

The Bengal Partition and Political Contestations: Shyama Prasad Mukherjee's Influence

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Abstract: *The study explores the political and communal dynamics of Bengal leading up to the 1947 partition, with a particular focus on the role of Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee in contesting the United Bengal proposal and advocating for the creation of West Bengal within the Indian Union. By examining the interplay between escalating communal tensions, electoral outcomes, and social unrest, the research highlights how Mukherjee leveraged his leadership of the Hindu Mahasabha to mobilize Bengali Hindus through political campaigns, grassroots activism, and strategic alliances. Drawing on archival letters, speeches, newspaper reports, and contemporary scholarly analyses, the study demonstrates Mukherjee's ideological and organizational impact in shaping the discourse surrounding Bengal's partition. The findings underscore the significance of leadership, communal mobilization, and policy advocacy in influencing historical outcomes during critical transitional periods*

Keywords: Bengal Partition, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, United Bengal, Hindu Mahasabha, communal politics, political mobilization, 1947, West Bengal

I. INTRODUCTION

The partition of Bengal in 1947 occurred against a backdrop of escalating communal tensions and political negotiations that reshaped the Indian subcontinent during the final phase of British colonial rule. By the mid-1940s, the All-India Muslim League, under Muhammad Ali Jinnah, demanded Pakistan as a separate homeland for Muslims, while the Indian National Congress and other nationalist voices opposed a divided India. In the **1946 Bengal Legislative Assembly election**, the Muslim League achieved a decisive victory, expressing support for inclusion of Bengal within Pakistan, which intensified anxieties among the Hindu population in the province.

Shyama Prasad Mukherjee (1901–1953) was a prominent Bengal Hindu Mahasabha leader who became a central figure in the contestations over Bengal's political future. Appointed president of the Akhil Bhartiya Hindu Mahasabha in 1943, Mukherjee grew increasingly convinced that the proposed "United Bengal" scheme—backed by Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy and Sarat Chandra Bose, which envisaged an independent, undivided Bengal separate from both India and Pakistan—would leave Hindu Bengalis politically marginalized and at risk of domination under a Muslim-majority administration. In April **1947**, the Mahasabha authorised him to pursue measures that would "ensure the partition of Bengal," and in **May 1947** he wrote to Governor-General Lord Louis Mountbatten asserting that Bengal should be partitioned "even if India was not."

Mukherjee's articulation of a Bengali Hindu homeland movement rested on a belief—shaped in part by the **Calcutta communal riots of August 1946** and the **Noakhali violence later that year**—that the safety and cultural identity of Hindus in Bengal could only be preserved through a territorial partition aligning with religious majorities. While his approach rested on communal criteria that remain contested by historians, Mukherjee mobilised public opinion, urged political action, and opposed alternative visions such as the united Bengal proposal, contributing to debates that shaped the contours of Bengal's division and the establishment of *West Bengal* as part of the Indian Union.



1.1. The Background of the Study

In the tumultuous backdrop of **British India's final decolonization phase**, the future of **Bengal (1946–1947)** became a focal point of communal contestation: the **Muslim League's victory in the 1946 Bengal elections**, where it won a decisive majority, strengthened calls to include the entire province in **Pakistan**, while Hindu leaders feared marginalization under Muslim-majority rule, especially after the **Calcutta riots in August 1946** and violent upheavals in Noakhali later that year. Against this context, **Shyama Prasad Mukherjee (1901–1953)**, then president of the **Akhil Bhartiya Hindu Mahasabha**, argued that an independent united Bengal—championed by leaders like Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy and Sarat Chandra Bose—“would be a virtual Pakistan,” jeopardizing the political and cultural security of Bengali Hindus; he therefore spearheaded the demand for the partition of Bengal on communal lines, forming the **Bengal Partition League** and in **May 1947** writing to **Governor-General Lord Mountbatten** that “Bengal must be partitioned even if India was not,” asserting that Hindus had “suffered ... in every sphere of national activities, educational, economic, political and even religious” under prevailing conditions. While Mukherjee's advocacy was controversial and remains debated in historiography, his mobilization around the communal contours of Bengal's future contributed to the establishment of **West Bengal within the Indian Union** following the June 1947 decisions, shaping the province's political destiny in the closing chapter of the subcontinent's colonial history.

1.2. The Need and Significance of the Study

The study on The Bengal Partition and Political Contestations: Shyama Prasad Mukherjee's Influence is significant as it sheds light on a critical juncture in Indian history where political, communal, and ideological forces intersected to shape the subcontinent's destiny. Understanding the political and communal conditions in Bengal prior to 1947 (O1) provides insights into the factors that escalated tensions between Hindu and Muslim communities, leading to the eventual partition. Analyzing Mukherjee's role in opposing the United Bengal proposal and advocating for partition (O2) helps contextualize the strategies and motivations of nationalist leaders navigating a volatile political environment. Additionally, assessing the impact of Hindu Mahasabha policies on Bengali Hindu mobilization during 1946–1947 (O3) contributes to a nuanced understanding of communal politics, leadership dynamics, and grassroots activism, offering valuable lessons for historiography, political science, and the study of nation-building processes in colonial and post-colonial contexts. This research not only illuminates the historical importance of Mukherjee's leadership but also underscores the enduring consequences of the Bengal partition on regional identity, communal relations, and political discourse in India (Chakrabarty, 2007; Mukherjee, 1947).

1.3. The Research Questions

RQ₁: What were the key political and communal conditions in Bengal that contributed to the partition in 1947?

RQ₂: How did Shyama Prasad Mukherjee influence the debate over the United Bengal proposal, and what strategies did he employ to advocate for the partition?

RQ₃: In what ways did the policies and activities of the Hindu Mahasabha shape the political mobilization of Bengali Hindus during 1946–1947?

1.4. The Objectives of the Study

O₁: To examine the political and communal conditions in Bengal leading up to the partition in 1947.

O₂: To analyze **role** Shyama Prasad Mukherjee's in contesting the United Bengal proposal and advocating for partition.

O₃: To assess the influence of Hindu Mahasabha policies on Bengali Hindu political mobilization during 1946–1947.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Ganguly, A. (2026). *Mookerjee and Bengal's unravelling*. This contemporary analysis focuses on the 125th birth anniversary of Mookerjee, re-evaluating his early administrative tenures at Calcutta University as a precursor to his political strategy. Ganguly argues that Mukherjee's 1940s contestations were a defense against the "Islamist



consolidation" in Bengal. The literature of this year emphasizes Mukherjee's foresight regarding the "United Bengal" plan, which he successfully branded as a "Virtual Pakistan," thereby shifting the *Bhadralok* consensus toward partition.

Das, T. (2026). *Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee: The rescuer of the Bengali Hindus from the United Bengal movement.* Published in the *Vidyasagar University Journal*, this article provides a granular look at the 1947 Gallup poll by the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*. Das highlights that Mukherjee's influence was so pervasive that 98.3% of responding Hindus favored partition. The study frames Mookerjee as a pragmatic "precursor to self-respect," who leveraged the Mountbatten Plan to ensure West Bengal remained part of India.

Chakraborty, D. (2023). *Paschimanga Dibas and the role of Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee in creating West Bengal.* This work explores the "West Bengal Day" (June 20) movement. It argues that Mukherjee's success lay in his ability to unite diverse Hindu factions—including Dalit leaders like P.R. Thakur—against the Muslim League's dominance. The literature here emphasizes Mookerjee famous retort to Nehru: "You divided India, I divided Pakistan," framing the partition of Bengal as a proactive victory for the Hindu minority.

Bandyopadhyay, S., & Basu, R. (2022). *Caste and partition in Bengal: The story of Dalit refugees, 1946–1961.* While Mookerjee is often associated with upper-caste politics, this seminal 2022 study examines the political contestations involving Dalit communities. It notes how Mookerjee's Hindu Mahasabha competed with the Scheduled Castes Federation for the loyalty of "Namashudra" voters, ultimately influencing the border-making process through communal-political mobilization.

Sarkar, J. (2020). *Fed by famine: The Hindu Mahasabha's politics of religion, caste, and relief in response to the Great Bengal Famine, 1943–1944.* This article in *Modern Asian Studies* provides a critical look at how Mookerjee used the humanitarian crisis of the 1943 famine to build a grassroots political base. By organizing relief through the Hindu Mahasabha, Mookerjee contested the Muslim League government's perceived neglect of Hindu victims, effectively using relief activism as a tool for political mobilization that would later fuel the partition movement.

2.1. The Research Gap

Despite extensive scholarship on the Bengal partition and Shyama Prasad Mukherjee's political activism, gaps remain in fully connecting the broader political and communal conditions with the specific strategies Mukherjee employed to contest the United Bengal proposal and the mechanisms through which the Hindu Mahasabha mobilized Bengali Hindus during 1946–1947. While recent studies highlight Mukherjee's foresight, influence on public opinion, and engagement with upper-caste and Dalit communities (Ganguly, 2026; Das, 2026; Bandyopadhyay & Basu, 2022), few works systematically integrate the interplay between grassroots communal tensions, institutional policies, and Mukherjee's political interventions in a comprehensive historical framework. This study addresses this gap by examining the confluence of political conditions, leadership decisions, and organizational strategies that shaped the partition of Bengal.

III. THE METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The content analysis of this study focused on examining primary and secondary sources, including archival letters, speeches, contemporary newspaper reports, and scholarly articles, to understand the political and communal dynamics surrounding Bengal's partition. Special attention was given to Shyama Prasad Mukherjee's correspondence with Governor-General Mountbatten, his public addresses, and Hindu Mahasabha resolutions to trace strategies for mobilizing Bengali Hindus against the United Bengal proposal. Newspaper editorials and opinion surveys, such as those conducted by *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, were analysed to gauge public sentiment and the effectiveness of Mukherjee's campaigns. This approach allowed the study to identify recurring themes of communal anxiety, political activism, leadership intervention, and organizational mobilization, highlighting how strategic communication and policy advocacy shaped both public opinion and political outcomes during 1946–1947.



IV. THE ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

O₁: To examine the political and communal conditions in Bengal leading up to the partition in 1947.

In the mid-1940s, Bengal, one of British India's most politically charged provinces, found itself at the centre of escalating political and communal tensions that ultimately shaped its partition in 1947. These tensions had deep roots: the Muslim majority in eastern Bengal increasingly rallied behind the All-India Muslim League's call for a separate Muslim homeland following its Lahore Resolution of 1940, while significant Hindu and other communities grew wary of being politically marginalized in a united province under Muslim League dominance. This polarization was starkly exposed on 16 August 1946, when the Muslim League called for Direct Action Day to press its demand for Pakistan, proclaiming that the only choices were "either a divided India or a destroyed India" — a statement that encapsulated the high stakes of communal politics at the time. The League's call triggered the infamous Great Calcutta Killings, a brutal four-day communal conflagration in which thousands of Hindus and Muslims perished and tens of thousands were left homeless as entire city neighborhoods succumbed to violence and retaliatory attacks; the riots not only shattered social harmony but also signaled a profound breakdown in political dialogue and trust between communities in Bengal.

These outbreaks were not isolated incidents but part of a broader pattern of communal strife across the region in 1946–47, reflected in subsequent violent episodes such as the Noakhali disturbances and the Bihar riots, which fed cycles of reprisal and fear that extended beyond Bengal's borders and intensified concerns over safety and political futures for both Hindus and Muslims. Simultaneously, economic and social grievances — including peasant movements like the Tebhaga agitation of 1946–47, which challenged entrenched landlord hierarchies — intersected with communal cleavages, as political organisations sought to convert economic discontent into religious or political mobilization. In urban contexts like Calcutta, communal violence reshaped everyday life: entire districts became segregated along religious lines, and a profound mistrust developed as people began to avoid contact with neighbours of different communities. Amid this volatile atmosphere, political actors at various levels adopted hardened positions that reflected and reinforced communal divides. The Bengal legislative elections of 1946 — conducted on limited communal electorates — had already exposed deep political fissures, with the Muslim League securing a commanding position in Muslim seats and the Hindu community fragmented among different political parties. Intensifying debates over Bengal's future — whether as part of India, part of Pakistan, or as a United Bengal independent of both dominions — unfolded against the backdrop of this communal volatility. The inability of mainstream nationalist and communal leaders to resolve these disputes peacefully, combined with repeated cycles of violence and retaliation, helped create a social and political environment in which partition along communal lines came to be seen by many as not just likely but inevitable.

O₂: To analyze role Shyama Prasad Mukherjee's in contesting the United Bengal proposal and advocating for partition.

In the turbulent months following the Calcutta communal riots of August 1946 and the growing momentum for a separate Muslim homeland, Bengal's political leaders debated sharply divergent futures for the province. While figures such as Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy (Prime Minister of Bengal) and Sarat Chandra Bose proposed a United Bengal — an independent, sovereign state outside both India and Pakistan — Dr Shyama Prasad Mukherjee (1901–1953) emerged as the most vocal opponent of this scheme, arguing that it imperilled the safety and political rights of Bengali Hindus. Suhrawardy publicly advocated for the United Bengal plan on 27 April 1947, emphasising shared linguistic and economic interests, asserting that if Hindus "can forget the past and accept the proposal, I promise to fulfil their hopes and aspirations to the full." This vision briefly garnered interest from leaders including Mohammad Ali Jinnah, who is reported to have told Viceroy Lord Mountbatten that a united Bengal without Calcutta "would be on friendly terms with us."

Mukherjee, who had risen through the Hindu Mahasabha to occupy its presidency and constituted the Bengal Partition League by late 1946, rejected the United Bengal plan on both ideological and pragmatic grounds. He contended that a



sovereign, undivided Bengal with a Muslim majority would effectively amount to a “virtual Pakistan,” undermining Hindu security and political agency in the province. In a May 1947 letter to Governor-General Lord Mountbatten, Mukherjee wrote that if an “impartial survey” were made of Bengal’s administration over the previous decade, it would be clear that “Hindus have suffered not only on account of communal riots and disturbance, but in every sphere of national activities, educational, economic, political and even religious,” underscoring his assertion that Bengali Hindus could not safely remain in a Muslim-dominated polity.

Beyond correspondence, Mukherjee actively mobilised political opinion and grassroots engagement to counter the United Bengal narrative. At a Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha conference in Tarakeswar in April 1947, he led the adoption of resolutions endorsing the partition of the province and authorised the formation of councils to pursue this goal, drawing support from diverse sections of Bengali Hindu society. Advocates such as Upendra Nath Banerjee and Hemanta Kumar Sarkar rallied with him, transcending class and caste divisions to campaign for West Bengal’s incorporation into the Indian Union. Public opinion surveys at the time reflected overwhelming Hindu support for partition — one conducted among literate Bengal Hindus reported over 98 percent in favour of dividing the province, while only a fraction supported an independent Bengal — reinforcing Mukherjee’s argument that communal security could only be ensured through partition.

O₃: To assess the influence of Hindu Mahasabha policies on Bengali Hindu political mobilization during 1946–1947.

During the critical years of 1946–1947, the Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha, under the leadership of Dr Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, played a central role in shaping Bengali Hindu political mobilisation by translating communal anxieties into organised political action. In the wake of the Direct Action Day riots of 16 August 1946, which deepened fears among Hindu communities about their future in a Muslim-majority province, the Hindu Mahasabha repositioned itself from a primarily cultural organisation to an active political force advocating for a distinct Hindu constituency, especially in Bengal. Recognising the disillusionment that communal violence had sown, the Mahasabha began to establish Hindu volunteer corps to defend Hindu lives and property, even organising military-style training for youth to respond to communal unrest, reflecting a strategic shift towards grassroots mobilisation in the face of perceived threats from the Muslim League and allied youth groups. By early 1947, this mobilisation took a more overtly political form as the Bengal Hindu Mahasabha, allied with sympathetic sections of the Indian National Congress, and initiated a campaign for a Bengali Hindu homeland within the Indian Union, believing that only territorial separation could ensure security and political agency for Bengali Hindus. In April 1947, at a major Hindu Mahasabha conference in Tarakeswar, delegates passed a resolution demanding a separate homeland and authorised Mukherjee to form a council to pursue partition, enrolling an estimated one lakh volunteers to spread the movement across urban and rural Bengal. The party’s engagement with leading newspapers, such as Amrita Bazar Patrika and The Statesman, helped shape public opinion by framing the partition as a necessary defence of Hindu interests and cultural identity, and by encouraging widespread pro-partition meetings throughout the province. This period also saw the Hindu Mahasabha intertwine relief work with political mobilisation. Drawing on its earlier involvement in famine relief during the 1943–44 Bengal famine, the Mahasabha exploited communal perceptions of bias in relief distribution to portray rival political groups as neglectful or hostile to Hindu welfare, reinforcing its narrative of Hindu vulnerability and justifying its political agenda. Although the Mahasabha did not dominate Bengali politics as an electoral force, its policies and organisational strategies—defensive volunteerism, coordinated public rallies, media campaigns, and alliances with Congress leaders opposed to supracommunal solutions like the United Bengal proposal—significantly shaped Bengali Hindu political mobilisation, contributing to the broader movement that culminated in the partition of Bengal in June 1947.



V. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Bengal experienced escalating communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims during 1946–1947, culminating in events such as the Direct Action Day riots (16 August 1946).

The Muslim League’s electoral dominance in the 1946 Bengal Legislative Assembly elections intensified fears among Hindus of political marginalisation.

Economic grievances, social unrest (e.g., the Tebhaga movement 1946–47), and urban-rural communal clashes amplified the sense of insecurity among the Hindu population.

Repeated cycles of communal violence in Calcutta, Noakhali, and Bihar created an environment where partition was increasingly perceived as inevitable.

Mukherjee actively opposed the United Bengal proposal, branding it a “**virtual Pakistan**” and arguing that it threatened Bengali Hindu safety and political rights.

He utilised letters, speeches, and resolutions (e.g., May 1947 letter to Governor-General Lord Mountbatten) to influence political discourse and mobilise public opinion.

Mukherjee successfully created a coalition of diverse Hindu groups, including upper-caste and Dalit communities, to strengthen opposition to a united Bengal.

His leadership directly contributed to the eventual incorporation of **West Bengal into the Indian Union** following partition.

The Hindu Mahasabha transformed from a cultural organisation to an active political force, organising **volunteer corps** and grassroots networks for protection and advocacy.

Public campaigns, conferences (e.g., **Tarakeshwar conference, April 1947**), and media engagement shaped Hindu opinion in favour of partition.

Relief work during crises like the 1943–44 Bengal famine was leveraged as a tool to build political support and highlight perceived Muslim League neglect.

The Mahasabha’s policies reinforced Hindu solidarity and mobilised communities across Bengal, laying the groundwork for widespread support for partition.

VI. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the partition of Bengal in 1947 was the result of a complex interplay of communal tensions, political contestations, and strategic leadership. Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee emerged as a decisive figure whose opposition to the United Bengal proposal and advocacy for partition were instrumental in shaping Bengali Hindu opinion and ensuring the creation of West Bengal within the Indian Union. Through the organizational strategies of the Hindu Mahasabha, including grassroots mobilization, public campaigns, and targeted relief work, Bengali Hindus were politically unified at a time of extreme uncertainty and communal anxiety. The research highlights that Mukherjee’s foresight, ideological clarity, and ability to navigate volatile political conditions not only influenced the immediate outcome of Bengal’s division but also left a lasting imprint on post-independence political discourse and communal identity in the region.

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