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Role of the Bengal Province during the Pakistan Movement: A Historical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the socio-economic, political and electoral role of Bengal in the Pakistan Movement between 1937 and 1947. Bengal was the largest Muslim-majority province of British India. It had significant economic, demographic and political importance. The study traces the transformation of Bengal's Muslim politics from regional, agrarian-based politics to national-level support for the All-India Muslim League. The study analyses the 1937 provincial elections, the Krishak Praja Party-Muslim League coalitions, the agrarian reforms of A. K. Fazlul Huq's ministry, the reorganization of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League and the impact of the Second World War in the form of the Bengal Famine. The article argues that Bengal's contributions were not only directed by the Muslim League's central leadership. Rather, political under-representation, economic inequalities, religious identity, and the demand for provincial autonomy shaped Bengal's Muslim political consciousness. It was Fazlul Huq's presentation of the Pakistan Resolution in 1940, which provided decisive provincial legitimacy to the Pakistan demand, while the organizational efforts of Khawaja Nazimuddin, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, and Abul Hashim transformed the League into a mass political organization. The Muslim League's decisive victory in the 1946 Bengal elections and Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy's resolution at the Delhi Convention in 1946 on the issue of States was a popular endorsement of Pakistan's demand by the Bengali Muslims. The study concludes that, despite the support of the United Bengal movement, Bengal's political leadership's role was indispensable for the success of the Pakistan Movement.



Introduction

Bengal's role in the Pakistan Movement developed over the years due to political and socio-economic changes during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After the British rule in 1757¹ in Bengal, Bengali Muslims lost their former influence in administration and education, while the Hindu middle class, called *Bhadralok*, emerged, gaining greater access to English education, government (govt) employment, and professional opportunities.² Due to new agricultural and tax reforms, many Muslim peasants came under the control of powerful landlords, creating economic and social grievances.

Bengali nationalism was a political and cultural movement that emerged in the 19th century in British India. It was greatly associated with the *Bengal Renaissance* and the Bengali Language Movement. *Ram Mohan Roy* was a scholar, reformer and educationist who challenged traditional Hindu beliefs and customs. He is known as the father of Bengal's Renaissance.³ It is important that Muslims were not directly associated with Bengal's renaissance.⁴ Meanwhile, religious and political awakening movements among Muslims like the Faraizi Movement strengthened Muslim identity and tried to mobilise the rural Muslim population. Muslim leaders, including Abdul Latif and Syed Ameer Ali, sought to promote modern education among Muslims and organised their political representation.⁵ The Bengal's partition in 1905 was a major turning point in the history of sub-continent. After partition, Muslims got majority in Eastern Bengal. Now they had better opportunities for education, employment, and political representation. Due to the strong resistance of the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Hindu Mahasabha, the partition of Bengal was annulled in 1911, which created deep disappointment and strengthened the belief that Muslims needed an independent political organisation.⁶ The establishment of the All India Muslim League (AIML) at Dhaka in 1906 gave Muslims a permanent political platform.⁷

The Lucknow Pact of 1916 was a major breakthrough in the history of Hindu-Muslim cooperation. INC accepted the separate Muslim electorates. A. K. Fazlul Huq, one of Bengal's leading Muslim politicians, played a significant role in the formulation of the agreement. Fazlul Haq served as the President of the AIML from 1916 to 1921.⁸

The Bengal Pact of 1923, associated with Chittaranjan Das and supported by several Bengali Muslim leaders, attempted to resolve communal differences by providing Muslims with a fair share in local institutions, govt employment and political representation.^{9,10} However, the death of

¹ Kamruddin Ahmad, *A Social History of Bengal* (Dacca: Raushan Ara Ahmed, 1970), xxxi

² Tejas Harad, "Class, Caste and Habitus: The Rise of Bhadrlok in 19th-Century Bengal," *The Satyashodhak*, September 9, 2024, <https://thesatyashodhak.com/class-caste-and-habitus-the-rise-of-bhadrlok-in-19th-century-bengal/>

³ Tara Chand, *History of The Freedom Movement in India, Volume II* (Lahore: Book Trders, 1967), 588.

⁴ Ahmad, *A Social History of Bengal*, xxxiii

⁵ Muhammad Mojlum Khan, *The Muslim Heritage of Bengal: The Lives, Thoughts and Achievements of Great Muslim Scholars, Writers and Reformers of Bangladesh and West Bengal* (Markfield, Leicestershire, UK: Kube Publishing, 2013), 179–186.

⁶ Zahid Chouhady, Hassan Jafer Zaidi, *Tehreeke Pakistan mein Bengali Muslamano ka Numaya tareen Kirdaar* (Lahore: Shirkat Printing Press, 2014), 71–73.

⁷ Alid Uddin and Sk Appan Ahmed, "Political Development and the Muslim Community in Colonial Bengal (1909–1947): A Study," *International Journal of Social Science Research (IJSSR)* 2, no. 5 (September–October 2025): 306–12, <https://doi.org/10.70558/IJSSR.2025.v2.i5.30622>.

⁸ Amalendu De and Enayetur Rahim, "Huq, AK Fazlul," *Banglapedia: National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh*, last modified June 17, 2021, accessed August 3, 2026, https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Huq%2C_AK_Fazlul.

⁹ Manju Gopal Mukherjee, "C.R. Das and the Bengal Pact," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 61 (2000): 739–46, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44148149>

¹⁰ M. Rafique Afzal, *A History of the All-India Muslim League: 1906–1947* (Karachi: OUP, 2013), 172.

Chittaranjan Das was a great blow to the efforts of communal settlement between Muslims and Hindus.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Bengali Muslim politics transformed from aristocratic and urban to rural and peasant-based leadership. A. K. Fazlul Huq emerged as the main representative of this rural political class. His politics was associated with Muslim representation, demanding peasant welfare, and the reform of the zamindari system. The formation of the *Krishak Praja Party (KPP)* in 1936 showed that Muslim politics in Bengal was shaped not only by religion but also by class and rural economic conditions.¹¹ According to the Govt of India Act 1935, one of the most important provisions of the Act was the introduction of provincial autonomy. Total 250 seats were allocated for Bengal legislature and 117 seats were allocated exclusively for the Muslims.¹²

Elections of 1936-37 and Bengal

According to the Govt of India Act 1935, provincial elections were held in British India during the winter of 1936–37. Bengal, being a Muslim-majority province, became politically important because its election results would show the impact of *AIML* on Muslim politics. Before the 1937 provincial elections, Bengal was not just another province like other provinces—it was a politically motivated, economically vital and strategically important province.¹³

Muslims formed around 54–55% of the population. However, the number of seats in the Bengal assembly was 48 % (119 out of 250¹⁴) as per the communal award of 1932. If some party was seeking power at the national level (especially the *AIML* or the *INC*), it had to secure Bengal's support. Before the elections of 1937, Bengal became a testing ground between the elite Muslim politics of *AIML* and the regional politics of *KPP*. Bengal's society was deeply influenced by the Zamindari system (landlords). There was a tussle going on between Muslim peasants and Hindu landlords (in many areas), resulting in economic grievances and class-based politics. During the elections, the major political parties in Bengal included the *KPP* led by A. K. Fazlul Huq; the *AIML*; the *INC*; the Hindu *Mahasabha*; and other smaller groups. Election results were as follows¹⁵:

Table 1: Election Results of 1937 Bengal Assembly Elections

Party/Group	Seats
Indian National Congress (INC)	54
All India Muslim League (AIML)	39
Krishak Praja Party (KPP)	36
Tripura Krishak Samiti	5
Akhil Bharatiya (Hindu Mahasabha)	4
The Congress Nationalist Party	1
Hindu Members (Independent)	37
Muslim Members (Independent)	43
Other Groups	31

¹¹ Taj ul-Islam Hashmi, *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia: The Communalization of Class Politics in East Bengal, 1920–1947* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), 166–167.

¹² Chouhadrady and Zaidi, *Tehreeke Pakistan mein Bengali Muslamano ka Numaya Tareen Kirdaar*, 94.

¹³ Willem van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia* (London: Anthem Press, 2005), 55–60.

¹⁴ Chouhadrady and Zaidi, *Tehreek-e-Pakistan Mein Bengali Musalmanon ka Numaya Tareen Kirdaar*, 67.

¹⁵ David Denis Taylor, "Indian Politics and the Elections of 1937" (PhD diss., University of London, 1971).

Total	250
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Source: Taylor, *Indian Politics and the Elections of 1937*.

According to the result, no party had a clear majority in the elections. KPP under the leadership of Fazlul Huq, emerged as a major regional party. After the 1937 elections Fazlul Haq tried to make a coalition with the INC, but Congress was not interested in forming a coalition due to its policy of avoiding coalition govts in those provinces where it did not have a clear majority. KPP, led by A.K. Fazlul Huq with 36 seats, made a coalition with the AIML led by Khawaja Nazumuddin, which had won 39 seats. KPP performed very well among Muslim peasants because it raised issues of landlordism, debt relief, and peasant rights during its election campaign. AIML was still seen as a party of Muslim elites rather than the masses. After the elections, A. K. Fazlul Huq of Krisak Praja Party became the Premier of Bengal in 1937.¹⁶ The 1937 Bengal elections were important for several reasons. The results showed the rise of regional Muslim politics in Bengal. The results strengthened Fazlul Huq's political role and proved that the AIML was not yet the only representative of Indian Muslims. AIML showed mixed performance in the Bengal legislative elections. Although it could not get the majority of seats, it still performed well compared to other Muslim-majority provinces like Punjab. INC was unable to attract Muslim voters and won mainly in Hindu-majority constituencies. These results also laid the foundation for later AIML expansion in Bengal. Most Bengali Muslims were rural peasants, so they were more attracted to Fazlul Huq's agrarian agenda than to the League's elite political platform.¹⁷

AIML's Lucknow and Calcutta Sessions and Bengal

The 1937 Lucknow Session of the AIML marked a turning point in Muslim politics in British India. It was held on 15-18 October 1937.¹⁸ The annual session was presided over by Muhammad Ali Jinnah. The session was aimed to reorganise and revive the AIML after its poor performance in the 1936-37 elections. Jinnah wanted the political unity of Muslims under a single platform. Fazlul Haq attended the Lucknow Session of AIML.¹⁹ It was a significant moment in the history of Bengal politics. Fazl had been expelled by Jinnah from AIML in 1936. Now he rejoined it against the wishes of Congress leaders. Fazl gave a very fiery speech at this moment. He strongly criticised the Congress during his address. Fazl acknowledged Jinnah's leadership at the national level. Fazl warned that if Muslims were harmed in the United Provinces, Bengal's Muslims would not remain passive. Jinnah also recognised the services of Fazlul Haq and declared him a key provincial ally. It was at Lucknow that the title of Sher-i-Bangal, i.e., *Tiger of Bengal*, was given to Fazlul Haq.²⁰ During the Lucknow session, it was agreed that the League would support KPP at the provincial level, while KPP would support AIML at the national level. This showed a temporary alignment between provincial and central Muslim leadership.

Due to the importance of Bengal, the next session of AIML was held on 17-18 April in Calcutta.²¹ Its main focus was the Shadiganj Mosque incident and the reorganisation of AIML. During this session, AIML adopted a green flag with a crescent and a star in white as a party flag.²² During this

¹⁶ Zahid Choudhry, *Muslim Punjab ka Siasi Irtiqa* (Lahore: Idara Mutalia Tareekh, 2013),107.

¹⁷ A.F. Salahuddin Ahmed, *Bengali Nationalism and The Emergence of Bangladesh, An Introductory Outline*, (Dhaka: ICBS,1994),76

¹⁸ Afzal, *A History of the All-India Muslim League*,230.

¹⁹ Harun-or-Rashid, *The Political Ascendancy of the Muslim League, 1937-1947 and India's Partition* (Delhi: Primus Books,2020),369-370

²⁰ Ahmed, *Bengali Nationalism*,77.

²¹ Harun-or-Rashid, *Political Ascendancy of the Muslim League*, 370.

²² Afzal, *A History of the All-India Muslim League*,232-233.

session, Jinnah was addressed by many speakers as Quaid-e-Azam.²³

Reforms by the KPP Govt and its Opposition

AIML supported Huq's ministry until December 1941. Fazlul Haq came into power on a commitment to bring agrarian reforms. Although he was partly successful in bringing limited reforms. This caused a rift among his supporters who wanted more radical reforms. Resultantly, many KPP members deserted Huq. In this critical time, AIML supported the Huq's govt. When the KPP govt passed reform bills like *the Tenancy Act*, INC strongly opposed it. Even many landlords affiliated with AIML also voiced against it. Some supporters and members of KPP also deserted the party, claiming that Prime Minister Fazlul Haq was unable to fulfil the election manifesto. Huq retaliated by calling a meeting and expelling the deserters, and appointing new office bearers.²⁴ The Bengal Tenancy (Amendment) Act, 1938, was not a completely new law but a major reform of the 1885 Act, introduced by Fazlul Haq's ministry to improve peasant conditions.²⁵ It also aimed to reduce peasant indebtedness alongside tenancy reform. These land reforms were strongly opposed by landlords affiliated with AIML and INC. The Tenancy Act reduced the interest rate on arrears of rent from 12.5 to 6.5 percent.²⁶

After the 1937 elections, A. K. Fazlul Haq's ministry sought to reduce the dominance of the Hindu bhadralok elite in Bengal's administration and many urban institutions, like the Calcutta Municipal Corporation. The Haq ministry supported changes to the *Calcutta Municipal Corporation* system to give Muslims more representation.²⁷ INC opposed such moves. INC argued that municipal institutions should not be organised along a communal basis.

The Bengal Secondary Bill 1940 was another important piece of legislation introduced by A. K. Fazlul Haq's ministry for increasing Muslims representation in schools.²⁸ The bill's main objective was to reorganise and regulate secondary education in Bengal as well as to give the provincial govt greater authority and supervision over the secondary education system.²⁹

Govt wanted Muslims to get more representation in schools. At that time, Bengal's education system was dominated by Hindu urban elites. These bills (Corporation Bill and University Bill) increased mistrust between the INC and Fazlul Haq's KPP govt.³⁰

Pakistan Resolution and Bengal

Bengal had a decisive role in the Pakistan Resolution. The 27th session of AIML was held in Lahore during 22-24 March 1940. The Prime Ministers of Bengal and Punjab, Fazlul Haq and Sikanadar Hayat, respectively, attended the session. The Pakistan Resolution was formally presented by A.K. Fazlul Huq of Bengal on 23 March 1940. This was a significant moment as it showed the affiliation of Bengali muslims with the idea of the *Two-Nation Theory*. It also showed that the demand for separate Muslim-majority states was not only coming from the elite class of North Indian Muslims, but also from Muslim-majority provinces like Bengal. There was a big

²³ Riaz Ahmad, *Quaid-i-Azam Jinnah, A Chronology* (Karachi: Quaid-i-Azam Academy, 1981), 71.

²⁴ Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal, 1937–1947* (New Delhi: Impex India, 1976), 98.

²⁵ Ian talbot, *Provincial Politics and the Pakistan Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 65.

²⁶ Chouhrary and Zaidi, *Tehreek-e-Pakistan Mein Bengali Musalmanon ka Kirdaar*, 121.

²⁷ Ibid, 123.

²⁸ Joya Chatterji, "The Reorientation of the Bengal Congress, 1937–45," in *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932–1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 103–149, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511563256.006>.

²⁹ Chouhrary and Zaidi, *Tehreek-e-Pakistan Mein Bengali Musalmanon ka Kirdaar*, 134-137

³⁰ Ibid, 134-137, 173

contingent of Bengal that participated in the Lahore session of the AIML. Nazumuddin was a part of the committee that finalized the draft of the resolution.³¹

The role played by Fazlul Huq gave the resolution greater legitimacy. Bengal Muslims supported the idea strongly. They feared that in a united India, their political, economic, and cultural interests could be under threat from the Hindu majority. It demanded: “*Muslim-majority areas in the north-western and eastern zones of India should be grouped to form independent states where the units would be autonomous and sovereign.*”³² This meant that areas such as Punjab, Sindh, NWFP, Balochistan, and the Bengal-Assam region were seen as possible Muslim-majority zones. Interestingly, the resolution did not use the word “Pakistan” directly. Bengal supported the Pakistan demand for several reasons.³³ Most Bengali Muslims were peasants and tenants, while the majority of Hindus were big landlords and businessmen. Muslim leaders believed that political autonomy would help to protect Muslim economic interests. Bengali Muslims had a distinct religious and cultural identity. They wanted constitutional protection for their social, cultural and religious norms and customs.

KPP’s Govt and Relation with AIML (From Cooperation to Conflict, 1937-1941)

The relations between KPP of Bengal and the AIML saw many ups and downs and remained unstable. It started from competition to cooperation, and then to conflict. It began as an electoral competition during the 1936-37 elections, which turned into a coalition govt after the 1937 elections, reached a high point with Fazlul Haq’s role in the Pakistan Resolution of 1940, and finally collapsed and turned into conflict in 1941 due to differences over provincial autonomy, leadership, and control over Muslim politics in Bengal. There was always a discomfort among Muslim League elites over the issue of coalition with KPP. Both parties represented different classes. Haq wanted to protect the peasants while the League wanted Muslim unity, but without disturbing the landed interests of the elite class.³⁴

Bengali Hindus were also very annoyed over the policies of Fazlul Haq, and they brought a no-confidence motion in the assembly. At this time, AIML supported the KPP’s govt. Meanwhile, Congress’s new President, Moulana Azad, came up with a new idea of a national govt including all the main parties of Bengal. Negotiations were underway between Azad, Fazlul Haq, and Sikandar Hayat. AIML took this matter as a breach of the agreement between AIML and prohibited members from discussing any issue involving the Hindu-Muslim settlement with INC leaders. Moreover, the Bengal Muslim League also celebrated 23 March 1941 as *Pakistan Day*, against the wishes of Fazlul Haq.³⁵

World War II started in September 1939 in Europe. Japan entered World War II in December 1941 when it started its campaign in the Asia-Pacific region. The British Raj was under pressure when Japan swept across all Far Eastern countries and reached Burma. The British govt required support men and material for their war efforts. A *National Defence Council* was formed. Both the premiers of Bengal and Punjab were included in the council against the wishes of AIML. First, Fazl refused

³¹ Chouhrawy and Zaidi, *Tehreek-e-Pakistan Mein Bengali Musalmanon ka Kirdaar*, 218-219.

³² Mubarak Ali, *Qirardade Lahore kis ne likhi* (Lahore, Tareekh Publications, 2018), 90-95.

³³ Prof. Dr. Murshida Bintey Rahman, “Paradigm Shift in Attitude: From Pakistan to Bengali Nationalism,” *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research* 7, no. 4 (July–August 2025), <https://doi.org/10.36948/ijfmr.2025.v07i04>.

³⁴ Harun-or-Rashid, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh: Bengal Muslim League and Muslim Politics, 1906–1947*, rev. and enl. ed. (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 2003), 83–129

³⁵ Harun-or-Rashid, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh*, 128, 130, 192.

to resign from the council against the instructions by Jinnah, but later resigned from both the Defence Council and the Working Committee of AIML in September 1941.³⁶ In December 1941, Nazimuddin, Suhrawardy, Nawab of Dacca, and Tammizuddin resigned from the govt, resulting in the fall of Fazlul Haq's Ministry. But a few days later, a new govt was formed by Fazlul Haq. Finally, Jinnah expelled Fazlul Haq from the League on disciplinary grounds.³⁷

KPP's Govt (1941-43) and Challenges

After leaving the Bengal Presidency Muslim League, Haq formed a new party and coalition named *Progressive Coalition Party*, which also included the Hindu Mahasabha and Congress Forward Block. Mahasabha leader Shyama Prasad became the finance minister who had anti-Muslim sentiments, and this act of Fazlul Haq destroyed his reputation among Bengali Muslims.³⁸ AIML took full advantage of these actions by the new govt and accused Haq of betraying the Muslims' cause in Bengal. The coalition govt was cross-communal-based just like the Unionists' govt in Punjab. Fazlul Haq's new ministry started functioning on 12 December 1941.³⁹

There were many issues and challenges faced by the new govt, including political unrest, the Second World War, Japanese attack and advance in Southeast Asia, food shortages, and the Quit India movement. These conditions weakened the Haq's administration and created tension between the Haq's ministry, the British Governor, and the bureaucracy. AIML challenged the Haq's coalition. Jinnah had already expelled him from the League in December 1941 on charges of misconduct. League leaders such as Khwaja Nazimuddin and Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy started a public campaign and student mobilisation to prove that the League is the true representative of Bengal's Muslims. During his tenure, Haq tried to defend Bengal's provincial autonomy. He did not want Bengal's Muslim politics to be subdued by the AIML. He believed that Bengal had its own social, economic, and political identity. His relations with Jinnah never remained ideal. He, in fact, always opposed the interference of the League's central leadership in Bengal's affairs. Haq accused Jinnah of being more concerned with the Muslim minority provinces. There was a tussle over whether Bengal's Muslim politics should be controlled by regional political leaders like Fazlul Haq, or by the centralised League's leader, Muhammad Ali Jinnah.⁴⁰ By 1942, Haq's political base was shrinking, and the League was becoming popular in Bengal.⁴¹

By early 1943, Fazlul Haq's ministry had become politically unstable. Haq eventually gave his resignation on 29 March 1943.⁴² The Fazlul Haq govt of 1941–43 was significant because it was the last attempt in Bengal to form a regional, cross-communal govt before partition in 1947. Its failure strengthened the AIML in Bengal. Now Bengal's Muslim politics was revolving around the Pakistan movement.

Muslim League's Govt (1943-45) and Bengal Famine

After the fall of Haq's ministry, the League decided to join the ministry after much deliberation. In April 1943, a Muslim League ministry was formed in Bengal under Khwaja Nazimuddin.⁴³ His

³⁶ Afzal, *A History of the All-India Muslim League*, 427.

³⁷ Afzal, *A History of the All-India Muslim League*, 428.

³⁸ Talbot, *Provincial Politics and the Pakistan Movement*, 65.

³⁹ Chouhrary and Zaidi, *Tehreek-e-Pakistan Mein Bengali Musalmanon ka Kirdaar*, 276.

⁴⁰ Chouhrary and Zaidi, *Tehreek-e-Pakistan Mein Bengali Musalmanon ka Kirdaar*, 261.

⁴¹ Farooq Ahmad Dar, "Jinnah–Fazlul Haq Relations: An Appraisal," *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 27, no. 2 (Autumn 2019): 13–34, <https://ojs.aiou.edu.pk/index.php/jssh/article/download/1732/1415/4161>

⁴² Talbot, *Provincial Politics and the Pakistan Movement*, 67.

⁴³ India Office Records, Political and Judicial Department, IOR/L/P&J/5/151, British Library, London.

main task was to provide relief to people affected by the Bengal famine.⁴⁴ Some 3 million lives were lost during the famine in Bengal. It was a great catastrophe in Bengal's history.

One of the most controversial policies during the war was the British *Denial Policy*.⁴⁵ It was feared that Japanese forces might attack Bengal and occupy its main sea ports, supply routes, and communication networks. British authorities destroyed rice stocks and confiscated boats in the coastal region of Bengal to prevent a possible access of Japanese forces after the invasion.

The worst victims were the rural population of Bengal, fishermen, women, and children. There was a blame game of putting the responsibility on each other between the central and provincial govts. A relief operation was started by Suhrawardy as the chairman of the Relief Committee and minister for civil supplies. However, the Hindu press and propaganda machinery ran a campaign against the League's provincial govt and accused it of mismanagement and corruption, causing famine in the province. The British govt also affected by this propaganda campaign and accused Nazimuddin of corruption and nepotism. Resultantly, Nazimuddin started losing his grip on the govt. He lost the majority in the assembly. Finally, his ministry fell on 28 March 1945. A Governor's rule was imposed in Bengal under Section 93 till the next elections.⁴⁶

Struggle for Leadership within the Bengal Provincial Muslim League

Although the Muslim League in Bengal gained power in 1943, and it did not have any threat from other parties like KPP or INC, the struggle for supremacy over the provincial branch of the Muslim League, led by Nazimuddin and Suhrawardy, started. Meanwhile, a 3rd powerful figure emerged. This was Abul Hashim, general secretary of the provincial Muslim League. After becoming General Secretary of the Bengal Muslim League in 1943, Hashim worked day and night to reorganise the League at the grassroots level.⁴⁷ He knew the problems and issues of poor Bengali people being exploited by landlords and moneylenders. He conveyed the League's message to peasants and lower-middle-class Muslims rather than only to elite Muslim families.⁴⁸

Bengal Provincial Assembly Elections 1945-46

The elections were held under the Govt of India Act, 1935. Bengal had a 250-seat Legislative Assembly, divided into various categories including general, Muslim, European, Anglo-Indian, labour, landholder, commerce, university, and women's seats. There were total 117 Muslim seats. The election was held after the Bengal famine of 1943, increasing the communal tension and the decline of coalition politics.⁴⁹ The main contest was between the AIML and the INC.⁵⁰

The AIML fought the election on the basis of its demand for separate homeland for Muslims. In Bengal, these Muslims formed a majority overall, especially in eastern and rural Bengal. The new

⁴⁴ Chouhrary and Zaidi, *Tehreek-e-Pakistan Mein Bengali Musalmanon ka Kirdaar*, 317-321.

⁴⁵ Yasmin Khan, *The Raj at War: A People's History of India's Second World War* (London: The Bodley Head, 2015), 94.

⁴⁶ Chouhrary and Zaidi, *Tehreek-e-Pakistan Mein Bengali Musalmanon ka Kirdaar*, 374.

⁴⁷ A study on Abul Hashim notes that his election marked "a new era" in Bengal Muslim League politics, because he wanted to free the League from vested interests linked with the Dhaka Nawab family, Maulana Akram Khan's press influence, and business elites such as Ispahani

⁴⁸ Sucharita Sen, "Abul Hashim and Revisiting the United Bengal Plan (1946-47)," *The Daily Star*, October 7, 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/slow-reads/focus/news/abul-hashim-and-revisiting-the-united-bengal-plan-1946-47-3722406>

⁴⁹ Fid Backhouse and others, "Bengal Famine of 1943," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, last modified April 10, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bengal-famine-of-1943>.

⁵⁰ Nitish Sengupta, *Bengal Divided: The Unmaking of a Nation* (New Delhi: Random House India, 2012)

leadership of AIML successfully replaced older Muslim regional politics and the influence of A. K. Fazlul Huq's KPP.

Hashim made a tour of 45 days in Bengal and called it the Long March for 45 days. During this tour, he opened BPML branches in 18 districts. BPML was facing financial issues and a lack of funds. Both Hashim and Suhrawardy took this task and raised funds. They involved students in raising funds.⁵¹ The election campaign environment was heavily polarised. For AIML, elections were a referendum on issue of *Pakistan*, urging all the Muslims living in Bengal to support the League exclusively. While INC always supported the united and undivided India. The Bengal famine of 1943 causing deaths of nearly three million people due to starvation, also damaged public trust in the provincial administration and affected the election results.⁵² The results of the elections were as follows⁵³:

Table 2: Election Results -1945-46 Bengal Assembly Elections

Party	Seats
AIML	114
INC	86
KPK	3
Communist Party (CPI)	3
Hindu Mahasabha	1
Hindu Members (Independent)	8
Muslim Members (Independent)	13
Other Parties/ Members	22
Total Members	250

Source: Mushirul Hasan, *India Partitioned: The Other Face of Freedom* (New Delhi: Roli Books Private Limited, 2012).

The elections' results showed a victory for the AIML giving it a clear-cut majority in the assembly. It was the endorsement of the AIML's demand for Pakistan. After the election, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy formed the AIML govt in Bengal. He served as Chief Minister of Bengal before partition in 1947.⁵⁴

AIML Delhi Convention-1946

In the Lahore Resolution, the word *Independent States* was used. At that stage, the AIML was demanding that Muslim-majority areas in the North-Western Zone and Eastern Zone of British India should be grouped into separate political units.⁵⁵ Therefore, the plural word *States* suggested more than one Muslim-majority political arrangement. However, as time progressed, the idea of the *Two-Nation Theory* became more mature. After Second World War and the elections of 1945-46, it was evident that the British govt was leaving and independence of India was inevitable. In 1946, the Muslim League formally moved toward the demand for a single sovereign state for

⁵¹ Asma Zia Ullah, "Abul Hashim: The Unsung Hero of the Freedom Movement," *Pakistaniat: A Journal of Pakistan Studies* 5, no. 2 (2013): 73–92

⁵² Fid Backhouse and others, "Bengal Famine of 1943," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, last modified April 10, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bengal-famine-of-1943>.

⁵³ Mushirul Hasan, *India Partitioned: The Other Face of Freedom* (New Delhi: Roli Books Private Limited, 2012).

⁵⁴ "Bengal Legislative Assembly," *Banglapedia: National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh*, accessed May 13, 2026, https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Bengal_Legislative_Assembly

⁵⁵ Syed Muzammil Shah, "Lahore Resolution Demanded a Separate State? | Lies of Pakistan's History?" "April 7, 2024, YouTube vlog, 21:26 https://youtu.be/TMpEK3NH_II?si=507n0VGM41tmd17W

Indian Muslims. This matter regarding clarity between word *state* or *states* was discussed at Delhi during the AIML Legislators' Convention in April 1946. Bengal's Prime Minister Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy moved the important resolution at the convention in Delhi on 9 April 1946. The new resolution stated, "The Muslim-majority areas of Bengal and Assam in the North-East and Punjab, North-West Frontier Province, Sindh, and Balochistan in the North-West—described as the Pakistan Zones—should be formed into one sovereign independent state." This resolution is significant because it gave clarity to the earlier Lahore Resolution of 1940, which had used the plural word "*Independent States*". It is important that both resolutions were presented by Bengal's Prime Ministers.⁵⁶ It is important that some Bengali leaders, like Abul Hashim, were not convinced by this amendment, as he still believed that the Lahore Resolution of 1940 should be followed regarding the independence of two separate Muslim states in the north-east and west of India.⁵⁷

Direct Action Day and Communal Violence in Bengal

The Cabinet Mission Plan of 1946 was one of the last British efforts to solve the constitutional deadlock in India before independence. Their main task was to find a constitutional formula that would satisfy both INC and AIML and enable the peaceful transfer of power.

The most important part of the Plan was the *grouping of provinces*. The provinces were to be divided into three sections. *Group A* included mostly Hindu-majority provinces such as Madras, Bombay, UP, Bihar, Central Provinces, and Orissa. *Group B* included Muslim-majority provinces in the northwest — Punjab, Sindh, NWFP, and Baluchistan. *Group C* included Bengal and Assam.⁵⁸ For Congress and Bengali Hindu leaders, *Group C* was dangerous as they feared that Bengal, with its Muslim-majority population, and the League's ministry would dominate Assam and Bengal. Finally, the cabinet mission plan failed due to mistrust between AIML and INC and a conflicting interpretation of the grouping system. After the failure of the Cabinet Mission plan, Jinnah believed that Congress would not accept Muslims' rights in a united India. Therefore, Jinnah and the League decided to demonstrate Muslim political strength through mass protest. 16 August 1946 was marked as a *Direct Action Day*.⁵⁹

At that time, Bengal was politically sensitive as it had a League provincial govt under Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy. Calcutta had a large Hindu and Muslim population and a strong Hindu commercial influence. So Bengal became a main centre of Congress-League rivalry. Direct Action Day was basically a political protest called by AIML to increase pressure for the creation of Pakistan. Its main objective was to show that Muslims would not accept a constitutional settlement without their political rights and involvement. In Bengal, the day was declared a public holiday by the BPML. It became controversial at a time when communal tension was already high. This decision allowed large gatherings and processions. The protest soon turned into violence in Calcutta. Political mobilisation was turned into communal riots. During the violence, shops were looted, and houses were attacked. Once violence started, it quickly became retaliatory.

The riots lasted for several days in Calcutta, mainly from 16 to 19 August 1946. They were known as the *Great Calcutta Killings*. There was an estimate of around 5,000 to 10,000 deaths and about 15,000 wounded, although figures varied depending on the source.⁶⁰ In Calcutta, both communities suffered. Violence continued in many phases. In 1st phase, Calcutta was affected, but later it spread

⁵⁶ Chouhrary and Zaidi, *Tehreek-e-Pakistan Mein Bengali Musalmanon ka Kirdaar*, 396-397.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 445-446.

⁵⁸ Khalid bin Sayeed, *Pakistan: The Formative Phase 1857-1948* (London: OUP, 1994), 142.

⁵⁹ Chouhrary and Zaidi, *Tehreek-e-Pakistan Mein Bengali Musalmanon ka Kirdaar*, 409.

⁶⁰ Aakash Dutta, "The Great Calcutta Killings (1946): Causes, Consequences, and Civilian Resistance" (paper, September 1, 2025), [page number], <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5427454>.

to other parts of Bengal including Noakhali and Tippera districts. It began on 10 October 1946 and continued in different forms for several weeks till December 1946. It mainly targeted the Hindu minority population in Muslim-majority rural East Bengal. The Noakhali violence did not happen in isolation. It was the continuation of the Great Calcutta Killings of August 1946. The Noakhali riots were a revenge for Muslim casualties in Calcutta. It also had social and economic dimensions. In parts of rural Bengal, Hindus were often landholders and moneylenders, while many Muslims were poorer peasants.⁶¹

After the Noakhali riots, Mahatma Gandhi personally went to Noakhali to restore peace.⁶² Bengal violence strengthened this AIML's argument that Muslims needed a separate homeland. At the same time, many Congress and Hindu leaders also began to think that Partition might be the last solution to avoid civil war. Direct Action Day had a direct impact on Bengal as it increased the chances of the partition of Bengal.

United Bengal Movement-1947

The United Bengal Movement was a political movement in April-May 1947 to keep Bengal united at the time of the partition of British India. Supporters and propagators of this movement wanted Bengal to become either an independent sovereign state or to become part of either India or Pakistan as a whole.⁶³

The main idea was that Bengal should not be divided on communal lines. The supporters argued that Bengal had its own common identity, culture, language, economy, and history. They believed that dividing Bengal would damage its economy and social life, especially because Calcutta, located in Western Bengal, was the economic hub of Bengal, while eastern Bengal produced much of the raw material and agricultural products, such as rice and jute. In case of partition of Bengal, Calcutta and Eastern Bengal would be separated, and Bengal's economy would be damaged. Communal violence could also increase. According to the supporters of United Bengal, Bengal should remain united and become an independent sovereign state, neither part of India nor Pakistan. Suhrawardy and Sarat Bose were convinced that a united Bengal could protect both Muslims and Hindus better than partition. Abul Hashim was a main architect of the United Bengal movement. According to him, the Pakistan (Lahore) Resolution envisaged the creation of *Independent States* (not a single state) where constituent units would be autonomous.⁶⁴

On April 27, 1947, Bengal's Prime Minister *Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy* conducted a press conference in Delhi, expressing his opposition to the expected partition of Bengal. Suhrawardy, who himself was a lawyer and had a great affiliation with Calcutta, did not want to lose West Bengal.⁶⁵ Moreover, Muhammad Ali Jinnah was also not against independent Bengal scheme.⁶⁶ A five-point plan of United and Independent Bengal was finalised and presented by Suhrawardy and Bose on May 20, 1947. The plan was based on power-sharing formula between the Hindus and the Muslims.⁶⁷

⁶¹ Ahmed, *The Punjab Bloodied, Partitioned and Cleansed*, 105.

⁶² Sultan Mahmud Bhuiyan, "Gandhi Ashram," Banglapedia, last modified August 28, 2021, https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Gandhi_Ashram.

⁶³ Chouhrary and Zaidi, *Tehreek-e-Pakistan Mein Bengali Musalmanon ka Kirdaar*, 435-470.

⁶⁴ Zia Ullah, "Abul Hashim," 73-92.

⁶⁵ *The Pakistan Times* (Lahore), April 29, 1947.

⁶⁶ Chouhrary and Zaidi, *Tehreek-e-Pakistan Mein Bengali Musalmanon ka Kirdaar*, 447.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 455.

Congress leadership, especially leaders like Vallabhbhai Patel and Jawaharlal Nehru did not support an independent Bengal. Congress leaders feared that an independent Bengal might fall under Pakistan's influence. Finally, Congress leader Jawaharlal Nehru stated on 27 May 1947 that his party would "agree to Bengal remaining united only if it remains in the Indian Union".⁶⁸ Moreover, many Hindu Mahasabha and Bengali Hindu leaders also opposed the idea of United Bengal because they feared that Hindus would become a permanent minority in a Muslim-majority Bengal. Some AIML leaders outside Bengal were not comfortable with the idea of the United Plan. They wanted Muslim-majority eastern Bengal to become part of Pakistan. Muhammad Ali Jinnah was not strongly against the United Bengal idea at first. He thought that an independent Bengal might be better than Bengal being divided, and western Bengal going to India. Jinnah supported the idea of United Bengal in a statement on 8 April 1946.⁶⁹ On 26 April 1946, he told Mountbatten, "What is the use of Bengal without Calcutta? They are better off remaining united and independent. I am sure they would be on friendly terms with us"⁷⁰

The United Bengal scheme could not be materialized due to the opposition of Congress and Hindu Mahasabha leaders. Communal violence had destroyed trust between Hindus and Muslims. Time was running short, and the British were more interested in a quick transfer of power rather than experimenting with an independent Bengal.

3 June 1947 Plan and the Partition of Bengal

The June 3, 1947 Plan was the partition plan of British govt for the transfer of power in India, announced by Lord Mountbatten on 3 June 1947. The most important point was that India would no longer remain a single state. The plan accepted the demand that British India be divided into two dominion states, i.e., India and Pakistan, on the night of 14-15 August 1947. Since both Punjab and Bengal had mixed populations of Muslims and non-Muslims, the plan proposed the division of these two provinces on a communal basis. On the same evening, Jinnah, Nehru and Baldev Singh addressed the radio and accepted the plan.⁷¹

According to the 3rd June Partition Plan, the province of Bengal would be divided into East Bengal and West Bengal. Moreover, a referendum would be held to decide the fate of District Sylhet which was a Muslim-majority district and a part of the province of Assam.⁷²

Bengal was one of the most politically sensitive provinces of British India. Overall, it had a Muslim majority, but its population was divided into Eastern Bengal, which had a Muslim majority, and Western Bengal, which had a Hindu majority. The AIML wanted either the whole of Bengal or East Bengal to become part of Pakistan. INC and many Hindu leaders in Bengal opposed the inclusion of the whole province in Pakistan. They argued that the Hindu-majority areas of western Bengal should remain with India. The idea of United Bengal failed due to opposition of INC and Hindu Mahasabha.⁷³ British authorities wanted a quick transfer of power.

Under the 3 June Plan, three separate voting of the Bengal Legislative Assembly were held. The voting took place on 20 June 1947. In the joint sitting of the assembly, the majority of the members decided that united Bengal would join the new Constituent Assembly of Pakistan.

⁶⁸ Talbot, *Provincial Politics and the Pakistan Movement*, 77.

⁶⁹ *The Morning News* (Calcutta), April 7, 1947.

⁷⁰ Zia Ullah, "Abul Hashim," 86.

⁷¹ Sayeed, *Pakistan*, 173-174.

⁷² V.P. Menon, *The Transfer of Power in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 512.

⁷³ Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947*, Cambridge South Asian Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 260-62.

Moreover, the members representing Muslim majority areas cast their vote against partition by 106 to 35, while the members representing non-Muslim regions voted in support of partition by 58 to 21. Since the Partition Plan allowed partition if either group supported it, hence Bengal was divided into two regions i.e., East Bengal (joining Pakistan) and West Bengal (joining India).⁷⁴

Bengal Boundary Commission

The Bengal Boundary Commission was established in June 1947 under the partition plan of British India to demarcate the boundary between India and Pakistan in Bengal. Its main task was to divide the province of Bengal into the Muslim-minority region of West Bengal (later joined India) and the Muslim-majority region of East Bengal (later joined Pakistan).⁷⁵

The Bengal Boundary Commission had four judges as members. The Commission was supposed to divide Bengal on communal basis, as well as other factors, including geographical location, communication links, administrative convenience, and economic and other relevant factors. The district was taken as the basic unit, and the population was determined according to the 1941 census.⁷⁶ Cyril Radcliffe India, head of the commission reached India on 8 July 1947. He stayed in Delhi with the Viceroy for 48 hours to get the necessary briefing. He was given four to five weeks to complete the most difficult task, which had a long-lasting effect on the future of India and Pakistan.

The final boundary commission award, known as the Radcliffe Award, was announced on August 17, 1947 two days after the independence of India and Pakistan.⁷⁷ This delay created uncertainty because people did not know whether their districts would fall in India or Pakistan, resulting in violence and chaos. According to the commission report, Murshidabad, despite having a 70 percent Muslim-majority, was given to India, while Khulna, despite having a slight Hindu-majority of 51 percent was included in Pakistan. The Malda district also had a slight Muslim-majority, but it was divided, and most part of the district was given to India. The Sylhet district of Assam joined Pakistan following the referendum's decision in favour of Pakistan. However, the Karimganj sub-division of Sylhet District, despite having a Muslim majority was included in India. Chittagong Hill Tracts was having majority Buddhists population, but it was awarded to Pakistan due to its strategic and geographical location (geographically inaccessible to India).⁷⁸ The most crucial decision was regarding the status of Calcutta, the biggest port and financial hub of Bengal. Calcutta was assigned to India because the majority of its population was Hindus. Moreover, the economic factor was taken into consideration as a part of *Other Factors* while deciding the status of Calcutta.⁷⁹ Overall, the award was highly criticised and could not satisfy any party. Although INC had only one complaint regarding the inclusion of the Chittagong Hill Tracts to Pakistan. Jinnah declared it an 'unjust and political award'.⁸⁰

⁷⁴ Ibid, 251–60.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 231–255.

⁷⁶ Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, "Census of India Website: Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India," archived May 14, 2026

⁷⁷ Ishtiaq Ahmad, "Was The Radcliffe Award Made Public After The Transfer of Power To Blame Natives For The Violence?" Sep 2, 2024, YouTube vlog, 27:26, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KctC4qg2Mq8>

⁷⁸ Raikumari Chandra Kalindi Roy, *Land Rights of the Indigenous Peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh* (Copenhagen: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2000), 45–46.

⁷⁹ Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, *Freedom at Midnight* (Glasgow: Collins, 1975), 212.

⁸⁰ Muhammad Ali Jinnah, broadcast from Radio Pakistan, August 31, 1947, quoted in Sharif al Mujahid, *Quaid-i-Azam Jinnah* (Karachi, 1981), 643.

Conclusion

Bengal not only provide peripheral support to the Pakistan Movement. It provided ideological strength, provincial legitimacy, influential leadership and electoral authority. Bengal was the first province where AIML was a part of the coalition govt (1937-41) and later formed the govt in 1943. The *Lahore Resolution of 1940*, moved by Bengali leader A.K. Fazlul Huq, gave Bengal a historical importance in shaping the idea of the *Two-Nation Theory*. The research also shows that Bengal's politics was complex and often divided between regional interests and the central leadership of the AIML. Issues such as communal representation, class differences, political unrest, land reforms and wartime policies affected Muslim politics in Bengal. However, despite these challenges, AIML gradually expanded its mass base in Bengal under leaders such as Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, Khwaja Nazimuddin, and Abul Hashim. By the 1946 elections, Bengal had become one of the strongest pillars of the AIML. The history of Bengal from 1937 to 1947 proves that the creation of Pakistan was not possible without the major role played by Bengali Muslims in transforming the Pakistan Movement into a successful mass movement.