

# **‘The Other Side of the Border’: Examining the Essence of Home, Alienation and Fractured Identities in *Barbed Wire Fence: Stories of Displacement from the Barak Valley of Assam***

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## **Abstract**

The Partition of 1947 had a deep impact on the lives of the people of India’s northeast. However, despite the terrifying experiences of these people of the region during India’s partition, such narratives have remained unacknowledged and unexplored in the mainstream Partition studies. India’s northeast and its tales of brutal struggle during India’s Partition have hardly been a primary site of investigation. The Barak Valley, situated in the southern region of Assam, had its own share of extreme deprivation, social exploitation and political oppression during the Partition. Part of the Barak Valley was carved out of Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) during the Partition. Tales of homelessness, alienation and loss of identity abound the lives of the people of this region. This paper takes the reference of partition experiences from the narratives in the edited collection titled *Barbed Wire Fence: Stories of Displacement from the Barak Valley of Assam* (2015) by Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee and Dipendu Das. The study will examine the myriad facets of immigrant experience of people from present-day Bangladesh who were forced to leave their homeland during and after India’s independence and settle, amongst other places, in the Barak Valley of Assam. Drawing upon discourses on memory, identity and alienation, the research will also investigate the complexity of identity formation for those Bengalis who, on one hand were torn by the memories of their ‘home’, and on the other, by being considered unwanted and alien in Assam.

**Keywords :** Alienation; Barak valley; Displacement; Partition; Sylhet.

## Introduction

The Partition of 1947 has always been a topic of much debate, discussion, reminiscence and blame-game even after seventy-five years of India's independence. What has significantly not changed in all these years is the inability to store the partition memories in a safe corner and feel that this was a situation of the past and we are over and done with that! Partition memories in various contexts keep coming to the forefront even in today's time. The horrors and the resultant trauma of the then time have been projected time and again in Partition literature and films. Urvasi Butalia (2017) points out the digital initiatives which are being taken to record and share the Partition memories in today's time. She mentions about Guneeta Singh, a scientist in Berkeley, who began talking to her family about Partition and then started collecting the stories of the survivors. Today "the 1947 Partition Archive has over 2500 stories and many more waiting to be uploaded." (xxii) Butalia (2017) also mentions how "a group of young artists from across the three borders and within the diaspora have come together to create a book of graphic stories, *This Side, That Side.*" (xxii)

Despite such initiatives, one cannot deny that such factual records or creative works related to the Partition are mostly based on the experiences of people in Punjab and Bengal. However, there are various other pockets in India which had their own share of Partition horror and trauma. One such ignored and conveniently forgotten history in mainstream Partition studies is that of the Sylhet (in Bangladesh) – Barak Valley (in Assam, India) region which had experienced a trauma so deeply etched in the minds of the people that memories of that terrifying experience still haunt their minds. Also, important to note is the after effect of the partition which was long lasting with its tentacles deeply embedded in contemporary politics. Highlighting the absence of Partition experiences from India's northeast in mainstream Indian Partition studies, Binayak Dutta (2019) says,

In recent years, when revisionist writings on Partition of India emerged, as Bengal finally came to find space in it, the story of the Partition in Northeast India is still absent. This story is perhaps more complex and multilayered than what has been hitherto imagined by Partition scholarship. Here, Partition is not an event of 1947 but a process that has spread itself over two centuries engaging early colonial cartography, ethnicity and religion. (para 4)

The research will take the narratives in the edited collection titled *Barbed Wire Fence: Stories of Displacement from the Barak Valley of Assam* (2015)

[referred as *Barbed Wire Fence*/ BWF henceforth in this paper] by Nirmal Kanti Bhattacharjee and Dipendu Das as its primary source of study. Using the theoretical foundation of Trauma Studies and Memory Studies and also discourses on identity and alienation, the study will investigate the conditions of the refugees (both Hindu and Muslim), who had to leave their homeland in Sylhet (which had become a part of Pakistan after Partition) and settle in the Barak Valley of Assam. The research will also delve deep into issues of identity formation for those Bengalis, who were caught up in the quagmire of the Assamese-Bengali feud which made them alien and unwanted in their own homeland. The objective of this study is to explore the literary representation of the Sylhet-Barak Valley Partition in order to investigate the immigrant experience and the political repercussions later on.

### **The July Referendum and the Sylhet Partition**

Any study of the Sylhet partition requires a clear understanding of the historical facts connected to the division. It is a well-known fact that during the British regime, Sylhet was part of Assam from 1874 until 1947, during which there were protests from both the indigenous Assamese people as well as the Sylheti Hindu 'bhadrak' community to separate Sylhet from Assam. Anindita Dasgupta (2014) notes that the reason for such an opinion by the Assamese people was because "...the English-educated Sylheti Hindu *bhadrak* were seen not only as competitors for jobs but as a cultural threat over an economically weak Assamese middle class which had been trying to come into its own under the aegis of British colonialism since 1826." (71) The Sylheti Hindus as well as Muslims too wanted the separation as they could see that their cultural affinity was with the Bengali-speaking region of Sylhet rather than Assam. However, the Sylhet referendum of July 1947 changed everything for the Bengali Sylheti community despite their religious affiliation, when barring the three and half *thanas* of Ratabari, Karimganj, Patharkandi and Badarpur, the rest of Sylhet was ceded to East Pakistan.

This referendum was intended, according to Dr. Moushumi Choudhury (2021), "to craft out a homogenous *Asoniya* homeland in multicultural Assam by expelling the Sylheti Bengalis. It was therefore, ethno-linguistic divide rather than religious incompatibility and intolerance which was the triggering factor of the Partition of Assam." (112-113) Therefore, it was no surprise that it led to a mass migration of both Sylheti Hindus and Muslims over a period of time from the then East Pakistan to different parts of India's northeast, but "particularly to the more familiar parts of

southern Assam that had been contiguous to Sylhet and with which they had shared economic and social relations since 1874.” (Dasgupta, 2014, p. 72) The primary text chosen for this study portrays the experiences of such Sylheti Hindus and Muslims who chose to make Barak Valley of Assam their homeland after the Partition. Given the backdrop of the peculiar circumstances which led the Sylheti Bengalis to migrate to the Barak Valley of Assam after the Partition, this study will focus on the immigrant experiences and issues of identity as portrayed in literature from the region.

### **The Lost ‘Home’**

The primary source of this study, *Barbed Wire Fence*, is one of those very few creative works which documents the after effects of the Sylhet Partition and the myriad facets of immigrant experiences. Like all migrant ordeals, issues of homelessness, loss of livelihood and income, and struggles for identity formation are a part and parcel of the Sylheti Bengali experiences. Almost all the stories in the primary text taken for this study reflect on the issue of the loss of home and the resultant feeling of homelessness in a new land. While reflecting on the idea of ‘home’ for the migrated Sylhetis, Anindita Dasgupta (2014) notes the tendency of many urban Sylhetis in Assam to return to Sylhet annually or at least on special occasions like marriages and festivals. She says that this idea of longing for ‘home’ gave rise to the concept of “*deshar baari* (village home) and *town-er-baari* (town home) within the Sylheti discourse...”. (133) In the story, “Our Home” written by Saumitra Baishya, a similar sentiment can be witnessed. In the very beginning of the story, the author sets the background of the importance of ‘home’ for the Sylheti migrants –

My father and his elder brother came to this land in 1950. Three years after Independence....During those days of 1947, when there was a mass exodus of Hindu population to this country, my father’s family decided to stay back clinging onto their ancestral dwelling in East Pakistan. They might have had a faint hope of somehow succeeding in staying back amidst all the adversities. Ultimately, they had to desert their own soil forever in the decade of the 1950s. (BWF 160)

This introduction exemplifies the urge of the Sylheti Bengalis to hold on to their ancestral roots and dwellings. The narrative moves from the ancestral history of the narrator to the present and then courses on to a much later point of time in his life by when he has retired and joined the group of senior citizens. Throughout the first-person narrative, the focus of the

narrator is on his reminiscences of their joint-family village home in Hailakandi, a near substitute of their home on the other side of the border for his father and uncle. In later years while the family branch out to nuclear establishments in other locations due to job opportunities in urban locales, the nostalgic memory of the 'desher baari' (village home) as well as the obsession to hold on to its substitute; i.e., the 'townier baari' (city home) is carried forward in similar fashion. This nostalgia and the urge to go 'home' takes on a frantic turn in Amitabha Dev Choudhury's "Wake Up Call". The old woman, termed 'Masi' (elderly aunt), is obsessed with the idea of crossing the border and reaching her homeland in Sylhet, Bangladesh. Several people like her had experienced forced migration due to various reasons. 'Masi' had lost her memory of the past along with her identity in a land that she considers alien and keeps pleading all whom she knows to send her back home. In this direction, Suranjana Choudhury (2022) contends that "(t)he canvas of representation produced by Sylheti imagination insists on the layered nature of memory and illuminates our understanding of how home might not be a palpable, tangible entity, it might just exist only in writing." (9) Therefore, it is no surprise when 'Masi' gets to know that going over to Bangladesh would require a passport and visa in the present time, she collects and hoards scrap papers in the hope that those might help her cross the border, but of course, to no avail.

The sense of displacement and the urge to go 'home' is a recurrent theme in almost all the stories in *Barbed Wire Fence*. Whereas stories like Saumitra Baishya's brings out the nostalgia of the ancestral home in Sylhet, the issue of loss of land after crossing the border also crops up as a concern in many stories. The migrant Sylheti Bengali is caught up in the mire of the politics of land which ultimately robs them of not only their property but also their identity, thus stamping them as landless refugees forever. The social exploitation and political oppression are brought about in a very heart-wrenching manner in Moloy Kanti Dey's story, "Ashraf Ali's Homeland". Stamped as a 'foreigner' and 'citizen of Bangladesh', Ashraf Ali fights a lost battle as he is asked time and again, "You're a Bangladeshi. When have you come here?" (BWF 120) In this context, Sanjib Baruah (2015) highlights the "ambiguities of citizenship" which he says are not "unique to post-partition India" but a global issue of "citizen-foreigner binary". (85) He also points out how in this debate "the year a person crossed the border is crucial" (85) as per the citizenship laws in post-partition India. Asraf Ali gets caught in this legal lens and is destined to remain homeless and ultimately is transported to a "no man's land" (BWF 122) since he had "lost his homeland in Pakistan to Irfan *chacha* and in

Hindustan to Kader Mian.” (BWF 122) Handling the issue of deportation of refugees in a very sensitive manner, the author poses a very pertinent question – “Who are those who install check-posts on earth’s breast, making her two lungs two different nations?” (BWF 121) and making people like Ashraf a “no man – a nonentity”. (BWF 122) The peasant’s wife, Duliya in Jhumur’s Pandey’s story, “The Man of Geramthan and Duliya” too undergoes a similar fate. Caught up in the politics of class, she mortgages her land “by putting her thumb impression on plain paper” (BWF 158) to save her husband from going to prison for an unnamed and unidentified crime. The land that the couple had loved with all their heart becomes the property of the rich and influential Bisweswar and Duliya and her husband are forced to engage in the work of carrying bricks and breaking stones to feed themselves. The longing for the lost ‘home’ in Sylhet or the loss of the one made in the new homeland thus become a part and parcel of the Sylheti Bengali experience during and after the partition years. The stories in *Barbed Wire Fence* portray a true representation of this longing for ‘home’ and the struggles to retain that small piece of newfound homeland which gave these people some semblance of normalcy and identity in an alien land.

### **Whose language? Whose culture?**

The struggle to make an identity for oneself becomes more difficult for the Sylheti Bengalis in Assam with the indigenous Assamese people seeing them as competitors for jobs as well as a threat to the Assamese language and culture. In this context, Anindita Dasgupta (2014) explains the situation accurately –

To the Assamese Hindus in particular, who were the real competitors for government jobs, the complex went as deep as to gradually make them intolerant of things non-indigenous. They also became increasingly sensitive to their ‘otherness’ from the Bengalis – or Sylhetis, to be precise. What made matters more delicate was that the colonial masters imposed the Bengali language upon the province for the entire period from 1834 to 1874. As soon as this was changed in favour of Assamese, Sylhet was quickly thrust upon the incipient province, thus replacing only the form of what the Assamese saw as the overall ‘Bengali’ dominance. (137)

The politics of language is deeply embedded in the partition history of Assam’s Barak Valley and this aspect finds a place of prominence in the stories in *Barbed Wire Fence*. Whether immediately after the Partition or much

after, the Assamese-Bengali feud was an offshoot of the Sylhet-Barak Valley Partition. Shyamalendu Chakraborty's story, "Of Human Bonding", highlights the continuous struggles of one such Bengali named Hiren. Set against the backdrop of the troubled times in 1908s Assam filled with protest marches by the Assamese people, Chakraborty's story takes us through the uncomplicated love story of Hiren Ghosh and Rupali Bora. Even though the cultural and language differences do not cause any rift in their relationship, but it remains strained due to the external conditions. The state is caught up in the turmoil of political protests with throngs of people on the road carrying posters that "outsiders" should leave Assam and demanding Assam's independence from India. This scenario brings to mind the riots for language supremacy in Assam during the 1960s and 70s, where "the Official Language Movement of 1960 and the Medium of Instruction Movement of 1972...were based on the 'Assam for Assamese ideology.

The Bengalis of Barak Valley had protested against it." (Ghoshal, 2021, p. xv) Chakraborty's story therefore, is based on the real-life language strife. In such a condition, it is no surprise that Hiren Bora is targeted for being a 'foreigner' and 'outsider' in his own homeland. Hiren runs into continuous debates with 'once upon a time' friend, Khagen Mahanta, on his identity. While Hiren's pertinent question remains - "Do you consider the non-Assamese people residing permanently in Assam to be outsiders?" (BWF 5), Mahanta harps on the same old cause of the seed of discord and replies, "Assamese language and culture today are in deep crisis; they are approaching annihilation. And for this the Bengalis are to be blamed." (BWF 6) Even though the setting of the story is the 1980s, nothing much has changed in the Assamese-Bengali discord after Partition. In fact, Hiren and Mahanta's debate does not stop only in the exchange of dialogues. Given the heightened environment, Hiren faces much more and the ending of the story conveys the fact that the Partition had laid a permanent hostility between these two communities, the saga of which continues even at a much later point of time.

Arijit Choudhury's story, "Fire", written on similar lines is, however, not so mild in the delineating of the situation. The Assamese-Bengali feud in this story has reached its zenith and much like Hiren, the Bengali Mahendra too faces similar hatred from his Assamese friends. The movement to oust 'foreigners' from Assam was in full-swing as the Assamese have realized that "...about fifty to sixty lakh 'foreigners' reside in Assam and if the migrants leave, their land and property would rightfully belong to the local Assamese residents." (BWF 56) Towards this goal, people like Mahen-

dra are seen as threat by the Assamese community. After several warnings and attempts to kill him, he is forced to leave his home in upper Assam and go to Silchar where the agitation has not touched since Barak Valley is a Sylheti Bengali dominated region. This brings out the issue of continuous displacement and forced migration for the Sylheti Bengalis living in Assam. But the misery does not end only with struggles to establish identity for the Bengalis in Assam but goes deeper to the inherent hatred that has enveloped the minds of the Assamese people for the Bengalis. When Mahendra after several months of leaving home gets to know about the birth of his son in his absence, he cannot control his emotions and decides to visit his family for a night. He does see his son and meets his family but his visit immediately comes to the notice of the Assamese revolutionaries in his village. With great difficulty Mahendra is able to escape to the house of a neighbour but his house is set on fire with his family members inside. These two stories bring to light the offshoot of the Sylhet-Barak Valley Partition which led to terrible conflicts between the Assamese and Bengalis and the impact of such disputes even in contemporary times. Speaking about this conflict as existed before Partition, Sanjib Baruah (2015) says, "Tensions between the predominantly Assamese-speaking Brahmaputra Valley and the predominantly Bengali-speaking Surma Valley - which apart from Sylhet, also included the district of Cachar - were a constant in the political history of British colonial Assam." (83) The stories in *Barbed Wire Fence* take up this politics of language and culture to showcase its repercussions in later times too.

### **The Sylheti Muslims in Assam**

When one looks deep at the peculiar case of the Sylheti Bengalis in Assam, the pertinent question of religion comes to the forefront. This is because the very basis of the India-Pakistan Partition of 1947 was on religious lines. But the case of Sylhet-Barak Valley Partition and the after effects have led to more discourses on the language and culture discords than religion. However, that does not mean that the issue of religion is entirely absent in the case of the Sylhet Partition. The Sylheti Muslims of Barak Valley were keen that their region becomes a part of Pakistan after the Partition. But the peculiar situation created after the Partition with Sylhet being made a part of East Pakistan leaving the three and half *thanas* of Ratabari, Karimganj, Patharkandi and Badarpur a part of Barak Valley in Assam, made the situation very tricky for the Sylheti Muslims. The general environment was that of a sense of betrayal towards the Muslims which resulted in migration of large number of Sylheti Muslims after the Partition to Barak Valley and other parts of Assam. But even before this migration, during the last



decade of the nineteenth century, huge numbers of landless peasants from the districts of Mymensingh, Noakhali, Pabna and Bogura had begun to migrate to Assam, to which the colonial masters were agreeable to. In this context, Sanjib Baruah (2015) rightly points out that

(i) in order to understand postcolonial Assam's persistent difficulties with the question of citizenship of post-partition migrants, one must begin with the fact in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Assam was under British colonial rule, it was official policy to encourage the settlement of Muslim East Bengali peasants in Assam. (82)

This group of people provided cheap and steady labour supply to the Assamese landlords but at the same time, increased the number of Bengali speaking population in Assam. Over a long period of time with "assimilation, integration, intermarriage and the resultant localization" (Dasgupta, 2014, p. 165), the situation became much more complicated. In this context, Anindita Dasgupta points out that in the early years of the twentieth century, the Muslim community in Assam was a differentiated and fragmented group which may be divided thus – "first, the 'indigenous' Assamese-speaking Muslims located in the Brahmaputra Valley; second, the Bengali-speaking Muslims of East Bengal origin who settled in the Brahmaputra Valley since 1911; and third, the Bengali-speaking Muslims settled in the Surma Valley (Sylhet and Cachar) since 1874." (Dasgupta, 2014, p. 165) Given this background of the Sylheti Muslims, one thing becomes clear that there existed a huge group of the Sylheti Muslims in Assam who were seen as 'foreigners' and were the unprivileged ones in terms of economic condition and status in the society. Highlighting the issue of illegal Bangladeshi migrants in Assam, Partha S. Ghosh (2016) says that this is a "subject on which everybody seems to be knowing so much, still they know so little, largely because of the unavailability of hard data." (xii) This confusion arises from dependency on assumptions, doubts, fears as well as lost and/ or forgotten documents.

It is majorly this group of people who are dealt with in the stories in the book, *Barbed Wire Fence*. This must be because of their precarious position in terms of identity and status. In Badarujjaman Choudhury's story, "Food Giver", we come across the issues of alienation, loss of home and poverty of the Sylheti Muslims. As discussed earlier in this study in connection with the idea of the loss of home, Moloy Kanti Dey's story, "Ashraf Ali's Homeland", points out yet again to the forced displacement of the Sylheti Muslim, Ashraf Ali, who ultimately becomes a non-entity

in a 'no man's land'. Dipendu Das' story, "Sucking Milk" portrays the tragic tale of the poverty-ridden Salema, a Sylheti Muslim migrant, who has taken shelter in the town's railway station with her infant child. In order to somehow live, she resorts to selling her body in the abandoned railway compartments which leads to her getting affected with STDs. In a final turn of events where there is no respite for people like her, extreme hunger pushes Salema to drink the milk that flows down the drain behind the temple after being offered to Lord Ganesha. The extremity of misery and the sense of pathos become the hallmark of all these stories which are intended to portray the situation of the Sylheti Muslims in Assam.

### **The 'Bhadralok' versus the 'Have Nots'**

In connection to the debatable status of the Sylheti Bengalis in Assam, one important issue that comes to the forefront is the difference in living conditions within the community. It is not possible to group all Sylheti migrants under one umbrella conveniently based on their historical experiences. The issue of class distinction crops up as a major divide in this line of thought. The educated and employed 'Bhadralok' community was distinctly different from their impoverished counterparts. The elite middle class community "(i)n the district headquarters of the colonial government of Assam...were the quintessential *babus*, or government employees in clerical positions, disproportionately employed in the provincial government offices." (Dasgupta, 2014, p. 127) This class of people majorly occupied various legal positions, teaching and even had their presence in trading and contract jobs. They had mastered the language of the colonial masters and had secured government jobs with relative ease. They had even built new homes in Brahmaputra Valley or Shillong, which was the second home of Bengalis at that time, often returning to their ancestral homes in Sylhet on special occasions. In sharp contrast to this idyllic situation of the 'Bhadralok' community, their poor brethren seemed remotely related to them.

With a headstart already in Assam before the Partition, the condition of the upper-class Bengalis cannot be compared to that of the poor migrants who were homeless and had no means of sustenance. This aspect of the fissure within the Sylheti Bengali community is portrayed in some stories in *Barbed Wire Fence*. Amalendu Bhattacharya's story, "The Chronicle of Vyomkesh Kavyatirtha", brings into light this distinction within the community. Vyomkesh Kavyatirtha, a Brahmin priest, and Mathuranath Chakraborty, the *bara sahib* (chief manager) of Baithakhal Tea Estate, hailed from the same place in Panchakhanda in Sylhet. Mathuranath re-

members his old ties with Vyomkesh and therefore, is keen that all the marriage rituals of his son are performed by him. Even though the two men share the nostalgic memory of the long-lost past and the land of their former days, any similarity in their situation ends just there. While Mathuranath is brimming to the full with wealth and luxury, Vyomkesh struggles to manage two square meals a day for his family. The story ends too with his eternal pathetic condition of remaining hungry and going back home without being able to fulfill the promise of bringing sweets for his children. Whereas in Vyomkesh Kavyatirtha's story, fate acts as a deterrent in fulfilling the small joys of his family, in Jhumur Pandey's story "The Man of Geramthan and Duliya", human intervention can be seen. Duliya and her husband fall prey to the politics of class and lose the piece of land that they loved above anything to the rich and influential Bisweswar. Duliya is tricked in mortgaging their land while her husband is put behind bars for no crime committed. Eventually, Duliya and her husband are forced to engage in the work of carrying bricks and breaking stones to feed themselves while their land is seized and tilled by the new owner, Bisweswar. Such narratives portray the divide which was visible within the Sylheti Bengali community in terms of their economical condition.

### **Violence in Sylhet Partition**

It is commonly believed that the reason why Partition studies are dominated by narratives from Punjab and Bengal is because these two states experienced unimaginable violence and trauma during Partition. Partition stories too are therefore, rife with bloodshed, rapes and several other forms of violence. In contrast, when we look at the Partition history of Sylhet, there is of course, the sense of displacement and the loss of home and property, but we do not come across stories of violence and bloodshed the way that we find in other mainstream Partition narratives. Anindita Dasgupta (2014) records that in the process of her field study while writing the book, *Remembering Sylhet*, she had interviewed both Sylheti Hindus and Muslims and had found in the memories of both the communities a deep sense of regret at having lost ties to their 'homeland' but an absence of stories of violence. In summing up her experiences after speaking to several Sylheti Hindus, she records

...violence has been a missing theme in the predominantly *bhadralok* Sylheti Hindu narratives. While there indeed was 'nostalgia'...there was comparatively less 'trauma' associated with their memories of 1947. In fact, most Sylheti Hindus did not use

the word 'violence' in their storytelling with me. At best there were hazy references to some instances of violence being inflicted on 'others'; but as noted previously, besides cases of a few petty thefts or land encroachment by people of the other faith, none could provide me with any instance of communal violence that they had seen, experienced personally or even read about in the newspapers of the time. (64-65)

This is similar to the experiences recorded by the Sylheti Muslims too in whose narratives again "violence was not one of the principal elements" but rather, "a profound sense of regret about what had happened to the Sylheti Muslims in 1947". (Dasgupta, 2014, p. 67) A similar line of thought is seen in the narratives in the collection, *Barbed Wire Fence* too. Every story in the book is heart-wrenching in its portrayal of displacement, struggles and sufferings of the Sylheti Bengalis in Assam but there is hardly any portrayal of violence as such. The few instances of violence and bloodshed that are portrayed are ensued as a result of the Assamese-Bengali feud seen in stories such as, "Of Human Bonding", "Fire" and "Treasury" which are representations of the after-effects of the Sylhet Partition.

## **Conclusion**

Even though violence was not a prominent part of the Sylhet Partition, the trauma of displacement had a devastating effect on the Sylheti Bengalis of Assam and the ones who migrated later on. Whereas, for the Sylheti *bhadralok*, relocating to Assam was devoid of any direct violence or economic struggles, the Sylheti Muslims did not experience an easy transition into independent India. However, both the communities looked at the July Referendum and Partition with a deep sense of sorrow and regret. The collection of stories, *Barbed Wire Fence*, records this sense of misery and struggles and how the Sylheti Bengalis, caught in the quagmire of various politics, still crave for their lost homeland. The stories are a testimony to the fact that "Barak Valley has nurtured very different memories of partition, and its perspective on the question of the citizenship of cross-border migrants – of Hindu migrants to be precise – is fundamentally different from that in the Brahmaputra Valley." (Baruah, 2015, p. 88) Even after seventy-five years of India's independence, the story of Sylhet is hardly known and does not find representation in mainstream Partition studies. Several related political issues in the meanwhile related to citizenship had come to the forefront, thus, bringing the peculiar situation to the attention of the entire country and outside. While people started taking interest in the political situation of Assam and raked up details regarding

the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and their implications, the Sylhet story still remains “caught within the acutely personal realms of the Sylheti memory, nostalgia and imagination and living-room conversations.” (Dasgupta, 2014, p. 269)

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