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Bengali Identity and the Birth of West Bengal: Syama Prasad Mookerjee's Contribution and a Forgotten History

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the historical circumstances surrounding the Partition of Bengal in 1947 and the emergence of West Bengal as a separate state within the Indian Union, focusing particularly on the political role of Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee. It explores the creation of West Bengal as a defining moment in Bengali identity, political representation, communal relations and cultural belonging. The study traces the evolution of Bengali nationalism and the political developments of the 1930s and 1940s, including the proposal for a united and sovereign Bengal advanced by Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy and Sarat Chandra Bose. Against the backdrop of communal violence in 1946, particularly the Great Calcutta Killings and the Noakhali violence, it analyses Mookerjee's advocacy for a separate West Bengal, his political mobilisation, public speeches and organisational initiatives. Special attention is given to the Tarakeswar Hindu Mahasabha conference in April 1947 and the Bengal Legislative Assembly's decision of 20 June 1947. The paper also acknowledges the human suffering, displacement and communal polarisation caused by Partition. It argues for a balanced reassessment of Mookerjee's contribution, situating his role within the wider complexities of Partition, historical memory and the formation of modern Bengali identity.

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Introduction: History, Collective Memory and Identity

History is one of the principal foundations of a community's collective memory, self-understanding and sense of existence. The history of a people contains the story of its origins and development, the record of its struggles and sacrifices, its cultural inheritance, social transformations, political rise and decline, and the lessons that shape its future. A community conscious of its past can investigate the sources of its achievements, learn from its failures and sustain confidence in difficult circumstances. By contrast, when a society neglects its history, forgets the experiences of earlier generations or reduces history to a merely formal subject of study, it becomes difficult for that society to understand its identity and the significance of its historical experience. Historical amnesia does not simply mean forgetting past events. It also involves losing the ability to draw lessons from earlier experiences, values, struggles and mistakes. When such amnesia affects a society's collective outlook and cultural consciousness, its sense of identity may weaken, its historical judgement may narrow and uncertainty may arise about the direction of its future.

A considerable part of the history surrounding the Partition of India in 1947, the argument suggests, has remained obscured from public understanding, with the result that the past has often been presented in a distorted or incomplete manner. When reliable historical information is not made accessible to younger generations, society risks becoming detached from its own history. This may also explain why the history of Bengali identity does not always evoke an adequate sense of historical awareness or pride. The paper argues that important aspects of the Partition, the creation of West Bengal and the leadership involved in that process have, over time, received insufficient attention or become entangled in contentious interpretations. These questions therefore deserve renewed examination through careful historical research.

The Partition of Bengal in 1947 was an event of exceptional complexity. It was connected simultaneously with the joy of independence, territorial separation, the displacement of people and the emergence of a new political identity. Its significance cannot be understood merely as an exercise in drawing administrative boundaries. Religious identity, Bengali linguistic and cultural affiliations, economic interests, political representation and competing visions of the future state were all involved. The present-day state of West Bengal emerged through this process. One political figure whose name is closely associated with the movement for its creation is Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee. In the political circumstances of late colonial India, and amid the confrontation with the Muslim League, his political judgement and determination contributed to the demand for a separate province. The paper maintains that he also played a decisive role in seeking protection for the social and cultural interests of a substantial section of Bengal's Hindu population.

His contribution, however, has become the subject of differing and sometimes polarised interpretations. A fresh assessment is therefore necessary.

The Political Background to the Partition of Bengal

The modern expression of Bengali nationalism became particularly visible in the early twentieth century. The anti-partition movement against Lord Curzon's division of Bengal, together with swadeshi mobilisation, the boycott movement, the growth of nationalist consciousness and political solidarity within Bengali society, played an important part in India's freedom struggle. The annulment of the Partition in 1911 gave the idea of an undivided Bengal renewed political significance. Yet Bengal's political circumstances changed considerably over the following decades. Under colonial rule, separate electorates, communal representation, economic inequalities, landlord–tenant relations and competition among political parties complicated relations between Hindus and Muslims. During the 1930s and 1940s, religious identity increasingly became an important basis of political mobilisation.

The Muslim League's demand for Pakistan and the Lahore Resolution of 1940 gave fresh momentum to this process. The provincial elections of 1937, the formation of ministries and subsequent political negotiations brought the Krishak Praja Party, the Muslim League, the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha into an increasingly complex contest for power. It was in this political environment that Syama Prasad Mookerjee emerged as a prominent leader of the Hindu Mahasabha. His political concerns centred on the representation, security and constitutional rights of the Hindu community. The League's demand for a separate Muslim state, articulated through the logic of the two-nation theory, intensified anxieties about Bengal's political future.

In undivided Bengal, leaders such as Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy considered political arrangements that included the idea of a sovereign Bengal or a larger eastern political unit. In early 1947, Suhrawardy and nationalist leaders such as Sarat Chandra Bose explored the possibility of an independent, united Bengal. They argued that partition would destroy Bengali solidarity and undermine the province's economic strength. A substantial section of Bengal's Hindu population, however, viewed this proposal with deep apprehension. Mookerjee and the Hindu Mahasabha feared that an undivided Bengal under the political influence of the Muslim League would leave Hindus as a vulnerable minority and place their religious, cultural and social interests at risk.

Two developments strengthened these concerns. First, the violence associated with Direct Action Day on 16 August 1946 in Calcutta, followed by the violence in Noakhali, created profound fear and insecurity among

many Bengali Hindus. Mookerjee regarded the Suhrawardy ministry's handling of the crisis as a failure of administration and impartiality. In his view, the security of Hindus could not be assured without a political arrangement in which they would not remain a permanently vulnerable minority. Second, the demographic composition of undivided Bengal raised questions about the political representation of its communities. Mookerjee argued that, under a province-wide democratic system, Hindus could be consistently marginalised because Muslims formed the majority. In this context, he rejected the proposal for an undivided Bengal and campaigned for a separate West Bengal.

Organising Bengali Hindus and Mookerjee's Political Role

In the changing political circumstances after 1939, Mookerjee became an influential voice in the political mobilisation of Bengal's Hindu population. Alongside his work as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Calcutta, he entered the Bengal Legislative Assembly in 1937 through the University constituency. Between 1940 and 1944, he served as a leading office-bearer of the All-India Hindu Mahasabha and as president of the Bengal Hindu Mahasabha. Through these roles, he remained active in articulating the political identity and claims of Bengali Hindus. For a period, from December 1941, he also served as Finance Minister in the ministry led by A. K. Fazlul Huq. He resigned in 1942 in protest against government repression during the Quit India Movement, particularly the treatment of people in Midnapore and elsewhere.

Mookerjee was again elected to the Bengal Legislative Assembly in 1946 from the University constituency. During the communal violence in Calcutta, he assisted people affected by the attacks and helped organise young volunteers to resist further violence. The paper refers to the formation of a Hindu National Guard volunteer organisation during this period. Mookerjee was also elected to the Constituent Assembly from Bengal. His legislative speeches between 1937 and 1947 repeatedly raised the issue of violence and discrimination affecting Bengali Hindus. The paper cites Assembly proceedings concerning the Great Calcutta Killings, the Noakhali violence and the Chandpur riots as evidence of the issues he raised.

During the Calcutta violence, Mookerjee became one of the prominent political voices claiming to represent the fears of the Hindu community. The paper records his severe criticism of Suhrawardy, including the remark that he was 'the best goonda' available not merely in the province but, in Mookerjee's words, throughout the world. It also refers to the account of historian Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, who alleged that Suhrawardy had been involved in the planning and organisation of the Calcutta violence. The paper further notes that, within two months of the Calcutta killings, communal violence spread to Noakhali in eastern Bengal. Citing Majumdar's account, it refers to reports of killings, arson, sexual violence and forced conversions.

The Cripps Mission of 1942, the Wavell Plan of 1945, the Cabinet Mission of 1946, the Mountbatten Plan of 1947 and the Radcliffe boundary-making process formed part of the wider political and constitutional developments surrounding independence and Partition. The paper argues that Mookerjee recognised the implications of the Muslim League's growing demand for Pakistan and interpreted it as a warning of the possible fragmentation of India. At the Surma Valley and Shillong Hill District Hindu Conference, held on 6–7 April 1940, he warned that the Pakistan movement should not be dismissed lightly and called upon those committed to Hindustan to oppose the demand. In a speech at the Mahakoshal Provincial Hindu Conference on 7 December 1940, he criticised the two-nation theory and the demand for a separate Muslim state within India.

The Tarakeswar Conference and the Demand for a Separate West Bengal

As communal tensions intensified through the Noakhali episode and the Calcutta violence, the Tarakeswar conference became an important moment in the politics of Bengal's partition. The Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha held its historic conference at Tarakeswar from 4 to 6 April 1947. At a time when political debate over Bengal's future was becoming increasingly urgent, the conference gave the demand for partition a clearer political form and an organisational foundation. Some Congress leaders were also concerned that if the whole of Bengal became part of Pakistan, eastern India would face serious political, economic and strategic difficulties. Particular concern was expressed about the port of Calcutta, the industrial region, communications and the connection between north-eastern India and the rest of the country. The demand that Hindu-majority areas of Bengal remain within the Indian Union consequently began to receive support beyond the Hindu Mahasabha, including from sections of the Congress.

In February 1947, the Hindu Mahasabha formed a committee to work towards the creation of a separate province for Bengal's Hindus and subsequently organised support for partition in different districts. The Tarakeswar conference, held under the chairmanship of Nirmal Chandra Chatterjee, was a significant stage in this campaign. Addressing the conference on 5 April, Mookerjee argued that partition offered the only practical solution to Bengal's communal problem. He stated: 'I can conceive of no other solution of the communal problem in Bengal than to divide the province and let the two major communities residing herein live in peace and freedom.' The paper also notes that he welcomed the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee's position in favour of partition.

The Hindu Mahasabha leadership argued that even if Pakistan did not come into existence, a separate province comprising Bengal's Hindu-majority areas would still be necessary. Addressing a public meeting in New Delhi on 22 April 1947, Mookerjee maintained that the demand for separation should not depend

upon whether Pakistan was conceded. Even if the Cabinet Mission's proposal for a weak and loose centre were accepted, he argued, a new province consisting of Bengal's Hindu-majority areas should be created. At that time, Syama Prasad Mukherjee sent him a very important message - "The Hindu Mahasabha leaders were adamant on this issue and in order to make it a reality, S.P. Mukherjee sent a cable to Lord Listowel, Secretary to State for India and Sir Stafford Cripps, which stated: Pakistan or no Pakistan, in the interest of the peace and harmony and the political and economic advancement of the people, it is essential that a separate province including Calcutta which have 75% Hindus, must be created in Bengal comprising Hindu majority areas which will remain in Indian Union. We are against the division of India but if Pakistan is conceded against our will, separation of Hindu majority areas in Bengal is inseparable as indeed suggested in the Cabinet Mission scheme of May 16, 1946.

When Lord Mountbatten travelled to London in connection with the transfer of power, Mookerjee sent communications to British officials, including Lord Listowel and Sir Stafford Cripps. He argued that, whether or not Pakistan was created, a separate province including Calcutta and the Hindu-majority areas of Bengal was essential for peace, political stability and economic development. Such a province, he insisted, should remain within the Indian Union. He opposed the division of India, but maintained that if Partition were imposed, the separation of Bengal's Hindu-majority areas was unavoidable.

In a letter to Mountbatten dated 2 May 1947, Mookerjee reiterated that Punjab and Bengal needed to be divided, irrespective of whether India as a whole was partitioned. He referred to Bengal's large territory and population and argued that administrative convenience was not the only consideration. In his assessment, communal misgovernment and administrative disorder had left Hindus in Bengal severely disadvantaged despite their contribution to the province's development. He also discussed the question of population exchange. The paper reproduces his argument that transferring millions of Hindus from an undivided Bengal would be practically impossible, whereas partition would make population movement comparatively more manageable. These statements reflect the contemporary political anxieties and proposals recorded in the correspondence; they should also be understood in the context of the enormous human consequences that followed Partition.

On 7 May 1947, Mookerjee sent a cable to Lord Listowel arguing that if India were partitioned, Bengal's Hindu-majority areas must also be separated. He called for the replacement of the existing ministry, which he believed had failed to maintain peace and order, and proposed the formation of separate regional ministries for eastern and western Bengal.

Political Opposition to the Proposal for a United Bengal

While Mookerjee travelled across Bengal to build public support for partition, Sarat Chandra Bose did not, according to the paper, undertake a comparable public campaign in support of his proposal for a united sovereign Bengal. Instead, he communicated his opposition through statements and correspondence. Mookerjee strongly challenged the proposal associated with Bose and Suhrawardy. The paper quotes an account in which Mookerjee dismissed Suhrawardy's promised 'paradise' as wholly unconvincing in view of the conditions then prevailing in Bengal. Mookerjee and many other Hindus suspected that the proposal for a sovereign united Bengal could ultimately facilitate the inclusion of the whole province in Pakistan through an understanding with Jinnah.

The Amrita Bazar Patrika, a daily newspaper, describes the Congress–Mahasabha alignment as instrumental in securing West Bengal as a Hindu-majority province within a divided India. Bengali Hindus, faced with what they regarded as limited political alternatives, supported the division of Bengal and the province's continued association with India. It also notes that several political figures, including Sarat Bose's brother Satish Bose and Kiran Shankar Roy, supported partition. Jinnah, the paper observes, obtained Pakistan but described it as 'moth-eaten' because he lost East Punjab and West Bengal.

Bengali intellectuals also participated in the debate. At a public meeting in New Delhi on 22 April 1947, historian Surendranath Sen reportedly spoke in support of Bengal's partition. On 7 May, five distinguished scholars and scientists—Sir Jadunath Sarkar, Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, Meghnad Saha, Shishir Mitra and Suniti Kumar Chatterji—sent a cable to Wavell. They expressed concern that continuing communal violence had endangered life and property and had damaged education, business and industry. They argued that the existing ministry had failed to maintain law and order and that a separate province including Calcutta was necessary. Similar communications were sent to Stafford Cripps and John Anderson.

On 15 May 1947, the Congress rejected the proposal for a sovereign Bengal. The Muslim League high command also declined to accept the proposed arrangements for equal representation and a 50:50 division of power in the legislature and administration. The proposal advanced by Suhrawardy and Sarat Bose consequently lost crucial political support. Mookerjee also wrote to Jawaharlal Nehru, urging that the idea of a sovereign Bengal should not be taken seriously. He argued that even under a weak central arrangement envisaged by the Cabinet Mission, Hindus would have no adequate security in Bengal, and therefore demanded the creation of two provinces from the existing territory of Bengal, whether or not Pakistan came into being.

In this crisis, Mookerjee maintained that if India was to be divided on communal lines, Bengal could not be handed over in its entirety to Pakistan or to an arrangement in which the security of its Hindu population could not be guaranteed. His position was that Bengal should remain undivided if India remained united; but if India were partitioned on communal lines, Bengal too should be divided so that a part of it could remain within India. He worked to bring together the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha, non-political Bengali intellectuals, sections of the Congress and members of the Bengal Legislative Assembly. Memoranda submitted to Mountbatten and senior British officials stressed the economic and strategic importance of keeping Calcutta and the Hindu-majority areas of western Bengal within India.

20 June 1947: The Constitutional Decision to Divide Bengal

20 June 1947 was a decisive date in the history of West Bengal's creation. On that day, members of the Bengal Legislative Assembly met in separate sessions, in accordance with the 3 June Mountbatten Plan, to decide the province's future. Representatives of the Muslim-majority districts opposed partition and voted in favour of determining the future constitution through a separate Constituent Assembly. Representatives of the non-Muslim-majority areas, by contrast, voted for the partition of Bengal and the creation of a separate West Bengal. The process of partition thus received formal legislative approval.

According to the figures cited in the paper, representatives of the non-Muslim-majority areas voted 58 to 21 in favour of partition, while representatives of the Muslim-majority areas voted 106 to 35 against it. The significance of this decision was far-reaching: the demand for a distinct provincial identity in the western part of Bengal was accepted through a constitutional process. The votes of the 58 members in favour of partition helped establish the legal and constitutional basis for the emergence of West Bengal within the geographical map of India. The paper attributes an important role in this outcome to the movement for Bengal's partition led by Mookerjee. His firm position, changes in the outlook of Congress leaders, initiatives by other political actors, shifts in public opinion, communal conflict and the British plan for the transfer of power all contributed to the final decision.

The date should therefore not be treated as an incidental entry in the calendar. It marks a significant moment in the political struggle over territorial identity and state formation in eastern India. The suffering caused by Partition was real and immense; equally, the creation of a province that remained within India was also a historical outcome. The paper argues that Mookerjee's political resolve helped ensure that West Bengal emerged as a constituent state of the Indian Union. It further connects the demand for a separate province with the experiences of communal violence and persecution faced by sections of the Hindu population in

eastern Bengal, including in the period before the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. These arguments, the paper suggests, demonstrate the strategic thinking of Mookerjee and other political leaders of the time.

Historical Assessment and the Problem of Contemporary Memory

Mookerjee's role in the creation of West Bengal is interpreted differently by historians and political commentators. Some critics argue that the Partition inflicted severe damage on Bengal's culture and economy and caused the displacement and suffering of millions. From this perspective, responsibility must be attached to the political process that divided the province. Others maintain that, had Mookerjee not taken a forceful position at that critical moment, the whole of Bengal might have faced the possibility of becoming part of Pakistan. In that event, the geographical boundaries and political status of present-day West Bengal might have been very different. The paper contends that prolonged political polarisation and selective treatments in textbooks have sometimes presented this complex chapter in a one-sided manner, contributing to the marginalisation of Mookerjee's wider role in popular memory.

The history of Bengali identity is marked by plurality and tension. West Bengal emerged from the conflict between, on the one hand, the emotional attachment to an undivided Bengal and the aspiration for Bengali unity and, on the other, the lived experience of communal violence and the struggle for political security. Mookerjee's political judgement and uncompromising leadership formed one important force in this complex process. Only by examining the relationship between political ideals and historical realities without prejudice can the history of Bengal's Partition and the creation of West Bengal be understood in its full complexity.

The Partition of 1947 raised fundamental questions about Bengali identity. For centuries, the Bengali language and culture had provided a shared framework for the lives, literature, music, customs and social relationships of Hindus and Muslims. During Partition, however, religious identity became one of the principal bases for determining political boundaries. Bengalis consequently faced difficult questions: should the primary foundation of their identity be language and culture, or religious community? Could territorial division on the basis of religious majorities be accepted as a means of protecting the security and political rights of a community, even at the cost of linguistic and cultural unity?

Mookerjee's position represented one specific political answer to this crisis. He believed that if the idea of an undivided Bengal could not ensure the political security of Hindu-majority areas, the creation of a separate West Bengal was the more practicable solution. From this perspective, the security and political identity of Bengali Hindus received particular emphasis. Supporters of a united Bengal, however, believed

that religious partition would damage Bengal's long cultural inheritance and the economic interdependence of its regions. They feared that the linguistic and cultural unity of the Bengali people would be fractured by a political boundary. Both positions must be examined in their contemporary context.

It is difficult to understand the anxieties of a large section of the Hindu population in western Bengal without considering Mookerjee's political concerns. Equally, an unconditional endorsement of his position would risk overlooking the human catastrophe caused by Partition, the deepening of communal divisions and the alternative political possibilities that were debated at the time. The crisis of Bengali identity was therefore not simply a history of Hindu–Muslim conflict. It involved, simultaneously, language, religion, citizenship, political representation and competing forms of allegiance to the state.

Four Dimensions of Mookerjee's Contribution

Mookerjee's contribution may be assessed from at least four perspectives. First, political organisation and the formation of public opinion: he helped turn the demand for a separate province, with western Bengal remaining within India, into an organised political programme. Through speeches, political mobilisation and opposition to the proposal for a united Bengal, he brought the issue into the public domain.

Second, security and political representation: his speeches gave prominence to the future, political rights and cultural security of the Hindu-majority areas. These concerns need to be assessed against the background of communal violence and political uncertainty in 1946–47.

Third, the relationship between West Bengal and the Indian Union: Mookerjee advocated a political arrangement in which western Bengal would remain outside Pakistan and form part of the Indian Union. This position was significant in the movement to establish West Bengal as a separate province. His letter to Jawaharlal Nehru dated 14 May 1947, cited in the paper, is presented as evidence of this political position.

Fourth, the limitations and controversies of his politics: by supporting the determination of territorial boundaries on the basis of religious identity, his politics became part of the wider process of communal polarisation. His contribution cannot be assessed adequately without acknowledging the long-term cultural and human consequences of the division of Bengali society. Chhanda Chatterjee's study, Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the Hindu Dissent and the Partition of Bengal, 1932–1947, is identified in the paper as an important scholarly work that examines his position beyond a simplified division between hero and villain, situating it instead within contemporary documents and political circumstances.

Recognising Mookerjee's historical contribution and critically evaluating his political ideology are not mutually exclusive tasks. A more balanced interpretation becomes possible precisely when both are undertaken together.

Reassessing a 'Forgotten History': The Responsibility of Historiography

Although the phrase 'forgotten history' appears in the title of this paper, it raises an important question: which aspects of history have been forgotten, by whom, and for what reasons? The fact that a particular aspect of the past receives limited attention in public memory or textbooks does not necessarily mean that it has been entirely erased. The question must instead be investigated through an analysis of competing historical interpretations, political memory and the changing directions of scholarship.

Historical writing on Mookerjee's role reflects different perspectives. Some accounts present him as one of the principal architects of West Bengal. Critical scholarship, on the other hand, analyses the limitations of his Hindu nationalist politics and its role in the Partition of Bengal. Haimanti Roy's research, as cited in the paper, demonstrates that public debate in Bengal during 1946–47 included a range of possible positions and active political disagreements about the province's future. Partition should therefore not be treated as the only imaginable or inevitable outcome; the political alternatives available at the time also deserve serious consideration.

A reassessment of the history of West Bengal's creation is particularly important in this context. Rather than allowing present-day political preferences or vested interests to determine the narrative, historians should present the past to younger generations through an impartial and evidence-based method. Such an approach would enable Mookerjee's contribution to be assessed more appropriately while also bringing out the complex and multidimensional history of West Bengal's formation.

Ultimately, the history of Bengali identity and the creation of West Bengal cannot be reduced to a single individual, a single political organisation or a single interpretation. It emerged from the interaction of competing nationalisms, communal anxieties, constitutional negotiations, regional interests, political mobilisation and the lived experiences of ordinary people. A humane and rigorous historiography must acknowledge both the political calculations that shaped the decision and the human cost borne by those who experienced Partition. Only such a balanced approach can do justice to the historical complexity of 1947.

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