

## Dr B.C. Roy and the First Decade of the Indian Federation

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Dr B.C. Roy, who led West Bengal as chief minister between 1948 and 1962, died on this first day of July, 59 years ago. He was known for his exactitude and his scientific temper, but to take leave of the world on the same date on which he came into it and that too, as soon as he had reached a perfect 80, is more than just unusual.

Indians still view the early, long-serving chief ministers like Govind Ballabh Pant, K. Kamaraj or Bidhan Chandra Roy with a certain amount of awe, for they are the ones who defined the rules of the game. While briefly recapitulating some highlights in B.C. Roy's 14-years' rule, we may observe the fluidity and unique problems faced by states in those early years. They came in all sizes and shapes and the Union was quite top-down by design. It was, nevertheless, a federal arrangement – largely because India was too diverse and ungovernably large to function as a unitary country. Both the Union and its constituents needed, therefore, to establish codes and protocols over areas and issues that could never be covered by typed-out Acts and Rules. Jawaharlal Nehru surely started as the 'first among equals', which fitted in quite well with his liberal-democrat image, yet his strong ideas and long stewardship ensured that he towered too tall over all others. We need also to understand that even in the 'golden era', the Centre presided over states quite decisively.

Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy is viewed as quite 'autonomous' and he surely belonged to that small handful that never appeared to be overwhelmed by Nehru. His reputation is of one who 'checked and balanced' the prime minister, which he did at times, but we may also appreciate the extent to which this was true or, at all, possible. When we are alarmed at the prime minister's relentless subordination of all chief ministers, whether they belong to his party or not, we may not beguile ourselves into believing that his predecessors were completely different. But when Roy addressed the formidable prime minister of India by his first name, not as Pandit-ji, people were more than taken aback, even then, and we may not witness such informality ever again.

Bidhan Roy's strength lay primarily in his professional competence – not as a politician – but as a physician. He could, therefore, walk into Nehru's inner chambers for he often treated him as his patient, and he had been his father's doctor and for Gandhi's as well. He was also seven years senior to Nehru, in age, and he had also been educated in England, and coincidentally, both returned to India in 1911-12. The fact that he completed two prized medical degrees, MRCP and FRCS, simultaneously in a record period of only two years and three months, was not only very rare but earned him the regard of the medical community, in England and well as in India. Barrister Jawaharlal was more than impressed, but Roy moved on with his medical practice and teaching. He excelled in it and India decided to honour him in perpetuity by declaring that this date to be observed as National Doctors' Day.

Roy did not join politics until 1925, and in that year, he defeated 'the grand old man of

Bengal', the redoubtable 'Surrender-Not' S.N. Banerjea, in a straight fight from Barrackpore. He first leaned towards the Swaraj party, led by Motilal Nehru, C.R. Das and Vithalbhai Patel, that had broken off from Gandhi's Congress, but as soon as differences were reconciled, he joined the mainstream of the Congress. As Subhas was in and out of jail, B.C. Roy organised the Civil Disobedience Movement in Bengal in 1930 and so thorough and effective was he that Motilal had him promoted as a member of the prestigious Congress Working Committee. Roy kept his practice alive and took care to cultivate the image of the legendary doctor who added value to the Congress movement. He was chosen by the 'high command' to serve as mayor of Calcutta Corporation, and he proved his dexterity in handling the faction-ridden Bengal Provincial Congress — where Subhas Chandra Bose was, incidentally, an active participant. Roy was full 15 years senior to Bose, which mattered in a traditional gerontocratic society, and he was a skilled dribbler in politics as well.

B.C. Roy maintained a neutral stance in the 'Gandhi versus the Bengal Congress' ideological debate and even thereafter. His proximity to the Nehru family and Gandhi's politics earned him brownie points that would serve him well in future, especially as the bulk of the Congress party in Bengal was perceived to be more favourable to a defiant Subhas Chandra. We must remember that Bengal was a Muslim-majority province but its economic and social domination had traditionally been in the hands of the English-educated, upper-caste Hindus. These *bhadraloks* lorded it over the vast majority, consisting largely of Muslims and 'depressed castes'. This elite constituted just 6.4% of the population but it monopolised education and employment in both the government and private sectors.

From the second decade of the 20th century, however, Muslims and, thereafter, the 'depressed castes' embarked on their political empowerment campaigns and the tussle began. As soon as relatively large-scale voting (far short of universal adult franchise) began from 1937, Muslims led government-formation in Bengal, first under Fazlul Haq's Krishak Praja Party and then under the Muslim League. Thus, when Subhas became the president of the Indian National Congress in 1938, and again in 1939, the party was already on the decline in the politics of the 'undivided province. But even two months before Independence and Partition, no one really knew for sure whether Bengal would be split or remain united, as the demand to partition it on communal lines was ultimately rammed through by the Muslim League, there was a strong lobby to keep it as separate, united Hindu-Muslim nation. The Congress officially opposed the creation of Pakistan and was, frankly, quite confused in Bengal.

The purpose of stating these facts is to appreciate that while compromise was absolutely unthinkable in Punjab, all options were open in Bengal. Hindu-Muslim animosities were neither so bitter and nor communalism so deep in Bengal. Passion for the common language and the syncretic heritage were quite strong, even in the worst of times — as the 2021 election results have recently reconfirmed. The traditionally powerful (Hindu) leadership of the Provincial Congress had an impressive base in East Bengal. Its leaders became quite rootless after Partition, because like many in Bengal, Congress leaders were not prepared for it. Roy's predecessor, the first chief minister, was from the 'far East' had to go as he had angered the dominant 'Hughli faction' of the West Bengal Congress. As a *pravasi* Bengali, born and bred largely in Bihar, Roy was seen as being above this parochial conflict. Nehru surely played a role and Roy had often no option but to acquiesce to Delhi's decisions. He had to fall in line with Nehru's plans even when they adversely affected the state.

The first issue on which federal relations had to be settled related to the distribution of income tax collected by the Union but meant partly to be granted to states. Under the existing British formula, the Niemeyer Award, Bengal and Bombay provinces were

entitled to 20% of the total tax collection — since they were instrumental in garnering its lion's share. When Nehru's government reduced West Bengal's share to just 12%, Roy led the hue and cry against it, on the ground that the hiving off of the eastern bulk did not really matter as almost all the income tax was always collected in Kolkata.

The Central government had not constituted the Finance Commission that the constitution had prescribed, and Nehru assuaged Roy by setting up a Committee under C.D. Deshmukh — which increased Bengal's share to 13.5%. The point is that this head-on conflict marked the beginning of the great federal debate that continues till today. The Southern states of India are up against the present Union government's plan to reward the North Indian states for not being able to check their population.

Similarly, while the setting up of the Durgapur Steel Plant did give a fillip to his narrative that the Asansol-Durgapur-Raniganj belt was, indeed, the Ruhr of India, and did wonders to his image, the 'Freight Equalisation' policy that he had to gulp down ensured that the locational advantage of eastern India was taken away quite decisively. In any case, the new Licensing Policy of the Nehru era meant that, ultimately, the Centre finally decided which industry should be set up where, and even during Roy's tenure, West Bengal started losing out quite rapidly to States like Maharashtra. The State's essential raw materials like cotton or petroleum arrived with heavy and uneconomic transport costs attached. But, we remember B.C. Roy for his indomitable spirit to state his contrary views (quite unthinkable nowadays) and in securing the best bargain possible from Nehru's government. Thus, other than Durgapur, he could also set up two new modern townships at Kalyani and Bidhannagar (Kolkata's Salt Lake town), and create a large urban settlement to accommodate refugees, called Ashokenagar-Habra.

Refugees were, indeed, the most difficult of his challenges — more so as Nehru and Patel were totally overtaken by the 73 lakh Hindus and Sikhs who had crossed over from Pakistani Punjab in just four years following Independence. They had little time for the problem of much smaller numbers of Hindus of East Pakistan, who were entering an already densely occupied West Bengal in regular instalments. But the number was not too small either, and reports reveal that some 25 lakhs had crossed over to West Bengal between 1947 and 1950. By the time Roy died in 1962, the total number of refugees from East Pakistan had gone up to 42.6 lakh, which was certainly a large number in the population of 3.5 crores then. Besides, this official figure is quite an understatement as numerous immigrants, especially the bhadraloks, simply moved in with their extended families and kin in West Bengal. Travelling to and fro and cross-settlements were traditionally much more fluid between the east and west in Bengal

The 1951 Census noted that 25 lakhs had already moved over from the east and settled in and around Kolkata even before the Partition. But Nehru was banking too much on Bengal's more tolerant ethos and wanted a harassed Bidhan Roy to agree. On April 1, 1948, he told Bengal that "it is dangerous to encourage this exodus as this may lead to disastrous consequences." A fortnight later, he was more explicit that "Hindus should not leave East Bengal. If they do so in very large numbers, they will suffer greatly and we might be wholly unable to make any arrangement." Though this was clearly discriminatory, since his government was showering its resources to take care of refugees who had fled West Pakistan, Roy had to stomach it, with just some protest.

The 'secular ethos' of Bengal held true to some extent, and in the entire quarter-century of East Pakistan's existence, not more than 15 lakh Bengali Muslims crossed over to it. This is only a small fraction of the number that deserted Punjab and Uttar Pradesh for West Pakistan. Many Muslims, in fact, returned to West Bengal. Thus, while the Central government could requisition some 4.5 million acres of property abandoned by Muslims who had fled to West Pakistan, to accommodate Hindus and Sikhs, there was hardly a

tenth of such resources left behind by Muslims in West Bengal.

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But Nehru was also being rather impractical, as ethos or no ethos, communal and anti-social elements in both communities invariably created deliberate mayhem and riots, to loot and seize 'enemy property'. The situation in Bengal was becoming quite explosive, with the government largely ignoring the refugee problem, but Nehru insisted that B.C. Roy should not be an alarmist. In 1949, the Congress lost a critical by-election in South Kolkata, which sent shock waves. More disturbing were the forceful occupation of vacant lands, both government and private, by impatient refugees in the heart of Kolkata. Communists had jumped in and were busy organising them and when Nehru visited Calcutta in July 1949, angry refugees hurled stones and shoes at his car. A bomb exploded at a public meeting that he addressed. Violence was in the air but Delhi was fixated on the problem in its own backyard.

It was then that B.C. Roy embarked on his policy 'to spread out the refugees' from the camps, parks and pavements of Kolkata, to the western districts of Bengal. But the east Bengalis found them inadequately green and much too dry and rough. Roy's plans to transport and transplant them in large numbers in Dandakaranya in the heart of India and in the Andaman Islands were only partially successful and caused considerable misery. But Bidhan's 'Jawahar' looked the other way and Centre-state relations were under strain even then, however 'democratic' be the tensions. The positive spinoff of the communist leadership of the refugee movement was, however, that the natural tendency to communalise the issue was checked quite effectively, unlike in western and northern India. We need to take a fair appraisal and admit that Bengal had issues with the Union government not just when the Left or the Trinamool came to power, but right from the beginning. It will also explain why there is historical angst about Nehru, Gandhi and Patel in the state.

Food was a perennial problem in the over-populated state, more so after it was cut off from the bountiful east. In August 1959, the Communist-led 'Food Movement' was a turning point in the state's history. Jyoti Basu claimed that 80 of his supporters were killed and the state assembly exploded in anger. Roy handled the crisis with aplomb, as he had become used to the high drama and violence that Communists displayed in their agitations. His very imperial Kolkata Police, which insisted on communicating only in English, and its British-trained mounted police were quite forbidding and their reprisals terribly deadly — that protestors learnt to their dismay. The 'One Paisa Tram Fare' agitation of 1953 and the 'Teachers' Movement' of 1954 are considered legendary in Communist lore, but Roy's stern handling is also remembered. The CPI, however, proved to be a worthy foe and Roy was all admiration for Jyoti Basu. No wonder that, while the Congress has completely forgotten B.C. Roy and the party itself is in the ICU in Bengal, the communists are the ones who still hold him in high respect, as the true builder of modern Bengal.