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Tamas: The Portrayal of Sufferings, Homelessness and Loss of Identity of the Sikhs during the Partition of India, 1947

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Abstract:

Partition of the Indian Sub-continent into two sovereign states of India and Pakistan is one of the worst chapters in socio-political history of the Indian Sub-continent. Partition was devised as the solution to the ongoing communal problem of the day but the way it was implemented and the consequent incidents like forced migration, loots, mass-killings, rapes and forced conversions turned it into a man-made tragedy giving traumatic wounds which are still to be healed. Partition novels present different perspectives of different authors according to their individual sensitivities and approaches towards this man-made disaster. *Tamas*, written by Bhasham Sahni, is one of the novels that portray a realistic picture of the time and events taking place just before the partition. The aim of this paper is to explore the unending sufferings due to homelessness, killings and forced conversions of the Sikh community during this time as narrated in '*Tamas*'. This paper brings into limelight how the members of this minority community, the people like Sardar Harnam Singh and his wife Banto, losing their homes, become persons of nowhere and his own son Iqbal Singh, having been stripped off their original identity, are turned into Iqbal Ahmed through forced conversions in just a couple of hours through a ceremony. This paper also shows how the centuries old peaceful co-existence of various communities ceased to exist in a couple of days.

Keywords: partition; sovereign states; migration; homelessness; identity; forced conversions.

Since ages, the Indian Sub-continent has been the home of people practicing different religions living in a harmonious coexistence keeping their religious matters confined to their personal lives. After the British succeeded in establishing colonial rule over this Sub-continent they started implementing the policy of 'divide and rule' among the different communities and

making people conscious of their differences on the basis of religions so that they could keep their rule stronger and longer. This is reflected in the talks of Richard, the Deputy Commissioner of the town portrayed in the novel *Tamas*, when he says to his wife Liza, “Darling, rulers have their eyes only on differences that divide their subjects, not on what unites them” (Sahni, 51). The demand of freedom from the colonial rule and the question regarding who would be the next ruler of this vast land after the British left brought the leaders of the different communities to the forefront. In the emerging two nations, to secure a better share in the political power, in which “...it is the number which seals the fate of the people” (Jha, V), they started polarizing the common masses on the basis of their religion to suit their motives and this religious polarization gave birth to the idea of partitioning the sub-continent. It is a well known fact that religion was the only basis on which the idea of partitioning the Indian Sub-continent and creating two sovereign nations was dreamt of. It is reflected in the words Jhawan he writes, “Pakistan was created on the basis of religion” (Jha, 2).

Muhammad Iqbal is the person who proposed the name ‘Pakistan’ to the land of their dreams. “In 1930 the poet Iqbal had already mooted the proposal of a separate state for the Muslims on the north-west embracing Sindh, Baluchistan, Punjab and the North-West Frontier” (Chatterjee 17). Under the scheme proposed by Muhammad Iqbal, Punjab was to be the part of future Pakistan, the nation that was supposed to be the country for the Muslims but “The communal scene in the Punjab differed from other Indian provinces in the sense that this was a province which, apart from the Hindu Muslim binary, was marked by the presence of a third force – the Sikhs” (Chatterjee 11). In Bengal and Punjab, the part of the proposed Pakistan, Muslims were in majority but Punjab was different from Bengal because “Punjab had great importance for the Muslims as they were the majority occupying this area, but sacrosanct for the Sikhs from the religious point of view because it was birthplace of their Gurus” (Sandhu 215).

After the period of the World War II, the communal problems in the Sub-continent were getting bad to worse and at the same time the British government was no longer powerful enough to manage the affairs and it decided to leave India as soon as possible. In *Jinnah: Creator of Pakistan*, Hector Bolitho writes:

The issue surfaced when on February 20, 1947, the British Prime Minister Mr. Clement Richard Attlee (1883-1967), announced in the House of Commons to grant the

independence to Indians by June 1948. He also told that the King (Albert Frederick Arthur 1895-1952) had appointed his cousin Lord Mountbatten (1900-1979) as the last Viceroy of India. (pp. 157-158)

By the time the newly appointed Viceroy came to India, it became necessary to partition the Sub-continent to get rid of the ongoing communal problem of the day. “By March 1947, when Mountbatten arrived to replace the Viceroy Lord Archibald Percival Wavell (1883-1950), partition was the only solution through which it was possible to secure the agreement or at least the acquiescence of both Congress and League”(Jones 622). Lord Mountbatten, after holding several rounds of meetings with the leaders of different communities finalized the Partition Plan, also known as the Mountbatten Plan, on the 3rd of June, 1947. It was broadcasted on the All India Radio:

It was at last seven o'clock and the Viceroy, after the preliminary remarks by the announcer, came on the air...The Viceroy spoke in a clipped, sharp accent and even this non-English speaking audience could sense the emotion behind what he was saying. He was soon finished and all eyes turned towards Arun, the college boy of the community. Arun had understood it all only too well, and in a shaken voice he said, 'Partition!' and made a gesture with his hands of chopping a thing in two. 'Partition!' many voices shouted out aloud and the mouths remained open. 'Yes, partition!' said Arun. (Nahal 24-25)

Then what followed it, were migration, identity crisis, rapes, murders and unending sufferings of the common masses which turned this partition into one of the bloodiest and traumatic historical events in the annals of the world history. Since then, numerous writers, some of them actually being the sufferers of this traumatic experience or some of them were the descendents of those who had suffered it, have been responding to and depicting this holocaust in different languages in their own way. Bhisham Sahni, born in Rawalpindi (now in Pakistan) in 1915, is one of such writers who portrayed the realistic and pathetic story of this tragic incident in their own way. Originally in Hindi, he wrote *Tamas* in 1973 and later on in 1988 he himself translated it into English. *Tamas*, a Sahitya Academy Award (1976) winning novel is a reflective response to the partition of India.

The story of *Tamas* is set in a small-town in frontier province of the Punjab of 1947, just before a few weeks from the Partition. The title of the novel, *Tamas*, which stands for darkness in English, is quite symbolic. It represents the darkness that arises out of communalism all over the country. The ongoing situation can be compared from the situation of Nathu in the opening scene of the novel which starts like this:

The clay lamp in the alcove flickered. Close to it, where the wall joined the ceiling, two bricks had been removed from the wall, leaving behind a gaping hole. With every gust of wind, the flame in the clay lamp quivered violently and long shadows flitted across the walls. But as soon as the flame steadied again, a thin line of smoke would rise in a straight light, licking, as it went, the side of the alcove. (Sahni 1)

Here Nathu, a poor tanner, is struggling to kill a pig. He struggling in the same way as the India of 1947 was struggling to solve the communal problem of the day and the darkness resulted out of communal frenzy was prevalent all over the country.

Nathu has been given five rupees by Murad Ali, an influential Muslim who told him, "The veterinary surgeon needs a pig for his experiments" (Sahni 3). Here again the theme of darkness is implicit as Nathu does not know the real purpose of the pig being killed. He has been instructed by Murad Ali to finish the job before early morning, again it is in the darkness that the work should be finished, when Kalu, the sweeper, would come with a pushcart to fetch the carcass to deliver it to the veterinary surgeon. Nathu does the job accordingly and leaves the hut for his house situated in another part of the city. While on the way to his home, he comes to know that a carcass is lying on the steps of the mosque. He sees the carcass from far away and it seems to him the same pig that he delivered to Kalu in the morning and then he realizes that he has been cheated.

The news of a carcass of pig lying on the steps of the mosque causes the tension ridden city erupted and the enraged Muslims slaughter a cow in its response which leads to a clash between the two communities, the Hindus and the Muslims. A delegation consisted of the members of the Congress and the Muslim League meets Mr. Richard, the deputy commissioner, and appeals him to take necessary actions before the peace of the city is destroyed and the

communal riots start. The British government doesn't seem willing to do anything that could stop the riots as is shown through the reply given by Richard:

The administration does not enjoy a hood reputation with you gentlemen. I am a British officer, and you have little faith in the British government. You won't very much care to listen to what I have to say. (Sahni, 94)

Here it is very clear that the British officers and administrators did show little intention of doing anything to maintain law and order which was their responsibility. They showed a complete indifference to take the preventive measures in the situations like this but applied the policy of 'Wait and Watch'.

Before the delegates of the committee reach the city, riots started and the city is engulfed in the flames of fire. DevDatt along with his comrades, the members of the Communist Party, tried to his best to keep the situation under control and maintain peace. He succeeds in bringing Bhakshiji, a President of District Congress Committee, to the house of Hayat Bakshs, the member of the Muslim league, to prepare the plan to discuss the future course of action but the meeting fails. When Bakshiji was preparing to leave, "the news came that in the labour colony of Ratta too rioting had started and that two Sikh carpenters had been hacked to death" (Sahni, 188) and thus the riots reach the labour colony.

Amidst the riots in their full swing and the Jarnail, the one and only Sikh, who was a Congress worker, keeps endeavoring to spread Gandhian philosophy of peace like this:

"Sahiban, Hindus and Musalmans are brothers. There is rioting in the city; fires are raging and there is no one to stop it. The Deputy Commissioner is sitting in his bungalow, with his madam in his arms. I say, our real enemy is the Englishman. Gandhiji says that it is the Englishman who makes us fight one another. We should not be taken in by what the Englishman says. 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)

Being a poor man, who was also a Sikh, he becomes the first person to be killed, who belongs to any political party. His death is very pathetic:

“You, son of a...” shouted someone standing behind him, and with one swing of his lathi, hit the Jarnail on his head and broke his skull into two. Jarnail fell down in a heap, with his cane, his green ‘military’ uniform, his torn turban and his torn chappals, before he could finish his sentence. (Sahni, 190-1)

Sardar Harnam Singh, a man of sixty, and his wife Banto is the only Sikh family living in Dhok Ilahi Baksh. They run a tea-shop there. Their son Iqbal Singh runs a cloth shop in another village Mirpur, and daughter, named Jasbir has been married to Sardar Kishen Singh of Sayyedpur. As the situation in the villages around is getting bad to worse day by day, Banto says to her husband, “Let us get away from this village and go to Khanpur where some of our relatives are living. In this entire village we are the only Sikh couple, all the others are Muslims” (Sahni, 214). But Harnam Singh is not ready to close the shop and leave. Being concerned of their safety, she again advises to leave but her husband again declines showing a deep faith in his deeds and the villagers, no matter which religion [Muslim] they belong to, among whom he grew up. He says:

‘Listen, my good woman, we have never thought ill of anyone; we have never harmed anyone. People in the village too have been good to us. We do not owe anyone anything. Right in your presence, Karim Khan has assured me no less than ten times that we should continue to live here with an easy mind, that no one would dare cast an evil eye on us, and who in the village enjoys more respect than Karim Khan? We are the only family of Sikhs living in the village. Will they not feel ashamed of attacking two defenceless old people?’ (Sahni, 215)

But on the evening of the same day, when Karim Khan passes from in front of the Harnam Singh’s tea-shop and without stopping there even for a while he tells him that the things have become worse and warns him to leave the village as soon as possible. He says to Sardar, “Your welfare lies in leaving the place” (Sahni 216).

When it becomes clear that their safety lies only in leaving the village, the couple decides to leave. Here the compulsion of the Sikh community is quite visible as they had to suffer and accept the situations without having any say in it. “During the political crisis in the Punjab in March and April 1947 the Sikh finally threw in their lot” (Brooks 221).

No sooner does the old couple leave their home, keeping a few ornaments and a double barrel gun with them and leaving everything behind, and reach a few meters away, the marauders come, loot the shop and set it on fire. All it happens before the very eyes of them. At once they become homeless and are turned into man of nowhere. After walking for the whole night, they reach the outskirts of a village at early morning and think of taking shelter somewhere in the village, the pathetic turmoil inside the Sardar gets expression. This is visible in the conversation between the Sardar and his wife:

‘Don’t you know anyone in Muridpur?’

Harnam Singh smiled. ‘No one gave us shelter where I knew everyone, our shop was looted and our house set on fire. Many of the villagers had been my childhood playmates, we had grown up together.’ (Sahni226)

Both the husband and wife are given shelter by Rajo, the wife of Ehsan Ali and mother of Ramzan, a member of the Muslim league, while the male members of the house are not present. Later on Ehasan Ali, one of the marauders who looted the shop of Harnam Singh, returns to his home with the trunk that sometimes used to belong to the Sikh couple. When Harnam Singh sees it, he gives its key to them. When Ramjan returns and comes to know that the Sikh couple is hiding in the godown at the back of the house he becomes crazy:

‘Stop chattering, ma. In the city they have killed two hundred Musalmans.’ And blows from the pickaxe began to fall on the door again. ‘Come out, you kafirs, you bloody...’

Another two blows on the door and the door fell open ...

‘Come out, you kafirs...’ said Ramzan peeping in.

Harnam Singh and his wife sat close to each other, their eyes dazzled as they tried to look out. As the door was broken open, Harnam Singh stood up and slowly came out.

‘Put me to death if you want to,’ he said in a hoarse voice. (Sahni268)

As soon as Ramjan sees the Sardar Harnam Singh, cannot dare to harm the people acquainted to him he throws the axe. At around the midnight, Rajo leads Harnam Singh and his wife Banto out of the house and they once again are caught in the dilemma of where they can and should go.

The flames of the communal riots started in the city have reached Sayyedpur too. All the members of the Sikh community are taking shelter in the gurudwara and those of the Muslim community in the haveli of Sheikh. They have gathered to fight against the other community and save themselves what may come. "The Sikhs have always been a martial community. A Sikh child always had some recent tale of sacrifice and heroism to initiate him to the ways of the world" (Chatterjee12). It is noteworthy here to see what is going on in the minds of the Sikhs who are gathered inside the guradwara:

A kind of dust filled Teja Singh's mind. His ecstasy bordered on frenzy! All his emotions centred round the word 'Sacrifice!'

'Chant the Ardas, you Singhs of the Guru!'

... The gurudwara was resounded. The entire prayer was recited, which took quite some time. (Sahni, 236)

When the marauders reach Sayyedpur, "A bitter fight took place. It went on for two days and two nights. Then the ammunition was exhausted and it became impossible to go on" (Sahni, 282). A number of the Sikhs were killed and all the Sikh women, realizing that it would not be possible to save themselves from the tyrannical hand of the marauders, being led by Jasbir, the wife of sardar Kishan Singh and the daughter of Harnam Singh, committed suicide what they called 'Sacrifice' by jumping into the well.

Through the character of Iqbal Singh, Bhisham Sahni portrays the forced conversion and loss of identity which the Sikhs had to go through during the partition of India and Pakistan. When the riots reach Mirpur, the village where Iqbal Singh used to sell cloths, he leaves the village to join his parents. While he is on the way, he happens to meet the marauders returning from Khanpur. The marauders chase and torture him:

A young Sikh victim, Iqbal Singh is intercepted by a group of Muslims; among them there is an acquaintance of his which steps back, turn away his eyes and submits to the dishonor of the nasty scene. Iqbal Singh is thrashed and stoned, then is forced to conversion, but the roles of tortures and tortured do not change in the least. The Muslims take happiness in harassment and crushing him. (Kolhe 234)

In the leadership of Ramzan, he is brought to the village; his head is shaved, his beard is given a Muslim cut and through the ceremony of a couple of hours, Iqbal Singh is turned into Iqbal Ahmad:

By the time evening fell, all the marks of Sikhism on Iqbal Singh's person had been replaced by the marks of the Muslim faith. A mere change of marks had brought about the transformation. Now he was no longer an enemy but a friend, not a kafir but a believer; to whom the doors of all Muslim houses were open. Lying on his cot, Iqbal Ahmed kept tossing and turning the whole night. (Sahni 281)

In this way, though the life of Iqbal Singh, a Sikh, is spared but all his dignity, honour and his original identity was snatched from him and he is left to lead a life to which he does not belong. He has been provided with a kind of life which is much more painful than the death itself.

When the riots stopped, it was calculated by the statistics babu in the relief camps that "the number of Hindus and Sikhs killed equalled more or less the number of Muslims killed. The material losses of Hindus and Sikhs were much higher" (Sahni, 324). The author further writes about the changes that took place after the riots as, "After the riots a strong trend set in – Muslims were keen to move out of Hindu localities, and likewise, Hindus and Sikhs from predominantly Muslim localities" (Sahni, 324).

On the basis of the above discussion it becomes very clear that *Tamas* is a novel that depicts a realistic picture of the unending social, economic, physical as well as psychological sufferings of the Sikh community during the partition of the Indian sub-continent. It portrays how the people like Harnam Singh and his wife, became homeless and along with the Jarnail, the women of Sayedpur became the victim of the communal riots during the days of partition of the

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Indian Sub-continent. The characters like Iqbal Singh show how the member of this community had to go through forceful conversion and lose their identity of their own and the communal riots changed the fate of the millions of people and destroyed the centuries long peaceful co-existence of this land.

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