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Fazlul Huq, Krishak Praja Party and the Elections of 1937:

First Political Breakthrough

In 1936 Fazlul Huq added a new colour to Bengal politics by taking together the interests of the *krishaks* (peasants) as well as of the *prajas* (tenants). The extension of franchise right to the six annas-rent-paying tenant by the Government of India Act, 1935, had opened new opportunities before the Krishak Praja Party. To mobilize this selection of peasants behind the Party and capture their support, Fazlul Huq started a campaign for the abolition of the zamindari system. In the election *Manifesto* of the Krishak Praja Party (KPP), published in 1936, it was clearly laid down:

“Thorough overhauling of the Bengal Tenancy Act in the interest of the agriculturists ensuring the vesting of proprietary rights in the tillers of the soil and including

- (i) the abolition of the zamindar’s right of *nazar* and *salamy* right of pre-emption;
- (ii) tenants’ right of mutation of name without additional payment;
- (iii) reduction of rate of rent”; and

“To take adequate and effective measures against illegal exactions by the zamindars, moneylenders and their representatives”.¹ The other highlights of the Krishak Praja Party’s manifesto were: introduction of free and compulsory education, construction of a hospital at every thana, total autonomy of Bengal, reduction in the administrative expenditure, rupees one thousand monthly salary for the Ministers and release of the political prisoners.² The KPP programme also included giving interest free loans to the peasants, creating irrigation facilities by digging canals all over the country, taking steps for the adequate representation of Muslims and the scheduled castes in the services, introducing measures for the amelioration of the condition of labourers by the provisions of minimum wages etc.³ Though the manifesto of the KPP

concentrated more on the economic requirements of the Bengali masses, it also demanded “full responsible Government for India with adequate and effective safeguards of Mussalmans.....”⁴ Most of these demands and programme of the KPP were mainly directed to appease the peasants for gaining cheap popularity and consolidating their support behind the Party. At the same time, in order to attract the rich peasants, it brought out the propaganda ‘down with zamindari’. The election *Manifesto* “reflected the aspirations of the richer peasants who held occupancy rights direct from the zamindars. It was they who were the most vocally critical of zamindari powers which stood in the way of their economic and social betterment”⁵.

So the richer peasants, Muslim middle class people, small traders, clerks, petty landowners and poorer under-raiyats rallied behind the Krishak Praja Party and made campaign against the money-lenders and the zamindars characterizing them ‘as Hindu oppressors of the Muslim people’.⁶ The KPP projected itself as the tribune of the ordinary people against the elite, irrespective of the Hindu *bhadralok* or the wealthier Muslims who traditionally dominated rural Bengal. Having a rural background, Fazlul Huq realized the fact that his rustic origin would help him to wrest power from the traditional elite. This feeling ultimately persuaded some opportunists (who were very power-hungry) to join the Party.⁷ Not only that, in order to play down the communal feelings and demonstrate its secular character, the Krishak Praja Party spearheaded its attacks on the zamindars in general, and Sir Nazimuddin and Sir K.G.M. Farouqi, in particular.⁸ But it can be said without any doubt that the leadership of the KPP, failed to check the growth of the *jotedars* (at the expense of share croppers), who came forward to the centre stage of Bengal politics (‘from locality to province’) for political gain and to get themselves elected to the Legislative Council. “The Krishak Praja Party was thus the agency by which the jotedars, mainly Muslim and newly enfranchised, came out of the wings out the centre stage of Bengal politics. In the past Muslim jotedar had played little part in provincial politics, though they had begun to make their mark in the localities”.⁹ So it was not unusual that the Krishak Praja Party had to face the charge of being a ‘jotedar party’.¹⁰ Admitting the truth in this allegation Abul Mansur Ahmed recalled in his memoirs: “Bengal’s Krishak movement was criticized by many as being a jotedar movement. In absolute terms, their accusations held a great deal of truth..... but were, for that era, a kind of ultra-

leftism... According to my knowledge and belief, then the Praja movement was a natural and spontaneous people's movement, appropriate to the needs of the time".^{10a}

By early 1930's in Bengal, "the provincial Muslim League did not exist except in name"¹¹ and its leadership virtually went to those who were more active in the newly formed Krishak Praja Party. Fazlul Huq was not satisfied with the policies and programme of the Muslim League and there was vast difference of opinion between him and the leaders of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League whose President and Secretary at that time were Maulavi Mujibur Rahman and Dr. R. Ahmad. Fazlul Huq said that the KPP would protect the interests of the poor peasants and the Party would be open for all irrespective of their caste, colour or religion. He understood the fact that the most important problem of the poor peasantry was the scarcity of food and cloth and he wanted its immediate solution. Famine, flood, drought, epidemic etc. did not make any difference between the Hindus and Muslims and these took lives irrespective of caste and religion. So the poor masses belonging to different caste and religion, saw the Krishak Praja Party as the Party of their own, trusted and supported it and realized that the KPP was the only political party at that time which could protect their interests and fight for their cause. The consolidation of the Muslim peasantry under the radical leadership of Fazlul Huq and the banner of the Krishak Praja Party, posed a serious threat to the prominent aristocratic and upper-middle-class Muslims who felt helpless in the fact of the extended suffrage as they had no other alternative but to depend on the votes of the peasantry whose interests were completely opposite to theirs. In this situation, Nawab Habibullah of Dacca thought it necessary to form a new political organization of the Muslims which would come forward to protect the interests of the landlords. Consequently, the United Muslim Party (UMP) was formed (with the Muslim led different groups) at his Calcutta residence in Hungerford Street, on 25 May, 1936. Nawab Khwaja Habibullah became its first President, Khan Bhadur Musharraf Hossain its Vice-President and Hasan Ispahani, a non-Bengali Calcutta merchant, its Treasurer.¹² Later on, men like Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy (who became its Secretary) Khan Bahadur Abdul Momen, Maulana Mohammad Akram Khan and Maulavi Tamizuddin Khan joined and strengthened the Party. Of the sixteen founder members, more than eight were big landlords of whom four belonged to the Dhaka Nawab family. The UMP soon made an electoral alliance with several powerful and prominent Muslim families of

Bengal who were united to challenge the KPP.¹³ Along with the UMP, another organization, i.e. the New Muslim Majlis also came into existence under the initiative of Abdur Rahim Siddequi and H. Ispahani.

However, the leaders of the United Muslim Party did not feel themselves safe and realized the fact that their prospects in the forthcoming elections would remain uncertain and gloomy unless they forged a united front with the Krishak Praja Party. As a tactical move, Nawab Habibullah convened a joint meeting of the UMP and the KPP, at his residence in Calcutta, seeking the latter's cooperation in the ensuing elections. But the leading members of the Krishak Praja Party like Fazlul Huq, Abdul Karim and Syed Nausher Ali, did not attend the meeting in which the participants ultimately failed to take a unanimous decision of selecting a consensus candidate for the leadership of the united front.¹⁴ The members of the KPP, wanted Fazlul Huq as the leader of the united front, but he was not acceptable to the Muslim aristocrats as he fought for the abolition of the zamindari system. Fazlul Huq accused the United Muslim Party as 'a *zamindar* party', 'a Ministerial Party'¹⁵ where as Khwaja Nazimuddin of the UMP, charged that Fazlul Huq's Krishak Praja Party was not a purely Muslim organization'.^{15a} Keeping all these in his mind, Fazlul Huq spurned the hand of cooperation extended to him by the leaders of the UMP and began to campaign against the Dacca Nawab and the other prominent leaders of the UMP in their own districts, appealing the voters to back the true representatives of the peasants.¹⁶ Furthermore, in an open letter written to the Governor of Bengal dated 8 August 1936, Fazlul Huq made an appeal to him to safeguard the interests of the peasantry from the onslaught imposed on them by the leaders of the United Muslim Party.¹⁷ In reply, the Private Secretary to the Governor, agreed to support the movements for the benefit and welfare of the common masses and expressed his willingness to play the role of a neutral arbiter in the forthcoming elections.^{17a}

Meanwhile Jinnah invited as many as forty leaders from Bengal to attend the first meeting of the Central Parliamentary Board (formed on 21 May 1936) held at Lahore on 8 June. Only the 'Three Musketeers', namely Abdur Rahaman Siddiqui, Hasan Ispahani and Khwaja Nooruddin responded to his call and, finally, Siddiqui and Ispahani went there. But the BPML and the Praja Party deliberately ignored Jinnah's invitation. On the other hand, from mid 1936, political rivalry between the

Krishak Praja Party and the United Muslim Party grew up in Bengal. In this situation, Nawab Habibullah of Dacca, the President of the United Muslim Party, convened a three-day All-Bengal Conference at the Calcutta Town Hall in August 1936 which was going to be attended by a large number of delegates. Apprehending a grand success of the conference, M.A.H. Ispahani persuaded Fazlul Huq to create disturbance which he thought, would impose bar on the success of the United Muslim Party. On the first day of the conference i.e., 2 August 1936, in a pre-planned manner, Fazlul Huq entered the Town Hall along with some of his supporters. At one stage, when the proceedings of the conference were going on, Fazlul Huq stood up and began to address the gathering. But the workers of the United Muslim Party shouted loudly in order to stop him. The supporters of Fazlul Huq then began the counter shouting which ultimately created a confusing situation and the functioning of the meeting became almost impossible. Thereupon, M.A.H. Ispahani suggested the postponement of the conference and also to invite Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah to settle the differences among various leaders of Bengal¹⁸ and instantly he sent a telegram to M.A. Jinnah in this regard. Intense factionalism among the Muslims in Bengal provided just the right opportunity to Jinnah to come to Bengal and establish himself as the overlord of provincial politics. He clearly mentioned his goal: 'Let the cream of Hindu society be organised under the banner of Congress and the cream of Muslim society under the banner of Muslim League. Then let us put up a united demand for independence of our dear motherland. Our demand will be irresistible!'¹⁹

M.A. Jinnah came to Calcutta on 15 August 1936²⁰ "to visit Bengal and to use his best endeavour to bring about peace, understanding and unity in the divided ranks of Muslim Bengal and to bring the United Muslim Party and the Krishak Praja Party under the banner of the All-India Muslim League".²¹ The unity talks went on for several days but the prominent leaders of both the rival parties i.e., the Krishak Praja Party and the United Muslim Party, were not ready to compromise with each other. At one stage when the rumour of the Krishak Praja Party's merger with the Muslim League spread out, the UMP all of a sudden, took the initiative to merge itself with the Muslim League and thus out-manoeuvred the KPP at the last moment.²² Jinnah then formed a thirty-three member Parliamentary Board for Bengal and nominated its members mainly from the zamindar class who were not acceptable to the Krishak

Praja Party. Jinnah's main intention was to incorporate his personal nominees in the Parliamentary Board from amongst the members of the United Muslim Party and in that process, make an attempt to give the KPP a minority status in the Board. An agreement was arrived at between the representatives of the United Muslim Party, the League and the Moslem Majlis, and the All-India Muslim League Parliamentary Board for Bengal be constituted according to the following quota: the UMP-15, the New Muslim Majlis – 7; the BPML – 7; Independent Non-Party members to be nominated by Mr. Jinnah – 4.²³ Although Fazlul Huq was initially nominated to the Central Parliamentary Board of the League (consisting of fifty-four members), the clash between Jinnah and Fazlul Huq became inevitable because of the former's non-cooperative attitude towards the KPP's twin demands – i) the abolition of the zamindari system in Bengal without compensation and ii) the introduction of free primary education in Bengal without raising additional taxation.²⁴ Unity talks between M.A. Jinnah and Fazlul Huq, however, continued. Jinnah put forward the following conditions:

- i) The Krishak Praja Party will have to nominate its candidates, for the forthcoming general election, on Muslim League tickets;
- ii) The demand for the abolition of the zamindari system will have to be struck off from the Krishak Praja Party's manifesto (as it went against the principle laid down in the Muslim League's new constitution);²⁵
- iii) In the Parliamentary Board, the KPP and the Muslim League will get forty and sixty per cent representation respectively;
- iv) Jinnah himself will select the representatives of the Muslim League.

On the other hand, the demands of the Krishak Praja Party were:

- i) In Bengal, their representatives would fight the election not on Muslim League ticket but on Krishak Praja Party's ticket. However, at the Centre, they would accept Muslim League ticket and at All-India level, the KPP would abide by the principles of the Muslim League;
- ii) In the Parliamentary Board, the KPP will have to be given fifty per cent (not forty) representation;

- iii) Like the KPP, the Muslim League representatives will be selected by the Provincial Working Committee (not by Jinnah).²⁶ The prolonged discussions which lasted about a week, ultimately broke down as Jinnah did not accept the demands (particularly the abolition of the zamindari system) of the Krishak Praja Party²⁷ and for him, it was not ‘practical politics’.^{27a} The question of ‘no nomination’ by Jinnah was another *sine qua non* for the KPP.

In the meantime, however, the Krishak Praja Party, in the interest of the Bengali Muslims, agreed on 1 September 1936, to join the Bengal Muslim League Parliamentary Board (on a quota of fifteen) provided that

- i) the ideals, aims and objectives of the Krishak Praja Party be accepted and implemented;
- ii) the KPP be allowed to maintain its separate identity and make publicity of its own policy and programme; and
- iii) the KPP be given a free hand in selecting the non-Muslim candidates in the coming Legislative Assembly elections.²⁸ Fazlul Huq said: “I wish to make on point absolutely clear, whichever may be the group or groups with which we may consent to cooperate, the Nikhil Banga Krishak Praja Samity will always maintain its separate entity and be prepared to carry on its propaganda for the purpose of carrying out its own aims and objects. It is only with regard to the Legislature that we are adopting our present policy. As regards the Non-Moslem candidates our election board will continue to take necessary steps for the nomination of candidates and supporting them at the time of elections”.²⁹

The first meeting of the Bengal Muslim League Parliamentary Board was called on 8 September 1936³⁰ at the Calcutta residence of the Nawab Habibullah of Dacca to elect the Leaders of the Parliamentary Board and to determine the policies, programmes and terms of the election manifesto.³¹ But this meeting was convened without making any consultation with Fazlul Huq against which he issued a Press release characterizing the arbitrary action of the convener of the meeting as “a fresh and deliberate attempt to insult the Krishak Praja Party and to make them feel that as *krishaks* and *prajas* they must submit here and elsewhere to what the Nawabs and

zamindars may choose to decide on their behalf'.³² In spite of the fact, Fazlul Huq and thirteen other members of the Krishak Praja Party attended the meeting which was presided over by Maulvi Abdul Karim. In this meeting, deliberations went on to minimize the differences between the Muslim League and the Krishak Praja Party.³³ But, when Shamsuddin Ahmed, the Secretary of the Krishak Praja Party, began to read out the aims, objectives and programmes of his party, some followers of Jinnah strongly opposed him and created an unruly scene claiming the exclusion of the demand for the abolition of the zamindari system without compensation from the programmes of the Krishak Praja Party.³⁴ The representatives of the KPP refused to compromise and left out of the meeting.³⁵ Fazlul Huq accused the non-Bengali Muslim businessmen in Calcutta responsible for the failure to achieve unity among the Bengali Muslims and declared that he would not allow that community to 'control the destiny of Bengali Muslims'.³⁶ The editorial column of *The Amrita Bazar Patrika* dated 9 September 1936, remarked that though Jinnah on 17 August 1936, had agreed to accept the KPP as one of the constituents of the Bengal Muslim League Parliamentary Board (BMLPB), his followers preferred to forget it in the very first meeting of the Board and took unprecedented steps to disrupt the meeting. Therefore, Fazlul Huq could not be blamed for such an untoward incident.³⁷ It was also confirmed by Maulvi Abdul Karim, the President of the said meeting who held Jinnahite Muslim League leader Abul Hasan Ispahani, responsible for such an unwanted incident.³⁸

The Nawab Bahadur of Dacca sent a letter to Fazlul Huq mentioning the date of the next meeting and requested him to attend the same. In its reply, Fazlul Huq wrote that until and unless the Bengal Muslim League Parliamentary Board (BMLPB) did recognize his party as one of the constituents of the Board and accept its separate entity and, at the same time agree to implement the aims and programme of the Krishak Praja Party, the possibility of his joining the Board meeting was out of question.³⁹ This meeting of the BMLPB was, however, held at the residence of Nawab Bahadur of Dacca on September 10, 1936. In this meeting, the Nawab Bahadur of Dacca was elected as President, Adamji Haji Dand as Treasurer, Abul Hasan Ispahani and Hossain Sahid Suhrawardy as Joint – Secretaries of the BMLPB. During this time, H.S. Suhrawardy came into close contact with M.A. Jinnah and he became a very prominent leader of the Muslim League as he was very much trusted, supported

and backed by Jinnah.⁴⁰ Interestingly, in parallel to the BMLPB, Fazlul Huq also formed the Krishak Praja Parliamentary Board (KPPB) with Shamsuddin Ahmed and, Later, Rajab Ali Tarafdar as its Secretary. Fazlul Huq himself became the President of the KPPB.⁴¹ He did not trust the All-India Muslim League (AIML) leadership and in a Long Press statement he declared: “My fight is with landlords, capitalists, and holders of vested interests. The landlords are 95 per cent Hindus, and capitalists and others are about 98 per cent Hindus. Far from helping me, they are out to throw all obstacles in my way..... I am fighting for a satisfactory solution of the bread problem or, in other words, of the ‘dal bhat’ problem of Bengal, and also for the thorough overhauling of the Tenancy Laws in Bengal so as to give some relief to agriculturists. This can not be effected by the Muslim League Parliamentary Board, because in that Board out of 28 members, as many as 11 are non-Bengalis who hail from Ispahan (an obvious reference to M.A.H. Ispahani, the moving spirit behind the BPML and a close associate of Jinnah’s), Tehran, Badkshan, and Samarkand and other places outside Bengal, and 89 per cent are landlords and capitalists. These landlords and capitalists can not certainly join us in this fight, because they are the very people with whom we will have to carry on a life and death struggle. All talks of Muslim unity and solidarity for merely political ends are worse than useless when it is remembered that the Mussalman cultivating classes constitute more than 90 per cent of the total Muslim population of Bengal, and it is, therefore, their interest which must be fundamental in any scheme we may lay down for ourselves, or for the sake of any ideal which we may seek to achieve. On the fundamental question of the interest of the Projas and the Krishaks, the tillers of the soil who sweat so that others might enjoy the fruits of their labour, there is no difference whatever between the Hindus and the Mussalmans, for their interests are welded into one another, together they stand and together, we are confident, that shall triumph”.⁴²

Meanwhile, Abul Hasan Ispahani and H.S. Suhrawardy tried their best to diminish the influence of Fazlul Huq on the Bengal Muslim League Parliamentary Board. Both of them realized the fact that the poor Muslims were greatly influenced by the aims, objectives and programmes of the Krishak Praja Party. In order to create confusion among the poor masses, they on 12 September 1936, evolved a manifesto of the League Parliamentary Board imitating the aims and programme of the KPP and distributed it to publish in the newspaper. The manifesto reflected that the Muslim

League would try to abolish the Permanent Settlement if possible and included several demands protecting the interests of the Muslims.⁴³ The Nawabs and Khan Bahadurs of the League, in this way, tried to get popularity and success in the forthcoming election. Not only that, the BMLPB raised certain allegations against Fazlul Huq and charged him with betraying the Muslim cause in league with the Hindus. The leaders of the League Parliamentary Board also accused that the Hindus extended financial support to Fazlul Huq. In reply, Fazlul Huq completely rejected all these allegations and strongly demanded that he had not taken any kind of financial assistance from a single Hindu and gave an open challenge to the accusers to prove their allegation.⁴⁴ He also gave a call that the Nawab Bahadur of Dacca, Sir Nazimuddin, Nawab Farooqi and other zamindar members of the League Parliamentary Board would have to make an announcement repealing the practices of *Nazrana* and *Salami* which would testify that they were quite sympathetic towards the poor peasants. Huq reminded them that all big promises would bring no fruit if they were not put into action in reality.⁴⁵ He also urged that all the members of the Muslim League Parliamentary Board should recognize the right of land ownership of the poor tenants and accordingly an amendment bill should be brought before the Council. If these were materialized, Fazlul Huq assured that he would stop the independent activities of the Krishak Praja Party. He gave this promise to Jinnah and his followers of Bengal.⁴⁶

But on the other hand, so many allegations were raised and rumours were in the air against Fazlul Huq. It was publicized that Fazlul Huq was himself involved in a conspiracy for getting a ministry. In its reply, he explained that it should not be treated as an offence simply because nobody could raise a question on his ability and competence of becoming a minister. He demanded that he was the only living personality who had tirelessly tried his best to introduce administrative reforms in between 1908 and 1920 and also till the first two sessions of the Round Table Conference. According to him, if he was successful in becoming a minister, it would be greater gain of his own community and his country than his individual gain and interest.⁴⁷ Fazlul Huq categorically stated that if he was hungry for becoming a minister, his best policy should have been to join in the opponent party, the leaders of which were very eager to make an alliance with him and were very much willing to give him a seat in the ministerial cabinet as a reward of his desertion. But he was not

provoked rather determined on his principle and he had no hesitation in rejecting such offer.⁴⁸ Fazlul Huq also argued that his critics had either already forgotten his past service to his own community or they were committing self-deception. He reminded them that there was no one in Bengal except him who had given so much of time and labour for the protection of the interests of the Muslims. According to him, among the hundred Muslim government employees, fifty were indebted to him for their respective services.⁴⁹ But his critics did not stop there. Some of his contemporary politicians of Bengal, reminded Fazlul Huq of the treachery of Mirjafar and the dangers of a conspiracy with the Hindus. He vehemently opposed their allegation and said that he was not at all involved in any conspiracy with any one. Fazlul Huq remarked: "I have been reminded of the treachery of Mirjafar and the dangers of a conspiracy with the Hindus. In the first place, I am not in conspiracy with anybody. Secondly, Mirjafar's chief co-conspirator was not the Hindus. The Hindus played the second fiddle. I make a present of this fact to the Muslim Knights and Nawabs who are banking upon cooperation with Clive Street in the future Legislative Council".⁵⁰ But all these arguments and explanations did not satisfy the then Muslim League leaders and infuriated Jinnah then sought an explanation from Fazlul Huq on 4 October 1936 alleging that Huq was involved in anti-League activities.⁵¹ Fazlul Huq made an aggressive reply: "You have the impertinence to ask for an explanation from me. Let me remind you that I have been associated with the Muslim League for a longer period than any other Muslim politician in India now living.... You are now the President of the League, but I held this very position as long ago as 1919 and I presided at the Delhi Session of the All India Muslim League in 1918.... You are not working for Muslim solidarity at all but seem to be playing a deep game.... The League Parliamentary Board is a creature of your fancy and is breeding dissension in Muslim ranks.... let me assure you, that the Bengal Presidency Muslim League treated your Parliamentary Board with deserved contempt. The Bengal Muslim League (is) co-operating with the Praja Party and have severed connection with your Parliamentary Board. Your conduct in Bengal has surprised everyone.... I call upon you to explain your conduct...."⁵² Getting this reply, Jinnah became infuriated and removed Fazlul Huq in early November 1936 from membership of the Central Parliamentary Board of the League on the charge of 'insubordination, and disloyalty to and defiance of the principles and policies of the Central (League) Board'.⁵³ Not only that, the leading newspapers like *The Azad* and *The Star of India*, vehemently

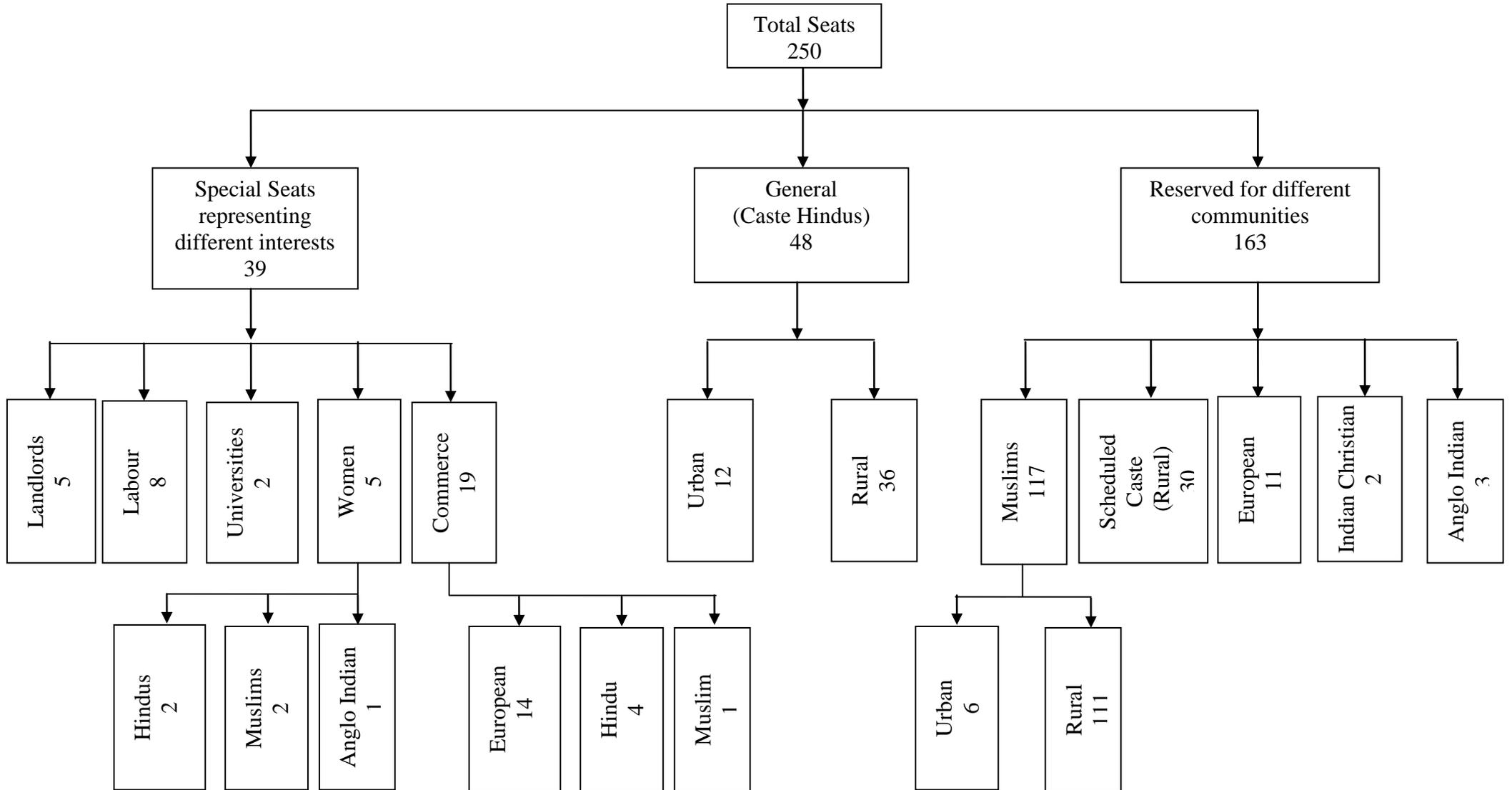
attacked Fazlul Huq for making conspiracy with the Hindus which went against the interests of the Muslims in Bengal.⁵⁴ In *The Star of India* on 17 October 1936, it was published that Fazlul Huq made an alliance with the Hindu zamindars for the forthcoming elections. In reply he said: “My attention has been drawn to an announcement made in the ‘Star of India’ dated 17 Oct. to the effect that I am going to join the Hindu landlords in the forthcoming election and that the Star of India is reliably informed that Maulavi Ashrafuddin Choudhury, Prof. Jitendralal Banerjee and myself have submitted a written letter to the Maharaja of Burdwan stating certain terms under which the Proja Party is willing to co-operate with the Hindu Zamindar group I declare more emphatically that it is absolutely false that there are secret negotiations between the leaders of the Proja Party and the leaders of the Hindu Zamindar Party, that it is absolutely false that I signed any paper with anybody either on behalf of myself or others.....”⁵⁵ Thus on the eve of the 1937 Assembly elections, the schism in Bengal Muslim politics was complete, both internally and externally and Fazlul Huq decided to take part in the ensuing provincial elections on their own.⁵⁶

The Elections of 1937:

- a. **The composition of Provincial Legislature:-** The Government of India Act of 1919 set up a unicameral Legislature in all the nine provinces. But the Government of India Act, 1935 provided a bicameral Legislature consisting of a Legislative Council and a Legislative Assembly in six Indian provinces (Assam, Bengal, Bihar, Bombay, Madras and the United Provinces) and a unicameral Legislature in the rest five (Punjab, the Central Provinces, North-West Frontier Province, Orissa and Sind).
- b. **Distribution of seats in the various Legislative Assemblies under the Government of India Act, 1935:-** The number of seats in the various Legislative Assemblies was: 50 in the North-West Frontier Province, 60 each in Orissa and Sind, 108 in Assam, 112 in the Central Provinces, 152 in Bihar, 175 each in the Punjab and Bombay, 215 in Madras, 228 in the United Provinces and 250 in Bengal.

- c. **Distribution of seats in the Bengal Provincial Legislature under the Act of 1935:-** It had two chambers, the Legislative Council or the 'Upper House' and the Legislative Assembly or the 'Lower House' to which the Cabinet was made responsible. The number of seats in the Bengal Legislative Council was fixed not less than 63 and not more than 65 and they were divided as: General (Hindus) Urban – 2, Rural – 8; Muslims Urban – 1, Rural – 16; Europeans – 3; Candidates elected by members of the Legislative Assembly – 27; Government nominated – 6 to 8.⁵⁷ The total number of seats in the Bengal Legislative Assembly or the 'Lower House' was fixed at 250 and these 250 seats were divided into 17 categories such as: 1. General Hindus, 2. Scheduled Castes, 3. Muslims, 4. Europeans, 5. Anglo-Indians, 6. Indian Christians, 7. Landlords, 8. Universities, 9. Labour, 10. Commerce, 11. Women etc. The composition of the Bengal Assembly (consisting of 250 seats) under the Government of India Act, 1935 is given below:

Table III. 1: Composition of the Bengal Assembly under the Government of India Act, 1935



Source: Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal, 1937-1947*, p. 69.

This type of composition of seats in the Bengal Legislative Assembly under the Government of India Act, 1935, helped Fazlul Huq and his Krishak Praja Party as the Party under his able leadership, gained more popularity in rural areas (where the seats were greater in number) than in urban areas (where the seats were nominal). On the other hand, the Congress was not very much benefitted as the General Hindu Seats were divided into Caste Hindus and Scheduled Castes. But the Muslim League got an edge as the number of Muslim seats was heavily increased which prompted the Party to organize its own strength and make a bid for capturing power in Bengal. The Christians on the other hand, who formed only 0.36% of the population were entitled to 31 seats which ultimately helped the European group to be a deciding factor in the formation of future coalition ministries in Bengal.

- d. **Voting Rights:** The Government of India Act, 1935 made a fundamental change in Bengal politics by lowering the franchise though it still remained tied to property qualifications. Previously, under the Government of India Act, 1919, only those paying an income tax on the minimum income of Rs.10,000 per annum or those paying a minimum land revenue of Rs.750 per annum, were entitled to vote. It was found that only 3% of the total population was able to cast their votes. But under the Act of 1935, the franchise was extended to those people who paid the motor vehicles tax, or income tax or a tax or licence fee to the Calcutta Corporation, or municipal tax of not less than annas 8 or road and public works tax of not less than annas 8 or the Chaukidari tax of not less than annas 6 per year⁵⁸ and passed the matriculation or an equivalent examination. Women having all these qualifications were given the right to vote. As a result, the franchise raised upto almost 14%⁵⁹ (although the figure was very meager keeping in mind the total number of population). The number of Muslim voters increased almost upto 600% in comparison to 1919. The total number of voters in Bengal went upto 66,95,483 (which was 13.4% of the total population) including 60,00,000 female voters. Out of the total voters (66,95,483) in Bengal, 34,58,364 were Muslim voters (which was 51.65%)⁶⁰ and the minimum age for obtaining the voting right was fixed at 20 years. The extension of franchise in Bengal is reflected in the table given below:

Table III.2: **Extension of Franchise in Bengal from 1920 to 1936**

Year	Total Voters in Bengal	% of the total population
1920	9,96,316	2.2
1923	10,21,300	2.2
1926	11,53,212	2.4
1929	13,44,316	2.6
1936	66,95,483	13.4

Source: Enayetur Rahim, *Provincial Autonomy in Bengal (1937 – 1943)*, pp. 30-31.

But it was written in *The Statesman* that: “candidates seeking elections to the Bengal Legislature are now seeking the confidence of 6,662,654 persons entitled to exercise the franchise. This is very much wider franchise than has been previously existed. Altogether, only 13.3% of the population is yet able to vote”.⁶¹ It further pointed out: “The six million voters whose support these candidates seek are spread over a total of 77,521 square miles. Bengal thus provides the largest electorate of any province in India spread over the widest field”.⁶²

- e. **Extent of the Assembly Constituency:-** In 1937 elections, the number of voters and the areas of constituencies were not the same throughout Bengal. The biggest constituency (in terms of voters) was Faridpur (which was a Hindu seat having 1,37,478 voters) and the smallest constituency was Bankura (which was a Muslim seat having 5,158 voters). The largest rural constituency (in terms of geographical areas) was Midnapore (which was a Muslim seat having an area of 5,245 square miles) and the smallest was Munshiganj (which was a Muslim seat having an area of 126 square miles). The average of voters per Muslim seats was 29,596 and in its counterpart (i.e. in Hindu seats), the figure was 37,606 which was quite high in comparison to other provinces of India.⁶³ It should be mentioned here that in the elections of 1937, the Muslims would cast their votes only in Muslim seats and their counterpart i.e. the Hindus similarly would apply their voting right only in those seats assigned to them. As a result, the Muslim League (which was completely a Muslim organization) was able to contest only in those seats reserved for the Muslims and the Congress (which had its support base among the Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs etc.) was able to nominate its

candidates in different categories of seats which gave the Congress better opportunities and higher chances of success. The election areas, number of seats and voters are shown in the table given below:

Table III. 3: Election Areas, No. of Seats and Number of Voters in the Elections of 1937

Election Areas	No. of Seats	Number of Voters
General (Urban)	12	3,85,347
General (Rural)	66	24,26,288
Muslims(Urban)	6	55,538
Muslims(Rural)	111	34,02,826
Anglo-Indian	3	8,525
European	11	14,175
Indian Christian	2	10,038
Commerce	19	926
Landlords	5	1,951
Universities	2	1,479
Labour	8	3,13,400
Women	5	74,990
Total	250	66,95,483

Source: J.H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal*, p. 292.

- f. **Contesting Political Parties:-** In the 1937 Bengal Assembly elections, there were three major political parties, viz. the Bengal Provincial Congress, the League Parliamentary Board (which virtually came to be meant the League in Bengal) and the Krishak Praja Party (KPP). It should be noted here that in the Assembly elections of 1937, the Bengal Provincial Muslim League (BPML) did not contest in its name, rather it extended its support to the KPP led by Fazlul Huq. In the Muslim constituencies, the principal contestants were the KPP, the League Parliamentary Board (which fought each other for gaining political leadership of the Muslim community in Bengal) and a large number of Independents. There were other Muslim political organizations like the Jamiat-

i-Ulema-i-Bangla (an Islamic religio-political organization), the Jamiat-i-Talaba-i-Arabia, Bengal (All Bengal Arabic Student Association), the Dhaka District Muslim Federation (founded in 1930 with the Nawab of Dacca, Khwaja Habibullah as its President and Khwaja Shahabuddin as its Secretary),⁶⁴ All Bengal Muslim Student Association (formed in 1933 with Abdul Waseque as its Secretary and Khan Bahadur Asaduzzaman as its President)⁶⁵ etc. which did not contest in the elections rather extended their support to the League Parliamentary Board.⁶⁶ Along with these, the Tippera Krishak Samity, a locally based pro-congress militant faction of the Krishak Praja Party, also contested in a few seats under the leadership of Asimuddin. In the Hindu constituencies, the principal contestants were the Congress, Hindu Nationalist Party, Hindu Mahasabha and a huge number of Independents.

- g. **Number of Contestants:-** In the Bengal Assembly elections of 1937, there were 642 candidates who were contesting in 250 seats. As 2 Muslim League candidates, 1 KPP candidate, 6 Independent candidates and 38 candidates participating in the Special Seats, elected as 'uncontested' candidates, actually there were 203 seats in which finally 595 candidates contested against each other. Although the Muslim League was able to give its candidates in all the Urban seats (6), it failed to give its candidates in all the Rural seats (111) and it was finally able to give 73 candidates in 72 Rural constituencies. The Krishak Praja Party, on the other hand was able to give its candidates in 3 Urban seats and the Party ultimately filed its nomination in 72 Rural seats (having 73 candidates). Surprisingly, the Independents contested in 4 Urban seats and 176 Independent candidates filed their nominations in 87 Rural seats. In this election, the Tippera Krishak Samity also contested in 10 Muslim constituencies. It clearly suggests that all the Muslim political parties, failed to give their candidates in 117 Muslim constituencies. It is to be added here that the Muslim league failed to give a single candidate in the districts like Nadia, Murshidabad, Bagura, Pabna, Noakhali, Chittagong and Tippera.⁶⁷

Election Manifestoes:-

- (i) **The Muslim League:-** In June 1936, the Central Parliamentary Board of the AIML prepared a 14-point *Manifesto* which included: “(1) protection of the religious rights of the Muslims; (2) repeal of all repressive laws; (3) resistance to all measures detrimental to the interests of India; (4) reduction of heavy cost of administrative machinery; (5) nationalization of Indian Army and reduction of military expenditure; (6) encouragement of the development of industries, including cottage industries; (7) regulation of currency and exchange; (8) the social, educational and economic uplift of the rural population; (9) relief of agricultural indebtedness; (10) free and compulsory elementary education; (11) protection and promotion of the Urdu language and Script; (12) reduction of the heavy burden of taxation; and the last but not the least (14) creation of a healthy public opinion and general political consciousness throughout the country”.⁶⁸
- The League Parliamentary Board accepted all the 14 points prepared by the Central Parliamentary Board and at the same time, it had also drawn up a 25-point programme setting out the special needs of Bengal. These points included: “(1) protection of the religious and other rights of the Muslims; (2) eradication of Permanent Settlement evils; (3) repealing the Bengal Tenancy act (1928) with a view to (a) repealing the provisions to enhancement of rent, transfer fees and pre-emption, and (b) securing reduction of rent; (4) relief of agricultural indebtedness through the enforcement of the Bengal Agricultural Debtors’ Act; (5) protection of the rural population from illegal exaction made by zamindars and *mahajan*; (6) raising of the price of jute; (7) marketing facilities for agricultural commodities; (8) an agricultural survey of Bengal for crop planning; (9) arrangement for dairy and poultry farming; (10) resuscitation of the dead/dying rivers and tanks; (11) supply of drinking water and better medical facilities; (12) introduction of compulsory and free primary education; (13) amendment of the Calcutta University act; (14) establishment of a Board of Secondary Education; (15) development of technical, industrial and agricultural education; (16) religious instruction for Muslim boys in schools and improvement of the *madrassah* education; (17) raising Muslim representation in the public services in proportion to their numerical strength; (18) solution of unemployment problem; (19) development of cottage industries; (20)

development of fisheries; (21) financial assistance for the development of industries; (22) adoption of a preferential policy favouring the use of Bengali and Indian products; (23) adoption of a well-defined labour policy including payment of a fair wage, provision for insurance, better housing and educational and medical facilities; (24) reduction in the cost of administration; and (25) amendment of the Calcutta Municipal Act to safeguard the Muslim interest”.⁶⁹

- (ii) **The Krishak Praja Party (KPP):-** At the fourth Annual session, held in Dacca in July 1936, the Krishak Praja Party decided to participate in the Assembly elections believing the fact that ‘so long as full control over the administration of the country was not in the grip of the *prajas*, the complete amelioration of the condition of the masses would be a mere dream’.⁷⁰ At that session, the KPP adopted a 14-point election *Manifesto* which were as follows: “(1) abolition of the Zamindari system (Permanent Settlement) without compensation; (2) establishment of proprietary right of the cultivators in the land; (3) reduction of land rent by fixing a maximum rate for each class of land; (4) annulment of landlords’ right of pre-emption; (5) abolition of *nazar-salami* and criminal punishment for all illegal exactions, such as, *abwab*; (6) solution of the problem of agricultural indebtedness of cultivators by constituting Debt Settlement Boards and giving long-term loans at not more than 4 per cent interest per annum; (7) restriction of jute cultivation and fixation of the minimum price of jute; (8) resuscitation of dead and dying rivers and improvement of agriculture, trade, commerce and sanitation; (9) establishment of one hospital in each *thana* (local police area); (10) full self-government in Bengal; (11) introduction of compulsory and free primary education; (12) reduction of the cost of administration; (13) fixation of minister’s salary at Rs.1000/- per month; and (14) repeal of all repressive laws, and release of all political prisoners”.⁷¹

If we make a comparison of the election manifestoes of the League Parliamentary Board and the Krishak Praja Party, it would reveal that both these parties had ‘common minimum programme’ like the introduction of compulsory and free primary education, reduction of the cost of administration and land rent, raising the price of jute and abolition of *nazar-salami* and other illegal exactions such as

abwab and pre-emption etc. Although both the KPP and the Muslim League agreed on the fact that operation of the Permanent Settlement and Tenancy Acts in Bengal had prevented the economic growth and development of the province, they differed on its solution. While the KPP strongly demanded for the abolition of the Permanent Settlement without compensation, the League Board was reluctant to take any drastic measure in this regard and concentrated only on the eradication of its evils. Fazlul Huq put forward his Party stand in a press release where he categorically stated: “To all these measures (i.e. measures incorporated in the *Manifesto*) zamindars, capitalists, and those holding vested interests will offer strenuous opposition. It is, therefore, inevitable that there will be a division of the country into two main classes, viz., those of the rich and influential on the one side and the poor and helpless on the other. We represent the latter⁷² Interestingly, the KPP ignored some important demands of the Muslim community like the amendment of Calcutta Municipal Act and Calcutta University Act, establishment of a Secondary Education Board and for proportionate representation of the Muslims in the public services which were incorporated in the League Board *Manifesto*. On the other hand, unlike the KPP, the League Board did not make any specific commitment to the fixation of minister’s salary and the release of political prisoners. Above all, while the League Board emphasized the need for Muslim unity and solidarity, the KPP was non-communal in its approach, initiating a programme essentially for the peasantry irrespective of religion and considered the issue of Muslim solidarity as a “false cry”.⁷³ It is interesting to note that the KPP was not at all interested to contest a single Hindu or a Scheduled Caste seat although the Party had many caste Hindu and Namasudra supporters and rank holders. Rather it was only interested in getting the Muslim votes and tried to represent the ‘true’ interests of the Muslims of Bengal.

(iii) **The Congress:-** Although the Congress criticized and rejected the Government of India Act, 1935 ‘in its entirety’ and regarded that it could not produce ‘substantial benefits’, the All India Congress Committee (AICC) resolved to contest the provincial election ‘in order to prevent the operation of forces calculated to strengthen alien domination and exploitation’⁷⁴ and obtain *Swaraj*. The Congress election *Manifesto* identified extreme poverty, unemployment and indebtedness of the peasantry as the most burning problems of the country and believed that ‘only independence can give us the power to solve our economic

and social problems and end the exploitation of our masses'.⁷⁵ As instructed by the AICC, the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee (BPCC) issued a supplementary election *Manifesto* (on the eve of the Assembly elections) which proposed for: "(1) amendment of the land tenure system in the interests of the peasants; (2) reduction of indebtedness of the cultivators; (3) reduction of rent, revenue and the burden of taxation; (4) increase in the productivity of the land; (5) credit facilities for the cultivators; (6) development of small industries and arrangement for proper marketing; (7) development of industrial, commercial and cultural education; (8) building of all industrial and commercial ventures on national lines; and (9) development of waterways and irrigation channels and sanitation of the province as well as cheaper methods of transport".⁷⁶ At the same time, the BPCC in its election *Manifesto*, put emphasis also on the introduction of compulsory and free primary education, repeal of all repressive laws, release of all political prisoners, reduction of the cost of administration, fixation of maximum salary at Rs.500/- per month etc. Although the BPCC put forward all these need-based demands, the Bengal Congress was too divided at that time and isolation of most of the Muslim leaders after 1935, made the Party almost a 'Hindu organization'. As a result, the Bengal Congressites neither had courage 'to contest Muslim seats nor could any Muslim risk to fight election on Congress ticket'.⁷⁷ At the same time, the election *Manifesto* of the BPCC, failed to attract the Bengal peasantry as it did not raise the demand for the abolition of the Permanent Settlement.

Apart from these there were other political organizations like the Hindu Mahasabha, the Hindu Nationalist Party (which issued its Election *Manifesto* with a 9 – point programme like- to fight against the Communal Award, to promote friendly relations with other communities, to place the demand for release of detained prisoners, 'to bring about a more intimate and cordial relationship between landlords and tenants', to combat the problem of unemployment, to restructure and reorganized the educational system of the province and the like)^{77a} and trade union organizations like the Bengal Trade Union Federation (whose Election *Manifesto* duly represented 17 workers' and 11 agricultural labourers' demands)^{77b} also came out to contest the elections with specific objectives.

Election Funds:-

In order to contest in the elections of 1937, it was absolutely necessary for the leading political parties to generate their election funds and in this matter, the Muslim League was far ahead than its counterpart i.e. the Krishak Praja Party. The major sources of funds for the League Board were the large scale subscriptions received from the zamindars and businessmen. When the United Muslim Party, the forerunner of the League Board, was formed in May 1936, five zamindars and one professional who were its founder-members, subscribed Rs.27,500/- to the party fund.⁷⁸ The inclusion of non-Bengali Muslim business magnates of Calcutta in the League Parliamentary Board, largely contributed to boost its election fund. The election of Hasan Ispahani as one of the Joint-Secretaries of the League Board and Sir Adamjee Hajee Dawood as its Treasurer was very significant from this particular aspect. Not only that, Jinnah before his departure from Calcutta on 26 August 1936, met with the members of the newly formed League Parliamentary Board and made an appeal to subscribe Rs.50,000/- to its funds for conducting the elections in the province.⁷⁹ Apart from that, both Khwaja Nazimuddin and K.G.M. Farooqui, two prominent League leaders, were in the Government – Nazimuddin in the Governor's Executive Council and Farooqui a Minister. Their personal influence also helped the League to flourish the party fund. Moreover, the Calcutta Khilafat Committee had a good fund at its disposal that became available for the League Board. Along with these, there was also financial backing from the Calcutta Muslim Chamber of Commerce. It should be mentioned here that the candidates of the League Board in general, economically were in a far better position and were able to bear a considerable portion of the election expenses of their own.

Financially, the Krishak Praja Party was completely unmatched for the League Parliamentary Board (as the KPP had a very limited fund) and the Party did not raise any central election funds for mitigating the election expenses. Although the KPP had the financial backing of a few zamindars, *taluqdars* and rich people, that support was not at all sufficient enough to meet the colossal election expenses. Further, most of its elections candidates who had middle class background, could hardly afford any lump sum amount from their own pockets to the general election fund. So the Party had to bank on the personal popularity and charisma of its leaders. But the leaders of the

League Parliamentary Board and a section of the Muslim Press alleged that the members of the KPP received money from the Congress and the Hindus 'who were said to be out to cause disunity within the Muslim community'⁸⁰ and wanted Fazlul Huq to win against the League. The base of this accusation was not confirmed but it is true that neither the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee (BPCC) set up candidates in Muslim constituencies nor did the KPP contest any Scheduled Caste seats on its ticket and these two political parties were reluctant to poach on each others territory.

Election Symbols:

Each contestant participating at the Bengal provincial elections, was given his or her election symbol. The objects which were easily found in the rural areas and the people were very much familiar with those objects, were picked up as election symbols like the plough, spade, hurricane, hookka (tobacco-pipe), bullock-cart, mango tree etc. As the Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) which is commonly used nowadays for election purposes in India indicating the candidate's name on the left hand side and his/her election symbol on the right hand side of the EVM was not at all available at that time and there was no system of issuance of the Ballot Paper (indicating the candidate's name and his or her election symbol), the voters usually collected their ballot slips from the Polling Officers and dropped those slips in the specific ballot boxes (which were kept in the voting and reflected each candidate's election symbol). At the end of voting hours, the Polling Officers collected the ballot slips from each ballot box (having the impression of election symbol of each contestant) and counted one by one. The ballot box in which highest number of ballot slips were found in favour of a particular candidate, he or she was declared 'elected'.⁸¹

Election Campaign:

The submission of nomination papers was started in December 1936 and the leading political parties participating at the elections finalized their nominees in the first week of January 1937 and concentrated in the election campaign. In the Muslim Constituencies, there was a direct contest between the League Parliamentary Board and the Krishak Praja Party and both these parties had certain advantages over each

other. The first and foremost advantage which the League Parliamentary Board enjoyed, was that the Board had sufficient funds whereas the financial condition of the KPP was unsatisfactory and it stood nowhere to be compared with that of the League: Secondly, the defection of Akram Khan, Tamizuddin Khan (who were the prominent leaders of the Praja Movement), and Khan Bahadur Abdul Momin from the KPP and their joining the League Board strengthened the League and weakened the KPP. Thirdly, almost the entire Muslim press supported the League propaganda and started vigorous campaign in its favour. The League publicized its political agenda mainly through the *Azad* (Bengali daily) and the *Star of India* (English daily). Under Akram Khan's able editorship, the *Azad* (which had at that time the highest circulation among the Bengali Muslims), became the mouthpiece of the League Board in Bengal. Akram Khan was also the owner of another weekly *Muhammadi*. Along with these, there were a large number Urdu Weeklies and Monthlies which were engaged in popularizing the Election *Manifesto* of the League Board among the Urdu-speaking Muslims of Calcutta and suburbs. On the other hand, the KPP had only one weekly called *Chashi* (Peasant), published from Mymensingh – a district town in East Bengal. On certain occasions, the Hindu press supported the KPP against the League Board which gave the League and the Muslim press a golden opportunity to criticize the KPP as the 'paid agents' of the Hindus. Fourthly, the League Board's slogan of Muslim solidarity had a tremendous impact upon the righteous Muslims of Bengal. Last but not least, at the time of elections, Nazimuddin, a prominent leader of the League Board, was in the Governor's Executive Council and by virtue of his post, he was in a position to utilize the Government machinery and his power and position in favour of the League Board candidates. He also spent a huge amount of money, nearly three times as much as Fazlul Huq.

On the other hand, the KPP also enjoyed certain advantages. The first and foremost advantage (which the KPP had), was its leader Fazlul Huq who became extremely popular among the masses (for his leadership quality and extraordinary eloquence) and the people in general, affectionately called him 'Huq Saheb'. He was an asset for the Praja Party candidates who used his popularity and charisma for gaining success in the elections. Secondly, most of the KPP candidates in the elections of 1937, were not 'outsiders' in their constituencies, who used to address the election meetings and common gatherings in local dialects which attracted the rural

people who felt very homely with them and mixed and interacted with them more freely and spontaneously. On the other hand, with the exception of Akram Khan, none of the prominent leaders of the League Board (who were mainly Urdu speaking), ‘felt at home in a predominantly Bengali-speaking gathering’.⁸² Thirdly, the election *Manifesto* of the Krishak Praja Party had become very popular among the rural masses than League Board *Manifesto*, particularly the KPP’s demand for the abolition of the Zamindari system without compensation. Not only that, Fazlul Huq promised everyone to provide *dal-bhat* (rice and pulses) which became a very significant slogan of the KPP in its election campaign and attracted a vast audience including a large number of newly enfranchised rural people who only dreamt of eating *dal-bhat* (which was according to them, the most important subsistence of living) regularly. Fourthly, the KPP had a large band of dedicated workers (particularly in the districts where the Proja movement was very strong), whose sincerity, simplistic approach and door-to-door activities, covering mile after mile on foot, talking to the peasants in their own language, had greater impact than the efforts of the ‘hired’ workers of the Muslim League who talked ‘in terms of religion and enemies of Islam’.⁸³ It should be kept in mind that the KPP workers never challenged talk of Muslim solidarity, rather they emphasized that this unity or solidarity should be attained at “the door of peasants and never at the palace of zamindars”.⁸⁴ According to them, it was ridiculous to talk about unity in a village between a Muslim zamindar and a Muslim praja, between a Muslim money-leader and a Muslim debtor. So they argued that it should be the duty of the elitist and high-placed Muslims to ‘come down from their pedestal and join the peasants for the sake of unity’.⁸⁵

Certain dramatic political developments at this time took place in Bengal which created a stir among the voters and generated their interest in favour of the KPP. Dr. R. Ahmed gave an open challenge to Nazimuddin to contest against Fazlul Huq from any constituency and this ‘battle royal’ took place in Patuakhali constituency of the Dacca district – which was within the ‘zamindari’ area of Nazimuddin and was considered as the safest place for him. He was former Education Minister of Bengal (1929) and he was elected from that constituency twice in the past. On the other hand, Fazlul Huq (whose original constituency was Pirozepur), was an ‘outsider’ here except the fact that his ancestors came from the same area. But he showed his courage to fight against Nazimuddin from Patuakhali Muslim (rural)

constitency⁸⁶, the contest which was categorized as ‘the fourth battle of Panipat’^{86a} by B.D. Habibullah, one of the lieutenants of Fazlul Huq. He challenged the zamindari system on the one hand, and the Muslim League and the Government on the other. In the election campaign, Fazlul Huq assured that after being elected in this contest, he would abolish the zamindari of Nazimuddin and save the lives of the *krishaks* and *prajas* from the inhuman torture and massive exploitation of the Nawabs of Dacca and also of the money-lending classes.⁸⁷ This prompted the Nawab of Dacca to come forward in favour of Nazimuddin and participate in the election campaign against Fazlul Huq. Not only that, the Maulanas, Maulvis and Pirs from all over Bengal came down to Patuakhali and openly made appeals to the Muslims to vote for Nazimuddin for the sake of Islam⁸⁸ and Shah Sufi Maulana Abu Bakr Siddiqui, the famous Pir of Furfura and President of the Jamiat, issued the *fatwa* (religious ruling) in favour of Nazimuddin.⁸⁹ Maulana Abu Bakr highlighted the League Board as the ‘real Muslim praja samity’ and made appeal to the Muslims in general and to his disciples in particular, to cast their votes in favour of the League candidates. Even the Muslim students from the Punjab, U.P., N.W.F.P. and other provinces were brought to Bengal to canvass for Nazimuddin. “All the powers and influence of the Ahsan Manjil (Nawab’s palace) were poured into Nazimuddin’s campaign and even the Governor, Sir John Anderson, took unprecedented step by visiting Patuakhali and arguing voters to return the Khawaja”.⁹⁰ Against all these, Fazlul Huq also mobilized a huge number of party workers, students, *krishaks* and *prajas* and was able to bring a good number of Maulanas to participate in the election campaign in his favour and thus Patuakhali ‘attracted unprecedented interest’. In his election campaign Fazlul Huq captivated the hearts of the peasants by saying: “..... from now onwards begins the grim fight between the zamindars and capitalists on the one side and the poor people on the other You know much more than I do of the appalling misery that prevails in villages and how thousands are dying everyday in rural areas of Bengal in actual starvation and semi-starvation. The problem of ‘dal bhat’, some kind of coarse cloth to cover nudity is the problem of problems which stares us in the face and which must be solved immediately..... An obvious and immediate solution to the problem will be by effecting drastic economy in the cost of administration, by reducing taxation on the poor, by repeal of such taxation as tells heavily on the masses and by thorough overhauling the Bengal Tenancy Act and other Acts in the interest of the Raiyats....”⁹¹ Thereafter, he promised them that ‘by the grace of God’, he would

abolish zamindari in the shortest possible time.⁹² He also publicly declared that the 1937 elections would ‘determine whether there would be Bengali or non-Bengali *raj* in Bengal’.⁹³ It is to be mentioned here that M.A. Jinnah (who was invited by Ispahani in his letter dated 13 December 1936), also came to Bengal and engaged himself in canvassing for two weeks in favour of the Muslim League candidates in Calcutta, Dacca, Mymensingh, Comilla and Barisal and strongly criticized both the KPP and the Congress and made an appeal to the gathering not to believe in the election *Manifesto* of the KPP particularly its sensational promise to abolish the zamindari system. He said: “Men may promise to abolish the Permanent Settlement tomorrow. But in fact it is moonshine and a false promise.....”⁹⁴ At a public meeting in Calcutta where Ispahani was ‘facing a tough opposition’, Jinnah categorically stated: “.... I appeal to you in the name of the solidarity of the 80 million Muslims of India.... to see that those who create difference in your camp at this critical juncture are smashed and the flag of the Muslim League is carried into the Legislature.” In his political task, he was strongly supported by the Muslim press which considered the KPP candidates as the ‘paid agents’ of the Congress, Mahasabha etc. and warned the Muslims that ‘to vote for them is to cut your throat’.⁹⁵ During this election campaign, the *Star of India* gave a clarion call: ‘Muslim Voters, Beware! Do You Want Congressmen To Rule Bengal? If not-Send Fazlul Huq To The Wall: Smash Up The Praja Party’.⁹⁶ On the other hand, on the eve of the election, Fazlul Huq gave an emotional statement: “.....if unfortunately I am defeated, my defeat will be even more glorious than that of Napoleon at Waterloo. The forces of wealthy people arrayed against me....”⁹⁷

Elections of 1937:

The elections to the Bengal Legislative Assembly in 203 seats (as 47 seats were filled without contest) and Bengal Legislative Council in 19 seats (as 11 seats were filled without contest) were held in between 16 - 27 January 1937 and the by-election was held at the end of February 1937. In this election, 594 candidates contested for 203 seats in the Bengal Legislative Assembly out of which 120 candidates forfeited their deposit while in the Bengal Legislative Council, 50 candidates contested for 19 seats out of which 7 candidates forfeited their deposit.⁹⁸ In the Legislative Assembly, only 40.5% voters (i.e. 2,586,404) cast their votes and in the case of Legislative Council,

the figure was 46.6% (out of 12005, 5593 cast their votes).^{98a} Although there was special arrangement for the female voters, only 5.2% female voters used their voting right.^{98b}

Election Results:

In the 1937 elections, the party/group-wise position (as per official results) in the Bengal Legislative Assembly of 250 members was as follows: Congress - 52,⁹⁹ Independent (Hindu) - 39, Hindu Nationalist - 3, Hindu Mahasabha - 2, Independent (Muslim) - 43, League Parliamentary Board - 39, KPP - 36, Tippera Krishak Samity - 5, European Group - 25, Anglo-Indian - 4 and Indian Christian - 2.^{99a} It is clearly reflected in the table and diagram given below:

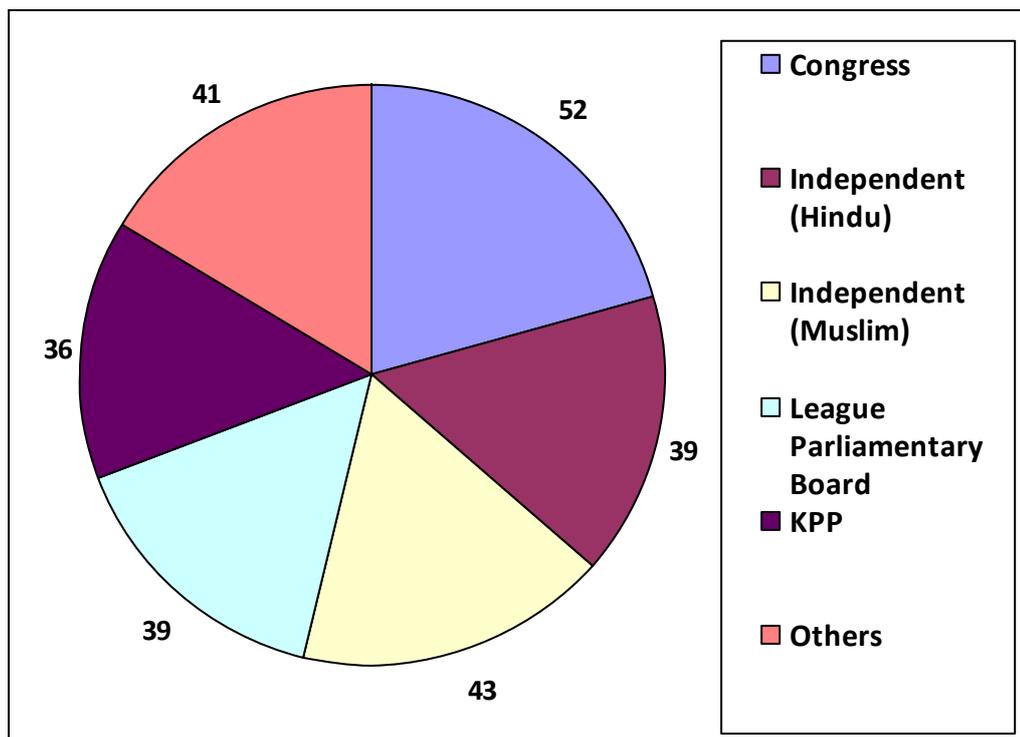
Table III.4: Results of the Elections to the Bengal Legislative Assembly held in January 1937

Name of the Party	No. of Seats Contested				No. of Seats Won ^a			
	Special Constituency	Urban	Rural	Total	Special Constituency	Urban	Rural	Total
Congress				54	5	11	36	52
Independent (Hindu)					9		6	15
Independent (Scheduled Castes)				128	3		21	24
Hindu Nationalist					1	1	1	03
Hindu Mahasabha							2	02
Independent (Muslim)	4 ^b	6	87	97	2		41(5)	43(5)
LPB ^c	4 ^d	6	72	82	4(1)	6(1)	29(4)	39(4)
KPP ^e		3	72	75			36(1)	36(1)
TKS ^f			10	10			5	05
European Group								25
Anglo-Indian								04
Indian Christian								02
Total								250

- a. Number of seats won uncontested in brackets
- b. 2 special (general) seats, 1 women’s seat and 1 Muslim Chamber of Commerce
- c. League Parliamentary Board
- d. These included 3 special (reserved) seats, viz. 2 women’s and 1 Muslim Chamber of Commerce, and 1 special (general) seat, i.e. Dhaka University Constituency
- e. Krishak Praja Party
- f. Tippera Krishak Samity

This Table is based on the following sources: *Return Showing Results of Elections in India 1937 in Parliamentary Papers, 1937-38*, Cmd. 5589, Vol. XXI; cited in Harun -or – Rashid, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh: Bengal Muslim League and Muslim Politics, 1906 – 1947*, p. 75; Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal 1937-1947*, p. 88 .

Diagram III.1: Results of the Elections to the Bengal Legislative Assembly held in January 1937



In the prestige fight in the Patuakhali (rural) constituency, Fazlul Huq achieved an overwhelming victory against Nazimuddin which came as a deep blow to the confidence of the Muslim League. In this contest, Fazlul Huq obtained 13,742 votes while his opponent Nazimuddin secured only 6,308 votes which was less than half of the votes that Mr. Huq was successful to get in his favour.¹⁰⁰ On receiving the news of his victory, Fazlul Huq became overwhelmed and in youthful exuberance uttered: “In the event of the failure of the government to accept the demands of the peasants I will throw the Writers’ Buildings into the Lal Dighi (the lake in front of the red coloured Writers’ Buildings, the secretariat building where the Ministers took their offices)”.¹⁰¹ But Nazimuddin’s agony for his humiliating defeat in the hands of Fazlul Huq did not last long as he was soon elected to the Bengal Legislative Assembly in a bye-election (held on 25 February 1937) from the North Calcutta Constituency, vacated by H.S. Suhrawardy who became victorious from two constituencies in the elections of 1937. Fazlul Huq also became successful in Pirozepur North (rural) Mohammedan Constituency where he defeated the League candidate Lehaz-ud-din Ahmed and thus he was elected both from Patuakhali and Pirozepur constituencies.¹⁰² He then decided to give up the Pirozepur seat which was ultimately won by Syed Ahmed Afzal of the KPP in the by-election.

In the Upper Chamber (i.e. Bengal Legislative Council), the Party/Category-wise position is reflected in the table given below:

Table III.5: Results of the Elections to the Bengal Legislative Council held in 1937

Party/Category	Direct Election	Indirect Election (elected by the members of the Legislative Assembly	Total
Congress	03	07	10
Independent Hindu & Scheduled Castes	05	07	12
Hindu Nationalist	01	00	01
Hindu Mahasabha	01	00	01
Independent Muslim	09	04	13

Muslim League	07	04	11
Krishak Praja Party	01	02	03
Tippera Krishak Samity	00	00	00
European Group	03	03	06
Anglo-Indian	00	00	00
Indian Christian	00	00	00
Total	30	27	57

Source: Enayetur Rahim, *Provincial Autonomy in Bengal 1937-1943*, p. 91.

In the Legislative Council, the KPP won only 1 seat out of 17 elected Muslim seats. The main reason for the massive failure of the Krishak Praja Party to capture more Council seats was probably the size of the electorate. The voting qualifications for the Council elections were so high that only 3,683 people were given the right to vote of whom only 1,587 persons cast their votes.¹⁰³ The results further signified that the League Board had much stronger support base than the KPP amongst the upper section of the society. For example, in the elections to the Legislative Assembly (Lower House), the League did not win a single seat in the district of Barisal, whereas the Party became successful to capture the only Council seat allotted to that district.¹⁰⁴

1. **Result Analysis:-** The highlight of the election results was that in the Muslim constituencies, Independents won the highest number of seats, while the League Board and the KPP came out the second and third position respectively. While all the seats won by the KPP belonged to the rural constituencies (the bulk of them belonging to the East Bengal), the League Board alone won seats in all types of constituencies special, urban and rural (as the Table III.1 shows) and performed exceptionally well in the western part of Bengal because of the personal influence and popularity of Akram Khan, H.S. Suhrawardy and Abdul Momin among the Muslim voters. Interestingly, although the League Board secured more seats, the percentage of votes it polled was less than that of either the KPP or the Independents taken together. The League Board polled 61.47 per cent of the urban votes, 26.52 per cent of the rural votes and altogether 27.10 per cent of the total Muslim votes. The KPP secured 15.39 per cent of the urban votes, 31.78 per cent of the rural votes and 31.51 per cent of all Muslim votes¹⁰⁵ which was 4.41% more than the League Board. All these are shown in the tables and diagrams given below:

Table III.6: Percentage of Votes Secured by the Parties in the Muslim Constituencies^a in Bengal*

Name of the Party	% of Votes Secured		
	Urban	Rural	Total
LPB	61.47	26.52	27.10
KPP	15.39	31.78	31.51
Independent	23.14	37.87	37.62
TKS	-	3.83	3.77

^a Special Constituencies excluded

*This Table is based on the following sources: *Return Showing Results of Elections in India 1937 in Parliamentary Papers, 1937-38*, Cmd. 5589, Vol.XXI; see also, Shila Sen, *op.cit.*, pp. 88-89 and Harun -or – Rashid, *op.cit.*, p. 75.

Diagram III.2: Voting Percentage Secured by the Parties in the Muslim Constituencies (excluding Special Constituencies)

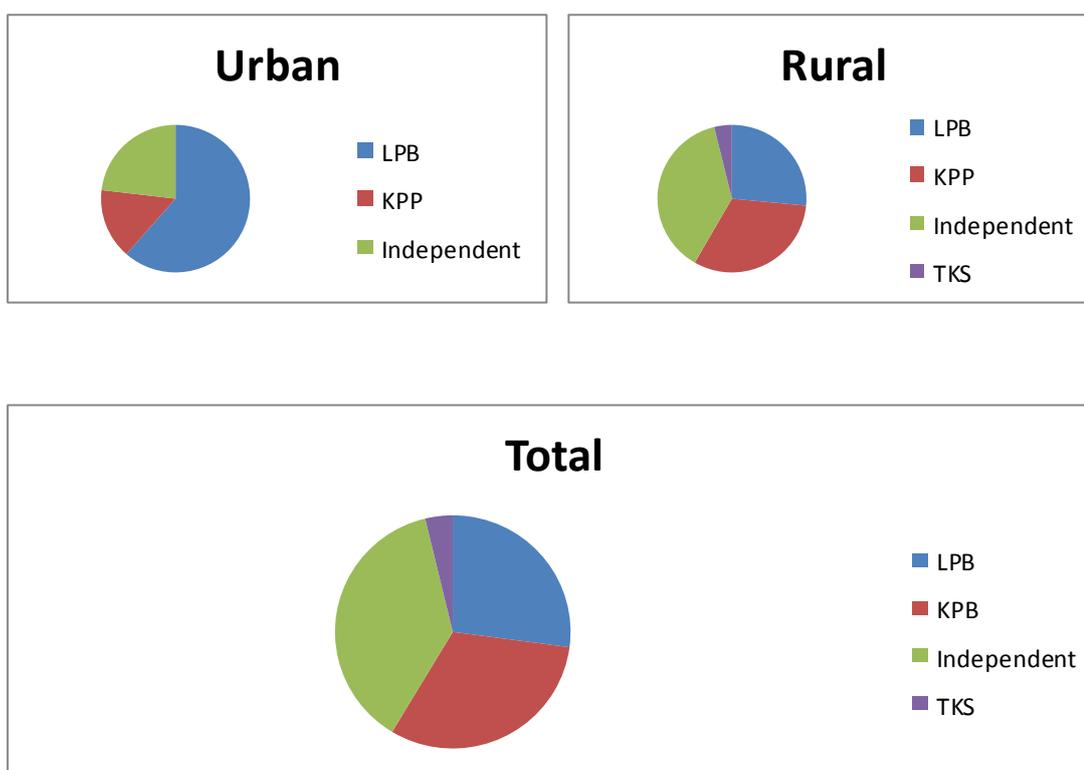


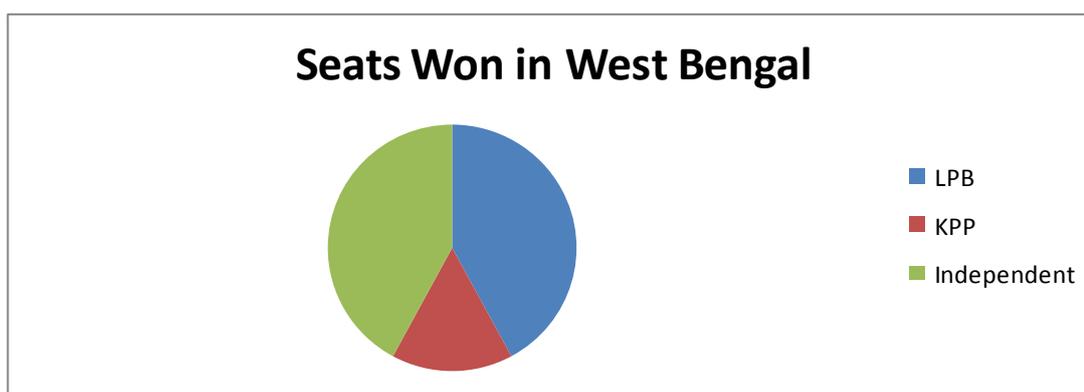
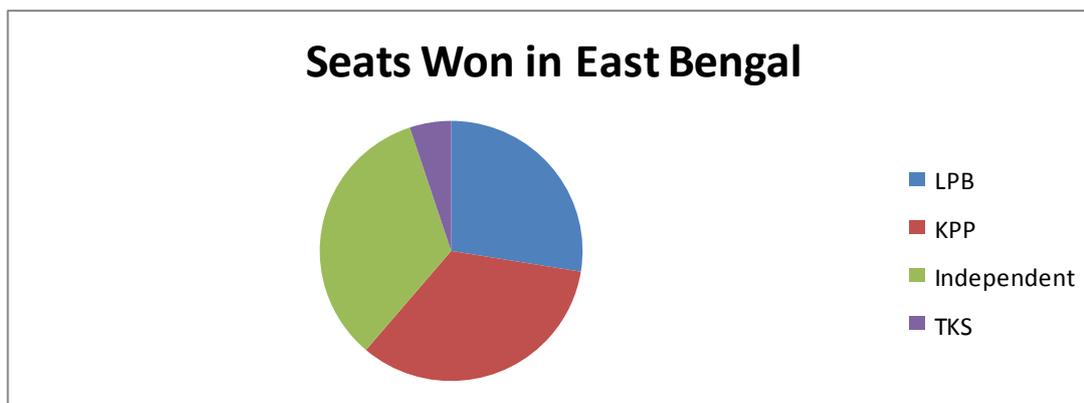
Table III.7: No. of Seats Won and Percentage of Seats Secured by the Parties in the Muslim Constituencies^a in Bengal East and West*

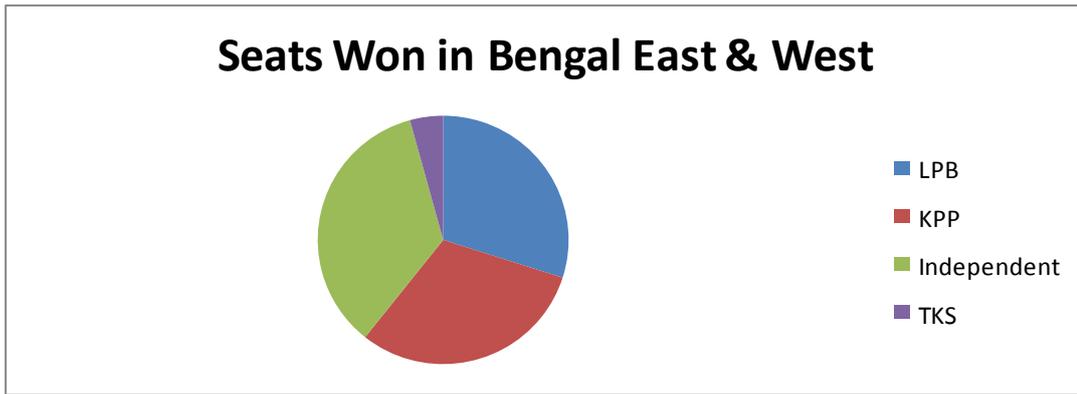
Name of the Party	East Bengal		West Bengal		Bengal(East & West)	
	Seats Won	% of Seats Secured	Seats Won	% of Seats Secured	Seats Won	% of Seats Secured
LPB	27	27.55	08	42.10	35	29.91
KPP	33	33.67	03	15.79	36	30.76
Independent	33	33.67	08	42.10	41	35.04
TKS	05	5.10	-	-	05	4.27
Total	98	99.99	19	99.99	117	99.98

a Special Constituencies excluded

*The number and percentage of seats won by each party in Eastern and Western parts of Bengal are counted from: *Return Showing Results of Elections in India 1937-38, Cmd. 5589, Vol. XXI*; cited in Harun -or – Rashid, *op.cit.*, p. 78.

Diagram III.3: No. of Seats Won by the Parties in the Muslim Constituencies (excluding Special Constituencies) in the East and West Bengal





Although in the urban and rural constituencies (consisting of 117 seats), the KPP won 1(one) seat more than the League Board (as the Table III.7 shows), the addition of 4(four) seats to the League Board from special constituencies (35+4=39 seats) reduced the former to the third position. However, the Tippera Krishak Samity with its 5(five) elected members, decided to make an alliance with the KPP against the League Board¹⁰⁶ which would allow the KPP to count upon 2(two) seats more (36+5=41 seats) than the League Board in the final results. So all the three rival groups (including Independent) shared almost equal number of seats and became ambitious for forming the new ministry.

The results further suggest that within East Bengal, the Krishak Praja Party succeeded more in the districts of Barisal, Faridpur, Khulna, Jessore, Mymensingh, Bogra and Rajshahi which were the strongholds of the *Praja* movement. The League Board achieved success mainly in Dacca and Rangpur and it failed to capture even a single seat in the district of Barisal which was the home town of Fazlul Huq. Unlike the KPP and the League Board, the Independent achieved success throughout the province. The Tippera Krishak Samity confined itself within the district and captured 5 (five) seats out of 10(ten). All these are reflected in the table given below:

Table III.8: Seats Won by the Parties in the Muslim Constituencies in Different Districts of Bengal*

Name of the District	Seats Won by Parties				
	LPB	KPP	TKS	Independent	Total Seats
Burdwan	–	–	–	1	1
Birbhum	–	1	–	–	1
Bankura	1	–	–	–	1
Midnapore	–	–	–	1	1
Hooghly	1	–	–	1	2
Howrah	–	–	–	1	1
24-Pargana	3	–	–	1	4
Khustia	–	1	–	1	2
Murshidabad	–	–	–	3	3
Jessore	1	2	–	1	4
Khulna	–	3	–	–	3
Rajshahi	–	2	–	3	5
Dinajpur	1	–	–	2	3
Rangpur	5	2	–	–	7
Jalpaiguri	–	–	–	1	1
Bogra	1	2	–	1	4
Pabna	1	–	–	4	5
Malda	–	1	–	1	2
Dacca	8	1	–	1	10
Mymensingh	4	7	–	5	16
Faridpur	2	3	–	1	6
Barisal	–	7	–	2	9
Tipper	2	–	5	3	10
Noakhali	1	2	–	3	6
Chittagong	1	1	–	3	5
Calcutta	3	–	–	–	3
Total	35	36	5	41	117

*This Table is derived from *Return Showing Results of Elections in India 1937* in Parliamentary Papers, 1937-38, Cmd.5589, Vol. XXI; cited in Harun -or – Rashid, *op.cit.*, p. 78.

It is to be mentioned here that the League Board inspite of Jinnah's sincere efforts, failed to achieve an extraordinary success in all the Provincial Assemblies in India and secured 104 seats out of the total 482 Muslim seats and polled only 4.8% of the total Muslim votes. In the Muslim majority provinces, the Board obtained the highest number of seats in Bengal (35 out of 117 seats) and only 2 seats in Punjab and failed to open its account in Sind and NWFP. In the Muslim minority provinces, the Board got the highest number of seats in UP (29 out of 64 Muslim seats) but failed to secure even a single seat in Bihar, Orissa and Central Provinces. All these are reflected in the table given below:

Table III.9: No. of Seats Won and Percentage of Seats Secured by the League Parliamentary Boards in different Provinces of India*

	Name of the province	Total Muslim Seats ^a	Seats Won	% of Seats Won
Muslim Majority Provinces	Bengal	117	35	29.91
	Punjab	84	02	2.38
	Sind	33	—	—
	NWFP	36	—	—
Total		270	37	13.70
Muslim Minority Provinces	UP	64	29	45.31
	Madras	28	10	35.71
	Bombay	29	19	65.51
	Assam	34	09	26.47
	Bihar	39	—	—
	Orissa	04	—	—
	CP	14	—	—
Total		212	67	31.60
Grand Total		482	104	21.57

a Special Seats excluded

*The Table is based on the data collected from: *Star of India*, 2 March 1937, p. 5; *Return Showing Results of Elections in India 1937 in Parliamentary Papers, 1937-38*, Cmd. 5589, Vol. XXI; cited in Harun -or – Rashid, *op.cit.*, p. 80.

From the earlier tables and diagrams, it is quite clear that in the elections of 1937, not a single political party was able to get an absolute majority in the Bengal Legislative Assembly. The strength of the Congress, Krishak Praja Party and Muslim League in the Bengal Assembly was almost the same, though the Congress had an edge and emerged as the single largest party. The approximation of number was such that no single party could form a ministry of its own. So the formation of a coalition ministry became inevitable. The best option was the KPP-Congress coalition or a KPP ministry backed by the Congress. As both the parties (i.e. the KPP and the Congress) had the strength of 96 members, they needed the support of another 30 members ($250 \div 2 + 1$) to prove the majority in the House and form a coalition ministry and there was the scope to reach at that magic figure (i.e. 126) with the support of the Independents. Fazlul Huq initially wanted to form a coalition ministry (headed by him) with the Bengal Congress (led by Sarat Chandra Bose) and talks between the KPP and the Bengal Congress began at the positive end. It is to be mentioned here that having the highest strength in the Bengal Legislative Assembly, the Congress could come forward to form a ministry but the All India Congress Committee at that point of time was suffering from indecision. Bengal Congress members of all the factions, such as J.C. Gupta, B.C. Roy, K.S. Roy, S.C. Bose and T.C. Goswami wanted to take office in alliance with the Muslim – Namasudra party of Fazlul Huq.¹⁰⁷ Sarat Chandra Bose assured support to Fazlul Huq on condition that the Praja ministry would release all the political prisoners including the anarchists. But the talks between the leaders of the KPP and the Bengal Congress failed as the leaders could not agree on the question of priority in the proposed coalition ministry: the Congress insisting on the release of political prisoners and the KPP harping on land reforms including the abolition of the zamindari system. The discussion among the leaders of the KPP and the Congress went on for hours at the residence of J.M. Sen Gupta. But as both sides insisted on their point, the discussion ultimately broke down.¹⁰⁸ According to some, the negotiations did not materialize because of obstinate insistence of Fazlul Huq on the inclusion of Nalini Ranjan Sarker (who was once a well-known Congress leader but later left the Congress and was said to have given financial assistance to Fazlul Huq) in the Cabinet. But the Congress leaders were deadly against of it and Nalini Ranjan Sarker ultimately played an active role in bringing about rapprochement between the Muslim League and the Krishak Praja Party at his residence.^{108a} The contemporary newspapers also expressed their opinion on the

issues of disagreement between the KPP and the Congress. The *Forward* wrote on 22 February 1937: “We are in a position to state that the proposal for a combination of the Congress party and the Praja Party in order to form the first Ministry in Bengal has been finally dropped. The inclusion of the release of political prisoners in the programme of the Praja Party roused the hope that the Congress Party and Praja Party might work together either in opposition or in office but it has been discovered... that the Praja leaders are not prepared to make the question a cause of war with the Governor and all they intend is to move resolutions in the Assembly recommending that course....”

Ultimately the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee (BPCC) decided not to accept the office and the official announcement was made on 13 March 1937.¹⁰⁹ The Congress Working Committee (CWC) also did not favour this coalition and Nehru directed that the Congress should not negotiate for membership of any coalition in Bengal which would give a chance to the Muslim League for coming to power in Bengal. The Muslim League leaders realized the danger of the Praja-Congress coalition. When the Leaguers saw that the formation of a KPP-Congress coalition ministry became impossible in Bengal, they took the opportunity and Jinnah as well as the League Board leaders of Bengal offered their support to Fazlul Huq and assured their full co-operation including the acceptance of his premiership in a coalition with the League.¹¹⁰ Mr. Huq had, therefore, no other alternative but to enter into a coalition with the Bengal Muslim League led by Khwaja Nazimuddin and Nawab Habibullah Bahadur of Dacca. On a positive note, Mr. Huq declared on 31 January 1937, that ‘the Praja Party would co-operate with the other Muslim groups in the Bengal Assembly’.¹¹¹ On 13 February 1937, the *Star of India* in a special late edition published a statement issued by Fazlul Huq, Ispahani, Shamsuddin Ahmed, H.S. Suhrawardy and K. Habibullah to the effect that the leaders of the Krishak Praja Party and the Muslim League agreed to co-operate for the purpose of working the constitution. The statement was as follows: “In response to the very strong feeling in the Province that the Muslim members of the Bengal Legislative Assembly should work together and the desire expressed by all the members that could be consulted, the leaders of the League and Praja parties have decided to cooperate under the leadership of Mr. A.K. Fazlul Huq for the purpose of working the constitution and, as a result of discussions, have arrived at an agreement subject to the ratification of the

parties”. Thereafter, a meeting of the members of the Muslim League Parliamentary Board who were elected to the Bengal Legislative Assembly and also a meeting of the executive committee of the Krishak Praja Party held on 14 - 15 February 1937, respectively, ratified the move by the leaders for a “Praja-League combine”. The decision was formally made public through a joint formal statement on 26 February 1937, by both Nawab Habibullah of Dacca (President of the BPML) and Fazlul Huq.¹¹² Both the KPP and the Muslim League agreed to a common 14-point parliamentary programme primarily at the expense of ‘the toning down of the more extreme portions of the former’s original manifesto’. For example, instead of an outright abolition of the zamindari system (which was the first and foremost electoral promise of the KPP), it was agreed to appoint a committee of inquiry on the matter.

In spite of the Praja-League entente,¹¹³ the formation of a ministry proved to be a ‘delicate problem’¹¹⁴ for Fazlul Huq as a number of influential members elected in the Bengal Assembly who were prominent zamindars, began to mobilize support in their favour in the name of territorial or other parochial interests with the purpose of ensuring and securing seats in the cabinet.¹¹⁵ The most prominent of them were Masud Ali Khan Panni (a leading landlord of Karatia, East Bengal), Nawab K.G.M. Farooqui (a big zamindar of Comilla, East Bengal) and Nawab Musharraf Hossain (an influential zamindar and a tea magnate of Jalpaiguri, North Bengal). Being a resident of North Bengal, Nawab Musharraf Hossain posed a threat by organizing the Assembly of North Bengal Group consisting of 25 members to protect what they called ‘the legitimate rights of North Bengal to its share in the administration of the country’.¹¹⁶

It took almost three weeks for Fazlul Huq to form a ministry of 11 members of whom 6 were Muslims (including the premier) and 5 Hindus (though they constituted the smallest group in the coalition) and the Governor of Bengal finally accepted Mr. Huq’s proposals (for the formation of eleven-member Cabinet) on 2 March 1937.¹¹⁷ Among the 6 Muslim ministers, it was decided to have 3 from the Krishak Praja Party (Fazlul Huq, Syed Nausher Ali and Shamsuddin Ahmed) and the rest (i.e. 3) from the Muslim League (Nawab Habibullah, Sir Nazimuddin and H.S. Suhrawardy). On the day before the submission of the final panel of ministers to the Governor, Shamsuddin Ahmed, the Secretary of the KPP was dropped and Nawab Musharraf Hossain of the

Muslim League included in his place which ultimately helped the Muslim League to make stronger its position in the Cabinet with its 4 members than that of the KPP which had 3, including the Premier. According to Abul Mansur Ahmed, Fazlul Huq gave up the idea of Shamsuddin largely because of the opposition from the Governor (secret I.B. report against him)¹¹⁸ and the European Group who considered him (Shamsuddin) a person of ‘extreme views’¹¹⁹ which created great resentment among the young brigade of the KPP and a few months later, finally caused a split of the Party,¹²⁰ both parliamentary wing and the organization, into two sections – one led by Shamsuddin Ahmed (who later formed the Independent Praja Party) and the other remaining loyal to Fazlul Huq. It was also decided that that among the 5 Hindu members, there would be 3 Caste Hindu ministers (Nalini Ranjan Sarker, Sir Bijoy Prasad Singh Roy and Maharaja Srish Chanda Nandi who belonged to the Nationalist Party) and 2 would be Scheduled caste (Mukunda Bihari Mullick and Prasanna Dev Raikat who belonged to the Scheduled Caste Party). It should be mentioned here that the Nationalist Party led by J.N. Basu, having a strength of 14 members, got 3 and Scheduled Caste Party with 22 members, obtained 2 Cabinet seats.¹²¹ In this context, Fazlul Huq in a press interview said: “To the great Hindu community, I have cheerfully given an equal representation in the Cabinet with the Muslims because I recognize that although the exigencies of a political situation may have reduced the proportion of cooperative Hindus in the legislature to the position of a negligible minority, the representation to which any community is entitled in the counsels of Government must be determined by much higher consideration than the mere counting of heads of its members in the legislature”.¹²² It is to be noted here that an attempt was made to include Syama Prasad Mookerjee in the Cabinet which ultimately did not materialize because of the strong opposition of the Muslims. In an executive meeting held on 1 April 1937, the Bengal Muslim Youngmen League passed a resolution to the effect: “This meeting learns with surprise and resentment that Prof. Humayun Kabir, M.L.C., tried his utmost for the inclusion of Mr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University, in the Cabinet in utter disregard of the wishes of the entire Muslim students for reasons best know to him”.¹²³

As per the schedule, the following members were sworn in as Cabinet Ministers in the Praja-League Coalition Ministry on 1 April 1937 and the portfolios were allotted to them¹²⁴ as herein under:

Table III.10: List of Cabinet Ministers, their Parties and their Portfolios in the Praja- League Ministry

Sl. No.	Name of the Cabinet Minister	Name of the Party/Category	Name of the Portfolio
1.	The Hon'ble Mr. A.K. Fazlul Huq, Chief Minister	KPP	Education
2.	” ” Sir Nazimuddin	Muslim League	Home
3.	” ” Khwaja Habibullah	Muslim League	Agriculture and Industries
4.	” ” H.S. Suhrawardy	Muslim League	Commerce and Labour
5.	” ” Syed Nausher Ali	KPP	Public Health and Local Self-Government
6.	” ” Musharraf Hossain ^a	Independent/ League Board	Judiciary and Legislature
7.	” ” Nalini Ranjan Sarker	Caste Hindu	Finance
8.	” ” Sir B.P. Singh Roy	Caste Hindu	Revenue
9.	” ” Prasanna Dev Raikat	Scheduled Caste	Excise and Forest
10.	” ” M.B. Mullick	Scheduled Caste	Co-operative, Credit and Rural Indebtedness
11.	” ” Maharaja Srish Chandra Nandi	Caste Hindu	Communication and Works

Source: *Star of India*, 1 April 1937, p. 5.

a In the Bengal Assembly Elections of 1937, Musharraf Hossain contested as an independent candidate and was returned unopposed. Originally he belonged to the League Parliamentary Board.

A close look at the composition of the Ministry reveals that out of 11 members, 6 were zamindars (Khwaja Habibullah, Sir Nazimuddin, Musharraf Hossain, Sir B.P. Singh Roy, Srish Chanda Nandi and Prasanna Dev Raikat), 1 capitalist (Nalini Ranjan Sarker) and 3 lawyer-cum-politicians (Fazlul Huq, H.S. Suhrawardy and Nausher Ali)¹²⁵ which caused great resentment and dissatisfaction

among the ‘radicals’ in the KPP who described the Ministry as ‘subservient to British Imperialism and Bengal Landlordism’.¹²⁶ Certainly rural Bengal and, particularly, the *krishaks* and *prajas* were not at all adequately represented in the Cabinet which was basically filled up by urban people belonging to zamindar class (9 out of 11) and most of its members (at least 6 out of 11) were returned from special constituencies who did not have any contact with the people at large.¹²⁷ As the zamindari elements dominated the Cabinet, it was practically impossible to implement the election manifesto of the KPP and Fazlul Huq was to shelve the *dal-bhat* issue on which he fought the elections. It was almost a year later (in July 1938), Fazlul Huq was to circulate a note among his Cabinet colleagues in which he complained: “I have been repeatedly suggesting that something should be done which will catch the imagination of the people and make the Ministry popular but all my suggestions have been turned down as either impracticable or difficult or harmful..... I wish to emphasize the point that we are a thoroughly unpopular lot. I have heard it said by more than one responsible person that the public impression is that the present Cabinet is a “bankers’ Cabinet”.¹²⁸ It clearly resembles the fact that he had ‘responsibilities’ but he did not enjoy much ‘power’ to fulfill those responsibilities and satisfy his own *krishaks* and *prajas*. In his Cabinet, ‘the advocates of ryats, if any, will be clearly outvoted by those of the landlords..... Although Fazlul Huq was the Premier, he did not have much ‘authority’, ‘command’ and ‘control’ over his Cabinet members and he was ‘at the mercy of reactionary groups and vested interests represented by the Nalini-Nazimuddin-Musharruff – B.P. Singh Roy combine’.¹²⁹ Not only that, the British officials in Bengal clearly preferred Nazimuddin to Huq and ‘used him as a foil against the Chief Minister and the KPP within the ministry’.¹³⁰

But ‘this was the only kind of ministry Fazlul Huq could form’¹³¹ and he tried his best to cool down his own party members who became angry due to the exclusion of Shamsuddin Ahmed from the list of the Cabinet ministers. So an emergency meeting of the KPP leaders in Calcutta was called in the evening of the day on which the Bengal Cabinet was sworn in. After heated discussions, the meeting decided to form a six member advisory board with 3 members from the KPP namely, Fazlul Huq, Syed Nausher Ali and Abul Mansur Ahmed and 3 members from the Muslim League, namely, Nawab Habibullah, Sir Nazimuddin and H.S. Suhrawardy¹³² which became defunct at its very first meeting because of disagreement on the question of

ministers' salary and abolition of the zamindari system.¹³³ But the formation of the advisory board (which was termed as 'Super Cabinet' by the critics) could not satisfy the 'rebellious' members of the KPP who consequently formed an Independent group within the Party and decided to contest in the election of the Speaker of the new Assembly. In this case, the Congress committed the first mistake – a Himalayan blunder¹³⁴ by putting up its own candidate, Kumar Sibsekhareswar Roy. The coalition supported by the European bloc proposed the name of Khan Bahadur (later Sir) Azizul Haque for Speakership. As a matter of strategy, the Congress should have backed the opposition candidate, Tamizuddin Khan who was supported by the Independent group of the Krishak Praja Party which resulted in the division of the votes of the Opposition. In the first voting for the Speakership, Azizul Haque got 116, Sibsekhareswar Roy – 83 and Tamizuddin – 42 votes. In the second voting, the name of Tamizuddin Khan was dropped and consequently Azizul Haque obtained 158 votes and Sibsekhareswar Roy got 82 votes.¹³⁵ The Congress failure to support Tamizuddin Khan for Speakership paved the way for the easy victory of the Opposition and 'injected a fresh dose of communal feeling into the legislative politics of Bengal'.¹³⁶ In order to teach a good lesson to the dissident group (led by Shamsuddin Ahmed) of the KPP, Fazlul Huq convened a meeting of the Bengal Krishak Praja Assembly group on 1 September 1937. After a prolonged heated deliberation, 17 dissident Praja M.L.A.s (including Shamsuddin Ahmed) were expelled from the Party which ultimately resulted in reducing the strength of the Praja Party in the Assembly to 32. The virulent opposition from the Congress, the dissatisfaction of the Hindus and also of the *krishaks* and *prajas*, the split within the KPP and the desertion of a considerable number of the Party members, created an awkward situation for Fazlul Huq which compelled him to join the Muslim League publicly on 15 October 1937 at its Lucknow session hoping to save the Ministry and to turn 'personal loss into political gain'. He at first, signed the creed of the League in the midst of a huge gathering which embraced him with shouts of "Allah-o-Akbar" and applauded him with 'Sher-e-Bangla' (The Tiger of Bengal).¹³⁷ In return, Fazlul Huq declared that "he would be under the banner of the League without any reservation". Thus he came under the 'control' of Jinnah and his Muslim League and a new chapter in his life as well as in the history of Muslim politics in Bengal began. He openly remarked: "I submit to my leader Mr. Jinnah for all my future work and

assured him that I shall abide by his decision.... I have entirely thrown myself at the disposal of Mr. Jinnah.... I am prepared for any sacrifice when Islam demands it”¹³⁸

In this manner, Fazlul Huq who was a non-communal at heart and fought to protect Hindu-Muslim unity, compromised with the communal forces and just within three years, he was invited by Jinnah to move the Lahore Resolution (at the annual session of the All-India Muslim League held on 22 March 1940 at Lahore) which demanded separate homeland for the Muslims and paved the way for the creation of ‘Pakistan’ (sacred land). If the formation of a KPP-Congress coalition ministry or a KPP ministry backed by the Congress would have come to reality in Bengal after the elections of 1937, it is to be said that there would have been a complete change in the political dynamics of Bengal vis-a-vis India.

Notes and References:

1. *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 10 September 1936; see also, Amalendu De, *Pakistan Prastab O Fazlul Huq* (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1989, Appendix A, pp. 218-222.
2. For more details, see, Abul Mansur Ahmed, *Amar Dekha Rajnitir Panchas Bachhar* (in Bengali), Dhaka, 1988, Vol. I, pp. 91-99; also see, Rangalal Sen, "Elite Conflict and Muslim Politics in Bengal, 1937-1947", in S.R. Chakravarty and Virendra Narain (eds.), *Bangladesh History and Culture*, New Delhi, 1986, p. 87.
3. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 10 September 1936.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-47*, Cambridge, 1994, p. 75.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
- 10a. Abul Mansur Ahmed, *op.cit.*, p. 63.
11. M. A.H. Ispahani, *Quaid-i-Azam Jinnah As I Knew Him*, Karachi, 1976, p.14.
12. *The Statesman*, May 25, 1936; see also, Joya Chatterji, *op.cit.*, p. 79; *Star of India*, 25 May 1935, p. 5.
13. Joya Chatterji, *op.cit.*, p. 79.
14. Abul Mansur Ahmed, *op.cit.*, p. 87.
15. *Star of India*, 16 June 1936, p. 5.
- 15a. *The Statesman*, 16 June 1936; *Star of India*, 24 June 1936, p. 5.
16. *The Statesman*, 13 July 1936.

17. S.M Azizul Huq Shahjahan, *Shatabdir Kanthaswar, Abul Kasem Fazlul Huq* (in Bengali), Dacca, 1387 B.S., pp. 89-94.
- 17a. *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.
18. M.A.H. Ispahani, *op.cit.*, pp. 20-23; also see, Rangalal Sen, *op.cit.*, p. 85.
19. Soumitra De, *Nationalism and Separatism in Bengal: A Study of India's Partition*, New Delhi, 1992, pp. 219-220.
20. Z.H. Zaidi (ed.), *M.A. Jinnah – Ispahani Correspondence, 1936 – 1948*, Karachi, 1975, p. 77.
21. M.A.H. Ispahani, *op.cit.*, p. 23.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
23. *The Statesman*, August 26, 1936; see also, Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal, 1937 – 1947*, New Delhi, 1976, p. 74.
24. Stanley Wolpert, *Jinnah of Pakistan*, New Delhi, 1989, pp. 143 – 144.
25. Abul Mansur Ahmed, *op.cit.*, p. 96.
26. The prominent leaders of the Krishak Praja Party thought that they would lose the support of the Scheduled Caste population of Bengal if they would fight the election at the provincial level on Muslim League ticket. They also realized the fact that the selection of the Muslim representatives by the Provincial Working Committee (and not by Jinnah), would help them to get the support and cooperation of the Muslim League workers and nomination could open back-door for the unwanted person who would create disturbing situation. See, Abul Mansur Ahmed, *op.cit.*, pp. 96 – 97.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 97; see also, Humayun Kabir, *Muslim Politics: 1906-1942*, Calcutta, 1943, p. 10.
- 27a. Jinnah to Fazlul Huq, 4 October 1936, Humaira Momen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal: A Study of Krishak Praja Party and the Elections of 1937*, Dhaka, 1972; p. 50.
28. Statement Issued by A.K. Fazlul Huq, see *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 1 September 1936.
29. *Ibid.*, see also, *The Statesman*, 1 September 1936.

30. Shila Sen, *op.cit.*, p. 74.
31. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 1 September 1936.
32. *The Star of India*, 1 September 1936.
33. *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 9 September 1936.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*
36. Kamruddin Ahmad, *A Social History of Bengal*, Dacca, 1970, p. 33.
37. *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 9 September 1936.
38. *Ibid.*, 11 September 1936.
39. *Ibid.*, 10 September 1936.
40. A.S.M. Abdur Rab, *Sahid Suhrawardy* (in Bengali), Dacca, 1968, pp. 20 – 21.
41. Shila Sen, *op.cit.*, pp. 78 – 79.
42. *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 11 September 1936.
43. The Programme of work in the Assembly outlined by the Muslim League Parliamentary Board. See, *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 13 September 1936.
44. A.K. Fazlul Huq' reply to critics, see, *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 24 September 1936.
45. *Ibid.*
46. *Ibid.*
47. *Ibid.*
48. *Ibid.*
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Ibid.*
51. S.M. Azizul Huq Shahjahan, *op.cit.*, pp. 115 – 122.
52. Fazlul Huq to Jinnah, 30 October 1936, Kamruddin Ahmad, *op.cit.* pp. 33-35.
53. *Star of India*, 3 November 1936, p. 1.
54. Shila Sen, *op.cit.*, p. 85.

55. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 20 October 1936, p. 10.
56. Abul Mansur Ahmed, *op.cit.*, pp. 100 – 103.
57. Enayetur Rahim, *Provincial Autonomy in Bengal (1937 – 1943)*, Rajshahi, 1981, pp. 25 – 30.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
59. *Ibid.*, pp. 30 – 31.
60. *Ibid.*, p. 43, fn. 196; The women were given the right to cast their votes in 1925, see, Humaira Momen, *op.cit.*, p. 26.
61. *The Statesman*, 13 January 1937.
62. *Ibid.*, 14 January 1937.
63. Enayetur Rahim, *op.cit.*, p. 26.
64. *Star of India*, 11 February 1936, p. 3.
65. *Ibid.*, 26 December 1933, p. 6.
66. *Ibid.*, 14 November 1936, p. 9.
67. Humaira Momen, *op.cit.*, pp. 62 – 65.
68. *Star of India*, 12 June 1936, p. 1; see also, Harun-or-Rashid, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh: Bengal Muslim League and Muslim Politics, 1906 – 1947*, Dhaka, 2003, p. 54.
69. *Election Manifesto* of the League Board, *Star of India*, 12 September 1936, p. 4; see also, Harun-or-Rashid, *ibid.*, p. 55.
70. Fazlul Huq's presidential speech in *Star of India*, 15 July 1936, p. 6.
71. *Star of India*, 18 July 1936, p. 3; see also, Harun-or-Rashid, *op.cit.*, p. 56; Abul Mansur Ahmed, *op.cit.*, p. 113.
72. *Ibid.*, 12 September 1936, pp. 9, 12.
73. *Ibid.*
74. *Congress Election Manifesto*, (Bombay 1936), pp. 1-12.
75. *Ibid.*; see also, Jawaharlal Nehru's speech in *The Statesman*, 10 January 1937, p. 12.

76. *Circular* (n.d.), AICC G-24 (i) 1936; see also, Harun-or-Rashid, *op.cit.*, pp. 58-59.
77. Shila Sen, *op.cit.*, p. 81.
- 77a. *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 6 November 1936.
- 77b. *Ibid.*, 16 November 1936.
78. Khwaja Habibullah, Sir Nazimuddin, Nawab Mohiuddin Farooqui, Nawab Musharraf Hossain and Khan Bahadur Azizul Huq subscribed Rs.5,000/- each and Professor A.F. Rahman Rs.2,500/-, *Star of India*, 25 May 1936, p. 1.
79. *Ibid.*, 27 August 1936, p. 1.
80. *Ibid.*, 15 January 1937, p. 8; *ibid.*, 25 January 1937, p. 1.
81. Humaira Momen, *op.cit.*, p. 61.
82. Kamruddin Ahmad, *op.cit.*, p. 25.
83. Shila Sen, *op.cit.*, p. 85.
84. Abul Mansur Ahmed, *op.cit.*, n. 2, p. 127.
85. Shila Sen, *op.cit.*, p. 86.
86. In the Patuakhali Constituency, the polling was held on 23 January between 8 A.M. and 4.30 P.M. and the counting was taken place on 27 January 1937.
- 86a. B.D. Habibullah, *Shere Bangla* (in Bengali), Dacca, 1962, p. 60.
87. Imran Hossain, *Bangali Muslim Buddhijibi: Chinta O Karma* (in Bengali), Dhaka, Bangla Academy, 1993, p. 171.
88. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 10 January 1937.
89. *Azad*, 17 January 1937.
90. Joya Chatterji, *op.cit.*, p. 85.
91. Kalipada Biswas, *Yukta Banglar Shesh Adhyaya* (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1966, pp. 27-28.
92. *Ibid.*
93. Harun-or-Rashid, *op.cit.*, p. 71.
94. *Star of India*, 4 January 1937, p. 5.
95. *Ibid.*, 15 January 1937, p. 8.

96. *Ibid.*, 13 January 1937, p. 5.
97. *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 28 January 1937, p. 9.
98. Jahanara Begum, *The Last Decade of Undivided Bengal: Parties, Politics & Personalities*, Calcutta 1994, pp.34-36.
- 98a. *Ibid.*
- 98b. Enayetur Rahim, *op.cit.*, pp. 82-85.
99. According to Prof. John Gallagher, in the Bengal Assembly Election of 1937, the Congress won 54 seats (43 of the 48 General Seats, 6 of the seats reserved for the Depressed Classes and 5 of the seats reserved for Labour) out of the total 250 seats (which was 21.6%). See, John Gallagher, "Congress in Decline: Bengal, 1930 to 1939", in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (1973), p. 643.
- 99a. *Return Showing Results of Elections in India 1937 in Parliamentary Papers, 1937-38*, Cmd. 5589, Vol. XXI; cited in Harun-or-Rashid, *op.cit.*, p. 74.
100. *Franchise: Elections in Bengal 1936-37*; see also, Harun-or-Rashid, *op.cit.*, p. 79.
101. Jahanara Bengum, *op.cit.*, p. 36.
102. *The Statesman*, 28 January 1937.
103. *Return Showing Results of Elections in India 1937 in Parliamentary Papers, 1937-38*, Cmd. 5589, Vol. XXI; see also, Harun-or-Rashid, *op.cit.*, p. 79.
104. *Ibid.*
105. Shila Sen, *op.cit.*, pp. 88-89.
106. *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 4 February 1937, p. 13.
107. Nalinaksha Sanyal to Nehru, 20 February 1937; File E5/840 of 1937, AICC.
108. Abdul Mansur Ahmed, *op.cit.*, pp. 144-46.
- 108a. Kalipada Biswas, *op.cit.*, n. 28, pp. 32 and 36-37; see also Shila Sen, *op.cit.*, p. 93.
109. *Indian Annual Register*, Calcutta, Vol. I, 1937, p. 8.
110. Abul Mansur Ahmed, *op.cit.*, n. 2, pp. 136-137.
111. *Indian Annual Register*, Calcutta, Vol. I, 1937, p. 4.

112. *Shila Sen, op.cit., p. 91.*
113. See *Star of India*, 15 February 1937, p. 6; *ibid.*, 17 February 1937, p. 5; *ibid.*, 20 February 1937, p. 10; also *ibid.*, 27 February 1937, p. 9.
114. *A Brief Summary of Political Events in the Presidency of Bengal during the year 1937*, Government of India, Home Department (Political), File No.132/38, in National Archives of India, New Delhi.
115. Anderson to Linlithgow, 9 March 1937; see also *Star of India*, 11 March 1937, p. 1; *ibid.*, 16 March 1937, p. 4.
116. *Star of India*, 27 February 1937, p. 9; see also *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 27 February 1937, p. 5.
117. *Indian Annual Register*, Vol. I, Calcutta, 1937, p. 9.
118. Abul Mansur Ahmed, *op.cit.*, n. 2, p. 142.
119. Anderson to Linlithgow, 7 April 1937, *Bengal Governor's Reports to Viceroy*, R/3/2/2, p. 3. Anderson wrote: “..... in deference to my very strong views he (Fazlul Huq) gave up the idea of getting into the Cabinet a very useful lieutenant of his own, by name Shamsuddin – a capable person of extreme views.....”
120. On 1 September 1937, Fazlul Huq purged 17 ‘disloyal’ members (1 Independent, 5 Tippera Krishak Samity and 11 original members of the KPP) of the Krishak Praja Assembly Party including Shamsuddin Ahmed, Maniruzzaman Islamabadi, Abu Hossain Sarkar, Ghyasuddin Ahmed and Nawabzada Syed Hasan Ali. On 11 September 1937, Shamsuddin’s faction of the KPP organized the Fifth Annual General Meeting at Gaibanda in Rangpur district at which a vote of no confidence against Fazlul Huq was held and the members who remained ‘loyal’ to him (Mr. Huq) were expelled. See, *Star of India*, 13 September 1937, p. 8. But that meeting was declared illegal by Fazlul Huq who six days later, convened the Fifth Annual General Meeting of the Party in which new office-bearers were elected with himself as President and Abul Quasem, a member of the Bengal Assembly elected as an independent candidate, as Secretary. See, *Star of India*, 17 September 1937, p. 4.
121. *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 1 April 1937.

122. *Star of India*, 25 March 1937.
123. *Ibid.*, 5 April 1937.
124. *Ibid.*, 1 April 1937, p. 5.
125. The profession of Mukunda Bihari Mullick, a Scheduled Caste representative, is unknown.
126. Nausher Ali, after he resigned from the Cabinet in June 1938, made same kind of rundown on Fazlul Huq's Ministry. Nausher Ali to Fazlul Huq, 14 June 1938, *Star of India*, 25 June 1937, p. 8.
127. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 31 March 1937.
128. Confidential note by Fazlul Huq, B.P. Singh Roy Papers; see also Partha Chatterjee, "Bengal Politics and the Muslim Masses, 1920-47", *The Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, March 1982, Vol. XX, No. 1, pp. 37-38.
129. Shila Sen, *op.cit.*, p. 95.
130. Partha Chatterjee, *op.cit.*, pp. 37-38.
131. *Ibid.*
132. Abul Mansur Ahmed, *op.cit.*, p. 123.
133. *Ibid.*, pp. 114-115.
134. Kalipada Biswas, *op.cit.*, n. 28, p. 104.
135. Shila Sen, *op.cit.*, p. 97.
136. *Ibid.*
137. Sirajuddin Ahmed, *Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq* (in Bengali), Dacca, 1997, p. 94.
138. *The Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 17 October 1937.