

## Tamas as a Mirror of the Society

Dr. Nilesh Thakre

Hutatma Rashtriya Arts and Science College  
Ashti (Wardha)

HHH

### Abstract

*It is rightly held that literature is the mirror of the society. So is Tamas. But it should not be confused with history. History is a record of events and incidents while literature has a wider perspective. It views how the permanent values of life were affected by the events. Tamas describes the events which actually might not have taken place, but it certainly presents the mental make-up of different classes of the people as it was in those times.*

**Keywords:** British, society, partition, violence, personal interests

"Bhishma Sahani is a thinking man. His stories and novels have a message to give. Tamas too presents certain truths of life which the writer has seen and experienced. Tamas as its name implies says that life in its pre-partitioned days had the darkness of communal prejudices, exploitation, superstitions, greed, looting and killing" (Butalia 57). The novelist has presented the view that low class persons, the Riffraff, like Murad Ali, were the real villains. The city was peaceful though Pakistan was a cankerous issue for everybody. Murad Ali was a person anon-grata, doing no particular business except wandering in the city and delivering carcasses of the animals to Nathu sort of persons for a payment of eight annas or so. This fellow used to wear a knee-length khaki coat, a white salwar and a turban on his head 'to make him look distinctive'. He must have in his mind to do something that could make him a distinguished man. As it was not possible for him to think of doing something great, he must have planned to do a great mischief. What greater mischief could he do than putting the social life of the city out of gear? One thing that it makes clear is that a plebeian could do a great harm because the wise and the rich didn't have patience to enquire as to who was the mischief-monger and what was his intention. Had the wise once made enquiries, the evil mind of Murad Ali would have been exposed.

This novel exposes the British Policy of divide and rule. The city became tense after the carcass of a pig was found on the steps of the mosque. The administration had the knowledge of this fact, but the Deputy Commissioner

pretended to be ignorant of it. A deputation of the citizens went to meet him and request him to take measures to prevent the outbreak of the riot but he gave a cold shoulder to the deputation. When the city was tense, a Muslim tenant was evicted forcibly with prior information to him but he pretended to be ignorant of it. He didn't want to postpone the eviction until normalcy returned to the city, obviously because he wanted Hindus and Muslims to fight with each other. He rejected all the proposals of the deputation on one ground or the other. He rejected the idea of setting up army pickets saying that army was not under his control. So was not the air force. These were lame excuses. If he had written to the concerned authorities stating the necessity for deploying army to prevent riots, it could have been done. But he simply ignored it. He rejected the idea of clamping curfew because he said it would make people nervous. He did not take any steps to prevent the riot which actually broke out before the deputation left his residence. The Britishers took sadistic pleasure in seeing the Indians killing one another.

The Indian public was not intelligent enough to see the British hand. Richard's wife could easily see that her husband made Hindus and Muslims fight. She said to Richard, "In the name of freedom they fight against you but in the name of religion you make them fight one another" (34). She even went to the extent of asking her husband to resolve their differences by telling them that they belonged to the same racial stock and therefore they should not fight one another. But the Indians failed to see through the British policy. They asked if any Britisher had thrown the carcass of a pig on the steps of the mosque or a Britisher had come to stab the scent-seller. They killed Jurnail when he said that Hindus and Muslims were brothers but the Deputy Commissioner was the real enemy of the people.

The fear of impending riot had gripped the minds of Hindus. They started making preparations for self-defense. Vanaprasthi as his name connoted had renounced the worldly life, recited verses like Shantipath for the peace and well-being of all in the world felt compelled to think of the necessity to make preparations

for defense of Hindus in the city. Sikhs also came to him for consultation because they were equally apprehensive. Dev Vrat gave training to Hindu boys in wielding lathis and daggers. It was another matter that Dev Vrat's mind was full of fantastic ideas such as fire-arrows used in Mahabharat times, references of bombs and aero planes in Hindu scriptures etc. He inspired Hindu boys with the examples of Shivaji and Mahayana Pratap. His trainees could do nothing worthwhile when the riot broke out.

Bhisham Sahni had witnessed the pre-partition and post-partition riots. He has therefore given a graphic description of the horrendous conditions Hindus had to pass through. He has given example of Harnam Singh who lived with his wife Banto in a village of Muslim population. His was the only Sikh family in the village. He was assured by an influential Muslim Karim Khan that nobody would dare cast an evil eye on his family in the village. But he was stunned when Karim Khan told him at the eleventh hour to leave the village for his safety since the Mujahideens coming from outside would not listen to him. There was no time for his wife to prepare a few chapatis for their journey to an unknown destination. He gathered cash and some ornaments and his gun to go on his journey. He became homeless, and was running with his wife ceaselessly for shelter. His grievance was that he had been a playmate of so many of them in the village but none came forward to give him shelter. The emotions of friendship were thrown to the four winds. His son who was on his way to meet his parents was sighted by a group of marauders. Being alone, he went into a cave but he was stoned and was forced to come out on pain of death. He was presented and forced to accept Islam. His daughter had to commit hara-kiri with several others when she feared that her honor was at the stake. Harnam a fugitive as he was could not know anything about his son and daughter. The lives of the fugitives were in shambles. Nobody knew what was there in the store of destiny for him. Harnam Singh's is an example of hundreds who were in the like manner uprooted from their native villages.

The novelist wants to present the truth that Hindus were never prepared for self-defense. "Lala Lakshmi Narain is a classic example of Hindus caught unprepared. When Grain Market was set on fire Lalaji was worried about his own godown and safety of his son, but he could do nothing more than worrying. He didn't have any weapon in his house. He had once bought a small wood-chopper from a fair to cut neem twigs to brush his teeth. He made a feverish search for the small woodchopper because something was better than nothing" (Sharma 63). His wife who was more intelligent, advised to stop making search for the

woodchopper because that would be of no use in a fight for life since it would not kill anybody. Lalaji had the four mosquito net sticks which he thought could be used effectively in self-defense. He gave one stick to his servant Nanku with the instructions to keep it with him while standing guard at the gate of the house. Even he himself wanted to go out in search of his son with a mosquito-net stick in his hand, but his wife stopped him from doing such a foolish act. But what else he could do when he had no other weapon in his house. The novelist has presented the reality with a tinge of humor.

Hindus and Muslims were living harmoniously in mixed localities. But Pakistan issue had divided them and the British Government exploited the situation to widen the gulf. It was Britisher's suggestion that the Congress which was fighting for freedom of united India was a Hindu Organization and did not represent the interest of the Muslims. Some saner ones like Maulana Azad did not buy the suggestion but the idea went deep into the minds of a large number of Muslim who resided in the area which was proposed to be Pakistan area. This confrontation is beautifully described by the novelist. The rallies of the Congress and the Muslim League stood face to face in a lane too narrow to escape confrontation. The volunteers of the Muslim League said vociferously that Congress was an organization of the Hindus and the Muslims in Congress including the one of the status of Maulana Azad were the dogs of the Congress. The volunteers of Congress tried their best to convince the Muslims that Congress was a national party, represented interests of both the communities but their efforts were infructuous. When the riot broke out Hindus and Muslims shifted to the colonies of their majority. Lala Lakshmi Narain was transferred to a safer area and so was Prof. Rzgghu Nath though both of these families were shifted by a Muslim friend who was the only one of his kind. He was a philanthropist untouched with communal prejudices.

Hindu-Muslim divide had gone deep in the minds of the people. When the joint deputation went to the Deputy Commissioner to request him to take pre-emptive measures to maintain peace and order in the city, the Hindus and Muslims traded charges against each other openly. Hayat Baksh, for instance said, "If police is alerted the situation can be brought under control in no time despite the mischief played by the Hindus (49)." Lala Lakshmi Narain said in defence that there was no evidence to prove that it was done by Hindus. He was rather astonished to hear such charges being made so abruptly. He felt it should have been an exclusively Hindu deputation.

When riot broke out Hindu boys did no harm except injuring two old persons and they regretted having done that. Gopal Singh stabbed Nur Din and told Teja Singh that he had to stab him because he was coming straight to attack him. They had great regard for Nur Din. Even the assailant called him 'Baba Nura' affectionately. They were full of regret for having injured Baba Nura and exclaimed 'What? The Blind Baba Nura !' When the scent-seller was stabbed, the novelist has described him as a kind-hearted fellow ready to escort his assailant safely to his house. The novelist has shown that it was just childish on the part of the assailant to have stabbed so good a man. Muslims on the contrary, got hold of an innocent girl, raped her and boasted of having done that. Muslim boys chased Iqbal Singh, stoned him and forced him to accept Islam under the threat of death. But there were some kind-hearted Muslims also who rescued the Sikhs from mouth of death. Harnam Singh for example was given shelter by a Muslim woman, Rajo who rescued them out of the jaws of death. Similarly, Shah Nawaz helped Hindu families shift to a safer place. But Muslims in general were devoid of fellow-feeling.

"The riot had taken place largely due to the Pakistan issue, yet people at least of the higher class, were not inspired by patriotism. They were more conscious of their personal interests than country's" (Kanikar 28). When people gathered to make peace committee after the riot was over, they started talking about business matters. Munshi Ram, property dealer, thought it was an opportunity for him to get some business because rarely did so many rich persons assembled at one place. He said to Sheikh Nur Elahi that it was the right time to buy property since prices had fallen due to riots but they would rise again when peace was restored. He argued that Hindus and Sikh were trying to shift from Muslim-majority areas and would sell their properties at low prices. When he failed to convince Sheikh Nur Elahi, he got hold of Babu Prithvi Chand in the hope that a Hindu might agree to make a deal but Prithvi Chand refused to buy his argument saying nobody would sell his house after normalcy had returned. Lakshmi Narain and Nur Elahi had been classmates. They talked in jocular vein. In spite of being Hindu and Muslim at heart, they were elderly worldly-wise businessmen who knew well enough that they needed each other'. It was due to this consideration that Nur Elahihad shifted Lala Lakshmi Narain's bales to a safer place even though labor was not available. Lala Shyamlal wanted to know from the Statistics Babu who would be the Congress candidate for Municipal elections. When he came to know that Mangal Sen was to get the Congress ticket from his ward, he started speaking against him. He said the Mangal Sen was running gambling dens with the help of the police

and he did not wear khadi. Lala Shyamlal, not being a Congress activist, had no chance of getting the Congress ticket, but he wanted that Congress should not field its candidate from his ward.

When the meeting began under the chairmanship of Mr. Herbert, Principal of the Christian College, it was decided that a peace committee should be set up here and now. The question sprang up who would be the vice-president. There was lot of wrangling on the issue of selecting the office bearers of the peace committee. After a lot of haggling three vice-presidents one each from three communities-Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs were selected. The question of national interest was put on the back-burner. When the hurly-burly was over, the members of the committee sat in a bus to go round the city to appeal to the people to maintain peace and harmony. But the man who sat next to the driver's seat with microphone in his hand, was none but Murad Ali who had ignited the communal fire.

"A novelist's may not report the incidents as such like a historian but his aim is wider. He wants to present social, political and economic tendencies of the people through imaginary situations and characters to show how far they were congruous or incongruous" (Mukherjee 59). After all, to use Arnold's words, literature teaches 'How to live?' 'Tamas' has exposed antisocial characters, such as Murad Ali, people's confusion about British policy of divide and rule, the mistake of fighting among themselves instead of fighting with the arch-enemy, people's selfish motives. The novelists have succeeded in presenting the fear psychosis during pre-partition days.

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