



## Northeast India and Partition's Forgotten Displacements

**Fasiha Athara Laskar**

Assistant Professor, Krishna Bora B.Ed College, Lanka, Hojai, Assam, Dept Of Political Science

**Zahid Athar Laskar**

Assistant Professor, Umshyrpi College, Shillong, Meghalaya, India, Department Of Law

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### ABSTRACT

At the time of independence India got partitioned in 1947, making two parts India and Pakistan. This partition is not peaceful. We remembered this partition through violence upheld in Punjab and Bengal. And this violence hid the major effects of partition for Northeast India. The partition experiences of Northeast India remain largely neglected by mainstream historiography. This article focuses on these forgotten displacements of Northeast India. And in the time of partition large - scale migration of Bengali refugees into Assam, Tripura and the hill tracts we are going to focus on it specially the separation of Sylhet through a referendum. This study argues that the partition in northeast India received less attention but this region has serious effects. By using historical records, oral testimonies and existing research we can argue that. Still we can see the impact of partition in this region's politics and society today. Because partition changes borders, communities and identities in one night among people. By highlighting these often-overlooked experiences of displacement, the study broadens our understanding of Partition and its lasting legacy.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

When most of us in India talk about the Partition of 1947, the images that come to mind are those of refugee trains, crowded camps, and cities engulfed in violence - Delhi, Lahore, Amritsar, and Calcutta. The dominant memory of Partition is that of Punjab and Bengal, of vast population exchanges and unforgettable brutality. However, for those who come from India's northeastern region or who read more closely into regional archives and family memories there is another story, quieter but equally significant. It is a story of small border towns and distant hills, of boundaries drawn with rulers across rivers and forests, and of people who woke up one morning to discover that they now belonged to a different country. This chapter attempts to bring that story into focus to discuss the forgotten displacements of Northeast India during and after Partition.

Northeast India encompassing present-day Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, and parts of Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh was geographically distant from the Delhi, Lahore, Calcutta axis but intimately linked to the political decisions of 1947. Its border districts, especially Sylhet, Cachar, and the adjoining hill tracts, underwent territorial reorganization, mass migration, and identity transformations. The Partition here was quieter, slower, and often undocumented, which is why historian Yasmin Saikia (2011) calls it "a Partition without recognition."

## 2. Historical Background:

### 2.1 The Northeastern Frontier Before 1947

Before 1947, the Northeastern frontier was defined by immense ethnic diversity, distinct political structures, and British colonial administrative mechanisms designed to isolate the hills from the plains. The region comprised directly ruled colonial provinces, sovereign princely states, and unadministered tribal borderlands.

After the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826), Assam came under British rule. The British introduced the Inner Line Regulation (1873) to protect tribal areas and later classified many hill regions as Excluded Areas under the Government of India Act, 1935.

In 1914, the North-East Frontier Tracts (NEFT) were created and later reorganized into Sadiya, Balipara, Lakhimpur, and Tirap Frontier Tracts, forming the basis of NEFA (present-day Arunachal Pradesh). Manipur and Tripura remained princely states under British paramountcy.



British policies kept the hills and plains administratively separate and encouraged migration into Assam, shaping the region's future social and political developments. After 1947, the frontier tracts became part of Assam.

## **2.2 A Mosaic on the Edge of Empire**

Before 1947, the Northeast Frontier was not an empty borderland . It was a culturally rich and diverse region. It was home to Assamese, Bengali, Khasi, Jaintia, Garo, Naga, and many other ethnic communities. Each community has its own language, customs, and traditions. These communities were connected through trade, marriage, and cultural exchange. Sylhet's historical affiliation with both Assam and Bengal is a striking example. Sylhet reflected this diversity, sharing deep historical and cultural ties with both Assam and Bengal, and serving as an important center of trade, tea cultivation, and interaction among different peoples. The area's rich tea gardens, riverine markets, and lively towns drew merchants and migrants from across the region, making it a true crossroads of civilizations.

## **2.3 British Rule: Ecology of Exclusion and Extraction**

The arrival of the British in the 19th century brought major changes to the Northeast. After the Treaty of Yandabo (1826), Assam came under British rule, and Sylhet was transferred from Bengal to Assam in 1874. The British changed the land, labour, and legal systems, turning the region into an important source of tea, oil, and timber. Large tea plantations were established in Assam, using migrant labour and managed by British planters. Instead of governing the Northeast as one region, the British created Excluded Areas and introduced the Inner Line Regulation, separating the tribal hills from the plains. As a result, many villages that had long been connected through trade and family ties were divided, creating mistrust and weakening old relationships.

## **2.4 A Fractured Consciousness Emerges**

By the 1940s, the political situation in Assam and the Northeast had become increasingly complex. Many Assamese leaders worked to protect their language, culture, and identity. At the same time, migration from Bengal, encouraged by British settlement policies and economic opportunities. This created concerns among local people about land ownership, employment, and cultural identity. This gave rise to movements demanding the protection of indigenous rights. Tribal communities also sought greater autonomy. Because they believed British rule had both isolated them and exposed them to outside influence. At the same time, British policies that classified people mainly by religion increased communal divisions. As religious politics



became stronger, the region's long-standing tradition of peaceful coexistence among different communities came under growing pressure.

## 2.5 Partition's Looming Specter

As Partition became imminent, the Northeast found itself pulled between competing currents: Bengali-speaking Muslims in Sylhet, Assamese-speaking Hindus in the Brahmaputra valley, and tribal movements in the hills all looked to the future with apprehension. Sylhet's fate was particularly contentious. Would it remain with Assam or merge with East Bengal (Pakistan)? The referendum in Sylhet in July 1947, conducted amid intense rainfall and volatile emotions, led to its partial merger with Pakistan, fracturing not just maps but families, economies, and entire worldviews. Assamese leaders, wary of being swamped by "immigrants," and tribal chiefs, anxious about autonomy, found themselves negotiating a new reality. Axone was shaped as much by colonial legacies as by the anxieties and hopes of a divided India.

## 2.6 Epilogue: Northeast's Forgotten Displacements

The Partition of 1947 had a major but often overlooked impact on Northeast India. Assam was separated from Bengal and became almost landlocked. Because losing its important trade route through the Port of Chittagong. This badly affected trade, transport, and the region's economy.

After Partition, thousands of refugees from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) settled in Assam and Tripura. Their arrival changed the population of the region and led to long-term debates over land, identity, citizenship, and the rights of indigenous communities.

Partition also broke old road, rail, and river trade routes that had connected the Northeast with Bengal. The region was left connected to the rest of India mainly through the narrow Siliguri Corridor, also known as the "Chicken's Neck." Many people were forced to leave their homes, lost their identities, and continued to struggle for recognition and autonomy.

The history of Partition in Northeast India is often ignored. But it is an important part of India's past. It shows how colonial policies, religious divisions, and Partition permanently changed a region. Despite these hardships, the people of the Northeast showed great resilience, and their experiences deserve an important place in India's national memory.

## 3. Why is the Northeast "Forgotten" in Partition Histories?

The Partition of Northeast India has often been ignored in mainstream history for several reasons.



First, the large-scale violence and migration in Punjab and Bengal drew attention away from the Northeast.

Second, the Northeast had a complex political and geographical structure, with plains, hills, princely states, and tribal areas. This made administration and historical records incomplete and uneven.

Third, the impact of Partition in the Northeast was different. Instead of only dividing India and Pakistan, it involved referendums, boundary changes, and the division of villages and trade routes. These changes were less visible and did not always result in the large refugee camps or widespread violence seen elsewhere.

Finally, migration in the Northeast happened gradually. Many families moved over several years rather than all at once. As a result, the effects of Partition were slow and less noticeable, causing the history of the region's Partition to remain largely forgotten despite its deep and lasting impact.

#### **4. Key spaces and patterns of displacement**

##### **4.1 Sylhet and the referendum**

The Partition of the Northeast was most directly experienced through the Sylhet Referendum of July 1947. Unlike in Punjab or Bengal, where Partition was decided at the elite political level, Sylhet's fate was determined by a public vote. Sylhet - then part of Assam, is perhaps the most widely known northeastern episode connected directly to Partition. In July 1947, a referendum was held to decide whether Sylhet would join East Pakistan or remain with India. The result favoured joining East Pakistan, though the process and its consequences were locally fraught. For Hindus in Sylhet the vote produced deep anxieties: some families migrated ahead of or soon after the vote; others stayed but found themselves cut off from old trade and kin networks. The referendum not only rearranged a border on a map; it rearranged lives across the region and triggered flows of people into neighbouring districts of Assam and the hill tracts. The Sylhet episode remains a useful lens because it shows how political instruments (a referendum) produced migration and long-term displacement in the Northeast.

##### **4.2 Barak Valley and Cachar: slipping into new sovereignties**

The southern districts of Assam, Cachar, Karimganj, Hailakandi and the Barak Valley region experienced significant unsettlement. Parts of what was a contiguous Bengali-speaking cultural zone were carved up; people who had once considered themselves part of the same trade and social circuits suddenly found themselves across an international boundary. For many Bengali Hindus the logic of migration was simple and frightening: to be in a Hindu-majority India rather than Muslim-majority Pakistan. For others, however, migration was not immediate; some moved later as economic and political pressures increased in subsequent



years. The Barak Valley's story is also a reminder that displacement after 1947 did not end in a single year; it unfolded in waves across decades.

#### **4.3 Hill tracts and the “invisible” boundary**

The hill areas home to Khasi, Garo, Jaintia, Naga and other peoples were sliced by boundary demarcations that paid little regard to indigenous mobility. For hill communities, the new frontier often separated complementary ecological zones: uplands used for swidden cultivation, lowland markets and riverine routes. When boundary pillars were fixed, they sometimes bifurcated villages or pastures, creating long-term livelihood losses. The violence here was not always communal in the way the Punjab experienced it; often it was bureaucratic violence the violence of being made a “minority” overnight in an area you had used for generations. Recent local studies have shown how those demarcations are still felt in daily life and memory.

#### **5. Who moved and why: motivations beyond communal violence**

It is tempting to reduce all Partition migration to communal fear of physical violence, but northeastern movements remind us that motivations were multiple and layered. In the Northeast we find:

5.1 Security fears among minorities (e.g., Hindus in Sylhet and East Bengal) who migrated to India fearing persecution.

5.2 Economic rationales, where people moved toward perceived opportunities (river ports, towns, tea garden jobs, or government employment in Assam).

5.3 Kinship and marriage ties that pulled families across the new borders.

5.4 Administrative pushes and pulls, where governments issued certificates, land allotments, resettlement schemes or, conversely, failed to provide basic rights, nudging people to move.

5.5 Long-term marginalization, where communities that stayed behind felt their cultural and economic space shrink, giving later generations identity and livelihood pressures that compelled migration.

Scholars working on the Northeast emphasise that the forms of migration here were often gradual, circuitous, and sometimes officially “unrecorded.” This is why oral histories and local records are vital for reconstructing the movements.



## 6. Oral histories and the ethics of “remembering”

One of the major advances in Partition studies over the last few decades has been the turn to oral testimony. The feminist historians and oral historians who led this work argued that the official numbers and administrative files cannot capture the texture of loss, fear, and everyday reorganization that families experienced. In the Northeast, where official paperwork is often patchy, oral testimonies become even more important.

Listening to elders in Cachar or to survivors in Shillong, one hears recurrent motifs: a sudden knock on the door; a neighbour who disappeared; a market that stopped coming; the day the really trusted road link closed. These small stories eventually map onto larger patterns of land loss, changing citizenship claims and intercommunal mistrust. But working with such testimonies requires sensitivity: memories are shaped by subsequent politics, by the desire to be recognised, and by local rivalries. The researcher must therefore triangulate oral accounts with administrative records, newspapers and personal archives wherever possible. Urvashi Butalia’s pioneering emphasis on voices-from-below has been a model for many scholars in the region.

### 6.2 .State responses: relief, rehabilitation and the limits of administration

The Indian state, in the immediate aftermath of Partition, had to respond to multiple crises. In the Northeast, relief and rehabilitation measures were uneven and often slow. Some displaced families received plots and housing in planned colonies Rynjah Colony in Shillong is a documented example of a settlement sanctioned in the early 1950s for displaced families but for many the assistance was minimal and bureaucratically conditioned. Over time, the dynamics of citizenship and migration became complicated by later events (e.g., the 1965 and 1971 conflicts, and India’s relationship with East Pakistan/Bangladesh), which meant that displacement in the Northeast often had recursive effects across generations.

A crucial point here is that “resettlement” did not always translate into social integration. Refugee households might receive a plot on paper but remain marginalised economically and politically. In Assam, the presence of Bengali-speaking displaced populations fed into longer-term local rivalries about language, land and representation troubles that would later explode in movements and demands over citizenship.

In oral testimonies collected in Assam (Sharma, 2011), survivors recall how rumours, fear, and uncertainty drove decisions. Some families migrated days before the final vote, carrying little more than clothes and utensils. Others waited to see if “life would go on as usual,” only to find themselves on the wrong side of



the border overnight. The process was often chaotic and without administrative preparation, as the newly formed governments in Delhi and Dacca struggled to manage refugee flows.

### **6.3 Long-term consequences: citizenship, identity and politics**

The afterlives of Partition in the Northeast are visible in political disputes about citizenship, immigration, and ethnic majorities. Assam's later anxieties about "outsiders," the rise of movements for regional identity, and the complex status of Bengali-speaking communities in the Barak Valley all have roots, in part, in the dislocations and demographic shifts that started with Partition and continued afterwards.

Moreover, cross-border kin ties and economic relations continued even after the frontier was drawn. People in tea gardens, small towns and hill tracts often had relatives across the border; border regulation disrupted these ties, affecting markets, marriages and social life. Where policies failed to give clear citizenship rights, statelessness or semi-statelessness emerged for particular groups, with prolonged social consequences.

### **7. A Case Vignette (Composite)**

To make the generalities more concrete, let me offer a short composite vignette drawn from multiple oral accounts and local studies. Imagine a small Sylheti Hindu family in 1947: the father runs a small grocer's shop in a market town; the mother looks after two schoolchildren and an elderly mother. The referendum result passes for Sylhet to join East Pakistan. The father receives rumours that a nearby village has been attacked; a cousin writes that trains carrying Hindus leave for Assam. They have to decide: stay with the shop and the old house, or leave for an uncertain future in Assam town, where conversation is in a different register and jobs are scarce. They choose to go. On arrival they get temporary housing; a few years later the local administration offers them a small allotment in a colony. Their children grow up bilingual but often feel like outsiders in both places. They vote in Assam, but their sense of belonging is fragile. This composite stands for many such families who traded places for safety but paid a long-term cost in identity and political insecurity. This vignette is informed by individual narratives recorded across the region and reflects the multiple small choices that added up to larger demographic shifts.

### **8. CONCLUSION**

The history of Partition in Northeast India was not a single event that ended in 1947. Instead, it was a long and gradual process that changed borders, communities, identities, and everyday life. Unlike Punjab and Bengal, where the effects of Partition were immediate and highly visible, the Northeast experienced slow but lasting transformations. New international borders divided villages, disrupted trade routes, separated



families, and changed long-standing cultural and economic connections. Many people were forced to migrate, while others found themselves living in unfamiliar political and social conditions without ever leaving their homes.

The impact of these changes continued long after independence. Questions of citizenship, migration, land ownership, identity, and autonomy became central political issues in the region. Many tribal and indigenous communities struggled to protect their culture, language, and traditional rights in the face of changing demographics and new administrative boundaries. These experiences shaped the political and social history of the Northeast for decades.

For a long time, however, these stories remained absent from mainstream accounts of Partition. The focus on the violence and mass migration in Punjab and Bengal meant that the quieter but equally important experiences of the Northeast received little attention. Yet, the suffering caused by Partition in the region was real. It involved the loss of homes, separation from ancestral lands, disruption of livelihoods, and the emotional pain of broken communities.

Studying these forgotten histories gives us a more complete understanding of the Partition of 1947. It reminds us that Partition was not only about drawing new borders on a map but also about the lives of ordinary people whose identities, relationships, and futures were permanently changed. Recognizing the experiences of Northeast India helps create a more inclusive national memory and honours the resilience of the people who endured these challenges. Remembering these histories is essential for understanding India's past and for appreciating the diversity of experiences that shaped the nation after independence.

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