Chapter V
Finding Sylhet in the metropolis: Sylhetis of Delhi

5.0: Introducing the city

Coming from the East, I remember catching the first glimpse of Delhi – its smog enveloped distant skyline – as the long serpent like train I was traveling slowly crawled forward on Old Yamuna Bridge to enter the city. As the train moving past the dilapidated outer wall of Red Fort made its way towards old Delhi Railway Station I sat back and eagerly waited as any tourist would, the city and its life to unfold before my eyes. Little did I realize that twenty five years later Delhi would cease to remain prisoner of that tourist gaze, and instead emerge as a subject of my future academic preoccupations; indeed, here it is, and this chapter bears witness to that. It begins as I shall shortly do, with a brief cultural history of the city followed by a discussion on its Bengali community in general and Sylheti in particular in colonial and early post-colonial period. The next section moves ahead to locate the Sylheti community within the wider cultural matrix of contemporary Delhi. The following one in two parts, focuses first, on Sreehatta Sammilani, Delhi and the role played by it in preservation and propagation of Sylheti culture and identity in the city and second, albeit very briefly on the role of Bipin Chandra Pal Memorial Trust in that; the final section offers 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 III.

Delhi (including New Delhi), officially known as National Capital Territory of Delhi with a total population of about 1,38,50,507 persons in 2001 is home to a variety of religious and linguistic groups of which Hindus (82%) and Hindi speakers (11,210,843) are respectively the largest, the latter followed by Punjabi (9,88,980), Urdu (8,74,333), Bangla (2,08,414) speakers and so on [Census of India, 2001]. In fact, the city has a large immigrant population drawn primarily from Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and Bihar, and also from other states of the eastern arits residents claim, grown as a culturally cosmopolitan city which people from across the country and outside not only visit but also more often than not choose to stay on. As a city with a burgeoning middle class Delhi’s culture has never been more cosmopolitan
than it is now, though writings suggest that it was historically always so [see for instance, Frykenberg 1986; Gupta 2002; Mitra 1970; Singh 2001; Singh 2001; Vidal et al 2000]. Delhi’s culture, of nineteenth century in particular at least for quintessential Dilliwallahs like the famous poet Ghalib always remained the finest example of India’s vibrant cultural and syncretic tradition notwithstanding the grim picture painted by few European visitors and scholars alike. Though the city in nineteenth century absorbed changes brought in by the British on one hand, yet it by and large retained the continuity of its earlier cultural tradition on the other. As Narayani Gupta writes: ‘Change clashed sometimes and co-existed often with continuity .... That cross-class and cross-communal camaraderie that had thrived on the implicit separateness of each group remained’ [2002:51]. The city’s cosmopolitan cultural character survived throughout nineteenth century and as Percival Spear would observe, well into the next one. Predictably after 1911 further changes were introduced to Delhi, but it continued to locate itself at the confluence of the past and present, of the old and new; likewise, it drew not only from its Shahajanabadi tradition but also from the new one bequeathed by Lutyens, Baker and others. The spirit of cultural and religious cosmopolitanism that Delhi carried for centuries continues to survive even today, a fact vouched by die hard Delhi loyalists. I have been repeatedly told by older residents that Delhi’s strength lies in its resilience, its ability to emerge phoenix like after every disaster, its capacity to absorb people who want to make it their home and finally, its unity that survives amidst diversity. It is hailed as a city that represents and upholds the ‘undying spirit of the Indian nation’ where multiple religious, caste and linguistic communities are believed to be living in peaceful co-existence; periods of anguish suffered by the city and its inhabitants are brushed aside as momentary deviations and nothing more. Claims of historical continuity and cultural pluralism however, are contested by scholars who suggest that the city is marked by ‘absence of spatial and historical continuity in recent times’. As Denis Vidal and his colleagues write: ‘Despite the new status it acquired as India’s capital in 1911-12 and the sweeping changes which have transformed the city since independence, Delhi has somehow got stuck with an image based on stereotypes .... Delhi is defined as a “city of cities” – an urban patchwork made up of various components, each of which is thought to bear the imprint of a distinct social, cultural and architectural identity’ [2000:16]. Delhi thus, carries an image that is characterized by discontinuity, fragmentation and heterogeneity of its urban fabric; a city that is as

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Ashok Mitra (1970) writes, in perpetual ‘search of a centre, a common coat of arms, a single personality’. While on one hand it would be incorrect and unfair to say that Delhi lacks historical and cultural continuity and can be compared to ‘a hall of mirrors, each reflecting the power of the moment’, on the other to view the city as an un-fragmented and homogeneous whole would amount to the same [see for instance, Frykenberg 1986; Singh 2001; Singh 2001; Vidal 2000]. If for a section of inhabitants as field notes suggest, it is the motley of communities living in the heterogeneous space of Delhi that gives the city its plural but united character, for others it represents an entity whose space is not only not collective and cosmopolitan as Mitra also opines but in fact, deeply fragmented along lines of religion, caste, language, race and so forth; or as a senior Bengali gentleman tells me that ‘Delhi appears to belong to everybody but actually belongs to none, or at best only to a strongly interconnected few’.

Field notes show that Delhi’s middle class across religious and linguistic affiliations attach an idyllic value to the city’s pre-colonial and colonial past. However, non-Punjabis in particular say that its cultural fabric underwent drastic change after independence, more so due to partition-migration. Most Bengalis (including Sylhetis), older ones in particular I spoke to observed that the city which is their home now, and to which they are emotionally attached is not what it used to be — meaning not ‘dominated by Punjabis’ — during imperial reign or the immediate years following partition. The ‘Punjabified’ culture that post-independence Delhi eventually acquired is resented by a section of Bengali middle class, but its younger members born and raised in the city not only show no resentment but instead a positive approval of that; some of them opine that the cosmopolitan culture of Delhi has only strengthened further following the addition of a global corporate spirit to it. Indeed, Delhi and its contemporary culture continues to grapple with, and is subjected to simultaneous claims of unity and contestation that revolves around issues culture, language, religion, caste, class and so forth. Its constituent communities as shown in the case of Bengalis (including Sylhetis), also remain divided in opinion about its cosmopolitan character along lines of age, length and place of residence in particular. As Arunava Chakrabarty argues: ‘I was born and raised in Delhi and never had any problems with Punjabis or any other community. I am a Bengali (and a Sylheti) but we are part of Delhi culture. C.R Park Bongs have the Bengali syndrome but I have never lived there. Older Bongs keep talking about partition but why bring back what is over, and
create divisions now. We should live in present'. Indeed, partition transformed not only the cultural but also demographic, economic, political and religious structure of Delhi as Hindu refugees, from West Pakistan (and West Punjab) in particular poured into the city while its Muslim population left it en masse. Though actual number of migrants from West Punjab to Delhi cannot be fully ascertained, yet unprecedented rise of the city’s population points to the fact that cause of that lay in partition-related events, concerning in-migration from West Punjab (and other provinces of West Pakistan to some extent) in particular; the number of in-migrants from East Pakistan was comparatively smaller at 2% of the total number of immigrants.\(^1\) To the large resident Punjabi population of the city was added a larger number, and in course of time the community came to play as V. N Datta (1986) opines, the most prominent role in physical, political and cultural transformation of Delhi. However, as Delhi gradually turned into the most important ‘symbol of the new and independent Indian nation’, and also a simultaneous ‘refugee-istan’ and ‘Punjab-istan’ some members of the old resident elite, Punjabi and non-Punjabi alike lamented among others, the passing away of classical and syncretic Hindustani (Hindi and Urdu) culture of the city. But as Ashok Mitra says, Delhi in time also managed to recover the lost glory. However, not all scholars and commentators are as positive as Mitra; the fact that Delhi’s cultural landscape increasingly turned into a “Punjabscape” after partition, and continues to remain so has not gone down well for old residents. Dipankar Gupta for instance, quotes an old resident of Delhi who says: ‘Delhi was invaded by Punjabi culture. Every aspect of our lives became Punjabi. The food became increasingly Punjabi or Punjabi Mughlai, our cultural tastes too became Punjabi, even our demeanour and values became Punjabi’ [n.d cited in Gupta 1991:81]. On a similar vein Khushwant Singh writes:

With the cream of Muslim society gone, Urdu went into a steep decline to be replaced by Hindi and spoken Punjabi. Mushairas became rare: kavi sammelans taking their place .... Punjabis imposed their own way of living on the city. Emphasis was on good food and ostentatious display of wealth. Dhabas sprang everywhere; so did restaurants serving gourmet tandoori chicken and fish, dal makhni, sarson ka saag and malai-ki-roti followed by gajar ka halwa or kulfi falooda. All things Punjabis relished. During the wedding season roads are often clogged with processions: the groom atop a white mare, his sarbala clutching him from behind, men in pink turbans and women doing bhangra to the beat of drums or a brass band playing Hindi film tunes in garish make-believe military uniforms .... New Delhi is no longer the city I grew up and lived for over eighty years [2001:41].
Partition and independence as Gyanendra Pandey writes, ‘had very different meanings for different sections of Delhi’s population’ [2003:124]. While privileged classes lamented as they did the decline of Delhi’s classical culture celebrated nonetheless India’s new found freedom, the refugees struggled hard to just culturally adapt and survive in the city. If Punjabi refugees, resented by some and admired by others stood as active agents of cultural transformation of Delhi, Bengalis in general and from East Bengal and Sylhet in particular – mainly after partition – too were not far behind.

Migration of Bengalis to other parts of the Indian sub-continent began as early eighteenth century, picked up pace in the next, and culminated during and after the partition in 1947. Haraprasad Chattopadhyaya shows how in the colonial period it was not only Bengali labour class that migrated in search of economic opportunities and jobs, but upper and middle class bhadralok too. Bengalis began to arrive in Delhi during the early part of nineteenth century primarily to work in educational and medical institutions. As Chattopadhyaya writes:

The association of Bengalis with Delhi dates back to the early part of the 19th century, if not to an earlier period. In 1792 was founded the Delhi Oriental College. The year 1839 witnessed the establishment of a Government dispensary in Delhi. The inauguration of the college and the dispensary supplied the earliest opportunities to the upper-class people of the Bengali society for turning their faces to the historic city on the Jumna. Rajkrishna De came to Delhi in 1839 to assume charge of the Government dispensary. He died in 1840, which year saw the foundation of the Delhi Kali Bari with a Kali temple by Mahatma Krishnananda Brahmacari [1987:454-455].

Their population steadily rose following declaration of Delhi as the new capital of British India in 1911. Hailing from western Bengal as well as from faraway eastern Bengal and Assam, Bengali officials of the colonial government moved into the city in bulk after that; while few settled down permanently, others as temporary residents not only maintained close ties with their native places but eventually left the city to settle down there. The section of Bengalis engaged in educational activities grew larger with the establishment of University of Delhi in 1922. Numbering at 2,671 in 1921 the population of Bengalis as Haraprasad Chattopadhyaya (1987) notes, more than doubled and was raised to 6,632 in 1931. Migration of Sylhetis to other parts of the sub-continent began with the onset of colonial rule. Though not much is known about the nature of Sylheti migration to Delhi, yet its older residents opine that it was in late colonial period that middle class government officials and civil servants began
moving to the city. Rabindra Kumar Bhattacharjee provides a brief account as follows:

_I came to Delhi in 1958 and found a fairly large middle class Sylheti community spread across it. While most came after partition a good number if I remember correctly, was already living in the city prior to that, like Pramod Ranjan Bhattacharjee, Shashanka Kar, Satish Chakrabarty, Manmatha Ranjan Chowdhury, Ajit Das, Anil Dhar, Jnan Ranjan Roy Choudhury and others. They worked in railways, health, banking, meteorology, law, home, finance and science and technology departments; CAG office had maximum Sylhetis. Among founders of the Bengali Higher Secondary School in Vinay Nagar was a Sylheti gentleman called Satish Chakrabarty. He was also with the Bidhan Roy High School in Moti Bagh; another Sylheti gentleman, Ratish Chandra Bhattacharjee also contributed immensely and he retired as Principal of Vinay Nagar Higher Secondary School; Anil Dhar was involved in music and art. Actually, most of them had houses in Sylhet and wanted to go back after retirement. But partition happened and they eventually settled down here; in time Sylhetis grew in number and continued to help in-coming migrants. When I came ten years after partition the community had slightly recovered from the initial trauma. With Sylhet lost forever we along with other Bengalis got busy in making our living and arranging housing in this faraway city._

Spread across the old city and New Delhi, Bengalis (including Sylhetis) not only worked towards consolidation of their own community but also contributed to larger cultural life of the colonial city. The early years following partition saw the community to which more members were added with origins in East Bengal and Sylhet, struggling not only to come to terms with the new reality but also ensure for itself permanent housing in the city; East Pakistan Displaced Persons’ Association (hereafter EPDPAA) established in 1954, and Sreehatta Sammilani, Delhi (hereafter SSD) established in 1957 were geared towards providing relief to members displaced from their homelands that now lay in East Pakistan. As a community, its members from East Bengal and Sylhet in particular in deep trauma after partition Bengalis in post-independence Delhi suffered no doubt, but with a penchant for activities related to education and art they emerged in course of time as one of the prime movers of the city’s social and cultural life. The number of displaced persons who arrived from East Pakistan to Delhi was small compared to the one from western sector. The total number of displaced persons from East Pakistan in Delhi stood at 3,674 (2,438 males and 1,236 females) in 1951; while 2,645 (1,411 males and 1,234 females) persons came from East Bengal, 1,029 (1,027 males and 02 females) moved from Sylhet [Census of India: Displaced Persons – 1951, 1954:52-53]. What is interesting is that
East Bengali and Sylheti migrants I spoke to dismissed the census figures as inaccurate; Jyotirmay Mitra, a senior member of EPDPA says that the actual number of migrants were far more than what official records show. He says: ‘The attention of government was towards Punjabi migrants, and Bengalis hardly featured in its scheme of things. A large number of East Pakistani displaced persons arrived in Delhi after acquiring the legal status of “displaced” in West Bengal and Assam. So they were not included among the “displaced” of Delhi. Some came directly but failed to acquire that status’ [also see Bandopadhyay 2008; Chakrabarty 2005; Sarkar 2005]. In early post-partition years the middle class Bengali (including Sylheti) community in the city as field notes suggest, comprised of both pre and post-partition residents; it included members with origins in western Bengal, eastern Bengal, and Sylhet with more numbers added to the last two in course of time. Drawn from the educated middle class and employed in government and other sectors, partition-migrants from East Bengal and Sylhet settled down in Lutyens’s Delhi as well as old city, and parts of its southern stretch. While few owned dwelling places, others lived in official accommodation provided by government or privately rented houses. Following sustained campaign by EPDPA, the government granted a plot of land to East Pakistani migrants in south eastern part of the city in 1968. In 1969 EPDP Group Housing Society began construction of permanent houses in the area known then as EPDP Colony, and since 1970’s as Chittaranjan Park. Chittaranjan Park was initially developed over 218 acres of land with 2145 dwelling units to which was later added another 10 acres with 714 such units. Apart from providing residential accommodation to over three thousand displaced persons from East Pakistan, EPDPA turned itself, and the colony into the most prominent and lasting symbol of Bengali culture in Delhi. Pankaj Kumar Roy, current General Secretary of EPDPA succinctly sums up the trajectory of growth of the association and colony. He writes:

E.P.D.P’s progress has traversed through the aftermath of the partition of India. It saw the hardship and turmoil faced by its members once the land was allotted to them .... Thus started in Delhi a conglomerate of Bengalis, living in what was bleak, lifeless and rocky terrain, called E.P.D.P Colony. Life was quite complex then without infrastructural facilities but it moved on. Some hesitated to shift to this un-developed colony but brave ones moved and lived to show and encourage others to follow suit. From then on it continues to be hot bed of Bengali ethos, culture and influences. Over the years, lot of transition and transformation has taken place in E.P.D.P Colony besides it being called Chittaranjan Park. It is E.P.D.P Association’s credit that it grew over the years and taken upon itself the changing role and responsibility from
To the resident community of Sylhetis in Delhi was added more members following partition, and a large number of them being members of EPDPA were accommodated in Chittaranjan Park (hereafter CRP) in 1970’s. SSD was established to address the issue of relief and rehabilitation of Sylheti migrants but more importantly, it was meant to function in addition, as a socio-cultural support system for the community in Delhi. As Surendra Kumar Dey, India’s first Union Minister of Community Development and one of the founders of SSD observes:

Citizens of Sylhet, the minority community after partition, opted by and large to migrate to other parts of India. It is appropriate that New Delhi, the Capital, must house a significant reflection of them. Sreehatta Sammilani is a fitting organization to provide an open forum to the migrants…. My conception of the Sreehatta Sammilani is an organization of migrants from Sylhet eager and willing to support each other through mutual help, a forum acting for a renaissance of the now eclipsed basic qualities which makes the even partitioned district an envy of the rest of Bangladesh today [1973:no pp; also see Bhattacharjee 1973].

The non-availability of documents dating from that period makes the task of tracing SSD’s relief and rehabilitation related activities difficult. However, conversations with senior members suggest that SSD was less directly involved in relief related activities and more as mentioned, in providing social support and fostering a sense of cultural togetherness amongst the ‘uprooted and trauma ridden’ members of the community. As Bhudev Chakrabarty observes: ‘Partition was the second trauma that Sylhetis suffered after 1874. But then we had Sylhet, but 1947 we lost that too. Coming and settling down in Delhi was so difficult and we experienced tremendous anxiety and fear. God should never make one a refugee. Some of us had jobs, some did not. Sylhetis suffered so much and SSD gave us emotional support’. ‘With a view to revive social and cultural activities related to their place of origin some notable sons of Sreehatta who resided in Delhi in the fifties decided to establish an association of the Sylhet people’[Golden Jubilee Annual Cultural Evening Souvenir, SSD, Delhi, 2007 (hereafter GJACES); also see Bhattacharya 1992]. As Ramranjan Bhattacharjee writes: ‘Prior to partition a number of Sylhetis resided in Delhi and to them were added the bastuhara, nishshambal sharanarthis [homeless, propertyless, refugees]
from Sylhet. Out of such necessity Sreehatta Sammilani was born’ [1988:16 (translation mine); also see BK, SS (SU), Calcutta, 1961-62, 1966-67]. Manmatha Ranjan Chowdhury, one of the early functionaries of SSD opines: ‘Though the Sammilani did not clearly state its intent of making housing arrangements for homeless Sylhetis in Delhi yet, the issue was in their minds. Since the government made housing arrangements for East Pakistan migrants, the Sylhetis also got houses in Chittaranjan Park. In that situation the Sammilani did not think it necessary to make separate housing provision for Sylhetis’ [1989:no pp (translation mine)]. As a young association plagued by paucity of funds, SSD nevertheless tried to extend help and financial assistance to displaced Sylhetis, to students in particular. As Rabindra Kumar Bhattacharjee says:

SSD was created in difficult times and undertaking large scale relief operation was difficult without enough funds or an office. Members of that time like Manmatha Ranjan Chowdhury, Satyendra Bhattacharjee, Satish Chandra Chakrabarty, Ashok Chanda, S.K Dey, Suresh Deb, Mohitosh Pakayastha, Naresh Chakrabarty, Nripati Ranjan Choudhury, Nishi Kanta Bhattacharjee, Jnan Ranjan Roy Choudhury, Womesh Deb, Srish Dasgupta and Ajit Das concentrated more on preserving the cultural heritage of Sylhet and providing educational and financial opportunities to Sylheti students; S.K Dey had already benefited from SS (SU) which funded his studies abroad and he wanted SSD to be like that. EPDPA had already started work and Sylhetis participated wholeheartedly and S.K Dey, Triguna Sen and others supported it. The Nabadarsha Srihatta Sammilani was successful in rehabilitation unlike us as it was an old organization with years of experience and high social standing. In Delhi we Sylhetis went along with other people from East Pakistan also because we were a small group as compared to Calcutta and non-Bengalis saw us not as Sylhetis but Bengalis. But we had to retain our distinct cultural identity and SSD was born out of that urge. Partition was a big blow but Sylhetis managed to preserve their identity even amidst other Bengalis. Actually what we did in 1960’s was cultural rehabilitation of Sylhetis as culture was our strength, our distinct identity. SSD tried to culturally unite the dispersed Sylhetis of Delhi. In CRP which had so many Sylhetis practising Sylheti culture or speaking the dialect it was not much of a problem but for those outside, SSD was the only common platform outside their families. I say that main contribution of SSD was mental and emotional rehabilitation. If one is mentally at home and united physical rehabilitation becomes easy and SSD stood solidly behind every Sylheti as a source of support and strength.

Conversations across the city with members displaced by partition, both of eastern Bengal and Sylhet origin suggest that a large number of them attribute the ‘successful rehabilitation of displaced persons in Delhi’ to the proactive role played by their respective (older) resident communities, and the two associations; not only that, they
also unanimously claim that the two associations as nodal agencies ‘successfully forged ties of unity and integrity’ among their respective community members. However, others contest such views as evident for instance, from what Abinash Das (and his wife Uma Das) has to say: ‘We came to Delhi in 1960’s and no Sylheti helped us in any way. Some helped but only grudgingly. We are self made and have a house today, but we could not get one in CRP when other Sylhetis got. Many of our Bangal friends also got no help at all from EPDPA; about SSD (and we are not members) the lesser said is better. Nobody stood by us’. It is obvious that neither Sylheti community nor the larger Bengali community (largely comprised of East Bengalis) is immune to contestation from within, be it on lines of residential location or associational affiliation. Reflecting on the matter Dhurjoti Prasad Kar notes:

I am aware that a number of Sylhetis and East Bengalis could not get help from their communities or a place in CRP. But how everyone could be accommodated in CRP? As a member I know SSD did its best and our community was and is held together by it and it is our identity and sign of our community unity. All associations of CRP have contributed to Delhi’s culture in general and at the same time retained their individual ones and in SSD’s case Sylheti too. CRP is the center of Bengali culture; everything related to Bengali culture is available here, from music, folk songs, Durga Puja to panchphoron [five mixed spices], posto [poppy seeds], shona moong dal [gold colored Moong Dal], shukti [dried fish], misti [sweetmeat] not to mention delicious river fish. Where is the harm in calling it our cultural homeland? Of course, for Sylhetis first homeland is SSD. But we survive together in CRP and Bengalis and Sylhetis are progressive and open people and they know how to participate in other cultures as well as keep their own. I always say this to our young members because by participating in larger Punjabi dominated culture of Delhi they often tend to forget their own one [also see Bandopadhyay 2008; Chakrabarty 2005]

Undoubtedly, the contribution of displaced Bengalis (including Sylhetis) to post-colonial culture — art, literature, education, cuisine — of Delhi is noteworthy if not predominant. What is interesting is that the community has also been if not wholly, but at least partially in places like say, CRP able to practise and preserve a nearly ‘exclusive Bengali’ (and Sylheti) ‘culture and identity’. In fact, as Balmiki Prasad Singh writes: ‘The immigrants have retained their community identity by maintaining their own prayer halls and cultural groups, and by doing so have enriched the cultural life of Delhi. They have injected elements of their folklore into Delhi’s culture, absorbed its elements’ [2001:10]. While the Bengali (including Sylheti) community as field notes suggest, appear to be in no dilemma about its own cultural contribution to life of the city, a large section of its members, the old and middle aged in particular
resent the fact that the contribution not only goes un-noticed but more often than not is eclipsed by the predominant, and ‘aggressive Hindi/Punjabi culture’. As a result, Delhi often comes across as a city that could well be first called as a senior Bengali gentleman says, ‘the capital of Punjab and then India’. Consequently, the view that Delhi has a plural and cosmopolitan cultural ethos/spirit is critically addressed and evaluated by these members. For them, in the name of cosmopolitan culture what actually gets practised and propagated in Delhi is essentially a kind of ‘mixed and synthetic Punjabi culture’ that is far removed from its ‘original and authentic Punjabi form and content’. Not surprisingly, for senior residents of CRP the fact that the colony and its neighborhood has witnessed a steady rise of non-Bengali population in recent times due to ‘indiscriminate land grabbing, tenancy rights,’ and so forth has predictably set alarm bells ringing. These members fear that unless immediate steps are taken to address the matter, a grave situation may arise; a situation so grave that not only the colony’s ‘distinctive linguistic and cultural profile’ may eventually change but Bengali identity itself could either be altered beyond recognition or completely become ‘luptoppray ba lupto [nearing disappearance or disappearance]’ [see for instance, Bandopadhyay 2008; Chakrabarty 2005]. Sylhetis in general and of CRP in particular share this anxiety with their non-Sylheti Bengali counterparts. But they are also bearers of an additional anxiety, an anxiety that emanates from the urge to preserve their Sylheti identity in a city that is thousands of miles away not only from Sylhet but also from its miniature – Barak Valley – in India.

5.1: Sylheti community life in contemporary Delhi

Calcutta being closer to Sylhet and the imperial capital till 1911 always attracted a fairly large number of Sylhetis, students in particular since nineteenth century, and the figure rose further following partition. Unlike Delhi, Calcutta by the time partition happened had a somewhat entrenched Sylheti community; more importantly, it had an association – SS (SU) – that was already engaged in affairs of the community for seventy one years. Therefore, what the resident Sylheti community in general and SS (SU) in particular could do, and did in Calcutta for in-coming migrants in terms of extending relief and rehabilitation including formation of housing colonies such as NCHSL could hardly be done in Delhi. SSD as most of its members believe, did its best to ‘culturally and emotionally’ rehabilitate Sylhetis but partly because of
formation of a common colony for East Pakistani migrants and also lack of sufficient resources and funds, it could not establish a housing society or colony where majority population would be of Sylhet origin. As a result, and partly because of socio-historic character of Delhi as a city, Sylhetis came to be more geographically dispersed in it as compared to Calcutta. Though CRP eventually became home to substantial number of Sylhetis, yet it not only had an East Bengal origin majority but in course of time turned into a symbol of its culture, perhaps renaming of EPDPA as East Bengal Displaced Persons’ Association in 2009 being a pointer to that [EBDP News, EBDPA, Delhi, June, 2009]. While for non-Bengalis, most of whom are unaware that undivided Sylhet was part of Assam and not (East) Bengal in 1947, all Bengalis living in Chittaranjan Park are presumed to have come from erstwhile East Bengal but for residents of the colony, Sylhetis in particular their individual identities based on districts of origin in what became East Pakistan in 1947 (now Bangladesh) remains important. Sylheti residents of CRP as field notes show, bear no sense of resentment towards a broad East Bengali or for that matter a broader Bengali culture, yet at the same time they – old, middle aged and freshly arrived ones from Barak Valley and other places of North East India in particular – insist that ‘cultural distinctiveness’ of Sylheti identity ought to be preserved and perpetuated within that meaning as a senior gentleman says, ‘khhander madhya diye purnake pranate pranati koraii aammader uddeshya [realization of the whole through the part is our aim]’. For Sylhetis living outside the colony – that being the majority – and spread across length and breadth of the city and National Capital Region (hereafter NCR), their too identity remains as crucial as those living inside it.

My conversations with middle class Sylhetis across Delhi show that by and large they not only participate in cultural activities of the larger Bengali community but also publicly highlight the Bengali component of their identity, more so when pitched vis-à-vis non-Bengalis; older residents, both inside and outside CRP who often describe themselves as probashi Bangalis (Bengalis living outside Bengali ancestral homeland) – and not probashi Srihattiyio/Ashambashi or Purbottwarbashi Bangalis – hold simultaneous memberships of SSD as well as other Bengali run associations in the city. The fact that such residents identify themselves as probashi Bangalis (who are of Sylhet origin) adds to their level of acceptance within larger probashi Bangali community of the city; it also allows them at least in public sphere, to resolve the
dilemma of having to deal with a double-sphered/componented distinctly fused identity, occasional and moderate levels of contestation from non-Sylhetis, particularly “Ghotis” of the city notwithstanding. Newer residents, from Barak Valley and other parts of North East India in particular show a kind of resentment with the probashi Bangali identification; they insist that they are one, Sylhetis and two, Bengalis of Assam and more importantly, Purbottwarer Bangali, use of the latter category in public sphere being contested by older residents of the city given that for instance, one of the most prominent members of the community, former Member of Parliament from Silchar and Union Minister Santosh Mohan Dev (and his wife) when he lived in Delhi always ‘identified himself as a Bengali’ sans a prefix or suffix. As Sukanta Deb in an analytical vein explains:

I have been living in Delhi for years now and see myself as a Bengali. We should help Bengali community unite so that non-Bengalis don’t dominate; other Bengalis also more or less accept us as Bengalis. Sylhetis are united anyway and I am a proud member of SSD. In Delhi people don’t doubt if I am Bengali as in Assam and that way we are at peace here. We are Sylhetis at home and in SSD but outside we are Bengalis. In CRP we are Bengalis first but also Sylhetis at the same time, also because SSD is incidentally located here. That makes things easier for us. North East is very close to us as one can see from number of SSD members from that region. But we also should not forget that we are Bengalis too but were forced to leave Bengal in 1874 and Sylhet in 1947. Who says if we call ourselves probashi Bangalis we stop being Sylheti? Sylhetiness is in our blood; our family and SSD have given us scope to keep that flowing. Delhi is ideal place for Sylheti culture to grow but younger Delhi born generations are bit of a problem. Here Sylhetis do not have Assamese and typical Ghotis in large numbers (but non-Bengalis are sometimes a problem); Purbabongiyas are quite nice; sometimes they too make fun of us but not so badly as in Kolkata. To end, we should uphold our united culture, both Bengali and Sylheti.

Field notes suggest that members of the community irrespective of age, length and place of residence, caste, occupation and gender across the city appear to rest in a more or less comfortable zone so far as Bengali (prefixed by Purbottwar or not) component of their identity is concerned. However, Sylheti component is not only considered the vital one but also that which needs to be actively practised, propagated and preserved. While members feel that Sylheti culture has more space to sustain and grow in Delhi as it does not have an overwhelming ‘Kolkata or Ashamiya [Kolkatan or Assamese] atmosphere’, yet I noticed a sense of anxiety that comes from the fact that scope of practise of that is limited to family and association alone; SSD no doubt
is the visible vehicle of Sylheti culture and identity in the public sphere but it occupies only an extremely tiny space of that as compared to Kolkata where the two associations occupy a slightly larger one, and Karimganj where notwithstanding extreme anxieties and complexities, character of the entire public sphere is essentially Sylheti though projected otherwise in the wider one. As Ajoy Kumar Chakrabarty pertinently explains:

*We do not have a hard cultural boundary between Sylhetis and non-Sylhetis in Delhi and it is easier to be a Sylheti here. But the problem is scope of Sylheti culture is very limited here; the situation is better in Kolkata because if one is not able to remain Sylheti then he can become Bengali. But in Delhi Bengali identity itself is limited and threatened. So the jump is straight to non-Bengali (mainly Punjabi) culture, at least for younger generation. So Delhi gives Sylhetis cultural freedom but at the same time because of its dominant non-Bengali atmosphere also threatens that. I am not against non-Bengalis but I fear that our culture may just disappear as a result of influence of their's. I therefore stress that Bengali community should be united and Sylhetis are united in any case. Our collective Sylheti identity is our strength making Bengali identity stronger in turn; and so I stress on more younger members for our associations; Sylhet and Sylhetis may gradually die out unless we take serious action and perhaps induct more members from Barak Valley as that is our strength; young Sylhetis coming from there can practise Sylheti culture without pressure; some do have initial problems with Bengali culture which they tend to see as primarily Kolkati but I tell them that Kolkatis outside Kolkata are better people. Actually, except non-Bengali influence on generations born and bred in Delhi the city is nice for Sylhetis because they can avoid Kolkata which they always fear in a way, where Sylheti ways, pronunciation is often laughed at.*

Sylheti community of Delhi may be broadly classified along location and associational membership into four categories: a) members living in CRP who are also members of SSD b) members living in CRP who are not members of SSD c) members living outside CRP who are also members of SSD, and d) members living outside CRP who are not members of SSD. In short, the capital's Sylhetis either reside inside or outside CRP and are either members or non-members of SSD. The community as mentioned primarily comprises of middle class retired as well as working professionals and students; unlike Kolkata, the community in Delhi has a number albeit small, of Sylheti Muslims who are primarily students in colleges and universities. However, being a community where Hindus are in majority, Muslims as field notes show, are rarely accounted for. In fact, most Hindu members are completely unaware about the presence of Sylheti Muslims in the city; among those who are, some display total indifference while others respond in a way that is nothing
more than lukewarm. For Sylheti Hindus, their Muslim counterparts despite being present in the city do not feature in the community and its scheme of things including membership list (2008-09) of SSD; the only three Muslim members who are part of it are from Barak Valley. Sylheti Muslims too express little interest in “becoming part” of the larger community (read Hindu), and SSD; some of them, from Barak Valley in particular, are however, part of an association called Barak Valley Student & Youth Association (hereafter BASYA) formed in 2003 in Delhi. Interestingly, culture rooted Sylheti identity as it is articulated and expressed in the city by associations has been increasingly “Barakvalleyised” over years, and the reasons among others, being first, heavy migration from that region to the city, and second, political patronage derived from elected members of parliament from Barak Valley. Other than SSD which offers members of the community an exclusive Sylheti cultural space to articulate (and also become) their identity, the family in absence of a larger space like a Sylheti colony or an apartment complex remains the other, albeit smaller and more confined space. The spaces however, are not uncontested from within as well outside as a result of which Sylheti identity that the middle class community otherwise claims to be resting on a shared cultural tradition, a tradition that gives the identity its strength, its collective and unifying character, and above all its ‘distinctiveness’, comes across as fragmented along lines of age, occupation, caste, religion, length and place of residence, associational affiliation, relation to Barak Valley, and so forth. Not only is the united character of community and identity challenged, but for a large number of younger members born and bred in Delhi the very idea of ‘Srihattiyo samaj aar Srihattiyo charitrrik baishishthata [Sylheti society and distinctive Sylheti character]’ stands negated or even dismissed. While the next two sections by focusing on the associations will look at such complexities, the following discussion will do so in the context of Sylheti families located in CRP and outside it.

As a colony that houses substantial number of East Pakistani displaced persons, CRP has about 110 Sylheti Hindu families; in addition, it has a number of Sylhetis who are tenants. Built in 1970’s, the colony has Sylheti families which have been living in the city prior to partition, and which arrived immediately after that; it also has ones which came in, and settled during the last decade. The community, its members claim played a very important role not only in making of the colony but also its cultural life; most Sylhetis are active members of EBDPA, and other associations that exist in CRP.
Since the place also houses SSD (and Bipin Chandra Pal Memorial Trust (hereafter BCPMT)), most Sylhetis are also part of that though few (tenants in particular) are not members. As a colony with a fairly large Sylheti concentration, Sylhetis residing at CRP claim that they belong to the larger Bengali community for sure but are no less part of the Sylheti one at the same time; not only that, most derive pride from the fact that they have been able to preserve an ‘authentic and living’ Sylheti culture in the city compared to those living outside. That has been possible as Sukanta Deb says, because unlike other parts of the city in CRP one, a large Sylheti population lives in a common space two, older residents are more in number three, non-Sylheti Bengalis and not non-Bengalis are immediate neighbours, and four, SSD (and BCPMT) is located in it (since 1980’s). Though spread across blocks and pockets, members claim that as a result of nearly everyday interaction (telephonic and face-to-face), and that too in Sylheti dialect for years, the CRP Sylheti community has become a strong and united ‘sub-community’ within the larger Bengali one; a community which its middle class members believe, is the vanguard of Sylheti culture and identity in Delhi. My conversation with Jyotsna Roy Choudhury throws light on the matter. She says:

_I came to Delhi in 1959 after marriage and my husband was already living here and we came to CRP in 1982 where with so many Sylhetis around we felt at home; we had to speak Koilkati but could speak Sylheti often which would be impossible elsewhere in Delhi with Hindwallahs around. Other Bengalis did not mind much though they thought we Sylhetis are too community centric and speak a difficult language and always mix with other Sylhetis. Speaking in mother-tongue is not parochialism but pride in one’s heritage and culture. Bengalis appreciate our unity also and I say yes, all Sylhetis belong to one parivar [family] who could neither be in Bengal nor Sylhet after referendum about which I remember a bit. Residents like us kept the true Sylheti spirit alive in CRP and Delhi and that was our duty. When SSD had its office in CRP we got more strength though things are changing now. I wish we had a full colony of Sylhetis but I am happy that we are living among Bengalis and at least a good number of Sylhetis. I have brought up my children in a Sylheti atmosphere. They may not speak in Sylheti which is a little sad but they know about their origin and how rich Sylheti culture is. My grandchildren often tell me to teach them Sylheti speech. In big cities where not many Sylhetis can be together Sylheti parents at home should provide the atmosphere. After all culture is all we have. Our culture teaches us love and generosity and I have taught my children those. They have grown up as proud Bengalis no doubt but also proud Sylhetis._

In CRP individual family spaces which exist in close proximity and are sites of day-to-day practise of Sylheti culture are often viewed as a combined and common community (or ‘sub-community’) space to which every Sylheti resident belongs; a
space where every Sylheti resident feels free and proud to be Sylheti, that is speak Sylheti dialect, practise ‘Srihattiyo shamajik achar-byabohar ebong sanskriti [Sylheti social rules-behaviour and culture]’, and finally cultivate Sylhettita. Indeed, as in Karimganj and Kolkata, in Delhi too dialect and social practices are considered the prime markers of Sylheti culture and identity, those being ‘distinct’ and ‘exclusive’ to the community. And family as members say, is the repository of that ‘exclusive’ culture; a space where that culture is built, lived, preserved, and eventually transmitted to the wider community. Consider for instance, what Nirmalendu Bhattacharjee says:

_We four brothers and our families live in this house built by my father Late Nishi Kanta Bhattacharjee who was very active in EBDPA and SSD. He came to Delhi in 1961-62 and I in 1967. My father insisted the house to be named Sreebhumi as that would be a way to remember our lost homeland and retain our distinct culture and identity as Ratish Bhattacharjee did. All families here try to create a mini-Sylhet at home; our speech is warm and customs progressive and so there is no dowry in marriage or discouraging education. As Brahmans we are very particular about our inherited social roles and responsibilities as all castes are, but we do not follow all caste rules except in (arranged) marriages. Our children have been trained to not forget their roots, that they are Sylhetis though they cannot speak but follow Sylheti speech; being Sylheti is a way of life, from Shidol Shutki, personal behaviour to marriage customs, music, dance, games like Das Pachish and collective behaviour; family is where we learn things and in Delhi it is very important because in a way that is where Sylheti culture can be propagated at a personal level and children cannot avoid hearing and seeing Sylheti speech and social customs. SSD is there but not all youngsters are enthusiastic about it. I tell the children that they are Bengalis and Delhiites but their core culture is Sylheti, it is their base. People complain that younger Sylhetis are forgetting who they are but I say if a family wants, parents want it is possible to inculcate Sylheti values in them. I know Sylheti families which have non-Sylheti or even non-Bengali members but they all appreciate Sylheti culture and some not only understand but also speak Sylheti._

Indeed, Sylheti speech is seen as instrumental in building family tradition, and at a broader level uniting the community and creating its ‘distinct and exclusive’ identity. And quite predictably I encountered, in CRP in particular remarks like _Sylheti na koite parle research korbai kemne; Sylheti bhashatai to aashol aar ita Banglar upabhasha nai, itau Bangla bhasha; bhasha na janie Sylheti shomajre bhujtai nai; Kalkatian matte cholbo ni_ [how would you conduct research without knowing Sylheti speech; Sylheti language is the actual one and it is not a sub-language/dialect of Bangla but Bangla itself; if you do not know the language you cannot understand Sylheti social
life; Kolkata speech work will not work], and so forth. Social practices which Sylhetis otherwise broadly share with the larger Bengali community, with those from East Bengal in particular are also however, considered ‘exclusive’ to the community. As Dhurjoti Prasad Kar says: ‘I am very particular about Sylheti culture at home. Home is where children learn Sylheti customs and values. I insist that at home one must be Sylheti irrespective of what one is outside. I encourage marriage between Sylhetis and do not believe in dowry. I have spread awareness in my house about Sylheti language, folk culture, Sylhet’s contribution to freedom struggle, our religious heritage and so on’. In fact, Kar says that richness of Sylhet’s folk culture is such that every month of the calendar year features some utsav (festival) or the other; though not all festivals are celebrated in the city, but he adds, some are. Other than dialect and social practices, the families also make sure that knowledge of Sylhet’s political history, its separation from Bengal in 1874, and its partition in 1947 are passed down to younger members; ‘struggle of Sylhetis’ during the days following partition in Assam, and elsewhere in India are repeatedly mentioned. As the community in Delhi is linked more strongly with contemporary culture and politics of Barak Valley as compared to the one in Kolkata, ‘struggle of Sylhetis’ located there also features in its identity discourse. Senior members of the families insist that only by ‘remembering what was done to Sylhet since 1874 and what is being done to Barak Valley by the Assamese’, and reminding Sylheti children of those will make the latter realize that ‘there is an urgent need of saving Sylheti and Barak Valley culture’; as refugees ousted from their ancestral homeland culture remains their ‘only place of seeking refuge’ and therefore, that is what needs to be nourished and preserved. Admittedly, for members CRP provides the ideal atmosphere for that.

Sylheti family culture as practised by individual members in CRP however, is not sans contestation as field notes show, from outside, albeit moderately by non-Sylheti Bengalis, non-CRP Sylhetis, and finally other resident Sylheti families; Sylheti Muslims of the city not only contest Sylheti culture as practised by CRP families or by those outside it but also prefer to maintain distance with larger Bengali community of the city. As Javed Alam Choudhury tells me: ‘Do you think Hindu Sylhetis or other Bengalis of CRP will accept us? It is a colony of Hindu refugees. Many dislike Muslims and Hindu Sylhetis will blame us for everything from partition to illegal immigration. Hindu Sylhetis are not Sylhetis but Bengalis for me. We are Indian
Sylhetis, and Bengali Muslims yes, but from North East’. While a section of non-Sylheti Bengalis find Sylheti families, except for a few ‘dangerously Sylheti’ in matters of speech and marriage preferences, a section of non-CRP Sylhetis instead consider them, again except for a few ‘hardly Sylheti’ given their ‘compulsory proximity’ to non-Sylheti (“Ghoti” in particular) Bengali culture. Few resident Sylheti families too contest each other on grounds ranging from use of speech and following customs to the claim of being ‘authentic bearers of Sylheti culture’. What Hiren (and his wife Shyamoli Dhar) says rather elaborately is revealing and insightful. He notes:

We shifted to CRP 15 years ago thinking it would be nice to live among Bengalis and Sylhetis. But despite claiming from roof tops that they are Sylhetis most have actually not remained so as they do not speak but ignore the speech at home and do not follow our cultural norms and behaviour including offer of a cup of tea; older Sylheti families are first to give up everything and first to say that they haven’t. But one thing they follow and that is caste rules and Brahman families, particularly Shampoos are very caste conscious and they hesitate to even attend a Shampoo and non-Shampoo Brahman marriage. We all (also Kayasthas) follow some caste rules but Brahmans think they are elite Sylhetis. It is like grading Sylheti families on the basis of their origin in Sylhet and India, say from Barak Valley or Shillong or Guwahati, caste, profession, arrival to CRP etc. Sylhetis are called casteists by other Bengalis and we say Brahmans are and not the whole community. How much of Sylheti culture we have in families is little doubtful as we have to adjust to changes and so why make false claims. Shampoos are many in CRP and what they call Sylheti culture is actually their family centered Brahman culture. Where is unity in CRP and SSD in this world of competition; we are only Sylhetis in our own ways.

Sylheti families of CRP also are not uncontested from within as field records show. Families with mixed marriages where a member is married to a non-Sylheti Bengali or a non-Bengali face resistance though usually moderate, from within; of course, resistance of such non-Sylheti and non-Bengali members do not reach an extent where institutions of family and marriage stand threatened. As Manjusha Ghosh says:

I am from Noakhali married to a Sylheti. Sylhetis are nice but tend to impose their culture on others. Even after so many years of marriage my Sylheti relations who are otherwise very nice complain that I do not understand things. I proudly say I am from Noakhali and maybe living with a Sylheti I have also developed this identity business; the other day I saw a young Punjabi girl married to a Sylheti attending the cultural function of SSD. She did not understand a thing but maybe was politely forced to attend that; many non-Bengalis married to Sylhetis say how much they dislike dry fish for instance, but have to endure its cooking at home or hear relations talk endlessly about how great Sylhetis are. We all love our spouses but that doesn’t mean we have stop becoming who we are and turn Sylhetis instead. Among CRP Sylhetis the tendency is maximum but generally all Sylhetis and also from

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North East are like that. Sylhetis prefer to marry Sylhetis but if that is not possible then they will carefully try to convert the non-Sylheti/Bengali spouse; Ha, Ha, I am happily married in a SYLHETI family.

However, the most challenging task faced by families is to inculcate what they call ‘Sylheti values’ among their younger (both of Sylheti and mixed parentage) members. In this context the difference between families which have young members born and bred in the city, and families which have moved in late with young members raised not till a certain age (say till twenties) in Delhi becomes pertinent. While the latter face fewer problems with active promotion of Sylheti culture including speech and social customs among young family members, the former face resistance from them. In fact, except for a few, most young ‘Delhiite Sylhetis’ I have met not only resist ‘imposition of Sylheti atmosphere at home’ but also often appear hostile to that. Interestingly, despite resistance to ‘home served Sylheti culture’ such members do not fail to mention that their origin lies in Sylhet, but the matter draws to a close just at that. As Deboleena Shome for instance, remarks:

*I and my friends* thoroughly dislike endless talks on Sylhet and greatness of Sylhetis. I know I am a Sylheti and that should be all but old relations and my parents will always regret that I do not know the speech [they did not force me], do not eat Shutki and do not intend to marry a Sylheti etc. They talk in Sylheti at home which other Bengalis don’t follow. They are obsessed with this Sylheti thing after living so many years here. I understand their sentiment but we have to move ahead in a global age. What sense will Sylheti speech and identity make? I am tired of having Sylhet all around me at home and hearing about Kolikatis, Assamese and partition. Because of this Sylheti thing my own Bangla speech also has a typical tone which non-Bengalis cannot catch but some of my other Bengali friends can. I am a Delhiite first and then a Bengali and Sylheti. My parents say: shobtai thako kintu eta bhuliyo na je tumi aashole Sylheti; Sylheti na malayo tumi Sylheti thakbai jodi tumi Sylhetor mormo bujho (be whoever you want but do not forget you are actually a Sylheti; even if you do not speak Sylheti you will remain one provided you understand the value of Sylhet). Why can’t Sylheti parents leave their children alone to grow up and become just good human beings and global citizens?

Sylheti families residing outside CRP as mentioned are dispersed across the city and NCR. Unlike CRP which provides a large section of its resident Sylhetis with a sense of belonging to a collective space in addition to individual family spaces, non-CRP Sylhetis dispersed as they are, rely essentially on the latter to remain ‘active Sylhetis’ in the city. As Bazlur Rahman Khan says: ‘My home is the only place where I can be Sylheti. I and my younger sisters live here and sometimes friends and relations from
Barak Valley also come. We cook food together and most importantly speak in Sylhet: more friends the merrier. I am not a member of SSD so for me my home is all I have, where I can remain a true (Karimganj) Sylheti’. Field notes point out that among non-CRP Sylhetis too speech and social practices whose sphere of operation is restricted to the inner world of family, remain the most important markers of their identity. As Bhudev Chakrabarty (and his son Tapash Chakrabarty) says:

Unlike CRP, Dwarka has a fairly large Sylheti population which is spread far and wide with new ones arriving regularly from North East. Ratan Chakrabarty, a family friend has in fact, thought of compiling a Sylheti telephone and address directory to help us locate each other. We would also like to know whether families are 100% or 75% or 25% Sylheti. I realized early that other than SSD which anyway exists we must encourage Sylheti culture within family also on a day to day basis. I taught my children Sylheti speech and we speak that at home and as pucca [pure] Sylhetis my children are proud of the identity though not all Delhi children are like that as their parents do not encourage them to learn Sylheti. Bujhcho ni ei bhashatai jerom pran aar darad aase aar kunu bhasat nai. Sylheti bhasha shunleu aamar mont a bhala hoi jai. Er lagi aami aamar bhasat Sylheti koyaisi hokkoi re diya [You know the life and warmth that Sylheti speech has no other does. So I taught everybody Sylheti at home]. The speech and culture of Sylhet is so unique and rich that I could not have deprived my children of those. Our social system, rituals guided by Srihatta Smriti, marriage norms, sense of religious devotion, food like Shidol, Birain Chaul, Pitha, Koril etc. makes us unique. We are generous and warm people who always welcome guests even if they are not Sylhetis, aar Sylheti hoile to kothai nai [and if one is Sylheti then it’s even better]. My children know about Sylheti folk songs of Radha Raman and Hachon Raja, Dhamai, Bau Nach and everything; we have Manasa Puja; Rupasi Puja, Mangal Chandi Puja at home; maintaining all our traditions was difficult after partition but I made it a point. I lost my homeland and the pain will go only when I die but I ensured that with loss of Sylhet not everything was lost. Who could take away my cherished cultural tradition which made me proud to be a Sylheti first and last.

In fact, among families living far away from CRP (and SSD) and Dwarka – for instance, in Dilshad Colony, Vaishali (Ghaziabad), Gurgaon and Rohini – I came across Sylheti families like say of Ajit Das who had similar things to say as mentioned above. However, only in few families I found Delhi bred younger members well versed in conversational Sylheti. But families of newly arrived Sylhetis from North East India do have not only young members who speak Sylheti (interspersed by Hindi words though), but also insist on retaining Sylheti culture at home. While a number of such members live in CRP, the majority reside outside that. An interesting point that often came up in conversations with them was the distinction
drawn between say, Sylheti families from Barak Valley and those hailing from say Shillong, Guwahati and other places of North East India. While the former see the latter (addressed commonly and often pejoratively as *Shillongs*) as 'snobbish and upstartish' and claim that they themselves are 'true representatives of undiluted Sylheti culture', the latter say that the former (addressed commonly and often pejoratively as *Silcharis*) are 'backward and uncouth' and it is they who actually are bearers of the 'fine Sylheti culture, speech and etiquette'. However, such cross accusations are not usually publicly expressed; these remain as sub-texts no doubt, but not to the extent of casting lasting influence on unanimously claimed 'united character' of the community. As Kaustav Acharya says:

*I came about a decade ago from NE and stay in Dwarka, and I have relations across the region; for me Sylhetis are just Sylhetis, irrespective of where they come from, preferably speaking and maintaining a Sylheti way of life and spirit. In fact we should be grateful to Barak Valley because it has fought for our identity all along and in SSD we observe 19 May regularly; without the language movement we would neither remain Bengalis nor Sylhetis. In the small Delhi community why create divisions on Shillong-Barak Valley basis? We are a closely knit group which has lost its motherland and should stand together come what may. SSD is there to highlight our identity but individually, in families also we must try to remain Sylheti; it is difficult in Delhi with influence of non-Bengali culture but not impossible even outside the comfortable CRP. In fact, we should be given credit for that. It is easier if both spouses are Sylheti and that is why marrying within the community is important. As a conscious parent I maintain Sylheti culture like speaking Sylheti, eating Shidol at home, reading on Sylhet, and will tell my son when he grows up about the land of his forefathers. Few Bengalis think we are closed and parochial and sometimes make sneer remarks about our Bangla speech. But that's what they always did and I do not really care. When other members of my family come visiting they feel proud that aami Srihattiyo sanskriti bhulchi na [I have not forgotten Sylheti culture].*

As in the case of CRP, contestation to family centric, middle class Sylheti culture outside CRP also comes as I gathered, not only from outside but also from within. In fact, I have been told by Sylhetis themselves how for instance, their non-Sylheti Bengali neighbors if they happen to have them, often complain, albeit not always in a serious tone about the kind of Bangla they speak or food (dry fish in particular) they eat. Non-Bengalis on the other hand if aware of how regular Bangla speech sounds and incidentally happen to hear a Sylheti conversation often enquire as Sukanya Debroy tells me, if the language is Bangladeshi. In areas and residential complexes where few Sylheti families live close by say Dwarka for instance, individual family
cultures are subjected to close cross-scrutiny. Points of contention between families range again from caste, type of occupation, and level of education to place of origin in undivided Sylhet and in post-partition India, time of arrival in the city, type of Sylheti spoken, kind of rituals performed, nature of food consumed, and so forth. Field notes suggest that caste identity remains one of the potential sources of fragmentation between families, and within the wider community; individual families are routinely dubbed either as ‘too Brahmanical’ or vice-versa. Culture practised by non-CRP Sylhetis is also not free from contestation from the ones residing in CRP. ‘In CRP we are amidst Bengalis so all others know what Sylheti culture is all about or how rich it is. So we have been able to retain our culture and identity. But for my community outside that is hardly possible; they are as I tell my friends, less Bengalis and least Sylhetis surrounded as they are by non-Bengalis. I really don’t blame them for that’, remarks Sukanta Deb in a slightly different context of members of SSD living faraway from CRP.

Sylheti families to reiterate again, face more challenge from within than from outside, particularly from those who are in the process of growing up. In most families (except for a few) parents being in favour of ‘retaining Sylheti culture at home’ (which they often fail to clearly define except perhaps in terms of speech), end up facing a kind of resistance from their children who gradually tend to move towards ‘not even Bengali but dominant non-Bengali (Hindi/Punjabi) culture’ of the city. It is to be noted that most Sylheti parents do not force their children to learn Sylheti or encourage any Sylheti-Bengali distinction; rather, they insist as Paritosh Dutta Choudhury tells me, that their children should grow up to be ‘Bengalis who are aware of their Sylheti origin and culture’. However, for the children in such families’ parental desires often clash with the ones of their own as my conversation with Deboleena Shome has shown, and the case outside CRP is not much different. In fact, field notes suggest that across the three sites a section of Sylheti parents are caught in a dilemma when it comes to choice of speech to be spoken at home and outside. In Karimganj, middle class children learn both fluent Sylheti and regular Bangla speech; while knowledge of Sylheti which is lingua franca of the district in particular and Barak Valley in general enables them to carry out everyday interactions, regular Bangla comes to use during conversations with non-Sylheti Bengalis located in, and outside the region. In Kolkata and Delhi, it is usually (not without exceptions) in regular Bangla that
children are trained to speak albeit with a hint of mild regret. In Delhi the situation is slightly complex given that children grow up in a wider non-Bengali atmosphere where spoken Bangla itself often runs the eventual risk of eroding away. As Prithwish Chakrabarty says: 'Much as I would love to, but my growing daughter will not be able to speak Sylheti though will surely follow that. Forget Sylheti for once as even her Bangla speech will survive or not I doubt. She, growing up in Delhi will end up speaking neither Sylheti nor regular Bangla as she will speak Hindi. I don't mind that but I hope she will remember her roots'.

Contestations notwithstanding, the Sylheti community as field notes show, does not appear to be sharply divided along length and area of location of its constituent member families; views and counter-views as and when expressed generally stem from purely personal experiences and contexts of interaction between members. Non-Sylheti Bengalis, most being refugees themselves do not come across as ones involved in any serious contestation vis-à-vis Sylhetis. Even if casual remarks are made say, about Sylheti form of speech and its unfathomable character, and 'inward looking tendency of the community', these are also compensated by a kind of appreciation for the 'united character of the community in which all Sylhetis know each other', and a character as Aditya Sen (of Faridpur-Khulna origin) says in a tone of regret, no other district community of erstwhile East Pakistan has. He, upon meeting me remarks: 'Aapnara Sylhetira to Baddidero haar maniyechen; aapnader ki darun unity; dekhle hinshe hoi [you Sylhetis have beaten Baidyas; you all have fantastic unity; I envy you all]'. Indeed, the 'fantastic unity' of Sylheti community as perceived by Sen and claimed by its middle class members alike is what the next section by focusing on SSD, further interrogates.

5.2: Coming together in the city: Sylheti life in organizations
Two known organizations run by the Sylheti community in Delhi as mentioned, are SSD and BCPMT; BASYA, run essentially by students hailing from Barak Valley also accommodates a large number of Sylhetis though in principle it is open to other communities of that region too. SSD being the oldest and largest of these has members drawn from every part of the city as well as other areas of NCR; it also includes a substantial number of outstation members, from Barak Valley in particular. However, a large number of Sylhetis residing in the city including CRP are not
members of SSD. SSD like other SA in India is not just an association that is devoted to social welfare activities and promotion of Sylheti culture but also for its members in particular a home, a thikana (address), and finally their identity. This resonates in a poem entitled ‘Bandhu, Tuke Naw Tomar Moner Thikana’ written by Jnan Ranjan Roy Choudhury in 1975. It goes as follows:


Indeed, SSD is more often than not considered as ‘mini-Sylhet’ which not only provides its members with the scope and space to nostalgically remember Sylhet but also keep alive the very act of remembering by regular practise of its cultural tradition. For its middle class members SSD is an umbrella, a shelter and a place of cultural refuge meant to be shared by all Sylhetis of the city in particular and country in general. However, its members at the same time opine that SSD is open to other communities who are in agreement with its social and cultural goals as well. As Manmatha Ranjan Chowdhury, one of the founding members of SSD writes: ‘Thus Sylhet people or comparatively young ones ... should get an opportunity to learn about Sylhet and to let their fellow Sylhetees know of their homely virtues, and qualities to attain them and to let outsiders also be benefited with. Thus the Sammilani is not a coterie of the Sylhet people, though it is of the Sylhetees, by the Sylhetees but not for Sylhetees alone’ [1984: no pp; also see Bhattacharjee 1973; Dass 1981]. And SSD does have few non-Sylhetis as members who are either spouses of Sylheti members or have proximity to Sylheti culture in terms of say, having Sylheti relations or lived at some point in time in Barak Valley in particular and North East India in general. Be that as it may, SSD and BCPMT however, remain at the end of the day not just going by their names but in composition too near completely Sylheti. Indeed, for the member Sylhetis the two organizations remain integral to their cultural life in
Delhi; BCPMT is less broad based in terms of membership and is officially not known as a “Sylheti organization” but trustees who run it are also drawn from the community. Though not officially involved in any kind of political activity, yet the fact remains that SSD was, and is (more so since 1980’s) heavily patronized by the Barak Valley based political leadership as a result of which it has been consciously avoided by a section of the larger Sylheti community located in the city and elsewhere in India. But by and large for its middle class members SSD always did, and continues to represent the ‘spirit of unity and integrity that has historically been the defining feature of the community’. To uphold the ‘united character’, to strengthen that further, and to nourish the primary constituent (culture) of that unity was what the founders of SSD had aimed for. As a community of displaced Hindus in the city, intensely anxiety and trauma ridden after partition, Sylhetis, influenced by the already existing SS (SU) in Calcutta and Sylhet Association in Shillong realized early that perhaps an organization established and modeled after those would be the ideal and most practical way of consolidating under one umbrella the ‘fast dispersing and perhaps faster disintegrating’ community. Sylhet certainly could not be recovered but a replica, a miniature of the lost homeland could be created instead in the city which above all would not allow the community to ‘forget itself’ or ‘suffer from historical and cultural amnesia’; in short, SSD would strive to provide the community with a ‘sthayi thikana [permanent address]’, a sense of ‘nirapatta [safety]’, and finally a sense of ‘garba [pride]’ to be Sylheti. SSD, a large number of its current members believe has succeeded in achieving the founding goals. But as Bithika Dev, its current President and a sitting MLA from Barak Valley asks whether Bengalis whose origin lie in Sylhet have actually been able to find a ‘permanent home’ for themselves after more than half a century of India’s independence. Drawing attention to the matter she, in a reflective mood writes:

Independence has made us chiraanchal [ever moving], jajabar [nomad]. During last fifty years we gomy so many things – higher education, house, cars, only we did not get a permanent address. The journey to safety our forefathers undertook with hope fifty years ago has not ended; we have still not reached that nirapad thikana [safe address]. After fifty years we are only happy somehow by forgetting the pain of our refugee life. But our happiness is like water on lotus leaves. The moment the local people get disturbed, we have to look for a route to escape.... Except Delhi ... Bengalis have always been humiliated, mistrusted and treated as second class citizens, in Meghalaya we are “Utkhar”, in Assam “Kela Bongal”, in West Bengal “Bangal”, in Orissa “Shoda Bangali”, these epithets we have been carrying for the past
fifty years. As bearers of a classical culture and civilization, we are without a gotra [group identification]. We do not have a place to call our own. We are the natun lhudi [new Jews] of post independence India. Does our future lie in another Israel? [1997: no pp (translation mine); also see Bhattacharjee 1980; Bhattacharya 1992].

SSD, claimed as a non-regional organization caters to the Sylheti community across India like the other SA do. For its Delhi based members SSD is the most prominent marker of their identity; rather, it is not the marker but identity itself. The identity as field notes show is articulated and propagated in a collectively practised cultural idiom which in tum is drawn from individual family rooted practices. SSD (and BCPMT) has not only managed to create a space for Sylhetis of the city but also as members and trustees say, for its larger Bengali community. Indeed, both are counted among the well known socio-cultural organizations of the larger Bengali community in particular and of Delhi in general.

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

Srihatta (Sylhet), the most enlightened and prosperous district of Assam was lost to East Pakistan, in the wake of partition of India in the year 1947. Hundreds and thousands of Sylhetee Hindus, as people of Sylhet are called [sic], were compelled to leave their hearth and home in search of shelter all over India. The Sylhetees who gathered in Delhi began to realize the growing need for forging closer ties among themselves for promoting social welfare and for sustaining the rich cultural heritage of Sylhet. Out of this realization was born the Srihatta Sammilani, Delhi [cited in Bhattacharjee 1988:16].

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

I remember the evening when we Delhi residing Sylhetis assembled at Naresh Chandra Deb’s house to discuss the formation of SSD. At that time we were involved in cultural activities of the brihattara [larger/wider] Bengali society. Given that, we questioned whether by separating/estranging ourselves from the Bengali society it would be wise to form a separate association of Sylhetis. But we always felt proud to identify ourselves as Sylhetis. So, I ignored the issue and attached myself with other Sylhetis without any dilemma. We assembled Sylhetis with limitless hope, enthusiasm and high spirit unanimously took up the task of establishing the SSD [1989: no pp (translation mine)].

The rationale behind formation of an association devoted primarily to Sylhetis of the city may have raised eyebrows of non-Sylheti Bengalis but it was not a matter that Sylhetis themselves were indifferent to. Indeed, on one hand they could not help but give an “associational expression” to their identity which they historically considered ‘distinct’ but on the other they also feared that such a measure would raise questions about their Bengali (component) identity whose bearer they certainly were. Caught in a dilemma, Sylhetis spared no means to address that as for instance, an early and devoted member of SSD named Ratish Chandra Bhattacharjee’s writing shows. He writes:

Sreehatta Sammilani is a meeting centre for Sylhetis, it lights the memory of the motherland, it is a communication centre where we are uninhibited in speech and conversation in our language, it gives a Sylheti atmosphere where we can unburden our minds. The Sammilani no doubt connects us, but connectivity being restricted to Sylhet often creates issues when analysed intelligently. Our intelligence says, why connectivity should be restricted to a geographical boundary, why should that be covered by a regional character. The principle should be Vasudaiva Kutumbakam. We also believe in that. That is why during the inauguration ceremony it was said that membership of Sreehatta Sammilani is not a means of contestation to any Banga Sammilani or Biswa Sammilani, rather it is their prishthaaposhok [support]…. But we must know our mother. Our identity begins with our mother. So, if we know more and better about her that will only add to our knowledge…. We must not forget that despite being Bengali speaking we Sylhetis have a reason to be part of Sreehatta Sammilani. Sreebhumi was pulled and pushed around since 1874 by the British…. We must bring back the lost glory and do we not require a sammilita [collective] effort for that? Is united struggle not the fundamental goal of the Sammilani? [1973: no pp (translation mine); also see Chowdhury 1982b].
Indeed, SSD was born more out of 'necessity' accentuated in particular after partition, than expression of 'parochial pride' which Sylhetis were more often than not accused of. As Sushanta Krishna Dass writes:

Sylhet was a pawn of the imperialist design. It was this questionable "Satranj Ki Khel" (game of chess) that swamped this otherwise sav'able land into "East Pakistan". It's a story of real deprivation. But the story is undertold.... Sylhet's story of deprivation is conceptually different from the partition of the country. The bad-blood created by the two-nations theory already clouding the horizon of the sub-continent, the nightmare of the direct actions of Calcutta and Punjab fresh in memory, the stay of the Hindus of Sylhet in the "East Pakistan" was doubly staked due to their taking part in the referendum exposedly on Hindu-Muslim dichotomy, thus their time old Muslim neighbours and friends becoming direct antagonists. Here is an extra reason for too heavy migration of Hindus from Sylhet district. Many of them were coming to Delhi. Uprooted and bewildered -- they tried contacting sympathizers. The contacts were mostly the easily approachable people of their district, settled in Delhi with considered status. People with farsight as the contacts were, they felt that organized help would be more meaningful than individual initiative. So, they met in a forum and the Sreehatta Sammilani, Delhi was born. Thus the Sammilani may be called a child of necessity, not of parochialism [1981: no pp]

Following meetings and deliberations held at residences of Sylheti members spread across the city, SSD was officially registered on 16 April, 1958 as a socio-cultural organization. Headed by Ashok Kumar Chanda, the twenty three member executive committee outlined the objectives, rules and regulations of SSD which among others stated:

The aims and objects of the Sammilani are:- (a) To promote welfare of the members, and to render assistance to refugees, displaced persons coming from Sylhet district as far as possible; (b) To promote social relationship among members by organizing meetings, social gatherings and lectures; (c) To organize and render social services to members; (d) To provide such financial assistance to the members and their dependents as may become necessary in an emergency or while in distress; (e) To help the orphans and render financial assistance to poor and deserving meritorious students of the members who are unable to defray educational expenses to the extent possible; (f) To promote intellectual and cultural activities.... Membership . . . (i) Ordinary Member.- Any person who or whose wife/husband or any of whose or whose wife/husband's parents or grandparents was/were inhabitant(s) of the District of Sylhet as constituted on 14/8/47 and who is a citizen of India and who has now been residing or likely to reside in future in the Union Territory of Delhi and who is above the age of 18 years shall be eligible to be an ordinary member. (ii) Life Member.- Any person eligible to be an ordinary member may be enrolled as a Life Member .... (iii) Associate Member.- Ant person who does not come under (i) but subscribes to the aims and objects of the Sammilani and is above the age of 18 years shall be
eligible to be an Associate Member. Vote: .... (b) Each member, except an Honorary member or an Associate members, enrolled up to 31st December of the financial year shall be entitled to vote ...
(e) At the meeting of the General Body votes shall ordinarily be taken by a show of hands. If the General Body so decides, votes may be taken for the decision of any question at any meeting by ballot (f) At the meeting of the Executive Committee, votes shall be taken by show of hands (g) Votes by proxy will not be allowed in any meeting .... The Memorandum and/or the Rules and Regulations may, at any time, be altered or added by a resolution passed by two thirds majority of the members entitled to vote and present at a meeting of the General Body [Memorandum of Association, SSD, Delhi, 1958-59 (emphasis original)].

Memorandum of Association of SSD including rules and regulations have been amended from time to time including revision of membership fee structure; while some provisions such as rendering assistance to refugees and displaced persons from Sylhet, associate membership, and so forth have been deleted from it, few such as nomination of chief patron and other patrons to executive committee, extension of its term to two years in place of one, addition to its numerical composition, establishment of trust/organization ‘for promotion and implementation of one or more of the objectives of the Sammilani’, non eligibility of say, the President of SSD to take up office of chairperson of any trust founded by it, introduction of voting by secret ballot, provision to include members from those districts that are part of NCR , and so forth have been added [General Secretary’s Report, SSD, Delhi, 2002-03 (Unpublished); Millenium Review: Annual General Meeting (hereafter MRAGM), SSD, Delhi, 2000 (Unpublished)]. However, it appears that SSD functions less by clearly laid down rules and regulations (both original and amended) and more by vested interests of a section of its members who hold both financial and political command over it. SSD’s functioning as records and field notes suggest, remains shrouded in ambiguity, and needless to say, it remains a deeply divided organization from within not only along predictable lines of caste, occupation and similar others but also exercise of power. Perhaps the founders of SSD never foresaw the association functioning the way it does now. Fragmentations notwithstanding, for a large section of its members it however, continues to remain the ‘emotional anchor and voice of their identity’. In fact, SSD right since the time of its formation was perceived to be so. As Benoy Krishna Bhattacharya writes:

The convergence of human waves towards Delhi also made its impact upon the Sammilani.... People of erstwhile Sylhet or their descendants for professional, academic or other reasons reached
Delhi, some among them consciously or unconsciously landed there in search of identity, identity which only the mainstream could offer. With the loss of Sylhet, the identity crisis became paramount. Eastern India accommodated them, not with warmth everywhere, and sometimes grudgingly or even with hostility. The sensitivity and intellectual richness of these people [make] them painfully realize that they were not welcome everywhere. Delhi being the nucleus of mainstream, became the goal of many sensitive people of Sylhet or their descendants. Here they found they could flourish in all their materialness and spontaneity of living. A Sylhet [cannot] be recreated but it [can] be occasionally relived, if its spirit [can] be preserved [1992: no pp; also see GJACES, SSD, Delhi, 2007].

Not surprisingly, SSD in particular and other SA in general are often called ‘mini-Sylhets’ that sprung up in India prior to, and after independence. Such ‘mini-Sylhets’ are instrumental in retaining the sense of nostalgia that older members of the community in particular are gripped with. As Benoy Krishna Bhattacharya writes:

Hundreds and thousands of people from the district ... came out as refugees, in search of base elsewhere in India, leaving behind not only their ancestral homes but also millions of dreams and aspirations which grow with homes. Slowly and gradually they built up their mini-Sylhets in Calcutta, Delhi ... Bombay ... Durgapur ... and many other places by forming Sreehatta Sammilanees.... It is through these Sammilani activities that the Sylhetees, as they are called, retain the nostalgia in memory of a land gone with the winds down the memory lane and yet revived through continual renewals all over the country through cultural activities. In memory Sylhet is destined to live forever [1996: no pp].

Housed in BCPMT run Bipin Chandra Pal Memorial Bhavan (hereafter BCPMB) at A-81, Chittaranjan Park, SSD with 662 life members (of which 71 are from Barak Valley alone) in 2008-09 indeed comes close to being described as another ‘mini-Sylhet’. BCPMB, constructed by SSD established BCPMT is an imposing structure with a statue of B.C. Pal erected right at the entrance. Housed inside, the SSD office has among others, a framed map of undivided Sylhet on one of its walls; in fact, that map adorns almost all official chambers including the library of BCPMB [see Images 5.0 and 5.1]. Not only in spirit and activity but also in a physical sense SSD comes across as miniature (undivided) Sylhet. However, Sylhet, as members tell me is not just a ‘business of memory’ for them but ‘a living thing, an active presence that is
Chapter V

Image 5.0: View of BCPMB, Delhi

Photo courtesy: Nabanipa Bhattacharjee

Chapter V

Image 5.1: Framed map of pre-partition Sylhet in BCPMB, Delhi

Photo courtesy: Nabanipa Bhattacharjee
indispensable to their existence'. ‘As a member I know SSD is not a dead organization that does nothing except wallow in nostalgia’, says Anjana Sengupta ‘for, it is alive and growing in terms of regular social work and cultural activities. It formed BCPMT in 1988 which was a big achievement. It takes active interest in “real” problems faced by the community so that that remains strong and united. Nostalgia has not held us back from active work’. Indeed, it is in this ‘mini-Sylhet’ that most middle class members collectively, and squarely locate themselves by celebrating cultural festivals, felicitating eminent Sylhetis, paying respects to martyrs of 19 May, 1961, writing in souvenirs, and above all speaking Sylheti dialect. While for some members SSD certainly means a culturally alive and united ‘mini-Sylhet’, for others it is a ‘mini-Sylhet’ that is divided, and culturally near close to being dead. As Krishna Nandy notes: ‘I was and will remain a member of SSD but I am very much disheartened by the state of its affairs. SSD was Sylhet for me but it now is divided and destroyed by people who have only their personal interest in mind. Hardly any good cultural activities happen. Sylhet’s and SSD’s fate are same as they will always be divided either by religion or by power and money’. Be that as it may, among the notable achievements of SSD, formation of BCPMT which I shall discuss later, in 1988 remains foremost followed by social welfare activities and series of cultural programs that it organizes on annual basis. However, it is important to note that SSD often carries out is social and cultural activities with the active collaboration of BCPMT though these are officially independent bodies [see for instance, GJACES, SSD, Delhi, 2007; MRAGM, SSD, Delhi, 2000]. Social welfare activities, as a SSD authored write-up entitled ‘About Ourselves’ which appears in almost all souvenirs suggests are:

On the social front, Sreehatta Sammilani have been contributing its might in its humble way to help the poor and the needy as far as practicable. For this a special fund has been created for awarding scholarship to the poor and meritorious students and financial help to the needy persons for medical treatment. From time to time Sammilani have contributed to the Prime Minister’s Relief Fund, the National Defence Fund, the Flood Relief Programmes, etc. so that it can reach out to the people in distress throughout the country [cited in GJACES, SSD, Delhi, 2007: no pp; also see Chowdhury et al 1982].

Records suggest that apart from providing scholarships to financially weak students and monetary aid to ailing and needy patients, other activities which may be broadly
classified as social is primarily handled by BCPMT; activities such as upkeep of the office, installation of computers and other technical gadgets, provision of indoor games and other sports facilities, and so forth are carried out by SSD. In the past, SSD as and when it found poor student applicants did provide annual stipends to them despite being plagued by paucity of funds; while such stipends were mainly received by children of its members, no record is found to suggest that those were restricted to them [see for instance, Chowdhury et al 1982; Shri Shri Chaitanya Jayanti Souvenir (hereafter SSCJS), SSD, Delhi, 1981]. SSD, relatively financially sound in the new millennium carried the tradition of awarding scholarships (when it found applicants) and in addition, extending help to needy patients. Apart from donating funds to schools, health and child care centers in Delhi and North East (Barak Valley in particular), SSD also lends support to social causes. During the Assam Movement in 1980, SSD as records show, very seriously addressed the problems faced by minorities (read Bengalis) in North East India including submission of memorandum to central authorities. The cultural activities of SSD include: a) cultural functions, and b) publication of annual souvenirs, and needless to say, the former in terms of wide and active involvement of members remains the most important one. The three annual cultural events of SSD are: a) Sri Chaitanya’s birth anniversary celebration b) Annual Cultural Day function, and c) Bijoya Sammelan celebration. Other than these the association also organizes functions to: a) commemorate the birth anniversaries of eminent Sylheti personalities like Pandit Sitanath Tattwabhushan, Bipin Chandra Pal, Sundari Mohan Das and others b) felicitate old and living Sylhetis of the city c) mark the contribution of Sylhetis (and sometimes non-Sylhetis too) who are well known for their work in various spheres of social and cultural life d) debate and discuss social and political issues including seminars on Jawaharlal Nehru and his thought (held in 1989), history and culture of Barak Valley (held in 1992), and so forth e) celebrate Saraswati Puja f) organize indoor and outdoor sports events g) pay tribute to martyrs of 19 May, 1961, and observe the day as Shaheed Divas h) celebrate the first day of Nababarsha (Bengali New Year), and i) invite well known musical bands and dance troupes for performance [Annual Cultural Evening Souvenir (hereafter ACES), SSD, Delhi, 2009; Chowdhury et al 1982; GJACES, SSD, Delhi, 2007; MRAGM, SSD, Delhi, 2000; SSCJS, SSD, Delhi, 1981.]. While most cultural events continue to be
held as in the past, one competitive event, an indoor game called *Das Pachish* (literally Ten Twenty Five) no longer features in the list of events. Perhaps the last time it was held as the record of 1981 shows, was in 1979-80. *Das Pachish* is an indoor game that resembles to some extent what is commonly known as *Pasha Khela* (Dice Game), and is widely played by men and women in Sylheti families. It is extremely popular in Barak Valley, and I have seen Sylhetis with immense seriousness and concentration playing and participating in it. In fact, the game is so close to Sylheti hearts that it is considered not only ‘exclusive’ (in terms of Sylheti words and phrases used) to the community but also a ‘distinct’ marker of its identity. In Barak Valley, and also in Delhi I was often asked about my own competence in the game to which I replied in affirmative. Senior members of SSD consider the discontinuation of *Das Pachish* competition unfortunate, more so because young Sylhetis as a result stand deprived of the pleasure of playing it. Reflecting on the game and cultural activities in general Tara Pal Choudhury, current General Secretary of SSD says:

> Our main cultural activities are Mahaprabhu’s birth anniversary, Bijoya Sammelan and Annual Day celebrations. As you have seen, these are very well organized and attended by young and old alike though the latter are more in number. SSD organizes these and BCPMT also cooperates as we also support all its activities. The best thing is that Sylheti spirit becomes alive on such occasions. I know *Das Pachish* competition used to be held and it is a wonderful and absorbing game but somehow I think in Delhi people have lost interest as it is a time consuming game. I would love to play it myself with all the speaking and shouting in Sylheti and so much beauty and excitement. Such programs were always held by SSD. Time to time we also have seminars on say Barak Valley and functions to remember illustrious sons and daughters of Sylhet like Nirmalendu Choudhury, Gurusaday Dutta, Triguna Sen, Surendra Kumar Dey and others. Every Sylheti and sometimes others too who do well in any field is given recognition by us as we have a social responsibility towards recognizing, preserving and also promoting Sylheti culture and tradition. Our functions have been chaired and attended by eminent Indians from all walks of life like Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, Swami Chinmoyananda, Humayun Kabir (his wife was Sylheti), Nihar Ranjan Ray, Phulrenu Guha, Jajabar, Ajit Kumar Panja (his wife was Sylheti) and others. Years back the Bangladeshi Sylheti High Commissioner in Delhi used to regularly attend our functions. We also invite famous bands and dance groups to perform like Dohar, Dera Dona Bhanda, Mamata Shankar’s troupe and Gitanjali. In 2006 SSD actively campaigned for SMS votes for singer Debojit Saha from Silchar and he is performing, as you can see, in our Golden Jubilee function. We also participate in Shaheed Divas observed by BCPMT. Hope we will be able to do more in future under the able leadership of our president Bithika Dev and our chief patron Santosh Mohan Dev.
Unlike records of SS (SU) and SKSA of Kolkata which have fairly systematic and elaborate description of their cultural activities, the ones of SSD are not so and therefore, my own participation, more frequent as compared to Kolkata due to my residential location in the city in those has been crucial. In fact, it often becomes difficult to distinguish between events held by SSD and BCPMT so close are their ‘spirits of collaboration’. Be that as it may, the Golden Jubilee celebrations of SSD began on 14 April 2007 with the felicitation of its three senior and long time members namely, Srish Chandra Dasgupta, Ajit Das and Basanti Dhar. As part of year long celebrations SSD organized among others, two cultural events namely, performance by the noted danseuse Mamata Shankar and her ballet troupe and musical extravaganza by Debojit Saha of ZEE Voice of India fame. Having attended both, I was witness to the larger crowd that assembled to hear Debojit Saha on 15 December 2007 at B.C Pal auditorium, and on that day another four senior members of SSD were felicitated. Debojit introduced himself in Sylheti speech but began with popular songs of Hindi cinema and continued for a while. It was then that I heard older Sylheti members of the audience complain that Debojit being from Silchar ought to have sung Sylheti folk songs; upon that being communicated to, and complied by him the audience broke out in loud applause to beats of popular Sylheti numbers. As and when he spoke after that it was in Sylheti speech, and he even declared that he had come to SSD not as a professional artist but as ‘Srihatter santan [son of Sylhet]’. I met Satyajit Choudhury that day, and he reflected on the event and in general on SSD as follows:

You must come to my place in Lodhi Road. Anyway, dekhsoni kita gaan guise? aamrar Sylheti gaanu shobcheye best hoise. SSDit aaiya Sylheti gaan na gaile cholbo ni? Er lagi tare aana hoise [have you seen how he sang? Our Sylheti songs were the best. How can he not sing Sylheti songs in SSD? That is why he was called]. Sylheti folk songs like Suhaag Chand Bodoni tumi naso to dekhi and ki herilam joler ghate giya are the best. Today I feel so proud to be a Sylheti and credit goes to SSD for successfully bringing together all Sylhetis. We Sylhetis belong to one family and like all families we have some trouble but one look at the crowd will tell you that despite differences we are finally Sylhetis – in speech, culture, habit and everything; all our events are well attended by young and old people and the former, though few, come often. So many inter-marriages happen now that it is difficult to find full Sylheti families in big cities and a youngster whose spouse is not Sylheti or not Bengali will find it difficult to participate fully in Sylheti functions. But thanks to SSD that we can remain Sylheti even in Delhi that is so far from Sylhet and Barak Valley [also see GJACES, SSD, Delhi, 2007; MRAGM, SSD, Delhi, 2000].
The Chaitanya Jayanti Utsav is celebrated on a regular basis in March every year. On that day members and devotees drawn from all communities, and spread across the city assemble at the now constructed BCPMB to participate in Satya Narayan Puja, Harir Loot (dry sweets distributed as loot) and Kirtan (devotional songs sung in chorus); the devotees are also given prasad and bhog (sacred offerings). In fact, importance of the event may be gauged from the fact that it is not only well attended, but SSD in 1981 and 1985 brought out souvenirs dedicated exclusively to Sri Chaitanya’s life and thought. Indeed, Sri Chaitanya remains one of the lasting icons of Sylheti community, and the editor of SJCS, Manmatha Ranjan Chowdhury writes: ‘The holy land of Sylhet has the unique privilege of being the ancestral home of Shree Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and it was in the fitness of things that Sammilani decided to celebrate the holy Birth day of Mahaprabhu on the “Dol Purnima” day every year by arranging spiritual discourses and devotional music. Shree Chaitanya Jayanti was inaugurated in the year 1961 by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan’ [1982a:no pp; also see, General Secretary’s Report, SSD, Delhi, 2008-09 (Unpublished); SSCJS, SSD, Delhi, 1981; Shree Shree Chaitanya Mahaprabhu’s Fifth Centenary Celebration Souvenir (hereafter SSCMFCCS), SSD, Delhi, 1985]. As Gita Choudhury says:

Chaitanya Utsav is very important for us because not only was he a great religious thinker and guru and Indian but a Sylheti too. So what if he was not born in Sylhet? His forefathers were born there and most of his early devotees were Sylhetis. He is the ultimate pride of Sylhet. And everywhere his anniversary is observed. I look forward to the event because it is conducted so beautifully and members who may stay away from other functions make it a point to attend this; the songs and kirtans often bring tears to our eyes and as devotees we pray together to Mahaprabhu and realize how lucky we are to have inherited and retained Sylhet’s religious tradition despite losing Sylhet in 1947.

Annual Cultural Day/Evening is held during winter months by SSD. More or less held uninterrupted since 1961, SSD always laid great stress on its importance, more so because the event provided an opportunity to first, showcase Sylhet’s cultural heritage, and second, present that to the wider public. While the event prior to availability of B.C Pal auditorium used to be held in rented auditoriums across the city, it is held in the former now. Over the years well known music, dance and theatre groups have participated in annual cultural events so have noted folk musicians, poets, litteratuers and others. Needless to say, the tone and texture of the events remained
focused on Sylhet including performances in Sylheti speech. Reflecting on the purpose of SSD’s annual festival, Manmatha Ranjan Chowdhury writes: ‘(ii) Annual Cultural Festival. Sylhet has a rich cultural heritage and Sreehatta Sammilani considers itself responsible for making efforts to sustain and nourish it. Cultural festival is organized every year. Efforts are made to depict the good old cultural life of Sylhet and its neighbouring areas through its songs and dances. The annual festival is a distinct contribution to the cultural life of the capital’ [1982a: no pp; also see ACES, SSD, Delhi, 2009; Images 5.2 and 5.3]. The Annual Cultural Evenings held in B.C Pal auditorium on 17 January, and again on 14 November in 2009 were the ones I attended. On both occasions’ fairly large audiences were present, though the organizers told me that numbers were low as compared to earlier years. The evenings began with welcome speeches followed by poetry recitation, songs, solo, group dance, and theatre performances though none of these had exclusive Sylheti content; not only were those, the welcome speeches and votes of thanks proposed on both occasions too were not in Sylheti speech but regular Bangla. I did notice a sense a discomfort among senior members regarding the “absence of Sylhet in a Sylheti function”. However, some relief came to those on 14 November when the Executive Trustee of BCPMT, Dipendra Krishna Dutta Choudhury in his speech highlighted the significance of Sylheti dialect in the growth and development of Bangla language. He, among others, claimed that Sylheti is not an ‘upabhasha [dialect]’ of Bangla but its ‘aadi bhasha [classical/original language]’, and by citing instances of numerous Sylheti words present in Charjyapada Sahitya, the oldest form of Bangla literature he concluded that Sylheti bhasha being ‘suprachin [ancient]’ ought to be recognized as ‘the authentic Bangla language’. He told me later that the time has arrived to fight and restore the lost glory of Sylheti dialect which Kolkata based Bengalis never did, or would encourage and therefore, the struggle admittedly would have to be carried on by Sylhetis themselves. Except for such speeches which could remind a Sylheti member of the audience of his/her origin and dialect, Annual Evenings of SSD, at least the two that I attended are hardly Sylheti in content or form. As Rabi Ranjan Dhar, current Joint Secretary of SSD notes:

Annual cultural day is the signature event of SSD in which we all wholeheartedly participate. We have had very well know singers like Anup Ghosal, Lakkhidass Bairagi and dance experts like Mukundadas Bhattacharjee from Silchar. There is bit of change now as young people are few; Delhite Sylhetis are losing touch
Chapter V

Image 5.2: Inauguration ceremony of Annual Cultural Day function, 2009, SSD, Delhi

Photo courtesy: Nabanipa Bhattacharjee

Chapter V

Image 5.3: Dance performance at Annual Cultural Day function, 2009, SSD, Delhi

Photo courtesy: Nabanipa Bhattacharjee
with the culture of Sylhet and may become an endangered species. But enthusiastic people also come from those families where Sylheti culture is discussed and practised; I feel programs of SSD should happen on Sylheti themes and in Sylheti bhasha. But we could have fewer participants then and non-Sylheti Bengalis would feel out of place too as I know some do; I am not against other cultures and SSD encourages variety but not at the cost of sidelining Sylheti culture; how can one forget Sylheti Ramayan? Broad based does not mean forgetting one’s own heritage. But with all difficulties also we are and will remain successful. For me coming from Pushp Vihar and for a large number of others the annual day means reunion, meeting other Sylhetis and getting to talk in our matri bhasha [mother tongue]. SSD rejuvenates me and sometimes I feel where and what would I be without it in Delhi.

*Bijoya Sammelan* doubling as the annual get-together/picnic is held in the winter months following Saradiya Durga Puja. As an event that is informal in spirit, it provides much needed relaxation to members from the grueling life in the city. As Manmatha Ranjan Chowdhury writes: ‘Bijoya Sammilan is organized every year, usually a day long programme to promote social contacts and to establish new one, to exchange ideas and to promote a feeling of oneness. This is a merry programme of sports and picnic in pleasant natural surroundings and is enjoyed alike by old, young and children’ [1982a: no pp; also see MRAGM, SSD, Delhi, 2000; *ACES*, SSD, Delhi, 2006]. The event used to be held earlier at well known picnic spots in and around the city, and children in particular enjoyed the outing. Having attended one, Subhashish, a thirteen years old student was inspired to compose a poem entitled ‘The Warmth of Shreehatta Sammilani’, and publish that in the annual souvenir. He writes:

> After a long summer so hot and crisp/and rains that come and go/We finally wanted to take a break/but didn't know where to go/We finally decided to go for a picnic/and play games that bring us joys/We played games like racing and antakshari/and joined kids played with toys/The picnic was organized by Shreehatta Sammilani/and people were very active/There were many prizes at the end/and the people were very inquisitive/There were many games like racing/and others like musical chair/There was no shade to stand as all the trees were bare/The food was provided by the people/and it was so delicious!/After lunch there was a fancy dress competition and many children had participated/They were so realistic/and didn't look if they were created/And finally it came to an end/and it was a cool Sunday/Even though it was so hot and warm/it had been converted into a chilled sunday [cited in *ACDS*, SSD, Delhi, 1998: no pp].

Held in recent times at BCPMB on a holiday or preferably a Sunday, the attractions of the annual get-together are events such as sports, drawing, painting, fancy dress competitions and most importantly, an elaborate, three to four course lunch which
often includes *shidol shutki chutney* (dry fish paste/curry). In 2005, a Sylheti vocabulary competition was added to the list of events. As a *ACES* states: ‘[I]n order to promote Sylheti Language an open to all competition was conducted, where popular words/proverbs of Sylheti language was put before the members for telling the meaning & framing the corresponding sentence. The response was well appreciated & the participation of the younger generation was encouraging’ [2006:no pp]. As a participant in the get-together held on 19 October 2008, I happened to witness most of the events mentioned above. Dressed in best of clothes, members appeared to be completely relaxed, and at ease as they met, laughed and spoke in Sylheti to either renew old relations or forge new ones with each other. Indeed, ‘one Sylheti inevitably knowing the other’ phenomenon or what is generally referred as ‘Sylheti network’ believed to be extending beyond the regular kinship based one, was fully at work, and in the past too, the event had succeeded in making Sylhetis feel ‘that every one belonged not only to a common ethnic [sic] root; they were as if the members of same family’ [cited in MRAGM, SSD, Delhi, 2000; also see *ACES*, SSD, Delhi, 2009]. As Benoy Kumar Bhattacharya reflects:

*I am an old member from Gurgaon and because I live so far away from SSD, CRP and hardly get to speak Sylheti (we speak Hindi mostly) and meet friends that I come to this event; the time we spend at get-togethers sustain us rest of the year and takes away much sorrow from our lives. All of us participate in that including youngsters and it our duty to convince them to attend such Sylheti festivals; in Sylheti vocabulary contest we give Sylheti words like say, tena (cloth), fal (jump), tuma (piece), huroin (broom), pua (boy), puri (girl), pek (mud) and ask contestants to give equivalent meanings in regular Bangla or English. Heavy discussions also happen but such lighter moments makes the atmosphere friendly; the best thing, as you can see, happens at lunch when people scream, “O ba tare aarokta masor tukra deo or dailor loge begun baja dilay na deki?; shutkit morich parse na ni? [Hey you, give him another piece of fish or why no Brinjal fry with Dal?; is dry fish curry without green chillies?]. Such screams are expressions of warmth and love of the fact that we are nothing but Sylhetis.*

Reponses of middle class members who participate in such cultural functions does show the presence of a collective and united spirit among them including an urge to preserve and propagate their Sylheti identity which a member says, is ‘*Sholoana Sylheti* [completely Sylheti]’, and simultaneously ‘*Sholoana Bangali* [completely Bengali]’; in such events distinctions based on length, place of residence and others are almost overlooked. However, the “Sylhetiised Bangaliana” (Bengalihood) that members practise, and the functions uphold is not without contestation; in fact, the
entire gamut of activities of SSD including the souvenirs published as I shall shortly show, face more resistance from within than from without. The souvenirs that SSD brings out on occasions such as Annual Cultural Festival/Day/Evening usually contain a report on its yearly activities, message from President/Chief Patron, outline of the day’s/evening’s program, list of past office bearers, profile of elected executive committee, photographs, poems, articles on Sylhet’s social and cultural tradition, list of members and their postal addresses and telephone numbers, congratulatory and condolence messages, and so forth, not to mention the very large number of advertisements inserted by Barak Valley and Delhi based individuals and firms. Published at different points in time within a working year (but not in 2009-2010), copies of old souvenirs are hard to procure given the slack storage and archiving system followed by SSD, and I had to run pillar to post to procure for instance, important ones like *Silver Jubilee Celebration Souvenir* (1982) and *SSCMFCCS* (1985) which needless to say, I did, and succeeded. Followed by these two, the souvenir published in 1989 to mark the birth centenary of Jawaharlal Nehru remains another important document.

The first, edited by Manmatha Ranjan Chowdhury and others contains a total of seventeen articles and write ups, and in addition, the annual report, list of members and their places of origin in Sylhet and goodwill messages. The writings, focused on Sylhet range from Sri Chaitanya’s thoughts to role of modern education in Sylhet, contribution of Sylhetis to Bangla literature, Sylhet and Rabindranath Tagore, Sylhet Association of Shillong and most importantly, partition and refugeehood. The second has fourteen write ups on Sri Chaitanya with a few on hitherto unaddressed aspects of his life and philosophy; it has two articles by non-Indians namely, Swami Swahananda of Hollywood, U.S.A based Vedanta Society and Mohammad Muslim Choudhury of Sheikhghat, Sylhet, Bangladesh. The equally valuable third – dedicated to Nehru – has two short pieces on Nehru followed however, by poems and ten pieces on Sylheti culture and heritage including ones on Achyut Charan Choudhury (Tattwanidhi), Surendra Kumar Dey and interestingly, Satindra Mohan Dev, a political leader from Silchar and father of Santosh Mohan Dev, the current Chief Patron of SSD; in fact, writings on him are found in other souvenirs as well. The *GJACES* (2007) is considered an important document by members, though except for a few most constituent articles are reprints of originals published in earlier issues.
SSD as the MRAGM suggests, had also undertaken a project to publish a five chapter book on heritage of Sylhet where among others, contributors were requested to provide elaborate profiles and descriptions of their places of origin in the undivided district which however, failed to take off. Though not neat in structure and editing, yet the tri-lingual (Bangla, English and Sylheti) souvenirs do throw light on issues considered as Kaustav Acharya, a member of SSD says significant by the community; more importantly, these aid in understanding the process of Sylheti identity reconstruction in contemporary Delhi in particular and India in general. The available souvenirs in general include: a) articles on religious, political, literary, folk and cultural history of Sylhet such as ‘Sreehatta Ba Sreebhumi Samparke Sankhepe Itibritta’, ‘Sylhet – Traditional and Modern’, and ‘Sribhumir Atmakatha’ b) write ups on SSD and its activities such as ‘Sylheti O Sreehatta Sammilani’, and ‘Aami Tomaderee Lok’ c) personal tributes, memoirs, reminiscences, travelogues and accounts of partition experience such as ‘Chinnamul’, ‘Janmabhumi Sribhumi’, ‘Sruti O Smriti Theke’, ‘Bhuli Nai’, ‘Amon Deshti Kohaw Khunje Pabe Nako Tumi’, and ‘Shonar Desh Sreebhumi Sreehatta’ d) long and short poems such as ‘Tomadereee’, and ‘Jigyasha’ e) articles on Surma-Barak Valley such as ‘Srihatter Shaheed’, ‘Surma O Barak Upatyaaka: Oitijhya O Sanskriti’, and ‘Byaribhaktitarangini O Barak Upatyaakar Noukapujabidhir Punthi’ f) write ups on eminent Sylheti personalities such as ‘Srihatta Pran: Jatindra Mohan Swarane’, ‘Sribhumir Bhabaghure: Bhuparyatak Shri Ramnath Biswas’, and ‘Jananeta Satindra Mohan Dev’ g) write ups on music and dance of Surma-Barak Valley such as ‘Sylheter Loksangeet Prasange’, and ‘Barak-Surma Upatyaakar Ghum Bhanganiya Gaan’ h) articles on eminent Indian leaders such as ‘Lekhak Nehru’, and ‘Bishwer Bismay Rishi Aurobindo’ i) short notes on relationship of Sylhetis and “others” (non-Sylheti Bengalis and Assamese) such as ‘Aashami’, and ‘Kolkatar Abhigyata’ j) write ups and poems on, and in Sylheti language such as ‘U Hu Amon Kunu Hashi Aayeruna’, ‘Maskar Dhamail’, ‘Naiyor’, ‘Haur-Hhari Brittanta’, ‘Hokkolta Nay, Jeta Na Jamaileu Aoina’, ‘Hakkaleu Hashilay, Mui Kunu Na …’, and ‘Pitha Sanbad’, and k) reports and write ups on, and by BCPMT such as ‘Bipin Chandra Paler Smriti Rakshar Procheshta’, ‘Bipin Chandra Pal Memorial Bhavan: A Report’, and so forth. The write-ups, either directly or indirectly alludes that the identity of the community being historically ‘distinct’ ought to be not only preserved but simultaneously celebrated and promoted; admittedly, the role of SSD in that is considered of prime importance [see for
instance, Bhattacharjee 1973; Bhattacharya 1992, 1996; Chowdhury 1982a, 1882b, 1984]. For middle class Sylhetis, and even those who are not regular contributors to the souvenirs reading and thinking about Sylhet amounts to a kind of catharsis which in case of those who write finds further scope and space in that act. The writings are predictably not critical in tone and tenor; rather, the picture of Sylhet – its people and culture, and finally its identity – that emerges out of the writings comes close to being borderless, syncretic and idyllic from within except for a short travel account by a senior member of SSD named Anupama Deb. Writing about her re-visit to Panchakanda, Sylhet in 1990, she notes:

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

Indeed, on face the Sylheti community appears as its middle class projects, as one that is sans fragmentation; consequently, its identity as carried by SSD in the city, appears as similarly projected. But as mentioned, and field notes also suggest that contestations within SSD are intense to the extent that it actually “functions” as a “split-through-the-middle” association. In fact, what I have termed as contestation ought to be called bitter infighting and conflict, to say the least. However, what is interesting is that SSD despite such internal conflicts has not officially split up as was say for instance, the case with SS (SU), and the subsequently formed SKSA in Kolkata. Contrary to claims of ‘efficiency and success of SSD’ made by a section of members including the office bearers, its mode and pattern of functioning, organizational structure, social and cultural activities have all been brought under scanner by the other section comprising of both old and young members. For a section of younger members in their thirties, and born and bred in Delhi in particular SSD is more of an ‘old, conservative club’ meant for ‘idle and retired’ members where ‘glory of Sylhet and its rich culture’ is endlessly discussed without ‘any concrete, practical agenda’. As Arunava Chakrabarty says:
I am a member of SSD but it is like an old members' club where every evening Sylhetis living in CRP in particular meet to chat in Sylheti about their families, marriage alliances, Barak Valley and North East. Sylhetis will mix with others but preferably look for a fellow Sylheti. With such a prime property SSD should utilize that in a better way; cultural festivals should cater to young and wider public more in such a way that they do not get tired of hearing about the past, crisis of Sylhetis etc. SSD needs overhauling and a fresh lease of life and the souvenirs should have current news, business developments, foreign policy, reviews on films and books etc; better management and financial strategies are required; in the age of packaging and marketing the same could be done with Sylheti culture and SSD so that they become popular and survive; Sylheti tourism could be introduced like package tours to Sylhet; all young and old should move with the times as that is running out. With all kinds of bitterness in SSD it may just cease to exist one day and blame would go to its old and conservative members.

Among younger ‘dissatisfied’ members, few also contest the ‘overwhelming importance of Barak Valley’ in the affairs of SSD. Primarily born and raised outside the valley, such members often in a tone laced with sarcasm remark that SSD ought to be ‘renamed as Barak Valley Association’ for, it is practically just that. ‘I agree Barak Valley is the home of Sylheti culture in India’, says Paromita Dutta, and adds ‘but why should I let people from there dominate me. I am also a Sylheti but not from that place; so am I less Sylheti? SSD belongs to every Sylheti but Barak Valley gets preference. G.C College’s alumni meetings are held here. Is SSD Barak Valley’s Zamindari? In fact, the ‘domination of Barak Valley’ comes across as the major point of contestation among members. To be precise, the ‘domination of SSD by political leaders from Barak Valley’ is what is resented, and not the region or its people per se. As Krishna Nandy elaborates:

What SSD has become now is shameful and many of us do not participate in anything except for a few functions to able to meet old friends. Earlier political leaders from Silchar, Karimganj, Hailakandi and Shillong were good people; Suresh Deb, Jyotsna Chanda and others worked tirelessly and selflessly for Sylhetis and SSD. But with Santosh Mohan and Bithika Dev, who I agree put in lot of effort to create BCPMT, things changed as SSD and BCPMT turned into Congress associations and some members’ virtually became their slaves. All activities were geared towards winning elections in Silchar and so Barak Valley and its issues got priority; more members were also inducted from there to help and please that constituency; I have nothing against our own Sylheti people of that region who need support but even the Devs’ are not really interested in that; SSD is just used as platform so that the Devs’ can claim to have helped Barak Valley by helping its people who come to Delhi for studies, medical treatment etc.; BCPMT observes 19 May only to show and please Barak Valley as most of its trustees have no commitment to that day, except for publishing a few articles, poems etc; Devs’ and their cronies built BCPMT with
not the formers’ own but taxpayers’ money; Bithika Dev has been the president of SSD since 1988 [except for 1999-2000] and also the chairperson of BCPMT. Devs’ and their supporters are in total control and no dissent is allowed. I silently observe the decline of SSD and the quality of its functions and souvenirs. The Sylheti intelligentsia which ran SSD is gone and how can political opportunists run a social organization. Those who oppose its mode of functioning are sidelined.

Field notes suggest that SSD is near totally divided into two camps along the issue of exercise of power by Santosh Mohan and Bithika Dev (hereafter SMD and BD respectively); while one camp has avowed supporters (‘sycophants’) of the duo who, they claim are ‘life and soul’ of SSD, not to mention the ‘perpetual source of grants and funds’, the other has dissenters who hold the duo responsible for ‘corrupting and destroying’ SSD, and converting it into their ‘personal fiefdom’. In between the two are members who may be called “fence sitters” meaning their opposition or support to the duo are purely opportunity driven and hence, context dependant. The number of visible dissenters is admittedly small. However, there are members who are vehement in their opposition but refuse to voice that and hence, largely remain closeted to the extent of remaining members only in name. Adding to what Nandy says, Hiren Dhar explains:

As a member I know SSD is neither about Sylhetis nor about their cultural identity because it is about SMD, BD, Congress, vote politics, money power and so we rarely go there now. Senior people made SSD so that it would become our community, collective identity, space to unite probashi Sylhetis, symbol of our distinctive culture and intellectual excellence in Delhi. But SSD is full of sycophants of SMD and BD and now their daughter. They first took over the trust and then grabbed SSD which many opposed; system of rotating trustees was changed and official positions filled up with their own people; in one election BD flew in people from Barak Valley to vote for her so that her contestant could be defeated; rules were regularly flouted or “suitably” amended; secret ballot was introduced; SMD also named the entire charitable dispensary run by BCPMT after his father for which he paid no full money, and after all who was Satindra Mohan Dev but another politician; even the conference hall/auditorium in BCPMB is named after himself; SMD’s supporters say that he did give money for the dispensary and for everything but where are the correct records? I can go on and on but there is no point and I am told that problems have been solved, meaning actually the duo in full control. Contribution of SMD must be recognized but his dictatorship based on money and political power opposed; SSD has become a victim and I wish another SSD could be made but that would mean breaking up the community totally [also see ACDS, SSD, Delhi, 1999; MRAGM, SSD, Delhi, 2000].

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Contestations within SSD also exist along lines of say for instance, caste composition, length and place of residence in the city, place of origin in Sylhet, occupational status of members and so forth. A section of upper caste, Brahman members in particular point to the ‘declining standards of SSD’, and suggest that the cause behind lies in ‘increasing importance granted to the ashikkhita [uneducated (read lower caste)] members to run it’. Even on matters not directly pertaining to SSD, caste, place of origin, educational status remain as forces of fragmentation within its members; a kind of division also exists between members of SSD who live in and outside CRP and that is among others, related to physical proximity to SSD which is located in the colony. Its non-CRP members complain how while fixing meetings for instance, CRP based office bearers fail to comprehend the difficulties that the former would face to attend those; the former also allege that CRP Sylhetis have ‘almost monopolized SSD’ because they live close to it [see for example, MRAGM, SSD, Delhi, 2000]. However, such contestations appear to be only moderate or sometimes ‘non-existent’ as compared to those related to exercise of power and authority. Even for those who contest SSD from outside, the latter remains one of the most frequently cited issues; SSD’s role in life of the community in Delhi is questioned and contested by say, non-member Sylhetis, non-Sylheti Bengalis, Sylheti Muslims and finally, to some extent by BCPMT. 11 The contestation SSD faces from non-Sylheti Bengalis of the city is due to as Shyamal Kumar Biswas (of Barisal origin) says, ‘the attitude of Sylhetis, and not Sylhet’s history and culture’. He adds:

I know quite well about SSD and appreciate the Sylheti spirit of forming associations; but Sylhetis are very closed and sensitive about their district culture, speech and identity unlike other Benaglis or their associations; we have all suffered partition but Sylhetis simply refuse to come out of that; I understand Sylheti culture is special but so are cultures of others. Sylhetis say they are Bengalis and observe 19 May but when other Bengalis want to do that they often resist, particularly those from Cachar. Things are better now but still they are very sensitive about 19 May. Sylhetis are nice and helpful, as Santosh Dev is, but their attitude, regarding speech in particular, creates some problems. They are obsessed with their language and Kolkataiya bhasha (even in Delhi) makes them go into a shell; sometimes we are also at fault as we don’t follow Sylheti speech well. But why not keep Sylheti at home and proudly speak Bangla like we all do, I tell them. This strange attitude does not allow Sylhetis to be full Bengalis. They will remain Bengalis but only in their own terms. SSD does good work but I regret that that is actually confined to that community. I have heard there are problems in SSD but still its members are very much attached to each other. There must be something in that.
Projection of SSD as a cultural symbol of the Sylheti community in Delhi is resisted by those who are not part of the association; in fact, the community in general is fragmented along lines of associational membership, and a far larger number of Sylhetis, both Hindus and Muslims are outside SSD as compared to those who are its part. While a section of non-SSD members of the community consciously keep away from the association, others are either not aware of its existence or completely indifferent to it. Shadabul Haq casually happens to tell me that a number of his friends are aware of SSD but least interested to, let alone join, even attend its cultural functions for reasons such as ‘political compulsions of being Muslims of Assam and India’, ‘SSD representing undivided Sylhet and essentially Hindus’, and ‘Hindu character of SSD’. Non-SSD Hindu members of the community have yet another story and in fact, numerous stories to tell, at least those who choose not to have any associational membership. And these too point to the fragmentary character of the middle class community and its identity in the city. Though not a member but well aware of the activities of SSD, Saptarshi Choudhury notes as follows:

I grew up in NE India and came to Delhi in late 1990’s. I speak the dialect fluently at home and remain a Sylheti at heard and in deed; once a Sylheti, always a Sylheti. I read a peace by the economist Bibek Debroy about how he felt when he heard somebody speak in Sylheti inside the train he was traveling in, in Paris. I feel the same when I suddenly hear Sylheti in Delhi but my love for Sylhet and Sylhetis did not draw me to SSD as I do not need it to define my identity because my parents did that years ago; SSD is run by a bunch of people who do not have any idea of Sylhet or its culture. For them Sylhetita means eating food at picnics and writing things about Sylhet which are often not correct as I saw in a souvenir once: SSD, I am told, is Rana Dev’s adda and a select group decides everything. He has formed a trust in the name of Bipin Pal but I am told everything there is named after him and his family: Sylhetis of SSD do not realize that they are being used by him and needy people from Silchar actually do not get help as for that Ranada’s connections are required. SSD may provide anchorage to NE Sylhetis when they arrive in Delhi but not for long. I also know very old families here who think that SSD is very mediocre and parochial. People feel claustrophobic not because being Sylheti is not fashionable but SSD is a dying association driven by vested interests of its members, caste politics and so on. So I have happily decided to stay away from SSD

I did try to discuss at different points in time albeit indirectly, about some of issues, and the one of ‘domination of Barak Valley’ in particular with the office bearers of SSD. I was certainly not encouraged, but Dipendra Krishna Dutta Choudhury by way of general discussion quite cautiously and briefly addressed some of those. He opines:
Like every organization SSD (of which I am a member) also has problems but some elements do not want to see its success and are bent upon giving it a bad name without realizing that they are harming themselves and the community. So much of trauma we have suffered; first we were pushed out of Bengal and then Sylhet and Assam; we Hindus lost the referendum by 55,000 votes and still we have not learnt. SSD is a well-integrated organization and the number of "problematic" members is very small. These people created problems for BCPMT too and we handled that. Why should we resent Barak Valley or its leaders? [you are not from Barak Valley I think]; in fact, we should focus more on that region as a part of Sylhet lies there; SMD and BD are indispensable and so are their blessings and instead of being grateful some members are hell bent upon tarnishing their image and please do not pay attention to them as I will tell you that SSD would be nowhere without them. We welcome positive suggestions about our functions, working pattern, writings in souvenirs; sometimes other Bengalis may feel a little out of place but I don't think they have any serious grievance and all are welcome to SSD, Hindus, Muslims, other Bengalis, non-Bengalis, everybody including the ones who have problems with it.

5.2.2: Celebrating B.C Pal's legacy: Bipin Chandra Pal Memorial Trust

The urge to recognize and honour the memory of Bipin Chandra Pal, one of the front-ranking political personalities of modern India, and a Sylheti by birth led SSD to establish BCPMT in 1988. Since early 1980's senior members of SSD including its founder member Manamatha Ranjan Chowdhury contemplated on modes by which the lasting contribution of Pal could be preserved and perpetuated. Its history goes as follows:

Since 1981, when Shri Manmatha Ranjan Choudhury took over as President of the Sammilani, he had been inspiring the members to think about what all could and should be done to perpetuate the memory of Bipin Chandra Pal, one of the illustrious sons of mother India and pride of Sylhet, in particular.... It was recognized that instead of undertaking any venture directly by the Sreehatta Sammilani, Delhi, it would be more befitting to found a Trust for the purpose with national perspective aimed at generating a national awareness about the life, visions and work of Bipin Chandra Pal. Discussion on detailed objects and framework of a Trust Deed to be executed by the Sreehatta Sammilani also made significant headway. Simultaneously some efforts were made to draw attention of the nation about a hitherto forgotten National Hero.... Smt. Bithika Dev took over as President after the Annual General Meeting held in 1988. The Executive Committee of the Sammilani finalized the text of the Deed of Trust [cited in MRAGM, SSD, Delhi, 2000:18; also see ACDS, SSD, Delhi, 1990; Chowdhury 1989]

Prior to registration of BCPMT, SSD took up with Municipal Corporation of Delhi the task of naming the main road of CRP after Bipin Chandra Pal, and in early 1988 with permission granted the road was formally inaugurated as Bipin Chandra Pal
Marg by Atal Behari Vajpayee. On 30 August 1988 the Trust Deed was finally registered. The main objectives of the BCPMT are stated below:

a. to undertake/encourage research on life, work and message of Bipin Chandra Pal; b. to collect, compile and/or publish speeches, letters and writing of Bipin Chandra Pal as a national preserve with a view to provide scopes to citizens of India, particularly the younger generation, to imbibe spirits of nationalism and selfless services; c. to arrange and organize lectures, debates, discussions, radio talks etc. for the advancement of the “Objects” of the Trust; d. to purchase, acquire, take on lease, land/building and/or construct buildings for establishment of Bipin Chandra Pal Memorial Institute with the provisions for:- i) auditorium/exhibition hall; ii) library; iii) students home; iv) lodging for transit patients from outside; v) charitable institutions for welfare services to be run by the Trust; vi) founder’s office; e) to do all such acts, deeds and things necessary for charitable purposes and for social and cultural advancement of the people as the Trustees may think fit and proper for the furtherance of the “Object” [Deed of Trust, SSD/BCPMT, Delhi, 1988:4; also see Cultural Evening Souvenir, BCPMT, Delhi, 1992].

With Santosh Mohan Dev at the helm of affairs, Bithika Dev as Chairperson and Santosh Kumar Dam as Executive Trustee, BCPMT undertook its maiden task(s) of first, location of a suitable piece of land in the city, and second, construction of a building on that which would upon completion house it as well its founder SSD. The eleven member-BCPMT of which two were ex-officio members from the founder/SSD succeeded in acquiring half an acre of land at A-81, Chittaranjan Park in 1993 on which BCPMB was built. It was inaugurated by former Indian National Army (INA) member Captain Lakshmi Sehgal on 16 March 1997, and the bronze statue of Bipin Chandra Pal was inaugurated the same day by Purno A. Sangma, the then Speaker of Lok Sabha. It is to be noted that though BCPMT was formed by SSD, yet for all official purposes it is an independent body sans any connection with the Sylheti community. However, the composition of its trust board, relationship with SSD, links with culture and politics of Barak Valley, and actions and programs show that BCPMT has rarely been un-connected to its founder in particular and Sylheti community in general. In fact, BCPMT, its tustees claim is a source of pride for the community not only because it accords the much deserved and desired recognition to one of the most famous icons of Sylhetis but also because it does that in a ‘grand’ way in no other place but the capital of India. As Benoy Krishna Bhattacharyya, one of the current trustees of BCPMT says:
Years after SSD was formed its members realized that Sylhetis of the city were now more or less settled having gone through the trauma of partition earlier. The community — strong, stable and united by 1980's — was in a position to take up the cause of giving recognition to Bipin Pal whose contribution to national movement and to Indian society at large was hardly known and acknowledged; he was and is a source of pride and inspiration for all Indians and certainly Sylhetis. So, SSD and Sylhetis from all parts of India thought that if nobody would do anything for Bipin Pal, they would. With SMD's support we made the trust and gave Pal his due recognition. And all this was done in Delhi which I think is a great achievement. The entire Sylheti community of Delhi and India are proud of the trust and its achievements and SSD too. What we could do, of course with the Devs' help, would have been impossible for others. It shows that Sylhetis can do things even after suffering the pain of partition and displacement. BCPMT has responsibility towards all Indians, all Bengalis but also to people of Sylhet origin who live in Barak Valley and outside it, in Delhi, Kolkata and other places. About Barak Valley we are very concerned because people of that region really need help and we have been traditionally associated with it, and also with Assam University.

Over the years BCPMT has undertaken both social welfare and cultural activities over and above its specific activities related to research and promotion of Bipin Chandra Pal’s thoughts and works. BCPMT with its own website, and housed in BCPMB runs the Satindra Mohan Dev Medical Centre that includes a fully functional OPD where medical care on concessional rates are provided to patients from the city and elsewhere in the country; it also runs the Hridaibala and Sarat Chandra Bose Library cum Study Centre where books, periodicals, magazines etc. on diverse subjects are available. The library has a collection of works by, and on Bipin Chandra Pal and interestingly, also on Sylhet and Barak Valley. BCPMT also runs an auditorium cum conference hall (named after Santosh Mohan Dev) with a sitting capacity of more than three hundred, a well designed board/delegate room, a canteen and finally, a guest house where students and patients in particular from far flung regions of the country (North East in particular) are provided temporary accommodation. Its management claims that such facilities including lending the premises for conducting marriage and other social functions are provided to all Indian nationals on concessional rates. SSD which as per the Deed of Trust (1988) has an office in BCPMB premises is provided in addition, with the free of cost facility to use the auditorium for holding its meetings and functions. BCPMT from time to time has been involved in other philanthropic activities such as donations to relief funds, financial support to the needy and so forth; it also lends support to social and cultural causes as deemed fit by
the eleven-member board of trustees headed presently by Bithika Dev. However, activities related to Bipin Chandra Pal’s life and works remain central to BCPMT including procuring the Freedom Struggle papers from National Library, Kolkata, holding photo exhibitions on Pal’s life, commissioning documentary films on him, presenting his portraits to educational institutions such as Assam University, Silchar, and so forth. Due to its efforts, a portrait of Bipin Chandra Pal was unveiled in the Central Hall of Parliament on 5 December 2007. To mark the 142nd birth anniversary of Pal on 7 November 2000, it organized a three day national seminar (7-9 November) on the theme ‘Bipin Chandra Pal and His Times’ where well known scholars participated; again, to mark the 149th birth anniversary, it held a one day seminar on the theme ‘Global Warming and Its Impact in India’ on 17 November 2007. Since 2004, BCPMT also organized four annual Bipin Chandra Pal Memorial Lectures either on the man and his works or on any theme of contemporary relevance. Apart from publishing the Newsletters, it has brought out books written on, and by Bipin Chandra Pal such as Bipin Chandra Pal: Selected Bibliography (2001) by Bijoy Dev, Memories of My Life and Times (Reprint, 2004) by Bipin Chandra Pal and so forth [Newsletter(s), BCPMT, Delhi, 2000-08; ACES, SSD, Delhi, 2006].

In all the activities listed above, SSD and its members are active participants as records and field notes show. The situation is no different in Kolkata where SS (SU) and Sylhet Union Trust (hereafter SUT) that it founded actively collaborate with each other, but then the latter at least officially bears the name of Sylhet, its building is called Srihatta Bhavan and most importantly, its official objectives include ‘benefit, welfare and service of the people especially those originating from Sylhet and Cachar’ [Deed of Trust, SS (SU)/SUT, Calcutta, 1982]. What has happened in case of BCPMT is that on the name of Bipin Chandra Pal who was a Sylheti no doubt but also an “Indian nationalist leader”, it has turned out to be an organization that is if not fully but certainly more than partially connected to the Sylheti community in general, and as official records show of Barak Valley in particular. Certainly there is no official restriction on BCPMT so far as its association with the Sylheti community and SSD goes. However, none of its officially stated objectives unlike those of SUT allow such clear association with the larger Sylheti community in particular. While some trustees are quite open in their admission about BCPMT’s ‘responsibility towards Sylhetis’, others are slightly cautious in their response. It is to be noted that the trustees never
claim that BCPMT is exclusively for Sylhetis or for Sylhetis hailing from North East India, and Barak Valley in particular; rather, they insist that it is ‘for all Indians’ and ‘all Bengalis’ who are interested to know about, and work on Bipin Chandra Pal in particular and Indian society, culture and politics in general. But the point is, other than Bipin Chandra Pal, it is the Sylhetti community and the one located especially in Barak Valley which features at the top of BCPMT’s agenda. Even a quick glance at the Newsletter(s) which report its organizational and other activities shows that a lion’s share of those is related to the community and the region beginning with say, names of the medical center and conference hall to observing 19 May as Shaheed Divas every year, not to mention the identities of some of its trustees including the chairperson herself. Even the librarian is a Sylhetti (from Kolkata) and majority of staff are the same, and drawn primarily from Barak Valley. Again for instance, without fail BCPMT in collaboration with SSD pays homage to the language martyrs’ of Barak Valley on 19 May every year. As one official BCPMT reports note: ‘[T]he Trust and the Sammilani organized the Saheed Diwas to remember the eleven language – Martyrs who laid their lives on 19 May 1961 to defend the right of mother tongue, which was Bengali. Apart from patriotic songs, floral & vocal tributes through lectures were offered by the members of the Trust & the Sammilani’ [Newsletter, BCPMT, Delhi, July 2007-November 2008; also see ACES, SSD, Delhi, 2006]. Indeed, for both BCPMT and SSD, 19 May is of immense significance; while the library has a large number of books on that, the souvenirs of SSD as mentioned, also contains short poems on the same. As Dipendra Krishna Dutta Choudhury remarks:

**Devoted to B. C Pal, BCPMT is an independent body that also does other charitable and cultural activities and since it has no open membership, SSD helps to organize its functions; this connection may lead some to think that we work for Sylhetis; but I don’t think anybody does and if so, they must tell us. People know we work for all Indians irrespective of caste, creed and region and BCPMT is one of the best cultural achievements of Bengalis in general and Sylhetis in particular. It is of and by but not for the latter alone. BCPMT has always supported the lattered and strengthened SSD and through its works Bengalis and Sylhetis have got recognition and people tell me that. A gentleman from Silchar wrote a moving piece for us after we helped in his daughter’s treatment in Delhi. Our people in North East face so many problems due to lack of funds and good treatment, not to mention the problem of being a minority. They themselves fought for their rights in 1961 and became successful and will be in future. We in BCPMT and SSD only let them know that we are with them in everything and in our small way we observe 19 May as Shahid Divas because that was a**

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moment of sorrow as well as glory. What Cachar could do in 1961 was great. It is sad that Barak Valley’s history, culture and its successes are not known to anyone outside; our chairperson is an MLA from Silchar so she also has a responsibility and where is the harm in working for a deprived region. We work for others too as per our rules. But Sylhetis are bound to feel proud because BCPMT is a source of great support and inspiration.

BCPMT’s mode of functioning and activities including utilization of the premises of BCPMB are however, contested too. I was unable to detect any serious difference of opinion, if any among members (of which two are drawn from SSD) of the trust board, but a section of members of SSD did not hesitate to list their grievances concerning BCPMT. It is to be noted that a section of Sylhetis, both Hindus and Muslims who are not associated either with SSD or BCPMT neither make any distinction between the two otherwise independent bodies nor in their combined critical opinions about those. However, it is the contestation from a section of members of SSD that is vital. The MRAGM (2000) shows how SSD drawing upon clauses in the *Deed of Trust*, disapproved of the ways in which BCPMT functioned and carried out its activities including for instance: a) naming the building BCPMB instead of Bipin Chandra Pal Memorial Institute b) naming the auditorium/conference hall after Santosh Mohan Dev c) naming the library after Hridaibala and Sarat Chandra Bose d) naming the medical centre after Satindra Mohan Dev e) presence of thirteen trustees on the board since 1994 instead of eleven f) non-fulfillment of the objective of setting up a students’ home g) use of BCPMB premises for commercial purposes, and so forth. The issues however, are believed by a section as ‘amicably resolved’ by 2002 including that of having eleven members in the trust board. But field notes suggest that deep resentment, albeit covert still prevails. As Atulya Prasad Hom Choudhury elaborately comments:

*BCPMT has not done anything much except for completely taking over SSD and we who resisted had to step aside silently because the SMD led group was so powerful. Now no problems are there because both are led by the same group. But BCPMT itself is destroyed; where is Bipin Pal except in the form of statue and in his name appearing on the outer wall of BCPMB; inside it is the Devas*, father, son, wife and daughter; when BCPMT was made we had thought that finally the leader would get his due and make all Sylhetis proud. We suffered when the British and Assamese played with our lives and Bengalis ignored us; we fought back and settled ourselves and then we fought for Bangla language, our rights and won. BCPMT was also such an achievement but all our dreams have been undone; forget doing anything constructive for Sylhetis, BCPMT has hardly done anything for Pal except re-publishing his own works; now it should be renamed as Barak Valley Congress.*
Viewed by and large as a socio-cultural organization of Bengalis of the city as the Government of West Bengal run website www.wbgovt.com also shows, BCPMT and its activities however, remain a debatable matter among non-Sylheti members of the Bengali community. Arun Chakrabarty, a senior journalist engaged in what he calls the study of ‘Inner Indian Bengali Diaspora’, and Director of Bahirbanga Foundation for instance, writes in an internet blog about how a section of BCPMT members in 2008 insisted that the ‘observation of 19 May should be the prerogative of the people from Cachar only’ as a result of which the ‘Trust’s finalized program for the 19 May observation … had to be stopped at press and the “outsiders” were dropped to be replaced by the Barak Valley speakers’. He adds: ‘It shows one of the reasons why such a great valiant day of the Indian Bengalis could not find its ways to their hearts, and why 21 February was internationalized as a “Mother Language Day”’ [Posted by www.innerindian diaspora.com/blog, Wednesday, 14 May 2008, and accessed on 3 December, 2009; also see Chapter VI]. On a similar vein Pradip Bikash Guha (of Birbhum origin) argues:

BCPMT is a very successful organization and it has resources and political backing to propagate Bipin Chandra Pal’s contribution. We Bengalis are proud of it no doubt but I wish other leaders of Bengal had also got such exposure. But who will speak for them. Will Sylhetis do? Sylhetis are very united and they are very, very conscious of their identity; only such unity could create BCPMT. But Sylhetis see themselves as Sylhetis first and Bengalis later. So BCPMT is also Sylheti first (as Pal was a Sylheti) and then Bengali but mainly those who come from Silchar who in any case are again Sylhetis. It is very broad based on paper but in spirit it is totally Sylheti. I am not saying that Sylhetis do not cooperate with Bengalis but Bangla lanugage is a sensitive issue. The Trust is so
exclusive that it is difficult for non-Sylhetis like us to get in (not that I have tried). Non-Bengalis do not understand these things and for them BCPMT is another Bengali association but we Bengalis know that things are not so simple. Anyway, these are my impressions based on chats with my non-Sylheti friends and personally I have nothing against BCPMT or Sylhetis as I have always been welcomed to BCPMB.

5.3: So far, yet so near: re-creating Sylhet in the city

SSD (and BCPMT) as evident from above, certainly plays a significant role in preservation and promotion of Sylheti culture in the city. Its interest in the affairs of Barak Valley in particular and North East in general also shows that the Sylheti community of that region is closely tied to it not only culturally but also in terms of leadership, general membership and active participation. The efforts to address Barak Valley and its people, of which a very large number are Sylhetis or Sylheti speaking, saw the establishment of BASYA in Delhi. On 26 January 2003, the association was formed and subsequently registered as an NGO in 2008. It is ‘a collective enterprise of students and non-student youth hailing from the Barak Valley region of Assam and living in Delhi for educational and other diverse purposes’ [Introductory Note, BAYSA, Delhi, n.d:1 (Unpublished)]. Its aim however, is not limited to the support of students and professionals coming from the three districts of Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi to Delhi but extends to include development of Barak Valley as a whole. Its mission statement says: ‘BASYA[D] works for the educational, cultural and socio-economic welfare and progress of students, youth and the common people from the Barak Valley in Delhi and there in the region. Our special importance is on disseminating the cultural tradition and language of Barak Valley’ [Ibid.:2; also see Memorandum of Association, BAYSA, Delhi, 2008]. Its broad objective among others, is also to ‘act as a bridge between the valley and the rest of the country in spreading linguistic cultural ethnicity [sic] of Barak Valley’, and to ‘make best efforts for mutual harmony, cooperation, love and affection among the Barakites’ [Ibid:3]. This young association currently has about eighty seven members of Barak Valley origin residing in the city or elsewhere in India. BASYA is open to all who hail from Barak Valley, and is not confined to Sylhetis though most of its members belong to that community. So, it does not function as another organization of Sylhetis in the city; rather, it claims to be a forum for the Bengalis of Assam who interestingly as the Introductory Note says, have rarely been adequately represented in other associations.
formed by people of Assam, and which are 'busy in the welfare of Brahmaputra Valley people alone and focus narrowly for [sic] Assamese speaking masses' in Delhi. It adds:

They lack in the credential of being the representative bodies of all students and youth of Assam .... It is a fact that anyone from Barak Valley – whether student or youth – feel isolated, identity-less whenever he identifies himself as Bengali in reply to any query. He falls in dilemma because it is a difficult task to make someone understand that besides Assamese, Bangla is also the official language of Assam; for that matter people are even unaware about Barak Valley – its history, cultural life and tradition. We are in need of a platform, which can connect people of Barak Valley, staying away from home in Delhi, so that we can stand by each other in good and bad time. Above all, we need to uphold our identity of being descendant of rich cultural and traditional values, ethos and peace loving nature before our fellow citizens. Keeping all these things in mind, BASYA[D] was formed [n.d:1-2].

Indeed, people of Barak Valley appear to be by and large well represented in the capital, at least those who choose to be parts of both or either of the two associations. However, I did not come across any Sylheti (or non-Sylheti) from that region who is a member of both; in fact, none of the SSD members I spoke too had the remotest idea of existence of BASYA. Upon mentioning the matter to Bazlur Rahman Khan, one of its founders, he says: 'SSD is about Sylhet and not all members of the association are from Barak Valley. We have a lot of Sylheti members too but our association is for all Bengalis of Barak Valley whether they are Sylhetis or not. So SSD may not know about us. Sylheti identity is important for me but I am a Bengali and Indian and that made me think of forming BASYA'. However, it is not only in Delhi – directly in the name of BASYA or SSD (and BCPMT) – that Barak Valley and its culture is well articulated but also in other parts of India. For a large section of the Sylheti community Barak Valley remains, contestations notwithstanding the most important source of cultural, not to mention financial strength. Consequently, most SA, both big and small are connected to it or its political leaders in particular. In fact, Barak Valley in particular and North East in general lends even after sixty four years of partition the much required strength for the articulation of a distinctly fused Sylheti identity in contemporary India. For most members and non-members of associations alike, the very existence of a territorial space called Barak Valley with its thriving Sylheti culture is a source of sustenance and support, moderate contestations notwithstanding. In Delhi for instance, a large section of Sylhetis I spoke to showed resentment
towards ‘the political and money power exercised by leaders from that region over others’ but not to Barak Valley or its people, and certainly not its culture. Indeed, for middle class Sylhetis across India, and in this case Delhi, their identity draws nourishment from the Sylheti culture actively practised by their co-class town members and more importantly, rural population in the villages of Barak Valley. As Rathindra Mohan Bhattacharyya, a Kolkata based member of SS (SU) who also campaigns in writing for renaming Karimganj as ‘Purbo Srihatta [East Sylhet]’ observes:

*SA across India are run by old people and youngsters coming fresh from Barak Valley and without the latter and Barak Valley SA will not survive. Delhi or Kolkata born Sylheti children will not be able to preserve Sylheti culture and language and it is not their fault as they will say that there is no Sylhet in India and they are either Kolkatan or Delhiite or Bombayite and so on. Even Barak Valley children may lose interest and hence, it is important to rename Karimganj as East Sylhet so that the name of Sylhet remains attached to a territory; that will help save the identity of Sylhetis; why should Karimganj be not renamed? there is a Punjab, Dinajpur, Nadia on the Indian side; Hindu leaders failed us during referendum and after that even failed to retain the name of Sylhet in India as they never thought what would happen to we Sylhetis living in India, with what identity we would live or how our Sylheti identity would gradually near death without the legal name of Sylhet. For Kolkata Sylhetis Barak Valley, mainly Karimganj is very, very important as Delhi is luckier because more Sylheti children from Barak Valley go there to study and SSD has active leaders from that region; so Delhi is in far better position than Kolkata so far as Sylhetis are concerned [also see Bhattacharyya 2009].*

While it may not be incorrect that Barak Valley sustains the Sylheti component of the identity of the community in Delhi, yet in Assam the story is far more complex. The struggle of Sylhetis of Barak Valley to focus on the Bengali component of their identity draws support and recognition from members of the community settled outside the region, in Delhi in particular. However, being physically distant from the region, middle class Hindu Sylhetis living in Delhi appear to be by and large at ease with the Bengali component of their identity; with long distance added to the direct support provided by Barak Valley, members of SSD (and BCPMT) in particular also come across as “relatively free” to preserve and promote the Sylheti component of that. In Delhi that is more so because “resistance” from the Assamese, and non-Sylheti Bengali community in particular is far less compared to Kolkata. The alleged ‘threat to Sylheti culture’ is attributed to the larger non-Bengali cultural atmosphere of
the city, officially articulated as ‘threat to Bengali culture’, and equally applicable to
the larger Bengali community. Indeed, most Sylhetis are part of one or the other
Bengali run associations of the city including Bahirbanga Foundation Trust which
functions as a cultural platform for Bengalis living outside Bengal in India. Devoted
to preservation and promotion of Bangla language and culture that is spoken, written
and practised in India but outside West Bengal, its formation indicates an attempt by
Bengalis to articulate their identity based interestingly, on the concept of
‘Bahirbanga/Inner Indian Bengali Diaspora’. However, Sylhetis being part of
Bahirbanga is a matter of contestation not just within the community in Delhi but
more so in Barak Valley as Chapter II and III shows. Field notes suggest that Sylhetis
of Delhi irrespective of where they live or whether or not they are part of SSD (and
BCPMT) consider non-Bengalis both ‘facilitators as well as contestants’ so far as
their identity in concerned; non-Bengalis facilitate articulation of the Sylheti
component on one hand but contest the Bengali one on the other. The point is, middle
class Sylhetis do face contestation from outside, from non-Bengalis in particular but
that is not as Sylhetis but Bengalis.

The Sylheti community of Delhi however, as is evident from above is more
fragmented from within, and that is less along lines of length and place of residence
and more along associational membership and vice-versa. SSD, its symbolic
relevance, projection as ‘mini-Sylhet’, role as an ‘uniting force’, and so forth remain
intensely contested from within; it certainly functions less as a mere marker and more
as a culturally self-sufficient community for a section of its members, but for others it
is nothing more than a platform used to meet ‘narrow ends and vested interests’; for
the latter, SSD as it stands now is plagued by failure and mismanagement to such an
extent that its original agenda of ‘re-creating Sylhet in a place so far away from actual
Sylhet’ has been dashed to the ground. SSD, such members argue have only ‘pushed
Sylhet farther instead of bringing it closer to the lives of Delhi’s Sylhetis’; by
pursuing an agenda that selectively decides ‘which Sylheti should participate in its
cultural functions, who and what should be felicitated and commemorated’, SSD,
such members say has only ‘politicized its activities and events’. A section of younger
members of SSD, those born and bred in Delhi in particular also appear to be
dissatisfied with its agenda, mode and pattern of functioning; their co-age group
members from North East (including Barak Valley) are however, more in sync with
Middle class Sylhetis, both Hindus and Muslims who are outside SSD, and at least those who are aware of its existence and to some extent its agenda and functions, appear to have no love lost for it. The older among them dismiss it as a symbol of Sylheti ‘cultural unity and identity’ while younger ones, again those born and bred in Delhi in particular refuse to have any connection with an ‘association that is stuck up’ and ‘has a narrow and regional outlook’. Other than the point of associational affiliation, the community is marked by usual divisions along lines of caste, religion, occupation, and so forth. Therefore, the closely knit and integrated nature of the city’s Sylheti community as claimed by its middle class, and especially a section of members of SSD, remains perhaps at the end just a projection that is consciously (or otherwise) indifferent to the existing and potential forces of internal fragmentation. Whether or not Sylhet could be, or is being re-created in Delhi is an issue that is confined to middle class Sylheti community. However, its identity – re-constructed, preserved and propagated through the family or the association or both – exists, contestations notwithstanding. The cultural boundary between Sylhetis and non-Sylheti Bengalis not being as sharp as for instance, in Kolkata, the “other” for both remain the non-Bengalis of the city; in fact, it is interesting to note that a contextually located ‘Dillir Bangali [Delhi’s Bengalis]’ identity is often jointly articulated by Sylhetis and non-Sylheti Bengalis of the city, and that is pitched not so much vis-à-vis non-Bengali identity but what is termed as ‘Kolkatar Bangali’ [Kolkata’s Bengalis]’ identity. In Delhi, it is as Bangalis (Bengalis) that Sylhetis and their non-Sylheti counterparts’ fight what is generally called as ‘non-Bengali domination’. The cultural fabric of Delhi, often projected as one that is multicultural in ethos and cosmopolitan in spirit is certainly not sans contesting claims and counter-claims. For Bengalis (including Sylhetis) who have made the city their home, and where their children are raised, the struggle is two pronged: first, to resist the overwhelming influence of what is generically referred as ‘non-Bengali culture’ (though essentially meaning Punjabi), and second, be recognized as ‘(Delhi’s) Bengalis’ by their counterparts living in Kolkata in particular and West Bengal in general. As Bengalis (including Sylhetis) of Delhi in Chittaranjan Park and elsewhere through associations, magazines, and journals debate and write about who they are, the city rushes on while the tall minarets of Jama Masjid, the ramparts of Red Fort, and the lazily flowing Yamuna alone remain to bear witness.
Notes:

1 In fact, rehabilitation efforts that Government of India took up to address the situation of refugees from West Pakistan were far more exhaustive, and systematic compared to the one that was undertaken for refugees from East Pakistan and Sylhet in Delhi and elsewhere [see for instance, *After Partition*, Publications Division, Government of India, 1948; Chakrabarty 2005; Datta 1986; Davar et al 2002; Gupta 1991; Luthri 1972; Rao 1967; Rao & Desai 1965; Sarkar 2005; Singh 2001; Singh 2001; Tan & Kudaisya 2000].

2 As number of Bengalis grew a larger number of temples and community associations came to be established in the city; around late 1870's a Bengali association called Bandhab Samiti was formed followed by another Banga Sahitya Sabha in 1894, and the first Durga Puja of the city was held in 1910. The annual Durga Puja (now known as the Kashmere Gate Durga Puja) not only served a religious purpose but also turned into a symbol of unity for the *probashi* Bengali community. It is to be noted that I did not come across any single, comprehensive work on the Bengalis of Delhi. However, numerous articles (too many to be cited here) on the community are available for instance, in the journal *Unmukta Uchhwas* launched in 1994. I am told that an essay by Bimal Bhushan Chakrabarty entitled *'Rajdhani Dillir Bangali Samaj'* was published in an annual Durga Puja souvenir in Chittaranjan Park in 1974. But I failed to trace it. One could get an overview of the community also from websites such as www.bahirbanga.com and www.bengalassociation.com.

3 Ramranjan Bhattacharjee (1988) provides an account of Sylhetis settled outside the district; in the chapter *'Bahirsrihatte Srijattabashi'* he by beginning with Sri Chaitanya who settled down at Nabaddwip in Nadia district of western Bengal, lists names and occupations of Sylhetis who moved and lived in other parts of India including Benaras, Vrindavan and Mithila region. However, he does not mention the migration of Sylhetis to Delhi [also see for example, Adams 1987; Gardner 1993, 1995].

4 Sadhana Bhattacharyya, on a visit to Delhi in 1955 remembers (as she tells me) her Sylheti relations living in Karol Bagh, East Vinay Nagar, Lodhi Colony, Gole Market, Civil Lines, Mall Road, Timarpur, Kashmere Gate, Minto Road, Curzon Road, Old Mill Road, Shahjahan Road, Panchkuian Road, Daryaganj and so on.

5 EPDPA made provisions for establishment of shops and markets to ensure rehabilitation of unemployed members of the community, and in 1969 began publication of a registered quarterly named *Purbachal* to address the members of Chittaranjan Park in particular and Bengali community of the city in general; *EPDP News* (now *EBDP News*), another official newsletter is also published on a fairly regular basis by the association In 1971, modeled after the Karol Bagh Bangiya Samaj, Chittaranjan Park Bangiya Samaj (known earlier as Kalkaji Bangiya Samaj) was formed; that was followed by Purbasree Mahila Samity and Chittaranjan Park Kali Mandir Society established in 1973; the colony in addition, houses Chittaranjan Memorial Society, Bijn Chandra Pal Memorial Trust, Sriehatta Sammilani, Chittagon Association, Jessore-Kulna Milan Samity and other such cultural and social welfare organizations [see for example, *Purbachaler Katha*, EPDPA, Chittaranjan Park, New Delhi, 2008; *EBDP News*, EBDPA, Chittaranjan Park, New Delhi, June, 2009; Bandopadhya 2008; Chakrabarty 2005].


7 In south western Delhi, Dwarka and places like Palam and Mahavir Enclave as members say, has not less than one hundred Sylheti families who are mostly later day migrants from North East India;
Dwarka situated East Pakistan Displaced Persons’ Cooperative Group Housing Society Limited (Dakshinayan Apartments) also has about fifteen Sylheti families. Sylheti Muslims who are generally located outside CRP are found in Gurgaon, Munirka, and Okhla area including Jamia Nagar, Shaheen Bagh, Batla House and so forth. Some also live in and around University of Delhi’s north campus (in student hostels) in Mukherjee Nagar, Kamla Nagar, and as far as the area around Chandni Chowk.

It is to be noted that despite repeated appeals to the current office bearers of SSD, no copy of amended rules and regulations (and also annual proceedings and financial records) was made available to me; not only that, even existence of such amendments was categorically denied despite the fact that those remained officially documented. Perhaps what the office bearers did not know was that I had managed to get a copy of MRAGM (2000) elaborately stating the amendments, and also verbal information from few members about not only the existence of such ‘politically motivated’ amendments but also how original provisions of Memorandum of Association were flouted on regular basis to accommodate vested interests of certain ‘powerful members’. For instance, fact that the same individual heads both SSD and BCPMT which the former founded is often called ‘incidental’, though that violates the amendment as stated in MRAGM; also recruitment of members from outside the city (and NCR) is a clear violation of the amended membership criteria as stated in the same.

SSD celebrated its silver jubilee in 1982, and old timers like Ajit Das tells me that the function to mark the occasion with Surendra Kumar Dey as Chief Guest, and under the dynamic leadership of it’s the then President, Manmatha Ranjan Chowdhury was a complete success; the souvenir published on that occasion also remains one of the best documents of SSD [also see for example, Chowdhury et al 1982].

In fact, pages featuring advertisements often placed between say, a write up are more as compared to those devoted to writings. Unlike SS (SU) and SKSA, SSD has no officially named mukhopatra or swaranika (mouthpiece/souvenir). SSD souvenirs are variously named as Annual Cultural Day, Annual Cultural Evening, Annual Cultural Program, Annual Cultural Festival or just Sreehatta Sammilani, or even Brochure; replete with typological errors, none of them provide lists of contents, page numbers and notes on contributors, and some also do not contain General Secretaries’ Reports; some souvenirs are again on specific themes say for instance, on Sri Chaitanya’s or Jawaharlal Nehru’s life and thought. However, cover pages of the souvenirs are well designed with pictures, sketches and photographs of Sri Chaitanya, artists who have performed in SSD functions, and scenes of rural Sylhet and India; souvenirs published in 1995 and 1996 have parts of the Bangla poem written by Rabindranath Tagore entitled Sreebhumi (1326 B.S) on their respective cover pages. It is to be noted that not all consulted souvenirs have been mentioned in the text, and therefore, the bibliography contains only those which have been specifically referred.

Conflict between SSD and BCPMT did take place in late 1990’s but that was related less to the issue “Sylheti community”, and more to issues of distribution of power and authority, domain of jurisdiction and operation, utilization of funds and so forth; in fact, the two organizations involved in a legal battle for some time, did get into serious mudslinging with the latter accusing SSD of launching a ‘disinformation campaign’, and so forth. However, in 2002 the issues were ‘amicably resolved’, and with both currently headed by Bithika Dev these function in very close collaboration as a “combined power centre” [see for example, ACDS, SSD, Delhi, 1999, 2002; MRAGM, SSD, Delhi, 2000; Newsletter, BCPMT, Delhi, September, 2000].

BASYA’s activities since 2003 included: a) organizing educational fairs in Karimganj b) holding annual social gatherings c) organizing admission campaigns in Barak Valley including sending forms and prospectus of Delhi’s colleges and universities there d) extending financial help to Barak Valley students in Delhi, and e) taking up the problems faced by the people of the region with public leaders and intellectuals [Introductory Note, BAYSA, Delhi, n.d]. BASYA is currently engaged in addition to its main objectives, in launching its website, planning a felicitation program for four eminent public personalities of Barak Valley, addressing the cause of two ‘deprived communities’ namely, ‘Muslim fishermen and tea garden labourers’ of the region, naming Silchar railway station as Bhasha Shaheed station and so forth.