

The Erosion Of Sylheti Cultural Identity: Cross-Cultural Influences And Globalisation In Northeastern India

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Abstract

The Sylheti group, with its unique linguistic, ceremonial, and cultural customs, is becoming increasingly subject to the homogenising effects of globalisation and cross-cultural influences. Local religious practices, ethnic food traditions, and folk dances like Dhamail are vanishing as pan-Indian and Western values take hold. This research investigates how generational transitions, notably among the new generation, language stigmatisation, and the rise of mainstream cultural activities contribute to the loss of Sylheti identity. This study draws connections to other oppressed communities throughout the world by situating Sylheti's concerns within global frameworks such as cultural hegemony and globalisation theory. By evaluating ethnographic investigations, community interviews, and cultural theories, the study highlights the urgent need for systemic measures to conserve Sylheti culture through education, digital documentation, and grassroots activism.

Keywords

Cultural erosion, Cultural hegemony, Cultural preservation, Globalization, Linguistic shift, Marginalised communities, Sylheti identity,

Introduction

Sylheti Hindus of the Bengali community are known for their unique cultural and linguistic identity. Though linguistically the same, Hindu Sylheti culture is quite different from Muslim culture, which is often shaped by the religious faith and rituals. It is quite evident from their traditional customs and ritualistic practices. Originating from the Sylhet region of Bangladesh, many of the Sylheti people spread across northeastern India, particularly in Tripura, Assam, and some parts of West Bengal. Besides, the Sylheti Hindu diaspora can be found around the world. They have a rich cultural history, indigenous rituals, folk tradition, etc., blended with religious flavour, and these are passed down through generations. However, in recent decades, the traditional lifestyle and practices of Sylheti Hindu people have come under severe threat. The rise of globalisation, rapid urbanisation, and cultural homogenisation have led to the gradual decline of Sylheti Hindu tradition. What had once been known for its prosperous and promising customs and traditions is now the threat of extinction. Adoption of pan-Indian norms, an increase of dominant cultural influence, and too much preference for standard Bengali and Hindi languages instead of the Sylheti dialect have contributed much to this decline. At this juncture of cultural crisis, the Sylheti Hindu community is struggling for their identity. The younger generation too feels an inferiority complex as they view their culture and tradition as backdated or irrelevant.

Moreover, the Sylheti Hindu community's religious and spiritual practices are rapidly disappearing. Rituals like 'Kormartir Broto' (a ritual for celebrating the Karma or deed), Bhola Sankranti, and Baba Harir Seva (a local ritual honouring Lord Shiva) are rapidly disappearing, and pan-Indian celebrations like Ganesh Chaturdashi, Ram Navami, and Karwa Chawt, etc., are emerging and replacing the indigenous rituals. This shift not only signifies the loss of spiritual diversity but also a departure from the very essence of Sylheti identity.

The community's culinary traditions too are in severe threat of erosion. Traditional Sylheti dishes like sidal bhorta (spicy smashed dry fish), Begun Bhorta (smashed brinjal), and Chunga Pitha (bamboo rice) are slowly disappearing from everyday life. These dishes, which have been passed through generations, are now on the verge of extinction, and these are being replaced by fast food and commercially available cuisine. Unique cooking recipes of Sylheti Hindus are being replaced with pan-Indian, cross-cultural, and cross-national flavours. Under this situation, the Sylheti people urgently need to preserve their cultural heritage. Despite the significant influences of the mainstream culture within the community to revive and maintain Sylheti tradition.

1.Theoretical Framework

The issue of cultural decline of marginalised communities such as the Sylheti people is influenced by a multitude of social, political, and economic factors. To understand the forces behind this decline and the efforts at preservation, it is important to study the relevant cultural theories. These theoretical frameworks will help to contextualise the findings and provide a broader understanding of the intersection between globalisation, identity, and cultural transformation.

1.1Cultural Homogenization and Globalization

One of the most important theories, which is very much relevant to the analysis of cultural erosion within the Sylheti Hindu community, is cultural homogenisation. Homogenisation refers to theories by which a distinct culture becomes increasingly similar due to the influence of global forces, such as mass media, technology, and international trade. This concept is often associated with McDonaldization. McDonaldization is a term coined by sociologist George Ritzer. According to McDonaldization, global consumer culture is spreading universally, leading to standardisation in various facets of life, from food to education, entertainment, and even religious practices. In the Sylheti community, this homogenisation can be found in the replacement of local festivals like Kormartir Broto with pan-Indian practices and festivals such as Ganesh Chaturdashi and Karwa Chauth. These imported practices and festivals not only dilute the community's unique cultural identity but also indicate the broader societal shifts that undervalue smaller, local cultures in favour of mainstream, nationalistic, or global norms. Social media platforms and online streaming services have intensified this process by exposing young Sylheti people to a variety of global cultural products that shape their preferences and perceptions of what is "modern" or "acceptable."

The theories of Roland Robertson and Ulrich Beck further shed light on this process. Robertson's idea of glocalisation insists that while globalisation spreads global cultural products, local communities adapt and reshape these products to fit their specific needs. However, in the case of the Sylheti community, the adaptation is limited, and the influence of external global forces is more powerful, which leads to a kind of cultural erosion rather than innovation or syncretism. Similarly, Beck's risk society framework shows how globalisation leads to unexpected risks, including the loss of local traditions and identities as communities become more incorporated into a globalised network.

1.2 Cultural Identity and Postcolonial Theory

The struggle for cultural identity in the face of external influences is a central concern in postcolonial theory. Through the lenses of Edward Said's Orientalism and Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity, the Sylheti community's experience of cultural displacement can be understood. In the context of postcolonial theory, marginalised or smaller communities are often found subjugated by dominant, hegemonic cultural narratives, especially when these narratives come from former colonial powers or dominant nation-states. For Sylheti people, the preference of Standard Bengali (being promoted as the language of education and administration) and Hindi reflects a similar dynamic.

Bhabha's concept of hybridity shows how colonial cultures blend different traditions, languages, and customs and how this blending creates new cultural ideas and also paves the way for people to resist foreign influences. However, in the case of the Sylheti Hindu community, this hybridity is often a one-way process, where local practices are diluted or abandoned in favour of more dominant cultural forms. The shift in religious practices and the disappearance of indigenous rituals like Baba Harir Seva and Kormartir Broto can be seen as a form of cultural imperialism, where the cultural "other" (in this case, the Sylheti community) is forced and compelled to adopt the values and practices of the dominant culture.

Antonio Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony is key here to understand why Sylheti Hindu culture is gradually falling apart. According to Gramsci, dominant and powerful classes often maintain their power not just by force but by imposing their own culture and ideas on others. In the case of the Sylheti Hindu community, this can be noticed in how pan-Indian culture is becoming more popular while Sylheti Hindu traditions are fading day by day. Many people originating from this community devalue their own Sylheti dialect, food habits, rituals, etc.

1.3 Theories of Language and Identity

Language plays a vital role in the formation and preservation of cultural identity. According to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, language is not just a medium of communication but a symbol of power. It reflects social status and reinforces existing social hierarchies. In the case of the Sylheti community, the rise of Standard Bengali, Hindi, and English as the medium of formal and dominant language in education, government, and media has made the Sylheti language less valuable. Native speakers of the Sylheti language believe that speaking the dominant language would earn them, which ultimately affects their identity and behaviour.

Developer of the concept of linguistic imperialism, Robert Phillipson, opines that powerful languages (like Standard Bengali and Hindi) often replace marginalised, regional, and indigenous languages. As a result, the modern generation of the Sylheti Hindu community feels ashamed of speaking in their own dialect. Modern parents of this community are seen interacting with their children either in standard Bengali or standard Bengali language blended with English words.

2. Decline of Local Festivals and Ritual

Festivals and rituals of the Sylheti Hindu community have always been an important part and parcel for keeping their cultural traditions and heritage alive and making the people of the community united. Many of these celebrations are associated with their farming seasons, local gods, or changes in nature. These celebrations have helped shape Sylheti identity for generations. However, because of globalisation and modernisation, more people are moving to cities, and because of this, many of these traditions are disappearing rapidly.

2.1 The Role of Local Festivals and Rituals in Sylheti CuCulture

Local festivals and rituals are the heartbeats of the spiritual and social life of the Sylheti Hindu community. These traditional festivals and rituals are not merely special occasions but bring people together, honour nature, and strengthen cultural identity. Many of these rituals are linked to the well-being of the collective and are meant to please the gods who protect and guide them in their way of living. For example, *Kormartir Broto* is an important ritual in Sylheti homes, where women fast and pray to local gods to show the path of right karma or good deeds. It is believed that our own karma defines and affects our future. *Bhula Sankranti* is observed for the well-being of cattle. Cows are decorated with flowers and worshipped with utmost devotion. In *Sithali Broto*, the Sylheti Hindu community celebrates and worships Goddess *Sithali*. It is believed that Goddess *Sithali* will save them from the epidemic of chickenpox and smallpox. In *Kaal Bhoirab Broto*, they worship and revere God Shiva. In *Badsha Puja*, Lord *Badsha* is worshipped as the lord of the forest. *Surja Broto* and *Sosthi Puja* are also key rituals that emphasise the well-being of family members. These events are often celebrated in elaborate rituals, offerings, and community gatherings. Besides their spiritual significance, these festivals are often considered important social occasions where community members come and unite together to celebrate. They share *prasad* (food offerings to deities) and religious experience with one another. Devotional dances, songs, and storytelling are common during these gatherings, and it further strengthens the sense of their collective identity.

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2.2 The Impact of Globalisation and Urbanisation on Local Festivals

At present, globalisation and urbanisation have greatly affected these local festivals and rituals in the Sylheti Hindu community. As younger people move to cities for better opportunities, they become less connected to their rural traditions; rather than in the city, they get involved in dominated cultural norms. Because of busy schedules in city life and the influence of global cultural trends, they get less time for their traditional rituals or simplify these rituals. Many imported festivals like *Ganesh Chaturdashi*, *Ram Navami*, *Chot Puja*, *Raksha Bandhan*, *Karwa Chauth*, etc. from the mainstream are now gradually replacing and contributing to the decline of traditional Sylheti rituals. All these festivals become popular in India due to commercialisation, social media, and cultural exchanges. The attraction of these festivals, with their large celebrations, elaborate decorations, and commercial appeal, has led many people to replace local rituals with these imported ones. The rise of materialism and consumer culture, especially during popular festivals, has changed the focus from spiritual practices and community values.

3. Decline of Sylheti Food and Traditions

Food is an important part of the Sylheti Hindu community's identity. Each region has their unique culinary traditions, which are passed down through generations. The Sylheti Hindu community often boasts of a variety of unique and flavourful foods that have long been associated with its regional identity. However, with the increasing influence of cross-cultural practices, urbanisation, and globalisation, Sylheti food traditions are in serious decline. This section will throw light on the rich culinary heritage of Sylheti food and the impact of urbanisation and the dominant culture on the culinary heritage of the Sylheti Hindu community.

3.1 The Rich Culinary Heritage of Sylheti Food

Sylheti cuisine is rooted in the region's agricultural practice. The food traditions of the Sylheti Hindu community are characterised by a reliance on locally grown rice, vegetables, fish, and various indigenous ingredients. Traditional dishes such as *Sidal Bhorta* (fried dry fish with chopped onion), *Begun Bhorta* (mashed brinjal with garlic, mustard oil, and green chillies), *Chunga Pitha* (steamed rice cakes in bamboo), *Chaler Koro Bhaja* (fried rice with spices), and *Panta Bhat* (fermented rice soaked in water) are examples of the community's close connection to the land and its resources. These traditional foods not only represent the Sylheti people's deep connection to their environment but also reflect their cultural values. Many of these foods are prepared for special occasions, rituals, and festivals, which play an important role in maintaining cultural continuity and communal ties.

3.2 The Impact of Urbanisation and Changing Lifestyles

Rapid urbanisation has played a significant role in the decline of Sylheti Hindus' food traditions. Urbanisation has played a significant role in the decline of Sylheti food traditions. As more Sylheti people migrate to urban centres for better job opportunities and social mobility, they are increasingly exposed to the culinary practices of mainstream society. In urban areas, the influence of fast food, processed foods, and popular national dishes has led to a departure from traditional home-cooked meals. The decline of traditional Sylheti food is also related to the changing economic conditions in the community. Due to the price rise of essential commodities and unavailability of regional products, it has become more challenging for families to maintain traditional culinary practices. As the people are more prone to business rather than agriculture, there is a scarcity of available ingredients, and hence they find it difficult to stick with their culinary practices, which further contributed to the erosion of food tradition.

3.3 The Influence of Cross-Cultural Practices and Imported Food

The influences of cross-cultural practices have added a variety of new foods into the Sylheti Hindu community, leading to the gradual replacement of traditional dishes with imported ones. The popularity of foods from different regions of India has overshadowed local Sylheti dishes in many households. People prefer these foods because they are easy to find, quick to prepare, and advertised as modern and stylish. Moreover, the global fast-food industry has made a significant impact on local markets, with international chains like McDonald's, KFC, and Domino's Pizza becoming increasingly popular among young people in urban areas. These fast foods offer convenience, affordability, and an appeal to the desire for modernity. As a result, many Sylheti youth have become disconnected from their traditional food culture, seeing it as old-fashioned or inferior to the globalised food trends. The influence of imported food is not limited to fast food. Processed and packaged foods, including snacks, beverages, and ready-to-eat meals, have become staples in many Sylheti households. These foods, often made with artificial preservatives and additives, have contributed to the decline of homemade traditional foods. The growing reliance on processed foods has implications not only for health but also for cultural preservation, as it represents a departure from the time-honoured methods of food preparation that were central to Sylheti culinary practices.

3.4 Loss of Culinary Skills and Knowledge

The decline of Sylheti food traditions is also linked to the loss of culinary skills and knowledge that were once passed down through generations. In the past, cooking was a skill that was exercised within families, with older generations teaching younger ones how to prepare traditional dishes. Cooking was seen as a communal activity,

bringing families together and fostering a sense of cultural pride. However, with the increasing preference for ready-made foods and the rise of convenience cooking, many of the younger generation no longer learn how to prepare traditional Sylheti meals.

4. Erosion of Sylheti Language and Folk literature

Sylheti language is not a formal language. It existed as a spoken dialect of the Sylheti community for centuries. It is meant for their expression—expression of thought and emotion. The gradual decline of the Sylheti language is a serious threat to the cultural identity of the Sylheti community. Sylheti speakers are borrowing words from the dominant mainstream. Standard Bengali, Hind, and English words are dominating over the Sylheti language, and the original dialect is getting weak or on the verge of extinction. Language and culture are deeply connected, so when fewer people speak Sylheti, important traditions and values start to disappear. For example, the word *Mangalacharan* is being recently replaced by *Ashirbad* or ‘Blessing Ceremony’. *Onnyo prason* is replaced by the rice ceremony. *Saad Bhokkhon* is replaced by ‘Baby Shower.’ *Chaturthamangal* is replaced by *Bou Bhat*, or ‘Reception Ceremony.’ Folk songs, rhymes, and stories (keccha in Sylheti) and the folk dance *Dhamail* are especially at risk since they are mostly passed down through speech. If they are lost, people may forget their history and heritage. In other words, losing the language also weakens community ties. Festivals, religious ceremonies, and family gatherings often use Sylheti, but when younger generations stop speaking it, they feel less connected to their roots. This makes it harder for them to appreciate their culture. Sylheti is also important for keeping oral traditions alive. Many cultural events, like weddings, farming rituals, and seasonal festivals, are closely linked to the language. If Sylheti fades away, these traditions become harder to continue, leading to their disappearance and a loss of cultural diversity.

Conclusion

This study attempts to highlight the critical necessity to conserve Sylheti culture, which is fast vanishing owing to globalisation, intercommunity marriages, and the influence of dominant cultures. The loss of language, traditional festivals, folk dances, and cuisine is not unique to Sylheti; it is part of a greater worldwide crisis in which minor cultures are being wiped out by more dominant ones. If prompt action is not taken, future generations may grow up with no link to their ancestors. To prevent this degradation, Sylheti traditions must be carefully safeguarded and promoted. Schools should include Sylheti history, language, and customs in their curriculum so that children grow up with an understanding of their heritage. Media platforms such as television, social media, and online content should be used to showcase Sylheti art, music, and folklore, making cultural pride a part of everyday life. Additionally, the creation of cultural archives, both physical and digital, can help document Sylheti traditions for future generations.

Maintaining Sylheti identity, however, is not just the job of a few individuals. To ensure the preservation of this rich legacy, cooperation among the Sylheti diaspora, lawmakers, educators, and cultural groups is required. Language classes, storytelling events, and cultural festivals should all be promoted and supported by the neighbourhood. Time to do something about it. Not only can Sylheti culture survive, but it can flourish if the community comes together with pride and passion. There are responsibilities for every Sylheti speaker, family, and leader who values their heritage. Protecting the past is only one aspect of the Sylheti tradition; another is making sure that cultural diversity is acknowledged and transmitted to coming generations.

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