CHAPTER VII
THE FINAL PHASE:
A CONFUSED NATIONALISM CONFRONTED BY
AGGRESSIVE REGIONALISM OF BRAHMAPUTRA
VALLEY

The political situation in India took a new turn with the advent of Labour Party in power in Britain in 1945. The government called Lord Wavell, the Governor-general of India to Britain for consultation and finally declared that the Government was eager to introduce self-government in India at the earliest possible time and therefore, fresh elections to the central and provincial legislatures, which remained in abeyance because of world war II, would be immediately held as envisaged by the Government of India Act, 1935.

The Leaders of India's two major organizations the Congress and the Muslim League continued to think in terms of unilateral importance and remained apart. In the election the Congress secured an overwhelming majority of non-Muslim seats while the League won parallel and sometimes even more impressive success in Muslim constituencies everywhere, except in the North-West Frontier Province, which continued to be a Congress stronghold in spite of its predominant Muslim population. It was good that Congress
demanded immediate transfer of power from the British Government. Only it was pity that it could not come to term with the League on the principle of unity based on self-determination among Indian people. The trend of the election results set an all-India pattern.

In Assam, the Congress attained the status of a single largest party in Legislative Assembly. Out of 108 seats, congress won 58 seats.¹ Despite its overwhelming victory in the election, the Congress in Assam had to face a difficult task while forming the second Congress ministry. This time Gopinath Bordoloi was confronted with the problem of handling the members of Surma Valley in the formation of cabinet. Though he was given the full freedom by the high command, the Surma Valley Congressites raised the demand for equal representation in the cabinet arguing that the Surma valley could not be confined with merely Muslim and scheduled caste representation and also demanded that to guide the Government on policy matters, a joint body would be formed consisting of the members from the APCC and BPCC as Congress units. The same

¹. Home political, File No. 51/2/46, Assam Archives, Guwahati.
demand they put forward with regard to the selection of candidates and was not conceded to by APCC. These demands of the members of the Surma Valley were viewed by Bordoloi as unjust and untenable. To remove the deadlocks between the two valleys, Moulana Abul Kalam Azad along with Secretary, Bengal PCC came to Shillong at the request of Sardar Patel to install a government acceptable to both the valleys and for that purpose, a Joint Parliamentary Board consisting of representatives of the two provincial Congress originations was to be constituted to guide the ministry. The circumstances under which Azad reached the conclusion could be easily understood from the letter Azad wrote to Patel. Azad wrote:—

"The differences between the Assam Valley and Surma Valley have gone deep in Assam and now every question is viewed from the same point of view. The rivalry of these groups went on in regard to ministry also and as you know, these groups had their demands too. However, I now tried that these sentiments may not flare up any further, so that the demands of various groups as well as the efficiency of the cabinet may not suffer. A great deal of success has, therefore, been achieved, and so far as I could gauge I have found that the whole province was satisfied over it ".

After prolonged discussions with members of both the valleys, Azad reached settlement by suggesting the formation of a cabinet which would give representation to both the valleys with the Home portfolio going to Basanta Kumar Das. Azad also constituted a Joint Parliamentary Board at the insistence of the Surma Valley members in which two from Sylhet DCC, one from Cachar DCC, four from APCC, Secretaries of APCC and BPCC along with the leaders of Assam Legislative Party were included. Azad left Assam with the impression that the whole province was satisfied with the arrangement but the Assam Pradesh Congress leaders were not happy over it. This was evident from the letter written by Bordoloi to Patel. It read:

"...to such an arrangement the Bengal PCC Secretary had already agreed and signed, but so far as the Assam PCC is concerned the matter is waiting for considerations of the working committee. My own reaction to the setting up of any machinery of advice or even control, I am not quite sure how smoothly it will work. The success of the congress in the general seats has brought

the Surma Valley feelings to the extent of causing bitterness among some members. The Surma valley friends have choosen to criticize the Government and even the congress Government of 13 months, on grounds which from the point of view of population, revenue given to the government etc and all considerations are absolutely untenable. Maulana Saheb was learnt it first hand and I am not quite sure whether the establishment of such committee will really not keep this jealousy alive. I should keep you informed the every action of mine beginning from formation of ministry giving seats to either valley where the population between Assam Valley and Surma valley is 6 to 4 roughly, distribution of important portfolios, etc, are being adversely criticized by a section of these Assamese people. Maulana saheb seemed to come to the conclusion that only alternative to this state of things is to separate the Bengal districts of Sylhet and a portion of Cachar from Assam and join these with Bengal, a consummation of which the Assamese people are looking for the last 40 years.

This letter of Bordoloi somehow convinced Patel and latter put an end to the debate by stating that the only alternative left before APCC was to separate the Bengali district of Sylhet and portion

of Cachar from Assam. In the light of this statement it could be argued that Bordoloi's effort fostered the aspiration of retaining Caste Hindu Assamese hegemony in the province of Assam. At the same time, it was the crystallisation and legitimization of parochialism of both the valley partners for which they were striving since 1874 (sometimes open sometimes beneath the operational plane). When Sylhet and Cachar were administratively amalgamated with Assam without taking into consideration their socio-cultural ties with Bengal. Thus, in the post-war political situation, when everybody felt that transfer of power was round the corner, the nationality question of the region attained a new dimension.

The Labour Party's victory in the election of 1945 was a breakthrough in the Indo-British relations. In the three previous years, the conditions in India following Quit India Movement and the aftermath of INA trial too vastly altered the political scenario in India, suggesting that it had become very difficult for Britain to hold on in India any further. It was at this stage that the new British Prime Minister Attlee made a statement in the House of Commons on the Indian issue about the Governments' decision to transfer power to the Indians by June 1947. The Attle Government's decision to send a Cabinet Mission to India for negotiations with the Indian leaders
for transfer of power obviously marked a qualitative and a decisive change in the British policy towards India.

The Cabinet Mission, after a series of talks with the Indian leaders announced that for the purpose of getting together, an effective government of India having the support of major political parties would be set up while the constitution of India was being hammered out. This meant that there would be an interim government, that is, the Viceroy's Council would be fully Indianised till a new constitution was framed and an elected Government would be set up at the centre. In setting out the structure of the grouping part of the plan the Mission explained that there would be three groups. The group C would consist of Assam and Bengal. As soon as the statement was declared, it aroused immediate public reaction in Assam against the grouping clause. Gopinath Bordoloi, the Premier of Assam, who was in Delhi at the time of announcing the plan, saw in the grouping part of the plan a mischievous design that would place Assam at the mercy of the Muslim majority Bengal for all time to come. It seemed to Bordoloi immoral and unjust to place Hindu majority province like Assam in Group C. To save Assam from Grouping octopus, Bordoloi sought the help of Gandhiji but the latter suggested that there was no question of it being rejected in full or
part. A man of far-sight, Bordoloi did not lose heart and he evolved a threefold strategy to frustrate the Grouping design. He and APCC roused the people of Assam to launch a united movement against the scheme. As the premier, he called a session of the Assam Legislative Assembly to elect Assam's representatives to the Constituent Assembly and at the same time passed a resolution asking the Assam members not to sit in the legislature of section C. Alongside this, he again decided to seek Gandhiji's help to save Assam. In response to Bordoloi's call, the people of Assam raised a united voice against the Grouping scheme that strengthened Bordoloi's plea to fight the scheme.

Indeed, the Bengali speaking people of the Surma Barak valley were inclined to welcome the grouping proposal of the Cabinet Mission at least as a partial approach to the greater Bengal of their desire, though recognizing the inadequacy of this method. As a result, a wider split occurred between the congress of the two valleys. The Surma Valley Congress leaders lost no opportunity in welcoming

the grouping plan. The difference between the congress leaders of two valleys was further fanned by the briefing of the Cabinet Mission proposal by Premier Bordoloi. He stated before the press that he had put the question of separation of Sylhet from Assam before the Mission without any consultation with the members of the Surma-Barak Valley. There was a strong resentment against Bardoloi in the Hindu press for putting up the question of separation of Sylhet from Assam. As a result both Bardoloi and the Brahmaputra Valley members of the Cabinet were extremely unpopular with the Surma Valley members and Surma Valley Congress as a whole. The Sylhet DCC reacted sharply to this move and resolved to support the declared Congress policy of redistribution of provincial boundaries on the basis of language and culture and accordingly, demanded the "inclusion of Sylhet, Cachar and Goalpara to Bengal". The demand was obviously a counter move intended to embarrass the Congress leadership of Brahmaputra Valley which received encouragement from Kiron Sankar Ray, the leader of the Congress.

party in Bengal Legislative Assembly. The feeling of Surma Valley was conveyed to Ray by Rabindra Nath Aditya, Surma Valley Congress leader. He wrote 'We the people of the Surma Valley are living on the margin of history or more aptly of geography. Our Assembly party leader Sj Gopinath Bordoloi met the Cabinet Mission with the directives from the Assam Provinvncial Congress Committee, and not from the Assam Congress Assembly Party. So, we notice a statement made by him to the press that he has no objection to Sylhet being tagged to East Bengal. It has highly perturbed the people of Sylhet'.

Ray pleaded before the Cabinet Mission for the inclusion of Sylhet along with Cachar and Goalpara into Bengal. Ray’s claim was bitterly opposed by Siddinath Sarma, the General Secretary of APCC, who considered it irresponsible and destined to create provincial bitterness and undermine the solidarity of an all India Organisation.

The Cachar DCC, however, was sharply divided on the question of

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the inclusion of cachar into Bengal. The representatives of the indigenous people have decided to disassociate themselves with the Sylhet leaders. On the contrary, the Hindus of the Brahmaputra valley also continued the movement for the separation of Sylhet in order to bring to an end the unnatural union of Assam with Bengal grouping proposals. A prominent congress leader of Sylhet, Abalakanta Gupta, considered the grouping as "a desirable step" in view of the possible transfer of the district to Bengal. The Hindu leaders of Sylhet favoured grouping and vehemently resented Assam congress leader's anti-grouping expression. While justifying grouping, Abalakanta Gupta was critical of the APCC and particularly, Gopinath Bardoloi who masterminded the opposition. He remarked: 'Bardoloi's opinion does not reflect the sentiments of the Bengalees of Surma Valley or indeed of the entire Assam. We feel should there be any grouping at all the proposed grouping of Assam with Bengal is much more desirable.' 11 Quoting the oft-repeated demand of the separation of Sylhet from Assam, Gupta said, 'If Surma Valley or as the Bardoloi

11. Ibid. p. 356.
insists Sylhet alone is to be transferred to Bengal under new constitution, justice and fairness demand that their representative should participate in the constitution-making of Bengal. The proposed grouping offers this opportunity.\textsuperscript{12} It was unworthy of the Surma-Valley Hindu leadership to show such a lack of far-sight in not being able to unearth the real motive behind the Section. But the picture became gradually clear to them and with it, leaders like Basanta Kumar Das and Baidyanath Mukherjee moved away towards the cause of Assam.

Muslim League generally welcomed the scheme which, they felt, had the merit of dissolving the unrealities surrounding Pakistan plan from the point of view of the Muslims of Assam. However, the indigenous Muslims of the Brahmaputra Valley were not quite certain whether they would benefit more from communal support to the group. Some of them saw the chance of their being swamped by the immigrants. Majority of the Assamese Muslims were at best lukewarm in their attitude towards the Cabinet Mission plan. The nationalist Muslim's confusion was more confounded and they were at a loss to

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
decide whether it was good for them. Some farsighted nationalist Muslims saw in it their extinction as a party and were concerned more with survival than any real analysis of the proposal.\textsuperscript{13}

Significantly, it was reported that the League Muslims of Surma Valley at one stage tried to make a common cause with the Hindus there and Bengalis throughout the province. Despite the restraint by some Hindu leaders of Bengal who displayed heated feeling against the so-called anti-Bengali complex which, in their opinion, lay behind the protest against grouping with Bengal. The Assembly met on 16 July to elect the representative to the Constituent Assembly.

The remarkable thing about the voting was that the Surma valley and pro-Bengali elements of the Congress voted with the Brahmaputra valley members, though until quite recently they had been strongly advocating grouping and opposing the stand taken by the congressmen of the other valley. Premier Bordoloi, however, gave a strong assurance to the congressmen from the Surma valley and said, "...If cultural and linguistic needs of a particular part of Assam require fulfilment by any territorial re-adjustment surely the Congress

\textsuperscript{13} B. J. Deb, \textit{op.cit}, pp 299-300.
as a party will be glad to see such fulfilment.' Governor of Assam, Andrew Clow fully shared Gopinath Bordoloi's fear that if Assam were to be lumped with Bengal in Group C, this province would be left at the mercy of Bengalis. He informed Mountbattan, the then Viceroy of India, on the validity of Bodoloi's apprehension and said in the note 'The caste Hinus are apprehensive and not without cause that a constitution framed for Assam in Group C would place them in a weaker position than they hold a present, and perhaps an even weaker position than they deserve ....'  

Gopinath Bordoloi had a personal discussion with Mountbatten on the Grouping Scheme and told the viceroy that he would suggest not to partition Bengal as an undivided Bengal would be advantageous for Assam in respect of Communication with the rest of the country. The note submitted by the governor and the views expressed by Bordoloi greatly influenced the Viceroy in abandoning the Cabinet Mission proposal so far grouping clause was concerned. There is no doubt that Bardoloi had acted in that

15. Ibid. P. 321.
crucial stage of history with exemplary foresight as a result of which Assam was saved from a possible disaster.

While Assam was passing her days in uncertainties, the political events in India took a new turn which compelled the British Government to think of a fresh approach to Indian problems. Prime Minister Atlee realized that only alternative with them was to transfer power to the Indians. He also announced the replacement of Wavell by Lord Mountbatten as Viceroy of India. Mountbatten, after scrutinizing the entire situation, was convinced that the unity of India as envisaged by the Cabinet Mission plan was not workable and thereby decided the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan. The plan proposed for the partition of Bengal and Punjab but in case of Assam, a referendum was to be held in Sylhet district to obtain the people's verdict whether they would remain in Assam or opt for the Eastern wing of proposed Pakistan. His plan was approved by the British cabinet and he was successful in persuading the Congress and the League.

The British Government's statement of 3rd June 1947 was well received by the people of the Brahmaputra valley in particular. They were satisfied at the recognition of Assam as a non-Muslim province along with the prospect of Sylhet being separated on
linguistic and economic grounds. The provision of referendum was considered more justifiable and democratic than the grouping plan of 16 May, 1947.

The news also brought relief to the congress leadership which offered the possibility of a new Assam free from politics of tension of the decades of provincial autonomy. Though Assam premier Bordoloi had earlier addressed a meeting of some three thousand people at Gauhati advocating retention of Sylhet in Assam, the feeling of most of Assamese leaders had been very much consistent with the earlier stand and as such the termination of artificial union of Sylhet with Assam was considered desirable. Obviously, there could not be any unanimity among the Congressmen of the Brahmaputra valley. Bordoli's predicament was understandable. On 3rd July, 1947 Patel sent a telegraphic message urging Bordoloi to extend utmost support for securing referendum in favour of retention of Sylhet in Assam. Patel advised Bordoloi to try his best and not to remain indifferent.

The Congress of the Brahmaputra valley had been urged to remember that the question was one to be decided by the people of Sylhet and to abstain from expression of views. The Surma Valley Congress made all efforts to explain its volte face in regard to the
reunion of Sylhet with Bengal and due entirety to 'compulsion of facts' and its yearning to salvage as much of India as possible from "forces of reaction" The followers of the Jamiat-ul-ulema-Hind decided not to follow their co-religionist as they thought it would amount to political suicide. The Jamiat decided to fight tooth and nail against the transfer of Sylhet. They immediately resolved to start the movement for retention of Sylhet in the Indian Union and within the province of Assam along with their Hindu brethren of Sylhet.16

Even there was a growing body of League opinion against Sylhet's transfer to East Pakistan as this would weaken the provincial league apart from pushing the Sylhet Muslims into a position of insignificance in East Pakistan. Besides, they were apprehensive of a low standard of life in East Pakistan. Some Sylhet Leaguers, at first, expressed the view that unless forced by the high command of Assam, provincial League would probably favoured the inclusion of Sylhet in Assam. Some of the League minded Zaminders of Sylhet also did not favour the transfer as they feared loss of their privileges in being in Pakistan.17

17. Ibid. p. 322.
However, the Muslim League in Sylhet was riding on the Congress horse of the Brahmaputra Valley in maintaining the propaganda of reunion of Sylhet with Bengal. Every argument which the Congress made previously for this purpose was equally stressed by League. Thus, the League declared that in order to escape from "inter-racial jealously and valleyism" the only way out was to recognize the historical and geographical link of Sylhet with Eastern Bengal apart from close linguistic and racial affinity. It was claimed that there was as much unity between Sylhet and East Bengal as between Canada and the USA and as much dissimilarity between Sylhet and Assam as between Belgium and Holland.\(^\text{18}\) It is clear from the above comment that the religious feeling and idealism of the Muslims of Sylhet was declared to be in conflict with the ideal of a purely secular approach of western society. The scheduled castes were divided from the very beginning and a split occurred after the second annual conference of the Assam Provincial Scheduled Castes Federation. The Federation had passed a resolution by majority votes expressing

\(^{18}\) Ibid. p. 323.
solidarity with the Muslim League in an attempt to retaliate the caste Hindu supremacy in the Congress. During referendum, Muslim league was successful in getting the support of the few leaders of the Scheduled Caste community. Jogendra Mondal, a Scheduled Caste leader, came and held meeting among the people belonging to his community and preached in favour of Pakistan. His effort to persuade his community people, however, did not leave any impact and they were not lured by the fake commitment given by him on the question of transfer. Thus, when he visited sylhet, a section of the Jamiat Volunteers along with a handful of plantation labours launched protest against his provocative speeches during which four Leaguers were injured.19

Fragmentation of Localism : Segmentalisation of Demands and Aspirations

The politics of Surma-Barak valley took a new turn since the briefing of the Cabinet Mission by Bardoloi. An in-depth

analysis of the reaction of the Cachar DCC to the Grouping proposal shows that there developed a sharp division between the indigenous Cachar leaders and immigrant Sylhet leaders on this issue. The Cachar DCC in a resolution passed on 27th April, 1946 declared in favour of remaining with Assam and strongly opposed the Sylhet leaders who in the name of the Surma Valley and without consulting Cachar District, have resolved for inclusion of Cachar to Bengal".20 This move was opposed by Upendra Sankar Dutta, vice president of Cachar DCC who along with some other members were in agreement with the stand taken by the Sylhet DCC. The Silchar Bar Association, dominated by the people of Sylhet, unanimously demanded the inclusion of Cachar to Bengal on linguistic basis. This move was vehemently opposed by some indigenous communities of Cachar and, in order to resist the transfer of Cachar, they organized meetings to express their views regarding their stands and also the views taken by different local organizations. A meeting of this kind was held at Silchar on 27th April under the presidentship of Nibaran Chandra

Laskar, a Congress M.L.A. The meeting opposed the proposal for transfer of cachar from Assam in consideration of political and economic advantages. While opposing a plebiscite to decide the issue, the meeting resolved that the bonafide natives of the district can not put any confidence on foreigners or domiciled inhabitants of this district with regard to any decision about Cachar problem. The meeting was attended by Nibaran Chandra Laskar, Bidyapati Singha, Lochanmoni Nath, president Cachar Jogi Sanmmelon, Nanda Kishore Singha, General Secretary N.M.J. Sangha, N.C. Patni, Vice Chairmen, Silchar Local Board, Dhaneswar Singha, Member Silchar Local Board, Dulal Chandra Nath, pleader, Dr. Uma Charan Mahanta, Kabiraj Mahendra Chandra Sarma and others. The meeting also decided to send a delegation to the Premier of Assam to apprise him of the sentiment of the people. The successful holding of this meeting led to the emergence of a new phase in cachar politics.21

A meeting of similar nature was organized by Cachar Plains Tribals Association in June, 1947 which resolved "The

relation between Sylhet and Cachar is nothing but the exploiter and exploited. Before the advent of British Rule the bonafide people of cachar - Hindus, Muslims and the Tribals - lived free from any kind of exploitation, but along with the advent of the British rule in Cachar the exploiters from Sylhet were freely allowed to migrate in the district. They not only helped the alien rule to be deep rooted in Cachar, but also exploited and are still exploiting the bonafide people of Cachar economically, politically and in all other respects. They will do so more and more if Sylhet is not separated from Assam as soon as possible. Besides, Sylhet was never connected with Assam except under the British rule, whereas Cachar has close relation with Assam from time immemorial. All bonafide people of Cachar irrespective of caste, creed or political affiliations, therefore, can not but demand immediate separation of Sylhet district so that they can live peacefully from any kind of native or foreign domination."

Bidyapati Singh, President, Assam Manipuri

Congress, Cachar, wrote a letter to Assam Tribune regarding the future of Cachar. The letter read:

"So long all eyes were rivetted for the expected declaration and now the cat is out of the bag and reactions are every where. It seems to me the portion dealing with referendum in Sylhet and contiguous Muslim majority areas of adjoining district is a both edged weapon and enigmatic .... From many years passed the people of Cachar have been opining both by press and platform their firm desire to stand by Assam and no way to be separated from Assam. My own interpretation of the portion is that the question of separation of Cachar or any part of it from Assam does not arise in any eventuality, of course, the Muslim League may move in a way ignoring the public opinion of Cachar and the fact that Cachar is a district of overwhelming non-Muslim majority leaving aside the bare truth that Cachar will be economically ruined if she be included in East Bengal. At present the problem of referendum in Sylhet is overshadowing the apprehensions, I am referring to, I am simply drawing the pointed attention of Congress leaders of Assam as well as Bengal to be awakened to the responsibility on them to see that in no way Cachar or any part of it may go to East Bengal by default in the whirlpool of present political current of division and redistribution. Rather justice would demand that south Sylhet and Karimganj sub-division may fairly be joined with Cachar if truncating of small areas be the order of the day".\textsuperscript{23}

Paresh Chandra Chowdhury, Secretary Cachar DCC has issued similar statement to the press. ".... the case of Cachar at least in this valley is one for the Government of Assam to be directly interested to. The Assam Government Should take up the cause of its territory before the Boundary Commission directly so that no part of Assam, excepting the Muslim Majority area of Sylhet can be curved out of Assam."²⁴

To substantiate the argument put forward by the aforesaid organisations, the Cachar Kalyan Samiti held a public meeting on 2nd July, 1947 at Lalabazar, Hailakandi which was presided over by Hirendra Chakarborty and was attended by Five thousand people including Muslims. The meeting adopted the following resolution."The Cachar people to render all possible help with men and money to Sylhet in her fight against East Bengal amalgamation. This meeting opines that the only Muslim majority Hailakandi Thana circled by non-muslim majority areas can never be tagged with Sylhet, it rather demands amalgamation of Contiguous non-Muslim majority areas of Sylhet and cachar".²⁵

²⁵ The Assam Tribune, Guwahati, July 4, 1947.
Regarding the future of Cachar, the Assam leadership at the initial stage of referendum was worried and took positive stand for its retention in Assam. Bordoloi wrote to Patel that although the fate of Sylhet was yet to be decided and the future was uncertain, the native people of Cachar were very firm in their attitude against going to Pakistan. They were afraid that in case the verdict of the referendum went in favour of Sylhet joining Pakistan, the Boundary Commission might award Hailakandi Thana from Cachar to that Country. He put forward elaborate arguments in support of retention of Cachar and even few thanas of Sylhet in Assam on Grounds of Communication with the rest of India. But the general public opinion in Assam was in favour of transfer of Sylhet along with Cachar. In 1937, Nilmoni Phukan and Ambika Giri Roy Choudhury told Nehru while he visited Assam that the Assamese people would be the staunchest supporters of Congress if Sylhet and Cachar plains were separated from Assam. Even in the Election Manifesto of 1946 Congress amongst other provisions, pledged that

the party would work for separating Sylhet and Cachar from Assam. At this critical juncture, it was not possible on the part of Bordoloi to ignore the sentiments of the general public opinion of Brahmaputra Valley in spite of his sympathy towards the cause of cachar.\textsuperscript{27} He wrote to Patel in 1946 that only alternative to this state of things is to separate the Bengali speaking District of Sylhet and a portion of Cachar from Assam and join these with Bengal ... a consummation to which the Assamese people are looking for the last 40 years".\textsuperscript{28} Thus, when the result of referendum was declared there was a sense of jubilation and relief in the Brahmaputra Valley.

The above mentioned differences within the different segments of the valley's society itself were responsible for the failure to build up indissoluble valley solidarity and added a new dimension at the crucial moment of referendum. If these broad division could have been resisted, the valley's politics might have opened new horizon in the socio-political set up. But for its failure, the valley is yet to formulate an indivisible identity to fight against neo-imperialist design of exploitation since independence.

\textsuperscript{27} B. J. Deb. \textit{op. cit.}, 330.
The Death of a dream

The announcement of Mountbatten Plan came as a rude shock to the leaders of Surma Valley. Immediately, a student convention was held at Silchar in February, 1947 which unanimously resolved to continue their agitation for the independence of united India. Satindra Mohan Deb convened an emergent meeting at Silchar on 8 June, 1947, which was presided over by Basanta Kumar Das. R. Aditya, Baidynath Mukherjee, Abdul Matlib Mazumdar, Lalit Kar, Labanya Kumar Chowdhury, Kamini Kumar Sen participated in the meeting and in their fiery speeches demanded the retention of Sylhet in India. Hailakandi Congress Committee did their best to fight referendum and sent hundreds of volunteers to help their brethren in Sylhet. A contingent of Congress workers were sent to Sylhet under the leadership of Santosh Kumar Roy. They were deputed to work at Roynagar of Sylhet where no party dared to work as it was predominantly a Muslim majority area. In Karimganj sub-division, Congress workers in batches from Hailakandi worked in different localities. In this connection, names of Binode Behari Singh, Amulya Ratan Sengupta, Abdul Latif Laskar, Utpal Roy and many others deserved special mention. Besides, Hirendra Chakroborty and his
brothers helped many voters by providing transport at free of cost. The Sylhet referendum was held on 6 and 7 July, 1947. It was virtually a vote on the twin issues of the reorganization of India on a Communal line and of the province of Assam on a linguistic basis. The Government put before the electorates an alternative: they could vote either for inclusion of Sylhet to East Bengal or for the retention of the district in Assam. The average percentage of valid votes polled to total electorate was 77.33. The result was communicated to the Viceroy on 12th July by the Governor of Assam and it was officially announced on 13th July by a press note by the Viceroy. 2,39,619 votes were cast in favour of Pakistan while 1,84,041 were in favour of maintaining the status quo and thus, the League own by 55,578 votes. The following table shows the sub-division wise statistical information of the result.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-division</th>
<th>No. of total Muslim votes</th>
<th>No. of non-Muslim votes</th>
<th>Votes Casts in favour of Pakistan</th>
<th>Votes in favour of Assam</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sylhet(N)</td>
<td>92,208</td>
<td>48,863</td>
<td>68,381</td>
<td>38,871</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karimganj</td>
<td>54,022</td>
<td>46,221</td>
<td>41,262</td>
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<td>Habiganj</td>
<td>75,274</td>
<td>60,252</td>
<td>54,543</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sylhet(S)</td>
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<td>41,427</td>
<td>31,718</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sunamganj</td>
<td>51,346</td>
<td>39,045</td>
<td>43,715</td>
<td>34,211</td>
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<td>3,11,707</td>
<td>2,35,806</td>
<td>2,39,619</td>
<td>1,84,041</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

29. Home political. File No. 7 of 11/7/47, Assam Archives.
30. Ibid. p.50.
The above statistics reveal some interesting facts. The average percentage of valid votes to total electorate was 77.33 and the league own by 55,578 votes. In spite of the fact that 72,114 Muslims and 65,486 Hindu voters did not turn up, the league secured the majority. Thus, in the ultimate analysis, Muslim majority could be eroded by Hindus and nationalist Muslims propaganda to the extent of 6628 only. This clearly militates against the view that a large number of Muslims voted for the retention of Sylhet in Assam. This also proves that Scheduled Caste support against Sylhet's going to Pakistan was illusory. If these two conclusions are wrong, where from did the league get the excess votes. Moreover, the exclusion of the entire labour population from the referendum was the most glaring deviation from the fundamental principle on which the country was divided. In short, the justification and correctness of the complaints and counter-complaints which characterized the referendum cannot be ascertained particularly in view of the fact that these are made by parties completely alienated from each other.

and holding dimetrically opposite views. But it cannot be denied that a wholly insecure and unstable situation prevailed in the district and so far as the complaints were concerned, much were officially unfounded but everything could not be denied.33

Basanta Kumar Das, the then Home Minister of Assam, issued in a statement on the day of referendum alleging that the Congress volunteers and supporters were prevented from voting by threats and intimidation. But this allegation was negated by Hydari, the then Governor of Assam and accused B.K. Das and other leaders for making such irresponsible statement and hiding the truth. Hydari somehow convinced Nehru when the latter received information of many events of malpractices from the people of Surma Valley.34

The result was celebrated by the Muslims of Sylhet and Assam alike. The Congress made feeble noises about the manner in which the League had participated in the event but admitted that such acts had not materially affected the result. After the referendum, the Boundary Commission under the chairmanship of Cyril Redcliff

33. Ibid.
was entrusted the task of demarcation of Muslim and non-Muslim majority area. The commission declared its award after three days of independence. According to the award, four thanas viz, Patharkandi, Ratabari, Badarpur and half of Karimganj were to be retained in India while the rest were to be amalgamated with East Pakistan.35

The result of the referendum was pre-destined. The Sylheti Hindus and Nationalist Muslims who opposed tooth and nail the amputation of Sylhet, which was described by Sardar Patel as diseased limb, accepted the result as fait accompli. There was a general notion prevailing among the Hindus of Sylhet that Sylhet was lost due to the militant attitude of the League that was encouraged by the apathy of the Assam Government is not wholly founded on truth. The Home Ministers of India and Assam, the Deputy Inspector General of Police, the Officer Commanding the Armed Forces in the district and a very large sections of the people were Hindus occupying positions of power and authority. Both Indian National Congress and Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee which endorsed the referendum failed miserably to fulfil their obligations

towards the Hindus and the Jamiat Muslims who opposed the referendum. The Assamese had little stake in the future of Sylhet in Pakistan. Moreover, Sylheti Hindus agitation for reunion with Bengal as well as their sense of superior position which was often illusory, had alienated them and made them to lose the sympathy of the Assamese. Finally, because of their differences at the operational plane, the Hindus of the Valley could not organize themselves properly for the ordeal, though there was no dearth of men and money. "Sylhet leadership", according to Veteran Sylhet Congressman, who had directly participated in the referendum work "failed to acquit itself well". Basanta Kumar Das was partly blamed for his failure to resist the demand of the League for cutting Sylhet from India. As the most Important leader of Sylhet occupying a position of authority in the cabinet next to Bardoloi, he could not assert himself and was accused of not being vigilant about the activities of the League as well as the British Government. But according to his Biographer, 'he could have taken up strong attitude at the time vis-a-vis the Assam

36. Ibid. p.36.
Ministry but he preferred to avoid going to the bitter end and leading to a ministerial crisis specially when he was not certain about the attitude of Congress Parliamentary Party." 37 We do not know who really benifitted but apperantly Sylhet fell a victim. Sylhet, "the golden calf", which was sacrificed in 1874 to usher a new province, was now once again sacrificed at the altar of a new province. Needless to say that both Bordoloi and APCC masterminded the referendum because of their apathetic attitude towards the Surma-Barak Valley. To quote Rabindranath Aditya, "The Assam leadership, too eager to get rid of Sylhet with a view to curving out a homogenous province arranged little protection for the minorities of Sylhet in the free exercise of their Universal franchise. When the result of the referendum was declared, there was a subdued sense of relief in the Assam Valley as the majority of votes cast were in favour of Pakistan." 38 At the sametime, the leaders of the Valley also could not escape their responsibility. They failed to resist the referendum because they lacked co-ordination. So, when the question of partition and

37. Quoted by M.Kar, op.cit, p.340.
38. Rabindranath Aditya, op.cit, p.31.
referendum came, the Congress Committees of both the districts were not in a position to exert its influence on the leaders either at the national level or at the provincial level. So, the referendum came as a fatal blow to the Congressites of the Valley and their failure to read the portents of the future, made them the worst victims of history.