

Ilyas Chattha *

‘What is the use of Bengal without Calcutta’? Jinnah’s Advocacy for an Independent Bengal, 1947

Abstract

On 26 April, 1947, when the last viceroy Lord Mountbatten asked Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah ‘what his views are about keeping Bengal united at the price of its remaining out of Pakistan’, Jinnah replied, ‘I should be delighted. What is the use of Bengal without Calcutta? They had much better remain united and independent. I am sure they would be on friendly terms with us’. The idea of an independent Bengal, as a single economic and political unit, was floated by Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy, then the premier of Bengal, at a press conference in Delhi in April 1947. He called on the British to recognise an independent, undivided and sovereign Bengal in a divided India as a separate dominion. This study argues that Jinnah promoted the idea of an independent Bengal, while the Congress leadership opposed it. Drawing on fresh archival source material, this study attempts to address four important questions. Why did Jinnah support the idea of an independent Bengal against the Congress’s strategy to divide it? Why did the movement of an independent Bengal fail? Why did alternatively Jinnah demand a ‘corridor’ connecting East and West Pakistan? Finally, what were the longer aftereffects of the movement of an independent Bengal? By looking at these key historical aspects of the movement of Pakistan, this study suggests we can better understand the 1951 Language Movement in East Pakistan and finally the birth of Bangladesh twenty years later.

Introduction

Muslims constituted the majority of the population of Bengal,¹ in which the Muslim League government was in power in the face of fierce opposition from both the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha. The chief minister Hussain Suhrawardy came from one of Bengal’s elite families, and had an Oxford law degree and a Russian wife. He is often remembered either as for his part in the Bengal Famine of 1943 and the Great Calcutta Killings of 1946 as chief minister,²

* Dr. Ilyas Chattha, Faculty Member at the School of Humanities and Social Science, LUMS; Email: ilyas.chattha@lums.edu.pk

¹ According to the 1941 census, Muslims formed 54 percent of the population as against 44 percent of Hindus.

² J. Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); S. Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal 1905-1947* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991); A. Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

or his role in the Pakistani politics following the Partition.³ Seldom is acknowledged that he was also the harbinger who consumed his energy and time to change the course of subcontinent history by floating the concept of an independent Bengal during the last days of Raj, especially from the crucial months of April to June 1947.⁴ With the exception of Bidyut Chakrabarty's work,⁵ little has been written about the independent Bengal movement. Chakrabarty sees the Congress version of the events concerning to the failure of the scheme of the independent Bengal. This study focuses on the little-studied motives of the Muslim League and Jinnah for the advocacy of a united Bengal as a single economic and political unit. This element has not been previously considered at length in Pakistan. Conventional accounts in nationalist historiography ignore local level developments in their focus on the 'high politics' of the events 1940s concerning the constitutional debates and complex political negotiations that preceded the division of India. Challenging national narratives requires us to not only consider original sources but also to think out the very units of analysis, sites and phase of the events. This article argues the movement of third dominion of Bengal was a significant step and in this Jinnah was being consistent, for he had vehemently opposed the early partition of the province in 1905. This aspect is not well recognised in the standard national histories, and instead it is commonly believed that Jinnah saw Suhrawardy's scheme of an independent Bengal as a heresy. 70 plus years on, the debate of the creation of India and Pakistan would be incomplete unless talking about the movement of independent Bengal and Jinnah's thoughts on it. Furthermore, by looking at this background, we can better understand the 1951 Language Movement in East Pakistan and lastly the birth of Bangladesh in 1971.

In the wake of the British Prime Minister Attlee's 20 February 1947 announcement that by June 1948 British political power in India would be completely withdrawn, the Bengal premier Suhrawardy started lobbying for an united Bengal campaign. Suhrawardy officially announced the concept at a press conference in Delhi on 27 April 1947. He argued that partition of Bengal would be 'suicide for the people, whether, Hindus, Muslims or Scheduled Caste. We Bengalis have a common mother tongue and common economic interests. Bengal has very little affinity with the Punjab. Bengal will be an independent state and decide by herself later whether she would link up with Pakistan'.⁶ On the same day, during his meeting with the viceroy Mountbatten, Suhrawardy presented the free case of Bengal and the impeding perils of the division on its social structures

³M. Taukdar (ed.), *Memoirs of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy with a Brief Account of his Life and Work* (Dhaka: Dhaka University Press, 1987); also see R. Kokab and M. Hussain, 'National Integration of Pakistan: An Assessment of Political Leadership of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy', *Journal of Political Studies*, 24, 1, (2017), pp. 315-31; M. Bhuiyan, *Emergence of Bangladesh and Role of Awami League* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1982); S. Ikramullah, *Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁴K. Dasgupta, 'Muslim Businessmen and the Partition of Bengal', *Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences*, 12, 3, (2018), pp. 12-30.

⁵Bidyut Chakrabarty, 'An Alternative to Partition: The United Bengal Scheme', *South Asian, Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. XXVI, no. 2 (August 2003): pp. 193-212.

⁶*Pakistan Times* (Lahore) 9 April 1947, p.1.

and economy. Suhrawardy urged the new viceroy to keep Bengal in the Commonwealth and to postpone the Partition until November 1947. He argued that 'if Bengal is to be great, it can only be so if it stands on its own legs and all combine to make it great. It must be master of its own resources and riches and its own destiny. It must be ceased to be exploited by others and shall not continue to suffer any longer for the benefit of the rest of India'. Mountbatten 'considered it far better to keep Bengal as one economic unit than to have it partitioned'. He pointed out that 'there was practically no prospective of getting partition implemented before we left in June 1948'.⁷

Suhrawardy's arguments were supported by a group of Muslim league leaders, including the Secretary of the Bengal League, Abul Hashim. After this impetus, Suhrawardy had obtained some support from the leaders of the Congress in the Bengal Legislative Assembly, notably Sarat Chandra Bose (brother of Subhas Chandra Bose) and Kiran Shankar Roy. Sarat Bose especially saw the campaign for independent Bengal as probably the last chance for the Bengal Provincial Congress (BPC) to recapture its old position as the major political force in Bengal. Accordingly, on 20 May 1947 Sarat Bose and K.S. Roy concluded a tentative agreement with Suhrawardy and his Muslim League cohorts, namely the Secretary of the Bengal League, Abul Hashim. At its core the 'free state of Bengal agreement' aimed to keep the province united as one entity. So it would neither join India nor Pakistan.

The Free State of Bengal Agreement

1. Bengal would be a Free State with a Constituent Assembly of its own.
2. The Constitution of the Free State of Bengal would provide for election to the Bengal Legislature on the basis of joint electorates and adult franchise, with reservation of seats proportionate to the population of Hindus and Muslims.
3. A Constituent Assembly composed of 30 persons, 15 Muslims and 15 non-Muslim members of the Legislature respectively, excluding the Europeans.
4. The seats as between the Hindus and the scheduled caste Hindus will be distributed amongst them in proportion to their respective population, or in such manner as may be agreed among them. The constituencies and the votes will be distributive and not cumulative. A candidate who gets the majority of the votes of his own constituency cast during the elections and 25 percent of the votes of the other communities so cast will be declared elected. If no candidate satisfies these conditions, that candidate who gets the largest number of votes of his own community will be elected.
5. Pending the final emergence of a Legislature and a Ministry under the new constitution, the Hindus (including the Scheduled Caste Hindus) and

⁷Mountbatten Papers, Mountbatten's interview with Suhrawardy, 26 April 1947, Vol. X, Doc. 227, pp. 448-449.

the Muslims will have an equal share in the services including military and police. The services will be manned by Bengalees.

6. On the announcement by His Majesty's Government that the proposal of the Free State of Bengal has been accepted and that Bengal will not be partitioned, the present Bengal Ministry will be dissolved and new Interim Ministry brought into being, consisting of an equal number of Muslims and Hindus (including Scheduled Caste Hindus) but excluding the Chief Minister. In his Ministry, the Chief Minister will be a Muslim and the Home Minister a Hindu
7. The Free State of Bengal would decide its relations with the rest of India. The question of joining any Union would be decided by the Legislature of the Free State of Bengal by a two-thirds majority.
8. In the interim a new coalition ministry would be formed consisting of an equal number of Muslims and Hindus, and the two communities would have an equal share in the services, including the military and police.⁸

Jinnah's Advocacy for an Independent Bengal

Days after signing the 'Free State of Bengal Agreement' with the Bengal Congress leader Sarat Bose, Suhrawardy flew to Delhi to meet the Muslim League leader Jinnah. By explaining 'the merits of the formula of free and united Bengal' and the support of some Hindu Bengali leaders, Suhrawardy requested Jinnah to raise this matter with Mountbatten.⁹ 'Bengal has not yet been partitioned and we shall continue to take all constitution steps to save the province from being divided', he told the Bengal press at Calcutta airport by detailing his meeting with Jinnah. 'I discussed the proposal of a sovereign united Bengal with Jinnah and other Muslim League leaders explaining them the desirability and feasibility of a sovereign united Bengal. I also had a two and a half hours' discussion with the Viceroy on Bengal future'.¹⁰ On 19 May 1947, in his meeting with the viceroy, Jinnah told Mountbatten that he would have been happy to settle for a Bengali Dominion. It would maintain a good relation with Pakistan and it was possible that Assam would also follow the idea of separate Dominion Status. He advised Mountbatten that 'with its Muslim Majority, an Independent Bengal would be a sort of subsidiary Pakistan'.¹¹

Why did Jinnah support the idea of an independent Bengal? To avoid the impending partition of the province, Jinnah had agreed on a third dominion of an independent Bengal. He preferred a separate existence of Bengal rather than to obtain for Pakistan the rural slum of east Bengal. Jinnah's advocacy to the third dominion of Bengal was a significant step and in this the Muslim League leader was being consistent, for he had vehemently opposed the partition of the province

⁸Sarat Chandra Bose, *Whither Two Bengals* (Calcutta: Netaji Research Bureau, 1970), pp.5-6

⁹*Times of India*, May 24, 1947, p. 7.

¹⁰ SOVEREIGN STATE OF BENGAL: 'No Leisure Opposition, Says Mr. Suhrawardy', *Times of India*, May 17, 1947, p.7.

¹¹Mountbatten Papers, India and Burma Committee, 25th Meeting, 19 May 1947, X, Doc. 485, p. 899.

early in 1905. To fully understand Jinnah's support for the scheme of a united Bengal, we need to contextualise some of the unfolding events in this period. From his arrival in India, Mountbatten had thought in term of a reduced Pakistan for Jinnah, 'whilst keeping a strong Centre for the rest of India at Delhi'.¹² On 15 April 1947, the last viceroy explained to Francis Mudie, the Governor of Punjab, that his vision of a Pakistan included:

Only Sind and the western half of the Punjab, with a total population 15 million, i.e. less than 4 per cent of the total population of India. Nobody could then say that this Pakistan was seriously undermining the unity of India. In fact, it might be regarded as a fairly large Indian state which had decided not to join the Constituent Assembly.¹³

Mountbatten thought this form of Pakistan could hardly survive. He believed that Bengal and the North -West Frontier Province (NWFP) would not 'follow Mr. Jinnah's lead' and 'Mr. Jinnah's Pakistan would, in the end, consist of only Sind and part of the Punjab'.¹⁴ 'East Bengal might contract out and ...the North-West Frontier was a liability'. If Jinnah did not accept this Pakistan, then the only alternative was to be forced back into 'contracting out' areas into a union where Congress dominated.¹⁵ The hope was that Jinnah would back away from the compromised Pakistan that would result. It was generally believed that if Jinnah accepted the partition of the two provinces, there would be a revolt from the Muslims of the Punjab and Bengal.¹⁶ Perhaps, the reason behind this was to ostracise and marginalise Jinnah as Patel and Nehru had done for Gandhi.¹⁷

Against Jinnah's arguments to preserve the unity of Punjab and Bengal provinces, Mountbatten calculatedly used Jinnah's two-nation theory as an argument against him. He urged Jinnah to realise that if India were to be divided on a communal basis, by the same logic Bengal and Punjab must be bisected. Mountbatten's analysis on this point was as radical as Jinnah's insistence on a full six-province of Pakistan. 'The feeling invoked in his heart by the prospect of the partition of these Provinces was the feeling invoked *in my heart and the heart of Congress* against the partition of India itself', Mountbatten asserted.¹⁸ He drove Jinnah into a tenacious demand for the partition. Jinnah could have his Pakistan, but it would be a reduced version. Mountbatten vainly reported: 'I am afraid I drove the old

¹²Mountbatten Papers, Mountbatten's interview with Sir F. Mudie, 15 April 1947, X, Doc. 149, p. 260.

¹³Ibid., pp. 259-60.

¹⁴Mountbatten Papers, Minutes of First Day of First Governors' Conference, 15 April 1947, Doc. 147, p. 255.

¹⁵Mountbatten Papers, Minutes of Viceroy's Tenth Miscellaneous Meeting, 8 May 1947, X, 'Pandit Nehru's Plan', Doc350, p. 674.

¹⁶Mountbatten Papers, Jenkins to Mountbatten, 7 June 1947, XI, Document No. 105, p. 195; also see V. P. Menon to Patel, 10 May 1947, Durga Das (ed.), *SPC*, Vol. 4, (1972): Doc. 118, pp. 113-114.

¹⁷Patel and Nehru's grip on the Congress during the closing days of Raj overrode the inner voice of Gandhi. For how Patel and Nehru marginalised Gandhi at this time, for details see S. K. Majumdar, *Jinnah and Gandhi: Their Role in India's Quest for Freedom* (Calcutta: Firm. K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1966).

¹⁸Mountbatten Papers, 9 April 1947, V.P.R. 2, L/PO/6/123, O.I.O.C.; italics for emphasis.

gentleman quite mad because whichever way his argument went I always pursued it to a stage beyond which he did not wish it to go'.¹⁹ Jinnah's own logic of the two nations in India- the Hindu and Muslim- was cutting his coveted Pakistan down to size. 'If you persist in chasing me with your ruthless logic we shall get nowhere', Jinnah tellingly argued.²⁰ Mountbatten had come to the conclusion that the solution of the Indian problems would be a united India or a truncated Pakistan, consisting of half of the Punjab and Bengal. Although in the subsequent days Jinnah was to accept this 'ruthless logic' by accepting a reduced and disjointed Pakistan, he started supporting Suhrawardy's idea of an independent Bengal as a single economic and political unit.

I argue Jinnah's support the idea of an independent Bengal was an attempt to halt the partition of Bengal. As I glimpsed above, the principles of the Suhrawardy-Sarat Boss agreement was not different from the constitutional position Jinnah, who held that at the moment of the British withdrawal the unitary centre created by the British would stand dissolved and any future union would be negotiated anew between constituent units. In March 1940, he demanded separate Muslim States; in April 1946, 470 Muslim legislators voted for a single sovereign Pakistan of six full provinces; in April Jinnah endorsed Shaheed Suhrawardy's plan for a Free State of Bengal. As glimpsed above, Suhrawardy began floating the idea of an Independent Bengal following Atlee's announcement on 20 February 1947 that it was 'the definite intention' of the British to leave India by June 1948, even if that necessitated transferring power 'in some areas to existing Provincial Governments'. Jinnah had already given his blessing to the efforts to secure a united and independent Bengal. On 26 April 1947 he had told Mountbatten that that he would be 'delighted' with that outcome even though it meant Bengal would stay out of Pakistan: 'they had better remain united and independent; I am sure they would be on friendly terms with us'.²¹

Calcutta as 'a Free City'

In the city of Calcutta, Hindus formed a clear majority of 74 percent of the population, while Muslim minority made about 23 percent of the population, according to the 1941 Census. Conceding that East Pakistan had a grim economic future shorn of Calcutta, Jinnah looked for a way to keep the city in East Pakistan. Describing Calcutta 'as the heart of Bengal' around which 'the province has developed and grown', he insisted that 'Calcutta should not be torn away from Eastern Bengal'. Conversely, Jinnah argued that 'to divide the jute growing East Bengal districts from Calcutta' would lead to 'the destruction of Calcutta within a few years'. He wrote:

if unfortunately, partition is decided upon and eastern Bengal is deprived of its only port of Calcutta which has developed its present position, in no case should it be allowed to go with the western Bengal, otherwise, it will follow as a corollary that western Bengal will go into Hindustan and His

¹⁹ Mountbatten Papers, Mountbatten's interview with Jinnah, 8 April 1947, X, Doc. 101, p. 160.

²⁰ Mountbatten Papers, V.P.R. No. 3, April 1947, X, Doc. 165, p. 300.

²¹ Mountbatten Papers, Mountbatten's interview with Jinnah, 26 April 1947, X, Doc. 229, p. 453.

Majesty's Government will be making the present of one great port to Hindustan. In any event, if worst comes to worst, Calcutta should be made a free port.²²

Jinnah proposed that Calcutta should become a free city. Jinnah's view was that the ports and mills of Calcutta were wholly reliant on the fertile agricultural production of eastern Bengal to provide the raw materials, primarily jute, for processing and export. If that connection was broken, the economies of both sides would suffer, as was borne out in the aftermath of the 1947 partition. In this context, Jinnah's decision to support Suhrawardy can also be attributed, to a large extent, to M.A.H. Ispahani of the Muslim Chamber of Commerce in Calcutta, who was reported to have persuaded Quaid to discuss the matter with the viceroy. It is clear that big Muslim business houses, such as Ispahani and Adajee, had their substantial units in Bengal but the epicentre of business was in the city of Calcutta. Their main anxiety was on Calcutta when the debate on the division of Bengal had intensified. In his recent work on the finality of Muslim businessmen in Bengal on the eve of Partition, Das Gupta argued:

It was Ispahani who first took the initiative of motivating Jinnah in favour of this united independent Bengal plan and provided financial support for the plan. Ispahani was quick enough to realise the outcomes if Calcutta would go with India. From this city he started his business and it was the heart of all great business endeavours. Therefore, when did he find the united Bengal plan as the most suitable option to the partition of Bengal plan, he readily extended his support to Suhrawardy-Hashim's group. Perhaps he had an intention to control the jute industry in West Bengal, mostly owned by the Indian Chamber of commerce or the British business houses.²³

Suhrawardy campaign an independent sovereign Bengal gained a big impetus for Jinnah's support as some powerful rivals of Suhrawardy in the Bengal politics came to backing the idea. Convinced by Jinnah's support, one was Khawaja Nazimuddin, Nawab of Dakha, who, had opposed the idea of an independent Bengal. Convinced by Jinnah's support, he expressed to the Bengali media: 'An Independent sovereign Bengal is in the best interest of its people, whether Muslim or Non-Muslim...and the Partition of the Province is fatal to the interests of Bengalis as such'.²⁴ Suhrawardy were also able to secure the support of none other than Mahatma Gandhi, who proposed to discuss the idea of united Bengal with the Congress Working Committee. On 10 May, Suhrawardy with Fazul Rahman, then Revenue Minister, met Gandhi at Sodepore Ashram in Calcutta. After the meeting, Suhrawardy told the Bengal press that:

I placed before Mr. Gandhi my picture of the future united Bengal as I visualise it. I consider that if Bengal is partitioned, it will be cruelly disastrous for everyone. All sections of the population should, therefore, cooperate to save Bengal. If I have the future in my hands, it is my duty

²²Mountbatten Papers India and Burma Committee, 25th Meeting, 19 May 1947, X, Doc. 485, p. 899.

²³Dasgupta, 'Muslim Businessmen and the Partition of Bengal', p. 22.

²⁴*Statesman*, 23 April 1947, cited by Chakrabarty, 'An Alternative to Partition', pp. 193-212.

to see that Bengal becomes prosperous and becomes a great country. I do not want partition at any cost. I shall never be a party to any scheme for partition or work for it...²⁵

As the scheme of united Bengal started momentum, the battle for the city of Calcutta intensified. 'PANIC AND GANG WARFARE IN CALCUTTA' was the leading headline in the 30 May 1947 *Manchester Guardian*, in which the British paper detailed the raging tensions between Muslims and Hindus in the city of Calcutta.

Civic life in Calcutta is dislocated and business is struggling along under the twin handicaps of insecurity and disorder. Already city is virtually divided into 'Pakistan' and 'Hindustan' quarters according to whether Moslems or Hindu predominate. Taxi drivers will not venture into hostile areas and householders are banding themselves together on communal lines for self-defence and retaliation. Armed guards are stationed at street corners and pickets guard the houses of political leaders.²⁶

Why the idea of an Independent Bengal failed?

The renowned Bengal historian Boss argues that it was the veto of the Congress High Command that wrecked the possibility of preserving the unity of Bengal as a political entity'.²⁷ In a different context, Bidyut Chakrabart shows the Indian Chamber of Commerce opposed the United Bengal movement from the beginning. G.D. Birla, a Bengali Hindu businessman, in a letter to the All-India Congress Committee (AICC) suggested that the Suhrawardy sponsored United Bengal campaign was a ploy to create a greater Pakistan.²⁸ It is clear that big Hindu business houses, such as Marwari and Birla, had invested in Bengal and the separation of Muslim majority areas meant to be a loss for the Hindu big business. Their main concern was on Calcutta. If Bengal needed to get separated from India, Calcutta remained with India or with the Hindu majority areas of Bengal in case Bengal gets divided. Archival source suggests the Congress leadership opposed the unity of Bengal and went to all extent to stop this. Sardar Patel in a meeting with Mountbatten rejected the idea of a Calcutta Free Port 'not even for six days'.²⁹ Attributing the existence of the port of Calcutta and the development of trade, commerce and industry around to the city, Kshitish Chandra Neogy, a Congress politician from West Bengal, considered Calcutta an integral part of Indian union. In one of his articles in the *Times of India*, he wrote:

Mr Jinnah claims Bengal as the homeland of the Muslims, but will graciously permit non-Muslims to live there on the sufferance of the Muslims on the understanding that of they find it difficult to do so, they can leave Bengal. In other words, the Bengali Hindu cannot claim Bengal

²⁵ Gandhi-Suhrawardy Talks: PREMIER'S "SAVE BENGAL" PLEA, *Times of India*, May 12, 1947, p. 1.

²⁶ 'PANIC AND GANG WARFARE IN CALCUTTA: Dangers in Every Political Solution', *The Manchester Guardian*, May 30, 1947, p. 8.

²⁷ S Bose, 'A Doubtful Inheritance: The Partition of Bengal in 1947', in D. A. Low (ed.), *The Political Inheritance of Pakistan*, (New York: Palgrave, 1991), pp. 130-143.

²⁸ Chakrabarty, 'An Alternative to Partition', pp. 193-212.

²⁹ Mountbatten Papers, 5 June 1947, V.P.R. 8, L/PO/6/123, O.I.O.C.

'What is the use of Bengal without Calcutta'? Jinnah's Advocacy for an

as his homeland. This means it incumbent on us to urge the partition of the province and the creation of a homeland for the Bengali Hindu and other nationalists.³⁰

The Congress and the Scheme of United Bengal

The Congress leaders were categorically against the idea of a third dominion of Bengal, believing the partition would be only temporary measure. They opposed the proposal, stating that 'without Calcutta, Eastern Bengal might well, within two or three years, re-join the western part of the Province'.³¹ They believed that an independent Bengal under the umbrella of the Commonwealth would be difficult to bring back into the Indian union in the coming months. Shyama Prasad Mookherjee, a Hindu Bengali and the Mahasabha leader, saw the scheme of united Bengal a calculated move and sense of frustration. Rejecting the idea of an independent Bengal on the grounds that it would 'be a virtual Pakistan' he wrote to the Congress leader Sardar Patel 'If Mr. Jinnah is compelled to do so by the force of events, please do not allow the question of partition of Bengal to be dished'.³² The Bengali leader Binoy Kumar Roy wrote to Patel:

Please try to come to Bengal and rescue Bengal from the clutches of these traitors. These leaders forget that they are helping the Britishers by their unholy game. ...If Bengal is made free today, Assam will be forced to follow suit, since Assam does not possess direct communication with the India Union. Eastern Pakistan will, in course of time, grow upon the ashes of Bengal and Assam.³³

Their fears were not void. Jinnah had demanded the partition of Assam on the same grounds, when the Congress high command demanded the partition of Punjab and Bengal. In a retribution move, the Congress leadership insisted that during the NWFP referendum, that a clause allowing for an independent State of Pathan should be an option in the Partition plan. Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the Frontier Gandhi, had given an indication to Nehru that they would prefer to join India rather than Pakistan at a subsequent stage. Jinnah wanted in the same vein a clause should be added allowing for the independent of Bengal, as he believed the Scheduled Castes would vote for an independence Bengal rather than join India. Jinnah stated:

In a divided Bengal the scheduled castes, constituting almost one-third of the total population, would, as they rightly say...be divided into two parts, one at the mercy of the caste Hindus in western and the other at the mercy of the Muslims in eastern Bengal. They dread the caste Hindus and

³⁰ "Hindu Bengal Must Demand Division": MR. NEOGY'S APPEAL', *Times of India*, May 22, 1947, p.5.

³¹ Mountbatten Papers, India and Burma Committee, 25th Meeting, 19 May 1947, X, Doc. 485, p. 899.

³² Shyama Prasad Mookherjee to Patel, 11 May 1947, in D. Das (ed.), *SPC*, Vol. IV, (1972): Doc. 42, pp. 40-41.

³³ Binoy Kumar Roy to Patel, 16 May 1947, *Ibid.*, Doc. 44, p. 42.

it is well-known that they have suffered economic and social tyranny at the hands of the Hindus for which there is no parallel in the world.³⁴

The Congress leadership not only antagonistically resisted the idea of Assam partition, but believed that an independent Bengal would be pro-Pakistan. They did not want to give Pakistan any advantage in surviving, since they had accepted Pakistan as a calculated move so that the seceding areas could be forced in such a position where they could hardly continue their existence. Sardar Patel warned the Congress in the Bengal Legislative Assembly that the talk of the idea of a sovereign of independent Bengal was a 'trap to induce the unwary and unwise to enter into the parlour of the Muslim League'.³⁵ 'There will be no treachery', Patel tellingly directed to Kshitish Chandra Neogy, an influential Indian politician from West Bengal,

The cry of sovereign independent Bengal is a trap in which even Kiran Shankar [Roy] may fall with Sarat Babu (Sarat Chandra Bose). The only way to save the Hindus of Bengal is to insist on partition of Bengal and to listen to nothing else. This is the only way to bring the Muslim League in Bengal to its senses.³⁶

Nehru shared Patel's thoughts and concerns about an independent Bengal and cautioned the Bengali Hindus not to be misled by Suhrawardy, who he had blamed for the 1946 great Calcutta killings. An independent Bengal would mean 'the dominance of the Muslim League', Nehru thought, 'and practically the whole of Bengal going into the Pakistan area'. Nehru agreed to a united Bengal only if it stayed in the Union. He told Mountbatten, that he was 'not in favour of an independent Bengal unless closely linked to Hindustan, as he felt that a partition now would anyhow bring East Bengal in to Hindustan in a few years'.³⁷

N.D. Mazumdar, a member of Executive Council of the B.P.C.C.....the authority of any Congress leader to entertain such proposals ---I cannot conceive of any responsible leader of the Bengal Congress entertaining such proposals, unless the position of Bengal within the union of free India has been accepted by the Muslim League as the basis for any negotiation whatever.³⁸

The British Stance on the Scheme of Independent Bengal

On 30 May 1947, an editorial in *The Manchester Guardian* argued:

The case of united Bengal is admittedly rather vague, being based on a 'Free State of Bengal' whose relationship with the Central Government would be decided by a Bengal Constitution Assembly and whose internal politics would be on the basis of Joint Electorates with reservation of seats between communities on population strength. This conception of a

³⁴Mountbatten Papers, Viceroy's Personal Report No. 8, XI, Doc 91, p. 158. When the Congress high command demanded the partition of Punjab and Bengal, Jinnah demanded the partition of Assam on the same grounds. See Mountbatten's interview with Jinnah, 10 April 1947, X, Doc. 116, p. 186.

³⁵ Patel to Binoy Kumar Roy, 23 March 1947, in Das (ed.), SPC, Vol. IV, (1972), Doc No. 45, p. 45.

³⁶ Patel to K. C. Neogy, 13 May 1947, Ibid., Doc. 41, pp. 39-40.

³⁷Mountbatten Papers, 15 May 1947, V.P.R. 7, L/PO/6/123, O.I.O.C.

³⁸'League Plan Repudiated', *Times of India*, May 22, 1947, p.5.

united Bengal is likely to be anathema to Mr Jinnah and it is also vehemently opposed by the majority of Bengali Hindus, whose dominant desire is to cut loose from the Moslem majority in Eastern Bengal. If Bengal is divided then the Governor, Sir Frederic Burrows, and the military authorities will have the herculean task of keeping the peace in Calcutta and Eastern Bengal in the face of strong Moslem resentment.³⁹

The British Prime Minister Attlee believed Bengal would opt to be an independent state instead of joining either India or Pakistan. On 12 June on the eve of the announcement of 'the partition plan', Attlee told Lewis Williams Douglas, then the US ambassador to London, that he thought 'a division of Punjab is likely', but added that there was a 'distinct possibility Bengal might decide against partition and against joining either Hindustan or Pakistan'.⁴⁰

Where did Mountbatten stand on an independent Bengal? Archival material discloses that Mountbatten himself had cultivated the Independent Bengal scheme because of the 'British commercial interests'.⁴¹ He had encouraged the Bengali leaders to seek and demonstrate the support for the independent Bengal movement.⁴² In a meeting with Suhrawardy in April 1947, Mountbatten 'considered it far better to keep Bengal as one economic unit than to have it partitioned'. He pointed out that 'there was practically no prospective of getting partition implemented before we left in June 1948'.⁴³ Mountbatten pressed upon the India Office in London to make an exception for Bengal and to allow it to become 'An Independent Dominion'.⁴⁴ In May 1947, when the viceroy was in London for the final round of parleys for the transfer of power to the Indians, the scheme of united Bengal was discussed and considered as the option 'B'. On 28 May, the viceroy recorded two alternative broadcast statements in London. Broadcast 'A' was to be used if it appeared probable that Bengal would be partitioned; Broadcast 'B' if the balance of probability pointed in the direction of Bengal remaining unified.⁴⁵ Alternative 'B' omitted a reference to 'Bengal and part of Assam', leaving Punjab alone a candidate for partition, and contained an additional paragraph which read: 'Bengal was one of the Provinces for whom

³⁹'PANIC AND GANG WARFARE IN CALCUTTA', *Manchester Guardian*, May 30, 1947, p.8.

⁴⁰Mountbatten Papers, 1 June 1947, V.P.R. 7, L/PO/6/123, O.I.O.C.

⁴¹*Manchester Guardian*, May 17, 1947, p. 6.

⁴² Leonard Gordon has pointed out that Mountbatten allowed Suhrawardy and Kiron Shankar Roy to seek and demonstrate the support for the Independent Bengal Movement, Leonard. A. Gordon, Book review of 'Freedom at Midnight', by Larry Collins and D. Lapiere, in *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 35, 4 (August 1976): p. 703; also see, W. H. Morris-Jones, 'The Road to Disunion', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 31, 4 (August 1972), p. 920.

⁴³Mountbatten Papers, Mountbatten's interview with Suhrawardy, 26 April 1947, X, Doc. 227, pp. 448-449.

⁴⁴Mountbatten Papers, Minutes of Viceroy's Ninth Miscellaneous Meeting, 1 May 1947, Mss. Eur; E 341/46, O.I.O.C.

⁴⁵S Bose, 'A Doubtful Inheritance: The Partition of Bengal in 1947', in D. A. Low (ed.), *The Political Inheritance of Pakistan*, (New York: Palgrave, 1991), pp. 130-143.

partition was demanded, but the newly formed Coalition Government of Bengal have asked for their case to be reconsidered'.⁴⁶

However, Mountbatten staged a volt-face and, 'removed the choice of Independence in the case of Bengal on Nehru's request', as Viceroy's Personal Report reveals.⁴⁷ Three decades later, Mountbatten placed the blame for the division of Bengal upon Jinnah, as India as a whole.

I told Mr Jinnah to leave Bengal alone since they are Bengalis first, but nothing made an impact on Mr Jinnah. He was adamant and wanted Bengal's tea and jute to make Pakistan viable. I told him that the two parts of Pakistan would break up in 25 years. And this was what really happened'.⁴⁸

In contrast, some Indian and British observers had different views. For example, Sir Frederick Burrows, the last governor of Bengal and a staunch ally of united Bengal, sadly predicted that 'Bengal will be sacrificed at the altar of Nehru's all-India outlook'.⁴⁹ This sentiment was shared by many. One was Sarat Chandra Boss, a member of Bengal Legislative Assembly, who lamented: 'Future generations will, I am afraid, condemn us for conceding division of India and supporting partition of Bengal and Punjab'.⁵⁰ Having failed to halt the partition of Bengal and repeating that the Muslim League would 'fight every inch' of the way to resist the division of the two provinces, Jinnah came out with an alternative proposal- and that was a demand of corridor connecting East and West Pakistan.

Jinnah's Demand for a Corridor Connecting East and West Pakistan

Little has been written on Jinnah's demand for a maritime and land links between East and West Pakistan. Jinnah demanded a thousand mile 'corridor' through India to link the twenty-five million Muslims of the two wings of Pakistan that there was no land link between two halves. In an interview with Doon Cambell, the reporter of Reuters on 20 May 1947, Jinnah expressly made three points:

1. The Moslem League will demand a corridor through Hindustan to connect the two groups of Pakistan provinces in north western and north-eastern India.
2. The League will 'fight every inch of the way' in opposing the partition of Bengal and Punjab provinces.
3. A 'really beneficial' relationship can be established between Pakistan and Britain

In reply to a question as would he favour a federation of Pakistan states, even if there was to be partitioned of the Punjab and Bengal, Jinnah replied:

The new clamor for partition that has been started by a local section of caste Hindus in Bengal and by the Sikhs in the Punjab will have disastrous results if these two provinces are partitioned, and the Sikhs in

⁴⁶Mountbatten Papers, 28 May 1947, London Broadcast, V.P.R. 7, L/PO/6/123, O.I.O.C.

⁴⁷Mountbatten Papers, Viceroy's Personal Report No. 8, XI, Doc. 91. p. 162.

⁴⁸B.K. Joshi, 'Mountbatten blamed Jinnah for Partition', *Times of India*, Nov 11, 1980, p.1.

⁴⁹Mountbatten Papers, Burrows to Mountbatten, 28 May 1947, X, Doc. 554, p. 1025.

⁵⁰Das (ed.), *SPC*, Vol. IV, (1972): p. [1i].

'What is the use of Bengal without Calcutta'? Jinnah's Advocacy for an

the Punjab will be the greatest sufferers. The case Hindus will suffer most in western Bengal and the eastern Punjab.⁵¹

However, this demand was rejected by both Mountbatten and the Congress leadership. Mountbatten viewed the corridor claim a 'personal embarrassment' and reported to London that Jinnah's demand 'almost certainly a manoeuvre', to undermine the Congress plan of partitioning the two main provinces.⁵² Years after Partition, Mountbatten recorded his conversation with Jinnah, when the Quaid asked 'a land corridor between the East and West Pakistan'.

'I told Mr Jinnah, what, a land corridor?

Populated by non-Muslims?

A hostage to fortune?

An invitation to war?

You must be crazy.'⁵³

The Congress, too, leadership opposed Jinnah's demand for corridor. For example, Rajagopalachari viewed the demand for a corridor 'a British conspiracy' as some British politicians incited Jinnah to interpolate. In an interview to the Associated Press of India, the Congress leader said:

Mr. Doon Campbell has made Mr. Jinnah ask for a corridor 12, 00 miles long from Lahore to Dacca. Such conditions reduce the League claim to stark absurdity. It would appear that the sooner the Muslim League wakes up from its dream and readjusts its aspirations to daylight the better, such fantastic claims must serve to end this business, which has tarried too long. India cannot afford to waste any more time in foolish trifling.⁵⁴

The pro-Congress press described Jinnah's demand of connecting two parts of Pakistan as 'preposterous', 'fantastic' and 'incredible'. Some referred it variously as on Hitler's demand of a Polish corridor. For example the May 25th issue of *Janata* described to Jinnah as the 'League Fuehrer' who wanted 'corridors to connect the various bits of Pakistan though he knows that once separation is conceded by the Congress, it will take a war to establish right of way from Karachi to Dacca',⁵⁵

The Congress leadership considered the corridor demand an irredentist tactic and viewed it with embarrassment. Sardar Patel called the demand 'fantastic nonsense'. Nehru denounced it as completely 'unrealistic and absurd'. He said of Jinnah that 'he accepts what he gets and goes on asking for more' and demanded that the Interim Government be treated immediately by convention as a Dominion

⁵¹'JINNAH Demands Corridor to Link', *New York Times*, May 22, 1947.

⁵²Mountbatten Papers, V.P.R. 7, L/PO/6/123, O.I.O.C.

⁵³B.K. Joshi, 'Mountbatten blamed Jinnah for Partition', *Times of India*, Nov 11, 1980, p.1.

⁵⁴"Stark Absurdity" Of Corridor Plea: 'C. R.' URGES LEAGUE TO WAKE UP', *Times of India*, May 28, 1947, p.1; also see 'INDIAN CORRIDOR "ABSURD": Reply to Mr. Jinnah', *Manchester Guardian* (Manchester), 29 May 1947, p. 8.

⁵⁵Sukeshi Kamra, 'The War of Images: Mohammed Ali Jinnah and Editorial Cartoons in the Indian Nationalist Press, 1947', *A Review of International English* (2003), pp.7-8.

Government. Mountbatten viewed the demand a 'personal embarrassment'.⁵⁶ Dr Rajendra Prasad, the president of the Constituent Assembly and a member of the Congress party working committee, described Jinnah's demand of corridor as an 'untenable proposal'. 'The rest of India will never agree. I do not think there is any case of a corridor. This would mean cutting through the Punjab, Delhi, the United Provinces, Bihar and part of Bengal- a distance of almost 1,000, miles right through predominately non-Moslem areas'. Referring to the division of India, Prasad said, 'I hate division, but if it comes we must insist upon the partition of the provinces of Bengal and the Punjab.'⁵⁷

Conclusion

This exploration has shown Jinnah's support of the united Bengal movement was part of a grand Muslim League strategy to create a bigger East Pakistan comprising east and west Bengal. Both east and west wings of Bengal had their own structural problems in the way of economic development but it was Calcutta, the major city in the region, which mattered more the local economy. Jinnah did not want a Bengal without Calcutta in his dreamed Pakistan and would much rather see Bengal stay united. Congress vehemently rejected this plan for its own reasons. In Joya Chatterji's expression, the idea of an independent Bengal was 'never more than a pipe dream'.⁵⁸ Despite its failure, the movement of united Bengal plan was historic because it stands to show how the years leading to the Partition and eventual independence of India and Pakistan were full of raging debates and possibilities. The analysis has shown while some leading Hindu Bengal leaders supported Suhrawardy's scheme of united Bengal, majority of Hindu population solidly backed the partition of the province with the lines of the Congress policy. While Suhrawardy was popular among the majority of Muslim population of the Bengal, the premier had become very unpopular amongst large sections of the Hindu population for his alleged responsibility in the Calcutta Killings of 1946, which had resulted in the death of more than 5000 people. Moreover, the idea of united Bengal came too late, with Hindus now solidly backing partition of the province. The period of Suhrawardy's scheme of united Bengal spanned from April to May 1947. By the time Mountbatten announced the Partition Plan on June 3 with advancing the date of British withdrawal from June 1948 to August 15, 1947, the movement of united Bengal had officially come to end. In such a sense of urgency, there was no time for sustained campaigning for the mobilisation of masses in Bengal and the possibility of the building cross-parties alliances.

When the idea of united Bengal failed, Suhrawardy reportedly considered to retire from politics and sadly lamented in June 1947: 'Nobody can be happy that the march of events has divided the Bengalee people. Perhaps a time may come when the realization of a common language and common outlook and the necessity of a common economic development may again bring the two parts together'.⁵⁹ Within

⁵⁶'NEHRU IS SCORNFUL OF 'CORRIDOR' IDEA', *New York Times*, May 25, 1947, p. 25.

⁵⁷'Corridor Idea Attacked', *New York Times*, May 24, 1947.

⁵⁸Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, p.260.

⁵⁹Quoted in Chakrabarty, 'An Alternative to Partition', p. 211.

years following the partition and independence, the idea of a sovereign Bengal as a single economic and political unit started forming raging debates, while conspicuously manifestation could be seen in the 1951 Language Movement and its culmination in the Bangladeshi independence movement twenty years later. Although the dream of reuniting West Bengal with Bangladesh to pursue an alternative homeland narrative that includes all of the people who lived in the region as members of the Bengali nation remain just a dream, some have rightly pointed out that the jubilant post-independence period in Bangladesh also raised expectations of the possibility of reversing the 1947 partition, just as was done in 1911.⁶⁰

⁶⁰R. Jones, 'Dreaming of a Bolden Bengal: Discontinuities of Place and Identity in South Asia', *Asian Studies Review*, vol. 35, (2011), p. 384.