Chapter - 8
Summary and Conclusion

The Partition of Sylhet and consequent massive forced migration of population to Cachar find little expression in the existing history and creative literature. In this academic exercise, we have analysed elaborately the causes that forced the Partition-induced displaced Bengali Hindus to migrate from their native land—Sylhet /East Pakistan to overwhelmingly Bengali speaking district of Cachar in Assam. The study also simultaneously looks into the response of the host society and the government in relief, resettlement and rehabilitation of the refugees who migrated to Cachar. An attempt was made to review the assimilation and integration of the refugees into the host society and the community.

In order to comprehend and analyse the complex issue of migration of the Partition-displaced Bengali Hindus to Cachar we ventured into available primary and secondary sources that were useful and relevant. Therefore, wide-ranging archival records, official reports, documents and private manuscripts etc. were analysed to understand the various issues relating to the migration of a large number of people and their experiences in rehabilitation and integration into Cachar. Secondary sources relevant to the work were also extensively studied and analysed. The newspaper reports and pamphlets specifically around the issues of Partition and displacement were useful to understand the genesis and nature of the migration and other related issues. The newspaper reports also provided significant inputs in understanding the relation of the refugees with the host society and the government.

Given the nature of migration which not only generated physical difficulties but also inflicted severe mental trauma to a large number of individuals and families, the archival records were found to be inadequate to understand the experiences and feelings of these distressed refugees. The data was, therefore, supplemented with the lived experiences of the refugees extracted
through interviews and informal interactive discussion with them. Oral interviews enabled us to understand the feelings, memories and experiences of the victims who lived through the trials and tribulations of Partition. A micro level study was conducted to register the experiences of refugees still languishing in the Central Destitute Home at Silchar in Cachar district.

The study has been divided into eight inter-related chapters. In the first chapter, we have stated the statement of the problem, objectives, methodology scope, significance, hypotheses and limitation of the study. We also briefly reviewed the relevant secondary literature pertinent to the study. In addition, we have also clarified some conceptual issues involved in this study.

In the second chapter, we have found that the creation of India and Pakistan on religious basis was a violent transition from a composite society to a vivisected region. The Two-nation theory on the basis of which India was divided lost its credibility within two decades of freedom and Partition with the creation of Bangladesh as an independent country. It is pertinent to mention that in many cases the conflict that swept colonial India was primarily caused by the colonial policies that paid no heed to the aspiration of the people. Thus the First Partition of Bengal was reinforced by the colonial state for economic reason. Hence the Bengali speaking district of Sylhet which was historically, linguistically, geographically and ethnically an integral part of Bengal was sliced off arbitrarily and incorporated into a distinct socio-culturally different Assam which eventually invoked conflicts between the Bengalis and the Assamese. The Second Partition of Bengal has historical significance. It curved the growing solidarity and political consciousness that emerged with nationalist movement gained momentum in India. Thus the British divided the two colonial subjects of two Bengal according to the religion they professed. The movement started for the freedom from the colonial rule was diluted with reactionary communal forces instigated by the British policy of “Divide and Rule” Invariably, these forces weakened the nationalist movement and eventually ignited wild communal violence in many parts of the country. On the eve of the independence, Assam which was a Hindu majority province experienced a split and a referendum was
conducted in the Muslim majority Sylhet district to incorporate it either in India or Pakistan. Significantly, the demand for referendum was not demanded by the natives of Sylhet who enjoyed an enriched inter-community relationship in their native land before referendum was thrust upon them. The result of the referendum was pronounced in favour of its joining to Pakistan except three and half thanas to be retained in Assam to establish land corridor with Tripura and Lushai hills.

The impact of Partition of Sylhet was visibly severe in North East India. Assam might have lost negligible acres of land due to Partition but it had to bear a substantial burden with severe market disruption, total isolation and loss of communication and infrastructure. Partition was implemented to put an end to the communal violence and to resolve the supposedly deteriorated Hindu-Muslim relations. But instead of solving the problems it created more problems. It is found that many of the problems that engulfed Post-colonial India are the legacy of the Partition.

In the third chapter we found that the relocation of border with the Partition of Sylhet triggered off a huge migration of population to Cachar. In the wake of Partition and its aftermath, the Partition-induced migrants were categorised as forced migrants due to their compulsion to flee their motherland in situation of violence or perceived threat of violence. After analysing Census Reports, oral histories and available literature, we found that forced migration began to Cachar during and after Noakhali violence of 1946. During independence such migration remained fluid but reached its peak after communal violence in 1950. In subsequent years also the migration continued due to the introduction of passport system in 1952, deteriorating food situation and consequent persecution of minorities in 1956, communal violence in 1964 and during Indo- Pakistan war in 1965.

During and after Partition, migration took place primarily due to deepening fear of debasing social status of Hindus in the Muslim state of Pakistan. After Partition the Government of Pakistan enacted discriminatory property acts which dispossessed the Hindu minorities of their ownership rights
over houses and land. A large scale requisition of Hindu houses took place in Sylhet/ East Pakistan which compelled the Bengali Hindus to leave the land of their forefathers. Thus the propelling factors of migration of a significant number of Bengali Hindus to Cachar were: cultural insecurities, economic dispossession, direct hit of physical violence, fear of persecution, protection of honour of women, migration of zamindars and leaders from the village etc. In case of government servants option was given to serve either India or Pakistan.

Among the Partition-displaced, the Sylheti Hindus who migrated to Cachar since the referendum were a majority. It was found that the fleeing refugees took multiple mode of communication in life-threatening situation of engulfing communal violence in East Pakistan. Due to insensible government on both sides of the border, the whole process of flow remained painful. This was further compounded by the natural calamities like flood. From the oral interviews and newspaper reports it is found that there was inadequate arrangement in transit camps set up in the border areas. The torture of ansars in check posts compounded the sufferings of the refugees. The plight of the most vulnerable refugees like women, children, old and infirm was invariably severe. Thus in the transit the refugees were almost devastated.

In the fourth chapter, the useful insights that we have drawn from the oral interviews help us to construct the narratives based on the lives of the refugees—before and after the Partition. The freezing silence that prevailed over the arrival of refugees in Cachar and their rehabilitation and eventual integration was perhaps due to fear of further conflicts and the traumatic memory of the refugees. In the interview that was conducted in the course of this study or informal interactive discussion, the refugees expressed their feelings of an enriched inter-community life in their native place in Sylhet. The religion-based identity did not essentially determine the free interaction of the communities. Rather they cherished their identity as Sylhetis in the canvas of harmony in their native land. In such an ambience, the intrusion of cruel violence convulsed them and created an enigmatic situation which compelled them to flee in search of a secured space. The violent displacement from their native home and painstaking effort in
Summary and Conclusion

Cachar since May 1950 and it continued up to 1953 while the rehabilitation work of other districts of Assam was with the Assam government. Keeping in mind on voters, the Assam Government took over the rehabilitation of refugees in Cachar grudgingly after initial reluctance.

Another inadequacy of rehabilitation was that the newly formed government after independence faced the crisis with nascent economy and was not equipped to handle such a magnitude of migration. It is pertinent to mention that the government was not specific about the terms — relief, resettlement and rehabilitation and quite often these three terms were used synonymously. The difficulties in conceptualisation prevented the government to formulate the policies clearly. The weaknesses in implementing the schemes, insensitivity and apathy of the government, the corrupt practices of the relief officials compounded the plight of the refugees. A large number of refugees could not restore their livelihood due to lack of support and had to part with their traditional livelihood.

It is found that the government's policy of rehabilitation was primarily concentrated on camp refugees that prevented a large number of non-camp refugees to avail rehabilitation benefits. Even the camp refugees suffered a lot and many died untimely as a result of the apathy of the government. It is found that many of the middle class refugees were reluctant to acknowledge their refugee status and plunged into the grim struggle of survival without taking any patronage from the government. But a large number of refugees had no economic means or support structure to fend for themselves under the circumstances. So they had no option but to avail whatever relief measures were provided by the government.

The care and hospitality which the post-colonial Indian Government failed to deliver was compensated to a large extent by the humanitarian assistance of the non-state actors who extended all possible help to the distressed refugees. A large number of middle class and lower middle class refugees rehabilitated themselves with the assistance of their kith and kin. Eventually, Cachar District Refugee Board came into existence to articulate the demands of the refugees and proffered various memorandums to the government and organised them in
processions, strikes, and demonstrations etc. A large number of individuals spent sleepless nights to provide physical and moral succour to the refugees in their attempt to rebuild their lives.

In the seventh chapter, it is found that, a strong propelling factor of migration of Bengali Hindu displaced before and after Partition and especially after communal violence in East Pakistan was to protect the honour of women. A large number of women migrated to Cachar from Sylhet/ East Pakistan and the number of destitute women were high. Women who are the victim of patriarchy in normal times suffered perversely as vulnerable refugees since their displacement to their attempt of integration in Cachar. The government set up three destitute homes in Cachar to shelter the destitute women but their swelling number virtually led them to squat in the verandh of many household and offices in a pitiable condition. They experienced extreme drudgery in rebuilding lives in hostile jungle terrain etc. where the camps or rehabilitation sites were set up. The insensitivity of the government towards the refugees claimed many lives including many children.

In many cases, the relief officials misbehaved and even treated them inhumanely. Even if they suffered a lot, they responded to the catastrophe of Partition with utmost dedication to reconstruct home and had to bear the responsibility of other vulnerable refugees like old, infirm and children. Some of them could not enter into marriage due to “lack of resources” or often crossed “marriageable age” in the attempt to rebuild families. Their sufferings and sacrifice was not recognised in male centered narratives and glossed over to silence. In our attempt to retrieve the experiences of women victimised by Partition we found the voice of single women was relatively confident than the housewives.

It is pertinent to mention that the refugees experienced Partition when they were eagerly waiting to reap the fruits of freedom. Many of them were in the forefront of the freedom struggle but virtually became refugees only to suffer pain, trauma, humiliation and homelessness. They lost their land to a political decision that paid no attention to their emotions and sentiments. The
redistribution of territory was undertaken without understanding the implications of population displacement and related problems.

In the wake of independence and after-math, the Partition of Assam evoked a lot of controversies. The Bengali Hindus reacted to the Partition as the long cherished desire of Assamese to push Sylhet outside Assam. The holding of referendum was debated in most literature as a “betrayal and a slur” in the history of India. The result of the referendum did not reflect the real voice of the people because the natives of Sylhet enjoyed an amicable inter-community life in pre-referendum period. On the eve of the referendum the district population was communally polarised to incorporate it either in India or Pakistan. To a large section of Bengali Hindus, the separation of Sylhet was due to the Assam Congress and a section of the Asamaiya elites who made all efforts to oust Sylhet outside Assam.

The failure of the Assamese elites to understand the plural landscape of Assam has brought multiple cracks in the “corporate living” of the communities. The Partition-displaced Bengali Hindus were looked as threat to swamp the culture of the Assamese. The valley jealousy between the largely Asamiya speaking Brahmaputra Valley and overwhelmingly Bengali speaking Surma Valley compounded with the migration of a significant number of refugees. This in fact, failed to fulfill the dream of a homogeneous Asamiya homeland. Consequently, the Bengali Hindu refugees faced marginalisation in the largely Asamiya speaking Assam.

The fluid definitions between the immigrants, economic migrants, refugees etc. could not truly determine the Partition-induced Bengali Hindu refugees and they were subjected to discrimination. Many of them due to their inability to produce refugee registration certificates, camp cards ‘border slips’ etc. which they either lost in the run or could not preserve due to their ignorance are branded as D-Voters, immigrants etc. Hence, they are forced to be displaced fiercely from their adopted home also and many elderly refugees are also not exception to it. As a whole, Partition devastated their lives altogether.
Partition altered many social norms and age-old traditions. The Joint family system which was the dominant mode of family structure in India disintegrated after the Partition. The individual family also faced division and disintegration as the members were dispersed in different places in search of livelihood. While economic hardship and social constraints were reflected in the struggle for sustenance of many lower middle class and lower class refugees, the trauma of truncated families haunt the upper and middle class refugees. The generations affected by the Partition have dwindled but the after-effects of the massive catastrophe continue to haunt the present generation. The arbitrarily drawn border created many ‘mental borders’ and continues to affect inter-community relations. It incited more and more ethnic conflicts and religious fundamentalism which plagued the entire subcontinent. A long sixty four years have elapsed since their migration but there still exists a nostalgic yearning for their lost native land. Some other refugees remember their home and homeland with a sense of loss. Since a large number of refugees shared a strikingly similar culture, literature and language before independence and Partition, there is an urge of reconciliation across the border.