Siddhartha Deb born in 1970 is an Indian English writer who was born in Meghalaya and grew up in a small town in the north-eastern region of India, a border region near Tibet, China, Burma, and Bangladesh. He was educated in India and also at Columbia University, USA. Deb began his career in journalism as a Sports Journalist in Calcutta in 1994, before moving to Delhi to continue regular Journalism until 1998. He worked as a journalist in Calcutta and Delhi and has written for *Lingua Franca*, the *London Review of Books, New Statesman*, the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *Boston Globe*. He went to the United States in 1998 on a literature fellowship and now lives in New York.

He was well familiar to Literature and reading was one of his childhood interests. The place where he grew up always gave him something to ponder upon and scribble. He himself says, “This is an obscure and turbulent area, and it has informed much of my work, including my two novels, *The Point of Return* and *An outline of the Republic*.‘

Currently Deb is working as an Associate Professor at the New School in New York. He has been awarded PEN/Open Book Award for his book *The Beautiful and the Damned* in 2012. He worked as a fellow member in Radcliffe Institute of Advanced Studies, 2009-2010. His debut Novel *The Point of Return* was a New York Times’ “Notable Book of the Year”, 2003. His another book *An Outline of the Republic* was long listed for the “Impac Dublin International Award”, and shortlisted for the “Crossword Prize” in India, and the “book of the year” in

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Deb’s novels are like a mirror to the contemporary society, as he explores the issues related to the life and society. His vision as a writer is not limited to the external conflicts and happenings, but he also focuses on the internal crisis and sufferings which a person acquires through his surroundings and his reactions to it which again intensify and bring new issues. His keen observation and writings of native land include facts related to politics, social norms and economic destitute and its impact on the life of a common man. Along with the contemporary conditions, Deb also brings out the historical facts related to politics and society and its impact on people at the present context of time.

Autobiographical note in his novels clearly reveal that he writes what he saw and experienced. History, Politics and Geographical details of North East region affecting the lives of common man is very graphically and sensitively revealed by the writer. In an interview with The Hindu, when asked about his novels set in North East region, he answered, “that's where I grew up and because no one in mainstream India writes about it. There wasn't and still isn't any interest in the region.” His efforts to bring his state and its problems into the light have been made through his novels. Deb’s penetration into the human psyche and his style of revealing social facts take the readers to his own world.

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2 Bhatt, Shakti, An Interview with Siddhartha Deb. The Hindu. 3 December 2006.
As the *Times Literary Supplement*, a Weekly Literary Review of London states about his style:

An elegant and confident blend of styles...Brilliantly and fiercely rooted in a past all but lost in official history, in a locality all but extinguished by cartographic boundaries.³

His debut Novel *The Point of Return* was published in 2002 was selected as *New York Times* “Notable Book”. The novel is Deb’s apparently partly autobiographical and delves into the world of official corruption and ethnic violence in India’s remote northeast. The social facts revealed in the novel are through the character Babu and his father Dr. Dam. As the novel is partially autobiographical, we can see that Babu is projected as Deb himself and Mr. Dam his father. The setting is an unnamed town which is presumably based on Shillong, where Deb grew up. The first section of the novel, “Arrival,” which accounts for half the novel’s total length, is written in reverse chronological order, starting in 1987 and finishing in 1979.

Dr. Dam is shown as a government official who served at the State’s Dairy and Veterinary department. He was an honest man who believed in working hard for the country but this attitude made him suffer in the novel. As the novel goes from present to past, we see in the beginning how Dr. Dam who is a retired man now had to undergo immense trouble at government offices to get his

pension. Not only Dr. Dam, but others like him who came to get their pension, were troubled by government officials who used to dispatch their amount. The atmosphere of the office is shown where the employers talked in rough manner. The troubles of the people like Dr. Dam were intensified if they complaint against the slow working procedures and long lunch hours. The writer explains the situation as,

The clerks could be seen in the central room, hanging around desks overflowing with piles of paper with crumpled markers sticking out. They crossed their legs, rested hands on hips, fingered the long metal spikes on the desks, gesticulating and talking as afternoon edition of a local newspaper changed hands. Some of the pensioners, the men, walked up the corridor and turned back again, coughing self-consciously as they passed the open doors. This has no effect on those inside.⁴

These employees although were meant to work but they turned their working hours into leisure period which was causing trouble to the people. Babu, who first time accompanied his father to the pension office, got irritated at the slow working procedures and lazy attitude of the people. Ultimately even after getting the pension Dr. Dam’s troubles did not come to a halt. His full allowances

were not granted to him and when he talked to the manager, he refused to pay as he said these orders were given by the former minister and now he is out of power and his orders will not be carried out. He argues that it is easy to enjoy favours when a politician is in power, but after his fall this is out of question. We see how the official system was infected by corruption and troubled the common mass. Deb focuses on such issues and brings out the minute details which were irksome for the life of common man.

As Babu goes through a retrospect we see how Dr. Dam suffered at different stages of his career because of his hard working and honest attitude towards work which was unacceptable by the corrupt political system. Dr. Dam was a simple man, who wanted to implement Government’s schemes efficiently for the welfare of the society. His attention towards the five year Plan and sincerity to implement it is seen in the novel. He brings out the scheme of providing milk at Public booths in plastic bottles to avoid the problem of stealing and contamination of milk. But Dr. Dam was opposed by the Minister who disapproved his scheme and rejected his proposal saying that booths were built on public property and the money should be returned to the people. He even doubts the safety and stealing of milk in plastic bottle as he says, “All one needs is a syringe to make a small puncture in the packet and a flame to seal the hole.”

This way Dr. Dam’s idea to deliver healthy milk to the common people was crushed under the foot of the Minister. He did not approve of these changes and

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ordered Dr. Dam to carry on with the same procedure which was going on for years i.e. to sell open milk. Dr. Dam's efforts went in vain and we see how the corrupt and obstinate officials acted as an obstacle in the progress and welfare.

We also see that Dr. Dam was not only hard working and honest, but also had courage to oppose the ailing system strongly. One night when Minister called Dr. Dam and ordered him to get fifty birds for the party at his home, Dam refused to give him the birds as it was against the norms. Minister already had hundred birds for the feast at his home now he demanded more, but Dr. Dam was adamant and refused to send him more birds. We see how the Minister calls Dr. Dam and says,

You get the birds now. Get birds from market. Pay for it. I give you money tomorrow. Is a matter of prestige.

“Sorry, sir. It can’t be done.” He put down the phone  

We see the germs of corruption infected the system from top to bottom. A few people like Dr. Dam tried to bring out their best and work for the welfare of society, but such efforts were crushed by the people at lower as well as higher levels. These people infected the system and also the society through their ill deeds and cheatings. We come across the frustrations faced by Dr Dam as his

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sense ofrectitude clashes with the petty bureaucracy and corruption that surround him.

We see how Dr. Dam’s every possible effort was suppressed by the people around him. The arrival of foreign officials for inspection of how their money and equipments were used for the welfare of animals, was a victory on the part of Dr. Dam. We see how the two officials Nielson and Knudsen from Denmark were impressed by Dr. Dam’s work and his innovative ideas.

Dr. Dam’s working techniques with the country like Nepal, where he worked with hand to hand instead of with a competitive spirit, was appreciated by the officials. As Dr. Ahmad in the novel explains,

We have been trying to regulate hygiene and milking procedures among them, providing aid and medical attention, and pooling our resources to create a unified network. We don’t see them as outsiders or competitors and we don’t let them see us that way, either. It was Dr. Dam’s idea.7

The two visitors were highly impressed and gave positive reports for this section under Dr. Dam but this was not acceptable to the corrupt officials. As a result, Dr. Dam was blamed for not checking the identity of the visitors and for

allowing them to take pictures on farm. They told him these people could have been here to know the secret weapons and plans of the country. Dr. Dam was criticized for not checking the lens of their camera, which could be of high pixels to capture other details of National Security. They questioned Dr. Dam’s way of work and ignored his achievement of funds and grants from these people by saying that,

The security of country cannot be compromised for the sake of milk and eggs.

National pride is more important than food.\(^8\)

Poor Dr. Dam who was an innocent man had to bear, due to the corrupt system which had deep roots. Everybody knew those people were from the permission of Ministry of external affairs, but still they troubled him. Thus in the novel we see that the Corruption from all quarters was infecting the society and was acting as an obstacle in the progress and welfare of the people. Persons like Dr. Dam were not appreciated or encouraged by the Government. Interestingly, they suffered due to their hard work and honesty. From the head to the toe the officials, ministers, and employees almost everybody was under the influence of corruption and greed.

Conservative family structure in this region is also shown by the writer. Women were not allowed to work and attaining higher studies by the youngsters was also not appreciated. Male members were elected as the head of the family and women were suppressed and ordered to work accordingly. The children were expected to learn the native culture and rituals. As we see in the novel after Dr. Dam and his family shifted to Silachar his younger brother took advantage of his being ill and declared himself as the head of the family and asked Dam’s wife to cook food for the whole household. He ordered Babu to work in fields instead of going to college. As Biren (brother of Dr. Dam) says:

Will have to pick up some skills. College education is not for someone in your position. If you must, attend night college and get a degree that might be useful if you want a clerical job later.⁹

Another prominent issue in the novel is ethnic conflicts, and loss of identity of people like Dr. Dam and Babu. Dr Dam was forced out of what was to become East Pakistan after Partition, and was later to become Bangladesh. But he and other displaced East Bengalis could not find a place within the large agglomeration that is India. Local tribes who wish to demarcate their own homeland and expel those who would contaminate their isolationist purity, were

always after the lives of these Bengali people. Dr Dam tried to build a home for his family, but was frustrated at every turn, watching as his physical constructions succumb to the same fate as his mental conception of home, destroyed by either bad luck or the vicissitudes of bureaucracy.

The migrant, the person who doesn’t belong anywhere, is a staple figure in recent Indian fiction, and in *The Point of Return*, Deb provides a disquisition on the subject through the persona of a family friend, Dr Chatterji. Discussing the forlorn state of the Bengali minority, Dr Chatterji contends that no matter how long they remain in their adopted home in the hills, they will remain foreigners forever. As he says:

> We are a dispersed people, wandering, but unlike the Jews we have no mythical homeland. Nor do we have their achievements that would make the world recognize and fear us one day. My two brothers have not been here for years. They left as soon as they could, but they found Calcutta too narrow, too alien, after their childhoods here. No doubt you face the same problem. One of them lives in England now, the other in Belgium. They send photographs of their houses, their cars, and their fair children with red cheeks who write *Shubho Bijoya* in English every year until the time comes for them to grow up and leave their homes.¹⁰

Babu shows in the novel, how he went through all the sufferings due to the conflicts of Tribals and Non-Tribals as he himself was a Non-Tribal. He records his experience from the time he was a child and suffered physical assault due to these clashes. Babu recalls the time when he was called for an interview in Delhi, but was termed as a foreigner. He remembers how in the childhood days during a protest he heard the slogans like, “Go back foreign dogs, go back Bangladeshis”. He remembers that many times he was beaten by the people for not being a tribal, for not speaking the same language they spoke, for having different features and colour complexions. He wondered, where his home was, Bangladesh, India or Pakistan. People like him were not accepted anywhere. There was no place which he could call home.

Feelings of fear and alienation always surrounded him and he felt powerless. He recalls one incident, when he and his father, unaware of the curfew went out and were beaten by the people in market. Cops too didn’t take any action against the people and thus both Babu and Dr. Dam were left helpless and horrified. As Babu explains,

We stood there on the road, brushing the dirt off our clothes. My Father looked more embarrassed than scared or angry and the arrival of three policeman did not help. They wanted to know what we are doing there, and why we had not seen the posters in the market
When after years Babu comes back to his homeland, he feels that despite the sufferings he came across he was fortunate enough that he managed to escape. He learnt about the various attacks on Non-Tribal people which were inhuman and full of hatred. Dr. Chatterjee informed him about the past where he revealed that how brutally and mercilessly the Non-Tribals were killed. Many were slaughtered amidst the whole market and nothing was done against them. Law and order was in their hands as the ministers were biased as they themselves were from tribal groups. Children were burnt for studying in tribal schools, women were left alone after losing their husbands. Dr. Dam who his whole life served the country and state considering it his own was at the end terrified at the point of gun by his head minister for not carrying out the schemes as per his wish and ultimately was threatened by such words, “corpse of one more foreigner will not make any difference.”

Deb in an interview by Harper Collins Publishers when was asked about the roots of these fractured relationships between tribals and non tribals answered,

The British colonial rule was superb at fostering divisions upon people on the basis of religion, ethnicity, class, and caste, and this is the point

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12 Ibid. 276. Print.
from which the fractured relationship originates. Add to that mass migration to the hills by Bengali Hindus fleeing their original homeland because of the partition of India in 1947 and the insecurity of the hill people because they are marginal compared to other groups in India, and there you have all the elements of a bitter misunderstanding.

The novel aptly brings out the sufferings of these people in the land in which they lived their entire life from the very childhood. They were homeless even after serving the country for years. These ethnic clashes resulted in the issues like the conversion of mass population into Christianity and adaptation of other religions by tribal people which later on further developed the feeling of insecurity among them.

Thus in the Novel we come across various social and political issues polluting the environment and infecting the society. Prasanta Das (Reader, Dept of English and Foreign Languages, Tezpur University) writes for the novel:

Nationhood, identity, memory, home, migration, exile, ethnic violence, bureaucratic corruption, and a son’s gradual, if belated, understanding of the meaning of his father’s

life are the main themes of Deb's outstanding debut novel.\textsuperscript{14}

In the novel we see that his longing and pain for the past and his love for his native place where he was termed as a foreigner, troubled him up to the very end of the novel. He brings out the plight of the Bangladeshi people who suffered as their presence in the North Eastern States was protested and objected. In the concluding lines of the novel we see his pain and longing for his birth place, which he had to leave due to the ethnic clashes and violence which took place against the people like him. He writes:

\begin{quote}
I look at my birth place, knowing that I will never see it again. I want It to be home for everyone who lives there, for everyone to have a place in it, that cannot be lost or stolen. But how you achieve that future is no longer my concern, I tell my hometown.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

Deb's other novel, \textit{An Outline of the Republic} or \textit{Surface}, was published in 2005. The novel focuses on the various social issues prevalent in North East Indian states. The insecure environment of these states, problem of insurgency and other issues like ethnic clashes, drug use and highest rate of illiteracy are clearly

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\textsuperscript{14} Das, Prasanta. \textit{Indian English Writing from North East}. \url{www.academia.edu}. n.d. web.
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revealed by the writer. Throughout the novel Deb avoids naming the region of which he talks about. In the whole novel it is referred to ‘region’. Deb in his novel shows us the true picture of these regions by discussing the contemporary conditions and situations. These sensitive areas and the problems suffered by the local people, migrants and tribes are shown by the writer.

The novel revolves around the character Amrit, who is a Sikh reporter for a magazine in Calcutta named *Sentinal*. The whole situation and problems are shown through this character. As Amrit travels to the place for preparing his report, he comes across various issues and facts of which he was, till now unaware, the facts which are concealed by the people in the depths of these regions. The problem of insurgency in these regions is also shown by the novelist. Deb shows us how Amrit, after reaching, near Manipur, gets to know about the insurgent group MORLS (Movement Organized to Resuscitate the Liberation Struggle), the group which was responsible for various violent occurrences. They were the authoritative and controlling power of that place and if disobeyed they simply shot the person dead. Because of such groups there was a lack of peace in the society and terror always filled the lives of these people.

Just like MORLS there were other insurgent groups too, which were formed due to some reason or the other. Every group had its own cause for protest and dispute. As Deb writes,

as many as a hundred fifty groups swirling in the vortex of the
region, a discontented army of teenagers and young people sworn
to similar but separate causes, moving stealthily along arms routes
from jungle camps located in Bangladesh and Burma.¹⁶

These groups were not only authoritative with the local people, but also
regulated the actions of the government. It is shown in the novel that the local
Government has to obey the instructions laid by these people and it had no
power to go against them or question their actions. The formations of these
insurgent groups were a result of various demands and attention of the people
here. As the novelist writes,

The insurgents had been in the region in one form or another for
nearly four decades, crystallizing around different ethnic and tribal
identities as a distant government in Delhi alternated between

complete neglect and brute force.¹⁷

People from different tribes of different states formed their groups like
Nagas, Assamese, Bodos, Hmras and mizos and all these had clashes and
hatred towards each other, disturbing the social lives of people. The insurgents
disturbed the lives of common man and infected and restrained the society from
doing any activity which could be helpful and creative. People here lived in terror,

¹⁷ Ibid. 178. Print
one mistake committed by them and their life would be taken away. Their normal living was ruined and fear of being killed always disturbed them. Lack of education, problem of unemployment, increase in crimes all this was prevalent due to insurgency. We see how these insurgent groups were unsatisfied by the central government and their actions. Through the novel we learn that North Eastern states were rich in oil; however, the people living here could not benefit from the oil wells constructed by the Delhi Government. Rebel groups like MORLS thus kept on fomenting minor troubles, so as to convey their frustration and resentment to the central Government. As the writer writes,

Not enough oil to quench the thirst of an entire country, but

sufficient to justify expensive equipments and staff, and quite

enough to create a grievance for the insurgents who claimed, quite

rightfully, that all the wealth was taken out of their region with


MORLS casted themselves as the guardians of morality in the society. It is shown how suppressions and orders were imposed by these people on the innocent people who lived there irrespective of the fact they were migrants or native tribes. These groups suppressed women by ordering them to dress modestly, and putting further restrictions upon them. We see in the Novel that Amrit, the reporter, comes to this region to know the story of a woman who was
blamed to be a porn actress and was killed by this insurgent group MORLS as a warning to those engaged in corrupt activities. Amrit moves out in search of that girl named Leela, and discovers that she was not a porn actress as she was blamed to be by the people. The writer brings out her truth in these words:

But Leela she was a smart girl who went to a great college in Delhi on a scholarship, someone who was very much a part of the success that is the Prosperity Project.\(^\text{19}\)

We see that the innocent girl was paraded in front of the media by the insurgents and later they tried to kill her. Media persons could not object against that parade out of fear. We come across this fact that a porn movie was never found by the reporter Amrit as there wasn’t any. And the girl was threatened as she belonged to the prosperity project which was being run by the man Malik. She became a victim of politics which took place between Malik and people of MORLS. We see how women were used as sacrificial beasts by these people to save themselves. As Malik says,

Discredit the woman, and everything else falls into place, Malik explained to MORLS. It was an old, time-tested strategy, and it would work well for their plan.\(^\text{20}\)


\(^{20}\) Ibid. 275. Print
Amrit discovers that Leela, the girl in the photo, is not a porn film actress but an employee of a highly successful social project called the Prosperity Project. The photo was apparently stage-managed by the Kurtz-like Director of the project, Malik, and the Prosperity Project too turns out to be a mere façade. When Singh arrives in Imphal, Lila has disappeared and Malik is first abducted by MORLS and later killed by them under mysterious circumstances.

These groups also had anger against the people crossing borders from Bangladesh, China etc, and conversion of tribal people to other religions like Christianity. There were clashes between the tribes due to lust of land and power. Life in these regions was uncertain and totally disturbed by the sensitivity of the location, ethnic clashes and hatred towards each other. They had feeling of being left out in their own country, deprived of desired attention and financial and other favours. We also see in the novel, how these people were neglected by the government as well. Numerous diseases prevailed in these states. Aids, Cancer and rampant drug use in these areas shocked the reporter Amrit. People here lived an isolated life amidst dangers, diseases and hatred. They were unaware of any kind of growth and development and were left alone by the government to suffer. Deb ends the novel with a pessimistic note shattering all the hopes for change and betterment in these states. The reason he, himself, gives in an interview with *The Hindu*, is stated below:

The melancholy note is deliberate. A piece of art isn’t meant to offer
false, superficial, comfort. There are too many things that already do
that advertising, so much of journalism, mainstream films. But the
melancholic note wouldn't be too interesting without the option of
redemption, and I think there are a number of characters in this book
who ask difficult questions of themselves and what they have
experienced. That's a form of redemption.21

Thus the novel graphically projects the insecure and sensitive society of the
people living in the North Eastern areas. Prasanta Das (Reader, Dept of English
and Foreign Languages Tezpur University) writes in his paper for the novel,

    In Surface we see aspects of life in the Northeast that have
not so far figured in Indian English fiction – the curfews,
the terrorist outfits and their crippling hold on citizens,
the military search operations, the scams and the region's
abysmal quality of Leadership.22

    Hence we can see that in both the novels Deb through his unique way
of writing represents the facts related to the North Eastern society, and take the

readers to his own world. His style penetrates the story deep into the mind of the readers. His deep insight into the psychology of his characters, brings out the internal crisis which are caused due to the external social conflicts. His keen observance of the society in which he lives and its effect on the social being is clearly shown in the novels through the characters like Dr. Dam, Babu and Amrit.

His style is unique as he takes the readers to the past and brings back to the present, swinging to and fro in the emotions and feelings which haunted him of past and his present life which gave him new experiences are effectively shown by the writer. He divides the books into sections and thus traces the events effectively.

The external flaws of the society and its effect on the psyche of the people are clearly shown in the novels. Deb, however, not only focuses on the negative aspects but also brings out the positive aspects present in the society by depicting the ardent endeavours of the responsible and balanced people who do not allow the flickering flame of hope for resurrection of peace in the region to die out. In his novels he doesn’t simply lay down problems and facts, but also gives the readers the logical explanation of occurrence of these problems.