MAPPING THE PAST: EXPLORING MEMORY AND LIMINAL SUBJECTIVITY OF THE POST-PARTITION BENGALI MIGRANTS IN SIDDHARTHA DEB'S "THE POINT OF RETURN"

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Abstract. Colonial rule in South Asia has undeniably reshaped the region's spatial and cultural landscape. However, the tremors of colonisation's aftermath, which include partition, genocide, refugee movements, etc., have acquired characteristics which reek distinctly of their regional epicentre. South Asian countries, as is true of most postcolonial nation-states, often posit their territorial space, defined through cartographic borders, as the most essential and fundamental factor in determining the abstract concept of nationality. Though the nationalistic discourses celebrate the sanctity and inalterability of the territorial space, this is not as fixed as discourses would lead one to believe. This article intends to examine the transience of territorial space that is continually reconfigured along linguistic and ethnic lines, which consequently determines the belongingness or alienation of an individual in the given geopolitical scenario. The 'post-memory' of displacement, alienation and loss that haunts the post-Partition generation of migrants and their sense of homelessness that is distinct from, yet as poignant as that of their ancestors, will be examined through the textual framework of Siddhartha Deb's debut novel *The Point of Return* (2002). The article will present a nuanced study of the tension emanating from the fractured interface between nationalism and sub-nationalism, which is adroitly portrayed by Siddhartha Deb in this novel.

Keywords: subjectivity, post-memory, migration, partition, Northeast India, ethnic conflict

INTRODUCTION

The Point of Return (2002), which is the debut novel of Siddhartha Deb, serves as a poignant exploration of the northeastern region

of India[1], a locale characterised by its status as one of the most strife-ridden areas in the country. This geographical expanse is home to an array of distinct cultural groups, each situated at varying stages of development and possessing relatively autonomous historical narratives, all intricately entangled within a complex web of political entities. The complex mosaic is marked by significant tensions among various ethnic and linguistic communities as they navigate the challenges of political recognition and identity. Deb's novel, with its deep sensitivity and nuanced approach, focuses on a particular case of ethnic conflict—namely, the tensions between Bengalis, both Hindus and Muslims, and the Khasis[2] in Meghalaya, a state in the northeastern region. The novel carefully outlines the historical context of these tensions and the fraught relations between the Khasis and non-Khasis.

Unfortunately, the ethnic conflicts in Northeast India and other postcolonial struggles have not received the same level of attention in media or literature, when juxtaposed against conflicts in other global regions such as Kashmir, Sri Lanka, Bosnia, or Syria. The region has been beleaguered by prolonged insurgencies and bouts of violence, rendering states like Manipur and Nagaland highly militarised zones, where citizens grapple with the precariousness of existence in the pervasive shadow of firearms and explosives. Moreover, the substantial influx of illegal migrants from neighbouring Bangladesh has exacerbated the socio-political unrest prevailing in the area. These multifaceted issues have left an indelible mark on the collective psyche of the population, engendering a profound sense of mistrust *vis-à-vis* the central governing authority. Consequently, the region remains, to a significant extent, marginalised from the mainland of India, which engenders a sentiment deeply rooted in the perception that they have perpetually occupied the status of the Other. The enduring effects of Partition[3] and the repeated redrawing of borders, largely driven by ethnic demands for autonomy, have significantly shaped the region's volatile and often turbulent socio-political environment.

Moreover, there exists a paucity of literature that addresses pressing contemporary concerns affecting the northeastern region. The nation-centric epic narratives crafted by literary luminaries such as Salman Rushdie and Shashi Tharoor have frequently overlooked the intricacies of micro-level narratives, thus failing to encompass the unfolding contemporary historical landscape. Within the spectrum of postcolonial Indian English literature, there has been a pervasive inclination towards encapsulating the entirety of India, replete with its extensive historical tapestry, on an epic scale. This inclination towards a national narrative constitutes the hallmark of Indian English literature. During the 1980s, there was a notable rise in narratives focused on national identities, often referred to as 'nationsroman', a term proposed by Priya Joshi (Joshi 2002, 262). Authors such as Rohinton Mistry, Salman Rushdie, I. Allan Sealy, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Tharoor, and Mukul Kesavan offered critical perspectives on postcolonial nationalism and the idea of a unified nation, while still showing varying levels of engagement with the concept of a national narrative. The novels from this Rushdie era, primarily revisionist, viewed the representation of India and its historical development as a significant and challenging endeavour.

In recent times, English literary works emanating from Northeast India have gained prominence, drawing significant attention to the region. Unlike the broader Indian English literary landscape, they distinctly reflect a strong sense of place and local identity, addressing pressing and authentic issues specific to the region. Siddhartha Deb's writings are particularly noteworthy in this context, as they offer timely and impactful portrayals of Northeast India. His novels, *The Point of Return* and *Surface* (2005), provide nuanced and insightful perspectives on this complex area. *The Point of Return* serves as a window into the lives of individuals caught in the midst of ethnic conflicts, exploring themes of migration, displacement, cultural clash, and the exilic experiences of Bengali immigrants. The novel carefully examines the painful process of redrawing state boundaries along ethnic lines, revealing the resulting violence, dislocation, and enduring memories of loss.

This paper aims to analyse the social and ontological experiences of 'outsiders' within the context of ethnic movements seeking political and cultural recognition. It will focus on Deb's debut novel, *The Point of Return*, to explore interconnected issues of migration, territorial boundaries, and the concepts of home and belonging, with a particular emphasis on how memory shapes these experiences.

The setting of this semi-autobiographical novel is an unnamed hill town, which is widely assumed to be Shillong, a prominent hill station and the administrative capital of Meghalaya, the northeastern state where Siddhartha Deb was born. The narrative parallels Deb's own family history, mirroring the experiences of the Dam family in the novel. Like the characters in the book, Deb's ancestors relocated to this hill town after being displaced from what later became East Pakistan following the Partition of India in 1947, which eventually transformed into Bangladesh in 1971. Consequently, the themes of migration and the choice of geographical settings within Deb's literary work beckon readers to interpret it as an autobiographical narrative. In a revealing interview, Deb conveyed the impact of his unique upbringing: "As a child of East Bengali migrants in the hill areas of the Northeast, I was distanced from the upper classes, from Calcutta, from my original homeland, and from the place we were living in" (Bhatt 2006, 205). His formative years were spent in this region before being compelled to depart due to ethnically fuelled complexities. Following his initial career in journalism with various newspaper agencies in Kolkata and New Delhi, Deb undertook a research fellowship at Columbia University in the United States, where he completed his PhD. He has lived in the US for the past sixteen years and has also served as a writer-in-residence at The New School in New York City.

Deb's literary works are notably influenced by the themes of forced migration and repeated displacements that have affected both him and his family. Emphasising the personal dimension inherent in his literary endeavours, Deb acknowledged:

> Things were very precarious for me and my family in my youth, and writing was a way of understanding the things that were happening to me and to others around me [...]. Ideas of home and belonging are complicated, and much of my fiction explores these complications. (Bhatt 2006, 201)

Despite its fictional framework, the novel clearly reflects Deb's personal experiences. This paper argues that the novel not only depicts the challenges faced by the Bengali migrant minority in Northeast India but also explores the real distances and transitions between their original homes, the long-lost and often imagined homelands, and their new settlements. Concurrently, it endeavours to scrutinise how Deb employs the realm of memory as a narrative device to recount his tale of migration and the trauma stemming from loss and dislocation. In essence, our paper aims to demonstrate how Deb's novel captures the suffering and marginalisation experienced by individuals who are persistently regarded as 'outsiders' both within the larger national context and within smaller ethnic or regional communities that exist within the broader national framework.

The Tripartite Nexus: Ethnicity, Migrancy and Borders

The ethnic landscape of Northeast India is remarkably complex and diverse. Over an extended period, various ethnic groups in this region have waged prolonged struggles against the Indian nation-state in their quest for political autonomy. Groups such as the Bodo, Naga, Kuki, Mizo and Khasi[4] have contested the nation-state's notion of a unified national identity, striving instead to create new narratives of nationhood that reflect their unique ethnic identities and cultural traditions. The pervasive sense of alienation felt by the region's inhabitants, driven by both geographical isolation and historical grievances, coupled with demographic changes from significant migrations from Bangladesh, has fuelled a rise in militant nationalism and calls for political self-determination among the

indigenous communities. These identity-based movements and manoeuvres have led to significant territorial reconfigurations and an increase in conflicts among various tribes and groups within the region.

Migration issues are deeply intertwined with the sociopolitical instability prevalent in Northeast India, as local tribes often view successive waves of migrants as serious threats to their cultural heritage and economic resources. The strongest antagonism is directed at Bengali migrants, including both Hindus and Muslims, who have arrived from what was formerly East Pakistan. This section of the paper explores the complex relationship between ethnicity and migration, examining the various boundaries—whether ethnic or political—that shape the precarious and uncertain lives of migrants in the Northeast. Additionally, it aims to analyse the challenges migrants face, particularly when local hostility towards outsiders manifests in violent expressions of ethnic identity.

The narrative of the novel revolves around the Dam family and their arduous journey through life in their adopted homeland. This tale finds its voice through the perspective of Babu, the son of Dr. Dam, who, during the tumultuous period of partition, was but a school student. Within the narrative, two parallel storylines converge: one delves into the experiences of the elder generation, marked by the travails of migration and a lifetime marked by the enduring stigma of being perceived as outsiders in a landscape fraught with ethnic, cartographic, and religious demarcations. Dr. Dam serves as the emblematic figure of this generation. In his newly adopted homeland, he led a life characterised by quietude and dedication, diligently serving as a government official committed to the betterment of the local populace. As the narrative unfolds, the reader, much like Dr. Dam's son Babu, comes to admire the resilience and fortitude that defined his life as he grappled with and surmounted numerous challenges.

Concurrently, the narrative also encapsulates the experiences of the post-partition generation, heirs to the memories of their forebears. They confronted the intricate task of forging their own

sense of belonging and identity within the context of the postcolonial nation-space. The ordeal of migration, accompanied by its attendant pain, melancholy, trepidations, and anxieties, manifested differently between the first and second generations of migrants. Deb's novel artfully exposes how the evolving dynamics of regional ethnic relations and the sociopolitical milieu of the nation influenced the unique pathways that each generation of migrants traversed, as they grappled with their precarious existence and endured the melancholy and stigma associated with migrancy.

The narrator's ancestors, encompassing both his parents and grandparents, sought refuge from the harrowing violence that engulfed India during the tumultuous partition of 1947, eventually finding solace in Assam, situated on the eastern fringes of the Indian subcontinent. Subsequently, Dr. Dam embarked upon a career in the Indian Administrative Service, assuming a role within the veterinary department in the hill town, where he established his residence. Deeply influenced by the nationalist fervour that permeated the Indian freedom struggle and the enduring legacy of British colonial rule, he conducted himself with unwavering dedication and integrity in his service. His unwavering idealism, rooted in his faith in Indian nationalism and the national system, stands in stark contrast to the belief systems embraced by his son.

Babu's deviance from his parents' fervent nationalism can be attributed to the era in which he came of age—a period marked by a profound crisis in the democratic principles underpinning the nation. Babu emerges as a product of the post-Independence and post-Nehruvian milieu, a time when the lofty aspirations and pledges of anti-colonial nationalism were gradually eroding in the face of pervasive corruption, the escalating forces of communalism, power-driven political machinations, and the proliferation of ethnic and linguistic divisions within the populace. Furthermore, this era witnessed the emergence of assertive sub-nationalist movements among various marginalised tribes and communities in the Northeast, often manifesting in violent expressions, and giving rise to fervent calls for autonomy, and in

some instances, outright secession, from different quarters within the region.

In the novel, the Dam family embarks on a ceaseless journey from one locale to another, in an ardent pursuit to establish roots and construct a place they can call home. Yet, despite their tangible connections to these diverse settings, they remain eternally adrift, burdened by the perpetual spectre of their migratory existence. Siddhartha Deb's novel bears a striking resemblance to Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988). The narrative voice of Babu, characterised by its inherent instability, parallels the unnamed narrator in Ghosh's novel, both heavily reliant on the reservoir of memory's resources and vocabulary to reconstruct or fathom the complexities of the past. Akin to Ghosh's work, *The Point of Return* delves into the plight of the Bengali populace, fractured by the partition of the Indian subcontinent. Also, Deb's novel, like Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, underscores the arbitrary nature of borders and boundaries in the construction of a nation. This novel, in a resemblance to *The Shadow Lines*, revolves intricately around the interconnected themes of migration, cartography, and memory. However, in Deb's narrative, the condition of exile experienced by migrants is not solely a consequence of the partition and the haphazard delineation of boundaries but also arises from the sub-nationalist and militant ethnic assertions enacted by tribal communities within a state embedded within the larger republic, specifically, the undivided state of Assam. Deb's novel unveils "the manner in which a nation, constructed on an impromptu operating table, can persistently redefine itself through the imposition of fresh internal and external boundaries" (Pisharoty 2002).

Since 1947, the Dam family had established their residence amidst the indigenous Khasi community in Shillong. Nevertheless, their existence in this hill station and their interactions with the local populace remained perpetually uncertain. Tensions escalated during a period when the state's unity was unravelling, and novel demarcations were being instituted to delineate the emerging state of Meghalaya, extracted from the territories of Assam. While these

geographical and geopolitical transformations held distinct implications for the grandparents, who had previously endured the traumatic experience of partition, their significance assumed a magnitude of relevance even greater for Dr. Dam and his son, Babu, in subsequent years. As Babu notes:

> "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. It showed that the landscape of his past would forever be permanent and unchanging, not something that was historical and therefore open to perpetual revision but a place beyond the vagaries of time." (Deb 2002, 26)

However, Dr Dam remained acutely cognisant of these transformative developments. On a particular night in 1971, ensconced alone within the confines of a bungalow, he avidly perused the news reports detailing the outbreak of the conflict between India and Pakistan within what had once constituted his homeland, East Pakistan. This war ultimately precipitated the birth of the fledgling nation of Bangladesh:

> He had become emotional at the thought of a war machine moving towards a land that for all the liberation to come would never again be home [...] those place names that had been left behind the border of '47 [...]. Irrevocably gone, like the matriculation certificate he never claimed because he did not have the required fee? (Deb 2002, 110)

Deb adeptly portrays the enduring ethnic fault-lines that have persisted between the hill tribes and non-tribal inhabitants within the confines of the state of Meghalaya. In Dr. Dam's case, the prohibitive 'protective discrimination act' enforced within Meghalaya precluded him from acquiring or constructing a residence in Shillong, a testament to the legislation's restrictions on property ownership by 'outsiders'. The hill region bore witness to escalating ethnic tensions during the 1970s, characterised by a growing assertiveness among local hill-dwellers, as they fervently

demanded new legislation safeguarding their rights to land and resources against encroachments by external settlers. This heightened awareness was rooted in a longstanding perception of being marginalised and overlooked by the Indian central government, ultimately fanning the embers of political mobilisation, which had lain dormant but now rekindled the conviction of having been colonised and marginalised by the Indian nation-state. The self-assertion movement rapidly assumed a more contentious dimension as demands for the establishment of a new state and the expulsion of all 'outsiders', including Bengalis, Assamese, and Nepali individuals, grew in intensity. The resultant upheaval, commonly referred to as the 'anti-dkhar' or 'foreign dogs' riots, persisted well into the 1980s, compelling these marginalised groups to vacate Shillong and disperse to other regions within the country.

In the year 1979, a wave of violent rioting and bloodshed engulfed the region, with a particular focus on targeting migrant Bengali communities. During this tumultuous period, the state underwent partition into distinct tribal territories, each delineated with specific quotas allocated for the indigenous hill-dwelling populations. As Meghalaya assumed its identity as a nascent tribal state, several measures were implemented that directly impacted non-tribal entrepreneurs. These included the imposition of higher taxation rates, the rejection of a proposed railway connection to the state, on the grounds that it would facilitate further migration, and the implementation of a mandate stipulating that Bengalis must carry identity cards at all times to substantiate their status as Indian citizens (Deb 2002, 176). For Babu, these ethnic tensions manifested in deeply personal ways. The town, which he had hitherto considered his home, a place of convergence for his childhood aspirations and unwavering faith in the future (187), underwent a distressing transformation, evolving into an environment fraught with fear and impending danger.

Amidst the backdrop of escalating ethnic tensions and the burgeoning tribal students' movements, Dr. Dam and Babu found themselves subjected to ethnic animosity and unprovoked physical

assaults, all within the confines of the very town that had long served as their residence. During this turbulent phase characterised by widespread violence, strikes, and a prevailing atmosphere of apprehension, non-tribal residents, with Bengalis bearing the brunt, were compelled to reinterpret their daily existence through a novel framework of indignation and fear, which pervaded the town. This paradigm shift effectively divided the populace into distinct categories of 'insiders' and 'outsiders', thereby imposing a new set of societal norms (Deb 2002, 175). For Babu, whose singular sense of home had always been embodied by this town, comprehending the sudden emergence of divisions between 'us' and 'them' within this familiar landscape proved to be an enigma. He grappled with the bewildering transformation, wherein the town he had forever regarded as his own became a place where he and others like him were disparagingly referred to as 'Dkhar'. As the novel elucidates:

> What this meant was that by some undefined process, the 'we' became composed exclusively of non-tribals, and the tribals who had been part of my life since the age of six faded away, joining groups of their own (Deb 2002, 177).

The local Khasi community vehemently expressed their desire for the Dam family to depart, by labelling them as Bangladeshis. However, the question loomed: Where could they possibly relocate to? This predicament is poignantly captured by the phrase "What had been left behind could not even be given a name?" (Deb 2002, 178), symbolising the profound sense of dislocation that ensued as new borders and nation-states materialised in spaces that were once simply referred to as 'home'. The violence inflicted upon migrants and non-tribal inhabitants by the indigenous population finds its roots in the contentious issue of territoriality and the intricate cartographical reconfiguration of the region. Dr. Dam's life is forever altered when he becomes a victim of a mob assault during a period of turmoil. These national borders are deliberately drawn to demarcate a stark distinction between 'outsiders' and 'insiders'. The historical partition of the subcontinent stands as a sombre reminder

of the brutality and violence that can accompany the delineation of borders between nations. Deb's novel indelibly captures the atmosphere of paranoia, violence, and upheaval experienced by individuals when the cartographic landscape undergoes a process of reconfiguration.

A substantial corpus of literary works, spanning both vernacular languages and English, has emerged to grapple with the partition of the Indian subcontinent and the unimaginable horrors and enduring trauma it engendered. It is imperative to acknowledge that the historical documentation and literary portrayals of the partition are predominantly skewed towards the Punjab region. Historians and authors have diligently chronicled the human tragedy, the bestiality, and the brutal riots and bloodshed involving the Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh communities. Consequently, the partition of the subcontinent is frequently perceived as an event that primarily afflicted these particular communities. Regrettably, the trauma of partition on the eastern side of India, a region that continues to bear its weight, is often overshadowed. Novels such as Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Deb's *The Point of Return* stand as notable exceptions, delving into the partition's impact on the eastern region of the subcontinent. Deb's literary work illuminates that, on the eastern side, the partition resonated with communities beyond Hindus and Muslims, albeit in distinctive ways.

Anindita Dasgupta astutely reminds us that when our focus shifts to the northeastern quadrant of India, the partition of the subcontinent becomes manifestly more intricate than a mere Hindu-Muslim dichotomy. Her scholarly inquiries into the narratives of partition migrants from Sylhet underscore that many of the post-partition conflagrations in the Northeast were fundamentally rooted in "the rivalry between Assamese and Bengali middle-classes in colonial Assam rather than that between Hindus and Muslims of the colonial province" (Dasgupta 2001, 345). In these regions of India, the partition evolved into an event entailing not only Hindus and Muslims but also interwoven local ethnic intricacies.

Amit Baishya (2010) further elucidates that *The Point of Return* unveils the complexities of evolving from a 'Hindu' to an 'Indian' identity within the eastern frontier region, where such transitions often clashed with local rivalries and issues, thereby fracturing the presumed seamlessness of assimilation into the 'national order of things'. Even individuals who were ostensibly demographically assimilated into the national framework as Bengali Hindus could abruptly find themselves relegated to the status of 'outsiders' as new demarcations between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' were (re)defined within specific locales in post-colonial India. Baishya underscores that *The Point of Return* vividly exemplifies the trajectory "of post-partition Hindu Bengali refugees from Refugee-Indian, Indian-not-Refugee, not-Indian-not-Refugee to Indian-but-always-Refugee through the characterisation of Dr. Dam" (Baishya 2018, 261).

Dr. Dam's initial recognition of the pervasive paranoia embedded within the India he diligently served materialised when he encountered a disconcerting incident involving two Danish professors who had arrived in the hill-town to assess the Indo-Danish Dairy Project. These academicians were unjustly subjected to suspicions of espionage, illuminating the prevalence of apprehension and mistrust. Subsequently, amidst the tumultuous period in the hill regions, Dr. Dam found himself confronting this unsettling reality once more, which served as a poignant reminder that:

> The nation he imagined being shored up through the efforts of people like him was ultimately a fortress, where everywhere around him new battle lines were being drawn and fresh groups of people were being defined as outsiders, borders bristling with barbed-wire teeth. (Deb 2002, 221)

Deb's novel is inherently concerned with delving into the liminal subjectivity experienced by Bengali Hindu migrants. This state of liminality stands in stark contrast to the recognition conferred by official state citizenship. For Bengali Hindus, India naturally emerged as their chosen adopted homeland. However, as vividly portrayed within the novel, a significant portion of these migrants

found themselves perpetually marginalised, unable to attain the status of full-fledged citizens within their newfound country. Their narratives, embedded in the context of the partition, have, by and large, remained overlooked within the broader national historical narratives, primarily because they were presumed to have been seamlessly incorporated into the institutional framework of the nation-state. The liminal existence experienced by Bengali migrants like Dr. Dam may not exhibit the same degree of absolute hopelessness as that witnessed in the case of contemporary refugees hailing from regions such as Syria and Iraq. Nevertheless, the figure of Dr. Dam effectively "internalises certain aspects of the modes of being-in-the-world that encapsulate the essence of the refugee" (Baishya 2018, 239). Deb posits that one does not inherently become an exile within their own country; rather, this designation is thrust upon them by the capricious nature of geographical delineations. The constructs of nationalism and ethnic boundaries invariably dictate that certain individuals remain uncharted within the demographic landscape of postcolonial India.

CONCLUSION

In the culmination of his journey, Babu arrives at the stark realisation of the implausibility of a triumphant return to his erstwhile home. In a deliberate rejection of conventional notions surrounding the motifs of 'return' and 'homecoming', Deb's narrative exhibits a certain resonance with Jamaica Kincaid's novel, *Lucy* (1991). Much like the protagonist Lucy, Babu consciously opts to retain the status of an exile, assuming the role of a writer residing within the metropolis of Delhi. Deb's novel, resonating Kincaid's narrative, can be discerned as a concerted effort to challenge the pervasive assumptions that underlie numerous counter-narratives pertaining to exile and displacement. These typically adhere to the notion that the disorienting experience of 'exile' inexorably

culminates in the joyous celebrations of a triumphant 'return' (Sugg 2002, 156).

In the face of exile, Babu, similar to Lucy's response, can only lay claim to two intangible possessions: memory and his personal 'history'. Despite the persistent undercurrent of nostalgia fuelling a yearning for some form of return, Babu's mnemonic endeavour accentuates not the pursuit of an exclusive 'homeland' but rather underscores the broader and more universally relevant themes encompassing the elusive nature of the concepts of home and belonging. The epigraphs selected by Deb for the novel, drawn from the works of Ursula Le Guin and Herman Melville, significantly reinforce this perspective. Baishya echoes these sentiments in his analysis, noting that the novel is:

> A phenomenological exploration of the meanings of 'home', the 'space of childhood' and the condition of homelessness [...] an intense exploration of the phenomenological realities engendered by the displacement of populations, and the subsequent negotiations that such displaced people and their future generations have to undergo in the sphere of everyday life with the governmental regimes of the postcolonial state apparatus. (Baishya 2018, 262)

In an interview with Sangeeta Barooah Pisharoty, Deb articulated that this situation extends to encompass the entirety of the Northeastern region, where "all its people, whether indigenous inhabitants or migrants, appear to occupy an uncertain and fragile position within a nation where the lines of identity are seemingly etched in stone" (Pisharoty 2002). The volatile nature and proliferation of secessionist movements within the region can be attributed to a confluence of factors, including imbalanced power dynamics, ethnic political ambitions and conflicts, and the region's prolonged history of neglect by the Indian state, particularly concerning communities residing on the fringes.

However, it is noteworthy that Deb's novel primarily conveys the perspective of migrants, neglecting to amplify the long-standing narrative of exploitation and dispossession endured by the indigenous inhabitants. Furthermore, the novel does not explore the

indifference displayed by the central government, whose 'one nation, one state' ideology often disregards the lived reality of what Dr Amalendu Guha aptly characterises as the "little nationalities" (2) within the region. In reference to the narrator's discernible bitterness concerning the precarious state of non-tribal rights in the hill states of the Northeast, Priyamvada Gopal observes that, "While the questions posed by the novel hold significant importance due to their perceived intractability, the narrative ultimately, and paradoxically, weakens itself by refraining from engaging with history in a more nuanced manner" (182).

Over an extended period, the indigenous tribal communities endured derogatory treatment and outright ridicule from individuals hailing from the larger Indian populace. Concurrently, the parochial and chauvinistic postures adopted by dominant nationalities, coupled with the appropriation of the lands and resources of indigenous inhabitants by individuals originating from Bangladesh, exacerbated their insecurities regarding their very survival. This gradually fostered a deep-seated apprehension of outsiders. The escalating sentiment of uncertainty and precarity ultimately propelled these "little nationalities" onto the path of ethnic assertion and self-preservation.

Despite these narrative gaps, *The Point of Return* emerges as a literary work intrinsically linked to contemporary sociopolitical processes within this contentious region of the Indian republic. Through its contemplative exploration of ethnic struggles and the plight of marginalised communities, the novel underscores the urgency of reconfiguring the national narrative from the periphery. Furthermore, it calls for a comprehensive re-evaluation of the very concept of nationhood and national identity or belonging within the context of postcolonial India.

NOTES

1. The Northeast region of India is a diverse and strategically important area, comprising eight states: Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya,

Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim. This region is known for its ethnic diversity, with numerous indigenous communities, languages, and cultures. Geographically, it is characterised by hilly terrain, lush forests, and river valleys, and it shares international borders with countries like China, Myanmar, Bhutan and Bangladesh.

2. The Khasis are an indigenous ethnic group native to the northeastern part of India, primarily inhabiting the state of Meghalaya. The Khasi people speak the Khasi language, which belongs to the Mon-Khmer branch of the Austroasiatic language family.
3. Partition refers to the 1947 division of British India into two independent nations, India and Pakistan. It was a traumatic event that led to widespread violence, mass migrations, and deep-seated communal tensions. India became a predominantly Hindu-majority country, while Pakistan was established as a Muslim-majority state, with its territory split into West Pakistan (present-day Pakistan) and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh).
4. The Bodo, Naga, Kuki, Mizo, and Khasi are indigenous ethnic groups from Northeast India, each with distinct languages and cultural traditions, and they have been actively seeking varying degrees of political autonomy and recognition within the Indian state.

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