformist credentials. One of them, Nikhil Chakrabarty (who helped Hashim draft the BPML election manifesto of 1945), explained to his skeptical comrades from other provinces that the Scheme endorsed the cause of little people defending their common homeland from wealthy oppressors – “sixty millions” of Bengalis against “Akram Khans and Shyama Prasads”.<sup>223</sup>

### With the end of the Raj in sight

Unlike the case of the interior, the PM underestimated the need to win (urban) Hindu hearts in order to preserve the peace in Bengal cities. Rather, he was convinced that the way to achieve this goal was a secret political settlement, this time with Sarat Chandra Bose (political heir of his famous brother Subhas, leader of the INA) and some ex-INA officers who had ties to him. The BPML, like the British authorities, notably overestimated Bose’s influence; in fact, he was quite isolated both in his community

<sup>219</sup> CP, 27 March 1947, pp. 6–7.

<sup>220</sup> *Peoples’ Age*, 9 March 1947.

<sup>221</sup> Rahmat Ali Choudhuri to Chief Secretary of Bengal’s Government, 18 February 1947, *Alleged rioting and looting by the Communists in Jalpaiguri district*, Bengal Home (Poll.), Confidential, File No. 130/47, WBSA, p. 1.

<sup>222</sup> Several demonstrations against the Bill engaged Hindus as well as Muslims, and in four districts of Bengal, *jotedar samitis* [associations] open to both communities were created at this time. See Lahiri, *Postwar Revolt of the Rural Poor in Bengal*, pp. 80–81 and Majumdar, *The Tebhaga Movement*, pp. 192–193, 196–197.

<sup>223</sup> *People’s Age*, 25 May 1947.

and in the BPCC. The negotiations were conducted by Abul Hashim and his faction, but due to its relative lack of influence in politics there is no doubt that the PM was at least kept informed. His statements from this time, such as “It is my earnest desire to make Bengal a great and prosperous country by the joint efforts of the Hindus and the Muslims”,<sup>224</sup> sat well with this.

All the secrets were however exposed a mere few days after talks began, since the leaked information was printed in *Swadhinata*. Abul Hashim, who feared a possible reaction from the conservatives, immediately stated that these were “purely academic discussions”, and accused the CPI of an “attempt to create disruption among League leaders”.<sup>225</sup> This mysterious affair stopped negotiations for a few months. The pitiable quarrel over elections of the new President of the BPML (Akram Khan had wanted to retire, but after months of intrigues, including the efforts of his long-time rivals Fazlul Huq and Abul Hashim to replace him, he changed his mind) added to the picture of chaos in the League.

After Attlee’s statement on 20<sup>th</sup> February, Nehru and Kripalani soon began to openly discuss the partition of Bengal and Punjab, mostly due to the severe communal disturbances in the latter. This was a rude shock to the new Viceroy Louis Mountbatten and new Secretary of State for India William Listowel, who rightly concluded that such a division of India would be detrimental for the future Pakistan.<sup>226</sup> Suhrawardy thought the same. His indirect responses to this – made more and more repeatedly – were public statements such as: “Bengal belonged to Bengalees and Bengal was indivisible”<sup>227</sup> or “Peace must be preserved at any cost”<sup>228</sup> (the latter statement was made on the eve of Pakistan Day, the anniversary of the Lahore Resolution). On 13<sup>th</sup> March he assured the members of the Bengal Legislative Council that the province would achieve independence.<sup>229</sup> Still, he knew that neither beating the drums of Bengali solidarity nor mere promises would solve the problems. Burrows informed Wavell that the PM is “a very frightened man”<sup>230</sup> and reported:

“His sentiments have been echoed by two of his colleagues, but I doubt if the rank and file of the Party have the vision to realize that they cannot hope by means of their present political power (...) to dominate

<sup>224</sup> *Star of India*, 21 January 1947.

<sup>225</sup> *Star of India*, 28 January 1947; Abul Hashim, *In Retrospect*, pp. 152–153; Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal*, pp. 224–225. The source of the leak was Shamsuddin Ahmad (his motives are hard to ascertain, but it should be noted he apparently lost Suhrawardy’s trust after this move; in May, he was even not included in the United Bengal talks).

<sup>226</sup> Note of India Office, 4 March 1947, TOP vol. IX, doc. 480, enclosure, pp. 841–850. In Listowel’s opinion if Bengal were to become independent, then Pakistan would be deprived of taxes from this province, and wouldn’t be able to defend its borders from the west. It seems that Whitehall shared Suhrawardy’s opinion that other provinces were exploiting Bengal to some extent.

<sup>227</sup> *Star of India*, 18 March 1947.

<sup>228</sup> *Star of India*, 22 March 1947.

<sup>229</sup> *Pakistan Times*, 15 March 1947.

<sup>230</sup> Wavell, *The Viceroy’s Journal*, p. 428.

the Hindus with whom the economic power still rests; and I see that, possibly under pressure from the Party, Suhrawardy has had to ‘explain’ that when he speaks of a League-Congress coalition in Bengal he is assuming coalitions in other (Congress-dominated) Provinces too. I am not sure how this arises if Bengal is independent!”<sup>231</sup>

The PM was indeed pleading for Coalition Ministries in every province,<sup>232</sup> stressing that one-party rule in Bengal must end. The *Statesman*, which even suggested inviting a Communist to the Cabinet, judged that Suhrawardy seemed to be looking into the future now, when he needed to focus on the present.<sup>233</sup> Burrows, though ill at this time, was eager to help his “cad able to long term planning” in maintaining Bengal unity, negotiating with the leaders of the BPCC. This wasn’t an easy task however. Kiran Sankar Roy, who was among those invited to the talks, reminded the Governor that the PM’s speeches, while worthy of appreciation, “were the expressions mainly of his individual opinion and had but slight backing from the Muslim League party”.<sup>234</sup>

Furthermore, promises and visions in those speeches were at once inconclusive and uncompromising. This was partly because the PM did not want to comment on some of the BPCC suggestions – such as Sarat Bose’s idea of avoiding partition by a hasty transfer of full political power to Indian Union, which was totally at odds with Suhrawardy’s aims – and partly due to severe problems he had with his own party. The presentation of the *Bargadar Bill* to the Bengal Assembly was treated by the growing cohorts of the PM’s opponents as a signal to counterattack, even though Suhrawardy was already trying to discreetly take a step back. At the end of March, Jinnah and Liaquat received a statement signed by 74 members of the Bengal Legislative Assembly and Council, including prominent names such as Nurul Amin, Habibullah Bahar and Fazlul Huq. Their demand was for “a dynamic approach by superior wisdom and experience” from the administration, which meant reconstituting the Cabinet to include some of the petitioners and finding plum posts for the rest.<sup>235</sup> Muslim newspapers – *The Morning News*, *Star of India* and *Azad* – immediately began a fierce campaign endorsing this plan, although both journalists and politicians mostly abstained from deeper criticisms of the government in public, as that could have diminished support towards the BPML as a whole. When Fazlul Huq, who as usual was impervious towards such nuances, burst with a litany of grievances against the Cabinet during the League’s open meeting at Chandpur, he was severely berated by his supporters from Nazimuddin’s faction.<sup>236</sup>

<sup>231</sup> Burrows to Wavell, 19 March 1947, BP vol. III, doc. 239, p. 201.

<sup>232</sup> *Star of India*, 15 March 1947.

<sup>233</sup> *Statesman*, 18 March 1947.

<sup>234</sup> Record of interview between Mr Kiran Shankar Roy and Sir F. Burrows, 22 March 1947, TOP vol. X, doc. 5, p. 6.

<sup>235</sup> Statement by A.K. Fazlul Huq & 73 other MLAs & MLCs from Bengal, 20 March 1947, JP vol. I, part I, doc. 251 (enclosure), pp. 432–434.

<sup>236</sup> Ispahani to Huq, 28 February 1947, JP vol. I, part I, doc. 58 (enclosure), pp. 131–132.

Jinnah did not share Suhrawardy's bitter (and publicized) opinion that the rebels are "a coterie of self-seekers",<sup>237</sup> yet he also definitely didn't want to meddle with the existing government in the crucial Muslim-dominated province and thus replied dryly: "Strongly advise remain united at this critical moment".<sup>238</sup>

What is most interesting here are the points that the insurgents made. Aside from the hypocritical suggestion of cleansing the government from "corruption and nepotism" they raised alarms in other spheres:

"Since its very inception the present Ministry had miserably failed to honour its pledges and programmes, especially with regard to vital problems like Muslim education, abolition of permanent settlement, food crisis, as also agricultural and industrial advancement of the province, and has never cared to implement its assurances to the party [BPML], more so after the Calcutta riots whence the Muslims have been all the more exposed to dangers from various directions. And even when Comilla and Noakhali Muslims have been actually on fire, the Government of the day have looked on complacently,<sup>239</sup> allowing things to drift and, what is still more unfortunate, the present regime has done positive harm to the Muslim cause by bundling out of the district of Noakhali and Comilla a large number of Muslim officers at a critical moment when their services were most needed, and has of late pursued a policy of appeasement of the other community, thus shaking the mores of Muslims in the countryside".<sup>240</sup>

There can be no better proof of the fact that only the *bhadraloks* saw Suhrawardy as an anti-Hindu hawk.<sup>241</sup>

As Burrows noted a little later, "Mr. Suhrawardy's position in the Muslim League was not at all secure (...) he (...) would have been got rid of if an alternative leader could have been found".<sup>242</sup> Thus, confronted with such accusations – to which Jinnah might have added his voice were it not for his tactical position – the PM had to be cautious.

<sup>237</sup> Quoted from Harun-or-Rashid, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh*, p. 280.

<sup>238</sup> Jinnah to Habibullah Bahar, 1 April 1947, JP vol. I, part 1, doc. 277, p. 479.

<sup>239</sup> For anyone who might be unsure what exactly is meant in this sentence, an editorial from *Star of India* helps. It pointed out that following the Noakhali riot, when the Hindu press was printing "monstrously exaggerated lies (...) the Government did not raise its little finger to choke these monstrous lies into the throats of their propagators, as they should have been done". *Star of India*, 22 March 1947.

<sup>240</sup> Statement by A. K. Fazlul Huq & 73 other M.L.A.'s & MLCs from Bengal, 20 March 1947, JP vol. I, part I, doc. 251 (enclosure), pp. 432–434. The part about Permanent Settlement was quite absurd as many of the undersigned were big landlords themselves and did not see the need for change during Assembly debates.

<sup>241</sup> It might be added that very similar accusations were enunciated by the Nazimuddin faction of BPML after Great Calcutta Riot; see Mukherjee, *Agitations, Riots and the Transitional State*, pp. 182–183.

<sup>242</sup> Minutes of Viceroy's Ninth Miscellaneous Meeting, 1 May 1947, TOP vol. X, doc. 264, p. 512.

On Pakistan Day he said that next year this holiday would no longer be necessary, as Pakistan, “a place where every one shall live peacefully and happily”, would be achieved in the meantime.<sup>243</sup> And a few days earlier he had said that he was “not in a position to say now whether there would be a Central Government or not, or if there would be any division to form a complete Pakistan. But of this he was certain that Pakistan was bound to come to the Muslims in some form or other and Bengal would form part of Pakistan where there would be scrupulous regard for the rights of all minorities”.<sup>244</sup>

Also in March 1947 *The Basis of Pakistan*, a book by one Nafis Ahmad – Professor of Geography from Calcutta – appeared in bookstores. The foreword, written by Suhrawardy, stated: “Pakistan, however, does not merely connote a *combination of States or lands* but a mode of Government where Islamic principles of equality and democracy will be combined with a wise scheme of economic and industrial development for the benefit of the common people in which there will be no distinction between castes or creeds”.<sup>245</sup> Yet this wording had nothing to do with Nafis Ahmad’s book, which was mostly about the economic potential of future Pakistan, reviewing it in terms of a unitary state (not “states”) with a strong central government.

In the meantime the PM looked for potential allies, ready to offer them far-reaching concessions in return for their support. He counted heavily on London, as can be seen from his mid-April talks with the freshly nominated and first High Commissioner of Britain, Terence Shone. The latter got the impression that Bengal’s PM was dead set on maintaining close ties with former colonial overlords (“I suppose I could offer Bengal to England on a platter, but that the offer might be refused” – Suhrawardy told him), and that he was a half-broken, depressed man.

“When speaking about the division of Bengal, Mr. Suhrawardy asked where in the world could one go nowadays, to settle down in peace. Was England a good place, – or Ireland? Or perhaps the Balearic Islands? One must have work of some kind; he believed hall porters in New York did very well”.<sup>246</sup>

Oddly enough, these confessions have not caught the eye of any scholar known to me, even though they are quite crucial in trying to ascertain the PM’s mental state at this time.

<sup>243</sup> Misra, H. S. Suhrawardy’s Dilemma, p. 170.

<sup>244</sup> *Star of India*, 18 March 1947.

<sup>245</sup> Nafis Ahmad, *The Basis of Pakistan*, Thacker, Spink&Co., Calcutta 1947, [no page number]. Italics mine. Note the resemblance between these words and Jinnah’s famous speech from 11<sup>th</sup> August the same year. Suhrawardy’s next lines are also telling: “It is impossible now to visualize that Hindustan and Pakistan will always exist in a perpetual state of hatred and conflict. Once the Muslim nation settles down to its task, it is certain, so Prof. Nafis Ahmad believes, that the people of Hindustan will realize that India’s destiny lies in developing a pattern of multi-national states like Russia. This must be the hope of all of us”.

<sup>246</sup> Note by Sir T[erence] Shone, 17 April 1947, TOP vol. X, doc. 163, p. 294.

He had reasons for being down. March and early April brought a flow of Hindu resolutions (including one from the BPCC<sup>247</sup>) demanding partition or at least resigning from establishing Pakistan in Bengal's soil. What sounded truly alarming for the Muslims, however, was the tune of anti-Partition orations during the Hindu Mahasabha session at Tarakeshwar. "To frustrate the vivisection of *Akhand* [One] Hindustan the Hindus must first vivisect Pakistan. The first immediate step was the creation of a Hindu Province in West Bengal, the second the expulsion of Muslim trespassers from Assam at any cost as to sandwich and smother East Pakistan between two Hindu provinces"<sup>248</sup> – was the message of its absent spiritual leader Vinayak Savarkar. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee and other Bengali Mahasabhites backed him, and the final resolutions, aside from demanding partition, stated that 100,000 Hindu volunteers should be recruited to eventually defend their co-religionists.<sup>249</sup>

Although the numbers were unrealistic, this rhetoric had impact: after Noakhali, volunteers started flowing to right-wing paramilitary Hindu organisations. In December 1946 in Bengal alone there were about 3000 members (mostly in Calcutta) in the Hindusthan National Guards, 14 000 in *Hindusthan Seva Dal* (founded by Indian National Army veterans), and a few thousand more in *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* and other groups. It was significantly more than the Muslim National Guards in Bengal ever had, although they were expanding too (9 000 in December 1946, 14 000 in April the next year).<sup>250</sup>

At one time Burrows openly suggested that the PM dismantle the Guards – concerned less about their role in the province itself and more about the menace of an "invasion to Assam".<sup>251</sup> Suhrawardy refused, reminding the Governor that a similar move in Punjab had provoked civil war. He may have also thought, however, that the Guards may be useful in the future. Hindu paramilitary organizations in Bengal were still outnumbering Muslim ones in terms of recruits,<sup>252</sup> and at the same time Congress was sending clear signals that any settlement would require getting rid of Punjabi policemen.

<sup>247</sup> See Sunanda Sanyal, Soumya Basu, *The Sickle and the Crescent – Communists, Muslim League and India's Partition*, Kolkata 2011, pp. 155–156.

<sup>248</sup> Quoted from: Serajuddin Hossain, *Look In to the Mirror*, Dacca 1974, p. 9.

<sup>249</sup> See *Hindusthan Standard*, 13 April 1947, and League workers comments in: *Star of India*, 7 April 1947; *Star of India*, 8 April 1947.

<sup>250</sup> The numbers are taken from: *Secret Report on the Political Situation in Bengal for the second half of December, 1946*, R/3/2/59A, IOR, p. 104; see also: Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal*, pp. 203, 279 and Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, p. 238.

<sup>251</sup> An initiative taken by Nazimuddin's faction to send Guards to Assam against the Congress provincial government led by Gopinath Bardoloi, which was at this time evicting illegal Muslim settlers; this was one of the reasons Assam protested so vehemently against the idea of Group C, not to mention Bengal's independence. See for example Amalendu Guha, *Planter-Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826–1947*, New Delhi 1977, pp. 310–318 or Bimal J. Dev, Dilip Kumar Lahiri, *Assam Muslims: Politics & Cohesion*, Delhi 1985, pp. 51–53, 86–115 and 148–149; in general, though, Bengal-Assam relations during Suhrawardy's tenure are inadequately researched and call for a separate paper.

<sup>252</sup> Burrows to Mountbatten, 22 April 1947, BP vol. III, doc. 241, p. 207.



## The case of Punjabi constables

What happened in Calcutta during March, April and (to a lesser extent) May 1947 can be seen as *pars pro toto* of Suhrawardy's way of doing politics and also of the difference between the PM's black myth and his real role. The myth goes as follows: When a decision over Bengal's future was imminent, Suhrawardy, desperately trying to get more power over Hindus, employed several hundred Punjabi policemen at Calcutta's Special Armed Branch. He tolerated and (in more radical versions) even inspired their brutal excesses – hoping that it would scare Hindus into submission, silencing their protests against either Pakistan or independent, Muslim-dominated Bengal.<sup>253</sup>

To deconstruct the myth one has to begin from a seemingly distant topic: The Gurkhas' political life during the war and postwar years. Two major political powers among them at this time were All-India Gurkha League led by Dhambar Singh Gurung and the Nepalese National Congress. The latter was a Nehruvian milieu that sought social change for Nepal like the one envisaged by the AICC; the former included many retired officers and had strong backing at Darjeeling. The AICC itself made overtures to the All-India Gurkha League, hoping to secure control over a strategically important region, and possibly to find some common ground with Gurkhas from the Indian Army. In effect both main Gurkha parties, although heavily at odds with each other, had ties with Congress.<sup>254</sup>

This development, as is shown by the documents, convinced Suhrawardy that Gurkhas – among them most of Calcutta's armed policemen and a good portion of the soldiers in Bengal – were switching *in gremio* into the anti-League camp. British rulers saw this as well. While up until 1945 the Gurkhas were always seen as war professionals, loyal only to them and apolitical (for the Congress, of course, obedience to London wasn't apolitical at all), they began to admit that it had changed. Burrows noted that “in the Armed Branch (...) the hillman can no longer (since the Calcutta riots especially) be implicitly relied on as free from pro-Hindu bias”.<sup>255</sup> Their preponderance in the Armed Branch and the army caused even greater problems as far as Suhrawardy was concerned. What was going to happen when British left? Maybe “one day Mr. Nehru, on a big black horse, might lead a Hindu army against Muslim Bengal” and/or induce the Nepalese to move against it too, as the PM genuinely feared<sup>256</sup>?

<sup>253</sup> Joya Chatterji supplies a few examples of how this version of the story became rooted in popular culture and consciousness, with the Punjabis as veritable demons who, according to one pamphlet, “have set up a Secret Slaughter House in Calcutta, and people arrested for violation of Curfew Orders are Taken in Police Lorries by the Punjabi Police (...) they are butchered, their bodies chopped off and packed in wooden crates and taken out of the city for some unknown destination”. Quoted in: Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, p. 243.

<sup>254</sup> See Chiranjib K. Kar, *Sub-regional movement in India – A case study: Political History of the Gorkhas in Darjeeling district*, Calcutta [undated, published by the author]; Nahar Singh, Kirpal Singh (eds.), *History of All-India Gurkha League: 1943–1949*, New Delhi 1987.

<sup>255</sup> Note by Sir F. Burrows, 14 February 1947, TOP vol. IX, doc. 395, p. 706.

<sup>256</sup> Note by Sir T. Shone, 17 April 1947, TOP vol. X, doc. 163, p. 293.

“Suhrawardy openly told me that Darjeeling was the one part of Bengal which the Ministry could not hope to hold in the event of serious trouble there. Normally the hillmen are a peaceable lot, but the communists and the Gurkha League have been getting at them”.<sup>257</sup>

Once again it should be emphasized that at this time no one knew if and how the British Indian army would be divided after Partition. Bengali ministers were not the only ones seriously considering the possibility that it would be given undivided to India, while Pakistan and (in case of its independence) Bengal would have to build a new one. For the Muslim League, the possibility of pro-Congress armed Gurkha constables in Calcutta and Gurkha sepoy left in decolonized Bengal as almost the only serious military force put independent Bengal or Eastern Pakistan in grave danger – a possibility taken more seriously than a contemporary reader would imagine.

For that reason Raghieb Ahsan – the radical President of the Calcutta party branch – cried loudly for the “immediate recruitment of at least 30,000 Muslim ex-servicemen in the Armed Police Force for the industrial areas of Bengal” as “the menace of the rebellion of Gurkhas (...) will grow”.<sup>258</sup> The conservative faction of the BPML gave support to this demand.

Compared with this, steps finally undertaken by Suhrawardy to diversify the Armed Branch ethnically<sup>259</sup> can be reasonably called moderate. Ultimately he employed 609 Punjabi Muslims, i.e. about one Punjabi for every two Gurkhas. It was one of the reasons that Burrows gave him the green light: some sort of gesture to the BPML’s hardliners seemed necessary, not to mention the real under-representation of Muslims in said unit. This didn’t prevent Mountbatten from scolding his Governor over what he saw as appeasement of the BPML.<sup>260</sup> But then he already knew the consequences of bringing Punjabis into service.

And the results were disastrous. At this time, following the fall of the Unionist government, the civil war in the Punjab was in full swing, and thus the imported policemen

<sup>257</sup> Burrows to Wavell, 6 November 1946, R/3/2/58A, IOR, pp. 26–27. To Wavell the PM also “drew a most gloomy picture of Bengal after our departure, with Darjeeling annexed by Nepal or Sikkim etc.” (Wavell, *The Viceroy’s Journal*, p. 408).

<sup>258</sup> Raghieb Ahsan to Suhrawardy, 13 April 1947, JP vol. I, part 1, doc. 314, enclosure no. 3, pp. 545–546.

<sup>259</sup> Discussions about it were entangled with quarrels in the Cabinet over the role of the Armed Branch and the desired composition, with Shamsuddin Ahmad (as usual) as the PM’s main opponent. While Suhrawardy (backed by Burrows) suggested that importing law-enforcing troops from outside Bengal may not be a bad idea, since the Armed Branch had to shoot when ordered to and not to fraternize with would-be rioters, the Minister of Commerce saw this as discrimination and argued that Bengalization of the Branch would be more dignified and would reassure the nation, i.e. seeing his own kin maintaining order could deter an ordinary citizen from rioting, as the Gurkhas’ presence “greatly aggravated the Bengalee crowds”. Whatever the reader will agree with, I would warn against a misinterpretation of Suhrawardy’s position as autocratic; one needs only to consider how the Great Calcutta Riot would have been handled, had the matter had been left to the Bengali police or military force. As for why Punjabis of all people were employed, the reasons were 1) a surplus of demobilized soldiers from this particular province and 2) their reputation as a “martial race”, unlike Bengalis. See CP, 16 May 1946, p. 6.

<sup>260</sup> Mountbatten to Burrows, 28 April 1947, R/3/2/59A, IOR, p. 39.

brought with them substantial anti-Hindu prejudices. Within no time cases of robbing Hindus under the pretext of searching, or of assaulting innocent men became an everyday occurrence; allegedly there was also at least one gang rape.<sup>261</sup> The conservative fraction of the BPML, which arranged for housing newcomers in Ispahani's luxurious estate, gave them full support. When rapists in uniforms were brought to court (and this was the only case involving Punjabi policemen that even reached the court during this time), Ahmad Ispahani (Hassan's brother) asked Jinnah for "some action" to boost their colleagues' morale, since there were "political reasons" behind the case, which was all a propaganda fable anyway, while "the Punjabi police work has been so good that for the future peace and well-being of the city it is essential to augment its strength by at least 100%".<sup>262</sup> Suhrawardy abstained from commenting on this.<sup>263</sup>

Then came the predictable reaction. Tucker reports that Hindus dubbed the new constables "The Pakistan Occupation Army of Bengal".<sup>264</sup> As it was put in one pro-Partition petition from Calcutta, the PM tried to "force the Hindus to withdraw the campaign for partition" by employing Punjabis "to cause terror in the Hindu *mohallas*".<sup>265</sup> Allegedly

"it is (...) said that from the outset they have been boasting openly that they were not ordinary 'armed police' but men recruited by Chief Minister Suhrawardy for 'his own' force and for a purpose that would be shortly disclosed".<sup>266</sup>

Conspiracy theories aside, there may be a simpler reason for the PM's silence: the Gurkhas, irritated by the arrival of rivals from the Punjab and their arrogant rampage

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<sup>261</sup> For examples, see *Hindusthan Standard*, 16 April 1947 (rape case); BLA, vol. LXXII, part 3, First Session, 1947, 24 April 1947, pp. 237–241; BLC, First Session, 1947, No. 29, 21 April 1947, p. 555; Sewak Singh to Burrows, 2 May 1947, S.P. Mookerjee Papers, Installment II–IV, Subject File No. 158, NMML, pp. 3–7; J.G. Narang to Hardwick, 7 May 1947, S. P. Mookerjee Papers, Installment II–IV, Subject File No. 154, NMML, pp. 1–2; Debendra Nath Mukherjee to Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, 27 April 1947, S.P. Mookerjee Papers, Installment II–IV, Subject File No. 141, NMML, pp. 20–21; memo of Indian Association, 16 May 1947, AICC Papers, File No. CL-14D/2, NMML, pp. 301–302; Tucker, *While Memory Serves*, pp. 274–275. In the last case, the allegation led to a Hindu mob attacking Muslims in north Calcutta with firearms. The way the alleged rape was used in Hindu propaganda is thoroughly analyzed in Mukherjee, *Agitations, Riots and the Transitional State*, pp. 222–236.

<sup>262</sup> Ahmad Ispahani to Jinnah, 28 April 1947, JP vol. I, part 1, doc. 356, p. 621. At the same time, *Star of India* ensured that "The few [sic] Punjabi Muslims that have been added to Calcutta's armed police cannot make much difference in a force that is so predominantly Hindu". *Star of India*, 18 April 1947. It should be noted however that to the *bhadraloks*' horror a few weeks later the rapists were ultimately freed for a lack of proofs.

<sup>263</sup> Years later he wrote however that without Punjabis the "Calcutta riots would never have been brought under control". *Memoirs of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy*, p. 106.

<sup>264</sup> Tucker, *While Memory Serves*, p. 234.

<sup>265</sup> Quoted from: Chakrabarty, *The Partition of Bengal and Assam*, p. 108. Notably, Chakrabarty doesn't even mention Gurkhas in the context of Calcutta violence (neither does any other scholar known to me with the exception of Ishan Mukherjee).

<sup>266</sup> Tyson to Folk, 12 July 1947, Tyson Collection, MSS Eur. E341/41, No. 411, IOR.

(not to mention the fact that the dilapidated barracks of the former were veritable slums compared with the places where Punjabis were housed), increasingly began following in their footsteps. In fact, in April there were a similar number of cases of police assaults by Punjabis and Gurkhas; the worst one happened on 29<sup>th</sup> April, when

“another Gurkha civilian was knifed. A Gurkha policeman, the worse for liquor, took up his cause, quarreled with some Muslims and was assaulted. A company of Gurkha police turned out and attacked the nearby Muslim *bustee* [slum quarter], killing six and injuring others. Houses were broken into and there was looting”.<sup>267</sup>

This came to resemble a gang war, and Suhrawardy hardly can be blamed for refusing to send Punjabis home at this stage; the result would have been to leave his co-religionists at the mercy of demoralized Gurkha constables, while the newcomers, brutal as they were, provided some balance of power. From his note dated 19<sup>th</sup> April we also know that the PM’s main concern was “dealing with recalcitrant Gurkhas”, and as for the Punjabis, “we should have mixed pickets of Gurkhas and PMs presided over by European Military Police and Sergeants”.<sup>268</sup> It seems he naively believed that wise administrative methods could bring both groups to work together (and curb their excesses). Yet his relative inaction against the newcomers bears an undoubtedly communal shade.

Would the situation have changed in any way had the PM openly denounced his troublesome allies? Gandhi certainly thought so, and the PM’s stubborn refusal to treat the Punjabi atrocities as anything other than isolated incidents was one of the reasons the Mahatma did not back his United Bengal Scheme.<sup>269</sup>

At this time the PM also meddled with the regular police. “Another most disturbing feature is that transfers and suspension from service of subordinate officers have been ordered by the Home Minister [Suhrawardy]” – lamented Taylor. “Transfers resulting from political considerations will ruin the morale of the force; if orders of this nature come from such a high level the authority of district Police officers is necessarily undermined and the result will be complete absence of discipline”.<sup>270</sup> Without consulting other sources – if they exist – it’s hard to say anything about either the scale of this interference or of the PM’s reasons. They may have been communal, or he may have felt here as well that he was maintaining the communal balance. But even if it was the latter, by trying to do

<sup>267</sup> Toker, *While Memory Serves*, p. 235; see also *Secret Report on the Political Situation in Bengal for the second half of April, 1947*, R/3/2/59A, IOR, p. 34 and Mukherjee, *Agitations, Riots and the Transitional State*, pp. 219–222. After this Burrows tried to rectify the situation on his own discreetly replacing some Gurkhas for a time – since in his opinion, 2/3 of them were “doubtful elements” – by soldiers and “normal” policemen. See Burrows to Listowel, 2 May 1947, L/P&J/8/655, IOR, p. 32 and Viceroy’s Personal Report No. 5, 1 May 1947, TOP vol. X, doc. 276, p. 540.

<sup>268</sup> HCM’s note about *Calcutta Police Matters*, Bengal Home (Poll.), Confidential, File No. 217/47, WBSA.

<sup>269</sup> See the accounts regarding Suhrawardy – Gandhi meetings in May: Bose, *My Days With Gandhi*, pp. 230–231 and Pyarelal, *Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. II, p. 182.

<sup>270</sup> Note by the Inspector-General of Police, Bengal, 7 January 1947, L/P&J/8/577, IOR, p. 10.

so personally, and going against the unwritten autonomy that the police had enjoyed up until that time, he again behaved as if he wanted to confirm the wildest of Hindu fears, and (partly because of that) his actions were bringing unpredictable, often harmful effects.

### United Bengal Scheme

Of all the initiatives undertaken by Suhrawardy's government, the United Bengal Scheme is certainly the best-covered by historiography. Repeating here the full course of events – Suhrawardy's negotiations with Kiran Sankar Roy and Sarat Chandra Bose, Jinnah's early vagueness and later outward rejection in the middle of May, the change of heart by Nazimuddin's faction which was following the *Quaid's* orders, the vehement protests by Assamese and AICC leaders, Gandhi's (rejected) offer to become Suhrawardy's secretary, mass protests of *bhadraloks* and the final fiasco of the project – is therefore not needed here.<sup>271</sup> There are however a few details which should be added to this picture.

Firstly, Suhrawardy seriously considered another possibility, one which is often overlooked by scholars: that he could do his work without the *Quaid's* agreement. As he told Burrows:

“A coalition, formed now, must, he said, be a firm partnership based on the continued integrity of Bengal. For the formation of a coalition he must make terms with the Hindus in Bengal and come to arrangement with them, *before* the announcement of H.M.G., to form a coalition *after* the announcement, unless Jinnah allows the formation of a coalition now”.<sup>272</sup>

This means that the PM was ready to cut an umbilical cord linking him with the AIML's High Command if London firmly backed the United Bengal Scheme, thus securing also Suhrawardy's position; not what a politician secretly plotting ways to make Bengal an unofficial vassal of Pakistan would have done. Maybe the PM was overly cautious in not sharing these reflections with Congress? Perhaps he was afraid that opponents of the Scheme (irrespective of party affiliation) would disclose them to Jinnah, inciting him to openly condemn Suhrawardy.

Yet the aura of secrecy around his actions only aroused more suspicions. The same could be said about his ill-thought-out attempt to make use of the deepening rift between leading politicians of the BPCC and the Hindu right – with Vallabhbhai Patel of the AICC being at the forefront of the latter no less than the Mahasabha. The PM publicly

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<sup>271</sup> See Harun-or-Rashid, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh*, pp. 257–322; Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, pp. 220–265; Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, “The division of hearts”: Mahatma Gandhi and the partition of Bengal, 1947, in: Amrik Singh (ed.), *Partition in Retrospect*, Delhi 2000, pp. 199–211; A.G. Noorani, ‘United Bengal plan: pipe dream or missed opportunity?’, in: *ibidem*, pp. 246–258.

<sup>272</sup> Burrows to Mountbatten, 7 May 1947, TOP vol. X, doc. 337, pp. 651–652.

criticized Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, but did so in a way which made even liberal *bhadraloks* feel mocked and insulted.

“The cry for the partition of Bengal is nothing but an attempt to get the rich prize of Calcutta and thus deprive the Muslims of trade and commerce. (...) If Calcutta becomes a bone of contention what will remain of it?<sup>273</sup> (...) He [Mukherjee] even likens the position of Hindus in Bengal to a hell, a hell, however, so privileged, so replete with wealth, power and influence, that the Muslims consider it their aim and ambition. I ask them, is domination possible any more anywhere, and what have the Hindus to fear in Bengal of all places on earth? The idea of domination has to disappear and is disappearing. The British that have dominated India so long have had to confess that domination is outmoded and no one race or party can dominate over the other in a face of determination and a will to assert. Where the British have failed is it possible that any other people in India can succeed?”<sup>274</sup>

It was not only his scornful tone that prevented Hindus from believing the PM’s words. Outmoded or not, the domination still persisted, and visible proof of this was Suhrawardy’s actions against newspapers at around the same time, ruthlessly executing freshly promulgated regulations. This unwise move was based on a false assumption that in this way the media could be forced not to criticize negotiations about the Scheme during their crucial stage. Serajuddin Hossain – at this time a young journalist and a sympathizer of the PM – recalled later:

“The Hindu Press of Calcutta kept on attacking Mr. Suhrawardy on communal grounds, that too at a time when Mr. Suhrawardy was moving whole hog for communal amity (...) Their propaganda, having become a constant source of trouble in an already riot-ridden city, the Government had to take stern measures against a number of the Hindu Press. Mr. Suhrawardy never believed in suppression of Press, but in view of developing circumstances involving the life and property of a section of the people, his Government had to, under painful necessity, take legal actions against them”.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> Nehru saw in this phrase “a threat that the Muslims will do their best to sack Calcutta rather than let it be handed over to the Hindus after the partition of Bengal, and that the present Provincial Government will back disorders to that end”. Moubatten to Burrows, 10 May 1947, TOP vol. X, doc. 393, p. 747. Both the Viceroy and the Governor agreed this was absurd, but it shows how Suhrawardy’s words tended to be misinterpreted.

<sup>274</sup> *Star of India*, 8 May 1947.

<sup>275</sup> Hossain, *Look In To The Mirror*, p. 23.



It may even be that Suhrawardy was thinking on those lines himself, but objectively speaking this was a hagiographic justifying of unjustifiable action. Even the distinguished, non-judgmental *Statesman* wrote openly that the PM went too far.<sup>276</sup> Publishers of leading Hindu titles – *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, *Hindusthan Standard* – faced fines. In the case of *Swadhinata*, not only the editor-in-chief and publisher but even print office management (!) found themselves in court due to one allegedly insulting article from December.<sup>277</sup> Obviously, in context of the presence of Punjabi policemen, Hindus responded with allegations that the PM “has sought to throttle the Press, to muzzle the Press in order to see that murders of the citizens can take place in the black chamber”.<sup>278</sup> Congress orators tried to outdo each other in vociferous condemnation of the government led by Suhrawardy, the man who “out-Hitlered Hitler himself”,<sup>279</sup> for an “extreme communalism which is a relic of the middle age and which is emitting obnoxious smell of Nazism”.<sup>280</sup> The PM did not react.

The use of exquisite epithets was one thing and genuine fears combined with lawful pretenses was another. Strangely enough, at this time Suhrawardy was absolutely convinced that only dishonest, power-hungry politicians and upper classes rejected independence, while “the people” would heartily subscribe to United Bengal Scheme. Thus from the very beginning he exclaimed that only “public opinion” can decide about the future of the province, since the public’s judgment can be influenced neither by party discipline nor by favors and “special interests” – unlike, so he thought, Assembly members. A partial explanation of his conviction lies undoubtedly in his close cooperation with Jogendranath Mandal, who in the previous months – among other things – added his voice to the PM’s peace appeals after Noakhali riot. Now Mandal was the main Hindu propagator of the Scheme, addressing meetings and persuading influential workers more fervently than Suhrawardy himself (mostly because he preferred United Bengal, where both Muslims and others would be of importance, to Pakistan). Greatly overestimating his own influence, Mandal sincerely believed in the dichotomy: rich, mean and pro-Congress *bhadraloks* versus poor, open and potentially pro-Scheme *dalits*, who would back him once it was explained to them why they should do so. Lower class urban Hindus (as in case of Communists or the PM) were not included in his picture.<sup>281</sup>

<sup>276</sup> *Statesman*, 23 April 1947.

<sup>277</sup> Hossain, *Look In To The Mirror*, p. 23; *Secret Report on the Political Situation in Bengal for the second half of April, 1947*, R/3/2/59A, IOR; Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Defining Moments in Bengal, 1920–1947*, New Delhi 2014, p. 315; *Hindusthan Standard*, 29 April 1947. For the PM’s explanation see BLC, First Session, 1947, No. 34, 29 April 1947, pp. 643–646.

<sup>278</sup> BLA, vol. LXXII, part 3, First Session, 1947, 22 April 1947, p. 144 (words of Niharendu Dutt-Mazumdar).

<sup>279</sup> BLC, First Session, 1947, No. 33, 29 April 1947, p. 634.

<sup>280</sup> BLA, vol. LXXII, part 3, First Session, 1947, 2 May 1947, p. 351.

<sup>281</sup> See Dwaipayana Sen, ‘No matter how, Jogendranath had to be defeated’: The Scheduled Castes Federation and the making of partition in Bengal, 1945–1947, *Indian Economic & Social History Review* vol. 49 (2012), no. 3, pp. 351–359 and Ghazal Asif, Jogendranath Mandal and the Politics of Dalit Recognition in Pakistan, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 2020, pp. 1–17 [First View Article published online, Viewed 27 January 2020 <<https://www.academia.edu/41513093>>].

That Mandal shared these feelings with Suhrawardy is visible in the PM's letter to Eric Mieville, Viceroy's secretary:

“A propaganda is going amongst them [*dalits*] and they are being rapidly converted. It only needs a little more time and the whole atmosphere will change (...) But if you take a notional vote of the representatives who have been elected to the legislature, then of course Bengal is doomed”.<sup>282</sup>

It was doomed indeed, but for a broader set of reasons, the PM's actions being among them.

### Suhrawardy's place in colonial structure of power

Only a deeper analysis of Suhrawardy's relations with those below and equal to him makes it possible to address in a systematic way the problem of his relations with the ones above, i.e. the Governor, the Viceroy and (indirectly) the British PM. A question about the limits of Suhrawardy's political causal power – his place and possibilities within a colonial network – is obviously also part of the broader question about the place of provincial politicians in the British Raj on the eve of decolonization.

If we pick one word to describe post-war Indian colonial government imperatives, “smoothness” would be a good choice. Having decided for economical and political reasons that the smooth transfer of power to Indian elected representatives should take place before the end of Attlee's tenure if possible, what London now expected from colonial officials was avoiding civil and political unrest at all cost.

This change of course wasn't immediate. Attlee had to bend Wavell to his will and recall a few leading Raj officials to replace them with his nominated candidates instead. One of them was Burrows, who had no previous India experience yet was personally known to Attlee as a railway union leader. He replaced Casey, who after the November 1945 riots called Bengalis (in his diary) “poor misguided creatures” in need of a stern lesson.<sup>283</sup> Incidentally, Burrows arrived shortly after the second wave of disturbances provoked by the I.N.A. trial and subsequent (highly mythologized) Bombay Mutiny. Although (contrary to the AICC's hopes) the Army remained loyal to London, as Daniel Marston had shown, these incidents made Attlee even more determined to compel his subordinates to demonstrate the Empire's goodwill towards Indians.<sup>284</sup> Eventually, Wavell

<sup>282</sup> Suhrawardy to Mieville, 19 May 1947, in: *Inside Bengal Politics 1936–1947: Unpublished Correspondence of Partition Leaders*, Harun-or-Rashid (ed.), Dhaka 2003, doc. 22, p. 78. In another letter he wrote that “Hindus of Eastern or North Bengal do not desire partition”. Suhrawardy to Ismay, 27 April 1947, *ibidem*, doc. 20, p. 76.

<sup>283</sup> *Casey's Diary*, vol. IV, p. 258, see also *Statesman*, 30 November 1945.

<sup>284</sup> Daniel Marston, *The Indian Army and the End of the Raj*, Cambridge 2014, chapter V. For a general characteristics of British policy at this time see Robin James Moore, *Endgames of empire: studies of Britain's Indian problem*, Oxford 1988, chapters V–VI.

came to be seen as another obstacle towards smooth decolonization, and so Mountbatten took his place – retaining the principle of smoothness but adding a new one: hastiness.

How did this affect the relations between provincial Prime Ministers and their direct colonial partners and watchmen, the Governors? As it happens, Bengal provides useful comparisons. In 1942 Governor John Herbert had dismissed Fazlul Huq and his (second) Cabinet just because he no longer saw the possibility of working with him after the PM protested against the British' brutal suppression of Midnapore riot. Herbert had not even consulted the Viceroy before taking the decision. The Viceroy was quite shocked over the turn of events but due to Bengal being a frontier province he had not dared to either recall the Governor or revert his decision, as that would have brought internal discords among colonial officials to light, thus undermining their authority. Two years later Casey imposed the Governor's direct rule by dismissing Nazimuddin – not due to a lack of trust towards him but rather because (after the Government lost a prestigious vote) pro-Congress Speaker of the Assembly, Syed Nausher Ali, had refused to open any further sessions as long as Nazimuddin holds office.

After the war however, the new approach also meant a closer control over the moves of Governors. Not only were they no longer given a free hand to deal with local politicians as they saw fit, but the latter's opinion about them was treated more seriously by colonial rulers. A well-known example is an abrupt dismissal of the Governor of NWFP, Olaf Caroe, when his decision to make a referendum about his province's future exposed him to accusations of being pro-League from both the PM Khan Sahib and the Congress.<sup>285</sup> Notably, the AICC was at this time as wary of Governor Burrows – “Suhrawardy's underdog”<sup>286</sup> – as it was of Caroe. Yet Mountbatten never as much as considered recalling Burrows, in part probably because the latter was Attlee's personal nominee, but also due to the fact that such a move would be badly received by the BPML.

The change of purposes was followed by change of forms. Although Casey genuinely liked Nazimuddin – a fellow Cambridge alumnus – whenever there was a disagreement between the two, Casey took the attitude of a dry schoolmaster scolding his naughty pupil. We find nothing of this sort in Burrows' records, although – as mentioned above – at times he did not approve of his PM's actions.<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> It shouldn't be forgotten that in Spring 1946 London also chose to dismiss the Governor of Burma, Reginald Dorman-Smith, over letting him get rid of Aung San and quell the eventual protests by force – even though Aung San was proven guilty of severe crimes and the Governor's policy towards minorities may be seen in hindsight as far more honest towards them than the British agreement to “one Burma”. Here the leader, although unelected, enjoyed the confidence of both main politicians and the people, which could have meant widespread riots if Dorman-Smith stayed – although Mountbatten's faith that *thakins* will offer minorities a square deal was also an important factor. See Nicholas Tarling, *Britain, Southeast Asia and the Onset of the Cold War, 1945–1950*, Cambridge 1998, pp. 65–77; Shelby Tucker, *Burma: Curse of Independence*, London 2001, pp. 106–117; Peter Lowe, *Contending With Nationalism and Communism: British Policy Towards South-East Asia, 1945–65*, Basingstoke 2009, pp. 18–23.

<sup>286</sup> K.C. Neogy to Patel, 11 June 1947, *Sardar Patel's Correspondence, 1945–50*, vol. IV, Durga Das (ed.), Ahmedabad 1972, doc. 60 [misprinted as 6], p. 58.

<sup>287</sup> See for example *Casey's Diary*, vol. II, pp. 110–111. Burrows himself kept no diary, but a great deal of information about his talks with politicians may be found in the letters of his Secretary Ian Tyson, as well as in

How wide was the provincial PM's scope of maneuver in this situation? He had to check. A good example comes from the interactions – described above – between Burrows and Suhrawardy during the Great Calcutta Riot. The PM was, in a way, testing the extent to which he could bend the unwritten colonial rules, as well as his own position in the face of the Governor (though it's doubtful that he saw it that way). As for Burrows, it is clear that he did not wish to clearly indicate his reservations about Suhrawardy, in view of the fact that both would have to cooperate in the future as well.<sup>288</sup> Taylor and other senior colonial officials perceived this as cowardice and/or passiveness. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they would have much preferred Casey and his stand towards indigenous politicians, pointing out that he would have dealt firmly with Suhrawardy's "iniquities" such as his efforts to direct police work in Lal Bazaar.<sup>289</sup> On the other hand, who was a democratically elected representative of Bengalis here?

The very same fact – that Suhrawardy commanded a majority in both chambers of Bengal Parliament – was the sole reason that Wavell refrained from dismissing him after the Great Calcutta Riot. Having heard the accounts of his subordinates, the Viceroy formed the opinion that the PM's politics was one of the main factors in heightening communal tensions, which fueled the riot. Yet imposing a new Prime Minister against the Assembly's will would be impossible, and switching to Governor's direct rule bore the risk of being perceived – not only in Bengal, but in the whole India – as a detestable "imperialism".<sup>290</sup> Before the war, or during Herbert and Casey's tenures, the situation would no doubt have been handled differently.

A somewhat similar situation happened in Assam when its PM, Gopinath Bardoloi, began to evict (as it was mentioned) Muslim Bengali settlers from Surma Valley. As this was backed by a Hindu majority both in the Assamese Assembly and outside of it, Governor Andrew Clow chose to remain idle, although the eviction was at times quite brutal and Muslims across India – beginning from Bengal – protested fiercely.<sup>291</sup> Yet the Hindus were afraid that after decolonization the settlers would be granted the right to vote in Assam, reducing their majority, and so the action was seen as crucial; blocking it would have meant far more problems for the British than allowing for it. In Bihar, Governor Hugh Dow agreed with Mountbatten (and Patel) than any enquiry concerning anti-Muslim pogroms organized at the end of 1946 by Hindus (87% of Bihar's population), would only result in the recrudescence of trouble. As for the Congress PM Shri Krishna Sinha, his role was seemingly similar to that of Suhrawardy towards the Noakhali riot: he

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Governor's reports.

<sup>288</sup> Note that later it was Suhrawardy who forced Burrows to shorten his Darjeeling holiday and visit East Bengal after the Noakhali riot. See Patel to Cripps, 19 October 1946, TOP vol. VIII, doc. 478, pp. 750–751; Tyson to Folk, 18–21 October 1946, Tyson Collection, MSS Eur. E341/40, No. 373, IOR.

<sup>289</sup> Taylor, *Final Years of Stress in Bengal*, p. 10.

<sup>290</sup> Wavell's initial choice was Azizul Haque, a loyal Bengali Muslim from ICS who at any rate had no real political backing in his province. See Wavell, *The Viceroy's Journal*, p. 339.

<sup>291</sup> See Clow's letters to Mountbatten in: Mountbatten Papers, File 177, neg. 15559 [microfilm], IOR.

neither incited it nor did as much as he could to help the victims, or punish the rioters, some of whom belonged to his party.<sup>292</sup>

But this same attitude of avoiding major problems at any cost could have worked against indigenous leaders, as happened to Suhrawardy when Burrows did not agree to legalize *tebhaga* by an Order – a step which in all likelihood would have changed the balance of power (although it's hard to say whether this would have rather resulted in an M.L.A.'s mutiny against the PM, or in villagers flocking under his wings). Instead Burrows ordered his subordinates, District Officers and Police Superintendents, to take a stern attitude towards the movement. Had Suhrawardy been able to secure a majority Assembly vote to both block his recall and back his reform initiatives, Burrows would have to relent, but it was not so. Conversely, when in September the PM announced that he wouldn't cooperate with the Interim Government, in line with the opinion of the Assembly and (Muslim) public, the Governor was helpless.

As already noted, Burrows was personally both fond and critical of Suhrawardy. The change in the PM's attitude towards the Crown – from “eradicating British imperialism root and branch” to the declaration that independent Bengal would seek Dominion status even against Attlee's will – certainly had an impact on the way he was treated, too. Yet neither his private contacts with colonial officials nor his (rather late) declarations of loyalty to the Crown at this epoch meant as much as they might have meant in previous years. In minor issues, they still carried some weight. If, for example, Burrows did not allow Suhrawardy to employ Punjabi policemen, the situation in Calcutta may not have become so tense as it did (at first he seemingly tried to oppose this idea, but in the end relented to the PM's pressure<sup>293</sup>). Yet even though Burrows backed the United Bengal Scheme, nothing came of it.

In short, a Governor (as well as Viceroy) from this period was able to ignore a provincial Prime Minister, or the Assembly who elected him, or (though not always) “the people” threatening unrest in case of an unpopular decision – but not all three, as he could have done and sometimes did before and during the war.<sup>294</sup> Thus when Suhrawardy and Burrows joined forces to promote the United Bengal Scheme, Mountbatten, having weighed the pros and cons carefully, reluctantly agreed to endorse the project on the condition that the Bengal Assembly will first indicate its support of it. As the Assembly did not, and at the same time the Viceroy met with strong protest from the AICC's High Command as well as from Bengali Hindus who bombarded him with pro-Partition letters, the Scheme died. During this (1946–1947) period, the fate of provincial leaders and their

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<sup>292</sup> See Ghausia Parveen, *Communal Strife in Bihar 1946–1992* (PhD diss., Aligarh Muslim University, 2015), pp. 76–77 and Mohammad Sajjad, *Muslim Politics in Bihar: Changing Contours*, New Delhi 2004, pp. 164–170.

<sup>293</sup> Tyson to Folk, 12 July 1947, Tyson Collection, MSS Eur. E341/41, No. 411, IOR; M.H.R. Talukdar, *Life and work*, in: *Memoirs of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy...*, p. 25.

<sup>294</sup> Perhaps understandably, however, far less has been written about the role of Governors in provinces which were at this time neither the field of a communal conflict nor the Indo-Pakistan one. It would be useful to research this subject deeper, beginning from Archibald Nye, Governor of Madras and another one of Attlee's personal nominees.

political power ultimately depended more upon their real backing among representatives and “the people” than their relations with colonial superiors (though many haven’t realized that) – because the same superiors changed their priorities.

Such a political atmosphere waned shortly after the Partition. Still, it influenced the assertiveness of the demands that Eastern Bengalis began to make shortly after Partition towards the Pakistani Government. This firm stand of the “place” against the “palace” (to quote Machiavellian categories) in the 1950s gave Suhrawardy a chance for political comeback.

## Conclusions

While outside of India the United Bengal Scheme is often labeled “a pipe dream”<sup>295</sup> and Bangladeshi historiography sees in “Bangsam” a paradise lost<sup>296</sup> – those opinions can be debated<sup>297</sup> – this subject is at times presented (mostly in Indian historiography) in a way that is simply unjust. According to this stream, the United Bengal Scheme “was a ploy, as the evidence suggests, to create ‘a greater Pakistan’”.<sup>298</sup>

Like similar opinions formulated about Suhrawardy by *bhadraloks* during his lifetime, this assessment is understandable but palpably wrong. The movement, as the evidence suggests, was the logical consequence of Suhrawardy’s methods as politician, and in many respects as a man. Being neither a saint nor a man free of communalism, having created a contradictory record of ruthless power-seeking and sycophantic behavior<sup>299</sup> when he wanted to defend his position, he was still wiser and more far-sighted than most leading Indian politicians from that time. While going a little too far in supporting his community, he was also receiving the fiercest blows from the same community and his party; the pressure they exerted was one of the leading factors of his ultimate failure. If he had not been afraid of being labeled a “traitor” (as had happened in 1941 to Fazlul Huq when he allied with the Mahasabha), perhaps he would have done more to appease the Hindus; and conversely, had he tried harder to dispel Hindu fears himself, they might have more readily trusted him when it mattered, and in this case Gandhi would have been more eager to help him as well.

<sup>295</sup> Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, p. 260.

<sup>296</sup> See meta-analysis: Partha Chatterjee, *The Second Partition of Bengal*, in: Ranabir Samaddar (ed.), *Reflections on Partition in the East*, Delhi 1997, pp. 35–58.

<sup>297</sup> Note also what British professionals thought about this: “The general opinion, as at present known, is that the proposal has come too late: if it was to have had any chance of success it should have been put forward at least a year ago”. *Secret Report on the Political Situation in Bengal for the first half of May, 1947*, R/3/2/59A, IOR, p. 28.

<sup>298</sup> Chakrabarty, *The Partition of Bengal and Assam*, p. 86.

<sup>299</sup> Maybe the best example is his famous phrase spoken during the League session when on 9<sup>th</sup> June 1947 Mountbatten’s plan of partition had been agreed for in a vote: “*Quaid-i-Azam*, only eleven votes against us!” (Abul Hashim, *In Retrospect*, p. 180). His hope that it would secure him some post in Pakistan was a vain one.



This also applies to the record of Suhrawardy's government in other spheres. In hindsight it can be seen that Burrows was right; the "cad" really did well when it came to "long term planning". Elevated into the office by the communal, but also leftist tide, he genuinely intended to enforce economical and (to a lesser degree) social reforms, many of which would have benefited Hindus as well. Several times he tried to work out an inter-communal settlement at the party level (BPML-BPCC) and consequently at the broader one as well (Muslims-Hindus, without forgetting about *dalits*), in accordance with his initial intentions to secure the support of rural "Bengali people" against the exponents of landed interests. Yet at this time most of the *bhadraloks* saw his every initiative as an anti-Hindu plot, while the PM's reformatory drive was hampered by three mighty opponents: the conservative faction of the BPML backed by Jinnah, the ongoing developments in India, and last but not least, time. When on 20<sup>th</sup> February 1947 it became clear that any long-term planning must be replaced by a short-term one immediately, Suhrawardy had to hastily drop everything else – including his reform initiatives and some allies he had made from them – to direct his energies to winning Bengal's independence, a game which had to be played against plenty of conflicting interests and mutual prejudices, and which was ultimately lost. While some allies came back to the PM's camp when he put the United Bengal Scheme on table, nothing came of his hopes to win over the "people". Thus his vision is often derided in historiography as containing cynical, empty promises – and hopefully I have proven that this interpretation is wrong.

Yet the Bengali Hamlet – like his Shakespearean counterpart – was more than a political fighter who just met stronger opponents. The failure of most of his projects was caused not only by outside circumstances, but also his personality, with his tendency to overuse empty words and mock practically everyone, as well as his compulsion to always have the last word even when he desperately needed to keep those whom he quarreled with onside. His marital separation (1946) may have been another reason behind his mood swings along with depression, and a sense of loss in some crucial moments; those traits have been confirmed by too many sources to try to dismiss them as histrionic poses.

All this doesn't mean that Suhrawardy should be whitewashed. For example, the employment of Punjabi constables and his later refusal to dismiss them are understandable, but the fact that he never – from what we know – used any subtler means to curb their excesses (and their venomous slogans) makes him guilty by negligence. The same is true with his handling of the Great Calcutta Riot, Noakhali and his general attitude towards non-Muslims; even considering his uneasy political situation he could have done more to help them and boost their confidence. Not that the PM promoted brutal actions against Hindus; rather it seems (aside from other factors) that he simply didn't care enough to deal with it in more active way. In the end, this attitude only deepened the communal rift.

In the course of time he seemingly acknowledged some of his mistakes: the fact that shortly after Partition he officially proposed that Hindus be allowed to join the Pakistan Muslim League may serve as a proof. For an earlier example, there is a telling scene in Horace Alexander's memoirs from the time of Partition, when Suhrawardy and

Gandhi were organizing peace meetings in Calcutta (again, to the irritation of Jinnah and Nazimuddin). A group of Hindu youths shouted at the ex-PM: “What about last August? Are you not ashamed of yourself?”. ‘Yes’ – replied Suhrawardy without hesitation. ‘I am ashamed of it. We must all be ashamed’.<sup>300</sup>

Perhaps this was the best way to summarize his tenure – not that most Hindus were convinced. Manikuntala Sen, a Communist worker who left valuable memoirs, angrily noted:

“But who was that man standing behind the Mahatma? It was none other than the notorious Suhrawardy Saheb who had been a commander of the Direct Action. He appeared like a perfectly innocent cat, sitting with his tail rolled up, as if he was a soft, gentle domestic pet, such was the hypocritical expression on his face. (...) As I watched him, I burnt with indignation. I felt frustrated that Suhrawardy got what he had wanted. And what did Gandhiji get?”<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>300</sup> Alexander, *Gandhi through Western Eyes*, p. 157. Later Gandhi expressed a very high opinion about Suhrawardy’s role at this time; see Alan Campbell-Johnson, *Mission with Mountbatten*, Robert Hale Ltd., London 1972, p. 208.

<sup>301</sup> Sen, *In Search of Freedom*, p. 177.

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