Origins of the Movement

The idea of establishing an integrated eastern India frontier province consisting of parts of Assam and Manipur, was a brain-child of the frustrated Bengali elites, who were allegedly discriminated against and suppressed by the local Assamese majority in the heterogeneous province of Assam. The movement for the formation of Purbachal Pradesh on the eastern border of Assam, with a view to giving accommodation to the displaced Hindus of Sylhet and East Bengal (now in Bangladesh) soon began gaining popularity.

After Independence, the Bengalis of Assam were reduced to a tiny minority because the thickly populated district of Sylhet became a part of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). As a result of the partition, the proportion of the Assamese people in the local population of Assam had risen from about a fifth to one-third. But the Bengalis, though much reduced in percentage, formed the largest single group in the province, particularly so because of
the influx of the refugees after the partition. ¹

The Bengalis soon began to develop and suffer from a sense of minority complex. The Bengalis did not like the administrative and cultural domination of the Assamese. Above all the imagined superiority complex of the Assamese made the Bengali minority to think more about their community's integrity and safety. To save their identity they planned to arouse the sentiments of other minority groups who were inhabited in different parts of the Assam province.

Like the other minority groups in Assam, some of the political leaders of Manipur were also enthusiastically moved by the cause of the Bengalis, the largest minority in the province. The Manipuri political leaders came out in support of the demand for a united eastern frontier province. The proposed 'Purbachal Pradesh' was to comprise of some Hill districts, frontier areas or tracts, plain districts, and states of the Assam province. ²

² Ibid.
According to Professor J.K. Choudhury, the Purbachal Pradesh could have comprised of hill districts - the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the districts including Shillong, the Garo Hills District, the Lushai Hills District, the Naga Hills District, the Mikir Hills, parts of Nowgong and the Sibsagar district except the mouzas of Barpathar and Sarupathar. In the frontier tracts, it could include the Sadiya and Balipara frontier tracts, the Tirap Frontier Tract with the Lakhimpur Frontier and the Naga tribal areas. In the plain districts, the district of Cachar including Karimganj and the north Cachar sub-divisions. The district of Goalpara was also to be included. Further he felt that Purbachal could be formed with such states like Tripura, Manipur, Cooch-Behar and the Khasi states (including the above mentioned areas). But he did realise that it would finally depend on the will of the people of these states whether they would like to join Purbachal. His argument was that 'Tripura, Manipur or Cooch-Behar are not such states according to the Government of India as can stand by themselves and

3. Ibid, p. 11.
bear the burden of a full-fledged modern-democratic administration; nor are they geographically continuous to amalgamate with a view to forming one viable unit. The only alternative left to them is, therefore, a merger ... But the formation of the proposed Pradesh would have resulted in the domination of the backward groups or tribes by the Bengalis and this would not have been palatable to the non-Bengali segments of the population.

Professor Choudhury's arguments were, however, neither cogent nor convincing. Tripura and Manipur have been constituted as different states. Not to talk of the small area which could not form a separate state, even today there are many small countries like Maldives, Sri Lanka, etc., who are even sovereign and independent. It is not the area but the capacity of the administrative efficiency which determines viability of a state. One cannot, however, fail to appreciate Professor Choudhury's plea that the people of every district and state should be allowed to have their own languages and script at the primary stage of education, with Hindustani as a compulsory language. The

4. Ibid.
The Constitution has assured educational and cultural rights to the linguistic minorities, and the national educational policy is also similarly oriented.

The formation of a new Purbachal might not be difficult, provided the people concerned willed it. The problem, however, was whether a strong and an efficient state could have been formed including all the components instead of dividing Assam into pieces. Perhaps a demand for more democratic decentralization in Assam might have been better. But Professor Choudhury seemed to believe that the Assamese and the Bengalis could never come to terms as if they had some deep-rooted animosities and irreconcilable aspirations. The Bengali elites, however, were not unnaturally apprehensive about their position and future under the new set-up as some of the Assamese leaders had given the impression as if they should like to liquidate Manipur culture, literature, script, language and customs. As a matter of fact, such leaders might not have had the slightest consideration for the minorities, whose demand then was to introduce Hindustani as State language. Referring to the vicious step taken by
the Assam Government to introduce Assamese language in all the schools and the colleges of Manipur, Laishram Joychandra Singh of the Manipur State Congress sharply reacted: 'If the Assamese brush aside this logic of facts and stick to the imposition of Assamese as State language, Manipur cannot come into Assam'. It was, therefore, in the interest of both the Assamese and the Manipuris that there should be some safeguards for the proper development of the culture and language of the minorities. The declaration that the Assam Government would have Assamese only as the provincial language made the Bengali people more excited.

The Bengali questioned the majority of the Assamese in Assam in view of the fact that they were only about two and half million, whereas the other different groups formed the six and half million of


They further foresaw that if the Assamese brush aside this logic of facts and stick to the imposition of Assamese as the State language, Manipur could not come into Assam. Then in the interest of both Manipur and Assam a new administrative province should come into existence.
the whole Assamese population. All communities had the same rights in the state and could not accept domination by any one of them. But the fact that the Assamese enjoyed the monopoly in the government jobs was highlighted by Choudhury.\textsuperscript{7}

There appeared to be some psychological misunderstanding between the two major groups and the Bengali elites openly criticised the anti-Bengali policy of the Assam Government. The Assam Government on the other hand did not relent and refused to provide settlement facilities to the Hindu Bengali refugees who had come from East Pakistan. B.C. Purkayastha however admitted that '... Assam with its heterogeneous population and undeveloped regions need the Bengali talent for the development of the province. However, Bengali talent is temporarily reserved for Purbachal'.\textsuperscript{8} The Assamese had burnt down and looted the houses of the Bengalis who had been the inhabitants from the time immemorial.

\textsuperscript{7} Birendra Chandra Purkayastha, 'Purbachala A Home For Pakistan Refugees', \textit{The Hindustan Standard}, October 31, 1948, p. 11.

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid, p. 5.
Nalini Kanta Nag condemned the 'insular parochialism' of the Assamese to eliminate the non-Assamese, particularly the Bengalis from the province of Assam. He vehemently criticised the Assamese for suppressing the Bengalis politically, economically, linguistically and culturally. The specific complaints, which he pointed out were the disallowance of suffrage to the Bengalis, no appointment of the qualified Bengalis to the vacant posts, no contract from the Assam Government, the ban on starting new industries and business, the forcible ejection of lands, the stoppage of the grants-in-aid to the Bengali institutions, etc. Nalini Kanta Nag again condemned the Assam Government for 'a ruthless policy of extermination of Bengalis'.

9. Ibid.

10. Chaudhury felt that there were frantic efforts to exclude non-Assamese from the voter's list. This cultural, the economic and political conflict was likely to grow and lead to the disastrous consequences unless checked in time and it could be checked only by separating the non-Assamese areas from Assam. Ibid, August 4, 1948, p. 8.

11. N.K. Nag, 'A Plea For Purbachal Province' Ibid, October 31, 1948, p. 11. Nag foresaw that there could never be a compromise on this score since a change of heart should precede any compromise, but the other side was lacking any desire for this.
In view of the above facts the Bengalis were very much irritated. As a matter of fact, the idea for the formation of a new eastern India frontier province was the brain-child of the Bengalis. The Bengali elite did not appreciate the pressure put by the Hindu Bengali refugees on the Assam Government to accept them as refugees. The main question was that how these landless refugees would be given settlement in the land of Assam, as Sylhet had already ceded to Pakistan. It gave birth to a movement which spread over the other eastern states of India. Some leaders from Cachar, Tripura, Manipur in cooperation with each other formed Purbachal Sangathan Committee and discussed the matter in order to find a solution to bring a peaceful atmosphere in the eastern region of India.

The Calcutta branch of the Purbachal Pradesh Sangathan Committee and the Cachar District Congress leaders also supported at a meeting held in Calcutta on October 25, 1948, the resolution adopted by the West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee for the creation of a separate and a new Congress province with Manipur, Tripura, Cachar and Lushai Hills. 12

12. Ibid, October 27, 1948, p. 3.
On June 30, 1948, the demand for the creation of a separate Congress province having a separate administrative unit was put forward before the Congress Working Committee through a sub-committee. The deputation headed by Kalipada Mukherjee, Secretary of the Bengal Province Congress Committee, included Anil Chanda, the Principal, Paresh Chaudhury and Dilip Chakravarty of the Cachar District Congress Committee. It contended that 'this area have no cultural or linguistic link with the rest of Assam and even geographically is separated by a high range of hills.'

The argument, however, did not carry much weight. From the foregoing statement we can draw a conclusion that the movement was sectarian in character. Assuming that there are no cultural and linguistic similarities among the Assamese and the tribal people it is worthwhile to examine to what extent this could be found in case of Purbachal Pradesh, with Manipuris, Cacharis, Bengalis, Tripuris and Lushais having so very distinct cultures and languages.

14. Ibid.
In a meeting held on August 22, 1948, the Cachar District Congress Committee demanded a separate administrative Congress Province with Manipur, Tripura and Lushai Hills. And a body named the Purbachal Province Organising Committee was also formed with Srijut Paresh Chandra Choudhury as the President and Nani Goswami and Rajendra Bhattacharya as the Joint Secretaries. The aim and object of the body was to ask for a separate Congress province. They insisted that the formation of a new province would be the only solution for the problem of upliftment of this backward area. It was further stated that 'the draft scheme ... not only solves the vexed question of integrating the states but also assures complete autonomy for the districts and states in all internal matters to be administered through District or State Councils as envisaged in the sixth schedule of the draft constitution of India.' It was pointed out that every component unit would not be able to maintain its own culture and language at the district level, until and unless it could arrange for a separate and an independent university and a High Court.

15. Ibid, p. 2.
The ultimate future was to be decided on the principle of self-determination.  

Professor Jogendra Kumar Choudhury repeatedly emphasized the hard need of an east India frontier province. He tried to convince the people through many lectures on the burning topic of Purbachal Pradesh. He emphasised the point that it would increase the spirit of the Indian nationalism and moreover, it would help in safeguarding people's different cultures and languages. He was of the opinion that the proposed Purbachal Pradesh should be centrally administered. A resolution in appreciation and approval of the steps taken by the Cachar District Committee was unanimously adopted at a meeting presided over by Khan Saheb Rashid Ali Laskar, ex-Member of the Legislative Council.

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16. Ibid. It was reported that there were indications that the authorities of Manipur (and Tripura) would support this move.

17. Ibid, November 2, 1948, p. 3.


19. Ibid.
Causes of Failure

The Purbachal movement failed to arouse public opinion and was nipped in the bud mainly because it was undesirable cry for an unreasonable demand. The Congress Working Committee at its meeting held on November 19, 1948, turned down the request for a separate Purbachal Pradesh.

The Government considered the demand an outcome of the anti-Assamese feelings and never paid any serious attention to it. The demand was emotional and the justification given by N.K. Nag in his article was one-sided. He got involved in petty politics and, it appears, was himself not very clear about it. He intentionally ignored the different components of the tribal groups of Manipur, who formed a considerable share of population. These tribals hardly knew Bengali language. As in the case of the Manipuris, it is a fact that they may be knowing Bengali script,

but it is not necessary that they should understand Bengali language. It would be the same case with the Lushais. The Bengali language would be quite foreign to them. However, Nalikanta Nag rightly pointed out the similarities of religion between the Hindu Manipuris and the Bengalis who followed Vaishnavism. But he forgot to mention about the religion of the hill people of Manipur. Hence, his belief that religion would be able to bring unity also did not carry much weight. If we look back to the history we would be able to recall many incidents where religion had failed to play a unifying role. Therefore, Nag's force of argument does not appear to be fully logical.

To take up the case of Professor Debratta Datta's views supporting the proposal of forming a north-east India frontier province. He was in favour of immediate creation of a north-east India frontier province. He concluded that 'The Manipuris too, are afraid of the policy of Assamisation of the present Government of Assam, and hence they are reluctant to be tagged into Assam. If Manipur is put into Assam, it will be

21. Ibid.
done defying the popular will and offering opportunities to our enemy. The mere possibility of placing the state within the Assam has made the Manipur restless. 22

As the political propaganda was in high tone, a few of the leaders of Manipur were afraid of domination by the Assamese. Some of them openly supported the movement of Purbachal Pradesh. Laishram Joychandra Singh, one of the Congress leaders of Manipur, explained how the idea of a new state in the north-east India came to be highlighted. In his opinion it was purely a linguistic issue. 23 The Congress leaders of Manipur were tooth and nail against the imposition of Assamese language which was being introduced in all the schools and the colleges of Manipur. On the other hand, they were in favour of Hindustani as the State language of Assam. Only this could bring about a compromise on the language issue, the Manipur State appeared to be prepared to come out from


the province of Assam and form a new administrative unit, i.e. the north-east India frontier province.24

The Assam Bengal Manipuri Society, Cachar District Congress Committee, Congress East Bengal Minority Rehabilitation and Citizenship Right Committee (Cachar), and Mar Mongolian Federation also criticised Gopinath Bordoloi, Premier of Assam, for his anti-Purbachal policies. They jointly condemned his statement on the need to maintain unity as itself disruptive and unwanted.25

It was decided to send a delegation to Delhi to emphasize upon the Congress High Command indispensability of a separate congress administrative block. They proposed to submit a memorandum. The body passed a resolution in favour of Purbachal Pradesh consisting of Goalpara, Cooch-Behar, Garo Hills, Khasi Hills, Naga Hills, Lushai Hills, Cachar, Tripura state and State of Manipur. The meeting which was held at Gujrat Mansion in Bentick

24. Ibid.

25. They further said: 'Hon'ble Sri Bordoloi's undue stress on the 'indigenous' population and bespeaks of narrow parochialism that blatantly challenges all principles and policies pursued by the Indian National Congress and the ideals of Indian nationalism.' Ibid, October 22, 1948, p. 5.
street on November 6, 1948, appointed a Committee to mould public opinion in favour of this scheme.26

At the same time, a delegation of three men led by Gopinath Bordoloi with the intention to oppose the plan for Purbachal Province, left Gauhati for Delhi. It was to impress upon the Congress Working Committee for the inclusion of Cachar in the All India People's Conference Committee.27 It was learnt that another deputation from Cachar had left for Delhi with a view to pressurize the Congress Working Committee on the point of a new province.28

But nothing happened to this effect as the Assam Government strongly opposed the Purbachal movement. The Premier of Assam rejected the theory on the geographical strategic grounds. He considered this as a very unwise and disruptive move. However, he conceded that such an important matter should be decided by democratic means in accordance with the

27. Ibid, November 8, 1948, p. 3.
28. Ibid.
wishes of the people.\textsuperscript{29} An interesting aspect of the situation was that the Premier himself had been encouraging some organisations or persons to oppose the movement of Purbachal Pradesh. The body like ‘Cachar Kalyan Samiti’ became the forceful agent in propagating against the movement.\textsuperscript{30} It got encouragement from the side of the government of Assam.\textsuperscript{31}

The Assam Governor was also reportedly interested in seeing the movement fizzle out. It was alleged that Sir Akbar Hydari, Governor of Assam, was also singing to the tune of Bordoloi.\textsuperscript{32} He went

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    \item \textsuperscript{29} The Amrita Bazar Patrika (Calcutta), October 15, 1948, p. 7.
    \item \textsuperscript{30} On the other hand, Bidyapati Singh, one of the members of the legislative assembly, supporting the move for Purbachal Pradesh warned the people to be on their guard against false, mischievous and reactionary propaganda carried on by some organisations. The Hindustan Standard (Calcutta), November 2, 1948, p. 3.
    \item \textsuperscript{31} B.C. Purkayastha, ‘Purbachal - A Home for Pakistan Refugees’, Ibid, October 10, 1948, p. 11.
    \item \textsuperscript{32} Sir Akbar Hydari commented: ‘I refer to the canker of provincialism now beginning to infect our body politic. Unless it is cut out and that soon, it will foul the whole of our national life. In the end this growth will strangple it; it will bring about the Balkinisation of India. The only remedy is for us all to realise our mutual interdependence ...’ Ibid, August 17, 1948, p. 9.
\end{itemize}
out on tour with the purpose to dissuade the people from taking part in the movement of Purbachal Pradesh. He went to Silchar and sought the views of pleaders, and also Muktear Bar on the Purbachal Pradesh movement; and was visibly annoyed when he came to know that they had enthusiastically supported the idea of Purbachal Pradesh. Both the Governor and Brigadier Habibur Rahman advised the people to abandon the idea on the plea that smaller provincial units would only weaken the defence of the country.

The argument of strengthening the defence of the country, at the same time was used by Debratta Datta in favour of a separate province. The argument appeared to carry some weight when he remarked that the 'Discontent in these frontier districts is at such a high pitch at the present movement that our enemy will find a very fertile ground here for fomenting.' He further alleged that there were some fascist in outlook among the Assamese who

33. Ibid.
34. Ibid, October 23, 1948, p. 2.
considered themselves having a close racial affinity with the Burmese, and looked upon them as their spiritual home.\textsuperscript{36} He referred to the Communist movement which really threatened the internal peace and tranquility of the country, particularly, in the north-east India region. The neighbouring countries like Burma and Malaya had become victims of the Communist insurgency. The Government appeared to share some of his apprehensions and the closure of the Palel-Tummu road by an Ordinance of the Assam Government, was not without significance.

Datta recalled that the Burmese reign of Manipur as not an event of 'distant past' and felt stories of Burmese infiltration into Cachar and Upper Assam are yet fresh enough to be exploited by our enemy by raising the cry of the revival of old bonds.\textsuperscript{37} Taking into consideration all these factors, Datta suggested that the only solution would be the formation of a new province directly to be administered by the Centre.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
The Assam Government, however, never seriously took up the demand for Purbachal Pradesh and turned down it as impracticable. It appears that both the Assam Government as well as the Central Government had fully understood the game of the Bengali elites, who were guided more by their personal communal whims, than anything else. With the passage of time the problem got complicated. Then the matter was taken up by the Central Congress Committee. In a resolution adopted by the Congress Working Committee on September 8, 1948, the proposal for the formation of Purbachal Pradesh in the north-eastern India was strongly criticized and outrightly rejected. The Committee at the same time promised to multi-culture character of the province of Assam. Also the protection of diverse languages was assured. Moreover the languages of the Manipuris and the Lushais were recognized by a resolution of the

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38. Beside that, even in the matter of election, sufficient safeguards had been provided so that any possible clique might not intervene or impose its will, which was another major reason which led a strong section to decide for the cessation from the Assam province Congress.
The people, it appeared fully appreciated the line taken by the Congress Working Committee, which was under the circumstances the only reasonable course for maintaining solidarity in the north-eastern region without jeopardising the culture and the linguistic interest of the heterogeneous community living there. And so in the due course, the movement for the creation of a new province fizzled out.

39. The Amrita Bazar Patrika (Calcutta), November 18, 1948, p. 1. The decision of the Working Committee had come as a devastating blow to the reactionary group of politicians, which was taking the advantage of this unfortunate controversy so long, trying to create chaos and confusion in the north-east region.