



Contours of Regionalism and Cultural Exclusion in *Shillong Times: A Story of Friendship and Fear*

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Abstract:

This study investigates the entanglement of regionalism, identity politics, and social justice in Nilanjan P. Choudhary's *Shillong Times: A Story of Friendship and Fear* by tracking the processes of cultural exclusion and marginalisation in the novel. The study provides the socio-political context of the novel in Meghalaya and the lived experience of the marginalised characters affected by regional and ethnic politics. Based on qualitative textual analysis and drawing on the work of B. R. Ambedkar, the study shows how the inequities depicted in the novel are consistent with the lived experience of ethnic marginalisation and social exclusion and relates depictions of hegemony, discrimination and politics of belonging to the problem of political alienation and ethnic conflict and cultural identity, particularly in the context of regionalism. This work situates the novel within broader discussions of regional and ethnic identities thereby, contributing to studies on regional and ethnic identity in Indian literature as well as contemporary debates on democracy and social.

Keywords: Social Justice, Ethnic Marginalisation, Political Alienation, Cultural Identity.

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Introduction

The partition of India is generally perceived as a conflict between Hindus and Muslims who separated into two nations, India and Pakistan. The impact of partition extended beyond religion and also affected boundaries that separated individuals based on the social, cultural, ethnic and class aspects of life. These dimensions created communities and worldviews that have outlasted the subsequent political partition of India and Pakistan. Partition and the associated exchange of populations between the two new countries resulted in the mass migration of Hindus and Sikhs out from territory that became Pakistan and into India. These migrations included the movement of Bengali Hindus fleeing what is now Bangladesh (East Bengal) to other Indian states, such as Meghalaya in northeast India, where large numbers of Bengali migrants settled. This history, which has not been articulated in the dominant political narrative, could help explain the social and cultural cleavages that emerged in the region in 1947. During the Partition of India in 1947, around 14 million Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs moved back and forth across the border from India into Pakistan and vice versa. Not all Muslims moved out of India, though, and in 1951 Muslims made up 10 percent of India's population. For some of them, India was not considered a foreign land, and they stressed their loyalty to their homeland (Ansari).

Sanjoy Hazarika observes that "what is not often understood is that the North-East suffered the impact of not one but two partitions" (xi). In the 1937 Partition of Burma, the age-old linkages between the Nagas, the Mizos, the Manipuris and tribal peoples of present Arunachal Pradesh were severed by the division between the newly independent states of India and Myanmar. The 1947 partition of Bengal and Assam further divided 'the region' and added to the pre-existing communal and ethnic cleavages of the two predominant communities-Hindus and Muslims-and the region's ethnic minorities: the Khasis, Garos, Hajongs, Rabhas, Karbis,

Koch-Rajbongshis, Reangs and Chakmas (Dutta 47). The 1905 partition of Bengal and the liberation of Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) in 1971 also had a lasting impact on Northeast India that can be seen in the changing demography and migration, and inter-ethnic relations. All of these have resulted in several contemporary political and social problems such as identity crisis, marginalisation, secessionism, insurgency, militarisation, unemployment, depletion of natural resources, and trafficking in humans, arms, and drugs (McDuie-Ra 165-182).

While the existence of political divisions between the Indian Muslim and Hindu leaderships is seen as a reason for the Partition of colonial India into the Muslim majority state of Pakistan and the Hindu majority state of India, this does not account for the violence. The hurried decolonisation of India in 1947 after Labour Party victories in the British general elections and post-war recognition of the Empire's over-reach may have played a role. Furthermore, the basic premise of Pakistan as a Muslim homeland is contested, given that more Muslims remained in India than were included in Pakistan, which itself was divided into East Bengal (now Bangladesh) and the western region (Khan 89). Ambedkar investigates the partition of India, including the demarcation of borders and the transfer of populations, and discusses how these were major drivers of the creation of Pakistan. He points out that if they were not handled carefully, these issues would provoke further disruption. Ambedkar then questions the validity of the claims of the Muslim League and states that the principle of self-determination must not be used to apply territorial claims on any basis of religion or dynasty. Ambedkar asserts that, "Self-determination must be by the people" (177), and must take into account factors such as geography and population mingling.

Ambedkar opposes the Muslim League's demand for Pakistan as a Muslim-majority state as violating the principle of self-determination. However, regarding regions such as Bengal and

Punjab where Muslims are in a majority, he suggests partitioning based on religion and ethnicity. However, Ambedkar opposes self-determination being applied unequally to provinces where the people are mixed, such as North-West Frontier Province, Sindh and Baluchistan. Ambedkar writes that these should be granted cultural autonomy, with appropriate political safeguards. Partitioning these, he argues, would be detrimental to all people concerned. He criticises the position of the Muslim League, reads Jinnah as backtracking on extending self-determination to Pakistan's non-Muslim minorities, and criticises those religious minorities as "who crowd Punjab and Bengal". He proposes that if the Muslim League wants self-determination for Muslims, they should also support partitioning Hindu minorities. Ambedkar cites Sir Edward Carson's pragmatic approach in Northern Ireland, which acknowledged territorial realities and excluded regions with notable opposition (179).

Ambedkar suggests that there has to be agreement between the communities, not on the basis of the religious majority or power but on the basis of the moral order and moral recognition of the rights and aspirations of each community. The only guarantee against civil war in Pakistan is to respect and protect all its communities. If the basis of setting a border is a just and reasonable one, then all the lived spaces affected by the border should be recognised. If not, then Pakistan's very existence would rest upon oppression, exclusion and not mutual respect and understanding (180).

Ambedkar addresses the issue of the organisation and morality that would be necessary for the mass migration that would likely follow Pakistan's formation. He asserts that if the new borders are readjusted, the transfer of the population in Punjab and Bengal would not be necessary. He writes about the transfer of the population as follows:

In the first place, if the boundaries of the Punjab and Bengal are redrawn there will be no question of transfer of population so far as these two Provinces are concerned. In the second place, the Musalmans residing in Hindustan do not propose to migrate to Pakistan nor does the League want their transfer. In the third place, the Hindus in the North-West Frontier Province, Sind and Baluchistan do not want to migrate. If these assumptions are correct, the problem of transfer of population is far from being a staggering problem. Indeed it is so small that there is no need to regard it as a problem at all. (181)

He argued that since Muslims and Hindus would be free to move in either direction between India and Pakistan, the direction between the two countries was irrelevant. Rather, the practical challenges of transferring residents, including property, financial, and legal issues, were more relevant when organising the migration process. Ambedkar recommended a treaty between India and Pakistan to ease migration, which included protection of movable property, conversion of immovable property to cash, and damages. He stresses that the process is most effective when emigrants are settled voluntarily with the assistance of authorities and should be planned to ensure that migrations are timely, fair, and orderly.

Methodology and Objectives

The study employs the qualitative research design of close textual analysis to analyse Nilanjan P. Choudhury's *Shillong Times: A Story of Friendship and Fear*. This work attempts to place the representation of regionalism and cultural othering in the novel in the historical context of partition, postcoloniality and the relationship between Khasi and Bengali communities in Meghalaya. It also explores how the social and cultural aftermath of the Bengali and Khasi feud

was inherited after the Partition of India and how this historical divide has had implications for contemporary social relations.

It also seeks to explore *Shillong Times: A Story of Friendship and Fear*'s critique of intergenerational cultural trauma through an analysis of the relations between the characters and the transmission of memory, and concepts of fear, prejudice, and belonging in particular as they are reproduced in the historical and contemporary settings, how they define identities, and how they could lead to reconciliation and coexistence. The aim, in short, is to illustrate how the novel speaks to contemporary debates on cultural identity, regionalism, nationalism, and the ethics of diversity and acceptance in postcolonial India.

Analysis

The novel presents Shillong, of which the region is a microcosm, as both a site of regionalism and a battleground for the prejudices that lie at the roots of cultural exclusion, aspirations for self-governance, and fears of cultural extinction and marginalisation. It also deals with the anguish of the existential crises these events can cause, which sometimes require the creation of a separate space or identity. The tension between protection of important friendships and self-interest serves to illustrate the psychological impact of regionalism on those whom it is intended to induce or coerce.

Social and cultural exclusion is not like those phenomena. While bullying directly harms its victim, social and cultural exclusion does not initially seem to be bad in itself for the person experiencing it. However, exclusion is sometimes justified and so can be seen as a necessary and useful thing to bring about certain ends within most kinds of social groups (Killen *et al* 173). For instance, groups may exclude people for practical reasons related to group size, or for reasons of

merit, such as a lack of certain characteristics or skills. It may, however, also be problematic, in particular when the main cost of exclusion is not physical, but rather psychological. Within harmful exclusion, a further distinction can be made between exclusion triggered by the individual's specific attributes (such as shyness, awkwardness, or unpleasantness), and that triggered by group membership. The latter, often referred to as intergroup exclusion, occurs when an individual is excluded from interacting with or being part of a group, or being part of a discussion, specifically due to belonging to a certain social, ethnic, cultural or ideological group. Such exclusion is based on a natural tendency to separate in-groups and out-groups. The study of intergroup attitudes and prejudice has been a central concern for social psychology (Dovidio and Gaertner 3), and intergroup rejection is one of the central concerns of the inclusion and exclusion literature (Abrams *et al* 1).

The novel provides a detailed depiction of cultural exclusion and ethnic strife. Through the character of Debujit Dutta (Debu), a Bengali boy, the narrative examines how nationalism and identity are intrinsically tied within the social fabric of Shillong, like much of post-partition India. Debu, the fourteenth-year-old Bengali boy wants to survive in the ethnocultural-racial milieu of Shillong. He soon learns from his first encounter with Clint Eastwood Lyngdoh, a Khasi boy, that a sociocultural-ethnocultural divide exists between the Khasi tribe members and Bengali migrants. The term "Dkhar" used by the Khasi boys to refer to Debu and to distinguish him from themselves positions him as an outsider. As a post-Partition migrant, Debu's outsider status is fragile and always reinforced by being reminded of it. For example, the tension between the Khasi and Bengali people in Shillong points to the inter-communal tension that Ambedkar was critical of, but is not limited to religion. For instance, Ambedkar argued that "steps must be taken to delimit the areas wherever it is possible by redrawing provincial boundaries on ethnic

and cultural lines by separating the Muslim majority districts from the districts in which the majority consists of non-Muslims” (Ambedkar 186). Hence, the lasting consequences of partition are obvious even for those living far away from the borders of India and Pakistan.

As Debu is learning to fit into their lifestyle, Clint continues to introduce him to the features of Khasi culture which would be ‘foreign’ to Debu’s Bengali family. Music, food and social life, all of which would get Debu’s mother upset, such as Kalsang, a Chinese restaurant frequently visited by Clint and his friends. Clint, however, is visibly friendly with Debu, and this challenges cultural exclusion on a different level. As tensions build between the Bengali community and the Khasi community in the film, the ethnic divide between the two communities shows how past communities’ resentments permeate identities of different communities. It symbolises the remnants of the partition and how Indians, especially the natives from the northeastern states, have experienced balkanisation of community and ethnicity. The term “*dkhar*,” central to the incident between Debu and the Khasi boys, illuminates the entrenched cultural boundaries faced by Debu as a Bengali migrant. In the beginning, Debu takes the word as a personal name, but later realises that the proper noun is a derogatory term for outsiders in the Khasi language. “It’s the Khasi word for foreigner” (Choudhury 2) literally means “foreigner” and is a derogatory term for people from outside the Khasi ethnic group. The term is used to convey that, despite having been born and brought up in Shillong, Debu is not Khasi. For the local community, “nationalism means speaking and understanding the same dialect” (Mukhim 6). Khasi boys use *dkhar* as a derogatory term to refer to a non-Khasi, especially someone of Bengali descent. In reality, it reflects the ethnic divide between native Khasi and Bengali immigrant populations of Shillong. By now, Debu was beginning to suspect that *dkhar* was not a proper name, but an insult of some sort. One that could not be taken lightly by any

self-respecting fourteen-year-old (Choudhury 2). The realisation that the term is a social marker for outsiders highlights the regionalism and ethnic exclusion that Debu has to negotiate in post-partition India. The cultural exclusion parallels the ethnic discrimination Ambedkar condemned during partition that uses religion and ethnicity to exclude “outsiders” and discriminate against other communities based on ethnic identity. He stated that “religion, language, script and personal law of each community should be safeguarded by a paramount constitutional check enabling the majority of members, representing that community in the legislature to place a veto on any legislative or other measure affecting it. A similar veto must be provided against any measure designed or calculated to affect adversely the economic well - being of any community” (Ambedkar 97).

The Khasi boys threaten and tease Debu, following him everywhere, while he reacts with fear and anxiety, underscoring the social vulnerability of Bengali immigrants in Shillong. His fear of being beaten and humiliated for being Bengali evokes the social ostracism and economic exploitation faced by many migrants in the region.

The language of violence and hate punctuated by racialised epithets immediately recalls the legacies of partition in the wounding and dislocation of communities sharing history, culture, and trade routes. The boys yelling “Bengali bastard!” (Choudhury 3) is a proclamation of localised subject position which counters attempts to exclude these migrants seen as “foreign” to the land, as *dkhar*. The resonance of partition is ever present even in ordinary exchanges, as Debu’s experience suggests. Indeed, hinting at the failure of partition to address larger issues, such as the alienation of displaced peoples, this scene shows the condition of partition in the region. But partition was also about ethnic hatred: people like Debu had to cross the hostile lands of political exile where their cultural as well as ethnic identity was constantly repudiated.

The Incident at Jacob's ladder crystallises the ways in which memories of partition continue to divide. Debu's experience as an alienated Bengali migrant, viciously targeted for his ethnicity, maps the contour of regionalism and cultural oppression that so many people suffered after partition. Ambedkar's critiques of partition, as well as his dream of an integrated, united India free from high-low divisions and internal hierarchies in its social fabric, constitute another axis for unpacking the text's high-low divisions.

Debu's cultural isolation underscores the persistence of regionalism. Being labelled a "foreigner" extends beyond legal nationality to encompass cultural and ethnic belonging within the region. For the Khasi community, Bengalis are considered non-tribal and outsiders, rendering Debu a foreigner even in his own home. Ambedkar's vision of integrated India where all social groups have the same dignity and are integrated into the mainstream of Indian society is in direct contrast to Debu's predicament. Despite being born and raised in Shillong, Debu is not integrated into Khasi society. As he states, "But I'm from here, aren't I? I even remember going to Tiny Tots nursery in Dhankheti when I was five" (Choudhury 14). However, Debu is ethnically non-Khasi and is, therefore, socially excluded from the Khasi ethnic community. Ambedkar's vision of belonging corresponded with this sense of alienation, especially his criticism that partition was unable to address ethnic and cultural inequalities on a wider scale.

The partition and ethnic conflicts of the region can also be seen in Mr. Dutta's discourse with Debu. Mr. Dutta observes that the Bengali people are a part of Shillong's history and have lived there for years, but they are still "outsiders" in Shillong. Through Mr. Dutta, the author ironically mirrors the tribal character of the community where one is branded as an outsider even after coming to live in the same place for decades due to ethnic and cultural tribalism. This is

further evidenced by Mr. Dutta cynically commenting about the irony of the Khasis themselves being called as “Chinkys” while his own son is branded *dkhar* (Choudhury 13).

This nexus of forced migration underscores a persistent tension in Shillong: the question of who qualifies as a native and as a migrant. The Bengalis in Shillong have lived in the city for decades, yet are categorised as outsiders. This is a legacy of the partition of the country, which uprooted millions and drew artificial lines of distinction. To return to Ambedkar’s remark on the social question surrounding partition, partition did not only introduce a political partition but also a social and cultural partition, one whose effects in the form of discrimination and ethnic exclusion haunt the social relations and identities of Khasis and non-Khasis in Shillong to this day, and which Debu and his father encounter in their everyday reality as the obstacles to overcome. Debu’s and his family’s identity is entwined with the legacy of partition. While Mr. Dutta tries to reassure Debu, Debu, nonetheless, remains cognisant of the tensions in the community. By focusing on the family’s legitimacy and long history in Shillong, the story exemplifies the politics of identity in post-partition India. Mr. Dutta tells Debu:

Our family has been living in Shillong since 1935 over fifty-two years now. It’s true that your grandfather grew up in what is Bangladesh today. But, at that time, it was part of undivided Bengal, of India. You, me, my father, we are all Indians- by birth. Satisfied now? (Choudhury17)

Identity and belonging are multilayered, contested concepts that are often used interchangeably. Broadly, these dimensions are social, cultural, political and affective and often tied to the concepts of place, ethnicity, religion, language, nationality, caste, class, community and gender (Yuval-Davis 197). In North East India, they are captured in the *Jati*, *Mati* and *Bheti* which refers to nationality, land, and hearth, and symbolically whose triad consists of the clan,

home and homeland. Likewise, in the BBC Reith Lectures, Kwame Anthony Appiah examines culture, colour, country and creed to argue that identity is a socially constructed, fluid, multiple and evolving phenomenon (Appiah).

As Nira Yuval-Davis argues, belonging is not a given but rather something that can be expressed through a collection of attachments, and can develop through various forms of attachment, ranging from personal relationships onto broader collectivities such as communities, nations or humanity as a whole (Yuval-Davis 199). Belonging can be chosen or ascribed by others. It can be tenuous or deeply rooted, depending on social and political conditions. Yuval-Davis further distinguishes between three related dimensions of belonging: social location, emotional attachment and a sense of value. The first of these, social location, reflects social positioning through multiple systems such as class, caste, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and age. Emotional attachment refers to the narratives that people build to make sense of themselves and others (Yuval-Davis 202).

Belonging has also been understood in relation to everyday spatial practices to which Michel de Certeau refers in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Belonging is an emotional, experiential relation to places, developed through everyday practices (de Certeau 313). Likewise, Rituparna Bhattacharyya argues that many public spaces in India are produced by hegemonic patriarchal power which creates conditions of exclusion for women resulting in a lack of belonging in public spaces (Bhattacharyya 311-25). People from North East India also experience similar disbelonging as in other parts of mainland India through discrimination, marginalisation and exploitation (Ranjan 440-57). The phenomenon is linked to territorial belonging, ethnocentrism and competition over key economic resources, in addition to the issue of illegal immigration from Bangladesh and concerns about indigenous identity, ethnicity and

culture (Barooah 43-52). Over the years, concerns of territorial belonging have become more politicised, giving rise to identity politics in the region (Yuval-Davis 197-214).

This is also well illustrated by *Life of Pi*, in which Yann Martel teaches that territorial conflict does not arise from aggression but from the instinctive defence of space (Martel 43). However, in human society the territorial sense of belonging is more complicated, due to ethnicity, nationalism, migration, and political power. Post-independence India, North East India has witnessed growing identity politics, which has not only contributed to the rise of militancy among different ethnic groups in the region, but also influenced the electoral politics of the region, especially in Assam (Srikanth 4117-24). Migration, segregation and socio-cultural marginalisation of diverse ethnic groups of the region has strengthened regional and ethnic identity politics in northeast India.

The family saga of the migration from undivided Bengal to Shillong also represents the debilitating legacy of partition and impact it has on families vulnerable to repeated regional conflicts: while the father tries to assert the family's position in Shillong, Debu ends up at its fringes, reinforcing the enduring impact of cultural and ethnic fragmentation resulting from partition. Partition is not merely a cause of political division. Its most deleterious effect is to weaken the integrity of national identity; thus civic nationalism gives way to ethnic nationalism. In the chapter "Border Crossing", Mr. Dutta recounts the experiences of his family before and after the partition of India in 1947. His statement about the loss of his original homeland in Bangladesh, and the beauty of Sylhet, is one of many examples of the emotional and physical sacrifices Bengali families made while migrating. In a manner similar to the millions of people who had to choose between India and Pakistan, when Mr. Dutta's father did not want to leave for India and selected Pakistan, he lost his whole land, house and neighborhood. The "Surma

River” and the “paddy fields” express the displacement of not just places, but identities, which each family went through. Mr. Dutta is sad when he recalls “The lords seated across the table in Delhi decided that the country would be split in two, and they named the two countries, India and Pakistan. They determined that the eastern part of Bengal, known as Bangladesh, would be ceded to Pakistan” (Choudhury 22).

Partition is a political action which decides the fate of millions and divides families, cultures, and economies. Ambedkar challenges the assumption that a nation can be created and defined by the religious ties of its population. Partition was not only a great political event with political aftermaths; it was also a great social and cultural event that drew up and often deepened divisions haplessly devoid of clear historical or geographical rationale. Mr. Dutta’s account evokes the trauma of displacement from the familiar and the loss of his identity and sense of place.

Mr. Dutta’s nostalgic recollections of Sylhet contrast with Debu’s more pragmatic perspective on Shillong. Debu cannot fathom his father’s elevated praise of Sylhet as he was born in independent India and regards Shillong as home. The generational consideration is typical of the partition’s aftermath for survivors and their descendants; the subjectivity of the second generation grows out of their parents’ memories. The fact that Mr. Dutta’s father had to build a new identity in a new country resonates with Ambedkar’s views on social justice and the right to identity post-partition. Despite the fact that he could never return to Bangladesh, his life remained steeped in his homeland. His discomfort with this exile and his desire to remain in Shillong, however, challenge the diasporic and internalised regionalism critiqued in many partition narratives: in this case, identity loss involves cultural as well as geographical loss.

Considering Mr. Dutta's father had experienced divided realities during partition, it should not be surprising for his family to continue the same animosity for politicians whom he held as responsible for the division of families and colonies. His disillusionment with Gandhi and Jinnah, whom he blames in part for being "Butchers of the nation- this Gandhi and Jinnah!" (Choudhury 22), and his own inability to counter the greed for power represent the inherited trauma of partition. Dutta's anger and disappointment echoed Ambedkar's view of politicians who, rather than serving their people, instigated partition. According to Ambedkar, they were oblivious of the impact their actions would have on societies. He commented, "there is no prospect of an agreement between political leaders in the near future" (Ambedkar 188). Ambedkar states of Savarkar that he wanted "the Muslim nation to be co-equal in authority with the Hindu nation. He wants the Hindu nation to be the dominant nation and the Muslim nation to be the servient nation" (72).

On the other hand, partition turned natives into strangers and strangers into natives. Moreover, one's own kin becomes an outsider as a result of forced choice of homeland. The ambiguity of guilt is indicated by Mr. Dutta's linking of the partition to political failure and to increased communal and other schisms in society. The family's bitterness and loss are passed on to Debu. Partition's effects, torn across families, are present decades after the partition.

Debu says of the Khasis: "They call us dkhar. We call them Chinkys. Where is all this going? For god's sake it's 1987! Forty years after independence" (Choudhury 13) reflects the cyclical process of social exclusion, similar to the impact of partition on India's society. Regionalism and ethnic-communalism prevailed in post-partition India, which also reaffirms Ambedkar's hypothesis that the political partition itself is not sufficient for real national integration, since the social integration, mutual acceptance and the acceptance of others'

identities are also needed to build a post-partition society. Debu's story reinforces the hypothesis, and it is consistent with one of Ambedkar's main principles: that unity comes not only from the political level but also from social integration. Regionalism and cultural exclusion are presented to the reader as both an individual and a collective experience in the novel. Partition of people was not only a political reality, but it was also a reality embedded in the socio-cultural fabric of postcolonial India. Ambedkar believed that the idea of "two nations but that there shall be no divorce between them" would be justified "if the two nations were to live as partners in friendly intercourse with mutual respect and accord" (Ambedkar 72).

Not only social, cultural and political contexts, but even intra-community relationships were affected by Partition. The relationship of the Bengali communities of Shillong and Calcutta can be described as being simultaneously one of attachment and estrangement. Calcutta became a cultural, metaphoric, imaginal 'sanctuary' for Shillong Bengalis when the tribesmen of the northeast turned against them. This is a reading that sees Calcutta as a powerful space, but a space achieved at a cost. As another instance of analogy, the image of "Israel" as a "land of refuge" for persecuted Jews is invoked to illustrate how the Bengali community in Shillong viewed Calcutta as a "last resort" in the case of structural ethnic exclusion, "Calcutta was to the Shillong Bengali what Israel was to the Jews- an imagined sanctuary from the various Bongal Khedao (Banish the Bengalis) movements that were flaring up across the Northeast" (Choudhury 105).

Similarly, in discussing the effects of partition and subsequent migrations across international and inter-communal spaces on identity, Ambedkar states that the "transfer should not be forced but should be left open for those who declare their intention to transfer" (182) in the context of migration of people across national borders. Post partition, the Shillong Bengali

community sees itself as a diaspora: a displaced people, officially part of India, socially alienated in Shillong. As Ambedkar said, sub-regional differences can even cause social alienation, even among people of the same religion. Social Exclusion is caused by religious differences as well as sub-regional differences. For the Dutta family, Calcutta is a utopia, a memory that brings comfort, but also acts as a reminder of the lost ideal.

As a Sylheti-speaking Bengali, he sees the language difference as typical of the relationship between Sylheti Bengalis and Calcuttans, a social hierarchy within Bengali society. Mr. Dutta argues that “Sylheti and Calcuttians were two edges of the same knife. It was a knife that cut deep and left lasting scars on the psyche of the Shillong Sylheti” (Choudhury 106). The linguistic divide is a manifestation of regionalism and the need for Ambedkar’s position on cultural hierarchy, as the partition was not only a division of religion and polity, but also of language, as the Sylheti language, Calcuttian Bengali language and others created further divisions within communities. Many like Mr. Dutta, who went back to Calcutta, were excluded for their cultural otherness and their native dialect at home marked them as ‘inferior Bengali’. In post partition India, this exclusion extended past ethnic and religious boundaries, becoming a parochial one. The language hierarchy further marked political and cultural inequities for these ‘parochial’ subjects.

Even though it hosts a rich culture and distinct dialect, the Sylheti community is culturally invisible. The Sylheti language and culture are treated as derivatives, not natural language. He writes, ‘Sylheti is not Bengali. In fact, it isn’t even a proper language. It is just pidgin’ (Choudhury 107). One reason for this is the internalisation of an inferiority complex toward the dialect and culture, which causes those affected to cut themselves off voluntarily from the rest of the Bengali nation. This is the quintessential cultural exclusion of

Ambedkarite concept and post-partition literature: that erstwhile nationalities whose people share a history and religion are split by religion. The Sylheti tend to be socially and economically marginalised among the wider Bengali people. This is largely due to the hierarchy between urban and rural culture, whereby the cultures of major cities (for example, Calcutta) take precedence over local dialects and cultures.

Clint's sacrifice for Mr. Dutta symbolises the age-old clash between the tribal and the non-tribal people. Clint, as a Khasi, represents the tribal people and Mr. Dutta, the Bengali immigrants, who are non-tribal people of the region. The Bengali people, many of whom are post-partition refugees from present-day Bangladesh, are marginalised as a part of regionalism and ethnicism, and culturally excluded by the tribal Khasi people. Stereotypes and epithets such as *dkhar* in the attack show that the cultural exclusion remains socio-culturally deep-rooted, and Bengali migrants from Bengal/Bangladesh remain outsiders even when granted Indian citizenship.

The tension between Mr. Dutta and Mr Lyngdoh, which is partly influenced by their family connections and ethnic differences, is described by Ambedkar to illustrate how the social impact of partition went beyond restricting itself to isolating just the religious communities on either side, and also flared up ethnic strife and regional disparity. Mr. Dutta's account of his family's dislocation and his father's loss of land, friends and family is seen as a metaphor for the cultural dissonance of the Bengali diaspora in Shillong and underscoring Ambedkar's view of partition as further denoting psychological harm. The khukri that Mr. Dutta uses to defend his shop is a metaphor for violence stemming from cultural marginalisation.

This little shop of mine, which I have built for over twenty years, with my own hands, with my blood and my sweat and my love. This shop which for twenty years has

provided for me and my family, which has given me everything that a man could need- food, a house, a scooter, your school fees. I couldn't just stand by and watch while they destroyed it in front of my own eyes. I went mad with anger. (Choudhury 229)

The passage is also an indirect metaphor for the Bengali migrants' fear of settling on inhospitable land only to be reminded of their status as foreigners during the trauma of settlement. The image is a symbol of the alienation and separation felt by many people in post-partition India. Clint's relationship with the older generations contrasts their deep prejudice in secured land with the precarious position of youth growing into a world of challenges created by their own, but the sacrifices and regrets throughout the novel indicate that they must often repeat the mistakes of their parents and grandparents. The self-sacrificial act of Clint in trying to save Mr. Dutta is a parable of how the choice of innocence and sacrifice of youth in the face of intergenerational conflict and ethnic hatred can open the way to healing and reconciliation, as the very Mr. Lyngdoh himself says, "It is because of my son that I am stopping you. Because my son risked his own life to save this man. I don't know why he did it but I want him to tell me himself. And he will tell me". No one is to touch this man. When the father says, "We have had enough bloodshed for one day" (Choudhury 230), the reader senses somewhat of Clint's physical and emotional torment. This focus on youth suggests it is a promising platform for reconciliation, where the naivety of youth might be better suited for making peace than the burdens of past histories of pain and hatred which adults carry. Clint's injury and coma may be understood as an allegory for cultural trauma. Mr. Lyngdoh's guilt and sorrow about causing the riots nearly resulting in Clint's death is evidence of how intergenerational cycles of violence perpetuate ethnic and cultural othering. The store incident illustrates the manner in which previously porous boundaries between communities have become so rigid that violence becomes

the only possible response to boundary breach and transgression. The focus of Mr. Dutta's and Mr. Lyngdoh's interactions, and the nature of their thoughts and clashes, and their eventual meeting, is used to depict the seemingly insurmountable ethnic boundaries, going beyond politics into the heart. At the hospital, the cross-ethnic group of Debu, Audrey, Mr. Dutta and Mr. Lyngdoh praying for Clint's survival is symbolic of their efforts to overcome ethnic divisions. Audrey's statement "If there is a god above, then he will live. You must not lose hope" (Choudhury 233) gives the sense of renewal at the end of this episode, and represents Ambedkar's vision for India, which is ultimately one of compassion and coexistence, not cultural parochialism. The same idea of common humanity carries over to Ambedkar's call for social justice, for transcending ethnic and cultural divisions based on historical injustices to see each other as fellow human beings.

Mr. Lyngdoh and Mr. Dutta represent the extent to which historical, colonial divisions, intergenerational trauma, regionalism, and ethnic hatred seep across community boundaries. Unified by the pain of losing a son, the two men perpetuate a cycle of regret and self-loathing, as the intersection of the opposing cultural and communal worlds they occupied fatally clash.

Mr. Lyngdoh enfolded him in his arms. Shhh... shhh. Don't say that. He comforted Debu. You did nothing wrong. It is us adults who are responsible. We dragged you children into our fights, our stupid power games. And now my son...poor motherless son.. is paying the price for my sins, greed. If something happens to him...I will...I don't know what I will do. (Choudhury 232)

Mr. Lyngdoh is pained by the consequences of the clashes between the two communities and the fact that his son lost his life to save Mr. Dutta because of the stupid power games by adults. The sense of not being able to tolerate the consequences of their suffering in the hands of

the more elderly citizens in a way resembles the post-partition effects and conflicts between the Khasis and the Bengalis in Shillong.

Conclusion

Setting the long term consequences of the partition on regional and cultural identities in tune with Ambedkar's castigation of intergenerational atomisation, the novel intones that Clint's sacrifice and the ensuing prayer brings to the fore not only the best in us but also the morass of ethnic purism, and the possibility of reconciliation through compassion and self-examination. Even though the novel begins with violence and division, it ends with hope and reconciliation, indicating that, even though the identities of the people of Shillong may have been broken, there is an opportunity for them to come together, much in the same way that Ambedkar envisioned.

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