

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### THE COMMUNALIST DIVIDE AND ROAD TO PARTITION 1944 – 1947

Communalism is an ideology, and like all ideologies, it is rooted in a social milieu. It cannot be separated from the politics of the time, nor can it be distanced from the material foundations of society. The most significant development that decisively shaped Bengal politics in the decades before the 1947 partition was undoubtedly the emergence of Muslims as a distinct socio-cultural group, and their importance in the political arena with the introduction of the 1932 Communal Award. However, Muslim separatism in Bengal was not merely political opportunism reinforced by rhetoric. It had to build on a real, original Muslim identity, a sense that all Muslims were in a sense a similar and, in those senses, different from all Hindus, that Muslims formed a distinct set among Bengalis<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, in order to understand the increasing communal conflict in Malda in the decade before 1947, we must look at the process of identity formation among the Malda Muslims reinforced during the nineteenth century. It would provide significant clues to grasp the processes that led to communalist division and finally to partition.

The 1872 census of Bengal – the first ever to be taken in the area – revealed that Bengal proper, hitherto considered principally the domain of the Hindus, was inhabited by an unexpectedly large number of Muslims<sup>2</sup>. In the case of Malda, it was found that nearly half, or 48 percent, of the total population were Muslims. Hunter also noted that in Malda the Hindu and Muslim population were evenly balanced<sup>3</sup>. However, the 1941 census clearly showed that Malda became a Muslim majority district:

Table 8.1 Percentage of Muslim and non-Muslims in the district of Rajshahi Division according to the census of India 1941.

District	Percentage of Muslim	Percentage of non-Muslims
Rajshahi (15,71,750)	74.6	25.4
Malda (12,32,618)	56.7	43.3
Dinajpur (19,26,833)	50.2	49.8
Jalpaiguri (10,89,513)	23.8	76.2
Darjeeling (3,76,369)	2.5	97.5
Rangpur (28,77,847)	73.4	26.6
Bogura (12,60,563)	83.9	16.1
Pabna (17,05,072)	77.1	22.9

Source : Census of India, vol. IV, Bengal (Tables), pp. 2-3, 37-40.

Note: Figures in parenthesis show the total population in the districts.

As a community, the Muslims in Malda were overwhelmingly rural in character and they contributed only a fraction of the urban population<sup>4</sup>. They belonged predominantly to the cultivating classes. The Census Commissioner wrote in 1881: '..... The vast numbers of Mohammedan agriculturists in the Rajshahi Division tilling the soil as their ancestors did before them'<sup>5</sup>. Owing to the fertility of the soil, the Muslims who generally predominated in the riverside lands and *chars* in the district were not driven to the necessity of seeking occupation elsewhere<sup>6</sup>. In Malda, there was also a sizeable number of Muslims who claimed foreign ancestry or *ashraf* status<sup>7</sup>. The *Siyar-ul-Mutakherin*, a contemporary account by Mir Ghulam Hussain-Khan, referring to the Maratha invasions of Bengal, remarked that there was a general

exodus of the Musalman nobility and gentry from the western side, which was immune from Maratha raids<sup>8</sup>. Khondker Fuzli Rubbee suggested that the districts of Malda, Murshidabad, Burdwan, Hooghly, Rajshahi and Bogra, which had the largest concentration of *aima* (lit. subsistence or maintenance; rent-free land granted by a Muslim ruler) had the biggest proportion of immigrant families<sup>9</sup>. Writing in 1871 Professor Blochmann of the Calcutta Madrassah expressed almost the same opinion and spoke of the numerous *ashraf* families, recipients of *madad-i-mash* tenures, who were concentrated in these districts<sup>10</sup>.

Rafiuddin Ahmed has shown that the emergence of a new sense of identity among the Bengal Muslims may be traced back to a series of religious reform movements. The prominent among these were the Tariqah-i-Muhammadiya (erroneously called Indian Wahabism) and the Faraizi<sup>11</sup>. The case of Malda was important in this respect because the district was one of the important centers of the Tariqah movement<sup>12</sup>. The efforts of Maulana Inayet Ali, the well-known Patna Caliph, were largely responsible for the great enthusiasm created in Malda, Murshidabad and adjacent areas<sup>13</sup>. Writing in 1876 Hunter noted that 'a great majority of them (Muslims) belong to the Faraizi and Wahabi sects'<sup>14</sup>. This reformist group maintained that Islam in Bengal needed a through cleansing. The Tariqah-i-Muhammadiya sect, in order to restore Islam to its purity, sought to denude it of all Hindu influences. In Malda, as elsewhere in Bengal, the Tariqah movement drew its support principally from the poorer sections of the community. Small cultivators, landless labourers, weavers and a few *mullahs* filed the ranks of its fighters in the frontier war<sup>15</sup>. The movement was not merely an agency for religious reform; the poorer sections of the Muslim society found their voice in politics through them. The growth of a community consciousness among the non-elite Muslim population in Malda was the inevitable result of the Tariqah movement.

The Wahabi State Trials (1864-70) in the Malda Court created a sensation among the urban educated Muslim community. Most of them were professional people, government officials and landholders. They did not support the religious fanaticism of the Wahabis. Nevertheless, they did agree

on one point: the present condition of the Muslims should be improved<sup>16</sup>. They also felt the need to safeguard the interests of the Muslim educated classes through representation of their demands to the government. It was due to their efforts the *Maldah Mohammedans Association* was established in Englishbazar in 1890. Its object was to improve the social, political and educational condition of the Muslim community of the district<sup>17</sup>. The President and Secretary of the Association were Maulavi Muhammad Ismail Choudhury and Khan Sahib Abdul Aziz Khan respectively. Both of them were pleader and residents of Englishbazar. The membership of this Association was open to all educated Muslims and its official business was transacted by an elected committee of 30 members, mostly resident of Englishbazar. In the year 1890, total number of its member was 130<sup>18</sup>.

In the late nineteenth century, a debate cropped up among the Bengal Muslims regarding the use of *Mussalmani Bangla*, a curious hybrid that made indiscriminate use of Arabic, Persian and Urdu words<sup>19</sup>. Akram Khan, a noted Muslim literati, opined that the present form of Bengali was not equipped to accommodate the Arabic and Persian words. Nawab Ali Chaudhury founded a society in 1899, called the *Bangiya Sahitya Visayak Musalman Sabha*, aiming to reform the language<sup>20</sup>. This initiative, taken by a section of the Muslim literati, had its reflection in Malda also. In a pamphlet issued by the Maldah Mohammedans Association in 1906 it was pointed out that Bengali could only be accepted as the language of the Bengali Muslims if thoroughly Islamized. It argued that the introduction of Islami Bangla would enable Muslims to learn their mother tongue, which was still believed to be Urdu. Further, it was thought that this would inter alia arrest the rapid 'de-nationalization' of the Bengali Muslims, which, in its view, was quickly setting in because of their learning *Bengali*<sup>21</sup>.

The Maldah Mohammedans Association's suggestions, in fact, reflected a desperate quest for an uncompromising Islamic identity free of all idolatrous accretions. By insisting on the inclusion of Arabic and Persian words in Bengali, the Muslim intellectuals were clearly in favour of a language that was not only different but also de-linked from the Hindu intellectual roots<sup>22</sup>.

It is to be noted here that in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the relations between the two principal communities of the district, Hindus and Muslims, had been far from unfriendly, particularly in the rural areas. Participation in one another's ceremonials and festivals had become a regular feature in the lives of the Hindu and Muslims of Malda. Amusements like *gambhira* and *alkap* were enjoyed by Hindus and Muslims alike. Two of the prominent composer of *gambhira* songs, in which Hindu deity Shiva was worshipped, were Sk. Suleman and Md. Safi<sup>23</sup>. However, with an intensification of orthodoxy at the turn of the century, Muslims in Malda became less accommodating in spirit. The presence and activities of itinerant *mulla*hs – rural priests – became increasingly observable. They began to exercise increasing influence over the illiterate Muslim rural masses. They played an important role in bridging the gap between the town based educated Muslims and the rural Muslim masses<sup>24</sup>. Under their influence, a vast number of Muslim peasants were first communalized. Later they were politicized.

The percentage of Muslim participants in the Swadeshi and anti-partition agitation in Malda was quite negligible. In 1909, a Muslim religious – cum – social association *Anjuman-i-Islamia* was established in Malda at the behest of Maulavi Abdul Aziz Khan. A pleader by profession, he was the Chairman of the Englishbazar Municipality during the years 1900 – 1912. The other prominent leaders of the *Anjuman* were Maulavi Kader Box and Muhammad Laljan<sup>25</sup>. A large number of Muslims became involved in the Non-cooperation – Khilafat Movement of 1921 – 22. A District Khilafat Committee was formed with Md. Jiauddin, a pleader and later became Chairman of the Englishbazar Municipality, as a leading figure of the said committee<sup>26</sup>.

However, after the withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1922, communal politics raised its ugly head in Bengal, which had its reverberations in Malda also. On 27 October 1925, a meeting was organized by the Muslims of Araidanga and Chandipur villages in Ratua p.s., at the house of a dismissed Sub-Inspector of police named Mubarak Ali Khan of Araidanga. As per the decision of the meeting an association styled '*Malda Moslem Yubak Sangha*' was formed. Munshi Yakub Ali, a teacher of Araidanga High English

School was the president of the association. Kazi Reasat Hossain and Mubarak Ali Khan were made the vice-presidents. Ahmed Ali Khan of Araidanga became its secretary. The *Moslem Yubak Sangha* declared that its aims were to raise social, political and economic status of the Muslims of the district, but the available evidences suggest that its tone was openly communal<sup>27</sup>.

## CRYSTALLIZATION OF HINDU AND MUSLIM COMMUNAL BLOCKS

The period between 1932 and 1947 sharply shows the mutation in the formation of Hindus and Muslims as communities opposed to each other in the political arena. What was distinctive about this period was the growth of the communities as political units in a permanent adversarial relationship. This was further consolidated following the introduction of the communal electorate in the 1937 provincial elections<sup>28</sup>. The process culminated in the construction of a Muslim bloc and consequently the 'othering' of the Hindus. Muslims gradually emerged as key players in 'high politics' and demands were placed for reservations of seats for the community in educational institutions and government employment. The consolidation of Muslim communal forces was matched, if not surpassed, by the rising tide of Hindu communalism. The rise and consolidation of Hindu blocks in Bengal drew largely upon 'communal common sense of dying Hindu'<sup>29</sup>. The Hindu demographic strength was certain to decline, as the argument runs, in view of the proliferation of Muslims due to reasons connected with their social system. The fear of being outnumbered by Muslims appeared to be an effective instrument for those engaged in the mobilization for an exclusive Hindu constituency<sup>30</sup>. In this way, what occurred in the late 1930s in Bengal was, to borrow a term from Ellul, a '*psychological crystallization*' of communal identity among Hindus and Muslims<sup>31</sup>.

It needs to be mentioned here that the relationship between the two major communities in Malda was at least, until the end of the second decade of the twentieth century, free from any tension and conflict. However, in the thirties, signs of tension were clearly discernible in the local scenario. From the late 1920s, some Hindu leaders began to recognize the need to 'reclaim' the low

castes in order to create a unified Hindu political community. The Hindu Sabha movement, which grew out of a perceived need to counteract Christian and Muslim proselytisation, underlined solidarity among the different Hindu castes. A branch of the Hindu Sabha was set up in Malda in 1929 with definite programme of propaganda and conversion<sup>32</sup>. Gosain Rudrananda Giri was the President of the Malda Hindu Sabha and Ashutosh Choudhury, one of the richest landlords of Malda, was its Secretary. The Malda Hindu Sabha was dominated by landlords, merchants and lawyers. The organization aimed at promoting the 'interests of the Hindus of Malda in all respects'. A government report stated that the Malda Hindu Sabha exercised some influence over the local Hindus and held many periodical meetings<sup>33</sup>. In March 1928, Ashutosh Choudhury wrote a letter to Padamraj Jain, Secretary of the Hindu Sabha, regarding delegates to be sent to its Mymensing conference. Six delegates were sent from Malda and they were Ashutosh Choudhury, Madan Mohan Satiar (merchant), Narayan Chandra Saha (merchant), Krishna Gopal Sen Kabiraj, Kailash Nath Roy and Bholanath Choudhury<sup>34</sup>. In 1928, the Maithil Brahmins of Araidanga, Shobhanagar, Dharampur and Nagharia founded another 'Hindu' association. The name of the association was '*All India Maithil Youngman Society, Malda*'. The society celebrated its first anniversary on 10 November 1929 at Araidanga. Pandit Khealiram Jha, vice-president of Mathura - Agra Maithil Mahasammilan, presided over the anniversary functions. About four hundred delegates attended the conference, of which forty came from other districts and provinces<sup>35</sup>. Pramatha Nath Misra, a local pleader was the president of the Reception Committee. Atul Chandra Kumar of Araidanga and Bhupendranath Jha of Nagharia also took a leading role in organizing the conference. The aim of the society was to 'safeguard the interest of the rights and the legitimate interests and privileges of the Hindus and to promote solidarity amongst all sections of the Hindu community'<sup>36</sup>.

The All Bengal Provincial Hindu Conference was held in Malda on 17 and 18 September 1932. The conference was presided over by Ramananda Chatterjee, editor of the *Modern Review*. More than a thousand delegates attended the conference<sup>37</sup>. A number of women and representatives from the depressed classes and *santals* were also included among the delegates.

Jyotirmohan Misra, a local zamindar was the chairperson of the Reception Committee. The committee included Panchanan Majumdar, Asutosh Choudhury, Gosain Rudrananda Giri, Kaliprasanna Saha, Iswarial Ghosh, Bijoy Niyogi, Probodh Kumar Ray, Sasibhusan Kumar, Narayan Das Behani and others<sup>38</sup>. A volunteer organization was also formed for the conference. Rakhal Chandra Roy was the GOC of the organization. Satyendra Prasanna Sarkar, Nandalal Choudhury and Nikunjabehari Gupta were his lieutenants under whose command the volunteers drilled and paraded<sup>39</sup>. Prof. Benoy Sarkar, Sarala Devi Choudhurani and Padamraj Jain were among the dignitaries who were present in the conference. A resolution was passed requesting Swami Satyananda, Haridas Majumdar and Jogeswar Mandal to attend the conference convened by Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya and to strive in collaboration with Dr. Moonje for settlement of the problem concerning the depressed classes on the lines adopted at the conference as far as practicable<sup>40</sup>. The conference gave a call for rejuvenation of the Bengali Hindus as a community.

From the mid-thirties onwards, as Joya Chatterjee has shown, Bengal witnessed a flurry of caste consolidation programmes, initiated chiefly under Hindu Sabha and Mahasabha auspices. These programmes were, in fact, part of a broader campaign to create a united and self-conscious Hindu political community in Bengal<sup>41</sup>. The Hindu Mission since the 1930s had been displaying an awareness that in order to thwart what it conceived to be the Muslim threat it was essential to mobilize the lower caste segments of the Bengali Hindu population<sup>42</sup>. Around 1938 the Mission was actively working for the uplift of the poor Namasudras in Nababganj of Malda<sup>43</sup>. Early in 1939, a communal tension cropped up in the Namasudra pocket of Nababganj. An excitement broke out over the passing of a Saraswati Puja procession with music by the local Namasudra in front of a mosque at Nababganj<sup>44</sup>. During this time, the Maldaha Hindu Sabha picked up issues like assault on Hindu women and defilement of Hindu temples by Muslims in the district and agitated for sometime<sup>45</sup>. A meeting of the *santals* was convened at Dharampur on 10 April 1933, in which Swami Premananda, a member of Maldaha Hindu Mission, explained to them the principles of the Hindu faith<sup>46</sup>.

The communal politics in Malda took a new turn with the establishment of branches of the Muslim League and Hindu Mahasabha. In fact, there did not actually exist a formal provincial unit of the Muslim League in Bengal before 1936. There were two major provincial Muslim Parties: the Krishak Praja Party of Fazlul Huq and the United Muslim Party led by Nazimuddin, Nawab Habibullah and others. The chief organizer of the Krishak Praja Party in Malda was Idris Ahmed of Nababganj<sup>47</sup>. Idris Ahmed, a graduate of Rajshahi College, founded the noted Dadanchak High Madrassa in 1920 and was primarily an educationist. Later in 1935, he joined the Krishak Praja Party and elected vice-president of its Malda unit. In 1937 provincial election, Idris Ahmed contested from Malda South Rural (Muha) Constituency and won by a sizeable margin<sup>48</sup>. With the cooperation of A. K. Fazlul Huq, Premier of Bengal, Idris Ahmed set up a college at Dadanchak of Nababganj. In the arena of Muslim politics in Malda Idris Ahmed was no doubt, an influential person<sup>49</sup>. Idris Ahmed was secular in outlook. He did not support the communal politics of the Muslim League even in 1946. In 1939 in his speech in Bengal Legislative Assembly, he argued that 'when we speak about nationalism we often mix it with Hinduism but I think that the Muslims have every right to be a nationalist while maintaining their Muslim identity at the same time'<sup>50</sup>.

It was in such a context that moves were made to set up a district unit of the Muslim League. In October 1937, an All Bengal Muslim Conference organized by the Muslim League was held in Berhampore, Murshidabad. The conference was presided over by Jinnah himself. Following that conference, the League and its MLAs took initiative in setting up branches of the League at district and Thana levels<sup>51</sup>. It was as part of these developments that in February 1938, the district unit of the Muslim League was set up in Malda and Zahur Ahmed Chaudhury, a pleader of Malda Bar and councilor of Englishbazar Municipality was elected its president<sup>52</sup>. During the years 1938 – 1947, Zahur Ahmed Chaudhury was the unchallenged leader of the Muslim League in Malda. Amongst the other Muslim League leaders of Malda, names of Illias Ahmed, Md. Ziauddin, Md. Laljan, Mujibar Rahaman, Mobarak Ali

Chaudhury, Raisuddin Ahmed, and Hamiduddin Ahmed are worth mentioned<sup>53</sup>.

The following table shows how the Muslim League enhanced its strength in the various districts of North Bengal.

Table 8.2 Year wise membership of the Muslim League in North Bengal.

District	Year 1939	Year 1940	Year 1941	S.P.'s comment
Malda	-----	29,000	43,000	Number given by the president of the League
Rajshahi	3,079	4,908	5,681	League's propaganda during census of 1941
Jalpaiguri	6,000	7,000	8,000	League's propaganda during census of 1941
Pabna	12,783	13,904	14,572	Number given by the president of the League
Dinajpur	1,382	5,087	6,186	Propaganda by League
Rangpur	4,879	7,649	10,701	Propaganda by League

Source : I. B. report on Muslim League Membership, Government of Bengal, File No. 147 - 38 (A), Part I

In such a situation, the caste consolidation programme of the district unit of the Hindu Mahasabha created tension between the two communities. In 1939, a campaign was organized by the local Hindu Mahasabha leaders to mobilize the *santals* in defense of Hindu religion. In fact, as we have discussed, the district of Malda was particularly well known for such mobilization of the tribals from the days of Jitu Santal<sup>54</sup>. Ever since then, whenever the local Hindu Mahasabha leaders wanted to put on a display of Hindu power, they brought

to Malda town a large number of *santals*, fed them generously and tried to excite in them a communal passion. In 1941, Zahur Ahmed Choudhury, President of the local Muslim League, complained to the District Magistrate of Malda that the *Janmastami* procession in 1940, organized by the local Hindu Mahasabha was crowded with *santals* armed with bows, arrows and *tangis*. They shouted anti-Muslim slogan. This intensified communal tension in the district. Zahur Ahmed Choudhury further alleged that following a Hindu Mahasabha mass meeting in May 1940, the local *santals* overtly began to show their anti-Muslim sentiments; they gave up working in the houses of Muslims and stopped harvesting their paddy<sup>55</sup>.

In Malda, several big zamindars took up the cause of the Hindu Mahasabha, repudiating their traditional ties with the Bengal Congress. Jyotirmohan Misra, the zamindar of Harishchandrapur, acted as host to a Mahasabha Conference in his zamindari. Ashutosh Choudhury, one of the big zamindars of Malda, was himself the secretary of the local Hindu Mahasabha. According to an official report, a Mahasabha meeting was held on 7 May 1939 at the house of Babu Bhairabendra Narayan Roy, the zamindar of Singhabad<sup>56</sup>. There are indeed some points in Joya Chatterjee's argument that '*mufassil* zamindar, who had been key supporters of the Congress during the Assembly elections, had changed track and welcome the new Hindu Party which promised to defend their landed interests in a more determined fashion than the Bose Congress'<sup>57</sup>. Official report mentions another mass meeting organized by the local Mahasabha at Gajol hat on 29 December 1940. A large number of armed *santals* assembled to listen to the Hindu leaders. 'Hindustan is the name of this country', one leader proclaimed, 'and the Hindus alone have right to inhabit it. Only if the Muslims do agree to live here as ordinary tenants, there can no objections. Those who are born in India and follow one of the religions of Indian origin are all Hindu'. As the *santals* were Hindus, they should take the responsibility of defending the honour of the Hindu community, their womenfolk and their temples<sup>58</sup>. In this way, the local Mahasabha leaders followed the strategy of using the armed *santals* for the defense of Hinduism.

That the Hindu communalism was gaining ground in Malda in late 1930s is clear. However, the Muslim League activists were not sitting on the fence. The strength of the Muslim communalists was not negligible in Malda and often they rose to the occasion and gave provocation to intensify communalism to serve their vested interest. Sometimes in 1941, a clash occurred at Shibganj between the Hindus and the Muslims in connection with the immersion procession of the Hindus and the matter was seriously complicated as it took a communal turn<sup>59</sup>. However, that was not the only occasion. In spite of special precautions trouble over Moharrum procession occurred at Nababganj in 1942. According to the government report, 'the most serious incident was at Nababganj in Malda district, where some of the processionists *looted* or damaged some Hindu shops. A number police were injured and the Sub-Deputy Magistrate in charge was compelled to order firing, as a result three Muslims were injured'<sup>60</sup>. In 1941, another communal tension was aggravated centering round the slaughter of cow during the 'Bakar Id' festival at Singhabad. It was alleged that Bhairabendra Narayan Roy, the local zamindar and leader of the Hindu Mahasabha, imposed restrictions on cow slaughtering. The Muslims became furious and *looted* some shops owned by the Hindus at Singhabad hat. However, Bhairabendra Narayan Roy refuted all the charges against him and alleged that the whole incident was the conspiracy of some Muslim League activists to defame him<sup>61</sup>.

Thus, in the 1940s Hindu-Muslim political and communal rivalry became acute in Malda. The Muslim League was slowly emerging as the mouthpiece of Muslim separatism. The gradual development of communal feelings, mutual misunderstanding and suspicion took Congress and Muslim League in Malda poles apart. Communalism started to raise its ugly head in rural Malda and political parties began to pander to this dangerous trend. The competition for government jobs, desire for economic superiority and for political power became the most important factors of this communal rivalry. The changing composition of local bodies – Union, Local and District Boards and Municipalities – reflected a significant shift in the balance of power between Hindus and Muslims<sup>62</sup>. When groups that had previously been entrenched in power lost their control over these bodies, they were deeply resentful and it

was usually the Hindu *bhadralok* who lost. The result, all too often, was communal conflict<sup>63</sup>. The District Board election in 1941 in Malda was marred by fisticuffs when a group alleging 'communal bias' on the part of the presiding officer 'broke up the recording of votes by violence at the polling centre'<sup>64</sup>.

Control over school and college committees was another issue, which fuelled communal tension. Thus, we observe that in 1944, over the issue of the establishment of the Malda College, a difference of opinion among the Hindus and Muslims came on the surface. From a contemporary local newspaper source, we come to know that the initiative in the establishment of a college was taken by Ashutosh Choudhury and Jadunandan Choudhury, the two prominent leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha. Zahur Ahmed Choudhury, President of the local Muslim League, gave a generous donation for this purpose. In return, he demanded reservation of seats for the local Muslim students. However, Ashutosh Choudhury categorically opposed his demand<sup>65</sup>. A meeting had to be convened to wipe out such dissension over the college issue. At this meeting Jiauddin Ahmed, the Chairman of the Englishbazar Municipality, made an appeal to the both communities to look at the college affair with secular outlook. He stated that though the Hindus donated Rs. 33,000 and the Muslims only Rs. 10,000, students of both communities would get equal scope of education in the proposed college. In such a situation, Jiauddin Ahmed stated, if the Hindus retained a slight majority in the college committee, the local Muslims ought not to express resentment<sup>66</sup>. It needs to be mentioned that Jiauddin Ahmed was an influential leader of the Muslim League. For his statement on the college issue, Jiauddin was bitterly criticized by his League compatriots<sup>67</sup>.

Mutual suspicion and distrust was thus looming large in the horizon. In such an atmosphere, a riot between the *santals* and the Muslims took place at Bamongola in November 1944. The issue was the immersion of the Goddess Kali. The men who were taking their daily *namaj* at the local *masjid* asked the *santal* procession not to beat drums. However, the *santals* did not listen to and finally a riot broke out. It resulted in the killing of two people, one of them

was a *santal* and the other was a Muslim. The police rushed to the spot and arrested some twenty persons<sup>68</sup>. The local Hindu Mahasabha, as the report states, tried to politicize this event. The Muslim League came forward to support the role of the Muslims. A communal tension was thus cropped up in the district<sup>69</sup>.

A few months later in April 1945, trouble broke out again between these two communities in the Barind areas over the alleged abduction of a *santal* girl by a Muslim man. Several houses were burnt down and one person was killed, and the incident had serious repercussions on the relations between the two communities in Malda. Although the situation was soon brought under control, the tensions continued for some time. There was a strong probability that the Hindu Mahasabha was actively involved here, as two months later in a Legislative Assembly by-election in Malda, they were assiduously trying to put forward a *santal* candidate, who, however, declined to stand<sup>70</sup>.

The failure of the Malda Congress to sustain its organizational hold in the district was due to a variety of reasons, including internal squabbles<sup>71</sup>. It paved the path for the steady growth of the Mahasabha and the Muslim League who, in fact, became the true representatives of their respective communities as the partition of Bengal drew close. In February 1946, at the prize distribution ceremony of the B. R. Sen Public Library and Museum in Malda, disturbance started over trivial matters. The proceedings of the ceremony commenced with the singing of the nationalist song *Bande Mataram*. Some Muslim gentlemen attending the meeting objected to the song. Throwing of brickbats and a pandemonium followed. Soon after the sub-divisional officer arrived with a contingent of armed force. The police escorted women attending the ceremony to their homes. Some people were injured. The situation was, however, brought under control. The district administration passed an order under section 144 of the CRPC banning all processions, public meetings and assembly of five or more persons<sup>72</sup>.

In their analysis of pre-partition violence in Bengal, Suranjan Das and Patricia Gossman consider the historical trajectory, which culminated in the creation of political blocks of Hindus and Muslims on the eve of partition. Das traces the

changes in the nature of riots in Bengal between 1905 and 1947 from being relatively spontaneous and manifestations of class differences to being planned, organized and attaining an overtly communal tone. In his assessment of communal violence, he outlines the conjunction of elite and popular communalism, which he argues ultimately manifested itself through the Calcutta riots of 1946<sup>73</sup>. Patricia Gossman examines the means by which violence became ritualized and was constitutive of the process of identity formation in Bengal during the same period. She argues that in addition to colonial authorities, Hindu and Muslim political leaders were instrumental in articulating the narratives of communal violence by constructing 'facts' out of every incident. Such representations through numerous repetitions helped to freeze popular perceptions of identity<sup>74</sup>.

#### DEMANDS FOR PARTITION: TO DIVIDE OR NOT TO DIVIDE

The announcement of the Cabinet Mission Plan in March 1946 decisively indicated British plans for transferring power to Indians. Although the Cabinet Mission was projected within political circles as the last ditch effort to avoid partition and Pakistan, its failure to reach any consensus between the Congress and the League representatives assured the possibility of Pakistan. Congress leaders in Bengal began to think seriously about partitioning the province to assure their continued political prominence within free India. The 1946 Calcutta riots sealed their decision in favour of partition<sup>75</sup>.

By late 1946, many Bengalis, both Hindu and Muslims, were convinced that Pakistan whatever its constitutional structure and spatial coordinates was inevitable. However, what needs to be emphasized is the ideological confusion that accompanied such a conviction. For some sections of urbanized Bengali Hindus, Pakistan had come to mean a permanent loss of political sovereignty and their subjection to 'Muslim tyranny'<sup>76</sup>. For most, 'Pakistan' continued remain fuzzy, an idea which made no distinctive efforts to move away from its initial conceptualization of a nation based on a religious majority<sup>77</sup>.

The establishment of the Hindu Mahasabha sponsored Partition League in December 1946 signalled the emergence of an organized movement among Bengali Hindus that demanded a 'separate homeland for the Hindus'. Between February 20 and June 20, 1947, a mere four months from the announcement of the British decision to leave India to the Bengal Assembly's vote for partitioning the province and the western half joining the Indian Union, the partition discourse reached a fevered pick. As the Hindu Mahasabha deployed their cadres, the Bengal Congress also jumped onto the bandwagon for partition, albeit for different reasons. Nalini Ranjan Sarkar argued that 'the Hindus have been forced into this position by extreme circumstances' whose roots lay in the 'communal administration' of the Bengal Muslim League<sup>78</sup>. Kiran Sankar Roy also ultimately argued in terms of the political necessity for partition to ensure the survival of the Indian state.

Between February and June 1947, representations from political units such as the Municipal and Union Boards, civil group like District Bar Associations and Zamindar Associations, and local clubs flooded the offices of the Hindu Mahasabha and the AICC voicing their demands for partition<sup>79</sup>. A front-page cartoon in the Hindustan Standard depicted the *viceroi* being overwhelmed by nearly 10,000 telegrams demanding the partition of Bengal<sup>80</sup>. Most of these petitions asked for the formation of a separate province of West Bengal that would remain within the Indian Union.<sup>81</sup>

The demand for partitioning the province spread to the districts and *mufassil* towns as well. The influential section of the Hindu community in Malda insisted upon uniting the district with West Bengal. The annual conference of the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangha (RSS) was held in Malda in April 1947. Sibendu Sekhar Roy, then the Secretary of the local Hindu Mahasabha addressed the meeting of the volunteers. He supported the proposed partition of Bengal and demanded the inclusion of Malda into 'Hindu India'<sup>82</sup>. He criticized Gandhiji as the latter persistently opposed the partition of India. Roy remarked that in view of blood bath owing to recurring Muslim violence in different parts of the country, the partition of India would be the only answer. He made a scathing criticism against the Congress leaders and alleged that

they had been persistently appeasing the minority community. According to Roy, due to this shortsighted policy of the congress leaders, the existence of the Hindus would be at stake<sup>83</sup>. Roy further stated, if the non-Hindu people like to live in Hindu India, they must follow the Hindu culture. They must stay in India in subordination to the Hindu nation<sup>84</sup>.

In May 1947, the Congress and Mahasabha jointly convened a mammoth public meeting in Calcutta to press for partition, which was presided over by the historian Sir Jadunath Sarkar<sup>85</sup>. This pattern of cooperation between the executives of the two parties at the provincial level was replicated in the *mufassils*. In Malda, a meeting of the Hindus of the district represented by all political parties was held on 18 May 1947 at Town Hall. Its purpose was to demand for the inclusion of Malda in *Hindu Bengal*<sup>86</sup>. The meeting was presided over by Charu Chandra Sanyal M. L. C. Many noted personalities of local politics, such as Nikunja Behari Gupta (secretary, Malda District Congress Committee), Ramhari Roy (Congress nominated M L A), Ashutosh Choudhury (local zamindar and leader of the Hindu Mahasabha) and Sibendu Sekhar Roy (Secretary, Malda Hindu Mahasabha) were present at the meeting. At the end of the meeting, a resolution was adopted which stated that :

- a) Bengal should be divided in two parts – Hindu Bengal and Muslim Bengal.
- b) The districts of Malda, Dinajpur and Rajshahi up to the river Atrai should be included in Hindu Bengal in order to unite the Hindu – dominated districts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri of North Bengal with the Presidency and Burdwan Divisions.
- c) To equalize the distribution of population in each part of Bengal (i.e., Hindu Bengal and Muslim Bengal), Gopalganj of Faridpur district and some parts of Madaripur should be united with Jessore and Khulna of the Presidency Division.
- d) It was hoped that the Muslim population in Hindu Bengal would get fair treatment and the authorities would guarantee their security.

e) The Hindu Bengal would remain as a province of Independent India.

Lalbihari Majumdar, the editor of a contemporary local newspaper as well as a leader of the Malda Congress, stated in his column that he was stringently opposed to the idea of both divided India and divided Bengal. However, if the partition of India became inevitable he would have no other option but to support the proposed partition of Bengal. At the same time, the editor admitted that the possibility of saving Bengal from partition became remote, because majority of Hindus supported partition<sup>88</sup>.

Joya chatterjee rightly observes that the *bhadralok* were the backbone of this movement for partition of Bengal. In 1947, *bhadralok* Bengalis, once the pioneers of nationalism, used every available stratagem and device to demand that their province be divided<sup>89</sup>. The Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha were by no means the only forums through which they expressed their demand for a separate Hindu Province. In those districts where Hindu were in a minority and Muslims dominated the local bodies, professional associations controlled by *bhadralok* Hindus were pressed into service. The Malda Bar Association thus held a special meeting on 30 April 1947 and adopted a unanimous resolution in support of the partition proposal. They wanted the Hindu majority province of West Bengal to include the district of Malda<sup>90</sup>.

To counter the mobilization drive of the Hindus of Malda for partition, the local Muslim league organized itself to press for inclusion of the district in the proposed Pakistan. Although Malda was Muslim majority district, Hindus were demographically preponderant in urban areas. The League High Command received memoranda from Malda urging the League leaders to bring the district within Pakistan. However, the campaign in Malda gradually fizzled out, presumably because of Suhrawardy's assurance of its inclusion in Pakistan due to a clear Muslim majority there<sup>91</sup>.

Even at this late date, dissenters remained against the idea of any division of the province. One group led by Sarat Bose and Abul Hashim promoted the idea of a United Bengal, which would not be constitutionally part of India and

Pakistan but have an independent identity<sup>92</sup>. In a letter to Sardar Patel, Sarat Bose specified that 'it is not a fact that Bengali Hindus unanimously demand partition. As far as East Bengal is concerned, there is not the slightest doubt that the majority of Hindus were opposed to partition ... the demand for partition is more or less confined to the middle classes... Future generations will, I am afraid, condemn us for conceding the division of India and supporting the partition of Bengal and Punjab'<sup>93</sup>. This plan did not find much support within the political ranks of the Bengal Congress or the Muslim League. Leonard Gordon tended to study the United Bengal Plan as a realistic alternative to partition, but to Joya Chatterjee, it was never more than a 'pipe dream'<sup>94</sup>. The Bengali public already inundated by Mahasabha propaganda was wary of the possibilities that Bengal as an independent entity might in the future join Pakistan.

The United Bengal Scheme failed to attract any real support from the Hindus of *mufassil* Bengal. The views of Lalbihari Majumdar, a noted literati of Malda, perhaps reflected their attitude towards the scheme. 'The proposal is absurd. In such climate of distrust and large-scale communal violence, the partition of Bengal would be the only practical solution'<sup>95</sup>. Majumdar wholeheartedly supported the statement of Surendra Mohan Ghosh, the President of the BPCC, that an undivided Bengal in a divided India was an impossibility<sup>96</sup>. The local Hindu Mahasabha made a scathing criticism against the United Bengal Scheme and alleged that Bengal Hindus had suffered terribly under the League ministry because of communal misrule and maladministration<sup>97</sup>.

With the announcement of the Partition Plan on 3 June 1947, the saga of a United Bengal ended. The Bengal Legislative Assembly discussed the 3 June Plan in its session on 20 June 1947. At the joint session, 90 voted to join the existing constituent assembly (i.e., stay with India), while 126 voted to join the new constituent assembly (i.e., join Pakistan). In the meeting of members from Hindu majority districts, delegates voted for partition 58 to 21. In a separate meeting, those from the Muslim majority districts supported the sovereign Bengal proposal, by 106 votes to 34, that the districts in which the

Muslims were demographically preponderant should join the proposed Pakistan Constituent Assembly<sup>98</sup>.

After the vote, the overarching issue was to ensure that one's own locality continued to remain within one's perceived nation and one continued to be an Indian or a Pakistani. Bengalis now wrote letters and passed resolutions providing rationales for the inclusion of a particular locality within India or Pakistan. The reasons mainly focused on economic, religious and cultural issues. For instance, *Minar* – a weekly newspaper that represented the voice of the Malda Muslims, stated that for a long time the Hindus and Muslims had been residing in Malda with harmony and friendship. The district of Malda had been comparatively free from any sort of communal violence, which badly affected the other parts of India and Bengal<sup>99</sup>. At the time of communal holocaust of 1946, the peace – loving people of Malda came in open arms to maintain communal amity and peace. The editor of *Minar* believed that this communal harmony would not be disturbed with or without its inclusion in India. He appealed to the authorities not to divide the district at the time of partition. He argued that the division of Malda would be harmful for two reasons. In the first place, if divided Malda as a full-fledged district may not exist at all. Secondly, the partition of this unique citadel of Hindu-Muslim cultural conjugation would be condemned by future generations<sup>100</sup>.

The Hindu literati of Malda echoed the voice of the *Minar* and agreed that the district should not be divided. At the same time, they found it reasonable and justified to include undivided Malda in the proposed Hindu Bengal. On behalf of them, the editor of *Gourdoot*, a leading local newspaper, presented certain logic<sup>101</sup>:

In the first place, the district of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri would certainly be included in Hindu Bengal. So if the district of Malda was not included in Hindu Bengal, the contact of those two districts with the other parts of Hindu Bengal would be disturbed.

Secondly, the impending partition was not a partition of a district or a province, but a partition of a country. Therefore, each party would be eager to get natural boundary.

Thirdly, the districts of Malda and Dinajpur were called the *Granary of North Bengal*. These two districts were the most significant supply zones of rice to other parts of North Bengal. Hence, the separation of Malda and Dinajpur from North Bengal would render the people of this region dependent on other regions for food-grains<sup>102</sup>.

Once the Indian political parties accepted the decision to partition, the next step was the constitution of a Boundary Commission to draw up the 'real' border. The impossible task of determining a border to accommodate religious demography was delegated to Cyril Radcliffe, a British Civil Servant with little knowledge of Indian subcontinent, who chaired the five member Boundary Commission. The members of the Commission were all judges. The Bengal Boundary Commission thus consisted of well-known judges, B. K. Mukherjee, C. C. Biswas, Abu Saleh Muhammed and S. A. Rahaman<sup>103</sup>. Gyanesh Kudaisya and Tai Young Tan examine the varied issues that confronted the Commission and reveal how it was hampered by unclear and contradictory terms of reference<sup>104</sup>. The conflicting claims of the leading political parties and a restricted schedule of six weeks made their task more difficult.

The terms of reference for the Bengal Boundary Commission were simple enough: 'to demarcate the boundaries on the basis of ascertaining the contiguous majority areas of Muslims and non-Muslims and in doing so take into account also other factors'<sup>105</sup>. Further, where a clear contiguous majority or minority became difficult to establish, the 'other factors' would assume primacy. What comprised the 'other factors' remained undefined, giving Radcliffe room for maneuver<sup>106</sup>.

However, in the days before Partition, contingency and confusion were the two catchwords defining the lives of people of Malda. They had little knowledge of how Mountbatten's plan or the Radcliffe Award would change their destinies. The case of Malda, in fact, posed a problem before the

Boundary Commission. In Malda, out of fifteen police stations, nine had a Muslim preponderance over non-Muslims. The problem was that if these nine police stations would finally be handed over to Pakistan, the communication channels between southern Bengal and northern part of Bengal would be disturbed. Therefore, nobody knew for sure whether the district would finally be assigned to India or Pakistan. This reminds us the characters in Bhisham Sahni's story 'We Have Arrived in Amritsar' who did not know whether Lahore or Gurdaspur would be in India or Pakistan<sup>107</sup>.

Two contemporary newspapers of Malda, *Gourdoot* and *Maldaha Samachar*, portrayed the picture of the district on the eve of transfer of power and consequent partition of the country. It highlighted the anxiety and uncertainty of the people looming large over the future of Malda and at the same time expressed concern over the mounting communal tension in the district. It was reported that in the last week of July 1947 a large procession was organized by the local Muslim League. The leaders of the local Muslim League – Jahur Ahmed Choudhury, Tahur Ahmed Choudhury, Arif Sattar Hazi, Ansar Choudhury, Sabir Jaan were all present in the procession. It demanded the union of Malda with Pakistan. The procession raised the slogan 'Pakistan Zindabad'<sup>108</sup>. The local Hindu Mahasabha sharply reacted. The Mahasabha organized a rally of some thousand people at Englishbazar demanding the inclusion of Malda in Hindu Bengal<sup>109</sup>. Naturally, communal tension was increasing. At Kaliachak, two sporadic incidents of looting and arsoning occurred. A clash between two communities broke out at Ratua after a procession raised the slogan 'Pakistan Zindabad'. Though no casualty was reported, the tension reached its apogee<sup>110</sup>.

At Englishbazar, a rumor ran on 29 July 1947, that the district administration had confirmed the union of Malda with Pakistan<sup>111</sup>. A sense of uncertainty and confusion confronted the Hindus. However, both the local Congress and Hindu Mahasabha dismissed this news as baseless. Some people, according to newspaper report, belonging to the minority community had been preventing members of their community from purchasing the essential commodities from shops owned by the Hindus<sup>112</sup>. A bomb explosion near the

local cinema house injured some people, which created panic in the region. All these incidents made the situation tense and the streets of the town wore a deserted look in the evening<sup>113</sup>. It was reported that a section of the people of Englishbazar had thought of leaving the town apprehending an orgy of violence on August 15. The editor of *Gourdoot* noticed a huge gathering everyday at the local bank for withdrawing their deposit in face of prevailing uncertainty. The newly formed peace committee strained every nerve to maintain peace in the town. It appealed to the people that any rumour regarding communal tension should go unheeded<sup>114</sup>.

This confusion and uncertainty continued until the announcement of the Radcliffe Award on 17 August 1947, two days after the declaration of Independence. Although the Award was ready by 12 August, Mountbatten, fearing civil strife, had arranged for its publication only after the British had relinquished constitutional control over India. The confusion that engulfed the people of Dinajpur and Malda on the eve of partition is aptly portrayed in Satinath Bhaduri's short story 'Gananayak' or 'The Champion of the People'<sup>115</sup>. Situated in a small village on the border between Purnia and Dinajpur, the villagers in the story did not know whether they were part of India or Pakistan. The narrative began with Munimji, the local black marketer announcing that Dinajpur and Malda already become part of Pakistan. The information spread like wildfire, and people gathered in the market to collect as much rice as possible to survive at this hour of crisis. When Pora Gossain, the leader and priest of the *rajbansis*, heard that the village of Titlia would be awarded to Hindustan, he was elated. Achchimaddi, a Muslim resident of Mirpur, was also happy to hear that his village would be awarded to Pakistan. Shortly after Munimji's declaration, the villagers, who had hitherto maintained peaceful co-existence, put up the Congress and League flags in Titlia and Mirpur respectively. Hindu refugees from Mirpur left their home and set up camp on the other side. However, when the Boundary Award was finally published, the residents of Titlia found that their area had been awarded to Pakistan. For Pora Gossain, being a part of Pakistan means that 'I am going to be buried when I die. They won't even let me go to the temple'. Similarly for Achchimaddi, Indian citizenship means, 'We will be forced to pray facing east,

and they won't let us kill chicken'. For both characters, the main concern was culture and their spatial identification of the imagined nations of India and Pakistan. The story ends with Munimji making the maximum financial gain from the confusion<sup>116</sup>.

In fact, people in Malda interpreted Mountbatten's 3 June Plan in different ways. Although leading newspapers carried the details of the provisional plan to partition, the public had little understanding of how it would translate into reality. The Award was to follow the principle of contiguous majority areas but it was not the only consideration for the division. The public was unaware of the specifics of these other considerations until after the Award was announced. In Malda, for three days, between 12 and 15 August 1947, nobody knew for sure whether the district would finally be assigned to India or Pakistan<sup>117</sup>. The Pakistani flag, as the District Magistrate reminisced, 'fluttered over the collectorate until 14 August'<sup>118</sup>. The local Muslim League, under the leadership of Akbar Ali Munshi, had hoisted the Pakistani flag on the roof of Malda Zilla School<sup>119</sup>. At Araidanga, Atul Chandra Kumar, a prominent leader of the Congress, was 'requested' by the local Muslim leaders, to hoist the Pakistani flag<sup>120</sup>. At Kaliachak, and Sujapur, several processions were organized by the local Muslim League to celebrate the inclusion of Malda within Pakistan<sup>121</sup>. However, when the Radcliffe Award was published on 17 August 1947, it was seen that among the fifteen police stations of Malda district, Shibganj, Bholahat, Nachol, Gomastapur and Nababganj were included into Pakistan and remaining ten police stations came to India. Accordingly, the administration of Malda was handed over to a District Magistrate of West Bengal<sup>122</sup>.

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116. *Ibid.*
117. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 14 August 1947
118. Asok Mitra, *The New India 1948 – 55 : Memoirs of an Indian Civil Servant*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1991, p. 2
119. Interview with Manik Jha, founder – member of the local Communist Party, on 11 July 2001
120. Interview with Sibendu Sekhar Roy, then the secretary of the Hindu Mahasabha, on 16 August 1997
121. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 19 August 1947

122. Asok Mitra, *The New India*, op. cit., p. 3