

Reaction of the People of Surma Valley to transfer of the Valley to Assam (1874)

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0.1. The Issue

When Assam was constituted into a Chief Commissioner's province in 1874 out of the Bengal Presidency the districts of Sylhet and Cachar of the Dacca Division of Bengal were also transferred to the new province. These two districts were for sometimes called Sylhet Division, but finally, the Surma Valley Division after the river which formed the life line of the valley. A natural extension of the Gangetic Bengal, the alluvial valley is separated from Assam by the hill range. In ancient times it formed Srihatta-mandala of Samatata and in circa 11th century AD, the autonomous Srihattadesha of the Deva rulers of Bhatera copper-plates.¹ The people of the valley speak in 'Sylheti' dialect of Bengali.² The reaction of the people to the transfer, which is the central theme of this paper, therefore, was quick and sharp, and a movement for reunion with Bengal intermittently came on the surface till the end of the British rule in 1947.³

0.2 The Antecedents

The question of the formation of Assam as a Chief Commissioner's province, originally suggested by Sir George Campbell in his Orissa Famine Report, was revived by Lord Mayo in his Minute of 11 February 1871 when the report of a spate of Lushai (Mizo) raids in Cachar reached him. The idea was to relieve the over burdened Government of Bengal of some territory which it was unable to supervise and to provide the neglected eastern and northern districts of the presidency with a strong and stable administration. Mayo found enough justification for the transfer of Sylhet and Cachar to the new province. In his opinion, Cachar was as backward as Assam and it had vast agricultural prospects. Two-thirds of the district were still jungle or unsurveyed wastes which unless conducted with constant supervision

would result in some losses to the Government as it had been experienced in Assam. It was also exposed to the raids of the neighbouring hill tribes like Assam and, in fact, the Lushai raids in Cachar in 1871 had prompted the Government of India to reconsider the proposal to establish a Chief Commissionership in the north-east frontier which was left undecided in 1868. Moreover, Assam and Cachar were important tea districts. As regards Sylhet, it was found to be intimately connected with Cachar and closer to the proposed capital (Shillong) of the new province than to Dacca or Calcutta. As a frontier district, liability to Lushai invasions and in tea interests, Sylhet was on the same footing as Cachar. It was of course a permanently settled district and covered by the regulations, including the jurisdiction of the Calcutta High Court, which were in force in Bengal, but it could be 'deregulationised'. In the opinion of Mayo, it was not 'wise to split the tea country' consisting of Assam, Cachar and Sylhet as in tea interests the three districts could hardly be separated from each other.⁵ Another important reason given by the Government was that the surplus revenue of the Surma valley could balance the deficit in the Assam Valley.⁶ To these arguments, Stuart Bayley, Home Secretary to Government of India, later on added that it was desirable to have the laws necessary in tea-districts worked by one agency and that the depots at Dharampasha and Chattak which the steamers enroute for Cachar called on were in Sylhet district.⁷

0.3. The Reaction

The people in Sylhet and Cachar strongly protested against the transfer of their districts from Bengal. As Neogy puts it, "While the official world held divergent views on the question of the creation of Assam Chief Commissionership and the redistribution of districts and divisions, the public opinion of the areas affected was united in condemning the measure. Neither the press nor the people of these areas acquiesced in the decision. Their reaction was quick and profound."⁸ In the Home Department Proceedings we come across at least three memorandums that were submitted by the people of Surma Valley urging upon the Government of India to revise the decision of transferring Sylhet and Cachar to Assam.

The first memorandum was submitted by the Sylhet People's Association to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal. It was signed by more than two thousand inhabitants of Sylhet. They pointed out the rich cultural heritage of this ancient district and its affinity

with the rest of Bengal through the ages. In the British period also the district was governed by the same Principles rules and forms without any distinction with the rest of Bengal. The memorialists feared that with the transfer of the district to Assam, Sylhet shall be administered by the military officers on deputation to civilian posts and in the process, the district shall be deprived of the services of highly trained Judges and Magistrates. It would miss the valuable acts and regulations of the Bengal Council, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, the Bengal Board of Revenue and the Calcutta High Court. All these would not only result in deterioration in the standard of administration but also in social and cultural degradation of the people. Calcutta was the educational and cultural headquarter of Sylhet. The youths of Sylhet were educated in Calcutta, they were familiar only with the arts, sciences and civilization that Calcutta had been generating at the time. The connections with Calcutta shall be snapped by the transfer and a cultural gap with the rest of the Bengalis shall emerge. On the otherhand, there was no communication system or commercial connection between Sylhet and Assam. The memorialists also deprecated the idea of a non-regulated system of administration as it prevailed in Assam or to be called as 'Assamese'.⁹

The people in Sylhet waited on the Lieutenant Governor during his proposed visit to Sylhet in September 1874. They also prepared a memorandum to be handed over to the Governor-General through the Lieutenant Governor. As the visit was ultimately cancelled, the memorandum was sent directly to the Government of India. The memorialists argued against the transfer in the same line as did the Sylhet People's Association and appealed to the Governor-General to abandon the proposed transfer.¹⁰

The third memorandum was submitted to the Government of India by the inhabitants of Cachar. The memorialists pointed out that there was no route between Cachar and Assam, whereas there were regular lines of communication between Cachar and Calcutta. The climate of Assam was insalubrious which the people of Cachar would find difficult to stand during their visits there. Cachar had been under the jurisdiction of the courts presided over by covenanted civil servants, the Calcutta High Court and the Privy Council. As the administration of justice in Assam was in the hands of military officers in charge of civil administration, the transfer of the district to Assam would prove to be detrimental to the interests and welfare of the people since there was a vast difference between the administration of justice by civilians and the same

by military men. There was, according to them, so good reason for depriving them of the protection of the covenanted officers who had so long been presiding over the civil administration of Cachar. The memorialists therefore, appealed to the Governor-General to revise the decision to transfer Cachar to Assam.¹¹

The press also ventilated the public opinion in Surma Valley. The *Hindu Hitoishini*, for example, sternly objected to the transfer of Sylhet and Cachar to Assam and it pointed out that Dacca was within more easy reach of the people of these districts.¹² The *Banga Bandhu* pointed out that in respect of language, manners and customs Sylhet and Cachar substantially differed from Assam and the laws that might be passed for the Assamese will not suit the people of these two districts. In its opinion the Government has acted unwisely in including Sylhet and Cachar in Assam.¹³

0.4. A fait accompli

The reaction of the people of Surma Valley had no impact on the Government as it is evident from the implementation of the scheme. The transfer of Sylhet and Cachar to Assam is an important example of how the British Government ignored the public opinion in India before the national movement in the country could assume an organised character. Lord Northbrook, the Viceroy and Governor-General of India' however, visited Sylhet in September 1874. The memorial submitted by the inhabitants of Sylhet eventually was forwarded to the Secretary of State for India, but the latter turned down the appeal of the memorialists. In its reply the Government assured the people that they will continue to be governed by the Bengal laws and regulations. We reproduce below the text of the latter¹⁴

1. *His Excellency the Governor General in Council directs me to acknowledge through the Government of Bengal receipt of the memorial signed by certain inhabitants of the district of Sylhet against the transfer of the district to Assam. The memorial begins by an allusion to the Bill which has since passed into law, for the transfer of certain powers from the Bengal Government to the Government of India and the impression of the memorialists seems to be that this law will effect some material change in the system under which they have been hitherto administered.*

2. *In reply I am to explain for the information of the memorialists that this law has only given formal completion to a decision which has been passed after long and careful consideration.*

It was recommended by the late Lieutt Governor Sir George Campbell and it has been sanctioned by the Secretary of State after due regard to all the considerations set forth in the memorial under acknowledgement. But neither the transfer of the district nor the passing of an act which formally withdraws the district from jurisdiction of certain authorities in Bengal will make any substantial change in the mode of administering Sylhet. There will certainly be no change whatever in the system of law and judicial procedure under which inhabitants of Sylhet have hitherto lived, nor in the principles which apply throughout Bengal to the settlement and collection of land revenue.

3. *His Excellency the Governor General in Council regrets therefore that he can not accede to the prayer of the memorialists, and I am to request that his honour the Lieutt Governor may be pleased to cause this reply to be communicated to them.*

It has however, to be admitted in this connection that there was no substantial change in the administrative character of Surma Valley districts. The laws and regulations passed by the Bengal Council remained in operation. In fact, the jurisdiction of the Calcutta High Court covered the whole of Assam throughout the British period. The judicial Commissioner of Assam and the judge of Sylhet continued as Civil and Sessions judges of Assam Valley and Surma Valley respectively. These Judges were under the High Court of Calcutta. The executive officers in Assam Valley continued to try civil and criminal cases for sometimes, but in Surma Valley separate judicial staff was retained as they were during Bengal Administration. The help of assessors was taken by the judicial officers in Assam Valley, but in Surma Valley the Jury System prevailed. The land revenue systems also by the large remained unaffected,¹⁵

0.5. Summing-up

The reaction of the people of Surma Valley to the transfer of their area to Assam was a manifestation of the level of political consciousness and an awareness of their identity and their cultural and linguistic affinity with Bengal. Situated in the north-east corner of Bengal, this tiny valley could as well be described as Ishan Banga (or North-East Bengal) in geographical context, although the state formation processes in the region and the ethnic, linguistic and cultural traits of the population had made it almost inseparable from South-East Bengal. This commonality of heritage prompted the people to react spontaneously to the separ-

tion. They could realise the merit of modern system of administration governed by acts and regulations, they appreciated the spirit of New India that was born in Calcutta and they shared the growing national sentiment in the country.

In the context of a frontier region like the Surma Valley, the growth of public opinion in the area at that point of time is indeed noteworthy. Sylhet passed under the British with the rest of Bengal after the battle of Plassey and by 1874 there were at least five high schools in the district, but the Cachar portion of the valley was annexed in 1832 and the first school there was established only in 1863. There was not a single college in the valley before the establishment of the M. C. College at Sylhet in 1892. Despite these, the intelligentsia seemed to be at par with the rest of Bengal. And this is because irrespective of the political status of the area the youths in the Surma Valley even in earlier times received education in important centres of learning in Bengal. By 1874 a good number of youths had received modern higher education in Calcutta and many more were studying in various colleges there. They constituted the emerging middle class in the valley that voiced the public grievances.

On the transfer issue the people decided to petition the government which was the standard method of middle class movement in the country in 10th century. The mass mobilisation or agitational approach was not expected at that stage. Nevertheless, the formation of the Sylhet People's Association which in all probability was organised to protest against the transfer had introduced the element of organisational politics in public life.

The petition was no doubt turned down by the Government of India, but the public reaction had succeeded in impelling the the Governor General of India to extend in writing some guarantees regarding identity and status. The government abandoned its original plan of deregulationising Sylhet and keeping Assam outside the jurisdiction of Calcutta High. In fact, the transfer made no impact at the local level. Bengali continued to be the medium of education and the language of the court. The schools and colleges were affiliated to the Calcutta University. As a result, the social and cultural ties with Bengal could not be snapped by the transfer. The Surma Valley had a common response with the rest of Bengal to the Indian national movement. The revolutionary groups of Bengal Jugantar Party and Anusilan Samiti had a strong net work in the valley. The Assam Association (1903-1921) and the Surma Valley Political Conference (1906-1932) spearheaded

agitations over local problems of Assam Valley and Surma Valley respectively. Cachar and Sylhet district congress committees were affiliated to Bengal Provincial Congress Committee till 1947, although the rest of Assam had Assam Provincial Congress Committee.

Notes & Rferences

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