

**Tracing the Garo in the Architecture of Absence: Representing the Ethnic Communities and Their Exodus in Post-Partition India in Pashupati Bharadwaj's *Simsangar Duta Par***

Sutanu Palchowdhury

Research Scholar

**Abstract:**

The historiography of Indian partition narratives has systematically refused to incorporate the diverse ethnic, linguistic and cultural identities of this vast nation and has represented the pivotal event of partition and the subsequent displacement solely as Hindu-Muslim dichotomies. Consequently the exodus of millions of people under the Hindu-Muslim binary during the partition of India in 1947 is a well known fact but the smaller-scale exoduses of several ethnic communities like Garos, Hajongs, Rabhas, Kochs are less recognized. In post-partition India where identities are politicized in the name of two major religious binaries, it seemed to be a challenge for the ethnic communities to preserve their unique cultural identity from the homogenizing pressures of the dominant cultural practices of the time. To keep themselves away from the mainstream communal tensions several communities sought refuge to and migrated to the hilly areas that unflinchingly purported to provide as a sanctuary for them with time.

The paper studies the representation of this ethnic exodus in Assamese novelist Pashupati Bharadwaj's *Simsangar Duta Par* written in 1965 and it analyzes how the exodus took place from East Bengal to the Garo Hills which are now a part of Garo-Khasi range in Meghalaya of Independent India.

**Keywords:** Partition, Exodus, Politics of Representation, Identity, Ethnic cleansing

The partition of India is an epoch-making catastrophe of Indian history where millions of people were forced to migrate on both side of the border. But the history of partition has systematically obliterated the experiences of others

Post-partition India has chanced to witness the exodus in the first half of the seventh decade. From 1947 to 1971 a number of ethnic communities of India were forced to migrate from East Bengal to Garo Hills. These communities comprised of the Kochs, the Hajongs, the Rabhas, the Garos and many more who from the north eastern provinces of East Pakistan resettled in Assam and then in Meghalaya thereafter. As the politics of South Asian subcontinent was heavily afflicted with international tensions, conflicts and war like Indo-Chinese war of 1962 and Indo-Pak war of 1965 of the time, the exoduses of this ethnic groups, though of small scale, caught nobody's attention. The exodus must be interpreted in relation to the aspect of partition since the major exodus of partition contributed to this small series of exoduses that occurred just four years after the partition happened. Partition is limited to the description of a division of land between the two major groups of people of India and it focuses on the migration and the resettlement issues of Hindu and Muslim of India only. The small scale exoduses of various ethnic groups are obliterated and excluded from the oeuvre of partition historiography very systematically. This deliberate exclusion was operated on the basis of class, race and belief in order to restrict them to the access of some fundamental rights. This article is going to explore and study the perspective of the majoritarian politics in representing the tribal people of the Northeastern part of India, specially the Garo people, as mentioned in the text of the select novel for study. This Northeastern part of India including Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Manipur, Mizoram and Sikkim are distinguished from the mainland in terms of geographical, linguistic and ethnic aspect. In this different states of India different types of tribal people reside which we will discuss in the list below:

Assam: Chakma, Chutiya, Dimasa, Borokakachari, Kachari, Sonwal, Miri, Rabha, Garos, Hajong, Garo, Khasis, Gangte, Karbi, Boro

Meghalaya: Chakma, Garos, Hajong, Jaintias Khasis, Lakher, Pawai, Raba, Mikir

Nagaland: Angami, Garo, Kachari, Kuki, Mikir, Nagas, Sema, Ao, Chakhesang, Konyak, Lotha, Phom, Rengma, Sangtam

Arunachal Pradesh: Apatamis, Abor, Dafla, Mishmi, Idu, Taroan, Tagin, Adi, Monpa, Wancho, Galong, Momba, Sherdukpen, Singpho, Nyishi,

Tripura: Bhil, Bhutia, Chaimal, Chakma, Halam, Khasia, Lushai, Mizel, Namte, Mag, Munda, Riang

Manipur: Naga, Kuki, Meitei, Aimol, Angami, Chiru, Maram, Monsang, Paite, Purum, Thadou, Anal, Mao, Tangkhul, Thadou, Poumai Naga

Mizoram: Chakma, Dimasa, Khasi, Kuki, Lakher, Pawi, Raba, Synteng, Lushai

Sikkim: Bhutia, Khas, Lepchas, Limboo, Tamang

In pre-partition time, British got the power to control some of this hill areas with the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 but the domination of British was not welcomed with a warm heart by all the tribes of this hill areas. But the British did not stop exerting their power on Assam and expanded to control the whole region gradually.

“After the Treaty, British controlled Assam and thus became the masters of Brahmaputra Valley and they began to consolidate their rule. In 1830, the Kachari king Govinda Chandra was assassinated and the British annexed Kachari kingdom in 1832.” (Chatterjee)

The marginalization of the tribes was possible due to various reasons. They lived on the margin of society having no knowledge of the happenings of mainstream society. Their geographical remoteness and their dependence on forest for their livelihood made them marginalized in economic terms. Their culture being different from the norms of traditional society they are treated as Others and relegated to the periphery. The present area of Garo hills was previously a part of Assam till the month of April, 1972 and Meghalaya was constituted on 21<sup>st</sup> of January of 1972 by taking away two districts of Assam. Meghalaya is formed mostly by the Khasis, Garos, Boro, Kuki, Hajongs and others. This same variety of tribes with the similar ethnic cultural tradition lives on the other side of the border. After partition most of the Garo villages falling on the other side of the border tried to infiltrate from East Pakistan to India. Before and after the 1970s mass exodus happened in India as the anti-Hindu riots tried to do ethnic cleansing by removing the tribes deliberately to create a homogenous population in East Pakistan. The announcement of “Kashmir Day” on 3<sup>rd</sup> January of 1964 in East Pakistan on the theft of the holy Hazratbal relic a new violence in the name of religion escalated by the non-Hindu mobs in East Pakistan. The targeted attack on the Hindu people resulted in the migration of about 75000

refugees from East Pakistan to Assam. Of them almost 35000 refugees were Christians who are no other than the tribe communities from Garo, Hajong, Dalu and others. ( Bhattacharyya, 1987) In this paper we are going to examine the issues like the politics of representation, marginalization, identity and minority through the critical reading of a fictional account and not a historical one where the author, an eminent Assamese novelist Pashupati Bharadwaj ( a pseudonym for Umakanta Sharma) presupposes in his novel *Simsangar Duta Par* that an exodus has happened from East Bengal to Garo Hills. The novel opens up with a beautiful description of two sisters from the Garo community. They belonged to the Aghitok Sangma clan of the community. These two sisters, Chitramani and Bilamani used to live in East Bengal which was then called East Pakistan just after the partition of India happened. Chitramani was the elder sister and being preferably more beautiful, she was going to be married with Hinoi, a handsome person from the Marak clan of the same village. However with the passage of time Chitramani feels attracted to a different person, Kurno who was supposed to be braver and learned than Hinoi. Kurno used to belong to the same Aghitok Sangma clan of which she was a part. This romantic triangle at the very outset sets off the upcoming complications in the plot of the novel. The situation gets complicated when an omniscient narrator describes that Chitramani is abducted by some strange people and taken to the remote jungle and is gang raped for several times by this group and other people also continuously for three days in a small cabin. The narrator says that Kurno appears in the middle and rescuing her brings back to Kakarkandi village. Physically tormented and psychologically fragmented she decides to commit suicide but Kurno saves her and encourages her to keep up a positive attitude towards life. As Kurno was dedicated to her and in this situation no one is going to marry her, Kurno decides to take up the responsibility of Chitramani by marrying her and promises to keep her in a state of happiness for his lifetime. But she was kept outside of and denied acceptance in the mainstream society of her community as an invisible restriction was imposed on her movement and she feels isolated in her own clan as no one feels free to visit her. Even her father and sister were feeling hesitated to meet her due to the incident of losing virginity before marriage. Now a number of events took place in the village of Kakarkandi and in its adjacent villages also. So it is not only the Garo people but also the other ethnic communities like Rabha, Hajong, Koch and other tribal neighbors of this villages suffered various types of atrocities in the villages like Rakhalganj, Lakshmiganj, Paikpara, Fatiktala and others. Unlike the other villages Kakarkandi was a big one

where the level of tortures were intolerable and endless as the terrorists supposed this village as a possible source of resistance and therefore the families of Chitramani like the other fellow residents of this village were dominated and oppressed to a greater degree. The author writes,

“Kakarkandi has lost the capacity to put out the fire that lit there so suddenly. Afire has taken place here for the first time. The ripe paddies in the wide fields of Kakarkandi have been stolen. Bulls used for plowing have been stolen from their cowsheds. The girls of this village have been snatched forcefully. The first instance of robbery has taken place here only. Kakarkandi will protest if the other villagers suffer. But whatcourage will these small villages show to proceed to protest if Kakarkandi is subjugated first? (Bharadwaj 40-41)

Days of happiness are gone now and numerous types of atrocities are brought down upon the lives of the villagers by the unknown perpetrators. Raghunath and his family have been robbed and Raghunath was killed when he ventures to take revenge on the robbers. His wife was raped and his little child’s head is smashed by the criminals. Jagmohan’s home has been burnt to ashes in the village of Fatiktala and his cow which escapes being burned, mooses on as it cannot find its calf in the cowshed which is burned down. An old man called Momen in the village has been so brutally tortured that he commits suicide on the very next day morning. In the same village Haren’s home and library have been set on fire and Dora, a beautiful girl was burned alive. Kurno, the only courageous tribe of the locality here plays an important role in making a resistance to this violence as he inspires and gathers his fellow tribes to assimilate and engage them to answer back this uprising by making a group of tribes. But the resistance does not work as the police and administration do not come forward to help them or take a single initiative to stop the crimes. Though their resistance does not result in their victory or mark their freedom from distress, it testifies to their moral upliftment at the time crisis. However, the situation remains the same as the violence increases in various forms often leading to the brutal death of the tribal people. They were ready to make counter-attack against the perpetrators but their hopelessness was evident in the fact that presumably the government has a strong support behind the perpetrators. The author writes,

“ People have forgotten about their priorities. They have no feeling other than this. They are full of the desire for revenge. The people of the village have put their spears into anyone that faces them. They have no bad feelings about killing people. Tortures for long have made them

swift. They did not find any chance to take revenge till now. They tried to save themselves even after they were disdained. Even after their girls and women were abducted and disrespected, they could not take revenge. They have taken their full chance today. The fire of their revenge is lit all over here.” (Bhardwaj 124)

That the problems of the tribal are not interfered officially testify to the fact that they are treated as others in their own homeland. The officials and the government show that they are culturally and politically excluded from the mainstream culture of colonial India. The culture of the tribes of highlands is systematically represented as ‘other’ from the culture of the plains by the British people. As most of the revolts against imperial encroachment come from the plains so the British tried to segregate them from the cultural influence of the the plains. The politics of exclusivism was also because most of the tribes of hill areas were neither Hinduised nor Islamic. Certain tribes of hill areas were influenced by Buddhism but most of them were the followers of traditional animistic religion. Hence the officers of colonial India tried to Christianize them and by doing this they wanted to keep them separate from the Hinduised socio-cultural practice of India. David Scott’s letter to His Lordship-in-Council dated July 10, 1827 asserts that British people considered the tribal people as animals needed to be domesticated and humanized. In the letter David Scott wrote,

“as soon as convenient such further measures as may be requisite to afford to the Garos instruction in Christian religion as constituting, independently of other instruction, by far the most feasible and efficacious means of humanizing that race of people and effecting the objects which Government has all along had in view in regard to them.” (Boorah 31)

The tribal people must be westernized as the Orient or the East is all barbaric and uncivilized. They are treated as the Other in the history. In *With Christ in Assam*, Ellen Elizabeth Vickland presents the native people of India are residing at the worst of its condition and they need redemption. She gives vent to her ideas that in ‘brown India’ Christ is regarded as the only golden light that can enlighten the lives of this uncivilized people and therefore India needed the patronage of Christianity (Gogoi 42) This Euro-centric perspective has been described in Edward Said’s post-colonial text *Orientalism* where he vehemently criticizes the viewpoint as a political construct by the western countries who seek to understand the cultural matrix of the orient only through the intervention of Europe. European culture gained its superiority by making a

distinction between the Orient and the Occident. The cultural definition of the Orient as the Other is evident in their representation of the East as the barbaric, irrational and uncivilized in comparison to which the West represents themselves as active, rational and civilized. Said clarifies that Orientalism is a method through which the culture of Orient is invented, represented and legitimized as Others to the whole world and therefore is a “Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the ‘Orient’ (Said 3) and depending on the theoretical framework of Michel Foucault’s power dynamics Said writes,

“without examining Orientalism as a discourse, one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage- and even produce –the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-enlightenment period” (Said 3)

The systematic otherization of a particular ethnic group is practiced in India from the pre-partitioned period to the post-partitioned one where the power has deliberately attempted to minoritize them in their own homeland. The novelist has maintained the silence in regard to the mention of the perpetrators to restrict him from creating further mutual hatred. The cultural construction of the tribe as Others has contributed much to the formation of homogenous identity of a nation after partition when in the biosphere of neo-nationalism dominated by each majority group of respective region resulted in the loss of identity of small groups of people and this is evidently augmented by the political division of a country on the basis of two major religions. By analyzing the historical narratives, partition historiographies, socio-political dynamics through the post colonial theories, this study has explored a the critical dimension of the dominant narratives of Indian history that, with the passage of time refuse to include the ethnic exodus in the oeuvre of partition history by the discursive practice of exclusivism and tend to treat them as the minoritized objects or the distinct social groups and ‘others’ of a nation.

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