Chapter VI

Concluding Observations

Today, I've abided with the Sylheti community considering myself a true and typical Sylheti, my head held high and a Sylheti tune on my lips all the time.

Sylhoti kowai bala (Sylheti’s da best)
I may or may not be an angel but a Sylheti, I am for sure.


My encounter with Eesha Roy Choudhury, a thirteen year old Sylheti school going girl based in Chittaranjan Park, Delhi in April 2010 was perhaps no less significant than the one I had with the senior historian friend during the summer of 2006. I had met and interviewed her grandmother Jyotsna Roy Choudhury earlier but unfortunately, never cared to know Eesha’s views on Sylheti community to which she belonged on her father’s side. Having been told at home that I would be ‘writing something’ on Sylhetis young Eesha persuaded her family to arrange a meeting with me so that we could talk about the community she claimed to be ‘completely in love’ with. We met and talked, and I must confess that what she told me was far from anything I had expected from a Delhi based second generation Sylheti girl whose father was also born and raised in the city. ‘Insanely in love’ with Sylheti speech as she proudly told me, Eesha had already expressed her feelings about Sylhetis – the ‘community’ she unhesitatingly added – in a piece of writing entitled ‘Sylheti Angel’ on her blog in May 2009. The blog-post, excerpts of that quoted above, made interesting reading. It clearly and eloquently argued that not only did Sylhetis on the Indian side constitute a ‘community’ but they had an identity whose marker among others, was their form of speech. What took me by surprise was not what Eesha wrote for such articulations, on the web in this case were widespread. However, what was interesting here was that the “Sylheti identity business” concerned a thirteen year old who was far away not only from Sylhet, and the Sylheti heartland in India – Barak Valley – but had never shared any “tangible” relation with the two sites. Though in course of fieldwork I did come across young Sylhetis born and raised outside Barak Valley articulating their distinctly fused community identity, yet not many had
appeared to be as intensely engaged with that as Eesha was. She was for instance, not a young Sylheti who was ‘forced’ by parental pressure to ‘be Sylheti’; rather, as she proudly declared ‘chose’ to be one. She wrote regularly about the community which included a ‘Sylheti version’ of the famous Cinderella fairy tale; a tale where Cinderella is a Silchar based poor Sylheti girl who is harassed by her step-mother and sisters till the time the President of Shreehatta Sammilani, Delhi announces that her marriageable son would like to choose a Sylheti bride from amongst the participants of a grand Dhamail (a very popular dance form of Sylhet) function.

In this tale which is yet to be completed Eesha makes Cinderella and all other characters speak Sylheti dialect, and live by social practices of the community. From ‘Sylheti Ramayana’ of Sundari Mohan Das to ‘Sylheti Cinderella’ of Eesha Roy Choudhury the community has indeed come a long way. And it is this journey that I attempted to trace over the period of last four years. If the conversation of that summer of 2006 inspired me to make a beginning, the one with Eesha in the summer of 2010 showed that the beginning was not only not un-worthwhile but also expansive, dynamic and transformative. Though Eesha’s reflections re-assured me of the fact that I had not involved myself in a wild goose chase of “Sylheti identity”, yet I did not take those as the final proof of existence of a distinctly fused Sylheti identity in contemporary India. Rather, the conversation with Eesha only made me realize that no journey whether of a community or an academic work is ever complete. Likewise, identity issues are predicated upon possibilities and contexts instead of being geared towards once-and-for-all conclusive resolutions. This work therefore, is informed by a sense of beginning that does not necessarily push it towards the search for an end. However, it is not just a fixed, final end that is not searched for, but beginning (in fact, of all kinds) itself is critically engaged with and seen as coeval with change, movement and transformation. Transformative and expanded notions of beginnings often creating newer ones were thus attempted to be made the guiding forces behind the spirit and practise of this work. Before I continue further, it is important to outline what this chapter plans to look at. To begin with, I provide very brief remarks – as every chapter has sections on concluding thoughts – about the preceding chapters, and that is followed by a general, concluding discussion on the work, its various aspects and future possibilities; it is to be noted that it is by choice – so as to ensure a somewhat “free flowing” discussion – that reference to primary and secondary
sources has been avoided in this chapter. Coming at the end of the thesis this short chapter is an obvious concluding summary but it is certainly not about non-critiqueable, infallible, conclusive arguments. If I often argue as I sometimes quite "strongly" do in the preceding chapters along certain conceptual lines, that in no way indicates that I consider such arguments resistant to criticism and hence, necessarily correct, full and final; rather, I take those as ones that have every possibility of being subjected to critical inquiry which as and when attempted would only add to the quality of this work.

The thesis opens with the introductory chapter which traces the colonial political history of Sylhet since 1874, the year which saw the Bangla speaking district separated from Bengal Presidency and tied to the newly created province of Assam. Along with Cachar, another predominantly Bangla speaking district of the Presidency that came to be attached to Assam the same year it came to constitute the Surma Valley division of the province till the referendum and partition of Sylhet in 1947. In this historical backdrop Chapter I outlines the research agenda and follows that up with a discussion on methods and techniques available to empirically address that. Based on multi-sited fieldwork/ethnographic method aimed at generating qualitative data the work as the chapter suggests is an attempt to make sense of the process of re-construction of Sylheti community and its identity by its middle class in particular, in contemporary India. The broad conceptual-theoretical framework which supports a historically informed, sociological understanding of that process is the theme of Chapter II. It is in this chapter that I have shown how it is imperative to examine the coordinates of colonial Sylheti identity construction in order to map the process of its re-construction in post-colonial India. Drawing upon available and relevant sources I have argued that the colonial community was constructed into a nation – albeit without a modern, independent state –after 1874. Construction of Sylheti nation by the middle class did not come about by relinquishing the existing "cultural right/claim" to membership in the larger Bengali nation. An interviewee thus remarked that the Sylheti nation could very well be called a ‘paranation’ that existed ‘beside/alongside/ in addition to, Bengali nation’ of which it was an integral, yet ‘distinct’ part. The colonial Sylheti middle class thus operated along two interconnected domains which enabled it to construct a community and an identity which by virtue of having two components namely, Bengali and (in addition) Sylheti
bore a *distinctly fused* character. It is to be noted that this work deliberately refrains from taking the Bengali component of Sylheti identity - both colonial and post-colonial - as term of analytical reference. Rather, by treating the Sylheti component as that it explores the relationship between the two; the expression Bengali-Sylheti (and such others) for instance, has not been used to explain the fusion of the two components so as to avoid ascribing/foisting upon the community a “hyphenated” community identity. The colonial Sylheti case is complex no doubt, but at the same time also extremely fascinating as Chapter II shows, and the same goes for its post-colonial *avatar* too. The historical-political context in which colonial Sylheti identity took shape stood altered after partition, and resulted in what I have called its re-construction. The identity re-construction process of the by and large dispersed community in post-partition India which Chapter II theorizes is however, not an uncontested one. In fact, ways in which the middle class articulates the dialect and *Sylhetitta* defined Sylheti component of its identity vis-à-vis “others” is more often than not (anxiously and) contextually determined as this work on a comparative vein shows. Sylheti identity in contemporary India thus works through numerous immanent as well as non-immanent sources of challenges and critiques. As self-claimed responsibility of middle class Sylhetis, conscious preservation and propagation of Sylheti culture and identity is rarely taken up by other classes in the three sites. This class invariably projects itself (and the community) as one whose members are ‘united by a collective spirit’ rooted in the ‘undying love for Sylhet’ and ‘all things Sylheti’. But such claims, to reiterate are often met with counter-claims, differences and deployment of alternative modes and strategies by members from within the class. The point is: the identity re-construction process facilitated for instance, by networks of social capital bearing associations and housing colonies is far from being a uniform one influenced as it remains by a diverse range of socio-political factors and contexts. Indeed, it is this contextually, constantly and most importantly, *anxiously* worked upon *distinctly fused* re-constructed identity that members of Sylheti middle class bear in contemporary India.

What does it mean to be a Sylheti in a Sylheti heartland? How is Sylheti component of the identity articulated in Karimganj in particular and Barak Valley in general in contemporary Assam? These are questions that *Chapter III* deals with, and by way of that provides a glimpse of the life of middle class Sylhetis in a site that was once part
of undivided Sylhet (and Surma Valley). This chapter throws up extremely pertinent insights as it tackles the issue of Sylheti identity in the backdrop of partition no doubt but more importantly, in light of the politics of post-colonial Assam(ese) state. As a site of mixed religious composition coupled with considerable presence of non-Sylheti Bengali and other social groups, Karimganj in particular and Barak Valley in general also house a very large section of non-middle class Sylheti population. In a socio-cultural atmosphere that is undeniably Sylheti and where majority speak the dialect, Karimganj middle class despite the projection of a united picture of itself and the community actually fails as field notes suggest sustaining that. It is interesting how ‘distinct’ Sylheti cultural features – dialect and social practices – claimed as shared and held in common actually stand deeply contested from within and outside. Sylheti middle class of the region comprising both Hindus and Muslims articulates its distinctly fused identity vis-à-vis the Assamese and non-Sylheti Bengalis by contextual deployment of either of the two identity components. In fact, what is interesting is that in Karimganj (and Barak Valley) the assertion of both components is near extraordinary. The middle class in that site therefore, claims to be as ‘purely’ Sylheti as it is – with glorious acts and deeds of the language martyrs of 1961 behind – Bengali, the latter though extraordinarily clearly visible in the larger public sphere. Such claims however, may be traced to the web of ‘denial and anxiety’ historically-politically spun around the community since nineteenth century; following partition the web only acquired a more sharp, complex and anxiety ridden character. Though contemporary Sylheti identity in the region bears similarities with its colonial form, yet it is also marked by differences with that. The process of production of reconstructed Sylheti identity in southern Assam is thus informed among others, by its transformed (deep anguish-ridden) relationship of negotiation with the post-partition Assamese and larger Bengali identities.

The work moves out of southern Assam to Kolkata and Delhi in the two subsequent chapters. Contemporary location of the community in Kolkata is the theme of Chapter IV. Both as a site and space Kolkata remains particularly significant in Sylheti identity discourse in contemporary India and in fact, it had never been otherwise. As a community of predominantly middle class Hindus, a large number of Sylhetis of the city are actively engaged in preservation and dissemination of their ‘distinct’ cultural heritage, and existence of among others, of two associations is a
pointer towards that as is the predominantly Sylheti housing colony in northern Kolkata. Character of the community identity in Kolkata does have strong resemblance with that in southern Assam, yet there are points of departure too hinged in particular upon “everyday/immediate non-presence” of the Assamese and Sylheti Muslims on one hand and “everyday presence” of non-Sylheti Bengalis (commonly addressed as Koilkatis) on the other in the city. If the process of re-construction of identity in southern Assam is marked by an extremely heightened sense of anxiety, in Kolkata it is not exactly so and the process rather, is featured by a sense of relative and mild ease. Middle class articulation of the distinctly fused Sylheti identity – practised in family, colony and associational spaces – is however, as in southern Assam marked by claims of uniformity as well as counter claims to that along various lines from within and outside. Not only is Sylheti community and its middle class marked by fragmentary tendencies but the Bengali community of which it too is a part is obviously not exempt from those. While the chapter admittedly demonstrates how Sylheti identity meanders through claims and counter claims to carve out the lives of its bearers, it also throws up an issue that has rarely received any serious academic attention, and that is the constitution and character of what is referred as Bengali identity. It is thus imperative to interrogate not only who is a Bengali or what does it entail to be one, but also claim of Kolkata as the legitimate site and space of Bengali culture and identity. It is not just reading of Sylheti identity in Karimganj and Kolkata but in Delhi too that makes me realize the significance of the issue. In fact, all three chapters weaved together as they are, offer clues that necessitate thinking over the critical issue of “cultural (il)legitimacy” and “right” of Bengalis located outside Kolkata in particular and West Bengal in general to carve out a Bengali identity for themselves. Though this work does address the issue, yet better thought out and concerted efforts ought to be directed towards its examination.

Chapter V which looks at Sylheti identity discourse in Delhi in the backdrop of partition induced migration of various communities to the city not only draws attention to this issue but also a host of others. Middle class Sylheti community of Delhi with some members being residents of the city since colonial period is considerably large, though not as large as in Kolkata. Comprising of both early and late migrants, the predominantly Hindu community is not less active than its Kolkata counterpart so far as engagement with preservation and propagation of Sylheti culture
is concerned, and other than family it is the Chittaranjan Park based Sreehatta Sammilani that provides the space for practise of that, elements of contestation notwithstanding. Sylheti identity articulated by the capital based middle class by and large follows the terms of the broad community identity re-construction discourse in India but there are interesting departures too. Negotiating interestingly, alongside the non-Sylheti Bengali community (a large section of that of eastern Bengal origin) with the non-Bengali community Sylheti middle class of the capital however, is despite projection of its united character not un-fragmented from within. It is also important to note here that the category of non-Bengali is contextually constructed by Sylheti middle class; it sometimes includes all non-Bangla (and Sylheti) speaking groups but at other times classifies the Assamese speakers as a distinct category within that. In short, Assamese language speakers fall within a “differently” constructed paradigm of non-Bengaliness, and more often than not they are referred by Sylhetis as just ‘Assamese’ and rarely as ‘non-Bengalis’, established non-Bengaliness of the former notwithstanding.

The point is: in southern Assam in particular, the Assamese speakers are so very “distinct” among non-Bengali “others” that not only is the broad framework of what constitutes non-Bengaliness redefined but a separate category that goes by “name” of the linguistic community constructed. In Delhi however, given the large presence of non-Bangla (and Sylheti) and non-Assamese speaking population the category of non-Bengali is usually applied to Hindi and other language speaking collectivities. But reference to the Assamese which is not infrequent due to strong links of the city based community with Barak Valley is as always in terms of the former’s ‘Assamese’ and not ‘non-Bengali’ identity. Contestations notwithstanding, Sylheti middle class of the city share as it does a relatively porous cultural boundary with its non-Sylheti Bengali counterpart articulates its identity as Bengali when pitched vis-à-vis the dominant non-Bengali identity of the city; distinctly fused Sylheti identity thus lays contextual stress either on its Bengali or Sylheti component depending upon the “other” identity it has to negotiate with. The “everyday non-Bengali presence” therefore, becomes central to Sylhetis of the city just as “non-Sylheti Bengali presence” becomes to the community in Kolkata and “Assamese presence” to the one in Barak Valley. It is indeed by political-contextual (and sometimes hierarchical) conceptualization of the “others” – the Assamese, non-Sylheti Bengalis and non-Bengalis – that the dual
domained, *distinctly fused* Sylheti identity in contemporary India frames out its post-partition re-construction discourse. While specific locations have specific “others”, yet for a large section of the middle class irrespective of where they are based in India all these stand combined (not always on empirical, experiential grounds) in the construction of a broad non-Sylheti “other” vis-à-vis which Sylheti identity articulates and consolidates itself in the country.

The task of comprehending the dynamics of Sylheti identity re-construction in post-colonial India has not been to reiterate, an easy one. As an identity that is *distinctly fused* and characterized by (anxious and) contextual assertion of the constituent components, its coordinates more often than not are difficult to fit into a clear and concise theoretical framework. Though I do “name” the community as most importantly, the title of the work shows as Sylheti, yet that is not by ignoring the other component that lies within it. Admittedly, I do not attempt in this work to “deliver an identity” to the community; rather, all I suggest is a mode of explanation, a conceptual approach that being eclectic in character may help make some sense of the (contexts of) identity. Inspired by a range of theories and concepts I attempt therefore, to simply map the ways in which the (dispersed) community with all its complexities functions with an identity in post-colonial India, and mapping the colonial experience of the community which all five preceding chapters individually do only adds to a clearer perception of that. Though I am aware that to a reader not familiar with the theme my simple mapping may actually appear to be enormously complex caught as he/she may get in the long and arduous journeys between sites and contexts, in making sense of ‘distinctiveness’, fusion, dual domains/spheres, in multiple categories, in repetitive tracts and finally, in the considerably broad historical-political canvas, yet I can only say that generally every work that attempts to make a beginning runs the risk of such “hazards”; “hazards” which have to be if I may request the reader a little patiently borne.

I do not claim to have made any path-breaking intervention or breakthrough through this work, but it cannot be denied that it has succeeded to some extent in striking upon crucial aspects of Sylheti identity preservation and propagation in contemporary India. By addressing the issues set out as objectives in Chapter I the work has brought into focus the fact that identity as a concept and form of practice has not only not exhausted its potential to influence social life but also academic research. In fact,
works like this one only show how that continues to remain an issue that is as engaging for its bearers as it is for researchers. More importantly, the work highlights that other than those identities say, centered on castes or religions which are conventional favorites of sociologists in India many more not only exist but also require inclusion in the current academic agenda. It is in this context that I would like to mention the three tangents along which feedback about the work has been provided to me by friends and colleagues; one is all about appreciation and immense academic value of the work while the other is nearly the opposite. The third, provided primarily by members of the community (not always the official interviewees) is somewhere in between the other two. This line of feedback is marked by appreciation but with a rider which I would say is not total rejection of my efforts but a sense of disappointment with those. A few with whom I did share in detail what the work argues unhesitatingly told me how I had done both ‘great service and disservice to the community’. It would be interesting to recall part-translated (from Bangla and Sylheti) fragments of one such recent, long telephonic conversation I had with a Karimganj based senior Sylheti gentleman on 7 April 2010, and whose name I choose to withhold here. He says:

\textit{We are very proud because you have done a good job. You are a true Sylheti because you love your community; otherwise you would not have taken the pain to understand what we have gone through. But because you show how the community is actually deeply divided, the whole purpose of the work is lost [I interrupt here to clarify my arguments]. Instead of showing how united we are you insist on picking the threads of disunity; these are not important for, every community has these elements; there is nothing to prove here [I try to interrupt again and then maintain silence]. I had thought that you would really understand but I am deeply disappointed for, you have let us down; how would your study benefit us? How would it help us fight our case in Assam? We are a deprived people and you should have thought about us. Your story may not be the real story.}

While I did try to explain to him that I had evidence to support my arguments, yet nothing much came out of that. He was almost convinced that I had let the community which is ‘my own’, down. I must confess that the conversation left me somewhat uncomfortable with notions of guilt and justice working overtime in my mind. But then I also realized, and almost immediately that this kind of feedback is what I have all possibilities of expecting in near future. Instead of feeling dejected and torn by guilt I decided therefore, to take the feedback as a positive, critical addition to the
work. Indeed, our individual ways of "doing justice" to the community has not coincided; nevertheless, we are tied by that very idea. But contrary to his, my idea of justice necessitated more than anything else the adoption of a critically sensitive perspective which I invariably attempted to adopt all along. Such conflicting ideas of justice are not unheard among those – both researchers and respondents – who participate in making of a research work but the point is such ideas also act as intellectual stimulants of immense value for the former. I regret the disappointment of the gentleman but at the same time I am convinced that not for a moment have I tried to be anything but just in the investigation of life of the community.

Therefore, it is also keeping in mind the mixed bag of general feedbacks that I talk about the few successful inroads that this work of social science claims to have made. However, if the work claims success on certain counts it also as I realize, tends to fall back on many. Limitations associated for instance, with carrying out field work in multiple sites is one of those. Pressure to divide my time and energy between the three sites resulted in a kind of fieldwork(s) with which I was not always satisfied. I almost always wished I had more time at my disposal so that I could concentrate more on each site. Perhaps a sense of hurry did come to inform the process of generation of data, and eventually putting together of the work. To my mind, problems associated with logistics remains the central if I may call limitation of this work. So far as limitations related to academically substantive issues are concerned, I shall not hesitate to say that there are a couple of those. However, I am not sure whether failure to adequately address such issues can be subsumed under the rubric of limitations. To cut a long story short, I would have liked to delve deeper into certain issues which I consider extremely important but given first, the scope and objective(s) of the work and second, nature of those, I could not do so. Though not for a moment I absolve myself, but at the same time I would only hasten to add that most of the issues which I shall discuss below require far more rigorous and independent academic attention and treatment. Taken thus, the issues are ones that I would like to engage with in future academic endeavours. One such concerns the construction of Bengali identity in India (and Bangladesh). Though this work as I have already mentioned in this as well as other chapters is certainly about that, yet much more needs to be done to be able to sociologically argue the case. I for instance, would like to take up in future the Bangla speaking population of North East India in general to explore the idea of Bengal and
Bengaliness and consequently, Bengali identity in contemporary India; a comparative analysis taking Bangladesh into account would only enrich, and add to that study. Bengalis of North East India no doubt bring to mind two important sites of their concentration in the region namely, Barak Valley in Assam and Tripura. Though Barak Valley is part of this work, yet not enough attention given its objective and scope has been paid to it. Actually, the site and space of Barak Valley, its existence as a zone of Bengali cultural assertion in (colonial and) post-colonial Assam ought to attract more attention and emerge not just as a part-theme of a wider work but in fact, a focused and full scale one. Similarly, the Bengali community of post-independent Tripura also needs to be addressed. It is unfortunate that even in most of the standard works on Bengal or North East in general “Tripura’s presence” is actually felt by its “glaring absence”. Given my research interests I would like to look at Bengalis of the two sites, compare them, and then explore their relationship vis-à-vis each other and Bengalis of West Bengal, and also Bangladesh. Even at the cost of sounding too ambitious I would stress that a study of the kind I propose is feasible.

Taking cue from this work I would argue that there is no uniform idea of Bengal(i), contested as it remains by alternative visions based on geo-political and historical contexts. If Kolkata rooted “high” Bengali identity discourse tends to rules the roost, that is not left unchallenged by contemporary discourses of Bahirbanga, Barak Banga, Tritiya Bhuvan and Ishan Bangla – all emanating from within the very community – in India or similar ones in Bangladesh. Perhaps it is time that possibility of not one but multiple Bengals – in West Bengal (say, Medinipur), Bangladesh, Barak Valley and for instance, Tripura – is taken note of without of course suggesting at any point that those are essentially culturally exclusive and distant from one another. The point I am trying to make is: the relationship shared by various Bengalis, by various “kinds” of Bengali may actually prove to be a highly fascinating area of inquiry than perhaps fully anticipated at the moment, and an addition to that of course, would be a critical and discursive understanding of Kolkata, the symbolic jewel of the Bengali crown. Another matter inextricably linked to exploration of the idea of Bengal(i) is that of the relationship between Bengalis of western ("Ghotis") and eastern ("Bangal") Bengal origin. Myriad ways in which it informs the popular discourse of Bengali culture and identity is something that for reasons unknown has remained completely unattended in contemporary social science. Perhaps one reason
why the issue almost never succeeds in drawing academic attention is because the relationship has acquired a character of “inevitable normality”; a kind of social fact that is “normally natural” and therefore, without the potential to generate investigative instincts. However, I argue that precisely because of its widespread nature the issue ought to be seriously examined. Beginning with general conversations in public sphere including cyberspace, matrimonial advertisements in newspapers and on internet to political and cultural (including food, dress and language) opinions and mobilizations, the “Ghoti-Bangal” business rarely refuses to take a back seat. Indeed, the culture and politics of post-partition West Bengal but cannot ignore the role played by the issue in shaping them. Without suggesting that a volatile conflict situation based on such group identity articulations exist among Bengalis of contemporary India I am however, inclined to argue that the relationship of “Ghotis” and “Bangals”, internal contestations notwithstanding is more often than not punctuated by elements anxiety and hence, constant negotiation. Though I do not have a ready blue print of going about researching the issue in future, but I would perhaps focus on two intertwined public media where the issue gets played out: first, the printed texts, newspapers and literary texts in particular and second, conversations in sites and chat rooms on the internet.

Another issue that begs focus, and which is linked to the above discussion is the Language Movement of 1960-61 in southern Assam. Not only has the movement not found any place in standard works on social movements in India but its role in the construction of Bengali identity in post-partition South Asia has also gone unnoticed. I intended to devote more attention – I touched upon it in Chapters II, III & V – to it but again that was not what I could have done given the scope of this work. Hailed by Barak Valley as martyrs who laid down their lives to uphold the cause of Bangla language – the ‘mother tongue of Bengalis of that region’, and Assam – the killing of eleven people during the Language Movement on 19 May, 1961 more than anything else saw the birth of an alternative Bengali cultural discourse. It showed that the “right” to “speak” for Bangla language was not confined to “official” Bengalis of West Bengal and Bangladesh alone; Barak Valley’s movement proved that another Bangla speaking space not only “legitimately” existed but also fiercely resisted all hegemonic measures that infringed upon its “right” to exist. However, precisely because the movement (with its martyrs) claimed to have carved out an alternative
Bengali cultural space outside “official Bengali” spaces that it failed to draw attention of the middle class intelligentsia of West Bengal in particular and scholars engaged in the study of language (linked to fixed, and designated territories) based mobilizations in general. It is interesting to note that for years following the movement a large section of the West Bengal (Kolkata) based Bengali middle class in particular and Bengali middle class in general hardly cared to “recognize” its importance let alone hail 19 May as a significant moment in the history of Bengali culture; in fact, few members of the latter attributed that as Chapter V shows, to the “closed” attitude of Barak Valley’s Bengalis themselves. However, declaration of 21 February – the day two (Pakistani) Bengalis died defending the cause of Bangla in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in 1952 – as International Mother Tongue Day by United Nations saw a curious middle class change (a classic volte-face) of mind in West Bengal.

The Kolkata based Bengalis, the middle class in particular had no reason not to share with their Bangladeshi counterpart the pride and glory of 21 February, and they indeed wholeheartedly did; the business of sharing was by and large on equal terms except for the fact that unlike Bangladeshis they had no “official” Bangla language martyrs to fall upon to strengthen their claim. And it was then that 19 May “had” to be brought in. West Bengal per se may not have had the “opportunity” to witness Bengalis dying to defend their mother tongue but India did and in fact, India had far greater number (eleven) of Bangla language martyrs as compared to only two of Bangladesh. The earlier discomfort of middle class with the fact that these Bengali martyrs did not die on “official Bengali soil” i.e. in West Bengal was very carefully negotiated by bringing in the Indian nation, and pitching that vis-à-vis the Bangladeshi one. So, in a tactical move Bengali and Indian nations were made to coincide. Consequently, Bangla was invoked as a language to which not only West Bengal but India as a whole could lay claim. And Barak Valley – thanks to 19 May and the eleven martyrs – despite being an “uncomfortable alternative Bengali space” came to be “officially accommodated” by the Bengali middle class of Indian West Bengal thus enabling it to work out on an “even footing” its relationship with Bangladesh(is) and that historic moment of 1952; if the Bengalis of Bangladesh produced two martyrs, Bengalis of India produced an added nine, and if the Bangladeshi nation had ‘Ekushe’ and ‘Unnishsho Bahanno’ (21 February and 1952), Indian nation had its ‘Unishe’ and ‘Unnishsho Ekshotti’ (19 May and 1961) too.
While it is true that the "arrival of 19 May" – thanks to 21 February 1952 and United Nations – is rather "well recognized" by West Bengal now, but what still remains to be explored is whether it has any "independent" relevance for its Kolkata based middle class in particular; in short, does the "language movement, 19 May and eleven martyrs" have any meaning outside the context of 21 February – the Aantorjatik Matri Bhasha Dibash? I would argue that it hardly does; "19 May" is remembered and marked as "19 May", the Bhasha Saheed Dibash (Language Martyrs’ Day) only perhaps in Barak Valley because outside, in West Bengal (Kolkata) in particular the day is essentially used to mark "21 February" every year. I have to admit that the cultural politics surrounding the movement throws up extremely pertinent points, and it is this that I would be keen on exploring to address the larger process of construction of Bengali identity in India or for that matter, the sub-continent.

In more ways than one I have by now indicated that Barak Valley remains a theme of lasting interest for me. I would be interested in future to not only re-visit the Sylheti community (and include responses of Assamese speakers) located there but also in addition, conduct a full length study of its Muslim members – their caste based stratification system in particular – and Mahimals would be a special case of attention. Among other social collectivities of the region, the Nath community also presents highly interesting features and given a chance I would be more than happy to study that. Finally, an issue that holds my interest is the consistent demand of a section of Barak Valley middle class as touched upon in Chapter III, for an independent political status of the region within the framework of Indian constitution. The demand as is obvious was never met but that far from dampening the spirit of that section of Barak Valley middle class only added to its resolve to continue with the agenda, and the recent memorandum of demand (as reported by Paritosh Paul Choudhury, one of its prime signatories) submitted to the center on the eve of constitution of the second State Reorganization Commission proves that. What is interesting about the issue is that it hardly has a popular base confined as it remains to a very small section of the middle class. In fact, it is a sensitive issue not only for the Assam(ese) state but also for large number of Bangla speaking Hindus and Muslims – both in Barak and Brahmaputra Valleys – with conflicting political interests. Study of the dynamics of the demand therefore, necessitates deep engagement with the linguistic and religious (communal) politics of contemporary Assam. I have hinted at the issue in this work
but what I have not done is its in-depth examination. That is partly because post-colonial politics of Assam is perhaps the most complex in India and it cannot or rather does not deserve to be “accommodated” on the sidelines. With the decadal census of 2011 already underway things are likely to get further complicated in Assam; the projected Bangla speaking population figure of 30% and above with rising number of “Bangla” speaking Muslims in particular is an issue that is likely to snowball into political controversy much before the official census data is released next year. Though I am not sure whether Assamese language speakers will turn as a section of Bengalis of Assam believe into a ‘linguistic minority in Assam’ by 2011 paving the way for creation of a Bengali state out of it in future, yet it would be extremely interesting to follow the developments over the next twelve months and I must add that signs of such developments being extremely heated to say the least, are already visible among others, in print and visual media of the state. The issue of statehood for Bengalis of Barak Valley in the context of unfolding politics in Assam is something that I am most likely to take up immediately upon completion of this work.

Having outlined at length my future academic agenda it is certainly time to if I may say on a lighter vein, shut shop. However, I but cannot restrain myself from the urge to add a few quick points. The first pertains to the dialect that Sylhetis not only widely use but also are extraordinarily proud of. Discussion on Sylheti dialect and its significance as one of the most prominent markers of Sylheti identity occurs throughout the work, but I would love to devote more attention to that. I would also for example, like to extend the study of associations run by Sylhetis to those located outside Kolkata and Delhi. Not only those but associations built around districts of origin by non-Sylheti Bengali groups, and which proliferate the public sphere of Kolkata too remain a subject of my academic interest. Finally, articulation(s) of Sylheti identity in cyberspace is what I would but not ignore for anything. And it is here that Sylhetis of Bangladesh too would be registered by their presence. I have mentioned elsewhere in this thesis the extent to which Sylhetis across the world are engaged in cyber-activity not just to talk shop but seriously debate their identity with people across the board. It is thrilling but at the same time slightly unsettling (meaning unfathomable) to see thousands of Sylhetis anxiously chatting with each other about who they are, what they eat, how they talk, who they love or hate, and so forth. In fact, the number of internet sites and chat rooms run by Sylhetis is so large.
that it is unmatched even by those of all other non-Sylheti Bengali groups put together. What is it that drives young Sylhetis to debate such serious existential issues on the internet? Is it just plain love for the community to which they belong? Or is it the manifestation of some deep existential anxiety? Is “excessive love” the product of an equally “excessive anxiety”? It is perhaps possible to “explain” the anxiety of Sylhetis of India as I have done in this work, but what about those of Bangladesh? I recall having found a community called ‘Swadhin Sylhet [independent Sylhet]’ about a month ago on Facebook, a popular social networking internet site. Run by a group of Bangladeshi Sylhetis, its home page has a brief history and map of Sylhet district of Bangladesh pasted on it. The conversations listed there – viewing of those permitted only upon registration as a member which I immediately became – are about the ‘distinctiveness’ of Sylhet’s history and culture (speech) and hence, possibilities of carving out an independent nation to be called ‘People’s Republic of Sylhet’ out of Bangladesh; a member of the community also discusses the chances of inclusion of Assam in that yet-to-be born nation-state. A similar attempt was reportedly made during the war for liberation in 1970-71 to “really” carve out an independent Sylhet out of (East) Pakistan. Be that as it may, to get back to Swadhin Sylhet, I am not sure what would become of the site and its members if the state machinery came to take serious note of such ideas but in all likelihood as I would like to believe to feel reassured, it would not consider the “virtual” site a potential forum for generation of ideas about “real” secessionist mobilization. It is no doubt important for me to anticipate the actions of Bangladeshi state, but more than that what I am interested in is to understand the cultural and political reasons behind formation of this cyber community or similar others in the first place. Indeed, the virtual world offers immense possibilities of yielding highly challenging themes of social research. I will not deny that the list of future research interests of mine have already grown pretty long. It is therefore time – and I promise not to add further quick points now – that I actually call it a day. For months now I have looked forward to this moment; the moment when I would be writing the formal, concluding lines of this doctoral thesis. I am relieved to have been able to officially complete the work that I had set out to do in 2006. But I am deeply melancholy too as I write these lines, and for reasons not known to me I wish the writing would not come to an end. Though I am signing off from writing now, I also know that this work will not end because it was never meant to be.