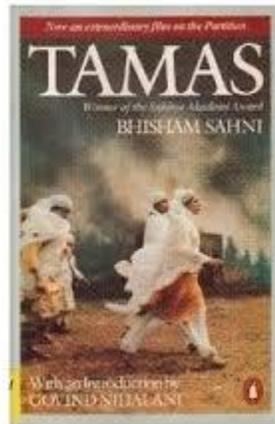


Communalism and the Politics of the Sacred: A Study of *Tamas* by Bhisham Sahni

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Abstract

Tamas is a Sahitya Akademi award winning novel, based in a small town, which endures the ravages of communal riots that succeeded the Independence of India. But transcending the limits of a fictional story, it lays bare the policy of segregation followed by the Britishers, the futility and brutality of communal violence and puts before the reader a dwarfed version of the tragedy. This paper is an attempt to unravel the parallels existing between *Tamas* and the situation prevailing in the nation as well as the roles played by the national leaders during the riotous times. It also enumerates the all-important lesson that *Tamas* beckons on all Indians to maintain unity and peace during tough times and discard any attempt to create dissensions between them.

Keywords: Communal, Conflagration, Atrocity, Riot.

Tamas – Repository of India's Independence

A nation's greatest teacher is its own history which bears within itself the zenith of pinnacles it has reached and the tragic abyss it has endured. Only by keeping in mind the fruits of

our experience that we can construct our present in a pragmatic and purposeful manner and plan our future with wisdom, care and perspective. Awareness of one's own self-identity is indeed the first step towards self-realization. Every nation possesses a unique history and one such repository of India's Independence is Bhisham Sahni's novel *Tamas*.

Almost every nation in the world has at one point or another endured the ravages of patriotic struggle for its Independence. When, as in Nehru's words, it makes a tryst with destiny and when its soul long suppressed finds utterance and the moment always stands as a symbol of harnessing unity, strength and patriotism in the nation. But the Independence struggle of few nations have stood out because of the eternal messages in the principles of morality and humanity they have conveyed to the world. The American War of Independence illuminated the world with the concept of Democracy. The French redeemed it with the ideals of equality, fraternity and liberty. And the Indian Independence movement alluded to the century fraught with violence of its two world wars, the only alternative of peaceful co-existence - Doctrine of Ahimsa- "Non-Violence".

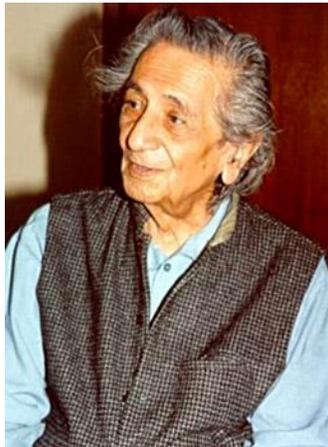
Led by the apostle of peace - Mahatma Gandhi, if the message reached its culmination by stirring the multitudes of the second most populous nation in the world against the British Empire, its conclusion in the form of Indian independence was nothing but opening of Pandora's Box filled with conflagration and cataclysm. India's Independence, achieved on 15th August 1947 was succeeded by communal riots which transcended every limit and horror imaginable to a sane mind. And the most poignant and realistic depiction of the national tragedy can be witnessed in Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas*.

The Plot of *Tamas* - Compression in Expression

Although, the plot of partition had formed the basis of many famous works like '*Train To Pakistan*' by Khushwant Singh, '*Jutha Sach*' by Yashpal, and so on, but what puts the work above and aside all these is the fact that Sahni, maybe consciously or unconsciously, presents us, in his work, a smaller analogy to the situation prevalent in the whole nation and the corresponding roles played by all the important players. The Congress, Muslim League with its leaders, the extremist organizations of Hindus and Muslims, The British administration and its attitude, the plight of the common people all find their prototypes condensed in a single novel thus attributing to the work, the epithet of being unique example of compression in expression.

Tamas is based in a small town frontier inhabited by an equal but irregularly settled population of Hindus and Muslims. It clearly stands as smaller analogy of India and more specifically north India, where a similar situation exists. Just like north India the town also burnt in the heat of communal passions when a *chammar* Nathu was tricked by an unscrupulous politician Murad Ali into killing a pig and had it thrown in front of a Mosque. The Muslims retaliated by killing a cow and thus the battlefield for communal riots was prepared. Extremist organizations of both the religions prepared their youngsters for the holy crusade and they were openly encouraged to violate both humanity and chastity.

Bhisham Sahni – An Astute Author



Bhisham Sahni (1915-2003)

Courtesy: www.indianetzone.com

Bhisham Sahni has astutely depicted how atrocities were heaped on the people of ‘other religion’ as we see some Muslims catch hold of a Hindu girl and rape her one after another. When the last man’s turn comes he realizes that “he is doing it on a dead body”. The Brahmin peon is murdered and his wife forcibly abducted by village numberdar. A youngster Ranveer and his group members kill a Muslim seller who was worried for the safety of his murderers and intended to help. Jasbir Kaur, in order to guard her honor from the captors belonging to different faith jumped into the gurudwara well with the rest of the ladies of the village. Many men were forcibly converted to the other religion like Iqbal Singh, who was caught, while searching for his parents.

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No Exaggeration

Any Individual oblivious to the Indian history would consider these incidents as the imaginings of a senile mind, but the truth is that nowhere has Sahni either exaggerated or mitigated the levels of inhumanity and brutality reached in the orgy of violence. A glimpse of real life incidents of the conflagration would easily go on to prove it. During the ominous summer of 1947, in Sheikhpura, north of Lahore (Pakistan), the entire Hindu and Sikh community was herded into a godown and murdered by Muslim army and police deserters. Guldip Singh witnessed a few women including his mother jumping into fire, just like Jasbir Kaur. The same fate awaited the villagers of Mohammad who resided near Amritsar and he witnessed his neighbors killing their own wives and daughters. Bagh Das, living in Lyallpur was forcibly converted to Islam with his entire family and friends. But a Brahmin in his village killed his own family and committed suicide to save himself from the ignominy. The brutality committed with religious sanction knew no bars and was meted out with Biblical balance- an eye for an eye, a murder for a murder, a rape for a rape, a massacre for a massacre. The conditions worsened to the extent that British officers usually commented that it was far worse than anything they had witnessed in the Second World War and Captain Atkins noted- “The vultures had become so bloated by their feasts that they could no longer fly and the wild dogs so demanding in their taste that they only ate the livers of the corpses littering the road” (Collins and Lapierre. 379).

The Prophetic Warning

And the prophetic warning of Bakshiji in *Tamas* that vultures would fly over the city was fulfilled. Thus, it is explicit that Sahni has presented the realistic depiction of the atrocities committed during the conflagration, dwarfed only in number and dimension but not in horror and brutality.

Political Conflicts

The Inner conflicts of Congress have also not escaped his view. Bakshiji secretary of District Congress Committee, Mehtaji, master Ram Dass, Shankerlal, Kashmirilal, the General all stand as the representatives of the Congress, who are no longer interested in social work,

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indulge in scandal-mongering behind each other's back, quarrel over petty issues, a proof of it is implicit in the incident when a candidate's nomination was withheld on the remonstrance of Shankerlal only for the absurd reason that his pajama cord was made up of silk instead of homespun cotton. Infighting, nepotism, corruption and selfishness in the Congress members allude to the fissures in I.N.C as the same sort of sordid situation existed in it also. Till date many intellectuals believe that Congress leaders seceded to the demand of Jinnah's Pakistan only because they were too eager to acquire the power to rule the nation, which they could feel within their grasp. The same leaders who some time ago formed Gandhi's entourage, now by-passed him by accepting partition as the ultimate price for freedom. The cordial conflict between Nehru and Patel would soon reach a crescendo and their split was checked only by Gandhi's assassination. Transformation of the ideal organization which guided India in the freedom struggle to a power hungry industry had now begun.

The Role of Britishers

The novel also underscores the role Britishers during the riotous times. After the twin murders of the pig and the cow in Sayyedpur, the simmering discontent in the two communities was bound to flare up and in order to check it, when the representatives of the Congress, Muslim League and the Sikhs went to meet the district Commissioner Richard, he expressed his helplessness in interfering in religious matters. Not even an aeroplane was flown, which could have served as a caveat to check the rising tide of fanaticism. Commissioner Richard declared that he could do nothing as the power was in fact in the hands of Nehru and Patel in Delhi. This negligent attitude of British administration helped the riots to flare up and catalyzed them to colossal proportions.

Riots Spread All Over

But the precincts of this flared up riot was not limited to Sayyedpur, in fact the same callous and despondent attitude of British government bore witness to displacement of 14 million people (as per UNHCR estimate) deaths ranging from 250,000 individuals (by Sir Chandulal Trivedi, first governor of Punjab) to 500,000 (Judge G.D Khosla in 'Stern Reckoning') and almost 75,000 rapes. The fact stands bare as we see when north India was burning, Lord

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Mountbatten was enjoying the cool atmosphere in Shimla. During the peak of the riots, Falleti hotel in the burning Lahore remained a place for heavenly pleasure for Englishmen and women, where they partied every night, only a few blocks away from the ruins of a Hindu neighborhood. Even the presumption that the administration was in the hands of Indians is complete illusion, as the 55000 strong Punjab Boundary Force was under the command of General Pete Rees. When the Indian and Pakistani governments wanted to control them so as to effectively stem the rising riots, because they were unable to do so as the Army was taking command from a third authority, Field Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck threatened to resign. Neither is there any iota of truth in the case that the British top brass administration was caught unawares of the deteriorating conditions of the subcontinent as when Lord Mountbatten arrived in India as the last Viceroy, his A.D.C Lord Ismay candidly informed him-

“India was a ship on fire in mid-ocean with ammunition in her hold. The question” he told Mountbatten “was could they get the fire out before it reached the ammunition” (Collins and Lapierre. 95)

Failed to Respond in Time

But just like Richard in *Tamas* they failed to react in time. But then they were only following age-old policy of “Divide and Rule” adopted by the Britishers. The same is enunciated by Richard to his wife Liza that the rulers have their eyes only on differences that divide their subjects and not on what unites them. He informs her that the Indians fight against them in the name of Independence and they fight against each other in the name of religion. But his wife Liza could see through the scrupulous policy and replied with candor of an astute diplomat-

“In the name of freedom they fight against you, but in the name of religion you make them fight one-another”. (42)

Role of Liza

It is interesting to note here that Bhisham Sahni has employed an Englishwoman in order to portray the amalgamation of Hindus and Muslims. It was his genius masterstroke, when he depicted how Liza is unable to distinguish between her cook Iqbal Din and her husband’s secretary Iqbal Singh. It enunciates the indistinguishable similarity between Hindus and

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Muslims. But the conditions prevailing in the nation, condemned its administrators to accept partition as a regrettable necessity. In fact, for the Britishers it was the only way out that they could extract themselves from a commitment they could no longer afford. They had ruled India based on the slogan-“Divide and Rule” and now wished to leave on the basis of another-“Fragment and Quit”.

Gandhi’s Image and Impact

But one man who always stood against both was Mahatma Gandhi. And it is highly interesting to note how Bhisham Sahni has represented him in his work. It is no one else but the General who stands as the miniature figure of Winston Churchill’s “Half-Naked Fakir”. The General was very much unlike Gandhi in appearance, he always wore a proper military uniform with medals. But he stood for the same ideals and principles as did the Mahatma. He always echoed the same views that Pakistan would be created over his dead body and regularly courted imprisonment. The General was considered a senile old man by his Congress colleagues, one who was always ever-ready to give a loud and pompous speech in his grating voice. But then Mahatma Gandhi was also sidelined by both the Congress and the country during those times and his views were considered as outdated and impractical. When he went on his last fast unto death, in Delhi, to restore peace in the whole nation and payment of the long overdue 200 million rupees to Pakistan, a procession reached his doorstep in Birla House raising slogans to let Gandhi die. Although, later on a sea change swept the whole nation and every important player on the national scene pledged to live peacefully and put an end to the riots and the government also agreed to make the payment to Pakistan. But during the specific time that Tamas deals with, he was considered just like the General as a man who talks too much, knows too little and understands almost nothing. And just like the General, Mahatma Gandhi was also destined to meet his end at the hands of a religious fanatic.

However, it is of paramount importance to note that the most important role during the conflagration was played by Mahatma Gandhi himself. As it was a foregone conclusion that if the riots blew up in Calcutta then they would easily dwarf the violence and bloodshed both in number and brutality of Punjab, because the city was a hopeless mix of a larger population of

Hindus and Muslims living in close, irregular, intricate pattern. Calcutta had already tasted blood the previous year when the Direct Action Day of Muslim League took its toll on many lives in the city. The Indian government had already exhausted its armed forces, police, machinery, but was still failing in the front of Punjab and now, neither had the resources and nor the administrative machinery to control the riots if they broke out in Calcutta.

The Dynamic Role of Gandhi

But one man stood up where a whole army failed with his weapons of peace and non-violence. Mahatma Gandhi went from place to place, mohalla to mohalla, door to door, forcing the people to undertake a solemn pledge to save their co-religionists. And the whole of Bengal reacted to his pleas by maintaining complete peace during the conflagration. Indians once again abided by the advice of their Bapu, the prodigal sons had returned to their father. In the savage city people exchanged oaths of peace and brotherhood. Probable the most violence prone city in the world had reacted to the message of the messenger of Peace and Non-violence and overcame the urge to commit violence. It is beyond the precincts of imagination, that in a single nation, in one part Hindus and Muslims are slaughtering each other, ‘trains of death’ are being exchanged between the newly formed nations, lives have been lost by lakhs, women have been raped by thousands and in another part of the same country Hindus and Muslims are pledging to each other’s protection, living in complete harmony. It truly was as The New York Times confirmed- “The wonder of India”.

Omnipresent View of Bhisham Sahni

Indeed, no aspect of the turbulent times has escaped the omnipresent view of Bhisham Sahni. The roles played by the extremist organizations of both Hindus and Muslims in maligning the pure minds of the youngsters and preparing them for religious crusade, has explicitly been reproduced by the story of Ranveer and co. Although there were a few people during the independence riots just like Mir Dad and Sohan Singh who could foresee the shallowness behind the veil of violence, but their views were just like in *Tamas* were drowned in tide of hatred and animosity. That year in 1947, the rains were exceptionally delayed and in India, an agriculture based country, rains are considered to be the best riot extinguisher. Even this minute detail has

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also been presented in the novel when the chief of Hindu organization remarks that the sins of Muslims have been so adverse that the rain Gods are also not turning up. Indeed, the situation existing in the whole nation has been compressed within the realms of a single novel, with such artistic brilliance i.e. beyond contestation.

Importance of *Tamas* Goes Beyond the Story Narrated

However, it would be an error of judgment if the importance of *Tamas* is considered limited to be a representation of the conflagrations. As its significance goes way beyond it. Although, in literary terms it cannot be considered a masterpiece but the value of its teaching to the nation is priceless, but in order to comprehend the real value of the work, we, must first bear in mind the essential attribute of India.

All Pervasive Diversity in India

India is a nation whose one aspect shadows all other, and that is its diversity, being a country whose constitution itself recognizes 22 languages and almost 1652 languages and dialects are spoken countrywide. If a foreigner comes to visit India, then the individual would witness that as they move from one part of the country to another for ex. From north India to south or east India, then the scenario undergoes a complete change, the plains are replaced with hilly or infinite coastal region, people speaking differently, eating differently, wearing differently and even thinking differently, can be witnessed. In my own hilly state, if we go to the upper regions, then none is able to comprehend the language of the inhabitants. India, is in fact a nation which has amalgamated within itself, through the centuries all those who have approached the nation, whether they be the Aryans in search of a new homeland or those who come to gain knowledge and peace, or the uncountable rapacious rulers who attacked it attracted by its bounty. Accommodation and tolerance have been the prime qualities of this nation. But, this unique feature of diversity is not immune to the problems it brings with itself. Every now and then in the course of life India has to face a cunning politician, or a scrupulous leader or a fanatic zealot who try to divide the countrymen and give rise to antagonism between them. The Murad Alis of *Tamas* raise their heads time and again, and the nation has to bear the consequences of their designs. And that is when the importance of *Tamas* reaches its zenith.

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Resistance to Visual Presentation of the Story

It was a novel which was published much later than the time it records in 1973 and went on to win the Sahitya Akademi award. But when it was televised on the Doordarshan to the masses, a huge hue and cry was raised. A petition was filed in the Bombay High Court to defer its telecast infinitely. But the judgment of Justice Bakhtawar Lenin and Justice Sujata Manohar sums up the importance of *Tamas* when they judge that *Tamas* is the anatomy of that tragical period. It depicts how communal violence was generated by the fundamentalists and extremists in both communities and how innocent persons were duped into serving the ulterior purposes of fundamentalists and communalists of both sides; how extremists' elements in both communities infuse tension and hatred for their own ends at the cost of inter-communal harmony, how realization ultimately dawns as to the futility of it all and finally how inherent goodness in human nature triumphs and both communities learn to live in amity.

A Significant Comment from a Character of the Novel

During the course of the novel, the all-important character who sums up the entire British outlook, Richard, comments that the Indians -

“Don't know their history. They only live it.”(37)

And, *Tamas* is that important repository of history which reflects to the people of India, that unity is the rudimentary aspect of their survival. The British ruled over India on the policies, enumerated by the single slogan - 'Divide and Rule' and Indians countered it with another - 'Unity in Diversity'. *Tamas* bears within itself, for eternity, the lesson that India the Indians have to counter every Murad Ali, with their unity's strength or otherwise all they will ever achieve is futile violence and horrible bloodshed. It is a work which alludes to a nation, and its panacea for civilized existence, i.e. its unity.

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