

Partition, Politics, and the Quest for Bengali Identity: A Case of Barak Valley in South Assam

By

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The Partition of India into two dominions of India and Pakistan in 1947 is unquestionably the most remarkable event of the twentieth century which considerably shaped the destiny of South Asia. The Partition ushered in an era of independence for India and also left the country split into two dominions of India and Pakistan. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, expressed the jubilation of India's Independence in his *Tryst with Destiny* speech at the midnight of August 14, 1947. Thus, the Independence of India was a moment of celebration for majority of the countrymen. But for the people of the two provinces of Bengal and Punjab, the news of Partition was a nightmare. "Mountbatten's formula was to divide India but retain maximum unity. The country would be partitioned but so would Punjab and Bengal so that the limited Pakistan that emerged would meet both the Congress and the League positions to some extent."¹ Such a scheme of Partition undoubtedly exaggerated the misery of the people of these two provinces and their experiences were also discernible from the people of the rest of India. There were large-scale communal riots and an enormous scale of refugee migration which left a painful memory on the surviving generations. It had been estimated that "six to seven million Muslims moved from India to Pakistan and nearly eight million Hindus and Sikhs moved from Pakistan to India."² It was one of the largest population migrations in the history of the world. India's Partition historiography is replete with images that show the utter misery of people trekking for miles in bare feet to cross borders or to board overcrowded trains while carrying just a few ordinary belongings.

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Refugee Watch, 61 & 62, June & December 2023.

Partition Stalemate and the Case of Assam

It is well known that Lord Mountbatten's Partition scheme envisaged mainly a division of Bengal and Punjab on communal lines. But apart from these two provinces, there were two other areas which were directly affected by this scheme of Partition—Assam and North-Western Frontier Province. But the reference to these two areas is often underrated in Partition literature. With regard to Assam, Partition experience is mainly linked with the Sylhet Referendum. In fact, the Mountbatten Plan of June 3, 1947, clearly stated that “[t]hrough Assam is predominantly a non-Muslim province, the district of Sylhet which is contiguous to Bengal is predominantly Muslim...If it is decided that Bengal should be partitioned, a referendum will be held in Sylhet under the aegis of the Governor General and in consultation with the Assam Provincial Government to decide whether the district of Sylhet should continue to form part of Assam province or should be amalgamated with the new province of East Bengal.”³ Irony lies in the subsequent decision of holding a referendum in Sylhet when it was rather uncalled for. Sylhet was the part of Assam which was not subject of Partition at all. The Cabinet Mission proposed Assam to be included in Part-C territory but at the initiative of a delegation from Assam, Assam was placed in Part-A territory. Besides, Sylhet was the only district where a referendum was held while it was well known for its Muslim majority. But the referendum was made unavoidable. The strategy of the ruling Congress leaders of Assam was to sacrifice Sylhet to retain the demographic balance in favour of the Assamese. Soon “it was announced that Bengal and Punjab would be partitioned and the fortunes of the district of Sylhet in Assam as well as the North Western Frontier Province would be determined by separate referendums on the basis of existing electoral rolls of the Provincial Assemblies. On the pretext of not being sons of the soil, more than one and a half lakh Hindu tea garden labourers were disenfranchised in the electoral roll for the 1946 Assembly elections. Had they been allowed to vote and had only 40 per cent of them turned up for polling they could have turned the scale.”⁴ In another study, however, the number of delisted tea garden labourers was reported to be lesser. “All the tea garden labourers were not ‘Hindus’. Many were animists and followers of religions that had few links with ‘Caste-Hindus’...In Sylhet there was one labour constituency and there were 11,449 voters on the electoral roll in 1946.”⁵ The truth stands in between. Sylhet had 221 Tea estates with 197,272 tea garden labour population. “Of them only 30,502 living in 31 estates were taken into consideration for enumeration in 1946 and only 11,449 of them were found eligible as voters.”⁶ Needless to say that the referendum that followed on July 6 and 7, 1947, mandated the transfer of almost the whole of Sylhet. The Sylhet Referendum thus surely decided the fate of Sylhet but with many unresolved issues and questions that continue to haunt the politics of Assam and underlines a deep-seated division in the demography of the state. It is also true that Sylhet's merger with Pakistan created a void and an existential crisis for the Bengali speaking inhabitants of Barak Valley. Sadly, the impact of this sudden disruption of the history of Barak Valley was not extensively

deliberated upon and documented systematically. Barak Valley continues to be a land often ignored and alienated by the Brahmaputra Valley and the rest of India.

Rationale of the Study

Separation of Sylhet from Assam has a long-term effect on the politics and demography of Assam, particularly of Barak Valley which was an integral part of Surma Valley. In fact, Barak Valley lost its refuge with the disappearance of Sylhet from the map of India. Overnight the ideological, political, and cultural fabric of the region has been disrupted at the dictate of the then colonial masters and the ordinary residents have been compelled to reconcile with a destiny they would have never chosen wilfully. No one questioned the legitimacy of holding a referendum singularly in Sylhet. There was also not enough murmur about various missing links in the process of the referendum. But what is troubling is that there is not enough literature dealing with the impact of the Sylhet Referendum in the politics and socio-cultural life of Barak Valley. Most literature takes a comprehensive view of the impact of the Referendum in the lives of the Bengali population, their identity crisis, the complexities of *Sylheti* identity or the historical backdrop that precipitated the crisis. But no one adequately dealt with the question of the impact of the Sylhet Referendum in Barak Valley. The sudden disruption in the history of the region unquestionably left an unending existential crisis for the people inhabiting the region. How did the people of Barak Valley reconcile with this historical tragedy? What role did the political leadership play in doing damage control? How did Assamese ruling elite react? Did the incident permanently rob Barak Valley of its roots? The present study intends to add up certain disjointed facts and events and find answers to the questions posed. For the purpose of the present study, required data and information were collected primarily from non-archival sources, particularly oral narrations, books, journals, newspaper articles of yesteryears, autobiographies and letters of eminent figures of the then time. Primary sources like Cachar States Reorganisation Committee (CSRC) Report, Census data and inputs from academicians, people delisted in the National Register of Citizens (NRC), activists working for citizenship rights of people in the detention camps in Assam were also taken into account.

Understanding how the Sylhet Referendum has affected people's lives and politics in Assam requires more introspection than a general Partition narrative. This is due to Sylhet's complicated past. Before India was actually divided, Sylhet was going through the pain of separation. Hence, the secession of Sylhet during Partition renewed the fear of the loss of Bengali identity in Barak Valley. People who had to migrate from Sylhet to the Indian side in the aftermath of the Referendum were constantly referring to histories and memories of the lost land. They became the captives of an "imagined" identity. The Bengali residents of Assam took delight in remembering the life they had left behind in Sylhet. More than seven decades have passed since the

loss of Sylhet, yet this yearning is sustained, and it is not constrained by the allegiance to a nation state. The stigma of being an “outsider” inside their own country made the situation further worse for Hindu Bengalis prolonging in them the sense of uprootedness. Thus, when the Partition of Bengal and Punjab was a huge human tragedy which gradually calmed down with the identification with the nation state, the Partition of Sylhet remained an unfinished task in which people still feel that they did not get a fair chance to unite to Bengal due to the Partition of India and had to make peace with their destiny in Assam. The octogenarian Sylheti Hindus frequently reaffirm that the Partition has rendered us “captives” in a foreign land for all time. With a heavy heart and a fear of permanently losing their cultural identity, they felt powerless and had no choice but to stand behind Assam. Thereby, it makes sense to think of the Sylheti Hindus as one of the hyphenated “national” minorities and marginal groups that may or may not be a part of the nation but “never quite.”⁷ They have no place to call home, and their search for a “safer” place remains elusive.

Despite being akin to a “hyphenated” community, Sylheti Hindus remained firmly loyal to their national identity. No tribal or ethnic group, regardless of size, has remained untouched by a militant drive for nationhood in northeast India. But these rootless Sylheti Hindus were mostly devoid of such aspiration, with the exception of reiterating their demand for liberation from Assam in the initial years of Partition. This may be one of the reasons why they did not get enough mention in India's overall Partition story. India's Partition narrative is mostly focused on Bengal and Punjab. Their Partition tales fill up the spectrum in an incredibly strange manner while marginalising the narrative of the Sylhet Partition. It is crucial to remember that in Punjab and Bengal, Partition was the culmination of Md. Ali Jinnah's *Two Nation Theory* alongside the conspiracy of colonial masters, but in Assam, this dynamic was used to stir up ethnic and linguistic rivalry. The conspirators were not strangers. The communal divide was used as a perfect opportunity to expel Sylhet. The Hindu population of Sylhet had no choice but to leave the place, never again having the possibility to reunite with Bengal. For them, Partition is a reminder of their marginalisation in an independent nation rather than an actual event that occurred almost two centuries ago.

Nevertheless, the *Sylhetis* are not the lone victims of Partition. The Partition of Bengal/Sylhet has affected the life of many lesser known communities in the northeast of India. Sylhet was surrounded by the lands of Khasi and Jaintia that were partitioned along with Sylhet. The transfer of Mymensing, Comilla, and plains Tripura to Pakistan divided many other tribes of the region, most notably the Garos. Partition disrupted their habitat, their ancestral homes and divided the kinsmen between the two countries. “[T]he process of [P]artition also adversely affected a number of indigenous communities of colonial Assam such as the Khasi, Jaintia, Garo, Hajong, not to forget the Chakmas and the Reangs, to name a few. That apart, the process of [P]artition of 1947 was surely the last in the series of the colonial project of [P]artition as only about ten years before, in 1937, the process of administrative separation of Burma from India also generated disruptive trails.

The legitimi[s]ation of the borders between the two countries had a terrible destructive impact on cross-border cultural and connectivity linkages as in the case of the Radcliffe boundary.”⁸ There is no denying the fact that these communities have endured hardship on par with the Bengali victims of the Sylhet Referendum, but largely free of obstacles that could jeopardise their linguistic and cultural identities. They are not seen as illegal immigrants in the guise of victims. There is no disagreement with regard to their native status regardless of how and when they settled in various parts of northeast of India.

On the Question of Bengali Identity

Although Barak Valley in Assam is home to a number of ethnic and linguistic groups, the Bengali community makes up the majority of the population, accounting for 80.84 per cent of the total population.⁹ However, the question of identity of the Bengalis in Barak Valley continues to be a contentious and multifaceted issue that has persisted for decades, from the time of colonial rule to the present day. The demography of the Valley was redefined multiple times owing to the separation of Sylhet and Cahar (1874), Partition of Bengal (1905) and its annulment (1912), Sylhet Referendum (1947) and the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971). The Bengalis who settled in Barak Valley and migrated mainly following the Referendum have fought for decades to defend their own language and culture, unlike their brethren who shifted and settled in the Brahmaputra valley and accepted to hold on to their Bengali identity under the dominant Assamese language and culture. This is true of both the Hindu and Muslim Bengalis of Barak Valley, but more so for Hindus. As observed by Nagen Saikia, noted litterateur and General Secretary of Asom Sahitya Sabha, “[m]ost of the Bengalee Hindu settlers in Assam have been living with separate (Bengali) identity since the time of their forefathers in this land.”¹⁰ This struggle for cultural existence is unique to the Bengalis of Barak Valley and distinguishes them from many other communities who arrived earlier and settled in this region. As mentioned, the Bengalis who settled in the Brahmaputra Valley did not exhibit similar resolve and determination to secure their rights to language and culture and more or less reconciled with their situation for obvious reasons. While the Hindu Bengalis, who relocated in the Brahmaputra Valley, did not try to assert their Bengali identity, the Muslim counterpart generally compromised and did not reclaim their identity under the changed political reality of the state. This was evident in the first Census Report of independent India. “There is a striking increase in the percentage of people who speak Assamese in 1951 (56.7), which was only 31.4 per cent in 1931; there is an equally striking decrease in the percentage of people speaking Bengali which is only 16.5 against 26.8 per cent in 1931. With the solitary exception of Assamese, every language and language group in Assam shows a decline in the percentage of the people speaking the same. This entire decline has gone to swell the percentage of the people speaking Assamese in 1951.”¹¹ The assimilation of Bengali Muslims in the Brahmaputra Valley is now close to near completion. However, Barak Valley

resisted this trend of integration together notwithstanding occasional communal flare-ups that led to disruptions on Hindu-Muslim unity. Barak Valley continues to endure the secular legacy of the Surma Valley. Both the Hindus and Muslims of Barak Valley, in spite of the politics of polarisation, have resisted the forces that aimed to breach their Bengali identity successfully so far. Even today, both Hindus and Muslims continue to have a strong sense of loyalty to their Bengali roots, and they endured the pain of the Sylhet Partition together, albeit in a different way. Though divided by religion, they are not particularly separated in terms of their quest for Bengali identity. Of various linguistic minority groups in Assam, it is Bengali Sylhetis of Barak Valley who resisted and continues to resist the threat to their Bengali identity, although often unheard.

A Brief Overview of Barak and Surma Valley

Barak Valley today is located in the southern part of Assam. The region is named after the Barak River which flows through the states of Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram and Assam. The term “Barak Valley” was coined in the late twentieth century. At present, there are three administrative districts in Barak Valley, namely, Cachar, Karimganj, and Hailakandi. Out of these three districts, Karimganj was a sub-division of Sylhet District. Cachar was a Bengali-speaking district of the Bengal Presidency which was annexed to Assam in 1874 simultaneously with Sylhet. Hailakandi district of today was a Muslim majority sub-division of Cachar district before Independence. Sylhet district with Cachar formed the administrative unit called the Surma Valley Division prior to Sylhet Referendum. Following the Referendum and the Partition of the district of Sylhet, on the basis of the Radcliffe Award, a major part of Sylhet district was transferred to East Pakistan and only three and half *thanas* of Karimganj sub-division viz., Patharkandi (277 square miles), Ratabari (240 square miles), a part of Karimganj (145 square miles), and Badarpur (77 square miles) were integrated into Cachar district of Assam. After Independence, Cachar district had four sub-divisions: Silchar, Hailakandi, Karimganj, and North Cachar. In 1951, North Cachar was carved out and merged with the district of United Mikir and North Cachar Hills. Later, two other sub-divisions viz., Karimganj and Hailakandi were also separated from Cachar and declared as districts on July 1, 1983, and September 29, 1989, respectively. The geographical map of the old Cachar district was thus redrawn to give way to the landlocked “Barak Valley.” Historically all three districts of the present Barak Valley were part of the then Surma Valley and were inseparable neighbours of Sylhet.

The districts of Sylhet and Cachar, jointly known as the Surma Valley Division, constituted a Bengali speaking region of southern Assam since 1874. Numerical strength of Muslims was higher in Surma Valley. According to the 1941 Census Report, Cachar (3,862 square miles) had a total population of 641,181 of which 225,816 were Hindus and 232,950 were Muslims. On the other hand, Sylhet (5,478 square miles) had a total

population of 3,116,602 of which there were 1,892,117 Muslims and 1,149,514 Hindus.¹² In Assam “as a whole the Muslims are only 33.73 per cent as against the Hindus who are 41.29 per cent of the population. If we take the districts, then Sylhet is the only district in which the Muslims are 60.71 per cent of the population...The utmost that can be fairly claimed as a Muslim zone is the district of Sylhet, although a majority of 60.71 per cent can hardly be called an overwhelming majority.”¹³ Hence, the seed of future discord was latent in the demography of Surma Valley.

Referendum in Retrospect

Sylhet Referendum, although not quite talked about, is perhaps the most intriguing subtext of India’s Partition. After 75 years of Independence, the scar of the incident is fresh in the minds of the victims and their kith and kin are still in quest of a homogeneous status in Assam. The sense of estrangement of the people of Barak Valley is also latent in the incident of the Referendum. What did precipitate the separation of culturally rich, economically self-sufficient and politically vibrant “Sylhet” from Assam? As history goes back, Ahom ruled Assam for six hundred years before being briefly subjugated by the Burmese and annexed to British India. Between 1826 and 1832, colonial masters annexed Assam to Bengal Presidency. “The Burmese were finally forced to surrender their claim over Assam under the Treaty of Yandaboo, 1826. During the following decade and a half, the kingdoms of Jaintia, Cachar, and Assam along with their dependencies, and all the petty, independent tribal states of the Khasi Hills were annexed.”¹⁴ In 1874, Assam was made a Chief Commissioner’s province and to fill its revenue deficit, Bengali dominated Sylhet, Cachar, and Goalpara were separated from Bengal and attached to Assam. “To make it financially viable, the authorities, therefore decided, in September 1874, to incorporate into it the populous Bengali-speaking district of Sylhet, which, historically as well as ethnically, was an integral part of Bengal.”¹⁵ Hence, Sylhet, a prized land of the Bengal Presidency, was truncated from its parent land forever. Thus, the present “Barak Valley” which was an indispensable part of the Surma Valley had undergone the experience of partition twice—once in 1874 when Cachar and later Sylhet district was isolated from Bengal and again in 1947 when the Referendum resulted in the separation of Sylhet. The Sylhet Referendum was not merely one of the unfortunate incidents in human history that faded in time. The incident is a day-to-day reality for Assam’s sizable Bengali community and often resurfaces in the politics of Assam as a nightmare for Bengali speaking residents. The incident had a greater effect in Barak Valley since it altered the landscape and history of the region, leaving it landlocked and underdeveloped. There are explanations for the lasting effects of the incident. The genesis of Sylhet Referendum dates back to the late nineteenth century colonial rule. The union of Bengali inhabited Sylhet and Cachar districts to the new province of Assam was perceived with suspicion and angst by either side in Assam and Bengal. The people of the Brahmaputra Valley

staged several protests to express their resentment against Sylhet's amalgamation. There was fear of Bengali domination in jobs and tea plantation establishments. "In 1901, the total number of the population supported by 'professions' in Sylhet alone was 44,573, while the figure for the entire Brahmaputra Valley added up to only 27,517. When the province was re-constituted into a Chief Commissioner-ship in 1912, the number of literate persons in Sylhet alone was 132,495 against 144,584 in the whole of the Brahmaputra Valley. Again, English literates of that valley numbered 18,214 whereas Sylhet alone had 10,980."¹⁶ The intellectual divide between the then Assamese and Sylhetis had become the major bone of contention since the inclusion of Sylhet in Assam. Sylhet Referendum, unlike other areas, was more a matter of ethnic divide than a Hindu-Muslim question. The declaration of Bengali as the major language in schools and courts in Assam in 1836 added fuel to the fire. While Assamese were discontented, residents of Sylhet were also not happy. Sylheti aristocratic class sent a petition to the then Governor General in Council for reunion with Bengal, but their prayer went unheeded. The agitation for reunion with Bengal slowly acquired the character of a constitutional battle with the establishment of the Sylhet Peoples' Association and Sylhet-Bengal Reunion League in the 1920s. "Pamphlets were distributed throughout Sylhet to mobilise mass support. A massive conference was held to strategise and accelerate the pace of reunion. There were ongoing meetings, agitations and representations. Public opinion was mobilised to the hilt. While at Sylhet during this time, the first Governor of Assam, Beatson Bell, wrote to Viceroy Chelmsford pleading with him to retain Sylhet's revenue, education, and judicial system under Bengal [P]residency."¹⁷ The sentiment of the district in this regard was aptly explained by Archdale Earle, the Chief Commissioner of Assam, in the following words: "[t]hey (residents of Sylhet) wished to be spurred to higher things by contact with the advanced Bengalis and they lose by being pitted against the backward races of Assam. Inevitably, the district was convulsed by an unparalleled agitation."¹⁸ Thus, on the one hand, Sylhet was agitating to reunite with Bengal and on the other, the then leadership in Assam was trying to get rid of Sylhet. Lord Wavell, the Viceroy wrote in his Journal in 1946, that "Gopinath Bardoloi, the Congress Premier of Assam gave the Cabinet Mission to understand that Assam would be quite prepared to hand over Sylhet to Eastern Bengal."¹⁹ The Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) articulated in its Election Manifesto in 1945 that "[u]nless the province of Assam is organised on the basis of Assamese language and Assamese culture, the survival of the Assamese nationality and culture will become impossible. The inclusion of Bengali speaking Sylhet and Cachar and immigration or importation of lacs of Bengali settlers on wastelands has been threatening to destroy the distinctiveness of Assam and has, in practice, caused many disorders in its administration."²⁰ Perhaps Premier (Chief Minister of Assam) Gopinath Bardoloi was more interested to avoid Assam's grouping with Bengal than surrendering Sylhet. "In his discussions with the Cabinet Mission and Lord Wavell at Delhi, Gopinath Bardoloi had repeatedly emphasise[s] on this aspect of the question and said that Assam should not be included in the grouping with Bengal."²¹ In his letter to A.K. Chanda, the then

member of the Assam Legislative Council from Cachar, Bardoloi wrote, "I have become almost crazy with what the British Govt. and the Muslim League have done and I fear what Congress may do in respect of Assam, small and poor province do not seem to count anywhere...I am really in a grave fix not because I am afraid of either the Muslim League or the British Govt. but because of the fear that we might have to break away from the Congress."²² This letter implies that Bardoloi had been concerned about holding a referendum in Sylhet. In a discussion with Gandhi, Bardoloi somewhat expressed this ambivalence and attributed the divide on the majority attitude of two Valleys.²³ Thus, majority opinion on either side was not in favour of the integration of Sylhet to India. Amidst such a scenario, a referendum in Sylhet and its subsequent union with Pakistan became inevitable.

Dynamics of Demography

The demography of Sylhet also played an important role in its trajectory leading to the Referendum. For majority of the Muslim inhabitants of Sylhet, it was a calculated decision to vote and merge with Pakistan. But for the Hindu population of the district, it was a compulsion to vote against their Muslim counterpart. They were left with no alternative but to cede with Assam thereby giving up their long-sustained yearning to merge with more "advanced" Bengal. "Ironically, when the opportunity for a return to East Bengal (later East Pakistan) came in 1947, the Sylheti Hindus defended their right to remain in Assam/India while many Sylheti Muslims wanted to separate. When the referendum was held on July 6 and 7, the outcome was by and large consistent with the demographic composition of the district where Muslims had a numerical edge: 56.6 per cent of Sylhetis voted for joining East Pakistan and 43.3 per cent voted for remaining in Assam/India. Following this outcome most of the Sylhet district was ceded to East Pakistan."²⁴ But there was no absolute polarisation of electorates as is claimed often. "The circumstantial evidences suggest that a section of the Muslims must have voted for India...At least 0.74 [per cent] of the Muslims voted for India. It should, therefore, be presumed that 3,135 Muslims had voted for India"²⁵ It is pertinent to mention that the votes polled for India were 3,135 more than the total votes polled by the non-Muslims. But this minuscule variation in Muslim votes was not enough to turn the verdict in favour of India. Thus, "at the time of [P]artition, the Hindus and the Muslims of Assam were in two opposite camps led by the Congress and the League respectively. The nationalist Muslims, small in number, were hardly capable of influencing the politics of the province in any appreciable manner. In free India, the Sylhet Hindus became a community of refugees though for 73 years they were a major and often a deciding factor in Assam politics. The district became a 'sacrificial lamb' for the third time during the same period in the interests of Assam."²⁶ Over the next couple of years, large numbers of Sylheti Hindus from the surrendered parts of Sylhet began to move to the northeastern states of India,

especially to southern Assam, where they had established some interpersonal contacts in the period 1874–1947.

Sylhet Referendum and Unresolved Issues

Unfortunately, the Partition of Sylhet has failed to ease the anxiety of the ruling establishment. The consequence of the Referendum went as per the prophecy of Rohini Kumar Choudhury, the lone member of all-Assamese Bardoloi delegation. “He cautioned Bordoloi and other members not to do this mistake. The problem would persist but not the land.”²⁷ In no time, the apprehension of the leader became a reality. Large influx of refugees from Eastern Bengal has instead accentuated the fear of marginalisation of Assamese. Subsequent repressive policies of the leadership widened the fissures between the Assamese and the Bengalis. The results were the anti-Bengali riots of 1948, 1950, 1960, 1968, 1972 and 1980. The worst manifestation of the increasing Assamese-Bengali divide was seen during the language movement of 1961. The Bengalis of Barak Valley opposed the imposition of Assamese as the official language throughout Assam and defended their right to language at the cost of eleven martyrs. History repeated sooner than later in 1972 when the people of Barak Valley once again had to oppose the imposition of Assamese language at the College level at the loss of twin lives. The peak was reached with the commencement of the anti-foreigners agitation in Assam in the late’70s, also popularly known as *Bongal Kheda Andolan* (Expel Bengalis). Besides being categorically directed against the Bengali population, the character of the movement was evasive. At the time, the movement was initiated there was no real threat to Assamese identity. Threat was apprehended as the All Assam Student’s Union (AASU) and the Asom Gana Sangram Parishad (AGP) came up with the magic number of 45 lakhs foreigners in Assam, almost all of them of being Bengali. Agitation started and continued till the signing of the Assam Accord on August 15, 1985. The Accord under Clause 6 guaranteed all possible safeguards to Assamese language and culture. But the unease persisted. The result was the passing of the controversial Secondary Education Board of Assam (SEBA) circular imposing Assamese as a compulsory Language once again in 1986. Circular was withdrawn but at the expense of two more young lives and huge resistance from Barak Valley. Yet the onslaught on Bengali language and culture did not eclipse in Assam. At the end of the 54th Convention of *Asam Sahitya Sabha* in Hailakandi district of Barak Valley, Assamese playwright Satya Prasad Barua said, “[t]hey seemed to be convinced when I told them that they did not speak Bengali in their homes and that they actually spoke a language different from Bengali and this was what we might call Baraki language. I told them if they cultivated and developed this language, they would soon find out that it had more affinities with Assamese than Bengali.”²⁸ Needless to say that the spoken version of any language has many dialects. Just as the people of Barak Valley speak *Sylheti*, slightly dissimilar to elegant Bengali, Assamese also speak different dialects of *Asomiya* language. Thus, the identity crisis of Bengali population is latent in history

itself. For the time being it disappears to resurface with further strength. It is occasionally expressed in the statements of Assam Sahitya Sabha, at times in the pronouncements of AASU and sometimes in government decisions. In fact, the Sylhet Referendum left behind a plethora of issues like illegal immigration, NRC Exercise, identity movements, “D Voter” and citizenship conundrum. These are not isolated affairs rather very much connected with the Partition and its legacies.

Barak Valley Post-Referendum

The incorporation of Sylhet and Cachar in the political structure of Assam was not a natural act of redefining the territory of a state for administrative purposes. It was a conscious decision carried out through clear-cut political imposition. The question of historical, geographical, and cultural affinity of the people of either side was not at all addressed while forging the union of two alien lands. This political decision to combine Cachar and Sylhet with Assam affected the lives of millions of inhabitants and dislocated them from their roots forever. An existential crisis is born for the people of Surma Valley as they were apprehending the loss of their socio-cultural identity in the inhospitable situation of Assam. There was going on relentless agitation for reunion with Bengal in the districts of Sylhet and Cachar. However, the end of the colonial rule put an end to this struggle for the right of self-determination of the people of Surma Valley but at the loss of Sylhet. Sylhet, the darling of Surma Valley, had slipped to East Pakistan. Cachar district which had once been an important part of the Surma Valley became the lone Bengali stronghold in Assam. The Cachar district today with the remains of the then Sylhet constitute the present Barak Valley. Literature suggests that Sylhet and Cachar were closely related throughout the colonial era in terms of their cultural, linguistic, and political ties. The degree of interdependence between Sylhet and Cachar was so profound that all three Cachar leaders unanimously opposed the Assam Legislative Council resolution that recommended the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal in 1926. The reason was the sense of insecurity and the fear of *realized* *zed* on that Cachar might encounter without Sylhet. While opposing the said resolution, Maulavi Rashid Ali Laskar, a member of the Council from Cachar said,

As for the people of Cachar, these people have not migrated from the Assam Valley, they have not migrated from the hills, they have not dropped from heaven. The Cachar people are descendants of Sylhet...Their position is that they do not want to go to Bengal, their main object is to remain with Sylhet. If Sylhet remains they want to remain, if Sylhet goes to Bengal they want to go also. That is the opinion of Cachar. I represent not only my own constituency but I represent the opinion of the entire Cachar.²⁹

Ali's Observations aptly summarise the dilemma of Cachar. For Sylhet, reunion with Bengal was important but for Cachar concern was to remain

with Sylhet. But in two decades, Sylhet became a territory of East Pakistan. Cachar district lost its brethren and was realized overnight in Assam.

Quest for Separate Statehood

It was thus obvious that the people of Cachar (later Barak Valley) were unable to reconcile with the separation of Sylhet. They were grappling hard to accept the misery that this historical tragedy unfolded for them. Soon they realized that reunion with Bengal was not a realistic option as geography became the major obstacle after the Partition of Sylhet. To reconcile and live in Assam was also not a practical proposition. This might jeopardise the cultural identity of Bengalis. Hence, in 1948, in a mass convention of Congress, they demanded a separate state for south Assam as *Purbachal*. The idea was initiated in a mass Convention of the Congress party in April 1948. The Congress Working Committee of Cachar accepted the proposal of this separate homeland comprising Tripura, Manipur, and undivided Cachar in September of the same year. But the notion of a refugee idea did not allow the proposal to consolidate, although the Congress High Command theoretically accepted the scheme of *Purbachal*. Few years later, the Cachar States Reorganisation Committee (CSRC) and a few allied organisations submitted a memorandum to the three-member States Reorganization Committee (SRC) named “Purbachal Reconsidered” in April 1954. A note on the report of the CSRC was submitted to the Ministry of Home Affairs on October 28, 1955. This exhaustive document succinctly highlights the angst and agony of Bengalis of Cachar with evidences and also possible substitutes to Purbachal. To make out their case for a separate state, it is observed,

that the policy of Assamisation and, in the pursuit of it, of discrimination by the Government of Assam against the Bengalees, is highly detrimental to their political, economic, cultural and other interests, and creates that kind of estrangement of feeling and resulting conflict as act against the unity of India and its emotional integration, and ultimately, the stability and security of this region...Cachar is 77 [per cent] a Bengali speaking district and forms, with Tripura, a Bengali zone, on this part of [E]ast Pakistan, being formerly a cultural and geographical part of what is now West Bengal...The proposal for a separate State with Manipur, Lushai Hills, Tripura and Cachar, i.e. the smallest possible Purbachal—is the ‘only serious alternative to merger in Assam’ if Manipur agreed...Should Purbachal in any shape or form be thought impracticable or if Manipur and/or Tripura do not change their mind, we, the people of Cachar, will yet like to leave Assam and share the fate of Tripura whatever that may be...As the only surviving Bengali region on this side of East Pakistan, this area should not be surrendered again and made weaker to face a process of slow death, each in its turn, and in isolation.³⁰

However, the demand of the CSRC was not accepted by the SRC but the issues raised were carefully examined and while dismissing the claim of Purbachal, the SRC observed that,

the CSRC, itself recognises that this new State will be financially in deficit for quite some time. The proposed Purbachal will have an international boundary on three sides...Hence, substantial minorities speaking languages other than Bengali will be found in it, with the result that it will provide no real solution of the existing difficulties...It has been represented to us that the activities of the Assam Jatiya Mahasabha and the policies of the local government have not only not reconciled the Bengalis in this part of Assam, but have had quite the opposite result...It is difficult for us to believe that the arrangements which have been made adequately meet the needs of the Bengali-speaking population in this district, and in particular the problem of primary education in this area should receive early attention.³¹

Although the SRC did not recommend the creation of Purbachal, the movement for separate statehood continued. When the Bill for the adoption of Assamese as the official language was approved in the Assam Assembly on October 24, 1960, the district of Cachar exploded in agitation. "On January 15, 1961, in a joint conference of Congress Committees of Silchar, Karimganj and Hailakandi, demand for a separate administrative arrangement for Barak Valley was resonated once again. In 1967, Janamangal Parishad, a civil society organi[s]ation was created in Cachar to plead for separation from Assam. A memorandum for the Union Territory status of Barak Valley was submitted to the Union Government. A delegation of important political leaders and residents went to Delhi...When the then Home Minister K.C. Panth declared Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh as union territories, the Union Territory Demand Committee (U.T.D.C) was constituted in Cachar in December 1970."³² A Number of memorandums were submitted to the Government of India. Multiple visits were made by the delegation of the U.T.D.C to New Delhi. Talks were held but without any concrete result. "The union territory movement which was all along led primarily by the Bengali Hindu leadership of Cachar continued till the 1980s when it finally petered out. It was in July 1986 that the last memorandum on the issue was submitted to Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi by the Union Territory Demand Committee."³³ After that sporadic demands for statehood were heard before it fizzled out completely. A number of factors have contributed to the failure of Cachar statehood/union territory movement. The most important one was the lack of political support. The movement was primarily steered by civil society organisations at various stages. Demand for separate statehood never became an electoral issue in Barak Valley, and thus failed to pave the way for the birth of a regional political group. But this does not undermine the cause for which the demand was repeatedly made. The birth of a political party in the name of Barak Democratic Front (BDF) in a mass convention in Silchar on November 28, 2020, is evidence of the void that the movement's failure left behind. BDF is considered as the first regional party in Barak Valley and the primary goal of the party is to ensure a fair deal for Barak Valley. BDF is a political platform to protest against the "constant deprivation and discrimination that the people of Barak Valley are being subjected to by the Brahmaputra Valley."³⁴

Politics of Subversion

After Sylhet seceded and the idea of the “Surma Valley” was dissolved, political developments were much quicker and more unexpected in Cachar/Barak Valley. As long as Cachar was with Sylhet, the leadership in Assam was not in a position to meddle in the politics of this region. The Politics of “Surma Valley” had a distinctive character and was focussed mostly on All-India issues and separating Sylhet and Cachar from Assam. However, as soon as Sylhet separated, the political leadership in Assam became anxious to undermine the thriving political legacy of Surma Valley in Cachar. As a first move toward realising their plan, they decided to seize the Cachar District Congress Committee (DCC) and sever its link with the Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee (BPCC). It is important to note that the District Congress Committees in Sylhet and Cachar had been affiliated with the BPCC since 1919. On September 2, 1947, less than one month after India attained independence, the APCC convened an emergent meeting in Shillong and intimated that the DCC send a representative. Mahitosh Purkayastha, Assistant General Secretary of the DCC travelled to Shillong. About his interaction with the then General Secretary of the APCC, he writes,

Next day I met Shri Siddinath Sharma, the General Secretary of the A.P.C.C. He told me that they intended to move a resolution in the meeting of the A.P.C.C for the inclusion of Cachar District within A.P.C.C as they had received representation from many persons of Cachar District in this respect. I replied that we had no knowledge of any such representation and if any Congressmen of our district sent a copy of it to us...I wanted to see the copy of the representation they received but he replied that these were not in the file.³⁵

In light of this worrying development, the DCC, Cachar led by Upendra Shankar Dutta, held a meeting on September 13 to clarify their stand on the pitch of the APCC. It was observed in the meeting that,

[t]he Cachar DCC as also the people of the district has always been anxious to continue connection with the BPCC and the DCC or BPCC was never been consulted to express their views by the APCC and as such resolution dated 2.9.47 of the APCC on the subject was uncalled for and unconstitutional...hence be it resolved that this committee do hereby strongly protest against the resolution of the APCC and reiterate their views that the district of Cachar along with the part of Karimganj retained in Assam should remain incorporated with the BPCC as a separate zone.³⁶

But before the leaders of Cachar Congress could act accordingly, the Brahmaputra Valley leaders moved quickly to alter the leadership of Cachar Congress. In the next two years, nationalist Congress leaders of Cachar were sidelined to be replaced by the APCC’s nominated members. Many of them were the erstwhile leaders of the Muslim League. For example, Moinul Haque Chowdhury, who is considered the pioneer of modern Barak Valley, was the General Secretary of the Youth Front of Muslim League. “In 1950, he joined

Indian National Congress and became a member of the Assam Legislative Assembly in 1952 and later Cabinet Minister in 1962.²³⁷ This was not a unique case. Many with no background in Congress were encouraged and appointed to various posts in Cachar Congress. It was thus obvious that the leadership in Cachar in the years following the Partition was not really competent to manage the difficult issues like rehabilitation of refugees, providing livelihood to millions of homeless, combating the imperialistic design of the Assam Government or guiding the dislodged people in the right direction. Leadership crisis that was seeded in the politics of Barak Valley at the onset of Independence had an enduring impact on the future of this region. The backwardness of the place lends credence to this claim. The lead for any movement or initiative to meet the aspirations of the people of Barak Valley was always provided by a non-political forum, be it the movement to preserve Bengali language or culture or the call for a separate state or the demand for a central university. There are many instances to show how political leadership has fallen apart when the needs of the people were at their worst. Following the failure of the Congress leadership to lead the language movement of 1961, the *Cachar Gana Sangram Parishad* took the lead. In 1972, when Gauhati and Dibrugarh universities decided to switch over to Assamese language at the college, the students and teachers of Barak Valley took the lead to build pressure on the government to roll back their decision. The Movement for the establishment of a central university was also initiated and led by *Cachar Shiksha Sangrakshan Samiti* and later by All Cachar, Karimganj, Hailakandi Students' Union (ACKSHA). The issue of backwardness or ongoing attacks on the language and culture of the people of Barak Valley did not find a suitable political voice until the founding of the BDF. However, the BDF since its formation as a political party is trying to lay out its political base on issues of deprivation and existential crisis of the region. So far, Partition has neither allowed the politics of this place to assimilate with Assamese political culture nor to retain the legacy of pre-Partition days.

Conclusion

The preceding exercise was not intended to invoke the bitter memory of the past. Instead, it aims to provide the complex historical trajectory that has shaped the relations between Barak Valley and Brahmaputra Valley. Both the regions remained juxtaposed in their contrast histories of anguish and struggle. The history of Bengali domination in Assam, followed by their subsequent marginalisation has remained to be the major source of contention between Bengalis and Assamese. As a result, until now the tale of two valleys has evolved in two different directions, without one being the counterpart of the other. But there have been overt attempts to bridge the gap under the current and the preceding political regime of Assam. This may be because the present political establishment in Assam is attempting to redefine the state's long-standing ethnolinguistic nationalism with religious nationalism. Regardless of the underlying dynamics, under the current regime of Chief

Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, the development of Barak Valley was given priority. He also visited the region a number of times after assuming the office of the Chief Minister in May 2021. In September 2021, Assam Chief Minister started his Durga Puja celebration by offering prayers in the famous Kachakanti temple of Silchar in Barak Valley. During the devastating flood of June 2022, the current Chief Minister visited Barak Valley a number of times. Under his Chairmanship, the first-ever three-day meeting of the Assam Cabinet was held in Barak Valley in Silchar in November 2022. He was also very magnanimous in acknowledging the significant contribution of Bengalis to the growth of language, culture and literature in Assam and recalled Tagore's visit to Assam in a recent conference of the Assam Bengali Youth Students' Federation in Silapathar in Dhemaji district. Such initiatives and statements are designed to strengthen the togetherness of the two Valleys. However, the language of unity needs to be echoed not just in political dispensation but also outside of it. After all, a certain degree of disassociation from the past and identification with the present is imperative for a stable and peaceful Assam.

Notes

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