CHAPTER V
EXPERIMENT WITH PROVINCIAL AUTONOMY (1922-42)

In 1912, immediately after the annulment of the partition of Bengal, Assam acquired the status of fullfledged Chief Commissionership and the districts of Sylhet and Cachar were incorporated in Assam. This new arrangement was a sigh of relief for the people of Brahmaputra valley and they celebrated the occasion with jubilation. The people of Surma-Barak valley, particularly of the district of Sylhet, considered it to be a deep injury and a deep wound that had been inflicted on them, because they had no affinity with Assam whatsoever - geographical, ethnological and linguistic. As Archdale Earle, the then Chief Commissioner of Assam said 'they wished to be spurred to higher things by contact with advanced Bengalees and they lose by being pitted against the backward district of Assam.' Thus in 1912, when the whole of Bengal was rejoicing in being united as a homogenous unit, the Bengali speaking people of Surma-Barak valley expressed their resentment over the annulment. Interestingly, the intensity of their resentment was not the same

amongst two major segments of the population but the end result was the same. The nationalists, mainly represented by the Hindu leaders, were dissatisfied because the valley was merged with Assam ignoring their demand for reunion with Bengal. On the other hand, the Muslim leaders, represented by the Anjuman-I-Islamia and Muslim Association, resented the dissolution of the province of East Bengal and Assam, the formation of which in 1905 received their full-fledged support. Under the new circumstances, the Muslim leaders shifted their position and for the time being rendered their support for merger with Bengal. The Anjuman-I-Islamia in a public meeting demanded immediate separation from Assam and the Muslim Association under the presidentship of Nawab Samsul Huda of Dacca passed a resolution recommending merger of Sylhet with Bengal which was signed by all members of the Legislative Council irrespective of their political affiliation. Similar demand was placed by the Sylhet Peoples' Association, the outfit of the reunionists. On the other hand, when the whole of Surma-Barak valley mourned over their partition from the mother province (Bengal), the people of Brahmaputra valley

considered it to be a boon in disguise.

It was alleged by the people of Brahmaputra valley that whenever the Assam proper made a demand for a University or a High Court, there was invariably a counter demand for a similar institution in other valley. To them, Sylhetis had a false notion of superiority and they considered to spurn the Assamese culture and even they felt the administrative structure of Assam as inferior and imperfect as compared to Bengal. Finally, the Sylhet district was considered to be economically deficit one. It was obvious that the aspiration of the people of Brahmaputra valley clashed with those of the people of Surma-Barak valley and due to this, relation embittered, feelings frayed even on minor issues which affected their approaches to the many burning issues of the province.³

On the other hand, within the valley itself, there was differences of opinion amongst its inhabitants. The bulk of the urban Hindu, both in Sylhet and Cachar had their origin in Sylhet. It was quite natural on their part to support reunion with Bengal where as rural folk of Cachar were not sure as to the desirability of such reunion. In other words, the people of Cachar, in general were less

³ History of Agitation for reunion of Sylhet with Bengal
File no. 3/1945, Nehru Memorial Museum Library, New Delhi.
enthusiastic towards the demand for the district's incorporation with Bengal since they were not in a position to face the stiff competition with the enlightened Jamindars and educated people of Sylhet in political field. This attitude of the people of Cachar stood as a hurdle in the way of uniting the people of both the districts of Cachar and Sylhet on many serious issues. Moreover, the Mohammedan inhabitants of the valley were reluctant to the idea of reunion as they considered the separation of Sylhet district alone without Cachar and Goalpara would be incongruous and detrimental to the interest of the people of the whole valley. They had their equation in terms of religion superceeding their linguistic and cultural identity.

The political activity of the valley in the early 20th century was, in fact, carried under the Sylhet ethos and were dominated by the leaders of Sylhet. The Surma-Barak valley though shared equal political power with the Brahmaputra valley, the Cachar's share in this regard always remained to the minimum and Cachar had grievances against the leaders of Sylhet.

The government held divergent views regarding separation issue. From the very beginning, the Government of Assam for political and economic reason, was not willing to concede to the demand of the transfer of the district of Cachar to Bengal. It was opined that Cachar was essentially a Assam district and historically and culturally
this district was closely linked with Assam. Even the stand of the Government of Bengal on Cachar was not very encouraging. The reunion issue was discussed in the Bengal Council and a resolution was passed supporting the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal provided the Government of Assam made a contribution as a set off against the deficit of the Sylhet district. But the case of Cachar was vehemently rejected by the Government of Bengal. Moreover, the Government of Assam had an apprehension that separation of Sylhet would encourage counter agitation in Cachar, Lusai Hills and Goalpara upsetting the existing arrangement. The member of the Government of India categorically stated on March 7, 1912 that it would not consider any proposal for inclusion of any Bengali speaking area in Bengal. A question on the subject was raised in the Imperial Legislature in 1912 and the Government replied that "since Sylhet has been a part of Assam for thirty eight years, it is naturally included in that province. Now that, it has been once more separated from Eastern Bengal. As I have already informed the house that all considerations of boundary adjustment have been postponed."

4. AICC papers File No.5, 1938-39, NMML
5. Ibid.
The reemergence of Bengal-Sylhet reunion issue on the cue of Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms was inevitable. At this time the theory of self-determination of distinct nationalities gained momentum not only abroad but also in India. The Calcutta session of the Congress in 1917 also vertically endorsed the same principle and conceded the demand for linguistic provinces for its own organisational set-up. After his arrival in India, Edwin Montagu, Secretary of State, was requested by a delegation led by Abdul Karim from Surma-Barak valley to transfer Sylhet to Bengal. In 1917, Sylhet People's Association also submitted a similar memorandum, to the viceroy. In 1918, Kamini Kumar Chanda, a member of the Indian Legislative Council raised the issue in Bengal provincial conference in the form of General resolution to recommend the constitution of linguistic province but the resolution was ultimately defeated.

The politico-economic conditions of both the Brahmaputra valley and Surma-Barak valley attributed some inherent contradictions among themselves and this cleavage between the two entities were aptly reflected in their respective approaches inside

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the legislature which dominated the political scenario of the province in the period under discussion. The valley jealousy was apparent in the question of establishment of a separate University or a High Court for Assam or on the question of location of such institution. As early as 1924, Brojendra Narayan Chowdhury opposed the move in the fulfilment of Bramhaputra valley's desire for a separate University. To justify his argument he said that it had obtained a solemn promise from the Government in 1874 that the District would never be deprived of the services of Calcutta University and this assurance was reasserted subsequently by a commenique of the Chief Commissioner of Assam that the connection of the people of the valley with Calcutta University would remain undisturbed till the representative of the valley expressed their clear desire to have a University of its own.

In the second Reformed Council, B.N.Chowdhury moved the resolution recommending transfer of Sylhet to Bengal. He termed Assam's relation with Bengal as a "three legged race" and asserted that an unwilling rebellious partner would always obstruct Assam's

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ALCP (1924), vol 4. pp. 568-70, Sec Appendix D. 
9. Ibid.
peace, prosperity and progress. To counter this move, Sadananda Dwara moved a modified resolution for the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal. He expressed his resentment through the motion and said the transfer would put an end to the valley rivalry vitiated by claim and counter-claim. He observed, "Perhaps for the last ten years, the only politics of Assam will be whether Sylhet is to go to Bengal or not. The question would not be considered in the interest of a particular community but in the interest of whole province." He sought an assurance from the government that the status of Assam as province, after Sylhet being transferred to Bengal, would not be affected. This resolution came as a rude shock to the agitated Councillor's of Cachar and they pointed out that Assam would not be a homogenous province by separating Sylhet alone. They came forward with the claims of their oneness with Sylhet and demanded to remain with it, be it in Assam or Bengal. Accordingly, in March session of the Council, Rashid Ali Laskar, who once opposed the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal, moved a resolution seeking transfer of Cachar to Bengal excluding North Cachar Hills and asserted that if Cachar is kept in Assam against

her will, it will not only be an injury to the people of Cachar but also become a clog to the wheel of progress of the people of Assam.\footnote{12. ALCD, 1926, vol 4, p 85. ALAL. Guwahati}

But Cachar separation issue unlike that of Sylhet faced a hostile House. The Councillors from Brahmaputra valley particularly Mohammedans took separate stand. Faiznur Ali said that the Cachar separation move was engineered by the people who were not the indigenous inhabitants but the settlers in the district,\footnote{13. ALCP, 1926, vol 4, p.85., AICC papers File No. 3/1945, NMML.} Saadulla also opposed the move on the ground that the combined Muslim strength would play a dominant role in Assam politics.\footnote{14. Ibid.} Dewan Wasil Ali, supporting Sadulla, said, "Sylhet after its merger with Assam had made rapid strides in all fields. The bar, benches and Sub-ordinate services which were once dominated by the Bengalees were being at present manned by the Sylhetis."\footnote{15. AICC papers. File no. 3/1945, NMML. A.C.Bhuyan and S.De, (ed.). Political History of Assam, Vol.II, \textit{op. cit.}, 288.} However, if Sylhet would merge with Bengal, he opined that there was no justification to retain Cachar in Assam as both the units culturally and linguistically were tied up with Bengal.

Cachar councillors were, however, of divided opinion owing to the difference among the inhabitants of the district. The bulk of the urban populace, related to one way or the other with Sylhet
favoured reunion with Bengal. Whereas, the rural folk of Cachar were less enthusiastic towards their reunion with Bengal. This became clear when Bipin Chandra Deblaskar came forward to speak for retention of Cachar with Assam. In his long speech delivered in Bengali, Deblaskar made it clear that the idea of the transfer of Surma-Barak valley to Bengal was dear to the urban people, not to the rural masses of Cachar. He opined that the people of Cachar had many reasons to oppose the transfer motion. Under Bengal province, Cachar could not compete with the enlightened, powerful and well-to-do Zaminders, Rajas and educated people of the Sylhet in the political field. Moreover, Bengal being a larger province, the voice of Cachar would not reach the Governor as easily as it could in Assam, being a comparatively a smaller unit. He stated that any wrong decision under any circumstances would amount to betrayal of the trust of the voters who had sent him to the council.¹⁶

Even the Mohammedan councillors from Cachar who had earlier supported the transfer issue changed their mind. They were being lured by divisive politics played by the colonial ruler. The

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¹⁶. ALCD, vol 4, 1924, a speech by Bipin Chandra Devlaskar in Bengali in March Session, 1924. Appendix E.
prospect of Muslim outnumbering the Bengalee Hindus in the new province had a great political and economic advantage in the new administrative set up where Muslims would be majority and the most favoured community. Allauddin Ahmed, a member from Cachar expressed his fear in his speech in which he said that in that case the district of Cachar would be nowhere. At the same time he resented that only the people of Sylhet were eager to go to the Bengal "Not a single cry has came from Bengal in our aid". He continued "as far as I am aware there has been no sympathetic movement from Bengal to take us back in their midst. Does it not indicate that we want to mix with people who have no sympathy for us? This reminds me one Bengali proverb - ami kandi bhai bhai, Bhair Chokuth pani nai (I cry for my brother who has no tear to shed for me".\(^17\) But this argument was only partially valid since the District Congress Committees of both the districts were officially tagged with BPCC till 1947.

There were mixed feeling even amongst the common masses. It was alleged by a section of people that the campaign for transfer was engineered by the upper caste Hindus.\(^18\) This lack of

\(^{17}\) M.Kar, op.cit. p.119. ALCD. vol.4.1924

\(^{18}\) Santanu Dutta, "Reunion (with Bengal) Movement in Barak valley", op.cit. P:7
unanimity on the transfer issue was also crystallised in the Surma valley political conference of 1924 held in Sunamganj under the presidency of Sarojini Naidu and forced the executive body to drop the issue from the main agenda.\textsuperscript{19}

Since 1926, the rigid attitude of both the Hindus and the Muslim leaders gradually softened towards Assam politics. The Muslim Councillors of both the valleys took a united stand and successfully adopted a resolution recommending retention of Sylhet and Cachar in Assam. Dewan Wasil Chowdhury, Mohammedan Councillor from Sylhet demanded the retention of Sylhet in Assam and declared that the future of 'the land of Sahajalal'(Sylhet) depended on its fate being bounded up with that of Assam.\textsuperscript{20} The Hindu leaders also gradually veered more and more towards status quo and they appealed to the councillors of Brahmaputra valley to create a feeling of love among the people of both the valleys and not to throw the Surma valley out to Bengal. But there was lack of unanimity amongst the leaders of Cachar. In Cachar, one section having its base at Hailakandi sub-Division opposed the transfer of

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} ALCD, vol 3, p 711, 1928.
Cachar along with Sylhet to Bengal. This section wanted to disassociate Cachar from Sylhet. The other section representing both Hindus and Mohammedans insisted on their association with Sylhet and wanted to remain in Assam along with Sylhet. This section identified the Hailakandi based move as sectarian and being piloted by a few Jamindars of the Sub-division who were afraid of the rigidity of the tenancy law of Bengal. Thus when the Cachar councillors were fighting on transfer issue in the Council, the Sylhet, councilors remained neutral because they felt that the inclusion of Cachar would delay their transfer and conceded to the official view that Cachar was historically belonged to Assam.\textsuperscript{21} The sudden change of attitude of Sylhet leaders created confusion amongst the Cachar members and this lack of unanimity made both the Districts hostile house when the situation demanded their mutual trust and co-ordination.

The Government of India, on its part, did not fail to exploit the cleavage between different sections of the people on the issue of transfer. It asserted that the considerable body of opinion was against the transfer, holding that this would be detrimental to the interest of

\textsuperscript{21} A.C. Bhuyan and S. De, Political History of Assam, Vol. II \textit{op. cit.}, P. 289.
the community. It was stated that the move for the transfer had been initiated by a few Hindu Swarajists who dreamt of installing a Swarajya Government in Bengal and needed to strengthen the size of the Hindu Community by the transfer.\textsuperscript{22} The Government therefore declined to make any promise regarding the transfer of Sylhet as it would reduce the status of Assam as a province. As far as Cachar was concerned, it refused to view it as a district of Bengal. Its transfer was, therefore, overruled. The Government wanted the legislature to consider the matter once again.\textsuperscript{23} Accordingly, a special session of the Assam Legislative Council was convened on 6th January, 1926. A W Botham, at the outset, made it clear that the sole aim of the session was to ascertain the considered opinion of the Council on the question of separation of Sylhet, in the light of the observation made by the Government of India. This time, a resolution, for the transfer of Sylhet, was moved by an Assamese leader, Sadananda Dwara, who sought an assurance that the status of Assam would not be affected by the transfer. Despite the opposition from the Assamese Muslim leaders

\textsuperscript{22} S. Nag in Arun Bhuyan (ed.) Nationalist Upsurge in Assam, op.cit, P.315
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
like Saadulla, the resolution was carried by 26 to 11 votes.\textsuperscript{24}

Two of the three Cachar members, namely, Bipin Chandra Deblaskar and Rashid Ali Laskar participated in the debate and the texts of their speeches are available in the proceedings of the Assam Legislative Council. Bipin Chandra Deblaskar made it clear that he supported the resolution in 1924 because at that time the proposal was for the transfer of both Sylhet and Cachar. But now that the resolution was for the transfer of Sylhet alone and therefore, he was unable to support it. He said, 'Now the leaders from Sylhet are saying that they will draw out Cachar if Sylhet is included in Bengal. But the people of Cachar refused to be satisfied with the false assurance given to them by Sylhet district because of their previous behaviour and all the permanent citizens of Silchar strongly asked me to protest against the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal, that is why I am protesting against the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal. If I accept the proposal regarding the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal I shall be a betrayer before the people of Cachar. The leaders of Sylhet district can not expect to get wholehearted support from the representatives of the Cachar

district because of intriguing attitude meted out to them. Cachar always followed Sylhet, that is why the people of Cachar are anguished today. The leaders of Sylhet are giving assurance that they will add Cachar to Bengal after the inclusion of Sylhet to the same. The people of Cachar can not rely upon the assurance of the leaders of Sylhet as they did not wait for the Cachar people in their struggle for reunion with Bengal. Due to this reason, I am protesting against the resolution. So far as I know, not a single member of Cachar will agree to this resolution."

Maulavi Rahid Ali Laskar, another member from Cachar, also said that the resolution passed in 1924 included Cachar and Sylhet and 'unless Cachar was included in that resolution there was every likelihood that the resolution would have been defeated at that time.' He said, "As for the people of Cachar, these people have not migrated from the Assam Valley, they have not migrated from the hills, they have not dropped from heaven. The Cachar people are descendants of Sylhet. ....Their position is that they do not want to go to Bengal, their main object is to remain with Sylhet. If Sylhet

remains they want to remain, if Sylhet goes to Bengal they want to go also. That is the position of Cachar. I represent not only my own constituency but I represent the opinion of the entire district.”

The third Cachar member, Harendranath Chakraborty, appears to have not participated in the debate, as his speech is not found in the proceedings. However, he also voted against the resolution. All the Cachar members thus unitedly opposed the 'Sylhet Resolution'. It should be also noted that all the three Cachar members moved a separate resolution recommending the transfer of both Cachar and Sylhet to Bengal, although this 'Cachar Resolution' was defeated in the Council. J.B. Bhattacharjee summed up the situation in the following words:

"the members from Cachar opposed the 'Sylhet Resolution' in the Assam Council in 1926, firstly, because the resolution recommended the transfer of Sylhet only and, secondly, because they wanted both Cachar and Sylhet to be reunited with Bengal. In their speeches in the Council, they made it clear that Cachar and Sylhet together formed the Surma (Barak) Valley and the people in these

two districts were geographically, historically, culturally and linguistically inseparable from each other. Sylhet alone should not be transferred, because the people of Cachar were also 'Sylhetee' by language and culture. In other words, by opposing the resolution for the separation of Sylhet they opposed the vivisection of the Surma (Barak) Valley."^27

As soon as the resolution was passed, it raised a storm of protest throughout the Surma-Barak valley. Anjuman-I-Islamia, Muslim Students Association and Muslim League in Assam and Surma Valley Muslim Conference vehemently opposed the move of the transfer of Sylhet to Bengal. Encouraged by the success of its divisive politics, the Government backed the reopening of the issue in the council. Md. Bhakt Mazumder moved a resolution on 17th September, 1928, asserting that the people of Sylhet and Cachar were opposed to the transfer of their district to Bengal, as the Muslims would have better prospect in Assam. ^28 The Government's stand was that it would not come in the way if the people of Sylhet desired the transfer to Bengal provided it did not affect the existing status of Assam. It also made clear that it was aware of the polarisation between

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the Hindus and Mislims over the issue and until and unless such disunity disappeared, the administration would not affect any change in the existing territorial arrangement. To retrieve the situation, Basanta Kumar Das, a Hindu member from the Surma valley demanded that the Government should examine the views of those who pay the Chowkidari or Municipal rates about the desire of the districts of Sylhet and Cachar regarding the transfer of these districts to Bengal and represent them to the proper authorities. The demand for amendment of Basanta Das was rejected by 29 to 12 votes. But the original resolution was thereafter passed without a division. Accordingly the Chief Secretary G.E.Soames, reported to the Indian Statutory Commission that "the opinion of the province expressed through its elected representatives in the Legislative Council is opposed to the transfer of Sylhet." This sealed the issue and the issue of transfer of sylhet was never again raised in the form of resolution in the legislature. Thus, communal interests triumphed over linguistic affinities in the case of Sylhet.

Apart from the Sylhet-Bengal reunion issue, the cleavage

29. ALCIP (1928), vol 8, PP 784 and 811-2.
30. S. Nag, Arun Bhyuan (ed.), Nationalist Upsurge in Assam, op.cit, P.317
between the two valley's was so acute that it transcended communal and caste differences. The line of division in Assam politics was turned primarily not between the inhabitants of Bramhaputra valley and those of Surma valley. The rivalry between the two valleys centred round the particular aspiration of the valleys to build up necessary infrastructural facilities for the development of the respective valley societies and to cultivate and protect their particular valley interests. Except on some general demands this difference of attitude actually obstructed and hampered the formulation of a general policy for the development of the province as a whole. The valleys were no doubt unanimous to demand free and compulsory primary education and starting of technical and industrial schools with attached workshop in choosen centres of the province and adopted two resolutions of Radha Binod Das to this effect in 1921. They also adopted in the same Council the resolution of Romoni Mohon Das to start hand spinning as home industry and to appoint spinning masters for teaching the art in home through out the province. In 1937 the valleys were also unanimous to demand to the Government of India to grant

31. ALCP 1921, vol PP 93, 245, 256.
to the province their entire income from the excise duty on petrol and kerosene produced in Assam. But the valleys, contrary to this general agreement, opposed each other on proposals made on valley lines.\textsuperscript{32}

In 1921, Surma-Barak valley resented over the establishment of an emporium in Bramhaputra valley on the ground that the Surma valleys developmental matters were overlooked. The valley had no intention to hamper the development of the Bramhaputra valley but wanted fair and equal treatment in regard to the developmental schemes of the province. But Rashid Ali Laskar, a Councillor from Cachar took a dispassionate view and requested the Sylhet councillors to allow the establishment of the institution to build up in Assam valley and rupture on valley lines.

The establishment of a medical school at Sylhet was a crying need and long felt want of the valley. In 1913, Kamini Kumar Chanda explained the condition of the students of the valley in regard to their medical education and termed their position as "Dhobi ka kutta, na ghor ka na ghat ka." That they were refused admission in Dacca Medical School on the ground that they were the people of Assam.

\textsuperscript{32} ALCP 1921, vol, 10, P 408
and when they approached to the Barrywhite Medical school, Dibrugarh, they were told to wait till the claim of the people of Assam valley were satisfied. In view of difficulties experienced by the valley, demands were repeatedly placed in the floor of the Council and Assembly. But the Government refused to concede to the demand of the Surma-valley Councillors on the ground that the public exchequer of the province was so poor that it was not in a position even to start institutions to teach the minor crafts like weaving and carpentry in districts. Due to this financial position of the province, the Surma valley members, inspite of appreciating the demand for a technical school at Jorhat, failed to support immediate implementation as they were apprehensive that such a course would disturb the realisation, of their medical school.

In 1925, Sylhet demanded the introduction of B.Sc class and Economics in B.A. class in Murari Chand College, Sylhet and was opposed by Saadulla, the then Education Minister on the ground that Sylhet was going to be transferred to Bengal. Cachar, the other partner, was also not happy with the developmental schemes for their district and as such in the budget session of 1926, Bipin Chandra

33. Ibid.
34. ALCP, 1926, vol XVI pp 629.
Deblaskar expressed his dissatisfaction for non-allotment of fund in the budget for undertaking new schemes in Cachar even though the Council had decided to keep the district as an integral part of Assam apart from Sylhet. Rashid Ali Laskar expressed his resentment at the mode of treatment to Cachar in regard to its development and found the district of Cachar neither in Assam nor in Bengal.

In 1936, finding the government aggreable to consider the proposal for the establishment of an agricultural school or college in the province, Sylhet Councillors forwarded their claim to the Government to examine the feasibility to start the same in the medical school building of Sylhet but the Assam valley Councillors were opposed to the duplication of the institutions in the province. The Councillors from Cachar, also extended the support to the Bramhaputra valley to have one agricultural school or college in the province.

On March 1938, Premier Saadulla laid before the Assembly a proposal for the establishment of a High Court in Assam. This was vehemently opposed by the non-congress members of the Surma

35. Ibid.
36. Ibid
valley both Hindus and Muslims. The valley was satisfied with the
services of Calcutta High Court and felt that its interests would remain
safe and protected under the jurisdiction of that Court. 38

The Assam University Bill 1941 was subject of intense
controversy between the two valleys. The bill was introduced in March
1941. 39 The Surma-Barak valley particularly Sylhet was not very
keen to have a separate university in the province because it had
obtained a solemn promise from the government since 1874 that the
district would never be deprived of the services of Calcutta University.
A public meeting of all sections of people was held at Sylhet town on
23rd February, 1941 and a resolution passed therein expressed
"emphatic protest" against the proposal for a separate University in
Assam. 40 The meeting also gave mandate to all the representatives of
the valley to offer effective opposition to any proposal for a University
in Assam. In response to this, Kamini Kumar Sen, while participating
in the budget discussion, recorded his reservation in a typical manner
"A University for the purpose of maintaining or improving
Assamese language and culture would serve no useful purpose to

38. op.cit. pp 169-170
39. Sylhet's opposition to separate University File no C-6(4) 41, P 61, AL
the people of Sylhet .... If unfortunately in spite of opposition from Sylhet, there' to be a University, I would suggest Sylhet as the fittest place for location.' 41 But while moving the bill the Education Minister discounted all apprehension from the Surma valley and characterised this as "absolutely unfounded and based on the most regrettable prejudices". 42 As a compromise, the Muslim members from the Surma Valley favoured Shillong as the site for the proposed University.

The above survey reveals some interesting features. None can miss the contradictions, confusions and indecisions reflected in the debate and, all parties involved, more or less contributed to create a fluid situation. The fact is that the confusion was not limited at the regional or local level only, it was evident at the national level as well.

When the provincial Congress committees were formed, the national leadership placed district Congress Committees of Sylhet and Cachar within the jurisdiction of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee. The implication was clear that at the national level, the

41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.
justifiability of the demand for the re-union of the two districts of Surma-Barak Valley was accepted. But at the provincial level, the attitude of the subordinate units of the INC was different. Assam Pradesh Congress Committee was eager to get rid of Sylhet but was reluctant to part with Cachar. On the otherhand, the Bengal leaders did not know much about Cachar and when the official group of the Bengal Assembly opposed the inclusion of Cachar in the re-union resolution, the former could not offer much resistance.

Within the Surma-Barak valley itself, the situation was no less confusing. Different segments responded differently and at time changed their positions with utmost ease. At the very initial stage, there was a semblance of unity amongst the legislators but gradually cleavages became apparent and differences of opinion came into open. The most consolidated stand was taken by the Muslim members who enblock opposed the move of the re-union, though some of them earlier supported the move. On the otherhand, the Hindu members of the legislature failed to offer a united front. In the Hailakandi Sub-division, a Hindu Zaminder family had always been opposed to any initiative taken by the Congress leaders and hence a legislator hailing from that family propagated the theory that the indigenous people of Cachar, irrespective of their religion, were opposed to the re-union. Kamini Kumar Chanda, who led the re-
union movement of Cachar, though initially succeeded in ensuring support of some indigenous Hindu leaders from rural Cachar, could not hold them for long and most of them voiced their opposition or at least reluctance to the re-union.

Thus, the Surma-Barak valley was a divided house on the question of re-union. Only united group that stood firmly to the cause were the Hindu leaders of Sylhet. In Cachar, leaders from urban areas were with their counterparts of Sylhet, but the rural gentry took a different position. The Muslim leaders of the entire valley stood unitedly against re-union. This belated stance was taken avowedly for the imagined benefits derived by the community because of the valleys' incorporation in Assam. But the real reason laid in the arguments put forwarded by Saadulla and others was that the huge Muslim population of Surma-Barak valley would enhance their political bargaining power of the entire province.

The debate also manifests the complexities that encompassed the natural relationship between nationalism, religiousism and localism at the operational level and at the national level. The leadership was inclined to accommodate the regional aspirations and that was the reason for making special provisions for incorporation of the two D.C.C's of the valley in the organisational framework of the B.P.C.C. But what appeared to them as the genuine
regional interest was actually not backed by all segment of the society of the region concerned. In Cachar, the leaders of the indigenous Hindu Community broke away from the reunion movement raising the slogan of localism and Muslim leaders of Cachar also vocal about the same kind of localism. But at the operational plane, their alliance with the Muslim leaders was motivated not by any local interest; rather they formulated a regional level alliance of Muslims of the province arming the bogey of localism. This kind of multiple shades of the local level manouvres deserved to be given due importance while studying the social realities of the region.