Chapter IV

Experiencing Sylhet in the city: Sylhetis of Kolkata

4.0: Colonial city and the community

It is on a chilly, wintry morning that the Howrah bound Rajdhani Express slowly chugs into the station. As I patiently wait inside to disembark, memories and images of the city which lies across the river flash past my mind. Following the porter outside I look in awe as I have so many times in the past, at the magnificent, double cantilever Howrah Bridge. ‘This bridge is old and not half as good as the new Vidyasagar Setu. You must see that to know what is Kalkatta (Kolkata/Calcutta) now’, says the impatient porter as I stand gazing at the bridge with the river flowing lazily underneath. I gather that the distinction drawn between Howrah Bridge and Vidyasagar Setu is similar to the one between what he considers, old and “Calcutta”, and consequently new and “Kolkata”. My work however, shall move to and fro, across time and space between Calcutta and Kolkata (interchangeably used) to map the journey of a community that has been an integral part of the city’s cultural and political history. While this section presents a broad cultural sketch of the colonial city and its middle class Sylheti community, the next in two parts, maps the community and its culture in post-colonial Calcutta, in Nabadarsha Cooperative Housing Society Limited at Birati in particular. Again in two parts, the following section examines the role played by Srihatta Sammilani (Sylhet Union) and South Kolkata Sylhet Association in preservation and propagation of Sylheti culture and identity in the city. The chapter concludes by a discussion on All India Federation of Sylhet Associations headquartered in Kolkata, and an interpretative summary of the preceding sections. It is to be noted that only names of respondents are mentioned in this chapter, and their details are provided in Appendix II.

It is during the period of re-naming boom in India – 2001 to be precise – when Calcutta was rechristened as Kolkata. With a total population of 4,572,876 persons in 2001, the metropolis houses various religious and linguistic communities of which the Hindus and Bangla speakers are respectively the largest [Census of India, 2001]. Marked otherwise by gross poverty and unemployment the city however, has a
thriving social and cultural life that goes back to the colonial times. As Sukanta Chaudhuri notes:

[the formal, and dominant, note of the city’s history was undoubtedly colonial; but ... colonial forces operated here in a terrain rich in competing systems and traditions. These were sometimes supplanted, sometimes transformed by fusion with the colonial experience; .... There [is] also a deeper absorption of new concepts and values inculcated by that process, leading to a phase of intense intellectual activity and social awareness — including some radical reforms — often called the Bengal Renaissance.... it was by any reckoning a period of exhilarating thought and change, .... But perhaps excepting two other Indian centres, Bombay and Madras, there [is] no city where the colonial impact [has] given birth to a new society and culture so complex, so creative, so stably indigenized. Ultimately, that culture passed beyond colonial confines to acquire an independent life .... The city grew in collaboration with colonial rule or ... by a necessary reliance on the colonial system. But this symbiosis bred resentment and disillusion, creating a classic tradition of protest politics and economic discontent, even while the collaborative role persisted. The history of “Calcutta culture” is valuable in itself; much more so as illustrating the process of colonial urbanization to a unique degree with unique consequences [1990a:1-3; also see for example, Chaudhuri 1990b; Sinha 1978]

Rooted in the urban structure of nineteenth century Calcutta, its colonial middle class set for itself the task of transforming the city’s spatial and cultural landscape — by blending Western and indigenous traditions — which eventually ushered in what is called the era of “Renaissance”, and it was in that historical context that the cultural tradition of Calcutta in particular and Bengal in general grew. As Sumit Sarkar notes:

For the average educated Bengali today, nineteenth century Calcutta lives on mainly as a galaxy of great names. Religious and social reformers, scholars, literary giants, journalists and patriotic orators, maybe a couple of scientists, all merge to form an image of “rennaissance”, nabajagaran (awakening), or nabayuga (new age), assumed to mark the transition of from medieval to modern. Calcutta enters centrally into this image even though many of the most distinguished figures — Bankimchandra Chattapadhyay or Rabindranath Tagore, for instance — spent much of their working lives outside it. And, twentieth century nationalism, Left politics, and Satyajit Ray apart, the “rennaissance” today provides the major justification for recalling the history of the city [2006:160; also see for example, Bose 1969; De 2002; Kopf 1969].

However, the common sense identification of the middle class “Renaissance” culture with Calcutta alone is tenuous for, not only was that a contested domain but the culture also drew heavily as Sarkar observes, from the rural and sub-urban traditions that existed outside the city. Be that as it may, Calcutta was firmly placed at the centre
of the ‘distinctive’ as Sarkar says, middle class and its culture formation process. He remarks:

Calcutta was central to the colonial middle class of Bengal, for it constituted the heart of three kinds of institutional networks crucial for the emergence of the nineteenth-and twentieth-century bhadralok as a distinctive formation: the new kinds of schools and colleges which came to be considered the indispensable entry points into modern liberal professions, the printing press, and clerical jobs in government or mercantile offices .... Nineteenth century Calcutta had become a real metropolis for the bhadralok, providing education, opportunities for jobs, printed books, a taste for new cultural values [Ibid.:170&176; also see for instance, Broomfield 1968; Chaudhuri 1990a, 1990b].

By late nineteenth century the full impact of “Renaissance” culture, debates on its carrier and character notwithstanding, was reflected in the spread of progressive educational, social, moral, religious and political ideas across Bengal Presidency, and the neighbouring province of Assam. Notwithstanding the differences that lay within and outside the Bengali middle class, it more or less continued to carry forth the nineteenth century “Renaissance” influenced cultural legacy amidst political upheavals and changes brought about first, by partition of the Presidency in 1905, second, by annulment of that followed by shifting of the capital to New Delhi in 1912, and third, partition in 1947. The emergence of Calcutta as a centre of modern education and culture threw up opportunities for all communities; as the most important centre of trade and commerce in the eastern region it attracted innumerable economic migrants as well.¹ The culture that eventually grew in colonial Calcutta sustained and thrived on elements drawn from diverse cultural traditions of its Jewish, Armenian, Chinese, Anglo-Indian, Parsi, Assamese, Marwari, Oriya, and Bihari population to mention just a few. Colonial Calcutta with its expanding demographic structure developed a multicultural and composite character preached and propagated by its urbanized middle class, contradictions notwithstanding. The gap between projection and practice of composite and egalitarian culture stood reflected for instance, in the domain of migrant occupation and employment. As Satyesh Chakrabarty argues:

[a]dmission into ... jobs was chiefly restricted to newcomers bearing good references from those already in employment. In issuing such references, kinship, caste, and regional, local, religious or linguistic affiliations operated in a highly discriminatory fashion. Hence different institutions and occupations, in Calcutta as elsewhere, have come to admit immigrants from specific regions

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and backgrounds in a highly preferential fashion. The much-acclaimed pan-Indian character of Calcutta’s population rides upon such discriminatory or preferential systems of absorption [1990: 4-5; also see for example, Bose 1968; Panchbhai 1972].

Be that as it may, the population movement between Bengal and Assam was however, a two way affair. In fact, Assam was always a site of Bengali migration which gathered momentum following the official induction in 1874 of the three Bangla speaking districts of Sylhet and Cachar (Surma Valley), and Goalpara into it. While the middle class of Surma Valley came to Calcutta in pursuit of higher education, political activism, and employment, its Assamese counterpart was not far behind. Indeed, it was colonial Calcutta where seeds were first planted for the future consolidation of Assamese and Sylheti middle class, and their respective identities. As with people elsewhere in Bengal, for people of Surma Valley too Calcutta represented a space of ‘authentic’ and ‘enlightened’ Bengali culture, the most important component of that among others, being modern (English) educational values. Smooth transition of its students to Calcutta was however, facilitated by the existing system of education in Surma Valley, particularly in Sylhet being on par with that of the city. As Santanu Dutta opines:

The Sylhet region of Surma Valley became a component unit of the Bengal Presidency in 1765, and in spite of its peripheral location, the district of Sylhet was linked to Calcutta from the very early phase of the modern period. The introduction of the British administrative infrastructure, and the system of English education based on secular, modern and scientific lines, the extension of steamer services, railways and the post and telegraph contributed towards the gradual rise of modern political consciousness in the Valley. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the system of modern education had made headway in the Valley.... In 1867 there were about 1127 students enrolled in 28 schools of the district and half of them were residents of Sylhet town alone.... The progress of education in the valley helped a galaxy of brilliant students to proceed to Calcutta, for higher studies and the valley found in them the harbingers of a Bengali Renaissance and of Indian nationalism [2000:123-124; also see Chapter II].

The nature of Sylheti life in colonial Calcutta is best portrayed by Bipin Chandra Pal in his two books namely, Memories of My Life and Times (2004 [1932]) and Sattarbatsar: Atmajiboni (1954); the available documents of Srihatta Sammilani (Sylhet Union), Kolkata also add to that. Sylheti students like Bipin Chandra Pal, Sundari Mohan Das, Tara Kishore Chaudhuri, and others made their journey to Calcutta to primarily pursue higher studies. Upon arrival, the students were provided
with residence and food facilities by the Sylhet *chatrabashes* (student hostels/boarding houses/messes) that dotted the city landscape. According to Rajat Sanyal, ‘in the second half of the century, separate boarding houses were founded in Calcutta by people from different districts and localities, and newcomers could find shelter there in a friendly and helpful atmosphere because of regional ties’ [1980:222-223; also see Choudhury 1982; Pal 2004; Bhattacharjee 1936]. In fact, colonial Calcutta had students arriving not just from Sylhet but also from the remote districts of eastern Bengal, and other *mofussil* towns to those messes where they were accommodated on the basis of their districts of origin. As Bipin Chandra Pal writes:

> When I first arrived in Calcutta there was no accommodation provided by the university. The students who came from the mofussils would rent a place to live in the city. Students from different districts established their separate boarding houses. Students from Tripura would stay in the Tripura Mess and Dacca had two for its students, among which the 33, Mussalmanpara Lane Mess was famous as it housed well known and meritorious students. Similarly, there was a Barisal Mess and a Jessore-Khulna Mess too. Our Sylhet too had a mess and that was where I arrived in Calcutta. Sundari Mohan Das was already living there and I joined him and the group [1954:156-157 (translation mine); also see Choudhury 1982]

In 1875, Pal began his life in Calcutta in a mess situated at 15, Nimoo Khansama’s Lane which primarily housed students with origin in Sylhet. The mess was as he writes, ‘*Srihattiyoder adda* [informal gathering place of Sylhetis]’ where students from diverse castes and regions of Sylhet lived to pursue not only their individual vocations but also participate in a collectively built progressive culture which in turn enabled them to ‘question received ideas and values’ regarding rules of caste, commensality and religion. As a space where the impact of modern education influenced to a great extent by Brahmo ideals was most visible and deep, it became for students like Pal the foundation for future growth of nationalistic, and various reformist values and practices. He writes:

> Students’ messes in Calcutta, in my college days ..., were like small republics and were managed on strictly democratic lines. Everything was decided by voice of the majority of the members of the mess.... almost in everything that concerned the common life of the mess, the members had a supreme voice. Strict discipline was maintained ... over every young man who belonged to a mess.... We made from time to time laws and regulations for the proper administration of our little republics. The composition of our mess called for some sort of compromise between the so-called orthodox and the Brahmo and other heterodox members of our republic.... It was, however, clearly understood that the members
Though Sylhet had considerable Brahmo presence at that time, yet it was not something that upper caste Hindus usually took to. In fact, students like Sundari Mohan Das who was an initiated Brahmo when he arrived in Calcutta, faced resistance from non-Brahmo Sylheti students in the mess. However, given the heavy Brahmo atmosphere of urban Calcutta many students including Pal eventually embraced Brahmoism, which as a religious ideology contrary to orthodox Hinduism stressed the need of religious and moral regeneration of Bengalis on modern, scientific lines. Eminent Brahmos, as well as others took up the task of engaging young students for carrying forward such causes. In 1875, Ananda Mohan Bose established the Calcutta Students’ Association which Surendra Nath Banerjee joined, and together they launched one of the first patriotic youth movements in Bengal. In fact, similar sabhas, sammilanis, samitis, and samajs (forms of social association/collectivity) were integral to the social life of nineteenth century Calcutta, and those addressed a wide range of issues, a very important one being education of women. Those also played active roles in bringing about social change and transformation in colonial Bengal [see for example, Bose 1968; Bose 1969; Pal 2004; Sanyal 1980; Sinha 1978]. The student messes served as fertile ground for the growth of such associations, and one such was the Srihatta Sammilani (Sylhet Union) (hereafter SS (SU)) established in 1876 and housed in the Madan Baral Lane Mess.

Among various associations – whose members were essentially drawn from the middle class – that flourished in Calcutta, a large number were devoted to the cause of initiating social development, more so among women in the districts of eastern Bengal, Assam, and Tripura; associations like Mymensingh Sammilani, Tripura Hitasadhini Sabha, and so forth relentlessly worked towards such goals as did SS (SU). But it was not just to pursue these goals that district associations were established for, one of the significant reasons lay closer home. No doubt, the formation of SS (SU) was primarily guided by the urge to propagate the views of Ananda Mohan Bose, Surendra Nath Banerjee and Sivanath Sastri among others, regarding duty of students towards realization of nationalist and egalitarian gender ideals in Sylhet, but it was also committed towards building a strong social network, and instilling a sense of security among 'Kolikata probashi Sylhetis' [Sylhetis living
outside Sylhet in Calcutta]’ who were often ridiculed, and left isolated for their tongue and behaviour. Bipin Chandra Pal and Sundari Mohan Das, both founders of the association provide similar pictures of the nature of inter-group relations in colonial Calcutta. As Pal writes:

I do not know how things are now; but in my young days, students in the Calcutta colleges, who came from Bengal districts, and particularly in the Presidency College, which was patronized by the sons of the aristocracy of Calcutta, had rather bad time of it, specially if they were very sensitive. Their local patois was the object of open ridicule by their more refined metropolitan fellow students. Many of these mufassil boys were very shy and of a far more serious mood than the Calcutta boys; and they failed often times to freely mix with the latter .... But there were, of course, exceptions. But generally the East Bengal or Bangal boys found it rather hard to put up with the ridicule of the Calcutta boys. Dacca boys were too proud of their own district and of their old traditions ... to accommodate themselves to the new conditions; so while we Sylhet boys put forth strenuous efforts to give up our local patois as soon as we came to Calcutta and learn the idiom and intonations of the metropolis, our Dacca friends kept up the habit of talking in their district patois as a matter of parochial pride and patriotism [2004:160-161].

In fact, Pal’s Sylheti toned Bangla speech was an object of constant ridicule even amongst the non-Sylheti “Bangal” (pejorative use for people of eastern Bengal origin) members of the mess, of which Sundari Mohan Das was also a resident. The fellow “Bangals” from Comilla for instance, considered Sylhetis uncivilized and uncouth, and in the hand written mess magazine called ‘Bangal Gazette’ Pal’s speech was frequently subjected to ‘aakromon [attack]’ to which he reacted with equal ferocity [Das 1936:2; also see Chapter II & III; Choudhury 1982; Shome 1936a]. The middle class of Calcutta unlike what it chose to project was characterized by deep divides based on caste, religion, language, origin and location (rural/urban), not to mention the treatment it meted out to the lower class. Featured by the broad “Ghoti-Bangal” (the former is pejorative use for people of western Bengal origin) dichotomy, the social structure of the middle class proved to be more discriminatory towards Sylhetis as compared to other “Bangals” for, the former were not just “Bangals” but in addition, Sylhetis who again officially belonged to Assam and not Bengal. In fact, the deep rooted “Ghoti-Bangal” divide within the Bengali middle class never ceased to raise its head, and in changing forms and contexts it continued as the much practised but least recognized feature of its internal social relations.
Given the scenario in 1870’s, SS (SU) emerged as a carrier of the Calcutta generated progressive social values to Sylhet on one hand and an agency for articulation of Sylheti identity on the other. As Amalendu Guha argues: ‘The Bengali-speaking districts of Sylhet and Cachar, by that time, were much more involved in the mainstream of Bengal politics. Nevertheless students therefrom, who were residents in Calcutta, asserted their separate identity by forming the Shrihatta Sammilani in 1877’ [1977:24]. Indeed, assertion of separate identities by eastern Bengal and Assam districts with roots in the mess culture of colonial Calcutta eventually gave birth to the culture of establishing associations, and after partition camps and colonies along similar lines. Meanwhile in Sylhet, largely due to the efforts of SS (SU) schools and colleges grew in number which provided their students with facilities similar to the ones in Calcutta. In course of time, SS (SU) ceased to remain restricted to students, and grew as a space where all Sylhetis arriving in Calcutta could find a home. The number of Sylheti families gradually increased in the city, and by 1940’s some made it their permanent home. Predominantly settled in localities around northern and central Calcutta for instance, in Beleghata, Teritibazar, Shyam Bazar, Amherst Street, Keshub Sen Street, Baithak Khana Road, Sealdah, Bow Bazar, Entally, Moulali and Park Circus, and also in parts of southern Calcutta such as Bhowanipore and Kalighat, these families also contributed towards the formation of a stable social network which helped the newcomers with housing and employment opportunities. As the community consolidated, the pattern of articulation and expression of its identity witnessed changes. Unlike Sylhetis of 1870’s who as Bipin Chandra Pal says, gave up their ‘local patois’ to forge social relations with the larger Bengali middle class of the metropolis, those of 1940’s did the reverse. As Rishi Kumar Bhattacharjee recounts:

*Upon disembarking from the train at Sealdah station in Calcutta my elder brother, a student of Science College then, strictly instructed me to speak nothing but Sylheti. I was taken aback and slightly unsettled by the urgency in his tone. He directed me to be more than audible so as to make others hear my speech. I still remember his tone after so many years. Acharya Prafulla Chandra Chatrabash at 171, Lower Circular Road was a mess meant for general migrant students but it housed a large number of Sylhetis and that is where I went. There too I was categorically told by the Sylheti inmates to speak Sylheti which I would have done anyway. But the assertion was tremendous, almost amounting to imposition. The more non-Sylheti Bengalis laughed at us the more we asserted ourselves though there was no direct hostility between us.*
By 1947, Sylheti middle class grew firm roots in the urban milieu of Calcutta. With the support of a strong social network whose nodal point was SS (SU) this class which maintained close links with its native district was instrumental in forging a collective spirit amongst its members across Bengal and Assam. At the time of referendum, Calcutta based Sylhetis mobilized by SS (SU) took active part to vote, and retain the district in Assam. As Himendu Biswas observes:

* I was a student of Calcutta University and a political activist and so was my brother Hemanga Biswas. I traveled from Calcutta to Habiganj in Sylhet to campaign and vote in the referendum. We had collected funds and campaigned heavily in Calcutta too and all Sylhetis living in the city went to vote. We were a strong and united community in Calcutta and not for a moment felt the physical distance between ourselves and our countrymen living in Sylhet. We were Sylhetis and nothing else, and retaining Sylhet was our common objective. Unfortunately we lost, and Sylhet went forever to Pakistan.

As migrants poured into Calcutta following partition, its resident Sylhetis adopted all available means to accommodate them; SS (SU) not only helped those Sylheti migrants who arrived in Calcutta but also extended support to their counterparts in Cachar, and other places in Assam. With a population that only increased with every passing year, the middle class Sylheti community began looking for such strategies and modes that would suit the process of articulation of its identity albeit now, in post-partition Calcutta and India. Indeed, for the community 1947 turned out to be yet another significant moment – the other being 1874 – not to imagine as it did earlier, but re-imagine itself in the city and elsewhere.

### 4.1: Living in post-colonial Calcutta

#### 4.1.1: The city after partition

Compared to the large volume of migration from East Bengal the one from Sylhet, being restricted by and large to Assam, to West Bengal was much lower at least during the immediate years following partition. In 1951 the number of displaced from Sylhet alone stood at 99,542 persons in Assam whereas in West Bengal it was barely 9,858 persons [Census of India, Displaced Persons-1951 1954:53; also see Chatterji 2008; Luthra 1972]. Undoubtedly, number of migrants from the eastern Bengal districts was the highest, yet the official figure of those from Sylhet in West Bengal as
projected, was not so abysmally low. As Bijon Bihari Purkayastha (and wife Leela Purkayastha) pertinently explains:

No one knows the exact number of Sylhetis who came to Calcutta at that time. Most refugees reached Assam and then moved to Calcutta as a result of which they were enumerated in Assam and not in West Bengal. In fact, official enumeration on the basis of district of origin in Pakistan stopped after a while. Moreover, Sylhetis refugees being Bengalis were taken to be no different from other refugees from East Bengal. So, officially the figure of Sylheti refugees remained low but unofficially it was high. There was no provision of a Sylheti census, and census figures in any case would be half truths. The affluent, educated refugees settled in Calcutta with the help of relatives and friends and others went to the suburbs. To the large Sylheti population of the city a larger number was added. Many of us were not official refugees but with Sylhet gone we all became refugees, even those who were settled in the city much before partition. Sylhetis arrived in large numbers after 1971 and also during the period of disturbance in Assam and Meghalaya in the 1980’s.

As the number of migrants multiplied in West Bengal, its population swelled in alarming proportions which in turn put enormous pressure on its now limited land and economic resources. Most Hindu refugees who arrived in West Bengal during the immediate post-partition years belonged to the middle class who already had close connections with it. For decades, East Bengal (and Surma Valley) had provided a steady supply of high-caste, white-collar migrants to Calcutta in particular and Bengal in general and therefore, when the time came to move out of Pakistan this class quite naturally, migrated to the city. ‘They had qualifications, they had kin and they had connections. All they wanted was work and shelter, and they calculated they had a reasonable chance of getting both in West Bengal’ [Chatterji 2008:115]. For non-middle class migrants (mostly from East Bengal) the situation was markedly different. Calcutta, where most refugees, particularly a large section of the middle class, attempted and eventually settled down expanded rapidly to accommodate them. ‘In the post-Independence era, the city of migrants became a city of refugees, as the exodus which began in 1946 continued nearly four decades later, with changes in cause, character, scale and impact’ [Chatterjee 1990:70]. Pranati Chaudhuri notes how that changed the physical, demographic and cultural landscape of Calcutta. She writes:

Prior to partition the main area of habitation and economic activities was the city of Calcutta proper. After the partition of 1947, the continuous infiltration [sic] of refugees, however, changed the mosaic of settlements to a large extent .... In the
The process of refugee rehabilitation and resettlement was primarily an economic one, but it was simultaneously marked by cultural adjustment and change both for East Bengal (and Surma Valley) migrants as well as their resident West Bengal(i) counterparts. ‘As for the refugees, so too for the local Bengalis ... these changes in their old patterns of life caused deep tensions and anxieties’ [Chatterji 2008:157; also see Guha 1959]. The transformation of Calcutta into a ‘refugee city’ was fiercely resented by its “original” middle class, particularly “Ghoti” residents; “Bangals”, viewed as uninvited guests, usurpers and opportunists and in addition, greedy, lazy, and uncouth were squarely blamed for bringing about the decline of Calcutta. If “Ghotis” ridiculed “Bangals” – their accented speech and way of life – the latter saw “Ghotis” as a community of parsimonious, parochial, prejudiced and backward people. Consider for example, excerpts from a long chat on “Ghoti-Bangal” relationship in an internet chat room where a “Bati” (born of “Ghoti-Bangal” parentage) writes:

I am a Bati, so let me speak for both. As a Ghoti I can say: Bangal monusso noi, Uriara jontu, Lomfo dei, gache othe, Lej nei kintu [Bangals are not human, Oriyas are animals, They jump and climb trees, But do not have tails] .... As Bangal I can say: We are very hardworking. West bengal totha samagra bharoter unnoti r pichone jara ache tader modhye jara bangali tader modhye besir bhag i bangal (In entire West Bengal and India, those who are responsible for progress and development, and amongst them those who are Bengalis, the most are Bangals) [www.silchar.com/cgi-bin/adda/MahaAdda.pl accessed on 5 October 2009, (part translation mine)].

In fact, Calcutta had no dearth of social groups who could be subjected to cultural-communal (particularly linguistic) profiling by sections of its educated middle class; apart from “Bangals” (and Sylhetis), Bengalis with origin in western Bengal districts such as Medinipur, Bankura and others, Marwaris (Meros), Biharis (Khotta), Oriyas (Ure), and Muslims (Lere) too were more often than not turned not only objects of fun and ridicule, but also victims of exclusionary practices. Nirmal Kumar Bose (1968) draws attention to the nature of inter-community relations in the city, and he pertinently writes: ‘The overlap in culture has been too small: class has not succeeded
in dissolving linguistic or regional ties, or even in obliterating cultural differences to any appreciable extent' [1968:82]. On a similar vein another scholar notes:

The people that compose the population of this city belong to various linguistic and religious denominations. Except for their "official and commercial interests" when they have peripheral interaction with the people of other groups, most of them remain usually confined in their cultural islands .... A feeling of cultural and intellectual superiority coupled with "a strong sense of local patriotism"... in the Bengalee mind creates a paradox. The Bengalee wishes a non-Bengalee to remain as he is ... but at the same time feels critical about him for maintaining his ethnic identity and not acceding to the Bengalee way of life.... This situation creates a vicious circle by giving rise to inter-ethnic prejudices which further widen the gulf between communities and create more barriers for social harmony and cultural synthesis [Panchbhai 1972:50-51; also see for example, Bose 1968; Ray 2002; Sinha 1978].

However, both Bose and Panchbhai locate their findings in the context of differences that lie between larger communities and classes in Calcutta and therefore, do not address the issue of cultural difference that exists within those. My field notes suggest that the Bengali community of Calcutta and its middle class are deeply fragmented along among others, linguistic and cultural (and religious) lines although they claim and appear as culturally composite and united, and marked by spirit of pluralism. Taking note of the contradictions that lie in the cultural structure of Calcutta, Nirmal Kumar Bose argues:

[t]his superstructure of cultural pluralism has persisted in the civic community of Calcutta, and perhaps helped indirectly in maintaining communal differences.... Maybe with increasing opportunities of employment, when ... numerous civic and professional associations grow in number, and their membership cuts across various communities, the citizen's life in Calcutta will become more urbanized, and freed from some of the narrowness to which it is still subject [1968:84-85].

However, Bose's suggestion of urbanization as a panacea for erasure of cultural boundaries between communities in the city has not met with much success for, in contemporary Calcutta too as in the past, cultural boundaries outside and within communities and classes persist. For people whose origin lie in East Bengal (and Sylhet), maintenance of cultural boundaries is visible among others in the growth of district centered colonies, housing societies and associations in recent times, and the roots of which to reiterate, go back to the tradition of establishing district messes in colonial Calcutta followed by formation of colonies and associations along similar
lines after partition. Following the addition of a large community of legal (and non-legal) refugees, who gradually consolidated their position as a community of “Bangals”, to the larger Bengali community of the city after partition the cultural divides within the latter to reiterate, sharpened. Not only that, the “Bangal” community itself was further sub-divided (and hierarchically stratified) into communities based on individual districts of origin in East Bengal (and Assam). Such district identity centric communities contextually voiced and articulated their aspirations and demands either on the bases of their individual identities or as a collective of refugees or “Bangals” [see for example, Bose 2000; Chatterjee 1998; Ghosh 2002]. Again, such communities were not free from fragmentary influences pertaining to the class, caste, gender and occupation including as in the case of Sylhetis, difference based on the region of origin in Sylhet, from within. As Ratish Chandra Roychoudhury (and wife Shanti Shubhra Roychoudhury) notes:

*Bangals were, and are divided into communities of Barisalis, Mymensinghis, Dhakaiya, Chattgaiya and of course Sylhetis. Each has something to say about the other and not all have same prestige; people from Noakhali are said to belong to Ali-Kuli-Noakhali (Muslim-Labour-Noakhali) culture by Sylhetis who also look down upon Chattgaiyas. We, at least I have always tried to help and support every Sylhethi refugee, educated as they were, as well as others who came to Calcutta. But many Sylheti refugees told me that their relations and friends hardly helped and they were betrayed by people of their own status; Sylheti were always distant from, as is called, the Koilkatis and not much was expected of them; Koilkati is quite a vague category if one thinks carefully; it certainly includes Ghotos, but also those from East Bengal and Sylhet who have had a very long association with Calcutta and most importantly, are able to speak effortlessly in Kelu or Koilkati Bhasha. As an educated man I understand the politics played by the educated classes of all groups.*

The intra-Bengali cultural differences manifested among others, in the establishment of refugee colonies and associations, and again many of those had distinct district centric community composition and character. Calcutta was dotted with such refugee colonies where members of a particular district resided, spoke their native tongue, and practised their own culture; by providing a deep sense of security and belonging to the members, such colonies fostered the growth of collective community spirit, and eventually ‘distinct’ identities. Colonies with mixed refugee population were also characterized by a sense of community feeling but differences existed in the domain of cultural practices (say speech) of the constituent groups, not to mention the ones with the “Calcutta” that existed outside the colony. Writing of Bijoygarh colony in southern Calcutta, Manas Ray notes:
The main road among many other things signified a different language – the road that took us to a land of a different language, where our vernacular was a taboo. In fact, we lived in three orbits of dialect. First, the dialect of our family, where we were the unadulterated inhabitants of our own East-Bengal district – Chattogram, Barishal, Noakhali or Dhaka; second, the particular lilt of Netaji Nagar, where we were East Bengalis and our language hegemonized by the Dhaka dialect; and, third, as office-goers and in the heart of Calcutta, our Dhaka-influenced dialect yielding to the standard version of Calcutta. English words had a sparkler effect – words that came to us not so much for their meaning as to give a little sparkle to our speech [2002:157]

If colonies were spaces where distinct refugee identities shaped and grew, the associations established on similar grounds were additional ones. Such associations played a crucial role not only in economic but also cultural rehabilitation of their individual district refugees, the latter unfortunately accorded very little attention in studies on partition-migration. As Pradip Bose writes:

One important aspect of the refugees in West Bengal that has rarely been addressed either by the government or by the scholars is the cultural dimension of refugeehood. The experience of refugee is profoundly cultural and the disjunction that refugees face between their familiar way-of-being and a new reality, compels them to resolve the problem of meaning and interpret their experience continuously. Anthropologists working with refugees have found that that it is erroneous to view them simply as “economic being” because the refugee’s self-identity is often anchored in one’s past .... The leveling down of each refugee to common denominator and constructing an ideal-typical refugee, often subverts the best thought plans of rehabilitation, because plans ignore the “individualities” which are the foundation of refugee identity .... [The essays address] the question of how past persists in the present or how the present includes a partiality, a lack of fullness, resulting from the undertow of the past [2000:2-3].

Two types of district associations existed in Calcutta to extend help to refugees at that time: a) old associations such as SS (SU) and b) new associations such as Chattagram Parishad established in 1956. Indeed, district centric identities which marked Calcutta’s cultural life all along came to be further consolidated through such colonies and associations following partition. As Gautam Ghosh argues:

The displaced responded to … new circumstances and uncertainties by recalibrating their identity and allegiance, shifting them from East Bengal as a whole to the particular districts in East Bengal they were originally from. The district, rather than their identification with East Bengal/ Bangladesh in its entirety, came to serve as the point of reference for their claims to dignified treatment in India [2002:330].
4.1.2: Where are the Sylhetis?

Bulk of refugee migration from Sylhet admittedly happened in Assam but Calcutta too as mentioned, was not far behind. Primarily drawn from the educated middle class, many families arrived in the city 1946 onwards, albeit not in a single rushed movement but in gaps, either directly from Sylhet or via Assam. The resident Sylhetis of Calcutta, in their private capacities and with the aid of SS (SU), took up the task of providing relief and rehabilitation to those, albeit not without seeking assistance from the central and state governments. As Santimoy Bhattacharyya notes:

"We tried to help our Sylheti brothers and sisters as much as possible; Barishalis and Mymensinghis helped theirs; those with legal refugee status could get help from government in terms of accommodation and jobs but others were supported by their kith and kin. SS (SU) helped every Sylheti whether they lived in camps, or outside in their own accommodation; we all faced so much of hardship then, in Calcutta and Assam, that the official status of a Sylheti did not matter; we lost Sylhet and that was the only truth. The situation in Cachar, where maximum Sylhetis went, was far worse than Calcutta and it was our duty (and we wanted) to help them too."

The claim of extension of help to all migrants by the resident Sylhetis of Calcutta and SS (SU) however, remains a contested one; for instance, Animesh Dhar Choudhury narrates the hardships his family faced upon arrival in the city in 1960's. He says:

"Though number of Sylheti refugees in Calcutta was very small compared to Assam but we suffered here too; being a refugee was not easy and to get food, shelter and a job was very difficult. We struggled like all other refugees and our plight was no less; few Sylheti refugees may be alive today to tell the tale of their woes; no Sylheti relation, not SS (SU) provided anything to me; they made tall claims but actually did nothing as they functioned along caste and rich and poor lines. My own educated friends and relations, not to mention others treated me shabbily and I can name them. I made it on my own and I am a proud Sylheti today."

While such responses are not unfounded and uncommon, yet a large number of Sylhetis acknowledged the proactive role played by SS (SU) in particular and resident Sylhetis in general in refugee relief and rehabilitation. Records of SS (SU) of which only few are available, show that throughout 1950's and 1960's the issue of rehabilitation topped its agenda that included inter alia: a) relief and resettlement of Sylheti migrants in Calcutta in particular and Assam (Cachar) in general b) documenting facts (and figures) about the community in Calcutta, and c) providing cultural and moral support to it in the city and elsewhere. Indeed, records dating from
that period point to the deep crisis the community and SS (SU) faced, and the then General Secretary’s opening words for instance, during the Annual General Body meeting held in 1952 throws light on the situation. He says:

Partition has forced us to leave our own land.... Today we are unloved and undesired everywhere. Today we are like beggars without means and protection. Our destination is uncertain, and our lives are in peril. Our culture, heritage ... our society, in fact our self-identity runs the risk of being pushed to oblivion.... However, it is true that we have lost our land, but our hearts still beat in our fragile bodies. In fact, because we have been uprooted, so we are more eager to build our own homes in another land. So, in this time of crisis we have to remain alive, protect our distinctiveness and survive. Though we are part of Bengal yet, we have to preserve our past self-identity. There is no clash between the samasthi [whole] and the byesthi [part], rather they can help and cooperate with each other. To build the nation it is important that all its component social identities which are distinct acknowledged. So in the name of nationalism and patriotism we should not forget our own distinctiveness. Doing that would amount to self-annihilation.... So if we think that Srihatta Sammilani should survive and work, we have to morally and dutifully cooperate with each other to preserve our self-identity and culture through that. We have to contribute towards the relief and rehabilitation of Sylheti people of Calcutta and Cachar,...engage with the past and present Sylheti culture...and help further the cause of female education [cited in Barshik Karjyabibarani (hereafter BK), SS (SU), Calcutta, 1951-52 (translation mine); also see Bhattacharjee 1382 B.S].

Among specific tasks, the one related to resettlement included collection of funds for poor and needy students of Calcutta (and Cachar), and attempts to establish students’ hostels, housing societies and colonies for Sylhetis residing in the city. The Sylhet Union Multipurpose Co-operative Colony Society Limited was formed by SS (SU) in 1950’s, and entrusted with the task of building a housing colony named Sribhumi Samabay Palli Samiti near Sarkar Haat, Behala in southern Calcutta [cited in Ibid.: 1955-58; also see Chakravarty 2002]. SS (SU) undertook such tasks not only to ensure the rehabilitation of Sylhetis but also to consolidate its own position and role as the guardian of Sylhetis, and their culture in post-partition India. As its the then General Secretary Ananga Chakrabarty writes:

For the uprooted and sarbahara [one whose everything is lost] people of Sylhet, this [SS (SU)] generates the feeling of hope, future possibilities and a happy home. If, through [SS (SU)] we pledge to preserve our living ideals and culture in a collective manner, only then we will be able to build parabashe nijabash [our own homes in this foreign land], a natun Srihatta [new Sylhet].... This [SS (SU)] is an ideal Sylheti organization and our duty should be to extend its influence not only amongst the Sylhetis of Calcutta but all those sons and daughters of Sylhet who are dispersed now.... This organization will be the voice of innumerable
Meanwhile the proposal for construction of a permanent office building to house SS (SU) was also raised, though the housing project at Behala had already begun running into rough weather. As the then General Secretary of SS (SU) Manoranjan Gupta writes:

About Sribhumi Palli in Behala, Sarkar Haat for people from Sylhet and Cachar, the details were given in the last meeting held in 1959-60. Some conflicts arose among members about its finance and administration ... an enquiry into such matters was called for; hopefully the fact-finding team will submit its report and the matter will be resolved. Regrettably not all buyers of plots in Behala are interested to settle there and so it looks that the project is not on the path of success [cited in Ibid.: 1960-61 (translation mine)].

While a permanent office was constructed in 1980's by Sylhet Union Trust at Kalindi Housing Estate in northern Calcutta, the housing project at Behala eventually failed to materialize due to lack, and alleged mismanagement of funds. However, a colony named Nabadarsha Co-operative Housing Society Limited (hereafter NCHSL) located in Birati region of North 24 Parganas district was eventually established not officially by SS (SU) though, but some of its prominent and active members. In fact, this colony ‘could have been named Srihattanibash or Sylhet Colony because the seeds of its formation germinated in SS (SU) and its founding members were Sylhetis.... Most of the early residents of the colony were Sylheti refugees and therefore, in this area it is popularly known as Sylhet Colony, but the founders chose to name it Nabadarsha’ [Biswas 1989-90 (translation mine)]. Indeed, rationale for the formation of NCHSL lay in the circumstances the Sylheti community found itself after partition. ‘The sense of being torn apart and homeless, socio-political situation of Bengalis in Assam, recurrent and organized communal conflict, and finally ideas and objectives of SS (SU), all led to creation of the society’ [Ibid. (translation mine)]. Proposal for the society was first suggested in 1963 at the annual meeting of SS (SU), and was subsequently registered in 1964. On 23 January 1965, NCHSL was formally established as one of its founders Kshitish Chandra Choudhury says, to house the middle class people (read Sylhetis) of Calcutta [cited in Ibid.]. With the failure of the housing project at Behala, it was decided that so far as NCHSL was concerned SS
SU would not interfere in its organizational functioning. ‘The object of the society [shall] be primarily to establish on a cooperative basis settlements for persons with moderate income, by affording each settled, facilities for owning a house and ultimately to develop ... the settlements so established into self-sufficient communities’ [Bye Laws, NCHSL, Birati, Calcutta, n.d:2; also see Barshik Karjyabibarani, NCHSL, Birati, Kolkata, 2007-08]. Though as the bye law shows, NCHSL was not officially restricted to Sylhetis, yet majority of families living there had origins in Sylhet. Spread over 60.72 acres of land and 483 plot holding permanent members, the premises of NCHSL now includes a fishery, garden, health center, school, community center and library. More importantly, it remains as its senior resident Shishir Ranjan Choudhury says, a collective space for the propagation of an ‘unadulterated’ Sylheti culture in the city.

Though Sylheti majority housing societies as large as NCHSL are not too many in Kolkata, yet it is not uncommon to find among others, in Garia, Narendrapur, Baishnabhga Patuli localities of southern Kolkata residential complexes where Sylhetis are housed either exclusively or in large numbers. In fact, since 1980’s these areas have emerged as the most preferred destinations of Sylhetis from North East India. Though older Sylheti residents of the city who are located in areas such as Birati, Kalighat, Ballygunge, Entally, Park Street and Salt Lake maintain close links with the newly arrived members of the community, yet the relationship is not sans the anxiety albeit covert, that comes with differences generated by the issue of length and place of residence in the city. Spread across the city and its suburbs, middle class Sylhetis in their private capacities and through spaces provided by the associations are involved in preservation and dissemination of Sylheti culture. The collective identity that middle class Sylhetis uphold in Kolkata is essentially a Hindu (cultural) one that is free from any sustained engagement with the Assamese on one hand and Sylheti Muslims (in India) on the other; also, the identity appears to be more at peace with its Bengali component as compared what that goes through in Barak Valley. Another important point is, unlike Karimganj where the middle class unfailingly assert religious syncretism as the distinguishing feature of its ‘composite’ identity, in Kolkata that is restricted to the domain of print as for instance, in magazines and souvenirs published by the association(s); Sylheti identity discourse in Kolkata except
in print, is marked by near total "absence" of the Sylheti Muslims of India, though Sylhetis (Hindus and Muslims) of Bangladesh have begun to figure now.

The middle class as field notes suggest, is gripped by an acute sense of "partition confined Sylhetalgia" (in line with what Jacques Derrida had referred as 'Nostalgeria') – a sense of history coming to a stop in 1947 – which remains to a large extent divorced from its everyday practise of the larger metropolitan culture of the city. In fact, Sylheti identity in Kolkata rests within exclusive confines of the family and either of the two (sometimes both) Sylhet Associations (hereafter SA in a generic sense) namely, SS (SU) and South Calcutta Sylhet Association (hereafter SKSA since Calcutta was changed to Kolkata after 2001). Among residential complexes that house Sylheti majority population, it is in NCHSL that the community and its identity finds a voice that is collective in terms of being located in a space that is not confined to the family and association(s). Along with two SA, NCHSL perhaps remains the most important cultural symbol for the community not only in Kolkata but also in India. Anchored in Sylheti cultural tradition which includes dialect/speech and social practices, the identity that is asserted as composite and unified by the middle class is however, not uncontested from within as well as outside it, the latter primarily by non-Sylheti Bengalis as Kolkata hardly has a clearly identifiable Sylheti non-middle class or any "other" groups; it also remains contested by those Sylhetis who are neither part of SA nor reside in NCHSL but claim to be 'proud Sylhetis' nonetheless. My field work in Kolkata quite predictably begins with visits to NCHSL at Birati which I was told is the right place to get a 'feel of real Sylheti culture'. The premises of NCHSL resemble any other residential complex, except for fragments of conversation in Sylheti speech I occasionally catch while walking along its beautiful tree lined avenues and lanes; the other thing that strikes me are the houses that carry names such as Raygarh, Dulali and others, to indicate the occupants' place of origin in Sylhet [see Images 4.0 and 4.1]. Indeed, the atmosphere of NCHSL as Paritosh Bhattacharya says, 'is distinctly Sylheti. Nabadarsha aailay mane Sylhet aailay [you come to Nabadarsha you come to Sylhet]. Every family will offer food and spend time
Chapter IV

Image 4.0: Glimpse of NCHSL, Birati, Kolkata

Photo courtesy: Nabanipa Bhattacharjee

Chapter IV

Image 4.1: A house named Dulali in NCHSL, Birati, Kolkata

Photo courtesy: Nabanipa Bhattacharjee
which will never happen if you go to a typical Koilkati household. Sylhetis are warm and hospitable and we have that exclusive culture here'. Among the markers of Sylheti composite culture which residents of NCHSL do not fail to highlight, Sylheti dialect remains very important. Almost all Sylheti residents I spoke to enquired about my competence so far as Sylheti speech was concerned, to the extent that a shadow of doubt was cast on my ability to conduct research on the community when they found that I was not as well equipped as many would have desired. Consider for instance, what Shishir Ranjan Choudhury tells me: ‘I will speak to you on two conditions. You will have to pass a Sylheti quiz test where I will ask you questions related to Sylhet’s history and culture and second, you will have to speak in Sylheti. It is important that you pass both or else there is no point talking to you. It is sad that youngsters in Kolkata cannot speak Sylheti but you ought to’. Despite NCHSL being claimed as a Sylheti hub its younger residents as elsewhere in Kolkata are unable to speak, but able to follow Sylheti speech. However, those who have recently moved from say, Barak Valley are better equipped in speech as compared to the ones born and bred in the city. As Sraboni Chakrabarty observes:

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I was born and raised in Kolkata and we hear Sylheti speech only at home or in SS (SU) and in latter too it is rare. I married a non-Sylheti and cannot speak Sylheti myself but I am still a proud Sylheti. The older generation feels bit sad about my marriage but they know that in Kolkata one cannot speak publicly in Sylheti as no one would understand which would not be the case in Barak Valley. At least in NCHSL we get to hear the speech but the city is not restricted to this colony. Non-Sylhetis, particularly Ghotis make fun of us saying that our [and mine] Bangla has a peculiar tone; imagine what speaking Sylheti in public would do; I tell my friends that even though I do not speak Sylheti, yet I am a Sylheti for sure.
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Sylheti speech as the most significant marker of identity remains contested on issues related to place of origin in Sylhet, and length of residence in the Society and the city. Contrary to claims of being a community united on basis of speech, such issues bring to fore the existing but generally invisible lines of fragmentation within and outside the community in NCHSL. For instance, Debojyoti Roy says:

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Obviously Sylhetis in this Society and Kolkata have a common historical tradition but not everyone thinks that way. We speak Sylheti and prefer marrying within the community; speech is very important in our life but then which kind of Sylheti speech is the issue. A certain kind of speech of say east-central Sylhet is generally liked here and people like me who are from other areas are joked about by others by saying we are Bhatiyra that is from
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Bhatir desh; at times jokes take a serious tone too. A family arrived from Silchar a few years ago and the way some of my community friends privately commented on their speech, like "tara Silchoror kacha Sylheti koi, erokom kowa aamra bauut aage chari disi [they speak raw Sylheti which we gave up years ago]" was sad. Actually, families which have lived in Kolkata for many years are little snobbish because they think their speech is more refined and cultured which I see as more influenced by Koilkati; but Koilkatis still laugh at them. These people (and most of them are Brahmins) will talk big about Sylheti speech but given a chance will criticise the same spoken by a fellow Sylheti or even switch to Koilkati which I call Sil-Cal [mixture of Sylheti and regular Calcutta Bangla speech].

Non-Sylheti Bengali residents of NCHSL harbour mixed feelings about their Sylheti co-members; while they resent the Sylheti label attached to the society, yet at the same time they cannot but acknowledge that it is indeed so. As Hiranmoy Ghosh remarks:

We all live in this society and I am neither a Bangal nor a Sylheti but a Ghotti; it is unfair to call it a Sylheti society after the majority community. Some friends were not in favour but I chose to live here as it is a beautiful place; I have nothing against Sylhetis and appreciate their unity but at times they become oppressive at least in speaking (not in any formal meetings and gatherings though), marital relations and sometimes food too; we have made adjustments with our Sylheti friends but not everything of theirs' is good and I really do not understand their speech; after all we all live in Kolkata which is not a Bangal or Sylheti city but a Bangali one.

The other marker which the middle class considers shared exclusively by all Sylhetis is their social practices including customs, norms and values. Upon being asked what is so 'Sylheti' and exclusive about the social practices which other Bengalis do not share, a number of members appeared to be at a loss [see for example, Rajat Jayanti Barsha Swaranika, NCHSL, Birati, Kolkata, 1989-90]. However, the remaining pointed out that Sylhetis certainly have a 'swatantra sanskritik sattwa [independent cultural self/identity]' but at the same time also add that, that is not in conflict with the 'brihattara Bangali sanskritik sattwa [larger Bengali cultural self/identity]' [see for instance, Dutta 2002; Paul Choudhury 2002; Purkayastha 1998; BK, SS (SU), Kolkata, 1952-53; Sreebhumi, SKSA, Kolkata, 2006-07] The distinctly fused character of Sylheti identity is asserted by the community but unlike in Karimganj, the Bengali component is considered more or less given by the majority of Sylhetis (primarily the younger ones) of NCHSL in particular and Kolkata in general though not totally sans complexity as the last section will show, and contestation. As Jharna
Dey adds during an interview with her husband Tapan Kumar Dey at NCHSL: ‘I have lived in Kolkata for last 50 years, yet every time I speak to the shopkeeper next door he says, “ektu bhalo kore bujhiye bolben. Aaeddin shumeo aapnar kotha ekbare dhorte pari na [will you speak a little clearly. I have heard you for such a long time, yet cannot follow you at one go]. People still doubt if I speak Bangla’ [also see Choudhury 1992]. Indeed, speech remains central to Sylheti culture and consequently, Sylheti identity, contestation from within and outside notwithstanding. However, social practices related to samajik byabostha (social organization), the system of marriage in particular is not only no less but also one which as mentioned, the middle class claims as a tradition shared by Sylhetis but not other Bengalis, particularly “Ghotis”. Writing about what she calls the ‘distinctiveness of Sylheti system of marriage’, Subhadra Bhattacharji notes: ‘The rules and regulations of Sylheti marriage have bisheshattwa [distinctiveness]. Sylhetis never had dowry system. Nehru said that “Sylhet is Bengal but with a difference” and that is applicable to our marriage system too .... The beauty and distinctiveness of Sylheti marriage is tulonabihin [unparalleled]’ [2002:22; also see for instance, Basu 2006; Tattwanidhi 2004; Datta 2002]. On a similar vein Paritosh Bhattacharya says:

In Nabadarsha we follow the samajik byabostha of Sylhet as that is our tradition; we follow caste rules but have no problem with lower castes. Please note that I am not casteist, but why should I give up my bancha parichay and parampara [lineage and tradition]; as progressive people we educate women and do not discriminate on basis of religion. Sylhet had that tradition and we carry it in Nabadarsha. Sylhetis living here are united but every family also has, and follows its own caste and cultural tradition without interference; Koikkatis are also like us but we have some basic differences like in marriage system, in food, in other rituals and behaviour, in spending money; Sylhetis respect women and have a simple marriage without pan and tattwa [dowry]. I prefer Sylheti girls and boys from Barak Valley or here to be married to our children. The aluum-gelaum [coming and going in a kind of Bangla speech] culture of Ghotis is problematic for us; Purbabangiyos are better in some ways.

However, such views are contested not only by non-Sylhetis Bengalis of NCHSL but also sections of its Sylheti community. Samarendra Mitra for instance, tells me: ‘We have similarities and differences with each other but some Sylhetis tend to highlight only the latter. Our marriage systems have similarities as we are all Hindus, but Sylhetis say they have no dowry system, no caste etc. I can name those Sylhetis who are not at all forward, and not only believe in but demand dowry for their sons, and
are in fact very caste conscious'. The claim of shared samajik hyabostha and bibhapratha (system of marriage) is contested from within the community as the following remarks of Anindita Paul (and her husband Rudrangshu Paul) shows:

Living in Nabadarsha as Sylhetis also is not all that easy as it appears. This is Shampoo Babonor colony [colony of Sampradayik Brahmans pejoratively called Shampoos] by, of and for Bhattacharjees; and we are not that; inter-caste marriages happen but Brahmans, mainly the Shampoos have difficulty accepting those; also marriage rituals are little different for Brahmans and non-Brahmans; though not so rigidly, but caste distinctions, in food, rituals etc. are expected to be maintained; private references like Kayasthabarir ranna [food of Kayastha households] are common. Even days of mourning for the dead are lesser for Brahmans (11 days, and for non-Brahmans 13 days); “ita to rebā ammrā samajik niyom. Ita to maniya cholā lagbo [these are our social customs. We have to abide by them]” is what a Brahman will say if I would question him True, dowry is not part of our custom but so many Sylhetis demand that and given a chance I may not have hesitated also. We are all Sylhetis no doubt but what is common I cannot understand at times; but maybe speech is, and our common roots in Sylhet which is unfortunately lost.

Removed from the urban chaos of Kolkata city NCHSL symbolizes a space that is exclusive in terms of geography and for its Sylheti community, in terms of culture too. While a section of its non-Sylheti members insist that the character of its cultural space is nothing but Bengali, Sylhetis add to that its simultaneous Sylheti character which among others, is claimed as more ‘pure and authentic’ compared to rest of Kolkata. I have been told countless times by most members that unlike Sylhetis who live elsewhere in the city and ‘practise the culture as passtime’, in NCHSL that is a collectively lived experience. As a self-proclaimed bearer of ‘older Sylheti’ tradition of the city, Sylhetis of NCHSL assert that the responsibility to carry that forward lies on them for, the early Sylheti settlers who ‘directly experienced partition’ not only wanted to rehabilitate the refugees in NCHSL but also desired that the Society (and SS (SU)) emerge as the ‘Sylhet of Calcutta (and India)’ in future providing thus, a cultural base for Sylhetis within and outside the city [see for example, Rajat Jayanti Barsha Swaranika, NCHSL, Birati, Kolkata, 1989-90; BK, SS (SU), Calcutta, 1958-59]. Cultural assertion of NCHSL Sylhetis no doubt stems from the claim to ‘older Sylheti’ tradition that contributed among others, to the formation of the ‘nearly homogeneous’ housing society. However, this cultural assertion posed vis-à-vis Sylheti culture practised outside the Society derives additional strength from its territorial, albeit officially unrecognized anchorage within a clearly bounded physical
space. However, so far as maintenance of cultural boundary is concerned, that is seldom guided by a strict code of discipline; in fact, Sylhetis of NCHSL as Shishir Ranjan Choudhury says, believe that ‘they, as bearers of living tradition of Sylhet have a prominent and positive role to play in uniting the larger Sylheti community of Kolkata, and that was the vision of the founders’ of the Society who having failed to provide housing to all Sylhetis of the city in NCHSL desired it to remain at least a cultural base shared by the entire community’. Undoubtedly, as field notes suggest, NCHSL is a symbol of Sylheti culture and way of life not only for Sylhetis but non-Sylhetis (in a different sense) of the city too. But foregrounding the housing-society-located Sylheti culture as the prime mover of the community identity discourse in Kolkata poses serious problems. For instance, Sylhetis living outside NCHSL either grudgingly acknowledge its symbolic significance or outright question its legitimacy to act as the guardian of Sylheti interests in the city. Also, not all its Sylheti residents divided as they are on issues of speech, caste, and so forth accept its ‘domineering role’ in the larger affairs of the community in Kolkata. Resistance to the symbolic value of NCHSL comes from the younger generation, and those who are comparatively newer arrivals to the community and city. Most importantly, Sylheti culture of NCHSL is viewed as inherently caste-ridden and Brahmanical both in content as well as form, and the view interestingly comes not only from non-Brahmans but also those Brahmans who are ritually placed beneath “Shampoos” (pejorative use for Sampradayik Brahmans), the latter being a large group in NCHSL. As Ranjit Kumar Dutta puts succinctly:

_I am comparatively new to the city as I built my house in 1990's. I joined SS (SU) and I knew about NCHSL anyway as it is part of Sylheti tradition of the city. It has the old migrants and newer (fewer) ones too. Youngsters do not want to go there because it is in northern Kolkata; they also find the Sylheti business a bit too much. The problem is some NCHSL Sylhetis think they are dharok-bahok [bearer-carrier] of Sylheti culture in Kolkata; I give them credit as Nabadarsha gave shelter and shape to the Sylheti community in Kolkata after partition but they are not exclusive and superior, but like all others. Though they don't say but their behaviour shows; instead of helping build a cohesive group they have isolated so many Sylhetis. And caste of course is a cause of dislike because NCHSL is believed to be not Nabadarsha but Shampooadarsha colony. There may not be so many Shampoos now but we non-Brahmans, and also my non-Shampoo Brahman friends still consider it as the hub of one particular kind of Brahmans._
It is not just NCHSL’s primacy that is contested by sections of the community, but the collective identity itself as discussion held with younger members suggest. Most young Sylhetis aged between say, twenty and thirty years in spite of their inability to speak Sylheti do not resist being called Sylhetis but others, a much smaller number though refuse to be identified by the ‘Sylheti tag’ claim as they do that they are nothing but Bengalis and more importantly, of Kolkata which the citadel of Bengali culture. As a Sylheti born and raised in Kolkata, Madhuparna Chakrabarty says: ‘In this age of globalization it is important to highlight a global identity first followed by a Bengali identity that is identified with Kolkata for it is a global city. It is mindless to keep going back to past, to Sylheti identity which only pulls one backward and acts as an obstacle to the growth of a global Bengali identity’. Among other symbols of middle class Sylheti identity in Kolkata are two SA namely, SS (SU) and SKSA which as mentioned, play pivotal roles in the life of the community. However, the very existence of two SA is a pointer towards the fragmentary character of the collective and united Sylheti community and its identity that the middle class endlessly propagates. Moreover, SA like NCHSL is a symbol which is contested from within as well as from those who belong to: a) one of the two and b) none of the two. In fact, Kolkata has a large number of Sylhetis who neither live in NCHSL nor are members of either of the two SA and for those, being a Sylheti is not contingent upon such affiliations, the associational one in particular. As Kakoli Choudhury argues:

I am a Sylheti highly interested in the history and culture of Sylhet. I have lived in this city for years but not Nabadarsha remember for, whoever comes here thinks that all Sylhetis live there and it’s a nice place. I am not a member of any SA because my being Sylheti does not depend upon that; people who run the associations hardly know anything of Sylhet and publish meaningless articles in their souvenirs and hold equally meaningless picnics and functions. I do not as a principle, go to these associations. Being a Sylheti or a Bangal is not easy in Kolkata because even so many years after partition we have a sense of disconnect, something amiss, as my friend from Barisal would agree. Kolkata has a core to which not all are welcome and Sylheti associations cannot help me to get over this disconnect; it will only aggravate if we Sylhetis are isolated.

4.2: Associations and Sylheti community life in Kolkata

SA of Kolkata in particular and West Bengal in general are integral to the cultural life of the community in the state. The objective common to SA is ‘to contact and keep
up a fellow feeling and brotherhood amongst all people of Sylhet’ in their respective areas of operation as well as in India and the world [Memorandum of Association, Uttarbanga Srihatta Sanskriti Sammilani, Siliguri, 1984]. Official documents show how SA driven by a sense of “cultural obligation” are engaged not only in preservation but also propagation of Sylheti culture, more so because that often displays signs of fading into oblivion in contemporary India given the changing attitudes of younger members of the community in particular. For instance, one SA document states:

[w]e are of the opinion that the broadness of mind and brotherly feelings will develop from constant approach [sic] to Sylheti culture, which is very rich and progressive in nature. We should be very proud of our cultural heritage and intend to inculcate the same to our generations to come.... As a matter of fact we are putting in our earnest endeavours .... to cultivate Sylheti culture and common habits of which we have every reason to boast. A common platform with induction of cultural background and habits will add to the harmony and feeling of oneness for the people of Sylhet origin [Aims and Objectives, SKSA, Calcutta, n.d (unpublished)].

Though the associations are built around a district centric culture, yet the community insists that these being firmly embedded in spirit in the larger Bengali and Indian cultural traditions, are not ‘aancholik sanskritik sansthas [regional cultural organizations]’; as associations sans political agenda, these are essentially involved in philanthropic activities and strictly restricted to the cultural sphere.13 Indeed, Sylhet, the land lost and died has come to be regained and resurrected, now re-culturally by such SA in West Bengal and elsewhere in India; like other district associations of say, Chittagong and Mymensingh these are as the office bearers claim, cultural spaces and symbols that foster the spirit of unity and action among their members in particular and the community in general.

4.2.1: Keeping Sylhet alive: Srihatta Sammilani (Sylhet Union)

‘Srihatte madhyama nasti [there is no middle in Sylhet] for, our cultural expressions follow no middle path .... It is either the best or worst, the latter being rare’, remarks a member of the audience – drawn essentially from the middle class Sylheti community – during a cultural function of SKSA held on 18 November 2007 in Kolkata. Interestingly, as in the colonial period, in contemporary times too it is the middle class that remains the vanguard of Sylheti culture and heritage in Kolkata and elsewhere in
India. SS (SU) was established by the colonial Sylheti middle class whose student representatives in Calcutta having gained exposure in the fields of modern English education and progressive social values and consequently, driven by 'swadesh [Sylhet] prem [love for nation/country]' directed their attention towards the social and moral uplift of Sylheti women in particular and the community in general. As Ramranjan Bhattacharjee opines:

The aims of the Srihatta Sammilani included swadeshpriti [love for nation/country], spread of education and culture, mainly of women, in Sylhet, fight against corruption, relief for victims of flood and famine, fight against narcotics consumption, mainly alcoholism, ... fight against social superstitions, spread of knowledge related to mother and child health, obstetrics and midwifery and financial support to meritorious but poor students of Sylhet [1988:11 (translation mine); also see Bhattacharjee 1936; Bhattacharya 1992].

Along with the task of forging unity and brotherhood among Sylhetis of the city, SS (SU) dedicated itself to the development and spread of 'strishiksha [womens’ education]' in Sylhet. As one of its founders Sundari Mohan Das writes: ‘The task of Srihatta Sammilani was to forge unity and loving relationship among the Sylhetis who lived faraway from Sylhet in Calcutta.... Following discussions it was decided that our collective energy should be directed towards the development of female education in Sylhet’ [1936:2 (translation mine); also see Bhattacharjee 1936]. The task however, was more difficult than it appeared as ‘female education was considered reprehensible by the conservative and backward Sylheti society. Education of women was held as a Khiristani [Christianityish] practice’ [Shome 1936b:31(translation mine)]. Yet, the association and its eminent members like Bipin Chandra Pal, Tarakishore Choudhury, Reverend Jaygovinda Shome, Maulana Abdul Karim, Saradacharan Syam and others remained steadfast in the agenda and began the process by: a) negotiations with the government of Assam to establish girls’ schools in Sylhet b) extension of financial help to the privately run girls’ schools and c) introduction of syllabi, annual examination and merit awards for the non-school going, 'antthapurbashini mahilagan [home confined women]' of Sylhet [Ibid.]. Not restricted to any particular social class or religious group, the SS (SU) launched educational agenda eventually had decisive social impact on the larger society and culture of Sylhet. During the early years of twentieth century the activities of SS (SU) witnessed a lull as most of its members became actively involved in the freedom struggle. Its agenda by and large remained as
it was, except for the addition of a *Priti Sammelan* (social gathering/picnic) of the community at Calcutta to be held annually. The annual *Priti Sammelan* became a space where community members would meet, get acquainted and establish friendship with each other. As Sylheti population of the city grew and dispersed, SS (SU) with 443 members in 1936 was alarmed by the ominous signs of erosion of social ties within the community. Since it always stood as the symbol of collective and united Sylheti life of Calcutta the concern was as its member Paresh Lal Shome says, not only genuine and justified but also required urgent attention and action so as to ensure its own as well as the community’s well being. He writes:

> The Sammilani always worked towards the creation of a *sammilita jibon* [collective life] of the community in Calcutta and the well being of Sylhet.... Apart from female education, it always stood by the problems faced by Sylhet and Sylhetis. It used to be a live symbol of the collective life of Calcutta Sylhetis. But with growing population of Sylhetis and their dispersal, it has become difficult to maintain the social ties. If we can bring all the Sylhetis together, only than the Sammilani will be a strong and powerful association. Apart from forging *samajik bondhon* [social ties], the Sammilani may become the help center of Sylhetis in pursuit of education, business, jobs and consequently contribute towards the protection of their interests....in course of time it may emerge as a powerful Sylheti organization, a meeting place for Sylhetis [1936a:91 (translation mine); also see *Sylhet Chronicle*, Sylhet, 22 January 1939].

In 1936, the association organized a cultural event chaired by Sundari Mohan Das to mark its Diamond Jubilee year; in fact, the souvenir published on that occasion remains the most valuable source of information about its activities (or lack of such) in the colonial period. The souvenir, and also other available records of SS (SU) dating from 1930’s and 1940’s show the association making repeated appeals to the community to come forward and participate in its social welfare and related activities which primarily included providing financial help to poor students, and organizing the annual *Priti Sammelan* [BK, SS (SU), Calcutta 1937-39, 1940-41; also see *Sylhet Chronicle*, Sylhet, 22 January 1939]. The appeals continued, but acquired a tone marked by increasing anguish and urgency following partition. Describing the community as one that was now in peril as a result of being ‘*swadesh hoite bitarita, bideshao abanchita* [driven out of the nation/country, undesirable in foreign land]’, the association called upon its young and old members to come forward and renew their pledge to remain united in spirit and action so as to render useful service to the community, the most important being as already discussed, the task of rehabilitation.
of refugees. Its influence which was feared to be waning during the decade preceding partition made a comeback as its membership swelled and activities multiplied [Ibid.: 1951-52; also see Ibid.: 1956-59, 1962-64]. To sum up: the broad post-partition agenda of SS (SU) till late 1970's included among others: a) relief and rehabilitation of migrants in Calcutta and Cachar b) census of Sylheti population of Calcutta c) social and welfare work and extension of financial support to the community, its students in particular d) consolidation of its position as the ‘moral’ guardian of Sylheti interests e) initiatives to establish effective communication among Sylhetis and SA outside Calcutta f) preservation of Sylheti culture and heritage including erecting public statues, unveiling portraits, naming streets and roads and felicitation of eminent Sylhetis g) compulsory organization of the annual Priti Sammelan h) construction of Srihatta/Sribhumi Bhavan i) publication of the mouthpiece Sribhumi, and books on Sylhet j) support to the Language Movement in Cachar k) generation of funds and donation, and l) amendment of rules and regulations of SS (SU) [Ibid.: 1951-53, 1955-59, 1974-77; also see Chakravarty 2002].

Given the altered geo-political situation of India in 1947, the legitimacy and purpose of SS (SU)’s existence in the country was hotly debated. However, the association having addressed the matter maintained that at no point in time since its formation was its role and responsibility as crucial and essential, meaning to act as the ‘cultural and moral anchor’ for the ‘chinnamul and bastuhara [uprooted and homeless]’ Sylheti community, as in the aftermath of partition [Ibid. 1951-52, 1960-61]. To that effect, SS (SU) amended its existing Memorandum of Association (to be registered in West Bengal) in 1961 as given below:

The objects of the Srihatta Sammilani shall be to provide a meeting ground for those Indian nationals who had or have their ancestral homes in Sylhet & Cachar, for social and cultural activities; to provide amenities (a hostel) for the students of Sylhet and Cachar studying in Calcutta; to render aids for education and social uplift; to render social service; to launch and foster any other constructive activities for the furtherance of its aims and objects; .... The membership ... shall be open to those Indian nationals whose ancestral homes were/are in Sylhet and Cachar. Others, who by domicile or acquaintance or intimacy or otherwise identify themselves with the objects ... may be enrolled as members .... The Srihatta Sammilani may publish their own organ under the title “Sribhumi”.... The Executive Committee may put up ... proposal for constituting a Trustee Board for specific purposes, such as construction of “Sribhumi Bhavan” or Rehabilitation of people of Sylhet [Memorandum of Association of the Sylhet Union (Revised in 1961), Calcutta, 1961:2-5; also see BK, SS (SU), Calcutta, 1963-64].
The long pending proposal of building the Srihatta Bhavan led SS (SU) to create an eleven member Sylhet Union Trust (hereafter SUT) in 1982; the foundation stone of Srihatta Bhavan (changed from Sribhumi Bhavan) (hereafter SB) at 81, Kalindi Housing Estate was laid on 16 February 1986 by Dr. Triguna Sen, an eminent Sylheti who was also former Vice-Chancellor of Jadavpur University and Education Minister of India. The SB was to have a hall and auditorium, a reading room and library, rooms for temporary residence and finally, a students’ hostel and museum (of Sylheti culture); SB now houses the offices of SUT and SS (SU) (by a formal arrangement with SUT) though the construction work is yet to be completed. SUT and SS (SU) function independently, the former being essentially engaged in: a) administering (and constructing) SB b) social welfare work namely, annual scholarships (two) to students and running free homeopathic (three) clinics, and c) running a matrimonial bureau named Parinayan [BK, SS (SU), Kolkata, 2004-05, 2008-09; Chakravarty 2002; Deed of Trust, SS (SU)/SUT, Calcutta, 1982]. The objectives of SUT are as follows:

Resolved that the Trust now embark on social service activities such as, a) promotion of [s]ylheti culture, b) establish a marriage bureau to assist [s]ylhetias to find suitable matches within the community, c) homeopath clinic, free or partly free in select localities to serve the weaker section of the society, d) organize a ladies’ wing to start a non-formal school and /or vocational training such as, tailoring, dressmaking, needle work, etc. for women folk of weaker section of the community, e) introduce some memorial lectures and /or memorial scholarship; and commence such activities in a phased manner as may be possible within the financial means of the trust [cited in Roy Choudhury 2002:82; also see Deed of Trust, SS (SU)/SUT, Calcutta, 1982].

The matrimonial bureau Parinayan (www.parinayan.com) was established by SUT in 1992 to aid the ‘chinnamul Srihattiyas [uprooted Sylhetis]’ find suitable matches within the community and hence, ensure the preservation of Sylheti social tradition. Open to all, its success in addition lies as Shishir Ranjan Choudhury says, in the bureau’s ability to attract non-Sylheti Bengalis who are eager to forge marriage alliances with Sylhetis. He writes:

Working as the manager of Parinayan, I have had a delightful experience. Bengalis, whether of East or West Bengal, married to Sylhetis always want that their children to marry Sylhetis because, they say, ‘Srihatta manushjon khub bhalo hoi [Sylhetis are good people]’ ... So the good qualities of Sylhetis which attract others should be upheld and preserved, that is my request .... Also the bichchinna [separated/dispersed] Sylhetis, who are always keen on marital relations within the community look up to Parinayan for
Currently available records show that SS (SU) is engaged with two broad categories of activities: a) social welfare work namely, providing merit scholarships and running health awareness programs, and b) preservation and propagation of Sylheti cultural heritage; the latter includes: a) cultural events and functions, and b) publication of Smarak Granthas (commemoration volumes) and Sribhumi [BK, SS (SU), Kolkata, 2001-09; also see Images 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4]. While the office bearers of SS (SU) argue that its activities related to social welfare are as important as the cultural ones, yet field notes suggest that it is primarily the latter that draws middle class Sylhetis of Kolkata to it. As its current General Secretary Ahindra Kumar Bhattacharyya says:

Among all such organizations including Sylheti ones, SS (SU) is perhaps the oldest surviving one. We have succeeded in keeping the tradition of Sylhet alive in spirit and action. We are presently committed equally to the founding agenda of social welfare work and helping Sylhetis cultivate their cultural heritage as we did when Sylhet was in India. We have equally important responsibilities to carry forth both the heritage of Sylhet and the association; our scholarships help poor students of Barak Valley and other places to make their careers, though funds are not always easy to manage, the annual subscription of ordinary members being Rs. 50 and life members Rs. 1000 (Ordinary Members in 2009 are 737 and Life Members 393) Ordinary Members are many more in number but many forget to renew their membership, so only current figures are available. SS (SU) has a glorious history of sending students like Gurusaday Dutta, ICS, to study in England; Sylhetis of Kolkata are attracted to SS (SU) primarily for preserving their cultural identity and that is obvious because they live outside Sylhet and Barak Valley. After all, cultural identity is all we are left with; who can forget partition or what was done to Sylhet and Cachar in 1874. SS (SU) is itself a chinhha [symbol] of Sylheti culture and hence, gives a sense of identity to us. We want all SA that exist now to work for welfare of the community; old records of SS (SU) show that our association being the oldest and not a regional one always wanted to establish ties with other SA to chart out a common agenda but unfortunately that did not work out. Anyway, we are trying our best to preserve Sylheti heritage which is our right and duty [also see Ibid.: 1960-61, 1968-69, 2001-09; Roy Choudhury 2002].

The cultural agenda and activities pursued by SS (SU) appear to be no different from those of other district associations of Kolkata as for instance, Gautam Ghosh’s study (2002) of Mymensingh Association shows. No doubt, for all such district associations’ partition remains the common frame of reference. But for SS (SU) and
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Image 4.2: Health Awareness Programme, 2008, SS (SU), Kolkata

Photo courtesy: Nabanipa Bhattacharjee

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Image 4.3: Remembering pre-partition Sylhet, 2008, SS (SU), Kolkata

Photo courtesy: Nabanipa Bhattacharjee
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Image 4.4: Commemorating the birth anniversary of B. C Pal, 2009, SS (SU), Kolkata

Photo courtesy: Ahindra Kumar Bhattacharyya
SKSA, an additional one remains the moment of separation of Sylhet from Bengal in 1874. As a community ‘betrayed twice’, an expression most of its members do not fail to use, the trajectory of its identity formation stands markedly apart from Mymensingh, Barisal, Chittagong and other district centric identity trajectories. As founder of www.syllheti.org Pritam Bhattacharjee observes:

*We Sylhetis always had a distinct identity but it grew further since our separation from Bengal; partition was the greatest blow, but 1874 was no less. But till 1947 we at least had Sylhet even if that was placed outside Bengal. Partition took away Sylhet too but our identity was already made by then but we now had to function without a bhougolik [geographical] identity. So, we strove to focus totally on culture in a conscious way to compensate for the absence of Sylhet; SS (SU)’s focus was also directed to that. It was a difficult and painful process with Sylhet gone but we could do better than other districts because we already had an identity; SS (SU) gave us the necessary support and push and its contribution is immense. Other SA have also done their bit [also see Ibid.: 1958-59, 1964-65].*

SS (SU)’s post-partition cultural events and functions as records show, were/are: a) *Barshik Priti Sammelan/Milan Utsav* (annual social reunion) b) birth anniversary celebrations of famous Sylhetis like Bipin Chandra Pal (7 November), Sundari Mohan Das (18 December) and Gurusaday Dutta (20 May) c) *Mahaprabhu Sri Chaitanya Abirbhab/Janmoutsav* (15 March) (Sri Chaitanya’s birth anniversary celebration) d) *Kriti Sanbardhana* (felicitiation of eminent Sylhetis) e) *Sammilanir shakha gothon/bistaar* (formation of SS (SU) branches to promote Sylheti culture) f) *Sankritik/Krishti Utsav* (cultural event) comprising of dance, poetry reading, theatre and musical performances by well known (Sylheti and sometimes non-Sylheti) artists, and g) lectures, seminars and promotion of literature on Sylhet and those written in the Sylheti speech in particular. Though all cultural activities are carried out on a regular basis, the annual *Milan Utsav* (hereafter *MU*) is as I witnessed the most well attended and participated one.14 Held on a date and place chosen by the members in and around Kolkata, the reunion is the signature activity of SS (SU). The occasion of *MU* over the years has come to be clubbed with the *Sanskritik Utsav* (at least some events) where old and young members of the community are provided with the opportunity to ‘speak Sylheti and practise, and uphold their *sanskritik ebong samajik baishistha* [cultural and social distinctiveness]’. As Purabi Dutta, current Joint Secretary of SS (SU) says:
Our members attend all functions in full strength. Our Sanskritik Shakha [cultural wing] very actively organizes all janmoutsav's and other cultural events; Sri Chaitanya, S. M. Das and B. C. Pal birth anniversaries are very, very important for us and lectures, seminars are held to mark those. In 1956, the bust of S. M. Das was unveiled by Bidhan Chandra Roy at N. M. College and New CIT Road was renamed as Sundari Mohan Das Avenue. We are trying to erect a bust of B. C. Pal also. It is very important that we do these things because we have the responsibility of keeping the glorious tradition of Sylhet alive and train our children to follow that. Not too many young Sylhetis come but some do, and that gives us hope. In the annual MU huge numbers of Sylhetis turn up as did in the past. It used to be held in the Botanical Gardens for years but we keep changing the venue now. We provide elaborate lunch and organize sports, dance, music and poetry competitions; MU gives every Sylheti a chance to meet relations and friends, (sometimes eat Sylheti food too), perform Dhamail, sing Sylheti songs and most importantly, speak in Sylheti as that is otherwise difficult in Kolkata. During MU our members can talk of Sylhet and without the embarrassment of being laughed at, speak in Sylheti [also see Ibid.: 1967-68; Ghosh 2002; Sylhet Chronicle, Sylhet, 25 March 1940].

‘On the day of MU most of us feel as if we are in Sylhet though many of us have never been to that place, and the credit goes to SS (SU)’, says Ranjit Chakraborty, current Vice-President of SS (SU) during a casual discussion on the occasion of a Health Awareness program (14 December 2008) at SB. Indeed, most members of the community I met during that and spoke to echoed similar feelings, though few younger members complained of ‘acute boredom’ that MUs’ subjected them to year after year. Be that as it may, MU by and large remains the most popular and visible mode of Sylheti identity expression in the city. MUs’ held between 2007-09 in various parts of Kolkata say, at NCHSL in Birati, Kanungo Park in Garia and FD Park in Salt Lake included: a) Sylheti folk song and dance by noted artists like Madhuchanda Nag, Shubha Prasad Nandi Mazumdar b) Hasya/Byangya Koutuk (humour/joke/satire) performance by Tapan Das of Zee TV fame c) sports d) exhibition and release of books written by Sylhetis on Sylhet or other themes e) lectures by senior members of the community f) condolences for departed members g) Dhamail competition between teams drawn from across the city and finally, h) Khichuri and Labra (dal and rice cooked together, and mixed vegetable) and other kinds of lunch [see for example, BK, SS (SU), Kolkata, 2006-09; Chakravarty 2002]. The purpose of MU as Ahindra Kumar Bhattacharyya says, is to ensure that Sylheti space exists and flourishes in the country where members of the community may meet, remember Sylhet, speak Sylheti, ‘feel at home’, and strengthen mutual ties to remain as a cohesive and united
group. Reflecting on the MU of 2007 he writes: ‘Sylhetis living across India and outside participated in the MU and added to its stature and glory. Friends, relations and well wishers spent the day together and *purono smriti romonthon korte korte kichhukhon jonyo holeo jeno shonail otte fire jete perechilen* [remember old times and travel back, even for a while, to the golden past]’ [cited in BK, SS (SU), Kolkata, 2006-07:6]. In fact, if MU is a space for ‘recollecting past and strengthening the present’, so are the written documents (other than BK) such as *Sribhumi* and other *Smarak Granthas*. Five such documents published by SS (SU) are available namely, *Srihatta Sammilanir Hirak Jayanti Smriti Pustika* (hereafter *SSHJSP*) (1936), *Smarak Grantha: Eksho Pachishtama Barshapurti Udjapan Utsab* (hereafter *SGBUU*) (2002), *Gurusaday Dutta Eksho Pachishtama Janmabarshiki Ujyapan Smarak Grantha* (hereafter *GDJUSG*) (2007), *Sribhumi: Sundari Mohan Das Janmabarshiki Sankhya* (*SSMDJS*), and *Sribhumi: Bipin Chandra Pal Janmabarshiki Sankhya* (hereafter *SBCPJS*) (2009). In addition, SS (SU) has published a number of books on Sylhet and its cultural heritage for instance, *Srihatta Parichay* (1983) by Ranendra Nath Deb and *Srihatta Sreshtha Santanera* (1998) by Bijon Bihari Purkayastha. However, it is not only SS (SU) but publishing houses like Oriental Book Company and Sribhumi Publishing Company for instance, are well known publishers of books on Sylhet. As Bijon Bihari Purkayastha observes at length:

*Sylhetis are known to be writing about themselves and why should not they? I have written as there is so much to write about our rich heritage and culture; I found publishers like Kripesh Chandra Bhattacharjee led Oriental Book Company and SS (SU). Kripeshbabu was devoted to Sylhet and its culture and he funded anything connected to those; SS (SU) has also done a great job by publishing about Sylhet, its partition, our pain and trauma; its souvenirs are minehouses of information and give space to Sylhetis to at least write about Sylhet as we have lost the right to have it; writing is a kind of catharsis, unburdening of pain, memory. My Sylhet – that I am a Sylheti – is in my books; Sylhet comes alive when I write about it. But mind you, this exercise is not a communal one as we have nothing against other Bengalis or Bangladeshi Sylhetis. In fact, I have written how the kind of Srihatta charcha [studying Sylhet] we do here remains fragmented due to geographical constraints but maybe we can know the part to know the whole; whoever is interested and knows of Sylhet can write and speak in SS (SU) functions and we encourage them. I write on everything but writing on Sylhet is my freedom and right and I enjoy that the most; writing on Sylhet is important as that will show our sad story and existential crisis to our children who may not be inclined to join SS (SU) but still read books on the theme. Actually, books should be written in Sylheti dialect more often to keep it alive; SS (SU) published one such written by Phanindra Nath Dutta years ago. After all, the beautiful and vibrant Sylheti
dialect is our additional pride, our identity apart from Bangla, Bengali. Our credit is that we can simultaneously be first rate Sylhetis and Bengalis [also see BK, SS (SU), Calcutta, 1968-69; Chakravarty 2002; Purkayastha et al 2002].

Writings in Sribhumi and Smarak Granthas (hereafter S&SG) throw light on how written space is adopted as a mode for articulation of Sylheti identity. By writing on Sylhet – its speech and social practices – the contributors as Purkayastha pertinently notes, experience a sense of catharsis as well as relief from the ever lurking danger of 'bismiriti [forgetting]', of not 'remembering Sylhet'. What the famous Czech novelist Milan Kundera would call the struggle of memory against forgetting is played out in the world of writing where triumph of the former is desired and hailed. The individual acts of not 'forgetting Sylhet' translate into the collective, community act of 'remembering Sylhet' most importantly, for the purpose of 'educating' the young Sylhetis born and raised in Kolkata so as to spare them the anxiety associated with 'astitver sankat [crisis of identity/existence]' that the community continues to face even today. The writings contained in S&SG have wide ranging themes such as: a) geographical and socio-cultural history of Sylhet that includes essays on for instance, female education, language and literature, folk culture, music, dance, art, marriage, cuisine, syncretic heritage of Shah Jalal and Sri Chaitanya, Hindu-Muslim relations, Buddhist influence, influence of Ramakrishna Mission, Sanskrit education, participation of Sylhetis in the freedom movement, and so forth b) memoirs and reminiscences that includes essays on memories of Sylhet, trauma and pain of partition and the like c) poetry and prose written in Sylheti dialect that includes plays, reprint of Sylheti Ramayana and Mahabharata, Sylheti proverbs, and so forth d) Sylheti identity, its ‘distinctiveness’, and challenges faced by it in contemporary India e) tribute to eminent Sylhetis like B.C Pal and others, and finally f) function and role of SS (SU) and other SA in contemporary India, and extension of goodwill to the latter [Bhattacharjee 1936; Roy Choudhury et al 2002; GDJUSG 2007; SSMDJS 2008; Chakraborty et al 2009; also see Ghosh 2002; Purkayastha et al 2002].

Indeed, SS (SU) facilitated written space and the non-written one featured by cultural events and functions merge to become a common cultural space, and grow into a symbol of cultural identity for Sylheis of Kolkata in particular and India in general. Not only that, SS (SU), its cultural events and S&SG, particularly for the members becomes the community itself which is consequently projected as strong and united

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by them. Kaushik Pandit for instance, remarks: ‘As a member, SS (SU) for me is not just an association or astitver pratik [symbol of identity/existence] but astitva [identity/existence] itself. Kolkata is not Sylhet or Barak Valley, so SS (SU) is like those places in this city. It is my community, my home, my society. I belong to both Bengali and Sylheti societies of Kolkata’ [also see SSMDJS 2008]. Reflecting on the ‘SA phenomenon’ and Sylheti community life Sujit Choudhury pertinently opines:

Sylhetis and Bengalis in general have urge to form all kinds of associations and SA are not unique. But Sylhet’s history since 1874 has been different from other districts of Bengal. SS (SU) was for encouraging education in Sylhet but it also realized the necessity to create a platform, a space for expression of Sylheti identity. Separated from Bengal but in possession of Sylhet its people became too Bengali (as guardian of Bengali language in Assam) and in addition too Sylheti simultaneously. As the Assamese became more and more distant so did non-Sylheti Bengalis though the latter remained a grey area; but the relation was not easy for sure. By 1947 Sylheti identity was already somewhat made; in Calcutta, SS (SU) took lead in that direction with its middle class base; while for other district associations their district identity became important after 1947, for Sylhetis that was the case since 1874. So, instead of constructing a new one, Calcutta Sylhetis only had retain and propagate their identity in newer ways to suit the situation; so, SS (SU) in particular cannot be seen as a "refugee association" though now it has popularly but incorrectly come to mean that; except the Delhi association, formed mainly to address issues of Sylheti refugees, all others (and far too many) came up much, much later and outside Barak Valley and Assam (as it does not require one) those have turned into the community itself; what the community creates in turn shapes it. SA are into good things no doubt and their members say how they have kept the community together but I am not sure of that. In SA, Sylheti culture is safe and secure and to a large extent Bengali culture too but it is different in Assam. In Barak Valley, we do not end with 1947 but move back and forth everyday to 1874, 1947, 1961, 1972 and 1986 and so on. I do not mean other Sylhetis are divorced from Barak Valley but our everyday concerns are different [also see Ghosh 2002; SSMDJS 2008].

The projection of SS (SU) as a common cultural space and symbol of Sylheti community identity however is not an internally uncontested exercise. While a large section of its middle class members assert the indispensability of the association in terms of preservation of Sylheti cultural heritage and consolidation of community identity, others counter such ‘tall claims’. The counter claims are centered on issues of caste, occupation, age, length of residence in Kolkata, pattern and mode of functioning of SS (SU) – its agenda, its claim to be a unifying force, its symbolic relevance – and so forth. I gathered during discussions that discontentment prevailed amongst a fairly large number of members concerning the association; unlike younger
members who were open and willing to discuss their ‘problems’ with SS (SU), the senior ones were relatively less so. However, I did manage to elicit on conditions of confidentiality, few clear and candid responses. Rajat Kanta Deb for instance, says:

I became a member of SS (SU) when I settled down in the city in 1990's; I chose SS (SU) to be among Sylhetis and speak the bhasha. I was proud to be a new member of the oldest association and I am still very proud but perhaps only in name or when I have to tell others. I am not a Brahman or an upper caste Kayastha and not very knowledgeable and somehow I felt little sidelined even though I wanted to work; SS (SU) is dominated by Brahmins as the list will show; 30% of ordinary members are just Bhatts [Bhattacharjees’]; 20% of life members the same in 2008; imagine their total number, though not all are not from Kolkata; upper castes dominate, and particularly those from Nabadarsha. Why should we have any meeting, MU there? Thank God, MUs’ are now held in other places. I had thought SS (SU) will treat us like one Sylheti family but that was a dream; all organizations have problems with profession, caste etc but this one should have been different. But here we have all kinds of issues plus type of bhasha, Shillong-Silchar origin etc. But such things are done indirectly and from outside you will feel as all members will say, that everything is fine, Sylhetis are together, they love Cachar etc. I feel so sad.

If caste composition of SS (SU) is a source of fragmentation, so is its general agenda and pattern of functioning. Sharmistha Dasgupta tells me that SS (SU) is plagued by all kinds of ‘infighting’ ‘power games’ and ‘conspiracies’ which make it no different from other organizations. Not surprisingly, she continues, SS (SU) no longer commands the respect it used to from its own members, let alone the larger Sylheti community; SS (SU) is ‘affected’, ‘stuck’ and ‘hung up’ says she, and continues to ‘bask in old glory’ and hence, remains indifferent to the need of ‘modernizing its agenda and functions’. She adds:

Not many Sylhetis of my generation are in SS (SU) though it needs young and energetic people like us. And I am, and will remain always in it. But the way it functions with age old agenda, who would want to come. It repeatedly appeals to younger Sylhetis to work but if they suggest something, older ones will say, ita hoito nai or tumra shobta bujtai nai [that will not happen or you will not understand everything]. Imagine SS (SU) does not even have a website. I understand that preservation of our heritage is its first job but we can do that in a more innovative way including the birth anniversary celebrations, MU and other things. It is so stuck to the past, to separation from Bengal and partition. I am not asking to give up those but we need to focus more on the present of our community; souvenirs also should be made more younger reader friendly. It should get over traditional divisions of caste, religion, which Sylheti has come from where etc because such things come, even though unconsciously. SS (SU) was always a secular community with a progressive agenda and Rev. Jayagovinda Shome, a Christian and Muslims like Maulana Abdul Karim were
It is obvious that SS (SU) and the Sylheti culture it claims to uphold remains contested by a sections of its own members whose allegations, though hesitantly expressed throws up interesting questions ranging from “legitimacy of its existence” to its symbolization as the ‘dharok-bahok [bearer-carrier]’ of Sylheti culture. While a section of its members, particularly the recently arrived opine that SS (SU) is ‘ruled by Nabadarsha centric Koilkati Sylhetis’ who anyway hardly ‘do anything’, and when they do end up ‘diluting Sylheti culture’, younger members say that ‘its outlook is narrow, too partition-centric and distanced from Bangladesh’. Some members also point to the fact that SS (SU) is nothing but an association of ‘Hindu Brahmans’ who are engaged with Sylheti ‘uchha sanskriti [high culture]’ which common Sylhetis cannot identify with, and SKSA is far better in this matter. In fact, the list of grievances narrated left me slightly bewildered and shocked because on the face every member I spoke to appeared to be not just calm and content but also committed to SS (SU). I realized that Sylheti middle class of Kolkata is no different from the larger middle class of the city which appears to be composite and united but is actually deeply fragmented. Cultural symbols such as NCHSL and SA, professed to be held in common by the Sylheti middle class of Kolkata, are also predictably otherwise. Field notes demonstrate that SS (SU) – its symbolic significance, cultural agenda and organizational pattern – is not only not always acceptable to sections of its own members but also which as I will discuss shortly, those outside it, a pointer to the latter being the formation of SKSA in 1998. When I hint at the issues during a conversation with Ahindra Kumar Bhattacharyya, he argues at length to clarify:

*You must have been told by some members about issues of caste, Nabadarsha and other things and I can guess who they are; those are personal views and we cannot do much. But I will still address a few. History of SS (SU) will show that it never did anything on caste lines and was always secular unlike organizations like Srihatta Brahman Parishad or Srihatta Baidik Samiti. Its founders were Hindus as well as non-Hindus and non-Brahmans working for the common cause of Sylheti people and if some call it casteist it is sad really. We do have a large number of Brahmans and that too Bhattacharjees/yyas like me or the President and entire Sylhet did.*
I cannot say they dominate SS (SU), but their presence is inevitably more visible and so, irritable to few; we try to involve everyone, old and young members from all parts of the city and also outside; Bangladeshi Sylhetis are welcome but legal problems may arise; we have no problems with Muslims but somehow they do not come. Actually, Sylhetis just cannot forget partition and that is natural; SS (SU) had to alter its agenda due to that though our social welfare work remains as it is. Partition cannot be ignored and we read and write about that regularly but we are not a pure refugee association. As educated bhadralok our agenda is to preserve Sylheti culture, help that grow and bring youngsters in; we have few young members but the number has to grow. We are trying to address their needs but without compromising on our core agenda. We hold MU in new places now and not Nabadarsha as some members may think it is far off and getting tagged with the colony. But one should not think that way because NCHSL and SS (SU) always had close links and we should respect that. Anyway, we welcome everybody, from Kolkata, from NE or other parts of India to become our members. Barak Valley is our strength and very important for us but Sylhetis of Kolkata are also a large group and so is SS (SU). We need Barak Valley’s help all the time, we are all one family, but SS (SU) also has an independent existence, a tradition, and it will survive even without certain kinds of “patronage”. We should not be bothered about who is patronizing whom but work tirelessly to keep the old and young SA alive. SS (SU), you must agree, is the oldest surviving symbol of Sylheti cultural and collective spirit in Kolkata and across the world. All of us should work to strengthen it.

4.2.2: Saluting Sylheti spirit: South Kolkata Sylhet Association

On a cold 18 November evening in 2007 I joined a group of Sylhetis at Surya Sen Mancha situated near Jadavpur in southern Kolkata on the occasion of annual Bijoya Sammelan. Assembled under the banner of SKSA the group welcomed me, another fellow Sylheti to participate and witness the celebration of what a member called the ‘indomitable Sylheti spirit’. ‘The SKSA is a young, energetic and vibrant association of Sylhetis and it is driven by the desire to not just preserve but actively promote Sylheti culture’, said Bappu Endaw, current General Secretary of SKSA as I made my way towards a vacant seat. The small auditorium was nearly filled by the time Deba Prasad Paul Choudhury, its current President rose to open the function in Sylheti speech. The cultural events included dance/music performances, poetry reading, personal recollections of undivided Sylhet and accounts of recent visits to Sylhet, and so forth. ‘We met earlier but this evening should be special for you because you could experience Sylheti culture live. Now you know that SKSA not only exists but also “acts” unlike other associations’, remarked Bappu Endaw, yet again. In fact, not until 14 November 2007 did I know that SKSA existed (and I did mention that to Bappu
Endaw), and was taken by surprise when a distant relation of mine on being told about my interest in SA of Kolkata happened to casually mention the name of Deba Prasad Paul Choudhury and 'something like a Sylhet Association of his'. I looked up the directory of Kolkata Telephones and managed to meet him, realizing little that he would introduce me to yet another large, well-established and thriving association of Sylhetis of Kolkata. Located at 17, Ramthakur Park, Baghajatin SKSA was established in 1998 at the initiative of Sylheti residents living as is evident from the name, in southern parts of Kolkata. The reason behind formation of SKSA was as its members say, to enable Sylhetis of that area to interact on a regular and frequent basis and 'collectively nurture the Sylheti spirit'. Interestingly, unlike the objectives of SS (SU) as stated in its Memorandum of Association, 1961, the ones of SKSA as stated in its Memorandum of Association, 1998-99 do not make a direct reference to Sylhetis. It reads as follows:

Aims and Objects: a) To perform various works unitedly, for the benefit of people of all classes and sects b) To promote the cultural heritage of Bengal through various performances relating to literature, arts, science etc. c) To build up, maintain and improve, on regular basis, social communion amongst people who are highly dedicated to the activities relating to welfare of the society d) To help the needy students of all communities of the prosecution of studies e) To help the aged, sick, helpless and indigent persons f) To engage and assist in such philanthropic activities as may be deemed appropriate by the governing body of the society g) To collect donations and subscriptions for the purpose of the society h) To construct, maintain, improve, develop and alter any buildings, houses or other works necessary or convenient for the purpose of society .... The income and properties ... shall be solely applied towards the promotion of the objects stated above and no portion thereof shall be paid to or delivered amongst any of its members by way of profits [Memorandum of Association, S KSA, Calcutta, 1998-99].

Yet, Sylhet is not only mentioned in the official name of the association but also in the general documents, the swaranika (souvenir) Sreebhumi and most importantly, the official appeal for donation and subscription issued by its President, and the latter states: 'an organization named South Calcutta Sylhet Association has been formed ... at the initiative of some inhabitants of [S]outhern part of Calcutta, who had their origin at the district of Sylhet, Bangladesh. Please be kind enough to forward your Life Membership fees or Donation ... and mail it to the Treasurer' [Barshik Swaranika, SKSA, Kolkata, 2000-01; also see Aims and Objectives, SKSA, Calcutta, n.d]. After I pointed to Deba Prasad Paul Choudhury the ambiguity, he argued:
‘Sylhetis are Bengalis and we work for Bengali community in general and Sylhetis in particular. Sylhet appears in the name because with no Sylhet here that is the only space we have. We have to do justice to Sylheti bisheshatwa [distinctiveness] and cannot forget we are Bengalis too; SKSA is proud to carry both identities effortlessly’.

Interestingly, in course of the same conversation Paul Choudhury, gripped by sudden and strong emotion says:

Aamra Bangali-unga/ni nay. Baki Bangalira aamrare manche ni kunudin. Aamarar koite lage je aamra tarar lakhan, aalada nay. Aami koi aami Sylheti, prothom aar shesh. Aar ami Panchakhandi Sylheti taaroo aage. Kolkatat thaki khajei Bangali ami nischoy, kintu Sylhet aamar pran, aamar Maa. Maar thaki dure thaka jai kintu kunudin chhara jay na, bujho ni. Aami cholish bachharor sfire Kolkatat aasi kintu Sylhet aar Sylheti bhasha bulchi na. Khene aar kemne bultam? Kolkatira kharap nai kintu aamrar loge hokolita mile na. Khagoje, kalame aami Bangali kintu aamar pranta, aamar monta, aamar shoebat aashole Sylheti. Tumio to Sylheti, tumi bhujbay [we are not Bengalis or anything. The other Bengalis never accepted us. We have to tell them that we are like them, not different. I say I am Sylheti, first and last. And a Panchakhandi even before that. I live in Kolkata so I am a Bengali surely, but Sylhet is my life, my mother. One may stay away from the mother, but cannot forget/leave her, do you understand I have been living in Kolkata for over 40 years but have not forgotten Sylhet or Sylheti speech. Why and how can I forget? Kolkata people are not bad but we do not relate in every way. I am officially a Bengali but my life, my heart, in fact, all I have is Sylheti. You are a Sylheti, you will understand.

The agenda pursued by SKSA is similar to the one of not only SS (SU) but all SA spread across India; with a fairly large number of ordinary (600 in 2009) and life members (170 in 2009) drawn from the Sylheti community of southern Kolkata (also few from other parts) in particular and India in general, its agenda includes social welfare and cultural activities, the latter focused on history and tradition of Sylhet.

The association, not yet in possession of its own property uses the house/address of its President at Baghajatin as the permanent office. The executive committee, supported by various sub-committees runs the affairs of the association including holding of annual general body meetings, circulating annual proceedings, drawing up the financial plan, publishing Sreebhumi and annual membership list (which interestingly includes the members’ places of origin in Sylhet) and so forth [Proceedings of Annual General Meeting (hereafter PAGM), SKSA, Kolkata, 2007-09 (Unpublished); also see Sreebhumi, SKSA, Kolkata, 2008-09]. In 2006-07, SKSA, by giving a call to all other SA of India launched the process to form an All India Federation of Sreehatta
Associations (hereafter AIFSA) in order to facilitate better coordination amongst the member associations, and collectively work towards welfare of Sylheti community. The social welfare activities of SKSA include: a) extension of financial help and scholarships/stipends to Sylheti and non-Sylheti students who belong to economically weaker sections b) extension of help to people who come to Kolkata for medical treatment from other parts of India, North East India in particular (for instance, at AMRI, Dhakuria, and Srihatta Mediclinic, Rash Behari Avenue) c) arrangement of food and accommodation (as and when feasible) at reasonable rates for students and ailing people who come to the city d) providing travel companions to the aged who wish to travel in and around Kolkata e) negotiating marriage alliances within the community and finally, f) free distribution of books and study materials to poor and needy students [Barshik Swaranika, SKSA, Kolkata, 2002-03, 2003-04, 2005-06; Sreebhumi 2006-09; PAGM, SKSA, Kolkata, 2007-09]. The social/voluntary welfare programs of SKSA as one of its founders Nirmal Sen Choudhury says, remains one of its most important objectives. He says: ‘SKSA is not just devoted to the cause of Sylheti people and their culture but also has a social obligation towards people at large. Social development is a pre-requisite for healthy cultural growth and that is why we are bent upon aiding poor people with affordable health care and education; our society and culture can grow that way’.

While voluntary social service remains crucial to the association’s agenda, the cultural activities are not only any less but perhaps far more significant as available records and field notes suggest. Members I had conversations with unanimously declared that the ‘sajib sanskritik [culturally alive]’ agenda and ethos upheld by SKSA drew them towards it. More importantly, few suggested that the initiative of SKSA to strengthen the cultural ties between Sylhetis of India and Bangaldesh which they felt was a necessary and positive step, was another reason for they joining it. In fact, its members also pointed out that SKSA was the only association in Kolkata that maintained close ties with the ‘home of Sylheti culture in India’ meaning Barak Valley. Indeed, preservation and propagation of Sylheti culture remains the core activity of SKSA which includes as Bappu Endaw notes: first, celebration of birth anniversary of Sri Chaitanya and other eminent Sylhetis like Bipin Chandra Pal, Sundari Mohan Das, Santadas Babaji and so forth, second, felicitation of aged and prominent members of the community including conferring honorary Life
Membership to them, third, annual celebration of Nababarsha and Bijoya Sammelan, fourth, organization of the annual Sylhet Utsav, fifth, arrangement of short trips of members in and around West Bengal (a trip to Mayapur was organized in 2008), and as and when possible to Sylhet, sixth, organization of joint cultural functions with the participation of other SA, and seventh, publication of Sreebhumi [see for instance, Barshik Swaranika, SKSA, Kolkata, 2000-04, 2005-06; Sreebhumi 2006-09]. As I moved in and around southern Kolkata in 2008 speaking to members of SKSA about their lives and cultural practices in general and reasons behind joining the association in particular, I was repeatedly reminded of what Nirmal Sen Choudhury had said at that Bijoya Sammelan function of 2007. He had, in an emotionally moving speech (I did see few older members of the audience wiping their eyes) said:

_We Sylhetis are people with culture but unfortunately without geography. We are like Jews who always carried their culture even outside their homeland. We have a homeland but because of trick of history we can no longer call that our home or gain entry. How durbhaga [unfortunate] we are; 1947 was the saddest year of our lives. But we Sylhetis survived 1947 and will continue to do so because bhugoler parihash [joke played by geography] cannot deter us from using the only punji [capital], our sanskritik ebong shamajik oitjhya [social-cultural heritage], that we have; that punji is our strength; that also helped us bear the pain of our separation from Bengal. The time has now come to renew our pledge to our society and community. We have created SKSA on the basis of our sankritik ebong samajik punji and it will guide, make us alive and unite us. Let us not forget our golden Sylhet which produced the best of Bengali minds. SKSA is our home because only with Sylheti culture we feel at home [part paraphrasing mine]._

Indeed, for middle class members of SKSA it is viewed as the ‘authentic repository of Sylheti culture’ in Kolkata. While members of SS (SU) claim the same, yet their expressions often appear to be slightly more trained and if I may say, guarded compared to those of SKSA members. Perhaps, I gather, being members of a younger association it is but natural that members of SKSA are driven by a sense of urgency to prove their ‘authentic Sylheti’ credentials. Quite predictably, the cultural events and functions organized by SKSA more often than not involve not just a large audience but a large number of participants as well, though this is not to say that SS (SU) functions are not well attended. As Debjani Ghosh remarks: ‘Every event of SKSA is important for us because by attending them, and a very large number gathers every time, we not only remain united but get to take part in Sylheti cultural activities like Dhamail dance, folk songs and so on. I doubt if other associations are able to
motivate so many people to participate. I am very proud of SKSA”. The three annual cultural events held at places chosen around southern Kolkata and witness maximum turn out are Nababarshabaran Anusthan (Bengali New Year Welcome Function) held in April-May, Bijoya Sammelan Anusthan (End of Durga Puja Celebration Function) held in September-October, and Barshik Milan Utsav/Mela (Annual Meeting/Gathering) held in January-February [Sreebhumi, SKSA, Kolkata, 2006-09]. At times, other cultural activities such as commemoration of birth and death anniversaries, felicitation of eminent Sylhetis, meetings of AIFSA, guest lectures and so forth are included in these major cultural events. As Debraj Paul Choudhury narrates:

I am an active member, and can say that cultural functions of SKSA are held throughout the year. It begins with the Nababarsha celebration where everything is done in accordance with Sylheti culture and style like speaking in Sylheti, singing Sylheti folk songs etc and we also sing Nazrul Geeti, Rabindra Sangeet as well. Bijoya Sammelan includes music and dance performance, Sindur Khela [application of vermillion among women], etc. Sylhet Utsav held in January is the best, and we wait for the event. It starts with a Mangalik Anusthan meaning Odhibash [auspicious ritual before beginning an event] where women give Sankkhadhwani and Ulludhwani [blow the conchshell and make an auspicious sound]. That is followed by sports events, Dhamail dance, songs, Sylheti humour and finally lunch which sometimes include shutki [dry fish] as an item. We sometimes have Sylheti food festival and handicraft exhibition as well. In 2007, almost 500 people came to the annual gathering and that year we also organized a meeting to pay our respects to famous folk singer Nirmalendu Choudhury on his 25th death anniversary. This shows the strong bonds we all share.

SKSA maintains close contact with other SA located in India, and also Sylhetis of Bangladesh. For instance, it took part in Sreehatta Sammilani, Delhi organized Bipin Chandra Pal Smaran Utsav (Bipin Chandra Pal Remembrance Celebration) in 2008, and it participates in SS (SU) organized birth anniversary celebration of Sundari Mohan Das held at National Medical College, Kolkata every year; not only that, SKSA also invites other SA located in and outside the state to participate and perform in its cultural events as for instance, during the annual Sylhet Utsav held in January 2009 which in addition, included the first official meeting of AIFSA [Barshik Swaranika, SKSA, Kolkata, 2000-04, 2005-06; Sreebhumi 2008-09]. To mark the contribution of the famous Sylheti folk music maestro Nirmalendu Choudhury, SKSA organizes the Nirmalendu Choudhury Lok Utsav (Nirmalendu Choudhury Folk
Festival) in collaboration with the Utpalendu Choudhury led cultural association Lokabharti, and which witness active participation of Bangladeshi folk singers and activists as well; SKSA also observes the birth anniverasy of Gurusaday Dutta whose contribution to folk culture studies remains its everlasting source of inspiration [Sreebhumi, SKSA, Kolkata, 2007-08]. In fact, cultural functions with focus on folk culture of Sylhet are staples of SA across India and SKSA in particular; admittedly, folk music and dance are considered as Chapter III shows, the ‘most vibrant and finest elements’ of Sylheti culture. Folk music and dance extravaganza predictably feature in every Sylhet Utsav (name for annual Milan Utsav/Mela since 2007) where well known Bangladeshi and Indian singers like Bidit Lal Das, Subimal Dutta, Pranesh Shome, and music bands like Surma Dohar perform on a regular basis. In fact, such is the level of appreciation for folk music that during a performance by the popular band Surma Dohar at Sylhet Utsav 2009 whose preparations I happened to witness first hand, the audience unable to restrain its unbridled enthusiasm began to sing and dance to the tunes played, and continued do so till late in the night. The two day Sylhet Utsav held in 2009 suggests Nirmal Sen Choudhury, was the grandest of cultural events organized so far by SKSA [see Images 4.5 and 4.6]. It included: a) homage to B.C Pal b) two invited lectures on B.C Pal and Sylheti culture by Prof. Usha Ranjan Bhattacharya c) cultural extravaganza including Sruti Natak (theatre recital) by Deradona Bhand, Silchar, music-dance-drama by Sribhumi (the cultural wing of SKSA), play by Sreehatta Sammilani, Delhi, folk music by Surma Dohar and so forth d) Gunijan Sanbardhana (felicitation of eminent Sylhetis) of Sacchidananda Dhar and Pinaki Choudhury e) release of Pragati Parvaha, the mouthpiece of AIFSA f) holding AIFSA meetings and workshops g) scholarship/stipend award to students h) sports events i) sumptuous lunch and informal chat sessions around camp fire at night followed by dinner [see for instance, Sreebhumi, SKSA, Kolkata, 2008-09]. Recounting his experience of Sylhet Utsav 2009, Sabyasachi Dasgupta says: ‘I attended the Sylhet Utsav and it really was a grand affair. I was thrilled to see the numbers and enthusiasm among young Sylhetis. People spoke in Sylheti, cracked Sylheti jokes, fixed marriage alliances, ate, sang and danced. It is really worth being a Sylheti and to belong to the community; SKSA deserves all credit for that’.
Chapter IV

Image 4.5: *Sylhet Utsav* 2009, SKSA, Kolkata.

Photo Courtesy: Bappu Endaw

Chapter IV

Image 4.6: *Dhamail* function at *Sylhet Utsav*, 2009, SKSA, Kolkata

Photo courtesy: Bappu Endaw
Cultural life of SKSA is however, not confined to such events and functions alone. The association annually publishes its swaranika/souvenir/mouthpiece Sreebhumi to ‘highlight and bring to fore the rich cultural heritage of Sylhet for benefit of bhabishyat prajanma [future generation] so that they develop a heartfelt tie to Srijhater ujjwal sanskriti [Sylhet’s bright culture]’ [Sreebhumi, SKSA, Kolkata, 2008-09 (translation mine)]. SKSA has published eight swaranika/souvenirs (named since 2006-07 as Sreebhumi), the latest being in 2008-09; while four issues have general cover page designs, the rest have: a) map of undivided Sylhet (2005-06) b) photograph of Keane Bridge built in 1936 on Surma river in Sylhet town (2006-07) c) photograph of Ghari Ghar (clock tower) located on the bank of Surma in Sylhet town (2007-08), and d) photograph of Deba Prasad Paul Choudhury who passed away in January 2009 (2008-09). I was told by Nirmal Sen Choudhury (a member of the editorial board) that such photographs not only provided older members a glimpse of the world they had ‘left behind, yet remained connected to’ but also gave younger members a chance to see ‘what their motherland/homeland actually looked like’. The photograph of Keane Bridge interestingly, carries a caption that says: ‘this Bridge connects Sylhet town with its Railway station and it has an immense emotional bondage with the people of Sylhet’ [Sreebhumi, SKSA, Kolkata, 2006-07]. Apart from general Sylhet related writings, the souvenirs contain photographs of cultural events and eminent Sylhetis like Syed Mujtaba Ali, annual financial/audit and general reports, appeals among others, for funds to build a ‘smriti mandir [memorial house] of Sylhet’ in Kolkata, condolence messages/notices and finally, personal goodwill messages and advertisements from across the country; one personal message for instance, wishes SKSA the best for its ‘earnest endeavour to unite all Sylhetis’. Interestingly, the souvenirs carry a large number of advertisements and goodwill messages from Bangladeshi Sylhetis too; while advocate Bandhu Gopal Das of Sylhet Law Chamber, Sylhet regularly sends his ‘Best Compliments’, a couple by the names of Jafar and Sirin Osman of Dhaka periodically extend their ‘Best Wishes for South Kolkata Sylhet Association & all the Sylhetees & Bengalis’. By and large focused on Sylhet’s history and culture, general writings in the souvenirs include: a) ‘gabeshonamulok gadya [research oriented prose]’ on literary, religious, political, educational and folk (music and dance) tradition of Sylhet b) tribute to eminent Sylhetis like Hachon Raja, Radharaman, Raghunath Shiromoni,Bipin Chandra Pal, Sundari Mohan Das, Gurusaday Dutta, Triguna Sen, Swami Gahananada, Swami Premeshananda and so forth c) personal accounts, memoirs and reminiscences d) short stories, plays, poems and travel accounts, sometimes written in Sylheti dialect e)

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reflections on Sylheti identity, 'unique' Sylheti qualities, separation of Sylhet and Bengal in 1874 and partition f) positive and fond reflections on Sylhetis by non-Sylhetis, and g) language and culture of Barak Valley [Barshik Swaranika, SKSA, Kolkata, 2000-04, 2005-06; Sreebhumi, SKSA, Kolkata, 2008-09]. The souvenirs usually begin with a mukhobandha (preface) which invariably refer to the 'geographical trick' played by history on Sylheti community; in fact, the souvenirs are full of short renderings and notes often written by unnamed members who exhort SKSA and its members to rise and unitedly face the challenge of preserving the 'distinct' identity, and building a 'cultural community albeit sans geography' in India. Deba Prasad Paul Choudhury for instance, writes in the preface of Barshik Swaranika, 2001-02 about how the present and adopted 'swadesh [own nation/country]' of Sylhetis in India fail to provide actual 'swad [taste]' of the original homeland (Sylhet). However, he adds that the 'distinctive' identity of Sylhetis – their dialect and social practices – has remained unchanged despite the altered contours of Sylhet's history and geography, and the urgent duty of the community is to preserve that 'bhugol bihin swatantra Srihattiyo satrwa [geography less independent Sylheti self/identity]' [also see Barshik Swaranika, SKSA, Kolkata, 2003-04, 2005-06]. A poem composed in Sylheti dialect by SKSA member Shyamal Bhattacharjee laments the loss of Sylhet, and echoes what Paul Choudhury writes. It goes as follows:


Other than the content mentioned above, the souvenirs also contain short essays which touch upon the contentious issue of failure of SS (SU) to effectively address the contemporary situation of Sylhetis in Kolkata in particular and India in general. Adopting a moral tone the writers of these essays blame albeit selectively, members of SS (SU) for bringing about downfall of one of the most prestigious 'oitijhyabahi sangathans [heritage organizations]' of Sylhetis. As Nirmal Sen Choudhury writes:

"The [SS (SU)] was not formed to only hold annual social gatherings; it had far reaching intentions and goals. However, only an isolated few realized that. The kind of well planned..."
organizational activity that could have established the [SS (SU)] on a firmer footing in history unfortunately did not happen. Routine activity sans fervour is not a positive signal for preservation and protection of identity and existence. Not only history but the future generation will take notice of the organizational destruction and be reluctant to participate in the activities. The moral responsibility for the new generation’s reluctance and inactivity will squarely lie on the earlier generation [2000-01: no pp (translation mine); also see Barshik Swaranika, SKSA, Kolkata, 2003-04; Bhattacharjee 2000-01].

In fact, field notes adding to what Sen Choudhury says, show how a large section of members of SKSA actually consider the ‘moral bankruptcy’ of SS (SU), and its consequent ‘loss of moral legitimacy’ as the most important factors behind the formation of their association, though they publicly (and sometimes officially in Sreebhumi) maintain that the rising population of Sylhetis in ever expanding Kolkata city necessitated the formation of an additional SA in it [Sreebhumi, SKSA, Kolkata, 2006-07]. Before I discuss how the two SA remain contested cultural spaces from outside, it is important to note that SKSA is not immune to internal fragmentary forces either. As in the case of SS (SU), few members question SKSA’s agenda including its mode and pattern of functioning, caste composition and inability to draw sufficient young members, and so forth. Santanu Chakrabarty puts forth his arguments not as he says, as criticism but suggestions for ‘future improvement of SKSA’. He argues at length:

*As a South Kolkatan I am a member of SKSA and no doubt it does good work. But the agenda is not very innovative and youth friendly. Culture is our property and we need to handle it carefully when we decide to spread it among the wider community. I joined SKSA because it promised activity and dynamism but what has it done for Kolkata Sylhetis except for routine activities, busy as it is with AIFSA which I don’t deny is important. Even quality and content of Sreebhumi has to be improved to highlight correctly our high and advanced culture. Caste prejudices also need to be removed so that non-Brahmans who are a majority here do not laugh at Babons [pejorative use for Brahmins] like me. Not all are like that but some often tell me: rakholyin aafnar babnaki maat [keep aside your Brahmanical talk]. The newcomers who are critical of everything Kolkati also think that old timers of Kolkata are less Sylheti and more Kolkati especially when old timers break into Koliakati Bangia while speaking in Sylheti. That is not fair as we are both Sylhetis and Kolkatis. I also do not appreciate much the patronage of Sylheti political leaders, though that is for funds etc. But we should also look for other means to sustain our young organization; though I am not against, but our ties with Bangladesh need careful handling. I will always remain a member but only positive shamalochona [criticism] will help our young association and Sylheti community grow to the extent we can be proud of in future.*
Such ‘positive criticisms’ however, as field notes point do not indicate that except for some issues that require ‘attention and improvement’ all is well with SKSA. For instance, during the Bijoya Sammelan function that I attended members Monotosh and Jayati Biswas whom I happened to already know remarked off-hand about their experience in SKSA. They said: ‘We live in southern Kolkata so we are members as its functions are held in this part of Kolkata. So what is the point in blaming SS (SU) and calling it Nabadarsha and north centric? SKSA imitates SS (SU) and suffers from identity crisis; problems with it are endless and we are not sure how far it will succeed in keeping us together’. In fact, beginning with SKSA’s a) initiative to form AIFSA b) patronage by Sylheti political leaders c) ties with Bangladeshi Sylhetis d) induction of young members e) caste/group composition f) naming the souvenir Sreebhumi g) attitude towards SS (SU) h) south centric sphere of operation and finally, i) claim as the ‘authentic voice of Sylheti unity’, do not remain internally uncontested though outwardly such issues become the rallying points of its ‘practical, moral and legitimate’ right to exist and thrive in the city and country. As younger of the two associations in Kolkata, SKSA as field notes and available records show, has to constantly negotiate with SS (SU) and its one hundred thirty four years old historical legacy; the result is deep identity crisis that the former and a large number of its members face who as Monotosh and Jayati Biswas say, ‘have to among others, painstakingly clarify to outsiders that two SA exist in Kolkata and that they do not belong to the aadi [original] Srihatta Sammilani but the new one called SKSA about whose existence most people are not aware’ [see for example, Barshik Swaranika, SKSA, Kolkata, 2000-04, 2005-06; Sreebhumi, SKSA, Kolkata, 2006-09]. Internal contestation notwithstanding, SKSA remains for its members (except perhaps the harshest member critics) a vibrant and live symbol of a composite and united Sylheti cultural identity. As Deba Prasad Paul Choudhury says:

We felt the need, and struggled to build SKSA because South Kolkata required another association where Sylhetis could meet, talk and feel at home. SS (SU) did not do much work when we formed SKSA. As a new association we faced fund problems, membership issues and so on. We turned to every member of the community. Santosh Mohan Dev, the minister from Silchar supported us in every way and we are grateful. I know people think SKSA is for non-Brahmans but that is a lie spread by our enemies. We want every Sylheti with us, Brahmans, non-Brahmans, Hindus, Muslims, Bangladeshis and of Barak Valley; only then our dream of building a strong and dynamic community will work. Our souvenir is very nice but it requires improvement. Following us, SS (SU) named their souvenir Sribhumi also and we appreciate that,
and have nothing against it. In fact, it is SS (SU) that refuses to join us or AIFSA. AIFSA is our dream, our support and we have to build it with help of youngsters so that Sylhetis do not feel insecure about losing their culture and heritage. We are doing our best but not everyone as it happens is happy, and we welcome criticisms. You mention some identity crisis of SKSA but there is no such thing, and every association has a beginning, as SS (SU) did, and SKSA and AIFSA will emerge victorious in future and members will be proud of these. Should I say Long Live SKSA and AIFSA? Long Live Sylhetis! [also see Sreebhumi, SKSA, Kolkata, 2006-09; Pragati Pravaha, AIFSA, Kolkata, January, 2009]

Much like NCHSL as I have already shown, SS (SU) and SKSA too are contested symbols not only from within but also without. In fact, very existence of two SA in the same city points to the fragmentary character of the so called united and common cultural space of middle class Sylheti community of Kolkata. I have hinted at how formation of SKSA was not soley guided by locational considerations; rather, alleged moral bankruptcy of SS (SU) was one of the contributory factors behind the initiative. However, over the years the two associations have followed a civic principle of peaceful co-existence and officially recognized each other’s contribution towards preservation and propagation of Sylheti culture [see for example, SSMDJS 2008; BK, SS (SU), Kolkata, 2005-06; Sreebhumi, SKSA, Kolkata, 2007-08]. But the relationship, though not exactly hostile is actually less than as field notes suggest, cordial and peaceful; the fact that SS (SU) has chosen to remain outside SKSA initiated AIFSA has only added to the already existing anxiety and tension ridden relationship [Minutes of Meeting of AIFSA, Delhi, 2008 (Unpublished)]. A section of SS (SU) members not only consider SKSA a ‘bhunphor [suddenly emerged]’ entity but also squarely blame it for ‘bifurcation of the painstakingly created Sylheti space’ of Kolkata; they insist that SKSA was created to serve the ‘vested interests’ of some ‘power hungry’ members of the community, and the situation continues to be same even today. As Amulya Bhushan Raychaudhuri opines:

SKSA is not really a friend of Sylhetis because first they divided our common culture and then pretended through AIFSA to unite all of us. We are not with AIFSA because our individual work should be done first and SS (SU) has no official rule supporting such things. SS (SU) is supposed to create sanmanay sansthas [united associations] and branches and not unite with another one; SS (SU) should have been the nodal organization; so how does this new SKSA thing come in?: entire community should have rallied behind SS (SU) and remained united under its banner for, it is the oldest and most prestigious Srihatta Sammilani that survived all kinds of political upheavals. SKSA survives on political patronage while we depend only on common Sylhetis for funds etc. We carry the true and authentic Sylheti spirit and who can question that and our bonedi [old/classical] tradition is our strength. They have also named their souvenir after ours and that is amusing really, and by
cultivating links with Bangladesh they intend to show their patriotism. We can do that too but by following proper rules and laws; SKSA always blamed us for being Nabadarsha centric [even calling it by that name], Brahman dominated, inactive and interestingly, anti-Muslim and so on; such allegations are totally motivated and untrue; SKSA suffers from deep hinamanyata [inferiority complex] actually. SS (SU) was, and will remain the true bearer of Sylheti cultural heritage, and for that we have, and will work [also see Bhattacharjee 1988, Roy Choudhury et al 2002; SSMDJS 2008].

If some members of SS (SU) at least voice their unfavourable opinion albeit in private, about SKSA, others feign complete ignorance about its existence in the city. ‘I really have no idea about SKSA because I am not sure if such an association exists at all. Someone did mention about an association once but naturally I was not bothered. It must be a small and informal group and one cannot call that an association really. SS (SU) is the only association of Sylhetis in Kolkata’, remarks its active members Tapan Kumar and Jharna Dey. Interestingly, records of SS (SU) dating from 1960’s show that it was not averse to the idea of other SA being established across India; rather, it always welcomed such efforts [see for example, BK, SS (SU), Calcutta, 1960-62, 1966-69]. However, being a ‘moulik sanstha [fundamental organization]’ it expected other SA to function as its ‘shakha sangathans [branch organizations]’, and it continued to pursue the issue albeit without any success [BK, SS (SU), Kolkata, 2001-06; also see SSMDJS 2008]. The establishment of SKSA as an independent, non-SS (SU) branch organization in the very heart of Kolkata predictably did not go down well with SS (SU) functionaries and members; most importantly, it challenged the latter’s claim of being the sole symbol or rather, the identity itself of Sylheti community of Kolkata. As Sujit Choudhury pertinently points out:

For Sylheti middle class in and outside Kolkata, SS (SU) is not just an element of their identity but identity itself. Actually, Kolkata and SS (SU) were synonyms for the community till the time the other association was not formed. Kolkata is “special” for Sylhetis and so is SS (SU); for middle class Sylhetis of North East for example, the making of Kolkata as a place invariably includes SS (SU) but now the new association will also have to figure; SS (SU) will certainly find that difficult to accept; for the new association the situation is not easy at all as it will have to prove itself time and again and explain its rationale of existence and in the end may or may not be able to capture the imagination of the community as SS (SU) did, and still does to a large extent.
As mentioned, a kind of SS (SU) induced existential anxiety indeed prevails among some members of SKSA who are caught between their commitment to the association on one hand and being skeptical of its ‘eventual sustainability’ on the other. But SKSA does have a large number of members who experience no such crisis, though I cannot but point out that its vociferous negation is actually indicative of that very one. Such members of SKSA again privately, adopt a near totally dismissive tone while discussing SS (SU) and its activites; near totally because the one hundred thirty four years old legacy of SS (SU) is not only something they have to reckon with, but also that it cannot be merely wished away. Indeed, these members just cannot but acknowledge the presence of SS (SU), much as they would like to do otherwise. ‘SS (SU)’s historical legacy is ours too and we are proud of that, but what is problematic is the way it functions now. People like Phanindra Nath Dutta, Ananga Mohan Chakrabarty worked tirelessly for the association after partition. But all that has gone down the drain. What sense would it make to stick to a defunct association’, says Debjani Ghosh. Therefore, SS (SU) comes to be selectively appreciated and accepted; while its past is valorized and considered as a legacy shared by all members of the community irrespective of associational affiliations, its present is demonized and consequently, held responsible for creating irreconcilable divisions and distances within the community. Consider for instance, what Animesh Dhar Choudhury says:

SS (SU) was a great organization but some people destroyed it. I was its member but gave up to join SKSA because that hardly did anything except for helping select refugees, organizing picnics and eating khichuri-labra; its leaders had a big-brotherly attitude which I hated and all Brahmans from Nabadarsha by the way; Brahmans, I am sorry to say, are very caste conscious and constantly disrespect others. Establishing SKSA was a necessity to do something solid for Sylhetis and even now Nabadarsha sammilani refuses to cooperate with us; being older it is full of ego and arrogance though that is no excuse for feeling superior; it current members wanted all SA to fall at their feet and beg, and none of us did, and today they stand isolated; that arrogance prevented it from joining AIFSA which is a great initiative of SKSA. We always try to include all and Barak Valley is our strength and leadership of Santosh Mohan Dev, Gautam Roy and others mean so much to us as also support from our Sylheti brothers and sisters and members living in Bangladesh. SS (SU) has no such support and it has also copied the name of our souvenir, Ha, Ha!; SS (SU) is an association of old Kolikati Hindu Brahmans who only speak of Sylhet during picnics but actually do nothing for Sylhetis, and so what Sylheti culture will it spread after all; no wonder it gets much fewer younger and Sylheti speaking members than SKSA. So, what Sylheti identity are they talking about? SKSA is a young and dynamic association of workers who genuinely love Sylhet, do not create divisions in the community and
Indeed, middle class Sylheti community in Kolkata remains sharply split along lines of associational affiliation; if SS (SU) and SKSA members are locked in a battle like situation featured by allegations and counter-allegations, members of the community who are affiliated to none of the two also add to that. Though it is impossible to know the number of Sylhetis who claim no associational affiliation, yet senior functionaries of SS (SU) and SKSA tell me that the number is fairly large. I did meet many who not only showed no interest in the two associations but actually ended up being severely critical of those. However, these members of at no point suggested that they are not Sylhetis; rather, they insisted that their identity is rooted in their personal family propagated Sylheti cultural tradition. As Sarbani Sen says: ‘I am a Sylheti and you can see the way I speak Bangla even after being born and bred in this city. I am very proud of my Sylheti heritage but somehow I never felt inclined to join any of the associations. What has my being Sylheti got to do with those? Sylhetis endlessly fight in such associations and I do not want to be part of those’. A number of young Sylheti members I met also viewed the associations with disinterest and interestingly, grave suspicion. For such members association activity is largely seen as ‘colossal waste of time, spent in remembering a place – Sylhet – that is lost forever’; not only that, such members also fear being ‘forcefully attached/married to a Sylheti girl/boy’ given that the associations are potential ‘fixers/agencies of matrimonial alliances’. Indeed, the two associations are contested from within and outside as well as by members of the community who are members of none. But, yet another group of Sylhetis exist who incidentally not only not contest the SA but perhaps act as their saving grace; such members are ones who belong to both SS (SU) and SKSA, and refuse to accept division of the community on associational or other lines. As Himendu Biswas observes: ‘I am member of both associations and feel at home in both. It is sad that two associations of the same community have to exist in one city like in case of Mymensingh. But I am proud of both because their agenda is the same; what matters is that we are all Sylhetis who have lost our homeland, and we should be united at all costs to preserve our identity’. Indeed, the pressing need to be united and strong as Nirmal Sen Choudhury says, motivated the association to initiate the formation of AIFSA which among others, he adds would ensure that SA of India participated on an equal footing towards realization of the common goal of preservation of Sylheti culture and identity.
4.3: Being Sylheti in contemporary Kolkata

The above discussion shows that for middle class Sylhetis living outside North East India, and Barak Valley in particular housing colonies and associations are crucial for their identity articulation, a variety of contestations notwithstanding. The associations in particular as carriers of as they claim, ‘distinctive Srijattiyo samajik ebong sanskritik punji [Sylheti social and cultural capital]’ are instruments for forging closer ties amongst members of the community. In fact, the associations are not just cultural and symbolic tropes for articulation of Sylheti identity but the identity itself, except perhaps for members who are not part of them. This association borne identity is claimed by middle class as shared and practised in common within spaces of the individual associations as well as outside those in say for example, the space provided by AIFSA. But again as I have shown, the claim is not sans debate and contestation. As Nirmal Sen Choudhury notes:

*I do not disagree that associations have problems as every human organization does but those are not important. The point is Sylhetis were and are a united community and only a strong and well knit community could have built SS (SU); it is another matter that it is not as it used to be. These are products of our united spirit, our rich and composite culture and now, after partition, these have become the community for us, our distinctive identity. We make associations but associations also tell us who we are, what is our culture like. At least for people like us who live faraway from Sylhet and also Barak Valley associations are like oases where our energies are replenished and we go out only to know that there is a home, a Sylhet Association [SKSA and AIFSA] to come back to. To strengthen our close community ties into a closer one AIFSA was created. But you see SS (SU) is out of AIFSA; perhaps it does not feel the urge to be united with fellow Sylhetis or some other issues come in its way. AIFSA stands for unity and samannay [togetherness] among all Sylheti people and by creating it we and other SA have managed to make a permanent jayga [space] for ourselves and Sylheti culture. It is not possible to territorially unite all Sylhetis so AIFSA has been created instead [also see Chapter V].*

As stated earlier, records of both SS (SU) and SKSA show that both associations more often than not included ‘sarbabharatiya samannay [all-India togetherness]’ among Sylhetis, and SA spread across India as part of their agenda. SKSA however, took the lead in 2006 in turning that objective into reality. In December 2006, the first meeting of the then proposed AIFSA was held in Kolkata followed by two others in 2007. On 23 March 2008 Sreehatta Sammilani, Delhi (hereafter SSD) hosted an AIFSA meeting followed by another one hosted by SKSA in Kolkata in January 2009.
where its official foundation was finally laid [Pragati Pravaha, AIFSA, Kolkata, January & September 2009; Sreebhumi, SKSA, Kolkata, 2006-09]. Though SS (SU) participated in the first meeting held in 2006, it eventually backed out; AIFSA presently comprises of the following member associations: a) SKSA b) SSD c) Srihatta Sammilani, Durgapur d) Srihatta Sammilani, Madhyamgram e) Srihatta Sammilani, Kalyani f) Uttar Banga Srihatta Sanskriti Sammilani, Siliguri f) Srihatta Sammilani, Mumbai and g) Srihatta Sammilani, Bangalore. With Bithika Dev, a sitting member of Assam Legislative Assembly from Silchar as President, AIFSA known in Bangla as Sarbabharatiya Sreehatta Sammilani Samannay Sanstha is headquartered at 17, Ramthakur Park, Baghajatin, Kolkata, and publishes a *krorpatra* (supplement/newsletter) entitled Pragati Pravaha on quarterly basis (only two issues have been published in January and September 2009 respectively since it was launched); the supplements/newsletters include poems in Sylheti dialect, accounts of travel to Sylhet, Sylheti Quiz, tributes to B.C Pal and other eminent Sylhetis, matrimonial advertisements and so forth. The available final draft copy (which is also the final registered copy as communicated by Nirmal Sen Choudhury) of aims, objectives and membership conditions of AIFSA states:

a) The primary object of the society is for togetherness amongst different units of Sylheti organizations, and to bring all units under common umbrella of common feeling of cohesion. b) To promote and encourage advancement of literary, cultural, non-political, religious and other relevant heritages of the people of Sylhet from their ancestors. c) To help the needy students of all communities, for the prosecution of studies. d) To help the aged, sick, helpless and indigent persons. e) To encourage and assist in such other philanthropic activities as may be deemed appropriate by the Governing Body of the Federation. f) To collect donation and subscriptions for the purpose of the Federation and spend the same in fulfillment of all or any of the aims and objects of the Federation. g) SPECIAL OBJECTS FOR CONSIDERATION i) To fulfill the long-awaited goal of Solidarity amongst Sylheti people residing everywhere to maintain our highly rich culture and distinct social commitments ii) Formation of common platform to bring social awareness of our culture and tradition, to our younger generation and for upholding the heritage of Sylhet district with proper honour and valuation of famous sons and daughters of Sylhet iii) To develop practice of mutual awareness amongst different units by way of 'give and take' activities and thereby to activate commonly the existence of the people of Sylhet on a basis of heart-to-heart feelings. TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF MEMBERSHIP. Each individual unit of organization belonging to people of Sylhet origin or Sylhet culture born in places other than Sylhet is eligible to become member of the Federation. The organization or organizations, which may crop up after formation of this federation are also eligible for membership of the federation.
In contemporary Kolkata being a Sylheti as this chapter shows, is not without complexities related to not only membership but also non-membership of housing colonies and associations and so forth. Assertion of Sylheti dialect and social practices, by older members of the community in particular no doubt occurs in a fragmentary fashion but occurs nonetheless. Distinctly fused Sylheti identity which in this case essentially bears a Hindu character, and the urgent need to preserve and transmit that to younger members remains the driving spirit of the community; while some seek association or housing colony membership, others choose the space provided by family to practise that. As mentioned, contemporary Sylheti identity discourse in Kolkata unlike Karimganj has very little engagement with Sylheti Muslims and the Assamese though Hindu Sylhetis of the city intensely involved as they are with history of undivided Sylhet and partition, do not fail to squarely blame (and hence, “engage”) the latter in particular and former in general (albeit privately) for their ‘condition of territorial homelessness’ in independent India. Though for Hindu middle class Sylhetis of Kolkata the two groups invariably stand as historically constructed “others”, yet articulation of their present (and everyday) identity is not so sharply pitched vis-à-vis those. As Amulya Bhushan Raychaudhuri says: ‘The Assamese destroyed us and Muslims too. I feel sad about Barak Valley, with so many Muslims: Muslims took away our land and now in India we Hindus should be free from them, and so I do not encourage ties with Bangladesh. In Kolkata we are free from Assamese and Sylheti Muslims and therefore, get to nurture our culture in peace’. Reactions such as this is hard to get for, the middle class quite predictably upholds the ‘glorious syncretic tradition’ of Sylhet; without having to go through the “ordeal of daily engagement with Muslims” claims of religious syncretism of this class as mentioned, largely remains confined to the domain of print [see for instance, Roy Choudhury et al 2002; SSMDJS 2008; Sreebhumi, SKSA, Kolkata, 2008-09]. I do not suggest and Chapter III shows that, that religious syncretism is “actually practised” in Barak Valley but at least it remains there an issue that is politically pertinent, and necessary to be engaged with unlike Kolkata.

It does appear on the face that Sylheti identity in Kolkata consolidates and survives without the presence of clearly identifiable “others” but field notes suggest that the
case is not so; while Assamese and Sylheti Muslims remain as albeit “non-immediate presents”, non-Sylheti Bengalis commonly referred as Koilkatis, stand as a group that is not only “present” but also vis-à-vis which Sylheti identity articulates itself. However, it is important to note that not all non-Sylheti Bengalis are considered “others”; in fact, field notes suggest that these “others” are classified and ranked in terms of first, ‘Purbo and Paschim Bangiyo [East and West Bengal(i)]’ Bengalis and second, specific districts of origin of the former. Consequently, Purbo Bangiyo Bengalis – “Bangals” – hailing from districts close to Sylhet, such as Mymensingh are considered the least distant “others” while Paschim Bangiyo Bengalis – “Ghotis” – are placed at the bottom of the hierarchy as the most distant ones. So, when Sylhetis of Kolkata use Koilkati to refer to non-Sylheti Bengalis they primarily mean the “Ghotis” and only to certain extent “Bangals”. In Barak Valley though, non-Sylhetis who by and large have some association with Kolkata, its colloquial language (regular Bangla) and culture in particular are projected as a monolithic community of Kelus/Koilkatis. For non-Sylhetis Bengalis of Kolkata, “Ghotis” in particular and I spoke to a few, Sylhetis are broadly taken to be “Bangals” speaking the ‘peculiar’ ‘Bangal bhasa [language of eastern Bengal districts]”; “Bangals” as Bhaswati Ray (of Jessore origin) says, view Sylhetis more often than not as a ‘distinct and closed community’ speaking an ‘un-understandable language’, and ‘following different kinds of social customs’, though she adds that ‘Sylhetis are clever, hardworking and intelligent’. Sylhetis are ‘just Sylhetis’ says Himendu Biswas and refuses to be called a “Bangal” (also because Sylhetis commonly use the term to refer to Muslims of eastern Bengal origin). He adds:

We Sylhetis way back in 1874 ceased to be Bangals; Bangals are at least considered Bengalis but our identity was always questioned by Bangals from say Dhaka or Barisal and surely Ghotis. My Bangla speech is ridiculed by all Bengalis and more by Ghotis. A Ghoti colleague of mine says that, Himendubabu aaddin Kolkatay thekeo malodan ke bolen mallyodan aar dhonnobad ke bolen dhonyobad; Sylhetider bhasata porishkar hoyi na kintu purono Bangatra besh bhaloi Bangla bolte pare [after having lived in Kolkata for so long Himendubabu still pronounces some words in a peculiar way unlike other Bangals who have picked up Bangla language better. The language of Sylhetis refuses to become clean and clear]. I tell them that I speak Sylheti with Bangla accent and not Bangla with Sylheti accent. I say that my Bengaliness is my own whether they recognize or not. And of course I am a Sylheti always. But not always all non-Sylhetis are against Sylhetis and there are very nice people too particularly in suburbs and villages. It is Kolkata where the problem lies [also see Choudhury 2002a,
The resistance to Kolkata, and ‘Koilkati bhasha’ and culture vis-à-vis Sylhet, and Sylheti speech and culture is particularly visible among older members of the community, and also among recently arrived younger ones. While the Sylheti component continues to remain the inner domain of their distinctly fused identity, for younger members of the community born and raised in Kolkata that often acquires a fluid character in the sense that it is, if at all only contextually articulated with Bengali component remaining as the steady one. Unlike Karimganj where non-Sylheti Bengali and Assamese identities are pitched vis-à-vis the “somewhat ungiven” Bengali component of Sylheti identity, in Kolkata that is, at least for the older and a section of younger ones replaced by the “somewhat ungiven” characterized Sylheti component.

Re-constructed and practised either in associations, colonies or family spaces, collectively or individually, on daily or non-daily basis, Sylheti identity however, survives in Kolkata not just by itself but with support and strength that the territorial and cultural space called Barak Valley provides it with. The point is, by and large the post-partition Sylheti community of Kolkata as field notes demonstrate, carries a re-constructed identity that is slightly less anxiously distinctly fused, and at relative ease (and sans political pressures) as compared to the one in Karimganj in particular and Barak Valley in general. However, it is as fragmented as perhaps the one in Karimganj; for that matter, not only is middle class Sylheti community of Kolkata fragmented but as this chapter suggests, the “cosmopolitan” city and its “composite and united” middle class, Bengali community and its “committed-to-multiculturalism” middle class are all marked by fragmentary tendencies and deep divisions. While Nirmal Kumar Bose pointed out how inter-community relations were far from cordial in Kolkata, what he did not dwell upon was the fact that Bengali community itself could be a victim of that. As Bengalis of Kolkata over addas (informal gathering) and endless cups of tea get preoccupied defining the character of Bangali sattwa, sanskriti ebong bhasha (Bengali self/identity, culture and language), and who could be called a Bengali, it is perhaps time that they pause for a while, take stock and on a critical-reflexive vein engage with those.
1 In fact, Haraprasad Chattopadhyay examines in depth and detail the pattern of population movement between Bengal and other regions. About Calcutta which he calls a ‘museum of migrants’ in particular he quotes Ashok Mitra, and writes: ‘Calcutta, as described by Ashok Mitra with no whiff of exaggeration, is India’s city [...].[W]ith a hundred gates open for entrance but not one for departure’. [So to say, Calcutta grew with the growth of her migrant population and necessarily came to occupy a distinct place in the story of internal migration in India’ [1987:404; also see for example, Chakrabarty 1990; Chatterjee 1990; Munsi 1990; Sinha 1978].

2 Both Bengalis of Surma Valley and Assamese of Brahmaputra Valley had presence in Calcutta since early nineteenth century. By 1901 as Haraprasad Chattopadhyaya shows, 2,630 people moved from Assam to Calcutta; between 1901 and 1911 Goalpara accounted for 53 migrants, Sylhet 2, 390, and other districts of Assam 2,542, the sum total being 4,986 migrants. Between 1911 and 1921 number of migrants from Assam to Calcutta stood at 2,951 of which Assam to Calcutta stood at 2,951 of which Sylhet accounted for 1,299, and other Assam districts 1,497; the period between 1921 and 1931 saw a jump with the number rising to a total of 4,616 migrants [1987:415&417]. However, if a large number of migrants permanently settled in Calcutta, an equal number having completed their education or service returned to their native places in Assam.

3 Influenced by the social and cultural climate of nineteenth century Calcutta, Assamese students among whom many subscribed to Brahmo practices initiated the process of extending the “Renaissance” generated ideals to Assam. Alongside proliferation of printed materials in Assamese, language, clubs and associations were established in Calcutta to support the efforts. The Assamese middle class which emerged in the process admittedly showed three simultaneous influences: ‘(i) the spread of British administration and associated infrastructure, (ii) the cultural activities of the Christian Missionaries, particularly the American Baptists and (iii) the direct and indirect impact of the Bengal Renaissance. By and large, it was through the latter two agencies that Western ideas could reach and be absorbed in Assam’ [Guha 1972:299; also see Chapter II].

4 Toward the close of Pal’s university life, three student messes in Calcutta stood out namely, Bikrampur Mess at 33, Mussalmanpara Lane, Tippera Mess at 28, Mechubazar Street, and Sylhet Mess at 14, College Street; these gained prominence in terms of ‘all kinds of public activities of those days among the student population of the metropolis’ and ‘became something like landmarks in the life of the East Bengal students in Calcutta’ [Pal 2004:151]. Bikrampur Mess stood at the top as it housed meritorious students like Ananda Mohan Bose, Rajani Nath Roy, Shashi Bhushan Dutta and others; in addition, it was also known for its ‘liberal social and religious’ atmosphere influenced by ideas of the Keshab Chandra Sen led Brahmo Samaj, and in course of time emerged as the most prominent ‘symbol of culture and progress’ in the community of students. ‘The Tippera mess ... and the Sylhet mess ... came to considerable prominence after 1874, and particularly after the great schism in the Brahmo Samaj, due to the marriage of the eldest daughter of Keshub Chandra Sen to the minor Maharaja of Cooch Behar, on account of the intimate association of some of us with the new Brahmo movement under Sivnanath Sastri’ [Ibid.: 152].

5 Murari Chand College was established in Sylhet town in 1892 and in time along with Cotton College, established in Gauhati in 1901 became the two most renowned colleges as Heramba Kumar Barpuiji (2004a, 2004b) says, of Assam and the eastern region. However, it is important to note that Surma Valley too had its home grown associations such as Sylhet Peoples’ Association and Surma Valley Association which were instrumental in mobilizing public (political) opinion in the region. Indeed, both within and outside (say, Sylhet Students’ Association established in Calcutta in 1909), associations of Surma Valley performed their respective roles to carve out an identity for the community; in 1893, a Sylhet Association was established in Shillong, the capital of Assam to extend financial help to Sylheti students [see for instance, Bhattacharjee 2000; Dutta 2000; Memorandum and Rules (Revised), The Sylhet Association, Shillong, 1994].

6 The story, only with a fragment (Sylhetis) of which I have dealt here, of refugee relief and rehabilitation in West Bengal is a complex one in all respects; a story featured by acceptance and success as well as denial and failure. The Congress led central and state governments far from alleviating the sufferings of refugees, only added to their existing plight; the refugees, refusing to succumb fought back for their dignity and rights [see for example, Bhattacharjee 2008; Bose 2000; Chakrabarti 1990; Chatterjee 2004a, 2004b].
The attribute on which such discriminatory practices rested was the speech (cultural) identity of the individual groups. However, a section of the middle class did see the influence of Bangal bhasa [language of eastern Bengal districts] on the standard colloquial of Calcutta as evidence of positive, cultural exchange [see for example, Basu 1972; Chaudhuri 1983]. But for others, such exchanges amounted to the corruption of the city’s ‘distinct’ sankritik oitijhya (cultural heritage).

Eventually, associations of the other erstwhile East Bengal (and Surma Valley) districts as Saroj Ranjan Choudhury and Dinendra Kumar Goswami confirmed during our discussion, were formed in the city; in contemporary Kolkata these associations in the “absence of the refugee issue”, are focused on preserving and transmitting their respective district cultural tradition to their younger generations in particular.

In fact, in 1964-65 out of the first 250 plot owners as Kiritihari Bhattacharjee, member, executive committee, NCHSL tells me, only one was a non-Sylheti; 1980’s however, witnessed a shift when more non-Sylheti members were inducted into the society following the availability of unused and vacant plots.

For instance, Grihalakshmi Apartments in Baishnabghata Patuli Township consists of six flats which are owned and occupied by Sylhetis; its resident Sudhangshu Choudhury says: ‘We are all Sylhetis who came mainly from Shilong and decided to have only Sylhetis as members. We feel comfortable amongst our own people and can speak Sylheti and practise our culture. Mixed population would have meant talking in Koilkati always and it would not be easy to make Koilkati understand our culture. It is interesting to note in this context a remark made by a non-Sylheti Bengali friend of mine who says that building a house or purchasing a flat in Kolkata for a Sylheti amounts to reaching a ‘spiritual climax’.

While this could be true, yet I would argue that the climax is neither uninterrogated nor unnegotiated.

Even in Barak Valley and New Delhi almost every Sylheti I met and spoke to, upon being told that Kolkata would be included in the study enquired if I had ever visited NCHSL, Birati. ‘You must go to Nabadarsha and see how Sylhetis have kept alive our cultural heritage despite being part of Koilkati culture; it is mini-Sylhet’, said a Sylheti gentleman I happened to meet in New Delhi.

While two are housed in Kolkata four namely, Uttar Banga Srihatta Sanskriti Sammilani, Kalyani Srihatta Sammilani, Madhyamgram Srihatta Sammilani and Durgapur Srihatta Sammilani are housed in Siliguri, Kalyani, Madhyamgram and Durgapur respectively; with the exception of SS (SU), all others were established in post-independent India.

However, SS (SU) did have a role to play in the politics of colonial Sylhet and Assam including in the referendum as available documents of that period show. Not only were members actively involved in say, issues like the political reunion of Sylhet and Bengal in 1920s and 1930’s, but the association itself adopted measures to address those. For instance, chaired by Gurusaday Dutta ICS, a debate on the theme ‘Srihatta O Cachar Jila Assam Hoite Bichinna Koriya Bangadeshe Jog Kora Houk’ was organized by SS (SU) in 1938 to mobilize public opinion in favour of Sylhet’s merger with Bengal [BK, SS (SU), Calcutta, 1938-39; also see Bhattacharjee 1936; Sylhet Chronicle, Sylhet, 9 & 23 April 1934].

Following the communal riots in Calcutta in 1946, it not only engaged in rehabilitation of Surma Valley victims but also ‘ ensured that [those] were represented in the Danga Tadanta Commission…. in consultation with the Assam Premier and Trade Advisor [it] also got involved in a fact-finding mission…. and submitted a report to the government counsel… and helped establish the contact between the riot victims and the Assam government [Ibid.: 1946-47 (translation mine)]. The occasional political interventions that it made apart from its regular social ones however, ceased after partition; in fact, its entire agenda came to be re-worked in light of the changed geographical contours of independent India.

Due to constraint of space I have refrained from providing accounts of experiences I had in MU and other such events of SS (SU) and SKSA as a participant and observer. However, the ongoing discussion is hinged as much upon those as upon the experiences of respondents.

Other than the writings, S&SG also contains large number of photographs (of meetings and events), and notices and advertisements inserted by Sylheti run internet sites, business and publishing houses, hospitals and Sylheti well-wishers from across India; the financial/audit and general reports and list of members of SS (SU) are recorded in BK.