

The Concept of North-East India and the Partition Historiography

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It is necessary to have a clear picture of the pre-independence days to understand the trends of development in North-East India in the post- independence period. Many of the seeds of postcolonial disorder in North-East India were sown in the colonial period and the most devastating tale of woes actually began with the partition of the country in 1947. The historiography of partition has gone through a sea change during recent years, particularly after the golden jubilee year of India's Independence, as the researchers are now more interested in reconstructing the aftermath of Partition, which has brought the high cost associated with the process and radical changes in the societies of Eastern and North-Eastern India, rather than the causes of the landmark event and the 'high politics' behind it. Today it is largely related to the process of evaluating the achievements and failures of the nation-state after six decades of Independence.[1]

The Concept of North-East

True, the British colonists were to evolve the idea of a "north-eastern frontier" agency after they colonized the Brahmaputra valley and surrounding hill areas on the Indo-Burma frontier and Alexander Mackenzie perhaps first articulated the concept of a "northeast" frontier.[2] Initially, the concept remained a geographical one. For much of the British period, undivided Assam was thought of as the "north-east frontier of Bengal", and its economy and politics were largely dictated from and linked to this westerly direction. [3] In fact, the concept of North-East India was virtually a creation of the 1947 Partition itself. While East Pakistan (and now Bangladesh) was "India-locked," similarly North-East India was "Pakistan (and now Bangladesh)-locked." Ninety-nine per cent of North-east India's borders is with foreign countries, making it impossible to separate domestic and foreign policy. However, according to Sanjib Baruah, the phrase 'North-east India' practically entered the Indian lexicon only in

1971 with the culmination of the North Eastern Council and also the dramatic changes in the region's political geography with the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent nation when Pakistan was split in 1971 and that the category 'North-east' had its roots in the set of national security considerations. The entire North-Eastern region was looked through security prism rather than development prism

North-East was practically cut off from the rest of the country since 1947 and the memory of the Partition triggered further fragmentation and conflict in the society. The Partition resulted in the abrupt severance of inland water, road and railway communications, as well as the loss of access to the Chittagong port, crippling crucial economic linkages and driving up costs of all commodities. Though the Northeast region has critical strategic significance, it remains tenuously connected with the rest of India through a thin umbilical cord, the so-called 'chicken's neck', or the 'Siliguri Corridor' in North Bengal, with an approximate width of 33 kilometres on the eastern side and 21 kilometres on the western side.[4] This constitutes barely one per cent of the boundaries of the region, while the remaining over 99 per cent of its borders are international – with China to the North; Bangladesh to the South West; Bhutan to the North West; and Myanmar to the East. In fact the Northeast India is a frontier region in the true sense of the term. Due to its geographical location, and great distance from New Delhi, the people of this region often suffer from a feeling of neglect and feel that the central government does not have much time or concern for their security, priorities and needs. This feeling has, at times, been exacerbated by responses from New Delhi which did not take into account the feelings and sensitivities of the people inhabiting this area.[5]

In the post-independence period, New Delhi, according to Haimendorf, was unable to sensitively respond to the intricate realities of the North East.[6] Rather, it seemed to follow the colonial policy of isolation and alienation, treating the North East differently from the other Indian states. The northeastern states with just 25 out of a total of 543 seats in the Lok Sabha were so long politically insignificant in Delhi. In the North East, a sense of incompatibility grew into one of resentment against being made

a part of India, and in the post-partition period an anti-India sentiment ultimately emerged amongst a section of the region's people, especially when the Indian government cold shouldered local aspirations. Given the region's historical background, antagonism could be easily instigated by external forces.

Verrier Elwin, the distinguished British anthropologist and missionary, who was Jawaharlal Nehru's trusted adviser on all tribal matters, proposed to keep tribals of the North-East as tribals without disturbing them with so-called modern developmental programmes.[7]. But not many in the wider political community and the academics were comfortable with that approach. The Nehru- Elwin model virtually came down crashing in the harsher world that began in the mid-1960s. It was widely felt that the time had come to take a new look at Elwin formula that had lost the meaning and served only the vested interests. The hill societies have also witnessed great change over the past six decades.[8] More and more people have gained access to some form of education and to basic allopathic medicine and health care. Christianity is rapidly replacing indigenous religions. Swidden cultivation [9] is losing prominence to sedentary forms of hill farming. New sources of wealth, including commercial forestry and craze for 'white collar' or government jobs by the emerging middle class people etc., are creating sharp social stratification in North-Eastern societies; and because of these social changes new and newer challenges to the Nation-State are coming from the 'periphery', i.e. the North-East.[10] Large-scale population movements and migrations in the post-partition decades have caused dramatic changes in the demographic ratios and social and cultural mixes of people in some states, and caused the local population to feel endangered and beleaguered. The roots of ethnicity or revivalism or social distance in North-East India are to be searched in that background as the present situation of unrest has its vital root in the partition of India. For example, the distance between Kolkata and Agartala before Partition was about 300 kms.(via Bengal). It became 1,700 kms, through NH 48, after the partition. Even the best roads in the world cannot make up for this difference. Six of the eight state capitals of North-East are still not connected by

rail. Only Guwahati and Agartala today (metre gauge) are connected by rail. Three of the capital cities (Itanagar, Kohima, and Shillong) do not have modern airport facilities. This isolation, since the days of partition, affects the economic prospects for the region (by affecting the costs of imports and exports) as well as the responsiveness of the rest of India to catastrophes in the region.

B.G. Verghese sums up in the following way the cumulative impact of the chain that commenced in the North-East with the cataclysmic events of 1947 partition:

The physical and psychological severity of the blow was not fully appreciated in the country and the disruption of communications and markets was not repaired soon enough, nor infrastructure developed to match the new needs completed as expeditiously as necessary. Isolated and traumatised, the Northeast turned inward. A succession of insurgencies and movements to seek separation or autonomy, assert identity or exclude foreigners and outsiders aggravated the hiatus, with the rest of the country coming to think of the Northeast with disinterest as a far-away place, perpetually troubled. Beset with its own internal problems and complexes, the Northeast fell behind economically and despite its inherent wealth remains at the bottom of the heap as a conglomeration of seemingly impecunious special category States. [11]

Take for example, the case of Assam in a synoptic form :

Before Partition : – Assam's per capita income was 5th from the top – Industrialisation in 1834 with Tea companies – Coal industries in 1850's – Timber export started in 1850's – Railway tracks were laid in 1860's – Asia's first Oil refinery, Digboi (1901) – Agricultural productivity higher than national average –impressive handloom & handicraft products

But what was the scenario after Partition (1947)? — Other than elimination of North-Eastern Region's traditional trade and commercial linkages that

existed in pre-partition days – Assam was truncated and creation of separate states — illegal migration, — and from the economic angle : – huge infrastructure gap - power, road, communication, education – lack of industrialization : unemployment – Liberalization policy did not have much impact and Assam has the lowest per capita income at Rs 7513 currently among the eight NE states, including Sikkim.

At the very beginning of the post-independence period, North-East essentially meant Assam and the two erstwhile princely states, Manipur and Tripura. Assam was later on truncated and four tribal states were created: Nagaland (1963), Meghalaya (1972), Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram (1987). This was done to protect the distinct cultural and linguistic identity and interests of the people of the region. In spite of this division, the maximum number of Scheduled Tribes in North-Eastern region reside in Assam (according to 2001 census, out of Assam's total population of 26,655,528, the number of S. T. was 3,308,570 constituting 12.4% of the population). Previously the North-East was known as the land of the so-called "seven sisters", [12] but with the joining of Sikkim the number is now eight; although the "sisters" in the past rarely met with each other. The North-East at present comprises of the eight States of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim which collectively account for about 8 per cent of the country's geographical area and roughly 4 per cent of its population with about 200 ethnic groups, languages and dialects. J.B Fuller in his Introduction to Alan Playfair's book on the Garos [13] wrote in 1909 that the province of Assam at the far northeastern corner of India is a 'museum of nationalities'. Over the years, the geographical entity, the social setting, economy, politics and aspirations of the ethnic groups of this region were bunched together into one unit and the term 'northeast' is used and the *eight sisters* are identified as a single geographic unit and socio-economic entity and identity. Jairam Ramesh, the Central Minister, himself admits that the word 'Northeast' is particularly unfortunate because it tends to evoke images of a homogeneous, undifferentiated mass, which it certainly is not. In fact, the repeated use of the phrase 'Northeast' creates more problems

than it actually solves. The concept of North-East was politically formalized in 1971 when the North East Council (NEC) was formed (and functioned from 1972) and Sikkim was included in the North East Council in 2002.

Though little known and relatively little studied both within and outside the country, the North East is a region as colourful and varied as India itself. Some indologists and intellectuals have seized upon caste divisions, untouchability, religious obscurantism, and practices of dowry, *sati* etc. as distinctive evidence of India's social relations and to them, these social ills have literally come to define India and her perennial backwardness. But in North-East India most of these social ills were not so glaring; although slavery, though not of European parlance, was there in the society. The Chinese scholar and pilgrim Hiuen Tsang, who visited the plains of Assam in the first half of the seventh century, described the region as covered with beautiful mountains, lush forests and wild life, and depicted a fairly advanced civilization and rich cultural heritage in his narrative.

The North-East represents the richest ethnic region of the world, and meeting point of four major races (Austic, Mongoloid, Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Aryan) who came from different directions at different historical times. The Australoids came to this region before the coming of the Mongoloids who partially or fully absorbed the Australoid strains. The physical features of different tribes of North-East India suggest that the Australoid elements are present in some of the tribes even today. India's North-East has been catchments for many communities and ethnic groups. From South-East Asia have come the Khasis (part of the Austic, Mon-Khmer group) originally from Kampuchea; the Bodos, descendants of the Tibeto-Burman race; and the Tai-Ahoms, who ruled Assam for 600 years, migrating to the Brahmaputra Valley in the thirteenth century from the Shan province, bordering Burma (Myanmar) and Thailand. Various Naga communities are on both sides of the India-Myanmar border, and, other than Nagaland, are settled in Arunachal Pradesh (Noctes and Wanchos), Manipur (the Tangkhuls, among others), and Assam. In a word, the North-East is a 'mini-India': 200

of India's 635 tribal communities live there and 175 of 325 Indian languages are spoken in the region.[14]

Partition Historiography

The history of Partition is well documented from different perspectives. From *the colonial perspective*, we have books on official and semi-official documents by: Mansergh and others,[15] Alan Campbell-Johnson, [16] Penderel Moon,[17] C. H. Philips and M. D Wainwright, [18] and others. From *The Indian Perspective*, we have, other than the invaluable volumes like *Towards Freedom : Documents on the Movement for Independence in India*, there are the works of authoritative persons such as Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, [19] V.P.Menon,[20] P.N. Chopra,[21] Subimal Dutt, [22] Ajit Bhattacharjya,[23] and many others, and it is not necessary to recount the same except to the extent germane to the theme of the present paper. From *The Pakistani Perspective*, we have documents as published by the Government of Pakistan [24] and Syed Sharifuddin Pirzada, [25]

The historiography of Partition is enriched from various angles by Leonard Mosley,[26] Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre,[27] Patrick French, [28] Mushirul Hasan, [29] Ayesha Jalal, [30] Ravinder Kumar, [31] Yong and Kudaisya, [32] and many others.

The socioeconomic impact of Partition on different localities and individuals has drawn the attention of researchers, as the human dimension of the experience of Partition has become the major content of the new Partition historiography.[33] The Partition resulted in extreme violence and one of the largest migrations in history. Partition deaths throughout India and Pakistan numbered between 500,000 and one million, while some ten to twelve million migrants moved across the new borders in Punjab and Bengal. [34] In the words of Lucy Chester :

Although estimates of partition casualties remain controversial, it is clear that great suffering, on a scale rarely seen in human history, accompanied the partition. Violence,

and the memory of violence, is therefore one of partition's legacies to the South Asian region.... partition's scars remain in the minds, if no longer on the bodies, of many South Asians. It is not only the actual survivors of partition who exhibit this damage; their descendents are also marked. [35]

Regarding Tripura, the 1947 partition was a disaster. It opened the floodgates of an influx from East Bengal that forever changed the demography of the erstwhile princely state. This demographic change paved the way for a fierce ethnic conflict that has ravaged the tiny state for the last three decades.

A very few people in the entire North-Eastern region had ever heard the name Radcliffe, although their day-to-day life since the post-partition days were regulated and influenced by the 'Radcliffe Line'.

Joya Chatterjee, over and above her celebrated work *Bengal Divided*, [36] has developed a standard criticism against the 'Radcliffe Line' drawn between the two parts of Bengal and North-East India. In her words it was 'a hastily and ignorantly drawn line' by a man who had 'no background in Indian administration, nor did he have any prior experience of adjudicating disputes of this sort'. [37] Before his appointment, Sir Cyril Radcliffe, a reputed barrister, had never visited India and knew no-one in India. Paradoxically, to the British and feuding politicians alike, this liability was looked upon as an asset; on the theory that ignorance of India would equal impartiality, and he was considered to be unbiased toward any of the parties, except of course Britain. Britain's action in 1947- condemned as a "shameful flight" by Winston Churchill (who predicted that India would break up in just ten years, though his forecast proved wrong)—had a catastrophic effect particularly on the North-East. *Stanley Wolpert's new book — Shameful Flight*, published in 2006, is an account of the Partition story which *lays the blame for one of the most horrific episodes of the 20th century squarely* on Mountbatten, the flamboyant cousin of the king, who rushed the process of nationhood along at an absurd pace. Radcliffe Award was the outcome of an official plan announced by Lord Mountbatten. The partition, according to the Radcliff Award, was followed by a massive

influx of Bengali Hindu refugees from East Pakistan to different parts of the country. The migration virtually started before the partition, particularly after the Noakhali riot in 1946. Partition brought with it unceasing waves of migration that disrupted, and continue to disturb, existing demographic equations in different parts of North-Eastern region, particularly the present Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram. Wolpert's main contention is that the United Kingdom abandoned India in a reckless and headlong retreat - a retreat that left India and Pakistan in a chaotic bloodbath that left perhaps a million dead and 12 million refugees.[38] Wolpert points out, *He(Radcliff) was to accomplish, in a month, work that should have taken at least a year....He was so afraid of what he had done — worried that Sikhs, Hindus or Muslims would kill him — (that) he left India hastily.* [39]

The Indo-Pak international border on the eastern sector was drawn right through thickly populated areas instead of between them. Not only were the new borders artificial, but also no one knew for sure where they began, because the border had not been physically demarcated on the ground. It not only divided a nation but also cut through the middle of several villages.[40] There were even instances (particularly in Tripura) where the dividing line passed through a single house with some rooms in India and others in Pakistan. No society can develop without peaceful borders with its neighbours. The present situation of border unrest in Tripura either over the Muhari river basin issue of Belonia (South Tripura) or over the ongoing border fencing issue (inspite of Indo-Bangla Treaty of 1974, popularly known as the Indira-Mujib Treaty), has vital root in the Radcliffe Award.

More importantly, it disrupted the traditional way of life and people were cut off from their traditional markets, sources of livelihood, medical facilities, etc. [41] In fact, it created a “cartographical monstrosity, a deep ulcer on the right flank of India”. Radcliffe justified such casual division with the truism that no matter what he did, people would suffer. The thinking behind this justification may never be known since Radcliffe “destroyed all his papers before he left India”[42] on 15 August 1947, before

even the boundary awards were distributed. On August 16, 1947 at 5:00pm, the Indians and Pakistanis were given two hours to study copies, before the Radcliffe award was published on 17 August.[43] . True, Cyril Radcliffe was assisted by four other members of the Boundary Commission : Bijon Mukherjee, C.C.Biswas, M.A.Rahman and M.M.Akram, all of them lawyers belonging to two different religious communities.[44] But there was practically nothing that they agreed upon, with the result that the award, eventually published on August 17, i.e. two days after independence, was entirely the handiwork of Radcliffe alone. Here then is the dramatic story of a truly pivotal moment in history, an event that ignited fires of continuing political unrest that still burn in South Asia.

Some observers felt Radcliffe gave too much weight to economic considerations, neglecting his mandate to determine the “contiguous majority areas” of religious groups. For example, the Chittagong Hill Tracts— densely forested hills contiguous to the Lushai Hills (now Mizoram) of India and the Arakan hills of Burma (now Myanmar) and inhabited by largely Buddhist Chakma tribesmen — were awarded to Pakistan despite the fact that the Muslim population amounted to only three per cent. It is not yet known how Radcliffe was persuaded to award the Chittagong Hill Tracts to Pakistan as there was no official discussion on the matter, and many on the Indian side assumed the CHT would be awarded to India and the Indian tricolour was hoisted at the headquarters of the tracts at Rangamati on 15 August, 1947. Two days later however, the Radcliffe award was announced, and the tricolour was replaced by the crescent-and-star Pakistani flag. In the post-partition period large scale human rights violation became a part of the life of the Chakmas and other tribes of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Sanjoy Hazarika in his “Refugees Within, Refugees Without” has painted a telling picture how being hounded out by the growing incidents of communal violence and the displacement caused by the Kaptai Hydel Power Project, the innocent victims of partition like the Chakmas and Hajongs of the Chittagong Hill Tracts and Mymensingh districts respectively of Pakistan, were forced to migrate and take refuge in Arunachal Pradesh,

Tripura and Mizoram in a number of waves since 1964 and how this created lots of tension in Arunachal Pradesh between the people who claim themselves indigenous and the refugees.[45] The Chakma and Hajong refugees' problem is till today one of the most critical but contemporary problem in the region which has vitiated the society. Partition and its outcome are bound to be multi-angular, particularly from the point of view of the so-called 'indigenous' and 'settlers'. In fact, the refugee problem in the present world is one of the most painful sites which we are to observe particularly after the Second World War. Nobody wants to recognize him or her as refugee or synonym to this. The Partition of India in 1947 resulted in one of the largest and most rapid migrations in human history and, in the words of A.G. Noorani, the Partition ranked, beyond a doubt, "as one of the 10 greatest tragedies in human history". [46]

Not that the attempt was made first by Radcliffe. The story of the first Partition of Bengal in 1905 is well-known. At the outset, British strategy toward Northeast India was:

**** to make sure that the tribals remained separated from the plains people, and the economic interests of the British in the plains were not disturbed;*

**** to ensure that all tribal aspirations were ruthlessly curbed by keeping the bogey of the plains people dangling in their faces; and,*

**** to ensure that the tribal feudal order remained intact, with the paraphernalia of tribal chiefs" etc.[47]*

During the colonial period, Northeast Frontier District, Naga Hills District, Lushai Hills District and North Cachar Hills Subdivision were considered as the excluded areas. The partially excluded areas were the Garo Hills District, Khasi and Jaintia Hills district except Shillong and Mikir Hills district. J.P. Mills served in Assam from 1913, and became Secretary to Sir Robert Reid when he was Governor of Assam. During the

Second World War period, J.P.Mills, Advisor to the Governor of Assam for Tribal Affairs, suggested, three alternatives for the hill areas of the North-East:

- i. the inclusion of all the hills in Assam;
- ii. the exclusion of all the hills from Assam;
- iii. the inclusion of some of the hills in Assam.

Robert Reid, the Governor of Assam (1937-1942), was personally in favour of the second alternative and wanted the formation of an Union of States in the hills of the North-East India and Upper Burma. Robert Reid also stated that

'they (tribals of Northeast India) are not Indians in any sense of the word, neither in origin nor in appearance, nor in habits, nor in outlook and it is by historical accident that they are tagged to Indian province.'

Therefore, the inclusion of the region into Indian Territory can be termed, according to him, as a 'series of historical accident'. [48] In fact, Reid wrote in his memoirs:

"We had thought of setting up some sort of agency to embrace the whole North-East Frontier fringe, and to exclude it from the general run of Indian politics with which it had no affinity" [49]

Known as the Reid Plan, the proposal for a North-Eastern Hills Province fired the imagination of a number of British Administrators [50]

On the eve of Partition, Prof. Reginald Coupland of Cambridge University came out with a suggestion to trifurcate India with a Christian Dominion in NE India. Perhaps, Coupland had a point, because if partition of India was to be done on religious lines, then, he thought that Christians must also assert. Coupland fine-tuned the proposal that developed into what we know as the Coupland's Plan for a 'Crown Colony' under the British Government. [51] His idea did not fructify because the Khasis, Garos and others could not be provoked into rebellion. The late Sir Winston Churchill, then a Prime

Minister of Britain, had approved Sir Robert Reid's plan in principle. But the Labour party, headed by Attlee which came to power after World War II, did not act on it due to multifarious reasons.

The three major irritants at present in Indo-Bangladesh relations are: (i) Insurgents from Northeast India using Bangladesh territory as a sanctuary to launch terrorist campaigns against India. (ii) Cross-border migration from Bangladesh to the bordering states of India. (iii) Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan engaged in Bangladesh in anti-India activities. And all these had its root in the 'Radcliffe Line'

Narratives of the 1947 Partition and its outcome are bound to be multi-angular.

But despite the passage of 60 odd years after the partition, the positive contributions of the 'Partition refugees' to Tripura's over-all economic growth and development have not yet been systematically described or assessed. If the better-off and middle class people from East Pakistan could reconstruct their lives with relative ease in West Bengal, for those belonging to the lower middle class and degraded castes, it was almost impossible and most of them opted for Tripura and the like. 'Partition refugees' in India met much better treatment in the western part of the country, where they became part of the mainstream, while in the east, particularly in Tripura, they languished, struggled hard and radicalized the margins.

From another point of view also, the 'Partition refugees' acted as growth-booster. The hardy peasantry of eastern Bengal reclaimed the undulating terrain in Tripura for wet-rice cultivation that would boost revenues and the State's GNP. The settlement of 'Partition refugees' into this backward region, where large areas of land were lying unexploited, helped as a growth-booster in the short-run. To take only one example from Tripura : In 1945- 46, the total revenue receipts of Tripura were Rs. 40,63,782 only; [52] but in the year 1972- 73, it went up to 217.38 lakhs, which is 5 times [53] the amount of 1945- 46. The 'Partition refugees' were the main suppliers of labour input which is essential for development. The 'Partition refugees' not simply broke the

monotony of the age-old *jhum* economy, but ultimately strengthened the monetization of economic transactions which in itself was a great economic advance. Regarding 'Partition refugees' we have lots of memoirs in Bengali, voices of the victims, fictions, pictures, literary and cultural studies in West Bengal and a powerful writer like Prafulla Chakrabarti on the subject.[54] Unfortunately, in North-East India, this is yet to be done.

By underscoring women-related issues as central to the Partition-narrative, Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta in their edited book offer a social and cultural complement to extant studies on colonial politics and communal violence in Bengal which also altered both the demographic composition and economic profiles of Assam and Tripura.[55] The Partition also wrought other important changes in women's lives so that formerly home-bound non-tribal women frequently emerged as wage earners to support their dispossessed migrant families. Thus the entire problem may be thoroughly surveyed from multi-angular perspectives, so to understand the present trends of social history in North-East India.

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