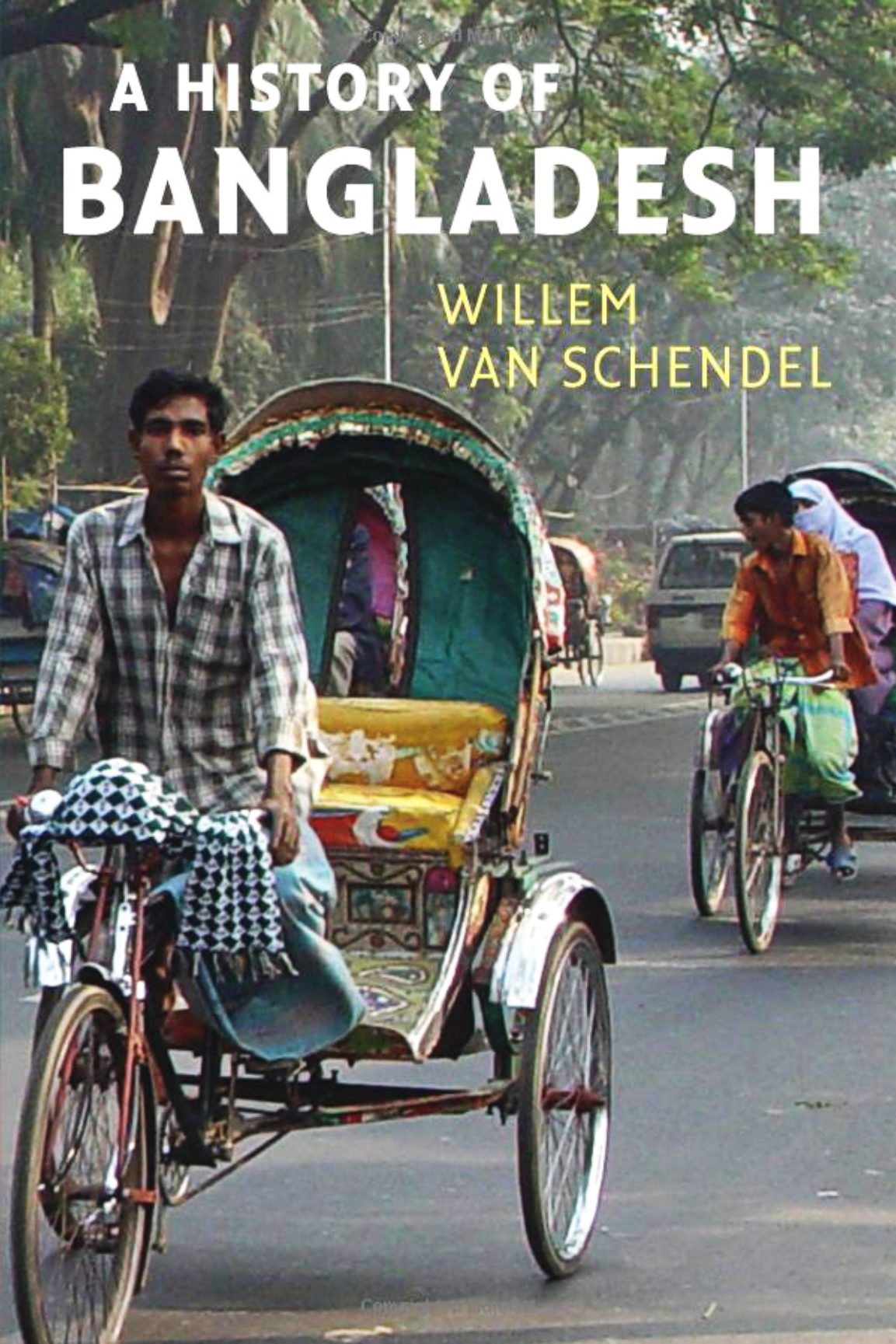
A HISTORY OF
BANGLADESH
WILLEM
VAN SCHENDEL

A HISTORY OF BANGLADESH

Bangladesh is a new name for an old land whose history is little known to the wider world. A country chiefly known in the West through media images of poverty, underdevelopment and natural disasters, Bangladesh did not exist as an independent state until 1971. Willem van Schendel's history reveals the country's vibrant, colourful past and its diverse culture as it navigates the extraordinary twists and turns that have created modern Bangladesh. The story begins with the early geological history of the delta which has decisively shaped Bangladesh society. The narrative then moves chronologically through the era of colonial rule, the partition of Bengal, the war with Pakistan and the birth of Bangladesh as an independent state. In so doing, it reveals the forces that have made Bangladesh what it is today. This is an eloquent introduction to a fascinating country and its resilient and inventive people.

WILLEM VAN SCHENDEL is Professor of Modern Asian History at the University of Amsterdam and Head of the Asia Department of the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam. His previous publications include *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia* (2005) and *Global Blue: Indigo and Espionage in Colonial Bengal* (with Pierre-Paul Darrac, 2006).

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WILLEM VAN SCHENDEL
University of Amsterdam

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521861748

First published 2009
Reprinted with corrections 2009

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-521-86174-8 Hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-67974-9 Paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2010

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CHAPTER 8

Colonial conflicts

The colonial period ushered in major political and cultural renewal. Establishing British authority was not simply a question of defeating former rulers at Polashi and controlling zamindars. An authoritarian state based on an alliance with rural grandees was bound to call forth opposition, and, indeed, rebellion was a frequent companion of colonial rule. Right at the outset British rule was challenged severely and unexpectedly by thousands of armed religious mendicants who were enraged by an ill-advised government policy of banning the collection of alms. The revolt gained widespread support from a rural population suffering under the newly imposed system of taxation and it turned against tax collectors and armed forces. Known as the Fakir–Sannyasi resistance – fakir and sannyasi being the terms for Muslim and Hindu religious men, respectively – it combined guerrilla tactics and mass battles in which thousands participated. These rebels engaged the British all over Bengal and Bihar from the early 1760s to the 1790s.[1] Resentment against the encroaching colonial state also found expression in various local revolts – for example, in Chittagong and Mymensingh[2] – and these movements took the form of protecting community rights.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, British rule was no longer threatened in the Bengal delta.[3] When the large revolt of 1857 – known to the British as 'the Mutiny' and to some nationalist historians as 'the First War of Independence' – brought the near-collapse of British rule in many parts of northern and central India, the Bengal delta remained aloof. Certainly, there was a soldier rebellion in Chittagong and trepidation among the British in Dhaka, but because neither the landlords and the middle classes nor the peasantry supported the revolt, it fizzled out after some skirmishes. In the Bengal delta political disaffection now focused on the effects of commercial agriculture and cultivators' legal rights. Resistance typically pitted cultivators and a rising middle class, on the one hand, against zamindars, European entrepreneurs and the colonial state, on the other.

Several movements turned against the forced cultivation of indigo and successfully ended the hated indigo industry in the Bengal delta. The leaders of these movements were Islamic preachers who had been on extended pilgrimages to Mecca and who had been influenced by contemporary Arabian Wahhabism, a school of thought that set itself against moral decline and political weakness in Islam and that disapproved of the popular veneration of saints and their shrines. Upon their return they had started campaigns to 'purify' the religious practices of Bengali Muslims but soon they turned into champions of peasant class interests. The result was armed resistance against zamindars, planters and British rule. Titu Mir (1782–1831) spent five years in Mecca and then became the leader of the Tariqah-i-Muhammadiyah revolt in Bengal. Haji Shariatullah (1781–1840), who was in Mecca for nineteen years, returned to lead the Faraizi revolt. His son and successor Dudu Miah (1819–62) also spent five years in Mecca before leading peasants into the 'Blue Mutiny' (1859–62) that wiped out indigo in Bengal. Not all peasant revolts were religiously inspired, however. The Pabna Revolt (1873) emphasised the class angle more exclusively. It was linked to the success of another cash crop, jute, and the emergence of a new rural middle class that began to assert itself against the zamindars.

The late nineteenth century saw the beginnings of a political connection between some members of the bhodrolok gentry and peasant activists. This is how an annoyed landlord from western Bengal described it at the time:

> They are for the most part east Bengal men, joined by some English-returned natives, who also hail from that part of the country. Many of them have seen something or read still more of the doings of Irish agitators . . . They go to the ryots [tenants], pretend to be their friends, sow seeds of dissension between them and the Zamindars, and thus set class against class.[4]

This political connection between peasant activism and upper-class contestation became an important model for many twentieth-century movements in the Bengal delta. Hopes for an end to economic exploitation and for self-determination merged in a plethora of anti-colonial, nationalist and communist agitations. Many of these were linked to organisations at the all-India level. The British responded with a mix of violent repression and concessions. Concessions included somewhat loosening the government's alliance with the zamindars, giving more rights to cultivators and allowing more bhodrolok representation and participation in policy-making. But ultimately it was a question of too little, too late. The last decades of colonial rule were very turbulent as nationalists staged non-cooperation and civil disobedience campaigns and

demanded that the British quit India, whilst communist-inspired tenant movements struggled against agrarian oppression.

DIVISION IN 1905

In the Bengal delta, the shape of things to come was prefigured by an administrative change. In 1905 the British divided the huge province of Bengal into a western part ('Bengal') and an eastern part ('Eastern Bengal and Assam') (Map 8.1). This decision led to a sharp division of minds all over Bengal (and indeed all over India). Many saw the Bengal partition of 1905 as a calculated move to break the anti-colonial movement, which was particularly strong in Bengal, and to 'divide and rule' the Bengali-speaking population.[5]

Map 8.1. The division of the province of Bengal in 1905.

A very vocal opposition developed, especially among the middle and upper classes in Kolkata. They feared a loss of economic power (tea and jute exports might now go through the port of Chittagong), inconvenience (east Bengal's absentee landlords had settled in Kolkata) and competition (a new court system in east Bengal might exclude Kolkata lawyers and new newspapers might restrict the circulation of the Kolkata press). What turned this local opposition into a significant force, however, was its national momentum. It galvanised the nationalist movement and gained it popular support. It also demonstrated that conventional moderate forms of protest (press campaigns, petitions, meetings and conferences) did not work. As a result the protesters developed new strategies. The first became known as the Swadeshi movement (*svadeśi*; own-country).[6] It entailed a boycott of British goods, education and administration and advocated self-help in the form of establishing Indian-owned industries, reviving handloom and craft production, setting up national schools and developing village improvement schemes.

The second strategy – which came to the fore as the limitations of the boycott and self-help programmes became clear to more radical opponents of the division of Bengal – was political assassination. Known as 'Bengal terrorism', this strategy first developed in revolutionary youth groups that took their cue from Russian, Italian and Irish secret societies. They used the public display of violence against high-ranking British individuals and local collaborators as an anti-colonial tool. The campaign proved highly successful, because not only the attacks themselves but also the trials following them were widely publicised.[7] These created revolutionary heroes whom many in Bangladesh still remember as martyrs, especially Khudiram Basu (who was hanged in 1908), 'Mastarda' Surya Sen (who organised an elaborate raid on the Chittagong armoury in 1930 and was hanged in 1934) and Pritilata Waddadar, a young woman from Chittagong who took part in the Chittagong armoury raid and committed suicide at the age of twenty-one when she was surrounded by police in 1932 (Plate 8.1).[8]

The administrative division of Bengal in 1905 ushered in a new period of anti-colonial organising all over South Asia. In Bengal, however, it was also a watershed of another sort: it exposed the weakness of political solidarity between religious communities. After 1905 'Muslims' and 'Hindus' became clear-cut *political* categories and these categories have figured very prominently in Bengal political life ever since.

A number of factors combined to make this happen. First, in the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam, Muslims formed a clear majority

Plate 8.1. Pritilata Waddadar.

of the population. The new capital was Dhaka and to house the administration a number of impressive buildings were constructed here, for example, the Governor's Residence and Curzon Hall (Plate 8.2). Many educated Muslims hoped to get jobs in the provincial administration or in Dhaka's growing service sector. These educated Muslims saw the new province as a career opportunity.

Second, although quite a few Muslims, in both parts of Bengal, initially joined the protests against the division of their province, their enthusiasm soon waned because of the cultural politics imposed on these protests. The bhodrolok gentry took the lead in the anti-division movement, and, as we have seen, this group was dominated by high-caste Hindus from Kolkata. Their particular socio-religious location set the tone of the Swadeshi movement: the anti-division movement was fuelled by a romantic, anti-colonial Bengali nationalism.[9] They sought to mobilise popular support by connecting this with Hindu revivalism, equating the Motherland with the goddess Kali and adopting the song *Bande Mātaram* ('Mother, I Bow to Thee'), to which many Muslims

Plate 8.2. Curzon Hall, constructed as Dhaka's city hall, now part of Dhaka University.

objected, as the movement's anthem. Plans for national education underlined the need to revive a glorious Hindu past, revolutionary youth clubs were inspired by Hindu spirituality and lower-caste Hindus were persuaded to join the boycott by means of traditional caste sanctions.[10] This religious flavour strengthened the movement's hold over millions of Hindus – but it antagonised non-Hindus.

Third, Muslims in Bengal had recently begun to define themselves self-consciously as a community. Since the 1870s the British had treated Muslims as a separate political community and thus encouraged the development of political consciousness on the basis of religious identity.[11] This was not easy, however, because Bengal's Muslims did not see themselves as a distinct community at all. Any notion of unity among various groups of Muslims was prevented by profound differences between them. The principal distinction was socio-cultural. Until the late nineteenth century, the vast majority of Bengali Muslims were 'more a part of the larger Bengali community comprising Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, and animists than any specific Islamic community'.[12] They

subscribed to a popular Islam with deep roots in the region's rural culture. A much smaller but more powerful group of co-religionists was orientated towards an urban, upper-class culture. They thought of themselves as aristocratic and of Arab, Persian or Central Asian descent (*ashraf*). Many of these Bengal ashraf tried to emulate a North Indian model of Islamic culture – based on Persian and Urdu and orientated towards Delhi, Lahore, Agra and Lucknow – and they considered themselves to be the guardians of authentic Islamic culture in this eastern hinterland. They looked down upon the Islam of local cultivators and artisans, whom they considered to be parochial native converts (*ajlaf* or *atrap*; low-born) whose religious practices, language and lifestyle were uneducated and tainted by non-Islamic influences. In the nineteenth century these self-appointed arbiters of Islamic rectitude undertook various attempts at 'ashraf-ising' Islamic practices in the Bengal countryside (where over 95 per cent of Muslims lived), a civilising offensive that became easier as the means of communication and the rate of literacy increased. As more Bengal Muslims became educated, however, there was a flowering of various new ideas and literary expression among them (see box 'Rokeya the satirist').

Although many educated Muslims continued to be reluctant to accept lowly peasants steeped in Bengali culture – which they categorised as non-Islamic – as 'true' Muslims, the notion of a common Muslim identity had taken root by the time the British decided to divide Bengal and electoral politics developed.[13] Thus the idea of a political party representing all Muslims became a possibility, and at a meeting in Dhaka in 1906 a group of ashraf politicians established the All-India Muslim League. This new party emerged to counter the anti-division agitation and the party behind it, the Indian National Congress. Its appeal to the Muslim community – not just in Bengal but all over India – was a harbinger of a new era of political mobilisation on the basis of religious community. Such politics – in which Hindu and Muslim politicians participated in equal measure[14] – came to be described as 'communal' politics or 'communalism'.

Finally, tensions between Hindus and Muslims in Bengal were intensified by economic grievances. In eastern Bengal the tenants (overwhelmingly Muslims) began to assert their economic rights *vis-à-vis* the landlords and moneylenders (mostly Hindus). At the same time the emerging Muslim middle class was frustrated in its social and political ambitions by the disdainful attitude of Hindu notables, who continued to regard them as far below themselves in terms of prestige and status. In 1906 and 1907, Hindu Swadeshi activists and their Muslim opponents

Rokeya the satirist

In 1905 a Bengali woman set pen to paper to create Ladyland, a feminist utopia in which clever, scientific-minded women rule a perfect country after their men had almost ruined it through incessant warfare. The narrator is Sultana, an astonished visitor from Bengal, who is shown around by Sister Sara:

I met more than a hundred women while walking there, but not a single man.
'Where are the men?' I asked her.
'In their proper places, where they ought to be.'
'Pray let me know what you mean by "their proper places".'
'O, I see my mistake, you cannot know our customs, as you were never here before. We shut our men indoors.'
'Just as we are kept in the zenana [women's quarters]*?'*
'Exactly so.'
'How funny,' I burst into a laugh. Sister Sara laughed too.
'But dear Sultana, how unfair it is to shut in the harmless women and let loose the men [. . .] *Why do you allow yourselves to be shut up?'*
'Because it cannot be helped as they are stronger than women.'
'A lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race. You have neglected the duty you owe to yourselves and you have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interests.'
'But my dear Sister Sara, if we do everything by ourselves, what will the men do then?'
'They should not do anything, excuse me; they are fit for nothing. Only catch them and put them into the zenana.'

It was Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (now best known as Begum Rokeya) who created this satirical dream of a society where 'ladies rule over the country and control all social matters, while gentlemen are kept in the Mardanas [men's quarters] to mind babies, to cook and to do all sorts of domestic work.'

Rokeya (1880–1932) was born into a well-off Muslim family in Rangpur (northern Bangladesh). In her circles female education was frowned upon because it broke the strict rules of female seclusion. Nevertheless her elder siblings secretly taught her to read and write Bengali and English. Married at sixteen to a much older high official in Bhagalpur (Bihar), she found in him a supporter of her writings on women's emancipation, which soon began to be published in periodicals for the educated elite. Widowed at twenty-nine, she set up schools for girls. Her two roles – that of provocative feminist writer and that of educationist trying to persuade parents to entrust their daughters' education to her – often clashed.

Today Rokeya is widely claimed as one of the pioneers of South Asia's women's movement; her writings are translated and continue to be published in both Bangladesh and India.[15]

Plate 8.3. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain.

began to use mob violence against each other in several parts of eastern Bengal, notably Mymensingh and Comilla.[16] These 'communal riots' and the sense of insecurity they produced proved to be powerful instruments in strengthening religious solidarities. They created and nurtured communal stereotypes. Many Hindu bhodrolok now saw rural Muslims not just as inferior but as dangerous anti-Swadeshi hooligans who acted as agents of the British. Among Muslims, on the other hand, Hindus were increasingly depicted as arrogant, wily and insensitive exploiters who sought to rule over Muslims in perpetuity.

In 1911 the British annulled the 1905 division of Bengal and at the same time announced that the imperial capital was to be transferred from Kolkata to Delhi in north India. It took twenty years to construct a new administrative capital (New Delhi) and its inauguration did not take place till 1931. Nevertheless, from 1911 most of Bengal's politicians lost power as their arena shrank from the national to the regional level. The

move of 1911 achieved relatively easily what, according to many, had been the main purpose of the 1905 division: to undermine Bengali politicians' remarkable hold on nationalist politics in India. What the division of Bengal of 1905–1911 did not accomplish, however, was a separation of Bengalis on regional terms. If anything, it strengthened a sense of Bengaliness across the region. But what it did effect was the creation of a specific regional political framework in which religious identity began to overrule regional and class identities. Thus for Muslims and Hindus across Bengal, irrespective of their local and class diversities, the region of Bengal now became the focus of lively – but largely separate and antagonistic – identity politics.

The remaining decades till the end of colonial rule saw a complex struggle between those who resisted this trend towards communal politics and those who promoted it. Among the former were all-India nationalists, all-Bengal nationalists, socialists and communists. Among the latter were Hindu and Muslim chauvinists, as well as those who thought that the economic emancipation of Muslims in Bengal could best be achieved by creating organisations focusing on their interests. The political connection between peasant activism and upper- and middle-class contestation remained visible in all successful movements of the period, from communist-inspired strikes and sharecropper revolts to broad support for both nationalist and communalist causes all over the Bengal delta.

Meanwhile representative politics were developing in Bengal. Elections were first introduced in urban municipalities on the basis of a very limited vote in the late nineteenth century. Under popular pressure the system gradually expanded to include the rural areas, provincial and central legislative councils and larger groups of voters.[17] It never extended to universal voting rights, however, and in 1909 Muslim leaders obtained a system under which Muslims could vote separately for reserved seats. This structure of separate electorates was later extended to include designated seats for low-caste Hindus ('scheduled castes') and it endured till the end of colonial rule.

Up to 1920, candidates contested elections independent of party affiliation. Even after the introduction of party-nominated candidates, independents remained important: in elections in 1937 one third of the 250 Bengal seats went to independent candidates. But soon afterwards party politics advanced quickly. A combination of separate electorates and party-nominated candidates ensured that the communal trend became firmly embedded in Bengal's representative politics: the elections of 1946 returned only 3 per cent independents. Now two parties clearly

	1937	1946
independent candidates	*32*	*3*
Muslim League	*21*	*46*
Indian National Congress	*16*	*34*
other parties and groups	*31*	*17*
Total (N = 250)	*100 %*	*100 %*

Figure 8.1. Results of the Provincial Assembly elections in Bengal, 1937 and 1946 (percentage of seats).

dominated the scene: the Muslim League and the Indian National Congress (Figure 8.1). Electoral politics underlined Bengal's regional specificity: Congress, which won control everywhere else in India (except Punjab), never succeeded in doing so in Bengal.

The political ferment of the first decades of the twentieth century began to point to the possibility that British rule might come sooner than previously expected. It also entrenched Hindus and Muslims as political categories more firmly than before. By 1940, however, the political future of the Bengal delta still seemed to be completely open, and nobody could possibly imagine that some thirty years down the road there would be a state called Bangladesh.