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The Dacca Riot, 1941¹

The 1940s in Bengal were marked by a steady rise on the communal barometer. It is only fitting that I begin this study with an analysis of the first major riot of the decade. The Dacca riot of 1941 engulfed not only the city of Dacca but also the countryside, specifically the *thanas* of Raipur, Shibpur and Narsinghdi. It was in a way a harbinger to the horrors that would unleash in 1946 – the Great Calcutta Killing and the Noakhali riots. Described as ‘a transition to a new phase’ by Suranjan Das, it quantitatively and qualitatively ushered in a new kind of violence in the province. Hence it is, in several ways, key to understanding the later riots that shook Bengal a year before independence and partition.

It is necessary to provide a background sketch of the various socioeconomic and political factors that led to the riot.² Like most districts of East Bengal, Dacca too had a substantial Muslim population. In 1872, census enumerations had found that Muslims constituted 56.5 per cent of the population and each successive enumeration showed a marked increase in this percentage.³ Their rate of population growth between 1872 and 1901 was found to be nearly twice as much as that of Hindus.⁴ Muslims predominated in almost every part of the district, but their population was highest in the northern *thanas* of Raipura and Kapasia, and lowest in Dacca city, where they were outnumbered by Hindus.⁵ The proportion of Hindus was lowest in the Narayanganj subdivision. Namasudras were the dominant Hindu caste. They were numerous throughout the district, but mainly concentrated in Srinagar, Nawabganj and Keraniganj *thanas*.⁶ In the 1941 riot, this pattern of population distribution significantly determined the nature of violence. Hindu rioters were the chief aggressors in Dacca city, whereas Muslim rioters wreaked havoc in rural areas.

Dacca had also been strongly influenced by the Wahabi and Faraizi movements, with their emphasis on avoidance of Hindu and other syncretic rites and rituals. Although numerically a minority, Hindus formed the bulk of the upper and middle classes in the city, with wealth and education being

largely concentrated in their hands. In Dacca, like everywhere else in East Bengal, Hindus dominated trade and moneylending. The ratio of moneylenders was the highest in Dacca as compared to the rest of Bengal. It was estimated to be about 280 per lakh of persons as compared to 40 in Burdwan or 26 in Bankura.⁷ Although some Muslims were petty shopkeepers, they did not have the capital to compete with the Hindus in the wholesale and quasi-wholesale trade. The cream of commerce had consequently passed into Hindu hands.⁸ Moreover, due to the Islamic taboo on usury, Muslims were hardly engaged in moneylending. In time, the city had seen the Hindus become richer, while the condition of the Muslims had remained roughly the same.⁹ The sharp contrast in their socio-economic statuses was marked 'most obviously' by the different kinds of houses inhabited by the people of the two communities. Muslim residential areas were fast turning into overpopulated, insanitary slums. On the other hand, Hindus were building 'palatial residences' on the best urban sites.¹⁰

Before the 1941 riot, Dacca had already suffered two major communal disturbances in 1926 and 1930. A brief reference to them will provide an understanding of how the 1941 riot stood apart. The 1926 riot broke out after a large number of local Muslims protested against the playing of music around mosques during the Janmashtami festival.¹¹ A Muslim *hartal* was organized on 8 and 9 September, which coincided precisely with the days of Janmashtami procession.¹² The primary motive for the *hartal* was to prevent Muslim carriage drivers and cartmen from providing services to Hindus during the festival. Hindus carried out a smaller procession nonetheless. They shouted slogans like '*Hindu Dharma ki Jai*', and on 10 September, organized a retaliatory boycott of Muslim carriage drivers. Trouble really started when during the boycott, the Hindus forced passengers to disembark from carriages and burnt down hackney carriages. Muslim carriage drivers predictably responded with a counter offensive. Disturbances went on for almost three days.

The upheaval was predominantly an urban disturbance.¹³ The riot was marked by sporadic stabbings and attacks on Sahas, the leading Hindu mercantile community in Dacca. Instances of Muslims looting Hindu shops were limited, and there were no reports of rape, large scale murders or forced conversions. But nevertheless, a new development began from the 1926 riot, i.e. the desecration of images and idols of Hindu gods. Suranjan Das, who has conducted an in-depth study of the riot of 1926, observes that "The Janmashtami procession at Dacca . . . was a "time-honoured institution" where Muslim musicians and labourers were employed, wealthy Muslims lent their elephants and horses, and Muslims from surrounding villages crowded

the streets to watch the ceremony. But in 1925–26, this spirit was rapidly undermined.¹⁴

Studying the Dacca riot of 1930, Tanika Sarkar has remarked,

In Bengal . . . due to the rather peculiar configuration of property relations and social tensions conflicts did have a marked tendency to correspond to the contours of a communal conflict. Sectionalist politicians and Government officials played upon this peculiarity for all they were worth. The violence that ensued can be partially isolated from the undoubted pressures and strength of a distinctly religious response to a different community.¹⁵

The riot of 1930 was directly linked with the onset of the Depression from 1929. Dacca belonged to the heart of the jute belt.¹⁶ From 1926 the product market in jute had begun to wobble, and by 1930 it had completely collapsed. If in the year 1929 the index of jute prices is taken to be 100, in 1928 the index number was 107.3. But in 1930 it went down to 54.9, and crashed to 50.4 in the following year.¹⁷ The rural credit system completely collapsed. With the ‘cataclysmic drop’ in crop prices, the primary producers, especially the jute cultivators, found it extremely hard to obtain cash and make ends meet.¹⁸ Moneylenders simply refused to advance necessary cash loans. The rate of transfers of *raiya* holdings picked up from the mid-1930s. In 1934, the approximate number of sales was 1,47,619, and of mortgages, 3,49,400. In 1936, this had increased to 1,72,956 sales and 3,52,469 mortgages.¹⁹ An official report from the district magistrate of Tippera described the situation thus:

In normal times they would have tided over the crisis by resorting to the village mahajan, but on this occasion this source of supply was practically dried up. The village moneylenders scarcely have much accumulated balances; they deal in fluid cash, lending, realizing and lending again. In 1930, the arrangement was reversed; they realized little, their debtors could not pay and prospective borrowers could not get relief.²⁰

The pattern of violence in Dacca in 1930 was typically marked by attacks on Hindu property and on the propertied class. The Hindu business centre at Kayettuli bore the brunt of repeated Muslim attacks. Loss of property was the primary Hindu grievance, not so much murder.²¹ The primary targets of the rioters were the houses of Sahas and moneylenders. Apart from numerous cases of tearing up debt bonds, there was also a massive plunder of a local *bat* (market) and Hindu property worth Rs 2,43,182 was destroyed.²² Several rice godowns were also attacked. Sugata Bose best describes the peasant mood: ‘If

the availability of the credit disguised an exploitative, symbiotic relationship in a benevolent garb, its scarcity destroyed the justification for the exploitation and therefore the very basis of the ties between the peasants and the mahajans.²³ The cash famine was one of the major factors contributing to attacks on mahajans in the riot of 1930.

Communal tension did spread to rural areas, but arson was fairly limited. There were no reports of rape or forced conversion. 'Self-restraint, quite remarkable in a riot situation, was in fact evident when a huge armed Muslim gang attacked a Hindu house where four young girls were alone by themselves. The girls just lost their jewels.'²⁴ Hindu moneylenders, and not so much landlords, were the main targets of attack. The probable reason behind this, according to Sarkar, was that the rent burden was not so heavy in Dacca. Moreover, as Sarkar remarks, 'landlords were perhaps vested with some amount of customary legitimacy or authority in peasant minds, whereas mahajans, often forming a distinct group, external to peasants, and displacing them from their lands, would form no part of their patriarchal moral universe.'²⁵ The rioting crowd also demonstrated an 'alternate concept of fair deal,' aroused more by a sense of undoing economic injustice than communal antipathy.²⁶ Rioters did not necessarily always appropriate the looted property, but sold it at very low prices. As we shall see later, there was a shift from this in the pattern of violence that characterized the communal riot of 1941 in Dacca. The self-restraint that was visible in 1926 and 1930 was remarkably absent in not just the Dacca Riot of 1941, but also in all the major communal disturbances of the 1940s. In fact, attacks on women became the norm in the communal violence to come.

1930–31 was marked by a spate of *hat* looting and attacks on mahajans. As the downward spiral in the price of jute and other agricultural commodities continued, peasant purchasing power only crashed further. The looting of *hats* or bazaars which stocked these relatively expensive articles was, thus, an 'expression of threatened consumer consciousness.'²⁷ As Sarkar argues, the entire *hat* was seldom looted. Shops that stocked the more expensive items were isolated for the attack.²⁸ *Hat* looting was rampant in Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Jessore and Faridpur. At Munshiganj subdivision of Dacca, a group of around fifty peasants attacked a *hat* at Tangibari in March and looted clothes and food items. But this form of *hat* looting was soon replaced by a more organized form of protest – the refusal to pay rent and pay back agricultural loans.

The general peasant militancy of the 1930s crystallized into mushrooming of numerous Krishak Samitis. The prevailing economic distress and real shrinkage of credit as well as extortionate acts of village mahajans and smaller

landlords in the past prepared the ground for Krishak Samiti activities.²⁹ Dacca was also one of the important nerve centres of Krishak Samiti Activities. An official report from the district magistrate of Tippera in December 1931 read: 'Samitis have been started in almost every village with their own presidents and secretaries. Almost everybody in the village is a member of the Samiti except the mahajans.'³⁰ These *samitis* demanded that mahajans had to surrender their documents and that they would decide when and how debts had to be repaid. As the decade waned, meetings of these *samitis* became more frequent, and they demanded the early establishment of Debt Settlement Boards. At a Samiti Conference held at Dacca in April 1936, Fazlul Huq, an important Krishak Samiti leader, helped to bring together most of the Krishak Samitis of almost all districts. Thus was born the Krishak Praja Party (KPP), in an attempt to unify Samiti activities throughout the province. This was also the beginning of an organized peasant politics in the province, which then exercised an important yet fluctuating influence on the politics of the province.

A brief overview of the political scenario of the province is important here; it will be discussed in detail in chapter 3. Elections to provincial legislatures were held for the first time in 1937. In Bengal, the three main players were the Congress, the Muslim League and the KPP. In its election propaganda, the League stressed the need for Muslim solidarity as a prerequisite for making provincial autonomy meaningful to Muslims in Bengal.³¹ The main plank of the KPP propaganda was the abolition of zamindari without compensation. It promised '*dal-bhaat*' to all in Bengal, a slogan devised to endear itself to the common-man.³² The Congress mainly talked of Swaraj, political change and constitutional reforms.

In the elections of 1937, Fazlul Huq defeated the League candidate Nazimuddin by a big margin.³³ The Muslim League got 39 seats (out of the 82 contested), KPP got 36 seats (out of the 75 contested) and the Congress got 54 seats, making a sweep in the general constituencies. Although the Muslim League obtained more seats, the percentage of votes polled was less than that of the KPP. Huq, being the leader of the KPP, opened negotiations with the Congress to form a coalition. However, talks between the two parties soon broke down. The Congress insisted on giving immediate importance to the release of political prisoners while for the KPP, the settlement of agrarian debt was the primary concern. As negotiations between the KPP and the Congress broke down, the KPP saw no option but to form a coalition ministry with the League, with Huq as the Chief Minister.³⁴ However, this turned out to be the biggest political blunder for Huq – the selection of personnel of the Ministry

was not in his hands, and nine out of eleven members were from the zamindar class. This was deeply resented by other members of the KPP, who soon began to distance themselves from the new coalition party. Faced with severe criticism from both the KPP and the Congress for completely deviating from his electoral promises, Huq joined the Muslim League in October 1937. With this, the ministry practically became a League ministry. Shila Sen observes, 'Within six months he realised that to save the ministry, it was necessary to join the Muslim League and to satisfy the Muslim League it was necessary to arouse communal, i.e. anti-Hindu passions.'³⁵

After coming to power in 1937, the League-dominated Bengal Government, under Fazlul Huq, passed certain legislations which directly benefitted the Muslim cultivators at the expense of the Hindu zamindars and moneylenders. The Bengal Tenancy Amendment Act of 1938 abolished the landlords' transfer fee and the realization of *abwab* by the landlord or his agent was made punishable by fine.³⁶ The Bengal Money-lenders Act of 1940 also curbed the activities of the Hindu moneylenders by abolishing compound interest, fixing maximum rates of interest and providing for repayment by instalments. This Act was specially lauded by the pro-League daily the *Star of India* as one which carried with it 'a message of hope for those who have been for years plunged into dark despair of ever releasing themselves from the clutches of the avaricious and unscrupulous moneylender, who, with his extortionate usury sucks the lifeblood of the people.'³⁷ This was the beginning of a number of pro-peasant legislations passed by the Bengal Government under the League leadership, which began to take the wind out of the KPP sails.

Bengal in 1940 was already a communally charged province. Suranjan Das argues that outside the world of politics, some short-term changes in population and prices had made members of both communities 'restive.' The Census of 1941 reported that between 1931 and 1941, Dacca District had registered a population growth of 18.34 per cent and the city of Dacca alone had seen an increase of 35.03 per cent.³⁸ Wages in the agricultural sector remained low, but the cost of living in Bengal increased by nearly 200 per cent compared to the pre-war years.³⁹ Rice imports from Burma had been stopped because of the war, and low output meant reduced supply and rising prices of major food-grains. Allegations were also levelled by Muslim merchants against their Hindu counterparts of 'cornering cloth' and other essential items for higher profits later.⁴⁰ Das argues that these economic developments affected most of the subordinate social groups among Muslims. This, in turn, was reflected in the pattern of violence against the Hindu trading community and propertied

classes during the riot, as we shall see later. The Sankharis (conch-shell workers), who had been active in the previous disturbances in Dacca, had seen a depression in their trade⁴¹ in the past decade; they were restless and were susceptible to communal propaganda.⁴²

There were other short term political developments which directly impacted communal relations in the province. The twenty-first session of the All India Hindu Mahasabha was held on 28 December 1939 in Calcutta amidst great pomp and splendour. A grand reception was held on 27 December upon the arrival of Savarkar, president of the All India Hindu Mahasabha. The *Amrita Bazar Patrika* described the scene as almost a carnival:

A most magnificent reception was given to Veer Savarkar, president-elect of the All India Hindu Mahasabha on arrival in Calcutta yesterday morning . . . The Wednesday procession was, to compute modestly, two-mile long and was marked by great popular enthusiasm. The enthusiasm displayed came as a great revelation to many. It indicated what swift strides the movement was making in Bengal and what gigantic proportions it had assumed in so short a time.⁴³

The newspaper published an interesting editorial on 27 December, a day before the Mahasabha Conference began. It pointed out that the enthusiasm shown by Bengali Hindus for the Mahasabha was neither the result of a 'reactionary communal mentality nor the outcome of any anti-Muslim prejudice.'⁴⁴ Instead, the widespread support was said to have stemmed from the fact that unlike the Congress, the Mahasabha did not believe in making repeated concessions to the Muslims, whom the paper described as 'reactionary communal groups who want to lean for support on foreign imperialists for the maintenance of their privileged position in the Indian body politic.'⁴⁵ The daily argued that young Hindus of Bengal were not satisfied with the Congress' preparations for attaining independence, i.e. through non-violence. Ridiculing the Gandhian method, it pointed out that young Hindus no longer shared the belief that the pursuit of the national ideal of freedom should be stopped for fear of any manifestation of violence on the part of communal reactionaries.⁴⁶ Summing up, it stated:

Torn by doubts and disappointments, the Hindus of Bengal have arrived at the conclusion that it is only by consolidating their own strength that they may expect a satisfactory solution of the communal or national problem. It is possibly this which explains their enthusiasm for the Hindu Mahasabha which promises a way out of the present difficulty.⁴⁷

The governor, Sir John Herbert, observed that owing to publicity in the press, the Hindu Mahasabha meeting had a 'profound impression' upon all sections of Hindus.⁴⁸ Interestingly, the governor's report to the viceroy that some deterioration of the communal situation was 'generally expected' as a result of this meeting⁴⁹ belied an undertone of indifference. At the Mahasabha session important leaders made charged speeches, urging the removal of untouchability as the primary goal of Hindus.⁵⁰ A program of action was laid down for this whereby it was hoped that in the next two years, more steps should be taken to remove untouchability than the previous two hundred years.⁵¹ Resolutions were also moved for the formation of a volunteer corps called the Hindu Militia, the main task of which would be to reorganize and consolidate the Hindu community. Provincial Hindu Sabhas were urged to organize these militias in their respective provinces very seriously. Already from 1938, the Bharat Sevashram Sangha (BSS), a popular Hindu revivalist organization, had intensified its activities amongst Namasudras, Paundra-Kshatriyas and other Scheduled Castes in the districts of Jessore, Khulna, Faridpur and Barisal.⁵² The main plank of the BSS was to mobilize untouchables and lower castes in order to increase the 'muscle power' of the community.⁵³ Now, the Mahasabha also took this up seriously. Hindu martial spirit was seen as a necessity, with renewed emphasis on consolidation of the community. It explicitly identified the Muslim as enemy in a rather narrow and polarized understanding of nationalism.

In February 1940, tension was reported from the Pabna College, where the college authorities had allowed the Saraswati Puja to be held within the college. Muslims were annoyed by this because a similar request to hold the Bakr-id sacrifices had been denied the previous week.⁵⁴ Saraswati Puja celebrations also resulted in communal tension in Faridpur. The Imam of the Court Mosque was assaulted, and a major clash was only just prevented.⁵⁵ In Chuadanga (Nadia), as a reprisal of the 'more than usually splendid celebration' of the Puja, beef and remains of meals were strewn in front of Hindu houses.⁵⁶ Cases of desecration of idols were reported from Brahmanbaria and Bakarganj. April and May saw a serious communal clash between Muslims of Khulna and Namasudras of Jessore. Heavy police patrols, posted in the area to prevent further trouble, continued till the end of May.⁵⁷

Dacca itself was communally quite restive. During the Rathajatra festival in July 1940, there was a minor communal disturbance in the city when some Muslim shops and stables in the Madan Mohan Basak Road were burnt.⁵⁸ Further trouble was prevented when both Hindus and Muslims of the area

formed a Peace Committee. Two hundred rupees were raised by subscription and paid to the owners as compensation for their losses. The Manasha Puja in August 1940 further raised the communal temper. A Hindu procession playing loud music crossed a mosque during prayer time and was stopped by Muslim worshippers. Although the matter was settled and there was no outward disorder, for a while communal tension simmered.⁵⁹

The Murapara incident in August 1940 also added to this. Murapara was a village in Narayangunj subdivision of the district of Dacca. It was a part of the constituency of Mr Shahabuddin, a member of the Muslim League. In August 1940, some Muslims cut down branches of trees which adjoined a building described as 'a mosque situated in the compound of a Hindu gentleman'.⁶⁰ Orders were passed under Section 144 (which prohibited the assembly of more than five people), but they were defied and the police were attacked. A *maulvi* was suspected of having started the agitation. He was arrested, and the sanction of the Bengal Government for detaining him was sought. But the Government ordered the release of the *maulvi*, and League ministers subsequently pressurized the sub-divisional officer to adjourn the hearing of the case against all the accused.⁶¹ Both the Congress and the Mahasabha made high weather of this incident alleging that the League ministry had interfered in the law and order process to protect members of their own community.

These were alarming signs of escalation of conflict. What consolidated and worsened the communal temper in almost the entire province were the Secondary Education Bill (1940) and the census propaganda of 1940–41. The Secondary Education Bill (hereafter referred to as SEB) was introduced in the Bengal Legislative Assembly in August 1940 by the Bengal Premier and Education Minister Fazlul Huq. The Bill proposed to set up a large board of secondary education to regulate and control it. It sought therefore to bring out secondary education from the control and regulation of the Calcutta University.⁶² The proposed board would consist of 50 members who would be elected through separate electorates. Excluding the president, the board would have 22 Hindus, 20 Muslims and 7 Europeans. In accordance with the Poona Pact, the Scheduled Castes (hereafter referred to as SCs) would have reserved seats among Hindu representation.⁶³ Three important players now emerged on the political scene – League Muslims, 'Caste Hindus' and the Scheduled Castes.

Muslim opinion in the Assembly, dominated by the League and its sympathizers, welcomed the government measure as a just one. Fazlul Huq himself claimed that the Bill was necessary since Muslims of Bengal

had had a 'bitter experience' of the University's conception of an 'adequate representation' of Muslim interests. Muslims had in the past years been grossly underrepresented in the University's Syndicate, the body responsible for deciding the fate of secondary education.⁶⁴ Fazlur Rahman, a League MLA of Dacca, also echoed similar sentiments when he claimed that the Calcutta University had so far followed an educational policy which had never taken into consideration the needs of Muslim students.⁶⁵ Hence it was absolutely essential to wrest control of secondary education from the Calcutta University. The Bill was claimed to have the support of the 'oppressed' sections of Bengal, i.e. the Muslims and the SCs. The only reason as to why the Bill was labelled as a 'communal' one, argued Syed Badrudduja, was that it was being sponsored by a government that enjoyed the support of the Muslim majority of the province.⁶⁶

SC leaders were already disenchanted with the Fazlul Huq Government in matters of their own education. They had earlier been disappointed with the budget of 1938–39, because only a paltry amount of Rs 30, 000 was granted for the development of SC education in Bengal.⁶⁷ Under pressure from opposition from SC leaders, Huq presented a supplementary budget later that year. But even that had failed to impress the SC leaders in the Assembly, because the grant of Rs 5 lakhs that was provided was not an annual grant, but a non-recurring grant to be spent over an unspecified number of years.⁶⁸

Scheduled Caste leaders were mostly united in their opinion that the Secondary Education Bill of 1940 did not give them adequate representation on the proposed board. While the SC ministers in the Cabinet staunchly supported the bill⁶⁹, there were others who had their reservations. Pramatha Ranjan Thakur⁷⁰ opposed the bill on the grounds that the SC representation in the proposed board was inadequate. His contention was that on the board of fifty members, there would be only five SCs who would be 'more or less nominated by the Government and the Scheduled Castes as a community would have no power to send in their representatives independently to the Board.'⁷¹ Moreover, although a Scheduled Caste Secondary Education Committee had been proposed, it was nowhere mentioned clearly in the bill that members of this committee would be solely SCs. Thakur, in fact, later resigned from the Select Committee where the bill was eventually sent. He explained that he was disillusioned by the conduct of the Muslim members on the committee.⁷² Rasik Lal Biswas, another SC MLA, had a mixed opinion. On one hand, he did not support the Caste Hindu motion for circulating the bill to elicit public opinion. He reasoned that the SC community was not organised enough to form a concerted public opinion. On the other hand, he

also supported Thakur's objection that the SC representation on the proposed board was grossly inadequate.⁷³ Upendra Nath Barman, another SC MLA representing the Independent Scheduled Caste Party, supported the 'principle' of the bill, but at the same time, he supported the motion for circulating the bill for public opinion⁷⁴.

The Caste Hindu bloc, consisting of the Bengal Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha, opposed the Bill tooth and nail. Right at the very beginning, they refused to offer their names to the proposed Select Committee. The main bone of contention was that it brought communalism into education by introducing separate representation and that it increased official control over education. In this sense, Caste Hindus claimed, it was not an educational bill; rather, it was a political bill. They proposed that instead of immediately referring the bill to the Select Committee, it should be circulated for garnering public opinion. Congress representatives claimed that 'in the interest of nationalism, the sacred field of education must be kept free from all communal questions.'⁷⁵ The following argument is illuminating:

It may be known to the House that the Hon'ble education minister has recently started a *second grade college* in his native village, which by the way is my village too, and may I tell the House that the staff he has appointed for the college is by no means Muslim in composition. It is rather Hindu in composition. Not that the Hon'ble education minister has any super-abundance of love for the Hindus or any hatred for his co-religionists! He has simply appointed the *best men available in the field* . . .⁷⁶ [Emphasis mine.]

The italicised phrases reek of the ingrained sense of superiority of Caste Hindus. The use of the phrase 'second grade' for a college set up by the Muslim education minister is juxtaposed with deep irony about the 'best men' in the field. It is also interesting that when a suggestion was made to institutionalize provisions for educationally disadvantaged groups, it was branded as communal. At the same time, the 'Hindu' discourse invariably ignored the special needs of the SCs.

Caste Hindu opposition bordered on open threats. Atul Sen declared that if the Ministry tried to impose the bill, Hindus would 'unsettle a settled fact' and this would involve the two communities in a deadly conflict. Shyama Prasad Mookerjee, one of the most prominent leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha, argued that 75 per cent of the children in secondary schools belonged to Hindus, and most schools in the province had been set up by Hindu endeavour. Hence, it did not make sense to give control of education to Muslims. He offered three

interesting courses to the Government of Bengal. One was to drop the bill 'by the voice of reason.'⁷⁷ The second, applicable if the government decided to go ahead with the bill, was that Hindus should be given the liberty to develop their education as they themselves deemed fit. This would involve, as he pompously declared:

If for some years Hindus and Muslims living in Bengal can thus separately proceed with the task of their educational reconstruction in an atmosphere devoid of bitterness and conflict, it is more than likely that sooner than we expect they may both agree to evolve a national system of education consistent with the needs of the province . . . Let the finances be distributed in accordance with the number of pupils reading at various stages and let the professional institutions be maintained on a non-communal basis. Such separate provisions have existed in several countries faced with minority problems. Muslims urge in season and out of season that although for 90 years they have received education during British rule mainly in institutions funded and maintained by Hindu money, that the Hindus have been responsible for destroying their culture and retarding the growth of their education. If that is their true estimate and apprehension, it is better that they should take control of their education for some years to come.⁷⁸

The third alternative for the government would be to force through the bill in spite of all opposition. In that case, threatened Mookerjee, Hindus were ready to fight the 'menace' rather than reduce themselves to 'a state of subservience in the field of culture.'⁷⁹

Prominent Mahasabha leaders toured different parts of Bengal condemning the Secondary Education Bill and urging Hindus to unite for the 'national' cause. At the same time, they reiterated the call for Hindu *Sangathan* as the crying need of the hour and promoted the Mahasabha as the only 'Hindu Nationalist Organization.'⁸⁰ The Bengal Hindu Mahasabha held its annual general meeting in Calcutta in September 1940. It was attended by about 250 members from all over the province. Its annual report presented at this meeting claimed that a great danger was threatening Bengal in the form of the Education Bill and all Hindus were asked to sink their differences of caste and class and rally under the leadership of Savarkar.⁸¹ The report also claimed that the membership of the Bengal Mahasabha was on the rise and that there were 366 branches of Hindu Sabhas at the end of August 1940, of which 153 had been established in the last year.⁸²

A conjunction between education and community self-defence was visualised. The fear of disintegration of the 'Hindu' community as a result

of increasing self-assertiveness of the SCs was linked with the obvious need of re-incorporating the latter within traditional Hindu fold. This was then mapped on to the fear of a projected disintegration of the great Hindu community because of an imminent Muslim onslaught through their attempted 'Pakistanization' of every domain of public life, including education. The need for organizing a volunteer corps for protecting the 'legitimate rights' of Hindus was reiterated. The Working Committee of the Mahasabha proposed to launch a movement for physical regeneration throughout the province. For this, the annual report claimed, a physical training camp had already been organised in Calcutta where several young men from different parts of Bengal were given training in self-defence techniques. They were said to have gone back to their respective districts to impart physical training in their own localities.⁸³ The report thus represented Muslims in 1940:

There was widespread campaign of vilification of Hindus, their deities and their worship, carried on by prominent members of the Moslem [sic] League Party. The chief minister also indulged in frequent outbursts and tirades against the Hindus. The ignorant Muslim masses in some cases thought that Muslim Raj had come and a number of images of Hindu deities and temples were broken and desecrated at some places in East and North Bengal. There were also many cases of economic boycott of Hindus . . .⁸⁴

This report of the Mahasabha was published in prominent pro-Hindu newspapers such as the *Hindusthan Standard* and the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*. A cause-and-effect ripple was thus created by emphasizing the need to organise and unite the entire Hindu community and train it in a combat culture in order to defend themselves from a Muslim onslaught. Shyama Prasad Mookerjee himself went on a tour of important districts like Rajshahi, Dinajpur and Jalpaiguri on 9 September to promote the ideals of the Mahasabha and organise *Sangathan*. Before this, Mahasabha volunteers had extensively toured districts in Bengal to promote cow protection.

These sustained efforts by the Mahasabha gradually bore fruit in some districts. In Namasudra populated areas like Jessore and Narail, events like the All Bengal Hindu Day, which was observed in August 1940, had some success.⁸⁵ The Mahasabha drive also began to receive the active assistance of prominent SC leaders such as Patiram Roy (Paundra-Kshatriya community), who participated in the Backward Class Hindu Conference organised by the Bharat Sevashram Sangha in March 1941, where issues like conversion and *Shuddhi* were discussed.⁸⁶

The next wave of communal antagonism began with the census operations of 1941–42. The Bengal governor remarked in February 1941 that the most ‘lively interest’ was being displayed about them.⁸⁷ Both Hindu and Muslim leaders proclaimed the danger that the census enumeration could underestimate numbers in their own community and inflate the numbers for the other. The charge was clearly reminiscent of the census propaganda of 1931, when allegations were made by both Hindus and Muslims that enumerators from the other community had exaggerated numbers of their own co-religionists by ‘fictitious entries’ while suppressing details about the other community.⁸⁸ The Hindu Mahasabha now organised a series of meetings in various parts of the province, where important leaders like N. C. Chatterjee and S. P. Mookerjee emphasized the importance of the census figures and the necessity for ‘vigilance’ to see to it that the numbers were correctly recorded.⁸⁹ The governor reflected that the tours and meetings organised by the Mahasabha were a cause of ‘immediate source of anxiety’ since they accentuated communal feelings, and remarked that ‘only the gravest consequences can be expected to result from an extended agitation by a body which could and would appeal to communal fanaticism and would be unrestrained by any profound adherence to principles of non-violence.’⁹⁰ In a confidential report to the viceroy on 7 March 1941, he confided that as a result of the census issue, communal tensions had reached a climax.⁹¹

Fazlul Huq issued the following statement in March 1941:

I am now convinced that the Muslims will be shown as something near 30% and the Hindus a little over 60% of the population in Bengal. What else could happen when lawyers, scientists, professors, lecturers, landlords, merchants, Brahmins and non-Brahmins and all the medley caste and sub-caste have deliberately combined to tell lies and make false statements in order to inflate their figures? What better can I expect when I find men who have spent their whole life in the teaching of the youth, making false statements without the slightest qualms of conscience and indulging in an orgy of chicanery, perjury and falsehood? . . . If dishonesty succeeds in Bengal as it has so often succeeded in the past, and a mockery of figures is put forth as a census of the population, I will decide definitely in favour of Pakistan.⁹²

This was just the fodder that Hindu Mahasabha leaders needed. The Mahasabha used this as an opportunity to carry on their tirade against the Muslim leaders of the Ministry. N. C. Chatterjee, the president of the All Bengal Census Board, alleged that Huq had lost his mental balance.⁹³ The

Hindu Mahasabha held a massive protest meeting in Calcutta on 3 March 1941. It accused the chief minister of abusing his position and for carrying on a 'persistent partisan propaganda of a viciously communal nature.'⁹⁴ The meeting called upon all classes and sections of Hindus irrespective of political and party affiliations to unite, hold public meetings and express their 'strong disapprobation' of Fazlul Huq and demand that he be removed from the position of the chief minister of Bengal.

Advocate Phanindranath Mukherjee filed a petition before the chief presidency magistrate on 7 March against Fazlul Huq on charges of defamation. Hindu teachers of Bengal also claimed that they were 'indignant' about the 'reckless and mendacious' charges levelled against teachers and professors as a 'foul and sinister conspiracy' to deflate the Muslim population of Bengal.⁹⁵ A protest meeting of Hindus held at the Town Hall in Calcutta on 6 March ridiculed Huq thus: 'We all earnestly request Mr Fazlul Huq to take leave, enjoy rest in a salubrious climate until there is complete restoration of mental equilibrium . . .'⁹⁶ In the interior villages of different districts like Mymensingh, meetings were held under the auspices of the Mahasabha, where the chief minister's remarks were discussed.⁹⁷ The Hindu Conference held at Krishnanagar in November 1940 pointed out the importance of 'accuracy' in the census and urged Hindus to record themselves 'simply as Hindus'⁹⁸ and not give their caste details. It condemned the Bengal Government's alleged intention to count Hindus according to their castes and subcastes while refusing to record the numbers of different Muslim social groups such as Momins, Bedias etc. The conference also passed several resolutions to promote Hindu solidarity, organise their defence power and even for the establishment of a military college in Bengal for imparting martial training to the Bengali youth.⁹⁹ Amidst all this uproar, the Congress was conspicuous in its silence.

Muslim League leaders reacted in a predictable fashion. At a meeting held in Town Hall in Calcutta on 9 March 1941, under the Presidency of Maulana Akram Khan, Member of Legislative Council (MLC), it was declared that the returns of the present census would be absolutely unacceptable to the Muslims, and that the census organizations in Bengal had supposedly been exploited by the Hindu Mahasabha and the Congress to undermine the Communal Award and the Poona Pact.¹⁰⁰ The meeting expressed its confidence in the leadership of Fazlul Huq and characterized 'the cry of a section of the Mahasabhite high class Hindu capitalists against Fazlul Huq as a device to cover their sins and offenses against census operation.'¹⁰¹ Khan accused the Hindu Mahasabha of appointing propaganda officers who toured the rural areas to deflate the

number of Muslims. He warned Hindus that this tactic, if adopted in future, 'would bring about a serious situation in the province.'¹⁰² Khan Bahadur Sharifuddin Ahmad, secretary of the Bengal Central Census Board, issued a statement to the press where he said that the propaganda started by the leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha through their public speeches and writings was 'designed to inflate the number of Hindus and secure a reduction in the number of Muslims in this province and is consequently mischievous.'¹⁰³

The press was entangled in both these issues, only making matters worse. Both pro-Hindu and pro-League newspapers published every detail of the Legislative Assembly proceedings on the Secondary Education Bill. The *Hindusthan Standard* gave its 'unqualified support' to the Caste Hindu Opposition.¹⁰⁴ The entire text of the resignation letter of SC leader P. R. Thakur from the Select Committee was published on 8 September, wherein he mentioned that Muslim leaders were interested in the Bill only for communal reasons.¹⁰⁵ The newspaper openly labelled the Hindu 'cause' as the truly 'national' one, while that of the Muslims was denigrated as communal. The difference, it claimed, between the Hindu and Muslim cause was obvious:

It is that Hindus want a Board composed of educationists who should have the interests of education at heart and would have no objection to a Board entirely composed of Muslims if they were taken in on the ground of their educational experience and knowledge of educational problems and not because they professed a particular faith. They would, for the same underlying reason, equally strongly oppose the inclusion of a single Muslim in the Board if he came simply as a Muslim and a party nominee . . . their opposition is prompted by considerations which it is easy to recognise as those of the nation.¹⁰⁶

Details of protest meetings held all over the province were published almost daily by pro-Hindu newspapers. A very grandiose description of the Krishnanagar Hindu Conference was published in the erudite monthly journal *Modern Review*. It claimed that thousands attended the conference at the Town Hall, and an equally large number stood outside, listening to speeches of Mahasabha leaders on loudspeakers.¹⁰⁷ The *Amrita Bazar Patrika* described the Hindu protest meeting at the Calcutta Town Hall on 6 March thus,

It was a mammoth gathering which assembled at the Town Hall on Thursday – a gathering which was without parallel within recent memory. It reminded one of the greatest demonstration which was held years ago to protest against the attack of Lord Lytton against the women of Bengal over which Mrs Sarojini Naidu presided. Yesterday's demonstration bore eloquent testimony to the

depth of indignation to which the feelings of Hindus have been roused by the attacks of the chief minister. Both by its size and representative character the demonstration was unique. Thousands were crowded out, who filled up the steps of the Town Hall and adjoining places and listened to the proceedings, which were broadcast through loud-speakers.¹⁰⁸

The Muslim point of view, in an article published in the *Statesman* under the column 'Shahed'¹⁰⁹ ridiculed S. P. Mookerjee's three courses to the Bengal Government about the Secondary Education Bill. Regarding the second course of action, where Mookerjee suggested a separation of educational institutions for Hindus and Muslims, the article suggested that it was nothing short of an acceptance of Pakistan. It pointed out that the same instinct which had prompted Mookerjee to suggest the separation of education in Bengal had prompted Muslim minorities in India to seek a similar political solution for a bigger problem.¹¹⁰

The *Star of India*, the League mouthpiece in Bengal, published an editorial on 7 February 1941 regarding the census operations. It issued a warning that the Muslims of Bengal were in 'blissful slumber' while attempts were made 'to cut the soil of this province from underneath their feet.'¹¹¹ It claimed that it could give the Bengal Muslims 'irrefutable evidence' that an overwhelming majority of Hindus of Bengal was thinking only in terms of the census and praying that by any means the tables will be turned on the Muslims of Bengal.¹¹² It stated, 'With all the emphasis at our command we warn the Muslims of Bengal today that their very existence in this province is at stake, as inflation of the Hindus spells, as sure as the rising sun, the annihilation of the Muslims of Bengal.'¹¹³ On 4 March 1941, the *Star of India* wrote provocatively, 'The time has come for the little rats to know that the lion is not dead, only sleeping; the challenge is to be accepted; the enmity is to be met on its own ground; Mussalmans cannot resort to meanness and trickeries which characterise their political enemies; the Hindus will see to whom Bengal belongs; they shall be taught the lesson they need.'¹¹⁴

Incidentally, although the governor watched the census propaganda very closely and admitted that it was leading to a worsening of the communal situation, he did not act upon it. He justified his inaction to Linlithgow stating,

These charges and counter charges have raised a high pitch of communal feeling, but I felt that it would be unwise to strike in any obvious manner until the census operations were over, lest I should be accused of interfering with that freedom of speech which both sides demanded as a requisite to ensure that their followers were enumerated.¹¹⁵

After the census enumeration was over in March, John Herbert proposed to hold a meeting to discuss the situation. The meeting would comprise of the representative leaders of each group in the assembly, i.e. the Muslims, Scheduled Castes, the Forward Bloc (represented by Sarat Bose) and the official Congress (represented by Kiran Shankar Roy). He assured the viceroy that at this meeting he would take a 'very firm and uncompromising line, because at this stage any hesitancy would only lead to an intensification of communal disharmony.'¹¹⁶ Obviously, the governor was too late. He had felt the communal pulse in the city before the census propaganda had started. Had he acted earlier, some efforts could have been made to keep the leaders of both the communities in check. Such indifference of the colonial government was not new. It was not the first time that they had been confronted with rising communal temper before or during census enumerations. Communal animosities around census speculations were known from the time of the 1911 census.¹¹⁷ Commenting on the effects of census, Kenneth Jones remarks, 'Religions became communities mapped, counted and above all compared with other religious communities.'¹¹⁸ Pradip Kumar Datta explains that the census could explain to some extent the stabilization of identities around new religious orientations, backed up by institutional facilities such as reserved education and employment quotas.¹¹⁹

Holi celebrations on 13 and 14 March led to a number of instances of communal tension in the province.¹²⁰ At Bhola (Bakarganj), local officers tried to take measures to prevent coloured water from being sprinkled on Muslims. However, a couple of instances of that did take place. In retaliation, some Muslims slaughtered a calf and paraded the town with the carcass sprinkling its blood on the way.¹²¹ Three Muslims were arrested in this connection. The situation in Chittagong and Noakhali were reported to be 'very threatening' but no actual disturbances occurred.¹²² In Khulna, on the borders of Faridpur and Bakarganj, trouble was reported on 14 March. A minor issue over the price of jute developed into a very serious confrontation between Muslims and Namasudras.¹²³ A Namasudra village and a Muslim village were burnt leaving three dead and many more injured. Considerable stocks of grain were also destroyed. But the most serious disturbance took place in Dacca, which we shall now study in detail.

THE RIOT

On 14 March, the day of Holi, trouble started at Sankhari Bazar, an area thickly populated by the Sankharis, or Hindu conch-shell workers. Coloured

water fell on a Muslim woman and resulted in a minor clash between the two communities. There were disturbances near the Babu Bazar Police Station and at the entrance to the Sankhari Bazar, where the two communities threw brickbats at each other, but crowds were dispersed quickly by the arrival of the police.¹²⁴ 15 and 16 March were relatively quiet. On the 17th, some Hindu milkmen at Naya Sarak Yusuf Market were attacked by Muslims.¹²⁵ The same night, twelve Hindus and six Muslims were assaulted in different parts of the town of Dacca. The situation worsened from the night of 17 March, when there was a small fire in a Muslim shed on the Tanti Bazar and Malitola Bridge Junction. There were rumours of an attack on a temple at Malitola on the 17th. However, the Dacca Riot Enquiry Committee claimed that there was no apparent damage to the temple and no deliberate attack had taken place, although stray missiles could have landed nearby as a result of the crowds throwing brickbats at each other¹²⁶. On the night of 17 March, one Muslim was stabbed to death while nine Muslims and six Hindus were injured.

There are discrepancies in reports about a funeral procession carrying the corpse of Faiz Khan, the Muslim who was stabbed to death on 17 March. Several Hindu witnesses claimed before the Enquiry Committee that on 18 March they saw a funeral procession of a Muslim at the north-west end of the city, numbering around 2500, and that the processionists were crying out '*Allah hoo Akbar*' and '*Hindu sala log ko maro*'.¹²⁷ (Kill the wretched Hindus). The police, however, reported that the procession consisted only of about fifteen to twenty family members of the deceased and that there was no shouting of slogans.¹²⁸ The official Riot Enquiry Committee agreed with the police report.

The first 'pitched battle' between the two communities occurred on the morning of 18 March at the junction of the Manohar Khan Bazar with the Nawabpur road.¹²⁹ The Manohar Khan Bazar was a Muslim stronghold to the west of the Nawabpur road which divided it from the Hindu stronghold of Thatari Bazar.¹³⁰ Even the additional superintendent of police (city) was attacked with bricks when he arrived at the scene of trouble.¹³¹

Arson of a serious nature began in the city from 18 March. The first fire broke out at Mihilal Saha's cloth shop on the main Chowk Circular Road at about 10 pm.¹³² The Chowk area was the main Hindu business centre and the Sahas were the wealthiest Hindu mercantile community of Dacca. More cases of arson were reported from the morning of the 19th. Between 11 am and 1 pm, shops of Gopi Mohan Saha and the Padma Bastralaya on the west and east corners of Sawari Ghat Lane were set ablaze. On the 20th and 21st, more shops in Sawari Ghat and Barakatra and on the Chowk Circular Road were damaged by fire.¹³³

From 19 March, the delivery of mail stopped for about a fortnight. Since the afternoon of 19 March, an order under section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code was put into force in Dacca, prohibiting the assembly of more than five persons and on carrying of weapons, and imposed a curfew order.¹³⁴ A state of emergency was declared, and the Dacca Defence Scheme was brought into operation by 9 pm on 18 March. It provided for greater police mobilization and for calling out the Eastern Frontier Rifles and posting them at certain danger points in the city.¹³⁵

On 21 March afternoon, the rioting took a turn for the worse when Mr P. Nag, the subdivisional officer at Dacca, was stabbed near Islampur while trying to disperse riotous crowds. Around noon that day, there was a 'serious clash' between the two communities near Swamibagh, in the course of which members of both communities sustained serious injuries.¹³⁶ The police arrived and arrested a number of *apparently* innocent Hindu youths, as a result of which Hindus of that locality panicked, and began to leave their homes and move elsewhere within the city; some were reported to be leaving Dacca altogether.¹³⁷ The *Amrita Bazar Patrika* reported that from 21 March, foodstuff in the city had run short in some Hindu localities. When people from such localities went to Narayanganj for food, Muslim shopkeepers refused to sell them anything.¹³⁸

Reports of attacks on mosques and temples were mostly exaggerated. However, there were a few attacks on both between the 18th and the 21st. The Thatari Bazar mosque, some twenty or thirty yards from the junction of Nawabpur Road, was attacked on the 18th. The Rai Saheb Bazar mosque was also damaged on 19 March, but the Enquiry Committee claimed that there was no clear evidence that it had been deliberately attacked. On the 19th, a temple at south Maisundi was attacked and partly burnt.¹³⁹

There was a brief lull in the disturbances between 21 and 28 March, although isolated cases of stabbing, looting and arson continued during this period. Armed and unarmed pickets were posted in different localities. Armed police passed along the main roads in every locality from the night of 21 March.¹⁴⁰ On 22 March, due to rumours that the Gopibagh locality to the east of Hatkhola would be attacked by Muslims from villages, most Hindu women and children fled the area. At about 11 pm, a Muslim hut was burnt in the locality.¹⁴¹ The *Amrita Bazar Patrika* reported of it being rumoured that with a view to throw the blame on the Hindus, some Muslims of the area had set fire to the hut.¹⁴² On 23 March, shops began to open at Patuatuli, Nawabpur and Islampur.¹⁴³ From 25 March, curfew was relaxed and new curfew hours imposed from 10 pm to 5 am.¹⁴⁴ From 27 March, tension eased further and

people started visiting adjacent localities to enquire about friends and relatives. Still both communities remained confined in localities dominated by their coreligionists.¹⁴⁵

Panic continued in the city. Leaders of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League issued a statement on 22 March asking the Muslims of Dacca not to hold 'Pakistan Day' celebrations on 23 March, as had been decided by the All India Muslim League.¹⁴⁶ However, there were widespread protests against this decision. The *Star of India*, in an article on 24 March 1941, wrote:

We do not see why the League Executive should think that if Muslims hold their Pakistan Day meetings, communal situation would further deteriorate. There is nothing in the Pakistan scheme which can be termed as communal; the Muslims have a scheme which is, at least, according to themselves, the only solution to the Indian impasse . . .¹⁴⁷

Eventually, Pakistan Day meetings were held all over Calcutta and in the rest of the province, but not in Dacca. Such self-restraint by the provincial government changed completely with the stepping up of the Pakistan demand in Bengal from 1944, as we shall observe in subsequent chapters.

On 22 March, the governor of Bengal wrote to the viceroy that orders have been issued under the Defence of India Rules for pre-censorship of all except approved press reports on the Dacca Riot.¹⁴⁸ According to the order, 'all matters relating to any communal disturbance in the province, whether by way of news, comment, correspondence, notice, statement, advertisement, illustration, or otherwise, shall, before being published in any document, be submitted for scrutiny to a) In Calcutta to the special press advisor b) Elsewhere to the district press advisor.'¹⁴⁹

While the situation in Dacca city remained serious, there was an outbreak of disturbances in the Narsinghdi Circle in the Narayanganj subdivision of the district of Dacca from 1 April. Raipura, Shibpur and Narsinghdi *thanas* were the worst affected areas. In the rural areas, Muslims were the chief aggressors. Trouble started at Adiabab Bazar (also known as the Radhaganj Bazar) on 1 April in Raipura, when a number of Hindu shops were attacked by Muslims.¹⁵⁰ There are contradictory reports as to why the trouble started, but from this point onwards the situation deteriorated rapidly and 'large bands of Muslims, in most instances several hundred strong, attacked Hindu villages or Hindu *paras*, committing looting and arson on a very large scale.'¹⁵¹ The Adiabab - Rahimabad area, just on the border of Raipura and Shibpur police stations were roughly the center of disturbances in the rural areas.

A letter from the Hindu inhabitants of Sutrapur to the district magistrate of Dacca stated that on the night of 2 April, there was a 'serious attempt' to attack and loot Hindu houses of the *moballa* by not less than 300 Muslims of the neighbouring areas; the miscreants started throwing brickbats and *gulail* to frighten and drive away the inhabitants from their houses, which would allow them to loot the vacant houses.¹⁵² Hindu witnesses deposed before the Enquiry Committee that their villages were attacked by Muslim mobs numbering between two hundred and two thousand, headed by persons 'who seemed to be leaders', dressed in khaki or black shirts and carrying swords.¹⁵³ They shouted slogans such as '*Allab-hoo-Akbar*', '*Pakistan Zindabad*', '*Huq Saheb ki Jai*' etc. They also claimed that the mob told them that they had been given seven days when they were free to attack the Hindus who must either accept Islam or leave the locality.¹⁵⁴ This advance intimation of forced conversion later became widespread in Noakhali in 1946. Members of the Enquiry Committee visited parts of the rural area affected by the riot on 7th and 8th June, and also made an aerial survey of the affected area on 13 June. It admitted that even after two months of the occurrence of the disturbances, the scenes were 'pathetic' - villages had been razed to the ground and all that remained were a few *pucca* houses, iron safes and blackened corrugated iron sheets.¹⁵⁵ From the morning of 3 April, an exodus of people to Agartala and Tripura started.

In a letter to the viceroy on 7 April 1941, the governor of Bengal reported that planes were used for reconnaissance and that the presence of the inspector general of police at Dacca would ensure fair and firm action. The governor was eager to emphasize prompt action by the police and military in Dacca. He pointed out that the police force had been reinforced by three platoons of Eastern Frontier Rifles to prevent the further spread of disorders. On 1 July 1941, he informed the viceroy that the police force had been further strengthened by twelve European sergeants from Calcutta, 150 East Frontier Rifles from Chittagong and Barrackpur and 450 armed police from Presidency, Burdwan and Rajshahi Range reserves.¹⁵⁶

On 10 April 1941, the governor reported that the situation was returning to normal and more than 200 arrests had already been made.¹⁵⁷ He stressed that the riots had been confined to 'general looting and arson' and no authenticated reports of assault or forcible conversion had been received. In a telegram on 19 April, he further stated that about 2000 refugees had already returned to their villages and the situation was completely under control.¹⁵⁸ On 14 April, an announcement was made that 'in all cases in Dacca of assaults on individuals

or rioting or street fighting or any other disturbance whatsoever, wholesale arrests are liable to be made of male persons of the community believed to be responsible residing in the locality.¹⁵⁹ The Enquiry Committee claimed that these wholesale arrests had a good deterring effect, although it admitted that the system of wholesale arrests had inconvenienced many innocent and law abiding citizens.¹⁶⁰

Although in the rural areas Hindus were generally the victims, instances of retaliation were not completely absent. A Bengali pamphlet circulating in Dacca on 17 April 1941 goaded Hindus to take revenge on the 'infidel Muslim community' which was carrying on 'inhuman oppression' on Hindus.¹⁶¹ The pamphlet claimed that Hindus were being coerced to embrace Islam, eat beef and read the Koran. On refusal, they were apparently killed. It also stated that the Muslim hooligans were 'ravishing' Hindu women and 'polluting temples by throwing beef therein', and declared that:

Brothers! Kick at the British lion and seize the sceptre of justice in your own hands. With your own hand stab your assailant at his heart. Drink the blood of his heart and pacify your heart.

Unite all the Hindus living in various localities of the town and attack the Muslim localities in an organized way from all directions and annihilate them. And afterwards make a drive towards the villages and destroy the Muslims totally.¹⁶²

The Intelligence Branch of Calcutta, in a report on 14 May 1941, stated that they had information from their 'agent' that an 'ex-convict' Gobinda Kar was travelling to the United Provinces via Calcutta 'to procure an expert in bomb-making' and to collect arms 'for the purpose of committing outrages' against Muslims of Dacca.¹⁶³ The agent also reported that 'attempts were being made to procure phosphorous and carbon sulphate to make fire-bombs for perpetrating outrages on the Muslims in the town.'¹⁶⁴ An intercepted Bengali letter from one Noni Gopal Das of Dacca spoke of the fear psychosis and the drive for retaliation that had seized Hindus. The letter asks the recipient to send help soon and if possible send some daggers. He specified, 'The daggers must be double edged. Supplying a sketch. Tear out the letter. Mind it that you are living in Mohameddan reign.'¹⁶⁵

The Special Branch of the Calcutta Police had information that members of the Dacca Anushilan Party were trying to 'avenge the wrong committed upon the Hindus.'¹⁶⁶ The party sought to procure arms from Comilla for this

purpose. Apparently, the party had also advised its student members to keep a number of daggers in stock. A member of the party, Kedareswar Sengupta, had apparently declared that attempts had also been made to secure financial help from the Hindu Mahasabha.¹⁶⁷

Disturbances at Dacca led to troubling repercussions in an already communally charged province. In April, the governor admitted to fearing that clashes might spread to the neighbouring district of Tippera, and police forces were sent out as a precautionary measure.¹⁶⁸ In Feni (Noakhali), there were a few reports of temple desecrations. In Patuakhali (Bakarganj) an idol was found inside a mosque, after which a cow's skull was planted in a temple.¹⁶⁹ The situation in Chittagong was also reported to be 'worrying.'¹⁷⁰ 'Alarmist rumours' were circulated throughout East Bengal.¹⁷¹ The governor wrote to the viceroy that in Calcutta, some highly objectionable leaflets were circulating amongst Hindus which urged them to rise up against Muslim 'oppression' and gave the most 'lurid and exaggerated' account of the Dacca disturbances.¹⁷² He observed, 'There is no doubt that the order imposing censorship of news from Dacca has been of great value in controlling the spread of rumours, but it is difficult to prevent their dissemination by leaflets and letters.'¹⁷³

In a report dated 7 April 1941, the Special Branch of the Calcutta police stated that as a result of the riot, the position of the Hindu Mahasabha had greatly improved and that of the Bengal Congress had declined.¹⁷⁴ Almost everyone in Dacca, the report said, was unwilling to contribute to the Relief Fund opened by the Congress, but would readily contribute to that of the Mahasabha. The report claimed that this was because there was a general perception that the Bengal Congress, being a non-communal body, was providing relief to both Hindus and the Muslims, and this would not be tolerated by the Hindus of Dacca.¹⁷⁵ The Mahasabha propaganda had borne fruit and resulted in preventing Hindus from contributing to the Congress fund. There were other instances too of attempts by the Mahasabha to communalize the situation even more. In a letter on 9 April 1941, the Central Intelligence Officer from Karachi wrote to his counterpart in Calcutta that the general secretary of the Bengal Hindu Mahasabha had been sending photos of Hindu riot casualties to local and other papers all over the country.¹⁷⁶ He was claiming that property worth Rs 25 lakhs had been destroyed. He had asked the newspapers to publish these reports and pictures so that Hindus all over the country would know about the fate of Hindus at Dacca.¹⁷⁷ The riots, therefore, considerably helped the fortunes of communal political parties, even as they seriously polarised Hindus and Muslims.

CHARACTERISTICS MARKING THE RIOT

While the riots of 1941 showcased some of the familiar patterns of violence, there were also some marked differences. The nature of violence in this riot also set the trend for rioting that would become rampant in the riots of Calcutta and Noakhali in 1946.

As in the disturbances of 1926 and 1930, houses and shops belonging to the Saha community were attacked most often. But unlike previous instances, these attacks were much more violent. For three days, from 19 to 21 March, there was considerable looting and enormous destruction of property by arson in the Chowk area.¹⁷⁸ As mentioned before, the Chowk was the main centre for Hindu business. It largely comprised of double- or triple-storeyed brick buildings, belonging to the Sahas. Rooms on the ground floor were used as showrooms and godowns where goods were stored. The DREC stated that it was clear that the total loss incurred by the Hindu business community in this area was quite large.¹⁷⁹

Stabbing was not 'sporadic' as in earlier riots but it was now the most common method used to harm or kill members of the other community. The governor of Bengal, in a telegram to the viceroy on 28 June, stated that there had been reports of stabbing following the Rathajatra festival.¹⁸⁰ It became a more frequent feature with Fazlul Huq's visit to Dacca. An intercepted letter by the Special Branch of Calcutta Police, from one Mr A. B. Guha to Shyama Prasad Mookerjee, dated 10 April 1941, stated that the presence of the chief minister and other ministers in the province encouraged fresh cases of stabbing, including one at the Jagannath Hall of the Jagannath University of Dacca, which led to the closure of the university.¹⁸¹ Hindu residents of Dacca were hence drawing a direct link between the presence of League ministers and an escalation of violence. From 17 March to 3 June, the DREC reported that there had been 86 reported cases of stabbings in the city.¹⁸²

Arson and looting assumed serious proportions and this was a major departure from the previous instances of disturbances. Both Hindus and Muslims set fire to each other's shops. Fires were started 'surreptitiously' from the gullies and passages behind the big shops.

The ordinary method was to pour kerosene oil under the doors and then insert a burning rag at the end of a stick . . . As a rule, the shop was set on fire first and looting took place when the fire was extinguished and goods were exposed.¹⁸³

The method ensured that fires would have taken a firm hold before their presence was discovered.¹⁸⁴ The Enquiry Committee, on its part, noted that there was a complete absence of fire-fighting appliances in Dacca, apart from the so-called 'fire engine' which was apparently a converted watering cart. The water hose leaked at several places and most attempts to douse the flames were useless.¹⁸⁵ The greater part of the looting took place in later stages when the intensity of the fire had reduced and the goods inside the shop or the house were exposed.¹⁸⁶ However, as the Enquiry Committee claimed, the general impression of looting was also exaggerated, since many people who saw owners removing goods with the help of the police jumped to the conclusion that rioters were looting with the help of the police.¹⁸⁷

Kamini Kumar Dutta, (a Congressman and a member of the Legislative Council) found, after a tour of the affected areas in the rural hinterland, that only Hindu houses were burnt.¹⁸⁸ He pointed out that the modus operandi of the parties committing loot and arson was the same. They first demanded money for exempting the houses from fire and loot. After extorting the money, some houses were spared, but most of them were still looted and burnt.¹⁸⁹ He claimed that from the statements of a large number of victims, it appeared to him that the 'raiding parties' had a list with them of the prominent houses to be looted and burnt. They mostly belonged to rich moneylenders and landlords.¹⁹⁰

Forced conversions were a novelty for the 1941 riot. While there were no reported cases of conversion to Islam from the city, several were reported from rural areas. No specific numbers were, however, available. Many witnesses from Raipura, Shibpur and Narsinghdi gave evidence of forced conversion or attempts at conversion before the Enquiry Committee.¹⁹¹ According to the report of the DREC, instances were 'both numerous and widespread.'¹⁹² One Hindu witness claimed that after his house was looted, a number of Muslims came to him on 4 April and told him that if he did not embrace Islam, his house would be burnt. His family was forced to recite the *kalma* and wear a *lungi*, and a paper was given to him with the instruction that if any Muslim later came to burn his house, the piece of paper should be shown to him. The contents of the paper could be translated as, 'We of Laterba Palpara have embraced the sacred Islamic faith. Every Muslim should see to it that no house of Laterba is molested.' It was signed by one 'Maulvi Korbanali of Sachimara.'¹⁹³ The Additional Superintendent of Police Mr Mukherji also reported a similar instance on 3 April. On his way to quell a fire, he heard shouts of *Allah-hoo-Akbar* at a distance. Reaching the house from which slogans were emanating, he found a large number of people assembled there. Some Muslims were

arrested after the Hindu owner of the house complained of attempts at forced conversion. On a table in the room, there was a paper which read, 'We the following persons accept Islam voluntarily and in good faith.'¹⁹⁴ Almost all cases of loot and arson followed the same pattern. First, Hindu inmates were asked if they would convert to Islam. If they agreed, they were immediately made to go through a formal ceremony of conversion. In some cases, houses of converted Hindus were spared from loot and arson, but they were informed that a common feast would soon be held where they would have to eat beef and marry off 'their women' to Muslims.¹⁹⁵

Members of the Congress and the Mahasabha shouted themselves hoarse that the riot was the direct result of the propaganda around Pakistan. The Bengal Congress claimed that after the Pakistan meeting at Bhairab (where Nazimuddin had presided), local Muslim leaders were bold enough to preach that 'Pakistan has been established and that only Muslims should reside in Pakistan and the Hindus who would be converted may be allowed to live in Pakistan.'¹⁹⁶ S. P. Mookerjee also claimed that Muslim attackers were crying out slogans like *Pakistan Zindabad*, *Jinnah Zindabad* and *Fazlul Huq Zindabad*.¹⁹⁷ According to him, reports gathered by the Hindu Mahasabha from the refugees indicated that Muslims had proclaimed that Pakistan had been established, and demanded that Hindus should embrace Islam if they wanted to live peacefully.¹⁹⁸

Instances of attacks on the police and the armed forces by the rioters were not uncommon. On 19 March, there was one such incident at the Nawab Yusuf Bazar, when rioters attacked a police party with brickbats and shouts of *Allah-hoo-Akbar*. Soon, more rioters gathered and threw more bricks at the police. Some forces of the Eastern Frontier Rifles patrolling the area warned the rioters and eventually had to open fire at them in self-defense, as a result of which three of them died on the spot and two others died later in a hospital.¹⁹⁹ On the same day, when Mr Ranjit Roy tried to approach a row of abandoned Hindu shops which had been set on fire along the road between Maulvi Bazar and Chowk Square, he found the street barricaded with broken planks from which large nails were sticking out, making it impossible for motor cars to approach the scene.²⁰⁰ On 21 March, at Swamibagh, when the police arrived at a scene of disturbance, Inspector Allen was almost shot from one of the Hindu houses.²⁰¹ This incident led to the arrest of 94 Hindus. On 4 April, at Saikerchar, which is at a short distance from the Rahimabad area, a police party was attacked by a Muslim mob.²⁰²

Charges were repeatedly levelled by both local Hindus and Muslims and by leaders, especially of the Hindu Mahasabha, of inaction and discrimination by the police and local authorities. S. P. Mookerjee, commenting on the system of mass arrests, stated that the police failed to get hold of the actual assailants, and a large number of people, most of whom were innocent, were arrested in a general round up of local people. He further claimed that houses of well-known Hindus were searched without any pretext.²⁰³ The station master of Khanabari had informed Kamini Dutta that on receipt of information about the looting of the Radhanagar Bazar on the afternoon of 1 April, he had sent a message to the district magistrate and the police superintendent of Dacca repeatedly, but no immediate action was taken by the concerned authorities.²⁰⁴

Mookerjee complained that many attacks against the Hindus could have been averted if the police officers at Raipura had made even a little effort in time. He also suggested that in the earlier stages, the attitude of the authorities was characterized by 'practically complete apathy' and that they refused to accept suggestions made by Hindus for the adoption of effective precautionary measures to prevent the spread of the mischief.²⁰⁵ According to him, 'Known bad characters of different affected localities were allowed to roam at large, in spite of repeated suggestions from the Hindu public to control their movements.' He cited examples of two such goondas, Arman and Habib.²⁰⁶

Activities of the goonda named Arman were also discussed by the Enquiry Committee. Interestingly, according to the Committee Report, Arman, a well-known burglar, had surrendered himself to the police a few days before the riot broke out, saying that he was likely to be implicated falsely by the Hindus in the event of a communal riot. He asked permission to reside in the *thana*. Permission was granted to him, but no watch was kept on his movements during the day. The Enquiry Committee Report mentions: 'The result was that he lived in the security of the police station from where he could, if so disposed, sally forth for any criminal purpose and return again safe from pursuit.'²⁰⁷ So the concerns raised by Mookerjee in terms of the free movement of goondas were not completely without foundation.

A Hindu witness claimed that when his shop was looted by some Muslim rioters, he went to the subdivisional officer for help, but nobody came to his rescue.²⁰⁸ The same witness also claimed that when he was trying to move the women of his household to safety, because all Hindu shops near him were set on fire, he had again gone to the Armed Police for help, but to no avail.²⁰⁹

The Enquiry Committee too confirmed three cases where the authorities did not live up to their roles. The first was the case of Sub-Inspector Ansaruddin.

According to the committee report, on 19 and 20 March, he did little to stop disturbances in the Chowk area. His movements from 18 March to 22 March were not very clear, and his arrivals and departures were not clearly mentioned in the station diary. His personal diary too, it appeared, had been written up later and was wrongly dated.²¹⁰ Two other sub-inspectors, Mr Aziz and Mr Abdul Latif were also accused by the Enquiry Committee of ignoring their primary duties of preventing fire and looting in the Chowk area for performing 'less important and urgent duties.'²¹¹ However, the Enquiry Committee was quick to mention that their inactivity was not due to their 'pronounced sympathy' with the Muslims; rather it was their failure to realize the seriousness of the conditions of the area which had prompted them to pay attention to other tasks.²¹² Nonetheless, the inaction of the police force and the presence of the League-dominated Government added to the feelings of insecurity and distrust.

The Enquiry Committee repeatedly made excuses as to why it was difficult for the police to arrest more offenders and recover larger quantities of loot. It said that the maze of lanes and alleyways which intersected every few yards of the town afforded countless means for culprits to escape.²¹³ It claimed that the police force was 'wholly inadequate' to patrol entire areas and 'pursuit would almost certainly be fruitless.'²¹⁴ The police were unable to arrest several Muslim goondas who were active during the riot, because apparently, the names that were submitted by the Hindus to the police were only nicknames, and the police had no other information by which they could take desired action against them.²¹⁵ In fact the DREC also blamed the public for not offering any cooperation. People not only failed to give information that might have led to the arrest of offenders or to the recovery of property, but also increased the difficulties of the police 'by frequently summoning them to deal with incidents which only existed in their own fearful minds.'²¹⁶ The committee maintained that the public often made 'unreasonable demands' for police protection – 'The waste of police material in affording such protection is obvious, and the insistent demand shows how little the public appreciate the magnitude of the task which the police were called upon to perform.'²¹⁷

It is obvious that the scale of violence and level of organization in 1941 was much higher than in the previous instances. In the riots of 1926 and 1930, the main victims were the economically better off class amongst Hindus, especially the Sahas. But although there were attacks on the houses of wealthy Sahas in the Chowk area, stabbings and murders now became more numerous and they were not limited to well-off Hindus alone. The Enquiry Committee itself

described the violence as 'an orgy of indiscriminate stabbing . . . all that was necessary was that the victim should be a member of the opposite community. Beggars and cripples were not spared so long as the number of victims could be increased.'²¹⁸ Violence was directed at all parts of the rival community – places of worship, homes and the body itself.²¹⁹ This time the links of the riot with the world of organized politics were more conspicuous. The concept of a community was more consolidated and active. In the conjunction of class and community, scales were tipped heavily in favour of the latter.

ANTI-COMMUNAL RESISTANCE, RELIEF AND REHABILITATION

Even amidst such dark times, a flicker of hope still shimmered in the form of inter-community solidarity and goodwill. Even before the riot started, some friendly Muslims warned the Hindus about impending violence.²²⁰ Some rich Hindus left their valuables with local Muslims and the latter kept them safely and returned them to the respective owners after the disturbances had subsided.²²¹ There were some mosques in the Hindu majority quarters which were protected and defended by Hindus, and likewise, Muslims protected many temples in Muslim majority areas.²²² Neighbourliness was a habit that persisted even in times of great rupture.

After violence had continued for some time, there was a general tendency among all political organizations to restore order. On 22 March, S. P. Mookerjee, Dr R. C. Majumdar, the nawab of Dacca and a few other Hindu and Muslim leaders went to different localities in the city and appealed to the people for peace with assurances of adequate police protection in case of fresh trouble.²²³ A goodwill mission of students under the joint auspices of the Bengal Provincial Students Federation (BPSF) and the All Bengal Muslim Students League left for Dacca from Calcutta on 22 March, to try and establish communal harmony and provide relief to distressed victims.²²⁴ On 25 March, a meeting of students of both communities was held at a park in the city, where peace measures were discussed. Mr Gairuddin Pradhan, general secretary of the Carmichael Hostel of the Dacca University, attended it. He said that students were the key to restoring Hindu-Muslim unity and appealed to Muslim students to come forward and help the victims.²²⁵ It has been mentioned before that the Government of Bengal had tried to cancel the Pakistan Day meetings which were to be held in the city on 23 March. The official Government communiqué read:

Government have noted with regret that recent events at Dacca and a few other places have interfered with the communal concord which had hitherto been prevailing throughout the province. They are therefore anxious that the situation should not further deteriorate. To this end they are of the opinion that it is most desirable that no meeting should be held to put forward the views of any particular community since, at this juncture, such meetings may, even inadvertently, be the cause of accentuating communal discord.²²⁶

Several Relief Committees sprang up in the city of Dacca and in affected rural areas. Important amongst them were the Bharat Sevashram Sangha, the Ramakrishna Mission, the Narayanganj-Dacca Hindu Relief Committee, the Marwari Relief Society, the Hindu Mahasabha, the Congress Constructive Workers Association and The Bengali Merchants Association. However, apart from the last two relief groups, all of the above provided relief exclusively to Hindus. Ananda Prasad Choudhuri of the Congress Constructive Workers Association, in a letter to Rajkumari Amrit Kaur at Sevagram (Wardha) on 17 May 1941, mentioned that the largest amount of relief material was distributed by the government; the government provided up to a pound of free rice per day to every Hindu in about 65–70 villages affected in the area.²²⁷ After 10 April, the government stopped the supply of free rice and started advancing agricultural loans instead. The Congress Constructive Workers Association ran a cheap grain shop where rice was sold to the distressed at reduced prices. However, deep distrust prevailed between the two communities and restoring goodwill was, understandably, not easy.

Nalini Ranjan Sarkar and Kiran Shankar Roy, leaders of the Bengal Congress Assembly Party, along with Kalipada Mukherjee, member of the All India Congress Committee, arrived at Mymensingh on 16 April on their way to Dacca. There, they met prominent Congress workers and held discussions on the communal problem. Kiran Shankar Roy, also from the Congress, pointed to the danger of false rumours. He said that whatever might be the political differences between the two communities, the path of fighting and rioting was certainly not the way to settle differences.²²⁸ He appealed to the people of Mymensingh to make the peace committees a 'living organization' so that all causes of friction could be properly dealt with and the spread of false rumours and 'mischievous propaganda' might be avoided. A printed appeal for peace by Chief Minister Fazlul Huq was also circulated all over Dacca on 18 April.²²⁹

But their belated peace efforts were not entirely successful. Panic-stricken refugees began to leave Dacca from the night of 2 April and took shelter in Agartala in the state of Tripura. The ruler of Tripura, Maharaja Manikya

Bahadur, gave them asylum. Kamini Kumar Dutta claimed that he had visited Agartala and by the morning of 5 April, the number of refugees had reached five thousand.²³⁰ The Railway Company, claimed Dutta, was transporting these refugees free of charge. By 8 April, the number of refugees at Agartala had reached ten thousand, and a relief committee was formed there by local Hindus and Muslims to tend to their needs. Maharaja Manikya Bahadur personally looked after the conveyance of the refugees to Agartala and their accommodation there. He also agreed to give any amount of land that the refugees would require for erecting their temporary shelters.²³¹ However, the biggest problem was how to restore confidence in their minds and rehabilitate them, as the large population of refugees could not live on charity for a long time. Some of the refugees were so panic-stricken that they were planning to settle down in the Tripura State permanently.²³²

Gandhi was at Sevagram when the Dacca Riot took place, but he constantly kept in touch with the Congress relief workers in the affected areas. His opinion about organizing relief and handling the situation was different from conventional ones, and they make for an interesting study. He wrote to the secretary of the BPCC, Mr. Guha, on 23 April that relief by way of organizing food and clothing did not seem too relevant to him; he was more concerned about why riots occurred in the first place in spite of Congress activities in the province.²³³ His message to Congress relief workers was that they must not be satisfied with mere relief work. That, according to him, was the task of 'social workers.' Congressmen should find out ways to combat the evil of communalism. He pointed out that governments could not be expected to help in a scenario where people were easily frightened.²³⁴

In a letter to Shyama Prasad Mookerjee on 21 April, he said that he was feeling 'dazed and powerless;' it pained him to see that thousands of people were leaving their homes.²³⁵ He said that if refugees were true votaries of nonviolence, 'they would not flee before a crowd of a few hundred goondas' and that 'they would die to a man in the defence of their hearths and homes . . .'²³⁶ He believed that such people, who had fear in their heart, could never be nonviolent; for them violence was the only option – 'I can expect violent people to become nonviolent some day but I am not so sure about cowards becoming non-violent all of a sudden.'²³⁷ He confessed that during communal trouble, he had not yet been able to demonstrate the efficacy of nonviolent action on a mass scale, but he wished to live to show such an example.²³⁸ This had deeper implications for his philosophy of nonviolence and its practical application in combating communalism. This aspect has been analyzed in greater detail in the last chapter.

The Dacca Riot of 1941 stood at the crossroads in the history of communal violence in Bengal.²³⁹ It ushered in a new, more organized form of communal violence. The scale of the riots also got larger from here. In a way, it was the precursor to the genocide of 1946–47, as after this, the communal atmosphere in Bengal intensified steadily. The world of organized politics increasingly tied itself into popular perceptions of community interests. Every attempt was made to rouse community-based consciousness on all political issues that came to the fore. This was particularly true of famine relief and the Bengal Secondary Education Bill of 1944, which further embittered relations between the two communities. We shall now turn our attention to these developments.

ENDNOTES

1. In this chapter, as elsewhere in the book, Dacca has been used, instead of the current name of the city, i.e Dhaka.
2. A much more detailed analysis has been made in chapter III
3. B. C. Allen, *Eastern Bengal District Gazetteers, Dacca* (The Pioneer Press, Allahabad, 1912), p 62.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid, p 63.
6. Ibid, p 68.
7. Tanika Sarkar, *Bengal 1928–1934, The Politics of Protest* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1987), p 111.
8. B. C. Allen, *Eastern Bengal District Gazetteers, Dacca* (The Pioneer Press, Allahabad, 1912), p 65.
9. Sarkar, *The Politics of Protest*, p 110.
10. Ibid.
11. It is a Hindu festival celebrating the birth of Lord Krishna.
12. Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal*, p 84
13. Ibid, p 88.
14. Ibid, p 77.
15. Sarkar, *The Politics of Protest*, p 106. For more details on the nature of the configuration of these property relations and social tensions, see Chapter III.
16. The jute belt comprised the main jute growing districts of East Bengal, namely Dacca, Mymensingh, Faridpur, Tippera, Pabna and Rajshahi
17. Sarkar, *The Politics of Protest*, p 112.
18. Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919–1947* (Hyderabad: Cambridge University Press in association with Orient Longman, 1987), p 112.
19. Partha Chatterjee, *Bengal, 1920–1947, Volume 1, The Land Question* (Calcutta: K. P. Bagchi and Company, 1984), p 143

20. WBSA, File No. 849/31 Home Political, Confidential letter from district magistrate of Tippera to the under secretary, Political Department, 26 December 1931.
21. Sarkar, *The Politics of Protest*, p 113.
22. Ibid, p 107.
23. Bose, *Agrarian Bengal*, p 190.
24. Sarkar, *The Politics of Protest*, p 113.
25. Ibid, p 113.
26. Das, 'Communal Violence in Twentieth Century Colonial Bengal,' in Suranjan Das, *Interrogating Politics*, p 6.
27. Sarkar, *The Politics of Protest*, p 127.
28. Ibid.
29. Bose, *Agrarian Bengal*, p 198.
30. Ibid, p 197.
31. N. N. Mitra, ed., *The Indian Annual Register*, 1936, Volume 1, Published by The Annual Register Office, 16-1 Komedan Bagan Lane, P. O. Park Street, Calcutta, p 301.
32. Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal 1937-1947* (New Delhi: Impex India, 1976), p 79-80.
33. For further details see Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal*, p 88.
34. The Muslim League had agreed to all the conditions of the KPP – the prime-ministership of Huq and the KPP electoral program.
35. Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal*, p 99.
36. Report of the Dacca Riots Enquiry Committee, Government of Bengal, Home Department, Political (Henceforth referred to as DREC), p 28.
37. *Star of India*, 12 September 1940.
38. Census of India, 1941, Volume IV, pp 8-9, 18, Cited in Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal*, p 147.
39. Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal*, p 147.
40. Ibid, p 148.
41. The Conch-shell industry had been described in the Census of India 1931 as 'decadent'. Census of India, 1931, Volume IV, Part I, p 305.
42. Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal*, p 155.
43. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 28 December 1939.
44. Ibid, 27 December 1939.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. India Office Records (hereafter IOR) File No. L/PJ/5/146, governor's report on the political situation for the first half of January 1940.
49. Ibid.
50. Throughout the 1920s, the Depressed Classes of Bengal in general and the Namasudras in particular had begun to assert their voice against Caste Hindu social norms. They had organized and participated in some temple entry Satyagrahas,

most notable of which was the Munshiganj Satyagraha of August 1929, which went on for almost eight months. While the Congress staunchly condemned such modes of Satyagrahas, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay observes that this sort of assertive behavior on part of the Depressed Classes alarmed the protagonists of Hindu solidarity. The Depressed Classes in Bengal largely stayed away from the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1930, and later showed some enthusiasm for the Communal Award (1932). Although they were dissatisfied with only ten seats allocated to them in Bengal, they were partly satisfied with the provision of election through special electorates. Gandhi's fast unto death in 1932 to reverse the provision of separate electorates for the depressed classes found little sympathy amongst those of Bengal. The fast ended with the signing of the Poona Pact that accepted the reservation of seats for the Depressed Classes from the general electorate seats in the provincial Legislatures. In Bengal, the number of such seats was now increased to 30. Initially, the Namasudras were strongly dissatisfied with Ambedkar signing Poona Pact because of the loss of the Special Electorates. However, as the Poona Pact was also accepted by the British, the Depressed Classes in Bengal did not have much option but to accept it as well. Although the Depressed Classes were by no means united, with fractures within themselves and also within the dominant Namasudra leadership, their general assertiveness against Caste Hindu domination was seen as alarming by the various Hindu right wing groups, especially the Mahasabha. Hence, in the absence of much Congress action in this regard, there was an increased emphasis by the Mahasabha on making important overtures to the Depressed Castes in Bengal. See Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872–1947* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997).

51. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 29 December 1939.
52. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India*, p 214.
53. *Ibid.*
54. IOR, File No. L/PJ/5/146, governor's report on the political situation for the 1st half of February 1940.
55. *Ibid*, governor's report on the political situation for the 2nd half of February 1940.
56. *Ibid.*
57. *Ibid.*
58. Dacca Riot Enquiry Committee, p 1.
59. *Ibid.*
60. *Ibid*, p 30.
61. *Ibid.*
62. So far, both Calcutta University and the Department of Education were in charge of formulating and developing Secondary Education.
63. Assembly Proceedings, Official Report, Bengal Legislative Assembly (hereafter referred to as BLAP) 8th Session, Volume LVII, No. 5, pp 45–46.
64. *Ibid*, p 44, Speech by Fazlul Huq.
65. *Ibid*, p 243, Speech by Fazlur Rahman.
66. *Ibid*, p 107, Speech by Syed Badrudduja.
67. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India*, p 177.
68. *Ibid.*

69. There were two Scheduled Caste ministers in the 1st Fazlul Huq Cabinet: Prasannadeb Raikat (Rajbansi) and Mukunda Behari Mullick (Namasudra).
70. He was a prominent Namasudra leader of the Calcutta Scheduled Caste League, which was formed in 1938, with pro-Congress leanings. Other important leaders of this group were Rasiklal Biswas, Monmohan Das and Jogendranath Mandal (who became its president in 1940). Members of the Calcutta Scheduled Caste League also formed the Independent Scheduled Caste Party in 1938 as a new Legislative Party within the Bengal Legislative Assembly. It was formed at the residence of Sarat Bose to cooperate with the Congress and withdraw support from the Huq-Muslim League Coalition Party. However, these Namasudra leaders of the Independent Scheduled Caste Party had maintained that they would keep a separate existence in the Legislature. With Subhash Bose's arrest and subsequent escape from the country, the relationship of Scheduled Castes with the Congress began to turn rocky. By 1942, there were fresh realignments within the SC leadership. In March 1942, another Parliamentary party was constituted called the Bengal Scheduled Caste Party, with Mukunda Behari Mullick as the leader and Rasiklal Biawas as the Whip. By 1943, two distinct factions emerged within the SC leadership in Bengal: the Bengal Scheduled Caste Party with Pulin Behari Mullick and Mukunda Behari Mullick as its prominent leaders and the Bengal Scheduled Caste League led by Jogendranath Mandal, the latter more or less supporting the Nazimuddin Ministry. In 1943, Mandal also formed the Bengal branch of the All India Scheduled Caste Federation (founded by Ambedkar in 1942). For more details on the shifting Scheduled Caste allegiances during the early 40s, see Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India*.
71. BLAP, 8th Session, Volume LVII, No. 5, p 79, Speech by Pramatha Ranjan Thakur.
72. *Hindusthan Standard*, 8 September 1940. For the full text of the letter written by P. R. Thakur to Fazlul Huq tendering his resignation, see Appendix 1.
73. BLAP, 8th Session, Volume LVII, No. 5, p 111, Speech by Rasik Lal Biswas.
74. *Ibid*, pp 191–195, Speech by Upendra Nath Barman.
75. *Ibid*, p 82, Speech by Congress MLA Atul Chandra Sen.
76. *Ibid*.
77. *Ibid*, p 277, Speech by S. P. Mookerjee.
78. *Ibid*, pp 277–78, Speech by S. P. Mookerjee.
79. *Ibid*, p 279.
80. *Hindusthan Standard*, 4 September 1940. It should be noted that by condemning the Bill which tried, in however limited a way, to safeguard the interests of the SCs, the Mahasabha was clearly trying to safeguard the Caste Hindus' interests.
81. *Ibid*, 8 September 1940.
82. *Ibid*, 8 September 1940.
83. *Ibid*.
84. *Ibid*.
85. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Culture and Hegemony: Social Domination in Colonial Bengal* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004), p 201.
86. Bandyopadhyay, *Protest and Identity in Colonial India*, p 214. The Mahasabha claimed that Hindu 'lower' castes were repeatedly being converted to Islam, either

forcibly during riots or sometimes voluntarily. The *Shuddhi* (or purification) of such castes was envisaged by reconverting them into the Hindu fold.

87. IOR, File No. L/PJ/5/148, p 269, Report on the political situation for the first half of February 1941.
88. Census of India 1931, Volume V, Bengal and Sikkim, Part I Report, p xiv.
89. IOR, File No. L/PJ/5/148, p 269, Report on the political situation for the first half of February 1941.
90. Ibid, p 258, Report on the political situation for the second half of February 1941
91. Ibid, p 254, Confidential Report no. 4, governor's Camp. Bengal, 7th March, 1941.
92. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 2 March 1941.
93. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 3 March 1941.
94. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 4 March 1941.
95. Ibid, 6 March 1941.
96. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 7 March, 1941.
97. Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Culture and Hegemony*, p 205
98. *Modern Review* 68, no. 6 (December 1940): p 600–1.
99. Ibid.
100. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 10 March 1941.
101. Ibid.
102. Ibid.
103. *Star of India*, 5 February 1941.
104. *Hindusthan Standard*, 30 August 1940.
105. For the full text of the letter published by the newspaper, see Appendix 1.
106. *Hindusthan Standard*, 30 August 1940.
107. *Modern Review* 68, No. 6 (December 1940): p 599
108. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 7 March 1941
109. *The Statesman*, 2 September 1940, p 3. 'Dar-el-Islam by Shahed' – Regarding this particular column, the Statesman wrote: 'In his weekly feature, "Shahed" puts forward a Muslim point of view on current questions. The Statesman recognizes that the Muslim community has fewer facilities than Hindus or Europeans for the expression of opinion in the Press in India, but the editor accepts no responsibility for "Shahed's" views.'
110. Ibid.
111. *Star of India*, 7 February, 1941.
112. Ibid.
113. Ibid.
114. *Star of India*, 4 March 1941. Also see Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal*, p 146.
115. IOR, file No. L/PJ/5/148, p 254, Confidential Report No. 4, Governor's Camp, Bengal, 7th March, 1941 - Confidential letter from the Governor of Bengal to the viceroy.
116. Ibid.
117. See, Pradip Kumar Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth Century Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p 23–24

118. Kenneth Jones, 'Religious Identity and the Indian Census,' in *The Census in British India: New Perspectives*, ed. N. G. Barrier (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1981), p 81.
119. Datta, *Carving Blocs*, p 25
120. Holi could lead to a potentially explosive situation because often amidst the carnivalesque frivolities, coloured water would, intentionally or un-intentionally, be thrown on members of the other community.
121. IOR, File no. L/PJ/5/148, p 233. Report on Political Situation for second half of March 1941.
122. Ibid.
123. Ibid.
124. DREC, p 2.
125. S. P. Mookerjee, 1st Installment (Uma Prasad Mookerjee) Papers , NMML, Printed Publications, Serial Number 1, p 5 – Statement submitted on behalf of the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha and the Dacca Hindu Mahasabha before the Dacca Riots Enquiry Committee, 1941.
126. DREC, p 2
127. DREC, p 7
128. Ibid.
129. Ibid, p 3.
130. DREC, p 3.
131. Ibid, p 3.
132. DREC, p 13.
133. Ibid.
134. S. P. Mookerjee 1st Installment (Uma Prasad Mookerjee) Papers , NMML, Printed Publications, Serial Number 1, p 6 - Statement submitted on behalf of the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha and the Dacca Hindu Mahasabha before the Dacca Riots Enquiry Committee, 1941
135. DREC, p 3.
136. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 22 March, 1941.
137. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 22 March, 1941.
138. Ibid.
139. DREC, p 5.
140. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 23 March 1941.
141. Ibid.
142. Ibid.
143. *Dacca Prakash*, 1 June 1941.
144. Ibid.
145. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 28 March 1941.
146. *Star of India*, 24 March, 1941.
147. Ibid.
148. NAI, File No 5/25/41 Poll (I), p 7. Telegram dated 22nd March 1941 from The governor of Bengal to the viceroy.
149. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 24 March, 1941.
150. DREC, p 32.

151. DREC, p 32.
152. SB File No PM 734/41, 1941 p 32, Petition dated 3rd April 1941 from the Hindu inhabitants of Jorepool Lane, P.S. Sutrapur, District Dacca, to the district magistrate, Dacca.
153. DREC, p 32.
154. Ibid, p 32.
155. Ibid, p 33.
156. NAI, Home Political File No 5/8/41 Poll (I), p 26, Telegram from governor of Bengal to viceroy, dated 30 June 1941.
157. Ibid, p 15, Telegram from governor of Bengal to viceroy, dated 10 April 1941.
158. Ibid, p 22, Telegram from governor of Bengal to viceroy, dated 19 April 1941.
159. DREC, p 11.
160. Ibid.
161. SB File No PM 734/41 1941, p 145, English translation of a Bengali leaflet titled 'Hindus only will protect the Hindus', Intercepted by Special Branch on 17.4.1941. The author of this leaflet is unknown.
162. Ibid, p 145. This translation is by the police officer who compiled the report.
163. SB File No PM 734/41 (II), p 87, Gist from A. S. 249, dated 5.5.41, Intelligence Branch, CID, Calcutta, dated 14th May, 1941, No. C/S 2822/2.
164. Ibid.
165. Ibid, p 25, English translation and copy of a Bengali letter, bearing the postal seal of Farashgange, dated 18 April 1941.
166. SB File No PM 734/41 (II), p 173-74, Statement of A.S. 249, dated 24.4.41 (by letter) received by Special Branch on 28.4.41.
167. Ibid.
168. IOR File No. L/PJ/5/148, p 219. Report on Political Situation for the first half of April 1941.
169. Ibid.
170. IOR File No. L/PJ/5/148, p 215, Confidential Report from the Bengal governor to the viceroy, dated 22 April 1941.
171. Ibid, p 219.
172. Ibid, p 215.
173. Ibid.
174. SB File No. PM 734/41, 1941, p 1 A, 'Bengal Congress – Hindu Mahasava' Special Branch Report dated 7.4.41.
175. Ibid.
176. Ibid, p 41 D, Copy of Memo No. 5/A. I. /39, dated 9th April 1941, from the Central Intelligence Officer, Karachi, to the Central Intelligence Officer, Calcutta.
177. Ibid.
178. DREC, p 12.
179. Ibid, p 13.
180. NAI, Home Political File No. 5/8/41 Poll (I), p 24, Telegram from governor of Bengal to viceroy, dated 28th June 1941.
181. SB File No PM 734/41, 1941, p 12. Special Branch interception of Inland/Foreign Mail on 15th April 1941, from A. K. Guha, Dacca to S. P. Mookerjee. Letter is dated as 14.4.41.

182. DREC, p 76.
183. DREC, p 14.
184. *Ibid*, p 17.
185. *Ibid*, p 17.
186. *Ibid*, p 18.
187. *Ibid*.
188. M. K. Gandhi Papers (Pyarelal Collection), NMML, Subject File No. 27, p 43 - Letter dated Calcutta, 10th April, 1941, from Kamini Kumar Dutta, M.L.C, Bengal Legislative Council, to the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, Calcutta.
189. *Ibid*, p 85 - Letter dated Comilla, the 20th April, 1941, from Kamini K. Dutta, Member, Bengal Legislative Council, to the president, Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, Calcutta.
190. *Ibid*, p 86.
191. DREC, p 34.
192. *Ibid*, p 34.
193. *Ibid*, p 34.
194. *Ibid*, p 35.
195. M. K. Gandhi Papers (Pyarelal Collection), NMML, Subject File No. 27, p 86 - Letter dated Comilla, the 20th April, 1941, from Kamini K. Dutta, Member, Bengal Legislative Council, to the president, Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, Calcutta.
196. SB File No 734/41 (II), p 206, Statement of Shrish Chatterjee, member of BPCC; Report of additional deputy commissioner of police, dated 19 June 1941.
197. *Ibid*, pp 95–100, Statement of the Dacca Situation by Dr. S. P. Mookerjee on 16 April 1941.
198. *Ibid*.
199. *Dacca Prakash*, 1 June 1941, p 2.
200. DREC, pp 13–14.
201. DREC, p 5.
202. *Ibid*, p 36.
203. M. K. Gandhi Papers (Pyarelal Collection), NMML, Subject file No. 23, p 6. Statement by Dr. Shyama Prasad Mookerjee, Working President, All-India Hindu Mahasabha, 1941.
204. *Ibid*, Subject file No 27, p 49 - Letter dated Calcutta, 10th April, 1941, from Kamini Kumar Dutta, M.L.C, Bengal Legislative Council, to the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, Calcutta.
205. S. P. Mookerjee (Uma Prasad Mookerjee) Papers, NMML, Printed Material, Serial Number 1, p 6. Statement submitted on behalf of the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha and the Dacca Hindu Mahasabha before the Dacca Riots Enquiry Committee, 1941.
206. *Ibid*.
207. DREC, p 12.
208. *Dacca Prakash*, 22 June 1941, p 2.
209. *Ibid*.

210. DREC, p 16.
211. Ibid, p 16.
212. Ibid, p 17.
213. DREC, p 22.
214. Ibid.
215. Ibid, p 12.
216. Ibid.
217. DREC, p 10.
218. Ibid, p 31.
219. Das, 'Communal Violence in Twentieth Century Colonial Bengal,' p 8
220. M. K. Gandhi Papers (Pyarelal Collection), NMML, Subject File No. 27, p 45 - Letter dated 10th April, 1941, Calcutta, from Kamini Kumar Dutta, M.L.C, Bengal Legislative Council, to the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, Calcutta.
221. Ibid, p 47 - Letter dated 10th April, 1941, Calcutta, from Kamini Kumar Dutta, M.L.C, Bengal Legislative Council, to the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, Calcutta.
222. Ibid, p 88 - Letter dated 20th April 1941, Comilla, from Kamini K. Dutta, Member, Bengal Legislative Council, to the president, Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, Calcutta.
223. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 23 March 1941.
224. Ibid, 24 March 1941.
225. Ibid, 26 March 1941.
226. Ibid, 23 March 1941.
227. M. K. Gandhi Papers (Pyarelal Collection), NMML, Subject File No. 27, p 91 - Letter dated 17.5.1941, from Ananda Prasad Choudhuri, Congress Constructive Workers' Association, Relief Centre: P.O. Raipura (Dacca) to Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Sevagram, Wardha.
228. *Amrita Bazar Patrika* 22 April 1941.
229. Ibid, 19 April 1941.
230. M. K. Gandhi Papers (Pyarelal Collection), NMML, Subject File No. 27, pp 41-42 - Letter dated Calcutta, 10th April, 1941, from Kamini Kumar Dutta, M.L.C, Bengal Legislative Council, to the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, Calcutta.
231. Ibid, p 49, Letter dated Calcutta, 10th April, 1941, from Kamini Kumar Dutta, M.L.C, Bengal Legislative Council, to the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, Calcutta.
232. Ibid, p 51 - Letter dated Calcutta, 10th April, 1941, from Kamini Kumar Dutta, M.L.C, Bengal Legislative Council, to the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, Calcutta.
233. M. K. Gandhi Papers (Pyarelal Collection), NMML, Subject File No. 30, p 4 - Handwritten Letter dated Sevagram, 23.4.41, from M. K. Gandhi, to A. Guha, secretary, B.P.C.C.
234. Ibid, p 4.

235. Ibid, p 5. Handwritten letter, dated 21.4.41, Sevagram, Wardha, from M. K. Gandhi, to Shyama Prasad Mookerjee.
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239. Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal*, p 159.