

Suhrawardy and the ‘Great Calcutta Killing’: Revisiting the Episode and its Consequences

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Abstract:

Soon after the installation of the League Ministry headed by H.S. Suhrawardy in Bengal, the Cabinet Mission announced its draft plan on 16 May 1946 rejecting the Muslim League’s demand for ‘Pakistan’ which prompted the League Council to give a clarion call to all the Muslims to go for ‘Direct Action’ for achieving ‘Pakistan’. Following the Council’s decision, Suhrawardy, the Bengal Premier-cum Home Minister, came forward to observe the ‘Direct Action Day’ on 16 August 1946 declaring a public holiday on that day which brought disastrous consequences in Calcutta as the city witnessed communal riot, blood-shed and a ‘reign of terror’ for four days. The entire episode vitiated Bengal politics, embittered Hindu-Muslim relationship and intensified communal tension which altogether made the partition inevitable in 1947.

Key Words: *Suhrawardy, Jinnah, Direct Action Day, Great Calcutta Killing, Muslim League, Congress, Hindu Mahasabha*

In the elections to the Bengal Legislative Assembly (consisting of 250 members), which took place in between 19 March and 22 March 1946, all the leading political parties failed to achieve absolute majority and to reach at the magic figure of 126 (250/2+1) to form the ministry of its own. The overall results of the Assembly elections show that the Bengal Provincial Muslim League (BPML) won in 114 seats, the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee (BPCC) obtained 86 seats, the Independent (Hindu) won in 6 seats, the Krishak Praja Party (KPP) captured 4 seats, the Communist Party of India (CPI) bagged 3 seats, the Independent (Muslim) candidates got elected in 2 seats and rest of the seats were held by the European Group- 25, the Anglo-Indians-4, Indian Christians- 2,

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the Hindu Mahasabha- 1, the Emarat Party- 1, the Kshatriya Samity- 1 and the Scheduled Caste Federation- 1.¹ As the BPML emerged as the single largest party, Sir Frederick Burrows, the then Governor of Bengal, invited H.S. Suhrawardy (who was already elected as the Leader of the League Parliamentary Party), to form the ministry on 2 April 1946. At that point of time, he was 12-short of the magic figure but within a few days he was able to 'manage' the support of some elected Independents, Independent Scheduled Castes and also the European Group (numbering 25) and to have a comfortable majority in the House. Ultimately Suhrawardy formed a 8-member ministry (consisting of 7 Ministers from the Muslim League and the rest from the Scheduled Castes)² on 24 April 1946 in the Throne Room at the Government House at 12:30 P.M.

Few days later, the Cabinet Mission (consisting of Lord Pethick Lawrence, Sir Stafford Cripps and Mr. A.V. Alexander) which arrived in India (on 24 March 1946) mainly to resolve the country's constitutional deadlock, to set up a constitution making body and to amicably frame a constitution, announced its draft plan on 16 May 1946. Rejecting Jinnah's demand, the draft plan categorically stated that: "The setting up of a separate sovereign state of Pakistan on the lines claimed by the Muslim League would not solve the Communal Minority problem. Nor can we see any justification for including within a sovereign Pakistan, those districts of Punjab and of Bengal and Assam, in which the population is predominantly non-Muslim. Every argument that can be used in favour of Pakistan, can equally, in our view, be used in favour of the exclusion of the non-Muslim areas, from Pakistan. The point would particularly affect the position of the Sikhs.... We are, therefore, unable to advise the British Government that the power that at present resides in British hands, would be handed over to two entirely separate sovereign states...."³

In the Cabinet Mission Plan, it was stated: "There should be a Union of India embracing both British India and the States which should deal with the following subjects: foreign affairs defence, and communications....All subjects other than the union subjects and all residuary powers should vest in the provinces. Provinces should be free to form Groups with executives and legislatures and each Group could determine the provincial subjects to be taken in common...."⁴ According to this Plan, there would be

three main administrative groups of provinces-Group A: all Hindu – majority provinces (Madras, Bombay, Central Provinces, United Provinces, Bihar and Orissa); Group B: all Muslim – majority provinces of the north-west (Sind, Punjab, North-West Frontier Province and Baluchistan); Group C: Muslim – majority provinces of the north - east consisting of Bengal and Assam. The Plan also outlined that a Constituent Assembly would be elected by the provincial Assemblies by proportional representation where the members from Groups A, B and C were to sit separately to decide the constitution for the provinces and if possible, for the groups also. Thereafter, the whole Constituent Assembly (all three Sections, A, B and C combined) would sit together to frame the Union constitution. Not only that, according to the Plan, on the demand of the Legislature of a province, the constitutions of the Union and of the Groups would be reconsidered and revisited after an initial period of ten years and at ten- yearly intervals thereafter.⁵ The Cabinet Mission also proposed for the setting up of an Interim Government (consisting of 14 members – 6 from the Congress, 5 from the Muslim League and 1 each from the Indian Christians, Sikhs and Parsees) at the Centre, under the Viceroy.

The reactions of the Congress and the Muslim League to the plans of the Cabinet Mission were mixed. The Congress welcomed the Plan as it rejected the ‘Pakistan’ proposal and recommended a scheme which was based on the concept of a united India. But the Congress leaders were opposed to the system of compulsory groupings of the so-called ‘Pakistan’ provinces as it would deprive the provinces of their autonomy and hamper the interests of the Sikhs. They were not satisfied with the Mission’s clarification (on 25 May) that grouping would be compulsory at first, but the provinces would have the right to secede from a group after the first general election and after the constitution had been finalized. The Congress leaders also demanded that the Constituent Assembly which was proposed to frame the Constitution of India should be “a sovereign body” and they criticized the absence of any provision for elected members from the Princely States in the proposed Constituent Assembly. Gandhiji, however, warmly welcomed the plans of the Cabinet Mission at a meeting in Delhi on 17 May 1946 and declared: “Cabinet Mission’s proposals contained the seed to convert this land of sorrow, into one without sorrow and suffering”.⁶ Although the Muslim League was not at all happy with the

rejection of the 'Pakistan' scheme, welcomed the Grouping Scheme. The AIML accepted the Cabinet Mission's Plan on 6 June 1946 and declared in its resolution that "the basis and the foundation of Pakistan are inherent in the Mission's Plan by virtue of compulsory grouping of the six Muslim provinces in Section B and C", and that the League agreed to "co-operate with the Constitution-making machinery proposed in the scheme outline by the Mission, in the hope that it would ultimately result in the establishment of completely sovereign Pakistan".⁷ In that meeting of the AIML, Jinnah categorically mentioned: "Muslim India will not rest content until we have established full, complete and sovereign Pakistan".⁸ In addition to this, Jinnah thought that the Congress would not accept the Plan which ultimately would prompt the British Government to invite 'the League alone to form the Interim Government at the Centre'.⁹

But Jinnah's assumption did not materialize as the Congress Working Committee after much heated debate, passed a resolution on 25 June 1946 accepting the long-term plan put forward by the Cabinet Mission. Although the AICC accepted the Plan, the next AICC meeting which was convened at Bombay on 7 July 1946, was turned into a stormy one. In that meeting, Aruna Asaf Ali, the left-wing Socialist leader, severely attacked the Cabinet Mission's Plan and raised her voice for a united mass struggle to expel the British from the soil of India. Jawaharlal Nehru, the newly elected Congress President by replacing Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, tried to assure the critics by declaring: "It is not a question of our accepting any plan, long or short....We are not bound by a single thing, except that we have decided for the moment to go to the Constituent Assembly".¹⁰ He reiterated his assertion in a Press conference on 10 July: "...the Constituent Assembly would never accept any dictation or any other directive from the British Government in regard to its work...."¹¹ and he went further: "... the probability is, from any approach to the question, that there will be no grouping"¹² as N.W.F.P. and Assam would have objections to joining Section B and C.

All these developments and statements created a great uproar within the League which led Jinnah to convene a meeting of the League Council at Bombay on 27-29 July 1946. In that meeting, the Council passed two important resolutions: by the first, it ultimately decided to withdraw its acceptance of the long-term plans of the Cabinet

Mission and by the second resolution (passed on 29 July 1946), the Council gave a clarion call on the 'Muslim Nation' to go in the way of 'Direct Action' to achieve Pakistan and renounce all titles conferred upon them by the 'alien government'.¹³ In the second resolution of the Council, it was mentioned: "Whereas the Council of the All India Muslim League has resolved to reject the proposals embodied in the statement of the Cabinet Delegation and the Viceroy dated 16th May, 1946 due to the intransigence of the Congress on one hand, and the breach of faith with the Muslims by the British Government on the other.... and whereas it has become abundantly clear that the Muslims of India would not rest contented with anything less than the immediate establishment of Independent and fully Sovereign State of Pakistan and would resist any attempt to impose any constitution-making machinery or any constitution, long term or short term, or the setting up of any Interim Government at the centre without the approval and consent of the Muslim League; the Council of the All India Muslim League is convinced that now the time has come for the Muslim Nation to resort to Direct Action to achieve Pakistan to assert their just rights, to vindicate their honour and to get rid of present British slavery and the contemplated future caste – Hindu domination".¹⁴

On the next day (i.e. on 30 July 1946), the Working Committee of the AIML adopted a resolution (now famous as the 'Direct Action Resolution') by which all the branches of the League throughout India were directed to hold 16 August as a 'Direct Action Day'.¹⁵ M.A. Jinnah, the League Supremo, declared: "This day we bid good-bye to constitutional methods. Today we have also forged a pistol and are in a position to use it".¹⁶

In that meeting of the League Council, Suhrawardy, the Bengal Premier, rejected the Cabinet Mission's Plan by saying: "... We cannot any more rely either on the professions of British friendliness or on the hope that the Congress will one day do justice to us. The Congress was out to destroy Muslim resurgence in this country... Let the Congress beware that it is not going to fight just a handful of people fighting for power, but a nation which is struggling for its life and will secure that life".¹⁷ He came forward to abide by the decision of the AIML and made an appeal to the Muslim youth to 'marshal all your forces under the banner of the Muslim League'.¹⁸

As there was a Muslim League ministry, it was quite expected that the 'Day' would be observed with much fanfare in Bengal. The BPML took certain programmes to organize and observe throughout Bengal such as: i) to organize complete general *hartal* or strike; ii) to give explanation of the 'Direct Action' resolution of the AIML before the public gathering in mosques and in public meetings; iii) to offer *munajat* (special prayer) for the freedom of Muslim India; iv) to arrange peaceful processions and demonstrations; and lastly v) to make appeals to all other political parties to observe *hartal* on that day (i.e. Friday, 16 August 1946).¹⁹ The prominent BPML leaders like Suhrawardy, Abul Hashim and the like, tried to project the 'Direct Action Day' as a struggle against British imperialism and devised it as anti-Congress and anti-Hindu. Nazimuddin, the then President of the BPML and his supporters (known as the 'Khwaja group'), as it was quite expected, also came forward to implement the decision of the Working Committee of the AIML. The 'Muslim National Guard' was formed in Calcutta and its training centres were opened in every district of Bengal. On 1 August 1946, Nazimuddin made an appeal to the Muslim youth to immediately join in the 'Muslim National Guard'. Four days later (i.e. on 5 August), an assembly of the 'Muslim National Guard' was held at the Muslim Institute where Nazimuddin asked the audience to follow the holy Quran and the Islamic order. Meanwhile, the Viceroy gave an offer to the Congress to form an Interim Government at the Centre on 8 August 1946 and the Congress instantaneously accepted the offer on 12 August. Though the Viceroy officially announced the appointment of the Congress-led Interim Government with Jawaharlal Nehru as its Vice-President on 24 August, the offer to the Congress was an open secret to the Muslim League circles and embittered the political environment prior to the observance of the 'Direct Action Day'.

Strongly reacting against the creation of an absolutely Congress-led Interim Government at the Centre, Suhrawardy in an interview with the Associated Press of America on 10 August, warned: "[The] probable result of putting the Congress in power, bypassing the Muslim League, would be the declaration of complete independence of Bengal and the setting up of a parallel government. We shall see that no revenue is derived from Bengal and will consider ourselves a separate state having no connection with the centre".²⁰ This statement of Suhrawardy aroused worst possible fears amongst

the Hindus. Not only that, some official declarations and decisions of Suhrawardy also intensified communal tension and created tremendous repercussions. He declared 16 August as a public holiday in Bengal – a decision which was widely criticized and condemned. The Hindu Mahasabha brought censure motion against the League in the Bengal Legislative Council on the official declaration of holiday on 16 August which was ultimately defeated by 31-13 votes.²¹ Defending his decision, Suhrawardy said in the Bengal Legislature on 15 August 1946: “The government have declared a public Holiday under the Negotiable Instruments Act for the purpose of minimizing the risks of conflicts and in the interests of peace and order”.²² In addition to this, his announcement of the release of the ‘pre-Reform’ political prisoners on 15 August, also complicated the then political situation of Bengal.²³

The Congress leadership attacked the Premier-cum Home Minister for ‘giving people a direct encouragement to law breaking and violence’.²⁴ The Bengal Provincial Congress Committee (BPCC) convened a public rally at the Deshapriya Park on 14 August 1946 where Surendra Mohan Ghosh, the President of the BPCC, announced the decision to oppose the proposed *hartal* on 16 and warned both the Hindus and Muslims to keep themselves away from any sort of incitement.²⁵ On the other hand, the Leftist Tram Labour Union in its meeting held at the University Institute on 15 August, took a ‘controversial’ decision to support the proposed *hartal* on 16 in order to continue its ‘fight against Imperialism’ and to protect ‘unity’ among the labourers unless it apprehended that there would be a riot amongst the labourers themselves.²⁶

Calcutta, a predominantly Hindu city where the Muslims constituted barely 23.6 per cent of the population, a city which was well-known for communal harmony and peace and many glorious anti-imperialist movements, became the first victim of communal bloodshed because of the instigating activities and speeches of some leading politicians. S.M. Usman, the Secretary of the Calcutta District League and the then Mayor of Calcutta, announced on 9 August the detailed programme of the ‘Direct Action’ and told that a historic rally and gathering would be held at Calcutta Maidan. He declared *jehad* or holy war against the Hindus and published and distributed several inflammatory leaflets and pamphlets (mostly in Urdu) to incite the Muslims to commit

violence against the Hindus in the name of religion. On 10 August, he issued a statement in Urdu in which he said: "I appeal to the Mussalmans of Calcutta.... to rise to the occasion..... We are in the midst of the month of *Ramazan* fasting. But this is a month of real *Jihad* [i.e. holy war] ... Let Muslims brave... Muslims must remember that it was in *Ramazan* that the Quran was revealed..... the permission for *Jihad* was granted by Allah [i.e. God]... The Muslim League is fortunate that it is starting its action in this holy month".²⁷ Same kind of provocative words were expressed in one of the pamphlets of the Muslim League: "We Muslims have had the crown and have ruled. Do not lose heart, be ready and take swords.... Oh Kafir! Your doom is not far and the general massacre will come. We shall show our glory with swords in hands and will have a special victory".²⁸ *The Star of India* (which was controlled by the Ispahanis), also made campaign for the observation of the 'Direct Action Day' from 9 to 13 August. On 14 August, the members of the 'Muslim National Guard' were instructed to assemble in the khaki dress at the Muslim Institute on the day of 'Direct Action' at 8-30 A.M. On that day, Nurul Huda, a distinguished leader of the League, declared: "No more slogans. The clarion call has come for action and nothing but action".²⁹

The Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha (BPHM), the Hindu press and many contemporary Hindu leaders of Bengal did not sit idle and strongly reacted against these reactionary statements and considered these provocative comments 'as a threat to 'Pakistanise' the whole of Bengal forthwith'.³⁰ The majority of the Hindu Bengalis considered the 'Pakistan' scheme as 'the permanent loss of political sovereignty and their subjection to the will of the Muslim majority' and they were determined to protect their 'homeland' for which 'they were ready to fight to the death'.³¹ In one of its leaflets (written in Bengali), the Hindu Mahasabha urged: "Sixteenth August, Beware! The Muslim League has declared the 16th of August as the "Direct Action (Sangram – War) Day" and on that very day public has been asked to observe "*hartal*". That day has been proclaimed as such for the Muslim League to attain Pakistan. The Bengali Hindus and every non-Muslim are opposed to Pakistan. Under these circumstances to observe "*hartal*" on the 16th as proclaimed by the League or to help them in any way would mean supporting their demand [i.e. Pakistan]. The Bengal's Hindus can never do that. The

League Ministry had the audacity to declare that day as a holiday.... By this method that day the Govt. Hindu employees will be forced to observe "*hartal*". The Hindus will have to give a clear reply to this highhandedness of the Muslim League. It is the clear duty of every Hindu that he will do his usual normal duty and no Hindu, non-Muslim or anti-League Muslim shall observe "*hartal*" nor will he allow anyone to observe "*hartal*"...."³² Thus the leaders and their followers belonging to both the communities (i.e. Hindus and Muslims), were heavily charged up before the observation of the 'Direct Action Day' and they were taking all sorts of preparations and devising various plans and techniques to deploy on that day against each other. On the other hand, the role of the Bengal Governor and the British military forces was not at all satisfactory. The military officers decided in a meeting held at Barrackpore on 14 August 1946: "When the riot begins, we will not interfere. If the people want swaraj (self rule), let them fight for it".³³

Finally the 'Day' (i.e.16 August) came in when the leaders of the BPML and their supporters launched 'Direct Action' and gave whole-hearted effort to make it successful which in turn brought disastrous consequences particularly in Calcutta. The League organized a large rally on that day at the Calcutta Maidan which was addressed by Khwaja Nazimuddin, Gaznafar Ali Khan of Lahore, Suhrawardy and the like. Nazimuddin in his exciting speech said: "Our struggle is against the Congress and Hindus".³⁴ Addressing the rally, Suhrawardy gave a hint that the army and police had been "restrained" which in the words of F.J. Burrows, the Bengal Governor, 'was an open invitation to disorder; and in fact many the listeners started attacking Hindus and looting Hindu shops as soon as they left the meeting'.³⁵

The Muslims resorted to looting and arson and forced the Hindu shopkeepers to observe *hartal* on that day. Defending themselves the Muslims alleged that the Hindus at first, wholeheartedly tried to spoil their observance of 'Direct Action' by resorting to rioting and looting³⁶ and also by attacking the processionists from the housetops of the Hindus.³⁷ According to Nirmal Kumar Bose, "The offensive began from the side of the Muslim mobs; but within a few hours the Hindus....also struck back".³⁸ As a result, Calcutta witnessed a 'reign of terror' for fully four days (16-19 August 1946) when the entire law and order machinery of the government suddenly collapsed and the city

completely went under the control of the hooligans. A massive communal riot broke out which took a heavy death toll of both the communities. This episode came to be known in Indian history as ‘the Great Calcutta Killing’ which was identified with ‘widespread loot, incendiaries and murder on a scale unprecedented in the history of Calcutta’.³⁹ F.J. Burrows, the then Governor of Bengal in his report wrote that on 16 August ‘communal trouble started as early as at 7 a.m. in Manicktala in north-east Calcutta and has continued and spread throughout the day. Situation upto 6 p.m. is that there have been numerous and widespread communal clashes in Calcutta’.⁴⁰

On that day, more than 100 (according to the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, the actual figure would be 161) people lost their lives⁴¹ and 583 people were injured and were admitted to the hospitals (upto 12 noon).⁴² But ‘mass butchery’ according to the *Modern Review*, ‘started with the early dawn of Saturday’⁴³ which took away the lives of about 300 (but *The Statesman* mentioned the figure as 270).⁴⁴ The magnitude of the catastrophe compelled Jinnah to unequivocally condemn the acts of violence on 17 August 1946: “I unreservedly condemn the acts of violence and deeply sympathise with those who have suffered”.⁴⁵ But surprisingly, the Bengal Government and the police did not take any action against the hooligans till the evening of 17 and ultimately at night the military forces were deployed. F.J. Burrows, the then Governor of Bengal, tried to defend his position: “the atmosphere was admittedly explosive and we realized – and I impressed it on my CM and his colleagues – that the League were playing with fire”,⁴⁶ but Suhrawardy did not take any immediately action.

On 18 August, the total number of deaths rose upto 2000 and at the end of the riot, it was reported that over 4,000 people (of both sides) died and 11,000 injured in the streets and bye- lanes of Calcutta.⁴⁷ In addition to this, the Government Report (of 28 August) stated the fact that 10,000 people became homeless as their buildings were set on fire during the course of the riot.⁴⁸ *The Statesman* in its editorial titled ‘Disgrace Abounding’, called it ‘a political demonstration of the Muslim League’ and it came to the conclusion: “this is not a riot. It needs a word from mediaeval history, a fury. Yet ‘fury’ sounds spontaneous and there must have been some deliberation and organisation to set this fury on its way. The horde who ran about battering and killing with 8 ft lathis may

have found them lying about or bought them out of their pockets, but that is hard to believe”.⁴⁹

The main participants of the Calcutta riot, according to Suranjan Das, were non-Bengalis, many of whom belonged to the underworld.⁵⁰ It had its resemblance in the report of F.J. Burrows, the Bengal Governor (dated 22 August 1946) wherein it was clearly stated that it was a pogrom between rival armies of the Calcutta underworld.⁵¹ In the words Suranjan Das “What, however, most clearly distinguishes the 1946 violence from earlier outbreaks was its highly organized nature and direct links with institutional politics. The leadership for both Hindus and Muslims now came from established political parties: Muslim League for the Muslims and Hindu Mahasabha and sections within the Congress for the Hindus”.⁵² He further pointed out that the ‘leading members of the [Hindu] community and Marwari businessmen made available their mansions and their workshops to be used as bases for operations’.⁵³

It was not only a riot or ‘a war between two communities’, it was more than that and it took the character of a ‘civil war’. Tapan Raychaudhuri who witnessed arson and murder in the vicinity of the Scottish Church College (the locality where he lived), narrated his ‘very humbling’ experience of those four days (16 to 19 August 1946) in his *The World in Our Time: A Memoir*. The genocide destroyed forever his ‘pride in the non-communal outlook of educated Bengali Hindus’.⁵⁴ Nikhil Chakravarty, another eyewitness of that holocaust, described: “There was cold-blooded killing on both sides. The riot was well-organised on both sides. Suhrawardy organised the riot ruthlessly to show that... [the Muslims] will retain Calcutta. On the Hindu side, it was part of the campaign for the Partition of Bengal....”⁵⁵ It must be mentioned here that there were some good, sensible and heroic people of both the communities who took all risks to protect the members of the other community during those crucial days.

Immediately after this massacre, the leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha, a section of the Congress leaders and a section of the Hindu press absolutely put the blame on Suhrawardy and his Ministry and particularly accused Mr. Suhrawardy of giving ‘marching orders’ to the Muslims of Calcutta. Also his presence in the police control room at Lal Bazar when the killings went on the rampage throughout the city was

questioned by them. It was revealed from the report of the Detective Department that the vehicles of the Calcutta Corporation were used to carry the processionists. Even the car of the Bengal Premier was used for carrying food for the assemblage along with knives, weapons, kerosene, petrol etc.⁵⁶ Suhrawardy was also attacked for delaying in the deployment of the police forces when the situation was going out of his control. Even in the secret note of the Home Department of the Bengal Government, it was stated that when they were called for action on the night of 17 August, thereafter the police 'did not interfere when crime was being committed in their presence' and in addition to this, inspite of protecting the lives of the people and their properties, they even joined in the act of looting.⁵⁷ *The Statesman* severely criticized the role of the Bengal Government and its complete failure in the judgment of the situation and its regrettable inefficiency in the running of administration: "The origin of the appalling carnage and loss in the capital of a great Province we believe the worst communal rioting in India's history was a political demonstration by the Muslim League.

Bengal's is a Muslim League Ministry.... the obligation on the Bengal Ministry, is fulfilment of the League's declared policy of keeping 'Direct Action Day' peaceful was unique. But instead of fulfilling this, it undeniably by confused acts of omission and provocation, contributed to the horrible events which have occurred".⁵⁸ Even Bucher, acting Army Commander, when he met the Viceroy in Calcutta on 26 August 1946, commented on the 'completely communal attitude of the Chief Minister Suhrawardy....'⁵⁹ On the same day, Wavell, the Viceroy, wrote in his diary his observation about the position of the Bengal Government: "He [Governor] outlined the position in the Assembly where the Government was really dependent on the European vote and could be turned out. But there was no alternative ministry and a Section 93 administration was not possible. He said that Suhrawardy had forfeited everyone's confidence and suggested the possibility of a coalition ministry....."⁶⁰

On 27 August 1946, Sarat Chandra Bose, the then member of Congress Working Committee and Leader of the party in the Central Assembly, attacked the British Government and the Bengal Governor and demanded for the dissolution of the Muslim League Ministry led by Suhrawardy and called for the formation of an all-party ministry

in Bengal in order to restore communal harmony and peace.⁶¹ Mrinal Kanti Bose, the President of the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), also condemned the inactive role of the Bengal Governor and told him that the province had no use for him.⁶² In order to cool down the situation, Lord Wavell, the Viceroy, met with Gandhiji and Nehru in Delhi on 27 August 1946 and put emphasis on the formation of coalition governments, both in Bengal and at the Centre. He tried to convince both of the leaders by citing the example of the 'Calcutta Killings' about the necessity of keeping British troops in India for an indefinite period. The Viceroy also suggested them that they should issue a statement asserting the position of the Congress that the provinces must remain in their Sections till the completion of the first elections under the new constitution. On the next day (i.e. 28 August), far from agreeing, Gandhiji gave him a written reply wherein he categorically said: "If India wants her blood bath she shall have it....If British arms are kept here for internal peace and order, your Interim Government would be reduced to a farce. The Congress cannot afford to impose its will on warring elements in India, through the use of British arms. Nor can the Congress be expected to bend itself and adopt what it considers a wrong cause, because of the brutal exhibition recently witnessed in Bengal. Such submissions would itself lead to an encouragement and repetition of such tragedies...."⁶³ In his reply, Jawaharlal Nehru also expressed the same mood: "Provincial autonomy is a basic provision and each province has the right to decide whether to form or join a group or not".⁶⁴ As a result, Wavell's meeting with the Congress leaders did not bear any result and he became extremely hostile towards the Congress. But the Viceroy could not take any step against it as Pethick Lawrence, the Secretary of State, requested him 'to do nothing rash with the Congress'.⁶⁵ Despite the Viceroy's resentment, a twelve-member Congress-dominated Interim Government headed by Jawaharlal Nehru was sworn in on 2 September 1946 without having any League representative.

Suhrawardy who was severely criticized for his maladministration and mishandling of the situation following the observance of the 'Direct Action Day', after the catastrophe, he appeared to have 'changed his mind and sincerely wanted to restore confidence among Hindus'⁶⁶ which was reflected in his attempt to form a coalition government in Bengal with the Hindus. But Suhrawardy, as rightly pointed out by the

Star of India, was not in a position to take any independent decision in this matter as everything was depended on the green signal of the League Supremo Jinnah. So he met Jinnah at Bombay on 5 and 6 September, discussed with him the Bengal situation and requested him to give necessary permission for the formation of a coalition government in Bengal. But he failed to get the approval from Jinnah. The Nazimuddin group were also opposed to it as they were 'keen for an ouster of Suhrawardy from the provincial League leadership'.⁶⁷ Lord Wavell, the Viceroy, recorded this event in his diary of 8 September 1946 that "the only event to record is an interview with Suhrawardy, the Premier of Bengal, who had gone to Bombay to see Jinnah, and was on his way back to Calcutta. He had obviously drawn a complete blank with Jinnah, who had refused to allow him to establish a coalition ministry in Bengal, unless there was a satisfactory coalition at the Centre. Perhaps he trusts Suhrawardy as little as I do..... Suhrawardy was obviously very worried. I dislike and distrust him intensely. I have always thought him a dishonest, self-seeking careerist with no principles. I think Jinnah is worried too, but he seems as intransigent as ever".⁶⁸

Returning to Calcutta in empty-handed, Suhrawardy had to face tremendous attacks from the Opposition in the Bengal Legislative Assembly when its second session started from 12 September 1946. On that day, the Congress brought the adjournment motion in the House as a protest against the Calcutta massacre which was ultimately defeated in the Legislative Council by 29 votes to 17 (9 members, including the 6 Europeans, refrained from casting their votes).⁶⁹

On 19 September Dhirendra Nath Dutta, Deputy Leader of the Congress Parliamentary Party, moved the no-confidence motions in the House against the League Ministry in general and the Chief Minister in particular. The Congress members like Bimal Coomar Ghose, Ishwar Das Jalan, Bhupati Majumdar, Kiran Sankar Roy, Bina Das and the like came forward to support him. Moving this no-confidence motion, D.N. Dutta accused the Government (which was the custodian of the law) for violating the law and also provoking the people 'to break the law'. In his speech, he severely criticized the police and Executive Officers for their failure in 'maintaining the law and order' and also

condemned the Council of Ministers for their irresponsible conduct at the time of communal riots.⁷⁰

Keeping in mind the aftermath of the Calcutta riots, B.C. Ghose demanded that for the 'future political and economic well being of the province.... the Chief Minister must vacate his high office'.⁷¹ Ishwar Das Jalan of the Opposition, reiterated the failure of the Government and told in the House: "so far as the Government of Bengal is concerned, it had failed to preserve law and order, not only in a lane or a by lane but in the broadest streets of Calcutta, not only for an hour or two but for days together".⁷² He also expressed his strong resentment against the Chief Minister that the catastrophe even took place when Suhrawardy himself was present in the police Control Room. Nisith Nath Kundu, Niharendu Dutta Majumdar, Ganendra Bhattacharjee and Bijoy Krishna Sarkar participated in this debate and highlighted the corruption, inefficiency, sluggishness and partiality of the League Ministry and the police altogether.

Participating in this debate Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the Hindu Mahasabha leader, gave the longest speech in the House on 20 September 1946 wherein he strongly attacked both the Government and the Chief Minister: "... What happened in Calcutta is not the result of a sudden explosion but it is the culmination of an administration, inefficient, corrupt and communal.... We are like poles asunder when you say that you will plunge the country into war if you do not get Pakistan and we say that you shall not get Pakistan. These views are irreconcilable...."⁷³ As regards the future of Bengal as well as India, he uttered: "What about the future? My friends, the Muslims, say that they constitute 25 per cent of India's population, and that is so big a minority that they will never agree to live under 75 per cent Hindu domination. Now if that is their honest and genuine point of view how can they expect that 45 per cent of the Hindu population of this Province will ever agree to live under a constitution where that particular nation represented by Muslims, constituting only of 55 per cent will along dominate?.... Now, if the Muslims of Bengal under the leadership of the Muslim League feel that they can exterminate the Hindus, that is a fantastic idea which can never be given effect to: three and a half crores can never exterminate three crores nor can three crores exterminate three and a half crores..... It is therefore vitally necessary that this false and foolish idea

of Pakistan or Islamic rule has to be banished for ever from your head. In Bengal we have got to live together. We say as a condition precedent this Ministry must go. Only then can we create a state of affairs which will make it possible to build a future Bengal which will be for the good of all, irrespective of any caste, creed or community".⁷⁴

Jyoti Basu, the CPI leader who was selected from the Railway Labour Constituency in the 1946 Bengal Provincial Assembly Elections and later became the Chief Minister of West Bengal, said before the House that the British Imperialists, who were looking after Indian administration, were the main criminals for the communal riots and pointed out the fact that while 'the Sind Governor disallowed the declaration of holiday on 16 August, the Bengal Governor did the contrary in Calcutta'. He made an appeal to preserve Hindu-Muslim unity and communal harmony and at the same time, put emphasis on the formation of a coalition ministry in Bengal.⁷⁵ Kiran Sankar Roy, the Opposition Leader in the House, urged the Bengal Government to suppress hooliganism and vandalism at any cost and restore peace and communal harmony.

In reply to the no-confidence motion of the Opposition against him and against his Ministry, H.S. Suhrawardy, the Chief Minister cum the Home Minister, tried to defend his action prior to the Calcutta riot: "The 16th August had been declared by me a holiday. That was done for the purpose of minimizing conflicts but the Hindu newspapers and leaders deliberately interpreted it in a different light and exhorted their young men to oppose it in all possible way".⁷⁶ The members of the ruling party like Abul Hashim, Minister Shamsuddin Ahmed, Mohammad Habibulla Chowdhury, M.A.H. Ispahani and the like participated in the debate and put the blame mainly on the 'Hindu Press' (particularly on the *Basumati*) for the unfortunate and regrettable happenings in Calcutta. Fazlul Huq who rejoined the League in September 1946, considered the riot as 'pre-planned' and called it a purely 'fiendish fury' with which both Hindus and Muslims had been murdered. In a highly emotional speech at the floor of the House, Mr. Huq said: "while we are shouting here, the fate of India is going to be decided not by resolutions here and there, but in White Hall and in Delhi. It would have been better if we had watched and seen what would be the upshot and the result of the talks which are now going on between the Viceroy and the Party leaders. I am optimistic in this respect. I feel

Sir, that all will end well. If there is a Coalition Government at the Centre there is no reason why there should not be a Coalition Government in all the provinces.... I want to see peace established in the country".⁷⁷

After a long and much heated debate which continued for two days (19-20 September 1946), the no-confidence motions against the Ministry and the Chief Minister were put on to vote. The motion against the Ministry was defeated by 131 to 87 votes and the other against the Chief Minister was defeated by 130 votes (Suhrawardy, the Chief Minister abstained from voting) to 85. The European Group (20 members), the Communists (3 members) and the Speaker remained neutral whereas 5 members from the European Group, 2 members from the Congress and 1 Nationalist Muslim remained absent at the time of voting.⁷⁸ It is to be mentioned here that under tremendous pressure, the Calcutta Disturbances Commission of Enquiry was set up with Sir Patrick Spens as its President but the Commission did not submit its report.

Although Suhrawardy was able to save his chair of the Premier and his Ministry, the tragic and horrific experiences of the people of Calcutta on the occasion of the observance of the 'Direct Action Day', did not at all washout from the minds of both the Hindus and Muslims who by and large, were in search of a 'chance' to take revenge against each other. The celebration of the 'Day' not only shattered mutual trust and cordiality and accelerated much tension in Bengal but also in India which was 'rapidly transformed by communal riots on an unprecedented scale: starting with Calcutta on 16-19 August, touching Bombay from 1 September, spreading to Noakhali in east Bengal (10 October), Bihar (25 October), Garmukteswar in U.P. (November), and engulfing the Punjab from March 1947 onwards'.⁷⁹ As a 'chain reaction' to the Calcutta massacre, riots broke out in the different districts of Bengal like Dacca, Mymensingh, Chittagong, Barisal, Pabna etc. But Noakhali and Tippera, the two southeastern districts of Bengal, bore the worst consequences. Noakhali where the Hindus constituted only 18 per cent of the total population, witnessed a massive communal riot led by Mian Ghulam Sarwar from 10 October 1946 and continued for at least seven days in which hundreds of Hindus were massacred by the Muslim hoodlums (backed by the League Ministry). Under the auspices of the local administration, the reports of the riot did not come to the surface

before 15 October, the day *Amrita Bazar Patrika* wrote: "Riotious mobs with deadly weapons are raiding villages and looting, murder and arson are continuing....on a very large scale".⁸⁰ F.J. Burrows, the then Governor of Bengal, also did mention about the Noakhali riot in his confidential report of 16 October 1946 wherein he pointed out: "Large bands of Moslem hooligans [are].... moving about terrorizing Hindus and committing acts of arson, loot and murder, kidnapping and forcibly converting Hindus".⁸¹ More than 3000 people became homeless in that region and in addition to arson, looting, murder, abduction of women and forced conversion, there were many cases of forced marriages.⁸² The most gruesome side of the Noakhali riot was the inhuman torture committed on the Hindu women which compelled Gandhiji to rush to that place on 6 November 1946 to restore communal harmony and peace. To quote Gandhiji, "It is the cry of outraged womanhood that has promptly called me to Noakhali"⁸³ where he had to put his *ahimsa* (non-violence) to the acid test. From Noakhali, the riot spread to Tippera and thereafter to Bihar where 'a madness' had 'seized the people' and took the lives of at least 7000.⁸⁴ Aggressive Hindu peasants massacred a huge number of Muslims and the Congress government failed to cool down the situation. Same kind of butchery took place in other parts of the country like Bombay (where 162 Hindus and 158 Muslims were killed),⁸⁵ Garmukteswar in U.P. (where the 'Hindu pilgrims slaughtered a thousand Muslims'),⁸⁶ Punjab (where according to Penderel Moon, 1,80,000 people had been killed and millions of people belonging to Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims, had become refugees)⁸⁷ etc.

The situation became much more intense because of the inflammatory statements and speeches of Vallabhbhai Patel, Jinnah and others which added much fuel to the fire. With the passage of time, it was observed that the 'secular' ideals of many of the Congress leaders tended to evaporate. In spite, of the Muslim League's joining in the Interim Government (in October 1946), it failed to control the growing communal inferno. The series of communal riots along with the non-workability of the Interim Government led by Nehru at the centre, compelled many political leaders and a large section of the population to accept what had been unthinkable so far- a Partition of India and the demand of Pakistan, a separate homeland for the Muslims, almost became a 'near

reality'. Many Hindus and Sikhs in Bengal (although there was a movement for 'Independent Sovereign Bengal' led by Suhrawardy, Sarat Chandra Bose and Abul Hashim) and Punjab who were alarmed at the prospect of compulsory grouping which might lead them in Pakistan, insistently launched campaign for the partition of their provinces. The Hindu Mahasabha led by Syama Prasad Mookerjee also demanded the partition of Bengal in order to establish a separate Hindu-majority West Bengal Province (including Calcutta). The BPCC in its meeting, took a resolution on 4 April 1947, in favour of partition and urged for the formation of a new state of West Bengal within the Indian union.⁸⁸ Jinnah, the League Supremo, on the other hand, denounced the move for partitioning Punjab and Bengal as it was intended to 'unnerve the Muslims by repeatedly emphasizing that the Muslims will get a truncated or mutilated Pakistan'.⁸⁹ At last after a series of interviews with the Indian political leaders and in consultation with His Majesty's Government, Mountbatten announced his Plan on 3 June 1947 for the transfer of power on the basis of partition and dominion status which was instantaneously accepted by the High Commands of both the Congress and the Muslim League. The Mountbatten Plan ultimately paved the way for 'three partitions'- partition of India, partition of Punjab and partition of Bengal. Thus it can be said without any doubt that the observance of the 'Direct Action Day' and its aftermath – the 'Great Calcutta Killing' created permanent cleavage between the Hindus and Muslims and laid the edifice of the partition of Bengal in 1947.

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2. Suhrawardy's Ministry was expanded on 21 November 1946 and 4 new Ministers (1 from the 'Khwaja group' and 3 from the Bengali Hindu) were included and the number of Ministers rose upto 11. Surprisingly, Mr. Jogendra Nath Mondal, the leader of the Scheduled Castes and the Minister of Judicial, Works and Buildings Departments, was excluded and he was replaced by Negendra Narayan Roy (in charge of Judicial and Legislative Departments) and Dwarakanath Barori (in charge of Works and Buildings Department). The only representative from the 'Khwaja group' was Fazlur Rahman who was allotted the portfolio of Land and Land Revenue Department and the Jails Branch of the Home Department.

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18. *Morning News*, 1 and 5 August 1946.
19. *Star of India* 6 August 1946, p. 3.
20. *Azad*, 11 August 1946, p. 1; *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 20 September 1946 (cutting); quoted in Abul Hashim, *In Retrospection*, Dhaka, Mowla Brothers, 1974, pp. 121-122.
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22. *Star of India*, 15 August 1946, pp. 1, 6.
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24. See Assembly Debate in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 20 September 1946 (cutting).
25. *Hindusthan Standard*, 15-16 August 1946; see also, Sandip Bandyopadhyay, *op.cit.*, p. 35.
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