IN THE SHADOWS OF VIOLENCE: MIGRATION, PERCEPTIONS OF SECURITY AND TALES OF HORROR IN POST - PARTITION NORTHEAST INDIA

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Introduction

Over the years, politics in northeast India has been mired by a clamor over human migration to northeast India from areas that came to form Bangladesh after 1971. There is no doubt that over the years, people cutting across religion or cultural boundaries have migrated in large numbers into Assam, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh. Though this process seemed to have witnessed an upward swing after 1947, the process seemed to have really taken off after 1965. The process seemed an unending trail of people migrating across the borders. This story of migration has often given rise to claims and counterclaims. On the one hand is the story of inundation of north-east India by ‘Bangladeshis’ and on the other is the silent story of depleting numbers of non-Muslims in the Bangladesh Census.

Reconstruction of the story of decolonization and its cartographic realignments would remain incomplete without an incorporation of such tales of the displaced from Eastern Pakistan. Between the two extreme positions of “refugeeness” and “suffering” on one side and voluntary migrants, economic opportunists and “interlopers” on the other, the displaced East Bengal & Assam needs a proper rehabilitation. While this paper would try to establish the rationale behind the hue human tragedy called ‘displacement in the east’, on the twin pillars of ‘perceptions of security’ and ‘tales of horror’

VIOLENT PARTING: VIOLENCE ON PARTITION AND AFTER
One is left surprised by the insensitivity of no less a person than Pandit Nehru himself, who failed to appreciate the nature of migration of people from East Pakistan. In a letter to Dr B.C. Roy, the Chief Minister of West Bengal on the 2nd of December 1949, he observed that,

There was something elemental about this (the Punjab) and we have come to face the situation. In Eastern Pakistan the migration has been at a slower pace and rather gradual.

It is the prolonged process of eastern displacement that seemed to militate against their claim to victimhood.

Though both the Hindus and the Muslims who supported unified India were the targets, the Hindus bore the larger brunt. Post partition minority emotion found expression in fear, suspicion, hate and violence while the majority community emotions were one of jubilation, victory celebrations and depravity, which found expression in licentious behaviour of League supporters. While the League supporters celebrated on the streets with processions and fireworks and observed ‘Thanks giving Day’, as a public expression of jubilation, at the grassroots, the League supporters shouted provocative slogans and intimidated the minorities. One could revert to the recordings of Suhasini Das from Sylhet, who noted,

“19.7.1947… the law and order situation was worsening. The exuberance of the Muslim League at the creation of Pakistan sounded like threats to the minority community”.
Both at the town and the rural interiors, community relationship between the two communities – the Hindus and the Muslims witnessed rapid deterioration. The Muslims behaved like victors in a battle and the Hindus were forced into a position of the vanquished. Threats issued by local Muslim League supporting Mirasdars were still fresh in the minds of the residents. Thus, when the results of the Referendum came in, it opened the floodgates of retribution and revenge. As the League successfully intimidated and absorbed the Jamiat leadership in Sylhet into its ranks, those who resisted such advances among the grassroots workers were hunted and killed. Two Jamiat grassroot stalwarts, the scions of the Zamindar family of Pritim Pasha viz, Ali Haidar Khan and Ali Asghar Khan were shot dead in cold blood. Other Jamati workers who did not accept the League creed were victimised by a strategic use of the state machinery. Depravity and humiliation reached unprecedented heights. Jamati workers in Sunamganj were paraded throughout the town on donkey back and with turtle shell garlands around their neck.

Few of the displaced could understand the intricacies of the transfer of power but most realized its ominous implications.

“We could rarely understand what the Referendum meant but we could perceive from overhearing our elders that we had lost the battle and we would have to leave our home”.

The time was unfavourable for both the Hindus and Muslims. A small group of die hard Jamati Muslims who would not succumb to the league brand of Islamic politics and the Hindus in general, commonly identified as ‘Kafers’. The tension that gripped their minds could also be borne out through a record in a contemporary diary, which read as, “14.7.1947 … at night, I talked to the neighbours. They were all worried that the League could be planning some mischief. They were especially worried about protecting the womenfolk.”

This and numerous similar notes and letters indicate the extent of intimidation and harassment that the Hindus of the district were subject to, which ensured their displacement to India. The launch of a witch-hunt to punish the opponents of the Muslim League, by the Muslim League leadership with the active participation of the Muslim League National guards led to almost all the prominent pro-India campaign leaders fleeing East Pakistan by the time partition was actually affected on the 15th of August 1947. This had a backbreaking impact on the morale of the Hindus of the district, as one of the respondent observed, influential Hindu leaders left Sylhet. They were leaders of the community. The Zamindar of Pailgaon, Brajendra Narayan Choudhury, the Dastidars of the Dastidar Estate and Sri Nalini Mohon Kar who were some of such leaders who left the district in fear of retribution, gave a message to the people who remained, that their ancestral land was no longer safe for them. Sushasini Das’s account also carried the same message when it observed, “when people close to me decided to leave Sylhet, tears flooded my eyes … people were leaving Pakistan in search of safe havens elsewhere … The empty houses stared back at us in despair … Some thieves were freely looting these empty houses. Nobody stopped them.”

Lawlessness had become the law of the day and the minority civil society lay terrorised and marginalised. In the construction of this post referendum Sylheti narrative, the position of women acquired criticality in the deciding of the need for displacement. The ‘concept of honour’ was intimately con-
nected to women and hence threatening the women and their honour was the best way to intimidate an already traumatised society, as the men area were engrossed in their worry of “protecting the womenfolk”. Memories of Noakhali swept across minds as the men folk made hurried moves to move to safe locations to save the honour and life of the women in the family, as one of my respondents, in course of my interview told me that “we the Hindus felt that something terrible as in Eastern Bengal earlier should not befall us”.

The predatory tones of the Muslim peasants in the rural areas made life unbearable for the people. The relationship between the two communities saw a swift decline and the civil society was polarised between the Muslims who took over the role of predators and the Hindus who were the hunted. The report of Suhasini Das noted, that, “the beautiful relationship between the Hindus and the Muslims were deteriorating day by day”, which was further aggravated by the Muslim League apathy towards maintaining the relationship between the two communities as the same account noted, “… People were leaving the villages and crowding into the cities. They would have felt assured if members of the Muslim League had promised protection to them. The League members are not interested in doing so.”

The League activists began to believe that Pakistan was an exclusive zone for the Muslims where the others had no place. Suhasini Das also provided a vivid account of the situation when she noted, “The Muslim League was going about telling people that only Muslims would be welcome in the new nation. The others were dispensable.”

This position taken by the Muslim League leadership was corroborated by the tribal leaders from East Pakistan as well. A Garo elder in course of an interview to Ellen Bal clearly remembered that, “After the partition, we knew that it would be difficult for non-Muslim people to live in East Pakistan. The leaders of the Muslim League spoke openly that everyone in East Pakistan had to become a Muslim, or leave the country.”

Narratives of the post-partition days highlight the sudden loss of trust and outbreak of large-scale violence.

Reports of deployment of local police to stop the movement of people from neighbouring areas such as Kishoreganj and Brahmanbaria, point to the existence of cross-district participation in the violence which only proves its immense magnitude. The Deputy Commissioner of Sylhet, Khan Bahadur Habib Ali was quoted to have stated that troops were sent to the disturbed areas and that the Government was taking all steps to stop the spread of the disturbances. According to the paper, the police were also given the orders to open fire on violent mobs if necessary and the government had initiated relief and rehabilitation.

But such incidents were recurrent, and received little attention from the government despite complaints being filed at the highest levels by the minority leadership in East Pakistan. Violence against and violation of the Hindu minorities had acquired a regular pattern between 1947 and 1950 and continued even thereafter. However, within the time frame of this study, it would suffice to argue that it continued on varied scales regularly since the birth of Pakistan in varied forms with occasional
smatterings of a large conflagration. While violence broke out on a large scale at Habiganj in 1947, in 1948 it was the turn of Noagaon. On the night of 11th February, about twelve hundred Muslims attacked the Kaibarta locality to take revenge for a failed attack on the same about six months earlier. The mob scared the villagers, who were mostly women and children, by bursting crackers and shouts of the Muslim religious war cry of Allah Ho Akbar and set the houses on fire. The life and property of the Hindu minorities were under threat and it was extensively discussed when the minority Affairs Ministers of the two Bengals met on April 19th, 1948 and again when the officials of India and East Pakistan met between 6th and 14th December, of the same year. Threats and intimidations of the non Muslim minorities were a part of both official and popular programmes and it took various forms. Jogendra Mandal, in his resignation letter addressed to Liaquat Ali Khan specifically refers to the cases of violence against the Hindus, especially the Scheduled Caste Hindus of Habiganj district was brutally insecure. The narrative of Jogendra Nath Mondol informs us that, their “women were ravished, their houses raided and properties looted by the police and the local Mussalmans. The military pickets posted in the area not only oppressed these people and took away foodstuff forcibly from Hindu houses but also forced the Hindus to send their womenfolk at night to the camp to satisfy the carnal desire of the military.”

Apart from physical violence, violation would also extend to indiscriminate requisition of Hindu houses at Sylhet of other towns. Dacoit, forced conversions, forced marriages and abductions had become a part of life, especially in the rural areas. Raids and violation of Hindu Houses were also common. While these violations were indulged at the local levels, the large scale requisition of Hindu property, across East Pakistan, left no doubt about official support towards creating discomfort in the lives of urban Hindus and conveying a message to them to leave their homes and hearth. By the close of 1949 and beginning of 1950, the communal situation in East Pakistan was volatile and precarious. Aggravated by continuous outpourings of Ansar propaganda, mob violence broke out in Biani Bazar and Barlekh police station areas in Sylhet. In February 1950, matters reached a crescendo when the East Pakistani media in collusion with the ruling political leadership in East Pakistan launched an attack on the minority community leaders of inciting communal passion and unrest in East Pakistan. Within days of the launch of this campaign, as the Chief Secretaries of East Pakistan and West Bengal met at Dacca, riots broke out in the East Pakistan on rumours that thousands of Muslims had been killed and hundreds of women molested in West Bengal. In the frenzy that followed, the riots spread to almost all the districts of East Pakistan, including Sylhet. While riots broke out at Dacca on the 7th of February, 1950, it reached Sylhet by the 11th. A Memorandum submitted to Liaqat Ali Khan, the Pakistani Prime Minister on his visit to Dacca, by the Hindu Minority leaders of East Pakistan, in March 1950, noted that, by the 11th of February, the local Ansar leaders were indulging in speeches that bordered on extreme incitement and provocation. Their local press Organ, ANSAR, detailed acts of forcible conversion of Hindus in the rural areas of Sylhet by Muslim crowd led by local maulvis. Real trouble started at Sylhet town on the 13th of February and continued unabated till the 16th. Official reports recorded as many as 60 cases of stabbing which led to the death of the victims and rampant arson which led to burning of about ten to twelve houses in the town. Violence also rapidly spread to the rural areas within the Sadar, Biswanath, Chatak, Fenchuganj, Balaganj and Golapganj police stations.
In all these cases, the Memorandum observed that, large number of Hindu villages were attacked and completely destroyed. Hindu girls were abducted and raped. There was mass conversion of Hindus which followed a set pattern.

A few Mullahs would first visit the village and ask the hindus to save themselves by embracing Islam. This was followed by certain symbolic rituals, for instance, Brahmins being made to tear their sacred thread and recite the Kalma. Any show of resistance was met with mob violence of looting and burning the village, killing of people and abduction of women.

In view of this unprecedented violence and violations, Hindu residents of Sylhet, reluctantly and with a heavy heart, shifted to India. Dakshinarajan Basu in his celebrated work, ChereAsha Gram tried to weave a collection of displacement experiences, some of which are from Sylhet, with no support from their Mussalman friends and neighbours, with fear of reprisal, coercion and experience of loss of property and honour, the Hindus of East Pakistan had little choice but to be displaced.

PARTITION’S POST-SCRIPT:
When partition finally took place, greatest impact of partition on northeast India was through migration of refugees and demographic transformation. Partition changed the way politics came to be perceived not only in Assam but entire north eastern India. While interprovincial borders of colonial era became international boundaries, perceptions about population migration also underwent a change. Inter-provincial migration which was easy and mostly unrestricted became restricted by the legal regimes governing international population movement. Though there was no restriction of people from East Pakistan to Assam in the initial years after independence, gradually the provincial governments and the Government of India began to discourage migration of people from East Pakistan to India by 1950. Partition introduced the ‘foreigners’ dimension into politics in North East India with the introduction of passport system in 1952. The situation became critical as the initial trickle of people wanting to migrate to India from East Pakistan became a flood by 1950 as the political atmosphere in East Pakistan became increasingly hostile to the minority communities.

The Census Report for Assam, Manipur and Tripura, 1951 observed, that, “the recent influx of Hindu refugees from Pakistan constitutes the biggest migration stream into Assam during the last decade. Following the Noakhali Riots, in October, 1946, and the Partition of India, there has been an almost steady and continuous exodus of the Hindus of Pakistan into Assam. According to a census taken in July 1949, there were 24,600 families of displaced persons in Assam or approximately 114,500 persons”

The migration situation aggravated further as riots broke out in various other parts of East Pakistan in 1949 and 1950. The Census Report 1951, observed that, “Soon after the 1949 Refugee Census occurred the incidences of Soneswar and Habiganj, the oppression of the Hajongs in Northern Mymensingh and the atrocities committed on the Santhals in Rajshahi, in East Dinajpur, etc., then came the gruesome incidents over large areas of East Pakistan in February-March 1950, especially Dacca. These led to the inevitable result, viz, the desertion by hundreds and thousands of Hindus in East Pakistan of their hearths and homes to seek shelter in the neighboring districts of West Bengal and Assam whichever was nearer...” Smti. Suhasini Das who was a witness to the “great calamity”
wondered.
“How could anyone happily leave behind his home where his forefathers had lived for years?”
The number of displaced almost touched about half a million people by April, 1950. The grave situation led the Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan to meet in April and come up with an agreement, popularly known as the Nehru - Liaquat Pact. But despite the pact there was no improvement in the situation on the ground and a large number of displaced preferred to settle down in Assam. The Census of 1951 revealed that as many as 274,455 persons were settled in Assam, predominantly in the plains. While 259,946 persons settled in plains areas, only 14,509 persons moved into the hill areas. Partition of Sylhet from Assam and its amalgamation with East Pakistan had a major impact on the flow of refugees from East Pakistan to Assam. The Census report pointed out that “most of the refugees come from the bordering district of Sylhet.” As community lives were disrupted in post-colonial Assam by the operation of partition, migration of refugees from East Pakistan had an adverse impact on community relations both in the plains and the hills of Assam. Settlement of these refugees in the various districts of Assam was viewed as a threat to the idea of political homogenization of spaces.

ASSAM AND REFUGEES: AN OVERVIEW
Conflicts arose over the Assam government’s decision expressing its inability to part with any land for refugee rehabilitation. Nehru wrote to Bordoloi, the Premier of Assam that the decision of Assam government was earning it a bad name. Matters came to a head when Nehru, as the head of the Central Government threatened to curtail the central financial assistance to Assam if the government did not adopt a favorable attitude to rehabilitate east Pakistani refugees. Bordoloi’s reply to Nehru was firm and clear that it was not feasible for him to give more land to the refugees as the government of Assam had to accommodate the existing demand of land from local cultivators and “Assam was a purely agricultural economy, it was impossible for a popular government to ignore these facts in the face of continued industrial backwardness…” On the ground, popular response to the presence of refugees were extremely hostile.

As against 2, 73, 000 refugees in the Census of 1951, the number of refugees returned in 1961 Census was 6, 28, 000. The influx of refugees contributed to social tension in Assam. Assamese elites feared danger to their economic political and cultural life. Situation became more critical as the Census Superintendent observed in his report of 1961 that “[A]fter independence the Bengali Muslim immigrants into the Assam Valley have, almost to a man returned their mother tongue as Assamese whether they know the language or not.” This was alarming as these immigrants had also done the same in the colonial period as “what they want is land in the valley, and if knowledge of Assamese language helps them to become ‘indigenous’ they do not mind about their mother tongue.” The culture conscious Assamese elite who welcomed these immigrants began to be wary of them. As these immigrants became vote-banks of the ruling party in power, they became more assertive. In 1962, they flew Pakistani flag with cries of Pakistan Zindabad in villages near Tezpur and Moraj area of the Nagaon district. In the backdrop of the Chinese invasion, the government launched the Prevention of Infiltration from Pakistan Scheme (PIP) to check and deport infiltrators from Assam. Though the government of Shri B.P. Chaliha began to vigorously implement the scheme, cries of harassment by the Jamiat-ul-Ulama-e-Hind and opposition from two of the cabinet ministers of Assam, viz, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed and Moin-ul-Haque Chaudhury ensured the slow death of the scheme.
The birth of Bangladesh on the partition of Pakistan in 1971 made the situation worse. It added the ‘Bangladeshi’ dimension to the ‘foreigners’ imbroglio.

P.N. Luthra observed in Problem of Refugees from East Bengal that “however poignant the records of refugee tragedies have been, none of them come to the level at what the world has witnessed in the way of the refugee influx which started on the fatal day of March 26th 1971. In a brief span of seven months up to the end of October, 1971 the influx from east Bengal has been of the order of 9.5 million.”

By late 1970s, the issue of foreigners in electoral rolls had come to become a major issue in Assam politics. The Assam Anti-Foreigners Agitations were launched in 1978 and which came to a close with the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985. The question of presence of foreigners of Bengali origin in Assam had, despite the signing of the Accord never dissipated from Assamese popular imagination, taking the form of anti-Foreigner demonstrations from time to time. The threat to Assam from across its eastern border never really disappeared from popular and administrative debates in north East India. By 1998, the foreigners issue again came to the centre-stage of politics with the publication of a Report sent to the President of India by the then Governor of Assam, Lt. Gen S.K. Sinha. Sinha’s report legitimized the abiding popular apprehensions among the Assamese elite of Bangladeshi aggression in Assam. His observation found place in most of the judicial pronouncements and popular discourse on illegal migration in Assam. When Justice B.K. Sharma observed in 2008 that “… large number of Bangladeshis present in the state of Assam… have become the kingmakers,” the ghost of partition, Pakistan and Bangladesh came back to haunt the politically sensitive elite who had felt that the foreigners issue had never really been buried for good.

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION:
Let us close our conversation by drawing our attention to three random incidents from the north east of India between 2011 and 2013.

Incident 1 - On the 7th of May, 2013, two members of the Assam Gana Parishad snatched a copy of the 119th Amendment Bill to the Constitution of India from the hands of Salman Khurshid, the External affairs Minister, Government of India, as he tried to introduce it in the Rajya Sabha. The Bill related to the formalization of the Land Swap Agreement signed between India and Bangladesh during the Indian Prime Minister’s visit to Bangladesh in September 2011.

Incident 2 - On the 1st of July, 2013, the Meghalaya Public Service Commission came out with an advertisement for recruitment of two posts of Assistant Conservator of Forests in the Department of Forest and Environment, Government of Meghalaya where it was stated that “applications from citizens of India who are bona-fide residents of Meghalaya will be considered and displaced persons from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) permanently residing in Meghalaya or intending to reside permanently in Meghalaya possessing Indian citizenship certificate may also apply.” This perfectly legal and innocuous advertisement set off a strong protest from the Khasi Students’ Union, the biggest and most powerful pressure group in the Khasi Hills Districts of Meghalaya who termed the advertisement as one with ‘objectionable conditions’ and aimed at ‘provoking the sentiments the local unemployed youth of the state.’ The advertisement was withdrawn.
Incident 3 - On the 8th of March, 2011 the Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi pointed out that he would seek refugee status for Hindus who fled East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) fearing persecution. On the 10th of September, 2013, he reiterated the position of 2011 and pointed out that “we feel that their case should be considered on humanitarian grounds.”

Despite being three independent stories, they share common threads. Apart from the fact that they are concerned with an area which formed colonial and post-colonial Assam, they are products of partition of India. They prove that partition continues to affect our lives despite the lapse of more than six decades since the event of 1947. Over years, the unresolved boundary question in north east India and the continuous acrimony over the legality of migration across the created state-nation boundaries has become a pointer to the assertion that partition is not an event but a process which is far from its closure.

I can only conclude by emphasising what I had written elsewhere, that the partition story in northeast India is a complex story far from the possibility of a definitive conclusion. Here, “partition is a living history...yet to be discovered which we are still only beginning to remember.” But today when we are at a critical juncture of history where the society is polarized it is important to look beyond the tension and move forward towards peace and development. It is therefore important to acknowledge the burden of history on the lives of the people of North East India and learn the lesson from history. It is imminent that we should take pragmatic note of the laws of the land in force – case in point being The Immigrants (Expulsion From Assam) Act, 1950 which has since been brought back to life by the Supreme court vide Sarbananda Sonowalvs Union of India, 2005. The Assam Accord, 1985 which has been defunct for the last so many years because of the retrospective clause introduced in it needs a fresh look.

While the participants of the citizenship debate have continuously debated around the existing Constitutional provisions, it is important to take into consideration of the other legal frameworks to examine the possibilities of moving out of the current stalemate over the claims of citizenship among the immigrants and the resistance to their claims. One of the probable ways could be to grant citizenship to the immigrants who are claiming refugee status on lines of clause 2 (b) of the Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act, 1950. For the people of this region as a whole, the three tier residency system could be a viable alternative.
Citation

P. K. Chakrabarti, Marginal Men, p.21
Star of India, July 16th& 18th, NAI
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Dawn, dt. 5th July NAI
My interface with Shri Suhsil Chandra Nag, who was then a student of Nabin Chandra High School and presently resides at Shillong, dt. 14.03.07.
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Suhasini Das, opcit, p.169
Suhasini Das, opcit, p. 170
Suhasini Das, opcit. p.169
Dawn, August 27th, 1947
Hindu fishermen were known as kaibartas within the Hindu occupational caste hierarchy while the muslims of the same occupational caste were called Maimals.
The men had mostly gone away for fishing.
Para 13 of Jogendra Nath Mandal’s resignation letter sent to Liaquat Ali Khan, as Appendix IV of the Jurist Commission Enquiry Report, p. 360
Local Muslim militia who were armed and indulged in systematic minority intimidation and violence
A.J.Kamra, The Prolonged Partition and Its Pogroms, p.56
In a theocratic environment, conversion, as a process of religious persecution would enlist the participation of local clergymen who would sanctify or certify successful completion of such acts of conversion
Ibid
Ibid, p.358.
Ibid, p.394.
Ibid, pp. 394-95.
P. N. Luthra, Problem of Refugees from East Bengal, EPW, Dec, 1971,
Meghalaya was carved out of the post-colonial composite state of Assam in 1972.
Binayak Dutta, Recovering Sylhet, HimalSouthAsian, 22ndNovember, 2012.
