Chapter I

Introducing Sylhet: historical outline, research concerns, and others

There were reasons for which we had it painfully uprooted
and now the gap of the missing tooth
is an embarrassing memory in the mouth

But the tongue is a child
Habitually searching for a world where it is not

Nabanita Kanungo, 2008a.

Having come a long way since that blazing and busy summer of 2006, this work of sociology which attempted to map the coordinates of Sylheti community in post-partition India grew out of multiple encounters and experiences both personal and otherwise. Drawing upon the preceding discussion it is only worthwhile therefore, to critically reflect upon say, ways by which the work delineated its objectives, and the method(s) it adopted to approach the community. It would do well to ask for instance, what was the journey like or which route(s) the work walked upon? How did it weave together the insights drawn from multi-sited fieldwork? How did the work address my subject position not just as a researcher but also as a member of Sylheti community? Finally, did the work successfully “strike” the imagination as noted earlier, of contemporary social science in India? Before answers to such queries are found and addressed, it is only imperative to have an idea of the political history of Sylhet beginning from 1874 up until referendum and partition. Therefore, this two sectioned chapter begins by introducing – with support of secondary sources – to the reader the significant aspects of that political history upon which this work is crucially hinged. However, it does that by starting off with a quick look at pre-colonial history of the region. The second section rather elaborately situates the work and its concerns and most importantly, the methods adopted to bring those to fruition. Needless to say, this section obviously attempts along the way to make sense of the questions and issues mentioned above, and it also following the conventional structure of introductory chapters, outlines the main contents of subsequent chapters including the concluding one.
1.0: Sylhet: a historical outline

Due to lack of availability of reliable sources notes the eminent historian Sujit Choudhury, it is indeed an uphill task to put together an authentic account of the ancient and medieval histories of Sylhet, a region on the eastern part of Indian subcontinent. He (2006) suggests that its earliest inhabitants belonged to the Austro speech community, and practised a form of underdeveloped or Jhum cultivation. It was only around fifth century that the process of Aryanization began in the region accompanied by growth of plough cultivation and settled mode of existence. Ruled by local chieftains and kings, evidence of state formation in Sylhet region may be traced back to seventh-tenth century. The earliest historical evidence found in Nidhanpur Copper Plate (discovered twelve miles from Karimganj town in Nidhanpur village of Panchakhanda pargana) issued by King Bhaskaravarma of Kamrupa in seventh century shows the advent of more than two hundred Hindu Brahmans who were given generous land grants by the king to settle in an administrative unit equivalent to a modern district called Chandrapuri Vishaya. After seventh century the rule of Kamrupa kings ceased in Sylhet, and the region subsequently came under the rulers of Banga Samatata region. Both Kalapur Copper Plate issued by Samatata king Marundanatha (found in Sylhet) in late seventh century and Lokanatha Copper Plate issued by king Lokanatha (found in Comilla) around the same time suggests that boundaries of their kingdoms stretched from Comilla to Sylhet, and Jatinga in Cachar. However, it was Paschimbhag Copper Plate (found in Sylhet) issued by Vangiya (Bengali) king Srichandra of Bikrampur in tenth century that recognized, and established Sylhet as a distinct geographical and political entity. Deciphered by the noted historian Kamalakanta Gupta, it also settled the debate over location of Chandrapuri Vishaya by showing that the district incorporated in its territory major portions of Karimganj, Maulavi Bazar and Habiganj sub-divisions of (Srihattamandala) Sylhet. In fact, copper plates in general and Paschimbhag Copper Plate in particular remains the most important source of early socio-political and economic history of eastern Bengal and Surma-Barak Valley [see for example, Choudhury 2000, 2004; Morrison 1970]. The subsequent Bhatera Copper Plates I&II (found in Sylhet) issued by kings Govinda Keshab Dev and Ishan Dev in eleventh-twelfth century reaffirm the existence of Sylhet as a distinct rajya or sovereign territory. With gradual decline of Srihattarajya chieftains of smaller kingdoms of
Laur, Gaur and Jaintiya started vying with each other for political control of the region. The region passed under control of the Turko-Afghan sultan Shams-ud-din Firoz Shah of Bengal around thirteenth-fourteenth century. His deputy Sikandar Khan Ghazi aided by disciples of the Arab saint Hazrat Shah Jalal conquered, and heralded the advent of Islam in Sylhet. According to David Ludden: ‘A patchwork of territories had emerged by 1303, when Shah Jalal conquered local rajas and established Islam in Sylhet, creating a new Muslim boundary. When the traveller Ibn Batuta met Shah Jalal, in 1346, the Sylhet landscape held diverse territories of Khasis, Garos, Hindus, Muslims and others’ [2003a:51; also see Ali 1970; Ludden 2003b, 2003c]. Sylhet became part of Mughal Empire and emerged as a frontier town of its Bengal Suba (province) in 1612. With British East India Company acquiring Diwani of Bengal in 1765 the region came under its administration, and the adjoining regions of Assam and Cachar were annexed to British territory respectively in 1826 and 1832.

Out of the ‘unwieldy’ Bengal Presidency Assam districts as a division was separated and clubbed with Cachar, Goalpara, Garo Hills and the other hill districts to create a new Chief Commissioner’s province on 6 February 1874. However, as a new province with inadequate revenue potential Assam could hardly take up the responsibility of governance. ‘To make it financially viable, the authorities therefore decided in September to incorporate into it the populous, Bengali-speaking district of Sylhet which historically as well as ethnically, was an integral part of Bengal’[Guha1977:27; also see Ahmed 1999; Allen et al 1993; Gait 2006]. Indeed, in 1874 the situation changed for the Assamese as well as Bengalis of Sylhet and Cachar, the latter being an adjoining district of Sylhet with a large Bangla speaking population. Claiming to be racially, linguistically and above all culturally different from the Assamese, Bengalis of Sylhet (and Cachar) resented the prospect of being in Assam. ‘While the official world held divergent views on the question of the creation of Assam Chief Commissionership and the redistribution of districts and divisions, the public opinion of the areas affected was united in condemning the measure. Neither the press nor the people of these areas acquiesced in this decision’ [Neogy 1987:120]. The newspaper Banga Bandhu for instance, opined that the government had acted ‘unwisely in including Sylhet and Cachar in the Assam Commission’ [cited in Ibid.:121]. For the colonial state however, the foremost concern was to find an ‘inexpensive and effective way’ to administer the area covering Assam districts, and
'considerations of historical continuity or cultural contiguity' were far from their minds [Baruah 1999:25]. To the Assamese, creation of the new province spelt both hope and despair. While on one hand for the first time among others, Assam(ese) would be officially free from being administered by Bengal[is], viewed as "extension of Denva", and other Assamese
identity, on the other, Assamese and English speaking people of Sylhet (and Cachar) in it would act as an obstacle towards the realization of that desire. For people of Sylhet (and Cachar) transfer to Assam meant their formal disassociation with Bengal. Both Hindus and Muslims of Sylhet appealed to the Viceroy in August 1874 for retention of the district in Bengal. The protest was based on:

['The cultural identity and historical association that Sylhet had with Bengal and the disadvantages of Sylhet's being yoked with a "backward" region. They further apprehended that the district would have to put up with laws and institutions inferior to what it had been accustomed to in Bengal under the permanent settlement [Guha 1977:27; also see Bhattacharjee 1989a].

The government of India refused to accede to the request of retention but in a letter dated 5 September 1874 it assured petitioners 'that there would be no change whatever in the system of law and judicial procedure under which the inhabitants of Sylhet had hitherto lived, nor in the principles which applied throughout Bengal to the settlement and collection of land revenue' ['Letter from Government of Assam', No.Pol-1917-5585, dated 30 October 1924, 1947: 01]. But despite the assurance protests continued in public media. Kristodas Pal, the editor of Hindu Patriot 'echoed the sentiments of the Bengalis when he stated that Sylhet was the golden calf which was being sacrificed for the new idol called the province of Assam' [cited in Guha 1977:28]. For next thirty one years Sylhet remained in Assam and number Bengalis (mainly of Sylhet) in it steadily increased and that was evident among others, in the high representation of Bengalis not only in service sector but also in other institutional bodies [see for instance, Barpujari 2004b; Baruah 1999; Datta Ray 1978; Guha 1977]. In 1905, with partition of Bengal and formation of the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam much to Sylhet's (and Cachar's) desire it was reunited with Bengal districts. However, after a brief interlude:

[When the announcement of the dissolution of that province in December 1911 threatened again to separate Sylhet from Eastern Bengal an agitation was immediately set on foot for the incorporation of Sylhet in Bengal instead of in the reconstituted...
province of Assam. Hindu educated opinion was, and has remained, generally in favour of re-union with Bengal. Muhammadans who had at first supported the agitation for inclusion in Bengal realized that continuance in Assam was to the interest of district and of their community [Letter from Government of Assam, No.Pol-1917-5585, dated 30 October 1924, 1947:01; also see Bhattacharjee 2000; Kar 1990].

It is to be noted that general Muslim opinion in Sylhet was always in favour of reunion with Bengal right since 1874. Views on that began to get divided around 1910, and gathered momentum amongst its middle class political leadership in particular in 1920’s. Interpreting a remark made in 1926 by Dewan Wasil Choudhury, a representative from Sylhet in Assam Legislative Council regarding distinction between Bengalis and Sylhetis Sanjib Baruah says:

[w]hile by and large the population of Sylhet were by then incorporated into the powerful Calcutta-centered nationalism of Bengal and thought of themselves as Bengalis, the notion of Sylheti being distinct from Bengali had not disappeared. Perhaps more significantly, in this usage it probably overlapped with the growing Hindu-Muslim cleavage; Choudhury’s term “Sylheti” probably mostly referred to the Muslim inhabitants of the district [1999:42 (emphasis mine); also see Bhattacharjee 1989a; Dutta 2000; Kar 1990; Nag 2000].

Be that as it may, the annulment of partition of Bengal in 1912 and restoration of Sylhet to Assam witnessed a fresh wave of protest from inhabitants of the former. By 1920’s organizations such as Sylhet Peoples’ Association and Sylhet-Bengal Reunion League mobilized public opinion and demanded incorporation of the district in Bengal ['History of Agitation for Reunion of Sylhet with Bengal', All India Congress Committee Files, No.3, 1945:02; also see Bhattacharjee 2000; Choudhury 1982; Dutta 2000; Nag 1990]. Anticipating serious political consequences, the imperial government rejected almost with finality appeals and proposals of people of Surma Valley (Sylhet and Cachar) for territorial and linguistic reorganization of the provinces of Assam and Bengal. The provincial government of Bengal at the same time expressed its unwillingness to consider the issue of reunion because: a) there was no ‘live demand’ in Bengal for it b) other districts like Manbhum in Bihar and Orissa would make similar demands and c) sentiment alone of the people of Sylhet (and not Bengal) could not be a valid and pressing cause for such a serious demand ['Letters from Government of Bengal’, Nos.635-P., and 1197-D.D dated 15 January
1925 and 28 August 1925, 1947:02&17; also see Map 1.0]. Bangla speaking Sylhetis perhaps felt let down by the lack of enthusiasm for reunion amongst their counterparts in Bengal. As Khan Bahadur A.A Choudhury (of Sylhet) observed in 1920:

[n]ot a single cry has come from Bengal in our aid. As far as I am aware, there has been no systematic movement from Bengal to take us in their midst, what does it indicate? Does it not indicate that we want to mix with people who have no sympathy for us? This reminds me of an old Bengali proverb i.e. “I shed tears for my brother, but my brother sheds no tears for me” [cited in M. Kar 1990:119].

By the time the decision to partition India came through, sentiments and views of people of Assam which by now was a Governor’s province were sharply divided along linguistic and religious lines. In his 3 June 1947 statement the Viceroy argued:

Though Assam is predominantly a non-Muslim province, the district of Sylhet which is contiguous to Bengal is predominantly Muslim. There has been a demand that in the event of the partition of Bengal, Sylhet should be amalgamated with the Muslim part of Bengal. Accordingly, if it is decided that Bengal should be partitioned, a referendum will be held in Sylhet under the aegis of the Governor-General and in consultation with the Assam provincial Government to decide whether the district of Sylhet should continue to form part of Assam province or should be amalgamated with the new province East Bengal if that province agrees. If the referendum results in favour of amalgamation with East Bengal, a Boundary Commission with terms similar to those for the Punjab and Bengal will be set-up to demarcate areas of Sylhet district and contiguous Muslim majority areas of adjoining districts which will then be transferred to East Bengal. The rest of Assam will, in any case, continue to [remain] in India [cited in Mansergh et al 1982:92; also see Map 1.1]

In defense of the decision to hold a referendum in Sylhet the Viceroy remarked that people of Sylhet district would now be able to ‘decide their fate themselves’. Requests and pleas to re-think and stall the decision were ignored by the colonial state; memoranda from various political organizations backed by Congress, caste and linguistic communities including tea-garden workers of Surma Valley poured in for retention of the district in Assam. Unlike Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Hind, Muslim League remained steadfast in its decision to not allow Sylhet go out of the proposed Pakistan scheme; the community of scheduled castes though inspired by the famous Jogendra Mandal to join hands with League remained somewhat divided on the issue.
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Map 1.0: Surma Valley Division (Sylhet and Cachar) of Assam, 1931

Source: The Imperial Gazetteer Atlas of India (reprint) Volume. XXVI, Delhi, 1931.
Chapter I
Map 1.1: Sylhet district on the eve of referendum and partition, 1947

Source: Paul Choudhury 1992
The Schedule Caste voters were wooed by the Congress as well as the League. Most of the League leaders appealed to them to vote for joining Pakistan. Sri Jogendra Mandal, a member of the Interim Government, arrived in Sylhet before the referendum and urged schedule caste voters to join the move for Sylhet's amalgamation with Pakistan. However though a large number of schedule caste voters felt the same, a few thought otherwise. The Assam Schedule Caste Federation Conference held at Sunamganj on 27 June passed a resolution favouring Sylhet remaining in India. Infact the Amrita Bazar Patrika correspondent claimed as late as on 3 July that "the rank and file schedule caste community were with the supporters of retention" [Paul Choudhury 1992:59].

In a referendum held on 6 and 7 July 1947 majority voted in favor of Sylhet's merger with Pakistan. So, on 14 August Sylhet observed the first independence day of Pakistan. Though the Bengal (Sylhet) Boundary Commission chaired by Sir Arthur Cyril Radcliffe declared its award for Sylhet on 13 August, yet it was only three days later that it came into effect, and on 17 August Sylhet finally stood divided. Out of its Karimganj sub-division three thanas – Patharkandi (277 square miles), Ratabari (240 square miles), and Badarpur (47 square miles) – and a portion of Karimganj (145 square miles) thana with a population of about 28,25,282 persons were retained by Assam in India, while thanas of Beani Bazar, Barlekha and the other portion of Karimganj thana became part of Pakistan, as also the twelve other thanas to which Assam never laid claim [Census of India, 1951; also see for instance, Bhattacharjee 1989b; Chakrabarty 2002; Choudhury 2002; Dass 1996; Map 1.1; Tables 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4 (Appendix IV)]. The award of Radcliffe reads as follows:

A line shall be drawn from the point where the boundary between the thanas of Patharkandi and Kulaura meets the frontier of Tripura State and shall run north along the boundary between those thanas, then along the boundary between the thanas of Patharkandi and Barlekha, then along the boundary between the thanas of Karimganj and Barlekha, then along the boundary between the thanas of Karimganj and Beani Bazar to the point where that boundary meets the river Kusiyara. The line shall then turn to the east taking the river Kusiyara as the boundary and run to the point where that river meets the boundary between the districts of Sylhet and Cachar. The centre line of the main stream or channel shall constitute the boundary. So much of the district of Sylhet as lies to the west and north shall be detached from the Province of Assam and transferred to the Province of East Bengal. No other part of the Province of Assam shall be transferred [1950:155].

One reason among others, that led to retention of only three and a half thanas in India was to ensure smooth communication with Tripura which would otherwise cease to have any link with mainland India had a territorial passage like that not been provided
for. Though the Boundary Commission painstakingly deliberated on conflicting claims to territory made by its Muslim and non-Muslim members alike, yet Radcliffe’s decision finally prevailed. Essentially guided by referendum results and terms of reference for the Commission he declared: ‘I think that some exchange of territories must be effected if a workable division is to result. Some of the non-Muslim thanas must go to East Bengal and some Muslim territory and Hailakandi [a Muslim majority sub-division of Cachar contiguous to Sylhet] must be retained by Assam’ [Ibid.]. Accordingly, with 709 square miles of territory carved out of Sylhet, a truncated Karimganj was (re-) incorporated in Assam.

With the bulk of Sylhet’s territory merging with East Bengal to create (East) Pakistan, Assam’s relief was understandable. Partition for Assam served dual purpose: while on one hand it ensured Sylhet’s (and in addition, made ‘Cachar only and lonely’) ouster, on the other it made East Bengal (along with Sylhet) an officially foreign entity named (East) Pakistan. With a putative stop to Bengali immigration now, Assam would be able to rest in peace. In fact, the issue of immigration since the turn of twentieth century had been central to Assam’s politics. Encouraged by colonial state and a large section of Assamese speaking gentry alike till early years of nineteenth century, immigration of predominantly Muslim peasants from East Bengal (primarily from Mymensingh) to Assam (Brahmaputra Valley) however grew to be a matter of concern and alarm for the province after 1920’s [see for example, Chattopadhyaya 1987; Guha 1977; Kar 1990]. As if Bangla speaking Surma Valley was not enough that the province also had to deal with huge numbers of Muslim peasants who again spoke Bangla, considered akin by then to the “devil’s” language by sections of Assamese speaking middle class. While Bengali Hindus held sway over administrative positions, Bengali Muslim peasants – skilled and energetic cultivators that they were – took over the business of agriculture in Assam. The Assam(ese) leadership read the situation carefully, and delineated two objectives that it sought to work upon in future: first, ‘save Assam from the constant flow of Muslim immigration’, and second, ‘separate Bengali speaking districts of Sylhet and Cachar from the administrative unit of Assam in order to free government offices from the clutches of the Bengali Hindu employees’ [Choudhury 2002:63]. The Asamiya Deka Dal for instance, in a memorandum to Nehru in 1937 framed a detailed plan to save the Assamese speaking race and it suggested inter alia: ‘(i) transfer of Sylhet to
Bengal, (ii) total ban of Bengali immigration to the Brahmaputra Valley for a period of twenty years, and (iii) strict naturalization laws for resident Bengali immigrants' [cited in Ibid.]. Against this backdrop the decision of Radcliffe came as a blessing to Assam for, both Sylhet and East Bengal were now lodged in a separate country to which it had no obligation save a diplomatic one. But of course it is another matter that attitude of the Assam(ese) leadership towards Muslim immigrants altered temporarily during the years following partition, more so after results of the census of 1951 (but by late 1970's that re-altered again). 'Whereas the influx of Hindu Bengali refugees [following partition] remained a cause of concern for the Assamese leadership, the behaviour of the immigrant Muslims gave them some temporary satisfaction' [Ibid.:64]. Myron Weiner in a similar vein notes:

After 1947 the Bengali Muslims became de facto allies of the Assamese in their conflict with the Bengali Hindus. Bengali Muslims have been willing to accept Assamese as the medium of instruction in their schools and they have thrown their votes behind Assamese candidates for the state assembly and the national parliament. They have declared Assamese their mother tongue. In return, the state government has not attempted to eject Bengali Muslims from lands on which they have settled in the Brahmaputra valley, though earlier Assamese leaders had claimed that much of the settlement had taken place illegally. . There is thus an unspoken coalition between the Assamese and the Bengali Muslims against the Bengali Hindus. It is not a wholly stable coalition, however, since it could be shattered if there were to be a new major influx of Bengali Muslims into Assam, or if Bengali Hindus and Bengali Muslims coalesce [1978:124].

Be that as it may, obviously the outcome of the referendum was greeted with joy and hope by the Assam(ese) who since the time of Sylhet’s transfer to Assam resented that move. 'It was a strange partnership between Sylhet and Assam where neither could be comfortable, and in fact, the wedge between the two valleys [Brahmaputra Valley and Surma Valley] kept on increasing steadily since their union' [Paul Choudhury 1992:90; also see Sylhet Chronicle, Sylhet, 6 August 1934]. However, if imperial administrators burdened Assam by attaching Sylhet to it as early as 1874, they also in 1947 provided it with a 'god-sent' opportunity to be unburdened and relieved. Indeed, the certainty of transfer of Sylhet to Pakistan meant that the district was finally off the back of Assam. Unlike the NWFP referendum as Bidyut Chakrabarty writes, 'the Sylhet referendum was virtually a vote on the twin issues of reorganization of India on a communal and of Assam on a linguistic basis...., the Hindus who for decades agitated for amalgamation with Bengal voted for remaining in Assam, while the
Muslims opposing the division of Assam till 1928 supported the partition' [2002:346]. For leaders of Assam provincial Congress and sections of Assamese people and press, the transfer of Bangla speaking Sylhet above all would be the first step towards emergence of an uni-lingual and culturally homogeneous Assam. As Amalendu Guha writes: 'It was indeed a life-time’s opportunity for the Assamese leadership “to get rid of Sylhet” and carve out a linguistically more homogeneous province. Sylhet, “the golden calf”, which was sacrificed in 1874 to usher in a new province, was now once more sacrificed at the altar of a new state’ [1977:319-20; also see The Assam Tribune, Gauhati, 21 July 1947]. The relief that Assam desired for so long had come no doubt, but it was to be momentary and short lived. By retaining a portion of Sylhet albeit small, in Assam the imperial government refused to let the “Sylhet Issue” die what should have otherwise been its referendum induced natural death. ‘A last ditch effort was made by the Assamese ideologues to separate even the few thanas of Sylhet that the Radcliffe Commission had granted to India/Assam. The Assam Pradesh Congress Committee took Chief Minister Gopinath Bardoloi severely to task for not protesting against the inclusion of the four thanas in Assam' [Dasgupta 2001:351]. While historical evidence clearly suggests that both political (and a section of public) opinion in Assam was in favor of entire Sylhet’s amalgamation with Pakistan prior to and after the referendum, what is perhaps little known is that a similar approach prevailed regarding Cachar (Plains) too. For instance, in an obscure book with a foreword by Gopinath Bardoloi in early 1940’s an Assamese gentleman writes:

The demand for an Eastern Pakistan in its lesser intent means, in so far as it affects Assam, to include only the district of Sylhet .... This is a legitimate demand, to which as I have already observed elsewhere, Assam has no objection. Indeed I have gone beyond that and observed that Assam will have no objection to part with the Bengali district of Cachar (Plains) also if the people of that district agree to go with Sylhet. To a Pakistan of the kind that the national leaders are willing to concede and which we have endorsed, it is quite possible that Cachar, though with some hesitation, may ultimately choose to go. Her cultural and linguistic urge may dictate this course. Because without Sylhet she will be the only and lonely Bengali district in the Province of Assam .... I have not included the hill portion of the district of Cachar for transfer .... because [H]istorically, linguistically and ethnologically it is undoubtedly a part of Assam [Barua 1944:93 (emphasis mine)].

Despite the fact that no referendum was held in Hindu majority Cachar, the possibility of its incorporation in Pakistan along with Sylhet continued to be debated in public sphere. As Ambikagiri Roychoudhury for instance, opined: ‘There is little sense in trying to retain the junior partner of Sylhet – the Cachar plains, at any rate the
Hailakandi Sub-division – in Assam’ [The Assam Tribune, Gauhati, 22 July 1947].

Cachar, the other Bangla speaking district of undivided Surma Valley was closely attached to Sylhet, and it is to this Indian district that the slice of Sylhet – Karimganj – was attached after partition. In the charged post-independence climate of ‘Assam for the Assamese’ Cachar region now with Karimganj in its fold gradually began to consolidate itself as the living symbol of Bengali resistance and protest in the new province [see for example, The Shillong Times, 29 August & 19 October 1947; also see Choudhury 1986a]. Indeed, partition of the district came as a mixed bag for Hindus and Muslims of Sylhet as well as Assamese speakers of Assam. For Sylheti Hindus it meant permanent loss of their homeland though not without some consolation that came from the retention of a portion of Sylhet in India, while for a large section of Sylheti Muslims it was realization of the most desired and cherished goal of being able to retain their homeland and live amidst co-religionists. As for Assam, the politics that unfolded in post-independence years go on to show that far from acting as the much desired palliative partition grew instead as a source of deep anxiety and turmoil for the state and its Assamese speaking population finally culminating for instance, in the Assam Movement in 1979-80.

Among unfolding consequences of Sylhet’s merger with Pakistan was the movement of refugees to Assam. Like West Bengal, Assam too was caught unawares when refugees made a bee line to enter and settle down in the province (state). In fact, the movement of population in the eastern sector began much before what some would say the ‘radical surgery of Radcliffe’. As Joya Chatterji writes:

No one knows how many refugees went to India from East Bengal during this phase.... During these years, Hindus left East Bengal in successive waves and settled in West Bengal or the neighbouring states of Assam and Tripura. The vast majority – three in four families – went to West Bengal. One in ten settled in Tripura, and slightly more, about 13 per cent, went to Assam. Only two per cent settled in other parts of India. These refugees were predominantly Hindu Bengalis from East Bengal. A relatively small number were Hindus, again mainly Bengalis from Sylhet, formerly a part of Assam, and most of them went to Assam and Tripura, which were the parts of India closest to where they came from [2008:105-106, also see Luthra 1972].

Following the gruesome riots in Calcutta in August 1946, and then in Noakhali in eastern Bengal the stage was set for what eventually came to be one of the largest mass migrations in history. Though the riots happened in faraway Calcutta and a little closer home in Noakhali, yet Sylhet had its share of effect. Alarmed by the
communal turn of events Sylhet too began to prepare itself should things take a similar turn as they did in Bengal. Though Sylhet remained relatively free from communal violence as Anindita Dasgupta (2001) notes, yet its Hindu minority became more than apprehensive and slowly began to consider options of movement to safe and secure places, the process picking up after coming through of the decision of holding a referendum in Sylhet. As Dasgupta writes:

The flow of migrants ... from Sylhet and adjoining areas was not a single, rushed movement of a mass of people running for their lives. They came in stops and bursts, in trickles and flushes, throughout the entire period 1946-1950..., there were three major flows of migrants ...; in 1946, 1947-1948, and in 1950. Sylhet accounted for the largest number of such migrants, followed by Mymensingh and Dacca [2001:351-52].

The reasons underlying choice of Assam as a site to which someone from Sylhet could safely move to during that time were many. As Sushanta Krishna Dass notes:

There were many legal, historical and practical reasons for the Hindu Bengalis of Sylhet to turn to Assam. First, Sylhet was an integral part of Assam when the Province of Assam was created. Second, thanks to the Radcliffe Boundary Commission award, a part of the district comprising four thanas as Karimganj subdivision was awarded to India. Third, many Hindu employees of the Government of Assam opted to serve in India and came over to Assam, thus offering a base to many of their relatives and friends. Fourth, many Hindus of Sylhet had already been staying in different parts of the then Assam. Last but not the least, her twin sister, Cachar district was still in Assam. For all these reasons the Hindus of Sylhet migrated in large numbers to Assam, particularly to Cachar district [1980:859].

While a large number migrated during 1947-48 period, the rest arrived after the communal riots that rocked East Pakistan in 1950. Unlike western sector where movement of population following partition took place quickly and in very little time, the scenario was markedly different in eastern sector not only in terms of pace and time but also in matters of relief and rehabilitation. Private and informal conversations with Sylheti families in North East India, Kolkata and New Delhi suggest that partition of Sylhet, and its consequences deny every possibility of being treated as an uniform process; while for some it is just another historical event, for others it a past that refuses to die and remains as an ever living and disturbing present. Dasgupta though in another context, draws attention to this when she writes:

Refugee-hood has been and, in the contemporary period, continues to be a far more pluralistic experience than popular, even academic,
conceptions of it assume. It is this plurality that is in urgent need of exploration. Clearly, the predominant fashion of treating it as a uniform experience, albeit embellished with some local flavour, is an obstacle to a proper understanding of Partition migration [2001:358].

The point which contemporary partition historiography has drawn attention to also resonates in case of Sylhet, and that is the significance of multiple voices and stories that “actually” constitute the overarching “Partition Story of India”, and Sylhet. Stories that fieldwork managed to unravel in Karimganj, Kolkata and Delhi show how every Sylhetti had a different story to tell about the partition of his/her district, and its consequences, projection of “similarity” of experiences notwithstanding. Therefore, it is important to take into account different categories such as caste, class, gender and territorial location among others, in order to penetrate deeper and make sense of the story of Sylhet’s partition. Also it is equally pertinent to address the issues of Sylheti Muslims who either moved to Pakistan or as Joya Chatterji opines, chose to ‘stay on’ in India. The circumstances in which migration of Sylheti Hindus to India took place may be located within the broader framework of partition led displacement that occurred in Punjab, Sind and Bengal, differences in character and pattern between those notwithstanding. As a religious minority in Pakistan, Hindus of Sylhet following the referendum realized that the atmosphere in the district was not congenial for staying on. As Dimple Dutta Choudhury writes:

People became suspicious [on] the actions of Muslim League. The exuberance of the Muslim League at the creation of Pakistan sounded like threats to the minority community .... At this the minorities became panic stricken and did not know what to do .... The Hindus at this juncture could decide only to leave their ancestral lands. There were many Gandhian activists like Suhasini Das, who remained in Pakistan to help the minorities and restore their confidence to reside in Pakistan but the people would hardly feel assured as the Muslim League, who found the Government in Pakistan did not show any interest to promise protection to them .... The Hindus were left with no other option[s] but to abandon everything and cross over .... The atmosphere in post-partition Sylhet and the whole of Pakistan was fear striken. The government though declared to be secular but in practice adopted each and every measure to drive out the Hindus [2003:56-59; see also Das 2002].

While archival records and official sources do throw light on the causes and trajectories of exodus of minorities from Pakistan, yet it is imperative that these are supplemented by other sources such as oral testimonies and records, personal memoirs, unpublished letters and diaries, the latter certainly being in abundance when
it comes to narratives of Sylheti Hindus [see for example, Bandopadhyay 1997; Basu 1975; Biswass 1998; Chakrabarti 2007; Choudhury 2005a; Das 1996; Datta 2008; Ghatak 2001]. Unlike Punjab and Bengal as Dasgupta opines:

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\text{[t]here was no major incident of violence in Sylhet immediately before, during or after the Sylhet Referendum and Partition. The prime factor for migration, it appears was psychological pressure, fear of what could happen if they stayed back, rather than what actually happened or was happening to them at that time. Every new incident of violence against Hindus elsewhere in India gave a push to fresh out-migration into Assam. Two things stand out: one, that it was the migrant who actively decided when to move and where to go; and two, most Sylhetis were swayed by perceived fear or violence rather than actual instances of riots or mob-violence of any sort[2001:353-354].}
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Perhaps what Dasgupta's study brings out may not be incorrect, yet with only a little more than sixty years gone after partition it is too early to conclude on the nature of force(s) that propelled a very large number Hindus of Sylhet to migrate to India. Kalipada Dutta for instance, tells me as follows:

\[
\text{My family belonged to Kaliganj, a small place in that part of Karimganj that remained in Assam. We never had to move really due to partition. I was young then but I remember people coming from Sylhet, and their stories. Not everyone cited incidents of communal violence there, but all of them were terribly scared, particularly those families with women, children and aged members. Many recounted the severe threats from young Muslim boys and League cadres, not to mention stories of violence coming from other parts of East Bengal. Many did not know where they would eventually go in Assam for, often they did not have relations who could support them or would be willing to do so. The psychological pressure on Hindus to vacate houses in Sylhet escalated as time went by. Actually the intense pressure some times made these people desire even violent and instantaneous death. The push factor was so great that it almost amounted to direct violence. At least face to face encounters would settle things once and for all. At least Sylhetis would not wander in search of homes as they are doing even now. Being refugee is a curse, and by one stroke we all became that [see Appendix I].}
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It is clear from the testimony cited above that the ‘psychological pressure’ Sylheti Hindu migrants were subjected to was no less than what is commonly understood as “direct violence” leading to loss of lives and properties. Whether Sylhet was completely free from communal violence during the post-partition days remains a question that has I argue, only been partially answered. And in order to examine that, what becomes crucial is to problematize the understanding of violence itself: in short,
what constitutes violence and how certain phenomena come to be classified as violent/non-violent. As Dutta Choudhury argues:

The violence might have been more in Punjab but the partition of Sylhet created a different atmosphere where people went about their daily chores in dread and fear. It did face violence generated by communal forces but violence is not always measured by external acts of murder, loot or abductions but also the fear of being persecuted or being dispossessed etc. Whatever may be the reason, but the fact remains that many had to flee from Sylhet [2003:65; also see Rao 1974; Sylhet Chronicle, Sylhet, 7 November 1938].

Further, she goes on to cite two testimonies to show the kind of ‘violent’ circumstances under which Sylheti Hindus had to leave Pakistan. She writes:

One of the victims of the partition remarks painfully how his father had to leave Sylhet under compelling circumstances. They were living in a rented house at Shaikhoaghat, Sylhet which had seven rooms. On 22.2.1948 an employee of Munsif Court came to his house and asked his father to vacate at least four rooms to accommodate Munsif. But on their denial, the very next day, the Munsif along with his family of about seven to eight members came to their house with a contingent of armed police and forcibly vacated four rooms throwing out their furniture and also demanded to capture the kitchen. At this neither the Deputy Commissioner nor the Muslim League leaders took any step. So they had no other way but to leave for Karimganj on 26.2.1948. Another victim of the partition said that ....she faced the same situation when she was driven out of her home but the means was different. According to her the Muslims burnt her house and destroyed all her properties. They were not satisfied with it and went ahead in looting the left over things and torturing them to the utmost level. She was so much panicked that while coming with her daughter towards India, she had to choose a clandestine route through Jakiganj and arrived in India in 1950 [cited in Ibid.:59-60]

Though this work is not focused on the study of Sylhet’s partition and its immediate consequences including refugee relief and rehabilitation, yet it is foregrounded in that as it is also in the moment signified by 1874, the year of Sylhet’s separation from Bengal. Sylhet as Anindita Dasgupta (2001, 2008) and I (2009) among others, have noted has not been generally provided more than what may be called footnote treatment in partition historiography meaning it has rarely been included in well known and oft-quoted contemporary academic (written in English in particular) works – too numerous to be cited here – on India’s partition. However, the few available (in English) include for instance, those by Sujit Choudhury (2002), Jayanta Bhushan Bhattacharjee (1989b), Sanghamitra Paul Choudhury (1992), Sujit Kumar Ghosh (2000), Bidyut Chakrabarty (2002, 2004), Tanmay Bhattacharyya (2006), Anindita
Dasgupta (2001, 2008), Rabindra Nath Aditya (1970); official histories in general and historical works of say, Amalendu Guha (1977), Makhlan Lal Kar (1990), Sajal Nag (1990), Sanjib Baruah (1999), and so forth touch upon the issue but only in context of the larger political and cultural history of Assam. A large number of works – again too numerous to be cited here – mostly narrated and written by Sylhetis themselves exist in Bangla language. These not only narrate the referendum and partition but also first hand experience of the events, and subsequent ‘anxiety and trauma’ as the following chapters show, faced by the community in India. Indeed, in a curious act of academic oversight Sylhet’s experience of partition has evaded the attention of what Dasgupta calls “mainstream partition historiography” focused as it largely remains as Willem van Schendel (2005) says, on Punjab followed perhaps by Bengal. And both historians and social science researchers (only a few in any case) are equally implicated in this existing state of affairs. Not only does Sylhet not feature in say for instance, the well known Mushirul Hasan edited work entitled *India’s Partition: Process, Strategy, Mobilization* (1998) but it also does not find a place in another equally notable work edited by Ranabir Samaddar, ambitiously entitled *Reflections on Partition in the East* (1997). In the latter it is mentioned though – in the articles by Subir Bhaumik and Sandip Bandopadhyay – but only very, very briefly. In fact, Bhaumik in the piece ‘The Northeast: Fifty Years after the Partition’ manages to devote not more than a single sentence to Sylhet. It is interesting how Sylhet’s partition experience even fails to make it to a piece on North East, not to mention Bengal and eastern India and finally, South Asia. The point is among others, as I have argued elsewhere:

> [T]he Sylhet case suffered a *double handicap*: it was a non-Assamese district in Assam on the one hand and a Bengali speaking district outside Bengal on the other. As a result its partition and consequent plight was recognized and addressed neither by the Assamese not by the Bengalics of Bengal. Not surprisingly, the partition of Sylhet is rarely viewed as the *partition of Assam or division of the Bengali people*’ [2009: 78 (emphasis mine)].

Indeed, Sylhet has remained unclaimed and marginalized in “mainstream” partition historiography to the extent that it has not had the “fortune” of being the subject of a full scale “mainstream” academic work. The experience of partition-migrants from Sylhet too as mentioned has found little “mainstream” academic attention say for instance, in Tai Yong Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya’s work entitled *The Aftermath of*
Partition in South Asia (2000), except perhaps in the Sukalpa Bhattacharjee & Rajesh Dev edited book Ethno-narratives: Identity and Experience in North East India (2006), the Dakshinaranjan Basu edited book Chere Aasha Gram (1975) which again Dipesh Chakrabarty (2006) makes use of in his work on Bengali Hindu memories of displacement, Tridib Chakrabarti et al edited book Dhwansha O Nirman: Bangiya Udbastu Samajer Swakathita Bibaran (2007), and Sandip Bandopadhyay’s (1997) work on Bengali Hindu memories of partition. And as Chapter III shows, except for Anindita Dasgupta’s and Dimple Dutta Choudhury’s modest attempts, no full scale work on relief and rehabilitation of Sylheti migrants in particular in Assam, and elsewhere have been conducted till date though a large number exists on other partitioned communities. The ‘trauma and pain’ faced by the community as a result of partition is reflected in writings of its older (some long dead) members, but younger ones too, those currently living in North East India in particular are not far behind. In a poem written in English language Nabanita Kanungo, a young Sylheti poet living in Shillong writes:

Give the winds a clue/as to where the moon has sprinkled our silver memoirs/....Agreement papers, slipshod transactions/no agreement, no transaction/ All running the pavilion in haste/hazards and the hope of life’s benefit of doubt/These split moments are twanging from some mother’s hair/as the remains of a curled ribbon of bamboo and cane/as old Benarasi sarees are re-sewn/with stars torn from a Shillong night/Some grandmothers/who bottled the summer of plains as their tamarind youth/and who could have pickled Sylhet/if they had the sun and some time/Pack your goats and children and leave/The coordinates have changed/Confused houses do not shelter/I have not the fire to love the roof of nowhere [2008b:no pp].

Indeed, the coordinates of not only Sylhet’s territory but also its community underwent a change in 1947, non-uniformities of experience of partition notwithstanding. As a ‘nowhere people’ ‘exiled’ from Bengal, Sylhetis gradually began to re-orient their lives in the backdrop of social and political processes unleashed by partition. The distinctly fused colonial Sylheti identity as I shall elaborately discuss in the next chapter, which was constructed following Sylhet’s separation from Bengal came to be re-constructed in post-colonial India.3 Claimed as a community that believes as the noted Sylheti litterateur Amitabha Choudhury (2002a, 2002b) believes, ‘district is thicker than the country’ or only two countries exist in the world namely, ‘Sylhet and Bilet [foreign land]’, its middle class members
insist that the group ties and strong stable and for that matter, have always been. Engaged since nineteenth century in preservation and propagation of ‘distinct’ Sylheti cultural tradition say for instance, through establishment of Sylhet Associations (hereafter SA in a generic sense), history writing and so forth, middle class members of the community however, refuse to be labeled as ‘sectarian’, ‘parochial’, ‘ethnocentric’ or even bearers of a ‘hinterland insular psychology’ [see for example, Choudhury 2002a, 2002b; Chanda 2006; Raychaudhuri 1993, 2007]. Countering such ‘labeling tendencies’ Sushanta Krishna Dass suggests that the ‘swakiya/swatantra sanskritik sattwa [individual/independent cultural self/identity]’ of Sylhetis which is the product of historical and political exigencies, is often mistakenly viewed as parochial and divisive. He says: ‘Despite being 100% [sic] Bengalis, Sylhet and Sylhetis have a prithak [different] story, a history that is witness to denial and stepmotherly treatment. No other district of greater Bengal, except Sylhet, has the similar history. Like the shuttle cock of the badminton game, Sylhetis have been shuttled from court to court as victims of political conspiracy’ [2001:6; also see Dutta 2002; Paul Choudhury 2002]. While acknowledging the presence of a strong sense of Sylhetitta (Sylhetiness) among members of the community, a well-known writer denies the possibility of any inter-community clash based on that. He says: ‘[a]amar Srihattapriti o bishyapritite ... kono birodh dekhina [I do not see any opposition between my love for Sylhet and the world]’ [Purkayastha 1998:xv]. Indeed, it is this culturally anchored, politically conditioned Sylhetitta that remains in addition to Sylheti dialect the defining marker of Sylheti identity, articulated and disseminated primarily by the middle class through various means including the ever growing number of SA in contemporary India.\textsuperscript{4}

\textbf{1.1: Setting the research agenda: take offs and landings}

It is therefore, this rather large canvas that serves as the backdrop of this work. Taking off from that sun soaked, lazy afternoon of the summer of 2006 through the time of its official christening in 2007-2008, and eventual landing in 2010 the work traveled across time and space, between colonial and post-colonial eras, between eastern and northern India. I unlike Nabanita Kanungo’s (2008b) grandmothers despite having some sun soaked time did not and rather, had no intention to pickle Sylhet. My
intention conditioned by the training I had received in conducting sociological research was in fact, to reach out to the process by which Sylhet was pickled, bottled, preserved, tasted, hailed, denied and finally, negotiated and worked upon in contemporary India. The study is rooted thus, in processes and contexts – in the idea of Sylhet in motion, on the move – not towards a final resolution but constant becoming. My decision to explore the identity discourse of a community that had a complex political and cultural history was not very easily arrived at. While a number of blissfully ignorant friends wondered where Sylhet is or who are Sylhetis or whether Sylhet(is) is an appropriate theme of sociological research, others, those slightly better informed in particular remarked that since Sylhet is in Bangladesh so how could I claim that there are Sylhetis in India. The case of Punjabis and Bengalis the latter argued was understandable as parts of their territorial homeland and the names – Punjab and West Bengal – rested in India, but no part of Sylhet and the name was to be found here. Perhaps not ignorant but misinformed that they were, the case of the otherwise widely known Sindhis for instance, was happily forgotten. True, Sylhetis in India did not have a territorial name, but unlike Sindhis they did have a slice of Sylhet – Karimganj – in the southern tip of the Indian state of Assam. However, queries did not end with the territory-identity problematique for further, issues like the justification of addressing Sylhetis as ‘Sylhetis’ and not ‘Bengalis’ or even ‘Assam(ese)’, current location of Sylhetis both in and outside Assam, and so forth were raised. I was also struck by a remark that Partha Chatterjee in course of an informal conversation with David Ludden in Kolkata had made regarding Sylhet. Chatterjee upon being asked by Ludden – whose work on Sylhet is well known – why Sylhet did not feature in studies on Bengal or research agenda of Bengali scholars replied: ‘Oh! Sylhet … that was (is) in Assam … we are not concerned really’ [Private conversation with David Ludden, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 16 January 2009 (paraphrasing original)]. Indeed, Sylhet till 1947 was part of Assam but it was not that the Assamese given the complex relationship they shared with Bengalis of Sylhet were much too keen on exploring the life and culture of the district and its people. Realize as I did that Sylhet had a liminal presence, a grey existence between Bengal and Assam, the queries and comments of friends, and noted scholars added to that. In fact, such observations and remarks only helped sharpen my research questions as I continued to endlessly sift through the variety of available literature on
Sylhet and its people, debate and discuss the theme, and provide explanations though not always satisfactorily to myself as well as others.

Of the critical questions that were raised, one was the "absence" of Bangladesh – home to majority of Sylhetis – in the work. Though I – as title of the work shows – clearly mentioned that the study would look at Sylhetis in India, yet there was no escape from the name of Sylhet which after 1947 turned into a "property" of first, East Pakistan and then, Bangladesh. Apart from issues of scope, feasibility and logistics what could be the reasons I had asked myself, for "not accounting" for Bangladeshi Sylhetis in the work? Among others, the most important reason as I had gathered from the survey of works on Sylhet produced and published by Bangladeshis like the Sharifuddin Ahmed edited book entitled *Sylhet: History and Heritage* (1999), Mohammad Abdul Aziz et al edited two volume book entitled *Brihattar Sylheteter Itihash* (1997, 2006), and so forth was the "different" trajectory of Bangladeshi Sylheti community and its identity in post-partition era. While partition remained one of the most significant moments for Sylhetis in India, for their Bangladeshi counterparts partition if not forgotten was certainly put aside as Mushirul Hasan in another context observes, to highlight the more significant war of liberation of 1971. Indeed, it is interesting that out of sixty two articles in Ahmed’s book not a single one is on Sylhet referendum and partition *per se*, though the book by Aziz touches upon it, and has an exclusive one by Safar Ali Akanda entitled ‘Sylhete Ganabhot O Radcliffe Royedad’ (in Bangla). Indeed, for Sylhetis of Bangladesh history appears to have begun afresh after partition while for those on the Indian side it comes to have a near standstill character after that; for the latter, their contemporary identity discourse is hinged upon a sense of ‘deprivation’, ‘loss’ (of major portions of territory and ‘name’), ‘homelessness’, ‘trauma’, and ‘anxiety’ while for those in Bangladesh the story is certainly not the same. Curiously, the theme of territorial loss is common to both sides; Sylhetis of India lament the referendum dictated loss of major portions of Sylhet to East Pakistan/Bangladesh and Sylhetis of the latter as Akanda’s article or a series of articles in newspapers such as the Dhaka based *Holiday* (2001, 2002) shows, lament the loss of three and a half *thanases* to India. I do not intend to engage in a discussion of the competitive sense of loss (and also gain), but without suggesting that a irreversible divide exists between Sylhetis lodged on either side of the border I wish to state that given their “different” socio-political post-colonial conditioning it would
have been, and is unjust to study them in one, single work. It is also to be noted that
the religious composition of Bangladeshi Sylheti community (which is predominantly
Muslim) was not a factor that influenced my decision to “keep that out” of the work.
While it is true that Sylhetis on the Indian side are predominantly Hindus, yet this
study not only includes Sylheti Muslim (Indian) response but also refrains from
treating the community as already divided along religious lines. It is thus, not a work
that pre-empts communal fragmentation; instead, it leaves the issue – if at all there is
one – to be explored in the field.

Sylhet’s merger with Pakistan ‘robbed’ Sylhetis on the Indian side not only of major
parts of the territory but as mentioned the name, and consequently, as a large number
of interviewees pointed out they became not only ‘homeless but nameless too’. By
studying the community in India I certainly do not intend or claim to accord it with a
“value” (name), but what I surely aim is to drive home the point that researching the
“officially nameless” is as important as that which is officially named. Rather than
focusing on the singular act of partition which took away the official name, I have
proceeded to examine how forces unleashed by that initiated processes by which the
community developed an acute sense of namelessness compensated only perhaps by
establishing one Sylhet prefixed association (and websites too) after the other across
India. And this work therefore, is not about the historical moments of 1874 and 1947,
refugee relief and rehabilitation, Bengali-Sylheti-Assamese relationship and
established institutions per se for, it extends to weave all that together, and view those
in combination so as to facilitate a nuanced reading of Sylheti identity re-construction
in post-colonial India. Pitched vis-à-vis the Assamese and larger Bengali communities
Sylheti community in India is dispersed, though an area of its concentration happens
to be the three districts of southern Assam namely, Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi
known by the epithet Barak Valley. Substantial numbers also reside in Kolkata and
other towns of West Bengal, Delhi and Bangalore, not to mention cities and towns of
North East India. The middle class members of the community run – quite predictably
except for those living in Barak Valley – nine SA across India; they also in addition,
run an umbrella organization headquartered in Kolkata named All India Federation of
Shreehatta Associations (hereafter AIFSA) with individual SA – except for Sribatta
Sammilani (Sylhet Union), Kolkata (hereafter SS (SU)) – as members. Involved in
preserving and propagating the cultural heritage of Sylhet through numerous activities
including holding cultural functions, get-togethers, felicitation ceremonies, and publishing magazines, books, souvenirs, and so forth; these associations contribute enormously to the process of articulation of the community’s identity. Of the cultural identity markers of middle class Sylhetis two namely, Sylheti dialect and a sense of Sylhetitta (Sylhetiness) are prominent. Consistently claimed as an identity whose mainstay is the ‘distinct’ culture of Sylhet, the community – its middle class in particular – upholds it as the indicator of its ‘united and stable’ character. Field notes however, suggest that not only are the two components namely, Sylheti and Bengali of the distinctly fused Sylheti identity (anxiously and) contextually deployed but the community like all others is far from being a monolithic one impacted as it remains by spatial, caste, class, gender and religious dimensions, to name just a few. My use of the term community to classify Sylhetis therefore, does not indicate a linear and uniform characterization; to put it simply, it is used to describe a social collectivity which builds its communitarian credentials on the basis of certain markers and boundaries drawn from a common place of origin and culture. Following preliminary visits to Barak Valley and Kolkata, meeting Sylheti families in Delhi, and supplemented by reading of secondary sources I broadly sketched out the following intertwined issues that this work would attempt to address:

- Locating 1874 and 1947 as the two temporal moments of significance for the community in India.
- Construction of the distinctly fused Sylheti identity in colonial India.
- Re-construction of the same in the broad temporal frame of post-colonial India.
- Articulation of Sylheti identity in the specific context of Karimganj in particular and Barak Valley in general in contemporary Assam.
- Articulation of the same in contemporary Kolkata and Delhi.
- Modes adopted by the community to preserve and propagate its identity.
- Contribution of SA (and also housing colonies) in shaping the identity in Kolkata and Delhi.
- Context and consequence of the relationship between Sylheti, and the Assamese and larger Bengali communities.
- Predominant role of the middle class in such processes of articulation.
As a study hinged upon multi-sited fieldwork, its arguments are drawn from a broad framework of social science concepts and theories outlined in the next chapter, and it explores the processual consequences of 1874 and 1947 to argue that Sylheti community and its identity was constructed and re-constructed respectively as a result of those. Contemporary Sylheti identity therefore, is not only a product of process(es) but is also featured by that. While the two historical moments remain the common context, yet the study shows that in post-colonial India in particular, differing contexts of location of the community members result in differing modes and characters of articulation of the two components of the identity. And that indeed shows how it is perhaps impossible to talk — similarities between “different Sylheti identities” notwithstanding — about one, single Sylheti identity in India; arguably the work focuses both on what the middle class members take as ‘common’ markers of Sylheti identity, and how those are contested and negotiated from within as well as outside. With middle class as the segment of focus the study explores in depth how the response of this class to the issue of Sylheti community, and its identity is simultaneously marked by uniformity and fragmentation, stability and transformation, assertion and non-assertion, and so forth. As an identity that has both Sylheti and Bengali components, its articulations in the three different sites throw up very interesting insights admittedly including the nature of relationship as Chapters III, IV and V show, with its “others”. Needless to say, as a student of sociology I indeed find the research theme more than suitable for systematic investigation. I do not of course rule out the role played by extra-academic interests such as my experience as a member born and raised in the community in the choice of the research theme, but more than that I consider it of tremendous relevance in the sociological understanding of contemporary Indian society. Though this work is essentially sociological in orientation and practise, yet like most contemporary works on communities, cultures and identities it too does not remain confined to a single discipline. Predictably, it draws generously from relevant works by scholars from disciplines such as history, politics, literature, and so forth.

The available literature on Sylheti identity in India per se, at least in the English language is near about absent though the two articles by Anindita Dasgupta (2001, 2008) and one by Sukalpa Bhattacharjee (2006) are documents of substantial relevance. A burgeoning literature written in Bangla on the community in India in
general is found in writings on Sylhet and Barak Valley's history and culture (and dialect); Sujit Choudhury's works (Bangla and English) stand out among those, and in the book entitled *Barak Upatyakar Samaj O Rajniti* (2007) in particular, he is in an extremely well argued mode reflects on the contemporary situation in Barak Valley. The magazines and souvenirs of SA too provide interesting insights and great deal of information. Books and articles on Sylhet and Sylhetis of Bangladesh (also in the UK) by both Bangladeshi scholars as evident for instance, in the Sharifuddin Ahmed and Mohammad Abdul Aziz edited books, and non-Bangladeshi ones like those by Charles Adams (1987), Katy Gardner (1993, 1995) and David Ludden (2003b, 2003c) for instance, are also important so far as information on Sylhet is concerned; the numerous Sylheti websites, blogs and chatrooms on the internet – which actually ought to be treated as theme of an independent study – are virtual mine houses of wealth and information. What is commonly understood as an exercise in literature review is however, not done in this chapter as that runs as per requirement and relevance rather elaborately through all the subsequent chapters. As a work that is very wide in terms of time, space and scope, it is supported predictably as stated by an equally wide range of secondary and primary sources. Two kinds of primary data inform this work: one, drawn from archival (say for example, official and other documents/records, census data, and so forth) sources and two, from conversations and interviews carried out in the field sites. The former, collected from libraries and archives based in Delhi, Kolkata, Guwahati and Silchar, and also private sources throw light on colonial Sylhet as well as on the immediate years following partition, in particular on refugee relief and rehabilitation. Though the work has made some use of archival sources to narrate the political history of undivided Sylhet, its colonial socio-cultural profile has relied on secondary sources. Partition, and refugee relief and rehabilitation are addressed in this work with the help of some primary sources but given its thrust and scope on processes unleashed by the division and migration (of not all, but a very large section), the discussion unlike what historians would have done has not extended upon such sources. Discussions on referendum, partition and refugeehood pertinent as they are to the work has been if I may say, not shifted out but extended beyond the archives to “living” actors and actions’ laden fields. However, I must hasten to add that the relevance of archival source is unquestionable (and this work would have certainly benefited further had that been extensively consulted), and without alluding to the stereotype that “archives concern the dead”
and "do not have a live, dialogic spirit" I only plead for supporting archival material with what is called the oral (historical-sociological) one. Indeed, moments and happenings of immense historic value are neither seen as objects of archival research alone nor are those considered unilateral influences on the making and re-making of identity discourses; rather those, and the discourses are viewed as negotiated by the agency of both "directly" and "indirectly" concerned actors during and long after those times.

Primary data generated from what sociologists’ term as field(s) is the bedrock of this work. As mentioned, out of the existing sites of Sylheti concentration in India three have been chosen for the purpose of conducting fieldwork. The primary reasons behind choice of Karimganj for instance, are: a) it was a part of pre-partition, undivided Sylhet b) it is a small district town located in Assam c) it is part of the state’s Bangla speaking Barak Valley region d) it has a large section of “non-refugee” Sylheti population e) it has a mixed population of Hindus and Muslims, latter being the majority f) use of Sylheti dialect (speech) being widespread amongst old and young population, though written communication is in regular Bangla language g) it does not have any exclusive association of Sylhetis (SA) h) its political location throws light on the nature of relationship between Sylheti Hindus and Muslims, and Sylhetis and Assamese language speakers, and i) it is generally considered the ‘authentic’ site of Sylheti culture in India. Reasons behind choice of Kolkata and Delhi for instance, are: a) the two cities were not parts of undivided Sylhet b) these are large metropolises of mixed population, though Kolkata is predominantly Bengali c) these do not have a Sylheti majority population though considerably large numbers are present, particularly in Kolkata d) Sylheti population in the two cities comprise of old and new residents e) a large number of those Sylheti residents are partition-migrants f) both have been destinations of partition-migrants in general g) both have low Sylheti Muslim population, and Kolkata in particular h) use of Sylheti dialect (speech) among members of the community is restricted unlike Karimganj i) both cities have active presence of SA with large membership j) Kolkata is also home to a number of other district (of Bengal) associations which function in similar ways as its SA, and k) Kolkata has a non-Sylheti Bengali majority population while Delhi a non-Bengali majority one. Prior to arriving at a final decision regarding the choice of sites I was questioned repeatedly as to why I would focus also on places which are not
‘visibly’ Sylheti. Karimganj in particular and Barak Valley in general I was told were the ‘only’ right places to make sense of Sylheti life and spirit, and I did agree on that count. But having made preliminary visits to Sylheti homes and associations in the other two other places, I in no time realized that no critical and nuanced reading of Sylheti identity and its process of re-construction in contemporary India would be possible unless (“Sylhet” and) middle class Sylhetis dispersed as they are, are contextually located beyond Karimganj and Barak Valley. “Sylhet”, alive and kicking in southern Assam was undoubtedly the epicenter and the place to be for, there could be no place better than “Sylhet” itself albeit in India, to conduct research. However, I could not at the same time ignore the relentless attempts of middle class Sylhetis outside southern Assam to create ‘mini-Sylhets’ around them. In fact, Karimganj if I may say was almost “naturally” Sylheti both speech and culture wise while the two others were not only not but even a member’s claim of being “naturally” Sylheti was not free from processes of contestation and negotiation. Of course I do not at all suggest that Sylhetis of southern Assam have an un-interrogated, un-contested Sylheti existence for, not only they do not but the situation there is extraordinarily complex – and far more than in Kolkata and Delhi – given the presence of the Assam(ese) state. The point is, in all three sites middle class Sylheti identity stood negotiated within wider political and cultural contexts and hence, got articulated accordingly. So, it would be interesting I contemplated to examine in a comparative perspective how Sylhetis “worked” upon their identity and “presented” themselves vis-à-vis the Assamese, non-Sylheti Bengalis and non-Bengalis. Thus was born the idea of multi-sited fieldwork which among others, I argued with myself and my interrogators would bring to the fore the politics of identity re-formation and articulation within a multi-context, and comparative perspective. Moreover, the sites themselves as the three exclusive field based chapters show, were first, not free from fragmentary forces that rested within them and second, not any ordinary, “benign” geographical sites for, they have always had extraordinary symbolic relevance in Sylheti weltanschuaung, in its re-constructed post-colonial avatar in particular.

Having decided on the three sites the task I faced was to chalk out a methodological framework including selection of tools and techniques to be used to conduct research; more importantly, I had to as sociologists say select representative samples so as to ensure generation of relevant data. I chose to work within the framework of
qualitative fieldwork methodology, and adopted techniques like participant observation, focused interviews, unstructured open-ended interviews, group discussion, conversational analysis, and so forth. With field sites stretching between northern and extreme north eastern India I had to chalk out a detailed travel and living plan, and Delhi where I was based did not require much planning as compared to Kolkata and Karimganj. During 2007-09 I spent – though not at a very long and continuous stretch at any of the three places – close to twelve months formulating interview themes and questions, traveling, engaging in conversations/adda/golpo/gof (forms of informal chat), attending cultural functions, lectures, get-togethers, and holding interviews with the chosen respondents, not to mention the frantic attempts to collect and read more secondary literature all along. The respondents – selected on the basis of my objective judgment and understanding of research issues and questions – were drawn from the middle class population (and its various segments) of the community of the three sites. However, nature and character of the samples also varied due to their varied locations. But in all the three sites dimensions such as age, sex, education, occupation, caste, religion, locality, associational membership/non-membership, and so forth were taken into account while creating samples in order to ensure their representativeness, comparability and adequacy. While my own judgment was instrumental in the selection of respondents, I also drew support from say, in case of Kolkata and Delhi the detailed membership lists of SA. The support provided by preliminary observations and discussions with what are called “local sources/contacts” – in Karimganj in particular – was enormous. Sizes of the samples varied too but generally stayed within forty respondents in all three sites. So, I held conversations and interviews across Karimganj, Kolkata and Delhi with a little over one hundred people. However, I must add that structure and character of the interviews were not similar; while few were in-depth, the rest were not. Though conversations/golpo/gof and discussions (formal and informal) are often not treated as “authentic and scientific” sources of qualitative data, yet I have to admit that this study gained as much from those as from “scientific, structured/unstructured interviews” and therefore, I would appeal to treat the former on par with the latter so far as this work is concerned.

Engaged in what is referred as participant observation facilitated among others, by my familiarity with the dialect and social practices of the community I spent time with
Sylheti families including participation in their family functions, attended cultural functions, picnics, health camps etc. organized by SA namely, SS (SU), Kolkata, South Kolkata Sylhet Association (hereafter SKSA), and Sreehatta Sammilani, Delhi (hereafter SSD), and interviewed their office bearers and members, lived in Nabardarsha Cooperative Housing Society Limited (NCHSL), a predominantly Sylheti populated residential colony in Birati, Kolkata and finally, also spent some time with non-Sylheti Bengalis and Assamese. It is to be noted that the respondents were drawn not from “every conceivable corner” of the sites but localities considered important for this work; few interviews and discussions were also carried out in places other than the specified sites namely, Shillong, Silchar, Hailakandi, Dharmanagar (Tripura) and Guwahati to add to the broad concern of this work. While most of the generated data has been used to argue out the chapters, a good deal though not unimportant on any count has remained unutilized given the structure and scope of the work. It is at this juncture that I would like to clarify a few points about the “matter of generating data” from the three sites. In order to do that it is important to reflect upon how the respondents were selected by applying as I have already noted my own objective judgment. Commonly known as purposive or judgmental sampling technique in standard books on research methods, this technique is a form of non-probability sampling which is widely used to generate qualitative data. Predictably, it is not a favorite of those works which are geared towards generation of what is called “hard, scientific, quantitative data”. It is often viewed as a ‘last minute technique’ that more often than not is marked by personal bias leading eventually not to “error free” but highly “adulterated, non-scientific” data. However, I beg to differ with this view because not only do I consider qualitative data extremely relevant and useful but also claim that the technique of its generation by the means I adopted for instance, is far from “inauthentic and unscientific”. It is certainly more an intellectual strategy and less a hard demographic one but that does not imply that the technique is unfit for social scientific investigation. Having said this, I would argue that the respondents I spoke to were obviously not selected on the basis of my “personal” whims and fancies. My idea of being judgmental meant taking critical stock of the profile – to the extent that I could – of middle class Sylhetis in the three sites during preliminary visits to those; and my prior, practical knowledge about the community – an aspect important for judgmental sampling – also helped me zero in on those individuals that I would, and did subsequently interview.
Therefore, it is only after repeated visits and discussions with senior and junior members of the community and by taking note of the variables mentioned above, that I chose my respondents. I will not be so utterly arrogant or say foolish to claim that the technique I adopted was full proof, yet I can certainly say that in works such as this one, this technique is possibly one of the best suited to arrive nearest to reality. I may have missed out on people who would have had I spoken to them opened new vistas, but then such possibilities far from undermining the quality of the work only kept me alive to be able to look forward to further work on the theme in future.7 I have to admit that on number of occasions I failed to interview certain persons whom I considered highly suitable, and in such cases the samples had to be reconstituted. Another vital point so far this study is concerned was to do with occasional stretching of the idea of sample(s) to include those respondents who were not “strictly” but crucially linked to those. Frankly speaking, I was not sure at the outset whether for example, non-middle class Sylheti, non-Sylheti Bengali and Assamese responses – which (particularly Assamese) I made no or only little use of – or for that matter, those responses generated from outside the stated sites ought to be counted as belonging to “Sylheti middle class” samples. But not very late I ended up as mentioned, working upon the idea of sample itself to accommodate such responses. Before closing this discussion the point that I would not hesitate to make is: because judgment based sample choice is considered – by the “committed-to-scientific objectivity” variety of social scientists in particular – as one resting on “shaky scientific foundations” and therefore, it often demands of its maker/chooser “some serious explanation”; and in fact, far more serious than those that would been demanded from the choosers of statistics (probability) based sampling techniques. I would argue that a discrepant approach such as this actually stems from the fundamental flaw in conceptualization of science (and its method) itself which is rather too heavily tilted towards the “value of quantitative analysis”. I do not for a moment undermine the extraordinary importance of scientific, epistemological explanations or claim to be ‘against method(s)’. All I argue as shall be discussed shortly in detail is for a more liberated and expanded understanding of science in general and its method(s) and technique(s) in particular. It is only then perhaps studies based on researchers’ judgments, on qualitative modes of analyses would begin to make sense.
Located within the tradition of historical sociology which I have also discussed in the next chapter, and interpreted keeping in mind the importance of contemporary political and cultural contexts this work while taking into account as Charles Tilly would say, the epistemological, ontological and methodological divisions of our time does not pit sociology against history; the aim rather is as Tilly would add, to cut across the once forbidding frontier between the two disciplines. Though Tilly suggests that there is no coherent field called ‘historical sociology’, yet he does not rule out the possibility of creation of something – a genre, an effort – that resembles it. He writes: ‘Sociology as a whole can only gain, I believe, from an increased historical grounding of its models and theories. So if the diverse investigators working at the edges of sociology and history band together to promote a systematic appreciation of time and place for social processes, I suppose it will do no harm to call their common effort “historical sociology”’ [1980:59; also see Chapter II]. As a historically grounded sociological work its methodology as mentioned, has been qualitatively oriented field research. Without engaging with what distinguishes it from quantitative research technically and epistemologically it is important to delineate its general characteristics which Partha Nath Mukherji lists as follows:

(a) an emic perspective viewing “events, action, norms, values etc. from the point of view of people who are being studied”, (b) detailed description faithful to the perspectives of the participants in the “naturalistic” setting, (c) contextualizing behaviour, events, etc. within a holistic frame, (d) an inductive, open and flexible approach, and (e) a definite preference for theory generation rather than theory testing, formulation and testing of concepts and theories reflexively in tandem with data collection during research, and treating social science concepts as sensitizing concepts meant only to give a general sense of direction in approaching empirical instances [2000:40 (emphasis original)].

As a methodological orientation adopted by works ranging from the phenomenological, symbolic interactionist to ethnographic and similar others, it is hinged upon the critique of positivist epistemology. Among others, the intertwined issues of reflexivity, subjectivity-objectivity, and contextuality remain central to that critique. Visualizing an emancipatory role for social science the non-positivist epistemology notes not only the produced and contextual nature of social structures and systems but also argues for a negotiable, reconcilable relationship between the apparently non-reconcilable discourses of subjectivity and objectivity. More importantly, it squarely places reflexivity or self-reference/self-awareness/self-
understanding at the heart of social science knowledge and research as evident in works of say, Harold Garfinkel, Steve Woolgar, Malcolm Ashmore, Alvin Gouldner, Anthony Giddens, and so forth. In fact, practitioners of non-positivist epistemology argue that it is imperative for a researcher to turn as Loïc J. D Wacquant in another context writes, 'the instruments of his science upon himself', and to understand '[W]hat does the return ... of science upon itself entail?' [1996:36]. Of course, Wacquant here refers to Bourdieu's take on the issue of reflexivity which as he defines is 'the inclusion of a theory of intellectual practice as an integral component and necessary condition of a critical theory of society', but he argues further that Bourdieu's understanding differs from those of other theorists in three crucial ways: 'First, its primary target is not the individual analyst but the social and intellectual unconscious embedded in analytic tools and operations; second, it must be a collective enterprise rather than a burden of the lone academic; and third, it seeks not to assault but to buttress the epistemological security of sociology' [Ibid. (emphasis original)].

The reflexive turn in sociology as proposed by Bourdieu view sociologists as cultural producers whose theories and methods are shaped by critical praxis, and rather than discounting objectivity he only expands on it to increase to quote Wacquant yet again, 'the scope and solidity of social scientific knowledge' [Ibid.:37]. In fact, the issue of reflexivity among others, throws up questions not only regarding the use of tools and techniques such a participant observation but the very idea of fieldwork. Fieldwork is a method that has been the cornerstone, and one of most widely used ones of sociological/social anthropological research and quite predictably, the most discussed and debated too. It has been accepted as a preferred mode of enquiry by sociologists but heavily critiqued by others – practitioners of natural science in particular – on grounds of among others, its scientific validity, ability to generate objective data, and formulate generalized concepts and theories. In a well known work edited by M. N Srinivas and others fieldwork (intensive), debate on its scientific validity notwithstanding, is viewed as a key method/tool of generating meaningful, sensible knowledge about social life, in particular of complex and large societies such as India. In the preface to the second edition his colleagues A. M Shah and E.A Ramaswamy write:

The cardinal value of fieldwork lies in its ability to provide an intimate understanding of the complex matrices of social institutions and relationships that exists in all societies. Such matrices will continue to exist in the foreseeable future, however
much a society gets modernized or globalized. From this point of view, the extension of the method of fieldwork from the study of traditional communities such as tribes, castes, villages to urban communities and to such modern and complex organizations such as factories, trade unions ... is an important development. The valuable insight that fieldwork offers into these organizations points to the unlimited possibilities for the continued use of the method in ever newer fields. Another important value of fieldwork method is its capacity to throw up new and unexpected data [2002:vii].

Newer uses and applications of the method have as the authors write, called for compulsory innovations to the method itself but they add that ‘frills of the method can be tampered with so long as the core is intact. The crux lies in viewing issues holistically, allowing the free flow of information without too much direction, and listening with empathy’, and thereby ensuring generation of quality data [Ibid.:viii]. Indeed, as Srinivas argues in his famous essay entitled ‘Some Thoughts on the study of One’s Own Society’ (1990) fieldwork is of immense importance so far sociological training not perhaps of geniuses, but of ordinary students is concerned. And, such training should yield reasonably objective and advanced knowledge about the research problem. By negotiating the distance between self and the “other”, between subjectivity of the researcher and production of objective knowledge about the “other”, scientific and valid generalizations could be drawn from fieldwork. The importance of fieldwork/ethnography in sociological research is more or less firmly established, and also undiminished. However, the ways of going about it – application of certain techniques, positioning of observer and the observed – have all been influenced by broader discourses about nature and agenda of the discipline of sociology/social anthropology itself. The post-modernist turn in sociology/social anthropology for instance, and as discussed in the next chapter have raised questions about the “authencity” of conventional fieldwork framework, techniques, and finally production of ethnographic accounts of “other” communities and cultures. Meenakshi Thapan’s edited volume (1998) provides a useful summary about the method and contemporary debates surrounding its application and role in production of social and cultural knowledge. By reflecting on the crucial issues of subjectivity/objectivity, relation of self and the “other” and gendered selves, Thapan (citing Veena Das) suggests that the element of intersubjectivity in anthropological research is what needs celebration. Pointing to limitations, yet not disagreeing with all the arguments put forth by post-modernist anthropologists she opines that a critical humanist
discourse of anthropology with the idea of intersubjectivity at its center should be able to do justice to anthropological field research. She writes (of herself and the volume) thus:

This volume is a celebration of the intersubjective element in anthropological research and argues for a humanism that is cross-cultural and cuts across academic boundaries. It presents the view of the anthropological “other” (in this volume, the subject) as central not only to the research but also in transforming the life and consciousness of the researcher. The self and the subject are therefore viewed in an intersubjective relationship with very fine demarcating line. In this sense the self is not external to, or different from the subject, whose life and being is often internalized or reproduced by the researcher. As Hastrup points out, “self and other, subject and object are not categories of thought, not discrete entities” (1992:117). It is when the boundaries between self and non-self collapse that we can speak of fieldwork being in effect “a social drama confronting the performers with their unbounded selves” (Ibid). We are then “ourselves” in the field, trying to decipher and understand social reality but always in a state of flux and movement [1998:5-6; also see Okely & Callaway 1992].

Indeed, the spirit of intersubjectivity helps transcend barriers between subject and the object, self and the non-self and presents the possibility as Thapan suggests, of creation of expressive, reflexive narratives with their ‘attendant complexities and revelations, of an anthropological life’. It is imperative she adds, that ‘we begin to take account of experience and vision, individual, partial and contextualized as these might be. It is only when these many voices, and silences, are heard, and seriously listened to, that we can speak of anthropology that is truly humane and across cultures’ [Ibid.:33]. Urge for the spirit of self-discovery or reflexivity and non subject-object dichotomy in social science research is certainly not rooted in negation of the scientific spirit; rather, it rests on as Susan Hekman would observe, re-conceptualizing scientific activity and in fact, science itself. With science defined as any systematic mode of enquiry – wissenschaft – it is possible to inculcate the spirit of to recall Bourdieu, scientific reflexivity and view the “object of research” as, as enabled, agenced and empowered “subject” as the researcher. It is this scientific reflexivity that Bourdieu talks about in the Huxley Memorial Lecture delivered at Royal Anthropological Institute, London in 2002. Subsequently published in 2003, it eloquently argues how scientific reflexivity by critically interrogating the most objectivist tools of social science research namely, participant observation endeavors to increase rather than do away with scientific objectivity. By using the concept of ‘objectivation’ rather than observation Bourdieu shows that by ‘objectivation of the
subject of objectivation, of the analyzing subject – in short ... the researcher’, by mobilizing the researcher’s ‘social past thorough self-socio-analysis’, sociological research ‘can and does produce epistemic as well as existential benefits’ [2003:281-282 (emphasis original)]. Suggesting neither ‘that anthropologists must put nothing of themselves into their work’ nor ‘to the practice ... which consists in observing oneself observing, observing the observer in his work of observing or of transcribing his observations through a return on fieldwork, on the relationship with his informants’ he outlines his argument as follows:

One does not have to choose between participant observation, a necessarily fictitious immersion in a foreign milieu, and the objectivism of the “gaze from afar” of an observer who remains as remote from himself as from his object. Participant objectivation undertakes to explore not the “lived experience of the knowing subject” but the social conditions of possibility – and therefore the effects and limits – of that experience and, more precisely, of the act of objectivation itself. It aims at objetivizing the subject relation to the object which, far from leading to a relativistic and more-or-less anti-scientific subjectivism, is one of the condition of genuine scientific objectivity. What needs to be objectivized, then, is not the anthropologist performing the anthropological analysis of a foreign world but the social world that has made both the both the anthropologist and the conscious or unconscious anthropology that she (or he) engages in her anthropological practice [Ibid.:282-283].

Bourdieu’s reflection on participant observation which ought to be a process of ‘objectivation’ throws light on the role of fields of academic knowledge, and the impact of that on the ‘position’ of the researcher in the process of fieldwork. Though I have engaged with participant observation, yet at no point was I unaware of the debates surrounding it or for that matter, the issues of reflexivity, subject/object relationship, and so forth in carrying out fieldwork. My ways of talking, listening and recording in the sites was far from being a one sided, unilateral process. If I “interrogated” my subjects/respondents, I too stood “interrogated” by them not only in matters of my research interest but also deeply personal issues such as family history, view on caste and religion, marital choices, and so forth. As respondents who “responded” rather than “informed” me about their opinions and views, the process of fieldwork amongst middle class members of Sylheti community was certainly a dialogic and self-reflexive exercise. The task of “methodical” generation of data was not easy for sure, but it was not “terribly difficult” too perhaps because I was not on a frantic and near desperate search for “scientific” data, at least not by the time I had begun to near the end of fieldwork if at all there happens to be any end of that kind.
By then I was torn by the realization that what would eventually turn out to be “sociological data” for me to be incorporated in the carefully written chapters of a thesis was actually the deepest of experiences, feelings, opinions of a community which not once but twice was made to stand at the crossroads of life and history. I have to confess that the beginning of visits to families, and interviewing members saw me armed with thick notebooks, pens, a set of questions and more importantly, the highly valued but almost always the one dreaded piece of technological innovation namely, a recorder (and tape). I cannot begin to recount my entire experience of the early days when I would in something close to a combat mode make my way to meet an interviewee. Having set an appointment I would arrive at the designated place (usually a house), take a seat, and even before agreeing on a glass of water would hurry, possessed as I was by a sense of urgency to fish out the prepared set of questions, and that piece of dreaded magic – the recorder. During most conversations and interviews where invariably both I and my interviewees participated, the nature of my urgency was slightly different from the latters’. For my interviewees the discussions were urgent and yet not rushed for, those were on their lives, dialect/language(s), customs, practices, trials, tribulations and finally, Sylhet, and their identity and existence as Sylhetis. Almost all conversations pitched though on the broad theme fondly referred as ‘aamrar Sylhet [our Sylhet]’, also moved in multiple directions ranging from personal enquiries about the possibility of a change of my single status to the ‘scope and chance’ of securing college admission or even a job in Delhi. As time went by I calmed down, did away with the recorder during most interviews as its presence came to have more often than not an intimidating effect upon the conversation process, and either relied on notebook scribbles or power of memory to compile field data and write my detailed field notes. Another piece of technological device – camera – a favourite of field researchers however, did find its audience unlike the recorder. Photo opportunities almost never were resisted; rather, in most cases including cultural evenings and get-togethers that I attended photography was not only appreciated but encouraged. Admittedly I was delighted because unlike the interview/conversation process the one of photography was nearly unhindered. In fact, my failure to make extensive use of the recording device was compensated by frequent and smooth use of the camera. I must confess that the guilt of being “unable” to conduct research by following guidelines available in books on methods and techniques did plague me for a while, but I not being uncritical of the
paradigm that considers singular and relentless pursuit of "scientific data" central to "authentic" understanding of social-cultural life gradually managed to overcome that.

My travels in sociological fields – an expression inspired by Bernard Cohn – in 2007-08 took me to places I was much too familiar with. But I had never conducted (except in Delhi where I had done some work on "illegal" Bangladeshi immigrants) what is called fieldwork in those. Also, I had to grapple with that one issue debated widely by Indian sociologists/social anthropologists since mid-twentieth century: studying one's 'own community' and culture, and "authenticity" of that study. Though I personally supported by scholastic renderings on the matter was confident of going ahead with the study of my 'own community', what became slightly unsettling at least initially was not only to consider some members of Sylheti community with whom I was acquainted as sources of research but also "transform" my 'own community' into a "field". Making my way through the conceptual maze of sociological literature on methods and techniques, issues of neutrality and objectivity, critical distance and empathy, book-view and field-view, and so forth I realized that studying one's 'own community' was not so daunting after all, complexities thrown up by personal and "personalized" encounters and experiences notwithstanding. But such "complex" encounters both as a researcher and a Sylheti far from being deterrents came to constitute not only as Bourdieu would say, irreplaceable analytic resources but my modes of self-discovery. The fact that I "knew" of the community – its culture, dialect, past, 'glory', crises, anxieties and 'distinctiveness' – did impact conversations and interviews in ways that I did not desire or approve of initially. For instance, my knowledge of Sylheti dialect had paradoxical consequences; it was enabling so far rapport building and conversations were concerned but it also was a source of few unexpected, highly "personalized" and often uninhibited, not to mention undesirable, intimate conversations. It was during conversations of the latter kind I wished that my knowledge of the dialect was rudimentary. Indeed, I was caught at those times in the classic case of to be or not to be. As a community known for its deep love and attachment to the dialect my knowledge of that earned appreciation and thus, acted as a facilitator on one hand but also became a source of anguish (though only momentarily) on the other. But as I said my irksomeness occurred only initially for, in course of time I learnt to take things on a stride and in fact, welcome those. More importantly, I realized that more often than not unexpected – 'serendipitous' as
Robert Merton would call it — "non-sanitized/officialized" Sylheti (speech and all) conversations were not only sources of enormous wealth but actually yielded if not more, then certainly no less than the carefully thought out and planned ones. Inadvertent/“uncontrolled” remarks post scripted usually by a note of apology or say, opinions which were provided on strict conditions of anonymity was sociological data no doubt but more importantly, was “material(s)” unmediated by established notions of social propriety and control. Indeed, requests for anonymity revealed as much about the character of the community and its members as did non-requests for non-anonymity.

Responses generated by multi-sited fieldwork when subjected to critical interpretation and analysis in the light of existing secondary sources threw up interesting insights about the process of re-construction of the community and its identity in post-partition India. I have argued that the styles adopted by Sylheti middle class to imagine a Sylheti national community, and a distinctly fused identity (or a ‘paranational’ community meaning ‘beside/alongside/in addition to, Bengali nation’ as suggested by an interviewee) in colonial India were anxiously altered/transformed to evolve other suitable styles to re-imagine those following partition. To reiterate, it is by recognizing the invaluable importance of historical and political contexts therefore, that the process of transformation is mapped in this work. As an identity that has to constantly undergo the test of self-explanation swim as it has to in the post-colonial waters of fragmented selves and divided territories, its alternately prefixed or suffixed characterization is not free from deep anxiety and contestation. In fact, field notes as mentioned, show how the claim and projection of ‘united and uniform’ collective character of the community and its identity by Sylheti middle class is not free from internal was well as external contestations. Till the time I began to seriously consider looking at the community my view on it as an “insider” was not exactly monolithic aware as I was by training and practice of the non-monolithic nature of every kind of social collectivity, but also surely not one I shall not hesitate to confess that was informed by possible existence of the kind of contestations that I discovered later. However, preliminary visits to the sites set me on to examine not just the ‘collective spirit’ that held the community together but also how that was interrogated both by what may called in-dwelling or even ‘immanent critique’ and the out-dwelling one. Long and extremely insightful conversations with Sujit Choudhury, the well known
Karimganj based historian (now deceased) only added to that. It was he who stood by my argument that it was the middle class in particular – the vanguard of Sylheti identity – that required attention so far as making sense of the *distinctly fused* character of the identity was concerned. In fact, discussions with him which appear here as interviews turned into the much required “secondary source” for this work as did discussions which again appear as interviews with Kamaluddin Ahmed, another well known Karimganj based historian. In general of analytical nature as most of my educated and “qualified” respondents insisted upon “clearly explaining” their responses, the interviews that have been cited in the thesis are long and elaborate; and that is not only because of their explanatory content but also due to my mixed success at (part) translation and editing attempts of those. Most conversations and interviews drawn from fieldwork are included in the three exclusive chapters on three sites with for instance, Sujit Choudhury’s cutting across sites, and the thesis.9

The thesis therefore, is structured around one conceptual and three fieldwork chapters apart from this introductory, and the concluding one. The aims and objectives of all the six separate yet interwoven, multiple sectioned chapters including this one are mentioned at the beginning of individual chapters. However, I shall for benefit of the reader provide a brief outline of the following five here. While this chapter outlines the political history of Sylhet and reflects on broad issues related to methodology and pursuit of fieldwork, Chapter II attempts to carve out a broad conceptual schema to theorize and locate the arguments that the work engages with. Supported by detailed reading of available secondary literature on communities, cultures and identities this chapter focuses on the styles and modes adopted by colonial Sylheti middle class to construct the community and its identity, followed by an elaborate discussion on concepts and theories and finally, a reflection on nature of the re-constructed community, and its identity in contemporary India. Based on field experiences in Karimganj in particular and Barak Valley in general Chapter III examines the structure and condition of Sylheti community of the region. It begins with a current profile of the district and provides an account of its history since pre-colonial times up until the referendum and partition. The two subsequent sections respectively address first, Cachar including Karimganj’s experience of partition and relief and rehabilitation of Sylheti partition-migrants and second, cultural history and identity of middle class Sylheti community, both Hindu and Muslim of contemporary Karimganj.
In an interpretative mode the concluding section sums up findings of the preceding sections. This chapter may be considered as the foundational one for among others, it presents an outline of the socio-cultural institutions and practices of Sylhetis in general. Sylheti community of Kolkata is the theme of Chapter IV, and it takes off with a broad cultural sketch of the colonial city and its middle class Sylhetis. While the next section maps the community and its culture in post-colonial Calcutta, the following one examines the roles played by SS (SU) and SKSA in preservation and propagation of Sylheti culture and identity in contemporary Kolkata in particular and India in general. The chapter closes with a section that provides final comments and in addition, includes a discussion on AIFSA and its role in wider articulation of contemporary Sylheti identity.

Sylheti community of Delhi is the theme of Chapter V, and it begins with an outline of the cultural history of the city followed by a discussion on its Bengali community in general and Sylheti in particular in colonial and early post-colonial periods. The next two sections respectively look at first, the community within the wider cultural matrix of contemporary Delhi and second, at the roles played by SSD and Bipin Chandra Pal Memorial Trust in preservation and propagation of Sylheti life and identity in the city, and also elsewhere. Yet again, the final section closes with interpretative comments on the chapter. Since Chapters II, III, IV, and V include individual concluding summaries and observations the last and final one – Chapter VI – instead of following the conventional pattern of listing detailed remarks about the previous ones reflects in general on issues that the work had set out to examine. On a critical and exploratory vein the chapter points to both success and limitation of the work; in addition, it provides a discussion on issues that may contribute towards its expansion in future. That way, it is more about possible re-visits and re-imaginations in times to come. Product of multiple encounters and experiences, of the “official” and “personal(ized)” this work coloured by a reflexive spirit walked on those route(s) that the community did since 1874 through 1947 and finally, does in contemporary India. For me it was a moments-of-anxiety punctuated journey of self-discovery no doubt, but also of considerable thrill and exhilaration. I was anxious among others, not only about the shape that this work would eventually acquire given its wide canvas and scope – not to mention my editing capability – but also whether I had just done enough to put forth the kind of observations and arguments that I did.
Like such anxieties which were rarely absent, moments of immense satisfaction and joy following say, a stimulating conversation or striking of an idea or the discovery of a relevant piece of writing too were exactly so. Thus, to recall now was the experience of the work which saw me making friends out of respondents, respondents out of familial relations, home out of fields and fields out of home, and I found new homes in Karimganj, Kolkata and Delhi but also had fields coming to my home in Delhi. The work as it stands today is a critical-empathetic negotiation as much between in-here and out-there as between proximity and faraway, merger and distance, self and other, subject and object. Whether this work has as I observed in the beginning succeeded in striking and participating in the imagination of contemporary Indian social science is something for others to say but it surely and honestly intended, and attempted to do so, and the rest as the saying goes is best left to time.
The situation in post-colonial Assam as the historian Sujit Choudhury tells me, came to be something like: 'Sylhet/Bengali(i) is Dead. Long Live Sylhet/Bengali(i) ... True, Sylhet is gone but the Sylhetis/Bengalis haven't and they have Karimganj and Cachar to provide them with home and shelter' [see Appendix I].

Sylheti students and professionals living in Calcutta—many being victims of the riots—did not fail to communicate their experience to fellow Sylhetis in distant Assam. Ratindranath Bhattacharyya, a Sylheti student living in Hardinge Hostel in northern Calcutta provides a vivid description of the riots in letters written to his family in Sylhet, and Himendu Biswas, the President of Calcutta University Students Union at that time also narrated an eye-witness account of the riots to me [see Unpublished letters of R.N Bhattacharyya, August-October 1946; Appendix II].

Katy Gardner hints at the salience of 1874 and 1947 albeit in the context of Sylhetis of Bangladesh. She writes: In 1874 the British decided that instead of being part of Bengal, Sylhet should become Assamese [sic]. It was not until 1947 that, after a public referendum, the area was again assimilated into Bengal. This division is one reason is one reason why within Bangladesh Sylhet is perceived as being different from other districts' [1995:37 (emphasis mine)]. Another reason for this ‘difference’ is attributed by Gardner to the land revenue system in Sylhet which she calls ‘Assamese Revenue System’. She is perhaps unaware that Sylhet and Goalpara were the only two districts of colonial Assam which were guided not by as she says, ‘Assamese Revenue System’ but rules of Permanent Settlement which were also applicable in Bengal.

It is to be noted that I have drawn the two categories of Sylheti dialect and Sylhetitta to simplify (for practical purposes) what is broadly considered by members as ‘distinct’ Sylheti culture. In chapters III, IV & V I have looked at Sylheti culture through its two constituents namely, dialect and social practices, and Sylhetitta is roughly taken as an equivalent of the latter. Members of the community though do not operate along such clearly defined categories, and for them ‘distinct’ Sylheti culture is equivalent to Sylhetitta which includes the dialect as well as social practices.

‘Jaar naam nai, taar kothar daam nai [one who does not have a name, his words too does not have value]’, remarked a character in the famous Satyajit Ray film Hirak Rajar Deshe, and this is exactly how the community members describe their position in India.

For instance, the most well known work on Sylhet’s history by Achyut Charan Choudhury Tattwanidhi named Srihatter Itibritta has been elaborately discussed in the next chapter as also later works by scholars such as Sujit Choudhury, Kamaluddin Ahmed, Usha Ranjan Bhattacharya, and so forth in the subsequent ones and needless to say, this chapter has already noted the works on political history of colonial Sylhet.

With educated middle class segment as the focus, I traced its public (also government) and private sector employees, doctors, teachers, writers, litterateurs, political leaders, activists, students, homemakers, and so forth; men and women, young and old, upper and lower castes, and so forth belonging for example, to such social groups were kept in mind while constituting the samples.

Srinivas thus appears to agree with George Bernard Shaw when the latter in the preface to Saint Joan writes that: ‘The test of sanity is not the normality of the method but the reasonableness of the discovery’ [cited in Srinivas 1990: 154].

I have arranged my work site/place wise rather than theme wise because all the three sites both distinct and connected as they are demand exclusive attention. More importantly, the major themes say, location of Sylhetis since 1874 and after 1947, Sylheti dialect and social practices, articulation and transmission of Sylheti identity through SA, and so forth around which the thesis could have been also structured are in any case covered in detail in the three chapters and in addition, the one following this.

Notes:

1. The situation in post-colonial Assam as the historian Sujit Choudhury tells me, came to be something like: 'Sylhet/Bengali(i) is Dead. Long Live Sylhet/Bengali(i) ... True, Sylhet is gone but the Sylhetis/Bengalis haven't and they have Karimganj and Cachar to provide them with home and shelter' [see Appendix I].

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