

Event, Memory and Lore: Anecdotal History of Partition in Assam

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Abstract

Political history of Partition of India in 1947 is well-documented by historians. However, the grass root politics and the 'victimhood' of a number of communities affected by the Partition are still not fully explored. The scholarly moves to write alternative History based on individual memory and family experience, aided by the technological revolution have opened up multiple narratives of the partition of Assam and its aftermath. Here in northeast India the Partition is not just a History, but a lived story, which registers its presence in contemporary politics through songs, poems, rhymes and anecdotes related to transfer of power in Assam. These have remained hidden from mainstream partition scholarship. This paper seeks to attempt an anecdotal history of the partition in Assam and the Sylhet Referendum, which was a part of this Partition process.

Keywords: sylhet, partition, referendum, muslim league, congress.

Introduction

Despite the passage of more than sixty five years since the partition of India, the politics that Partition generated continues to be alive in Assam even today. Although the partition continues to be relevant to Assam to this day, it remains a marginally researched area within India's Partition historiography. In recent years there have been some attempts to engage with it¹, but the study of the Sylhet Referendum, the event around which partition in Assam was constructed, has primarily been treated from the perspective of political history and refugee studies.² It is time History writing moved beyond the confines of political history. Over the years, the historians have consciously engaged in finding common areas of interest with their cognate disciplines to

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construct a comprehensive picture of historical events. Use of anecdotes and stories ‘as a narration of a singular event’, as Joel Fineman defines in his ‘History of the Anecdote’³, has evolved as a tool and a source of history as anecdotes are ‘one and the same time literary and real’. It is for its ‘real’ character that anecdotes are of immense significance to the historians. Anecdotes, as Homi Bhaba points out, is real as it is a part of a community memory till the present, that recovers the moment of ‘angst’ and it is anxiety that ‘links us to the memory of the past while we struggle to choose a path through the ambiguous history of the present.’⁴ Partition in Assam can be an interesting case study to locate this interface between memory and history with anecdotes, songs, poems and slogans coming together to contribute to a hitherto missing alternative history of the event.

The Event

Sylhet, a district of colonial Assam, was predominantly a Bengali speaking area. It was earlier a part of Bengal which had been partitioned and merged with Assam in 1874. Since then, it continued to be a part of the province of Assam till the partition of 1947. When negotiations began to partition the Indian subcontinent between the colonial state on the one hand and the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League on the other, to create India and Pakistan, the colonial government in its wisdom decided to partition Punjab and Bengal and hold a referendum in the *Mussalman* majority district of Sylhet in Assam⁵ to decide whether it would join the predominantly Muslim state of Pakistan or continue to be a part of Assam and India. Thus, despite being part of a larger ‘non-Mussalman’ majority province Assam, the district of Sylhet was drawn into the vortex of Partition politics and campaigns. When Lord Mountbatten announced the decision of the colonial government to organize a referendum in the district of Sylhet on the 3rd of June, 1947 the contending parties- the Congress, the Communists and Jamiat-ul-ulama- i- Hind on the one side and the Muslim League and the Jamiat-i-Islami on the other jumped into the campaign. It was the battle between these contending groups which decided Sylhet’s fate after 14th of August 1947. While the first group was in favour of Sylhet remaining in India, the second was in favour of Sylhet joining Pakistan. Aggressive campaigns accompanied by rhetorical slogans rent the air as the days of the referendum drew close. Contrary to most official narratives⁶, the referendum campaign had a vibrant cultural

dimension which is reflected in songs, poems and slogans steeped in the unique sense of history, culture and geography of the people of Sylhet. Thus, while the first group came up with the slogan such as

*Sri Choitanyo o Shah Jalaler Bhumi
Pakistan na banaiyo tumi* ⁷

the other group also retorted in verse as,

*...Haati diya Majjid Bhanglo
Gambujer Chin Rakhlo Naa
Aamra to Bhai Asham e Thakbo Naa...* ⁸

By 1947, the Pakistan Movement had become steeped in communal rhetoric with religious idioms becoming an important part of the campaign. When Muslim League leaders arrived in Sylhet from Bengal, they were determined to espouse and establish the case for Pakistan invoking religion. One of them even spoke to the press stating that

...our cause so noble so Allah will be with us and so the first and the last battle for Pakistan will be fought at Sylhet.⁹

The tussle between the two opposing groups was not an even battle. The contest was keen and the battle lines were clearly drawn. But there was little doubt in minds of people on the field that the Muslim League had an upper hand in this battle in terms of men, money and material support.¹⁰ Even the colonial officials shared this perception.¹¹ It was therefore little surprise that while the Congress-Communist-Jamiyati volunteers spared no effort at getting their message across to the voters of the Referendum, their message was lost in the hustle-bustle of the campaign on most occasions. Though the colonial official perception admitted that the demography of the District was overwhelmingly against the Congress led combine, the Congress led group still held on to the hope that the referendum could be won by them by ensuring the total turnout of the Hindu voters and swinging the votes of a substantial section of the Mussalmans who had voted in favour of the Congress in the elections of 1946. But despite the efforts of the Congress and the Anti Partition campaigners, the referendum resulted in the victory of the Pro-Partition group led by the Muslim League. The Referendum was mired in an enormous amount of violence and intimidation. As against 15,000 Muslim League volunteers who had moved into the interiors of the district,¹²well

in time for the Referendum. As the Referendum Commissioner's Report pointed out, "the national guards penetrated into the remotest villages and created panic in the minds of non-Muslim villagers".¹³ The administration was extremely apprehensive about the situation and there could be little doubt that the administration was hopelessly unprepared to meet the situation. A report sent to the Viceroy by the Governor in the end of May, pointed out that "present armed strength at disposal of the province will not be sufficient to deal with the situation effectively. This amounts to 2850 armed police including Rail Force and 5 Battalions i.e. 62 platoons of Assam Rifles."¹⁴ The report was honest in admitting that the security was inadequate and there was apprehension of "widespread loss of life and destruction of property."¹⁵

With all these serious shortcomings Sylhet moved into the Referendum on the 6th and 7th of July, 1947. There was rampant cases of violence and intimidation and the Referendum Commissioner in his report honestly reported 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..."¹⁶ Though the official report tried to downplay 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."¹⁷ While disputes arose on the extent of the violence and intimidation during the Sylhet Referendum between the colonial officials on the one hand and the political leaders and activists of the Congress and the Muslim League on the other, the results of the referendum came to be notified by the Colonial Government.¹⁸ The Viceroy telegraphed the report of the Referendum Commissioner to the Government in London.¹⁹ But there was no doubt that there were feedback of violence and intimidation indulged in by the League volunteers which probably necessitated the intervention of the security forces.²⁰ 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. An IB Report of the incident sent to the Secretary of State reported, "Referendum in Sylhet completed fairly peacefully but fire opened on riotous Moslem crowd in South Sylhet July 7th: one killed three wounded. Leaguers attacked Congress workers near Sylhet twelve injured of whom eight taken to hospital (sic)"²¹ The firing on the 7th July let loose a reign of

terror at Sylhet on the Hindu population as the Muslim League supporters came out on the streets in retribution. The firing on the Muslim League supporters at Amtiol became the metamorphic moment of Sylhet partition which transformed the lives of the upper-caste and affluent Hindus who were forced to migrate to India.

The Memory and the Gupta Family

Ever since the publication of *The Other Side of Silence*²², historical narratives of partition of India have never been the same. Memory has acquired acceptance²³ and legitimacy as a corroborated source of historical information. It is this advantage that was on my mind as I decided to explore the possibility of recovering the story of the Sylhet Referendum and its violent interludes from the memory of those who had experienced and witnessed the turn of events during the Referendum in Sylhet. My interest in the project of re-narrativization began with my interaction with my uncle Bhupendra Kumar Bhattacharyaa, at Guwahati, who first informed me of the rhyme about Jitu Gupta that I deal with in this narrative in the third section called 'The Lore'. "I don't remember much about the referendum now except the four lines", is what he told me when he shared the rhyme with me. "It became very popular as the story of the Amtoil firing spread like wild fire across south Sylhet and Maulvi Bazar", is what he added to his earlier statement as a rider. What started as a family discussion got critical as I got familiar with Jitu Gupta and Sudhir Choudhury the two protagonists of my uncle's narratives. Jitu Gupta was the brother of Dakshina Ranjan, a prominent Congress man and the *mirasdar*²⁴ of Alowa, who went to Amtoil on the 6th of July and Sudhir Choudhury was the police officer who fired on the crowd at Amtoil on the 7th respectively. I chanced an interaction with the family members of these two protagonists of my narrative and it changed the way I looked at the referendum and its narratives. It is a coincidence of sorts that I had an occasion to meet Tapas Kumar Gupta, the son of Dakshina Ranjan Gupta, and nephew of Jitu Gupta at Delhi and then Shrimati Bani Choudhuri, wife of Late Sudhir Choudhury, the Assistant Commandant of the Syl Force²⁵ at Shillong.

As the Sylhet Referendum was formally announced, Dakshina Ranjan Gupta, a prominent Congress legislator from Sylhet, and also the *mirasdar* of Alowa in Sylhet began to take an important role in the campaign. In the

Congress campaign he was not alone. There were many other Congress leaders of the district, prominent being Basanta Das, Ananga Mohon Das and Brojendra Choudhury with whom he had collaborated since the days of the anti-colonial struggle launched by Mahatma Gandhi.²⁶ But the Referendum Campaign was unique. Each side was aware of the special nature of the campaign. The Congress led mobilization took to rallies, street corner meetings, door to door campaign, sloganeering, poster campaigns and even offering bribes in some cases²⁷ (see Pranesh Das Memoirs). Desperate times probably called for desperate measures and for the *Sylhetis*, as the people of Sylhet were colloquially referred to in Bengali society, it was a battle of their lives.²⁸ The situation was even more critical for the upper-caste Hindus as they were apprehensive of becoming citizens of Pakistan, which was conceived as an Islamic state.²⁹ When each and every Sylheti were involved in this life-and-death battle, it was not a surprise that Dakshina Ranjan Gupta, was almost “immersed in the struggle”.³⁰ He had been an MLA from Maulvi Bazar during the 1936 elections and it rankled him that when all other Hindus were part of the campaign, some of his own family members who did not share his enthusiasm. One of them was his own brother Jitendra or ‘Jitu’ as he was called in close circles.

“My father was extremely critical of my uncle and often chided him for his dis-interest in the Referendum campaign” is what Tapas Kumar Gupta told me at his apartment at Delhi, as I sat to talk with him about his childhood. Tapas Gupta continued to narrate, “My father was totally involved in it and my uncle’s lack of initiative and enthusiasm irritated him to the point of anger.”³¹ This conflict at Dakshina Ranjan’s home continued unabated, where the elder brother chided the younger and the younger brother showed open disregard of such fraternal admonition. But that day of July was a different day. ‘Probably the taunts hit home and the chastisement worked.’³² Something stirred inside Jitendra Gupta and like a man moved by resolve and purpose he moved into the village of Amtoil, trying to make his own silent contribution in this struggle for Sylhet in the Referendum. Little did he know that he was about to become a small, yet immortal part of this Referendum campaign history and the lore that emerged from it.

It was the most trying of times for the people of the district on the days of the Sylhet Referendum and the inclement weather made the

situation no easier. It was surely not a day, when one, would, in normal circumstances, step out of the house; and yet Jitendra Gupta did. Moving out of his ancestral country home at Alowa, he gradually moved towards Amtoil, a village where his family held substantial holdings in land. The visit was to the home of a trusted Mussalman Mondol³³, who had been much loyal to the Gupta family, a family of influential mirasdars, in Sylhet. He felt that the Mondol, as he had always been in the days of the past,³⁴ be receptive to the message that he carried in view of their long familial ties.

Sylhet was humming with activity. Contending parties were engaged in intensive surge that thousands of Sylhetis, who were working in various organizations outside Sylhet streamed into the district to exercise their franchise in the Referendum. Large meetings were being addressed and the contending parties made desperate attempts to convince the voters to toe their line of thought.³⁵ It was clear that the Congress could not win the referendum by Hindu votes alone and knew that if they had to tilt the scales in their favour they would have to secure Muslim support.³⁶ It is to secure this Muslim support that Jitendra Gupta, moved out of his house, on that fateful morning, drenched in incessant rain, yet oblivious of his discomfort.³⁷ He went to the house of the Mussalman Mondol, which was about two miles from his house, to convince him to allow the Hindus to cast their vote in the referendum. This visit had become imperative in view of the fact that the Muslim League volunteers and National guards from outside the province of Assam had penetrated into the remotest villages of the district.³⁸ It was known that every vote was crucial in the Referendum and the Muslim League volunteers who were campaigning in the interiors of the district of Sylhet to ensure victory for Pakistan in the referendum perceived every non-Muslim as their natural opponent. Amtoil was one such village which had come under League control. Abhijit Choudhury, a retired college teacher in Shillong summed up the tenor of the age when he told me that, "My teacher Dr. Makhan Kar, who was a Congress volunteer at Amtoil had to run for his life when he was chased by League National Guards with *daos*³⁹ there and could save his life only by jumping over a ditch."⁴⁰

Despite the tense situation that prevailed in the village, Jitendra Gupta went and tried the best to convince the Mussalman Mondol to allow the Hindu villagers to vote, without realizing that by then Mondol

was already won over into the League creed. Jitendra Gupta's pleas were of no avail and Mondol, in polite firmness told Jitendra alias Jitu Gupta to leave Amtoil, if he wanted to preserve his honour intact. Recollecting the incident, Tapas Gupta told, "My uncle refused to agree to this proposal and an animated argument ensued."⁴¹ As the dawn progressed into morning, the League volunteers began to attack the Hindu villagers and encircled them, in order to stop them from voting. When the news reached Kumud Choudhury, the IPS officer in charge of Maulvi Bazar, he contacted the then Asst. Commandant of the Syl force, Sudhir Choudhury to rush to Amtoil village and control the situation. Writing about the incident at p. 70-72 in his unpublished memoir *Smriti Charane – Judhouttor Shimanta*,⁴² Shri Sudhir Choudhury noted that,

Reaching Maulvi Bazar town I received a handwritten instruction from a senior officer directing me to go to Amtoil village, which was located on the village path leading to the Alowa village voting centre. It was reported that about four hundred Hindu men and women were held captive by armed Muslim League volunteer guards and their lives were in danger. I was given the responsibility to free these villagers and escort them to the voting station.

At that moment, I was very tired and I had no armed personnel, whom I could take along with me. Yet, accompanied by an orderly and three other personnel, on my vehicle, I immediately left for Amtoil. We took with us a rifle each. I was wearing the olive green uniform of the Rail force. The rice stalks in the paddy fields in Amtoil were at least as tall as our waist and it was submerged in water which was as high as our knees. I could see armed League volunteers guarding the field, from far but no other people could be seen. The village guard himself came forward and informed us that about four hundred Hindu men and women were held captive within the watery paddy field and some of the women were accompanied by their infant children. For us there was no scope for retreat. As we advanced, the village guard alerted villagers about our presence. We were identified as the military personnel. Feeling reassured, four hundred men and women who had been held captive by the Muslim League volunteers stood up. In response the armed League volunteers became aggressive and belligerent. As our presence became obvious, the Hindu crowd began to feel emboldened to move towards the voting station. It was this act that stirred the League guards into almost madness and they began to advance towards us. It is then that I realized that these guards were about thousand in strength. There was shouting all around. The armed

Muslim League Volunteers advanced menacingly and began to hurl their sharp spears at us. The terrorized Hindu villagers began to run in various directions and I was stuck in a very critical situation. In this dangerous situation, I was constrained to open fire on the violent League volunteers in self defence. As a result one League armed guard was killed and another was critically injured. In this confusion about half of the Hindu voters ran back home and we were able to escort only about two hundred and fifty voters to the polling station.⁴³

The Lore

The story that developed around the police firing at Amtoil however was very different from what had really taken place. It was a combination of apparently two unrelated developments. While one incident was the visit of Jitendra Gupta to Amtiol on the first day of voting during the Sylhet Referendum and the other was the firing “opened on riotous Moslem crowd in South Sylhet July 7th” which was the second day of the Referendum.⁴⁴ Though the two incidents had no apparent connection, yet they were combined by the Muslim League volunteers as propaganda in their violent⁴⁵ referendum campaign. Discussing the same Tapash Gupta, Jitu Gupta’s nephew emphatically pointed out that, “when the firing took place my uncle Jitendra Gupta was back home, nowhere in the scene.”⁴⁶ But despite his absence, the League goons asserted that it was Jitendra Gupta who had sent the army to counter them. When the firing resulted in the death of League guard, the League volunteers came out with a rhyme, which was as follows:

*Alowar Zamidar
Jitu Chura Naam Taar
Aamtoile gulli koira
Koirlo Atyachar.*⁴⁷

Jitendra Gupta had only a fleeting presence in Amtoil on that fateful day. Yet, when one League volunteer was felled by Syl Force bullet, the League lost no time in blaming him for the incident. While the League lost little time to forget its own vandalism, it instantly vilified the Zamidar family of Alowa. Suffixing a derogatory word, ‘*chura*’⁴⁸ to Jitendra Gupta’s name was the first step in that direction. Jitendra Gupta or Jitu passed into the hall of infamy in the League annals, though in the admission of the officer who opened fire, Jitu Gupta was never the cause of it. The entry

of Jitu Gupta into League lore was unusually fast, and the League spared no effort to forget or forgive the Gupta family. Jitu Gupta's presence early in the day at Amtoil was suffice for the League to build an emotive and oppressive anti-Hindu and anti Zamindar campaign at Maulvi Bazar. Jitu Gupta's background as a scion of the Zamindar family of Alowa provided fodder for the League's anti-Hindu propaganda.

This rhyme was used as intelligently crafted as an effective weapon to instigate the Muslim League supporters into a state of violence. The hysteria that followed the incident of police firing at Amtoil prevented the Muslim people at large from knowing the truth. They were on a war path. The League volunteers began to parade the town with the body of their dead comrade and their target was the Gupta family. Soon the crowd came down near the house of the Guptas at Alowa and began to raise slogans calling for the death of Jitu Gupta's brother, the head of the Gupta family, Dakhina Ranjan Gupta. 'Dakhina Guptar matha chai,⁴⁹ or we want the head of Dakhina Gupta, was one of the slogans raised by the agitated crowd. Although the situation was brought under control, the incident was never forgotten. When East Pakistan came into being, Jitu Gupta was charged with murder, supposedly for his role in the Amtoil firing. All these harassments forced Jitu Gupta to migrate to Karimganj, which after partition of 1947 became a part of India where he was soon forgotten, save his family and friends.

As Assam, along with Punjab and Bengal came to be partitioned in 1947, the district of Sylhet, save for only three and a half *Thanas* became a part of East Pakistan. What followed partition of Sylhet was a sustained communal campaign by the Muslim League volunteers at Sylhet to reinforce the Islamic character of the new state in the district as well. Hindus, who were identified as the 'other' were violently uprooted from Sylhet and most of these displaced found their way to India.⁵⁰ Over the years, as the post colonial state in India began to resist the rehabilitation of the displaced from East Pakistan, these displaced began to come out with details of their experiences in East Pakistan which forced them to leave their ancestral home and hearth. Anecdotes as the one surrounding the Gupta family became the texts around which narratives of Hindu post-colonial experiences in East Pakistan and their eventual uprooting came to be constructed. For the upper caste Hindu displaced from Sylhet, this incident at Amtoil transformed Jitendra Gupta from a reticent campaigner

of the Referendum into an icon within the referendum lores preserved among of the Hindu displaced. Though official reports were almost dismissive about this incident at Amtoil as single inconsequential event with one report observing that, "...as luck would have it there was only one case of opening fire to disperse mobs. This was actually done by Railforce..,"⁵¹ the incident continued to resonate among the articulate and upper caste displaced Hindus of Sylhet. The name of Jitendra Gupta, though never mentioned even once in the History of the Referendum, has stuck a deep chord in the minds of the people who were displaced from Maulvi Bazar in particular and Sylhet in general.⁵²

Many of the displaced Hindus of Maulvi Bazar often began their reminiscences about the referendum with this rhyme,⁵³ in which Jitu Gupta emerged unwillingly as a key player in Referendum politics and rhetoric. This song came to be used as a call given by the League to their supporters to unleash a wave of anti-Hindu vendetta in Sylhet. In Sylhet, where the Hindus constituted a major section of the Landlords, post-partition communal politics combined class conflict with religion to increase adversity for the Hindu landed elite.⁵⁴ 'Jitu Gupta' was easily identified with his class the 'landlords' or 'zamindars' who were accused of indulging in torture or 'atyachar' of their Mussalman opponents. The victim of Amtoil firing became a metaphor around whose death the Mussalman mass consciousness could be galvanized during the closing days of the Pakistan campaign. The result of such mobilization was violence, threat and harassment of the Hindus, leading to the displacement of about half a million from Sylhet alone.

This incident thus became transfixed in the minds of the displaced upper caste Hindus who recited this rhyme to highlight their plight in Eastern Pakistan especially Sylhet. Though never a part of historical truth, Jitu Gupta's name became etched in the popular culture that developed around the Sylhet Referendum and within Sylhetis displaced psyche. For a community who lost their land and remained endangered as 'outsiders' in the North East Indian states which played reluctant hosts to them, such tales linked them to their passage from their 'desh' Sylhet to 'Bharat'⁵⁵ While the Sylheti found himself marginalized in post-colonial Assam, such songs and tales became identified with his beleaguered identity. Anecdotes and rhymes became instruments by which the Sylheti could transmit the glory of his past and wretched condition of the present to his subsequent

generations. Faced with the prospect of continuous interrogation about his refugee-ness, the Sylheti is probably forced to dig deep into his community memory to justify his migration from his native land, in which tales as the one of Jitu Gupta become indispensable. Songs travel through word of mouth from country to country. While records of the Referendum were not enough to highlight its significance in the history of transfer of power in India, songs such as the one on Jitu Gupta helped to revive the memory of the referendum among the Sylheti displaced even today. Despite its absence in official records, Jitu Gupta and his journey to Amtoil on the fateful day of the Referendum had become an indispensable part of an Referendum story that survive among the Sylheti refugee survivors of the Referendum of 1947.

Conclusion

It is through anecdotes, rhymes and such other markers of popular culture that historical events become the source for community folklore. The exact details of the historical events however become submerged under the weight of new folk narratives that would emerge around the historical incident. The causality that historians search would fade into irrelevance and the future generations would often be guided by ‘constructed causalities’ that would be built up around the event to give it a folk texture. Passage of time would ensure that the history written by practicing historians would display a marked disjoint with the tales of events as preserved in the ‘archives’ of popular memory. The forms that ‘historical facts’ take often crystallize in folk narrative to challenge the ‘official vision of historical events’ itself. Often folklore as a source of information becomes a critical component of explanatory notes that emerged about a community history and identity formation and transformation at a moment of crises. Thus, for the Muslim League and Mussalmans of Sylhet, Jitu Gupta was a villain around whom the community response in the Referendum and post Referendum days could be constructed. For the Hindu Refugees, Jitu Gupta was the ‘metaphorical’ explanation for the community’s fate in Sylhet during the Referendum and flight from Sylhet after 1947.

Historical events get transformed into lore in a particular way, for a particular community as a response to a community’s experience at different points of time. Events critical to a community identity or that which shapes the communities’ consciousness and stirs its sentiment gets

transmitted into the future through the instrument of folklores. While the minute details of history fades into oblivion, the narratives about it transform themselves into folklore to acquire immortality for community instruction and education, long after the incident had occurred. In this transformation of history to lore, the event itself is passed on as on instructive capsule for the community and those who come in contact with it. This story of Jitu Gupta is a typical lore that tries to explore the problems of Sylheti upper caste Hindu identity and challenges faced by the Sylheti Hindu upper castes in the trying days of partition of India. It is also interesting to see how such anecdotes gets transformed to lore to construct communal consciousness and gets transmitted in varied forms from generation to generation.

Notes and References

- 1 Discussion on partition and its impact can be seen in works such as Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*, New Delhi, 2007; Joshodhara Bagchi and Subho Ranjan Das Gupta (eds.), *The Trauma and the Triumph Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, Gargi Chakraborty, *Coming out of Partition: Refugee women of Bengal*, Sujit Choudhury's 'God Sent Opportunity', *Seminar*, No. 510, 2002, B. Dutta, 'Forgotten Land, Forsaken People' in *Special issue of IUP Journal of History and Culture*, Vol IV, No. 3; B. Dutta, (2013), 'Violent Parting: Recovering the history of violence in Sylhet on Partition and after, (1947-1950)', *Heritage*, Vol.IV:I, 20-36.
- 2 Bidyut Chakraborty, The 'Hut' and the 'Axe': The Sylhet Referendum, in *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 39:317, 2002; Anindita Dasgupta, 'Denial and Resistance: Sylheti Partition 'Refugees' in Assam', in *Contemporary South Asia*, 10:3, 2001.
- 3 Joel Fineman, 'The History of an Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction' in H. Aram Veesser (ed.), *The New Historicism*, Routledge, London, 1989.
- 4 Homi Bhaba, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 2004, p. xix.
- 5 According to the *Census of Assam*, 1941, the district of Sylhet had a population of 31,16,602 persons. Of this population, 18,92,117 (60.71%) were Muslims and 11,49,514 (36.88%) were Hindus. 69,907 persons were Tribals (2.24%).
- 6 Private Secretary to the Viceroy Papers acc. No. 3471, National Archives of India, New Delhi, Mount Batten Papers, National Archives of India, New Delhi (hereafter referred to as N.A.I)

- 7 Loosely translated as ‘Do not make the land of Chaitaniya and Shah Jalal into the state of Pakistan’ (free translation mine)
- 8 Loosely translated as ‘they have broken down our mosques with elephants, removed all traces of minarets, we will not live in Assam anymore.’ (free translation mine).
- 9 *Star of India*, 4th July, 1947, N.M.M.L.
- 10 While the central leadership of the Congress had already conceded to the idea of creation of Pakistan and were reconciled to it, the provincial leadership of the Congress party in the Brahmaputra Valley were not too keen to retain the predominantly Bengali speaking Sylhet District in Assam once partition had been agreed to. The Assamese leaders were clear, even in 1946 that they were willing to part with Sylhet and Cachar, the two Bengali speaking districts to East Bengal. This can be seen in the report of the Viceroy Wavell and his meeting with Gopinath Bordoloi, the Premier of Assam in his Journal edited by Penderel Moon. See Penderel Moon, Wavell, *The Viceroy’s Journal*, Oxford University Press, London, 1973.
- 11 Annexure C to Referendum Commissioner’s report on the Sylhet Referendum in Private Secretary to the Viceroy Papers acc. No. 3471, National Archives of India, New Delhi.
- 12 *Star of India*, July 8th, 1947, NMML
- 13 Referendum Commissioner’s Report, Mountbatten Papers, Acc No. 5123
- 14 Mountbatten Papers, Acc No. 5123, NAI
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Referendum Commissioner’s Report, *op.cit.*
- 17 Annexure C, Referendum Commissioner’s Report, *op.cit.*
- 18 IOR R/3/1/158 ‘Referendum in Sylhet’ Jun-Aug 1947
- 19 Mountbatten Papers, Acc No. 5123 also see IOR R/3/1/158 ‘Referendum in Sylhet’ Jun-Aug 1947
- 20 The details of this incident is there in Political History of Assam, File No. 169, ASA and in the unpublished memoirs (written in Bengali) of Late Sudhir Choudhury who led the police team that fired in Amtiol entitled *Smriti Charane – Judhho Uttor Shimanta*.
- 21 Political History of Assam, File No. 169, ASA.
- 22 Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, Penguin, 1998.

- 23 For details see Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004. Also see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays In The Wake Of Subaltern Studies*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2002.
- 24 A *mirasdar* is a hereditary rent collector of a designated area in Permanent Settlement Areas. He is an intermediary between the Colonial state and the peasant cultivators in his area.
- 25 Syl Force was a temporary police force which was constituted by the Central Government to oversee the Sylhet Referendum in 1947.
- 26 My interface with Tapash Gupta. 4th June, 2009 at New Delhi
- 27 Pranesh Das Memoirs ‘Smarane Manene’ p. 75.
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 The situation for the Hindu backward caste leaders was different. Led by the backward caste leader Jogendra Nath Mondal, they came out to support Pakistan. They looked at Pakistan as a deliverance from upper caste hegemony. For details see IOR/3/1/158.
- 30 Tapash Gupta, *op.cit.*
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 A Mondol is a village level revenue official engaged with the measurement and assessment of the land and revenue.
- 34 My interface with Shri Tapash Kumar Gupta, Nephew of Jitendra Gupta and son of Shri Dakhina Ranjan Gupta on the 4th of June 2009 at New Delhi.
- 35 Dawn dated 2nd July, 1947, N.M.M.L.
- 36 Pranesh Das, *op.cit.*
- 37 Tapash Gupta, *op.cit.*
- 38 IOR R/3/1/158 also see Private Secretary to the Viceroy Papers, Acc. No. 3471, N.A.I.
- 39 Dao is a country made sharp long chopper.
- 40 Recollected Shri Abhijit Choudhury during the writers interface with him, at Shillong on 13th Aug., 2009.

- 41 Tapash Gupta, *op.cit.*
- 42 Sudhir Choudhury's memoirs which are as yet unpublished which, the writer was give access by Sudhir Choudhury's family.
- 43 *Ibid.*
- 44 Telegram from Chief Secretary, Assam to the Secretary of State for India, London, IOR R/3/1/158.
- 45 The violent character of the League Campaign and its contrast with the timid and disorganized anti-partition campaign led by the Congress was discussed among colonial officials themselves. For details see IOR R/3/1/158.
- 46 Tapash Gupta, *op.cit*
- 47 This song loosely translated would mean The Zamindar of Alowa by the name of Jitu Chura committed atrocities by firing a gun at Amtiol.(free translation mine).
- 48 The word is used in Sylhet as an appellation for a thief or someone who had entered a house or territory surreptitiously or without authorization.
- 49 My interface with Tapash Gupta, *op.cit.*
- 50 For details of this violent post partition campaign in Sylhet see B. Dutta, (2013), 'Violent Parting: Recovering the history of violence in Sylhet on Partition and after,(1947-1950)', *Heritage*, Vol.IV:I:20-36.
- 51 Referendum Commissioner's Report on the Sylhet Referendum *opcit*, Nation Archives of India.
- 52 My interface with Shri Bhupendra Kumar Bhattacharjee, retired Joint Secretary, Government of Assam, at Guwahati on 6th Nov.,2008.
- 53 Interface with B.K. Bhattacharjee, *opcit.*
- 54 See a detailed discussion of the same in an interview between the author and Smti Hashi Rani Choudhury hailing from the Mirasdar family of Purkayastha Para in Jinarpur, Sylhet in B. Dutta, 'Forgotten Land, Forsaken People' in *Special issue of IUP Journal of History and Culture*, Vol IV, No. 3.
- 55 This was the word that the Hindu nationalists referred to India.