

Drawing a line and division of identities through the Sylhet referendum

The faithful day was on 6 July 1947 which changed the course of history in the Northeast of India, as new boundaries were drawn by our erstwhile colonial masters. It was the referendum announced by Lord Mountbatten which would decide the faith of Sylhet. Let us rewind and understand the same through this commentary. It was in 1874 that the British conjoined the Bengali speaking Sylhet with the largely Assamese speaking Hindu population of Assam to make the region economically viable and stable. Sylhet was a source of cheap labour for the British to increase production in the tea plantations. However, it was also home to some of the best minds in the region who lived in the larger urban centres across the state of Assam. The referendum was an affair that was organized in haste with the vested interests of the British. After the referendum, the identity of the region of Sylhet was rather thrown into disarray.

Longing for a home

The Sylheti's longed for a homeland that they would call their own, but the region was now being absorbed into an alien country for the Bengali Hindus, who didn't share cultural ties with the Bengalis on the other side. There was no Sylhet carved on the Indian side of the border for them, following riots in East Pakistan there was an exodus of Hindus from East Pakistan to Assam. A majority of them stayed on in the Barak Valley, while others started to disseminate across the region. The Sylheti's slowly started amalgamating with greater Assam but a part of their imagination was still closely tied to their lost homeland whose very existence had been wiped out. What remained on the side of Assam was a land of three thanas-which came to be known as Karimganj in the Cachar District located on the banks of the Barak River.

The Sylheti's like any of the uprooted communities remained closely tied to that strand of a homeland which was now long lost in time but was kept alive through deeply moving personal narratives and tales which were passed down from one generation to the next. The result of the referendum was announced on 14 July over the radio. A total of 2,39,619 votes were cast in favour of joining East Pakistan while the remaining 1,84,401 votes were cast to remain as a part of Assam, India.

The Government of Assam played an integral role in settling the uprooted Sylheti's across the state, but a major chunk of the burden fell on the Barak Valley which had a significant Sylheti speaking population. With time, the Bengali Hindus started to settle down in the Brahmaputra Valley and started to take up jobs in the urban centres.

The brewing discontent

There was another storm that was ravaging somewhere around the same time. The main point of the whole conflict was the adoption of Assamese as an official language of the state during the 1960s which would lead to the six-year-long Assam movement (1979-85), whose tremors can still be felt in the region. The prime motive of the movement was to deport illegal Bangladeshi immigrants who had infiltrated the region fuelling a steep change in the demographics of the state.

Let us look at an excerpt from a poem by Hemanga Biswas, a political activist, poet and composer who rekindles the nostalgia for a lost land through his words here:

"Habibganj-er gang-cheelaamishonyedilamura

... Dana bhaingyaporlamaami Koilkata-r upor

Tomraamay chino ni? Tomraamay chino ni?"

(A seagull from Habibganj, I flew to the skies above

With broken wings, I fell on top of Calcutta

Do you all know me? Do you all know me?)

The poignant words tell a story of separation, an innate quest to make it back to the lost homeland which now only remains a part of the local folklore. The incessant violence during the period would in turn lead to mass migration from Assam to the nearby state of West Bengal, with several families being doubly displaced amidst the whole crisis.

The nostalgia and the present

Stories of the past have always carried a strong nostalgia that the younger generations can feel in the words of their ancestors. Communities like that of the Sylheti's always had an added responsibility to reaffirm their identities in the places they tried to settle in and start a new lease of life. The overlapping of Assamese and Bengali cultures became the destiny of Assam which has been an epicentre of identarian turmoil even in recent times.

Manjusha Datta's father aptly expresses these crisscrossing lines of identity with simplicity: "By nationality, we are Indians; by domicile we are Assamese; by descent we are Bengalis." Amidst these two proud identities, there will always remain certain lines of friction that have been used time and again by political leaders to fuel a vicious cycle of hatred. It would be wrong to characterize the whole situation as an 'insider' vs 'outsider' debate. Rather, I would end this piece by saying that the entire situation is more like a potpourri where culture, race and identities intersect in ways that remain to be comprehended. To look at the question, where are we heading to? Well, no one has an answer to that as the state of Assam seems to be descending into the well

of polarization, with identarian violence coming to the forefront and new battle-lines being drawn in the fragile underbelly of the region marred by ethno-nationalistic sentiments.