

Did you know?

MAJORITY of Bangladeshis living in the UK have family who originated from the Sylhet district of Bangladesh. We all know where Sylhet is, many of us have even visited the district and majority of Bangladeshis living in the UK speak Sylheti. But how much do we actually know about Sylhet - the valley of winding rivers and terraced tea gardens? Sylhet Times has selected a few facts about Sylhet that you will not normally have been taught during history class at high school.

Sylhet was known in the ancient time as Shilhat, the capital city of the Kingdom of Gaur or otherwise known as the 'enriched marketplace.' It was the commercial hub during the ancient period.

During the early medieval period, the district was inhabited by Indo-Aryan Brahmins, though ethnically the population would also have traces of Munda, Asamese, and Dravidian ancestry.

During this period Sylhet was ruled primarily by local chieftains as viceroy of the kings of Pragjyatispur. This was a period of relative prosperity and there is little evidence to suggest this was marred by wars or feuds.

Sylhet was certainly known by the rest of India, and is even referred to in the ancient Hindu sacred Tantric text, the Shakti Sangama Tantra, as 'Silhatta'. The last chieftain to reign in Sylhet was Govinda of Gaur, also known as Gaur Govinda.

The 14th century marked the beginning of Islamic influence in Sylhet. In 1303, the great Saint Hazrat Shah Jalal came to Sylhet from Delhi with a band of 360 disciples to preach Islam. He defeated the then Raja Gour Gobinda and Sylhet thus became a district of saints and shrines.

Shah Jalal died in Sylhet in 1350. His tomb is located inside the parameter of the mosque complex known as Dargah-e-Shah Jalal. Even today Shah Jalal remains revered; visitors arrive from all over Bangladesh and beyond to pay homage at his tomb. It is believed he transformed the witchcraft followers of the Raja into catfishes, which are still alive in the tank adjacent to the shrine swords. The Quran and the robes of the saint are still preserved in the shrine.

Saints including Shah Jalal were responsible for the conversion of majority of the population in the district from Hinduism to Islam. Sylhet became a centre of Islam in Bengal and during this era of Muslim rule, Sylhet was often referred to as Jalalabad in official documents and historical accounts.

In the late 18th century, the British East India Company became interested in Sylhet and saw it as an area of strategic importance in the war against Burma. Sylhet gradually was absorbed into British control and administration and was governed as a part of Bengal.

After the British administrative reorganisation of India, Sylhet was eventually incorporated into Assam. It remained a part of Assam for the rest of the era of British rule. In 1947, following a referendum, almost all of erstwhile Sylhet became a part of East Pakistan, barring the Karimganj subdivision which was incorporated into the new Indian state of Assam.

In 1971, Sylhet became part of the newly formed independent country of Bangladesh.

