

**Sylhet Referendum of 1947: A “forgotten” saga of Indian History****Nivedita Chakraborty, Department of History, Bethune College****Email Id [chakrabortynivedita9@gmail.com](mailto:chakrabortynivedita9@gmail.com)****Abstract:**

India has so far been experienced three referendums. But the history of Sylhet referendum was different from others in all respect. Colonization of Brahmaputra Valley by the English East India Company, followed by the immigration of non Assamese, regional politics, and controversy over language and ethnicity-all resulted in the referendum held on 6<sup>th</sup> & 7<sup>th</sup> July, 1947. The process of referendum was also a controversial one. Massive intimidation, irregularities were found on the occasion. The verdict of the referendum was in favour of the exclusion of Sylhet from Indian Union. Thus Muslim majority Sylhet was slashed out permanently and became a part of East Pakistan.

**Keywords:**

Referendum, Plebiscite, Line System, Migration, Cabinet Mission, Linguistic Nationalism, De-colonization. “Important decision that will affect a nation’s fate or humanity’s fate cannot be left to the referendums! Because such decisions require good knowledge of history; they required a sound reason and a powerful logic and masses do not have such characteristics!”

Mehmet Murat Ildan.

Referendums are common features in modern democracies which has a deep and far reaching consequences. It has a complicated legacy of success and failure throughout the history. Sometimes it upholds the power of common masses to get their legitimate rights and sometimes it legitimized the rule of the dictators. The first evidence of referendum came from Switzerland in the 13<sup>th</sup> century where common people expressed their opinion by raising their hands.

Indian subcontinent under the British rule has so far been experienced three referendums in 1947 just before the partition and transfer of power. They were-North-Western Frontier Provinces, Sylhet and Junagarh. Amongst them the Sylhet referendum produced a far reaching catastrophic result though passed into oblivion with the passing of time.

The case of Sylhet in 1947 was a curious one. Unlike the direct partition of Bengal and Punjab, it got the provision of a plebiscite out of the blue. Now the question is that why did Sylhet get this special treatment? The exclusion of Sylhet from Indian Union was not an independent incident. From the very beginning Sylhet has been regularly pin ponged by the British between Assam and Bengal. Colonialism and introduction of the capitalistic economy had a huge impact there. Being a part of global polity as well as economy many changes took place. So the question of Sylhet was very much intertwined with these changes and internal tensions of Bengal and specifically of Assam. Thus to get the answer we need to explore the ethnic history of Assam as well as the trine between Colonialism & National politics, ‘Communalism’ and linguistic nationalism

Now in Bangladesh, Sylhet was a Muslim majority province within a Hindu majority Assam, then. Sylhet (Srihatta/ Shilhatta) occupies the lower valley of the Barak or Surma river bounded on the north by the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, on the east by Cachar, on the south by hill Tippera and the west by the districts of Tippera and Mymansingh.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately very little is known about the early history of Sylhet. It was the birth place of great Vaishnava saint Chaitanya and Advaita.<sup>2</sup> It was ruled under the kingdoms of Harikela and Kamrupa. Then Sylhet was under the Sena and Deva dynasties in the early medieval period.<sup>3</sup> In the 14<sup>th</sup> century Sylhet was conquered by Shamsuddin Firoz Shah of Bengal.<sup>4</sup> Under the Mughals, Sylhet became a 'Sarkar' of Bengal Subah, governed by an Amil. Sylhet along with rest of the Bengal (Kingdoms of Manipur, Assam & Cachar Plains) came under the Control of English East India Company in 1765 after the grant of Diwani of Bengal.<sup>5</sup> Since then Assam became an extended part of Bengal Province. But this sparsely populated areas were not economically profitable for the Company. So they paid little attention towards these region. But the Burmese invasion (1817-1824) has changed the scenario and the British were forced to take an interventionist policy there. Finally, they reconquered the lost territories from the Burmese by signing the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826.

Globalization had its impact on Assam. With the British occupation, Assam became a part of capitalist economy. Apart from Burmese invasion, tea plantation was a major reason behind the interventionist policy of the Company. The Brahmaputra Valley had an abundance of cultivable wastelands. With the discovery of tea in 1821, Company took serious measures to utilize those lands. But tea was not the only commodity to attract the colonizer. Oil and coal fields were also the reason of British intervention in Assam. Thus in late Nineteenth century Assam witness an enormous economic dynamism. Amalendu Guha describes this economic revolution of Assam as "a big push without takeoff."<sup>6</sup>

The economic transformation also had its impact on the demographic composition of Assam. The colonial masters encouraged the immigration for tea plantation, road and railways building. As the density of population was very low in Brahmaputra Valley, particularly in Assam, the Company brought non Assamese, especially from Bengal to run the administration as well as the plantation industry. The influx of non Assamese population was phenomenal. Most of the earliest immigrant middle class Bengalis were from Sylhet. Apart from Bengalis, Muslims, Marwaris and Biharis also entered there and taking advantage of the economic expansion.<sup>7</sup> The Marwaris played an important role in Assam's economic transformation. They played a vital role in the capitalist transformation of Assam by making it from a non-monetized economy to a market economy. According to the **Bengal Administrative Report** for the year 1867-68, of total labour force of 34,433 in Assam proper, 22,800 or 2/3<sup>rd</sup> were imported labour.<sup>8</sup> The following table highlighted the influx of migrated labour forces from different parts of India to Assam.

Labour Forces from elsewhere

United Province	44,169(28%)
Other Parts of Bengal	22,067(15%)
Chotanagpur	22,745(16%)
Central Provinces	12,681(9%)
Madras	10,079(7%)
Total	144,876

**Source:** “The ‘hut’ and the ‘axe’: The 1947 Sylhet referendum”, Bidyut Chakrabarty in India Economic and Social History Review, 39, 4 (2002), Table-5.

According to the 1901 Census Report of India as many as 5.97 lakh people were brought into Assam in the preceding decades. These influx was the result of a well thought plan of the Colonial masters. In order to run the administration and economy smoothly, the help of Bengali professionals and Marwarishs were indispensable. So they encouraged the migrations as well as the use of Bengali language. Thus from 1836 to 1871 the Assamese language has been suppressed.<sup>9</sup>

On 6<sup>th</sup> February 1874 British Government decided to form a Chief Commissioner’s Province by taking Assam proper, Cachar, Goalpara, Garo Hills together. To make these area “financially viable”, the authority decided to incorporate Bengali speaking Sylhet district with it. Sylhet was the most populated area in the newly created province and Sylhetis were the most educated population with some western knowledge. Thus they were getting an advantageous position than the Assamese in the field of job. But it became a reason of tension among the Assamese and Bengali Hindu and Muslims migrated there. “When the then fledging Assamese middle class came to be their own, having acquainted themselves with the colonial way, they quite predictably came to consider the Hindu Bengali migrants from Sylhet, who had, by then come to have a stranglehold on the colonial bureaucracy’s ranks and files, thereby its local-level power structure ,as their usurpers and bitter rivals. This divide would prove pivotal in many crucial turns of history of the region in the years that followed.”<sup>10</sup> This middle class contest for job soon transformed into a linguistic nationalistic rivalry.It was not until the early 1870s, Sir George Campbell, Lieutenant Governor of Bengal conferred the Assamese language the status of a separate language different from Bengali.<sup>11</sup> So Sarveswar Barua rightly put it that,”...the line of division in Assam politics, is primarily not between Hindu and Muhameddan or on caste lines, but between the inhabitants of the Assam Valley and those of Surma Valley.”<sup>12</sup>

Since then Sylhet was regularly tossed between Bengal and Assam. Bengali speaking Hindu and Muslim, both protested against this unjust and whimsical decision and submitted a memorial to the Viceroy on 10<sup>th</sup> August 1874. A series of articles were published in **Hindoo Patriot** to ventilate the public fury.Kristodas Pal wrote that, Sylhet was a golden calf which was sacrificed for the new idol, the Assam Province.<sup>13</sup> **Hindoo Patriot** observed, “The people of Sylhet, it seems,

cherish almost the same feeling on the subject of annexation of their district to Assam that people of Alsace-Lorraine did on the absorption of their country by Germany. But that grievous wrong has been remedied now through bloodshed. I hope our wrong will be remedied through more peaceful means.”<sup>14</sup> Despite all these things Sylhet was incorporated into the Chief Commissioner’s Province on 12<sup>th</sup> September 1874. The newly formed Chief Commissioner’s Province comprised of –A) Preliterate hills districts (speaking diverse language), B) Assam Proper (five Assamese speaking districts), C) Goalpara (Bengali & Assamese culture overlapped), D) Surma Valley-Sylhet & Cachar (Bengali speaking districts).<sup>15</sup> Sylhet was thus slashed out from Bengal for next thirty years. J.B Bhattacharjee, a famous Bengali historian termed the incorporation of three Bengali speaking districts as “the first partition of Bengal.”<sup>16</sup>

In 1905 during the partition of Bengal a new province was created under the name “East Bengal & Assam” with Dacca its capital. So Sylhet became a part of Bengal once again. But in 1912 partition of Bengal was annulled. Assam was reconstituted as a separate province and once again Sylhet was added to it. But this created a volcanic eruption of public fury. The lawyers, Zamindars submitted a petition to Lord Hardinge. But nothing has changed. Even Rabindranath Tagore expressed his sadness when he visited Sylhet on November, 1919. He addressed Sylhet as “sribhumi” and wrote -

- “মমতাবিহীন কালস্রোতে
- বাংলার রাষ্ট্রসীমা হোতে
- নির্বাসিতা তুমি
- সুন্দরী শ্রীভূমি।”<sup>17</sup>

In 1920 **Sylhet Reunion League** was formed by Brojendra Narayan Chowdhury to protest against the merger of Sylhet with Assam and to retain the ‘Bengali’ identity of the Sylhetis. In a resolution in August 1924, he said that, “the indigenous population (of Sylhet) speaks Bengali, belong ethnologically to the Bengali race, have the same manners, customs and traditions and thoughts as their brethren in Bengal.”<sup>18</sup> On the other hand **Jorahat Sarbajanik Sabha** demanded the exclusion of Sylhet from Assam as they were seeking for their own ‘homeland’ based on language.<sup>19</sup> Provincial Congress Committee of Assam was founded in 1921 by taking only the Assamese speaking districts of Brahmaputra Valley. Bengali Speaking districts of Surma Valley (Sylhet & Cachar) and Barak Valley remained with the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee.<sup>20</sup> Apart from the “Assamese or Bengali” language dialect, another issue came on the surface in the 1920s which gave a communal colour to the entire situation. In 1920s the upper class Muslims became very powerful in the province. It was very obvious as from 1870s the influx of Muslim population was ever increasing, even they surpassed the Hindus of Assam. The following table exhibit the high rate of migrated Muslim population in Assam.

Districts	Hindus				Muhammadans				Hill Tribes	
	1872	1881	In-crease	Per-cent	1872	1881	In-crease	Per-cent	1872	1881
<b>Cachar</b>	128,219	186,657	58,438	45.57	74,361	92,393	18,032	24.25	1,989	9,570
<b>Sylhet</b>	859,234	949,353	90,119	10.49	854,131	1,015,531	161,400	18.89	6,015	8,708
Surma Valley	987,453	1,136,010	148,557	15.04	928,492	1,107,924	179,432	19.32	8,004	13,278
<b>Goalpara</b>	311,419	344,938	33,519	10.76	89,916	108,912	18,996	21.13	6,214	11,712
<b>Kamrup</b>	515,024	569,906	54,882	10.65	45,823	50,452	4,629	10.1	448	23,525
<b>Darrang</b>	221,389	251,838	30,449	13.75	13,859	15,504	1,645	11.86	108	4,852
<b>Nowgong</b>	245,615	249,710	4,095	1.58	10,066	12,074	2,008	19.94	207	48,478
<b>Sibsagar</b>	282,969	339,663	56,694	20.03	12,619	15,665	3,046	24.13	565	13,829
<b>Lakhimpur</b>	115,638	152,190	36,552	31.60	3,826	5,824	1,998	52.24	992	16,382
Brahmaputra Valley	1,692,054	1,908,245	116,191	12.54	176,109	208,431	32,322	18.36	8,534	118,778
Total of Plains Districts	2,679,507	3,044,255	364,748	13.61	1,104,601	1,316,355	211,754	19.17	16,538	132,056

Source: Report of the Census of Assam for 1881, Calcutta, 1883, p- 35

Most of the Muslim immigrants were from the Mymensingh districts. The following Table showing the influx of Muslim population to Brahmaputra Valley.

Districts	1911 Bengal ( Mymensingh)	1921 Bengal ( Mymensingh)	1931 Bengal ( Mymensingh)
Goalpara	77,000 (34,000)	1,51,000 (78,000)	1,70,000 (80,000)
Kamrup	4,000 (1,000)	44,000 ( 30,000)	1,34,000 ( 91,000)
Darrang	7,000 (1,000)	20,000 (12,000)	41,000 ( 30,000)
Nowgong	4,000 (1,000)	58,000 (52,000)	1,20,000 (108,000)
Sibsagar	14,000 (Nil)	14,000 (Nil)	12,000 (Nil)
Lakhimpur	14,000 (Nil)	14,000 (Nil)	19,000 (2,000)
Total	120,000 (37,000)	301,000 (172,000)	496,000 (311,000)

**Source:**

A Study of Migration from Bangladesh to Assam, India and its impact- Madhumita Sharma, March 2015, P- 13

Immigrants from Mymensingh were taking refuge basically in Barpeta and Nowgong subdivision. The Census Commissioner of 1911 Census warned about this steady infiltration, “..... a peaceful invasion of Assam by the advancing hordes of Mymensinghia army.....”<sup>21</sup> From 1913 the Assamese were trying to seek the attention of the colonial authority regarding this problem. In 1916 the Government introduced the “**Line System**” to check the influx. Under Line System the villages in Nowgong were divided into four categories- A) exclusively occupied by immigrants, B) exclusively reserved for Assamese, C) mixed villages in which there both immigrants and Assamese, and D) line villages in which a line has been drawn on the Assamese side of which no immigrant was allowed to settle.<sup>22</sup> Assamese public opinion against this immigration issue has been represented by **Asamiya Samkarshini Sabha**. In 1925 **Assam Association** pleaded the government to stop the immigration.<sup>23</sup> But the colonial government was not ready to implement the Line System to entire Brahmaputra Valley as it would hampered their economic interest. The ‘independent’ Muslim members of council also support the Government. Maulavi Keramat Ali of Sylhet opined that, “it would be committing suicide to stop settlement of land

A- YES VOTE			B-NO VOTE		
Serial No	Name	Identities	Serial No	Name	Identities
1.	Rai Bhadur Amarnath Ray	Hindu	1.	The Hon'ble Khan Bahadur	Muslim
2.	Rai Bhadur	Ditto	2.	Kutubuddin Ahmed	European
3.	Bipin Chandra Deb Laskar	Ditto	3.	The Hon'ble	Ditto
4.	Rai Sahib Har	Ditto	4.	Mr. J.E Webster	Ditto
5.	Kishore Chak- rabatti	Ditto	5.	Mr.A.W . Botham	Ditto
6.	.Babu Brajen- dra Narayan	Ditto	6.	Mr. G.E. So- ames	Ditto
7.	Chaudhuri	Ditto	7.	Mr. O.H. De- senne	Assamese
8.	Babu Gopen- dralal Chud- huri	Ditto	8.	Mr.J. R . Cun- ningham	Muslim/Planter
9.	The Hon'ble	Ditto	9.	Mr.W.C.M. Dundas	European/Planter
10.	Rai Bahadur Promode	Ditto	10.	Srijut Nilmoni	Muslim
11.	Chandra Dutta	Ditto	11.	Phukan	Native Christian
12.	Babu Krishna Sundar Dam	Ditto	12.		Muslim
13.			13.		

14.	Babu Kshirod	Ditto	14.	Maulavi Dewan Muhammad	Muslim
15.	Chandra Deb	Ditto	15.	Wasil Chaud- hury	Ditto
16.	Babu Briaj Mohan Dutta	Ditto	16.	Rev. J.C. Evans	European
17.	Srijut Kamak- hyaram Baruah	Ditto	17.	Khan Bhadur	Ditto
18.	Srijut Kamala Kanta Das	Muslim	18.	Abul Fazal Ahmed	Ditto
19.	Srijut Ma- hadeva Sarma	Ditto		Rev. James Mohan Nicolas Roy	
20.	Srijut Bishnu Charan Borah	Ditto		Maulavi Rashid Ali Laskar	
21.	Mr. Taraprasad Chaliha	Ditto		Khan Bhadur Alauddin Ah- med Chaudhuri	
22.	Srijut Rohini Kanta Barua	Ditto		The Hon'ble Maulavi Syed Mohammad Sadaulla	
	Srijut Kuladhar Chaliha			Mr. E.S. Roffey	
	Srijut Sa- danada Dowerah			Mr.M.H.Clarke	



	Maulavi Abdul Hamid			Mr. E>A.A.Joseph	
	Maulavi Dewan Abdul Rahim Chaudhuri				
	Maulavi Abdul Hannam Chaudhuri				
	Maulavi Muhammad Moudabbir Hussain Chaudhuri				
	Maulavi Nazmul Isalm Chaudhuri				

Source: **Historical Globalization and its Effects: A study of Sylhet and its people, 1874-1971, Ashfaq Hossain, University of Nottingham, Demember, 2009, pp-11-12**

with immigrants as they had brought with them a harder and improved method of cultivation.”<sup>24</sup>

The chance of a Muslim majoritarian rule gained its ground gradually in Brahmaputra Valley. They simultaneously thus opposed the strict enforcement of Line System as well as the demand of reunion of Sylhet to Bengal. Muslim leaders like Khan Bahadur Aluddin Chowdhuri, Maulavi

Dewan Wasil Choudhury claimed that Muslims of Sylhet district were against its reunion with Bengal. In 1924, August a vote was conducted in Assam Legislative Council which demonstrated the apathy of the Muslim on the question of Sylhet's reunion with Bengal.

These two tables show that ten Europeans and six Muslims were against the inclusion of Sylhet to Bengal. Though the Hindu members and five Muslim, members voted in favour. But very soon these Muslim members under Hindu leadership lost their interest in 'back to Bengal' movement.<sup>25</sup>

By 1930s the situation was further aggravated. Two opposite tendencies were found there. Assamese under the leadership of **Asamiya Samkarshini Sabha** vehemently protested against the immigration. Janananath Bora in **Dainik Batori** published an article in which he opined that only separation of Bengali majority Sylhet from Assam, recognition of Assamese language and banned on migration would save Assam's future.<sup>26</sup> Chandradhar Barooah in his note submitted to Indian Round Table Conference 1931, demanded the redistribution of Assam on linguistic basis.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand Muslims under their budding leader Muhammad Saadulla opposed the demand of exclusion of Muslim majority Sylhet from Assam. He was supported by many Muslim leaders like

Abdul Motin Chowdhury. Saadulla's logic was that, "If we allow Sylhet to go, on what basis or principle we could stop Cachar and Goalpara also from going?"<sup>28</sup> and if it would happen then the dream of a 'Muslim majority' province would shattered forever. So the Muslim leaders were trying to create a rift between the "Sylhetis" and Bengalis by saying that both the dialects are different from each other. They further said that the term "Sylheti" meant only the Muslim populations of Sylhet. The Muslim League leaders thought that, both the Muslims, Assamese and Sylhetis were facing the same problem of subjugation by the Bengali community. Mahmud Ali, the secretary of Assam Muslim League said that, "It could be safely accepted that Tribal Votes would be counted in our favour. These low caste Hindus and Tribals always counted in their fair dealings of the Muslims as against narrow castism (caste prejudice) of the high caste Hindus."<sup>29</sup> At that time, R.A Butler, the Under Secretary of State for India interviewed many Assamese leaders, including Chandradhar Barooah regarding the issue of the reunion of Sylhet with Bengal. But colonial Government did not change their opinion, considering their economic prospect in Assam. So the situation was very serious. Both the Assamese and Muslims wanted to get rid of the 'Bengali/Hindu' domination but in a different way.

In 1937 November Jawaharlal Nehru visited Assam for election campaign. He received two memorandum from Asamiya Sanrakshini Sabha and Asamiya Deka Dal. The first memorandum said that, "...as a means of saving Assamese race from extinction, a considerable section of the Assamese intelligentsia has express their minds in favour of the secession of Assam from India."<sup>30</sup> The second memorandum tendered by Asamiya Deka Dal even going further by providing a blue print to save Assamese race. It suggested – A) transfer of Sylhet to Bengal, B) total ban of

Bengali immigration to the Brahmaputra Valley for a period of twenty years, C) strict neutralization laws for resident Bengali immigrants. But Nehru was not impressed by these memorandums.

During 1937 election Muslim League under Muhammad Saadulla came into power in Assam. Saadulla's Government encourage the migration of Muslims from East Bengal. But Saadulla's Government collapsed in 1938. It was succeeded by the Coalition Ministry of Congress headed by Gopinath Bardoloi. It took the following resolution on the question of immigration. i) denial of land settlement to anybody in village and professional graze, ii) regulated settlement of landless people including immigrants on available wastelands, subject to holding of 30 bighas per family, iii) eviction of all immigrants squatters from areas declared protected tribal blocks in the sub-mountain region.<sup>31</sup> But Bardoloi's decision created widespread resentment among the immigrant leaders and he was forced to resign. Once again Saadulla form the ministry. He convened all-party conference on 'Line System'. He decided to go ahead with a land development scheme. They took the scheme of "**Grow More Food**" which was actually a hoax. Saadulla was trying to convince the British Government that he took this scheme to provide more and more food to the allied forces. Though Viceroy Wavell was not convinced and it is very clear from his statement, "The chief political problem is the desire of the Muslim Ministers to increase this immigration into uncultivated Governments lands under the pretext on Grow More Food but what they really after, is Grow More Muslims."<sup>32</sup> But before the scheme was implemented, Saadulla Ministry collapse.

In 1945 Assam Provincial Congress Committee demanded a culturally homogenous Assam in their election manifesto. In 1946 Assam province Premier Gopinath Bardoloi met Wavell and convinced him that, "Assam would be quite prepared to hand over Sylhet to Eastern Bengal."<sup>33</sup>

In 1946 Cabinet Mission came to India and announced to group different states of India into three groups-

Group A- Madras, Bombay, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Central Province and Orissa.

Group B-Punjab, North Western Frontier Province, Sindh and Balochistan.

Group C-Bengal and Assam.<sup>34</sup>

But neither Congress nor the Muslim League was satisfied with the proposal. Gopinath Bardolio vehemently opposed the clubbing of Hindu majority Assam with Muslim majority Bengal. The Cabinet Mission's proposal published on 16<sup>th</sup> May, 1946. On 16<sup>th</sup> July, 1946 Assam Legislative Assembly under Bardoloi adopted a resolution to disapprove the plan. Far sighted Bardoloi was able to understand that the Cabinet Mission Plan was a blue print of the future East Pakistan and merger of Assam with Bengal would seal the future of Assamese people forever. Finally he was

able to retain Assam within the Indian confederation with the help of Gandhi. However Bardoloi told the British delegation that he was ready to transfer Muslim majority Sylhet to East Pakistan.

In the meantime British Prime Minister Atlee declared that they would transfer the power to the Indians within June 1948. As a result Lord Mountbatten came to India with his partition plan. On his 3rd June plan he declared that, “Though Assam was predominantly a non-Muslim Province, the district of Sylhet, contiguous to Bengal, was predominantly Muslim. So the Plan outlined that if Bengal decided in favor of partition, then a referendum would be held in Sylhet to decide whether the district wanted to remain in Assam or be part of East Bengal.”<sup>35</sup> The date of Referendum was fixed on 6<sup>th</sup> & 7<sup>th</sup> July 1947 and H.C Stock was appointed as the Referendum Commissioner.

From the very beginning the Assam Governor had received many complaints regarding the *modus operandi* of the impending referendum. There were many discrepancies- i) The appointment of H.C Stock as the referendum commissioner raised controversy, ii) the date fixed for the referendum was not suitable as the entire Brahmaputra Valley was likely to be flooded, iii) within three weeks after the declaration of referendum it was very difficult for the Government to arrange enough number of presiding officers and polling officers, iv) the Muslim leaders demanded to rectify the electoral roll before the referendum as only 54.27% Muslims were enrolled there whereas the actual Muslim representation in Sylhet district was 60.0% of the total population, v) exclusion of the plantation labour and European planters from voting right also created controversy.<sup>36</sup>

As soon as the date of referendum declared the major political parties started their campaigns. They were broadly divide into two groups –the Congress, Communist party and Jamiat-ul-ulama whose symbol was ‘Hut’ and the Muslim League and Jamiat –i- ishami on the other hand whose symbol was ‘Axe’. Both of them stated vigorous campaigns accompanied by rhetorical slogans.<sup>37</sup> The first group aired the slogan while campaigning-

“শ্রী চৈতন্য ও শাহ জালালের ভূমি

পাকিস্তান না বানাইও তুমি।\*”<sup>38</sup>

While the other group sung that-

“ ...হাতি দিয়া মসজিদ ভাঙ্গলো

গম্বুজের চিন রাখলো না

আমরা তো ভাই আসমে থাকবো না।\*”<sup>39</sup>

Thus it was not only a political battle rather through these songs, slogans, poems a vibrant cultural trend was also established. Massive violence broke out on the referendum day. 15,000

Muslim league volunteers entered the interior districts before the vote. This was ratified in the Referendum Commissioners report, “the national guard penetrated into the remotest villages and created panic in the minds of non-Muslim villagers.”<sup>40</sup> A Sylheti lawyer recalled the hooliganism conducted by the workers of Muslim League- “The journey to the polling booth was not easy. We had to cross several rivers on boats. A large number of Muslim League and National Guard Volunteers from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh tried to obstruct us in some places. A group of 10-12 men made several attempts to sink our boats. Luckily we had brought with us the zamindar’s revolver. It was an empty revolver with no cartridges inside, but many of these men ran away we brandished the revolver at them.”<sup>41</sup>

Both parties apprehended that they would win the battle. But those who demanded the amalgamation of Sylhet came victorious. The total electorate consisted of 547,515 voters and of them 311, 707 or 56.93% were Muslims and 235,808 or 43.07% were non-Muslims. The Following table show the outcome of Sylhet referendum.

Sub Division	Muslim Electorate	General Electorate	Votes for East Bengal	Votes for Assam
<b>Sadar Sylhet</b>	92,268	48,863	68,381	38,871
<b>Karimganj</b>	54,022	46,221	41,262	40,536
<b>Habibganj</b>	75,274	60,252	54,543	36,952
<b>South Sylhet</b>	38,297	41,427	31,718	33,471
<b>Sunamganj</b>	51,846	39,045	43,715	34,211
<b>Total</b>	311,707	235,808	239,619	184,041

**Source:** The Sylhet Referendum (1947): Myth of a Communal Voting, J.B Bhattacharjee, P-483

Massive irregularities found in the election. During the counting excess ballot papers were found in the ballot box. On an Inquiry it was found that, “the Superintendent of Assam Government Press managed to print few thousand extra paper and put them in the ballot boxes through ‘pro-Pakistani’ polling staff.”<sup>42</sup> Nehru and Patel complained against these irregularities to Lord Mountbatten. However Gopinath Bardoloi expressed satisfaction with the referendum process. In compliance with the result of referendum, Radcliffe, the Boundary Commissioner has recommended

the transfer of the entire Sylhet district to East Pakistan with the exception of three thanas of Badarpur, Ratabari, Patharkandi and a portion of Karimganj thana.<sup>43</sup> Thus Sylhet was perpetually slashed out from Indian Union.

However, this was not the end of the problem. Sanjib Baruah rightly said that, “the separation of Sylhet in 1947 did not bring the tensions between Bengalis and Assamese to an end...”<sup>44</sup> Immigration could not stop after the partition and “...has had and, even now, continues to have the highest in migration rate of any state in India.”<sup>45</sup> Since Barak Valley shares the common border with Bangladesh (East Pakistan), influx of ‘Bangladeshi’ migrants is a common phenomenon even today. Weiner estimates that, “...of Assam’s 1971 population of 15 million, 51 percent may have been descendants of those counted in 1901 and 49 percent post 1901 migrants and their descendants.”<sup>46</sup> Even after the separation Assam remained a multilingual province with only 56.7 percent Assamese speaking people according to the Census of 1951. A large number Sylheti entered Assam from 1946 onwards. So it can be said that, “The Assam Pradesh Congress had clearly miscalculated the belief that partition would get rid of both Sylhet and Sylhetis.”<sup>47</sup>

Sylheti bhadrlok who permanently migrated to India between 1946-1950, “...was torn between the lost past and an uncertain future, finding him or herself rootless and homeless, a refugee who has to strive to locate his /her identity in a radical different present, which paradoxical enough, is shaped, influenced and conditioned by the very past which is irrecoverable.”<sup>48</sup> Many refugee pockets emerged in Shilong, Silchar, Nowgong, Gauhati, Dibrugarh, Lumding, Karimganj. The referendum and partition also redefined the very ‘Sylheti’ identity. Henceforth they were identified as ‘East Pakistani’ and the ‘Indian Sylheti’. Sylhet was wiped out from the map of India but “...their imagined identity remained tied to Sylhets in many different way.”<sup>49</sup>

So we may conclude that the exclusion of Sylhet was not only a result of Hindu-Muslim animosity rather it was an outcome complicated linguistic politics or sub-nationalism, ethnicity and preservation of indigenous culture, immigration, etc. Everyone was trying to get rid of the situation-Assamese were in search of their own homeland and the British Government was in hurry to shed the “White Man’s Burden.” Thus the role of decolonization process cannot be negated. But “Decolonization with Partition was clearly constructed very differently in Assam than in the Indian heartland.”<sup>50</sup>

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