



## The Reflective Response To The Partition

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**Abstract:**

*Partition of India has been interpreted in various ways by various litterateurs. Some use the Marxist paradigm for interpreting reality; others depended on their personal vision; some used satire and highly critical language to comment on the bitter aspects of socio-political reality before and after partition. Bhisham Sahni's Tamas (1974) is 'an intellectual anatomy of the partition.' It studied the structure and dynamics of the event and the then existing society by combining all the three above mentioned literary traits, certainly with Marxist overtones.*

Bhisham Sahni (August 8, 1915 – July 11, 2003) is one of the foremost writers of the country. Tamas and his other works are imbued with a sense of social responsibility. He was born into devout Arya Samajist family in Rawalpindi (now in Pakistan). He went to school there, then to Government College, Lahore the then considered bastion of social radicalism, from where he took a Masters degree in English Literature. He returned to Rawalpindi to join his father's import business. Later on he started teaching at a local college. At the same time he also became involved in activities of the Indian National Congress. He joined the freedom struggle and was jailed for his participation in the Quit India Movement of 1942. When communal riots broke out in Rawalpindi in March 1947, he worked with the Relief Committee. Partition changed everything. The Sahnis had to migrate to the new India from where Rawalpindi and Lahore seemed a foreign land. The trauma that the forced dislocation left on the then thirty-two year old Bhisham Sahni is portrayed with extreme sensitivity and little responsive/reactionary accusation in two of his most stirring pieces of fiction 'Amritsar Aa Gaya Hai' ('We have reached Amritsar') and Tamas ('The Darkness'). Bhisham Sahni settled down in Delhi and began to teach at Delhi University College. His first collection of short stories was published in 1953. In 1957, Bhisham Sahni moved to Moscow to work as a translator at the Foreign Languages Publishing House. He worked in the USSR for nearly seven years during which time he translated several Russian books into Hindi. He returned to India in 1963 and resumed teaching in Delhi. He was General Secretary of the Progressive Writers Association, and was the founder and chairman of 'SAHMAT', an organization promoting cross-cultural understanding, founded in memory of the murdered theatre artist and activist Safdar Hashmi. He edited a literary journal, Nai Kahaniyan from 1965-1967 and began working on Tamas, a novel based on his experiences as a young man, in 1971. Bhisham Sahni won the Sahitya Akademi Award for Tamas in 1946. He also won the Distinguished Writer Award of the Punjab Government, the Lotus Award of the Afro-Asian Writer's Association and the Soviet land Nehru Award. He published seven novels, nine collections of short stories, six plays and a biography of his late brother, the actor and writer Balraj Sahni. Many of his books have been translated into various foreign and Indian Languages. In 1998, he was conferred the Padma Bhushan by the President of India. In 2001, he published his own translation of Tamas in English. 'He remained a modest and affectionate teacher all his life, a gentlemen and a communist, like his mythological namesake, never to tire or retire.' His autobiography 'Aaj Ke Ateet' ('Past of the Present') was published a few months before his death. It will remain a valuable testament to a life of creativity and commitment.

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According to the Govind Nihalani (March 1988), the director of the tele-serial Tamas, “A traumatic historical event usually finds the artistic/literary response twice. Once, during the event has found its corner in the collective memory on the generation that witnessed it. The initial response tends to be emotional, intense and personal in character, even melodramatic. On the other hand, when the event is reflected upon with emotional detachment and objectivity, a clearer pattern of the various forces that shaped it is likely to emerge. Tamas is the reflective response to the Partition of India....”

Bhisham Sahni told Alok Bhalla in a long conversation conducted on 18 June 1996, at the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla that he wrote Tamas after he witnessed the riots in Bhivandi (1969-70). “It is not a calculated decision....I suddenly remembered the Rawalpindi riots. Some of the things I saw in Bhivandi were so similar to what I experienced in Rawalpindi that I started writing....I also felt that the conditions that had caused riots in 1947 were still present. The Partition of the country should have put an end to the riots, but it didn't. I started writing. When I began, I had no clearly conceived object in mind. Perhaps I merely wanted to recollect and relive my past.” While writing Tamas his childhood and young experiences in Rawalpindi and Lahore struck him significantly. They caught his eyes and he used them in the plot. As a writer, he did dig up his experiences and memories and drew upon them to understand the 'anatomy' of Partition. He very vividly portrays the first Rawalpindi riots of 1926, the Congress activities, the Prabhat Pheries, the constructive programs of the Congress, the role of the untouchables and the low caste people in the riots, the communist ideologues and their helplessness in curbing the riots, the religious frenzy present in the people and inflamed again and again by the orthodox and extremists leaders. Sahni, like Manto and Khushwant Singh, recreates his sociometry in his work Tamas. He links the past with the present and offers valuable lessons to keep intact India's plural and secular identity. This makes the novel even more relevant, when we are surrounded by divisive forces in almost every nook and corner of the country, threatening the diversity of Indian culture and its inherent unity. Tamas, as a literary document opens windows to India on the eve Partition and also sarcastically comments on the politico-economic alliances of the leaders based on their hostile interests and their willingness to control the mob for disturbing the social solidarity. It draws our attention to the chilling realities of the consequences of communal prejudice. The events described in Tamas are based on true accounts of the riots of 1947 that Sahni was a witness to in Rawalpindi. He attempts to depict the communal frenzy that controlled/gripped the West Punjab in the Pre-Partition days. The story is not centered on one character or one main incident or a series of incidents. It is an effort by the writer to portray the whole situation. The country was standing on the verge of independence and the English government, before handing over the power, succeeds in creating division, which not only stimulates horrifying massacres but which also results in the breaking of Hindu-Muslim inter-communal harmonious relations.

The novel begins with the vivid description of how Nathu sweated to slaughter a black pig as told by Murad Ali. It is quite ironical that it is poverty which makes Nathu undertake this for the sake of earning five rupees without even realizing the possible implication of his action. It is even more ironical that the task is entrusted to him by Murad Ali, a Muslim. Nathu slaughters the pig and a push-cart takes it to its 'destination'. Meanwhile the District Congress Committee, its secretary Bakshiji and various other office-holders and volunteers are out on their Prabhat Pheris, community programs and cleaning campaigns. The area was inhabited by Muslim families – washermen, butchers and hamam keepers – and then had a number of houses of Hindus and Sikhs, too. The population was intermixed. Though the Congress was all-India organization, Muslim League has the right to talk about welfare of the Muslims of the country. Sahni includes this debate in his novel and the reader experiences one of the historical debates in the 1940s. One of the Leaguers tells Bhakshiji, “It [the congress] is the chicanery of the Hindus... the incontrovertible truth is that the Congress is the body of the Hindus and the Muslim League of the Muslims.” He further refers all the Muslim Congress workers as 'the dogs of the Hindus' and calls Maulana Azad as 'the biggest dog of Hindus who goes wagging his tail before you.' As the Muslim League claimed, 'Freedom of Hindustan will be for the Hindus. It is in sovereign Pakistan alone that Muslims will be really free', the Congress member Jarmail shouts to this, “Pakistan over my dead body!” 'Political' communalism had started showing its colour. Pakistan movement was to be a success!

When the 'Indians' were preparing to get divided into two nation-states, the Deputy commissioners Richard and his wife Liza were talking about the similar racial stock of Indians – Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs of which they are unaware and their ignorance becomes the bliss for the Imperialists and the power-hungry political communal leaders. As Richard tells Liza, “These people know only what we tell them....Most people have no knowledge of their history. They only live it.” Richard was the representative of the British Empire carrying out the policies laid down in England and never bothered to consider the moral or ethical aspects of the profession he was in. His observation about common Indians seems to be very apt for that period, and even for the present, “Well, all Indians are quick-name of religion.” Liza rebels and says, “In the name of freedom they fight against you, but in the name of religion you make them fight

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one another. Isn't that right?" When she innocently suggests that he should intervene in the Hindu-Muslim conflict, Richard laughs away her suggestion, "Darling, rulers have their eyes only on differences that divide their subjects, not on what unites them." He tells her that all he can tell them is that they should resolve their religious disputes and the administration will only intervene if they need all material help. He also sarcastically tells Liza, 'If the subjects fight among themselves, the ruler is safe.' It is this passive attitude on the part of Richard in the novel and the British power in India in reality that communal riots could not be prevented from occurring. And when the administration does step in, it is to establish the supremacy of the British rule. The reader gets to know that it is Richard who hires Murad Ali and gets a pig killed, to use the carcass for a communal riot. In an interview given to Indian Literary Review in 1979, Bhisham Sahni said, "The British exploited our religious differences and were largely responsible for working up the communal frenzy. I have not gone into the long process by which, starting from the early twenties, or even earlier, the entire policy of the British Government was directed towards creating an atmosphere communal bitterness. It is culminated in the frenzy of 1947. It is deplorable that we played into their hands..... Tamas portrays the British administration at work through the manoeuvres of Richard." He told Bhalla, "...communal antagonism was a development that took place in the British period. The British were convinced of the differences between the Hindus and the Muslims. This also suited them, as their own numerical strength was small.... They wanted to stabilize themselves and one method that they used was to support one community at one time."

When the Prabhat Pheri activists reached the Imam Din Mohalla, a few stones came flying from somewhere thrice, deliberately thrown at the workers. Someone had left a dead pig on the step of the entrance of the 'Khailon ki Masjid' and the news spread in Mohalla. Shops and Doors began to shut in the street and the lanes too. However, the damage was done! 'A cow came running towards them, followed at some distance by a young man whose face was half-covered and who carried a big stick in his hand.' Bakshiji muttered: 'It seems kits and vultures will hover over the town for a long time.' Atmosphere of fear gets created in the town due to rumors and news of accumulation of arms and ammunition in Juma Masjid. Bhisham Sahni has very effectively shown us how defensive preparations can actually start communal riots. Fear and tension of the 'other' force people to make defensive preparations. The Arya Samaj Congregation, its members and the members of another Hindu organization and a local Gurudwara Committee meet to discuss a defensive strategy, and not really an aggression against Muslims. The preacher advises the storing of oil and keeping it hot and ready to be poured on assailants. A member suggests that our young men of the youth wing should be immediately given training in lathi-weilding. It should be mentioned here that most of members present were elderly businessmen, a couple of them were lawyers, or men in service, who still under the impression that the situation would eventually be brought under control by the administration. 'Tamas reveals the steady indoctrination that created communal loyalties, a religious identity among members of all communities. Very young Hindu boys are fed on stories of heroes whose heroism was chiefly displayed in resistance to Muslim invaders Shivaji, Rana Pratap. Ranvir, a boy of fifteen and the son of a merchant and the philanthropic chairman of the Hindu organization, is turn into a vicious killer by Master Dev Vrat, wing's akhara. Brought up on tales of Hindu heroes, brainwashed into believing what is 'clean' and 'unclean' Ranvir is trained to kill without hesitation. The account of how this fifteen-year-old boy is turned into a killer is horrifying. Senseless blood is made to seem a necessary associate of heroism. A chicken has to be slaughtered as an act of initiation. Later the children collect arms, chiefly knives, and install themselves where they may be able to pounce solitary unsuspection Muslims. In reality, too, the recruitment and the armament of the private armies continued unabated during this period. The Rashtriya Swayamsewak sangh (hereafter RSS) now had an estimated membership of 56,800 and was reportedly involved in bomb-making and even suspected of being instrumental in igniting the riots in Gurgaon. In the princely states of the Punjab, the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha became very active immediately after the Second World War B.S.Moonje, the organization's leader, exhorted the Hindu youth of Alwar city to arm and defend themselves. Both the states of Alwar and Bharatpur, on the fringes of Delhi became centers for paramilitary training and, after completing rapid and intensive courses, the young 'troops' were sent to battle 'theatres' in Delhi and the Punjab, (and in Rawalpindi, as in the case of Tamas!) One can see here a clear example of how literature reflects upon reality and truth of society, 1940 was a period (rather even today) as Tamas emphatically shows, when attempts were made to inspite loyalty to one's religion. No reference was made to vales such as compassion or sense of human brotherhood and sisterhood. The youth, whether Hindu or Muslim or Sikh, so much indoctrinated and violently trained that they actually start believed;"Killing is not difficult.... One has only to raise one's hand and it is done ... To stab a man to death is far easier. It poses no problem, killing poses no problem"

**The Reflective Response To The Partition****REFERENCES:**

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- 2.The Bhiwandi riots of 1970 were organized by the Shiv Sena, in which more than 250 people were killed. Published its report in seven volumes.
- 3.Bhisham Sahni in Alok Bhalla, Partition Dialogues. Memories of Lost Home (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.112
- 4.Bhisham Sahni, Apni Baat (Essays) (New Delhi: Vani Prakashan, 1990), p. 188
- 5.Pig is a 'forbidden' animal for Muslims. The reader gets a hint of for what purpose the pig has been killed.
- 6.Bhisham Sahni, Tamas, op.cit., 2001, p. 34
- 7.Bhisham Sahni, Tamas, op.cit., p. 41
- 8.In Bhalla, Partition Dialogues, op. cit., p. 116
- 9.Devendra Kohli (ed.), Indian Writers at Work (Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1991), pp. 123-136