

**IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY: A STUDY OF SELECTED
FICTION FROM ASSAM**

**DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF
MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY (ARTS)**

**IN
ENGLISH**

**BY
ABANTIKA DEV RAY**

**UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF
PROF. AMLAN DAS GUPTA**

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY**

2019

DECLARATION

Certified that the thesis entitled, IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY: A STUDY OF SELECTED FICTION FROM ASSAM, submitted by me towards the partial fulfilment of the degree of Master of Philosophy (Arts) in ENGLISH of Jadavpur University, is based upon my own original work and there is no plagiarism. This is also to certify that the work has not been submitted by me in part or in whole for the award of any other degree/diploma of the same Institution where the work is being carried out, or to any other Institution. A paper out of this dissertation has also been presented by me at a seminar/conference at JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY, thereby fulfilling the criteria for submission, as per the M.Phil Regulation (2017) of Jadavpur University.

Signature of the Candidate

Roll number:

Registration number:

Date:

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

On the basis of academic merit and satisfying all the criteria as declared above, the dissertation work of ABANTIKA DEV RAY entitled IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY: A STUDY OF SELECTED FICTION FROM ASSAM, is now ready for submission towards the partial fulfilment of the Degree of Master of Philosophy (Arts) in ENGLISH of Jadavpur University.

Head
Department of ENGLISH

Supervisor & Convener of RAC

Member of RAC

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank my supervisor, Prof. Amlan Das Gupta for the insights and encouragement he provided while I was writing this dissertation. Prof Das Gupta helped me give a distinct shape to my thoughts and I am immensely grateful to him for his guidance.

Secondly, I thank Prof Dipendu Das, Department of English, Assam University for his extremely valuable advice while I was preparing the outline for this dissertation. He gave me suggestions and ideas to work on and I am indebted to him for his perceptive ideas on Northeast India. I have used a book edited by Dr Das, *Barbed Wire Fence* as a primary text and I thank Shri Joydeep Biswas, Professor of Economics, Cachar College, Silchar for first mentioning this book to me. Prof. Biswas' articles published in newspapers have guided me in the initial stages of research. I thank Dr Rafat Ali, member of my RAC, for his comments and views on my dissertation during its final stages.

I thank my teachers at Loreto College, particularly Dr Aditi Das Gupta and Dr Sukanya Das Gupta, for guiding me through my formative years at college and inspiring me always. I was quite young and unaccompanied when I came to Kolkata to study, and my teachers at Loreto have been wonderful with their help and support. I also thank Dr Pinaki De, Department of English, Raja Peary Mohan College, Uttarpara, for helping me wade through the difficult span of a gap year after M.A, and furnishing me with some ideas to work on. I am also thankful to Shri Subha Prasad Nandi Majumdar of Burdwan University, a noted artiste and activist from Silchar, Assam – who is also a family friend, for helping me get a clear idea on the history of Barak Valley for this dissertation, despite his extremely busy schedule.

I am thankful to my parents, Shri Sudipto and Smt Soma Dev Ray for always providing me with the best possible opportunities, for standing by me in times of despair and constantly encouraging me to work better. To my aunt, Mrs Anushree Kar, especially, I extend my heartfelt love and gratitude, for always supporting me ever since I started staying in Kolkata.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	i - ii
Introduction	1 - 17
Chapter 1	
Defining Identity for the Postcolonial Bengali: Siddhartha Deb's <i>The Point of Return</i>	18–34
Chapter 2	
Ethno-Cultural and Religious Conflict and Rise of Nationalism in Assam: Dhruba Hazarika's <i>Sons of Brahma</i>	35 - 52
Chapter 3	
Bengalis at Present: <i>From Valley to Valley and Barbed Wire Fence</i>	53 - 72
Conclusion	73 – 76
Bibliography	

Introduction

In many ways, the question of existence for postcolonial citizens is dependent on their identities – it is this ‘identity’ which is attacked and sacrificed in times of crisis. Northeast India, with its rich and diverse variety of peoples and an extensive postcolonial history, is no stranger to this phenomenon. Here, almost every community has faced identity crisis at one time or the other. They have also fought these crises and emerged victorious with an independent identity of their own. In this dissertation, I shall study the predicament of the Bengali residents in India’s troubled Northeast, who are still trying to find anchor in these trying times, even after decades of residing in India’s Northeast as postcolonial citizens. The ‘Bengali citizen’ here denotes a ‘settler’ from East Pakistan or Bangladesh who was once part of the undivided India. I shall study this condition by reading the Bengali equation with tribal and Assamese communities in Assam. This, I hope, will be pertinent in light of the recent confusion in Assam regarding the Citizenship Bill. It shall be my aim to explore how the Bengali resistance has led them to hold their own in the face of racial and cultural onslaughts – in other words, how the postcolonial Bengali identity in the Northeast India is sustained despite being subjected to cultural, religious and linguistic onslaughts. I shall also look at how linguistic and religious politics are actively contributing to the crisis.

Concurrent with this line of thought is the study of sub-nationalism(s) in Northeast India. Almost every community in the Northeast has developed its own brand of nationalism. If the

communities indeed engaged in defining themselves in terms of an ‘imaginary, horizontal comradeship’¹ – which according to Benedict Anderson explains what nationalism as a concept is, then most communities within the region had developed their nationalism a long time back. Manipur and Tripura had been independent kingdoms even before Independence. The Assamese community derived their legacy from the Ahoms who were perhaps the most powerful rulers of Assam, with considerable cultural and social influence. One does not see the consolidation of Bengali nationalistic reaction till about the Language Movement of 1961, since they were almost always engaged in protecting themselves first from subjugation by other peoples. The Language Movement of Barak Valley witnessed the death of eleven martyrs at Silchar Railway Station in a police firing when they were protesting the imposition of Assamese as the principal state language in Assam on 19th May, 1961. This came to be known as the *Bhasha Shahid Divas* or Language Martyrs’ Day and its influence was supreme in the lives of Bengalis in Assam. It must be noted that insistence on the protection and development of Bengali language meant that Bengalis were refraining from succumbing to the pressures of cultural and linguistic hegemony and thus asserting themselves as different from Assamese.

While the Union Government has not quite succeeded in addressing the root of the problems in Northeast India since after the Partition, it has taken up implementation of National Register of Citizens (NRC) under direct supervision of the Hon’ble Supreme Court. It is being regarded as the newest tool of strengthening nationalistic fervor amongst people in the state and also a sort of culmination of the ethnic struggle that has been a constant phenomenon in Assam since the Independence of India in 1947. The exercise of NRC in Assam aims to a) identify

¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, (London: Verso, 1983).

immigrant residents in Assam from the neighbouring Bangladesh since 1971 and in the process, b) identify the '*Khilanjiya*' or original inhabitants of the state. In the recent times, there have been attempts to use the National Register of Citizens to establish a totalizing identity – that of the Assamese, and establishing the superiority of only Assamese language and culture. It may be noted that this claim is based on a long history of jingoism amongst multiple ethnic groups, who were interested in seceding from the larger landmass and establishing a separate identity for themselves. In the recent years, this exercise has developed into an attempt to mostly identify and detain 'D' or 'Doubtful' voters who are suspected to be Bangladeshi residents in Detention Camps. It appears that this was an expression of Assamese xenophobia which arose out of their own fears of marginalization. The protocol involved in this is extremely complicated and given these circumstances, looking into the intricacies of the National Register of Citizens would be an exercise worth its while, notwithstanding the harassment meted out to lakhs of legal citizens of linguistic minority to prove their nationality. However it will be wise to wait till the completed NRC is in place and instead, consider the period in history that precedes the NRC. It is hoped that charting this period in this dissertation will provide an introduction to the crisis in Assam.

Assam in Pre-Independent India

At this point, I would like to revert to the history of the region to understand the roots of the crisis. The Northeast India was always rife with struggle and invasions. The territory had been invaded by Kachari, Kamata, Sutiya rulers and the like even before the Ahoms came to power and lived and reigned for about 600 years. The Ahoms of the great Tai dynasty had a lot of magnitude in Assamese lives and imagination; they assimilated with the local Assamese culture, often intermarrying among themselves by means of which they infiltrated into the historical, political, cultural and social fabric of the land and its people. Many reformations were

brought to the Assamese society in this process. Towards the beginning of the nineteenth century, the decline of the Ahom rule was brought about by the entry of the Burmese into Assam. Then there was an extensive period of misrule and mismanagement in Assam carried out by the Burmese, which stopped only with the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 signed between the Burmese and the British. However, this also introduced the East India Company's rule in Assam.

Simultaneously, the decline of the Kachari kingdom too came about in 1832. This made it easier for the British to gradually strengthen their hold over Kachar. Now that they had established themselves in the region, the colonial government rearranged the province for administrative advantages in 1874 and the Chief Commissioner's Assam was soon formed by bringing together Kachar, Goalpara and other hill regions in place of what was previously only Assam. At around the same time, the district of Sylhet which was part of the then undivided Bengal was suddenly clubbed with the newly created Assam, in order to supplement its meagre revenue. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the British introduced railway tracks into the very poorly connected Northeast – both within the region and with the rest of the country. To lay these tracks, labourers were brought from Sylhet, Mymensingh, Rangpur and other districts in the then Bengal. This led to the new townships and villages along the tracks that housed immigrants. Following these labourers, agricultural labourers in search of land and employment opportunities too moved in. Migration into Assam during this time was encouraged by the British and facilitated by the upcoming tea industry which soon went on to become the largest industry in the area. Since local labour was unavailable for working in the tea plantations, the second largest migration into Assam took place from Bihar, Orissa and the Chota Nagpur region. Added to this was the migration of communities like Nepalis, Marwaris, Pathans and Sikhs who have settled and stayed on in Assam since then. Many historians opine that such a large scale

movement from one part of the land to the other was enabled by the intrinsic laziness of the Assamese. To counter this view, Sanjoy Hazarika writes in *Strangers of the Mist* that the dominant Hindu Assamese who were locals in the region “did not like to work on tea estates for they were not ‘only easy going, but also a proud race’...”², which according to Hazarika, had also “shackled the community.”³ He mentions that the Bengali incursion was recognized as a much greater threat to Assamese livelihood even then, compared to that of the immigrants of other communities, since the Bengalis (Hindus and Muslims) were the “most aggressive in terms of asserting their economic status.”⁴ Perhaps, it was a combination of the two: because the Assamese locals were laid back, they became hostile to the Bengalis as soon as they realized that immigrants from Bengal were assiduous and equally capable of appropriating their lands and economy.

Sanjoy Hazarika blames absentee landlordism for the eventual poverty of the landlords – which also made the settlers richer, who thus consolidated their economic and social position through hard work. But what most intellectuals do not consider is the distress that settler peasants were subjected to when they were arbitrarily made to migrate at the commands of the British.

It may be noted that Sylhet was a comparatively densely populated constituency with economically, academically and culturally rich Bengali people. This arbitrary change resulted in the changing demographics of the state, inconveniencing the Assamese, Bengali and tribal communities. Bengalis formed about 40 percent of the total population, compared to the 25 percent of Assamese, besides the rest of the tribal population in the newly formed province.

² Sanjoy Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist*, (Viking: Penguin, 1994), 38.

³ Hazarika, *Strangers*, 45.

⁴ Hazarika, *Strangers*, 39.

Sanjoy Hazarika mentions that the British “imported Bengali Hindus, who were educated in English and could help administer the place.”⁵

Added to this was the introduction of Bengali as the official language of the courts till 1873; the schools were in Bengali and in the race for jobs, the Bengalis had major advantages because they were equipped with English training. The Bengalis also formed the ‘visible government’ – they were thought to be regarded favourably by the colonizers which was a more serious cause of grievance against them borne by other communities. It took efforts by the Assamese to establish Assamese as a prime language; the efforts of American Baptist missionaries and Anandaram Dhekial Phukan, among others, are recognized widely in revival of Assamese as a language in Assam. It was not until 1901 that the first college in Assam was started.

Assam during Independence

I would like to now draw attention to the history of Bengal in and around 1947 and concentrate on what conditions brought about the Independence and Partition of the country. In this regard, the situation of Sylhet in Bengal would be particularly focused on, parts of which would become the Barak Valley after Partition, in and around which this dissertation is based. Independence of undivided India came at the cost of the Partition; parts of undivided Bengal came to be included in what would become Pakistan. Before the Partition, an attempt by both Hindus and Muslims to redefine their identities brought about a religious categorization among people. Soon this division became clearer in the conscious decision of Muslims to side with the

⁵ Hazarika, *Strangers*, 45.

decisions of the Muslim League and Muhammed Ali Jinnah's 'Two-Nation Theory'. Bidyut Chakrabarty writes, "... the celebration was undoubtedly marked by a tragic partition along religious lines which took an unacceptable toll in human life and suffering."⁶

The Lahore Resolution of 1940 possibly brought up the demand for a separate Muslim territory for the first time. It was suggested that, since Muslims were a majority in many parts of Northwest and East India, they were to be brought together under one common umbrella of a Muslim sovereign and autonomous nation, which would be treated at par with Hindu majority in all negotiations in the future. Also, the Cabinet Mission Proposal of May 1946 provided for a division of the country into three sections – A, B, C out of which C was to comprise Assam and Bengal. This was seen in Assam as a trick to include the region in 'Pakistan', which although not on the cards till then, was still a solution to the complicated situation of religious discrimination in Eastern India. However, because Bengal was granted 27 general and 33 Muslim representatives in the legislatures, Assam did not want to be clubbed with Sylhet and was ready to cede Sylhet and other Muslim dominated areas of Bengal to form a homogenous Assamese province. The Muslim League was thus successful in garnering support and mobilization in its favour to create a Muslim state separately in Bengal and Punjab. Bidyut Chakrabarty writes that, "Since in Bengal, peasants were largely Muslims and landlords Hindus, the Hindu – Muslim chasm had acquired a class dimension."⁷ This class interest also needed representation at the political level and hence the Partition was momentous in bringing these to the fore. It is widely considered that to most Muslims, the Partition of 1947 was about freedom not just from the

⁶ Bidyut Chakrabarty, *The Partition of Bengal and Assam, 1932- 1947* *Contours of Freedom*, (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 1.

⁷ Chakrabarty, *Partition of Bengal and Assam*, 13.

British control, but also from the supremacy and domination of the Hindu landlords. Such minor interests among the larger mass of people in the country, therefore, did not bring about unity of the country – rather, the Great Divide only strengthened communal forces within it.

Almost the whole of Sylhet was included in the newly created East Pakistan, excepting Ratabari, Karimganj, Badarpur – which were retained in Assam. The division in Bengal and Assam was on the basis of a Referendum that the Hindus and Muslims jointly participated in to create a new nation. With the creation of Pakistan (both East and West), Muslims of the country received a safe haven. Areas like Rangpur, Pabna, Mymensingh, Jessore, Sylhet were especially affected by the Partition since these were regions of undivided Bengal on the eastern part of India which now became parts of East Pakistan. That the Hindus in Pakistan were now at a danger of being marginalized was almost a corollary of the Partition, because religion now was a definitive factor of division created among people. A politics of ‘otherization’ made matters difficult for them – they were at the receiving end of torture and discrimination. An important point to remember is that, while the Partition of Bengal is often talked and written about, the crisis that happened in Assam as a result of the Great Divide is not documented very well – it is not a history that many people know or discuss about. The Bengali Hindus lost a great deal in this business of Partition – they were now the most unwanted people on both sides of the border, who were best out of the country. The memories of Partition are alive in the imaginations of the people and perhaps, will always be. It is important to note that the language issue would add to the ongoing controversy, and thus risk their safety to some extent. Much of this violence stemmed from the example set by the movement in East Pakistan in 1952, against efforts to make Urdu the National Language. In Assam, Assamese sentiments worked negatively to turn

Bengalis into rivals because the presence and dominance of Bengalis would prevent the creation of a linguistically and culturally homogenous province. Sanjoy Hazarika again observes:

The Assamese caste Hindus were as concerned about losing their lands to immigrants as going to Pakistan, Bardoloi decided to implement earlier government resolutions to evict migrants from forest reserves and other places where they had no business to be.⁸

It must be noted that although the Bengalis had always been identified as enemies by the Assamese, yet the Partition provided an ideal opportunity to them to openly oppose the Bengali presence in Assam. Before this, the eviction that the Bengalis faced was not that severe; it was a rather covert animosity that they were subjected to. In East Pakistan on the other hand, the problem was not so much with Bengalis but all Hindus in general. Thus, Bengalis in general bore the brunt of religious and linguistic communalism, the roots of which lay in the event of the Partition.

That the Assamese wanted to proclaim their superiority in Assam seemed to be the natural consequence of the Partition to many people. Sanjoy Hazarika writes in *Strangers of the Mist*⁹ of his meeting with Angami Zapu Phizo, the leader of the Naga underground rebellion of 1972, who categorically stated that the search for Assamese nationalism would happen sooner or later. This spirit of isolation was a common feature in all other tribes that constitute the Northeast, and there were reasons for this too. Udayon Misra states that the Freedom Movement having incidentally bypassed the tribal communities¹⁰, there was little enthusiasm amongst them for Indian Independence. During the time of Indian Independence, Manipur and Tripura were

⁸ Hazarika, *Strangers*, 73.

⁹ Hazarika, *Strangers*, 73. Gopinath Bardoloi was an Indian Independence activist who served as the first Chief Minister of Assam (1946-1950).

¹⁰ Udayon Misra, *India's North-East*, (New Delhi: OUP, 2014).

already princely states. The Khasi and Jaintia Hills (which later became Meghalaya) were never part of the Freedom Movement too. Similarly, North-east Frontier Province or NEFA (present-day Arunachal Pradesh) had a number of un-administered territories at that time and therefore, they were not bothered about Independence too. In the then Naga Hills district, the Naga National Council (NNC) had already observed their Independence before August 15, since they never considered themselves parts of the Indian Union and therefore, always were independent. The search for individual identity in place of the collective one was therefore present in the Northeast irrespective of the Freedom Movement, although at first glance, it might have appeared ‘secessionist’ to the rest of the nation. It is important to remember that as India was emerging from the clutches of British colonialism and familiarizing itself with the concept of an independent nation-state, there were many regions that needed attention as a whole – India’s Northeast, particularly was one such region situated at the “periphery” of the Freedom struggle which “nourished its own perceptions of freedom and independence.”¹¹ It was for this precise reason that the tribal communities did not encourage the phenomenon of co-existence with other communities in their territories. The rise of sub-nationalism(s) in Northeast India seems to have taken shape in this search for independent identities, the origins of which can be traced back to the isolation that these communities faced – to their absence in the ‘national imagination’ as it should have.¹²

Sanjoy Hazarika states a more detailed reason for the tribes’ isolation. The tribal areas of Assam were divided into Excluded Areas (including NEFA or Arunachal Pradesh, Naga and Lushai or Mizo Hills and North Cachar Hills) in 1936. The Partially Excluded zones included the Garo Hills, Mikir Hills of Nagaon and Sibsagar districts and parts of what would be Meghalaya

¹¹ Misra, *India’s North-East*, 12.

¹² Misra, *India’s North-East*, 10.

(Khasi and Jaintia Hills). These areas were under the Governor – the Cabinet and Legislators had no role there, meaning that decisions and legislations relating to these areas could only be passed at the Governor’s discretion. Gopinath Bardoloi thought that this could prove dangerous for them because the region was under an all-powerful body. Bardoloi’s views about the Excluded Areas were – as Hazarika states – “paternalistic ... if not assimilistic.”¹³ Hazarika states further:

Bardoloi agreed that the simple hillfolk needed to be protected from mercenary traders and mourned the lack of knowledge about these people in his own state as well as in other parts of India. He and his colleagues wanted these groups to develop according to their own traditions and genius and yet extend the democratic experiment of representative government to them so that they could slowly enter the modern age.¹⁴

Having been thus misunderstood, the tribes withdrew into a corner. The chasm between the mainland and the periphery thus gradually began to increase. While the Assamese were not exactly as isolated as the hill communities – indeed, a significant percentage of the population of Assam was actively involved in the Freedom Movement, yet the Assamese realized that they would become the more substantial percentage of the population in Assam, if Sylhet was separated from Assam. The separation of the Bengali-speaking Sylhet from Assam “altered the demographic balance in favour of the Assamese.”¹⁵ There was also a considerable debate in Assam about the National Anthem which had no mention of Assam. The Assamese were in favour of introducing ‘O mor aponar desh’ as the National Anthem in place of ‘Jana Gana

¹³ Hazarika, *Strangers*, 62.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Mana', which had a mention of Sindh, now a part of Pakistan. This strengthened the sense of exclusivist nationalism among the Assamese. Meanwhile, the issue of migrations assumed a complicated colouring in Assam. Because Assam shares its borders with Bangladesh, there have been more migrations to and from here than any other state in the Northeast, with a possible exception of Tripura. The Assamese accepted Partition and Independence with mixed emotions: they were successful in remaining a part of the Indian Union by actively participating in the Freedom Movement, with Sylhet becoming a part of East Pakistan. Assamese people claimed to be 'indigenous' citizens of Assam and declared their rights of ownership over the land. As a result, their ire was directed towards Bengalis and other non-Assamese tribes alike. They declared that none other than the Assamese could stay in Assam. When the new Cabinet came into effect, the new Chief Minister of Assam, Gopinath Bardoloi declared, "Assam is for Assamese only" which indicated that any other community wishing to reside in Assam would either have to assimilate themselves with the rest of the Assamese or relinquish their rights of citizenship.

Assam during 1971

The Liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 complicated the situation for Bengalis. While on the one hand, it was a life changing event for them, because they were finally free of the domination of Pakistan, it also made the scenario worse for Bengali Hindus – the minority in terms of population. They began to live with the sense of being unwanted in Bangladesh. The best possible option to them now was to migrate to the neighbouring regions – Assam and Tripura in this case, in search of land and shelter. In 1972, Meghalaya was carved out of Assam and for some time, was peopled by Bengali Hindus. This was not accepted by the Khasis who soon started to create problems for the Bengalis. Bengalis thus became doubly unwanted – first

in Bangladesh and then in Assam and Meghalaya. They turned into the common enemy for all peoples in the Northeast. Udayon Misra rightly observes that, Bengalis settled in Barak Valley would always be affected by the thought of being part of an Assamese majority province. They would also probably continue to live as an “unwelcome part of the state of Assam.”¹⁶

To my mind, the Liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 occurred as a consequence of the Partition, which was the most singular event that changed the lives of the people in the subcontinent forever. What remained after this catastrophic event were the memory of it and the loss of ‘home’ it brought in its wake. Dipesh Chakrabarty notes that this memory would constitute two parts – the trauma and the nostalgia. While the historical truth relating to this can be explained in terms of why, when and how the Partition happened, the trauma and nostalgia are the inexplicable bits of this experience: “A traumatized memory has a narrative structure which works on a principle opposite to that of any historical narrative.”¹⁷

This combination of trauma and nostalgia exists in the postcolonial Bengali even today, and is more in case of the Bengalis from East Pakistan – who are colloquially known as ‘Bangal’ in the Bengali circuit of West Bengal and ‘Bongaal’ in Assamese terms. Their identity, previously determined by religion, now was recreated on the basis of their language. Almost two or three generations of settlers have grown up amidst this historical framework, in which language is an important determinant of their identity. With the constant attacks on language, their citizenship also came to be questioned. In 1985, the Assam Accord was signed which demanded the upgrading of the electoral lists. It was clear that Assamese hegemony was already

¹⁶ Misra, *India's North-East*, 11.

¹⁷ Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘Remembered Village’: Representation of Hindu-Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of the Partition’, pub. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 31, No 32 (Aug 10, 1996). Acquired from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4404497>.

starting to gain ground, in that the Assamese leaders would not allow elections without proper electoral lists. Atul Bora, leader of All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and currently, Minister for Agriculture & Veterinary Department in the current Cabinet of Assam, mentioned in clear terms: "The elections were held in 1985, but we want a correct electoral roll, deleting the name of the foreigners... otherwise we will not allow any election to take place in Assam."¹⁸ At the same time, Golam Osmani of United Minority Front emphasizes: "No Government in Assam can continue unless it is supported by the minorities ... linguistic as well as religious."¹⁹ One can gauge the amount of confusion this complicated situation led to. The same confusions continue to exist till today, and now it has transformed into the NRC crisis. It is unfortunate to question these people's citizenship when they become stateless if left out in the final draft of the NRC having already lived and participated in elections for generations in this country. It is feared that a disastrous human crisis awaits Assam in near future.

In my dissertation, I shall observe this crisis from the perspective of literary texts. The trajectory of the Bengali condition in Assam will be traced from the time of Independence to the present decade. For this purpose, I shall first consider *The Point of Return* by Siddhartha Deb. It is historically set in the years following the Bangladesh War of 1971. This is a story of a father and son who are both postcolonial citizens. While the father is desperately in search of a 'home' in the land that he considers his own, the son feels distanced from the very same land. The father settles in Shillong in the then Assam, which later became the capital of Meghalaya from 1972 onwards. They live as strangers in their own 'home' in Shillong, which although not a permanent one, was still a source of solace to them. But more importantly, engaging with the novel in detail

¹⁸ Mentioned in a footage which is part of the broadcast stock footage archive of Wilderness Films India Ltd. Acquired from Youtube: <https://youtu.be/EiWxUe0vSuc>

¹⁹ Ibid.

will show how as Bengalis, the father and son face discrimination in the tribal state of Meghalaya – till they both desert it to discover themselves elsewhere. The idea of a ‘home’ remains elusive to them, as it is for most postcolonial Bengalis. ‘Home’ and the idea of stability are countered by the constant restlessness that is part and parcel of their lives.

As previously stated, the rise of ‘sub-nationalism’(s) is a noticeable feature in world politics. Partha Chatterjee points out that during the process of nation-building prior to Independence, nationalism in colonies was an ‘anti-colonial’ strategy; in the 70s however, it exceeded its limits and turned into a cause for ethnic struggles.²⁰ Nationalism is almost a world problem now, and a glimpse of this is seen in Dhruba Hazarika’s *Sons of Brahma*. It showcases this spirit of intense nationalism advocated by archetypal revolutionary groups like United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), which manifests into jingoism, hatred and violence. Interestingly, the story is narrated by a tribal voice, who can neither side with the revolution nor accept the presence of Bengalis, particularly Muslims. This text has been chosen for its insightful look into the crisis from the perspective of the tribal community. Dealing with the novel in the second chapter will also bring to the fore the effects of intense nationalism and show how the situation is complicated for both the Assamese and Bengali middle classes alike.

The third chapter talks of two texts, *From Valley to Valley* and *Barbed Wire Fence: Stories of Displacement from the Barak Valley of Assam*. Both these texts inspect the postcolonial condition of settler Bengalis in two different regions of Assam. *From Valley to Valley* written by Dipak Kumar Barkakati narrates the experiences of Kalikishore Dutta, who is

²⁰ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press), 1993.

the last member of an aristocratic family in the then East Pakistan. Kalikishore gives up his assets, migrates to Assam at a day's notice during Partition and begins to live his life independently in Assam. Many other people belonging to different sections of the population also travel with him to Assam. The novel draws a picture of the condition of Bengalis across the society, showing how the experience of Partition had affected and stayed on in people's lives forever. All of these people struggle to find their identity and a home for themselves.

Prof. Dipendu Das and Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee point out in the Introduction of *Barbed Wire Fence* that once a postcolonial citizen is uprooted, he is afraid of even hoping to dream of a land that will again be his own. *Barbed Wire Fence* is an anthology of stories from the Northeast that talks of such 'settler' individuals that have found a place for themselves in the newly created land. But this 'place' is not free of external attacks; everyday, challenges are hurled at their rights of citizenship in this country. Many characters in the anthology live with the memory of their glorious homeland back in East Pakistan, and more specifically, Sylhet. The ghost of Partition looms large in these people's lives, and although they are free of colonial clutches, they are devoid of an identity. This reading, I hope, will help to explore how these people in the Northeast have created their identities anew as postcolonial residents.

Since language is one of the roots of identity formation, it would be useful to look at the history of the Language Movement in Barak Valley of Assam comprising predominantly three Bengali speaking districts of Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. The Language Movement of 1961 is perhaps the most important event in the history of Barak Valley. It saw the protest against the forceful implementation of Assamese as the only official state language in both Barak and Brahmaputra Valleys. Eventually, eleven young people were martyred in Police firing at Silchar Railway Station on May 19, 1961. There have been considerable amounts of writing

about this incident in Barak Valley and the majority of it is in Bengali. I shall consider the nuanced effects of the Language Movement to understand the politics of nationalism – to see how nationalism also developed among Bengalis and how it culminated in the Language Movement of 1961. This, I hope, will also show how language shaped the Bengali identity in Barak Valley, more than the communal or religious angle of the matter.

It is hoped that this Introduction will provide an entrée to the following chapters that narrate and represent the crisis of the Bengali in postcolonial Northeast India.

Chapter 1

Defining ‘Identity’ for the Bengali citizen in Northeast India: Siddhartha

Deb’s *The Point of Return*

The division of the country into two halves was perhaps the most significant results of Independence. It also gave two distinct components to Pakistan – ‘East’ and ‘West’ Pakistan, which were indeed the results of the Partition. As it became clear that Pakistan was to be the safe haven for Muslims of the country, the Hindus on both sides chose to remain in Punjab which was located in India while their Muslim brothers stayed back in parts of undivided India, now belonging to Pakistan. A similar event occurred also in the Eastern part. Muslims of Sylhet chose their country by means of a Referendum that caused the exodus of their Hindu brethren to independent India. It is in fact, the Partition of India that was the root of all the horrors unleashed in the lives of postcolonial citizens of the Indian subcontinent; these horrors are part of peoples’ lived experience, and as Urvashi Butalia writes, “... exist(s) privately in the stories told and retold inside so many households in India and Pakistan.”²¹

It may be noted that the Partition created a polyphony of voices which were represented in the string of oral and written narratives that came after. Almost all stories of the Partition betray the sense of loss and displacement that is an inexplicable yet omnipresent feeling in these peoples. For my purposes, it will be pertinent to consider the Eastern side of independent India, which became Bangladesh in 1971. The people in this part have been destabilized twice – once while they were made part of Pakistan during Independence and secondly, when they deserted

²¹ Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence*, (Viking: Penguin, 1998), 4.

their land and home to re-settle in India after the creation of Bangladesh. Interestingly, the basis of segregation was religious; their religion determined if they were parts of a Hindu or Muslim majority country. In India, Assam – which was already on tenterhooks during the Freedom Struggle in which it had an important role to play – became the most common place of settlement for Bengali Hindus of East Pakistan. It may be noted that any communal tension in Northeast India is intricately connected with the problems of ethnicity, language and religion, to which migration adds its pangs. In the Introduction to *Barbed Wire Fence*, Dipendu Das and Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee write that, for Bengali citizens of Assam in Northeast India,

migration and displacement that remain central to the postcolonial and globalised world experience, acquire further dimensions as one seeks to delve deeper into the issues concerning displacement in Assam.²²

These ‘dimensions’ take shape into issues of identity crisis, which are the products of numerous onslaughts borne by the settler postcolonial Bengali. It is perhaps the most important of the many crises the postcolonial Bengali has had to face. This was an event with both social and cultural effect and a commonly shared experience by all postcolonial Bengali citizens. This chapter will deal with Siddhartha Deb’s *The Point of Return* which treats the Partition as a central cultural text around which the crisis of identity builds up. Primarily, an analysis of the novel will show how Bengalis have faced discrimination from the tribal population who claim original ancestry in the state of Meghalaya (which was born out of Assam in 1972). It has as one of its main protagonists, Dr Dam, who is seen throughout the text as a retired veterinary surgeon and also a postcolonial migrant Bengali in the state of Assam. The striking feature of the novel is that, the

²² Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee and Dipendu Das ed. *Barbed Wire Fence: Stories of Displacement from the Barak Valley of Assam*, (New Delhi: Niyogi Books), 2012, ix.

story accommodates very few characters and yet, encapsulates beautifully the pangs of migration induced by the event called Independence. It is also an exercise in recollection, as the narrator Babu goes back in time to narrate his father's trials in the new country and also his childhood and adolescence.

Dr Dam is based on the author's father himself. Although it is not directly mentioned, yet we understand that the locale – a small Northeastern hill town, is perhaps Shillong since there are references to localities like Rilbong, Jail Road, Police Bazaar and the like. Deb's childhood having been spent in Shillong, the story of *The Point of Return* is as much a reminiscence of his own childhood and adolescence as it is his father's life in service as a veterinary surgeon. Dr Dam's family had come over to India when the country was partitioned into two, and his late father had given up his land and vocation at a day's notice. Dr Dam almost rediscovers himself in India – towards the beginning of the novel, Babu writes:

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.²³

The change in borders represented not just a change in nationhood but also involved a process of rebuilding oneself from scratch, which in fact, contributed largely to the recreation of identities in this new land. Interestingly, this is a universal emotion in all postcolonial Bengalis even two or three generations later. One of the primary features of this condition, therefore, is the search

²³ Siddhartha Deb, *The Point of Return*, (New York: HarperCollins), 2004, 34.

for ‘home’ – which is an idea that eludes the postcolonial citizens forever. In a documentary by Britter Baire Films, Subha Prasad Nandi Majumdar, a noted Bengali artiste from Silchar (Assam) poignantly recalls:

Since my childhood, I knew that the word ‘home’ is a past tense. At present, it has no existence... Especially as Bengalis growing up in Assam, we are habituated to use the word ‘house’ in place of ‘home’. We say, ‘Where is your house?’, ‘I will visit your house’. No one says, ‘I will visit your home’... History has taken away our home and has given us a house in its place.²⁴

This same concern with finding a home also bothers Dr Dam, for after all, it is a house that guarantees a residency in a ‘foreign’ country. That he is also denied of his full pension which he is actually liable to receive, adds to his woes and the already existing fear of being denied an identity. In fact, it is this desire for a home in the new country that makes him buy a house near Narangi Oil Refineries in Gauhati (Guwahati). When the Government occupies the land without notice, Dr Dam can do nothing about it but accept his fate with resilience. But this thought does not leave him and this leads him to buy a plot of land at Silchar, beside his parents’ plot. This, he thinks, would help him define himself anew. However, this is a secret until his wife discovers him calculating costs. Babu and indeed the author himself, remembers that this was a momentous decision that his father had taken and quite a brave one too. Dr Dam and his family “would live after he had retired, he said firmly; no more government quarters, no more rented houses with strangely shaped rooms, but finally a house of our own.”²⁵

²⁴ Interview by Subha Prasad Nandi Majumdar in a documentary called ‘Apar Bangla’: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kD2xZfjFxpM&feature=share>

²⁵ Deb, *Point of Return*, 37.

The sacrifices that go into building a house that would hopefully turn into a 'home' might seem trivial to people accustomed to the benefits and advantages of having a permanent home, but for postcolonial migrant citizens, who are given the status of refugees in another country, it represents stability and intransience more than anything else. For most generations afterwards who settle in India automatically, the responsibility of having to find an identity for oneself is important, even though they themselves have houses for themselves and little attachment to their ancestral land back in the present Bangladesh. But perhaps the ghost of the Partition dominates the imagination of postcolonial Bengalis in the Northeast India and even though children of the third or fourth generation acquaint themselves with Partition only through the memories of their forefathers, yet it is a recurrent thought in most migrant Bengali families of Northeast India.

Dr Dam in the story is well aware of the fact that his claims to the land he stays and works in are not permanent, which is why he rushes into building a house for himself. Buying a land or house in the hill-town does not seem feasible, particularly after the change in ministry and the new laws put forth by it restricting 'outsiders' from owning property. The doctor's friends, Kar, Mukherjee, Dutta were already in possession of houses, but unlike them, he had

not shaken off the stigma of the refugee. He was still uncertainly poised, growing old, depositing the monthly rental checks, carrying out repairs on the plumbing, and writing to the owner that the holes in the ceiling needed to be fixed before the monsoons.²⁶

Dr Dam is caught in the web of principle and idealism that he can never get out of in his entire life. His son often fails to understand and subscribe to his father's ideals. However, if the generation and age gap between him and his son alienate them in their household, the efforts to

²⁶ Deb, *Point of Return*, 43.

build a decent house in Silchar brings them closer than even before. Ironically, his son is the victim of similar trials as his father, even though his experiences are of a different kind. He comes to realise how with the Independence of India, every ideal that Dr Dam held dear seems to have collapsed, landing him into an unsettling dilemma about his existence. When Dr Dam realizes that the cost of construction is more than he had initially planned, he reacts with his characteristic stoicism and curtails the costs of building. He abides by rationality but deters from paying extra charges to carry raw materials for construction to Silchar. It is this same toughness that enables him to accept the fact that the cement from Cherrapunjee to be used for construction of the house had hardened into stone after rains at Silchar and his brother Biren had done little to save the sacks of cement. Grand plans for the house collapse and the result is a much smaller dwelling to which the family shifts after Dr Dam has a stroke. However, the idea of 'home' does not develop for Babu as much as for his parents. He is reminded of how his uncle Biren is hostile to their living next door. Babu also recollects that during another of his uncle's marriage back in Silchar, he and his parents were always a kind of outsiders to the rest of their family. Neither could his extended family fit into their way of life, nor could they accept Babu as one of their own children. It was thus a house with odd members who met only occasionally during weddings. But that was all that signified a 'home' to Dr Dam – the spirit of which he had been trying to recreate in the house that he would build beside his parents' humble abode. For Babu however, 'home' signifies to him the little hill-town that they had had to desert, after being subjected to numerous attacks by the tribal population who claim to be original inhabitants. Although Babu is now well aware of the fact that this hill-town would never be his own – indeed, it is difficult for a postcolonial citizen in India's Northeast to find a 'home' – yet, it is this small town that fits the definition of a 'hometown', if any. It is here that his childhood and

youth have been spent, and it is this place that has molded his identity in ways more than one.

Towards the end of the novel, Babu as the narrator says of the hill-town:

But this was home, surely, this space of childhood, the place where I had seen my father on his feet, this confluence of childhood hopes and a faith in the future. All concentrated in the word *hometown*, a definite point in the curve of the earth, where the monsoon marshals its forces and bursts through rooms and windows and staircases with a wet, cold smell, where the winter months swivel from light to darkness and the halogen lamps that come on in the evening create little pools on the metaled roads, broken up momentarily by the rumbling wheels of supply trucks.²⁷

Dr Dam never insists staunchly on his identity as a Bengali. In fact, his entire life is spent in the services he renders to the veterinary department – never wanting to go against the state machinery, he is also extremely proficient in Assamese and thus, he sticks to the protocol of a Government servant with no chosen sides. But unknown to himself, he is always judged as a Bengali, first in Assam and then in Meghalaya. He is also symbolically affected by his journeys throughout his life. The journey undertaken to shift to Assam after Partition as part of the great exodus, makes him lose his identity for the first time. This is also the event that stripped most Bengali Hindus of their rights, lands and identities; but Dr Dam recovers from this. The second journey in his life makes him migrate within the new country and shift to Calcutta to study veterinary medicine. The most eventful years of his life as a veterinary surgeon give him the expertise and confidence that is not oft found in postcolonial citizens always in want of stability. If he ever faced it, it was not reflected in all the years that he had been active. Perhaps he gets the first taste of being ‘homeless’ when he loses the house at Narangi. His house at Silchar was a

²⁷ Deb, *Point of Return* 249.

sort of ready resort although he had always wanted to veer away from its faults and cracks. When he is at Silchar, he is brought to an epiphanic realization of his status as a Bengali in Northeast India, who had carried with themselves an identity “that allowed for neither growth nor change.”²⁸ Indeed, as the narrator describes, these people are defined by “not what they were – that was uncertain – but by what they were not.”²⁹ Yet, it is this place that provides him the identity that his workplace does not. The last journey he undertakes after his stroke brings him back closest to his roots, even though this was probably not the most ideal option for him. The Bengalis in India’s Northeast hold their language the dearest, which they still are very severe about. But for Dr Dam, an English educated Government officer, being known only by the language does not seem enough. In many ways, he tries to escape from the reality of which he is very much a part – and the easiest way of doing this is choosing English as a preferred medium of communication.

Babu too, prefers English for communication. At least in conversations with his father, he is comfortable in English and he does that with most of his other acquaintances. Whether it is derision for the dialect spoken in Silchar and other scattered parts in Northeast India or his education that shapes him in this way cannot be ascertained. It does however, seem to be a mechanism to combat the increasing marginality of the postcolonial citizen born out of linguistic and ethnic identity politics. It must be remembered that Shillong was and still is home to a colonial setup – it is known as the ‘Scotland of the East’. Given this, it is the English education that perhaps enables people – especially Bengalis – to hold their own and regard the language as a sort of refuge from the linguistic attacks hurled at them from various quarters. This adds to their identity by equipping them with another language which almost becomes a part of

²⁸ Deb, *Point of Return* 107.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

themselves. In fact, every crisis of ethnicity in Assam may be traced back to the linguistic factor. Because each community wants to establish its majority status, therefore, language becomes the most ready alternative on which attacks can be laid to achieve the greater goal of a homogeneous society. A group of peoples, therefore, turns into linguistic minority based on aggression. Assamese attempts at establishing linguistic homogeneity and eventually linguistic superiority prove to be self-destructive, as their territory is lost in bits. Kailash C. Baral seems to suggest that adopting English as the preferred medium gives the postcolonial minority peoples an identity – which is not subdued by the attacks from the dominant ethnicities of the region.³⁰ Because the Northeast has never been “at the centre of epistemic enunciation,”³¹ therefore the use of English and not of the vernacular can bring them at par with the mainland and thus help to deal with the crisis of identity. It can also help them get over the stigma of the ‘other’. For postcolonial Bengalis, their identity is ascertained by the use of not Bengali or Hindi or Khasi, but English that gives them a fresh and unique characteristic. It is very similar to ‘miyah poetry’ written by Muslims of erstwhile East Pakistan – the *Na-Axamiya* people or the ‘neo Assamese’, which is written in English to convey their loss of language and identity. In an essay titled, ‘Crossing Linguistic Boundaries’, Tilottoma Misra writes of writers from Arunachal, like Mamang Dai, Lummer Dai, Yeshe Dorje Thongchi, who choose English and Assamese as the principal language for communication. Misra opines that a conscious decision for many writers to write in an acquired language

³⁰ This is mentioned in the Keynote Address at the National Seminar on ‘Dynamics of Culture, Society and Literature: Emerging Literatures from North-East’ organized by IIAS, Shimla and Department of English, Mizoram University on 10-11 March, 2009. The lecture is collected in Margaret Ch. Zama ed. *Emerging Literatures from Northeast India*, (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2013)

³¹ Tilottoma Misra ed. *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and Essays* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), xviii.

is also based on the desire to target a readership which is wider than the limited one available in one's native tongue. The writers from many of the smaller ethnic communities of north-eastern India whose native languages do not have a script of their own or are spoken by only a handful of people have, however, adopted English as their acquired speech not merely out of choice but because the policy decisions of the state governments in these regions have favoured English above other languages as the medium of instruction in schools.³²

Kailash C. Baral also mentions that the reason for adopting English can be traced in the *Marg-Desi divide* which had contributed to the process of increasing 'Sanskritization' of indigenous languages. While the 'Marg' or Classical would refer to elite and immemorial traditions, the 'Desi' would stand for the local, ephemeral and popular traditions. Baral argues that some vernaculars of the Northeast have had to undergo a tradition of 'Sanskritization' in order to be close to what is accepted as the 'classical' tradition. An indigenous or vernacular tradition may not be a part of the Sanskritised/classical literary culture, which is why it becomes important to choose a language widely accepted at the pan-Indian and international levels. Baral says in his essay,

It is therefore pertinent to say that literary writings from Northeast have a plural signification; sometimes genre forms have been adopted from the Indian classical

³² Tilottoma Misra, 'Crossing Linguistic Boundaries: Two Arunachali Writers in Search of Readers', pub. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 42, No. 36 (Sept 8 – 14, 2007), pp. 3653 – 3661. Accessed from Jstor : <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40276364>

tradition and sometimes these forms have grown outside of it, mostly drawn from the English literary tradition.³³

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

For, marginality is indeed a question of primary importance to the people of Northeast India, where one or the other community often gets marginalized by others. It has been previously mentioned that Bengalis were at the receiving end of discrimination and intolerance in Assam both before and after Partition of the country. Post Independence, tribal communities of Assam gradually began to demand separate territories for themselves. The capital of Assam shifted to Dispur from Shillong – Meghalaya shelters a majority of Khasi population. Assamese ethno-nationalism did not want to accept diversity of ethnic origins, but regard everyone as ‘people of Assam’. This reluctance to admit differences and the need to introduce ‘detrribalization’ as an anti-colonial action soon alienated the tribal population. However, Bengalis bore the brunt of this; as previously stated, a significant portion of the Bengali population, who had settled in Assam after Independence now stayed back in Shillong, and become targeted at by the ‘indigenous’ people of the state. *The Point of Return* is replete with instances of chauvinism directed against Bengalis by the non-Assamese tribal groups (Khasis) in

³³ Kailash C. Baral, ‘Articulating Marginality’, in *Emerging Literatures from Northeast India*, ed. Margaret Ch. Zama, (New Delhi: Sage Publications), 2013, 4.

Meghalaya. In one such instance, Dr Dam has to meet the tribal Minister Leapingstone about an official matter. Leapingstone offends him by directing a gun towards him, about which he is frightened and has hallucinations later at the hospital. Leapingstone justifies himself by saying, “ ‘An outsider. A foreigner. Should have some respect.’ ”³⁴

An ironical occurrence in this case is the fact that, although Dr Dam and Babu have not insisted on adopting Bengali as their primary language of communication, yet their identity is never exclusive of their language and this lets makes them easy targets of tribal nationalism in the hill-town. The brotherhood that tribal people feel towards each other is a steady feature of their nationalism and this sentiment is echoed in their hatred towards the Bengali immigrants. In a much later occurrence, dated around 1986 in the novel, Dr Dam and Babu come across a tribal man at the Pension Office. He spits venom at them: “ ‘East Bengalis crossing the border, back and forth, up and down. Why *do* they cross the border, hey?’ ”³⁵ Their ethnicity and identity evoke disdain in the man. He continues ranting: “Always coming across the border, with hordes of squealing children, coming across like locusts, like rain.”³⁶ If at one point, insularity of Bengalis and other non-tribals dominated tribal officers and other Government positions, a reversal of position is reflected now in the loathing to the Bengalis in the state. Dr Dam reflects that even as a Bengali, he is not very different from the rest of the tribal and non-Assamese denizens of the hill-town. His history is equally old; his people are not merely settlers but also a very strong race, who had undergone numerous conflicts to achieve Freedom and indeed, it was not their fault that borders had made them aliens or the ‘other’ in the same country. It is this

³⁴ Deb, *Point of Return*, 96.

³⁵ Deb, *Point of Return*, 22.

³⁶ Deb, *Point of Return*, 23.

complicated allegiance to his race and community that he never fully acknowledges and yet, is made to accept at various junctures in his life.

Their memories of the place they call ‘home’ and the totality of their experiences of being here are punctuated by events that bring forth the disparity towards them. Towards the end, Babu recollects incidents of violence against him and his father. They are often termed ‘dkhar’ – outsiders to the state. He remembers how one Sunday morning when he was ten years old or so, he accompanies his father to the cobbler’s to mend the shoes bought from a Chinese shoe maker at Burra Bazaar. But that Sunday, the cobbler (who is originally from Bihar) is nowhere to be found; instead, they are greeted by curses and blows aimed at Dr Dam. They unfortunately and unknowingly, choose to venture outdoors on a day of strike and curfew called by student union leaders to protest the presence of ‘foreigners’ in the state, who are the Bengalis and other non-tribal people. Babu remembers that fear is an emotion that had gripped them at that time. Even now when the past can never return to him, he is surprised to notice that fear has reasonably blurred many aspects of the past, merged it with the present and given him a lingering sense of loss and despair – of never being accepted by the place that he and his father have loved so much and yet, have had to desert. All his experiences in his *hometown* have condensed into fear and it seems to be an indispensable part of his past. It possibly also results in creating the aversion to imagine any other place as his ‘home’. In another of his experiences, his Assamese friend Moni categorically mentions that the Khasi student union leaders have started protesting the presence of ‘outsiders’ and it is more unsafe for Bengalis than for the Assamese. Babu and his friend, Partha are assaulted on their way back from a rock concert. The air echoes with slogans as “Go back, Bangladeshis”, “Go back, outsiders”; they are saved by a tribal friend, Bantei who suggests that they come out of hiding only when the police have cleared the mess. Such extensive is the

communal violence that non-tribals almost start thinking twice of living in the hill town.

Bengalis have to carry identity cards to prove that they are Indians – the tribal government had already stopped the construction of the railway line to stop the entry of more Bangladeshis. The violence of 1979, which saw the murder of seven non-tribals at Garikhana on a bus, made many Bengalis look for shelter in non tribal neighbourhoods. The roots of this crisis primarily seem to be their language, since it is their language that they are identified by. The demands that are made of them to ‘go back’ have no substance, because there is no land that they really ‘belong to’. The sense of anxiety is poignantly described:

Instead I went through periods of completely different emotions, oscillating between a desire to blend with the town and the insiders and a virulent hatred for the place and a desire to leave it forever so that I would never hear that word, *Foreigner*, again.³⁷

However, for Dr Dam, terms like ‘dkhar’ are abstract terms that defy description, just as his experiences back in East Pakistan were. Dr Dam recounts his experiences of being haunted by some hostile communal elements during the riots of 1980, which he narrowly escapes by hiding in his quarters. Memories of ‘boots’ walking up and down trouble him forever and by his son’s description, fear of ‘boots’ is transferred to his son who is victim of the same sense of insecurity as his father. This fear is a gift of Khasi nationalism – which indicates that it is possible to include only as many number of ‘foreigners’ as is acceptable to make them ‘culturally homogeneous’. As Ernest Gellner mentions, a territorial political unit can become homogeneous “if it either kills, or expels, or assimilates all non-nationals.”³⁸ ‘Non-nationals’ as a term demands that members of different nationhood cannot be regarded ‘national citizens’, belonging

³⁷ Deb, *Point of Return*, 238.

³⁸ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell), 1983, 2.

to the same ‘nation’ is the primary precondition of nationhood. Gellner’s description indicates that two members of the same nation will (a) share the same culture, which would include a “system of ideas and signs and associations and ways of behaving and communicating” and (b) “recognize each other as belonging to the same nation.”³⁹ Dr Dam, Babu and other non-tribals never fit into the ‘imagined, political, sovereign [Khasi] community’⁴⁰ in Meghalaya. Like all Bengalis, this places Dr Dam and Babu in the ‘centre-periphery’ distinction that automatically relegates Bengalis to the periphery. As parts of Northeast India, Bengalis are therefore doubly colonized – once, by the British and secondly, by the Assamese and tribal nationalities of Northeast India.

As has been already emphasized in this discussion, ‘memory’ is perhaps the most important trope in Dr Dam’s and Babu’s story. Memory can be said to have *shaped* Babu in a number of ways. The trauma of displacement and migration from East Pakistan, classified as *memoire collective* or collective memory⁴¹ continues to live in the memory and experience of postcolonial Bengalis till date and perhaps always will, although the blow might get softened over the years. For an extremely reticent person like Dr Dam, each recollection, triggered by minor events, relates to some significance in the past and is a way of finding anchor in postcolonial India. The cultural events in the larger world around him coincide with his individual memory as a boy after Partition and as a young adult in Calcutta. When he narrates the tale of the tiger and the shoes he had bought with his scholarship money, he slips into a recollection that is interesting and yet distant to Babu’s experiences. In retrospect, Babu can identify with his father’s trials in his own abandonment of his hometown:

³⁹ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 7.

⁴⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, (London: Verso, 1983).

⁴¹ Astrid Erll, *Cultural Memory Studies*, (Berlin: Deutsche Nationalbibliothek, 2008).

Perhaps he was thinking about the past, about the village life that had come up so suddenly in his stories, and maybe he was overwhelmed by the memories, each bit that surfaced revealing only a small part of the whole, fragmentary and uncertain.⁴²

For Babu, his individual memory of living in the small hill-town, spending the greater part of his adolescence and youth here and then travelling back to Silchar with his parents are all parts of his cultural/collective memory that find mention in the story. Like every second generation postcolonial Bengali, his memories are centred more on the hill-town than on East Pakistan (a place that he has never been to). His individual memory includes giving away most of the little elements of the household that his mother had accumulated over the years before their departure and it is, in a way, symbolic of being uprooted from his hometown. He writes: “it has already become the past, I thought, this place, our lives here, as I looked at the bare walls and the boxes piled on the floor.”⁴³ All the days spent in the town are reduced to this single moment of departure, which is the only significant reality at this point. When he again comes back as a journalist, he has already successfully created that objective distance with the town that enables him to look at his situation from a nuanced perspective. In the final section of the novel, ‘Terminal’, Babu/the narrator assume interchangeable roles – as he looks back at the past, he comprehends that departure has only been a part of the complete experience. As he introspects, he categorizes his experience into parts as ‘hometown’, ‘maps’, ‘history’, ‘ships’, ‘memories’, ‘travelers’, ‘dreams’ and ‘airport’, which complement him as a postcolonial citizen in search of a composite identity. In fact, leaving behind his experiences of the hill-town has only created in him a *mélange* of feelings, both of love and hatred – something that he can never really part with though he can distance himself from them. His identity, which is composed of multiple layers,

⁴² Deb, *Point of Return*, 142.

⁴³ Deb, *Point of Return*, 199.

gets cemented. In fact, a very significant insight on the postcolonial Bengali condition is provided by Dr Chatterji, as he likens Bengalis with the Jews: “We are a dispersed people, wandering, but unlike the Jews we have no mythical homeland.”⁴⁴ Dr Chatterji also emphasizes that being insulated is not the solution to this crisis.

In a lecture delivered at Wellesley College as part of the Distinguished Writers’ Series⁴⁵ and even a couple of times in the novel, Siddhartha Deb emphasizes that Northeast of India has always been pushed to a corner – which makes it difficult for its problems to be brought to the fore. I would add that the problems of Bengalis particularly, have not been brought to limelight. It may also be observed that for Bengalis of Northeast India, the tribulations are more pronounced than other communities, since they are the only people without a defined territory to themselves. Linguistic marginalization in this case also stands out more than the religious conflict. Stripped of a solid identity, language is the only resort that keeps the Bengalis afloat; it still allows them to ask for their just rights and thus it becomes an important means of combat. Relations also need to improve among communities within Northeast India itself: continuous marginalization of any one community is likely to prove detrimental to the interests of the region. The solution to this problem is not as easy as implementing a Citizenship Bill (NRC); requires a more organized and methodical approach. One only hopes that this step will be taken by the Union Government in order to ameliorate this crisis.

⁴⁴ Deb, *Point of Return*, 287.

⁴⁵ Accessed from Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ae22oC5IHIA>

Chapter 2

Ethno-linguistic and Religious Conflict and Rise of Nationalism in Assam:

Dhruba Hazarika's *Sons of Brahma*

The Partition of India taught one that religion could be mobilized into becoming one of the greatest points of animosity amongst people. Frontier regions of the country, which became especially affected after Partition, now recorded evidences of people being massacred on the sole basis of religion which was quite a new experience for people on both sides of the border. On the western borders of the country, occurrences of religious difference and its consequent, recurrent problems have shown that Partition of the country could never have been a solution to the problem of colonialism. On the eastern flank, the issue of religion aggravated the already existing ethno-linguistic conflict. The region that suffered the most in this crisis was Assam in Northeast India. Both the Brahmaputra and Barak Valleys (including areas previously belonging to Bangladesh/ East Pakistan) witnessed troubles which included ethnic clashes, abductions and killings, ransom demands. The roots of most of these incidents could be traced back to the convoluted position of ethnicity and religion – which were gifts of the Partition.

In the previous chapter, I have discussed how ethnicity played an important role in antagonizing the Bengalis and non-Assamese tribal populace. In the following discourse, I shall consider how ethnicity, coupled with religion has added to the endangering of the Bengalis' position – making them the common enemy in the entirety of Northeast India, by reading in

detail, Dhruva Hazarika's *Sons of Brahma*. It is hoped that an analysis of this text will show how ethnicity and language are intricately connected and how religious and linguistic conflict gradually substituted each another in Assam.

To begin with, one must remember that there is an interesting reversal of contexts and interests at work in this entire crisis. During and after the Partition of the country, a relatively secular group of people came to be divided first on the basis of religion and then through their ethnic interests. Post 1947, the issue of culture, ethnicity and language gained prominence over religion, although religion too, is extremely important in the bargain. In a personal interview, noted artiste from Assam (Silchar), Subha Prasad Nandi Majumdar admits that any conflict in Assam is intricately associated with questions of ethnicity, language and religion. By the Sylhet Referendum which urged people to vote in favour of a Muslim-dominated Pakistan and Hindu India, people in the Northeast chose their own fate. When Assam was still part of undivided Bengal, the colonial government transferred a class of people consisting of clerks, doctors, merchants from Bengal proper to Assam, who came to be identified as the representatives of British colonial government in Assam. Bengali was established as the court language, and Bengalis educated in English became the first choices in case of jobs. Thus, they became the easiest targets of communal acrimony. Consciousness of people of Assam against Bengalis began to strengthen from that point onwards.

It is known that the absorption of Bengali Hindus into Assamese society started during the Ahom rule itself; many caste-Hindu Assamese families had Bengali lineage at one point of time. However, with the British rule, things had become bitter between them. Therefore, Independence and Partition appeared as an advantageous situation for the Assamese, because it provided an opportunity to alienate the Bengali. The separation of Sylhet from Assam during the

Independence Movement fulfilled the quest for a more or less homogeneous homeland for the Assamese in Assam but it came with its pangs. The large scale immigration of Bengalis into Assam “resulted in Bengali-Hindu enclaves coming up in several areas of the Brahmaputra Valley where linguistic and cultural exclusiveness played a major role.”⁴⁶ The Bengalis’ sense of superiority also worked towards worsening the mutual relationship. The first clashes between Assam and the Central Government happened over sheltering the refugees in Assam from the newly-created East Pakistan. As the refugee crisis began to be handled and placated to some extent, demands for a homogeneous state arose again. Trouble brewed when demands for establishing Assamese as an official language came up; it was now that Bengali Hindus declined to accept Assamese as the official language. Ever since then, the Bengali Hindus of Assam have undergone a complicated phase of relationships with the Assamese community, which continues even today.

The position of tea garden tribes in Assam was quite different. Initially, these people had an isolated existence, qualifying as the ‘other’ to the greater Assamese society. But with time, the tribes have themselves begun to identify themselves with the Assamese community. Conversely, there have also been efforts in recent years on the part of the Assamese to recognize them as integral parts of the Assamese community. However, Udayon Misra is of the opinion that this inclusiveness may have been a result of the “Assamese fear of being reduced to a minority in their own land.”⁴⁷ Misra also opines that broadening this scope has added a new angle to the Assamese identity.

⁴⁶ Udayon Misra, *India’s North-East*, (New Delhi: Oxford, 2014), 188.

⁴⁷ Misra, *India’s North-East*, 190.

The problem of assimilation with Assamese society probably did not trouble the Bengali Muslims at all. They took advantage of this situation and in many cases, could blend well with the Assamese, thus becoming *na-Asamiya* or neo-Assamese Muslim. Udayon Misra mentions how there are varying opinions in Assam regarding acceptance of the Bengali Muslim as integral parts of Assamese society. Some opinions are critical of these Muslims being called *Na-Asamiya* or *Miyah*. In fact, Bengali Muslims believed in educating their children in Assamese medium schools, rather than English medium ones, thus contributing strongly to strengthening linguistic nationalism in Assam. But debates still remain as to the definition of an Assamese identity. The process of nationality formation for the Assamese was an important part of the consolidation of Assamese identity. This development having begun with ‘Assamization’ (which brings together several communities of different origin under the common umbrella of a homogeneous ‘Assamese’ nation) is still not a complete process. Udayon Misra rightly states that opinions vary largely between the view that there is “no such Assamese identity at all”⁴⁸ and that such an identity encompasses everyone from native speakers of the language to those who readily adopt Assamese culture. Since Bengali Muslims and tea tribes did not object to assimilation, it became evident that Bengalis posed as the greatest threat to Assamese identity. They were also the most important dissidents and hindrances, as it were, to Assamese attempts at creating a linguistically, culturally homogeneous Assamese state. With the creation of Bangladesh and the influx of people, there was no other way to ensure Assamese majority in Assam but to forcibly enlist Bengali Muslims as Assamese. Sanjoy Hazarika writes that the growth of the Congress in Assam was based on a principle of expansion through assimilation:

⁴⁸ Misra, *India's North-East*, 163.

the Bengali *miyahs* would adopt the Assamese language, report themselves as Assamese speakers in the census, educate their children in Assamese schools and play what B. P Singh calls ‘a subservient role to caste Hindus in the agrarian sector.’⁴⁹

Previously, there had been attempts to turn the 31% of Assamese population (1931 Census) to 57% (1951 Census), and immigrant Muslims who now stayed in Assam had in many instances, readily accepted and proclaimed themselves as Assamese. However, since this consolidated Assamese population still did not reach 60%, (the tribals now having formed independent states of their own) Assam could not be declared culturally and linguistically Assamese, even though the States Reorganization Act was in force. In the 1960s, the Language Bill was passed – Bengalis gathered to protest this at Silchar Railway Station. Eleven of these people were shot at on May 19, 1961 and this constituted the Language Martyrs’ Movement or *Bhasha Shahid Andolan* which has since dominated Bengali imagination and consciousness. Udayon Misra states that this extended period of struggle between Bengalis and Assamese over whether Assamese was to be given the status of the official language embittered their relationship forever. There have been repeated attempts to recognize Bengalis as ‘Assamese of Bengali origin’ – thereby invalidating Bengali identity completely. Thus, even though the linguistic issue is the crux of the problem, it also includes in its ambit the issue of religion, thereby making the problem both religious and linguistic. Udayon Misra adds details on this issue:

The indigenous Assamese fear of losing their identity must be viewed not just as yet another case of being outnumbered in their own homeland but as one closely linked with the widening of the sociocultural base of the Assamese community itself to include large

⁴⁹ Sanjoy Hazarika, *Strangers of the Mist*, (Viking: Penguin, 1994), 44.

sections of people who belong to other linguistic groups but who, for reasons political or otherwise, are today opting to call themselves Assamese.⁵⁰

In Assam, language therefore becomes one of the tools for the protection and development of nationalism. Udayon Misra very aptly identifies language as an ‘instrument of exclusiveness’ which set certain cultural parameters.⁵¹ There were little attempts at accommodation on the part of both Assamese and Bengali Hindus. Also, within the Assamese society, there were scattered instances of discord between Assamese Hindus and Assamese Muslims; yet these two communities mostly got on well with each other.

There are instances of discrimination against Bengali Muslims too, although they are mostly looked upon as friend and ally. Even though migration happened as a result of colonialism, relations of the Assamese and Bengali Muslim communities began to be affected by the scarcity of cultivable land which was a result of migration. With the increase of Muslim population, this tension turned into a struggle for cultivable land between “immigrants and the autochthons.”⁵² In Dhruba Hazarika’s *Sons of Brahma*, the student leader Pranab Kalita is great friends with Jongom Hanse, a tribal youth (Karbi) and Srabana Banerjee, a Bengali. However, he is antagonistic to and initially suspicious of the Muslim boatmen who row them safely across the Brahmaputra. At one point, both Pranab and Jongom are on Hakim’s (the boatman) boat, when Pranab says in disgust, ‘ “Bloody Miah, they are everywhere in the valley. Another ten years and the Assamese will have to beg around.” ’⁵³ In an article, “Growing Up Miya in Assam: How the NRC Weaponised My Identity Against Me” published in Caravan magazine, Abdul Kalam Azad writes of his experiences of being a ‘miya’ in Assam. He had been visiting Guwahati as a

⁵⁰ Misra, *India’s North-East*, 163.

⁵¹ Misra, *India’s North-East*, 193.

⁵² Misra, *India’s North-East*, 196.

⁵³ Dhruba Hazarika, *Sons of Brahma*, (Gurgaon: Penguin, 2014), 80.

little boy, when he first realized that he had “another identity, a subordinate identity – I was a *miya*, a Bengali-origin Muslim, seen in Assam as an outsider, a suspected Bangladeshi.”⁵⁴ His uncle is assaulted by a group of young men and abused as ‘Kela Miya’ and ‘Bangladeshi’. This incident had such a huge impact on him that he confesses he “wanted to be Assamese – a better *Axomiya* than anyone else, whose identity cannot be questioned by anyone.”⁵⁵ The experience is nearly the same for most Muslims. In the course of the novel, Pranab changes his views, but that happens eventually and only after Hakim has proved himself trustworthy. Pranab is an unusual character: first he suspects Hakim and then he dives into the Brahmaputra to save his eleven year old son from drowning. He is caught in the confusion of being a liberal and a racist-nationalist at the same time, which is a dilemma that most middle class Assamese individuals face. Udayon Misra writes:

The reiteration of the polyethnic nature of the Assamese society on the one hand and the rather obsessive quest for a unilingual identity on the other seems to have been one of the major contradictions which the Assamese middle class has not been able to resolve till date.⁵⁶

It is seen that Assamese nationalism is a fledgling phenomenon – at once strong and frail and as much affected by the rivalry over language as is the Bengali consciousness in Assam. *Sons of Brahma* features Jongom Hanse as its central protagonist and the narrator – who although a Karbi youth by origin, identifies as Assamese, by virtue of being a resident of Karbi Anglong in Assam. Udayon Misra writes:

⁵⁴ Abdul Kalam Azad, ‘Growing Up Miya in Assam: How the NRC Weaponised My Identity Against Me’, in *Caravan*, (23 September, 2018). Accessed online: https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/growing-up-miya-in-assam-how-the-nrc-weaponised-my-identity-against-me?fbclid=IwAR37H151djzl7hzHJSQ10_UV9VqjsZ5u_ijJNUwlFCzkA4PgMVyGYNo

⁵⁵ See note 55 above.

⁵⁶ Misra, *India's North-East*, 172.

It is true that several of the plains tribes maybe said to have acquired a dual ‘nationality’ or identity in the sense that many of them considered themselves to be both tribal and Assamese. But, with the majority of the tribes, this sense of solidarity came under severe strain once the Assam Accord was signed.⁵⁷

It may be noted that when the Assam Accord was signed, the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), the singular mouthpiece of the indigenous Bodo-Kachari tribal community of Assam came to view the Accord as a step intended to protect only Assamese interests. According to these people, “the Assam agitators were essentially colonialists, a powerful community that had settled in the Brahmaputra Valley several centuries ago by ousting their forefathers.”⁵⁸ For the tribes therefore, the question of acquiring a safe land for themselves was important and to them, “the Assamese caste Hindu or Assamese Muslim was as much an interloper as a Bangladeshi, a Marwari or a Hindu Bengali.”⁵⁹

Jongom feels unable to completely belong to the state and subscribe to their politics. He is not in favour of the extreme nationalism that is rampant in the state, and also at the same time is prey to the latent feelings of disgust towards the immigrant Bengalis, particularly Muslims. Along with Pranab, he is suspicious of Hakim but he soon realizes Hakim’s innocuous nature. Dhruba Hazarika very intelligently introduces Jongom Hanse as the narrator. His position is neutral, and therefore it is assumed that his views would represent impartially the crisis of both the Assamese and Bengalis, as also that of tribal communities in Assam. Jongom Hanse incidentally, is a victim of the same duality between a unilingual/ mono-ethnic and poly-ethnic/multicultural identity that has thrown the Assamese middle class in a quandary.

⁵⁷ Misra, *India’s North-East*, 184.

⁵⁸ Hazarika, *Strangers*, 151.

⁵⁹ Hazarika, *Strangers*, 152.

When we first see Jongom, he is a bright student at Gauhati University who keeps away from active politics. His friend, Pranab is rather more actively involved in politics and writes vociferous articles protesting the influx and presence of immigrant Bengali Muslims in Assam. One morning, Jongom is accosted by a certain Anjan Phukan, first in the library and then in his hostel room. Anjan Phukan wants him to write revolutionary articles for their journal. Why Phukan selects Jongom out of all people is not known with certainty just at that time, but as the story unfolds, one can surmise that it was partly because of the reverence for Jongom's writing/articulation and partly because of a secret connection between the two of them, revealed much later in the story. It is apparent that Jongom is unwilling to write any sort of article for Anjan Phukan's party. Phukan suggests that Jongom write about the history and culture of Assam and about their natural resources including tea, oil and coal. He also mentions that Jongom could effectively help them develop their 'cause'. Although Jongom has no idea about Anjan Phukan's identity, he can still understand that Phukan is "someone who belonged to an organization that was clandestine in essence but vehement in its opposition to the concept of a sovereign, socialist, secular republic"⁶⁰ Jongom realizes that Anjan Phukan is devoted to a cause that has sympathizers "who were neither here nor there, taking sides that best suited them under the given circumstances."⁶¹ Though Anjan Phukan does not quite get round to mentioning it, it is later known that he is part of the secessionist-nationalist group, National Revolutionary Army, and therefore his views represent something of an Aryan stance, aimed at 'purifying' their land by exterminating 'outsiders'. 'Outsiders' here represent mainly Bengali Hindus and Muslims. The Party derives its wealth from abductions and killings of wealthy men in Assam, and as such,

⁶⁰ Hazarika, *Sons of Brahma*, 19.

⁶¹ Ibid.

their functions are very representative of the nationalist group, ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) who ravaged the state towards the latter half of the twentieth century.

The years leading up to the growth of nationalist insurgent groups like United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) were spent in an unsettling ambience born out of the steady burgeoning of Muslim population in Assam. It also has to be remembered that when the broader Assamese society considered the *Na-Asamiya* Muslims, Nepalese, Hindi-speaking people and tea garden labourers as integral parts of their society, they automatically alienated the plains tribes, who were already hostile to other communities over land-acquisition rights. Udayon Misra opines:

It seems to have been a quirk of history that Assamese overzealousness in protecting their language and linguistic identity eventually led to an irredentism which went a long way in alienating the tribal communities, while at the same time opening its doors to that very section of people against whom the indigenous Assamese have been agitating for almost a century now.⁶²

As more and more immigrant Muslims joined the mainstream Assamese society, adding to the indigenous Muslim population, a significant change in demographics came about. With this, religion gained importance and sentiments of discrimination and hatred towards Muslims began to surface again – primarily born out of a fear of subjugation. Assamese nationalism therefore was immensely perplexed over who it would include in its ambit and who it would exclude. The ULFA took birth in such extreme nationalistic conditions; ULFA tapped the latent chauvinism into open discrimination between Bengalis and Assamese.

⁶² Misra, *India's North-East*, 207.

ULFA was antagonistic also to the very idea of the 'state' and its people. If language was already a debated issue, ULFA's discrimination of religion now added to the chaos and made matters worse. They also simultaneously attacked migrant workers from Bihar and Hindi-speaking petty tradesmen from Assam (Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Duliajan, Doom Dooma, Jaipur etc.) Anjan Phukan is portrayed as a member of one of such nationalistic groups, with a desire for xenophobia to rid Assam of other communities of people. Their demands for 'Swadhin Asom' were summarily rejected by both Assam and Union Governments. Bengalis fell prey to ULFA's exploits like other communities; in fact, in many cases, Bengalis were subjected to maximum discrimination, as they had already been the worst enemies of Assamese sovereignty. As the novel progresses, one also comes to know it was Anjan Phukan who had killed Hakim's two other brothers and maimed Hakim forever. Hakim is a changed man when the story is narrated. But he admits that he was involved in smuggling of arms with an underground rebel group, one of whose members was Anjan Phukan himself. Pranab characterizes Anjan Phukan as a 'crafty fanatic'⁶³, like religious fundamentalists who cannot admit and accept differences of faith amidst people. Anjan Phukan seems to have been driven by a blood lust that he can never quite get over. In the novel, Phukan, in his one-dimensional hatred for non-Assamese people, is starkly contrasted with Pranab and Jongom, who comprehend the ever-present, delicate situation of ethnic relations in Assam and are therefore ready to accommodate/accept different people. Angry at losing arms due to a patrolling, Anjan Phukan kills Hakim's two brothers without the slightest remorse and this is perhaps why he becomes such a widely sought after 'criminal'. The morning he meets Jongom at his hostel is the last morning that he would be alive, since both Jongom and Anjan are arrested and Anjan killed by the Police soon after. Jongom gets involved in this trap without any fault of his own. Thus, being cornered and suspected by both the Police

⁶³ Hazarika, *Sons of Brahma*, 118.

and the revolutionary group, he flees Gauhati with Pranab and seeks the help of Suren Mama, a priest at Kamakhya Temple. Incidentally, Suren Mama's eldest son Mahesh had also been assaulted and mutilated by the Revolutionary Army because he had supplied clues against them to the Police. The Revolutionary Army, therefore, initially born out of an exclusionist-nationalist view to exclude immigrants, turns extremely cruel to different communities of people living in Assam and is feared for their activities of rampage and murder.

It is important to look at the rise of sectarian politics in Assam that demands the supremacy of only the 'indigenous' people and exclusion of the rest in the context of the growth of student politics. The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) was formed in April 1979 at the abandoned Rang Ghar pavilion in Sibsagar, by a group of young men dissatisfied with the running of things in the state. Some of these people were Motoks who were dispossessed tribes with close links to the Ahoms. They were unhappy at the cultural diversity of Assam and aimed at 'purification' of Assamese culture and state. 'Belonging' or indigeneity in Assam is an issue with varied and complicated answers. While the Assamese leaders, intellectuals and middle class often claimed that the plains tribes were parts of the Assamese society, as were Bengali Muslims enlisted as Assamese, thereby ascertaining their superiority over all peoples, the original idea of 'Assam' came into being only after the Ahoms consolidated their rule over the greater part of Brahmaputra Valley, after which it came to be known as 'Asom'. This was a derivation from 'Ahom'; the Ahoms were immensely accommodative, and being influenced greatly by Sandardeva's reformist Vaishnavism, were easily able to mingle into the society comprising all groups of people. The ULFA, with its nationalist policy, went against the basic grain of assimilation in the society. It is to be noted that the growth of Assamese nationalism has been

inextricably tied up with the question of official recognition of the Assamese language.

Loyalty to the Assamese language came to be viewed as the sole criterion in establishing one's identity as an Assamese.⁶⁴

After the death of Hiralal Patwari, MP of Mangoldoi constituency, the need for fresh elections was felt. Electoral lists came to be updated then (1979), and the presence of immigrant Bengalis (both Hindus and Muslims) came to be discovered. Exclusion of these people was demanded by All Assam Students' Union (AASU), so much so, that Sanjoy Hazarika opines that it became in the 1980s, "a one-point programme that drew support from villagers, townsfolk, farmers and industrial workers, government officers and even politicians."⁶⁵ The AASU movement which soon gained an anti-Congress colouring demanded strikes and deportation of 'foreign' nationals, while the nation state and Congress rule opted in favour of assimilating Bengali immigrants and Assamese locals and giving citizenship to Bengali immigrants. Elections were boycotted and in the infamous Nellie massacre, thousands of Bengali Muslim villagers were massacred (the death toll being 3000 to 4000). During this time, ULFA took this conflict one step further, as they opined that they did not agree with the policies adopted towards the exclusion of immigrants by AASU. The state of Assam needed a much stronger military solution to the problem of immigration and therefore, their policy was to mercilessly butcher anyone who stood in the way of turning Assam into a mono-ethnic landmass.

Benedict Anderson writes that "since World War II, every successful revolution has defined itself in 'national' terms"⁶⁶ and as such, each revolution is rooted temporally and spatially in a pre-revolutionary past. Almost every 'old' nation is challenged by 'sub-

⁶⁴ Misra, *India's North-East*, 173.

⁶⁵ Hazarika, *Sons of Brahma*, 137.

⁶⁶ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 2.

nationalism’ – multiple smaller revolts within a nation’s periphery that serve to bring forth demands of the various sub-nationalist groups. The end of the era of nationalism is not close; on the contrary, ‘nationness’ is the “most universally legitimate value” in one’s political life⁶⁷ which aids in upholding the spirit of nationalism. The growth of such sub-nationalism is a noticeable trend in Assam. The ULFA and its politics represent a sub-nationalistic struggle undertaken against the Congress regime in Assam which was at one point trying to provide citizenship to homeless immigrants. The ULFA made it clear that they were not interested in any sort of diplomatic arrangement that worked towards demeaning of the Assamese nation and so, they had probably dreamt of shedding this brand of ‘sub-ness one happy day’⁶⁸ in order to attain a linguistically, culturally and religiously homogeneous Assam. ‘Nationness’ of people, or the feeling of belonging to a ‘nation’ also furnishes the ‘imaginary comradeship’ with one’s fellow members and enables them “not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings”⁶⁹. Therefore, for Anjan Phukan and his Revolutionary Party, killing and dying for their ‘noble cause’ is just another step towards ensuring homogeneity of Assamese nation. Their vision of a sovereign ‘*Swadhin Asom*’ was inexorably linked with the condition of ‘de-Indianization’, since they considered Assam colonized by the Indian nation. Assam was to be freed of all ‘occupiers’ including Assamese population who saw themselves as ‘Indians’ and stood in the way of ULFA’s idea of an independent Assam.

One must, however, realize that nationalism is not a totalizing experience – sub-nationalistic revolutions which punctuate its growth arise in the interstices of the collective experience of ‘nationness’. If varying subjectivities in a nationalistic framework are constantly

⁶⁷ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 3.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 7.

interacting with each other, one must look beyond these narratives to focus on moments born out of cultural differences amongst them. Homi Bhabha opines, “It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated.”⁷⁰ The ‘homogeneous’ time and space of modernity of Anderson’s definition of ‘nationalism’, cannot give rise to such interactions of subjective experience. The ‘in-between’ spaces, as it were, provide opportunities for the expression of new selfhoods – whether individual or communal. Anjan Phukan is himself located in one such niche of communal experience that speaks of assimilation on the one hand, and exclusion on the other – and while the state tries to look after the interests of the local Assamese and tribal populace and immigrants, Phukan’s subjectivity and brand of nationalism opposes this. Phukan objects to admitting diversity among people. His is an identity that is ‘split’, one that he tries to disregard and present as ‘unified’ and singular, committed to preservation and protection of ‘indigenous’ Assamese identity. Anjan Phukan is characterized by extraordinary ruthlessness, hatred and cruelty that set him apart even from the rest of his allies. This hatred also does not consider people’s affiliations. As previously mentioned, Phukan’s quest for a homogeneous, uniform society begins first in filtering people based on language and then goes on to include religion and nationality.

The rebels of Revolutionary Party are driven by the same bloodlust when they hunt down Haresh Bardoloi, a tea estate manager and his overseer Jonathan. While Jonathan’s hands are chopped off, Haresh Bardoloi’s (referred to as Uncle Harry) wife and children are butchered since he refuses to pay the ransom demanded of him. Perhaps the rebels consider Haresh Bardoloi a representative of the British tea enterprise in Assam; since they protest the siphoning

⁷⁰ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994), 2.

of Assam's natural resources, Uncle Harry and his tea estate become the rebels' easiest targets. Surprisingly, Pranab's emotions represent this same sense of 'loss' – the articles discovered amidst Jongom's own articles that are supposedly written by Pranab reek of this agony of a race, “ ‘which, despite having everything, still remains poor.’ ”⁷¹ The secret that binds Anjan, Jongom and Pranab together has to do with their fathers. It so happened that Pranab's father Lohit Kalita had fathered Anjan Phukan with a Brahmin woman whom he could never marry, but who was given shelter by Brahma Hanse, Jongom's father. Brahma Hanse had in fact, reared Anjan in his childhood before he went back to his grandparents' village. However, neither Lohit Kalita nor Brahma Hanse knew that this young boy would grow up to be one of the most feared rebels in the country and that, he would be responsible for most of the killings and hostages that took place in Assam during this phase. It is unsettling to discover this connection; that Anjan Phukan, with his coldblooded depravity could have such a humble antiquity and bear such closeness to Pranab and Jongom themselves is beyond comprehension. It is only later that one comes to know that Lohit Kalita is the mastermind of the Revolutionary Army.

Perhaps, both fathers in the novel being named after the Brahmaputra is not a coincidence at all. That their natures are completely different from one another – Lohit being secretly sinister and running underground operations and Brahma giving up his profession as a doctor to engage as in agriculture – throws light on the irony of the situation. They are both 'sons of the soil' and therefore, 'sons' of 'Brahma' but each represents a different worldview. Both their sons are in a way, sons of Brahma too. But each, in the course of the novel, is made to question the validity of this belonging. Pranab and Jongom themselves come to discover goodness in a 'miyah' and extreme cruelty in a fellow Assamese. The question of who belongs to the land and

⁷¹ Hazarika, *Sons of Brahma*, 214.

who does not recur in this context. Simone Weil writes, “To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.”⁷² Is it therefore this need to be rooted that leads people in the novel to behave as they do is an issue that challenges the reader every time. Time and again, the reader is made to question the legitimacy of the jingoism that creates enemies of fellow beings.

Nationalistic fervor had once helped to get rid of colonialism and aided in nation-building process. Assam in independent Northeast India posed one of the first challenges to the Union Government and the process of nation-building. With the many years that have passed after, Assam has emerged multicultural, despite numerous attempts to prove its mono-ethnic identity, in which intense nationalism played an important part. My aim in this chapter has been to show how religion and ethnicity are both contributors to this idea of nationalism, and how the very idea of nationalism has been redefined over the ages. It may be concluded from this that, assimilation/amalgamation of many equally strong ethnic groups seems to be the only solution to this problem. However, in this process, how much of linguistic-cultural and religious heritage can be shed by each community and how much of it can be retained remains to be seen. With the change in political order, there is now a collective aim to determine people’s citizenship – the idea of ‘belonging’ to Assam gains precedence over everything else in the implementation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC). It is unfortunate that even after so many years of Independence, Assamese and Bengalis are largely bitter in their relationship towards each other and status of the Bengali denizen has not become any better. Newer schemes and methods brought forth by each political regime have only found new ways to harass these people. With the ascendancy of the BJP government, the religious factor is being used to an enormous

⁷² Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 40.

advantage; while the Assamese middle class is being assured that citizenship would be granted only to the '*Khilanjia*' or 'sons of the soil', there is actual evidence of the fact that this is being brought about by pestering the Muslim population in Assam. Many a time, the *Bongaal* or Bengali (Hindu) citizen is victimized too. It therefore, remains to be seen how much of the crisis will actually be solved and how the Indian nation state will live through its 'Northeast Experience'.

Chapter 3

Bengalis at present: *From Valley to Valley and Barbed Wire Fence*

Immigrant experience of Bengalis in Northeast India, created by the Partition and Independence in 1947, underwent a thorough change in 1971 with the Independence of Bangladesh. The demarcation of territories only created differences among people of same ethnicity and culture, following which they relocated to various places across Assam and Tripura, then the most feasible option to them. It is widely known that although these people belonged to the same country before being divided by borders, their large scale migration over generations was not welcome in Assam. Its effects were: a) displacement and b) creation of fractured identities. It took almost a lifetime for immigrants to settle, although sometimes, generations that came after often adjusted well to the land.

The two previous chapters deal at length with how immigrant Bengalis faced discrimination in Assam from tribals and Assamese locals alike. Added to this are their everyday experiences in Assam of dealing with crises of identity and citizenship. While some adapted to and tried to amalgamate with their surroundings, some others remained ‘other’ to this land forever. This present chapter will explore this situation from two perspectives: (a) the customary or routine experience of being a Bengali in Assam, through a novel, *From Valley to Valley*, written by Dipak Kumar Barkakati and (b) the experience of being alienated and ‘otherized’ in the last few decades through *Barbed Wire Fence*, a collection of short stories, edited by Dipendu Das and Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee. Both these texts of fiction will consider immigrant

experiences in two different regions/valleys of Assam, roughly from the years following Partition to the present decade.

I.

From Valley to Valley

From Valley to Valley was written by Dipak Kumar Barkakati and published in 2002 in Assamese as *Upatyakar Para Upatyakalai*. Translated by Gayatri Bhattacharji, it documents the lives of landed gentry and their tenants in erstwhile East Bengal who witness struggles of various kinds as they deal with the pressures of riots and Partition. The novel begins with the description of the Noakhali riots, prior to India's Independence. A significant portion in the novel deals with the consequences that an average Bengali citizen is left with following a mass riot involving loot and plunder. Kalikishore Dutta is the central protagonist of the novel; changes that take place in and around East Bengal are seen from his point of view and therefore, Kalikishore's story is as much a *bildungsroman* as it is an attempt at tracing the trajectory of the lives of Bengalis in Assam and Bengal. Kalikishore is quite young when the narrative begins; but when it finally ends, he is an aged man, much stronger and wiser than he was while he lived in his zamindari. The novel is a representation of Kalikishore's uprootedness and his trials to find a 'home', much like other Bengali residents of the time. At the beginning of the narrative, he is married and has a young wife Sailabala. He is lovingly known as 'Chotobabu' of the Dutta zamindari. His elder brother, Shyamkishore, a high school teacher at Noakhali is a much respected man. However when trouble breaks out one afternoon, Shyamkishore does not return home. Nothing is known of his whereabouts, only it is assumed that he is a victim of the Noakhali riots between Hindus and Muslims. Kalikishore instead is left with the responsibility of accompanying his wife and

sister-in-law Kalyani to a safer place. Amidst the conflagration, it is heard that they must take shelter in safe places still unscathed by fire. Ironically, Kalikishore takes refuge with a Muslim family who help them escape safely (by masquerading them as *lungi* and *burqa* clad Muslim men and women).

It is interesting that the novel represents various hierarchies of this society in this limited scope in which each class is subservient to the Duttas, thus according them the respect and status befitting a *zamindar* or landlord. There are the *Suklabaidyas*, *Sabdakars*, *Rudrapals*, *Malakars*, *Karmakars* (identified by their professions in many cases) – who have, for generations, been living under the patronage of the Duttas. There are also fellow Muslims who are quite friendly with the Dutta men, who are ready to assist the Duttas in any sort of misfortune. Although there are also instances in which the tenant farmers are treated as nothing more than tenants only, yet by and large, there is a predominantly harmonious coexistence among these people. This is in stark contrast to the political scenario around the time of the Noakhali riots, which is why these people are so perplexed and hapless in the face of this crisis. They have absolutely no clue as to their next course of action; they are also bemused about the causes of the conflict. The average/common man is beside himself with doubt and fear. Kalikishore's wife is about to give birth in this complicated condition. Everyone rushes to help the Duttas and this sort of fraternity with each other reminds one that religious and communal differences are still unfamiliar to this feudal society. It is remarkable that this same sense of helplessness, loss and desperation at being so unjustly dealt with runs across all classes in this hierarchical structure.

It is perhaps true that most people had no clear idea that in voting in favour of a Muslim majority province, they would alienate their own countrymen from one another. The symbol for India was a spade which lots of young people carried with themselves to show that they were in

favour of Hindustan/India as an independent nation state. It was as though nationalism drove people at this time into doing whatever they did. At least in Bengal and Assam, people were mobilized into treating the religious issue with a magnitude like never before. It was stoked into stimulating the Sylhet Referendum and eventually, the Partition of the country. Kalikishore and his family are immensely affected by this Referendum like most others of their ilk, but they decide that they would go with the flow and shift to safer regions of the country that were as yet unaffected by the Partition. The rest of his clan follow in his footsteps –as though they are inseparable. They encounter numerous struggles on the road but they brave these one by one to migrate to the neighbouring state of Assam. In one episode in the novel, the tenants gather around to ask for the Duttas' advice on the ongoing crisis. The congregation is composed of people from all religions and classes – and while some like Dheeman Chakravarty, the priest vehemently protest the presence of Muslims in their group, some others are not quite so sure yet about their hatred towards the Muslims. In fact, at this point, the crisis is not so much of their identity as it is of their religion. Kalikishore has an uncle, Charitrachandra Dutta who has already served during the time of *Banga Bhanga* or Partition of Bengal in 1905. Charitrachandra tries to maintain harmony among his people – he refuses to consider the possibility that Muslims mean any harm. To this view, he gets a mixed reaction. While it is Charitrachandra's opinion that they must stay back in Kulaura (Sylhet) and fight all odds, 'their' people or the Hindus decide otherwise. It is their religion that they try to salvage at this time and demands of patriotism cannot stop them from migration. It is also at this early point that they realize the complexity of their position: what country they all belong to determines their identity from now on. The Hindus' conscious decision to leave would also mean that they were relinquishing their rights

over the land and thus ascertain East Pakistan (which was to be born in this crisis) as completely a Muslim territory.

Muslims are not sure about their position in the crisis. Particularly for Muslims of Kulaura, it is difficult to take a stand since they had spent so many years together in peace. In one such episode, the author shows how old Rashid, who is also a childhood friend of Charitrachandra's, recalls the days of their youth – how they spent time rowing across the rivers Meghna and Barak. Rashid remembers how he had once attended the *shraddha* ceremony (last rites) of one of the Duttas, and how he had begun to be friends with Charitrachandra, whom he addressed as *Sahari Babu*. When Abu Mansur, another elderly Muslim of the village, visits Rashid after the Partition of the country, he reflects on the impossibility of the situation: “We had all hoped that there would be peace and happiness after Independence. But is there any peace, any contentment?”⁷³ The resounding calls of *Allah ho Akbar* once again remind them that the Hindus have almost deserted the land – the Duttas' own house is occupied some years later by local Muslims of the area. It is a distressing situation that they are in – neither are they happy with the division, nor can they completely relinquish the religious majority provided to them by the Partition of India and inclusion of their land in East Pakistan. Opposition to the implicit love affair of Matin and Maya (who belong to different religions) highlights the fact that relations between the Hindus and Muslims is indeed very sore. This incident spurs even more hatred between the two communities – houses and villages are ravaged and burnt down. Kalikishore's own attraction to Rashid's daughter, Zinnat remains unmentioned throughout his lifetime and

⁷³ Dipak Kumar Barkakati, *From Valley to Valley*, trans. Gayatri Bhattacharji, (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2010), 38.

even if he remembers it sometimes, he never gets round to mentioning it, particularly at this time.

Kalikishore's story is significant in that it portrays the resilience of immigrant Bengalis and shows how they coped, with the ambience of hatred and discrimination, albeit against their wishes. After Kalikishore has moved to India, he finds that there are also other people from East Pakistan who are trying their best to find suitable places for themselves in the new land. This struggle is similar irrespective of location; both Dr Dam (in *The Point of Return*) and Kalikishore (in *From Valley to Valley*) undergo similar struggles in two different parts of Assam. Kalikishore and his people shift to Badarpur, Karimganj and Silchar which are geographically proximate to East Pakistan. It is here that Kalikishore meets his friend Nirranjan who is a victim of this condition too. The novel provides an almost accurate description of refugee life and crisis common to all immigrants from East Bengal. While these people were used to an abundance of food, clothing and land in East Bengal, here they had to fight for their share, even after which these items were not readily available to them. It must be remembered that it was out of this critical condition that crisis of identities arose soon after. The struggle of having to redefine themselves, to determine their fair share in this milieu of refugees intimated them with this crisis of identity. That Kalikishore had belonged to a *zamindari* family while in East Pakistan aids him in getting services earlier than others in the refugee camp; however, resources, even then, are extremely limited. Nirranjan has already made himself quite popular during his stay at the camp, and assures Kalikishore that he would also be accorded the same privileges. It is remarkable to note that while in East Pakistan, people like Kalikishore used to first look after other people's (their tenants') interests, in this refugee camp, they consider their own interests primarily. This moment marks the beginning of defining and determining their selfhood. It is out of scarcity that

people are led to think about themselves, in a rather selfish manner. Perhaps this thought leads Niranjan to keep the news of his new job from Kalikishore. The author makes this comment quite unequivocally: “It was not lost on Kalikishore that Niranjan was not happy that Radharani had told him about the job. And almost immediately Radharani’s happy enthusiasm dimmed.”⁷⁴ There is a very poignant description of starving children rushing towards their camp and fighting and jostling to get a share of the fish that Kalikishore buys for his family. Kalikishore and Niranjan reflect on the predicament: “And in this camp, we are simply a crowd of beggars – fit only for charity.”⁷⁵

Kalikishore has difficulty adjusting himself to the new mode of life – he can never understand how he would take up any other profession and although he finds employment as a clerk in the Refugee Rehabilitation Office he is not quite at home there. He also witnesses unfair division of ration to refugees, but can do little to solve this. Dipesh Chakrabarty in his essay, ‘Remembered Villages: Representation of Hindu-Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of the Partition’ analyses a series of essays published in the Bengali newspaper *Jugantar* and later collected in a book *Chhere Asha Gram* (‘The Abandoned Village’) in 1975. One of these testimonials from Bhatikain, Chittagong have mentioned the poor food and living conditions in the camp and specifically mentioned that they “... do not approach the ‘relief babu’ who only gets into a rage ...”⁷⁶ It is apparent that Kalikishore gets the best treatment in the camp owing to class hierarchy, but most other families get lesser than their fair shares in this scenario. Poor people in *From Valley to Valley* often have to consume stale rice and pulses; but Sukumar

⁷⁴ Barkakati, *From Valley to Valley*, 138.

⁷⁵ Barkakati, *From Valley to Valley*, 128.

⁷⁶ Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘Remembered Villages: Representation of Hindu-Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of the Partition’, pub *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 31, No. 32, (Aug 10, 1996), 2144. Accessed from JStor: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4404497>, 2144.

Sarkar, the Relief Officer is enraged when someone points out the discrepancy. The essays in *Chhere Asha Gram* betray a sense of loss for the ancestral village which is the embodiment of everything sacred and beautiful and thus, the instances of defilement mentioned in the essays point to an emotion of sacrilege of the pristine village. *From Valley to Valley* represents this exact emotion as Kalikishore, Niranjana and other Bengali Hindus reminisce about their glorious past in East Pakistan. According to Dipesh Chakrabarty, the sense of loss which predominates is also interspersed with memories of their ancestral land, tinged with both nostalgia and trauma. Nothing could have prepared these people for the violence they were subjected to; the authors [of the essays] “express a stunned disbelief at the fact that it could happen at all, that they could be cut adrift in this sudden and cruel manner from the familiar worlds of their childhood.”⁷⁷

Kalikishore, Niranjana and others find themselves overwhelmed by patriotic fervor for their motherland, its spacious house, ponds, courtyard, orchards and groves whenever they reminisce about East Pakistan. The sense of bewilderment at Hindus and Muslims thus being estranged is immense for Kalikishore, Niranjana and others. The authors of these essays were also puzzled at how “neighbours turned against neighbours after years of living together in bonds of intimacy and affection, friends took up arms against friends.”⁷⁸ Thus dealing with the sense of betrayal added to the pressures of creating a new identity in a new country, making the struggle all the more difficult. Niranjana tells Kalikishore that the days of the past have gone by and therefore, he must “... find, and plant, [his] own roots.”⁷⁹ Niranjana himself settles in Lumding as a high school teacher and suggests that Kalikishore should do the same. If Kalikishore represents the not-so-flexible landed gentry of East Pakistan, Niranjana is representative of the assiduous middle class which is always in search of opportunities to recreate themselves. In the text, there are instances

⁷⁷ Ibid, 2144.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 2144.

⁷⁹ Barkakati, 167.

of Kalikishore giving up his job as clerk, buying land at a village called Pingchora and cultivating it to relive his experiences as a landlord. This venture fails miserably and it is then Kalikishore realizes that he must find his niche by becoming one with the mass of people that had immigrated to India. In his attempts to reaffirm his roots in this new country, he tries to participate in multiple roles in the society – as an official in the Relief Office, as a landlord and lastly as a teacher. By the end of his career, he realizes that one must find employment to sustain oneself, which would provide him with an authoritative identity. By this time, the demands of upholding their identities had seen quite a progression: it was not merely their religious identity but also communal identity as Bengalis that they had to look after. The text also mentions the protest against the use of Urdu as the principal official language in East Pakistan around 1952 that would soon add another dimension to Bengali identity crisis.

Kalikishore's last job as teacher takes him to Kathiatoli, a small town near Nagaon near Assam. He gets this job by means of Niranjan's connections with the Congress. Niranjan mentions to Kalikishore that he would like to be associated with the Assamese – the Boras and Hazarikas – thus pointing to assimilation as a solution to the problem of settlement. Niranjan realizes pretty early in the novel that the two communities must be amiable towards one another in their own interests and though Kalikishore is not entirely convinced, not having been able to let go off his zamindari conceit, he really has no better option at hand. It is ironical that while in undivided Assam and Bengal, Bengalis were better off at jobs, here in Assam of independent India, they had to struggle quite hard to find livelihood. In a final visit that Kalikishore pays to Kulaura, he comes to know that population in the region had increased so much as to create a scarcity in land and resources. Kalikishore reminds himself that he is very happy at Kathiatoli where tea garden labourers, Marwaris and Bengalis live together harmoniously. By this time,

Kalikishore's family had begun to accommodate Assamese culture and traditions. They share Assamese delicacies like *sunga pitha* during the Assamese festival, Bihu. In a conversation between Kalikishore and Dr Himangshu Guha, the local doctor, the aspect of assimilation is highlighted. Kalikishore is reminded of how many Muslim farmers employed in his farm at Pingchora had almost become Assamese themselves. The middle class view seems to be of that the migration of people from East Bengal/Pakistan made the situation difficult for Bengali Muslims and Hindus alike.

For most Bengalis during this time, assimilation and accommodation of Assamese culture continue until Assamese is proposed to be the only state language in Assam. This is during the 1960s and Kalikishore's family has just about begun to gain ground in Assam. They are taken aback at this sudden crisis again. For many Bengalis, accepting this demand would mean living safely in Assam; perhaps, the fear of being uprooted once again, and this time due to language, was too heavy a price to pay. Indeed, the fear of displacement makes one of the characters say in the novel: "... now we are, a community without roots."⁸⁰ Kalikishore's daughter Banashree takes lessons in history from a Professor Phukan, who emphasizes on these very points as he narrates to them the history of the region. Prof Phukan is conscious of the fact that Bengalis had been first brought to Assam by the British which causes the unequal distribution of resources. But because they had assimilated so well with the local Assamese population, it became difficult to identify who is an original resident and who is not. This particular factor signifies the anomalies of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in present day Assam, which, if implemented wholly, is likely to aggravate this confusion. The Assam Agitation which was to follow later in the 80s made more stringent demands on citizenship and this also led to crisis of

⁸⁰ Barkakati, *From Valley to Valley*, 247.

identity for Bengalis. Thus, while Prof Phukan in the novel is ideologically inclined towards and supportive of the agitators who want Assam to be rid of ‘outsiders’, on humanitarian grounds, he is not on their side, because he realizes that the entire process of identifying and deporting ‘outsiders’ is not free of fault; in fact, its functioning is largely erroneous. This situation gradually aggravates to make Bengalis the victims of Assamese hegemony. So while there is a character like Anjan Phukan (Chapter II) who is a believer in the extremist view of ‘Assam for Assamese only’, there are also characters like Kalikishore who try to mingle with the locals to achieve an Assamese identity, in order that they are not victimized once again – this time in the name of language, nationality and culture.

Banashree eventually wants to get married to Ananda, who is an Assamese by origin. Her father Kalikishore does not initially like Ananda, but later accepts him with grace. Ananda takes responsibility of Banashree’s safety during the Assam Agitation which redeems him in Kalikishore’s good graces. He realizes finally that this is a new world; there are newer generations of people who can adapt well to this ambience. Perhaps, this is his final recognition that he must loosen his grip a bit and since the days of zamindari have gone by, now is the time for a more welcoming approach towards the local population. It is assimilation that is the solution to the problem of communalism and therefore, the present generation will only adapt as much as is necessary. Perhaps, the principle of assimilation and absorption of cultures, without a desire for superiority, would serve to solve this crisis.

II.

Barbed Wire Fence: Stories of Displacement from the Barak Valley of Assam

The Barak Valley of Assam housed most postcolonial Bengalis after the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. One of the main reasons for this was that Barak Valley, located in the southern part of Assam, was geographically close to the porous Indo-Bangladesh borders, which made migrations easier. In the Introduction of *Barbed Wire Fence*, editors Dipendu Das and Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharya state how the Assamese intelligentsia was worried by the addition of Bengali speaking immigrants to their population and thus automatically identified them as the 'other'. The pangs of displacement, having been thus uprooted, were not easy for the people to bear. But, there was no representation of this in the literature of the times. The editors point out that the Bengalis were so busy looking for anchorage that they could hardly concentrate on literary productions. This marginality came to be explored by writers in Barak Valley only during the time of Assam Agitation of the 1980s, when there was a renewed fear of being displaced once again. Thus history and the incumbent situation of Assam had a considerably important role to play in the literature of the region. *Barbed Wire Fence* is a collection of such stories, portraying the condition of displaced peoples in Barak Valley. It also takes within its ambit stories from the local tea tribes and settler Bengalis. I shall consider a few of the stories in this section.

The very first story in the anthology is called 'Of Human Bonding'. Written by Shyamalendu Chakraborty, it portrays a utopian love story of an Assamese and a Bengali. Hiren Ghosh is aware of the hostility towards his community by Assamese locals, although he does not allow it to cloud his relationship with Rupali Bora. Amidst the passionate cries of *Jai Ai Asom* (Victory to Mother Assam), during the time of the Assam Agitation of 1980s, Hiren and Rupali continue to support each other. In one of the congregations at Rupali's house, there are debates and arguments centering the immigrant issue in Assam at the time. Khagen Mahanta, one of

Rupali's friends, clearly states that Assam is not for 'outsiders'. They refuse to consider Hiren as one of their own and this attitude is reflective of their hatred towards all settler Bengalis. It is interesting to note that this story bears instances of the debate about citizenship – whether non-Assamese people who came after 1951 should be granted citizenship or simply be branded as 'outsiders'. Hiren exhibits a visionary outlook when he says that this regressive agitation would take Assam back by at least fifty years. Khagen Mahanta's fear, on the other hand, represents the Assamese perspective of being outdone by Bengalis in jobs and Bengalis acquiring cultural precedence. Hiren believes that this alarm is pointless; no dynamic language or culture could ever be taken over by any other culture. For people like Khagen Mahanta, Assam is inclusive only of Assamese people and this is how the Assamese identity gets defined. Mahanta argues: "Assamese language and culture today are in deep crisis; they are approaching annihilation. And for this the Bengalis are to be blamed."⁸¹ Hiren poignantly emphasizes on the bitterness of the situation when he asks Rupali, "Rupa, in which country do we live?"⁸² Ironically, this statement underlines the position of Bengalis in Assam – which has not largely changed in all these years. If one considers the story in the light of the present crisis of the NRC in Assam, one might see that Bengalis in Assam, particularly in the Barak Valley are still confronting these very issues. The story is quite prophetic in that it speaks of the universal crisis among Bengalis and Assamese even though it is set almost forty years before the present time. In a panel discussion aired on Rajya Sabha TV, titled 'Discourse: Re-imagining the Northeast India', Prof. Udayon Misra states: "The average perception of the average citizen, I think, in the entire Northeast regarding Bangladeshi infiltration needs to be changed. That is where I think some real hard homework

⁸¹ Shyamalendu Chakraborty, 'Of Human Bonding', trans. Ashok Kumar Nandy, in *Barbed Wire Fence: Stories of Displacement from the Barak Valley of Assam*, ed. Dipendu Das and Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee, (New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2012), 6.

⁸² *Ibid*, 7.

needs to be done.”⁸³ There is a suggestion of increased and developed rhetoric between India and Bangladesh to solve the crisis of the border and immigration. Therefore, the attitude from forty years earlier needs to undergo certain progressions to bring an end to the crisis of citizenship and identity in Assam. Hiren and Rupali’s friend, Udayan – who is a Bengali by origin, escapes from Shillong, where he had been hounded by nationalists because of his Bengali roots. In the denouement of the story, Rupali is attacked and hurt with stones as fanatics come looking for the ‘Bongal’ or Hiren, thereby emphasizing the futility of the ethnic conflict in Assam.

Religion sometimes plays an important role in uniting the immigrants, particularly the working class of people. For instance, in ‘The First Order’ written by Mithilesh Bhattacharjee, a fish seller Haranath Das is rather proud of the fact that he has attended a twenty four hour *kirtan* at Baluchari Camp, where he stays with his family, having migrated to India after Partition. Their political leader addresses them by saying that they should be united and strengthened only by religion. Haranath mentions that even though schemes have supposedly been taken up by the Government for their upliftment, nothing as such happens in reality. They must, therefore, resort to religion to strengthen themselves – to be known and identified by their religious identity in times of crisis.

Arijit Choudhury’s ‘Fire’ is the story of the estrangement of two close friends, Atul and Mahendra Das, over the issue of citizenship. While Atul is not a member of any party but a staunch supporter of the AASU’s movement of detection and detention of ‘foreigners’, Mahendra on the other hand is a member of the Farmers’ Association who is also suspected to be a Communist because of his direct disapproval of the ways the so-called foreigners in Assam are treated. It is suspected that the Communists are sympathizers of the Bengalis in Assam, and if

⁸³ Acquired from Youtube: [https:// www.youtube.com/watch?v=j51grcfVziM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j51grcfVziM)

they gained power, the dream of a larger Bengal would soon be realized by bringing much of Assam under its cultural domain. The fear of being dominated and thus turning themselves into perpetrators of violence is inherent in the Assamese. Mahendra's wife Arati supports him in his stand and so does his father-in-law, but his friend Atul turns against him. Mahendra's family in the story has faced threats numerous times and not once does Atul consider their friendship before he turns against Mahendra. Given this situation, Mahendra decides to escape from the village so that his pregnant wife and the rest of his family are saved the horrors of the conflict. Mahendra finds shelter with Samsul, who is a second generation Muslim peasant in the Brahmaputra Valley. Their family had shifted to Nalbari when Samsul was very young; but they were not treated differently: their origin and nationality are still questioned and language has played an important part in this. The author mentions: "The Samsuls spoke Bengali at home, but three or four Assamese words inevitably cropped up in any sentence spoken. Moreover their children received education in the Assamese medium schools."⁸⁴ Thus the story provides insightful looks into the conflicting positions held by both Hindus and Muslims in Assam over the citizenship crisis. It also mentions the effects of the agitation on Assamese lives. Ironically, Mahesh escapes and takes shelter with a Bengali family in Silchar. In Barak Valley, although the movement to oust foreigners had lesser momentum compared to the Brahmaputra Valley, yet the religious factor was gradually gaining strong ground. Mahendra lives up to the true spirit of assimilation, as he learns a couple of Bengali words and phrases during his underground stint at Silchar. In the final stages of the story, Mahendra's house is set fire to, in order to teach him a lesson for not supporting the AASU's rebellion. A perceptive look at this crisis establishes the

⁸⁴ Arijit Choudhury, 'Fire', in *Barbed Wire Fence: Stories of Displacement from the Barak Valley of Assam*, ed. Dipendu Das and Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee, (New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2012), 60.

fact that the mindless rebellion to establish one's superiority was ultimately ruining the state and harming its innocent common people.

Kajal Demta's 'Parbati's Household' is an account of tea tribes and their trials in Assam. Always a deprived community, the tea tribes are often deceived by the officials in charge of their affairs which makes them all the more prone to deprivation. Particularly, in the citizenship crisis, they are never given a clear picture of what they must do to protect and preserve their rights. Parbati in this story is a simple labourer at Barasingha Tea Estate; her husband Dasharath is also a casual worker at the estate. Even after spending their entire lives in the region, they fail to receive her application for 'perment' (colloquial for 'permanent') citizenship in the state. Since their names are not on the voter list, they would not be granted the adequate advantages due to them. It may be mentioned that tea tribes were at one point deprived of the right to vote, because they were considered the 'floating population'. Both Parbati and Dasharath wonder how they would prove their ancestry, in spite of having lived here for ages. They are in two minds: while still bear the hope that the government would look after them, because they also belong to the area, they also wonder where they would go looking for food and resources, should they be deprived of those too.

Jhumur Pandey's story 'The Man of Geramthan and Duliya' is a story of the common man's love for the land and the sacrifices that they make in order to keep the land from being apprehended by rich, influential people. 'Geramthan' which is the place of worship of the village deity Gerambaba, is also the sacred place for the village tribes. Duliya is the character from whose perspective the story is narrated; Duliya's husband, referred to as the 'man of Geramthan', has gone missing since the morning following the death of Shambhu Babu, a young and radical leader who spoke for the rights of the poor people. The man of Geramthan is a passionate

follower of Shambhu Babu's principles and both he and Duliya are shocked by his death. It is later known that the man had been arrested because he had *gheraoed* the police station in connection with Shambhu Babu's murder. The little plot of land that Duliya has in her possession must be mortgaged to a village local, Bisweswar, to gather money to bail the man out. In this unfortunate turn of events, Duliya has no option but to do so; but, they are conned once again, since the man is not let out of prison till after six years and Bisweswar cultivates their land, thus robbing these poor people of their fair share of land. The story brings forth the identity crisis of tribal population and also draws attention to the unfair acquisition of their land in many other parts of Assam.

Instances of poor, unsuspecting people being deceived by those in power are also common with Bengali Hindus and Muslims in Barak and Brahmaputra Valleys of Assam. 'Ashraf Ali's Homeland', written by Moloy Kanti Dey, begins with Ashraf Ali being deported with his family to Bangladesh on charges of being an 'illegal immigrant'. It so happens that a plot of land in Ashraf's possession is laid claim to by a certain Kader Mian, who first tries and fails to trap Ashraf in a false court case. He then proves that Ashraf is a citizen of Bangladesh and therefore, he is not to be given the legal possession of the plot. Ashraf is reminded of the time when they had had to desert their land in Bangladesh and come over to Hindustan/independent India. Ashraf ponders: "Why does one have to give up the land of several ancestral generations? Why does one have to leave the near and dear ones behind?"⁸⁵ He was a young boy then, and had not quite understood the gravity of the situation. After all these years, when they are being deported again, he faces a similar dilemma: he cannot quite decide what his land and

⁸⁵ Moloy Kanti Dey, 'Ashraf Ali's Homeland', trans. Dipendu Das, in *Barbed Wire Fence: Stories of Displacement from the Barak Valley of Assam*, ed. Dipendu Das and Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee, (New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2012), 119.

identity actually are. Ashraf does not realize when they had crossed the Indo-Bangladesh border, since the landforms look almost similar to him. Lines of division between two neighbouring countries which were previously parts of the same landmass have many such people facing similar dilemma. Ashraf's loss of identity is perfectly encapsulated in the last line of the story: "... Ashraf realizes that he does not have a homeland anywhere in the world. He has lost his homeland in Pakistan to Irfan *chacha* and in Hindustan to Kader Mian. Homelands are now in their control. And Ashraf? Standing on the strip of no man's land, Ashraf, in fact, now is no man – a nonentity."⁸⁶

In Barak Valley, language is an important means of salvaging Bengali identity. 'The Elevation', written by Bijoya Deb, uses the Language Movement as one of the principal themes. Ujjaini, married to Suchibroto, is a 'whimsical, fanciful' woman. Her indifference towards her married life often makes Suchibroto wonder if Ujjaini lacks interest in their marriage. Their five year old son, Shomi is actually quite at home with his English education and Suchibroto has made it a point to enhance his skills, which are more than mediocre. Suchibroto insists on Shomi's English education rather than focusing on his Bengali roots, which is not what Ujjaini wants. Suchibroto has in many ways, cast his aspirations on his son and makes him a part of the rat race. On the day the story is narrated is the 19th of May, which is commemorated as the *Bhasha Shahid Divas* or Language Martyrs' Day in Barak Valley of Assam. Even though Ujjaini is proud of this momentous event, she cannot make her son participate in its celebrations, since he has not been taught to espouse his Bengali roots, especially by his father. It must be mentioned that even though the stories are works of fiction, they do embody some true aspects of the second or third generation postcolonial Bengalis of Assam. Unfortunately, a minor character

⁸⁶ Ibid, 122.

in the story – a twelve year old boy Manu, commits suicide. He is reported to have been suffering under the pressures of education and his parents’ elaborate dreams. It is ironical that the boy should have taken his life on Language Martyrs’ Day. Unpredictably, Suchibroto is way too shocked at this, and gains complete realization of the situation, as it were. He insists that Shomi should light a lamp in honour of the martyrs. It is as though with this event, he comprehends his identity once again; the constant struggle that he was experiencing between his Self and the cursory identity that he wished to keep up had resolved. Suchibroto is now comfortable in accepting himself and his son, as also his wife with her love for Bengali language and roots.

The crisis of a second/third generation postcolonial citizen is encapsulated through ‘Wake Up Call’, written by Amitabha Dev Choudhury. It is in the vulnerability of *Masi* that the narrator is reminded of his own position in the country. *Masi* who has become senile, awakens the narrator every morning. Her struggle is against her status as a reject in both India and East Pakistan; in spite of being given food and clothes, she still troubles people in helping her acquire documents for her to go back to East Pakistan. Her journey towards defining her identity in her ‘homeland’ is a relentless one. The sheltered, secure narrator identifies himself in *Masi*’s struggle. Through *Masi*, he realizes his roots and dreams of his homeland: “For years, for ages, it seems, I haven’t seen my own soil. The greens beneath my feet, the sky over my head, the breeze murmuring in my years, the heavy monsoon showers, the huge trees, the tender grass were nowhere in my vision.”⁸⁷ As he embraces his identity, he wonders: “Or *Masi*, our beloved forgotten *Masi*, has shown me the way?”⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Amitabha Dev Choudhury, ‘Wake Up Call’, trans. Subha Prasad Nandi Majumdar, in *Barbed Wire Fence: Stories of Displacement from the Barak Valley of Assam*”, ed. Dipendu Das and Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee, (New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2012), 148.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

Saumitra Baishya's 'Our Home' is a first person narrative of the experiences of a Bengali family who had come over to India after Partition, and then like most others of their class, had set themselves up after a series of trials. The narrator's father and uncle, along with their widowed mother, had bought a plot at Hailakandi in Assam with the small amount of money in exchange for the property at East Pakistan and the loan given to refugees for their rehabilitation. The narrator's father had 'Sylhet, East Pakistan' written on his citizenship certificate, which were the only traces of his origin in East Pakistan. He then describes the other members of his family: *Sonapishi*, *Boropishima*, *Jyetha Babu*, *Nodada*, *Chhorda*, *Bordi* and the like – all of which are common Bengali terms of referring to close relatives. The hardship that goes into the building of a house and turning it into a 'home' is an unforgettable experience for all postcolonial Bengalis. This story embodies the experience; it is the author's experience as a postcolonial Bengali that finds description in it.

The stories in *Barbed Wire Fence* thus create for the reader, an awareness of the socio-cultural situation of settler Bengalis in Assam. Most of the stories are written and narrated from the writers' personal experience and provide an unadulterated and unapologetic description of the spirit of survival against all odds, ever since 1947.

Conclusion

Northeast India is usually considered ‘remote’ because of its cultural distinctiveness and geographical distance from the mainland India. Whether it is actually remote or if the distance between the Centre and the ‘peripheral’ Northeast is shrinking a bit is a question worth debating. In this context it is important to talk about issues of trust and discrimination in relation to Northeast India. In an international conference titled, ‘Re-imagining India’s Northeast’⁸⁹, Prof. Sanjoy Hazarika mentions that there is need for actions that engender trust in the broader political and civil space, not just in the creation of Accords between New Delhi and Northeast India. While we talk of the common occurrence of discrimination in metropolitan cities, we must remember that discrimination as a phenomenon is also important to the social fabric of Northeast India, whether in Shillong, Aizawl, Imphal or within Assam. This needs to be addressed more courageously than it is usually done.

Drawing upon Prof Hazarika, one might deduce that discrimination within Northeast India, among several different communities, was an obvious effect of Partition. An important result of discrimination was ethnic cleansing/conflict which has attained considerable magnitude in Northeast India. Prof. Mahesh Rangarajan, ex-Director of Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML), talks of how in the recent years, the body politic is embedded within a dynamic social structure, as opposed to when the state was thought of only in political terms. This change is perceptible and significant in a region as complicated as India’s Northeast. While in world history, the World Wars had led to this change – and thus to enormous ethnic cleansing,

⁸⁹ Acquired from Youtube: <https://youtu.be/EiWxUe0vSuc>

in India, it was the Partition that aided this. Thus discrimination, ethnic violence and identity politics are all inherently connected to each other. The awareness of ethnic and social differences among each other and the demarcation of territory after Partition have contributed to complicating the social scenario within Northeast India.

I have attempted to discuss this phenomenon of discrimination and identity politics in Assam in the three chapters of my dissertation. I have looked at the crisis through a literary point of view – since it appears to me that there has not been an expansive literary examination of the issue. The question of the condition of postcolonial Bengalis – their equations with Assamese and tribal communities – with which I have concerned myself in this dissertation needs to be studied with care, since the body of work concerning this issue in English is quite slender, both in Barak and Brahmaputra Valleys.

In this dissertation, I have explored this issue of ethnic conflict between Bengalis and other communities in Assam because this appears to be the most important historical occurrence in Assam. Prof. Udayon Misra, also a panelist in the Conference, thinks that the residue of the problem of ethnicity and land still remains in Northeast India, and maybe solved through improved relations with Bangladesh. He thinks that it is not just sufficient to improve trade relations between India and Bangladesh, because trade is not only between nations but also peoples. Therefore the attitude of Assamese middle class towards immigrant Bengalis needs to change. The problem with Assamese people, which he calls the ‘paradox of the Assamese mind’ lies in the fact that there is a sense of being betrayed and not treated well by the Indian nation state in times of crisis – which also arises from the feeling of belonging to the country even though there were demands for ‘Swadhin Asom’ or Independent Assam. It is from this sense of betrayal and also fear of subjugation that the Assamese, are trying to bring about cultural,

linguistic and ethnic primacy in Assam. As I have previously argued, attaining linguistic superiority and uniformity has been the most important scheme to attain this. However, despite numerous attempts at establishing this, no one language has been given the status of a principal state language, following which attempts are being made to identify ‘illegal migrants’ from Bangladesh in Assam – which was also on the AASU’s agenda during the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985 and the basis of implementation of the NRC in Assam. Sanjoy Hazarika in his book, *Strangers No More: New Narratives from India’s Northeast* argues how this exercise of “virulent campaigns against ‘Bangladeshis’ have led nowhere except caused acute divisions, increased mutual suspicions and fears.”⁹⁰ However, it must be remembered that a development in New Delhi’s relationship with Bangladesh and a pragmatic approach to grant citizenship to legal and ‘native’ citizens (*Khilanjia*) led to this factor being turned into a major advantage for the currently ruling party, BJP. The problem arises when the process of this detection and deportation turns into a mechanism to establish the racial superiority of only the Assamese, by trying to discriminate against one minority community – which in this case turns out to be Bengali Muslims primarily. This is not to say that Bengali Hindus are not discriminated against; indeed in the first draft of the NRC published on December 31, 2017, many lawful citizens were omitted. Although this was mainly a technical glitch, and revisions are being made to this list, yet NRC is being widely regarded throughout the Bengali community as a means of threat to their identity and existence in Assam.

Therefore, in Assam, issues of citizenship and identity politics are gaining in enormity with each passing day. The implementation of NRC has led to a string of protests and radical journalism, with the hope that justice is done to people in the state. Meanwhile, with the current

⁹⁰ Sanjoy Hazarika, *Strangers No More: New Narratives from India’s Northeast*, (New Delhi: Aleph, 2018), 164.

government's insistence on supremacy of Hindu culture, Bengali Muslims are likely to be victimized even more. The only feasible solution of this crisis is nurturing a feeling of assimilation and accommodating multiple cultures, a point that I have made in my third chapter. One hopes that an enduring solution to this crisis is brought about through dialogue and discussion.

Bibliography

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso, 1983. Print.

Azad, Abdul Kalam. "Growing Up Miya in Assam: How the NRC Weaponised My Identity Against Me." *Caravan* (Sept 23, 2018). https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/growing-up-miya-in-assam-how-the-nrc-weaponised-my-identity-against-me?fbclid=IwAR37H151djzl7hzHJSQ10_UV9VqjsZ5u_ijJNUwIFCzkA4PgMVyGYNo

Baral, Kailash, C. "Articulating Marginality." In *Emerging Literatures from North-East India*, edited by Margaret Ch. Zama. 3 – 13. New Delhi: Sage Publications. 2013. Print.

Barkakati, Dipak Kumar. *From Valley to Valley*. Translated by Gayatri Bhattacharji. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi. 2010. Print.

Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge. 1994. Print.

Bhattacharjee, Nirmal Kanti and Dipendu Das, ed. *Barbed Wire Fence: Stories of Displacement from the Barak Valley of Assam*. New Delhi: Niyogi Books. 2012. Print.

Butalia, Urvashi. *The Other Side of Silence*. Viking: Penguin, 1994. Print.

Chakrabarty, Bidyut. *The Partition of Bengal and Assam: 1932-1947, Contours of Freedom*. London: RoutledgeCurzon. 2004. Print.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "Remembered Village: Representation of Hindu-Bengali Memories in the Aftermath of the Partition." *Economic and Political Weekly* 31, no. 30 (1996): 2143 – 2151.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4404497>

Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and its Fragments*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993. Print.

Deb, Siddhartha. *The Point of Return*. New York: HarperCollins. 2004. Print.

Erl, Astrid. *Cultural Memory Studies*. Berlin: Deutsche Nationalbibliothek. 2008. Print.

Gellner, Ernest. *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. 1983. Print.

Hazarika, Dhruva. *Sons of Brahma*. Gurgaon: Penguin. 2014. Print.

Hazarika, Sanjoy. *Strangers of the Mist*. Viking: Penguin, 1994. Print.

Hazarika, Sanjoy. *Strangers No More: New Narratives from India's Northeast*. New Delhi: Aleph. 2018. Print.

Misra, Tilottama, ed. *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India: Poetry and Essays*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 2011. Print.

Misra, Tilottama. "Crossing Linguistic Boundaries: Two Arunachali Writers in Search of Readers." *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 36 (Sept 8 – 14, 2007): 3653 – 3661.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40276364>

Misra, Udayon. *India's North-East*. New Delhi: OUP. 2014. Print.

Weil, Simone. *The Need for Roots*. London: Routledge. 2002. Print.

Zama, Margaret Ch, ed. *Emerging Literatures from Northeast India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications. 2013. Print.

