

Exploring the Historical Roots of the Indo-Bangladesh Border: The Assam Perspective

Ms. Sarada Jyoti Singha

Ph. D Scholar, Department of Political Science, Assam University, Silchar, Assam

Introduction

The process of border formation and the partition of India in 1947 stand as a crucial moment in history, its effect rumbling through the subcontinent and the world to this day. This event signaled the condition of British colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent and the emergence of two sovereign nations, India and Pakistan. However, it also triggered one of the largest and most tumultuous human migrations in history, resulting in profound human suffering and reshaping the geopolitical landscape of South Asia. The partition of India emerged from a complex interplay of historical, political and religious factors that had been simmering for decades. The eventual delineation of borders and partition were largely guided by religious considerations, with the Radcliffe Line, drawn by British barrister Cyril Radcliffe, serving as the demarcation between India and Pakistan. This division had far-reaching and enduring ramifications, as millions of individuals were compelled to leave their homes, leading to communal violence, displacement and suffering on an unprecedented scale. Communities that had coexisted for centuries suddenly found themselves separated by a freshly defined border, giving rise to a legacy of bitterness and conflict that still lingers in certain regions today.

The partition of India persists as an issue of significant historical inquiry as it offers scope for analyzing various perspectives regarding the construction of borders and national identities. The history of the partition underlines the significance of exploring the far-reaching impact that creation of borders put forth on the fortunes of numerous people on either side of the boundary. This further highlights the need for understanding the interconnection between politics, religion and geography in shaping the future of the borderland region. In this context, the present study aims to explore the historical occurrences pertaining to the creation of the Indo-Bangladesh border in Assam as a whole.

The Formation of Indo-Bangla Border in Assam and the Sylhet Referendum

The root of the Indo-Bangla border formation in Assam and specifically in Barak Valley dates back to 1874, when the British demarcated the boundaries of Assam to serve their colonial interests. From the time of its British annexation until 1873, Assam fell under the jurisdiction of the Bengal Presidency, which included regions like Orissa, Bengal, Bihar, United Provinces covering Delhi, portion of Central Provinces, and Chota Nagpur. However, it was because of huge administrative complexities an unexpected administrative alteration occurred in the year 1874 when Assam was upgraded into a Chief Commissioner's Province and, thus, bringing the entire region under the direct governance of the Governor-General-in-Council. This step had a tremendous impact on the demographic composition, ethnic and linguistic set up of the state. The stiff opposition came from the people of Sylhet for its

inclusion in Assam as it was culturally, linguistically and socially tied to Bengal. They were not agreed to become part of Assam, a region with which they have no affinities in terms of social, linguistic or cultural aspects. Taking all these in view the people of Sylhet started a movement to reunite with Bengal. Though the movement was not successful but the British government decided that there would be no modifications to the present legal and judicial system or the procedures governing land settlement and revenue collection which were consistent throughout Bengal. There was always remained a desire for Sylhet's reunion with Bengal, but no major developments took place until 1905.

A remarkable change occurred during the first decade of the twentieth century when the British regime established a new province in the name of 'Eastern Bengal and Assam,' which sparked huge protest and agitation across the areas for several years. Against this step the famous 'Swadeshi Movement' (1905) started which attracted the attention of people from all walks of life. Finally, it was due to the severe protest, the British Government was compelled to repeal the decision of partition by December 2011.

As a result of the withdrawal of the Order, Assam got back its previous and also upgraded with a new 'Legislative Council' (located in Shillong), which brought considerable relief among the Assamese fraternity. On the contrary, for the citizens of Surma Valley in general and Sylhet in particular, this withdrawal of Order created an outrage as it had unnecessarily integrated again the Bengali-speaking populace of the Valley with the Assamese with whom they had no affinities. This confusing situation had brought unprecedented agitation and protest in the region for complete restoration of administrative position, i.e. transfer of Sylhet to Bengal. But slowly and gradually the reunion of 'Sylhet and Bengal' lost its momentum and it got divulged as a vast section of Muslim population started deviating from the issue. The British regime also seriously concerned with the financial situation of the region because any kind of alteration in the boundaries would cause harm to the Muslims and the tea-planting communities.

Subsequently, in the 1940's decade it was observed that the Assamese intelligentsia started to develop a feeling towards separation of Sylhet from Assam. This flow was clearly noticed in between 1931 and 1937, when various Assamese representative groups, including the Assam Association, Assam Valley Political Conference, Asamiya Samrakshini Sabha, Asamiya Deka Dal, etc. consistently brought up the issue of transfer and vehemently advocated for the relocation of the district. Even the demand for transfer of Sylhet was moved by Nilambar Dutta in the Council with an argument that so long as Sylhet remains in Assam, the chance for the Assamese people to make progress was minimal. He advocated for a separate province of Assam without Sylhet, aiming to maintain the distinct identity of Assamese people among the diverse population of India. However, the proposal received protest from many quarters within the Assam Valley and consequently the proposal was withdrawn. Situation remarkable changed with the formation of the Saadulla Government in Assam as all the Muslim Ministers supported the idea for Independent Muslim States in North-Western and North-Eastern India as per the demand of the Muslim League. The League argued for the inclusion of Assam in the proposed state of Pakistan, leading Sylhet to be entangled in all

India Muslim partition politics in favour of Muslim community. Accordingly, there was a change in the opinion of the Hindu communities and they shifted from seeking reunion with Bengal to supporting Sylhet's retention in Assam. Conversely, the Muslim majority (once supported Sylhet's retention) now started demanding its transfer to the proposed state of Pakistan's eastern zone. The issue of Sylhet was resolved prior to declaration of independence through a Referendum conducted in July 1947 and the entire boundary demarcation was concluded based on the recommendations of the Radcliff Boundary Commission.

Sylhet Referendum and the Bengal Award

The historic pronouncement of Mountbatten on June 3, 1947 provided for a referendum in the Sylhet district of Assam to ascertain whether the greater part of the population in the district would decide to join East Bengal (Pakistan) or simply they would prefer to remain in Assam (India). The Referendum was taken place in the month of July (6 and 7), 1947 which resulted in 56.56 percent of votes for Pakistan and 43.44 percent extended their consent for India. Just by a margin of 13.12 percent votes, Sylhet went to Pakistan, and this has changed the entire geographic as well as demographic structure of the Cachar district.

The decision of the Sylhet Referendum raised an immediate concern regarding the division of Surma Valley and creating a new international boundary between India and Pakistan. It was already decided prior to the referendum that in case verdict of the referendum was in favour of merger of the district with Pakistan, there would be a Boundary Commission for demarcating the international boundary similar to Bengal and Punjab Commissions, aiming to settle the issue of Muslim-majority regions in Sylhet district and the nearby Muslim-majority areas in adjoining districts. Interestingly, the conditions mentioned by the British regime in June 1930 were actually applied in case of both Sylhet and Bengal, following the State Paper of June 1947.

But a clear difference can be observed in the language used for Sylhet to that of Bengal. It provided that for Bengal, the Boundary Commission was authorized to "demarcate the boundaries of the two parts" of the province keeping the issue of the majority areas of non-Muslims and Muslims. On the other hand, it was directed by the Commission that for the district of Sylhet there was a need for demarcation of the areas of the district where Muslim majority exists. Not only this, it further decided to assess the adjacent areas of neighbouring districts where Muslim majority resides. Unlike Bengal, it was found that there was no clear direction issued for demarcating the boundaries of the two parts of the district and also there was no specification provided for the basis of this demarcation.

It deserves mention here that as regard to Sylhet district the members of the Commission could not reach an agreement on the modalities of defining the boundary lines of two independent nations – India and Pakistan. After deliberating on their disagreements, the members of the Commission sought the input of Radcliffe, who clarified that the issue under discussion was only limited to the Sylhet and Cachar districts. He pointed out that among the other districts of Assam that bordered Sylhet, such as Garo Hills, Khasi and Jaintia Hills and Lushai Hills none had a Muslim majority population substantial enough to make a claim.

However, among the thirty five thanas in Sylhet, eight are predominantly inhabited by non-Muslims and two of these thanas, i.e., Sulla and Amirganj (the latter having almost equal Muslim and non-Muslim populations) are entirely surrounded by Muslim-majority areas. Therefore, it is concluded that they need to be grouped with the Muslim-majority areas in East Bengal. The six remaining thanas having a combined population exceeding 5,30,000, make a contiguous stretch along the southern boundary of the Sylhet district. These thanas were divided into two subdivisions - One of these subdivisions, South Sylhet has a non-Muslim majority of roughly 40,000 people, although the Muslim majority is marginally bigger. Regarding the Cachar district, there was a thana named Hailakhandi, which had a Muslim majority and it shared borders with the Muslim-majority divisions of Badarpur and Karimganj in the Sylhet district. The subdivision of Hailakhandi also included Katlichara which was located to its south. In this entire subdivision, Muslims hold a marginal majority, making up 51 percent of the population.

In the backdrop of the above situation Radcliffe argued that the frequent communication between Katlichara and Hailakhandi emphasized the requirement of having both areas under a single jurisdiction and as per the provision a compelling inclination developed to move the Hailakhandi subdivision (consisting of 1,66,536 people) from Assam to East Bengal. But on this emerging situation Redcliffe argued that dividing the region in such a manner would create significant administrative hurdles and consequently this could greatly impact the future well-being of the entire populace of the region. If the Muslim claim of Hailakhandi were accepted, it would segregate the six non-Muslim Thanases of Sylhet from the rest of the country including Assam. In addition, this new configuration would also create a geographical strip running east to west, contrary to the natural north-south division of the land. This arrangement would unusually segregates the railway line in Sylhet with very important junctions like the one for the town of Sylhet itself, would fall within Assam rather than East Bengal. Under this critical situation, Redcliffe strongly recommended that a practical division can only be achieved through a territorial exchange.

In the referendum the southern part of Sylhet (majority Hindu Population) sided with Assam, choosing not to join Pakistan (East Bengal). While Karimganj voted in favor of merging with Pakistan (East Bengal), the decision to retain three and a half thanas of the Karimganj subdivision, including Karimganj, Patharkandi, Ratabari and Badarpur in India was solely based on geopolitical factors. While finalizing the Award, Redcliffe had several choices - a) accepting the majority decision in the referendum, b) dividing the Sylhet district and adjacent areas based solely on religious lines, c) dividing the region based on geographical proximity without considering religious factors or the referendum outcome. By that time it was also clear that Tripura was merging with the Indian Union and hence it was essential to maintain a link with Karimganj to ensure its continuity with India. Thus, Redcliffe made the choice to overlook the results of the Referendum and retained three and half thanas in India. Consequently, the international boundary between India and Pakistan around Barak Valley was decided not on the basis of religion or Referendum only but based on factors like geographical contiguity. If the Referendum were the sole determinant, Karimganj should have been included in Pakistan and South Sylhet (Moulavi Bazar) should have been in India.

Besides, the prospect of the Kulaura railway junction in South Sylhet going to India would pose a risk of disrupting the railway link between Sylhet town and the rest of East Bengal, which had actually influenced Redcliffe's decision to award South Sylhet to East Bengal. Finally, it was on 13th August, 1947, the verdict of the Sylhet Referendum was submitted to the Viceroy, but the provisions mentioned under the Redcliffe Award were not declared till 17th August, 1947. Surprisingly, the entire Sylhet district including Karimganj was put under Pakistan for three days and the flag of Pakistan was hoisted in the entire Karimganj town. A complete misunderstanding and doubt persisted among the inhabitants of entire Karimganj and finally the decision was made public on August 17, 1947 and Karimganj as a part of Cachar district. As a result of this inclusion, a new international border covering 97 km was fixed between India and Pakistan on the side of the Karimganj and 27.3 km fixed in the Katigorah side of Cachar district.

It was after the two decades of inclusion of Sylhet in Pakistan the situation further changed significantly as the entire East Bengal including Sylhet emerged as a part of a new sovereign state – Bangladesh - in 1971. The emergence of Bangladesh marked the commencement of a new era in settling the international border issues between India and Bangladesh. As descendent to Pakistan, Bangladesh inherited the entire territorial and riverine boundaries, and consequently this emerged as a new international boundary between India and Bangladesh. The conflicts that existed during the partition persisted as no clear-cut boundary line emerged between India and Bangladesh after Bangladesh's creation. Thus, the present Indo-Bangladesh border is truly a historical legacy of partition period. Further, the existing enclaves also became an important component of India-Bangladesh relation. The first stage of ties between India and Bangladesh was amiable, as against the early relationship between India and Pakistan.

The emergence of Bangladesh brought a series of Agreement with India. The first step to promote the friendship between the two countries was initiated in the form of Indo-Bangladesh Trade Agreement, 1972. The Agreement tried to work mainly on two fronts – economic activities and cross border business. In 1974, the then Prime Minister of Bangladesh - Sheikh Mujibur Rahman - visited New Delhi to discuss bilateral issues, resulting in the signing of the Land Boundary Agreement (Indira-Majib) on May 16, 1974. This pact aimed to peacefully resolve boundary disputes between India and Bangladesh. Moreover, both countries agreed to allow people residing in Adverse Possession Lands to maintain their nationality in the host country, as outlined in Article 23 of the Agreement, which clearly stated that the governments of India and Bangladesh have reached a consensus that when territories are transferred, the residents of those areas would retain the right to stay in their existing location and maintain their nationality in the state to which the territories are being transferred. Until the border is officially delineated and territorial exchanges are agreed upon by both parties, there should be no disruption of the existing situation, and peaceful conditions must prevail in the affected regions.

Conclusion

It is true that all the problems relating to Indo-Bangladesh border have not been resolved till date. However, both the countries maintained a cordial relationship in all spheres over the last fifty years. During June 6-7, 2015 there was a Joint Declaration by the Prime Ministers of both the countries for prompt execution of the 1974 Land Boundary Agreement and its 2011 Protocol. The Prime Ministers of both the countries restated their commitment to respect the rights of all people and provide all amenities to the enclave's residents. Through a letter exchange, the historic ratification documents for the 1974 Land Boundary Agreement and its 2011 Protocol were shared, and the procedures for guaranteeing the seamless execution of the aforementioned Agreement and Protocol were negotiated. Meanwhile, India had undertaken construction of border fencing covering all the districts sharing the international border with Bangladesh. In Assam including Cachar district, border fencing along the India-Bangladesh boundary line has almost been completed except only the riverine areas. It is worthwhile to note that the Indi-Bangladesh boundary line covers plain as well as mountainous places, and this is why no precise demarcation rule was followed at the time of its formulation.

It is a fact that among all the neighbouring countries, the longest land border of India exists with Bangladesh, which includes twenty five districts representing varied natural and cultural landscapes. The entire boundary line touches five major divisions of Bangladesh such as Sylhet, Khulna, Chittagong, Rajshahi and Dhaka. That is to say, the entire India-Bangladesh border can be classified into different categories – plains in West Bengal, the Assam-Barak Valley and Tripura; riverine areas covering approximately 200 km in the Southern part of West Bengal and 50 km in Assam and hilly and jungle terrain in Meghalaya and Mizoram. Due to inadequate demarcation, the border intersects various villages, rivers, mountains, agricultural lands, char lands and public institutions, which causes various conflicts and suspicions surrounding its delineation. The porous condition of the border creates significant challenges in controlling illegal cross-border activities and migration from Bangladesh to India. Finally, it was on June 6, 2015 under the leadership of the PM Narendra Modi the Land Boundary Agreement was signed with Bangladesh, which facilitated the transfer of 162 enclaves - 111 Indian enclaves within Bangladesh and 51 Bangladeshi enclaves within India. Consequently, the Government initiated the border fencing and completed major part of it except the riverine sides. Further, to enhance border security, the Ministry of External Affairs (MoE), GOI, also started setting up of floodlights in the states of West Bengal, Meghalaya, Assam, Mizoram and Tripura for securing borders.

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