

Violent Uprooting: Recovering Women and Their Narratives of Anxiety from Partitioned Northeast India

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Abstract: *Partition, despite the passage of more than seven decades since 1947 continues to fester in the lives of the people of North East India as an unfinished agenda. However, despite of varied and contested scholarship that Partition of India generated, partition stories from north east India rarely found its place in Indian partition narratives. This absence was even more acute for women of the region who were doubly marginalized despite their immense suffering and consequent trauma. Recent research on partition experience in the subcontinent have generally remained silent on women's experiences in Assam. In recent years, scholars have tried to recover the voice of women and their experience of violent uprooting from their homes and homeland of Sylhet which was the southernmost district of colonial Assam and which was partitioned in 1947. This paper attempts to engage in partition studies from colonial Assam and reconstruct the narrative of partition, notions of violence, violation, and displacement from the narratives of displaced women originally residing in various parts of Sylhet in colonial Assam based on archival records, oral narratives, and published memoirs.*

Keywords: Partition, Assam, Sylhet Referendum, Women, Violence, Displacement

The Partition of Sylhet (Assam) and 'absent' women's Question

Women as the most vulnerable section of society in the fratricidal conflict of partition were also the worst victims of subversions of history. This problem was more acute in spaces of marginal academic engagement such as Assam. Women have rarely been the focus of partition history and it needed another round of genocidal violence to revive debates on the violence experienced seventy-seven years ago. One of the earliest writings on the partition experiences of Assam from Sylhet was limited only to its political dimension, exclusively built around official archival inputs. Partition as divorced from transfer of power was a story of anxiety and pain. The sudden transformation of a familiar

space into an unfamiliar terrain was traumatic. The situation was even more critical for women who found themselves victims of multiple marginalization. While the society and nation were both patriarchal, the process of history writing and power discourse were also essentially a male preserve. But for the Assam situation, the story was more complex as partition was preceded by a political process called a Referendum. Therefore, despite the existence of a cascade of texts on partition histories, few scholars in India and abroad have engaged with the Assam experience. Thus, while Punjab and Bengal dominated the partition history of India, Assam as the third site of Partition experience in India suffered invisibility. Women in this political narrative suffered multiple marginalization as partition and patriarchy combined to present women as absence in politics and struggle for power. Woven around women's narratives this paper has two major concerns. The first is to locate the narrative of partition politics and women participation and the second is to recover narratives of the moment of displacement from the recollections by women.

Sylhet Referendum and its political history

When the Colonial Government in its wisdom decided to decolonize, it also announced the partition Punjab and Bengal and hold a referendum in the Muslim majority district of Sylhet, in Assam. Despite being a part of the non-Muslim province of Assam, the district of Sylhet was drawn into the vortex of partition politics. Those who favored Sylhet joining Pakistan¹ were allotted the 'AXE', those that opposed partition² were given the symbol of the 'HUT'. The contest was keen and the battle lines were clearly drawn. But there was little doubt in minds of people on the field, including colonial official that the Muslim League had an upper hand in this battle.³ Sylhet moved into the Referendum on the 6th and 7th of July, 1947. There was rampant cases of violence and intimidation and there were reports that, "there were numerous allegations of intimidation of voters, nearly all of intimidation of Hindu voters by Muslim voters and volunteers, and a few cases of intimidation of Muslim voters..."⁴ Though the official report tried to down play the level of intimidation there was no denial of the same. The Report noted that, "No doubt some non-violent intimidation by League Muslims had begun but not to the extent claimed by the Hindus."⁵ While the extent of the violence and intimidation in the Sylhet Referendum became a bone of contention for the contending parties, the results of the referendum came to be notified by the Colonial Government as the Viceroy telegraphed the report of the Referendum Commissioner to the Government at London. But there was no doubt that the magnitude of the violence and intimidation indulged in by the League volunteers necessitated the intervention of the security forces. Firing was resorted to and it caused the death of one League volunteer and the injury of three others among the Leaguers and invited violent retaliation on the Congress workers of the area. Therefore, in the post-Referendum situation, the Sylhet question was placed before the

Bengal Boundary Commission with the contending sides making detailed presentations. On the 14th of August, Sylhet except three and a half thanas became a part of East Pakistan. What remained in India became part of the Cachar district of the composite state of Assam in post-colonial India. Though scholars⁶ have recently recovered Sylhet in Partition narratives they have failed to recover the women in their narration of politics. While Bhattacharjee and Chakraborty were obsessed with statist and elitist power games, it was surprising that Anindita who talked of partition through non statist sources also denied women their spaces in History.⁷ This paper is an attempt to overcome this imbalance by seeking to combine and contrast archival and oral history of partition of India at colonial Assam on the one hand and published memoirs authored by women writers on the other.

Women and the Sylhet Referendum 1947

Years of silence of the Indian state over violence of partition have thrown up varied questions embedded within the genre of private memorialisation among the partition violence victims, who were displaced from their ancestral homes. These reflections, reminiscences, histories, and monographs are a treasure trove for the recovery of the history of women's participation in the politics of the Referendum. Though this narrative is constructed through the voice of elite, articulate elderly women who survived to tell their tales, there is no doubt that women became active participants in this process from the very inception of the referendum campaign. My interface with Sabita Choudhury (nee Deb Purkayastha) at Shillong opened uncharted narratives.⁸ She remembered that "though I was small, only in class eight, I remember Anjali-di (Anjali Das) coming to our class to address us on the Referendum." There were many such women leaders as Anjali Das or Anjali-di as she was commonly referred to. If young women like Anjali Das were the leaders of the Anti-Partition campaign, the pro partitionist Muslim League campaign was also led by women leaders such as Zobeda Khatun Choudhury at the grassroots. It is through women's initiatives that the campaign in Sylhet was made more participatory and vibrant. Women's narratives about the Referendum more informative and detailed on several counts, in contrast to the official reports of the events preceding partition and those that came in its aftermath. Women were perceptive enough to record subtle but significant changes in society especially in everyday life, triggered off by the new political influences and which were ignored by officials in their records Sabita Choudhury's recollection about Zamila Khatun Choudhury appear to capture the changing temperaments of the society in Sylhet. Sabita Choudhury recollection that, "Zamila Khatun Choudhury most probably hailing from Bhadeswar in Dhaka Dakhin, was one of my closet friends. I had always seen her wearing a saree. But as the referendum campaign started, I saw her only wearing a Salwar Kameez. We were both students of Kishori Mohan Girls High School" was one such observation that does not find parallel in

archival records but which is immensely significant in recording the social and cultural communal polarization recorded through sartorial changes in Sylhet during partition campaign.

The onset of the referendum brought about sudden socio-cultural transformation of Sylheti social space before the Referendum and partition. For most women who were lived within the confines of the house, their introduction in politics began with Referendum. The first steps were taken by over hearing male members of the family discussing about the changing times and the approaching challenges. Bijoya Choudhury points out, "I was never involved with politics. We only wanted India to be independent. But as discussions became more intense, then we felt that we had to lend our ears to it. Pakistan, Referendum, etc. were words that floated into our ears. Our hearts were not willing to accept it and we were greatly pained." But then on, as the heat of campaign caught on with the people in Sylhet, women were not left behind. Very little has been written on the participation of both Hindu and Muslim women in it. Henna Das in her memoir¹⁰ brought out the singular role played by Jobeda Khatun Choudhury in the Muslim League campaign in the Referendum. But apart from the interesting narrative about the significant role of Zobeda Khatun or Zobeda Mashima as Hindu girls would refer to her, this memoir was also a text about the silent partition in civil society in Sylhet, preceding the referendum. It was, as if, silently, the Hindus and the Muslims were getting 'displaced' from each other's lives. Henna Das points out that, "We never understood or realized when and at what point, Mashima (as Zobeda Khatun was called) had left Congress and become attracted to the Muslim League. She never let us realized it. We only realized it during the Sylhet Referendum."

Women of all ages ranging from school girls to the elderly had moved head on into the movement of Pakistan at Sylhet and against it. For women such as Henna Das, who were part of the Communist movement at Sylhet, the decision of the Communist party to oppose the incorporation of Sylhet into Pakistan, saw the Congress and the Communist workers working together, which brought her into logger heads with women who worked for Pakistan. "In accordance with the decision of our Party (communist Party), we worked for the retention of the Sylhet in India. Mashima was working for making Sylhet a part of Pakistan."¹¹ Such memories were not isolated. Sandhya Lahiri (Das), who was the sister of Radesh Chandra Das, one of the leaders of the Communist Movement in Sylhet recollected the involvement of numerous women leaders in the Anti Pakistan campaign in the Sylhet Referendum. "Our leaders were Anjali Di (Anjali Das) and her sister Dr. Kalyani Das, Sushma Dey, Aparna Paul, all of whom were our party comrades. Our 'adda' or meeting place was the house of Moni Bose. Hena Di, sister of Basin Dutta was our other leader"¹² in how she remembered her and her comrades participating in the political battle, which the Sylhet Referendum was converted into.¹³ But what was even

more significant was the sudden displacement of Sylheti women from happy domesticity into public life and political participation, which Hena Das put across very succinctly¹⁴ as she recorded,

"On the other hand, I witnessed with bewilderment, the sudden awakening of Muslim women, which was unprecedented. Like water rushing out of a broken dam, these women who were yet confined indoors, were coming in scores to the voting centre to cast their vote for Pakistan."

Political participation of women was a salient feature of the Pakistan campaign in Sylhet, the crescendo of which was the Sylhet referendum. Sandhya Lahiri, an activist of the Communist Party of Sylhet in the Referendum campaign also vividly remembered the Sylhet Referendum campaign by women. As Sandhya Lahiri (Das), remembered the campaigns that she participated in, she also recounted slogans such as

*Gharer Bakshe vote dao
Shonar Sylhet bhangbo na
Bhanga Banglay jabo na.*

with which she and her comrades used to impress the anti partition minds. The 'ghar' was symbolized by 'the hut' while the symbol of the pro partitionist Muslim league was the 'kural' or the 'axe'. Each side used rhetoric which were immersed in imagery. The Muslim women were also not left behind. If the Congress-Communist combine came out to the street in 'prabhat pheris' or early morning musical processions, the League campaigners being more organized came out in open trucks and busses and countered the Congress slogans with their own such as,

*Gharer bakshe kural Maro
Assam e aar thakbo na
Guli khey morbo na*

Sandhya Lahiri (Das) narrated that 'as we went out in the morning, shouting 'Ghorer bakshe vote dao' during our probhat pheri, from the other side of the street came a bus loaded with Muslim League volunteers mostly women, who shouted, 'Ghorer bakshe kural Maro'. While we campaigned for the retention of our land in India, they were openly asking for their supporters to throw a spanner on our plans.'

If campaign was keen, the women volunteers on either side were no less aggressive than their menfolk and showed rare resolve. Reminiscences by women, who were participants in the politics of partition, were very graphic about the political realignments that had taken place in Sylhet during the partition campaigns and after. The enthusiasm of women was unique and unprecedented. Hena Das, wrote that "There were elections and voting in Sylhet, earlier as well, but never have I witnessed any such scene."

Communal relations in Sylhet deteriorated and friendships and fraternal spirit which had been characteristic of the place, was quickly forgotten. Hena Das in her memoirs pointed out that, she saw many of her friends joining the

pro-Pakistan movement led by Zobeda Khatun and she felt that she had never known them enough as many of them began to abuse her. Her memoir recorded that,

“I met Mashima in the voting centre. She was leading the women’s volunteer group and among whom were many of my friends. I had never seen these friends in politics or social service earlier. Great excitement and antagonism grew between the two opposing fronts over the voting in the Referendum. I realized it in the voting centre. Mashima turned her face away as she saw us. We got no opportunity to talk to her as the atmosphere was not conducive. The women volunteers were so excited that even my friends and classmate who were the Muslim League volunteers started abusing us. Their feeling was that by opposing Sylhet’s entry into Pakistan we were committing a great sin.”¹⁶

Post-Referendum politics and displacement of women

When the society was polarized and the political atmosphere hostile, victory in the referendum was interpreted as license for intimidation of Hindus who were minorities. These changes in the grassroots found mention in the dairy records of female political workers at Sylhet. Suhasini Das, a Gandhian social worker and Congress activist noted in her dairy, dt. 19.7.1947, that, ‘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’.¹⁷

As in Punjab, in Sylhet, then part of colonial Assam till 14th of August, 1947, the causes for displacement of people from their homes and articulation of experience of violence was often intertwined with the women question.¹⁸ Most of the Hindus felt alienated and threatened in Pakistan as they could neither identify with the League slogan of “*Allah-ho-Akbar*”, an over thy religious slogan which had been converted into a battle cry, nor could they sympathise with the League vision of Pakistan. While threats intimidation and violence held the field during the Referendum, after the results came in, the League supporting Zamindars openly threatened to evict Hindus or Muslims who had dared to vote against Pakistan. ‘Paliye ashte hoyechilo’ or ‘we had to flee and come to India’ is what Labangalata Purkayastha, from Gobindopur, Sylhet, had to say about her coming to India.¹⁹

Armed bands moved about the interior of Sylhet threatening vengeance on those who might have voted against joining East Bengal.²⁰ In Traditional society of Sylhet patriarchy constructed women in a typical way. Respectability of families was chained to the inviolability of women. Women’s respectability in turn was confined to the degree to which they were able to retain their sexual purity. Thus, women had to pay the price of independence through her life and displacement. Displacement of women in post Referendum Sylhet was not just a relocation of the body; it was a means to safeguard the family honour. One

such account, narrating the process of displacement observed,

*'How could anyone happily leave behind his home where his forefathers had lived for years?'*²¹

In the context of the history of Indian decolonisation, this question assumes utmost importance, to unlock the tragic tale of displacement and refugee situation where women played a critical role. Hashi Rani Choudhury, a new wed, expecting her first child, was clandestinely shifted out of Jinarpur, in Habiganj Sub Division to Shillong, her marital home. Recounting the situation, Hashirani said,

"Soon after the Referendum Muslim villagers went into a frenzy. Threat, intimidation and violence had increased. When the results were announced, I remember that our neighbours were overcome with excitement and exultation. But frenzy soon gave way to threat. In my paternal village of Jinarpur, Muslim League volunteers came to my house and threatened us. Capture the Hindu women they shouted. Capture the Hindu fields they cried. My father, who was a Zamindar decided to shift me out of his home and send me to my in-law's house at Shillong in the cover of night. I was expecting my first child then I was hurriedly bundled out of my father's house."

The situation was even more precarious for women folk who were married. Their life belonged to their husband and the fathers felt that it was better to shift them out of their homes, irrespective of their will. Politics of the day conspired with the men folk to displace the women. These women did not have any voice about their fate. Bani Choudhury, the wife of Late Sudhir Choudhury, then Assistant Commandant of the SYL Force recollected her moments of escape from Sylhet and her migration to Shillong in 1947 and her narrative gives us a fairly detailed account of the contemporary political situation in the district of Sylhet, which till the 14th of August, 1947, was a part of colonial Assam. As a new wed, she was then residing at her marital home at Sylhet town in the locality known as Zinda Bazar. As part of his operations, her husband had opened fire on a group of armed Muslim League supporting villagers at Amtoil, a village near Sylhet. The League supporters at Sylhet turned hostile towards her family. Her In-laws quickly shifted to their other house at Shillong. In her own words,

"... By the evening of the 7th July, it came to light that my husband had fired on a Muslim crowd at Amtoil. The atmosphere was highly volatile. Local League volunteers were agitated and we were warned that our house at Zinda Bazar could be attacked any moment. I was quickly shifted out of my marital home at Zinda Bazar to another of my In-Law's family home at Shillong. I had to flee to India overnight."

These narratives are immensely valuable in the reconstruction of the political situation in south Assam in the days of partition. The stories of threat of violation and violence from Sylhet in the life of respondents such as Hashi rani and Bani Choudhury helps us to understand the cause for displacement from Sylhet like

thousands of such stories from West Pakistan.²¹ As the tension and violence grew, apprehensions overwhelmed the minorities and protection of women came to occupy the core of their concern. Suhasini Das observed, in her notes dt. 14.7.1947, that, "... at night I talked to the neighbours. They were all worried that the League could be planning some mischief. They were especially worried about protection their womenfolk." It was these concerns they ensured the physical displacement of families from their ancestral 'bhite bari'. Displacement was a painful process, both for those who left Sylhet and those stayed back. Suhasini Das, observed in her dairy that, "When people close to me decided to leave Sylhet, tears flooded my eye..... people were leaving Pakistan in search of safe havens elsewhere.... The empty houses stared back at us in despair..." The fear of dishonour was the most important determinant to displace oneself from 'bhite bari' into an unknown world. Though they shifted to Shillong, the distance between their two homes were more psychological than geographical. The unfamiliarity of their route, the clandestine nature of their movement and the involuntary nature of their displacement was vivid tales of helpless condition of women in their patriarchal society during partition and immediately thereafter.

Narrating Violence and displacement in its myriad hues

Official reports could present only a cursory understanding about the nature and extent of violence in the area and could never capture the experiences of women. The stories of threat of violation and violence from Sylhet in the life of respondents such as Hashirani and Bani Choudhury helps us to understand the predatory nature of men as a cause for displacement from Sylhet like thousands of such stories from West Pakistan. The political situation in Sylhet was very critical. The Dawn in its August 27th & 28th 1947 edition reported, 'Reports of unrest and lawlessness are reaching Shillong from Habiganj Sub-Division of Sylhet district.'²² The situation was so critical that the Deputy Commissioner of Sylhet, Khan Bahadur Syed Habib Ali was forced to undertake a visit to the area and troops were sent in to control the situation.²³ As the tension and violence grew in new forms and proportions through rampant cases of dacoity, plunder of homes of Hindus and inaction of the Pakistani government,²⁴ apprehensions overwhelmed the minorities and protection of women came to occupy the core of their concern. Usha Devi, who was at Habiganj when partition was announced after referendum remembered that the exultations of the Muslim League supporters were intimidating. Though an octogenarian at the time when her interview was taken,²⁵ she recollected that,

"The Muslims were jubilant and lot of Hindu bhadrakok began to sell their houses to Muslim purchasers and leave the town. My father's mohri sold his house secretly and so did our neighbor Anondo Biswas. So the Muslims got a chance to move into the house next door. Our locality was till then, a Hindu locality. But soon harassment and intimidation started. Houses were put on fire. As the situation was unsafe, it was decided that we would be shifted to our

village home. As we were making our journey by boat, there were attempts to set it on fire. We were saved by my uncle's presence of mind, as he rowed the boat quickly to safety. We lived in constant anxiety of an attack by the Muslim League supporting goons. After the situation was slightly better, we returned to our house in the town. But things were hardly the same. We had to close our doors and windows and could not go to the ghat of the pond in our home freely for bathing. There were rampant cases of eve teasing and indecent catcalls. At our school, the strength of students gradually depleted. From about one hundred students, the number came down to seven. The Mussalman gentleman who took over the house of our neighbour, Anondo Biswas, was a married man and yet he tormented and intimidated us. He used to write notes and push it through our windows. One such note fell into my mother's hands and after which my parents decided to take and leave me at Shillong. My father secretly herded me to Shillong and left me at with my maternal uncle. I remember that we came from Habiganj to Kulaura by train and then took a bus to Shillong."

Though displacement was a painful process, both for those who left and those remained at Sylhet, their lives were never the same again. For Sabita Choudhury, there was more to share. Narratives of psychological uprooting and dispossession seem to have preceded the actual process of physical dislocation from her homeland. The onset of Pakistan inflicted more subtle forms of violence in the lives of the Hindu minorities of Pakistan, than what had been hitherto appreciated. She recounts that, "When I was promoted to class nine, I saw our text books were changed. Urdu was introduced along with Bangla. Books were changed overnight." Talking about the violence of the times of partition, Uma Purkayastha (nee Sen), residing at Shillong and earlier from Maulvi Bazar recounted the story of the death of Santosh Sengupta on the Bhairab bridge. She pointed out that,

"Santosh Babu was a prominent resident of Srimangal and the owner of Srimangal Cinema Hall. He was accompanying his friend Haji Muhammad Inamullah to Dacca to collect the film rolls, for his cinema hall. It as the practice in those days. On his return, he boarded the train from Dacca only to be woken up at the dead of night by noise, commotion, and cries for help in the adjoining compartment. Inamullah got Sengupta to change into a Lungi but when the mob came into their compartment it did not take long for the mob to find out about Sengupta's religious status and he was beheaded on the spot."²⁷

To the displaced genteel womenfolk or bhadra-mahila like Labangalata Purkayastha, Hashirani Choudhury, Bani Choudhury, Usha Devi, Sabita Choudhury (nee Deb) and Uma Purkayastha (nee Sen), their decision to displace themselves was invariably dictated by various forces over which they had no control. Though they shifted to towns close to Sylhet such as Karimganj or Shillong, the distance between their homes in Sylhet and their new locations of residence were more psychological than physical as their new residence were an involuntary compromise in their lives which they could never alter. The

unfamiliarity of their route, the clandestine nature of their migration and the involuntary nature of their displacement was vivid tales of vulnerability of women in patriarchal society during partition of India in the east. But of greater significance, over these narratives of partition and its accompanying violence at post-partition Sylhet is the impact that it had on the life-world and the consciousness of those who were uprooted and who lived on to share their tales. Usha Devi²⁸ presented the most vivid insight into such emotions of displacement as she stated, 'I could not cry before anyone but I used to regularly enter the bathroom and break down. I felt that I had been left alone in exile. There was no other way...' For women who were uprooted, life would never be the same.

Conclusion

This attempt at re-writing the history of the Sylhet Referendum, ie the event around which the history of partition revolves in Assam, as the site which links Assam with the partition politics of India in 1947, is proposed to be a story with a difference. It is a story that intends to attempt a historical reconstruction through the narratives of women alone. In this context, it is interesting to conclude, as Geraldine Forbes locates that '[w]riting the history of women in India was impossible until we begin to search for, unearth and preserve women's documents...' ²⁹ Therefore women's memoirs and women's interviews have been the primary fodder for this narrative apart from archival records. Partition narratives of Assam can only acquire a totality if it can accommodate the 'inner terrain of the female psyche' within the 'larger meta-narratives of decolonization and nation building', ³⁰ For the Sylheti women who were willing to be interviewed, partition was a moment of anxiety with its varied experiences of violent displacement and not of freedom. Though Sylhet did not experience as largescale violence as the Punjab or even Bengal, probably one needs to remember, as Meghna Guha Thakurta, in her essay, 'Uprooted and Divided' ³¹ argues that, "violence is not always to be measured by external acts of murder, loot or abduction, reports of which are also found in pre-partitioned Bengal. However, these occurrences might have been more sporadic on this side. What is crucial to note is that violence also typifies a state where a sense of fear is generated and perpetrated in such a way as to make it systemic, pervasive, and inevitable... In many communal riots which preceded as well as followed Partition, it was the fear of being persecuted, the fear of being dispossessed, the fear of not belonging that caused many to flee rather than actual acts of violence." In the case of partitioned Sylhet as well, Thakurta's explanation of violence can possibly be taken to be the most comprehensive understanding of the then prevailing situation between 1947 and 1950. Some of the stories, recovered in this narrative seeks to understand the myriad and nuanced experiences of violence among the minorities and the rationale for displacement of women from Sylhet. It is important to recover the 'inner terrain' ³² of women's psyche that contributed to their decisions to uproot themselves from their ancestral

homes and hearth. These narratives are seminally important to give meaning to the ideas of violence, violation and anxiety of Sylheti women, perceptions of which bind the women of Sylhet and Assam to the larger narratives of women's experiences in the Indian subcontinent, irrespective of the site of partition. While the importance of recovering the history of women's experiences hardly needs any reassertion, it is also to be admitted that most narratives of women are often mediated by caste, class, and religion. There are little or no memorials recorded by Dalit women or women of lower classes or even Muslim women dating to the Sylhet Referendum both from India and Bangladesh which render the project of rewriting the gender history of partition often lop-sided. This major deficiency needs to be overcome to give the history of decolonization in India a semblance of totality. While recent writings such as those of Adhir Biswas,³³ Monoranjan Byapari³⁴ and Mousumi Choudhury³⁵ from Bengal and Assam have initiated this counter current their writings have only exposed the frugality of marginal voices from partition histories as no Muslim or Dalit women's memoirs of Sylhet Referendum and its aftermath were available to the author, despite earnest search. This article is a preliminary attempt to recover some women voices from the moment of India's partition from Assam and build a template for re-writing the gender history of Indian partition in its varied dimensions which we are only beginning to initiate.

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