Chapter 6
THE SURMA VALLEY

The Surma Valley of Assam exposed itself as a distinct territory from the rest of the British Assam, especially from that of Assam Valley, in the context of its geographical position, population potential as well as interests. In the regional scenario of the Assam polity the valley maintained its contrasting identity. The Surma Valley identity was the amalgam of two politico-administrative units, viz., Cachar and Sylhet. Both the units shared a common valley existence as well as culturo-linguistic affinities. Inheriting a common Bengali identity, they felt unhappy with their separation from the British Bengal administration and aspired for their reunion with Bengal till the closing years of the British rule in India. These two districts were also much more involved in the mainstream of the politics of Bengal. From the common plank the representatives of the two districts formed a united block in the legislature and demanded infrastructural facilities for the development of the valley. They also shared a common feeling that their valley had been made to suffer injustices under the provincial administration of Assam. Despite their valley unity

1. Report of the Franchise Committee and the Committee on Divisions and Functions, 1919, p. 34
2. Guha, op.cit., p. 24
3. ALCP, 1919, April 2, p. 89
the politico-economic conditions and the institutions of the two districts created contradictions among themselves. For a proper appreciation of the Surma Valley identity it becomes imperative to examine the issues of these districts and their respective hopes and aspirations separately. The following two sections, thus, deal with the Districts of Cachar and Sylhet respectively.

Section I

Cachar: the mingled identity

The district of Cachar in the Surma Valley possessed an identity separable from that of the rest of Assam as well as Sylhet. After the take over of its administration the British found the territory, particularly the plains areas to be 'socially, linguistically and geographically a part of Bengal' and tagged it to the Dacca Division of Bengal in 1836 for managing its affairs under the regulations as existed in the neighbouring Bengal district of Sylhet.⁴ In the pre-reformed council of Assam the representative of Cachar highlighted the Surma Valley identity and fought the issues under the banner of Sylhet.⁵ Kamini Kumar Chanda, a representative of Cachar repeatedly raised the issue of the reunion of Sylhet

⁴ Bhattacharjee, J.B., op.cit., p. 73
⁵ See ALCP, 1913, March 13, p. 35; ALCP, 1914, April 2, p. 89
with Bengal and formed a united stand with the councillors of Sylhet to claim the inclusion of the district in Bengal. He also forcefully defended the claim of the Surma Valley to have a separate medical school in Sylhet for the medical education of the students of the valley. * Till the introduction of the Reformed Council in Assam in 1921 the individuality of Cachar practically remained mingled with the hopes and aspirations of the people of the district of Sylhet.

**Cachar under the Reformed Council**

The Governor's province of Assam with an enlarged Legislative Council of 53 members came into existence in 1921. The Reform introduced the territorial representation along with the usual communal representations. In the Reformed Council there were sixteen seats for the Surma Valley including three belonging to the district of Cachar. According to the communal distribution of seats two out of three were non-Muhammadan and one Muhammadan. 6859 non-Muhammadan voters elected the two representatives - one from Silchar and the other from Hailakandi, and 5941 Muhammadan voters returned one representative from the district as a whole. In the first and the second Reformed Council Bipin Chandra Deb-Laskar and Harkishore Chakravorty represented Silchar and Hailakandi non-Muhammadan Constituencies.

6. ALCF, 1913, April 10, pp. 48-49
respectively while Rasid Ali Laskar was returned from the Muhammadan Constituency. The District-wise distribution of the constituencies was as follows:

Table No. 1

Total Territorial Constituencies : 33

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constituencies</th>
<th>Surma Valley</th>
<th>Brahmaputra Valley</th>
<th>Goalpara</th>
<th>Hills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sylhet</td>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>Shillong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Char</td>
<td>Darang</td>
<td>Sibagar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Muhammadan</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muhammadan</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Report on the Administration of Assam for the year 1921-22, p. 97

In the context of the territory and population the district of Cachar seems to have received a satisfactory representation.

Cachar Issues in the Reformed Council (1921-36):

In the field of the valley rivalries of Assam the councillors of Cachar played a dispassionate and accommodative role as far as possible. Their approaches to the issues

7. The Assam Gazette, December 8, 1920 and November 14, 1923

*See the statement dealing with Civil Divisions of Assam (Chapter one).
affecting the interests of the province as well as the district were reasonable too. In 1921 when the councillors of Sylhet opposed the Government proposal on the establishment of an Emporium in the Assam Valley on the ground that the developmental aspects of the Surma Valley had been overlooked, the councillors of Cachar requested their valley-mates to allow the institution to be built-up there. They even advocated the avoidance of rupture in the Council on the valley lines. They also viewed such opposition as ominous. Similarly in the controversy over a separate University for the province they expressed realistic views. Even in 1916 the people of Cachar extended their support to the move and Kamini Kumar Chanda of Silchar openly advocated the establishment of a separate University in Assam. The councillors of the district though supported the Surma Valley's approach to the issue they were not opposed to the Brahmaputra Valley's demand for a separate University in the province. The councillors, however, claimed priority to the development of the educational institutions in Cachar including the establishment of a medical school in Sylhet. In 1935, when the Brahmaputra Valley was agitating for a separate University in Assam and its councillors were claiming the same through several motions and resolutions in the Council, the councillors of Cachar appreciated their moves and extended their support to the demand of the

8. ALCD, 1921, vol. I, p. 408
9. Bora, K., First Move for a separate University in Assam, op.cit.
other valley. The Hindu councillors of the district shared
the feelings of their counterparts of the Brahmaputra valley
and deprecated Assam's continued dependence in Calcutta for
the University services. They, however, were alert to their
own linguistic-cultural links with Bengal and claimed to remain
under the jurisdiction of the Calcutta University.

Despite having broad agreements on various issues with
the Assam Valley as well as Sylhet, Cachar maintained an individuality of its own. Its distinctiveness was reflected in the problems relating to the land revenue administration, issues connected with its cultural-linguistic features and the matters relating to its politico-administrative position. In the land system the land-holders of the district of Cachar belonged to the temporarily-settled raiyatwar category with joint ownership and joint responsibility towards payment of revenue. It was in 1900 that the system of joint ownership and coparcenary Mahals were discontinued in favour of periodic-settlement with the individual land-holders. The land system of the district, it appears, provided little scope for the growth of a stable landed aristocracy. For it a section of the Hindu landholders of Cachar fell attracted to the position held by the Mauzadars in the temporarily settled districts of the Brahmaputra Valley.

11. ibid., Sanat Kumar Das, p. 549; Hirendra Nath Chakraborty, p. 549
12. ibid., p. 972
They favoured the system as an ideal alternative to the Zamindar system and pleaded for its extension to Cachar. A resolution seeking the introduction of Mauzadari system in Cachar was moved on 22 September 1921 by Bipin Chandra Deb-Laskar. The Mauzadari system was advocated for bringing into existence a powerful influential local gentry in the district who would be able to command respect of the people under the patronage of the Government. The Muhammadan landholders of Cachar, particularly in the sub-division of Hailakandi, were, however, not in favour of the system. The Muhammadan councillor of the district, thus, opposed the resolution. The Government also found the condition as well as the attitude of the landholders unsuitable for the introduction of the system. The move was ultimately defeated and the effort of a section of the landholders to tie up their position with the influential Mauzadars of the Assam Valley ended in a fiasco.

In the field of sharing the employment opportunities, the councillors of Cachar tried to secure their reasonable share against the people of Sylhet. The Bengalee Hindu inhabitants of Cachar and Sylhet jointly enjoyed separate percentage of employment under the communal representation system. Cachar resented

14. ibid., pp. 660-61
15. ibid., p. 660
Sylhet's domination over the appointments. With a view to ensuring an effective voice of the district in the selection of candidates for provincial services and subordinate Executive services a Hindu councillor demanded the reconstitution of the Selection Committee of the Surma Valley Division with an equal number of representatives from the two districts. Cachar was dissatisfied with their ratio-appointments offered by the Committee dominated by the Sylhet members and claimed the inclusion of the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar in the Selection Committee. The move was, however, opposed by the councillors of Sylhet as well as by the Government. Consequently the resolution was negatived in the Council by eight to twenty three votes. Till December, 1935 the Hindus of the two districts excepting the Scheduled Castes, were treated separately from those of the people of the Brahmaputra Valley for appointment. The interests of the Muhammadans and the Scheduled castes population of the district on the other hand, remained united with the rest of the province and they held their ratio on provincial basis. Since the people of the district held disproportionate appointments in the Government departments they remained dissatisfied and claimed remedial measures ensuring equal treatment. As the proportion of appointments for

17. ibid., p. 314
18. ibid., pp. 316-17
19. Ibid., p. 318
20. ALCD, 1936, vol. XVI, p. 793
the district was not separately treated the councillors of the district favoured the recruitment on the basis of competence alone and rejected the Brahmaputra Valley's claim to divide the posts on the basis of valleys as well as Hill districts. 22

Regarding the general development of Cachar the councillors remained complaisant in their approach. The overall economic condition as well as the economic pursuit of its people, 23 however, made the representatives dispassionate. They, unlike the councillors of Sylhet, proceeded with minor demands. As for example, in 1926 a councillor of the district moved the Council for the grant of eight stipends of rupees nine each per month for the brilliant students of Silchar Chatuspati, four of which were to be reserved for the natives of the district. But the Council declined to entertain the special claim of the district as a matter of principle for which the resolution was rejected. 24 Several occasions like this made the councillors disappointed. The representatives of the district were not happy with the developmental approach of the Government towards their district. In the budget speech of 1926 Bipin Chandra Deb-Laskar expressed his disappointment for non-allotment of fund in the budget for Cachar even though it was claimed as a

22. ALCD, 1936, vol. XVI, p. 1553


part of Assam. The councillors, thus, felt neglected as aliens in their own home-state. Due to their valley position the people of Cachar found themselves placed amidst the cross-currents of Assam and Bengal and discovered innumerable irritants in their way to secure proper developmental facilities. Even certain minor claims like the provincialisation of the Victoria Memorial School at Hailakandi or sanction of grant-in-aid to the Raja Govinda Chandra School at Barkhole could not muster necessary support from the members of the Council. These, seemingly genuine grievances, were viewed as parochial in nature and principles\textsuperscript{25} by the fellow members of the other valley.

The inherent contradiction of the district of Cachar was exposed during the functioning of the Reformed Council. The Sylhet transfer issue, which dominated the proceedings of the Council from 1924 to 1932, created problems for the representatives of Cachar who were not very keen on claiming separation from Assam. It was of the opinion that if Sylhet were transferred then Cachar should also be transferred.\textsuperscript{26} In 1924 the original resolution of Sylhet councillors concerning the transfer of Sylhet was, thus, amended to include the claim of Cachar for its transfer alongwith Sylhet at the instance of the Cachar councillor.\textsuperscript{27} The representatives of Cachar were of divided

\textsuperscript{26} Guha, op.cit., p. 166
\textsuperscript{27} ALCD, 1924, vol. IV, p. 606
opinion owing to the differences of opinion among the inhabitants of the district. The bulk of the urban Hindus having their origin in Sylhet favoured the reunion of the Surma Valley with Bengal, whereas the rural folk of Cachar wanted to remain in Assam. The people of Cachar were, in general, less enthusiastic towards their union with Bengal. Since they were not in a position to face the competition with 'the Rajas, Zamindars and educated people of Bengal'. The Muhammadan councillor of the district opposed the separation of Sylhet alone and viewed that the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal without Cachar and Goalpara would be an incongruous and incomplete step towards redrawing the provincial boundary of Assam on a linguistic basis. The Muhammadan councillor also entertained doubt about the acceptability of Cachar in Sylhet and Bengal.

In 1926 the district faced a difficult situation when the Council in its special session recommended the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal. The adopted resolution was piloted by a Brahmaputra Valley councillor. The agitated councillors of Cachar pointed out that Assam would not become a homogenous Assamese province by separating Sylhet alone. They claimed their oneness with Sylhet and demanded to remain with it, be it in Bengal or Assam. With that end in view, in the next

28. ibid., p. 585
29. ibid., p. 595
30. ALCD, 1926, vol. VI, p. 85
session of the Council, Rasid Ali Laskar, the Muhammadan councillor moved a resolution seeking transfer of Cachar excluding the North Cachar Hills to Bengal. It was explained that —

"... if Cachar is kept in Assam against her will, it will not only be to the injury of the people of Cachar alone but it will also become a clog to the wheel of progress of the people of Assam. . . . . So, even for the interest of Assam Valley, I think, my friend of Assam valley should let Cachar go in order to attain uniformity in the province."  

Cachar separation resolution, unlike that of Sylhet, faced a hostile house and both the Government and the councillors of the Brahmaputra Valley opposed the resolution. The Government pointed out that Cachar historically belonged to Assam and it did not have any bona fide claim for separation from Assam. It was explained that Bengal did not like the inclusion of Cachar in Bengal*.  

Faisanur Ali, a Brahmaputra Valley councillor, however, identified the Cachar separation move as engineered by the people who were not indigenous inhabitants of the district but the settlers in the district.  

31. ibid., p. 115; Incidentally Rasid Ali Laskar opposed Sylhet separation resolution of 1924  

32. ibid., p. 185  

*A resolution recommending transfer of Sylhet to Bengal was adopted in the Bengal Council but an amendment seeking inclusion of Cachar was rejected by 11 to 2 votes. —ALCD, 1926, vol. VI, p. 49  

33. ibid., p. 184
councillors of the district, however, asserted their locus standi as early settlers having settlements even prior to the migration of the Kacharis into the valley. The main ground of opposition was that transfer of Cachar would mean the isolation of the Lushai Hills District from Assam. The most frustrating approach to the resolution came from the councillors of Sylhet. The Sylhet councillors remained indifferent as well as unsympathetic towards Cachar's claim for union with Bengal. It appears that none of the Sylhet councillors were really interested in tagging Cachar with Sylhet. The Sylhet councillors rather contributed to the general Assamese opinion that the district historically, if not linguistically, was an integral part of Assam. The interesting episode of the resolution was that those who opposed the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal supported Cachar and all those who supported the transfer of Sylhet opposed Cachar separation.

Cachar's association with Sylhet as well as Assam became secured in 1928 when all the Muhammadan councillors of the province came forward to oppose the separation of Sylhet and passed a resolution to that effect despite strong opposition of the Hindu councillors. With the desire to remain in

34. ibid., p. 192
36. Guha, op.cit., p. 167
37. Rao, op.cit., p. 252
38. ALCD, 1928, vol. VIII, p. 812
Assam along with Sylhet a Hindu councillor of Cachar appealed to the councillors of the Brahmaputra Valley to create a feeling of love among the people and not to throw them out to Bengal. The period following the passing of the resolution was marked by a division of opinion among the leaders of Cachar. One section, having its base at Hailakandi sub-division opposed the transfer of the district alongwith Sylhet to Bengal and strongly advocated its retention within Assam. This section wanted to dissociate themselves from Sylhet, keeping the option open for Sylhet to decide for itself. The other section representing the Hindus and the Muhammadans, however, insisted on their association with Sylhet. This section wanted to remain within Assam alongwith Sylhet. It identified the Hailakandi based move as sectarian and being piolated by a few Zamindars who were afraid of the rigidity of the tenancy legislation of Bengal.

Cachar under the Government of India Act 1935:

Under the dispensation of the Act of 1935 the long followed parity between the two valleys in the distribution of the legislative seats was discarded. Consequently, out of 108 seats of the Assam Legislative Assembly, only 38 went in favour

39. ibid., pp. 792-93
40. ALCD, 1932, vol. XII, p. 649
41. ibid., pp. 656-57
of the Sunna Valley. In the process of the communal division of seats out of 46 general constituencies of the province fifteen including four of the seven Scheduled Castes seats were earmarked for the Sunna Valley. The valley held twenty out of the 34 Muhammadan constituencies of the province. Five seats of the valley - two general, one Scheduled Castes and two Muhammadan belonged to the district of Cachar. The sharing of the valley seats was as follows:

Table No. 2
The Sunna Valley: Total seats - 38

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Surma Valley</th>
<th>General</th>
<th>Scheduled Castes</th>
<th>Muhammadans</th>
<th>Plains tribal</th>
<th>Tea Labourer</th>
<th>Indian planting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylhet</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cachar</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Report on the Administration of Assam for the year 1937-38, pp. 7-8

In the second chamber, i.e., the Assam Legislative Council the general seats were, however, shared equally by all the districts with the exception of the district of Sylhet. Sylhet was allotted two seats in the Council. Among the six Muhammadan seats in the Council Sylhet occupied three and the district of Cachar with Karinganj Sub-division of Sylhet jointly enjoyed one. The other two Muhammadan seats were given to the Brahmaputra Valley.
In the first Assam Legislative Assembly, Cachar was represented by Arun Kumar Chanda, Hirendra Chandra Chakraborty, Kala Chand Roy, Muzarof Ali Laskar and Namwar Ali Borbhuivar. The Congress representatives of the district along with their counterparts of Sylhet and the Brahmaputra Valley worked in the Assembly under the leadership of a Joint Parliamentary Committee. As the majority members of the Congress party in the first Assembly were elected from the Brahmaputra Valley, they preferred to elect the leader from their own valley. As such Gopinath Bordoloi was elected the leader and Khirode Chandra Deb of Sylhet became the deputy leader. In the passing away of Khirode Chandra Deb in July 1937, the deputy leadership of the party devolved on Arun Kumar Chanda, a prominent Congress leader of Cachar. The Congress programme in the Assembly although stressed on the national and provincial issues such as

44. Aditya, R.N., From the Corridors of Memory, Karimganj, 1970, p. 39
wrecking the constitution from within, removal of all repressive laws, demanding reduction of land revenue and the like, it also accepted the programme to agitate for the transfer of Sylhet and Cachar excluding the North Cachar Hills to Bengal. The Congress members under the leadership of Bardoloi and Chanda carried on attacks against the Government and the Congress leaders of Cachar while participating in the general debates of the House. The Congress programmes contributed to dislodge the Saadulla Ministry as well as bringing the Congress party to power under the leadership of Gopinath Bardoloi.  

The political activities of the district were in fact dominated by the leaders of the Sylhet and carried under the Surma Valley ethos. During the third Saadulla Ministry of November 1939, when Hirendra Nath Chakraborty of Hailakandi was inducted as a Minister, Cachar availed of the first opportunity to participate in the Ministry of the province. The Surma Valley as a whole, though enjoyed equal share in the composition of the Ministry, Cachar’s representation always remained to the minimum. During the period under survey the representation of Cachar vis-a-vis the district of Sylhet in the Ministry was as follows:

The people of the Surma Valley in general welcomed the grouping scheme of the Cabinet Mission. Thus, they could not support the views of Gopinath Bordoloi, the Premier of Assam, the Assam Provincial Congress Committee as well as the people of the Brahmaputra Valley. The valley held a strong conviction

### Table No. 3
The Assam Ministries (1937-47)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ministry</th>
<th>No. of Ministry</th>
<th>Surma Valley</th>
<th>Sylhet</th>
<th>Cachar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Saadulla Ministry 1st April 1937 to 4th February, 1938</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Saadulla Ministry 5th Feb.'38 to 18th Sep.'38</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Gopinath Bordoloi Ministry 19th Sep.'38 to 16th Nov.'39</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Saadulla Ministry 17th Nov.'39 to 24th Dec.'41</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Saadulla Ministry 25th Aug.'42 to 23rd March'45</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Saadulla Ministry 24th March '45 to 10th Feb.'46</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Gopinath Bordoloi Ministry 11th Feb.'46 to 14th Aug.'47</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Gopinath Bordoloi Ministry September'47</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

that Assam would not be able to last long without establishing close association with Bengal.\textsuperscript{46} The grouping plan, however, fizzled out and the prospect of partition of India became imminent. When the efforts were going on to incorporate certain areas of Assam in the eastern part of Pakistan Cachar began to assert its distinctive existence. It wanted to remain with Assam and opposed its tagging with Sylhet. Prof. Nibaran Chandra Laskar, the then M.L.A. from the district in a statement on 16 May, 1947 explained that though Cachar and Sylhet constituted the Surma Valley the former had little cultural and linguistic affinities with the latter. He characterised the demand for inclusion of Cachar in the so-called Muslim homeland of Eastern Pakistan as a fanatic move since majority of the inhabitants of the district were non-Muhammadan. He wanted the district to be left to itself so that it could exercise the right to decide its own fate. In the eventuality of any plebiscite, it was claimed that the same should be held district-wise and not valley-wise.\textsuperscript{47} The Mountbatten plan and the referendum proposed for Sylhet created a lot of stir in the valley. The people of Sylhet and Cachar, who were bound by common language, culture and way of life since their separation from Bengal in 1874 and constituted the "little Bengal" of Assam,\textsuperscript{48} began to drift away from each other. A.K. Barman,

\textsuperscript{46} Amrit Basar Patrika, Calcutta, June 1, 1946
\textsuperscript{47} Assam Tribune, Gauhati, May 16, 1947
\textsuperscript{48} Bhattacharjee, J.B., op.cit., p. 291
Secretary of the Cachar Plains Tribal Association in a statement termed the relation between Sylhet and Cachar as one of the exploiter and the exploited. He urged all the bonafide people of Cachar, irrespective of caste, creed or political affiliation, to demand immediate separation of Sylhet from the province of Assam, so that they could live peacefully without any exploitation of any kind, native or foreign. The Cachar Kalyan Samiti formed under the Presidentship of Prof. M.C. Laskar, M.L.A. also appealed to the people of Cachar to remain in readiness so that they could fight for retention of their 'dear land' in Indian Union. The Samiti also asked the people of the district to take some special interests in Sylhet so that the neighbouring district could also be retained in Assam. It further requested the people to render all possible help to Sylhet to fight against its amalgamation with East Pakistan and oppose the attempts of tagging the Muslim majority areas of Hailakandi with Sylhet. Sylhet was ultimately amalgamated with East Pakistan and the district of Cachar remained with India. The Indian part of the district of Sylhet, comprising only three and a half thanas, was later annexed as a Sub-division of the district. The partition, however, made the district a small Bengali speaking area of the province of Assam. The isolated

49. Assam Tribune, Gauhati, Letter, June 9, 1947
50. ibid., June 20, 1947
51. ibid., July 4, 1947
region, shrunk in size, remained detached from the mainland of Assam by a long range of high hills. Although the sixth Schedule to the Constitution of India made provisions for looking after the special needs of the hill people of Assam, the people of Cachar were left to be treated under the general scheme. In the new constitution Cachar's integration with the rest of Assam was taken for granted.52

Section II

Sylhet: the Hostile Identity

In the composition of the British Assam the district of Sylhet had been a special addition. When the territories of Assam were constituted into a Chief Commissioner's province on 6 February 1874 the district of Sylhet was not included. Its inclusion in Assam was delayed as the Secretary of State for India did not approve of it on the consideration that it was a Bengali speaking area and in every respect a part of Bengal proper. Since no real ground was found for its segregation from Bengal, it was tagged to Assam with which it had nothing in common excepting the foreign Government.53 At a time when the population of the vast Assam had been very small, the addition of this populous Bengal district became an important

52. Aditya, op.cit., pp. 38-39
53. Bhattacharjee, K.K., op.cit., p. 86
event to reckon with. The addition contributed to make Assam a viable unit of local Government in the North East. The population of the districts of Assam was as follows:

**Table No. 4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>1881</th>
<th>1891</th>
<th>1921</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cachar</td>
<td>293,738</td>
<td>367,542</td>
<td>500,484</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylhet</td>
<td>1,069,009</td>
<td>2,154,593</td>
<td>2,541,341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>446,232</td>
<td>452,304</td>
<td>762,523</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>644,960</td>
<td>634,249</td>
<td>762,671</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>273,333</td>
<td>307,761</td>
<td>477,935</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowgong</td>
<td>310,579</td>
<td>344,141</td>
<td>397,921</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>370,274</td>
<td>457,274</td>
<td>823,197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>179,893</td>
<td>254,053</td>
<td>588,295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naga Hills</td>
<td>Details not available.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khasi &amp; Jaintia Hills</td>
<td>169,360</td>
<td>197,904</td>
<td>243,263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garo Hills</td>
<td>109,548</td>
<td>121,570</td>
<td>179,140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lushai Hills</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>98,406</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: An Account of Assam and its Administration, Shillong, 1903, p. 192; Report on the Administration of Assam for the year 1921-22, Shillong, 1923, p. 71
Position of Sylhet in the Political Administration of Assam:

Since the incorporation of Sylhet in the province of Assam it occupied a place of prominence in the politico-administrative set up of Assam. In the pre-reformed Council of Assam (1912-20) the district was represented by five councillors\(^\text{54}\) in the Council of 24 members, of whom 13 were nominated and 11 elected. Among the nominated members nine were official:\(^\text{55}\) In the Reformed Council of 1921 the prominence of the district was retained and it held 13 elected seats as against 12 from the five Assam Valley districts. Four came from Goalpara and 3 from the district of Cachar. In the formation of the Executive Government of the Province, that is, the Executive Council and the Ministry under the Dyarchy of 1921-3, the councillors of Sylhet invariably represented the Surma Valley and shared posts almost equally with those from the Brahmaputra Valley. In the Ministries of the period the representation from Sylhet was as follows:

\(^{54}\) ALCP, 1913, April 10, p. 49

\(^{55}\) Report of the Franchise Committee and the Committee on Division of Functions, 1919, p. 76
In the Reformed Council of 1927-29 the Governor searched for a Hindu councillor from the Surma Valley but none of the Hindu members belonging to the Swaraj Party was inclined to accept the office. Thus, when Saadulla, a Muslim member was selected from the Brahmaputra Valley the Governor appointed J.J.M. Nichols Roy keeping in view the delicate communal and Valley issues of the Province. 56

With the introduction of the Provincial autonomy in 1937 the Surma Valley's control over the legislature was reduced to some extent. Till 14 August 1947 Sylhet remained a single territorial unit to be represented by the highest number of members. In the Assembly of 108 members the district had 31 members - twelve of whom were Hindus and the remaining nineteen Muhammadans. In the Legislative Council (second Chamber) of that period the district was represented by five members. While every district of the Province was allotted a general seat the district of Sylhet got two, and of the six Muhammadan seats of the Council it possessed three. In the period from 1937 to 1947 though all the Ministries were headed by the leaders of the Brahmaputra Valley the district remained highly represented in its composition. The number of Ministers drawn from the district during the period was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ministry headed by</th>
<th>Total Number of Ministers</th>
<th>Number of Ministers from the District of Sylhet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Muhammad Saadulla</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. -Do-</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Gopinath Bardoloi</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Muhammad Saadulla</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table No. 6 (contd.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5. Muhammad Saadulla</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. -Do-</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Gopinath Bardoloi</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The district of Sylhet, thus, held a commendable position in the political structure of the Province for which it could assert itself in a forceful way on different issues of the provincial politics.

A. Economic Indigence vis-a-vis Sylhet:

The councillors of the Surma Valley in general could not appreciate the danger connected with the opium issue of the Assam Valley in the proper perspective as the use of this drug had been very moderate in their valley. Since pan or betel leaf, supari or betel nut and tobacco formed the major items of consumption the district fortunately remained one of the least opium affected areas of the Province.


*See opium consumption table in Chapter 3, p.
insignificant consumption of opium, thus, made the councillors of the district less enthusiastic to fight against the same in a big way. They extended lukewarm support to the members of the other valley in the Council when the latter suggested strong measures against the large scale sale of Government opium. On 8 April, 1920 the councillor of the valley, remaining complacent, voted against the resolution of Ghanashyam Barua which suggested introduction of personal registration of the opium eaters. Ramani Mohan Das, a councillor from Karimganj, a sub-division of Sylhet, who voted against the above resolution subsequently explained that he was guided by the belief that a scheme of prohibition might lead to the diversion of the addicts to much harmful drug. It was not, "because that the Surma Valley as a rule go against the Assam Valley that the officials go against the non-officials." The fact, however, remained that the councillors of the district were generally guided by the Government views. The Government held that considerable reduction of consumption could be brought about not by cutting of legitimate supply but by diminution in the demand. Moreover, the Government advocated that immediate prohibition might result in the diversion of the addicts to more injurious intoxicants.

59. Guha, op.cit., pp. 90-91
60. ALCD, 1921, vol. I, p. 65
In the first Reformed Council, due to the impact of the Congress prohibition programme, the councillors of the District responded favourably to the resolution moved by J. J. N. Nichols Roy on 22 March, 1921. The resolution sought introduction of rationing of opium as well as registration of the opium eaters, so that the evil could be eradicated within a period of ten years. Promode Chandra Dutta, a councillor from the district, who later became a Minister as well as the Executive Councillor of the province, assured full support to the Brahma­putra Valley in this regard. 62 Thus the resolution which had been rejected in the pre-reformed council was adopted in the Reformed Council by 26 to 13 votes. The stand of the councillors of Sylhet, however, varied according to the tempo of the House and the attitude of the Government on this issue. On 17 March 1922, they thus sided with the Government to oppose a resolution tabled by Nilmani Phukan through which suggestions were made to introduce "Pass Book" for rationing opium. 63 Similar was their approach to a resolution of 30 June 1924 which wanted to appoint an All India Committee to study the problem. 64

In the second Reformed Council the councillors of Sylhet extended their full support to the moves of the

63. ALCD, 1922, vol. II, p. 311
64. ALCD, 1924, vol. IV, pp. 719-21
Swarajists of the Brahmaputra Valley against the evil. On 3 March 1925 they supported Kuladhar Chaliha's resolution recommending total prohibition on sale and consumption of opium excepting on medical and scientific purposes. They also made an open breast confession about their limitation of knowledge on the issue. Brojendra Narayan Chaudhury, a councillor from the district, who later on was elected deputy leader of the Assam Nationalist Party, confessed that he entered in the Council as 'an ignoramus on the subject of opium'. It came as a revelation to him that even after thirty years of the functioning of the Government policy on opium there had not been any recognisable decrease in the consumption of the drug in the Assam Valley. Similar was the statement of Kshirode Chandra Deb, an elected councillor from Karimganj and the Chief Whip of the Assam Nationalist Party.

This unison under the influence of the Swarajists had been short lived and soon some of the councillors drifted away from their earlier stand. In 1932 it appeared that the Surma Valley members were not happy with the policy of ten per cent cut on opium ration as it had encouraged smuggling and reduced the revenue. Asomiya, a local newspaper, in its editorial condemned the valley-members' intended move towards reverting

65. ALCD, 1925, vol. V, pp. 56-57
66. ibid., p. 59
the policy. On the opium issue, thus, an attitudinal bickering between the two valleys prevailed and the councillors of Sylhet did not treat it seriously or include the same in the general agenda of their socio-economic programmes.

The district was found, however, following its own agenda of socio-economic demands. Sylhet, as the mainland of the Surma Valley, claimed equal developmental facilities with the other valley. The claims for developmental infrastructures were carried not only against the other valley but also against the fellow district of the Surma Valley, i.e., Cachar. Rai Bahadur Dulal Chandra Deb, a councillor from Sylhet questioned in 1907 the propriety of selection of Silchar, the headquarters of the district of Cachar, to the exclusion of Sylhet, the premier district of the valley, as the headquarters of the Commissioner of the Surma Valley and the Hills District Division. It was also the headquarter of the Inspector of Schools of the Surma Valley. As a matter of fact the district of Sylhet lacked necessary institutions to satisfy the minimum needs for development. A strong feeling, thus, prompted the councillors of Sylhet not only to demand the implementation of various schemes in the district but also oppose the establishment of similar schemes in other areas of the province ignoring their claims. In the budget session of the first Reformed Council

68. ibid., p. 215
69. EBALCP, 1907, February 6, Question and Answer.
in 1921 Alauddin Ahmed Chaudhury, a nominated councillor of the district expressing his strong resentment against the Government proposal to establish one Emporium in the Assam Valley, charged the Government of neglecting the developmental aspect of the Surma Valley. Although he had no grudge against the development of the Assam Valley, he demanded equal treatment for his valley also. It was highlighted that the populous district had to be paid greater attention on the principle of "greatest boon to greatest number". 70

One major demand raised by the councillors of Sylhet was for a Medical school in the valley. The students of the valley experienced genuine problems in getting admission into the medical schools of Assam and Bengal. On 10 April 1913 Kamini Kumar Chanda in his budget speech explained the condition as follows:

"Our boys, when they go to Dacca Medical School are refused admission on the ground that we are in Assam. When we come to Dibrugarh they are told to wait till the claims of the Assamese boys are satisfied." 71

70. ALCD, 1921, vol. I, p. 103

71. He explained the sentiment thus: "Our position is that of the proverbial washerman’s dog 'dhobi ka Kutta nehi ghar ka nehi ghat ka'. - ALCP, April 10, p. 48
He further argued, "I wish to make it clear that we have not a word of complaint against our brethren in Assam. They are perfectly justified in resenting our intrusion, for it is really so. Any other people would do the same. The school was established for their benefit. The province is theirs as the name implies. Sylhet is no part of Assam. Geographically, socially or ethnologically ... ... ... It is not against the people of Assam we complain, but against Government. To Assam we respectfully say, if we are interlopers as they have every right to look upon us, we are so not of free choice, but under compulsion." 72

The demand for a Medical school was formally placed in the First Reformed Council on 17 March 1922 in the form of a resolution. An appeal was made to the councillors of the Brahmaputra Valley to consider the demand of the district sympathetically and lend their support to the move. The resolution was, however, opposed and subsequently withdrawn on financial ground. 73 The demand persisted and in 1926 the councillors became successful to make the Government agree to prepare a scheme for the same. Emphasizing the need for the

72. ibid., pp. 48-49
73. ALCD, 1922, vol. II, p. 304
development of Sylhet as a part of the province a councillor contested the concept "Assam for Assamese". He claimed equal treatment for both the valleys. The demand for a medical school for the district, although was adopted in the Council, the same was not implemented. Birendra Lal Das another councillor of the district, raised the issue in 1935. He, while appreciating the Council's move to equip fully the Berrywhite Medical School of Dibrugarh, requested the House not to overlook the demand for a separate medical school in the Surma Valley. The demand was subsequently carried through the Assembly and the members from Sylhet criticised the Government, repeatedly, for its failure to establish the institution. All the efforts of the councillors of the district as well as the valley in this regard seemed to go in vain since the institution was not established during the period under survey.

It is to be noted that as the fate of Sylhet in Assam remained hanging in the balance, the developmental schemes also suffered setbacks. The "Back to Bengal" movement of the period is a pointer to it. In the budget session of 1922 a councillor of the Brahmaputra Valley moved a cut motion or the allotment of fund for the construction of the Murarichand College building at Sylhet since the movement for 'Sylhet-Bengal

74. ALCD, 1926, vol. VI, p. 699
75. ALCD, 1935, vol. XV, p. 208
76. Report on the Working of the Assam Legislative Assembly (1937-45), Shillong, 1946, pp. 27, 47
reunion' was in full swing. On a similar ground, in 1925, Saadulla, Minister in charge of Education, opposed the demand to start the B.A. Course in Economics as well as B.Sc. Classes in the Murarichand College. The Government declined to accept liability to spend Rs. 70,000 in Sylhet for the same until the issue of its reunion with Bengal was settled once for all. The councillors of Sylhet, however, contested the above contention of the councillors of the other valley and that of the Government. They asserted that as long as the district continued to remain in Assam their claims could not be set aside. To establish the legitimacy of the claims they suggested the drawing up of two separate financial budgets for each of the two valleys. In 1936, finding the councillors of the other valley opposed to the duplication of the institutions of the province, they placed before the Government their claim to examine the feasibility of starting an Agricultural School or College in Sylhet. However, in the face of strong opposition from the other valley no developmental strategy could be undertaken in Sylhet for which it remained materially and psychologically aloof from the rest of the province.

A noteworthy feature of Sylhet was its land tenure system. Though Sylhet and part of Goalpara had been permanently

77. ALCD, 1926, vol. II, p. 493
78. ALCD, 1925, vol. V, p. 64
79. ibid., pp. 94-97
80. ALCD, 1936, vol. XVI, pp. 1422-25
settled areas, the number of the permanently settled estates in Sylhet, unlike those in Goalpara was quite bigger. The proprietors held 51.34 per cent as against the occupancy raiyats holding about 34.5 per cent of the lands of the district. That is, about 86 per cent of the land were under the peasant proprietors or their equivalent - the occupancy tenants. These land holders were locally known as the Mirasdars.81 The peasant proprietors of the district, unlike those in the Assam Valley, were not affected by the periodic enhancement of land revenue. The peasant proprietors, however, resented the burden of the Local Rates introduced in 1879. The Local Rates were charged on land in addition to land tax and local cess. The councillors of the district along with those of the permanently settled Goalpara were not happy with the sale procedure of their permanently settled estates, which was undertaken to collect arrears of the local rates. They viewed the system as an infringement of their right to hold permanent settlement, and demanded immediate stop to such sale.82 Their claim was also carried or in the Council. In 1932, contrary to their expectation, in the name of bringing parity in local rates between the temporarily-settled districts of Assam and the permanently-settled districts of Sylhet and Goalpara, the Assam Local Rates (Amendment) Bill, 1931 was introduced in the Council. The Bill was accepted and

82. ALCD, 1925, vol. V, p. 1165
referred to the Select Committee in the teeth of opposition from the councillors of Sylhet and Goalpara. Defending the measure the Government impressed the House that due to the existence of large number of permanently-settled holdings in the district of Sylhet it could make less contribution to the provincial fund. Besides this, it was also explained that the district was dependent on the contribution of the Assam Valley and Cachar for its development. The Government, thus, indirectly supported the contention of the Brahmaputra Valley that the district of Sylhet was a 'white elephant'. The Bill was viewed by the councillors on the basis of land system. The support of Milambar Dutta, a councillor from Upper Assam for the Bill was viewed by the councillors of the permanently settled Goalpara, as an unfavourable treatment meted out by Upper Assam to Lower Assam. The success of the Bill was viewed by the councillors as the success of the Government to divide the members of the Council not only on the basis of valleys but also fragment them between Upper Assam and Lower Assam divisions.

In 1936 the councillors of Sylhet opposed the Government decision to enforce the Assam Local Rates (Amendment) Act

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83. The extent of deficit in the district for the year ending on 19.8.1931 was estimated as ten and a half lakh of rupees. — ALCD, 1932, vol. XII, p. 292

84. ibid., p. 723

85. ibid., Rohini Kumar Chaudhuri, p. 725; Magendra Nath Chaudhury, p. 727
1932 and demanded its postponement. A resolution to that effect, however, could not be carried in the Council as it failed to draw the sympathy of the other valley. The point of discord was that the latter found the Surma Valley raiyats as paying only a nominal rate in comparison to that paid by the raiyats of their valley. Moreover, the other valley was not satisfied with the obstructionist role of the Surma Valley in the preceding session on the issue regarding the establishment of a High Court in Assam. In 1937, on behalf of the Government Abdul Matin Chaudhury, a Minister from Sylhet, however, introduced the Assam Local Rates (Amendment) Bill, 1937 with the avowed object of undoing the wrong done in 1931. The members of the district of Sylhet while opposing the new amended bill appealed to the members of the Assam Valley to lend them support in this regard. They made it clear that as the Assam Valley needed the support of the Surma Valley to fight for the reduction of land revenue, in reciprocation they should also support them in their fight against the imposition of this additional tax which would adversely affect the middle classes of the Surma Valley.

The struggle for existence in Sylhet had been severe that that in the Assam Valley. In 1921 the district

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86. ALCD, 1936, vol. XVI, pp. 415-16
87. ALAD, 1937, vol. I, pp. 177, 184
88. Report of the Assam Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee, op.cit., pp. 16-17
administration found about 80 per cent of its population in debt and about 90 per cent badly clothed. Moreover, the density of population in the district was also the highest among the districts. It was 472 as against 143 of Lakhimpur, 162 of Sibsagar, 108 of Nowgong, 164 of Darrang, 197 of Kamrup, 193 of Goalpara and 148 of Cachar in per square mile. In the field of employment, particularly in the Government sector, the people of the district had, however, a comparatively comfortable position. They secured that privilege due to their early initiation to English education and Governmental jobs. The presence of its people in large number in the offices of the Government was an eyesore not only to the people of the Brahmaputra Valley but also to that of their own valley-mates, i.e., the people of Cachar.

The councillors from Sylhet playing a defensive role tried to maintain their status-quo in the policy of recruitment. It became a part of their duty to refute the charge that they were taking away all the "loaves and fishes" of the province and monopolising the Government posts. The councillors tried to impress upon their counter parts from the Brahmaputra Valley that the Sylhetese could take that position when the people of the Brahmaputra Valley remained self-content without caring for

89. ibid., p. 13
90. ibid., p. 6
91. ALCD, 1932, vol. XII, p. 640
the petty jobs under the Government. Their contention also found support from the Government. H.G. Dernehey, the Chief Secretary explained in the Council in 1936 as follows:

"The Surma Valley people (who) have at present more than their numerical proportion of posts in the services, is a matter of long past history. It is not due to the method by which the Government are recruiting at present. It is due to past, when the distribution of posts according to communal proportion, which now in force, had not ordered, and also to the fact that in some services for many years certain communities could not produce qualified representatives."

The people of the district of Sylhet were satisfied with the Government policy of recruitment for which the councillors were not in favour of any change in the system. They opposed the resolution of Sarveswar Barua which suggested the apportionment of all the gazetted posts between the two valleys and the Hill districts to overcome rivalry on territorial and communal lines. In the communal division of posts also the major communities of the district enjoyed a strong

92. ibid., p. 648
93. ALCD, 1936, vol. XIV, pp. 1551-52
94. ibid., p. 1548
position. The Hindus of Cachar and Sylhet were recognised as a separate community from those of the Brahmaputra Valley and were allotted separate representation in the services. The Muhammadans of the district along with those of the Assam Valley constituted one unit and enjoyed proportional representation.

Within the valley, the district of Sylhet faced charges from Cachar of monopolising the posts. Demanding equal share in the posts of the valley the councillors from Cachar claimed measures to safeguard their interests against those of Sylhet. To look after the interest of the district the councillors of Cachar wanted the inclusion of the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar in the Committee for selection of candidates in the Surma Valley Division. The representatives of Sylhet refused to entertain Cachar's claim for equal share since they found it unreasonable. Thus in the competitive claims over the employment opportunities the contented and happy representatives of Sylhet failed to appreciate the genuine grievances of the partners. Lack of sympathetic appraisal ultimately led to grave misunderstanding between the partners and consequently led to its separation from Assam.

95. ALCD, 1922, vol. II, p. 316
96. ibid., p. 316
B. Socio-cultural and Linguistic Issues:

In the linguistic-cultural arena of Assam Sylhet displayed a distinct existence, being the frontier district of Bengal and Bengali being the common language of about ninety-two per cent of its population. The local dialect known as 'Sylheti' however, differed to a great extent from the language spoken in Bengal.97 As a matter of fact Bengali language of books, newspaper and communication, differed profoundly in vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation from various dialects of different parts of Bengal.98 The educated Bengalees of Sylhet like those of other parts of Bengal were equipped with the same language that served to unite them with their compatriots of Bengal. On the culturo-linguistic issues they derived their sustenance from Calcutta, the nerve centre of Bengali culture. Within the greater frame of Bengal, however, Sylhet maintained its socio-cultural distinctiveness. The students of Sylhet and Cachar established the 'Sreehatta Sammilani' in 1877 to assert their own identity.99 Similarly in Shillong, the provincial headquarters of Assam the Sylheti residents formed the 'Sylhet Association' or the 'Shreehatta Samiti' in 1892 at the

97. Allen, B.C. and others, op.cit., p. 421
98. Seal, A., The Emergence of Indian Nationalism, Competition and Collaboration in the Nineteenth Century, p. 47
99. The Assamese Literary Society was formed in Calcutta in 1872 at the initiative of Assamese resident there. - Juba, op.cit., p. 24
Sylhet stayed with Assam with an assurance that its people would not be deprived of the facilities of the Calcutta University and the Calcutta High Court until their representatives expressed their opinion to have separate institutions for themselves. The linguistic-cultural bases being in Bengal the leaders of the district moved apart from the general linguistic-cultural aspirations of the Assam Valley. They also tried to preserve and protect their own ethos through Bengal. As a part of Assam, however, they carried moves for the improvement of education. In 1916 Kamini Kumar Chanda supported a move to have a separate University in Assam. Similarly in the first Reformed Council, on 6 March 1923, Muhammad Bakht Kasumdar, a councillor of the district demanded the holding of a conference to discuss the need of having a University and a Board of Secondary Education in the province. In the second Reformed Council, on 17 September, 1924 Brojendra Narayan Chaudhury asked for a thorough study of the educational situation in the High Schools and the Colleges of Assam. He wanted to examine whether the education based on foreign culture had

100. Chaudhury, B.B., 'Sreehatta Samiti', Shillong (Bengali), Shreehatta Sammilani Silver Jubilee Celebration, Volume, Delhi, August, 1982

101. ALAD, 1941, vol. I, p. 266

102. Borah, First Move for a Separate University in Assam.

103. ALCD, 1923, vol. III, p. 86
been instrumental in neglecting the indigenous culture, or whether it had ignored the culture of the heart and head and confined itself simply to the culture of hand. He also favoured the move to compulsorily teaching of history and tradition of Assam (and of Bengal for the Surma Valley) and regular singing of the national anthem in the schools and the colleges to instil patriotism among the students. Mr. Chaudhury, though advocated a progressive change in the educational system, he remained conservative to demand a University and a Board of Secondary Education for Assam. He, however, requested the Assam Valley councillors to wait for some more time, until the exit of Sylhet from Assam. The councillors of Sylhet could not heartily support the demand for a University in Assam.

The move for a University received momentum in 1935, on the eve of the introduction of provincial autonomy. In all the sessions of the Council in that year the demand was frequently raised by the councillors of the Brahmaputra Valley. The response of the councillors of Sylhet to these moves, however, had been lukewarm, unsympathetic and at times dubious. In the February-March Session though they voted in favour of a proposal for forming an Assam panel for the Calcutta University.

104. ALCD, 1924, vol. IV, pp. 1019-20
105. ibid., pp. 1073-74
106. ALDC, 1935, vol. XV, pp. 140-44
they in the same session on 6 March refused to extend support to censure the Government for its alleged failure to establish a University and take 'earnest, sincere and practical steps' for the same. 107 Abdur Rahim Chaudhury, another councillor found it difficult to give any definite opinion on behalf of the district on that issue as the people of the Assam Valley were in favour of Sylhet's transfer to Bengal. 108 In the same year the councillors of the Surma Valley offered a restricted support to a motion tabled by Brindaban Goswami on University. They assured that the Surma Valley would not be a bar to the other Valley's demand for a University. 109 In the May-June session of 1935 they expressed a divided opinion on J.J.M. Nichols Roy's resolution which sought to recommend the immediate preparation of a scheme for a University in Assam. Majority of the councillors demanded that a University should not be thrust upon the people who were opposed to the general scheme of a University meant for the two valleys. 110 The other section, however, admitted that the demand for a University prevailed in that valley too. 111

107. ibid., pp. 542-43
109. ibid., p. 552
110. ibid., p. 970
111. ibid., p. 977
The introduction of the Assam University Bill, 1941 aggravated the rift between the two valleys. A public meeting held at Sylhet town on 23 February, 1941 adopted a resolution to express its "emphatic protest" against the proposed University. It viewed that a University in Assam would materially affect the language and cultural affinity of the people by severing their old ties with the Calcutta University. The meeting also expressed doubts on the financial capacity of Assam to maintain a University and its standard.\textsuperscript{112} The Sylhet members opposed a Government motion to refer the University Bill to a Select Committee and instead wanted its circulation for eliciting public opinion.\textsuperscript{113} Baidyanath Mookherjee, an Indian planting representative of the Surma Valley explained the position as follows:

"Sir, Calcutta is the centre of culture and civilisation of the Bengalee people. So as I have said before that I have been ordered by the people of Surma Valley to express here that this Bill is most inopportune, inequitous and dangerous one. I pray that Hon'ble Education Minister will not press to send the Bill to a Select Committee."\textsuperscript{114}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{112} Deb, B.J., op.cit., p. 170
  \item \textsuperscript{113} ALAD, 1941, vol. I, pp. 263-69
  \item \textsuperscript{114} ibid., p. 293
\end{itemize}
The attitude of the Surma Valley Congress leaders on this issue was evidently dubious. They demanded vociferous support from the Surma Valley so as to retain its ties with the Calcutta University. They intended to get an assurance from the Government that the Surma Valley would be excluded from the scope of the Bill. Their main concern was not to submit to the Assam Valley.  

115 Though the general trend in the district was to oppose the move for a separate University, the supporting trend was not altogether absent. Muhammad Haqbul Haqbul Mussain Chaudhury, a member from Sunamganj of Sylhet not only supported the scheme, but also wrote series of articles in newspapers supporting the cause of establishment of a University in Assam. He advocated the need for a unified University and opposed the idea of sectarian University in the province. He entertained the hope that a University established on liberal basis would remove the valley bickerings through its teaching, culture and education and bridgeup the 'gulf of difference between the two valleys'.  

116 Thus, an undercurrent of integrationist trend, although weak and unorganised, was present in the district.

Another issue that tended to create regional differences was that of a High Court in Assam. Sylhet followed an obstructionist policy against the province’s demand for a High

115. Deb, B.J., op.cit., p. 171
Court. The basis of its opposition had been an assurance of the Government given in 1874 to the people that there would be no change in their system of law, judicial procedure, and the settlement and collection of land revenue. Thus, in demanding a High Court for the province the representatives from Sylhet remained not only guided by their own consideration but also displayed a confusing role. While the other partners of the province resented the province's contribution towards the maintenance of the Calcutta High Court, they defended it as essential. The attempts to omit that expenditure were regarded by them as an act of depriving the people of the district of Sylhet from their rightful claim to that institution. It is to be noted that the total amount paid by Assam for the maintenance of the Calcutta High Court during the period from 1920 to 1935 was Rs. 9,38,400. In 1935 the movement for a High Court in Assam was intensified and Munawwarali, a Sylhet councillor also tabled a motion demanding steps for immediate preparation of a scheme so that a High Court could be established. But a section of the councillors from that district subsequently opposed Rohini Kumar Chaudhuri's resolution on the same demand. Their contention was that the interest of Assam were quite safe

117. Assam Secretarial File, Pol.A. March 1926, p. 4
118. ALCD, 1923, vol. III, p. 302
120. ALCD, 1935, vol. XV, pp. 364-65
under the protection of the Calcutta High Court. Viewed the
demand as mere sentimental they declined to entertain the same
which was also expensive. 121

In 1937 the Assam Legislative Assembly adopted a
resolution on the establishment of a separate High Court in
Assam overriding the opposition of Sylhet. In the context of
the changed political position the members of the district
expressed mixed reaction to the proposal. The Hindu members
expressed doubts as to the viability of the institution after
the exit of Sylhet. They ultimately had to concede to the
strong demand of the Assamese people in this regard. 122 The
Muhammadan members of the district, however, came forward to
accept a High Court in Assam provided its headquarters were
located at Shillong instead of Gauhati. 123 Sylhet's acrimonious
opposition to the issue continued throughout the period
under consideration.

C. The Contentious Partners: the inevitables:

Sylhet was incorporated in the political structure of
Assam for administrative purposes only for it the people
remained psychologically and materially attached to the political

121. ibid., pp. 1483-85
123. ibid., p. 2207; ALAD, 1938, vol. I, p. 915
life and social system of Bengal. The natural barriers of Assam, e.g., the hill range that separated the two valleys, also kept the Surma Valley in general and Sylhet in particular away from the mainland of Assam polity. Moreover, the political development of Assam had not been at par with that of Sylhet for which the leaders of the latter remained dissatisfied with their placement in Assam. The sentiment of the district in this regard was aptly explained by Archdale Earle, the Chief Commissioner of Assam as follows: "They wished to be spurred to higher things by contact with the advanced Bengalees and they lose by being pitted against the backward races of Assam." 124

The leaders of the district, thus, uneasily stayed in Assam and piloted moves, both in the administrative as well as in the political level to reunite with Bengal. 125 The Government of Assam opposed the transfer of Sylhet for two reasons, firstly, the transfer issue was likely to have effect on the political status and privileges of Assam and, secondly a process of dismemberment would begin with it and likely to encourage similar movements in Cachar and Goalpara. 126

The ideal political model before the district of Sylhet had been Bengal and its leaders followed it althrough. They


125. For details, see Simon Commission Report on India, vol. XII pp. 75-77

126. ibid., pp. 89-90
also doubted the potentiality of Assam and its advancement. 127 Considering the economic constraints of Assam a councillor of the district even suggested the transfer of all the plains districts including Shillong cantonment to Bengal. 128 The need for the reconstitution of all the British Indian provinces was voiced to ensure ethnic and linguistic unity before the establishment of full responsible Governments in them. Amarnath Roy, a councillor from Sylhet, participating in the discussion on the Swarajists' resolution for the establishment of a full responsible Government in Assam demanded the redrawing of provincial boundaries and said,

"Provincial autonomy to my mind is fraught with serious dangers; it will circumscribe our outlook, raise provincial jealousies and stand as a clog to our progress towards the building up of a healthy all India patriotism. Our outlook readily narrows down from provincialism to parochialism. Mere administrative convenience cannot be the only basis for constitution of provinces. We must have ethnic and linguistic unity as our basis . . . ." 129

127. ALCD, 1922, vol. II, pp. 103-04
128. ALCD, 1923, vol. III, p. 28
129. ALCD, 1924, vol. IV, pp. 63-64
The Swarajist councillors of the province, however, demanded immediate introduction of full responsible Government in Assam, if needed by separating the hill districts from Assam. In this connection Promode Chandra Dutta, a councillor from the district and Minister in his note to the Government on 19 July 1925 framed a strong case for the transfer of the whole of Assam excepting the hill areas to Bengal. Bolstering the cause of transfer he cited the census Report of 1921 and identified Assam as a Bengali speaking province. In his opinion the Hill Districts could be administered as an agency area by the Central Government through the Government of Bengal.

Regarding the transfer of Sylhet initially both the Hindu and the Muhammadan leaders of the district supported the moves. However, from 1926 onwards the Muhammadan councillors of the province began to change their strategy on communal considerations. Thus in 1926, when the legislative Council passed a resolution purporting to recommend the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal, the Muhammadan councillors, other than those who joined the Swaraj party, stood opposed to the move.

130. ibid., p. 75
131. Assam Secretariat File, Pol.A. March 26, 1926, op.cit., p.4
132. Simon Commission Report on India, op.cit., p. 76

*According to Census figures the total population was 7,606,230 of which 3,524,318 were Bengali speaking, 1,718,712 Assamese speaking and 2,363,200 spoke a number of tribal language.
1928 the Muhammadan councillors of the Surma Valley took a united stand with those of the Brahmaputra Valley and successfully adopted a resolution demanding the retention of Sylhet and Cachar in Assam. A Muhammadan councillor of Sylhet declared that future prosperity of the "land of Sahajalal", i.e., Sylhet depended on its fate being bounded up with that of Assam. 133

From the thirties onwards the rigid attitude of the Hindu councillors of the district also relaxed towards Assam polity. Close association with the people of the Assam Valley and their desire not to leave that association began to appear in their discussions. By 1932, they viewed a resolution of Nilambar Dutta, a Brahmaputra Valley member, suggesting the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal as frustrating. 134

The last attempt for the union with Bengal came through the Cabinet Mission's declaration of 16 May 1946, which suggested 'Grouping' of Assam with Bengal. A meeting held at Shillong under the auspices of the Surma Sannilani and attended by the Congress leaders of the district like Akshay Kumar Das, Ex-Minister, Basanta Kumar Das, Minister, Abala Kanta Gupta, M.L.A. and Nirendra Nath Deb, M.L.A. welcomed Assam's grouping with Bengal. In this meeting the leaders of the district formally declared their disassociation with the view of Assam's premier Gopinath Bardoloi on 'Grouping'. They made it clear that the

133. ALCD, 1928, vol. VIII, p. 711
134. ALCD, 1932, vol. XII, pp. 646-48
views expressed in the press by the Assamese leaders and the Assam provincial Congress Committee did neither represent the views of the Surma Valley nor had they possessed any authority to do so on their behalf. The Hindu leaders of the district were, however, not unanimous in accepting the 'Grouping' of Assam with Bengal. Baidyanath Mookherjee, a member from the district and Minister expressed the opposite view. In a press statement he explained, "If Assam is tagged to and grouped with Bengal it is sure to lose its identity as a separate autonomous province. Although a part of the population of the province has cultural and linguistic affinity with Bengal, the major part of the province is inhabited by people whose language and culture are different from those of the people of Bengal." His statement further contended, "the cultural and economic development of a country depends mainly on its political condition and if the political destiny of a province is in the hands of another province whose cultural and economic life is different, such a condition naturally results in imposition of the latter's own culture and economy on the former. Exploitation is bound to occur." The scheme of 'Grouping', however, did not materialise and a referendum on Sylhet was declared on 3 June 1947.

135. Amrit Bazar Patrika (Calcutta), June 1, 1946, p. 5
136. Assam Tribune (Gauhati), June 11, 1947
The statement of 3 June 1947 on referendum was received by the people of the district differently from the rest of the province. It fell heavily on the Hindu population of the district and the Hindu leaders who previously advocated for a referendum to decide their union with Bengal, came forward to oppose the same. Rabindra Nath Aditya, a member of Sylhet and Chief Whip of the Assam Congress parliamentary party in a press statement made a fervent appeal to the people of the Assam Valley for help. He stated, "Cannot we expect a friendly help in our difficulty? Believe us it is not our intention to exploit you ...." The Muhammadan population of the district also expressed mixed reaction on the issue of separation in the changed situation. The Jamiet-ul-Ulema claimed status-quo for Sylhet in Assam. Some League-minded Zamindars of Sylhet also did not favour the separation as it would likely to affect their privileges in Pakistan. In the face of these contradictions the referendum decided the transfer of Sylhet to Pakistan and it seceded from Assam. The Boundary Commission retained only three and a half thanas of the district (present Karimganj District) in Assam. Gopinath Bardoloi, the Premier of Assam accepted the Indian portion of

137. ALCD, 1928, vol. VIII, p. 717
138. Assam Tribune, June 24, 1947
139. ibid., June 21, 1947
140. Deb, B.J., op.cit., p. 319
Sylhet as a gain in area and population to Assam. 141

Sylhet, the dominant partner of the Surma Valley had been eager to get out of Assam's political structure and although considered its stay in Assam as a passing phase. It played an obstructionist role in the provincial politics of Assam. In its quest for Bengali identity the representatives sacrificed many of their developmental prospects. The district played with the racial, cultural and linguistic issues at the cost of genuine economic issues and thus retarded the development of the valley in particular and the province in general.

141. ALAD, 1947, p. 1441