

Pakistan Movement and Communalization of Peasants in Colonial Assam

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One of the most important areas of study on colonial Assam has been the coming and settlement of peasants from districts of eastern Bengal. This immigration of peasant population in Assam and their expansion into the districts of Brahmaputra valley has had its effects on political mobilization in colonial Assam. Though these peasants were initially welcomed into Assam by the Assamese elites, they were subsequently viewed with immense suspicion and hostility. Over time these immigrants began to play a crucial role in Assam with the onset of communal politics. While the initial years of the twentieth century led to a lot of debates on the nature and status of these Bengali immigrants in Assam, the decade of the 30s was a turning point in the history of immigrant peasant centric politics in Assam with the arrival of Muslim League in Assam who openly championed the cause of the peasants while the colonial state and the local Assamese elite were clearly hostile to them. The introduction of representative politics and the birth of the Pakistan movement were two political developments that made these peasants an invaluable resource for the Muslim League in the expansion of their political base in Assam. This was also a phase which witnessed the communalization of peasant consciousness in Assam with the active mobilization of the peasants by the ulama on behalf of the Muslim League. Despite an array of scholars producing their works on peasant movements and communal politics in this peripheral colonial province, few have integrated the two by relating peasant mobilization to the Pakistan movement. This paper seeks to interrogate the communalization of peasant movement in colonial Assam and locate it within the play of communal politics in Assam and Muslim mobilization of the Pakistan Movement.

Key words: Pakistan, peasants, immigration, ulama, maulvis, line system, eviction, invasion.

Beginning of East Bengali Peasant Immigration into Assam

By 1880s, the official policy on wasteland management and agriculture underwent changes. Concern with food deficit in Assam which was one of the direct fallout of the fear generated by the Orissa famine of 1866 and 1867 forced colonial officials to seek alternative strategies. Accordingly colonial officials began to encourage a change in the nature of immigration of people from various provinces of colonial India into Assam. Therefore by 1890s there was a colonial consensus around the question of encouragement for the Muslim peasants of Bengali origin for reclamation of wasteland in Assam. Colonial officials had very limited choice. It was felt that, the stout and fanatical Mahomedan of East Bengal may possibly be better material,¹ for extension of cultivation over wastelands in Assam. Colonial officials viewed immigration from eastern Bengal to Assam as a means to relieve the excess population pressure on Tippera and Mymensingh.²

The Partition of Bengal and the constitution of the province of eastern Bengal and Assam in 1905 facilitated the migration of peasants from east Bengal to Assam and 'stream of landless

peasants started pouring from East Bengal through rail, road and waterways.³ This changing trend was first highlighted in the Census of 1911.⁴ The completion of the Golakgunj- Gauhati extension of the eastern Bengal Railway in 1911 dramatically increased the inter-provincial migration of peasants from Bengal to Assam. ‘Migration from the Eastern Bengal districts, particularly from Mymensingh, was into the districts of Goalpara, Nowgong, kamrup and Sunamganj sub-division of Sylhet.’⁵ According to the census of 1921, of the 300,000 cultivators who had migrated to Assam from the eastern districts of Bengal, 151,000 had settled in Goalpara and 44,000 in Kamrup alone. 78,000 among these settlers in Goalpara and 30,000 of these settlers in Kamrup were from Mymensingh.⁶ By the next decade, the number of Bengalis in Goalpara rose to 170,000 of whom 80,000 were from Mymensingh. In Kamrup, their number registered a phenomenal increase with the census recording the presence of 134,000 Bengali migrants in Kamrup of whom 91,000 were from Mymensingh.⁷

Migration of Bengali Peasantry – Story of ‘Vultures’ and ‘Ants’

Colonial officers were initially not averse of this demographic transformation. But after 1911, this unprecedented inter-provincial migration of population alarmed them setting off a change in official attitude towards unrestricted Bengali peasant migration into Assam. Much before Mullan, the word ‘invasion’ was used to describe the migration of peasants from Bengal by the Census Commissioner in his report of 1911 as he ominously made a reference to the dangers of such migration. In the report of 1911, migration came to be reflected as “a peaceful invasion of Assam by the advancing hoardes of Mymensinghia army...”⁸ The first set of rules to regulate and restrict the immigration of agricultural immigrants from Bengal to Assam was proposed in 1915, which, among other things, introduced changes in the tenure of the holdings. But such proposal evoked protests among the Assamese public opinion, on the ground that such rules would “affect permanent heritable and transferable character of the tenures.”⁹ In 1916, the then Director of Land Records first came up with a proposal to regulate the migration and settlement of these migrants. The proposal was designed with the ostensible purpose of “assisting the settlement of the incoming immigrants and coordinate the work of all districts into which immigration was going on”¹⁰ But it was evident that by 1916 that official perceptions about inter-provincial migration between Bengal and Assam had changed and the official patronage to migration was gradually withdrawn. By 1920, the proposal to appoint Colonization Officers to regulate immigration also found favour with the then Commissioner Mr. William Reid.¹¹ The Deputy Commissioners of the Brahmaputra valley districts were already in favour of such regulations¹² and Deputy Commissioners of Kamrup and Nowgong had already implemented their own variations of the Line System which regulated the settlements of the immigrants within a designated area separate from the Assamese.¹³ In sharp contrast to the early colonial position promoting immigration, in post-1911 senario, officers began to view east Bengali migration as ‘indiscriminate’.¹⁴ By 1923, during the tenure of Mr Higgins as the Deputy Commissioner of Nowgong, the villages in Nowgong district was classified into seven different classes. His successor, Mr. Thomas carried the initiative further when he passed necessary orders restricting the immigration and settlement of immigrants to only eight *Mauzas* of the district.

But despite these opinions, though the provincial government could not evolve any consensus policy to restrict or regulate immigration, by 1928 the affected districts led by their Deputy Commissioners did evolve their own mechanisms of regulating immigration. The general colonial opinion was still not clearly against the settlement of wastelands by immigrants which got them into a conflict with the Assamese elite who were in favour of securing the interests of Assamese peasants and their future agricultural expansion.¹⁵

Though immigration was an inalienable part of the colonial policy on arable expansion and revenue maximization, it was only in the twentieth century that population trickle from Bengal turned into a tide. The Census of 1921, pointed out that, "In 1911, few cultivators from Eastern Bengal had gone beyond Goalpara, those censused in the other districts of the Assam Valley numbering only a few thousands and being mostly clerks, traders and professional men. In the last decade (1911-1921) the movement has extended far up the valley and the colonists now form an appreciable element in the population of all the four lower and central districts..."¹⁶ The alarmist tone of the report had its impact on the politics of the day and also became the key note for the Report of 1931 authored under the guidance of C.S. Mullan, the Census Superintendent. Mullan created a stir when he observed that,

"...by 1921, the first army corps of the invaders had conquered Goalpara. The second army corps which followed them in the years 1921-1931 has consolidated their position in that district and has also completed their conquest of Nowgong. The Barpeta subdivision of Kamrup has also fallen to their attack and Darrang is being invaded. Sibsagar has so far escaped completely but the few thousand Mymensinghians in North Lakhimpur are an outpost which may, during the next decade, prove to be a valuable basis of major operations."¹⁷

This Report of Mullan not only set the tone for a prolonged debate on land management and settlement and politics in Assam.

Pakistan Movement in Assam- Communalization of the peasantry

Between 1940 and 1945, the Muslim League leadership left no stone unturned to assert their claims over Assam, despite the Muslims not forming the majority in the province.¹⁸ Though there was no direct reference to Assam in the League proposal of Pakistan moved at Lahore, its impact on Assam was evident that by early 1940s, when the Muslim League Leadership left no stone unturned to justify the inclusion of Assam into Pakistan. While Bengal was clearly, a Muslim majority province, the Muslim League leadership were trying hard to justify their point that Assam, which had a sizable Mussalman population, was not outside its sphere of interest. The decision of the Assam Government led by Sir Syed Mohammad Saadullah to enumerate the population in the 1941 census, on the basis of community, rather than on their religious affiliation, was clearly a move to further reduce the numerical strength of the Hindu Community in Assam in official records, as a preparation for future Muslim League justification to demand the inclusion of Assam in Pakistan. By 1943, even Liaqat Ali Khan clearly argued that Assam was very much, a part of the Pakistan

plan of the Muslim League. Liaqat Ali, presenting his general secretary's report, in the Karachi session of the Muslim League in December 1943, noted with satisfaction that the League was successful in forming the Government and retaining power on all those provinces which would constitute the geographical area of Pakistan. Assam was one such province.

Assam was keenly observed because it was essentially a non-Muslim majority province and yet was within the Muslim League proposal of Pakistan. In every session of the Muslim League, since 1940, Assam found mention in the presidential address of Muhammad Ali Jinnah and the General Secretary's report of Nawabzada Liaqat Ali Khan. The assumption of office by the Muslim League led government in Assam, brought happiness to Jinnah, who only saw it as the first step in making Assam a part of Pakistan. In view of the political and demographic fluidity of Assam, the establishment of a Muslim League Government in the Province with Muhammad Sadullah as the Premier was a moment of immense significance for the Muslim League in 1939 in the province. The issue of muslim peasant immigration from Bengal was viewed as a very important part of the politics of peopling in the province of Assam. Immigrants as agents of demographic change were perceived as strengthening the Muslim League claims over Assam as part of Pakistan. The immigration issue was also becoming more acute. This could be specially appreciated in the light of the League's plan to include Assam in their 'five Moslem provinces'.¹⁹ Meetings by Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan were arranged in various parts of Assam. In the Assam Valley the Muslim League continued the with its campaign to abolish the line system and also celebrate Pakistan Day. The League was bracing for confrontation which became unavoidable with the League and the Jamiat-ul-Ulama organising conferences and meetings in adjacent venues. This conflict between the rival Muslim organisations was to become a regular feature in the years as a run-up to the elections of 1945-46. There was no doubt that the League remained steadfast in pushing ahead its twin agenda of Pakistan and immigration in Bengal and Assam, the two issues being intimately related with the immigrants providing the mass base for the Pakistan movement. Even Jinnah in his correspondence dated 8 December 1941 noted the expansion of the League organisation in Assam with much satisfaction.²⁰ Two meetings of the Muslim immigrants were held in the Darrang district which were presided over by Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan. Both these meetings strongly extolled the Muslim League and stressed on the necessity of abolishing the line system, while supporting the Pakistan scheme²¹ with the Maulana calling upon the immigrants to occupy wastelands by force if the government did not meet their demand by a specified date.

By 1941 communal tension between Muslims and Hindus in general touched a new high in East Bengal and Assam. The League organised the Assam Bengal Proja Conference (mainly an affair of Muslim immigrants) at Ghagmari in Goalpara in February.²² This was addressed by Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan, who proposed to undertake a tour of Assam threatening civil disobedience if the *zamindari* system was not abolished. Meetings of the League addressed by Bengal leaders also took place at Shillong and Sylhet.²³ August 1942 was also witness to a momentous movement popularly known as the 'Quit India Movement'. The attitude of the Muslim villagers in Assam had been hostile to any Congress mass movement, even at times reflective of Muslim exasperation at

the sabotage and boycott of Muslim shops by the Congress. The Muslim League became very active in safeguarding Muslim interests in Sylhet, while the volunteers of the League were mobilised in Nowgong town to counter picketing of Muslim shops by the Congress.²⁴ Tensions began to rise in Bengal and Assam with looting by Muslims and firing by Hindu *zamindars*. Communication with Shillong was disrupted. However, the Surma Valley the scene of many conflicts, was almost incident-free due to the high percentage of Muslims who stayed aloof from civil disobedience. In Mongoldoi, however, Muslim immigrants were called upon to defend the shops of the Muslims against any attacks, which aroused protest among the non-Muslims. Significantly, however, here too the immigrants were mobilised on the plea that 'mosques were in danger'.²⁵ The Hindu Mahasabha intensified its activities with a vigorous protest against the intention of Sir Saadulla to form a ministry in Assam. While Hindu volunteers seized boats and carts of immigrants loaded with paddy immigrants retaliated when Hindu traders transported their paddy through immigrant dominated areas.²⁶ It was evident that communal relations had struck a new low. On the whole, the Muslim League was able to keep the Muslims away from the movement as incidents of looting of shops and assaults on shopkeepers continued throughout the province which kept the conflict between Hindus and Muslims alive. In Assam, the immigration issue was at the centre stage of politics with food crisis in the war period.

It was popularly perceived that the line system was the greatest impediment to Muslim immigration into Assam and all efforts were being made to remove this impediment. It was equally clear that the League, who had already envisioned Assam as an integral part of their Eastern Pakistan scheme had connected the immigration question with it and was willing to launch a movement in favour of the rights of immigrants. With Maulvis or grassroot preachers and Maulanas like Abdul Hamid Khan, the Provincial League President, infamous for his inflammatory speeches among its top leadership, the League in Assam and Bengal plunged head-on into this movement.

The immigrants were also trying to forcefully penetrate into the grazing reserves in the Barpeta subdivision of Kamrup district. Reportedly armed with weapons, they attacked the grazers. A public meeting under the auspices of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League, the Assam Muslim Association and the Calcutta Muslim Students League was held with Suhrawardy in the chair. The meeting passed resolutions condemning the eviction of Bengali immigrants and declared the line system as illegal. Similar resolutions were also adopted at the Working Committee meeting of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League held on the 20 February.²⁷ The League prepared an agenda for an agitational programme keeping in mind the three principal issues that were raised by them, namely, in the Pakistan proposal, the question of eviction question and the question of famine and food. Mosques and private houses were the seats of secret meetings where decisions were taken to offer resistance in cases of eviction.

The League's strategy was to infuse the immigration question as part of their Pakistan campaign. Eviction was not a simple question of land settlement. The agitations that followed the League rejection of the Cabinet Mission was only as an excuse for intensification of the pro-immigration movement of the League.²⁸ Secret intelligence reports revealed extensive preparations for 'direct

action' in Assam. Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan met the local Muslim Leaguers of Bongaigaon in a secret meeting at the residence of Maulvi Mukhlesur Rahman. He gave them instructions to organise Muslim League National Guards in every village and urged them to sacrifice all for the sake of Pakistan and to be ready for direct action. Mujahedins were enlisted at the Dhubri office while Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan met the local leaders. He was reported to have distributed Rs. 10,000 to reliable persons 'to start business'. Leaflet signed by Maulana Muhammad Akram Khan, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan and Muhammad Abdulla Baki appealing for monetary and other help were circulated. There was no doubt that the League preparations for the 'Direct Action Day' were going on in full steam especially in the immigrant dominated areas.

A massive campaign initiated by Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan to boycott the market was launched in Dhubri, Sylhet and Luming and its neighbourhood²⁹ which strengthened communal forces. In Assam protests were organized in Kamrup and Darang by the Assamese against attacks on the immigrants. There were reports of clashes between the Kacharis and Muslim immigrants in the Nalbari tribal areas. By December 1946, the antagonism between the Congress and the League had reached a point of no return, with the Hindus and the Muslims accusing each other for the political impasse the subcontinent was moving into. While the League stepped up their movement and argument for Pakistan, on the grassroot level, they began to expand the strength of the Muslim League National Guards.

The period from March 1947 to August 1947 thus assumes utmost significance for the League it was a last yet determined bid to carve 'Pakistan'. The disputes in the League now centred not on how to justify or ensure Pakistan but on the extent to which the territories of the new proposed Pakistan could be expanded. The agreement over Partition between the leadership of the Congress, the League and the government would now harbour over negotiation for territories in the three states that would be affected by the Partition, viz., the Punjab, Bengal and Assam. Assam and Bengal had been brought into one group by the Cabinet Mission Plan. On this the Congress held that it would not be proper to force any of the provinces to join the group and that each province should be granted the freedom to decide if it wanted to join the group. It is significant to note that, unlike Bengal, Assam was a predominantly Hindu majority province, with only 30% of the population being Muslims. The League, however, held that any change in the plan would lead to their rejection of the same, which they finally did. The League's objection was not only on the question of interpreting the plan but also on the fate of the province of Assam on which the League and the Congress never saw eye to eye. While the League insisted that the plan be revoked,³⁰ the focus shifted to Assam, the Congress leadership could not understand the cause for League intransigence over Assam. Maulana Azad wrote,

Nobody can understand why the League placed so much emphasis on the question of Assam when Assam was not a Muslim majority province. If the Leagues' own criterion was applied there was no valid reason to force Assam to join Bengal.³¹

However, the situation remaining volatile the initiative shifted to exerting pressure through the League activities in Bengal, including the recruitment of volunteer corps who would serve as

messengers and workers in the field for the League. The major section of the recruitment was from Eastern Bengal. The decision of the Punjab government to declare the Punjab Muslim National Guards as an unlawful association saw repercussions in Assam where the Muslim League organised meetings and *hartals*. There was rise in the Muslim League National Guards, the volunteer corps of the League in East Bengal and Assam, which were a source of much trouble for the administration. Apart from being 'unruly' and having a 'militant tone', they were recruited from all over the province of Eastern Bengal and in certain pockets of Assam. The involvement of the religious leadership and the religious cadre became even more pronounced in Assam where, as a result of the Punjab government's decision to ban the League National Guards, the League disobedience movement had spread rapidly and had intensified throughout the province with increasing effect on the masses. On 28 February a Muslim League meeting of about 1,000 people was held at Bhurakata school field in the Mankachar police station under the presidency of Maulvi Abul Kasem, where Maulvis Kasabuddin Ahmad of Rowmari and Lichu Mia of Mankachar also spoke. In the meetings resolutions were adopted:

- (i) to protest against the line system of the government and to subscribe towards the funds of the Muslim League Committee for improvement of local institutions.
- (ii) to abolish the zamindari system and to ask the zamindars to deal with tenants leniently and politely.³²

A closed door meeting of Muslims was held at Maulvi Bazar on 20 February. The meeting of the Provincial League Working Committee at Nowgong evoked tension. Meanwhile Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan, MLA, continued to organise training camps for Muslim militia near Rahumari in Bengal just over the provincial border of Assam from Mankachar. He also organised a series of rural conferences. The 'East Pakistan Conference' held at Rahumari-Mankachar, christened Pakistan kila, organised by Maulvi Abdul Kashem and presided over by Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan, attracted over 10,000 people. This was significant as it was an organised camp for the training of the militia indulging in propaganda or communal disturbances.

In fact, leaflets in the name of prominent Muslim leaders of the Golakganj police station were circulated in Dhubri inviting the Muslims to attend a big meeting at the premises of the Romatganj madrassah. The meeting would be addressed by Maulana Sayed Ashadulla Shiraji of Pubna, and the agenda was 'a discussion about the present situation and the future course of action' 'thought the meeting has been called a religious one'.³³ All these activities terrorised the Hindus living in this area. Movements of the League were thus intended to import both the provinces of Bengal and Assam with the end of altering the Assam government's eviction policy. Secret meetings were organized in the interiors of Barpeta by Maulavi Aatur Rahman, the secretary of the Barpeta District Muslim League and Maulvi Kuddus Khan instigating the evicted immigrants to re-encroach the grazing reserves. It was also reported that Maulana Bhasani was preparing to intensify the Pakistan campaign at which the occupation of all the grazing reserves was the main objective.³⁴ An intelligence report for the month of March 1947 observed that in one of the Muslim League meetings held in Sitali, presided by one Maulana Kazimuddin Ahmed, which was attended by a

large number of immigrants from neighbouring villages, resolutions were adopted calling upon the immigrants to,

defy all government law and advice.

re encroach the grazing reserves and other vacant land by force.

to observe hartal in all places and to stage anti-eviction demonstrations on 20.3.47 and to close huts(markets) that day.

to enlist one man from each family to form League army and to undergo training in the League camp.

to take action as Muslims on those who go against the League.³⁵

A report from the SDO Barpeta sent to the Deputy Commissioner Kamrup indicated that a hartal was observed by the Muslim Shopkeepers throughout the subdivision in support with the Pakistan Movement while processions were taken out and meetings organized at the League office premises condemning the eviction policy of the Assam government. The local League leaders also began to raise funds to “help the distressed evictees.”³⁶ Maulvis from Bengal also attended the meeting where “they encouraged the people to be conquerors like the people of Noakhali...to combine and fight the government.”³⁷ The joint Assam Bengal Action Committee is reported to contemplate sending Muslims from the border districts of Bengal to occupy the wastelands in Assam and to help the Bengali Muslim immigrants fight against the Assam government. An East Pakistan kila was established at Rangpur on the borders of Assam with reports of 40 Muslim National Guards joining there. Feelings against eviction were running high at Chittagong and, following the holding of ‘Assam’ Day, Muslim National Guards were to sent to Assam, with some already having moved in from Noakhali and Tippera.

The League campaigned actively at Goalpara and the border areas of Bengal with fairly large meetings of about 10 to 15 thousand people only four miles from the Assam border in Bengal. Plans were made by some of the divines/Mullahs to organize an ‘invasion’ of the Muhammadan population from Bengal to Assam. One such prominent organiser was Maulvi Gnyasuddin Pathan, who would have been “willing enough to make the invasion a reality” save for lack of finances. Maulvi Abdul Hashem, one of the principal organisers of the Muslim disobedience, proposed to violate government orders at Darang and large processions organized by the League were held to protest the arrest of Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan. Encroachment by the immigrants into the grazing reserves was causing a great deal of tension.³⁸ The Pakistan campaign was carefully prepared by Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan, Maulvi Syed Abdur Rouf and Maulvi Kazimuddin Ahmad, the President of the Barpeta District Muslim League with the objective of occupying all the reserves. Reports were also received of stray incidences of encroachment with mass movements, which would be undertaken on the arrival of the volunteers of the Muslim National Guards from other provinces. Maulvis were also found touring the Barpeta subdivision to incite the masses. By 1946-47 it was amply clear that the twin political issues of immigration and Pakistan had brought the Ulama to field agitation both in movement and mobilisation.³⁹ In Assam, the eviction policy of the Assam government continued to

exert pressure in various parts of East Bengal which bordered Assam. There were ever-growing interest about it in the neighbouring Rangpur district. As with the official reports suggested, “situation on the Assam border has dangerous possibilities”,⁴⁰ where a number of meetings continued to be held through the month of April and where speeches denouncing the eviction policy had been delivered. Large meetings were held at Chilmari and Sonahat with an assembly of approximately 30,000 and 10,000, respectively. The official sources ascribe the participation of the people in this movement to “propaganda to consider the conquest of Assam as a jehad.”⁴¹ A second kila or fort for the concentration of the volunteers of the Muslim League National Guard was constructed at Rangpur district, and preparations were made for the dispatch of these volunteers into Assam. The problems posed by the League and its leaders calling for jehad had become so acute that the government in Bengal began to consider measures to clamp down on League activities. The people of Assam were alarmed at the ‘invasion’ policy of the League. There were frequent meetings by the Muslim League in Barpeta subdivision of the Kamrup district and in Darrang. There were organised schemes of sending small parties, one after the other to Goalpara, to hoist the League flag at the Mankachar police station. On the 16 and 17 black flag demonstrations against a minister of the Assam government were followed by acts of stone throwing and hooliganism in Karimganj town. Tempers continued to be frayed on the question of eviction of immigrants. While the League called off negotiations on the pretext that the Assam government was not serious, the Ahom inhabitants of Assam indicated that, when they would be in a position to assert their will, they would “attempt to exclude all foreigners from Upper Assam”.⁴² This position assumes importance in view of the decision of the British Cabinet to draw up plans for transfer of power ‘without any avoidable delay.’⁴³

On 18 May the Viceroy proceeded to London and the Cabinet approved the new plan for the transfer of power. On 3 June the Prime Minister issued a statement which published the proposals for the transfer of power along with the proposal and procedure of partition in Bengal and Punjab and Assam. This announcement opened an unprecedented chapter in the history of communal conflict in the subcontinent which reached a crescendo in the Sylhet Referendum and the partition of the subcontinent on 14 August 1947. The League too was getting aggressive with a section of the Muslims busy collecting food and preparing plans for defence and offence.⁴⁴ In Assam the local leaders were asked by the Central Committee of the League to use their discretion, with the Assamese Muslims of Goalpara being unfavourable towards any League-sponsored violence. The surrender of Maulvi Abul Kashem and the Divisional Commissioner’s awareness of the activities of the League in the Pakistan kila brought about temporary suspension of the hostile acts of the League. With the resignation of Abdul Hamid Khan from the position of Chairman of the North Sylhet Council of Action and the dissolution of the National Guards of the North Sylhet subdivision, there emerged signs of dissension in the leadership of the League in Sylhet. Numerous protest meetings took place against the League use of force by the administration against the League and the immigrants, with the immigrants, armed with crude weapons, shadowing the police patrol. In the Assam Valley the Congress once again became active in the formation of Seva Dals and the

training centre of the Gurkha League at Lakhimpur district. By this period, it was also becoming evident that the Jamiat-ul-Ulama was losing ground in its normal stronghold of North Sylhet. At the same time, the harassment of the Jamiat ul Ulama i-Hind workers by the supporters of the League continued unabated with the active help of the Muslim League National Guards. In the Jaintia area a movement was undertaken to convert Jamiat workers to the League's point of view. Incidentally the Jaintia area was a major stronghold of the Jamiat ul Ulama-i-Hind. The League proposed a joint meeting with the Jamiat adherents at Kanairghat but it was not attended by the Jamiat followers. Mubeswar Ali, who was the 'master' of propaganda in the Jaintia area held several meetings in the Jaintia. An office of the League was also started in the area and it was believed that a large section of the Jamiat men were either falling to coercion or persuasion and either willing to join the League or had already done so.⁴⁵

Conclusion

When the June 3rd proposals came to be circulated, the communal antagonism was so aggravated that the reaction of the community leaders to the proposal for transfer of power was one of satisfaction. They were buoyed with the feeling that they would finally be able to create an unhindered space to develop their culture unhampered. In Assam the League began to reconcile with their inability to incorporate the entire province into Pakistan and had to be content with what Jinnah called 'moth-eaten Pakistan'. Though the peasant question was quickly abandoned and the focus of the provincial Muslim League shifted its focus to the campaign at the referendum at Sylhet, there was no doubt in their minds that the League mobilization of peasantry had served its purpose. The Muslim League considered the transfer of Sylhet to East Bengal – a foregone conclusion – almost a *fait accompli*. Buoyed by the demographic structure of the district, as a Muslim Majority area, the League leaders came around to campaign in the district with renewed enthusiasm. League did not spare any effort in organising an intensive campaign. It was the last 'do or die battle', the significance of which found emphasis in the words of Muhammad Abdus Subhan, Chairman, Sylhet Pakistan Referendum Committee Calcutta who pointed out that "so the . . . last battle of Pakistan will be fought in Sylhet. The whole Muslim world is looking towards us. . .".¹ It can be argued that the mobilization of the peasants is primary in comprehending the gradual transformation of the political culture of colonial Assam and the onset of communalism in a space that had been the epitome of syncretic living. Scores of small skirmishes in the countryside were not only indicative of changing socio-economic relations but they also point towards the transformation in the peasant consciousness in colonial Assam in the twentieth century. It is important to take the influence of the 'itinerant and half educated maulvis' on the immigrant peasantry in the transformation of the political landscape of colonial Assam and the strength of the Pakistan movement in this province. This is something that needs to be taken on board to construct a comprehensive understanding of the politics of de-colonization in colonial Assam.

Notes and References

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44. *Home Pol.(I) F. R., May 1947, No.18/5/47, NAI*
45. *Ibid*, p.12
46. *Star of India*, Calcutta, July 4th Friday 1947. NMML

