

# Portrayal Of Communal Issues In Bhisham Sahni's Tamas

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## Abstract

The partition of India is a highly painful event whose memories have had haunted the psyche of many creative writers. The British India was divided on religious lines. Really it was a rash, hasty move by the colonial rulers who had not bothered on the proper execution of partitioning the land. As the result, the communal tensions ran high; the brothers of yesterday became today's foes; the gory event of partition has been sensitively articulated by BishamSahni in his novel, Tamas. The novel offers a near-impartial portrayal of the events and times of Partition. The present article attempts a study of communal issues which rocked the Indian subcontinent during the Partition.

**Keywords:** communal, partition, colonial, subcontinent, psyche, British-India.

## INTRODUCTION

Today, BhishamSahni is ranked along with the leading progressive writers in India. He possessed a deep sense of contemporaneity. His seminal work Tamasdeals with the tragic and unfortunate event of the partition of Indian sub-continent. It is also a political text which deals with the consequences of a political decision. One finds that the disintegration of a socio-cultural set-up is the direct result of the erosion of moral and humanitarian values. BhishamSahni presents the two ethnic groups, the Hindus and the Muslims coexisting together. A dead pig outside a mosque fans the communal passions. Now religious and political issues become more important than human lives. While narrating various episodes and incidents in this tragic drama, BhishamSahni assumes the role of a 'disinterested critic' and a progressive writer.

Tamas is a novel of its own kind. It is a political text in which the political issues and ethnic identity matter a lot. It is about the tragic event of the partition of the Indian sub-continent and it also concentrates on the factors and reasons responsible for the communal riots. All the characters are engaged and obsessed with racial and political considerations. The communal clashes begin due to the killing of a pig and a cow. Many precious human lives are lost and the savage inside man plays havoc with life at large. Sahni is among the leading progressive writers. He has artistically integrated various episodes into an organic whole. The novel has an episodic structure because it deals with the fate of two races where the novelist has to record the myriad experiences of the people engaged in a struggle of issues and religions. It is not possible for a novelist to render the entire range of experiences on a small canvas of a novel, yet they can be

presented in a nutshell. This is what Sahni has done admirably.

He presents both the Hindus and the Muslims erring and later repenting. He also introduces quite a few characters in his narrative who illuminate the dark nights during the riots. One finds characters like Rajo, Shahnawaz Khan, Harnam Singh, Banto and Richard. Sahni promotes and advocates progressive values while describing the exodus of people across the border which had not yet been declared. As a progressive writer, Sahni rises above the local territories and deals with the universal. He is more concerned with problems of humanity rather than of one ethnic group. The novel serves a lesson to mankind by showing the real face of such unfortunate and painful situations.

The novel harshly reminds that politicians are the first step towards insanity of human kind. Be it a Muslim, Hindu or Sikh, many of the politicians are self-centered and wicked, and without telling it, Bhisham Sahni proves this. The novel tells the story of several families and characters. Sahni has not even changed the real names of many characters in the book to maintain realism. It tells the story of a good Hindu, a good Muslim, a good Sikh, a bad Sikh, a bad Muslim, a bad Hindu and worse than all, the British.

The novel begins with a Muslim's bidding Nathu (Principal Character) to kill a pig under the pretext of giving it to a researcher. Nathu, a poor man, accepts it and kills it. At dawn, someone takes the pig as instructed from Nathu. A little while later, the pig carcass is found on a mosque's steps. The town which is already in tension erupts at once. The enraged Muslims retaliate by killing a cow. All hell breaks loose and scores of Hindus and Sikhs are massacred by Muslims. Hindus and Sikhs in turn massacre scores of Muslims. It recreates the four days of violence through the eyes of different characters in the novel and the horrifying experiences of people.

The novel is divided into two parts. Part one comprises 13 chapters. It begins and ends with Nathu and shows the disastrous results of his innocent act of killing a pig. In these 13 chapters, we are introduced to all the major forces in the town: the Congress, the Muslim League, the British administrator, Hindu fundamentalists and the Communists. We go through the lanes of the town and it is Bara Bazar, both before and after the riots. Much of this comes to us through the consciousness of Nathu. Part one ends with Nathu's confessing his sin to his wife.

Part two, consists of 8 chapters which can be divided into two sections. The first section comprises five chapters (from 14 to 18) which take us to the surrounding villages where the violence has spread and focuses mainly on the Sikhs living there particularly on one family-of Harnam Singh, his wife Banto, their son Iqbal Singh and daughter Jasbir. The last three from 19 to 21 chapters form the second section. This takes us back to the town and shows signs of the restoring of peace and also gives us an idea of relief and work being done for the victims of violence. As a progressive writer, Sahni does not favour any particular community. It reflects Sahni's secular vision and a deep concern for the pain and suffering of mankind.

The novel deals with four major political parties- Congress, Hindu Mahasabha, Muslim League and the Communists; and four religious organizations- Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians, respectively. The politico-religious equations overlap. The Congress party has, Bakshiji, Mehta, Shankerlal, Kashmerilal, Ram Das and the General as its workers; whereas Ranvir, Vanprasthiji and Master Devbrat belong to the Hindu fundamentalist group; Ehsan Ali, Ramzan and Hayat Baksh are not only staunch Muslims but are a part of the Muslim League as well; the Communists though few in number had committed workers like Devdutt and the Sikh community was guided by leaders like Kishan Singh, Teja Singh and the Granthi. Christians are the British rulers as Richard is the Deputy Commissioner of the area who is reprehensive

of the colonial rule. None of the parties have women workers. The rich and powerful ShahnawazReghunath and Lakshmi Narain are the shadows of the neocolonial agents and they remain undivided irrespective of their religious commitments, as economic interests bind them and therefore they help each other. While Shahnawaz does not harm Lakshmi Narain, he nevertheless pushes Milkhi his servant, down the stairs, out of sheer communal hatred generated after viewing a tuft of hair on his head, an identity marker of his being a Hindu. It is the poor and helpless who are ultimately the victims of such insanity. Ranvir and his friends kill a peddler, a scent-seller who was a melech; Murad Ali deploys Nathu, a chamar whose profession is to kill animals for skin hides, to kill a pig which is used later to fan the fire of communal hatred.

In times of communal strife, women are more vulnerable to suffering and exploitation. Worst of its kind is rape and abduction. A poignant incident is where a Hindu woman is gang raped by ten Muslim men. She dies during the course of the crime but they continue to rape her (288); another man narrates a story of catching hold of a low caste bagri woman, raping her and then killing her (288). There are numerous instances of loot and rape and men do not hesitate to gloat over their crimes. Allah Rakha had kidnapped Parkasho, performed some sort of nikkah rites and married her (330-335). His wife Liza becomes an emotional wreck due to loneliness and depression; he pretends to be unaware of the tense situation of the town when a delegation of Hindus and Muslims meets him to appraise the administration of the deteriorating condition (92-97); and his detachment is visible in a conversation between Liza and him:

"I have to go Sayedpur tomorrow, to get a disinfectant sprayed into a well. ..why don't you come along too? ..From there we can proceed to Taxila. ...The rural area. ...is lovely. ..on my rounds I saw lark. ..a lovely stream. ..the fruit orchard."

And Liza chides Richard; "What sort of a person are you, Richard that in such places (where women had drowned themselves) too, you can see new kinds of birds... When a hundred and three villages are burnt down". (313-14).

Liza tries to understand the differences between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs on the basis of their names-RoshanLal as Hindu and Roshan Din as Muslim, Iqbal Chand as Hindu, Iqbal Ahmed as Muslim and Iqbal Singh as Sikh (43). Apparently she is unable to distinguish them except when Richard pinpoints their identity markers like the beard, turban, offering of namaz, eating beef or pork, Jhatka or halal (51). Richard spells out clearly the colonizers' policy when he explains to Liza; In the name of religion they fight one another, in the name of freedom they fight against us' to which Liza replies: Don't try to be too clever, Richard I also know a thing or two. In the name of freedom they fight against you, but in the name of religion you make them fight one another" (50). Liza is able to sympathize with the Indians. Her compassion can be well read in the above textual passages.

Rajo, the Muslim woman who shelters the Sikh couple Harnam Singh and Banto is a kind-hearted, God-fearing woman and is sympathetic to the suffering of people irrespective of their religion. She is a symbol of true humanity. Harnam Singh and Banto are rendered homeless and in utter depraved condition they knock at the door of Rajo who not only provides shelter and food but also hides them and later walked till the grove to see them off safely. She handed back Harnam Singh's gun and Banto's jewellery which had been looted by the husband and son (253-271). When her daughter - in - law Akran, a victim of internalized patriarchy intervenes, Rajo replies; 'I shall answer them myself. Shall I push out a person who has come seeking shelter? Everyone has to go into God's presence one day' (258) Here religion cuts across all barriers to be more humane, more compassionate. Compassion wins over communalism and the message is loud and clear in the text. Man made interpretations of Scriptures have degraded

religion and the message of love and peace has got diffused. Our mentality has narrowed down and our horizons have faded. Thus women think beyond religious fanaticism and power-equations. They fully realize the pain they have undergone in the making of their homes; the basic unit of any society, culture or nation.

Apart from the violence and the communal frenzy that most of the partition novels record, another issue that finds a very subtle place in these writings is the love and loyalty that transcends religious and communal divide. At the time when people were indiscriminately killing every person who belonged to minority, there still were people who did not snap their ties with their old mates. No doubt, violence and hatred fill the pages of these works, but the emotions of love and sacrifice, even for the strangers, leave an indelible mark on our heart and psyche. The realization that these works are based upon the real events further strengthens our faith in the goodness and humanity. In *Tamas*, we come across various scenes of violence which show the extent up to which a person can go during communal riots. But at the same time we meet various characters who transcend every religious and mortal restriction to save those in distress. There are people who even at the time when the survival was the most important thing for everyone, don't hesitate to risk their own lives in saving the people belonging to different religions.

Most of the writers who have taken up the theme have tried to describe the violence and killings that took place at the time on both the sides of the border. The trauma that followed the event also found the place in many literary pieces. While recording the sensitive events which made the masses suffer, many writers found it difficult to take an objective approach, without taking sides. Sahni's *Tamas* is considered the most objective response to the partition of India. *Tamas* looks at "chaos preceding the slitting of the subcontinent in a small town in the North West Frontier province (now in Pakistan)" (Warrier 335). The novel is impartial in its

portrayal of the partition story and is a grim warning to humanity.

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