



## **Re-examining the Activities of Jogendranath Mandal and Scheduled Castes Federation in Bengal (1943-1947)**

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### **Abstract**

The present paper is all about the efforts of Jogendranath Mandal for ameliorating the hardships of the Dalits through the Bengal unit of Scheduled Castes Federation (SCF) from 1943 to 1947. In this context, the Federation endeavoured to create an independent political platform by entering into a strategic alliance with the Muslim League. To achieve these goals, Mandal and his Federation ran through the following crucial points such as anti-Poona Pact day and the Dalit-Muslim League alliance, the election of 1946, Ambedkar's election to the Constituent Assembly, the Calcutta riots, his nomination to the Interim Government and the anti-partition agitation. But Congress not only adopted all evil measures to side line the Federation rather ensured its defeat in the election. The paper also shows how the Congress' and Hindu Mahasabha's majoritarian instinct led to the partition of Bengal and thus crippled the Scheduled Castes Federation's fight for the political autonomy of Dalit downtrodden.

**Key-words:**Jogendranath Mandal,Scheduled Castes Federation (SCF), Muslim League, Bengal, Partition.



## Introduction

JogendranathMandal was the first Namasudra leader in Bengal's political history with explicit Ambedkarite leanings who emerged to exercise influence over the Dalits of the province. He founded the Bengal unit of the All India Scheduled Castes Federation in May 1943 with Monmohan Das and Shyama Prasad Barman as joint secretaries. The Federation began the publication of its Bangla periodical *Jagran*(Awakening) and the English –language *People's Herald*from June 1946.<sup>1</sup>Mandal's own motivation to establish the provincial unit of SCF originated with his identification with B. R. Ambedkar's political programme at the Nagpur conference of 1942, where the latter had founded the All India Scheduled Castes Federation.<sup>2</sup> From very beginning, the Federation identified itself as a party opposed to both the Congress' and Hindu Mahasabha's claims to represent Dalits. Mandal also longed to coordinate Dalit and Muslim political unity within the provincial context as well as extend Bengali support to Ambedkar's national organization. The SCF in Bengal therefore came into existence with various sources such as Mandal's disillusionment with caste Hindus in the Congress and Hindu Mahasabha, his encounter with Ambedkar and his selection from among provincial aspirants, and the curiously under remarked dissemination and affirmative appraisal of its political agenda by the Dalits of the province.

## Anti-Poona Pact Day and the SCF-Muslim League Alliance

Mandal joined the previous Nazimuddin ministry shortly before the Bengal unit of SCF in 1943, and was subsequently chosen to join the Suhrawardy cabinet as Minister in Charge of the Judicial and Legislative department and Works and Buildings.<sup>3</sup> His logic to unite both the Dalits and Muslims was based on the apparent political-economic harmony of the two communities. In his view, the spirit animating his alliance with the Muslim League was closely linked to the socio-economic circumstances experienced by Dalits and Muslims alike.

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<sup>1</sup>DwaipayanaSen, *The Decline of the Caste Question: JogendranathMandal and the Defeat of Dalit Politics in Bengal*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 99.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 100.

<sup>3</sup>SekharBandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 249.



The shared experience of the grinding poverty of rural Bengal was common to both communities. The following nature held force: the British and caste Hindus were capital, Dalits and Muslims, labour. The vast majority of the Dalit population was poor and had been deprived of formal education- as were the majority of Muslims. The spirit motivating the political alliance in the domain of elite politics then was to draw on this shared experience, crafting policies benefitting the vast majority of the population of Bengal.

The incidents which came to light in August 1946, then, as a result of the call for the Direct Action Day, must be placed in the context of the cooperation that had developed between the Scheduled Castes Federation and the Muslim League over the past three years.<sup>4</sup> Mandal and the SCF had responded in kind. Although insufficiently acknowledged, 15 August 1946 coincided with the SCF's Anti-Poona Pact Day, part of a series of protest activities coordinated across British India. A day earlier, the Secretary of the Calcutta District Muslim League issued a statement urging Muslims to support the SCF's protest.<sup>5</sup> The Federation and Muslim League carried out a procession through several streets in central Calcutta and converged at the designated Ochterlony monument. Mandal presided over a meeting where speakers condemned both the Cabinet Mission and the Congress by passing the legitimate demands of the Scheduled Castes and called upon the audience to be prepared for any future struggle under the leadership of Ambedkar and Jinnah. He informed that he received a letter from the Secretary of the Muslim League supporting them and added that they must take joint action to force the Congress and the Government to concede their demands.

The SCF also organized protest rallies in the small towns where its party had found a base over the previous two years. In Khulna, some Scheduled Caste students processed through the town on 15 August 1946, shouting "Down with Poona Pact," "No compromise with the enemy" and other slogans. In another meeting, the speakers appealed to the audience to unite under the flag of the All India Scheduled Castes Federation, and declared that Jagjivan Ram was not the chosen representative of the all Scheduled Caste Hindus in the

<sup>4</sup>Suranjan Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal, 1905-1947* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 165.

<sup>5</sup>*Star of India*, 14 August 1946.



country. Under the chairmanship of RasikLal Biswas, who had defected several years prior from the Congress, held a meeting at the B. Sarkar Hall. Speakers explained that the Scheduled Castes had been duped by the upper-caste Hindus. They criticised the proposals of the Cabinet Mission and declared that the ministers had not looked to the interests of the minorities. They urged members of the Scheduled Castes to be ready to fight against the Congress and the British in alliance with the Muslims, in order to wrest their legitimate demands from them. Members of the Muslim League, who were present, delivered similar speeches.

## **The Election of 1946**

The question whether the Congress was the true representative of the Dalits or not, had been posed with particular urgency only months prior to Anti-Poona Pact Day during the 1946 elections. The fact that the Congress swept the seats reserved for Scheduled Castes by winning 24 out of 30, a stunning response to Ambedkar's and Mandal's claim that Congress did not represent their communities, has been freighted with tremendous importance in recent historiography: the integration of the Scheduled Castes into mainstream nationalism; the crisis of the Federation brought about by its own inadequacies;<sup>6</sup> or the extraordinary success of propaganda about a Hindu community.<sup>7</sup> The results have been taken as indices of at least the middle-class mind among these communities and their popular will.<sup>8</sup> Such assessments have been called into question by Ramnarayan S. Rawat, who demonstrated the considerable weight to the Federation's claim that the electoral arrangements under the Poona Pact in force during the election were heavily tilted in favour of the Congress' candidates in the United Provinces.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>SekharBandyopadhyay, "Transfer of Power and the Crisis of Dalit Politics in India, 1945-1947," *Modern Asian Studies* 34 (2000).

<sup>7</sup>Joya Chatterjee, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 230.

<sup>8</sup>SekharBandyopadhyay, "From Alienation to Integration: Changes in the Politics of Caste in Bengal, 1937-47," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 31 (1994): 373

<sup>9</sup>Ramnarayan S. Rawat, "Making Claims for Power: A New Agenda for Dalit Politics in Uttar Pradesh, 1946-1948," in SuvirKaul (ed.), *The Partitions of Memory: The Afterlife of the Division of India* (Delhi, Permanent Black, 2001)



Other indices of Dalit political consciousness should include the fact that of the 121 candidates who stood for the primary elections in Bengal, only 29 were from the Congress. Or that of the 75 candidates who successfully emerged from the primary to the general elections to contest the 30 seats reserved for Scheduled Caste MLAs, only 25 were Congress, whereas Independents (the largest category) numbered 37. What this suggests is the presence of a far greater diversity of political opinion than the final results seem to indicate. Such trends raise important questions about the circumstances under which 24 of these 25 Congress candidates emerged victorious in the general election, and whether the results of the general election ought to be read as a reliable indication of Dalits' political preferences.<sup>10</sup>

But there is more. Mandal was one of but two Federation candidates all over India to have won in the election—even Ambedkar did not prove victorious—from among the 151 seats in the various provincial assemblies reserved for the Scheduled Castes. It is undoubtedly true that the Congress' vastly more developed organizational machinery and financial clout dwarfed the Federation, yet this only makes the depth of their anti-Federation sentiment all the more instructive. What makes such activities all the more revealing are the stringent financial circumstances under which the Federation operated. Mandal, who along with significant support from the large pool of the well-wishers from among the Namasudra and wider Dalit community funded the election campaigns, could only afford to put up eight candidates for election.<sup>11</sup> Due to campaigning for his own election and the constraints of time and money, Mandal was unable to canvas for the remaining Federation candidates in their own constituencies leading, in his view, to their defeat. The Congress was nonetheless keen to secure his failure. As Mandal recalled of the moment: "No matter how, Jogendranath had to be defeated".<sup>12</sup> Mandal nevertheless eventually won from a reserved seat in the south Bakarganj constituency, the very heartland of Namasudra political clout. Mandal had to negotiate far greater obstacles to his re-election to the assembly, as the Congress had apparently launched a smear campaign against him in northern Barisal.

<sup>10</sup>Return Showing the Results of Elections to the Central Legislative Assembly and the Provincial Legislatures in 1945-46 (New Delhi: Government of India, 1948).

<sup>11</sup>Jogendranath Mandal, *Aprakasita Atmakatha*, 123.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 126.



Despite the forethought that the Congress appeared to have given to ‘spoil the field’, Mandal was elected from South Barisal, again, as one of but two Federation candidates all over India. Even Ambedkar could not prevail. The victory therefore catapulted Mandal into a position of unexpected seniority within the Federation itself.

### **Ambedkar’s Election to the Constituent Assembly**

Ambedkar travelled to Calcutta after the announcement of the elections to the Constituent Assembly from the various provincial assemblies.<sup>13</sup> He expected to garner the support of the European MLAs in Bengal as he found no possibilities of his election from his home town in Bombay, but upon hearing that they would not participate in the election, returned to Delhi disappointed. He complained to Mandal that there was no scope of his being elected from any province except Bengal and even that did not come to fruition.<sup>14</sup> It was then, Mandal recalled, that he took it upon himself to ensure Ambedkar’s election.<sup>15</sup>

In response, the Bengal Congress launched its own efforts to prevent this possibility. But Mandal personally secured the agreement of the independent Rajbangshi MLA from Rangpur, Narendra Narayan Roy. The Congress had apparently prevented one of their MLAs from Tangail, Gayanath Biswas, from meeting with Mandal, evidently to standstill his campaign. It is thus absolutely clear that the Congress remained intent on ensuring the exclusion of Ambedkar.

Although Gayanath Biswas was initially elected with the Congress, he was willing to support Ambedkar and sent word of his intentions to Mandal from his concealed location. The evening before the election at the Assembly, Mandal received a telephone call from Khwaja Shahabuddin confirming the former’s prediction during a conversation earlier in the day that once M. B. Mullick heard that Gayanath Biswas and Dwarika Nath Barui would support Ambedkar, he would also vote accordingly. He also received the commitments of Congress Dalit MLAs from Jessore and Pabna, Bholanath Biswas and Haran Chandra

<sup>13</sup> “Scheduled Castes and Cabinet Mission: Dr. Ambedkar’s Criticism,” Times of India, 1 July 1946, 6.

<sup>14</sup> Jogendranath Mandal, *Aprakasita Atmakatha*, 145.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 144-153



Barman, respectively. A crowd of SCF activities gathered outside the Assembly to receive news of the election results on the day they were announced, and were evidently involved in a scuffle.<sup>16</sup> Ambedkar's election was celebrated at a victory procession taken out throughout Calcutta the following day and subsequent festivities Mandal hosted at his home. Shortly after the election, several of the MLAs Mandal had encouraged to vote for Ambedkar defected from the Congress. This surge in support for Ambedkar that Mandal orchestrated became the basis for Ambedkar's own appeal to the British government that they reconsider their refusal of recognition to the Federation.

### **Mandal and the Calcutta Riots**

In the days following the killings in Calcutta, Mandal faced a groundswell of anger, vitriol and criticism for his role in the provincial government.<sup>17</sup> Hindu public opinion, including that of other notable Dalit leaders, turned violently against him, demanding his resignation from the Suhrawardy ministry. Mandal was perceived as but a stooge of the Muslim League. As the prominent Dalit minister in the Muslim League ministry, the full force of Hindu Bengal's fury and indignation was directed towards him. Mandal adopted an entirely exceptional view on the mass violence for which he was allegedly responsible, which effectively called on Dalits to extricate themselves from the polarizing dynamic of the carnage. His position was all the more extraordinary given that he apparently "used to receive threatening letters from caste Hindus and Mahasabhites practically every day..."<sup>18</sup>

Mandal initially made his views public on the Calcutta riots in an editorial published in *Jagaran*.<sup>19</sup> He complained that those upper-castes owned newspapers that published various pieces chastising him did not offer him the opportunity to respond to their public censure. He had even sent various statements to their offices to no avail; they refused to publish them. Their willingness, he reasoned, was a result of the fact that his policies and

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<sup>16</sup>“Polling in Bengal Assembly: Harijan Demonstrations,” *Times of India*, 18 July 1946, 10.

<sup>17</sup>Bidyut Chakrabarty, *The Partition of Bengal and Assam, 1932-1947: Contour of Freedom* (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>18</sup>“Life Sketch of Mr. Mandal,” *Sind Observer*, 6.

<sup>19</sup>“Phedreshan Sabhapatir Bibriti – Tapashil Jatike Nirapeksha Thhakibar Nieddesh – Danga Hangamay Kono Sampraday Hoibe Na,” *Jagaran*, 14 September 1946.



opinions no longer served upper-caste interests. Responding to critics trying to tarnish his reputation, he diminished the value of their accusations, given that they were predominantly of the Congress or Hindu Mahasabha.

Reprising the specific context for the SCF's participation alongside the Muslim League in the Day of Direct Action – namely the SCF's exclusion from the proceedings of the Cabinet Mission thus far – Mandal emphasized the ongoing nationwide anti-Poona Pact *Satyagraha* and the various protests in East Bengal. It was in this context that the Federation's participation with the Muslim League in protest ought to have acquired meaning. Reacting on the Calcutta riots, Jogendranath Mandal made the bald and categorical assertion that even though these riots had a communal implication, this was not at all a communal war. "Even if these riots appear communal, this is not a communal war." This was nothing more than apolitical battle between the Congress and the Muslim League.<sup>20</sup>

Mandal therefore characterised the opportunistic claim that the vast majority of the people involved in the Calcutta riots were Scheduled Castes as but a ploy to pit them against the Muslims. Dalits, he contended, had nothing to gain from enmity with the Muslims, who in economic and political terms, stood on essentially the same footing as they did. This was of particular significance again in the context of their exclusion from the Cabinet Mission, and the unwillingness to recognize the Dalits as a minority community. Mandal was thus drawing attention to how the specificity of the SCF's protest had been erroneously conflated with the communal violence they were perceived to have condoned. His contentions thus ran in direct contrast to his critics.<sup>21</sup>

The most notable aspect of Mandal's statement, however, was his declaration of a policy of neutrality with regard to the violence in Calcutta and his urging Dalits to adopt the same. He hoped that both Hindu and Muslim leaders would refrain from trying to engage their followers against the other community, and that they themselves would not respond to such exhortations. Finally, he made a plea to their leaders, activists, students, and general

<sup>20</sup>Dwaipayana Sen, *The Decline of the Caste Questions: Jogendranath Mandal and the Defeat of Dalit Politics in Bengal*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 156.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.,156.





populace, to bear in mind the future political and economic welfare of their community, and remain aloof from the battles being waged between other political parties. Despite the overall reconciliatory tenor of his statement, Mandal could not but have been painfully aware that Dalits in fact have been participants in and victims of the violence that brought the city to its knees. Keeping his own political and ideological commitments in mind, he sought to reveal the full implications of Dalit victimhood being converted into fodder for Hindu communalism. As his arguments suggest, Mandal was only too aware of the cruel irony that their involvement in the riots bolstered the moral capital of Hindu righteousness against Muslim aggression.<sup>22</sup>

## **The Interim Government**

When the news of the violence in Calcutta spread, similarly brutal exchanges started in Bengal and beyond in October 1948. Muslim League nominated Mandal to join the interim government as Law Minister. The nomination has generally been viewed as the League's sarcastic attempt to retaliate against the Congress for including Muslims among their own list of nominated representatives. If one adopted a somewhat more sympathetic reading of the matter, however, one would have to contend with the very genuine sense of gratitude that Dalits all over the country felt toward Jinnah and the League for this choice. Such expressions were on display in processions and demonstrations that appeared all over the country, from Agra and Fatehgarh to Calcutta, Delhi, Bombay and Nagpur.<sup>23</sup>

Jinnah addressed to a gathering of about 3000 Scheduled Caste men who had assembled to his house on 16 October to thank him for including their representative in the new central government: "It is easy to make promise and then forget them, but I believe in action, and assure you that I shall never fail to do for you whatever lies in my power...." He further said: I am your friend, and I shall always be your friend. I did my very best for the

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<sup>22</sup>Dwaipayana sen, *The Decline of the Caste Questions: Jogendrnath Mandal and the Defeat of Dalit Politics in Bengal*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 157.

<sup>23</sup>Hindustan Standard, File No. 191/46.



Scheduled Castes at the Round Table Conference, and this matter is on actual record.”<sup>24</sup> The correspondent for *The Times of India* thus spoke of a “deeper political motive.” Mandal’s nomination was also regarded as a “gesture of sympathy and solidarity with the down-trodden section of the Hindu community.”<sup>25</sup>

Mandal himself stated at a press interview that “...an injustice was done to the Scheduled Castes by the British Cabinet Mission, and that Congress has been undone by this act of the Muslim League. I am grateful to Mr. Jinnah for his offering a seat to the Scheduled Castes Federation out of the Muslim League’s quota. The Congress high command was likewise hardly pleased with Mandal’s nomination. And Gandhi, for his part, opined that “he could not sense any generosity in Mandal’s nomination especially when he read what was happening in Eastern Bengal.” A man like himself ought to be glad, they might say, that another seat had been given to a Harijan. Bu he would be deceiving himself and Mr. Jinnah if he said so...<sup>26</sup> But during much of his tenure as minister in law in the interim government, Mandal was preoccupied with the SCF’s various activities across the country. Perhaps this is why he does not feature too prominently in the transfer of power documents.

### **The Prospect of Dalit and Muslim Unity**

In distinct contrast to his assessment of the Calcutta riots-which he characterized as a political battle between the Congress and the League – after touring East Bengal in October 1946to urge calm upon various localities in his new role as a minister of the interim government, Mandal asserted that it was ‘fantastic to impute political motives behind the recent outbreak, and link political parties with the disturbances. It was an uprising of violent elements pure and simple, and nothing but sheer lawlessness and the activities of the unsocial elements are responsible. No political parties are involved.’<sup>27</sup> In a plea to Muslims and Dalits all over

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<sup>24</sup>Information Department, India Office (Telegram A.3563 from the Press Information Bureau, New Delhi, 18 October 1946), IOR/L/PJ/10/50.

<sup>25</sup>“India’s New Coalition Government,” *Times of India*, 16 October 1946, 1.

<sup>26</sup>Information Department, India Office (Telegram A. 3561from the Press Information Bureau, New Delhi, 17 October 1946), IOR/L/PJ/10/75.

<sup>27</sup>Information Department, India Office (Telegram A. 3602 from the Press Information Bureau), New Delhi, 25 October 1946, IOR/L/P&J/8/578.



Bengal, other leaders like Khwaja Nazimuddin, Fazlur Rahman Rasik Lal Biswas, Dwarika Nath Bauri etc. reasoned that their political alliance had no value if their communities were to forsake living together peaceably and lost sight of their conjoined futures. They warned, “Our enemies can instigate Muslims and Scheduled Castes into riots and mayhem,” and thus especially hoped that they would desist from such incitement and keep their two communities’ mutual welfare in mind.<sup>28</sup> This leaflet was distributed in Jessore and Faridpur, and cropped up in the intelligence reports of the time.

Several articles and editorials published in *Jagaran* after the riots in eastern Bengal stressed a similar message that neither Muslims nor Dalits stood to gain from them, and the only parties that stood to benefit from this violence were the Congress and Mahasabha, which could exploit the slippage between their dual identification as both Scheduled Caste and Hindu, and thus instrumentally mobilize animosity (as in Noakhali and Calcutta) toward the alleged irreconcilability of Hindus and Muslims. SCF and League student leaders maintained correspondence to similar effect. There remained considerable efforts to prolong sentiments of mutual goodwill and solidarity in a context in which they were not readily available.

### **Jogendranath Mandal and Anti-Partition Agitation**

During his term as law minister in the interim government and increasingly once the possibility of Partition drew near, Mandal toured the country extensively, addressing various meetings on the details of the Federation’s constitutional and political demands, the need for Dalit political unity, and about how disastrously partition would impact their communities. He travelled from Delhi, to Bombay, to Calcutta, Nagpur, Karimganj, Ferozabad, and Pune, in addition to countless smaller district towns all over Bengal, laying great emphasis in his autobiography on the effusiveness of his various receptions all over the country, seemingly enthused by the prospect of political mobilization. Indeed, Mandal and some of his colleagues expressed great optimism, despite the SCF’s being confronted with a situation where Congress had for all intents and purposes manufactured their redundancy.

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<sup>28</sup>“Musolman o Tapashili Sampradayer Prati,” *Jagaran*, 9 November 1946, File No. 717D/46: Muslim League.



The Bengali Hindu movement for dividing the province began to develop momentum in late 1946 in the wake of riots in Calcutta and East Bengal. It emerged to public prominence in March and April of 1947, with the Hindu Mahasabha's annual provincial conference at the Shaivaite site of pilgrimage in Tarakeswar marking a key turning point.<sup>29</sup> In May, 1947, Mandal and SCF launched a campaign throughout the province opposing the Hindu demand for the Partition of Bengal, eliciting the wrath and opposition of the Bengal Congress and Mahasabha, the principal proponents of the divide. Mandal opined that Partition would not solve the problem of communalism in Bengal rather the present scheme for the Partition of Bengal was only to crush the Scheduled Castes and get all power in the hands of the Caste Hindus.<sup>30</sup> A United Bengal, therefore, was a necessity in the interest of the Scheduled Castes people of the province.<sup>31</sup> But the government proceeded on the unverified assumption that since Dalits voted for Congress in the election of 1946, they now demanded division.

## Conclusion:

The failure of Jogendranath Mandal and the SCF's plan for Dalit political autonomy corresponded with the united Hindu demand for the Partition of Bengal. This happened not only due to the inadequacies of SCF but equally due to the result of the sustained efforts of the Congress to ensure that an independent political movement amongst Dalits found no fertile terrain. Despite the weakness of Federation, the Congress deliberately tried to marginalise the only political organization that posed a threat to its domination over the Dalits in the election of 1946. Further the threat of Congress could not stop Mandal to ensure the victory of Ambedkar in the election of the Constituent Assembly. Subsequently Mandal furthermore became the object of Indian and Hindu nationalist critique because of his association with League both in the Government of Bengal and the Interim Government of India, against the backdrop of the most unprecedented acts of mass communal violence in modern history of South Asia. When the Partition of Bengal became inevitable, the Campaign

<sup>29</sup>Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 240-265.

<sup>30</sup>“Partition to Crush Scheduled Castes: Scheme Opposed by Mr. Mandal,” *Morning News*, 11 May 1947.

<sup>31</sup>*Free Press*, 18 May 1947, in *Mandal, Mahapran Jogendrnath, dvitiya Khanda*, 27-28.



led by Mandal and his SCF against the move yet again met with the Congress' opposition. In his view, partition would not only fail to resolve the issue of communalism, but would damage the existence of SCF, and leave the Dalits vulnerable to caste Hindus in the West and Muslims in the East. Undoubtedly the defeat of Mandal and SCF can be traced to their shortcomings, there were other factors too such as various efforts to ensure their decline. Certainly there were the efforts of Congress and Hindu Mahasabha for constructing a united Hindu community which unanimously demanded the partition of their province. Among various casualties of Partition, one might consider the very possibility for Dalit political autonomy.