

## **Addendum with the Missive: 01 July 2023**

### **Some relatively unknown facts about the 1947 partition of Bengal**

The celebration of June 20 as Bengal's Foundation Day is historically defensible since history is not just laying out of fact, it is also an interpretation of the mentality of the key players and also the people who were either victims or beneficiaries. The second partition of Bengal was a matter of joy for many, regardless of religion, since it relieved them of the torture of the Muslim League-led government that was in power given the victory of Muslim League within the format of Westminster parliamentary democracy. With a majority in Bengal Legislature, the League came to power and HS Suhrawardy became Bengal's Chief Minister. As GD Khosla's report on the 1946 Calcutta riot already pinpointed the incumbent Chief Minister as responsible for the mayhem that led to the killing of many Hindus although Muslims were not spared when Hindus retaliated, three days after the famous August killing started. It was a matter of great pain that a Chief Minister who was also a Muslim allowed the rioters to be as brutal as possible to the hapless Hindus in various parts of Calcutta. It is also a matter, codified in government documents that Suhrawardy controlled the movement of the police by taking charge of the control room in the police Head Quarter, located in Lal bazar. As Nirad C Chaudhuri reminisces, 'in every Muslim quarter, the Muslims were seen to sharpen their knives and spears and heard to utter threat. Well-disposed Muslims sent words to their Hindu friends to be careful and avoid trouble spots'. Even the pro-League daily, *The Statesman* was horrified by the sudden changes in the city when 'some of those disrupting the city's peace were privileged. The bands of ruffians rushing about in lorries, stopping to assault and attack and generally spreading fear and confusion found the conveyances they wanted. On a day when no one else could get transport for lawful occasions, these men had all they wanted; it is not a ridiculous assumption that they had been provided for in advance'. Even Suhrawardy's attitude was circumspect, as the Bengal Inspector General of Police, SG Taylor admitted that 'the Chief Minister's own attitude during the rioting was reprehensible. ... During his visit to the riot-affected areas, when the Army Commander expressed that he was surprised that Muslims became so belligerent in areas they lived happily with their Hindu brethren so far. In response, Suhrawardy replied, we shall put an end to all that'. Perhaps, the League leadership realized that Hindus remained stubborn in their opposition to partition which led them to show their strength elsewhere. So, Noakhali was chosen because there 85% were Muslims and Hindus were a miniscule minority. On 10 October, 1946, an auspicious day because it was a day of Laxmi Puja which was held in almost all Hindu households, riot broke out at the aegis of the Muslim League member of Bengal legislative Assembly, Ghulam Sarwar in this small mofussil town in east Bengal. Besides the support of the League leadership, the administration was also in connivance with the rioters. As the available government report suggests that Sarwar was protected from being arrested which the Army Commander, HS Tukurconveyed by stating that 'on one occasion, when the army was going to raid on a village to arrest him the police have given information of the intended raid and he disappeared'. On another occasion, MO Carter, the Chittagong Divisional Commissioner complained to the Bengal Home Secretary that the Chittagong District Magistrate who was a Muslim 'released an arrested absconder suspected of having committed murder in Noakhali riot before the latter had even been produced in the court'. He was candidly thus mentioned that 'there was no doubt that the whole administration, from top to

bottom, was communally-minded supporting Muslims to gain at any cost'. It has further been reported that the revamping of the notoriously famous Muslim National Guard just before the Noakhali mayhem broke out was deliberately done by the government in power. Not only that, Suhrawardy was reported to have arranged to release many of the history sheeters Guard members from prison and he was also instrumental in popularizing the Guard as an effective shield for protecting Muslims from Hindu attacks.

Many of the historians admired the initiative of a faction of the Bengal Congress, led by Sarat Bose and KS Roy to create United Bengal apart from India and Pakistan following the withdrawal of the British rule. This was also the failure of the stalwarts of Bengal Congress to understand the ploy of the League Chief Minister, HSSuhrawardy, as his letter to Jinnah demonstrates. He persuaded the Quaid-i-Azam not to intervene in the campaign for retaining Bengal as an independent unit since his plan was to join Pakistan as soon as it was formally guaranteed. Jinnah responded by emphasizing that it was a great plan to found a Greater Pakistan. The campaign however fizzled out once Shyama Prasad Mookherjee led an equally strong campaign against such a conspiracy. It was a counter to the consolidation of Muslims for including west Bengal in the proposed Pakistan which was clearly stated by Mookherjee when he mentioned that 'the aggressive majority community feels that it is advancing its political aims by opposing the Hindus and depriving them of their due rights ... and with a government of their own in power which will not interfere with their acts of lawlessness and oppression, the League objective can easily be realized'.

In the light of the above historically-documented events, the celebration of 20 June as West Bengal's foundation does not seem to be historically ill-conceived. The second partition of Bengal was formally articulated by following the established constitutional practices. The Muslims were zealous because, as the local dailies reported, 'at last they have a country which they call their own' although the Muslim businessmen were not happy because 'they are sacrificed by the League leadership to fulfill their narrow ambition'. Hindus were also happy because their campaign for partition 'resulted in what they aspired' [because] now, they will be able to maintain their own culture unhampered' although some of them apprehended that with a truncated Bengal, the Hindus 'will carry little weight in the council of Hindustan'.

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