Home and Identity for the Bengali in Northeast India: Siddhartha Deb's *The Point of Return*

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Abstract

Displacement and identity crisis resulting from Partition affected people of undivided India immensely. The loss of 'home' and land which led to this crisis became eternal to the postcolonial experience of Bengalis on the eastern side of the border. This search for 'home' was the only way to recover their identity. This paper will study the postcolonial Bengali yearning for a 'home' and the stability it embodies through Siddhartha Deb's *The Point of Return.* It will also look at how Bengalis bore the brunt of Khasi sub-nationalism that added to their identity crisis and strengthened their desire for a 'home' of their own. (103 words)

Keywords: displacement, home, identity crisis, migration, nationalism.

The Sylhet Referendum of 1947 radically and definitively altered the position of the province of Sylhet which was then located in undivided Assam. It included Sylhet in Pakistan and made it a Muslim majority province, and made Bengali Hindus suffer from a crisis of identity. Again following liberation of Bangladesh in 1971, Bengali Hindus suffered from displacement as they deserted their home and lands and settled in India. Thus, being displaced twice facilitated migration and these movements gave rise to several experiences, which "… exist(s) privately in the stories told and retold inside so many households in India and Pakistan" (Butalia 4). The search for a lost 'home' is perhaps the most poignant of these stories and also the most important signifier of the postcolonial Bengalis' identity crisis and their desire for stability. This phenomenon will be studied through Siddhartha Deb's *The Point of Return*.

The Partition in Northeast India was intricately connected with problems of ethnicity, language and religion, to which migration adds its pangs. In the Introduction to the anthology, *Barbed Wire Fence: Stories of Displacement from the Barak Valley of Assam,* Dipendu Das and Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee write that, for Bengali citizens of Assam in Northeast India, "migration and displacement that remain central to the postcolonial and globalised world experience, acquire further dimensions as one seeks to delve deeper into the issues concerning displacement in Assam" (Bhattacharjee and Das ix). This displacement aggravates the desire for a 'home' for postcolonial Bengalis in Northeast India. Migration has made Bengalis the common enemies here. Deb's novel, a representative text for postcolonial Bengalis, shows (a) how Bengalis seek an identity through efforts at anchorage and (b) face discrimination from the tribal population who claim original ancestry in the state of Meghalaya (born out of Assam in 1972). Its protagonist is Dr Dam, a retired veterinary surgeon and postcolonial migrant Bengali in the state of Assam. As the narrator Babu goes back in time to narrate his father's trials in the new country and his growing years, it becomes an exercise in recollection of the pangs of migration.

Dr Dam is based on the author's father himself. Although never directly mentioned in this autobiographical novel, the locale – the small Northeastern hill town is Shillong since there are references to localities like Rilbong, Jail Road, Police Bazaar where Deb grew up and his father served as veterinary surgeon. Dr Dam's family had come over to India when the country was partitioned, and his late father had given up his land and vocation at a day's notice. The story of Dr Dam's rediscovery of himself is narrated by Babu:

> The burden of the Partition, of finding a new way of life in the country that had been fashioned so bloodily in 1947, he had left to his eldest son, my father. My grandfather's references to the home left behind as East Pakistan, decades after East Pakistan had seceded from Pakistan to become the independent nation state of Bangladesh, revealed something more than a limited grasp of geopolitical shifts (Deb 34).

The change in borders represented not just a change in nationhood but also involved a process of rebuilding oneself from scratch, which in fact, contributed largely to the recreation of identities in this new land. Interestingly, this is a universal emotion in all postcolonial Bengalis even two or three generations later. One of the primary features of this condition, therefore, is the search for 'home' – an idea that eludes the postcolonial citizens forever. In a documentary by Britter Baire Films, Subha Prasad Nandi Majumdar, a noted Bengali artiste from Silchar (Assam) poignantly recalls:

> Since my childhood, I knew that the word 'home' is a past tense. At present, it has no existence… Especially as Bengalis growing up in Assam, we are habituated to use the word 'house' in place of 'home'. We say, 'Where is your house?', 'I will visit your house'. No one says, 'I will visit your home'… History has taken away our home and has given us a house in its place ("Apaar Bangla").

This same concern with finding a home also bothers Dr Dam. It makes him buy a house near Narangi Oil Refineries in Gauhati (Guwahati). When the Government occupies the land without notice, he can do nothing about it but accept his fate with resilience. But this thought does not leave him and leads him to buy a plot of land at Silchar, beside his parents' plot. He thinks that this would help him define himself anew. Babu emphasizes that this is where Dr Dam's family "would live after he had retired, he said firmly; no more government quarters, no more rented houses with strangely shaped rooms, but finally a house of our own" (Deb 37).

The sacrifices that go into building a house that would hopefully turn into a 'home' might seem trivial to people accustomed to the benefits and advantages of having a permanent home, but for postcolonial migrant citizens who are refugees in another country, it represents stability more than anything else. This quest for a house/home also governs the imaginations of later generations, who despite little attachment to their ancestral land back in present Bangladesh, are acquainted with it through the memories of their forefathers.

Dr Dam in the story is well aware of the fact that his claims to the land he stays and works in are not permanent, and only his own house would provide him that durability. Buying land or house in the hill-town does not seem feasible, particularly after the change in ministry and the new laws put forth by it restricting 'outsiders' from owning property. The doctor's friends, Kar, Mukherjee, Dutta were already in possession of houses, but unlike them, he had "not shaken off the stigma of the refugee. He was still uncertainly poised, growing old, depositing the monthly rental checks, carrying out repairs on the plumbing, and writing to the owner that the holes in the ceiling needed to be fixed before the monsoons" (Deb 43).

Dr Dam is caught in the web of principle and idealism that he can never get out of in his entire life and which his son often fails to understand and subscribe to. However, if the generation and age gap between both of them alienate them in their household, the efforts to build a decent house in Silchar bring them closer than even before. When Dr Dam realizes that the cost of construction is more than he had initially planned, he reacts with his characteristic stoicism and curtails the costs of building. He abides by rationality, deters from paying extra charges to carry raw materials for construction to Silchar. It is this same toughness that enables him to accept the fact that the cement carried in trucks from Cherrapunjee to be used for construction of the house had hardened into stone after rains at Silchar and his brother Biren had done little to save the sacks of cement. Grand plans for the house collapse and the result is a much smaller dwelling to which the family shifts after Dr Dam has a stroke. Babu is reminded of how his uncle Biren is hostile to their living next door. He recollects too, that during another of his uncle's marriage back in Silchar, he and his parents were always treated as outsiders to the rest of their family.

Neither could his extended family fit into their way of life, nor could they accept Babu as one of their own children. Thus a house with odd members who met only occasionally during weddings was all that signified a 'home' to Dr Dam – the spirit of which he had been trying to recreate in the house that he would now build.

For Babu however, 'home' signifies the little hill-town that they had had to desert, after being subjected to numerous attacks by the tribal population who claim to be original inhabitants. Although it would never be his, yet it is this small town that was home, surely, this space of childhood, the place where I had seen my father on his feet, this confluence of childhood hopes and a faith in the future. All concentrated in the word *hometown,* a definite point in the curve of the earth, where the monsoon marshals its forces and bursts through rooms and windows and staircases with a wet, cold smell, where the winter months swivel from light to darkness and the halogen lamps that come on in the evening create little pools on the metaled roads, broken up momentarily by the rumbling wheels of supply trucks (Deb 249).

Dr Dam never insists staunchly on his identity as a Bengali. In fact, his entire life is spent in the services he renders to the veterinary department – never wanting to go against the state machinery, he is extremely proficient in Assamese and thus, he sticks to the protocol of a Government servant with no chosen sides. But unknown to himself, he is always judged as a Bengali. He is also symbolically affected by his journeys throughout his life. The journey undertaken to shift to Assam after Partition as part of the great exodus, makes him lose his identity for the first time. The second journey to Calcutta makes him recreate his identity as a veterinary surgeon, while the third back to Silchar signifies a sort of consolidation of all that he had achieved in his lifetime. His house at Silchar was a sort of ready resort although he had always wanted to veer away from its faults and cracks. When he is at Silchar, he is brought to an epiphanic realization of his status as a Bengali in Northeast India, who had carried with themselves an identity "that allowed for neither growth nor change" (107). Indeed, as the narrator describes, these people are defined by "not what they were – that was uncertain – but by what they were not" (107).

Both father and son prefer English for communication. Whether it is derision for the Sylheti dialect spoken in Silchar and other scattered parts in Northeast India or his education that shapes him in this way cannot be ascertained. It does however, seem to be a mechanism to combat the increasing marginality of the postcolonial citizen and the linguistic attacks hurled at them. For postcolonial Bengalis in Shillong (Meghalaya), their identity is ascertained by the use of not Bengali or Hindi or Khasi, but English that gives them a fresh and unique characteristic. In an essay titled, 'Crossing Linguistic Boundaries', Tilottoma Misra writes of writers from Arunachal, like Mamang Dai, Lummer Dai, Yeshe Dorje Thongchi, who choose English and Assamese as the principal language for communication. Misra opines that a conscious decision for many writers to write in an acquired language is also based on the desire to target a readership which is wider than the limited one available in one's native tongue. The writers from many of the smaller ethnic communities of north-eastern India whose native languages do not have a script of their own or are spoken by only a handful of people have, however, adopted English as their acquired speech not merely out of choice but because the policy decisions of the state governments in these regions have favoured English above other languages as the medium of instruction in schools (3654).

Thus, choosing English also helps a writer to determine his/her position vis-à-vis the rest of the 'mainland' and fight the increasing marginality. In this case, Babu as a narrator and teller of tales and a postcolonial citizen at that, wishes to tell his story to the people outside by means of a more pan-Indian language. Also, his choice of his language of communication allows him to give up his own language in favour of English to overcome the marginality that accompanies his existence.

For, marginality is a question of primary importance to the people of Northeast India, where one or the other community often gets marginalized by others. It has been previously mentioned that Bengalis were at the receiving end of discrimination and intolerance in Assam both before and after Partition of the country. Post Independence, tribal communities of Assam gradually began to demand separate territories for themselves. The capital of Assam shifted to Dispur from Shillong – Meghalaya now shelters a majority of Khasi population. Assamese ethno-nationalism did not want to accept diversity of ethnic origins, but regard everyone as 'people of Assam'. This reluctance to admit differences and the need to introduce 'detribalization' as an anti-colonial action soon alienated the tribal population. However, Bengalis bore the brunt of this; as previously stated, a significant portion of the Bengali population, who had settled in Assam after Independence now stayed back in Shillong, and become targeted at by the 'indigenous' people of the state. *The Point of Return* is replete with instances of chauvinism directed against Bengalis by the non-Assamese tribal groups (Khasis) in Meghalaya. In one such instance, Dr Dam has to meet the tribal Minister Leapingstone about an official matter. Leapingstone offends him by directing a gun towards him, about which he is terrified and has hallucinations later at the hospital. Leapingstone justifies himself by saying, "An outsider. A foreigner. Should have some respect" (Deb 96).

An ironical occurrence in this case is the fact that, although Dr Dam and Babu have not insisted on adopting Bengali as their primary language of communication, yet their identity is never exclusive of their language and this makes them easy targets of tribal 'nationalism' in the hill-town. The brotherhood that tribal people feel towards each other is a steady feature of their sub-nationalism and this sentiment is echoed in their hatred towards the Bengali immigrants. In a much later occurrence, dated around 1986 in the novel, Dr Dam and Babu come across a tribal man at the Pension Office. He spits venom at them: "East Bengalis crossing the border, back and forth, up and down. Why *do* they cross the border, hey?" (22) Their ethnicity and identity evoke disdain in the man. He continues ranting: "Always coming across the border, with hordes of squealing children, coming across like locusts, like rain" (23). If at one point, insularity of Bengalis and other non-tribals dominated over tribal officers and other Government positions, a reversal of position is reflected now in the loathing to the Bengalis in the state. Dr Dam reflects that even as a Bengali, he is not very different from the rest of the tribal and non-Assamese denizens of the hill-town. His history is equally old; his people are not merely settlers but also a very strong race, who had undergone numerous conflicts to achieve Freedom and indeed, it was not their fault that borders had made them aliens or the 'other' in the same country. It is this complicated allegiance to his race and community that he never fully acknowledges and yet, is made to accept at various junctures in his life.

Their memories of the place they call 'home' and the totality of their experiences of being here are punctuated by events that bring forth the disparity towards them. Towards the end, Babu recollects incidents of violence against him and his father. They are often termed ‘dkhar’ – outsiders to the state. He remembers how one Sunday morning when he is ten years old or so, he accompanies his father to the cobbler’s to mend the shoes bought from a Chinese shoe maker at Burra Bazaar. But that Sunday, the cobbler (who is originally from Bihar) is nowhere to be found; instead, they are greeted by curses and blows aimed at Dr Dam. They had unfortunately and unknowingly, chosen to venture outdoors on a day of strike and curfew called by student union leaders to protest the presence of ‘foreigners’ in the state – Bengalis and other non-tribals. Babu remembers that fear had gripped them at that time. Even now when the past can never return to him, he is surprised to notice that fear has reasonably blurred many aspects of the past, merged it with the present and given him a lingering sense of loss and despair – of never being accepted by the place that he and his father have loved so much and yet, have had to desert. All his experiences in his *hometown* have condensed into fear and it seems to be an indispensable part of his past. It possibly also results in creating the aversion to imagine any other place as his ‘home’. In another of his experiences, his Assamese friend Moni categorically mentions that the Khasi student union leaders have started protesting the presence of ‘outsiders’ and it is more unsafe for Bengalis than for the Assamese. Babu and his friend, Partha are assaulted on their way back from a rock concert. The air echoes with slogans as “Go back, Bangladeshis”, “Go back, outsiders”. So extensive is the communal violence that non-tribals almost start thinking twice of living in the hill town. Bengalis have to carry identity cards to prove that they are Indians – the tribal government had already stopped the construction of the railway line to stop the entry of more Bangladeshis. The violence of 1979, which saw the murder of seven non-tribals at Garikhana on a bus, made many Bengalis look for shelter in non tribal neighbourhoods. The roots of this crisis primarily seem to be their language, since it is their language that they are identified by. The demands that are made of them to ‘go back’ have no substance, because there is no land that they really ‘belong to’. The sense of anxiety is poignantly described: “Instead I went through periods of completely different emotions, oscillating between a desire to blend with the town and the insiders and a virulent hatred for the place and a desire to leave it forever so that I would never hear that word, *Foreigner,* again” (238).

However, for Dr Dam, terms like ‘dkhar’ are abstract terms that defy description, just as his experiences back in East Pakistan were. Dr Dam recounts his experiences of being haunted by some hostile communal elements during the riots of 1980, which he narrowly escapes by hiding in his quarters. Memories of ‘boots’ walking up and down trouble him forever and by his son’s description, fear of ‘boots’ is transferred to his son who is victim of the same sense of insecurity as his father. This fear is a gift of Khasi sub-nationalism – which indicates that it is possible to include only as many number of ‘foreigners’ as is acceptable to make them ‘culturally homogeneous’. As Ernest Gellner mentions, a territorial political unit can become homogeneous “if it either kills, or expels, or assimilates all non-nationals” (2). ‘Non-nationals’ as a term demands that members of different nationhood cannot be regarded as ‘national citizens’, belonging to the same ‘nation’ is the primary precondition of nationhood. Gellner’s description indicates that two members of the same nation will (a) share the same culture, which would include a “system of ideas and signs and associations and ways of behaving and communicating” and (b) “*recognize* each other as belonging to the same nation” (7). Dr Dam, Babu and other non-tribals never fit into the Khasis’ “imagined, political, sovereign community” (Anderson 6). Like all Bengalis, this places Dr Dam and Babu in the ‘centre-periphery’ distinction that automatically relegates Bengalis to the periphery. As parts of Northeast India, Bengalis are therefore doubly colonized – once, by the British and secondly, by the Assamese and tribal nationalities of Northeast India.

As has been already emphasized in this discussion, 'memory' is perhaps the most important trope in Dr Dam's and Babu's story. Memory can be said to have *shaped* Babu in a number of ways. The trauma of displacement and migration from East Pakistan, classified as *memoire collective* or collective memory (Erll 143) continues to live in the memory and experience of postcolonial Bengalis till date and perhaps always will, although the blow might get softened over the years. For an extremely reticent person like Dr Dam, each recollection, triggered by minor events, relates to some significance in the past and is a way of finding anchor in postcolonial India. The cultural events in the larger world around him coincide with his individual memory as a boy after Partition and as a young adult in Calcutta. When he narrates the tale of the tiger and the shoes he had bought with his scholarship money, he slips into a recollection that is interesting and yet distant to Babu's experiences. In retrospect, Babu can identify with his father's trials in his own abandonment of his hometown – "perhaps he was thinking about the past, about the village life that had come up so suddenly in his stories, and maybe he was overwhelmed by the memories, each bit that surfaced revealing only a small part of the whole, fragmentary and uncertain" (Deb 142).

For Babu, his individual memory of living in the small hill-town, spending the greater part of his adolescence and youth here and then travelling back to Silchar with his parents are all parts of his cultural/collective memory that find mention in the story. Like every second generation postcolonial Bengali, his memories are centred more on the hill-town than on East Pakistan (a place that he has never been to). His individual memory includes giving away most of the little elements of the household that his mother had accumulated over the years before their departure and it is, in a way, symbolic of being uprooted from his hometown. He writes: "it has already become the past, I thought, this place, our lives here, as I looked at the bare walls and the boxes piled on the floor" (199). All the days spent in the town are reduced to this single moment of departure, which is the only significant reality at this point. When he again comes back as a journalist, he has already successfully created that objective distance with the town that enables him to look at his situation from a nuanced perspective. In the final section of the novel, 'Terminal', Babu/the narrator assume interchangeable roles – as he looks back at the past, he comprehends that departure has only been a part of the complete experience. As he introspects, he categorizes his experience into parts as 'hometown', 'maps', 'history', 'ships', 'memories', 'travelers', 'dreams' and 'airport', which complement him as a postcolonial citizen in search of a composite identity. In fact, leaving behind his experiences of the hill-town has only created in him a mélange of feelings, both of love and hatred – something that he can never really part with though he can distance himself from them. His identity, which is composed of multiple layers, gets cemented. In fact, a very significant insight on the postcolonial Bengali condition is provided by Dr Chatterji, as he likens Bengalis with the Jews: "We are a dispersed people, wandering, but unlike the Jews we have no mythical homeland" (287). Dr Chatterji also emphasizes that being insulated is not the solution to this crisis.

For Bengalis of Northeast India particularly, the tribulations are more pronounced than other communities, which are almost never brought to focus. Stripped of almost all identities, language is the only resort that for Bengalis is a means of combat, which keeps them afloat in a globalised world. Their crisis of identity, alleviated in some amounts in the last few decades, has been rekindled by the National Register of Citizens (NRC). Babu and Dr Dam are significant representatives in a universal predicament – which Bengalis in Northeast India face daily. One only hopes that there can be a proper solution to this problem before long.

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