

Introduction

In spite of a considerable number of works on the organized and unorganized forms of politics of pre partition Bengal, there has been a dearth of discussion on the political parties in general. None of the existing literatures reflect Bengal politics in terms of a political process providing scopes for highlighting the language of party politics both in and outside the arena of legislative politics in pre partition Bengal. Most of the writings has dealt either with the growth of nationalist politics under the fold of the Congress or discussed the general political developments in Bengal with a special reference to the course of Muslim politics under the Muslim League. In late colonial Bengal the shift from nationalism to communalism is one of the popular issues for the historians working on it. However, almost all these works are based on the background of all India politics dominated mainly by two major political parties the Muslim League and the Indian National Congress. It may be noted that the political language of the minor political parties were not less expressive than the major political parties because at every crucial stage of late colonial Bengal politics these parties appeared with greater potentials of articulating the existing political realities. After the enactment of the Act of 1919 the entire structure of party politics entered into a more responsible phase of decision making. The political parties now became more involved into the task of carrying the weightage of expectations from people to state and took the responsibility of influencing the content of public policy in favour of some set of principles. It was seen that from 1920s some important political personalities took the opportunity of mobilizing popular support in

favour of their respective ideas and political objectives. Until the partition of the province these personalities stayed as the originating spirit of different political developments and to some extent set the pulse of late colonial Bengal politics. Leaders like Chittaranjan Das, A K Fazlul Huq, Shyamaprasad Mukherjee, and Subhas Chandra Bose were the few among others who had contributed in their own way to make their political philosophy more special than their contemporaries. All of these leaders tried to ensure that that any cost the interest of Bengal and Bengalis must be kept unabated in every circumstance. Definitely the shadow of communal preferences sometimes put them under pressure, however, a strong sense of belonging always made them attached with their people and soil. The late colonial politics in Bengal while reflecting the the dynamisms of mainstream Indian politics, maintained its essential characters in identical terms. In this process the minor political parties had some definite roles to play.

Ever since the Indian national movement started, Bengal remained the most politically advanced province. It was here that the very necessities of a separate Muslim organization were felt in early 20th century and within the first three decades of the century the Congress continued to grow as the most enterprising political party of the nationalist Indians. The constituency of nationalist politics went beyond the confines of elite politics after the Non cooperation movement (1920-22) and the involbment of a large section of the masses into the nationalist movement put forward the importance of leadership in transforming the ambitions of the masses into an anti colonial national movement. In Bengal the task of articulating the aspirations of the masses was carried on by a numbers of

for Indian National Congress and the Muslim League and the term 'minor' has been used to describe those parties which had tried to function independently out of the influence of the major political parties. Some of these parties were called minor in the sense that they had either originated or worked under the fold of the all India parties and some of them had failed to overlap the politics of the major ones in spite of their independent approach. Side by side a few political parties with national importance had played a secondary role in Bengal politics and they were proved to be minor in comparison to the political action of the major political parties. On virtue of their programmes and party mechanism some of these minor parties were seemed to take a regional character, however, it would be wrong to describe them as a mere regional party because both in regard to the ideology and objectives of these parties successfully attained a national appeal not less than the major all India parties. Numerous studies have been devoted till now on the very politics of the major political parties but no detailed study has been made on the political language of minor political parties on the background of the late colonial Bengal politics. The present subject undertaken for the dissertation work is the study of the minor political parties in Bengal in the late colonial period when the cross currents of different socio political developments widened the spheres of party politics both in the levels of ideology and practice.

In this present discussion a special attention has been given on the relationship of the minor political parties with the major parties because any discussion on the minor parties is likely to be incomplete unless the role of the major political parties is evaluated in that particular occasion. The parties which are taken into consideration are the All India Hindu Mahasabha (1915), Swaraj Party (1922), Workers and Peasants Party (1925), Bengal Muslim Party(1926), Independent Muslim Party (1926), Nationalist Party(1932), Krisak Praja Party(1936), United Muslim Party (1936), Forward Block (1939), and Revolutionary Socialist Party (1941). The emergence of some of these political parties was situational as well as of political necessity. But they did not exist for long and disappeared within a short time. The minor Muslim parties fell in this category. Some other parties even took part in the ministerial process but lacked the spirit and endeavor to sustain itself at the office for a long period of time. Within half a decade or so these parties only remained in paper having no organization or office in the actual sense of the term. The Swaraj Party and the Krisak Praja Party even after some years of extensive political programmes and activities lost their charisma to compete other political forces and in the midst of various vicissitudes they became almost out of the political scene. A parallel trend could be seen in respect of the communist movement in Bengal. Although socialist group avowing socialism appeared in India on the eve of the October revolution, systematic communist mobilization started after a considerable period of time. Following the establishment of the Communist Party of India in 1920, communists groups emerged in different parts of India. It can be pointed out that no important theoretical and strategical innovations were made on the part of the Indian communists rather it anticipated several

important tendencies manifested in the international communist movement. Changing ideological position and practical contestations of the Indian communists resulted in the emergence of many communist parties. Official restrictions on the communist movement also forced the communists to form minor communist groups or to make use of the platform of the Congress for practical necessities. All of the mushroom communist parties claimed to be the real communist party although factional differences and ideological battle over some tactical issues arrested the growth of a consolidated communist party until a considerable period of time. Some of the minor communist parties had either worked as a 'transitional party' or as a legal cover of the out-lowed communist party. The Workers and Peasants Party fell in the first category while the Bengal Labour Party was proved to be the ideal legal platform for carrying on communist activity into its due course of action. Apart from this two, the Young Comrade League, Communist League (later renamed as the Revolutionary Communist Party of India), Samyraj Party, Indian Proletarian Revolutionary Party, Chattra Yuba Samsad, Bolshevik Party and a few other communist groups emerged time to time in Bengal. Most of these parties either merged with the Communist Party later or continued its independent existence for some years. Unlike the minor communist parties, the Forward Block and the Revolutionary Socialist Party appeared as a challenge to the existing state of Gandhian Congress politics and the shifting tendencies of the community movement respectively. But these parties failed to reach to the point of expectation for a numbers of tactical mistakes and situational compulsions. It was the situational compulsion what necessitated the slow but steady development of another political party with an aim to socio

cultural movement to protect the community interests of the Hindus. In its silent bid to be the alternative of the Congress, the Hindu Mahasabha faced numbers of constraints in Bengal at first but ultimately it stood as the sole minor party to capture a significant place for itself at the time of taking the final decision on the fate of Bengal in 1947.

One question becomes very much pertinent here that whether in a colonial situation a political party evolved automatically as a natural reaction of the existing socio political system or these parties had emerged in a created phenomenon or in a given political situation. How far a party would be able to represent the popular will or to what extent a party would be successful in transforming the existing socio economic imbalance depends largely on the response of the party to many voices of the nation be it a class, caste, an ideology or even a region. In this light it may be noted that the working of party system within the colonial framework was directed towards a one party domination on the basis of its superior potentials to influence and accommodate all shades of opinion and different interest groups. Simultaneously the factional and intra party group competition might be at work as a normal tendency of single party domination. In a colonial situation the domination of one nationalist party could easily be exposed before the challenges of some outer nationalist forces seeking for legitimacy into the political mainstream and the minor political parties might be taken here as an example of this type of trend subject to experiments from the nationalist and counter nationalist forces.

The socio economic structure of Bengal was one of the determinants of political developments in Bengal. Right from the introduction of representative government the predominance of the Muslim peasantry under Hindu landlords remained a crucial factor of East Bengal politics. This combination was very much useful to transform economic grievances of the peasantry to communalizing the class relation of the peasantry. This sort of manipulations was not autonomous in nature. The interplay of party politics and the existing realities of economic differences between a Muslim peasant and a Hindu zamindar or moneylender often employed some extra territorial mechanisms to keep the situation under control. The minor political parties specially those worked mainly on the popular realm of politics fell within the quandary of deviating religion from economic grievances because in most of the cases they failed to identify those issues from the institutional level of politics or faced a serious setback when corresponding to the ideology of religion with that of an ideology of class struggle or class confrontation. In case of the minor communist parties it happened to be very common.

After the First World War, Mahatma Gandhi and a new group of leaders took command of the Indian National Congress. The acceptance of Gandhi as the new mass leader was not same in all the provinces. In Bengal Gandhi was challenged mainly on ideological grounds. The confrontation was with groups or parties like the revolutionaries and the communists and some times with personalities like Chittaranjan Das or Subhas Chandra Bose. Chhittaranjan Das led the first opposition against Gandhi. The establishment of the Swaraj Party with the programmes of council entry in defiance of the no changers indeed set an attack on the

Gandhian dogma for the first time in Bengal. In the first chapter it has been discussed how the Swaraj Party had started its journey in Bengal as the first important minor political party and why Chittaranjan Das's ambitious project on Hindu Muslim unity went in vein within a few years after his death. All the more in spite of the Swaraj Party being an integral part of the Congress, Chittaranjan Das did not enjoy the party strength behind him during his enthusiastic ventures in activating the Bengal Pact (1923). This chapter has sought to answer the pertinent questions like why did the Swaraj Party fail to check the alienation of the Muslim Swarajists particularly after the death of Chittaranjan Das and what kind of relation did the party share with the Congress and the other existing minor political parties of Bengal! On the whole this chapter intends to make an evaluation of Swarajists politics when the actual possibilities of Gandhian politics were put at a test on the ground of intense factionalism and communal animosities. It was expected that the party would be able to politicize the masses by supporting some real demand of the people. The validity of such politics lasted as long as it could sustain the spirit of anti British agitation but the narrow vested interests emerged within the rank and file of the party and thereby spoiled the actual relevance of this party before the electorate. The real test of Gandhism depended on to what extent the party could utilize an autonomous subjectivity of unanticipated mass action while exercising a different power relation conducted through an institutional language of political culture. This chapter is an attempt to make some practical conclusion on the utility of the Swaraj Party and to make an evaluation on the legacy it had left for the critical time ahead.

During the entire period of the operation of the Diarchy (1921-1937), the Muslim League failed to participate in the council on its own and the leadership of Muslim politics remained in the hands of some Muslim leaders who had shown immense enthusiasm on their part to protect Muslim interests within the legislature at any cost. With the sudden withdrawal of the Non Cooperation movement the sectarian forces who had been forced to lie down because of the mass involvement in the Non Cooperation movement, now came out from their pockets and raised some new issues of communal discontent like Music before mosque or cow sacrifice including that of the Suddhi or Tabligh and Sanghathan or Tanzeem. But no positive steps were taken by the Swarajist Muslims and the Hindu leaders to educate the masses on the very nature of the colonial rule and divert their grievances into a struggle against imperialism. In absence of such programmes sectarian forces easily mobilized the masses on behalf of their political propaganda. An unwarranted fear of Muslim domination motivated a section of the Hindu Bengalis for protecting their interests. Subsequent efforts were made by these Hindus with the establishment of Hindu Sabha in 1924. The activities of the Hindu Sabha under the agencies of the Hindu Mahasabha stimulated further sectarian tensions all over the province and gradually mutual suspicion and hatred between the Hindus and the Muslims got shaped into violent communal riots. The constitutional developments starting from the Act of 1919 created genuine hopes among the Bengali Muslims as if they were coming to power. These hopes and aspirations opened another dimension of Bengal politics in which a few Muslim political parties had an opportunity to get crystallized. The interplay of the Hindu- Muslim politics in the 20s of the 20th century presents a

picture of growing politicization of the respective electorates along sectarian line although the mechanisms adopted by these two types of politics were different in character and outlook. The Second chapter of the present discussion highlights the mode of sectarian politics in the 20s and early 30s with a special reference to the Hindu and Muslim political parties. This chapter seeks to deal with how in the 20s of the last century the radical spirit of the Hindu Bengalis was transformed into sectarianism and how this sectarian mode of politics took a grip over the peasant politics with the turn of the decade. Even the politics of the so called nationalists and the Swarajists also came to be spotted as one of conflicting class interests between the zamindars and the peasant masses in general at the time of the Tenancy Act Amendment Debate in 1928. From the third decade of the 20th century both the Hindus and the Muslims redefined their identities through a continuous process of making and remaking. What was really exceptional in this period was the development of the communities as mutually conflicting unites which was further consolidated after the introduction of the communal Award in 1932. From late 20s some new political trends appeared in Bengal when the political parties found new constituencies of support with a new narrative of popular politics. During and aftermath of the Non Cooperation movement the Congress leadership successfully promoted the causes of popular misery with a new language of political strategies and from this point the hitherto undefined factors figured the subsequent courses of national movement in India. The Swaraj Party first took the opportunity of radicalizing the horizon of politics by incorporating new actors into the political terrain ,however, caste and religious loyalties of the political participants often led the party into another type of political

mobilization less identified with the notions of popular politics at large. In spite of a general awareness of linking the peasant and working class movement with the wider anti British agitation, the Swaraj Party failed to adopt a concrete agrarian programme and the majority of the Muslim peasantry of East Bengal did not find anything appealing in the programmes and policies of the Swaraj Party. Its general line of maintaining an understanding with the zamindars and the propertied elites prevented any further consolidation of its position among the peasant masses. With the death of Citteranjan Das, the harmful effects of city politics could be visible along with a total disruption of Hindu Muslim joint political ventures. Within a year of his death the Bengal Pact was rejected in 1926, the parting of the Muslims from Swarajist rank and file became almost a possibility. The slow inroad of the terrorists the Swaraj Party with a certain Hindu ideology and the gradual submission of the Swarajist leaders to the terrorist groups not only spoiled its secular image but also gave the communal Muslims a chance to make their presence more visible against the Swarajists in Bengal. The pattern of Congress-Swarajist voting in the Tenancy Amendment Act of 1928 completely shattered the hopes for Hindu Muslim cooperation in Bengal and the necessity of a new Muslim organization was felt to protect the interest of the Muslim peasants. Accordingly the *Praja* (tenant) movement was launched in 1929 with the establishment of the Nkhil Banga Praja Samity. In 1936 the Samity changed its name into Krisak Praja Party (KPP) under the dynamic leadership of A.K. Fazlul Huq. Right from its inception this party had sustained its ideological fight against non Bengali Muslim political domination in Bengal specially in the Bengal Muslim League securing the support of the Muslim landlords

and business interests. It was due to the personal popularity and the popular political programmes of the KPP that it completely swept the polls in the election of 1937 under the new constitutional system of 1935. The attention of the third chapter is on how the understanding between Muslim Jotedar and non Bengali Muslim elites led to the absorption of the KPP by the Muslim League after 1937. Initially the KPP had emerged as the sole political organization to capture the imagination of the peasants in an uniform manner so that a sense 'commonness' could have been achieved against the zamindars and moneylenders. The gradual pre-eminence of the KPP over the political arena itself signaled some major shifts in the level of popular politics in agrarian Bengal. The most important one was the ascendancy of one Praja identity over other corresponding identities so that the lower strata of the peasantry could at best be identified with the higher echelon of the peasantry within same bracket. However, it did not work for long. This chapter seeks to highlight that why the KPP failed to handle the political language of a peasant class properly at a time when the possibilities of articulating the dual identities of 'Muslim' and 'peasant' in a same discourse was very much present in Bengal and how the immediate class enemy of a poor peasant took the position of his liberator by virtue of being a minor political party which had the possibility to become a dominant political party not less important than the position of the Congress and the Muslim League of the subsequent period. Side by side the communist failure to address the class issues has been discussed in this chapter with a special emphasis on the Communist -KPP relation in the realm of agrarian politics. It may be mentioned in this regard that a number of minor pro communist parties were active in the popular front

from late 1920s. In order to understand the real mode of peasant politics in the 20s and the 30s of 20th century, it becomes necessary to make an evaluation of the minor communist parties working on the popular field. With the formation of the Workers and Peasant Party in 1926, a large number of terrorist turned communists stepped in the popular political area and within a few years similar parties had evolved with different objectives and programmes on the communist line of thinking. These parties had served as a transitional link between revolutionary terrorism and communism in a period when it was almost impossible to work in the name of an original communist party due to a numbers of external compulsions and internal difficulties. These parties had their own revolutionary programmes for the workers also. However, factional squabbles and organizational weakness prevented any consolidation of their poison in different areas of the province. Among a numbs of m parties, special emphasis has been given on the student organizations, the working class parties like the Indian Proletarian Revolutionary Party, Samyraj Party, Young Comrade League and others. IN comparison with their strength among the workers, the role of these parties remained marginal among the peasants. Apart from a few East Bengal districts those minor communist parties with a peasant political orientation failed to overlap the politics of the Krishak Samities controlled by the Cøngress and the KPP in the 30s. Interestingly the anti zamindar sentiment of the Kisan Sabha made a common ground with the KPP who fought the election on the same cause in 1937. However KPP's zeal to keep the intermediary landed interests did not fit well with the Kisan Sabha who unlike the KPP tried for the total socio economic empowerment of the peasantry so that they could fight for their cause independently.

Nevertheless the minor communist parties and the Kisan Sabha could not become an alternative of the KPP in agrarian politics of Bengal and more or less continued to move for specific issues of peasant discontent in several occasions. The Third chapter of this present study leads to a general overview of the situation how in absence of a concrete radical language of politics, communal forces had a grip over the popular political file and why the minor political parties failed to check the tendencies of whole scale communalization of popular politics in late colonial Bengal. Beside this the mutual relationship and the political adjustments of different minor political parties has been discussed as a natural corollary to the remaking and unmaking of politics in the 1930s of the 20th century.

In the last chapter of this study specific issues have been taken to assess the nature of politics of the leftist parties at the of the Second World War. Here an attempt has been made to trace the main facades of Bengal politics so that the political commitment and circumstantial obligations of the minor political parties could best be viewed with reference to the political maneuverings of the major political parties like the Congress and the Muslim League. The rise of the Revolutionary Socialist Party and the Forward Block was the most noteworthy event of this period. The shifting allegiance of the Communist Party from National Front to Peoples' War policy added new dimensions in the political scenario of Bengal in the wake of the Second World War.. In this chapter these issues have been focused to make an understanding of Bengal politics before and after the war so that the changing character of the political parties could be viewed as an indicator of future course of politics in Bengal. In this regard ,one

may recall the condition of the Radical Democratic Party, the Congress Socialist Party and the KPP which seem to have been defunct in terms of their ideology and political goal. However, the political bequest of these parties in Bengal remained as much as exciting like the Hindu Mahasabha or the Muslim League after the election of 1946. The role played by the Forward Block in relation to the other parties specially that of the KPP and the Hindu Mahasabha after 1941 has been analyzed in this chapter meticulously because the Forward Block seems to have been the single party in Bengal fit for fighting communal forces. But in the light of the available documents it appears that it failed to serve the historical purpose at this crucial juncture of Indian history. Interestingly none of the minor political parties were able to respond to the important political issues which were going to decide the fate of Bengal in 1946-47. At the time of communal clashes almost all the minor political parties remained silent and even the voices of the popular minor parties did not sound as may be expected. Most of the minor parties who had taken an important role in the 30s, failed to be a decisive factor in Bengal especially on the question of an independent sovereign Bengal proposed by some leaders from both the Hindus and the Muslims. It is a matter to be noted that most of the minor parties which had emerged in certain historical moments with definite aims and objectives proved to be either indifferent or having no voice at the time of the ultimate crisis. Nevertheless, it is true that at the final year before partition some of these parties were historically non-existent. The last chapter makes an investigation why the active minor political parties could not raise their voices over the politics of the major parties and simply played a role as a silent spectator at the time of the final catastrophe in 1947. Keeping in view these issues this study has attempted to present the



role of the minor political parties from 1921 (when the working of the Bengal legislative Council started under the rule of the Diarchy) to 1947. Within this period historically one may experience the situational political adjustment of the minor political parties according to their self-seeking attitudes and on any political issue either national or provincial, they appear to be perplexed. It is likely that had there been any positive response from the minor political parties, the future of Bengal as well as the identity of Bengalis would have been different and the history of Bengal might have been written otherwise.