

Exploring Human Psyche During Communal Violence: A Study in Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas*

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Abstract. Human psyche has been decoded and unfolded time to time and it has been recorded in different genres of literature. Communal violence has unfolded a different human psyche. The novel *Tamas* written by Bhisham Sahni explores various aspects of human nature. In the novel Sahni beautifully works on man to man relation, community to community relation, neighbour to neighbour relation and comes to a conclusion that however strong one's relation is with the neighbour, it totally fails when the society erupts in the flame of communal violence. But the novelist has also painted some good characters in the novel as well. The novel presents women as the worst sufferers during the communal violence because men suffer in terms of death, material destruction and displacement whereas women besides these things lose their dignity and self-respect. The financial destruction that men lose, can be regained but the physical purity that women lose, cannot be regained, on the contrary, its memory haunts throughout their life.

Keywords : Communal; dignity; massacre; partition; harmony; riot; manipulate; psyche; kafirs; marauders; financial destruction; bloodshed.

Communal violence since the time of partition between India and Pakistan has been a pervasive and fearsome picture in human life because it has resulted in loss of humanity, the murder of inner soul and has presented the ugly face of the society. Riots, blood baths, massacre are a few of the many names used for the communal riots that have haunted India since independence. India had witnessed a number of communal riots in the post-independence history. The very thought and memory of communal riots of Jabalpur in Madhya Pradesh in 1961, Ahmadabad riots in 1969, Sikh riots in 1984, Merrut riots in 1987, Bhagalpur riots in 1989, Mumbai riots in 1992, Gujarat riot in 2002, Riots in Assam in 2012 and the clash between the Hindus and the Muslims at Muzaffarnagar district, in Uttar Pradesh in 2013 raise questions on our material advancement. Communal violence and riots in India have been seen as the religious war amid different religious groups particularly the Hindus and the Muslims. In this contest, a writer has commented that Hinduism and Islam together form a single image of religious militancy, as they entangle one another, fighting like two armies at war, or boxers in a ring. Newsweek even used a phrase from media coverage of militant Islam to headline its story on Ayodhya - "Holy War in India."

During communal riots, numerous innocent people have lost their lives and many children's aspirations to be something has been buried under the demolition of the mosque, the temple and in the burning trains. One can see the naked picture of humanity by peeping into human soul during communal violence. Literature of any country is always wide awake to pick any kind of cultural, religious and social activities and reflect them through a particular genre. The partition novel, a new genre in English literature which took its literary form with the Partition of British India into the sovereign states of India and Pakistan explores physical violence, man to man killing scene, suffering and painful experiences of the society during and after the Partition. The novel presents women also as the worst sufferers during the communal violence because men suffer in terms of death, material destruction and displacement whereas women besides these things, lose their dignity and self-respect. The financial loss that men suffer can be regained but the physical purity that women lose, cannot be regained; on the contrary its memory haunts throughout their life.

Tamas is one of the most powerful novels written on the theme of partition by Bhisham Sahni who won the Sahitya Akademi Award for this novel in 1975. The purpose of penning this article on *Tamas* is not to remind all the people of the same history of carnage and bloodshed during the partition nor to hurt and attack the sentiment of any religious group. But this article studies the failure of people and the society in controlling the elements of communal violence even in 68 years. It further digs out the seed of the religious tension particularly between the Hindu and the Muslim. The novel also offers a peep into human psyche that changes in a minute forgetting the long established relation and becomes a devil under the influence of communalism which has powerful impact on the psyche of secular people and even the very soul of democratic state. This article is a humble attempt to establish the belief in secularism, communal unity and harmony by avoiding the motto of anti-social elements that serve their political purpose through violence.

Tamas has been derived from a Sanskrit word 'Tam' which means 'Darkness'. The term 'darkness' which the novelist refers to in the novel is not that of environment, but it is 'the darkness of mind and soul' that prevailed during the partition and this darkness resulted in a bloody violence breaking out in the form of communal riot. The content actually focused the riots during 1947-48 at Rawalpindi in Pakistan. Sahni has given a fictional touch to the incidences occurred during the time. It shows the intense feelings of retaliations among Hindus and Muslims and Sikhs and the success of the divide and rule policy of the British. The story has a flow, coherence and originality of thoughts and the retention of the reality to which the author was himself the witness. *Tamas* as the title suggests, shows the darkness prevailing during the time of partition. But this darkness is still overcasting in our society. We can see it in

the case of 2012 communal violence in Assam and the clash between the Hindu and the Muslim in Muzaffarnagar district, in Uttar Pradesh in 2013. Even the calculator would fail to count the toll of death during all the cases of communal violence that have occurred in every part of India from the day of partition to the present day. Once the communal violence starts even the best of human beings start falling prey to it, and even the most secular people start traducing other religion.

The story of the novel, *Tamas*, breaks out in a small village where both the Hindus and the Muslims dwell. The foundation of the Congress Party and the Muslim League in the country gives a clear hint that the country is going to be torn into two pieces as India and Pakistan although this is the fact that most of the Hindus and the Muslims were not in favour of the partition. What they wanted was only independence, but some political persons wanted to serve their political motives by hook or by crook, so they start spreading rumours that the congress party is the party of the Hindus, not the Muslims. It becomes clear when we are introduced to a singing party, a group of congress workers, going for a Prabhat Pheri – a kind of community work. In the Prabhat Pheri, people are from different religions. They are Bakshiji, Aziz, Hakim, Sankarlal, Kashmirilal, Mehtaji, Ramdas and Ajit Singh. Today they all gather to clean the drains situated in the Muslim locality. But they have to encounter the other group which raises the slogan – ‘Pakistan Zindabad!’ At this, an elderly person from the group of Prabhat Pheri replies :

‘Congress is everyone’s organization, of Hindus,
Sikhs Muslims. You know this well enough,
Mahmud Sahib. There was a time when you too
were with us.’ (Sahni 33)

The novelist introduces the character like Murad Ali who knows well that religion is the most powerful weapon to win the political gain in the society and in the country, so he hatches a plan to play with the sentiment of religious people. Since he is a muslim, he is well-aware of how to manipulate his community and how it can be instigated against the Hindus. So he gets a pig killed by Nathu with the power of money and the magic of lie and gets it thrown at the entrance of the mosque by the other person. This instigation works on his community and they react violently. They start pelting stones from their roofs over the group of Prabhat Pheri who were at the Imam Din Mohalla to clean the drain. The act of throwing a pig at the entrance of the mosque becomes an issue because according to the Muslim religion, the pig is considered to be haram which damages the chastity of the Mosque. Without a hair of doubt, they develop the concept that this is the act of the Hindus and they target them. A white-

haired Muslim, who had praised the Congress workers a few minutes ago for their social service turns to them with furious temperament and says :

‘Clear out of here if you don’t want to be skinned alive! Aren’t you listening? Rascals, clear out of here.’ (63)

Here, the novelist explores the psyche of the Muslim soul that is full of religious sentiment that forgets humanity and becomes violent. It is really strange that even animals have been divided into Hindus and Muslims. Soon the entire community of muslim develops hatred towards the Hindus. When Bakshiji removes the carcass of the pig from the steps of the mosque, he hears the sounds of the commotion and finds a Muslim whose face is half covered running after a cow to kill it. The city in no time catches communal tense. Then the writer turns to the Hindu community where Vanaprasthi prepares the Hindu community for the communal violence. He ferments the feelings of insecurity among the Hindus and the sin committed by the Muslim. He says to the masses :

‘Much blighted has this land been by the sins of the Muslims, even the Divine has refused us this grace, and the earth its bounty.’ (73)

Sahni here openly shows Vanaprasthiji preaching violence to the masses and commanding them to be equipped with lathis and other weapons. One of the Hindus passes comments on the preparation of the violence saying :

‘This is the biggest shortcoming of the Hindu character. We think of digging a well only when we are thirsty. The situation is fast deteriorating; the Muslims have already stocked weapons in the Jama Masjid where we are thinking now of buying lathis.’ (75)

Vanaprasthiji asks his preceptor, Master Dev Vrat, the organizer of the Youth Wing’s akhara to prepare his team for the safety of the Hindu Community. Master Dev Vrat fires the inner soul of his student Ranvir with the narration of the story of the valour of Rana Pratap. Soon he gets ready and prepared for the violence. On the other hand, the same job is done by Pir sahib in the muslim community. If Vanprashtiji projects the muslims as “unclean” then the Pir Sahib calls the Hindus “Kafir”. Nathu who had killed the pig under the influence of money, feels guilty and he moves to his house. Nathu while on his way to home sees the

crowd gathering in the mosque. He is surprised to see such gathering because people gather at the mosque in such large number only on Id day. But soon he realises that the crowd is there because of the Pir of Golra Sharif who is there to poison the muslims against the Hindus. The outcome of this preaching of Pir sahib becomes visible when Nathu after reaching his house hears the noises coming from far away. Nathu comes out and sees the flames of fire which has broken out somewhere. Finally he comes to know that Grain market is set on fire and noise of “Allah-o- Akbar” starts coming.

In *Tamas*, Sahni shows how friends and neighbours turn out to be enemies overnight. The Grain Market of the Hindus is set on fire by the Muslims and they turn to the Hindu locality, burning their houses. In this situation the writer explores the inside picture of human soul through the character of Lalaji whose house is surrounded by the muslims. The very noise of “Allah-o- Akbar” makes him restless. It is the same Lalaji who donated five hundred rupees that very morning to train the Hindu boys with a lathi. He thinks about the safety of the Hindu community, not about his family. Even he allows his son Ranvir to be a Hindu warrior. He thinks that he should not worry and fear the muslims that live around his house because all Muslims are very poor and they depend on him for their livelihood. They cannot harm him. But the fire raging in the Grain Market mounts the concern about his safety because all the muslims are now changed. They are making an attack on the Hindus. Here the writer explores the very fact that even poverty does not prevent Muslims from being violent at the time of riot. Again the writer explores the inner soul of Lalaji who now changes his opinion about the muslims that ‘they could not be trusted’ when his close friend neighbour Fateh Din from his roof says, “Have no fear Lalaji. No one will dare to look with an evil eye towards your house. He will have to settle with us before he raises his hand against you”. (152) Despite this mental support by Fateh Din, Lalaji trusts only Fateh Din’s words; he does not trust Fateh Din and his family. Here the writer gives a message that trust in each other’s community at the time of communal violence is very important and helpful to control the riot.

The novel also clearly mentions that the personal relations can indemnify the people against the communal violence. There are many incidents in the novel which confirm this. The case of Shah Nawaz and Raghu Nath is an illuminating example. Tension is prevailing all around, but their friendship is still strong. In fact, Shah Nawaz takes his friend to a safe place and warns the local muslims:

Look Fakira, Listen, with your ears open. If anybody dares to look at my friend’s house with an evil eye, I shall catch hold of you and skin you alive. (166)

Shah Nawaz is an interesting case study by the novelist and through him he makes clear that communalism affects the unconscious of a person, it is a poison that spreads in the mind and the person does not even realise it. This is what happens with Shah Nawaz. On the one hand he saves Raghu Nath; on the other hand he kills Milkhi, Raghu Nath's servant. He himself is unable to understand the reason behind the murder. Bhisham Sahni writes about Shah Nawaz's instigation:

‘A casual glance through the window into inner courtyard of a mosque suddenly roused the ‘Muslim’ in Shah Nawaz and gave a poor kick to the poor servant.’ (177)

Though it is a piece of fiction, it is plausible because such things were happening at that time. The muslim neighbour gave protection to our family, but the same person went to another mohalla and gets indulged in wanton killing. Later on Shah Nawaz helps his community kill the Hindus in villages. Here the novelist explores the relationship of a man with the other through the character of Shah Nawaz. The writer talks about mutual relationship and Hindu- Muslim relationship. Shah Nawaz saves his Hindu friends because of his individual loyalty, but at the same time he also helps Muslims in the rural areas kill the Hindus as a part of communal loyalty. Thus Shah Nawaz shows mutual relationship towards Raghu Nath and Hindu-Muslim relationship towards Milkhi and the Hindus in the village.

The characters of Karim Khan and Harnam Singh in the novel throw light on human dilemma during communal violence. Harnam Singh belongs to Sikh community and lives in the Muslim community and Karim Khan has good term with him in the community. Harnam Singh with his wife Banto Singh runs a tea shop which is very popular. But when the communal tension increases in the town and in the village, Karim Khan hints Harnam Singh about the danger lurking on him because of marauders. The writer depicts the dilemma of human who is divided and changed in a minute during the violence. Karim Khan who always visited his shop to have tea but during the tense situation he does not openly show his relation with Harnam Singh. The novelist writes that ‘Karim Khan came over but did not stop at his shop. As he passed by, he merely turned his face once towards Harnam Singh, slowed down his pace and muttered while pretending to cough, ‘Things have taken a bad turn Harnam Singh. Your welfare lies in leaving the place’. (216) In most cases, the people from different community do not show mutual relation at the time of violence. They maintain Hindu-Muslim relation as Karim Khan does.

In another scene of the novel, we are introduced with human dilemma through Shelter episode. When Harnam Singh with his wife Banto leaves his village, he moves from pillar to post to get shelter. No one of his close acquaintances gives him shelter. Finally he reaches the other village where he gets shelter at Ehsan Ali's house. When Harnam and Banto ask the woman of the house for shelter, she remains stood undecided for a moment. Here the novelist explores the psyche and dilemma of human soul of the lady that is caught between humanity and religious beliefs. She is overburdened with the concept of her community that every Hindu or Sikh is the enemy of the Muslim during violence. They all are kafirs. The woman of the house knew well that her husband and son would go to any extent against her if she gave the kafirs shelter. Despite this, she opens the gate and gives them shelter and food in the absence of their male members. Here she sets an example of humanity that is a lesson to all.

When the son of the house, Ramzan, returns killing Hindus and he is told of the two kafirs, Harnam Singh and Banto Bai, his wife, he becomes furious at his mother and says, 'How dare you give shelter to kafirs!' Rajo. Ramzan's wife was against the shelter as she hated kafirs so she poisoned her husband. Rajo immediately feels and says :

'Are you mad? Where's that witch, your wife? I'm going to pull out her tongue. Ah, there you are Haramzade'. I told you not to tell your rogue of a husband about these Sikhs. Why did you tell him? Can't you hold a secret in your belly?' At this Ramzan says, 'Ma, stop being foolish! These kafirs have killed two hundred Mussalmans in the city.' Ramzan attacked the door again. 'You kafirs, come out! You!' (268)

As Harnam Singh and his wife, Banto came out of the room, Ramzan caught hold of Harnam Singh by the neck and pulled him down. Harnam Singh's turban fell off. Ramzan swiftly let go his neck as he recognised Harnam Singh. He had taken tea at his shop a couple of times. In an agony of indecision Ramzan raised his axe but could not bring himself to the point of striking Harnam Singh with it. It is one thing to kill a kafir and quite another to kill a man with whom one is familiar with and who is also staying under one's roof. Sahni beautifully portrays the psyche of the three muslims of the same family and explores their dilemma.

The most poignant scene in the novel is the scene of gurudwara which is under the threat of marauders' attack coming from the east shouting 'Allah-o

Akbar'. These marauders have killed, plundered, looted and raped many women and now they target the gurudwara. All the male sikhs gather their children and women at one place in the gurudwara and all the males come out shouting.

Finally, Bhisham Sahni moves to the very fact that during communal violence, some anti-social elements and political agencies play an active role in firing the sentiment of religious people. In the name of communal riot, they serve their evil motives. Some of them instigate the innocent so that they may loot others' property during the riot. Some are rapists that satiate their carnal desire by raping women. Some show their masculine power over women as we find in novel *Azadi* written by Chaman Nahal. One of the most powerfully touching scenes in the novel is the parade of the naked Hindu and Sikh women in Sialkot. In retaliation, muslim women are paraded exactly in the same manner in the Indian Punjab. Some achieve their political gain during all communal violence. Such people visit different villagers and towns equipped with deadly weapons to support their community. They instigate the innocent villages with rumour that the Hindus have killed ten Muslims in the town. As Ramzan tells before attacking Harnam Singh, 'stop chattering, Ma. In the city they have killed two hundred Musalmans' . (268) The Hindus do the same thing to the innocent people of their community saying that the muslims have killed twenty hindus and so on. It is surprising that when the poor muslims or the hindus die for want of food or they are ill or they need money for the wedding of their daughters, no people from different areas come for help. On the contrary,

The novel delivers a stern warning against the use of religion for achieving political and personal motives. It shows that religion is the most sensitive issue for the human beings. Once the religious sentiments of a person are hurt, he acts like an enraged Othello who cannot smell anything foul in the incidents, but destroys everything that comes in the way. This is the reason that the British applied 'religion' for divide and rule policy. In the novel, the novelist seems to interpret the evil designs of the British and of the communal groups mainly through Richard, an I.C.S. The conversation between Richard and his wife Liza introduces the theme of partition. Their conversation clarifies the fact that the policy of divide and rule brought havoc by making the people alienated and making suspicious of one another. The British intentionally tried for the growth of communalism because they knew well that the Indians are an irascible lot and highly volatile...ready to shed blood in the name of religion. They played the role of only a spectator instead of controlling the communal crisis. Richard, the British official of the district is "the mouth-piece of British imperialism when he took upon himself the task of putting into practices the policies and imperialist designs of the British ruling class" (40).

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The novelist vividly delineates the tricks of divide and rule among the communities. In the period of pre-independence, there was no inherent idea of separation among the people. Colonizers adopted the policy to break the unity and integration, so that they may remain busy fighting with one another instead of opposing the Empire. The government adopted the policy and encouraged everyone in the country to safeguard the empire and themselves. This is clear when Richard said to his wife, "When the people fight among themselves the ruler is safe." (45) The conversation between Liza and Richard reveals that the British rulers did play an important role in the promotion, spread, growth and ultimate success of communalism. Sahni clearly shows the historical fact that how the element of communalism had been exploited by the British in order to survive and rule. But what has gone wrong with the people even in the 21st century is that they have not yet understood the divide and rule policy of some of the politicians. Such politicians only make people communal and try to be 'masiha' of a particular community during the election.

Thus, through the novel *Tamas*, Sahni appeals to all for fighting against communal violence which is the greatest enemy of the secular country like India. I would like to conclude my paper with my own composition :

Awake! Awake! Countrymen,
Awake! Awake!
Out of religious frenzy
If thou not awake, your entity will be fake
Shake thy inner conscious and enjoy life precious
When nobody's D N A is religious, then why so much furious
Hey ho! Hey ho! Let us sing
Peace! Peace! Peace!

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Work Cited

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