

*The Fashioning of a Frontier: The Radcliffe
Line and Bengal's Border Landscape,
1947–52*¹

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The partition of India is customarily described in surgical metaphors, as an operation, an amputation, a vivisection or a dismemberment. By extension, the new borders created in 1947 are often thought of as incision scars.²

At first sight, it seems unremarkable that this surgical imagery has been so central to the way in which the process of partition has been represented. It is consistent with the British portrayal of their position in these events as one of clinical detachment. It also complements the anthropomorphic conception of the nation (as mother) that was evoked so often in Indian nationalist discourse. From the standpoint of the independent Indian state, moreover, it is easy to see why it has been convenient to depict Pakistan as a diseased limb that had to be sacrificed for the health of the national body-politic.

The surgical analogy is, however, as misleading as it is vivid. For one, the deployment of medical phraseology has lent weight to the impression that partition was a necessary part of a process of healing: that it was a surgical solution to the communal disease. Fifty years on, however, it is clear that partition has not cured the sub-

¹ An early version of the first part of this article was presented (in absentia) at the South Asian Studies Conference in Copenhagen in August 1996. The author is grateful for comments on that paper, as also for the critical suggestions (on this one) made by Tanika Sarkar, Anil Seal and Samita Sen.

² Medical and surgical analogies have been used to describe partition ever since 1947. In fact, Jinnah first spoke of it thus in a meeting with Mountbatten in April 1947: 'It would have to be a surgical operation.' (Mountbatten replied, 'An anaesthetic is required before the operation.') Alan Campbell-Johnson, *Mission with Mountbatten* (London (1951), 1985), p. 57. In 1969, Hodson described partition as 'a period of dissection', another variation on the surgical theme. See H. V. Hodson, *The Great Divide: Britain–India–Pakistan* (Karachi (1969), 1993), pp. 322–55. It was also very common to talk of communal violence as 'blood-letting', another expression that harks back to an earlier era of medicine.

continent of communalism and the idea that partition was a remedy has been widely challenged. The surgical metaphor suggests, furthermore, that partition was something that was done in India: that she was the passive object of the surgeon's knife and therefore not responsible for the act or its consequences. This has accorded well with the nationalist version of partition, which has been content to hold the British policy of divide and rule (and Jinnah's collusion with it) responsible for the events of 1947. Recent research has shown, however, that India's nationalist leaders were actively involved in the partition and their agency and culpability in the tragic events of 1947 is increasingly coming to be recognized.

But there are other implications of thinking of partition in this way, some of which have not seriously been questioned. One outcome has been the tendency to view partition as a single, definitive act, a clean-cut vivisection that was executed—with clinical precision—in a single stroke. By 17 August 1947, when Radcliffe announced his Award, the operation is thought to have been concluded, all loose ends tied up. But in fact, as we shall see, partition was a messy, long-drawn-out process. It was in no sense finally or tidily concluded in August 1947; indeed, one could argue that the process had just begun, and that it is still unfinished today.

The surgical metaphor has also supported the idea that the actual business of drawing the borderline was a technical affair informed by detailed specialist knowledge, just as the work of a surgeon is based upon specialist scientific knowledge. This could hardly contrast more sharply with the facts. Sir Cyril Radcliffe, author of the Boundary Awards, was a rank outsider to India. He had no background in Indian administration, nor did he have any prior experience of adjudicating disputes of this sort.³ If his appointment to the position of Chairman of the Boundary Commissions did not generate controversy it was because it was a tradition in British Indian civil adminis-

³ Sir (later Viscount) Cyril John Radcliffe (1899–1977) was, by 1938, 'the outstanding figure at the Chancery bar'. His 'meteorical [*sic*] legal career' was interrupted only by the Second World War, when he joined the Ministry of Information, becoming its director-general in 1941. This had been his only experience of administration when, in 1947, he was called upon to chair the boundary commissions in India. Subsequently, however, he chaired so many public enquiries in Britain that one critic was led to denounce 'Government by Radcliffery!' Lord Blake and C. S. Nicholls (eds), *The Dictionary of National Biography 1971–1980* (Oxford and New York, 1986), pp. 696–7.

tration to confer the most responsible and prestigious jobs upon the 'confident amateur' rather than the 'narrow technician'.⁴

It does not follow from this, however, that the actual business of partition was merely a matter of sorting out the administrative details, once the politicians had made all the important decisions. Those who 'implemented' partition may have been, in their own eyes, disinterested professionals who simply carried out their orders to the best of their ability, who did their job in the best traditions of administrative professionalism—rationally, carefully and deliberately, without fear or favour.⁵ Because they regarded themselves as non-partisan, it has been assumed that the process by which they partitioned India was apolitical. This assumption has bolstered the prevailing impression that while politics informed the decision to divide India, politics and politicians had little bearing on the execution of partition. Chronologically speaking, 3 June 1947, the date of Mountbatten's partition plan, is assumed to be a dividing line. Before 3 June, politicians are known to have jockeyed to influence the terms of partition and the transfer of power. After 3 June, the bureaucrats are believed to have taken over. As a result of this, historians of partition, all of whom have been interested in the political rather than the administrative issues involved, have tended to end their stories with the 3 June plan. Few have ventured beyond this date.

Yet the moment one crosses this Rubicon, the picture that emerges could hardly be more complicated. The politics and administration of partition prove to have been too intricately intermeshed to be separated neatly into mutually exclusive domains. Political concerns were in play at every stage and at all levels of the very protracted process of partition.

The object of this article is to unravel some of these complexities by looking at the making of the borderline between West Bengal

⁴ In his discussion of the Indian Civil Service tradition, Potter observes that 'the whole structure of the Raj celebrated generalist control and continuity, not specialist expertise and innovation'. He argues that 'the amateur ideal was linked to the older idea of a man of leisure, with the time and ability to engage in a wide variety of pursuits that were unremunerative. The professional, by contrast, was a narrow specialist paid for his technical skills . . .'. See David C. Potter, *India's Political Administrators. From ICS to IAS* (Delhi, 1966), pp. 34, 74–5.

⁵ The administrators of British India were accustomed to regard themselves as 'agents of justice and effective action, having the fairness and thoroughness to examine facts and the integrity to act upon [their] findings'. Simon Raven, *The English Gentleman* (London, 1961), pp. 58–9.

and East Pakistan. It is divided into two parts. The first part looks at the Bengal border from the top down, at the actual mapping out of the Radcliffe line through Bengal. It asks how and why this line came to take the precise shape that it did, by investigating the Boundary Commission and its procedures. The second part looks closely at the Bengal border itself, as viewed from the ground. How did a line drawn on a map become a tangible geopolitical reality? How was it institutionalized and administered? How was it given legitimacy? How did it affect the people who lived in its vicinity? How, in other words, did it work? The particular emphasis, dictated chiefly by the availability of source materials, is on West Bengal's experience.

I

The 3 June Statement

Before we begin to look at this process, it is worth recalling that certain significant political choices on the form that partition would take had been written into the 3 June Plan itself. Though apparently leaving the entire question of partition open, the Plan delimited the parameters within which a division could take place. According to the Plan, the Bengal Legislative Assembly was to divide itself into two parts, one consisting of the representatives of Muslim-majority districts and the other of the Hindu-majority districts. Each assembly was to meet separately to ascertain whether the majority of its members wished to partition their province. In the event that they did, they were to indicate whether they wished to attach their half of the province to India or to Pakistan.⁶ Accordingly, on 20 June, these two provisionally partitioned units met to vote on the question of partition. The majority of representatives of the Hindu majority districts voted in favour of the partition of Bengal, while those of the Muslim-majority districts voted against it.⁷ On the basis of this vote, it was

⁶ 'Statement by His Majesty's Government, dated the 3rd June 1947'. *Partition Proceedings*, I (Government of India Press, New Delhi, 1949), p. 2 (hereafter *PP*, followed by volume and page numbers).

⁷ The political background against which these votes were cast is discussed very briefly below. For further details on the political developments that led to the partition of Bengal, see Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided. Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947* (Cambridge, 1994). The provisional West Bengal Legislative Assembly voted by 58 votes to 21 that the province should be partitioned and that West

taken that the will to partition had been sufficiently established. It was only after this vote that the Boundary Commission was set up to determine the real or final border between the two Bengals.

This procedure had some remarkable features, which become apparent if we consider the process by which the people's will to partition was assumed to have been established. The vote that was taken to establish their will to partition had been cast in an Assembly temporarily or notionally divided into two parts. Before the Boundary Commission had given its Award, there was no knowing to what extent these notional units would match the final shape of the two partitioned states. The partition vote was therefore necessarily an imperfect one because members of the notional West Bengal Assembly voted for partition without knowing for certain whether their constituencies would continue to be in West Bengal when the Award was finally made. Whether or not such fore-knowledge would have made a difference to the final outcome—the majority in the West Bengal assembly deciding in favour of partition—must remain a matter of conjecture. But it is significant that the procedure for establishing the will on a question of such momentous import was dealt with so summarily.

It is also significant that the two voting blocs were divided, in the first instance, on territorial lines. This is noteworthy because everyone agrees that the basis for the partition was to satisfy a communal demand for autonomy; that its purpose was to ensure, for those who demanded it, a communal right to self-determination. But from the very start of the process of implementing the partition, this principle had to be tempered by a host of other considerations, amongst which territorial questions were paramount. The two voting groups into which the Bengal Assembly was divided were composed of the representatives of territorial rather than communal units: Hindu-majority and Muslim-majority districts respectively. Hindu and Muslim members were not invited to meet separately to determine their collective communal will on what was, in its primary form, a communal question. There is little doubt that the result of the voting (Hindus voting aye and Muslims nay) would have been the same. But it is interesting

Bengal should join the existing Constituent Assembly. At a separate meeting later on the same day, members of the East Bengal Assembly voted against partition by 106 votes to 35. Burrows to Mountbatten, telegram dated 2 June 1947. Document No. 278, N. Mansergh and P. Moon (eds), *Constitutional Relations between Britain and India: The Transfer of Power 1942–1947* (London, 1970–82), Vol. XI (hereafter, *TP*, XI, No. 278, and so on).

that the option of a communal vote was not raised by any of the parties concerned.

By this stage, therefore, the parties appear to have accepted that communal autonomy was to be realized by the creation of separate territorial sovereignties. There are subtle but significant differences between the notions of communal autonomy and territorial sovereignty. The first emphasizes the rights of the people of a community to self-determination, rights which could in theory be achieved within a single state. The second stresses the bounded space within which a community is sovereign, and could be realized only by a territorial separation.⁸ The tension between the two concepts is not always apparent but nevertheless it emerged quite sharply when the actual process of division began, as the focus of attention rapidly shifted from the question of how communal autonomy could be realized to the issue of how much territory was to be made available to each state.

The Constitution of the Bengal Boundary Commission

Once the will to partition had been established in this singular fashion, the next step was to set up a Boundary Commission that would draw up the final or 'real' border, on the basis of which power would be transferred to the two dominions.

The establishment of the Commission, though on the face of it uncontroversial, reveals some of the priorities of the key players at this stage of the negotiations for the transfer of power. Jinnah had been in favour of having a Commission composed of three 'impartial' non-Indians, appointed on the recommendation of the United Nations.⁹ But his proposal had not found favour with the Earl of Listowel, then Secretary of State for India. Listowel was not only worried that 'the Russian and other Slav states [might] create . . . difficulties'; he was also concerned that an appeal to the UN might 'suggest that we ourselves had proved incapable of transferring power without recourse to that body . . .'.¹⁰ The Congress also

⁸ Indeed, it has been argued that it was precisely this ambiguity that Jinnah exploited when he refused to define Pakistan in precise terms. Ayesha Jalal, *The Sole Spokesman. Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* (Cambridge, 1985).

⁹ Mountbatten to Listowel, telegram dated 9 June 1947, *TP*, XI, No. 120.

¹⁰ Listowel to Mountbatten, telegram dated 13 June 1947, *ibid.*, No. 195.

opposed Jinnah's proposal, though for different reasons: Nehru feared that going to the UN would cause an unacceptable delay. He suggested instead that 'each Commission should consist of an independent Chairman and four other persons of whom two would be nominated by the Muslim League and two by the Congress'; that they should all be 'of high judicial standing' and should elect their own Chairman.¹¹ Eventually, Mountbatten accepted this proposal word for word.¹²

The significance of all this lies not only in its demonstration of the extent to which, by this stage, Mountbatten was happy to take his cue from Nehru and the Congress.¹³ The fact that the members of the Boundary Commissions were to be nominated by political parties indicates the degree to which party-political considerations were expected to play a part in the Commission's findings. No one at the time appeared to have any doubt that the work of the Commissions was not going to be simply technical. In the circumstances, the fact that the Commissioners were to be judges of the highest standing was neither here nor there.

If the impartiality and professionalism of the Commissioners had already been vitiated by the manner of their appointment, every effort was made to protect the credibility of Sir Cyril Radcliffe, whose name Mountbatten proposed as Chairman jointly of the Bengal and Punjab Boundary Commissions.¹⁴ Perhaps one reason for this was that the Congress party had initially objected to Radcliffe, apparently under the impression that he was a conservative and therefore likely to favour the Muslim League.¹⁵ (Here was another example of the part that party-political bias was expected to play in these events.) Mountbatten took pains to ensure that Radcliffe as Chairman 'should not only be, but appear to be, free from official influence'. He insisted, for instance, that Radcliffe should be housed nei-

¹¹ Nehru to Mountbatten, 10 June 1947, *ibid.*, No. 128.

¹² 'Minutes of the Viceroy's Eighteenth Miscellaneous Meeting', *ibid.*, No. 175.

¹³ Mountbatten had initially agreed with Jinnah, telling Listowel that personally, he 'could think of no better proposal'. Mountbatten to Listowel, telegram dated 9 June 1947, *ibid.*, No. 120. But he did a volte-face as soon as Nehru made his objections known. No doubt the arrangement recommended by Nehru suited his strategy better: it would give an Indian gloss to the Commission while ensuring that the effective deciding voice would be that of an 'independent' (non-Indian) chairman in whose appointment the Viceroy should confidently expect to have a say.

¹⁴ Radcliffe had been recommended to Mountbatten for the job by the Secretary of State as a man of high integrity, legal reputation and wide experience. Listowel to Mountbatten, 13 June 1947, *ibid.*, No. 182.

¹⁵ Viceroy's Personal Report No. 10 dated 27 June 1947, *ibid.*, No. 369.

ther in the Governor's residence while at Calcutta nor in the Viceroy's house in Delhi and refused to entertain any petitions on the boundary question before the Award was made.¹⁶

None of this, however, appears to have had any effect on what one observer described as 'the obstinate popular belief that Radcliffe [would] Award as HE [Mountbatten] dictates . . .'.¹⁷ And there are reasons to believe, despite all protestations to the contrary,¹⁸ that this belief was not entirely unfounded. Mountbatten did not influence the fine print of the Award but he undoubtedly inspired some of its broader features. For one thing, it was Mountbatten's idea that Radcliffe should chair both Commissions with the idea that a single chairman would keep the larger picture in mind.¹⁹ No doubt with an eye to enhancing the palatability of the Awards, he went so far as to advise Radcliffe to compensate each party's gains on one border with losses on the other.²⁰ So although the two Commissions were intended to be entirely independent, in fact they were not. This brought into play the prospect of a quid pro quo between Bengal and Punjab.

Radcliffe subsequently insisted that he paid no heed to Mountbatten's advice and treated each Commission strictly independently.²¹ Nevertheless, the parties framed their respective cases before the Commissions under the impression that the two Awards would be linked, and that some loose principle of balance between them would be followed. This certainly influenced the final contours of both borders.

It is also true that Mountbatten, by and large, left Radcliffe to interpret his own terms of reference.²² But the terms themselves

¹⁶ Abbott to I. D. Scott, telegram dated 5 July 1947, *ibid.*, No. 529.

¹⁷ Major Short to Stafford Cripps, 3 August 1947, *ibid.*, No. 326.

¹⁸ See, for instance, Alan Campbell-Johnson's defence of Mountbatten's 'honour' in his *Mission with Mountbatten* (London (1951), 1985), p. 308; and also Hodson, *The Great Divide*, pp. 352–5.

¹⁹ The suggestion that Radcliffe should chair both commissions first came from Jinnah. Record of meeting between Jinnah and Mountbatten, 23 June 1947, *TP*, XI, No. 311. Mountbatten was quick to take it up, explaining that one chairman could usefully make adjustments of losses and gains between the two borders. Meeting of the Special Committee of the Indian Cabinet, 26 June 1947, *ibid.*, No. 354.

²⁰ Hodson, *The Great Divide*, p. 355.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 354–5.

²² With some notable exceptions: on the question of whether only those districts of Assam contiguous to Sylhet were to be considered for transfer to East Bengal, or whether all Muslim-majority areas in Assam be considered for transfer, Mountbatten informally advised Radcliffe in favour of the former interpretation, though he refused to give a ruling on the matter. Abell to Radcliffe, 2 August 1947, *TP*, XII, No. 318 (enclosure); No. 326. This drastically limited the scope for the

were set out by the Viceroy, who once again saw fit to accept Nehru's advice on the subject. Nehru was clear that the work of the Boundary Commission was to be done as quickly as possible, believing (with characteristic naïveté) that 'when the two States have been formed, those States will mutually consider modifications and variations of their frontiers so that a satisfactory arrangement is reached' and that 'this was likely to be a fairly lengthy process involving the ascertaining of the wishes of the people concerned in those areas'.²³ If, he argued, this was left to the Boundary Commission, its work would be 'heavy and prolonged',²⁴ making it unlikely that the borders would be defined by 15 August. In these circumstances, the transfer of power would either have to be delayed or be carried out on the basis of the existing notional boundaries. Nehru was convinced that both these options were unacceptable and that, for the purpose of transferring power, a makeshift border would do. Mountbatten (at least on the face of it) agreed with him. So when Nehru suggested that the Boundary Commission be instructed only 'to demarcate the boundaries of the two parts of Bengal on the basis of ascertaining contiguous majority areas of Muslims and non-Muslims', taking 'into account other factors',²⁵ Mountbatten accepted Nehru's proposal to the letter.²⁶ The fact that the border was never intended to be anything other than a rough-and-ready improvisation was impressed upon Radcliffe,²⁷ and the result of his labours bore all the marks of the rush job that it was.

This insistence on speed flew in the face of the administrators' advice. The clearest warning came from Evan Jenkins, Governor of

transfer of territories from Assam to East Bengal. It has also been revealed by Christopher Beaumont, who acted as Private Secretary to Radcliffe, that Mountbatten (allegedly under pressure from Nehru) persuaded Radcliffe to change the Punjab borderline in India's favour, so that Ferozepur tehsil was awarded to India instead of Pakistan. Statement by Christopher Beaumont (1989), Appendix VI, in Ansar Hussain Khan, *The Rediscovery of India. A New Subcontinent* (Hyderabad, 1995).

²³ Nehru to Mountbatten, 12 June 1947, *TP*, XI, No. 158. This was, incidentally, as close as he or anyone else came to recognizing that the way in which the people's wishes had been ascertained under the terms of the Plan had been far from satisfactory. Nehru himself did not refer again to the need for any further investigations into the people's wishes once the Award had been made.

²⁴ Nehru to Mountbatten, 12 June 1947, *ibid.*, No. 158.

²⁵ Enclosure to *ibid.*

²⁶ See the 'Announcement by His Excellency the Governor General' dated 30 June 1947, in *PP*, VI, pp. 8–9.

²⁷ Hodson, *The Great Divide*, pp. 347–8; Minutes of the Viceroy's 54th Staff Meeting, 8 July 1947, *TP*, XI, No. 12.

Punjab, a man who was often described as being the best administrator in India. His assessment was that ‘. . . in the time available it [would] be quite impossible to make a clean job of partition, and even if . . . disorder [were checked] up to 15 August . . . there [would] be appalling confusion [afterwards] . . .’. Making a pointed reference to Mountbatten’s ignorance of civilian (as opposed to military) affairs, he stressed that ‘. . . in civil administration, certain things cannot be done in a matter of days or weeks, and “standstill” orders (most of which will be accepted very grudgingly by the Parties) do not really solve the administrative problem . . .’.²⁸ But his counsel was not heeded by the Viceroy, whose entire strategy for partition appears to have been to rush it through without giving anyone a moment to pause for thought.²⁹ And the Indian leaders, perhaps tempted by the short-term gains that a speedy settlement seemed to offer, went along with him.³⁰

Radcliffe’s Award was ready on 12 August, well in time for the transfer of power in Pakistan on the fourteenth. But in a remarkable

²⁸ ‘Meetings of the Partition Committee’, he said, ‘resemble a Peace Conference with a new war in sight. . . . The Chairman of the Boundary Commission does not arrive until 14 July. His colleagues have given the Punjab Government an enormous questionnaire, the replies to which cannot be ready before about 20 July. Thereafter, if all the information is to be studied and transferred to special maps and if the parties are to be heard at any length it is difficult to see how the Commission can report by 15 August . . .’. [Punjab] Governor’s Appreciation, *TP*, XII, enclosure to No. 81.

²⁹ For a more sympathetic assessment of Mountbatten’s gameplan, see H. V. Brasted and Carl Bridge, ‘The Transfer of Power in South Asia: an historiographical review’, *South Asia*, Vol. XVII, No. 1 (1994), pp. 93–114.

³⁰ Fifty years on, it is still impossible for the historian (at least this one) to comprehend the mad haste with which these decisions were taken. One might conjecture (uncharitably) that perhaps both the League and Congress leaders were in an inordinate hurry to assume office, or that the Congressmen in particular were anxious to wrap things up while a friendly Viceroy, Mountbatten, was in command. A kinder view might be that they were all eager to avert a communal holocaust. Yet in hindsight one can see that in their very haste, they hurtled blindly towards precisely the scenario they wished to avoid: for there is little doubt that the Punjab violence was in no small measure a response to perceived injustices and irregularities in the Punjab Boundary Award. One can only share the bafflement of Maulana Azad, when he writes, ‘Why was there such a hurry in taking a decision which almost everybody regarded as wrong? If the right solution to the Indian problem could not be found by 15 August, why take a wrong decision and then sorrow over it? I had again and again said that it was better to wait until a correct solution was found. I had done my best but my friends and colleagues did not support me. The only explanation I can find for their strange blindness to facts is that anger or despair had clouded their vision. Perhaps also the fixation of a date—15 August—acted like a charm and hypnotised them into accepting whatever Mountbatten said . . .’. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, *India Wins Freedom* (New Delhi (1959), 1988), p. 226.

last-minute about-turn, Mountbatten suddenly developed cold feet about publishing it. He brought his influence to bear upon Radcliffe, who agreed reluctantly to post-date the Award for the thirteenth, by which time Mountbatten had already left for Karachi, and ultimately the Award was only published on 17 August.

We cannot be certain whether Mountbatten genuinely changed his mind upon realizing late in the day just how unpopular the Award would be, or whether to delay the announcement had been his intention all along. Once again, he ignored administrative advice, this time from the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. Auchinleck warned that because it was already widely known that the Award was ready, the delay in announcing it, by allowing 'the wildest rumours' to gain currency, was 'having the most disturbing and harmful effect'.³¹ But Mountbatten's concern to protect his Government's image overrode all other factors. As he explained to the British Government, although 'from the purely administrative point of view there were considerable advantages in immediate publication so that the new boundaries could take effect on 15 August . . . it had been obvious all along that, the later we postponed publication, the less would the inevitable odium react upon the British . . .'.³² More personal considerations also appear to have been involved in this decision. By all accounts, Lord Mountbatten was a man who enjoyed pomp and circumstance more than most. So he was particularly anxious that no unpleasantness should mar the transfer of power celebrations in which he would play viceroy for the last time.

For reasons of this sort, power was transferred on the basis of the notional boundaries after all, and the hurry with which the Radcliffe line was drafted turned out to have been completely—and as we shall see, tragically—unnecessary.

Claims and Counter-claims: The Bengal Boundary Commission

Political imperatives of the statesmen in Delhi and London thus profoundly shaped not only the character of the Boundary Commissions but also the nature of the Awards and the timing of their announcement. In Calcutta too, the sittings of the Bengal Commission

³¹ Note by Auchinleck dated 15 August 1947, *TP*, XII, No. 486.

³² Viceroy's Seventeenth Personal Report, 16 August 1947, *ibid.*, No. 489.

attracted the keenest political interest. The Commission was supposed to arrive at its decision by studying closely the claims and representations put to it by members of the public. But, in fact, constraints of time meant that only the petitions presented by the key political parties could be examined with any degree of thoroughness. Also, as we have seen, the four presiding judges were party-political appointees, so it was only to be expected that their recommendations to the Chairman would be deeply partisan.³³ And because Radcliffe arrived at his Award essentially through evaluating their respective arguments, the claims and counter-claims of the political parties had a direct bearing on the final outcome.

The Bengal Boundary Commission's brief was to 'demarkate the boundaries of the two parts of [the province] on the basis of ascertaining contiguous majority areas of Muslims and non-Muslims' while also taking into account 'other factors'.³⁴ The cases put before the Boundary Commission by the Muslim League and the Hindu 'Co-ordination Committee' both used this last ambiguously worded clause to press for the inclusion of territory that could not conceivably have been claimed on the grounds of contiguous majority areas. But there were significant differences of emphasis between the two representations made before the Commission. Within the Hindu Co-ordination Committee, inter-party disagreements broke out on the question of what constituted a reasonable claim. There are also tantalizing hints of schisms within the Congress party's ranks on the question of the shape and size of the new West Bengal. These dissensions throw light on the kind of concerns that were uppermost in the minds of the politicians when they lobbied before the Commission.

One striking feature of both cases was the language in which they were couched. Both cases were written in a highly legalistic, technical style that could not have been more different from the hyperbole of the communal propaganda generated for popular consumption. Both were persuasive and insisted on the reasonableness of their respective demands. Both were backed with reams of 'evidence' and called on 'experts' to validate their arguments. The style in which the arguments were presented (and also much of their substance) calls to mind a property dispute being fought in a court of law. In addition, the fact that all the Commissioners were judges

³³ See the 'Report of Non-Muslim Members' and the 'Report of Muslim Members', in *PP*, VI, pp. 29-70; 71-115.

³⁴ 'Statement by His Majesty's Government, dated the 3rd June 1947', *PP*, I, p. 2.

and the Chairman was a lawyer, has bolstered the widespread impression that the Award and the cases on which it was based were the product of legal expertise, resting on judicial (rather than political) rationality; and by extension that the Commission's rulings met the technical requirements of legal justice. But the picture that emerges from a closer reading of the Commission's deliberations is not so clear cut.

The 'Muslim' case was the simpler of the two. For one thing, there was just one party involved; only the Muslim League came forward to represent the Muslims before the Commission. The Bengal Provincial Muslim League was deeply divided by this time and the two main factions, led by Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy and Khwaja Nazimuddin respectively, were on the bitterest of terms. But these differences did not affect the Muslim League case before the Commission, because only Nazimuddin's party took any interest in it. It will be recalled that Suhrawardy and Abul Hashim had co-authored a proposal for a united and sovereign Bengal, independent of both India and Pakistan. Having made public their opposition to the partition of Bengal, the two men were not disposed to sit down to work out the details of a division they had already rejected.³⁵ And for obvious reasons, Congress-minded Muslims (such as Ashrafuddin Ahmed Chowdhury), who were staunchly opposed to partition in any form, took no part in the Boundary Commission's proceedings. Nazimuddin's group, on the other hand, supported the creation of a single Pakistan: they had opposed the partition of Bengal only because they wanted the whole of the province for Pakistan. Moreover, as the faction with the closest ties with Jinnah and the All-India Muslim League, Nazimuddin's group could confidently expect to take charge of East Pakistan after partition and they therefore had the greatest stake in the Commission's proceedings.³⁶ So at the end of the day, Nazimuddin's party took charge of the 'Muslim' case on its own.

³⁵ Hamidul Huq Chowdhury, who framed the Muslim League's case, thus recalls, 'I did not receive any assistance from . . . Suhrawardy. . . . [T]he group represented by . . . Suhrawardy was not on talking terms with me or my group. . . . As a result, during . . . the Boundary Commission I was left entirely to my own resource[s] without any assistance or help from the [Suhrawardy] party. Not for one single day did any member of the party of the Ministry take any interest in the Boundary [Commission] proceedings in Sylhet or Bengal . . .'. Hamidul Huq Chowdhury, *Memoirs* (Dhaka, 1989), pp. 118–19.

³⁶ For more details on the differences within the Bengal Muslim League on the partition issue, see Shila Sen, *Muslim Politics in Bengal, 1937–1947* (New Delhi, 1976), pp. 203–45.

But the 'Muslim' case was also simpler in another sense: it had the single objective of extracting for East Bengal as much territory as possible. In order to achieve this, it insisted on particular principles. The first was that the scope of the term 'contiguity' was to be limited to areas *within* Bengal; i.e. that if a Hindu-majority area was not contiguous to any other Hindu-majority area in Bengal it should go to East Bengal, even if it were contiguous to any other Hindu-majority outside Bengal in the Indian union. On this basis, the League claimed for East Bengal three districts where Muslims were a small minority of the population, namely the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri.³⁷

The next point that the League insisted upon was that the unit of partition should be either the union or the subdivision. As the smallest units of administration, it was argued, they were cohesive and integrated in terms of politics and governance and could not easily be divided. Of the two, it favoured the subdivision, which would, it claimed, yield a straighter borderline. The League's spokesmen urged that the communal majority of each subdivision be worked out and that contiguous Muslim-majority subdivisions be allotted to East Bengal. Of course, there was merit in the argument that administrative and political units (such as unions) might have real advantages as units of partition over *thanas* (or police stations), which were merely criminal jurisdictions. But the point was more that a division based on contiguous majority subdivisions or even unions would give East Bengal more territory.

In addition, the Muslim League claimed huge territories for East Bengal on the basis of a variety of 'other factors'. The scope of the 'other factors' clause was interpreted most liberally to make a bid for Calcutta. The League insisted that East Bengal must be given a share of the provincial revenue proportionate to its share of Bengal's population, and this could only be achieved if Calcutta went to the east.³⁸ On these grounds, not only did the League demand for East

³⁷ This description of the Muslim League representation before the Bengal Boundary Commission is based on the 'Report of the Muslim Members' before the Bengal Boundary Commission, reproduced in *PP*, VI, *Reports of the Members and Awards of the Chairman of the Boundary Commission* (West Bengal Government Press, Alipore, 1950), pp. 71–82.

³⁸ It asserted that 'The total revenue of Bengal is about forty crores [rupees] of which thirteen crores are . . . contributed by Calcutta alone. If Calcutta goes to West Bengal, the result will be that West Bengal with about one third of the total population of the Province will appropriate 66.9% of the revenue, while East Bengal with two thirds of the population will have at its disposal only 33% of the revenue . . .'. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

Bengal the whole of the Calcutta urban agglomeration, it also staked its claim to areas west of Calcutta where jute mills, military installations, ordnance factories, railway workshops and lines were located on the ground that these facilities were essential for East Bengal's economy, internal communication and defence.³⁹

In effect, the Muslim League was asking for all the territory east of the Hooghly and Bhagirathi rivers.⁴⁰ Its representatives knew that this scheme would place roughly two-thirds⁴¹ of the Hindu population of Bengal in East Pakistan. But they insisted that '... the partition [was] not to be effected on the basis of putting the maximum percentage of any class of population on one side or the other or balancing the populations in the two provinces. The basis is the determination of contiguous majority areas...'.⁴²

Hence, in order to claim for East Bengal the greatest possible amount of territory, the Muslim members of the Commission were driven to insist that the aim of partition was *not* to ensure self-determination for the largest possible numbers of each community, apparently reversing the Muslim League's proclaimed objectives. Their reasons for taking this position become clearer if it is borne in mind that the party had opposed the partition of Bengal. It had good reasons for this. Muslims constituted a majority of roughly 55% in Bengal as a whole. If Bengal were not divided, a government elected by the Muslim majority would exercise sovereignty over the entire territory of Bengal. The 1946 elections had proved beyond doubt that this would be a Muslim League government.⁴³ A partition could only serve to reduce the extent of territory over which the League's sovereignty could extend. Once the partition of Bengal had been accepted in principle, the logical aim for Muslim spokesmen was to limit, as far as possible, the loss of territory and assets to West

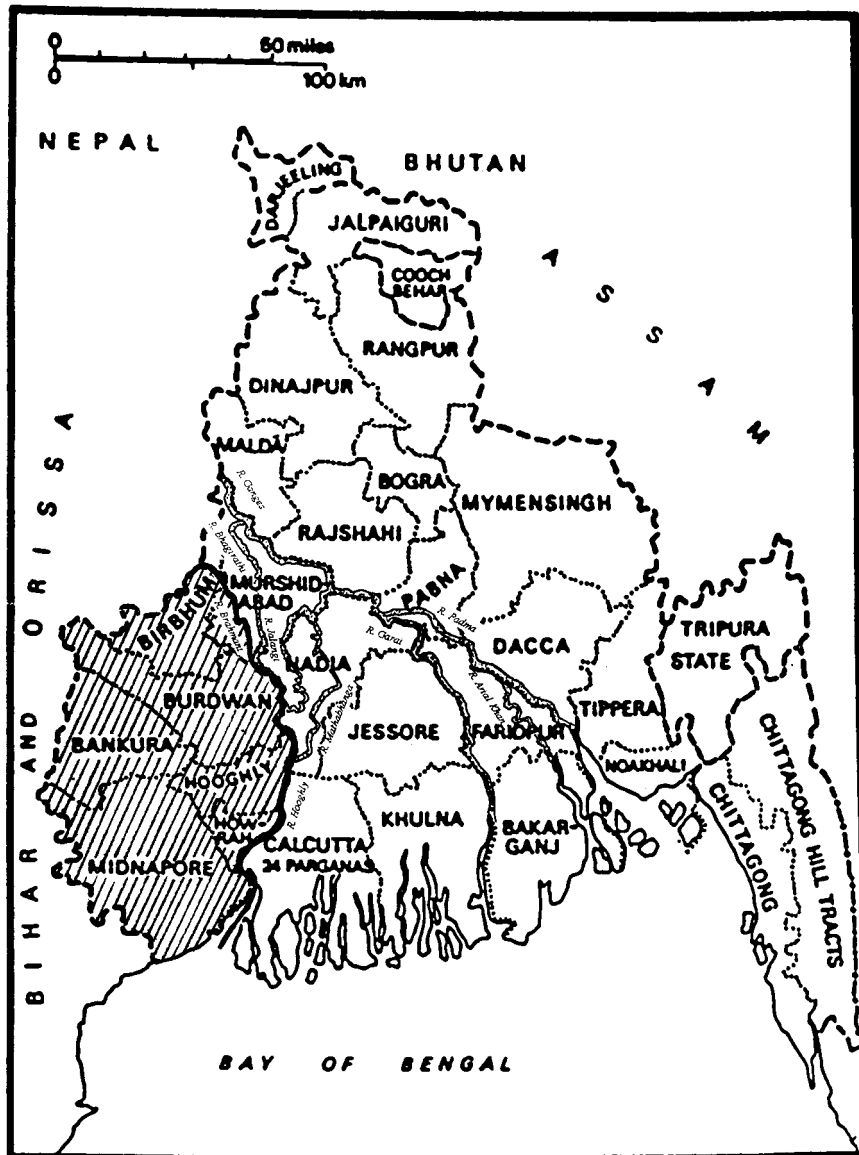
³⁹ This very loose reading of the 'other factors' clause contrasted sharply with the case presented by the judges nominated by the Muslim League for the Punjab Boundary Commission, who insisted on the narrowest possible interpretation of the same clause. See, for instance, the report of Mr Justice Muhammad Munir, 6 August 1947, in Kirpal Singh (ed.), *Select Documents on Partition of Punjab—1947, India and Pakistan* (Delhi, 1991), pp. 419–20.

⁴⁰ See Map I.

⁴¹ The exact figure was 66.89%. *PP*, VI, p. 78.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ The League had won a spectacular victory in the Bengal Assembly elections, polling over two million Muslim votes and capturing 114 out of 121 Muslim seats. 'Franchise, Elections in Bengal, 1946', File No. L/P&J/8/475, India Office Library and Records.



Map I. The boundary line proposed by the Muslim League. (The shaded area shows the proposed limits of West Bengal.)

Bengal. By claiming almost four-fifths of the province, they had nothing to lose and everything to gain.

For the Hindu members of the Commission, however, the position was not so straightforward. The Hindu members of the provisional West Bengal Assembly had voted for partition so as to secure a 'homeland' for the Hindus of Bengal. They had wanted, in other words, to create a separate space within which Hindus, by virtue of their larger numbers, would determine their own future.⁴⁴ So it was crucially important to have a homeland with an outright and sizeable Hindu majority. Like their Muslim counterparts, on the other hand, they also wanted enough territory to accommodate the population and sustain a viable economy. The imperative for a communal majority had to be balanced against the requirements of space and economic rationality. How much territory was 'enough'? How far could the communal majority safely be watered down? These were questions with no obvious or determinate answer. Inevitably, there were differences amongst the spokesmen for Hindu interests on what constituted the best possible solution.

These disagreements were accentuated by the fact that four parties jointly presented the Hindu case before the Boundary Commission. In addition to the Congress, the Hindu Mahasabha, the Indian Association and the New Bengal Association⁴⁵ were represented on the Central Co-ordination Committee. The barrister Atul Chandra Gupta was appointed by the Congress president, J. B. Kripalani, as its chairman. He also led the Congress camp on the Committee.

Differences emerged when the spokesmen of the four parties put their heads together to formulate the case to be argued before the Commission. The representatives of the three smaller parties constituted a majority of ten in the twelve-member Co-ordination Committee. They insisted that the maximum possible extent of territory must be claimed. In addition to the ten Hindu-majority districts (Burdwan, Midnapore, Birbhum, Bankura, Howrah, Hooghly, 24 Parganas, Khulna, Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri), they demanded that two entire Muslim-majority districts (Malda and Murshidabad), large parts of Nadia, Faridpur and Dinajpur, and selected thanas in Rang-

⁴⁴ For more details on the Hindu communal campaign for the partition of Bengal in 1947, see Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*.

⁴⁵ The New Bengal Association was formed towards the end of 1946 to agitate for the partition of Bengal. Government of [West] Bengal Intelligence Branch (hereafter GB IB) File No. 1009/47.

pur and Rajshahi, be given to West Bengal.⁴⁶ This would have given West Bengal roughly 57% of the total area of Bengal (minus the Chittagong Hill Tracts, which were claimed for the Indian Union but not for West Bengal).⁴⁷

It made sense for the smaller parties such as the Mahasabha and the New Bengal Association, susceptible as they were to pressure from Hindu extremist fringe groups, to put forward this maximum demand. Indeed, even this maximal claim fell far short of what was being demanded by some of their wilder supporters. The Arya Rashtra Sangha, for instance, insisted that as much as four-fifths of the territory of Bengal be made over to West Bengal, on the grounds that four-fifths of all lands were owned by Hindus; that every single town in Bengal should go to the West because over 75% of their population was Hindu, and so on.⁴⁸ The New Bengal Association itself was a right-wing pressure group which had come into existence in 1946 as a forum to lobby for the partition of Bengal. Run by a self-styled Major General, it was a front-runner in all subsequent campaigns to demand more Bihari areas for West Bengal.⁴⁹ Not much is known about the association or its leaders. But its pamphlets suggest that for 'Major General' Chatterjee and his cohorts, Hindu Bengalis were a distinct race of people, and that they were of the view that for this people to fulfil its destiny, it was crucial to have enough space.⁵⁰ Territory was clearly central to the Association's vision of 'New Bengal'.

The Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha, as a branch of a larger all-India organization, could not advocate patently aggressive Bengali chauvinism of this sort, however much some of its members

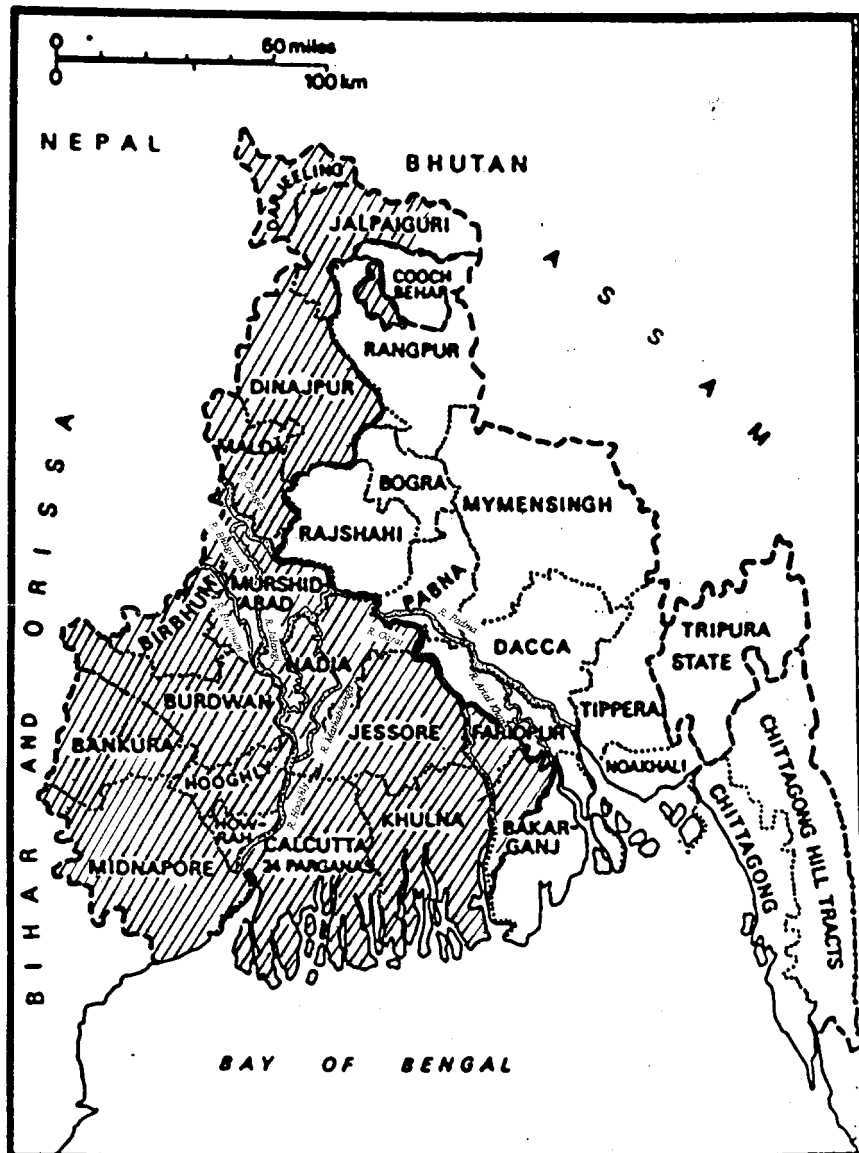
⁴⁶ See Map II.

⁴⁷ *Memorandum for the Bengal Boundary Commission. Submitted by the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha and the New Bengal Association.* Dr S. P. Mookerjee Papers, 1st Instalment, Printed Material, File No. 17 (Serial No. 8) (Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, hereafter NMML).

⁴⁸ Krishna Kumar Chatterjee, *Arya Rashtra Sangha: Warning*, undated, in AICC Papers, First instalment, File No. CL-14(D)/1948, NMML (hereafter AICC-I/CL-14(D)/1948, and so on).

⁴⁹ From September 1947, the New Bengal Association began a vocal campaign for the amalgamation of Bengali-speaking tracts of Bihar with West Bengal. It circulated several pamphlets which alleged that the Bihar government was systematically ill-treating Bengalis, in which it threatened to undertake 'direct action' if its demands were not fulfilled. 'A brief note on the New Bengal Association', dated 16 December 1948. GB IB File No. 1009/47.

⁵⁰ There was a distinctly fascist tenor to some of the New Bengal Association's fulminations. See 'A brief note on the New Bengal Association', *ibid.*



Map II. The boundary line proposed by the Hindu Mahasabha and the New Bengal Association. (The shaded area shows the proposed limits of West Bengal.)

may have shared the New Bengal Association's world view. But there were other important party-political considerations that pushed the Bengal Mahasabha to make implausible demands for territory. Such inroads as the Bengal branch of the Mahasabha had been able to make in building an organization were chiefly limited to the eastern districts, to Barisal and Dacca in particular.⁵¹ The party had also worked hard to woo the Scheduled Castes into the Mahasabha fold through *shuddhi* and *sangathan* campaigns in the early forties.⁵² The largest and most influential of these castes, the Namasudras, were clustered in the districts of Jessore and Faridpur: this was one persuasive reason for the Mahasabha to demand that these areas be included in West Bengal.⁵³ In the aftermath of the 1946 elections, in which the Mahasabha had been humbled by the Congress, it was understandably anxious to salvage as much of this base as possible. It also clearly hoped to recover some lost ground by winning the allegiance of Hindu refugees from East Bengal, who had begun to arrive in thousands after the Noakhali riots. So it justified its excessive territorial claims on the grounds that 'the new State of West Bengal should be in a position to provide for the inclusion and accommodation of immigrants from Pakistan'.⁵⁴ Though undoubtedly

⁵¹ Writing in August 1945 Ashutosh Lahiry, the Secretary of the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha, claimed that there were 1,400 branches all over Bengal. Ashutosh Lahiry to Rai Bahadur Surendra Nath Gupta Bhaya, 14 August 1945. Dr S. P. Mookerjee Papers, II-IV Instalment, File No. 90/1944-45. His claim cannot be substantiated, but the party's papers indicate that the most dynamic branch was in Barisal, while those in Narayanganj, Dacca, Sirajgang, Noakhali, Brahmanbaria, Pabna and Chandpur were active.

⁵² For further details on the Mahasabha's campaign for the allegiance of the Scheduled Castes, see Chatterji, *Bengal Divided*, pp. 195-203.

⁵³ The Mahasabha Memorandum insisted that '... all the Scheduled Caste members from West Bengal had voted for the partition of Bengal and had joined the Hindu campaign for a separate homeland. It is the universal desire of all sections of Scheduled Castes to remain as citizens of the Indian Union. The recognised leaders of the Scheduled Castes have in unequivocal terms demanded their inclusion in the West Bengal Province and declared their unwillingness to join the Pakistan State. For this reason we demand the inclusion of the Sub-Division of Gopalganj which is predominantly a Scheduled Caste area as well as the adjoining territory in the districts of Faridpur and Bakarganj...'. *Memorandum for the Boundary Commission submitted by the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha and the New Bengal Association*, p. 4. Dr S. P. Mookerjee Papers, (NMML) First Instalment, Printed Matter, Serial No. 8, File No. 17/1947.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2. Indeed, even after the Radcliffe Award was announced, Dr Shyama Prasad Mookerjee continued to insist in Parliament that more East Pakistani areas be seized so as to accommodate the refugees in West Bengal, and the issue remained one of the focal points of Mahasabha campaigns at least until the first general elections in 1952.

aware that it was very unlikely to succeed in persuading the Boundary Commission that its demands were fair or reasonable, its leaders probably calculated that it could do the party no harm to try. If they failed, as they almost certainly would, they could still claim to have fought for the Hindu cause until the bitter end. If, on the other hand, they succeeded in winning for West Bengal even the smallest piece of extra area (in excess of the Congress demand), they would come out as heroes who had stood up for Hindu rights, in contrast to the weak-kneed moderacy of the Congress.

Atul Chandra Gupta, the lawyer who represented the Congress party, took a very different view of the Hindu cases. He was convinced that to put forward this maximum demand, which claimed over 57% of the land for 46% of the population, would be suicidal because 'no one seriously thinks that it will be accepted by the Commission'.⁵⁵ It was, he argued, bad legal strategy to argue a case that could so easily be shot down. He held that it was more crucial for the Hindu side to present a patently reasonable case, because it was the Hindu side that had called for partition in the first place. When the other Hindu parties refused to accept this argument, he offered to put two plans forward. The first, called the 'Congress Scheme', outlined the Congress party's maximum demand. Although it called upon 'other factors' to demand a good number of Muslim-majority thanas, it still fell considerably short of the Mahasabha's more fantastic claims.⁵⁶ The second plan (known as the 'Congress Plan') was a lesser, more plausible claim, drawn up strictly on the basis of contiguous majorities. As Gupta explained, the point of having two plans was tactical: he wanted to demonstrate the shortcomings of the Plan to strengthen the larger claims put forward in the Congress Scheme.⁵⁷ But the other parties felt that this procedure was so com-

⁵⁵ Atul Chandra Gupta to J. B. Kripalani, 12 July 1947, AICC-I/G-33/1947-48.

⁵⁶ So, for instance, while the Mahasabha demanded the whole of Malda (a Muslim-majority district), the Congress scheme did not claim its five eastern thanas. Similarly, while the Mahasabha wanted all of Jessore, the Congress asked only for those parts of that district that lay to the west of the River Gorai. In Rajshahi, the Mahasabha asked for three thanas, the Congress scheme asked for only one: namely Boalia. See the *Memorandum on the Partition of Bengal presented on Behalf of the Indian National Congress before the Bengal Boundary Commission* (filed on 17 July 1947), AICC-I/CL-14(D)/1947-48.

⁵⁷ As he explained to Kripalani, his purpose was 'to show the defects of the plan to strengthen our argument for adopting the Scheme of partition . . . this cannot be done by keeping Plan I up the sleeve and bringing it out only after the attack on the Scheme of partition by the Muslim League and Muslim commissioners . . .'. Atul Chandra Gupta to J. B. Kripalani, 12 July 1947, AICC-I/G-33/1947-48.

plicated and devious that it was likely to fail, and they voted (by ten votes to two) to include only the maximum demand in the final memorandum. Gupta then threatened to resign from the Committee.⁵⁸ At this point, the Congress leadership intervened: Dr Prafulla Ghosh wrote to Kripalani in support of the Chairman's view,⁵⁹ Gupta retracted his resignation and the two cases were presented side by side.

Why did the Bengal Congress dig in its heels, even to the extent of overruling the majority in the Hindu Co-ordination Committee? At one level, the party was merely following its lawyer's advice on the best strategy (and that it was sound advice was proved subsequently when the Award was made). But would Atul Chandra Gupta's purely technical view of the case have prevailed if there had not been good political reasons to support it? Dr Prafulla Ghosh, as Chief-Minister-in-waiting and as leader of the shadow cabinet, was obliged to take a more responsible position than the Hindu opposition.⁶⁰ He was also alive to the security implications of the border and was concerned that no demands be made that might jeopardize the safety of Calcutta.⁶¹ But perhaps, more importantly, the Congress leadership in Bengal was enjoying its first ever taste of power. Like the all-India Congress leadership, it could see the logic of cutting out potential trouble spots where its writ might be challenged.⁶² It could also see clearly that it was inadvisable to water down too much the Hindu majority of West Bengal, by including large Muslim-majority areas. From the point of view of those who would take over the reins of the West Bengal government, a compact state with a clear-cut Hindu majority would be the best guarantee for the

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Prafulla Ghosh to J. B. Kripalani, 12 July 1947, AICC-I/G-33/1947-48.

⁶⁰ He explained to Kripalani, 'I do feel that it would be wrong not to put [the Plan] [forward]. In my humble opinion the Scheme of partition can never be accepted. So Plan No 1 should be submitted as a proposal. Unreasonableness of the Scheme of partition will be apparent and if we do not put this plan before the judges we shall lose our case . . .'. Prafulla Ghosh to Acharya Kripalani, 12 July 1947, AICC-I/G-33/1947-48.

⁶¹ As he pointed out, 'According to Plan No. 1, the boundary of Pakistan will be 40 miles off from Calcutta. If we demand more than that, we shall have to concede that as far as the Pakistan capital is concerned . . .'. *Ibid.*

⁶² For similar sorts of reasons, for instance, there were those in the Congress who were not averse to surrendering Kashmir to Pakistan. Sheikh Abdullah clearly believed that Sardar Patel was amongst them. See the Patel-Abdullah correspondence in Durga Das (ed.), *Sardar Patel's Correspondence 1945-1950*, I (Ahmedabad, 1971), pp. 228-45. Also see Prakash Chandra, 'The National Question in Kashmir', *Social Scientist*, 13, 6 (June 1985), p. 50.

future.⁶³ In other words, for Prafulla Ghosh and the Congress establishment, a bird in hand was worth two in the bush.

But there were also different sorts of rumblings within the Congress party. Now that power was at last within reach, it was hard indeed to accept a smaller share in it. Once the decision to partition Bengal had been made, cracks began to surface in the alliance that had led the Jatiya Banga Andolan (or the 'Bengal National Movement' as the Congress described the movement for partition it had led). In May 1947, a pamphlet entitled *The Origin and Progress of the Partition Movement in Bengal* was published by the West Bengal Provincial Committee. The Provincial Committee was a Congress-sponsored body which had been set up in December 1946 at Calcutta with the object of mobilizing support for partition.⁶⁴ The pamphlet alleged that in January 1947, dissension had emerged within the Committee on the question of the boundaries of the proposed new West Bengal state. The dissidents within the Committee had formed the Jatiya Banga Sangathan Samiti, with Jadabendranath Panja of the Burdwan District Congress Committee as President and Atulya Ghosh, secretary of the Hooghly Congress, as its Secretary. This Samiti lobbied for the *exclusion* of the entire Muslim-majority districts of Nadia, Jessore and Murshidabad, and also of the Hindu-majority districts of Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling in North Bengal.⁶⁵ It also opposed plans to demand the inclusion of Bengali-speaking areas of Bihar in the new West Bengal state.

This proposal points to the existence, within the Congress party, of minimalist pressures for the creation of a small and territorially compact state that would include only the districts of south-west and central Bengal. This is significant in itself, particularly as a counterpoint to the wild claims of Mahasabha and other parties, and also to the expansionism of the West Bengal Congress in later years.⁶⁶ But it is also revealing to look at the particularities of the plan: at what areas it proposed to include and what it wanted to jettison.

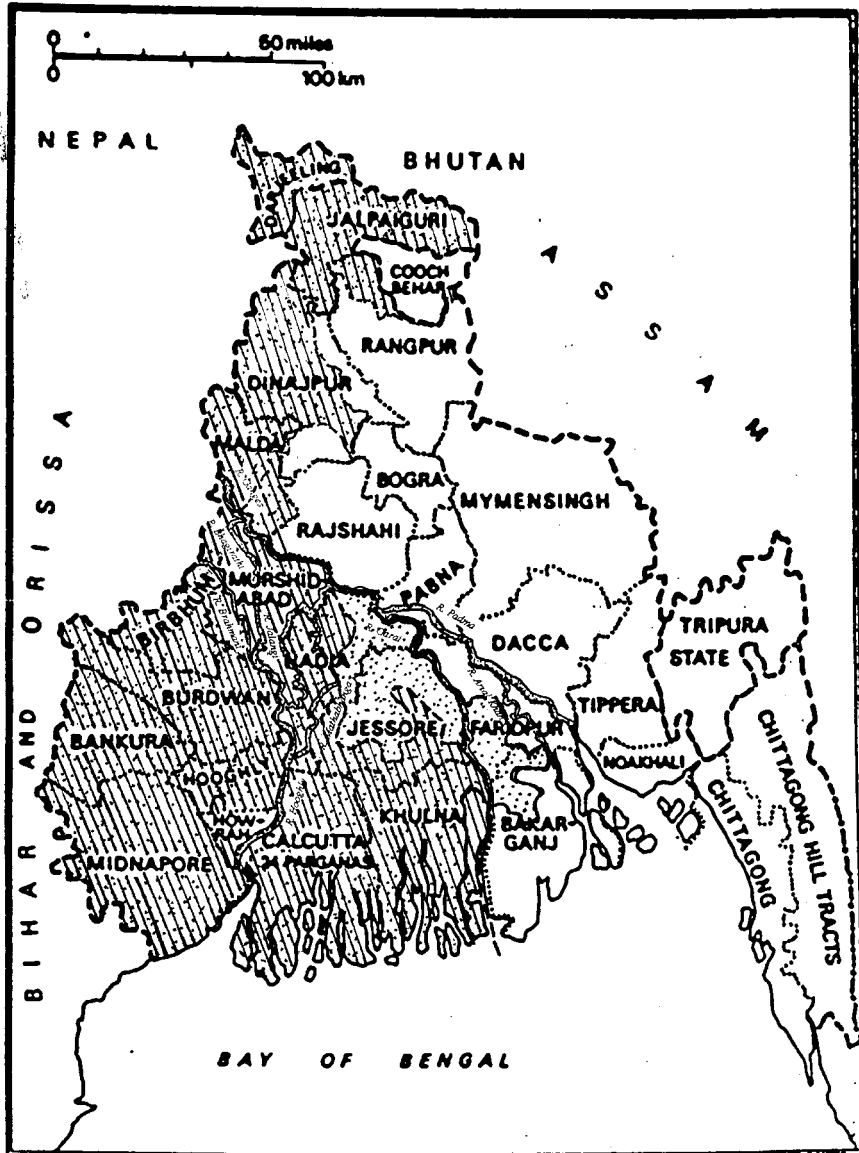
The demand to exclude North Bengal was particularly significant. North Bengal was something of a frontier region, ethnically and cul-

⁶³ See Map III.

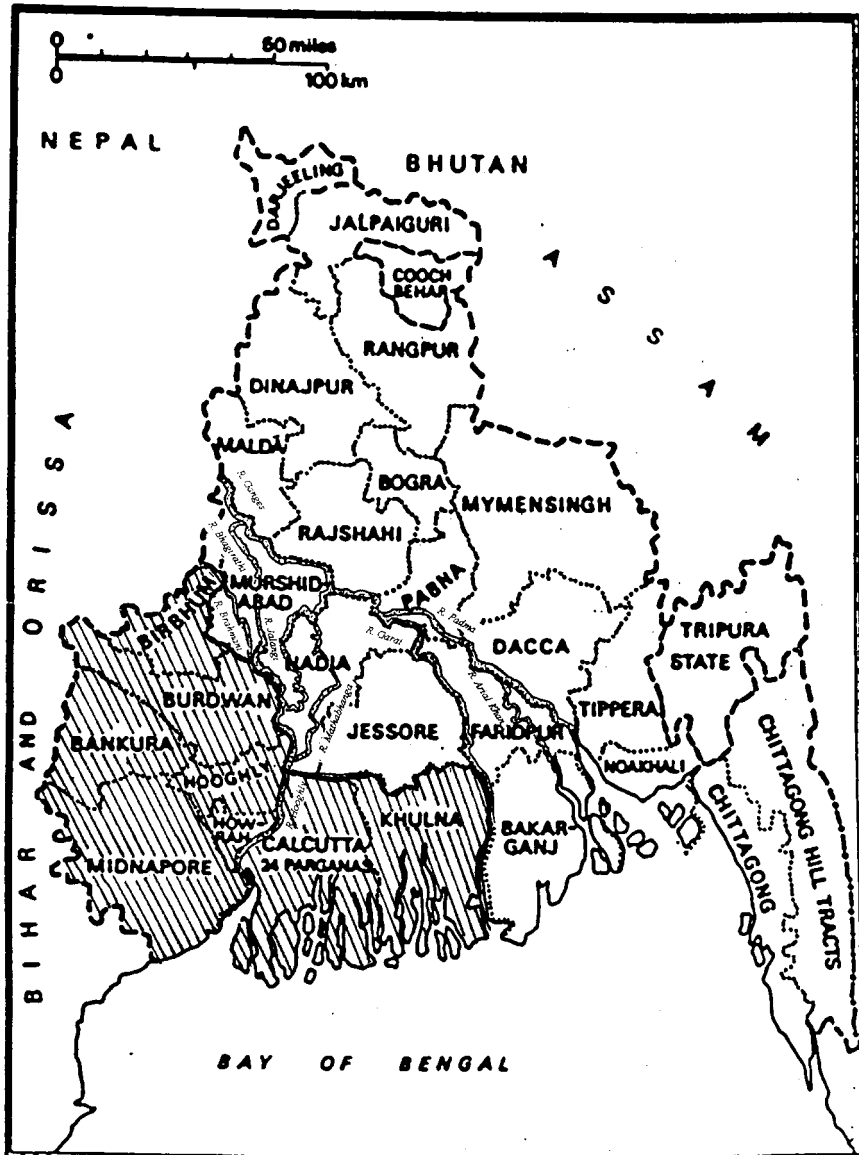
⁶⁴ Hemanta Kumar Sarkar was its general secretary and Upendranath Banerjee its president. *The Origin and Progress of the Partition Movement in Bengal*, West Bengal Provisional Committee, Calcutta, 1 May 1947. AICC-I/CL-14(D)/1946.

⁶⁵ See Map IV.

⁶⁶ For details on the West Bengal Congress party's role in the movement for a greater Bengal, see Marcus Franda, *West Bengal and the Federalizing Process in India* (Princeton, 1968).



Map III. The boundary line proposed by the Congress. (The shaded area shows the limits of West Bengal proposed in the Congress Scheme. The dotted area shows the limits of West Bengal proposed in the Congress Plan.)



Map IV. The boundary line proposed by the Jatiya Banga Sangathan Samiti. (The shaded area shows the proposed limits of West Bengal.)

turally distinct from the Bengal heartland.⁶⁷ It had long been a political backwater, although in recent years it had been the locus of communist campaigns among sharecroppers and plantation labour. But from the economic point of view, North Bengal was enormously important. Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri produced practically all of Bengal's fine teas and were destined to be key revenue earners for the new state. Indeed, so great was the economic potential of these two districts that neighbouring states coveted them for themselves. In September 1947, there were reports that Assamese politicians were encouraging anti-Bengali movements in North Bengal. In Darjeeling, the Gurkha League demanded independence from West Bengal, allegedly with the backing of Assamese politicians and British tea planters (the latter no doubt could see the advantages of having their estates in the less volatile state of Assam, safe from the communist menace). At the same time the Raja of Cooch-Bihar began a campaign against Bengali *bhatias* (outsiders), insisting that the autochthonous Rajbangshi tribals of Jalpaiguri and Cooch-Bihar had more in common with their neighbours in Assam than with the Bengali babus.⁶⁸ If Cooch-Bihar could not be allowed to exist as a separate state, he insisted that it must go to Assam rather than to Bengal. Not long afterwards, when the boundary disputes between West Bengal and Bihar began to gain ground, the police reported secret meetings between Bihari and Gurkha leaders, at which they discussed the possibility of Darjeeling's transfer to Bihar.⁶⁹ It was plain to all, therefore, that North Bengal was a glittering prize. Yet there were Congressmen in West Bengal who would gladly have thrown it away.

Murshidabad also had a special significance as the site of the headwaters of the Hooghly. It was generally agreed that the survival of Hooghly as a port (and of Calcutta as an entrepôt of trade) depended on its link with the River Ganges, which flowed through the northern edge of Murshidabad. The representatives of all four Hindu parties had therefore insisted that Murshidabad be included in West Bengal, although it was a Muslim-majority district. There appears to have

⁶⁷ For an excellent ethnography of the area, see Ranajit Das Gupta, *Economy, Society and Politics in Bengal: Jalpaiguri 1869-1947* (Delhi, 1992), pp. 5-26.

⁶⁸ Secretary, Dacca District National Chamber of Commerce to Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, 5 September 1947. AICC-I/G-30/1947-48.

⁶⁹ Superintendent of Police (Intelligence Branch), Darjeeling, to Special Superintendent of Police (Intelligence Branch), West Bengal, 15 July 1953. GB IB File No. 1034/48.

been an unspoken understanding that if it came to a trade-off, they were prepared to exchange Khulna, a large Hindu-majority district to the east of the 24 Parganas, for Murshidabad.⁷⁰ So the Jatiya Banga Sangathan Samiti's case went against the tide of opinion on the Hindu side. If, moreover, these three districts were sacrificed, it would mean that the claim to parts of Dinajpur and Malda (and eventually Cooch-Bihar) on the grounds of contiguity would also have to be given up. All in all, six districts (Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Cooch-Bihar, Dinajpur, Malda and Murshidabad) were being written off in exchange for one: Khulna. Three of the six (Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch-Bihar) had outright, unequivocal, Hindu majorities. What imperatives could have prompted this remarkable demand?

One obvious answer is that Khulna Congressmen were involved in this move. From their point of view, any territorial or economic losses that the state might have to suffer in the future would be preferable to the immediate loss of Khulna to Pakistan. But neither of the office holders of the Samiti was from Khulna, nor is there any evidence that Khulna men were particularly strongly represented on the Samiti. So clearly this was not the only consideration.

It seems very likely that the formation of the Samiti was the first phase in the process by which territorial factionalism emerged as a powerful force within the West Bengal Congress. The notorious fractiousness of the Bengal Congress had not been much in evidence during the forties. Once Subhas Bose and his supporters had been expelled from the party, the Congress leadership that had taken over the party had displayed a rare cohesiveness and unity of purpose, particularly during the campaign for the partition of Bengal. But immediately after Independence, groupism re-emerged with a vengeance. For three or four years afterwards, Congressmen in West Bengal would engage in a rancorous contest for the control of the party organization, in which the battle lines were drawn on territorial lines. Partymen from the West Bengal heartland (chiefly Hooghly, Burdwan and Midnapore) would form themselves into an alliance in order to wrest control of the party from the refugee Congressmen from East Bengal who, by virtue of their larger numbers, continued to dominate the organization after partition, despite the fact that they had left their constituencies behind in Pakistan. Atulya Ghosh

⁷⁰ Murshidabad had a Muslim majority of 56.55%. Atul Gupta, in his letter to Kripalani, insisted that this district had to be claimed for West Bengal 'in any event'. Atul Chandra Gupta to J. B. Kripalani, 12 July 1947. AICC-I/G-33/1947-48.

of Hooghly and Jadabedranath Panja of Burdwan were key players in this battle in which the stake was nothing less than the capture of political power.⁷¹ The involvement of these two men in the Jatiya Banga Sangathan Samiti suggests that the nucleus of the new alliance had begun to crystallize well before 15 August 1947. The move to limit the boundaries of the new state to the West Bengal heartland may well have been a pre-emptive strike by Atulya Ghosh, a man whose foresight and ruthlessness would win him the secretaryship of the West Bengal Congress in 1950. By January 1947, when the Jatiya Banga Sangathan Samiti was formed, it must have been clear to him that while nothing could stop the Congress party from taking office in West Bengal after partition, it was not clear which Congressmen would seize power in the divided party. If the state boundaries were drawn so as to include only the districts of the Burdwan and Presidency divisions in the new West Bengal, Congressmen from these districts would have the best chance of controlling the party and government after partition and independence. Atulya Ghosh and the members of the Sangathan Samiti seem not to have been unduly concerned about the fact that such a partition would involve sacrificing to Pakistan the sizeable Hindu population of six northern districts.

If this is correct, it would seem that canny politicians had realized very early on that the Radcliffe line would do much more than demarcate the boundaries between two nations. It would shape the very contours of control and influence in the divided successor states. It would help to define not only the political futures of political parties in the two successor states, but also of the individuals and factions within the parties that would rule them. The disputes between the Congress and the Mahasabha on the boundary question indicate that their leaders could see that the shape of the border would have implications for the future of their respective parties. Within the Congress, equally, at least some partymen seem to have been keenly conscious of the part which the borderline would play in determining who would capture the organization.

The Hindu and Muslim cases presented before the Boundary Commission thus reflected concerns and aspirations that had little to do with a communal vision of the welfare of the 'communities'. In the

⁷¹ Some details on this struggle within the West Bengal Congress are available in Prasanta Sengupta, *The Congress Party in West Bengal. A Study of Factionalism 1947-86* (Calcutta, 1986).

making of the Radcliffe Award, questions of economic rationality, geographical coherence and strategic necessity were not the only 'other factors' that tempered the fundamental principles of contiguity and communal majority on which partition was supposed to be based. Party-political, factional and personal ambitions were also very much in evidence in the list of issues that influenced the final shape the border would take.

To return to the metaphor of the surgical operation, this would suggest that by the time the surgeon had begun his task, the original problem he had been called in to solve had been so overlaid with other secondary factors that it had been all but forgotten; or if not forgotten then certainly pushed far into the background.

Radcliffe's Award

These were some of the pressures and counter-pressures that Radcliffe had to weigh against each other while making his Award. He had to appear to be even-handed to all sides, while keeping in mind the imperatives of British policy for the future of the sub-continent. Inevitably, his Award pleased no one entirely, but there is little doubt that it displeased some less than others.

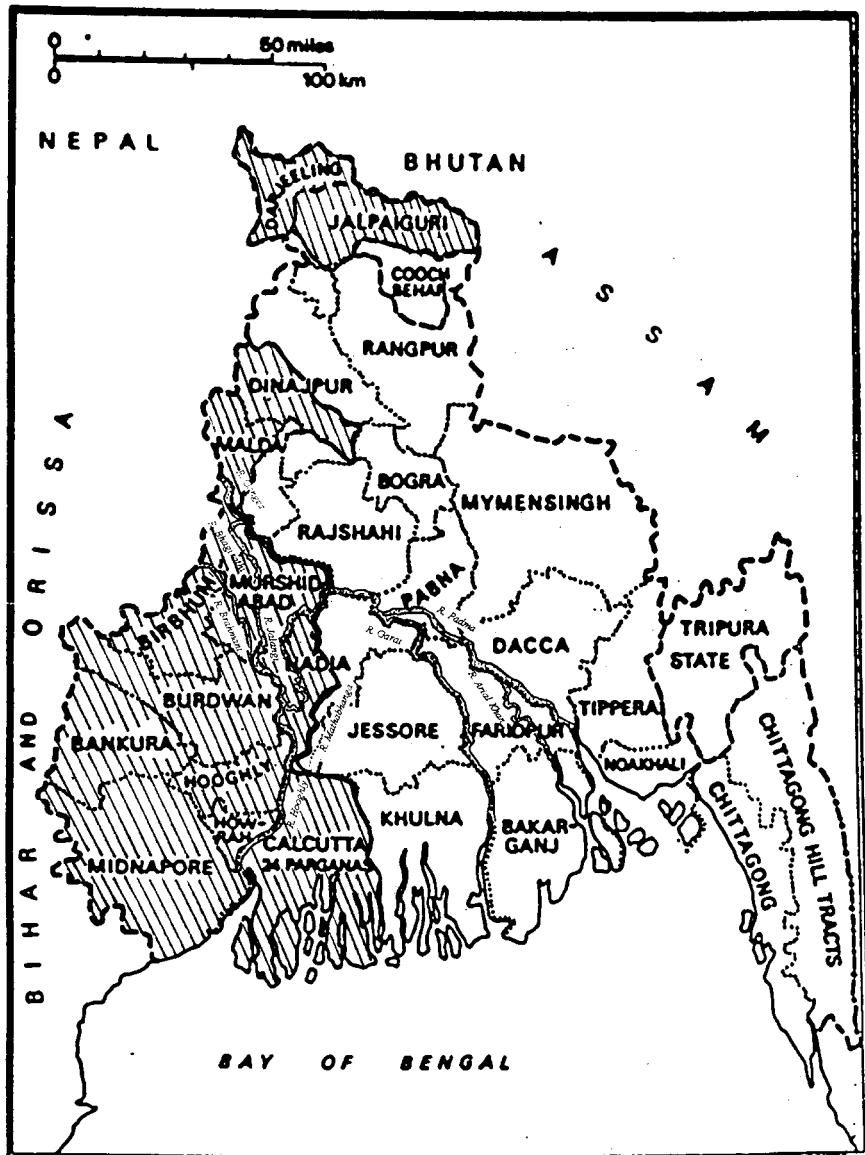
The Award gave West Bengal an area of 28,000 square miles, containing a population of 21.19 million people of which nearly 5.3 million (or 29%) were Muslims. East Bengal got 49,000 square miles for a population of 39.11 million, of which 29.1% (11.4 million) were Hindus.⁷² West Bengal got 36.36% of the land to accommodate some 35.14% of the people, while East Bengal got 63.6% of the land to accommodate 64.85% of the population.⁷³

These figures make it immediately obvious that Radcliffe accepted the two 'cardinal principles' of the Congress case: firstly that the two parts respectively were to contain as large a proportion as possible of the total Muslim and non-Muslim population of Bengal, and secondly that 'the ratio of Muslims to non-Muslims in one zone must be as nearly equal as possible to the ratio of non-Muslims to Muslims in the other'.⁷⁴ Radcliffe's Award created two states in which the

⁷² Saroj Chakrabarty, *With Dr. B. C. Roy and other Chief Ministers. (A record up to 1962)* (Calcutta, 1974), pp. 59–60.

⁷³ See Map V.

⁷⁴ See *The Memorandum on the Partition of Bengal presented on Behalf of the Indian National Congress Case before the Bengal Boundary Commission* (Calcutta, 1947), in AICC-I/CL-14(D)/1946; and 'Report of the Non-Muslim Members', *PP*, VI, p. 30.



Map V. The Radcliffe Line. (The shaded area shows the territory awarded to West Bengal.)

ratio of the majority to the minority population was almost exactly the same.

Radcliffe also conceded the Congress argument that *thanas* (police stations), as the smallest units for which census figures had been published, were the most acceptable units of partition.⁷⁵ He accepted the Congress argument about the importance of the Murshidabad and Nadia river system for the survival of the Hooghly and gave the whole of Murshidabad to West Bengal. Khulna went to Pakistan except for those parts of it that fell to the east of the River Mathabhangha. It goes without saying that Calcutta went to West Bengal. The tea-producing districts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri also went to West Bengal,⁷⁶ with the exception of the five Muslim-majority thanas of the Boda–Debiganj–Pachagarh area.⁷⁷ In awarding these areas to West Bengal, Radcliffe rejected the first principle of the Muslim League's case: namely that the scope of the term 'contiguity' was to be limited to areas *within* Bengal.

In its broad principles, therefore, the Radcliffe plan looked remarkably like the Congress scheme. The only major point that the Congress did not win was its insistence that the boundary must be continuous.⁷⁸ Radcliffe would not allow this, so there were in effect *two* Radcliffe lines. A continuous boundary would have given West Bengal a corridor connecting the two North Bengal districts with the rest of the province: as it was, the two halves were separated from each other by a substantial stretch of foreign (and for the most part), hostile, territory.⁷⁹ This awkward arrangement was not put right until 1956, when the States Reorganization Committee awarded a narrow piece of Bihar to West Bengal.⁸⁰

Nor would Radcliffe allow the principle of contiguity to be compromised too much: so the thana of Boalia in Rajshahi, the four

⁷⁵ *The Memorandum on the Partition of Bengal presented on Behalf of the Indian National Congress Case before the Bengal Boundary Commission*, p. 27.

⁷⁶ 'The Schedule', Sir Cyril Radcliffe's Award, 12 August 1947; in *PP*, VI, p. 119.

⁷⁷ See the telegram from Kaviraj Satish Chandra Lahiry to J. B. Kripalani dated 4 September 1947 in AICC-I/G-33/1947-48; and Ranajit Dasgupta, *Economy, Society and Politics in Bengal*, pp. 237-9.

⁷⁸ See point number two of the 'Guiding Rules' set out in *The Memorandum on the Partition of Bengal presented on Behalf of the Indian National Congress Case before the Bengal Boundary Commission*.

⁷⁹ It would have been difficult to justify giving West Bengal a corridor after Nehru himself had denounced Jinnah's demand for a corridor to link West and East Pakistan as 'fantastic and absurd'. Campbell-Johnson, *Mission with Mountbatten*, pp. 94-6.

⁸⁰ *Report of the States Reorganisation Committee* (New Delhi (Manager of Publications), 1955), pp. 174-80.

thanas in Bakarganj and the areas of Faridpur claimed for West Bengal by the Congress, all went to East Bengal. Despite this, Radcliffe's package was very similar, on the whole, to the Congress proposal. The Award placed 71% of the Muslim population in East Bengal and 70.8% of the Hindu population in West Bengal. Had the Congress scheme been followed in its entirety, the figures would have been 73% and 70.67%, respectively.⁸¹

Why did Radcliffe accept so much of the letter and spirit of the Congress scheme? Was he simply guided by his legal training to accept what was undoubtedly the soundest and best-reasoned case? The Award itself, brief and baldly stated as it is, gives no indication of Radcliffe's mind. Moreover, since Radcliffe refused steadfastly to elaborate further upon, supplement or discuss his Awards once they had been made, perhaps we shall never know the reasons for certain.⁸² But if it is recalled that Mountbatten had allowed the Congress leadership not only to determine the structure and composition of the Boundary Commissions but also to draft their terms of reference, is not entirely surprising to find that the Commission awarded, to such extent as it did, in the Congress party's favour.

II

Ambiguities and Errors in the Award

Saroj Chakrabarty, whose memoirs are a key resource for the study of West Bengal in this period, writes that 'there was considerable resentment particularly among Hindus, over certain features of the Award'.⁸³ If the Congress had got more or less what it wanted from Radcliffe, how do we explain the extent of discontent with the Award in West Bengal? Why is the Award remembered as a monument of folly?

Much of the most vocal discontent with the Award was specific rather than general: while particular aspects of it were criticized in the strongest terms, the Award as a whole was not challenged. This sort of discontent was voiced chiefly by Hindus and Muslims who

⁸¹ See the *Memorandum on the Partition of Bengal presented on Behalf of the Indian National Congress before the Bengal Boundary Commission*, p. 4.

⁸² Hodson, *The Great Divide*, p. 353.

⁸³ Chakrabarty acted as personal secretary to three successive chief ministers of West Bengal: Dr Prafulla Ghosh, Dr B. C. Roy and P. C. Sen. See his *With Dr. B. C. Roy*, p. 60.

believed that their particular thanas, subdivisions and districts had reasonable grounds to demand inclusion in West and East Bengal respectively, but who found themselves in the wrong country after independence. They belonged mostly to areas immediately to the east or south-east of the Radcliffe line. So while Muslims in Murshidabad⁸⁴ and Nabadwip⁸⁵ were furious to find that their district had gone to West Bengal, Hindus of the five southern thanas of Jalpaiguri protested bitterly against their inclusion in East Pakistan.⁸⁶ So did Hindus who found themselves in the wrong part of Dinajpur.⁸⁷ In Nadia, particularly in Meherpur, Gangni and parts of Chuadanga west of the River Mathabhanga, Hindus took the view that their inclusion in East Bengal violated the spirit of the Award itself.⁸⁸ But the most trenchant and bitter (albeit partial) attack on the Award

⁸⁴ A police officer reported that because under the notional division, Murshidabad had been included in East Bengal, when Radcliffe awarded the district to West Bengal 'underground and open activities started for the inclusion of Murshidabad in East Pakistan . . . [and] communal tension ran high . . .'. 'Note showing the developments in Murshidabad district since the partition of Bengal', dated 1 December 1948, GB IB File No. 1238/47 (Murshidabad).

⁸⁵ Particularly in Karimpur thana, where the Muslims constituted over 80% of the population, 'the Muslims . . . had high hopes that their area would be included in Pakistan and as such they had hoisted the Pakistan Dominion flag . . .'. Special Superintendent's report dated 23 September 1947. GB IB File No. 167/47 (Nabadwip).

⁸⁶ At a public meeting in Jalpaiguri, people of Patgram, Boda, Pachagarh and Debiganj thanas demanded the return of their respective thanas to West Bengal, if not with Pakistan's consent, then through a UN-sponsored plebiscite or referendum. Telegram from Satish Chandra Lahiry to J. B. Kripalani, 4 September 1947, AICC-I/G-33/1947-48. Also see the memorial by the people of Jalpaiguri and Thakurgaon subdivisions, 27 August 1947, in AICC-I/CL-14/1946, and the telegram from Nagendra Sarkar of Pachagram to Kripalani, dated 30 August 1947, in AICC-I/G-33/1947-48.

⁸⁷ The President of the Patnitola Congress Committee in Balurghat wrote objecting to the exclusion of the thanas of Porsa, Patnitola and Damurhat from West Bengal so as to tag them on to Bogra in East Pakistan. President, Patnitola Congress Committee to the members of the Boundary Commission, 12 September 1947, *ibid.* A public meeting in Thakurgaon denounced the award as 'highly unjust, unfair and inequitable'. 'Resolution of the Public Meeting held by Thakurgaon subdivisional Public', 22 August 1947, in AICC-I/CL-14/1946. Nishithanath Kundu, MLA from Dinajpur, petitioned the Boundary Commission against the exclusion of five non-Muslim majority thanas from West Bengal, pointing out that valuable sugar and rice mills owned by Hindus had in the process been lost to Pakistan. Memorial by Nishithanath Kundu and others to the Boundary Commission, 27 August 1946, *ibid.* The Merchants Association of Thakurgaon also protested at the inclusion of Thakurgaon in East Pakistan. Secretary, Thakurgaon Merchants Association to Acharya Kripalani, 28 August 1947, *ibid.*

⁸⁸ Secretary, New Bengal Association, Meherpur, Nadia, to Acharya Kripalani, 11 September 1947, AICC-I/G-33/1947-48.

came from Khulna. Khulna was a Hindu-majority district, covering an area of roughly 4,800 square miles to the east of the 24 Parganas. Under the provisional cabinet arrangements it had been included, in its entirety, in West Bengal. Now, after the Award, the whole district went to Pakistan in what was widely believed to be an exchange for Murshidabad. This did not, as we have seen, come as a complete surprise: nevertheless, feelings in the district ran so high that even the Khulna District Congress Committee petitioned that Khulna be exchanged back for Murshidabad.⁸⁹ Justices Mukherjee and Biswas, the two Hindu members of the Bengal Boundary Committee, were forced to make a public declaration to the effect that no territory had been 'exchanged' in the first place,⁹⁰ but Khulna's Hindu spokesmen found this denial hard to believe.⁹¹ Murshidabad's Hindu leaders, for their part, reacted fiercely against what they described as the 'utter selfishness and lack of perspective' of the Khulna Congress and urged the party leadership to 'cry halt to this sinister move'.⁹² They insisted that any agitation for the modification of the Radcliffe Award must demand territory *in addition to* that which had already been placed in West Bengal.⁹³ Each aggrieved district and thana, in other words, was looking out strictly for itself.

It would seem, therefore, that as the reality of partition hit them, Hindu politicians east and west very quickly forgot about the putat-

⁸⁹ Associated Press of India report, cited in Ramagopal Banerjee to Acharya Kripalani, 10 September 1947, *ibid.*

⁹⁰ Ramagopal Banerjee to Acharya Kripalani, 10 September 1947, *ibid.*

⁹¹ Memorials, resolutions and all manner of petitions poured in from Nangla, Sujanshahi, Nagarghat, Tala, Mashaldanga and Sakdali (see AICC-I/G-33/1947-48); from Bagerhat, Kamira, Katipara and Gangarampur (see AICC-I/CL-14(D)/1946).

⁹² Ramagopal Banerjee to Acharya Kripalani, 10 September 1947, AICC-I/G-33/1947-48.

⁹³ Powerful Hindus of Murshidabad issued a statement in which they agreed that the award was 'unfair, illogical and full of inconsistencies'. But they insisted that 'any attempt to have an area now placed in the Indian Union exchanged for a non-Muslim majority area placed in Pakistan . . . is bound to encourage rebellious conditions in a number of border districts' and advised the public of East and West Bengal 'to peacefully permit the operation of the Boundary Commission's award . . .'. Statement issued by Maharaja Sris Chandra Nandy, MLA of Cossimbazar, Dr S. K. Ganguly (president of the New Bengal Association), Dr Radhakamud Mukherjee, Syamapada Banerjee (MLA and Secretary of the Murshidabad District Congress Committee), Bejoy Singh Nahar (zamindar), Nalinakshya Sanyal and others, enclosed in a letter from S. K. Ganguly to J. B. Kripalani dated 2 September, 1947, in AICC-I/G-33/1947-48.

ive brotherhood that had inspired their demand for a homeland. But new, equally unattractive particularisms now rose in its stead—suddenly, the district emerged as a new locus of political solidarity. So while Hindus in Khulna resented being ‘sacrificed’ for the Hindu homeland, they were quite happy to demand that someone else (Murshidabad Hindus) be offered up at the altar instead. (The same spirit characterized the Murshidabad Hindu leadership’s defence of the new status quo.) It is fair to say that this sort of criticism of the Radcliffe line was far from being a critique of partition, or even of the Award as a whole. It was the panic-stricken response of people who realized, too late, that they had been shut out of their promised land.

But there were also a number of more general and fundamental problems with the Award, which emerged only gradually with the first efforts to implement and administer it. Despite its appearance of thoroughness and finality, the Award was surrounded by uncertainty. A good part of this was the result of misinformation. Most people simply did not have access to the printed document and did not know what it contained.⁹⁴ The controversy that surrounded the Award, the strong (if localized) campaigns against it, and the confusion about the scope of the Arbitral Tribunal that had been appointed to referee disputes about the division of assets,⁹⁵ all created the impression that the Award might substantially be amended. For more than a year after the Award was made, rumours that this or that district was going to be exchanged for the other fuelled hopes and fears among many people on both sides of the border. A ‘strong rumour throughout Nadia district to the effect that Nadia and Murshidabad would be included in Pakistan in exchange with Khulna’, for instance, was reported to have sparked off panic amongst Nadia

⁹⁴ In his short story, ‘The Champion of the People’, the Bengali writer Satinath Bhaduri has portrayed vividly the confusion and uncertainty surrounding the precise terms of the Boundary Commission’s Award. An English translation of this story is included in Alok Bhalla (ed.), *Stories about the Partition of India*, Vol. I (New Delhi, 1994).

⁹⁵ The Arbitral Tribunal, chaired by Sir Patrick Spens (Chief Justice of the Federal Court), was to make awards on the division of assets and liabilities between India and Pakistan, and on the apportionment between the two dominions of expenses incurred by the Joint Defence Council. It was also to decide ‘other matters arising out of partition’. It was perhaps this last clause that encouraged hopes that the Tribunal would consider border disputes. See ‘The Arbitral Tribunal Order, 1947’ dated 12 August 1947, *PP*, Vol. I, pp. 58–9.

Hindus; no doubt it also was the cause of vain hope for Hindus in Khulna.⁹⁶ People of bordering areas lived in a state of anxiety believing that any day they could wake up to find themselves in India where they had been in Pakistan, as part of a majority where they had once been minorities, and vice versa. This wildly unstable equilibrium between the communities strained communal relations to breaking point. The pettiest incidents sparked off brutal killings and the most unsubstantial rumours caused people to flee their homes in their thousands. For both governments, this became a problem of unmanageable proportions. On 14 December 1948, Nehru and Liaquat Ali Khan signed the Inter-Dominion Agreement in a desperate bid to bring calm to the troubled borders.⁹⁷ Both sides agreed to set up a tribunal that would resolve, once and for all, boundary disputes 'arising out of the interpretation of the Radcliffe Award'. This Tribunal, chaired by the Swedish judge Algot Bagge, announced its decisions in February 1950.⁹⁸ In it, Justice Bagge interpreted and clarified those parts of Radcliffe's notification which had been ambiguously worded.

The Boundary Disputes Tribunal's decision cleared up some of the doubts and misinformation about the correct interpretation of the Award. But there was another whole order of problems that it did not begin to address. Even where there was no room for doubt about what Radcliffe meant, there were still enormous difficulties in first defining and then administering the border.

When he drafted the border line, Radcliffe based it upon physical or natural markers and pre-existing administrative borders. Parts of it were traced over the boundaries between thanas and districts, other parts followed the course of large rivers and their tributaries.

⁹⁶ Memo from the Superintendent of Police, Nadia, to the Inspector General of Police, West Bengal, dated 31 March 1948, in GB IB File No. 1238/47 (Nabadwip).

⁹⁷ Proceedings of the Inter-Dominion Conference held at Calcutta, 15–18 April 1948, Government of West Bengal Home (Political) Department Confidential Files (hereafter GWB HPC) for the year 1948 (no file number). West Bengal State Archives.

⁹⁸ The Tribunal's brief was limited: it was only to demarcate the boundary between Murshidabad and Rajshahi districts, and to settle disputes about the course of the Mathabhangra river. Justices Chandrashekhar Aiyer and Shahabuddin represented India and Pakistan respectively. See the 'Decisions given by the Indo-Pakistan Boundary Disputes Tribunal in conformity with the agreement concluded at the Inter-Dominion Conference at Delhi on December 14, 1948 between the Dominion of India and the Dominion of Pakistan relating to the interpretation of the report of the Bengal Boundary Commission, August 12 and 13, 1947', *PP*, Vol. VI, pp. 315–21.

On paper the result was a clear and tidy line. But as Radcliffe would have realized if he had visited the border areas himself, the picture on the ground was very different. The frontiers between thanas, and even between districts, were not physically marked out. Actual administrative boundaries could only be established with reference to survey and settlement maps, which were often inaccurate and almost always outdated. 'There is nothing to demarcate the boundary line except an imaginary one supported by settlement maps showing the border of villages', complained one intelligence branch officer of the Nadia border. 'In the event of encroachment . . . the matter will remain disputed until it is . . . amicably settled by both Dominions or decided by a court of law by reference to the Settlement documents, which may or may not be accepted by both Dominions . . .'.⁹⁹ Such disputes could only be resolved by goodwill on both sides, which, in the strained aftermath of partition, was not often to be had.

The problem became even more complicated in cases where settlement maps differed from the crime maps used by the local police stations to establish their jurisdiction. Radcliffe had settled on the thana as the smallest unit of partition, but he used settlement maps (rather than crime maps) to mark out the border. Contradictions between the two maps were sought to be exploited by both sides, each insisting on whichever interpretation would give it more territory. On the border between Khulna and the 24 Parganas, for instance, just to the east of Hasnabad, lay a village called Rajnagar. Until October 1945, this village had been included within the jurisdiction of the Debhatta thana police in Khulna district. But in 1945, the Land Record and Surveys Department had decided to add the village on to Hasnabad thana in the 24 Parganas. This change had not, however, been marked on to the relevant crime maps. In August 1947, it had been included, *de facto*, in West Bengal. Muslims in Khulna challenged this,¹⁰⁰ and the village became the scene of a protracted and bitter stand-off between the two states.

Nor did geographical or 'natural' boundaries work any better as border posts. If anything, they were even more ambiguous. Some of the rivers which were a part of Radcliffe's line were fed by the melting Himalayan ice-caps and flowed all year round. Others were rain-

⁹⁹ Inspector's 'Report on Border Intelligence of Nadia district', 23 April 1948, in GB IB File No. 1238-47 (Nabadwip).

¹⁰⁰ Extract from the report of the Chief Inspector of Police, Basirhat, dated 31 December 1947, in GB IB File No. 1238-47 (24 Parganas).

fed, and except for the monsoon months, dried up to a trickle. The Mathabhanga river, for instance, which was the dividing line between the two halves of Nadia, 'lies totally dry throughout the year except during the rainy season . . .'. But once the rains began, it would burst its banks and flood large tracts, obscuring the border completely. 'During the heavy and constant downpour, the western portion of the district [would] be practically cut off from the district headquarters', noted one observer, and 'the only way of transport and communication [would become] impassable'.¹⁰¹ So not only was this section of the border invisible for several months of the year, it was also unapproachable; with disastrous effects on border security and administration.

Even the more perennial rivers created difficulties when they stood in as the border. For one thing, they were apt suddenly to change their course. Radcliffe had designated the River Mathabhanga as the border for the north-western part of Nadia, starting from the point at which 'the channel of the river Mathabhanga takes off from the river Ganges. . .'.¹⁰² The problem was that the erratic Mathabhanga had already changed its path, starting off at a new point some distance to the west of the old source. The new course had not been depicted on the Bengal Government Press map which Radcliffe used (although it had been shown correctly on the updated Revenue and Survey Department map). The result of this error was that almost 500 square miles of territory went to Pakistan when it should have gone to India.¹⁰³

Nor was there any guarantee that Bengal's volatile rivers would stick to the course they were following at the time of partition. In January 1948, a police officer reported that the River Ichhamati, which defined the boundary between Khulna and the 24 Parganas, had taken a new course sixteen miles south of Hasnabad. 'The new stream, after taking a crescent course, now joins the original river at Ghumti . . . about twenty miles south of Hasnabad.' The old course

¹⁰¹ Inspector's Report on Border Intelligence of Nadia district', 23 April 1948, in GB IB File No. 1238-47 (Nabadwip).

¹⁰² Sir Cyril Radcliffe's award, *PP*, Vol. VI, pp. 119-20.

¹⁰³ Secretary, New Bengal Association, Meherpur, Nadia, to Acharya Kripalani, 11 September 1947. AICC-I/G-33/1947-48. The Mathabhanga issue was one of those clarified by Justice Bagge in 1950: the starting point of the river was fixed at a point in the Ganges south-west of Jalangi village. 'Decisions given by the Indo-Pakistan Boundary Disputes Tribunal', *PP*, Vol. VI, p. 321.

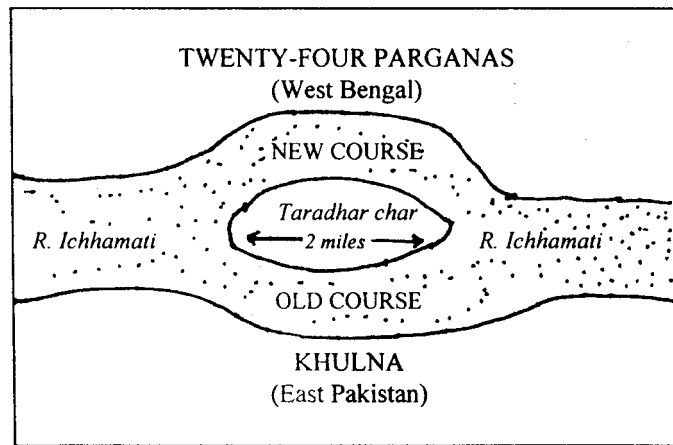


Fig. 1. Taradhar *char* in the River Ichhamati

was no longer navigable except during the flow tide: during the ebb tide all boats would have to use the new stream. In between the old course and the new stream, there was a piece of uninhabited land which had become a *char* (the Bengali word for a strip of sandy land rising out of the river bed above water level). The new *char* in the Ichhamati, called Taradhar *char*, was about two miles long and almost a mile wide.¹⁰⁴ This tiny tract of land was submerged during flow tide, but during ebb tide was of enormous strategic significance. By virtue of its position, it was the key to the control of the entire river.¹⁰⁵ Both sides were quick to realize this, and Taradhar *char* became a flash-point as each tried forcibly to claim it.

Radcliffe had not given any thought to the possibility of rivers changing course; a serious lapse in a province whose rivers were notoriously wayward. Nor did he pay attention to the question of the *chars* which were a common feature in all the large rivers of Bengal. In all likelihood he did not know that they existed, otherwise he would surely have foreseen the difficulties they would create. The River Padma, which divided Murshidabad and Rajshahi, was dotted with *chars*. These 'became a bone of contention and a source of con-

¹⁰⁴ See Figure 1.

¹⁰⁵ Superintendent of Police (DIB), 24 Parganas, to the Assistant Inspector General of Police, West Bengal, 14 January 1948. GB IB File No. 1238-47 (24 Parganas).

stant trouble from the latter half of 1947', which 'continued unabated' until the first war between India and Pakistan.¹⁰⁶ Both sides had agreed, after the Inter-Dominion Conference, to leave existing *chars* unoccupied and to treat them as no-man's-land.¹⁰⁷ But this agreement was often violated, particularly as it did not cover the new *chars* that came up every year as water levels fell off. Both countries scrambled to occupy them, adding to the ill will between India and Pakistan.

Some of *chars* in the River Padma were so large that they had whole villages built upon them, and the people who inhabited these little islands became victims of a protracted tug-of-war. Biren Mandal¹⁰⁸ lived on Rajnagore *char* in the Padma river. As was typical of Bengali villages, his homestead was made up of several thatched huts, two of which fell in Rajshahi in Pakistan, while the other huts were in Murshidabad in India. According to a police report, both Indian and Pakistani troops periodically 'claimed his allegiance'. What this meant in real terms can only be guessed at. We do know that one of his neighbours, Bishnu Pramanik, died in the crossfire.¹⁰⁹ Like Toba Tek Singh in Sadat Hasan Manto's celebrated story, Rajnagore *char* belonged neither here nor there and its inhabitants paid a heavy price indeed for the Boundary Commission's careless oversight.

Tragedies of this sort could have been avoided, or at least minimized, had Radcliffe and the Boundary Commissioners done their job with greater care and sensitivity. Indeed, one is struck by the audacious haste with which they executed their task. Radcliffe did not come out to India until 8 July; the sittings of the Bengal Boundary Commission were held between 16 and 24 July, and Radcliffe gave his decision on 12 August. Radcliffe did not attend any of its public sittings in person, he merely examined the papers presented to the Commission by all parties.¹¹⁰ He made no effort to survey the areas

¹⁰⁶ 'Note showing the developments in Murshidabad district since the partition of Bengal', 1 December 1948. GB IB File No. 1238-47 (Murshidabad).

¹⁰⁷ Memo No. S. 50-51, dated 17 February 1951. *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ The names of all individuals involved in border incidents referred to here have been changed, in compliance with the wishes of the Deputy Inspector General of Police, Intelligence Branch, West Bengal. The aliases used here have been chosen carefully to reflect the caste, community and class locations of the individuals they refer to.

¹⁰⁹ 'A report on the incident in *char* Munshipara'. GB IB File No. 1238-47 (Murshidabad).

¹¹⁰ Because the sittings of the Punjab Boundary Commission, which Radcliffe also chaired, were held at the same time as those of the Bengal Boundary Commission, he attended neither. Sir Cyril Radcliffe's award, *PP*, Vol. VI, p. 116.

he had been asked to carve up. An aerial view of the Murshidabad and Nadia rivers could have revealed some of the more obvious problems, such as the new course of the Mathabhanga and the existence of *chars*. But it seems that no one, not even the Congress and Muslim League leaders, thought that such a survey was necessary. Policemen, revenue officers and bureaucrats in the border districts were not consulted: they undoubtedly would have given the Commission valuable advice on the conditions on the ground. It is no surprise that an Award drafted with so little attention to detail was so slipshod, so full of gross inaccuracies. All those involved in its making must bear culpability for the sheer human cost of their astounding negligence.

The Border and Everyday Life

But if we look to yet another level—to the everyday operation of the Radcliffe line—it becomes clear that no such Award, however carefully and sensitively worked out, could ever have been just or rational in the way that it impinged upon the lives of people.

The border cut a channel several hundred miles long, mostly through settled agricultural land. The Bengal countryside was a dense patchwork of small and large holdings, rights over which were shared in a variety of ways. Landlords, *jotedars*, tenant proprietors, sharecroppers and a host of other intermediaries all claimed a part of the produce of each plot of land. The same person often sharecropped one plot, held tenurial rights over another, cultivated part of this with the help of his family and let the other part out to be sharecropped by someone else. A zamindar, in the same way, might have owned one or two estates outright, but held *talugdari* and *jotedari* rights over several other plots scattered over large areas.

The line which severed this landscape was bound to disrupt every aspect of existence for the rural community, criminalizing the routine and customary transactions by which it survived. It separated the peasant's homestead from the plot he had sharecropped in the last season and the peasant-proprietor from his holding. It cut creditors off from debtors; landlords from tenants. When a *bhag-chashi* (sharecropper) crossed the line to bring home his share of the standing crop, he risked arrest and beatings. So, for instance, when a peasant of Kumarganj in West Dinajpur was returning from Phulbari across the border with a maund of paddy that he had earned, he was

arrested by the East Pakistani border militia.¹¹¹ A Hindu zamindar of Kazipur in Nadia, who, in January 1950, crossed over to Damurhuda 'to realise rents from his tenants . . . was arrested by the Pakistani border patrol and released with a warning never to return'.¹¹² That October, a resident of Dinhata in Cooch-Bihar, while returning from Rangpur with money he had reclaimed from a creditor, was robbed at the border of forty-five rupees.¹¹³ In another similar incident, Subroto Dutta and his servant Narendra Ghosh of Puthikhali in Nabadwip went to Medinipur across the border to reclaim a grain loan. Narendra was carrying 35 seers of paddy back to Puthikhali for his master when he was caught and severely beaten by a Pakistani constable.¹¹⁴ The same thing happened on the western side of the border. In March 1951, some Muslims of Balabari in Cooch-Bihar, who had sought shelter across the border during a communal flare-up, returned to reap the paddy they had sowed on their own plots. As one of them told the police: 'Sometime after we proceeded with harvesting, I noticed four soldiers along with [a member of the] Panchayat coming towards us. I informed my companions and asked them to run away . . .'. But the Indian police shot one of them dead as he tried to cross back to safety.¹¹⁵

The border thus ruptured agrarian communities all along its lengths. Now it is important to recall that these communities were by no means always harmonious ones, and the relations between their members were often bitterly antagonistic. During the forties, particularly in parts of north and deltaic Bengal, sharecroppers were engaged in a protracted and often violent struggle to retain a two-third share of the produce (*tebhaga*). Where the border cut through *tebhaga* areas, its impact on such local battles could be momentous. If it cut a *jotedar* off from the land he had given out to sharecroppers, it became almost impossible for him to insist on his share. Conversely, it was greatly to the disadvantage of sharecroppers if the lands they held in *barga* fell on the wrong side of the border. If they insisted on crossing over to reap their 'rightful' share, the concerned

¹¹¹ Report for the second half of August 1950, Fortnightly Reports on Border Incidents in West Bengal (hereafter FRBI), GB IB File No. 1238-A/47.

¹¹² FRBI for the second half of January 1950. *Ibid.*

¹¹³ FRBI, October 1950. *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ This incident created so much ill will that it prompted a mass exodus of Medinipur Hindus to Malda. Report of the Assistant Sub-Inspector of Tungi camp, P. S. Krishnaganj, dated 7 February 1948. GB IB File No. 1238-47 (Nabadwip).

¹¹⁵ Statement of Emam Ali Khondokar, 28 March 1951. GB IB File No. 1238-47 (Cooch-Bihar).

jotedar could appeal to the border security patrols for protection. For their part, the sharecroppers could and did ask for the support of border patrols from their side to assist them in harvesting their crop and the policemen often obliged. Every harvesting season (at least until 1952), cases of 'forcible harvesting of paddy by Pakistani Muslims' were reported in large numbers; so much so that in December 1950, the West Bengal Inspector General of Police issued a special notice to all Border Superintendents to be vigilant in preventing such incidents.¹¹⁶ In this way, border policemen and militias were drawn into agrarian conflict along the length of the border, and local struggles assumed international dimensions.

In the same way, livestock could become the cause of international incidents. Cattle were not allowed freely to cross the border. It had been a common practice for poorer sharecroppers (*adhiars*) to enter into agreements with *jotedars* in which the latter would lend them the seed-grain, plough and bullocks with which they would sow and till the land. But now, if the *adhiar* was on the wrong side of the boundary, it could be difficult to get the cattle and implements across to him. So, when a Hindu resident of Mathabhanga in Cooch-Bihar tried to send a pair of bullocks across the border to his *adhiars* at Balarhat, they were snatched away by militiamen and he never saw them again.¹¹⁷

Grazing one's herds along the border also became a risky business. If they strayed across the line, they could be seized by the police or stolen by villagers on the other side. Cattle theft was particularly common on the stretches of dry border between Cooch-Bihar and Rangpur, between Malda and Rajshahi, and between Nadia and Kushtia. In one week in May 1950, as many as 250 head of cattle were stolen from English Bazar.¹¹⁸ It was difficult and dangerous to try and recover lost livestock. In one incident, an Indian Muslim of Sitalkuchi crossed over to Hatibandha to retrieve a cow that had strayed across to Pakistani territory. He was caught by a Pakistani patrol party. They beat him to death.¹¹⁹

Where rivers formed the borderline, fishermen who customarily fished in their waters found that their traditional occupation was now regarded as an offence. Those who fell into the hands of the river patrols were not only threatened and abused, their nets, boats

¹¹⁶ FBRI for the first fortnight of November 1950. GB IB File No. 1237(A)-1947.

¹¹⁷ FRBI for the second fortnight of July 1950. GB IB File No. 1238-A/47.

¹¹⁸ FRBI for the first fortnight of May 1950. *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ FRBI for the second fortnight of April 1951. *Ibid.*

and even their catch were confiscated. A fisherman of Karimpur was fishing in his boat on the Mathabhanga, when he was captured by the Pakistani police. They harassed him and relieved him of his catch.¹²⁰ Some fishermen of Gaighata in the 24 Parganas were fired at while they fished in the Ichhamati. They jumped into the river and swam to safety, but their boats were seized by the police patrol.¹²¹ The communities that fished in the many *bils* (shallow ponds or lakes) that spanned the border faced similar difficulties. In Dinajpur, the boundary line between Porsa and Tapan thanas passed through a large *bil* that was almost three miles wide. Fishermen from both thanas who depended on this *bil* for their survival now risked their lives every time they went out to fish.¹²² Border patrols and vigilantes were not the only source of danger. Sometimes fisherfolk of one side attacked fishermen from across the border. In April 1950, two hundred Pakistani fishermen attacked Indian fishermen who were casting their nets on the Indian side of Panchbar *bil*, and drove them out by force.¹²³ Here was another case of the border being exploited to settle older political scores: one section of this fishing community made the most of the opportunity to claim the sole right to fish in a *bil* that they had shared with other fisherfolk before partition.

Even people who lived at some distance from the border found that it disrupted their lives in all sorts of ways. Few villages had their own shops. Most depended on weekly *haats* and on bigger markets several miles away. The border cut many villages off from the markets that served them. This meant that villagers now had to brave crossing the border to purchase their personal supplies of salt, cloth and oil and whatever other goods they needed. But it also meant that the local trade on which whole regions depended was seriously hampered. The border divided towns from the hinterland that habitually supplied their needs. For instance, oilcakes, green vegetables, potatoes, brinjals and pulses were not grown or produced in the villages surrounding Rajshahi town. ‘Since time immemorial’

¹²⁰ FRBI for the second fortnight of August 1950. *Ibid.*

¹²¹ FRBI for the first fortnight of August 1951. *Ibid.* In another such incident, five Indian fishermen were arrested and their boats were seized when they were found fishing midstream in the Ichhamati near Sodepur. FRBI for the second fortnight of May 1950. *Ibid.*

¹²² President of the Patnitola Congress Committee, Balurghat, to members of the Boundary Commission, 12 September 1947. AICC-I/G-33/1947-48.

¹²³ FRBI for the first fortnight of May 1950. *Ibid.*

these had been supplied by villagers living on the southern bank of the Padma in Murshidabad. Prices were substantially lower in Murshidabad than in Rajshahi, so it had been worth their while to cross the river and carry their produce all the way to Rajshahi to sell in the markets there. After partition, the Padma became the border and people were not allowed to cross it with commodities. As a result, a whole sub-economy was destroyed.¹²⁴

The suffering that resulted from the loss of markets must have been widespread. By this time, Bengali villagers had become fully integrated into the market economy. Because they all had to pay their rents and other dues and service their debts in cash, they had to sell at least part of their produce in the market.¹²⁵ After partition, they naturally continued to try to get to their regular markets, often with grave consequences. A *goala* (milkman) of Kushtia, now in East Pakistan, was shot dead as he crossed the border to Nadia with milk for his customers.¹²⁶ Border policemen drove a potter of Chapra (Nadia) away as he crossed the border to sell earthenware goods at Thakurpur, but only after they had robbed him of all his pots.¹²⁷ Two Indians were arrested while they were returning home to Karimpur in Nadia after buying a *maund* of paddy at Brajanathpur *haat* in Kushtia.¹²⁸ A vegetable vendor was beaten up and robbed as he returned from Daulatpur to Jalangi in Murshidabad.¹²⁹

Even when villages and their respective markets were fortuitously on the same side of the boundary, there were problems when the roads or railheads that served them were on the wrong side. The thanas of Porsa and Patnitala, which went to Bogra in East Pakistan after partition, produced two million maunds of surplus paddy every year. This paddy was sold at Nithpur *haat*, also in Pakistan. But the railhead connecting Nithpur went to West Bengal. The nearest line in East Pakistan was over forty miles away. The paddy now had to be transported this distance by bullock-cart or lorry, raising its price substantially.¹³⁰ While Radcliffe made an effort to preserve, as far as

¹²⁴ President, Rajshahi District Congress Committee to Dr P. C. Ghosh, 18 October 1947. AICC-I/G-5/1947-48.

¹²⁵ Sugata Bose has argued the case for a highly monetized agrarian economy in twentieth-century Bengal. See his *Agrarian Bengal. Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919-1947* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 34-97.

¹²⁶ FRBI for the first fortnight of May 1950. GB IB 1238-A/47.

¹²⁷ FRBI for the second fortnight of August 1950. *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ FRBI for October 1950. *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ FRBI for the second fortnight of May 1950. *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ President, Patnitola Congress Committee, Balurghat, to the members of the Boundary Commission, 12 September 1947. AICC-I/G-33/1947-48.

possible, the integrity of major highways and railway lines, smaller roads and lines were fragmented and many markets suffered the same fate as Nithpur.

Of course, the most serious disruption to transport, communication and trade was caused by the separation of North Bengal from the rest of West Bengal. Between Rohanpur railway station and Godgharighat, people had to suffer 'the hardship and humiliation of passing through Pakistani territory, where they were subjected to searches'. To get to Calcutta from Malda, they had to take a circuitous route via Rajmahal in Bihar, with numerous changes and long waits.¹³¹ All this caused a major setback to the multi-million-rupee tea trade.¹³² Not surprisingly, months after partition, the Indian Tea Planters' Association submitted a detailed road-cum-rail plan that would connect Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Malda and West Dinajpur with Assam and with the rest of West Bengal. The West Bengal government naturally took this plan very seriously and regarded the task of re-establishing this link as an urgent priority. But the problems of smaller roads and markets were never addressed, with long-term effects on the economy of the border zones.

Towns were not only major markets of rural produce, they were also administrative headquarters and housed public institutions. Their hospitals, dispensaries and law courts drew people from miles around. The Radcliffe line cut many of them off from the people they were designed to serve. A constable of Malda who took ten days' casual leave to go home to Faridpur so as to attend the hearing of a civil suit was arrested, locked up for several hours, and prevented from attending the hearing.¹³³ In cases such as this, litigation already under way had to be abandoned by appellants from the wrong side of the border. In many more, legal cases could not be instituted at all because of the border had made the old district headquarters inaccessible, and the nearest court on this side of the line was too far away. The border also sometimes set these institutions apart from the staff that manned them, as in the case of the doctor who

¹³¹ Resolution passed at a public meeting at Malda on 18 February 1948. AICC-I/G-5/1947-48. Also see the letter from Surendra Mohan Ghosh to Balvantrai Mehta (AICC General Secretary), 18 November 1953. AICC Papers Second Instalment, Parliamentary Board File No. 21 of 1953 (hereafter AICC-II/PB—followed by the relevant file no. and year).

¹³² Tea was grown only in Darjeeling and the Jalpaiguri Dooars. It was packed mostly in Calcutta, whence much of it left by ship to markets all over the world.

¹³³ Fortnightly appreciation of the border situation in West Bengal for the second fortnight of March, 1948. GB IB File No. 1238-A/47 (KW).

lived in Karimpur but worked at the dispensary in Kazipur Bazar across the Nadia border. Every day he walked half a mile from his home to the dispensary, and returned in the evening. One evening he was arrested as he was walking home. He was searched and detained for two days, all the medicines and instruments he had kept in his bag were confiscated and he was forced to pay a fine of two thousand rupees.¹³⁴ He lost his job and much of his practice; the dispensary lost a skilled and qualified employee and the people of Kazipur Bazar lost access to their doctor. It would take years, even decades, before problems of this sort were even addressed.¹³⁵

And finally, the border separated people from their families. Particularly for those unfortunate women whose natal and affinal homes were on opposite sides of the boundary, the rare visits home to their parents became a difficult and dangerous proposition. One woman was robbed at Jadabpur on the border as she tried to go home to her family in Meherpur. In all likelihood, few others dared (or were allowed) even to try.¹³⁶ Their stories are not recorded in the police archive but their experiences are a part of lived memory and partition folklore.

¹³⁴ English translation of the petition of Dr Gaur Chandra Ray or Fulbari, P. S. Karimpur, Nadia, dated 16 March 1948. GB IB File No. 1238-47 (Nabadwip).

¹³⁵ The effect of partition on institutions, particularly in the east, was compounded many times over by the massive exodus of refugees from both sides of the border. The first wave of refugees from east to west was predominantly composed of middle-class Hindus: and amongst them were many of the doctors, lawyers, teachers, clerks and white collar employees who had manned public institutions in East Bengal. Of the 1.1 million refugees who migrated to West Bengal by June 1948, 350,000 belonged to the urban *bhadralok* and 550,000 to the rural *bhadralok*. Prafulla Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men. The Refugees and the Left—Political Experiment in West Bengal* (Calcutta, 1990), p. 1. East Pakistan lacked people qualified to take over from them, it lacked the universities and technical institutes that could train another generation to take their place and so its hospitals, courts, schools and offices would run below par for decades. West Bengal, on the other hand, was inundated with skilled, qualified and educated people for whom no jobs were available. They would join the ranks of the unemployed and disaffected, creating enormous problems for future governments. The refugee issue is a rich and complex subject in itself, and I will not attempt to discuss it here. For details, see Prafulla Chakrabarti, *The Marginal Men*.

¹³⁶ FRBI for the second fortnight of June 1950. GB IB File No. 1238-A/47. The border also interfered with the customary visits of the son-in law (*jamai-babu*) to his in-laws on the occasion of *Jamai-shoshti*. Kishori Mohan Sarkar of Jalangi in Murshidabad was arrested while trying to visit his father-in-law at Bagwan. The same fate befell Jadunath Mistri of Lalgola. Extract from the Murshidabad district Weekly Confidential Report for the week ending 27 November 1948. GB IB 1238-A/1947.

The Evolution of New Ways of Life

One reason why the Bengal border continued to be troubled by incidents of this sort years after partition was a confused and contradictory government policy. In Punjab, both governments had agreed in principle to compensate all migrants for property that they had left behind, thereby ensuring that they would not return to reclaim it. Nehru's government also undertook a fairly vigorous scheme to resettle and rehabilitate Punjabi refugees.¹³⁷ These policies were a clear indication that both India and Pakistan intended to treat the partition of Punjab as final and irrevocable.

But because conditions in Bengal were not as volatile at the time, and because the flow of refugees across the eastern border was not as sudden and torrential, the two countries took the view that normalcy in Bengal could be restored more easily. To this end, they agreed that Bengalis could retain their title to land on both sides of the border and undertook to safeguard evacuee property for its owners until such time when they could safely come back to claim it.¹³⁸ This meant that, in theory, many West Bengalis continued after partition to own land in East Pakistan and vice versa. It also meant that, officially, the Bengal border was to be porous. Government policy decreed that people were to be allowed freely to cross the Radcliffe line to attend to their legitimate business on the other side.¹³⁹ At a meeting in Dacca in February 1948, government representatives of East and West Bengal '... agreed to ensure the implementation of the two Premiers' agreement allowing nationals of one state to move the produce of his land lying in another State in the border areas...'.¹⁴⁰ For those who migrated to the other side from places that were far away from the border, these rights remained on paper. But people who lived beside the border could and did try

¹³⁷ See Gyanesh Kudaisya, 'The demographic upheaval of partition: refugees and agricultural resettlement in India, 1947-67', *South Asia*, Vol. XVIII, Special issue (1995), pp. 73-94.

¹³⁸ At the Inter-Dominion Conference, Nehru and Liaquat Ali Khan agreed to set up Evacuee Property Management Boards on both sides of the Bengal border. Proceedings of the Inter-Dominion Conference held at Calcutta, 15-18 April 1948, GWB HPC for the year 1948 (no file number). West Bengal State Archives.

¹³⁹ Until March 1948, this right was guaranteed by the Standstill Agreement between India and Pakistan.

¹⁴⁰ *Proceedings of the Conference of Representatives of the Governments of East Bengal and West Bengal, held at Dacca on 14 February, 1948*. GWB HPC File No. 62 (1-20)/48. The Inter-Dominion agreement reaffirmed this right for the citizens of the two Bengals.

physically to exercise the right to their property and its produce that had been guaranteed to them.¹⁴¹

These arrangements were inspired by a genuine belief that peace would return to Bengal if Hindu and Muslim refugees were encouraged to return to their homes.¹⁴² But in the border areas, things turned out very differently. Two factors prevented the government's design to achieve a porous but peaceful border from having the desired effect. The first was the drive to stop smuggling. The second factor was the difficulty of impressing the official policy of openness upon border police and militias. In the turbulent aftermath of partition, local policemen and vigilantes on both sides of the border were inclined to be vicious and vindictive towards minorities and overzealous in guarding the frontier. People who were brave or foolhardy enough to cross over regardless ran the risk of being robbed, of being arrested on trumped-up charges, being beaten or even, as we have seen, being killed.¹⁴³

Immediately after partition, the Standstill Agreement between the two dominions had provided for the joint administration of currency, trade, imports and exports.¹⁴⁴ But after it lapsed in March 1948, the Radcliffe line became an economic frontier across which trade, particularly in certain key commodities, was strictly controlled. This had the effect of notifying as criminal a whole range of customary economic activities along the border. Even though the two governments agreed at the Dacca Conference to make an exception for the inhabitants of the border areas, we have seen above that this provision was largely disregarded by officials on the spot. So, in fact, by the middle of 1948, there were three different and conflicting directives

¹⁴¹ So, for instance, every year Pakistani Muslims would cross the Bongaon border to farm the 200 *bighas* of land they owned at different points along the border. District Inspection Officer's Report dated 14 December 1948. GB IB File No. 1238-47 (24 Parganas).

¹⁴² Nehru was convinced that all that was needed in Bengal was a 'psychological' approach: that if the right psychological conditions were created then people would return to their homes. Jawaharlal Nehru to Bidhan Chandra Roy, 2 December 1949. Cited in Saroj Chakrabarty, *With Dr. B. C. Roy*, p. 143.

¹⁴³ Government representatives recognized that most incidents of this sort arose out of the 'misrepresentation of Government policy by overzealous, misinformed or tactless petty officials on either side . . .'. *Proceedings of the Conference of Representatives of the Governments of East Bengal and West Bengal*. GWB HPC File No. 62 (1-20)/48.

¹⁴⁴ The agreement retained controls over essential commodities such as steel, coal and textiles, provided for the free movement of goods and persons between the two dominions and for the retention of existing customs, tariffs, currency and coinage until 31 March 1948. *The Statesman*, 8 July 1947.

regarding economic activity on the border. First: citizens of one dominion could legally own property in the other; second: the government would control all trade in commodities between the two countries; and third: inhabitants of the border area would be allowed to continue to buy their personal requirements and sell their individual produce across the border.

The result, as we have seen, was messy. Officials on the spot were left with the discretion to decide which particular policy prevailed in each individual case, and they were usually harsh in dealing with border crossing by border-dwellers on genuine and legitimate business. But, on the other hand, this somewhat confused policy created space for the emergence of smuggling as a thriving enterprise in the border areas, usually with the connivance of the border police.

Smuggling across the Bengal border was an attractive proposition. The price of food was higher in East Bengal than anywhere else in India,¹⁴⁵ and there was a huge demand in West Bengal for East Bengali raw jute. Anyone could see that there was a fortune to be made in smuggling rice across the border for sale in the markets of East Bengal,¹⁴⁶ and in bringing jute into West Bengal. The Indian government, struggling as it was against severe and chronic food shortages, was anxious to prevent any foodgrains from being lost to government procurement schemes. The government of East Pakistan was equally concerned to prevent raw jute from being spirited across the border. Jute was one of its key trading advantages over India, and East Pakistan could not allow it to be squandered.¹⁴⁷ So both governments made arrangements to secure the border against smugglers.¹⁴⁸

Despite this, smuggling was widespread. In April 1948, border secret police reported that 'smuggling of foodgrains, textile goods

¹⁴⁵ 'The Viceroy's visit to Bengal: Note by the Viceroy', *PP*, Vol. I, p. 188(C).

¹⁴⁶ On the Nadia–Kushtia border, the difference in the price of a maund of paddy could be as high as Rs. 6/-. In Shikarpore, for instance, in Nabadwip, paddy sold at Rs. 8/- per maund, whereas at *Char* Pragpur across the border it could command as much as Rs. 14/-. District Sub-Inspector's Report dated 20 December 1947. GB IB File No. 167/47 (Nabadwip).

¹⁴⁷ Ayesha Jalal, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia. A Comparative and Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 24.

¹⁴⁸ For instance, at the end of September 1950, the border patrol at Ramkrishnapur was reportedly strengthened to prevent the smuggling of jute. Extract from the Weekly Confidential Report for Murshidabad district for the week ending 30 September 1950. GB IB 1238–47 (Murshidabad). On the Indian side, efforts were

and all kinds of commodities from West Bengal to East Bengal territory by all conceivable and ingenious means continues unabated . . .'.¹⁴⁹ Rice, cloth, kerosene oil and salt figured at the top of the list of goods smuggled eastwards. Consumer goods such as soap, matches, tobacco, cigarettes, soda and torch cells also regularly made their way across the border to East Bengal.¹⁵⁰ Jute dominated the list of clandestine exports from east to west.¹⁵¹ Betel nuts and chillies, which were substantially cheaper in East Bengal, were also routinely smuggled westwards.¹⁵²

How did all of this affect everyday life on the border? It would appear that a good many border-dwellers became involved in this clandestine trade. Of course, many of them were treated as smugglers even when they were merely conducting their habitual business across the border, selling their wares and buying a few goods to meet their personal needs. But there seems little doubt that many individuals and even entire village communities took deliberately to smuggling on a regular basis. This was, in a sense, the one door of opportunity that had been opened to them when partition shut all others. As border-dwellers, they were formally entitled to cross over with their individual produce: this made them the only nationals of one state who had the right to enter the other with goods of any description. They could exploit this position to conduct their own petty illegal trade in locally produced commodities, or to act as covers or delivery-men for wider smuggling networks. One intelligence officer was surprised to find 'no disorder and very little bad feeling among the people of the two dominions' when he surveyed conditions in border villages in the 24 Parganas. His assessment was that 'the expected bad feeling is probably nipped [in the bud] by the self-interest of both the people of India and Pakistan. They are too

made to strengthen police presence at points such as Aungalbari in Karimpur which was an entrepôt for the illegal export of foodgrains and cotton to East Bengal.

¹⁴⁹ Fortnightly Appreciation of the Border Situation in West Bengal (hereafter FABS) for the first fortnight in April 1948. GB IB File No. 1238-A/47 (KW).

¹⁵⁰ See the FRBIs for the first fortnight in April 1950, the first fortnight in May 1950, the first fortnight in August 1950 and the first fortnight in February 1951, all in GB IB 1238-A/47.

¹⁵¹ So, for instance, the Pakistani police stopped two boats carrying over 200 maunds of jute across the Padma from Shibgunje in Rajshahi to Suti in Murshidabad. Telegraphic message from the Superintendent of Police, Murshidabad, to the Deputy Inspector General of the Intelligence Branch, dated 3 October 1950. GB IB File No. 1238/47 (Murshidabad).

¹⁵² FRBI for the first fortnight in August 1950. GB IB File No. 1238-A/47.

busy with their own smuggling of chillies, mustard oil, cloth, black pepper etc . . .'.¹⁵³

For these villagers, the exigencies of survival outweighed the exhortations of the ideologues against dealing with the enemy. Patriotism and communalism were luxuries that they could ill afford now that partition had ruptured so many of their traditional subsistence networks. The District Magistrate of Khulna in Pakistan recognized this when he held a meeting at Kaliganj to warn its inhabitants against smuggling. He reportedly said that ' . . . all sorts of exports to India were stopped now, "especially the export of jute". He warned them that the Pakistan government would not hesitate to shoot smugglers. He added that "*Muslims should realise that Pakistan is their own dominion* and requested them to check all sorts of corruption and smuggling" . . .'.¹⁵⁴ His appeal to Pakistani nationalism was realistically backed up with the threat of force, a sign that the communal and nationalist argument alone was not enough to persuade his audience. In other words, border villagers appeared to be developing an attitude of rough-and-ready cynicism towards the official ideologies of their respective states: an attitude which the authorities were inclined to regard as subversive.

To cope with this kind of mass subversion, it was not enough simply to beef up border patrols, although both governments did their best to strengthen and invigorate border security.¹⁵⁵ In all likelihood, the idea of setting up border militias was first proposed to deal with the enemy within. In February 1948, 'the Pakistan government was reported to have given a call to Muslim youths to build up a 150,000 strong non-official Muslim military organisation' to be called the Ansar Bahini. An expensive recruitment campaign using cinema slides and magic lantern shows was taken up in earnest.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ Report on border affairs dated 20 March 1950. GB IB File No. 1238-47 (24 Parganas).

¹⁵⁴ Report of the Assistant Sub-Inspector of Himulganj of a meeting held on 28 November 1949. Report on border incidents for the week ending 17 December 1949. GB IB File No. 1238/47 (24 Parganas). Emphasis added. Similarly in October 1947, the East Bengal minister for Public Health and Local Self-Government announced that only 'loyal citizens' were wanted in Pakistan, and that 'the unscrupulous men who are gambling with the food of the nation for their individual gains' would be severely punished. *The Statesman*, 8 October 1947.

¹⁵⁵ By the end of 1949, Indian border police had begun regularly to complain that Pakistani officials were being 'over-zealous' in their drive to check smuggling. See the weekly reports of border incidents in the 24 Parganas for the latter part of 1949. GB IB File No. 1238/47 (24 Parganas).

¹⁵⁶ FRBI for the second fortnight of February 1948. GB IB File No. 1238A/47 (KW).

The idea clearly was to draw motivated youths into the campaign against smuggling. They would act as a vigilante force, rooting out the bad eggs in the home camp and injecting a healthy dose of the state's political ideology into the border-dwelling communities. There were plenty of suitably indoctrinated young men out on a limb now that organizations such as the Muslim National Guard had become defunct. They flocked to the new Muslim militia and within months, lathi-wielding Ansars had become a familiar and dreaded sight all along the border. Not only were they involved in many of the crimes committed against border-crossers, they were also responsible for raising the communal temperature along the border. Ansars seem to have been behind a new trend which emerged after 1950, in which Muslims from border-lying villages in West Bengal would cross over to Pakistan after burning down their homesteads. Presumably this was to prevent Hindu refugees from occupying evacuee Muslim property. If they were not able to set fire to their homes before crossing, Ansars would do the job for them.¹⁵⁷ Before this, it had not been uncommon for Muslims intending to migrate to Pakistan to enter into informal agreements to exchange some property with Hindus crossing the other way. It was also quite common for Muslims who left for Pakistan when the communal situation was fraught, to return to their homes in India later when the air had cleared a little.¹⁵⁸ But once the Ansars began to display a dog-in-the-manger attitude towards Muslim evacuee property in India, communal attitudes hardened and informal and temporary arrangements such as these became much harder to achieve. In one typical incident, Ansars arrested a Hindu of Gadra in Jalpaiguri on a border road for plucking mangoes from a tree (on the Indian side of the road) that had belonged to a Muslim who had left for Pakistan. In retaliation, the man's brother attacked a Pakistani Muslim when he crossed over to graze his cattle. Communal tempers were frayed for a good while afterwards as a result.¹⁵⁹

The West Bengal government did not lag behind in setting up a militia of its own. In February 1948, Dr B. C. Roy announced his Government's plans for the prevention of smuggling along the frontier. These included arrangements not only for the establishment for a volunteer corps but also for 'training villagers in border areas to

¹⁵⁷ See, for instance, the FRBIs for April 1950. GB IB File No.1238-A/47.

¹⁵⁸ Several examples of this are cited in the FRBI for the second fortnight in September 1950. *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ FRBI for the first fortnight of June, 1950. *Ibid.*

defend themselves [and] to act in collaboration with the police in the neighbourhood [. . .to] assist them in stopping smuggling'.¹⁶⁰ On 16 March 1948, the Bangiya Jatiya Rakshi Dal (the Bengal National Protection Brigade) was formed. It was a provincial volunteer force of a 'semi-military nature', made up of trained youths from the six border districts: Jalpaiguri, West Dinajpur, Malda, Murshidabad, Nadia and the 24 Parganas.¹⁶¹ The Rakshi Dal was exempted from the ban against holding parades and wearing uniforms that had been imposed upon private organizations in the wake of Gandhi's killing. It was administered in each district by a high-powered committee consisting of the Magistrate, the Superintendent of Police, the President of the District Congress Committee and the local Assembly Member. The Government's instruction was that 'the administration of the Bangiya Jatiya Rakshi Dal should take the highest priority over routine administration'.¹⁶²

Not much information is available about the Rakshi Dal's activities. But one horrific incident is perhaps indicative of the general pattern. In March 1950, Muslims from various parts of Dinhata thana in Cooch-Bihar began to leave their homes and take shelter in Pakistani enclaves along the border. Masaldanga was one of these enclaves, into which about 1,500 Muslims crowded together seeking security in numbers. Some time at the end of March, the local Rakshi Dal led by the secretary of the Nazirhat Congress Committee, began to drive them out. In a campaign that resembles the ethnic cleansing of today's world, they besieged the little enclave, cutting its inhabitants off from access to food and other essential supplies. The people of Masaldanga decided to shift wholesale across the border to safety. On 28 March, they made their way to the check-post under the protection of a Hindu mercenary who had collected a ransom from them as the price for his services. When they reached the border, they found the local Congress secretary waiting for them in the company of excise inspectors, who insisted on searching them and their belongings. This added insult infuriated the Pakistani Muslims who had collected on the other side of the border to watch. They forced their way through and a riot broke out. The Congressman, who was armed with a dagger, stabbed one of them to death, whereupon the mob turned on him and killed him with his own weapon. His body

¹⁶⁰ *The Statesman*, 4 February, 1948.

¹⁶¹ Chief Secretary to the Government of West Bengal (Home Political) to District Officers, dated 16 March, 1948. GB IB File No. 769/48.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

was dragged across the border so as to deny the dead man the dignity of a suitable cremation.¹⁶³

Incidents such as these suggest that the presence of armed border militias did much to re-ignite communal hostilities along the border. If this is correct, it would seem that they played an important part in strengthening the border and making it more impregnable. This was not just because they carried lathis (and even guns) and tended to use them indiscriminately. In this they merely supplemented the already considerable physical force wielded by the official border security force. Their special contribution was to act as an ideological bulwark, not only against outsiders but against the fifth-columnists within. Their presence in the community served as a warning to the so-called 'anti-nationals' who would trade with the enemy. And for ordinary law-abiding villagers they acted as teachers in citizenship, preaching patriotism and loyalty to the new nation-state, and defining the neighbour across the border as the enemy.¹⁶⁴ Villagers were encouraged to keep their eyes open and report suspicious activities to them: in other words, to carry tales against fellow-villagers and neighbours to the authorities. So it is significant that it was Banaphool Panchayat, head of the village council of Jaigir Balabari, who betrayed his neighbour Ershad Ali Khondokar and his companions when they crossed the border to reap the crop on their own plots in March 1951: Banaphool actually led the soldiers to the spot and pointed the culprits out to them.¹⁶⁵ There was also an important symbolism in the Ansars' act of burning down houses evacuated by the Indian Muslims who crossed the border to Pakistan. It was not just that the Muslim refugee now no longer had anything to go back to, although this was undeniably important. By encouraging him to set fire to his home, the Ansar was asking the Muslim refugee to repudiate his entire Indian past, to be 'born again' as a Pakistani. It was almost a rite of passage which made migration to the new state a final and irrevocable act.

This flew in the face of the official policy of openness, just as the Rakshi Dal's effort at ethnic cleansing in Cooch-Bihar defied Nehru's 'psychological' approach of guaranteeing security to minorit-

¹⁶³ Note dated 19 April 1950. GB IB File No. 1238/47 (Cooch-Bihar).

¹⁶⁴ The Commandant of the Pakistan National Guard thus announced that one of its main objects 'was to enable the people to serve their country better by training them in citizenship and discipline . . .'. *The Statesman*, 23 December 1947.

¹⁶⁵ One man was shot dead in this incident. GB IB File No. 1238-27 (Cooch-Bihar).

ies. The militias ensured that life could not go on as usual on the border. We cannot be certain how far this was the result that the two governments intended to achieve. On the Indian side, we know that there were differences of opinion between Nehru and Dr B. C. Roy, the Premier of West Bengal. The latter favoured a hard-line approach towards Pakistan and would have preferred to seal the border completely, even to Hindu refugees from the east. He also recommended that the border zones be cleared of Muslims and resettled with 'loyal' Hindus, but Nehru would have none of it.¹⁶⁶ It is perhaps significant that the decision to set up the Rakshi Dal was taken by the West Bengal (rather than the Indian) government. On the Pakistani side, we know only that from the middle of 1951, the border was further fortified in preparation for the impending war between India and Pakistan. In August 1951, Khulna Hindus were reportedly shifted out from areas within a radius of three miles from the border, and the entire population, Hindu and Muslim, was evacuated from the Jalpaiguri border. Jungles in the border zone began to be cleared and the booking of goods between Rajshahi and Godagari was stopped. In September, Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code was declared along the entire Nadia border, and in October, *haats* along the entire length of the border were closed down.¹⁶⁷

All of this changed life on the border beyond recognition. Long before war actually broke out, the little villages and once-sleepy hamlets had become busy centres of militia activities. People whose closest contact with the state had once been the local *chowkidar* now became accustomed to seeing armed men in uniform. Where they had once lived off the land as best as they could, earning a little cash by selling their wares at the weekly market, now they could, if they dared, turn to smuggling instead, or else offer to supply the needs of the nearest police picket or army barracks. Village politics that

¹⁶⁶ Nehru wrote: 'I have had some reports about the border areas of Nadia district. It is stated that large number[s] of Muslims living on our side of the border are being uprooted and taken elsewhere. Presumably, the policy is to clear those areas, up to a certain depth, of Muslims because it is thought that they might be unreliable elements in case of trouble. I feel that such a policy would be definitely wrong and harmful even from the narrowest view of expediency. It would, of course, be against any general principle that we follow. . . . Any such attempt would do us injury in many ways. . . . I should like you to look into this matter and take steps to rectify any such action which might have been taken . . .'. Jawaharlal Nehru to Dr Bidham Chandra Roy, 15 September 1951. Cited in Saroj Chakrabarty, *With Dr. B. C. Roy*, pp. 192–3.

¹⁶⁷ Report of the Superintendent of Police (Intelligence Branch), Nadia, dated 26 September 1951. GB IB File No. 1238-A/47.

had, so far as we know, revolved around the caste councils, union boards and tenancy disputes, now began to be the site where citizenship and patriotic duty were propagated, where ideological battles between nations were fought.

This suggests that, even if the border zones were geographically on the periphery of the new state, politically they were not. Once these regions had been quiet backwaters where the state was a distant presence. But now, paradoxically, the border catapulted them into the closest touch with the state. It has been customary to think of borders as being peripheral to the state. If the centre is the core of the state, where its political, economic and cultural hegemony is strongest, the border has been generally thought of as its opposite, as a terrain where the political power of the state is most compromised.¹⁶⁸ But as we have seen, on the Bengal frontier the relationship between the nation-state and its borders was far more complex, intense and direct than the centre-periphery model would have us expect.

Conclusion

In the first part of this paper, we saw how the Radcliffe line came to take its final shape. We saw how the making of the border was influenced by calculations that often had little to do with communal or even national interest. The arguments and appeals presented before the Boundary Commission demonstrated, if anything, how quickly communal solidarity could fall apart along lines of territory, party, faction and personal ambition when it ran into the reality of partition. If the original purpose of the Bengal partition was indeed to wrest a separate homeland for the Hindu community, it is striking how many Hindus were sacrificed in order to achieve it, and how readily these sacrifices were made.

Yet the myth of the homeland had to be kept alive, especially at the border. We saw in the second part of the paper how the border, once defined, quickly became sacrosanct. And it had to be honoured as such by the ordinary village people who happened to live along its path, even at the expense of their homes, their lands, their livelihood and their very lives. If heavy-handed persuasion and even force were

¹⁶⁸ See the introduction by Julian Minghi in Dennis Rumley and Julian Minghi (eds), *The Geography of Border Landscapes* (London and New York, 1991).

necessary to extract their compliance, it was justified 'in the national interest'.

To return to the discussion of the surgical metaphor with which this paper began: the first half of this essay has shown how inappropriate it is to consider the drawing of the border as a purely technical affair. The border was not drawn dispassionately, with clinical precision and attention to detail. It was a hastily and ignorantly drawn line, in whose drafting political pressures played no small part. Moreover, the political considerations that shaped the drawing up of the border were substantially different from the concerns which had influenced the 3 June plan. In this sense, the politics of partition was far from being over and done with on 3 June or even on 17 August 1947. Partition was a political process which continued to unfold long afterwards, and indeed continues to unfold even today.

So partition was in no sense like an operation that was concluded in August 1947. The border is far from being the trace of an event long over, like a healed and fading incision scar. It is still in the process of being formed. Its creation was not merely a matter of drawing a line through a map by a qualified technocrat: it was created again and again, by a number of different agencies, on the ground through which it ran. Its shape (both literally and metaphorically) has varied, and continues to vary, through time.

But it is the second part of this paper which has shown us what is really wrong with the surgical metaphor. We have seen how extraordinarily violent and crude an instrument the border was. Looked at from the ground, from the eyes of those whose lives it shattered, this violence was the more terrifying because it was irrational, because there was no sense in which it could ever have been rational. Even if in one place the Radcliffe line had not cut this sharecropper off from his field, or separated that woman from her parental home, they would have been the lucky exceptions and their lives undoubtedly would have been damaged in a thousand other ways. The idiom of surgery puts a gloss on this experience. Surgery is painful and bloody, but it serves a purpose—it makes things all right in the end—and the pain of surgery is comprehensible and endurable because of this. By describing the creation of the border in these terms, the violence that was involved in this process (and the destruction that could never be put right) has been contained within an acceptable, comprehensible and even meaningful idiom. The surgical metaphor has thus worked to lend legitimacy and credibility not only to the Radcliffe line but to the very idea of partition itself.