



The Point of Return

By Siddhartha Deb
ISBN: 9780060501532

Introduction

Set in the remote, northeastern hills of India, *The Point of Return* revolves around the father-son relationship of a willful, curious boy, Babu, and Dr. Dam, an enigmatic product of British colonial rule and Nehruvian nationalism. Told in reverse chronological order, the novel examines an India where the ideals that brought freedom from colonial rule are beginning to crack under the pressure of new rebellions and conflicts. For Dr. Dam and Babu, this has meant living as strangers in the same home, puzzled and resentful, tied only by blood. As the father grows weary and old and the son tries to understand him, clashes between ethnic groups in their small town show them to be strangers to their country as well. Before long, Babu finds himself embarking on a great journey, an odyssey through the memories of his father, his family, and his nation.

The Point of Return poignantly explores the precarious balance of family relationships built around secrets and the intrusions of political conflicts outside the control of individuals. From start to finish, it is a powerful, moving, and unforgettable story.

Discussion Questions

1. What does Dr. Dam tell Babu he does for a living? What are some of the privileges and tensions that Dr. Dam experiences in his profession? How does his professional responsibility conflict with his transportation of cement to Silchar?
2. When Babu accompanies Dr. Dam to the pension office, they encounter a lame man, who tells them: "Bengalis...[n]o use for Bengalis, always coming over the border." How does this exchange allude to the racism that Babu and his father endure? What does the conversation reveal about the political situation in northeastern India following 1947?
3. How does Dr. Dam's Town Milk Supply Scheme work? Why does Dr. Dam's milk supply scheme provoke Leapingstone? Why do you think this episode persists in Dr. Dam's memory until his death?
4. "Strange kind of wedding isn't it, where everyone does their own thing? Strange kind of family." How does Babu feel about his extended family? Discuss Babu's visit to Silchar when his uncle Ranen teaches him to swim. Why does this episode create such tension in Babu's extended family?
5. Why does the visit to the dairy farm from the Danish academics Knudsen and Nielsen seem to provoke such concern on the part of the Indian intelligence division? What does the government's reaction suggest about their feelings toward foreigners and outsiders?
6. Siddhartha Deb, the author of *The Point of Return*, has written his narrative in reverse chronological order. How does this narrative progression affect you as a reader? Are you better able to understand the importance of past events by seeing them in terms of their effect on the future?
7. When Dr. Dam becomes ill, how does his relationship with Babu change? What are some of Babu's new responsibilities? How does the family come to depend on relatives like Anil and Biren? Were you surprised by Mrs. Dam's response to some of Biren's demands?
8. "People think that those who have gone away relinquished their rights to the place left behind, are gone forever." Discuss the importance of place and one's hometown in *The Point of Return*. What motivates Babu to tell his story? Why does he feel compelled to record his homeland? What is his homeland?
9. What is the significance of Adolf Hitler, the captain of the local cricket club who becomes the dominant leader of the tribal students' union? How does he impact Babu's sense of his identity and his feeling of belonging? When Babu encounters Adolf as an adult, how does their exchange affect him?
10. How do you interpret the ending of *The Point of Return*? How does Babu feel about his birthplace? How has his conversation with Dr. Chatterji affected him? What has he learned in his return to his hometown? Do you think he feels like he belongs there, or like he's a foreigner?

About the author

Siddhartha Deb was born in northeastern India in 1970. He has 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 came to the United States in 1998 on a literature fellowship and lives in New York.