



# A Study of Socio-Political Manipulation in Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas*

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Received: 12 Jun 2022; Received in revised form: 08 Jul 2022; Accepted: 13 Jul 2022; Available online: 19 Jul 2022

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**Abstract**— Ernest Benn, said that, "Politics is the art of looking for trouble, finding it everywhere, diagnosing it incorrectly and applying the wrong remedies." As the lines suggested, *Tamas*, elucidates the tragic politics behind communal riots by generating a false violation. The notable themes of *Tamas* include institutional violence, religious identity, communal politics and female centric assaults. This novel addresses the outcome of institutionalised violence and imposed ethnic conflict. The objective of the paper is to analyse socio-political manipulation and communal clashes in *Tamas*.

**Keywords**— political manipulation, communal violence, institutional violence, ethnic identity, imperial power.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Politics is derived from Greek, refers to the affairs of cities. It is defined as "the method of rulership over a national government, state government and local government in groups, or other forms of ruling power relations among individuals, such as the distribution of resources or status." It is apparent that politics is a way of life and part of manufactured society as viewed by Aristotle, "Man is by nature a political animal." Politics has an ever-changing quality to interpreting lives constantly. This interpretation depends on the impression of a political situation and political solution. Politics cannot be limited to communities or to any specific political parties, as its nature is to spread the influence and impact across international governance and cross-border communities. It is a connecting line to people. The fundamental principles of politics are decision making and influencing people. A predecessor of a political party makes decisions, and his/her followers make them power through the political influence, which sometimes becomes a socio-political manipulation. Influencing manipulative politics requires disharmony among two or more ethnic or

religious communities. Solving any political issue certainly requires a tricky, sensitive approach, whether it happens naturally or otherwise. Deceptive influence and manipulation tactics were used to gain power.

Religion can be claimed as a constant source of politics. The existence of religion plays a significant part in gaining political power. Precisely, religion is used as a weapon to endure force. Supporting or influencing a religious community through any form of political campaign leads a manipulation among two groups. A margin between two religious communities decides the opportunity of political parties to influence a political principle or manipulate them. So religious disharmonies are purposefully made as a result of socio-political manipulation.

Bhisham Sahni's novel *Tamas* explains the consequences of political manipulation after the India-Pakistan partition movement. He discusses Hindu-Muslim conflicts with appropriate events. In Sanskrit, *Tamas* means darkness which symbolizes some incidents in the novel. Sahni's well-knitted plot explains how an ordinary person's action changes a situation from harmony to kaput. The novelist brings out other themes like partition, mass suicide, theft,

forced religious conversion, homelessness, identity crisis, ethnic violence and displacement. The backdrop of the novel is communal conflict in Saidpur village. Sahni explains the less discussed facts of innocent lives who have been victimized and how they have been forced to be homeless as a cause of communal conflict. He highlights the plight of being betrayed by neighbourhood and friends because of one's religious identity. His depiction of animals, like "pig", "cow", and "horse", symbolizes a specific religion and its belief. As the title refers, darkness and wickedness surround everywhere, and the novel carries light only at the end.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Violating the norms of governance, law, and morality can be named physical violence or otherwise. It takes place at an individual level or group level. Violence is an outcome of prohibited rights of the suppressed and marginalised minority in society. Violence has been used to attain power either by an individual or by a group. The violation between ethnic groups affects the harmony of every day and puts a pause to it. To discuss the themes of socio-political manipulation, the theory of collective violence is chosen to analyse the behaviour of the collective number of people who volunteers for social violations.

Britannica's article on collective violence theory explains, "Criminologists divide violence into two major types: individual violence and collective violence. Individual (or personal) violence is a harmful force directed at one person against others. It includes making physical attacks and destroying another's property. In contrast, collective violence consists of several persons directing injurious force against others." Collective violence is also subdivided into social, political and economic violence. Arthur William Kornhauser, a sociologist, develops the theory. Communal violence theory shares the characteristics of Smelser's Collective behaviour theory and Kornhauser's mass society theory. Collective violence can be classified into three kinds.

1. Situational collective violence: An unexpected and spontaneous violent behaviour. Mob fights and political meeting dispersal are situational kinds.
2. Organised collective violence: Well planned and executed ideas lead to another kind of violent behaviour against official rules.
3. Institutional collective violence: An official authority guides further proceedings in a war zone and violent behaviour. Capturing and seizing

decides the power play between two nations or communities.

Collective violence theory is one of the significant theories for interpreting socio-political violence. WHO explains collective violence as "an instrumental use of violence by people who identify themselves as members of a group, whether this group is transitory or has a more permanent identity against another group or set of individuals, to achieve political, economic or economic or social objectives." This theory shows that people's spontaneous acts react to sensitive issues in society. When the powerful authority lacks to solve problems and make the right decision, they tend to face the collective violence of rioters. Social difficulties like inequality, marginalisation, political domination, ethnic conflict and identity crisis are the primary factors of collective violence. Manipulative behaviour towards the socio-political or socio-economic groups creates violence of collective or individual types.

## III. METHODOLOGY

The founder of modern research, Paul Felix Lazarsfeld, introduced quantitative and qualitative approaches together in "Marienthal: The Sociography of an Unemployed Community" in 1930. Qualitative analysis is defined as the data obtained by the researcher from first-hand observation, interviews, questionnaires (on which participants write descriptively), focus groups, participant observation, recordings made in natural settings, documents, and artefacts. It defines that the collected information is commonly non-numerical. Also, this method consists of ethnographic study and interpretative phenomenological analysis. The interpretive approach chiefly deals with social theories and aspects that reflect reality as socially constructed. Applying a qualitative analytical approach to research inquires about the reasoning behind human behaviour.

### Thematic Analysis

The novel *Tamas* is a classical representation of partitioned India. The novelist Bhisham Sahni has astutely inscribed the cruel politics behind mass violence during the partition movement in *Tamas*. The novel sets in the northern part of India. The ethnic communities of Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh are involved in the religious conflagration of political conspiracy obviously. When the novel begins, Murad Ali, a Muslim, orders his petty worker Nathu, a Hindu, to slaughter a pig for five rupees. A poor tanner, Nathu struggles to kill the pig in the dark; nevertheless, he does his job before the sunrise. He carried the pig carcass halfway towards Muslim Mohalla, where Kalu, a Christian guy who Murad Ali had asked to throw

the animal corpse at the Mosque entrance. The carcass of the pig created turmoil between neighbour communities of Islam. As time passed by, communal tensions rapidly began.

Along with a pig carcass, a cow and horse were slaughtered in front of Hindu and Sikh lanes. The shock of communal disharmony between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs worsened the situation. At the same time, they started looting properties, setting the fire, human killing, rape, robbery and so on happened during the riot zone. A Sikh man, Harnam Singh and his family is shown as innocent prey of an egocentric communal clash. When there is infused violence in the state, the deputy commissioner Richard lethargically procrastinates taking any action against the sensational issue. The novel ends with an ironic note of the continuation of imperial rule because it is the aeroplane that has settled the mass communal violence. The man, Murad Ali, who descended the communal rage, is now leading the peace campaign with all political parties in a bus. Sahni indirectly says that both the deputy commissioner and Murad Ali have erupted the communal clash, which restored imperial order and repeated the cycle of indifference. The novel *Tamas* is a lesson of perfect political planning to seize power.

Sahni focuses on religious politics, ethnic identity, institutional violence, identity crisis and inhumanity in *Tamas*. He vividly depicts the politics behind communal conflicts. He symbolically highlights the encircling gloominess of the riot zone and the minds of religious fanatics. In the novel, the imperial administrators have wickedly thrown a sensational move of slaughtering an animal with a spiritual reference to violate ethnic identity. This Sahni shows the people's religious belief toward an animal and its symbolic meaning. The people of Sayedpur analyze the animal's carcass as a religious insult which caused savagery to humanity.

*Tamas* has no central characters as the riot itself carries a prominent role throughout the journey. However, there are significant characters who are forced to become a victim, refugees, murderers, rapists, fanatics or a burglar by choice. However, Sahni has given a set of serious characters who change themselves due to the communal outbreak. Nathu, a petty worker, was the first character introduced by Sahni. He was allotted to kill a pig that night, and he was not aware of its purpose. Once he was done with that ugly pig, he wasn't at ease, and all the time, he was found guilty of his work. During the conflict, he vanishes before the novel ends.

Richard, the deputy commissioner of the British administration, has a part in settling the riot down in the end; meanwhile, he plans for a communal rift to restore the

imperial rule. He often criticizes his wife's ethnic identity and cultural beliefs, Liza. Another character Harnam Singh is familiar with his strong faith in god. He ran a teashop with his wife, Banto Singh. When the religious turmoil occurs, they are robbed and threatened by a fellow friend. His son Iqbal Singh was converted forcefully to Islam by Muslim fanatics, and his daughter Jasbir Kaur imposed to commit suicide in Gurudwara well to protect her innocence. A young boy, Ranvir, and his companions are involved in killing and attacking. The young boys have been taught to kill Muslims to protect their community. Murad Ali, a Muslim man, is the one who initiated the riot by commanding Nathu to slaughter a pig at the beginning and it him again, which leads to the peace program with Congress and Muslim League leaders at the end. The role of socio-political manipulation and institutional violence is visible in these characters. Sahni has witnessed the 1947 communal riots first-hand also; his depiction of characters and events in this novel has essentially marked partition literature. The following passages will explain the religious politics for power and the effects of selfish acts.

In this novel, the fighting communities are unaware of their origin and the conspiracy of communal disharmony. They slay their people on the battlefield. The religious extremists failed to recognize the victims as fellow human beings of the same nation. So Sahni explains their origin through the character Richard who is himself a historian. While Richard and his wife Liza have a conversation about the Indian race and their head, they discuss counter-question and explanations. He says that the people of India belong to the same race and they share identical features. When Liza hadn't believed in his story, he further elucidates the history, "The first people who came here were from central Asia; then, centuries later...They all belong to same race. The people called "Aryans" who came here thousands of years ago, and the people called "Muslims" who came here around one thousand years ago – they all come from the same race. They all come from the same basic stock." (Sahni 43). Through Richard, it is apparent that Indians involved in communal outbursts are ignorant of their origin. So, he adds more points stating to Liza, "The people here know nothing. They only know what we tell them...These people don't know their own history; they just live it." (Sahni 43). Richard's interest in the topic shows his obsession with history and his imperial audacity to fragment the religious community.

Once Liza asks Richard to see the holy festival, he immediately reminds her about the communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims. Again, Liza asks him, "Where shall we go this weekend? Taxila?" (Sahni 46), and to that, he replies, "We won't be able to go there for a while, Liza; there's a bit of tension in the city nowadays.

Once the situation improves, we'll go. We'll go somewhere" (Sahni 46). Sahni did not just make a fictitious note about the British couple's conversation about weekend plans. Deswal's article on *Tamas* novel explains that "Lord Mountbatten was enjoying the cool atmosphere in Shimla. During the peak of riots, the Falleti hotel in the burning Lahore remained a place for heavenly pleasure for Englishmen and women. They partied every night, only a few blocks away from the ruins of a Hindu neighbourhood." (Deswal 137). Likewise, during the communal tensions, the deputy commissioner is portrayed spending leisure time with his wife on the top of the hill besides taking action against religious extremists. It is noticeable that Richard participated in generating communal violence, hence not settling the tensions. With the knowledge of Indian roots and origin, he used religion as a weapon to manipulate people, only to restore his rules.

Earlier, British politics entered to Indian political administration that changed people's purpose of politics as in Britain's policy of "Divide and Rule" for India and "Fragment and Quit" policy for them. The pity is neither political party members nor common people know it. The discussion of communal politics had taken place between Liza and Richard again. When Richard says, "They're fighting amongst themselves in the name of religion; they're fighting us for control of the country", and to mock his cleverness, Liza responds that "These people are fighting you for their country, and you're making them fight amongst themselves over religion." (Sahni, 53). In the later part of the novel, Bakhshi, a congress committee member and a riot survivor, register a comment about British rulers, similar to Liza's opinion. He stated, "The British started the riot, the British ended the riots... The British have played us again." (Sahni, 303-304). Through the text lines, Sahni clarified that the communal clashes between two or more groups in India are the aftermath of Britisher's political game.

According to Robert Dahl, manipulation is power as he says, "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do". Dahl's opinion suits the character Nathu from *Tamas* as it is evident that Murad Ali took power over him to slaughter a pig for a pittance amount of five rupees. Murad Ali knows that money is the driving force to manipulate or convince Nathu to get the job done; otherwise, he wouldn't do it. He utilised Nathu's innocence and poverty for power. Nathu unconsciously accepted killing a pig; as Sahni says, "What had possessed him to accept this job? If he hadn't taken an advance, he would already have pushed the pig out of the hut and chased it away" (Sahni 4). Being a Muslim, Murad Ali was aware that killing a pig would cause immense tension among the communities. He carefully highlights

the risks to Nathu "This is a Muslim area. If any Muslim sees you, there will be trouble. Take care. I think it's a terrible job too, but what to do, these are Vet Sahib's orders – how can I say no?" (Sahni 6). Murad Ali left all his Islamic faith and culture behind to become a political leader.

Another character, Harnam Singh, an innocent Sikh who lost his son and daughter, his home, and his tea shop in a communal clash. He is a victim of an identity crisis among his fellow communities, and he became a stranger in his native. A group of Muslim extremists looted Harnam Singh and his wife Banto away from their home. Ever since the riot broke, his belief in the Sikh god and trust among the Muslim community vanished. A couple of rioters took some of Harnam Singh's properties. Later they set fire to his house and tea shop. The Sikh couple witnessed the rise of the conflagration in their wealth and livelihood. When Harnam Singh was the only Sikh among the Muslim community of the village, he had never been secluded from socio-political and religious gatherings because his tea shop was the medium for all sorts of communication. As he is a victim of an identity crisis, Rawson's article on *Tamas* describes the plight of becoming a stranger or refugee in his homeland. She explains, "The consequence of Partition had made age-old friends to enemies and their own land was now foreign to them. Thus, space which they had created in the hearts of others was taken away on the pretext of religion. They had become strangers to their people, whom they had once considered as family and were part of their joys and sorrows." (Rawson, 34).

In *Tamas*, it is visible that the outrageous act of dismissing a community for their ethnic identity leads only to hostility against others. This communal intolerance generates an identity crisis and causes trauma of migration. During a riot, Harnam Singh and Banto flee from their home to safeguard themselves from the freaks. Lines from Sharma's article highlight the difficulties of refugees in reality, "*Tamas* focuses on the communal violence and the effect of rumour on the people. It also underlines the stark reality of life that at the end of the day, only the poor become the victims of society at large." (Sharma, 24).

The minor character Iqbal Singh, the son of Harnam Singh, is an example of forced religious conversion. When Iqbal tries to escape from the hands of Muslim fanatics, he gets caught. The Muslims demand Iqbal to recite the Arabic phrase "Nara-e-Takbir! Allahu Akbar!" to convert as a Muslim. For his life, Iqbal agreed to change his religion, and throughout the way toward Mohalla, the fanatics humiliated him. The description of Iqbal's plight is highlighted by Sahni "He opened Iqbal Singh's mouth

with his hand and stuffed in a piece of meat dripping with blood. Iqbal Singh's eyes bulged. He couldn't breathe." (Sahni, 278). During the occasion of circumcision, all his identity of Sikhism was withered.

Anonymous female victims of communal clash in the novel are the true reflection of the actual assaults caused by fanatics. One of the female suicide victims in *Tamas* is Jasbir Kaur, the daughter of Harnam Singh was the first to jump into the Gurudwara well. The women in the Sikh community have committed mass suicide to restore their dignity from the extremists. This suicidal event seems true as the mass suicide survivor narrated Urvashi Butalia in an interview inscribed in the work *The Other Side of Silence*. The survivor, Basant Kaur, recalls, "Many girls were killed. Then Mata Lajjawanti had a well near her house, in a sort of a garden. Then we jumped into that, some hundred...girls and boys. All of us. Even boys, not only children, but grown-up boys. I also went in, took my two children, and then jumped in..." (Butalia, 158).

The communal tensions didn't only focus on uprooting other communities but also involved committing female-centric violence. In the novel, an anonymous woman was captured by zealots; she tried to protect herself from being killed by them, but they stabbed her. The explaining lines from the text, "Don't kill me, you seven can keep me with you, do whatever you want, one at a time, just don't kill me." says the woman, and the murderer states that "What do you think? Aziza stabbed her right in the chest. She died right there." (Sahni, 286). The novelist tells an incident about gang rape and murder of a Hindu girl to underline the plight of sexual violence in a brotherhood nation. A group of Muslim extremists ruthlessly assaulted the girl. Lines from the novel depict the uncivilised behaviour of men toward a woman, "Everyone – Nabi, Lalu, Mira, Murtaza – we all took turns doing her... When my turn came, she didn't make a peep underneath me – she wasn't moving! I looked down and saw she was dead. I was doing it with a corpse." (Sahni, 285). Women harassment, sexual tormenting, and any physical violence are punishable, so after knowing these regulations, the rioters must have used the situation. Hence, violence was not a shock of truce but a planned one to act upon the circumstances.

The silenced voices of riot victims are reflected through Sahni's characters, Harnam Singh, Banto, Jasbir Kaur, Iqbal Singh, Nathu and many other dead people of Saidpur. Also, the people behind the communal clash in *Tamas* were brought to light. The violence between fellow human beings has been examined as collective violence of all kinds with the support of an organisation. Thus, communal tensions between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs

in *tamas* result from socio-political manipulation in an egocentric communal society.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In the end, the novelist scrutinizes the bitter reality that had happened to those who hadn't been involved in any communal violence. It shows the power of wealth and politics against ordinary citizens. The wealthy, politicians and business people were quite ordinarily looked after their routine works, which means they were not assaulted or uprooted. Their exhausting behaviour is represented in Radha S. Gautam's article, which analyses that "all elites are shown gathered at one place. They seem to be back to business as usual. Politicians are shown arguing with one another; businessmen doing their deals; a real estate broker tries to sell property left by the fleeing refugees." (Gautam, 308). Though the dark times of riot in Sayedpur ended, Sahni proposes a prophetic warning through the Congress party member Bakhshi that, "Vultures will fly, still more will fly" (Sahni, 344). This line reflects the future's unstoppable violence, and the novelist hasn't exaggerated his notion of the nation.

This paper tries to incorporate the idea of tolerating each other for the harmony of the human community and a better livelihood. The novelist astutely reveals that rumours and religious manipulation from outside are what raised a wall of hatred. Also, political parties don't help connect the cultures and religions across the world as their only intention is to rule and hold power. A vacuum of communal peace still prevails among us.

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