Chapter III

Living in the three and a half thanas: Sylhetis of Karimganj

3.0: Introducing Karimganj

3.0.1: Profiling the district

As the sun sets on the river boatmen row faster to reach its centre or at least to a point where upon discovery, the heavily armed border police would not accuse them of an attempted crossover. We are in the world of borders and boundaries, of rivers and mountains, of plains and flatlands; in short, we have arrived in Karimganj, a small town that lies right on the Indo-Bangladesh border, and often becomes the border itself [see Image 3.0]. Located on the bank of river Kushiyara (a branch of river Barak), Karimganj is the headquarters of a district that goes by the same name in the southern tip of Assam [see Map 3.0]. As one of the three districts – Cachar and Hailakandi the other two – of Barak Valley, Karimganj was part of Cachar until it was granted the status of a district in 1983. This chapter narrates the history, culture and politics of the district which also remains central to the understanding of Sylheti community, and its identity in India. This section divided into two, provides an outline of the geographical location, administrative system, population profile and economic and political structures of Karimganj; it also briefly looks at the history of the district beginning with pre-colonial times up until the end of colonial rule. The following section takes off from 1947, and concentrates on locating Cachar including Karimganj’s experience of partition and its consequences, the most important being relief and rehabilitation of its Sylheti partition-migrants. Drawing upon field notes and available literature the next section in two parts engages with critical issues of cultural history and identity of the middle class Sylheti community of the district in particular, and neighbouring districts of Cachar and Hailakandi in general. The final section by reflecting on issues thrown up in the previous ones show how these aid in reading Sylheti identity discourse in contemporary Karimganj and Barak Valley. It is to be noted that only names of respondents are mentioned in this chapter, and their details are provided in Appendix I.
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Image 3.0: Bangladeshi and Indian territories on the left and right bank respectively of river Kushiyara.

Photo courtesy: Nabanipa Bhattacharjee
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Map 3.0: Karimganj district, 2001

Source: Assam Administrative Atlas, Guwahati, Directorate of Census Operations, 2001
Situated between longitudes 92°15'E and 92°35'E and latitudes 24°15' and 25°55'N, Karimganj with a total area of 1809 square kilometers is bounded on the north by Bangladesh and Cachar, on south by Mizoram and Tripura, on west by Bangladesh and Tripura, and on east by Hailakandi. The district with a total population of 10,07,976 persons in 2001, comprises of various geographical features; it shares 92 kilometers of international border with Bangladesh of which 41 kilometers is demarcated by river Kushiyara and 51 kilometers by land. Headed by a Deputy Commissioner who is concerned with law and order, and land revenue it has one Sub-Division (Karimganj Sadar), five Circles/Tehsils (Karimganj, Nilambazar, Patherkandi, Ramkrishna Nagar and Badarpur), five C.D Blocks (North Karimganj, South Karimganj, Badarpur, Patherkandi, Ramkrishna Nagar, Lowairpoa and Dullavcherra) and five police stations (Karimganj, Badarpur, Patherkandi, Ratabari and Ramkrishnagar). Its land area is divided into two categories namely, permanently settled estate and temporarily settled estate though settlement operation is yet to be completed. Apart from handling matters related to law and order, the administration and other elected bodies of representatives are involved in overall development of the district; the two urban administrative organs are Karimganj Municipal Board and Badarpur Town Committee while rural ones are (in descending order) Mahakuma Parishad, Anchalik Panchayat and Gram Panchayat. Out of the total population of Karimganj in 2001, 1,30,957 are scheduled castes– Namasudra, Patni and Kaibarta – 2,901 scheduled tribes – Dimasa, Kachari, Barmans and other generic tribes – 5, 27,214 Muslims, 8,746 Christians and 4,70,708 Hindus. With a high density of 557 persons per square kilometer, a considerably balanced sex ratio (947 females per 1000 males), and moderate literacy rate (66.24%) bulk of the district’s population (93%) lives in rural areas, and urban and semi-urban areas account for merely 07% of the total population. According to the official website www.karimganj.nic.in, its inhabitants predominantly speak Bangla language, ‘particularly, Sylheti, a dialect of Bengali spoken by the people of Sylhet, now in Bangladesh, to which Karimganj once belonged’; other languages spoken are Hindi, Manipuri, Assamese, Dimasa, and so forth.

With rail and air networks in an underdeveloped stage, most preferred means of communication with Karimganj is the road link or National Highway No.44 that originates in Shillong, Meghalaya and terminates in Agartala, Tripura; to facilitate
border trade a new National Highway No.151 has been sanctioned to connect the district via Sutarkandi, with Bangladesh. Though not very regular in nature, the river link maintained by Central Inland Water Transport Corporation from Karimganj to Kolkata via Bangladesh, continues to function. In fact, poor communication links with rest of India is one of the vital factors behind underdevelopment of Karimganj in particular and Barak Valley in general; its official website suggests that of the total population only 2,35,016 persons constitute the main work-force and 68,278 persons the marginal one, rest being economically non-productive. As much as 60% of the work-force is engaged in agriculture and allied activities like farming, fishing, forestry, and horticulture constituting thus the primary sector of the economy; secondary and tertiary sectors predictably employ minimum work-force. Apart from agrarian activities and some internal trade, it is international trade with Bangladesh that contributes to the generation of the District Domestic Product. Both river (Kalibari Ghat) and land (Sutarkandi) borders are regularly used to trade in food items, fruits, and coal; the proposed opening of an International Trading Centre and Free Trade Zone at Sutarkandi, the border post situated 12 kilometers from Karimganj town is likely to increase the volume of trade, and boost up the local economy [see Images 3.1 and 3.2]. Once a town bustling with commercial activity, Karimganj following partition gradually lost importance as its rail and river links with Calcutta stood snapped; though river link was eventually restored, the rail link is yet to resume. Indeed, Karimganj, and for that matter entire Barak Valley, has to depend for all essential goods and supplies on the rest of India to which it is connected by a rail link that more often than not remains suspended, and a road link that is highly prone to natural hazards such as heavy rains and landslides. The five members that Karimganj sends to Assam Legislative Assembly, and one to Lok Sabha have not been able to make much difference to the existing state of affairs, and as a result it continues to reel under poverty and unemployment. In fact, as an economically backward, land-locked and geographically remote place for, these are the expressions usually prefixed to Karimganj, the fate of the district was decided way back during the Sylhet referendum. Indeed, Karimganj at the stroke of midnight of 15 August 1947 found itself not only on the margins of future economy but also the geography of independent India.
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Image 3.1: The border town of Karimganj.

Photo courtesy: Nabania Bhattacharjee
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Image 3.2: Border road at Sutarkandi, Karimganj

Photo courtesy: Swatoleena Bhattacharjee
3.0.2: On a short historical trek

Available historical records do not throw much light on the pre-colonial history of Karimganj region, and therefore it is difficult to outline a chronologically consistent historical account. Believed by some as named after a local Mirasdar Mohammed Karim Choudhury, or by others after the Pathan chief Mohammed Karim (and Mohammed Zaki who established Zakiganj on the other side of Kushiyara in Bangladesh), and composed of one Arabic (Karim) and Persian (Ganj) words each Karimganj’s upper age limit ‘cannot go beyond the 14\(^{th}\) [C]entury A.D. when the Turko-Afghan [R]ule extended over the Sylhet region including Karimganj upto Bundashil (Badarpur) on the east’ [Ahmed 2008:95; also see Allen et al 1993; Tattwanidhi 2004; Hunter 1998]. Kamaluddin Ahmed (2008) notes that the history of Karimganj (town) passed through three important stages during the colonial period. It started as a ganj or small trading and market centre, grew into a thana, and finally came to be in 1878 the headquarters of a sub-division of the same name in undivided Sylhet. The process of Karimganj’s growth as an important urban centre had begun in mid-nineteenth century and among others, the colonial government introduced the Permanent Settlement – the region being part of Bengal – which regulated its land relations and agrarian structure. With natural water navigation system, and land and climate suited to cultivation of tea Karimganj along with other parts of Sylhet emerged as an important center for the European planters and their tea trade.

Following the induction of Sylhet in Assam in 1874 Karimganj as a newly created sub-division of Surma Valley headed by a European civilian sub-divisional officer, covered in its territorial-administrative jurisdiction a large area including six thanas namely, Karimganj, Beani Bazar, Barlekha, Patharkandi, Ratabari and Badarpur. By the last decade of nineteenth century rail and river networks were extended to Karimganj, and as a result its commercial importance increased manifold. While the water navigation system facilitated connection with the sea port at Chittagong, the Assam-Bengal Railway network enabled trade transaction with Calcutta. Karimganj’s inclusion in the Cachar-Chittagong-Calcutta (and later Tinsukia in upper Assam, and Sylhet) transportation network not only contributed to its urbanization process, but also shaped the structure of its emerging educated middle class. By early years of twentieth century, ‘Karimganj emerged as the third largest town of Surma Valley … containing the office of the SDO, a Munseff Court, a Criminal Court, a Police Station,
a small jail ..., a six bedded hospital, a high school and a M V School in addition to the big market and the river port"[Ibid:103]. However, it is not only as a business center that Karimganj acquired its reputation for, it had more than its fair share of educational and cultural institutions not to mention its record of participation in political (nationalist) mass struggles, and it played for instance, an active role in Chorgola Exodus, one of the largest labour mobilizations in the sub-continent. It is obvious that Karimganj was certainly not out of sync with the socio-political developments that took place elsewhere in India, and not surprisingly, it played host to noted litterateurs including Rabindranath Tagore in 1919, political leaders and other public personalities of the time. Indeed, by 1930’s Karimganj town came to be one of the most preferred educational and cultural centers in eastern India. Comprising of a heterogeneous mix of religious and linguistic communities Karimganj however remained as historians suggest, relatively violence free and peaceful during the years preceding partition. However, outcome of the referendum gave a new meaning to its historical journey for, by single stroke it charted the path that this sub-division of undivided Sylhet district would have to tread in independent India. Indeed, not only were the geographical coordinates of Karimganj re-drawn but its cultural and political ones too. Thereafter in Karimganj, life indeed had to be re-imagined and re-lived in the backdrop of such altered coordinates.

3.1: Coming out of partition: the relief and rehabilitation story

Contemporary socio-political history of Karimganj begins with the partition of Sylhet in 1947, and the subsequent attachment of a portion of it to Cachar district. Though the Assam(ese) political leadership heaved a sigh of relief following Sylhet’s merger with Pakistan, yet the retention of 709 square miles of the district in India remained a matter of concern for it. Also perhaps what Assam and its leaders did not foresee – or did not care to foresee so preoccupied and hurried were they in 1947 – inter alia, was the mammoth proportion of migration that would follow from its freshly severed territory in (East) Pakistan to its own once partition became a reality. Undoubtedly, of all the Assam districts Cachar including Karimganj witnessed the heaviest influx of migrants from Sylhet. However, very little has been done in terms of academic work so far as partition-migration from Sylhet is concerned except perhaps for those by Anindita Dasgupta (2001, 2008) and Dimple Dutta Choudhury (2003); Moushumi
Pathak’s (2004) work is focused on East Bengali partition-migrants in Brahmaputra Valley and does not discuss Sylhetis in particular. The early visits to Karimganj and other places in Barak Valley left me somewhat disappointed. Notwithstanding the ones that possibly escaped my attention, the uncountable writings on Sylhet that I came across either had referendum and partition, or history and culture of undivided Sylhet as central themes. Struck as I was by the near absence of works on Sylheti partition-migrants, the scenario did not prove to be any better when my search for works on Sylheti identity began; why I questioned myself, a community that is so ‘proud’ of its history and identity not care to direct systematic attention towards mapping its journey in post-independent India; or why for that matter, even current academic projects fail to take notice of that. Sujit Choudhury draws attention to the matter, and says:

Immigration both as an academic and political theme has been the consistent focus of studies on Assam, and there are reasons for that; but very few are on the immediate period that followed partition; one possible reason is that the process was essentially at work in the Cachar region, and concerned Bengalis who in any case have always been the object of Assamese indifference. "Mainstream" scholars are generally indifferent to the eastern sector of partition and then, in that Bengal precedes Sylhet, Sylhetis themselves write so much about their glorious history and cultural heritage but very little on what actually happened after partition, i.e. what are its outcomes, and what it means to be a Sylhet in today’s Assam and India. Maybe the first generation of Sylheti migrants were too caught up with the process of making sense of their resettled lives, and remembering what they had left behind. It is only second and third generation Sylhetis who perhaps can study partition-migration better. So far as Sylheti identity is concerned in Barak Valley the situation is both simple and complex; simple because most consider themselves “naturally” Sylheti, but the matter gets complicated when this identity is seen vis-à-vis the Assamese “other”. Sylhetis then go on to assert their Bengali identity. The case of Sylhetis in India is very complex. Studies from Barak Valley region are coming up, and other scholars from Guwahati and elsewhere appear interested too. Maybe things are changing.

Partly to address the phenomenon, and also because it has a bearing on this work, I have attempted by primarily drawing upon field notes and also available literature to draw a picture of the relief and rehabilitation scenario in Cachar including Karimganj here. Census records provide a clear picture of the volume of partition-migration to Assam between 1946 and 1950. In Assam – with 2,74,455 partition-migrants – apart from places like say Dhubri, Goalpara, Dibrugarh and Nowgong, it is Silchar and Karimganj that witnessed as mentioned, the heaviest influx of displaced people.
[Census of India, Displaced Persons-1951:1954; also see Tables 1.1 and 1.2 (Appendix IV)] Though it is Silchar that recorded the largest number of displaced persons, Karimganj followed closely behind. In fact, a comparison of total population growth rates of select border towns of Assam between 1941 and 1971 show that the figure was highest in Karimganj which as Sushanta Krishna Dass (1996) says proves that it is this sub-division of Cachar that accommodated throughout those years the maximum number of migrants from its neighbour across the border [see Table 1.3 (Appendix IV)]. However, without suggesting that statistical data have no relevance – and not without reasons migration studies at least in the western hemisphere, have always accorded primacy to that – what I argue for is a sociologically sensitive and nuanced approach that can move beyond mere (game of) numbers, and concentrate on the social and political complexities that informed the process of migration and residence of Sylhetis in post-colonial Assam. Following partition, the movement of Sylheti Hindus which began way back in 1946 quickened, and apart from Cachar other places in unified Assam like Shillong, Guwahati, and Nowgong also accommodated large number of Sylheti migrants, as did cities and towns outside it like Calcutta, Delhi, Dharmanagar (in Tripura), and so forth.

Assam following the division, comprised of the following categories of Sylhetis: a) families who lived there for a long time and never any had regular connection with Sylhet b) families who lived there but had regular relations with Sylhet c) families who lived in that part of Sylhet (Karimganj) retained by Assam d) families who arrived as official migrants and e) families who arrived as un-documented and unofficial migrants. While the first three included both Hindus and Muslims, the last two primarily comprised of Hindus (and sometimes Muslims too). Predictably, the Sylheti population that chose to settle down in Assam was predominantly Hindu drawn from various castes and classes; Muslims who chose to remain on the Indian side were similarly represented too. Even a quick glance at the private papers of Shyama Prasad Mookerjee for instance, show how individual groups of Sylheti migrants from different parts of Assam including Cachar given their specific experiences, often separately voiced their concerns and opinions about relief and rehabilitation measures. Similarities of experience as projected also by the middle class notwithstanding, it is important to move away from a monolithic understanding of Sylheti migrant experience in Assam, and look at how diverse caste, class, gender and religious
groups perceived and defined their specific experiences. Anindita Dasgupta for instance, looks at the *bhadralok* Sylheti migrants who permanently settled down in Assam between 1946-1950; she sub-divides this category further as follows: ‘Those who migrated out of Sylhet before 1947 but had continued to have a *desher bari* in Sylhet. Those who migrated after 1947, mostly “optees” of the government of Assam and other professionals and traders. Those who lived in the four *thanas* of Ratabari, Patharkandi, Karimganj and Badarpur, who did not have to move at all’ [2001:351]. She goes on to argue that:

The profile of the Sylheti *bhodralok* is conclusively different from the refugee stereotype thrown up by studies focused on Partition along the western Indo-Pakistan border. This was a small British-educated urbanized class in colonial Assam constituting a chunk of the colonial elite in all the Assam districts who, inspite of losing their *desher baari* after the Sylhet Referendum, were not pauperized or victims of communal violence. Instead, with the help of an integrated social network and educational qualifications, they managed to re-establish themselves in their land of choice without much difficulty. To this class, refugeehood entailed a condition of shame, penury and helplessness, and this was an appellation they were eager to resist and deny [Ibid.:357].

Though Dasgupta quite convincingly shows how unlike other classes, the Sylheti *bhadralok* as a class positioned itself vis-à-vis partition and refugeehood, yet she by failing to say, contextualise and in addition, problematise concepts such as refugee, *bhadralok* and ‘optee’ only ends up constructing another uniform, uncontested *bhadralok* migrant narrative. Her plea for adoption of a pluralistic approach to study partition-migration is no doubt well intended, but unfortunately does not quite reflect in the study she has conducted. Consider for example, what Nihar Ranjan Dutta in a reflective mood says:

> My family always lived in Karimganj, and we never moved after Sylhet was partitioned; we never became refugees as others did. We upper caste kayastha middle class people were mercifully spared the trauma of becoming refugees, but many fellow Sylhetis, in fact, the majority did go through harrowing experiences. True, we did not become refugees and live as “original” Sylhetis in Karimganj but after partition all of us became refugees in some way or the other because we could not have gone to Sylhet on the other side. Karimganj was our home but the other part of Sylhet was too. That was forever lost, and we all became “refugees” in a certain sense at one go. Many colleagues of my father from Habiganj, Sunamganj and other places chose India and migrated; they had to because the other choice was Pakistan; coming to India was not really a matter of option because there was no other place to settle down.
Fieldwork carried out in Karimganj reveals that whether or not one's family was officially refugee did not “really” matter, and so was the case in other two districts of Barak Valley, and also in places like Shillong and Guwahati where I had informal discussions with middle class Sylhetis. While few did ‘deny and resist’ as Dasgupta would say, the refugee tag, majority confessed that they were indeed refugees because it is the loss of desh – of Sylhet, of the homeland – that made every Sylheti a refugee, ‘carrying forever the burden of refugeehood’. Interestingly, middle class Sylheti Muslims too voiced similar opinions. As Anwar Alam Choudhury remarks:

*I belong to a village in Karimganj, and in a way I believe I still live in Sylhet as this place never became part of Pakistan; but I do feel a sense of deep loss. Though I am a real Sylheti in India and our family never went to Pakistan, and Karimganj is my homeland, yet this homeland sometimes has little meaning without Sylhet; after all, no child feels at ease without the father and mother or relations; we Sylhetis have lost lot of our strength without Sylhet, and in a way lost the right to call ourselves Sylheti; no wonder, we forever seek refuge as refugee in Sylheti language, music, folk culture and other things. Had Sylhet not gone to Pakistan we would, my community people would have never been refugees. I think most Hindus and Muslims feel the sense of being refugees. I am not a refugee certainly, and yet you know a refugee.*

It is obvious that Sylheti migrant experience in Assam is far from being without serious contestations and complexities. Be that as it may, let me now map the dynamics of the migration story as it gradually unfolded in the province (state). Just as large number of Sylheti Hindus facing persecution or even the threat of it on communal grounds began moving towards Assam including Cachar, similar number of Sylheti Muslims as Kamaluddin Ahmed (2008) confirms, made the reverse journey to Pakistan. As Juned Choudhury, the Dhaka based son of Assam Muslim League leader Abdul Matin Choudhury tells me over one of our regular telephonic chats: ‘After partition my father and his family moved to East Pakistan, and I have now settled down in Dhaka. We had to leave India because outcome of the referendum made the migration imperative. Though some of my relations did not move, most of Muslims did, particularly of the middle class. At that time perhaps that was the best and only option.’ Three sub-divisions of undivided Sylhet namely, North Sylhet, Habiganj and Sunamganj witnessed maximum exodus of Hindus as compared to the other two sub-divisions namely, South Sylhet and Karimganj.

South Sylhet sub-division though had less Muslim population but Maulvi Bazar witnessed immense uprootment being followed by Kulaura, Srimangal, Kamalganj and Rajnagar. The exact data is not
available. But the maximum of them came ... after the riot of 1950 .... The refugees had been mainly in the occupation of mirasadari, agriculture and business and services in Sylhet. From Karimganj sub-division, the influx had been comparatively less as three and a half of its thanas were retained in India. Beanibazar and Barleka under this subdivision marked immense exodus. The refugees from North Sylhet subdivision had been maximum. Almost all the police stations under this subdivision witnessed immense exodus. It was followed by Habiganj subdivision... Under Sunamganj subdivision, Sunamganj, Chhatak and Jagannathpur witnessed maximum emigration of minorities [Dutta Choudhury 2003:72; also see Sylhet Chronicle, Sylhet, 4 March 1940].

Upon arrival in Assam the migrants, belonging to various castes and classes of government employees, small businessmen, contractors, small industrialists, agriculturists, and small and big landlords settled down either in camps set up by the government or in shelters provided by extended families and friends. Scattered as they became in various places of Assam, the migrants struggled to eke out livings for themselves; while that was less difficult for some, for others it meant either long periods of temporary residence in refugee camps and destitute homes or worse, homeless wandering from one place to another. Similar to their counterparts in West Bengal Sylheti migrants in Assam too found the situation, completely unanticipated as it was by both central and state governments, ‘not only less conducive but extremely hostile to their material and emotional needs. Grudgingly granted ... entry by the government ..., the refugees realized early that their struggle for survival had hardly ended; in fact it had just begun’ [Bhattacharjee 2008:38]. The Relief and Rehabilitation ministry set up by the government of India encountered immense hurdles in effectively addressing the plight of migrants, and ensuring their planned settlement in Assam. One of those was the consistent opposition of the Gopinath Bardoloi led Congress government in Assam to all such central rehabilitation policies. As Sanjib Baruah summarizing the situation, writes:

After the partition of India in 1947, the tension between Assamese subnationalism and pan-Indianism nearly reached a crisis point on the question of settlement of Hindu refugees from East Bengal. Assam Premier Bordoloi argued that Assam could not accommodate very many refugees. However, as careful historian of this controversy puts it, the pan-Indian Congress leaders tended to “think of themselves as more all-India minded than their provincial counterparts” and “claimed superior understanding of the local situation and were determined to impose their will on the Bordoloi government”. Relying on an exchange of letters between Jawaharlal Nehru and Gopinath Bordoloi, historian Nirode Barooah writes that “Nehru treated many of Bordoloi’s judgements on the events of his own state with little respect” and a number of
times he displayed “impatience and condescension”…. Nehru not very subtly threatened that “if Assam adopts an attitude of incapacity to help solve the refugee problem, then the claims of Assam, for financial help will obviously suffer [1999:85].

Among the primary reasons cited for the opposition was non-availability of adequate land to accommodate the ever increasing number of migrants in the province. However, unable to contain the influx and also withstand the centre’s directives, Assam government after a while relented, and began to work towards addressing the matter. To that effect it issued on 4 May 1948, a circular that stated in no uncertain terms the policy it would like to follow regarding immigration and land settlement in Assam. It reads as follows:

In view of the emergency created by the influx of refugees into the province from East Pakistan territories and in order to preserve peace, tranquility and social equilibrium in towns and villages, the government reiterates its policy that settlement of land should be in no circumstances made with persons who are not indigenous to the province. The non-indigenous inhabitants of the province should include, for the purpose of land settlement during the present emergency, persons who are non-Assamese settlers in Assam though they already have lands and houses of their own and have made Assam their home to all intents and purposes [cited in Choudhury 2002:64 (emphasis original)].

Despite the discouraging mood of Assam government also evident from the above circular, immigration continued unabated. Consequently, the central pressure to formulate an official relief and rehabilitation policy only mounted on the province. With such a policy in place relief and rehabilitation work began in Assam; in Cachar it took off with the establishment of Central Refugee Board (hereafter CRBC) at Silchar, and three sub-divisional committees which were to collectively undertake the responsibility (along with other voluntary organizations) of settling the migrants. Relief work however had to be intensified after 1950, and in Karimganj alone were ‘opened twenty seven helping centres amongst which 16 were by local congress workers, three by Ramkrishna Mission and Girls’ High School, and three directly by the Government and the rest by the local relief committee .... Besides, fourteen refugee camps were established in the Karimganj sub-division to help the refugees’ [cited in Dutta Choudhury 2003:93; also see Jugashakti, Karimganj, 7 April 1950]. Apart from camps and training centers the government also set up as Dimple Dutta Choudhury shows, housing colonies across the district for instance, in places like Silchar, Udharbond, Lakhipur, Sonai and Katigorah. However, in course of time non-
official camps and colonies also sprung up alongside the official ones, and it was in those camps that migrants who failed to register themselves as legal refugees found their place. As Arati Debi says:

My family now lives in Ratabari and I was very young jokhon Pakistan hoisil [when Pakistan was created]. But I remember people pouring into Karimganj from Sylhet and they all wanted to stay here. Ei jaga refugee di bhora aasil [this place was full of refugees]. Koto bura manush, bidhoba betintore aami bikka chaite dekchi, bashar kaam korte dekchi, kamlagiri, bashon maja; shobta korta tara. Oto mono nai kintu bouut re mat te shunchi je tarar thakar jega nai aar sorkare kunta ditto nai koi dishe karon tarar refugee kagoz aasil na. Tarar moideh chuto jaato aasla naile puroitgirio korta parta; baute pora lekha jaanta na aar gorib to aslau; kita koibai rego, goriboru hokkol jhamela; aamrar bashato shunchi bout betin harai gesoin and aamare to dekhitrai kaam koria khair [I have seen so many old men and widows begging, doing domestic chores in homes of others, repair work, washing utensils; they did everything. I do not remember everything but remember them saying that government has refused them help because they did have refugee papers. Many refugees were low castes or else they could have become priests; many were uneducated and of course they were poor; what to do, it is always the poor who face the problems. I have heard that in my family too many women disappeared and you can see me working as a domestic help now].

If a large section failed to fight for their legal rights and benefits, another section indeed made hay as the sun shone. The latter had people who in spite of meeting either only a few or sometimes no official criteria, managed to claim refugee status for themselves. Needless to say, the benefits ranged from easier access to funds and housing to firmer claims to citizenship. What Paresh Chandra Choudhury says below is revealing.

Handing over our Sylhet house to tenants, I came to India finally in 1948 to our house in Shillong. My father had retired as a senior government servant and we were a relatively affluent family. He had a refugee card and we got benefits, although nothing extraordinary and related to things like buying food, fuel and so on. Officially our family may have met one or two conditions but we really could not be called refugees in economic terms. We were refugees surely but could have done without the economic benefit that came with the card. I remember far needy people from Sylhet denied help as they, many being uneducated to the extent of being unable to write an application, could not manage their ways in government offices to secure refugee cards. Anyway, the government hardly offered enough for so many claimants. My uncle who settled down in Srikona in Cachar after 1950 told me how acute food shortage coupled with inhuman living conditions, diseases and epidemics in camps often resulted in riot like situations and even deaths. Actually, in that mad moment of rush only the powerful with connections benefited and those who really deserved help, poor men and women who fled Sylhet with nothing
but their lives, hardly got anything. Coming back to the card, I must say that it had more than economic value as it meant for families like mine the means to claim legitimate citizenship in Assam and India. During those politically unstable times with unforeseen futures the card became our source of strength and we hardly cared whether our strength came by depriving others of that.

In fact, the issue of citizenship was a critical one for the migrants given the volatile socio-political scenario in Assam at that time. Following further influx of migrants after 1950 the central government in order to facilitate the grant of Indian citizenship to those who sought that, altered the time deadline of their arrival to India which in turn benefited some but not those who arrived after that. As Sanjib Baruah writes:

After the large-scale population movements that followed the partition of 1947, the Constitution of India had fixed July 19, 1948 as the deadline for migrants from what became Pakistan to claim citizenship in India. However, the procedure for gaining Indian citizenship for those who moved after that was quite easy. When post-partition riots led to more migration of minorities from East Pakistan to India and from India to East Pakistan, a treaty between the two countries, popularly called the Nehru-Liaqat pact, prescribed that refugees returning home by December 31, 1950 would be entitled to get back their property, effectively “pushing back the date beyond the Constitution’s July 19, 1948 to the end of 1950”. The Nehru-Liaqat pact created a fiction that “once calm was restored the refugees would return to their homes across the border unlike the western region where the exchange of population was treated as final”.... Legally speaking, there is thus some ambiguity about the status of Hindu immigrants who have crossed over to India since the 1950’s. In case of the Muslim immigrants ... many Indian laws were not prone to distinguishing between Hindu and Muslim immigrants from East Pakistan/Bangladesh. However, there are exceptions. The Immigrants (Expulsion from Assam) Act of 1950 implicitly distinguished between Hindu refugees and Muslim illegal aliens. But the law was repealed in 1957[1999:118-119].

It is in this backdrop therefore, that rehabilitation work continued to be carried out in Cachar. In order to facilitate the process acts such as, Assam Land (Requisition and Acquisition) Amendment Act, 1949, Assam Forest Products (Acquisition) Act, 1950 and Assam Displaced Persons (Rehabilitation Loans) Act, 1951 that inter alia, provided for a) ‘requisition and speedy acquisition of land for displaced persons’ b) ‘the government to acquire forest products, ... for the purpose of rehabilitating the refugees ....’ and c) ‘the grant and recovery of loans to displaced persons for their rehabilitation’, were passed [cited in Dutta Choudhury 2003:84]. Alongside such measures the setting up of camps and colonies continued in full swing. By 1952, a
large section of migrants came to be accommodated in camps, training-cum-work centers (TWC) and official and non-official colonies (OC and NOC respectively) at namely: Ghungoor (TWC), Panchgram (OC&TWC), Majigaon (OC&TWC), Ramkrishnanagar (OC&TWC), Duhalia (OC), Kathirail (OC), Kinnarkhal (OC), Gandhinagar (OC), Satirsangan (OC), Bishnunagar (OC), Sonebeel (OC), Bag-o-Bahar (NOC) and Hailakandi (NOC) with both governmental and private aid [The Chronicle, Silchar, 28 November & 5 December 1952]. The tea-gardens of Cachar as always, shared the task of providing work and employment to the migrants. So, as Shankar Bhattacharjee whose father was actively involved in relief work in Ramkrishnanagar says, while the tea gardens predominantly employed the educated refugees to run the affairs of administration, others were trained to become part of the industrial and agrarian work force; still others were promised government and semi-government jobs, and the rest either self-settled them or remained without any fixed occupation and mode of income. The point is: a large number of migrants continued to remain in pitiable conditions particularly the poorer ones, and certainly women who had no male family members to support them, relief efforts notwithstanding.

Taking note of the situation, CRBC apprised Gopinath Bardoloi of the condition of relief and rehabilitation in the district in a memorandum submitted on 30 May 1950. It among others, stated as follows:

\[\text{It is estimated that more than a lac of refugees have already entered this district after the recent disturbance in East Pakistan and although the flow is not so brisk, presently the recent development in East Pakistan [are] likely to cause a fresh exodus... This board conveys its hearty thanks to the authors of the new constitution and the Indian Parliament for the generous provisions they have made for admission of the older refugees to the full rights of citizenship in India... But in so far as the question of their resettlement and rehabilitation until now are concerned this Board submits nothing substantial has yet been done. Before the new influx about two years and a half have passed yet the vital problems concerning them seem to be hanging in the mid-air, and almost all the schemes, plans and programmes have remained simply on paper. It may be admitted that new influx ... has overshadowed all others; yet from humanistic stand point the cases of older refugees ... can never be ignored. It is the fervent hope of the Board that there should be proper co-ordination between the Centre and the Province in the matters of rehabilitation of the older refugees.... The I.T.A scheme expected to rehabilitate ... agriculturists has not come up to results initially expected .... The number expected to be rehabilitated on this scheme is but a fraction of the huge number of refugees who principally depend [of] agriculture and many are still floating in a bewildered manner.... Amongst refugees there is a large number accustomed to town life and trained in town vocations ... and small towns now existing in Cachar are too small.}\]
to accommodate the large number needing residence in towns or their suburbs.... The problem can be well tackled ... if the ... existing towns ... be extended.... This will immediately solve ....the problem of middle class refugees like Medical practitioners, traders, school masters, lawyers and artisans and craftsmen etc.... Special facilities for admission to technical institutes, school of engineering, Veterinary college, Agricultural college and other educational institutions should be provided for the refugee students.... It is strongly urged that two ladies' Home be immediately organized at Silehar and Karimganj with proper facilities for vocational guidance.... This Board humbly submits that ... people acquiring Indian domicile may kindly be admitted to full rights of citizenship of Assam and may be treated as having acquired domicile by taking up his fixed habitation in Assam [Shyamaprasad Mookerjee Papers, Subject File No. 40/1950]

On a tour of Assam in 1950, Shyamaprasad Mookerjee was disturbed to see the dismal situation of relief and rehabilitation; he also noted the anxiety-ridden and hostile relationship that prevailed amongst the Assamese and Bengali migrants in particular and Bengalis in general. Mookerjee pleaded for inter-community amity, and ‘appealed to the people of Assam to rehabilitate these unfortunate victims of partition who had to leave their hearth and homes’ [The Assam Tribune, Guwahati, 19 June 1950]. But sections of Assamese speaking population influenced by organizations such as Assam Sanrakshini Sabha and Assam Jatiya Mahasabha continued to resist all attempts to rehabilitate the migrants whom they saw essentially as Bengali intruders and nothing else.12 It is in this emerging context that CRBC submitted a memorandum to Shyamaprasad Mookerjee on 23 June 1950. On a note of disapproval regarding the unhelpful and discriminatory attitude of Assam government it stated as follows:

The policy of the Government of Assam with regard to the refugees is influenced to a great extent by a section of the Assamese people whose attitude is one of opposition[s] to rehabilitation of refugees on the score of their being Bengalis by race.... The schemes suggested by Shri Ajit Prasad Jain, Minister of Relief and Rehabilitation, Government of India ... is undoubtedly laudable, but a speedy implementation of these schemes may not happen for certain circumstances peculiar to Assam [Shyamaprasad Mookerjee Papers, Subject File No. 40/1950; also see Jugashakti, Karimganj, 14 April 1950].13

Be that as it may, as time went by the problems faced by refugees multiplied, and so did their apathy towards state and central officialdom. Coupled with inadequate food supply many refugee camps and colonies at say, Duhalia, Ratabari and others regularly reported internal conflict, disease, epidemic and death. As a journalist on a note of appeal writes:

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Maijgaon, Ramkrishna Nagar, Ghoongoor, Kathiraile, Hailakandi, Silchar and Karimganj are witnessing the procession of living and walking phantoms—men, women and children. All the schemes of resettlement have fallen through. No relief measure is in operation. So this mass of uprooted humanity is proceeding to grave into which these colonies are transforming... The procession of phantoms and skeletons marches to grave and rehabilitation colonies degenerate into so many hells! So, help, save! [The Chronicle, Silchar, 13 June 1952]

Karimganj as mentioned experienced the heaviest influx as a result of which the condition of its migrant population steadily grew from bad to worse.14 The migrants in Dullavcherra in Karimganj sub-division for instance, suffered immensely, and by mid-July 1950 about four hundred of those were reported to have succumbed to death. CRBC surveyed the area and reported on 25 July 1950 as follows:

Due to malnutrition and want of food, clothing, and medical assistance, the refugees are dying in large numbers. During the last three months men, women and children numbering about four hundred already died; and more are on the verge of death.... The pressing wants have so demoralized the refugees that one gentleman... committed suicide by hanging himself, being unable to feed his starving family. In the I.T.A camp of Gambhira T.E., which we visited, fifteen refugees have died and about 60% of the inmates of this camp are suffering from various diseases.... if... steps... are not taken at once, a vast number of the unfortunate displaced persons will die miserably to the discredit of the Popular Government and the Executive Authorities [Shyamaprasad Mookerjee Papers, Subject File No.40/1950; also see Jugashakti, Karimganj, 26 May 1950].

It was not only in camps and colonies but in tea gardens too that migrants faced immense hardships including starvation and death, and it was not just the lower classes that suffered but a section of agriculturalists and middle class migrants too. As Usha Debi recounts:

As a young girl of about 17 years my life was not safe, and I literally fled Sylhet around 1950 and came to Shillong. I also traveled to Cachar to meet relatives who had taken shelter there. I remember long talks about the poor condition in refugee camps and saw how people struggled to just survive. People from Habiganj from where I came arrived in large numbers and many could not make sense of things around them. We were too many and the government had so little to offer in terms of food and shelter. Educated and well off families which never had to think about two square meals a day earlier had to actually beg. Even close relations and friends turned their back to the refugees. Sylhet was a prosperous district and many Sylhetis turned beggars overnight just because of partition. I really do not feel like recounting all that as those memories still haunt me.
The countless letters and memoranda that flowed between the district, state and central machineries show the nature and extent of problems attributed among others, to state apathy, encountered by the migrants. Those on a note of appeal for redressal sought: a) official enumeration and classification of migrants who entered Assam between 1946 and 1950, and after that b) continuation of rehabilitation provisions to older refugees (who arrived before 1950) including grant of land, financial loan and dole c) facilitation of rehabilitation measures for new refugees (who arrived in 1950, and after) including fiscal and housing assistance d) official registration of non-registered refugees ensuring their status as non-Pakistani nationals, and grant of citizenship to them e) improvement of condition of tea garden based refugees f) proper and adequate provisions for rehabilitating middle class, non-agriculturist refugees including financial grant for extension of townships g) adequate provisions for training women including unattached ones h) measures to tackle the acute food shortage in camps and colonies, and the district as a whole i) check on infiltration from East Pakistan, and measures to curb anti-state activities of the infiltrators j) release of genuine political and other voluntary relief workers detained without trial k) implementation of schemes such as, I.T.A and other programs effectively l) financial grant for establishment of medical centers, schools, colleges and technical training institutes, and work centres m) stock-taking of evacuee property in the district n) establishment of more camps, and improvement of living condition in the existing camps, colonies and destitute homes including provision for trained medical assistance to check disease and epidemic in those o) establishment of small-scale industries including cottage industry p) speedy facilitation of the process of land settlement for refugees, and finally q) suspension of anti-refugee, ‘drive out-Bengali’ moves [see for example, Shyamaprasad Mookerjee Papers, Subject File No. 40&62/1950; Dasgupta 2001; Dutta Choudhury 2003; The Chronicle, Silchar, 29 August 1952].

The government of Assam addressed such issues from time to time, and did partially succeed as Dimple Dutta Choudhury shows, in containing the situation. Biren Dutta who served as a R&R officer at Badarpurghat camp in Karimganj in 1950 on a similar vein observes that ‘though most families had to go through the teething troubles of settling down in new areas, yet refugee rehabilitation in Cachar was by & large satisfactory’. Whether attempts of the government(s) were partially successful and by
and large satisfactory can be debated endlessly but the point is, the feeling of deep discontentment that prevailed in Cachar not only refused to die down but in fact, continued to grow day by day. And it was primarily Assam government that faced the flak for being unable to demonstrate effective progress in rehabilitation work. **Mohanalal Saxena**, who was sent by Nehru to look into the problem of refugees in Eastern India, in his report wrote: “The refugees who have got into the state of Assam are there inspite of the unhelpful attitude of the state government” [cited in Choudhury 2002:64]. Taking up the cause of migrants **Suresh Chandra Deb**, a Member of Parliament from Cachar communicated to New Delhi about the unsatisfactory role of the state government in handling the situation. In July 1952, **Baidya Nath Mukherjee**, Minister of Supply and Planning in the Assam government toured Cachar to survey the situation first hand, and he assured its people of the required food supply and medical aid. In January 1953, **Union Rehabilitation Minister Ajit Prasad Jain** accompanied by a team of state and central officials visited Cachar. Though New Delhi’s intervention was desired and welcomed because of alleged indifference and complacency of the Assam government, yet that failed to generate much hope amongst the people of Cachar. Upon the arrival of Jawaharlal Nehru at Silchar on 3 April 1953, Cachar seemed to have found a life time opportunity to put forth its long pending demands to someone no less than the Prime Minister. Nehru however, noting as he did the condition of refugees in Cachar had other things in mind too. In his address to the people at Silchar he spoke about issues ranging from problems in Naga Hills, Jammu and Kashmir to communist and Pakistani threat to India, and so forth. He, contrary to what most people of the district would have desired and liked, did not dwell as *The Chronicle* published from Silchar, dated 10 April 1953 reports, much on the immediate situation in Cachar. Let me recall what **Sudhangshu Das** has to say on the matter:

**Nehru and his Congress party never cared for Bengal and its people. The centre's half-hearted rehabilitation efforts in West Bengal prove that. And why would he care for Sylhetis who are a group of Bengalis in Assam? He knew what was happening in Cachar and Assam in 1950's but that was far from his mind. He off and on directed Gopinath Bardoloi to address the plight of Bengali refugees, but that was not enough. He should have been more proactive, but could not always be because he had to take account of the advice of Bardoloi and Assam Provincial Congress. The people of Cachar hoped that things would improve after Nehru's visit, but that did not happen. It is not surprising that people from Cachar appealed to Shyama Prasad Mukherjee more often as there were very few leaders that refugees could turn to in those days,**
leaders who would understand what Hindu Sylhetis of Cachar were facing. It is sad but the politics played by Congress only added to our suffering.

Following Nehru’s arrival and departure Cachar continued with its battle to resettle migrants who by the middle of 1950’s came to be comprised predominantly of Sylhetis no doubt, but also a considerable number of non-Sylheti Bengalis from erstwhile eastern Bengal. By end of the decade with the rehabilitation and resettlement process more or less in control, Cachar began its resistance against the forces of aggressive linguistic nationalism unleashed by the Assam(ese) state. In the aftermath of the war of liberation in East Pakistan the issue of relief and rehabilitation did come to the fore again, but by then Cachar was already in the thick of yet another raging war; a war now waged not only for bare survival, but cultural recognition of Bangla language in Assam.

3.2: Picking up the threads

3.2.1: Making of Barak Valley

The partition of India as Wilhelm Van Schendel remarked at a seminar in 2009, remains not only a mind blowing but a mind altering event too. For the people of Sylhet and Cachar in India the alteration of territorial boundaries of Assam province and more importantly, Sylhet and Surma Valley following partition remains a defining moment. Lament as they do the territorial truncation, it is however the history of irreversible fragmentation of the composite cultural heritage of undivided Surma Valley that remains an ever present past – a past that stands as a wound that refuses to heal, and make way for the unhindered journey of their present in independent India. Contemporary writings on Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj – Barak Valley – however demonstrate that not one, but two historical moments namely, transfer of Sylhet and Cachar from Bengal to Assam in 1874, and partition of Sylhet and Surma Valley in 1947 dominate their present socio-cultural and political discourses, and it is with both the moments that people of Barak Valley have still not come to terms [see for example, Dass 1986, 2001; Deb Choudhury 2006; Choudhury 1986a, 2005b, 2007; Deb Lashkar 2005; Dutta 2008; Purkayastha 2007; Ray 1994].
Differences in historical and political trajectories notwithstanding Sylhet and Cachar, the twin districts that comprised undivided Surma Valley since 1874 were firmly embedded in the larger Bengali cultural tradition and hence, shared close religious, economic (tea trade) linguistic and cultural ties with each other. As Nihar Ranjan Ray writes:

Like Goalpara district, the majority of population of Sylhet and Cachar are Bengali speakers. Their social and cultural tradition is also like the Bengalis. The valley of Barak and Surma is but the last section of the Meghna valley (Mymensingh-Tripura-Dhaka). There is almost no natural boundary between the two valleys. And this is the reason why the custom and culture of ancient and medieval Eastern Bengal could spread so easily in Sylhet and Cachar. Even now the Hindu-Muslim society and culture of Sylhet and Cachar are closely tied with that of the Eastern Bengal districts including their social customs and folkways and economy .... These districts constitute the South Eastern boundary of Bengal [1412B.S:69 (translation mine); also see Bhadra 1911; Gupta 2009].

By virtue of Cachar sharing close relations with Sylhet, its identity bore strong resemblance with the latter. As a neighbouring district whose inhabitants were predominantly Bengali albeit of Cachari origin, Cachar also shared with Sylhet inter alia, the history of separation from Bengal in 1874. Following the separation Surma Valley, with the twins Sylhet and Cachar in fold emerged as a “distinct” territorial, political and cultural site of Bengali and Sylheti identity assertion in colonial Assam. For Sylhet, its twin Cachar came to be almost “naturally” considered an extended Sylheti homeland. Not only that, being the prominent and dominant of the twins Sylhet came to exert widespread, and often decisive influence as Sujit Choudhury (2007) indicates, on the society and culture of Cachar. As Usha Ranjan Bhattacharya writes: ‘Culturally Cachar [is] linked with Sylhet and from that point of view it won’t be an exaggeration to say that Cachar forms a part of greater Sylhet .... Culturally, the fate of Cachar [is] inseparable from that of Sylhet’ [1979:9]. Unlike Sylhetis who constructed, and articulated an identity during colonial period, their Cachari counterparts despite meeting similar (but not same) conditions were unable to clearly articulate a similar one for themselves, and eventually Cachari identity unconsolidated as it remained was subsumed under its more “culturally powerful” Sylheti counterpart. In an essay entitled Hatabhagya Cachar Syed Mujtaba Ali, the well known Bengali writer of Sylheti origin writes: ‘It must be stated that Cachar is not a region without its own heritage. But because it shared that heritage with Sylhet, the
one that is its own lies buried under the much discussed latter' [1409 B.S:43 (translation mine)]. Pitched vis-à-vis larger Bengali and Assamese identities, Sylheti identity found Cachar an additional and willing source of strength to articulate itself. The territorial proximity and linguistic affinity that Sylhet shared with Cachar facilitated an almost uncontested process of their co-existence in colonial Assam; a co-existence that was considered historically determined, and natural sans sub-texts of hierarchy, power and politics by both Sylhetis and Cacharis of colonial Surma Valley. It is in this context that Sujit Choudhury’s observation about Barak Valley which is but “replicated Surma Valley” becomes relevant. He opines: ‘The division between Sylhetis and Cacharis hardly mean and prove anything…. 95% of Bengalis of this valley are from Sylhet, and there is no linguistic and cultural difference between them, so drawing a division between them is meaningless and useless’ [2007:17 (translation mine)]. Indeed, by the time Sylhet was partitioned the territory of Cachar stood fully (encroached upon and) incorporated in the idea of Sylheti homeland. Indeed, the Sylhetification of already-Hinduised-Bengalified-Cachar (particularly Silchar) was not only uncontested and but also complete. Cachar came to be considered not an extension of Sylheti homeland but homeland itself; in “absence” of Sylhet it was Cachar that provided the necessary territorial and cultural support for articulation of Sylheti identity in post-partition India. As Abdul Majid Barbhuiya on an analytical vein, argues:

*Differences do exist between Sylhetis and Cacharis, and I am a Cachari. But such differences are small and insignificant. Perhaps an independent Cachari identity did not grow because it was not necessary. Both Sylhet and Cachar were like twin brothers in Surma Valley and the relationship remains the same in Barak Valley. Why distinguish between brothers? Let us not get into Sylheti-Cachari division because we are all Bengalis at the end of the day. Bengalis of Barak Valley, and of Assam. Sylheti-Cachari division is deliberately brought up by the Assamese, and maybe some like-minded Bengalis too (maybe of Hailakandi) for political reasons, for creating rift between Bengalis of Barak Valley. If Bengali Hindus and Muslims of Barak Valley speak Sylheti no problem should arise because it is nothing but another type of Bangla. The point is, even if Surma Valley is gone Barak Valley continues to carry on with that common Bengali cultural tradition.*

Interestingly, even for those Sylhetis who are dispersed and settled elsewhere in India “Cachar” (or Barak Valley) remains the space that sustains and supports the efforts to articulate and express their, albeit re-constructed, identity now. Though the territorial and cultural space of post-partition Cachar (plains) now stands divided into three
separate districts, yet by introducing the epithet Barak Valley to denote those as members of a unified collective in Assam the people of the region have retained the scope of sustaining Sylheti culture on one hand, and resisting (as Bengalis) the homogenizing intentions of Assam(ese) state on the other. Though loss (alteration) of territory exists as the ever present past for the people of erstwhile Surma Valley, yet that has come to be compensated by the “re-emergence” of Barak Valley with Karimganj in fold as a site that preserves Sylheti colonial legacy on one hand and also acts as a territorial anchorage for Sylheti identity in post-colonial Assam, and India on the other. In the course of my travels in Karimganj and other districts of Barak Valley I encountered as the following discussion shows, the difficulty of treating Karimganj as a “distinct” site of Sylheti concentration for, the other two districts were no less. Differences notwithstanding, members of the middle class of the region insisted on use of the epithet Barak Valley to commonly, and collectively identify themselves thereby indicating how they, as primarily Sylheti speaking Bengali majority, have accommodated both Sylhetis and Cacharis, and also other smaller social collectivities in it. As Santanu Dutta argues: ‘The political identity of the valley is the amalgam of two political and historical regions of Sylhet and Cachar. The Sylhet region is represented by the present district of Karimganj while the Cachar regional entity is carried by the present districts of Cachar and Hailakandi’ [1995:4 (emphasis mine)].

Predictably, all kinds of literature that is now produced by the region either use the fused form of Sylhet-Cachar or simply Barak Valley as the framework of reference. Interestingly, the writings dating from colonial period rarely used the former or even the epithet Surma Valley as is evident for instance, in the two monumental works namely, Srihatter Itibritta and Cacharer Itibritta. It is obvious that post-partition change of topography and politics has influenced the region's re-naming discourse which now has to: a) legitimize the existence of Sylhetis, and a part of Sylhet (Karimganj) in post-colonial Assam b) invariably include Cachar including Hailakandi as that remains the only territorial and cultural space (in addition to Karimganj) of undivided Surma Valley in post-colonial Assam c) address the present division of Cachar into three separate districts, and d) build a unified and collective (Bengali) front – both cultural and political – to resist the hegemonic intentions of Assam(ese) state. Indeed, even an attempt to trace the genealogy of the term Barak Valley becomes not only extremely complex but difficult and risky too [see for
This region and its politics have passed through so many territorial upheavals. Colonial Surma Valley and present Barak Valley share commonalities, but there are differences. The twins Sylhet and Cachar was always an unit of the former but despite being in a symbiotic relationship each, particularly Sylhet chose to maintain a kind of distinctiveness seen above all in history writing of that period. Cachar had to do its own bit. Somehow Sylheti historians missed out on Cachar’s contribution to history of Sylhet and Surma Valley. Cachar was included in writings on Sylhet but rarely in the title of books etc. That the region was officially known not as Surma-Barak but only Surma Valley perhaps had a role to play. A kind of cultural politics was played by Sylhetis who dominated the valley. But they stood together as a visible Bengali cultural-political unit and practically there was (is) no difference between Sylhetis and Cacharis. The situation changed after partition. For Sylhetis in India only Cachar and a fragment of Sylhet of undivided Surma Valley remained. Cachar helped migrant Sylhetis and became in addition to Karimganj, a homeland to which they could lay some claim on the basis of their territorial and cultural affinity in undivided Surma Valley. Sylhetis, insecure after partition, realized in a hard way that their fate was, and remains tied to Cachar. I for one, believe that no history of the region is possible without taking cognizance of both Sylhet and Cachar. Critics may say that, as Sylhet is in Bangladesh now I have deliberately added Cachar (in my writings) to it as that is in India and will help Sylhetis lay claim on Cachar. This is not true. For me it is an (additional) corrective to the kind of histories written in colonial period. When Cachar was divided into three districts Barak Valley as a common name appeared most suitable, share as the districts did their culture and identity. 17

Indeed, Barak valley as it stands today both territorially and culturally, owes its emergence to the two historical moments of significance namely, 1874 and 1947, and Karimganj as part and parcel of that cannot therefore be addressed in isolation. In short, study of the middle class community of Karimganj necessitates its moving to and fro between the districts, its location in the broader socio-cultural context of Barak Valley in particular, and not to mention that of outside it in general including Sylhetis living in Brahmaputra Valley and elsewhere in North East India. Fieldwork conducted in and around Karimganj town suggests that its middle class Sylheti community shares deep and intense bond with Sylhetis living elsewhere, yet a close and critical reading also point to differences that are contextually determined and accordingly expressed. Following partition as a part of undivided Sylhet Karimganj as mentioned, emerged as the most preferred destination of migrant Sylhetis. ‘As a result, new residential blocks like Jai Hind Colony and Netaji Subhash Pally on
western part of the town, Roy Nagar in Bazar area, Subhash Nagar and Shree Nagar in the southern periphery of the town sprang up within a couple of years. The evening market called Mirashdari Bazar situated by the Madan Mohan Road assumed a new name “Refugee Market” [Ahmed 2008:108]. As Hindu population of the town swelled its Muslim population, particularly of the educated middle class dwindled as most chose to migrate to Pakistan. Altered in composition and profile, the population of Karimganj slowly began to pick up remains of the threads broken and scattered due to partition. One of the telling consequences was reflected in its altered social structure as Sujit Choudhury points out:

Partition added new dimensions to the social structure of Karimganj as Muslims left the town and its composition became predominantly Hindu. In the villages of Karimganj, the massive influx of refugees created pressure on the resources as a result of which both Hindus and Muslims living there resented them. Social categories such as rural-urban, local-non local came to be employed by people of Karimganj too [2007:23 (translation mine)].

As a sub-division attached to Cachar district Karimganj’s journey in post-independent India began by introduction of government programs and schemes to develop its social, educational and economic infrastructure. The town grew like the others of Cachar till the war of liberation broke out in East Pakistan in 1971. The sub-division, particularly the town as a result of fresh migration experienced an additional burden on its already swelling population and infrastructure. In course of time, Silchar emerged as the most important political and commercial centre of the region, a fact grudgingly acknowledged by the people of Karimganj. In fact, field notes show that a sense of resentment albeit generally covert, colours the relationship of Silchar and Karimganj with the latter accusing the former of ‘overtaking’ it in ‘status and importance’. As Susanta Krishna Dass argues:

[d]uring the first twenty four years since Independence, Karimganj had been an equally important town of Barak Valley, it being the second inland water port of Assam and as such a more important commercial centre than Silchar .... In keeping with Karimganj town’s population increase in many respects including social, cultural and political activities, Karimganj’s attainments were in no way below the rank that Silchar could boast of, if not better [1996:78-79].

However, the official importance of Silchar as compared to Karimganj is compensated by the latter’s claim of being relatively ‘advanced’ in matters of
preservation and propagation of Sylheti and Bengali cultural tradition. It is interesting that in all three Barak Valley districts their respective middle classes claim to represent a single community of Bengalis who are collective bearers of the cultural tradition of undivided Surma Valley on one hand and express their individual and ‘distinct’ traditions on the other. As Shibani Biswas explains:

The three towns of Barak Valley were and are tied together in every possible respect. We are all Bengalis, practise Bengali culture and tradition and most importantly speak, and write in Bangla language. This aspect ties us in Barak Valley for, it is important to resist every move of the Assamese to convert the multilingual character of Assam to suit their political agenda. But every district of Barak Valley historically also has a culture of its own. Karimganj was part of Sylhet and other two parts of Cachar. Though all districts have Sylheti culture, Karimganj stands slightly apart. As part of erstwhile Sylhet its people are the carriers of authentic Sylheti language and culture; Sylheti spoken in Karimganj has variations with Hailakandi and Cachar. You tell me that someone proposed East Sylhet as a new name for Karimganj; the re-naming business is not new for, in 1980’s Karimganj sounding like a Muslim name, was proposed to be re-named Karmakunj by Hindu right-wing groups and Sreebhumi by die-hard Sylhetis. You know somehow Karimganj fails to get the recognition it deserves be it in matters of upholding Sylheti culture or the Bengali one. Entire credit for the language movement is taken away by Silchar but I as an active participant in that know for sure that Karimganj’s contribution was the maximum. Anyway, these differences and similarities hardly matter because I see no future for either Sylheti or Bangla as all vernacular languages will suffer at the hands of English. The crisis is deeper and wider [also see Bhattacharjee 2009; Choudhury 2007].

The claim that Karimganj is the seat of ‘authentic’ Sylheti culture in contemporary India comes out as the most repeated theme in the interviews and conversations I had.

It is interesting to note that except for the middle class which consciously identifies the importance of both Sylheti and Bengali components of the distinctively fused character of its re-constructed identity, contextual deployment of those notwithstanding, other classes appear to consider both as given and hence, indistinguishable. However, despite the fact that the middle class community of Karimganj is divided along caste, class, gender and religious lines, yet the existence of ‘one’, composite Sylheti identity is claimed by all its members. But field notes show that it is a claim that again remains a contextual and contested one. Original residents and settlers, Hindus and Muslims alike unanimously agree that Karimganj following the cultural tradition of undivided Sylhet has not only retained that ethos, but also successfully resisted attempts of its dilution. As Dilip Lashkar notes:
Developed over the years Karimganj of course has a unique culture that cuts across social divides. Sylhet stands replicated here. We speak Sylheti and are proud of it; our achar, hyabohar [norms, behaviour] reflect the common tradition. We may preach and practise our different caste norms and religions like Hinduism and Islam, but we can rightly boast of a syncretic culture that was there in Surma Valley. Sylhet's history had both Sri Chaitanya and Haaral Shahjalal, and Cachar too had religious amity; we who live in Karimganj and Barak Valley are parts of the common culture of Sylhet and Bengal and are proud of being from Karimganj, being Karimganjis as youngsters are fond of saying; we uphold both Sylhetita [Sylhetiness] and Bangalitta [Bengaliness] that rooted in the unique culture of Karimganj. We are satisfied with ourselves and have no clash with Sylhetis living elsewhere because we are all Sylhetis.

The assertion that Karimganj is the site of authentic and ‘high’ Sylheti culture is highly pronounced amongst Muslims of the district. Leaving aside the compulsions of post-colonial Muslim identity politics for once, most members of the community assert not only their ‘original’ Sylheti identity but also point out how they are different from their Cachari co-religionists. Ashraf Sadiq Alam observes:

I am a not only a Sylheti but an original Sylheti as I am from Bhanga, near Badarpur; we never were part of Pakistan; Karimganj has both Hindu and Muslim original and settler Sylhetis but most Muslims are original in the sense that they always lived here. Though there is a distinction, yet I don't encourage it for, we are all from Karimganj. Actually Sylhetis of Karimganj are very different from other Sylhetis of Barak Valley. I am also an upper caste Sylheti Muslim. Only few Sylheti Muslims of Karimganj will of course tell you so boldly that they are Sylhetis as there are compulsions of various kinds; we are not only Sylhetis but Muslims and Bengalis too. But you are a Sylheti from outside, and will understand. Many Sylheti Muslims are scared to say they are Sylhetis amidst other Hindu Sylhetis of Karimganj; so many just say they are Muslims first and last. Anyway, that is a different issue. What should I say of Cachar? We Muslims of Karimganj are Sylhetis and descendents of Shah Jalal and not recently converted ones like those of Cachar and Hailakandi. They are uthras [upwardly mobile] while we are khanjani [of aristocratic lineage] Muslims; Cachari Muslims are not nice to look at, are dark and have no correct shahabat, aadab-kayda [manners and etiquette]. We do not encourage marital relations of Sylheti and Cachari Muslims though things are changing now; Sylheti and Cachari Hindus have closer relations; we Sylheti Muslims are actually different as Sylhet and Cachar always had, and have differences.

It is not only Alam but a number of other Muslims of Karimganj too like their Hindu counterparts expressed similar views, albeit in highly guarded tones. Indeed, for Muslims their religious identity remains not only an additional, but also a critical dimension. Middle class Sylheti identity as it stands in contemporary Karimganj and Barak Valley puts forth a a picture that is multidimensional and highly complex, and subsequent discussions will address that.
3.2.2: In search of Sylheti culture

Field notes suggest that the two most important markers of Sylheti culture in Karimganj are: a) dialect/form of speech and b) social practices including values, customs and norms. Considered to be a ‘distinct’ dialect of Bangla with ‘some peculiarities of pronunciation which tend to render it [Sylhettia] unintelligible to strangers’ as George Abraham Grierson (1903-28) observes, Sylheti form of speech is spoken by the majority in Karimganj. Not only in Karimganj, but in entire Barak Valley the use of Sylheti speech as a lingua franca is considered necessary as well as appropriate. For a considerably large section of the middle class this linguistic (speech) assertion draws additional support from a ‘distinct’ script called Sylheti Nagri. Research has revealed that an ‘indigenous’ script called Sylheti Nagri/Musalmani Nagri/Phool Nagri/Jalalabadi Nagri appeared in the public sphere of Maulavi Bazar and Karimganj around eighteenth century to cater to the needs of Sylheti dialect. Influenced by the Perso-Arabic, Kayethi and Bangla scripts but essentially based on the Devanagari, the form of writing was popular amongst the population of rural Sylhet, Muslims in particular. Similarly, Grierson notes that among ‘the low class Muhammadans of the east of the district the use of the Devanagari alphabet occurs. It is extremely common for Muhammadans to sign their names in this character, and the only explanation they offer for its use is that it is so much easier to learn than Bengali’[1903-28:224; also see Ali 1979; Chanda 2006; Chapter II; Chatterjee 1970; Shome 2003]. Though it is no longer in regular use, yet large number of Sylhetis in India and elsewhere take immense pride in the fact that their dialect was supported by a standard script which in turn rendered it akin to a language, and its literature fit for publication from no less a place than Calcutta. Though the community of Karimganj irrespective of age and other categories (contextually encourage and) make use of regular Bangla for formal spoken and written communication, yet the inability to speak or understand the dialect is generally considered inappropriate, and often unfortunate in Sylheti social circles. In Karimganj in particular and Barak Valley in general those Sylhetis unable to speak the dialect are often objects of criticism, not to say fun and ridicule. The situation worsens if such speakers use regular Bangla (commonly referred as Kelu/Koilikati/Kalkatian or Calcutta/Kolkata speech) in their interaction with other Sylhetis; consequently, they are considered as afflicted by the ‘deshi kuttar bilati dak
[country dog with a foreign bark]’ syndrome. The fate of Bengalis of non-Sylheti origin happens to be the worst. As Sudipta Chakrabarty narrates:

> I live and work in Karimganj but being from Kolkata and a non-Sylheti I speak regular Bangla. Sylheti that is spoken in Karimganj is considered exclusive and pure creating thus further problems; Sylhetis are very nice but highly exclusivist when it comes to people from West Bengal; at times they are treated more unkindly than the Assamese who are otherwise their sworn enemy. If I speak in non-Sylhetised Bangla which I always do, I could be ignored or laughed at. I almost feel scared opening my mouth even after living here for so many years; not all Sylhetis do that but majority do. If I spend time with fellow non-Sylheti Kolkatans, I could be called parochial. Though I haven’t tried, but it is difficult to become Sylheti even if one speaks the dialect; Sylhetis may not just accept him/her. My daughter speaks fluent Sylheti as she grew up here. But she is likely to face a dilemma because neither Sylhetis nor people of Kolkata will accept her.

Pejoratively branded as ‘faarmer dims [farm produced eggs]’ and literally accused of speaking in ‘chapar akshar [printed word]’, these Bengalis are often considered nothing less than intruders of Sylheti cultural space. It is obvious that for sections of Sylheti middle class their linguistic (speech) identity more often than not acquires a texture and tone that comes dangerously close to what Suman Turfan calls ‘Sylheti moulobad [Sylheti fundamentalism]’ [n.d:90]. Though the aggressive character that Sylheti speech identity takes is not without reasons rooted in history and politics, yet that cannot be treated as a justification of that kind of assertion. The exclusivist assertion of Sylheti identity comes to the fore when its Bengali component is questioned and challenged by a section of non-Sylheti Bengalis, a popular expression of that being in the realm of “mainstream” Bangla language and literature. The form of Bangla speech of Sylhetis of Barak Valley in particular is not only considered unfathomable and consequently unauthentic, but also ridiculed; they are not just viewed as “Bangals” (pejorative use for people of eastern Bengal origin) but worse than that, as Sylhetis [see for example Majumdar 2007]. Sylheti resistance to that comes in various forms and contexts; while a section of the middle class react or totally withdraw, others, particularly a large section of middle class Hindus either grudgingly acknowledge the relationship or suitably re-work it, and an exercise in the latter includes construction of coinages such as *Tritiya Bhuvan* (Third World) and *Ishaan Bangla* (North East Bengal), *Barak Banga* (Barak Bengal) to define the cultural (literary) and territorial space of Barak Valley [see for example Bhattacharjee 2006; Bhattacharya 2001, 2003; Biswas 2001]. Interestingly, as I state elsewhere:
It is to be noted that it is not Bengal that is resented but those Bengalis of Kolkata, whose object of laughter and ridicule the Sylhetis [and their form of speech] have always been. So Kolkata in the Sylheti weltanschung symbolizes a socio-cultural space that is to be unwillingly recognised [for practical reasons] but preferably avoided and resisted if not in deed then in thought and speech. Share as they do, a paradoxical relationship with Bengal and Bengalis, many Sylhetis ... resent being called deterritorialised Probashi Bangalis, ...because first, a part territory of erstwhile Sylhet albeit without the name remains in Assam/India, second, for more than 130 years it is Assam, and not Bengal, that is their territorial homeland, third, most Bengalis of West Bengal never acknowledge, let alone recognize them as Bengalis in the first place ... and so the Probashi question does not arise and fourth, it is as Bengalis of Assam that they want their identity to be articulated in India [Bhattacharjee 2009:79].

Indeed, a deep sense of persecution and victimhood colours the middle class Sylheti psyche which in turn leads to twin assertions albeit contextual, of its Sylhetiness as well as Bengaliness vis-à-vis West Bengal (Kolkata) based non-Sylheti Bengalis and the Assamese. Young Sylhetis of Karimganj traveling to, or living in Kolkata say that their form of Bangla speech has to constantly face the test of authenticity in terms of intonation and pronunciation. As Shubhashish Shome says: 'When I travel to Kolkata I am told: Bah, tumi to besh bhalo Bangia bolte paro. Aamra tomar kotha besh bhujte parchi [really, you speak Bangla quite well. We are more or less able to follow you]. My speaking Bangla comes as a surprise because Bengalis of Assam are assumed to be different; sometimes it is so difficult and painful to be different'.

Indeed, for both Sylhetis and their non-Sylheti Bengali counterparts their speech identities face contestation depending on where they are located. If Sylhetiised Bangla is claimed as adulterated and unfathomable in "pure and correct" Bangla speaking Kolkata, the situation is reverse in Barak Valley. For its common people as also its middle class, except for those who claim and insist upon ‘close connections with Kolkata’ (and Koilkati), it is Koilkati bhasha (Kolkata language) that is different and unfathomable. Historian Anuradha Chanda points this out as she recounts her experience of field (research) visits to Barak Valley where, particularly in semi-urban locales, very few respondents followed her regular Bangla (of Kolkata) speech; they insisted that she spoke in Bangla meaning she says, Sylheti or Sylhetiised Bangla because for the common people of that region that is the form of Bangla that is understood and accepted; the way regular Bangla language (of Kolkata) is viewed and treated in Barak Valley is similar to the fate that Sylhetiised Bangla language meets in Kolkata [Closing Remarks, Seminar on ‘Identity and Acculturation: Sylhet Nagri
It is interesting to note that what is generally considered to be standard and fixed, and in this case the Kolkata centric Bengali linguistic identity more often than not remains contested and de-centered in sites and spaces outside it.

While it is true that a strong sense of ‘unique’, and ‘unified’ speech identity visible also in the numerous internet sites run by Sylhetis of Karimganj and also other districts of Barak Valley prevails, yet field notes shows that it is not without internal differences. Diverse caste, class, religious and territorial locations inform the articulation and expression of Sylheti speech in Karimganj, and that is again socially hierarchised and ranked. If Bina Nath says ‘tarar mat ami bujhi na go; aamra jelang mati tara matoin na [I do not understand their speech; the way we speak, they do not]’ while describing her town-bred, educated Sylheti employer’s speech, it is countered by the latter who says (as told by Bina): ‘tumrar kaacha Sylheti bujha aamrar dushadhya; amrar/aamar Sylheti oinyarakam, budhoi aaro falish aar shuddha Bangla ghesha [It is impossible to follow the raw Sylheti of you people. Our and my Sylheti is different, perhaps more polished and closer to appropriate Bangla’]. Kamaluddin Ahmed’s exposition on the matter is pertinent, and he says:

"We are Sylhetis as we follow Sylheti speech and customs which despite being Bangla has a specific element. I shall not go into that. But like others, Sylheti speech also has variations; the general Sylheti spoken in Karimganj is different (perhaps less adulterated) from other places in Barak Valley and outside. Within Karimganj too there are differences in pronunciation and intonation among various castes, classes and religious groups; rural-urban and literacy levels are important too. Sadly this difference creates social divisions; I feel such divisions are not usual upper-lower business because middle class is the creator, and also victim of those. Sylhetis of educated, upper caste, urban Hindus and Muslims of Karimganj town is taken as the standard, refined form and also considered closer to standard Bangla; Sylheti spoken by a remote Patharkanodi or Ratabari villager is branded kaacha and grama y [raw and rural] compared to that spoken in Karimganj or Badarpur town; again, the Sylheti spoken by Hindus and Muslims have a general difference though in the same class that is usually minimal. Every language or dialect has such obvious contextual differences but those should not be projected as sources of social division. We all have the right to speak Sylheti the way we want to, and standardization of a particular form is problematic; since Sylhetis speak Bangla with a taan [tone] they are often ridiculed by other Bengalis; we should not do the same in our community; variations should be accepted and respected for, at the end of the day we all speak Sylheti."
Variations in Sylheti speech that is seen in Karimganj or for that matter in Barak Valley, reflects the similar ones that prevailed in undivided Surma Valley. The region — with Sylhet and Cachar — certainly had a marked Sylheti linguistic (speech) character in addition to the larger Bengali linguistic one, a fact attested by none less than Suniti Kumar Chatterjee. He writes: 'The dialects of Bengali fall into four main classes ... Radha, Pundra or Varendra; Vangya; and Kamarupa ... extreme forms of the Vangya speech, in Sylhet, Kachar, Tippera, Noakhali and Chittagong, have developed some phonetic and morphological characteristics which are foreign to other groups' [1970:138; also see Bidyabinod 1336B.S; Rajkhowa 1913]. However, within Surma Valley eastern Sylhet and Cachar shared more linguistic (speech) similarities, and consequently variations with others. As Grierson notes:

East of Sylhet lies the District of Cachar, also belonging to the Assam province. The language of the south of the District is Bengali, which is superceded in the hills in the north of the District, and also in the hill country to the east and south of the District, by various languages of the Tibeto-Burman family. The Bengali spoken in Cachar is the most eastern outpost of the language. It is the same as that spoken in Eastern Sylhet, and possesses all the peculiar characteristics of the Eastern Bengal type [1903-28:233].

In Sylhet too the speech showed sharp user variations which again Grierson pertinently points out. He writes:

In the west and south of this District, especially in Sunamganj and Habiganj, the language closely resembles that of Mymensingh. In North-East and North Sylhet, especially in Jaintiapur and Karimganj, the language is more corrupt. Sylhet Town, which is the head-quarters of the District, being within six miles of the Jaintiapur Pargana, lies within the area in which this dialect is spoken, and hence this form of speech is called Sylhettia by Europeans. For this reason it is often wrongly said that the language of the whole Sylhet District is uniform, and the term Sylhettia incorrectly applied to the dialect of the west of the District, as well as to that of the North-East. The term "Sylhettia" properly means the language of the town, and not of the District, of Sylhet [Ibid.:221].

It is obvious that Sylheti that was spoken in Surma Valley not only had diverse forms within Sylhet but also outside it. Cachar which also had Sylheti as Grierson suggests, as the predominant form of speech however, incorporated elements of other local dialects as well [see for example, Bhattacharya 1979; Choudhury 2007; Lahiri 1368 B.S]. In fact, Bangla language that developed in eastern Surma Valley i.e Karimganj and Cachar was not only a particular kind of Sylheti, but also one that was an
amalgam of elements drawn from other linguistic traditions of eastern Bengal and Assam; likewise, the dominant mode of speech that is commonly understood as Sylheti, and designated as Bangla although often prefixed by the term aancholik (regional) as in the book entitled Barak Upatyakar Aancholik Bangla Bhashar Abhidan O Bhashatattwa (1412 B.S), and spoken by the majority in Barak Valley is a reproduction of that amalgamated form. Following partition the linguistic diversity that was widely distributed earlier in entire Surma Valley, and Sylhet came to have a more restricted sphere of operation; the migrants as and where they settled in Barak Valley used the speech that they did in their places of origin. The form of Sylheti speech considered exclusive to Karimganj earlier, now accommodated the other forms too. Predictably, Sylheti that is spoken in the district now show such variations not just across classes for instance, but within those say for example, the middle class too. Middle class migrants from Habiganj for example, stand out as an interesting case. 21 Due to heavy influence of the Mymensingh and Comilla dialects on the speech of Sylhetis of Habiganj origin, their Sylheti speech is often considered unfathomable by non-Habiganj origin middle class Sylhetis. As Rina Hom Choudhury says:

My forefathers are from Habiganj and my speech even today has that Habiganji taan which others Sylhetis do not. If somebody knocks at my door I say, 'keta re? [who is that?]'; whereas a non-Habiganji will say 'key re? [who is that?]'; some Sylhetis say 'kita koritrai? [what are you doing?]'; while others say 'kita kororai? [what are you doing?]'; I think Sylheti speech changes every kilometer. Habiganj I think was slightly different from other places in Sylhet as we were very close to Mymensingh and Tripura in speech and marital relations; obsession with Sylhet and Sylheti was more in Karimganj and Sadar; so, differences were, and are there but not amongst youngsters to that extent. Typical Habiganji Sylheti is often not understood by other Sylhetis in say, Karimganj, and sometimes considered improper and laughed at, and resisted too. To the latter without really getting too angry I say that even if I speak Habiganji it does not really matter as we all speak Bangla at the end of the day. Our Bangla also has a different touch and laughed at, and that hurts but actually hardly proves anything.

Such linguistic differences that lie within and outside the middle class of Karimganj in particular and Barak Valley in general however, stand reconciled in the Bengali identity that is espoused, and consciously upheld across the region more so since 1960-61. The Sylheti component that serves as the inner sphere is of course more vehemently asserted in Karimganj as compared to Cachar and Hailakandi. Unlike Cachar particularly Silchar town, it is Hailakandi where Sylheti dialect and consequently, identity stands considerably more contested. In fact, Himashish
Chakrabarty says that Sylhetis have a tendency to club everybody in Barak Valley in one category namely, Sylheti, and he argues:

You know this is very problematic. Even you assumed that I am Sylheti, but as a researcher you should know. We are originally from Faridpur but settled in Hailakandi for generations now; we do speak a kind of Sylheti but that is not like Karimganj or Silchar; certainly we are not Sylhetis. What we speak in Hailakandi is a mixture of eastern Bengal dialects, Sylheti and other local dialects of the area. Why call that Sylheti or even Sylheti Bangia; call it just Bangla or by any other name. Because Sylhetis are a majority other groups, their forms of speech and identity get sidelined.

What Himashish says resonates with the comments made by Badruddin Ahmed earlier in 2008. To the question whether he was a Sylheti came the answer which is as follows:

Your question is incorrect as you think that all who live in Barak Valley are Sylhetis just because they speak in a similar way. Yes, that way we could be called Sylhetis but I insist that we are from Hailakandi which was never part of Sylhet. You cannot force on me an identity which is not mine. 'Aafne koila aami Ubakandir te aami Ubakandir hoi gelam ni [you say I am from Ubakandi (a fictitious place) and I start belonging to that place]'. I am from Hailakandi and yes Cachar, and that is the truth, and obviously we are all Bengalis. Why do you have to bring in this Sylheti business. There are people from Dhaka, Faridpur, Mymensingh and other districts in Hailakandi and other parts of Barak Valley, and also Manipuris, Dimasas, Karbis and so many other tribes, but outsiders assume that we are all Sylhetis. This is not fair. Please accept that Cachar also has an identity though Karimganj and Badarpur will not agree. Even people of Cachar living in Silchar will not agree. Silchar is heavily populated by Sylhetis. Let us agree on one thing, we are all Bengalis of Barak Valley now, both Hindus and Muslims. We perhaps speak a kind of Sylheti, which you must remember has lot of local Cachari influence, but imposing Sylheti identity on this basis is not fair [also see Choudhury 2007].

Indeed, speech as is evident remains the central and critical issue around which middle class cultural (and political) identity of the region is built and articulated. The situation gets further complicated when viewed in light of the linguistic policies propagated by the Assam(ese) state since independence. Notwithstanding differences of opinion, the inner sphere that sustains the officially articulated Bengali identity of the entire region is undoubtedly Sylheti. However, as mentioned even amongst the middle class of Karimganj who not only claim to be the ‘rightful heirs’ of Sylheti cultural tradition but also believe in and actively practice that a sense of deep discomfort prevails when it comes to the formal/open expression of Sylheti identity.

As Ashish Bhattacharjee on an analytical vein says:
Whether one is a Sylheti is not an easy question to answer in Barak Valley; it is a political issue and this region suffers from deep astiver sankat [identity crisis]. But I believe in calling a spade a spade. We are all Sylhetis, both Hindus and Muslims. Karimganj has flourishing Sylheti culture with similarities with eastern Bengali one. But some of our specific customs, rituals etc and the pure Karimganj dialect we speak makes us little different. But calling ourselves Sylheti officially creates political problems with the Cacharis and Assamese around us. So we are Bengalis of Assam in India; we go on being Sylhetis but have to call ourselves Bengalis. It is very confusing actually because we are also Bengalis anyway. My parents say that it is because Bengal separated and British partitioned us that we have to face this situation. Bengalis are anyway threatened in Assam so why would anyone bring the Sylheti thing in. It is very sad actually. But I feel better when I think that at least in Karimganj (thank god) we have been able to preserve Sylheti identity, and will do so in future.

As field notes show, other than the dialect, social practices including values, customs and norms constitute the backbone of the cultural tradition that middle class Sylhetis of Karimganj are proud to preserve and propagate. Members of the community I had conversations with untiringly reiterated how the ‘responsibility of carrying forth that tradition’ of Sylhet rested on their shoulders. Like Sylheti speech what is commonly understood and designated as Sylheti social practices too is actually a synthesis of elements drawn from various religious and cultural traditions of neighbouring regions including obviously Bengal [see for example, Ahmed 1999; Ahmed 2004; Aziz et al 1997, 2006; Bhattacharjee 1936; Rahman 1991; Tattwanidhi 2002, 2004, 2005]. However, the middle class of Karimganj while acknowledging the synthesis on one hand do not fail to highlight the predominance of its Sylheti element on the other; likewise, the composite culture of Surma Valley is acknowledged, albeit by claiming the predominance of Sylheti culture in that. As Sujit Choudhury opines: ‘for all practical purposes, the Surma-Barak Valley ... [forms] a single cultural unit since time immemorial’, yet he continues, ‘[I]f we venture to reconstruct the past of Barak Valley, frequent reference to Sylhet becomes obvious’ [1986b:xii]. But what is interesting is that the middle class both its Hindu and Muslim members officially project the element of synthesis as was there in what is called the composite legacy of not only undivided Sylhet but particularly Surma Valley, and which is believed to have continued unbroken in Barak Valley in the larger public sphere; the identity that is constructed on this basis is admittedly officially Bengali, albeit predominantly Sylheti in content, in the larger public sphere. The other classes however, rarely
display the kind of dilemma that is so evident, and visible in the middle class of Karimganj. I have been repeatedly told by middle class Sylhetis — in formal and informal discussions, and as evident in secondary literature — how the people of southern Assam always faced, and continue to face ‘sanskritir and astitver sankat [crisis of culture and identity/existence]’; a crisis whose genesis lie in 1874 and 1947; a crisis that is born out of the indifference of ‘West Bengalis’ (sic) on one hand and threat from the Assam(ese) state on the other. Following a trip to Assam, a visitor perhaps told me that he felt a sense of ‘asthirata [anxiety]’ prevailed amongst its middle class Bengalis, particularly those from Barak Valley. As mentioned, the non-middle class population of Karimganj including Patharkandi, Ratabari and Badarpur — both Hindus and Muslims — show minimal or no anxiety when asked the simple (otherwise profound) question as to who they are? The immediate answer is that they are Sylhetis followed by (upon asking whether they are Bengalis or not) the claim that they are Bengalis too. Consider for instance, the fragments of a conversation I (NB) had with Ajijur Rehman (AR) [see Image 3.3]. It goes as follows:

NB: Are you Sylheti? AR: We are all Sylhetis, what is there to ask?
NB: But Sylhet is in Bangladesh. AR: So what, we Sylhetis are here; we are from Karimganj, only the name is not there but that doesn’t matter.
NB: Are you a Bengali? AR: Yes we are Bengalis; you ask a very funny question.
NB: But do you speak Sylheti or Bangla? AR: You educated people ask difficult questions; Sylheti and Bangla are the same; where do you see the difference?
NB: How can you be both Sylheti and Bengali? AR: I don’t understand you. Sylhetis are Bengalis and Bengalis are Sylhetis; Sylheti means Bengali; Is there a difference? But I never thought about that. Hindu or Muslim, we are all Sylhetis.
NB: But you live in Assam, AR: Who told you? Assam is very far away. One has to take the train or the bus to reach there. A relation of mine used to work there, in Pandu, near Guwahati.
NB: So you are a Sylheti, are you? AR: Of course. my father and uncle were Sylhetis, so surely I am one; I do not see why you should ask this. It is obvious; everybody is a Sylheti here; this side and also on the other side; but sadly we cannot easily go to the other side because of the BSF.
NB: What about Hajlakandi and Cachar? Are there Sylhetis? AR: Oh yes! but I don’t believe you do not know. You have come from Delhi and you still ask this question. There are Sylhetis in Assam also, in Hojai, Lumding, I have few relations there.
Chapter III

Image 3.3: Conversation with Ajijur Rehman, Inatpur, Karimganj

Photo courtesy: Nabanipa Bhattacharjee
Indeed, it is the middle class of Karimganj that is caught in the classic situation of to be, or not to be consciously Sylheti. Not surprisingly, its assertions and denials regarding the Sylheti component of the identity both in linguistic and social terms remain more often than not, extraordinarily contextual. What is interesting is that almost all middle class respondents are aware of such shifting contexts, and do not fail to explain those. As Himani Ray says: ‘We are all Sylhetis in Karimganj and Barak Valley but it is only to people like you that we can declare that openly; not naturally to others because there would be problems. Being a Bengali is anyway difficult in Assam and Sylheti all the more. The best for us is to say we belong to Barak Valley’.

The social practices that sustain the identity of the Karimganj and Barak Valley middle class is as mentioned, composite in character. This composite ‘sanskritik oitijhya [cultural heritage]’ of Srihatta-Cachar or Barak Valley, albeit Sylhetiised stands reflected not only in everyday social practices of its people but also in official expressions such as Barak Utsav, and Barak Upatyaka Banga Sahitya O Sanskriti Sammelan (hereafter BUBSSS). Caste, class, gender, rural, urban, origin (Sylhet and Cachar) religious, and such other specificites notwithstanding, the culture of Barak Valley shows signs of unity and syncretism as Mukundadas Bhattacharjee’s poem shows:


Though language (meaning Bangla) remains as the poet claims a unifying force of the valley, nevertheless it is not free from nuances and sub-texts as shown earlier. However, unlike language/dialect which is a more potent zone of contestation, the
cultural domain of social practice is less so; indeed, it is language, and the politics surrounding it that remains the defining feature of the identity of Barak Valley. Perhaps one reason why social practices in general and non-institutionalized ones in particular remain a site of moderate contestation is the critical role played by religion in it. Given that Barak Valley houses large numbers of Hindus as well as Muslims, those social practices which are strictly institutionalized by religion are clearly demarcated as independent and exclusive spaces. However, those social practices which are not strictly so, go on to create a space that is common to both Hindus and Muslims, Sylhetis and Cacharis, and so forth; and it is this syncretic cultural space that is projected as one of the unifying elements of the consciously official Bengali identity of Barak Valley. Interestingly, even this space being considered Sylheti does not generate the kind of resistance from say, Hailakandi which is the case when the speech is called so. As Partha Pratim Das says: ‘Unlike speech, folk culture and other samajik [social] practices are not resisted even if called Sylheti because those are not so sensitive matters in Barak Valley. Nothing except speech is important here because it is the most visible sign of our identity. Karimganj is different because in any case, everything is Sylheti culture there, language, customs etc. though the usual differences remain’. It is clear that the composite culture of Barak Valley thus has two unequally contested, but equally Sylhetiised cultural domains of speech and social practices. Be that as it may, it is on this Sylhetiised composite culture that as is obvious by now, Karimganj lays exclusive claim. Perhaps the only point of difference as the middle class insists but fails to clearly point out between the cultures of Karimganj and other districts of Barak Valley is the ‘pure and strong’ Sylheti character of its speech, an issue I have already discussed, and social practices. Apart from customary rituals specific to its Hindus and Muslims, the Sylheti community of Karimganj shares a culture that is common to both religious communities. Other than the ‘pure’ Sylheti dialect which binds it together, social practices including caste norms, culinary habits, folk art and worship, customs and values also perform similar function. Before I go ahead, a general picture of the culture as perceived by the community is in order here. Sujit Choudhury’s comments serve as the much required aid to make a beginning. He says:

To get an idea of the common culture of Karimganj is not easy as there are numerous divisions in that. One has to first define what is common; common in matters of what. Every culture has common space as well as exclusive spaces. I am not saying there is no
common culture in Karimganj but there are also distinct spaces. To
differentiate between distinct and common is difficult. Anyway,
religious affiliations apart, the community in Karimganj has
certain social features that is shared by all members and reflected
in patterns of food habits, music, forms of non-formal worship,
caste structure etc. Sometimes in these, Hindu and Muslim, Sylheti
and Cachari all merge, at other times they remain distinct. The
middle class will claim that they are simultaneously Sylheti and
Bengali, Hindu and Muslim depending on the importance of each
of these. They will write and talk about Sylhet but will, as you must
have seen, very cautiously articulate it. Actually this class is also
internally divided and makes distinctions between Sylhetis. Many
categories exist here, and this class uses them as per its
convenience. Among other classes things are simpler because such
categories remain largely unquestioned. It is the middle class that
is problematic and you want to focus on that. Remember that it will
only be a partial picture.

As mentioned, the common cultural space shared by the middle class members of
Karimganj is claimed as ‘pure and undiluted Sylheti’ though most do not forget to add
in due course that it is Bengali as well. Consider for instance, what Leena Deb says:
‘Karimganj is the natural place for Sylheti, meaning Bengali, culture. You cannot
expect that from Silchar, Hailakandi, Guwahati or Shillong. We have Hindus and
Muslims here but we share so many things in common; we follow caste rules, eat non­
vegetarian food, listen to similar music, perform similar dances, worship in mokams;
what else one wants. We are lucky to be able to remain Sylheti’. Field notes suggest
that the cultural commonalities shared by Sylheti urban middle class among others,
include: first, claim to exclusive syncretic heritage (and part territory) of Sylhet and
second, social practices namely, a) caste structure and values b) diet and culinary
habits e) non-institutionalized forms of culture (folk) including art and worship, and f)
gender values. It is to be noted that a large section of the middle class while
acknowledging this common cultural space fails to explicitly point out the character
of: a) its exclusive Sylhetiness b) its simultaneous Bengaliness, and c) its difference
with similar spaces that exist in Cachar and Hailkandi, and in all regions across India;
for the other section the above are more clearly viewed. However, taken as a whole
this class, albeit contextually recognizes the space either as ‘distinctly’ Sylheti and
Karimganj centered or distinctly fused with Bengali and Barak Valley. Though this
space is shared across classes, yet it is the middle class that consciously articulates its
existence, and also incessantly propagates its ‘democratic and secular’ character. But I
shall show how this claim eventually turns out to be a form of mere lip service, given
the deeply divided character of this class.
Claiming to be inheritors of the syncretic heritage and a portion of Sylhet – including land tenure laws guided by Permanent Settlement till 1961 – this class as its senior member Nihar Ranjan Dutta’s comments show, takes immense pride in preserving and protecting that. He says:

*Karimganj as part of eastern Sylhet had a great heritage primarily created by the Sanskrit pandits of Panchakhanda, educated Kayasthas and few khandani, upper caste, educated Muslims like say Syed Mijtaba Ali and Syed Murtaza Ali ... Achyut Charan Tattwanidhi was also from Maina village in Karimganj. We must remember that in India the responsibility to carry forward that culture lies on us for, we are residents of Karimganj though as an original one, I have a greater responsibility compared to the settlers’* [also see Choudhury et al 1996; Purkayastha 1998; Tattwanidhi 2002, 2004, 2005].

Apparently unified in its claim to the heritage of Sylhet, and territory of Karimganj this class however, remains fragmented along lines of religion, caste, origin and most importantly, the settler and non-settler issue. In a conversation with Ashesh Roy this issue is brought to light. He says:

*I am an educated and cultured man but have to run a small business now as bad times have fallen. I am a Saha by caste and my origin lies in Sunamganj region. People in Karimganj are accommodating but very caste, religion and place conscious. Original residents will not fail to remind that I am a migrant from Bangladesh (after 1971) that to not from the other part of Karimganj but other part of Sylhet too. Tumi to aashol Sylheti nay reba [you are not a actual Sylheti], they say. That is why I think some Sylhetis of other parts of Sylhet say they are not Sylhetis. Thank god I am Hindu or else more questions would come. Anyone, even an educated one will ask: naam kita? koi thako? kabe aailay? Basha koi aasil? [what is the name? where do you stay? when did you come? where was your home?]. He will also in due course ask for my caste and religion anyway is obvious by name.

Almost all conversations I had point to the fact that common syncretic tradition of Sylhet and Karimganj as articulated by its middle class is plagued by claims and counter claims from within. Its constituent members – Hindus and Muslims, upper and lower castes, settlers and non-settlers – are all caught in a situation where projection of what is politically correct and appropriate rarely matches what is actually desired and believed. One only needs to probe deeper to sense the level of uneasiness that lies beneath the claim of a common culture rooted Sylheti identity. As Ejaz Hussain notes:

*Pick up any book on important personalities of Sylhet or Karimganj or Barak Valley and show me the number of Muslim
names in it. Maybe Sylhet was syncretic, but Karimganj has not inherited that. Some educated Hindus and Muslims will claim that but I know that the tradition and even Karimganj town is seen by Hindus as belonging to them only. We Muslims as part and parcel of that history and as actual people of Karimganj don’t figure anywhere. In the book Swaraniya Jara, Baraniya Jara by Ranajit Choudhury, out of fifty well known personalities of Sylhet, forty six are Hindus and four are Muslims. All books on Sylhet’s history and culture, written earlier or now show the contribution of Hindus as maximum and that too of the upper castes. Famous books on Sylhet mainly talk of upper caste Hindus and their families. Muslims are mentioned only in some chapters. Though I don’t like Bangladesh but at least they recognize the role of Sylheti Muslims. It is really very sad [also see Ahmed 1999; Aziz et al 1997, 2006; Tattwanidhi 2002, 2004, 2005; Purkayastha 1998; Rahman 1991]

Indeed, the tradition of writing history of Sylhet and Karimganj – both undivided and divided – show how that is not sans communal tones and claims. In fact, the middle class untiringly goes on about the ‘glorious syncretic culture’ of Sylhet on one hand but rarely write and practise that on the other. Examples of religious amity are cited with reference to Sylhet as the land of both Sri Chaitanya and Hazrat Shah Jalal, or the near absence of communal violence in Sylhet before, and during partition. The fact that Sylhet was partitioned on communal lines is always discounted by putting the blame squarely on the devious manoeuvres of the Gopinath Bardoloi led Congress government of colonial Assam. The resistance that the supposedly secular Sylheti middle class could have unitedly offered did not come by, and instead the class itself stood communally divided with Hindus continuing to support Congress (considered the representative of Hindu “secular” interests) and large sections of Muslims, except for those who belonged to Jamiat-e-Ulema-a-Hind, the League. The point is, except for a miniscule section of the middle class the rest of its members were, and are neither progressive nor secular. In the garb of unity and syncretism the middle class remains in Karimganj as field notes suggest, near totally polarized on communal lines; accordingly, the historical tradition too falls victim to primordially motivated interpretations.²³

The caste structure of Karimganj presents a pattern that is close to one that existed in undivided Sylhet, and in general the Indian sub-continent. Achyut Charan Choudhury Tattwanidhi lists the following Hindu occupational jatis inhabiting Sylhet, and specific to it namely, Kayastha (writing and clerical work), Kamar (blacksmiths), Kahar (cultivators and palanquin bearers), Kushiyari (sugarcane cultivators), Keoali/Kapali (cloth makers), Kaibarta (fishing net makers), Ganak (astrologers and
fortune tellers), Gandapal/Garowal (boat keepers), Gandhabanik (aromatic scent sellers), Goala (dairy business), Chunar (limestone business), Dholi/Badyakar (drum beaters/pipers), Tanti (weavers), Teli (oil pressers), Das (cultivators), Dhopa (laundry business), Nadiyal/Dom/Patni (fishery business), Namashudra (fishery and boat making business), Napit (barbers), Brahman (teachers, priests and zamindars), Brahman Barna (priests), Bhuinmali (palanquin bearers and earth diggers), Moira (sweetmeat sellers), Mahara (palanquin bearers), Malo (fisherfolk), Jugi/Nath (weavers/cultivators), Lohait Kuri (fishery business), Barui (betel leaf business), Baidya (doctors), Sakkhari (sea shell business), Shuri (wine business), Saha/Sahu (business folk) and Subarna Banik (gold etc.business) [2004:81-90; also see Allen et al 1993; Gupta 1931; Hunter 1998]. Needless to say, this primarily occupation based classification on the face of social transformations cannot be seen as constituting a water tight system. It also stands slightly altered when Barak Valley as a whole is taken into account. According to Shibtapan Basu (2006) apart from the four broad varnas other occupational groups are: Mahishya, Sadgop, Goala, Nathjogi, Baishya-Saha, Patni, Kaibarta, Malakar, Karmakar, Napit, Tanti, Dhopa, Chhutor, Muchi, Sutradhar, Tantabay, Namashudra, Dhibar, Hari Patni, and Jogis. Among Hindus the structure is hierarchically arranged with Sampradayik Brahmans (of Vedic lineage) placed at the top followed by other sub-groups of Brahmans and non-Brahmans alike. In Karimganj the Brahmans are followed by Kayasthas and Baishyas, and then by groups such as Namasudra, Kaibarta, Patni and others; Baishya-Sahas however, are a numerically large and powerful group as they dominate the economic life of the district. Those involved in the fishery related occupation are placed lowest in caste hierarchy with perhaps the Naths preceding them.24

In contemporary Karimganj like the Hindus, Muslims too follow a broad system of occupation based caste heirarchy that divides them into upper, middle and lower castes, and few among these are again specific to the region. The stratification system of Sylheti Muslims resembles the Hindu one but unlike the latter it is not anchored in ancient texts and scriptures. Accordingly, description of the system also does not follow a uniform pattern. For instance, if Tattwanidhi (2004) notes the following jatis among Muslims of Sylhet namely, Kureshi (descendents of Hazrat Mohammed and Hazrat Shah Jalal), Gayin (singers), Jola (cloth merchants), Nagarchi (musical instrument makers), Pathan (descendents of Afghans), Mahimal (fisher folk), Mir
Shikari (hunters), Mughal (descendants of Mughal dynasty), Bej (bird catchers and snake charmers), Sheikh (descendants of Arabs) and Sayyed (descendants of Ali, the son-in-law of Hazrat Mohammad), Kumar Suresh Singh (2002) cites six endogamous groups (not castes) namely, Sayeed, Choudhury, Talukdar, Kiran, Mailmal and Hajam, and Kamaluddin Ahmed argues that five groups namely, Choudhury, Tapadar, Talukdar, Kiran and Mahimal are hierarchically positioned with Tapadars rarely sharing marital relations with upper caste Choudhurys. The Kirans (erstwhile Nankar subjects now essentially bonded labourers) and Mahimals (fisher folk) are placed at the bottom of the hierarchy, and the social distance between those and the upper castes is enormous [see for instance, Basu 2006; Haque n.d]. Amongst Muslims of Cachari origin the system of stratification, as Ramijur Bar Lashkar points out in our discussion, is similarly hierarchised with Majumdar at the top, followed by Choudhury, Bar Lashkar, Lashkar, Barbhuiya, Majarbhuuiya and finally Ali, Mian, and Mahimal.25

The caste structures and practices of Hindus and Muslims of Karimganj as mentioned, show marked similarities in terms of their past legacy and present articulation. The middle class interestingly, considers this caste-defined space as a marker of authentic Sylheti *samajik oitijhya* (social heritage) of Karimganj, and also as one that is shared in by Hindus and Muslims alike. Though in principle, and socially correct expressions caste as an institution is considered an undemocratic and divisive force, yet by dubbing practices related to it as essentially socio-cultural in nature the members of this class ensure its legitimacy within and outside itself. The middle class vehemently denies the existence of *jati byabostha* (caste organization) in Karimganj, and instead articulate it as a form of collective *samajik byabostha* (social organization) that is not ‘*dharma bhittik* [religion based]’ but ‘*karma bhittik* [occupation based]’, and inherited from the tradition of undivided Sylhet. Indeed, for sections of upper castes who belong to the middle class, the otherwise caste-determined social space becomes one that is featured by communal and cultural harmony. As Asish Bhattacharjee says:

*We hardly follow any caste norms nowadays though I am a Brahman. I practise what was taught to me by my forefathers and why should I give that up? I am not discriminating against others. The caste system as you call it is actually a samajik bidhi byabostha [social rules and organization] which our ancestors rightly handed down to us. After all, this system is what is left in Karimganj of Sylhet. I do not see any difficulty if we are all happy with our samajik abasthan [social location], and we don't fight over this. Even Muslims have a system like ours.*
What the middle class calls and claims as *samajik byabostha* (social organization) however remains contested from within; its lower caste members deny such claims which they say, preach egalitarianism only in principle and not in practice. These members allege that in the ‘garb of *samaj ebong sanskriti* [society and culture]’ what the upper castes actually do is practise rigorous caste distinctions, and discrimination. And the situation was no different in undivided Surma Valley though as compared to Cachar it was Sylhet as Sujit Choudhury (2007) shows, which had a more entrenched system of hierarchical stratification demonstrated for instance, in *Srihatter Itibritta*. As Nurul Haq remarks:

> Despite being educated and economically well off, in social status I am considered low because I am of Mahimal caste and also Cachari by origin. My upper caste Hindu and Muslim friends may not say that openly but it is obvious. What unity are we talking about then when I am always “recognized” by my caste status, as a Mahimal. Sylheti Muslims still take me as “Cachari Muslim” though I have done political work in Badarpur. With Sylheti Muslims I share only beef eating and reading the namaz [prayer] and nothing else. Sometimes upper caste Muslims would hesitate to go to a masjid [mosque] where a lower caste maulvi [preacher] conducts the prayers. For lower classes things are simpler as they believe that jatoi aakhol [wisdom lies in caste]. My Hindu friends are also extremely caste conscious. A Brahman or Kayastha marrying say, an educated and wealthy Saha or Kaibarta is news in Karimganj. We carry over the rigid caste system from Sylhet and nothing has changed, though in Cachar and Hailkandi things are not as bad. We Mahimals were treated like this in history and also now.

Dietary habits of Sylhetis are considered not only exclusive but one that rests in the domain of cultural commonness. In fact, the culinary tradition of Sylhetis like other groups reflects regional specificities including those influenced by environment and culture. Apart from rice which is the staple food, fish remains an indispensable item of the regular Sylheti diet. Writing on Sylhet William W. Hunter notes:

> The food of the well-to-do shopkeeper consists of rice, salt, oil, fish, pulses, vegetables spices, tamarind, and milk occasionally. The food of the peasants does not differ from the above list, except in quality. Fish and fruit are plentiful in Sylhet; and both these commodities are largely exported to other Districts. The Muhammadans eat meat of all kinds, except pork; the Hindus will only touch pigeons. Pan or betel leaf, supari or betel nut, and tobacco form a large item in the monthly expenditure of every family [1998:286; also see Raychaudhuri 1993, 2007].

The food habits of Sylhetis and Cacharis do not show any marked difference and falls within the larger culinary tradition of Bengal, its erstwhile eastern districts in
particular and also other neighbouring regions. Sylhetis however consider among others, items such as shutki (dried fish), biroin chaul (a variety of sticky rice), chunga pitha (sweet meat of rice powder) and shoishya (mustard seed paste) as Shambhoo C. Dey (2006) points out, specific to their culinary culture and hence, boundary markers between that and other culinary cultures of Bengal. Though eating shutki is a habit that Sylhetis (and Cacharis) share with people from say, Chittagong, Noakhali and Mymensingh, yet it is a particular variety of shutki called shidol (a fish dried in a special way) that occupies the status of ‘distinction’ in their culinary weltanschuang and not surprisingly, across the world it remains one of the singular markers of Sylheti identity surpassable only perhaps by Sylheti dialect. Biroin chaul eaten with fried fish, milk and other items is considered a delicacy of Sylheti cuisine to be consumed most importantly, on the day of Makar Sankranti. Tattwanidhi while describing the rules of commensality mentions ‘this variety of rice as an important ingredient of the food served in marriage and other social functions’ [2004:513; also see Chakraborty 2007]. The widespread use of mustard paste for preparation of fish and vegetable gravy is another aspect that Sylhetis consider exclusive to their culinary culture though the claim is contested by non-Sylheti Bengalis, and Sylhetis with origins in western Sylhet. I have been told that mustard as an essential ingredient of food is predominant among Sylhetis of eastern Sylhet, its Brahmans in particular. Other food items such as oranges and pineapples (fruits), bual mach (a variety of fish), koril (bamboo fruit) and churan/mukhi (a variety of Arum) as also pitha (sweet meat cakes of flour/rice powder) of various kinds namely daiyari, aafani, chunga pitha, una pitha, ketli pitha and gokul pitha are taken to be indispensable items of Sylheti culinary tradition which the middle class articulates as ‘distinct’ vis-à-vis “others” (say, the Assamese, and Bengalis of western Bengal origin in particular), and inherently composite as Kumar Suresh Singh (2002) hints, in character. It is on this ‘distinct’ Sylheti composite culinary culture that the Karimganj middle class lays exclusive claim. As Ajit Bikash Ray argues:

Food is basic to every culture and we Sylhetis are particular about it. Our food has strong Sylheti elements which are not found in other parts of Bengal and Assam. Shidol, biroin chaul etc is part of our common culinary and cultural heritage and everybody in Karimganj will agree to that; we must protect and preserve that. Of course we have food habits which are caste, class and religion specific but there is no clash. Obviously not every food can be consumed by everyone. Children now are fond of fast food and may not be able to appreciate our culinary heritage but we need to train
them. People of Kolkata, West Bengal sometimes make fun of our food and also from Barisal like the writer Tapan Raychaudhuri. I say it is sad that they will not know its taste and hence, remain losers.

However, the claim of a composite culinary culture centric identity too remains a matter of contestation within the middle class. In fact, food becomes associated with specific identities of caste and religion, and divides the so called common cultural space. Accordingly dietary habits are classified and ranked, and the culinary space turns into an arena albeit unacknowledged, of identity assertion where food becomes either Hindu or Muslim, upper or lower caste, old or young, and finally Sylheti or non-Sylheti. Shubhashish Shome observes that culinary distinctions and rules of interdining are strictly followed in Karimganj, both in villages and towns. He says:

*I eat all kinds of food, pizza, noodles etc. I eat shutki and when I travel to Kolkata people ask me, tomra shutki mach khaon na? Ki gondho? Bhalo lage kheti? [you eat dried fish? It smells? Do you like it?]; I say yes, but then realize that it indeed smells and there is no harm in giving that up. In Karimgarif social gatherings serve traditional food, of course keeping in mind caste and religious considerations. Invitation to my father’s Muslim friends' house means separate food and eating arrangements because Muslims eat beef and we Hindus don’t. If the invitation is to a lower caste house many people will indirectly enquire about the caste of the cook. Actually, food eaten by Muslims or lower castes are slightly different and also cooked in a different style with extra onion and garlic; Hindu widows do not eat non-vegetarian food but Muslim widows do; Hindu and Bengali pitha are different from say, a kind of pitha called handesh which Muslims make during marriage function.*

Other than strictly institutionalized religious practices of Hindus and Muslims, there exists non-institutionalized forms of religious culture – *loukik aachar bichar* (folk practices) – which are products of the collective spirit of the community. In fact, a glance at the voluminous literature produced from Barak Valley on the subject suggests that *lookay jibon* (folk life) and *loukik/lola sanskriti* (folk culture) are considered spaces where religious syncretic spirit of the valley is best expressed [see for example, Ahmed 1999; Ahmed 2004; Vidyabinod 1930; Basu 2001; Bhattacharjee 1996; Bhattacharjee 1995; Choudhury et al 1996; Choudhury 1986b; Purkayastha et al 2002]. As Sanjib Deb Lashkar writes:

*It is surprising that despite colonial conspiracy and the burden of partition, this region remains a united territory where the socio-cultural fabric is composite, progressive and its folk religion free of sanskar [binding norms]. This is the time to focus on the folk*
Folk culture as a force that binds the community of Barak Valley includes forms of music, dance, craft, medicine, literature and most importantly, worship. Scholars like Amalendu Bhattacharjee, Kamaluddin Ahmed, Sujit Choudhury and others who have written extensively on the folk tradition of Barak Valley argue that it is a near complete replication of the syncretic loka sanskriti (folk culture) of undivided Surma Valley; a culture that witnessed territorial fragmentation, but remained unfragmented in spirit and practice itself. The influence of Sylhet in making of this folk culture stands out for several reasons, the most important being the twin heritage of Sri Chaitanya and Hazrat Shah Jalal preceded by Buddhists of the Sahajiya tradition. The religious and cultural syncretism that Sylhetis, particularly the middle class are so proud of owes its origin to liberal religious Buddhist, Vaishnavite and Sufi traditions of Sylhet in particular and Bengal in general. Consequently, its folk culture displays a space where strict codes of conduct associated with Hinduism and Islam fail to sustain and operate; in short, it is a space featured by restriction of institutionalized religious codes to the private sphere and expression of the non-institutionalized ones instead. In the otherwise communally polarized atmosphere of Karimganj this space serves more as an oasis where high and strict religious and caste distinctions do not hold sway, and where cultures and identities merge to create a ‘syncretic’ and ‘united’ Sylheti identity. Quite predictably the Sylheti middle class lays claim upon it to vindicate more than anything else, its historically ‘secular’ character. And again, Karimganj as the sole representative of Sylhet in Barak Valley lays exclusive claim on that space which however, as I shall show remains as contested albeit less vehemently, as the others.

Karimganj middle class upholds the composite Aaul-Baul-Marifati and Panchalikirtan – forms of folk religion influenced musical practices – tradition drawn from both Vaishnavite and Sufi religious practices. Sanjib Deb Lashkar opines that this tradition, particularly the Baul is the ‘nijashya dharma [own/ ‘distinct’ religion]’ of Bengalis; it reflects in the long cultural tradition that begins with Charjyapada, Chandidas, and culminates in Lalan Fakir, Hasan Raja, Radha Raman and finally, Nazrul and Rabindranath [Ibid.:79]. If customs related to marriage, birth and death show the influence of this tradition, so do art forms such as music and dance. Though
essentially related to rural life and practised more widely in villages folk music in fact represents as Kamaluddin Ahmed says, a complete social domain where values and customs, gender relations, emotions and desires of the society are best articulated and expressed [Ahmed 2004:38; also see for example Basu 2001; Bhattacharjee 1988; Sen 2003]. The folk music tradition of Surma-Barak Valley which is a ‘regional variant of the larger Bengali one’ he continues, may be divided into two categories in terms of presentation technique namely: a) individual, and b) collective/chorus. The first is represented by musical forms such as Baul, Bhatiyali, Marifati, Murshidi, Nimai-Sanyas, Rakhalia, Dehattatva and music related to love, sorrow/suffering and Islamic devotion, and the second includes Dhamail, Ojha Gaan, Kirtan, Shari, Jari and Gajir Gaan [ibid.:39]. Of these forms many as Mukundadas Bhattacharjee (1995) writes, also have accompanying dance forms say for example, Thhat Naach, Ojha Naach, Dhamail, Kirtaner Naach, Jari Naach, Rakhalia Naach, Bhulabhumir Naach, Gajir Naach, Nuka Tanar Naach, Bau Naach, Charak Naach, and so forth. However, of all these the syncretic Baul-Marifati tradition influenced songs of Hasan Raja, Shitolang Shah and Radha Raman, and dance forms like Dhamail, Ojha Naach and Bau Naach are popularly claimed by the middle class as ‘distinctive’ markers of culturally composite Sylheti identity, though the others remain equally significant. However, while most folk music and dance forms are taken as evidence of religious syncretism, some are considered distinctly Hindu and Muslim in origin and practice. As Nabarun Dey notes:

Karimganj’s strength is its thriving Sylheti loka sanskriti [folk culture]; our music, dance, craft, literature and others; Sylheti poems, chhora [short poems], probad-probochan [proverbs and advices] are our invaluable folk literature. These can be seen more in villages and not in towns. But in town we take pride in that heritage and Hindus and Muslims are all part of it. Certain things say, some songs and dances are different for Hindus and Muslims but that doesn’t really matter. Hindus worship Badshah Baba, offer sirni to Satyapir and visit dargas, mazars, mokams all the time, while Muslims have tremendous faith on Bisori [Manasa, snake goddess] and other deities. I sometimes visit Baruni mela too.

Form of folk worship perhaps is the other domain where the spirit of syncretism comes out in full force, though distinct Hindu and Muslim forms exist alongside. In fact, it is important to note that folk religion which in essence stands apart from institutionalized form of religion simultaneously contains particularistic as well as syncretic forms. So, in Karimganj in particular and Barak Valley in general one notes
three forms of folk worship: a) Hindu b) Muslim and c) Hindu-Muslim. Sujit Choudhury (1986b) writing in the context of Barak Valley points to the following Hindu folk cults namely, Savitri-Satyaban, Siddeshwar Kapilasram (site), Bhuvan Tirtha (site), Badshah, Ranachandi and Nimata, Nouka Puja, Darai and Kartikeya. Muslim folk cults are primarily drawn from the liberal Sufi tradition of Hazrat Shah Jalal and consequently, one does not fail to notice the numerous *dargas, mokams* and *mazars* (places of worship associated with Sufi tradition) that dot the landscape of Karimganj, perhaps far exceeding the number of *masjids* (mosque/place for formal Islamic prayer) [see for example, Basu 2004; Bhattacharjee 1988; Deb Lashkar 2005; Tattwanidhi 2004]. According to Shibatapan Basu 2000) the well known sites of Muslim folk worship are Hazrat Shah Aadam Khaki Rouza, Aachim Shah Mokam, Syedpur Mokam, Ramuj Shah Darga, Manasangan Mokam, Shahmardini Mokam and Shah Badar Aastana. Of folk cults which represent the spirit of religious syncretism, the one associated with Badshah (though included within the Hindu cultic tradition by Sujit Choudhury) is the most prominent in Karimganj; the cults of Bishori, Satya Pir and others however, are no less important. As Sanjib Deb Lashkar writes: ‘The expression of religious cooperation and co-existence is best seen in the establishment of Badshah Than in the regions of Karimganj, Ratabari and Patharkandi. Most importantly, in many places Badshah Than is located inside Kali Mandirs where Hindus and Muslims have equal rights of entry’ [2005:80 (translation mine)].

Badshah, also known as *Baghai* (lord of tigers) has no image and no special shrine dedicated to him for, in every Kali temple, particularly in southern Karimganj he invariably finds a place. Offered *sirni* (sweet gravy made of rice/wheat) and *gqjar* (a variety of fish though not eaten by Hindus), Badshah’s origin (believed to be in the mokam of Chhalag Mowa in Patharkandi-Ratabari region) shows distinct association with Islam and his dwelling places resemble those of Muslim *pirs* (holy men of Sufi tradition), albeit located inside *mandirs* (Hindu temples). So, what is interesting as Sujit Choudhury says is:

*Badshah co-exists with goddess Kali within the very inner campus of Kali temples. Kali is supposed to be the most fierce and malicious of the Hindu divinities and her wrath for heretics and non-believers is well known. How the village folk with their simple belief and unqualified regard dare to accommodate a godling of presumed Muslim origin with a definite Muslim name within the abode of Kali is a problem worth investigation [1986b:59; also see Basu 2006].*
Though Badshah is the most frequently cited example of 'religious samannay [compositeness]' of a shared cultural space by the middle class, yet as Choudhury says, he remains a godling venerated and worshipped essentially by Hindus and Muslims of lower class (and caste). However, it is not only across classes that what is believed to be the shared cultural space offered by folk religion, the syncretic variety in particular contested, but within the middle class too. Its right-wing religious elements for instance, not only denounce the syncretic form in particular but folk forms of worship in general; folk art too is not spared though it it is relatively less contested. In line with their class character, such members mention their discontent only in the passing but they do alright. Upon mentioning the matter to Sujit Choudhury then, and later (over telephone) he succinctly explains:

Middle class rarely practises what it preaches. Its members go on as you say highlighting Sylhetiness but what constitutes that is decided by their caste, gender, rural-urban and religious positions. Folk culture is a kind of capital for this class to define Sylhetiness but problems are there too. Its Hindu moulobadi [fundamentalist] elements consider folk forms as deviation from "authentic" [Brahmanical] Hinduism while its Muslims consider Sufi tradition not Islamic enough. They do not endorse religious syncretism and the folk forms that it creates. You tell me that known right wingers also mentioned such things only in passing. Obviously, you will not be able to get things out from them so easily. A mullah or a priest will tell you straight but not the urban, educated, prosperous middle class right wingers. They will cautiously give a hint. But I live here and can confidently say that this is how they think and it is not only the present that they question but the past too. Such thoughts aggravated after partition and the subsequent communal politics of this region and country. This class will stress the cultural commonalities as you say and at the same time divide, a certain section though, it on the basis of their religious, caste and other identities. But thankfully such elements have not yet taken over completely.

In the interview with Shibani Biswas I was told that the 'distinctiveness' of Sylheti culture lies among other things, in its egalitarian structure of gender and education; a structure that flourished in undivided Sylhet, and does so in Karimganj now. 'Sylhet had a more advanced system of education (for example, M.C College) compared to other districts of Bengal and most importantly, in the field of stri-shikkha (female/women's education). Accordingly, the status of women was also on par with men. I am proud of that tradition where women, both Hindus and Muslims were given the respect they rightly deserved'. Position of women in Sylhet as described by Achyut Charan Choudhury Tattwanidhi (2004) points to their role in the domestic
sphere alone, and education hardly finds a mention except for that which is associated with knowledge of scriptures and epics. However, women poets and writers like Chandrabati Debi, Aparna Debi, Krishna Priya Choudhurani, Sahifa Banu, Hemanta Kumari Choudhurani, Annadasundari Debi and, so forth do find mention in books on Sylhet. The spread of modern education amongst Sylheti women began around the time of “Bengal Renaissance” and picked up by late nineteenth century, and Srihatta Sammilani (Sylhet Union), Calcutta played a pioneering role in that; Pandita Ramabai, related to Sylhet by marriage only added to that. As Anurupa Biswas writes:

The need for female education was first addressed by the Srihatta Sammilani. They sent questions papers printed in Calcutta to various examination centers in Sylhet to enable women to appear for examinations. The Brahma Samaj in Sylhet also was involved in such efforts. Raj Chandra Choudhury and Hemanta Kumari Choudhury were the pioneers. Their efforts saw the establishment of the first school for girls in Sylhet in 1903. The Welsh Presbyterian Mission also ran a school for girls which later came to be known as Kishori Mohan Balika Vidyalaya. In Habiganj town too the missionaries ran a school for girls [1998:34 (translation mine); also see Bhattacharjee 2002; Chapter IV].

By mid-twentieth century, Sylhet, cutting across religions had women freedom fighters, social activists, writers, poets and educationists like Sarala Bala Deb, Begum Rokeya, Leela Ray (Nag), Shamsi Khanam, Jobeda Khatun Choudhury, Sarojini Das, Nareshnandini Dutta, Hena Das, Jyotsna Chanda and, so forth [see for instance, Bhattacharjee 1988; Das 1997; Purkayastha 1998]. Not surprisingly, for the Sylheti middle class of Karimganj its educational heritage is a form of ‘cultural capital’ shared by its every member. More importantly, it is a legacy that is considered vital so far as contemporary growth of progressive gender values of the class in particular and community in general is concerned. Prior to partition, Karimganj sub-division had a total of sixteen middle and high level schools and madrassas with the first M.E school established around 1864 followed by Nilmoni High School in 1916, Middle Vernacular Madrassa in 1926, Karimganj Public High School in 1930, MMMC Girls’ High School in 1935 and finally, Karimganj College in 1946 [see for example, Bhattacharjee n.d; Biswas 1998; Dass 1996; Image 3.4]. While most educational institutions in contemporary Karimganj cater to men and women alike, some such as Rabindra Sadan Girls’ College are exclusively meant for the latter. In this context that Ajit Bikash Ray remarks:
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Image 3.4: Nilmoni School established in 1916, Karimganj.

Photo courtesy: Swatoleena Bhattacharjee
Karimganj stands out as the inheritor of the progressive educational legacy of Sylhet which not only addressed the menfolk but women as well. Sylheti women are educationally advanced and there is no gender discrimination here. Women are respected at home and outside as Sylheti tradition demands it. But Hindu upper caste women stand out amongst all. Lower caste women are fewer in number. Muslim women are also educated but not like Hindus. They have restrictions, get married early and rarely work outside. Hindus in a way are little more progressive in matters of nari shiksha [education of women], aar tara aageo aasil [and they were in the past too].

It is obvious that the middle class claim of a common educational tradition and progressive gender values is viewed by sections of its members as essentially Hindu, and upper caste in content and character. Modern education no doubt was a bastion of upper caste women in undivided Sylhet, a fact grudgingly acknowledged by the lower caste members of the middle class, yet it was not restricted to Hindu women alone. Razia Nisar Choudhury notes that caste is the deciding factor in women’s education while religious affiliation is not. She says:

*I am an educated Muslim woman because Islam does not preach gender disparity, and actually Hinduism does. Hindus think that the gender equity we have in Karimganj is their contribution and Muslims are dubbed as backward and oppressive in matters of women’s education and rights. This is not true because Muslims had, and have contributed to the propagation of gender equality here though mainly by the upper castes like Choudhurys and others. Upper caste Muslims are very forward looking compared to lower castes. A lower caste Muslim may be very rich, have a car etc. but he will not educate his daughter much, or let her work. Caste is very important for us, for Hindus and Muslims in Karimganj, as that decides one’s attitude towards education.*

3.3: Living in contemporary times

Much as the middle class of Karimganj is involved in the projection of a culture rooted Sylheti identity, equal if not more effort is directed towards assertion as mentioned, of the Bengali component of that. An identity that is otherwise common to all Sylhetis across classes and religious communities however, is appropriated and consciously articulated as a ‘distinct and authentic’ one by the middle class Sylhetis of Karimganj although it faces resistance – along cultural markers of dialect and social practices – from a) within the class b) other classes, and finally c) other two districts of Barak Valley. Most importantly, as the bearer of a contemporary history that emerged out of partition, the expression of Sylheti identity in Karimganj remains politically determined, and consequently (componentially) contextual. It may appear
to a casual observer as an identity which is given, homogeneous and free from crisis not just in Karimganj but entire Barak Valley, but careful reading shows that it is certainly not so; in fact, it is far from being an uncontested and monolithic one. If within Barak Valley the Sylhetis of Karimganj are dubbed as exclusivist and parochial, outside it the Bengali component of their identity remains questioned and threatened; the dilemma that they face is far more than what is experienced by Sylhetis settled elsewhere in India. For the Sylhti Hindus of Karimganj the situation is slightly less complex compared to their Muslim counterparts. Field notes suggest that the former as and when necessary, are able to more easily negotiate their identity vis-à-vis: a) Sylheti Hindus of Cachar and Hailakandi b) Cachari Hindus c) Bengalis living outside Assam. For the latter, their religious identity complicates the process. As Muslims of Assam they run the risk of being equated with their “immigrant”, “non-son-of-the-soil”, “foreigner” co-religionists, and as Sylhetis they are often liable to be accused of extra-territorial allegiance to Bangladesh. Be that as it may, Sylheti component of the identity as and when asserted by Muslims are vis-à-vis one, Mymensinghia Muslims who are considered immigrants/settlers, legal or otherwise, and two, Cachari Muslims, and assertion of collective Muslim/Islamic identity occurs when pitched vis-à-vis a collective Hindu one.

For Sylheti middle class and its constituent religious identities in Karimganj, it is the Bengali component of identity that emerges as the “consciously official and visible” unifying force not just for itself but for the relationship it shares with Cachar and Hailakandi. How the Bengali component faces threats and exists in perpetual ‘sankat [crisis]’ in Barak Valley i.e. in Assam is something with which the scholars and intellectuals of the region in particular and middle class in general are constantly engaged [see for example, Bhattacharjee 2006; Bhattacharya 2001, 2003, 2010b; Choudhury 2005b, 2007]. All forms of literature including newspapers, professional journals and popular magazines published from the region more often than not contain writings on the language (Bangla) issue; poems, short stories and novels are written to honour the memory of the eleven men and women who laid down their lives on 19 May 1961 for Bangla language; an incident which is claimed as unparallel in the history of Bangla language surpassable perhaps only by the language movement of 1952 in erstwhile East Pakistan. As poet Chabi Gupta writes:

Nineteenth May/tell me where I should/Keep our bleeding youth of long forty years?/My backbone, as I straighten it up/I see Tagore
and Nazrul/Extending their caring arms/The fertile field of rural Barak, Boatword River, the warm heart of mankind/Soil-plastered hut in the courtyard/Everywhere, in happiness, sorrow, festival/ Dear to the roots of tongue/Folk tales, Folk songs, Rhymes, Tune, Rhythm, the Padmapuran with smells of life/Dhamail, Bratakatha, Paachali, the songs of Ghazi/The inherited Nineteenth May/The tell-tale water, roots/The restless water, space [2002:1; also see for example, Bulbul 1995; Choudhury 2007; Deb 2005; Lashkar n.d, 2000; Kar 1999; Paul Choudhury 1972; Moitra 2007; Shome 2000].

In fact, so large is the oeuvre that it becomes impossible to make a complete list of writings on the issue. Among others, this shows how the community remains in the grip of a deep existential anxiety; an anxiety that is also attributed to indifference of the larger Kolkata based Bengali community towards their fellow Bangla speakers in Assam. However, Assam(ese) state remains the most distant and alien “other” vis-à-vis which Bengali component of the distinctly fused identity is articulated and asserted. Ironically, it often appears that it is this existential crisis as the middle class call it, which binds in one thread the Bangla speaking people of Barak Valley. Living in contemporary Karimganj and Barak Valley comes to mean an almost near compulsive assertion of Bengaliness; an assertion aggravated by linguistic policies propagated by the Assam(ese) state since independence [see for example, Brass 1995; Chapter II; Choudhury 2007; Deka 1995; Goswami 1997; Lashkar n.d, 2000; Neog 1976].

The story that Bengalis of Barak Valley, both Sylhetis and non-Sylhetis narrate is not only complex but also characterized as claimed, by betrayal, discrimination, neglect, exploitation and oppression – all directed against the Assam(ese) state. Going back to history, with ouster of the powerful Bangla speaking district of Sylhet in 1947 the stage was set for the much desired reorganization of Assam along unilingual and consequently, unicultural lines. Though Cachar now stood as the ‘only and lonely’ Bangla speaking district of Assam, yet the incorporation of Karimganj coupled with the unanticipated large scale settlement of Bengali partition-migrants from Sylhet and other places of East Bengal in it gave it a fresh lease of life. As Bengali population steadily rose not just in Cachar but also other areas of Assam, the provincial state countered that by unleashing forces of aggressive Assamese linguistic nationalism. In 1954 a demand for a separate state to be named Purbachal modeled after the earlier
Plan for Purbachal of 1948, was laid before State Reorganization Commission by Cachar States Re-Organization Committee. The demand, spearheaded by Cachar, was meant to address the plight of all non-Assamese speaking groups in the state victims as they claimed to be of Assam(ese) partisanship and domination [see for example Datta 1993; Paul Choudhury 1972]. The demand not being met the resistance of Cachar continued, and culminated in the Language Movement of 1960-61 [see Image 3.5]. As a protest against proposed declaration of Assamese as the only official language of Assam, Cachar plunged into a movement that witnessed violence and killing of eleven Bengalis by state police at Silchar on 19 May, 1961, eventually leading to withdrawal of the controversial language bill. With Bangla reinstated as the other official language, Cachar heaved a sigh of relief. However, it was to be momentary for, the issue resurfaced in a more aggressive form in the aftermath of war of liberation in 1971 which saw among others, huge Bengali migration to Cachar. In 1972 a memorandum was submitted by Cachar Gana Parishad Union Territory Demand Committee to the Prime Minister with the demand of union territory status for Cachar, and yet again the demand failed to be accepted. By the time Assam plunged into a full scale, violent anti-outsider movement in 1980, polarization between Cachar (Barak Valley) and Brahmaputra Valley represented by Bengalis and Assamese respectively, was complete. Primarily directed against Bangla speaking Hindus and Muslims, the movement reaffirmed the chauvinistic ideology that underlay Assam’s post-colonial social and political structure. Claimed by sections of its intelligentsia as a movement for right of the Assamese to self-determination, it aimed to oust the Bengali population in order to correct historical wrongs and bring justice to Assam and its Assamese speaking people. In contemporary Assam as Sujit Choudhury (2007) says, homogenizing agenda of the state continues unabated; an agenda that has now acquired a less direct but more potent strategy. He argues that the Assam(ese) state aided by organizations like Assam Sahitya Sabha, and abetted by few Bengali lackeys are engaged in a relentless exercise to divide and restructure the linguistic profile and identity which were, and remain Bangla and Bengali respectively, of Barak Valley itself.
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Image 3.5: Honouring the Language Movement (1961) martyrs, Karimganj

Photo courtesy: Nabanipa Bhattacharjee
It is obvious that for middle class Sylhetis of Barak Valley it is the Bengali component of their identity that remains politically crucial and significant. In colonial period too that remained important in the larger public sphere, but it became more pronounced and vocal as it struggled to consolidate itself vis-à-vis the “other” middle class entrenched Assamese linguistic identity which in the post-partition years became equally, if not more so. The tradition of resistance that began in 1960-61 continued as the language issue was raised time and again in say, 1972 and 1986. Given the volatile nature of language issue in Assam Sylhetis of Barak Valley in a politically necessitated tactical move therefore, strictly restrict the articulation of Sylheti component to the non-political sphere. With the Assam(ese) state’s hegemonic intention as Sujit Choudhury suggests, to divide and split Barak Valley’s Bengali identity it is imperative for its Sylheti members to uphold the Bengali component of their identity even if that entails relative (conscious) indifference to (and backgrounding of) the Sylheti one. And it is as Bengalis of Assam, and not of Bahirbanga (Bengalis outside Bengal) that middle class Sylhetis of Barak Valley should articulate their identity says Bijit Bhattacharya. He continues:

I do not call myself Sylheti. I read and write in Bangla and by culture I am Bengali; my writings are well accepted in Kolkata and other places. Bangla language and our identity are in crisis. Assam (state) remains the greatest threat for us as it is trying to, through school syllabi and other means to change Bangla as Assam is now changed to Asom to rid it of Bangla influence. But threat is also from the Bengali bhashar dalals (language middlemen) in Brahmaputra Valley; they have sold themselves to the Assamese just to get some benefits. They are destroying the cause of Bangla in Assam. We have contributed so much to Bangla language and literature so why should not we feel proud to uphold our Bengali identity. Barak Valley has produced Bangla bhasha shahids [Bengali language martyrs] and not Brahmaputra Valley. We are not Bangabhasi Asamiya [Bengali speaking Assamese] or Probashi Bengalis but Assambashi Bangalis [Bengalis of Assam]. We have no extra-territorial allegiance to West Bengal. So I am a Bengali, an Assambashi Bengali and then a Sylheti.

For both Bhattacharya and Choudhury the hegemonic policies of the Assam(ese) state lie at the root of crisis faced by Bangla language and identity in Barak Valley; while the former adds Bengalis of Brahmaputra Valley as co-conspirators, Choudhury points to internal bhibhajans (divisions) that exist within the Bengali community of Barak Valley adding to that. By doing so, Choudhury does interrogate Barak Valley’s common Bengali identity but more importantly, he shows how that fails to
consolidate sufficiently as evident during the movement of 1960-61 for instance, to resist the ever increasing Assam(ese) threat. The divisions he suggests, are made to rest on the fundamental separation of rural and urban and hence, get categorized accordingly as: a) Local (rural) – Non-Local (urban) b) Cachari (rural) – Sylheti (urban) c) Lower Caste Hindu (rural) – Upper Caste Hindu (urban), d) Muslim (rural) – Hindu (urban) and finally e) Bengali Muslim, Lower Caste Hindu, Tea Labour, Meitei Manipuri, Bishnupriya Manipuri, Dimasa and other tribes (rural) – Bengali Upper Caste Hindu (urban) (partition refugees) [2007:16-17]. Such divisions exist continues Choudhury, as they do in every society, but it is the deliberate attempt to highlight and project these as primordial and permanent that speak volumes about the Assam(ese) state’s hegemonic agenda. Indeed, the issue of language (related with immigration) remains as always, central to culture and politics of contemporary Assam.

With the overall Bengali population close to 30% in Assam the anxiety of the Assam(ese) state is palpable, and more it tries to grapple with that more is the resistance from its linguistic and other minorities articulated for instance, in demands ranging from autonomous councils to full statehood. Interestingly, the demand to constitute Barak Valley as a separate political unit though raised time and again never had a popular base even amongst the middle class, and its Muslims in particular. Subhash Deb comments on that as follows:

Statehood demand made by Barak Valley earlier was essentially a Bengali Hindu demand as hardly any Muslim despite all efforts participated. Now the Hindus should not demand because the combined population of Barak Valley will make it Muslim majority state and that would be dangerous. The Barak Valley Muslims never did, and will not demand a state because one, they will anyway demographically and democratically take over two, they being part of larger Muslim community of Assam will not divide it by asking for a separate state, three, they would not just want Barak Valley but entire Assam and that would be possible if they remain united as one religious community, and four, their fight is against the Assamese and they want total political power on the basis of religious identity based electoral politics. Given the current Muslim politics in Assam, they are all set to rule the entire state and so why should they waste energy in Barak Valley. It will be their’s in any case. We were never together in any demand or anything except perhaps to some extent in language and culture, though that too sometimes is sidelined by the main Islamic identity. To Hindus, threat comes from the Assamese and also Muslims; though few Muslims are progressive but majority are not.
Though it is not always easily and clearly visible, yet religious/communal polarization comes full circle in Barak Valley evident particularly in such expressions albeit covert, of the middle class. Therefore, for multiple identities that survive in Barak Valley Bangla language remains the neutral ground, and a space where despite differences possibility of negotiation exists. By designating Assam(ese) state as the common enemy, middle class Barak Valley attempts to consolidate its otherwise communally divided identity. If the years 1874 and 1947 retain immense significance even today, it is 1961 that stands out as yet another defining moment for Barak Valley. Hailed and observed as Bhasha Sahid Divas – and the bullet victims as martyrs – 19 May is the living and sacrosanct symbol of resistance and self-identity for its Bengalis. Consequently, any disregard shown to that is viewed as an attack on what Emile Durkheim would say, the collective conscience of Barak Valley. For the middle class, its hard fought and retained Bengali identity provides it with an established platform to negotiate on its ‘own terms’ not only with the Assam(ese) state but also with the larger Bengali community living outside Barak Valley; organizations like Barak Upatyaka Matri Bhasha Suraksha Samiti and BUBSSS among others, have been created to not only preserve and propagate what has been earned but also carry forward the ongoing struggle. The **distinctly fused** Sylheti identity of the Karimganj middle class in particular and Barak Valley in general as is obvious stands re-constructed in the sense that its Bengali component is extraordinarily consciously and categorically highlighted. As inter-relationship between the components get extremely anxiously re-worked vis-à-vis “others” in post-partition India young Sylhetis of the valley keep busy by creating a Sylheti “territorial” homeland rooted identity in guess what, in [www.syllheti.org](http://www.syllheti.org), in cyberspace.
Of the three field sites it is only for Karimganj that such current details have been provided because one, it is a small district town and two, such details about Kolkata and New Delhi are only too well known to be repeated in this thesis. The details including population data have been taken from the *Census of India, 2001* and the government maintained current website.

This is suggested by official records, newspapers and private papers of political leaders available in the archives; memoirs and reminiscences, personal diaries and letters, novels and biographies both published and unpublished also suggest the same. Of such sources which may be explored for future studies on the theme, the former undoubtedly remains a body of important evidence. The latter may also provide pertinent information and insight but being primarily restricted to descriptive (political) accounts, and that too in Bengali and hence, inaccessible to non-Bengali speaking researchers, of the referendum and partition may fail to throw adequate light on social consequences of those, the massive transborder migration of people in particular.

In fact, it is surprising that partition-migration in general (and just of Sylhetis) as a phenomenon that practically defined the contours of post-colonial Assamese politics has been paid so little attention and even by those scholars who never tire of studying the issue of immigration in the state. It is touched upon no doubt, but then that is usually it.

Subir Dey, a student researching the Mymensingh Muslims of Assam adds to the explanation when he tells me that even in what he calls the *hierarchy of subalternity* Sylhet’s partition and its consequences occupy a place at the bottom.

It is to be noted that I have touched upon the issue of partition relief and rehabilitation only to extent it suits the scope of this work. Also I have chosen in this and the two following chapters, to use the term migrant (often interchangeably with refugee) rather broadly, aware though I am of the complex legal parameters used to classify its various internal categories such as optees, refugees, displaced and exiles, because that serves the purpose of this work.

It is obvious that a rough sketch of the migrant population in post-independent Cachar in particular and Assam in general can be drawn from the data cited above. However, it ought to be remembered that statistical data more often than not fails to reveal the entire story, and therefore even documents such as *Census of India, 1951* which till date remains one of the most important sources of information about the migration question in Assam needs to be read (and supported with other sources) with utmost care and caution.

In order to make sense of such complexities it is important locate those in the context of post-colonial immigration centric politics of Assam, and it is in this context perhaps Dasgupta witnesses ‘denial’ of refugeehood in Brahmaputra Valley and I see almost the reverse in Barak Valley. In fact, a comparative study of Sylhetis which I have not attempted, living in the two valleys would have made things clearer.

Though it is widely maintained by a large section of Sylhetis that the district always had extremely harmonious inter-faith relationship, and following that no serious communal violence before, during and after partition, yet the claim is countered by others. I have not gone into detailed examination of the issue but some works suggest that there were instances of communal violence in Sylhet and the situation in post-partition period was highly communalized which led to heavy cross-migration of both Hindus and Muslims. The movement ceased for a while after signing of the Nehru-Liaqat Pact in 1950 but only to begin again a little later [see for example, Chapter I; Dutta Choudhury 2003; Das 2002; Sylhet Chronicle, Sylhet, 31 October & 7 November 1938].

In fact, the process of getting oneself registered as a refugee which above all meant an official-legal status accompanied by state extended benefits inherently involved a certain kind of politics played out between the person seeking such a status and the state machinery (say, police), not to mention the role played by middlemen and power brokers. In more than one case, persons unable to acquire the refugee slip – being much in demand then – came from disadvantaged social groups that included the lower castes and classes, women and aged; in short, persons who were unable to “negotiate” the terms and conditions involved in acquiring the ever elusive refugee slip/card.
Ambikagiri Ray Choudhury, the General Secretary of the Assam Jatiya Mahasabha in a circular dated 19 June 1950 opined: ‘The Asom Jatiya Mahasabha considers all people living within the four boundaries of the state of Assam as Assamese with no traces of extra-territorial linguistic, cultural and social affinities .... Assam holds no lands ... to give to [innumeral] numbers of refugees .... The old Bengali settlers are the main elements who have done immense harm to the peaceful existence of Assam and they are the source of all troubles’ [Shyamaprasad Mookerjee Papers, Subject File No.62/1950]. He again reiterates his position in a telegram dated 14 June 1950 to Mookerjee where he writes: ‘Assam people eagerly awaiting your proposed tour. They feel you would better avail hospitalities of non-sectarian public of Assam instead of parochial Bengali means to thwart the rehabilitation process to Mookerjee where he writes: ‘Assam people eagerly awaiting your proposed tour. They feel you would better avail hospitalities of non-sectarian public of Assam instead of parochial Bengali means to thwart the rehabilitation process.

The sectarian feeling that prevailed amongst a section of the Assamese speaking population acted as a constant source of pressure on the state government. In mortal fear of Assam being attacked by, a) Muslims immigrants who want to Pakistaniize Assam’, and b) ‘Hindu immigrants and settlers who want to establish Greater Bengal at the cost of Assam’, this section resorted to all public and private means to thwart the rehabilitation process [Ibid., Subject File No.62/1950]. Claiming to be sympathetic to the migrants, an anonymous writer at the same time warns the Assam government of the possible fall outs, including jeopardizing Assam’s social, political and economic structures by a people who look to another province as their natural home, of accommodating those [Ibid.].

Reporting the situation, a newspaper noted that: ‘[S]tarvation, disease, death etc. have been taking heavy toll[s] of human lives in the refugee colonies in the [S]ubdivision of Karimganj. Refugees famished and reduced to skeletons have again begun flocking [in] the town of Karimganj. They are touring ... the town ... and demonstrating their extremely distressed plight’ [The Chronicle, Silchar, 27 June 1952; also see Jugashakti, Karimganj, 7 & 23 April 1934].

Following the visit, supported by All Assam Refugee Association, Cachar Refugee Association and various local refugee committees and associations launched mass protests to seek immediate redressal of the mounting grievances; Karimganj Refugee Conference on 17 August 1952 resolved among others, to appeal for a) correct census of refugees and provide registration cards to them b) abolish the distinctions between I.T.A, colonies and others c) give land to refugees and rehabilitate them in occupationally suitable businesses d) build townships to house middle class refugees e) offer educational facilities to prospective students and f) build one Central Destitute Home in Cachar [The Chronicle, 8 & 29 August 1952]. In fact, All Assam Refugee Conference held on 13 and 14 August 1952 at Gauhati had also adopted similar resolutions, and regarding Cachar it had observed that since rehabilitation in the district had failed miserably an enquiry committee required to be set up to look into the matter [The Chronicle, 5 September, 1952].

It is to be noted that this is primarily a secondary source based preliminary discussion on the nature of relationship between colonial Sylhet and Cachar, and engaged with to support the larger objectives of this work. The issue is extremely complex, and begs nothing but singular attention. In fact, Cachar with two “distinct” zones of plains and hills has a complex cultural history itself, and cannot be understood without interrogating the role of (Hindu) Bengal(ism) in that [see for example, Bhattacharjee 1977; Bhattacharjya 2002; Guha 2005; Gupta 2009]. Following that, the term Cachari (identity) requires to be problematised in the first place. However, the scope of this work does not allow me to examine such issues at length. In this work by Cachar and Cacharis I have meant respectively the territory and people of the plains zone of the district.
Choudhury’s arguments are no doubt insightful but what I find is, if I may call, a somewhat paradoxical note running through those. That is related to the insistence on according Cachar(is) its long overdue recognition on one hand but reiterating the non-existence of difference between that and Sylhet(is) on the other. This paradox however, may make sense if located in the context of Bengali-Assamese relationship in post-colonial Assam. In short, Cacharis and Sylhetis as two separate communities with their individual histories may exist but when pitched vis-à-vis the Assamese speaking community these are to be coalesced often with the latter in a dominant position, into one, united Bengali community. Taking note of my argument Choudury, after I mentioned that to him opined that because I had taken Sylheti as the central term of reference I arrived at the kind of understanding that I did. Had I started off with Bengali instead, things would appear to be perhaps less complicated.

Atanu Ghosh, a non-Sylheti Bengali confirms this in our discussion. Also for instance, a person no less than the vice-chancellor of Assam University, Silchar in another context remarks: ‘those who speak in the printed word see Sylhetis in a different light and again the Sylhetis also cannot accept others’ [Samayik Prasanga, Silchar, 1 October 2007 (translation mine)].

Instances of Sylheti speech being the object of “special attention” are far too many to be recounted here. My maternal grandfather tells me how a restaurant owner in Kolkata advised him to speak correct Bangla after he requested the latter for a macher muri (head of fish, and muri also means puffed rice) instead of macher muro (head of fish). I have been told that when Syed Mujtaba Ali arrived in Shantiniketan, Tagore upon speaking with him remarked that his mouth continued to smell of kamthalebu (oranges). Some Sylhetis say, by that Tagore meant the famous oranges of Sylhet while others maintain that the poet had actually referred to Ali’s unclean Bangla speech.

It is in this context that an incident my father had heard (whose veracity he could not vouch for) becomes interesting. It goes as follows: reflecting upon a speech that Tagore delivered in Sylhet town an old Sylheti peasant who heard that later remarked: emne shohta thikku asin kintu taan jibhba saaf nay; Bangla koita paroin na (the speech was alright but his tongue was unclear; could not speak Bangla).

Though Habiganji stands slightly apart (and sometimes seen in a different light) from what is generally taken as Shankar Jyoti Deb (2010) suggests, as regular Sylheti speech in Karimganj, yet its speakers are not particularly discriminated against. Rather, Sylhetis of Habiganj origin are not only highly regarded but placed at uppermost echelons of the social hierarchy. I have cited the example of Habiganj only to highlight the nature of speech variation.

As with the case of speech, in matters of social practice too it is the Sylheti component of identity that remains as the inner sphere at the foreground. However, acknowledgment of that to me perhaps came more easily and “naturally” (and less cautiously) because I was taken as an insider representing a comfort zone. But rarely did any respondent at the same time fail to strongly acknowledge the Bengali component as well. In fact, it would be interesting to compare the kind of responses I generated with those by someone who is not a Sylheti, if such an attempt is made in future.

In fact, secondary readings on Sylhet’s history and culture, and quite a few to be recounted here did suggest fragmentation of the community along what I would call communal lines but given the scope of this work, I did not elaborate on that. I did not as mentioned in Chapter I, begin my field work by pre-empting the communal character of Sylheti middle class, but eventually it did come out in the course of that [see for example, Chapters IV & V; Choudhury 2007].

The closely knit Nath community as Tushar Kanti Nath tells me, of Barak Valley stands out as one that is economically and educationally advanced – one of its notables being the famous engineer turned historian Rajmohan Nath. Claiming to be the descendants of Adi Gorakkha Nath who was a yogi (hermit/sage/saint), members of this community do not follow all the regular ritual practices of Hindus; death rituals in particular involve samadhi (burial) of the corpse presided over by any educated member of the community. The Nath community almost resembles a religion that shares elements of Hinduism, but nevertheless stands separate.

In fact, Muslims of Barak Valley as I observed, are extremely conscious of their caste identities. Both Sylheti and Cachari Muslims apart from claiming their ‘distinct’ identities, are divided along caste lines within themselves; but compared to the latter, the former’s caste structure is more exclusivist and rigid and in practice reflects most importantly, in marriage negotiations. Indeed, it is
popularly believed that *haddi bhala na hoile biya hoi na* (unless the bones are of good quality marriages do not happen).

26 Other Hindu folk gods and goddesses include Bishori, Kalki Narayan, Babahar, Rai Kalachand, Kachakhuri, Baruni Siddeshwar, Jhatpat Thakur, Teen Nath, Kachakanti, Rupashi and Shitala; some *bratas* (a form of worship by women) influenced by folk religion and performed by Hindu women are namely, Uuakka, Surjya, Rupashi, Shitoli, Kali, Basantara, Sankata, Karmatya, Utali, Bana [see for example, Basu 2001, 2006; Vidyabinod 1930].

27 Field notes suggest that most folk cults whether they are Hindu, Muslim or synthesis of the two are informed by class and caste dimensions For instance, Baruni Siddeshwar (a form of god Shiva) is often linked to lower caste Hindus while Bishori (a form of goddess Manasa) commands less respect from its upper and middle castes. Though Manasa, the snake goddess, is one of the most prominent and feared ones in Sylheti Hindu pantheon, yet not all forms of her are considered except perhaps in Nouka Puja (boat worship), appropriate for worship by higher castes. Nouka Puja where Manasa is the presiding deity also has a class location; being elaborate and expensive its performance is restricted to upper class of the Hindu community [see for example, Vidyabinod 1930; Bhattacharjee 1996; Choudhury 1986b].