

# The Role of Common People of Barak Valley of Assam in the Liberation War of Bangladesh

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## Abstract

The Barak Valley inside the state of Assam and comprising the three districts Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj played a salutary role during the liberation war of 1971. The liberation war of 1971 struck this border region with a different, intense emotion. The region, in fact, turned into a battlefield and everyone, without exception, contributed to this war of independence in his or her own way. Doctors, nurses, paramedical staff, students of nursing colleges dedicated themselves to the task of upholding the health and wellbeing of the refugees. The young generation organized meetings and protest marches. Political workers exerted pressure at the state and central levels demanding the diplomatic recognition of Bangladesh. The bureaucrats and administrators, social and professional groups, political bodies merged into the identity of liberation war, and responded fully to the call of 'Joy Bangla'.

In 1971, the simple inhabitants of Barak Valley were related in many ways to the Liberation War. In this article I shall concentrate on those critical days and nights in the light of history.

## Introduction

Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj these three districts carry the name 'Barak Valley', in the ancient and medieval periods this region was known as Cachar district. In 1971 everyday thousands of refugees entered crossing the bilateral border of Barak Valley. The waves of refugees started entering from the beginning of April 1971. Karimganj district in particular offered shelter and succour to 3 lakh refugees who had crossed over the border during these turbulent times. In fact, at one point of time, the number of refugees, who had crossed over from neighbouring East Bengal, was more than the number of local inhabitants in Karimganj. It can be claimed without any exaggeration that this entire border region gave birth to an exemplary history of humanism and empathy. Indeed, the three border districts previously mentioned also acted as an important supporting base of the historic war of liberation. Firing of guns at night, the sound of mortar shells, blackout, hiding in the trench etc. proved that the people of Barak Valley sat on a cauldron of fire. But they did not escape to safer regions. Rather, the brave residents of the Barak Valley remained linked to the war of liberation in different ways.<sup>1</sup> Countless common people responded to the magic call of 'Joy Bangla' and merged themselves with the hitherto unknown.

The organizer of the liberation war and important representative of the civil society in the Barak Valley, Atin Das, confirmed that this powerful pull and deep sense of attachment was of a different nature. Such a phenomenal confluence of hearts and souls, such a tumultuous tide of cooperation had not been experienced in the history of Barak in the past.<sup>2</sup>

In plain terms, this emotional assault affected the people of Barak valley, more or less. The cultural and creative dimension of the Barak Valley and its people was also set

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astir and enthused by the dramatic development of 1971. Artists, creative writers, theatre workers, members alert and active in cultural matters, intellectuals, teachers, housewives – all, all offered support and succour to the refugees and freedom fighters. The grassroot people living in this border region of Assam gave birth to an irresistible narrative, whose constituents were giving shelter, service rendered, assistance and humanism. It needs to be mentioned in this context that the flow of refugees from East Bengal was confined primarily to the Barak Valley.

### **The Geographical Location of Barak**

The Barak valley is an ancient human settlement. The fragmented eastern part of ‘Surama Valley’, as it was known before independence, constitutes the Barak Valley which comprises the three districts of – Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj. Though Barak Valley lies outside Bengal from the political point of view, we note that the entire region washed by Barak-Surama-Kushiara rivers which comprised the widespread Srihatta-Cachar region was known as Surama Valley.

After 1947, the original Cachar district came to be regarded as a separate district. At the same time, the Bengali dominated Srihatta-Cachar region came to be known everywhere as Barak district because of its political, economic, administrative and cultural distinction. From 1947 till 1983, this entire eastern region was known as Cachar. However, in 1983 Karimganj was turned into a subdivision based district. In 1989 Hailakandi was also promoted to the level of a subdivision based district. The Barak river, which is the main river of Barak Valley, flows through Cachar and Karimganj, and that is why this specific region acquired the geographical identity of Barak Valley. After the promotion of Hailakandi to a district level the name Barak Valley acquired a new strength and importance.

On the basis of its geographical location, the present state of Assam can be divided into three parts. These are Brahmaputra-washed Brahmaputra Valley; mountain and forest infested mountainous Assam and Barak River washed, Barak Valley. The river Brahmaputra was known as Louhitya in the ancient time, and River Barak had carried the ancient name of Barbacra. The name Barak has emerged from the two sounds ‘Bra’ and ‘Cro’ ‘Bra’ means divided and ‘cro’ means higher tributary.<sup>3</sup> The Barak River was divided into Surama and Kushiara rivers near Haritikar in Karimganj. Local people used to call this tributary of the divided river ‘Bacro’ which changed into Barak as a result of wrong pronunciations in vogue for many years.

The geographical extent of the valley is 6922 square kilometers. Out of this Cachar accounts for 3786 sq.km., Karimganj 1809 sq.km. and Hailakandi 1327 sq.km. The Barak valley constitutes 8.82 percentage of the entire, region of Assam. Its eastern longitude extends from 90.15 to 93.15 and northern latitude from 24.8 to 25.8.

### **Commitment of Barak’s Commoners in 1971**

At first the refugees were confined to Karimganj. Later, they sought shelter in Silchar, Hailakandi and Badarpur. The initial addresses of the refugees were local schools and colleges. The assistance rendered by the government was also insufficient in the early stage. But the common people of Barak did not wait for government’s help or its decision; they opened their doors for the East Bengal refugees. Along with schools and colleges, the refugees took shelter in local homes. The local inhabitants opened transit camps on the border and came forward to help the refugees, “Karimganj is in grave trouble. The poisonous smell of gunpowder floated in with the wind, it was linked to

the heartfelt cries of refugees who were assaulted by the Pakistani army. The water of the Kushiara river was polluted and poisonous, fishes were also poisonous. The markets were facing a tremendous shortage of all edibles. The limited supplies available were also infected and the fearstruck people thought that the edibles were also layered with germs and toxin.

People are coming in waves. Cholera is dancing at every door. The sounds of boots of the barbaric dacoits are coming from across the border that is why Karimganj today is always full of fear and ever awake".<sup>4</sup>

Not only Karimganj towns like Silchar, Hailakandi, Badarpur were also transformed into settlements of fear and anxiety. Though afflicted with this fear and anxiety the common people stood beside the helpless refugees and held their hands. More than a lakh refugees found shelter in 1971 in Karimganj. In fact, at one point of time, the number of refugees crossed the number of local inhabitants. Places like Nilambazar, Kaliganj, Achimganj, Latu, Mahisasan and Sutarkandi were abrim with refugees. Quite some Assistance Committees were formed in 1971 to help the refugees, to direct the relief measures and, above all, to present the logic and reason of the battle and crisis in East Bengal to the state and central governments. The biggest and the most influential of the platforms were founded by Silchar Municipal Corporation. The influential people of Silchar got together and formed the 'Bangladesh Sahayata Samiti'.<sup>5</sup>

In the first stage, temporary relief camps were raised in Government's Girl School, Normal School G.C. College, Cachar College, Narasimha Boy's School and Cachar High School. The Red Cross came forward to implement health improvement measures among the refugees. Large camps were set up in Swadeshi School or Dinanath Naba Kishore Girl's School. Political refugees were accommodated in this girl's school. Along with the municipal employees, Primary School Sikshak Sammilani, CRU, India Medical Association, Silchar branch, Cachar Club, Cachar Lawyer's Association and more than hundred other organisations tied themselves to the cause of liberation war in several ways. In the first stage or at the beginning, the number of refugees in Silchar was a trifle less, so the Silchar organizations went to Karimganj to implement their relief programmes. They also sent help and materials primarily to the transit camps operating in Latu, Patharkandi, Sutarkandi, Mahisasan. From the month of May 1971 waves and waves of refugees came to Silchar.<sup>6</sup> As in Silchar, varied relief programmes were implemented in Karimganj, Hailakandi and Badarpur.

On April 1, 1971, Karimganj Bangladesh Relief Committee was formed by distinguished people of Karimganj. Its president was Surendra Chandra Deb and Secretary Manmatha Nath Dutta. The Relief Committee of Karimganj distributed leaflets among the common people which appealed to them to come forward and help the refugees.<sup>7</sup>

### **Shelter for Refugees and Assistance**

Atin Das was the prime organiser of the liberation war in Barak Valley in 1971. Commenting on the grassroots' association with the liberation war he said, "Apart from the government's help and cooperation, the way in which the people of India extended their helpful hand at the citizens' level was something unique and phenomenal. No comparable depth or extent of this kind of cooperation was to be found in the past. They bore the responsibility in spite of their manifold limitations. Not only shelter was

given to more than ten million refugees, but also varied logistic support had to be given to the freedom fighters at the non-government level".<sup>8</sup>

In this context, one should not forget that cooperation at the government level was limited in the first phase of the liberation war. Even before the state and centre could decide on the quantum and nature of assistance, the common people of Assam including of course those who lived in Barak Valley came forward to help the refugees who had come from East Bengal.

Karimganj Merchant Association was the first organisation in Cachar which came forward to give assistance in every way possible. When, in the beginning of April, thousands entered Karimganj through Latu, Mahisasan and Sutarkandi, the Merchant Association opened a temporary camp or shelter at the Sutarkandi border and provided food to those who had crossed over. Expressing deep sympathy for the people of Bangladesh in those darkest days, the traders of Karimganj instead of spending money on sweetmeats on Pahela Baishak, Akhay Tiritiya and Rathajatra contributed the money thus saved to ameliorate the plight of the refugees – that was the humane decision they took.<sup>9</sup>

The President of Silchar Merchant Association, Arabinda Dutta Chaudhuri, used to collect vests, lungis, thread, hair oil, soap, biscuit and medicine. The Cachar Merchant Association contributed Rs. 1, 062/- to the Prime Minister Relief Fund in the month of August.<sup>10</sup> An organisation of Hailakandi named "Maitri" worked for the welfare of women and children who had crossed over. Members of this organisation went from door to door and collected Rs. 368.<sup>11</sup> Food was bought for children who were at the Hailakandi border with the money donated and was distributed among the children.

The Karimganj branch of the State Electricity Board decided to contribute one day's salary to help the refugees. As per this decision, the employees of the Karimganj branch donated their one day's salary in July. Rs. 425 thus collected was converted into a bank draft and given to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi when she was touring Karimganj.

The employees of Hailakandi State Electricity Board also donated one day's salary to further the cause of the liberation war. The employees – officers and clerks – of Cachar Municipal Corporation also donated one day's salary to the Chief Minister's Relief Fund; the amount raised was Rs. 2800.<sup>12</sup> At the initiative of the Cachar Club, its members raised a Relief Fund to help the refugees. The members called upon the affluent class and common people to contribute. The money thus collected was used partly to hand over cash doles and partly on other necessary items given to refugees living in Silchar and Karimganj. Nutritious food was supplied to the relief camps of Patharkandi and Sonakhira.<sup>13</sup>

The commoners living in Ratbari in Karimganj extended assistance to the refugees. The Ratbari police station in association with Bangladesh Sahayak Samiti took the initiative to form a corpus fund for the refugees. Members of this beneficial group went from door to door to collect money and they also organised a cultural function on May 30. Held at Ramkrishnanagar, this function concentrated on dance and songs and also on Kabigan (soiree of poets).<sup>14</sup> At the initiative of Hailakanti Mahila Samiti, Rs. 1000 was raised for the refugees. Rita Bhowmick, on behalf of the Samiti, donated this sum to the Chief Minister's Relief Fund.<sup>15</sup>

The Cachar Sikshak Sammilani was the first organisation to initiate a consolidated and comprehensive move to help the refugees. The members of this Samiti, without any exception, decided to donate their one day's wage for the great and human cause. The Higher Secondary Cachar Sikshak Sammilan and College Sikshak Samiti also adopted several other programmes to help the refugees. Rabindra Kumar Deb, general secretary on behalf of the Karimganj Mohkuma Prathamik Sikshak Sammilani, collected Rs. 1001 and sent it to the Chief Minister Mohendra Mohan Chaudhury. On October 5, the Chief Minister acknowledged this donation and sent a message of goodwill to the secretary of the Sammilani.

In order to help in the massive relief work undertaken, school teachers at the primary level of education collected Rs. 1001. These teachers had decided to donate their one day's salary to assist the refugees. The secretary of the Sikshak Samiti, Akram Ali, gave the money collected (Rs. 1001) to the Relief Fund.<sup>16</sup>

The teachers' organisation of Higher and Higher Secondary Education, which received aid from the Karimganj local government, donated Rs. 1501 to the Prime Minister's Relief Fund.<sup>17</sup> Also, the district-aided Higher and Higher Secondary School Sikshak Samiti contributed Rs. 1500 to the Prime Minister's Relief Fund.<sup>18</sup>

The students of Badarpur Nabinchandra College collected 26 saris, 92 pants, 46 blouses, three petticoats, 6 trousers, 24 vests, 6 sweaters, 5 coats and 1 hat and donated these to the representative of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. All these selfless initiatives undertaken by the teachers of Silchar, Karimganj, Hailakandi and Baradpur remain perhaps as the most glorious example of the commoners' engagement and commitment. Moreover, Dhubri Primary School, Dhubri Higher Secondary School, Cachar College, Silchar Higher Secondary School, Normal School, G.C. College, Narsimha Boy's School, Government Girls School, Dinanath Naba Kishore Girls School, Hailakandi High School and teachers of Badarpur College – all these educational institutions donated their one day's salary for the cause of the refugees. On the other hand, to supplement the monetary subscription of the school and college teachers, students went from door to door to collect money to increase the amount of the relief fund. Students of G.C. College in Silchar went from door to door to collect old clothes for the refugees. It also needs to be mentioned that the students of the Narasimha Boy's School abjured their daily tiffin and the money saved therefrom (Rs. 300), they donated to the Relief Fund.<sup>19</sup> Twenty Students of a primary school of Hailakandi donated their old books, exercise books, pens, school bags to twenty students living in the local relief camp.<sup>20</sup> In short, schools, and colleges, teachers and students displayed another type of glorious commitment and intense empathy. The non-teaching staff also stepped in and those of this category working at Cachar College, Badarpur College, Karimganj Teachers Training College, Karimganj College and Silchar Normal School contributed their one day's wage for the betterment of the refugees.

In order to extend even more help and assistance, in particular to the creative persons among the refugees, Karimganj District Mahila Samiti staged Tagore's dance drama 'Chandalika'. Rs. 300 was raised from this cultural programme and it was given to help the artistes among the refugees.<sup>21</sup> On November 11, a cultural evening was presented at the auditorium of the Karimganj College. Moreover, at the initiative of the Swadhin Bangladesh Sahayak Samiti (Silchar), two cultural functions were held on November 13 and 14. Silchar DSO's (District Sports' Organisation) lawn was the venue of these cultural functions and the creative group Jatrik organized the shows,

with the help of Pintu Datta and Arun Banerji. The famous singer Manna De performed in these functions and along with him Tarun Banerjee, Manju Banerjee, Kamal Sen, Neelkanta Nandi, Nimu Mukherjee, Pradip Ganguly, Khokan Mukherjee, Amar Datta and many others also participated. Finally, the refugee-artist Arati Roy and two artistes of Bangladesh Betar also performed.<sup>22</sup> A great number of the enthusiastic audience purchased tickets to gain admission and enjoyed the cultural presentations thoroughly.

### **Pressure exerted on state and central governments**

A hartal was observed on March 29 at Hailakandi to protest against the barbaric genocide taking place in Bangladesh. A big meeting was organised at the local Townhall where close to 500 persons were present. In that meeting, those who participated, appealed to the Indian Prime Minister to grant diplomatic recognition to East Bengal. At the end an effigy of Yahyah Khan was burnt.<sup>23</sup>

At the initiative of the Karimganj District Youth Congress, a people's meeting took place in the lawn of the High Madrasa which voiced support for the liberation war being fought in East Bengal. Again, on March 29, a full scale hartal was observed in Karimganj.<sup>24</sup> On the very same day, in the late afternoon, Students' Federation, College Union and other outfits organized a meeting in which support was declared for the war in East Bengal. On the very same day, the local Independent Students Society conveyed their heartfelt support to the liberation war fighters battling in Bangladesh.

Kaliganj and Achimganj observed hartal on March 30. A total hartal was observed on March 29 in Silchar. In order to express full and vocal support for the fighters in Bangladesh and also to support the hartals that were being observed, two massive student processions were organised by Cachar College and G.C.College. Local students of schools and colleges took part in this agitation. The students voiced the demand that India should stand beside the war of liberation – the demand was addressed to Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister. Cachar Students' Union, Teachers Committee, Workers Guild supported the hartal. Not even a single rickshaw came out in Silchar on the day of hartal. The local newspaper 'Arunoday' published a report on these protests with the headline 'We are beside you'. The student committee demanded the opening of the bilateral border and all out support for the fighting forces in Bangladesh.

A total hartal was observed in Karimganj's Nilambazar from 5 a.m. to afternoon 2 p.m. on April 5. Again, in order to condemn the hellish torture that was being perpetrated in Bangladesh, a full day hartal was observed at Sutarkandi, Fakirer Bazar, Jarer Bazar and Nayabazar. On April 10, in order to express sympathy, support and solidarity, hartal was observed in Batyia Bazar.<sup>25</sup> The students of the local Senior Madrasa also organized a strike. A massive procession marched on the streets to protest against the genocide in East Bengal. At a big public meeting held in the market at 4 p.m., an appeal was directed to powers-that-be to recognize the free and independent Bangladesh government.

On March 29, a hartal was observed in Latu where schools and shops remained closed. Students came out in a lively procession to protest against the massacre in Bangladesh. Hartal was also observed at Badarpur, Nilambazar and Katigoray. All these hartals, meetings and processions had one single agenda – grant recognition to

Bangladesh and support the liberation war in all ways possible, including military intervention.

I have consulted the newspapers ‘Arunoday’ and ‘Ajoy’ published from Silchar, ‘Jugashakti’ and, ‘Dristipat’ published from Karimganj, ‘Purbayan’ published from Hailakandi. In these papers I found, that the maximum number of editorials was devoted to Bangladesh. These editorials underlined the common desire of the people living in Barak Valley and the desire was fullscale support for Bangladesh. This included “We want India to give arms and training, we want a fitting reply to be given to the Pakistani army which had assaulted Cachar. In fact, the underlined message was, History will not forgive us if we do not stand behind and beside Bangladesh”.<sup>26</sup>

On June 28, students of Karimganj College organized a protest meeting and march to demand political recognition of Bangladesh. At same day Karimganj Teachers’ Association organised a protest meeting in which a proposal was drafted at the behest of all who attended.<sup>28</sup> This proposal expressed full-throated support for the freedom fighters in Bangladesh.

### **Efforts taken to create an international public opinion**

The common people of Barak Valley submitted a memorandum to Indira Gandhi in which a fervent appeal was made to stop the barbaric atrocity of the Pakistani army in Bangladesh. This memorandum requested Mrs. Gandhi to discuss the crisis of Bangladesh with world’s top political leaders and to raise the subject for debate at the United Nations.

Fifteen distinguished residents of Silchar published a statement on June 24 in the weekly ‘Arunoday’ where they appealed for the intervention of the UNO.<sup>29</sup>

The college teachers of Karimganj, on August 18, formed a human chain to protest against the liaison of China and USA which directly opposed the fight for freedom. The role of the imperialist USA which took the side of Pakistan was vehemently condemned.<sup>30</sup>

### **The Emancipation of Mujib**

A large assemblage was organised at Englar Bazar in Karimganj in which Mujib’s release and freedom was demanded. Saukat Ali Laskar was the President of this assemblage and quite some citizens delivered fervent lectures demanding the freedom of Mujib. A resolution was passed in this huge meeting. This resolution said that by imprisoning Mujib for a long period, the Pakistani powers-that-be were planning a secret trial in which Mujib would be condemned to death. The resolution further said that this conspiracy was primarily meant to assassinate Sheik Mujibur Rahman. Indeed, the great ideal of Islam was being trampled in the process. What is most unfortunate is that a few great powers were inciting this course of action. A sense of fear and terror enveloped the minds of the commoners because the UNO had not taken a single step to thwart this tragic and violent outcome till then. A demand was articulated in which the Indian government was urged to exert all forms of pressure to ensure the speedy release of Mujib.<sup>31</sup>

Fifteen women observed the Roza in 1971 in Achimganj to underline the dire need to release Mujib. This information was given by Professor Kamaluddin who taught at Karimganj College.<sup>32</sup> After a thorough search and investigation one woman was spotted in Karimganj who had observed the Roza. Professor Kamal took us to this

woman. My emotional query was – why did you observe the Roja and thereby demand the freedom of Mujib ? A downright, simple housewife, Asma Khatun, gave the reason in detail whose essence was “we were severely shocked and heartbroken to learn that the Pakistani army in East Bengal indulged in unspeakable cruelty and persecution. We were given all these news by refugee women who had crossed over. A family from Sylhet was given shelter in our house and its members described this pain and torture inflicted on Bengali woman. We were rendered speechless on hearing these news. A 16-year old daughter of this family, however, repeatedly said the tide will turn, Bangladeshis would be free and they would be able to go back to their homes. “Sheik Mujib will certainly bring freedom to our country”. My trust and faith were strengthened by her statement. That is why 15 women of our locality observed Roja in order to demand the unconditional release of Mujib. We went to Allah’s court and there raised our hands demanding the liberty of Mujib.<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, such a resolution adopted by Asma Khatun and her comrades, such warmth and love inspired the Barak Valley in 1971. The air was rent by slogans and processions whose one-point agenda was ‘Free Sheik Mujibur Rahman’. The students of Karimganj High Madrasa organised a protest march to demand the freedom of Mujib. On April 22, 1971, a special ovation was organised at the temple of Kalibari Ghat in Silchar.<sup>34</sup>The demand voiced there was “Free Mujib”. In short, Mujib and Joy Bangla became one and indivisible in the Barak Valley. A statue of Mujib was sculpted at Nilambazar. On August 8, at the initiative of the students and youths of Hailakandi, a day underlining the urgency to release Mujib was observed.

### **Health Service**

Silchar Medical College, Karimganj Civil Hospital, Hailakandi District Hospital, other hospitals and health centres, doctors and nurses became a part and parcel of the liberation war in another sense. Limitless love was displayed when the medical staff and workers attended to the freedom fighters and refugees. Indeed, the entire Barak Valley witnessed another heartfelt union between the medical workers and the East Bengal people. Refugees were shot from behind by the Pakistani soldiers, they had been injured in the process of their escape to Barak Valley, but they found their genuine benefactors in the doctors, nurses and medical workers in the Barak region. Not only a huge number of bullet-struck freedom fighters were attended to in love and empathy, but also medicines and medical facilities were sent to embattled Bangladesh.

Many injured freedom fighters were treated at Karimganj, Hailakandi and Silchar. The Silchar Medical College, in particular, attended to many many freedom fighters struck by bullets. Details of such crucial medical service are to be found in the medical registers of those days outlining the treatment rendered to many mukhtiyodhas. For better and more effective treatment, many went to Kolkata, Gauhati and Mumbai – descriptions of such referrals are also to be found in the register books.<sup>35</sup>

Dr. Nalinaksha Chaudhuri, Dr. H.K. Das Biswas, S.P. Nath, Manijendra Shyam, B. Bhattacharjee also played crucial roles in the sphere of medical service. In this context, Dr. Manijendra Shyam, deserves a special mention. During the 9-month long Liberation War he went to one house after another to help the refugees, without accepting single taka as fee.<sup>36</sup>

The doctors appealed to the Cachar Medical Representative Association and responding to this appeal the Association donated large amounts of medicine, free of cost, to the doctors and hospitals. The Cachar Mahila Samiti also played an important role in this sphere.<sup>37</sup>

Eight temporary primary medical centres were established in Karimganj. Kalibari Gate, Latu, Mahisasan, Lakshimbazar, Nafasayin, Sarisha and Mobarakpur were the entry points of refugees.

### **Evaluation**

When the wave of people's protest and resistance swelled in East Bengal -- during its earliest phase-- the people of Barak Valley responded with emotional fervour. The common people of the Barak Valley expressed solidarity with the brave freedom fighters and with the latter's dream to create an independent Bangladesh based on nationalism socialism and secularism. When hundreds of refugees entered the Barak Valley from the many points of the border in Karimganj, they were enveloped in a limitless love displayed by the common people of Barak. In fact, the local residents embraced the refugees with fervour. The media in Barak, in particular the newspapers and the civil society prepared the ground for this communion.

It is true that the influx of thousands of refugees and their border-based locations in Barak multiplied the cost of necessary objects manifold. The general life of the people in Cachar was severally affected because of this unnatural hike in prices. The impact of this price rise affected the lives of hundreds of refugees and also the lives of the local people. In spite of this terrible price rise, the common people of Cachar sent rice, pulse, salt, dried food and medicines to the fighters battling in warzones. Most schools and colleges were closed in this tense and turbulent phase because the refugees were accommodated there. Indeed, the maximum closure took place in Karimganj in 1971 to provide living space to the refugees. The educational institutions of Silchar, Karimganj and Hailakandi for all practical purposes, downed their shutters. A plan was prepared, according to which, schools in Silchar decided to open in the month of June. This decision was taken because by then quite some refugee camps had been constructed by the government. But the ceaseless inflow of refugees stood in the way, the schools remained as refugee-centers.

In any other part of the world, such ceaseless inflow of refugees would have created tension and unrest. But the Barak Valley remained as an exception, it exhibited a different type of love, cooperation, empathy and solidarity. In fact, this tremendous pressure of the refugees severely affected the daily lives of the local people. Sanitation, water supply, medical service, rail connections were jeopardized. On top of it there was subversion and the fear of Pakistani shelling. But the people of Barak ignored all these severe problems and pulled close to their hearts the lakhs of refugees who had crossed over from East Bengal. Indeed, what transpired during this phase was a union of hearts.

### **Conclusion**

But why this expression of abiding by humanism? Was it the common language that forged an unbreakable bond between the outsiders and the indigenous? From Latu and Mahisasan to Silchar, Hailakandi, Karimganj, Kalimganj or Achimganj – everywhere all stratum of people (commoners, politicians, administration, intellectuals) wanted to explore the reason for this spectacular solidarity. Many

reasons were given but there remained two constant reasons in the foreground. One was the pull of the country that had been left behind which accounted for the massive cooperation and the other common language. These two causes together prepared the region for the people's war.

The prime organiser of the liberation war in Barak, Atin Das, was asked about this total and absolute love and devotion. He said, "I have come from East Bengal and this pull of my roots ignited the blood of revolution in me".<sup>38</sup> Another organiser, Taramani Chaudhuri, responded to the crucial query by saying, "I am a permanent resident of Silchar; for sixteen generations my family has lived here. What stirred me into action was sheer humanism."<sup>39</sup>

Jalil Mia, a farmer, toiling in the Sutarkandi border, had this to say, "The women have described the torture and persecution heaped on them in such a way, that after hearing it, it was impossible on our part to support Pakistan. That is why I stood beside East Bengal, in spite of my Muslim identity".<sup>40</sup> Nitish Bhattacharjee of Hailakandi wrote in 'Purbayan', "On this side we have Karimganj, on the other side Jakiganj. In between these two flows the Kushiara river, 1971 incited us to forget the differences between these two shores. We have awakened now; this awakening is for the victory of Bengal".<sup>41</sup>

In the midst of such great unrest and war, this incomparable example of supporting the nationalist movement of another country is of course rare. The common people of Barak silently digested the sky high problems and difficulties and also the phase of this great unrest.

In the course of my field survey I interviewed many persons. Some asserted that the local Muslims of Barak opposed the formation of a Bangladeshi nation. They said that the local Muslims had nothing to do with the refugees and relief work. Atin Das, Nitish Bhattacharjee, Nisith Ranjan De and many others said that let alone help and assistance, the local Muslims tried to spread unrest in 1971. The continuous subversion, this location in the rail service, explosion of bombs bear testimony to this opposition. I asked many interviewees, "How could more than three lakh refugees gain shelter here in Barak if local Muslim were so much against them. One has to admit that the local Muslim population in Barak, is sizable, to say the least?"

Indeed, the border district of Karimganj is entirely peopled by Muslims. How could then one explain the shelter that was provided to refugees in house after house in Karimganj?

Imamuddin Bulbul, the senior journalist of Karimganj, Mujib Swadeshi, Taramani Chaudhuri, Muzzamil Ali and many others with whom I spoke gave me the impression that a oneway critique of Muslim attitude and action is basically baseless. In the pages of the newspapers and magazines published in Barak in 1971; in fact, in almost every page, there were news of Muslim shopkeepers, businessmen and family members helping the refugees. Marches, processions, meetings were held in Muslim-majority areas and the formation of the Sahayak Samiti was the result of a joint initiative taken by Muslims and Hindus, who stood fervently beside East Bengal. Some refugees in disguise with the help of Muslim extremists, perpetrated some acts of subversion in 1971. Nothing more than that.

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