Chapter - 2
History and Politics of Partition: Assam and Sylhet

Many interpretations of historical events are often taken as sacred and sacrosanct truths. History thus becomes coloured and tailored to fit more interpretations, which in turn becomes an authentic chronicle of historical events and development for future.

(Sundaram 2010).

2.1 From Composite Nation to Partition and Partition to Composite Nation

India is a multi-national state given the diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and racial communities which made up the Indian society. Some others call it a civilization-state (Ravinder Kumar, ‘L’Inde cited in Ivekovic 2000:173). In his autobiography Surendranath Banerjea spoke of his heady sense of participation in “a nation in making” (Banerjea cited in Roy 2007:4).

There exists another group which conceived Indian nationhood as ‘imagined community’ in which the nation is thought out or created (Cited in Chatterjee 1999:30). Rajat Roy argued that though nationalism derived the idea of civil society imported from Europe, this “constitute the mentality and culture of the body of people who are or have been seized by the idea of becoming a sovereign national state. The idea may be new, but the mentality and emotions are rooted in the past” (Roy 2007:5).

The issue of separate homeland was voiced from different quarters during the colonial period. Mohammad Iqbal’s blueprint did not envisage a separate Muslim state. He merely made out a case about provincial autonomy in Punjab, Sind and Baluchistan within the body politic of India. In 1933, Chaudhary Rahmat Ali, a Punjabi residing in Cambridge thought of the idea of Pakistan by Partitioning India. “In the beginning Pakistan was to consist of the Punjab,
North-West Frontier Province, Kashmir, Sind and Baluchistan only. Later in 1940, he initiated the second part of his programme embracing Bangistan, which was to include Bengal and Assam, and Osmanistan, comprising Hyderabad (Deccan)” (Khosla 1999:8). In 1939, Sikander Hyat Khan had published a scheme for the loosest of federations, with regional and zonal legislatures to deal with the common subjects. In January 1940, Dr. Abdul Latif of Hyderabad had outlined a plan for a minimal federation of homogeneous cultural zones (Gawyer and Appadorai, cited in Singh 1987:56).

V.D Savarkar argued strongly for a separate Hindu identity by underlying the well-entrenched cultural distinctiveness of the Hindus. Defining Hindu as a person “who regards his land of Bharatvarsha from the Indus to the Seas as his fatherland as well as his holy land” (Savarkar cited in Chakrabarty 2003:11). According to Asish Nandy, Savarkar appeared to have borrowed this definition from the nineteenth century thinkers of Bengal who advanced somewhat more or less similar kind of definition (Nandy 1995:67). M.S Golwalkar sought “to construct a ‘Hindu society’ highlighting the cultural uniqueness of the Hindus who have set up standards........ prescribed duties and rights (and) shed their blood in defence of the sanctity and integrity of the motherland”(Chakrabarty 2003:12).

In August 1944, an All-Party Sikh Conference was convened at Amritsar which called upon Master Tara Singh to appoint a committee to go into the proposal of an independent Sikh State. In his speech at the conference, Tara Singh declared that Sikhs too were a nation and if there was a division of the country they would not be the slaves of either Hindustan or Pakistan” (Mishra cited in Nag 1999:112). But these individualistic perceptions are inconsistent in view of the nature and functioning of the composite nature of the Indian society.

However, the Lahore Resolution of 1940 for the first time articulated the tangible demand of a separate homeland for the Muslims though the term Pakistan was not defined. It was only in February 1941 Jinnah explained the meaning of “Pakistan”
Some confusion prevails in the minds of some individuals in regard to the use of the word ‘Pakistan’. This word has become synonymous with the Lahore resolution owing to the fact that it is a convenient and compendious method of describing [it] ....For this reason the British and Indian newspapers generally have adopted the word ‘Pakistan’ to describe the Moslem demand as embodied in the Lahore resolution. I really see no objection to it......

(Press statement, Statesman 19 February 1941 cited in Moore 1993:185)

The creation of India and Pakistan after the Partition of British India was a violent transition from a composite society to vivisected regions. The Indian civilization which was enriched through widely divergent customs, traditions and convictions was sliced off arbitrarily by a political decision without considering its devastating consequences. The Two-nation theory -- on the basis of which India was divided, got severely undermined with the creation of Bangladesh within two decades of freedom and Partition. The theory was equally challenged in view of pervasive political divisions among the Indian Muslims as well as the distinctions entrenched in status, hierarchy and interests among them. It is pertinent to mention that in many parts of the country, the Hindus and the Muslims of the same class lived in amity and peace than with their co-religionists. Despite Pakistan was created on religious basis, a large number of Indian Muslims showed their reluctance for Pakistan and stayed back to their own home in India. The Muslim refugees from Northern India who migrated to Pakistan were discriminated as Muhajirs. In Bengal, the identity of being Bengali was predominant than the religious identity of being Hindu or Muslim due to the distinctive cultural and regional characteristics.¹ ‘The birth of Pakistan severed cultural ties and fragmented an intellectual tradition which was neither ‘Hindu’ nor ‘Muslim’ but, in its essence, Hindustani’ (Hasan 1993:30).

Mohammad Ali Jinnah advocated for a separate Muslim identity drawing upon the cultural differences between the Hindus and the Muslims. Given the Muslims of India to have constituted a nation Jinnah declared in Pakistan Resolution ‘The problem [between the Hindus and Muslims of India] is not of an
inter-communal character, but manifestly of an international one. Mussalmans are a nation according to any definition of a nation’ (Sherwani cited in Pandey 2001:29). But Jinnah and his Muslim League failed to garner much support from the Indian Muslims at large till 1946. Rather, he had conflicting relation with the provincial Muslim leaders of Punjab, Bengal and else where. Moreover, “Muslim political parties like Khaksars, Aharars, Khudai Khidmatgars, Momins opposed the Partition of India” (Singh 2009:482). The Muslim majority areas like Punjab, Sind, Baluchistan, North Western Frontier Province, East Bengal, the communities were largely peasants who fairly lived a simple inter-community life. The Muslim League did not command stronghold in these areas before 1946. The demand for Pakistan implored religion from the veil of personal conviction into the domain of public sphere. Thus traditional religion was identified as ethnic religion to fulfil the coveted goal of Pakistan. “Yet it has rarely spoken of how in a country like India traditional religion works in an ethnic context, in other words how with ethnic integration (of certain communities/societies) legitimation and mobilization, religion becomes ‘civil religion’ and a model of articulating civil and traditional rights; coupled with a concurrence of certain circumstances, the civil religion becomes the occasion of ‘events’ like Partition (and will continue to remain so)” (Samaddar 1997:6). Due to the British modality of ruling India with devious Divide and Rule Policy, the communitarian identity was crafted out by making more concessions in constitutional arrangements in favour of Muslims as a separate community. The demand for Partition, therefore, was not spontaneous but was primarily the results of political developments that took place between 1928 and 1940. Hence, the colonial rulers intentionally inflamed Muslim nationalism to counter the growing Bengali nationalism by reinforcing conflicts between the two colonial subjects. Given the failure in power-sharing with the Congress, Jinnah was ultimately successful to foist a Muslim political unity temporarily out of deeply divided Muslims and was turned almost into a ‘sole spokesperson’ of the Muslims essentially from an ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity. “Those who were thinking of creating an Islamic state did not realise that they were creating in a vacuum something which grows out of established political and social ideas and habits, that it must be the culmination of
efforts directed to a particular end and not the starting-point of a religious and political adventure” (Mujeeb 1993:406). Though Pakistan was created on religious basis, Jinnah as Governor-General declared himself as secular and advocated the rights of the Hindu minorities in Pakistan.  

The newly drawn border of the nation-states created multiple divisions instead of unifying the people. The state-mandated border had compelled the people to negotiate with an identity with anguish. It created different “mental borders” reinforced in exclusion and inclusion thereby creating majorities and minorities, natives and outsiders, nationals and aliens, refugees and vagabond etc. 

India after independence adopted composite nationalism to unify the discreet communities under one political idea of the nation. “One Partition some averted Partitions and several prospective Partitions made the Indian nationalist leadership paranoid and insecure about India’s future” (Nag 1999: 33). A shared identity of the citizens as Indians was conceived to be the unifying force to drive the nation out of the crisis.

**2.2 Partition Historiography—A Review**

The decolonisation of India was followed by a bloody and tragic Partition. The Partition of British India evoked a large volume of literature dealing with the causes and significance of this historically significant event. The historians and social scientists attempted to construct the history of the Partition with their distinct methodology. However, the long term consequences that the Partition of India reinforced necessarily led us to look into the aftermath of the event of the Partition and its impact. In order to understand the various interpretations that have constituted the historiography of the Partition, we have briefly dealt with the views of the Indian, Pakistani, Imperial, Subaltern, Leftist and Regional historians. It is found that the views of the historians regarding the circumstances leading to the division of British India are not unanimous. There are different interpretations viewed by various schools and individual historian as far as Partition is concerned over the role and responsibility of the different players and institutions involved in the tragic drama of the Partition.
2.2.1 View of the Indian Historians

The Indian historians have no unanimity in their views on the Partition. Some of them argued that both imperial design of divide and rule and the high ambitions of Jinnah who played into the hands of the colonial rulers that contributed significantly for the Partition of India. But there are others who pointed out the divisive distinctions between the Hindus and the Muslims. Failure on the part of the Congress is also considered by some to be an important factor for the Partition of the country. In India Allahabad school of history emphasises on composite culture. According to the protagonists, both the Indian communities have influenced each other to the core. Some others who pointed out the predominance of the Hindus also refused to accept the separation that existed between the communities.

A. Mehta and A. Patwardhan's work *The Communal Triangle in India* (1941) is a classic exposition of Divide and Rule theory. They pointed out that the British policy of separate electorates and communal representation in the legislatures as an “intentional policies to create inter-communal political conflict so as to prevent the growth of a national spirit” (Mehta and Patwardhan cited in Talbot 1993:234). According to K.M Panikkar, “the ‘history of India’ was essentially ‘the history of Hindu people’ to which the contribution of ‘Islamic culture’ brought a larger perspective” (Panikkar 1947:25). Anil Seal observed that India was not a nation but ‘a graveyard of nationalities of ancient conception and a cradle of modern nationalities struggling to be born’ (Seal 1968:339).

The events that occurred in Punjab, Sind and North-West Frontier Province, Calcutta, East Bengal and Bihar and the growth of Muslim communalism and separatist politics that supposed to have led to the division of Punjab and Bengal could be found in G.D Khosla's *Stern Reckoning* (Khosla 1999) and Mushirul Hasan ed. *India's Partition, Process, Strategy and Mobilization* (Hasan 1993). Another volume of the same historian *Inventing Boundaries: Gender, Politics and the Partition of India* (Hasan 2000) are a collection of essays highlighting the events and phenomena leading to the Partition of India. H. M Seervai's *Partition of India: Legend and Reality* (Seervai 1994) reflects the factors that led to the Partition of the sub-continent. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's *From Plassey to Partition: A History of Modern India* (Bandyopadhyay 2004) is a significant work on Partition that traces the history of nationalism since the beginning of colonial rule to the Partition. Anita Inder Singh's *Origins of the Partition of India* (Singh 1987) is an attempt to trace the roots of Partition.

The rise of communalism in colonial India as precursor to the Partition of the sub continent was addressed in works like Ayesha Jalal’s *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan* (Jalal 1985), Joya Chatterji’s *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and the Partition of India* (Chatterji 1999), Bipan Chandra’s *Communalism in Modern India* (Chandra 1993) Ram Puniyani’s *Communal Politics: Myth and Reality* (Puniyani 2003), Bidyut Chakrabarty’s *The Partition of Bengal and Assam 1932-1947* (Chakrabarty 2004), Suranjan Das’s *Communal Riots in Bengal 1905-1947* (Das 1991) etc. In *Hindu-Muslim Question and Our Freedom Struggle 1857-1935* Vol. I and *Hindu-Muslim Question and our Freedom Struggle 1936-1945* Vol. II., K.M Ashraf traces the genesis of the Hindu-Muslim Question and shows that both the communities at different phases lived in amity and co-operation but drifted away subsequently that led to the Partition (Ashraf 2005).

independence in India 1938- Part-1 and 2 and 3 (Chatterjee 1999) are also significant works dealing with the Partition.

2.2.2 View of the Pakistani Historians

Most Pakistani historians blamed the Hindu nationalists and the leaders of the Indian National Congress for the Partition of the subcontinent. Most of the writers argued that the British neither provoked nor encouraged the differences between the two communities. Hence, the Partition was the direct consequence and a logical culmination of age-old Hindu-Muslim socio-cultural rift and domination of the Hindus over the Muslims. Some of the Pakistani historians have concentrated their attention on two main historical periods. Firstly, the period dominated by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan from 1857 to the foundation of the Muslim League and secondly, the period after 1937 when the movement to Pakistan began to gather momentum. Eminent Pakistani historian I. H Qureshi affirms that British imperialism was never an ally of the Muslims but it remained fundamentally opposed to it (Qureshi 1965: 309). M untoz Hasan advocated that the creation of Pakistan was ‘a logical conclusion’ to the relations between the two communities of India (Hasan 1970: 329).

Khalid B Sayeed’s Pakistan: the Formative Phase-1857-1948 (Sayeed 1968) highlights the role of Jinnah and the Muslim League in the creation of Pakistan. Akbar Ahmed argues that “the idea of Pakistan was ‘irresistible and wide-spread among the Muslims’. In 1947 they ‘forced a separation’ and thus claimed for themselves a separate history of their own” (Ahmed 1997:113). M.A.H Ishapani in an article ‘Factors leading to the Partition of British India’ (Ishapani 1970), in Cyril Henry Philips and Mary Doreen Wainright ed. Volume The Partition of India: Policies and Perspectives analysed the factors leading to the Partition of Colonial India Jamiluddin Ahmed’s Recent Speeches and Writings of Mr. Jinnah (Ahmed 1942) attempts to look into the role of Jinnah in the creation of Pakistan.

2.2.3 View of the Imperial Historians

The imperial historians exploited the theory of communal divide that led to the emergence of communalism and ultimately to the Partition. Many of them argued that the Partition was the result of Hindu-Muslim conflict and projected independence as a generous gift of British liberalism. Their aim was to justify the
colonial policies and thereby absolved the colonial authority of any responsibility of the division. The Classical Imperialist Historiography ‘is mainly concerned with the rise, expansion and fulfillment of the British rule’ (Embree 1989:54). Penderel Moon in his book *Divide and Quit* (Moon 1998) had recorded that a general lack of wisdom and statesmanship on the part of the Congress during the years 1937-1942 made Partition unavoidable (Moon 1998: 274). C.H Phillips and Mary Doreen Wainright ed. *The Partition of India: Policies and Perspectives* have also considered the Indian leaders responsible for the Partition of India. They claimed that the object of the British policy was to maintain the unity of India (Philips and Wainright 1970:18). British historian Spear demonstrated the act of Partition as inevitable due to the rise of the separatist tendency from the time of the Arab invasion of Sind in the eight century (Spear cited in Pandey 2002:341). Hodson who was associated with the British Indian Government in different capacities since 1930 and the author of the book *The Great Divide: British-India-Pakistan* (Hodson 1969) was of the opinion that “The tale that ended in 1947 can be said to have had its beginning eight or nine centuries earlier. The transfer of power to two successor states was the end of the story, the preface of which was the annexation of the Punjab by Mahmood Gazni in 1018 AD and which began in earnest with the defeat of Prithviraj by Muhammad Ghori in 1192 AD” (Hodson idid 2002:341). The American approach emphasises “the religious, cultural, and social changes brought about by the modernizing impact of British rule and asks how this encouraged separatism” (Talbot 1993: 234).

The twelve volumes of the Transfer of Power- 1942-47 *Constitutional Relations between Great Britain and India* edited by Nicholas Mansergh and Penderel Moon (Mansergh and Moon 1970-1983) are British Government’s official Publications by Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, London which began with the Cripps Mission 1942. Nicholas Mansergh’s *Prelude to Partition: Concepts and Aims in Ireland and India* (Mansergh 1999) emphasises on the factors leading to the Partition. Diana Mansergh’s *Independent Years: The Selected Indian and Commonwealth Papers of Nicholas Mansergh* (Mansergh 1999), Leonard Mosley’s *The Last Days of the British Raj* (Mosley 1961), Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre’s *Freedom at Midnight* (Collins and Lapierre
1976) and Mountbatten and the Partition of India by the same author (1982) explore the last momentous days of the British Raj in India. Partition Observed: British Official Reports from South Asia Vol.I and Vol. II by Lionel Carter (Carter 2011) are attempts to record the accounts sent by British diplomats to London on the evolving situation in South Asia following Partition.

2.2.4 View of the Subaltern Historians

The Subaltern historiography which emerged in late 1970s criticised the traditional nationalist historiography for concentrating on leaders and institutions and for ignoring a wide range of reactions arising out of Colonialism. It criticised the European and American historiography and the Indian nationalism. “The Subaltern Studies Group highlighted the absence of the voice of the marginalized, who form a numerical majority over the elite group whose deeds had, in the traditionalist mode of discourse, resulted in ‘history’ and were responsible for determining the future of the nation” (Khan 2007: 103). In 1982 the first volume of the “Subaltern Studies” was edited by Ranajit Guha. He argued that the historiography of Indian nationalism had for a long time been dominated by elitism. “This ‘blinkerated historiography’ can not explain Indian nationalism because it neglects the contribution made by the people on their own, that is, independently of the elite to the making and development of this nationalism” (Guha 1982: 1-3). Gyanendra Pandey for example, argued that the conventional elitist Partition historiography has been seriously constrained by its self-imposed aim of “establishing the “causes of Partition” (Pandey 1994:207). Pandey thus shifted the causes to “the meaning of the Partition for those who lived through it, the trauma it produced and the transformation that it wrought” (ibid: 203).

2.2.5 View of the Leftist Historians

So far as Leftist historiography is concerned Bipan Chandra and his colleagues argued that the “Partition took place because of the ‘surging waves of Muslim communalism’ since 1937 and mainly because of the long term failure of the Congress to draw the Muslim masses into the national movement”. The Congress leaders accepted their failure and considered Partition as inevitable in the given circumstance (Chandra 1989: 500-4). Sumit Sarkar argued that “there
was more communal harmony at the ‘barricade lines’ reflected in the popular agitations, peasant struggles and industrial actions of the 1940s. The Congress leadership instead of harnessing these popular emotions accepted an early transfer of power at the price of Partition” (Sarkar 1985).

2.2.6 View of the Regional Historians

The Partition of Assam received little attention in the Partition historiography, though the province faced the brunt of the Partition severely. History books like the Government of Assam’s publication *Political History of Assam* Vol. I (Barpujari ed. 1977), Vol. II (Bhuyan and De ed.1978) and Vol. III (Bhuyan and De ed. 1980), H.K Barpujari ed. *Comprehensive History of Assam* Vol. V (Barpujari ed. 1993) and K.N Dutta’s *Landmarks of the Freedom Struggle in Assam* (Dutta 1998) deal with the Partition peripherally without analysing its impact on the lives of a large number of people affected by it. One more work of Barpujari *North-East India: Problems, Policies and Prospects* (Barpujari 1998) discusses the impact of Partition and migration on state politics. Amalendu Guha’s *Planter- Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam* 1826-1947 (Guha 1977) deals with the events in Assam leading to the Partition of 1947. Nirode Kumar Barooah’s *Bordoloi Dinlekha* Vol. I (Barooah 2000) and Vol. II (Barooah 2001), a diary written in Assamese language of the first Premier of Assam Gopinath Bordoloi, which highlights the political and social situation of Assam in and around the days of Partition. Journalist Harendranath Barua’s *Reflections on Assam* 1944-1983 (Barua 1992) is a collection of writings by the author which explores the events, leading to Partition and its consequence upon the later socio-political history of Assam. In *Religion in Politics: Eastern India 1905-1947* (Datta 2009), Binayak Datta deals with the role played by the *Ulama* in the Partition of Assam.

Partition nonetheless evokes a constant debate among the various schools of thought. More than sixty four years have passed since the event itself but the problem relating to the settlement of boundaries is still continuing. While Western boundaries of India appeared to be more or less settled, Partition in the East is an unsettled agenda. At the time it took place, Partition was looked at as a
solution to a large communal catastrophe that seemed imminent. When it came to be implemented, it seemed to have created more problems than it had solved. The provinces which were affected by the Partition were Punjab, Bengal and Assam. While debate on Indian Partition devoted a lot of time to Punjab and Bengal, little attention was paid to Assam. The Partition of India thus continued to remain a sore point of contestations among social scientists in the subcontinent and beyond. At times, it seemed like attempts by blind men in trying to describe an elephant. Each of the schools of thought has contended with each other because they have highlighted only some of the aspects of the phenomenon related to the Partition. If a holistic understanding of the phenomenon has to be arrived at, it has to incorporate all of these arguments and go beyond it to talk about the Partition as understood in academic and popular discourses. While the Cambridge School has highlighted the inherent contradictions in Indian society others such as the Subalterns have tried to highlight the popular dimension of the Partition politics. An attempt to understand the Partition which is a multi-dimensional phenomenon must incorporate various trends of thought.

2.3 Partition: The Communal Divide

The fierce communalism that rocked many parts of India significantly contributed to ruthlessly divide it at the end of decolonisation. But there are lots of written evidences to sustain that the Hindus and the Muslims lived in India quite peacefully and harmoniously since time immemorial. “India has been a multi-religious and multi-cultural since its known history. It was never mono-religious or mono-cultural. Then number of invasions and incursions from Aryans to Moghuls added to religious, cultural and linguistic pluralism” (Engineer: www.milligazette.com).

The Mughal emperor Akbar’s Din-i-ilahi or his religious policy in the medieval period of history encompassed all the religious groups within the same fold of tolerance and fraternity. In many parts of the country, the Hindus and the Muslims lived happily and harmoniously as neighbours for generations to the extent that genealogies and horoscopes of Muslim families were cast by Hindu Brahmans (Puniyani 2003: 92).
The Nizam of Hyderabad, a Muslim potentate, joined as often the Marathas and the British in war against the Muslim ruler of Mysore as the different rulers of the Maratha confederacy joined at various times, with the Muslims or the British and fought against other Maratha rulers of the same confederacy (Gokhale 1948: 23). Sayed Ahamad Khan was the apostle of Hindu-Muslim unity and all the institutions organized by him until 1870 were run by Joint Committees of Hindus and Mohammadans (Ashraf 2005: 46).

The awakening of the Muslim middle class emerged much later than the Hindus. Earlier, the Hindus occupied better share in the administration, medical and other posts. With the emergence of Muslim middle class, fierce competition gained ground between the two communities over the scarce resources. The British played a fomenting role in dividing the two colonial subjects by reinforcing more concessions to one community at the expense of another. “Simply put communalism is based on the assumptions that Indian society is divided into religious communities whose interests not only differ but are even opposed to each other. Communalism starts with the belief that in India people can be organized and grouped together for secular, that is, economic and political as also social and cultural purposes, only around their religious identities.” (Chandra 2008:3-4). The control over jobs and resources culminated in the economic struggle by the poorer people against the Zaminers, political class and elites etc. that came to be confused with communal politics in different parts of India.

The attempt to identify the communities on the basis of religion polarised and sharpened the social, economic and political divide which ultimately contributed in the division of the sub continent. The Legislative Council Reform of 1919 with the provision of separate electorates, Lord Curzon’s Partition of Bengal in 1905 and its repeal in 1912, the communal Award of 1932 sharpened the communal divide. “By treating the Muslims as a separate group, (the colonial state) had argued David Page ‘divided them from other Indians’. By granting them separate electorates, it institutionalized that division” (Page 1999: 260).

The birth of Muslim League in 1906 and the Hindu Mahasabha in 1915 weakened the nationalist movement and contributed significantly in communal
polarisation. The rapid growth of communal associations and institutions also played a vital role in rousing communal passions. Arya Samajist movement also spread in full measure in different parts of the country and Tabligh and Tanzim were in large part a response to Arya Samajist Shuddi and Sangathan etc. The establishment of Cow Protection Society had serious communal ramifications especially in Bhojpuri region and in 1912–1913 and violence rocked Ayodhya in Faizabad district, the district of Shahabad was ravaged wild communal conflagration in 1917 (Pandey 1983:60-61). In Bengal, two social forces seemed to have coincided with the religious division that led significantly towards the Partition (i) the rise of the Hindu zaminders (landlords) after the permanent settlement of Bengal and their exploitation of the Muslim peasants and the (ii) aspiration to regain ruling class status by the Muslims of Western India (Haque 1995: 1191). Partha Chatterjee articulated the crucial role of Islam in organising the Muslim peasants against the Hindu zaminders. Since in Bengal peasants were largely Muslims and the landlords were mainly Hindus, the Hindu-Muslim gulf had acquired a class dimension (Chatterjee 1993: 265-66). Suranjan Das points out that the riots in Bengal in the earlier period were relatively unorganised and were less connected with institutional politics. Rather such riots had a strong class orientation. The latter communal outbreaks according to him were governed by two distinct features (1) a merger of class and communal identities and (2) a convergence of elite and popular communalism (Das, cited in Chakrabarty 2004: 20).

Sugata Bose argued that the consolidation of Hindu-Muslim communal identity owed largely to the changes in the key elements of the Bengal agrarian social structure. According to him, the Great Depression of 1930’s brought a decisive change of class power in rural Bengal. The rupture in the system of rural credit relations deprived Hindu talukdars and traders of their dominance. Consequently, the renters and trading classes ceased to perform any useful function in situation of political challenge and they exploited religion to serve their purpose. “So at crucial juncture of Bengal’s history religious-commercial identity did impact a sense of collectivity and an ideological legitimization in a
specific historical conjuncture when the balance of class power in the countryside has already changed” (Bose 1986: 28).

Communal identities were consolidated by a host of other developments in the early twentieth century. Among other major developments to have an impact on separatist politics was the effort to draw up an Indian Constitution in the wake of Simon Commission, which reached India in 1927. Leaders of the Muslim League asked for a separate Sind province, parity of North West Frontier Province with other states, one third representations for Muslims in the Central Legislature and proportional representation in the Punjab and Bengal Legislative Assemblies. The Congress was identified as a Hindu group, drew its proposals in the Nehru report which recommended that India should be a federation based on linguistic provinces, provincial autonomy, elections based on electorates and seats in Central and Provincial Legislatures reserved for minorities in proportion to their population (Puniyani 2003: 93).

The report though initially accepted the Muslim demand for a separate province and reforms in North-West Frontier Province was subsequently withdrawn under the pressures of the organisations like the Hindu Mahasabha which patronized Hindu communalism. The assembly election of 1937 was significant to have built a permanent barrier in the Hindu- Muslim relations. The proposal of Jinnah to form the government jointly by the Muslim League and the Congress was turned down by the Congress. However, the Lahore Declaration of 1940 articulated the demand for Pakistan in a more tangible form.

2.4 First Partition of Bengal: Incorporation of Sylhet into Assam

In 1765, the British East India Company took over the Diwani of Bangla Suba and the district of Sylhet, of which Karimganj was a part, passed on to the British (Choudhuri 2002: 19). Cachar was eventually incorporated in 1832. Sylhet was all along historically, linguistically, geographically and ethnically an integral part of Bengal. Assam’s proper, together with Cachar, Goalpara, Garo hills and other districts of Bengal were partitioned out of Bengal to form a Chief Commissioner’s Province on 6 February 1874. But the new province seemed to lack revenue potentialities. The colonial government, in order to make Assam ‘financially viable’ decided to incorporate the populous Bengali speaking district
of Sylhet into the under populated new province of Assam. Accordingly, on 12 September 1874, the district of Sylhet was handed over to the new Chief Commissioner's Province. With this incorporation, a new administrative unit was created which was known as Surma Valley Division. The administrative change that was brought in 1874 to form the Chief Commissioner's Province of Assam with the incorporation of Sylhet was actually the First Partition in the history of British India.

Map–1

The Province of Assam under the Jurisdiction of the Chief Commissioner

The incorporation of Sylhet led to a reasonable number of Bengali clerks to flock into Assam to seek employment in the government offices. Fearing Bengali dominance, a series of agitations took place in the Brahmaputra Valley. This was intensified with the introduction of Bengali as the language of courts and schools of Assam in the year 1836. The union was argued on the ground that the zamindari system prevailing in Sylhet was not tune with the Assam land tenure arrangements and could not be amalgamated (Barooah 1990:91). The decision to bring Sylhet into Assam “separated the Bengali- speaking people on either side of the Meghna, but endangered rivalry and antagonism between the two Valleys of the Brahmaputra and Surma which continued with occasion breaks till our times” (Barpujari 1992: 275).

Map-2
The Province of Easter Bengal and Assam

2.5 Second Partition of Bengal

The colonial administration embarked on restructuring the boundaries of Bengal and Assam again in 1905 apparently for economic and administrative necessities. But in reality the Partition was carried out to curtail the power of the Hindu elites and “to prop up Muslim communalism to counter Congress and the national movement” (Mandal 2011: 76). Thus Lord Curzon intentionally divided Bengal to divide Bengali speaking population into Hindus and Muslims.

The Partition of Bengal was opposed severely but Curzon was determined in his bid. Consequently, the province of ‘Eastern Bengal and Assam’ was created on 16 October, 1905 with an area of 1,06,540 square miles and a population of 31 million.

Map–3
Bengal Partitioned and showing Railway link disrupted

![Map showing the partition of Bengal](image)

Source: Tathagata Roy, My People Uprooted 2003, 134
Considering the Partition a "grave national disaster" prayers, fierce agitations, massive protests and demonstrations etc. were organised throughout Bengal and Assam. The call to boycott British goods echoed throughout the Bengali speaking areas. 16 October 1905 was observed as a day of national mourning all over Bengal. In 1906 Rabindra Nath Tagore took *Amar Sonar Bangla* as a rallying cry for the annulment of Partition which later in 1971 was adopted as the national anthem of Bangladesh. Kazi Nazrul Islam popularly known as the revolutionary poet of Bengal articulated Hindu-Muslim unity in his songs such as

*Amra eki brinte duti kusum Hindu mussalman*

*Muslim tar nayan moni Hindu tahar pran.*

we are the two flowers of the same stem—Hindus and the Muslims. Muslim is the pearl of the eye while the Hindu its life (translation mine).

The Assamese elites vehemently opposed the creation of the new province on the ground that it would provide the Bengali Hindus and the Mohammedans to monopolise the government jobs. Besides, the new laws and regulations required in Eastern Bengal were likely to be introduced into Assam as well (Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam 1906: 38). In the Brahmaputra Valley, protest meetings were held at Dhubri, Gauripur, Goalpara, Gauhati and Dibrugarh (*The Bengalee* 17, 19 and 25 October, 2 November, 1905) In fact, the movement was mainly confined to the urban areas where Bengali elements in the population predominated. The anniversary of the anti-partition day was duly observed on 16 October 1906 at several places in the Assam Valley (*The Bengalee* 17 and 19 October 1906). At the initial stages, the Muslims of both the valleys joined the movement. But later on, "for the insistence on the observance of Hindu religious rites by the anti-partition leaders, the Mohammedans gradually began to cut themselves adrift from such agitations. The incitement of Muslim leaders like Nawab Salimullah of Dacca, bigoted Mollahs and above all the pro-Muslim sympathy of the British Indian Government turned them pro-partitionists and anti-Congress" (Barpujari 1977:191).
The Bengali-speaking population of the Surma Valley vehemently opposed the partition as they would be cut off from their kith and kin in Bengal when joined to Eastern Bengal. In the new province, the Surma Valley Hindus would be reduced to a minority and the latter feared that since they were backward in education compared to the transferred districts of Bengal, the claims of the Surma Valley people might be superseded by qualified men from Dacca, Mymensingh, Rajshahi and Assam Valley.

Ibid 1977: 182

In Surma Valley, anti-partition agitation culminated into a popular movement based on Swadeshi, boycott and national education. Meetings were organised at Sylhet, Habiganj, Maulavi Bazar, Silchar, Karimganj and Badarpur (The Bengali, cited in Barpujari 1977:184). In Habiganj sub division of Sylhet district the movement was more intense (Gupta 1974: 17) [translation mine].

On the anniversary of the anti-partition day, at Badarpur the Hindus and the Muslims both observed Rakhi Bandhan ceremony and fasted for the whole day. In a public meeting at Maulavi Bazar resolutions were passed renewing the Swadeshi vow and supporting the scheme of moving the authorities for placing the entire Bengali-speaking populations under one administrative unit.

Barpujari 1977: 185

The Surma Valley Association played a significant role in rousing political consciousness of the people of the Valley. It took efforts to keep the spirit of the agitation high and strengthened people’s belief in Swadeshi and Swaraj (ibid 1977:185).

“The frequent visit of Bipin Chandra Pal and the stirring speeches he made at the public meetings held at Habiganj, Baniachang, Badarpur, Silchar, Karimganj spread the message of swaraj to the masses” (ibid 1977). But the Anjuman-i-Islamia of Silchar was in favour of the Partition and sent delegates to attend a pro-partition meeting at Dacca on 16 October 1906 organised by the provincial Muhammedan Association of Eastern Bengal and Assam. On the same day at Maulavi Bazar, Habiganj, Sunamganj, and Sylhet pro-partition meetings were organised by a section of the Muhammedans in response to the appeal of the Bengali Muslims. The Mahishya community of the Surma valley like the
Muslims expressed their support and "deep loyalty to the government" (ibid 1977).

In his presidential address at the second meeting of the Surma Valley Conference held in 1908 Radha Binode Das "deplored that the game of 'favourite wife' so assiduously played by the British had the effect of winning the Muslims from the Hindus and what was worse, at places they were in open hostility against them". He reminded them that "for centuries we have lived as brotherly neighbours sharing each other's miseries and bound by a thousand ties". He was confident that these two communities would not remain engaged in cutting each other's throats for any length of time (ibid 1977:192).

In view of intensified agitations that were launched throughout Bengal and Assam, the Partition was ultimately annulled in 1912. Assam reverted to its former status of Chief Commissionership retaining the districts of Cachar, Goalpara and Sylhet with the Assamese complaint of Bengali domination. The creation of the Province of Eastern Bengal and Assam in 1905 could therefore be historically referred as the Second Partition of British India.

2.6 Sylhet Referendum: Prelude to the Partition of Sylhet

Sylhet experienced abrupt slicing of its boundary on the eve of independence by a political decision. It is significant to note that the mainstream historical scholarship paid little attention to the Partition of Sylhet and consequent forced displacement of population. The long-time aspiration of the Assam Congress and a section of Asamiyas to curve out a linguistically more homogeneous Assam culminated in Sylhet Referendum which provided them a long term opportunity to get rid of Sylhet. Rabindra Nath Aditya, a Sylhet Congress leader identified "Sylhet as a 'golden calf' which was sacrificed in 1874 to usher in a new province was now once more sacrificed at the altar of a new state" (Aditya 1970: 31).

Lord Mountbatten's Partition Plan of 1947 argued that Sylhet, a predominantly Muslim district in a multi-cultural province of Assam should in the event of Partition; undergo a referendum to decide on its amalgamation with the newly-formed Muslim province of East Bengal (Mansergh and Moon 1982: 92). It is significant to note that unlike Bengal, Assam was a predominantly
Hindu-majority province, with only 30% of the population being Muslims. Aditya observed that “if a district like Sylhet could be the subject matter of referendum and Partition, why not the Hindu majority areas of Sindh on the Indian border were subjected to the same test?” (Aditya 1970: 29).

Significantly, the demand for referendum was not voiced either by the Hindus or by the Muslims of Sylhet who enjoyed an enriched inter-community lives in their native land. Amalendu Guha argued that “the separation of Sylhet from Assam was chiefly the result of the efforts of the Assamese little nationalists and that after Sylhet was shaken off its back, the Assamese middle class emerged stronger and more ambitious than ever” (Guha 1977:27). The demand for Pakistan on religious basis turned the people of Sylhet ambivalent who did not experience communal violence earlier. They considered their homeland a unique ambience of unity and fraternity enriched with the contributions of Hajrat Shahjalal and Mahaprabhu Sri Chaitanya (My interview with Amalendu Chakrabarty, Dhirendra Nath and Dinesh Chakrabarty on 14 May 2006). Interestingly, they experienced quick transformation of their identity from Sylhetis to Hindus and Muslims just on the eve of the referendum.

Table 2.1: Demographic Composition of Sylhet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub Division</th>
<th>Scheduled Castes</th>
<th>General Hindus</th>
<th>Muslims</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North Sylhet</td>
<td>43,443</td>
<td>110423</td>
<td>490096</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Sylhet</td>
<td>66,837</td>
<td>198623</td>
<td>237650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habiganj</td>
<td>87411</td>
<td>172460</td>
<td>434359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunamganj</td>
<td>73344</td>
<td>144646</td>
<td>417404</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karimganj</td>
<td>87969</td>
<td>155258</td>
<td>311270</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 2.1 shows that Muslims constituted a majority in Sylhet. In North Sylhet subdivision they constituted an overwhelming majority of 67 percent. South Sylhet and Karimganj came less under the influence of Muslim faith.

Mrinal Kanti Dasgupta in his book Je Path Diye Elam (1994) observed that the referendum had divided a composite Hindu-Muslim society into two warring camps and the Hindus who lived in Sylhet for centuries felt as if they were foreigners in their own land and gradually began to leave the district (cited in Bhattacharjee 2006:192-3). R.N Choudhury of Sylhet complained to Home...
Minister Patel “of Muslim fanaticism and expressed the view that the referendum was ill-timed and that Sylhet people were against the referendum” (Kar 1990: 328).

In the pre-referendum period, the Muslim League did not have strong foothold in Sylhet. The success of the League in the referendum was primarily due to the systematic and organised efforts to polarise the Muslim population of the district by infusing Islamic ideas. The Muslim voters were asked to probe their identity as *pucca* Muslims by casting their votes in favour of joining Pakistan (Chakrabarty 2004: Dutta 2006: 206). The *Moulavis* played a crucial role in popularising the demand. Associated with the local mosque, these *Moulavis* had a stable group of followers who regularly attended Friday prayers. They also attended the weekly local *hats* and tried to mobilise the people by equating the vote in favour of Pakistan with a ‘great service to Islam’ (Chakrabarty 2004: 192). They were greatly influenced by the Bengal Provincial Muslim League, other Muslim organisations, leaders and the Muslim press. Innumerable public meetings were held in various parts of the district which aroused great enthusiasm among Sylhet Muslims. The students’ wing of the League also did not lag behind in propaganda and persistent efforts in mobilising the masses. The mandate which ultimately amalgamated larger share of the district to Pakistan except three and half *thanas* in favour of India reflected the religious polarisation. The result of the referendum shown in Table 2.2 is a clear pointer to religious polarisation.

The Indian National Congress leaders did not show any interest to retain Sylhet in Assam. There is a claim that the transfer of Sylhet to Pakistan had already been secretly decided upon and accepted by the Congress High Command and also by many in the Assam Congress to reduce the Bengali element in Assam’s population (Kar 1990:327).

The campaign to retain Sylhet in favour of India was affected by the ethnic division between the Assamese and the Bengalis of the Brahmaputra Valley and the Surma Valley. Brajendra Narayan Choudhury, a Sylhet Congress leader identified the cleavage between the Assamese Hindus and the Bengali
Hindus in Assam. Arun Kumar Chanda, identified two problems in the province—communalism and valley jealousy (Bhattacharjee 2006:121). He reiterated that “no body can predict the result of the Sylhet referendum. But whichever party wins, I must say that the referendum was not fair to the major section of the people who desire Sylhet to remain in Assam” (*Amrit Bazar Patrika* 14 July 1947).

It is pertinent to mention here that the Bengali-speaking Cachar and Sylhet were under the jurisdiction of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee which was preoccupied with the Partition of Bengal in and around the referendum. Consequently, it did not play any significant role to retain Sylhet in Assam. The Assam Provincial Congress was virtually an organisation of the Brahmaputra Valley with no organisational involvement with the party activities of the Surma Valley and more precisely there was a long standing demand in the Brahmaputra Valley to oust Sylhet outside Assam. The Assam Pradesh Congress Committee Election Manifesto had pledged to the electorate in 1945-46 that the party would work for separating Sylhet from Assam. “Maulana Sahib (i.e. Azad) seemed to come to the conclusion that the only alternative to this state of things is”, wrote Bardoloi to Patel in February 1946, “to separate the Bengal district of Sylhet and a portion of Cachar from Assam and join these with Bengal—a consummation to which the Assamese people are looking forward for the last 70 years...” (cited in Guha 1977: 319). Essentially, the Assam Provincial Congress leadership showed little interest ‘to meddle in Sylhet’s ‘Tryst with destiny’ and remained aloof in the months around the referendum and indirectly helped the ousting of Sylhet to Pakistan (Bhattacharjee 2006:53). “In the vital months of decision-making, the two Congress Committees travelled in opposite directions to each other. At the height of the communal and valley tension, the antagonism was far deeper” (ibid 2006: 53).

The Bengali Hindus who so far fought for reunion of Sylhet with Bengal now articulated their voice in favour of retaining in Assam. An analysis of the relevant literature and from the interviews conducted with the surviving victims in Cachar, it could be ascertained that the loss of their district to Pakistan came at the hour while they were eager to reap the fruits of freedom after prolonged
struggle against colonial oppression. They organised meetings, processions etc. to retain Sylhet in Assam. But the meetings etc. articulated by the Hindus were less organised and rowdy than the Muslim League. None of the prominent leaders of Congress participated actively when the referendum took off (Chakrabarty 2004: 197). The Hindu leadership in the district did not have the grass-root influence at the rural level. They were mostly drawn from the land owning class and they were in the vanguard of the Congress movement in the district. They failed to counter the vicious communal outcries of the Leaguers. The Sylheti Hindus from outside the district rushed up to their home to cast their votes. One of the popular songs which was sung by the Hindus around referendum reflected their anger against Jinnah

\[\begin{align*}
Gan \ o \ Noi \ Bajon \ O \ Noi & \quad \text{Ino Kiyor Nachna} \\
Dhak \ O \ Nai \ Dholok \ O \ Noi & \quad \text{Ino Kiba \ Bajna} \\
Jingga \ Ruilam \ Khira \ Ruilam & \quad \text{Tat Na Dilam Palo} \\
Haat \ Pao \ Dhuiya \ Maro & \quad \text{Jinnah \ r \ Kopalo} \\
Kural \ Ultaiyia \ Maro & \quad \text{Jinnah \ r \ Kopalo}
\end{align*}\]

(My conversation with Dhirendra Nath on 23 June 2006).

(No Song, No music, Can we break into a dance?  
No drum no cymbals, Can it be called music?  
Planting crippers and vegetables  
Without any support, What Pakistan is this?  
Reject the outlandish proposals of  
Mohammad Ali Jinnah) [Translation mine]

The local Jamiat-Ul-Ulema led by Hussain Ahmad Madani, consistently opposed the idea of Pakistan and advised all Muslims of the district to vote for an undivided India. They offered "manajat" with tears in their eyes for the retention of Sylhet in India (Kar 1990:331). Abdul Matlib Mazumdar of Hailakandi in Cachar district, a Jamiat member supported the Congress. Earlier, the Jamiat under the Assam Nationalist Muslim Convention organised a procession where 15,000 Muslim of Silchar Town participated on February 20 1947 against the
Pakistan -demand (Sujit Choudhuri, *Samayik Prasanga* 2000). The Muslim fishermen community who were locally called *mahimals* or *maimals* also opposed the scheme of Pakistan.

**Table 2.2: Results of the Sylhet Referendum, 6-7 July 1947**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the subdivisions</th>
<th>Total Muslim electorate</th>
<th>Total General electorate</th>
<th>Vote for East Bengal</th>
<th>Vote for remaining in Assam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sadar</td>
<td>92268</td>
<td>48863</td>
<td>68381</td>
<td>38871</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karimganj</td>
<td>54002</td>
<td>46221</td>
<td>41262</td>
<td>40536</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habiganj</td>
<td>75274</td>
<td>60252</td>
<td>54543</td>
<td>36952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Sylhet</td>
<td>38397</td>
<td>41427</td>
<td>31718</td>
<td>33471</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunamganj</td>
<td>51846</td>
<td>39045</td>
<td>43715</td>
<td>34211</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Mansergh et al., Vol. XI, 1982: 155, A. Hydari to Nehru 14 July 1947*

Table 2.2 shows that of the valid votes cast in the referendum 239619 (56.6 percent) were in favour of Sylhet's amalgamation with Pakistan and only 184041 (43.4 percent) were cast in favour of an undivided Assam in India.

The result of the referendum was significantly affected by the exclusion of around two lakhs tea garden labourers of different tea gardens of Sylhet. Purnendu Kishore Sengupta complained that “out of the district’s tea-labour population of 197, 272 residing in 221 estates, 166,750 residing in 190 were altogether left out of consideration. Of the rest of 30,502 tea-labourers in thirty one of them, in one *thana* of South Sylhet, only 11,449 were registered as voters in 1946. He estimated that out of 166,750 there would be at least 50,000 persons entitled to vote but were denied franchise” (ibid 1990: 329). Interestingly, they were allowed to participate in the General Election held in December 1945. Jiban Saontal was elected as the representative from the major tea belt of the district (Sri Mangal) [Bhattacharjee 2006: 194]. The extermination of the voting rights of the tea-planters created a widespread resentment who hold protests; demonstrations etc. in different parts of the district. They shouted slogans like:

*Labour vote Dena chahiye, hamara vote dena chahiye*

(My Conversation with Dibbendu Bhusan Dey on 16 June 2006).
Gopinath Bordoloi the Assam premier did not recommend the exclusion of Cachar from Assam when he met the cabinet delegation in 1946 and the viceroy in 1947. Cachar, though a Bengali-speaking district adjacent to Sylhet never challenged the Assamese caste Hindu hegemony. Nibaran Chandra Laskar, a member of the Legislative Assembly of Assam and the President of the Cachar Kalyan Samity issued a press statement wherein he stated that Assam should make every effort to retain Sylhet in the province while other parts of the country could remain in the new Indian Union. Cachar being the neighbouring district of Sylhet, had some special interests in retaining Sylhet in Assam. In case of amalgamation of Sylhet to East Pakistan, some portions of Cachar had the risk of being amalgamated with East Pakistan. The Press Statement also stated that if Sylhet could remain in Assam the border between Sylhet and Pakistan would protect Cachar from all troubles which were likely to be caused by Pakistan. He appealed to all people of the district to render all possible help to Sylhet in her fight against the contemplated amalgamation with East Bengal. Laskar lamented that despite all efforts, Sylhet was sent to East Pakistan. He found no justification of sending a portion of Cachar to East Pakistan due to its distinct history, culture, tradition, etc. In fact, Cachar had very little affinity with those of East Bengal and Sylhet. It was a purely temporarily settled and non-Muslim area and had never come under Muslim domination. Only one thana in the district i.e. Hailakandi had a slightly Muslim majority population (55.3%). But in the last Assembly election a Jamiat candidate won the election from the area was a clear indication that even the Muslim population of that area was against Pakistan. From the geographical point of view too, this area could not be separated from Cachar because it shared a natural boundary—the Saraspur Hills in the West (Bhattacharjee 1947: 91-93).

The holding of referendum in most literature was debated as a ‘betrayal and a slur’ in the history of India in the context of the alleged large scale rigging and mal practices of the Assam Congress Committee and the role played by its politicians for the fulfilment of their cause (Chakrabarty 2002:317-350, Bhattacharjee 1990:37-51; Das 1996:60). Since law and order was a state subject, many held the Bordoloi cabinet responsible for widespread intimidation, violence, rigging by the Muslim League National guards during referendum. The
withdrawal of military pockets by the Assam Government from many vulnerable localities clearly indicated the free hand given to the communal forces to perpetrate violence on Hindus. The entry of the Muslim League National Guards; the voluntary corps of militant tone was recruited from all over the province of East Bengal and in certain pockets of Assam. It was reported that the strength of the organisation was rapidly increasing in Cachar as well where the members were trained to be more militant with training in the use of swords, lathis, bows and arrows (Abstract of intelligence, Assam Police, 1946-47, File No.17: Government of Assam).

Jawaharlal Nehru received a lot of complaints which were basically of two types-- the first was about the effort undertaken by the League to stop the genuine voters from voting by threat and violence. It was also alleged that “in almost all the centres, a large number of non-voters and unauthorized League members were allowed” (AICC File, cited in Chakrabarty 2004:188). The second type of complaints were more specific. A voter named Monorama Dasi of Karimganj sent a telegram to the AICC office stating that the European presiding officer in the Karimganj Town female centre snatched away the ballot papers from their hands and put them into the ballot box marked with axe against their will (Government of India 1946-7). Basanta Kumar Das, the Assam Home minister complained that “there was the promise that the referendum would be conducted under military supervision with the help of the provincial police. The provincial government has already exhausted all their police and other resources and it was the inadequacy of the military deployed for the purpose that had made it impossible to conduct the referendum in a peaceful atmosphere” (cited in Kar 1990: 338).

Table 2.3: Thanas Remaining in Assam

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thanas</th>
<th>Area (square miles)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Badarpur</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratabari</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patharkandi</td>
<td>277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karimganj</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Census of India 1951A; 157).

Table 2.3 shows the thanas with a total area of 709 square miles and a population of 23 million were retained in the district of Cachar in Assam.
The result of the referendum was virtually in favour of amalgamation of the district of Sylhet to East Pakistan except three and half thanas – Badarpur (47 square miles), Ratabari (240 square miles), Patharkandi (277 square miles) and a portion of Karimganj thana (145 square miles). Only these thanas with a total area of 709 square miles and a population of 23 million were retained in the district of Cachar in Assam.

**Table 2.4: Percentage of Hindus Voting for Remaining in Assam**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub division</th>
<th>Votes for remaining in Assam (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sylhet Sadar</td>
<td>79.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karimganj</td>
<td>87.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habiganj</td>
<td>61.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Sylhet</td>
<td>80.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunamganj</td>
<td>87.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: IOR, R/3/1/158, Report by Stock, the Referendum Commissioner, 26 July 1947.*

Table 2.4 explores that 78 percent of the Hindu population of the district participated in the Referendum and the participation were more or less uniform throughout the district.

Amalendu Guha observed that to the Assamese political leadership the referendum in Sylhet came as a “life time’s opportunity ...to get rid of Sylhet” (Guha 1977: 319-20). This view was shared by many Bengalis.

**2.7 Impact of Partition on North-East India**

The impact of Partition on North-East India was severe. Many of the problems that engulfed the region are mostly the bi-product of the Partition of the country. The Sukla Commission Report that was submitted to the Prime Minister of India on 7 March, 1997 stated that “the North-East was uniquely disadvantaged by Partition which left its external parameter with no more than 2% contiguity with the rest of India.... No other part of the country barring Jammu and Kashmir has had to bear a comparable burden with severe market disruption, total isolation and loss of traditional communication infrastructure, all of which has pushed regional cost and prices well above national norms, transport subsidies notwithstanding” (Sukla Commission 1997: www.planning commission.)
Significantly, ‘tea’ the most important means of subsistence for the economy of Assam was dependent on the foreign market through the sea ports of Calcutta and Chittagong. But Partition robbed Assam of its easy accessibility to the port towns. With the emergence of East Pakistan, Chittagong came to be considered a foreign land and routes via East Pakistan to Calcutta not only proved difficult but were totally snapped away (Goswami 1994:179).

Historian David Ludden categorically stated the devastated impact of Partition, “Partition cut old routes of communication and mobility across new international borders more dramatically than almost anywhere in the world. The Bengal Assam railway tract from Guwahati to Dhaka was torn off at the Cachar--Sylhet border in 1965 which made communication between Dhaka and London easier than that between Dhaka and Guwahati” (Ludden 2003: 21). Assam’s topographical distinctiveness was affected by the amalgamation of Sylhet with Pakistan, the major portion of Surma Valley ceased to be a part of Assam.

B.G. Verghese underscored the impact of Partition in Post-colonial Assam. He stated that Partition caused the extreme isolation of the North-East as the region turned into South Asia’s third landlocked state along with Bhutan and Nepal, except for the 22 km. long chicken-neck corridor at Siliguri (Verghese 1997). “So, artificial frontiers became hard political – and mental – boundaries in South Asia, a context in which the evolution of the ‘North-East’ as an Indian land island, linked tenuously with the mainland but so distant in physical and psychological terms, must be judged” (Bhaumik 1997:142).

The Census of 1951 observed that though Assam’s loss in area as a result of this Partition is negligible (it has lost only one - eighteenth of its existing area), it had lost nearly one – third of its population and along with it the vast paddy lands and the tea, lime and cement industries of Sylhet – the far reaching affects of this loss will continue to be felt by Assam as well as India for many years to come. On the other hand, Assam’s topographical distinctiveness had been affected. With the amalgamation of Sylhet with Pakistan, the major portion of the Surma Valley ceased to be part of Assam. Only a remnant of this old natural division, namely the Cachar district as now constituted (including the new
truncated subdivision of Karimganj with *thanas* of Patharkandi, Ratabari and Badarpur and a portion of Karimganj *thana*) remains in the divided Assam (Census of India 1951 A: 2-15). The *Asomiya* elites were successful in dumping Sylhet into East Pakistan ignoring Assam a shared *Asomiya* homeland or a multicultural society (Dasgupta 2001A: 41).

The hill people were severely affected by the Partition of the country. “the ceding of East Bengal to Pakistan disrupted the traditional economic institutions in North - East India. It deprived the hill areas of the market for their agriculture products and handicrafts. It also meant an abnormal increase in the price of fish, a staple food and a decline in the price of jute. River-communications as well as road links were disrupted......Henceforth, the people of East Bengal needed passports to lawfully enter the Brahmaputra Valley and the tribals of Chittaganj hill tracts to enter the Mizo Hills; the people of Arunachal Pradesh were confronted by security forces near the borders of Tibet; the Nagaas found themselves living in India as well as Burma; and the Mizos in India were separated from their kinsmen in Burma. All these groups had hitherto, prior to Partition, moved freely and, therefore resented international frontiers that restricted their ‘natural’ movements” (Singh 1997: 5).

Arguments were raised in the Assam Assembly about the loss of survival means of a large number of people who were forced to suffer in the border areas in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, Mizoram and Garo hill districts. Before Partition, these border people used to sell oranges, pine-apples, betel nut, betel leafs, *tezpatt* etc. in Sylhet and used to get good price for their products. With the separation of irrigated areas to East Bengal, the problem turned more severe (Government of Assam 1957). Less attention was paid by the government to ameliorate their plight. The aggressive activities perpetrated by the Pakistani *ansars* along Sylhet-Cachar border like firing, cattle-lifting and looting of harvests etc. drenched them into intense fear and insecurities. Consequently, the people of Karimganj-Sutarkandi border took shelter in relief camps erected by the government in Karimganj (Government of Assam 1950).
Tarapada Bhattacharjee, the President of the Central Refugee Board of Cachar argued that the condition of the people in the border areas in Assam was disastrous. A large number of people led a camp life in Karimganj. People vacated their villages for good due to fear or torture. A large tract of land was devastated due to flood. He highlighted that there was lack of proper schemes for the people in the border areas and no industrial development took place. Lack of proper medical facility and transport bottleneck compounded their sufferings. There was dearth of doctors, nurses, and medical staffs to look into their health related problems. A Committee was appointed to enquire into the problems of the border people which suggested schemes involving an expenditure of Rs.10 lakhs. However, with great efforts of persuasion only three lakhs could be granted. The poor implementation of the schemes failed to address the real plight of those people (Government of Assam File 1954).

The Partition of Sylhet severely affected the communication network of entire North-East. “The frontier status of North-East was further deepened by the creation of East Pakistan. Consequently, a large tract of provincial and even district boundaries transformed into international boundaries all of a sudden. This substantially elongated the international border of the North-East” (Hussain 2007:58).

The Barak Valley turned land-locked due to Partition. It has a very fragile link with the rest of the country. The National highway 44 passing through the Hills of Meghalaya virtually connects the valley and it maintains a link with the rest of the country. The roads are vulnerable due to heavy landslide during rainy season. The meter-gauge rail tract connecting the valley with Guwahati is also prone to heavy landslide and communication link is regularly disrupted creating unremitting difficulties for the people. Even after sixty-four years of independence, the government is unable to connect the people of Barak Valley with sustainable communication. The Government failed to expedite the ongoing broad gauge railway project proposing to connect the people of Barak Valley with Guwahati and the rest of the country.
The natural movement towards the west was stopped although the clandestine and illegal trades are going on unabatedly for last five decades (Bhattacharjee 2006: 213). Arguments were raised in the Assam Assembly wherein one member argued that the border areas in Karimganj, Dhubri and Garo- Hills, smuggling were a common parlance. Although the police were deployed at the border still it was difficult to curtail the practice (Government of Assam 1953). Some others alleged the high-handedness of the police in promoting rather than curtailing the illegal trade (My conversation with Satindra Das in an interface on 12 June 2006).

The division of India on religious basis raised the issue of identity politics in which the smaller groups in Assam demanded political autonomy. This in fact was articulated in ethnic assertions by the Nagas, Mizos and Khasis who demanded their right to self-determination and independence. By passing phase, other groups are also asserting their autonomy. The North-East is thus virtually turned into a hotspot of secessionism with the dislocation of the economy and a disruption in road communication as well as normal communication among the communities.

The Partition of Sylhet could not fulfill “the long cherished dream” of a homogeneous Assamiya homeland. Rather, it forced mass displacement of Bengali Hindus to Brahmaputra Valley, Surma Valley and hill areas of Assam. Since the Bengali Hindus continued to be vulnerable as rival linguistic group in largely Assamese speaking Assam, in many cases they were forced to negotiate with vexed identities as immigrants, economic migrants, foreigners and D-voters etc. This evoked fear and ambivalence to the people. Partition compelled people to survive on no-man’s land.

After the exclusion of North Cachar Hills the district of Cachar became more homogeneous. With the inclusion of Chorgola and Longai Valley within it, Cachar ranked as one of the most important tea district of Assam. The sub division of Karimganj under the Sylhet District was created in 1878 with Karimganj town as its headquarter. The truncated Karimganj sub division was incorporated in the Cachar district of Assam as a full-fledged sub-division. This
sub-division was upgraded to a district on the 1st of July, 1983, vide Government Notification no.GAG15/83/1 dated June 1983 (Choudhuri 2002: 20).

Map–4

District of Cachar in Assam

2.8 Revisiting Partition Historiography and Rethinking Partition

The initial Partition historiography of India is political in nature which is largely concerned with the causes of the Partition and the role played by the great players involved in it. In recent years, there has been an essential surge to shift the course of the Partition from the causes to its catastrophic consequences. Hence, a large number of creative literatures have been springing up to explore the human reality of the Partition which is largely drawn out from oral testimonies and personal memories. Thus the voices of ordinary people affected by the Partition have been recovered to sensitively explore people’s history which hitherto remained unattended in official historiography. “There is a fair amount of scholarly agreement that partition occurred not because Hindus and Muslims could not live together, but because the elite of the two communities could not agree to power-sharing” (Ramdas 2010:316).

In the official Partition historiography in India, the violence orchestrated by the state machinery largely remained invisible. Rather, the violence between Hindus and Muslims were projected as the natural outcome of age-old Hindu-Muslim conflict. Such projection particularly focused Muslims as a homogeneous community culturally different from the Hindus. But the literary writings on Partition and the oral interviews that were conducted in the course of this study restore the people’s voice wherein the voice of communal hate, terror and violence was noticeably absent. Oral accounts of myriad experiences were reinforced in enriched community life and shared social and cultural space. But the associations and bonding consolidated through centuries had been snapped abruptly creating two countries though the people remained the same.

Partition was not a historical event that ended in 1947 but its consequences are wide-ranging. We could reasonably argue that Partition is an unfinished agenda, the repercussions of which have deeper ramifications into the lives of individuals and the nation in post-colonial India (Chatterjee 1999: Markovis 2003: Butalia 2007). Ritu Menon observes that “although the Partition of India is no longer a ‘current’ conflict so to speak, the processes that were set in
Partition left a fractured legacy in the society and culture of the subcontinent. The current resurgence of religious violence, ethnic and communal strife, Ram-Janambhumi-Babri-Masjid imbroglio, the Gujrat carnage, massacres of Sikhs in 1984, violence in India’s North East, three wars with its neighbour, the devastating conflict over Kashmir, increasingly troubled relationship between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh etc. reverberates the legacy of the Partition.

The nuclear power race between the two countries was the bitterest legacy of the Partition. Asish Nandy, describes the ideology of nuclear arms based security as ‘the most depraved, shameless and costly pornography of our times’ which ‘can not be judged only by the canons of international relations, geopolitics, political sociology or ethics.’ Instead, Nandy looks upon nuclearism as a ‘well known, identifiable, psycho-pathological syndrome’ (Nandy cited in Tan and Kudaisya 2000:221). The inability of ruling elites to accommodate democratic values and inequality in resource sharing echoes in the policy-making in post-colonial India. In the process, many do not have access to resources and perpetually suffer as victims of discrimination.

Partition created permanent division between the communities. Many people believe that Partition had permanently demarcated the population of the subcontinent, where the Muslims belonged to Pakistan and Hindus belonged to India. This perception led to marginalisation and at times intense sufferings of the minorities across the borders. Pakistan historian Mubarak Ali has observed that “creating and maintaining confrontational structure in an active political and social process to ensure that India becomes and remains Pakistan’s enemy and Pakistan becomes and remains India’s enemy” (Kothari and Mian 2010: 5). Such feelings have multi-dimensional effects -- like stagnation in trade and business, diversion of development fund in defence and an encompassing communal hatred that pervades the three successive nations created from the same womb in which the people are strikingly similar.
The supposedly rigid division between the communities was culminated with Sylhet referendum that was reflected in the oral interviews in which many of the respondents expressed that the division of the natives of Sylhet into Hindus and Muslims on the eve of the referendum covertly polarised the civilian population of the post-colonial Barak Valley. Since a large number of refugees migrated to Cachar to escape communal violence in their native land in Sylhet/East Pakistan in an almost devastating condition leaving behind their reasonably organised lives and given their traumatic experience as refugees, the Hindu-Muslim relation in Barak Valley has been turned very sharp. “Partition severely affected the people of Barak Valley wherein the Hindu-Muslim division had been sharp, where the boundary of a sub-division transformed into an international boundary” (Hussain 2010: 57).

The recent resurgence of literature essentially reflects the continuous urge of the people across the border for bridging Partition. Recently, in one such work Bridging Partition: People’s Initiatives for peace Between India and Pakistan edited by Smitu Kothari and Zia Mian with Kamla Bhasin, A.H Nayyar and Mohammad Tahseen consists of a series of articles reflecting peace initiative and urge for reconciliation across the borders of India and Pakistan. In one such laudable initiative for peace lies in Citizens Diplomacy Movement that has embraced thousand of activists, scholars, business people and retired government officials with interest in issues ranging from national security, cross border conflict, education, ecology, the rights of women, minorities etc. (Kothari and Mian 2010: 3). Kuldeep Nayar who contributed articles in Nawe-e-waqt, Nation, Dawn, Kabren etc. writes, “I have been appearing in Pakistan for the last twenty-five years to foster people- to- people contact and neighbourliness. I am, however, surprised at how my columns that appear in India have come to be accepted by the people in Pakistan. This confirms my belief that people in the two countries are not removed from each other in thinking. Democracy and secularism, which I emphasise in my writings, are what they want” (Nayar 2010: 88).

Oral interviews that were conducted with the Partition victims of Cachar are premised on a strong urge for reconciliation. One of my respondents
struggling insistently as a victim of Partition in Dohaliya refugee area in Karimganj district is hopeful of reconciliation of the people of the three countries—India, Pakistan and Bangladesh who are largely similar. One of the songs composed by him reflects the urge of reconciliation:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Amra Abar Milito hob} & \quad \text{Jati Dharma Bhule} \\
\text{Manush hoye Janmechi} & \quad \text{Man aar hush niye} \\
\text{Bhulte hobe mithya bhibhed,} & \quad \text{hinsha, bidesh, krodh} \\
\text{Sarthanneshi rajnitir kobol} & \quad \text{theke hazar mile Dur.} \\
\text{Manush hoye Janmechi bhai} & \quad \text{Hindu Muslim Noi} \\
\text{Manobotar Theke boro} & \quad \text{Aar kuno Dharma nai}
\end{align*}
\]

(My interview with Ranabir Deb on 14 December 2005)

(We cherish to reconcile irrespective of Community or religion

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{We are born as humans} & \quad \text{Not as Hindus or Muslims} \\
\text{There is no religion} & \quad \text{But Humanity} \\
\text{We must be cautious not to} & \quad \text{be trapped again by the divide and rule} \\
\text{of the self-centred politicians} & \quad \text{[translation mine].}
\end{align*}
\]

In view of the above, we could reasonably argue that cultural exchange and matured politics could contribute in overcoming the misunderstanding and could make real strides for a healthy neighbourly relationship among the people of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

2.9 Summary

The creation of India and Pakistan on religious basis was an abrupt transition from a composite society to vivisected regions. The failure of power-sharing by the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League and the British instigation of ‘divide and rule’ policy deteriorated Hindu-Muslim relation at the political level and consequently many parts of colonial India were rocked by wild communal violence. In view of unending stream of violence and apprehending a possible civil war, Partition was considered a viable solution to resolve the ongoing conflict. But the follow up incidents clearly indicated that Partition created more problems than it had solved.
The arbitrarily drawn border by the Partition Plan of 1947 was a part of the process that actually began with the reckless reorganisation of boundaries by the colonial state that paid no heed to the sentiment and aspiration of the people. Thus the First Partition of Bengal with the incorporation of Bengali speaking Sylhet district of Bengal to Assam gradually sowed the seeds of conflict between the Bengalis and the Assamese in colonial Assam. In fact, this had serious ramifications into the lives of Bengali Hindus in post-colonial Assam. They continue to face discrimination and marginalisation as a linguistic minority in a largely Asamiya-speaking Assam. The Second Partition of Bengal diluted the nationalist movement and eventually created a rift between the Hindus and the Muslims. On the eve of Independence, the Bengali-speaking Muslim majority Sylhet district located in Hindu-majority Assam was sliced off arbitrarily by a political decision even if the people of the district enjoyed an enriched inter-community life for generations. But they were suddenly redefined as Hindus and Muslims on the eve of the referendum. The Bengali Hindus of Assam who so long fought for reunion with Bengal cherished their desire to stay in Assam in India. But the verdict of the referendum was reinforced in amalgamation of Sylhet in favour of Pakistan except three and half thanas that were retained in Assam. The Bengalis found the referendum as ‘betrayal and slur’ in the moment when they were eager to reap the fruits of freedom after prolonged struggle.

The Partition of Sylhet could not fulfill the dream of a more homogeneous Assam with the migration of a significant number of Bengali Hindus to Brahmaputra Valley, Surma Valley and hill areas of Assam. The impact of the Partition in North Eastern part of the country is severe. The hastily drawn boundary was not sustainable wherein physical boundaries created multiple ‘mental borders’ and cracks in ‘corporate livings’ of the communities. In view of rising intolerance, ethnic and religious strife, we need to re-think Partition in the context of the legacy it left behind. Since the people enjoyed an enriched inter-community life in many parts of the country before independence and Partition and shared the strikingly similar culture, literature and language, there is an urge for reconciliation on both sides of the border.
Notes:

1. Irrespective of religious identity of being Hindu and Muslim, the Bengalis largely shared the same socio-cultural mosaic of Bengal. They celebrated their own Bengali new year on 15 April. Poets like Tagore were regarded with pride by all Bengalis irrespective of religious affiliation (Lapierre and Collins 2004:135).

2. See special article in Statesman (11 December 2010) B.K Bhattacharyya raised a pertinent question 'had Jinnah been secular, he could have prevented the exodus and protected the minorities who constituted 30 percent of the total population of East Bengal at the time of Partition. The process of grabbing the properties of Hindus began from the very day of Pakistan’s birth. The East Bengal (Emergency Requisition of Property Act, 1948) was enacted during Jinnah’s tenure as the Governor-General of Pakistan.

3. The arbitrarily drawn border created a vulnerable enclaves like Chitmahal. These are the territories that belong to one country but are in the control of another. Thus the inhabitants of such Chitmahal are denied their right to citizenship, nationality etc. (Butalia 2003:117-120).

4. In the Census of 1872 Sylhet was a district of Dacca division of Bengal land the Muslims constituted 49.67% of the total population, i.e. out of total population of 1,719,539 Muslims constituted 854.131. By 1941, the percentage of Muslims increased to 60.7% out of total population of 3,116,602.

5. The British embarked on territorial redistribution of Colonial India for their own interests. Though the First Partition of Bengal in 1874 and the creation of Chief Commissioner’s Province was grounded on administrative convenience wherein Assam could be developed but it was actually carried out to develop industries like tea, oil and coal—all dominated by whites (Sarkar 1983:106). They had other visions of territorial redistribution. Since the creation of the Chief Commissionership in 1874, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Chief
Commissioners of Burma and Assam and military experts proposed in 1892 due to strategic and administrative reasons, the transfer of the Chittagong division and the Lushai Hills to Assam. But the proposal remained unimplemented (Barpujari ed.1977: 177).

6. The Sylhet case suffered a double handicap; it was a non-Assamese district in Assam on the one hand and a Bengali speaking district outside Bengal, on the other. As a result its partition and consequent plight was recognized and addressed neither by the Assamese nor by the Bengalis of Bengal (Bhattacharjee 2009: 78).

7. It is pertinent to mention that in the pre-referendum period, Muslim League was not very strong in Sylhet. Mainul Haque Choudhury of Sylhet Muslim League was disappointed when a majority of the executive members of the district committee of the League was absent in a crucial meeting that was convened to prepare a agenda of action following the viceroy's declaration because some of the League members felt "betrayed" by this decision, there was a clear dissention among its members (Chakrabarty 2002: 340).

8. Arguments were raised in the Assam assembly highlighting the complaints of delay in payment of wages by the officers entrusted to implement the schemes. The loans which were given to these people varied between Rs.30 to Rs.200. Consequently, the people were at the brink of starvation. Moreover, the people in the border areas were dependent on cash crops and there was a proposal that those people would be involved in food cultivation. The sudden switching over from one kind of occupation to another affected their livelihood to a significant extent (Government of Assam 1954).