In Bengal, the largest province in British India with approximately 80 million people, one third of them being Muslims, homogenising imperatives of nationalism had meanwhile become more radical, especially in Calcutta, nurtured by, among other groups, respectable Bengali upper castes, the *bhadralok*, who arose during colonial times. To rid Calcutta of the troublesome Bengalis of the eastern regions, the colonial rulers partitioned Bengal in 1905,1 thereby creating a Muslim majority province consisting of East Bengal—with its influential Hindu educated middle class—and Assam, and designed to transform the Bengali-speaking population of West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa into a minority. In fact, in partitioned West Bengal, Oriya- and Hindi-speaking Biharis far outnumbered the Bengalis. Thus the national movement was made to look like a ridiculous Bengali idea which was not equally shared by other linguistic groups.2 Also the loss of Dacca to East Bengal was supposed to take the winds out of the sail of increasing Bengali radicalism. This gave a snub to radical Hindu nationalists and widened the gap between Hindus and Muslims. Meanwhile, the partition of Bengal created severe problems for the British, for the boycott of British goods, initiated in Bengal, was starting to acquire the character of a mass movement, the *swadeshi* movement, which called for promoting the culture of their ‘own country’—anticipating Gandhi’s political tactics.3 In political terms this meant *swaraj*, independence, and its call spread around the country. Apparently the British had underestimated Bengali nationalism

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1 This resulted in communalist movements because many Muslims led by the initiator of the scheme called “Muslim All-India Confederacy”, Nawab Salimullah (1884–1915) from Dacca, were in favour of this plan, while the Hindus rejected it.


at a time when Bengalis had already ‘imagined’ themselves as a nation and as a ‘people with history’.

In the Bengali jurist and landlord Fazl al-Haqq (1873–1962; President of the All-India Muslim League from 1916–1921) and subsequently in the Assamese ‘Abd al-Hamid Khan Bhashani (1885–1976; member of Congress and later of the All-India Muslim League), they later found proven leaders for their interests.

Similar discontent grew in Madras among its Telegu-speaking people, who supported swadeshi developments in Bengal, and in commercialised Bombay, particularly in the fields of steel and textile. In Punjab discontent with colonial rule heightened as well, partly due to high water rates and control in canal-irrigated colonies. This was juxtaposed with increasing tensions between Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims, which had led to the emergence of movements such as Arya Samaj (1875) in Punjab. The Malabar Coast was another troublesome area of rural violence. Though these developments were followed by colonial repression, the swadeshi Bengali anthem Bande Mataram (“Hail the Mother (India)” written by the Bengali novelist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, died 1894, in 1875) became the voice of nationalistic endeavour to be heard in the country. All this discontent had reasons based in political and economic monopolisation, exploitation and the increasing friction among different social and religious groups in a market dominated by colonial power.

Colonial repression was followed by compromise, when in 1906 the Liberal Party won election in Great Britain, though the colonial government meanwhile pursued its communal politics with added vigour. Instead of providing space for territorial and parliamentarian representation, the idea evolved of seeking communal representation. Already early in 1906 a delegation of Muslim leaders from the Muhammadan-Anglo-Oriental College in Aligarh headed by the powerful Ismaili, the Agha Khan III (1877–1957), had the initiative for separate electorates presented to Viceroy Lord Minto at Simla. Shortly thereafter, the All India Muslim League was founded in Dacca (see below), initially manned by feudal lords and some lawyers and traders, most of whom were not anti-British. More or less integrated into the colonial system from

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