Our Heritage

ISSN: 0474-9030

Vol-68-Issue-1-January-2020

Beyond Identity: The Protean "Bangladeshis" In The North East of India

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A huge hoarding at the turning of the main road leading towards Itanagar, the capital of Arunachal Pradesh, blatantly announced in bold letters-"Bangladeshis go back." Not only the gall that oozed out of every word, but the way such announcement of hatred is authenticated by a public hoarding exposes the dynamics of ethnic intolerance and violence that characterizes this beautiful region in the northeast of India, loosely referred to as the North-East.

This paper is my attempt to understand the word 'Bangladeshi' or 'bongal'that intrigued me when I first came to stay in the North East as a stranger. It is, I realized, a derogatory word used against a group of migrants who form an important part of the North East's economy. Why are they hated? What is it that makes them so invincible? How do they survive the endemic intolerance and violence carried out against them? In my paper I would try to find them a legitimate space in the history of the North East.

The North-East is a geographical space that accommodates eight states with a huge international border touching Myanmar, Tibet, Bhutan and Bangladesh. The Bangladeshis, as referred to in the hoarding are the immigrants from Bangladesh who continue to enter India through the porous international border. The word "Bangladeshi" changes slightly to accommodate local prejudices against this particular group of people and becomes 'bangal' or 'bongal'. Whatever the nomenclature, the word is a strong expression of othering. It is usually in use in the North-East and even West Bengal, a state that was politically, linguistically and culturally one with the present day Bangladesh. But the 'bangals' are the strange creations of India's colonial history many of whom are identified as illegitimate squatters and do not belong to any of the two countries-India or Bangladesh. During the partition of India into India and Pakistan the bangals were refugees from the then East Pakistan grudgingly accommodated as they came in trainloads,

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in boats or even walked hilly terrains carrying fear and uncertainty as their only baggage. They were desperate squatters; they were the social, economic and political problem for the new born free India. After the partition in 1947 history has taken a strange turn and the erstwhile East Pakistan warred against West Pakistan for attempting to impose their language Urdu on the Bengali speaking people of East Pakistan. The 1971partition of Pakistan was the fruit of linguistic nationalism whereas in1947 the British had partitioned India and had declared Pakistan as a Muslim state. The strange ways of history make it evident that divisions on the basis of race, ethnicity, language, religion and many more such categories are ephemeral, impermanent and extremely fluid and not natural or organic. Though categorized and crystallized as is usual in any question of nationalism, sub-nationalism, ethnocentrism etc., the strange force of humanity that negotiates daily with the subsistence of life creates a different pattern. The problem of refugee influx was inbuilt in the partition proposal. The British had employed a divide and rule policy and had imagined a great religious and social divide between the Hindus and Muslims. A poem written by W.H. Auden highlights how the British had constructed the idea of incompatibility of the Hindus and Muslims- the two major religious communities of India in his poem "Partition"-

> Unbiased at least he was when he arrived on his mission,
> Having never set eyes on the land he was called to partition
> Between two peoples fanatically at odds,
> With their different diets and incompatible gods.

Communal riots bloodied the partition and friends turned into foes. Thousands were dislocated and uprooted from their ancestral soil. Overnight they turned into refugees. It was a division artificially constructed by a few political leaders. But diaries, memoirs or literature depicting the mind of the people often tell different stories. Taslima Nasreen, a writer from Bangladesh calls it the "man made filth of religion" in her poem "Broken Bengal":

> There was a land – yours, mine, our forefathers'?
>
> Some suddenly halved this land of love into two.
>
> They who did it wrenched the stem of the dream
>
> Which danced like the upper end of the gourd,
>
> Dream of the people.

Literature reveals how this fire of communal sentiment also fed on other hidden elements like the greed for land and property, family or interfamily feud, patriarchal exploitations, poverty, hunger and many more. When it comes to the question of people, historical documentations are found to be lacking in perception. It is in literature that we find the depiction of minute particulars of responses that often deconstruct official as well as ideological renditions. Literature on partition often depicts that many tried to brave all adversities to remain in what they considered their desh

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or motherland which is not the nation state but the soil, the village of their ancestors. This shows a huge gap between the general concept of groupism or ethnic boundary created by the actors of ethno politics or even nationalism and the individual's agentiality in deciding not to move or give in to such imposed categorization. If poems sing of the collaborated dream of a people bound by language and culture to stay together, dissemination and migration is also part of human lot. If there is satisfaction in the security to be reified as a legitimized identity, there are cases where finding an identity is a far cry. However, many refugees of India's partition have been gradually enfolded in their adopted land and the memory of their motherland has transformed from trauma into some sweet and sad feeling at the back of the mind. As explained by Said, without citizenships and the privileges it entails, a people cannot be a people; and a person cannot be a person. What is more important- a secured identity or the root? Perhaps the ideal answer would be both. But as depicted in literature and also my findings through conversations with such uprooted people, some of them would not go back to Bangladesh because they are well settled in India. Others have realized that history has changed everything and the motherland is a strange place now. But this paper will deal with a totally different category. It will discuss the case of the Bangladeshis mentioned in the public hoarding in a state of the North-East. Though migrating from the same place i.e. Bangladesh, they do not share the same destiny of many other migrants from Bangladesh and the question of their identity formation is still unanswered.

The gradual assimilation of refugees of the partition of 1947 and the Bangladesh war in 1971 with the people of West Bengal has been easier as they shared a common language and culture. There is still a flow of people illegally crossing the border in search of better opportunities. These are poor people from the lower rung of society : both Hindus and Muslims. In West Bengal they easily merge with the local people. However the Bengalis from Bangladesh carry the markers of their particular region in certain food habits and dialectical specificities. They are identified as 'bangals' in a half serious, half-jocular mode by the Bengalis of West Bengal who have never known displacement. The term 'bangal' is derogatory .They are marked out as squatters without any root. The general impression is that they are quarrelsome, they love strong pungent cuisine, and they dream of an imaginary past when they were rich landlords. There is also a hidden rivalry as it is an accepted fact that the bangals are fighters and survivors. However, the leftist bias of the post-colonial politics of Bengal kept the Hindu Muslim dichotomy created during the colonial rule under the carpet. In West Bengal, unlike in the North East, the term 'bangal' applies for all who came from Bangladesh and not just the Muslim illegal migrants.

The case of Bangladeshis or bongals is different in the North-East of India .This is because the dynamics of the politics of this region with regard to the colonial and post-colonial India is unique. Equally unique is the spatial, racial and ethnic topography of this region in terms of the overall map and people of India. It is a vast region made up of rivers, valleys and a large portion of dense forests, steep mountains, and wastelands. Spatially it holds a crucial position in India's political map. At present it is completely surrounded by the international borders of Myanmar,

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China, Bhutan and Bangladesh and its connection to mainland India is possible through a narrow chicken's neck corridor. Before the partition of Bengal, during the colonial rule it was part of the Bengal presidency and prior to that it was known as the kingdom of the Ahoms. The Ahoms were migrants from Thailand. Though the indigenous tribes like the Bodos, Cacharis, Marans etc. were marginalised by the Ahoms, yet there was a kind of multiculturalism or multi-ethnic social base as the Ahom kings brought them into the fold through conquest and social bonding. The ferocious hill tribes, some of which were head hunters were kept at a distance and often appeased by the Ahom kings with a variety of tax in kind called 'posa'. Gradually the Ahom kings gave up their tribal identity and embraced religious and cultural traits from mainland India. However, this tendency of assimilation and multiculturalism was interrupted by the British colonial interference.

Assam was annexed to the British rule in 1826 when the Ahom king sought the help of the British to fight away Burmese invasions. After entering Assam the British discovered immense commercial possibilities in the region and soon ventured for oil mining and tea plantation.This required a huge labour force but the local Assamese villager preferred to cultivate his own land. Assam was not rich in population resources and the existing population considered itself self-sufficient. Sajal Nag, an eminent historian of the North East writes-"The British accused the Assamese of indolence because they were not willing to work to the desired extent."(Nag,1990:85)In fact the Assamese indolence was a familiar topic of discussion in the British records. However, a study of the demography vis- a- vis the land mass and the Assamese way of life would reveal that while the British in India were promulgating capitalist materialism, the Assamese world view stood in stark contrast. A huge land mass and a meagre population took care of the self sufficiency of the Assamese cultivators. Added to it was the distinctive feature of their culture which was inseparably connected with their religious institutions. Shankardev is the originator of all that is peculiarly Assamese in their social organization and culture. The neo-Vaishnavite movement promoted a simple way of daily life with a strong thrust on daily rituals and symbolism. Time in Assamese life was slow and languid. The social formation was unique too as groups were formed around Sattras. Thus they were innocent of the materialism that came with colonial capitalism. Another factor that the British identified as the reason of indolence was the culture of opium eating from the time of Ahom rule. However, the British had to import labourers from central India in order to work in the tea plantations and thus indentured labour was introduced. By 1921 these migrants constituted one sixth of Assam's population. The local food production could not feed this excess population. There was no culture of excess production and the Assamese refused to oblige. It is at this point that land hungry and poor Bengali Muslim peasants from the eastern part of Bengal were encouraged to immigrate to Assam and settle in the wastelands. The status of these settlers hereafter got entangled to the weird path of the colonial history of Assam.

Initially they were welcomed even by the Assamese middleclass intelligentsia because they were convinced that a growth in the population would help in the development of Assam. Sajal Nag quotes a famous Assamese litterateur Anandaram Dhekial Phukan- "the people from some badly

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provided parts of Bengal could be invited to immigrate"(Nag,1992:87)to improve the demographic structure of Assam. The immigration policies were planned in 1897 and a steady flow of peasants begun. These were stout and skilled cultivators mostly from the district of Bengal's Mymensingh who were victims of 'zamindari' oppression, land shortage, famine etc. They were mostly settled in the wastelands and uninhabitable 'chars' or river basins. Apart from land cultivation they contributed to fishing and boat building. As more and more immigrants poured in, they entered urban areas in search of semi-skilled jobs.

Assamese nationalism was largely spawned by hatred against the outsiders, especially the Bengali migrants. The Assamese-Bengali ethnic conflict is deeply etched in the social, political, religious and linguistic fabric that was woven by colonial history. The reasons are manifold.

Politically, this hatred was sown by the British in their divide and rule policy. The capitalist mode of production required a homogenous market. The administrators, for the sake of convenience merged Assam with Bengal without taking into account the economic as well as ethnic incompatibility. Bengal was one of the first states to enjoy the privileges of English education as well as modernization that stood in stark contrast to Assam. The administrators imposed Bengali as the designated official language of the area. For a long period in history the Bengalis too considered Assamese as a provincial dialect. The Bengali Hindus were incorporated in the administration and later posed a threat to the Assamese in the competitive job market. This generated the hatred against all Bengalis and initiated Assamese linguistic nationalism.

On a different plane the Bengali Muslim cultivators posed a threat to local farmers. The farmers from Bangladesh were experts in deep tube well irrigation and the cultivation of the high yielding variety of summer rice. This variety could survive even in the flood prone areas of Assam. They were equally good in vegetable farming. Skilled and hardworking, they were highly in demand among the indigenous cultivators who hired them as farm hands. But soon they overtook the local cultivators and from share croppers and tenants became independent farmers. The acquisition of land was often carried out illegally by getting thumb impressions on pieces of papers. This led to anger, angst and bloodshed. The genocide that occurred in Nellie in 1983 is an extreme case where not less than 1753 Bengali Muslims were killed. This was planned for weeks by the local Tibas, a tribe who had unwittingly and illegally sold their land to their tenants. Sanjoy Hazarika, a journalist writes in his book *Rites of Passage*-"Their bitterness grew as they saw the immigrants nourish the soil and grow more crops, making profits on fields which were, until recently, their own."(p46)

After the partition in 1947 the Hindu Bengalis who flew to Assam were religious and political refugees. Another spurt of Hindu Bengali refugees entered Assam and India in1971 when East Pakistan became Bangladesh. This again was to escape the tortures of the fanatic Khan soldiers. Most of them went for job and business and preferred to stay in urban areas. But the Muslim Bengalis who continue to enter Assam are poor cultivators who migrate for basic sustenance. Though Assam is still a land of plenty in comparison to the overpopulated Bangladesh,

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uncertainty, hardship and the xenophobia of the host country are part and parcel of their life. The chars they live in are villages on river basins and river islands made of new alluvium. They use the fertile land to cultivate paddy, jute and vegetables. They live in huts fashioned from dried jutes and get along without roads, schools, doctors and other basic amenities. These chars are impermanent entities that disappear with erosion or flood.

When we look at the other side of the problem, the influx of refugees and migrants since the colonial times altered permanently the future of Assam. The census report of 1931 says that this movement across the border destroyed more surely than anything else the structure of Assamese culture and civilization. After 1920 the Assamese were seriously apprehensive that unchecked immigration might change the demographic composition of the province, reducing the ethnic Assamese to a minority in their homeland. Sujit Chaudhury, an eminent historian of Assam writes in a paper titled "A 'god sent' opportunity?": "Since then the primary concern of the Assamese leadership centred around two objectives: (*i*) save Assam from the constant flow of Muslim immigration, and (*ii*) separate Bengali speaking districts of Sylhet and Cachar from the administrative unit of Assam in order to free government offices from the clutches of the Bengali Hindu employees."So when Sylhet, a wealthy district of Assam was ultimately tagged to East Pakistan, the Assamese in general greeted the loss as the district was inhabited by Bengalis. The governor in his first address after independence said that the native of Assam were then masters of their own house. But this was short lived as the influx of Bengali refugees, inbuilt within the partition proposal thwarted the hope. This led to Assam's linguistic nationalism. A circular issued in1948 by a students' union said-"Great caution will be necessary on the part of your staff to see that not a single individual of this class manages to creep into the electoral roll by any chance."(Chaudhuri, 2002) But no sooner was this sentiment published and a strong xenophobia gripped Assamese society a new turn of events further complicated Assam's history. After this the growth rate of Assamese speakers grew absurdly to 150% and that of Bengali speakers went down. This miracle happened because immigrant Bengali Muslims reported Assamese as their mother tongue in the census of 1951.The alliance between the Assamese and the Muslim peasants was that of convenience. The Assamese gentry did not want to confer full-fledged Assamese status on the immigrants. They could keep their land that they had illegally acquired, but their bid to enter middleclass professions or share political power was frowned upon by the Assamese gentry.

The Hindu Muslim division incurred by the British with their politics of discrimination was retained in Assam for the Muslim Bengalis joined the Assamese against the Hindu Bengalis. This coalition had an inbuilt weakness from the beginning. A vital question was raised in1936 by Khan Bahadur Nuruddin Ahmed on behalf of the migrants-"it is no use calling them Assamese without giving them the status of the Assamese."(Chaudhuri,2002)

In the middle of the seventies a researcher Myron Weiner predicted that this would incite more influx of Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh and at one point the Hindu and Muslim Bengalese might unite under the aegis of Bengali nationalism. This prediction came true in 1971

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when Bengalis of East Pakistan united against West Pakistan under the banner of linguistic nationalism. This sentiment was echoed and celebrated by the people of West Bengal who forgot for the time being their jibes against the 'bangals'. However, in the North East this sent alarming signals which reached its height when in 1979-80 the anti-foreigner movement was launched. Sajal Nag writes-"It was a renewed attempt to reduce the numerical strength of Bengalis in Assam. It grew into a social upheaval and continued for an incredibly long duration. It unleashed a reign of terror, violence and genocide of a magnitude unknown in Assam."(Nag, 1990:8)

The metaphorical significance of one's own home or house is deeply implicated in such ethno national clashes. According to Edward Said, as explained by R. Radhakrishnan, in the modern times nation has become the synonym for home, that the idea of home requires political embodiment and shape and that is achieved in one's nationality. The reification of one's national identity is achieved by the tool of othering. It is achieved with a normative principle of ethnic groupism that is conjectured as *a priori* or trans-historical. Rogers Brubaker in his essay "Ethnicity without groups" refers to a modern strategy of group making. It implies that the normative claims of ethnic groups are constructed. He maintains- "Sometimes this is done in quite cynical fashion. Ethnic and other insurgencies, for example, often adopt what is called in French a *politique du pire*, a politics of seeking the worst outcome in the short run so as to bolster their legitimacy.."(Brubaker, 2004:171) This he distinguishes as ethno politics which is situational or opportunistic and not at all natural.

In his novel *The Point of Return* Siddhartha Dev tries to explore the concept of 'home' from the point of view of his family who were refugees in Assam or the North East after the partition of Bengal in 1947. The hills of Shillong that was home to him suddenly turned strange during the anti-foreigner movement in 1979. His childhood friends overnight turn distant and hostile. One day he found posters on walls screaming-" Go back,Bangladeshis" (P.178). While discussing this novel in a classroom a few years after I had seen the hoarding in Itanagar I realized the true situation of people very complexly posited in the history of the North East. Perhaps, I thought, literature legitimizes that which is unbelievable in real life.

Who are these Bangladeshis? How do we define them? Are they a homogenous group of the same class, caste and religion? At what point of history did they transgress their limited national or ethnic boundary? Have they changed themselves through acculturation? Did this help them in finding a legitimate home? I remembered the public hoarding that had shocked me. I tried to conceptualize the Bangladeshis from the point of view of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. I remembered the poor indentured labourers, all Bengali Muslims seasonally imported in truckloads to help the tribal people with harvesting. They are also scattered everywhere as fishmongers, butchers, vegetable vendors and construction workers. They are invincible and inevitable. Twice I have witnessed how attempts by local entrepreneurs to throw them out of the fish markets failed. Such is their entrepreneurial ability that they are brought back by the local consumers who hate them.

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When I enquired about the anti-foreigner movement in Assam I gathered that though it was against Marwaris, Biharis ,Nepalis and Bengalis, the slogan was 'bongal khedao'meaning 'throw away the bongals'. Thus it can be conjectured without doubt that 'bongal' implies both 'the outsider' and 'the Bengali'. It further implies that the Bengalis were considered the main threat to Assamese hegemony. The reason lies in the tendency of the migrant to seek for legitimacy that could be achieved through inclusion into the middleclass and get attached to the circuits of power politics. Earlier the Bengali Muslims had not posed any threat as they belonged to the lower rung of society and were hardly educated. But this was short-lived because a section of the migrants grew affluent and entered the middleclass segment of society. This enabled them to enter power politics and contest independently against the Assamese. It also increased the possibility of the marginalized middleclass Bengali Hindus of Barak Valley to join hand in the name of Bengali hegemony. The Barak Valley is a peripheral segment of Assam. According to Sukalpa Bhattacharya this valley had remained a linguistic and cultural periphery of both Bengal and Assam. My negotiation with Assam's peculiar identity politics was when I came from West Bengal to work in this valley. Here, for the first time I came to realize that the same word 'bangal' could have different connotations. Here the Hindu Bengalis used this derogatory word against the Muslim infiltrators. I had sensed the Hindu-Muslim tension, but now I saw the contingent nature of history, and realized that nothing in it can be sanctified or permanent.

While tracing the history of migration from Bangladesh and the consequent effects on Assam, I have tried to highlight that the question of identity of the migrants is a problematic phenomenon and highly contingent in nature. This is to subvert the general tendency to miniaturize humanity into fixed and singular identity which has a contradictory effect of both legitimizing one's place in a nation as well as create a scope of ethnic clashes. According to Amartya Sen communitarian thinking helps to appreciate a person in his or her social context but it is a restricted understanding "since each person has many different associations and attachments, the respective importance of which varies widely depending on the context."(Sen,2006:177) For example civilizational classifiers have pigeonholed India as a Hindu civilization. This ignores not only the other religious groups but also the socio-cultural and linguistic affiliations of different groups that give out a secular tone. In the same manner the use of the derogatory umbrella term 'Bangladeshi' miniaturizes a huge group of human beings and provides an excuse to evade problematizing their status. I have made it clear that the destiny of the migrants in the North East is intrinsically related to Assam's colonial history. It is an existential crisis, recalcitrant, and the contrapuntal antagonistic relation of the people of the North East with the migrants has taken the shape of ethnic violence.

It is interesting to note that both the partition of 1947 as well as the Bangladesh war naturally enforced Hindu Bengalis to cross the border as in both cases the Hindus were targets. But "large groups of flood affected and land-starved" (Rajkumar, 2011:92) poor farmers, mostly Muslim and from the district of Mymensingh invaded the large tracts of the wastelands of Assam or the North East. While the educated Hindu migrants somehow created a niche for themselves in India and entered the secured boundary of Bengali middleclass, the migrants of the lower wrung,

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mostly Muslims had to live a life of constant camouflage and identity shift. My paper focusses on this group of people and questions if they can be brought under the aegis of ethnicity as it is a way of appreciating a group or individual as part of a nation. As Richard Jenkins says, "The 'nation' and 'national identity' or 'nationality' are, respectively, varities of ethnic collectivity and ethnicity…" (Jenkins, 2008:148).

My paper makes it clear that the question of ethnic groupism is in a way politically constructed. This is supported by Fredrick Barth, a socio-anthropologist who observed that ethnic groups are not naturally bounded cultural entities. According to Barth ethnicity is defined from the perspective of the members on their agreeing to be in the same group. This opens up the possibility of different cultural groups agreeing to pose as the same entity. In the context of Assam the Assamese and the Bengali Muslims at one point of time became one group in the fabric of Assam's ethno politics, in spite of having opposing cultural traits. I would not bring the topic of religion as Assam, from the time of the Mughals already had its own Muslim population. But these Muslim Bengali migrants officially gave up their mother tongue. According to Sanjay Hazarika, a writer and journalist: politics had created strange bedfellows in Assam. It is an irony that during the anti-foreigner movement in 1979 the political parties that won the election on the basis of anti-Bangladeshi agenda banked on the votes of the Naya Asamiya – the newly converted migrants from Bangladesh.

The strange behavioural pattern of the migrants actually legitimizes Barth's claim that ethnic groups are social than cultural entities and dialogic in nature.Living in close proximity and through every day social exchanges the Bengali Muslims internalized the Assamese language and everyday habits like the use of 'gamosa', 'xora', 'tambul' etc. Perhaps it is a conscious adaptation prodded by a deep survival instinct.

This extreme tendency to camouflage proved to be a strong tool of survival against ethno politics in which one's own cultural traits are aggressively underscored. Remaining invisible as a cultural entity yet participating in the economic growth of the North East they were able to create their own small group of elites who would represent their cause in the region's power politics and finally in the project of linguistic hegemony. Yet there is a question in this apparently simple turnout. If a group of Bengali Muslim migrants have entered the circuit of power politics to represent their brethren they have done so by entering the middleclass. Thus they have acquired the characteristics of the bourgeoisie. This includes the opportunistic use of ethnic framing to mask the pursuit of wealth and power. In the meantime the poor migrants remain invisible and ubiquitous, still pursuing an anchorless floating life without any legitimate identity. This is more so because even if a small group is benefitted, poor migrants continue to seep in through the borders.

Where do we place these people living in a grey area in the colourful North East with its rich variety of tribes, so distinct and visible in their culture and unique everyday life? In spite of ethnic clashes there is no question in their sense of belonging in the hills, forests, rich riverine

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valleys, in towns and villages. When it comes to the question of identity it is very common to see their sense of belonging to a particular ethnic group. The most common idea of ethnicity is related to a shared culture. It is also related to language, origin, religion etc. and naturally connects to the nation. Fredrick Barth problematized it by promoting the idea of ethnicity as related to man's social life which is always emergent through "perpetual coalition, fission and negotiation;"(Jenkins,2008:169). It is true that such interaction between different groups are unavoidable and acquisition of the host state's identity markers by these floating poor migrants is inevitable, but since survival requirements make them be on constant move they are forced to change their survival strategies. Thus they continue to be the unwanted 'Bangladeshis'. This word is a concept that simply indicates the 'other'.

There are many instances of their strategy of camouflage that I encountered in my daily life in the North East. Once when I was buying meat in a market of Assam I noticed that though the butcher looked like an Assamese with a gamosa on his shoulder and speaking fluent Assamese, he communicated with his assistant, probably his son, in Bangla. I noticed too that he spoke in Bangla only when his customers were out of hearing. I was overjoyed to find a Bengali and began speaking to him in Bangla. He gladly responded. But the moment an Assamese buyer arrived he immediately turned to him and completely ignored my presence. I tried to catch his attention as I had the legitimate claim to be attended first. At last when he turned his attention to me he switched to Hindi instead of Bangla. I was shocked and hurt. He looked at me with hard alien eyes.

My husband also remembers a funny experience when travelling in a bus plying from Mizoram to Silchar. He overheard a conversation between two Muslim labourers. It was about the taste of pork. The animated conversation revealed that one of the labourers had to eat the forbidden meat as he was working under a Mizo master and in Mizoram pork is a staple food. To the utter disbelief of his friend he confessed that he found the meat extremely delicious.

Instances from daily life often underscore the limitations of any form of theorization. The so called Bangladeshis are an entity crossing all borders of religion, culture and language, never crystallizing into a category, and only categories can form into ethnic groups. According to Roger Brubakers, to form a category one needs ecological niches in which to survive and flourish as a particular category. I would like to go further and add that the idea of a niche parallels the idea of home. For these Bangladeshis there is no such niche or home. Thus they have no inhibitions, for it is only one's home or 'desh' that binds one to tradition, religion, culture and language. Stories of theft, murder, rape, some true, some fictitious follow them wherever they go. Even literature depicts them as strange and dark, without any identity. In Mamang Dai's *Legends of Pensam* the road builders are described as dark creatures living in shanties, their women in bright sarees. There is no mention if they were Biharis or Bangladeshis , but they bring with them all sorts of nuisance like theft and filth. They are not allotted any consciousness in their depiction, as they are silent. Opinions are created around them. Thus, in

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real life, they provoke violence and respond with equal aggression. It is often a calculated instigation that takes the colour of ethnic violence.

Who are these Bangladeshis against whom the public hoarding had sent such strong signals of hatred? They form a grey area in the study of ethnicity. Poor and uneducated as they are, they do not know why they are called Bangladeshis. They do not identify themselves as Bangladeshis, nor would Bangladesh ever claim them to be their own. They do not belong to the nation state as they do not enjoy the privileges of citizenship with no photo identities or ration cards to crystallize their identity. 'Bangladeshi' is a concept that simply indicates the 'outsider'. Yet they are everywhere-helping to build houses, roads, selling fish in the markets, helping tribal communities during their harvesting times. Yet it is difficult to identify them as an ethnic group. Ethno politics depends on the reification of the other. Unlike 'race' the word ethnic has a positive ring for it stands in close relation to the nation. "Bangladeshi' carries a negative burden of guilt. Once a colleague who belongs to one of the indigenous tribes of Assam told me that as a child her mother often called her 'bongal'. I was surprised and asked her the reason. She said that the people of Assam are fond of napping during the afternoon. It is part of their culture and a sign of respectability. But she was a wayward child and wandered around while her family slept. To chide her and correct her bad habit the disparaging term was used by her mother. I asked her," But why 'bongal'?" She answered-"Bongals are Bangladeshis who do not have any culture, root or tradition: they work throughout the day."

I would like to conclude my paper with the questions that Siddharth Dev raised in his novel*The Point of Return.* Though he concentrates on the struggles of a Hindu migrant family and their constant search for a home, somewhere his voice takes up the responsibility to speak for the silent unconscious souls who are aware of nothing else but their daily struggles for sustenance. Remembering how during the colonial times Henry Walters entered Assam after crossing the plains of Bengal and how in his description he demonizes the people of Bengal as dark and querulous and the people of Shillong as towering in moral character, Dev falls prey to a mood of dark introspection-"Why did they move, these natives of the plains, bringing their noxious, dark, sunburnt faces to blight these mountains? Did they not foresee what would happen when such opposites met, the cool and the hot, the light and the dark, the honest and the thieving? Why did they not know their history?"(P. 158) My status as a Bengali visa vis Dev is not comparable as I have never experienced rootlessness. Thus I find him giving in to a sentimental outburst while mentioning the comments of Henry Walters, but I find the last line "Why did they not know their history?" significant in the context of the Bangladeshis in the North East. The Western concept of history is related to one's national or even ethnic identity. When we deal with the word 'Bangladeshi' we face a dead end.

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