

## UNDIVIDED INDEPENDENT BENGAL

Year 1947. The Indian subcontinent is on the verge of ending nearly two hundred years of British colonial rule. However, the Hindu-Muslim conflict in the Indian subcontinent was at its peak at that time. Bargaining is going on between the two main parties of Hindus and Muslims, Congress and Muslim League. After the declaration by the then British Prime Minister Attlee in February 1947, as the prospect of independence for the Indian subcontinent drew closer, it became clear that the independence of an undivided India was almost certain. India had to be divided to achieve independence. The Muslim League's two-nation theory is its manifestation. The then Muslim League, the political mouthpiece of the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent, called for the creation of a new country of Pakistan with a Muslim majority region, keeping the Hindu majority region of India in India. But the question arose, what will happen to the areas where Hindu and Muslim people live together almost in harmony? Where will those regions join? Not in India In Pakistan? Negotiations were going on between the Muslim League and the Congress. Bengal was one of these divided regions of India at that time. There were many speculations about whether there would be a united Bengal or whether Bengal would be divided. In such a situation, when the partition of India and Bengal was final due to the understanding of the Muslim League and the Congress, the Chief Minister of Undivided Bengal, Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy, formally demanded the establishment of independent, sovereign, and undivided Bengal in a press conference in Delhi on 27 April 1947.

### **Basu-Suhrawardy Pact**

After British Prime Minister Attlee's speech on India's independence, the then West Bengal leader Dr. The Hindu Mahasabha under the leadership of Shyama Prasad Mukherjee demanded the formation of West Bengal Province from the Hindu-dominated areas of Bengal and demanded that West Bengal should be included in India after India's independence. Calcutta's Hindutva newspaper and Bengali non-Bengali rich groups came forward in favor of their claim. Even the Congress, which had so far stood firm on the demand for a united India, accepted the partition of Bengal based on religion and included it in the recommendations of its Working Committee.

On the other hand, as the division of Bengal based on religion was a reflection of the two-nation theory of the Muslim League, they also accepted this demand. However, several Muslim and progressive leaders of Bengal took a stand against the partition of Bengal. Hossain Shaheed Suhrawardy and Abul Hashim are among them. Abul Hashim held the first meeting with Sarat Bose in January 1947 with the proposal to keep Bengal undivided. Then in April Hossain Shaheed Suhrawardy formally demanded the independent Bengal proposal. Bengal Muslim League and Congress leaders held a meeting at Sarat Bose's residence in Calcutta in May, following a formal demand in April. Congress leaders led by Sarat Bose in West Bengal supported this demand. However, the members of Khwaja Nazimuddin group of Muslim League Bengal opposed this claim and abstained from the discussion. In May itself, Bengal Congress president Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's elder brother Sarat Chandra Bose agreed to the demand for a single Bengal. Abul for the Muslim League On behalf of Hashim and the Congress, Sharat Bose formally signed an agreement to protect the integrity of Bengal known as the 'Bose-Suhrawardy Pact'. The main aim of this agreement was to protect the integrity of Bengal by any means. Bengal Provincial Muslim League secretary Abul Hashim and Bengali Provincial Congress League leader Kiran Shankar Roy also played significant roles in this agreement.

### **The rationale for an integral Bengal is due to the close relationship between the people of Apar Bengal and Opar Bengal**

Currently, Bengal is divided into two parts. One is West Bengal of India, the other is present-day Bangladesh. However, the people of these two Bengals were not so divided in 47 that the

same Bengal can be divided into two parts between two countries. It was a political understanding between the leaders of the two main political parties, the Congress and the Muslim League. The riots of 46 indeed created some distance between Hindus and Muslims in Bengal. Therefore the partition of Bengal was never a solution. Because the people of Apar Bengal and Opar Bengal had close contact. The spoken language of the two regions was also the same. Apart from religion, there are many cultural similarities between them. As Calcutta was the capital of the British period, there was a lot of movement of people from other Bengal to the other side of Bengal. At the same time, as there were many Hindus in Bengal, Likewise, there were many people of the Muslim religion on the other side of Bengal. The plan to divide Bengal on the pretext of religion alone was absurd. Therefore, the demand of the local leaders of Bengal to keep Bengal intact was very reasonable, coming out of the factionalism and understanding of the central leaders of the Muslim League and Congress.

### **The rationale of an integral Bengal due to historical reasons**

A review of history shows that Bengal historically existed as a separate entity for a long time compared to other regions of India. They have developed distinct and unique characteristics from the people of other regions of India. Even during the long five-hundred-year Pala period, Bengal was an independent sovereign territory. Bengal was an independent entity in India from 1342 to 1548. In addition, the national unity of the Hindu Muslims of Bengal was also revealed during the later Mughal and British periods on the question of nationality. Many Bengalis could not even accept the partition of Bengal in 1905. Even a large section of Hindus strongly protested against the partition of Bengal. Although there were several political and economic interests in it. Yet historically Bengal was a single entity, so the proposal to keep Bengal intact and establish United Bengal was quite reasonable.

### **The rationale of integral Bengal in creating Hindu-Muslim unity**

There is no way to deny the distance that was created between the Hindus and Muslims of Bengal due to various political and economic reasons. Partition of Bengal in 1905, annulment of partition in 1911, prolonged Muslim rule, disagreements over the provincial government in 1937, Muslim League's two-nation theory in 1940, and riots between Hindus and Muslims at various times widened this distance. But in the pre-partition period, when the Muslim League and the Congress were trying to use Bengal for their political advantage, the Hindu Muslims of Bengal most needed to agree on the question of Bengal. And so a section of political leaders of Bengal Congress and Muslim League at that time emphasized creating unity of Hindu Muslims of Bengal to protect the interests of Bengal. And forgetting all the previous differences, the demand of the Hindu Muslims of Bengal to collectively protect their interests was quite reasonable.

### **The rationale of Integral Bengal is to protect the interests of Bengal beyond the central interests of Congress and the Muslim League**

It may not be too much of a mistake to call the partition of the Indian subcontinent the political division of the then Congress and Muslim League. After the Second World War, on the one hand, as India's desire for independence intensified, on the other hand, the British also started rushing to give independence to India very soon. When the then British Prime Minister announced to withdraw their rule from India by June 48, then the central leaders of the Muslim League and Congress became active. It is also said from Britain that, If the central leaders of the Congress and the Muslim League failed to reach an agreement soon, the British government would be forced to leave the country, handing over power to the provincial governments. In such a situation, the central leaders of the Muslim League and the Congress were ready to make maximum sacrifices for their own interests. The Muslim League was already looking forward to the implementation of the two-nation theory. On the other hand, the Congress agreed with the Muslim League for the partition of India, as well as Bengal and Punjab due to its compromise with the Muslim League. But many local provincial leaders of Bengal were not in

favor of the division of Bengal. Preparations were made to undermine the interests of Bengal in the central interests of the Muslim League and Congress. In such a situation, several provincial leaders of Bengal proposed a united Bengal, which is quite reasonable. Also agreed with the Muslim League for the partition of Bengal and Punjab. But many local provincial leaders of Bengal were not in favor of the division of Bengal. Preparations were made to undermine the interests of Bengal in the central interests of the Muslim League and Congress. In such a situation, several provincial leaders of Bengal proposed a united Bengal, which is quite reasonable. Also agreed with the Muslim League for the partition of Bengal and Punjab. But many local provincial leaders of Bengal were not in favor of the division of Bengal. Preparations were made to undermine the interests of Bengal in the central interests of the Muslim League and Congress. In such a situation, several provincial leaders of Bengal proposed a united Bengal, which is quite reasonable.

### **Reaction to the Basu-Suhrawardy Pact**

#### **Congress response**

Almost all central leaders, including Mahatma Gandhi of Congress, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, opposed the Basu-Suhrawardy Pact. Even when Abul Hashim, Sarat Bose, and Suhrawardy approached Mahatma Gandhi with the proposal of establishing a united Bengal, Gandhi rejected the proposal and later wrote a letter to Sarat Bose asking him to desist from the proposal of a united Bengal. Because they did not want a separate independent state in the eastern part of India for both political and geographical reasons. At the same time, Kolkata was the capital of India during the British period. So India will lose an important city like Calcutta if Bengal becomes independent. On the other hand, if Assam were to secede from the Indian Union, it would have no rail link to the mainland and the Indian Union would lose Assam's vast petroleum and mineral resources. Even the Congress High Command felt that, If Bengal is divided, East Bengal will not be able to survive alone for long due to geo-political and economic reasons. Therefore, in the distant future, East Bengal will be forced to join the

#### **Muslim League's response**

The Muslim League central leaders rejected the proposal to establish an independent United Bengal as it was against the two-nation theory. However, there was a mixed reaction among the provincial Muslim League leaders to the idea of a separate Bengal. The then Bengal Muslim League President Maulana Akram Khan was initially in favor of a united Bengal, but after the Basu-Suhrawardy agreement for the establishment of an independent Bengal, he became opposed to it. Khwaja Nazimuddin, on the other hand, demanded the integration of integral Bengal as part of Pakistan and opposed the proposed independent Bengal. However, it is not known exactly what Muhammad Ali Jinnah's position was about the proposed independent Bengal. According to Hasan Ispahani, a Jinnah loyalist, Suhrawardy did not get Jinnah's support in establishing a united Bengal. On the other hand, Bengali League leader Maulana Ragib Ahsan said, that Suhrawardy got Jinnah's support in establishing United Bengal. Another leader Hussain Imam said that Jinnah had told Suhrawardy that if Gandhi and the Congress agreed, he would agree to this. However, it can be said without doubt that Jinnah did not directly comment on the Basu-Suhrawardy Pact, but Jinnah did not like their system of combined elections, as it was fundamentally against the two-nation theory.

#### **Hindu response**

It cannot be denied that many Hindus were in favor of the partition of Bengal due to Hindu-Muslim riots and various political reasons. Especially Calcutta-based Hindu merchants and elites demanded the partition of Bengal. But they were the ones who protested against the partition of Bengal in 1905. According to a survey by Amritbazar Patrika, 98.3 percent of Hindus were in favor of the partition of Bengal and 0.6 percent of Hindus were in favor of the integrity of Bengal. However, this survey was not accurate. Because almost all of the

Scheduled Hindu communities of East and West Bengal supported a united Bengal and they were almost half of the Hindu population at that time. But it must be admitted that the combined campaign of the hard-line Hindu Mahasabha and the Congress swayed the Hindus of Bengal in favor of a largely divided Bengal.

### **British government response**

British government officials had mixed reactions to the United Bengal proposal. Governor of Bengal Frederick Burrows and Indian Secretary Listwell were in favor of granting independence to undivided Bengal. But Viceroy Lord Mountbatten did not support this claim at first from an all-India point of view. Later, with the efforts of the Governor of Bengal, Frederick Burroughs, Viceroy Lord Mountbatten agreed to the independence of undivided Bengal. But later, due to the reluctance of Congress and the shortness of time, Lord Mountbatten was forced to drop this demand from the discussion.

### **Why did the United Bengal proposal fail?**

#### **Lack of time and foresight**

Delayed initiative was one of the main reasons for the failure of the United Bengal proposal. In 1947, when the whole of India was in turmoil over the question of independence, there was not enough time to create the public opinion that was needed to form a united independent Bengal, leaving behind political divisions and Hindu-Muslim conflict. On one hand, the British government was looking for a way to get out of power as soon as possible, on the other hand, the central leaders of the Congress and the Muslim League were busy protecting their interests. Therefore, the proposal to build an independent united Bengal did not get a chance to be discussed in the central circles. According to many, the big claim like the emergence of Bengal as the third independent state in the Indian subcontinent should have been raised a few years before India's independence. By doing this, grassroots public support in Bengal, There was an opportunity for provincial leaders to unite and discuss at the central level. Although the proposal of Basu-Suhrawardy united Bengal has enough logic, due to lack of time and foresight, the dream of a united Bengal became elusive.

#### **Disunity between the Muslim League and Congress**

Coordination between the Muslim League and the Congress was necessary in the implementation of the demand for an independent Bengal. But there was no mutually fruitful discussion between the then two major political parties, the Muslim League and the Congress. Even the Bengal Muslim League itself was ambivalent. The Suhrawardy group of the Bengal Muslim League wholeheartedly demanded an undivided Bengal, but the Khawaja group opposed an independent, undivided Bengal. Due to the good relations of the Central Muslim League and Jinnah with the Khawaja group, the Suhrawardy group's demand for a united Bengal was suppressed at the provincial level. On the other hand, the central high command of the Congress did not want to lose West Bengal, especially Calcutta and Assam. Therefore, from the very beginning of the Basu-Suhrawardy claim, the high command of the Congress namely Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Kiran Shankar Roy, and others were opposed. And when the high command of the two main political parties of the country is indifferent to this demand, then the implementation of this demand is a fantasy.

#### **Opposition to Communists and Hindu Mahasabha**

The then Communists of India and the Hindu Mahasabha took turns to oppose the proposal of a joint Bengal. Hindu Mahasabha Dr. Under the leadership of Shyamaprasad Mukherjee, West Bengal was very strongly demanded for partition. At the same time, the Hindu Mahasabha campaigned for the division of Bengal among the business community of Calcutta, Hindutva newspapers, and the Hindu elite community. This created public support for the Bengali partition in Bengal, especially in West Bengal. On the other hand, the Communist Party of

India on the one hand spoke in favor of an independent sovereign Bengal, they wrote in one issue of their party magazine 'Swadynta' that Bengal would be a big Bengal where Muslims would be a minority. As a result of this kind of propaganda by the Communist Party, the Muslims of Bengal were in a sort of existential crisis. As a result, some Muslims of Bengal lost confidence in Sarat Bose, Abul Hashim, and Suhrawardy.

### **Inconsistencies between contracts**

As mentioned earlier, the Basu-Sohrawardy agreement and the joint Bengal proposal were demanded much later. Hence many inconsistencies remained in the outline of a joint Bengal in this agreement. Even if the treaty proposals were made by Sarat Bose himself, by Suhrawardy, or by both together, nothing is precisely known. According to legend, Sarat Bose himself wrote these proposals and submitted them to the meeting on the condition that he would agree to the establishment of Akhand Bengal only if the Bengal Muslim League leaders accepted these demands. After the treaty proposals were published, Daily Azad commented that since Sarat Bose did not want a united Bengal, he was making some complicated proposals to tactfully withdraw from the movement.

### **Administrative reasons and the Hindu-Muslim divide**

For a long decade from 1937 to 1947, Muslims dominated the administration of Bengal. This created a kind of psychological division between Bengali Congress and Hindu elite groups towards Muslims. There was a fear within them that the Hindus would lag behind the Muslims in the political sphere in an integral India. On the other hand, West Bengal was richer in minerals than East Bengal. The political leaders and elite groups of West Bengal understood that they would enjoy more benefits in a divided Bengal than in a united Bengal. Hence the Hindu elite groups, politicians, and many Hindus of West Bengal took a stand for a partitioned India rather than a united India.

Hossain Shaheed Suhrawardy is the person who has made a concerted effort to form a united and independent Bengal. Husain Shaheed Suhrawardy tried to build a separate independent state by uniting the Bengalis as a third force outside the circle of India and Pakistan despite the hundred obstacles and uncertainties including lack of time, organizational weakness, lack of foresight, Muslim League-Congress conflict, Hindu-Muslim conflict. However, due to the lack of cooperation and personal interests of many political leaders, the proposal to form an integral independent Bengal collapsed. But Suhrawardy continued his efforts until the day before the partition of India and Pakistan. Maybe due to complex political, economic, and religious equations, integral Bengal could not be liberated, but Hossain Shaheed Suhrawardy will forever be remembered in the minds of the people of Bengal here and there because of his rational, epochal and adventurous action!