

Shyama Prasad Mukherjee: Partition of Bengal and its Aftermath

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Abstract

As a Calcutta University candidate for the Indian National Congress, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee began his political career in 1929 by being elected to the Bengal Legislative Council. He served as Bengal Province's finance minister in 1941–1942 during A.K. Fazlul Haq's progressive coalition administration. In 1939, after leaving the Congress party, he joined the Hindu Mahasabha. During the division of Bengal, Shyama Prasad actively defended the rights of the local Hindu population. After the partition of Bengal, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee founded the "Bharatiya Jana Sangh" (BJS) political party in 1953. One of the important political parties in India after independence that actively promoted Hindutva aspects was this one. This study emphasizes Shyama Prasad Mukherjee's contribution to the partition of Bengal. It also aims to draw attention to the question of whether Shyama Prasad Mukherjee played any part in West Bengal being an integral part of India.

Keywords: Bengal Legislative Council, Congress Party, Hindutva, Hindu Mahasabha, Partition, West Bengal, etc.

Introduction

Shyama Prasad Mukherjee was born into one of Bengal's most distinguished families. Sir Ashutosh, a well-known Bengali name, was his father. Shyama Prasad made major contributions to the political and cultural life of the nation in addition to enhancing the reputation and status of the family to which he was born. On 6th July 1901 he was born. He had an excellent academic record while attending Calcutta University. He was elected a Fellow of the University of Calcutta Senate in 1923. In 1924, he registered as an advocate with the Calcutta High Court. He departed for England in 1926 to pursue his Bar studies, joined Lincoln's Inn and was admitted to the Bar in 1927. He became the Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University in 1934, when he was thirty-three years old, and he served in that capacity until 1938.¹

From the sphere of education Shyama Prasad moved to the realm of Politics. In 1929 he was elected to the Bengal Legislative Council as a Congress candidate representing Calcutta University, but the following year he resigned when the Congress decided to boycott the legislature. Shyama Prasad did not agree with the

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policy of Congress and he stood for election as an independent candidate and was re-elected. From then onwards he was actively involved in politics till his death in 1953.²

Partition of Bengal

Curzon divided Bengal in 1905, but it was a very different process. Almost one-fourth of the nation at the time was in Bengal, which also encompassed Bihar and Orissa. Curzon divided Bengal in order to sever the unity of the Bengali-speaking people and to establish a distinct province with a Muslim majority. East Bengal and Assam were combined to form a single province with a preponderance of Muslims. In 1911, this division was lifted, and Bengal's linguistic unity was re-established. Bengal was divided into Bihar and Orissa. The only connection between the two splits (of 1905 and 1947) was that the new Bengal that arose after 1911 had a Muslim majority. In 1947 Bengal was divided once again as a result of severe conflict between Hindus and Muslims. Bengal had witnessed considerable communal violence in 1946 before the partition. The partition of Bengal was the result of firstly, a demand made by the Muslim League that the Indian Muslims were a nation in themselves, and hence ought to have a separate nation-state of their own. Therefore, all the Muslim-majority provinces were claimed under this scheme. Secondly, a massive communalization of the society along religious lines, culminating in serious communal violence in what was then known as Calcutta in August 1946.³

An organized protest that called for the vivisection of the province on the basis of religion came before the partition of Bengal. The so-called 'bhadralok', or "respectable people," of Bengali society, who had controlled that nation's nationalist politics ever before Bengal's first partition, led this effort. In less than 40 years, the politics of Bhadraklok had completely circled, going from nationalist agenda to more parochial concerns and from 'nationalism' to 'communalism'.⁴ An ideology known as communalism emphasises the importance of the community's intrinsic unity in relation to other communities while suppressing differences within the group. It has been used as a political propaganda weapon to create division, discord, and tensions amongst the groups based on religious and ethnic identity, which has resulted in animosity and bloodshed between the communities. People of many faiths lived side by side in harmony in ancient Indian civilization. The introduction of Islam to India throughout the Middle Ages was marked by sporadic acts of violence, such

as the demolition of Hindu temples by Mahmud Ghazni and the attacks against Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists by Mahmud of Ghor. Rulers like Akbar and Sher Shah Suri adhered to the Islamic doctrine of tolerance for the various cultures and traditions observed throughout the nation. It is a contemporary phenomenon that resulted from the effects of British colonialism and the reactions of Indian social classes.⁵

The Permanent Settlement's system of property relations, which gave rise to the Bengali Bhadrak, was fundamentally its product. They were generally a type of rentiers with intermediate tenurial rights to land rentals. There were several variations among the bhadralok. The term "bhadralok" in the vernacular is helpful since it conveys a feeling of exclusivity and social interactions as well as hints to the colonial origins of this class and its predominantly Hindu composition.⁶ By the mid-nineteenth century, bhadralok authors began referring to their class less and less as the 'bhadralok'—a term that connotes a class dependent on landed wealth—and more and more as the *shikhhita sampraday* (educated community) or the *shikhhita madhyabitta* (educated middle class). One of the prominent among these bhadralok people is Shyama Prasad Mukherjee. During the time when he was attached to the politics of the pre-Hindu Mahasabha bubble, Shyamaprasad played several long-lasting and noble humanitarian responsibilities. Even though he still had a strong Hindu awareness at the time, he was a more compassionate and perceptive leader of the populace.⁷

Shyama Prasad Mukherjee began his political career by participating in Congress action, but his support for Hindu interests never became an undercurrent. He didn't hesitate, though, to discuss his political engagement with Abul Kasem Fazlul Haq. In order to advocate the interests of Hindus in Bengal, Mukherjee joined the Hindu Mahasabha in 1939 under the advice of Hedgewar and Savarkar and became its president after Savarkar fell ill.⁸ He served in the Bengal Assembly before being appointed minister of industry and supply in Nehru's government in 1947.⁹

Shyamaprasad spoke for advancing the interests of the Hindu community several times in the leaves of his diary. His consideration for non-Hindus decreased as he became increasingly focused on serving the interests of Hindus. His frustration with Congress politics stemmed from their disregard for Hindu interests, which is ultimately why he quit the party. Despite urging Sarat Chandra Basu and Subhas Chandra Basu to consider the Hindu cause and support his opinions, he was

discouraged himself. He made a special effort to change Subhas Chandra Bose's mind on Hinduism, but in vain. Subhash Chandra, on the other hand, wrote, "that a long time ago, when prominent leaders of the Congress could be members of the communal organizations like Hindu Mahasabha and Muslim League. But in recent times, the circumstances have changed. These communal organizations have become more communal than before. As a reaction to this, the Indian National Congress has put into its constitution a clause to the effect that no member of a communal organization like Hindu Mahasabha and Muslim League can be a member of an elective committee of Congress".¹⁰ Eastern India, which was then undivided, was the origin of both the Indian independence movement and the 1947 split. In Dhaka, the Muslim League was established in 1906. It won the Bengal provincial elections of 1937 in an alliance with the Krishak Praja Party, which led to its election to power. In the Bengal Assembly, it won an absolute majority in 1944, and Hussein Suhrawardy was appointed chief minister. Muhammad Ali Jinnah announced "Direct Action Day" on August 16th, 1946, with the stated intention of publicizing the call for a Muslim nation in British India. Hindus in Calcutta were attacked by Muslim revelers coming back from a conference at the "Shaheed Minar" of Hussein Shaheed Suhrawardy, the then-Muslim League Chief Minister of Bengal. They could be heard yelling, "Larke lenge Pakistan," which means, "we will take Pakistan by force." The distribution of leaflets prior to Direct Action Day indicated a definite link between the demand for Pakistan and the use of violence. According to official sources, the rioting lasted for three days and resulted in about 4,000 fatalities, with Muslims and Hindus both losing an equal number of lives.¹¹ 'The Great Calcutta Killings' began as a result of the August call. Then followed the 1946 Noakhali-Tippera riots as a follow-up. Mukherjee was deeply affected by the riots of October 1946 in the Noakhali district of East Bengal where an estimated 5,000 Hindus were lynched by Muslim mobs for over a week, many women were raped, and hundreds of people were forcibly converted to Islam. By 1947, the Hindu Mahasabha was advocating for Bengal's division and urging the establishment of a distinct Hindu province inside the Indian Union. The "Bengali Hindu Homeland Movement" got its start when the Hindu Mahasabha authorised Mukherjee to take action to ensure the partition of Bengal during a conference held at Tarakeswar in April 1947. In his statement on April 5th at the Bengal Hindu Conference in Tarakeswar, Shyama Prasad proposed partitioning Bengal as the best way to address the issue

of intergroup conflict. Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee formed a council of action to create a homeland for the Bengali Hindus on the final day of the Bengal Hindu Conference at Tarakeswar. Following this, both the Congress and the Bengal Hindu Mahasabha stepped up their campaigning. There were a minimum of 76 partition meetings, of which 59 were called by the Congress, 12 by the Mahasabha, and 5 by both. To promote the division of Bengal, Shyama Prasad enlisted the aid of the media, including prominent publications of the day as *Dainik Basumati*, *The Statesman*, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, and others. Since Dr. Mukherjee, Major A.C. Chatterjee, and Dr. Pramathanath Banerjee are leading the Bengali Hindu Homeland Movement, one can be confident that they will do everything in their power to realise their goals, according to Sajanikanta Das, editor of the Bengali weekly “*Shanibarar Chithi*.” ‘Homeland for Bengali Hindus’ was the title of an article that appeared in *Amrita Bazar Patrika* on April 23rd, 1947 where the gallop poll results were published. According to the study, a whopping 98.3 per cent of Bengali Hindus were in favour of dividing Bengal into separate states.¹²

Vallabhbhai Patel endorsed the proposal when Lord Louis Mountbatten publicly announced it on June 3rd, 1947, and he successfully persuaded Nehru and other Congress leaders to embrace it. At the All India Congress Committee meeting called to vote on the proposal, Patel said, “I fully appreciate the fears of our brothers from the Muslim-majority areas. Nobody likes the division of India and my heart is heavy. But the choice is between one division and many divisions. We must face facts. We cannot give way to emotionalism and sentimentality. The Working Committee has not acted out of fear. But I am afraid of one thing, that all our toil and hardwork of these many years might go to waste or prove unfruitful. My nine months in office have completely disillusioned me regarding the supposed merits of the Cabinet Mission Plan. Except for a few honourable exceptions, Muslim officials from the top to down to the chaprasis (peons or servants) are working for the league. The communal veto given to the League in the Mission Plan would have blocked India’s progress at every stage. Whether we like it or not, *de facto* Pakistan already exists in Punjab and Bengal. Under the circumstances, I would prefer a *de jure* Pakistan, which may make the League more responsible. Freedom is coming. We have 75 to 80 per cent of India, which we can make strong with our genius. The League can develop the rest of the country.”

Patel represented India in the Partition Council after Gandhi rejected and

Congress approved the Plan, where he presided over the partition of public property and chose the Indian council of ministries alongside Nehru. All members of the Bengal Legislative Assembly from the province's Hindu-majority regions voted in favour of the division of Bengal and the establishment of (West Bengal), a separate homeland for Bengali Hindus, on June 20th, 1947.¹³

Congress-Muslim League

On 20th, June, 1947 Bengal was partitioned, the Bengali Hindu majority of West Bengal became the part of India and Bengali Muslim majority East Bengal (now Bangladesh) became the province of Pakistan. The role of Shyama Prasad Mukherjee and Hindu Mahasabha during the partition of Bengal were that they spoke about the interest of Hindus. But it was the Congress Party that played an important role during the partition of Bengal. Mookherjee and the Hindu Mahasabha were not present during the discussions between the Muslim League and the Congress. The split and the creation of contemporary West Bengal were the results of negotiations between the Congress party and the Muslim League. According to Sk. Mujibur Rahman's autobiography, the first president of Bangladesh and a former Muslim League leader during the 1947 partition (as well as Jinnah's friend), Jinnah first sought the whole Bengal province but ultimately agreed to a division of Bengal following negotiations with Congress. Mr. Rahman said that the whole Bengal area was an independent Muslim majority territory and that Mr. Sohrabardy, Bengal's former prime minister, wanted Bengal to be a distinct country like India and Pakistan. Bengal, which covers Assam and the entire North-east, except for Tripura, was a princely state.¹⁴

Mr. Sarat Bose, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose's older brother, likewise supported a free Bengali nation based on language. At the time, this was not accepted. Congress, according to Mr. Rahman, was prepared for the division of Bengal, but they were not prepared to leave Calcutta in order to join Pakistan. Formerly the richest city in India, Calcutta would undoubtedly become Pakistan's capital if India joined that country. However, Jinnah preferred Karachi as the nation's capital, meaning that West Pakistan, not Eastern Pakistan, would be the country's political hub. Thus, despite the fact that 60 per cent of the population of Calcutta and the nearby district 24 Pargana was Muslim, these two territories were included in India for the benefit of Nehru's Congress and Jinnah's Muslim League. Khulna

and Barishal, the two districts with a majority of Hindus, were handed to Pakistan, and the district of Dinajpur was divided, all in order to include Calcutta in India. Maldah and Murshidabad, two areas with a majority of Muslims, were also transferred to India. Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts were ceded to India, while Sylhet district joined Pakistan by a popular vote, in order to provide a land connection to North-East India. A princely kingdom named Coochbehar signed the instrument of admission and ultimately joined India. The modern West Bengal is a result of these districts.¹⁵

Shyama Prasad Mukherjee and Nehru-Liaquat Pact

Shyama Prasad Mukherjee disagreed with the Nehru-Liaquat Pact, which called for the establishment of a joint commission to ensure minority rights in Pakistan and India.¹⁶ On April 8th, 1950, the Nehru-Liaquat Pact, commonly referred to as the Delhi Pact, was an agreement between India and Pakistan that established guidelines for how minorities in both nations would be treated. Jawaharlal Nehru and Liaquat Ali Khan, the two prime leaders of the respective nations, both signed it. Minorities in both nations saw the necessity for such an agreement after Partition, which was accompanied by severe communal unrest. Over a million Hindus and Muslims are believed to have relocated to and from East Pakistan (current-day Bangladesh) as early as 1950, three years after the Partition was proclaimed, amid latent bloodshed and racial tensions. The governments of India and Pakistan formally concur that each will guarantee full equality of citizenship to all minorities within its borders, regardless of religion, as well as freedom of movement within each nation and the right to freedom of occupation, speech, and worship within the bounds of morality and the law. Minority members must share equal opportunities with members of the majority group to engage in public life, occupy political or other office, and serve in the civil and armed services of their nation. Both governments affirm the importance of these rights and commit to upholding them. But Mukherjee felt that in essence, the Pact would leave Hindus in East Bengal at the will of the Pakistani government. As an alternative, he promoted a planned exchange of people and property between East Bengal and the states of Tripura, Assam, West Bengal, and Bihar. This would allow East Bengal's Hindu minority to settle in India while driving the country's Muslim minorities to East Bengal.¹⁷

Shyama Prasad Mukherjee and Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS)

After the partition Shyama Prasad Mukherjee wanted to launch a political party before the first Lok Sabha election in 1951. On 21st October, 1951, Bharatiya Jana Sangh was officially formed with Shyama Prasad Mukherjee elected as its first national president. The Rashtriya Swamsevak Sangh (RSS) deputed three men to help Mukherjee set up the party organization. One of them, Deendayal Upadhyaya, was to become president of Jana Sangh later. The others were Sundar Singh Bhandari and Bhai Mahavir who was the son of Bhai Permanand, a staunch Arya Samaj member who was president of Hindu Mahasabha in the early 1930s. It was thus that a national democratic alternative that broadly represented Hindu interests came to be established. Within two months of the BJS' formation, the first general elections were announced. The Jana Sangh won three Lok Sabha seats in the election. Two were from West Bengal, Shyama Prasad won the Calcutta (East) seat while Durga Charan Banerjee elected from Midnapur Jhargram. Dr. Mukherjee provided several arguments for why Jana Sangh is the only political party with a unique strategy for addressing issues unique to Bengal. The Jana Sangh was effective in bringing the issues in Bengal to national attention and developed particular plans for assisting East Bengali Hindu immigrants, enacting land reforms, reducing unemployment, and boosting industrial output in Bengal. S. P. Mukherjee was scrambling to find housing for the underprivileged refugees. He urged the Assamese to abandon their animosity against Hindus and make place for the migrants. He hoped that Orissa and Bihar would also assist the refugees.¹⁸

Conclusion

The role of Shyama Prasad Mukherjee after coming into politics is widely seen as controversial. Whether he played a part in actually protecting Hindu interests or fanned communal sentiments to further political interests and his own political career is a subject of intense debate and discussions.

Scholars and political analysts continue to pen their thoughts on paper and exchange views on national television regarding Shyama Prasad while steering the discourse on Bengal politics and partition.

Was Shyama Prasad a product of the changing political developments of his time, or did he always possess a genuinely Hindu conservative bent of mind which gradually manifested over time - is what this article tries to address.

Notes and References

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