

# Partition's Shadow: Assam's Barak Valley and Siddhartha Deb's *The Point of Return* (2002)

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## Abstract

Assam's Barak Valley is an example of how the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan left behind long-term conflicts and issues pertaining to identity, place, and belonging that have created turmoil in the geo-political space that we refer to as India's Northeast. The transformation of this space from a frontier during colonial times to a borderland in 1947 is not only significant for the genealogy and configuration of states within the region but also because this understanding subverts common assumptions about 1947, particularly on issues of communal polarizations, the formation of the border as well as the participation of non-political groups like the tribal populations who had very little stake in the playing out of the Radcliffe Line. Siddhartha Deb's 2002 novel *The Point of Return* looks at some of these questions of identity and belonging that so plague the region. The novel is an exploration of the life journeys of Dr. Dam and his son Babu and their relationship to the geographical locations they come to inhabit. The spatial and temporal realities that came into being in the Northeastern region is charted through this text in the postcolonial state making practices that produce irreversible patterns of social and political chaos. Issues of ethnicity, language, and belonging that are contentious questions in this region are represented in this narrative as the continued precarity of people who had come to live here. This essay presents an analysis of the novel through the optics of history and literature, using tools from the Phenomenological analysis of Time by Paul Ricouer, to investigate how the interface of events and memory transform and complicate our understandings of a contentious divided past.

**Keywords:** Partition of India, Barak Valley, migration, communal polarization, memory, belonging, identity

Real life, life finally uncovered and clarified, the only life in consequence lived to the full, is literature.

– Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*

Assam, and particularly the Barak Valley, can be examined as significant sites of how the 1947 Partition of India left behind long duration conflicts and unsolved issues pertaining to identity, place, and belonging that have created unceasing turmoil in the geo-political space that we refer to as India's Northeast. To comprehend the transformation of this space from a frontier during colonial times to being India's borderlands in 1947 is significant for the genealogy and configuration of the states within the region (Yumnam 157-8). This understanding also subverts common assumptions about 1947, particularly on issues

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of communal polarizations, the formation of the border as well as the participation and resistance of groups like the tribal and plains populations to the vagaries of state formations. Many of these groups had initially very little at stake in the playing out of the Radcliffe Line but as the borders became heavily militarized and manned by the postcolonial state, protracted conflict zones emerged that were expressions of self-determination and forms of sub-nationalism of contending groups living in the region.

India's Northeast is a prime example of the fissures that existed in the nation-building project that emerged from the dominant nationalist discourses around 1947. The spatial and temporal realities that came into being in the Northeastern region remains largely uncharted although the postcolonial state making practices in the region have produced irreversible patterns of social and political ambiguities. After 1947, contentious issues of ethnicity, language, and belonging became paramount in the region and have remained so to this day. An exploration of these complex and current issues will therefore mean an understanding of local societies, their encounter with other communities and the various forms of politics and collectivities that have emerged in the region after the Partition. The formation of the northeastern borderlands in 1947 and the creation of East Pakistan resulted in a seemingly isolated landlocked Northeastern region that ended in a restructuring of territorial and political fault-lines. Unlike the communal conflagrations between Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims elsewhere in Bengal or in Punjab, the Northeastern region has seen conflicts between Hindus and Hindus, Hindus against Christians and hill tribes against people residing in the plains or valleys. For example, Barak Valley has seen xenophobic violence from time to time, not only between the hill tribes and non-tribals (like elsewhere in the region as in Meghalaya, Mizoram, and, most recently, in Manipur) but also from Assamese speakers who have continued to see the region as inhabited by "outsiders." In Assam, post-Partition immigration had continued throughout the 1950s to the 1970s, and the binaries of "homecoming" or "infiltration" change from time to time for the Hindus or Muslims who had crossed the borders either before or after the formation of Bangladesh in 1971. Assam, the largest state in Northeast India, was particularly perceived as suffering from a "dual predicament" of a "perennially repositioned internal and external frontier of Indian democracy" (Sur 168). Border control measures like a physical fence and documentary evidences to ascertain citizenships were put in place and in between 1979 and 1985, the Assam Movement gathered momentum to address the contentious issue of "foreigners" in the state that was related to ownership of land and conflicts over linguistic identities. Here, border fences and walls "acquire a metaphorical charge and transform into a potent political register, even as it struggles to impose neat territorial divisions" (Sur 170).

Barak Valley is situated at the southern tip of Assam and is separate from the Brahmaputra Valley. The geographical spread of the Barak Valley covers three districts of Assam: Cachar, Hailakandi, and Karimganj, the Jatinga Valley of North Cachar, the Jiri Frontier Tract (Jiribam) of Manipur, Kailashnagar-Dharmanagar area of Tripura, and four districts of Bangladesh: Sadar Sylhet, Maulavibazar, Habiganj, and Sunamganj. The three districts of Assam and the four districts of Bangladesh have emerged out of the two districts of Cachar and Sylhet in the British times, together known as the Surma Valley division since

the districts became a part of Assam in 1874. During the Partition in 1947, a major part of the Sylhet district (leaving only Karimganj to India) was transferred to East Pakistan, so the Indian portion of the valley is called Barak Valley today. The valley is the northern section of the Meghna valley (comprising Dhaka, Mymensingh, and Comilla) so that in the absence of natural boundaries, the traditions and culture of East Bengal spread easily to the Sylhet-Cachar region in the ancient and medieval periods. In 1947, Sylhet was the only region in the Eastern sector to have undergone a Referendum on July 6 and 7, 1947 to decide its fate whether to join Pakistan or not. While Congress ministers like Basanta Kumar Das campaigned extensively to keep Sylhet with India, Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, who played an important role in Muslim League politics in Assam, made sure that Sylhet went to East Pakistan. Ultimately, only Karimgunj remained in India while the rest of Sylhet merged with Pakistan. While Punjab and the rest of Bengal were divided on the basis of religion, the Sylhet referendum was a vote on two issues of realignment: India was partitioned on a communal basis and Assam on linguistic lines. The post-partition lived realities of people living in the Barak Valley therefore offer many insights on issues of linguistic and geographical identities, dispossession and migration.

After the division of the country, the Hindu middle class refugees in the Barak Valley were joined by other tribal exiles from the Chittagong Hill Tracts and from Mymensingh and Rangpur, who crossed into Assam for a variety of reasons. The migration patterns were varied and complex and ranged from communal persecution, economic reasons or even familial or marriage ties. The resultant tension between native population and the “intruders” often took the form of linguistic and economic opposition, sometimes between the same religious or ethnic groups. Apart from the agriculturists and artisans who came as refugees to the Barak valley, there were a large section of Sylheti middle-class economic migrants to the region. Their identity had been formed not as a result of rivalry against Muslims but in opposition to the Assamese Hindus who had resented their elite status and government jobs that many had enjoyed from British times. In the late nineteenth century, this rivalry began to assume serious proportions and the new Assamese middle class floated a number of organizations (for example the Asom Jatiya Mahasabha that had begun work in 1945-46), expressing alarm at the “Bengalisation” of Assamese society by the migrant Hindus and Muslims from Sylhet. The ideological ramifications of “infiltration” and the language question in the Barak and Brahmaputra valleys erupted in the “Bengal Kheda” movement where Bengali settlers were targeted and terrorized. The Assam Movement criticized an Indian law of 1950 (the Immigration Expulsion Act) that openly encouraged free entry into Assam of Hindus who were victims of communal disturbances in East Pakistan and turned Muslim peasants into “illegal Pakistanis” who were persecuted and deported. In contrast, the Hindu Bengali migrants were granted temporary lease of “abandoned” land that were in reality tracts where Muslim cultivators had been driven out (Sur 55). In Barak Valley, the Bengali settlers’ consciousness about language and identity, largely different from Assamese society, took the shape of a defensive linguistic nationalism. On 24 October 1960, the Assam Legislature passed a bill stating that Assamese would henceforth be the only official state language. The bill was to politically deny the existence of a large minority,

the Bengali speaking Hindu settlers who had made the Cachar region their home after the Partition. The Bengali settlers, in turn, claimed that the Barak Valley in lower Assam had always been an important cultural center of the language from medieval times. Thus, when the 1960 Bill was passed restricting the use of their mother tongue, the Bengali population erupted in anger. On 19 May 1961, a procession of students and writers went on a peaceful march through Silchar town demanding recognition for Bangla as a medium of instruction in schools and colleges. The police fired on the unarmed demonstrators and eleven people died (Sengupta 193-4).

Siddhartha Deb's 2002 novel *The Point of Return* looks at some of these questions of identity and belonging in the life journeys of Dr. Dam and his son Babu and their relationship to the geographical locations they come to inhabit: Gauhati, Shillong, and Silchar. Dr. Dam's family had come to the Barak Valley after the Partition, walking across the natural frontiers to Silchar town where they had set up their modest home. The trajectory of that journey is repeated throughout Dr. Dam's other migrations, and in his son's movements from Shillong and Silchar to Kolkata and to Delhi. The traces of that original journey leave its marks, like nomads leave behind smudges of their fires, indelible in a certain way. "No one will tell you what you yourself do not seem to know at times, that your forefathers came from elsewhere. From where? It cannot be found on the map of India, which, with its confident peaks and curves and wholeness, eliminates any speculation that in this representation of the subcontinent there are places that do not belong, people who do not belong" (Deb, 210). The curve of movements and memories are interlinked, and a return is possible, even if fleetingly. However, every return is compromised with the detritus of living: the space left behind seems to be "unreal" – "Perhaps this is the true return, the completion of a cycle set in motion long ago, and if it seems lonely, maybe it is because migration is a reductive evolutionary principle where the sprawling oppressive family gives way to its streamlined nuclear descendant, to be replaced finally by the individual straining at the limits of memory" (Deb 221). The life stories of the two men are "travel stories," to use Michel de Certeau's words, that show us a bio-geo political life of the exile. By following the quotidian movement of the characters through spaces and places, by registering their disillusionment and trauma, the novel goes beyond the historical knowledge of data and figures to present us with an eloquent affective approach to what we may decipher of a migrant's life. The narrative's contrapuntal juxtaposition of "Time" alerts us to the ways in which this different knowledge can nudge us to move from particular historical events to literature's different epistemological, aesthetic, and ethical practices. In the novel, Time is both synchronic and diachronic where the semantics of action is transformed into a diachronic narrative through the use of decipherable symbolic descriptions of houses and buildings. In the chapter titled "Wedding Season: 1982," the Dam family house on Lane 13 is a site that "marked more clearly than any other event a boundary between what had gone before and what was to come." It was a story that could be told now, safely as "most of the characters are gone; some of them I have let go willingly, while the others I lost without wanting to" (Deb 98). The trope of exile creates within the narrative a synchronic time where past and the present intermingle and are constitutive of each other. Yet each

of the protagonist's journeys, across houses and terrains, becomes in essence a journey to reformulate the trajectories of history as felt and narrated through a diachronic concept of time. In Paul Ricoeur's idea that fiction fuses with history to go back to their common origin in the epic may be usefully explored in this novel that unearths a "sphere of the horrible," inserting the memory of suffering of an old man, victim of a history he does not fully understand and never complains about, into our scheme of things: "to follow the story is not so much to enclose its surprises or discoveries within our recognition of the meaning attached to the story ... a new quality of time emerges from this understanding" (Ricoeur 67). Deb's novel helps us to understand the hitherto unknowable, the horrible, the mundane dimensions of the migrant's life: "Silchar was a small Bengali island in the state of Assam, heavily settled by immigrants from the villages of East Bengal, who had brought with them a sense of identity that allowed for neither growth nor change. They were defined not by what they were – that was uncertain – but by what they were not" (Deb 107). When Dr. Dam is posted to Shillong, his life story is superimposed onto the history of the town and its growth from a colonial outpost to its postcolonial dereliction and lurking violence. Dr. Dam is a witness to the growth of the city just as he is also its victim: the rising xenophobic hatred indiscriminately targets Bengalis, Nepalis, and Biharis who have made Shillong their homes for years. From 1979 onwards as the spiraling violence goes out of control, the unspoken trauma of being a *dkhar* (the Khasi word for foreigner) confronts the Dam family. Unable to articulate his outrage and his powerlessness, and victim of a state sponsored corruption, Dr. Dam decides to go back to Silchar after his retirement. Dr. Dam's experiences of both liminal spaces and "homes" are not of an immigrant to another continent who "invariably create an interculture, or a liminal way of life" (Ahmed 1) but of an insider/outsider dichotomy within similar cultural and social spaces that underlie his experiences of belonging.

The novel consolidates the struggle of remembrance against forgetting, just as it exemplifies a man's struggle against tyranny and injustice. In this lonely struggle, a single line in a diary entry exemplifies the horror of a slogan that haunts Dr. Dam and Babu: "Go Back, Bangladeshis." Going back had never been simple. Shillong, a colonial project, was begun in the 1870s when Assam was carved out of the Bengal presidency. As Shillong grew, it drew Assamese, Nepali, Marwari, and Sylheti speaking Bengalis who came to live and work there. The early economic migrants were followed by thousands more like Dr. Dam and his family. The Assam agitation of the 1970s ignited a Khasi sub nationalism that began to actively target non-tribal population who were regarded as racially inferior. Through the various events and ruminations in the text, we come to comprehend how a divided self can only be understood in terms of its relationships with the land and with other lives: this strong sense of belonging binds them to time and place, to anchor their histories in a symbiotic relationship to the individual and the collective, even when that collective evokes fear. In a memorable section, the narrator describes an event in Police Bazar where the father and son, unknowing of a public curfew declared only a few hours before by the Khasi students' union "against foreigners," are assaulted. That event teaches the young boy to practice running: "The truth is that the running was not for my father but for myself,



and what I was reacting to was not so much the attack that had taken place but the violence that was yet to come” (Deb 231).

The novel tries to unravel the impossibly tangled legacy of 1947 that are mirrored perpetually in the other larger questions of belonging, livelihood, and identity that give rise to a spiralling series of assaults and attacks on those perceived to be “outsiders.” Disjunction marks this narrative of intertwined lives of father and son, who look at memory in different ways and whose relationships to geography differ too. After changing homes many times, Dr. Dam decides to build a modest home next to his original family home where he had settled after 1947: “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 ever-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” (Deb 43). The attempts to find a place of sojourn is exactly matched by the son’s movement away from the town where he grew up: “Each churning in the storehouse of memory that is me displaces something, changing the contours of my hometown, merging that place with people and incidents that came much, much later” (Deb 216). The question of who gets to stay and who does not is answered in an elliptical way through the life of Dr. Dam whose first job as a vet is to look after the state-owned elephants. In the words of his son: “That is the image of him I love the most, of a shy and earnest young man riding a bicycle along a jungle track ... and as the jungle swallows him up completely he is happy, not because India or the government means anything to him. India is just a name, but this forest rising around him is a country without boundaries, whose borders cannot be mapped, where most the cartographers can do is mark, in bold letters, HERE THERE BE ELEPHANTS” (Deb 302).

The restive impossible homeland then offers another view of History that often defeats its very purpose of memorialization. “History, dragged so far from the metropolitan centers, from the rustic mainlands, will tell you nothing. In the Northeast, the way I remember it, history lies defeated, muttering solipsistically from desultory plaques put up to commemorate visiting politicians, the memorial stones fading against the brilliance of the colours in the streets. History is mired in one dirty green tank captured from the Pakistanis in the ’71 war ... pathetic in its smallness ... its rusting gun aimed far away, beyond the hills, at some distant and ideal enemy settlements” (Deb 211). History writing from the margins and borders entail a different leap of faith, a different crisis of consciousness and a different set of narrative strategies. With its contrapuntal juxtapositions of places, times, and memories, Deb’s novel achieves an altogether different affective wholeness to offer other sets of paradigms to history writing in the sub-continent. This chronicle then is both a memory text and a testimony of journeys: through the land and through the mind. In its narrative thrust, it refashions our understanding of places and times that are marked with unendurable violence yet filled with possibilities, if only we have the courage to face our and the nation’s past.

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