

Shyama Prasad Mukherjee and the Partition of Bengal: Politics, Identity and National Integration

Mamun Sarkar¹

¹PhD Research Scholar
Department of History
University of North Bengal
Darjeeling, West Bengal, India
Email:mamunhist002@gmail.com

Abstract: *The Partition of Bengal in 1947 was one of the most decisive and painful episodes in the history of modern India. It divided not only territory but also communities, families, memories, political aspirations and cultural identities. In this complex historical moment, Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee emerged as one of the most important political voices demanding that the Hindu-majority areas of Bengal should not be included in Pakistan but should remain within the Indian Union. This article examines Mukherjee's role in the Partition of Bengal through three interrelated themes: politics, identity and national integration. The article also shows that Mukherjee's politics after 1947 carried forward many of the concerns that shaped his position during Bengal's Partition. Based on biographies, historical studies, research articles, Ph.D. thesis materials and documentary sources, the article presents Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee as a complex historical figure: an educationist, parliamentarian, nationalist politician and regional leader whose role in the making of West Bengal continues to be remembered, debated and reinterpreted in contemporary India.*

Keywords: *Bengali Hindu identity, Integration, Refugee Politics, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, etc.*

Date of Submission: 24.08.2026

Date of Acceptance: 31.08.2026

.....

Introduction

The Partition of India in 1947 was one of the most transformative and traumatic events in the history of South Asia. It was not merely a constitutional arrangement or a transfer of political power from British rule to two successor states; it was a deep social rupture that divided territories, communities, families, memories and identities. Bengal, along with Punjab, became one of the most severely

Shyama Prasad Mukherjee and the Partition of Bengal: Politics, Identity and National Integration

affected regions of this process. The Partition of Bengal in 1947 created two different political spaces: West Bengal, which became part of India, and East Bengal, which became part of Pakistan and later emerged as Bangladesh in 1971. Therefore, the history of Bengal's Partition cannot be studied only as a side-effect of the Partition of India. It needs to be examined as a distinct regional experience shaped by Bengal's own political conflicts, communal relations, economic interests, cultural anxieties and demographic realities. The political situation of Bengal before Partition was highly complex. Bengal was a Muslim-majority province, but its political, educational and urban public life had long been influenced by Hindu *bhadralok* elites, especially in Calcutta and other urban centres. Muslim peasants formed a large section of the population, while Hindu middle-class groups retained considerable influence in education, administration, law, trade, journalism and cultural institutions. This uneven social structure produced competing claims over political power, representation, employment and provincial authority. According to Joya Chatterji, Bengal's Partition was not simply imposed from above by all-India leaders but emerged from local political and social processes within Bengal itself, especially the rise of Hindu communal politics and the demand for a separate Hindu-majority West Bengal in a Muslim-majority province. This makes Bengal's Partition a crucial case for understanding how regional politics interacted with the larger crisis of Indian nationalism.

The Partition of India in 1947 is often narrated through the larger story of British withdrawal, the Indian National Congress, the Muslim League and the creation of Pakistan. However, the experience of Partition was not uniform across India; Bengal had its own history, social composition, political conflicts and emotional landscape. The division of Bengal was shaped by local factors as much as by all-India negotiations. As a result, the political future of Bengal became one of the most contested questions of the transfer of power. Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee's role in this context requires serious academic attention. He is generally remembered as the founder of the *Bharatiya Jana Sangh*, an important parliamentarian and a strong advocate of Indian national unity. Yet his role in the Partition of Bengal is equally significant. Mukherjee argued that if India was to be divided on religious lines, then Bengal too could not be transferred as a whole to Pakistan simply because it had a Muslim majority. He demanded that the Hindu-majority districts of western Bengal should be separated from the proposed East Pakistan and should remain within India. This position contributed to the creation of West Bengal as an Indian state. Politically, his role was part of the larger struggle

Shyama Prasad Mukherjee and the Partition of Bengal: Politics, Identity and National Integration

over the future of Bengal. In terms of identity, it reflected the fears and aspirations of Bengali Hindus during a period of communal violence and displacement. From the perspective of national integration, his demand was tied to the question of how India would define its territory, sovereignty and constitutional unity after Partition. So this study examines Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee's political role in the Partition of Bengal and reassesses his contribution to the creation of West Bengal within the wider framework of politics, identity and national integration. It explores how Bengali Hindu identity, minority insecurity and the fear of Muslim League dominance shaped his demand for a separate West Bengal. Special attention is given to the significance of Calcutta and the western districts of Bengal in his political argument. The study further connects Bengal's Partition with the refugee question and Mukherjee's later vision of Indian national unity, thereby placing his role within the broader history of modern Indian politics.

Early Life and Bengal Politics

Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee was born on 6 July 1901 in Calcutta into a well-known Bengali family. He was the son of Sir Asutosh Mukherjee, the famous educationist and jurist often remembered as the "*Tiger of Bengal*." This family background shaped his intellectual life. Mukherjee first emerged not as a mass politician but as an academic, lawyer and educationist. He became associated with Calcutta University at a young age and later served as its Vice-Chancellor from 1934 to 1938. His career as an educationist is important because it shaped his understanding of culture, language, national identity and civic responsibility. As Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University, Mukherjee supported research in Indian history and culture, promoted Indian languages and encouraged the study of Indian civilization from an Indian viewpoint. Studies on his educational philosophy argue that he viewed education not merely as a means of earning livelihood but as an instrument of national reconstruction, cultural preservation and character formation. This educational vision later influenced his political thought. For Mukherjee, nationalism was not only a question of political independence. It was also linked with cultural confidence, historical consciousness and the formation of responsible citizens.

To understand Mukherjee's role, it is necessary to examine the political situation of Bengal in the decades before 1947. Bengal was a Muslim-majority province, but its social structure was highly complex. Muslim peasants formed a large part of the population, while Hindu elites, especially the

Shyama Prasad Mukherjee and the Partition of Bengal: Politics, Identity and National Integration

bhadralok, occupied prominent positions in education, law, administration, press and commerce. This imbalance produced social tensions, especially around representation, employment, land relations and political power. The Government of India Act of 1935 introduced provincial autonomy and created new political possibilities. In Bengal, the Muslim League, the Krishak Praja Party and the Congress all competed for influence. The Krishak Praja Party led by A. K. Fazlul Huq represented important sections of Muslim peasantry, while the Muslim League gradually strengthened its position among Muslim political elites. The Congress, though influential, did not always succeed in creating a broad-based provincial strategy. Biographical and political accounts sympathetic to Mukherjee argue that the failure of the Congress to form an effective coalition with the Krishak Praja Party allowed the Muslim League to gain influence in Bengal politics.

This period saw increasing communal polarization. The Muslim League's demand for Pakistan grew stronger after the Lahore Resolution of 1940. Bengal became a crucial province in this demand because of its Muslim majority and strategic location. At the same time, many Hindu groups feared that a Muslim League-dominated Bengal would reduce their political and administrative position. Joya Chatterji argues that the Hindu demand for Bengal's partition grew from a combination of communal, class and regional interests. In this interpretation, the partition demand reflected not only fear of Muslim rule but also the desire of Hindu elites to protect their social and economic position. Mukherjee entered active politics in this atmosphere. He became associated with the Hindu Mahasabha and later emerged as one of its most visible leaders in Bengal. His political rise was linked to the perception among many Bengali Hindus that Congress leadership was not sufficiently protecting their interests. Whether one agrees with this perception or not, it became a powerful factor in Bengal politics.

Crisis of 1946 and Partition Demand

The year 1946 became a turning point. The Cabinet Mission Plan initially suggested a united but federal India. However, disagreements between the Congress and the Muslim League led to a breakdown of trust. The Muslim League called for Direct Action Day on 16 August 1946. In Calcutta, this resulted in large-scale communal violence, known as the Great Calcutta Killing. The violence left a deep psychological impact on Bengal. It intensified fear, suspicion and the belief that coexistence under a single provincial arrangement might become impossible ([Bhattacharjee, 2018](#)).

Shyama Prasad Mukherjee and the Partition of Bengal: Politics, Identity and National Integration

For Mukherjee and his supporters, the events of 1946 strengthened the case for a separate West Bengal. The fear was that if the whole of Bengal went to Pakistan, Bengali Hindus would lose political protection, economic security and cultural space . The violence also made Calcutta central to the debate. Calcutta was not only Bengal's capital; it was the largest urban Centre in eastern India, a port city, an industrial centre and a major site of education and culture. Losing Calcutta to Pakistan would have altered the future of eastern India dramatically. Mukherjee's speeches and political activities during this period focused on the need to protect Hindu-majority areas and ensure that Calcutta remained within India. Supportive accounts describe his intervention as decisive in building public opinion for partitioning Bengal and retaining western Bengal within India . However, a critical historical approach must recognize that this mobilization occurred in an already polarized environment where different communities were making competing claims of safety, justice and nationhood .

Mukherjee's demand for Bengal's partition became more organized in early 1947. His argument was straightforward: if the principle of religious majority was being used to divide India and create Pakistan, then Hindu-majority regions of Bengal could not be forced into Pakistan . He demanded that western Bengal, with its Hindu-majority districts and Calcutta, should be separated from Muslim-majority eastern Bengal. The demand had several dimensions. First, it was territorial. Mukherjee wanted a clear boundary that would keep Hindu-majority areas within India. Second, it was political. He feared that an undivided Bengal under Muslim League influence would not provide equal security to Hindu citizens. Third, it was cultural. Calcutta and western Bengal were seen as centers of Bengali Hindu intellectual and cultural life. Fourth, it was economic. Calcutta's industries, port, educational institutions and administrative importance made it essential to the future of eastern India .

Chhanda Chatterjee's work is particularly important here because it focuses directly on Mukherjee's role in demanding the separation of Hindu-majority districts in western Bengal from proposed East Pakistan. According to this line of interpretation, Mukherjee provided leadership to a political campaign that had not previously received enough scholarly attention. The demand for West Bengal was not only a defensive movement but also a political project that imagined a secure space for Bengali Hindus within India . Public opinion became an important part of this campaign. Meetings, resolutions, petitions and press discussions helped create pressure. Mukherjee's supporters argue that

Shyama Prasad Mukherjee and the Partition of Bengal: Politics, Identity and National Integration

he brought together intellectuals, public figures and political representatives in favour of Bengal's partition . The question of whether Bengal should remain united, become independent, or be divided became central to Bengal politics in the months before August 1947.

One of the important debates of 1947 was the proposal for a "*United Bengal*." Some leaders, including Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy and Sarat Chandra Bose, explored the possibility of an undivided sovereign Bengal that would be separate from both India and Pakistan . Supporters of the idea saw it as a way to preserve Bengal's territorial unity and avoid Partition. However, Mukherjee strongly opposed this proposal. For Mukherjee, a sovereign United Bengal was unacceptable because he believed it would eventually become dominated by the Muslim League and might function effectively as a Pakistan-aligned state. He feared that such an arrangement would leave Bengali Hindus politically insecure. From his perspective, the proposal did not solve the problem of communal imbalance; rather, it avoided the real question of security and representation. Historians have debated this episode extensively. Some see the United Bengal proposal as a lost opportunity for a more inclusive regional nationalism, while others argue that by 1947 communal polarization had become so intense that the proposal lacked trust among major communities . Mukherjee's rejection of the United Bengal plan must be understood in this climate of mistrust. He did not see Bengal's unity as meaningful unless it could guarantee equal security, political representation and national belonging.

Identity Politics and Refugee Question

Identity was at the Centre of Mukherjee's political intervention. The Partition of Bengal was not merely about administrative boundaries. It was about who belonged where, who would control the state, and who would feel safe under which government. Mukherjee articulated the anxieties of Bengali Hindus, especially those who feared becoming a vulnerable minority in Pakistan . The identity question had historical depth. Bengali Hindu *bhadralok* identity had been formed through education, literature, administration and urban cultural life during the colonial period . Calcutta was central to this identity. If Calcutta had been included in Pakistan, Bengali Hindu political imagination would have suffered a major rupture. Mukherjee's demand for West Bengal, therefore, was also a demand to protect a cultural and political homeland. However, this identity politics must be critically understood. It did not represent all Bengalis equally. Muslim peasants, lower-caste groups, Scheduled

Shyama Prasad Mukherjee and the Partition of Bengal: Politics, Identity and National Integration

Castes and refugees experienced Partition differently . For many Muslims of eastern Bengal, Pakistan represented political empowerment after a long history of perceived marginalization. For many Hindus, Pakistan represented fear and displacement. For lower-caste Hindu groups, the decision was often shaped by local circumstances, land, livelihood and caste position rather than only elite political arguments . Therefore, Mukherjee's politics reflected a powerful but specific identity claim: the claim of Bengali Hindus for territorial and cultural security within India. According to Joya Chatterji, Bengal's Partition was deeply connected with Hindu communalism and the political interests of the *bhadralok*. At the same time, the later refugee crisis shows that Hindu fears of violence and displacement were not imaginary .

The Partition of Bengal did not end in August 1947. Its consequences continued for decades through migration, refugee settlement, border tensions and minority insecurity. Unlike Punjab, where migration was immediate and massive, Bengal experienced a long and uneven process of displacement. Refugees from East Pakistan came to West Bengal, Assam, Tripura and other regions in waves. Mukherjee made refugee rehabilitation a major political issue. After independence, he joined the first cabinet of India as Minister for Industry and Supply. However, he later resigned from the Nehru cabinet in 1950 in protest against government policy, especially after the Nehru-Liaquat Pact. He felt that the pact did not adequately protect Hindus in East Pakistan or address the refugee crisis in India . Whether one accepts his assessment or not, this episode shows that for Mukherjee the Partition question remained unfinished. "*Bharatiya Jana Sangh*" placed strong emphasis on the planned rehabilitation of refugees in West Bengal, suitable compensation from Pakistan, boundary readjustment and issues related to Bengal's post-Partition problems. The refugee question thus became part of Mukherjee's wider national politics. It allowed him to connect Bengal's regional suffering with an all-India debate on minority rights, state responsibility and national security .

Jana Sangh and National Integration

The founding of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh in 1951 was a major step in Mukherjee's political career. He had earlier been associated with the Hindu Mahasabha, but he later moved toward the creation of a new political platform. The Jana Sangh was presented as a nationalist alternative to the Congress . It emphasized cultural nationalism, national unity, refugee rehabilitation and opposition to policies seen as appeasement of Pakistan or religious minorities. According to Subba, the Jana Sangh was a

Shyama Prasad Mukherjee and the Partition of Bengal: Politics, Identity and National Integration

significant post-independence political party founded by Mukherjee in 1951. He also describes its association with the RSS and its role in preserving elements of Hindutva politics . At the same time, Mukherjee attempted to make it broader than the Hindu Mahasabha by opening it to those who accepted its idea of national culture and unity . The themes of identity, refugee protection, territorial security and national integration moved from Bengal politics into national politics. The Jana Sangh gave these concerns an organized political form .The final phase of Mukherjee's political life was dominated by the Kashmir issue. He opposed the special constitutional position of Jammu and Kashmir and argued for complete integration of the state with India. His slogan is often associated with the idea that one country should not have two constitutions, two heads and two flags . He entered Jammu and Kashmir in 1953 without a permit, was arrested and died in detention in Srinagar on 23 June 1953 .

The Kashmir issue may appear separate from Bengal's Partition, but in Mukherjee's political thought the two were connected. In Bengal, he argued against allowing strategically and culturally important territory to fall outside India. In Kashmir, he argued against a constitutional arrangement that he believed weakened national unity. In both cases, he emphasized territorial integrity, equal citizenship and constitutional unity . This does not mean that his position was universally accepted. Many leaders believed that Kashmir required special treatment because of its unique circumstances of accession, conflict and international attention. However, Mukherjee's position became central to the later politics of the Jana Sangh and the BJP. His death made him a symbol of national integration for his supporters .

Mukherjee's Legacy and Assessment

Mukherjee's legacy is complex. To his supporters, he was the leader who helped ensure that West Bengal and Calcutta remained within India, gave voice to refugees, created an alternative political tradition and sacrificed his life for national integration. To critics, he represents the rise of Hindu nationalist politics and the communalization of regional identity. Both views contain elements of historical truth, but neither is sufficient on its own. A serious academic approach should recognize three points. First, Mukherjee's intervention in Bengal was historically significant. He was among the most important leaders who organized opinion for the creation of West Bengal. Second, his politics was shaped by communal polarization and cannot be separated from Hindu identity mobilization.

Shyama Prasad Mukherjee and the Partition of Bengal: Politics, Identity and National Integration

Third, his later national politics connected Bengal's refugee and territorial questions with a broader ideology of Indian unity. His educational background also adds another layer to his legacy. According to Ansari, Mukherjee viewed education as a means of national reconstruction, cultural continuity and social transformation . This suggests that his nationalism had both political and cultural dimensions. His idea of nationhood was not only about territory but also about education, language, values and historical memory.

The role of Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee in the Partition of Bengal should not be judged only through present-day political loyalties. He lived and acted in a time of extreme violence, fear and uncertainty. His demand for Bengal's partition emerged from the belief that Bengali Hindus needed a secure homeland within India . The creation of West Bengal did provide such a territorial space. At the same time, the Partition also produced suffering, displacement and communal separation . Therefore, the outcome cannot be celebrated without acknowledging its tragedy. Mukherjee's politics highlights a difficult question: when coexistence fails under conditions of violence and mistrust, should communities seek territorial separation for security? His answer was yes. He believed that if India was being divided, then Bengal had to be divided as well . Critics may argue that this deepened communal division. Supporters may argue that it prevented an even greater disaster for Bengali Hindus. The historian's task is not to choose emotion over evidence but to understand why different political actors made the choices they did .

Conclusion

Shyama Prasad Mukherjee's role in the Partition of Bengal remains one of the most important and debated aspects of his political career. His demand for the separation of Hindu-majority areas from the proposed East Pakistan was shaped by the political crisis of late colonial Bengal, the growth of Muslim League influence, the violence of 1946, the uncertainty of transfer of power and the fear that Calcutta might be lost to Pakistan. He gave organized political voice to Bengali Hindu anxieties and helped strengthen the demand for West Bengal's inclusion in India. At the same time, his intervention must be placed within the broader history of communal politics, identity formation and class interests in Bengal. Mukherjee's politics was not simply humanitarian, nor was it only communal. It was a combination of regional concern, community protection, cultural nationalism and territorial strategy. His later work for refugee rehabilitation, the founding of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh and his Kashmir

Shyama Prasad Mukherjee and the Partition of Bengal: Politics, Identity and National Integration

movement show that his politics of Bengal was connected to a larger idea of Indian national integration. In the history of modern India, Mukherjee stands as a complex figure. He was an educationist who believed in cultural rootedness, a parliamentarian who valued constitutional debate, a nationalist who emphasized unity and a Bengal leader who saw Partition as a painful but necessary political solution. His role in the making of West Bengal deserves continued scholarly attention because it helps us understand how politics, identity and national integration interacted during one of the most difficult moments in Indian history.

Notes and References

- Aiyar, S. "Fazlul Huq, Region and Religion in Bengal: The Forgotten Alternative of 1940–43." *Modern Asian Studies* 42, no. 6 (2008): 1213–1252.
- Ansari, M. S. H. "Re-evaluating the Educational Philosophy of Dr. Syama Prasad Mukherjee and Its Relevance to Contemporary Indian Education." *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research* 8, no. 3 (2026): 1–14.
- Bandyopadhyay, S., and A. Basu Ray Chaudhury. "Partition in Bengal: Re-visiting the Caste Question, 1946–47." *Studies in History* 33, no. 2 (2017).
- Baxter, Craig. *The Jana Sangh: A Biography of an Indian Political Party*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1969.
- Bhattacharjee, D. "A. K. Fazlul Huq and Bengal Politics between the Two Partitions (1905–1947): Currents and Cross-Currents." PhD diss., University of North Bengal, 2017.
- Bhattacharjee, D. "Suhrawardy and the Great Calcutta Killing: Revisiting the Episode and Its Consequences." *Karatoya: North Bengal University Journal of History* 11 (2018): 131–152.
- Chakrabarty, B. "The 1947 United Bengal Movement: A Thesis without a Synthesis." *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 30, no. 4 (1993).
- Chatterjee, C. *Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the Hindu Dissent and the Partition of Bengal, 1932–1947*. London: Routledge, 2020.
- Chatterji, Joya. *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932–1947*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Chatterjee, P. K. *Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee and Indian Politics, 1938–1953: An Account of an Outstanding Political Leader*. New Delhi: Foundation Books/Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Constitution of India Project. "Syama Prasad Mookerjee." Accessed [date]. *Constitution of India Project*.
- Das, S. *Communal Riots in Bengal, 1905–1947*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Das, T. K. "Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee: The Rescuer of the Bengali Hindus." *Journal of History* 9 (2021): 105–116.
- Ghoshal, A. *Refugees, Borders and Identities: Rights and Habitat in East and Northeast India*. London: Routledge, 2021.
- Jalal, Ayesha. *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Khan, Yasmin. *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.
- Madhok, Balraj. *Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee: A Biography*. New Delhi: Deepak Prakashan, 1954.
- Mookerjee Research Foundation. *Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee: A Selfless Patriot*. New Delhi: Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation, n.d.
- Mookerjee, Syama Prasad. *Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee: A Very Short Life-Sketch*. New Delhi: Bharatiya Janata Party, n.d.
- Roy, Haimanti. *Partitioned Lives: Migrants, Refugees, Citizens in India and Pakistan, 1947–65*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Sen, Udit. *Citizen Refugee: Forging the Indian Nation after Partition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Subba, C. "Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee and the Role of Bharatiya Jana Sangh in Indian Politics." *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts* 10, no. 4 (2022): a569–a573.
- Talbot, Ian, and Gurharpal Singh. *The Partition of India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Shyama Prasad Mukherjee and the Partition of Bengal: Politics, Identity and National Integration

van Schendel, Willem. "Working through Partition: Making a Living in the Bengal Borderlands." *International Review of Social History* 46, no. 3 (2001): 393–421.

van Schendel, Willem. *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*. London: Anthem Press, 2005.

Zamindar, Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali. *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.