

Remembering Sylhet: A Forgotten Story of India's 1947 Partition

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Studies of India's Partition have been focused on the cases of Punjab and Bengal, but very few have been based on the site of partition in colonial Assam, "Sylhet". Urgent attention is required to record the historiography of partition in Sylhet as many of those who had experienced the phase of partition are more than 80 years old now.

This article is part of a larger study 'Where Is Sylhet? Hindu and Muslim Voices from a Forgotten Story of India's Partition' that has been supported by a postdoctoral grant from SEPHIS, International Institute of Social History, The Netherlands. The author thanks Khaleda Sultana Ahmed for her valuable fieldwork support for this project.

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Despite major methodological strides¹ made in recent years, most studies of India's 1947 Partition continue to remain focused on the two better-known cases of Punjab and Bengal. Remarkably little is known about other partition sites – the Sylhet district of colonial Assam, for instance – which was ceded to (East) Pakistan following the outcome of a referendum held on July 6 and 7, 1947 according to Mountbatten's partition plan of June 3, 1947. Besides a small Hindu pocket consisting of Ratabari, Patherkandi, Hailakandi and half of Karimganj thana, the rest of the district left Assam/India to join East Pakistan. Sixty years afterwards, the stories of such lesser known partition sites face the danger of being overlooked and forgotten by what may be called "mainstream" partition historiography unless documented without delay. Because oral history uses spoken sources, even in the absence of written documentation oral historians are able to document the histories of groups which have long been out of historical focus.

Given that the people who can remember and retell the story of the 1947 Sylhet partition, are more than 80 years old now, this task assumes even greater urgency.

Eastward towards Assam

Of late, historians in south Asia have been using non-traditional sources like memories, folk history and popular fiction to shed new light on the experiences of ordinary people whose lives were thrown into turmoil by the 1947 Partition. Their studies have helped flesh out the heterogeneity and the unevenness in the experience of Partition and generated a debate among academics. But in spite of vast and rich research, this "new" history still falls short of providing a wide-ranging view of the local nuances of Partition of India due to its near exclusive focus on Punjab and Bengal. Against this background, it may be interesting to turn the lens further east and north of Bengal, to look at a third site of partition, the district of Sylhet in the erstwhile colonial province of Assam.

Assam was little known in British India except for its tea production but which eventually became included in Jinnah's demand for a six-province Pakistan.

A Background

Sylhet, a Bengali-speaking district historically a part of East Bengal, was joined with its Assamese-speaking neighbour Assam in 1874 by the British who wanted

to make the latter province “economically viable” and self-sustaining. For several years afterwards, the Hindus of Sylhet demanded for a return to the more “advanced” Bengal, whereas the Muslims of Sylhet by and large preferred to remain in Assam where its leaders, along with the Assamese Muslims, found a more powerful political voice than they would have had if they returned to a Muslim-majority East Bengal. The indigenous Assamese too supported the separation of Sylhet from Assam for the entire period from 1874-1947 as the Sylhetis – or inhabitants of Sylhet – with their earlier access to English education were seen as competitors for jobs, and as exercising a cultural hegemony over an incipient Assamese middle class trying to come into its own under the aegis of British colonialism since 1826.

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.

Over the next few years, large numbers of Sylheti Hindus from the ceded parts of Sylhet district began to relocate to the Indian north-east, particularly to southern Assam, where they had established considerable economic and social networks in the period 1874-1947.² Over time there emerged a de-territorialised Sylheti identity in Assam/India, as Sylhetis formed pockets of minority groups – despite considerable indigenous opposition to refugee settlement – giving rise to powerful

identity politics in post-colonial years. In spite of being challenged by assimilative drives from time to time, festering citizenship issues, and the loss of a firm territorialised identity, Sylhet and Sylheti-ness continue to be recreated in many social, cultural and political forms in different parts of north-east India, particularly Assam, which remains today home to a large Sylheti settlement.

The Indian Sylheti Identity

The 1947 Sylhet referendum and partition was the defining moment of the (Indian) Sylheti identity for two reasons.

First, it marked the fracture of the Sylheti identity into at least two: the East Pakistani (since 1971, ‘Bangladeshi’) and the Indian Sylheti. The Bangladeshi Sylheti identity is commonly associated with Muslims from the Sylhet division of modern Bangladesh who claim to be ethnically and culturally separate from other Bengalis in Bangladesh. The Indian



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Sylheti identity, on the other hand, is little understood or recognised outside north-east India and it is associated primarily with the Hindus from both the ceded and the retained parts of erstwhile Sylhet district and who sometimes claim, ironically, to be a part of the greater Bengali diaspora ('probashi bangali') in post-colonial India.

It was also the beginning of a minoritised and de-territorialised Sylheti identity in post-independence India. The partition of Sylhet drastically reduced the number of Bengali-speaking Sylhetis in Assam, compared to the colonial times "when to the population of Sylhet one adds the number of Bengalis who immigrated to Assam, there were more Bengalis in Assam than Assamese" [Baruah 1990]. Secondly, even the official name of "Sylhet" was retained by East Pakistan/Bangladesh. The small Hindu pocket that remained with Assam/India was subsumed within Assam's Cachar district and

thereafter "Sylhet" altogether disappeared from the map of independent India. While Indian Sylhetis gradually learnt to associate themselves territorially with "Karimganj", "Shillong" or "Silchar", or simply "Assam", their imagined identity remained tied to Sylhet in many different ways. Thus, many little Sylhetis, standing uncertainly between a real and imagined identity, were recreated in different parts of north-east India over time.

Sylhet Partition Nuances

The Sylhet partition story has its own nuances: Firstly, none of the academic or popular works contain any direct references to major outbreaks of communal violence in Sylhet during or after the referendum. This is in striking contrast with the literature on Punjab and Bengal partitions, which are replete with accounts of communal violence, betrayals, forced migration, rape, abduction, etc. There are intermittent

references to communal tension, fears, petty criminal activities and rumours, but none of the Hindu-Muslim riots/clashes that one has come to associate with the Punjab and Bengal cases. Admittedly, some studies of the Bengal partition also point out that some of the migration was caused by a perception of, rather than actual, violence. Others suggest that some of it was caused by economic dislocations that made older patterns of livelihood untenable, yet references to sporadic violence in any such study are inevitable. In contrast, the absence of any direct mention of communal violence in Sylhet makes it an interesting topic for future research.

Secondly, a significant number of the Sylhetis who migrated to Assam/India soon after the referendum were exceptions to the general image people carried about India's Partition in 1947. They were English-educated "optees"³ or government personnel who were given the

opportunity to opt for transferring their service either to India or Pakistan at the time of Partition. This is a category of Partition migrants that has not yet been extensively explored by historians.

Thirdly, while Punjab and Bengal were divided on the basis of religion, the Sylhet referendum was a vote not on one, but on two concentric issues of the reorganisation of India on a communal basis and of Assam on a linguistic basis. The second issue, writes Sujit Chaudhuri "...had its origins in what can be called the long-cherished quest of the Assamese – carving out a homogeneous province for themselves".⁴ The Assam branch of Indian National Congress was not totally opposed to handing Sylhet over to East Pakistan as a means of settling the old demand of the indigenous Assamese to separate the latter district from Assam.⁵

Fourthly, unlike Punjab, and to a lesser extent Bengal, there appears to a wide gap between the official and personal histories of Sylhetis. While Sylhet is recreated and relived in different ways in north-east India, Partition history remains surprisingly silent on this topic. A purely academic exercise of looking up the term Sylhet in some of the more authoritative Partition studies did not provide much information other than what might go into the writing of a footnote or two. Therefore, one may say that Indian Sylhetis have no history, only memories that are passed down by family elders in the confines of private spaces giving rise to a narrative of immediacy and intimacy with Sylhet, that the older generation lived with and transmitted to the younger generation [Bhattacharjee 2006, p 156].

An Imagined Sylhet

Contemporary Sylheti identity has been constructed through a reclaiming of Sylhetiness via folk songs, popular culture, historical and social narratives, writes Sukalpa Bhattacharjee [Bhattacharjee 2006, p 163]. Parents of marriageable Indian girls continue to claim on matrimonial web sites that "...we follow a traditional lifestyle basically of the value of Sylhet".⁶ Some of them go so far as to claim that "...our native place is Sylhet".⁷ A yearning for the lost homeland is also discerned in the storytelling within

Sylheti families "(my grandfather) told me stories of our native place, Sylhet" writes a Sylheti blogger in cyberspace. "Of his childhood there, of the fresh air and plentiful fish in Surma river. He told me about books and food and politics. He told me about the time Gandhi and Nehru visited Sylhet. There was a twinkle in his eyes as he described Subhash Chandra Bose's visit to our native home in Sylhet".⁸

This nostalgia or shadowy memory of the imagined homeland of Sylhet is also discerned in much of Amit Chaudhuri's writings, where memories of Sylhet, the lost homeland of his mother, are repeatedly evoked. In *A Strange and Sublime Address*, Shonamama recalls his own childhood in Sylhet "...when India was one big piece and the British ruled us", which was followed by a move to Shillong with its "mountains and waterfalls" [Chaudhuri 2001, p 53]. In *Freedom Song*, Mini remembers her childhood in Puran Lane in Sylhet in pre-Partition days. "The votes were counted after the referendum" writes Chaudhuri, "their country was gone...after two months they packed their things and took a train to Guwahati and then a bus to Shillong..." [Chaudhuri 2001, p 380]. Again, in an evocative article titled 'At the Edge of the Clouds', Chaudhuri writes that Shillong was the town to which "my mother and her family moved, just before Sylhet, first part of Bengal, then Assam, was lost to Pakistan with the referendum".

But this is not the only way in which Sylhet is continuously remembered and recreated in contemporary times. Sujit Chaudhuri argues that had there been no Partition, there would not have been any "foreigner issue in Assam".⁹ He goes on to say that the "foreigner issue", projected as a core question associated with the survival of the Assamese nationality has drawn its entire rationale from Partition. Sanjib Baruah too points out that "... the separation of Sylhet did not bring the tensions between Bengalis and Assamese to an end..." [Baruah 1990, p 43]. Thus the legacy of the past continued to lurk behind the third generation locally-born children of Sylhetis though in recent years much reconciliation has been achieved. Yet, a sense

of "rootlessness" sometimes persists, as Deb summarises the "identity crisis" of the Sylhetis in general in the following words:

They were defined not by what they were – that was uncertain – but by what they were not. They were Indians because they were not Bangladeshis, Hindus because they were not Muslims, Bengalis because they were not Assamese. They clung to their language fiercely, and yet they were not really Bengali, because they spoke a dialect that aroused only amusement and derision in the real centre of Bengali culture and identity, in Calcutta.

Thus, while Sylhet lives in innumerable ways in the daily lives of thousands of Indians, it is remarkable that a serious effort at writing its history has yet to be made. An article on the internet spells out the Sylheti paradox of remembering and forgetting its own history in these words:

The greatest paradox is that we being such a home-loving community, such rooted to our soil, such grounded with the ethos of the place but such deep, such unbelievable forgetfulness. Such a great lapse of memory, such wonderful epilepsy cannot be explained unless we take into consideration the fact this forgetfulness might have been one of the strongest factors of our survival, physically as well as culturally, it evades all explanations. None of our literature, none of our later stories speak about this cultural discontinuity and this silence, this

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inexplicable silence may be more resonating than a lingering sadness, orchestrated in prose, poetry or music.¹⁰

In Conclusion

Sixty years afterwards, such lesser known stories face the danger of being forgotten by mainstream Partition historiography. The custodians of Sylheti history – or, the eyewitnesses of the Sylhet partition – are, on an average, more than 80 years old now. Their accounts need to be urgently documented if one is to come close to a nuanced understanding of India's Partition. In the absence of professional historical research, Sylheti narratives continue to construct their own heroes and villains within the popular realm that may be at variance with what might hold sway in academic circles. Many Sylheti eyewitnesses themselves expressed the need for objective historical research to this researcher, who was often met with apologetic statements like "I am not a historian, but I will tell you what I remember..." In the absence of historians, one was advised to speak with retired Assam government officers from the 1940s and 1950s who would be able to tell the "real" story "because they were there on the ground". Some of the eyewitnesses remember hazily or choose not to discuss the issue at all. Many others have passed away, or have relocated to different parts of India and abroad to live with their children in the twilight years of their lives. If a history of Sylhetis is not documented urgently, no one will ever know what really happened in the 1947 Sylhet referendum and partition.

NOTES

- 1 This paper is part of an ongoing larger study. Therefore, only a few of the ideas developed by the researcher have been presented here.
- 2 There is evidence of smaller numbers of Muslims who migrated to East Pakistan from Assam.
- 3 Exchange of certain categories of state personnel between Pakistan and India was organised by allowing them to opt for a position in the other state. These "optees", who arrived at the time of Partition, took the place of counterparts who travelled the other way. They took charge of tasks at all levels and in all branches of government. Other displaced people joined the state on an individual basis. The influence of these newcomers on state formation and state policies in the three countries has, to our knowledge, never been studied, let alone compared <http://www.idpad.org/docs/Vol.%20I%20%20No.%201%20January-June%202003.pdf> accessed on 15/6/2007.

- 4 S Chaudhuri, 'A God-sent' Opportunity?', <http://www.india-seminar.com/2002/510/510%20sujit%20chaudhuri.htm> (2002) accessed on 15/2/2008. Paraphrased by author.
- 5 Lord Wavell, the viceroy, wrote in his journal as early as April 1946, that Gopinath Bordoloi, the Congress Premier of Assam, gave the Cabinet Mission to understand that "Assam would be quite prepared to hand over Sylhet to Eastern Bengal" (Wavell, the *Viceroy's Journal*, No 21, April 1, 1946, p 234, quoted from Amalendu Guha, *Planter-Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826-1947*, New Delhi, Peoples Publishing House (1977), p 319.)
- 6 bmsr.telugumatrimony.com/cgi-bin/viewprofile.php?id=B417467 accessed on 20/5/2007.
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- 9 Chaudhuri (2002), op cit.
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