

# Referendum and Displacement in Demographic Transition in Barak Valley of Assam

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## ABSTRACT

*The state of Assam is comprised of the Brahmaputra Valley, the Barak Valley and the Hill range. Before independence and partition of India, Barak Valley was a part of the larger Surma Valley famed for its tea industry that came up under British colonial rule. At the time of independence the Sylhet district of Surma Valley was combined with East Bengal to form East Pakistan, which was to become Bangladesh later. For this decision a referendum was inflicted on the people of Sylhet. The referendum favoured merger of Sylhet with East Pakistan. A large number of people displaced from Sylhet to Assam. The Assam movement on illegal migrants ended with signing of Assam Accord in 1985. The work on finalization of NRC in Assam is under process. The possibilities of settlement of refugees need a careful policy decision by the Government.*

## Keywords:

## Background:

Before independence and partition of India, Barak Valley or South Assam was a part of the larger Surma Valley famed for its tea industry that came up under British colonial rule. But at the time of independence the Sylhet district of Surma Valley was combined with East Bengal to form East Pakistan, which was to become Bangladesh later. For this decision a referendum was inflicted on the people of Sylhet. The said referendum favoured merger of Sylhet with East Pakistan. Assam had to accommodate displaced refugees (both hindus and muslims) to a large number at the time of partition. As a result of declaration of Bangladesh as Islamic state and the continued communal disturbance there the Hindu people displaced to a large number at a later period also.

## Pre-colonial Cachar:

The South Assam or popularly known as Barak Valley consisted of three districts of Assam, namely Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. Up to 1947, Cachar district consisted of Silchar, Hailakandi and Halflong sub-division, but after the independence, Halflong sub-division was declared autonomous and renamed as North Cachar Hills district. Accordingly, Karimganj sub-division became a part of Cachar district, which was segregated from Sylhet district (Das, 1980). Cachar was formally annexed to the British territory by proclamation on the 14th August, 1832 and was then placed under the administration of a Superintendent. Captain Fisher was appointed the first Superintendent of the district (Bhattacharjee, 1996).

During the rule of Dimasa kings in Cachar, the king was the owner of the land and alienated by the occupants or inherited by their heirs. No proper land tenure and land revenue system evolved during this period. The first settlement of the Hindus in the district is placed in the reign of Raja Suradarpa Chandra. As land was plenty, rents were extremely low in comparison to the areas of Sylhet and in the beginning it was mostly in kind. There was no natural barrier between Cachar and Sylhet. The social boundary of Sylhet was expanded as an uninterrupted historical process over the land which was suitable for cultivation then prevalent in Sylhet and the adjoining districts of Bengal (Hunter, 1990 (reprint)).

When the Kachari king established his capital in Khaspur the distinct history of Cachar commences. Numerous colonies of Bengalis, who came up the Barak Valley from Sylhet, had planted their first settlement on the northern side of the river, shortly after passing the Sylhet frontier. At first the newcomers seem to have simply cleared land as stray settlers, paying rent to the Kachari Raja. But situation changed since 1833 when Cachar formed a part of Commissionership of Dacca until 1874 when it was included in the province of Assam (Roy, 2007).

## Restructuring Barak Valley: 1874-1947

Assam was constituted into a separate province in 1874, and the three districts Cachar, Sylhet and Goalpara were transferred from Bengal to the new province. With this, new political developments were noticed in various respects of administration including land revenue (Gangopadhyay, 1990). Sylhet, a Bengali-speaking district historically a part of East Bengal, was joined with its Assamese-speaking neighbour Assam in 1874 by the British. The main consideration was to make the latter province economically robust and self-sustaining. However the annexation of Sylhet with Assam was not happily welcomed by a section of people and inner-social conflicts continued for long. The indigenous Assamese

people supported the separation of Sylhet from Assam for the entire period from 1874-1947 as the inhabitants of Sylhet with their earlier access to English education were seen as competitors for jobs, and as exercising a cultural hegemony over an incipient Assamese middle class trying to come into its own under the aegis of British colonialism since 1826 (Dasgupta, 2008).

The Brahmaputra Valley, which forms northern part of Assam, is the largest in size comprising 71.7 percent of total geographical area of the state. On the other hand the Barak Valley region, which forms the southern part, is comparatively smaller in size. The hill regions formed by the Karbi-Anglong and the North-Cachar hills stands separated the two valleys from the middle. The Barak valley constitutes 8.9 percent of the geographical area of the state but it contains 11.22 percent of the population. It shares its border with North-Cachar hills district and the state of Meghalaya in the North; the state of Manipur in the East; the state of Mizoram in the South and the state of Tripura and the Sylhet district of Bangladesh in the West (Roy & Bezbaruah, 2002).

Administratively, the Barak Valley at present is comprised of three districts, namely the Cachar, the Karimganj and the Hailakandi. The Cachar is the largest and the Hailakandi is the smallest districts with total geographical areas of 3786 sq. km. and 1327 sq. km respectively and that of Karimganj district is 1809 sq. km. as per 2001 census.

### Referendum: The Partition Climax

Immigration has been a matter of concern for the people of Assam since the turn of the 20th century. The Brahmaputra valley had an abundance of cultivable wasteland when the British occupied the territory in 1826. Peasants, mostly Muslims, from over-populated East Bengal flocked to Assam under the patronage of the colonial administration as well as local zamindars and mouzadars. Initially, this migration was hailed as a positive phenomenon by the Assamese nobility. In 1885-86, the writer Gunabhiram wrote a series of articles highlighting the desirability of such immigration. Even as late as 1929, Jagannath Bujar-Barua, well-known intellectual, told the Assam Banking Enquiry Committee that 'immigration has brought prosperity to Barpeta area.' However, post 1920 the Assamese public opinion was apprehensive that unchecked immigration might change the demographic composition of the province, reducing the ethnic Assamese to a minority in their homeland (Choudhury, 2002).

A referendum was inflicted on Sylhet during 6-7 July, 1947 to decide the geographical attachment of the district- India or East Pakistan at the time of partition. The outcome was by and large consistent with the demographic composition of the district where Muslims had a numerical edge: 56.6 percent voted for joining East Pakistan and 43.3 percent voted for remaining in Assam/India. Following this outcome, most of the Sylhet district was ceded to East Pakistan (Dasgupta, 2008). It was indeed the lifetime opportunity for the Assamese leadership to get rid of Sylhet district and there was a feeling of relief in the Brahmaputra valley after the declaration of the result of referendum.

### Changing Demographic Composition

There is a widely held apprehension not only among the people of the state but of the rest of the country as well, that there has been sizeable infiltration of foreigners from Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan), the Muslims in particular, into Assam (Kammath, 1988). Since the Barak Valley region shares its border with Bangladesh and there is cultural and linguistic homogeneity among the people of the Barak Valley and Bangladesh, it has been apprehended the valley may shelters 'Bangladeshi' migrants.

Assam's demography establishes some features, which are very much unlike those of the country as a whole, if evaluated in historical perspective and quantifying the validity on the basis of population data. Data in Table 1 show that centurial (1871-1971) growth of population in the Barak Valley (423 percent) and the Brahmaputra Valley (571 percent) are much above that in case of the country as a whole (157 percent) which confirms heavy immigration into both the valley. The causes were mainly too heavy immigration of East Bengal cultivators, Muslims in particular, tea garden labourer and Nepalis and once for all during the decade, 1941-51, a heavy spate of East Bengal Hindu refugees (Shakdar, 1978).

**Table 1: Centurial Growth of Population in Barak Valley, Assam and all India**

Year	Barak Valley (Population in lakh)	Brahmaputra Valley (Population in lakh)	India (Population in lakh)
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
1871-72	3.33	19.17	2133.0
1971	17.43	128.82	5479.0
Growth (%)	423	571	157

Source: 1. Hunter (1879) 2. Census Report, 1971.

In the post-independence period also the state of Assam has been having a higher rate of growth of population than India as a whole. However, for the first time in 2001 census the decadal growth rate (1991-2001) in Assam appears to be less than that of India as a whole and continued during 2001-2011 also. Within the state of Assam the Barak Valley region has been having a relatively lower growth rate all along since 1961 but experienced higher growth since 1991 onwards compared to Assam as a whole (For details refer Table 2).

**Table 2 :Decadal Growth Rate of Population in Barak Valley, Assam and All India (in percentage)**

YEAR	Barak Valley	Assam	India
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
1901-11	13.80	6.90	5.7
1911-21	5.60	20.5	0.3
1921-31	6.30	19.9	11.0
1931-41	11.00	20.4	14.2
1941-51	23.80	19.9	13.3
1951-61	24.30	34.9	21.6
1961-71	24.20	34.9	24.1
1971-91*	45.20	53.3	48.5
1991-2001	19.97	18.85	21.34
2001-11	20.78	16.93	17.64

Source: Census Report, Govt. of India in various years . \* No census held in Assam in 1981. As such instead of 1971-81, the period 1971-91 is computed

### Way Forward

The century-old apprehension of alien domination had created the background of Assam agitation in 1970s. The agitation on illegal migrants ended with signing of Assam Accord in 1985 which provided for detecting and deporting foreigners who had come and settled in Assam after March 25, 1971. The work on finalisation of National Registrar of Citizens in Assam is under process on this principle. With central Government notification issued on 7<sup>th</sup> September 2015 regularising the entry and stay of minorities from Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan on the grounds of humanitarian considerations thrown the state of Assam again into further turmoil.

While the Hindu migrants have natural claim for settlement due to religious persecution in Bangladesh vis-a-vis partition proposal of India on the basis of Two Nations theory, it would be very difficult to adopt a policy of deportation of migrants (both hindus and muslims) in the state of Assam. Thus it is necessary to explore possibilities of settlement on the basis of ground reality with mutual interactions with stakeholders in the state and then to adopt a suitable policy decisions on the issue.

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