

Forging and Foraging Ethnic Identity: The Sylhet Association of Delhi

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sob**Nabanipa Bhattacharjee¹ and Manish Thakur²** 

Abstract

In 1874, Sylhet, a district of Bengal Presidency, was transferred to Assam. In 1947, following the Sylhet Referendum, Sylhet, except for three and a half thanas of the Karimganj sub-division that remained in India, was transferred to East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The Sylhet referendum and partition of India (Assam) provided, among others, the context for the articulation of a reconstructed Sylheti identity. Drawing on the particular case of the Sylhet Association of Delhi, which is called the Sreehatta Sammilani, Delhi (SSD), this article maps out the processes and practices of associational Sylheti ethnic identity and its reconstruction in a migrant community.

Keywords

Sylhet, partition-migrant, identity, ethnic association, SSD

Introduction

In 1874, Sylhet, a revenue-rich district of the Bengal Presidency was incorporated into the newly created Chief Commissioner's province of Assam. The Bengalis of Sylhet resented this geo-political alteration and launched a campaign for the district's reunification with Bengal. Following the Sylhet referendum in 1947, except for three and a half *thanas* of its Karimganj sub-division which was retained by India (Assam), the entire territory of Sylhet merged with (East) Pakistan. Drawing upon this variegated geo-political history, we argue that the Sylheti identity has been, and continues to be, contingent upon four interrelated processes: first, Sylhet's separation from Bengal and location in Assam since 1874, second, the

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Sylhet referendum and separation of Sylhet from India in 1947, third, the complex relationship of the Sylhetis with the non-Sylheti Bengalis and the Assamese in the colonial period¹, and fourth, the persistent Bengali (immigrant) question in post-colonial Assam which contains a very large (Bengali-) Sylheti speaking population in its southern part (see, Bhattacharjee, 2011, 2012). Arguably, such historical twists and turns have led to an unusually strong urge among Sylhetis in India and even, notwithstanding different geographical contexts, across the world to articulate, live and celebrate Sylheti ethnic identity. In the contemporary Indian context, the partition (and the forced migration which followed) has played the most important role in the process of reconstitution of Sylheti ethnic identity (see also Dasgupta, 2001, 2008; Gupta, 1991).² Among the various spaces created by the Indian Sylhetis to articulate their reconstituted identity, ethnic associations are the most visible and of immense importance to their members and the community at large. In fact, these associations, we suggest, are at the heart of urban Sylheti communitarian lives in India. While employing a historical-sociological approach, and focusing on one particular ethnic association—Sreehatta Sammilani, Delhi (hereafter SSD)—this article discusses the processes and practices of the reconstructed Sylheti ethnic identity in India. Based on an array of data sources—ethnographic, archival and secondary—the article aims to understand, first, how ethnic (migrant) associations are formed by making use of social capital and consequently function as active social networks for the members, and second, how these associations emerge both as the fora and modes of articulation of ethnic identity in urban spaces.

Ethnic Associations, Social Capital and Networks

There is plenty of literature to demonstrate that ethnic associations very often help migrants reconfigure their world in an alien and mostly metropolitan/urban contexts (see, for example, Driver & Driver 1982; Ghosh, 2002; Lewandowski, 1991; Sanyal, 1980; Singh, 1976; Thakur, 2012). Such reconfigurations are often informed by culturally mediated identity articulations, the proliferation of, as Manuel Castells (1997) notes, social networks and the emergence of cultural communes and associations. Social networks acquire extraordinary relevance in globalised, cosmopolitan urban settings and act as support systems to the ‘habits of the heart’ (Bellah et al., 1985). These social networks enable an individual to move beyond his/her immediate community/group. At the same time, they also cater to the formation of exclusive group identities. Strong migrant networks act as bearers of social capital and serve as footholds, anchorages, and resource structures for both potential as well as far-removed-from-home migrants (see, for example, Fawcett, 1989; Gardner, 1993, 1995). These networks constitute, and are constitutive of, what Pierre Bourdieu (2004) calls ‘social capital’. In this article, we ethnographically demonstrate how social capital remains foregrounded in such network constructions.

Social capital lies at the heart of the structure of people’s relationships and is realised and maintained collectively through social networks. Bourdieu writes,

'The network of relationships is the product of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships that are directly usable in the short or long term' (2004, p. 22).³ Social networks, by negotiation between social fields, where social capital (and other forms of capital) rests and strategies/struggles are carried out, and habitus, which constitutes a historically and culturally conditioned set of durable dispositions or propensities for social actions, carve out the individual domain of social practice. By extending Bourdieu's analytical framework, and without resorting to an uninterrogated celebration of community, we argue that the concept of social capital may be effectively used to interpret the ways in which people live their lives in urban settings while engaging with the politics of ethnic recognition. We also bring in Caroline Brettel (2000, 2005) to specify two dimensions of bonding and bridging of social capital to help illuminate our empirical data:

Bonding capital characterizes a closed circle built on close-knit networks, while bridging social capital connects individuals and groups to which they belong to a wider [network] circle. Clearly both these dimensions of capital are always at play. No circle is totally closed because individuals operate within nested hierarchies of identity that allow them to locate themselves in different communities at different times. Nevertheless, in some institutional contexts the bonds of similarity might be made more salient, while in others the bridges across differences receive greater emphasis. (Brettel, 2005, p. 854–855)

While the concept of social capital along with bonding and bridging dimensions have been widely applied in studies, we underscore its effective deployment through collective networks and sociocultural practices of individual members. Fundamental to identity (re)constructions of modern collectivities are, *inter alia*, associations which by virtue of bearing social capital act as networks connecting individuals to their respective groups. The associations that emerge and proliferate in the urban public sphere are 'institutional underpinnings of group identity ... and serve as vessels for husbanding [social] capital' (Greenbaum, 2002 cited in Brettel, 2005, p. 854).

Sylheti Migrants in Delhi

Although not much is known about the nature of Sylheti migration to Delhi, yet its older residents note that it was in late colonial period that middle-class government officials and civil servants began moving to the city (see, N. Bhattacharjee, 2011).⁴ Spread across the old city and New Delhi, Sylhetis, who belong to the larger group of ethnic Bengalis, not only worked towards the consolidation of their own community but also contributed to the broader cultural life of the colonial city. The early years following partition witnessed the Sylheti community struggling not only to come to terms with the new reality of the addition of migrants but also to ensure permanent settlement facilities in the city. The East Pakistan Displaced Persons' Association (hereafter EPDPA), which was established in 1954 in Delhi, was committed to providing relief and rehabilitation to all

Bengalis, including Sylhetis who were displaced from their homelands which now lay in East Pakistan. The number of displaced persons who arrived from East Pakistan to Delhi was small compared to the one from the western sector. According to the Census of India 1951, the total number of officially displaced persons from East Pakistan in Delhi stood at 3,674 (2,438 males and 1,236 females) in 1951; while 2,645 (1,411 males and 1,234 females) persons came from East Bengal, 1,029 (1,027 males and 2 females) moved from Sylhet (Government of India, 1954, pp. 52–53). However, these figures have been often claimed as inaccurate. A senior member of the EPDPA, for example, notes that the actual number of migrants were far more than what official record states. He says,

[A]ttention of government was towards Punjabi migrants, and Bengalis hardly featured in its scheme of things. A large number of East Pakistani displaced persons arrived in Delhi after acquiring the legal status of “displaced” in West Bengal and Assam. So, they were not included among the “displaced” of Delhi. Some came directly but failed to acquire that status. (cited in N. Bhattacharjee, 2011, p. 246; also see, Bandopadhyay, 2008; Sarkar, 2005)

In any case, in the early post-partition years, the Sylheti community in the city comprised of both pre- and post-partition residents. Drawn from the educated middle class and employed in government and other sectors, the post-partition migrants from Sylhet settled down in Lutyens’s Delhi as well as the old city and parts of its southern stretch. While few owned dwelling places, others lived in official accommodations provided by the government or privately rented houses. As Ramranjan Bhattacharjee writes: ‘Prior to partition a number of Sylhetis resided in Delhi [,] and to them were added the *bastuhara*, *nishshambal sharanarthis* [homeless, propertyless, refugees] from Sylhet. Out of such necessity Sreehatta Sammilani was born’ (1988, p. 16 [translation ours]; also see *Barshik Karjyabibarani*, SS (SU), Calcutta, 1960–1969). In 1957, the SSD was established to offer help and support to the entire Sylheti migrant community of Delhi. As Surendra Kumar Dey (1973), India’s first Union Minister of Community Development and one of the founders of the SSD, observed:

Citizens of Sylhet, the minority community after partition, opted by and large to migrate to other parts of India. It is appropriate that New Delhi, the Capital, must house a significant reflection of them. Sreehatta Sammilani is a fitting organization to provide an open forum to the migrants.... My conception of the Sreehatta Sammilani is an organization of migrants from Sylhet eager and willing to support each other through mutual help, a forum acting for a renaissance of the now eclipsed basic qualities which makes the even partitioned district an envy of the rest of Bangladesh today. (also see, Bhattacharjee, 1973; Bhattacharya, 1992; *Golden Jubilee Annual Cultural Evening Souvenir*, 2007 [hereafter *GJACES*]).

While the support efforts of the SSD continued, the EPDPA, by the 1970s, managed to provide a large number of Sylhetis with accommodation in Delhi’s south eastern neighbourhood of Chittaranjan Park which was built on land granted by the central government to East Pakistani refugees.⁵ Manmatha Ranjan Chowdhury (1989), one of the early functionaries of the SSD, opines:

Though the Sammilani did not clearly state its intent of making housing arrangements for homeless Sylhetis in Delhi yet, the issue was in their minds. Since the government made housing arrangements for East Pakistan migrants, the Sylhetis also got houses in Chittaranjan Park. In that situation the Sammilani did not think it necessary to make separate housing provision for Sylhetis [translation ours].

As a young association plagued by paucity of funds, the SSD, nevertheless, tried to extend help and financial assistance to the displaced Sylhetis, to the young students in particular. In time, the Sylhetis began to settle down in other parts of the city, and the SSD remained the nucleus of their socio-emotional existence in Delhi. It was one of the nodal bodies of the pan-Indian Sylheti network of associations⁶ that offered every Sylheti the necessary social and cultural capital to articulate and practice their ethnic (migrant) Sylheti identity, particularly in a multicultural space like Delhi. The anxiety to preserve what is called *Sylhetitta* (Sylhetiness), which is distinctly cultural in content, was and remains acute among Sylhetis notwithstanding their acknowledgement of the importance of the ideology of communal (including religious)-cultural pluralism. Noticeably, the SSD acted as a social-emotional support system of the uprooted and trauma ridden Sylheti community of Delhi. This is attested by Bhudev Chakrabarty who says,

Partition was the second trauma that Sylhetis suffered after 1874. But then we had Sylhet, but 1947 we lost that too. Coming and settling down in Delhi was so difficult and we experienced tremendous anxiety and fear. God should never make one a refugee. Some of us had jobs, some did not. Sylhetis suffered so much and the SSD gave us emotional support. (cited in N. Bhattacharjee, 2011, p. 247)

In addition, the SSD began to play a pivotal role in the post-partition ethnic identity re-construction discourse of the community. Today, the SSD has one thousand plus life members drawn from all over the National Capital Region and also other parts of India but most importantly, the north-eastern region and especially Barak Valley in Assam. Like other Sylhet Associations of India (hereafter SAI), which have different names but Sylhet/Sreehatta, of course, is common to all, it is not just an association which is devoted to social welfare activities and promotion of Sylheti culture but also, especially for its members, a *thikana* [address], a home and finally a forum for articulation and propagation of a distinct ethnic identity.

Reconstructing Sylhet: The Sreehatta Sammilani, Delhi

In early 1957, at the residence of Naresh Chandra Deb, Additional Member (Finance), Railway Board, the SSD was formed; later in the same year with Ashok Kumar Chanda, Comptroller and Auditor General of India, as President, it was formally launched. Ramranjan Bhattacharjee, quoting what the SSD had to say about its objectives, writes:

Srihatta (Sylhet), the most enlightened and prosperous district of Assam was lost to East Pakistan, in the wake of partition of India in the year 1947. Hundreds and thousands of Sylhetee Hindus, as people of Sylhet are called [sic], were compelled to leave

their hearth and home in search of shelter all over India. The Sylhetees who gathered in Delhi began to realize the growing need for forging closer ties among themselves for promoting social welfare and for sustaining the rich cultural heritage of Sylhet. Out of this realization was born the Srihatta Sammilani, Delhi. (1988, p. 16; also see, Memorandum of Association, SSD, 1958–1959)

Delhi, at that time, had a fairly good number of Sylhetis who held high offices in the central government; in addition, elected Members of Parliament from Assam (Barak Valley) also operated out of the city. Since its inception, therefore, the SSD benefited from such members of the community (see, for example, Bhattacharjee, 1988; Bhattacharya, 1992; Chowdhury, 1989; *GJACES*, 2007). Established at a time when the memory of partition was fresh and the wound very raw, the SSD was steadfast in its commitment to make, as noted already, necessary provision for the social and emotional rehabilitation of the migrant Sylheti (Hindu) community. In fact, the necessity of forming a separate association for the migrant Bengalis of Sylhet was debated amongst the founding members. Reflecting on the matter, Manmatha Ranjan Chowdhury (1989) writes:

I remember the evening when we Delhi residing Sylhetis assembled at Naresh Chandra Deb's house to discuss the formation of SSD. At that time, we were involved in cultural activities of the *brihattara* [larger/wider] Bengali society. Given that, we questioned whether by separating/estranging ourselves from the Bengali society it would be wise to form a separate association of Sylhetis. But we always felt proud to identify ourselves as Sylhetis. So, I ignored the issue and attached myself with other Sylhetis without any dilemma. We assembled Sylhetis, with limitless hope, enthusiasm and high spirit unanimously took up the task of establishing the SSD [translation ours].

Indeed, the SSD was born more out of necessity, accentuated after partition, rather than expression of parochial pride which Sylhetis were more often than not accused of. As Sushanta Krishna Dass (1981) writes:

Sylhet was a pawn of the imperialist design. It was this questionable 'Satranj Ki Khel' (game of chess) that swamped this otherwise sav'able land into 'East Pakistan'. It's a story of real deprivation. But the story is undertold.... Sylhet's story of deprivation is conceptually different from the partition of the country. The bad-blood created by the two-nations theory already clouding the horizon of the sub-continent, the nightmare of the direct actions of Calcutta and Punjab fresh in memory, the stay of the Hindus of Sylhet in the 'East Pakistan' was doubly staked due to their taking part in the referendum exposedly on Hindu-Muslim dichotomy, thus their time old Muslim neighbours and friends becoming direct antagonists. Here is an extra reason for too heavy migration of Hindus from Sylhet district. Many of them were coming to Delhi. Uprooted and bewildered – they tried contacting sympathizers. The contacts were mostly the easily approachable people of their district, settled in Delhi with considered status. People with farsight as the contacts were, they felt that organized help would be more meaningful than individual initiative. So, they met in a forum and the Sreehatta Sammilani, Delhi was born. Thus, the Sammilani may be called a child of necessity, not of parochialism.

The necessity was to address the severe identity crisis faced by the Sylheti migrants due to the displacement and loss of their homeland. And, the SSD was precisely mandated to do so. As Benoy Krishna Bhattacharya (1992) writes:

The convergence of human waves towards Delhi also made its impact upon the Sammilani.... People of erstwhile Sylhet or their descendants for professional, academic or other reasons reached Delhi, some among them consciously or unconsciously landed there in search of identity, identity which only the mainstream could offer. With the loss of Sylhet, the identity crisis became paramount. Eastern India accommodated them, not with warmth everywhere, and sometimes grudgingly or even with hostility. The sensitivity and intellectual richness of these people [make] them painfully realize that they were not welcome everywhere. Delhi being the nucleus of mainstream, became the goal of many sensitive people of Sylhet or their descendants. Here they found they could flourish in all their materialness and spontaneity of living. A Sylhet [cannot] be recreated but it [can] be occasionally relived, if its spirit [can] be preserved. (also see, *GJACES*, 2007)

Not surprisingly, the SSD in particular and other SAIs in general are often called mini-Sylhets that sprung up in India (prior to and) after partition and independence. Such associational mini-Sylhets are instrumental in retaining the deep sense of nostalgia which older members of the community in particular are gripped with. As Benoy Krishna Bhattacharya (1996) writes:

Hundreds and thousands of people from the district ... came out as refugees, in search of base elsewhere in India, leaving behind not only their ancestral homes but also millions of dreams and aspirations which grow with homes. Slowly and gradually, they built up their mini-Sylhets in Calcutta, Delhi ... Bombay ... Durgapur ... and many other places by forming Sreehatta Sammilanees ... It is through these Sammilani activities that the Sylhetees, as they are called, retain the nostalgia in memory of a land gone with the winds down the memory lane and yet revived through continual renewals all over the country through cultural activities. In memory Sylhet is destined to live forever. (also see, *Diamond Jubilee Annual Cultural Evening Souvenir*, SSD, 2018 (hereafter *DJACES*))

Housed in the Bipin Chandra Pal Memorial Trust (hereafter BCPMT) run Bipin Chandra Pal Memorial Bhavan (hereafter BCPMB) at A-81, Chittaranjan Park, the SSD, with approximately 1,150 life members and over 2,000 general members in 2022,⁷ indeed comes close to being described as another mini-Sylhet. BCPMB, constructed by the SSD established BCPMT, is an imposing structure with a statue of B. C. Pal erected right at the entrance. Housed inside, the SSD office has among others, a framed map of undivided Sylhet on one of its walls; in fact, that map adorns almost all official chambers including the library of BCPMB. Not only in spirit and activity but also in a physical sense, the SSD comes across as miniature (undivided) Sylhet. However, Sylhet, as members of the SSD maintain, is not just a 'business of memory' for them but 'a living thing, an active presence that is indispensable to their existence' (Bhattacharjee, 2011, pp. 270–272).

Activities of Sreehatta Sammilani, Delhi

Indeed, it is in the SSD cum mini-Sylhet that most members collectively and squarely locate themselves by celebrating cultural festivals, felicitating eminent Sylhetis, paying respects to the martyrs of the 1961 Bengali language movement of Assam, writing about Sylhet in magazines and souvenirs and, above all, speaking the Sylheti dialect. Among the notable achievements of the SSD, the formation of BCPMT in 1988 (after Bipin Pal who was a Sylheti by birth) remains foremost, followed by social welfare activities and series of cultural programmes that it organises on annual basis. However, it is important to note that the SSD often carries out its social and cultural activities with the active collaboration of BCPMT though these are officially independent bodies (see, for instance, *Silver Jubilee Celebration Souvenir*, SSD, 1982 (hereafter *SJCS*); Millenium Review: Annual General Meeting, SSD, 2000 (hereafter *MRAGM*); *GJACES*, 2007; *DJACES*, 2018); the social welfare activities are:

On the social front, Sreehatta Sammilani have been contributing its might in its humble way to help the poor and the needy as far as practicable. For this a special fund has been created for awarding scholarship to the poor and meritorious students and financial help to the needy persons for medical treatment. From [time-to-time] Sammilani have contributed to the Prime Minister's Relief Fund, the National Defence Fund, the Flood Relief Programmes, etc. so that it can reach out to the people in distress throughout the country. (*GJACES*, 2007; also see, *SJCS*, 1982, *DJACES*, 2018)

Records suggest that apart from providing scholarships to financially weak students and monetary aid to ailing and needy patients, other activities which may be broadly classified as social is primarily handled by BCPMT; activities such as upkeep of the office, installation of computers and other technical gadgets, provision of indoor games and other sports facilities, and so forth, are carried out by the SSD. In the past, the SSD, as and when it found poor student applicants, did provide annual stipends to them despite being plagued by paucity of funds; while such stipends were mainly received by children of its members, no record is found to suggest that those were restricted to them (see, for instance, *SJCS*, 1982; *Sri Sri Chaitanya Jayanti Souvenir* (hereafter *SSCJS*), 1981). The SSD, relatively financially sound in the new millennium, carried forward the tradition of awarding scholarships (when it found applicants) and in addition, extending help to needy patients. Apart from donating funds to schools, health and child care centres in Delhi and North East (Barak Valley in particular), the SSD also lends support, from time-to-time, to deal with social causes and crises triggered by, for example, natural disasters, ethnic conflicts, and so on, especially in North East India.⁸

The cultural activities of the SSD include (a) cultural functions and (b) the publication of annual souvenirs; however, the former, in terms of the wide and active involvement of members, remains the more important one. The three annual cultural events celebrated by the SSD are (a) Sri Chaitanya's birth anniversary, (b) Annual Cultural Day and (c) post-Durga Puja *Bijoya Sammelan*. Other than these, the SSD also organises functions to (a) commemorate the birth

anniversaries of eminent Sylheti personalities such as Pandit Sitanath Tattwabhusan, Bipin Chandra Pal, Sundari Mohan Das and others, (b) felicitate old and surviving Sylhetis of the city, (c) mark the contribution of Sylhetis (and occasionally non-Sylhetis too) who are well known for their work in various spheres of social and cultural life, (d) debate and discussions on social and political issues including seminars on Jawaharlal Nehru and his thought (held in 1989), history and culture of Barak Valley (held in 1992), and so forth, (e) celebrate Saraswati Puja, (f) organise indoor and outdoor sports events, (g) pay tribute to the martyrs of the 1961 Bengali language movement and observe 19 May, the day eleven people were gunned down in Silchar, as Shaheed Divas, (h) the first day of *Nababarsha* (Bengali New Year) and (i) invite well known musical bands and dance troupes for performance (see, *SJCS*, 1982; *MRAGM*, 2000, *GJACES*, 2007; *Annual Cultural Evening Souvenir* (hereafter *ACES*), 2006, 2009, 2014, 2016; *DJACES*, 2018). Most cultural events continue to be held now as it was in the past.

The Chaitanya Jayanti Utsav is celebrated on a regular basis in March every year. On that day the SSD members and devotees drawn from all communities and spread across the city assemble at the BCPMB to participate in Satya Narayan Puja, *Harir Loot* (dry sweets distributed as loot) and *Kirtan* (devotional songs sung in chorus); the devotees are also given *prasad* and *bhog* [sacred offerings]. In fact, the importance of the event may be gauged from the fact that it is not only well attended, but the SSD in 1981 and 1985 brought out souvenirs dedicated exclusively to Sri Chaitanya's life and thoughts. Indeed, Sri Chaitanya remains one of the lasting icons of the Sylheti community. As Manmatha Ranjan Chowdhury (1982a), writes:

The holy land of Sylhet has the unique privilege of being the ancestral home of Shree Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and it was in the fitness of things that Sammilani decided to celebrate the holy Birth day of Mahaprabhu on the 'Dol Purnima' day every year by arranging spiritual discourses and devotional music. Shree Chaitanya Jayanti was inaugurated in the year 1961 by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan. (also see, *SSCJS*, 1981)

The Annual Cultural Day/Evening is held during winter months by the SSD. More or less held uninterrupted since 1961, the SSD always laid great stress on its importance and more so because the event provided an opportunity to, first, showcase Sylhet's cultural heritage, and second, present that (preferably in Sylheti dialect) to the wider public. While the event prior to the availability of B. C. Pal auditorium used to be held in rented auditoriums across the city, it is held in the former now. Over the years, well-known music, dance and theatre groups have participated in the annual cultural events and so have noted folk musicians, poets, litterateurs and others. Admittedly, the tone and texture of the events remain focused on Sylhet including performances in Sylheti speech. Reflecting on the purpose of the SSD's annual festival, Manmatha Ranjan Chowdhury (1982a) writes:

(ii) *Annual Cultural Festival*. Sylhet has a rich cultural heritage and Sreehatta Sammilani considers itself responsible for making efforts to sustain and nourish it. Cultural festival

is organised every year. Efforts are made to depict the good old cultural life of Sylhet and its neighbouring areas through its songs and dances. The annual festival is a distinct contribution to the cultural life of the capital. (also see *ACES*, 2009, 2014, 2016)

The *Bijoya Sammelan*, doubling as the annual get-together/picnic, is held in the winter months following the Saradiya Durga Puja. As an event that is informal in spirit, it provides much-needed relaxation to members from the gruelling life in the city. As Manmatha Ranjan Chowdhury (1982a) writes:

Bijoya Sammilan is organised every year, usually a day long programme to promote social contacts and to establish new one, to exchange ideas and to promote a feeling of oneness. This is a merry programme of sports and picnic in pleasant natural surroundings and is enjoyed alike by old, young and children. (also see MRAGM, 2000; *ACES*, 2006)

The event used to be held earlier at well-known picnic spots in and around the city and children in particular enjoyed the outing. Held in recent times at BCPMB on a holiday or preferably a Sunday, the attractions of the annual get-together are events such as sports, drawing, painting, fancy dress competitions and most importantly, an elaborate, three to four course lunch which often includes *shidol shutki chutney* (dry fish paste/curry). In 2005, a Sylheti vocabulary competition was added to the list of events. As an *ACES* (2006) states:

[I]n order to promote Sylheti Language an open to all competition was conducted, where popular words/proverbs of Sylheti language [were] put before the members for telling the meaning & framing the corresponding sentence. The response was well appreciated & the participation of the younger generation was encouraging.⁹

Dressed in the best of clothes that day, the SSD members are completely relaxed and at ease as they meet, laugh and speak in Sylheti to either renew old relations or forge new ones with each other. Indeed, 'one Sylheti inevitably knowing the other' phenomenon or what is generally referred as the 'Sylheti network', believed to be extending beyond the regular and limited kinship-based one, is fully at work, and in the past too the event had succeeded in making Sylhetis feel 'that every one belonged not only to a common ethnic root; they were as if the members of same family' (cited in MRAGM, 2000, p. 3; also see *ACES*, 2009; N. Bhattacharjee, 2011). Such cultural functions show the presence of a collective and united spirit among Sylhetis including an urge to preserve and propagate their distinct, albeit reconstructed, ethnic identity which a member says is '[s]holoana Sylheti [completely Sylheti]' and simultaneously '[s]holoana Bangali [completely Bengali]' (N. Bhattacharjee, 2011, p. 280); during such events, distinctions based on length, place of residence and others are almost overlooked; Sylhetised *Bangaliana* [Bengalihood] is always the flavour of the day.

The souvenirs that the SSD publishes on occasions such as Annual Cultural Festival/Day/Evening usually contain a report on its yearly (including financial) activities, messages from the President/Chief Patron, the outline of the day's/evening's programme, list and profiles of past and present office

bearers, photographs, poems, articles on Sylhet's language, social and cultural tradition, list of members and their postal addresses and telephone numbers, congratulatory and condolence messages, and so forth, not to mention the very large number of advertisements inserted by Barak Valley and Delhi based individuals and firms.¹⁰ Published at different points in time within a working year, copies of old souvenirs are hard to procure given the slack storage and archiving system followed by the SSD. The writings focus on Sylhet ranging from Sri Chaitanya's thoughts to the role of modern education in Sylhet, the contribution of Sylhetis to Bangla literature, Sylhet and Rabindranath Tagore, Sylhet Association of Shillong and most importantly, partition and refugeehood. Although not neat in structure and editing, yet the tri-lingual (Bangla, English and Sylheti) souvenirs throw light on issues considered significant by the community; more importantly, these aid in understanding the Sylheti ethnic identity re-construction discourse in contemporary Delhi in particular and India in general. The write-ups, either directly or indirectly, allude that the ethnic identity of the community being historically distinct, and not to mention endowed with enormous amount of quality sociocultural capital, ought to be not only preserved but simultaneously celebrated and promoted; admittedly, the role of the SSD in that is considered of prime significance (see, for instance, Bhattacharjee, 1973; Bhattacharya, 1992, 1996; Chowdhury, 1982a, 1982b, 1984). For middle-class Sylhetis, and even those who are not regular contributors to the souvenirs, reading and thinking about Sylhet amounts to a kind of catharsis which in the case of those who write finds further scope and space in that act. The writings are predictably not critical in tone and tenor; rather, the picture of Sylhet—its people and culture, and finally its ethnic identity—that emerges out of the writings comes close to being borderless, syncretic and idyllic from within except for a few 'different' ones like the travel account of Anupama Deb, a senior member of the SSD. Writing about her revisit to Panchakanda, Sylhet in 1990, she notes:

After 42 years I revisited Panchakhanda again ... Despite knowing no house/home existed, I went to see the land of my forefathers ... There are about 7–8 mosques in the town from which mullahs, with the help of loudspeakers, call for namaz-azaan or make other announcements. At times, they also provide *kubyakkha* [incorrect explanation] of Hindu gods and goddesses. The Hindu families in Panchakhanda could not tell us by what means they would be able to live in peace. The level of education is low and so is the number of educated ... Everywhere education is Islam *ghesha* [close]. The mental urge I had to see the land was not fulfilled as everything had changed [translation ours]. (Deb, 1990)

Like most ethnic associations, the SSD too has both internal and external critics; claims of efficiency and success of the SSD are often contested along lines of mode and pattern of functioning, regional (Assam/Barak Valley) thrust, organisational structure, (advanced) age profile, caste and class composition, (impractical and old) social and cultural agenda, religious composition, narrow *Bangaliana* [Bengaliness], and so on (see, N. Bhattacharjee, 2011). Such split opinions notwithstanding, the SSD has not ceased to exist.

Conclusion

The SSD not only provides its members with the scope and space to nostalgically remember Sylhet but also keeps alive the very act of remembering by regular practises of its cultural tradition. For its members, the SSD is an umbrella, a shelter and a place of cultural refuge meant to be shared by all Sylhetis of the city in particular and the country in general. However, its members, at the same time, note that the SSD is open to other communities who are in agreement with its social and cultural goals. As Manmatha Ranjan Chowdhury (1984), one of the founding members of the SSD, writes:

Thus, Sylhet people or comparatively young ones ... should get an opportunity to learn about Sylhet and to let their fellow Sylhetees know of their homely virtues, and qualities to attain them and to let outsiders also be benefited with. Thus, the Sammilani is not a coterie of the Sylhet people, though it is of the Sylhetees, by the Sylhetees but not for Sylhetees alone. (also see, Bhattacharjee, 1973; Dass, 1981)

However, the SSD, in composition and character, remains near completely Sylheti. The SSD always did and continues to represent the 'spirit of unity and integrity that has historically been the defining feature of the community' (N. Bhattacharjee, 2011). To uphold the united ethnic Sylheti character, to strengthen that further, and to nourish the primary constituent (culture) of that unity was what the founders of the SSD had aimed for.

As a community of migrant Hindus in the city, intensely anxiety and trauma ridden after partition, Sylhetis, influenced by the already existing Srihatta Sammilani (Sylhet Union) (1876) in Calcutta and Sylhet Association (1893) in Shillong realised early that perhaps an organisation established and modelled after those would be the ideal and most practical way of consolidating under one umbrella the 'fast dispersing and perhaps faster disintegrating' community (N. Bhattacharjee, 2011). Sylhet certainly could not be recovered, but a replica, a miniature of the lost homeland—a sanctuary—could be reimagined and recreated instead in the city which, above all, would not allow the community to 'forget itself' or 'suffer from historical and cultural amnesia' (N. Bhattacharjee, 2011); in short, the SSD would strive to provide the Sylheti community with a '*sthayi thikana* [permanent address]', a sense of '*nirapatta* [safety]', and finally, a sense of '*garba* [pride]' to be Sylheti (N. Bhattacharjee, 2011). The SSD, as many of its members believe, has succeeded in achieving most of the founding goals, and yet, this success is marked by senses of both celebration and melancholy; celebration because the SSD survives, and melancholy because the territory of Sylhet is lost forever.

This article demonstrates that the SSD, like most urban ethnic associations, has succeeded in creating an active social network by the consistent and effective deployment of social capital *a la* Bourdieu (2004). Indeed, the activation and extension of social networks remain one of the central accomplishments of the SSD. Our findings resonate with what Brettel (2005) refers to as the twin dimensions of bonding and bridging social capital. While the bonding dimension is evident amongst the active members of the SSD, the bridging dimension

occasionally facilitates a connect between the association and the younger generation of Sylhetis in the city who may not often partake of the foundational ethos of the SSD.

Yet, the SSD is not about anchoring the Sylheti associational bond and the attendant ethnic identity alone. Like any other ethnic association active in a metropolitan context, the SSD *inter alia* provides a forum for many of its members to access wider networks in a way that helps them navigate the vicissitudes of everyday life in both diffuse and tangible ways. A chance meeting of two Sylhetis at a *Bijoya Sammelan*, for instance, can very well be the beginning of a mutually enriching bond which may move beyond primordial Sylheti solidarity and bring in other material interests. We know too well about ‘the strength of weak ties’ (Granovetter, 1973) and its definitive material pay-offs to remain oblivious of the instrumental dimensions of identity assertions of all types. And, the SSD has not been an exception to this. Its overwhelming preoccupation with Sylheti cultural identity should not mislead us in believing that there are impermeable and insurmountable boundaries between ideas and interests.

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Notes

1. Though at no point in history the Sylhetis considered themselves anything but Bengalis, yet due to their political location outside Bengal a long and dark shadow remained cast on that claim by other fellow Bengalis and to some extent the Assamese. The absence of territorial

affinity with Bengal and presence in Assam was compensated on the one hand by assertion of historical and cultural affinity (endorsed by none other than Tagore) with the former and cultivated (critical) distance with the latter, and articulation of a culture rooted 'distinct' Sylheti identity on the other. The identity that emerged as a result, and which [we] have termed Sylheti identity consisted of two components namely, Bengali and (in addition) Sylheti, with the latter predictably supporting its claim of being 'distinct' and eventually giving it a predominantly Sylheti character. Taking cue from Partha Chatterjee's works [we] argue that the two components rested in co-existing and mutually transformative inner/Sylheti and outer/Bengali domains. Indeed, Sylheti identity grew and thrived as an identity with a *distinctly fused* character, contextual deployment of either of its two components (termed generally as identities by [community members]) vis-à-vis 'others' notwithstanding. It did, and does thrive, but not without the anxiety that accompanies all such identities.... (N. Bhattacharjee, 2011, pp. 46–47; also see, for example, S. Bhattacharjee, 2011; Bhattacharjee, 2012)

Indeed, two temporal moments are significant in the Sylheti identity discourse: 1874, which led to the construction of Sylheti identity and 1947, which made its reconstruction imperative.

2. Whether or not it is a classic diasporic identity is hard to say, for it still has some kind of territorial mooring in the slice of Sylhet—the Karimganj district of present-day Assam—that remains in India. Of course, in the sense of loss of the name and the bulk territory of Sylhet, the Indian Sylheti identity may come close to resembling a diasporic one, but only, we argue, in a part/loose sense.
3. Bourdieu defines social capital as

The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word. These relationships may exist only in the practical state, in material and or symbolic exchanges which help to maintain them. They may also be socially instituted and guaranteed by the application of a common name ... and by a whole set of instituting acts designed simultaneously to form and inform those who undergo them; in this case, they are more or less really enacted and so maintained and reinforced, in exchanges. Being basically based on indissolubly material and symbolic exchanges, the establishment and maintenance of which presuppose reacknowledgement of proximity, they are also partially irreducible to objective relations of proximity in physical (geographical) space or even in economic and social space. The volume of social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected. (2004, p. 21)

4. The names of members of the Sylheti and other communities/organisations have not been mentioned to protect their privacy.
5. The terms 'refugee' and 'displaced' have been used in the text only in particular contexts and especially where community members have identified themselves as such. We have generally preferred to use the term 'migrant' for the Sylhetis in this article. Whether the terms 'refugee', 'displaced' or 'migrant' should be definitively used to identify Sylhetis of India is a matter of complex academic debate and beyond the scope of this article.
6. As reported by Nirmal Sen Choudhury, the editor of *Pragati Prabaho* which is the official house journal of the All-India Federation of Sreehatta Sammilanis (Regd.) (AIFSS), there are 17 Sylhet Associations of India (SAI) spread across the country of which the Kolkata situated Srihatta Sammilani (Sylhet Union), founded in 1876, is the oldest (see, for example, Bhattacharjee, 1973; Shubhashish, 1998; Bhattacharjee, 2013). These Sylheti ethnic associations function independently and, at the same time,

- (most) are also constituent units of the Kolkata-based AIFSS. This network, founded on Sylheti social and cultural capital, and cultivated and invested in/through associations like SSD, also includes a large number of Indian Sylheti ethno-cultural groups which operate on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and so forth. Most of these associations and groups have their own websites including SSD (<https://sreehattasammilanidelhi.in/>).
7. These figures have been communicated by Ajitesh Dutta, one of the current Executive Committee members, SSD, in 2023. It is to be noted that except for a few annual souvenirs, none contain reliable lists of life and general members of the association at any point in time.
 8. Among social crises addressed by the SSD, flood relief is an important one. Ajitesh Dutta communicated that the SSD undertook a massive relief and rehabilitation operation in 2023 to help the flood affected people of Barak Valley, Assam.
 9. Sylheti dialect/language proficiency is a defining attribute of Sylheti ethnic identity. Not only do articles on the dialect feature in the Annual Souvenirs but young Sylhetis are often urged to pass the litmus test of the distinct identity based on their Sylheti speaking and understanding ability. The Sylheti dialect has also drawn considerable academic attention in Bangladesh, India and England. To take a recent example, in England, which is home to a large (Bangladeshi) Sylheti population, Marie Thaut, a linguist by training, runs the Sylheti Language Project in SOAS, University of London, which offers, among others, Sylheti language learning courses to those interested. The Project's active social media traffic shows that it is close to being a success.
 10. SSD souvenirs are variously named as Annual Cultural Day, Annual Cultural Evening, Annual Cultural Program, Annual Cultural Festival or just Sreehatta Sammilani, or even Brochure; some souvenirs are general and some are again on specific themes say, for instance, Sri Chaitanya's or Jawaharlal Nehru's life and thought. The cover pages of the souvenirs are well designed with pictures, sketches and photographs of Sri Chaitanya, artists who have performed in SSD functions, and scenes of rural Sylhet and India; souvenirs published in 1995 and 1996 have parts of the Bangla poem written by Rabindranath Tagore entitled *Sreebhumi* (1326 B.S.) on their respective cover pages. These souvenirs, which more often than not have no page numbers, are the main (published) sources of information available on SSD.

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