

Emergence of Hindu Political Activity in
Late Colonial Bengal

Explorations of Attempts to Symbolically Represent a
'Hindu' Community

by

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DECLARATION

Certified that the thesis entitled *Emergence of Hindu Political Activity in Late Colonial Bengal: Exploration of Attempts to Symbolically Represent a 'Hindu' Community*, submitted by me in partial fulfilment of the degree of Masters of Philosophy (Arts) in the Department of History of Jadavpur University, is based upon my original work and there is NO plagiarism. This is also to certify that the work has not been submitted by me for the award of any other degree/diploma of the same institution where the work is carried out, or to any other Institution.

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On the basis of academic merit and satisfying of all the criteria as declared above the Dissertation work of **Shraman Guha** entitled *Emergence of Hindu Political Activity in Late Colonial Bengal: Exploration of Attempts to Symbolically Represent a 'Hindu' Community*, is now ready for submission towards the partial fulfilment of the Degree of Master of Philosophy (Arts) in Department of History of Jadavpur University.

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CONTENTS

			Page No.
01.	Acknowledgement	1
02.	Introduction	2-18
03.	Hindu Political Activism's Initial Scheme to Forge Hindu Unity in Bengal	19-40
04.	Exploring a Pattern of Growth of the Hindu Mahasabha Organization in Bengal	41-63
05.	The Question of Caste and a United Hindu Constituency: The Hindu Mahasabha in Faridpur	64-86
06.	Bibliography	87-90

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INTRODUCTION

The first decade of the twentieth century witnessed an extensive endeavour to initiate a process of consolidation of a 'Hindu' community. There was, however, no consensus regarding the exact modality by which this task was to be accomplished. Debates were rife regarding the components of this community and the relationship which the components should share with one another. Despite the presence of such disputations, several quarters across the sub-continent showed an urgency in designating the outlines of such a community, the contours of which could, in a near future, turn out to be a self-containing unit. The straggling nature of what was implied by the term 'Hindu' had now to be reformed. A boundary had to be set within which the different elements within the community had to function. A common target had to be fixed which would guide the activities of the differing interests within the purported community. This notion of the community was different from earlier visions of any communal consolidation in so far as it was supposed to be an 'all India' community which would transcend regional and parochial preoccupations. The community so formed- with a definite frontier and a semblance of consensus regarding its objective among its constituent elements- would then announce its presence in the social, political and cultural milieu of the sub-continent and compete for supremacy with other such well-defined communities as well as challenge the hegemony of the colonial state.

What were the conditions that contributed to the genesis of such an urge which spread across diverse regions in south Asia? One of the important stimuli to such an impulse was definitely the colonial census operations. Kenneth Jones in his perceptive essay points out the implication that census figures had on the perception of religious communities in the following manner: "Religions became communities mapped, counted, and above all compared with other religious communities"¹ He then goes on to elaborate how the course of formation of 'Hindu' identity has been concerned all throughout its life with enumerative exercises by the colonial state. The communities so constituted were thrust into a number game by the colonial authorities. There was great enthusiasm evinced by the colonial administrators in observing how this number game constructed by them unfolded and in anticipating its results. H.H. Risley, home

secretary, government of India, remarked in 1903, "Can the figures of the last census be regarded in any sense the forerunner of an Islamic or Christian revival which will threaten the citadel of Hinduism or will Hinduism hold its own in the future as it has done through the long ages of the past."² Thus, we observe that an important feature in this number game inaugurated by the colonial state was a keen interest in predicting whether the hitherto dominant community in the sub-continent would be able to maintain its position of dominance. This interest was sparked off by the relative slower rates of growth of the 'Hindu' category, as reflected in the census returns from 1881-1901. What happened to be a subject of interest to the colonial authorities was transformed into a matter of gravest concern to the putative leaders and ideologues subscribing to the 'Hindu' category. Several projections prophesying a veritable Hindu demographic decline started registering their presence within a Hindu public sphere.³ The concern and the resultant fear was exacerbated by a move by Census Commissioner E.A. Gait, when, in 1910 he proposed to exclude all those castes not served by Brahmins, not allowed to enter temples and suffering from similar other disabilities from the 'Hindu' category in Census inventories. It is interesting here to note that, as Sumit Sarkar argues, the projection of declining Hindu numbers had already been made by Census Commissioner O'Donnell way back in 1891. However, such a projection translated into a scare only in the first decade of the twentieth century.⁴ This decade was firstly marked by discussions and negotiations around the proposed constitutional reforms of 1909 which promised to grant a measure of representative government with separate electorates. Thus, numbers of a religious community became extremely important in determining the legislative careers of its political leaders. Secondly, the closing years of the decade were those in which the Swadeshi movement was coming to an end. The Swadeshi movement was one which had convinced a large section of upper caste Hindu political and social leadership of the importance of mass mobilization. Though not communal in character, the indispensability of commanding the allegiance of large number of people was impressed upon the Hindu bhadralok in the course of the Swadeshi movement. Thus, this decade represented a definite political conjuncture in which crude statistical inferences from census figures could turn into widespread fear about the impending depletion of the ranks of a 'Hindu' category and its eventual depletion. However, census operations were perhaps not the only factor stimulating apprehension and thus

setting the context for the endeavour to lay down the outlines of a consolidated 'Hindu' community. Sumit Sarkar contends that not only colonial discursive practices but an evolving pattern of conflict between the sharecroppers and tenure holders in the eastern districts of Bengal had greatly contributed in precipitating a perturbation among the high caste Hindu gentry, at least in Bengal.⁵ Using Nariaki Nakazato's work on the changing agrarian relations in eastern Bengal from 1870-1910, Sarkar contends that there was a move on the part of the gentry to shift from cash rents to produce rent-paying tenures, in the background of increasing prices of food grains. This move, if turned successful, would bring about a great differentiation among the peasant community of east Bengal (challenging the notions of earlier historiography on the agrarian relations in east Bengal, which assumed the presence of a relatively undifferentiated peasant community in east as compared to deep internal divisions in the west and north). Sensing alarm, the raiyats in Gaurnadi area of North Bakarganj started applying for permission to commute the payable rent in cash. Initial government response was sympathetic. The settlement officers of the area granted permission for cash commutations to an overwhelming majority of applicants between June and August 1908. It is worth mentioning here that the majority of the rent payers were lower caste Namasudras. As soon as permission for cash rents was granted by lower level settlement officials working on the ground, the upper caste tenure holders hit back with false cases of rent arrears and were supported in their machinations by pleaders who shared the same caste background.

Deputations urging a reversal of the government policy of granting permission for cash commutations started pouring in. In August 1908, the government, under pressure from several quarters reversed its policy and weighed in favour of the upper caste gentry. This instance of policy reversal sparked off sporadic acts of protests among the Namasudra peasantry and they were reported to have withdrawn sharecropping and other services from the upper castes for sometime.⁶ Sarkar points out that such an act of express declaration of difference by the lower castes in the particular political conjunction of the first decade of the twentieth century had created an uneasiness among the upper caste gentry of Bengal. It had once again activated a fear that what they regarded as 'Hindu', was in effect a fragile unit and could disintegrate any moment.⁷ Hence, the exigency to define the contours of a Hindu community.

Thus, we find that a fear on the part of the Hindu social and political leadership, generated by the calculations of census operations in a critical political conjunction and lower caste assertions created the conditions in which a discourse to consolidate a dominant communal unit could be born and flourish. In the following section we shall try to understand what was the nature of the community that the proponents of Hindu unity sought to establish and what were the tasks proposed to build up such a community.

We shall concentrate on the text entitled “Hindus- A Dying Race” written by a Bengali gentleman named U.N. Mukherjee. The text in question was serialized in the magazine *Bengalee* in 1909. Using rough statistical projections this text had contended that if the trend of slower growth rate of Hindu population was to continue, Hindu population would be obliterated in four hundred and thirty two years. This text gained considerable currency in the Hindu public and literary sphere.⁸ Not only did it raise alarm of impending death of a community, it attempted to analyse the causes which induced such a predicament for the Hindus, suggested some measures for their possible amelioration and finally offered a shadowy glimpse of an ideal Hindu community. Let us look at how Mukherjee envisaged this venture.

Mukherjee begins with an elaboration of ailments that haunt Hindu society. The core cause of decline of Hindu numbers was the poverty of its peasantry. The Hindu influence in the countryside was being lost also because of the diminishing influence of the Hindu (Bengali) moneylenders. This position of the Hindu peasantry was contrasted with the Muslim peasantry who were becoming prosperous, buying up land and unrestrained by caste restrictions were moving to the cities to take up urban occupations. The reason for such an instance of losing out was the lack of thrift of the Hindu peasantry, their indiscipline and drunkenness.⁹ Interestingly therefore, Mukherjee does not offer any economic explanation for an economic development. Rather he emphasizes the need for self-improvement in order to come out of the present sad state of affairs and reassert supremacy vis-à-vis the Muslims.

Next, Mukherjee goes on to explicate how through participation in different occasions the various social classes in England have been imbued with a sense of cohesive unity

and feeling of identification with a larger social organization which has thrust upon British citizens a feeling of common unified aims and objectives. He laments that caste divisions within the Hindu society precluded such move towards unification. Thus, the British case is projected as a model to be emulated. However, the course of development of the British society is posited as something inimitable.

The Hindus were portrayed as inherently incapable of investing in competitive time or commanding the volume of knowledge that British were able to.¹⁰ Such echoes of despair were especially significant at a time when the failure to prop up indigenous enterprise had failed to produce desired results and the prospect of challenging the might of British industry and commerce seemed not only distant but impossible. If then, the British case could not provide a solution to the problem of caste exclusivism and divided existence within the Hindu society what could be a probable exemplar to be emulated? Here again Mukherjee employs the strategy of juxtaposition. He argues that “the superiority of the...Mohammedans is entirely due to their religious revival and systematic moral training”¹¹ This religious revival had been made possible by the official policy of non-intervention in matters of faith. The Muslims had purportedly made full use of this policy in exploiting a social space not encroached by the state to build up institutions of training, innumerable mosques which acted as loci of communal congregation and had whipped up cohesion within the ranks of their community. The most important part of this drive was its independent feature and it glaringly pointed out that self-organization was not an impossible task to be accomplished. After driving home the need for self-organization, Mukherjee proceeded to invoke guilt among the Hindu males by stating that a major reason for Muslim proliferation is the desire of Hindu widows for Muslim males.¹² This argument, Pradip Kumar Datta remarks, had completely reversed the nineteenth century argument on Hindu females which had prioritized the idea of inviolate chastity. It had also turned on the stereotype of effete Hindu males measured against the image of powerful Muslim male.¹³ What caused Hindu males to appear effete and therefore unable to control the defection of its womenfolk? The argument was now given an economic turn. It was Muslim wealth which lured away Hindu widows.

Hindu peasants, being poor, could not afford to remarry and therefore, Mukherjee claimed, the lust of the widows of their community could only be satisfied by Muslim males. Thus, suspicion of Muslims was prescribed as a *raison d'être* of Hindus. And at the same time defeating the silent plans of the Muslims was projected as an achievement which would not only boost communal pride but will solve a whole host of social economic problems.¹⁴ We shall now try and understand how Mukherjee approached the question of caste and how he sought to negotiate with that question in order to build cohesion within a 'threatened' Hindu community.

Mukherjee projects the condition of the lower castes as that of desperate destitution leading to laziness, lack of thrift and chronic dependence on the higher castes. It was due to this reason that all attempts in the past for self-assertion of these castes, like the Vaishnavite movement, had been appropriated by the higher castes. Mukherjee then projects this unmitigable condition of the lower castes as that representing the general plight of the Hindus. Given the material status of the middle class Hindus, who were mostly upper caste, they could not be portrayed unfavourably in contradistinction to the Muslims. Thus, Mukherjee chose to depict the lower castes as representing the abject condition of Hindu society which was a complete inversion of the idealized Muslim. It was the time when the Hindu middle classes were beginning to feel a threat to the modicum of privileges that they had been enjoying under colonial rule. "By absenting them as an index to the Hindu condition, Mukherjee allowed the threat to privilege to be presented as the plight of the oppressed."¹⁵ As regards the question of reform, more than humanitarian concerns, Mukherjee is animated by the urgency to stem possibilities of alliances between the lower castes and the Muslims when he urges the upper castes to reach out to the lower castes. This project of reaching out was therefore calculated to arouse antagonism between the lower castes and the Muslims, which, in the context of rising agrarian distress was a prime imperative for the upper caste Hindu leadership. However, such a project of fomenting antagonism could not properly Hinduise the lower castes. In order to achieve that aim, the Brahmins needed to intervene. The Brahmins were designated as the automatic hegemon of Hindu society. They were then assigned the task of training the lower castes so that they could improve their character. In this way, the chronic 'laziness' and 'lack of thrift' of the lower castes could be overcome and at the same time a sustained organic connection between the different castes could be maintained.¹⁶

Given the popularity of the text and its widespread acceptance by numerous proponents of Hindu unity, it can be assumed that the kind of community outlined in this text was representative of the imaginings of a Hindu public sphere in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Let us summarize the salient points which U.N. Mukherjee tried to highlight in his work. Firstly, he adduced the notion of a threatened community suffering from foreseeable possibilities of grave demographic decline. Secondly, he pointed out that the decay of the community had set in through apparently sudden economic impoverishment. Thirdly he identified a host of moral cripples and unnecessary divisions of the community which was accelerating the cause of its decline. This image was juxtaposed to the image of a burgeoning Muslim community which was to be simultaneously stigmatized and emulated. In order to overcome the present disabilities of the community the need for unity was constantly emphasized. This could be achieved only through the building of centres of community congregation and moral teaching by the leaders of the community. These instances of congregation would, in turn promote organic connection between the various components within the community and thereby facilitate efforts of self organization through which the community will be able to match its adversarial Others. Needless to say, this community was envisioned as more of a social consolidation which could influence political and economic developments rather than as a strictly religious grouping. It was imagined as a constituency which needed to achieve unity and embark on a journey of supremacy within a context defined by colonial modernity. In a sense, U.N. Mukherjee was imagining the rudimentary structure of a (Hindu) national community. This was just an incipient stage in the crystallization of this community. There were, as yet, little efforts at trying to give a tangible shape to it on an all India level. It was only in Punjab, which had witnessed the birth of Hindu Sabha movements that some progress was made to this end. By the 1920s systematic efforts were launched all across the country to mould this consolidation into a recognizable constituency and create organizations that could claim to be a symbol of its representation on a political level. This project shall discuss such a systematic effort in Bengal in the 1920s. But before laying down the outlines of such a discussion, we shall briefly look at the historiography of

communalism and nationalism in south Asia and then try placing the present work in that historiographical matrix.

While trying to characterize Hindu nationalism, proponents have termed it as the truly authentic form of nationalism as opposed to the 'faulty' western notions of composite/territorial Indian nationalism propagated by 'pseudo secular' nationalists.¹⁷ Opponents of Hindu nationalism have termed it to be essentially 'anti-national'. They contend that only communalism- the mutual antagonism between communities- can best describe the projections of religious identities. Hindu communalism is the most extreme form of such a projection. To call this phenomenon nationalism is therefore a contradiction in itself.¹⁸ Thus, we find that analysis of the term Hindu nationalism essentially invokes the terms Indian nationalism and its avowed antithesis communalism. Sumit Sarkar has argued that these two terms have come to constitute a dialectic in Indian politics and this dialectic has fashioned much of the debate over the character of politics and the connotation of the term Hindu nationalism.¹⁹ From when did this dialectic start taking shape? Gyan Pandey contends that the 1920s, the period which witnessed a plethora of inter community riots across the sub-continent, saw the standardization of the ideology of nationalism as something 'unsullied', in theory, by the 'primordial' pulls of caste and community.²⁰ Therefore, nationalism was being defined in opposition to its others, namely the phenomena pervaded by the imprint of sectional solidarities. As Ayesha Jalal points out, these trends of sectional consolidation would increasingly be antagonized by the Congress and termed as detrimental to the emerging hegemony of the Indian nation.²¹ Since this dialectic has been posed as critical to the understanding of Indian politics and particularly the significance of the term Hindu nationalism, let us briefly undertake an overview of how different scholars have tried explaining these terms and their interrelationship.

Peter Van der Veer states that nationalism and communalism are the moderate and radical versions of the same concept. The moderates accept "cultural pluralism and equality among different religious communities within the nation, while the radicals see the nation as the community of co-religionists".²² The two terms are pronounced to be on the same conceptual plane and hence the difference between them is in terms of degree or quantity and not one of quality. Gyan Pandey contends that

communalism is a form of colonialist knowledge and adopts a marked flexibility in defining the term. Communalism is the condition of feeling of antagonism, which can translate into hostility, between two communities. It is not necessary that these communities have to be religiously defined. However a community shall evince a mentality of oppositional disposition only to a community with similar indices. For example, a linguistic community shall be antagonistic only to a linguistic community, a religious community shall be hostile towards a religious community and so on.²³

John Zavos argues that such a characterization of communalism turns it into a framework rather than a concept that can be defined. He instead goes on to formulate that communalism as a concept has a very simple structure- the feeling of antagonism towards another community which is its conceptual echo. It is nothing more than this. It is precisely because of this simplicity that communalism is unable to generate its own ideology. It employs the ideology of nationalism in executing its avowed task of antagonistic alignment. Nationalism, on the other hand is a complex and multi layered process of imagining or constructing a community on the basis of a common culture. In the case of Hindu nationalism, this common culture is provided by certain notions of Hinduism. Hindu communalism used this ideology of nationalism to align the economic, political and social interests of the Hindu community against the interest of its Other, namely the Indian Muslims.²⁴ Zavos then goes on to argue that Hindu nationalism as an ideology had an autonomous development at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century before the phase of emergence of the dialectic between nationalism and communalism in the 1920s. It specifically developed as a middle class ideology in conjunction with what he calls 'Indian' nationalism designating the type of nationalism imparted by the Indian National Congress. The development of Hindu nationalism, according to Zavos, was less teleologically burdened than is generally assumed to be, i.e., the crystallization of Hindu communalism in the 1920s is not necessarily a product of the ideological development of Hindu nationalism. Communalism was a historical condition which was event led, drawing on forces of nationalism, but not an ideological development in itself. The course of development of Hindu nationalism through the 1920s had an existence independent of the structure of communalism and it continues to bear that independent character to this day.²⁵

Zavos then goes on to establish the connection between Indian nationalism and Hindu nationalism. Rejecting the strict polarity assumed by Christophe Jaffrelot between ethnic(Hindu) nationalism and territorial(Indian) nationalism,²⁶ Zavos argues that both these ideologies were born from the same discursive space of Indian middle class public life and were locked in a struggle to capture the mental frameworks of the same. The argument is followed by the assertion that shifts in the political discourse of the Congress in the first decade of the twentieth century influenced the process of development of the stream of Hindu nationalism.

The first decade of the twentieth century marked the beginning of a phase in which ideological struggle was posited as a key confrontational strategy by a major portion of nationalist leadership. What this added emphasis on ideological struggle did was that it created a keen contest between the state and the nationalists on the issue of representation. The state claimed to best represent the interests of the people of the territory ruled by it, whereas the nationalists sought to wrest it from the state and assign the claim onto itself. Zavos argues that representation became the site of colonial politics.²⁷ Certain nationalists tried to extend the quality of representation by adopting a strategy of impressing upon the people of this country, through methods such as boycott, the hollowness of the claims of the state. Their strategy was that of acquiring legitimacy from the people of the country at large and thereby nullifying the levers and mechanisms of state power. This section came to be known as the extremists in contradistinction to the section within the Congress which continued to articulate politics through established structures of power and who legitimized the idea of representation through invocation of democratic and constitutional symbols. The representational claim of this section was symbolic. It claimed that Congress was a symbol of the nation and it derived its authority by the recognition of this symbol by the colonial power. It consciously eschewed the development of mechanisms to link representation to particular constituencies. In view of the growing influence of the extremists the colonial government deemed it essential to grant greater legitimacy to the stream of symbolic representation. As a result the Reforms of 1909 were advertised as a testimony to the capacity of parliamentary and democratic methods to effect change in state policy. The introduction of separate electorates by this Act conversely, recognized the existence of a 'Muslim' and hence a 'Hindu' community.

These communities were soon to turn into symbolic constituencies of incipient political organizations. Just as the Congress claimed to symbolically represent the nation, organizations striving to be symbolic representations of these constituencies would soon spring up within the grid of colonial politics.

The Hindu Sabhas in Punjab emerged in this context to represent the claims and safeguard the interests of an acknowledged Hindu community. It came into being in 1906 as a confederation of the Aryas, Sikhs, Brahmos, Theosophists, Sikhs and Sanatanists.²⁸ The principal aim was to create a forum for collaboration of varying components within the Hindu society and thereby present a consistent image of the community as a coherent whole. So long as the different religious affiliations could be represented on a single organizational platform, the organization could claim to legitimately represent the community as a whole. This method of representation was similar to the mode of symbolic representation practiced by the moderate section of the Congress in that the various components within a target constituency were sought to be federated on a single platform which would facilitate their harmonious coexistence and work towards resolution of disputes within its ranks in keeping with the umbrella objective of representation of overall interests of the Hindu community.

Another very significant feature of this mode of representation of the community was that it always avoided the thorny question of who precisely was being represented, i.e. it always avoided the question of linking representation to what might be constituted as sub constituencies within a community. The main point of concern for this mode of nationalism was, as Lala Lal Chand- a pioneer of the Hindu Sabha initiatives claimed, not the religious aspects of this community but the political aspects of the community under its present environment.²⁹ Unity became the foremost priority of this organization as it started assuming an all India character and in 1915 a countrywide platform for Hindu unity came into being with the inaugural session of the All India Hindu Mahasabha. Coming to the 1920s, development of an organizational base for this variant of nationalism became the supreme agenda of the proponents of Hindu unity.

The kind of community envisaged by U.N. Mukherjee in Bengal in the early years of the twentieth century had not yet developed into a full blown constituency in Bengal. It had just laid down the outlines of a cohesive unit and emphasized the need for internal unity. The process of launching that community in a race of constitutional politics had to wait for another ten years when several Hindu sabhas started working in Bengal. The process received a great fillip with the establishment of the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha in 1924. An organized form of Hindu political activity announced its arrival on the political stage of Bengal with this event.

The termination of the non cooperation movement, the growing failure of the Swarajist tactic of wrecking Councils from within, the widespread disillusionment of an expansive pool of revolutionary nationalists, the incessant bickering within the ranks of the B.P.C.C. had created a massive political vacuum in Bengal in the 1920s. The problem in the political sphere was reinforced by the rise of inter communal tensions in the form of widespread riots, challenge to the Calcutta based, Hindu upper caste social and political leadership by an emergent Muslim middle class and *mofussil* leadership, incipient labour unrest and tensions in agrarian relations. Such wide ranging contradictions had opened up a plethora of political possibilities in Bengal. New alliances of the now volatile social forces could lead to unexpected prospects for new political organizations. The situation was made all the more complicated by the untimely death of C.R. Das in 1924, the preeminent personality who could act as a cementing force in the political landscape of Bengal. The Hindu Mahasabha made its mark in the political landscape of Bengal precisely in this social and political context. It came in with its agenda of symbolic representation of a refurbished Hindu constituency which was constantly in the process of creation and consolidation. In order to fulfill its agenda it had to embark on the primary program of building up of an organizational structure or *sangathan* which became the chief preoccupation of the Hindu Mahasabha in the 1920s. It consequently set up branch Hindu Sabhas, tried to tap in the resources of the existing centres that it thought could augment the cause of Hindu unity, instrumentalized the tensions generated by Hindu Muslim conflicts and encouraged the work of conversion by itinerant Swamis. Through the adoption of these modalities it tried to negotiate with the local contradictions within Hindu society, attempted their resolution and established a kind of federated Hindu monolith in the form of a veritable body politic. The entity thus constructed was channeled in

the race for recognition in the matrix of colonial politics. It was the activity of the Hindu Mahasabha, challenging the idea of Congress style nationalism and its constant negotiations with the colonial state that marked its politics. This project shall look at how this politics managed to build up a pattern of organizational structure in Bengal from the moment of its inception in the early 1920s after the termination of the non-cooperation movement till the time of the civil disobedience movement in 1930 when the terms of political discourse in Bengal were again altered to an extent by a wave of mass nationalism.

Before presenting a brief overview of the chapters, let us consider the debate regarding communalism and nationalism and Zavos's idea of Hindu nationalism in the context of Bengal in the 1920s. For our present purpose, it seems difficult to designate the course of events we shall be discussing as strictly communalism or nationalism. The events that would be discussed in the succeeding chapters clearly demonstrate that the activities of the organizers of the Hindu Mahasabha in Bengal were not strictly limited to fomenting antagonistic alignments against the imagined Other of the Hindu community. It was concerned with carrying out various experiments with the diverse demographic profile of Bengal and welding the various components of this profile into a cohesive whole, one that held the potential of being constituted as a system of unified interests. This integrated system would then underpin the efforts by activists of Hindu unity to engage in a process of tussle and negotiation with the colonial state. Viewed from this perspective, this phenomenon cannot be described as communalism. However, a further qualification needs to be made here.

C.R. Das's ideology of fraternal co-existence of multiple communities had left a deep impression on his disciple Subhas Chandra Bose. In the wake of intensifying inter community tension in the 1920s, Bose was trying to formulate a design by which the aspirations of communitarian life could be maintained without jeopardizing the prospects of a united national liberation movement. He advocated that promotion of love and affection between the members of the communities was the only way to arrive at a solution to the animosity that was brewing in the social sphere. Efforts at expressions of cultural and religious practices of any community should be encouraged. However, such expressions should solely limit themselves to a social sphere. He contended that political ambitions of the leaders of a community is

indicative of obsessive self-assertion and invariably leads to fanaticism. The domain of politics should be left to those organizations which synthesize the aspirations of a putative Indian nation and thereby conduct a struggle for 'national' liberation.³⁰ This idea of nation and its concomitant ideology of nationalism had been much in vogue in the official discourse of the Congress from the 1920s, as we have discussed above. It is not clear whether the proponents of Hindu unity in Bengal ventured to base their initiatives on an idea of alternative nationalism even if there were vague implications. The evidence we have in our hand is a dictum of Padamraj Jain, the secretary of the Bengal provincial Hindu Sabha when he urges one of his intermediaries to be a strict nationalist (politically). It is not clear what he meant by the term 'nationalist'.(discussed in chapter 2). There is no evidence of Swami Shraddhanand, the chief ideologue of *sangathan* movement, advocating an ideology of nationalism.³¹ Rather, there was an overriding concern of promoting the interests of a community, bolstering its claims and designing it as a special community. The organizers of Hindu Sabhas who claimed to lead this community attempted to create a civil society and their movement, borrowing Sandria Freitag's words “operated in the very same public spaces, utilizing similar forms of publicity and venues of communication, and made very similar kinds of demands for protection of shared values and modes of behaviour and speech as did the nationalist movement. It tapped into the same emerging world of the informed individual and tried to mobilize him or her to act on behalf of a larger public interest.”³² We shall thus contend to call the activism of the Mahasabha as politics of a refurbished Hindu community which had latent potencies to evolve a discourse of nationalism. In carrying out this task the Mahasabha adopted a strategy of symbolic representation, i.e., it claimed to be a symbol of the community and its authority was based on the recognition of this symbol in colonial politics. In so far as it was symbolic it eschewed any mechanism to link representation to any particular constituency within such a constituency and cohesion within the community was its foremost priority.

Brief Outline of the Chapters

The first chapter discusses a phase of initial interaction of the politics of Hindu unity with the demographic diversity of Bengal. It explores the riots of 1926 in Calcutta and analyses the nature of organized leadership to such a riot. The riots provide an

excellent opportunity to investigate how the structures of organized leadership interacted with the domain of spontaneous mass action. The riots were mainly participated by upcountry labourers. Their actions were portrayed as actions of an organic Hindu community, which assumed the nature of a constituency. The Bengali middle classes could not be roped in to concretely construct the lineaments of such a constituency. However, once the constitution of the constituency was complete to an extent, the Hindu nationalist leaders started talking in terms of 'rights' of the community. It was through this discourse of rights that the proponents of Hindu unity tried to reach the civil society of Calcutta *bhadraloks* and attempted to create a communion of interests of a singular Hindu community in which both the upcountry workers as well the urban Bengali middle class featured.

The second chapter is a more direct discussion of the evolution of an organizational pattern of the Hindu Mahasabha in Bengal. It analyses the successive modes of engagement of the Hindu Mahasabha in the railway town of Kharagpur. From a phase of initial contact the Hindu Mahasabha built up a rather streamlined and robust organizational machinery in the town. This was done by the systematic and successful attempts at downplaying and then suspending the labour union at Kharagpur. This chapter is a testimony of how through subversion of internal divisions of class a hegemonic community was sought to be established and how the Hindu Mahasabha attempted to be a space for symbolic representation of that community.

The third and final chapter deals with the manner in which the Hindu Mahasabha deals with question of caste in Bengal. Through a study of the organizational work of the Mahasabha in Faridpur district (the district which witnessed substantial lower caste assertion from the 1870s), this chapter tries to find out how a resolution to the caste conundrum was sought by this organization. It analyses the various activities of the branch Hindu sabhas and presents the fact that the thorny question of linking representation to a particular possible constituency within the Hindu community was avoided. The Mahasabha evaded that question and undertook to build up energetic loci of overarching Hindu activities which, the leaders hoped, would drown distinctions of caste and act as visible embodiment of Hindu unity. These loci were then channeled forth in a confrontation with the state. It was in this way that the 'political aspects' of the community were being continuously produced and foregrounded.

Thus, the growth trajectory of the politics of Hindu unity in Bengal was charted out. Whatever the degree of its crystallization, it had embarked upon a path of registering itself in the grid of organized politics in Bengal and aspired to emerge as one of the contenders in the game for acquiring prominence in the extremely contested political landscape of Bengal.

NOTES:

1. Kenneth Jones, "Religious Identity and the Indian Census" in *The Census in British India: New Perspective*, N G Barrier (ed), (New Delhi, Manohar, 1981),81.
2. Pradip Kumar Dutta, "'Dying Hindus': Production of Hindu Communal Common Sense in Early Twentieth Century Bengal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, No. 25 (June 19, 1993):1306
3. These texts include U.N. Mukherjee's *Hindus- A Dying Race*, Sakharam Deuskar's *Bangiya Hindujati ki Dhongsher Mukhe?* among others. Some texts have also been discussed in Chapter3.
4. Sumit Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames Relocating Postmodernism, Hindutva and History*, (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002),85
5. Ibid.,87
6. Ibid.,90
7. Ibid.,91
8. Datta, "Dying", 1305 9. Ibid.,1307
10. Ibid.,1307
11. Ibid.,1307
12. Ibid.,1307
13. Ibid.,1308
14. Ibid.,1308
15. Ibid.,1308
16. Ibid.,1309
17. M.S. Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts*, (Bangalore: Vikram Prakashan, 1966),127
18. S Mahajan's paper cited in John Zavos, "Searching For Hindu Nationalism in

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19. Sumit Sarkar, 'Indian Nationalism and the Politics of Hindutva' in D Ludden (ed), *Contesting the Nation: Religion, Community and the Politics of Democracy in India*, (University of Pennsylvania, 1995, pp 270-93),270-71.
 20. Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, (Oxford University Press, Delhi,1990),235.
 21. Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan*, (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press,1985), and *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia: A Comparative and Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.,1995).
 22. Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1994), 22-23.
 23. Pandey, “Construction”,5-6
 24. Zavos, “Searching”,2270
 25. Ibid.,2270
 26. Ibid.,2271
 27. Ibid., 2275
 28. Ibid.,2273
 29. Ibid.,2273
 30. Semanti Ghosh, *Different Nationalisms*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017),179.
 31. Shradhanand Sanyasi, *Hindu Sangathan Saviour of the Dying Race*,(New Delhi : Arsh Sahitya Prachar Trust, 1926)passim.
 32. Sandria Freitag, “Contesting in Public: Colonial Legacies and Contemporary Communalism” in David Ludden ed. *Making India Hindu Religion, Community and the Politics of Democracy in India*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 219-20.

AN EARLY ATTEMPT TO FORGE HINDU

UNITY IN BENGAL

The Hindu Mahasabha draws the attention of all the Provinces in general and those of Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Punjab and N.W.F.P. in particular and of the Hindu Sabhas of these provinces to the distressful condition of Hindus in this country and the aforesaid provinces in particular where the numerical defection of Hindus has been going on steadily.¹

The Hindu Mahasabha regrets to note that cases of unwarrantable interference with observance of Hindu religious rites, ceremonies and festivals and taking out of religious processions are becoming frequent occasions in this country... the Hindu Mahasabha calls upon all provincial and local Hindu sabhas to render all necessary guidance and assistance to the Hindus at places where their rights are interfered with, in all legitimate steps they might take to prevent such interference².

The passages quoted above are excerpts from the resolutions adopted by the All India Hindu Mahasabha in its annual conference of 1926 held at Delhi and presided over by Raja Narindra Nath. They are indicative of the spheres which the leadership of the organization deemed important for consolidation of Hindus and also suggestive of the modalities envisioned by them to build up grass root organizational framework to cement a Hindu body politic. The issue of numerical defection of Hindus had gained considerable momentum in the earlier decade. Fears of an impending Hindu demographic decline were rife, which, according to P.K. Dutta had constituted the communal common sense of the Hindus.³ The Hindu Mahasabha had undertaken consistent programs to ameliorate what it identified as 'defection'. In its attempt at forging Hindu unity it constantly harped on the necessity of addressing the question of untouchability to shore up the numbers of a future Hindu constituency. This constituency would be projected as one meriting exclusive representation, thus reflecting a desire to create a community which was juxtaposed to the idea of the colonial state and the counter idea of territorial nationalism imparted by the Indian National Congress.

The second passage quoted above assumes greater significance in the light of this schema. It prescribes a procedure through which the type of consolidation mentioned above can be actualized. The central leadership is seen here to call upon all provincial and local Hindu Sabhas to render necessary guidance and assistance to all Hindus whose 'rights' are interfered with, in all (legitimate) steps they might take to prevent such interference. It would be interesting to know the precise means adopted by the local and provincial Hindu Sabhas to translate this resolution into a workable program for the organization. This chapter shall take up an instance from Bengal in 1926 in which a substantial portion of the public opinion among the Hindus felt that their community was under threat and subsequently a large section of the Hindu population took to the streets to undo what they thought to be the wrongs suffered by them. It shall then show how the local Hindu *sangathan* organizers attempted to fit in this terrain of activities in which one of the major motivations of mobilization was to save the community from impending peril of losing out to other communities. In other words this chapter shall focus on the distinct modes of intervention of Hindu *sangathan* organizers in the communal riots in second half of the 1920s in Bengal.

Communal riots were unexceptional in Bengal in the late 1920s. With the gradual decline of the wave of mass nationalism of the early part of the decade issues like music before mosques became instrumental in fomenting widespread communal disturbances. These occurrences were marked by numerous casualties and involved great deal of deployment of official resources. The extent to which these events vitiated relations between the two communities can be gauged from numerous official reports of the period- this is what A.N. Moberly, Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal has to say about the indispensability of police pickets even after a month of the occurrence of riots in Calcutta in 1926:

*...the streets in the disturbed areas have however been picketed all along and the existence of several factors which point to the continuance of acute tensions indicate that the immunity from rioting is due rather to the efficiency of police precautions than to any real change of view.*⁴

Candidates aspiring to run for the elections to the Legislative Council in 1926 stood no chance of winning unless they campaigned on communal lines.⁵ The course of the

riots narrated by the police reports do not point to definitive evidence of involvement of organized political forces in the orchestration of riots. However different political forces tried to yolk riots to their agendas and fulfill their organizational goals.

The Hindu Mahasabha found in these riots an instrument with which to implement its desired objective of consolidating a Hindu constituency. It had started its journey in Bengal only in 1924. It was desperately looking to make inroads into the political landscape of the province marked by a myriad of political forces starting to register their presence after the demise of the cementing authority of C.R. Das. Riots appeared to the Hindu sabhas as brilliant opportunities by which it could initiate the process of federating differing interests within the Hindu community and start talking in terms of specific political 'rights' which the community should enjoy. In order to investigate how this agenda was sought to be implemented, we shall look at the Calcutta riots which started in April 1926 generating tensions which simmered for a long time after subsidence of bloody conflicts. These riots, which spanned four months and involved mostly up country labourers, was attempted to be given an organized shape and then used to posit a range of political rights for Hindus. But before going into an analysis of the riots, we shall briefly look at some historical literature on riots in Bengal and try to locate this work in the historiographical terrain.

Suranjan Das, in his extensive study of communal riots in Bengal points out certain general traits of such occurrences. He traces the causes, courses and general implications of riots in Bengal and charts out a pattern in which such riots slowly transformed their nature in the course of the twentieth century. In doing so he looks at several characteristics which he considers worthy of analysis: thus for example when considering the Mymensingh riots he first looks at economic factors: the impact of rising rents on tenants, a majority of whom were Muslims and a general price rise; political factors such as the impact of the swadeshi movement and finally the role played by the press and campaigns by local interest groups.⁶ He makes a straightforward distinction between the spheres of elite communalism marked by contestations over access to education and employment and popular communalism which proved more sensitive in comparison to the former sphere to the vagaries of rising rents and the propaganda of itinerant *Maulvis*. He then goes on to state “elite and popular communalisms were not however mutually exclusive. It was, in fact the

changing relationship between the two which determined to a large extent the shape of communal violence in Bengal.”⁷ The mass of materials he explores does not suggest the existence of a singular, unambiguous motive behind acts of rioting in the early part of the twentieth century. Very often, communal hostility, lower class discontent and anti-imperialism co-existed as joint contributing stimuli for sparking off what came to be characterized as communal riots. These varying strands of motivation could be discerned till the Kishoreganj riots of 1930. He then states, “by the 1940s the explosive fusion of communal with nationalist and class modes of consciousness culminated in overtly communal riots... the outbreaks in this phase lost their initial class basis; became more organized; and were directly connected to developments in organized politics and consequently exclusively related to communal politics rather than class interests”⁸.

Sugato Bose in his work on the Kishoreganj riots of 1930 emphasizes on the impact that the Great Depression had on jute prices in Bengal at a time when variegated factors made the peasants of eastern Bengal predominantly dependent on jute.⁹ Low prices had intensified indebtedness among the cultivators which, Bose claims, was the material precondition of the riots in a system of agrarian relationships where *mahajans* were chiefly Hindus while the mass of the peasantry followed Islam. The depression hit the east Bengal countryside so hard that the traditional order of domination controlled by Hindu mahajan and talukdar could no longer be sustained. While deference for the money lender gradually vanished, the 'irrational strength of the Muslim identity ensured that the conflict in rural Bengal was channeled into the movement for Pakistan and not into the broad stream of national struggle.¹⁰ This is how he sums up the roots of communal violence in Bengal and then goes onto explain the trajectory of communal politics which culminated in the vivisection of the province in 1947.

We find an exploration of a kind of community consciousness that had developed among the up country workers and the immigrant population at large in the industrial belt of southern Bengal in Dipesh Chakraborty's work on the sporadic riots in north Calcutta, Hooghly and North 24 Parganas in the 1890s. Several factors including the institution of jobbery, reaching out of proponents of pan-Islamism to lower class

Muslims and the effective distance between workers and the bhadraloks who were becoming the pioneers of liberal ideology 'shielded the workers from viewing in other than community terms what was potentially a conflict between labour and capital.'¹¹ Partha Chatterjee in his work on agrarian relations and communalism in Bengal in the late colonial period traces the lineaments of a communal mode of political power which obtains in a predominantly agrarian society where land is not seen as a product of labour but as something natural or divinely given. In such societies, the relation of land and soil to the labouring individual is 'mediated by the naturally arisen, spontaneous, more or less historically developed and modified presence of the individual as member of the commune'.¹² Political power is always organized in such societies as the collective authority of the commune. Chatterjee contends that it is in the perception of usurpation of such a community by feudal or commercial exploitation that this community strikes back. In the late colonial period in Bengal, communal riots can be viewed as ideological transformation of a complex of feelings against feudal authority and commercial exploitation into political action against the enemies of a peasant community united by religion. The codes of behaviour, modalities of mobilization and epistemological world view of this domain of politics is absolutely contrasting to the ones obtaining in the organized domain of politics instituted by the state. It is in the nature of linkages with the domain of peasant communal politics with the domain of organized politics that designates one movement as Gandhian and another as communalist.

Thus in all the accounts attempting to explain riots in Bengal in the 1920s, we find a profile of the rioters as an amorphous group acting with apparent evanescent agency and propelled by a plethora of motivations. This chapter shall place the Hindu Sabhas of Bengal in this particular context. It shall see how an experiment was sought with this domain of amorphous mass actions and an attempt made to adapt the situation to the program of a Hindu nation. It shall thus be the study of temporal interface between the two seemingly contrasting domains of politics and perhaps a link which tries to explain the phenomenon of the explosive fusion of communalist with other modes of consciousness which Suranjan Das states was complete by the 1940s.

Calcutta Riots of 1926

The 1926 Calcutta riots broke out on 2nd April over the issue of music before mosques. A procession brought out by the Arya Samaj passed before Dinu Meah's mosque on Mechuabazar Street in the northern quarter of the city sparking off communal violence between up-country Hindus and Muslims. The riots raged on in two phases in April and May, resurfaced in July and tensions continued to simmer till the end of the year. Before delving deep into the details of the riot it would be worthwhile to consider the growth trajectory of communal feelings in the city, especially among the labouring immigrants, and identify the matrix of social forces within which the participants in these occurrences were placed.

In an article on the riots in Calcutta and the jute mills in the northern suburbs of the city, Dipesh Chakrabarty traces the magnitude and implications of immigration of upcountry labourers into Bengal in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. According to one estimate, by the turn of the twentieth century the up-country migrants formed about share 60 per cent of the labour force.¹³ Chakrabarty elucidates how a communal culture emerged among the up country mill hands and labouring people in the informal sector expressed by the sudden efflorescence of communal demands, a process by which the Muslim worker stressed the Muslim part of his identity and the Hindu worker the Hindu part of his identity.¹⁴ Issues which galvanized workers at this point in time were conflicts over cow slaughter and demolition of huts which were claimed to be mosques. The issue of cow slaughter seems to have been an imported issue because there were no reports of riots over such an issue in Bengal did not experience riots until the 1890s. Rather communal tensions soared in the districts of United Provinces and Bihar, from which majority of the workers migrated, over this particular issue. The conditions of labour recruitment and control managed by the institution of jobbery helped reinforced a communal ethos.

Chakrabarty claims that while for the Muslim immigrants social leadership was available from influential men in the city who in turn happened to be proponents of pan-islamism in the city, such leadership was absent for the Hindus. The networks of leadership for the latter did not extend beyond petty merchants and mill clerks. The

Marwari merchants were at times prepared to use communalism to elbow out the Muslim influence from the central business districts of the city but their involvement did not extend beyond that.¹⁵ The middle class Bengali Hindu bhadraloks for the most part stayed out of such conflicts and it was this hiatus which was instrumental in Hindu communal alacrity remaining majorly unorganized. The riots of Calcutta in 1926 shows a similar picture in terms of the composition of participants, the networks of leadership and the hiatus which was pointed out by Chakrabarty. However the riots, this time, provided an opportunity for a group of people to speak in the language of Hindu unity and attempt a bridging of this hiatus. This chapter shall use riot documents from official sources to demonstrate this effort.

We shall concentrate on the third phase of the riots of 1926 which took place in the city during July 11 to 25, 1926. This spell of riots arrived after a spate of very serious rioting in the months of April and May which resulted in a large number of casualties.

Communal tension was already on the rise in May and June and outbursts were only avoided by beefed up security arrangements by the state. The reason we choose the final riots for scrutiny is that it reflects the endmost configuration of several components that went into the making of the event of riot before the months which led up to the festivities of Durga Puja- the most important festival of Bengali Hindus.

Degrees of Organization in Mass Actions

It needs be mentioned at the outset that actions of the participants in riots cannot be strictly classified as either planned or unplanned. The documents at hand suggest a variety of circumstances in which the events from 11th to 25th July took place and were executed. Some events provide the impression of carefully planned action while others can be concluded as impetuous acts of hotheadedness. However the degrees of organization seem to be different for different communities involved as this section shall show.

For about two months after the termination of the first phase of the riots on May 9th, open hostilities between the two communities were only averted by the deployment of constant measures of vigilance through police pickets. The Bakr Id celebrations sailed

through smoothly by virtue of such measures taken on part of the authorities. Communal feelings remained high throughout this period. The helplessness of the authorities was expressly reflected in such statements as, “in the existing state of tension, however, a further clash between the communities was inevitable and it was impossible to do more than just postpone the evil day.”¹⁶ The fateful day could only be postponed till 11th July.

The scrimmage on 11th July occurred over the issue of the passage of Rathyatra Carriages before a mosque at Duttabagan Road. The issue of music before mosques had been instrumental in sparking off large scale conflicts resulting in more than 40 deaths in the preceding months according to official figures. A compromise had been brokered by the authorities between the two communities on this issue by prescribing time periods within which music could or could not be played by sankirtan parties passing before mosques. Despite such attempts at a temporary compromise, the issue did not lose its potential to act as a catalyst to initiate open hostilities. The Rathjatra procession carrying the Jagannath cars reached Duttabagan Road at about 5.45 p.m., where they “were stopped by a group of ten or fifteen Muhammadans standing in front of the mosque (who) informed the police that music should be stopped as this was the time of the Magrib prayer.”¹⁷ The police communicated this to the organizers of the procession and they at once complied with the request. However as the procession progressed, it was attacked by a party of fifty to sixty Muhammadans. The processionists also retaliated by throwing brickbats at the assailants. The police rushed to the scene and was able to dissuade the attackers by impressing upon them that music would not be played in front of the mosque. This success however did not last long. In a gap of some minutes after the procession had passed the mosque “a party of about one hundred and fifty Muhammadans, armed with lathis, ran up from the direction of Walastan. They were joined by the Muhammadans who had originally attacked the procession and a serious riot ensued, in the course of which ten Muhammadans and ten Hindus were injured and one of the Rathis was damaged. This incident indicates a defining pattern of organization of the up country Muslims and the centres of their operation. We shall elucidate this pattern further in the following paragraphs.

The 15th of July was slated for the postponed Rajrajeswari processions of the yarn

merchants of Sutapatty. This procession was originally scheduled to be held on 1st June, but its license was canceled by the police authorities under circumstances to which we shall return later. The procession started at 7 A.M. from 169A Harrison Road consisting of three hundred persons including flag bearers, musicians and visitors. It was taken out under heavy security arrangements with the Deputy Commissioner of Police, North Town escorting it and numerous police pickets lined along the road through which it was to pass. As the procession entered the vicinity of Dinu Chamrawalla mosque, a number of Muslims headed by a local fruit vendor intended to obstruct its passage demanding that music be stopped in front of the mosque. This congregation refused to listen to the reasoning of the police and were subsequently pushed through by the heavy police escort. This did not go down well with the agitators and they started attacking the procession with brickbats. The processionists also reportedly retaliated and a street fight ensued which was soon doused off by the police. The procession somehow managed to move on. In the meantime the local Muslims gathered at the spot and started attacking tram cars and buses passing the area. Meanwhile, a party of fifteen Muslim volunteers dressed in khaki and wearing Turkish caps demonstrated in front of the house of an influential Hindu merchant at 137 Harrison Road and attacked the gate man of the house. However, this did not create any casualties.

As the procession entered Central Avenue it was again attacked by a large crowd of Muslims who resisted all attempts by the police to disperse them. So persistent were these attackers that the police had to open fire in order to scatter the crowd.

Eighty six rounds of ammunition were fired in which eighteen persons were reported to have received gunshot injuries. The procession passed through this area but a number of Muslims collected immediately afterwards and attacked the Jorasanko police station where they assaulted a Sub-Inspector and two constables and destroyed the car of Deputy Commissioner, North Town. Here too, the police had to open fire before the attackers dispersed showing the determined nature of the attacks which were being made. When the procession entered the junction of Central Avenue and Mechubazar Street it was once again attacked by brick bats but the assailants were dispersed by the police. Further ahead, the procession was attacked at the junction of Central Avenue and Muktaram Babu Street and once again at the turning into Beadon

Street. Thereafter the procession did not face any offensive as it passed through Hindu majority areas until it came to Mirabhar Ghat for immersion of the idols. We shall quote the report of Commissioner of Police to describe the events thereafter...

“the images were set down and a party of about a hundred boatmen who had collected there attempted to create a disturbance. At this juncture the whistle of SS Kohistan was blown loudly and continuously, evidently to rally the Muhammadan lascars and boatmen and in a few minutes the number of Muhammadans had swelled to four or five hundred... the situation was full of dangerous possibilities but the police quickly intervened and promptly brought it under control...”¹⁸ The series of fracas mentioned above created the base of an extremely charged atmosphere which prompted a chain of sporadic isolated instances of violence across the day. Public transport was halted in the area till evening and close to ten incidents of stabbing were reported. Let us however return to the point we intend to prove in this section. In reflecting on the nature of the pertinacious attacks perpetrated on the Raj Rajeshwari procession the Commissioner of Police remarks: “it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the opposition offered by the Muhammadans to the Raj Rajeshwari procession was deliberate and prearranged. There is reason to believe that the initial intention was to offer passive resistance, but this intention was accompanied by a firm determination that the resistance thus offered must achieve its purpose, and the leaders who counselled this plan of action could not have overlooked the dangers of the course which they advocated.”¹⁹ Commenting on the nature of men who might have had a role in stirring the Muslim crowd to action, the Commissioner observes, “Mr. H.S. Suhrawardy, whose aggressive attitude in the earlier periods of the riot has been mentioned in previous reports, visited the neighbourhood shortly before this occurrence and that his temper before he did so was such as to cause more cautious leaders to warn him. His conduct and that of the other leaders concerned, cannot therefore, be too strongly condemned.”²⁰ This statement expresses surmises which show that social leadership to the Muslim up country labourers was provided by the same brand of people who had emerged as the chief support group of the migrant labouring Muslims in the 1890s. These people added a degree of planning and organization to the events and participants of the riots. It seems likely that the mosques which served as centres of Muslim community life acted as important locus

points around which actions were coordinated. Already in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the jobbers had come to control the economic and social life of the up country immigrants in north and north suburban Calcutta. These jobbers had on many occasions commissioned the building of mosques (many of which are still named after them). Muslim neighbourhoods and slums came to be identified on numerous occasions on the basis of the mosque around which they were situated. The imams in these mosques were also people close to the jobbers. Thus, the Muslim immigrant, his jobber, the imam and the mosque created a closely knit community which looked up to wealthy and influential men of the community for support and patronage in times of crisis. The latter were more than ready to lend support, which at certain times, as expressed in the instances quoted above, translated into organized mass communal activity. During the riots of 1890s great support was lent to the rioting Muslims by Haji Mohammad Zakaria, a wealthy menon merchant, trading out of Amratolla. This person was not only one of the most wealthy merchants of Calcutta and had power to influence policy decisions taken by the government on trade and factory reforms but was one of the foremost pan islamists in the city whose activism continued unabated even during the 1890s.²¹ The Muslims in Calcutta not only received material support from such influential men in times of hardships but were recipients of an ideology of pan-Islamism which further cemented the communal bonds and provided a sort of direction to their actions. Kenneth Mcpherson describes the likes of H.S. Suhrawardy as descendants of Haji Mohammad Zakaria who organized 'black' Muslim trade unions in the jute mills and docks of Calcutta in the 1920s and 1930s.²² Thus, we see that the Muslim up country labourers were placed within a relatively definite matrix of leadership, propelled by an ideology. The pattern which started to crystallize in the last decade of the nineteenth century had considerably consolidated by the mid-1920s.

The pattern of relations in which the Hindus were placed and its degree of coherence was rather different. It is difficult to find a well-defined structural organization in which the Hindu community operated. Rather there seems to be different loci of power interacting with one another in a sort of loose union. The first locus of power appears to be the Marwari merchants who played a very active role in the riots of 1926. The only instances of planned Hindu offensive seems to had come from these people inhabiting the area surrounding Harrison Road, Central Avenue and Armenian

Street. The month of July is marked by a series of religious processions. Alongside the Rathjatra and the Raj Rajeshwari processions this month is also the month for Mohurrum processions. These processions were accompanied with a degree of sporadic violence from 16th July. However no cases of organized attack were reported to have taken place on them, until this happened on the night of the 20th ... “at about 10.30 P.M. when the Amratolla procession was emerging from Gobinda Dhar Lane into Armenian street, they were attacked with brickbats and a number of shots were fired at them from the neighbouring Marwari houses. Panic immediately broke out among the processionists, who were speedily reinforced by their coreligionists from the neighbourhood, and the situation was with difficulty kept in hand by the police. One dead body bearing injuries was picked up after the disturbance. The houses from which shots were alleged to have been fired were subsequently raided by the Deputy Commissioner, North District, and ninety seven up country Hindus, most of whom were Marwaris, were arrested in connection with this incident...”²³ As the procession entered Central Avenue, it stopped in front of a Marawari house for the customary act of torch swinging. Many in the police pickets apprehended that this might be an occasion for a revenge of the shootout at Armenian Street. Suddenly a loud report was heard from the middle of the procession and the processionists, apparently under the impression that they were attacked by a bomb, broke loose and started attacking the neighbourhood shops and buildings. Immediately afterwards, a number of rounds were fired from Marwari houses on both sides of the thoroughfare and the processionists once again broke loose. The incidents of the 20th night provide the only instance of an organized attack by the Hindus on a Muslim procession. The fact that Marwari houses constituted an important centre of action was also recognized by the Muslims. The only incident of planned incendiarism in this phase of the riot was attempted to be executed on this very night- “the doors, windows and other combustible portions of a block of houses bounded by Central Avenue, Nilmadhab Sen Lane and Krishna Behari Lane...were drenched with oil...there seems little doubt that the oil was placed there by Muhammadans, with the object of setting fire to the houses by throwing down a torch during the passage of a Muharram procession.”²⁴ Oil had also been freely poured on the streets surrounding the block of houses in order to ensure that the chances of escape in case of a sudden fire were minimized. The attempt however did not fructify as heavy rains on the night of 20th had washed away the oil. This feature of the Marwari merchants being an important component in the

communal landscape of the city had a history of some two to three decades. Dipesh Chakraborty contends that Marwaris being new entrants to the business map of the city were striving to make a space for themselves in the central business district of the city were ready to use communalism to elbow out contenders. Both the Muslim merchants of the city as well as the immigrant workers felt threatened by this as the Marwaris brought with them new networks of labour and resource supply. Their presence also contributed to a development of the land market in the northern and central quarters of the city which led to fears of displacement among the poor Muslim mill hands and informal workers.²⁵ Thus a specimen of contradiction which had started to grow from the end of the nineteenth century had come of age in the middle of the 1920s as expressed in the events narrated above.

The second nature of a semblance of organized Hindu action can be discerned from the circumstances under which the license for the Raj Rajeshwari procession was canceled on 1st June. In the original application made for permission of the procession it was claimed that it would consist of only 75 persons and 40 bandsmen. However “at 2 P.M. on the date fixed for the procession it was found that attempts were being made to use the procession as a Hindu demonstration, and that large numbers of Hindus had collected with the object of participating in the ceremony. The procession was widely published in the press and by means of leaflet and the Hindu public were requested to join in large numbers.”²⁶ This was found to be flagrant violation of the terms of the license and since a large portion of the police force was already deployed in the maintenance of law and order which had deteriorated as a result of the riots in the preceding months, it was considered unwise to allow the passage of this procession. A protest meeting to condemn this action by the authorities was held at Town Hall on the following day 'at which Mr. N.N. Sircar, Barrister-at-Law, delivered a strong speech condemning the action of the authorities'.²⁷ This mode of protest indicates a new pattern of agitation by the Hindus which was starting to develop and could perhaps be construed as a linkage between a domain of amorphous, unorganized mass action and the domain of institutional politics. We shall return to this theme later.

Regional Composition of the Participants

Let us briefly take a look at the regional backgrounds of the participants in the riot. In the absence of court documents it is difficult to determine such indices. We may infer a little from the short observations of the police authorities on this subject: “as in the case of the first phase, the rioting was confined almost entirely to the Muhammadans and up country Hindus. The Bengali Hindus participated to a greater degree than in the first phase but generally speaking , they remained on the defensive.”²⁸ The Bengali bhadralok was still feeling distant from the men who worked in the mills. The reaction of the British Indian Association during the riots of 1890s was to petition the Viceroy “to open a volunteer corps and train the Bengalis in the use of arms (which) would enable them to resist the rowdy rioters”²⁹. This attitude remained unchanged throughout the opening decades of the twentieth century. 1909 was the year of publication of the famous pamphlet by U.N. Mukherjee which raised alarm at the impending demographic debacle of the Hindus. His pamphlet formed the initial basis of a Hindu nationalist ideology. Several tropes of hindu communalism found coherent expression for the first time in this work. Yet, as Pradip Kumar Dutta states, U.N. Mukherjee was one of the first persons to raise alarm at the shift in the regional composition of the population of Calcutta. Mukherjee showed in his figures how the Hindu Bengali population was massively outnumbered by Bengali Muslims and up country labourers. This was one of the major preoccupations of U.N. Mukherjee throughout most of his publications³⁰. Muslims were only a part of the overall deluge that overwhelmed the Bengali Hindus in Calcutta. The concern, then, even for U.N. Mukherjee, was to preserve the hegemony of a historically constituted template named the Hindu Bengali bhadralok. Thus, the hiatus which impeded instrumental social leadership to rioting Hindus in the 1890s continued to persist effectively. The campaigns carried out by the rioters in the form of printed leaflets were designed specifically to cater to a crowd of up country labourers. They contained a vocabulary which was not frequently used in the domain of formal politics, did not speak in terms of 'rights' per se, stressed on the importance of direct attack and were more often than not written in Hindi. We shall quote here one such leaflet which contained a Hindi poem urging the Hindus to completely vanquish the Muhammadans in open fight. Interestingly, this leaflet identifies Juggalkishore Birla and Madanmohan Malviya as leaders of the community; “the Hindus walk on their feet; you salas, you must

henceforth walk on your heads... where are the salas Rahim and Suhrawardy? If they are men bring them forth... if Malviya or Birla were to give us orders, we would light a holy fire and burn you all in it. We will feed you on pigs in Zakaria and destroy you...”³¹

This, then, was the matrix of social forces within which the events and participants of the riot of 1926 in Calcutta were placed. Certain features related to the levels of differential organization and regional composition of the rioters maintained patterns which corresponded to those established by the end of the twentieth century. The critical difference was the fact that these riots were much larger in scale than those of the 1890s. The number of casualties was unprecedented. There were serious blows to the wholesale trade, so much so, that in a meeting of the Marwari Chamber of Commerce on 28th July it was decided that no Marwari merchant should order further piece goods for four months under pain of serious penalties.³² The impact of the riots was so great that there was a proclivity on the part of the political parties to face the coming elections in October in an uncompromisingly communal spirit. The larger scale and wider impact made the riots an occasion for instrumentalization of an organizational strategy which was expressed in the resolutions of the annual conference of the All India Hindu Mahasabha. It was in the days succeeding the riots that mention of the Hindu Sabha makes an appearance in official documents. The Durga Puja celebrations were to be made an occasion which would turn the agenda so far limited to upcountry men to into one embracing Hindus as a whole.

Neither Rathjatra processions nor the Raj Rajshwari procession unite the Bengali Hindu bhadralok into a celebration of festivity. These processions for the most part remain confined to specific quarters and sections of the Bengali Hindu population. Thus, without exceptional circumstances such processions would not command the potency to establish the performance of a religious practice as a civil right, whose violation was to be rightfully resisted. The conclusion of open hostilities on the streets of Calcutta did not indicate an improvement of communal relations. Rather communal tensions remained as high as they were before the riots had commenced in April. Police pickets had to be maintained throughout the month's succeeding the riots in order to ensure that small conflicts did not snowball into protracted hostilities. Any attempt to resolve the question of music before mosques met with utter failure. We

gather from the report of the Chief Secretary, Government of Bengal to the Chief Secretary, Government of India that the said issue was the immediate cause of a riot in Kidderpore in September.³³ We hear apprehensions from both the Commissioner of Police, Calcutta and the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal that Durga Puja celebrations in October were to be made an occasion for widespread disturbances.³⁴ We shall make a list of contexts and situations that somewhat constituted the build up to the Durga Pujas. Firstly, a large number of men who had left the city after the first outbreak of riots in April had started returning to their workplaces. These men took an active part in the riots of April and had left the city voluntarily just before a state of emergency had been declared in May. Official voices portray these men as comprising a potentially dangerous aggregate of ruffians who can be employed any time to execute evil acts. Secondly, the press of each community had treated the recent incidents of communal rioting in Dacca in such a fashion so as to make the other community entirely responsible for the outbreak. This could have had some influence on keeping alive and aggravating the general atmosphere of communal tension that was already prevailing in the city. Thirdly, we turn our attention to a feature of communal relations that was new in the communal landscape of the city. This feature had only started to develop in May when Marwari merchants had begun to boycott the services of Muslims as a means to disrupt the livelihoods of thousands of laboring Muslims and also a symbol of solidarity with fellow community men. It was apprehended that such rejection would continue till the Pujas in October. The possibility of extension of the boycott till the Pujas was of marked importance.

The festivals are always an occasion for large sales of made up clothing as well as piece goods. The ready-made clothing sector was practically in the hands of Muslim tailors, and any attempt to boycott it would mean serious loss which would arouse bitter feelings. Finally, there was the issue of the Hindu Sabhas trying to make the Durga Pujas an occasion for Hindu demonstration. A leaflet issued by the Sabha claimed that the Pujas that year would be celebrated with unprecedented pomp. As recent experience in Dhaka suggested, Hindu processions were mostly provocative demonstrations which were designed to incite reaction from the Muslims.³⁵

Thus the terrain discussed so far evinces the existence of several bases of Hindu

communal action that could be activated either singularly or in unison to create trouble during October. They include the Hindu sabhas, the Marwari merchants and the 'reservoir' of upcountrymen who had just returned to the city and added to the hardships of the police authorities. It has been mentioned time and again that elections of November were to be fought in a communal spirit. We however have little evidence of the type of campaign undertaken by the candidates. So far as the nationalist politicians were concerned, they recognized the riots as raising 'very awkward questions about the constitutional problem and the most obvious response was to blame the police for not stopping the riots.'³⁶ They however do not appear to be a significant constituent that would aim to instrumentalize the Puja festivities to consolidate a community into an organized constituency.

Several motivations were operational in the aforesaid three bases of Hindu communal action. The Marwari merchants were probably acting from motivations already discussed in preceding sections. The up country labourers were trying to announce the stamp of their presence in the city. They maintained strategic relations with both MarwarimerchantsaswellasorganizersofHindusabhas to fulfill this objective. The Hindu sabhas were attempting to find out a point of intersection between these interests and translate such a juncture into viable political action. Such translation would also entail the attempt to bring communal strife to the mainstream of political and civic life in the city by making it a real agenda for the Bengali Hindu middle classes. The evidence we have in our hand to substantiate this claim is a piece of report prepared by Mr. C.E.S. Fairweather, Deputy Commissioner, Port Police on a situation he encountered at Maniktola spur on 17/10/1926: " when I came up(to Maniktola spur) I noticed a meeting of upcountry Hindus just at the gate; they were being addressed in rapid succession by various orators (also upcountry men) who each said about 100 or 150 words and then got down to make way for the next man. This meeting, from what I subsequently observed was a secession from the general crowd inside the compound... one man told the crowd to lie down on the road and stay there all night if necessary. The next man said that this was the time to make a determined stand and take the procession how they liked, as, if they did not, next time every road would be closed to them...that they were the first comers to Calcutta and had premier rights...there were about 150 to 200 men in the crowd who listened with occasional yells of applause."³⁷ Fairweather is here speaking of a Barwari puja organized in Maniktola by a group of

upcountrymen. This Puja also involved Bengalis. However the incident with which Fairweather initiates his account suggests that a rift had occurred between upcountry men and the Bengalis over some issue as a result of which a group of upcountry men had seceded from the crowd inside and were delivering speeches outside at the Maniktola spur. The speeches reported by Fairweather reflect the motivations of a group of upcountry men about the direction in which community action is to be channelized. They seek to establish their rights to be regarded as rightful inhabitants of this city vis-a-vis the Muslim immigrants and also perhaps as citizens who must enjoy equal rights as the more respectable Bengali speaking middle classes. However their modalities of action seem to differ from those with whom they sought to establish parity. The bone of contention here was that the Barwari puja could not obtain permission to take out the immersion procession along their desired route past Dinu Meah mosque. The group of upcountry men, many of whom appeared in Fairweather's eyes as seasoned agitators were determined to make the procession a matter of demonstration and take the procession along the originally proposed route. The fellow Bengalis inside the compound of the Puja celebrations were not prepared to dispense with this. The entire hiatus of which we spoke in the preceding sections, the contradictions which we referred to between bhadraloks with hands unsoiled with manual labour and mill hands seems to be encapsulated in the situation which had unfolded in front of Fairweather's eyes. It was here that Swami Biswananda stepped in. Biswananda had for long been a nationalist agitator and was active in galvanising mass action during the Non-Cooperation movement. He had been an active organizer among the railway workers since the early 1920s and was one of the main organizers of the Adra strike of Bengal Nagpur Railways. His style of agitation was to create a mix of anti-colonial and communal demands through which he attempted a curious pattern of organization among the workers.³⁸ Right after the provincial branch of the All India Hindu Mahasabha was formed in Bengal in 1924, we have numerous documents pertaining to Biswananda's direct involvement in the organizational work of the Sabha. He seems to be one of the foremost agitators and a charismatic organizer connected with Hindu Sangathan work.³⁹ Biswananda was seen present in the scene of the brawl when no compromise could be achieved between the two parties. He was asked by the Commissioner of Police to persuade his Bengali 'countrymen' to take out the procession. He refused and went away. Biswananda had been active since the afternoon to enlist prominent Bengalis in the

area in the task of persuasion of Bengali participants of the Puja to defy police orders. He held a long meeting with Madan Mohan Barman, one of the influential Bengalis in the area and brought him to the scene. It seems that the connections were not purely incidental.

Fairweather, commenting on the modalities of operation of leaders of the riot commented “the leaders or promoters give orders secretly beforehand. While riots are going on they pretend to move about in a detached manner and to defy the mobs. They even pretend to help the police... this enables them to glean information as to probable courses of police action and instruct their followers accordingly.”⁴⁰ Thus it seems, as is also partially reflected in the words of Fairweather⁴¹, that the Puja was organized with the express purpose of confederating differing interests within the Hindu community and unite them into a single program of political action, that of 'defying police orders', of hitting the streets to address the violation of serious political rights of the Hindus. The upcountry men addressing the crowd outside were not speaking in the language of 'rights'. Rather they were concerned with the assertion of a community consciousness. In the initial years of organizational journey of organized Hindu political activity in Bengal, Biswananda was attempting to forge a linkage between two seemingly distinct domains of political action- one was concerned with community and the other with institutions instituted by the state.

Although the attempt in this specific instance did not succeed, it heralded the arrival of a new brand of politics in the political landscape of Bengal. Its organizational history is replete with numerous such attempts through which it sought to consolidate several aspects of Hindu community life in the province. We shall look into several such attempts in the following chapter.

Notes:

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2. *Ibid.*, 176

3. Pradip Kumar Dutta, "Dying Hindus': Production of Hindu Communal Common Sense in Early Twentieth Century Bengal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, No. 25 (June 19, 1993): 1305
4. Letter from A.N. Moberly, Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal to J. Crerar, Secretary to the Government of India, 23 September 1926, G.B. Pol. File II/XXIII/1926, National Archives of India
5. Moberly to Crerar, 23 September 1926, G.B. Pol. File II/XXIII/1926, National Archives of India
6. Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal, 1905-1947* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991) passim
7. Suranjan Das, "Towards an Understanding of Communal Violence in Twentieth Century Bengal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 23, No.35 (August 27, 1988):1805
8. Das, "Towards," 1805
9. Sugato Bose, "The Roots of 'Communal' Violence in Rural Bengal. A Study of Kishoreganj Riots of 1930," *Modern Asian Studies* 16, No.3 (1982):489
10. Bose, "The Roots," 490
11. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Communal Riots and Labour: Bengal's Jute Mill-Hands in the 1890s," *Past and Present* No.91 (May 1981):169
12. Partha Chatterjee, "Agrarian Relations and Communalism in Bengal 1926-1935" in *Subaltern Studies I Writings on South Asian History and Society* ed, Ranajit Guha (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982),12
13. Ranajit Dasgupta, " Factory Labour in Eastern India: Sources of Supply, 1855-1946, Some Preliminary Findings," *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, No.13 (1976):296
14. Chakrabarty, "Communal," 145
15. Chakrabarty, "Communal," 168
16. Reports of Mr. J.E. Armstrong, Commissioner of Police on the Calcutta Riots, 11th to 25th July, 1926, G.B. Pol. File II / XXV / 1926, National Archives of India, 1
17. Reports of Mr. J.E. Armstrong, G. B. Pol. File II/XXV/1926, National Archives of India, 1
18. Reports of Mr. J.E. Armstrong, G.B. Pol. File II/XXV/1926, National Archives

- of India, 5
19. Reports of Mr. J.E. Armstrong, G.B. Pol. FileII/XXV/1926, National Archives of India, 7
 20. Reports of Mr. J.E. Armstrong, G.B. Pol. FileII/XXV/1926, National Archives of India, 7
 21. Chakrabarty, "Communal,"161
 22. Kenneth McPherson, "Muslims of Calcutta, 1918-1935: A Study of the Society and Politics of an Urban Minority Group in India (PhD diss., The Australian National University, 1972), 41 and 160
 23. Reports of Mr. J.E. Armstrong, G.B. Pol. FileII/XXV/1926, National Archives of India, 10
 24. Reports of Mr. J.E. Armstrong, G.B. Pol. FileII/XXV/1926, National Archives of India, 23
 25. Chakrabarty, "Communal,"166,167,168
 26. Reports of Mr. J.E. Armstrong, G.B. Pol. FileII/XXV/1926, National Archives of India, 3
 27. Reports of Mr. J.E. Armstrong, G.B. Pol. FileII/XXV/1926, National Archives of India, 3
 28. Reports of Mr. J.E. Armstrong, G.B. Pol. FileII/XXV/1926, National Archives of India, 16
 29. J.C. Bagal, *History of the Indian Association, 1870-1951* (Calcutta: 1953), 129
 30. Pradip Kumar Dutta, "Dying," 1308
 31. Reports of Mr. J.E. Armstrong, Commissioner of Police on the Calcutta Riots, April to May, 1926, G.B. Pol. File II/XXV/1926, National Archives of India, 25
 32. Reports of Mr. J.E. Armstrong, G.B. Pol. FileII/XXV/1926, National Archives of India, 25
 33. Moberly to Crerar, 23 September 1926, G.B. Pol. File II/XXIII/1926, National Archives of India
 34. Moberly to Crerar, 23 September 1926, G.B. Pol. File II/XXIII/1926, National Archives of India
 35. Moberly to Crerar, 23 September 1926, G.B. Pol. File II/XXIII/1926, National Archives of India

36. Letter from Chief Secretary, Government of Bengal to Chief Secretary, Government of India, Home Department, 17th April 1926, G.B. Pol. File, West Bengal State Archives
37. Report by C.E.S. Fairweather, Deputy Commissioner of Police, Port Police on Barwari Processions, 17th October, 1926, G.B. Pol. File II/XXIII/1926, National Archives of India
38. Nitin Sinha, "The World of Workers' Politics: Some Issues of Railway Workers in Colonial India 1918-1922, *Modern Asian Studies* 42, No.5 (September 2008): 1028,1029
39. See the Detailed I.B. Reports of Government of Bengal on the activities of Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha, West Bengal State Archives, I.B. Section
40. Report by C.E.S. Fairweather, Deputy Commissioner of Police, Port Police on Barwari Processions, 17th October, 1926, G.B. Pol. File II/XXIII/1926, National Archives of India
41. Fairweather comments in his report that the Barwari puja was organized by the upcountry men with the expressed purpose of making a 'catspaw' of the Bengali community.

EXPLORING A PATTERN OF GROWTH OF THE HINDU MAHASABHA ORGANIZATION IN BENGAL: ATTEMPTS TO SUBVERT DIVISIONS OF CLASS WITHIN A 'HINDU' COMMUNITY

In the previous chapter we had discussed an attempt by proponents of Hindu unity to establish the Mahasabha as a political force in the immensely contested political landscape of Bengal in the 1920s. The organizational structure of the Hindu Mahasabha and the Hindu *Sangathan* movement at large was just beginning to evolve in Bengal in 1926. It was still pendulous and hesitant about the connections it needed to make and uncertain about its general direction. The riots of 1926 provided the first opportunity to the Mahasabha as an organized political entity to carry out experiments in trying to create linkages between the domains of spontaneous mass action and the domain of institutional politics. In the following years there ensued a process of consolidation of organizational work. A close study of the documents concerning the routine proceedings of the Mahasabha would reflect the lineaments of a pattern of consolidation which progressed through stages and acquired a rather concrete shape in four to five years. Initial tentative moves gave way to resolute decisions and planning. This was achieved by a thorough exploration of movements, incipient public bodies, socially active places of worship such as *ashrams* and *maths* and swadeshi associations. At the same time concerted efforts were made to persuade deactivated non co operators and disillusioned Congressmen and enlist them in grass root work in order to build up a semblance of an election machinery. There were attempts to intervene in labour movements and build up a cohesive Hindu constituency. Although it might be argued that the politics of Hindu unity crystallized only marginally and remained at the sidelines of the game participated by a plethora of players¹, there was a degree of completion in the endeavours of its proponents. By 1930, an organizational base had been created which could hope to propel future movements and social actions engendered by a perceived threat to the community. This chapter shall try and read certain documents pertaining to the activities of the Hindu Mahasabha in Bengal, identify the areas in which the leadership of the provincial branch chose to concentrate, trace the trajectory of its growth in the first few years of

its life in Bengal and establish a discernible pattern of its evolution. We shall take up the case of the Hindu Mahasabha's interaction with the predominantly labouring population of Kharagpur and try to show, how through phases of successive engagement the organizing principles of the population was streamlined and synchronized with the objectives of the Hindu Mahasabha. Before going into the details of such an account, we shall briefly have a look at the terrain of organized political activity in Bengal in the 1920s, produce a short history of the workings of the Mahasabha in its All India manifestation and then situate our pieces of evidence in the particular context.

Distribution of Political Forces in Bengal in the 1920s

The Non- Cooperation movement marked a definite juncture point in the history of South Asia's national liberation movement. This movement marked the first phase of temporary connection between the programmes of the Indian National Congress and the variegated agendas of the masses. It established the Congress and Gandhi as the foremost agents of a struggle that sought to include diverse interests and aspirations. In many parts of the country this movement marked the first phase of the process of politicization and the bolstering of institutions and networks of the public sphere.² Bengal, too, was swept by this tide of mass nationalism. Even though critical of some programmes and methods of Gandhian politics, Rabindranath Tagore remarked in the initial days of the movement that this was the first time when the programmes of political leaders transcended the esoteric boundaries of English speaking classes, "...Mahatma Gandhi came and stood at the cottage door of the destitute millions, clad as one of them, and talking to them in their own language. Here was the Truth at last.

So the name of Mahatma, which was given to him, was his true name."³ It brought about a unity of multiple forces in Bengal, sharpened a number of issues and registered the Congress as a legitimate body through which mass action could be carried out. Two aspects of the movement illustrate its preeminence over all other currents of political activity in Bengal at that point in time. Firstly, it could draw in a large number of professionals and educated men to the realm of mass action. The motivation of participation of such a class was marked by a desire to engage with the masses rather than engaging in moderate constitutionalism or underground violent

coups and attacks. Let us consider the example of Nripen Chandra Banerji who till 1920 was only a lecturer at Presidency College, Calcutta. This person had been tremendously influenced by Gandhi's speeches at Nagpur in 1920 and there after wrote: "the lessons of 1905-9 had been seared into our hearts: we had passed through peaceful constitutionalism, underground terrorist coups, widespread boycott of British goods and institutions... without much visible support from the masses as the masses were as yet absolutely disorganized and young Bengal dreamt of a forcible seizure of power by a small minority- a dream that could never become true."⁴ Thus, to Nripen Banerji, Gandhi's programme signaled the arrival of a new era in Indian politics, one which promised to incorporate millions of people within the stream of national liberation movement, a scheme which could unlock the pent up aspirations of an oppressed nationality. This promise led him to relinquish his lucrative job at Presidency College and become one of the founder members of the District Congress Committee of Chittagong. Similar examples may be found in the likes of Jatindramohan Sengupta, who later went on to become one of the pillars of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee alongside Subhash Chandra Bose after the death of C.R. Das. He too gave up his career as a barrister and took charge of the Chittagong Congress. C.R. Das emerged as the principal leader in these circumstances, touring the province, inducting young recruits and creating networks of connection between different communities and activists from different political hues. Das drew in participants from the reservoir of activists who had previously been associated with revolutionary nationalist paths into the fold of the Congress machinery. The call of 'Swaraj in one year' was extremely appealing to those youth who had dreamt of usurping the British Empire through violent coups. The non-cooperation movement provided them with a range of activities, which could compensate for the sustained lull through which *biplabi* activity had been passing for some years. Secondly, the movement activated and brought to the fore certain issues and demands which, till this time, could not vociferously declare their presence as a subject which should merit the attention of politicians primarily engaged in pursuits of constitutional gains. At certain periods such issues and their expressions were at variance with the stated aims and objectives of the central or provincial Congress leadership. As the Non Cooperation movement gathered momentum in Chittagong, the leadership got involved in a dispute between the workers and owners of the British owned Burma Oil Company. The middle class Congress leadership, to the great appreciation of the workers, were

seen taking up the cudgels on behalf of labour interest, throwing in all their resources in encouraging a strike and thereby mounted substantial pressure on the owners so as to effect a compromise on the part of the latter. Sometime later, in 1921, the Congress workers' propaganda in the tea gardens of Assam had infused a belief about the impending advent of Gandhi Raj. This provoked a mass exodus of workers from the tea estates of Assam, running the owners the risk of complete abstinence of labour force. As the workers assembled at Chandpur, the rail and river head on the Meghna river connecting Assam to the rest of India, they were dispersed by bayonet charges on the request of their European owners and forced to return to their places of work. This incident provoked massive outrage throughout the region. The Chittagong Congress Committee headed by Banerji and Sengupta immediately announced a programme of boycott of all law courts for a fortnight. This was executed successfully with the active assistance of lower level clerks and subordinate officials of the said institutions. Soon after, Sengupta and Banerji conferred with the Indian employees of the Assam Bengal Railways. A very loose union was formed. At Sengupta's call, the entire Indian staff had gone on strike for 48 hours. The staff of the Steamer agencies in the main riverine ports of eastern Bengal followed suit. The main aim was to incapacitate government functions on all fronts by immobilizing nodal centres and areas of communication, ripple effects of which, the local leadership presumed, would soon grip the entire country. However, such entanglements were soon admonished by the party bosses at Calcutta and Delhi. The first reason that was furnished was that such strikes could not, in any way, jeopardize the functioning of East Bengal Railways since they were guaranteed against loss by the government. Secondly, as was later made amply clear by Gandhi, the Congress was not meant for such a manner of uprising.⁵ The kind of paralysis of administration that was envisioned by the local leadership would serve to strengthen such contradictions and in such manner as the Congress was still not ready to handle. Gandhi himself had to come down to Chittagong to persuade the workers to call off the strike.⁶ Instances of such autonomous mass action could also be found in the tribal protests of Midnapore which were initially turned on by the campaigns carried out by Non-Cooperators.⁷ Two points stand out from the narrative produced above. Firstly, the Congress, for a time being legitimized itself as a platform on which diverse issues and actions could register themselves and interact. As Sabyasachi Bhattacharya argues, the Congress

leadership sought to act as an impartial arbiter of such disputes and attempt a sort of synthesis of such diversities so as to drive them into the broad stream of anti-colonial nationalism. In effect, it was attempting the establishment of a hegemony which would effectively countervail the hegemony of the colonial state.⁸ We shall shortly find out that, for Bengal at least, such an attempt was limited and was to turn flaccid very quickly. Secondly, the patchwork unity achieved by the Congress and efflorescence of mass action on diverse counts showed that the dynamic of social forces acting in Bengal in the 1920s was too complex to be incorporated into a singular political programme. There were several axes on which this fragile unity could snap. Particularly important was the issue of inter communal relations. The temporary arrangement with the Khilafat movement provided some relief to the Congress. Yet, this was no solution. As soon as the tide of mass nationalism would ebb, such divisions would sharpen and realign social and political forces in the province. A last ditch attempt to erect a framework of unity was attempted by C.R. Das. We shall quickly glance at the nature of the attempt which he sought to undertake by officially departing from the professed line of action of the Gandhian Congress.

The non- Cooperation movement was officially called off by Gandhi after the Chauri Chaura incident in February 1922. C.R. Das was in prison at that point of time. Although, he bitterly resented the decision to renege on the movement, by the time he was released in August the bitterness had been moderated. However, right after his release he picked up a debate with the Gandhian line of non-entry to the Legislative Councils. At the Congress session of Gaya that year, he and Motilal Nehru made an adamant effort to push forward their programme of Council entry, through the contesting of 1923 elections. Their effort failed and the Gandhian faction headed by Pattabhi Sitaramayya and C. Rajagopalachari had their way. Das resigned from his presidency and was soon joined by Motilal Nehru in forming the Swarajya Party.

The victory of the no changers was only short lived. At the next meeting of the A.I.C.C. in February 1923, the tables began to turn and one after another no changer started relinquishing their posts. A special session of the Congress was summoned in September 1923, headed by Abul Kalam Azad to resolve the internal disputes. It was resolved in the session that the Congress would lift its restriction on Council entry and would permit such Congressman as would have no religious or other conscientious

objections to enter the Legislature through participation in the impending elections.⁹ Thus, the Swaraj Party became an official faction within the Congress and Das and his programme secured a sweeping victory.

What impelled Das to fight so vehemently for a programme which, *prima facie*, looked so constitutionalist and appeared to be an apparent retraction from the radicalism which pervaded political activity in Bengal during the heydays of the Non Cooperation Movement? Sabyaschi Bhattacharya underlines three calculations that could have made Das act as he did. Firstly, Das's principal motivation was to address the environment of lassitude which had gripped Bengal with the termination of the Non Cooperation movement. There was a large pool of activists from different hues and concomitant aspirations of a greater mass which needed a concerted programme. The Gandhian programme of social work and the moral dictum of boycott could not satisfy such a large and aspiring constituency. They needed a concrete and tangible programme which could effectually translate into action. Secondly, a section of the middle class Congressmen had been questioning the efficacy of the Council boycott programme. Their contention was that, while men like Surendranath Banerjee and P.C. Mitter were making use of their positions as ministers in the Council, prominent Congressmen like Das were languishing in political wilderness. This was a tactical mistake which had to be redressed and hence Council entry was an imperative course of action. Finally, Das had drawn a substantial portion of his pool of organisers from the *biplabi* camp. These men had accepted Gandhi's programme on condition that the promise of 'Swaraj in a year' was fulfilled. With the abrupt termination of the movement and the setting in of a general mood of enervation, many among Das's *biplabi* lieutenants showed signs of returning to their old paths. Once the programme of Council entry could be effectively presented as a tactic of wrecking the system from within, it had the potential to appeal to the erstwhile militant nationalists as an agreeable programme.¹⁰

Das assembled around him a body of committed activists representing diverse economic, social and political interests. The old guard of the Congress like Ashwini Kumar Dutta and Byomkes Chakrabarti joined him. Young and influential businessmen like Nalini Ranjan Sarkar were invested with the task of managing party coffers. Bhupati Majumdar, a notable revolutionary nationalist was won over to his

cause. He also obtained the confidence of a young Muslim leadership who were catapulted into public recognition through the Khilafat activities. The Swaraj Party was returned successfully throughout the province in the elections of 1923. In the initial days of its legislative activity, it attained some degree of success by denying salary to the ministers and securing the suspension of the passage of certain bills.

Most importantly, the decision to fight local body elections opened a plethora of opportunities to the Swarajists. One after another Municipal body elections were swept by the Swarajists. C.R. Das himself became the Mayor of Calcutta Corporation in 1924. These bodies could be effectively used to create greater connection with the masses, thereby furthering the cause of mobilization.

However, as C.R. Das's programme progressed in time, the Swarajist alternative of conglomerate unity, tailor made for Bengal, was showing signs of abrasion. Other than allegations made by revolutionary nationalists of lack of political will to initiate sufficient legislative proceedings for the release of political prisoners, there were widespread allegations of graft and sidelining of the older batch of Congress workers to make way for rich and powerful men like Nalini Ranjan Sarkar and J.M. Sengupta. The most important axis on which Das believed his project would be imperiled was that of inter communal relations. In a private conversation with Aurobindo Ghosh, he said that he did not want the British to leave India before a resolution on the communal question was formulated.¹¹ Das had been designing a plan for some time which he hinted at during the election campaigns of 1923. This was especially engineered to redress the condition of dismally low Muslim representation in legislatures, local self-government bodies and government services. The salient schemes of the plan were- a) representation in the Bengal Legislative Council would be on the basis of population, Hindus and Muslims, elected by separate electorates b) representation to the local bodies of self-government would be on the basis of a 60:40 Muslims : Hindus and the reverse for Hindu majority districts c) government jobs would be shared on a ratio of 55:45 Muslims: Non-Muslims. Till this ratio was reached a ratio of 80:20 Muslim: Non-Muslims would be maintained in recruitment. Although Das managed to get this proposal of seat and job sharing passed in the annual session of the Provincial Congress in June 1924, Hindu public opinion declared a tirade against this proposal. The *Ananda Bazar Patrika* and *Amrita Bazar*

Patrika publicized the pact as a direct attack on the Hindus. Even some of Das's Hindu Swarajist colleagues were extremely dissatisfied with this creation of Das. Not surprisingly, the pact was almost immediately dropped after Das's demise in 1925.

Das's discomposure with the question of strained relations between Hindus and Muslims and his calculations regarding its possible impact on the future of political activity in Bengal was a forecast of what was to follow later in the decade. Strained inter communal relations would manifest in serious instances of rioting across the province, consolidation of community identity consciousness, are alignment of various social forces and obviously organized efforts to capitalize on the situation by new entrants to the political scene in Bengal. Even after Das's death traces of his idea of combinational national existence lived on. Though lacking Das's rootedness and his maturity in handling tension ensuing from frictions between the variegated spheres of interests in Bengal, Das's followers made some attempts to grapple with the question of diversity in Bengal. Semonti Ghosh has traced the endeavour of Subhash Chandra Bose, an important follower Das's ideology, to work out a formulation on this question. According to Bose, the major contribution of Das was his success in communicating the idea of Swaraj to the masses. Ghosh argues that the invocation of the term 'masses' had turned on the idea of popular culture, diversities of cultural groups and multiplicity of communities. While C.R. Das, a pragmatist, had depended on an idea of contracts to ensure the fraternal existence of such multiple social and religious entities, Bose was bent on an idea of inculcating a deeper emotional structure to negotiate the question of diversity. He advocated that the remedy lay in fostering 'love and affection' between communities. However, he was vehemently critical of what he regarded as obsessive self-assertion of any community and said that while religiously inclined associations and organizations had full rights to function in social and cultural domains, they should not meddle with matters that fell within the jurisdiction of the Congress.¹² Thus, although he recognized the fact of separate communitarian existence, he was of the opinion that these communities could not be turned into potential constituencies which claimed exclusive representation within the matrix of colonial politics. The domain of politics was to be constituted by the sole fight for liberation of a territorially defined nation.

It was in this context of extreme social fragmentation and concomitant political

attempts to grapple with the rapid flux that the Hindu Mahasabha entered the contest for political relevance in Bengal. But before concentrating on the details of its political and organizational efforts in Bengal in the late 1920s, we shall briefly have a look at the history of the All India Hindu Mahasabha.

The All India Hindu Mahasabha

The formation of the All India Hindu Mahasabha signifies the culmination of nearly half a century of effort to construct a platform of Hindu unity. This effort was reinforced by several streams of religious revivalist and reform movements developing across the length and breadth of north India from the last quarter of the nineteenth century. To be brief, the reformist stream within the movement for Hindu unity found its greatest organizational expression in the activities of the Arya Samaj. The more orthodox stream, which mainly concerned itself with the preservation of Brahmanical hierarchy and undertook such activities as cow protection and promotion of Hindi and Nagri, carried out its work through the Sanatan Dharma Sabhas. Richard Gordon claims that such organisations were transitory and ephemeral. The movements passed through successive phases of growth and quiescence. However, the movements served to maintain commercial and social connections between influential men in leading North Indian cities which helped in building up a network matrix, which, in turn limbered up the Hindu Mahasabha's organizational framework from the second decade of the twentieth century.¹³ These streams of movement often clashed with one another and had carved out their areas of influence in North India. Efforts to reconcile these differences and build up a semblance of unity resulted in the formation of Hindu Sabhas in Benares, Kanpur and Allahabad. There were also some efforts to draw these sabhas together under an umbrella organization. The Hindu University Society met in 1912 to that end.¹⁴ But their efforts did not amount to anything substantial. The Punjab Hindu Sabha was formed in 1907 to safeguard the interests of the Hindu minority of the province. It was a body dedicated to promoting the rights of a very influential minority in the province keeping in mind the impending constitutional reforms of 1909. It was this body, which, in its fifth annual conference at Ambala in 1912 decided to draw in all the Hindu sabhas of the country. As a result of the resolution passed in the Ambala Session and later the Ferozepur session(1913) of the Punjab Hindu Sabha an All India Hindu Conference was held at Hardwar in

1915 on the occasion of the Kumbh Festival. This conference officially marked an understanding between the Arya Samajists of Punjab and the Sanatanists of eastern Uttar Pradesh and the All India Hindu Mahasabha was formed with headquarters at Dehradun, the residence of its first secretary, Pt. Dev Ratan Sarma.¹⁵ It was decided hereafter to set up provincial branches of the Mahasabha throughout the country. Provincial branches were subsequently set up at Maharashtra, Bihar and U.P. Yet, as, Richard Gordon claims, in its initial years, the Mahasabha was extremely limited geographically in both its outlook and activities. It could best be described as an inter provincial organization of the Hindus, acting as a loose connecting thread between the apparently independent activities of the Punjab and the U.P. Branch.¹⁶ The Khilafat wave and discernible signs of pan-Islamist consolidation raised alarm bells among Hindu leaders.

Possibilities of threats to the community were interpreted and dished out afresh. Widespread communal riots further complicated the scene. Jawaharlal Nehru, in his autobiography, attributed the growth of the Mahasabha to the communalism rampant in the 1920s. It was in these heady days of communal tension that the Bengal provincial branch of the Mahasabha was formed in 1924.

The Bengal Provincial branch was established by Piyus Kanti Ghosh, the editor of Amrita Bazar Patrika. The impact and urgency created by the Saharanpur riots ostensibly led Ghosh to pioneer the Hindu Sabha movement in Bengal.¹⁷ We learn from Richard Gordon that Byomkesh Chakrabarti, one of the old guards of Congress and once a close aide of C.R. Das also played a contributory role in commencing the Hindu Sabha movement in Bengal.¹⁸ The movement gained strength through intervention in the Calcutta riots of 1926 and received added momentum as successive riots gripped the province and a campaign 'to unite against Muslim aggression' could be sustained.¹⁹ It touched upon issues such as removal of untouchability, condition of Hindu widows and the question of conversion. Such issues arrived with new meanings in the changed social and political milieu of Bengal. They represented new threats and an urge to build new bastions of Hindu unity. This entailed closer understanding of the social reality of Bengal and consequent formulation of a course of action which could build the Mahasabha's career as a significant player in the space

that became filled with brilliant possibilities for newcomers after the death of C.R. Das. In building up its career, it followed a particular pattern. The next part of this chapter shall try and unearth the lineaments of such a pattern by investigating certain documents linked to the Hindu Sabha's as well as the Hindu Sangathan's involvement with the predominantly working class population of the railway town of Kharagpur.

Hindu Political Activism's Tryst with a Railway Settlement: Stages of Engagement; Intervention and Consolidation

The Phase of Initial Engagement

The years after the 1919 witnessed a gradual burgeoning of labour unrest throughout India. Many contemporary observers have termed this period as the phase of maturation of labour union activities in India.²⁰ A particularly important site of both spontaneous labour uprisings as well as organized trade union activity were the Railways. Railway workers from eastern India namely the Bengal Nagpur Railways and East India Railways held frequent strikes during this period. These strikes marked a curious pattern of conjunction between the unprompted agency of the workers and the mediation of agencies exterior to their everyday world. These external agencies included trade union organizers and those attempting to introduce the Congress project of nationalist politics to the working classes. There was also a third category of agents willing to establish a serious connection with working class activities. This was the category of sadhus, Hindu religious preachers, who had a history of involvement in reform movements and, who, from the early 1920s started evincing serious nationalist aspirations. The government suspected them to have international links and marked them as agitators with vested interests 'fomenting antagonism and discontent against the government'. They were suspected to be recruited by agencies with headquarters in Egypt, Afghanistan and Bolshevik Russia.²¹ The sadhus got explicitly connected with the nationalist movement from 1920. The Nagpur session of the Congress, December 1920, was attended by 106 of them. This was the session which officially launched the Non Cooperation movement and the delegation of 106 sadhus made a pledge to officially support the programme of Non Cooperation and transmit the message of boycott, non-violence and Swaraj to the grassroots. Interestingly it was in this session that the Congress also made an official declaration

to support the cause of the workers. A Sadhu Sangha was formed at this session and subsequently the All India Political Sadhu Sabha was formed in April 1921.

What exactly were the elements in the campaigns of these religious men, who now embarked upon a political task? We know from an article by Nitish Sinha that their campaigns contained an intensive endeavour to arrogate to themselves magical divine qualities.²² Foremost among the campaigners in the Bengal Nagpur Railways was Swami Biswananda. He toured the towns on the south western flanks of Bengal and galvanized a number of workers' protest. To begin with, he differentiated himself from other campaigners as someone who possessed supernatural qualities. We come to know from the same article that he toured Adra on the last days of December 1920. The workers of the railway workshop at Adra held a strike from 1st to 3rd January 1921.

Official sources claimed that it were the speeches and actions of Swami Biswananda which incited the workers to the strike. Although the strike was short lived and was called off on 3rd January 1921, several features of the strike demarcate it from other similar political actions of the time and distinguish it as an incipient prototype of a particular brand of politics.

The strike was taking place at a time when the call of Non-Cooperation was slowly converting into a call for mass boycott of public institutions. Gandhi had himself requested the help of sadhus to propagate the spirit of this call. Therefore, one might expect that while Biswananda was exhorting the masses to action at Adra, he was actually trying to impart the salient features of an anti-colonial national struggle whose professed aims and objectives were laid down at the Nagpur session of the Congress. However, the methods of Biswananda were starkly different from institutional modalities of mobilization and galvanization. He recognized his target constituency in a way which was not exactly congruent with the official Congress way of envisioning a populace. Finally, he visualized the desired pathway of this constituency in such a direction which could also be construed to be different from the official narrative of the movement. Let us try and illustrate the argument made above. Biswananda boldly claimed that the Europeans were at the root of all exploitation of menial labourers employed with the Bengal Nagpur Railways at Adra. He said that

'the whites were filling their bellies out of the earning of poor Indians.'²³ He further added that all government officials as a class were corrupt and could not be trusted by the people. What was the remedy suggested by him? He advised all Indian coolies and cleaners to withdraw their services. Other workers also joined in in this boycott. The Europeans at Adra were left with no supplies from the bazaars for the three days as a result of this boycott. This mode of boycott was different from the officially advocated line of boycott of public institutions. The juxtaposition of Europeans and Indians reinforced a sense of community. In order to make the presence of the community significant and meaningful Biswananda propagated effective social action. Through a social boycott of the Europeans, the Indian workers' sense of collectivity and solidarity vis a vis the Europeans could be tellingly established. This was to be a collectivity which consolidates and resists in the face of threats of exterior infringement.

Biswananda proved crafty in this technique. The identity of the workers was even juxtaposed to the lawyers who, on several occasions, were alleged to charge exorbitant amounts for fighting their cases. Evidently, the project of crystallization of the community was to proceed by the identification and vilification of actors existing exterior to it and with whom the community lived through a process of continual interaction. This technique of emphasis on the sense of a community was not a novelty invented by Biswananda. A large number of politicians, while interacting with the masses, appealed to this sense of corporate solidarity. Biswananda now proceeded to infuse a sense of purported direction to this community. It was on the fourth day of the whole affair at Adra, i.e. a day after the strike had been called off that the demands of the workers were produced before the magistrate. The first among these was to stop cow killing for good in Adra. A secret government report claimed, 'he impressed upon the people that there was no regeneration of the country possible until cow killing is stopped'.²⁴ It was here that he was marrying the agenda of non-cooperation with Hindu Sangathan movement's agenda of cow protection. He claimed that the main responsibility for cow killing lies with the Europeans. He therefore exhorted his audience to initially boycott Europeans for a sustained period of time, failing which "other methods" would be adopted. The above description highlights the fact that codes of mobilization used in this case cannot unproblematically be categorized as either nationalist or communal. At the same time it delineates a very curious pattern

of Biswananda's way of going about his job. He first engages with an amorphous, unorganized population which expressed a plethora of grievances and motivation. He then proceeds to build a semblance of cohesion in this motley group by inculcating a sense of community. Thereafter, he delineates the mission of this community to be protection of cows. The stress on this subject elevates it to the level of a sacred mission, one, without which 'no regeneration of the country is possible'. And finally, there is the call for action against anyone who might seem to be an impediment in the fulfillment of this 'sacred' mission. This was only an initial attempt to engage with an unorganized population.

This phase in the organizational journey of Hindu nationalist politics corresponds roughly to the stage of interaction with the possibilities created by the Calcutta riots discussed in the previous chapter. In the next stage, our documents show that Hindu nationalist politics entered into a deeper phase of engagement and experimentation. We shall turn our attention to it in the next section.

Stage of Closer Engagement

Before we delve into a full-fledged discussion of this section, let us make a few clarifications. Biswananda's activities were not limited to Adra alone. We learn from a government report that "he has delivered many speeches against government and has tried to spread discontent among police and other Government servants. He has organized and instigated strikes amongst labour in the coal fields in 1919-20, was also at Chandpur, Goalunda, and Chittagong in connection with the Assam Tea Coolies' strike and the shipping strike."²⁵ Though we do not have direct references of his work at Kharagpur, certain government reports indicate his influence on the Hindu population of the town. This town had witnessed wide scale inter communal fracas in May 1926. The regional composition of the rioters, the particular settlement patterns of Kharagpur and the intensity of hatred harboured by members of both communities made the task of restoring normalcy strenuous for the police authorities. Among the precautionary measures adopted by the police we find a piece of preventive injunction which says "On 23rd March (I) served a notice on Swami Biswananda under Section 144 C.P.C. forbidding him to Kharagpur. His previous exploits in stirring up labour troubles seemed to make this action necessary."²⁶ That this notice did not deter Biswananda is clear from the fact that on 24th March he disobeyed the orders and

started moving towards Kharagpur. He was detained thereafter and taken into custody. Proceedings against him were dropped on the 29th only after he submitted an undertaking that he would not visit Kharagpur in a month. These pieces of evidence reveal that Kharagpur had already been subjected to the type of organizational activity carried out by sadhus like Biswananda. Nothing else explains Biswananda's desperation to reach the spot defying prohibitory orders and also the police authority's vehement efforts to restrain him. We also learn from a later piece of evidence about the reception of Sangathan work performed by these preachers. A letter by a local organizer of the Kharagpur Hindu Sabha in 1927 implores the Provincial Secretary at Calcutta to send Swami Biswananda to Kharagpur in order to execute the work of preaching keeping in mind his immense popularity among the masses at the town.²⁷ It seems therefore that Kharagpur was not an exception among the towns dotting the Bengal Nagpur Railways and was well acquainted with the model of Hindu Sangathan work that Adra had experienced.

Trouble began in Kharagpur on 17th May, 1926. A rumour over a procession party passing a mosque sparked off tensions which lingered on for five days. The number of casualties soared up to 42, 11 killed and 29 seriously injured. Intense inter communal tension remained even after the termination of open hostilities. Personnel from Auxiliary Force India and the Bengal Armed police had to be called in to restore normalcy. A few days after normalcy was restored, the District Magistrate of Midnapore was entrusted with the task of preparing a detailed report about the courses of events of the riot and the probable contributing factors leading to the riots. While commenting on the 'ultimate' causes of the riot he identifies the general feeling of animosity that pervaded the country as being the underlying factor which fuelled the tension. He points out that such feelings existed in Kharagpur too, but it was difficult to predict when such feelings would burst out into bloody clashes. He then goes on to state some facts which is of particular significance to our point of concern: "... probably the first beginnings of any organization on communal lines were made in August 1925 when a quarrel over Mussalmans passing the main mosque led to the Hindus organizing themselves on 22nd September, 1925 in a Hindu Sabha or Sangathan. The first president was Beni Sham Wahi, a stock verifier on the railway."²⁸ He then goes on to give the names and professions of the other office bearers of the newly formed Hindu Sabha. Kharagpur, being a predominantly Railway

settlement, harboured a substantial migrant population with diverse regional backgrounds. The names of the office bearers suggest that there was an attempt to include Hindus from all linguistic and regional backgrounds within the structure of leadership of the Hindu Sabha. Mr. R.N. Reid, the District Magistrate, further observes that though the relations between the two communities were strained, the impetus for forming a Hindu Sabha did not necessarily arise spontaneously from within the local population: “the organization of the Hindus coincides with the arrival of Beni Sham Wahi. He came here on transfer about the middle of the year 1925 and there seems little doubt that he is the leading spirit in stirring up the feelings of Hindus.”²⁹ The local Hindu Sabha showed remarkable promptitude in trying to bind the Hindus of Kharagpur into action. A recently constructed Biswakarma temple was put into use as a meeting point, reminding one of the prescriptions of the high priests of Hindu Sangathan movement to build a Hindu Rashtra Mandir in every city.³⁰ As fears of impending trouble ran higher, this temple became the veritable office of the Hindus in the settlement, serving as the centre of planning, assembly and shelter for numerous Hindus staying up nights to guard off apprehended attacks from Muharram processions. Police reports to the District Magistrate suggest that on 8th May, a meeting was held at this Biswakarma temple in which “some inflammatory remarks were made.” The police intelligence further adds “Vaskar Dutt (Secretary of the newly constituted Hindu Sabha) and Kewal Ram were inciting the Hindus to attack the Muhammadans.”³¹ Intelligence inputs also claimed that throughout summer the railway workshops had been used for the surreptitious manufacture of murderous weapons, especially as news of the Calcutta riots poured into Kharagpur. The police authorities had identified these developments as potentially dangerous and as preludes to the riots that started on 17th May. And once the riots started, it was a “curious coincidence that Beni Sham, Vaskar Dutt Tewari and Kewal Ram had all been absent ever since”. Although, all of these leaders tried later to establish that their being away was only a mere coincidence, even the District Magistrate felt that their absence was especially designed to evade responsibility as leaders of the community to “come and help in the recent crisis.”³²

The above mentioned sequence of events demonstrates a change in the nature of engagement of a particular brand of politics with the possibilities created by mass

action which was generated by a perception of threat to the community. The intermittent and apparently unsystematic visits by the likes of Swami Biswananda had given way to a semblance of an organizational structure. Beni Sham Wahi, it appears on retrospect, came into the railway town not just to create momentary instances of rabble rousing. His mission was to build up an edifice which would show promise of being sustainable. The instrumentalization of the Biswakarma temple, the surreptitious, yet enduring exploits of manufacture of murderous weapons in the workshops were indicative of this trend towards durability. The sudden disappearance of the leaders on the days of conflict also corresponds to a pattern of behaviour maintained by community leaders during riots as discussed in the earlier chapter. The days of Non-Cooperation movement and the entanglement of multiple strands of motivation within an occurrence of mobilization was fast becoming a thing of the past. As axes of contradiction sharpened, organized forces rapidly began capitalizing on a particular axis, attempted to standardize inchoate dispositions and channel them through modalities of institutional politics. The Hindu population of Kharagpur was also a predominantly working class population. At a certain point in the enquiry report of Mr. Reid we stumble upon an observation which points to the conflicts faced by the sabha in its desired journey towards Hindu unity- “ the first vice president(of the Hindu Sabha) was Kashi Nath Muttoo, but he has since resigned to work for the labour union. The labour union is antagonistic to the Hindu Sabha and it is intended to embrace all communities. There is a good deal of jealousy between the Hindus who are part of it and Hindus who are part of the sabha.”³³ Although the present stage of engagement provided a rather durable structure for assembling the grievances of Hindus and translating them into effective action, it was yet not sufficient to resolve their multifarious social and economic contradictions. How did the Hindu Sabha of Kharagpur, acting under the supervision of the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha deal with this question? We shall find out in the next section.

The Stage of Intervention

Let us first try and understand the distribution of loci of activity among the Hindus in the town of Kharagpur. The first was the Hindu Sabha formed in 1925. It seems to us that the labour union in Kharagpur was yet another important locus of activity for the Hindus and there was significant overlapping of membership between the two organisations. The Hindus of Kharagpur did not generally perceive antagonism

between the simultaneous existence of the two bodies. They were meant to perform different functions and the existence of both seemed imperative to a number of them.³⁴ The population of Kharagpur was an assorted one. It included Bengali, Telegu and a considerable number of upcountry labourers, service providers and professionals. We have earlier referred to the 'jealousy' existing between the leadership of the Hindu Sabha and the labour union. It also seems to us that the provincial leadership of the Hindu Sabha wielded considerable control of the affairs at Kharagpur. They had the power to take decisions which could affect the fate of both the local Hindu sabha as well as the labour union. In a letter written by Tirath Prasad Khandelwal, a resident of New Settlement Bazar, Kharagpur to Padamraj Jain, secretary Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha on 24th February, 1927. We notice how strenuously he argues to establish the commitment of workers to the cause of Hindu unity: "... (that) the labour union at Kharagpur did not render any assistance to the Hindu community is false. The workers of the association are true Hindus and are lovers of peace."³⁵ Thereafter, he goes on to state two points which highlight two other aspects of a Hindu's identity at Kharagpur. "the men who are trying to make you show anguish to the labour union are Bhaskar Dutt and Awadh Behary Lall. The reason why the labour union had done injury to them is that formerly they remained employed with the printing press and had greatly oppressed the workers with the help of Europeans."³⁶ Here, Khandelwal tried to argue how, even as Hindus, some members of the sabha, by virtue of their positions of proximity with the European owners had done grave injustice to the workers. He then went on to explain "the two cherish a feeling of communal provincialism- hatred against Bengalis and Telegus...dividing the united Hindu community and rendering assistance to the Railway Company with the assistance of some upcountrymen."³⁷ Thus it seems that though the Hindu sabha had come to occupy an important position of credibility among the Hindu population of Kharagpur, the people of Kharagpur had envisioned it not just as a body to further the cause of Hindu unity but to address the numerous instances of sufferings on multiple planes by the working populations of Kharagpur. How did the provincial leadership respond to this call? Despite the apprehensions and misgivings of a number of Hindus in the town, the Mahasabha leadership decided to streamline its course of action and embark steadfastly on the direction of prioritizing the cause of Hindu unity over all other contradictions working within the Hindu

community. By a circular of 21st February 1927 it decided to 'dissolve' the union.³⁸ This phase marked an advance from engagement. The Hindu Mahasabha was now making moves which mere engagement could not effectuate. The ground built by the Sangathan work of sadhus and later rudimentary organisational endeavours through Hindu Sabha activities provided a channel to the provincial leadership through which it could start manipulating the dynamic of forces acting within Kharagpur. The stage of engagement was over. The Hindu Mahasabha had now entered a stage of intervention.

Stage of Consolidation

Kharagpur witnessed a fresh series of inter communal clashes on June 1928. A.B.Rao, the Secretary to the Kharagpur Hindu Sabha in a letter to Padamraj Jain, dated 30th June 1928 informs, "Hindu and Mahommedan riot began yesterday and is continuing still now. Nine Mahommedans and three Hindus (have been) killed and three slight Hindus injured are under treatment."³⁹ The foregoing mode of intervention in the terrain created by riots shows that the leaders of the Hindu Sabha had mostly absconded at the time of riots. The Hindu Sabhas did not play any concrete part in consolidating the community on the lines of a constituency. From 1928, we see the beginnings of organisational efforts to this end. These efforts started with enquiries by the district leadership about the status of criminal cases instituted against Hindus in connection with the riots. Right after the riots we find Santosh Chandra Das, a district level leader of the Hindu Mahasabha, carrying on correspondence with Ram Mohan Singh, Mukhtear of the Bar at Midnapur Court regarding the number of cases instituted against Hindus and the identities of the defendants.⁴⁰ The motive for this enquiry can be inferred from a letter written on a later date by a provincial preacher to the provincial secretary. The organizational formation of the provincial Hindu Mahasabha contained a secretary at the top of the hierarchy followed by an assistant secretary. Unlike other political organizations of the time it created posts of two preachers whose function was to carry the political message of the Mahasabha to the district and branch sabhas.⁴¹ Nriya Gopal Bhattacharya was one of the preachers of the Hindu Mahasabha in 1928. He had previously been active in Nadia and according to police reports was instrumental in stirring up the Hindus against Muslims at Palashipara.⁴² Bhattacharya was at Kharagpur in the days following the riots and

wrote this account of his work to the provincial secretary: "...all the responsible police officers of Kharagpur, and those who are specially deputed, are Mahommedans and are taking special interest in their community as apprehended... since my arrival here I am trying that the Kharagpur Relief Committee should take up charges of all communal cases and the Hindu leaders want to do so. But in fact many of the accused are conducting their own cases without giving any information to the Relief Committee, even. However, I shall make my best to centralise the activities of the Hindus accused... a whole time man should be placed here for conducting the cases.

These people want a man from the Provincial Hindu Sabha."⁴³ It was the first time that the provincial Hindu Mahasabha was noticed to formulate a scheme of work for the Kharagpur branch. Previous instances of interaction with the soil of Kharagpur had progressed through varied levels of engagement in trying to foster a sense of community, build up a Hindu Sabha to engage with the spontaneous communal feelings of the Hindus and then execute certain interventions to streamline and orient the activities of Hindus towards the goal of Hindu unity. The stage we are discussing in this section was the stage when the provincial Hindu Mahasabha attempted to provide a tangible programmatic shape to the ground prepared by the kind of activities we have described as engagement and intervention. It was also the period when the provincial Hindu Mahasabha started orientating the functions of the Branch sabhas towards its stated political goals. The straggling activities of Santosh Chandra Das and the local leaders now had to be amalgamated into a coherent whole. In a letter to Santosh Chandra Das dated 9th November, 1928, Padamraj Jain writes: "The Midnapore Hindu Sabha, it seems to me, has practically ceased to exist. That is very much deplorable, particularly when you are there... I propose to send Babu Nriya Gopal Bhattacharjee very shortly to help in the reorganization of the Sabha... I hope in the interest of your community, nay, for the sake of their very existence, you should not fail to take this trouble. One thing I want to make clear. Let not anybody suppose that the Hindu Sabha is merely an organization of men holding moderate views. It is desirable that the secretaries and other office bearers should be full nationalists politically."⁴⁴ One might speculate the political meaning of the phrase "moderate views." Yet, in light of the situation in 1928, it had an organizational message, which was that the Hindu Mahasabha did not want its members to be hesitant and indecisive regarding major political questions any longer. It had now finally raised its head as a

contender in the extremely contested political landscape of Bengal in the late 1920s. In order to sustain its status as a contender it needed to consolidate what it identified as its rank and file. The case of Kharagpur completes the growth trajectory of a Hindu Nationalist organization from its moment of initial engagement in the early 1920s to a stage of consolidation.

We shall study some more examples of the evolution of this organization in the third decade of the twentieth century in Bengal in the next chapter.

NOTES:

1. Papiya Chakravarty, “Emergence of the Bharat Sevashram Sangha: A Phase of the Hindu Response in Bengal to the Nationalist Ferment 1923-1930”, *Journal of History, Jadavpur University*, Vol.VII,(1986-87):80.
2. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Defining Moments in Bengal 1920-1947*,(New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014),147.
3. Ibid.,149
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39. The said letter is one written by Ram Mohan Singh to Santosh Chandra Das. The letter is a reply to Santosh Chandra Das's enquiry. File No. 279/25, WBSA, I.B. Section.
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THE QUESTION OF CASTE AND A UNITED

HINDU CONSTITUENCY: THE HINDU

MAHASABHA IN FARIDPUR

The project of shoring up the numbers of a potential Hindu constituency that would be able to act with unified motives, had engaged the proponents of ideology and politics of Hindu unity for a number of decades since the beginning of the twentieth century. This project principally entailed a reconceptualization of the myriad axes of differentiation that proponents of Hindu unity thought to be inimical to the task of developing a semblance of cohesion within the Hindu society. The primary area of concern was the question of caste. Spurred on by the number games introduced by census operations as well as by threats of lower caste assertions, the question of accommodation of numerous sub castes within a singular consolidated structure without disturbing the hierarchy of the Varna system animated the minds of many ideologues and activists seeking to build up a concrete platform of Hindu unity in the initial decades of the last century. Endeavours to find solutions to this conundrum led to new formulations about the identity of the several sub castes, the desirability of extending the frontiers of a Hindu bloc and adoption of several strategies aimed at amelioration of untouchability to thwart the depletion of Hindu population. Such endeavours multiplied manifold after the publication of U.N. Mukherjee's *Hindus- a Dying Race* in 1909, serialized in the magazine *Bengalee*, published from Calcutta.

Through selective use of Census data and projections, Mukherjee demonstrated that the Census figures had shown a steady drop in Hindu population in sharp contrast to the consistent rise in Muslim population. He thus calculated that if this trend continued, the entire Hindu population would be extinct in only four hundred and thirty two years. His claim was also buttressed by the decision of Census Commissioner E.A. Gait to keep out castes not served by Brahmins, not allowed to enter temples and suffering from similar disabilities, outside the Hindu category. The article was later turned into a pamphlet, translated and widely circulated all across the country. It immediately sparked off a widespread fear about the impending eventuality of Hindu demographic decline. Reminiscing its impact, Swami Shraddhanand, one of

the pioneers of the Hindu Sangathan movement writes in 1924: “It was in February 1912, while standing in the spacious hall of the Aryasamaj in Calcutta, that a Bengali gentleman, dressed in European habits, was introduced as Colonel U. Mukerji of the I. M. S. to me. His dress at first prejudiced me against him, but when he spoke to me of the pamphlet on which he was engaged and worked out mathematically how within the next 420 years the Indo-Aryan race would be wiped off the face of the earth unless steps were taken to save it, I learnt to respect his patriotism and resolved mentally that I would never be led away by mere appearance in judging of the worth of a man in future.”¹ The meeting created such a lasting impression on him that he dedicated himself to the study of statistics for eleven years and worked out stratagems through which, he believed, the protection and progress of his people could be ensured. One of the chief instruments of progress and protection of his people was a suggestion to the higher castes to change their discriminatory attitudes and adoption of an elaborate organizational programme to mitigate untouchability. There were voices contrary to this reformist streak which clamoured for the sanctity of the age old hierarchy of the caste system and sought to resist any attempt at tampering with the status quo. However, as we shall later discuss, even such voices backtracked when they could be persuaded that imposition of disabilities would deplete the numerical strength of the Hindu category. Thus, it would seem that a conjunction of factors had created the circumstances in which the question of social reform would once again raise its head at a time when anti-colonial nationalism was beginning to gather steam in the heady days of late colonial rule.

The emergence and spread of Hindu Mahasabha activities has been largely ascribed to the communalism rampant in the 1920s. Yet, as we had discussed in the previous chapter, the formation of the Hindu Mahasabha in 1915 was the culmination of a long process of quest for a platform of Hindu unity. It was born out of a working compromise between the reformist stream represented by the Arya Samaj and the more orthodox stream represented mainly by the Sanatan Dharma Sammelans. It needs to be mentioned here that the two streams did not abandon their separate identities and courses of action with the formation of the Hindu Mahasabha. The two branches continued to clash over several religious, social and also political questions throughout the succeeding decades.² One of the most serious issues on which these streams differed was the issue of modalities of accommodating of castes within the

Hindu fold. Particularly important was the issue of untouchability and debates circled around the desired degree of intermixing among the castes and the relative sanctity of pollution norms. With the arrival of a perception of threat to the numerical integrity of the Hindu population, the Hindu Mahasabha could not be contented with declaring the issue of caste as a merely social problem and therefore delegate the responsibility of its resolution solely to subsidiary organizations. As an organized political outfit professing to safeguard and promote the interests of Hindus, it needed to intervene in this matter and work out a scheme agreeable to the contending groups of interest. The yearly conferences of the All India Hindu Mahasabha almost invariably contained resolutions seeking to address this issue.³ There were evident points of divergence which the leadership attempted to bridge through tactical political maneuvering and skillful jugglery of words.⁴ This maneuvering was at the topmost level of the organizational hierarchy. In most cases the executive levels of an organization only represented in very abstract terms the happenings on the ground. The workings of the provincial branches of the Hindu Mahasabha and the numerous branch Hindu Sabhas affiliated to them were not reflected in the resolutions adopted at the yearly all India conferences. These branch units tried to negotiate local realities within the matrix of local and regional political equations. A study of such negotiations and interactions with localized realities would bring into sharp relief the political and organizational direction in which the Hindu Mahasabha was heading.

The previous chapter had discussed the evolution of a pattern of organizational functioning of the Hindu Mahasabha in Bengal through a study of the areas of activity prioritized by the provincial leadership. While the previous chapter had focused on the experimentation of the politics of Hindu unity with a predominantly labouring population of a railway town, this chapter shall investigate the way in which the Hindu Mahasabha tried to interact with the issue of caste in Bengal, the diverse responses to this issue emanating from within the organizational ranks and finally analyse the functioning of the organization in Faridpur district of east central Bengal which had the largest concentration of Namasudra population in Bengal in order to find out the relative weight attached by the provincial and local leadership of the organizational structure to social and political questions in its quest to forge a united Hindu bloc and become one of the major actors in the checkered political landscape of Bengal in late 1920s. But before we delve into a full length discussion of the nature of

interaction of the Hindu Mahasabha with the problem of caste divisions and untouchability we shall briefly look at the course of progress of lower caste assertions in Bengal, particularly the Namasudras, the consolidation of caste identity, possible fissures within such a consolidation and the nature of political and social response to such a development among the lower castes.

Sumit Sarkar, in his work on the development of an incipient model of Hindutva in Bengal in the early twentieth century, has stressed upon several factors which created a conducive field for the beginnings of crystallization of Hindu communal discourse in Bengal. His work is particularly important in the context of the present discussion since it takes account of several works by other historians of this period and also discusses the impact of pressures exerted by lower caste assertions, which, Sarkar claims, contributed to the development of a proto Hindutva discourse.⁵ What were the factors that Sarkar identified to be contributing to the discourse of aggressive Hindu unity? Firstly, he indicates the importance of colonial policies in solidifying caste and communal identities. The number game inaugurated by Census operations and the contingent issue of representation on the basis of separate electorate made it essential for each community to press forward their claim to superior numerical strength. The Swadeshi movement for the first time impressed upon the bhadralok politicians the need to adopt mechanisms for mass mobilization. This need steered them towards a realization of the political importance of Muslims and lower castes. Thus, even though a demographic scare had already been floated by Census Commissioner O'Donnell way back in 1891, it was only when demographic strength became an important determinant in the struggle for power that fear of numerical loss from within the ranks of a community became effective in evoking widespread and passionate responses that stressed upon the inherent spirit of unity which cemented the different castes within a Hindu category.⁶ However, Census operations and colonial policies inaugurating number games in the struggle for modicum of power devolved by legislation for representative government in India were not the only stimulants of bhadralok ideology and politics. There were wider social, economic and cultural factors which also contributed to a perception of alarm among the higher caste politicians and public figures. There was an up-thrust among the Namasudras

which took concrete shape in 1872. It mainly started as an agrarian protest movement which foregrounded the question of honour of the caste group. This protest movement gradually gave birth to a dissident ideology among the Namasudras, and a variant of Vaishnavism was formulated as the new ideological order for Namasudras. This new ideology was named Matua Dharma and the subsequent sect that was formed commanded the unqualified following of an overwhelming majority of the community. What is important here is that this act of fission entailed rejection of the age old relationships of deference and local level patterns of domination now came to be seriously challenged. Shekhar Bandyopadhyay argues that the Namasudras embarked on such a course of action riding on their recent economic advancement through petty commodity production and their contacts with some educational opportunities.⁷ This development among the Namasudras was seen by a section of bhadralok commentators as a definite instance of lower caste assertion which should merit the immediate attention of Hindu upper castes. For, an article argued, if the rising tide of aspirations of the educated men of humbler castes were not catered to by the men of higher castes the former were surely to be lured away by Christian missionary machinations.⁸ Thus, Sarkar identifies sources of challenge to bhadralok upper caste hegemony which were independent of colonial discursive practices.

Pressure of lower caste assertion was not only exerted by an educated well to do section of a depressed caste. Sarkar points out certain developments in the agrarian relations of eastern Bengal, which he claims, had significantly added to the woes of the upper caste landholding interests. Referring to Nariaki Nakazato's work on the changing agrarian relations in eastern Bengal, Sarkar points out the tendency on the part of the landholding gentry to shift from cash rents to produce paying barga (sharecropping) tenures, particularly in the context of rising prices of food grains.⁹ The sharecroppers were not ready to dispense with this. J.C. Jack, the Settlement Officer of Bakarganj and Faridpur had estimated that if produce rents were translated into money terms they would amount to Rs.12-13 per acre as compared to prevailing cash rates of Rs.3-4 per acre.¹⁰ There were legal provisions by virtue of which the sharecroppers could legitimately oppose produce rent and apply for commutation in cash. They were assisted in this process by European settlement officials who initiated their work in Gaurnadi police station of Bakarganj in 1903-04. This area, apart from

being a stronghold of bhadrakol nationalist politics was also settled by a significant number of Namasudra peasants and sharecroppers. Out of 1164 applications for transactions in cash, all but 30 cases were granted commutations between June and August 1908, by the tribunals presided over settlement officers. This intervention by the colonial state in the emerging contours of class struggle in the east Bengal countryside immediately evoked adverse reactions from the upper caste gentry. Numerous false cases of rent arrears were filed against the sharecroppers. Petitions invoking the abject condition of poor Brahmin rent receivers struggling to make both ends meet started pouring into the offices of district authorities.¹¹ The Namasudras tried to put up a resistance for some time by withdrawing barga and other services. However, such actions could not be sustained for long in the face of overwhelming obstacles provided by the tenurial interests and the colonial state. Short lived as these agitations might have been, they were able to act as important indicators of important features of Bengal's political scenario and social life. As Shekhar Bandopadhyay argues, the Swadeshi Movement was marked by a prominent absence and active opposition of the Namasudras.¹² The difference that marked the everyday lives of the castes in Bengal was now thrown into sharp focus. This process was complete to such an extent that the spheres of political and social activity of the higher castes and the Namasudras would significantly diverge in the coming days. This divergence would then necessitate efforts by organized political forces dominated by higher castes to gain confidence of the Namasudras through adoption of different political strategies and create a linkage between their avowed political programmes and the differentiated agendas of the Namasudras. Before a critical discussion of such efforts by organized political forces let us pick up some samples of initial efforts to grapple with the situation.

We have already discussed about the alarm raised by U.N. Mukherjee's article. How did U.N. Mukherjee seek to combat the impending decline of the Hindu population which he predicted with such certainty? His concrete effort was that of persuading barbers and washermen to extend their services to untouchable castes such as Malis of eastern Bengal, without disturbing pollution taboos.¹³ The decision by the Census Commissioner Gait to reduce the number of castes under the category 'Hindu', had created the context for redefining the outlines of the community. Such a redefinition

stressed upon the unity and universality of the term Hindu, which included all adhering to a set of social customs. Relative importance within a structure of hierarchy or disabilities imposed upon a social group, the argument added, could not qualify as a criteria for membership of Hindu community. Importance was also added to the question of authentic origin.¹⁴ Papers like the *Bengalee* and *Modern Review* advocated, to a limited extent, the need for caste reforms. However, there were discordant voices as well. The *Dawn* magazine strenuously advocated the superiority of caste hierarchy vis-à-vis the western idea of rights. The paper *Nayak*, on December 1910, went to the extent of supporting Gait's move as a measure to thwart upward mobility of lower castes. However, it quickly backtracked when it learnt that such a move could be the indirect result of Muslim League's constant efforts to reduce the number of Hindus in Census enumerations. These were initial ideological reactions to the realization of fissures within the community which were now becoming glaring and engendering a sense of unease. We shall not venture into more examples of reactions here. The only point to be noted here is that, such a sense of unease had not yet generated any plans of action to engage with the situation. An article in *Modern Review* can be seen as an anticipation of such an enterprise.

Entitled 'What Can be Done for the Namasudras', it suggested the introduction of schools, free dispensaries and a partial relaxation of pollution taboos. This had to be done to save the Namasudra peasantry from the clutches of their half educated brethren and Christian missionaries who had 'instigated them to a suicidal agitation' against their landlords. The ultimate remedy lay in convincing them of their integrality to Hindu society.¹⁵ This article, perhaps unconsciously, sets the theme of later attempts to establish connection with the Namasudras. Firstly, something needed to be 'done' for the lower castes. Secondly, the direction of reform work by the upper castes had to be the construction of a unity which would either serve the hegemonic nationalist project of the Congress or the alternative hegemony desired by Hindu nationalists. Thirdly, such endeavours were not to be neglected, since failure here would entail corresponding nourishment of mass bases for Christian missionaries as well as the newly emerging apparently autonomous elite from among the ranks of the Namasudras.

Let us now shift our focus to organized efforts to draw in the Namasudras to the ambit

of activities represented by the political forces dominated mainly by a higher caste leadership. From the time of dissociation of the Namasudras with the swadeshi movement, there had been attempts to involve the Namasudras, now armed with a fresh awareness of community consciousness, within the broader stream of nationalist movement. Keshab Chandra Das, a man with Namasudra background who had nationalist sympathies, along with his brother, Mohini Mohan Das, started the Bengal Namasudra Association in 1912. However, we find that owing to the nationalist ties of Keshab Chandra, this association did not enjoy much favour with the Namasudras and it ultimately had to shed its links with the nationalist leadership after the onset of the Home Rule Movement in 1916.¹⁶ Indigenous efforts for the social uplift of the Namasudras through the Depressed Classes Mission, which introduced free schools for the children of the depressed classes, failed miserably owing to lack of funds.

There were efforts by Keshab Chandra Das to start a cooperative movement among the Namasudras. He founded the Namasudra Provident and Banking Cooperation. However, within few days, serious charges of embezzlement forced the investors in this cooperative to lodge complaints with the police, with the result that the Managing Agent was prosecuted for professional swindling and criminal misappropriation.¹⁷ Thus the entire project floundered within years of its inception and Namasudra confidence in nationalist initiative had further declined. The failure of these efforts was juxtaposed with the consistent government patronage of the Namasudras' plea for bettering their material conditions. This sponsorship was not only limited to measures that benefitted the elite of the newly community conscious group but reached down to humbler levels. Copious grants flowed in to help the educational endeavours of Namasudra children and liberal concessions (or promises of them) for employment opportunities were made for them.¹⁸ This created a situation in which in various Namasudra accounts the colonial government rather than the nationalist leadership came to be seen as proximal to the interests of caste consolidation. This attitude had express political manifestations as well. When the Home Rule Movement started in 1916, it met with serious opposition from the Namasudras, who resisted any attempt to oust the ruling dispensation which they thought had ushered prosperity unto them. The subsequent discussions on Montague Chelmsford reforms and the possibility of devolution of some amount of autonomy had greatly unnerved the Namasudra

leadership. They were apprehensive of an upper caste oligarchy taking over the reins of the government once this act was executed. In consequence, they demanded communal representation and special safeguards from the Governor at the provincial level to protect Namadsudra interests from being jeopardized by the 'oligarchy'.¹⁹ The Non-Cooperation movement, which had mobilized large sections of the masses for the first time in the history of the anti-colonial national liberation movement had similarly failed to excite either the elite leadership among the Namasudra consolidation or the Namasudra peasantry. Gandhi's call for better treatment of untouchables and the symbolic gestures of the Congress aimed towards breaking the ice between the nationalist leadership and the Depressed Classes lacked a practical value. C.R. Das had personally written to Guruchand Thakur, the most revered leader of the Namasudras and the head of the Matua sect, asking for his support. The latter refused any assistance. Mobilization for the movement was worst in Bakarganj which contained a large Namasudra population. In August 1921 Bhismedeb Das and Nirode Behari Das, two Namasudra members in the Council supported a resolution to welcome the Prince of Wales. In the conferences of the Bengal Namasudra Association of 1922 and 1923, resolutions were passed demanding greater access of the Namasudras to vocational education and stressing upon the need to limber up electoral mechanisms to prepare the community for upcoming elections.²⁰ Without making the list longer, we can therefore safely claim that the social hiatus that was thrown into sharp focus in the first decade of the twentieth century had now come to assume political forms. The constant support of the government for Namasudra causes had almost made it impossible to politically win over the Namasudras, which happened to some extent only in the late 1930s.

However, the political organizations did make some attempts to address the question of untouchability. These were carried out mainly among the Namasudra peasantry, who, from the beginning of the 1920s had started developing a trajectory of growth quite distinct from their elite counterparts. We shall therefore discuss the fissure which was slowly developing within the Namasudra community and then proceed to see the manner in which Gandhian program of removal of untouchability uplift attempted to interact with the condition of the Namasudras.

While the elite leadership slowly immersed itself into institutional politics, it tended

to overlook the issues concerning the mass of Namasudra peasantry. The Council elections of 1923 proved to be a major setback for a number of Namasudra leaders associated with the Bengal Namasudra Association and other organizations of the depressed classes not having links with the nationalist stream. The Namasudra peasantry however did not lose their community consciousness. In the days following the Non-Cooperation movement, the Namasudra peasantry engaged in a riot with their Muslim neighbours in May 1923. The friction was caused by some petty dispute in the village of Sripur in Faridpur district over the abduction of some cattle owned by a Namasudra family. This violence was actually a result of a gradual buildup of tension between the two communities which started from the time of non-cooperation movement. The entire course of the riot showed that mobilization was amazingly quick for both communities as thousands of people from a number of surrounding villages could be assembled in no time. Secondly, despite opportunities on both sides to catch the enemy by surprise and launch stealthy attacks, both sides desisted from such action. Shekhar Bandyopadhyay stresses on these indices and claims that more than an intention of attack, the rioters were driven by motivation of affirming the honour of the community which was at stake. Another interesting feature showed up in these riots. Unlike the previous Jessore Khulna riot between the Namasudras and the Muslims in 1911, the elite leadership chose to stay away from the scene of actual conflict.²¹ Even though this leadership had later taken part in negotiations and discussions with the police authorities to douse off the tensions, the area of action and the priorities of this group were no longer synchronous with the sphere of activity in which the peasantry operated. The later day developments within the Namasudra peasantry: its involvement in sharecroppers' struggle in alliance with Muslim peasants and the influence of the Krishak Praja Party among the Namasudra peasantry further consolidated this phenomenon of a fissured community.

How did the Congress, then, seek an interface with this fissured community? From the account of Shekhar Bandyopadhyay, it seems that its policy was twofold. Within the realm of Council politics, the Congress party in its Swarajist guise had chosen to operate, in matters concerning the affairs of depressed classes, through Mohini Mohan Das, C.R. Das' chief recruit from the Namasudra community. He was assigned with the responsibility of raising issues concerning the allocation of funds to schools of the depressed classes, ensuring proper accommodation for Namasudra boys studying in

various cities and so on. His arguments underlined the fact that the persistence of educational and material disabilities for the Namasudras created obstruction in the path for swaraj. The government was to be held responsible for the non-fulfillment of such demands and made the target of organized political activity by the Namasudras.²²

In the larger social arena, the Congress was stridently striving to establish amicable terms with the Namasudras, in the light of changed political circumstances. The Khulna conference of 1926 made some ceremonial gestures to break the barriers of caste. After the annulment of the Non-Cooperation movement, removal of untouchability became one of Gandhi's central programme. This had supposedly created great excitement among the Namasudras. However, Shekhar Bandyopadhyay states that owing to internal feuds within the organization, the party could not take full advantage of this enthusiasm. Furthermore, the rank and file of the party was perhaps more interested in political battles rather than programmes of social reform. Thus, Gandhi's programme evoked very little response from the organizers. The little opportunity that was presented to the Congress to create linkage with the vast mass of Namasudra population was lost for the time being.²³ We do not find any attempts by the Congress to mobilize the Namasudras into action in the closing years of the third decade of the twentieth century. However, in the extremely contested political landscape of Bengal, there were other players designing strategies to deal with this situation. The situation was ripe for the application of the numerous resolutions on caste that the Hindu Mahasabha had adopted. Several tendencies within Hindu Sabha and the Hindu Sangathan movement tried to intervene in this social flux. They represented several trends within the Hindu nationalist movement. The following section will investigate the attempts by the actors in the Hindu Sangathan movement to establish a connection with this fissured community. It will then introduce the role of the Hindu Mahasabha in harmonizing these apparently disjointed efforts. Such investigations and examinations will perhaps throw up a pattern of the working of the Hindu Mahasabha which ensued from its engagements with the social and political reality in Bengal. This pattern reflected its quest to be one of the contenders in the race for grasping political power by the consolidation of a target constituency.

Hindu Mahasabha's Entanglement with the Caste Question in Bengal

As we have mentioned in the preceding section, the annual conferences of the Hindu Mahasabha were replete with resolutions urging the provincial and branch sabhas to tackle the problem of disabilities imposed upon the lower castes head on. This was mainly done with the object of empowering and emboldening a large part of an imagined Hindu body politic which had so far remained deactivated. The envisioning of a political life of the community necessitated the activation and mobilization of this neglected group. However, the Hindu Mahasabha could not tiptoe to such an end. It was an organization whose leadership was either wholly or overwhelmingly upper caste²⁴ and most importantly, it represented both the movements for reform as well as the revivalist stream seeking to resuscitate Brahmanical orthodoxy. There were bound to be numerous responses to the problem of mitigation of the division within Hindu society created by caste, particularly in the light of the delicate political climate prevailing in late colonial India. The Bengal experience, too, evinces this pattern of multiple and differential response.

Let us begin with the most radical response emanating from a quarter which seems to have had close ties and working understanding with the Mahasabha. Swami Jnanananda of Saktimath, Parulia, Dacca, wrote a letter to the Secretary of the Bengal Provincial Hindu Sabha, presumably in the end of 1929. The letter contained certain formulations regarding the structure of caste system, judgements on the laws and codes of caste division laid down by the ancient lawmakers. Thereafter it put forward a course of action on which reform measures could be initiated. It said “the total number of Hindus in Bengal is two crores and eight lacs, and out of them one crore and ninety lakh are being called sudras by the (ancient) law maker Raghunandan...this vast sea of men signifies the Hindu society in Bengal. In the opinion of the conference the injustice and meanness shown to them by writers of Hindu scriptures such as Manu, Atri and others are quite unbecoming of manliness and urges that the above custom should be set aside at once.”²⁵ He went on to say that any initiative for social reform can only succeed once it is backed by the political power of the state and therefore urged the Hindus to participate in the freedom struggle to the fullest extent and make the attainment of Swaraj their immediate goal. Alongside the condemnation of meanness and injustice meted out to a large population by

designating them as Sudras, this letter contained a strong indictment of the ancient law makers. The latter were portrayed as alien to the soil of Bengal and therefore unable to do justice to its Hindu population. This line of attack which alluded to a kind of regional hegemony embedded in the fundamental nature of Hindu social customs was uncommon in the discourses of the Hindu Sabha. We, however, do not know how the provincial political leadership of the Mahasabha dealt with this proposal. Jnanananda had only mentioned that he would present these views in the forthcoming session of the provincial Mahasabha. Since we do not find any practical expression of the proposal in the everyday workings of the Mahasabha, the correspondence can best be viewed as one of the numerous attempts by the provincial leadership to establish contacts with sprawling *maths* and *akharas* in Bengal to explore their potentialities in consolidating the Hindu population of the locality.

We shall now shift to another brand of response espoused by a person closer to the political leadership of the provincial Mahasabha than Jnanananda. The annual session of the Provincial Mahasabha in 1929 held at Dacca had adopted a strong resolution to tackle untouchability. Swami Satyananda of the Hindu Mission was one of the chief speakers in this conference. The Namasudras of Dacca division had been fighting for some time with limited or no success for their right to enter temples. Emboldened by Satyananda's speech at the meeting of the Hindu Sabha, the Namasudras of the area met him and urged him to take up their cause. Satyananda wasted no time in responding to their call. On 29 August 1929, a meeting was held near the Munshiganj Kalibari, where Satyananda delivered an inspiring speech. Thereupon, it was decided that a procession would force its way into the Kalibari the next day. The police authorities geared up sensing impending breakdown of the law and order situation. Section 144 of the CrPC was promulgated, prohibiting the agitators from entering the temple. However, the band of processionists managed to violate the prohibitory arrangements and entered the temple. Even though they could not enter the sanctum sanctorum, they took possession of the courtyard. Thereafter, the possession of this courtyard continued and took the form of a satyagraha with bands of Namasudra men pouring in and occupying the precincts of the Kalibari in intervals. This satyagraha was soon to convert into a big affair in Dacca and attracted the attention of local politicians. The Munshiganj Bar Association, which was in charge of the management of the temple, refused to accede to the demands of the Namasudras. The local and

provincial level leadership of the Congress intervened to work out a settlement without success. In October 1929, the protesters clashed with the police and several local leaders who had joined in to express solidarity with the satyagraha were arrested. The government took notice of the developments at Munshiganj and took cautious steps so as not to alienate the Namasudras. However, neither government intervention nor that of solidarity by the local nationalists could solve the crisis. After a prolonged siege of nearly nine months by the Namasudra protesters, the local upper caste youth started an indefinite hunger strike, joined in by Satyananda to 'bring their elders to sense.' This had a tremendous impact in the area and the following day, local women mobilized to open the gates of the Kalibari to Hindus of all classes.²⁶ It is important to note here that the established caste organizations played only a marginal role in this entire episode. The Munshiganj satyagraha therefore represented an episode of radical struggle by the relatively unorganized masses of the Namasudra community to assert their rights and affirm their honour. The struggle was led by Satyananda of the Hindu Mission who had direct relations with the political leadership of the Hindu Mahasabha organization.

Yet, can it be claimed that the Hindu Mahasabha made unmediated political investment in this whole affair? Does the radicalness of Satyananda encapsulate the organizational and political approach of the Hindu Mahasabha? The evidence we have in our hands, points to the contrary.

Let us analyse a letter written on the day the satyagraha started, by Satyanand to Padamraj Jain, the secretary, Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha: "the non-Brahmins of Munshiganj have decided to enter the local Kali temple and for that purpose have commenced Satyagraha from this morning. Hundreds of volunteers are being enlisted."²⁷ This act of intimation by Satyananda clarifies the point that the Satyagraha was started without the prior knowledge of the provincial leadership.

Thus, any possibility of a planned move by the Hindu sabha to mobilize the Namasudras and involve them in agitative action can be ruled out. Let alone concerted planning, there were doubts in Satyananada's mind as to whether the executive committee of the Provincial Hindu Mahasabha could extend unqualified support to this Satyagraha. He urged upon Padamraj Jain to convene an executive committee

meeting of the sabha and express the opinion of the sabha on this question.

Perhaps sensing that this act might evoke hostile responses from the political leadership, Satyananda adds at the end of the letter, "I beg to inform you that this was undertaken in obedience to the resolution passed in the Dacca Conference."²⁸ The satyagraha continued in the meantime. We learn from Shekhar Bandyopadhyay that it was visited by Padamraj Jain.²⁹ What relationship then, did the political leadership of the Hindu Mahasabha have with the satyagraha? In a letter dated 16th March 1930, Satyananda writes to Padamraj Jain, "I have called a public meeting of the Namasudras and other untouchables of the Dacca District. The meeting will be held on the 19th and in consultation with our supporters we shall decide on an aggressive measure... I am awfully busy to make arrangements so that the fight may continue with redoubled strength even after my arrest. For this purpose I have called one hundred volunteers whom I intend to give sufficient training so as to enable them to carry the fight to its logical end..."³⁰ Interestingly, even as Satyananda speaks of his efforts at gathering a group of active participants, he does not implore any help from Padamraj regarding the procurement of volunteers. It can be deduced from this silence that the local Hindu sabhas affiliated to the provincial branch did not have much role to play in the organization of the satyagraha. Nor did the satyagraha depend much on the organizational strength of local Hindu leaders associated with the Hindu sabhas. The glaring silence of the local Hindu sabha leaders on this topic in their correspondences with the provincial secretary throughout 1930 also testifies to this fact.³¹ What did Satyananda then expect from Padamraj? The answer is evident in the second part of the above mentioned letter: "You have already spent a good sum for the fight, but without this amount the movement will collapse after my arrest... I hope if sufficient pressure is brought upon the Government it will try to meet the demands of the untouchables at this time when the educated classes have declared a fight against the government under the leadership of Mahatmaji."³² The first help that Satyananda therefore seeks from Padamraj is that of pecuniary assistance. In the second part he speaks of a plan to channelize the target of a social movement towards the government. It was perhaps here that the Hindu Mahasabha shared a relationship with the satyagraha. As an organized political outfit it wanted to act as a bargaining tool for the interests of the Hindus as a whole. Padamraj could be of assistance when

it came to political negotiations at the institutional level. Thus, the plane in which Padamraj acted and that of the satyagrahis was completely different. More than an interest in the planning and organization of the satyagraha, the political leadership maintained an apparently distant relationship with the course of its development. The organizers of the satyagraha realized that. They sought to avail of the services of the provincial leadership only when it came to issues exterior to the social content of the satyagraha- pecuniary help and negotiations with the state. This, then, was the nature of interaction of the Hindu Mahasabha with a radical lower caste assertion in Bengal. However, it does not sufficiently explain the contradictions within its rank and the functional approach of the Mahasabha regarding questions of caste. In order to understand this, we shall focus in the next section on the direct activities of the Hindu Mahasabha in Faridpur. This district contained one of the largest concentrations of Namasudra population. The functioning of the Mahasabha in this district would significantly reveal the practical handling of the question of caste by the local and provincial leadership.

Abinash Chandra Chatterjee was once an office bearer in the Mukshedpur Branch Hindu Sabha, Faridpur district. He resigned his position in the Mukshedpur branch sabha and shifted to Pangsha. In a letter dated 28th February 1927 written to Padamraj Jain, he explained the reason of his resignation. He speaks here of the extreme torpor of the members of his erstwhile Hindu sabha in carrying out the task of the organization. He says that he was disgusted with the lack of courage of the organizers and therefore could no longer continue to lead a band of men with whom he was having constant differences of opinion and attitude. It might be worth mentioning here that the Hindu Sabhas were active in organizing Saraswati pujas in various districts of eastern Bengal.³³ They intended the occasion to be one of public expression of solidarity within the Hindu society. Thus, there were sincere attempts to include people from all castes on these occasions. These were more to be occasions of orchestrated social gatherings rather than being strictly religious observances.

Abinash Chandra Chatterjee had attempted something similar in Mukshedpur in the beginning of 1927. He writes of his subsequent experience in this letter: "During the Saraswati Puja of the Hindu Sava, I determined to get together Hindus of all classes. No member (of the sabha) appeared there. I thought that I shall remove untouchability

in some respect during the 'Anjalidan'. But the members did not make their appearance in the Puja house. They said that they had puja in their own houses, so they could not appear. But I know that if they would come here, their pujas would not have been ruined. This (their absence) is due to their timidity only.”³⁴ The letter suggests explicit split within the top echelon of the branch sabha regarding the initiative to be shown in removing untouchability and the differentiated levels of importance attached to this particular social problem. Thus, if its organizational rank showed such marked divisions, the degree of schism within the Hindu society at large in Faridpur was evidently much greater. In order to tackle this division and simultaneously build up a semblance of cohesion, the Hindu Mahasabha embarked upon a course of action which started to reflect a discernible pattern by the beginning of 1929.

In the first phase, it concentrated upon campaigns stressing the catholicity of Hindu religion and building up of loci of Hindu unity. Let us discuss this point in detail. In a letter dated 6th November, 1928, Bishnu Charan Adhikary, Secretary, Gopalganj Hindu Sabha, informed Padamraj Jain about the activities of local Hindu Sabha.

He wrote: “thousands of men and women came to visit the celebration that very day (31st October). The so called high classes gave Anjali together with the so called lower classes and took prasad jointly. This part of the country is inhabited mainly by the Kapalis, Namasudras and Rajbansis. The Musalmans are not so strong here. On the day of Birashtami the Namasudra lathial played lathi to the entire satisfaction of the persons present. Lectures with lantern by Sarada Prasanna Vedshastri worked miraculously among the audience. I think if such lectures can be delivered among the orthodox Hindus they cannot but change their views and cruel ideas, and sufficient number of lecturers must be engaged so that such lectures may be delivered in every village of Bengal. Nothing but education can remove the cruelty of the so called upper classes.”³⁵ The focus of Bishnu Charan here is to spread awareness of the integrality of the different castes within the Hindu society. The feeling of unity could not be instilled only by lectures. It needed to have concrete, visible manifestations.

The local organizers of the Hindu sabha sought to do just that. We have already talked about how Sarbajanin Saraswati Pujas were employed as modalities to express the

social solidarity of Hindus of all castes. These saraswati pujas were given absolutely preeminent positions in the list of priorities of the local level organizers. Girindra Nath Roy Chowdhury of the Madaripur Hindu Sabha boasted in January 1928, how he took the help of released detenues of the Congress party to organize a very successful puja.³⁶ Bishnu Charan's public Durga Puja also seems to be one of such endeavours to create a social platform of Hindu unity which could host Hindus of all castes. The main target was to build a temple, a space which could symbolize the peaceful co-existence of different castes. And then, on the model of Hindu Rashtra Mandir there were attempts to build Kalibaris, which could act as a meeting ground of all Hindus.³⁷ However, these measures were only marginally successful in winning the confidence of the Namasudras. Their alienation from high caste political and social initiatives continued unabated. So did the high caste suspicion about the motives of the Namasudras – a letter from Girindra Nath Chowdhury to Padamraj Jain in January 1930 expressed deep suspicion about the political integrity of the Namasudras, reflected disgust at their continued alienation from higher caste politics and prescribed profuse use of money in the upcoming by elections for Faridpur south constituency to defeat the Namasudra candidate.³⁸

The next phase in the organizational maneuvering of the Mahasabha was that of instrumentalization of these spaces of symbolic Hindu unity. Glimpses of such strategies can be found in some correspondences between the local and provincial leadership which related the major incidents taking place in the life of the Hindu Sabha in Faridpur. Girindranath Roy Chowdhury, in a letter dated 6th July 1928 related the events of the past six months in Madaripur in the following manner: “on the occasion of the last Saraswati Puja, a Hindu procession attempted to pass a mosque known as Puran Bazar Mosque. Mr. Holman, Assistant Superintendent of Police, Madaripur mercilessly assaulted some of the boys and seriously mutilated some of the images. Even after that the police has instituted a rioting case against eight young (Hindu) men of the town... in connection with the above procession another case has been instituted against 13 young men under section 32 of the Cr.PC...”³⁹ The occasion of Saraswati Puja had to be effectively established as a true symbol of Hindu unity. Ceremonial acts of performance of rituals by people of all

castes was not a sufficient programme to project it as a legitimate centre confederating the activities of all Hindus. In order to be established as a space trying to activate Hindu activities, it needed to be vibrant. It thus required a programme which would be disruptive, one which could elicit attention. Nothing better than a show to demonstrate an effort to circumvent the structural barriers faced by Hindus could serve its purpose. Thus the Saraswati Puja procession with musical accompaniments attempted to pass a mosque in an effort to establish the rights of Hindus to uninterrupted observance of religious practices. Once, a larger impediment to the cause of Hindu life could be established, internal tensions within the community could be termed as secondary and therefore meriting lesser attention.

Thus a threat of Muslim aggression was sought to be constructed against which all Hindus irrespective of caste had to unite. This was a method by which by the local leadership sought to co-opt Namasudras within a larger framework, one which would be controlled solely by leaders representing a larger Hindu interest. Alongside the construction of a threat of Muslim aggression the activity of the Hindu sabha also made the colonial state a target. This is a theme to which we shall return shortly.

Meanwhile, perhaps, bolstered by the reception of the ruckus by the local Hindu population in January, another procession tried to pass the same mosque in March on the occasion of Doljatra festivities. It was once again apprehended. Girindranath complained that unable to find any fault with the processionists the Muslims had smuggled abir (vermilion) into the mosque and vilified the Hindus. The police was once again alleged to have taken the side of the Muslims as cases of rioting were instituted against three 'highly respectable (Hindu) gentlemen'. The writer also found himself wronged by the police, as, being unable to 'implicate' him in any of the cases of rioting, the police had instituted a defamation case against him. The instances of assertive action by the Hindus had created a degree of satisfaction in Girindranath. He claimed that it was due to such assertions of the Hindus that Muslims did not dare slaughter a single cow in the area on the occasion of Bakrid. We cannot ascertain how much these episodes affected the general population of Faridpur at large. But it is certain that pitting the projected centres of Hindu unity against a perceived threat of Muslim aggression had greatly consolidated the Hindu communal feelings of at least the local leadership of the Hindu Sabha.

Construction and consolidation of a larger identity feeling vis-à-vis a dangerous other was embarked upon which sought to transcend divisions of caste. However, the story of Hindu Mahasabha's entanglement with the reality of Faridpur does not end here.

We may recall here Padamraj Jain's wake up call to Santosh Chandra Das of Kharagpur urging him to be nationalist (politically), referred to in the previous chapter. Girindranath held the police entirely responsible for the sufferings of the Hindu 'youth' and 'gentlemen', booked in connection with the clashes. He claimed that the S.P. of Faridpur, Ajijur Haq, acted with malicious intent against the Hindus. He was also accused, by Girindranath, of atrocities against the Hindus at Dacca in 1927, of creating division among the Hindu police officers and giving a free hand to Muslim officers to 'oppress' the Hindus. He was also alleged to have deliberately hurt the feelings of the Brahmins of Gopalganj sub division by slaughtering a cow in a Brahmin village. Girindranath sought to remedy this situation by the following means: "in order to vindicate the claim of the Hindus, I have boldly told all superior government officers about the S.P. and have been most seriously pressing for his transfer. The sub divisional officer, who was a Hindu has suddenly been transferred but the S.P. has remained undisturbed. From this fact it is quite palpable that the policy of the administration of the Government is to encourage the Muslims against the Hindus." ⁴⁰ Thus Girindranath made his aim very clear. The Hindu Mahasabha was not to remain satisfied simply by the construction of a greater identity embracing all denominations of Hindus which drew sustenance from the projection of an omnipresent Muslim threat, as has been suggested by Shekhar Bandyopadhyay.⁴¹ The newly constructed identity needed to have a political direction. It was therefore prescribed to struggle with the colonial state and wrest political concessions from it. The struggles of the community were to be turned into a battle to gain rights from the state. This was the chief instrument through which the Hindu Mahasabha would aspire to contest the Congress. The Congress sought to organize masses and adopt strategies based on its idea of territorial nationalism. This nation was to be pitted against the colonial state. The Hindu Mahasabha employed an ethnic criteria to define an imagined community. The important point, however, was to identify/create concrete constituents and manifestations of this notional entity and immediately place it in a political battle against the colonial state. The journey of a politics of Hindu

unity in Bengal was therefore beginning to crystallize into a pattern by the end of the 1920s. Whatever the level of its success, the Hindu Mahasabha had emerged as a potential contender in the checkered political landscape of Bengal in the 1920s.

NOTES:

1. Shradhanand Sanyasi, Hindu Sangathan Saviour of the Dying Race,(New Delhi, 1926), 12
2. Richard Gordon, “The Hindu Mahasabha and the Indian National Congress, 1915 to 1926”, Modern Asian Studies 9, No.2 (1975): 160
3. Indra Prakash, A Review of the History and Work of the Hindu Mahasabha and the Hindu Sangathan Movement (New Delhi: AkhilBharatiya Hindu Mahasabha,1938), 161- 223
4. Bhuwan Kumar Jha, “Forging 'Unity': Hindu Mahasabha and the Quest for Sangathan”, Proceedings of the Indian History Congress 68, No.1 (2007): 1079
5. Sumit Sarkar, Beyond Nationalist Frames Relocating Postmodernism, Hindutvaand History, (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002), 81-95
6. Ibid., 85
7. Sekhar Bandopadhyay, Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947 (New Delhi: OUP, 2011), 30-60
8. Sarkar, “Beyond”, 86
9. Ibid., 88
10. Ibid., 89
11. Ibid., 90
12. Bandopadhyay, “Caste”, 76-80
13. Sarkar, “Beyond”, 83
14. Ibid., 84
15. Ibid., 91
16. Bandopadhyay, “Caste”, 100

17. Ibid., 108
18. Ibid., 101-106
19. Ibid., 115
20. Ibid., 116-120
21. Ibid., 131
22. Ibid., 138
23. Ibid., 138
24. Gordon, "The Hindu", 176
25. Letter from Swami Jnanananda, Saktimath, Parulia to Secretary, Bengal Provincial Hindu Sabha, File No.- 279B/25, WBSA, I.B. Section
26. Bandopadhyay, "Caste", 146-150
27. Letter from Swami Satyananda, Munshiganj, Dacca to the Secretary, Bengal Provincial Hindu Sabha, File No.- 279B/25, WBSA, I.B. Section
28. Letter from Swami Satyananda, Munshiganj, Dacca to the Secretary, Bengal Provincial Hindu Sabha, File No.- 279B/25, WBSA, I.B. Section
29. Bandopadhyay, "Caste", 149
30. Letter from Swami Satyananda, Munshiganj, Dacca to the Secretary, Bengal Provincial Hindu Sabha, 16/3/1929, File No.- 279B/25, WBSA, I.B. Section
31. Letter from Swami Satyananda, Munshiganj, Dacca to the Secretary, Bengal Provincial Hindu Sabha, 16/3/1929, File No.- 279B/25, WBSA, I.B. Section
32. Letter from Swami Satyananda, Munshiganj, Dacca to the Secretary, Bengal Provincial Hindu Sabha, 16/3/1929, File No.- 279B/25, WBSA, I.B. Section
33. Files of Faridpur Hindu Sabha and Bakarganj Hindu Sabha, 279H/25 and 279J/25, WBSA, I.B. Section
34. Letter from Abinash Chandra Chatterjee, Pangsha, Faridpur, to Padamraj Jain, Secretary, Bengal Provincial Hindu Sabha, 28/2/1927, File No.279H/25, WBSA, I.B. Section
35. Letter from Bishnu Charan Adhikary, Secretary, Gopalganj Hindu Sabha to Padamraj Jain, Secretary, Bengal Provincial Hindu Sabha, 6/11/1928, File No.279H/25, WBSA, I.B. Section
36. Letter from Girindra Nath Roy Chowdhury, Secretary, Madaripur Hindu

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37. Letter from Bishnu Charan Adhikary, Secretary, Gopalganj Hindu Sabha to Padamraj Jain, Secretary, Bengal Provincial Hindu Sabha, 6/11/1928, File No.279H/25, WBSA, I.B. Section
 38. Letter from Girindra Nath Roy Chowdhury, Secretary, Madaripur Hindu Sabha to Padamraj Jain, Secretary, Bengal Provincial Hindu Sabha, 18/1/1930, File No.279H/25, WBSA, I.B. Section
 39. Letter from Girindra Nath Roy Chowdhury, Secretary, Madaripur Hindu Sabha to Padamraj Jain, Secretary, Bengal Provincial Hindu Sabha, 6/7/1928, File No.279H/25, WBSA, I.B. Section
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