

CHAPTER XV

WEST BENGAL

631. The material which has been submitted to this Commission from West Bengal is voluminous, and the claims or counter-claims of the other governments concerned, namely, Bihar, Assam and Orissa, have also been supported in considerable detail. Although these states are predominantly unilingual, the reorganisation of the border areas has not become any the less difficult or controversial. Indeed, as the incidents in Goalpara and the emotional upheaval that followed the appointment of this Commission in some of the disputed areas have indicated, the readjustment of West Bengal's borders has now become a major problem. We do not foresee that, with the passage of time, this problem will disappear. It must, therefore, be dealt with as part of the general settlement of the problem of reorganisation.

632. Obviously, without a clear appreciation of the conflicting points of view no lasting or satisfactory solution can be proposed. It is necessary, therefore, to indicate briefly the background to these disputes.

633. Partition has created many problems for West Bengal. Apart from the influx of refugees from Pakistan, which may now be estimated at about three and a half millions, the entire communications system of Bengal has been disrupted since 1947. The northern districts of the Presidency division have become less easily accessible from Calcutta; and West Bengal is now the only Part A State which is geographically not a compact and integrated unit.

634. To some extent, West Bengal's difficulties are also shared by Bihar and Assam. Communication links between the north and the south in this part of the country have not been as satisfactory as may be desired. The reasons for this deficiency are various. There is in the first place the problem of bridging the Ganga. The major rail bridge across this river was at Paksi in East Pakistan; and since this has been lost to India, a crossing at Mokameh Ghat is now being provided. The Mokameh Ghat bridge when it is completed will, however, relieve the congestion in traffic only partially. The break of gauge north of the Ganga, the inadequacies of the Assam rail link, and the comparative inaccessibility of the eastern areas of the Malda

and West Dinajpur districts of West Bengal will still remain problems which will have to be solved independently of the Mokameh project.

635. Various proposals have been put forward in order to improve communications between Calcutta and the north-eastern portion of India which is now somewhat isolated. One proposal is that a road-cum-rail bridge and a barrage across the Ganga at Farraka in West Bengal should be built. It has also been suggested that a new railway line from Dhubri in Assam *via* Alipur Duar to Siliguri should be laid and that line capacity should be doubled from that point onwards. Rail links are also proposed to be provided *via* the contemplated Farraka crossing, connecting the southern districts with Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch-Bihar through the Barsoi-Siliguri railway line; and links with suitable points in the east in the middle portion of the West Bengal State have also been proposed.

636. In order to supplement the transport capacity which will be provided by these new railway lines, two road links which will be part of the national highway system are also being constructed within or just on the borders of the West Bengal State. The West Bengal case is that all these projects should be given priority; and that such territorial readjustments should be made as will give to the State control over the areas through which the main lines of communication are to pass.

637. Geographical contiguity, in order to ensure the more orderly development of its communication links, is thus the main argument on which the West Bengal claims in the north, that is to say, in the Purnea and Santhal Parganas districts, are based. As regards the area which is to the south, the basis of the claim is that river control and irrigation development are now being projected on a very large scale in the Burdwan division of West Bengal. This development, it is claimed, will be helped by the transfer to West Bengal of a portion of the Santhal Parganas and the whole of Manbhum. The rivers which have been particularly mentioned in connection with these territorial claims are the Ajay and the Kasai, dams on which are proposed to be built in or on the borders of Bihar. The West Bengal Government has asked for the catchment areas of these two rivers, in order to ensure that its programme of river control and development is not jeopardised.

638. We have dealt so far with what apparently are the most important points in West Bengal's case. But it will be wrong to assume that the claims are based only on administrative grounds.

West Bengal, so far as we have been able to judge, feels that it has been treated unjustly. This feeling is based partly on the fact that from 1905 onwards the State has steadily lost territory; the result of the latest change has been to create a disconnected unit, and West Bengal thinks that its difficulties have not been appreciated.

639. The "areal extent" of Bengal, it has been stated, was always larger than it is at the present time. It is not surprising, therefore, that arguments drawn from history have also been considered to be relevant. The West Bengal Government and the Pradesh Congress Committee have relied to some extent on the fact that considerable portions of the areas now claimed were previously under the Government of Bengal. Reliance has also been placed on the definition of the limits of the Madarun Sarkar of the Moghul empire; on a resolution passed by the Congress in 1911; and on a statement reported to have been issued by some prominent leaders of Bihar in 1912, conceding West Bengal's claims to the territory east of the Mahananda, the whole of Manbhum and the Dhalbhum portion of the Singhbhum district.

640. The last-mentioned statement has been challenged and counter-arguments drawn from history have been produced in order to rebut West Bengal's claim. The Government of Bihar has also pointed out that no great importance need be attached to geographical contiguity, in view of the fact that the Constitution of India contains adequate provision to facilitate inter-state co-operation, even if such co-operation cannot be assumed in the normal course. The other grounds on which the claims have been made are, it is argued, not substantial.

641. A more or less extensive bilingual belt, it is stated, is unavoidable. Attempts to establish the precise linguistic and cultural affiliations of such areas can never be quite successful and may also be unnecessary since a completely unilingual area cannot always be created. Hindi is either the predominant language or at least a very important language in this bilingual border belt; and since Hindi is not only the regional official language in the disputed areas, but also the national language, proficiency in which is necessary and desirable, the grievance that Hindi is being "imposed" cannot be regarded as legitimate. The Bihar Government has also stated that the natural predominance of Hindi in these areas has been obscured in the past by attempts to impose Bengali; and it has been pointed out that a number of typically Bihari castes are to be found in the territory claimed.

642. Many of the arguments advanced against the proposal to create a Jharkhand State are also regarded as relevant to the proposal to transfer the rich mineral-bearing and industrialised areas of Rajmahal, Manbhum and Dhalbhum to West Bengal. This transfer, it is argued, is bound to dislocate the economy of residuary Bihar, and it will upset the balance between agriculture and industry.

643. Finally, it has been contended by Bihar that there is no popular demand in this disputed fringe for a rectification of the boundary.

644. The linguistic complexion of the disputed areas is unfortunately not quite clear. The mother-tongue data of the 1951 Census have been challenged by both Bengal and Bihar; and only a broad judgment as to the relative numerical strength of various linguistic groups in the districts of Purnea, Santhal Parganas, Manbhum and Goalpara seems possible. Neither West Bengal nor Bihar has, in these circumstances, confined itself to arguing from past figures. Both the governments have relied on a number of subsidiary factors in order to prove the cultural affinity of the disputed areas.

645. The arguments advanced by the Bihar Government in favour of the maintenance of the *status quo* are not without force. It has also to be recognised that bilingualism in the area under consideration has to be accepted as an inevitable fact and that no great importance can, therefore, be attached to mere linguistic affinity.

646. We feel, however, that quite apart from the special background of the West Bengal claim and its psychological aspect, there is no denying the fact that the present distribution of territories between Bihar and West Bengal is such as to give rise to some real administrative difficulties from the point of view of West Bengal. It may be possible, as the Bihar Government has contended, to mitigate these difficulties within the existing constitutional and administrative framework. However, now that an opportunity for a general settlement has presented itself, it will be desirable in our opinion to find more lasting solutions.

647. We shall first examine the claims made on the Purnea district. The mother-tongue data of the census returns for this district, as has been mentioned already, have been challenged by West Bengal. The main controversy in this district, however, relates to the classification of the dialect or dialects spoken to the east of the river Mahananda. Grierson, and following him O Malley, classified them as North Bengali, but the Bihar Government, relying among other evidence on the views of Gait, the Census Superintendent in 1901, has challenged this classification.

648. We do not feel called upon to review or to decide this question. The affinities between Kishanganjia or Sirpuria as spoken in the extreme east of Purnea district, on the one hand, and Bengali on the other, seem to be close. But this dialect is written in the Kaithi script, which is allied to Hindi, and as one proceeds westwards its affinities with Maithili and Hindi become more marked. Arguments based on linguistic affiliations, whether advanced by Bihar or by Bengal, are thus far from being conclusive.

649. The main argument in support of the West Bengal claim on this area is the desirability of making the State a geographically contiguous unit. The Bihar Government has represented that it is not necessary to transfer to West Bengal the area through which the national highway connecting the northern districts to the rest of West Bengal passes. The highway, it is stated, is now and will remain the responsibility of the Central Government, and whichever State functions as the agent of the Centre, the general principles which have already been laid down regarding the maintenance or the use of national highways will go a long way towards ensuring the interests of all those who may be using them. The Government of Bihar has also dealt at some length with the allegations of lack of co-operation in facilitating transport and communications between the southern and northern portions of West Bengal.

650. We feel that this is a matter which should be examined on its merits rather than on the basis of complaints or counter-complaints against one state or the other. We attach great importance to the geographical compactness of administrative units, because we are of the view that the physical integration of such units is vital to their real political and administrative integration. Apart from the inconvenience in administering geographically detached areas we must take note of the fact that the continued isolation of the northern districts from the rest of West Bengal will tend to foster and accentuate separatist trends in these districts. West Bengal, therefore, has a good case for a geographical integration of the northern areas.

651. Besides, even if the Bihar Government extend full co-operation in facilitating traffic between the north and the south of West Bengal, certain difficulties are inherent in the existing arrangements. These difficulties will be eliminated if portions of the Kishanganj sub-division and the Gopalpur revenue thana are transferred to West Bengal. This will enable West Bengal to construct feeder roads connecting the national highway to its other territories and to control road traffic with Darjeeling and other places in the north, by eliminating avoidable delays and cumbersome and inconvenient administrative arrangements, and by liberalising, if necessary, the

present practice relating to road transport. West Bengal will also acquire control of the Indo-Pakistan border in this region along its entire length. From an administrative point of view this will be both convenient and desirable.

652. We have carefully examined the suggestion that the entire area to the east of the river Mahananda in the Purnea district should be transferred from Bihar to West Bengal in order to provide for geographical contiguity between the two disconnected parts of West Bengal. We do not consider it necessary, however, to recommend the transfer of any area which may not be absolutely essential in order to achieve the object in view. Taking all the relevant factors into consideration we propose that

- (i) the portion of the Kishanganj sub-division which is to the east of the river Mahananda; and
- (ii) a portion of the Gopalpur revenue thana contiguous to the territory mentioned in (i) and extending down to national highway in this thana,

should be transferred to West Bengal. The actual delimitation of the new boundary will have to be settled after a detailed survey. The details of this transfer will have to be left, therefore, to the Government of India, acting in consultation with the State Governments concerned. But it should be ensured that control of the national highway in the Gopalpur revenue thana is vested in the Government of West Bengal.

653. While making this recommendation we have to take note of the fact that the eastern portion of the Kishanganj sub-division is predominantly inhabited by Muslims who would view with concern the transfer of this area to West Bengal on the ground that their linguistic and cultural rights might suffer and that the possible resettlement of displaced persons from East Bengal might dislocate their life. These fears are not without justification. It would, therefore, be necessary for the West Bengal Government to take effective steps such as the recognition of the special position of Urdu in this area for educational and official purposes. The density of population in this area is such that there is little scope for any resettlement of displaced persons. The West Bengal Government would, therefore, do well to make a clear announcement to the effect that no such resettlement would be undertaken. This would go a long way in our opinion in dispelling doubts and fears.

654. In the Santhal Parganas, the Santhals are, according to the 1951 Census, numerically the second most important linguistic group.

The West Bengal claims in this district seem to be based on a number of subsidiary arguments, such as that Santhals have affinities with West Bengal, and that the revenue history of this district indicates its administrative links with Birbhum and Murshidabad. These claims, however, are not convincing.

655. Bengali influence in the entire Santhal Parganas district is very slight. The percentage of the Bengali-speaking people is meagre in all the sub-divisions, excepting Rajmahal and Pakur, where they constitute about 16 and 13 per cent. of the population respectively. Rajmahal was for brief periods the capital of ancient Bengal. Even so, the Hindi-speaking population in Rajmahal, as the Bihar Government has pointed out, far outnumbers at the present time that speaking Bengali. That this is not an accidental or manipulated result is clear from the records of earlier censuses.

656. The areas claimed by West Bengal are an integral part of Santhal Parganas as it was constituted in 1855. It will be inconvenient to Bihar if this eastern fringe of this district were now detached from it. Apart from the administrative complications which may be created, Bihar will lose the Rajmahal coal-fields to West Bengal if the area claimed were transferred. Santhali opinion has not declared itself in favour of the West Bengal claim.

657. We have considered very carefully the question whether a portion of the Santhal Parganas alongside the Ganga, which is reported to be partially unsurveyed in this neighbourhood, can be transferred to West Bengal, in order to enable that State to control entirely one or more points at which this river can be crossed. We have also examined in some detail the case for the transfer of the catchment areas or a portion of territory along the course of the river Ajay. As has been stated elsewhere in this report, a claim which is based on the desirability of access to the proposed site of a river valley project will be admissible only if other factors are more or less evenly balanced. This is not the case so far as this district is concerned. We have, therefore, come to the conclusion that the transfer of any portion of the Santhal Parganas district to West Bengal will be difficult to justify.

658. In Manbhum, which is further to the south, the position is different. Manbhum is really composed of two different areas which are divided by the Damodar. These areas are now treated as two sub-districts, but with a population of 732,000 and 1,548,000 respectively, they are for practical purposes separate districts and are administered as such. Dhanbad which is the industrialised area, in

which incidentally Hindi is predominant, differs from Purulia which is comparatively less industrialised, and has a much greater concentration of the Bengali-speaking people.

659. There is no case for the transfer of Dhanbad to West Bengal. The Hindi speaking majority in this sub-district is 65 per cent. Coal-fields along the course of the Damodar river and the D.V.C. industrial belt are situated mostly in this sub-district, and there are indications that Dhanbad, like Jamshedpur further south, may soon attract a mixed population from all over India as it is further developed. The West Bengal claim to this area is, therefore, untenable.

660. In Purulia on the other hand, there is unmistakable evidence of Bengali influence even today. This sub-district has the largest concentration of Bengali-speaking people outside West Bengal.

661. The transfer of Purulia can be justified on the ground that it will facilitate the implementation of a flood control-cum-irrigation project which has recently been taken up in West Bengal. The Kangsabati (Kasai) river, which rises in Purulia, is of no real importance from the point of view of Bihar, but West Bengal has already utilised it to some extent in its lower reaches, and now proposes to build a dam on this river near the Bihar border

662. If flood control and irrigation in the Burdwan division are to be efficiently carried out in future it will be desirable to transfer to West Bengal a major portion of the catchment area because this will facilitate soil conservation measures and also provide perhaps a more appropriate dam site.

663. The importance of the Kasai to West Bengal will be apparent from the fact that it is supposed to derive its name of "the butcher" from the annual devastation which its flood waters cause in and round Midnapore. This may not be a conclusive argument justifying the proposed transfer. But in this case, as in the case of Bellary, which has been dealt with in Chapter IV of this part, the other arguments are either unimportant or are more or less balanced; in these circumstances, it cannot be regarded as a minor question that the implementation of a project to which West Bengal attaches considerable importance will be helped by the transfer.

664. It has been claimed by West Bengal that the linguistic tabulation of the 1951 Census cannot be regarded as satisfactory and that if we disregard the Census of 1951 and take into account the two previous Censuses at which the linguistic distribution of the people was recorded, the Bengali-speaking percentage was of the order of two-thirds of the total population in the entire district; in Purulia, which as has already been stated has even today a considerable

population speaking the Bengali language, it was, perhaps, more impressive.

665. We do not feel called upon to enter into the controversies relating to the figures of the preceding Censuses. We must, however, take note of the fact that even according to the 1951 Census, the Bengali-speaking majority in the rural areas Purulia will be about 55 per cent. (as against 28 per cent. of the Hindi-speaking people) if the Chas revenue thana, which is contiguous to Dhanbad is excluded.

666. Considering the circumstances referred to above in which the West Bengal claim to Manbhum has been made, we propose that the Purulia sub-district excluding the Chas thana should be transferred to West Bengal. Such a transfer will not seriously upset either the economy or the administrative structure of Bihar, but will, on a balance of considerations, be justified. It may be pointed out incidentally that since the area proposed to be transferred is virtually a district, the initial inconvenience, if any, as a result of the transfer will be negligible.

667. We pass next to Dhalbhum. From a linguistic point of view, Singhbhum district is the meeting ground of Ho, Oriya, Bengali, Hindi and Santhali. These languages are important roughly in the order named. In the Dhalbhum sub-division considered separately, Bengali is the largest language group but it cannot by any means be considered to be predominant; and a *prima facie* case for a boundary adjustment in favour of West Bengal has not been made out either on the ground of linguistic affiliation or on any other grounds. The historical links of this district with West Bengal, as in the case of Goalpara, are tenuous. It is also impossible to overlook the fact that in an important portion of the area claimed, that is to say, in and round Jamshedpur, the population is so mixed that no State can legitimately claim the city on cultural or linguistic grounds. Indeed, the West Bengal Government has itself recognised this fact. There is no case in our opinion for transferring to West Bengal either the Jamshedpur city or any other area by breaking up Dhalbhum.

668. We next deal with the West Bengal claims on Assam. These claims do not seem to us to be sound. There is no evidence, according to the 1951 Census, that the Goalpara district is predominantly Bengali-speaking. Although the figures have been challenged, and reference has been made to the considerable Muslim population in Goalpara which is claimed to be Bengali-speaking, we do not have enough evidence on the basis of which the mother-tongue data of 1951 can be disregarded. It is true that the latest Census figures show, as compared to the figures of 1931, very striking variations which cannot be satisfactorily explained. But we find it difficult

to admit on that ground alone any claim by West Bengal to Goalpara or any part of it. Such historical connection as there has been between Goalpara and West Bengal has been intermittent and tenuous. The district has now been part of Assam for such a long time that there is no justification for disturbing this position.

669. Our findings regarding the border disputes between West Bengal and Bihar and West Bengal and Assam can now be summarised. We have conceded the claim of West Bengal to the whole of the Purulia sub-district of Manbhum district, with the exception of the Chas thana, and have also admitted its claim to some territory east of the Mahananda in the Purnea district. The existing Bengal-Bihar and Bengal-Assam boundaries will continue except to the extent indicated.

670. The area and population of West Bengal as a result of these recommendations will be about 34,590 sq. miles and about 26.5 millions respectively.

671. We have already referred, in the opening paragraphs of this Chapter, to the long history and complicated nature of the border disputes. The claims which have been made on Bihar by or on behalf of West Bengal have not only been numerous but have also been conflicting.

672. The New Bengal Association, which submitted a representation to the Constituent Assembly in 1948, was broadly in favour of the addition of a little more than 10,000 sq. miles from Bihar to West Bengal. But a memorandum prepared at about the same time by the late Shri N. R. Sarker for the Government of West Bengal claimed an area of almost 16,000 sq. miles.

673. In a resolution passed by the West Bengal Legislative Assembly in August, 1952, this demand was more or less reiterated. The official representation which has now been made to this Commission on behalf of the Government of West Bengal is confined to a smaller area of about 11,840 sq. miles involving a population of about 5.7 millions. The West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee on the other hand claims at present an area of about 13,950 sq. miles involving a population of about 6.7 millions.

674. Our recommendations relate to two bits of territory which have been mentioned in every claim during the last seven years; and even in these two cases, they are confined to areas, the transfer of which can be regarded as absolutely essential. The proposals

which we have made will involve the transfer only of an area of about 3812 sq. miles and a population of about 1.7 millions. This is roughly about one-fourth and one-third of the area and population which have now been claimed in Bihar by the West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee and the West Bengal Government respectively.

675. The redrawing of these boundaries has been one of the most difficult problems with which this Commission has been faced. We have tried to arrive at decisions which are in our opinion fair and equitable. We have been anxious to ensure, if possible, that the sterile and unfortunate controversies which have claimed a great deal of the time and energy of the leaders of Bengal and Bihar should be brought to an end as early as possible.

676. Our Chairman, Shri Fazl Ali, because of his long connection with Bihar, has not considered it desirable to concern himself with investigating and deciding the territorial disputes to which Bihar is a party.