

## Communal Violence: A Reading of Raj Kamal Jha's *Fireproof*

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India is the largest democracy in the world. No other country shows such diversified coalition of people living together as this country does. One can easily perceive that people from different castes, backgrounds, religions, cultures, regions etc. live together in a single street. This close interaction and association among people have resulted in stronger ties, cross-cultural exchange and learning. But sometimes a tiny incident becomes a great cause of conflict between the communities. This confrontation among the people of two different communities, due to their economic, political, social or religious interests, is sporadically resulted in communal violence which is a serious threat to unity, integrity and secular democracy of the nation. It has been one of the major peace-breaking phenomena in India; it requires maintaining peaceful and harmonious relations among the inhabitants of the country. When people are antagonised, it works as a conflict generating variable, and provides a basis for violence. As V. V. Singh opines that Communal violence “is social disaster and policing assumes a significant meaning in response to understanding its dynamics and in evolving an approach to deal with the social challenge” (169). The eruption of communal violence is sudden and spasmodic “and its causation lay either in the prevalence of a communal atmosphere generated by communal politics and communal ideology or in conjectural causes, involving religious feelings alone or combined with some particular local interests, which could be effectively handled by efficient administrative or police action and secular public opinion” (Chandra, *Communalism* 5). It should immediately crush not only because it represents barbarism but also because its objective and consequence are to spread communal ideology in geometrical proportions. The members of one community treat their fellow members and community or society/country and their interests as ‘self’ and the rest are treated as ‘others.’ This mentality of superiority-complex or ideological dominance over the others as inferiors becomes the bone of contention for conflict among different communities. Once the virus of communal abhorrence is injected into the minds of people, it cannot be easily eliminated from their psyche. The imprints of the communal violence are so strong that it “forces even secular persons to organise self-defence on communal lines and to join hands with communal forces to defend their lives and property. It arouses in a flash all the hidden, passive communal elements in the personalities of the mass of the people” (Chandra, *Primer* 18). The immediate cause(s) for emergence of communal riots is (are) often petty such as an inter-religious marriage, teasing of girl(s) by the men of other community, passing of a religious procession of the other community with band-party in front of a mosque, cow slaughtering, quarrel between the two shopkeepers or property dispute or business rivalry between the two different communities or it can also be triggered by a baseless hearsay. But what really transforms all these causes into a riot is prevalence of the atmosphere of fear, suspicion, hatred and tension. This atmosphere is created over a long period of time precisely by the propagation of communal ideology by the communal leaders and ideologues who need not, however participate into or even directly precipitate, a riot.

Raj Kamal Jha's *Fireproof* (2006), set in the backdrop of Gujarat communal carnage of 2002, documents the brutal facts about one of the worst sectarian riots in India since Partition of the country in 1947. The riots were erupted in the aftermath of the Godhara Train Burning incident on 27<sup>th</sup> February 2002 which caused the death of fifty-nine Hindu passengers. In the massacre, more than a thousand people were killed, as many more were

injured and several others were forced to flee from their homes to live in the refugee camps. The novel has three sections, the first part entitled 'That Night,' is just an introduction of the novel in which Mr. Jay, a seemingly bland and middle class everyman and who is also the chief narrator of the story, with his wife is in the 'Holy Angel Nursing & Graduate Hospital' of Ahmedabad for her first delivery. Unfortunately his wife has given birth to a severely deformed baby, named as Ithim, almost mutilated and limbless only its eyes and eye-brows are completely formed. Entire story of the novel revolves around the mystery of this deformed baby. The second section named as 'The Day After' deals with the severe and brutal nature of communal violence, in which Jay with Ithim roams across the city of Ahmedabad that is under the grip of communal fire and he becomes a witness to this communal violence. Ms. Glass, a mystery woman, chalks out the whole plan in the novel. She sends the three attachments of photographs of the three riot affected families via Email to Jay to make him aware of the facts of on going sectarian violence across the city and his complicity into it, to which he does not ready to accept. Ultimately she makes a plan to prove him guilty of his active involvement into communal violence. 'The Night After', the last section of the novel, exposes some hidden facts of the sectarian violence through the plan of Ms. Glass to go on a journey to 'The Hideout', an imaginary place. At The Hideout 'a two act absurd play' is enacted to divulge the secret of the deformed baby that ultimately proves guilty to Jay for his involvement into the riots. At last he repents over his complicity into the violence.

The physical incompleteness/deformity of Ithim symbolizes the ghastly, bizarre face of communal violence that makes people limbless and crippled. But the fully grown eyes and eyes-brows of the baby symbolize as stranded people become witnesses as passive spectators of the violence. "Each eye of the baby was perfectly shaped, fully functional. His eyebrows were perfect, too . . . [but] the rest of the baby was a mess" (13). Ithim's bodily deformity, which symbolically reveals and protests the communal riots, echoes Gunter Grass's novel *The Tin Drum* (1959), in which the protagonist Oskar Matzerath's possible son, Kurt, persists in growing up at the age of three to protest totalitarian Nazi regime in Germany. Similarly in *Fireproof* Ithim's malformed body and immature birth with no hopes for physical growth has a profound thematic significance symbolizing the horrifying brutality of communal riots. Ithim's birth also embodies 'A New Type of Birth' in the novel. Commenting on the importance of the deformed baby, a deaf-mute – a tiny, truncated human that can only watch and cry silently with his perfect eyes, in the book review Antara Dev Sen observes that

Ithim symbolizes the silent majority who can see, weep, but do nothing. This limbless, voiceless mass is the eternal observer, who can be a victim but never an active agent for change. And we who have been watching the inhuman injustice are complicit in the violence. Our silence is consent; we share the guilt and are the father of this voiceless nation. The plastic paradise Ithim's mother had created in the nursery becomes irrelevant.

Throughout the novel Jha has tried to prove that the culprits/assailants of any riot do not easily accept their active or passive involvement in communal violence. While through the snaps of the riot affected families Ms. Glass makes an attempt to make Jay recall about the on-going communal violence but Jay does not ready to pay attention or to accept it. Lastly, therefore, she illustrates the real picture of the burning city in the hatred of communal fire that forced many more sufferers to depart from their homes and even the city in search of safe haven. In the novel, she presents lively and real picture of the burning city of Ahmedabad:

those lucky to have survived have decided to leave the city, go to other places . . . where their friends or relatives live, where they feel safer, where there won't be a knock in the middle of the day . . . some have to decided to return

once the fires die down, once they know that the killers have got tired . . .  
many may never return because there is nothing in this city now for them . . . .  
(164)

The writer has presented the inhuman, cruel and worst face of violence that left scores of dead bodies which were littered hither and thither in the streets and roads. There were no claimants for them. The number of the bodies signed as if they were raining something large and heavy from the sky. These bodies postured in such way that seems to be alive and sit in the streets and roads. The heartrending and pathetic description of the dead bodies is provided by the novelist through the chief narrator, who says: "I heard the bodies fall, the bones snap, I heard the crunch, even the sound of dead flesh hitting the cement, concrete . . . the body of the old man . . . and the charred child was in front but there was also a woman . . . dressed in a blue sari hitched to her knees" (147). Through the narrator, the writer has posed a question and seeks an answer of the whereabouts of these dead bodies. Jay self-interrogates, "Whose bodies were these, where had they come from and why had they fallen, as if from the sky? Why did they all bear marks of murder, of killing? Who were these victims, who were these culprits, were there more wherever they come from?" (148).

Through the three attachments Jha has tried to prove, the general concept that when communal riot prevails it is only carried out by laymen/illiterates but not by literate people, wrong. The novel illustrates that educated men directly or indirectly too participate into it. While the literates should not participate into such type of horrendous killing but to work for alleviation of the tension/misunderstanding in the minds of the people and to work for unity and integrity of the community/society/country. But in the novel, they actively participate as in the first attachment Tariq perceives the four attackers that

They look like educated men, not like the men he sees in his neighbourhood in frayed clothes, stained and unwashed . . . they are not men . . . who go from door to door with coloured flags and handbills. They are men . . . In a car, talking on a phone, taking out a pen from their pocket to take down something . . . . Confidant and educated. (173)

A person has multiple identities such as religious, linguistic, caste based identity, regional, racial, professional etc. but when communal riot breaks out it leaves only one identity dominant that is targeted by the assailants, as far as the Gujarat riots are concerned the religious/communal identity was targeted and their other identities are remained secondary. At the time of communal riots the mob (of either majority or minority community) generally targets the opposite community and they even attack on secular persons and patriots. The extremist rioters only understand the language of religious fanatics of their community that they have to attack on opposite/target community and butcher them as many as possible and destroy their utmost properties. In the novel, when Doctor 1, 2 and Head Nurse with two guards were going back to their homes in a van, they were stopped by mob and asked to the driver to tell their names, on the basis of that their identity could be fixed. Here their names determined their identity which became the sound reason of their death, as Doctor 1 uttered his pain, "we survived the quake . . . if he (the driver) had lied, if he had made up two Hindu names for us, they would have let us go," (117). And Doctor 2, further, makes it clear that because of Driver's different communal identity the mob, "asking the driver our names, then (the mob) letting the driver runs away" (49). Head Nurse also utters the same pain about her first-hand experience of this communal fire which surges too swiftly that she could not even tell the rioters that she is not affiliated to the target community but:

I am a Christian, I am from Kerala, my identity card was in my purse with my name but I doubt it would have helped because two years ago they were after Christians, too, . . . it was good that I didn't tell the mob about my religion, it

would have been very selfish of me given that Doctor 1 and Doctor 2 were also in the van because if they had let me go, I would have died every day with guilt. (239)

In the third attachment, the rioters do not heed the repeated pleadings of Abba that they should not harm people senselessly, but they, one by one, rape his Daughter-in-law (who was pregnant with her five months baby) and strangle her with a towel, slit her throat and wait for die, ultimately mercilessly slit her stomach and take her unborn baby out and throw it up of unborn flesh and of course the blood. Lastly they set the house on fire (there is a picture of her mutilated kitchen in the book on the page no. 205). They kick Abba in his stomach, spit on him and leave him alive, “so that he can live the last few years of his life with a fear, to which he has never felt before. And he can sit down, when his son comes and both of them can sit together and cry, and Abba can tell his son all that happened” (215), and his son can say his father to leave the city due to the threat of their survival in the city. “It has nothing to do with your honesty and your respect and probably nothing to do with the silk flag lying in your cupboard. Let’s leave this city” (215). Jha has depicted the inhuman nature of violent people at the time of communal violence throughout Gujarat. The frenzied rioters do not care their prior relations (with the people of target community), social and human values. Therefore they brutally cut the limbs, charred/immolate the bodies, force persons to be naked, physically assault women on mass level, and do vast scale looting, destruction/burning of the properties. The novelist has presented the bare reality and heart-rending facts of the happenings in the violence of Gujarat in 2002, as in the first attachment of the message, Tariq sees that before his eyes the four attackers (A, B, C and D) have torn his mother’s sari that “sound like a paper being ripped, shredded in the middle of the night” (175), they laugh in such a way as if they have got something unachievable/improbable in their life. “Her head snapping back, A is pulling her hair so hard that it leaves her forehead bare, washes by yellow light” (175). Tariq, an eyewitness of the incident, watches the barbaric fact: “There is a noise his mother makes when she is dragged along the street. It’s the sound of her skin scrapping, being peeled off. It’s sound of her legs against the tar, of her sari against the tar, of one hand, which flaps to one side, against the tar” (176). The author depicted pathetically the horrendous attack on such a way that it proves that at the time of 2002 communal riots humanity had totally disappeared from the minds of the rioters. When the four attackers have entered into Shabnam’s house:

Father went down onto his knees, Father was praying . . . they asked him to undress, . . . open his mouth and hold his tongue with his left hand...they brought the knife...Shabnam standing in the room . . . crying . . . shivering as if she was sick . . . Mother screaming . . . they told mother to do that, too, to undress and to show her tongue. (342)

They pissed into the mouths of both of her parents and forced Shabnam to look at her parents, who were bare clothes and one of the four says: “she hasn’t seen her parents like this before, so she should thank for it to them” (198). Father was shameful at the incident in front of his offspring and: “he kept shaking his head no no no no no no, Shabnam can’t see this, . . . shabnam has to see this, . . . Shabnam has to see her father and her mother naked, because wasn’t this how she was born? Or did they do it all dressed up? Shabnam has to see this. If she closes her eyes, we will kill her too” (199).

Here it is a similarity in case of Daughter-in-law with Kausar Bano’s case whose womb was also torn and the foetus was taken out and set aflame by the fanatic rioters in the Gujarat riots 2002. Making the correlation between these two inhuman activities, Harsh Mander comments: “it was chanted like and a dirge and a war cry over and over again by the brutalized survivors. It became what one of the citizen investigation teams appropriately

described as the meta-narrative of the entire massacre. It became the symbol for them of the ultimate cruelty that ordinary people, their own neighbours, were capable of.”

The communal riots of Gujarat 2002 made the condition of women deplorable, because of their large scale physical and mental tortures such as molestation, rape and even murder. As in the case of Tariq’s mother and Shabnam’s and Abba’s Daughter-in-law, the novelist has emphatically presented the view. A married woman-journalist of TV news who lived in a combined family with her daughter, the writer has depicted her pathetic condition. In a night, for the sake of women’s lives, when her family members heard about the mob which was proceeding towards their village, they had planned to depart for the neighbouring village where there were more followers of their community. But after the five minutes of their departure, they were caught by the attackers. There was large scale violence against her female family members, as the journalist recounts:

. . . they raped me, they raped my aunt, they raped my sister-in-law, my mother-in-law, they killed all of us, my daughter first, we were slit with knives, they raped my sister as well, they killed her three year old child and they left her for dead but my sister tricked them by lying still, by getting them to believe she was dead when she wasn’t. (267)

The riot engulfs the innocent people who have no connection with it but they become scapegoat in the hands of the extremists only because of their affiliation with the same community of the attackers. As in the case of fellow religionists of the Train attackers, these innocents were brought to the same category of the perpetrators of the attack on the train and incited the opposite community for violence. In the novel, a thirteen year old boy fell into the grip of the rioters. The frenzied mob had stopped him on the street and “they (the rioters) said you killed the people on the train yesterday morning.” He said no, he wasn’t there, “but that didn’t matter” (103), therefore they wanted the information of his whereabouts “between six and eight in the morning yesterday, that’s the time when the train was attacked” (103). He tried to convince them that he was in his house during the time of attack, but they didn’t leave him unhurt. Through the altercation between the rioters and him, he uttered his pain and innocence about the violence that

I was nowhere near the train between six and eight but that didn’t matter, they said, why don’t you cry, why don’t you feel sad, as sad we feel, at the fact that fifty-nine people have been burnt alive, I said I don’t know how sad I feel, they said don’t try to be funny, and then they stabbed me, . . . they said you may have been asleep but why were your people near the train . . . (103)

The novelist has opined that such type of false accusation makes angry to the victims/sufferers of the violence and their inner-self spurts out to take revenge that can be dangerous for unity and integrity of the country. Therefore Jha warns against such type of false charges, on the innocents because it widens the chasm among the people of two communities, as in the novel the juvenile reacts:

I think I should have told them yes, yes, yes, I burnt the train, I was so happy when I heard the news that I told mother, I will get not only flour but milk and honey as well, I should have told them that my family attacked the train, my mother was there, my two sisters . . . all of them were there, even my future wife and my future children, and all of them lit the fire, one by one and that we would do it again if we got the chance . . . (103)

In *Fireproof*, Jha questions the role of police and security personnel during the course of communal riots in Gujarat in 2002. They should have carried out their duty as responsible and accountable citizens of the nation but their collusion with the perpetrators of the violence is a serious threat to the secular values, unity and integrity of the country. The novelist is shocked at the role of the police during these riots. The complicity of the state machinery and



the police make people lose faith in just and lawful governance and force them to take recourse to violence in retaliation. If the police have been alert and impartial, such events would have been avoided but the situation was aggravated by their apathy. And inadequate actions against the culprits and withdrawal of the cases against them in past, create an impression in the minds of the people that they themselves should settle scores as the courts will not provide justice to them. On the Gujarat riots 2002, A. J. Jalali has commented: “these riots have shown the utter incompetence and callous negligence of the government in the state and on the other pre-planned offensive of the communal forces and their deep penetration in the state machinery, particularly the police” (49). They should vigil for their assignments as responsible and accountable citizens of the nation but their collusion with the perpetrators of violence is threat to the secular values, unity and integrity of the country. The writer is annoyed at the passive participation of the police and the other state machineries in communal riots. They might have evaded such heinous communal carnages but inactivity always aggravates the problems. In the novel, they are careless at their duty-posts and unfazed by the on-going incidents as if they are unacquainted from the violence. Shabnam is witness of the apathy of the police to check the violence: “She runs past policemen fast asleep, policemen laughing, policemen shifting the debris with their sticks, the tips of their shoes” (194). Sometimes in the course of panic police open firing on the innocent crowd, such an incident is occurred in the novel, in a footnote about a taxi driver who was next to his house when “the police had begun firing and the mob had run away, frightened, a police bullet hit me in the head, . . . I didn’t do anything, I was only walking but the police bullet . . . had my names written on it that day, it entered my head . . .” (85). Commenting upon the dubious role of police personnel V.V. Singh writes:

The laxity, lethargy and the alleged partisan attitude of the administrative authorities also provided opportunities for the outbreak of the communal riots and its escalation. . . . The administrative authorities . . . failed to deal with the element responsible for creating the communal disturbances. Actual culprits were not arrested, as believed by the public in general, but were let off due to the influence of political leaders. Such culprits freely operated and escalated the riots. This partisan attitude of the administration, thus, added fuel to the fire. (136-37)

Jha opines that after the riots, when a victim does not find justice, he/she wants to do his/her utmost effort to get it, either by fair or foul means. In the lunacy of revenge he inclines to do utmost destruction of his opposite community that is responsible for the attack. In the novel, when Shabnam does not find anyone’s help she makes up her mind to take revenge from the culprits of the on-going riot in her own way. To take revenge she uses the term ‘Magic.’ Explicating the meaning of this term in pain she reacts:

Magic means . . . I will pluck out a gun. An automatic, unlimited round of bullets. Not just an AK-47, but an ABCD...WXYZ forty-seven thousand, forty-seven million, billion, trillion. And I will fire it, keep firing it,

Magic means I will breathe in, I will swell my chest, rise on my toes...grow until I am double my size, triple...nine, ten. Until I, Shabnam, am so big that my eyes full of tears become as huge as water-tanks, hot and steaming, the water mixed with the fire, the heat gurgling, the vapour fierce and hot. Ready to drench all of you (perpetrators). (197)

The writer interrogates over the reasons behind such type of appalling occurrences in the society/country. People should contemplate over/find out the reasons behind the recurrence of communal violence and as much as possible to avoid them. In the novel, after the death of his mother, Tariq poses this question:

Who cares for reason? Why doesn't Reason, the right, the honourable Reason, come out and reveal itself to all of us? Why does it, instead, slink into the shadows behind the burnt houses, burry itself deep in the pile of ash, in the deep of ambers? . . . Then into a word? . . . press Reason flat against the page, why does it burrow into the letters, hide between their curves and their loops, inside the dots of *is*, bellow the dashes of the *ts*? (185)

The novel seeks an answer to the question that most of the perpetrators of communal violence do not face the judicial inquiry and they do not even interrogate in front of the local police for their complicity into riots. This silence for the culprits encourages them for further violence and lessens the faith in judiciary/government to the victims and the laymen as well. In the novel, Tariq seeking justice of mother's death, states his attitude, "I am an eyewitness to the city on fire? . . . I AM AN EYEWITNESS TO THE CITY ON FIRE, (185) to create hype for the judgement of his mother's death that the judges should summon the perpetrators to interrogate about their roles in violence. Throughout the novel, such as Ms. Glass has done to prove Jay's guilt of his active involvement into the on-going communal riots, we should force perpetrators to admit their active or passive roles in the riots, as Jay admits the truth that

*I am guilty.* I heard this as I passed Abba's daughter-in-law and Ithim, I heard this again as I passed Shabnam's parents, I heard this a third time as I passed Tariq's mother, the voice growing louder and louder as I continued to be lifted up through the darkness, higher and higher, towards the edge over which I had just fallen and where, I knew, the hospital bed was. Where my wife and my child lay. (374)

Communal violence is a threat to the existence of not only for our society/country but also for whole humanity. It is threat to the secular values and composite culture of the nation. India is a secular nation where everyone is free to follow the religion of his/her choice and without any discrimination the constitution provides this liberty because there is no state religion in the country. As a matter of fact, there is no matter in opposing or hurting the beliefs of followers of the other religions which often becomes sound cause of sectarian violence. We should follow the principle of 'live and let live' and honour the sentiments of the people of other community to create peaceful ambience for the welfare of humanity as well as community/society/nation. This will be helpful to the growth and development of the nation and its denizens. Violence is not an inherent characteristic of our nature but it is emerged from outside atmosphere for the vested interest of some selected people. We should take humanity as a whole which creates the atmosphere of violenceless society. Because the matter of violence comes only when we categorize ourselves into different groups, communities or sects hence our effort should be to create sect-less, community-less and group-less society in which the healthy progress of humanity would be possible. We should not live only for our community/society/region/language/country but in a broader context, for humanity. If we go with the concept of humanity and without discriminations respect the people of other communities, there will not be a scope for communal violence.

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