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### **Fazlul Huq, Peasant Politics and the Formation of the Krishak Praja Party (KPP)**

In all parts of India, the greater portion of the total population is, and always has been, dependent on the land for its existence and subsistence. During the colonial rule, this was absolutely true in the case of Bengal as a whole and particularly so of its eastern districts. In this connection, it should be mentioned here that the Muslim masses even greater number than the Hindus, were more concentrated in agriculture which is clearly been reflected in the Bengal Census of 1881: “.....while the husbandmen among the Hindus are only 49.28 per cent, the ratio among the Muslims is 62.81 per cent”.<sup>1</sup> The picture was almost the same throughout the nineteenth century and continued till the first half of the twentieth century. In the different districts of Bengal, while the majority of the peasants were Muslims, the Hindus were mainly the landowning classes. The Census of 1901 shows that the Muslims formed a larger portion of agricultural population and they were mostly tenants rather than landlords. In every 10,000 Muslims, no less than 7,316 were cultivators, but in the case of the Hindus, the figure was 5,555 amongst the same number (i.e. 10,000) of Hindu population. But the proportion of landholders was only 170 in 10,000 in the case of Muslims as against 217 in the same number of Hindus.<sup>2</sup> In the district of Bogra which was situated in the Rajshahi Division, the Muslims formed more than 80% of the total population. But even in this heavily Muslim populated district, “the Zamindars are mostly Hindus .....”<sup>3</sup> and there were only five (5) Muslim zamindars of importance. To cite another instance, in the district of Rajshahi where the Muslims formed about 78% of the population in the year 1911, there were only two (2) recognized and influential Muslim zamindars.<sup>4</sup> But there were big Hindu zamindars such as those of Nator, Dighapatia, Putia, Tahirpur and Dubalhati. Similarly, in Mymensingh, the largest district in the province of Bengal, the Muslims constituted three – quarters ( $\frac{3}{4}$ <sup>th</sup>) of the population. Although the general masses of this district were Muslims, the landowners here again mainly consisted of Hindu Brahmin and

Kayastha families. It is true that there were some big Muslim zamindars, such as Pannis of Karatia, A.K. Ghuznavi, Musharraf Hossain, Nawab Ali Chaudhuri and Sayyid Ahmad Hossain Chaudhury and there were also some Muslim taluqdars and rent-free proprietors. But in general, the Muslim zamindars of Bengal were not very prosperous. Their 'obscurity and poverty' were largely due to their failure in the payment of their land revenue in proper date and time and the sub-division of their estates among male and female heirs according to the Muslim Law of Succession. Also on several occasions, the Muslim zamindars brought allegations that they were cheated by their Hindu employees.

The different land revenue reforms introduced by the Nawabs of Bengal especially the *Malzamini* system introduced by Nawab Murshid Quli Khan (1717-1727) in 1722 heavily affected the poor peasants (as the rate of the land revenue was very excessive) and 'allowed and even encouraged the agglomeration of large stretches of territory under big zamindars dignified with the title of Raja' such as those of Bishnupur and Chandradwip which were governed by ancient Hindu princes and they ruled as autonomous chieftains under the Mughal rule.<sup>5</sup> Some other Rajas such as those of Rajshahi, Burdwan and Nadia were 'revenue farmers and officials of the Mughal government who turned their revenue collecting jurisdictions into immense hereditary *zamindaris* under the active patronage of the *nizamat*'.<sup>6</sup> Not only that, during the rule of Nawab Murshid Quli Khan, the Hindus were appointed in higher offices in the revenue and accounts departments whereas their counterparts, the Muslims were not appointed in those departments and the majority of them were the lower ryots. When the British established their control over Bengal after the battle of Plassey (1757) and particularly after the grant of *Diwani* (1765), there were 15 big zamindaris which paid 60 per cent of the land revenue of the province and constituted nearly half of its parganas.<sup>7</sup> These zamindars or taluqdars mostly belonged to high-ranking literati of Brahmins (priests), Kayasthas (scribes), Vaidyas (physicians), Saiyads (aristocratic Muslims) and Maulvis (learned Muslims). Besides these zamindars and taluqdars, a class of rich peasants called *jotedars* (originally the term meant simply 'a raiyat or subject who held his *jote* or cultivable plot on a direct lease from the *zamindar*, i.e., a subject who was not an under-raiyat') came into existence in the then Bengali society who constituted a dominant class of village landholders and belonged to respectable agricultural castes like the Sadgops, Aguris and Kaivartas

in West Bengal and Sheikh Muslims in East Bengal and their holdings might run from 50 to 6000 acres of land.<sup>8</sup> In the six eastern districts of Bengal, i.e., Bakarganj, Faridpore, Dacca, Mymensingh, Jessore and Khulna, there were also a large number of Namasudra<sup>8a</sup> cultivators who enjoyed, as Prof. Sugata Bose has shown, the ‘chasi or peasant status’, holding *jotes* or cultivable lands, owning the implements of agriculture and having solid titles to their homesteads.<sup>8b</sup> These *jotedars*, through the credit mechanism, enjoyed the command over the village labour force and the sharecroppers, having ‘plough but lacking seed and food, cultivated for a half share with grain loans advanced by the *jotedars*’. On the other hand, the agricultural labourers, having no land and means of production except their working capacity, ‘pledged their labour to the *jotedars* for a few rupees of loan’ and subsequently became ‘bonded labourers in the course of their perpetual borrowings’.<sup>9</sup> For example, during his survey of the district of Dinajpur, Francis Buchanan Hamilton found that only 6 per cent of the cultivating population enjoyed 36.5 per cent of the land leased by the *rai-yats* from the *zamindars*, whereas, 52.1 per cent of the agricultural workforce did not possess any land at all and worked either as sharecroppers or as agricultural labourers under the rich peasant- landlords.<sup>9a</sup> The picture was almost the same throughout Bengal and several land revenue experiments, reforms and land revenue settlements were introduced by the British administrators after 1765 in this part of the country (particularly the Permanent Settlement of Lord Cornwallis which came into effect on 22 March 1793 and gave the zamindars ‘full proprietary rights over the estates’), which ultimately stimulated sub-infeudation and posed serious threat to the rural population of Bengal (particularly East Bengal) and adversely affected both the Muslim zamindars (most of whom failed to pay the fixed amount of land revenue to the Government according to the ‘Sunset Law’) and also most of the Muslim peasants who were overburdened with excessive, unfixed amount of land revenue and *abwabs* payable to the zamindars) and had been suffering from inhuman torture, exploitation, expulsion and seizure of lands by the zamindars (who were mostly Hindus) under Regulations VII and V of 1799 and 1812. Taking advantage of the Permanent Settlement, the neo-rich urban Bengali Hindus purchased large tracts of land and became mostly ‘absentee’ zamindars. As a result, during the eighteenth century, nine-tenths of Bengali zamindars were Hindu. Not only that, in Bengal, the banking was also monopolized by the Hindus.<sup>10</sup> At that time the division between the oppressor and the oppressed coincided mainly with the religious division of the

population of Bengal. It has been rightly pointed out by the Subaltern scholar Prof. Partha Chatterjee that the ‘Muslim rent-receivers, where they did exist, were considered part of peasant community where as Hindu zamindars and talukdars were not’.<sup>11</sup> In the case of East Bengal as most of the zamindars were upper caste Hindus and most of the peasants and tenants were Muslims and lower caste Hindus (Namasudras or the depressed class), the relations between the landlords and the tenants easily took a communal or caste complexion.<sup>11a</sup> Thus East Bengal became a fertile ground for breeding separatism and communalism which was clearly observed and reflected during the time of the first partition of Bengal (1905).

The first partition of Bengal which came into effect on 16 October 1905, gave a serious blow to Bengal’s agrarian society where economic and political interests were mixed up with religious issues. The political motive of Lord Curzon, the then Viceroy (January 1899 – November 1905), was the separation of Calcutta, the centre of middle – class Hindu influence from the Muslim-majority districts in East Bengal and ‘to split up and thereby weaken a solid body of opponents to our rule’. The most influential leaders of the *Swadeshi* movement and the anti-partition agitation were the Hindu zamindars who feared that after partition, the zamindaris might be abolished in the Muslim-proja dominated eastern Bengal. It can be said that “the petty zamindar class of high caste Hindus became the spear-head of the *Swadeshi* movement in East Bengal was the clue to the ultimate failure of the movement, for their interests set them apart from the mass of Muslim cultivators in general and the leading body of large Muslim *jotedars* in particular. The social peculiarity of East Bengal which fed the growing political conflict in the province was that the *zamindars* and taluqdars in the area were mostly high caste Hindus, while the large *jotedars* under them were almost invariably Muslims of peasant stock”.<sup>12</sup> The loyalty of the Muslims to the British rule was taken for granted and the British Government at that time, formulated a deliberate policy of rallying the Muslims against the Hindus. Viceroy Lord Minto II (November 1906 – November 1910), also took a pro-Muslim policy and it was he who rewarded a Knighthood to Nawab Salimullah of Dacca in 1906 for his pro-British attitude and his constant support towards the different policies and programmes of the British Government. Not only that, Lord Minto II further vitiated the political environment by recognizing the Muslim claim to separate electorates for the Legislatures which was ultimately fulfilled by the Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909.

These political developments though incurred great repercussion in the Bengali society and sowed the seeds of separatism between the Hindus and the Muslims, these generated hopes and aspirations amongst the Muslim community and gave indulgence to think out their own destiny and own plan of action. Mutual dependence, mutual trust, mutual respect and above all, communal harmony was gradually becoming extinct. The *Mihir-O-Sudhakar*, a paper published from Calcutta and owned by a Muslim zamindar, Nawab Ali Chaudhury, accused the Hindu zamindars for their oppression against the Muslim tenants in between 1905 and 1908 and as a result, the paper gained popularity and its circulation increased a lot. In November 1906 a Muhammadan Vigilance Committee was formed in Calcutta in order to prevent ill-treatment of the Muslim tenants by the Hindu zamindars. The first political organization of the Muslims which came into being after the partition of Bengal was called Mohammedan Provincial Union with the objective of “uniting the Mohammedans of the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam into a compact body and representing to the government the views and aspirations of Muslims in social and political matters” and Nawab Salimullah of Dacca was elected as its Patron.<sup>13</sup> This ultimately paved the way for the formation of All-India Muslim League in December 1906 and Fazlul Huq was one of its founder-members. Meanwhile, in the district of Mymensingh, the followers of Nawab Salimullah raised two issues: i) demand for reduction of rent and ii) refusal to cultivate land owned by the Hindu zamindars. A communal pamphlet entitled *Nawab Saheber Bichar* (Judgement of the Nawab of Dacca) was widely circulated and the pamphlets (in Bengali) like *Swajati Andolan* and *Lal Istahar* made an appeal to the Muslims to boycott the Hindus totally. All these resulted in serious attacks on the Hindus in between 1906 and 1907 at various parts of Mymensingh and there were many incidents of murder, rape, forcible conversion, loot and destruction of private property. All these were not confined within the boundary of Mymensingh but similar type of activities also occurred in the Tippera, Rajshahi and Pabna in 1907.<sup>14</sup> At that time, the Muslim *jotedar* class in East Bengal attempted to capture union boards and local boards from the high caste Hindus who monopolized these local self-governing bodies<sup>15</sup> and with them joined the urban Muslim service and professional class which later made a determined effort for capturing political power in Bengal as a whole.<sup>16</sup> The Muslim peasants too had their grievances against the Hindu moneylenders as they were compelled to borrow from the mahajans at an exorbitant

rate of interest. At first the peasant's land was mortgaged who in turn, failed to repay the loan (with interest), found no other alternative but to give up his hopes to get back his own land and subsequently found himself transformed into a landless rural labour. Renowned scholar Prof. B.B. Chaudhuri described this trend as a stark 'process of depeasantization' in Bengal and Bihar in between 1885 and 1947. During this period Prof. Chaudhuri revealed in his research that the occupancy tenants were reduced to share croppers and agricultural labourers as a result of rural debt.<sup>17</sup> Rural indebtedness was originated in the then Bengali society as a result of the extension of the cultivation of jute instead of paddy, the subsistence crop. As the price fell below its production cost, the ryots did not enjoy the profit from the sale of jute and they were bound to take loan or debt from the moneylenders who were mainly the Sahas and Marwaris. The rate of interest sometimes rose up to 20% per month. Added to this, these moneylenders often forced the ryots to sell their crops only to them at a much cheaper rate than the existing price in the market. These Mahajans also imposed *Isvara-Vritti*, i.e. contributions for the maintenance of Hindu deities. There was another allegation against these Sahas and Mahajans that they never cleared the accounts of the poor peasants whose debt, as a result, ran from year's end to year's end and finally ended in the seizure, mortgage or sale of the debtors' lands. So these Hindu Mahajans especially the Sahas became the special targets of attack (mainly by the Muslims) between 1906 and 1907.

Under these circumstances, a psychological change was taken place among the Muslim peasants of Bengal which had rightly been pointed out by Prof. Sufia Ahmed, a Bangladeshi scholar of repute. According to her: "the Muslim peasant had begun to think of his problems as peculiar to his own community".<sup>18</sup> She further continued: "This followed from the growth of communal feeling and political agitation, which made the Muslim ryot to see a universal economic pressure in communal terms. It was a Hindu zamindar who was rack-renting him, pushing Swadeshi down his throat, interfering with his sacrifice of cattle at Id, and it was a Hindu Mahajan who was foreclosing on his cattle and implements when he could not pay the exorbitant interest upon his loans. The Mymensingh riots of 1906, unlike the Pabna ryots of 1873, had this new political or communal flavour".<sup>19</sup> This 'political or communal flavour' was originated in Bengal during 1905-'12 due to the policy pursued by the British Government and also because of the loyalist attitude of a large section of the Muslim

aristocracy, the hunger for higher and lucrative official posts in the Government service among the new English educated Muslim middle class and above all, the propaganda of the maulvies whose fanaticism was stimulated and utilized by the urban Muslim leaders. But on the other hand, it was totally overshadowed and overlooked that the Hindu tenants were also rack-rented by the Hindu zamindars and exploited by the Hindu Mahajans and that the Muslim tenants were ransacked by the Muslim zamindars as well. At that time agrarian grievances and land relations were judged primarily in the context of communal differences. The Muslim ryot considered that he was a victim of exploitation simply because he was a Muslim by religion. This separatist outlook and ideology was deliberately pampered, nurtured and popularized by the Muslim politicians and maulvies and it gained a solid base among the Muslim masses of Bengal particularly during the second and third decades of the twentieth century.

The then political parties of Bengal came into the field to capitalize this situation and win over the hearts of the poor peasants by adopting a sympathetic attitude towards them. But in that process on the one hand, the poor peasants were often being used as pawns in the struggle between the Government and the Nationalist Congressites and on the other hand, between the zamindars (mostly Hindus) and the Muslim middle class. The British Government endeavoured to take full advantage of the conflict between the Hindu landed aristocracy and the Muslim middle class. Simultaneously the Government understood the fact that by strengthening, supporting and patronizing the peasantry and the Muslim middle class of Bengal, it would be easier for them to cripple the backbone of the Hindu nationalists who were presumed as the staunch enemies and critics of the Government. The Muslim middle class (mainly composed of the rich-peasants and petty landlords of Bengal), came forward to back the peasantry (mostly Muslims) not only because they whole heartedly wanted to redress their grievances and ameliorate their living conditions, but to a great extent, to 'use' them against their arch rivals, i.e. the Hindu zamindars of Bengal. Being 'sympathetic' towards the Bengal peasantry, the British Government on the other hand, proposed in 1914 to amend certain provisions of the Tenancy Act of 1885 in favour of the peasantry.<sup>20</sup> Not only that the Government also showed its interest in the formation of Peasant Associations (for the cause of the peasantry) and encouraged the Muslim politicians to come forward in that direction.<sup>21</sup> It resulted in the formation

of the Calcutta Agricultural Association in 1917 by A.K. Fazlul Huq who successfully mobilized the peasantry of Bengal under its banner.<sup>22</sup> He travelled many places particularly in East Bengal with an intention to awaken the rural masses against the oppression of the zamindars. Likely, the politicians who were mostly the *jotedars* or rich peasants of Bengal began to show their interest in the affairs of the peasantry although the *jotedars* belonged to the privileged section of the Bengali society and had their own class interest or the interest of their own. They formed their own organizations and the Bengal Jotedars' and Raiyats' Association (which was formed in Calcutta in 1920) was one of them.<sup>23</sup>

In order to increase the number of voters in Bengal from 9000 to 1500000, the bulk of whom would be cultivators who could pay a minimum of one rupee annually in cess, the British Government in 1919 proposed for the further extension of the suffrage.<sup>24</sup> The Hindu *bhadralok* (gentleman) class did not support this move and favour the cultivators and as rentier and landowning class, their interest was not the same (rather opposite) as that of the cultivators. So the Hindu *bhadralok* (gentleman) politicians including Kumar S.S. Roy and Surendra Nath Banerjea insisted on a restricted franchise based on property-qualification. At the same time, they became very anxious that further relaxations of the property-qualifications would enable and enfranchise the poor Muslim and Namasudra peasants of Bengal and apprehended that their votes would go against them. The Muslim politicians including Nawab Ali were demanding more reserved seats for the Muslims (50% of the total seats) in the Bengal Legislative Council<sup>25</sup> which ultimately frightened the Hindu *bhadralok* politicians. The Government of India Act, 1919 reserved 39 seats (6 in urban and 33 in rural areas mainly in the Dacca, Chittagong, Rajshahi divisions of East Bengal) for the Muslims out of 113 elected members<sup>26</sup> and increased the number of voters from 9000 to 10,21,418.<sup>27</sup> This Act enfranchised only a very small section of the peasantry who were quite well-to-do. In the elections (held in October 1920), 132 Muslim candidates contested for 39 seats reserved for them. From the rural constituencies of East and North Bengal, 19 Muslim candidates won in the elections out of whom 10 Muslim elected candidates declared themselves as the representatives of the peasantry.<sup>28</sup> Out of the 56 elected Hindu seats in the new Council of 1920, 43 were filled up by the members of the Indian Association and British Indian Association, two pro-zamindar organizations of India.<sup>29</sup> Most of these members were highly

educated, famous lawyers, big zamindars and to a great extent, pro-British. So after the elections of 1920, the peasantry (the majority of whom being deprived of the voting rights), could not have their proper representation in the Legislative Council. Meanwhile, the Khilafat and the Non-Cooperation Movements (1919-1922) were launched and these two movements brought a great upsurge among the Bengal peasantry and they whole-heartedly supported the movements for their anti-British attitude, programme and propaganda. At that time, the peasantry began to consider the British as their sole-enemy instead of the indigenous zamindars and as a result, their first and foremost enemy went into the backstage.

But within a few years, this situation abruptly changed with the abandonment of the 'mass civil disobedience' in February 1922 and the peasant's main target of attack was once again shifted towards the zamindars of Bengal. When the Congress (which was considered as the Party of the 'haves') leadership (dominated by the zamindars and capitalists who did not favour any radical change in the land system by abolishing landlordism) was divided on the question of protecting the tenants from the oppression of the indigenous zamindars, the Muslim middle-class politicians of Bengal engaged themselves in mobilizing the peasantry and rousing consciousness among them. On 12 July 1920 from 6 Turn Street, Calcutta, a liberal, secular and mass-oriented newspaper named *Nabajug* (one-page evening daily and priced one paisa) was published by A.K. Fazlul Huq (its owner-cum-director) along with Kazi Nazrul Islam and Comrade Muzaffar Ahmad (who were the editors) and through it, raised the voice of protest against British imperialism. According to Muzaffar Ahmad (who was a founder member of the Communist Party of India), "Mr. Fazlul Huq was then known as a leftist leader".<sup>30</sup> Also he mentioned that Fazlul Huq used to encourage them to publish 'inflammatory' articles about the masses, especially the workers<sup>31</sup> and likely they published a leaflet, 'Respond to the call of the day' which highly enraged the Government. Out of vengeance, the Government ultimately decided to forfeit the security deposit of this paper.<sup>32</sup> Indomitable Fazlul Huq took up the land question as an important issue in order to consolidate his position among the rural masses, particularly among the Muslim peasants and began to organize several peasant meetings and rallies at different parts of Bengal which were also attended by the Namasudra peasants. One such rally was organized by Huq at Agoiljhara in Barisal in 1921.<sup>33</sup> Sarojini Naidu, Sarala Devi, Padmaraj Jain and other prominent

women Congress leaders tried to resist the Hindu peasants from joining the rally at Agoiljhara<sup>34</sup> which was ultimately attended by a large number of Muslim and Namasudra peasants who raised their voice against the inhuman treatment meted out to them by the zamindars and moneylenders.<sup>35</sup>

Fazlul Huq visited many places of East Bengal to come into close contact with the rural masses and to awaken them against the oppression of the zamindars and for that purpose many Praja Samities were set up at different corners. During the Non-Cooperation and Khilafat Movement, local peasant associations or Krishak Samities were established at Nadia, Tippera, Noakhali and some other districts of Bengal.<sup>36</sup> Most of these samities and praja conferences, in those days, were convened and dominated by the middle-class Muslim leaders and attended by mostly Muslim peasants and these conferences were the outcome of the challenging attitude of the middle class people towards the influential landed gentry of Bengal.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, some secular and non-communal peasant organizations were also formed during the Khilafat Movement viz. the Raiyat Sabha of Barrister J.N. Roy of Calcutta (formed in 1920) and the Krishak Samity of Chuadanga formed in 1921 by an Italian missionary.<sup>38</sup> Side by side, peasant parties were also formed like the Labour Kisan Party of Hindustan was set up in 1923 with Marxian ideology by Singaravelu and S.A. Dange. Although there were so many praja samities or Krishak Sabhas, the peasants mostly supported the Muslim praja or tenant organizations. Simply because the peasants were mostly Muslims and their common enemy was the Hindu zamindar and moneylender. At the same time, as they were mainly guided by communal considerations, the non-communal, secular peasant organizations did not have much impact on them. The Muslim '*jotedar* politicians' of Bengal came forward to capitalize this opportunity and began to highlight the grievances of the peasantry in the Legislative Council which was at that time, sharply divided between the 'Pro-Zamindar' and 'Pro-Raiyat' groups. The former was mostly consisted of the Hindu Congressites and the latter was controlled, led and dominated by the Muslim *jotedar* and middle-class members. Often Khan Bhadur Wasimuddin Ahmed, Abdul Jabbar Pahlowan, Syed Erfan Ali, Shah Abdur Rauf and sometimes A.K. Fazlul Huq and Sir Abdur Rahim used to speak in favour of the peasantry in the Legislative Council. For example, Syed Erfan Ali, a *jotedar* of Nadia, spoke against the British zamindars of that district who were unwilling to grant occupancy right to the *Utbandi* tenants. It

should be mentioned here that under the *Utbandi* system, lands were settled with the tenants for a short period during which they enjoyed no rights over those lands and the landlords, on the other hand, also did not grant any receipt to their tenants for the rent they had collected from them.<sup>39</sup> In that case, most of the Congress members of the Council were in favour of the zamindars and supported them which was not unnatural. But surprisingly, Fazlul Huq who later on floated the Praja Party in 1929, abstained from voting on the issue of granting occupancy right to the *Utbandi* tenants and Sir Abdur Rahim, the first President of the Praja Party, voted against the tenants.<sup>40</sup> Both of them did not support the *Utbandi* tenants largely because the zamindars involved here were not their political rivals, i.e. the Hindus, but belonged to the British community. It should be mentioned here that the Muslim Council-Members who were mostly rich peasants and urban middle-class people, desperately tried to curtail the power of the zamindars and often raised their voice against the zamindars. For example, in 1922 Abdul Jabbar Pahlowan, a big *jotedar* of Mymensingh and Khan Bhadur Wasimuddin Ahmed proposed to impose income tax on the income of the zamindars.<sup>41</sup> But as these Muslim Council members belonged to the *jotedar* or petty-landlord class<sup>42</sup> and were only interested in protecting their own class interest or personal interest, vehemently opposed the proposal to grant occupancy right to the *bargadars* or sharecroppers.

Here in this connection, it should be mentioned that the Bengal Tenancy Act (BT Act) of 1885 made an earnest attempt to control the greed, rapacity and cruelty of the zamindars and tenure holders and to provide protection to the tenants by giving them rights regarding security of tenure, fairness of rent, legal process for ejection and the like. The BT Act of 1885 did not determine the position of the sharecroppers but it stated that if someone cultivated the land of another person on the payment of rent either in cash or in kind or both, the former would be regarded as the tenant of the latter and thus the Act failed to satisfy a large number of *bhagchasi*, *bargadar* or the sharecroppers. In order to protect the sharecroppers and fulfill their demands, the Bengal Legislative Council appointed a Committee under the chairmanship of Sir John Kerr to draft an amendment to the Bengal Tenancy Act, 1885 which brought a great stir among the pro-raiyat politicians of Bengal. But the pro-zamindar Congress and other organizations were very much keen to protect the interest of the landed gentry and landed aristocracy. The Committee laid down the principle that ‘produce-

paying cultivators who supplied their own seeds and cattle and themselves chose their crops, should be treated as tenants'<sup>43</sup> and the Government, through the Tenancy Act Amendment Bill (1923), proposed to grant occupancy right to the *bargadars* or sharecroppers who had neither legal nor customary rights on the land. But this proposal caused a tremendous uproar and discontentment among the zamindars, *jotedars* and tenure holders who thought that the Government was trying to give tenancy rights to those who had never been tenants and as a result, had no right to get that status. To prevent any untoward effect on their own estates and apprehending revolutionary changes, the zamindars evicted the *bargadars* from their holdings on a massive scale, so much so that vast proportion of agricultural land remained uncultivated for some time. The landowners not only ejected the *bargadars* but at the same time they organized strong 'protest meetings' against these provisions. One such meeting was held at Salap in Pabna district where a representation was made by Babu Debi Das Sanyal who argued that these provisions were 'sure to bring about the annihilation of the middle-class as also of the widows and orphans who earn their livelihood with great difficulties by the income of bhag-chas and cause a terrible social revolution as a logical corollary'. He further reminded the 'benign Government' which had always been 'putting down Bolshevism' that it was now 'but helping a social revolution like one witnessed in Russia by the spread of Bolshevik ideas consequent on the enactment of the said two clauses'.<sup>44</sup> The leading political parties like the Indian National Congress, the Swarajya Party and also the Muslim League strongly opposed to the proposal of granting of occupancy right to the *bargadars* because most of the leaders of these political organizations came from the petty-landlord families of Bengal. As the Bengal Provincial Congress was not in favour of bringing any radical change in the existing land structure by abolishing the zamindari system, its leaders failed to lead the peasants and win their confidence by rising above their vested class- interests. The Swarajists, on the other hand, were not only sympathetic towards the zamindars and highlighted their 'progressive role' in the national struggle, but also a considerable number of Bengal zamindars (belonged to the Swarajist fold), were elected to the Bengal Legislative Council with the Swarajist support. So they tried to satisfy both the zamindars and the tenants within the framework of the zamindari system. Prof. Sumit Sarkar wrote : "The Swarajists here bitterly opposed any proposal to give tenancy status to *bargadars*, and showed no sympathy at all for a number of Namasudra and Muslim *bargadar* movements in the

mid-1920s in districts like Mymensingh, Dacca, Pabna, Khulna and Nadia”.<sup>45</sup> Protests and opposition to this particular provision regarding the sharecroppers became so formidable that the Bengal Government at first issued a communiqué denying all its intentions of giving *bargadars* any tenancy right which they did not already possess, and then dropped all favourable provisions regarding *bargadars* from the Tenancy Bill introduced in the Bengal Council in 1925.<sup>46</sup> The Bill was then sent to the Select Committee whose members, ‘still not reassured, wrote into it a definite statement declaring that cultivators who paid in produce, whether a fixed proportion or a fixed quantity, were not tenants’.<sup>47</sup> In any case, the Government was not willing to proceed further with the matter and ultimately decided to withdraw the Bill.<sup>48</sup>

All these revealed the fact that there were three different groups of politicians in Bengal : the first group representing the zamindar – dominated Congress of Bengal who were against of making any major amendment (in favour of the *bargadars*) of the Tenancy Act and the Congress was categorized by the Praja leaders as nothing but a ‘Hindu institution’.<sup>49</sup> The second group consisted of the *jotedars* and the rising Muslim middle class people of Bengal who had conflicting class-interest with both the zamindars and the peasantry. They mainly belonged to the Muslim League and later the Praja Party, formed in 1929. The third group was composed of the non-communal middle and lower middle class people of Bengal who had liberal views and Marxian ideals and some of them belonged to the Congress and some showed their fidelity towards the Communist organizations. The liberal and Progressive Congressites later formed the Labour Swaraj Party of the Indian National Congress in November 1925 in Calcutta. The prominent leaders of this Party were Qazi Nazrul Islam, Hemanta Kumar Sarkar, Kutbuddin Ahmad and Shamsuddin Husayan who supported the demand to give sole-ownership of the land to its tillers and eradicate class differences in the existing society. This Party was also known as the Labour-Tenant Swaraj Party and the *Langal* (a Bengali Weekly, Nazrul Islam was its chief director and Manibhusan Mukherjee was its editor) was the mouth-piece of this organization. Its first issue came to light on 25 December 1925<sup>50</sup> where Nazrul Islam’s two very famous poems *Samyabadi* (Communist) and *Krishaker Gan* (The Song of the Peasant) were published.

Before the foundation of the Labour Swaraj Party, the progressive and liberal politicians of Bengal organized a Praja Conference at Bogra on 7-8 February 1925 and took the resolution to form a permanent Praja Samity or Tenant Association. In presence of the leading Muslim politicians like Sir Abdur Rahim, Maulana Akram Khan, Shamsuddin Ahmed, Rajibuddin Tarafdar and the like, the All-Bengal Praja Samity was formed at Bogra.<sup>51</sup> The Samity started to mobilize the tenants and demonstrated the strength of the Praja movement in 1926. The Saha mahajans of Manikganj sub-division of the Dacca district, took possession of the mortgaged properties of the peasants who failed to pay their rent and other dues. The Praja leaders, such as Abdul Latif Biswas and others, as a mark of protest convened a Praja Conference at Ghiurhat in the Dacca district.<sup>52</sup> Fazlul Huq was asked to preside over this Conference which was attended by thousands of peasants who came from Dacca, Tangail, Pabna and the neighbouring areas. Here Mr. Huq gave a firing speech: “If I get opportunity, I shall by the Grace of Allah establish your rights, so that without zamindar’s permission you can construct buildings and tanks, alienate your land and arrange marriages of your children and are relieved of all illegal dues. I shall stop the pernicious usury and get release of your mortgaged land”. He advised the peasants not to cultivate the land of the Saha mahajans so long their lands were not released and the peasants quickly responded to his call.<sup>53</sup> This movement (lasted for about a year), finally compelled the Saha mahajans to return the seized properties to the original peasants.<sup>54</sup> This success highly inspired and motivated Fazlul Huq to address the Faridpore Convention (1927) demanding the protection of the raiyats’ interests.

After Bogra, the next Conference of the All Bengal Praja Samity or Nikhil Bangiya Proja Sammelan was held at Krishnanagar in Nadia on 6-7 February 1926 which was attended by Abdul Halim, Kutbuddin Ahmad, Shamsuddin Husayan, Samsuddin Ahmad, Soumendra Nath Tagore, Hemanta Kumar Sarkar, Dr. Naresh Chandra Sen Gupta, Atul Chandra Gupta, Nazrul Islam and the famous Communist leader of the then India “Comrade” Muzaffar Ahmad and Philip Spart, a well-known Communist leader of Britain. This Conference was presided over by Dr. N.C. Sen Gupta and there Nazrul Islam composed *Sramiker Gan* (The Song of the Labour) and sang it as the inaugural song of this Conference.<sup>55</sup> It supported the amendment of the Tenancy Act in favour of the peasants and the participants of the Conference decided to form the Peasants’ and Workers’ Party of Bengal.<sup>56</sup> This Party was later renamed

as the Workers' and Peasants' Party (W.P.P.) of Bengal in 1927 and in 1928 it came to be known as the All-India Workers' and Peasants' Party<sup>57</sup> which intended to popularize and promote Marxian ideals among the peasants and working class people of India. This organization was solely guided by the decisions and instructions of the Communist Party of India and to the British Government, it was nothing but the Communist Party in disguise.<sup>58</sup> The Party decided to form separate local peasant organizations and as a result, many pro-communist peasant associations or Krishak Samities were set up at Tippera, Noakhali, Nadia and some other districts of Bengal. The Krishak Samities were directly under the control of the Communists and some of these Samities also used the red flag with hammer and sickle as their symbol. These Samities demanded drastic land and social reforms and side by side, launched anti-British campaign.<sup>59</sup> So the formation of the Workers' and Peasants' Party under the leadership of Muzaffar Ahmad was a turning point in the history of the peasant movement in Bengal and the Party ushered new hopes and aspirations amongst the workers and peasants of Bengal. The WPP urged the peasants not to pay the taxes and rent and mobilized them to go on general strike. In Bengal, the Party popularized its aims, objectives and ideals through two Bengali weekly journals, viz. the *Langal* (the Plough) and the *Ganabani* (the Voice of the People). The WPP opposed the Congress, the Muslim League, the British Government and all other forces which came in the way of a peasant movement.<sup>60</sup> The Party strongly believed that the chief exploiting forces in Indian soil were the imperialist British administrators and along with them, the Indian capitalists and landlords – which were its targets of attack. So the Party was in favour of complete independence of the country from the yoke of British imperialism and wanted the appropriation of land without compensation.<sup>61</sup> On the other hand the landholders neither liked the word *Langal* as a title of a paper, nor did they welcome the Workers' and Peasants' Party and the Party gradually incurred the disappointment of both the British Government and local landlords. But in spite of its anti-zamindar attitude and pro-raiyat policies and programmes, the Workers' and Peasants' Party did not receive the full support of the Bengal peasantry who at that point of time, was more inclined to the communal and pro-British politicians rather than the Communists. Meanwhile, the peasants were so engrossed in their own problems that they failed to realize the danger of British imperialism and above all, they were not very much interested to relate their problems with that of the workers. They were also surprised to see the differences of opinion between the Communists

and the Swarajists on different issues and got frustrated and bewildered. Added to this, the views expressed in the *Ganabani* (edited by Muzaffar Ahmad), sharply differed from the views of the *Forward* (English daily) and the *Atmashakti* (Bengali weekly), the two important organs of the Swarajya Party. For example, Comrade Muzaffar Ahmad in his writings tried to analyze communal tension in Bengal and he came to the conclusion that the economic reasons were solely responsible for it. But in an article entitled “The Situation in East Bengal”, the *Forward* criticized the *Ganabani* for ascribing the communal problem “almost wholly to economic causes”<sup>62</sup> and challenged and disapproved Muzaffar Ahmad’s stand on the land and communal question. On this issue Nazrul Islam supported Muzaffar Ahmad and he wrote a long letter to the editor of the *Atmashakti* in which he strongly criticized the role of these two important organs of the Swarajya Party in understanding the burning issues relating to the Bengal peasantry. Indomitable Muzaffar Ahmad went ahead and clearly explained the impact of the land system on the Bengali life and raised the demand for the abolition of landlordism.<sup>63</sup>

At that time, the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee (BPCC) also came forward to adopt a programme of village uplift by solving the land problem. At the Gauhati (presently Guwahati) session of the Indian National Congress (1926), the communists moved a resolution demanding complete independence for India along with a clause urging the abolition of the zamindari system which created a great sensation in the Congress circles. J.M. Sen Gupta, a veteran Congress leader, remarked: “Zamindars contribute money to the Congress, still they are to be destroyed!”<sup>64</sup> It was the attitude of most of the Congress members and as a result, the resolution was easily defeated by overwhelming votes. But at Gauhati, the Congress members took the decisions that the Congress shall: (e) take steps to improve the condition of agricultural tenants by introducing and supporting measures to secure fixity of tenure and other advantages with a view to ensure a speedy amelioration of the condition of the tenants; and (f) generally, protect the rights of labour, agricultural and industrial, and adjust on an equitable basis the relations between the landlords and tenants, capitalists and workmen.<sup>65</sup> The Muslim League on the other hand, though represented the landed gentry of North India, had to support the peasants of Bengal because it was easier for the Party to exploit their communal sentiment and apply the communal card against their Hindu zamindars. Again it should be kept in mind that

most of the workers and supporters of the Muslim League in Bengal belonged to the peasantry who had genuine grievances against the zamindars (mostly Hindus). In 1925, for the first time in history of the Muslim League, its leaders including Sir Abdur Rahim, spoke in favour of the peasantry at the 17<sup>th</sup> annual session of the Party at Aligarh. In his Presidential address, Sir Abdur Rahim severely criticized the Swarajya Party for its opposition to the Tenancy Act Amendment Bill of 1923 which intended to give some relief to the raiyats of Bengal. He also expressed the fact that the Select Committee concerning the Bill was composed of the landlords who would not do any good to the “dumb millions of cultivators” of whom the majority was composed of the Muslims.<sup>66</sup> His main argument was that the Bill should be supported as it was being opposed both by the pro- zamindar Swarajya Party and the Bengal Congress. Sir Abdur Rahim also targeted the *bhadralok* (gentleman) class as they supported the zamindars of Bengal.<sup>67</sup> Henceforth, the Muslim League tried its best to attract the Bengal peasantry towards the Party by rousing deep-rooted hatred, distrust and disbelief against the zamindar dominated and pro- zamindar organizations of Bengal. As a result in 1928, Azizul Haque, a leader of Bengal Provincial Muslim League (BPML), opposed the idea of granting further rights to the zamindars by the introduction of pre-emption and *Salami* which were extremely detrimental to the interest of the peasants. Furthermore, he urged the then Viceroy to withhold his consent to the Tenancy Bill until those harmful provisions were dropped from the Bill.<sup>68</sup> Though the League members criticized the zamindars of Bengal, they never spoke against the zamindari system and raised their voice for its abolition simply because many of the League members had landed interests in Bengal and elsewhere. It was because of this reason the Muslim League leaders abstained from organizing a peasant front to launch a peasant movement within Bengal or outside Bengal. The League members who spotted the agrarian problem and raised the agrarian questions in favour of the peasantry, were not very attacking, aggressive and possessive and had a soft and mild voice in their course of action. They represented the urban professional class and the *jotedars* and had conflicting class interests with that of the zamindars. Later on, this group came forward to form the Praja Party to mobilize the peasantry against the zamindars of Bengal. So it was no unusual that the League leaders belonging to the landed gentry, were not at all interested to associate themselves with the demands and interests of the peasantry. So in 1931, at the twenty-second session of the All- India Muslim League in Delhi, they took a

resolution disapproving the idea of launching the “no-rent” movement by the peasantry which according to them, would eventually upset the principles of private property and bring disorder, chaos and anarchy in the country <sup>69</sup> and actually pose a threat to their own vested interest. But at the same time, there were some pro-tenant and anti-zamindar leaders in the Muslim League also, including Hussain Imam who felt that the zamindars were “Blood Suckers” and he came forward to support the “no-rent” programme of the tenants.<sup>70</sup> Although the Muslim League as a Party, did not organize any peasant front and put emphasis on an agrarian movement for the abolition of the Zamindari system, yet its Bengal leaders had to adopt a pro-tenant attitude at least for the sake of politics because they were dependent on their support (to ensure their vote banks) in their own constituencies to get themselves elected in the Bengal Legislative Council.

The House was divided on communal lines in 1928 when a Bill (which was drafted by the Special Committee) to amend the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1925 was brought before the Bengal Legislative Council in response to the demands raised by the under-raiyats (of various categories like bargadars, karshadars, kurfa and dhankarari raiyats). The Special Committee accepted the position that “sharecroppers who paid a fixed proportion of the produce (the usual terms under which a *bhagchasi*, *bargadar* or *adhiar* cultivated the land) were not tenants. However, those who paid a fixed quantity of produce as rent were, according to the Bill, to be regarded as tenants”.<sup>71</sup> The Bill also said that those “*bargadars* or *adhiars* who had been admitted in a document by their landlords, or had been held by a civil court, to be tenants would also be similarly recognized as raiyats or underraiyats”.<sup>72</sup> However, the Bill prohibited the commutation of produce rents to money rent in order to prevent the *bargadars* from claiming the status of tenant.<sup>73</sup> The Bill also proposed that “under raiyats who had homesteads on their lands and had held them for twenty years, or who had been admitted in a document by their landlord to have a permanent and heritable right, would not be evicted from their holdings”.<sup>74</sup> Some of the provisions of the Bill were not at all liked by the landowners. When the Bill was introduced in the Council by Sri Provasch Chandra Mitter in August 1928, the East Bengal landholders under the presidentship of Nawab Habibullah of Dacca protested against the Bill on the ground that it took away the rights of the zamindars.<sup>75</sup> A few days later a Landholders’ Conference was presided over by Maharaja Pradyot Coomar Tagore and he sent a

strong memorandum to the Viceroy, the Governor of Bengal, the Secretary of State for India, the British Prime Minister Ramsay McDonald and the Opposition Leader Lloyd George, strongly protesting against a couple of pro-tenant provisions in the Bill and expressing its deep concern at the proposal to give the tenants ‘the right of transferring their holdings’: “... the present occasion is most unsuitable to disturb the peace of a most influential class ... any such serious change of a settled policy is likely to be followed at no distant period by general discontent among a most loyal class of His Majesty’s subjects which is undesirable for good government in India and is likely to hasten an agrarian revolution. Agitation regarding this is being worked up by certain self-seeking agitators for political purposes as none of these agitators is an actual cultivator”.<sup>76</sup>

The class division and the communal cleavage came out sharply during the debate on the Tenancy Amendment Bill of 1928. All the Hindu members of the Bengal Council (including the Swarajists and non-Swarajists numbering 42 and 49 members respectively), voted in favour of the landlords, while the Muslim members (21 and 22 members respectively) with solitary exceptions, ‘showed a keen desire to further the interests of the ryots’ and voted in favour of the peasants and cultivators, “eighty percent”<sup>77</sup> of whom were Muslims. The Muslim Council members including Azizur Rahaman, Abul Kasem, Syed Abdur Rauf, Asimuddin Ahmad, Tamizuddin Khan, Syed Nausher Ali, Azizul Haque, Fazlul Huq, Nurul Huq Chaudhuri, Ekramul Huq, Syed Mohammad Atiqullah, Emaduddin Ahmed and the like, always supported the *bargadars* who were also partially supported by Khwaja Nazimuddin, Abdur Rahim, Muhammad Solaiman, Jitendralal Banerjee, K.C. Ray Chaudhuri, Rebati Mohan Sarkar etc. The Swarajists who went against the *bargadars*, were Ramesh Chandra Bagchi, Pramathanath Banerjea, Promotho Nath Banerjee, A.C. Banerjee, Sarat C. Basu, Subhas Chandra Bose, J.M. Das Gupta, Akhil Chandra Datta, Sris Chandra Nandy, Hem Chandra Naskar, Kumud Shankar Ray, Bidhan Chandra Roy, Kiran Sankar Roy, Sachindra Narayan Sanyal, Naliniranjan Sarkar, Ananda Mohan Poddar, Satish Chandra Sen and so on. The Swarajists were partially supported by Sashi Kanta Acharya Chaudhuri, Badridas Goenka, Bijoy Prasad Singh Roy, S.C. Bose, Abdus Sattar, Bhupendra Narayan Sinha etc. Occasionally some Muslim zamindars like A.K. Ghuznavi, Musharraf Hossain, Nawab Ali Chaudhuri etc. stood in favour of the Swarajists who also got the support of 37 members belonging to the

Official and European bloc.<sup>78</sup> It also exposed the role of the Congress at the time of passing the Amendment Bill (1928) in which the entire Congress bloc voted in favour of the said Bill to the detriment of the tenants' interests. This pro-zamindar attitude of the Congress completed the process of alienation of the ryots from the Party and since then the Congress never got back the support of the Bengal ryots<sup>79</sup> who were mostly Muslims. According to researcher Shaukat Ara Hussain, "The Muslim peasantry of Bengal became totally disillusioned with the Congress and at the same time they were aware of the ineffectiveness of the Muslim League to protect their interest....."<sup>80</sup> Not only that, the Bengali newspapers and journals like *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, *Mohammadi*, *Ganabani* etc. also expressed their opinion that some of the provisions of the Bengal Tenancy Amendment Bill of 1928, were completely anti-tenant. Going ahead, the *Ananda Bazar Patrika* published an editorial criticizing the role of the Swarajists for joining their hands with the Government in passing the detrimental (for the tenants) B.T. Act of 1928.<sup>81</sup> The *Ganabani* of 23 August 1928 stated that Nalini Ranjan Sarker, the mouthpiece of the Swarajya Party, who had posed himself as a champion of the raiyats, commented that he would not tolerate any injustice to the zamindars.<sup>82</sup> Sir Abdur Rahim, a Muslim member, sharply criticized the Swarajists and stated: 'The majority of this Council in combination with the Swarajists, the most powerful party in the House, have already finished with the *bargadars*, the cultivators of land.....' J.M. Sen Gupta of the Congress (Swarajists) defended the Party stand and said: 'They would see that during their fight for freedom, and until this fight for freedom was over, the interests of the tenants and the interests of the zamindars should be so adjusted – so reasonably adjusted – as not to create a civil war in the country before freedom was gained'. Similarly Dr. B.C. Roy who later became the Chief Minister of West Bengal in 1948, defended the Congress Party's stand against the *bargadars* on the ground that "as a party it did not feel that it was time for drastic measures in favour of tenants; there should first be some adjustment outside the Council between zamindars and tenants".<sup>83</sup> As a result, the Muslims of Bengal lost their faith in the leadership of the Indian National Congress and most of the Muslim leaders realized the fact that the "Congress could now claim to represent merely the rich, the landed gentry and educated minority. It had still not earned the right to lead the workers and peasants".<sup>84</sup> Hence, Maulana Muhammad Akram Khan and many others left the Congress. Observing this situation, J.M. Sen Gupta remarked: ".....from today the Congress not only lost the trust of the Muslim Bengal but also

of the peasants and farmers as well”.<sup>85</sup> Abul Mansur Ahmed identified this episode ‘as the straw on the camel’s back’ and stated that “neither in terms of the Muslim interest nor of the Praja interest was it possible to rely on the Congress”.<sup>86</sup>

By that time, a constitutional crisis developed in Bengal because of the resignations of two successive ministries (1926-28), one led by Sir Abdur Rahim and the other by A.K. Ghuznavi – Chakrabarty coalition, sarcastically called by the Muslims as ‘Gaja-Chakra’ Ministry. In order to solve this political deadlock, the Governor of Bengal dissolved the legislature on 22 April 1929 and issued an official notification for general elections which ultimately were taken place in the first week of June 1929. The results of the elections showed that out of the total strength of 39 seats allotted to the Muslims, the Bengal Muslim League and the Independent Muslim Party of Fazlul Huq each secured 11 seats while the remaining 17 seats were captured by A.K. Ghuznavi’s Muslim Legislative Association. As no political party obtained an absolute majority in the Bengal Council, the Governor ran the government with some handpicked ministers. So the people, particularly the Muslims, were in search of a viable alternative. By 1929, the relationship between the Hindu-*bhadralok* class and the Muslim middle-class was not easy and both these classes of people could not trust and rely on each other. The former not only opposed the enfranchisement of the peasantry and the Amendment of the Tenancy Act (1928) in favour of the *bargadars*, but also they opposed to the Rural Primary Education Bill of 1929 which was first placed by Nawab Musharraf Hossain and later by the then Education Minister Khwaja Nazimuddin (on 11 August) and the Bill was finally sent to the Select Committee. The Zamindar Minister, Kumar Shib Shekhareswar Roy resigned from the ministry as a protest against the Rural Primary Education Bill of 1929 and he along with fifty other *bhadralok* members of the Council walked-out.<sup>87</sup> Although initially Fazlul Huq was not in favour of the Bill (as it would hamper the Hindu-Muslim relations and impose a huge taxation of 1 crore and 26 lakhs of rupees for getting primary education), later he changed his mind and voted in its favour and finally the Bill was passed on 26 August 1930.<sup>88</sup> Meanwhile, the Muslim politicians put forward the demand for the abolition of the ‘urban weightage’ and the extension of the peasant representation in the Bengal Legislative Council. But the pro-zamindar Hindu members of the Council again raised their objections against these demands. Added to this, in 1929, the Congress hurt the Muslim sentiment by striking another blow by annulling the Bengal Pact of

C.R. Das at Krishnanagar (in Nadia district) under the presidentship of Subhas Chandra Bose. Henceforth, the Muslim Congressites of Bengal, lost their faith over the Congress and could not depend on the Party which neither protected the Muslim interests nor the interests of the Bengal peasantry.<sup>89</sup> As a result, many disillusioned Muslim Congressites (like Tamizuddin Khan, Maulana Akram Khan and others), began to leave the Congress and sought to find out a favourable political organization and a feasible alternative to the Congress.

The total disillusion of the Muslims of Bengal towards the pro-zamindar Congress and Swarajya Party along with the inactive and 'lethargic' approach of the Muslim League to protect the interests of the peasantry, paved the way for the foundation of the Bengal Praja Samity or the Tenant Association in July 1929. Twenty-seven elected Muslim members of the Bengal Legislative Council representing the Muslim Legislators' Association, the Muslim League and the Bengal Muslim Party, met at a conference on 1 July 1929 with a view to remove their mutual differences and to organize and mobilize the Muslims of Bengal particularly the peasantry, under one umbrella for the protection of their interests. The Conference was held at the residence of the Convener, Sir Abdur Rahim at 92, Ripon Street, Calcutta and was presided over by Nawab Habibullah, the son of the late Nawab Salimullah of Dacca. Twenty-seven Muslim Councilors including Nawab Mosharaf Hossain, Altaf Ali, Abdul Karim, Khwaja Nazimuddin, Rezaur Rahaman, Sir Abdur Rahim, H.S. Suhrawardy, Azizul Huque and Fazlul Huq, attended the Conference.<sup>90</sup> In this Conference H.S. Suhrawardy, A.H. Ghuznavi, Khwaja Nazimuddin, Nawab Musharraf Hossain and so on proposed for the formation of a 'purely' Muslim organization called the United Muslim Party (UMP) or the Bengal Muslim Council Association (BMCA) to safeguard the interests of the Muslims.<sup>91</sup> But Fazlul Huq favoured a non-communal organization and he nursed and nurtured in his mind the resolution of the Faridpore Convention (1927) which resolved to protect the interests of all the raiyats. So he advocated for the formation of a United Council Party (UCP), better known as the Council Praja Party of Bengal or Bengal Praja (Tenants') Party to ameliorate the conditions of the peasants.<sup>92</sup> Out of the twenty-seven Muslim Councilors participating at the Conference, eighteen Councilors supported Fazlul Huq and signed the pledge to honour his decision of the formation of the Council Praja Party.<sup>93</sup> As a result, the Council Praja Party (CPP) was formally inaugurated on 4

July 1929 at the home of Abdur Raheem, a Delhi born, Urdu-speaking Calcutta merchant and MLC, with Fazlul Huq as its leader and Abdur Raheem himself as the deputy leader. Maulavi Tamizuddin Khan, MLC from Faridpur, was elected its Secretary and Khan Bahadur Mohammad Azizul Haque of Nadia (later Knighted), and Shah Abdul Hamid, MLC from Mymensingh East, were its Joint Secretaries.<sup>94</sup> Soon the Council Praja Party was further broadened through a meeting in Calcutta accommodating different categories of Muslim political leaders and it was renamed as Nikhil Banga Praja Samity (NBPS) or All Bengal Tenants' Association which within a short span, became very much popular for its slogan – 'Land to the tillers'. Sir Abdur Rahim and Maulana Muhammad Akram Khan were elected as its President and Secretary respectively. The Vice-Presidents of this organization were: Maulvi Mujibur Rahman, Abdul Karim, Fazlul Huq, Dr. Abdullah Al-Mamun Suhrawardy and Khan Bahadur Abdul Momin. Shamsuddin Ahmad and Tamizuddin Ahmad Khan were elected as its Joint-Secretaries.<sup>95</sup> Among its office-bearers, while Sir Abdur Rahim, Akram Khan, Mujibur Rahman, Dr. Abdullah Al-Mamun Suhrawardy and Abdul Momin belonged to West Bengal, Fazlul Huq, Abdul Karim, Shamsuddin Ahmad and Tamizuddin represented East Bengal. Thus the organization had representatives from both halves of the province.

The Nikhil Banga Praja Samity was formed to safeguard the rights and interests of the Prajas (tenants) and the peasants irrespective of their caste, creed and religion<sup>96</sup> and for that purpose, the Samity would stand for concerted action in the Council.<sup>97</sup> The Praja Samity gave priority to Bengali interests as against those of the Centre. It tried to organize the masses on the basis of an economic programme and wanted to bring an agrarian revolution through parliamentary and constitutional methods.<sup>98</sup> Unlike the BPML and the BPCC, the Nikhil Banga Praja Samity was absolutely a regionally based organization without having any parent body outside. Although some of its office-bearers, namely Sir Abdur Rahim and Abdullah Suhrawardy were earlier very much vocal on communal lines, the Samity declared a non-communal programme. But it was predominantly a Muslim body (consisting of *jotedars* and urban professionals) and both its leadership and following were exclusively Muslim.<sup>99</sup> Even some Muslim landlords were very active on this platform. For example, Nawabzada Syed Hasan Ali of Dhonbari area of Mymensingh district not only joined the Samity but also extended significant financial support to the

organization. Not only that, with his financial assistance and sizable contribution, the Samity was able to purchase a press to launch its weekly organ the *Chashi* (Cultivator).<sup>100</sup> It can be precisely said that the Praja Samity directed its activities against the zamindars of Bengal and incidentally as the majority of the zamindars belonged to the Hindu community, the Samity became quite popular among all sections of the Muslim community. Most of the Praja leaders including Fazlul Huq, used the peasantry as a weapon to fight against the Hindu *bhadralok* and the non-Bengal leaders of the Muslim League and tried to capitalize the support of the peasants to get themselves elected in the Council. According to scholar Bazlur Rahman Khan, “The Proja Party may, perhaps, be thus looked upon as a political platform for a section of the Bengali Muslim middle class from which to attack both the caste Hindu and the traditional Muslim leadership and so to tilt the political balance in the province in their favour. The elite leadership of the party hardly had the aim of creating an egalitarian society in their mind. A social revolution was the last thing they would have wanted: it was not pursuing a new social utopia but intent upon reaping immediate political benefits of their stance by dislodging the incumbent leadership. Let us, however, not underestimate the difficult task of the Proja Party leaders had undertaken : they now needed to conciliate various classes of peasants, tenure holders and even to offer the Muslim landowners, a suitable alternative if they were successful to woo them”.<sup>101</sup>

The Great Depression of 1929-30, accelerated the rift between the two socially ‘opposite’ groups of Bengal – the zamindars and moneylenders on the one hand, and the peasants and tenants on the other. Due to recession in the prices both of the foodgrains and commercial crops, most of the peasants failed to pay their rents to the zamindars and interests (on debt) and other dues to the moneylenders and both the zamindars and moneylenders pressurized and heavily tortured the peasants and tenants for the realization of their dues. In order to get rid of the oppression, the tenants and peasants began to transfer their lands by sale or mortgage desperately in the districts of Noakhali, Tippera, Bogra, Mymensingh, Dacca and Pabna.<sup>102</sup> Surprisingly, the central leadership of the Nikhil Banga Praja Samity remained a silent spectator of the situation. It neither stopped the peasants and tenants from the distress sale of lands nor did it launch a ‘no rent campaign’. As a result, the Nikhil Banga Praja Samity almost remained an ineffective body till 1932.<sup>103</sup> By that time, the

Samity asked the different district samities to seek its affiliation and “accordingly, all except the Tippera Krishak Samity merged with the provincial body”<sup>104</sup> and from then onwards the Nikhil Banga Praja Samity gradually turned into an active and purposeful organization. The Krishak Samities of Noakhali, Tippera, Dhaka, Mymensingh, Pabna and Bogra were very strong on the basis of their organization and supporters and the samities of Bakarganj, Rangpur, Dinajpur and Murshidabad also became active. Interestingly, all the above mentioned places were “Muslim majority districts- where Zamindars (landlords) and Mahajans (moneylenders), often the same persons, were predominantly Hindu”.<sup>105</sup> As the Congress and the Muslim League had allegedly represented the interests of the rentier classes, they paid very little attention to safeguard the economic interests of the peasants which finally paved the way for Fazlul Huq to capitalize the situation and address the problems of the peasants and tenants.

In 1935, the Government of India Act was passed which introduced provincial autonomy in British India and included separate electoral clause. The Act added a new dimension to the Muslim politics in Bengal as the seeds of communal electorate sown in it, slowly paved the way for the partition of India. In the same year, the Nikhil Banga Praja Samity had to face a set-back when its President Sir Abdur Rahim resigned from the Samity after being elected to the Central Legislative Assembly. He also contested for the Speaker’s post as a candidate of the Independent Party and defeated Mr. Sherwani, the Congress candidate. But at the time of his resignation, Sir Abdur Rahim recommended the name of Khan Bahadur Abdul Momen for the chairmanship of the Samity. The younger group of the Samity protested against this recommendation at a meeting held at the residence of Moulvi Abdul Karim and demanded fresh election of the President.<sup>106</sup> This led to a power struggle within the Samity and both Khan Bahadur Abdul Momin of Burdwan and Fazlul Huq were aspiring for the presidentship of the Samity and each of them had their own followers. Maulana Muhammad Akram Khan and other workers from West Bengal and urban leaders like H.S. Suhrawardy and Hasan Ispahani were supporting Khan Bahadur Abdul Momen, whereas, the workers from East Bengal began to support Fazlul Huq. Young activists like Abul Mansur Ahmed, Shamsuddin Ahmed and Syed Nausher Ali extended their support towards Fazlul Huq.<sup>107</sup> This power struggle and polarization within the Praja Samity led to bitter relationship not only between Maulana

Muhammad Akram Khan and Fazlul Huq but also between the delegates and workers from East Bengal and West Bengal. This factionalism and groupism within the organization had a tremendous negative impact on the activities of the Samity and severely affected its growth in mobilizing the masses and organizing a stronger mass movement. Ultimately in a Conference held in Mymensingh in 1935 (which was presided over by Fazlul Huq), Mr. Huq was elected the President of the Nikhil Banga Praja Samity at the intervention of Abul Mansur Ahmed, the General Secretary of the Reception Committee of that Conference (though Fazlul Huq's candidature was objected on technical ground by Akram Khan but to no effect).<sup>108</sup> In spite of this schism, the Praja Samity proved its political strength in the elections of the Local Boards and District Boards in the year same (i.e. 1935). The Praja Samity candidates were elected in large numbers in all the districts of Bengal. For example, in the district of Mymensingh, they captured 64 out of 72 seats in the Local Boards. The winning candidates of the Local Boards elected the members of the District Board. Thus the District Boards also came under the control of the Praja Samity.<sup>109</sup> According to Abul Mansur Ahmed, "the Praja Samity was, in 1935, a multi-party affair. It included in its ranks Congressmen and anti-Congress Muslim leaders, loyalists and nationalists. Muslims of all parties, leaders and workers were present within its fold".<sup>109a</sup>

The next conference of the Nikhil Banga Praja Samity was held at Dacca on 11-12 July 1936<sup>110</sup> and Fazlul Huq was once again elected the President of the Samity due to abstention of Abdul Momen and Akram Khan.<sup>111</sup> In that Conference, there was a strong demand from a section of the members of the Nikhil Banga Praja Samity (known as the 'Left wing' of the organization), to include within the Samity the real *krishaks* (peasants) and also to re-name the organization as Krishak Praja Party (Peasants' and Tenants' Party). Against this backdrop Fazlul Huq, along with his large East Bengal supporters, left the parent body and established the Krishak Praja Party (KPP) and accordingly a resolution was taken in this Conference. The demands were accepted primarily to avoid further division in the organization at a time when the general elections were knocking at the door.<sup>112</sup> Another important reason of changing the nomenclature and inclusion of the *krishaks* (peasants) was to broaden the party "with the hope of wooing the rural votes whose number had then greatly increased".<sup>113</sup> The Nawab of Dhanbari and his son, Ansar Ali, installed a printing

press called the *Milan Prem* to launch the mouthpiece of the Krishak Praja Party, known as the *Chasi* (the Cultivator).<sup>114</sup> Sir Abdur Rahim became the President of the KPP; Fazlul Huq, Mujibur Rahman, Abdul Karim, Abdullah Suhrawardy and Abdul Momen were its Vice-Presidents; Mohammad Akram Khan became its Secretary and the Party's Joint Secretaries were Shamsuddin Ahmed and Tamizuddin Khan.<sup>115</sup> The KPP was almost entirely an East Bengal Party<sup>116</sup> and its leadership was mainly in the hands of the educated Muslim middle class who came from different walks of life. Significantly some of them, however, were neither *krishaks* (peasants) nor *prajas* (tenants). But few of them were *jotedars* who joined the KPP at the instance of Fazlul Huq.<sup>117</sup> Whatever may be the composition of the leadership of the Party, the formation of the Krishak Praja Party in July 1936 at Dacca, infused new hopes and aspirations among the real *krishaks* (peasants) and *prajas* (tenants) of Bengal who accepted it as a very strong alternative to the Congress or the Muslim League. So they rallied behind Fazlul Huq and the KPP and extended their all-round support towards the Party which was clearly reflected in the Bengal Assembly Elections of 1937.

## Notes and References:

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2. Report on the Census of India 1901, Vol.VI. p. 484. It is also cited in Sufia Ahmed, *Muslim Community in Bengal 1884-1912*, OUP, Bangladesh, 1974, p. 99.
3. J.N. Gupta, *Eastern Bengal and Assam District Gazetteer*, Bogra, p. 45.
4. The total population of the Rajshahi district in that year was 1,480,587, the Muslims numbered, 1,148,314 and Hindus 315,640. Report on the Census of India, 1911, Vol. V, Part II, p. 428. The names of the two Muslim Rais of Bagha and ii) Habibar Rahman Chaudhuri who had a residence in Niamatpur, a village in the Naogaon Sub-Division. See, O'Malley, L.S.S., *Bengal District Gazetteer: Rajshahi*, p. 174.
5. Rajat and Ratna Ray, 'Zamindars and Jotedars: a study of Rural Politics in Bengal', in *Modern Asian Studies*, 9, 1 (1975), p. 82.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.
7. James Grant, *Analysis of the Finances of Bengal*, pp. 267-269; cited in Rajat & Ratna Ray, 'Zamindars and Jotedars: a study of Rural Politics in Bengal', in *Modern Asian Studies*, 9,1 (1975), p. 83.
8. Rajat & Ratna Ray, *ibid.*, pp. 83-84.
- 8a. The Namasudras who were earlier known as the Chandalas or a lower grade of Sudras, constituted the 'second largest Hindu caste group in the British province of Bengal and the largest in its eastern parts'. According to the Census Report of 1911, as much as 77.94 per cent of the Namasudras were associated with agriculture, 1.15 per cent were in the rent-receiving category, 3.56 per cent were field labourers, wood cutters etc., and about 95.71 per cent were tenant-farmers, enjoying the status of either occupancy or non-occupancy *raiyat*. For details see, *Census of India*, 1911, Vol. V, Part II, pp. 370-373; see also, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947*, New Delhi, 2011, pp. 11-21.

- 8b. Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919-1947*, Cambridge, 1986, p. 19.
9. Rajat & Ratna Ray, *op.cit.*, p. 84.
- 9a. Francis Buchanan (Hamilton), *A Geographical, Statistical and Historical Description of the District, a Zilla, of Dinajpur, in the Province, or Subah, of Bengal*, Baptist Mission Press, 1883, pp. 236, 244; cited in Rajat & Ratna Ray, 'Zamindars and Jotedars: a study of Rural Politics in Bengal', in *Modern Asian Studies*, 9,1 (1975), p. 84.
10. For details, see N.K. Sinha, *Economic History of Bengal From Plassey to the Permanent Settlement*, 2 Vols., Calcutta, (1956 and 1962).
11. Partha Chatterjee, 'Agrarian Relations and Communalism in Bengal, 1926-35', in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies*, Vol. I, Delhi, 1982, p. 11.
- 11a. Nirmal Kumar Bose, *Hindu Samajer Garan* (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1356 B.S., pp. 140-142; see also, Amalendu De, *Roots of Separatism in Nineteenth Century Bengal*, Calcutta, 1974, p. 18.
12. Rajat and Ratna Ray, *op.cit.*, p. 101.
13. Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal, 1937-1947*, New Delhi, 1976, p. 35.
14. A.C. Banerjee, *The Agrarian System of Bengal*, Vol. II: 1793-1955, Calcutta, 1981, pp. 301-302.
15. *Bengal Legislative Council Proceedings (BLCP)*, 24 November 1921, speech of Ekramul Haq.
16. Rajat & Ratna Ray, *op.cit.*, p. 101.
17. Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri, 'The Process of Depeasantization in Bengal and Bihar 1885-1947', in *Indian Historical Review*, 3, 1 (1975).
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19. *Ibid.*
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22. J.H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal*, Berkeley, 1968, p. 157.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 157-158.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
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26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
29. J.H. Broomfield, *op.cit.*, pp. 175-176.
30. Muzaffar Ahmad, *Communist Party of India: Years of Formation, 1921-1933*, Calcutta, 1969, p. 5.
31. *Idem*, *Myself and the Communist Party of India*, Calcutta, 1970, p. 77.
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33. Amalendu De, *Pakistan Prastab O Fazlul Huq* (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1989, p. 8.
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37. P.S. Humaira Momen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal: A Study of Krishak Praja Party and the Elections of 1937*, Dacca, 1972, p. 38.
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96. Joya Chatterji, *op.cit.*, pp. 72-73; *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, September 3, 1929; Abul Mansur Ahmed, *op.cit.*, p. 63. While Joya Chatterji & Humaira Momen mentioned the name of the organization as Nikhil Banga Praja Samity, Amalendu De referred to Nikhil Banga Krishak Proja Samiti with Fazlul Huq as its leader and President (Amalendu De, *op.cit.*, p. 9).
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- 109a. *Ibid.*
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