ONE of Sheikh Mujib's closest friends before 1947, who remained close until 1971, was a relatively unknown maverick called Moazzem Ahmed Chowdhury. Born in Sylhet, he belonged to the Communist Party of India (CPI) and led its student wing there in the 1940s.

Seeing his promise, he was asked by the CPI to enter Muslim League ranks, which he did in Calcutta, and was soon a top student leader. He and his fellow worker never liked the Jinnah followers and were closer to Abul Hashim than any other. Sheikh Mujib, he mentions, always had the charisma of the supreme leader and everyone recognised that.

After the Calcutta riots of 1946, when Hindus and Muslims massacred each other at will in a proxy fight between the Congress and the Muslim League, all the hopeful illusions ended. The partition of Bengal became a fact of life, especially with Muslim Bengal who voted overwhelmingly for the Muslim League in the election of 1946. It was considered a vote for "Pakistan" -- a convenient political interpretation since nobody was sure what Pakistan stood for. Not even the stalwarts of Muslim Bengal who made sure the peasants voted for a state that would brutalise them.

When things settled down and partition became an unavoidable fact, Abul Hashim was shocked to find that there would be one Pakistan under the central Muslim League and not many Pakistans as the Lahore Resolution promised. Bengal's top leader H.S. Suhrawardy, who had sided with Jinnah in this one-Pakistan production, hoping for a seat in the central committee as a reward for his loyalty, ended up as his ally.

But even before Pakistan had officially come into being, a group of disgruntled young men of Bengal Muslim League met at the residence of Justice Masud in Calcutta and decided to fight to establish the independent country they thought the Lahore Resolution promised. Moazzem Ahmed Chowdhury took the lead, but there was no question about who they thought would be the leader when they planned and plotted:

"We thought that only Sheikh Mujib had the charisma to be the leader. He was stubborn and not always brilliant, but he had that quality which made people follow him."

The evil that bad marriages do

Most of us grew up with the idea that people became disillusioned with Pakistan after 1947 when it refused to recognise the national language, generating the events of 1952, and the economic denial throughout, leading to the "two economy" situation.

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This was, however, only half the story, because it doesn't say why the Pakistanis mistreated the Bengalis if they were part of the same state, journey, and dream. This idea of one monolithic Pakistan movement changes when one digs into the history of Bengal politics half a century earlier.

It seemed that there was an independent path of "independence" of what roughly translates into East Bengal/Bangladesh territory. It was somewhat confused but strong, and was articulated even before Pakistan came into being, drawing its strength from the words of the Lahore Resolution, which they believed promised several Muslim majority provinces and not one monolithic state.

Jinnah called this a typographical error, and had it changed in the book despite Abul Hashim's protest. Most leaders pinned their hope on the Lahore Resolution of March 23, 1940 calling for several "Pakistans," which many, including Bengali Muslim leaders, thought was what it said. It was even moved by a Bengali Muslim, the chief minister of Bengal, A.K. Fazlul Huq.

The political spasms of 1947 to 1971 drowned the memories that existed of the robust movement of an independent state that grew and then was slapped down by history. The people who were involved seemed to have a dual personality. They were let down by Pakistan in 1947, they knew, but had somehow hoped that the new state would do them right. But when that didn't happen, they were twice shocked.

Between 1940 and 1946, the scene had changed and the people were battling the central Muslim League and were talking of an independent "Eastern Pakistan," though without a high degree of specificity.

Yet, the "Muslim" sentiment was their ticket to power, so the Bengal Muslim League leadership never could be entirely free of the Muslim League tag which brought them to office in the 1937 elections, although there was a lack of identity with the aspirations and structure of the Urdu-speaking leadership favoured by Jinnah.

This was to cost them dearly as they shifted from one political leg to another, and history didn't wait for them to decide which was more comfortable. It decided itself, and suddenly they were tied in a very undesirable marriage called Pakistan. They thought they were going to get an independent land of their own; instead they were stuck with