

**POLITICS OF MIGRATION IN NORTH-EAST INDIA: EXPLORING THE ROOTS  
OF BELONGINGNESS IN SIDDHARTHA DEB'S THE POINT OF RETURN**

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*Remember, because nothing is ended  
But it is changed.*

-Mamang Dai, *The Legends of Pensam*.

**INTRODUCTION:**

Located in the South-Eastern part of the Asian continent, North-East India occupies an integral part in the entire Indian sub-continent, both geographically and historically. Geographically, India's North-East is rich in bio-diversity which hosts a large number of flora and fauna in the heart of the territory, which is a home to numerous species of plants and animals in the lap of nature. Known as the 'Seven-Sister' states of India, the region is also a home to various tribes sharing the land and space since times immemorial. However, historically, the region has faced various issues from time to time. Conflicts ranging from the issues related to sharing the land with other tribes to gaining superior autonomy and independence, India's North-East is considered to be a region full of conflicts which one can locate historically as well as in the present day scenario as well. Since the region shares its boundaries with international countries as well, the issue of migrancy, immigration and infiltration of the so called 'foreign people' in the land becomes a rampant issue in the region. The need for the local population to maintain the 'purity' of the land and its people and the notion of the outsiders 'polluting' this purity serves as a yardstick for the ongoing debates of 'insider-outsider' question.

**DISCUSSION:**

The Partition of the Indian sub-continent in 1947 has led to the massive movement of population from both sides of the border. Regions like Punjab on the Western part of the country and West-Bengal and North-East on the Eastern part of the country were two major regions which saw major upheavals, the issues of which are yet to be pacified. The pangs of Partition are real and an ongoing phenomenon. Added to the general ongoing trauma of Partition, Pakistan underwent the second wave of partition again in 1971 when the part of

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Bangladesh which was then known as East-Pakistan declared Independence after the war with West Pakistan. This war again led to the migration of a huge mass of population from Bangladesh to India. In the initial stage, India sought to give shelter to the Hindu-migrants filtering from the other side of the border, the masses generally known to be as 'refugees'. However, the initial wave of migrancy gave way to a continuous influx of refugees from across the border basically in the state of Assam and then to other parts of North-East. While some left behind their ancestral homelands and settled down in the newly provided land and survived with whatever basic amenities provided, others have been finding illegal means to be a part of mainstream India. Insurgency and violence has always been a part of this land. And since the region is geographically far away from the center, the problems people face in this part of the land is not always highlighted and is often neglected. Conflicts in North-Eastern India have not received the same level of attention as conflicts elsewhere in the country.

### **The Migrant's Case:**

Since literature is a social vehicle which draws ideas from the society and deliver it to readers all across time and space, therefore much of the writings from the North-East have contributed towards these contemporary issues. Priya Joshi in her book *In Another Country* (2004) using the term 'nationroman' (Joshi 260) highlights how the 1980s saw the rise of novels in Indian Writings in English with writers such as Salman Rushdie, Nayantara Sahgal, Rohinton Mistry and Sashi Tharoor comprising a canon, have taken up the task of representing India and Indian history to a large scale in their fictional narratives. While writers of the Rushdie generation deal with the vision of a united-India and its complexities; writers from the North-East deals exclusively with issues that are solely a part of the North-Eastern region to highlight the ongoing issues to mainstream Indian readers. Siddhartha Deb in his *The Point of Return* (2002) deals with the issues of migrancy, displacement and confrontation of the migrant characters in Meghalaya and Assam. Set in the hills of Meghalaya *The Point of Return* voices out the agitation both of the local residents and the outsiders while trying to accommodate into a new space, together, after Partition. Frantz Fanon in his *The Pitfalls of National Consciousness* (1961) points out that it is only during nationalism and independence that the country stands united as a whole. On the other hand, things become worse after independence is won. Fanon tells how soon after independence and the birth of a new country from the foreign powers, the authority goes into the hands of

certain people whom Fanon terms 'national bourgeoisie'. These are the people according to Fanon, who should look for the development of the natives. But soon, things fall out of control. Ethnic and religious profiling starts because now the natives discover that they are no longer benefited. Thus according to Fanon, there is a move from 'nationalism' to 'regionalism' where there is excessive corruption, violence and terrorism within the own country. Hence there are certain fractures within the idea of nationalism. This pitfall creates a sense of division within the mindsets of people. This situation becomes more problematic when the outsiders try to get a space in the newly formed nations. Deb in the novel projects what Paul Gilroy states about regarding the idea of 'postcolonial melancholia' in *After Empire* (2004). Gilroy describes the condition as,

an inability to face, never mind actually mourn, the profound change in circumstances and moods that actually followed the end of empire. The shock and anxiety that followed from the loss of any sense that the national collective was bound by a coherent and distinctive culture. (Gilroy 98)

Deb builds the narrative of the novel not in a general, linear manner but rather in a fragmented way. The plot of the story has no proper beginning and middle; it starts with an 'in-medias-res' tradition and moves backwards in time in the first part of the novel. Whereas, the second part, moves in a forward plane only to break again after a period of progress, where memories form snippets of the narration. The final part of the novel is an escape from the entire past, in a search for new hopes and aspirations. The plot structure of the novel indicates how the concept of 'post-colonial nation' is arbitrary. The fragmented and non-linear structure projected by Deb subverts the essentialist strategy associated with all grand-narratives and promotes the idea that nations are not a homogeneous entity.

Since the North-East is home to several ethnic groups, for a long time these groups have been fighting with each other within the state and nation for political autonomy. The fight for political autonomy in North-East India emerges because of two major reasons. First, since the region is far away from the center and the rest of India and secondly, because of the constant infiltration of migrants from beyond the border has disrupted the purity of the land and its people according to the ethnic majorities. Thus, there is a growing sense of alienation on one hand, for the people coming in from different regions and on the other by the projection of hatred and anger of ethnic majorities towards the outsiders contributing towards the cause.

For the indigenous people, the issue of migration has always been a threat towards their existence, culturally and economically as well. This anger and hatred becomes more absolute when the outsiders are Bengali migrants from East-Pakistan, be it Hindus or Muslims.

Deb also brings in the issue of the migrant population in the country with the character of Babu, Dr. Dam's son, the second generation migrant refugee taking birth in this country and growing up in Shillong. For Babu, the one who has grown up in Shillong and had been a part of India after Partition could never accept Shillong as his hometown because of the attitude of the locals and their angst directed towards them. Babu builds the past using his father's diary and memories from his childhood and the events narrated to him by other members of the family. It is Babu who questions the idea of the map and how maps constitute a national consciousness within people, "The political boundaries of India as depicted in the map are neither accurate nor correct." (209) Drawing and redrawing boundaries on a map can only divide people by bringing in a sense of alienation and estrangement.

**Situating 'Home' in the Context of a New Space:**

With the issues of migration, displacement, uprooting and re-rooting comes the question of Citizenship which further contributes towards cultural confrontations. The Citizenship Act of 1955 and Article 5-11 of the Indian Constitution proper describes the grounds on which a person can become the Citizen of India. Article 6 of the Indian Constitution highlights specifically the grounds for providing Citizenship to migrants coming from erstwhile Pakistan. However, the issue of Bangladeshi migrants is not charted out. This issue finds a voice in *The Point of Return* where Dr. Dam and his family are in a state of absolute dilemma because they are 'outsiders' in the country. Though their family moved inside the Indian Territory in 1947, in Silchar first and then in Shillong, yet because of the hostile attitude of the indigenous people, the family failed to find a 'home'. The narrator describes events from 1986, long after Partition and Meghalaya was carved out as a separate state yet the indigenous people refusing to accept the Dam family as a part of their homeland, as a part of their system. Himadri Lahiri in *The Diasporic Subject: Generations, Cultural Hybridity and the Citizenship Question* (2019) states that it depends upon the mutual respect of the stakeholders involved about the inclusion of the foreigners in the native land. Lahiri states,

What is important in this respect is the mutual perceptions of the stakeholders. The prevailing situation must encourage familiarity and mutual respect. An environment of suspicion defers the grant of citizenship to members of the immigrant communities (Lahiri 55).

History has record of events wherein because of the actions of the outsiders in native land, the peace of a nation is disrupted. The widespread xenophobic attitude is narrated in the plot during an episode when two foreign visitors stepped in Shillong on behalf of the Royal Veterinary and Agricultural University in Copenhagen on behalf of the Danish government to promote the state of agriculture and livestock rearing in the state during 1981. Since Dr. Dam, belonging to the veterinary department was given the responsibility to deal with the foreigners inside the state; he was questioned by the ministry on matters of national security. "Foreigners walking around sensitive areas, border States, taking pictures. Not good, no sir, not good for the country." (133) The locals continued addressing the Dam family and others coming in from erstwhile Bangladesh as 'Thieves', 'Bengalis' 'Locusts' and the local word 'Dkhar' for outsiders. Outside the pension office, an old man comments,

Bengalis, no use for Bengalis, always coming over the border. In '47 they came because the country was divided. In '71 because there was war. Always coming across the border, with hordes of squealing children, coming across like locusts, like rain. (22)

This attitude of the local inhabitant projects the hatred directly towards the Dam family. Deb projects how the outsiders were often an easy target for the locals inhabiting in the space. Once, both Dr. Dam and Babu had been an easy target of the physical violence exerted by the Students' Union and their campaign against the outsiders. When the police force came to the spot after the act of physical aggression had been carried out towards Dr. Dam and Babu, instead of saving the targeted citizens, the police commented,

When the student leaders announce a public curfew, everyone stays off the streets, even the local people. And you choose to go for a walk in a deserted street with a small boy. Don't you know that the curfew is a protest against the presence of foreigners? (227)

Since the mission was already visible to Dr. Dam and Babu, they were in no position to raise a voice or even speak a word regarding that matter. All they had to do was to accept the happening and walk down the street back home. The implication was clear enough at the point. The tribal/non-tribal conflict is a reality that still continues to exist in the North-Eastern part of India. Deb highlights what it takes to accommodate into a space which is not one's real homeland. Deb in *The Point of Return* problematizes the notion of 'home' and the idea of 'belongingness'. With the idea of home comes the idea of belongingness however this is not the actual scenario always. In case of the displaced migrants and refugees, the signifier 'home' does not always signify a sense of 'comfort' and 'belongingness'. Deb narrates the plight of the migrant-refugees how after the partition of the country Dr. Dam along with his family settled down in Assam and its neighbouring places in the later years. With a view of finding a shelter and comfort on the wake of riots and upheavals, the entire Dam family shifted to Silchar on the wake of Partition. The narrator constructs the past for the readers with the information he collected from the family members regarding a time that was turbulent in the history of the country. The trauma of leaving the original homeland behind and looking for a shelter in a land which is alien, foreign and unfamiliar is projected directly,

When word reached the family sometime in the autumn of 1947 that they must leave for India, it was said that he rose, grasped his stick, and set off without a word or a glance back, leaving it to his wife and children to gather what belongings they could.  
(35)

Through the above lines, Deb portrays the psychology of the first generation Diasporas who are uprooted from their personal space, thrown into a new space. The narrator describes how his father and his entire family shifted to the slums of Thikarbasti where the family rented only a single room for seven refugees which created a negative impact in the attitudinal behaviour of the grandfather after which he refused to express himself to the family members. The displacements however continued. The search for home in an alien space was persistent. Promod K. Nayar in *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction* (2008) speaks about the idea of 'home' and how it can be equated with a figment of imagination only. Nayar states, "Home is a product of speculation and imagination. It can be retrieved, reached, or returned to only in memory" (Nayar 192) Partition had uprooted the family members to an alien land where they had to struggle to accommodate and negotiate with the locals inhabiting the space. In the entire novel, this sense of alienation in a new land and the search for a home

while trying to accommodate with the strangers finds a voice and expression through narration by various characters. Dr. Dam had to struggle to look for a place for the family and in order to reduce the state of flux and figure out a root, he found a piece of land in Silchar which was being sold off by a Muslim at a much cheaper price by the Muslim peasant who had decided to migrate to East Pakistan in search of his roots. While Dr. Dam had to move in and out of the newly found home to complete his studies and find a stable career as a veterinary surgeon, his other siblings moved out to Calcutta while his only sister followed her son to Guwahati. Only Dam's brother Biren stayed back in the newly created home-space with his wife in Silchar. It was in the later years of his life that Dr. Dam settled down in Shillong as a Veterinary Officer serving the Government. Being rootless, Dr. Dam and the entire family had to struggle all throughout in the new spaces. "Dr. Dam had only known temporary places of various kinds, ever since he had left the village and the mud hut he had been born in." (38). The search for a new land continued till Dr. Dam figured out a space in the suburbs of Guwahati near Narangi Oil Refinery to build his house during the 1970s, long after Partition had taken place. The newly formed laws in Meghalaya did not allow a space to the outsiders to buy a piece of land and settle for themselves. This in turn limited the scope for Dr. Dam to continue living in Shillong after his retirement from the post. There were constant "signs of dissent among the hill people" (39) to allow the foreigners a space for building a home. Moreover, compared to Shillong, Guwahati provided an ease of access to land and settlement. There were no guerrilla groups, no masked men marching into the office out of nowhere and the land was cheap, the air clean and crisp. However, Dr. Dam's dream of getting his personal space in Guwahati also yielded no fruit. All his dreams shattered when one day he saw a government bulldozer crushing down the Narangi house to rubble because the road was being expanded.

When he approached his land that he saw the government bulldozers standing on what supposedly belonged to him, surrounded by vats of black pitch bubbling and trickling onto the road being expanded, creating a smooth, flat surface over the rubble of his desires. (43)

This entire act of bringing down the physical home space takes a heavy toll of Dam's psyche. It was too late for Dr. Dam to even think of getting a new space in Shillong and build up another house even if he had the minimal resources to do so. Unlike his neighbours in Shillong like Mukherjee, Kar and Dutta who had laid a solid claim to the town space to build

their houses in it, Dr. Dam could not shake off his fear of being an outsider and the possible attacks he might be facing in the near future because people viewed the outsiders neither Bengalis nor Muslims nor Hindus. No matter how alienated Dr. Dam had been with people and the place he was a part of, he never failed to serve the government and the job he was a part of. Dr. Dam always showed utmost respect for his work and carried it out with full devotion and admiration. While thinking about the development of the livestock in the state, he had been putting his thoughts for the well being of the people in his home land as well. The Chapter entitled 'The Minister's Chambers' highlights this aspect of Dr. Dam thinking about the people of his hometown and their well-being selflessly. Dr. Dam devised a town milk supply scheme which would reduce the adulteration of milk and alongside provide employment opportunities to the local people. However, the minister Leapingstone and his cousin denounced the scheme and condemned it vehemently. Not only did they condemn the scheme and closed down all the milk booths those were opened up in the nearby areas, but also threatened Dr. Dam to death using their gun. This created a traumatic impact in Dr. Dam's psyche because he finally knew, no matter how deeply he longed to be a part of the system, how deeply he wanted to serve the people being a government official, the system will never be inclusive. It provided no scope for the outsiders being a part of the internal matters of the state. According to the ministers inside the chamber, foreigners and outsiders should do what they are asked to do by the state and should never interfere in any matters related to the ongoing state of affairs. The minister ordered, "An outsider. A foreigner. Should have some respect." (96) This statement of the minister boils down and complicates the issue of the migrant population to nothingness and their value as a citizen inside the country even after serving the people and the space is worthless. *The Point of Return* gives examples of people who try to evade this conflict and settle elsewhere leaving behind the past, the place of belongingness and the original homeland. Babu serves as an example to this matter. By the time both Dr. and Mrs. Dam had left for heavenly abode, Babu leaves his homeland and travels to cosmopolitan cities which do not discriminate people on the basis of their point of origin. But it is not easy to leave behind the memories of the past. With people, travels culture and memory of his past and there is again a constant search for belongingness in the new space. The chapters 'Memories', 'Travelers' and 'Dreams' brings into focus the role of the human mind and its ability to construct the past using various means. A Freudian touch on the narration takes place as the past- with all its glory people and place slips into the present through dreams.

**CONCLUSION:**

Regarding the Partition of the Indian sub-continent, Ayesha Jalal in *The Pity of Partition* (2013) observes how “poets, creative writers, artists, and filmmakers have captured the pity of partition—quite as much as the pity of war—for defenseless people far more effectively than have academic historians bound by their disciplinary conventions.” (Jalal 4) There have been various attempts to represent and reconstruct the experiences of Partition by various fictional writers besides the general historiography of the events. Jalal further observes,

A historical portrayal of the human tragedy that was India’s partition through an innovative exploration of stories, memories, and histories can creatively trespass across the border between fictional and historical narratives. (Jalal 4)

Deb in *The Point of Return* speaks about the aftermath of Partition and the problems that cropped in after the British had left the country. Independence came in but with a price which had to be paid. Like Fanon observes in *The Wretched of the Earth*, every country post-independence undergoes a chain of crisis. In case of the Indian sub-continent as well, the dilemma of existence because of the redrawing of the map is highlighted by Siddhartha Deb in his work which finds a voice through characters such as Dr. Dam and Babu, representing the first generation and second generation migrants.

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