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Communal Tension and the Politics of Harmony: A Study of Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas*

Abstract

The article is an attempt to explore communal tension between Hindus and Muslims or Sikhs and Muslims and political endeavors to establish peace in the society. The novel is an example of triangular politics during Partition hours or better Indian Independence struggle. On one hand there is British colonial agency which rules over the principle of divide-and-rule, on the other, there is the Muslim League which demands a separate Islamic nation Pakistan and the third major political representation is shown through the Congress. All the three agencies are in some or the other way in search of power and this hunt for power sows the seeds of hatred against people, animals and religious places which cause communal tensions and anarchy in the society. In spite of ideological differences, these political agencies along with their comrades try their best to establish peace and order. In the novel, we have various examples of harmonious relations among all communities. Khudabakhsh and Raghunadh have very warm feelings to each other while people like Murad Ali, the cause of communal riots, are the black sheep for any community. Bakshiji and the General represent Gandhism and non-violence. They stand for the true spirit of India above the sectarian identities of people. Bakshiji, Hayat Baksh, Dev Dat, Aziz, etc., make all possible efforts to stop riots through their politics of harmony.

Keywords: Harmony, Triangular, Communal, Partition.

Introduction

Literature is the confluence of all the human sciences and a major part of any literature is governed by writings on politics. Indian writing in English, especially Partition literature, is enriched with political thinking and debates. Urvashi Butalia, the author of *The Other Side of Silence* claims that *politically Partition is over...it was surely more than just a political divide*.¹ In Departments of Political Science, Partition may be dead but in literature, Partition still matters because of its relevance at present. Anam Zakaria, a Pakistani researcher, has explored that the younger generations of both the nations are more antagonistic to each other than the first generation of Partition who were victims and faced violence and brutalities of the event in their lives. One can very easily trace its roots in bitter political relations of both the nations. Besides, the stories of Partition are the mirror of ultimate barbarism which warns the people against communalism and interrogate political decisions.

Khushwant Singh, Bhisham Sahni, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Chaman Nahal, Amitabh Ghosh, Manohar Malgaonkar, etc., have very honestly presented the socio-political account of the time of Partition in their writings. In general, Partition literature is dipped in blood and tears and records bloodshed, murder, rape, abduction, etc., in the lives of common human beings but along with it there is a depiction of mainstream players like Gandhi, Nehru, Jinnah, etc., and their political ideologies.

I have chosen Bhisham Sahni's Sahitya Academi Award winning novel *Tamas* (1977) originally written in Hindi and later translated into English by the author himself. The major characters of the novel are the embodiment of the ideologies of aforesaid leaders.

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It captures the socio-political scenario of the time. The novel is an example of triangular politics which led to the division of the country. On one hand, there is British colonial agency which rules over the principle of divide-and-rule, on the other hand, there is the Muslim League which demands a separate Islamic nation Pakistan and the third major political representation is shown through the Congress. All the three agencies are in some or the other way in search of power and this hunt for power sow the seeds of hatred against people, animals and religious places which causes communal tension and anarchy in the society.

In the very beginning of the novel, we see Nathu struggling with a pig to kill it. Murad Ali, one of the members of the Muslim League, gets the pig killed and thrown in front of a mosque and subsequently this causes communal hatred and animosity among the communities in the town. The incident was strategic and was used as an instrument to win the favor of the Muslims and spread communal hatred against the Hindus. Murad Ali succeeded in his malevolence. Consequently, all the communities whether Hindu or Muslim or Sikh start collecting weapons to attack their communal counterparts in order to defend themselves. In the course of the novel, a number of murders and rapes are reported and the town is burnt with the flames of fire. When Bakshiji along with other members of Congress reaches to clean the Muslim locality, he faces bitter opposition from the same persons who had praised their work. It seems to them that the Hindus are betraying them. On one hand, they insult Islam by throwing a dead pig in front of the mosque while on the other, they want the Congress to represent the Muslims as well.

Sahni advocates that in India every religion deserves respect and it is the persons of the same religion who use their own religion to meet their motives as Murad Ali did. Violence is sparked through the insult of metaphors. When the mosque is disrespected, in response Bakshiji sees a man with lathi running after a cow and at this he mutters, *"It seems kites and vultures will hover over the town for a long time."*³ This prophecy came out true and in terms of Captain Atkins, *"Every yard of the way there was a body, some butchered, some died of cholera, the vultures had become so bloated by their feasts they could fly no longer and the wild dogs so demanding in their taste they ate only the livers of the corpses littering on the road."*² Communal hatred had spread to such an extent that even the innocent animals had become the victims of communal violence and religious places had become the meeting places to spread communalism. Dr. Charu Sharma

quotes, *"Partition was not division of nations but of communities, values, memories and dreams. It is a phase in history when Hindus won, Muslims won, Colonial rulers won, freedom fighters won, political stalwarts won, but humanity lost.* Here sectarian identities overpower the humanitarian identities because history seems to guide people. Richard says to Liza, *"They belong to the same stock, the same features, same noses, mouths, broad foreheads, brown eyes...they don't know their history. They only live it,"* (Sahni, 41) i.e., the history of their origin and race does not matter to the Indians but the wounds of history do matter to them. According to Bhisham Sahni, this seems to be the route cause of communal tension in the country. The Hindus are of the opinion,

*"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"* (Sahni, 73)

Similarly, the Sikhs believed that they were settling scores with their traditional enemies, the same Turks. To the Muslims, history witnesses that they have an enmity with Hindus and the two can never be friends.

In fact, the riots take place when the rationality of a common man is governed by the preachings of religious gurus like Vanprasthiji and Devrat. The contradiction of religion has been shown with politics. Religion in the very beginning of the civilization was formed to set up peace and order and protect humanity but ironically religion itself became the cause of inhuman activities. Bakshiji and Jernail and Dev Dat teach the lessons of peace and harmony to the people as Mahatma Gandhi did.

Communal harmony or national unity in India cannot be discussed in absence of our great political legend Mahatma Gandhi. Throughout the world, he is known as the icon of peace, non-violence, and brotherhood. Unfortunately, in his own country and during his own lifetime, the most horrible event full of violence, and brutality took place and despite his efforts the country got divided and massacre disgraced the humanity. Bhisham Sahni embodied his (Gandhi's) ideologies in Bakshiji and Jernail. Non-violence gets reflection in Bakshiji while his meaning to independence, love for India and its people and Hindu-Muslim unity are shown through the character of Jernail, an insane. Hayat Baksh, the leader of the Muslim League is the supporter of Jinnah's two nation theory while Jernail opposes the two nation theory and time and again, he says, *"Sahiban,*

Hindus and Muslims are brothers, that they should not fight for an other...Gandhiji says, Pakistan shall be made over his dead body. I also say that Pakistan shall be made over my dead body. We are brothers. We shall live together, we shall live as one..." (Sahni, 190). This suggests a way leading to national unity through communal harmony which Mahatma Gandhi propagated. But like Mahatma Gandhi, he was subsided and killed by his own countrymen.

In spite of the communal tension in the town and different political ideologies, the major political leaders are concerned with the peace of the area. Peace and communalism are somewhere associated with politics. That is why in the end of the novel, communal harmony becomes a reality. All the political parties-Congress, Hindu Mahasabha, Muslim League and the Communists are brought together by comrades like Dev Datt, Kurban Ali, Atal, Amin, etc. Bhisham Sahni's own interest seems to lie in the Communists as the Comrades have been shown most actively participating to restore peace and order in the town, *"to convene a joint meeting of the representatives of all parties"* (Sahni, 185). Dev Datt believes, *"It is of paramount importance to bring together leaders of political parties"* because *"the very fact of their sitting together will exert a good influence on the people."* (Sahni, 186). This was the sense of trust which was restored on political grounds as politics affects our life and social surroundings. Unfortunately, the first attempt toward the establishment of peace is a failure though both Bakshiji and Hayat Baksh sign the peace proposal. The next meeting of the peace committee is arranged in a missionary college where Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians take part and ensure peace in the society. Though the tension was largely between Hindus and Muslims yet the

participation of all the sects strengthens a faithful and friendly bond among them which frames the base of sociable and democratic structure of the society. The politics of harmony and the restoration of peace get reflected in the slogans, *"Long live Hindu Muslim Unity! Peace committee Zindabad! Hindus and Muslims are one!"* (Sahni, 350).

Religion in India has always been coping with politics and politics with religion and the consequence has been marked in terms of communal tension. This communal tension is claimed to be the part of this relationship. But it is either politics or religion that has made the society better. The relevance of such concepts like liberalism, secularism and national unity sound very enlightened but they are equally challenging to be achieved in a nation of diversity and variety. At present, the political scenario has changed and we are expected to follow non-violence and liberalism what our modern political statesmen have envisioned of India. And the progress of the nation lies above communal and sectarian issues.

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