



# Post- Partition Crisis of Identity: A Study of Siddhartha Deb's *The Point of Return*

**-Pratap Deb**

Post-Graduate Teacher (English)  
Department of School Education  
Government of Tripura  
Agartala, Tripura, India.  
Pin- 799003

## Abstract

The partition literature of the Northeast deals with the theme of the quest for identity. The refugees of the Northeast had to face geographical, cultural, social and linguistic alienation- as Northeast of India comprises of diverse ethnic tribes. This paper focuses on the impact of partition on the Northeast of India, where the issues of displacement, violence, and quest for identity are a never-ending process because of the region's cultural heterogeneity. Siddhartha Deb's *The Point of Return*, subtly showcases these multifarious issues that time and again resurfaces in this region, resulting in a sort crisis in both the natives and the migrants.

**Keywords:** Partition, home, culture, displacement, identity.

The Partition of India in 1947, came as a great calamity of multi-faceted dimension which in the process left a tremendous mark on the social, political, economic and cultural context of certain parts of the undivided India, particularly in the Western and Eastern front. Necessarily, such an event of colossal magnitude found representation in literature from the sub-continent. This paper aims to bring out, the issues of displacement and identity faced by the migrants in the northeast with reference to Siddhartha Deb's novel *The Point of Return*.

Siddhartha Deb a contemporary writer from the Northeast of India was born in 1970 in Shillong, Meghalaya and grew up in this small town of Northeastern India which shares its border with Bangladesh and other Northeastern states like Assam. He received his formal education in India and America. There family is one such family which had migrated to India from Bangladesh and never quite properly settled in it. He has established himself as a writer which he calls his second self other than teaching with novels like- *The Point of Return* (2003), *Surface* (2005), *The Beautiful and the Damned* (2012).

In his article “Towards an Appreciative Paradigm for Literatures of the Northeast” Parag M. Sarma asserted that, “Northeast and its representation presents its own unique challenges and any attempt to access it must be informed and infused by the unique social and political setting of the region, the diverse cultural-scape that goes into the making of the place.” (qtd in Zama, 45) The present chapter includes Deb’s novel *The Point of Return* (2003), which is set on Shillong, a small northeastern city, the capital of Meghalaya. To some extent, this novel can be said as an autobiographical novel as the story is similar to the life of Siddhartha Deb and his family. The Dam family of the novel had its root in East Pakistan (presently Bangladesh) which was carved out of India during 1947, when the country was divided and freed. After facing a lot of trouble in their own homeland, the family was forced to migrate to the undivided state of Assam as it was adjacent to their native place. After their migration to this North-Eastern state, it began a long struggle, perhaps a never-ending one to get settled which proved futile every time, making the postcolonial concept of ‘home’ a blur one.

The narrative is divided into two parts- Arrival and Departure. The first part ironically moves backward in the time-frame 1987-1979, as Babu, the protagonist of the novel, aged seventeen, recalls what he remembers about his family, particularly father, and the incidents and people that have influenced him. As the novel opens, we find Dr.Dam, Babu’s father has retired from his service as government official after a hard-working and honest service-life in the State Veterinary Dept. of Assam. But, it is for this honesty he had to suffer a lot in life. The first chapter entitled ‘The Pension Office’ deals with the narrator and his father’s firsthand experience of the degraded bureaucracy and corruption in the government offices. Dr. Dam worked as a director in the Dairy and Veterinary Dept., in the State of Assam, and then the newly created hill state of Meghalaya, had to suffer inhumanly to collect his pension after retirement.

One of the important issues brought out in this novel by the writer was the loosening bond between the members of the same family after their displacement from their homeland. The age-old Indian family structure of the undivided Bengal was shattered and destroyed when people moved from one territory to the other for the search of a safe haven. The need of earning money to meet the problem of getting livelihood scattered the members of the erstwhile joint families and that created a large gap between the members of the different generation and the member of the same generation which could not be healed or repaired any more as it grew larger and larger. In relation to this change in family structure, Gargi Chakravartty opined, “This problem of space or spatial loss changed the family structure of the migrants. Initially, they clustered around their family units, with cousins staying together but with the expansion of the colonies, joint family units broke up into nuclear families... With the gradual disintegration of the joint family structure, patterns of life underwent radical transformations...” (82-83) We find the distance of the father and the son, Dr.Dam and Babu, because there is a generation gap between them. The protagonist has expressed the physical and mental distance at the very beginning of the story:

It was a small household but the spaces in it were vast. We sat on opposite sides of the room, waited politely for the other to finish with the newspaper, and went to our meals silently. If we ever found ourselves agreeing, it was only when my mother talked to us... That morning, when my father asked me come to the pension office with him, I was surprised. It sounded too much like an appeal to be ignored, but a day with him at a government office was not an attractive idea. My mother intervened. “Your father never asks anyone for help. Do you really want to let him go alone? I would go, but it is your company that he wants.” I couldn’t say no after that. (15)

Thus, we can find that there was a vast gap between two generations, between a father and his son.

There are some other issues also which dominate the novel of Deb. The most important issue dealt in this particular novel by the writer is the issue of postcolonial concept of home, homelessness, displacement, exile and the consequent identity crisis. The novel beautifully describes the plight of the migrant family, especially of Dr.Dam to construct a home after their forced migration from their homeland. Threatened by the communal riot, Babu’s father, grandfather and the other family members had to migrate to a one room rented house in a colony of refugees; devoid of all the material prospect. But, it was the hard work and education of Dr. Dam which provided

them some sort of relief. Dr. Dam first educated himself and then joined as a junior doctor in the state Dairy and Veterinary Dept of Assam. It was he who then bought a small plot for his family at Silchar, constructed a small house and shifted them there.

For people like Dr. Dam life was never easy. He tried his best to construct a home life long. But, every time he was disappointed and the image of home remained only in his memory in the form of their ancestral home which they have left behind in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Firstly, at an early age he bought a land in Silchar and wanted to live there after his retirement, but it proved absolutely absurd since the distance between the brothers started growing; secondly, he tried to make a home in Narangi, but soon discovered that it was occupied by the govt.; thirdly, he tried to settle down in Shillong where he was posted for a long time and where Babu was born and brought up. This was also lost in the passage of time with the cropping up of the anti-foreigner movement, especially for ousting the Bengalis by the natives. All these left Dr. Dam as a life-long refugee, moving from time to time, from place to place trying to get settle down. It was after losing everything; he decided to construct a building beside their family home in Silchar as a final attempt to settle down. The narrator expressed:

The house he would build in Silchar was a last-ditch attempt to find a resting place, to face the reality of retirement and not move from rented house to rented house on an over-tightening spiral, so that he could ultimately set forth on his final journey from the same emotional space at which he had arrived fifty-six years earlier, the space some of us call home. (43)

Like his father Babu, the protagonist of the novel could not have a home, could not also accumulate himself with the different cultures he had gone to, and remain alien to all.

Babu, who was born and brought up in Shillong, considered that place to be his hometown since his childhood. But, when he grew up he started observing that things were changing, that there were some differences between the natives/tribes of the land and the outsiders or the migrant Bengalis like them. This difference further grew into a large gap which was never to be healed. Based on this difference the state of Assam was divided into some smaller states each with their own culture and tradition. As the narrator observed, “The state of Assam to which he owed allegiance became smaller as new tribal states were formed, their fresh cartographic boundaries indicating more than anything a growing uncertainty about the relationship between the hills and the plains.” (39)

This change in the hills grew intense when Babu stepped into adulthood. He saw the movement of the local tribal Student Union to oust the non-tribals from their land. Things started with the Garikhana killing where a bus was set on fire and seven of its boarders were captured and then killed. Initially, the place was a calm and quiet one as we can find it from the words of Dr. Chatterjee, "... good fortune that had brought them to the one place in the region that was not fractured by ethnic divisions and insurgency. There were no guerrilla groups here... no masked man who could march into your office one day and take you away into the jungle. Land was cheap and the air crisp and clean,... The schools were the best in the region, the hospitals clean, there was amity between the tribal leaders and the immigrant settlers." (40-41)

But soon, the situation changed into a hostile and violent one making people like Dr. Dam and Babu on the verge of yet another displacement. Unlike their counterparts in West Bengal, the people who have migrated after their displacement from their ancestral homeland in East Bengal/ East Pakistan, to parts of Assam and other North-Eastern states were never settled, always felt the pressure of getting uprooted again due to their social, linguistic, geographical and cultural alienation to those places. Moreover, the natives of those places started thinking the immigrant settlers as 'interlopers' after the British colonial exploiters in the form of postcolonial internal colonizer. This changed the whole amity of the region as they turned hostile towards the already displaced people, making them struggle for survival and become homeless again. As Dr. Chatterjee explains Babu when he returns after more than years to the place he believed to be his homeland, but found it only a shadow/figment of his imagination when he again came across the word 'Dkhar' or 'foreigner', he was reminded of the slogans: "Go back, foreign dogs. Go back, Bangladeshis." (238) In his article, Arindam Sarma further expressed, "Siddhartha Deb's English novel *The Point of Return* is a nuanced study of the historical context of the fractured relationship between tribals and non-tribals, the reconfigurations of post-colonial spaces in India's Northeast, and the resultant violence, uprootedness, alienation, and the continued memory of injustice and loss. The novel depicts the unhomely condition of the Bengali immigrants displaced by the Partition and ethnic violence in the Northeast region."

The situation gets graver when it comes to the Northeast where many tribes and non-tribes jostle. But their cultural identity made it difficult to keep them in harmony. As Babu ponders while leaving his supposed hometown forever at the end of the novel narrates, "I look at my birthplace, knowing that I will never see it again.

I want it to be home for everyone who lives there, for everyone to have a place in it that cannot be lost or stolen.

But how you achieve that future is no longer my concern, I tell my hometown.” (304)

Dipankar Purkayastha in regard to partition and displacement further wrote in his article *Displacement as Context: Narratives from North East India* (2007), “For a Bengali, in North-East India, particularly for one who is a victim of the Partition of India in 1947, ‘desh’, is an indelible preoccupation...The word evokes the partition of India, displacement and migration, sufferings and rootlessness, marginalization and a never-ending crisis of identity.” (46) Siddhartha Deb in his Book Interview by the publisher Harper Collins, expressed about this as, “The British colonial rule was superb at fostering divisions upon people on the basis of religion, ethnicity, class, and caste, and this is the point from which the fractured relationship originates. Add to that mass migration to the hills by Bengali Hindus fleeing their original homeland because of the partition of India in 1947 and the insecurity of the hill people because they are marginal compared to other groups in India, and there you have all the elements of a bitter misunderstanding.”

Thus, we can see that, the stories dealt in the chapter aptly brings out the pain and suffering of the people belonging to the Northeast of India, particularly Assam and Meghalaya. The persona in the stories who are struggling hard to settle down somewhere after being uprooted from their homeland, were once the citizen of the undivided country. But, when they had to migrate, they were treated in the most undignified way by both the political leaders and also the local people of that place who also felt a sort of insecurity or in a sense are suffering from a crisis of identity.

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