

Tamas as a Political Novel

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Abstract

Tamas presents a picture of socio-political life of pre-partition days, which were days of great upheaval. Freedom struggle was in full swing. Britishers were not prepared to quit though they were under great political and economic pressure due to the damages done by world war II. Mahatma Gandhi's movements as Non-cooperation Movement, Boycott of British goods, Swadeshi Movement, Quit India Movement had weakened the Government's authority to a great extent. Britishers were convinced that the days of colonialism were over, yet they were dragging their feet.

Keywords: social, political, British, partition, violence

The British had decided not to leave India united and strong whenever they would be forced to quit. Therefore, they followed the policy of divide and rule. It was they, felt, a safe policy for them, since they would have the sadistic pleasure in seeing Indians killing one another without being exposed in their villainy. They succeeded in their policy and divided India into two states- Hindustan and Pakistan.

"Pre-partition days in India were the days of fermentation. Britishers had instilled the idea in the Muslim psyche that the Congress did not represent the Muslim interests. This created a fissure in the joint struggle for freedom of India. Tamas describes the thinking of Hindu and Muslim minds during pre-partition days' (Sharma 48). The idea of Pakistan was in the air. Muslims wanted it while the Congress opposed it. Mahatma Gandhi said in no uncertain words that Pakistan would be formed on his dead body. Thus, the two sides had taken rigid stands on this issue. This rigidity percolated to the lowest rung of the society. Murad Ali wanted to show that Hindus and Muslims would not be able to share a common platform. The roguish fellow exploited the Muslims' hatred for pigs. He knew that it was the simplest way to provoke Muslims against Hindus. Like an adept criminal, he got it done by simpletons like Nathu and Kalu without showing his hand in the crime, reminding of T.S. Eliot's Macavity who would break the law of gravity without being caught or even seen in the act. The sight of a pig's carcass provoked the Muslims beyond control, since it was an act of

sacrilege for them. The question that crops up is whether Murad Ali was incited by somebody or he had done it on his own. "Apparently, Murad Ali was the perpetrator of the crime, showing that the divide between the two communities had gone to the grass roots. Muslims could not think as they did not have reason to think that a Muslim could do such an act of sacrilege. A pig's carcass on the steps of the mosque was a reason for Muslims to retaliate." (Butalia 37)

The Hindu Muslim divide came to the fore when the rallies (Prabhat Pheris) of Hindus and Muslims came to meet in a narrow lane. The workers of the Muslim League were raising slogan 'Pakistan Zindabad' while the Congress workers raised slogan Inquilab Zindabad. The workers of the Muslim League said unequivocally that the Congress was the party of Hindus. They openly said that Muslims who had joined the Congress were the dogs of the Congress. They did not spare even as great a man as Maulana Azad. The Congress workers tried their best to convince them that the Congress was a national party, fighting for freedom of India, without making any distinction of caste, colour or creed but the Muslims did not buy the argument. When Jurnail Singh said plainly in Gandhi's tone and words that Pakistan would be formed on his dead body, the situation seemed to go out of hand. Everybody asked Jurnail Singh to be quiet though Jurnail refused to follow his advice. Being cynic he said that nobody would be able to silence him since he was a soldier of Netaji Subhash Bose's army. There was a clear line dividing the two camps one was for Pakistan and the other was against Pakistan.

The spirit of confrontation was again reflected when a joint deputation went to meet the Deputy Commissioner to request him to take immediate action to ensure that peace and harmony in the city were not disturbed. But there was no harmony among the members of the deputation. Hayat Baksh said openly before the Deputy Commissioner that the situation could be brought under control in no time if Police was alerted 'despite the mischief played by the Hindus'. And to prove the charge he said that the act of throwing the carcass on the steps of the mosque was done by none but the Hindus. The charge

could not be refuted though as we know it was false. The real culprit was Murad Ali, neither Nathu nor Kalu. Anyway, Hayat Baksh was countered by Lala Lakshmi Narain with the remark that there was no evidence to prove it. He asked Hayat Baksh, "How can you say that the Hindus had a hand in it?" The Deputy Commissioner had to advise both the parties, "Blaming one another will not serve any purpose" (63). Thus, Hindu-Muslim divide was sharp and open. The riot in the city was the manifestation of the same divide.

The Deputy Commissioner, Mr. Richard, was seen by Prof. Raghunath as a scholar, deeply interested in history and architecture. In his opinion it was unjust to appoint such a man on an administrative post. But Prof. Raghunath had seen only one side of the coin. Richard was an astute politician besides being a scholar. He knew well how he could implement the British policy of divide and rule. It was in his knowledge that the situation in the city was explosive and the riot would break out any time. But he decided to watch the situation with a cunning smile on his face. When the deputation went to request him to take immediate pre-emptive steps to prevent the riot, he received the deputation with a smile. He told the deputation derisively that they should instead go to Pandit Nehru who was in power. He cunningly rejected almost all the proposals of the members of the deputation on one pretext or the other. He would not set up army pickets because army was not under his control. Curfew he would not clamp since it would make people nervous. Aerial survey and patrolling was out of question at that stage. He left it to the members of the deputation to go round the city to appeal to the people to maintain peace and harmony. He advised the deputation to engage a bus fitted with a loud speaker and all the members of the deputation should go round the town to make a fervent appeal to the people to maintain peace and harmony (74). Richard knew well that people of singed psyche would not listen to such appeals. Had people been so well-disciplined and sane they would not have posed a threat. His intention was to allow the situation to precipitate. To make matters worse, he allowed the police to evict a Muslim tenant forcibly when the situation was so tense. When the deputation spoke of this to him, he pretended complete ignorance. This shows incontrovertibly that Richard wanted the riot to break out to see Hindus and Muslims cutting throats of one another and becoming sworn enemies as the British Government had desired. Before the members of the deputation left the Bungalow of the Deputy Commissioner, they got the news that a Hindu had been done to death. The Deputy Commissioner was still unmoved. Jurnail was right though his language was vulgar when he said that the Deputy Commissioner was snugly lying in his

bungalow while the city was burning. He would not budge before Hindus and Muslim had been killed in a good number. When he thought it was the stage for him to quell the riots, he managed everything including an aerial survey. It was easy for the British masters to put a stop to the rioting by merely raising their eye-brows. When the rioters saw the aero plane hovering over the city, fighting came to stand still. A Muslim fellow was about to set fire to the Gurudwara but the moment he saw the aero plane he threw away the kerosene oil-soaked rags and the match-stick he had lighted was used to light his biri. Firing stopped. The Sikhs who were holed up in the Gurudwara challenged the Muslims to fire knowing well that the sight of aero plane was dreadful to all the miscreants. It was all that easy to quell the riot, yet even this much was not done until the British Government felt that enough had been done to frustrate the Congress plan to fight unitedly for freedom. The riot was not engineered by the British Government though, it allowed the riot to continue until the breach between Hindus and Muslims was complete. Britishers were playing their dirty politics at the cost of lives of the people. It would not be an exaggeration if it is said that Indians were treated as goats and pigs by the heartless Britishers. It was one of their ways to break the spirit of the Indians. This fact was observed by Richard's wife, Liza who said plainly to her husband-"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. Isn't that, right?" In reply to his wife's observation, Richard admitted, "Darling rulers have their eyes on differences that divide their subjects not on what unites them" (83). But strange it was that most of the Indians failed to see through the British game. They said that the carcass of the pig was not thrown by the Britishers. In a conversation Mir Dad tried to convince his fellows that if Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims were united, the British Government would become weak. But it cut no ice with them. The fat butcher could not understand it. He replied, "How has the firangi harmed us? The Hindus and Muslims have been at daggers drawn all along." The butcher, of course, could not see the hidden British hand. He spoke what he had seen. Imagination he neither had nor was he supposed to have. He spoke out the common view, "The Englishman is justice-loving". The conversation was closed with the remark, "The fight is between the Hindu and the Muslim. The English man has nothing to do with it". It was impossible to bring home to the people that Britishers who like an adept puppeteer were managing the whole show from behind the curtain.

Mahatma Gandhi was less of a politician and more of a moralist. "He wanted freedom but he averred time and again that political freedom without freedom from social

evils was of little significance. Therefore, he had launched several programs for public health and improvement of economic conditions of the Indians" (Kaniker 62). Accordingly, the Congress workers would go in procession raising slogans Re Inquilab Zindabad to inspire people in general to fight for freedom and also undertake work for sanitation etc. There were Congress Committees in every district, Tehsils etc. Elections were held to elect office bearers of these committees. These elections caused rivalries and heart-burnings. It was typical of Indians to have a craving for position for both status and profit. In such circumstances unity was a casualty. This political situation is well reflected in the scene in which Congress workers assembled to go in a procession and indulged freely in mud-slinging. Aziz had his way to chastise every late comer. Bakshiji the 'thickest secretary' of the Congress committee was stickler for punctuality but was derided for being late on that particular day. Shanker accused Mehtaji of spending party money on his cigarettes. Mehtaji, President of the District Congress Committee, was charged with the offence of helping Sethi in getting Congress ticket in lieu of his buying an Insurance Policy of fifty thousand rupees from him. The novelist wants to show the friction within the Congress party itself.

The Indians have the inherent tendency of fighting over petty issues or non-issues. When the riot was quelled, a peace committee was to be formed. There was a long discussion as to how many vice-presidents the committee should have. A sardarji proposed that there should be three vice-presidents, one Hindu, one Muslim and one Sikh. But Dev Dutt proposed that vice-Presidents should

be selected from three political parties. Lakshmi Narain stood up immediately to say that Hindu Sabha was also a political party and as such it should not be ignored. Then there was a tussle about the selection of Executive Committee. One Muslim observed when selection was over that the Executive Committee had a larger number of Hindus and condemned it as a 'trickery of Hindus'. It was after a long wrangling that the Executive Committee was formed. After all, where was the necessity of the Executive Committee when it was only to make an appeal for peace and harmony.

Tamas is a veritable account of the political situation as it arose from the British policy of divide and rule, movements of the Congress, conflict between the Congress and the Muslim League and consequently between Hindus and Muslims. There was not even a ray of light in the darkness of conflicts and exploitation. The novel, therefore, is rightly named Tamas to imply that there was nothing but darkness in India.

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