Post-facto Trauma of Political Partition in *The Point of Return*

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The novel, *The Point of Return* authored by Siddhartha Deb reflects the trauma after political partition of independence. It addressed the post-facto issues of independence partition linked with crossing national border, displacement, cultural confrontation citing exilic condition of Bengali immigrants inhabiting in north-east India after the creation of East Pakistan as a part of Pakistan. It also shows the painful process of cartographic reconfigurations of political boundaries, ethnic lines and the resultant violence, up rootedness, alienation and continued memory loss. *The Point of Return* tells parallel stories of two consecutive generations—the first, represented by Dr Dam, a migrant from newly created East Pakistan. He was a victim of post-migration consequences suffering and the life-long stigma of being an outsider in an established ethnic, cartographic and religious boundary. The story also speaks about their second generation represented by Babu, who inherited the memory of their parents and grandparents. He had to negotiate his own sense of belonging and identity in the new homeland.

The novel was based on author's own reality. Like the Dam family in the novel, Deb's parents and grandparents came to the hill town Shillong when forced out from newly created East Pakistan in 1947 (291). This semi-autobiographical novel depicts not only the situation of the Bengali immigrant minority in the north-east, but also the physical distance and movement between places of origin and resettlement. In this novel, Siddhartha Deb presented life-like picture of the period of partition. It is horrific to read about the ethnic conflict and the condition of uprooted refugees. The first two sections titled "Arrival" and "Departure", the narrative runs chronologically backward from 1988-1979, shifting between first person (Babu's point of view) and third person narration, while the last two sections titled "Terminal" and "Travelogue", is in the first person narrative. These sections are framed like a travel diary that recounts the narrator's return journey to his hometown.

It is very sensitively imagined and astutely observed novel set on the theme of partition of Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan. A few other novels viz. *Train to Pakistan* by

Khushwant Singh, *Inqilab* by Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, *A Bend in the Ganges* by Manohar Malgonkar and *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh also deal with the theme of partition of British colonial India into India and Pakistan. *The Point of Return* is, however, the only comprehensive and catchy fictional account of post-partition period in north-east India.

The Points of Return opens with an old man, Dr Dam falling down "He became plunge away from the world he always known and fell softly on to the carpet" (2). This fall, the result of stroke recalls his earlier plunge, his decision, in 1947, to leave behind his home village in East Bengal in order to settle in India. Dam's family was ethnically connected to Bangladesh, the former East Pakistan. As a part of a cultural minority which was threatened by religious and social upheavals there, Babu's father Dr Dam and grandparents were among the lucky ones who managed to escape there by fleeting to Assam, a remote north-eastern province of India. On the journey to their new hometown, the first killings happened outside the veterinary compound. "Seven passengers were pulled out of the bus coming from Gauhati and knifed to death on the road where Dr Dam's walks had begun" (294). After partition of British India, lots of people became homeless and they have to move in search of new settlement. In the journey in search of home, many people lost their lives and many lost their relatives. Large scale migrants from neighbouring Bangladesh after partition added socio-political unrest in the North-eastern region. The presence of foreigners in this region has been exorcised by the local people. When partition declared, both Hindus and Muslims thought that they could live peacefully and socially. People, however, continued suffering. "Just a few years later, after the place became a hill state, they discovered that they were foreigners once more because of the language they spoke" (287). The generation that grow up in the stable family home were unaware of the uncertain processes faced to create that home. When they grow up and move on, it is usually a simple principle of expanding, of adding the extra wing or buying the big city apartment. Some, however, went through the vagaries of creating a house and a home. Dr Dam had only known temporary places of various kinds, ever since he had left the village and the mud he born. He made numerous attempts to procure property, both in Gauhati and Shillong. However, he lost his property in Gauhati in the name of road expansion in spite of his legal possessions. He never got the opportunity to build a house in Shilling because of the law prohibiting outsiders from acquiring land was already implemented in Meghalaya (pp. 43). Finally, he managed to build a house in the property he shared with his father and brothers in Silchar (pp. 44). Dr Dam's decision to build a house in Silchar was a dream because the permits had cost a great deal of money, the clerks and their supervising officers had demanded very high bribes.

The greatest strength of *The Point of Return* as a text is that it externalizes the festering symptom of homelessness—the fact that a being can never suspend its flight—through a haunting representation of the refugee. Discussing the forlorn state of the Bengali minority, Dr Chatterji contended that no matter how long they remain in their adopted home in the hills, they will remain foreigners forever. As he said, "*We are a dispersed people, wandering, but unlike the Jews we have no mythical homeland. Nor do we have their achievements that would make the world recognize and fear us one day. My two brothers have not been here for years. They left as soon as they could, but they found Calcutta too narrow, too alien, after their childhoods here. No doubt you face the same problem. One of them lives in England now, the other in Belgium. They send photographs of their houses, their cars, and their fair children with red cheeks who write Shubho Bijoya in English every year until the time comes for them to grow up and leave their homes.*" (pp. 287).

At the end of the novel Babu said:

> 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. I have truly let go, I know, as I step past the impatient conductor and the door closes behind me. (304)

After partition, immigrants lost their identity politically, socially, psychologically or mentally. Dr Dam and Babu, lived as strangers. Every Bengali was looked as an outsider from Bangladesh, as an illegal immigrant regardless of when and under what circumstances they had settled there. They had been assembled in a landscape of words, whispering "*Dkhar, Dkhar*" (239). In the language of the author:

> 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. They were Indians because they were not Bangladeshis, Hindus because they were not Muslims, Bengalis because they were not Assamese. They clung to their language fiercely, and yet they were not really Bengali, because they spoke a dialect that aroused only amusement and derision in the real centre of Bengali culture and identity, in Calcutta. Perhaps this was the reason that they had not been able to create anything beautiful, Dr Dam thought as he walked towards Premtolla, looking at the shops. Many of the shops were hardware stores, revealing the immigrant's passion for construction, while others dealt in automobile parts, targeting the tribal middle-

> class in neighbouring Mizoram. The few bookshops in the town were called "libraries", though they did not lend books, and everything else, from a garment shop to a grocery store, went by the generic title of "factory". The sight depressed him so much that his mind involuntarily turned back towards what he had been trying to escape, the family house on lane I3 with its growing distance between generations and yawning gap between the brothers (107).

The question of identity is revealed when xenophobic ethnic youth leader Adolf Hitler, a minister in the state cabinet holding Babu's eyes at the end of their interview whispered, almost imperceptibly –*Dkhar*! Foreigner. Babu realized that he has to bid his hometown goodbye forever. This word *Dkhar* irritated Babu repeatedly in his mind. Binary oppositions of tribal and non-tribal are echoed in the chapter "*Learning to Run*" when some decisions were adopted by tribal student union against nontribal people:

> Meetings held by the student union ended with demands and exhortations, with outcries of rage against the foreigners who had settled in the state, an exhilaration flow of political action that hurled itself in successive waves on anything perceived as alien outgrowths on native soil. On the night wind the smell of the burned flesh of the slaughtered cows of Nepali milkmen and herders, the rumble of jeeps with loudspeakers blaring out another act of assertion and demanding that the outsiders stay home the next day, the steady tapping of policemen's sticks on the dark, deserted streets. On the way back home from an early-morning run, while taking a detour through a colony emptied of most of its nontribal residents, the graffiti on the wall of a lonely and shabby cottage: WE SHALL COME TO THIS HOUSE AS WELL *(*235).
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> The larger decisions were placed in front of the tribal political leaders, for a ban on construction of the railway line because it would only bring in more Bangladeshis, to the demand that Bengalis carry identity cards all time to prove that they were Indian citizens (235). Tribal's anger directed itself at every stranger, and every Bengali was looked as an outsider from Bangladesh, as an illegal immigrant regardless of when and under what circumstances they had settled there (237).

Here, Deb provides a disquisition on alienation through the persona of a family friend, Dr Chatterji. He moaned that no matter how long they remain in their adopted home in the hills, they will remain foreigners forever, "When partition happened, and Hindu and Muslims both paid the price for their certainty that the world would not change, that they could go on observing their taboos and rituals and distinction forever, until they were taken by the scruffs of their necks"

(286) and "have to struggle to be very strong to survive. And then, just a few years later, after this place became a hill state, they discovered that they were foreigners once more because of the language they spoke" (287).

A few people who had enough money went outside for living:

> The majority, who will not have enough money or strength to take that route, they will dwindle and die here. Some of them will move to the suburbs of Calcutta, crowded together in the East Bengali ghettos. They will never look back to what they left behind, here or in Bangladesh. In Calcutta they will be mocked by those who didn't suffer from Partition or are more educated, they will be disavowed even by those East Bengalis who have become genteel. They can settle in Calcutta or Silchar or Gauhati if they like, there is land there, houses for them, because they will not remain here. But they will have outsiders here, in the form of officials and policemen from the central government, and big business men (288). Babu shows in the novel, how he became victim due to the conflicts of tribal and nontribal as he himself was a nontribal. After partition, tribal people who perceive these outsiders presence as a threat which potentially could pollute the sanctity of tribal people and rob their land and natural resources. Babu recorded his experience from his time of childhood and suffered physical assault due to these clashes. Children were burnt for studying in tribal schools; women were left alone after losing their husbands. Dr Dam who his whole life served the country and state considering it his own was at the end terrified at the point of gun by his head minister for not carrying out the schemes as per his wish. The novel aptly brings out the sufferings of these people in the land in which they lived their entire life from the very childhood. They were homeless even after serving the country for years. Deb has used one family of East-Bengal to represent thousands of sufferers like them. After his move to Silchar, Babu started reflecting on his own version of home. He spoke wistfully of the hill town they left behind, the site of most childhood memories.

Deb draws a sharp, memorable picture of the misunderstandings between father and son, exacerbated by rapid changes in India's political, ethnic and cultural landscape. *The Point of Return* revolves around the father-son relationship of a wilful, curious boy, Babu, and Dr Dam, an enigmatic product of British colonial rule and Nehruvian nationalism. Babu's relationship with his father is filled with straining and awkward silences. Dr Dam silently battled against political corruption all around him as well as the anti-Bengali fervour that enveloped the town in its spirit of tribalism and nationalistic renewal. Told in reverse chronological order, the novel examines an

India where the ideals that brought freedom from colonial rule are beginning to crack under pressure of new rebellions and conflicts. Dr Dam has his old-fashioned rectitude which Babu finds embarrassing and Nehru inspired ideals of national unity which seem increasingly irrelevant as sectarian violence blooms, but he refuses to challenge the ineptitude around him. For Dr Dam and Babu, this has meant living as strangers in the same home, puzzled and resentful, tied only by blood. As the father grows weary and old and the son tries to understand him, clashes between ethnic groups in their small town show them to be strangers to their country as well. Before long, Babu finds himself embarking on a great journey, an Odyssey through the memories of his father, his family, and his nation. To Babu, Dr Dam's servility in dealing with high ranking, unrefined superiors smack of a colonial mentality, remnants of his youth under the Raj.

Dr Dam seemed unusually frustrated, angry, and resentful about the way people were treated in the pension office. "Like cattle", (13) he said. Then he revised his comment, the animal comparison unsatisfactory to someone who had been a practicing veterinary surgeon for the first ten years of his career. Their form of protest against British officials was very different. "You always sign 'Yours Humbly'," Babu commented. "That's so demeaning." (14). Dr Dam always protested meekly and humbly and thinking for his self –respect. So he was sending the letter of complaint to minister anonymously. This decision not to sign his name seemed to strip the whole project of its purpose. According to Babu it made him as meek as those who never protested. His father seemed to have calculated all the possible courses of action and behaviour before executing a work. But in Babu's opinion there was no room in present system of varying opinions about the situation. Dr Dam considered his son over-confident and stubborn, unaware of the world as it really was. They used different languages even when both of them are communicating in English, his father always circumspect and cautious in his choice of words – "Thank you, Sahib, thank you, you'll see to it that I get my money today, won't you?" (8). This code of supplication towards state authorities is one of the key elements of Dr Dam's characterization. Dr Dam repeatedly refers to himself as a "Government Servant" - the accent falling strongly on "servant" (30). Babu recalls the differences in the English utilized by the father and the son; Dr Dam always "..... cautious and circumspect in his choice of words: 'Yours humbly, I beg to inform you...'' (15). He "flinches" when he hears his father refers to petty officials as "Sir" (28). It is easy to dismiss Dr Dam's reactions as an instance of his "*servile*" personality on the basis of Babu's interpretations; it may be useful to speculate whether this mode of behaviour is itself a strategy of negotiation that attempts to bridge the problematic gap between specific local institutions and trans local entities like the Indian state.

After partition, immigrant people became powerless. They could not speak anything against local people. They should bear all physical and mental harassment impinged upon them by tribal people. Nontribal people became powerless in their use of language. They could not build a house. Their children could not get admitted in tribal school. "A Bengali Muslim boy, he was given a seat at a government school in Mawkar. Tribals poured kerosene on him when he was coming out of the exam hall, looking through his question papers. They set him on fire" (285). Non-tribal boys could not talk to tribal girls (238). Police became powerless in tribal dominated area. In front of police, nontribal people were beaten and murdered. Police became simply a viewer in the front of tribal people. They could not say anything against student's union and tribal groups. Only strong and powerful people could survive in this region. So, Dr Chatterji said, "Only the strong survive." (282). According to him, Babu's father refused to understand this myth until it was too late. It's not ethics or honesty or professionalism or kindness alone, though these things are important. It is strength that determines the winner (282). Babu and his friends became victims when they were playing cricket, some tribal boys walking deliberately across the field meant the pitch had to be vacated. They were told brusquely to clear out from the playing area. Then Babu and his companion took out the stumps and collected the gear, careful not to display a good bat that might be confiscated. "They could not leave straight away the ground because that could be constructed as a deliberate insult and has been known to result in immediate reprisals". (240) In Delhi National Archive could not be visited without the permission of the secretariat. After partition, things had changed completely. Outsiders and foreigners were not permitted to enter in public places without the permission of higher authority. In national archive lady clerk said, "Tell them when you get back home to Bangladesh that change is good. People who cannot adjust to change are not good." (271) According to her, after partition circumstances had changed some local tribes or groups became more violent and aggressive towards outsiders. So, outsiders should bear it humbly and could not protest against them. Babu thought, "The violence in the streets that had been hurled against them had some grain of idealism in it. To misplace of purity of language on the streets was only corruption, boredom, rot, no different from the oppressive shades of power to be found elsewhere in the country". (299) Feelings of powerlessness and alienation haunted him like a shadow in his mind. He did not know where his home was. He did not know whether it was in India, Bangladesh or Pakistan. The novel has portrayed the brutality and vulnerable qualities of tribal groups towards nontribal groups. Babu described various incidents where nontribals were mercilessly and brutally killed. Many were slaughtered amidst market, no one can protest against them. Dr Dam has to face racial discrimination in his office. Dr Dam has served

the country and state considering it his own in his whole life. On the contrary, his minister threatened him for not carrying out the schemes as per his wish and warned him by such words: *Corpse of one more foreigner will not make any difference* (pp. 281) Feelings of fear and alienation always surrounded him and he felt powerless. He recalls one incident, when he and his father, unaware of the curfew went out and were beaten by the people in market. Police too didn't take any action against the people and thus both Babu and Dr Dam were left helpless and horrified. As Babu explains, "we stood there on the road, brushing the dirt of our clothes. My Father looked more embarrassed than scared or angry and the arrival of three policemen did not help. They wanted to know what we are doing there and why we had not seen the posters in the market place.The evidence of ethnic violence's have proved that outsiders became silent viewer in tribal dominated region" (pp. 227). When Dr Dam and Babu were walking in Police Bazaar, half a dozen blobs suddenly came and attacked Dr Dam. They were jabbing at him, the air turning solid with their curses and blows, a series of curiosity flat sounds produced by their open hands as they struck him in the face, chest, and stomach. They stood there on the road, brushing the dirt off their clothes, there came three policemen, but they did not help. Otherwise, Policemen asked them what they were doing there and why they had not seen the posters of curfew imposed by student's union. Dr Dam said that he heard no announcement on the radio last night. One policeman said "They put up the posters early in the morning". Dr Dam asked him "Who did?". "The student union," the policeman said, laughing. "When the student leaders announce a public curfew, everyone stays off the streets, even the local people. And you choose to go for a walk in a deserted street with a small boy. Don't you know that the curfew is a protest against the presence of foreigners?" (227). Dr Dam had understood all the implied meaning of the police, so he says nothing in this matter. The non-tribals were very excited, about this incident upon an honest man, a quiet man. The tribal officer who came to see Dr Dam remained silent for the most part, apologetic and a little uncomfortable. The conversation drifted around the situation and someone told him to be less strict about regulations. The nontribal here became powerless and they could not speak anything against tribal people whether it may right or wrong.

Feudal ownership of land had been diminished. Dr Dam spun no myths of great tracts of land and feudal ownership (pp. 239). Where there had once been the solidity of this place, there was a town slowly been stripped of its characteristics? The trees were no longer pines or firs or weeping willows. They had been assembled into a landscape of words, foreign words whispering "*Dkhar, Dkhar*." (239). It was only corruption, boredom, rot, no different from the oppressive shades of power to be found elsewhere in the country. In this novel it is found that when Babu

waited outside, smoking a last cigarette before the journey to Gauhati, taking one more look. There was a woman dressed in a black, a baby on one arm, wailing loudly. She was Nepali and her thick, dark mountain clothes clung to her like a shroud, the face red with exertion as she alternated between consoling the child in her arms and giving vent to her own feelings, tearing her hair and crying. A few bags were strewn around her, little bundles flung carelessly around, the debris of her sorrow. People hesitated, halted, and then looked away. Babu, unsure of her pain and his role was always powerless observer among the crowd.

The novel has aptly described the tribe and tribulation of people of the land in which they live their entire life from childhood to this present stage. They were hated even after serving their country for years. This ethnic clash has produced the issues like conversion of mass population into Christianity and adoption of other religion which further developed the feeling of fear and insecurity among them.

Deb has stated a picture of Bangladeshi people whose presence in North-eastern state was always considered as illegal. Existence of Bangladeshi people in this land is always protested by indigenous people. He brings out the plight of the Bangladeshi people whose presence in the North-eastern states was daily protested and objected.

It is seen in this novel that every character suffered from mental tension because of partition whether it may be directly or indirectly. The negative aspects like homelessness, ethnic conflict, corruption, non-indigenous, powerless were main psychological tensions in the victims of partition. They have to struggle in every aspect of their life for existence. It may be politically, socially, ethnically or mentally. After partition, people who were weak have to suffer very badly. So, Dr Chatterji said to Babu:

> That is what you must do, yes, use your contacts. Flash your press card. Publish an article. Let the world know about your sorrows, beaten from place to place across fifty years. Yes, I know you're thinking I'm rich, that I've held to my property in spite of everything. But I'll tell you something, I'm tired too. Tired and seek of seeing the others being destroyed, those who are not strong. In the village, they would have been peasants, petty officials and servants who would have been taken care of. Now I see them go down, without a fight, without a spark of spirit in them (283).

Dr Dam has to flee to native Bengal when India is partitioned in 1947. He moves to a northern hill town in the state of Assam and becomes a civil servant, one of the few who is conspicuously upstanding in corrupt post partition bureaucracy where bribery and thievery reign. His old-fashioned rectitude and Nehru inspired ideals of national unity which seem increasingly

irrelevant as sectarian violence blooms, but he refuses to challenge the ineptitude around him. It is seen that Dr Dam became frustrated, angry, and resentful about the way people were treated in pension office. The clerks, the officers, they were always rude and inconsiderate to the pensioners. They were insufficient in top of that. He waited very long time to get his pension order. Dr Dam and Babu waited for about half an hour for the check, a crisp, pink rectangle with scrawled signatures and figures and the all-important stamp of the Treasury on it. He looked up and turned back to the clerk who was handing out the last bunch of checks with much greater speed than he had managed so far. Dr Dam weaved his way through and began to argue in a low but insistent voice, displaying the check across the opening. The clerk shrugged, reached for the register and slapped it emphatically across the window, his finger marking out one little row towards the bottom of vast grid of red and black.

Dr Dam has suffered mentally because he has no place to build a house for his family. After he had built a house, he became a victim of some fate because it was destroyed either by bad luck or the vicissitudes of bureaucracy. The tragic fact of Dr Dam's life was that he could neither point out his beginning nor the point where he would eventually come to rest. The difference in attitudes between Dr Dam and Babu exacerbated by rapid change in India's political and cultural landscape compelled them living in the same home frustrated and mentally depressed, tied only by blood. As the father grows weary and old and the son tries to understand him, clashes between ethnic groups in their small town show them to be strangers to their country as well. After partition binary oppositions like insiders/outsiders, tribal/nontribal, indigenous/non-indigenous, powerful/powerless, Hindu/Muslim had increased psychic tension in the outsider's mind. Dr Dam had noticed a huge difference between pre and post partition period. He felt helpless after those decades of entirely selfless work, of wearing threadbare clothes and never using the privileges of his office for himself. When he felt he had been stripped of all power, he must have felt the weight of his whole life upon him and seen it as one big failure. He was older and seen many more things, the world war, Direct Action day, Partition, riots, wars across the borders, so many things.

"India is just a name, but this forest rising around him is a country without boundaries, whose boarders cannot be mapped, where the most cartographers can do is mark, in bold letters: HERE THERE BE ELPHENTS" (302). Like a cinematic fade out, the last image of Dr Dam in *The Point of Return* shows him melting away into the forest beyond the reach of the disciplinary apparatus of the nation-state. Instead of dismissing this utopian fantasy as escapist, it would be far more useful to reflect on the pathos of this image. Reading this image against the grain would

suggest that its power does not lie in what explicitly proposes—a world not bound by the nation-state, but rather in the anxiety it wants to conceal. This anxiety inheres itself in the subjective formation of the refugee - if one cannot be mapped demographically on to the nation-state system, then *home* becomes the signifier of a painful desire that always will exist at the level of fantasy, but will be deferred at the level of reality. Those who had left their homes forever to try and find themselves within the nation that was supposedly for everyone should have found that journey was not over. "The political boundaries of India as depicted in the map are neither accurate nor correct." (209).

The Point of Return is a realistic record of the traumatic condition caused by the partition. The novel is a tragic record of the partition of Indian subcontinent. It perfectly deals with the holocaust of India's partition. It pictured well, the specific political and socio-economic circumstances in the Northeast India in the post-partition era. It represents the author's deep understanding of human impulses and emotions and trauma after partition. The novel also emphasizes on universal values and father-son relationship besides narrating post-partition trauma.

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