



Contesting Concepts of Nation and Nationalism in Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* (2001)

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Abstract— *The Partition of 1947 can be regarded as the culmination of a long-drawn-out battle of competing ideologies which grappled with each other amidst the hegemonic presence of a colonial power. Through an analysis of Bhisham Sahni's literary narrative Tamas, this paper seeks to analyze the representation of contesting concepts of nationalism and nationhood which rose against the backdrop of chaos, suspicion and violence. It also attempts to underscore how Sahni's novel, through the use of irony and humour, resists the glorification of such nationalisms—whether secular or religious—which are otherwise painted with hues of grandeur in dominant discourses. In doing so, it can be said that Tamas emerges as a counter narrative radically critiquing the ways in which notions of nation and nationalism came to be constructed/imagined in dominant narratives. It questions the monolithic as well homogenizing tendencies involved in the creation of nation-states and, as a consequence, emerges as a text offering a significant discourse on power, equality, nation, and nationalism.*



Keywords— *Counter-narrative, Discourse, Ideology, Nationhood, Nationalism, Secularism*

A nation signifies a complex entity which, while being variously defined, also consistently eludes all efforts at defining it. First, it can be seen as a product of history or community—a record of the interactions and internal struggles of people living in close association with one another in a place with clearly demarcated boundaries. Secondly, in many ways, nation may also represent home. The concept of a nation, therefore, assumes many connotations, dependent as it is, on the situations and context in which it is defined. For instance, if nation is defined as signifying community or *jati* then Partha Chatterjee (1999) points out how *jati* itself is an ambiguous term which can have many meanings. *Jati* can signify caste, origin, species, lineage or clan or “human collectivities bound by loyalty to a state or organized around the natural and cultural characteristics of a country or province...” (p. 221). Similarly, if words such as *desh*, *watan*, or *qaum* are used to define a nation, they can also be interpreted in many ways. *Desh* or *watan* could mean a range of territorial units—one's native village or one's country. As Sudhir Chandra (1992) points out, this reflects

the tendency to conceive of more than one identity as national (p. 149). There is yet another narrower conception of nation where it is principally defined keeping in mind the regional and linguistic aspects that characterize a given place at a particular time. Thus, nations-within-a-nation can be envisaged based on such distinctions.

If nation can be imagined in multiple ways, then nationalism too cannot be regarded as a monolithic concept. Nationalism is constructed and defined in different ways the world over. Speaking about the issue of nationalism in Europe, Gyanendra Pandey points out the difference between the two kinds of nationalisms that have evolved in Germany and France—while Germany has attempted to define itself ethnocentrically, inspired by visions of one language, one *volk*; France, by contrast lays emphasis on the people of the territory, defined by the state and then productive of a nation (2001, p. 47). However, to define nationalism in India on the basis of the Andersonian model would involve overlooking religious, cultural and linguistic differences.

In view of the plurality of Indian society, one can say that there are multiple nationalisms at work in our country which can be defined on the basis of region, religion, language, caste or community. In the emergence of any modern nation-state, nationalism plays an important role and nationalist movements usually begin with a political purpose—of achieving freedom from colonial rule. The nation-state implies a concrete entity with well-defined boundaries and which primarily is a result of political negotiations. There is also an attempt to represent a nation-state by homogenizing identities in order to seek clarity and order. For the emergence of a strong nation-state, there is an attempt to centralize this ideology and prove that there is only one form of nationalism (Indian) that exists. As Sudipta Kaviraj points out in his essay “The Imaginary institution of India”: “By its very nature, this conception of nationalism had to be homogenizing” (1992, p. 2). Thus, the nation-state tries to negate the possibility of the existence of other forms of nationalism as this would not be in accordance with contemporary social, political and constitutional requirements. 1947 saw the emergence of two nations—India and Pakistan—after a long struggle with the colonial powers to assert the right to self-government. The independence and Partition of the Indian sub-continent was also a moment of “renegotiation and re-ordering...the resolution of some old oppositions and the construction of new ones” (Pandey, 2001, p. 17).

This paper attempts to examine *Tamas* as a text that offers a significant perspective on the issue of nation and nationalism. Though the novel does not directly engage or explicitly present a discourse on these issues, one can infer from the characters and situations and speculate on the different ways in which nation and nationalism have been imagined and constructed by them. The novel presents the complexities and the complications involved with such ideologies and how political parties utilize and manipulate these to further their own ends. Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* is set in 1947, just a few months before the Partition of the Indian sub-continent, wherein the dream of independence had concretized. The novel can be seen to work at two levels. At one level, it captures the trauma of Partition, the horrific massacres in the name of religion, the politics of the vested interests and the essential helplessness of the ordinary man grappling against such extraordinary circumstances. At another level, the novel demonstrates how various nationalisms, often incompatible, are at work simultaneously intent on imagining and building a nation of their choice.

The Indian National Congress has generally been regarded to be at the forefront of the freedom struggle. In fact, the rise of nationalism in India has always been equated with the establishment of the Congress party in 1885. As

Gyanendra Pandey points out the period between 1945 and 1947 was marked by intense struggle. The end of World War II and the changed political, military and economic position of Britain lent unprecedented urgency to the question of the transfer of power and the establishment of national government. It was at such a time that the Indian National Congress leadership was released from prison and efforts at mobilization of different sections of society were actively renewed; large scale urban demonstrations and rural uprisings took place after 1945 (2001, p. 21). It was the dream of the Congress to establish the Nehruvian vision of a modern, secular, democratic welfare state. Through the depiction of the workings of the Congress party and its members Sahni presents their efforts to realize this vision. However, what comes across is the difference between an ideal vision and the reality. In his interview with Alok Bhalla, Sahni has stated that he had presented the Congress party with a certain degree of “ironic detachment” and this is evident as the narrative clearly reveals the political and personal motives that guide them (2008, p. 123). Thus, the portrayal of the Congress workers is devoid of glorification. By focusing on their varied motives, their opportunism and the self-aggrandizing nature of these workers, Sahni demythologizes the glorified view that one usually associates with nationalist movements engrossed in the liberation of the country from colonial rule. Thus, Mehtaji, who in his spotless white *kurta pyjama* and cap considers himself to be a look alike of Jawaharlal Nehru, is also accused of selling insurance policies to people and giving them party tickets. Personal jealousies of the workers come to the fore in the form of petty bickering between Shankar, Mehtaji and others. It is also demonstrated how the Gandhian ideal of wearing khadi is mocked at and manipulated by Shankar who is instrumental in the denial of a party ticket to Kohli because he was using a silk cord to tie his *pyjamas*. Moreover, the ideals of community service which are propagated for the benefit of society are seen as problematic by many members except for a few like Bakshiji and Jarnail. Mehtaji is more concerned about the cleanliness of his clothes and gingerly picks up only pebbles from the street. They question the very ideals through which their party gained mass popularity. Gandhiji's call to non-violence and *Satyagraha* are mocked at by people within the party. As Kashmiri Lal questions:

Bapu has advised us not to use violence. If, in the event of a riot, a man were to attack me, what should I do? Should I fold my hands and say, “Come, brother, kill me. Here is my neck?” (Sahni, 2001, p. 326)

Moreover, when it is revealed that a carcass of a pig is found lying on the steps of a mosque, it is only Bakshiji and Jarnail who decide to remove it in order to avoid communal tensions while the others such as Mehta and Ram Das quietly slink away. Even after the riots, which led to large scale destruction of life and property, the next elections are uppermost in the minds of some workers and they avidly discuss as to who would receive a ticket.

The Indian National Congress, from its very beginning has been seen to represent and establish a secular nation and this has provided the blueprint for the Constitution. As against religious affiliations, the party is seen to represent secular nationalism which emphasizes the composite character of Indian society. The nationalism propagated by them was primarily defined territorially where, within the Indian territory, a variety of communal and cultural groups should live together. Though Mushirul Hasan contests the use of the term secular nationalism “in the context of nationalist struggle on grounds that nationalism and its secular dimension was associated with an amalgam which ranged all the way from Gandhi to Savarkar”; the expression has struck because, in theory at least, the Congress and its Left allies subscribed to secular values and were by and large committed in building a secular nation (1993, p. 1). Sahni's narrative questions this assumption and demonstrates that it is only a superficial tactic employed by them for manufacturing a strong nation-state. The text reveals that the consciousness of their religious identity is uppermost in the minds of some of the workers. Though they profess that they are committed to the task of building a secular nation, they are not free from the prejudices that are usually associated with the hardliners. So, during the cleanliness drive, Ramdas is acutely aware that he is a Brahmin by caste and such low work of cleaning drains should not be done by him. Moreover, his intention in leading the workers to a riot prone area raise questions about where his loyalty lies. The presence of Muslims in the Congress has always been seen as suspect. The members of the Muslim League go to the extent of calling them dogs and brand them as traitors. Though the Congress workers profess that the politics of religion does not exist, once the riots break out, the loyalty of the Muslims in the party is questioned. Mehta insists that in such troubled times nobody can be trusted, especially Muslims such as Latif who is suspected of passing information to the CID. Mubarak Ali is suspected of being a member of the Muslim League because he wears a Peshawari fur cap instead of a Gandhi cap. It is clear that once the riots begin, everybody seeks protection within his own community. Mehta, who is accused of “having one foot in the Congress and the other in the Hindu Sabha” tries to justify his stand by argument:

Will you come to save my life when a riot breaks out? The entire area on the other side of the ditch is inhabited by Muslims, and my house is on the edge of it... In a situation like this, I can only rely on the Hindus of the locality. This fellow who comes with a big knife to attack me will not ask me whether I was a member of the Congress or the Hindu Sabha (Sahni, 2001, p. 103).

He even goes to the extent of suggesting that should form *mohalla* committees like the Hindu Sabha. Nation is seen to comprise Hindu localities and Muslim localities and for the sake of personal safety, ideological differences are forgotten. Thus, Hayat Baksh, a member of the Muslim League tags along with a hardliner Lakshmi Narayan to reach his house safely for which he would have to pass through a Hindu locality. Hence, the larger view of a nation and Indian nationalism is a camouflage—their identities are primarily defined by their communities and inherently they can be as communal as others.

Jinnah's demand for a separate nation for Muslims and the consequent formation of Pakistan gave rise to an intense debate as to the nature and character of a new nation state. Moreover various “brands” of nationalisms began to clamour for their own nations based on their religious affiliations. It gave a chance to Hindu nationalists to proclaim that Muslims, by asking for a separate nation have proved that they are foreigners and have never considered themselves to be a part of India. The question of nationalism is essentially linked to the idea as to what constitutes a nation and who belongs to it. Sudhir Chandra, in his essay “Defining the Nation”, points out how the Hindu nationalist movement which began in the 19th century received an impetus from the belief that the general decline of the country began with Muslim rule (1992, p. 116). History, thus, comes to play an important role in such a construction of the nation and Indian history is seen to comprise of a Hindu era, Muslim era and British era. Thus, a glorified pre-colonial past is the past that had leaders like Jaychand and Prithviraj Chauhan, and the Muslim rule which began with treachery and vileness signified intolerance, bigotry and violence. So, when one speaks of freedom in their context, they demanded freedom not only from the British but also the Muslims as both have been excluded from such a conception of a nation. Partha Chatterjee discusses as to “what is the criterion for such inclusion or exclusion”? According to him:

It is one of historical origin. Buddhism and Jainism are Hindu because they

originate in India, out of debates and critiques that are internal to Hinduism. Islam or Christianity come from outside and are therefore foreign. And "India" here is the generic entity, with fixed territorial definitions, that act as the permanent arena for the history of the *jati* (1999, p. 110).

Such ideology is reflected in the novel by a section of people, prominent among them being the Vanasprasthi, Dev Vrat, a member of the Hindu Mahasabha and his student Ranvir, the fifteen-year-old son of Lala Lakshmi Narayan. Through the indoctrination of Ranvir, Sahni reveals how the seeds of communalism are sown in the minds of young people as they are taught to differentiate between "us" and "them" and stereotypical representations and communal hatred is harnessed for the creation of a Hindu nation. One of the most memorable incidents in the novel is the initiation of Ranvir into the youth wing of the organization where he is asked to kill a hen to prove his bravery. The incident is significant for many reasons. First, it demonstrates how the construction of a Hindu nation is primarily an invocation to precolonial valour. One of the reasons given by such organizations for the annexation of the country is the belief that Hindus have been cowards; they have not been brave enough to withstand the onslaught of foreigners. Thus, the killing of the hen is symbolic as it meant to inculcate notions of aggression, masculinity and valour. Ranvir, since his childhood is told stories of Rana Pratap and Shivaji, is taught how to scale walls, to fire arrows and to make a bomb. He is taught to use violence against the "mlecchas" and this violence is justified and regarded mandatory for the establishment of a Hindu nation. So, when Ranvir and his friend Dharamdev demand a cauldron for boiling oil, the reason they give is that the "cauldron is being taken for the defence of the nation" (Sahni, 2001, p. 89). Implicit in such a historical construction is a narrowing of the conception of the Indian nation, where nation is not only to be defended against the onslaught of the British but principally the Muslims. For the defence of the nation the use of violence is justified and this is evident when Ranvir and his friend kill an incense seller on account of his being a Muslim. As Gyanendra Pandey points out:

Nations and communities that would be nations, seem to deal with the moment of violence, their past (and present) by the relatively simple stratagem of drawing a neat boundary around themselves, distinguishing sharply between 'us' and 'them', and pronouncing the act of violence an act of the other or an act

necessitated by a threat to the self (2001, 177).

The Vanaprasthi who is "devoting heart and soul to the task of Hindu unity" is too eager to prove that in the event of a riot, the Hindus are well prepared for which weapons need to be collected, the bell of the Shivala temple has to be repaired, young men are to be taught to wield *lathis* because apparently the Muslims had already stocked weapons in the Jama Masjid.

In early 1947, the proposal to divide Punjab and Bengal elicited wide ranging responses from the Sikhs. Punjab, split in the middle, lost a large part of property and pilgrim sites to West Pakistan. This has remained a major factor in Indian politics ever since and the rise of the Khalistan movement is essentially linked to the commonly stated belief that the Hindus got Hindustan and the Muslims got Pakistan but the Sikhs were left like orphans. In the novel, prior to the communal riots, Hindus and Sikhs make joint arrangements for their safety in case they are attacked by Muslims, and Hindus and Sikhs are seen as one. The Vanaprasthi, in fact suggests that they should jointly meet the Deputy Commissioner Richard and discuss matters pertaining to the protection of their life and property against Muslim attack. But after the communal riots as the talk of the formation of Pakistan intensified, the Sikhs insisted on being recognized as a separate community. Thus, in the end when the peace committee is formed, questions are raised about the political status of the Sikh committee which invites the ire of some of their community members and they say: "It is an insult to the Sikh community. The Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee alone represents the Sikhs" (Sahni, 2001, 346). The novel, therefore, points out how the communally charged atmosphere crystallizes the religious identities of the people.

In *Tamas*, apart from Jarnail Singh, the only character who ceaselessly works to establish communal harmony is Dev Dutt. Sahni, in fact was accused of favouring the Communists as many people felt Dev Dutt to be an idealized character. The only son of his parents, he is a member of the Communist party and hence his conception of a nation is neither informed by religious, linguistic or caste differences but is based on the distinctions of class—the differences between the rich and the poor. He considers that the working class, being the largest population of the country is not swayed by traditional influences of religion and caste which the middle classes easily succumb to. As he says: "To view things emotionally can be very misleading for a communist. It is necessary to understand the evolutionary process of society" (Sahni, 2001, p. 184). Though he is keenly disliked by members of other parties

because of his affiliations, they accept the fact that he is a tireless worker, who does not desist from visiting even the most riot prone areas. After the riots he organizes a peace committee where the members of the prominent parties and communities would tour the city in a bus in order to make appeals for peace in the city. For this he ceaselessly works in getting the various parties to talk amongst themselves and to promote peace. After the riots when details of the losses suffered by life and property are being tabulated by the babu, Dev Dutt says:

Add another column to your tabulations indicating the number of poor people killed as against the well-to-do people.... It is an important aspect which will reveal to you quite a few things (Sahni, 2001, p. 325).

Thus, Dev Dutt is primarily concerned with his ideology and he never loses sight of his mission—the need to fight for the rights of the poor and the working classes.

In the novel, it is only Jarnail who emerges as a true nationalist; someone who holds nation supreme above considerations of religion, caste, creed and class. He represents the sole voice of sanity in an otherwise communally-charged atmosphere. He character may have a comic appeal but through him Sahni demonstrates the tragedy of an individual who is an idealist. As a member of the Congress party, he had been “jailed whether a movement was on or not”; “his self-designed military uniform” is covered with innumerable medallions and badges and he prides on the fact that he has danced with Nehru when the national flag was unfurled on the banks of Ravi. Overtly zealous whether he is making a speech or is a part of community service, Jarnail, till his death, exhorts people to fight against the British and not among themselves. When members of the Muslim League insist that only Pakistan can be a true nation of the Muslims, Jarnail retorts that the formation of Pakistan will be over his dead body. His retort is prophetic as he is indeed dead by the time Pakistan was formed. Unlike other workers who nurse political ambitions and are guided by monetary considerations, Jarnail is shown to be a man without a profession and a family with nothing to live on except a salary of fifteen rupees that he draws from the Congress’ office. While everyone during the riots hides to save his own skin Jarnail is killed trying to stop the riots by spreading Gandhi’s message for peace and pleading with people to act with restraint. From being a butt of people’s jokes and generally regarded as deranged, he emerges as a yardstick by which the honesty and integrity of others could be measured. This streak of madness in him is not really madness but a zeal to set things right, to make

people see and understand what reality is. Jarnail invites comparison with another madman—Manto’s Toba Tek Singh, and as Ravikant and Tarun K Saint point out, both meet the same fate as Gandhi (2001, p. xvii). One realizes that Jarnail is not a politician and though he may belong to a particular party, in essence, he symbolizes scores of people whose sacrifices have been instrumental in the struggle for independence.

CONCLUSION

Thus, a close and critical analysis of the various issues in *Tamas* demonstrates that though not explicit, the concept of nation and nationalism find an important place in the novel. Though conceptions of a secular or “Indian” nation and other narrow constructions of nation are usually regarded as mutually exclusive, the text reveals how both these views are characterized by ambiguities, contradictions and unresolved tensions. The depiction of Indian National Congress is a case in point. It is not entirely free from the rhetoric of communalism and the effort to construct a unified “Indian” nation is spurious. Behind such claims for secular nationalism lie varied and often incompatible conceptions. Nationalist historiography has generally characterized the Indian National Congress as an organization that not only led the struggle for independence but also safeguarded the interests of the minority communities. Sahni’s narrative undermines this image. Since the novel is based on autobiographical incidents and Sahni was also a Congress worker for some time, what he presents is an insider’s view—the real picture of how certain people call themselves nationalists in order to fulfill their political motives. The text demonstrates how this urgent need to bring Hindu-Muslim unity arose largely within the context of organized national efforts to deal with colonial subjugation rather than genuine belief in such a vision of communal harmony. One also finds that the narrower conceptions of nation and nationalism are also informed by such hypocrisy. Such views—as exemplified in the novel by Ranvir, Dev Vrat and others—are explicit as to what parameters should be used to define a nation. Varied concepts of nation and nationalism gradually emanate from the need to rationalize certain identities whether personal or political and to regard them as central or “national”. Jarnail’s view of a nation is, therefore, very different from that of Dev Vrat, but both in their own ways are engrossed in constructing a nation of their choice. So, one can say that the novel demonstrates how there are no universally acceptable criteria for defining a nation and nationalism.

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