



Novel Insights, An International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly Research Journal

ISSN: 3048-6572

Volume-I, Issue-I, August 2024, Page No.74-78

Published by Uttarsuri, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711

Website: <http://novelinsights.in/>

DOI: [10.69655/novelinsight.vol.1.issue.01W.007](https://doi.org/10.69655/novelinsight.vol.1.issue.01W.007)

Understandably, the ‘barbed-wire wound’ has not yet cured!

Sabyasachi Roy

Department of Physics, Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam-788710, India.

Email: sroy.phys@gmail.com

Received: 09.04.2024; Accepted: 15.08.2024; Available online: 31.08.2024

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Abstract

Seventy-seven years have elapsed since the Sylhet referendum (July 6 & 7, 1947). The part of Sylhet that was scissored during the partition and the Bengalis who came from the other side are still carrying the deep wound of the curse of that partition, compromising with the marginalization. Moreover, the Bengalis of the state are facing a special identity crisis as a result of the nationwide skepticism about the status of Bengalis in Assam. Following the Sylhet referendum, the curse of the Sylhet bifurcation, that is, the second partition of Sylhet is still haunting them.

The article attempts to illustrate a chronological analysis of the context and consequences of this century-long language tussle leading to persistent racial conflict and the other consequences relating to identity and citizenship.

Key Words: *Sylhet referendum, Partition, Bengalis, identity crisis*

The ‘Assam-problem’: It is said that the marginalized are rejected, neglected and subjugated by those in power. According to the American sociologist Talcott Parsons, “Power is a positive social phenomenon, [a] capacity for achieving goals in social system [as well as] power is negative phenomena which prevent others from their wishful act at will.....if one has more power, the other necessarily has less power.” Power is the root cause of social inequality and subsequent marginalization. This is accompanied by majoritarian hegemony. The fade scenario of this hegemony and subsequent marginalisation in Assam in post-independence India is visibly prominent. As a matter of fact, this 'Assam problem' has become more and more complicated with time.

'Assam-problem' basically refers to the problem of ethnic conflict in the language question in Assam which seeks to establish a single ethnicity of the larger language group in Assam and hence the marginalization of the ethnicity of the second largest language group in the state as well as the citizenship of linguistic minorities. The problem is like a double-edged sword — every time a planned initiative has been taken to solve this problem, the problem has manifested itself in a bigger form, taking the situation away from solution and stability. And, this has been going on for more than a century.

The Partition of Sylhet: One of the 'turning points' of this Assam-problem is the Sylhet referendum on the basis of which the Bengalis have been the victims of 'second partition'. It must be said that this (second) partition of the country, unfortunately, continues to survive to date making partition to be a live and continuous process. Renowned historian Amalendu Guha, in his book *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, says that the Sylhet referendum was centered on two main issues - the proposal to divide Assam on the basis of (religious) biracialism and the proposal to form the province of Assam on the basis of language.

In this context, steps were taken to hold a referendum to get the views of the people of Sylhet on the partition plan. Viceroy Lord Mountbatten said at the time that the people of Sylhet could decide their own destiny through this referendum. He announced the decision to partition the country on June 3, 1947 and also mentioned that a decision on Sylhet would be reached through a referendum. In addition, a demarcation commission was formed under the chairmanship of Cyril Radcliffe.

In that referendum, the Muslim League carried out a massive campaign in the Sylhet region. The Muslim League also issued a fatwa declaring voting for Pakistan a 'duty'. The electoral symbol of the Congress in the referendum was the house and the ax of the Muslim League. In the referendum held on 6 and 7 July, Sylhet was voted in favor of the annexation of East Bengal by a margin of about 55,000 votes (239,619 votes in favor of East Pakistan and 16, 4041 votes against). The decision to cut off a prosperous district of Assam was welcomed by the Assamese, with the satisfaction of taking the first step towards fulfilling their long-cherished desire to form a monolingual province for more than a century. Sujit Chowdhury rightly questioned whether this has been a "God-sent opportunity" for the Assamese.

Sylhet became part of East Pakistan, which gained independence on 14 August 1947. But according to the demarcation of the Radcliffe Boundary Commission, Sylhet was divided and exactly three days later on 17 August three and a half *thanas* of Sylhet (Patharkandi, Badarpur, Ratabari and a part of Karimganj thana) remained in India as part of Cachar district. About 609 square miles were cut from Sylhet and annexed to Assam. The purpose is said to be to allow Tripura to remain connected with the rest of India. However, it is not a problem to realize, after seventy-five years of partition, that this Sylhet partition did not satisfy any party. This reminds another comment of Sujit Chowdhury, "Had there been no partition, there would not have been any 'foreigner issue' in Assam."

As a part of Sylhet remained in India, the population of that region (more than 2.6 million) was recognized as a resident of Assam. Although it was not in the interest of the Assamese, the then leader of Assam Gopinath Bordoloi or his party did not protest in that way at that time. But the anger remains. Speaking on behalf of the Congress government in the Assam Legislative Assembly on November 5, 1948, the Governor of Assam, Mohammad Saleh Akbar Haideri, said: "The natives of Assam are now the masters of their own home. Now they have their own government which is both responsible and accountable to them. They will be able to take necessary steps for the promotion and spread of Assamese language and culture. Despite the desire, the Bengalis no longer have the power to impose anything on the Assamese people of the hills and valleys that make up today's Assam."

But this complacency was fleeting. After partition and independence, the whole of East India was plunged into racism and violence. The Hindus left the newly formed East Pakistan and took refuge in India. The anti-Hindu riots in the then East Pakistan in 1950 were another reason for that migration. In the context of the Sylhet partition, the Sylhet partition seemed to be a renaming of the second country to all those refugees who were uprooted. The fragmented people were forced to migrate from Upper Sylhet to the fragmented land of Upper Sylhet, bearing the brunt of statelessness due to political and ethnic adversity and natural disasters. Landless, stateless, they have to spend a long time as refugees. The reluctance of the state government to rehabilitate them, the pressure from the central government - all this is the tragic history of partition today.

It should be noted here that, despite the intense debate on the issue of cross-border migration in Assam, there is no clear universal information about the nature and extent of such flows. The mixed effects have also been seen in the case of political conjecture, as researchers vary widely between conjecture-based data and methods. Another thing needs to be mentioned here. Twenty-four years after independence, in 1971, East Pakistan was recognized as an independent state on the basis of language. The state of India, which was divided on the basis of religion in 1947, was the main ally in the formation of an independent state of Bangladesh in 1971 on the basis of language. The fact that partition on the basis of biracialism was not acceptable to the Bengalis in the end is a sign of this. But unfortunately, even today the Assamese Bengalis are constantly facing that language distortion. Even today, the crisis of self-identity has not been overcome, but the crisis has intensified.

In the conclusion of the book 'Planter Raj to Swaraj' (pp. 334-435) Amalendu Guha says, "*This two-track nationalism is nowhere so prominently traceable as in the case of Assam... The Assam Association (1903-20), The Assam Chatra Sanmilan (estd. 1916) and the Assam Sahitya Sabha (estd. 1917) – all of them attempted to articulate their Valley's unsettled quest for a linguistic-regional identity.*" The first installment of this article states that the number of Assamese-speaking people increased at an alarming rate in the 1951 census, which was a golden opportunity for the nationalists to realize their long-cherished desire to have Assam as a monolingual province. At that opportunity, the 'nationalists'

became desperate to establish authority. The intellectual-organizations of the Brahmaputra valley took to the field. This has an impact on state politics. Matters are discussed in the legislature without any hesitation. It was in this context that the language bill was introduced in the assembly and the language law was enacted (later this law was amended in the context of the language movement in the Barak Valley). This was the first clear and strong step taken by the state of Assam in post-independence India to destroy the multilingual existence of Assam and establish it as a monolingual state.

In addition, this same mentality is reflected in the Goalpara episode (1956), the Bengal-Kheda episode (1980-1980) and the Assam movement (1989-1975). Such a movement in the name of illegal expulsion of foreigners was in fact directed against the Bengali Hindus. Three years after independence, in 1970, the number of Bangla medium schools in Goalpara was reduced from 250 to three, which the government said was 'voluntary'. He had a miserable time in Assam. The whole state was covered with black clouds of incident, sectarianism and mistrust. Thousands of Bengalis (mainly Bengali Hindus) had to flee from the Brahmaputra valley to West Bengal to defend themselves under adverse conditions. In the wake of this long-running movement, Assam's economy, education and administration also suffered huge losses.

However, the Assam Movement resulted in the signing of the Assam Accords in 1975 and the end of six years of violent struggle. But doubts remain as to how much peace could be restored to the state. Forty years after the Assam Accord was signed to achieve a foreign-free state, the extent to which that 'expectation' has been realized today can be gauged from the smoky dissatisfaction in the state with the renewal of the Citizenship Register and the Citizenship Amendment Act. But wasn't the lion's share of the arguments behind the racial tensions in Assam for more than a century absurd? But isn't the multilingualism flowing in the arteries of Assam proving to be the ultimate truth for Assam in the course of time? But isn't peaceful coexistence the last word for a progressive and prosperous Assam? In today's situation the questions demand analysis.

Finally, here are two comments. Those who came to this post-partition Assam are the descendants of the indigenous inhabitants of the extended Bengal lands (Assuming 164 is also considered a native of Assam). Post-independence Assam should have been determined to carry forward the collective way of life of the various peoples in this land, preserving the continuity of the integrated tradition of folk religion that has been created in the past. However, Assam has been on the opposite side of this multilingual-multinational diversity of Assam in the last century, which is also contrary to the Vaishnava way of life followed by Sankardeva-Madhavadeva. And so, the state has repeatedly faced obstacles in forming a cohesive Assam, the compensation of which is still to be paid by the people of the state.

Second, narrowing the scope of citizenship to provide citizens with constitutionally protected and legitimate rights is not enough in a democratic state, it does not bring perfection in the running of the state. The success of citizenship lies in giving due respect to all citizens by overcoming class divisions, giving equal opportunity to all to participate in

the running of the state as well as giving citizens the opportunity to express their views for the betterment of the society and the state. In the context of multilingualism, the conflict over citizenship has only become apparent in the course of time due to immigration in this ever-bright region of Assam. Doubts remain about the goodwill behind all the efforts that have been made to overcome this conflict or how successful they have been. And that is why there is a dirty and fragmented picture of the ethnic conflict prevailing in the state on the basis of language conflict. A quote from Abraham Lincoln is noteworthy in this context, “*Let not him who is houseless pull down the house of another, but let him work diligently and build one for himself, thus by example assuring that his own shall be safe from violence when built.*”

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