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History

Sylhet Referendum Anniversary: A Time to Remember Partition Wasn't Only About a Hindu-Muslim Binary



Focusing on the Hindu-Muslim binary deflects attention from the smaller histories, often more complicated, that played out in micro-contexts in the run-up to independence.

Malini Bhattacharjee and P.C. Venkatraman
21 hours ago



Map of "Bengal" from Pope, G. U. (1880), Text-book of Indian History: Geographical Notes, Genealogical Tables, Examination Questions, London: W. H. Allen & Co. Pp. vii, 574. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

On July 6 and 7, 1947 in the Sylhet district of Assam (now part of Bangladesh), roughly six weeks before India became independent, queues of ordinary people braved rains and floods to cast their vote for a



Every year as August 15 draws close, public discourse is crowded with the ‘big story’ of the Partition, which continues to be framed by a Hindu-Muslim binary. This deflects attention from the smaller histories, often more complicated, that played out in micro-contexts in the run-up to independence. One such small history is that of the politics that ensued before the partition of Assam.

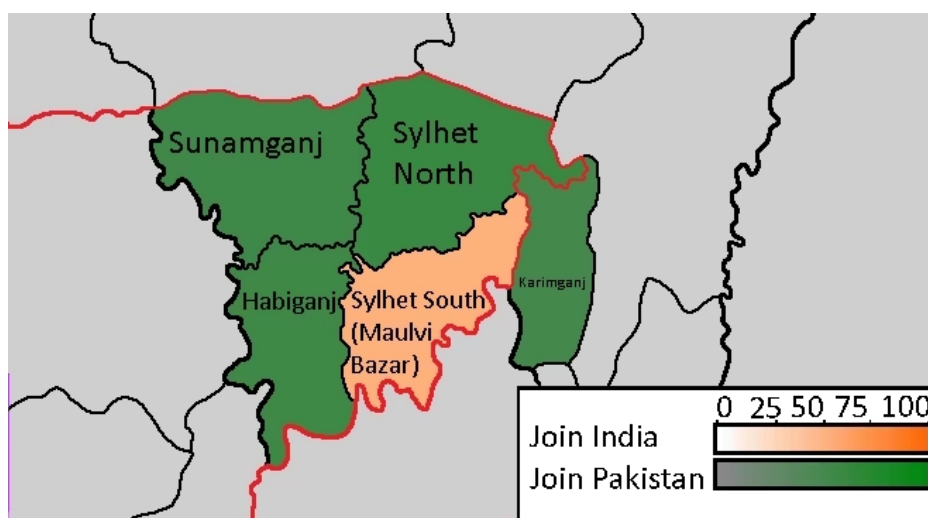
British urgency to leave

It became clear at the outset that despite conceding to the idea of a referendum that would in principle allow people some control over their fate, the British were keen on wrapping up this exercise quickly. The announcement of the Sylhet Referendum was made on June 21, through the radio and newspapers, roughly two weeks before the event.

Soon after, at a meeting of the district officers, several members expressed apprehensions about impending rains and floods in early July and had requested that the referendum be postponed. The referendum commissioner, H.C. Stork, remained adamant as Viceroy Mountbatten was firm on August 15 as the date of independence.

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The short notice and bad weather resulted in several potential voters being unable to cast their vote as they were stationed outside Sylhet at that time.





represents area in favour of joining East Bengal (Pakistan) and Orange represents area in favour of remaining part of Assam and joining India.

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Assamese-Bengali feud

Linguistic politics in Assam was another important cleavage that impacted the fate of the people. Sylhet was a peculiar case because it was a Bengali-speaking district which was clubbed with Assam in 1874 due to administrative reasons, and the Assamese leadership had forever resented its inclusion in the state owing to 'Bengali dominance' in the provincial bureaucracy.

The Sylhetis too in turn, as political scientist Sanjib Baruah writes, saw themselves as part of the 'Calcutta-centred nationalism of Bengal'. As sociologist Nabanipa Bhattacharjee has argued, this proved to be a 'double handicap'; being a non-Assamese district in Assam and a Bengali district outside Bengal, there was no 'pull-factor' for Sylhet when Partition actually occurred. Thus, on the Indian side of affairs the two regions that were culturally closest to Sylhet were either indifferent or committed to severing ties. Antagonisms around ethno-linguistic divisions thus contradict the macro-narrative of Partition solely being a product of a monolithic Hindu-Muslim divide.

The myth of the Muslim monolith

A closer examination of the rifts within the Hindu and Muslim communities also provides interesting ruptures to existing narratives. The biggest dissent confronting the Muslim League's (ML's) claim of being the sole representative of the country's Muslim population came from the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind, which opposed the League on the question of Partition.

The Jamiat feared that their Sylheti identity would get hollowed out under the League's call for forming a nation based solely on a religious identity, where other competing identities would not find any space for expression. The pro-India alliance thus saw the Jamiat, Congress and the Communist party coming together in an effort to convince the electorate to vote





East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh.

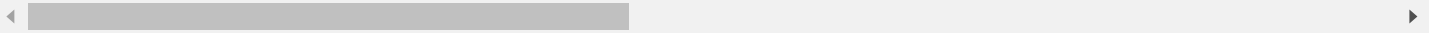
Such conflicts of intersectional identities were also brewing within the ranks of the ML where, as political scientist Bidyut Chakrabarty points out, the Hindi/Urdu speaking National Guards clashed with the local Sylheti cadres of the party over questions of superiority. Chakrabarty argues that during the volatile referendum campaign, when the ML deployed its National Guard units from the United Provinces to assist the local leadership, the former soon began asserting itself over the latter, employing aggressive and coercive tactics, and began portraying themselves as the saviours of Sylhet. It is important to understand that this assertion was not just indicative of the internal politics within the ML, but rather fed an ethno-linguistic discourse which argued that Urdu/Hindi speaking factions of the party were superior to the Sylheti/Bengali leadership, even in a region which was alien to them and whose language they did not speak.

Anxieties of the oppressed castes

Similar contradictions also plagued the Hindu community where Jogen Mandal, a tall Scheduled Caste leader, had allied with the ML and was their nominee to the Viceroy's Executive Council and campaigned in favour of Sylhet joining Pakistan. Mandal's affiliation with the League emanated from his distrust of the so-called upper caste dominated Congress and his hope that the lower caste communities would be better off in a non-Hindu majority state. Yet, despite being part of Liaquat Ali Khan's cabinet, he found himself unable to stop the violence in East Pakistan against the lowered caste Hindus. Disillusioned by the state of affairs in Pakistan, Mandal returned to India as early as 1950.

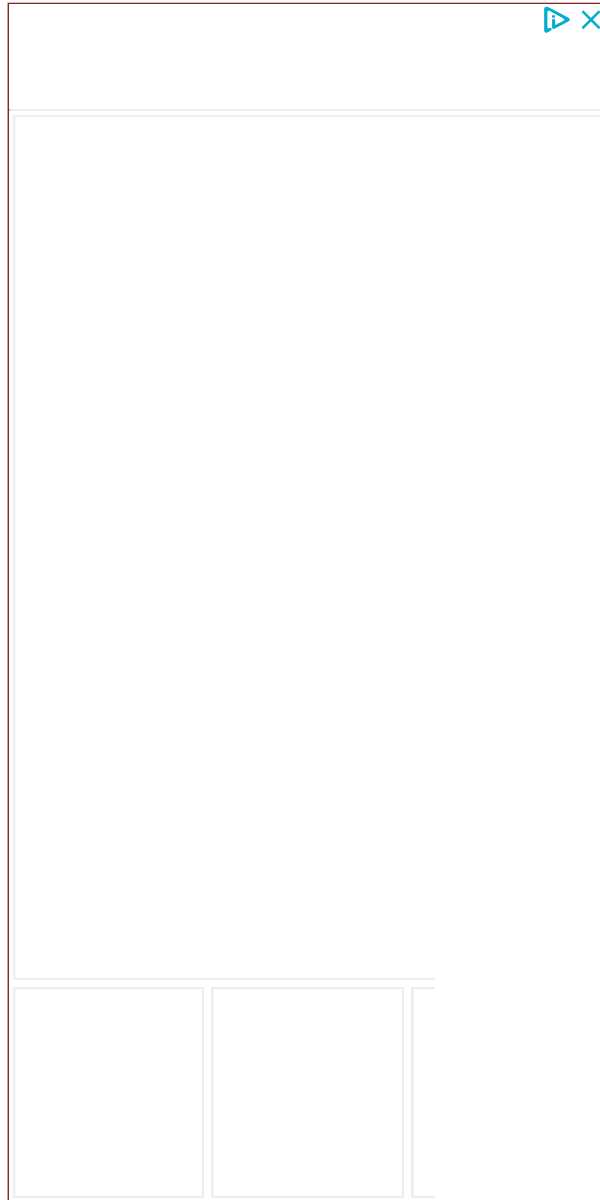
In narrating stories of the Partition, what often gets overlooked are the voices of dissent which though weren't strong enough to displace the dominant political discourse, were none the less able to articulate themselves in the form of a counter narrative. As is evident in the case of Sylhet, ranging from Mandal's skepticism about the space for the lowered castes in India, to the Jamiat's discomfort with marginalisation of the Sylheti identity or the internal conflicts between the Assamese-Bengali





Malini Bhattacharjee is faculty at Azim Premji University and P.C.

Venkatraman is a research associate at Azim Premji University.



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