

Little Sylhet: A Report on The East Bengali Community in Barak Valley, Southern Assam

Pallab Deb and Samiksha Bhan

Introduction

Our everyday interaction in the social world is characterized by certain points of reference that we use to define who we are. Every utterance, or action, or thought has an etymology and a sense of where it's coming from in the space of the social. The inevitable consequence of such interaction is that it creates identities that can be of varying kinds: ethnic, linguistic, regional, national etc. All of these identities depend on the social space and the character of time that shape them into being. An essential coming together of geography and historicity, contra Lefebvre (1991), can in turn be the mechanism through which we can understand the formation of identity.

This ethnography is an attempt to unravel what constitutes a diasporic identity, and how the diasporic community reconstructs the cultural environment of its lost homeland, by studying the experience of the Sylheti community in Barak Valley, South Assam. The migration of the Sylhetis from Sylhet (now in Bangladesh) took place in phases going back to the colonial era. The Sylhetis were one of the Bengali communities to have worked closely with the British Raj as clerks, doctors, lawyers and tea estate officials, having received an English education and exploited it for their benefits. It was for increasing the financial viability of the Assamese province which had been a self-ruled kingdom that Sylhet was incorporated within its territory in 1874 by the British (Dasgupta 2008). Only at the time of Partition did it become essential for the British to hold the Sylhet referendum as it grew to be a Muslim majority region, following a trajectory similar to the princely state of Kashmir.

The mechanical boundaries drawn by Partition across regions such as Punjab and Kashmir, brought about a shift in population demography of the two nations founded on religious lines. Sylhet became divided into its district of Karimganj becoming a part of India, while the rest of the region stayed within East Pakistan. The permanent mark of Partition also constructed the identification marker of the refugee along with it. What followed has been a continued process in history as the Sylheti community that already populated the erstwhile Surma Valley in dominant numbers negotiates its identity within the

matrices of Partition, the persecution of Hindus in East Pakistan and the formation of Bangladesh as an Islamic nation. The districts of Hailakandi and Cachar from the erstwhile Surma Valley and Karimganj from the erstwhile Sylhet constitute the present day Barak Valley in South Assam, which historically has been a Sylheti majority region.

The Sylheti community in Barak Valley thus presents a diaspora to be located in a region marked by the geographical and cultural continuity from Sylhet. The official language of the region being Bengali, the community found mechanisms to reconstruct the environs of its lost 'desh' within a new state. The questions that this ethnography poses are: How does the diasporic community integrate itself into a region marked by a geographical and cultural continuity under the rubric of the larger Bengali culture? How is identity itself embedded in the everyday lives of people? How does a community negotiate its identity when its homeland has become a part of another nation, while simultaneously legitimizing its space within its own nation-state? And finally, what are the internal shifts within the Sylheti community that has, since generations, accepted Barak Valley as a 'home away from home'? In other words, what does it mean for the younger generation of migrants to be Sylheti and Indian simultaneously?

Methodology

The fieldwork for the ethnography was held in Silchar, the headquarters of Cachar district in Barak Valley. The purpose of selecting the location of Silchar was to gauge the extent of cultural reconstruction of the Sylheti community. Silchar as the hub of economic, linguistic and cultural activity in Barak Valley is an important geographical point of contact between Assam and Bangladesh, and the second largest city in the state. Since our field work was limited to middle class Sylhetis, Silchar was the space where the recognition of being a Sylheti is present everywhere.

Our methodology for the study constituted of questionnaire survey, in-depth interviews and focus group observations.

The Seclusion of Sylhetis: From the Past to the Present

While our respondents provided us with a richly diverse set of responses, a common strain that we identified was that of a prevailing feeling of seclusion and disconnect from any larger 'whole'. Our contention is that because the districts of Sylhet and Cachar were historically reshuffled between larger units, and because of the geographical morphology, Sylhetis have developed this said sense of disconnect. This calls for a brief look at history to see how these areas came under different governing units at different times and to establish the historical presence of Sylhetis in the parts of Assam where their presence is seen as only the result of post-Partition migration by the larger Assamese community.

To talk of ancient and medieval Sylhet and Cachar is outside the ambit of this report and hence we are limiting ourselves to the colonial experience because much of the rife around the identity crisis in the region finds its roots in the British Raj and its policies. Sylhet came under British rule in 1765 and was made a part of the Dacca division. In 1832, the southern plain region of Cachar was annexed by the British, while the northern hilly part, roughly present day Dima Hasao, became part of the British Empire in 1854. Both these parts were under the Kachari Kingdom prior to the British, with the former having its last indigenous king in Govindrachandradwajanarayana Hasnu and the latter in Tularam. In 1874, both Sylhet and Cachar were joined with Assam. There was a short span of time when both, along with the rest of Assam, were joined with the eastern part of Bengal under the province of Eastern Bengal and Assam, from 1905 to 1912, after which Assam again became a separate province and Sylhet and Cachar were again separated from Bengal. In 1947, Sylhet became a part of East Pakistan after a referendum, save the sub-division of Karimganj, which remained part of Assam, along with the district of Cachar.

The historical presence of Sylhetis in Cachar can be attested to the geographical continuity between Cachar and Sylhet and their being parts of the Surma Valley system, of which Barak Valley is an extension. The earliest census data of Surma Valley, comprised of Sylhet and Cachar, enumerating the diverse linguistic groups present in the valley is from 1881. Bengalis were the absolute majority, with 2,114,606 speakers, as compared to the second and third largest languages in terms of speakers, Urdu (68,561 speakers) and Manipuri (47,356 speakers). In Sylhet, the percentage of Bengali speakers stood at 98%, whereas in Cachar, because of the presence of the Kuki and Kachari population, 'as well as a

great body of tea-coolies', the percentage of Bengali speakers was 66%. The Linguistic Survey of India from 1903 describes the Bengali dialect as spoken in Cachar to be the same as the one spoken in eastern Sylhet (Grierson 1903, 233). By 1931, the percentage of Bengali speakers had come down to 62.80% and 92.12% in Cachar and Sylhet respectively because of the influx of workers and merchants from other parts of the country. Sylhetis already maintained a large presence in Cachar during the time of the Partition, and because of the geographical proximity and an already settled large and dominant population of Sylhetis, it absorbed most of the influx of the migrants, which continued for decades as East Pakistan transformed into Bangladesh. According to the 2001 census data, which includes Chakma, Haijong and Rajbangsi under the category of Bengali speakers, 74.62% people in Cachar are Bengali speakers.

Sukalpa Bhattacharjee says that when 'the Sylhetis of Barak Valley imagine themselves as exiles and yet part of the diasporic Bengali identity, it produces a self-effacement that is conflated with the current situation of not being-at-home with itself, by being located in the contested trajectory of Assam's history' (Bhattacharjee 253). For Sylhetis in Silchar, the feeling of not being at home pervades their sense of belonging. The disjunction starts with the sense of being unwelcome, of having the same status as exiles in passing and never being accepted as one of the 'locals'. As Nabarun, a 25 year old student, puts it "Silchar is my hometown and it is my home, but yet, I don't feel home when I look at Assam." For Nabarun, the sense of not being welcomed comes from his own personal experience of linguistic chauvinism that he faced in Guwahati. The Barak Valley then begins to localise itself in the minds of the Sylhetis as being a separate sphere within Assam. It is part of Assam and yet it is not.

The seclusion that Silchar's Sylhetis feel is maintained by the loss of political power in the current setup where not only are they located in a remote region because of the post-Partition geo-political reconfiguration, they also have to face the ire of the other ethnic and linguistic groups which see them as being 'infiltrators', 'refugees' and 'outsiders'. Pre-partition Assam saw Sylhetis being the largest linguistic group, which, to the chagrin of the Assamese nationalists, conferred them with much political power. But yet, this separation from Bengal wasn't accepted by the Sylheti civil body and attempts were made to reunite with it.

While the official world held divergent views on the question of the creation of Assam Chief Commissionership and the redistribution of districts and divisions, the public opinion of the areas affected was united in condemning the measure. Neither the press nor the people of these areas acquiesced in this decision' [Neogy 1987:120 cited in Dasgupta 2013:3].

But yet, this anguish of this separation was felt to be borne by the exiled Sylhetis only. As early as 1920, Khan Bahadur A.A. Choudhury of Sylhet expressed his anguish at the seeming apathy of the larger Bengali community towards the 'exiled' Sylhetis:

[n]ot a single cry has come from Bengal in our aid. As far as I am aware, there has been no systematic movement from Bengal to take us in their midst, what does it indicate? Does it not indicate that we want to mix with people who have no sympathy for us? This reminds me of an old Bengali proverb i.e. "I shed tears for my brother, but my brother sheds no tears for me" [cited in M. Kar 1990:119 as cited in Dasgupta 2014:6].

This feeling of disconnect from the part of the Bengalis in Bengal is echoed in the present day too and has moulded itself to a new layer of separation from the larger Bengali community. Respondents said they feel separate from the Bengalis in West Bengal, even though both share the knowledge and heritage of a common language, literature, and culture. Somava, a 22 years old student, says "They are different from us. They don't know anything about us in Barak Valley and I see no attempt being made either to bridge the ignorance." This felt difference then puts the Sylhetis in a triple bind. They are separated, and hence different, from the Sylhetis in Sylhet, they are different, and hence separate, from the dominant Assamese in Assam, and they are both separated and different from the Bengalis in West Bengal. The effect of the seclusion is complete and all-encompassing.

The status of Sylheti as a dialect of Bangla is a much contested one in itself. While it is mutually intelligible with nearby eastern Bangla dialects, comparisons are always drawn between Sylheti and Standard Bangla, which is based on the dialect spoken in Nadia in West Bengal, to show how distant these two are from any high level of mutual intelligibility. It is also the only Bangla 'dialect' to have its own script, albeit not in much use anymore. The script, Sylheti Nagari, also known as Jalalabadi Nagari, has its first known recorded instance in Gulam Huson's puthi, 'Talib Huson', written in 1549. Puthis

were popular books of moral stories in the form of religious and fairy tales, which were read out in a group by one person and listened onto by others. The cultural and social dominance of Standard Bangla and its script, the Partition and the migration of a large portion of Sylhet's population, the use of Bangla in the Bangladeshi nation-building process against the Pakistani regime and the eventual adoption of Bangla as the national language in independent Bangladesh ensured the near extinction of Sylheti Nagari. There is a renewed interest by Sylheti nationalists in its revival and it is used as one of the cornerstones of putting forward the demand of formally recognising Sylhetis as a distinct ethnic and linguistic group and not just a sub-group within the larger Bengali community.

This demand has been primarily limited within Bangladeshi Sylhetis and the Bangladeshi Sylheti diaspora in the west, especially in UK where a majority of the Bengalis are of Sylheti descent. Online forums dedicated to Sylheti culture are filled with discussions about the difference between Sylhetis and the rest of the Bengalis. Yet, this identification of Sylhetis as a distinct cultural and linguistic unit is not present within the Sylhetis in Silchar. Most of our respondents said that they didn't feel any unease with identifying as both Sylhetis and Bengalis and saw the former as a subset of the latter. This might be because while in Bangladesh, Sylhetis have a defined geographical unit to feel connected to, which in turn gives them the security to make claims to a distinct identity, while Sylhetis in Barak Valley feel 'rootless' and friendless in a xenophobic region. To then enter the landscape of the larger nation, they have to identify with Bengalis, from which they can then derive both cultural capital in the form of prestige and also recognition that they will not get as just 'Sylhetis'. Most respondents recognised the diversity of the myriad dialects of Bangla, which made it easier for them to bridge the difference between the standard register of Bangla and Sylheti. This is aided by what Arjun, a 30 year Associate Professor of English, calls "cultural amnesia". He refers to the lack of awareness of the history of Sylhet, its language and its script amongst the Sylhetis in Silchar. Without the knowledge of the language's history and the seclusion from all sides – both tangible and intangible – the Sylhetis of Barak Valley are pushed to reconfigure their collective identity.

The Other Bangal

In the mainstream Indian Bengali cultural sphere, the categories of *Bangal* and *Ghoti* are used as markers of geographical ancestry. *Bangal* refers to someone whose family ancestry lies in East Bengal and *Ghoti* refers to someone whose family ancestry lies in West Bengal. This basis of the *Bangal-Ghoti* divide develops itself on the present day international border between Bangladesh and West Bengal and hence is a recent one. This renders the construction of an East Bengal and a West Bengal not on cultural basis but on geo-political borders that are prone to shifting. The short-lived British Indian province of Eastern Bengal and Assam included districts of Malda and Dinajpur which are now in West Bengal, whereas districts of Jessore and Khulna were part of the (western) Bengal province, which are now part of Bangladesh. This arbitrariness of the distinction points to the constant shifting of the identity markers. The *Bangal-Ghoti* distinction is not much in use in Bangladesh, nor is a Bangladeshi citizen referred to as a 'Bangal' in West Bengal. 'Illegal' migrants from Bangladesh are not referred to as *Bangal*, nor is the word used for Bangladeshi tourists in India. This category of a *Bangal* is then used chiefly for an Indian citizen of East Bengali ancestry, against which emerges the category of the non-migrant Bengali, the *Ghoti*.

In sharp contrast to the popular parlance in West Bengal, where Indians of East Bengali origin self-identify as *Bangal*, within the Sylheti community in Barak Valley, *Bangal* is a derogatory term meant for Muslims. While it is a blanket term for all Muslims, it is generally pointed towards the ones 'local' to the region. 'Local Muslims', as referred to by multiple respondents, primarily means the Sylheti Muslims, but in effect also the much smaller *Pangal* (Manipuri Muslim) community because they are often misidentified as being the former. When it is used for Muslims from other regions – say a Muslim from Kerala or Delhi - the 'Bangal-ness' of the Malayalam or Urdu speaking Muslim comes from their sharing of their religion with the 'local' Muslim and not from their Muslim identity itself. It is the transference of the epithet meant for local Muslims to the non-local ones. As such, the term derives its meaning from both the Muslim and the regional characters of the addressee.

As researchers with Hindu-identified names, asking Muslim respondents about the term and its effects was grounds for possible backlash. Being a word deemed unworthy of polite conversation, the usage of this term during interviews of older Hindu respondents could have been equally alienating. Limited to informal discussions with younger Hindu interviewees, there emitted a sense of both an easy familiarity and a certain discomfort with the word from the respondents. Most knew about the connotations it carries in West Bengal and displayed their incredibility with “In Kolkata, *we* are called Bangal!” A majority had used the word in a derogatory manner for a Muslim person at least once. All were aware that the word is considered uncivil by both Muslim and Hindu Sylhetis in Silchar.

‘Bangal’ then becomes a peculiar word that appears in both West Bengal and Barak Valley as a term of othering but in two different contexts. In the former, the Other is the East Bengali migrant while in the latter, the Other is the Muslim. In the former, the term is self-referential, in the latter it is a derogatory slang. The knowledge of the connotations of the word in the West Bengali context has travelled to Barak Valley through literature, cinema, television etc and is widely known, but Sylhetis and other East Bengalis living in the valley do not identify themselves as ‘Bangal’, even though ‘Ghoti’ is still used to refer to West Bengalis.

The respondents confessed to feeling unsettled with being identified with the term when in West Bengal or in conversations with Bengalis outside of the valley. Most of them said that they don’t correct the other participants in the conversations because either they feel it would be too complicated for them to explain and the others to understand, or that they feel uneasy bringing up meanings of the word deemed impolite in their native place. For Indian East Bengalis outside of Barak Valley, to not identify as Bangal is to be ashamed of one’s heritage. When inhabitants of the valley are confronted with this term in mainland India, it becomes a site of contestation where one is both repelled by the word because of the meanings it carries back home, and where one also has to identify with the same to portray regional pride. ‘Sylheti’ fails to work as a way out of this because one will be called a ‘Bangal’ in the sense of being an East Bengali precisely because of being a Sylheti because in the popular imagination, Sylhet is an East Bengali district.

Saussure says that the sign in circulation is affected by the change in the relationship between the signifier and the signified (Saussure 1966). For the native of Silchar in Calcutta, for example, the term 'Bengal' is a doubly loaded sign. The word has changed contexts and does not socially signify the same derogatory meanings that it does in Silchar. But the derogatory meanings are still present in what the word signifies for the person, who then has to negotiate between the two disparate significations. If signs are to be read against the context and not within it and if they are not just carriers of meanings but meaning makers themselves, then 'Bengal' could be read as a sign which defines for the person the landscape of their own identity. As one respondent puts it, "I don't like to use the word because of what it means here in Silchar, but in Kolkata, the word is imposed on me. Even if I don't like it, I identify as a 'Bengal' when I am there, because it means something else in Kolkata."

Unearthing Refugee-ness

The term refugee has been used as a wide category referring to people or communities forced out of their home country due to persecution or war. According to the official definition given by the Geneva Convention, a refugee refers to a person "who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted [...] is outside [their] country of nationality" (Article 1, Geneva Convention, 1951 in Ager 1999: 1).

The Sylheti experience problematizes the term 'refugee' because of the mechanical boundaries that Partition drew through a region. It is because of the complex nature of Partition which led to the birth of East Pakistan that divided not only states, but the Sylhet division as well, leaving the district of Karimganj split between the Indian and East Pakistani sides of the border. Thus, people who belonged to the Karimganj district of Sylhet long before Partition occupy an ambiguous position with regards to the term 'refugee' since there is no physical movement of the individual. Nevertheless, the border of nationality is drawn at the cost of losing one's cultural and geographical belongingness to a particular region, especially when the identification of being Sylheti is still strong among the people on the Indian side of the border even though they no longer belong to the present-day Sylhet.

In relation to such geographical ambiguity, also stands the notion of time that determines one's relation to the geographical space. Time plays an important role in categorizing people as 'refugee' or 'citizen'

alike, not only in the official definitions of nationality but also in the everyday recognition of people's identity. Since Partition became an event in history that accelerated the development of identity politics and social change, it came to be treated as a marker for assigning the term refugee or migrant to people (Mandal, 2011). In present day Barak Valley, the Sylheti community has varied subscriptions to the idea of refugee that diminishes with the length of time that particular individuals and their ancestors have spent living in Silchar, and surrounding districts. "My parents migrated in undivided India" responded the 64 year-old Shahabuddin Ahmed who made it clear that migration before Partition cannot attach the status of refugee to him.

Moreover, as Anindita Dasgupta has already pointed out the Sylheti partition refugees, especially the *bhadraloks* have always denied their "refugee-ness" on accounts of not having faced direct violence at the time of Partition, and the relationship their families shared with the Brahmaputra and Surma Valleys of colonial Assam long before Partition (2001). The present fieldwork also showed similar forms of denial and disturbance from most people with the term 'refugee'. But there was also recognition of having migrated from the homeland at some point of time. "I did not receive any governmental aid. I haven't lived in camps. Then why will I call myself a refugee? But yes, I migrated from Sylhet along with a passport and settled here", said the 66 year-old Rotindra Mohan Choudhary who migrated in 1966 and last visited Sylhet in 1971. The meaning of refugee is then delimited within the terms of refugee camps and government support, which the Sylheti people did not experience in any of the phases of migration.

This recognition became even more blurred when we interviewed people aged between 30-40 years. Even as there was a palpable knowledge of when their grandparents or great-grandparents moved to Cachar from Sylhet, they denied calling themselves migrants as well. "Since I was born in Assam, did my schooling and further studies from here and am now working in Assam only, I wouldn't call myself a migrant" Thus, the time that determines their refugee-ness becomes embedded differently with each generation being more temporally as well as spatially distant from the place of belonging or *desh*. It is not hard to imagine then that generational shifts in identity are conscious and unconscious at the same time.

Cultural Reconstruction: Imagining Sylhet

The geographical continuity from the erstwhile Surma Valley to present day Barak Valley embedded a sense of the lost 'desh' among people who migrated from pre-Partition era till after the formation of Bangladesh. In the literature on migrant communities, the question of assimilation becomes central especially when the recipient society has undergone shifts in its national boundary (Ager, 1999). As the complex eventuality of Partition took place, it brought with itself another eventuality; that of shifting modes of culture and identity. Migration and refugee studies have already pointed out that the term 'assimilation' does not take into account situations when migrants preserve their cultural and ethnic identity and "in some instances, even reconstruct their native environment in the new country" (Dona and Berry 1999: 172).

Berry's model lays down strategies of acculturation followed by migrant communities according to the varying importance they assign to their cultural identity and maintaining relations with the dominant society they have migrated into. The socio-cultural experience of the Sylheti community derails this model when we take into consideration the nature of Barak Valley as the historical mainstay of Sylheti dominance ever since the colonial era. Thus, there has been no acculturation processes for such a community which, even though migrated in phases, has had connections with the Valley ever since the British appointed Bengali officials under them in administration. This was starkly evident in the personal accounts of our respondents whose ancestors belonging to the erstwhile Surma Valley had been appointed by the British under tea estates or other government jobs. In this context, it becomes even more complex to account for the "exilic consciousness" that Sulkapa Bhattacharya examines in her work, of the Sylhetis of Barak Valley as the geographical region of Sylhet becomes the *distant locale* for many generations of migrants (Bhattacharya 2011).

Sylhet remains in the memory of most second generation migrants at least, who grew up listening to stories of their ancestral village, educational institutions where their parents/ grandparents studied, pre-Partition peace among communities, and an abundance of food. The Sylheti community in Barak has

attempted to internalize the characteristics of its lost homeland by keeping alive its local geet, dance forms such as dhamail, which is performed by women on weddings, and the various pujos, including Manasha puja, when the snake goddess who has a cult following in the north-eastern parts of the subcontinent is worshipped, and Saraswati pujo. The Sylhetis in Barak and in other parts of north-east also celebrate the harvest festival of Makar Shankranti along with the practice of 'mera-meri'. On this occasion small houses made of bamboo are constructed mostly by the children in the family and then burnt down in celebration. The myth behind the celebration remains unknown to most people, and the practice probably would have been transferred to younger generations through word of mouth. The occasion is coupled with the singing of a rhyme of sorts that celebrates the burning of the house believed to belong to a sheep couple.

Mera-merir ghor jale re hoi!

Mera gelo bajaaro, meri gelo koi?

Mera-Merir ghor jale re hoi!

(The ram and ewe's home is up in flames!

The ram's out shopping and the ewe's missing

The ram and ewe's home is up in flames!)

(Source: News18)

Practices such as these intertwine Barak Valley with present day Sylhet as well as the imagined Sylhet with a thread of continuity. In such a context, it is important to ask the question- which community are the Sylhetis of Barak Valley imagining for themselves. Anderson's theory provides us with a framework for the social construction of the nation as an imagined community which requires constant imagination of networks and relations with other inhabitants (Anderson 1983). The imagination of the community in the Sylheti experience is marred by the past and present which do not follow in a linear fashion but are rather characterized by simultaneity of national and ethnic identities. The specific experience of a diasporic community whose 'janmabhoomi' is across the national border constantly uses means to legitimize its nationality while finding mechanisms to retain its unique ethnicity. Such a process of

legitimization was replete in our fieldwork when respondents denied their migrant or refugee identity in place of a repeated “I am Indian”.

In support of such an assertion, there were responses that connected their specific concerns with national issues at large. A common thread that connected the young and the old was the dissatisfaction with infrastructure, transportation, educational institutes, health care services and the lack of a productive job market in Barak Valley. When asked about the concerns of the Sylheti community that are overlooked by the local MLA/ MP, the 73 year-old Aparesh Bhowmick made it a point to tell us that his concerns are not just “limited to my immediate identity, but in tandem with those of the nation.” The imagination here is of a larger community of people who may share the same political concerns as that of an ethnic community. The modernity of the nation-state as the representative of such an imagined community needs to be adhered to along with the traditional preservation of the Sylheti language, and the specific cultural practices of the community. In this regard, the distinction between the socio-political concerns of the *outer domain* and cultural preservation of *inner spiritual domain* become quite obvious (Chatterjee, 1986).

Ruptures in Identity

If the Sylheti diaspora showcases an ‘ease’ in some sense regarding the movement of people and culture, it is also a subject to be studied precisely because even such cultural proximity brought about ruptures in the Sylheti identity that shares an undeniable space with the larger Bengali culture. It is not hard to imagine for a community deracinated from its geographical place of belonging to go through some form of cultural dilution over the course of time. Such was the case when our respondents themselves couldn’t mark the difference between an essentially Sylheti practice and a Bengali practice followed by West and East Bengalis alike. Alongside, there was also a marked recognition of loss of one’s roots even as a selective number of customs and traditions survived over the course of generations. It is thus important to note the continuous ‘becoming’ of one’s identity marred by historical and political eventualities.

In accounting for the Caribbean diaspora, Stuart Hall theorized that identity cannot be understood without taking into account the “ruptures and discontinuities” that shape and actively constitute it.

Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (Hall 1990: 225)

It is this positioning of the Sylheti identity in relation to the wider Bengali-ness that shifts after the essence of *being* a Sylheti in one's own 'desh' is transformed into *becoming* a Sylheti in Barak. On this account, 64 year-old businessman Omkarnath Ray reflected on issues which mark his Sylheti identity as something to be preserved but also something that was soon getting lost in a “mixed culture” due to growing cosmopolitanism. This was a recurring theme in our interviews as the respondents accepted it as an inevitable factor for the community. The Sylhetis of Barak Valley still felt that their 'culture' to use a broad term was Bengali in every sense if not Sylheti in all its distinct characteristics. The middle class businessman still held close the importance of being able to read and communicate in Bengali, even if their particular dialect, which is not officially recognized, is somewhere assimilated within a conquering Bangla. This was exhibited when the respondent told us that his U.S. born grandchildren speak in Bengali at home. However the transference of the lost 'desh' and all the experiences, memories and labels that come with it were hardly lead to his children and grandchildren with the former having accepted Silchar as their homeland and birthplace. Thus, his children never considered themselves displaced even when they spoke in the Sylheti dialect. Our respondents were aware that assimilation also works at different levels changing in scale with the context. Thus, for most displaced Sylheti people living in other cities and towns of Assam outside of Barak Valley, it becomes natural to be co-opted within the local culture and lifestyle.

Inter-generational discontinuity

Another significant shift within the Sylheti identity presents a rupture of the clear distinction between the inner spiritual domain and the outer public domain that the older generation of migrants expressed. This became clearly visible with the third and fourth generation migrants aged between 20-30 years of age who accepted the Sylheti language as something given to them, but distanced themselves from their

immediate identity by identifying as a Bengali from Assam, or simply an Indian. Consequentially, on interviewing them, they turned to be indifferent to issues of political representation of one's ethnic identity, something that the older generation held in high regard. From issues such as the renaming of the Silchar Railway station to Bhasha Shaheed in commemoration of those who died during the Bhasha Andolan, to demands of a separate Bengali state in the North East, our younger respondents reacted in a starkly different manner than the older ones. "It seems like a form of tokenism to change the name of the railway station. The dead can't come back now", said Arjun, while Somava that the Bhasha Andolan was a "forgetful event" and thus needn't be harped upon.

Rather than a sustained indifference, there was a different set of questions that pre-occupied the young respondents. At one level, they sufficiently distanced themselves from questions on the representation of their Sylheti identity, but on another level, their identification as subjects under a modern nation-state was much more rooted than the older respondents. Thus, it was quite obvious to them that the Assam government did not care for Barak Valley and that promises of development had rung hollow in the past, and would continue to do so in all probability. An especially assertive dissatisfaction with employment opportunities and institutes of higher education in the entire state of Assam was a constant presence in their responses. The structural division of space into center and the periphery was manifested not just in the state ignorance of the peripheral but also became quite palpable when on asking if he would identify himself as Bengali or Sylheti, 25 year-old Mass Communication student Abhishek said that in Delhi, he would just identify as "a guy from the North-East" while within Assam, he would identify as Bengali. Such a position confirms that recognized labels of identity become more important than one's own ethnicity in constructing the self.

Another set of responses that embedded a concrete generational shift in identity was around marriage preferences on the basis of caste and religion within the Sylheti community. While the first and second generation migrants expressed a need to preserve marital relations within the community, marriage with a Sylheti of a religion or caste other than their own was unacceptable to most. Of course, religion became a stricter restriction than caste, as inter-marriages between Kayasthas and Brahmins, or even between Kayasthas and SCs had made caste interaction somewhat fluid for our respondents. This was

in marked contrast for our younger third and fourth generation Sylhetis who recognized the futility of having preference for someone else in a personal matter as marriage. “I would prefer that they don’t marry at all”, Arjun remarked, half amused by the question of preferences based on the lines of caste and religion. At another level were responses that gave some adherence to marriage preferences within the same religion, not because those respondents were particularly orthodox about it, but rather to be in conjunction with the society at large. On the other hand, Somava responded saying, “I personally wouldn’t put my preference over someone else’s decision, but if my brother were to have an inter-religious marriage, it would probably make his life harder. I don’t think that people in Silchar will let it go very easily.”

The set of responses from our younger respondents foregrounded the discontinuity in the Sylheti identity that was constructed by the older generation through a distinction between the inner spiritual domain of one’s own language and culture and the outer domain of national imagination. The contours of identity construction with regards to the younger migrants took a flight from the domain of cultural reconstruction to become subjectified within the national community. The spatial and temporal distancing from the lost ‘desh’ became the fundamental reason for 25 year-old Hizol Choudhary to remark, “It is only the Sylheti language that determines my Sylheti-ness; I haven’t found any other aspect of it till now.” Circumscribed within such an “intervention of history” to quote Hall, the Sylheti identity has undergone a privileging of the outer domain of national imagination over the inner domain of traditional cultural significance. The positioning of identity with respect to the past cannot take place at the cost of the future, and it is this simultaneity that shapes identity as an ever-shifting marker of one’s becoming.

The Politics of the Periphery

Bharatiya Gana Parishad (BGP) is a relatively newly formed political party in Assam, established just before the 2015 Assam elections in the August of the same year. With its agenda being primarily the welfare of the East Bengali Hindus in Assam, its curious name seems to hark back to both Bharatiya

Janata Party and Asom Gana Parishad; being inspired by the Hindutva politics of the former and the ethnocentric leanings of the latter. Their party headquarter is on the second floor of a shopping plaza in Kalapahar, Guwahati, which is both a commercial centre and a Bengali-populated area. The core party members are all East Bengali, male and employed in different professions, and they visit the office only on weekends. All of them, aged between later 20s to mid 60s, stay in and around Kalapahar and came to know each other through informal networks of friends. The feeling that one gets from the office space, as we sit with the party members on the terrace for the interview, is one of a relaxed, unceremonious meeting spot for friends. But each had strong political convictions and toted the party line ceremoniously.

“We are for the welfare of all the mistreated populations in Assam, be it the Santhals or the Bodos, but we have to start with the most disadvantaged and in Assam, it is the Hindu Bengali.”, said Ankush Choudhary, the chairman of the party. “The tribals have their quotas and their autonomous councils, whereas the Muslim Bengalis have reaped the benefits by registering themselves as Assamese. We are the only ones suffering.” The suffering of the Hindu Bengali in Assam was a recurrent motif throughout the interview and suggested by multiple media reports in local newspapers, it was the foundation under the party’s very existence. The supposed suppression of the Bengali Hindu comes from the supposed fact that the Bengali Hindus, unlike the Bengali Muslims, haven’t given up their language to assimilate into the larger Assamese community and still pose a danger to the Assamese hegemony over the state. “They are no longer culturally Bengali.” From this viewpoint, the party perceives the attack on Bengali culture in Assam, where because of their potential capturing of political power from the hands of the Assamese and because of their numeric weakness.

On asked about the Bengali origin Muslims, especially in northern and western Assam, where there have been multiple anti-Bengali Muslim massacres, Choudhary dismissed any such musings. “Even in Nellie, we were the ones who were killed.” This is in contrary to both the official report on Nellie Massacre and the independent findings made by journalists and academics which place the chaariya Muslim Bengali at the foreground of the receiving end of the violence. The imagination of persecution then fuels the ethnocentric politics of the party, much like it did for AGP and AASU during the Assam

Movement. The National Register of Citizen then becomes a weapon at the hands of the Assamese to harass the Bengali Hindu and to run him off his own land. “The NRC is only in Assam and is only pointed at the Hindu Bengali. If this is not persecution, then what is?”

BGP is based in Guwahati and is Brahmaputra Valley-centric when it comes to both its fears and its campaigning. The fear that emerges from being outnumbered by the Assamese that conjures up images of attacks on Bengali culture is not present in Barak Valley. While most respondents in Silchar agree that the Assamese hold the major power in Assam and that Barak Valley has been getting ‘step-motherly’ behaviour from the Assam government in terms of developmental initiatives, the absolute numeric majority in Barak Valley gives the resident Bengalis a sense of security that they think is missing in Brahmaputra Valley. Most responded to a question about the condition of Bengalis in Barak Valley with respect to Brahmaputra Valley with an agreement on the cultural security in the former, while a significant number also pointed out that Bengalis in Brahmaputra Valley have access to better education and more job opportunities and that the standard of living is much better in Guwahati than in Silchar.

While BGP maintains that the response from the Bengali Hindu community in Brahmaputra Valley has been overwhelming, with support also coming from the Barak Valley, in our informal conversations with Bengali Hindus in Guwahati and during our detailed interviews with Bengalis in Silchar, we were unable to find even one participant who could identify BGP and its politics. But this unawareness of BGP, a party formed for the supposed upliftment of Bengali Hindus in Assam, does not mean that the Sylhetis in Silchar are not divided in religious lines nor do they not make political choices on the basis of religious interests. During our in-depth interviews, we found that most Hindus in Silchar were in support of BJP in both Assam and at the centre. Indeed, BJP had won the elections in Silchar with a large margin. Even though the respondents were not asked for the name of the party that they had voted for, most were forthright with it and proud to have contributed in the *poriborton* (change) in the political sphere.

In the constituency of Sonai in Silchar, the candidate that BJP selected to run on its ticket was Aminul Haque Lashkar. This was a nod to the Muslim majority in the constituency. But in our field research, we found that most Muslims in the city were wary of BJP and thought of Lashkar as both a sign of tokenism and a political move to win the seat. As Shehabuddin Ahmed said, “They are trying to win over the traditional Congress votebank of Ali-Kuli-Nepali without really caring for them”. Ali-Kuli-Nepali is the colloquial way of referring to the supposed alliance between the Muslims, the tea tribes, and the Nepalis, who have been voting Congress to power in Assam. “Silchar and the Sylheti community here have been mostly secular, there was always *moitri* (friendship) between the Hindus and the Muslims, but this win of BJP is the sign that things are being changed here.”

Lashkar did win Sonai, but he didn't have to depend on the Muslim votes to win it. The Hindu residents of Meherpur, a neighbourhood under Sonai, whom we interviewed, had all told us that they had voted for him. But most of them clarified that they didn't vote for the candidate but the party and weren't happy that a Muslim had to win for BJP to win in Sonai. “It was because of us Hindus that he won because we wanted to make sure that the correct party won”, said one of the respondents.

The fear psychosis in northern Assam of being overrun by Muslims has reached southern Assam too. While the fear in northern Assam is of both the Muslim and the Bengali, compounded in the spectre of the illegal Bangladeshi migrant, the fear in southern Assam was only limited to the Muslim; the Hindu Bangladeshi was always welcomed. The victory of BJP was seen by a majority of the older Hindu respondents as a way of making sure that the demography in Barak Valley doesn't change. This was also one of the rhetoric used by BJP during their campaigning. The BJP had not only promised stricter border patrolling and eviction of 'illegal migrants' (Muslim Bangladeshis), but also to provide Hindu Bangladeshis asylum and citizenship. The fear of a demographical change was repeated by most BJP-supporters and was one of the points raised by BGP chairperson, Choudhury too. Most believed that the Partition and the birth of Pakistan meant that the basis of the establishment of Independent India was religious in nature, as a safe sanctuary for Hindus of East and West Pakistan. “They have Pakistan and now they have Bangladesh too, we Hindus have only India. Bangladeshi and Pakistani Hindus have by birth rights on claiming Indian citizenship.” said Choudhury, a statement which was repeated in

Silchar too. More often than not, the respondent brought in their own identity as Sylheti Hindu who had to move from their place of origin because of the Partition to lend legitimacy to their sympathy for the Hindus in Bangladesh who were being persecuted by radical Islamist fronts.

There was a noticeable generational difference in the political views of Hindu Sylhetis in Silchar. While most older and middle-aged Hindus had displayed support for the Hindutva politics of BJP, the younger respondents were more secular in their reasoning even when talking of their support for BJP. “See, between Congress, which has sucked Assam dry for decades, and BJP, which was never given the chance to prove itself here, I don’t see much reason for deliberation. We really needed the *poriborton*”, said a 25 year old student. When asked about providing asylum to Bangladeshi migrants, most said that they should be taken in temporarily, but should not be conferred citizenship, regardless of their religion. Stress on resources and over-population were the main reasons stated forward. Most Muslim respondents, regardless of their age, agreed with it. For them it was also the fear of actual miscreants passing in through the porous border and resulting in more difficulties for the local Muslims in Silchar.

This widespread support for BJP seemed to mirror a renewed effort to enter the national consciousness as bonafide Indians. Most conferred the credit of the coming of the long-awaited broad gauge train in Silchar to Narendra Modi and believed that now Barak Valley will be connected with the rest of the country. There was a desire to play out the role of a loyal Indian citizen as a mean to escape the seemingly permanent marker of being a migrant community, an epithet that most strongly refuted. Hence, the change in demography was linked to security concerns for the rest of the country, while voting for BJP was seen as “strengthening the hand of Modi at the centre”. This was the periphery voting to support the centre.

Conclusion

The Sylheti community of Barak Valley has negotiated its identity within the shifting historical and geographical contexts over the course of generations. The experiences of the community problematise the concept of refugee and migrant alike, which in the literature on diaspora, have been the conceptual frameworks to approach the question of identity and experience. A fulfilling reconstruction of their

cultural identity in Barak Valley also puts into question concepts of assimilation and integration, since the unique characteristics of the Sylheti situation was due to the complexity of Partition that left a part of the population static while the national boundary shifted. The ethnography brought to the foreground how an overarching event becomes contingent in the continuous relations a community draws with the space it occupies, as well as the way it negotiates its identity.

What then becomes of utmost importance is the ever-shifting nature of identity, which creates itself on the basis of ruptures and discontinuities that become marked in case of diaspora. What we learn about the Sylheti identity is exactly what Stuart Hall called the simultaneous being and becoming of identity, that can never be static or only based on the historical past of the community (Hall 1990). The generational shifts in terms of various matrices of Sylheti, Bengali and Indian brings into light another form of simultaneity, that of imagining the lost *desh* as well as the nation-state, but at different levels for the changing generation of migrants. The presence of the 'other' equally comes into play when accounting for the changing nature of identity. The Sylheti identity demarcates itself by a process of 'othering' the Bengali, the Assamese, and also along religious lines within itself. Identity defines itself with as much as it is not as it thinks it is. The othering then becomes an important component in the Sylheti community's identity formation which concretises itself through shifting claims over political representation and constructed oppositions between linguistic and social categories.

Bibliography:

Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities; Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*.

Baruah, S. 1999. *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Bhattacharjee, S. 2011. 'Narrative Constructions of Identity and the Sylheti Experience', in T. Mishra (ed.): *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India*. New Delhi: OUP.

Chatterjee, P. 1986. *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*. London: Zed Books

Dasgupta, A. 2013. *Remembering Sylhet: Hindu & Muslim Voices from a Nearly Forgotten Story of India's Partition*. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors.

Grierson, George A. (1903). *Linguistic Survey of India. Volume V, Part 1, Indo-Aryan family. Eastern group. Specimens of the Bengali and Assamese languages.* Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, India.

Hall, Stuart. 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora'. 1990. In Rutherford, J. (ed.) *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, United Kingdom

Mandal, M. 2011. *Settling the Unsettled A Study of Partition Refugees in West Bengal.* New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors.

Quinn, M. 1994. *The Swastika. Constructing the Symbol.* London: Routledge.

Saussure, F.D. 1966. *Course in General Linguistics.* New York: McGraw Hill.