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## THE 1943 BENGAL FAMINE: A BRIEF HISTORY OF POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS AT PLAY

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### Abstract

This paper briefly surveys the political developments at the beginning of the twentieth century and examines how those developments played a part in the Bengal Famine of 1943. The Bengal Famine of 1943 is arguably one of the worst man-made famines recorded in human history. There were a multitude of reasons behind it, each of which had contributed to the severity of the famine and its irreversible effects on the Bengali society. However, this paper largely focuses on examining the assertions made by the Churchill Project of Hillsdale College and certain sections of the British academia, who have been attempting to emphasise that Sir Winston Churchill and, by extension, the British government had provided humanitarian aid during the Bengal Famine. At the same time, there have been multiple efforts to shift the narrative of the Bengal Famine of 1943 and point fingers specifically at the Hindu society, especially by these aforementioned institutions. All this is taking place at a time when the decolonial narrative is gaining more traction in mainstream discourses. The purpose of this paper is to take a closer look at the policies and motivations of the colonial era British administration, not only to understand how each of their decisions led to the enormity of the Bengal Famine but also how certain institutions are encouraging the colonial narrative that is often distorted

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In 2020, a petition titled “Change the Curriculum to Include Information on Churchill and the Bengal Famine” was submitted to the UK Parliament. The UK National Curriculum was urged to include a mandatory section on the role of Winston Churchill in the 1943 Bengal Famine. Not surprisingly, the plea was rejected--on the grounds that the National Curriculum already allowed secondary schools to teach about the British Empire, with India as a focus of deep study. One doesn't have to be a sceptic to raise an eyebrow over the statement. The curious wording emphasises the fact that teaching about the British Empire is “allowed” but not “mandatory.” Besides, concerted efforts to change the narrative of the Bengal Famine have recently started to appear in various journals.

Author and historian Zareer Masani wrote one such article about the Bengal famine of 1943 titled “Churchill and the Genocide Myth” in *The Critic*, a British magazine. The piece commences with a peculiar paragraph: Masani alludes to a few people who accuse “Britain's most cherished hero” of being racist or even guilty of genocide. Admittedly, it is absurd to claim that Churchill single-handedly caused a famine, for a famine is usually caused by multiple factors. However, the very first paragraph itself establishes Masani's claim that anyone scrutinising Churchill must belong, in his words, to the “black lives madness and its left-liberal white apologia crowd,” thereby making it easy for him to “debunk” the said claim. Masani not only casually downplays imperialism, asserting that “it was typical of that time,” but also seems to echo the narrative of the Churchill Project of Hillsdale College.

A particular paragraph in Masani's article stood out: “Meanwhile, the cabinet instructed the government of India to impose rationing across the whole subcontinent, raise taxes and impose food price controls. The cabinet expressed a suspicion that the shortages were partly political in character, caused by Marwari (Hindu) supporters of Congress in an effort to embarrass the then Muslim Government of Bengal.” It is noteworthy for the reason that the rest of his article had very little to do with the aforementioned paragraph. Casual, out-of-context statements are not as innocent as they may seem. Looking through the Churchill Project of Hillsdale College, particularly their archives of the Bengal Famine, one notices that a few articles are iterations of the same common theme: “blame the famine on non-cooperative Hindus.” One finds in the archives the

articles of Dr. Zareer Masani, who obtained his doctorate in History from the University of Oxford, and also authored the books *Indira Gandhi: A Biography* and *Macaulay: Britain's Liberal Imperialist*. There is even an article by Dr. Abhijit Sarkar, who also obtained his doctorate at the University of Oxford.

Moreover, he is a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland and a member of the Royal Historical Society; apparently, in his own words, he “won research-funding of approximately a million pounds from prestigious funding bodies.” He was in the news recently for his controversial posts on social media, which were allegedly anti-Hindu.

The reason for the scrutiny of the credentials of Masani and Sarkar is that their articles seem to be united by one common factor--not only the subtle (or even unsubtle) attempt at absolving the responsibility of perhaps one of the worst man-made famines recorded in human history from the British administration but also shifting it entirely on either the Bengali society or the Hindus, who were, quote, unquote, “not cooperating with the British Empire.” To understand this atrocious attempt of selectively highlighting the suspicions of some British officials and Masani’s decision to write the aforementioned sentence on *The Critic*, one needs to take a closer look at the political history of the partition of India.

### **The “First” Partition of Bengal**

The partition of India is undoubtedly tied to the first partition of Bengal; therefore, it is imperative to understand the course of events that occurred before and after. Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India, announced the division of the Bengal Presidency, the largest presidency in British India, which had encompassed undivided Bengal, Bihar, and parts of Odisha (Orissa), Assam, and also parts of Meghalaya, Lushai Hills of Mizoram, and Nagaland. Lord Curzon had argued that the division would make administration more efficient, and to date British historians have maintained this view. Indian politicians and historians, on the other hand, have argued that the motive behind the 1905 Partition was political rather than administrative--the British administration wanted to achieve a weakened Bengal under the guise of administrative improvement (Chakravarti, 1958, p. 549).

Historically, it is true that discussions about improving administrative efficiency did take place; after the Orissa famine of 1866, Sir Stafford Northcote suggested a reduction in the size of the vast presidency of Bengal. In 1874, As-

sam was separated and made into Chief Commissioner Henry Cotton's province, and Sylhet was transferred to it despite local opposition (Sarkar, 1973, p. 9). In 1892, a proposal was mooted to transfer the South Lushai Hills and the Chittagong division to Assam. In 1896, the residents of Chittagong, Noakhali and Tipperah, the British Indian Association, the Indian Association and the East Bengal Association protested strongly. Around the same time, Henry Cotton and administrator Sir James Westland stated the impracticality of a plan to merge eastern Bengal's districts with Assam (Chakravarti, 1958, p. 549).

The matter was revived in 1903 by Sir Andrew Fraser, the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, in collaboration with Lord Curzon. This proposal took a different form: this time Dacca and Mymensingh were proposed to be added to Assam. In the last week of December 1903, Fraser proposed that Bakarganj and Faridpur would also be annexed to Assam. In 1904, Rangpur, Bogra, Pabna, even Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Malda, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar were to be transferred under the Chief Commissioner's province (Sarkar, 1973, p. 11). The Bengal presidency was simply too big for the colonial administrators to handle. However, a question needs to be asked: was that the only reason behind the 1905 division?

When partition was decided upon, Herbert Hope Risley, Secretary to the Government of India and an ethnographer, was called upon to communicate the plan to the Chief Secretary Government of Bengal. Risley prepared the draft of the communication on the basis of Lord Curzon's minute. Lord Curzon admitted that though Risley had knowledge about the people of Bengal, his plan seemed disastrous. In Lord Curzon's words: "Neither do I propose to send a copy of my minute home [...] It will be sufficient to send a copy privately to the Secretary of State *to explain the inner meaning of that it has not found altogether advisable to say in the letter to Bengal* (Chakravarti, 1958, p. 552)."

Why did the British administration hide facts from the public, which were mentioned in the original draft (Chakravarti, 1958, p. 552), (Sarkar, 1973, p. 11)? The leaders of Bengal were not wide of the mark when they interpreted the partition plan as a subtle attack on the growing nationalism, which was especially strong in the Bengal Presidency. To curb the rising tide of nationalism and political consciousness in Bengal, the colonial administrators conceived of policies to first break the solidarity of Bengali Hindus, the vanguard of the nation-

alist movement. They carved out two provinces--Bengali Hindus would be the linguistic minority in one and the religious minority in the other (Chakravarti, 1958, p. 552). This may have been the biggest reason why the Bengali Hindu polity opposed the partition, aside from cultural affinity (Bhattacharjee, 2005, p. 1025).

Another policy of the British administration was to give Muslims the political advantage; Lord Curzon himself delivered a speech on 18 February 1904 at Ahsan Manzil, the Dacca residence of Nawab Khwaja Salimullah, where he mentioned that Dacca was only “a shadow of its former self” and that the government envisaged “the creation of a centre of Muslim power” in Dacca, “which would invest in Muhammadans in eastern Bengal with a unity which they have not enjoyed since the days of the old Mussulman viceroys and kings, [...]” (Sarkar, 1973, p. 18). This was, perhaps, why Khwaja Salimullah ardently supported the partition. A historical context would do well here: the British East India Company (BEIC), under the leadership of Robert Clive, had toppled Siraj ud Daulah and his French allies in the Battle of Plassey after Mir Jafar Ali Khan, who was Siraj ud Daulah’s Commander in Chief, had defected. This enabled the BEIC to capture Calcutta and abolish the Mughal suzerainty, eventually leading the British empire to seize control of the entire subcontinent. The British, who abolished the Mughal empire, now lamented the lost glory of Mughal Dacca and vowed to bring it back should the Muslim polity support the British administration.

### **The Swadeshi Movement**

Unable to end the protest, the authorities reversed the partition in 1911. Districts, where Bengali was spoken, were once again unified; however, Assam, Bihar and Odisha were separated, and the capital was shifted to New Delhi. The Muslim leadership of Bengal was unsatisfied since they viewed the reversal of partition as compromising Muslim interests to quell Hindu protests. A. K. Fazlul Huq, who would become one of the dominant politicians, expressed his grief over the reversal of the partition in his first speech in the Bengal provincial legislature in April 1913: “I would only remind the officials that they are honour bound to render adequate compensations to the Muhammadan community for all the grievous wrongs inflicted on them by unceremonious annulment of the partition” (Sanaullah, 1995, p. 210).

The political zeal among the Muslim elite grew stronger as the Swadeshi movement gained strength. The call for a boycott of British goods did not concur with the interests of the Muslim elite, who considered the Swadeshi movement as a Hindu-interest-driven movement rather than a struggle for Indian independence. As a result, the All-India Muslim League was formed in 1906 in Dacca. An interesting nugget: after the Liberal Party won the 1906 general elections in the United Kingdom, John Morley became the Secretary of State for India. At this time, the British government was battling with a rising radical dissent from the Indian nationalists. Morley wished to keep the moderate Indians away from the radical faction by dangling the promise of more Indian political representation. Morley was guided by Viceroy Lord Minto and H.H. Risley, who urged representation on the basis of “different interests” in the Indian social structure (Kulke and Rothermund, 2004, p. 279). In that very year, a representative deputation of Muslim leaders demanded the introduction of the principle of separate electorates. It was around this time that the All-India Hindu Mahasabha was founded by Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya in order to safeguard the interests of the Hindu minority in the proposed constitutional reform (Gordon, 1975, p. 149).

### **The Khilafat Movement and Communal Violence**

Fast forward to the First World War when the Khilafat Movement, a pan-Islamist political protest, took place. In 1920, the All-India Muslim League published the Khilafat Manifesto, which called for the Muslims of India to unite and hold Britain accountable for removing the caliph of the Ottoman Empire. An alliance was made between the Khilafat and the Indian National Congress. Congress leader Mohandas Karamchand “Mahatma” Gandhi and the Khilafat leaders promised to work and fight together for the causes of Khilafat and self-governance of India. The protests ensued when sanctions were placed on the Ottoman Empire after the First World War by the Treaty of Sèvres, which was signed between the Allies of the first World War and the Ottoman Empire. The movement collapsed by late 1922 when Turkey gained a more favourable diplomatic position. By 1924, the role of caliph was abolished, and the Khilafat Movement ended too. It is evident that some Hindu politicians did support the Khilafat Movement initially in order to pressure the British government, albeit Muslims and Hindus had entirely different motivations. During this brief alliance in 1923, Bengal and other parts of India witnessed communal riots.

Despite the riots, Chittaranjan Das managed to forge the Bengal Pact of 1923 with the Muslim Leaders of Bengal, such as Abul Kasem Fazlul Huq and Hussein Shahid Suhrawardy. His aim was to gain support from the Muslims for the Swaraj Party (Jalal & Seal, 1981, p. 428). This was not the first pact forged in order to attempt to bring the two communities together to oppose the British administration; the Lucknow Pact of 1916--among others--was formed prior to the Bengal Pact. Interestingly, all the pacts demanded separate electorates and personal laws for Muslims. Besides, the pacts even stipulated that Muslim majority provinces of India be free from 'Hindu rule' (Ambedkar, 1954, p. 259). Following the death of Chittaranjan Das, the Bengal Pact of 1923 was abandoned and communal politics increased (Jalal & Seal, 1981, p.428-429).

Any mention of the Khilafat Movement must include the Moplah Riots. Characterised as a rebellion, it took place in Malabar, Kerala, in 1921. It began as an anti-British riot; however, it ended in violence against the Hindus, as was witnessed by a series of killings, rapes, forceful conversions and destruction of Hindu places of worship. Although some historians have a predilection for portraying the Moplah Riots as an anti-colonial, proletarian struggle, the riots can hardly be called a proletarian revolution since Hindus were attacked across class and caste (Ambedkar, 1945, p. 163). Similarly, the 1930s communal riots in East Bengal are also often painted as a struggle of the Muslim peasantry against the Hindu landed gentry. It is not an entirely convincing explanation. After the riots in 1930s in rural eastern Bengal, local officers acknowledged that the mobs were encouraged by "misleading rumours" spread by *maulavis*. Dacca had been a major centre of civil disobedience against the British administration in eastern Bengal. A large body of evidence, unearthed by the official Dacca Riots Enquiry Committee, suggests that professional goons--many of whom lived and practised sword-play in the Nawab of Dacca's *bagicha*--attacked Hindus and looted Hindu shops while the police supervised by the British officers turned a blind eye. Moreover, the police took the opportunity of the communal clashes to raid Hindu houses and spread terror among the nationalists, who happened to be Hindus (Bose, 1982, p. 481).

### **The Communal Award and its Implications**

A couple years later in 1932, The Communal Award, made by the British prime minister Ramsay MacDonald, extended the separate electorate (Chakrabarty, 2004, p. 25). In Bengal, according to the 1930s population census, Muslims

constituted approximately 54% and Hindus 45%. The Muslims were awarded 119 out of 250 seats, whereas Hindus around 80 seats (Chakrabarty, 2004, p. 60). To elaborate, Muslims were awarded 119 seats; Europeans and European commerce were granted 25 seats; Anglo-Indians, a miniscule majority, were given 4 seats; different institutions (such as Landholders' Association and Universities) were given 20 seats; and the rest of the seats were meant for Hindus. Hindu votes were further splintered by separate electorates: 70 seats went to Hindus under the category titled "General," and 10 seats were given to the 'depressed classes' (Chatterji, J., 1994 p.20).

Such logic did not divide the Muslims, even though in 1926 Dacca and Pabna did see violence, where Muslim peasants attacked Muslim money lenders, known as Muslim *talukdars* (Bose, 1982, p. 484). Hindu votes were splintered by separate electorates. In January 1935, Congress President Rajendra Prasad and All India Muslim League leader Muhammad Ali Jinnah met and discussed Hindu representation, among other things. Jinnah admitted that the outcome of the electorate scheme, especially after the Poona Pact, "was unfair to the Bengali Hindus." However, Jinnah was unwilling to grant a share to the "depressed classes" out of the 119 Muslim seats (Chakrabarty, 2004, p. 67), despite a class and wealth gap existing in the Muslim community too. This scheme was quite understandable from the British perspective; they did, after all, promise Nawab Khwaja Salimullah to make Dacca "the centre of Muslim power," and Salimullah's son Nawab Khwaja Habibullah, a cabinet minister at that time, only followed his father's footsteps. Moreover, Lord Willingdon, the Governor General and the Viceroy of India (1931-1936), proposed that Muslims should get 48.4 percent and Hindus only 39.2 percent of the seats, on the grounds that Muslims who, on the whole generally supported the government, wouldn't cooperate if they were not granted more seats (Chakrabarty, 2004, p. 61).

In the provincial elections in 1937, Congress emerged as the largest party. Congress had an unspoken alliance with Fazlul Huq's Krishak Praja Party; however, they failed to come to a coalition agreement. There were a couple of reasons: Congress had internal disagreements and its high command had called a halt to the negotiations due to Huq's refusal to release political prisoners (Chatterji, 1994, p. 104). Huq disapproved of the coalition anyway as he, in his own words, stated that "coalition with Congress could only be on such terms as amount to the virtual effacement of the Muslims as a separate po-

litical entity.” Huq then formed a coalition with the Muslim League (Singh, 1987, p. 26).

By then Europe and the world were embroiled in the Second World War. In the meantime, Huq had presented the Lahore Resolution for the creation of independent Muslim states in 1940 with much enthusiasm and conviction. Huq addressed the Congress: “I am a Muslim first and Bengali afterwards. I will take revenge on the Hindus of Bengal if Muslims are hurt in Congress-ruled provinces” (Aiyar, 2008, p. 1219). Nevertheless, Huq, unlike the rest of the Muslim League, managed to establish secular credentials by quelling the communal riots in 1918 and 1926, which was perhaps why Hindu members of the legislative assembly felt confident enough to form a Coalition government with Huq (Chatterjee, C., 2020, p. 84). It is important to note that the years between the first and second World Wars witnessed an increase in communal politics right through. The Muslim League, which started as an exclusively elite Muslim party, gained mobility among the masses. Rumours of atrocities on Muslims by the Congress party in Hindu majority villages were spread by the Muslim League. In rural Bengal, the Hindu Mahasabha campaigned by raising consciousness among the people that Hindu voices were being curbed and that Hindus were being imprisoned.

Local branches of the Hindu Mahasabha collected evidence and wrote reports of the sexual violence that Bengali and Santali Hindu women faced. This action galvanized the Muslim League, and they accused Hindus of conspiring against them (Ahsan, 1999, p. 815).

Infighting and fallouts within parties characterised this tumultuous period of time. Fazlul Huq joined the Viceroy’s defence council against the orders of Jinnah and the Muslim League.

In 1941, Huq announced his resignation from the defence council, just to play it safe, after he wrote a manifesto against Jinnah. According to Huq, Jinnah sought “to rule as an omnipotent authority over the destiny of 33 million in Bengal who occupy key position in Indian Muslim politics” (Singh, 1987, p. 68). Jinnah did not immediately take action because Suhrawardy and Khwaja Nazimuddin of the Muslim League did not support any action against Huq; also, Jinnah did not want to risk a split. Jinnah, however, removed Huq from the Muslim League Working Committee (Singh, 1987, p. 68). On the assurances of the Governor of Bengal John Herbert, Suhrawardy and Nazimuddin withdrew

their support from Huq's ministry (Singh, 1987, p. 69).

In the very same year of 1941, a second Coalition Government was formed, which included the secularists of Huq's Krishak Praja Party, some members from Subhas Chandra Bose's Forward Bloc, pro-Bose members of Congress party, and Syama Prasad Mookerjee from Hindu Mahasabha. Jinnah expected Herbert to call upon his candidate Nazimuddin to form the government. Since the arrest of Sarat Chandra Bose and Subhas Chandra Bose had weakened the Coalition government, Herbert, who perceived no threat, allowed the formation of the Coalition government (Aiyar, 2008, p. 1226). Jinnah and his supporters from the Bengal Muslim League saw this alliance as an opportunity to oust Huq. The League condemned Huq for "selling out to the Hindu minority" because of the inclusion of Syama Prasad Mookerjee and few other Hindu Ministers. To Huq's own dismay, he found out that he was losing support from the Muslim youth (Ahsan, 1999, p. 814). Huq, however, continued to profess loyalty to the Muslim League and put out a statement to make his position clear: "The domestic troubles in the Bengal Cabinet have absolutely no bearing on the Muslim League, nor has it anything to do with the question of our loyalty to the League itself." The Muslim League, however, managed to make the Bengali speaking Muslims flock to the League for Pakistan Movement (Aiyar, 2008, p. 1228). Governor John Herbert later played an important role in breaking the Coalition government in order to prop up a Muslim League government.

### **The fall of Rangoon, Quit India Movement and Churchill**

In March 1942, Rangoon had fallen to the Japanese. The Leader of the House of Commons, Sir Stafford Cripps, travelled to India to secure full Indian cooperation in the second World War. This diplomatic trip, known as the Cripps Mission, yielded discussions with major parties. But it was a failure since no leader accepted it. Syama Prasad Mookerjee repudiated the proposal as it decidedly suggested the vivisection of India. Cripps questioned Mookerjee on the Hindu Mahasabha's opposition to Congress. Mookerjee shrewdly replied that it was a quarrel between brothers, who, however, had the same goal (Das, 2000, p. 54). On 8 August 1942, the All-India Congress Committee met in Bombay and Gandhi exhorted the masses to protest against Britain after the Cripps Mission failed. This came to be known as the "Quit India Movement." All these events occurred against the backdrop of the Fall of France and the disastrous Norway campaign, following which Neville Chamberlain stepped down and Churchill

took his place. The Indian National Congress agreed to cooperate with the United Kingdom if a transfer of authority in India was made to an interim government.

The British administration's response was the August Offer. The Congress rejected the offer since it did not reflect the spirit of cooperation with Indian parties. The Hindu Mahasabha rejected it because the Executive Council, which the British administration had promised to expand to include Indian members, would not be able to function as a cabinet that would have a say in the legislature (Mishra, 1979, p. 718-719). Jinnah rejected the August Offer on the grounds that it had not offered "equal partnership" at the centre and in the provinces in return for joining the war effort of Britain. Members of the Muslim League Working Committee were initially in favour of the offer, but they abided by Jinnah's warning: cooperation would mean supplying soldiers, money, and running the administration; besides, protecting the British Raj would fall entirely on the Muslim League (Singh, 1987, p. 64).

After the initial boom, the Quit India Movement fizzled out. But Midnapore, an overwhelmingly Hindu majority district in Bengal, witnessed an open resistance to the point of rebellion in 1942. The Bengal famine of 1943 put an end to it. The Quit India Movement turned violent because the District Magistrate of Midnapore N.M. Khan had let loose a reign of terror in retaliation to the Quit India Movement. Mookerjee stated that the local officials had shot people, looted and destroyed property. Also, a devastating cyclone hit the region that year. But the District Magistrate postponed relief aid by weeks "in order to teach the people of Midnapore a lesson" (Chatterji, P., 2010, p. 59). After the declaration of war by Japan on 7 December 1941, the British administration, instead of preparing the people to fight the possible invasion, mulled applying the scorched-earth policy in parts of Bengal. Perhaps as a result of the civil disobedience of the Quit India movement. Mookerjee was irked by the British administration's Denial Policy, which included the destruction of means of communication and removal of rice and paddy from the threatened area. He deemed it "a shocking proof of the nervous breakdown of British administration in India." Mookerjee pleaded that boats, cycles, carriages and other means of communication in the affected areas be allowed to ply, instead of being destroyed until the arrival of the Japanese (Chatterji, P., 2010, p. 26).

After the Quit India movement, several Congress leaders were jailed. Events in Midnapore made the British officials suspect the Hindu ministers of the cabinet. The Governor of Bengal, John Herbert, began to suspect that Hindu ministers viewed Gandhi's methods of "Satyagraha" (non-violent civil resistance) as ineffective. Herbert wanted them to willingly resign because he suspected that the Hindu ministers tried to encourage anti-government activities by remaining in office. He also suspected that Mookerjee was the one who discouraged Huq from taking punitive measures against the civil disobedience movement. He wanted to topple the Huq ministry, but Viceroy Linlithgow curbed Herbert's zeal because he did not wish to see another crisis at a time when Britain was already entangled in a war (Ahsan, 1999, p. 819-820).

Mookerjee did not sit idle. He immediately wrote to Viceroy Linlithgow that immediate transfer of power was the only way, and he condemned police brutality during the Quit India Movement. Mookerjee requested President Franklin Roosevelt and Chiang Kai Shek, the leader of Kuomintang and the lawful President of China, to put pressure on the government of the United Kingdom (Das, 2000, p. 55). Meanwhile, severe floods and natural disasters hit different parts of Bengal, and the Hindu Mahasabha had their hands full with relief work. The overall situation got out of hand and Mookerjee tendered his resignation in 1942. His letter of resignation stated that the Ministry had too little power in matters concerning civil rights and liberties and that provincial autonomy, as promised in the Government of India Act of 1935, was a "colossal mockery" and he did not wish to take part in such a charade (Mookerjee, 1942, p. 55-56). Despite ideological differences between Mookerjee and Huq, and despite the occasional communal tensions in Bengal (Chatterji, P., 2010, p. 3), Mookerjee did not blame Huq for the collapse of the Coalition government. In fact, both cooperated on most matters. This did not stop Herbert from using Mookerjee's resignation letter as an excuse to oust Huq (Aiyar, 2008, p. 1234). Within a couple months after the fall of Huq, a Muslim League government headed by Khwaja Nazimuddin was appointed by the British administration (Ahsan, 1999, p. 823). Herbert adopted the Muslim

League party doctrines, one of which was the theory of "Hindu conspiracy." Herbert belittled Huq and claimed that he was completely under the influence of the Hindus, and thus incapable of taking any decisions without them. Herbert also asserted that Mookerjee had resigned because he wanted to maintain

the leadership of the Hindus when in reality Mookerjee had clearly stated how the British administration had repeatedly overrode the Indian ministers (Aiyar, 2008, p. 1233- 1234). Mookerjee also wrote about the British administration's mishandling of the cyclone relief work and how they had imposed punitive taxes only on Hindus. The Viceroy wanted to stop the circulation of the letter so that the American President, on whose help Britain was banking so much in the war, would not learn about the barbaric repression by the British administration. The Home Department of the Central Government exhorted the Home Departments of all provinces to not allow the letter to be published. Heavy censorship was imposed (Chatterjee, C., 2020, p. 239).

In contrast to Herbert's assertions, Viceroy Linlithgow, during his tour in Bengal, had concluded that the Coalition government had "rather more prospects of permanence than what was palatable to its opponents." Linlithgow himself had questioned Herbert's

accusations and pointed out that Hindus in Huq's ministry had had "a very real and material value in keeping communal feeling low" (Aiyar, 2008, p. 1235). Despite all this, the Hindu Mahasabha was willing to cooperate with an all-parties government, which was what Herbert had earlier advocated. However, the Muslim League leader Nazimuddin was chosen to form a ministry by the British administration, and he did not include any Mahasabha representative in his cabinet (Aiyar, 2008, p. 1236). The European Bloc supported Nazimuddin. He had also succeeded in winning over the Anglo-Indians and some Scheduled Caste members, such as Jogendranath Mandal. Nazimuddin retained Home and Defence for himself, Suhrawardy was given Civil Supplies, and Khwaja Shahabuddin, who was notorious for his abetment to the Dacca riots of 1941, was made a minister and given the Commerce, Labour and Industries portfolio (Chatterjee, C., 2020, p. 248).

In Herbert's letters to Linlithgow, it can be seen that his zeal to prop up a Muslim League government stemmed from his intention to suppress the Congress rebellion (Ahsan, 1999, p. 824), which was mostly associated with Hindus. The Quit India Movement gave Britain the perfect opportunity to impose punitive fines on Hindus collectively (Mookerjee, 1942, p. 73), and do away with the Hindu leadership and prop up the Muslim League to fill the void (Chatterjee, C., 2020, p. 236).

### **The Bengal Famine and the Role of the British Administration**

The Bengal Famine was one of the worst famines recorded in history. The aforementioned events all played a role in causing a humanitarian crisis so severe that it left millions of people dead and displaced. In 1943, Suhrawardy was the Civil Supplies Minister. Mookerjee tried to draw public attention to all this in his memoir "*Panchasher Manwantar*." The Government had banned the book at the time. The scorched-earth policy of the British administration and the punitive taxation gave rise to a man-made famine in 1943. In the six months following December 1942, after the harvest of the main crop, the first signs of famine began to appear. Contemporaneous accounts reveal that all the available rice was acquired and hoarded by dishonest individuals, who "became rich at the expense of the dying populace." Members of the Provincial Government were involved in the black market. Sir Arthur Jules Dash, Chairman of the Public Service Commission, was aware that Suhrawardy, as the Civil Supplies Minister, had a large share in the spoils along with many other important members in the Muslim League. Suhrawardy had capitalized on people's miseries and made so much profit from speculation in food grains, including wheat imports from Punjab, that income tax officials were after him even after the declaration of Indian Independence. In 1954, when he was a Minister of the Government of Pakistan, he made a special request to Prime Minister Nehru to ward off tax officials from apprehending him when his plane landed at Dum Dum airport, Calcutta, for refuelling (Chatterjee, C. 2020, p.38). The historical context as to why the British cabinet not only accused the Hindus of supporting the "anti-government agenda" of the Congress party but also of sabotaging the Muslim League government (which was wholly supported by the British administration), has been elucidated. There is ample evidence implicating the Muslim League government, but the British administration turned a blind eye since they nursed a grudge against the Congress party--the demand for self-governance and the launch of the "Quit India Movement" did not sit well with them. It is evident that the British administration held a grudge against the Hindus: why else did they try their level best to break the Coalition government and prop up Khwaja Nazimuddin, whose ménage was directly involved in attacks against the Hindu community?

This has got to be the most outlandish statement in Masani's article: "It was only thanks to the beneficence and wisdom of British rule, free from any hint of

war for a longer period than almost any other country in the world, that India had been able to increase and multiply to this astonishing extent [...] these were hardly the sentiments of someone willing genocide by starvation on the Indian people.” This sentence, at best, is intellectually dishonest. It perfectly reflects the stance of the British government, the British curriculum and perhaps even the British society. That Anglosphere wishes to preserve the memory of their great hero, Sir Winston Churchill, is understandable. There is no reason, however, for Indians to echo this sentiment.

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